

# **birmingham archaeology**



**THE UNIVERSITY  
OF BIRMINGHAM  
High Cross House  
Sharnford  
Leicestershire  
2004**



**Project No. 1150**

**High Cross House, Sharnford, Leicestershire**

**An Historic Building Assessment**

By  
Malcolm Hislop

*For further information please contact:*

Alex Jones (Director)

Birmingham Archaeology

The University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 5513

Fax: 0121 414 5516

E-Mail: [bham-arch@bham.ac.uk](mailto:bham-arch@bham.ac.uk)

Web Address: <http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

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# High Cross House, Sharnford, Leicestershire

## Summary

*In January 2004 Birmingham Archaeology undertook an historic building assessment of High Cross House, Sharnford, Leicestershire (NGR SP473887), a Grade II listed building. The project was commissioned by the owners Mr and Mrs Samra in connection with an application for listed building consent for proposed alterations to the property. The assessment distinguished several structural phases, the most important of which were the original late 17<sup>th</sup>-century shell of the house, and a major remodelling of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Descriptive notes and a statement of significance detailing the important aspects of the house served as a basis for assessing the impact of the proposed alterations.*

### 1.0 Introduction

In January 2004 Birmingham Archaeology undertook an historic building assessment of High Cross House, Leicestershire, a Grade II listed building. The project was commissioned by the owners Mr and Mrs Samra in connection with an application for listed building consent for proposed alterations to the property. The application was refused owing to concerns expressed by English Heritage about the impact on the historic plan form and fabric. This report seeks to provide an analysis of the historic development and significance of the building and of the elements to be altered. Owing to the rapid manner of assessment, and the fact that later accretions had obscured a great deal of earlier fabric, the results have to be considered as being tentative, and could be modified in the light of a more detailed survey or the exposure of previously unknown areas of the historic fabric.

### 2.0 Site Location

High Cross House is situated in Leicestershire, on the northeast side of the A5 immediately north of the its junction with the B577, at NGR SP473887. It lies approximately 1 mile to the east of Claybrooke Magna, and approximately 2 miles to the east of Sharnford.

### 3.0 Objective

To provide an analysis of the historic development of the property, a statement of significance, and an assessment of the impact of the proposed alterations.

### 4.0 Method

A rapid record was made of the building comprising written notes and structural analysis, in order to assess its historical development, the significance of its fittings, and the impact of the proposed alterations.

## 5.0 Descriptive Notes

### Exterior

Late 17<sup>th</sup>-century farmhouse remodelled as a villa in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with later 19<sup>th</sup>-century additions and subsequent alterations. Red brick, with early 19<sup>th</sup>-century stucco cladding incised as ashlar to the early house, and hipped plain tile roof. Main late 17<sup>th</sup> century range aligned northwest/southeast facing southwest, with rear wing aligned northeast/southwest. Mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century red brick extension of rear wing to northeast, and later 19<sup>th</sup>-century red brick kitchen wing added to northwest side of this extension.

#### Southwest elevation

Two stories with first floor band, five bays, with central half-glazed door and two windows to ground storey. Outline of former pedimented doorcase visible. Restored 12-pane glazing bar sashes with horns.

#### Northwest elevation

Three-bay stuccoed wing to the right with mainly 20<sup>th</sup>-century casements, french windows to the centre, later 20<sup>th</sup>-century semi-circular arched window to the right. A vertical break in the stuccowork at the junction with the main (southwest) range suggests that the wing is an addition, but internal detailing points to the two elements being contemporary, or near contemporary.

Lower red brick (Flemish garden wall bond) outhouse extension with plain tile roof attached to the left (northwest) (Plate 1). Two storeys with dentilled eaves band. One first floor window visible, 20<sup>th</sup>-century casement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century surround. Breaking forward from the left-hand (northwest) end of this extension is another red brick gabled outhouse (now kitchen) wing with segmental-arched blocked doorway to left, inserted 20<sup>th</sup>-century window to centre with concrete lintel and blocked upper window.

In the angle between the two elements is a mid to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century single-storey lean-to structure with boarded attachment to the right (southwest), not of special interest.

#### Southeast elevation

Main range to left has turret with lean-to roof attached to rear. In the angle between the main range and rear wing are some projections largely of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date with rendered walls, plain tile roofs, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century casements within segmental-arched openings. 20<sup>th</sup>-century glazed porch in front, not of special interest (Plate 2). Northeast end of rear wing set back to right with segmental-arched window to the left (southeast) and blocked, probably inserted, door to right (Plate 3). This wing is built of 2¼" thick red bricks laid in Flemish bond, which would not be incompatible with a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century date. Vertical joint between this wing and the outhouse extension to the right (northeast). The latter has a blocked segmental-arched door to the left (Plate 4), current entrance to right of centre

with 20<sup>th</sup>-century door and 20<sup>th</sup>-century lean-to porch. 19<sup>th</sup>-century segmental-arched windows to ground floor left of centre and first floor, the latter with chamfered black brick sills. Inserted 20<sup>th</sup>-century flat arch windows to right.

### Northeast Elevation

Gabled outhouse range to left of two storeys and attic. Early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century ground floor casement within earlier blocked opening; early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century large square fixed light bay window to first floor with geometric glazing bar pattern; 19<sup>th</sup>-century attic casement with segmental head. Attached single-storey kitchen wing to right with vertical joint in the brickwork between the two. The kitchen wing has a later 20<sup>th</sup>-century window.

### **Interior**

#### Ground Floor

##### *G1 (2640)*

Entrance hall. Quarry tile floor, 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded stone skirtings; plastered walls incised as ashlar. 4-panelled doors to northwest and southeast, the former a 20<sup>th</sup>-century replica, the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century with some replacement of the panel beading, both have 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded wooden architraves. Above the entrance a pelmet with foliated motifs, probably a reproduction piece. At the northeast end of the hall evidence for a former doorway communicating with G4, comprising breaks in the skirting, a change in materials from stone to timber, and an absence of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century inscribed stucco from the blocking. Also at the northeast end on the southeast side a dog-leg/winder staircase leading to the first floor, and then a door opening to the cellar steps.

##### *G2 (2550)*

Drawing Room. Entered from the entrance hall (G2) to the southeast. Wooden floor; 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded wooden skirting boards to southwest and southeast sides only, 20<sup>th</sup>-century skirting to northeast and northwest; 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded plaster ceiling cornice. In the northeast wall a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century fireplace with rounded back of 2" bricks, and brick relieving arch. The fireplace had a 19<sup>th</sup>-century marble surround, dismantled at the time of the survey, with moulded jambs, square lintel with a central fluted keystone bracket carrying a mantelpiece. Later 20<sup>th</sup>-century glazing bar sash window in northwest wall with semi-circular head. This seems to have been inserted within a blocking. Several feet to each side of the window, there is a break in the ceiling cornice and, on the northeast side, in the wall surface. There is also a corresponding change in the character of the wall from 19<sup>th</sup>-century lath and plaster to 20<sup>th</sup>-century solid plaster. Large 19<sup>th</sup>-century window to southwest with wooden panelled surround, the panelling partly dismantled at time of survey.

*G3 (2750)*

Dining Room. 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded wooden skirting, and 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded plaster ceiling cornice. 19<sup>th</sup>-century 3-bay Tuscan arcade along northeast wall, with shallow blind recess to the northwest, deep recess to southeast containing a window, and wider deep blind recess to centre. Fireplace in southeast wall with elaborate 19<sup>th</sup>-century marble surround bearing gilded metal decorations. The fireplace itself has an 18<sup>th</sup>-century cast-iron grate with swagged embossed decoration. Doorways to the northwest and southeast with 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded architraves. The former communicates with the hall, the latter (missing a door) with a room created out of one of the attached farmbuildings. Restored glazing bar sash window to southwest within 19<sup>th</sup>-century surround with moulded architrave.

*G4 (2650)*

Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century fireplace with plain stone surround, segmental arch and mantelpiece. The fireplace itself has been altered but retains remnants of its former curved back of 2" bricks. Narrow cupboard to left (southeast) of fireplace with wooden door, probably 20<sup>th</sup> century or a 20<sup>th</sup>-century restoration of an older door. Wide stepped alcove to right (northwest) of fireplace with rounded jamb to the rear, possibly an indication of a former doorway communicating with G2 (2550), though the evidence is unclear. Central north-south ceiling beam. Large inserted opening in north wall giving access to G5.

*G5 (2710)*

Large open fireplace in northeast wall, the mantle beam formed of a reused timber (contains a redundant mortise). Two late 17<sup>th</sup>-century northeast-southwest chamfered ceiling beams. Alcove to northwest of chimney containing a former window in the northeast wall. Alcove to southeast, now boxed in to form a lobby, formerly an entrance lobby entered from a now blocked doorway to the southeast.

*G6 (2210)*

Former outhouse, formerly entered from a now blocked doorway on the southeast side. Plain northeast-southwest ceiling beam supporting plain joists, several of which have failed at the ends. The outline of a former chimney can be seen on the southwest wall. This was evidently a late insertion that utilised the existing flue of the chimney in G5. The cast iron fireplace from this chimney was stored in G8 (2120) at the time of the survey and seemed to be a 20<sup>th</sup>-century reproduction piece. No other features of architectural interest.

*G7*

Currently an entrance passage, but formerly part of G8 (2120). The evidence for this is the north wall, which comprises a 19<sup>th</sup>-century ceiling beam that has been underbuilt in brick probably during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

*G8 (2120)*

Former outhouse, now storeroom. A northwest-southeast ceiling beam has recently been replaced by a steel joist. The plain 19<sup>th</sup>-century timber joists survive.

*G9 (3130)*

Former outhouse, now kitchen. No features of historic interest.

*G10*

Said to be the site of a former staircase ascending to the first floor (personal communication from Gurch Samra). No significant architectural features.

*G11*

Now bathroom. No significant architectural features; all 20<sup>th</sup>-century bathroom fittings.

*G12*

Porch. No significant architectural features.

*G13*

All fixtures and fittings are of later 20<sup>th</sup>-century character.

First Floor

*F1*

First floor landing. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century balustrade at top of stairs with stick balusters and turned newels. Immediately southeast is a blocked opening with 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded architrave, that formerly led into F8 (2480). At the southwest end of the landing are three 19<sup>th</sup>-century 6-panelled doors leading northwest to F2, southwest to F3, and southeast to F4.

*F2*

Box room. Door has an 8-pane overlight. No architectural embellishments.

*F3 (2460)*

Bedroom. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century skirting on southeast side only. Two windows to the southwest and one to the northwest, all restored glazing bar sashes. Fireplace with late 17<sup>th</sup>-century rounded brick back. Wooden reeded surround, possibly early 19<sup>th</sup> century but fixed with 20<sup>th</sup>-century screws, and probably a later imposition.



F4 (2260)

Bedroom. Two restored glazing bar sash windows to the southwest, and one 20<sup>th</sup>-century casement to the southeast. Semi-circular arched alcove to southeast end of northeast wall. Re-sited 18<sup>th</sup>-century six-panelled door in centre of northeast wall with raised and fielded panels and 19<sup>th</sup>-century moulded architrave. Now leads into an *en-suite* bathroom (F8/2480).

F5

All 20<sup>th</sup> century features except for a northeast-southwest floor beam exposed at the time of the survey (Plate 5). Unusually this contains a scarf joint, probably 17<sup>th</sup> century in date. The full extent of joint was not visible but it was bridled and edge-pegged and was probably edge-halved. Directly above this beam the end of a 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-century chamfered and stopped ceiling beam protrudes from the northeast wall; abutting it to the northwest is a plain, probably late 17<sup>th</sup>-century, beam.

F6 (2670)

Unmoulded six-panelled door with glazed upper lights containing 20<sup>th</sup>-century leaded coloured glass. 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-century chamfered and stopped northeast-southwest ceiling beam, with a secondary beam on the southeast side extending northwest-southeast. Chimneybreast against northeast wall containing small, probably late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, horseshoe arch fireplace on northwest side with cast iron fireback and grate. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century eight-pane lantern light high up in southeast wall. Alcove on the southeast side of chimney, cupboard on the southeast side now entered from the passage and containing remnants of a staircase at attic level.

F7

Moulded architrave. Windows all 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fireplace in northwest wall with segmental arch but no early features, now plastered. Inserted door to *en-suite* bathroom in west corner. The room has a high ceiling owing to the removal of an upper floor.

F8

Now *en suite* bathroom. No significant architectural features, all 20<sup>th</sup>-century fixtures and fittings.

F9

Now bathroom. Large early 20<sup>th</sup>-century window to northeast. All other fixtures and fittings are later 20<sup>th</sup>-century. The partition walls within this room and that dividing it from F10 are 20<sup>th</sup> century in date.

F10

Cupboard said to be the site of the former staircase that ascended from G10 (personal communication from Gurch Samra).

### Second Floor

Over the main (southwest) range a pair of collar and tie beam roof trusses with pegged joints which support the two hips. Probably late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Garden Wall (Plate 6)**

Wall enclosing garden to the west of the house. A short stretch on the northeast side is attached to and contemporary with the present kitchen wing. The remainder dates from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is constructed of breezeblocks, rendered and painted. In the northwest side is a gate, the wall being ramped up on either side and surmounted by a pair of pineapple finials, probably reproductions, though as they are painted it is difficult to tell.

## **6.0 Statement of significance**

High Cross House is a prominent landmark in an archaeologically sensitive area next to the intersection of Watling Street and the Fosse Way, and the site of the Roman fort Venonis. It also lies approximately 50 metres southeast of the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century High Cross and is the focus of a group of 19<sup>th</sup>-century former farmbuildings (now dwellings) arranged around a courtyard to the southeast. It is therefore a site with strong historical and archaeological associations that makes a significant contribution to the historic environment. Although it is Grade II listed, as an architectural type it is not particularly rare or intact, but the associations endow it with a greater importance than it might otherwise have.

The main architectural and historic interest of the house lies in its two earliest phases, that is to say the main late 17<sup>th</sup>-century build, and the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century remodelling. Phase 1 is not a great deal in evidence, being confined to the curved fireplace backs, some of the exposed ceiling beams, the kitchen fireplace in G5 and the adjacent window in the northeast wall, probably the main staircase (though not the balustrade), the stairs between the first and second floors, and the roof. It is, of course, possible that further features may survive hidden behind later accretions but these are the main elements on show.

Although Phase 1 is important, all aspects of which should be preserved where possible, the character of the house is mainly defined by its early 19<sup>th</sup>-century phase when stucco was applied both externally and internally, and the building was refenestrated with glazing bar sashes. In considering the overall effect of any proposed alterations it is this phase which should receive the greatest attention. Specific aspects relating to this phase other than the stucco work and the windows are much of the moulded and panelled woodwork including skirting boards, architraves, window frames and doors, the fireplace surrounds in G1, G3 and G4, the landing balustrade, and the arcade in G3 (2750).

Phases 3 and 4 all seem to have been constructed as outhouses of one kind or another and contain no architectural embellishments, though F7 does seem to have been intended for habitation to judge from the presence of the fireplace and the bay window to the north.

A number of other aspects of the house are of comparatively recent origin and not of special interest. There are several false timbers boxing in pipes and other service conduits, painted black to suggest antique beams and posts. These lack authenticity and do nothing to enhance the historic character of the house. A number of features seem to have been imported, and include at least one reproduction cast iron fireplace (in G7 at the time of the inspection but said to come from G6).

## **7.0 Impact Assessment**

The format of the following impact assessment, which details how the proposed alterations will affect the historic fabric, is based on a letter of 4 July 2003 from Susan Dobby of Blaby District Council detailing her concerns about the proposals, and, where appropriate, addresses each of her points, in the same order.

### **Ground Floor**

- There does seem to be evidence for a blocked doorway in the wall between G1 (2640) and G4 (2650) which was probably contemporary with the stone skirtings of G1 (2640). The plan of the house suggests that this was principal access from the main (southwest) range to the rear wing. The blocking seems to post-date the Phase 2 stucco surrounding it.
- The remains of the wall between rooms G4 and G5, which it is proposed to remove, is probably an original feature dating from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. It retains early 19<sup>th</sup>-century stucco on the southwest side, though the northeast side is plain. This proposal, then, will affect the early fabric of the house, though it is unlikely to diminish our understanding of the historic plan, which has already been compromised by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century insertion of a large opening.
- The fireplace/chimney breast had been removed from G6 at the time of the inspection, but the description given by Mr Samra suggests a later 20<sup>th</sup>-century construction. It was clear from an inspection of its former position that there had not been a fireplace in this position previously, but that the wall had been broached in recent times for the express purpose of providing access to the flue of the fireplace in G5 (2710).
- The original timber main beam in G8 had been replaced by a steel beam at the time of the inspection, and no evidence of its former character can be produced.
- The wall between G7 and G8 (2120) is probably of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century date, and the insertion of a new door would not affect any significant historic fabric.

- The demolition of the lean-to conservatory on the northwest side of the house would not be detrimental to the listed building, and would provide the opportunity of enhancing the view of the historic fabric. In order to improve on its predecessor any replacement would need to take this into account. The position of the proposed new conservatory does not impinge on the main interest of the building, that is to say, the original house, but on the later outbuildings, which are of lesser importance. It is suggested that in any scheme of alteration the opportunity be taken to reinstate the original window at the west end of the northeast wall of G5 (2710).

### **First Floor**

- The proposed *en-suite* partition in F3 (2460) will not affect the historic fabric.
- The proposed external drainage pipes are unlikely to affect the historic fabric but could detract from it if treated unsympathetically.
- The walls it is proposed to remove in order to enlarge the bathroom F9 (1890) appear to be of 20<sup>th</sup>-century date and not of special interest.

### **Second Floor**

- Removal of the staircase between the first and second floor would be detrimental to the historic fabric. This is probably an original staircase dating from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## **8.0 Acknowledgements**

This report was undertaken by Malcolm Hislop and edited by Helen Martin. The illustrations were prepared by John Halsted and Nigel Dodds.

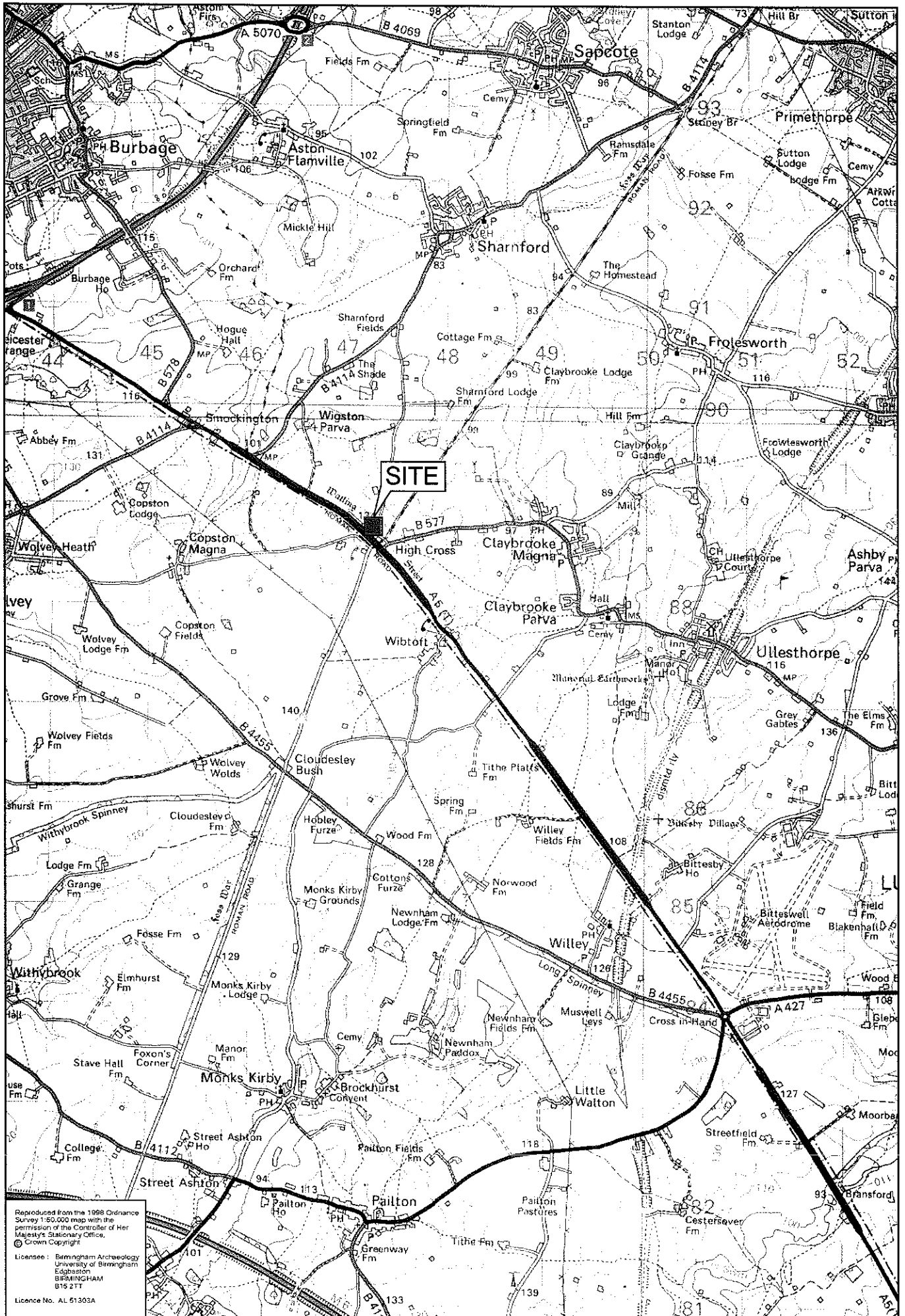


Fig.1

# Ground Floor Plan

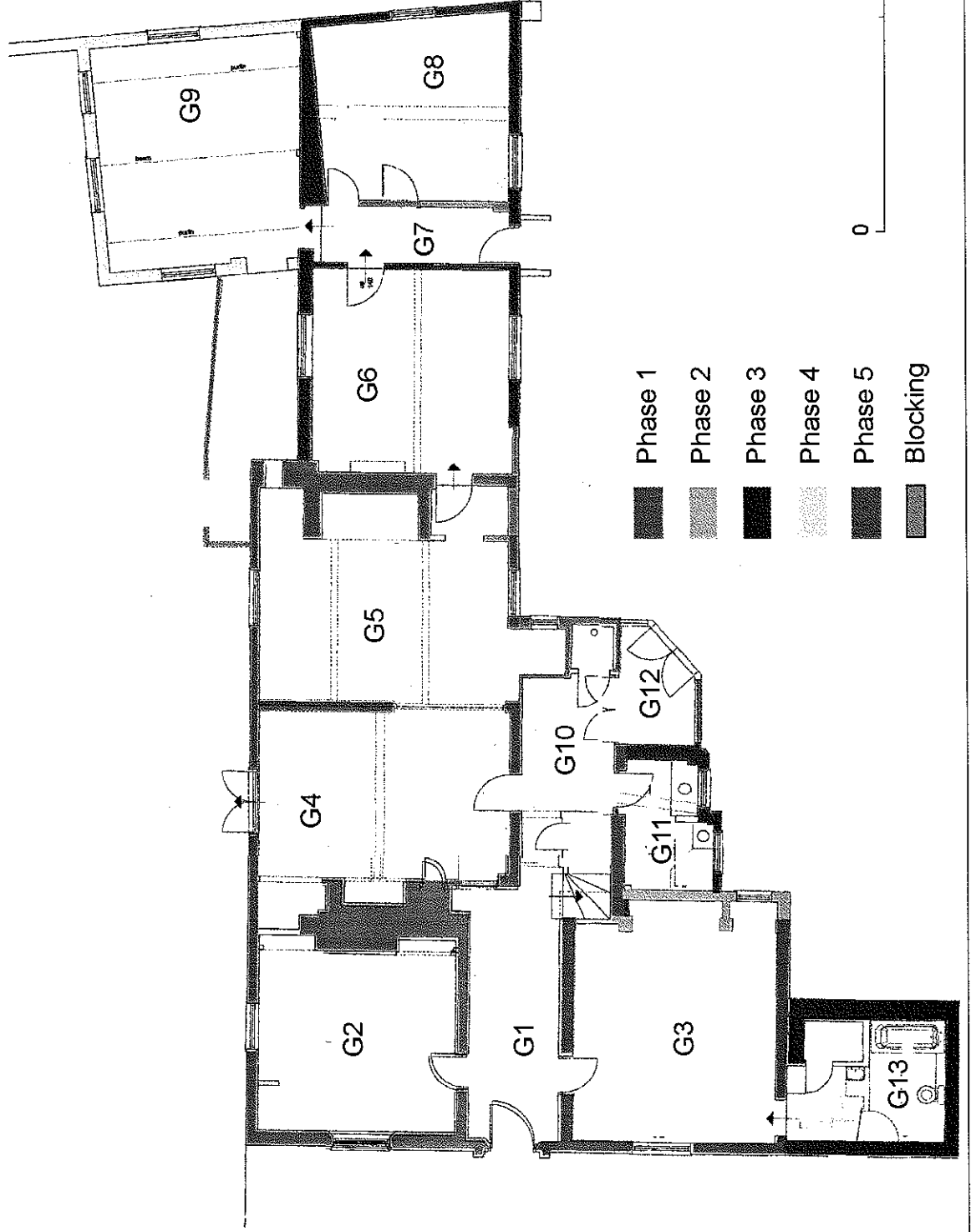
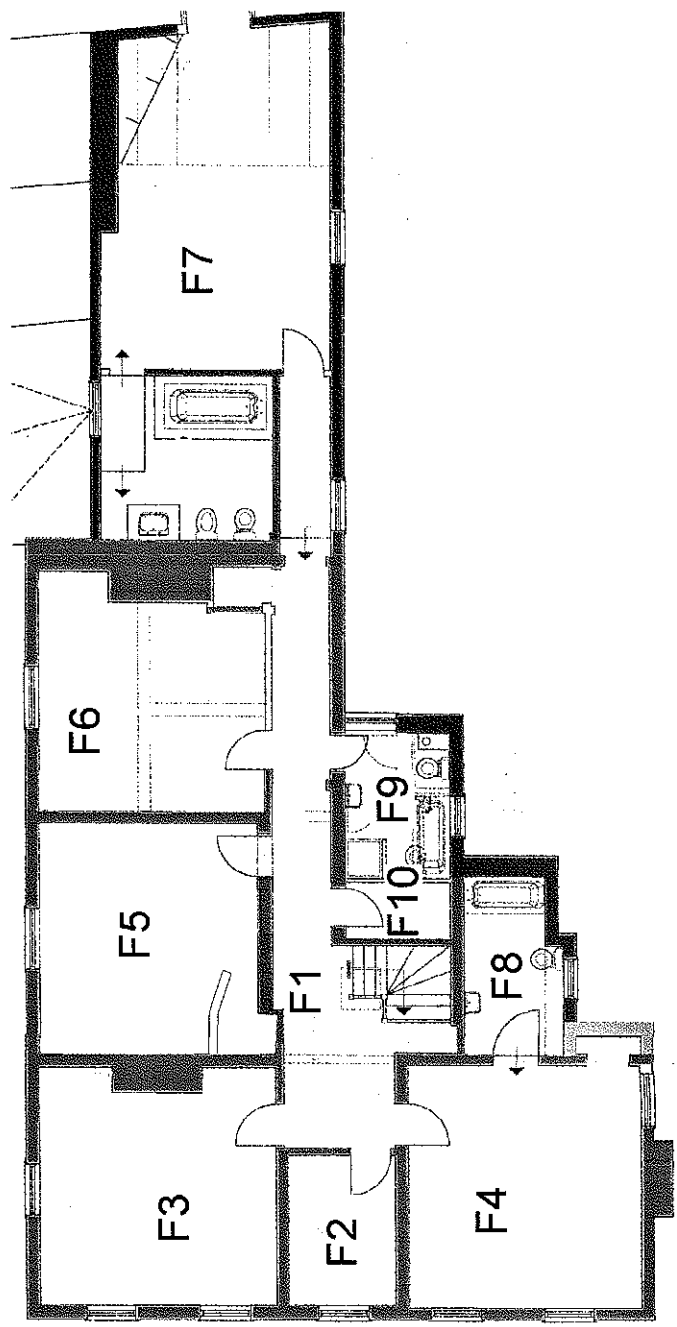
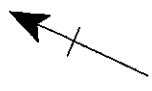


Fig.2

# First Floor Plan



- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Phase 3
- Phase 5

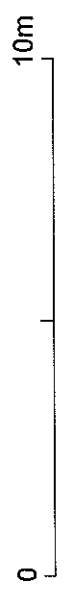


Fig.3



Plate 1

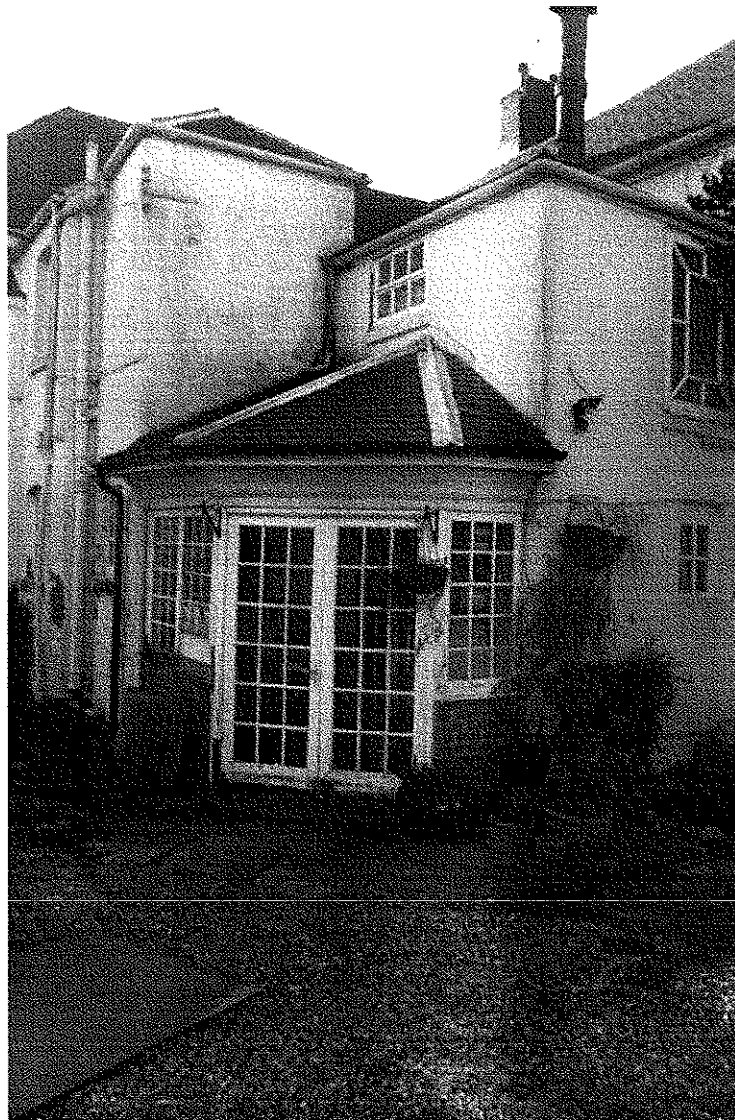


Plate 2



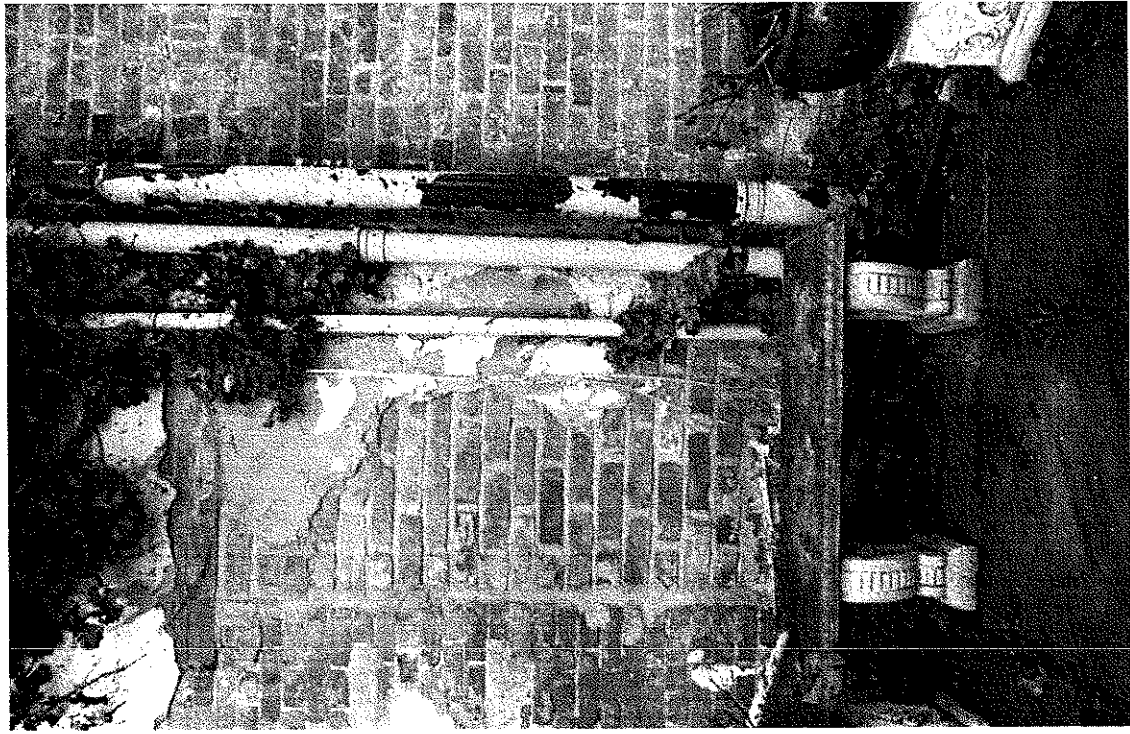


Plate 3



Plate 4

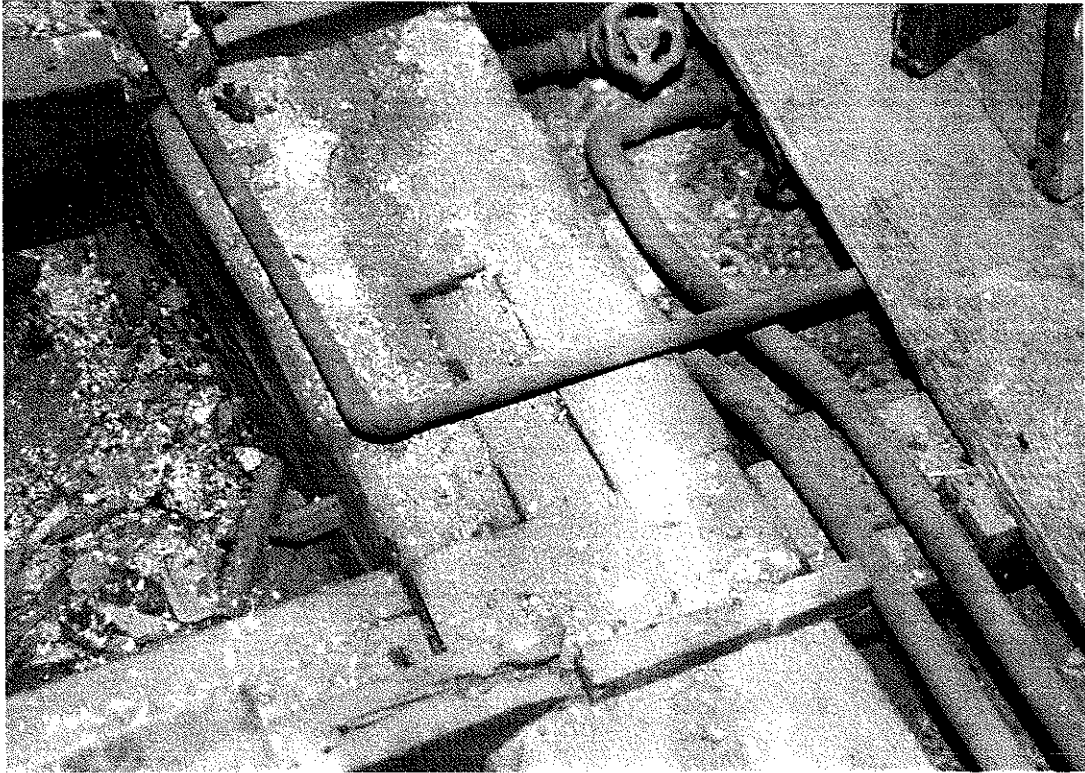


Plate 5



Plate 6