



ENGLISH HERITAGE

46-52 ARCHBISHOP'S PLACE
Brixton
London SW2

*Brief analysis and interpretation
of an early 19th century boundary wall*

by

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46-52, ARCHBISHOP'S PLACE
Brixton,
LB Lambeth

1.0 NATURE OF REQUEST

A Dangerous Structures notice had been served on the owners of the above by the local authority, concerning a rear boundary wall to the properties. Following discussions with the local authority, CON:LON REG sought advice from HART with regards to the quality and historical interest of the surviving fabric of the wall and as to whether it was worthy of inclusion on the statutory list. Little is currently known about the wall and its historical development.

From photographic evidence, supplied by the local authority Conservation Officer, it appeared that the wall might be constructed from a clay-marl, commonly called 'Cob' and covered with a modern, dense render. Garden walls were certainly constructed in this material up to the late C19, but it is quite extraordinary and rare to find survivals in London.

This brief report comprises a description based upon site observation following a single visit, limited examination and review of cartographic and other historic sources and an assessment of the extent, character and significance of fabric of either architectural or historical interest. A detailed history of the fabric of this structure is made complicated by alterations, which have occurred as the structure has historically evolved and the lack of conclusive documentary evidence. Only surfaces exposed on the day were examined and no disturbance to the fabric was undertaken.

Origin of Request: *Malcolm Woods (Kensington and South London)*
Date of Request: *September 2000*
Date of Report: *October 2000*
File Number: *Lambeth*

2.0 DESCRIPTION

The wall is situated on the western side of Ostade Road, set back and at an angle to its frontage, at the northern end of the road, north-east of St Matthias' Church (1894) and west of Brockwell Park, Brixton. The structure forms part of the Rush Common and Brixton Hill Conservation Area.

The standing wall measures approximately 30 m (96') in length and 3.1 m (10') in height, with an overall thickness of 300 mm (1'). A series of buttresses are positioned at regular intervals forming bays at approximately 4.1 m (13' 6") centres along the east face, with 7½ bays surviving. The whole assembly has been covered with a dense cement-based render, which also forms the wall capping, with a rounded 'weathered' face to Ostade Road.

Analysis:

Although the techniques adopted for construction appear to be similar, there was no evidence from the material used and method adopted for construction to suggest that this wall was of cob construction. Walls of this nature were typically constructed from a brick (or stone) foundation (commonly called 'pinning') and would have been capped by a coping (possibly of thatch or more likely tile). No evidence was found for any of these features and in fact it would appear that the wall may not have any founding and has been simply 'cast' from the ground.

Close site inspection of the exposed substrate confirmed that the wall is in fact of multi-material construction and consists of a 'concrete' mortar mix containing mainly gravel, pieces of brick and tile and chalk forming a hard monolithic mass. No traditional binding medium, such as hair or straw, was found.

The wall appears to have been constructed in situ using a method most similar to the pisé process, common to southern England and exceedingly rare in its true, compacted clay, form, using climbing shuttering or formwork, with evidence for lifts in at least two horizontal 'coursing' lines. The vertical distance between each 'course' some 910 mm (3' 0") is too large to suggest that blocks of the material may have been cast off site and placed during construction. Buttressing, existing on the external face (Ostade Road), has also been cast in this material and somewhat surprisingly, appears to have been placed at the same time as the wall was constructed. Secondary buttresses of brick have been placed on the internal west (Archbishop's Place) elevation, but none appear to have formerly existed.

Shallow chases are visible in the upper part of the west elevation together with the remains of former flashing assemblies. This evidence coupled with the substantial height of the wall and the 'external' position of the original buttresses and cap weathering, suggest that the structure was probably built to form a rear supporting wall. There is some indication from cartographic evidence that the eastern part of Archbishop's Place may have formed an enclosed walled garden (the boundary line of which is defined by the existing property boundaries and outlined on the 1868 OS), which probably supplied the former 'Tulse Villa' later 'The Elms' estate. It therefore seems plausible that the wall may have provided support for glasshouses, sheds or a covered area of some description.

With the development of Archbishop's Place c1840, the wall appears to have been retained as the boundary between the new estate and former common land to the southeast.

Condition:

The external rendering has broken away in a number of areas. This loss of cover and evidence for patch repairs of varying materials, suggest that the existing covering may in fact be detrimental to the surviving substrate, trapping moisture and encouraging the breakdown of the surface.

The wall, including its buttresses, has a tangible westward lean. There are also a number of major fractures evident. Walls of this nature have low tensile strength and will tear readily due to stress caused by local settlement at ground level or around openings. The construction of the brick buttresses on the west face has been attempted to oppose the lean of the wall. However, their construction was of poor quality and they appear not to have been placed exactly where they were required or adequately bonded. The lack of a suitable foundation has also exacerbated the condition.

3.0 BRIEF HISTORICAL SUMMARY

The area on either side of the present day Brixton Hill was largely uninhabited until the beginning of the 19th century, when large houses were begun in the area for families attracted by Brixton's accessibility from London. Small pockets of development had occurred in the area by the mid 18th century¹ but it was not until the late 19th century that development started on a much larger scale.

The earliest record of the area we currently have, Rocque's map of 1746, indicates the site to be arable land at this period. It is not until 1829 (Crutchley), with property boundaries noted, that the wall line appears to be circumscribed. However, the line must be regarded as arbitrary as walls of this nature were rarely surveyed to the same detail as property. Their material type and construction were rarely recorded.

The evidence compiled from map regression, documentary research and site investigation, would suggest that the wall was certainly constructed before the houses of Archbishop's Place were begun c1840 and clearly before brick became a cheaper and more readily available building material c1850. The origins of this wall would appear then to date from the early 19th century.

CONCLUSION

Although currently in a poor condition, the wall stands to more or less its original substantial proportions. Its purpose has changed, with the loss of whatever lean-to structures were placed against it, to that of a boundary wall.

Pisé de terre, or rammed earth, is known to have been introduced into this country from France in the late 18th century. It is difficult to determine the regional distribution however, it would appear that the process was commonly used by the more socially advanced landlords of southern England during the early 19th century².

There is no doubt that surviving walls of this type, extent and nature of construction are extremely rare in London, this being the only known survival and therefore of significance. More almost certainly were constructed but were lost, not because they were inherently impermanent, but due to the fact that they were difficult to adapt and little understood.

Furthermore, the wall is important as it occupies a focal point architecturally and aesthetically in the early 19th century historical development of the area. We should certainly be looking to offer protection to the structure. What form this might take is a matter for consideration.

Walls of this nature have been given statutory protection in the south-western counties of England, where the largest concentrations of cob structures are known to have survived. However, it is fair to say that those granted protection have, in most cases, been complete examples. Although a number of walls, which have claimed to be of this form of construction, have proved on examination to be of cob, formed between boards, we know of no walls constructed specifically using the *pisé* method, which have been listed.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

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2. McCann J, *Clay and Cob buildings*, 1983.

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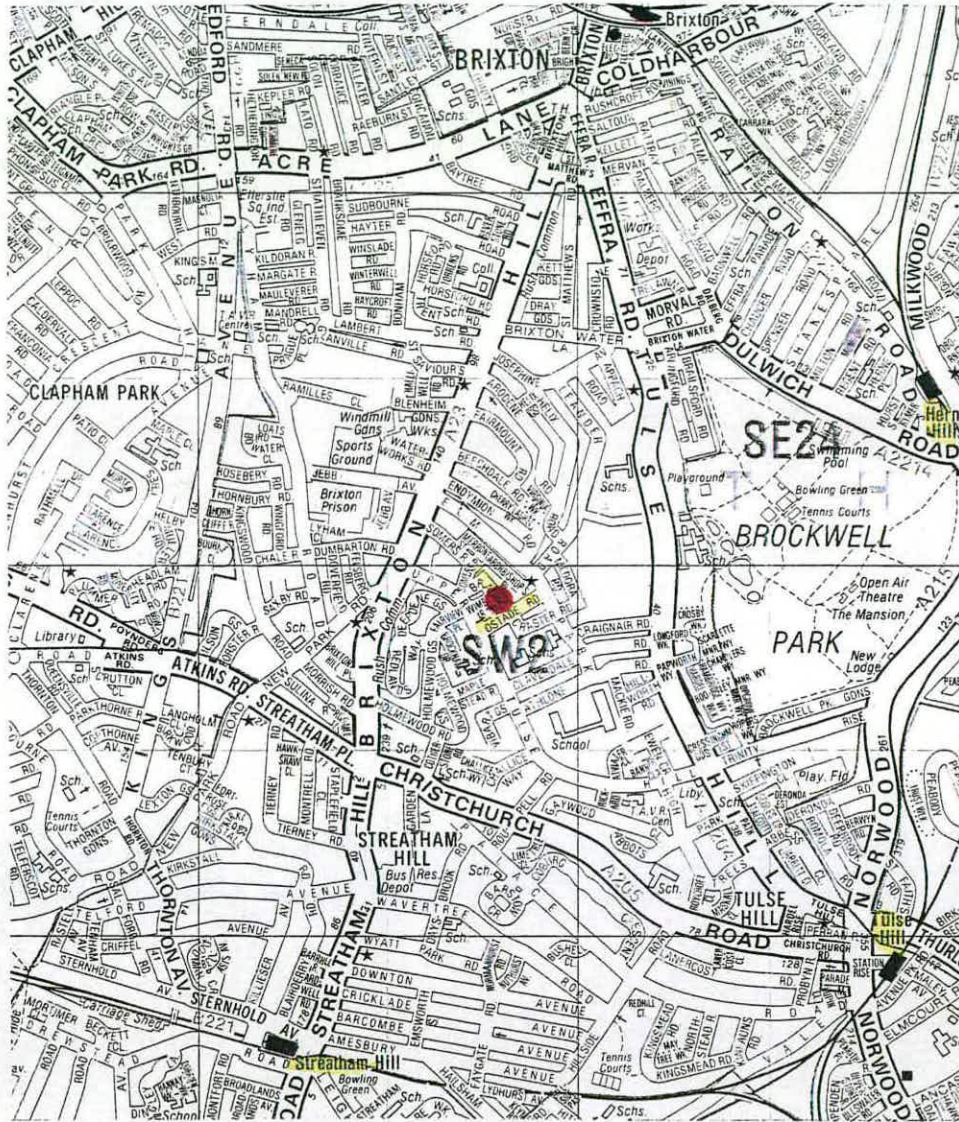


Fig.1

Site Location

(extract from *Master Atlas of Greater London*, 1995, Geographers' A-Z Map Co Ltd).

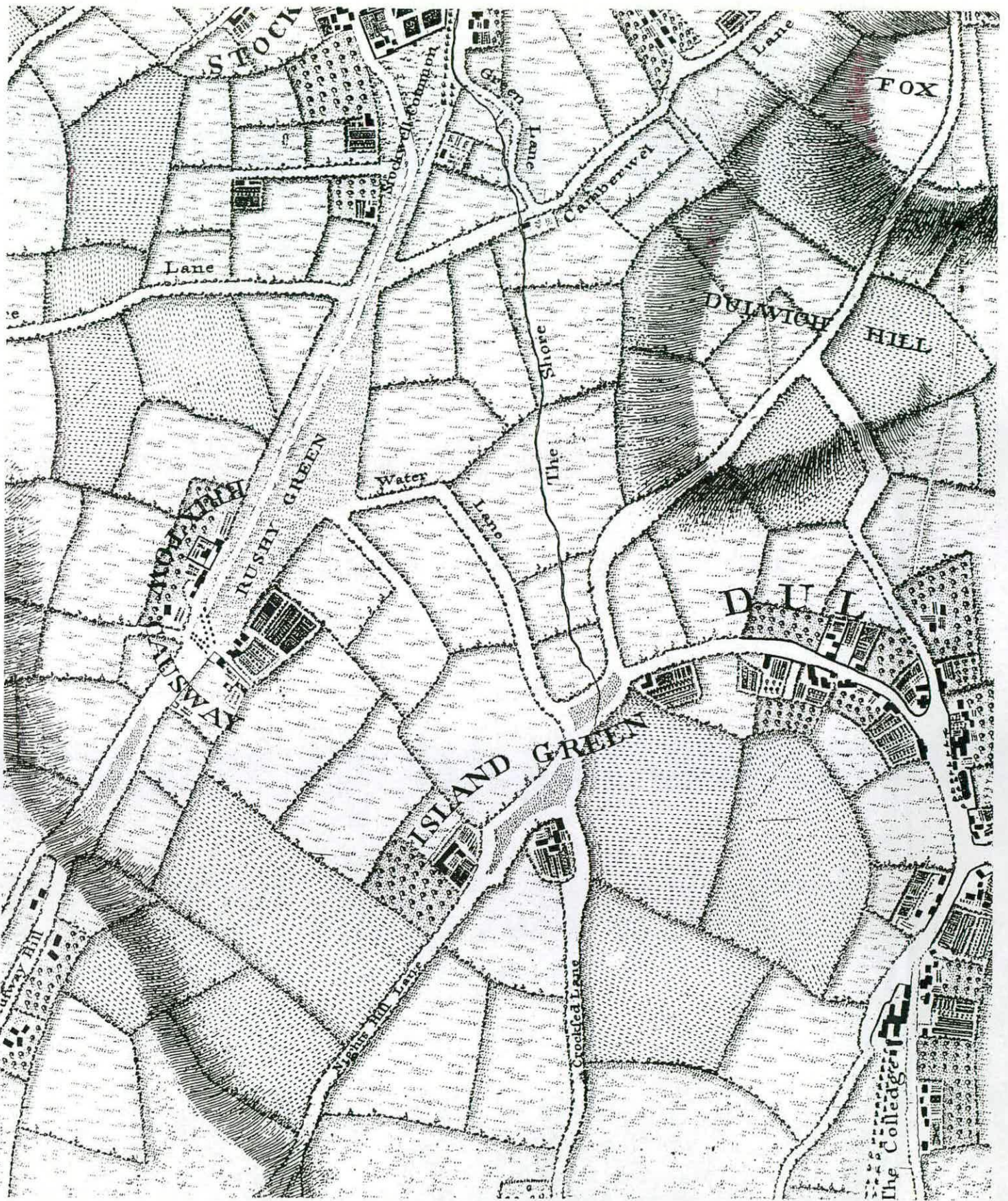


Fig.2

Rocque, Ten Miles round London, 1746
 (the site in the large field immediately to the south west of 'Island Green').

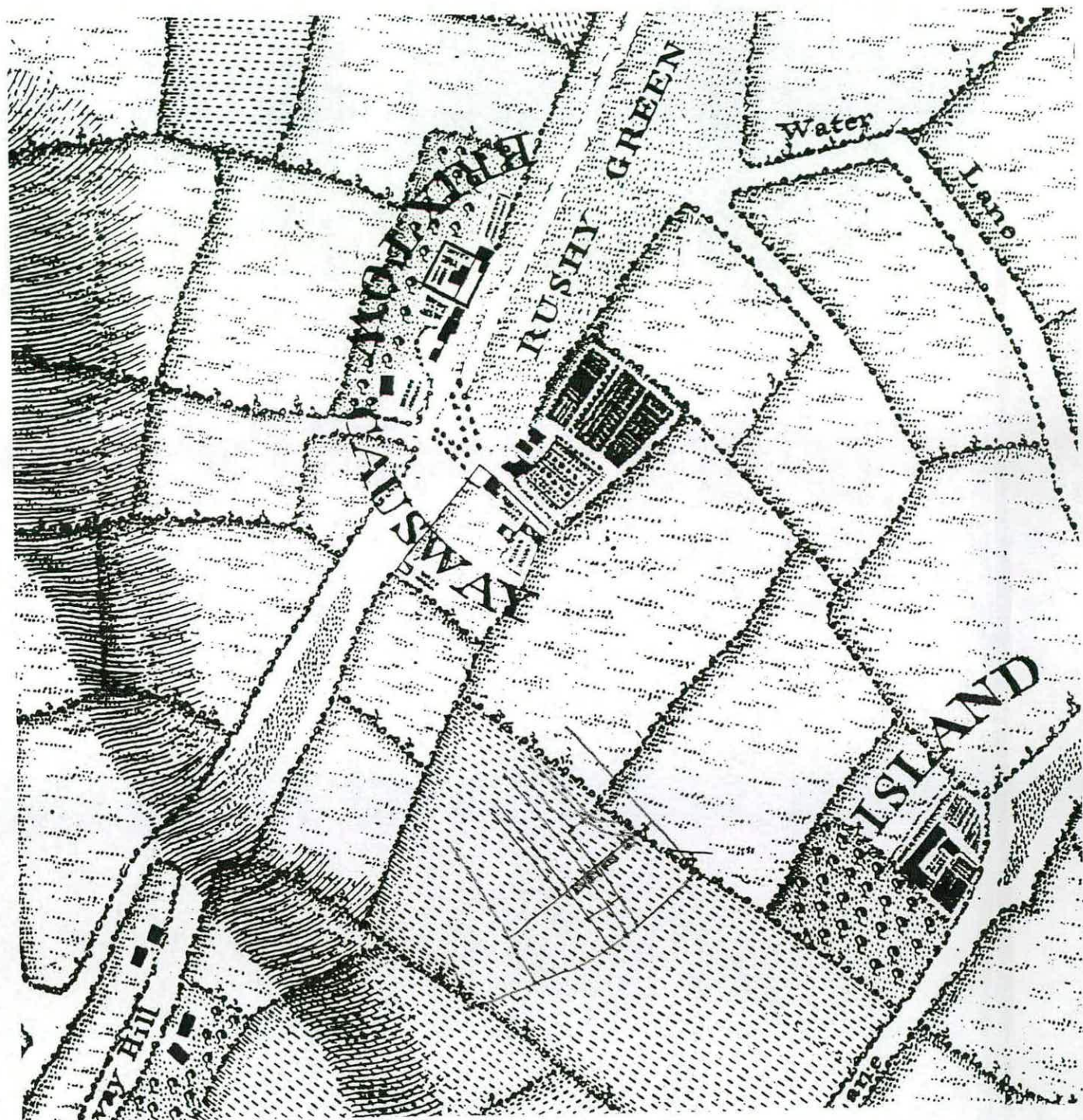


Fig.3

Enlargement of Rocque, 1746
(the site, Archbishop's Place c.1862 overlain in red).

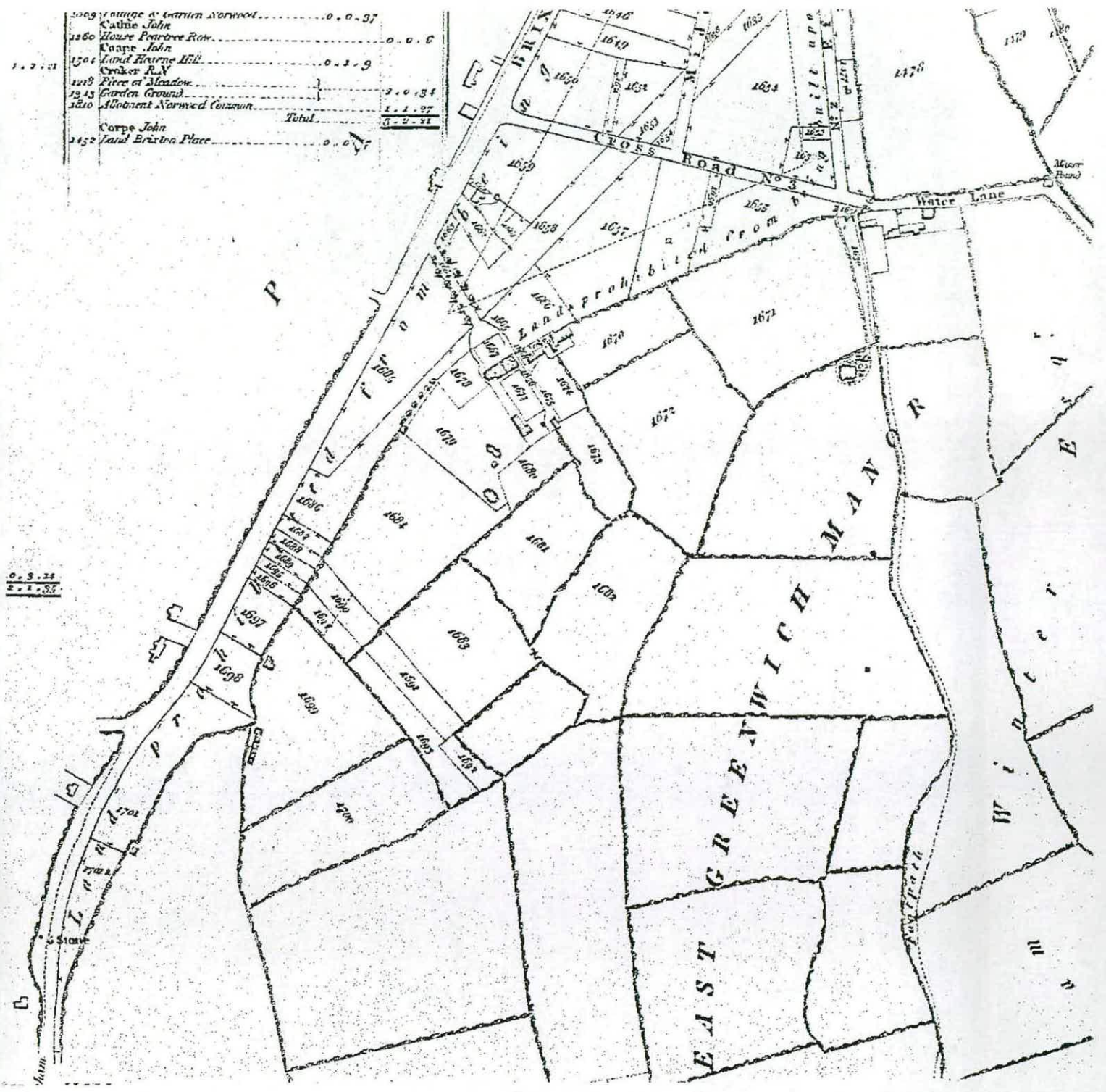


Fig 4

Enclosure 1806

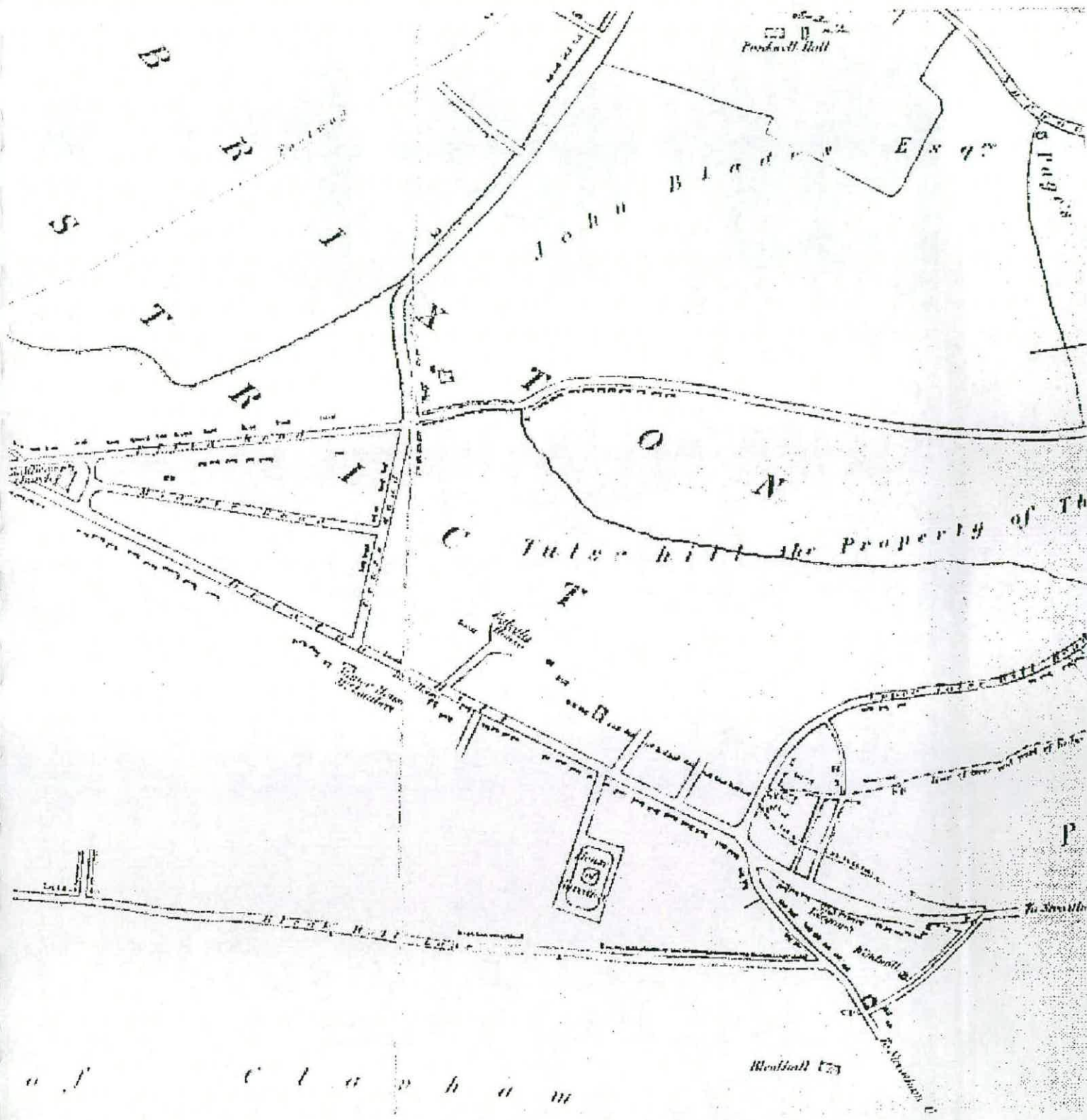


Fig. 5

Parish of Lambeth Ecclesiastical Districts 1824

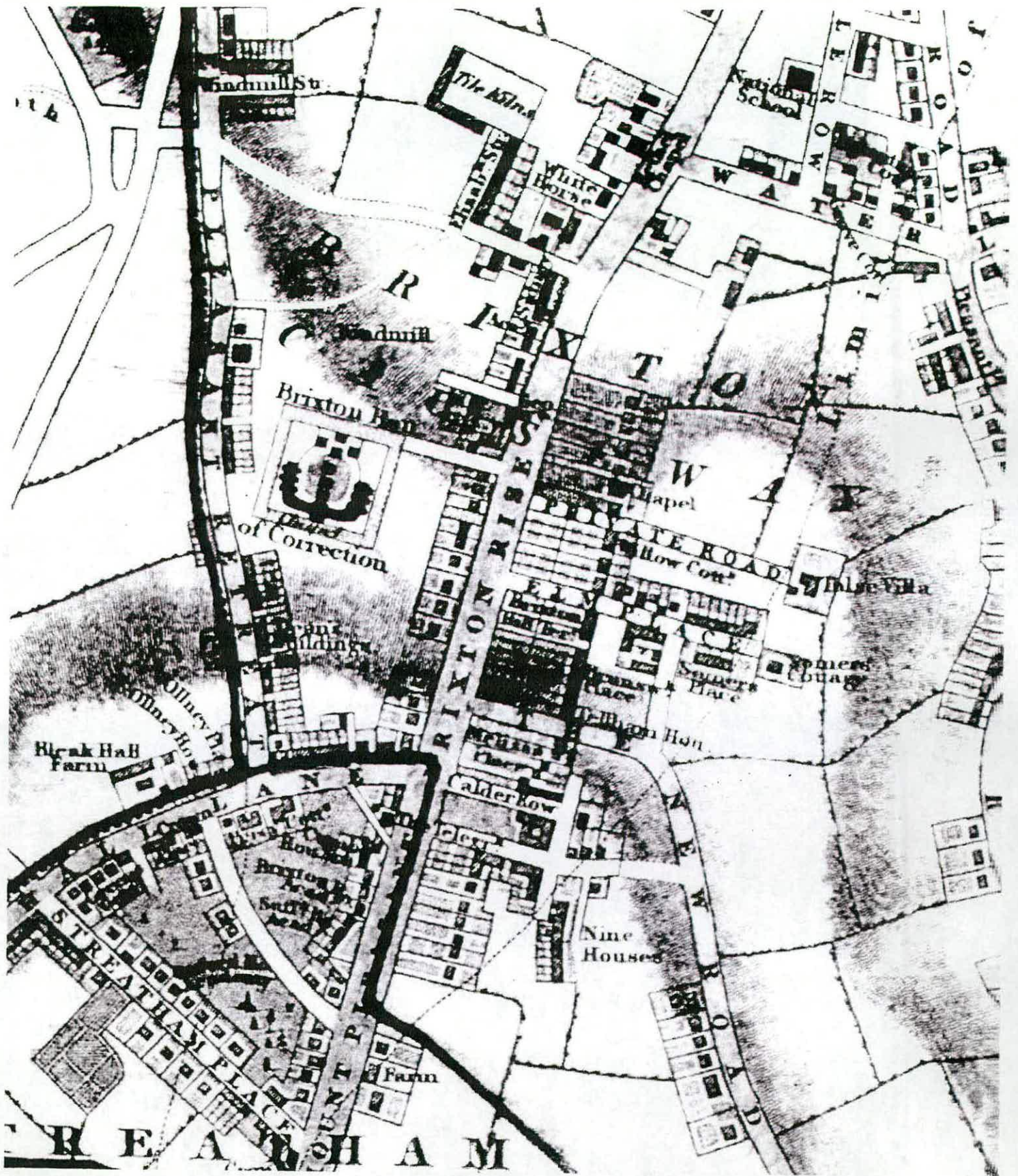


Fig. 6

Crutchley, 1829

(Archbishop's Place, yet to be built, between Private Road and Elm Place)

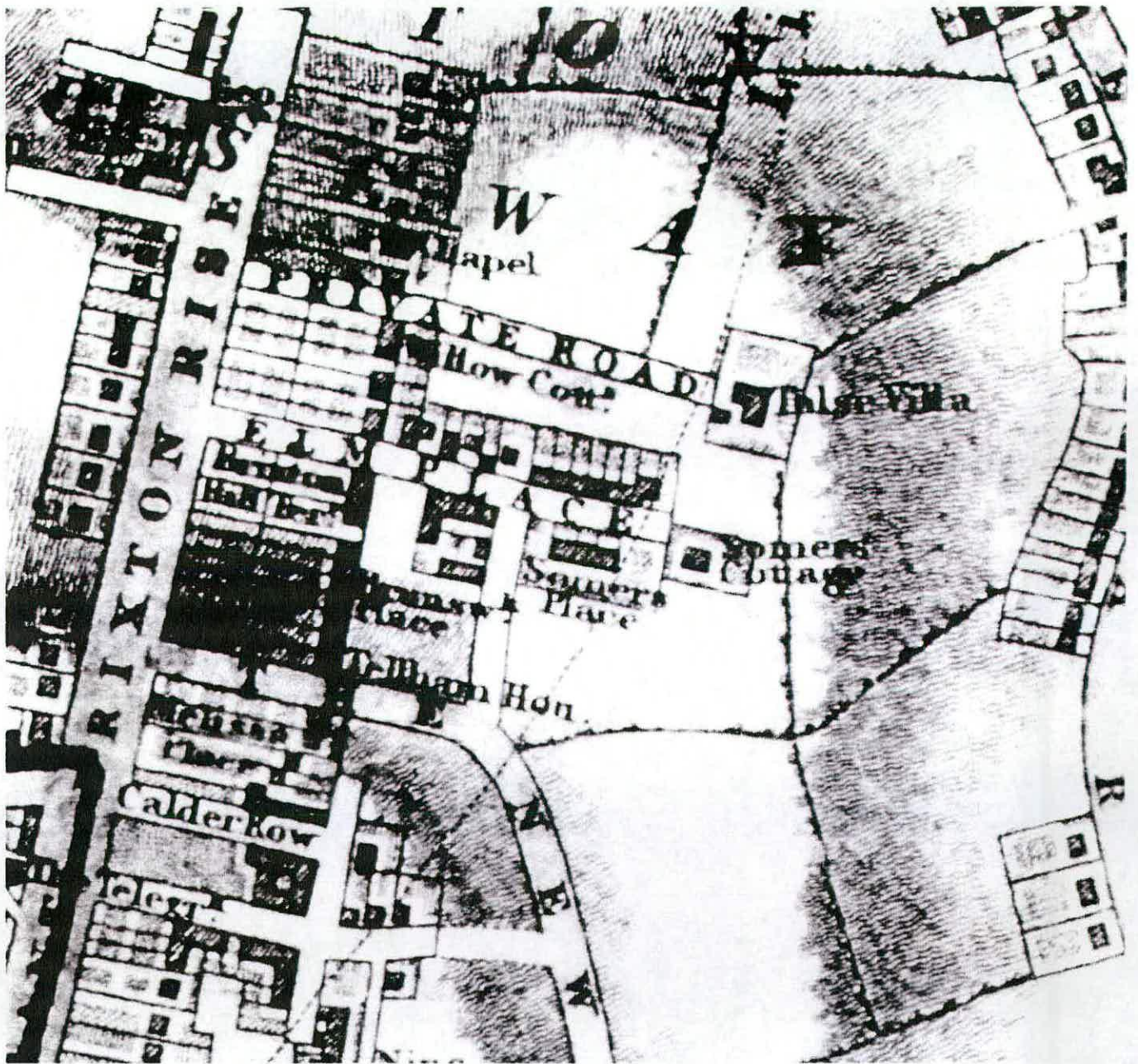


Fig. 7

Enlargement of Crutchley's map, 1829
(Archbishop's Place, yet to be built, between Private Road and Elm Place)

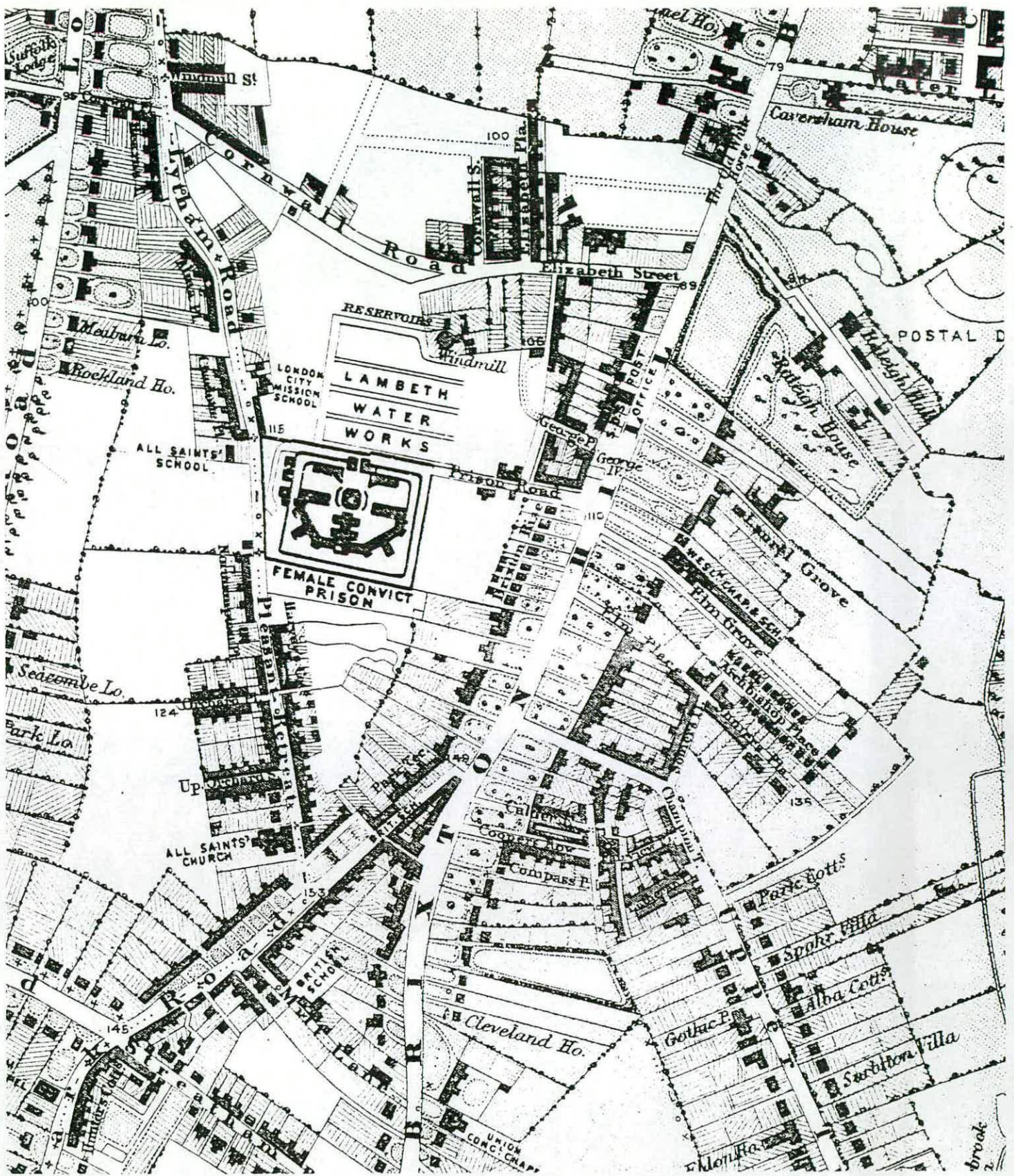


Fig. 8

Stanford's map of 1862
(Archbishop's Place now developed, between Elm Grove (formerly Private Road) and Elm Place)



Fig. 9

Enlargement of Stanford's map of 1862
(Archbishop's Place now developed, between Elm Grove (formerly Private Road) and Elm Place)

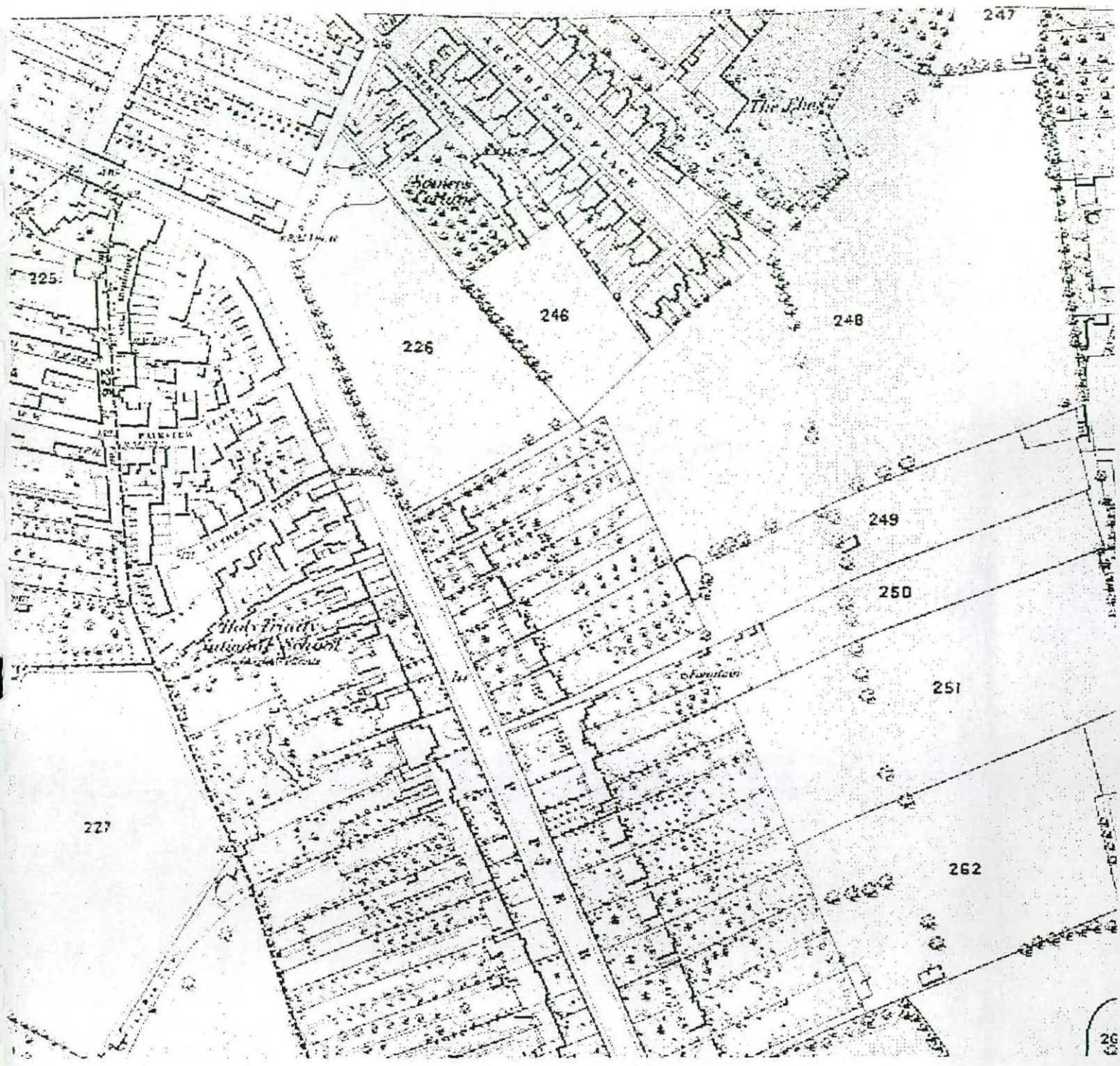


Fig. 10

Ordnance Survey (1st edition) 1868

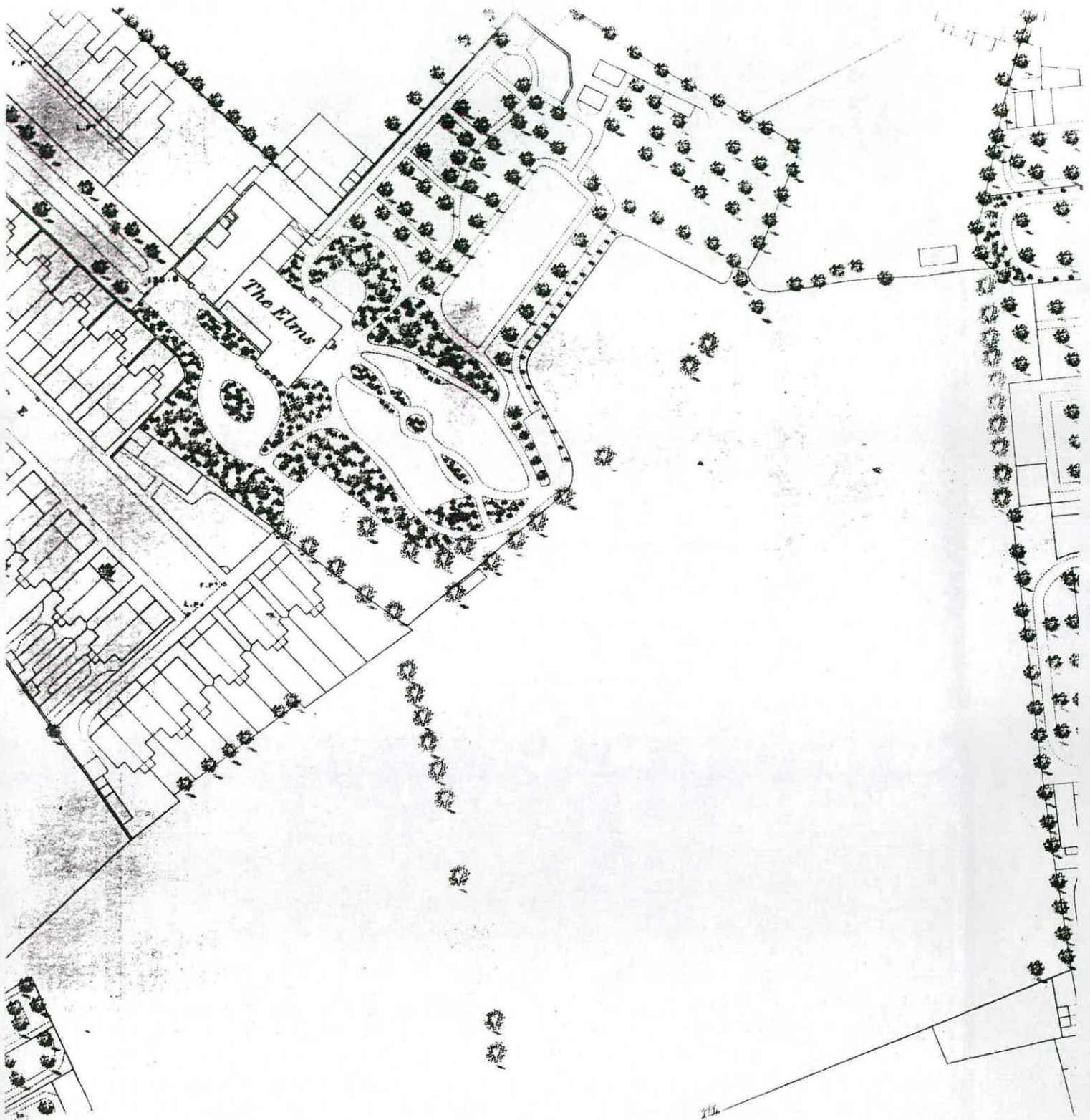


Fig. 11

Enlargement of Ordnance Survey (1st edition) 1868



Fig. 12

Ordnance Survey (60") 1894

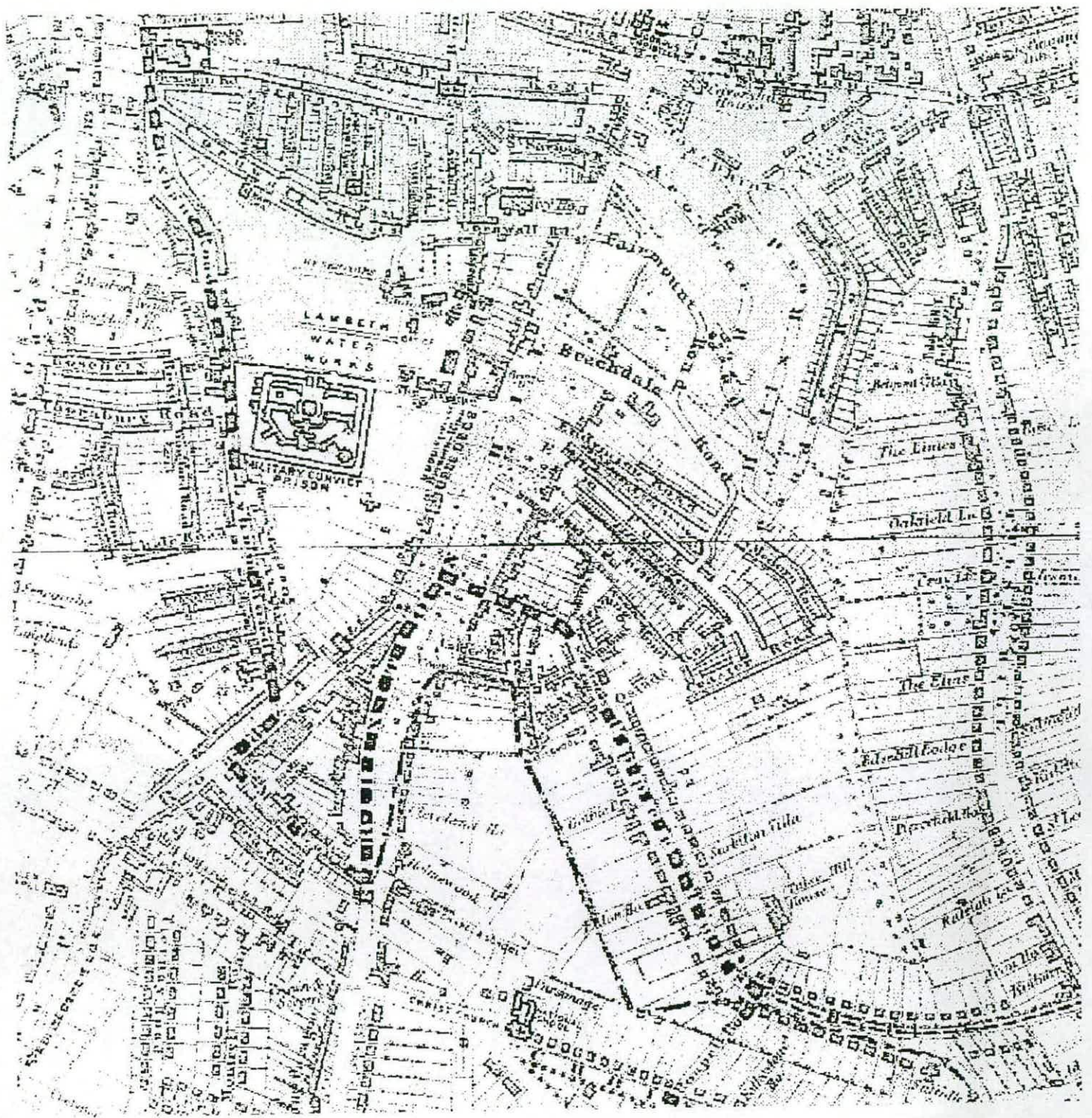


Fig. 13

Lambeth wards 1900



Fig. 14

Ordnance Survey (60") 1915

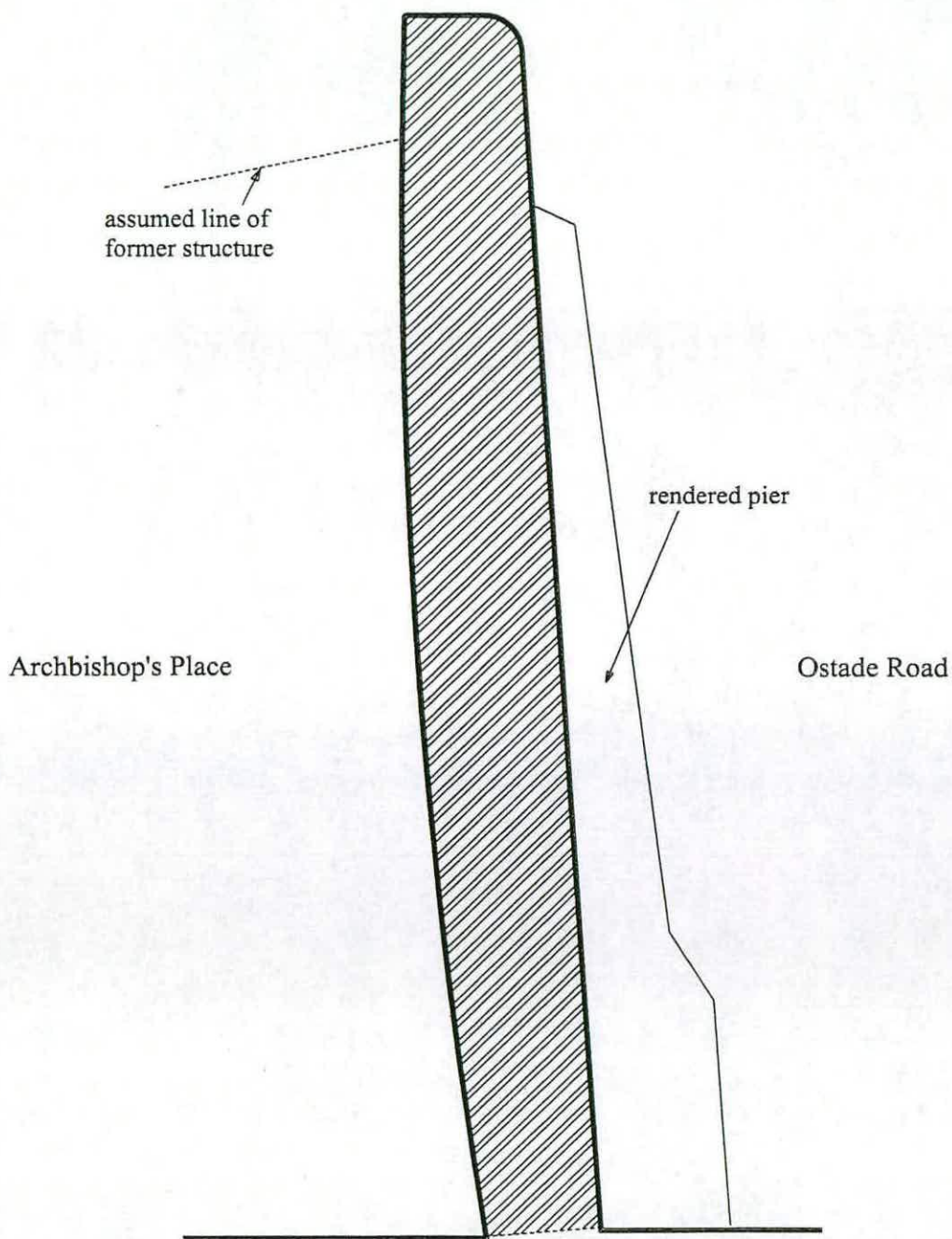


Fig. 15

46-52 ARCHBISHOP'S PLACE, Brixton, London SW2.

Section through rear wall of properties

Scale: 1:20

Date: Sept 2000

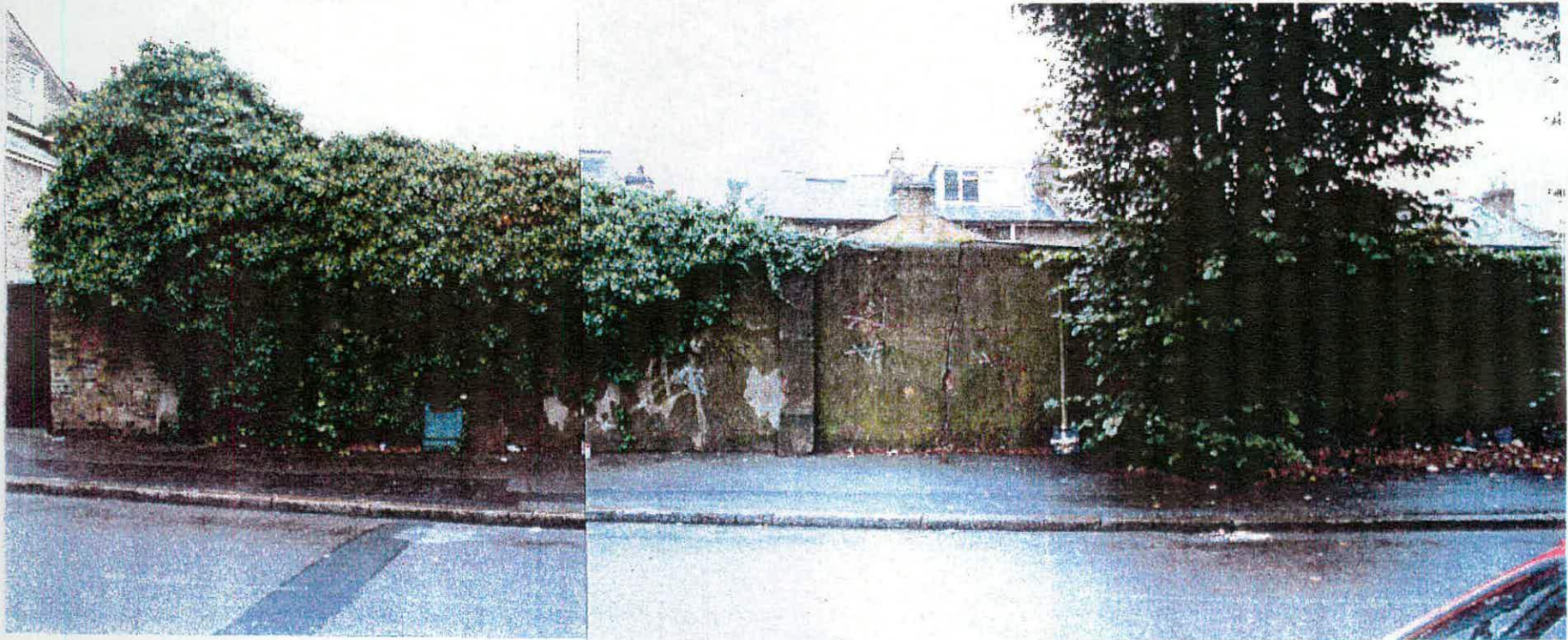


Plate. 1

Part-main front elevation of wall from Ostade Road



Plate. 2

Part-elevation of wall to Ostade Road showing cast-buttruss arrangement



Plate. 3

Ostade Road elevation showing horizontal breaks in the external render where movement has occurred on original construction lines



Plate. 4

Ostade Road elevation, detail at base of buttress



Plate. 5

Ostade Road elevation, original horizontal construction joint exposed due to failure of covering render



Plate. 6

Multi-material construction of wall consisting of a 'concrete' mortar mix containing mainly gravel, pieces of brick and tile and chalk forming a hard monolithic mass. No traditional binding medium, such as hair or straw, was found.



Plate. 7

Failure of external rendering in a number of places has left the substrate exposed and liable to decay.



Plate. 8

Original horizontal construction joint exposed due to failure of covering render at base of wall. It would appear that the wall may not have any founding and has been simply 'cast' from the ground.