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**WALSALL STREET/PRITCHARD STREET,
WEDNESBURY**

An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment 1996

by
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1.0: SUMMARY

This report provides an archaeological assessment of land adjoining Walsall Street and Pritchard Street, Wednesbury. The sources consulted for this assessment include the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record, published archaeological reports, and secondary documentary and map sources held at the Staffordshire Record Office and at Smethwick and Wednesbury Libraries.

The research indicates that the area may have been under pasture into the 19th century, although the previous recovery of pottery wasters from within the study area suggests nearby pottery production, also represented by the results of other nearby excavations. The Walsall Street frontage was occupied by a terrace of brick dwellings, which were recently demolished.

2.0: INTRODUCTION (Figs. 1-2)

2.1: The Report

This report provides an archaeological assessment of 1600 square metres of land located on the corner of Walsall Street and Pritchard Street, in Wednesbury town centre, in the former West Midlands County (hereinafter referred to as the study area: centred on NGR. SO39872951). Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned by R. Parsons Design to provide an archaeological desk-based assessment of the study area, in accordance with the requirements of the Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of Environment 1991). The assessment follows the methodology set down in a brief prepared by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (Waller 1996) and a Specification prepared by BUFAU (Jones 1996), both dated May 1996. This report was also prepared in accordance with the 'Standard and Guidance for Desk-Based Assessments' (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994).

2.2: Aims

The aims of this assessment were:

- (1) To collate the existing archaeological and historical information available, and consider the potential for the discovery of hitherto unrecorded archaeological remains within the study area. In particular, it was intended to establish the potential of the study area to provide evidence of late medieval/early post-medieval settlement and pottery production.
- (2) To assess the potential for the survival of archaeological features and deposits within the study area.
- (3) To provide an assessment of the local and regional context of the archaeology of the study area, and to identify any relevant research priorities.
- (4) To facilitate an informed strategy of subsequent trial-trenching.

2.3 Sources

A number of sources were consulted for this assessment.

The primary source of archaeological information for the study area and its setting is the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for the West Midlands, which contains an up-to-date record of all reported archaeological sites, and the recorded find-spots of individual artefacts. This information derives from archaeological discoveries made during fieldwork, or from reports by amateur fieldworkers. Another important source of information comprises published archaeological reports.

The historical sources consulted include local histories, antiquarian and estate maps, and early editions of Ordnance Survey maps. Photographs were also consulted, as appropriate. A geotechnical report (British Geotechnical 1996) provided useful data concerning the nature of below ground-deposits.

2.4: Topography and land use

The study area is located within the centre of Wednesbury, which is located on the South Staffordshire Plateau, between two major headstreams of the River Tame, and is dominated by Church Hill. The underlying geology of the area consists of undifferentiated glacial deposits, overlying a succession of grey siltstones, mudstones and sandstones belonging to the productive coal measures which dip gently westwards (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet memoir SO 99NE). The geotechnical investigation of the site (see below) identifies the subsoil in the study area as a 'yellow-green and slightly blue-grey silty clay (highly weathered mudstone: British Geotechnical 1996).

The study area presently comprises a lawned garden, containing shrub borders, located in the angle between Walsall Street and Pritchard Street.

3.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SETTING (Fig. 1)

This section is concerned with a discussion of those sites of archaeological interest which are located outside the study area, but which are nevertheless relevant for an understanding of the archaeological setting of the study area.

3.1: Prehistoric to Saxon

Possible rampart earthworks (West Midlands SMR No. 2614) identified by Hackwood (1902) have been interpreted as representing an Iron-Age hillfort settlement utilising the raised ground adjoining Church Hill (Ede 1962). The 'bury' element of the place name is also suggestive of this early origin. The possibility of the later utilisation of the higher ground on Church Hill during the Saxon period is also suggested by the place name, which may indicate the existence of a pagan Anglo-Saxon temple dedicated to the god of war Woden (Gelling 1962). It has also been suggested (Hackwood 1902) that the hill was fortified by Ethelfleda, the sister of King Edward the Elder, in the early 10th century, although Ede

(1962) argues that there is no evidence to support this conclusion. No evidence of prehistoric or Saxon activity was found during archaeological excavations across the line of some of the putative earthworks in 1989 (Butcux 1989), and the results of this fieldwork suggested that these and the other earthworks interpreted as ramparts were the result of modern landscaping.

There is no existing archaeological evidence for Roman settlement activity in the area, although the Sites and Monuments Record records individual find-spots of Roman coins (Nos. 2618, 4261) and a coin hoard (No. 2832).

3.2: Medieval settlement

Although Hodder (1992, 142) notes that 'the archaeological evidence for medieval Wednesbury remains sparse' some conclusions can nevertheless be drawn concerning the medieval topography and development of the town. The earliest focus of medieval settlement may have lain in the area around Church Hill, although the earliest surviving structure of St. Batholomew's Church (SMR No. 1401), is of 13th-century date, contained within a mainly 19th-century building. The detailed Parish Plan of 1799 (Fig. 3: Hodder 1992, fig. 2) allows the partial reconstruction of many features of the medieval topography of the town, notably the extensive medieval fields, exemplified by the narrow strip-fields typical of medieval agriculture. Hodder also suggests an alternative village nucleus in the area of the later Market Place. The local historian Ede argues that much of the manor of Wednesbury was subject to the penalties of forest law, perhaps indicating its location within the bounds of the royal forest of Cannock (Ede 1962). One of the more common crimes against forest law recorded here in the late 13th century was that of assarting, that is the making of clearings in forest for farming or to extract mineral resources.

The first document to detail the topography of medieval Wednesbury is the will of the lord of the manor, John Heronville, who died in 1315. This document refers to a manor house ('chief messuage'), a dovecote, a fishpond and a mill, surrounded by large open fields divided into strips. Reference is also made to marl-pits and an iron-mine, suggesting that localised pottery and iron production may have occurred in Wednesbury in the early 14th-century. Ede (1962) suggests that coal was also being extracted.

The results of limited archaeological fieldwork within the town have also shed light upon medieval settlement and industry. Excavations on the site of the former Oakswell Hall (SMR No. 2827), located immediately to the south of the study area, uncovered part of a building of late medieval date (Hodder and Glazebrook 1985), which succeeded an earlier medieval dwelling on the site, first documented in 1421. This site may have been the location of the medieval settlement's manor house, or the location of a secondary manor, although an alternative location of the manor on the site of the building known as 'Wednesbury Manor' (SMR No. 6450), to the north of the church, has also been suggested.

Trenching in the Market Place (Hodder 1992: SMR No. 1729) identified a probable 15th-century yard surface associated with post-holes and beam-slots. Excavations at Riddings Lane (Hodder 1988: SMR No. 1731) recorded a group of rubbish-pits in the area to the rear of the street frontage. The proximity of this feature group to a cultivation soil horizon, and the identification of evidence for cultivation at Oakswell Hall, was interpreted by Hodder to

indicate that the buildings of medieval Wednesbury continued to be interspersed with small gardens or allotments.

The possible location of a moat, suggested by the placename 'Moatfield Terrace' (SMR No. 2814), located to the northeast of the study area, has not been proven.

3.3: The evidence for industry

A notable feature of the limited archaeological investigations carried out to date in Wednesbury historic centre is the evidence provided for local pottery manufacture, as well as for other late medieval/ post-medieval industries. Hodder (1992, 104: SMR No. 1730) uncovered a pottery kiln in the Market Place, defined by an oval or circular hollow infilled with the collapsed clay dome of the former kiln roof. Waster sherds recovered from this and other archaeological investigations in the town show that the range of locally produced wares included Midlands Purple Wares, Cistercian wares, glazed red earthenwares, and Midlands Yellow wares (Hodder and Glazebrook 1985). The waste products of this industry were also recorded at Riddings Lane (SMR No. 1731), at the significantly named 'Potters Lane' site (SMR No. 5425), at Trowse Lane and at High Bullen (SMR No. 5426). The discovery of probable wasters in Cistercian ware and Blackware by workmen in the mid 19th-century, working to the southwest of the study area, is also recorded (SMR No. 5423).

Potters are first recorded in Wednesbury in 1422 (Ede 1962, 108). There is also a reference to marl-pits in the will of 1315 described above. The yellow and bluish clays used by the Wednesbury manufacturers were obtained, in the 17th-century, from Monway Field to the west of the town, and the pottery which was manufactured from this clay was decorated with a slip using red clay from Tipton (Plot 1686).

The expansion of the industry is perhaps reflected in the number of potters listed in the Quarter Sessions Rolls. Between 1583 and 1609 there were seven potters, and between 1676 and 1775 a total of 28 is recorded (Barker 1985). However, Hodder (1992, 96), suggests these figures could be distorted by the inclusion of 'potters' workmen'. Towards the end of the 18th century the industry declined and probably ended c.1800 due to competition from the Potteries in North Staffordshire (Bagnall 1854).

A feature of the Wednesbury pottery industry noted by Hodder (1992) is the domestic nature of production, which could have been undertaken in the large open spaces behind the street frontages. Despite this limited scale of production, Wednesbury pottery is widely recorded in the midlands at Lichfield, Walsall, Birmingham, Wolverhpton and at Dudley Castle.

Another industry recorded in the town is corn-milling, represented by a corn mill (SMR No. 6695), located to the south of the study area, which occupies the site of a mill first referred to in a document of 1632.

Small-scale extraction of iron and coal, probably for localised use by the ironworkers and potters, was also being carried out during the late medieval period (Ede 1962). The Quarter Sessions Rolls for 1583-1609 record various manufacturers of small iron goods, the principal trade being nail production. Other ironworking trades of note were buckle and lock making

and the manufacture of edged tools (*ibid*). The picture at this time appears to be one of interdependent local industries utilising the available resources of clay, iron and coal.

Increasing industrialisation at the end of the 17th century caused a major change to the industry of the town. Coal mining was conducted on a much larger scale to meet the demands of mechanised factory production and Wednesbury became an important market for the distribution of nail rods, as well as being an important source of iron-ore (*ibid*). The first references to clay-pipe manufacture and brick making also occur at this time (Plot 1686). Plot refers to arched bricks which were made to shore coal pits. Brick production declined towards the end of the 19th century due to the exhaustion of good clays (Ede 1962). The other major industry to emerge at the beginning of the 18th century was that of gunbarrel manufacture. This industry prospered in Wednesbury until the early 19th century, after which it enjoyed intermittent success during times of war (*ibid*).

4.0: THE STUDY AREA

4.1: Archaeological and historical evidence

Three wasters of Cistercian ware or Blackware, dated to the 16th century, recovered by workmen from a gas main trench in the southwestern corner of the study area (SMR No. 5425), provide evidence for pottery manufacture in the locality. This information is also the only archaeological data presently available specifically concerning the study area.

Since the archaeological information available for the study area is somewhat sparse, the following discussion concentrates upon analysis of the detailed 19th century mapping sequence for the study area and its immediate environs. The local historian Ede (1962) notes that there are no surviving medieval documents for the zone comprising the study area and its environs.

Perhaps the earliest mapping available for the study area is the Yates map of 1769 (Ede 1962, facing p.9). The depiction of the town is somewhat stylised, and the small-scale of the map makes it difficult to discern if the study area lay within the area then built-up.

The earliest detailed mapping available is the Parish Map, dated 1799 (Fig. 3). The study area forms part of land parcel 345, which may be pasture, fringed by trees. No buildings are recorded along the street frontage, or elsewhere within the study area.

The tithe map of Wednesbury (1844: not illustrated) is more detailed. The study area then comprised the southwestern corner of a large field called 'Mot Piece'. Although it has been suggested above that this name could imply a moated site in the vicinity (SMR No. 2814), following the local historian Hackwood (1902). Ede (1962) interprets the word 'Mot' as being of some antiquity, suggesting that it could refer to 'the original meeting place of the manor court or moot', which was often held in the open air. Larkham's Gazetteer of Moated Sites (1982) lists this site as one 'formerly considered to be moated'.

The Board of Health map (Fig. 4), dated 1853, shows the study area to lie on the southern limits of an open field, possibly used as pasture, although a small parcel of land in the

extreme southeast of the study area is divided-off. To the east of the study area was the George and Dragon Public House.

By 1890 (Ordnance Survey, First Edition: Fig. 5) a terrace of narrow brick dwellings was constructed on the Walsall Street frontage (then called 'Oakswell Road'), and the land to the rear was sub-divided into plots running back from the street frontage. Ede (1961) dates this building to between 1851-1861. Subsequent Ordnance Survey mapping (e.g. map of 1903: Fig. 6) indicates that the area changed little. The dwellings on the street frontage were demolished some time after compilation of the Ordnance Survey map of 1983 (Fig. 2), and the present lawned ornamental gardens were then laid out.

There are no Scheduled Ancient Monuments within the study area.

4.2: Geotechnical Information

A total of five boreholes was dug within the study area by British Geotechnical (1996). In Borehole 1, in the northwest of the study area, was noted topsoil with ash and masonry to a depth of 1.3m below the modern surface, with underlying sand-clay containing bricks. Borehole 2, in the northeast corner of the study area, encountered topsoil measuring 1.5m in depth, with underlying gravelly-clay containing pottery fragments. Borehole 3, in the southeast corner of the site, contained a demolition deposit, measuring 1.9m in depth. Borehole 4, in the southwest corner of the site, revealed a loose fill-deposit, 1.5m in depth, over brown silt-clay. Borehole 5, in the centre of the site, located a deposit of sand with masonry, measuring 2.10m in depth. These results indicate a considerable degree of disturbance within the study area.

4.3: Archaeological Survival

Analysis of the cartographic evidence suggests that the study area may have been used as pasture in the medieval and post-medieval periods. However, it is possible that any smaller structures within the study area could have been omitted from mapping. The study area may have been first developed in the post-medieval period between 1853 (Board of Health map) and 1861. Examination of the Ordnance Survey mapping (1890-1983) suggests that the ground-plans of these structures changed little during that period. It is possible that islands of medieval or post-medieval stratigraphy could survive later disturbance to the rear of the demolished 19th-century brick terrace.

The results of the borehole survey indicate that there has been a considerable depth of disturbance over the site, and in particular in the southeast corner of the study area (Borehole 3), where cellar fill is recorded. Demolition debris is recorded more extensively over the site, and disturbed horizons containing demolition debris are noted at depths of 1.5m + below the modern surface. A lower horizon recorded in Borehole 2, containing pottery fragments, could be a deep feature of archaeological interest, such as a pit.

5.0: DISCUSSION

Although the map evidence may not suggest the study area was located within the medieval settlement core of the town, the recovery of a group of wasters from within the study area, and its proximity to Oakswell Hall, could suggest some form of medieval activity within the study area, possibly associated with pottery production. Any such evidence of medieval activity could be relatively well-preserved, since the site appears to have been developed comparatively late in the post-medieval period, and the ground-plan of this brick terrace appears not to have been altered significantly from its first construction.

6.0: PROPOSALS (Fig. 7)

It is proposed to excavate a total of three trial-trenches (Fig. 7), each measuring 10m in length, and intended to sample the proposed development area as widely as possible.

TRENCH A: Located in the approximate position of Borehole 2, to test the possible pit-like feature recorded here during the geotechnical survey. The trench would also examine the potential of this area to contain evidence of plot boundaries, rubbish disposal, and pottery manufacture.

TRENCH B: Located just inside the street frontage, this trench would examine the potential of the frontage area to contain evidence of structures, plot divisions and pottery production.

TRENCH C: Located to the rear of the street frontage, this trench would test the potential of the area to the rear of the street frontage to contain evidence of pottery manufacture, plot divisions, and rubbish disposal.

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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MAP SOURCES

1769 Yates Map of Staffordshire
1799 Parish Plan of Wednesbury
1844 Wednesbury Tithe map
1853 Board of Health map
1890 Ordnance Survey, First Edition
1903 Ordnance Survey map
1919 Ordnance Survey map
1938 Ordnance Survey map
1971 Ordnance Survey map
1983 Ordnance Survey map

DRAFT



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

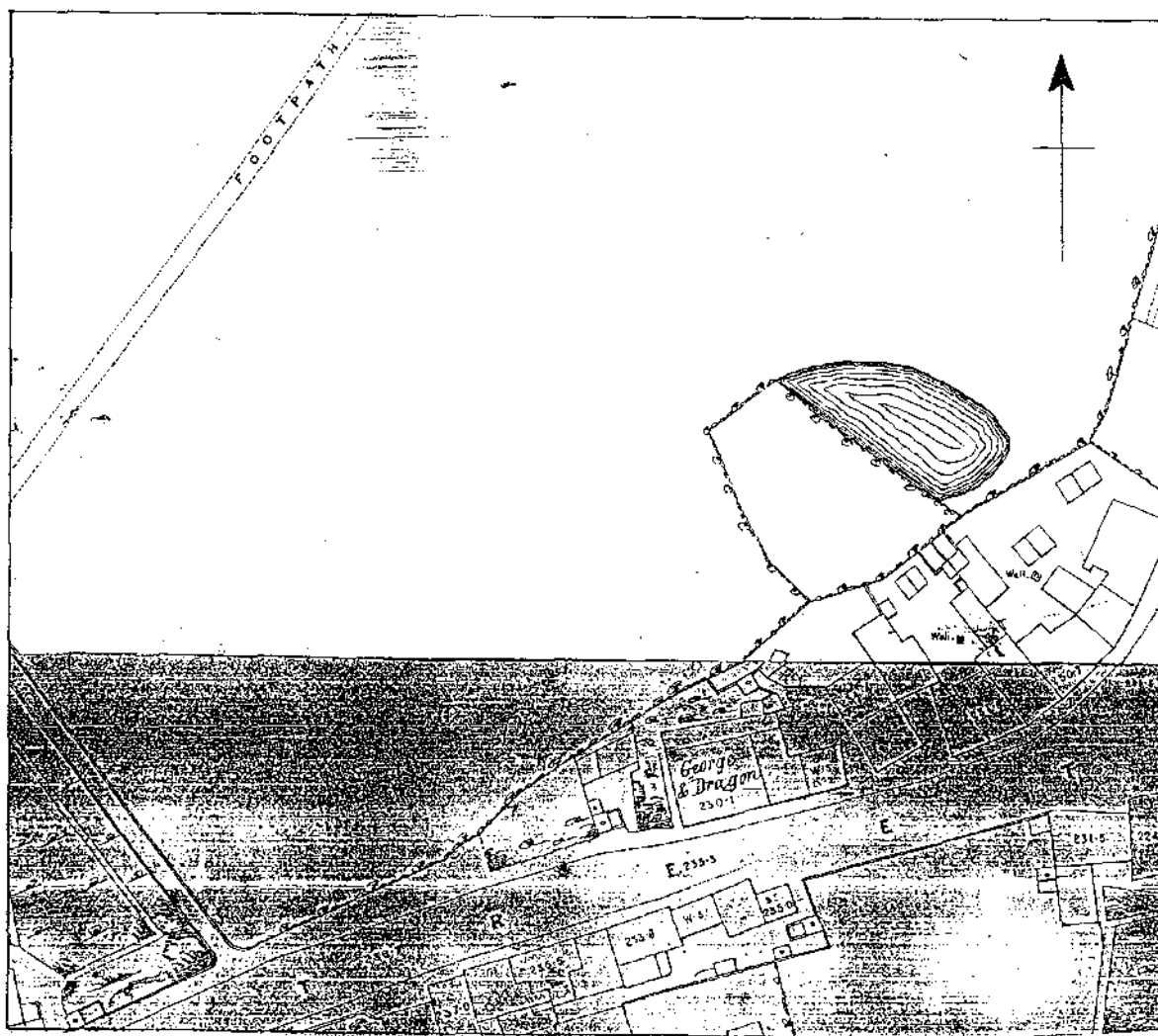


Fig.4

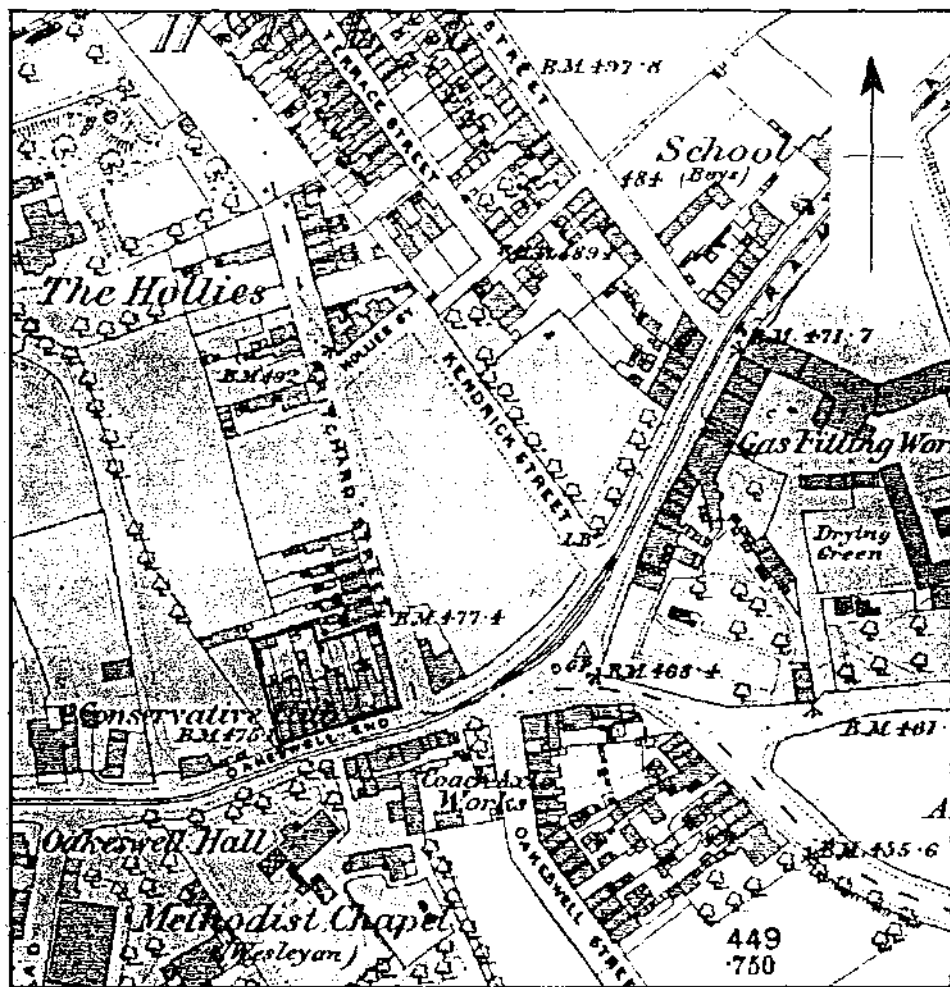


Fig.5

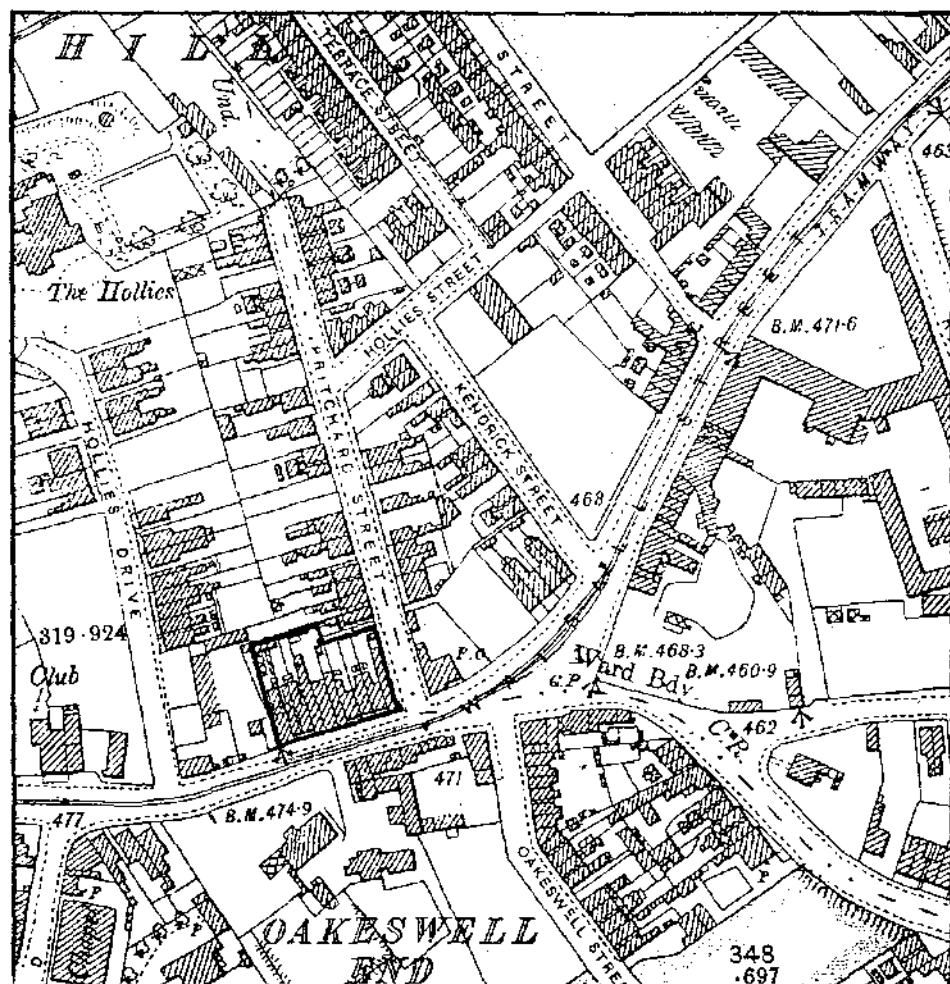


Fig.6

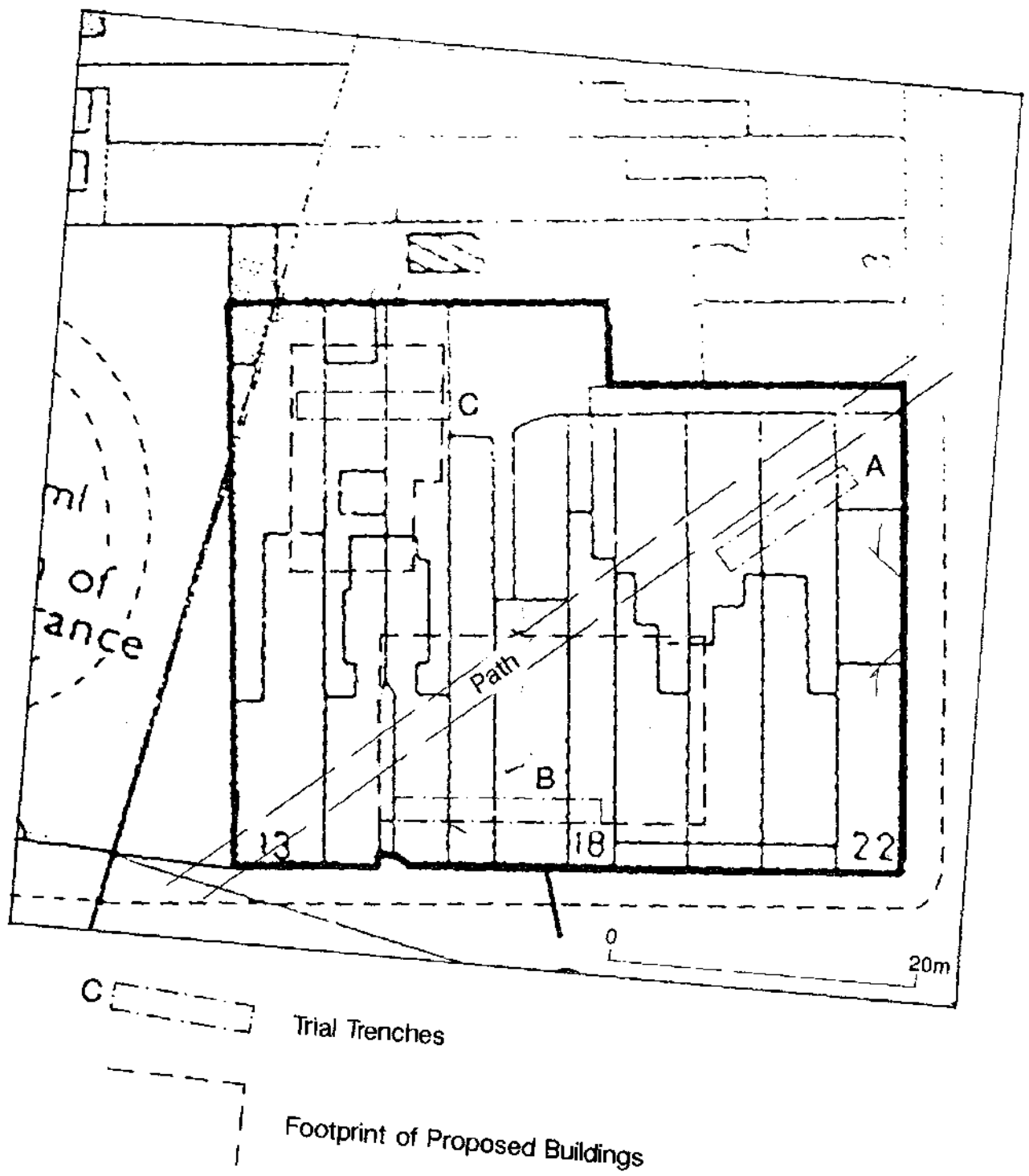


Fig.7

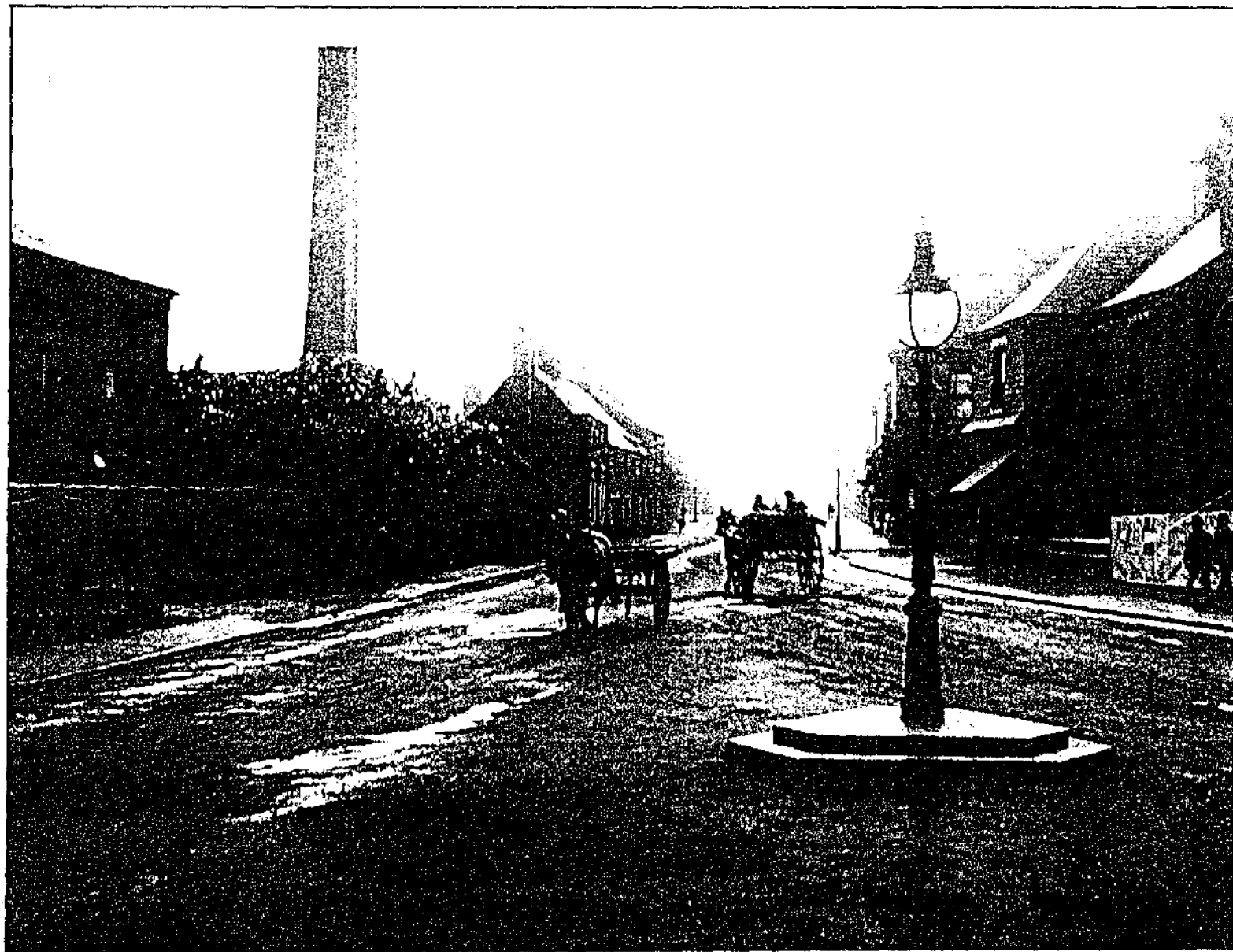


Plate 1