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Birmingham Town Hall:
An Archaeological Watching
Brief (Phase 2) 2004



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by
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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology at Birmingham Town Hall, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham (NGR 40663 28685), during May and June 2004 on behalf of Urban Design, Birmingham City Council. The work follows on from an initial watching brief carried out in 2003. During refurbishment works the watching brief observed phases of alteration in the architectural features of the north face of the building with balustrades having been removed from below window openings and glazing having been enlarged. Bricks with makers stamps suggest that these alterations were made between the 1860s and early 1890s. Documentary sources detailing refurbishments suggest that this work may have been carried out between 1875 and 1891. A well pre-dating the Town Hall was recorded in the basement, cut into natural sandstone. The well was not excavated, but it is likely that it relates to late eighteenth century buildings on the site, although an earlier date cannot be ruled out. Groundworks were observed to the north of the Town Hall, which revealed natural clays and gravels overlain by modern deposits.

1.0 Introduction

The watching brief was commissioned by Urban Design, Birmingham City Council following the requirements of a brief set out by Birmingham City Council and an approved written scheme of investigation prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (Birmingham Archaeology 2003). The work follows on from an initial phase of archaeological recording undertaken in October 2003 (Hewitson 2003). Further work was necessary due to renovation work being carried out on the north face of the Town Hall. These works provided the opportunity to record phases in the construction and alteration of the building.

2.0 Site location

The watching brief was undertaken at Birmingham Town Hall, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham (Fig. 1; NGR 40663, 28685), concentrating on the north face of the building (Fig. 2).

3.0 Background and objectives

Birmingham Town Hall (SMR 01342) is a Grade 1 listed building designed by Joseph Hanson and opened in 1834. The design of the building is based upon the Roman temple of Castor and Pollux, Rome, and was made from Selly Oak brick faced with Anglesey Marble. Later alterations to the building were made by Charles Edge in the late 1840s, along with numerous renovations during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

A current programme of renovation and refurbishment work includes exposure of the below ground structure of the north elevation of the building and the insertion of a duct. Birmingham City Council Conservation Group required an archaeological watching brief to be undertaken during these works. The watching brief conforms to a brief prepared by Birmingham City Council (BCC, 2003). The first phase of this

watching brief recorded the fabric of the basement wall during groundworks. No constructional phases or evidence of the anticipated below ground arches were visible and no significant archaeological deposits were encountered (Hewitson 2003).

In May and June 2004 work on the northern elevation of the Town Hall required further observation, in order that any architectural phases in the fabric of the building could be recorded, alongside any *in situ* archaeological deposits or features revealed during further groundworks.

4.0 Methods

The watching brief was undertaken by appropriately qualified archaeologists from Birmingham archaeology. Records were made using scale drawings, colour print photographs and colour transparencies. These records form the archive to be deposited with Birmingham Museum following consultation with the Conservation Group, Birmingham City Council.

5.0 Results

Architectural Features

Renovation work being carried out on the windows in the northern elevation of the Town Hall revealed evidence of a phase of alteration in the architectural design. Six windows are present at the northern elevation together with a central entrance (Plate 1). Two windows have a stone balustrade feature beneath (Plate 1; Plate 2), with the others having plain stone sills. It can be demonstrated that the balustrade features were once present in windows 3 and 4, to either side of the entrance. A scar from a baluster was partially visible on the inside face of the jambs of these windows. This demonstrates that the plain sills are a later addition (Fig. 3, Plate 3). The sills have clearly been inserted after the removal of the balustrade features at windows 3 and 4. The presence of the former balustrade was confirmed when the sill stones of windows 3 and 4 were removed for renovation and a full baluster scar became visible (Plate 4). The effect of removing the balustrades was to lengthen the glazed window panels.

The presence of brickwork recorded beneath the two sill stones of windows 3 and 4 contrasts with the stonework at the same level beneath windows 1 and 2 (Plate 1; Plate 5). This may be further evidence to suggest a phase of alteration. This is supported by the presence of dark purple brickwork (contrasting with the red Selly Oak Brick plinth) beneath windows 3 & 4, which appears to represent alteration to the external face. The sill stones of windows 3 and 4 rest upon this purple brick, which also butts against the internal face of the sill stones. This demonstrates, therefore, that the alteration to the windows is contemporary with the alteration to the brickwork below the existing sills.

Two maker's stamps were recorded on the dark purple bricks, 'Hamblet' and a six-pointed star motif (Fig. 4). Joseph Hamblett was recorded as a Brickmaker at the Percy Brickyard in West Bromwich in the Post Office Directory of Staffordshire, 1860 and again in 1864 as a "blue brick, tile and sanitary pipe maker". In 1880 Kelly's Directory of Birmingham notes Joseph Hamblett of West Bromwich as a "manufacturer of every description of vitrified blue bricks, copings, plinths, quarries, ridges...". The last record of Joseph Hamblett as a brick manufacturer appears to be the entry in Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire, 1892, after which J. Hamblett is

recorded as a private resident in 1900. The star motif can be compared with contemporary trademark symbols present in the 1860s and recorded in White's Directory of Birmingham, 1869, although none are associated with brick makers.

There was no evidence to suggest that the stone sills of windows 1 and 6 were replacements. This could suggest that these plain sill stones were a feature of the original design.

Record of Stratigraphy

To the north of the Town Hall the stratigraphy was recorded in a trench partly recorded during the Phase 1 watching brief (Hewitson 2003), at the east and west facing sections of an existing cutting.

In the north-east facing section a natural deposit of red sandy clay visible to the base of the trench (recorded up to 0.9m in depth) was overlain by a further natural layer of orange sand and gravel, 1m in depth (Fig. 5a, Plate 6). These natural deposits were in turn sealed by modern deposits of brick hardcore (0.2m in depth), tarmac (up to 0.5m in depth) and concrete (up to 0.6m in depth) beneath a recent paved surface.

The south-west facing section was also made up of a natural red clay visible to the base of the trench (recorded up to 0.6m in depth), overlain by a layer of natural orange sand and gravel, 0.65 m in depth (Fig. 5b, Plate 7). A layer of modern rubble hardcore was present above the gravel recorded up to a depth of 0.7m. A brick wall was visible in the section running north-west to south-east and walling perpendicular to this was also visible in the section (Fig. 5b). This brickwork is likely to be associated with modern service features, since a similar brick manhole or capped drain was also visible in section.

Archaeological Features

A well was recorded in the basement of the Town Hall, visible after the removal of floorboards (Fig. 6; Plate 8). The well was partially under the western basement wall of the Town Hall and was c.1.5m in diameter. The well had been infilled in the past, although the upper portion was open to a depth of c.1m. The fill of the well was not investigated further, due to health and safety considerations. The well appeared to be dug through natural red sandstone. The Town Hall appears to be located at the junction between sand and gravel deposits and Lower Keuper Sandstone, explaining why sandstone has not been recorded in the trench to the north of the building (British Geological Survey sheet 168, 1955). No artefacts were recovered from this phase of the watching brief.

6.0 Discussion

The watching brief provided evidence for a remodelling of the north-facing façade of the Town Hall, with the removal of balustrades from beneath two of the windows, the enlargement of the glazed area of the windows and the insertion of plain sill stones. Bricks used in the alterations recorded at Birmingham Town Hall were likely to have been manufactured between the 1860s and the 1890s, giving a broad date range for the alterations to the northern façade.

The balustrades were originally added as a feature of the Town Hall during the extensive remodelling of the northern façade by Charles Edge between 1848 and

1851, when a pediment and colonnade were constructed to mirror the southern elevation of the building (Melville and Partners 1999, 21). The original specification document of 1848 in its detail of the masonry working requests “The cap rails of the balusters in the several openings in one stone. The balusters firmly doweled with base and caps worked to detail.” (*ibid.* Section 8.3) Alterations to this remodelled façade must therefore post-date 1851.

Several later nineteenth and early twentieth century modifications to the Town Hall have been recorded, together with more recent renovations (*ibid.* 23-30). Externally accessed public lavatories are regarded as having been constructed at a date between the recorded 1875 alterations and the 1891 alterations at the northern façade of the building (*ibid.* Appendix A, Ground Floor Plan). The alterations to the balustrade features recorded during the watching brief are likely, therefore, to be contemporary with the creation of these female and male lavatories. The removal of the balustrades, consequent increase in height of the glazing and the insertion of plain sills is likely to relate to this phase of alteration. The removal of brickwork beneath may relate both to the insertion of new sills and a requirement for new services. The conversion of the central doorway from a window (as shown in Charles Edge’s 1848 plans) into an entrance is also likely to be contemporary with the creation of externally accessed lavatories.

The date of the brickwork (likely to be between 1860 and 1892) associated with the alterations to the windows appears to be consistent with the proposed date of alterations in this area. Whether the balustrade features were removed from the windows at either end of the northern façade at this time (windows 1 and 6), is less certain. There is no evidence of the existence of balustrade scars on the inside faces of the jambs of these windows, and stonework rather than brickwork was recorded beneath the sills. This either suggests that the balustrades were not present beneath these windows and were not added by Edge between 1848-51, or that they have been altered and repaired with stonework in a different manner, perhaps due to the fact that the insertion of services beneath them was not necessary. The creation of a ‘green room’ behind window 1 in 1875 (*ibid.*) might suggest, however, that an elongation of the window here was also undertaken and that this was contemporary with the alteration of all the window openings along the northern façade of the Town Hall at this date.

The stratigraphy observed in groundworks to the north of the Town Hall revealed natural sands and gravels overlying red sandy clay at a depth of between 0.7m and 1.3m beneath the present ground surface. The well recorded beneath the basement of the Town Hall suggests the building may be constructed on red sandstone. Brickwork here appears to relate to drainage features likely to be associated with Chamberlain Square. No earlier archaeological features were visible in this area.

The well recorded in the watching brief lies below a wall constructed between 1848 and 1851 during the works undertaken to extend the basement area (*ibid.* 21-22). The well almost certainly pre-dates the construction of the Town Hall and is likely to relate to previous settlement in this area of Birmingham.

There were buildings on the site of the Town Hall prior to its construction. The site was not developed in 1731, as shown on the Westley Plan of Birmingham (Fig.7), but

buildings are present on the 1778 Thomas Hanson map of Birmingham (Fig.8) and again on the 1824-25 Piggot Smith map of Birmingham (Fig.9). It can be suggested therefore that the well could be associated with late eighteenth century buildings on the site. It is equally possible, however, that the well relates to pre-eighteenth century occupation.

7.0 Acknowledgements

The watching brief was undertaken by John Halsted, Malcolm Hislop and Kristina Krawiec. The report and illustrations were prepared by John Halsted. The documentary research was carried out by Suzanna Davey, with advice from Kirsty Nichol. The project was managed by Laurence Jones who also edited the report.

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Documentary Sources

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Slater's Directory of Staffordshire 1862

Post Office Directory of Staffordshire 1864

Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1868

White's Directory of Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Walsall 1869, Part 4

Post Office Directory of Staffordshire 1872

Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1878

Kelly's Directory of Birmingham 1880

Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1888

Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1892

Kelly's Directory of Staffordshire 1900

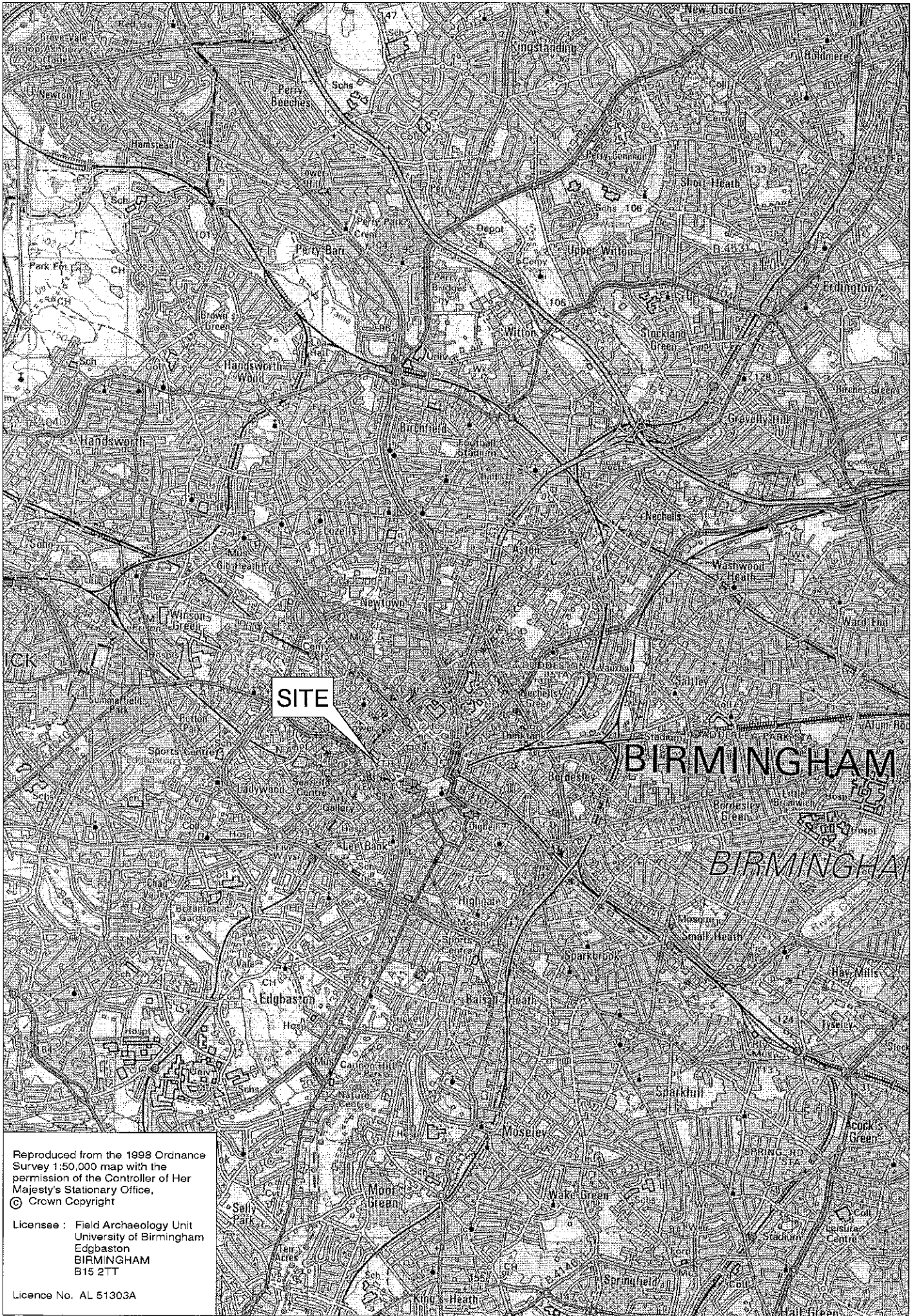
Cartographic Sources

Westley Plan of Birmingham 1731

Thomas Hanson Map of Birmingham 1778

Piggot-Smith Map of Birmingham 1824-5

British Geological Survey Sheet 168, 1955



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Fig.1

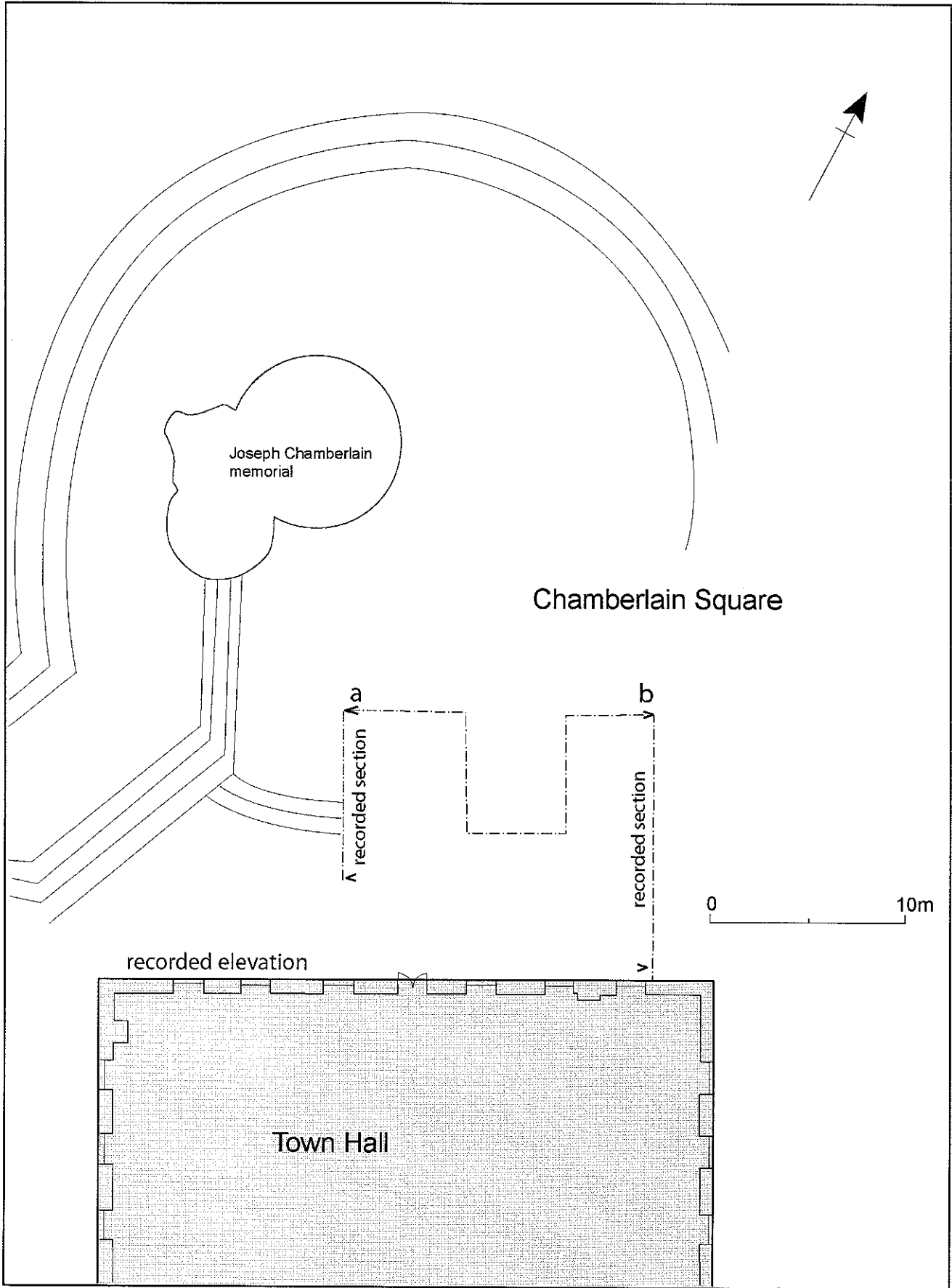


Fig.2

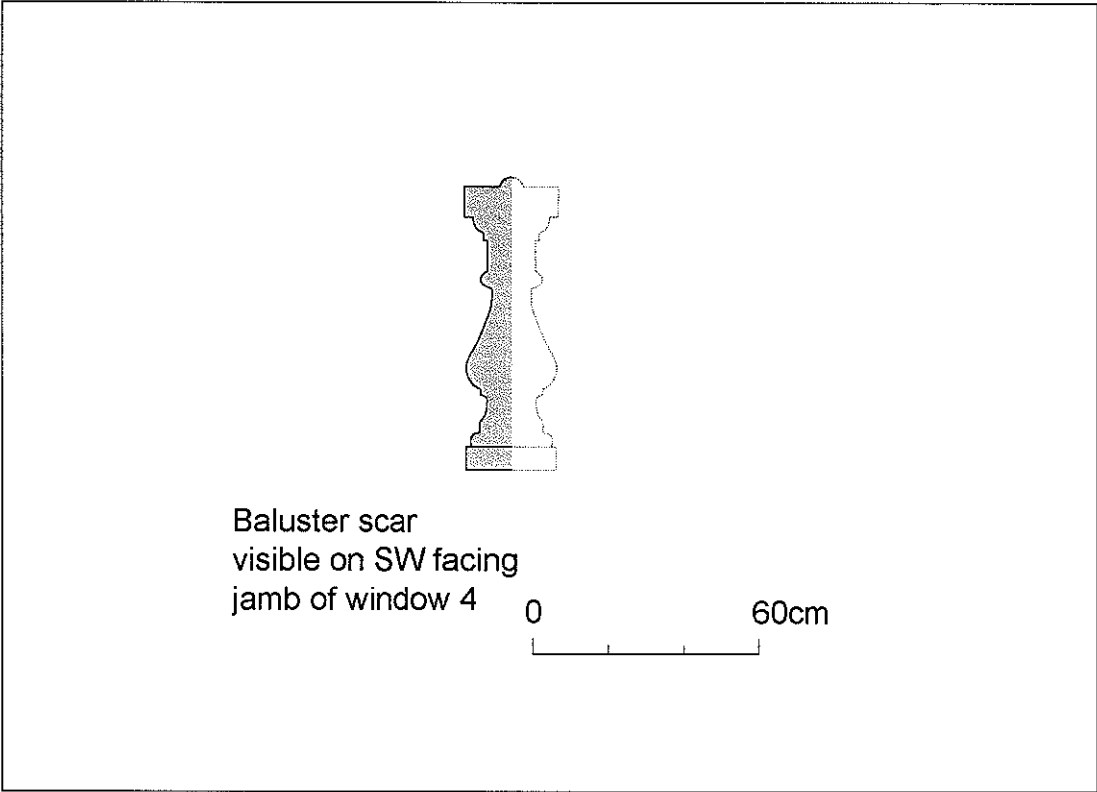


Fig.3

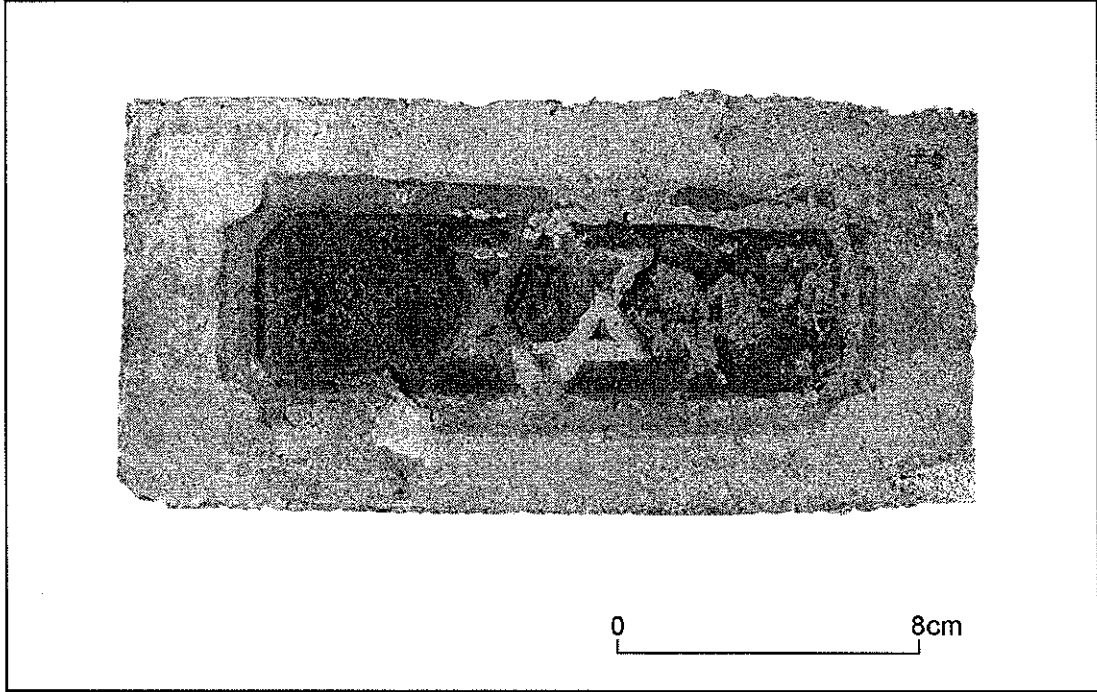


Fig.4

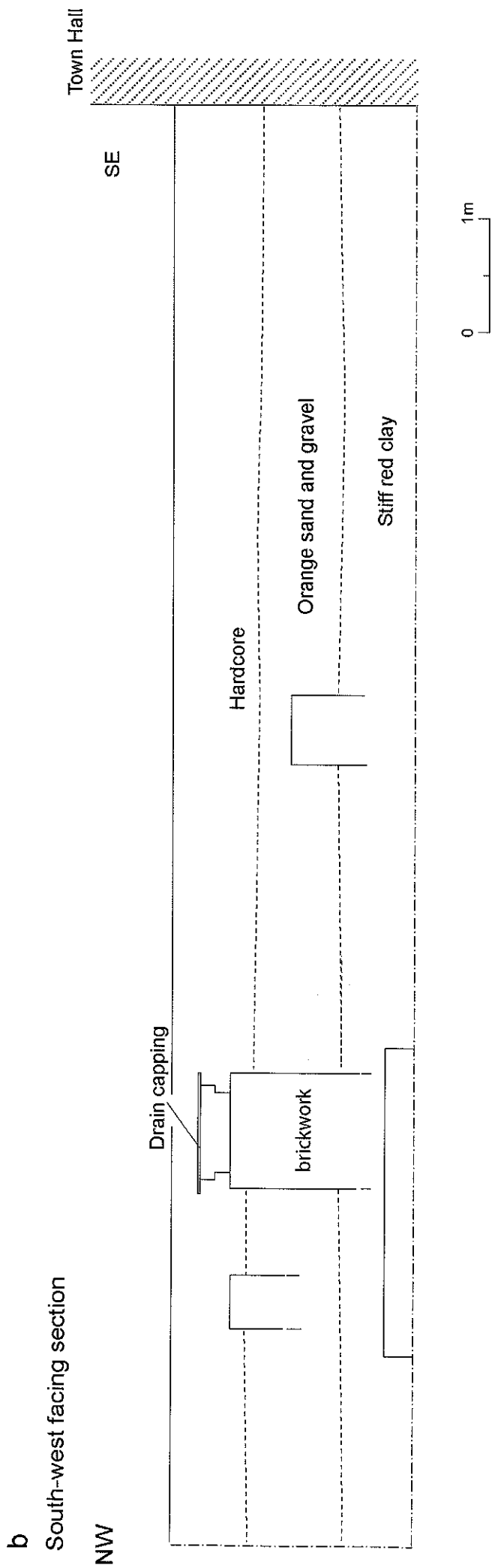
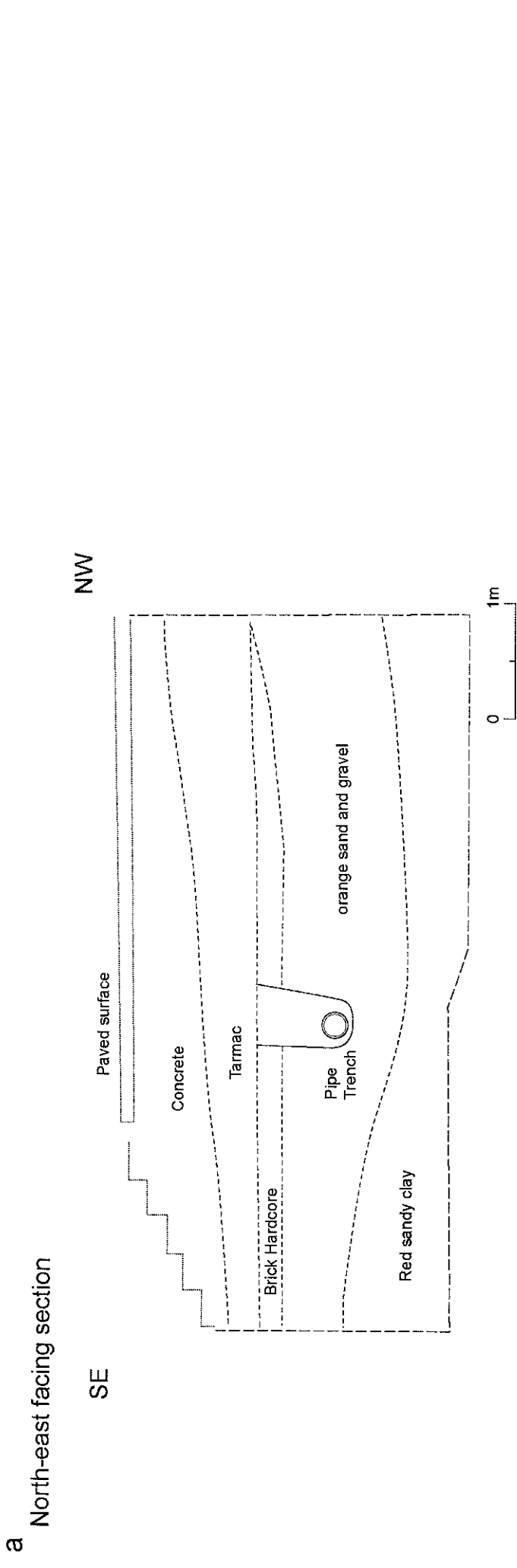


Fig.5

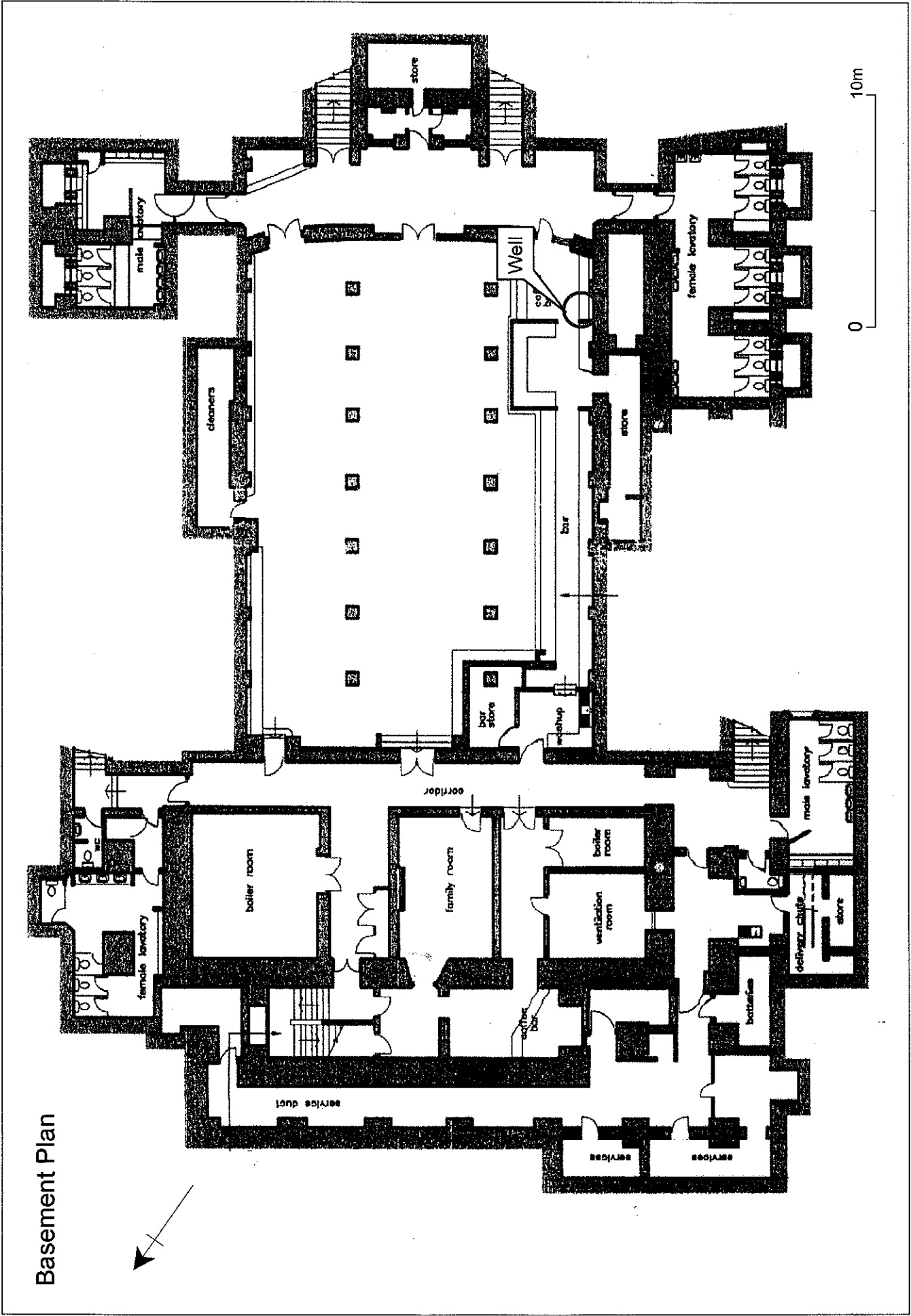


Fig.6

the PLAN of BIRMINGHAM, Survey'd in the Year 1731.

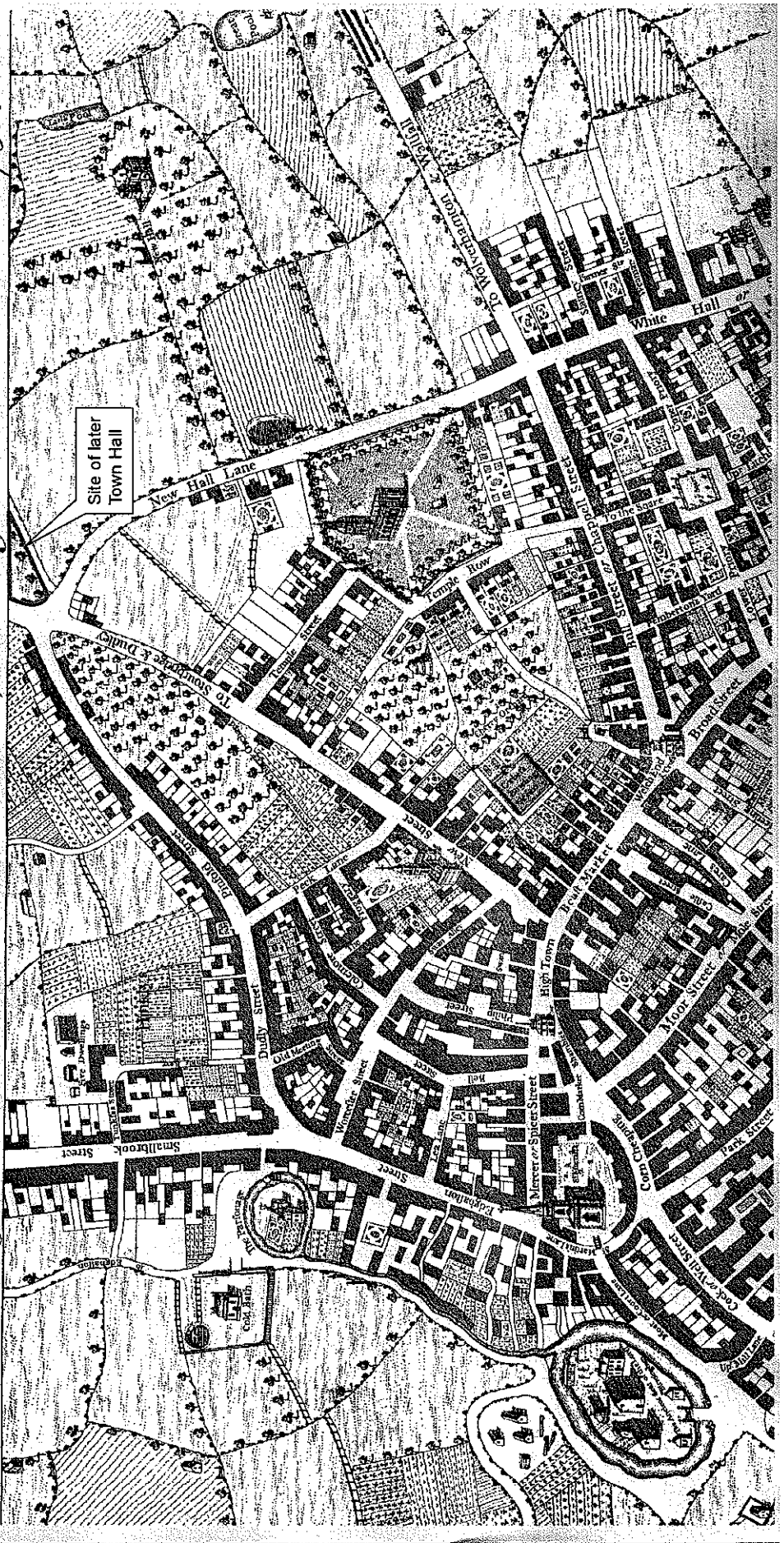


Fig.7

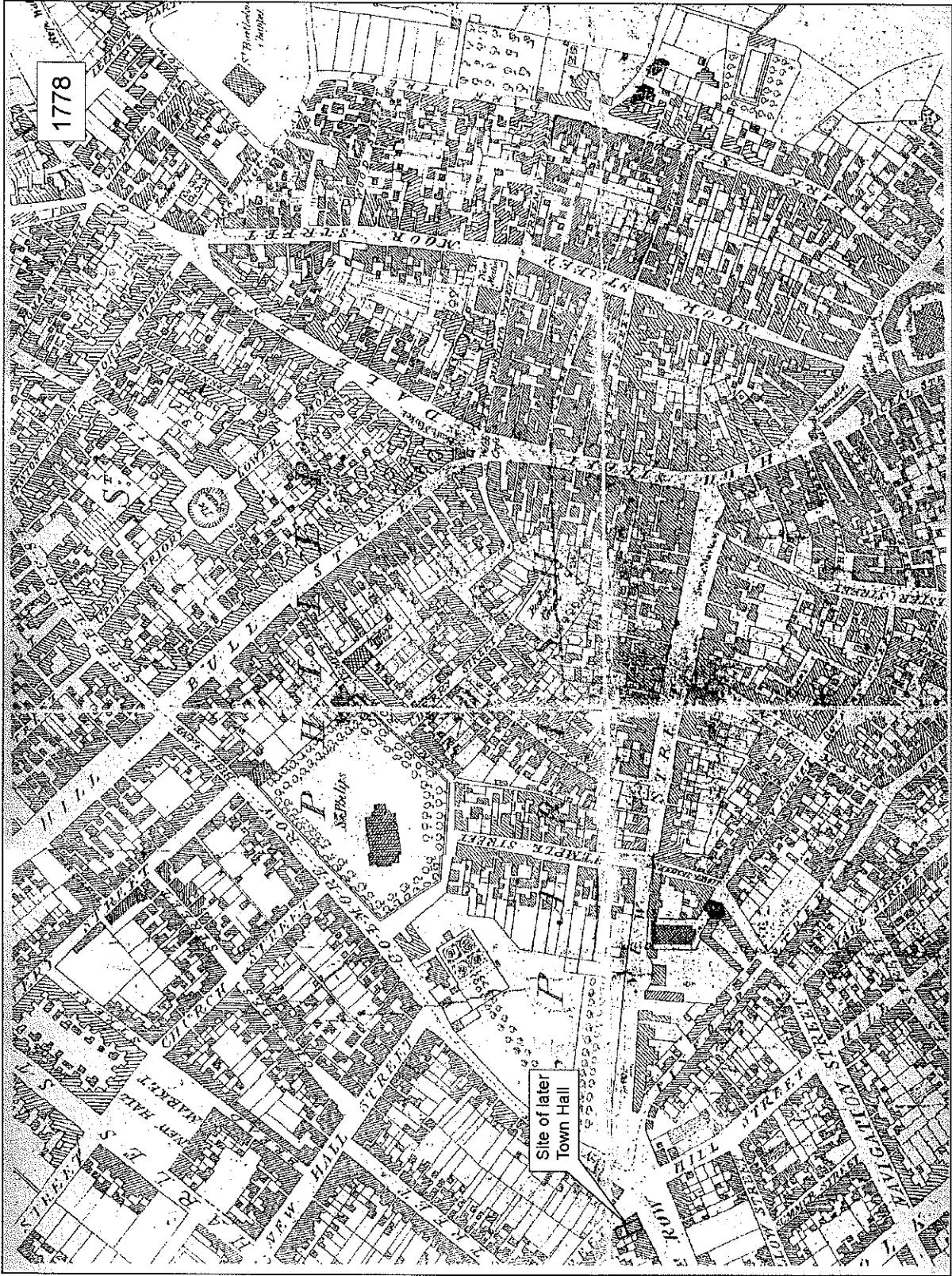


Fig. 8

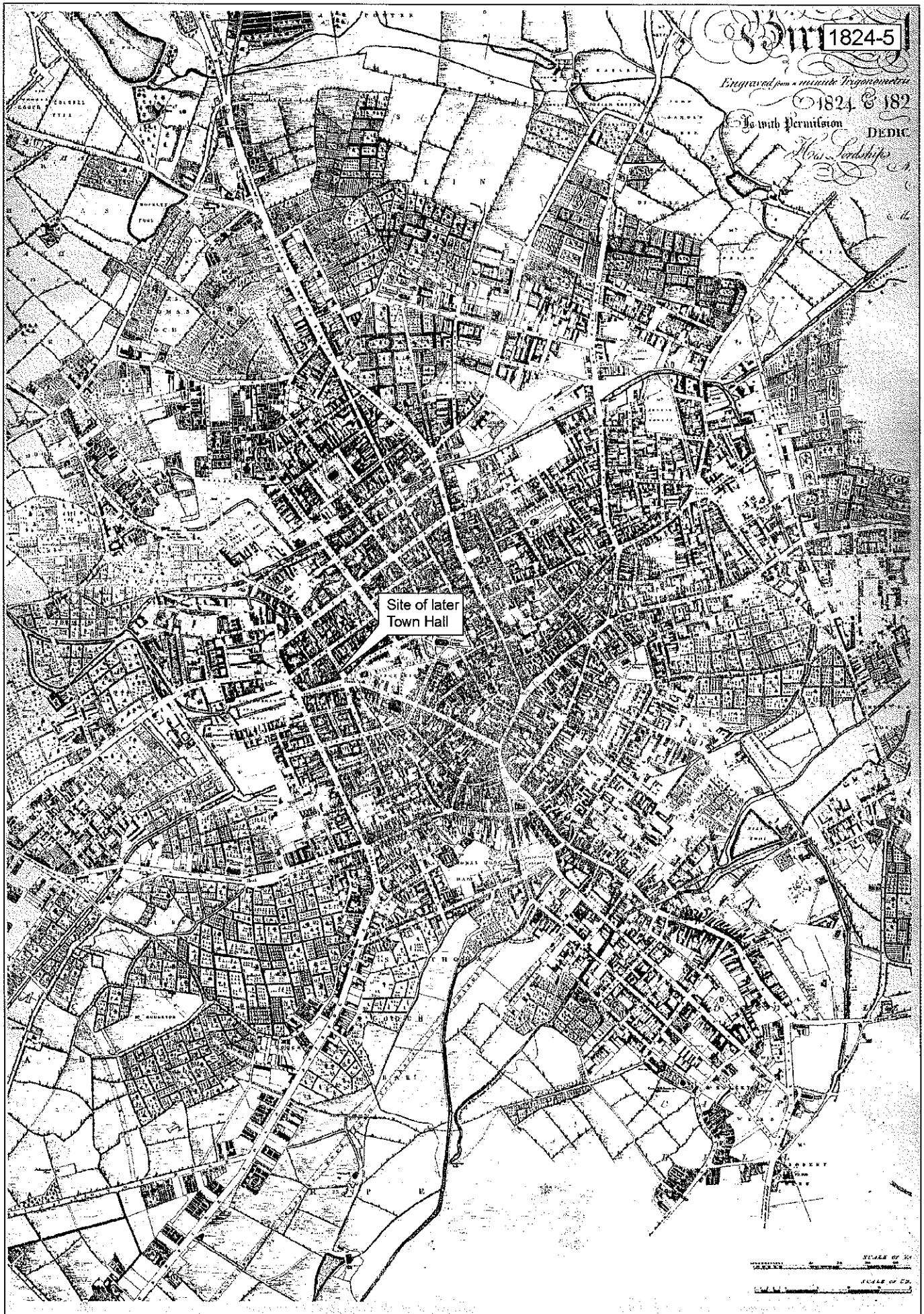
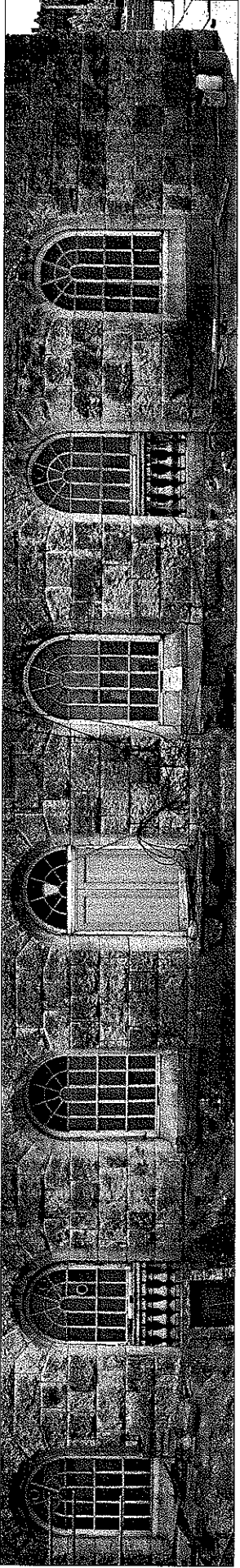


Fig.9



1

2

3

4

5

6

Plate 1



Plate 2

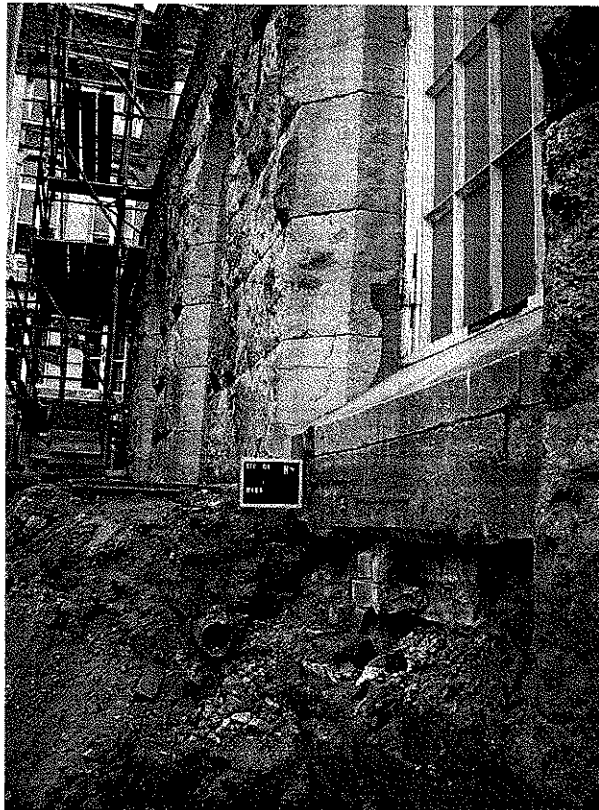


Plate 3

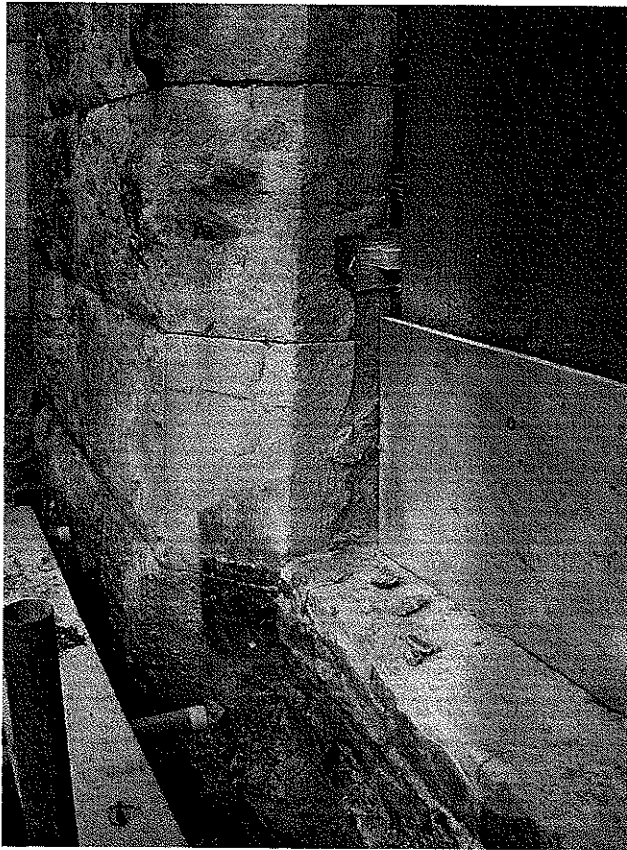


Plate 4



Plate 5

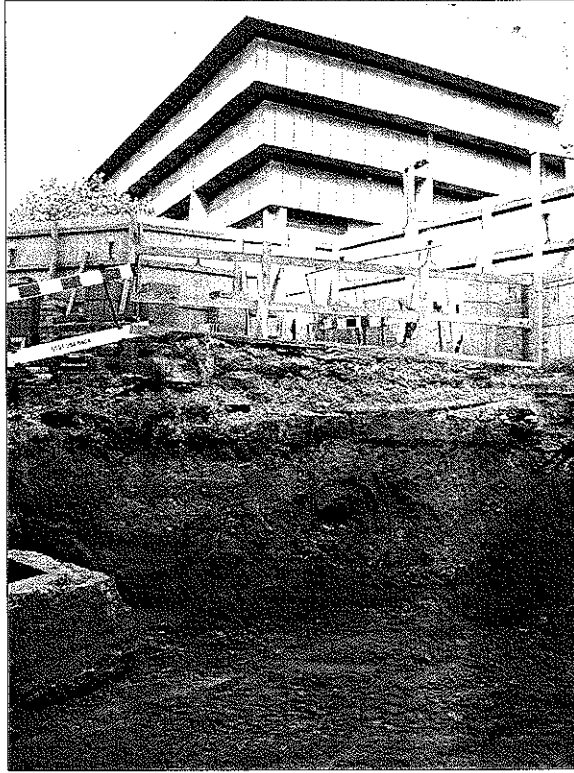


Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8