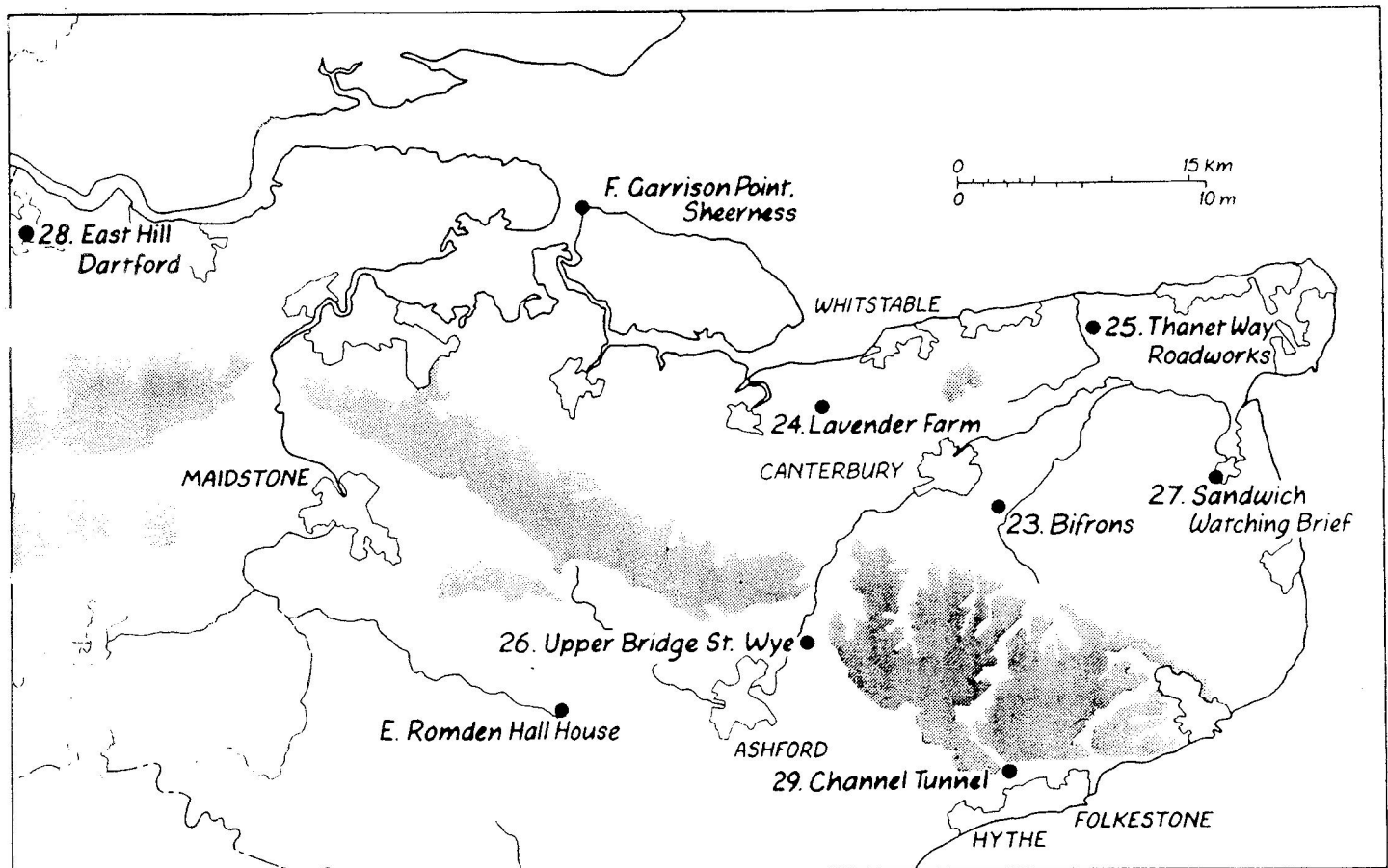
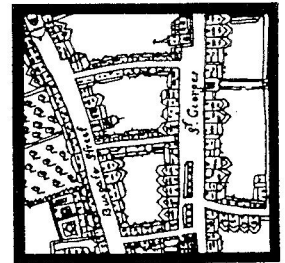


EXCAVATIONS: KENT SITES



▲ Excavation and building recording sites discussed in this year's report.

23. Bifrons

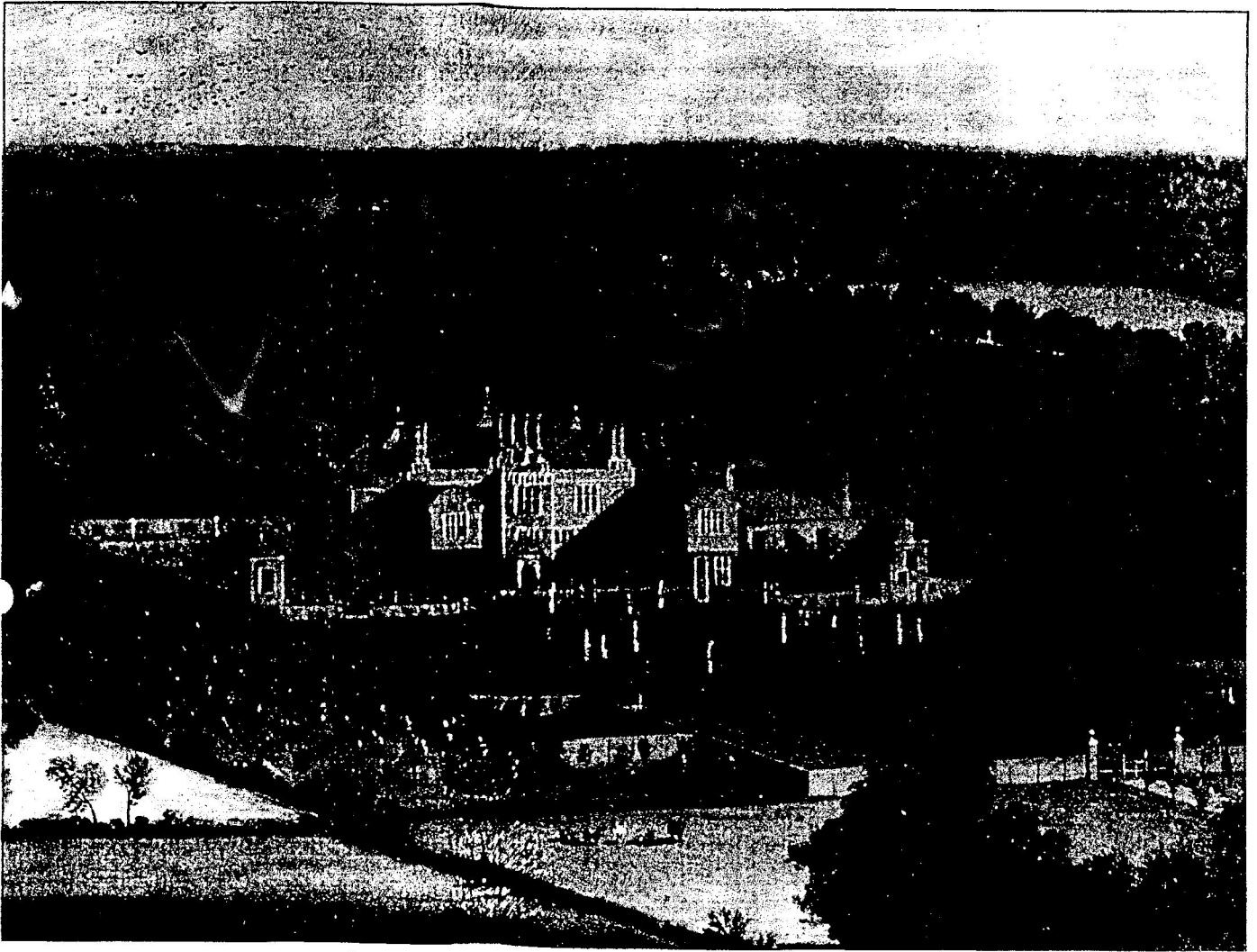
by Tim Allen and Richard Cross

During September and October 1988 and again between February to May 1989, the Trust undertook two short seasons of purely post-medieval archaeological work at Patribourne near Bridge. At the request of Savills of London who were acting as agents to the Conyngham Estate, the Trust excavated, almost wholly by machine clearance, the buried remains of the west wing of Bifrons House, a mid nineteenth-century rebuild of successive late sixteenth- and eighteenth-century country mansions. The place-name Bifrons occurs first in 1551 in the title deeds to the house and 54 acres of land and has been traditionally accepted as having the meaning 'two fronts'. The building was finally demolished in 1948.

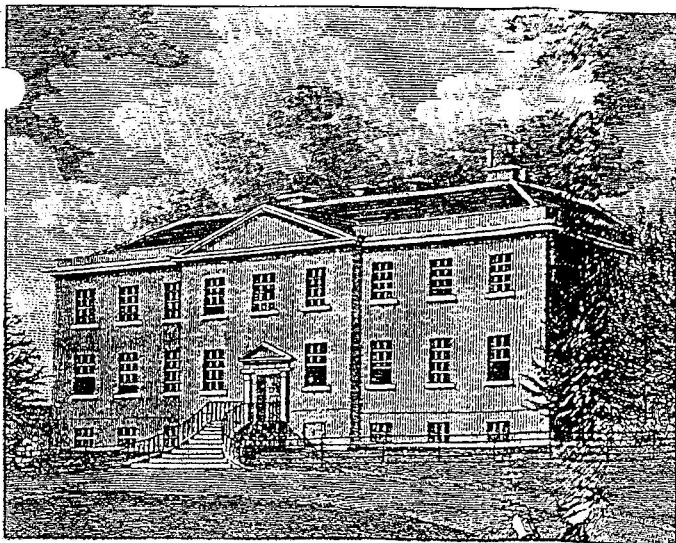
The earliest structural evidence exposed comprised parts of a rectangular building constructed of flint and mortar walls, internally plastered and set with brick quoins. This, and other short sections of wall foundations of similar build or date, together with a well, all possibly date

from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries and perhaps formed part of the original Bifrons house which was erected either by Sir Robert Bargrave (d. 1600) or his son Sir John Bargrave in an architectural style of predominantly Jacobean proportions. In its most developed form this building, with a modified E-plan and extensive south facing ornamental gardens, is depicted in a painting by either John Wootton or (more probably) Jan Siberechts executed in c. 1705-10 and in a nineteenth-century engraving based on other early paintings. Whether the early structures seen in the excavations did in fact form part of the original Bifrons mansion must, however, remain open to doubt, at least until more of its plan has been excavated and securely dated.

Whatever the case, the early structures together apparently with much earlier re-used fabric, were incorporated into another building put up anew by the Rev. Edward Taylor in 1767. Constructed in an elegant but plain



▲ Detail from a prospect of early Bifrons attributed to Jan Siberechts.



▲ Engraving of the north front of Bifrons, c. 1794

early Georgian style the building, of three floors, is depicted in an engraving of 1794 which also shows a central rising entrance over a semi-basement. The excavations exposed a large part, if not all, of the west wing indicating a rectangular plan for this building which probably had a frontage of about 36 m. Internally, other features of this building were also recorded. These included the remnants of an intricate drainage system, two wells and a cheese or cold storage pit.

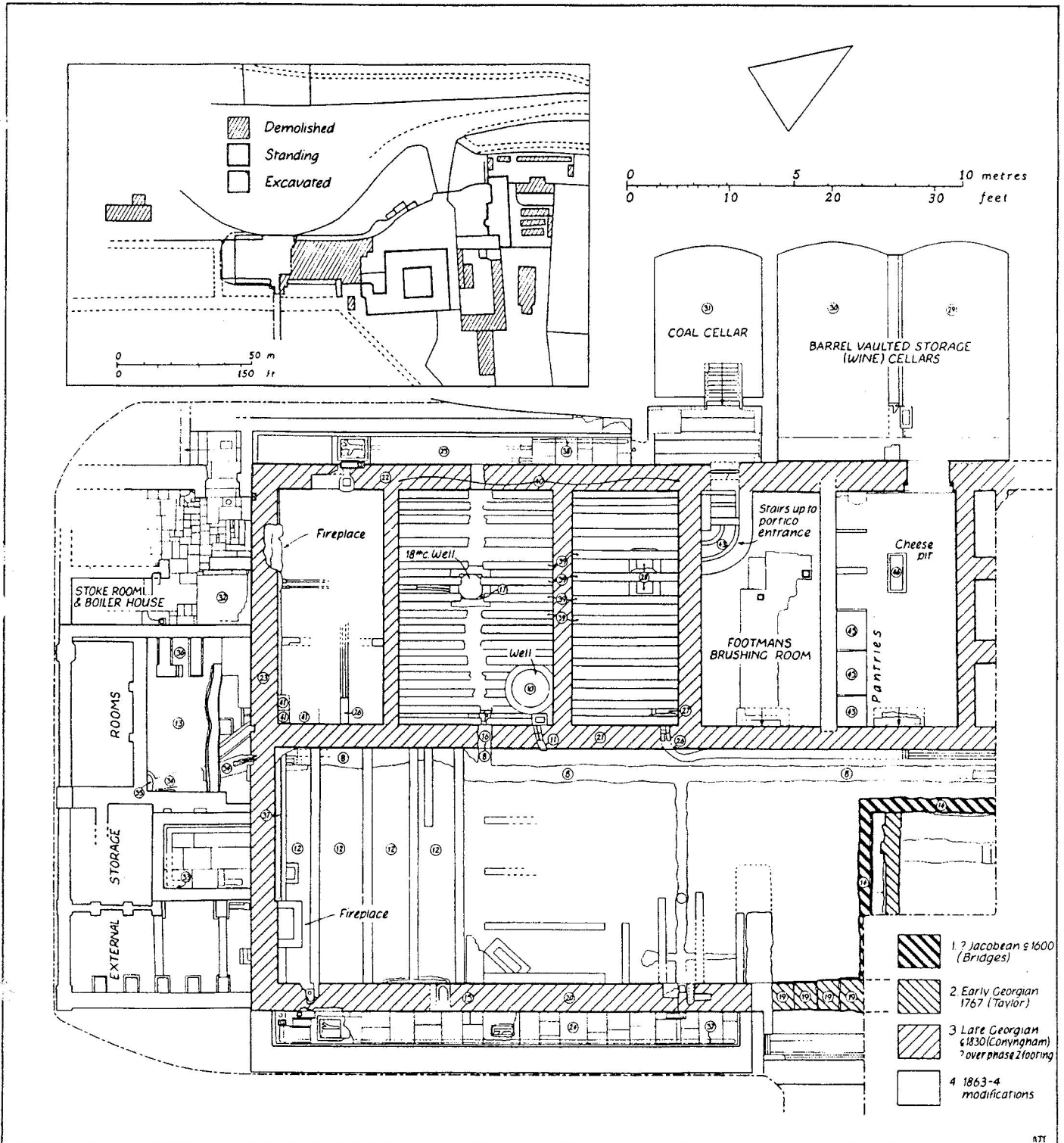
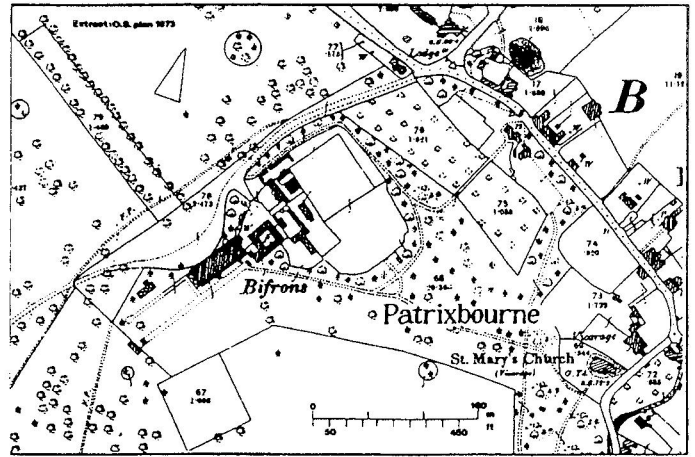
In 1830 the Bifrons estate passed by sale to the Conyngham family. Minor alterations to the house were probably undertaken both before and after its sale. The architect, Thomas Hunt (d. 1831) is known to have given Bifrons its 'Tudor' style and his pupil G.H. Smith is also known to have carried out alterations to the house in 1835. None of these changes, however, were readily identified in the excavations.

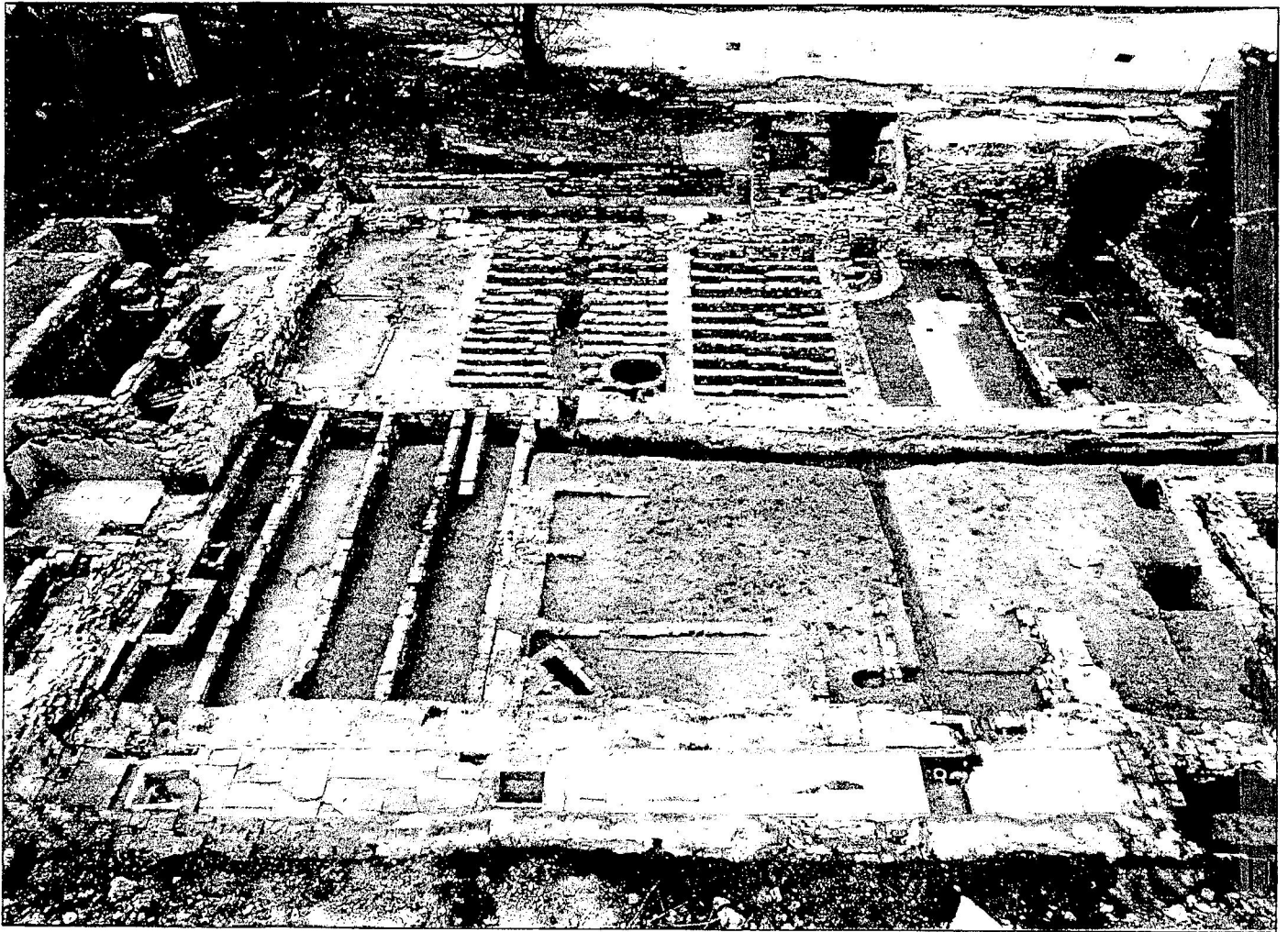
The major rebuilding of Bifrons occurred in 1863/64 when the early Georgian house was virtually demolished and the ground level to the north raised 2 m. by extensive dumping of sand. The majority of the structural remains exposed on the excavations date from this period of massive rebuilding. At semi-basement level the Georgian windows and wall foundation of the north elevation appear to have been retained, but were pierced for the insertion of a pair of barrel-vaulted cellars which extended below the main driveway. Another barrel-vaulted cellar was also surveyed immediately to the west of the main central entrance. This may date from c. 1815, being constructed of bricks in a yellow sandy fabric comparable to types used in the Napoleonic period fortifications at the Western Heights, Dover. A wide range of brick forms, sizes and fabrics were, in fact, observed in the various building phases of Bifrons house. Some were obviously early, possibly late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century in date, but it is notoriously difficult to date brick types individually with any degree of certainty. At a large and important building such as Bifrons there are the added complications of re-used earlier material and the use of large numbers of bricks procured at regular intervals from non-local sources. The predominant types used in the 1863/64 rebuilding were the soft red bricks probably from the Faversham brickyards, but use was also made of London Brick Company 'yellows'.

With the exception of the entirely Victorian north portico, the foundations of which were exposed, only the floors and wall partitions of the lower basement survived the demolition of 1948. These comprised

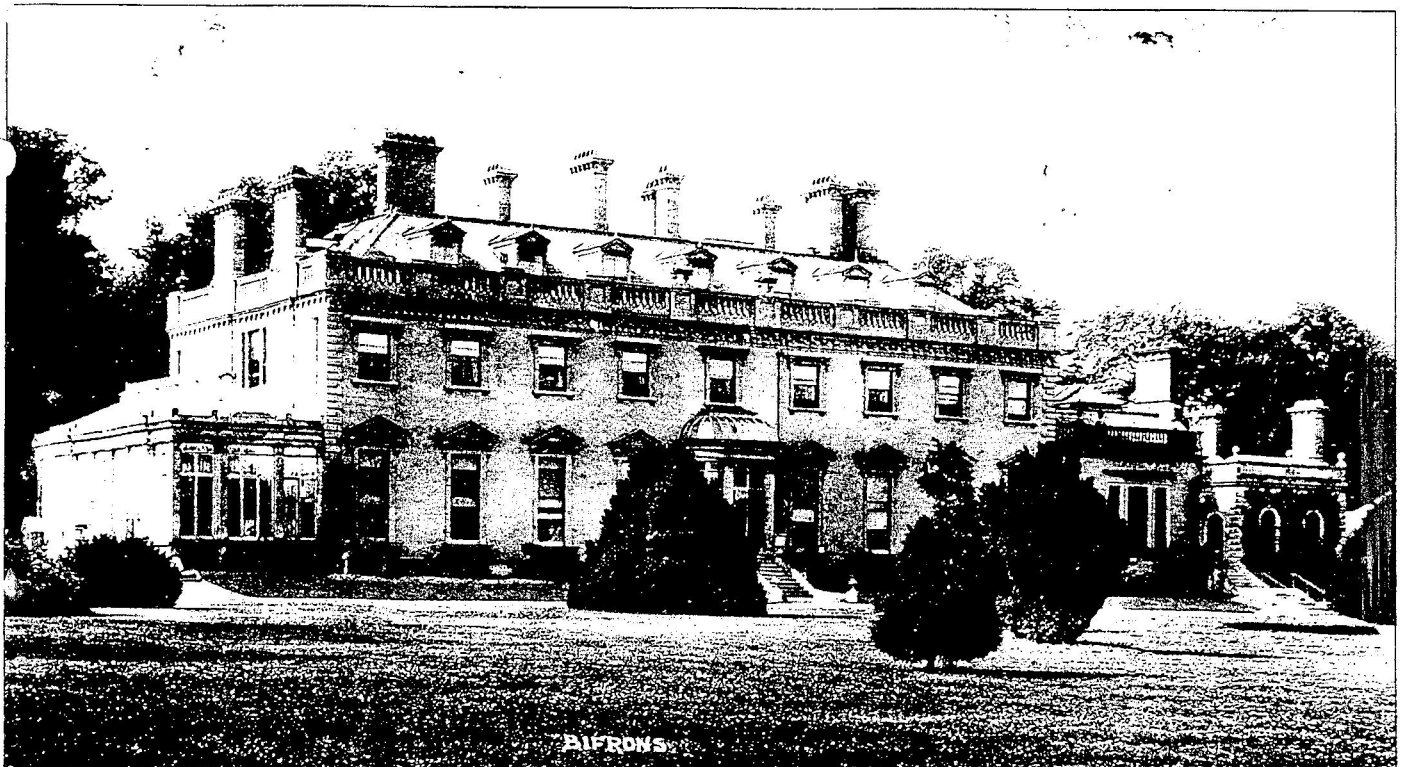
EXCAVATIONS: KENT SITES

a range of rooms leading off a central east-west corridor. The domestic functions of these rooms which included both outside and inside larders, scullery, kitchen, linen room, butler's pantry and brushing room as well as a footman and hallboy's bedroom, reflect something of the way of life of not only aristocratic Victorian England, but also the living and working conditions of the servants necessary to run such large country houses as Bifrons. Much of the complex sewerage, water and heating systems to the house was also recorded, but could not be directly related to individual room function and use. From the demolition deposits which infilled these rooms, however, a large number of architectural mouldings together with a range of other building materials provide some indication of the ornate and heavy Victorian internal decoration of the house. The recovery of a small Whitby jet bead and a 'flat' lead toy soldier from the silt of one drain similarly allow a glimpse of the material possessions of the occupants of the building in the nineteenth century.





▲ General view of excavation, looking north-west. Scale 2m.



▲ The south front of Bifrons c. 1900.