

THE STEPNEY MEETING BURIAL  
GROUND,  
WHITE HORSE STREET,  
L.B. TOWER HAMLETS

*An outline historical survey*

*by*

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## **FORMER STEPNEY MEETING HOUSE BURIAL GROUND, WHITE HORSE STREET, LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

*Richard Parrish of London Region has asked for a quick assessment of the historical significance of this disused late Georgian Nonconformist burial ground. It lies within the Stepney Conservation Area, but contains no listed structures itself. Proposals are currently afoot to carry out alterations and environmental 'upgrading'.*

### **CONTENTS**

#### **Description**

#### **Historical Context**

#### **The Burial Ground: History**

#### **The Local Context: Non-Conformist Burial Grounds in the East End**

#### **The Monuments**

#### **Assessment**

### **Description**

The former burial ground consists of a roughly rectangular area, about half an acre in size, bounded by White Horse Road to the west, Salmon Lane to the south and Matlock Street to the north. The churchyard of St Dunstan's, Stepney and the Lady Mico (or Mercers') Almshouses are situated a short distance to the north-west. The burial ground consists of a northern area, containing numerous monuments and fragments of masonry amid trees, and a southern area which is grassed over and devoid of any features. A path meanders from the south-east to the north-west, passing two concrete bench bases, devoid of benches. The whole is bounded within a brick wall, varying considerably in height and composition: along the northern perimeter it is about 6 ft high and a mixture of older red and newer yellow bricks; along the western and southern stretches it is simply a dwarf wall of fairly recent construction. The eastern wall, also low, is lined with railings.

The monuments are a mixture of headstones, mainly intact tomb chests, some heavy ledger stones and numerous fragments of masonry. The overall impression is one of prolonged neglect following past upheavals: the burial ground feels like a bomb site, which is just what it has been. It is also a mysterious enclave, the genesis of which is not immediately obvious. As such it is an open space in considerable need of conservation and explanation.

### **Historical Context**

The Stepney Meeting House was a noted Dissenting congregation, established in 1644 in Ocean Street, Ratcliff under the pastorship of the Rev. William Greenhill (1591-

1671).<sup>1</sup> Their first meeting house, resembling a brick dwelling house, was built in 1674 'upon a corner of an orchard belonging to an old mansion formerly known as King John's Palace'<sup>2</sup> in Stepney Way. It survived until its replacement with a Gothic meeting house, built to the designs of Searle, Son & Yelf and opened in 1863.<sup>3</sup> This was destroyed by enemy action during the last war and replaced in turn in 1959.<sup>4</sup>

The burial ground stands on the site of a substantial house named Copt Hall, which was shown in this position upon a 1615 plan of the Mercers' Company lands in Stepney<sup>5</sup> (**copy attached**) along with a second building to the north, on the west side of the burial ground. This site thus has a long and potentially significant building history, which warrants further investigation. The site plan attached to the 1885 *Church Property Book*<sup>6</sup> makes clear the principal changes in ownership of the site, which are set out below (**copy attached**).

As early as 1661, the congregation was left the sizeable estate of Samuel Truelove, a mariner resident in White Horse Road, Stepney.<sup>7</sup> Much of his estate was sold by trustees, but two of his houses in White Horse Road, located at the southern end of the present burial ground, were retained and rented out, their returns being used for the support of deserving poor women of the congregation. They were later converted at some point early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for use as almshouses proper.<sup>8</sup> This property (which became freehold in 1772) included the south-east section of the present burial ground. The north-east section was occupied by a row of six houses running up to the corner with present-day Matlock Street: these were in existence by the mid 1650s when they belonged to one Joan Hale, and remained standing until about 1740; two further houses were constructed to their south in the mid 1720s. Behind them lay gardens.<sup>9</sup> A comparison between Gascoyne's map of Stepney of 1703 and Rocque's plan of 1746 soon makes clear the changes which took place here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (**copies attached**).

The north-west section of the burial ground entered the possession of the Stepney Meeting in 1779, when William Streetin surrendered his copyhold interest in the property to the Rev. Samuel Brewer and six trustees<sup>10</sup>. This was a highly significant period in the site's history: the two remaining houses on White Horse Road were demolished; the almshouses were rebuilt; and the additional ground was earmarked for use as a burial ground. The first burial did not take place until 1790, however. Shortly after, the layout of the burial ground was shown on Horwood's 1792-99 map of London, which shows the ground to have been laid out in formal compartments

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<sup>1</sup> See his entry in the *DNB*.

<sup>2</sup> *Return comprising the Reports made to the Charity Commissioners... subject to the provisions of the Charitable Trusts Acts, 1853-1891* (HMSO 1897), 675.

<sup>3</sup> *Illustrated London News* 12<sup>th</sup> December 1863.

<sup>4</sup> *East London Advertiser* 18<sup>th</sup> September 1959.

<sup>5</sup> *A Copy of a Platt of such lands as belongeth to the Right Worll. Company of Mercers of London lying within the parish of Stepney in the Countie of Middlesex* (copy in HART historic plans chest: location of original unknown).

<sup>6</sup> Tower Hamlets local history library, Bancroft Road: W/SMH/A/13/19. This is the principal repository of documents relating to the congregation.

<sup>7</sup> A copy of the will, dated 5<sup>th</sup> September 1661, is at W/SMH/A/13/3..

<sup>8</sup> W/SMH/A/13/19, 103

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, 114-5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

(**copy attached**). A school was built alongside the almshouses in 1785 and enlarged in 1810 but relocated to a larger building in Garden Street in 1821, and the White Horse Road premises adapted for residential use, known as 88 White Horse Street.<sup>11</sup> During the 1820s serious consideration was given to the reconstruction of the almshouses, judging from a set of unsigned drawings,<sup>12</sup> but no action was taken. The almshouses survived until the Second World War, when a high explosive bomb scored a direct hit on them.<sup>13</sup> The site has been empty ever since, and the disturbed ground at the south end bears witness to the destruction of this area steeped in Nonconformist history.

### **The Burial Ground: History**

The burial ground was acquired in 1779, and regulations drawn up in 1780<sup>14</sup> but the first interment did not take place until 77 year-old Dinah Josselyn was laid to rest on April 26<sup>th</sup> 1790. She was one of three persons buried in that year. The regulations set out the range of burial options open to members of the congregation: these ranged in price from £10 for a lined vault, 9ft by 7ft, to 12/6 'for a Grave in the natural Earth where no Stone is to be placed'. 7/6 was payable to the pastor for each burial, and 5/- to the sexton for digging a fresh grave. Monuments incurred a separate charge, depending on their size: 'the general charge for a Tomb is 2/6 per course allowing two course above the ground free per grave in the natural earth'.

The rate of burials was not fast: five in 1791, seven in 1792 and in 1793, seventeen in 1794, eight in 1795, fourteen in 1796, ten in 1797, nine in 1798, twelve in 1799 and fourteen in 1800. This remained the approximate level of interment. The busiest year was 1818, with eighteen burials. Nearly all persons laid to rest came from the Poplar – Mile End – Limehouse area. Perhaps the most poignant entry in the burial register is found on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1797 when an infant named Scott 'about three hours old' was laid to rest here.

The burial ground was closed by Order in Council in 1853, just one of the great wave of closures of city graveyards that was then taking place in London. The last interment took place on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1853, some sixty three years after the first body was laid to rest. Taking an approximate average of twelve burials a year, a figure based on study of the burial registers from 1790 to 1830 only, the rough number of bodies buried here would be about 750. This is a relatively low number for an inner city graveyard which had been open for over sixty years in a fast-growing area such as Stepney.

The burial ground was known later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the Almshouse Ground or the Ratcliff Workhouse Ground, the latter name deriving from the proximity of this workhouse which had no actual connection with the burial ground. The appearance of the burial ground is shown on the 1870 Ordnance Survey map (**copy attached**): trees ran around the north-west, north and east perimeters, and a gateway led through to a path to the almshouses. In 1872 a public urinal was erected at the north-west corner of

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<sup>11</sup> *Return comprising the Reports...* (1897), 684.

<sup>12</sup> W/SMH/A/23/7-13.

<sup>13</sup> Tower Hamlets local history library, Map 1706A: *Bomb Damage in Stepney 1939-45*.

<sup>14</sup> These are written out at the back of one of the burial registers: W/SMH/A/4/2.

the burial ground.<sup>15</sup> In her survey of burial grounds conducted for the London County Council early in the 1890s, Mrs Basil Holmes described its condition thus: 'there are many tombstones and the ground is fairly tidy. The gate is generally open, as the entrance to the almshouse is through it'.<sup>16</sup> Views of the burial ground are virtually non-existent, so it is not possible to comment on the ongoing condition of the tombs. The earliest photograph of it found so far dates only from 1956,<sup>17</sup> and shows that a new wall of concrete posts and breeze blocks had been erected along the southern and western boundary after the bomb damage. Such damage was also responsible for the destruction of 1 Salmon Lane and the addition of its site to the south-eastern section of the graveyard.

### **The Local Context: Non-Conformist Burial Grounds in the East End**

The Stepney Meeting burial ground is but one of numerous burial grounds in the East End. Mrs Holmes's survey reckoned that they were most numerous in the Whitechapel and Hackney areas, and that there were originally about eighty graveyards attached to chapels and meeting houses within the LCC area.<sup>18</sup> Within the Tower Hamlets area are at least 25 Non-Conformist burial grounds, according to a hand-list in the local history library. This is an exceptionally high number, and reflects the area's history of dissent and immigration. The most celebrated of the burial grounds are probably the Jewish burial grounds on Mile End Road and Alderney Road, a short distance to the north. Tower Hamlets is thus graced with a number of long-disused burial grounds, which form very special enclaves within its dense urban fabric. These burial grounds introduce welcome areas of open space which are also endowed with historical significance and visual charm as well as the thoughtfulness associated with any place devoted to the burial of the dead.

### **The Monuments: a Survey**

The tombs have suffered considerably since Mrs Holmes's inspection over a century ago. No doubt the wartime bombing has had much to do with this, but decades of neglect have played their part too. Very few of the memorials are now either intact or legible. However, the quantity of masonry elements scattered over the northern area suggests that reconstruction of quite a number might well be possible. One has only to walk a short distance to the north, to St Dunstan's churchyard, to see the possibilities offered by tomb reconstruction.

The following monuments are legible, or of sufficient interest to deserve notice here. They are listed north to south, east to west.

#### **1 Charles Wilson d.1803**

Portland headstone with arched top. Inscription and relief weathered; date ascertained from register.

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<sup>15</sup> W/SMH/A/13/19, 117.

<sup>16</sup> *The London Burial Grounds* (1896), 300.

<sup>17</sup> LMA.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, 146 and 137.

**2 Unidentified Chest Tomb**

Portland stone base and detached ledger, c1800? Missing parts of chest are scattered across the burial ground.

**3 Susanna and Louisa Martin d.1844**

Heavy York stone ledger to mother and child.

**4 Unidentified Tomb Chest**

Portland stone chest with plain angle pilasters.

**5 Rev. George Ford d.1821**

Portland stone sarcophagus, tapered in form, with weathered lion heads and paws at the corners, upon a fielded tomb chest standing on a stepped base. The most ornate tomb in the burial ground, this commemorates the minister of the Stepney Meeting from 1796 to 1821 and was erected by his congregation 'as a token of their affectionate attachment'.

**6 Unidentified Body Stone**

Portland stone body stone, just to the west of the Ford tomb. Head and footstones are detached.

**7 George Barnes Miller d.1806**

Heavy York stone ledger slab with weathered inscription; identification deduced from registers.

**8 Mrs Anne Amphlett d.1842**

Arched York headstone, crisply lettered, to the wife of James Amphlett of Coburn Road, Bow.

**9 Mrs Mary Mascoll d.1801**

Tall arched York headstone, crisply lettered, to the wife of James Mascoll of Lower Smithfield and to Elizabeth Bacon, late of Framlingham, Suffolk d.1804.

**10 Unidentified Collapsed Tomb Chest**

Collapsed and partly buried tomb chest of Portland stone: moulded base and ledger suggest this dated from c1800 with projecting angle supports.

**11 Rev. Samuel Brewer d.1796**

Collapsed tomb chest of Portland stone, formerly surrounded with railings set into the base. Ledger slab surmounted with a curved superstructure, probably supporting an urn. The epitaph has disappeared along with the sides of the chest: identification made from the Stepney Meeting Church Property Book of 1885.<sup>19</sup> Brewer was minister of the Stepney Meeting, and responsible for the opening of this burial ground; this tomb would originally have been the most elaborate in the graveyard.

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<sup>19</sup> W/SMH/A/13/19, 116: the tomb stands on the site of the two houses built in the 1720s and demolished in 1779.

## Assessment

The Stepney Meeting Burial Ground forms a significant part of the historic character of the Stepney Conservation Area. It has suffered from extensive bomb damage and half a century at least of limited upkeep, but nonetheless retains considerable interest and presence. The monuments have suffered badly and few are in anything like their original condition. This is not an irreversible situation, however, and consolidation could usefully be carried out to restore some semblance of the burial ground's original appearance. Lack of documentary evidence about this original appearance is offset by our knowledge of other London burial grounds of the late Georgian period.

The burial ground is situated within the Stepney Conservation Area already. It is not proposed that any of the surviving tombs be considered for listing.

The following steps towards returning the ground to a more sympathetic and respected enclave warrant consideration:

- a) Tidying up and the discouraging of dog fouling
- b) consolidation of selected monuments
- c) re-thinking the design and purpose of the empty southern end of the burial ground
- d) reinstatement of boundary railings
- e) provision of replacement benches
- f) installation of paving along the present 'path of desire'
- g) an unobtrusive information board, outlining the site's history as a burial ground

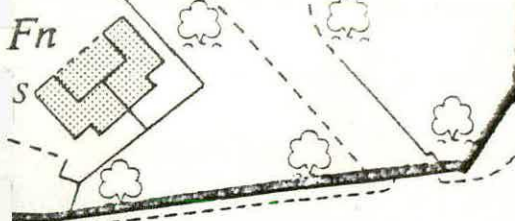
Roger Bowdler  
Historical Analysis and Research Team

20<sup>h</sup> April 2000

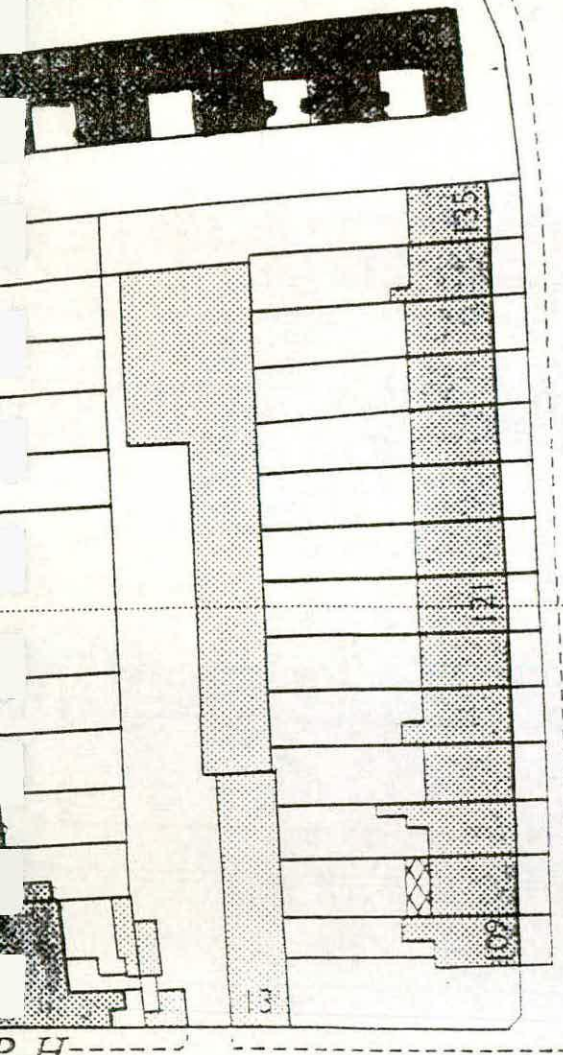
## ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Current OS map
- 2 *A Copy of a Platt of such lands as belongeth to the Right Worll Company of Mercers in London lying within the parish of Stepney in the Countie of Middlesex* (1615)
- 3 Site plan based on that in *Stepney Meeting Church Property Book* (1885)
- 4 *An Actuell Survey of the Parish of St Dunstan Stepney* by Joel Gascoyne (1703)
- 5 *A Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster* by John Rocque (1746)
- 6 *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster* by Richard Horwood (1799)
- 7 1<sup>st</sup> ed. OS map (1873)
- 8 Sketch site plan showing approximate position of tombs listed in the survey
- 9
  - a) The burial ground from the north-west corner, looking south-east
  - b) the burial ground from the west, looking east
- 10
  - a) the burial ground from the centre, looking north-east
  - b) the burial ground from the south-west corner, looking north-west
- 11
  - a) the burial ground, southern end, looking south
  - b) the burial ground, southern end, looking north
- 12
  - a) tomb of the Rev. George Ford d.1821 [5]
  - b) tomb of the Rev. Samuel Brewer d.1796 [11]
- 13
  - a) the Mascoll and Amphlett headstones of 1801 and 1842 [9 & 8]
  - b) collapsed chest tomb [10]
- 14
  - a) headstone of Charles Wilson d.1803 [1]
  - b) tombs in the north east corner, including the Martin ledger d.1844 [3]

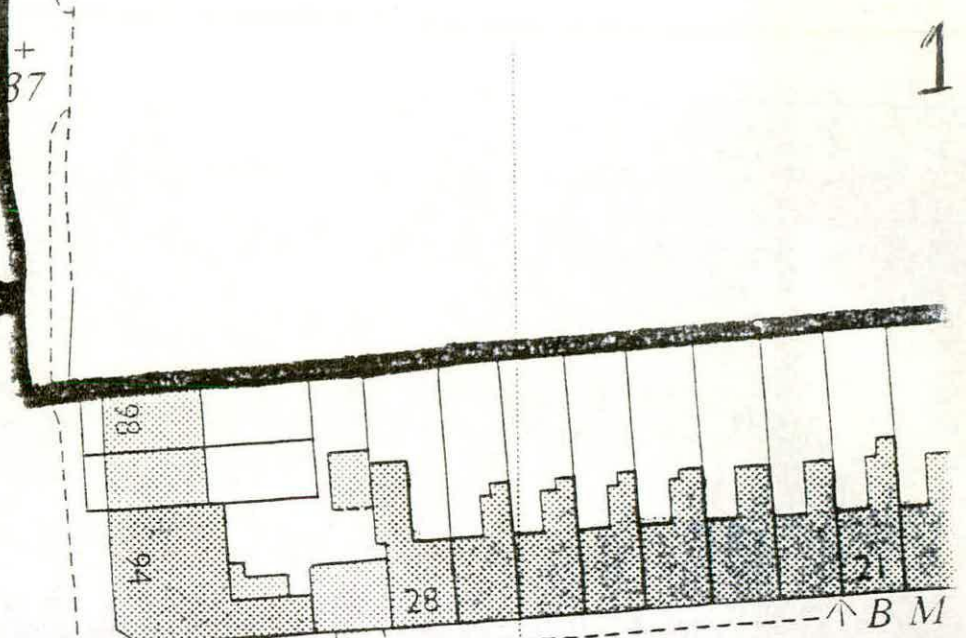




Mico's Almshouses



TROON STREET

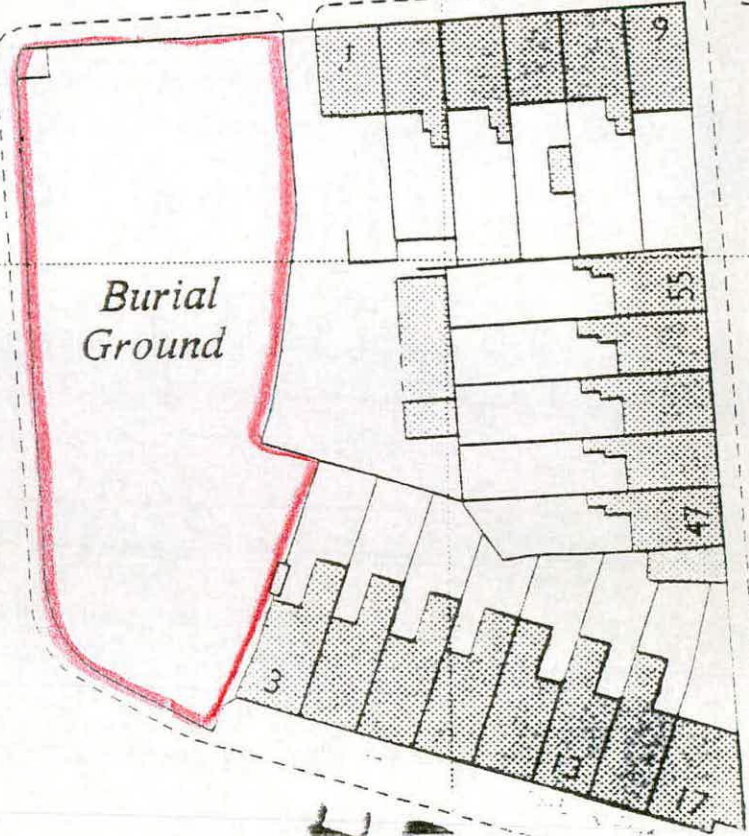


Colet Arms (PH)

MATLOCK ST

+ 38

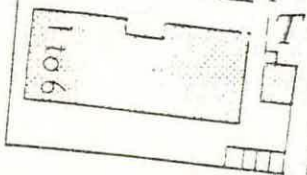
+ 36



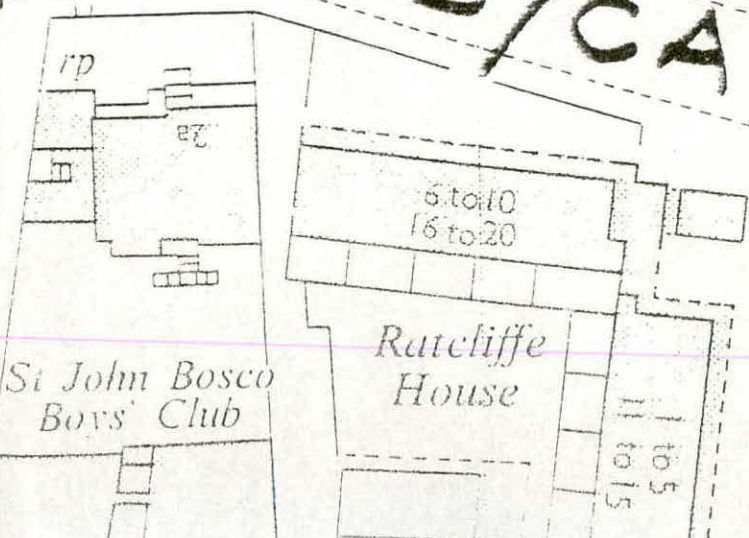
Burial Ground

HB/CA

Colet Flats



HORSE ROAD

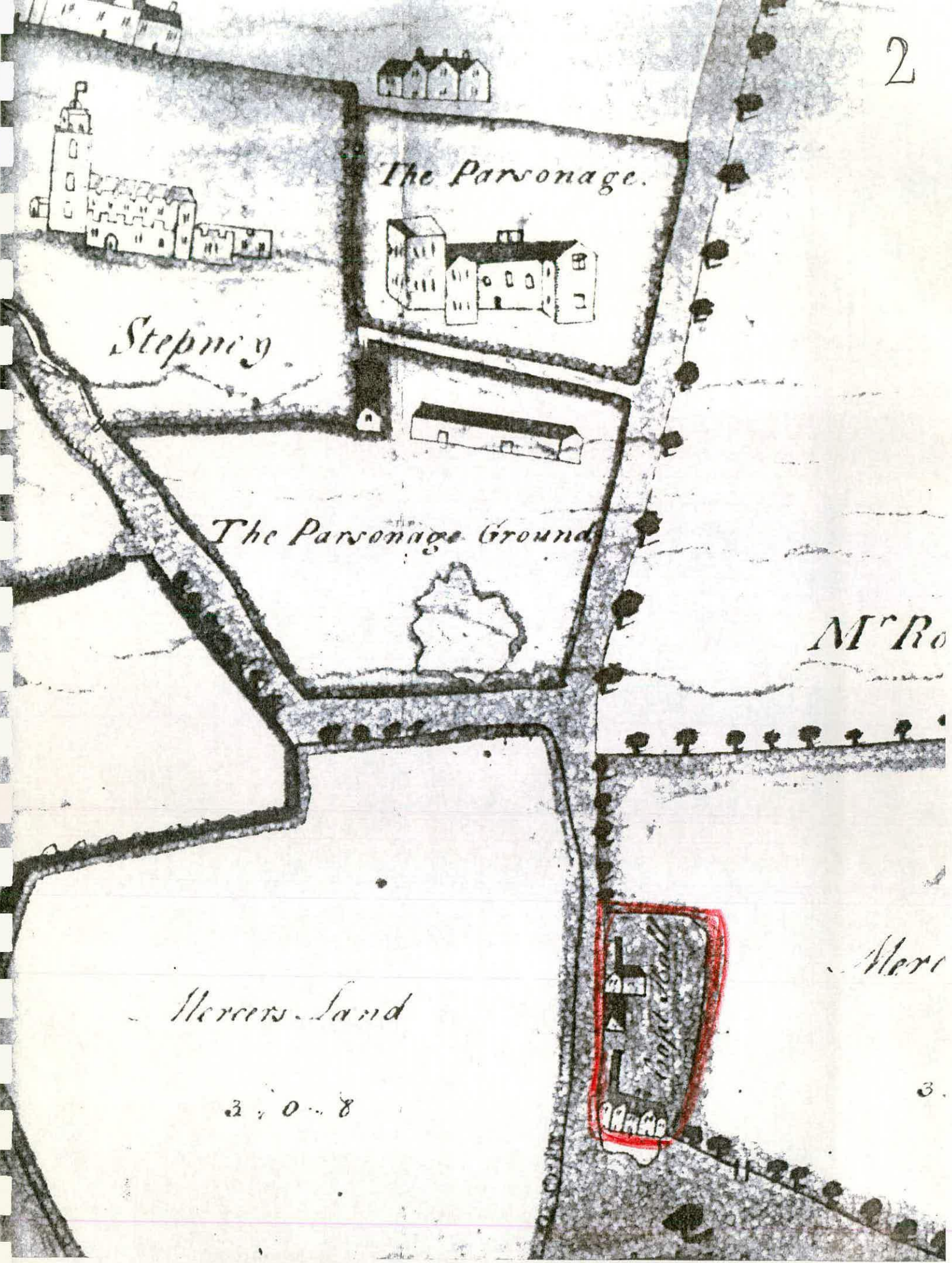


St John Bosco Boys' Club

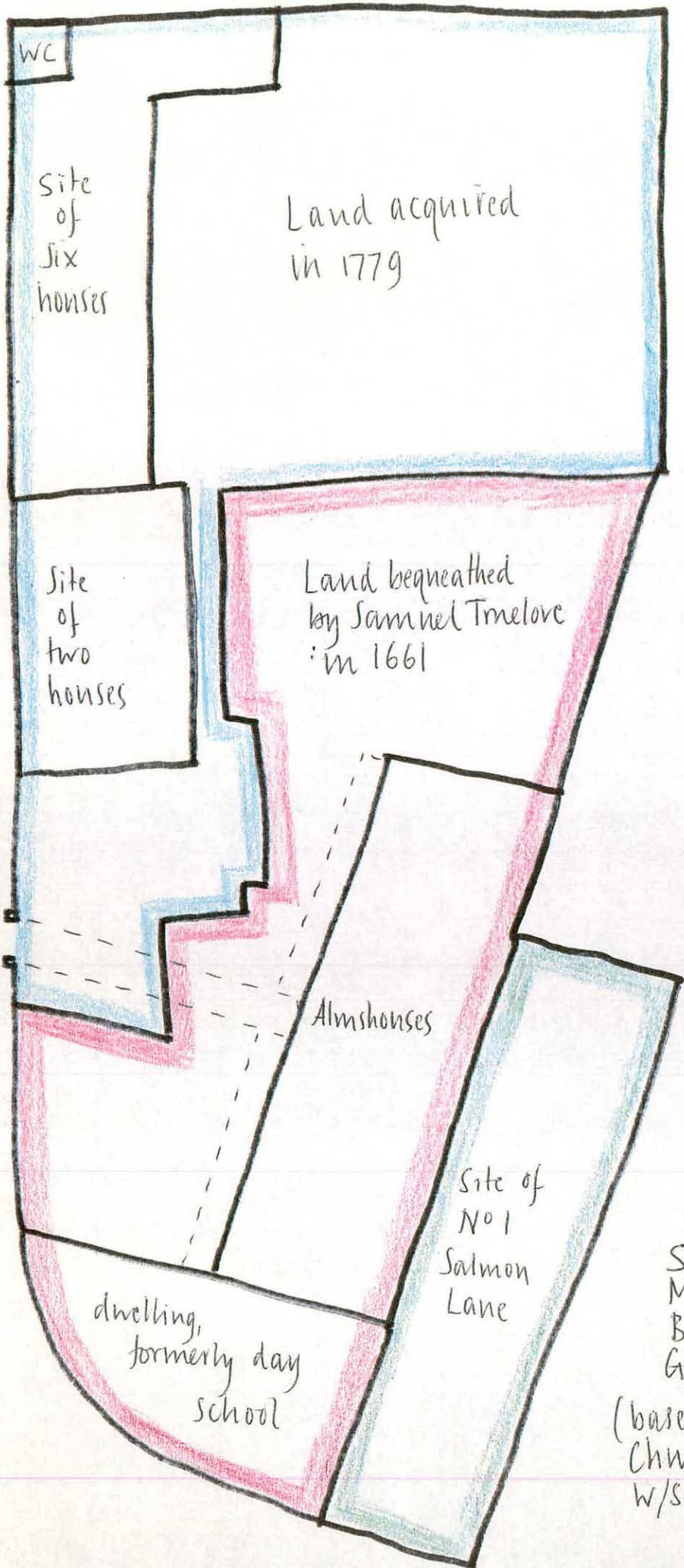
Ratcliffe House

FEET



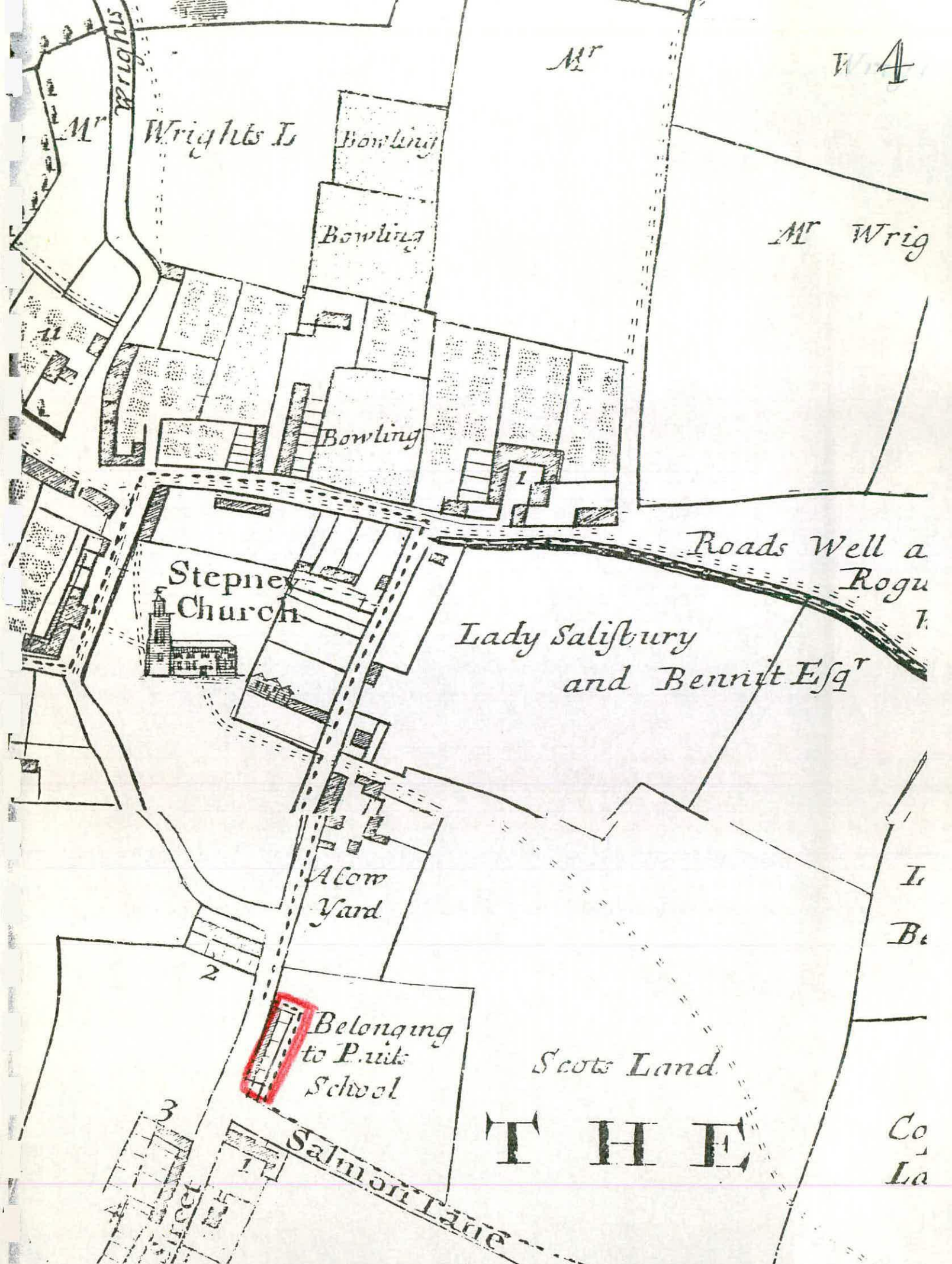




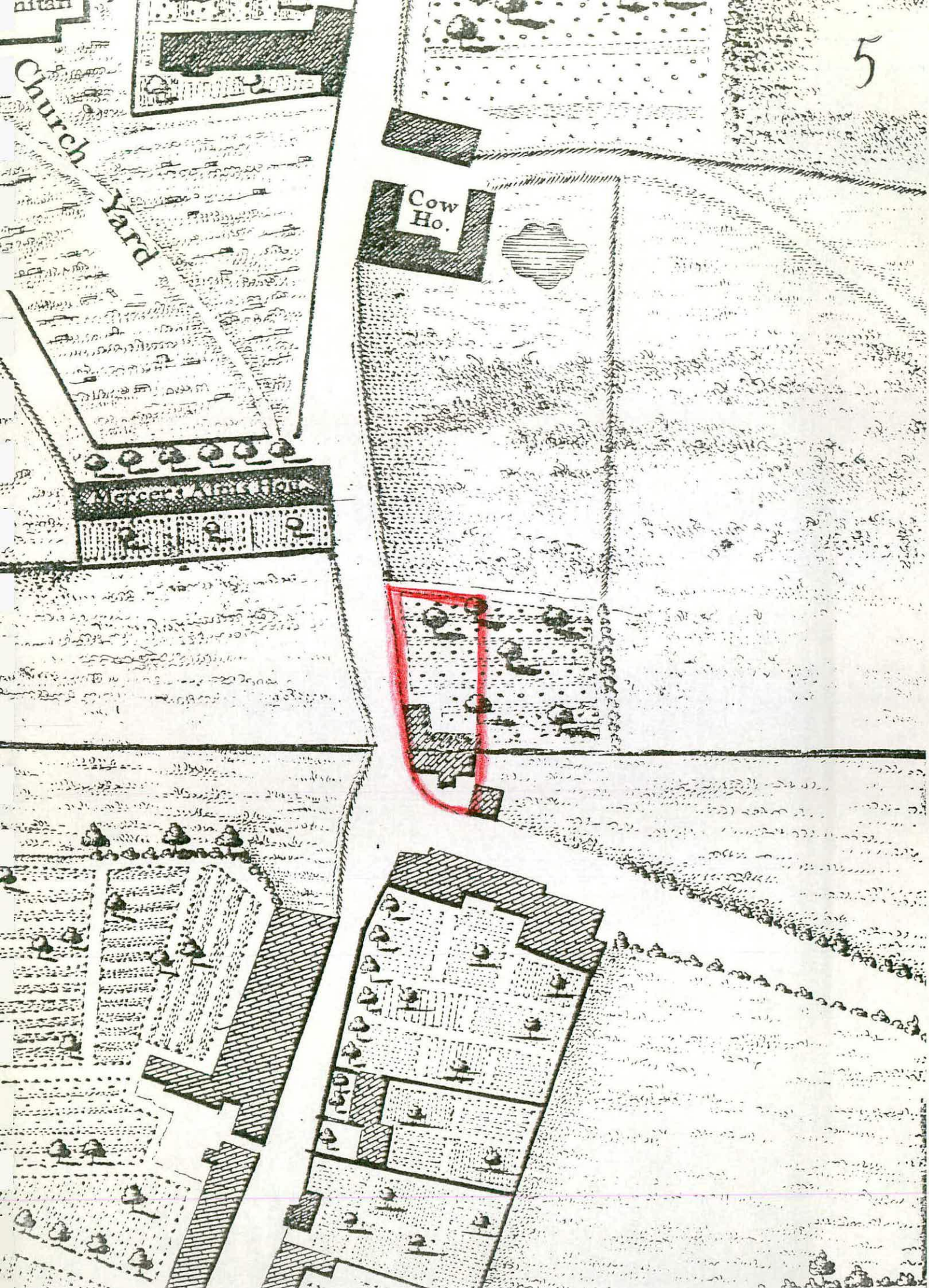


STEPNEY  
MEETING  
BURIAL  
GROUND  
(based on 1885  
Church Property Book,  
W/SMH/A/13/19)

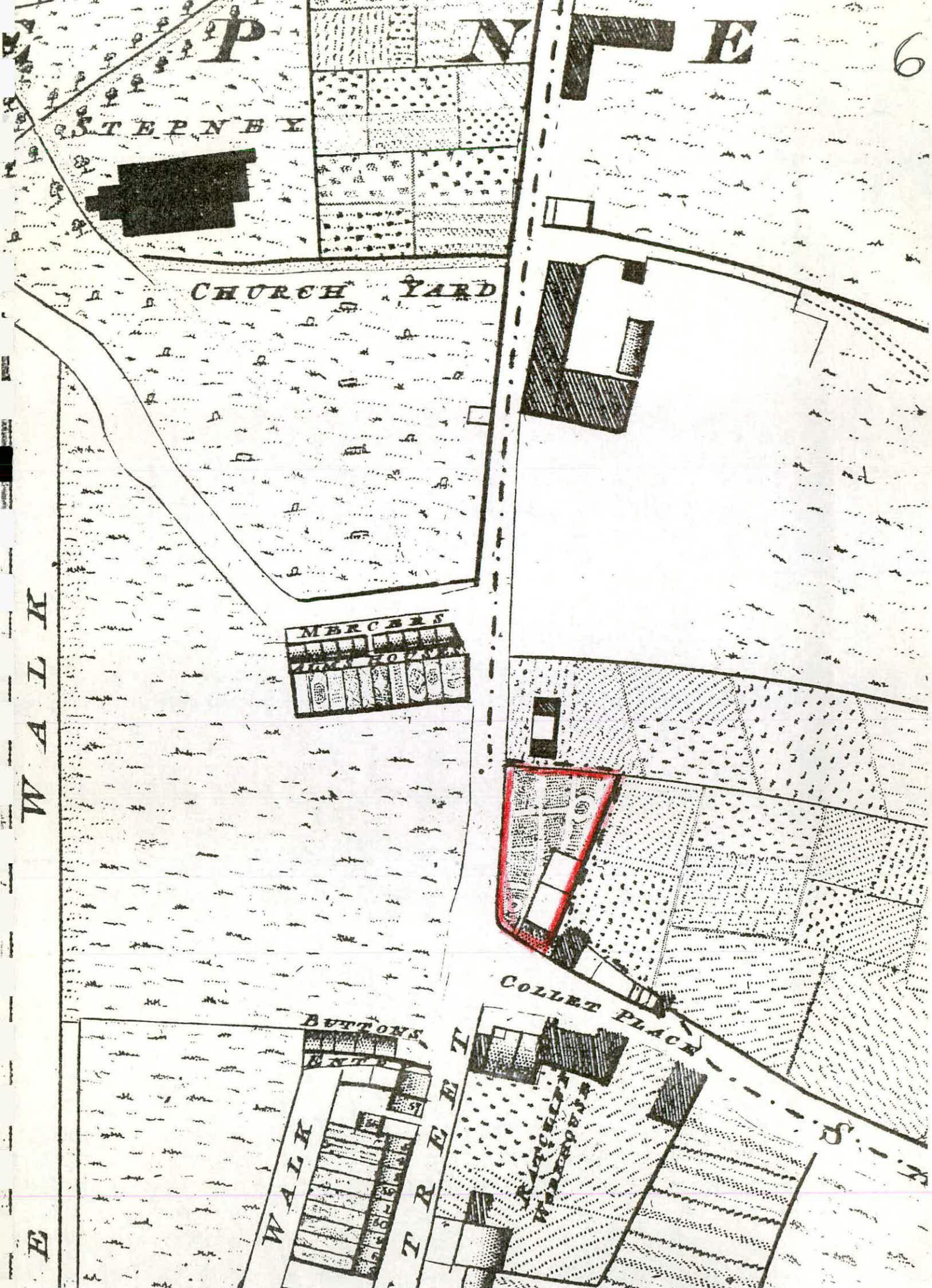






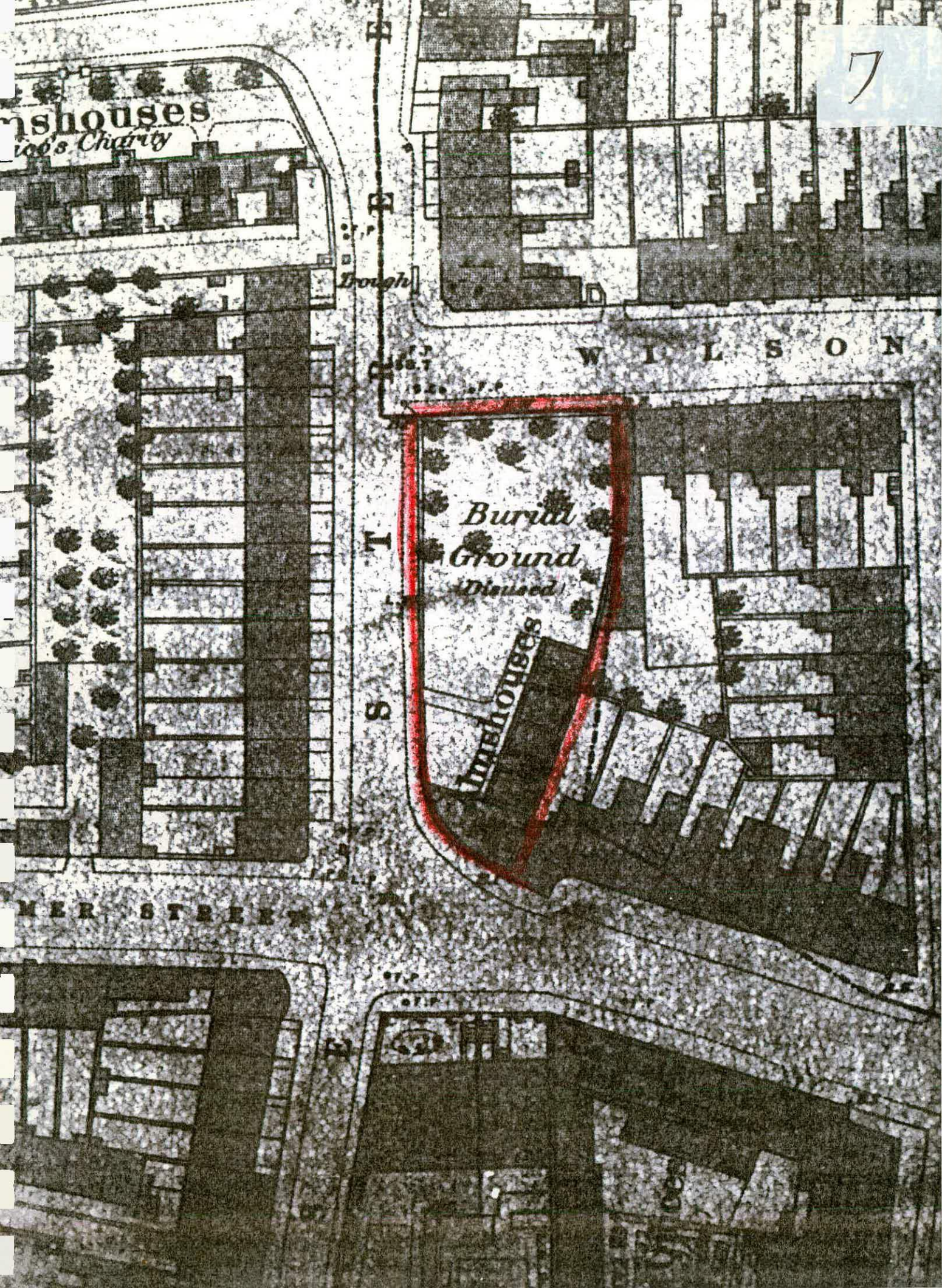




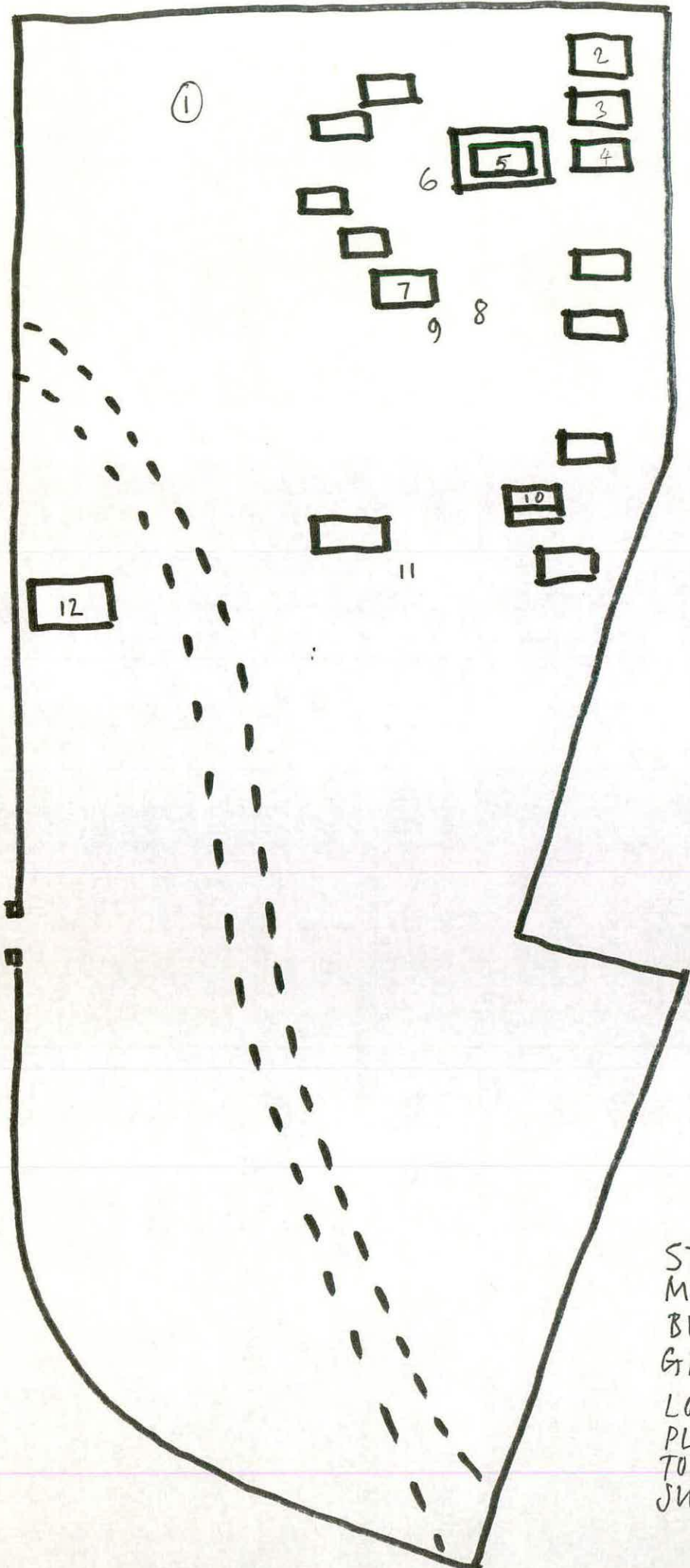


6 Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster by Richard Horwood (1700)









STEPNEY  
MEETING  
BURIAL  
GROUND  
LOCATION  
PLAN OF  
TOMBS IN  
SURVEY.





9 a) The burial ground from the north-west corner, looking south-east



b) the burial ground from the west, looking east





10 a) the burial ground from the centre, looking north-east



b) the burial ground from the south-west corner, looking north-west





11 a) the burial ground, southern end, looking south



b) the burial ground, southern end, looking north





12 a) tomb of the Rev. George Ford d.1821 [5]



b) tomb of the Rev. Samuel Brewer d.1796 [11]





13 a) the Mascoll and Amphlett headstones of 1801 and 1842 [9 & 8]



b) collapsed chest tomb [10]





14 a) headstone of Charles Wilson d.1803 [1]



b) tombs in the north east corner, including the Martin ledger d.1844 [3]