

**Touchwood Court,  
Solihull, West Midlands:  
an archaeological  
watching brief**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
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an archaeological watching brief**

by  
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# TOUCHWOOD COURT, SOLIHULL, WEST MIDLANDS

## An Archaeological Watching Brief 1999

### 1.0 SUMMARY

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit between June and December 1999, ahead of the Touchwood Court shopping centre development in Solihull (NGR SP 1500 7920). The location of the groundworks to the rear of the High Street, in the core of the Medieval town, meant that there was a possibility of archaeological deposits associated with the medieval settlement being revealed during the course of the development. Potential 'backplot' features were recorded in one area, but no dating evidence was recovered from these features. Elsewhere, either the ground had been subject to modern disturbance, or excavation methods were not conducive to the identification of archaeological features.*

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit during the comprehensive redevelopment of an area of Solihull town centre (Fig. 1 - NGR SP 1500 7920) for shopping, retail and leisure activities. The Touchwood Court development involved the construction of a multi-storey car park and associated service arrangements, highway works, landscaping and amenity works.

The development took place on land between the High Street, Station Road, Herbert Road and Homer Road (Fig. 2), an area falling within the planned medieval town of Solihull. It was possible that archaeological deposits associated with the medieval settlement, such as property boundaries, rubbish pits and other backplot features, had survived behind the High Street properties in the area of the new development. A planning condition therefore required that a watching brief should be carried out in this area during the course of the development, to observe and record any archaeological deposits revealed by the groundworks.

The zone of potential archaeological significance consisted of the area behind the High Street frontage buildings, extending to the back line of former property boundaries. This zone was sub-divided into five according to when groundworks and archaeological monitoring were taking place (Fig. 2). Zone A was the first area to be monitored, in June 1999, while zones D and E were the last to be monitored, in December 1999.

### 3.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first appearance of the place name 'Solihull' was in the Red Book of the Exchequer (Skipp 1984). This early reference is not firmly dated but it is thought to date to between 1170 and 1180. There is no mention of Solihull in the Domesday

Book of 1086, as the settlement was only established in the late 12th century. The de Limesi family from the adjoining manor of Ulverley founded the town as a trading centre at the crossing point of two major roads, one from Birmingham to Warwick and the other from Worcester to Coventry. It was the latter road that was of greater importance, as Coventry was the chief trading centre of the West Midlands area, while the Worcester-Droitwich area was also commercially important, particularly for its salt. The new town was strategically placed in another respect in that it was situated on the extreme edge of the manor of Ulverley and immediately abutting the neighbouring village of Langedon. Its location meant that it drew on the resources of two settlements, a characteristic of a number of 'planted boroughs'. A 'planted borough' is a place of trade deliberately established to fill a definite need by the scattered population of a large district. Stratford-upon-Avon is a comparable example. The result is ultimately the complete amalgamation of the two original communities and by c.1200, Ulverley was being referred to as the 'Old Town' or 'Olton' as it is known today (Bates 1991).

What was significant about the new town was that it was populated by burgesses - tenants holding their properties by burgage tenure. This meant that the townsman with a burgage plot was a freeman at a time when the majority of Englishmen were still tied to the obligations of the manorial system. As at Stratford-upon-Avon, potential settlers to Solihull were offered building plots on the newly laid out streets where they could erect a home-cum-workshop in which they could pursue their trades. In return for money rent the tenant was at liberty to direct his own life and affairs without feudal interference. This was a massive incentive to the 'villcins' of Ulverley and Langedone to move to the new town. There is evidence to suggest that the lords of the manor of Solihull were offering burgage plots from the 13th century onwards. The Catalogue of Ancient Deeds, published by the Public Record Office, shows that in 1339 there was a grant by 'Master Thomas de Notyngam, clerk, to Richard le Wodeward of Rouleic of a burgage plot in Solihull'. In creating a borough, the lord of the manor was looking after his own interests. Having a thriving commercial centre on his land meant he was free to share in the new wealth by collecting taxes, tolls, rents and fines from the burgesses.

In 1242, Solihull obtained a Royal Charter to hold a market and an annual three-day fair but by the late middle ages the town and its market were in decline, probably due to the continued growth of nearby Birmingham and Coventry.

The main focus of the medieval settlement was along the High Street, Mill Street and Drury Lane. The original burgage plots of the medieval town are still discernible in the property divisions marked along the High Street on 19th-century maps. 20th-century Ordnance Survey maps show that some of these boundaries are still respected to the present day.

The compact and neat layout of the medieval town can clearly be seen in the Tithe map of 1820 (Fig. 3), with rectangular burgage plots facing onto the High Street, Mill Street, Drury Lane and the Warwick Road, along with the triangular Market Square near the church. An illustration of the High Street from 1829 (Plate 1) shows St Alphege's church in the distance while a coach turns into Mill Lane past the timber framed George and Dragon public house on the corner. The pub, along with many of the structures beyond it on that side of the street, was destroyed in 1962 to make way

for the Mell Square shopping centre. The trees on the right obscure the so-called 'Manor House', which survives today, having been saved from demolition in the 1940s. The original Solihull Manor, Touchwood Hall, a moated manor which disappeared in the 17th century, is thought to have been located at the north end of Drury Lane (SMR 3079).

The property boundaries along the High Street remain largely unchanged on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1888 (Fig. 4). The area behind the plots is apparently occupied by orchards and Drury Lane is still bounded by fields along its southeastern side. An 1870 view of the southwestern side of the High Street (Plate 2) shows a timber framed cottage occupying approximately the area where McDonalds restaurant stands today. All of the structures pictured here have now gone, but the layout of the original property boundaries is still largely preserved, and the backplots extend some distance beyond into the area of the development. An 1890 view of the same side of the road, but looking in the opposite direction (Plate 3), shows the earlier structures had either disappeared or been heavily modified.

The 1908 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 5) shows the expansion of the town along the east side of New Road and the infilling of most of the remaining open land along the east side of Drury Lane. On the 1917 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 6), George Road has been constructed off Drury Lane, and additional structures appear in the backplots along the High Street. The land beyond remains as fields, and development has started along Homer Road. A photograph taken from the tower of the church seven years earlier (Plate 4) clearly shows the plots extending back from the High Street. Some remain as gardens, and many contain additional buildings.

This picture remains largely unchanged by the 1954 survey (Fig. 7), with further out buildings appearing in the backplots of High Street properties. Substantial development on the land behind the High Street appears to have begun in the 1960s. The 1968 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 8) shows the construction of the Municipal Offices along Church Hill Road with a car park and service road along the back of the High Street properties. This was followed by the construction of the Library, Magistrates court and Police Station along Homer Road in the early 1970s.

#### **4.0 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of the watching brief was to monitor all below-groundworks in areas of archaeological potential down to the natural subsoil. Any archaeological remains uncovered during the course of the groundworks were to be recorded to an appropriate level. Sampling and recovery of any contextual evidence which may contribute to an understanding of the archaeological remains within the area was also to take place, with particular emphasis on the medieval period.

#### **5.0 METHOD**

The groundworks for the development principally involved the excavation of a substantial 'C' shaped hollow to accommodate an underground car park beneath the proposed shopping centre. The hollow was excavated using mechanical diggers

positioned on the upper edge of the hole, cutting down against the edge and working northwest to southeast backwards across the site. The mechanical excavators used toothed buckets to remove modern surfaces and made ground, and cut up to 10m into the natural subsoil. No area stripping was carried out. The excavated edges were shored up with steel shuttering and all excavated material was then loaded straight on to trucks and removed from site.

Groundworks also took place in two further areas fronting on to the High Street to give corridors of access to the development behind. This involved the demolition of several modern structures and the clearance of the area prior to the cutting of foundation trenches into the subsoil.

Each monitoring visit was arranged in advance with the site manager as the extent of the groundwork expanded. The results of this archaeological monitoring, and the need for a continued archaeological presence, were reviewed throughout the course of the development.

Any archaeological deposits observed were recorded using pre-printed *pro-forma* recording cards for features and contexts, supplemented by scale drawings of sections and plans. Colour-slide and black and white photographs were also taken as appropriate. These records form the site archive which, at the time of writing, is stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

## **6.0 RESULTS**

### **6.1 Zone A**

Zone A was located on the western edge of the site. The area was excavated to a depth of approximately 10m throughout. Unfortunately, the method of mechanical excavation employed on the site was not conducive to archaeological monitoring and recording. A deep hole was rapidly excavated vertically, rather than by horizontal stripping, and it was therefore extremely difficult to observe whether or not any archaeological deposits were present, and none were recorded in this area.

### **6.2 Zone B**

Zone B formed the large central area of the site, bounded by the rear of the High Street properties to the east and the Police Station and public library to the west.

Again, the method of rapid, deep excavation largely prevented the identification of any archaeological remains in this area. However, a 42m long foundation trench cutting into the subsoil along the eastern edge of the site (Fig. 2) was excavated in such a way as to make it possible to observe features. The trench was aligned approximately southeast-northwest, running parallel with the High Street behind properties numbers 28 to 46. Nine features were observed cutting into the subsoil, and sealed by 0.5m of topsoil and modern debris associated with modern construction work (Fig. 9). Features F1 and F7 consisted of modern pipe trenches aligned east-west, and containing loose, dark fills. Features F4, F5 and F9 were linear cuts with sub-rounded profiles, also aligned east-west, and filled with silty-sand. Features F2,

F3, F6 and F8 consisted of a series of pits, approximately 2.5m in diameter and ranging from 0.6m to 1.8m in depth. No dateable material was found in any of these features.

### **6.3 Zone C**

Zone C was located at the southern end of the site, between the public library and the council offices. This area was excavated to a maximum depth of 5m into the natural subsoil. Brick foundations were identified in this area, probably relating to a short-lived modern structure shown adjacent to the council offices on the 1968 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 8).

### **6.4 Zone D**

Zone D was situated adjacent to the High Street, at the junction with Station Road and Popular Road. The area was cleared of modern debris, but no archaeological remains were identified due to extensive modern disturbance.

### **6.5 Zone E**

Zone E was situated adjacent to the High Street, opposite Mill Lane. After the demolition of several modern structures the site was cleared, but the area had been subject to heavy modern disturbance and no archaeological deposits were observed.

## **7.0 DISCUSSION**

Despite the location of the groundworks within the backplots of properties fronting the High Street, in the core area of the Medieval settlement, no datable archaeological deposits were observed. This may be due as much to the nature of the excavation methods employed as to the lack of surviving archaeological remains. The survival of pockets of archaeological deposits amongst modern disturbance is attested by the presence of the linear features and pits identified in zone B (features F2 to F6, F8 and F9), which possibly represent the remains of former property boundaries and associated activity in the backplots of High Street properties.

## **8.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This watching brief was sponsored by Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and was carried out by Chris Patrick of Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. The report was written by Chris Patrick and edited by Lucie Dingwall, with illustrations prepared by Nigel Dodds. The project was managed for BUFAU by Lucie Dingwall. Thanks are due to the site manager, Craig Graham, for his assistance during the project, and to the staff of Solihull Library Local Studies section for their assistance with documentary material.

## **9.0 REFERENCES**

Bates, S.1984. *Solihull, a Pictorial History*.

Pemberton, R. 1991. *Solihull and its Church*.

Skipp, V. 1984. *The Origins of Solihull, 2nd Edition*.

## **10.0 MAP SOURCES**

1820 Tithe map of Solihull and surrounding area.

1888 Ordnance Survey, First Edition.

1908 Ordnance Survey Map.

1917 Ordnance Survey Map.

1954 Ordnance Survey Map.

1968 Ordnance Survey Map.

(Copies of the above maps are held by Solihull Local Studies Library)



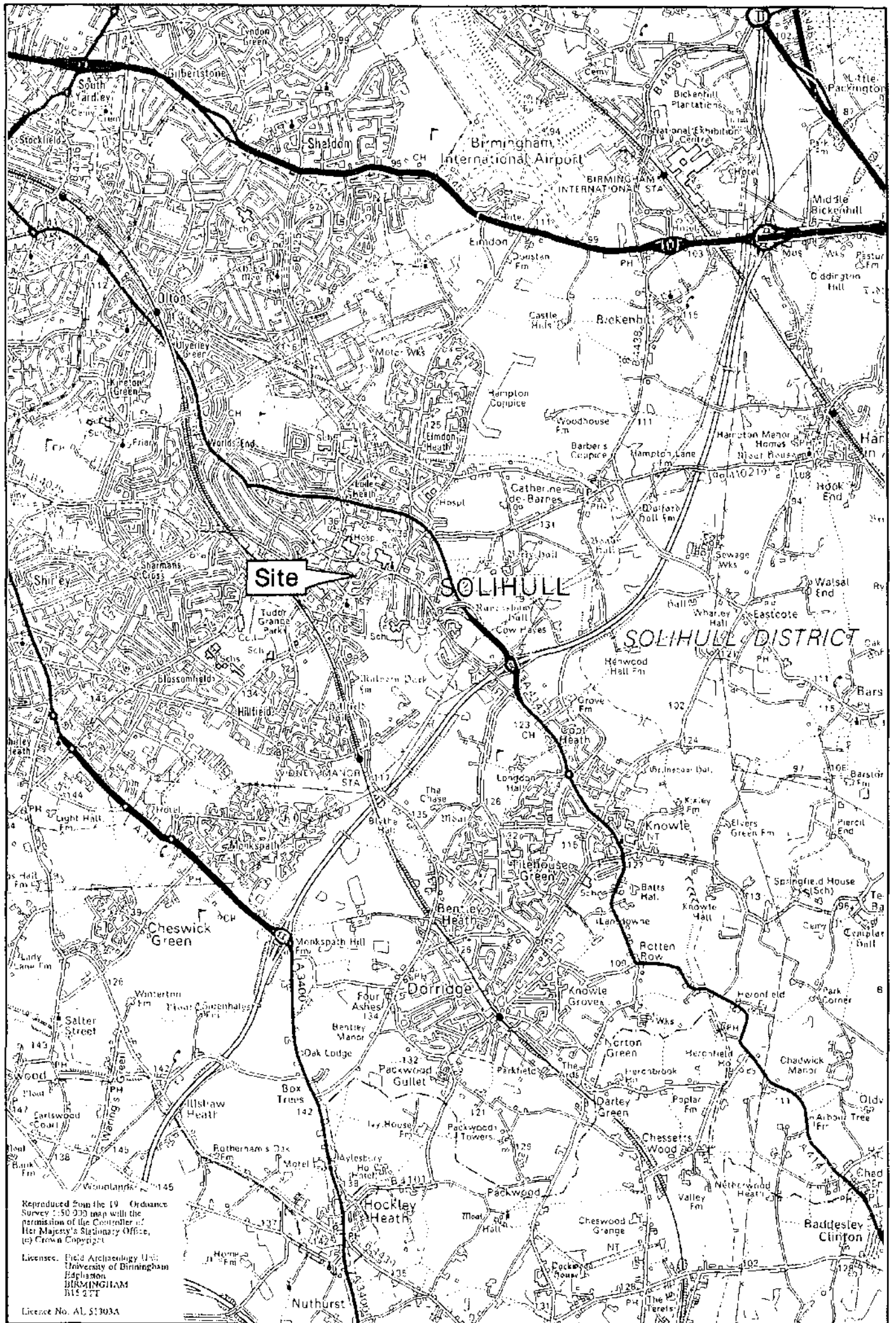


Fig. 1

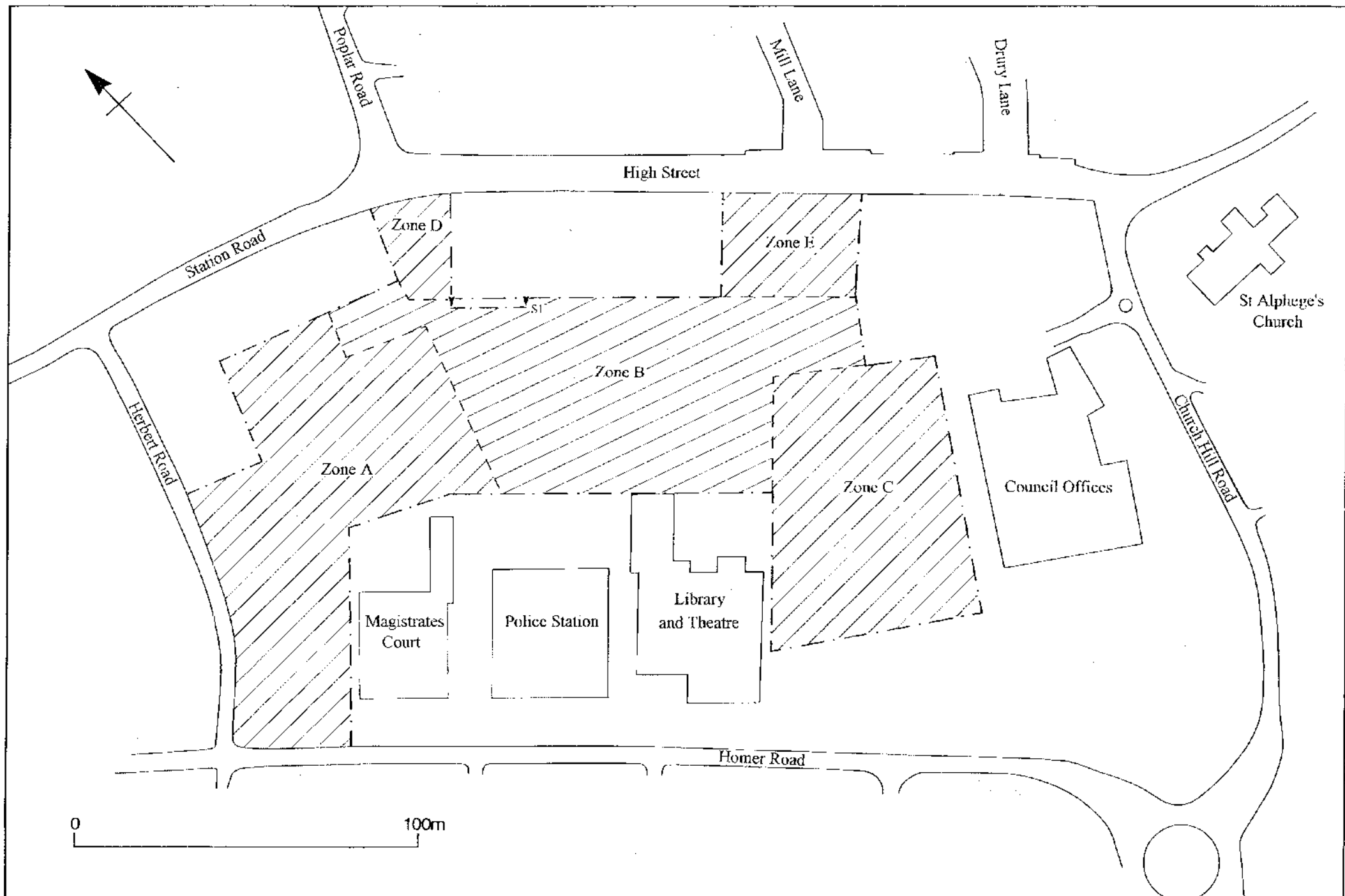


Fig. 2

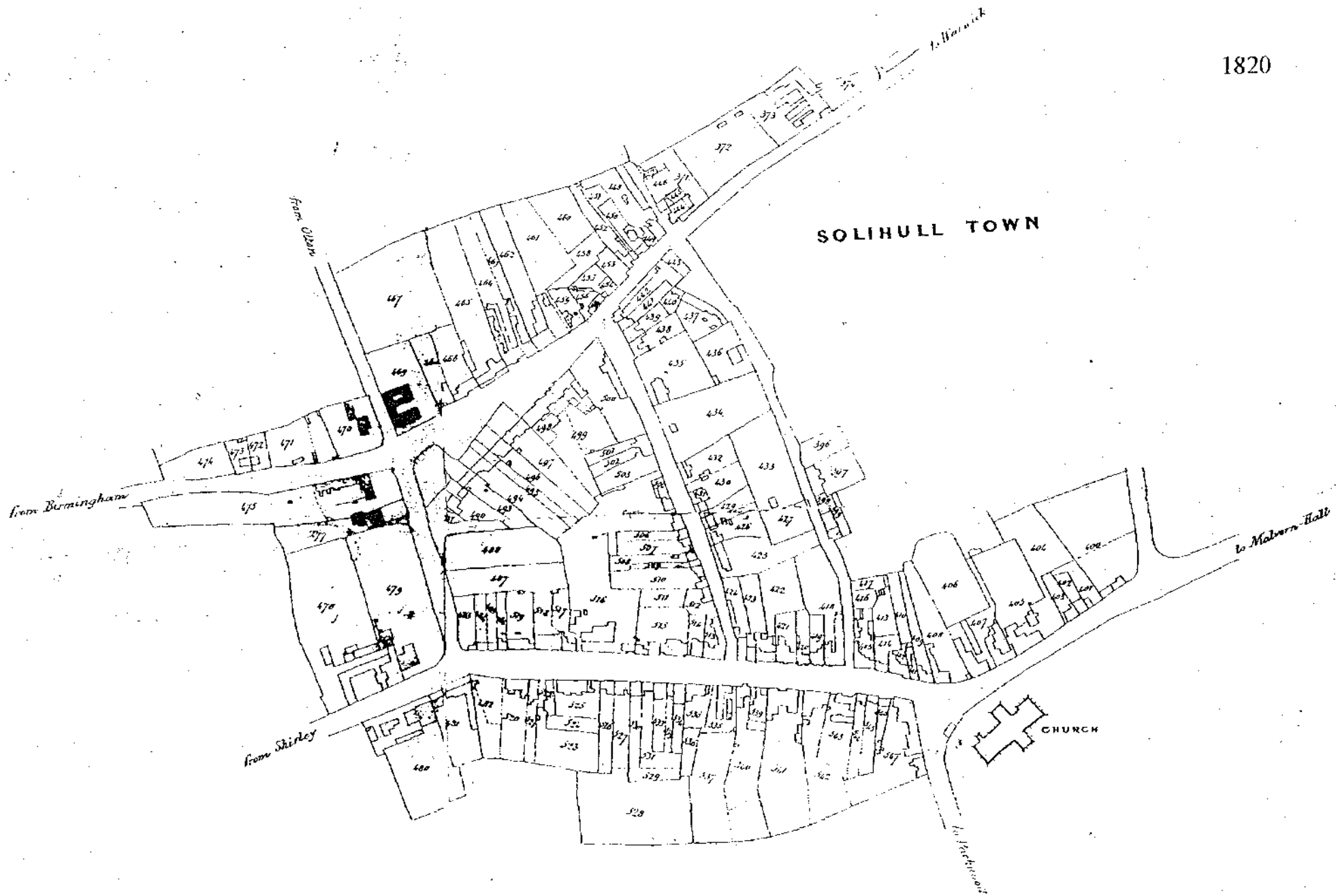


Fig. 3

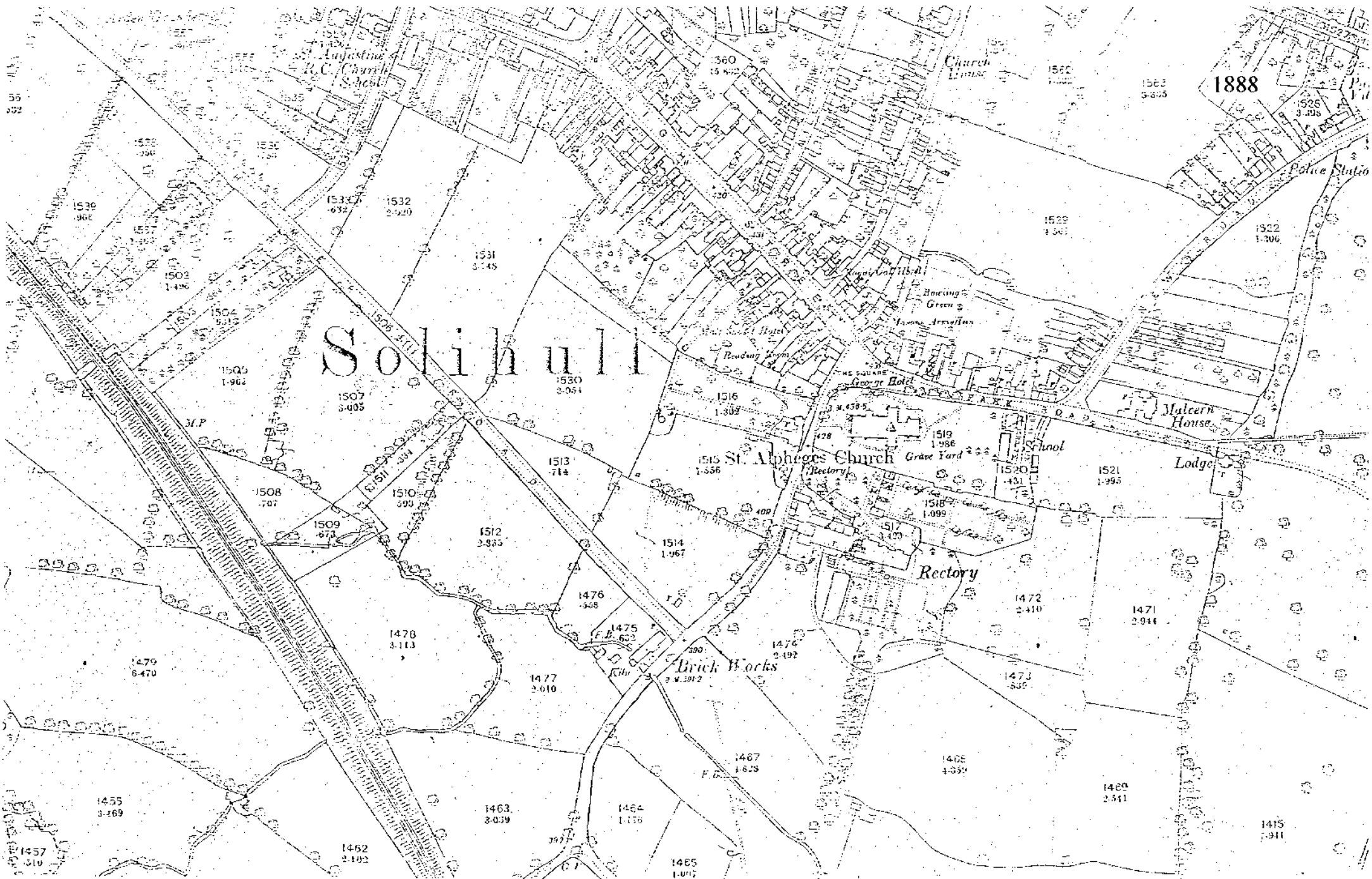


Fig. 4

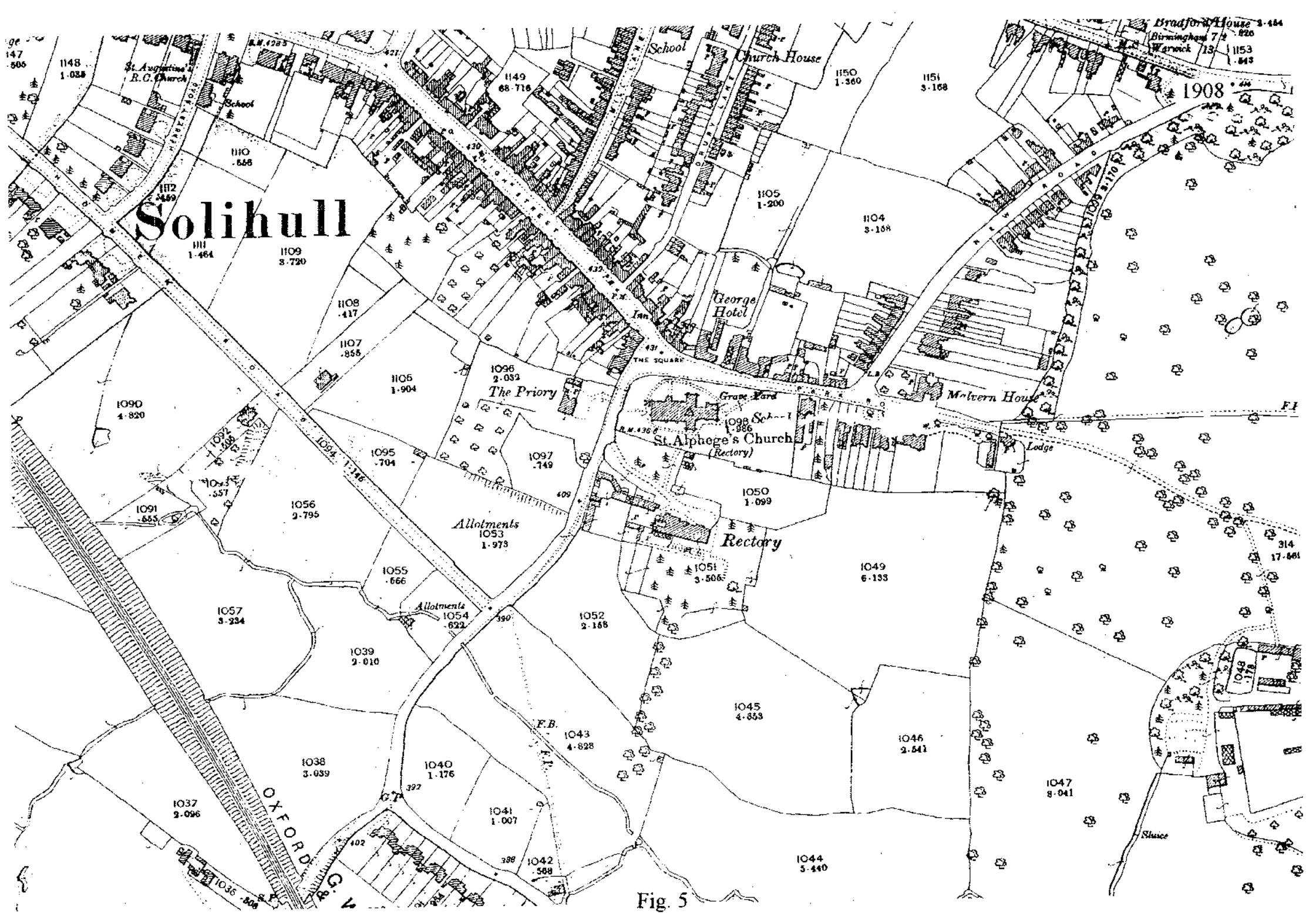


Fig. 5

Solihull

1917



Fig. 6

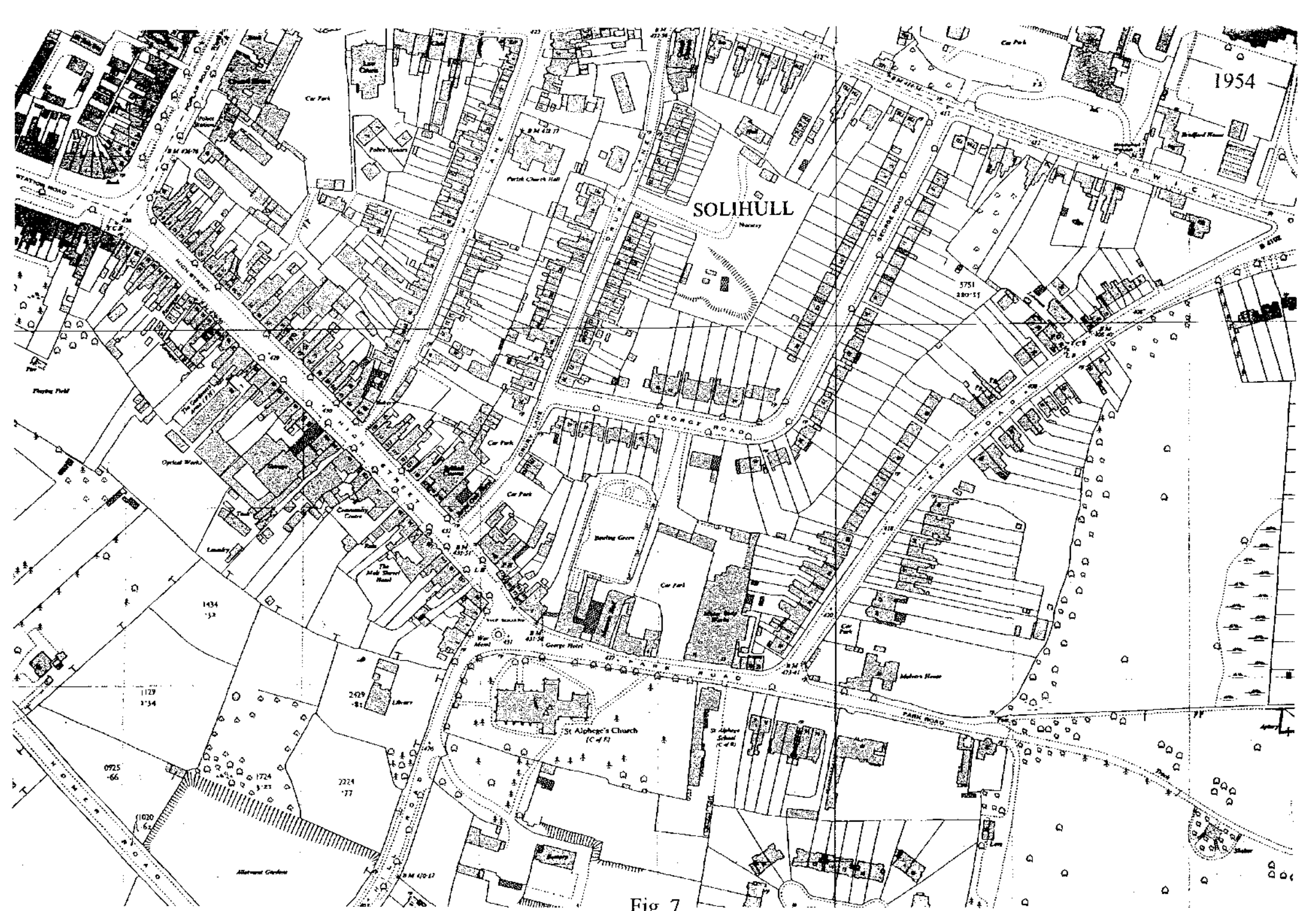


Fig. 7

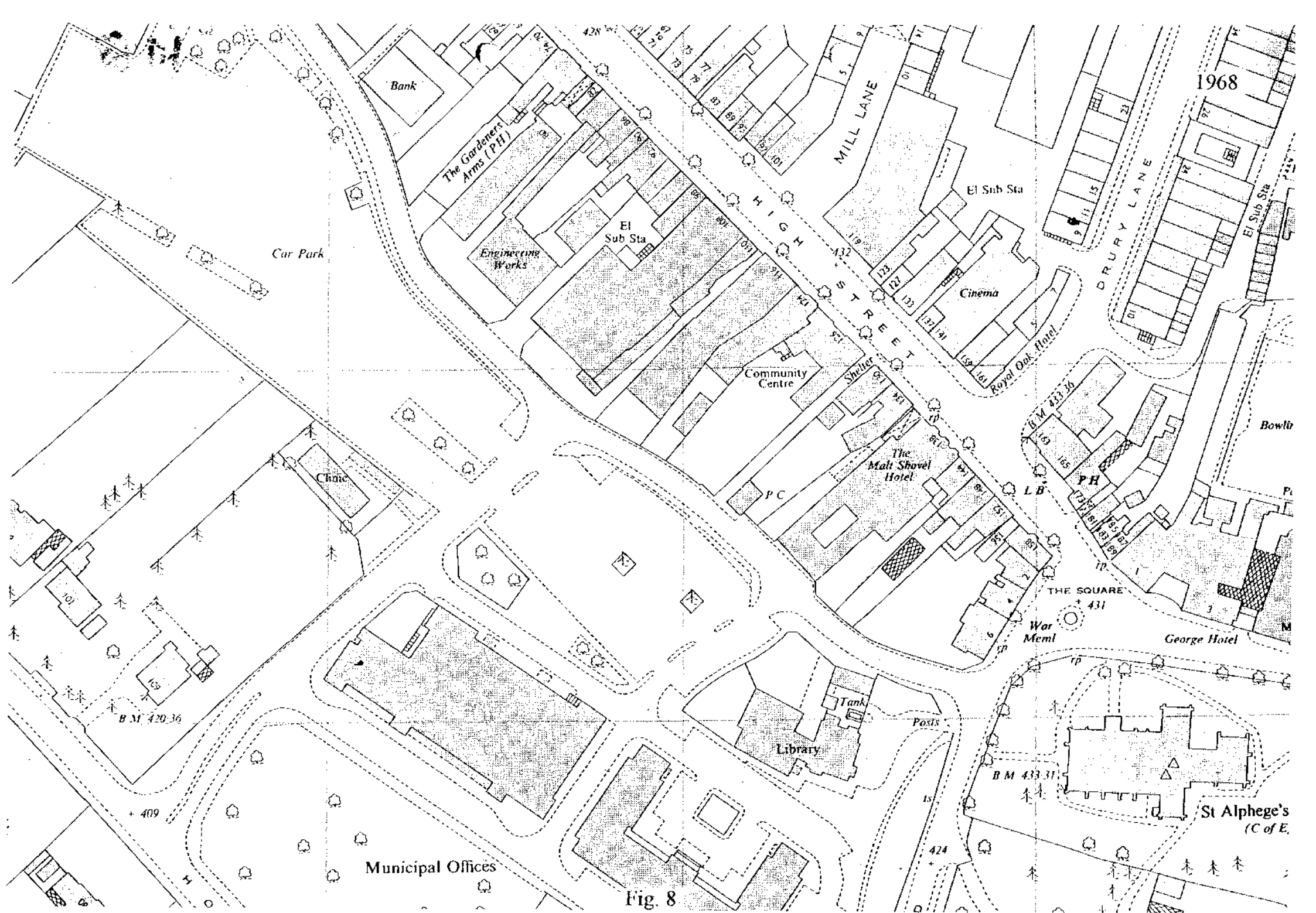


Fig. 8



Section 1 NE Facing

SE

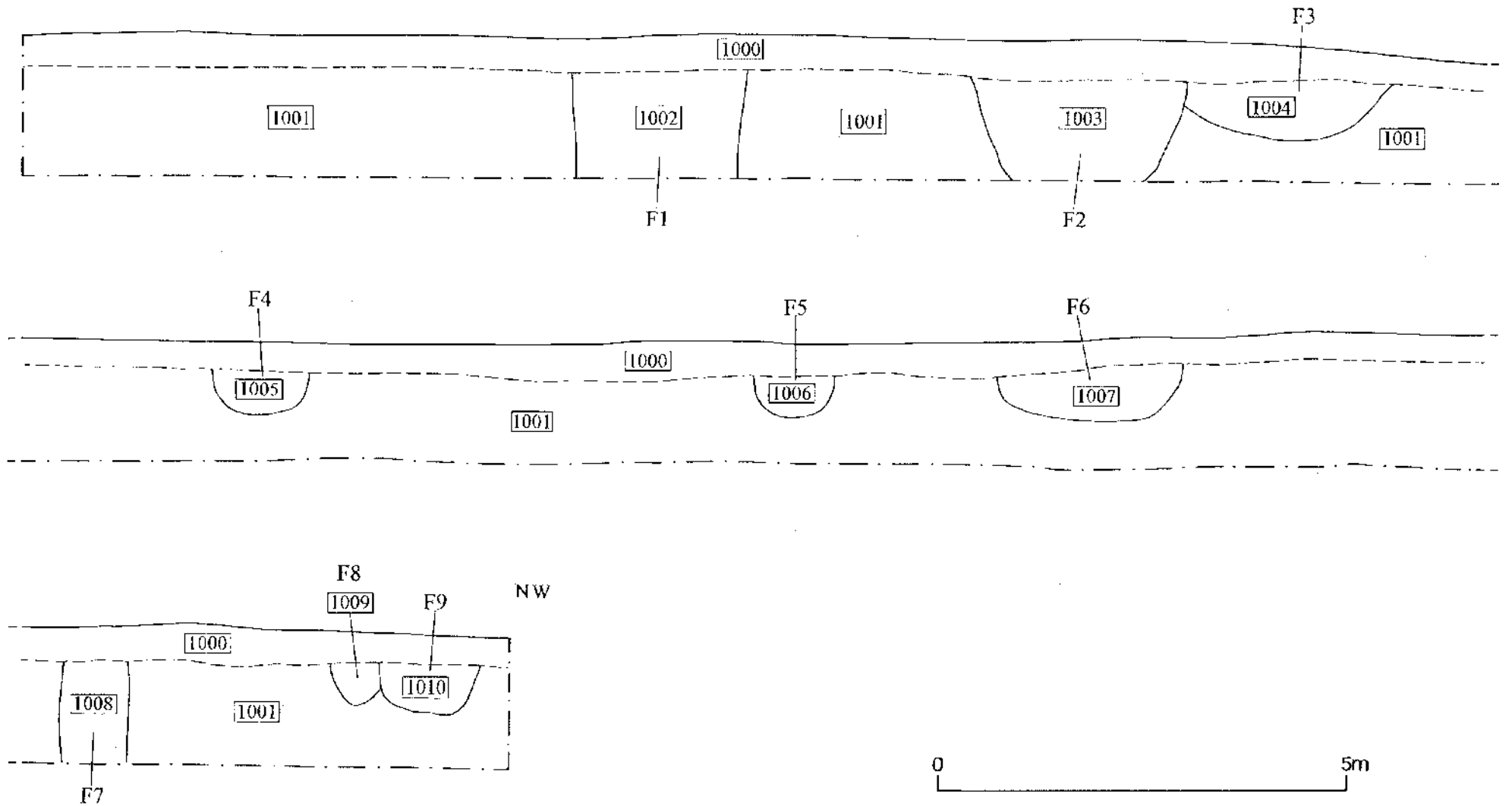


Fig. 9



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4