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Land at Albion Place, Northampton

Stage 1 archaeological evaluation

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1 Introduction

1.1 The following text outlines the results of an initial desk top archaeological assessment undertaken on behalf of McCarthy and Stone and focused on land fronting on Albion Place and to the south of Derngate, Northampton (NGR centring SP 758602).

1.2 The study area lies in the south-east quarter of the historic town (Fig 1). Until recently the site was occupied by the Northampton High School for Girls. It was vacated in 1992 and has been empty since. The main school building fronts Derngate with two modern brick built wings to its rear.

1.3 The geology is Northampton Sands with limestone and ironstone inclusions (RCHM 1984; Shaw *et al* 1992). The ground slopes to the south and has been terraced for tennis courts.

1.4 This study is based on records held by the Northamptonshire County Council SMR and the Northampton Local Studies Library. The records were sufficiently full to make a visit to the County Record Office unnecessary at this stage. The basic record for Northampton archaeology is the Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England) (RCHM 1984). The school property formed part of a large area to the south of Derngate which has been archaeologically evaluated by a Stage 1 assessment (Shaw 1991) and by Stage 2 trial trenching (Shaw *et al* 1992).

1.5 A series of maps shows the post-medieval development of Northampton and details of the study area, starting with Speed's map of 1610 (Fig 2), and followed by maps in 1746 (Noble and Butlin), 1807 (Roper and Cole) and 1847 (Wood and Law) (Figs 3-5). The Ordnance Survey 1st edition map of 1885 (Fig 6) is then followed by the modern sequence.

1.6 In the following text, Section 2 looks briefly at the archaeological importance of Northampton, Sections 3 and 4 outline the documentary and excavation evidence relating to the study area, Section 5 summarises the archaeological potential and Section 6 makes recommendations for the next steps.

2 Northampton: archaeological importance

2.1 Although there is some evidence of prehistoric and Romano-British occupation of the high ground north of the River Nene, later to be the site of the town, it was not until the middle Saxon period (AD 650-850) that the site became of major importance. A sequence of palace halls suggests the centre of a royal estate. The latest palace was destroyed by the Danes in the 10th century, and a flourishing late-Saxon town developed in the west part of the later town (RCHM 1984, 40).

2.2 By 1176/7 Northampton had become the second most prosperous town in England after London. By the end of the 12th century, town defences, initially a bank and ditch and later a stone wall, were in place and much of the street pattern had been laid out. However, by 1300 the town was in decline, and by the 16th century the town ranked 20th in England in terms of population (RCHM 1984, 47).

2.3 Post-medieval Northampton was extensively rebuilt following a fire in 1675. The main expansion of the town to its modern form occurred in the 19th century (RCHM 1984, 68).

3 Documentary background

3.1 The modern Derngate was originally Swynewellestrete, the name Derngate applying only to the gate through the town defences at the junction of Derngate with the Victoria Promenade and Cheyne Walk. Swinewell St was first recorded in 1185. 21 properties were recorded at the end of the 13th century and 22 in 1504. Cow Lane, a precursor of Swan Street, may have been in place by 1275 when a Cougate is recorded.

3.2 Speed's map of 1610 shows the study area occupied by a major building called 'The Towre' (Fig 2). This lay within an area known as the Grange. Brown (1915, 90) suggested that The Tower was part of Derngate, but this is unlikely. He also notes a 1218 commission to see to its repair, but this may be conflated from a reference to the Derngate itself. The Tower was held by John Neville, Lord Latimer, in Henry IV's reign, and in 1409-10 the name Latymer's Tour was recorded (Brown 1915, 90). In the reign of Henry VI, the Grange was held by Thomas Tresham, speaker of the Commons, and in 1498 was in the hands of John Chauncey whose will records a grant of 'Latymer towre'. In 1504 it was still held by John Chauncey. The evidence suggests that The Tower was the principal building of the Grange (Williams 1984; Shaw 1991).

The building was the residence of Sir John Lamb in the reign of Charles I. Associated barns were used to house vats filled with saltpetre for use in a gunpowder mill outside the city walls. In 1647, at a time of plague, the building was used to isolate the sick, and it was destroyed in the fire of 1675 (Brown 1915, 90).

3.3 Medieval tenements are recorded on modern Derngate and buildings are shown on Speed's map (Williams 1984). Albion Place was laid out in the 19th century across a field named as Tower Close on the 1746 and 1807 maps (Figs 3 and 4), and was in place at the time of the 1847 map (Fig 5).

4 Results of previous excavation

4.1 Trial trenching of the area bounded by Derngate, Victoria Promenade and Albion Place was undertaken in 1992 (Shaw *et al* 1992). One of the three objectives was to assess the archaeological potential in the area of The Tower (the others were to look at the medieval street frontage and at the town defences). The school was then still in use and in the event only two small test pits were opened.

4.2 Two of these trial excavations and a third earlier excavation have been sited within the study area (Fig 7).

4.2.1 A test pit (Fig 7 no 1) was excavated by hand in 1992 (Shaw *et al* 1992, Test Pit 1). This was 2m square and located the natural surface at 67.9m OD, 1.4m below the present ground surface (Fig 8). Two east-west running features were cut into a layer of sandy loam 0.4m thick. One contained a sherd of medieval pottery and the two features may have been medieval. They were sealed by layers of loam which contained post-medieval pottery and clay pipes. Two features, pits or ditches, were recorded at 1m and 0.4m from the ground surface.

4.2.2 A second test pit (Fig 7 no 2) was also excavated by hand (Shaw *et al* 1992, Test Pit 2). The cutting was stepped down from an initial 2.5m square and although the trench was cut to a depth of 2m, the natural surface was not reached (Fig 8). At the bottom of the trench were floor surfaces which resembled medieval surfaces noted elsewhere, although the excavators noted that they sealed a layer with a piece of possibly post-medieval glass. The floor levels lay beneath a succession of post-medieval layers of loam, 1.8m deep, which were cut just beneath ground level by a large pit.

4.2.3 The RCHM inventory notes a trial trench in 1975 at SP75836029 (SMR 1160/0/256) (Fig 7 no 3) which cut through a build up of loose soil to a depth of 3.5m without locating the natural surface.

4.3 Eight trial trenches were excavated in the area bounded by Derngate, Victoria Promenade, and Albion Place (Shaw *et al* 1992). Those adjacent to the study area are described in detail as are the relevant results from the others (Fig 7).

4.3.1 Trenches F and G were cut immediately to the south of the study area. In Trench F the natural surface was 0.4m below the ground level and had been cut into by two large quarry pits of medieval date. Trench G was excavated to a depth of 1m at the north end and 1.6m at the south end, and encountered post-medieval soil layers except at the south end where the natural surface was reached with a possible medieval layer above. The evidence suggested that the trench had been sited across a large post-medieval disturbance, presumably a pit, or perhaps an area of terracing.

4.3.2 Trench H lay to the east of the study area but occupied a similar position to the rear of the Derngate tenements. Excavation revealed medieval pits and postholes at a depth of 0.2 to 0.8m below ground level. There were also a few post-medieval features and all were sealed beneath post-medieval soil layers.

4.3.3 Of the remaining trenches, Trench A located medieval posthole structures, pits, and a possible later medieval stone-founded structure; Trench C, Romano-British features and a medieval boundary; and Trenches E and D, evidence of medieval buildings on the Derngate frontage. Trench B was abandoned because of flooding.

4.4 Other excavations and watching briefs nearby have revealed evidence of medieval occupation in the form of posthole structures and further quarry pits. To the west of Albion Place, 11th-14th century occupation has been recorded. To the north-west, excavation and watching briefs on the site of the Derngate produced important evidence (Shaw 1984). Prehistoric occupation was suggested by flint and pottery with some Mesolithic material amongst the flint, and Late Neolithic pottery identified amongst potsherds which could be of Neolithic or Iron Age date. Pottery of Late Saxon or early Norman date may be an indication of the eastward expansion of the Saxon town in the 11th century. Twelfth-century quarries may

have been the source for the stone walls of the town defences. There was evidence of buildings, initially timber-framed and later of stone with tiled roofs from the later medieval period, as well as a number of rubbish pits. A 16th-century timber building was also found.

4.5 Details of 5 engineer's test pits from the study area have been examined. Three of these show ironstone or sandstone at about 2.9m below ground level (TP3-5), the others show gravel and clay at the same depth (TP6-7). Above these levels 'made ground' is suggested in TP4 and 5 down to 0.6 and 1.1m respectively. Engineering records are difficult to interpret archaeologically but it may be that archaeological strata are represented in the test pits to a considerable depth.

5 Archaeological potential

5.1 The documentary and map evidence for The Tower indicates one of the most important private houses of the later medieval period. Speed's illustration of the building indicates a two or three storied tower and two building ranges. The tower might suggest a great tower of the 12th century with good quality private chambers and with additional buildings which would have been enlarged or rebuilt later. The documents demonstrate ownership by important citizens of the later medieval town. In the post-medieval period additional ancillary buildings with a specialised use are noted.

5.2 The main potential for the study area must therefore be focused on The Tower and clarification of its survival must be sought. Attempts so far, by means of the limited trenches of 1992 have not been sufficiently wide in scope and were inadequate to determine survival. However, of the three areas excavated in the study area, 1 on Fig 7 suggested a medieval floor level and this may indicate survival of the building buried beneath later demolition and levelling.

5.3 However, all three areas excavated revealed a considerable overburden of post-medieval soil layers with little evidence of post-medieval features. The trench at 3 is an indication of major disturbance and pitting. Adjacent to the study area, Trench G suggests further post-medieval disturbance may be widespread in the area. Deep post-medieval layers of this nature are difficult to understand in narrow trenches or test pits, and it may be that evidence of post-medieval activity has been missed. Generally this depth of urban deposit is the result of a gradual process of rubbish disposal, yet few buildings fronting Derngate are shown on maps until the 19th century.

5.4 The history of Northampton from its archaeology and documents (outlined in Section 2) suggests that widespread medieval occupation is to be expected in the study area. Trench II suggests that, in places, medieval levels behind the tenements on Derngate may lie beneath shallow post-medieval layers. Trench F indicates the survival of medieval quarrying. Further afield, to the west, the evidence suggests considerable potential medieval survival.

5.5 The chance finds nearby of Romano-British evidence at Trench C, and of prehistoric occupation at the Derngate site (Shaw 1984), are an indication that the unexpected cannot be ruled out.

5.6 The west part of the study area and its eastern boundary have already been damaged by the modern school buildings but, according to the map evidence, the great majority of the area has not been built on.

5.7 In summary, the evidence suggests deep and relatively undifferentiated post-medieval soil layers are present across the study area. Some may fill deep post-medieval features. Nevertheless the limited archaeological work undertaken so far does hint at the possibility of surviving elements of The Tower.

6 Recommendations

6.1 The position of The Tower may be suggested on the basis of Speed's map (Fig 7). Although the outlined area necessarily encompasses a fairly large area, the possibility of its lying within the study area is strong. If it is located here then the proposed new building running east of Albion Place would cut across it.

6.2 A programme of fieldwork focused specifically on the archaeology of The Tower is therefore recommended. The work should be concentrated on locating medieval structures and defining their survival.

6.3 Due to the depth of post-medieval layers, prospection for the building by means of a programme of machine-excavated trial trenches is indicated. The only indication of the building so far (at 2 on Fig 7) lay at a depth of 2m. Machine trenching would need to be accompanied by hand cleaning of sections and further hand digging as required.

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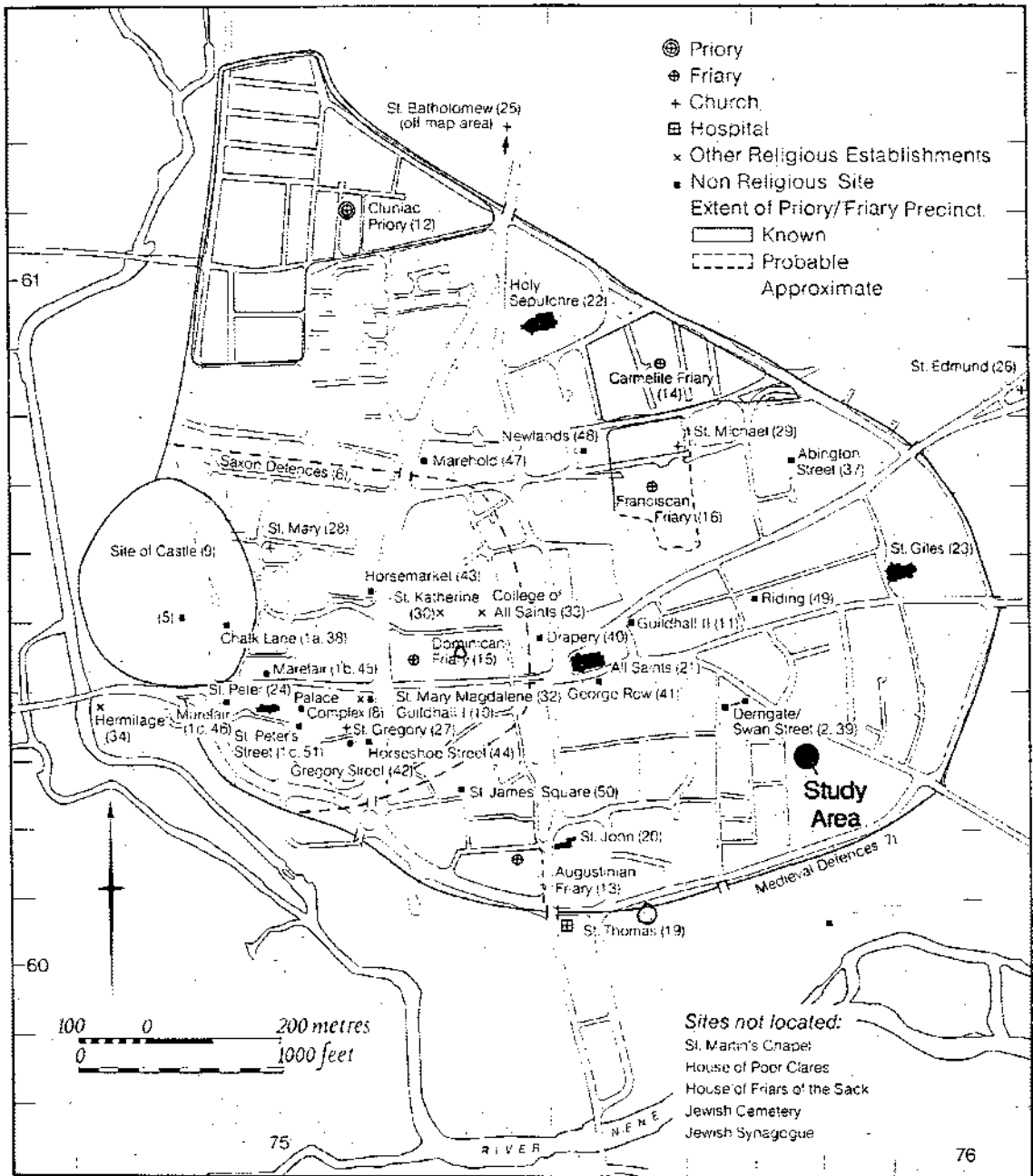


Fig 1 Historic Northampton and location of study area

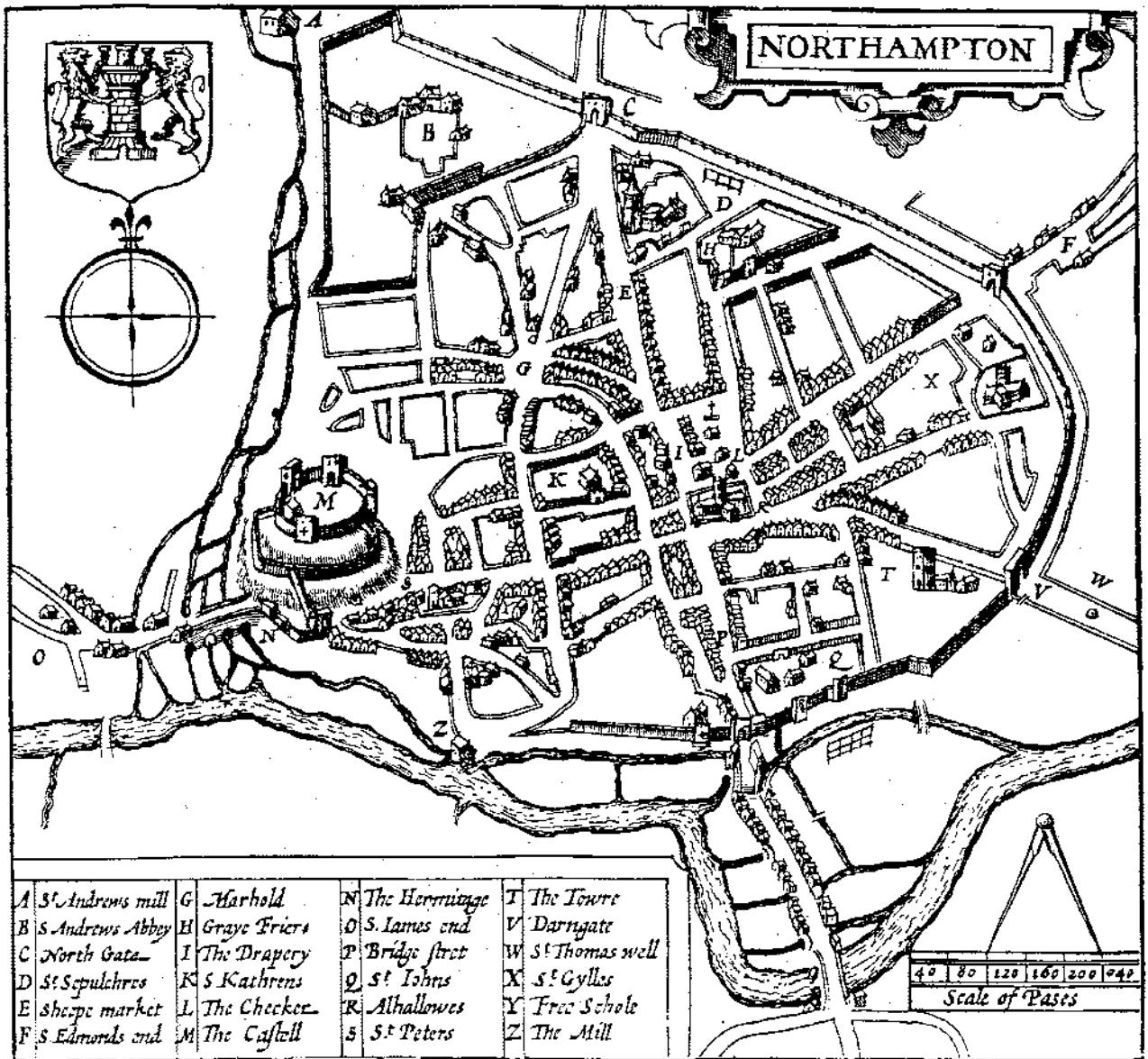


Fig 2 Northampton: Speed's map, 1610

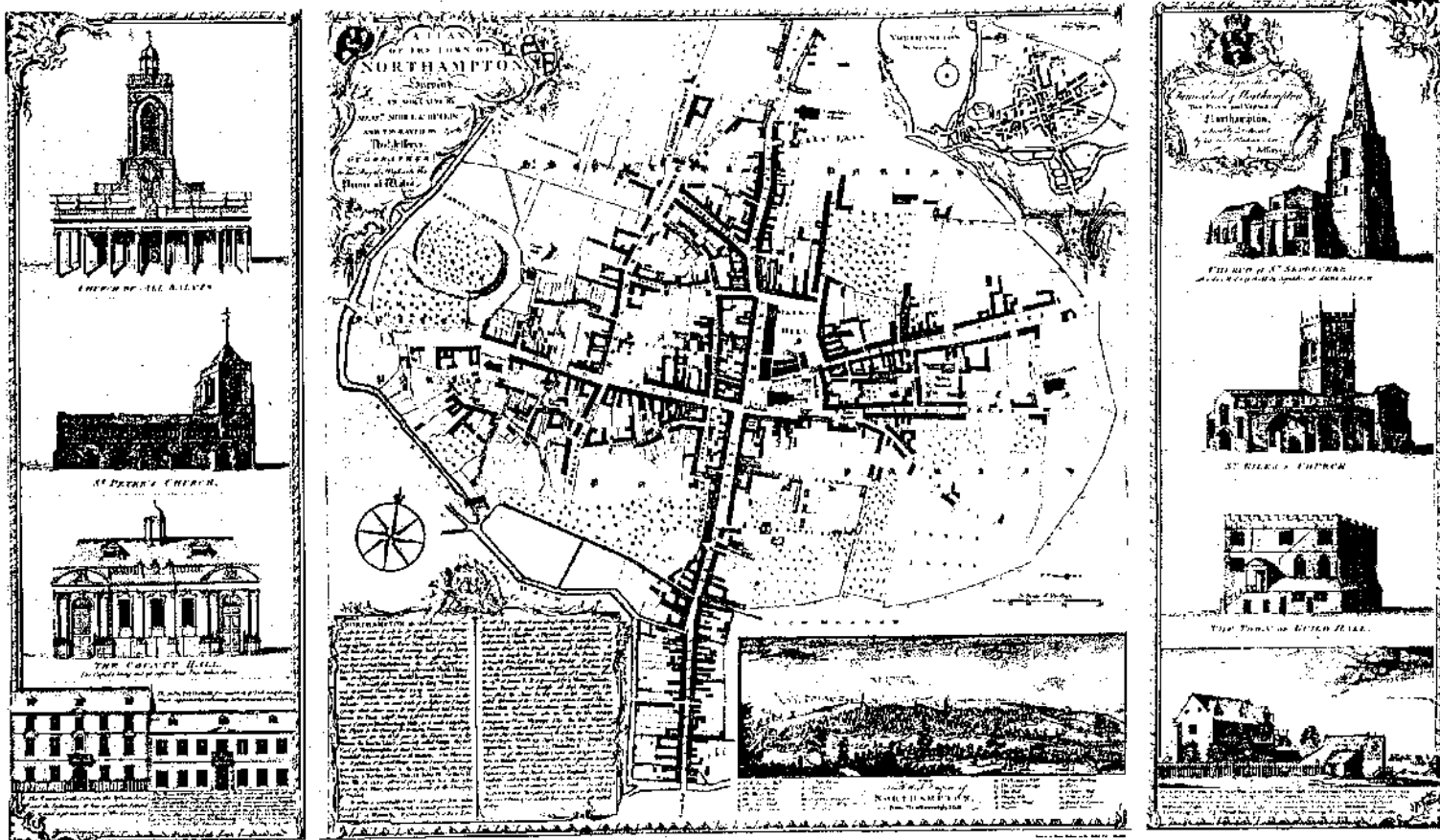


Fig 3 Northampton: Noble and Butlin's map, 1746

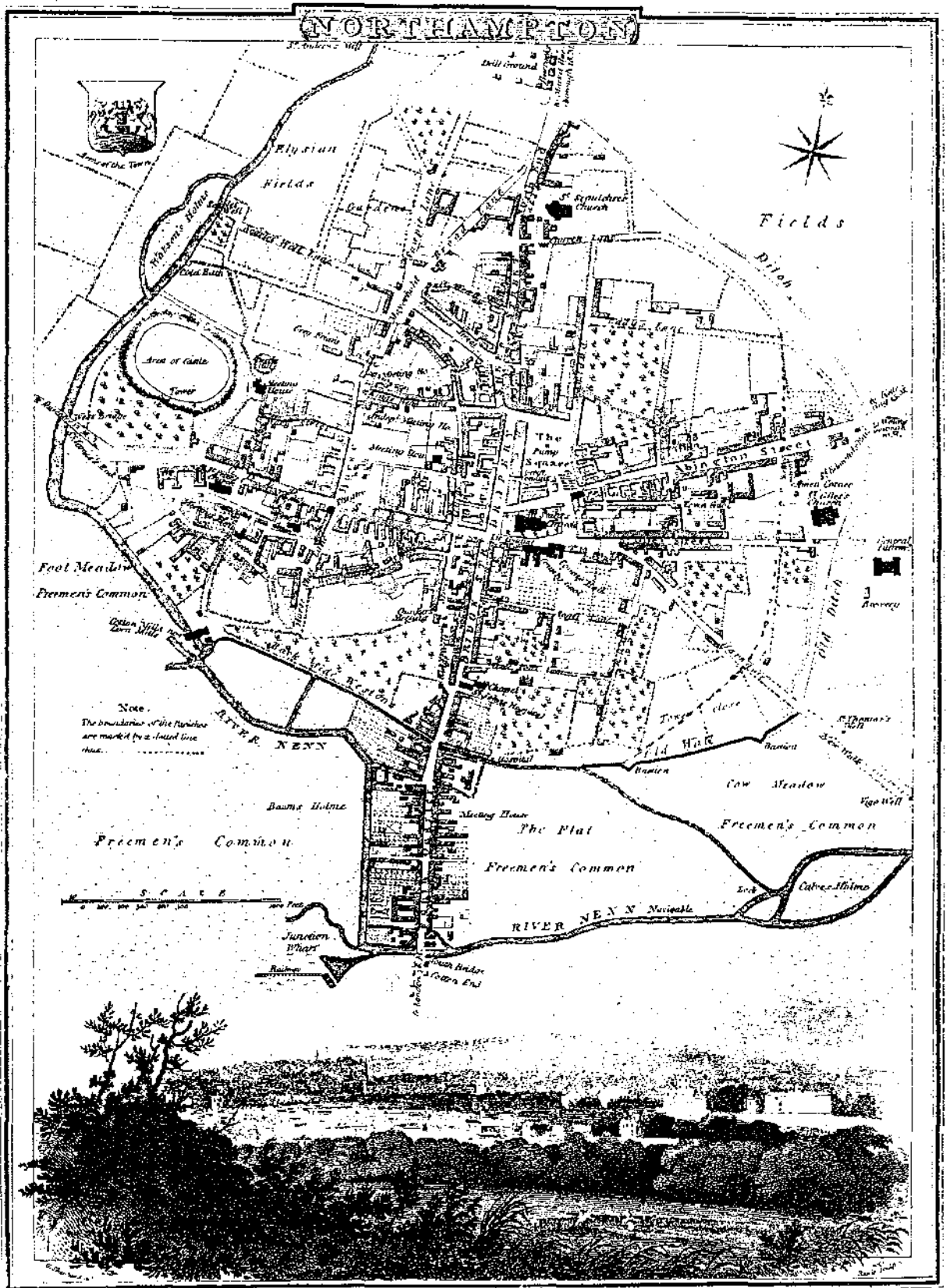


Fig 4 Northampton: Roper and Cole's map, 1807

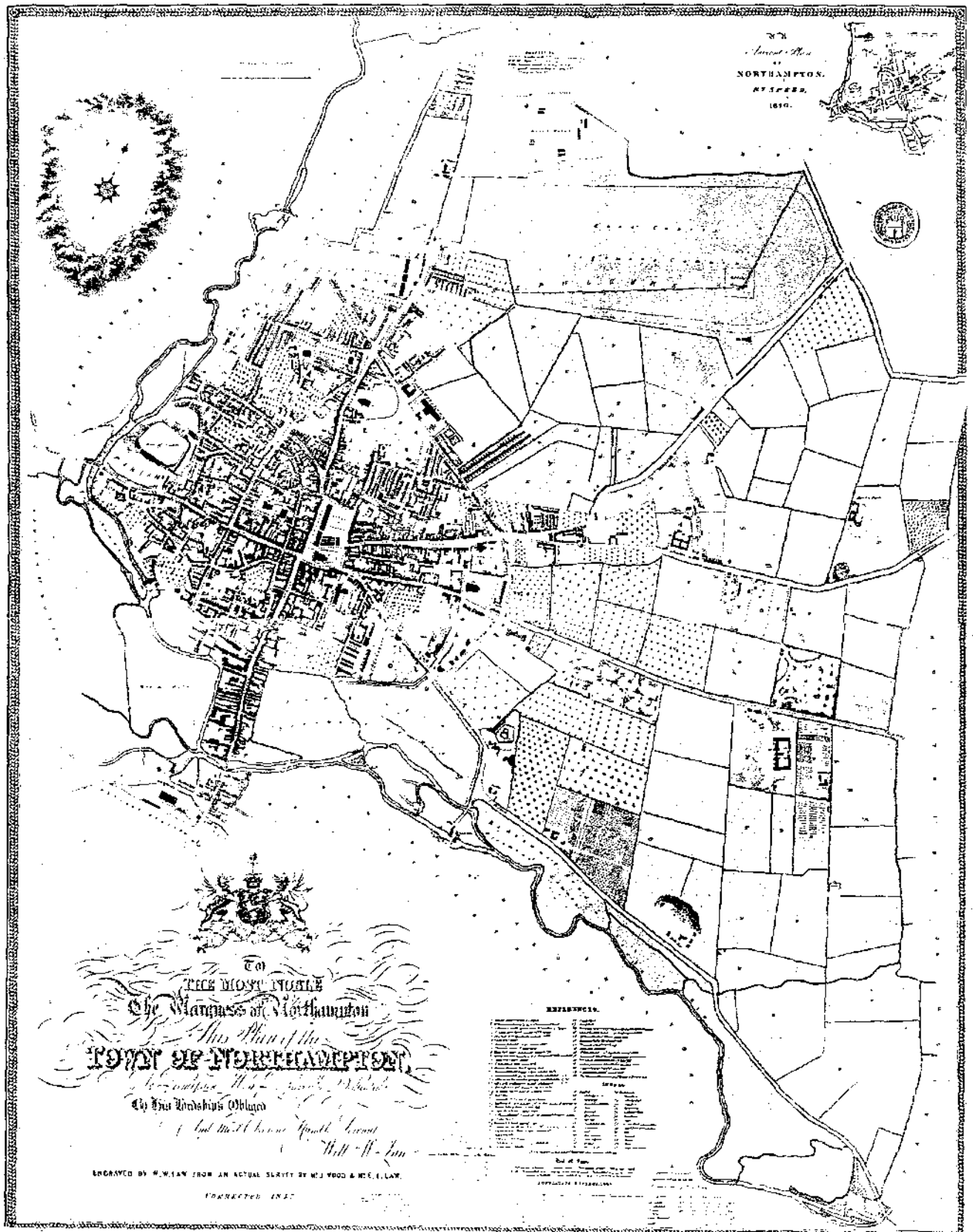


Fig 5 Northampton: Wood and Law's map, 1847

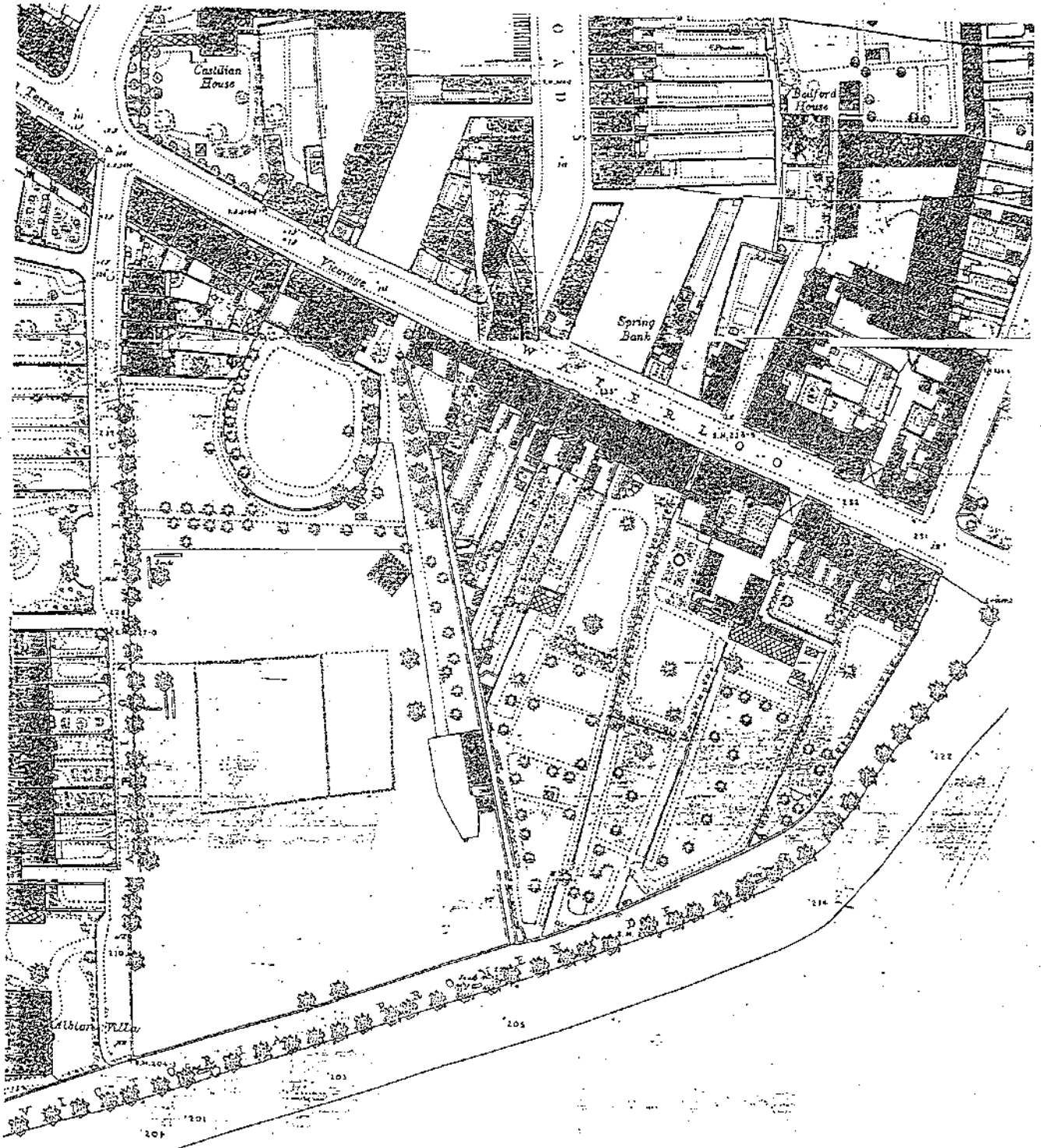


Fig 6 Northampton: Ordnance Survey 1st edition map, 1885