

**Astley's Car Park,
Gosford Street,
Coventry, West Midlands**

An Archaeological
Desk-Based Assessment

Project No.1275

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An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment**

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Plate 1 Buildings fronting Gosford Street before their demolition 1950's (Insert - Buildings on Gosford Street to the west of the study area c. 1914)

Astley's Car Park, Gosford Street, Coventry, West Midlands

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Summary

An archaeological desk-based assessment was carried out in January 2005 on Astley's Car Park to the south of Gosford Street, Coventry. The work was commissioned by Phoenix-Beard. The desk-based assessment has highlighted that this area of Coventry was occupied at least since the early medieval period, and possibly earlier, and that the inhabitants of Gosford Street were, amongst other things, involved in trade and the woollen cloth industry which was so important to Coventry's development during this period. The site itself lies immediately to the southwest of Gosford Gate and to the northwest of the Carmelite Friary of Whitefriars. Excavations to the east at 'Bridge Buildings' located the town wall, and the remains of a timber-framed medieval building.

The buildings on Gosford Street appear to be typical of the general urban environment of Coventry when until modern times, the older infrastructure was adapted for new industry, rather than demolished and rebuilt. The character of industry in Gosford Street appears to have changed with the general changes in and around the city, with ribbon-makers, watch-makers, cycle makers and motorcar manufacturers all being present at various times in the city's history.

Since the demolition of the buildings that formerly occupied the site, the study area has remained undeveloped and therefore the potential for the survival of important below-ground archaeological deposits is extremely high. To this end, a program of further archaeological investigation is recommended, prior to any redevelopment of the site.

1.0 Introduction

This report outlines the findings of an archaeological desk-based assessment of land at Astley's Car Park, Gosford Street, Coventry, West Midlands (NGR SP 341 788). The work was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology in January 2005, and was commissioned by Phoenix-Beard. The assessment adheres to the guidelines set down in the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

The aim of the report is to provide a summary of known archaeological and historical information relating to the Study Area and to enable appropriate mitigation strategies to be devised regarding development and the disturbance of potential below ground archaeological remains.

2.0 Location of the Study Area

The site is a sub-rectangular plot of land fronting onto Gosford Street, measuring approximately 90m x 15m. There were buildings present in the 1950s, but since their demolition, the site has been undeveloped. The site is located within the perimeter of

the old city walls, immediately to the southwest of Gosford Gate, to the east of the city centre.

3.0 Objectives

The objectives of this report were to:

- Compile a summary history of the development and land use within the study area
- Assess the possible presence or absence, location, extent, survival, quality, significance and date of any archaeological remains within the study area
- Assess the impact of development on the archaeological remains

4.0 Method

Research included consultation of the Coventry Historic Environment Record (HER), the primary database of known archaeological and historical sites for the area. Primary and secondary documentary sources, including historic maps, were examined at Coventry Local Studies Library and Birmingham University Library.

5.0 Geology and Topography

Coventry itself is situated in the northeast of the county of Warwickshire, and on the southeast fringe of the region once covered by the forest of Arden. The greater part of the modern city is on Permian Breccia and Sandstone, with a ridge of Triassic Keuper Sandstone giving place to Keuper Red Marls on the eastern side (VCH VIII 1-23).

The River Sherborne, now mostly culverted, passes to the east of the site, and was originally forded at Gosford Bridge.

6.0 General Historical Background

Artefacts have been found from the prehistoric and Romano-British periods in Coventry but there is little to indicate that there was a significant presence in what became the city centre. Although it is no longer believed that the Coventry district was once impenetrable forest, only gradually cleared by Anglo-Saxon invaders the population density recorded by Domesday was low even by Warwickshire standards, heavy clays that were difficult to plough have been given as the cause (Demidowicz 2003, 9).

It is almost certain, however, that Coventry first came into existence as an Anglo-Saxon settlement. The area was well suited to settlement by the Anglian and Saxon invaders who are known to have reached this area at a fairly early date and established the pagan Saxon cemetery of Baginton which is only $2\frac{3}{4}$ miles south of Coventry (VCH VII 1-23). The name Coventry is itself almost certainly of Old English origin, meaning Cofa's Tree. A further witness to its Saxon origin is the prevalence of the ending 'ley' (leah – a wood or clearing) in the names of its hamlets and nearby

parishes such as Pinley, Shortley and Canley and other places around Coventry with names that have roots in Old English (*ibid.*).

It has recently been suggested that in the Anglo-Saxon period Coventry was the centre for a large estate, and, since large estates very often contained a minster church, Coventry must therefore have had such an establishment. The argument for the existence of a church before Leofric's and Godiva's foundation is complicated and much of it is highly speculative, reflecting the desperate lack of information known about Coventry before the middle of the 11th century (Demidowicz 2003, 9).

The original location of the agricultural centre of Coventry is unknown. However, there was a 12th century suburb at Spon on the west, and beyond Gosford at the east. Settlement in the wooded river valley at Spon or in the well-watered Gosford area would have been more in character with the known practice of the Angles and Saxons (VCH VIII 1-23).

Before the making of the Domesday Survey there is no recorded mention of any individual place in the district of Coventry except Coventry itself. About 1043 a Benedictine house, consisting of an abbot and 24 monks, was founded there by Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and the Countess Godgifu (Godiva), his wife. It is highly probable that the whole of Coventry belonged to Godiva in her own right, and that the abbey was founded within her territories and was endowed by Leofric with lands in Warwickshire and elsewhere (*ibid.*).

Leofric died in 1057 and Godiva in 1067, and in 1086 the lands which she had held were specified as Coventry (5 hides) and Ansty and Foleshill (9 hides) (VCH VII 1-23). The entry for Coventry in the Domesday Book records an agricultural population of over sixty households, though these were not necessarily concentrated in one place, and Coventry may only have been the largest of a scatter of hamlets and individual farmsteads across this extensive manor (Demidowicz 2003, 9).

Soon after 1086 the whole city was granted to the earls of Chester, but by 1113 the priory (as the abbey had become between 1095 and 1102) was claiming a 'half' of Coventry later known as the Prior's Half. The rest of the town remaining to the earls of Chester formed part of what later was called the Earl's Half. Within the town the two halves were divided, according to a charter of c. 1161-1175 by a line running along the east-west axis of the town (VCH VIII 1-23).

There is no doubt that the priory stimulated the growth of Coventry, and a great market place was laid out in front of the west end of the church. The earls of Chester must also have played a part in the town's expansion, for, by the end of the 11th century, they had established a castle to the south of the priory and developed their own market area (Demidowicz 2003, 10).

In 1147, when Ranulf (II), Earl of Chester, besieged Coventry the king's men withdrew to the castle, but after Stephen relieved the town and routed the earl he is said to have destroyed the building. It must, however, have been repaired as it is mentioned in later charters (VCH VIII 1-23).

All physical remains of the castle disappeared at an early date and there has been much speculation as to its actual shape and size. Analysis has suggested, however, that the site of the 12th century castle was in the vicinity of the Earl Street part of the main east-west road, to the west of Gosford Street. Some time before 1250, the Earl of Chester moved his seat to Cheylesmore, allowing the castle to decay, and to be let out into tenements. The construction of the town walls during the latter half of the 14th century obviated the need for internal fortifications and gradually the castle disappeared from sight and from memory (*ibid.*).

It is clear from the evidence of corporation deeds that most of the streets lying north of the east-west spine road had been built up at an early date, so that when the city wall was erected in the later 14th century there was considerable disturbance of properties on its northern perimeter (*ibid.*).

For the 12th and particularly for the 13th centuries there is considerable evidence in deeds for street names and for descriptions of properties lying in those streets. Gosford Street itself appears to be one of the earliest roads in Coventry, forming with Jordan Well, Earl Street, High Street, Smithford Street and Spon Street the main east-west thoroughfare, running towards Coleshill in the west and Hinckley and Leicester in the east. By the 12th century streets ran out of the town to the north, east, southwest and possibly southeast, and all, except the southern exits, had their suburbs. This suggests that Coventry was already an important road centre, a supposition confirmed by the presence of bars at these exits in the 13th century and by the building of the five most important gates there in the 14th century. Certainly by the middle of the 14th century it was the centre of a network of roads linking it with Worcester, Holyhead, Leicester, and London and by the 16th century at the latest the main coach road from London to Holyhead passed through the city (VCH VIII 1-23).

During this period, Coventry's growth and reputation as a manufacturing and trading centre began to focus on the townsfolk acting independently of their lord (Demidowicz 2003, 11).

Although in 1329 a licence was granted to the priory and men of Coventry to levy murage for building a wall round the city, work does not seem to have started for some time. It was not until 1363 that licence to crenellate was granted, and this was followed 22 years later by a licence to complete the work. Parts of this wall, though badly preserved and largely rebuilt survive to the south of the study area (Fig. 2, HER 10214) (VCH VIII 1-23). The wall was finally completed in the 1530s (Demidowicz 2003, 13).

Twelve gates were erected at strategic points, further demonstrating that Coventry at this time was a hub of communication. Gosford Gate (Fig. 2, HER 6219), the location of which is immediately to the northeast of the site, lay on the main exit to the east and was in existence by 1411 (VCH VIII 1-23).

The economic development of the city was furthered by a series of royal charters granted during the 14th century. In 1334 and 1344 charters exempted Coventry merchants from toll, pavage and other duties throughout the kingdom. In 1355, the tripartite indenture, drawn up between Queen Isabel, the mayor and bailiffs, and the

prior, settled differences between the two halves, defined boundaries and made it possible for the city to develop as a whole (*ibid.*).

In 1451 the two halves of the city were reunited by the creation of the county of the city of Coventry. At this time Coventry was one of the most important cities in England outside of London, and in 1451 the incorporation by royal charter of the county of the city separated Coventry from the rest of Warwickshire. The county of the city was in existence for nearly 400 years (*ibid.*).

In about 1230 a Franciscan friary, Greyfriars, was founded in part of the Earl's Park. In 1342 Whitefriars was founded on the southeast edge of the town, to the southwest of the study area, by the Carmelites and in 1381-2 the Carthusians established Charterhouse beyond the town in open countryside. The establishment of these foundations reflects the continued and phenomenal growth in the prestige and wealth of Coventry (Demidowicz 2003, 11). In the mid-14th century, Coventry was secure in its position as one of the most important medieval commercial towns in England (*ibid.* 13).

As well as communication, trade played an important role in Coventry's development. Deeds dating from the 12th and 13th centuries suggest that the woollen cloth-making industry was already predominant, and that its participants lived mainly across the east-west axis of the town. Challoners, drapers and fullers are all recorded at Gosford Street, while tanners were mostly located on the opposite side of town at Spon Street, and smiths were mostly found in the northern part of the town (VCH VIII 151-157). Those described in the deeds as merchants naturally occupied the wealthier areas, Much Park Street, Earl Street, Gosford Street and Cheylesmore Lane (*ibid.*).

In the 14th and early 15th centuries, between a quarter and a third of those who appear in surviving Coventry records were involved in some aspect of the wool or cloth trades, and again many of these were located in Gosford Street. Mercers and merchants, who also mostly lived in the Gosford Street and Earl Street area, which was still the most wealthy part of town, had also greatly increased in number (*ibid.*). Wiremakers were also concentrated at Gosford Street.

The rapid development of Coventry from a rural community in the 11th century to a centre of many flourishing trades and of road communications by the end of the 13th, presupposes a considerable interest in foreign trade, which there is, in fact, much evidence for. Already by the late 14th century the emphasis had shifted to the cloth trade, raw materials being imported and the finished article exported. The external trade of Coventry passed mainly through the ports of London, Bristol, Southampton, and Boston, and there is also evidence for trade abroad (*ibid.*).

It is clear that in the economic life of Coventry the cloth trade was outstanding and the metal-working and leather and fur trades were also of some consequence, not only in the 14th and 15th centuries, when the peak of the city's prosperity was reached, but even in the late 12th and 13th centuries. Many of those engaged in the leading crafts of the city were influential, not only in their guilds, but also in the government of the city. The cloth trade was still outstanding in the early 16th century, despite the slump which it was experiencing (*ibid.*).

The church also contributed to the prosperity of the city, with many of the churches becoming places of pilgrimage, including the Carmelite Priory, or Whitefriars, located to the southwest of the study area, which was founded in 1342 (VCH VIII 125-141). A mill located to the southeast of the study area, which was in existence by 1200, was used at some point by the White Friars Monastery. It was also known as Shut Lane Mill and Altegeder Mill (HER 3169). It is possible that the Monastery also owned the land immediately to the south of the study area, situated between the Monastery and the Mill.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in 1539 had a disastrous effect on Coventry, made worse by the abolition of the town's most deeply rooted institutions, the religious guilds and chantries, in 1547. Whitefriars, Greyfriars and Charterhouse were closed down (Demidowicz 2003, 13).

By the beginning of the 17th century the city walls were overgrown and in a state of decay, but they were sufficiently restored for the defence of the city during the Civil War. In 1642 Coventry was described as being walled as well as London, and local tradition says that the pro-parliamentarian inhabitants used their walls to deny entrance to Charles I in 1642. In 1662 Charles II ordered the walls of Coventry to be razed to the ground, though in 1672 there was a change in attitude and an effort was made to preserve what remained of them (VCH VIII 1-23).

Coventry's trade and industry suffered a decline in the 16th century. There was some revival in the late 17th and early 18th centuries with the introduction of new types of cloth and the beginnings of the ribbon industry which was to become an important contribution to the city's economy during this period (VCH VIII 162-189). The new industries were small scale, labour intensive and unmechanised and were squeezed into the existing urban fabric (Demidowicz 2003, 16).

From the later 18th century, the main lines of industrial development in Coventry were in ribbon weaving and watchmaking, followed after less than a century by the emergence of the city first as the cradle of cycle manufacture and later as an important centre of the motor industry and its ancillary trades. It was the cycle industry that ensured that Coventry once again became prosperous (*ibid.*).

While the introduction of canals and trains provided the catalyst for growth and development for many places, the introduction of these new methods of transport and communication ensured that Coventry maintained its position as a hub of communication and strong industrial base throughout the 19th century. Although the pace of the town's economy quickened in the late 18th century, the first industrial revolution based on coal and iron largely passed by it (Demidowicz 2003, 15).

For the first half of the 19th century, watchmaking and silk ribbon weaving were the staple industries of the town and its northern hinterland. As both manufacturing activities needed plenty of light, but remained domestic in scale, houses with large windows on the front or back or on rear extensions became a characteristic building type. Many were being built in the long medieval burgage plots (Demidowicz 2003, 17).

Despite being a modern manufacturing city in the pre-war period, Coventry city centre retained many of its historic timber-framed buildings. This was one of the reasons Coventry was targeted by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War, which destroyed much of the city's heritage.

7.0 Cartographic and Documentary Evidence

The earliest map consulted was Speed's map of 1610 (Fig. 3), which depicts buildings fronting onto Gosford Street. These buildings, whilst stylised, appear to be narrow with steep pitched roofs. Plate 1 (insert) illustrates that houses of this kind, possibly dating to 15th – 16th century, jettied, though possessing later 17th and 18th century alterations, were still standing in 1914. The steep pitch of the roof of no. 74 Gosford Street (plate 1 main picture) also suggests that this building incorporated much earlier elements (Litherland pers. comm.).

Speed's map also depicts Gosford Gate, and the line of the city wall to the east of the site. The suburb of Far Gosford is also shown to be well populated, just outside the city walls, and White Fryers is located to the southwest of the site. Immediately to the north of the site, Gosford Street widens. Bradford's map of 1750 (Fig. 4) also shows the widening of the street, and annotates it as Swines Cross, which may indicate that this was a market place.

Bradford's map (Fig. 4) also clearly shows the property boundaries at the rear of the houses fronting Gosford Street in this area as respecting the line of earlier burgage plots. Between the buildings cart entrances are visible, reflecting the relative affluence of the area, dominated by merchants. At the back of the buildings smaller structures are visible, which may represent stables, workshops or separate kitchens. To the south of the property boundaries is a field called Old Brickiln Close, suggesting that the important tile and brick-making industry had at some time been present here. The wall, and Gosford Gate are also both depicted on this map, as is 'White Fryers' to the southwest.

Sharp's map of 1807 (Fig. 5) is very similar to Bradfords map. Gosford Gate had been pulled down by this time (removed in 1765), though St. George's chapel which had been attached to its north-east corner, was still standing. The 'White Fryers' building was still standing, though on this map it is annotated as a House of Industry. A map of 1837 (Fig. 6) shows extensions at the backs of the properties, though the original plot boundaries were still being respected and it is possible that the older buildings were incorporated into the new ones, rather than being completely demolished. Much of the town wall had also been removed by this point. Pigot and Co's trade directory of 1828-29 records the dominance of ribbon making in Coventry's industry at this period, and several ribbon makers are recorded at Gosford Street, though the industry itself was present throughout the city. Gosford Street also possessed grocers, butchers, bakers and flour merchants and general provision dealers and its fair share of Taverns, the Antelope adjacent to the study area being recorded in this trade directory.

The Board of Health map of 1851 (Fig. 7) again shows alterations to the properties, and looks as if at least half of the plot behind the buildings fronting Gosford Street was made up of workshops and yard surfaces. The boundaries, however, are

unchanged, and the nature of the new buildings suggests that there would be little below ground disturbance of any earlier archaeological deposits present. The 1888 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 8) shows little deviation from the Board of Health map, though it does show the buildings and yards in greater detail. Trade directories from this period (Curtis and Beamishes Directory of Coventry 1874-85 and 1881) record shop keepers, bakers and flour dealers, a tailor, weavers, a watch finisher and a clothes dealer as being present between the Antelope Inn and the Peacock Inn, at this end of Gosford Street.

Subsequent editions of Ordnance Survey maps, from 1905 (Fig. 9) and 1925 (Fig. 10) also show little change along Gosford Street in the vicinity of the study area. Again, trade directories from this period (Spennell's Annual Directory of Coventry and District 1911-12, and PJ Ltd Coventry Directory 1924) record the presence of a provision dealer, a butcher and machinists (weavers). By the edition of 1936 (Fig. 11) there were major changes to the south side of Gosford Street on either side of the study area, with the Motor Car Engine Works now present to the west, and the Motor Car Repair Works present to the east. The buildings within the study area and in its immediate vicinity remained mostly unaltered. Trade directories dating to the 1930s show an increase of cycle agents in this part of Gosford Street (and elsewhere in the city), reflecting the rise of this industry during this period. Also on Gosford Street, recorded in the PJ Ltd Coventry Directory of 1939-40 was Nuffield Mechanisation Ltd, manufacturers of anti-aircraft guns. To the southwest, the buildings of the workhouse were taken over by Coventry Corporation and became the Gulson Road Infirmary in 1929 (Dickinson 1992).

By the 1961 Ordnance Survey Edition (Fig. 12), the study area had mostly been cleared of buildings. Again, however, the property boundaries at the backs of the plots are unaltered. The study area remained free from development, and the construction of the new road system (Fig. 2) only affected the buildings and properties on the north side of Gosford Street.

8.0 Known Archaeological Information

Archaeological evaluations have been carried out in the vicinity of the study area, to the southwest at Gulson Hospital and immediately to the east at 'Bridge Buildings', 63-69 Gosford Street.

An evaluation in 1992 by Coventry Museums' Archaeological Unit was conducted as a response to a planning application to redevelop a temporary car park behind the Gulson Hospital Infirmary block. The evaluation was within the area on Bradford's map of 1750 described as Brick Kiln Close. The evaluation concluded that despite no positive evidence for a kiln was identified, it remained probable that there were kilns within the vicinity due to the high proportion and nature of the brick recovered. The pottery recovered from this evaluation spanned a period of approximately 800 years, and included material from the 11th and 12th centuries. An 18th-century garden soil was also present (Dickinson 1992).

Another evaluation was conducted in 1998 by Coventry Museums' and Galleries Archaeological Unit. This evaluation was within the precinct of the Coventry

Carmelite Friary (Whitefriars) located at Gulson Hospital. This evaluation demonstrated that archaeological features and deposits dating from the 11th century onwards survived in areas across the entire site, and further demonstrated that the medieval and early post-medieval features were buried deep beneath later garden soils (Flitcroft 1998).

The evaluation conducted on the site of 'Bridge Buildings' 63-69 Gulson Street (Dickinson 1991) immediately to the east of the study area was designed to establish the line of the medieval wall, and to determine where the wall altered direction to meet Gosford Gate (Dickinson 1991). The results of the evaluation also suggested occupation in the civil war period when Gosford Gate and this part of the wall were given extra fortifications. Medieval layers were identified, but not disturbed during the work. Within the previous premises of National Tyres, a timber structure was noted, which was almost certainly part of the rear wing of the demolished "Anchorsmith" Tavern. Subsequent dendrochronological analysis by the University of Nottingham produced a felling date for the primary upright of the structure of 1410-20 (Dickinson et al. 1991).

9.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Coventry began as a small Anglo-Saxon settlement, and grew in size and importance to be, for a while, the second city in England. It was predominantly through trade and communication that this came about, and during the medieval period Gosford Street, part of the main east-west thoroughfare and one of the earliest roads in Coventry, is known to have been occupied by merchants concerned with Coventry's primary commodity, cloth. It is entirely possible that the earliest settlement in Coventry was also concentrated around this road, as the suburb of Far Gosford, and the suburb around Spon Street to the west, were both topographically ideal for Anglo-Saxon settlers.

As the emphasis of Coventry's trade and industry changed throughout the centuries, so did the character of Gosford Street, and in later years, ribbon making, watchmaking, cycle making and motorcar manufacturers were all represented.

Despite Coventry's economic development, until modern times the city centre retained much of its historic environment. However, the city was extensively damaged during the Blitz, and has recently undergone dramatic urban renewal. Programmes of archaeological work conducted in conjunction with the redevelopment of the city centre have demonstrated the richness and extensive preservation of below-ground deposits relating to some of the most significant periods in Coventry's history. Archaeological work conducted in the vicinity of the study area has also demonstrated that archaeological features, structures and deposits from the medieval period onwards, also survive locally.

In addition to this, the present undeveloped nature of the site further suggests that below ground archaeological deposits are likely to survive. The buildings that previously fronted Gosford Street are shown in photographs to have had earlier elements incorporated into them, and since their demolition, no further buildings have been erected. The additions and alterations at the back of these buildings, identified

from cartographic analysis, are unlikely to have excessively truncated any earlier below ground archaeology. Recent maps suggest that the old boundaries denoting burgrave plots had been respected.

The site, therefore, has incredible potential for the survival of below-ground archaeological features and deposits that can contribute to the understanding of the history and development of Coventry, both in a local and city-wide context. A programme of further archaeological investigation is recommended prior to any development that may disturb these deposits.

10.0 Acknowledgements

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11.0 References

11.1 Cartographic Sources

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1888 Ordnance Survey 1st Edition
1905 Ordnance Survey Edition
1925 Ordnance Survey Edition
1936 Ordnance Survey Edition
1961 Ordnance Survey Edition

11.2 Other Sources

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1931-32 PJ Ltd Coventry Directory

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Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments*

Victoria County History references are located at the following website:
<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/source.asp?pubid=49> Accessed 20/1/05



Fig.1

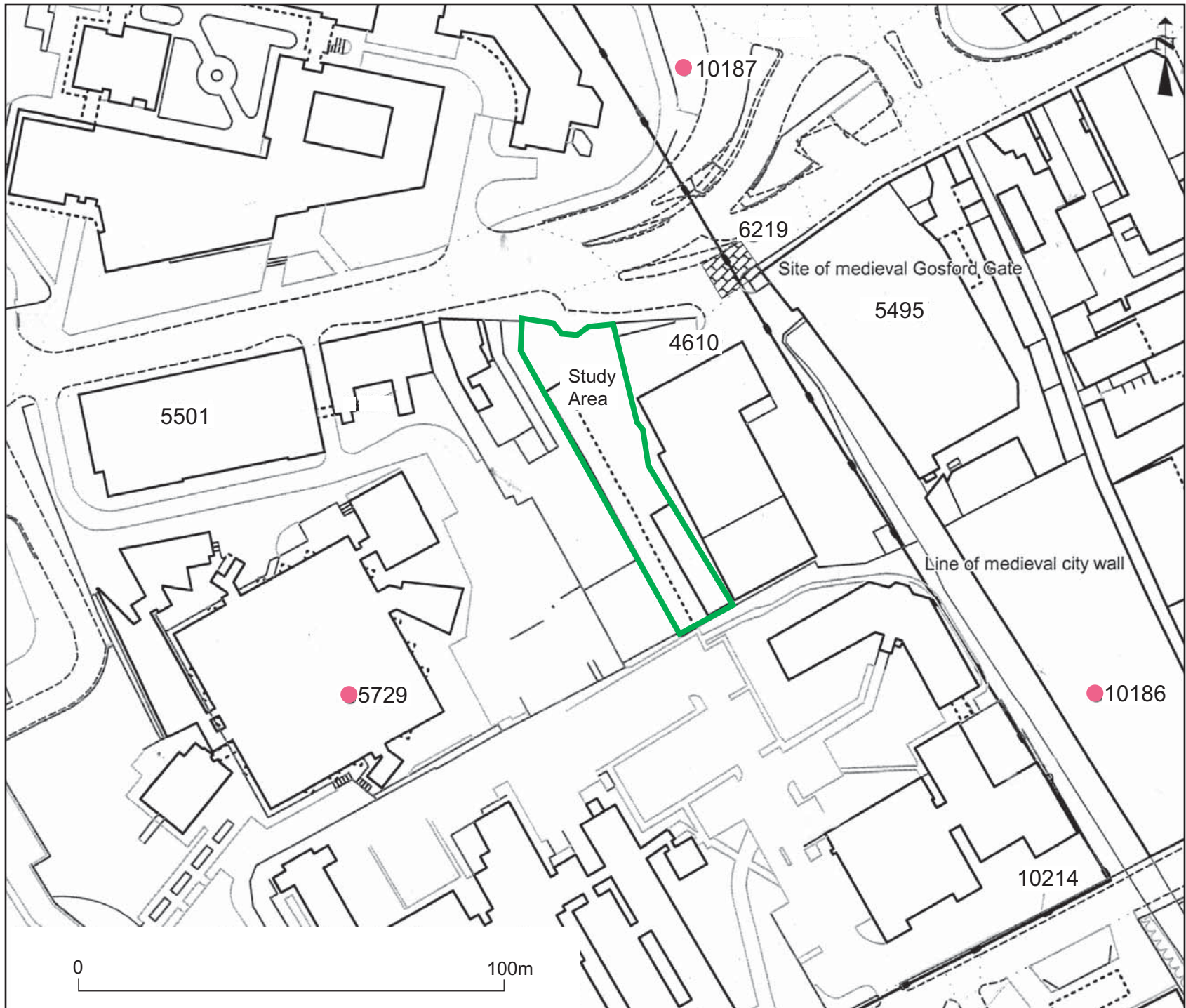


Fig.2

1610

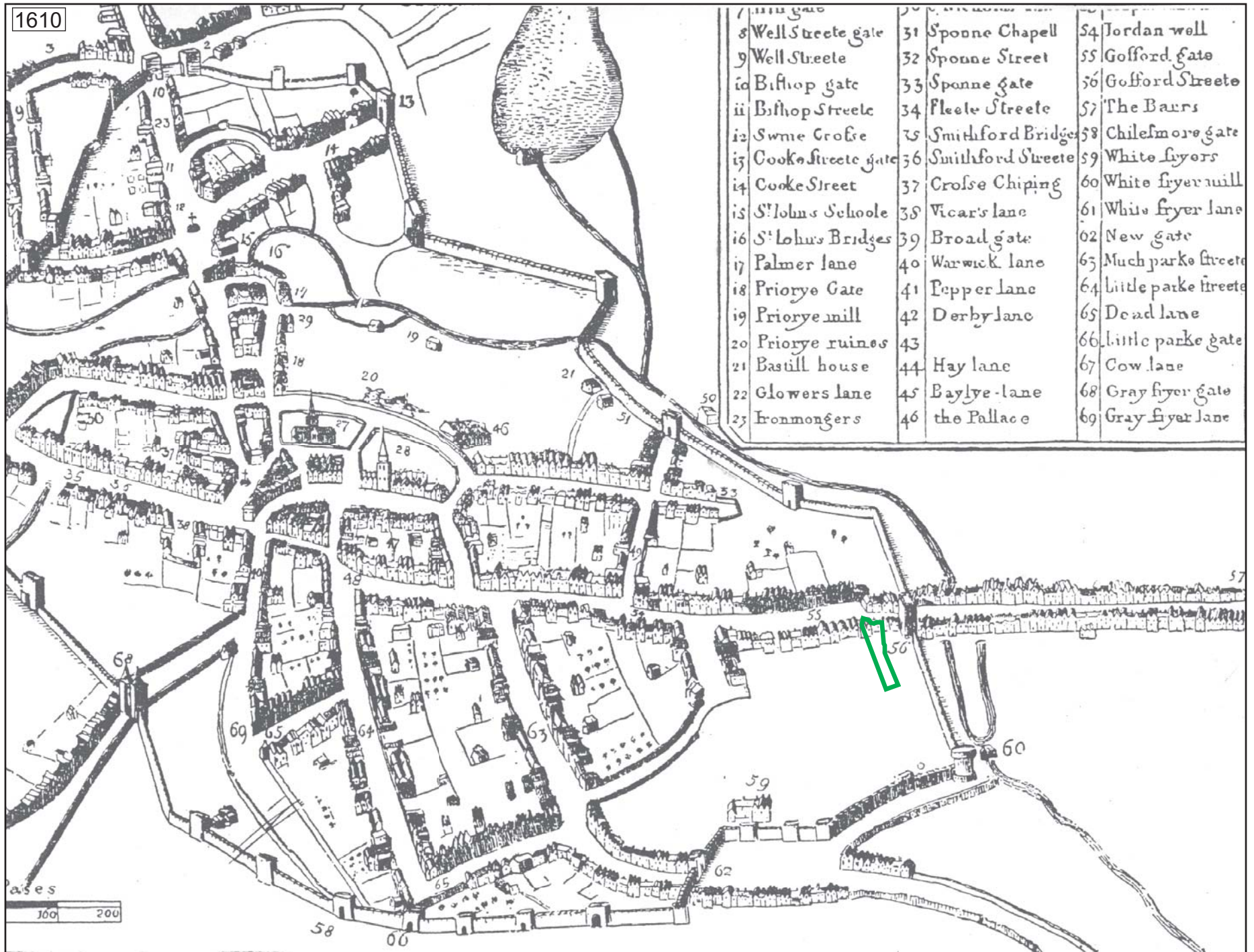


Fig.3

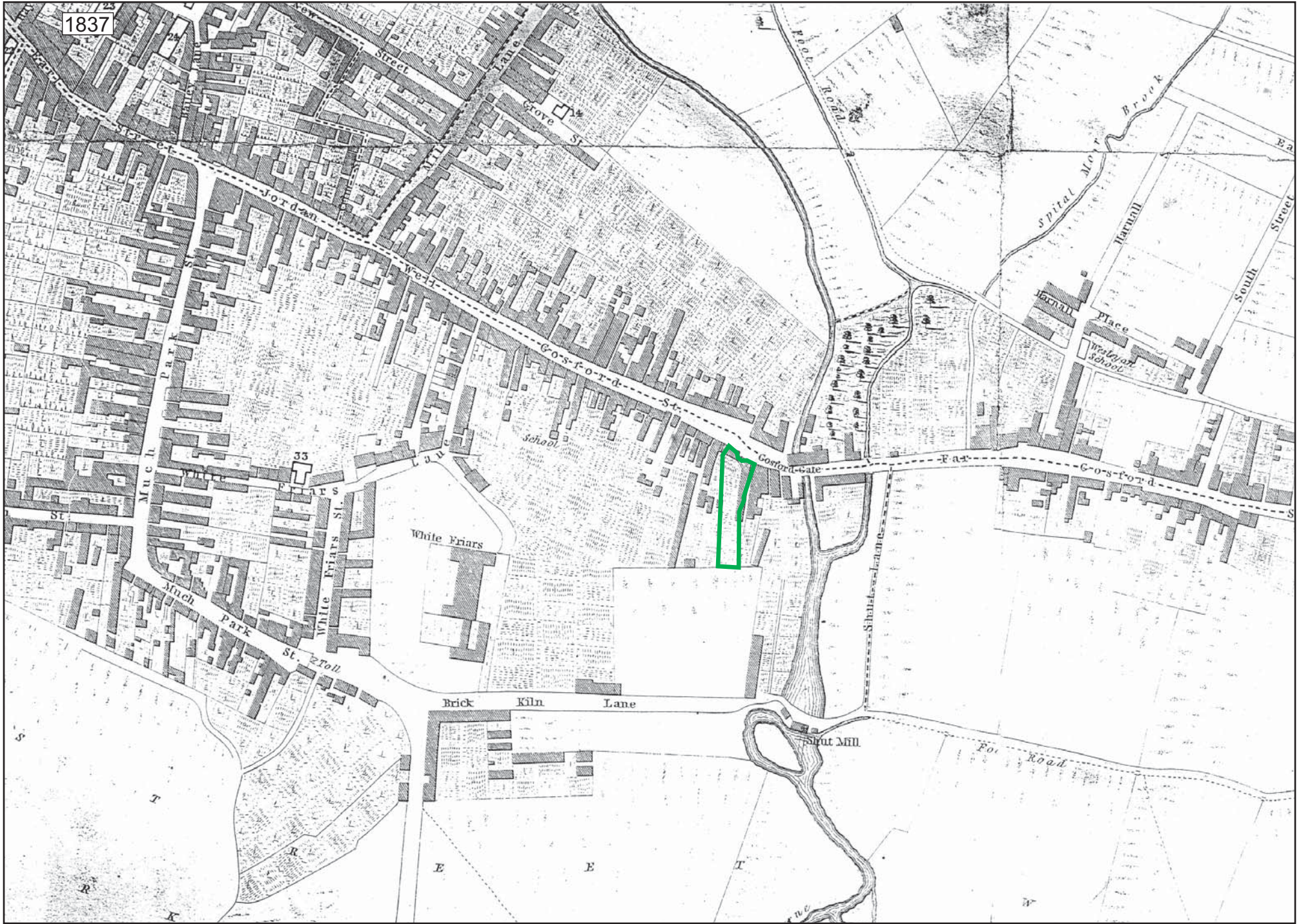


Fig.6

1851



Fig.7

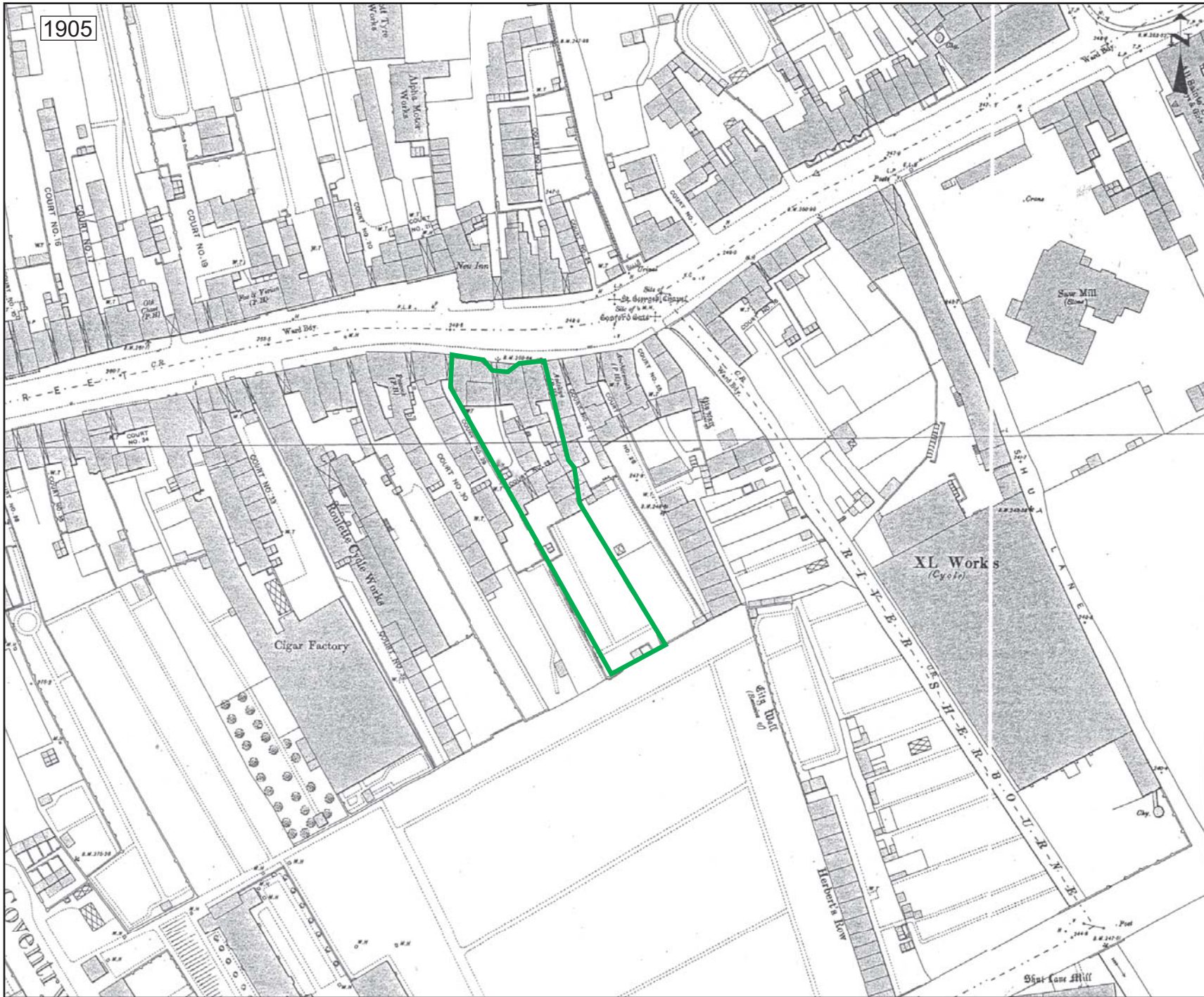


Fig.9



Fig.10

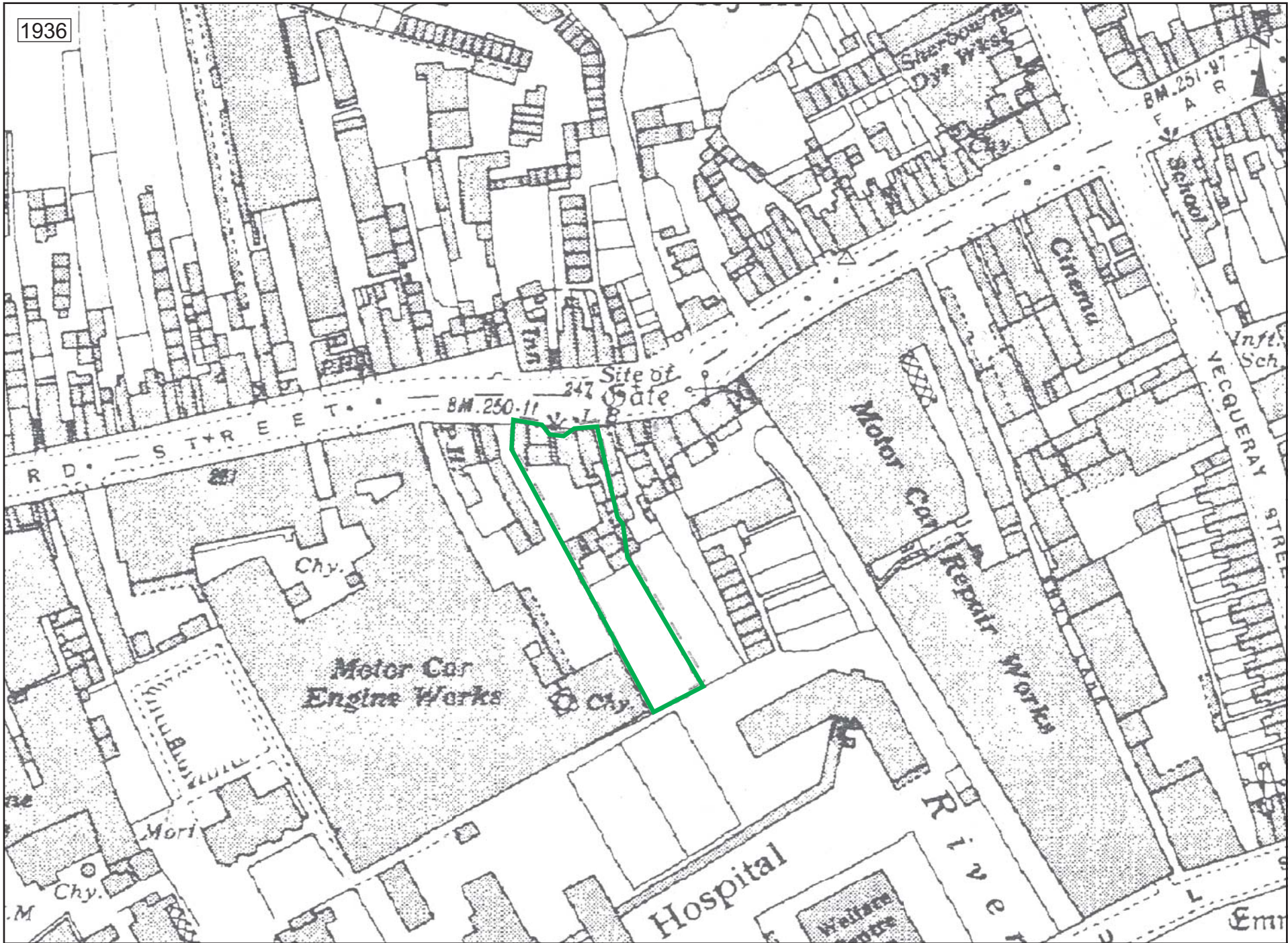


Fig.11

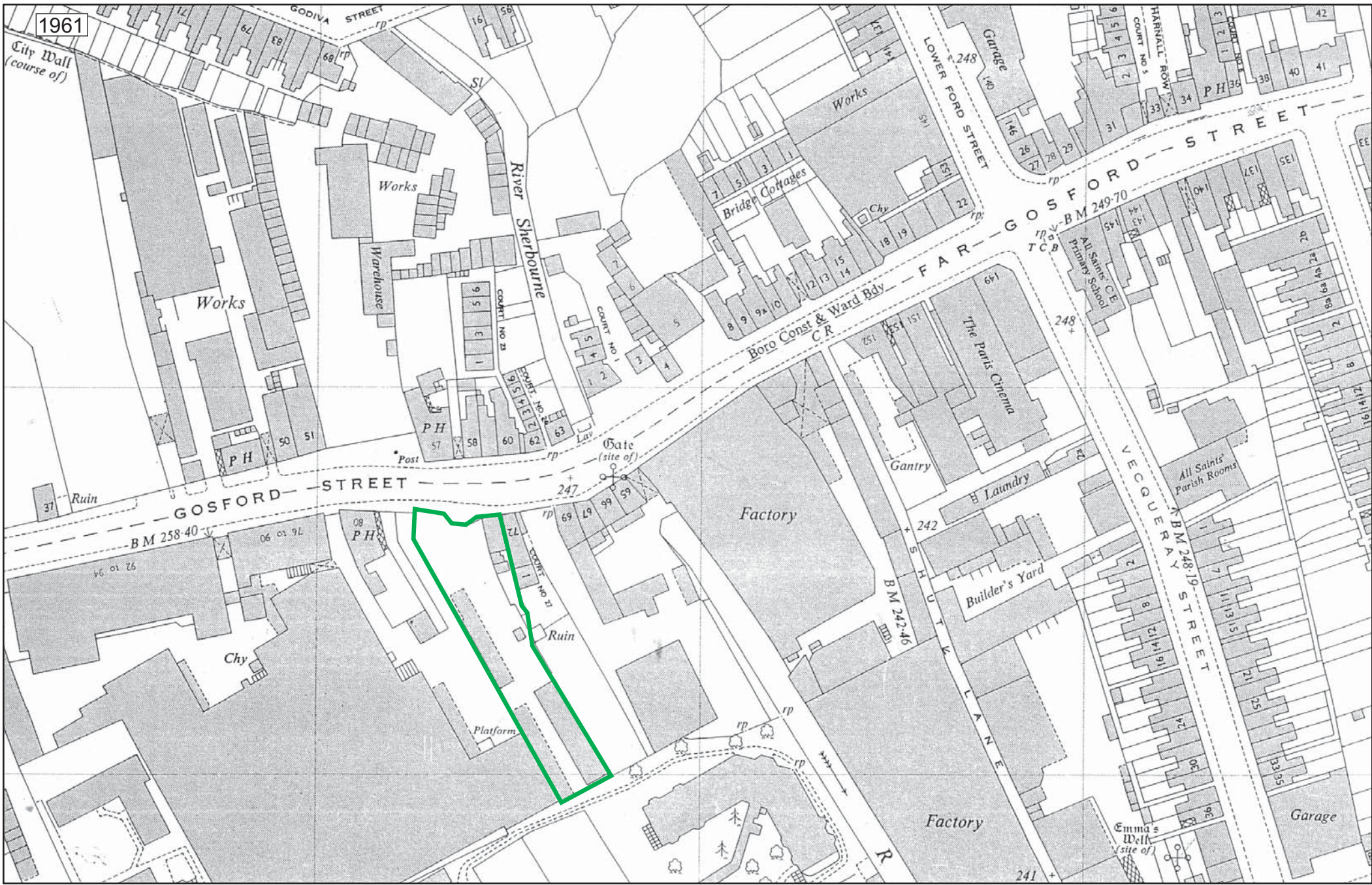


Fig.12



Plate 1