



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM

**An archaeological
watching brief during
cable trench excavation at
the junction of
Colmore Row and
St. Philip's Place,
Birmingham. 2001**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit



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Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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of Colmore Row and St. Philip's Place, Birmingham. 2001**

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1.0 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of a cable trench and an inspection chamber at the junction of Colmore Row and St Philip's Place, Birmingham City Centre (NGR SP 0700 8720), in November 2001. This was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and commissioned by W.S. Atkins Consultants Ltd., on behalf of North Midlands Construction and Cable and Wireless. The location of groundworks was within the possible previous limits of St. Philip's Cathedral churchyard. As a condition of the planning application, and of the Home Office licence for the removal of human remains, any groundworks were to be monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist in order to record any archaeological deposits and to recover any human remains and associated artefacts. During the course of this watching brief, the roofs of two possible Victorian brick-built vaults were recorded, but no other archaeological remains were identified. The full extent of these burial vaults was not available within the confines of the excavated service trench. Modern disturbance and the minimal depth of the excavations most likely explain the lack of further archaeological remains, although the existence of the vaults indicates the possible survival of burials outside the current churchyard boundary.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the excavation of a cable trench and an inspection chamber, prior to the laying of cable pipes, at the junction of Colmore Row and St. Philip's Place, Birmingham. The work was carried out in accordance with planning conditions and those of the Home Office licence for the removal of human remains (licence number A3498). The groundwork was carried out by North Midlands Construction, on behalf of Cable and Wireless, in November 2001. Due to the nature of the excavations and their close proximity to the churchyard of St. Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by W.S. Atkins Consultants Ltd., consultants for Cable and Wireless, to monitor the work and assess the date, depth, extent and nature of any archaeological deposits encountered. This included the recovery of any human remains and associated artefacts encountered. The watching brief was carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists' 1999 *Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief*.

3.0 Site location and history (Figs. 1 & 2)

The site is located opposite St. Philip's Cathedral, constituting an area of the pavement at the junction of Colmore Row and a substantial length of St. Philip's Place, in

Birmingham City Centre, West Midlands (NGR SP 0700 8720; Fig. 1). This is in the heart of the commercial and retail centre of the city.

Evidence for the development of St. Philip's churchyard and the surrounding area comes mainly from map, pictorial and secondary documentary sources. The earliest known representation of the church and its grounds is Westley's map of 1731 (Fig. 2). This stylistic representation of the churchyard shows a perimeter wall with an internal perimeter path flanked by a row of trees on either side. Paths are illustrated leading from St. Philip's church to the surrounding streets, much as they do today, with a few tombs and headstones on the grassed areas.

According to records, approximately 80,000 people were buried in the churchyard. This high concentration of burials within the boundary of St. Philip's meant that the churchyard became closed to burials on 15th August 1858 for reasons of public health. Burials in existing vaults and brick-lined graves continued after this date, although the lack of documentation means that all but a few are anonymous. The problem of burial for the masses was only resolved by the opening of the corporation cemetery at Witton in 1863.

While the pathways within the churchyard have remained broadly the same, changes to the boundaries have taken place. Alterations to the boundaries took place in 1900, with the widening of Temple Row West and St. Philip's Place at the expense of the burial ground. Letters from both 1839 and 1899 concerning the boundary alterations gave instruction as to what to do with any human remains that were disturbed during the work, and how arrangements were to be made for their re-internment.

Recent excavation carried out in the churchyard of St. Philip's Cathedral by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit recovered significant amounts of human skeletal remains and numerous burial vaults were also located (Patrick forthcoming).

4.0 Objectives

The principal objective of the watching brief was to identify and record any significant archaeological deposits prior to their destruction during the excavation of the cable trench and observation chamber. Particular attention was to be paid to the identification of any human skeletal remains and burial vaults associated with the churchyard of St. Philips Cathedral.

5.0 Method

A box trench created for an observation chamber, placed under the pavement of Colemore Row, was excavated with a mini-digger. This excavator was operated by the contractors and used a toothless ditching bucket. A cable trench was also excavated in

this manner. These excavations were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist from the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

Any significant archaeological deposits were excavated by hand and recorded on pro-forma record cards supplemented by scale plans, section drawings and photographs, where appropriate. Any disturbed human remains were recorded *in situ* and excavated in accordance with the Home Office licence (number A3498). Where no archaeological deposits were identified, the stratigraphy was recorded and photographed. These records comprise the site archive, which is currently stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

6.0 Results (Fig. 3) (Plates 1 - 4)

6.1 Cable Trench and Observation Chamber

An observation chamber was machine-excavated to a depth of approximately 1.5m, 0.6m wide and 3.5m long (Plate 1). A cable trench measuring approximately 30m long, 0.4m wide and 1m deep was also excavated along the course of St. Philip's Place (Plate 2).

The stratigraphy revealed in the observation box trench and the cable trench identified a natural red/brown silt-sand at an approximate depth of 1.1m below the present ground surface. Above this was a layer of coarse gravel approximately 0.3m deep, sealed by a thin layer of 0.1m thick fine red building sand, which lay beneath the pavement make-up of St. Philip's Place.

During these excavations no human skeletal remains were identified or recovered. The partial remains of two possible Victorian, brick-built burial vaults were observed in the cable trench.

6.2 Two Burial Vaults (Fig. 3, Plates 3 & 4)

Vault One, at the north end of the cable trench, had a barrelled roof, which measured 1.40m in width. It was constructed from red bricks, laid in stretcher courses, bonded by a coarse white lime mortar (Plate 3).

Vault Two was identified approximately 9.6m south of vault one and it had a very similar construction. The width of the roof measured approximately 1.9m and again it had a barrelled roof, constructed from red brick, laid in stretcher courses, bonded by a white coarse lime mortar (Plate 4).

In the confines of the cable trench, it was difficult to establish whether these vaults had been previously disturbed in earlier groundworks. There was, however, no sign of any associated human remains.

7.0 Discussion

The absence of any disarticulated human skeletal remains or intact burials found during excavations at Colemore Row and St. Philip's Place is probably due to the amount of disturbance that has taken place at St. Philip's graveyard over the last two centuries. Many of the human remains have already been cleared during previous building developments, landscaping and the reduction of the original boundaries of the churchyard. The depth of excavation required by the contractors undertaking the work was such that many remains may still lie undisturbed in much deeper deposits beneath Colemore Row and St. Philip's Place.

Although it was possible to identify, with a certain degree of accuracy, the presence of two burial vaults in the trench running along St. Philips Place, it was impossible to ascertain their actual dimensions or nature of construction, as only their roofs were visible. It did, however, indicate the probable former extent of the graveyard. Further work in this area may result in the discovery of more vaults and associated human remains.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The archaeological watching brief was carried out by Stephen Williams and managed by Gary Coates, who also edited this report. The illustrations and plates were prepared by Nigel Dodds.

The groundwork on site was carried out by North Midlands Construction, on behalf of Cable and Wireless. Keith Thompsom, from W.S. Atkins Consultants Ltd., monitored the project on behalf of Cable & Wireless.

Dr. Mike Hodder, Birmingham City Planning Archaeologist, monitored the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council.

9.0 References

Patrick, C. forthcoming *The Churchyard of St. Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham: An archaeological watching brief*. B.U.F.A.U. Report No.701

Figures

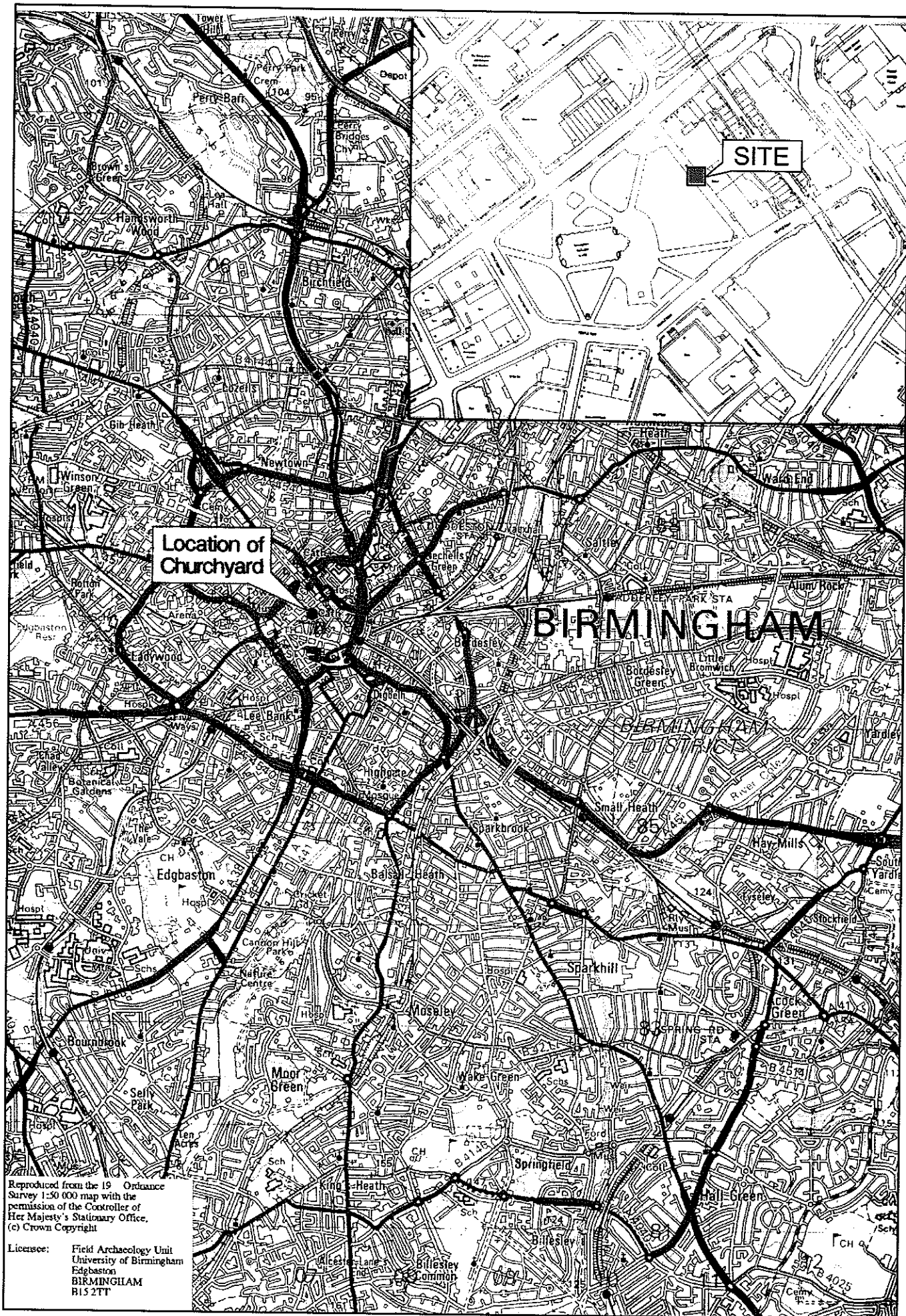


Fig.1

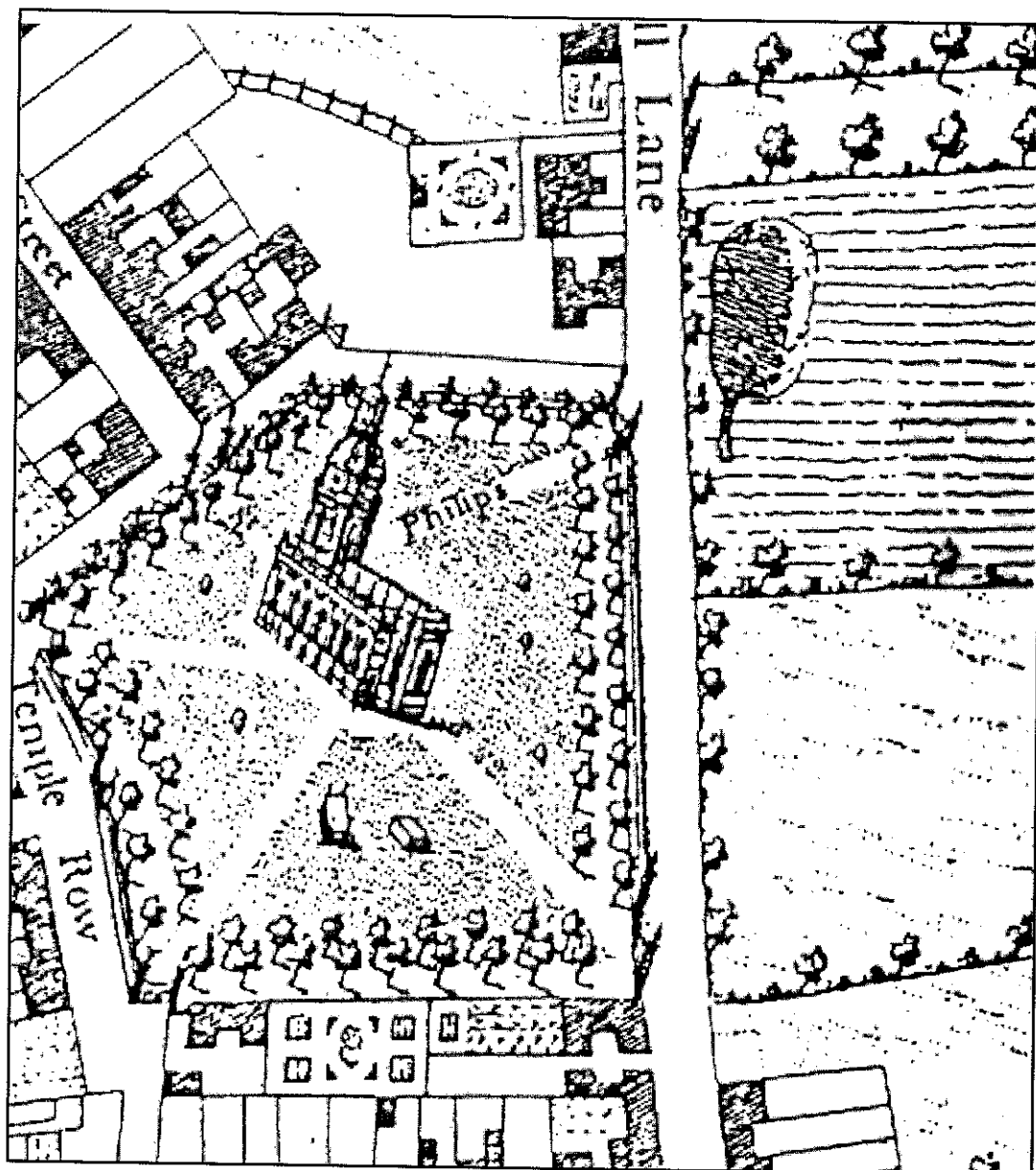


Fig.2 (1731)

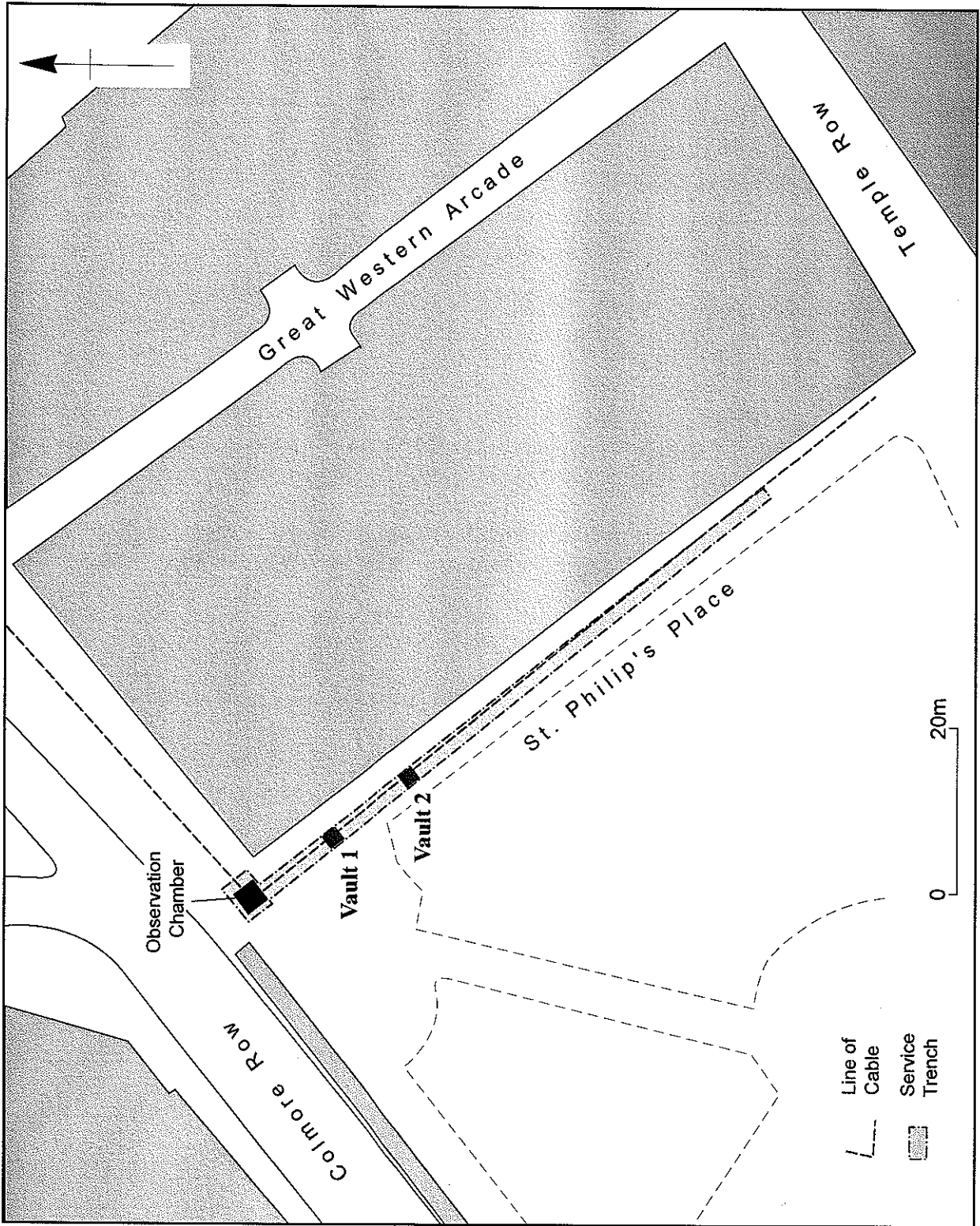


Fig.3

Plates



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 4



Plate 3