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Land Adjacent to the Old Fire
Station, Hales Street, Coventry:

An Archaeological Evaluation,
2006

Project No. 1469

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Planning Application Number 51457

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SUMMARY

An Archaeological Evaluation was undertaken on the site of a proposed extension to the Old Fire Station, Hales Street, Coventry (SMR 5504, NGR SP 3358 7929). The aim of the evaluation was to ascertain the location of the town boundary wall and ditch, as well as to investigate a building shown in the vicinity of the site on the Board of Health Map of 1851.

A single trench was excavated, revealing the rubble core of the medieval town wall. This comprised fragments of sandstone loosely bonded with lime mortar. Immediately to the west was a tumble of stone, identified as being the original facing of the wall. This comprised unbonded dressed sandstone blocks varying in size between 0.3mX0.2m and 0.3X0.6m. The full width of the wall could not be ascertained due to the presence of live services immediately to the north of the trench. No datable artefacts were recovered from this feature, however pottery dating from the 14th to mid-19th centuries was recovered from a clay-rich deposit immediately overlying the stone tumble. This was identified as the levelling layer for the brick floor of the mid-19th century building depicted on the Board of Health Map. Chilvers Coton A glazed ridge tiles were also recovered from this deposit, attesting to the presence of buildings of status in the vicinity of the site in the medieval period, which may represent further evidence of the Priory of St Mary which is known to have been located in this area of the town.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Nichol Thomas Limited on behalf of Rois Ali to undertake map regression and trial trenching ahead of a leisure development at the Old Fire Station, Hales Street, Coventry (hereinafter referred to as the study area).

This report outlines the results of documentary research and field evaluation carried out between July 13th and 19th 2006 and has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations (IFA 2001).

The evaluation conformed to a brief produced by the Planning Archaeologist, Coventry City Council (Appendix I), and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2006) which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

1.2 Location and geology

The site was located immediately adjacent to the Old Fire Station (SMR 5504), which it abutted to the southwest, it was bounded by Hales Street to the north-west and Pool Meadow Bus Station to the east and was centred on NGR SP 3358 7929 (Fig. 1).

The underlying geology consists of Mercia Mudstone, stiff red clay of the Triassic Enville Beds. This overlies coarse-grained red sandstone which in turn seals Carboniferous coal seams.

Prior to the evaluation taking place the site had been used as a lay-by. The trench was located where the medieval town wall and associated defensive ditch would have crossed on a northwest-southeast orientation to meet the Swanswell Gate on the opposite side of Hales Street.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest documentary records reveal that an abbey was constructed by the founders of Coventry, Earl Leofric and Lady Godiva, which was consecrated in 1043 (Rylatt and Mason 2003, 2). Records show that this had been replaced by the mid-13th century by the Priory of St. Mary, which combined Coventry's first cathedral with a Benedictine Priory (*ibid.*). The Cathedral and Priory buildings were swept away following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. However, the gatehouse itself survives on the ground today, as well as an upstanding stretch of the medieval wall (SMR 9203) immediately to the north of the development area. The gate, dating to the 15th century, was a later insertion into the wall which acted as a private

gate to the Priory linking the precinct with its orchards which were situated outside the city walls (Demidowicz 2003, 51).

Commerce in Coventry in the medieval period centred around the wool trade, which both encouraged and paid for the growth of the town at this time. The city's circuit of walls, gates and defensive ditches were constructed between the mid-14th and mid-16th centuries (Patrick 2004). The defensive circuit was maintained until the English Civil War, but following the Restoration it was largely razed, probably on the grounds of Coventry's Parliamentary stance during the war. Further demolition of the town's defences took place during the Industrial Revolution when the city became a significant urban industrial centre for the region. Recent excavations across the city have revealed that despite heavy bombing during the so-called Baedeker Raids of World War II, and subsequent clearance and redevelopment in the immediate post-war period, below-ground survival of earlier medieval deposits is generally good.

Excavations in the immediate vicinity of the site were undertaken as part of Coventry's Millennium Project (The Phoenix Initiative) these are reported upon elsewhere (Rylatt and Mason 2003). Other sites of interest held on the City's Historic Environment Record (Fig. 2) include the site of St Agnes' well (SMR 6227) which is reputedly said to have had healing properties, Palmer Lane Bridge (SMR 9223) believed to have 15th century origins, and the site of the Priory Mill (SMR 9054). Significant artefactual finds in the locale also include a fragment from a Saxon Cross shaft (SMR 6235).

The Old Fire Station was constructed in 1902, but the area of the study area remained open. It is possible, therefore, that the remains of the medieval town wall and its associated ditch, together with the building shown occupying the site in 1851, survive as archaeological features within the present site boundary.

3 DOCUMENTARY AND CARTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Speed's Map of 1610 (Fig. 3) does not annotate the Swanswell gate, as it was not one of the major routes into the City, and the area within this part of the circuit of defences is shown as being unoccupied at the time of his survey. Samuel Bradford's Plan of Coventry dating to 1748-49, and reproduced from an engraving by Thomas Jefferys published in 1750 (Fig. 4) tells a similar story, with orchards planted within the town boundary to the north of Hales Street.

The Tithe Map and associated Apportionment records land in the vicinity of the site as being called Boggy Meadow, owned by the Trustees of the Bablake Boys Charity, and rented by Thomas Moy for pasture. Land immediately to the north of the site is recorded as being called Spittle Close, owned by Trustees of the Thomas White's Charity, and rented for pasture by a Joseph Rigg.

Hales Street itself was laid out in 1848-50; it bypassed the gate which presented the opportunity of blocking the archway and incorporating the monument in a private residence (Demidowicz 2003, 51). Land in the area was subsequently sold for housing, however, stipulations were made by the Trustees of the Thomas White's Charity that any proposed development must have 'uniform elevations and must each cost not less than £300' (VCH 1969, 150). The Coventry Board of Health Map (dated 1851) depicts the area of the site as being undeveloped. However, the Swanswell Gatehouse is shown, with a corresponding building on the opposite side of the road, and the original line of the town boundary ditch is annotated (Fig. 5).

The first corporation baths for Coventry were opened in Hales Street in 1852, (VCH 1969, 282) and are depicted on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map (dated to 1888, Fig. 6). The area of the study area itself (immediately north of this building) is shown as unoccupied open ground, with the boundary wall and ancillary structures belonging to Holy Trinity School located at its northern end. The building depicted on the earlier Board of Health Map had been demolished by 1888. The First Edition Map also records the location of Priory Gate, on the opposite side of Hales Street, as well as the site of the Priory Mill to the south.

In the late 1890s Coventry became a Municipal Fire Brigade under the aegis of the Local Council (Anon 1985). This prompted the construction of the Fire Station in 1902, which replaced the Public Baths. The new Fire Station was opened on 9th October 1902 by the Mayor of Coventry (Anon 1961, 13). This new, purpose-built, facility incorporated stable blocks for the horses, which were rested in fields to the rear of the complex, as well as accommodation for the Chief and Officers (Anon 1985). The new Fire Station is shown on the Second Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1905 (Fig. 7, and Plates 1 and 2). Three houses for the Chief and Officers are also shown abutting the northern elevation (Plate 1). The study area was still unoccupied at this time, with the school boundary cutting through the northern end. By the time of the next survey in 1914 the Hippodrome had been constructed adjacent to the Town Gate on the opposite side of the road (Fig. 8).

The Fire Station building was extended in 1934, increasing the number of appliance bays from three to six, and adding to the quarters available over them (Anon 1961, 13). It was built to replicate the earlier building exactly (Plate 3). By 1936 Chantry Terrace, on the opposite side of the road to the study area, had been replaced by the Hippodrome Theatre (Fig. 9), and the Fire Station itself is shown as a continuous building along the frontage, following its earlier extension to the north. In the post-war period the site of the original Hippodrome was landscaped with gardens and a pond (1950 Ordnance Survey Map, Fig. 10), possibly due to bomb damage during the Coventry Blitz. By 1959 the Hippodrome Theatre had become the Coventry Theatre, and Trinity School was being used as warehousing (Fig. 11). The area of the study area was therefore not affected by the post-war rebuilding of the City.

By 1971 the buildings associated with Trinity School had been demolished, probably as improvements were made to the Coventry Ring Road, which was finally completed to its current layout in 1974. The new road layout depicted on the 1971 Ordnance Survey Map (Fig. 12) shows an entrance to an open, though enclosed, that is defined, yard area of unspecified function. The entranceway cuts across the northern half of the site. More recent refurbishment and extension of the Pool Meadow Station saw the area of this yard encroached upon, and it was during this latter phase of development, associated with the rebuilding of the bus station, that the study area became a lay-by to aid in maintaining access to the rear of commercial properties associated with the new bus station.

4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the evaluation was to determine the character, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried remains.

More specific aims were:

- To establish the precise location, alignment and condition of the city wall and ditch.
- To record and date any archaeological deposits related to the building depicted on the Board of Health Map of 1851.

5 METHODOLOGY

A single trench was excavated, measuring 4m by 2.8m (Fig. 2), this was smaller than originally planned, but all changes to the brief were made in consultation with the City Planning Archaeologist. The ditch was orientated north-south in order to intersect the line of the town wall and ditch as indicated by the wall scar on Swanswell Gate tower to the north-west. All topsoil and modern overburden were removed using a JCB mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the subsoil. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, features were planned at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, and sections were drawn through all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:20. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using monochrome, colour print, colour slide and digital photography.

Recovered finds were cleaned, marked and remedial conservation work was undertaken as necessary. Treatment of all finds conformed to guidance contained within 'A strategy for the care and investigation of finds' published by English Heritage.

The full site archive includes all artefactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (UKIC, 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with Coventry Museum subject to permission from the landowner.

6 RESULTS

The natural subsoil (1010), a compact red clay, was reached at a height of 77.39m AOD.

The rubble core of what appeared to be the town boundary wall were uncovered at a depth of 78.55m AOD. The footings followed a northwest-southeast orientation and comprised pieces of sandstone, which were loosely bonded with a lime mortar (1004, Fig. 13). Immediately to the west of the core of the wall was a tumble of stone identified as being the original facing for the wall (Plate 4). This comprised un-bonded dressed sandstone blocks varying in size between 0.3mX0.2m and 0.3X0.6m. The full width of the wall could not be ascertained due to the presence of live services immediately to the north of the trench. No datable artefacts were recovered from this feature.



Plate 4

The wall was sealed by a compact red-brown clay-rich levelling layer (1008, Fig. 13 and Plate 5), measuring 0.5m in depth and containing fragments of sandstone, brick and charcoal. Artefacts recovered from this layer included pottery dating from the medieval period to the mid-19th century (see Rátkai below), as well as animal bone, snail shells and tile. This layer probably represents a levelling layer for the later floor surface visible in the section on Plate 5.



Plate 5

The line of the medieval wall was cut by a later wall (1009) on a north-south alignment. The footings for the wall was made up of two courses of sandstone, which were probably reused stone robbed from the medieval wall. This formed the foundation for a brick wall (1005), which survived up to two courses high. It was constructed from bricks measuring 0.23mX0.12m. To the west of the wall were the remains of a brick floor or yard surface (1007 and 1003, Plate 5). Both areas of floor (1003 and 1007) overlay levelling layer 1008 and were in turn sealed by a very mixed layer of demolition material (1006) measuring 0.22m in depth. These archaeological layers had all been sealed by a dark brown levelling layer (1002), which measured 0.24m in depth, and had been cut towards the eastern edge of the trench by a modern service trench. A compact layer of scalplings (1001), measuring 0.22m in depth served as the support for the modern tarmac surface (1000), which measured 0.3m in depth (Fig. 13).



Plate 6

7 ARTEFACTUAL SUMMARY

All material from the evaluation will be deposited with Coventry City Museum under Accession Code HA 06.

7.1 The Pottery by Stephanie Rátkai

1008 (first half of the 19th c)

Chilvers Coton C ware x 1 (14th-15th c)

Late medieval/early post-medieval oxidised ware x 1 (15th-16th c)

Coarseware x 4 (17th-18th c)

Mottled ware x 1 (later 17th-mid 18th c)

Slip-coated ware x 1 (later 17th-mid 18th c)

Creamware x 2 (1790-1810?)

Pearlware x 1 (early 19th c)

Modern yellow ware x 1 (early 19th c)
Flower pot x 1 (late 18th-19th c)

7.2 Building materials by Stephanie Rátkai

1008

Ceramic roof tile x 12
Chilvers Coton A glazed ridge tile x 2
Stockingford Shale roofing slate x 1

7.3 Miscellaneous by Erica Macey

1008

Slag x1
Bone x 12
Snail shell x 1
Clay pipe fragment x 1

8 DISCUSSION

Following the Restoration and despite the orders of King Charles II in 1642 to raze the walls of Coventry to the ground, some sections of wall survive on the ground today. The general construction of the wall (1004), with the sandstone being loosely bonded with lime mortar, concurs with the remains of the medieval town wall which are still standing. The location of the wall (1004) at the northern end of the trench suggests that its associated defensive ditch, which would have been on the outer side of the town circuit, may still survive to the north of the trench. However, due to the presence of live services here it was not possible to excavate this area. The alignment of the wall did, however, line up well with the scarring visible on the Swanswell Gate on the opposite side of Hales Street.

The range of pottery collected from the early levelling layer (1008) is interesting in that there was nothing later than the mid-19th century, which suggests that the surface was associated with the building that is depicted on the Coventry Board of Health Map of 1851, which therefore predates the Fire Station.

The presence of Chilvers Coton A glazed ridge tiles is also significant in that they attest to the presence of buildings of status in the vicinity of the site in the medieval period.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Nicol Thomas, on behalf of Rois Ali. Thanks are due to Chris Lander and Bob Davies for their co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks also go to Chris Patrick, who monitored the project on behalf of Coventry City Council. Work on site was undertaken by Robert Burrows, Mark Charles and Andy Gittens, and documentary research was undertaken by Shane Kelleher. Thanks also go to Stephanie Rátkai for her specialist input, as well as Anna Wilson (HER Officer) and the staff at Coventry City Archives. Robert Burrows and Kirsty Nichol produced the written report which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Kirsty Nichol who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

10 REFERENCES

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APPENDIX I
CITY OF COVENTRY BRIEF FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION (PART B)



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Fig.1

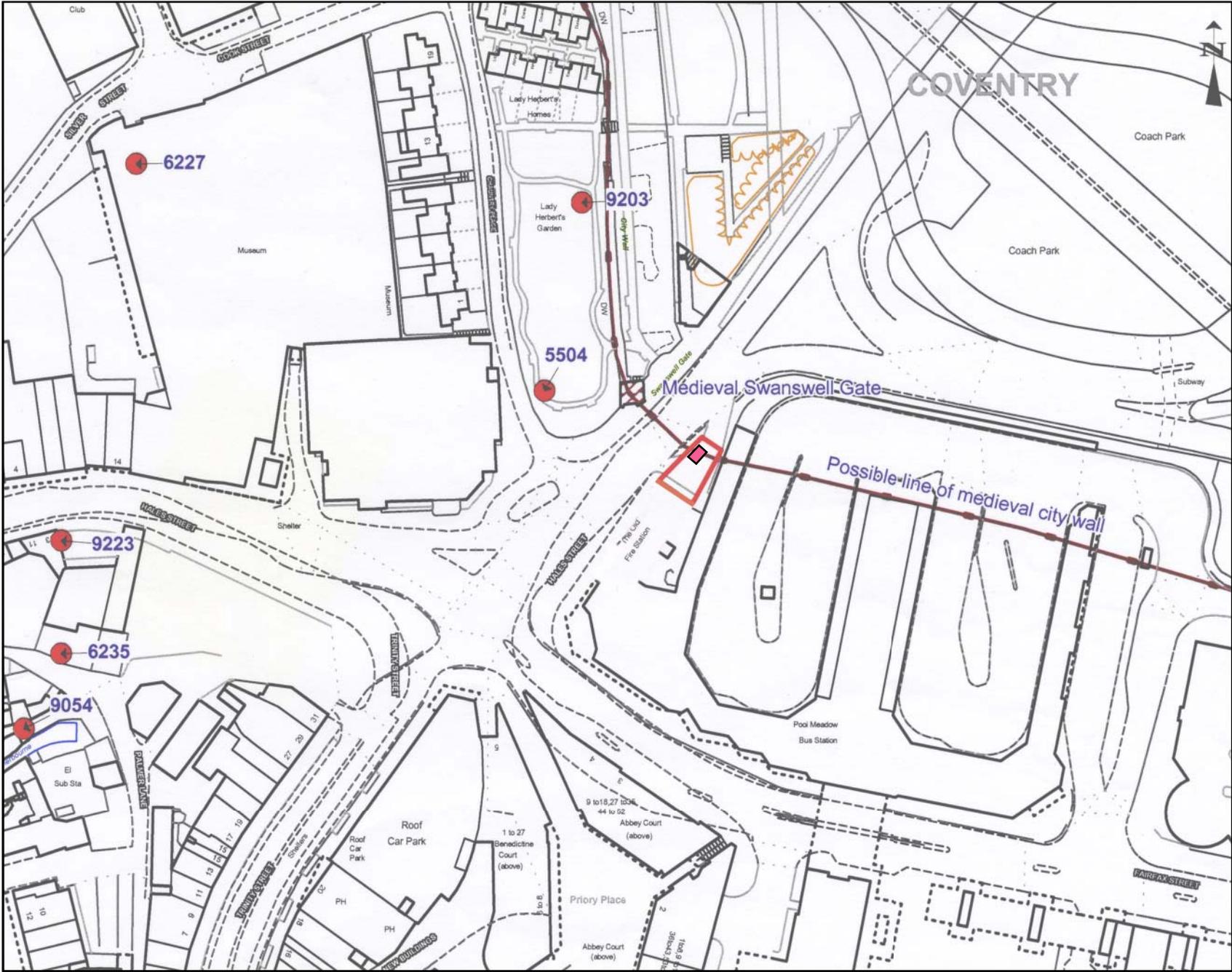


Fig.2

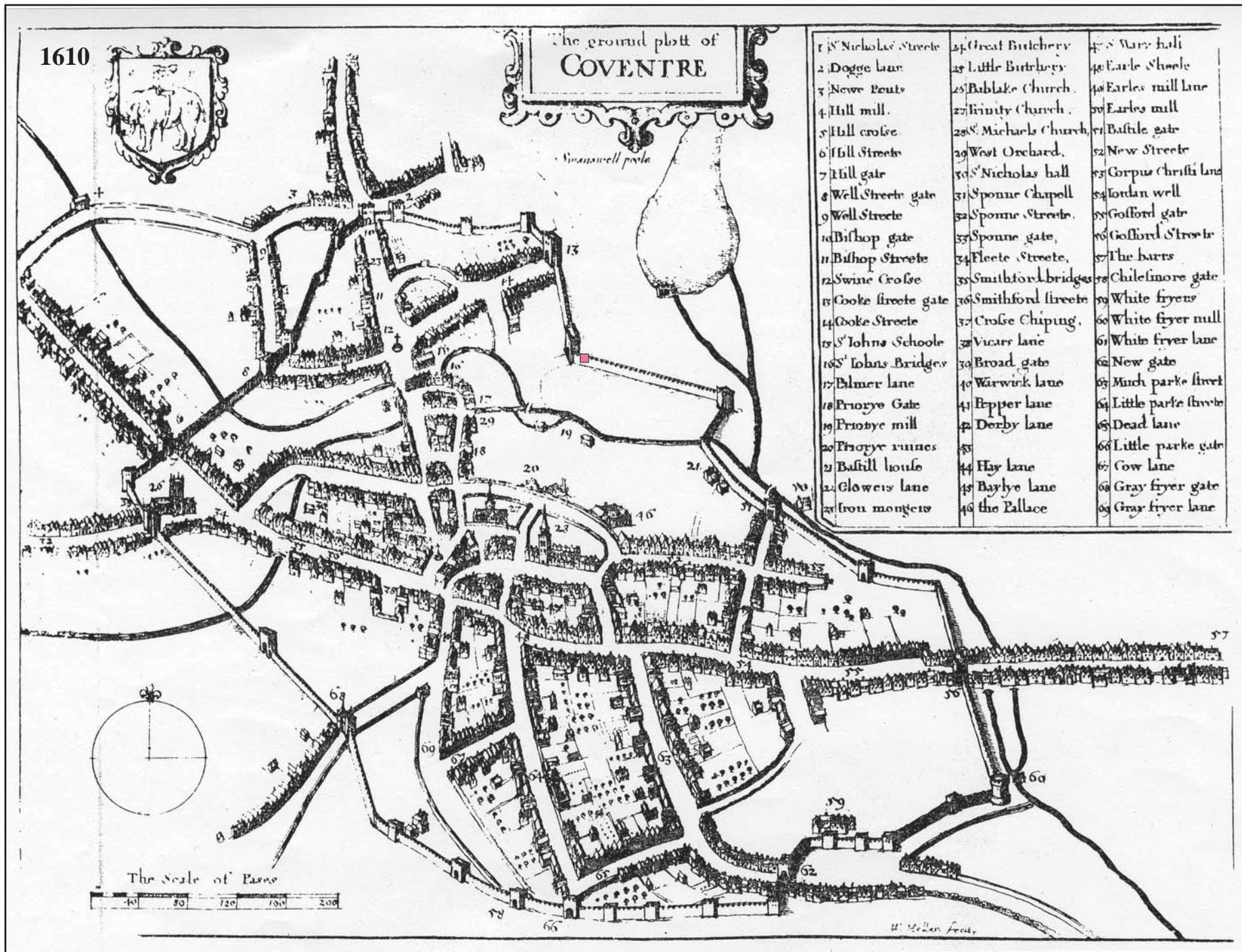


Fig.3

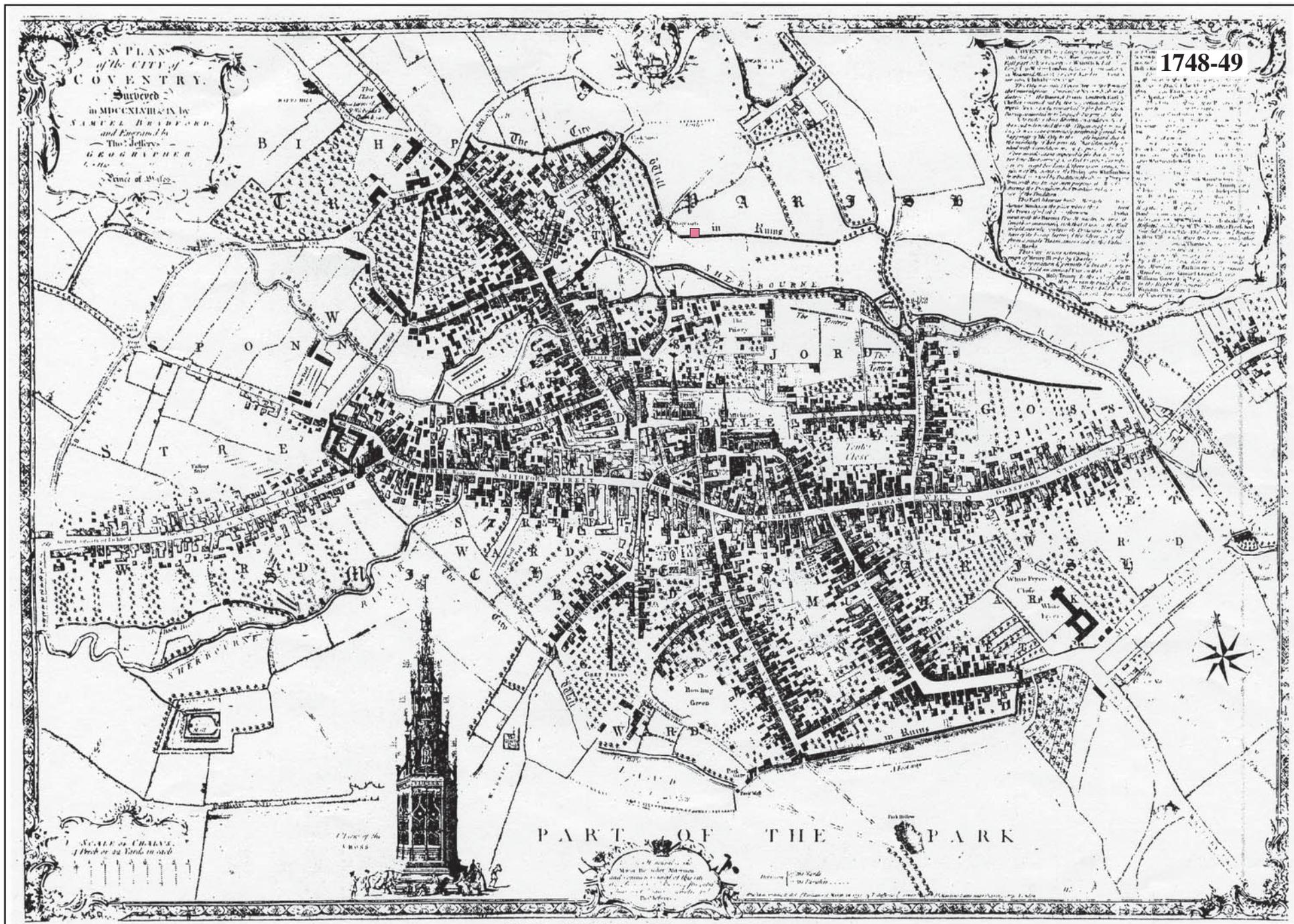


Fig.4

1851



Fig.5

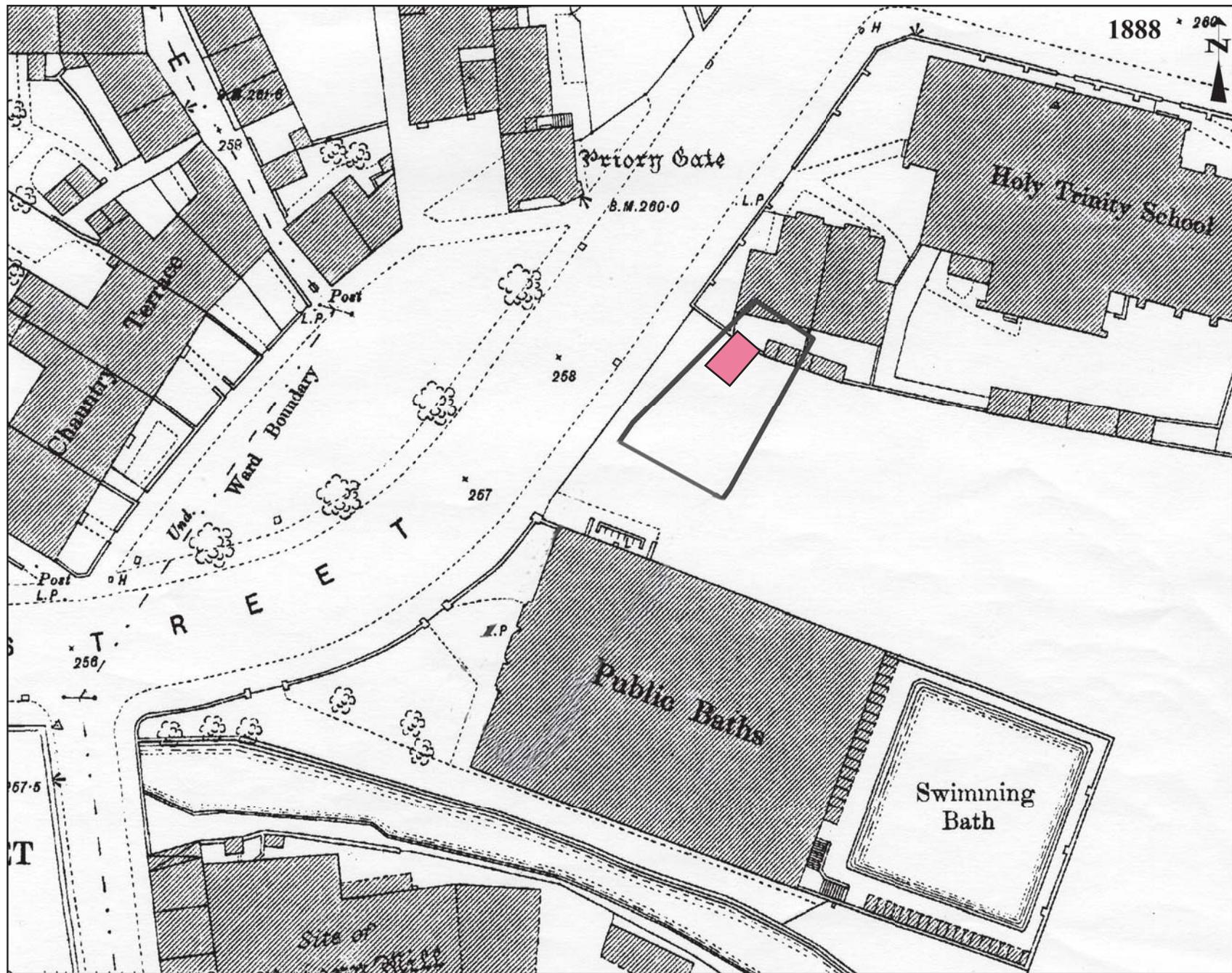


Fig.6

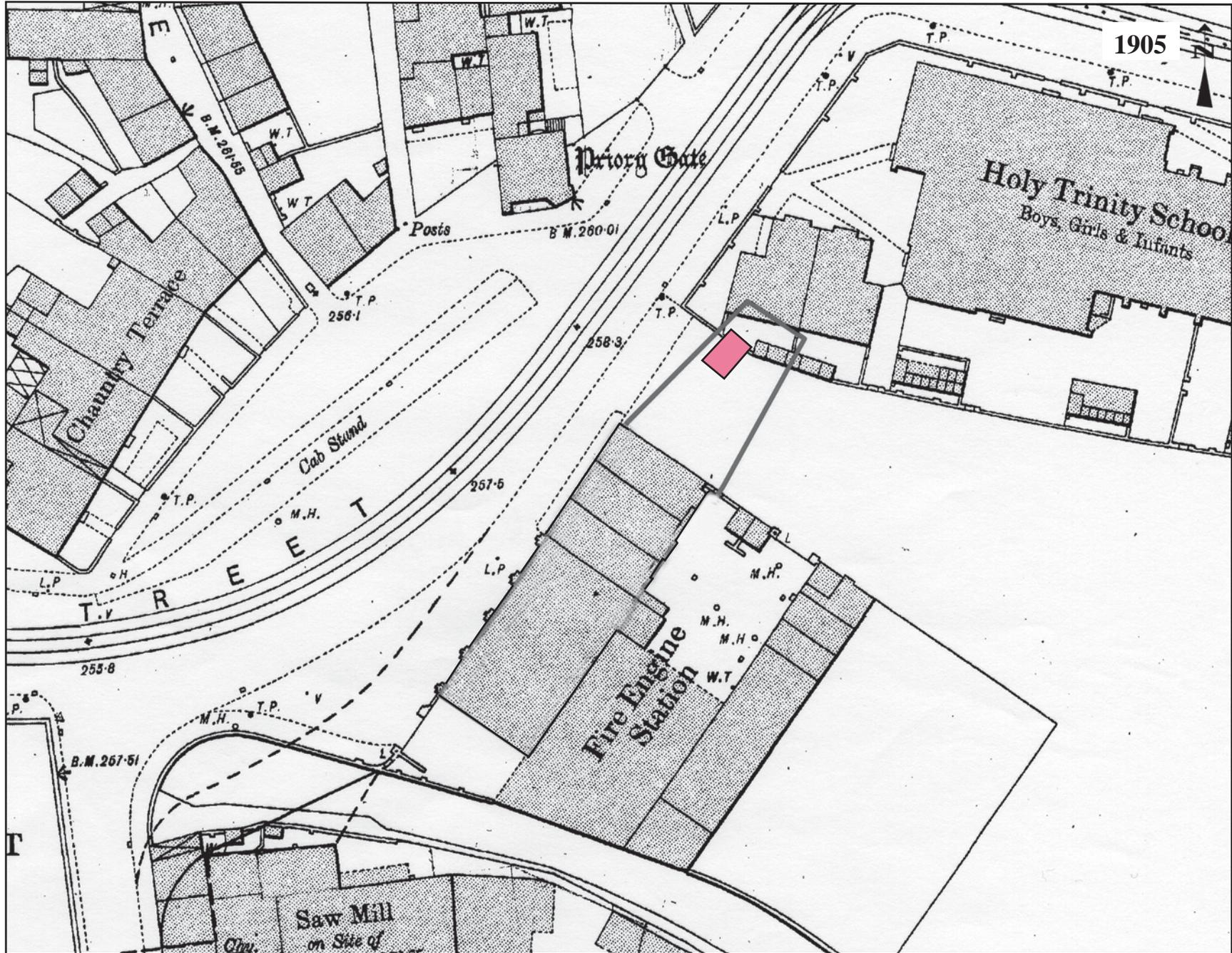


Fig.7

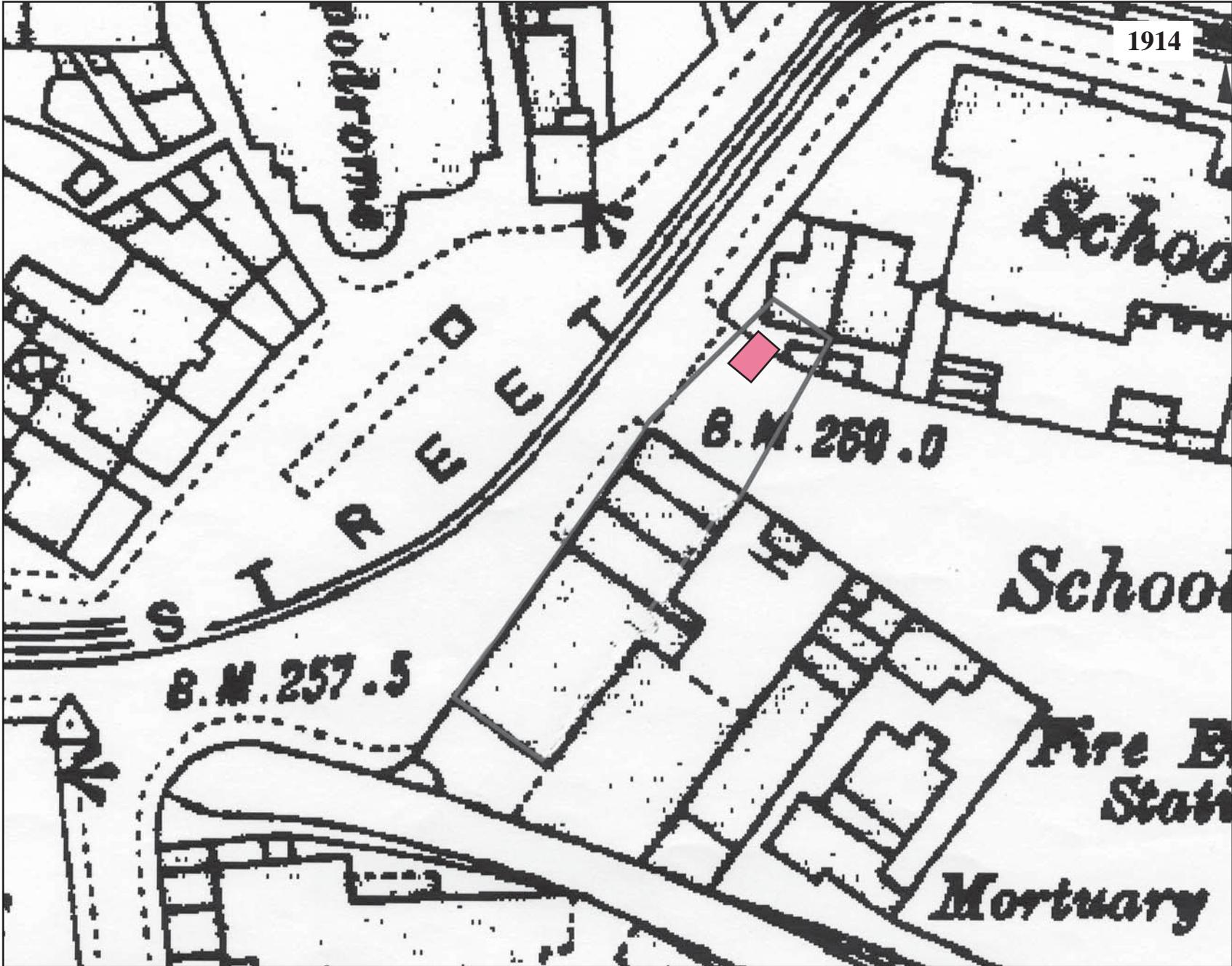


Fig.8

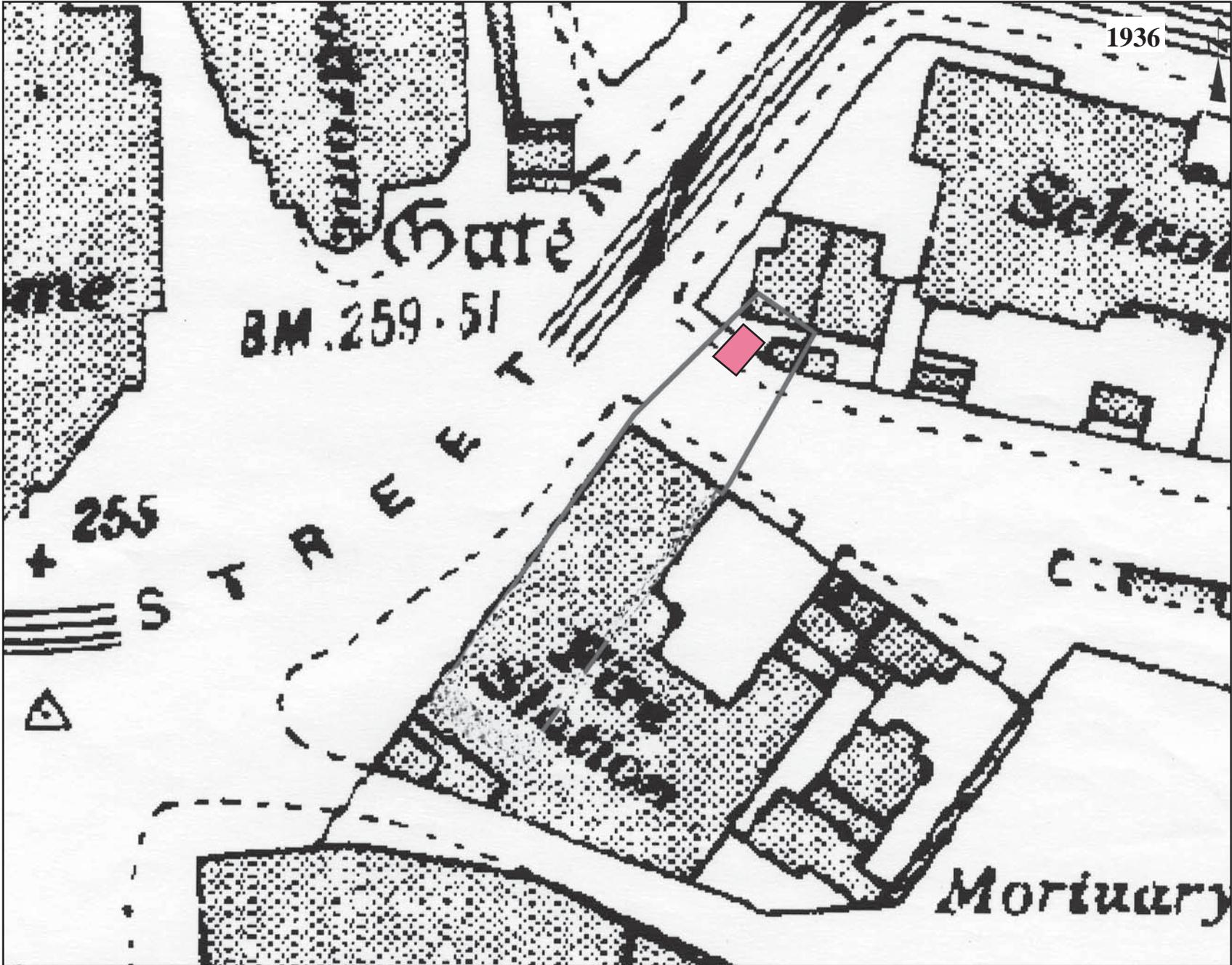


Fig.9

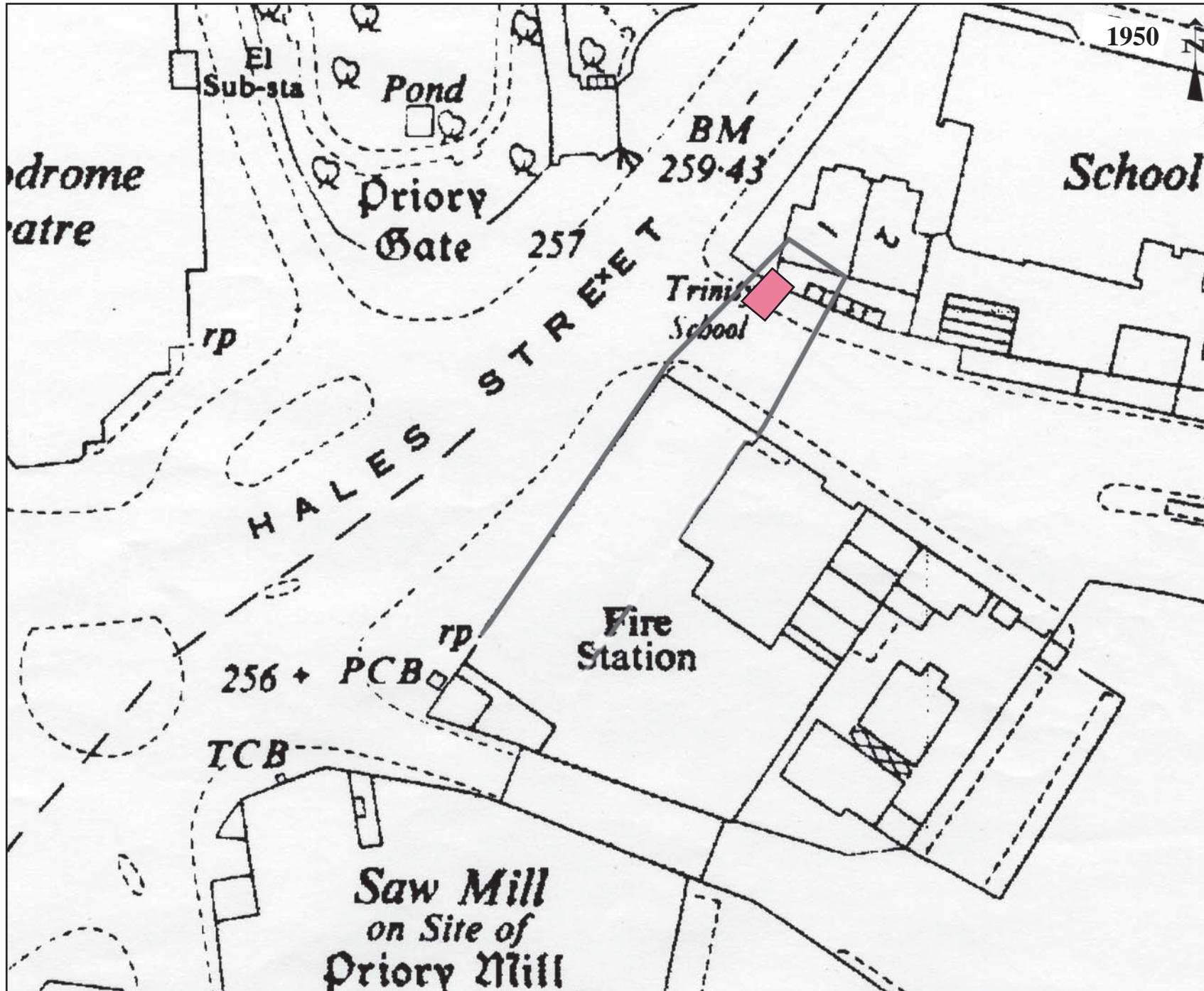


Fig.10

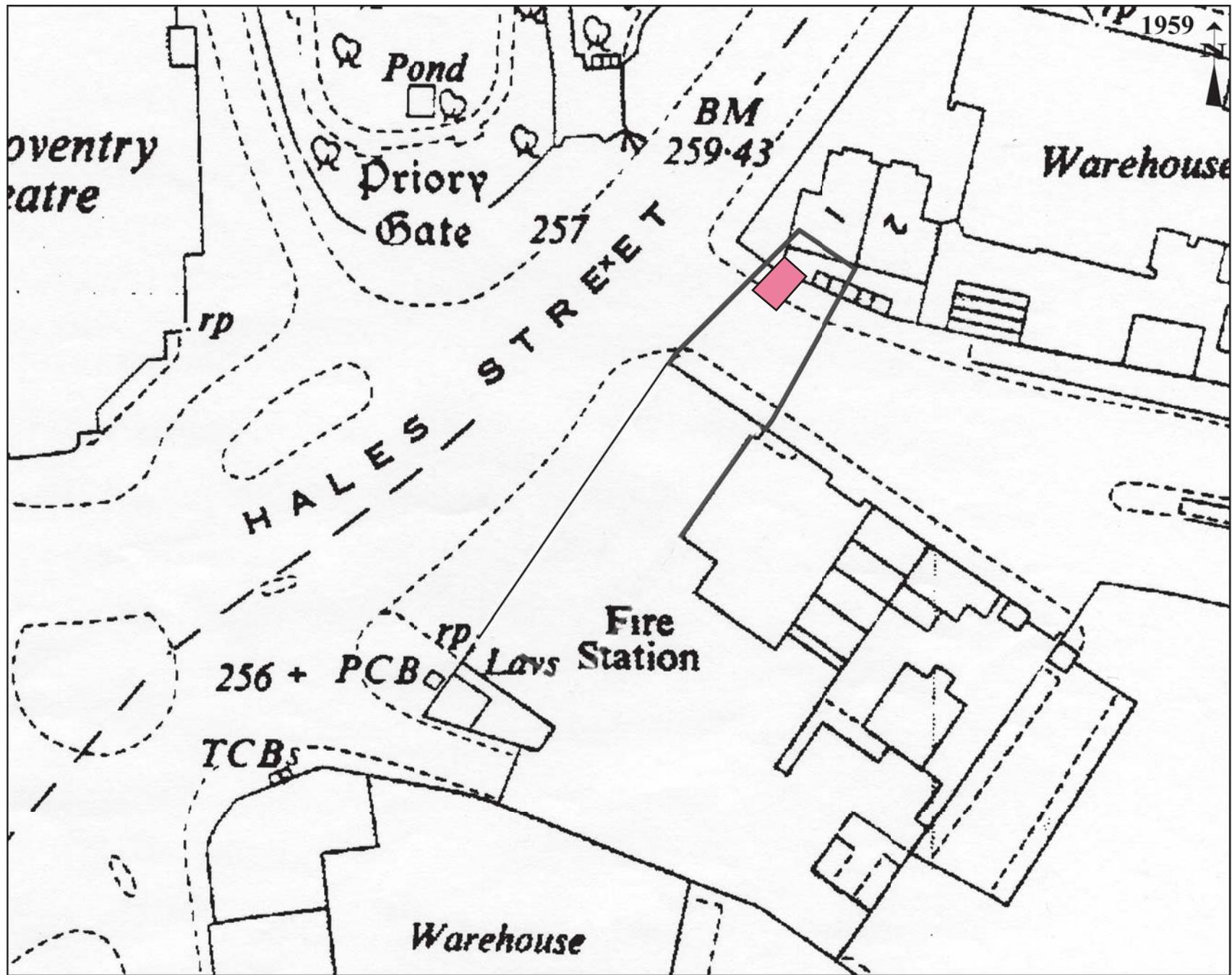


Fig.11

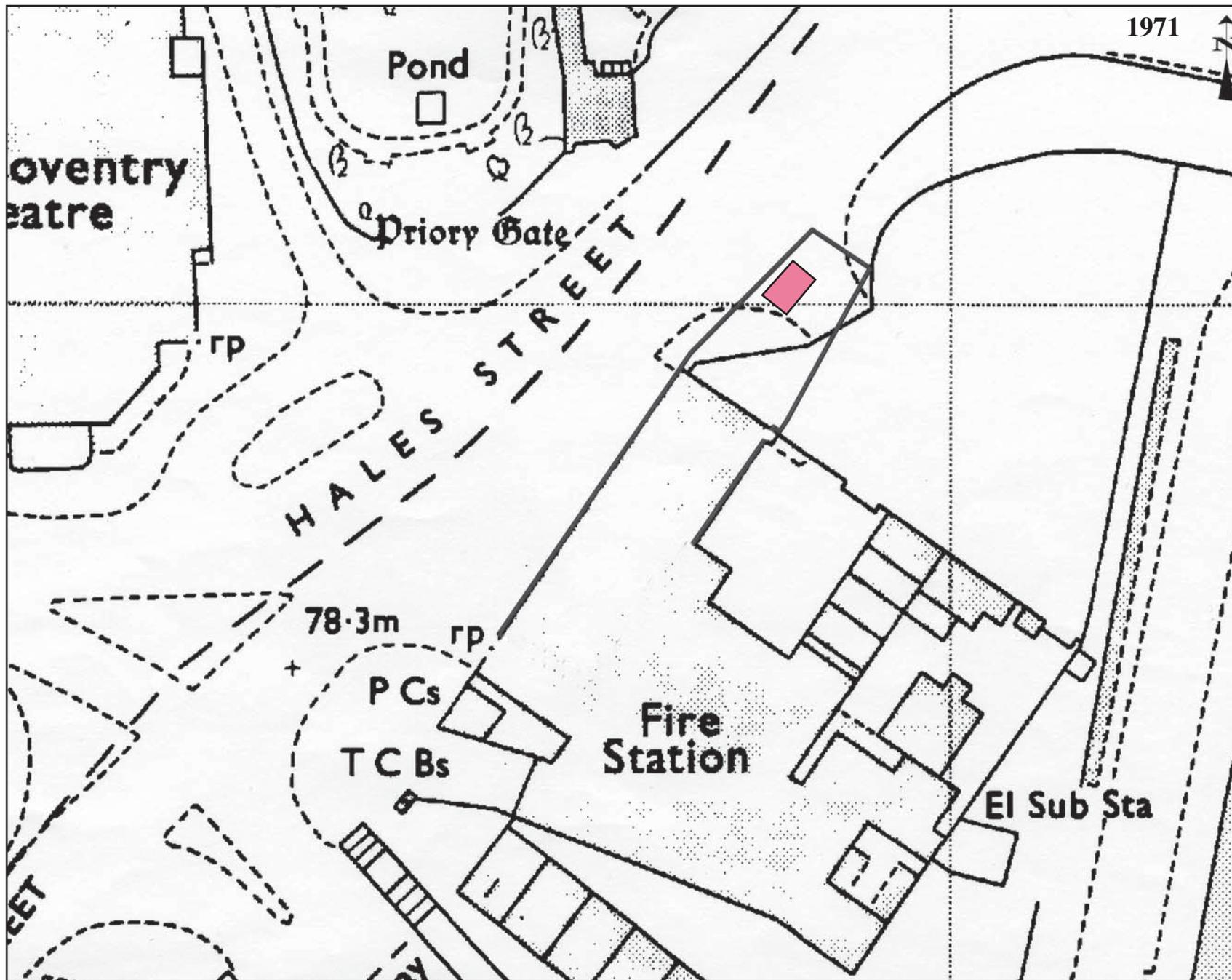


Fig.12

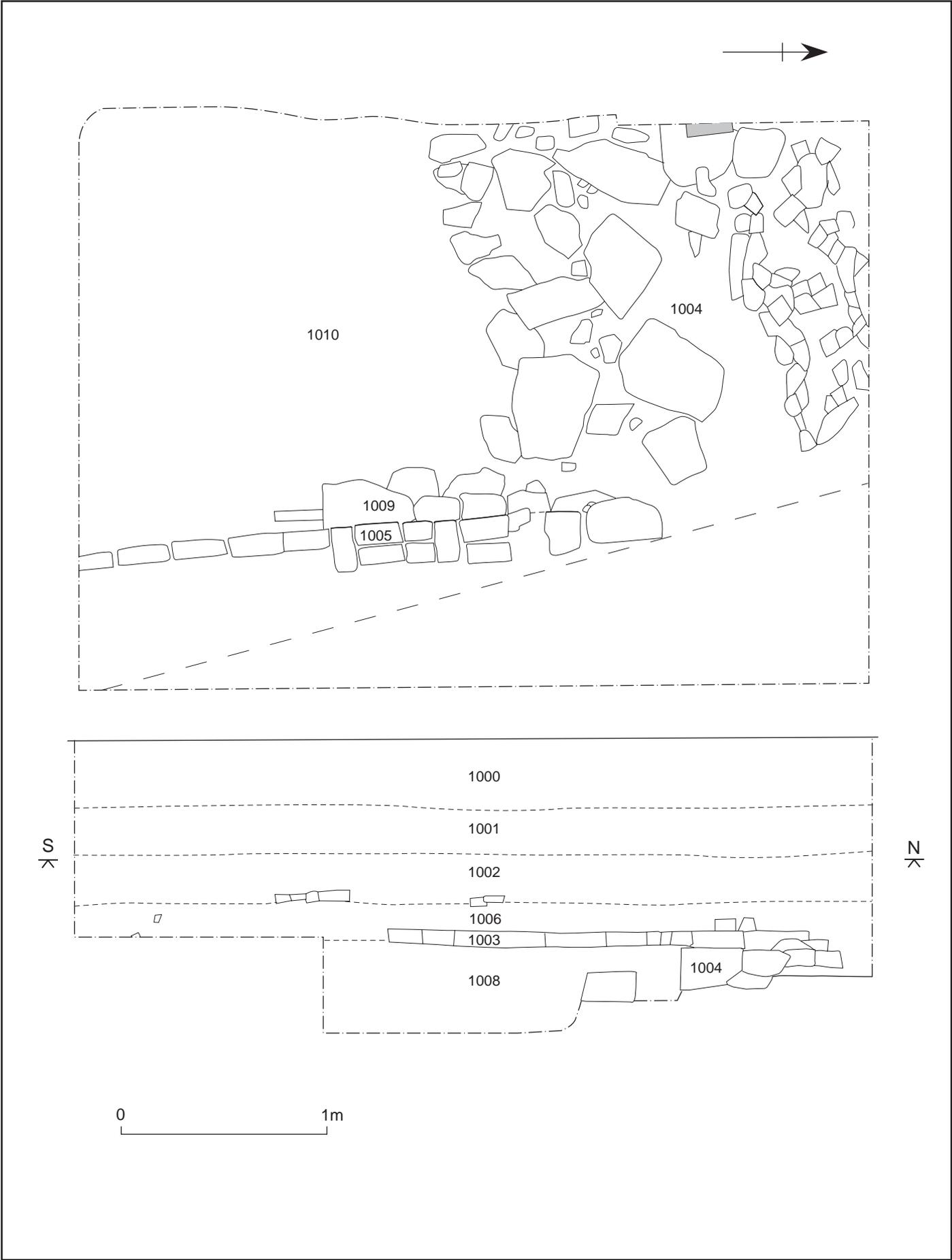


Fig.13



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3