

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**A Desk-based assessment and recording of
industrial buildings at the rear of 9-13
Wolverhampton Road, Bloxwich, West
Midlands (SMR 9456)**

B.U.F.A.U.



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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by
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A DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT AND RECORDING OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS AT THE REAR OF 9-13 WOLVERHAMPTON ROAD, BLOXWICH, WEST MIDLANDS (SMR 9456)

Introduction

This short report presents the results of an archaeological assessment and recording of industrial buildings to the rear of 9-13 Wolverhampton Road, Bloxwich, West Midlands (SMR 9456, hereinafter called the study area). The work follows a brief prepared by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record (White 1997) and was carried out on behalf of the sponsors Jessup Brothers Limited and Bromford Carinthia Housing Association between 24th and 31st of January 1997.

Objectives and Method

The objective of the archaeological work was to ascertain the date and significance of the buildings within the study area. This was to be achieved through a combination of desk-top analysis of surviving historic and cartographic evidence held by the Walsall Local History Centre, Essex Street, Walsall, together with an on-site inspection and photographic record of the buildings/structures. Photographs, both interior and exterior were taken of all buildings in 35mm format according to the requirements outlined in Section 9 of the brief (White 1997, 2).

The assessment of the importance of individual buildings of historical interest and the impact of the proposed development on the overall archaeological resource of the borough is made using the set of selection criteria laid out by the Secretary of State in 1990 (DoE 1990).

Site Description

The study area, which comprises a former industrial unit set in a combination of waste ground fronting Wolverhampton Road and a garden behind, is located between Wolverhampton Road and New Street at the north end of Bloxwich at grid reference SJ997022. The derelict industrial unit was last occupied by W.J.& H. Garratt Limited, specialists in steel conduit boxes and fittings, who vacated the site a few years ago.

The former industrial unit is an amalgam of several buildings or structures constructed for different purposes and at different times, the main buildings being delineated on figure 1, below. The most historically significant buildings are a two-storey industrial workshop to the north of the site (S1), and a terrace of two blind-backed cottages (S4) to the southeast. These are discussed in detail, below.

The other buildings are of limited interest being either relatively modern in date, or extensively vandalised. These comprise a two-storey brick office built between 1883

and 1902 (S2), the first-floor destroyed by fire; a single-storey brick extension (S3) to S2, also built between 1883 and 1902; a steel-framed post-war factory unit (S5); a single-storey brick garage (S6) behind S1, built between 1883 and 1902; an electricity sub-station (S7), built between 1919 and 1946; and a small brick-built toilet block (S8), constructed between 1902 and 1919. Various lean-to structures were constructed in the post-war period which connected these individual buildings into a single factory unit.

Historical Summary

No representation of the standing buildings within the study area was found prior to the First Edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map, which was surveyed in 1883. The only buildings standing today which are represented on the 1883 OS map were the isolated footprint of S1 to the rear of the Turf Tavern and S4 which formed one side of a court of buildings behind the Spotted Cow. The other buildings depicted on the 1883 map within the study area have been demolished or replaced, although their form and arrangement suggest that these structures were probably a mixture of domestic accommodation and workshops.

The development of the study area prior to 1883 can be ascertained by reference to the Tithe Map of Bloxwich surveyed in 1845 (WLSC ACC.321), and a plan of proposed freehold building plots in Marlborough Street, New Street and Victoria Street compiled in 1875 (WLSC 48//7/1). The Tithe Map depicts settlement clustered around each side of the triangular-shaped Short Heath in a pattern little changed since the Map of Bloxwich made in 1763. While settlement around Short Heath is mainly post-medieval in date, by the 19th century the area was considered to be a traditional working place of locksmiths in Bloxwich (Homeshaw 1988, 150). The buildings facing Wolverhampton Road, including the Turf Tavern, were largely rebuilt around 1850 when New Street was laid out behind the newly straightened Wolverhampton Road. The court behind the Spotted Cow, of which S4 is a part, probably dates from this period as no court is shown on the Tithe Map of 1845 here.

The north end of New Street was not developed until the 1870s when farmland belonging to Thomas Arch of Sandbank was sold to the Coneygreys Freehold Building Estate. The map of 1875 depicts the proposed layout of the new estate in plots which could be purchased with a deposit of £10 and 10s/fortnight instalments. The map shows the Turf Tavern to be in the possession of William Blickley, whose occupation was listed as 'a carpenter and publican' in the census of 1871. Land behind the Turf Tavern was shown sub-divided into a series of proposed building plots. No buildings were shown.

Therefore, map evidence indicates S1 was built between 1875 and 1883. Furthermore, in 1879 the Turf Tavern was purchased by the Wilkes - a family closely connected with lockmaking in Bloxwich, who still manage the pub today. Samuel Wilkes, a Short Heath lockmaker, led the revolt of the Walsall Foreign against the Borough in 1752 over the payment of poor rates, an event of some importance in the history of Walsall.

In 1904 the local magistrates refused to renew the licence for the Turf Tavern on the grounds that 'at the back of the premises is a lock factory belonging to the owner (Mary Wilkes) where 30 people are engaged, with free accession from one place to another, which we consider objectionable' (Cockayne 1984). This charge was repeated against Thomas and Matthew Wilkes in 1907. On balance, it seems highly likely that S1 was purpose-built as a lock-making factory between 1879 and 1883 by the Wilkes family.

A Brief Overview of Lockmaking in Bloxwich in the 19th century

Lockmaking has been an important industry in the West Midlands region from at least the 17th century. While the industry is perhaps most traditionally associated with Wolverhampton and Willenhall, it appears that the Short Heath area of Bloxwich was also recognised as a lockmaking centre within the locality in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A sample of various local directories compiled during the 19th century shows us that while lockmaking was never comparable to bit-making or awl blade-making for example which supplied the Walsall leather and saddlery industry, it was nevertheless a significant industry within Bloxwich. In Pearce's directory of 1813, of 36 trades cited and 151 firms listed, lockmaking was the fourth industry in terms of the numbers of firms listed in Bloxwich. There were 11 lockmakers, compared to 22 bit-makers, 16 farmers, and 14 awl blade-makers. By White's directory of 1834, 38 trades and 280 firms were listed in Bloxwich, including 16 locksmiths but the dominant trade of bit-making had expanded to 80 firms. Several members of the Wilkes family appear in each of these directories as locksmiths within the Short Heath area, for example in 1851 David, Matthew and Theophilus Wilkes are listed as lockmakers in Short Heath, and Daniel Wilkes was a beerhouse proprietor. By 1851 the numbers of lockmakers in Bloxwich had fallen to 14; however, it is possible that the fall in the number of lockmaking firms is a reflection of a change from small-scale family workshop production to a more organised capital intensive factory system. The construction of S1 as a purpose-built lockmaking factory between 1879 and 1883 may be viewed from this perspective.

Building Description

Structure 1

A purpose-built, two-storey, late-Victorian 'industrial vernacular' lock-making factory, originally freestanding within a yard to the rear of the Turf Tavern. Blue brick details around the windows and doors and decorated ridge tiles indicate the building was at the higher end of the quality scale for industrial structures of this type and period. Original open plan on both floors with exterior staircase providing access to the first floor was later sub-divided by wooden panelling and an interior staircase. Dimensions 17m by 6.75m externally (excluding staircase).

Plain tile saddleback roof with decorated ridge tiles with fleur-de-lys and club pattern. Many of the tiles are broken or missing. Roof structure of sawn and nailed timber, thin-section ridge piece and pairs of equidistant purlins supported by simple triangular trusses with diagonal struts from the tie-beam and a central vertical iron tie-bar. Trusses arranged between every two bays of the building with an extra truss at the east end to strengthen and support the lathe-booms located here.

Main elevation 9 bays in length defined by windows and doorways set into three-brick thick walls. Gable ends only double-brick thickness. The bonding of the main elevation is irregular, while that of the gables is of alternate courses of Flemish Bond with three stretcher courses between. Brick of main build is machine-cut red brick, dimensions 9" by 3 1/4" by 4". A large proportion of the main elevation is taken up by glazing, good lighting being an important requirement of lockmaking. The windows have chamfered blue brick sills. The segmental arches are also picked out in blue brick, the ground floor arches are of double blue brick laid on edge, the upper windows have only single-brick arches. There are wooden-framed triple casement windows with five rectangular lights to each window, generally the central window opens for ventilation.

There are narrow windows in the west gable on both floors. Each gable has a central chimney. The flue arrangement on the ground floor has been removed, but may have been for a hearth or stove in the west end and arguably a flue from a steam engine powering the lathe-booms at the east end. Original ground-floor access at the east end of the north facing main elevation, first floor access via external staircase on eastern gable. Ground-floor access in the southern elevation has been inserted through former window openings, although fire-damaged first-floor loading door is probably original.

The only original internal fittings are probably the remains of booms providing power via belts to lathes. These are centrally placed in the eastern three bays of the ground floor, with secondary booms to the north, with a second boom on the first floor powered by a belt running through a hole in the floor from downstairs. This boom is supported from the three most eastern roof trusses of the building. The booms were probably originally powered by a steam engine, although an electric motor is now *in situ*. There are workbenches in the eastern end of the building on the ground and first floor, although these probably relate to the final phase of use as a conduit-making factory.

Structure 4

It was not possible to carry out an internal inspection of Structure 4 because of its dangerous fire-damaged condition and insanitary interior created by a roosting pigeon population. The building consists of a pair of two-storey, blind-backed, low status court buildings arranged either side of a central chimney stack serving both properties. The construction of Structure 4 is cheap and simple with a plain tile low saddleback roof and badly-fired locally produced red clamped-bricks (dimensions 9" by 2 7/8" by 4 1/4"). The walls are irregularly bonded. There is an attempt at English Garden Wall Bond on the main elevation with four stretcher courses above ground-floor level, the gables have up to ten stretcher courses between irregular Flemish Bond. The windows

are simple with single edge-laid common brick arches to the ground floor and flat lintels on the first floor. The only decorative feature to break the bleak functional facade is the simple brick dentilation under the eaves of the main elevation

The buildings were gutted inside and little evidence survives for the original floor plans. It would appear that the plans of each house were identical, comprising a single ground-floor kitchen/parlour, heated by a range and entered directly through a centrally placed door. Access to the first-floor bedroom was up a straight staircase running from front to back of the gable wall and lit by smaller windows on the both floors. A blocked door through the gable wall under the stairs may have given access to a coal store. While this has since disappeared in the right-hand building there is a coal store in this position on the left-hand building.

Building Assessment

Structure 1

Survival/condition Externally the building fabric has good survival of evidence for the original form of the lockmaking factory. Much of the main northern elevation is obscured by ivy making a detailed assessment of condition difficult. However, it appears to be largely untouched, while the gables also retain good survival apart from a few minor alterations. The southern elevation is the most altered, particularly at ground-floor level. The windows at ground level have been blocked in and the walls painted. The only original interior fittings are the power booms. The general structural condition of the building is poor (see also fragility below). It seems unlikely that it could be retained as a usable building without considerable rebuilding. This would inevitably have an impact on the integrity of the original features.

Period In common with other buildings of the Industrial era, the chronological span of construction and use of the lockmaking factory is restricted in comparison to other archaeological monuments of earlier periods. The site appears to have had a working life of around 60 years as a lockmaking factory.

Rarity It is difficult to accurately assess the rarity of this building in the absence of broader research into the survival and development of this type of structure in Walsall or the West Midlands as a whole. Nevertheless, it can be stated that this once common building type has suffered a severe rate of attrition in the last 20-30 years. Other surviving examples of backplot workshops in the Bloxwich area are generally different in character and commonly associated with other industries, and even the survival of these buildings is fragmentary.

Comparison with other workshops associated with lockmaking, particularly in the Willenhall area, indicate that this building is not a typical example (Wrathmell 1977). Willenhall workshops are generally smaller, although like Structure 1 they are generally freestanding within backplots. This was because lockmaking required good lighting. However, Structure 1 differs from most lockmaking workshops in Willenhall in possessing a good but not excessive provision of natural light. This may be explicable in terms of the factory system in operation here, with organised shifts for

a workforce and not a small-scale family operation able to lengthen the hours of work as necessary to fulfil a large or outstanding order.

Structure 1 does share some characteristics of design with the Willenhall workshops in addition to the freestanding ground plan. These are the provision of hearths in the gables at either end of the building, the large open floor plan and the presence of a separate outside staircase to the second floor. However, the building also shares some of the characteristics of the workshops studied by Wrathmell close to the centre of Walsall. These are principally associated with the higher than average quality of the building and the addition of decorative features. In summary, the building may be characterised as an interesting later example of a hybrid form of backplot industrial building evolving from the earlier family-run workshop.

Fragility/vulnerability (full verification would require a structural engineers report). The building has been disused for several years and has suffered from vandalism, although it was not significantly damaged by a recent fire in Structures 2 and 3. However, the roof-structure appears to have tilted eastwards pushing the eastern gable wall of the building close to the limits of safety. The trusses have been extensively propped to prevent or limit further movement making occupation of the building difficult and dangerous.

Documentation The range of historical documentation for the building was sufficient to establish ownership, function, development and use. There is a good range of map evidence and a clear historical link between this building, the Turf Tavern and the Wilkes family, who have played an important role in the local history of Bloxwich.

Group Value The building is situated within the Bloxwich Park Conservation Area and forms part of a structural group with the Grade II listed Turf Tavern. The building also has group value in comparison with other surviving backyard workshop structures in the Bloxwich Park and Elmore Green Conservation Areas, and surviving examples of lockmaking factories and workshops particularly in Willenhall.

Potential The building has potential as both an illustration and record of the development of the lockmaking industry in Bloxwich in the later 19th century. It stands at a junction in the development of the factory system, retaining elements of the earlier back-plot family-run workshop and a dual economy system operating in tandem with the Turf Tavern, but also merging these with a later Victorian purpose-built factory employing a significant workforce of around 30.

Structure 4

Survival/condition Structure 4 represents the limited survival of one row of low status court housing. Little internal evidence has survived, although it was possible to reconstruct something of the floor plan. The rest of the court behind the Spotted Cow has been demolished.

Period c.1850 This type of building became common in industrial towns from the latter part of the 18th century onwards, but was effectively eradicated by the 1875

legislation. Programmes of urban improvement began to target this class of building for slum clearance prior to the close of the 19th century, a process which has been effectively almost completed this century.

Rarity The survival of this type of pre-1875 urban housing stock is extremely rare. For example, a recent Royal Commission architectural survey report on the Black Country (RCHME 1991,24) noted '*the slum clearance programme of the last forty years has effectively removed virtually all representative working class housing of before c.1880*'.

Fragility/vulnerability The building is in a dangerous condition which has been exacerbated by recent fire damage. In addition, the insanitary condition of the inside precludes further investigation without expensive protective precautions.

Documentation No documentation relating specifically to this building was found during the brief initial documentary research. However, the usual later 19th century map and census sources are available from which it may be possible to reconstruct a profile of the type of people who occupied these premises and the owners responsible for erecting this housing.

Group value While the building is the sole surviving fragment of the court, it possess limited group value with the Spotted Dog which it was built behind. It is also located within the Bloxwich Park conservation area, although Structure 4 clearly derives most of its historic value from the rarity of survival of this type of building.

Potential Even in its present condition the building possesses some potential to illustrate an aspect of the development of low status urban housing. However, the structural condition of the property would severely limit any attempt to realise this latent potential.

Acknowledgements

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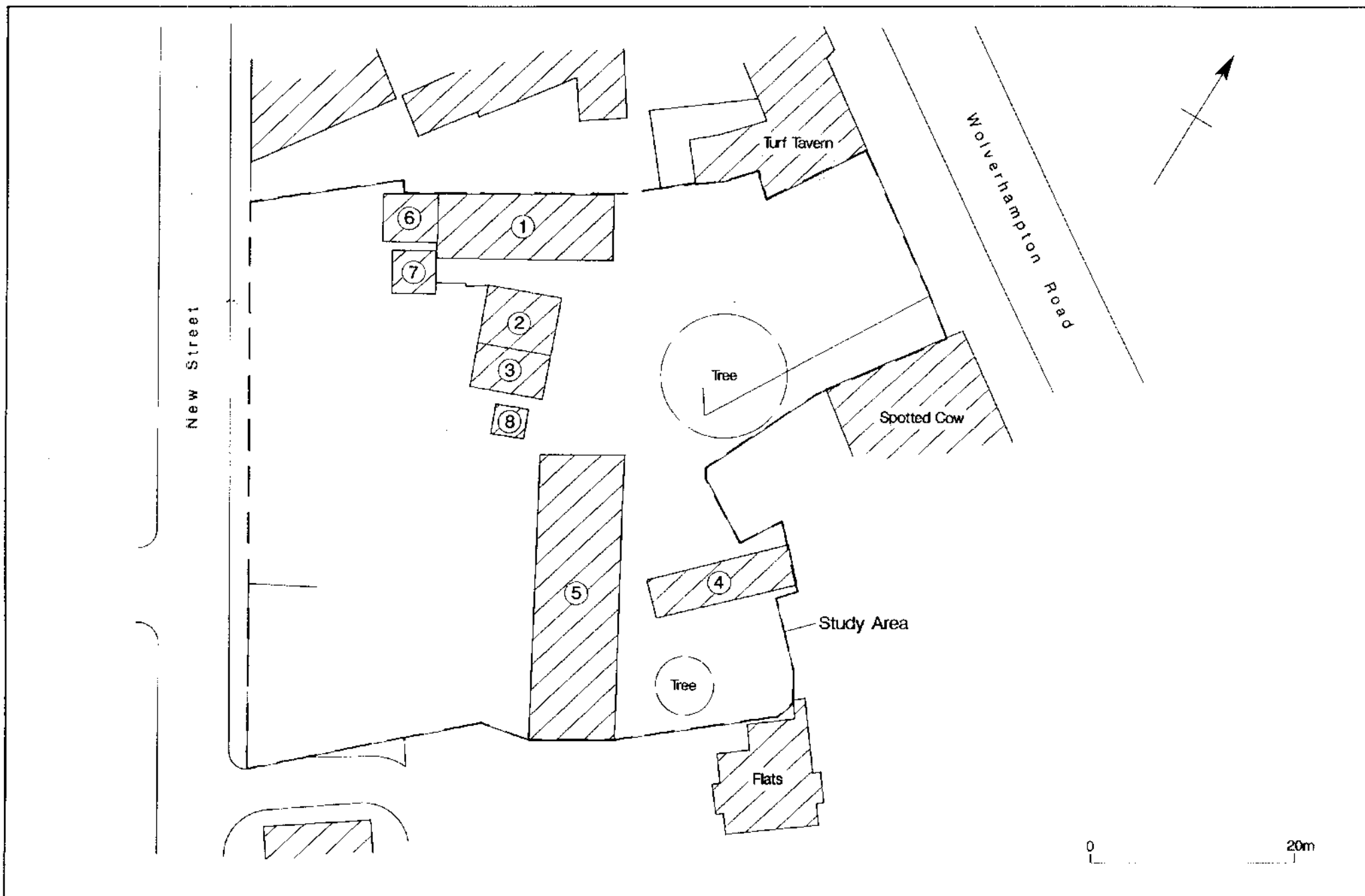
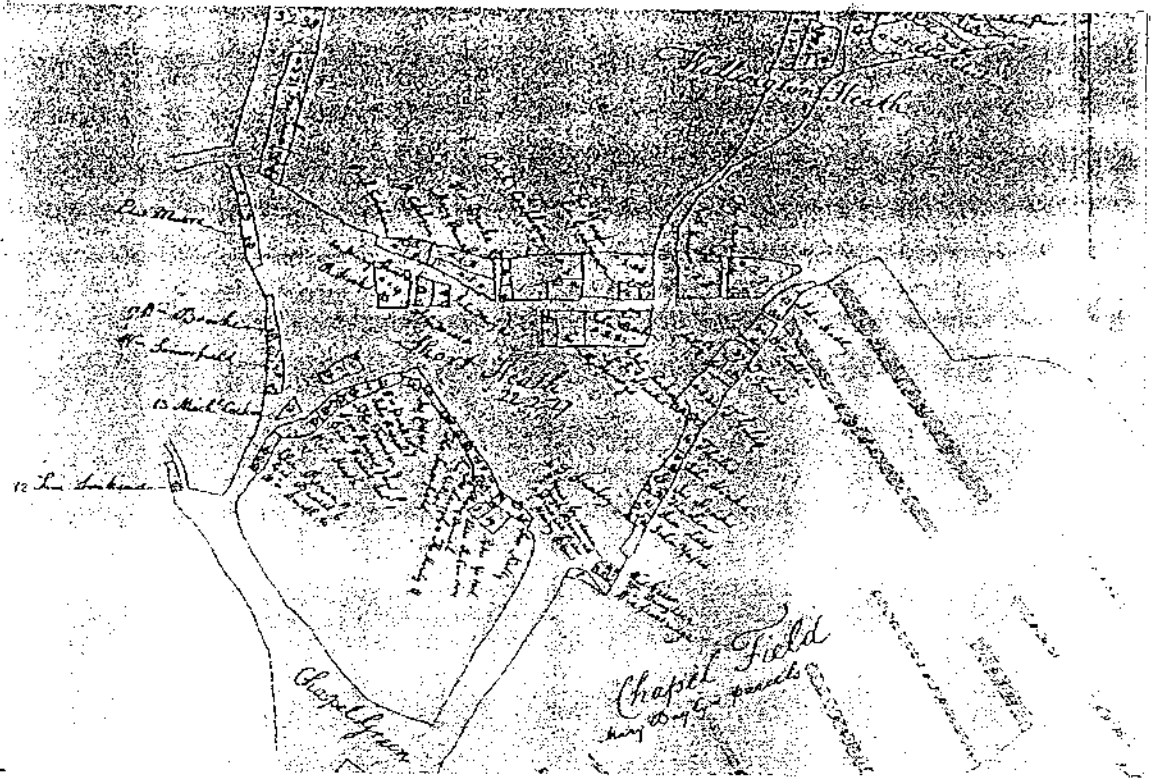
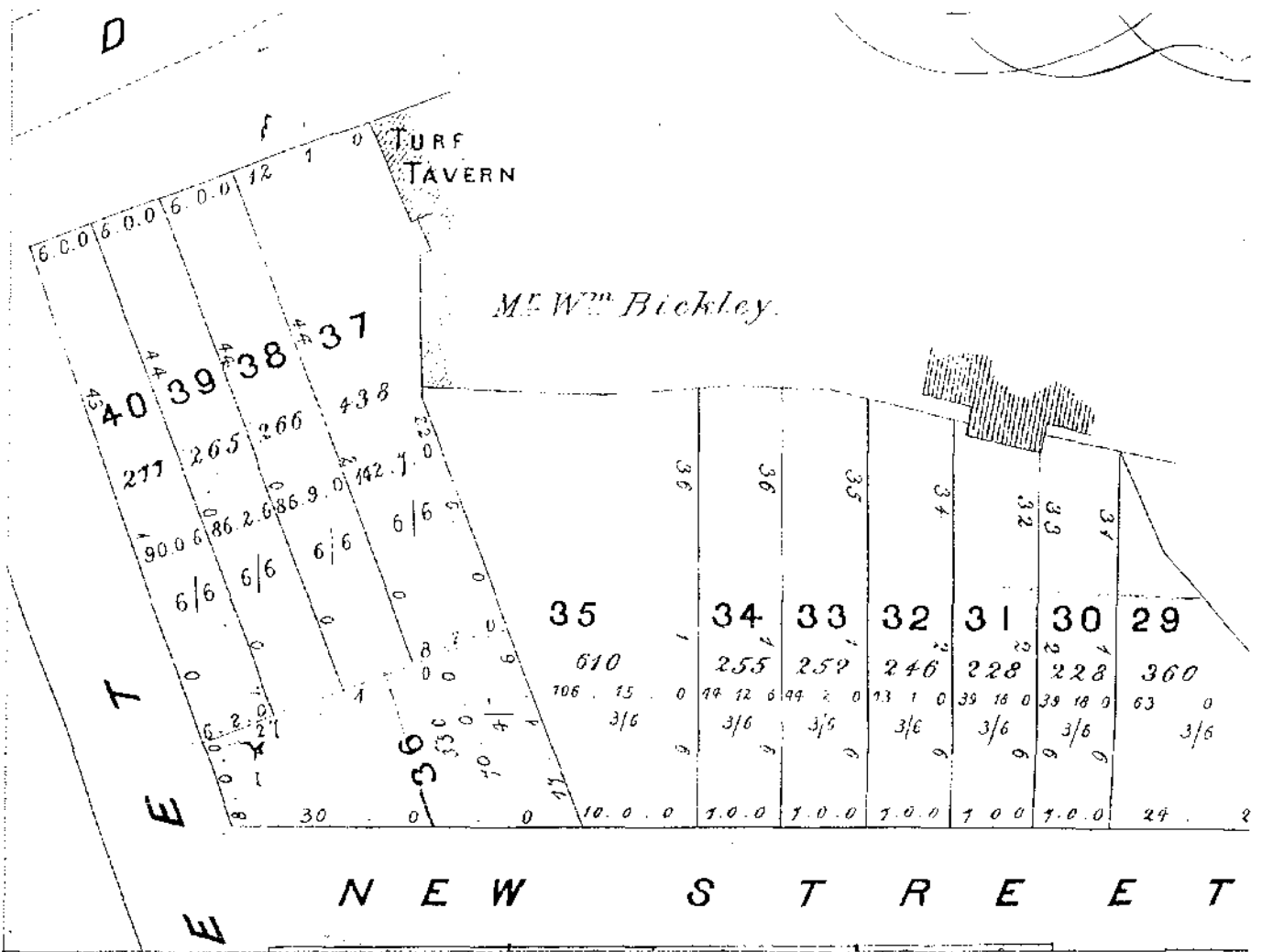


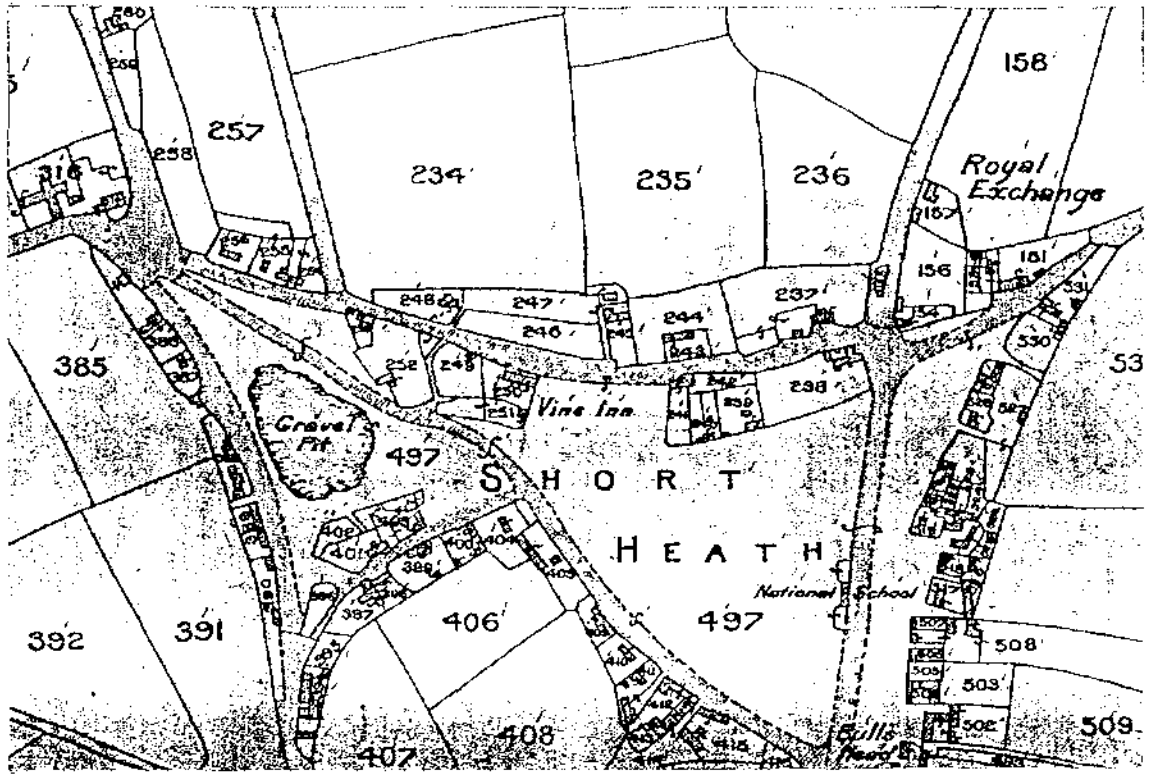
Fig.1



1763



1875



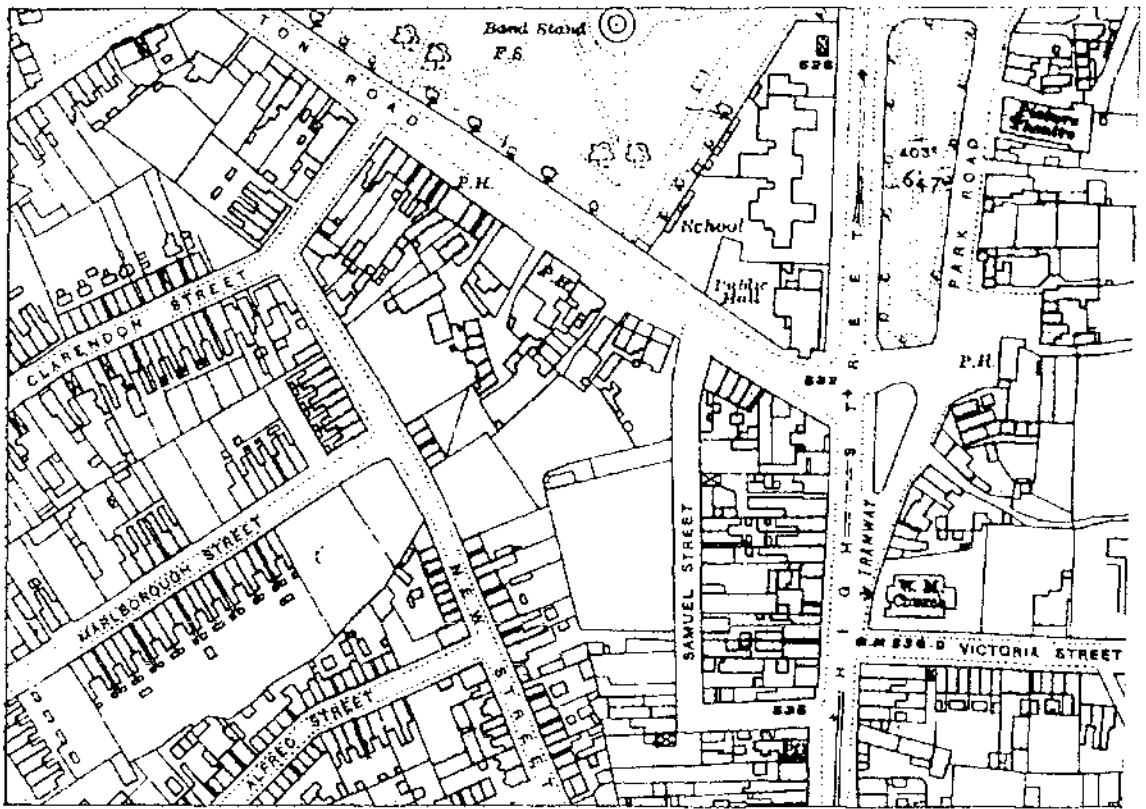
1845



1883



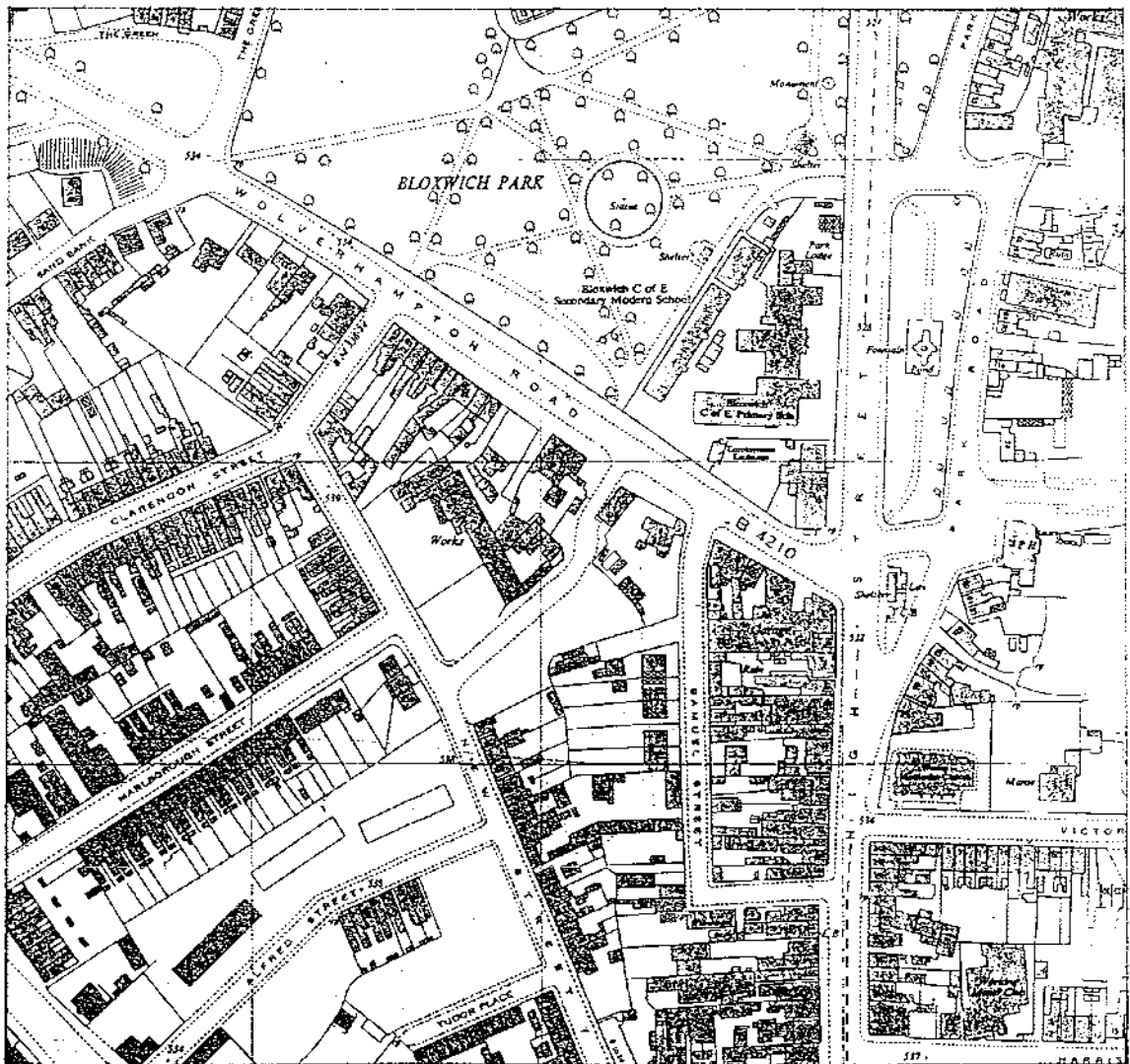
1902



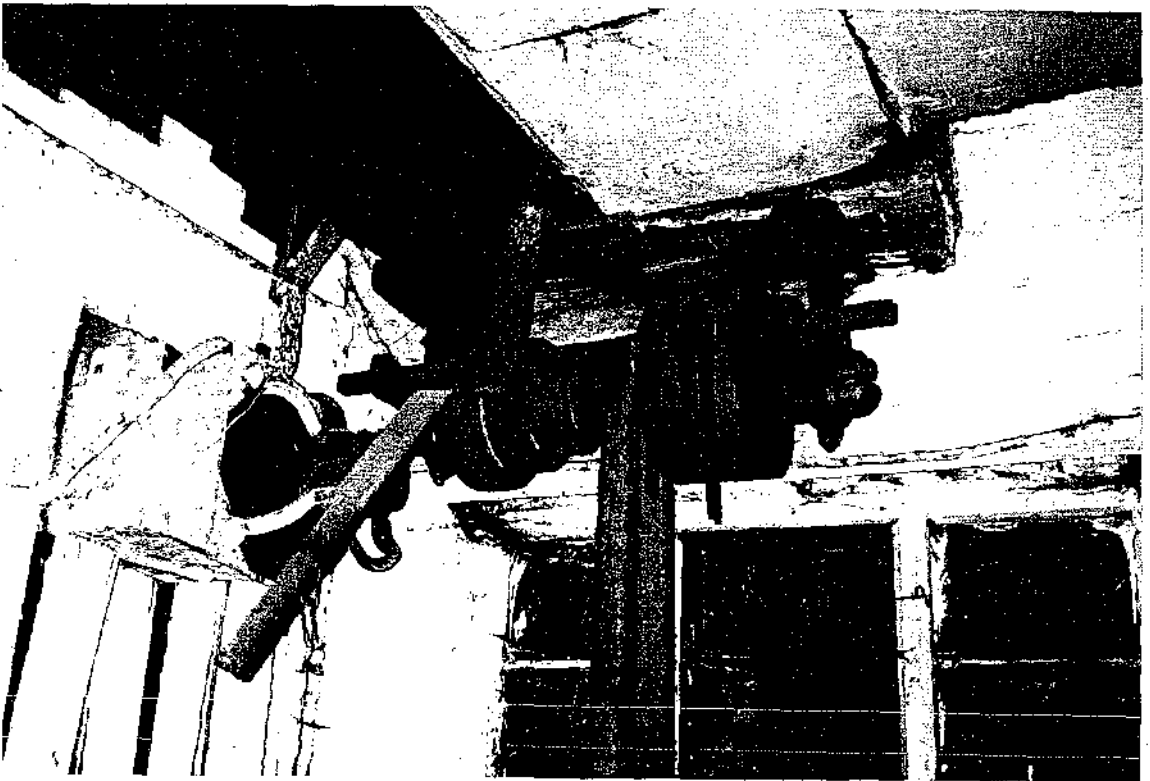
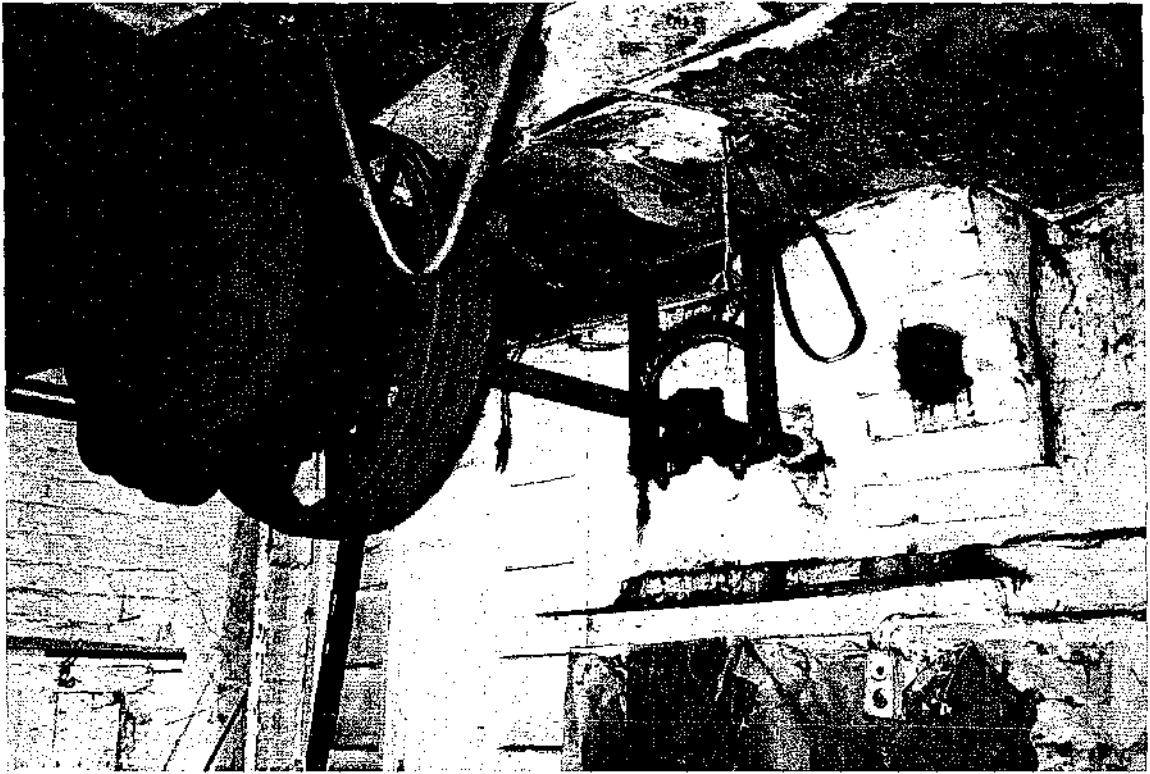
1919



1946



Recent



Structure 1: lathe booms



Structure 1: east elevation



Structure 1: general view and detail



Structure 4