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An Archaeological Evaluation at The Row Market, Edgbaston Street, Birmingham City Centre

1999

by
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1.0 Summary

An archaeological evaluation was carried out at The Row Market, Birmingham City Centre, prior to the construction of a new Rag Market building, in the period 19th - 22nd July, 1999. An earlier desk-based assessment (Mould and Litherland 1995) had identified the site as being part of a zone of potential archaeological survival. The excavation of two trial-trenches in 1999 showed discrete survival of a medieval pit in Trench 2, at a depth of 2m below the modern tarmac surface. The remainder of the recorded deposits and features were characterised by 19th-century cellars, which had been backfilled in the 20th century, and by services and their associated trenches. Despite major truncation of earlier deposits by cellaring, this evaluation demonstrated the survival of 'islands' of archaeological deposits and features. It is possible that other features dating to the medieval period, or earlier, also survive along the proposed wall-line of the new Rag Market building and it is recommended that a watching brief be carried out during groundworks associated with this construction.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken at The Row Market, Edgbaston Street, Birmingham City Centre. The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Commercial Services, Birmingham City Council to provide archaeological information in advance of proposed development of the site. The archaeological evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994), a Brief prepared by Birmingham City Council (Hodder 1999) and a Specification prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Mould 1999). This evaluation conformed to Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of Environment 1991).

3.0 The Site and its Location (Figure 1)

The site is located within Birmingham City Centre, between Edgbaston Street, Moat Lane and The Row (NGR SP 073 864). The site comprised a tarmac surface which had been used to house stalls for an open market.

4.0 Archaeological Background

An earlier stage of investigation comprised the assessment of documentary and cartographic sources, published and unpublished written records, and an on-site inspection of the proposed development area. The investigation identified a number of important archaeological sites within the immediate vicinity, comprising the medieval moated manor house, the smaller Parsonage Moat and associated watercourses, together with Edgbaston Street, which was one of the earliest streets to be laid-out in the town (Maps 1 and 2). The assessment indicated that a number of specific zones within the overall proposed development area required a phased archaeological response (Mould and Litherland 1995, Figure 1).

The site lies within Zone 4 and, given the history of development of the street block and information provided by early-19th-century plans, it was suggested that damage to archaeological deposits by cellarage might be anticipated here, particularly along the street frontages. However, it was also noted that previous urban excavations in the West Midlands - including evaluations in Digbeth and Deritend - had demonstrated that archaeological deposits can survive as 'islands' between areas of later disturbance. Recent archaeological investigation in the city centre, at a site further to the west, along Edgbaston Street, produced evidence for some of the earliest stages of Birmingham's growth and demonstrated the widespread survival of deposits and features dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries.

5.0 Objectives

The objectives of this archaeological evaluation were to determine the likely presence or absence of any archaeological deposits and features along the new wall line of the Rag Market. The evaluation aimed to establish the extent, date and character of surviving archaeological deposits and to assess their quality and significance. In addition, the evaluation aimed to assess the extent to which any archaeological deposits had been damaged by more recent building and demolition work, to provide information regarding the depth of archaeological deposits and the implications of the proposed development.

6.0 Method

Two trial-trenches were excavated. Both trenches were 'stepped' in order to comply with current Health and Safety regulations. The tarmac surface and modern overburden were mechanically removed, under archaeological supervision, to the top of any significant archaeological features and deposits, or to the top of the natural subsoil. The instability of Trench 1 meant that recording was carried out from the top of the trench.

All stratigraphical sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present, and contextual information was supplemented by scale drawings, plans, sections and photographs which, together with recovered artefacts, form the site archive. This is presently housed at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

7.0 Archaeological Results (Figures 2, 3 and 4)

Trench 1 (Figure 2)
(4m x 10m, aligned southwest-northeast, excavated to 108.40m AOD)

The yellow sand-gravel subsoil (1008) was recorded at a depth of 2m below the modern ground surface. It was cut by two brick-built cellars which had been backfilled with brick and rubble (1007). A black ashy layer (1006), *c.*0.15m in depth, sealed the cellar backfill. It was overlaid by a thin (*c.*0.10m) black band of ash, charcoal and coke (1005), which was itself overlaid by a light brown/grey silt mixed with broken bricks and mortar (1004). This layer was sealed by a thin band of reddish-brown sandy silt (1003), overlaid by a grey layer of sandy-silt mixed with broken tarmac, bricks and rubble (1002). A brown-red ashy silt layer which contained modern brick rubble (1001) was sealed by a band of hardcore (1009). This acted as the foundation for a tarmac surface (1000).

Trench 2 (Figures 2, 3 and 4)
(4m x 10m, aligned northwest-southeast, excavated to 109.78m AOD)

At the centre of Trench 2, the yellow gravel-sand subsoil (2012) was cut by a small sub-circular pit (F200), which had sloping sides and a flattish base. It was filled with a grey brown sandy silt (2010) which contained one sherd of medieval pottery and one bone fragment.

Southwest-facing Section (Figure 4, S.1)
The yellow gravel-sand subsoil (2012) was sealed by a layer of brown sandy clay silt (2008) which was itself overlaid by a grey silty-rubble layer (2007). All three were cut by a north-south aligned, brick-built, cellar wall (F202), its foundation trench-cut (F204) and by a similarly-aligned drain-trench (F203). Further up the truncated sequence, a series of hardcore, brick rubble and tarmac deposits (2002, 2003, 2004 and 2006) was sealed by a layer of concrete (2001) which continued over the cellar wall (F202). The concrete was overlaid by a tarmac surface (2000). The southeastern end of Trench 2 was characterised by cellar infill which was also sealed by a tarmac surface (2009).

Northeast-facing Section (Figure 4, S.2)
The pit (F200), which was identified in plan only, was sealed by a machine-brick surface (F201). This surface was overlaid by a 0.35m-thick layer of grey silt and rubble (2011) which was, in turn, overlaid by a 0.90m-thick layer of brown silt mixed with brick rubble (2005). Layers 2005 and 2011 and the brick surface (F201) were all cut by a north-south aligned drain (F203) and by a brick-built cellar wall (F202). A series of hardcore and brick rubble deposits (2002, 2003 and 2004) was built-up against the northwestern side of this wall and sealed the cut of F203. A layer of concrete (2001) extended along the northwest-facing section and was sealed by a tarmac surface (2000).

8.0 Discussion

One feature (F200) was dated to the medieval period. No earlier features were identified and no earlier artefacts were recorded. The survival of a medieval pit (F200) amongst the 19th-century cellar walls and drainage cuts suggests that there may be other surviving deposits and features along the length of the proposed new wall line of the Rag Market. As has already been mentioned (see Section 4.0 above) a number of sites within the city centre and within the West Midlands as a whole are characterised by the survival of islands of archaeology and the results of the evaluation show that The Row Market area is no exception.

9.0 Assessment of the Archaeological Importance of the Proposed Development Site

Despite the scarcity of medieval deposits and features identified by this evaluation, the site remains an important one. This is largely due to its proximity to the manorial moat of Birmingham, the Church of St. Martin and to Edgbaston Street itself, which is known to be one of the original streets laid out in the 12th century (Baker 1995). Although the evaluation suggests that the site has been subject to extensive truncation caused by 19th-century cellaring, it is possible that the evidence for some of the earliest stages of Birmingham's growth could be found within the proposed development area. Any surviving archaeological deposits have the potential to shed light on the early historical development of this area from the Middle Ages up to the present day. The importance of these archaeological deposits is enhanced by the inadequacy of surviving medieval historical records, and the consequent lack of understanding of the many facets of that process of early growth within the town, as discussed above.

10.0 Implications and Recommendations

10.1 Implications

The identification of a medieval pit in Trench 2, at a depth of 2m below the present ground level, suggests a potential for survival of other deposits and features along the new wall line for the Rag Market. These archaeological remains are likely to be affected by the construction of the new market building.

10.2 Recommendation

The recommendation below provides an outline of the archaeological mitigation fieldwork which could be required if the proposed development is approved. The precise nature of such mitigation would need to be determined and approved by the Planning Archaeologist for Birmingham City Council.

- It is recommended that an archaeological watching brief be carried out during any below-ground works associated with the future development of this zone. The purpose of the watching brief would be to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features which might be present below the modern ground surface, and

to provide an understanding of the history and the significance of the archaeology of the site as a whole. These aims would be achieved through a programme of archaeological monitoring visits to the site during contractors' below-ground works.

11.0 References

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12.0 Acknowledgements

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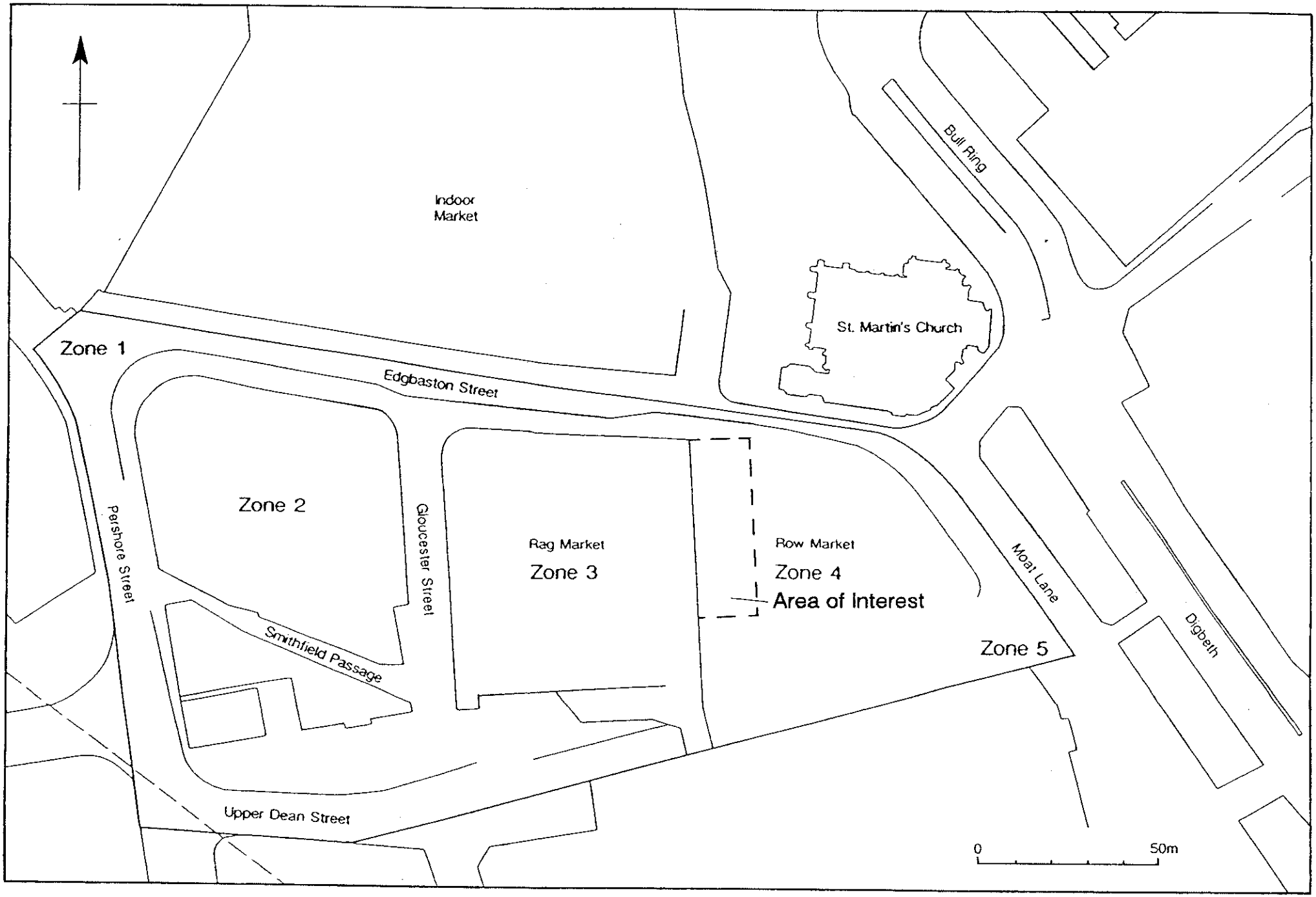

Indoor
Market
Bull Ring
St. Martin's Church
Zone 1
Edgbaston Street
Zone 2
Pershore Street
Gloucester Street
Rag Market
Zone 3
Row Market
Zone 4
Area of Interest
Moat Lane
Digbeth
Zone 5
Smithfield Passage
Upper Dean Street
0
50m

Fig 1

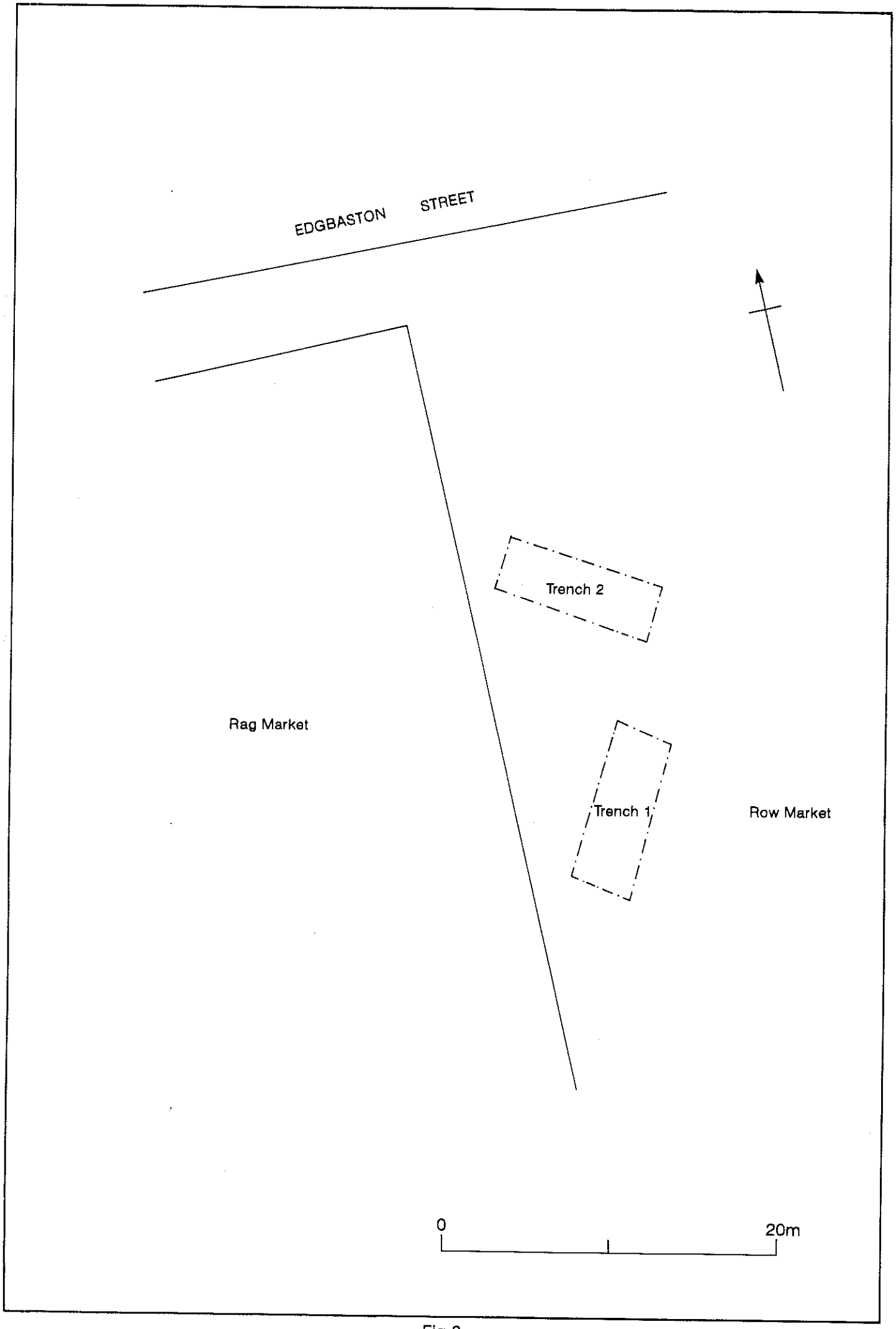

EDGBASTON STREET
Trench 2
Rag Market
Trench 1
Row Market
0
20m

Fig 2

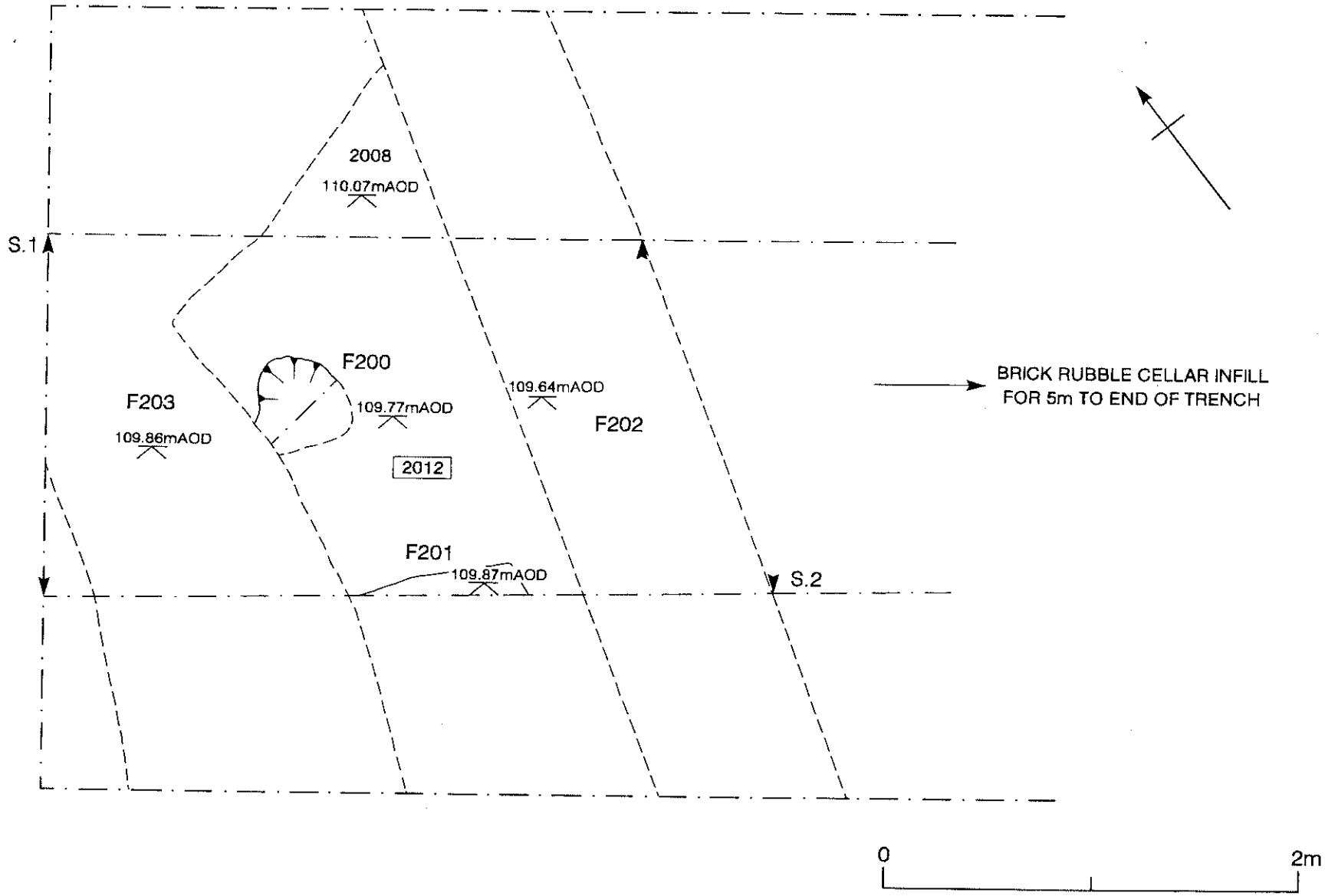
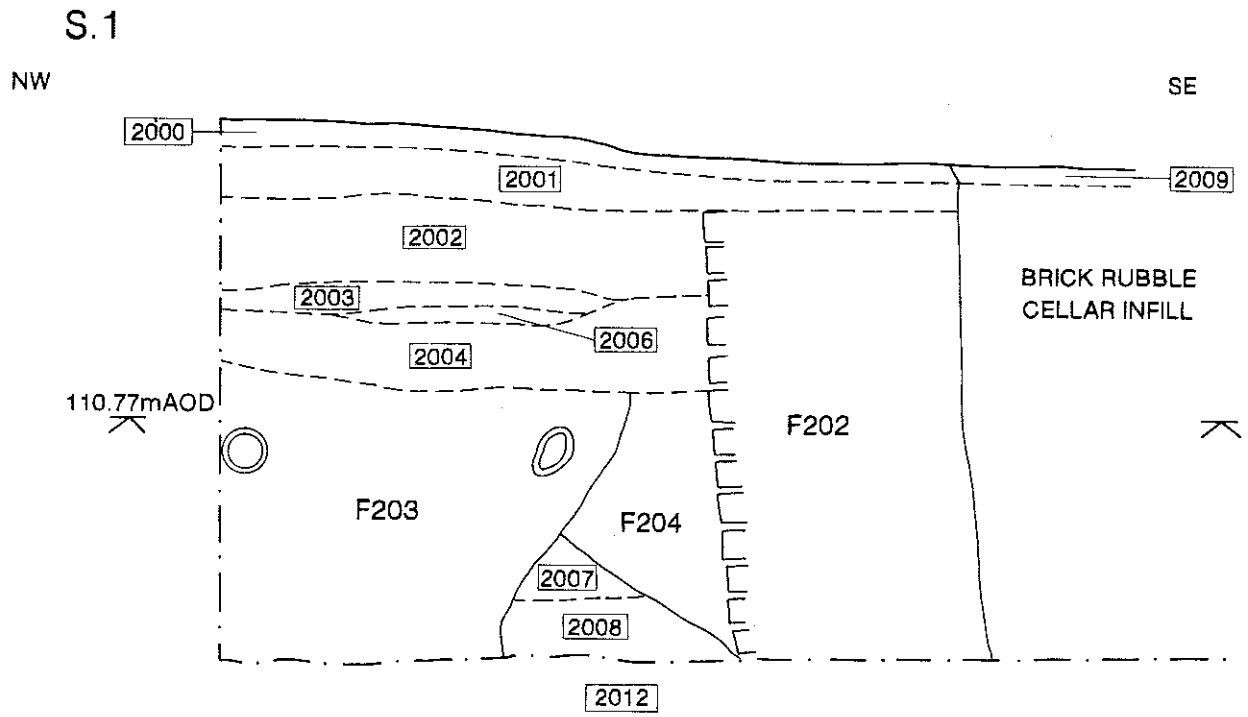

2008
110.07mAOD
S.1
F200
109.77mAOD
F203
109.86mAOD
2012
109.64mAOD
F202
F201
109.87mAOD
S.2
BRICK RUBBLE CELLAR INFILL
FOR 5m TO END OF TRENCH
0
2m

Fig 3


S.1
NW
SE
2000
2001
2009
2002
2003
2006
2004
BRICK RUBBLE
CELLAR INFILL
110.77mAOD
F202
F203
F204
2007
2008
2012

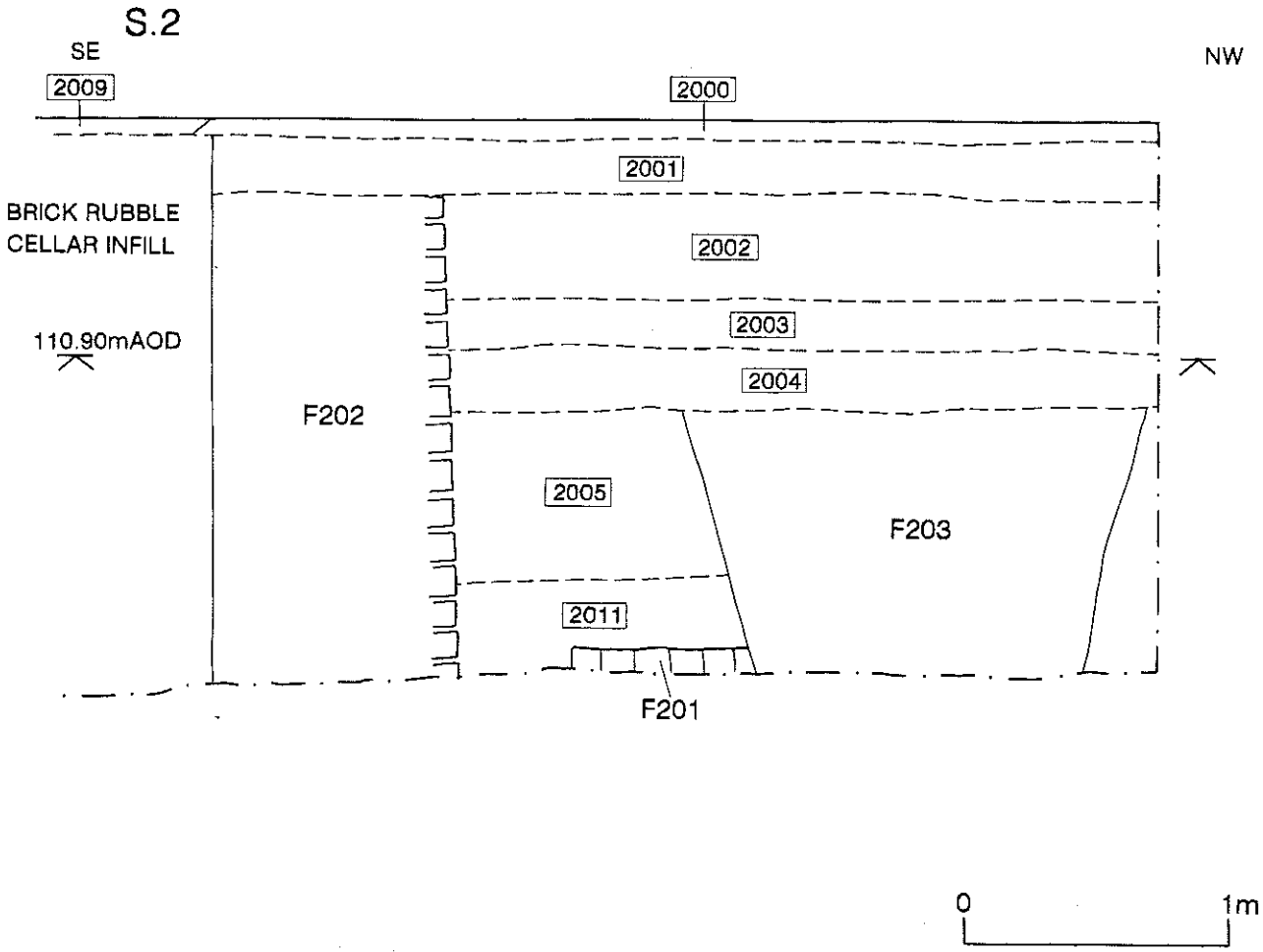
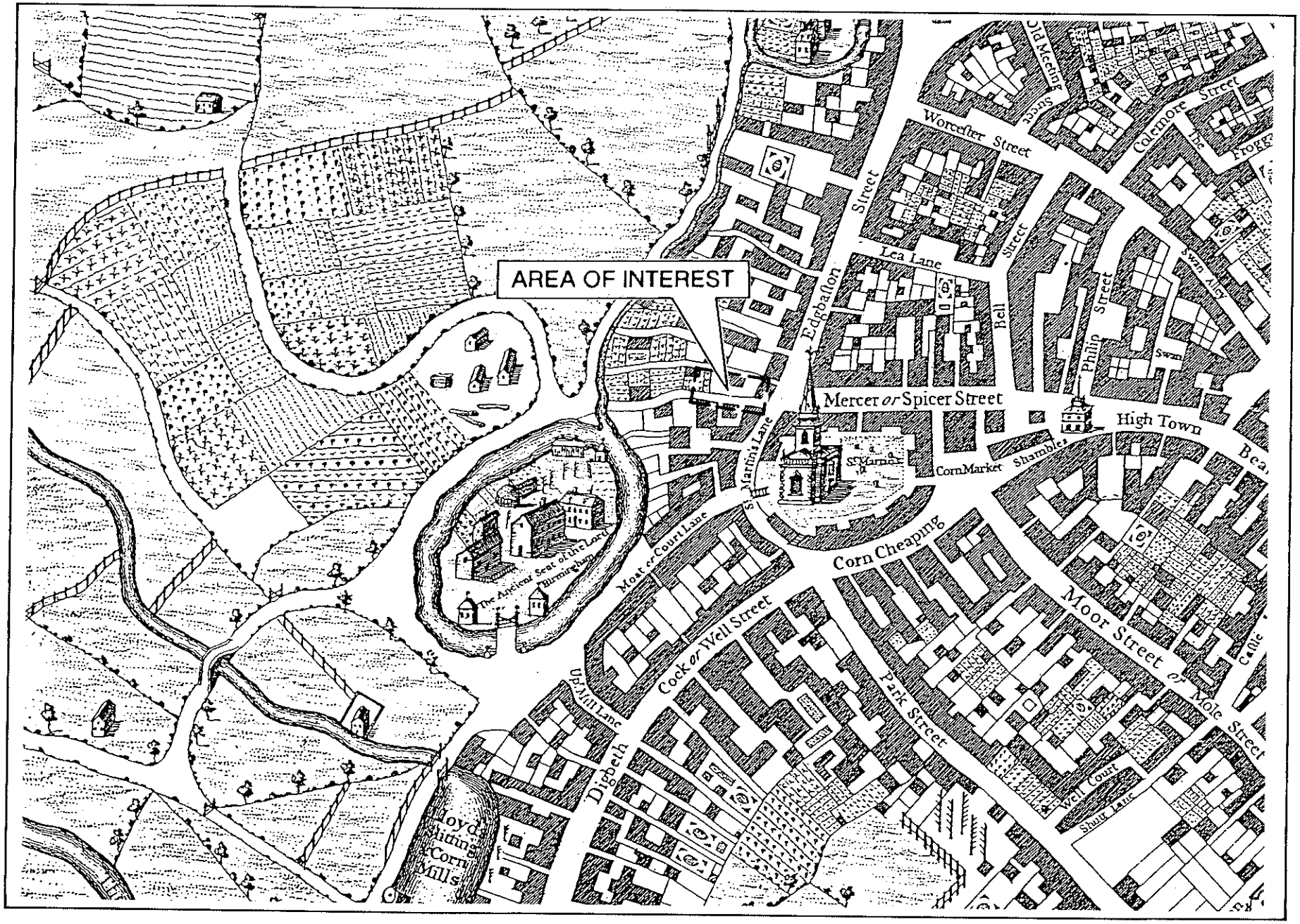
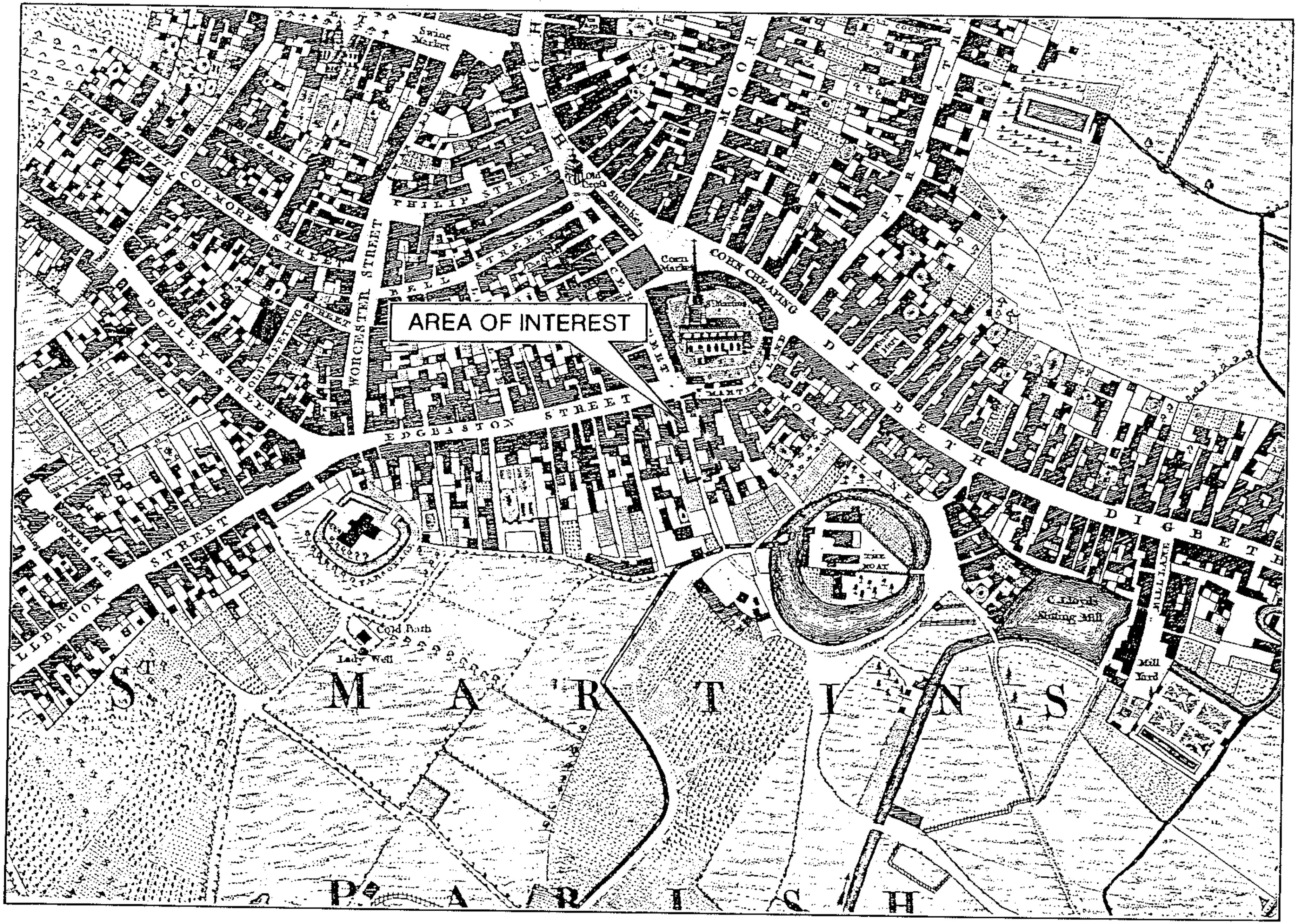

S.2
SE
NW
2009
2000
2001
BRICK RUBBLE
CELLAR INFILL
2002
2003
110.90mAOD
2004
F202
2005
F203
2011
F201
0
1m

Fig 4


AREA OF INTEREST
Worcester Street
Old Meeting
Street
Colemore
Street
Edgbaston
Street
Lea Lane
Bell
Street
Swan Alley
Philip
Street
Swan
Mercer or Spicer Street
High Town
Martin's Lane
St Martin's
CornMarket
Shambles
Moat or Court Lane
Corn Cheaping
Moor Street or Mole Street
Cock or Well Street
Park Street
Up Mill Lane
Digbeth
Well Court
Shoot Lane
Castle
The Ancient Seat of the Lord
Birmingham
Lloyd
hitting
Corn
Mills

Map 1


AREA OF INTEREST
DIGBETH
CORN CHEAPING
MOAT LANE
EDGBASTON STREET
WORCESTER STREET
PHILIP STREET
BELL STREET
MOOR
PARK
COLMORE STREET
DUDLEY STREET
Swine Market
Corn Market
Shambles
Old Cross
THE MOAT
Cold Bath
Lady Well
Mill Yard
ST MARTINS PARISH

Map 2