Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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Hartwell (Smithfield) Garage Site, Digbeth, Birmingham: An Archaeological Evaluation

by
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An Archaeological Evaluation at the Hartwell (Smithfield) Garage Site, Digbeth, Birmingham

Summary

An archaeological evaluation at the Hartwell Garage in Digbeth (NGR: SP 075865, centre; hereinafter called 'the application site') was undertaken on behalf of the owners, Hartwell plc, as part of a planning application to redevelop part of the site. The trial trenches demonstrated that potentially significant archaeological deposits survived as 'islands' between areas of later disturbance, and included a waterlogged deposit in Trench 2 which contained preserved pieces of leather and wood. The pottery recovered dated these archaeological deposits to the years between c.1500 and 1800. In addition to the archaeological deposits, structural evidence was found for a series of later 18th-century and 19th-century brick buildings, which were densely packed into the area before the garage was built this century.

Introduction

The archaeological evaluation was carried out in March 1996 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at the request of Amos and Needham, Architects, acting on behalf of Hartwell plc. The fieldwork consisted of the excavation of two trial trenches, and formed the second stage of an archaeological response, following a desk-based assessment in 1995 (Litherland 1995).

The archaeological evaluation was required to assess the implications of the proposed development of a car showroom and canopy on any surviving below-ground archaeology, in accordance with Policy 8.36 of the Council's Unitary Development Plan and Department of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance Note 16. The brief for the work was prepared by Dr Mike Hodder, Planning Archaeologist for Birmingham City Council (Hodder 1995), and is reproduced as an appendix to this report; additional specifications were provided by Amos and Needham.

Background

The application site is located in the district of Birmingham known as Digbeth which is situated on the western side of the Rea valley between Saint Martin's Church and the Bull Ring and the river. In this vicinity, just above the valley bottom, the drift geology is known to consist mainly of patches of sands and gravels which overly an expanse of Mercia Mudstone, formerly known as Keuper Marl. While Digbeth is known to have lain within the medieval town of Birmingham and to have become a regionally significant centre of metal manufacture by the 16th century (Holt 1985), the precise date when this part of Birmingham began to be developed has remained open to speculation in the absence of firm historical evidence or previous archaeological investigation.

The area of the application site potentially subject to below-ground disturbance lies wholly within the first zone of archaeological interest defined by the desk-based assessment (Litherland 1995). Whilst today this zone is an open garage forecourt, the OS map of 1890 (figure 5b) shows that it was once covered by a series of properties which developed along the important commercial frontage. The main building fronting onto Digbeth is defined as being at the 'head' of the plot, while the former yard area behind is defined as the 'backland'.

Objectives (figure 1)

Two trial trenches were excavated in the forecourt of the Hartwell Garage within the 'footprint' of the proposed new building in order to establish the presence/absence, character, extent, state of preservation and date of any archaeological deposits potentially affected by the proposed development. The research aims of the excavation were to assess the survival and significance of archaeological features or deposits along the Digbeth frontage and in the 'backland' behind, while also searching for evidence of medieval or early post-medieval industrial activity on the site. Excavation was supplemented by documentary and map research in order to place the results in context.

Method

Each of the two evaluation trenches was opened using a JCB-Excavator with a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket. The first trench (Trench 1) was cut from north to south, and measured 10m in length. The trench was set back c.6m from the street frontage in order to avoid anticipated deep cellarage associated with the main buildings at the 'head' of the plots fronting onto Digbeth. Trench 2 was cut from east to west across the 'backland' of these plots and was 6m long. All modern overburden within each trench was removed by machine to the level of the first surviving archaeological horizon identified. Subsequent excavation was by hand. Archaeological deposits were sampled in order to establish their extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date. The stratigraphy of each trial trench was recorded using a continuous numbered context system and BUFAU *pro-forma* record cards. All archaeological features and deposits were photographed and a full drawn record at an appropriate scale maintained.

Results

Trench 1

Trench 1 (10m x 1.6m) was aligned north-south to sample evidence for the historical development of the 'backland' behind the buildings fronting Digbeth. The discussion of the archaeology of Trench 1 is divided into two sections, which concern areas respectively to the north and south of a large centrally located disturbance caused by the insertion of a substantial modern reinforced concrete foundation, which effectively cuts the trench in two.

Trench 1 - North (figure 2)

In the north of Trench 1 the first coherent archaeological horizon consisted of a dirty grey/green silty clay layer with heavy charcoal flecking (equivalent to 1003 in the south of the trench). A sondage was cut to test the depth of 1002, which found the clean bluey/green natural clay of the Mercia Mudstone at a depth of 101.70m AOD. This was overlain by a thin (c.0.1m deep) band of noticeably cleaner grey clay (1018), which gradually merged into the dirtier layer (1002) above. Apart from the charcoal flecking, the matrix of both 1002 and 1018 was mainly derived from the natural clay beneath, which may indicate that this immediate area was not intensively occupied or worked before the late 18th century. During cleaning of 1002 eight sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered of 17th-19th date, although it is possible that these sherds may have worked down into 1002 from the disturbed levels immediately above.

A set of three ?reused red sandstone blocks (F100), the central block displaying well defined diagonal tooling, was set in a foundation trench (F101), which cut 1002. These blocks appeared to represent the foundation course for a narrow wall, aligned roughly diagonally across the trench. Excavation of the shallow foundation trench (F101) indicated that F100 had probably settled into 1002. Two sherds of medieval pot were recovered from the fill of F101, although it would be dangerous to infer the construction date of the wall from this limited evidence, particularly given the later date of the pottery recovered from 1002. It is more likely that the wall foundation F100 belongs to the backplot structure shown here in 1850, which had been demolished by 1890 (figures 5a and 5b). Other patches of mortar and building rubble set into 1002 towards the centre of the trench clearly represented intrusions from later (probably Victorian) building activity above.

Activity above 1002 can be broken down into two main phases of brick building. Close to the centre of the trench two associated wall stubs (Wall 3) were constructed from clamped red brick, 2.5 inches thick, commonly found in buildings of late-18th/early-19th century date. The wall was constructed upon a thick mixed levelling deposit consisting of ash, clinker and brick fragments (1011). In the northern end of the trench, bands of ash and mortar (1007) were cut by the foundations of a right-angled wall return, built of machine-cut red brick (Wall 1), which probably relate to the backplot structure depicted here on the OS map of 1890 (figure 5b). Another band of levelling material (1008), which contained a large quantity of clay roof tile, filled the space between Wall 1 and Wall 3. Above these features levelling deposits of brick and rubble underlay the modern surface of the garage forecourt.

Trench 1 - South (figure 3)

A similar horizon of dirty grey/green silty clay with heavy charcoal flecking (1003) was found to continue at a similar level to 1002 (c.102m AOD) in the north side of Trench 1. Again a sondage was cut through 1003, which revealed the same merging of this layer into a sub-layer (1019) overlying the natural bluey/green Mercia Mudstone. Only one sherd of a cooking pot rim was recovered during excavation of 1003, which may be medieval in date. Towards the south end of the trench, 1003 was cut by a substantial, four brick wide, clamped red brick wall of 2.5 inch-thick bricks (Wall 6) - probably the remains of a back wall of a tall late-18th/early 19th-century building fronting onto Digbeth. Wall 6 also cut into the Mercia Mudstone at a depth of 101.65m AOD, but waterlogging prevented contact with its base. Two cuts just to the north of Wall 6 (F102 and F103) were both related to later phases of building activity butting up to and over Wall 6.

Above 1003, the eastern baulk of the evaluation trench revealed evidence for a complex series of buildings which once occupied this backyard area. While it was difficult to reconstruct the precise sequence or relationship of the various walls to one another from the section, a broad pattern of development can be proposed.

Wall 8 represents a party wall, angled obliquely to the road frontage at this point, and visible on both the 1850 and 1890 maps (figure 5a and 5b). While Wall 8 is constructed in similar brick to Wall 6, it is clearly built over it, and must therefore be later. Wall 8 was not cut to the same depth as Wall 6, being constructed upon a foundation layer of ?reused sandstone blocks reminiscent of F100 to the north. This line of sandstone blocks may continue north of Wall 6 if the line of pink clay (1021) visible in the eastern baulk of the evaluation trench represents the back of packing material around the foundation. Another clamped red brick wall (Wall 4) butts Wall 8 and may represent an east/west return for a building.

Another wall and floor (Wall 5) can be seen near the centre of the section, built from the same level as Wall 8 and Wall 4 to the south. Wall 5 may therefore

belong to a roughly contemporary backyard structure also of late-18th/early-19th century date, possibly associated with Wall 3 in the northern half of Trench 1.

A cellar to the south of Wall 6 was later modified by the construction of a dog-leg, and a single brick thick, concrete skimmed, lining (Wall 7) against Wall 8. The purpose of this lining was probably to prevent flooding and the penetration of dampness into the cellar, which is probably Victorian, or even later, in date.

Activity above these building foundations is of recent date, associated with the creation of the garage forecourt sometime between 1937 and 1950.

Trench 2 (figure 4)

Trench 2 (6m x 1.6m) was aligned east-west to sample the archaeology across the width of the site, and in particular to pick up evidence of former property boundaries. A large and deep disturbance truncated all archaeological deposits in the eastern half of the trench to a depth of c.101m AOD. Consequently this area was not investigated further, and all recording was conducted from the safety of the top of trench.

Excavation was limited to a small area in the middle of the trench where initial cleaning indicated the isolated survival of earlier archaeological deposits. This area was shored to allow excavation to continue below a depth of 1.2m from the modern ground surface, in accordance with current Health and Safety Regulations, although excavation was complicated due to the seepage of ground-water beneath a depth of 101.60m AOD (c.1.70m below the current ground level).

The bluey-green clay horizon of the natural Mercia Mudstone (2027) was found at a depth of 101.30m AOD. This deposit was overlain by two archaeologically significant deposits - a very dark-brown slightly sandy waterlogged silt (2025), about 0.3m deep, situated above the natural, and a dirty grey-brown clay silt (2002), 0.35m in depth, which contained several fragments of brick and tile and post-medieval pottery.

Several samples of the waterlogged deposit (2025) were taken for analysis, and fragments of leather and wood were recovered. Unfortunately, waterlogging prevented the identification of further archaeological horizons within 2002, although the broad date range of the pottery recovered (15th to 18th century) suggests that this is possible.

Both 2002 and 2025 had survived the later disturbances which scoured away archaeological deposits in the rest of Trench 2 because of the protective enclosure provided by three walls (Wall 9, Wall 10 and Wall 14). The south and west walls of this enclosure (Wall 9 and Wall 10 respectively) were constructed from clamped red brick, and are probably late-18th or early-19th century in date. In contrast, Wall 14 was constructed in later 3 inch thick machine-cut brick. While no dating evidence was recovered from the foundation trenches of these walls, their physical relationship - each cutting 2002 - supports the typological sequence proposed for these walls, which, furthermore, can be matched to the available map evidence.

Both Wall 9 and Wall 10 can be identified on the 1850 map. Wall 9 probably represents the backwall of the large building fronting onto Digbeth which was demolished by 1890 (figure 5a), while Wall 10 formed the western boundary of this plot. Two other walls (Wall 12 and Wall 13), bonded into the southern side of Wall 9, were also built of the same type of brick. These walls may, therefore, have defined internal subdivisions within the larger building. All these features had been backfilled with a loose deposit of light brown sand, brick and building material (2007) up to the highest surviving courses of Wall 10 and Wall 14.

Wall 14 was constructed in later 3 inch thick machine-cut brick (2018), and was built over the crudely cut-off end of Wall 9, continuing in a southerly direction as Wall 15. Both Wall 14 and Wall 15 correspond with the footprint of the rear wing of the westernmost of the row of buildings shown on the 1890 OS map, which replaced the structure visible here in 1850, and are of a typically Victorian plan-form (figs 5a and 5b). The lower backfill (2008) east of Wall 14 was distinguished from 2007 to the west by its grey-brown colour, and in turn was sealed by abutting layers of black ash (2010) and pink sand (2011), each 0.10m in depth. Both layers acted as a bedding surface for a floor (F205) of machine-cut blue paviours (2013), which abutted the highest surviving courses of Wall 14. This yard surface can be identified on the 1890 OS map (figure 5b). In the east end of Trench 2, the stub of another north-south aligned wall (Wall 16), also made of machine-cut brick, was visible in the north- and south-facing sections. This wall is probably equivalent to the outer wall of an adjacent rear service wing depicted on the 1950 OS map (figure 5c).

In turn, the yard surface (F205) was sealed under another layer of demolition rubble (2006). This demolition layer extended almost the full length of Trench 2 to the east of a modern machine-cut brick wall (Wall 11), built upon Wall 10. This demolition layer probably represents the final clearance of any remaining structures in advance of the creation of the modern garage forecourt, which occurred in the 1980s (pers.comm. staff of the garage).

Activity to the west of Wall 11 is modern. A deposit of black ash (2004) was overlain by a layer of demolition rubble (2003), both layers being cut by the foundation trench (F201) for Wall 11, which in turn was sealed by a concrete surface (2001). This sequence is probably associated with the construction of the filling station forecourt depicted on the OS map of 1950 (figure 5c).

The Pottery (based upon comments by Stephanie Ratkai)

A large assemblage of pottery was recovered from Trench 2 in comparison with Trench 1 (94 sherds out of a total of 106). The majority of these finds came from context 2002 and consisted mainly of red earthenwares with black (32 sherds) or brown (36 sherds) glazes. Along with this pottery, which was the standard coarseware of the 17th to 18th centuries, 2002 produced two sherds of 16th to 18th century Midlands Yellow ware, as well as five sherds of Midlands Purple dating from the 15/16th centuries through to 1700. A medieval buff ware jug handle with a green glaze dating from the 14th to 15th centuries, and a sandy coloured cooking pot rim (13th-14th century), were recovered from the interface between 2002 and the organically rich deposit below (2025). Finds from this interface also included one sherd of red earthenware with a black glaze, two sherds of Midlands Yellow, two sherds of trailed slipware and two sherds of Midlands Purple.

The layers (2002 and 2025) beneath the rubble backfill were cut by the cellar walls, which suggests that they date from the late-18th century or earlier. The broad date range for the period of usage (15th-18th century) of the pottery recovered from 2002 makes it difficult to be any more specific. While no dating evidence was recovered from 2025, it is notable that fewer sherds of post-medieval date were found at its interface with 2002.

Analysis of the Waterlogged Deposit 2025

A sample of 35 litres was collected for analysis from context 2025. A total of 27 litres of this sample was processed by water flotation. The resulting flots contained a high percentage of wood fragments which precluded further detailed analysis. Several leather offcuts were recovered, including three quite large pieces, one of

which had a sewn hem which was clearly from some item of clothing. In addition to the leather, a quantity of roof tile was also recovered together with pieces of animal bone and larger chunks of wood.

Discussion

The evaluation at the Hartwell Garage site has provided a key-hole through which we can begin to quantify and characterise the archaeological potential of this part of the historic centre of Birmingham. The results have demonstrated that significant archaeological deposits have survived in this intensively developed area of Digbeth, albeit as 'islands' across the site.

Despite the relatively small area of the excavation, the deposits found within Trench 2 probably have most archaeological potential. Analysis of the waterlogged deposit (2025) has shown that preservation of organic matter is good. The survival of 2025 has indicated the potential of waterlogged deposits to add an extra archaeological dimension to our understanding of the development of this part of Birmingham, a possibility first suggested over 20 years ago when the site of the Birmingham Moat was excavated. While it should be recognised that there were difficulties in context recognition due to groundwater seepage, the layer above 2025 - (2002) - also provided a relatively large assemblage of post-medieval pottery, given the size of the area excavated. While the broad date range of usage of many types of post-medieval pottery means it is difficult to be very precise about when in this period the excavated area began to be intensively occupied, on balance the archaeological deposits probably pre-date the later 18th century, when the earliest structural evidence of brick building was found.

The 18th century was a period of intense change in Birmingham, which clearly paved the way for the industrial maturity the city achieved later in the 19th century. The survival of archaeological deposits from this period, and possibly further back into the 16th and 17th centuries, has demonstrated that archaeological investigation can provide another important source in addition to the existing documentary and cartographic sources about this crucial period in the historical development of the city: a period which, furthermore, is generally relatively poorly represented within the archaeological record, because so often it has been destroyed by intensive 19th-century development within an urban context.

While no deposits of medieval date were discovered during the evaluation, this apparently negative evidence should be seen within the context of the relatively small size of the area examined. In addition, the recovery of a small number of sherds of medieval pottery would seem to indicate an as yet unquantifiable level of medieval activity in the vicinity.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Hartwell plc for sponsoring this project. I would also like to thank Mr Rees Caddick, the General Manager, and Joanne Addicott of Amos and Needham, the architects for the development. Thanks are also due to Dr Mike Hodder, who monitored the evaluation on behalf of Birmingham City Council.

This report was written by Stephen Litherland and Derek Moscrop of BUFAU. The accompanying figures were produced by Mark Breedon. Simon Buteux, BUFAU Co-Director, edited the final text.

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Hodder, M. (1995) *Brief for an Archaeological Field Evaluation in advance of consideration of planning application no. C/4621/95/FUL*

Holt, R. (1985) *The Early History of the Town of Birmingham, 1166-1600* Dugdale Society Occasional Papers no.30

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BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE
Hartwell(Smithfield) Garage, 92-108 Digbeth, Birmingham
Brief for *Archaeological Field Evaluation* in advance of consideration of planning application no. C/04621/95/FUL

1.Summary
Redevelopment of the Hartwell(Smithfield) Garage site, 92-108 Digbeth, Birmingham, is likely to affect below-ground archaeological remains of medieval settlement and early industrial activities. This brief is for an assessment of the archaeological impact of the proposed development by means of a field evaluation consisting of excavated trenches.

2.Site location and description
The application site is bounded by Digbeth, Oxford Street and Meriden Street(centre SP 075865). This site lies within one of the areas of potential archaeological importance identified by the City Council.

3.Planning background
Planning Application no C/4621/95/FUL is for the proposed construction of a car showroom on the Digbeth frontage, with an attached display canopy and surrounding car parking. Present site levels are to be retained. Because of the potential archaeological impact of the proposed development on below-ground archaeological remains, an assessment of its archaeological implications is required before the application is determined, in accordance with Policy 8.36 of the Council's Unitary Development Plan,and central government advice in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, "Archaeology and Planning". The field evaluation is the second stage of the assessment, following a desk-based assessment produced in March 1995.

4.Archaeological background
The application site lies within the medieval town of Birmingham. A desk-based archaeological assessment of the whole of the Digbeth/Deritend area included the southern part of the application site, and a pre-application desk-based archaeological assessment of the Hartwell Smithfield site, in March 1995, defined five zones, two of which form the current application site. Zone I, the south half of the site, includes the Digbeth frontage, which may contain remains of medieval and later settlement and industry. Zone II, to the north, is likely to contain remains of the later industrial development of the area, including a gas works. Cellars are likely to be have disturbed below-ground archaeological remains along the street frontage.

5.Requirements for work
The archaeological field evaluation is required to define the nature, extent and significance of below-ground archaeological remains, so that appropriate mitigation strategies may be devised. The mitigation strategies may involve modification of site layout or foundation design to ensure in-situ preservation of archaeological remains, or, if this is not feasible, full archaeological recording in advance of development. The field evaluation is to be confined to the area of the proposed new building in the south part of the site, and is to address the following:
(i)The survival and significance of archaeological features and deposits on the Digbeth frontage;
(ii)The survival and significance of archaeological features and deposits in the "backland" behind the frontage;
(iii)The survival of archaeological evidence for medieval and early post-medieval industrial activity on the site.

6.Stages of work
The archaeological field evaluation is to consist of two trenches, each 2m wide. The lengths and approximate locations are to be as follows:
(i)8m long, along the line of the west wall of the proposed showroom building, but set back from the Digbeth frontage, which may have been disturbed by cellars.

(ii)5m long, along the line of the north wall of the proposed showroom building.
Surface deposits in each trench are to be mechanically removed, under archaeological supervision. Subsequent excavation is to be entirely manual. Excavation in each trench is to be sufficient to define and record, but not totally excavate, all archaeological deposits encountered. The potential of deposits for environmental analysis must be assessed. Trenches are to be backfilled at the end of the evaluation. Finds are to be cleaned, marked and bagged.

7.Staffing
The archaeological field evaluation is to be carried out in accordance with the Code of Conduct, Standards, Guidelines and practices of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, and all staff are to be suitably qualified and experienced for their roles in the project. It is recommended that the project be under the direct supervision of a Member or Associate Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

8.Written Scheme of Investigation
Potential contractors should present a Written Scheme of Investigation which details methods and staffing. It is recommended that the proposal be submitted to the City Council's Planning Archaeologist before a contractor is commissioned, to ensure that it meets the requirements of the brief.

9.Monitoring
The archaeological field evaluation must be carried out to the satisfaction of the Director of Planning and Architecture, Birmingham City Council, and will be monitored on his behalf by the Planning Archaeologist.

10.Reporting
The results of the archaeological field evaluation are to be presented as a written report, containing the following:
(i)An analytical summary of features and deposits;
(ii)Appropriate plans and sections;
(iii)A summary of finds;
(iv)An asessment of the site's significance in terms of national, regional and local importance. The non-statutory criteria for scheduling and the scoring headings for English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme should be employed;
(v)An assessment of the site's potential, as defined in part 5 above
(vi)A copy of this brief.
A copy of the report must be sent to the Planning Archaeologist.

11.Archive deposition
The written, drawn and photographic records of the archaeological field evaluation must be deposited with an appropriate repository within a reasonable time of completion, following consultation with the Planning Archaeologist.

12.Publication
The written report will become publicly accessible, as part of the Birmingham Sites and Monuments Record, within six months of completion. The contractor must submit a short summary report for inclusion in *West Midlands Archaeology*.

DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE
BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
Date prepared: 21 December 1995
Planning Archaeologist: Dr Michael Hodder 0121-235 3161 fax 0121-235 3666
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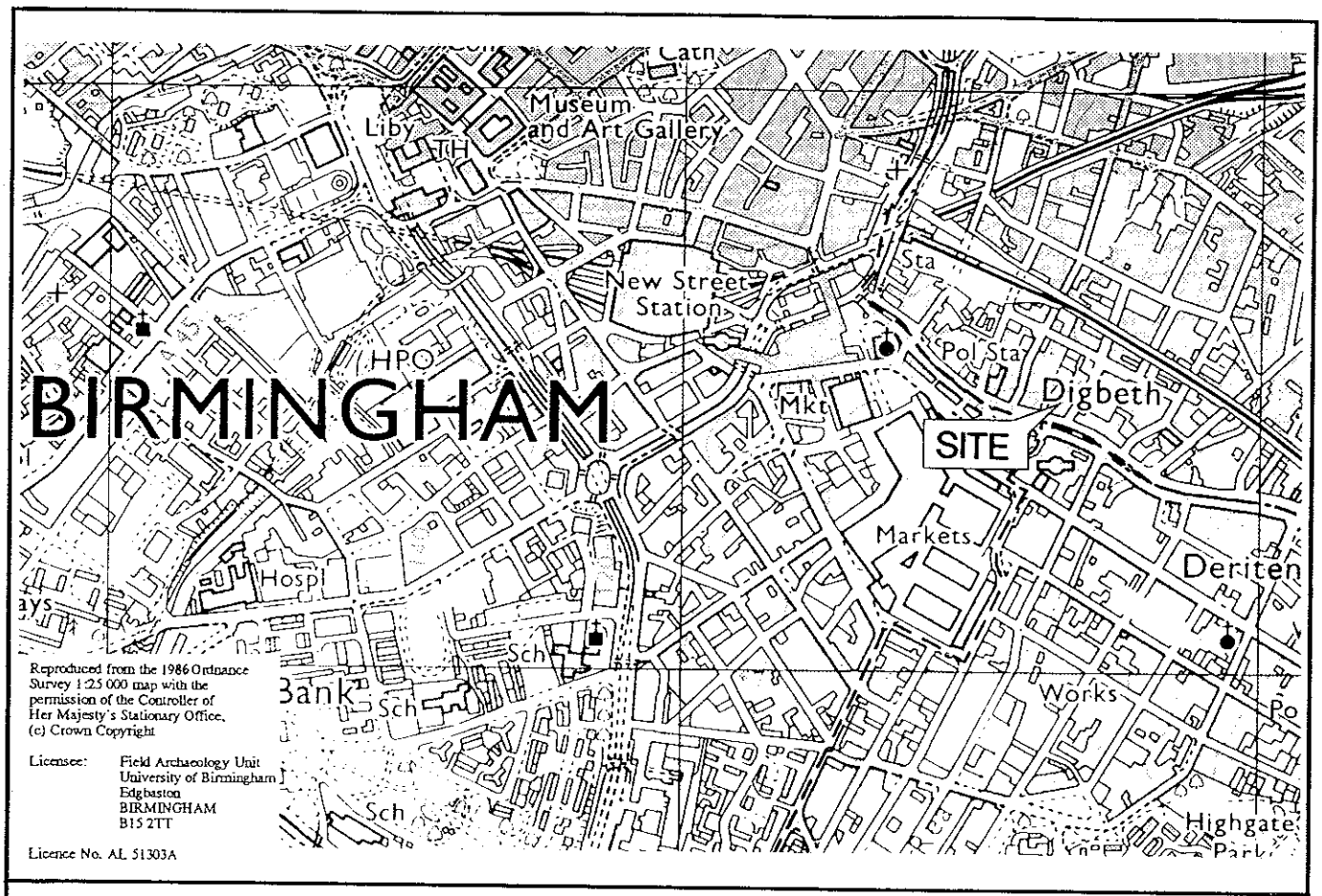
hartwel.wri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New Street Station
HPO
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Mkt
Pol Sta
Digbeth
SITE
Markets
Hospl
Bank
Sch
Works
Highgate
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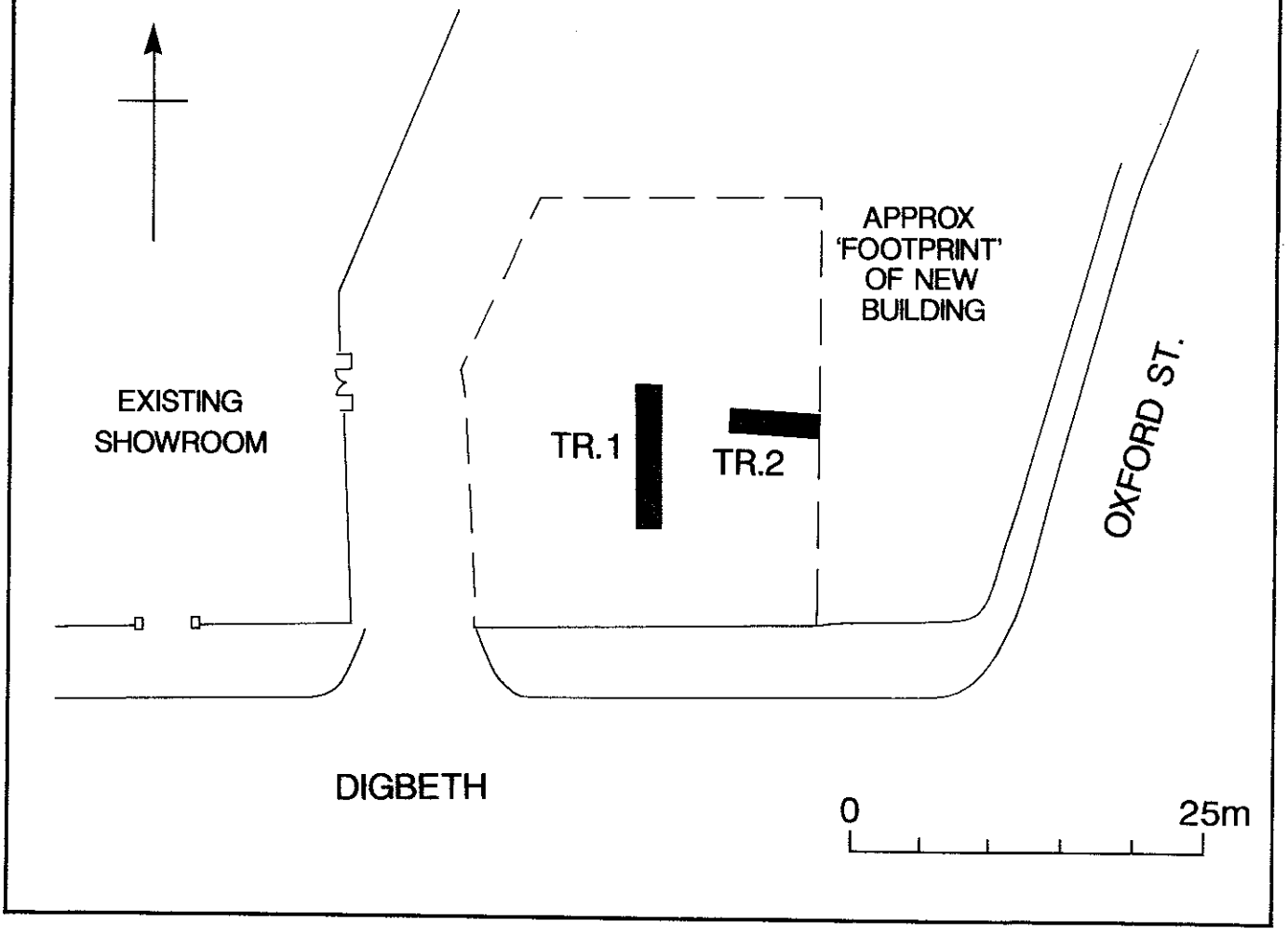
EXISTING SHOWROOM
APPROX 'FOOTPRINT' OF NEW BUILDING
TR.1
TR.2
OXFORD ST.
DIGBETH
0
25m

Fig.1

TRENCH 1 N. END SECTION AND PLAN

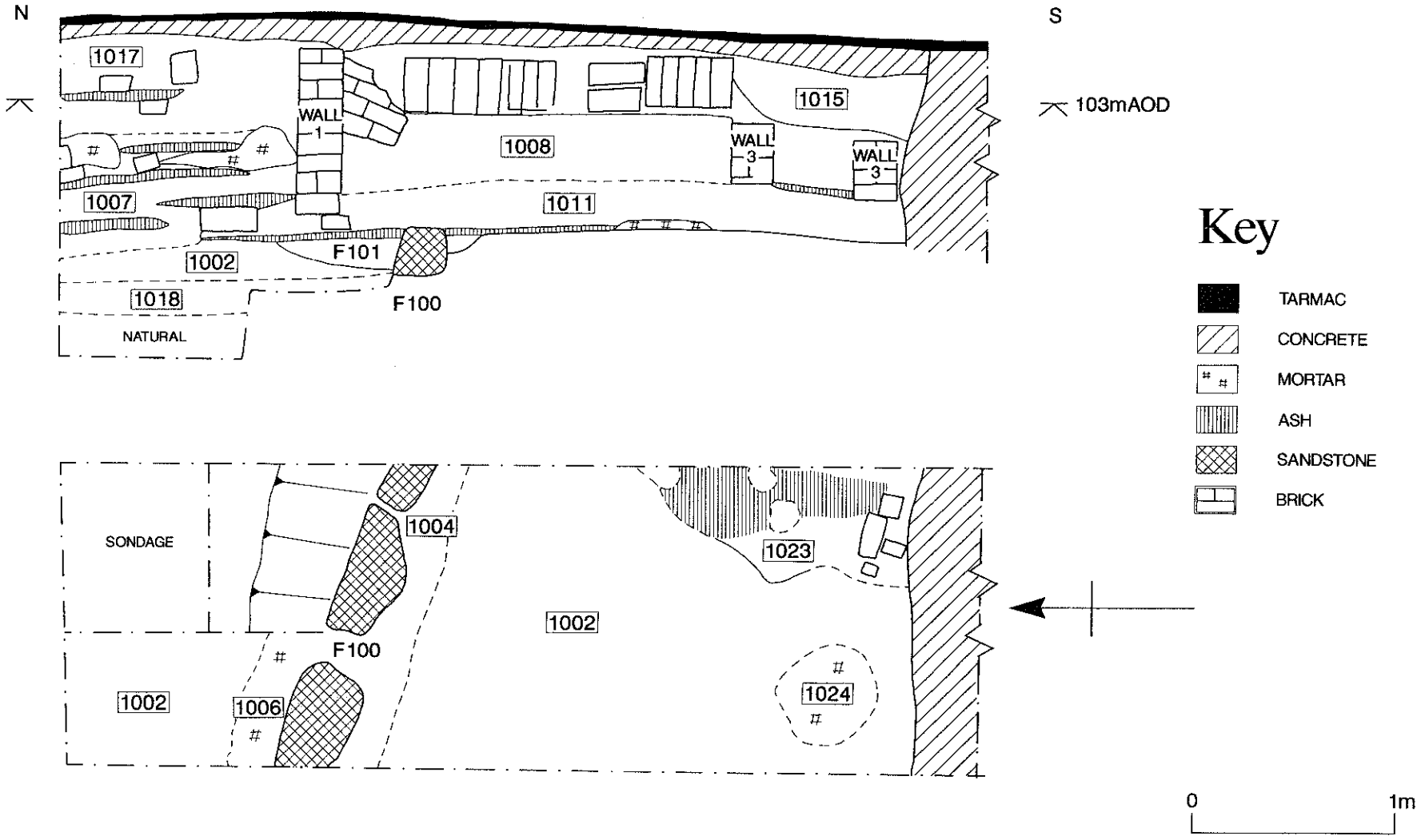

Fig.2

TRENCH 1 S. END SECTION AND PLAN

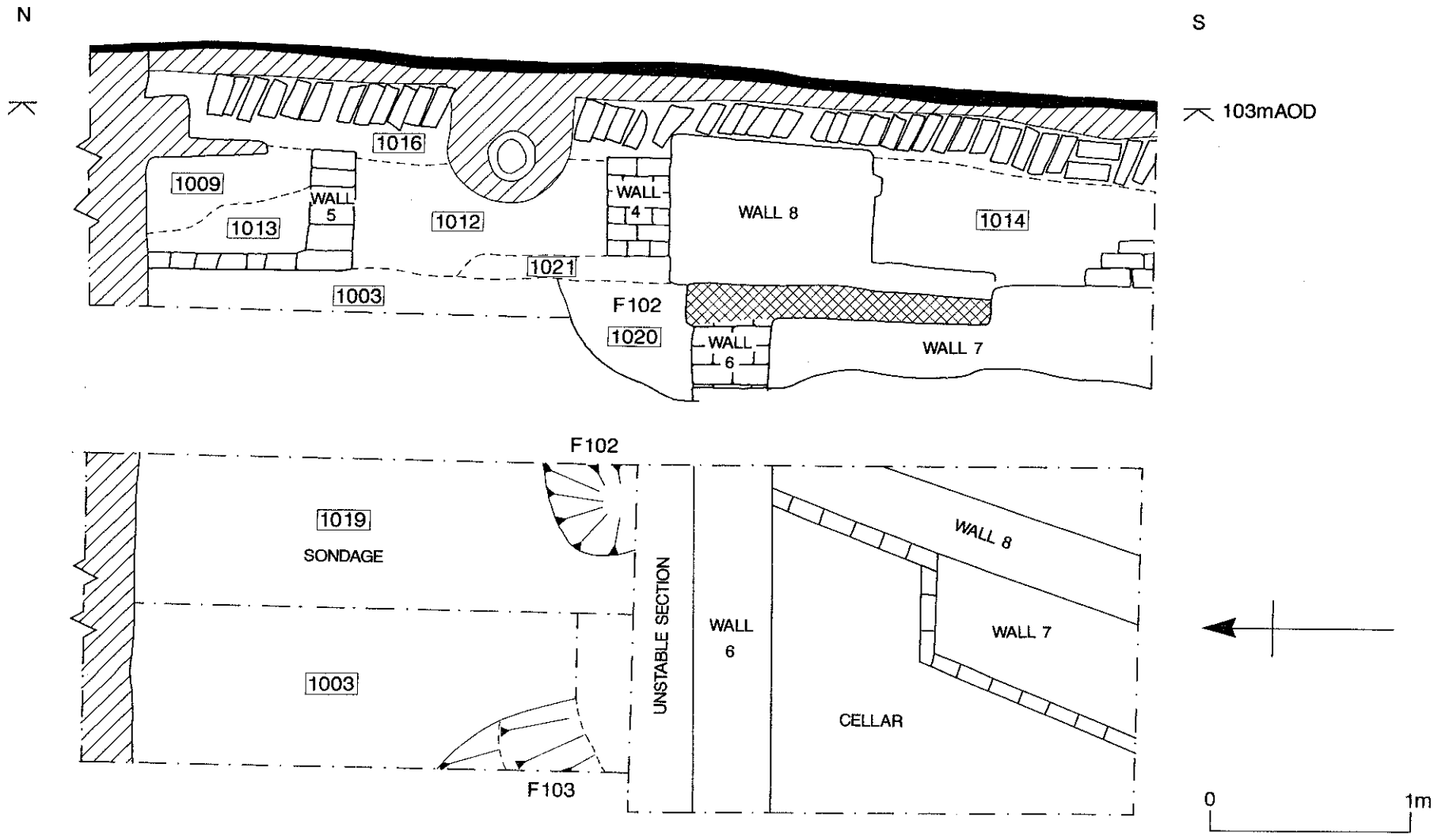

Fig.3

TRENCH 2 SOUTH-FACING SECTION AND PLAN

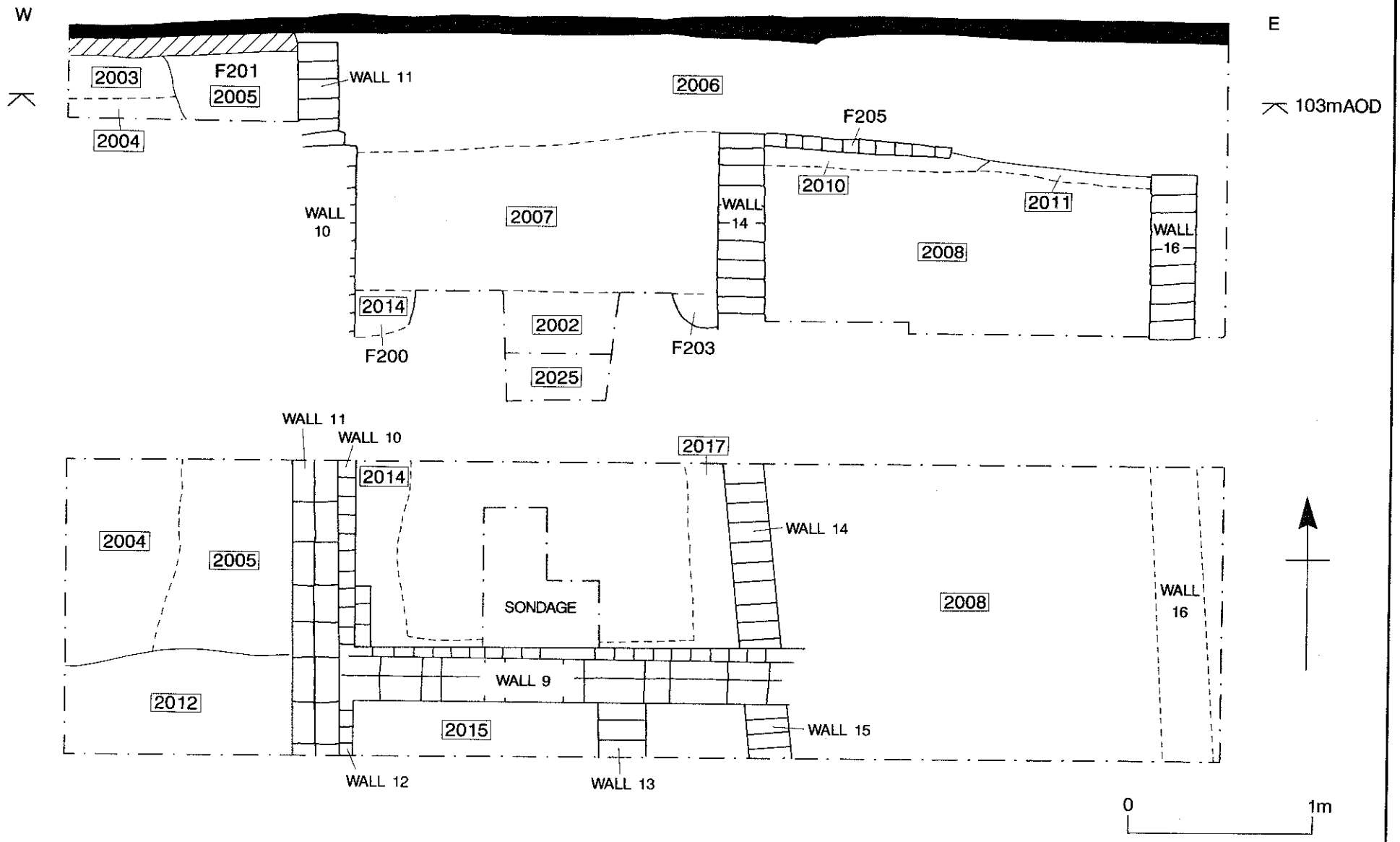

Fig.4

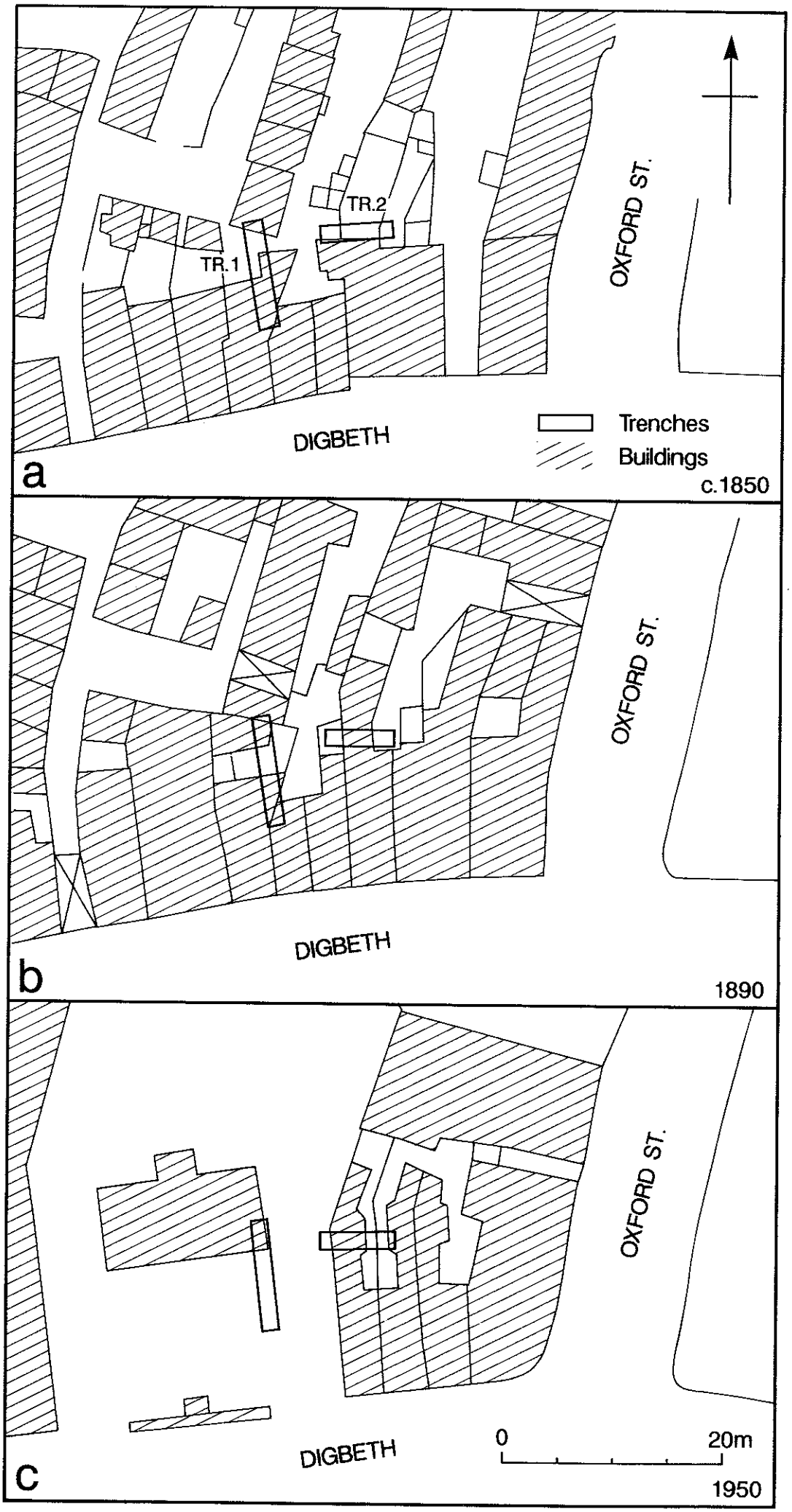
TR.1
TR.2
OXFORD ST.
DIGBETH
Trenches
Buildings
a
c.1850
OXFORD ST.
DIGBETH
b
1890
OXFORD ST.
DIGBETH
0
20m
c
1950

Fig.5