

**Croft Street Industrial
Estate, Willenhall, Walsall**

**An Archaeological Desk-Based
Assessment**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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Croft Street Industrial Estate, Willenhall, Walsall
An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment

by
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Contents

1.0	Summary
2.0	Introduction
3.0	Site location
4.0	Objectives
5.0	Method
6.0	Geology and topography
7.0	Archaeological and historical background
8.0	Cartographic information
9.0	Conclusion
10.0	Acknowledgements
11.0	References

Figures

Fig. 1	Location map
Fig. 2	The site (shaded area)
Fig. 3	The site and its archaeological setting
Fig. 4	The site divided into zones
Fig. 5	19th Century copy Plan
Fig. 6	1887 Ordnance Survey
Fig. 7	1902 Ordnance Survey
Fig. 8	1918 Ordnance Survey
Fig. 9	1938 Ordnance Survey
Fig. 10	1956 Ordnance Survey
Fig. 11	Areas of disturbance on the site (dates relate to Ordnance Survey maps)

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1.0: Summary

The desk-based assessment was carried out in advance of the construction of a new medical centre and associated community facilities at the Croft Street Industrial Estate in Willenhall, Walsall. The assessment examined the available documentary and cartographic evidence to identify any areas of potential archaeological interest. The site was considered to have archaeological potential due to its location near to, or within the medieval settlement of Willenhall. The site also had potential for post-medieval industrial archaeology, in particular lock-making. The site was found to have been greatly disturbed by building and demolition, especially during the course of the last two centuries.

2.0: Introduction

This archaeological assessment has been prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) on behalf of Stepnell Ltd., ahead of the construction of a new medical centre and associated community facilities. The aim of the report is to provide a summary of known and potential archaeological interests within the development site, based on existing data. The assessment adheres to the guidelines set down in the Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999). The assessment was prepared in accordance with a Specification prepared by the former West Midlands SMR, and a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by BUFAU (BUFAU 1999).

3.0: Site Location

The site is located at NGR SO 96289861 at the Croft Industrial Estate on Gomer Street in Willenhall (Fig. 1). It is bounded by Croft Street in the north, the backs of house-plots fronting onto Stafford Street to the east and Gomer Street to the west. To the south is a public car-park. The site comprises an area of 0.625 ha., and is in use as an industrial estate (Fig. 2), currently under demolition.

4.0: Objectives

The objective of this assessment was to determine the likely survival and significance of archaeological remains within and around the proposed development site, set in its local, regional, or national context, as appropriate. The desk-based assessment was intended to identify areas of archaeological potential within the site, to enable the targeting of trial-trenches, and also to highlight areas within the site where archaeological deposits will have been destroyed, so that these areas may be avoided.

5.0: Method

Published archaeological sources, primary and secondary records and maps held by Walsall Local History Centre, the Black Country Sites and Monuments Record and Birmingham University Library were consulted (see Section 11.0).

6.0: Geology and topography

Willenhall (Fig. 1) lies in a saucer-shaped depression surrounded by the Rowley Hills in the south, Sedgley Beacon and the high ground of Wolverhampton in the west, Essington in the north and Bentley Hay to the east. Within the town itself is a ridge of higher ground which runs approximately east-west and was formed in the Ice Age by drift glacial deposits. On either side of this ridge run two main streams. Willenhall lies in The South Staffordshire and Cannock Chase coalfields, although it only touches the northern edge of the exposed coalfield where the thick or middle coal seam appears in places on the surface. Only the middle and upper coal measures are present and carboniferous limestone and millstone grit are locally absent.

6.0: Archaeological and historical background (Fig. 3)

Prehistoric

Stafford Street was the location of a chance find of a prehistoric bronze axe (SMR WM2611). This was found in the first half of the 20th century whilst a gas main was being laid. No associated features are known to exist.

Roman

There is no evidence of Roman settlement in the area of Willenhall. Watling Street lies about 9 miles to the north, and Rykniel Street is about 6 miles to the east.

Saxon

A Saxon settlement is believed to have been established in Willenhall. The name of the town, written as 'Willanhalch' first appears historically in the 8th century as the signing-place of a charter of King Ethelbald of Mercia. It is thought that Willanhalch refers to Willenhall (Duignan 1902). Although there is another Willenhall near Coventry, this was only a hamlet dependent on Coventry and it is thought that any charter executed there would have been dated at Coventry.

Willenhall originally belonged to the ancient Mercian kings and was held by all the Saxon kings up to Edward the Confessor and Harold II. It then came into the possession of William the Conqueror as a royal manor and was set-down among the Crown lands as being of "ancient demesne" (Hackwood 1908).

In AD 911, an account of the battle of Wodnesfield (Wednesfield), relating the Danes' attack on Mercia in the time of King Edward the Elder, states that, 'after the defeat a great feast of rejoicings was held by the Saxons at Willenhall (Winehala),

‘the hall of victory’ (Willmore 1972). The theory that Willenhall means Hall of Victory is probably incorrect. Place-name evidence says that the part ‘halh’ means ‘small valley’ or ‘dry ground in marsh.’ Gelling (1984) suggests that ‘small valley’ or ‘hollow’ would seem the likely meaning of the ‘halh’ names around Wolverhampton, including Willenhall. As the town is situated in a depression, this seems likely. ‘Willian’ is known to be an Anglo-Saxon personal name.

The Domesday Book records ‘Winehala’ as being held by the king and comprising five villeins and three cottagers with three ploughs and consisting of 1 acre of meadow. The Clergy of Handone also held land in Willenhall (here spelt ‘Winenhale’) amounting to three villeins and five cottagers with three ploughs. The two different spellings of Willenhall here are thought to be wrongly spelt (Hackwood, 1908).

Medieval – post-medieval

The town of Willenhall probably owes its early growth to its position on the main road from Wolverhampton to Walsall. A reference was made to a church at Willenhale in 1297 in the Calendar of Patent Rolls (Hackwood 1908), but Willenhall was not then a parish in its own right, belonging instead to the parish of Wolverhampton. This church was probably a Chapel-of-Ease. The Church of St. Giles, to the east of the site, was begun in the early 14th century. This church was however, demolished in 1748 and a new church was built. Hodder (1994) writes that the medieval settlement of Willenhall lay along Walsall Street, Market Place and Wolverhampton Street, with a probable planned extension along Stafford Street (Fig. 3, SMR 5849), including the eastern part of the site.

In 1659 a fire devastated most of Willenhall town centre. The town was rebuilt using brick and tile. However, most of these houses have now gone, demolished in the 1960s. The Beil Public House in the Market Place, to the southeast of the site, dates to around 1660 and retains some of its original build. Another house from this period on Stafford Street survived well into the 20th century. In 1666 the population of Willenhall was about 300. A moated mansion stood in the area of Moat Street, to the east of Stafford Street. This had been destroyed by 1800 although the moat remained, finally being cleared when the Midland Railway was cut through the site in 1876. Around 1800, Willenhall had at least three windmills and probably a watermill as well. None of these were located within the site.

By the end of the 17th century, small metal goods were being produced in the town, such as curry combs, bolts, and latches. From this industry, Willenhall progressed to making locks, the industry for which it is most well-known. By the mid-18th century Willenhall was challenging Wolverhampton’s claim to have the most ingenious locksmiths in the country. In 1770 Willenhall had 148 lockmakers compared to 134 in Wolverhampton. The antiquary Richard Wilkes, who lived in Willenhall during the period 1691-1760, said that Willenhall produced more locks of all kinds than any other town of the same size in England or Europe (Greenslade 1967). Two 19th century houses with lockmaker’s workshops exist on Upper Lichfield Street about 100m to the southeast of the site (SMR WM1603). Another late 19th century lock works stands on Temple Row, about 50m to the northeast of the site (SMR WM 3367).

By 1801 the population of Willenhall had risen to 3143. Between 1841 and 1861 the population rose from 8695 to 17,256. By 1855 it had 340 locksmiths. Originally, the locks were hand-made in shops at the rear of the locksmiths' homes. As late as 1856 large lock-making companies were still not using machinery in their production. In the late-19th and 20th centuries the iron and brass founding industry began to develop.

No Scheduled Ancient Monuments or Listed Buildings are listed within the SMR as being within or immediately adjacent to the site.

8.0: Cartographic information

For ease of reference the site has been divided into Zones I, II and III (Fig. 4).

Evidence for the site itself comes mainly from the maps. The Croft, now known as Croft Street, was an accommodation road which ran between Round Croft and Tinkers Croft to the north of the site. The earliest map which shows the site in detail is the 1841 tithe map, showing the site as containing arable land, houses, gardens, yards and shops. If Stafford Street formed part of the medieval settlement of the town, it is likely that earlier buildings may have existed along the western edge of Stafford Street. However, it is unknown if this settlement could have extended far enough westwards to be included within the site, although the backplots may have extended within the site. The presence of a moated manor house in the area of Moat Street, to the northeast of the site, could also indicate the possibility of settlement extending along Stafford Street in the medieval or post-medieval periods.

According to the Tithe map, Zone I may have contained a pond. However, at some time between 1841 and 1887, a row of houses was built in this area. Zone II is also shown to have contained a possible pond on the Tithe map and appears to have been in use as arable land until some time between 1918 and 1938 when industrial development took place. Post-medieval settlement may perhaps be represented at the northern end of Zone III, where a line of houses fronting onto Croft Street are shown on the maps dating between 1841-1956. Prior to the building of the Stafford Street Brass and Iron Foundry, earlier industrial buildings existed on the site, particularly in the southern half of Zone III. Much of the site has therefore been disturbed, with residential development followed by demolition and industrial development, this succeeded in its turn by demolition and further industrial development.

A 1797 map showing land belonging to the Chapelry in Willenhall (not illustrated) shows part of the area around the site, although it is not absolutely clear whether the areas shown are within the site. As the map has an accompanying schedule of field names, although barely legible in places, it is possible to make some comparison with the 1841 tithe map, and to conclude that three of the numbered fields shown lie just outside the western edge of the site. A further field to the north which appears to be named Hall End may lie within the northeastern corner of the site, but it is not possible to confirm this. No buildings were shown in these fields.

A copy plan probably dating from the 19th century appears to be an enlarged copy of the tithe map. This has been included as Fig. 5 as it is more readable than the tithe map.

The 1841 Tithe map and Award, shows several buildings on the site. It is difficult to ascertain the exact area of the site, but a general approximation can be made. The map shows two possible ponds on the site, one in Zone I and another in Zone II. No buildings are shown in Zones I or II. Zone III has about ten buildings, four or five fronting on to Croft Street and the others behind and to the southeast. The whole of Zone II comprises an enclosure named 'House Piece', used as arable land. Although there are no houses shown within the enclosure, the field-name may refer to the fact that it was in the tenure of an adjoining landholding. In fact, both this piece of land and the homestead in the enclosure immediately adjacent to the south (part of which may also be included in Zone II of the site) were occupied by the same person, Mary Veal, although both pieces of land had different owners. The enclosures in Zone III contained a homestead, houses, shops and gardens. The car park outside the southeastern corner of the site contained a house, yard and garden. Gomer Street did not yet exist.

The First Edition 1887 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 6) shows that Gomer Street existed although does not reach its present full extent to meet up with Croft Street in the north. Houses have been built fronting onto Gomer Street and these, with their backyards, are contained within Zone I of the site. The yards to the south contain two, larger buildings. Zone II remains undeveloped, although there may be some slight development infringing on its southern edge. Zone III contains a large amount of development including a series of large buildings in the south which may be associated with industry. Croft Street is not named.

The 1902 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 7) shows that all three Zones remain largely unchanged. Some small-scale development has taken place outside Zone II to the west, but the main development in the area is the rebuilding of the lane presently named Croft Street. This was originally a service lane leading to the fields in the north and ran approximately southwest-northeast. Here, along with a new northern half of Gomer Street, it is represented by dotted rather than solid lines, showing that it is perhaps still under construction. It was also in the process of being widened and having its alignment changed slightly. This is probably due to the development taking place against its northern edge.

The 1918 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 8) shows only a slight change to the arrangement of the buildings in the northern half of Zone III. More development has taken place outside Zone II to the west, fronting onto Gomer Street. Outside the southeast of the site are areas labelled Court No. 1, 2 and 3.

The 1938 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9) shows development in Zone II. Seven large buildings, presumably of industrial function, have been erected along the eastern, western and southern edges of the zone. To the southeast of the site, the areas comprising Courts No. 1 and 2 have been demolished, leaving an open space.

The 1956 Ordnance Survey (Fig. 10) shows much change to the buildings within the site. Stafford Street Brass and Iron Foundry has been built in Zones II and III. Its associated outbuildings include a ramp, a tank and a chimney. The houses which fronted onto Croft Street in the north of Zone III had been demolished and replaced with foundry buildings.

8.0: Conclusion

From the available evidence it would appear that the eastern part of the site (Zone III) could contain features and deposits associated with medieval settlement. While traces of structures may be anticipated mainly closer to the Stafford Street frontage, evidence of backplot activity, possibly comprising small-scale industry and rubbish disposal may be found within the site. Traces of post-medieval industrial buildings may also be found, although no detailed cartographic evidence is available for the period prior to 1841 (Tithe map). The site has been greatly disturbed by ongoing processes of building and demolition, in particular due to the change of land-use from domestic to industrial. These processes may well have disturbed some archaeological deposits, although Fig. 11 suggests that some islands of potentially better archaeological survival may also exist on the site. Based on the areas of potential and disturbance, a revised scheme for trenching has been prepared.

9.0: Acknowledgements

The assessment was commissioned by Stepnell Ltd. This report was written by Sarah Watt and edited by Alex Jones. The figures were prepared by Nigel Dodds. The Black Country Sites and Monuments Record provided information about the site. Thanks also to Mike Hodder for his assistance.

10.0: References

Maps

Ordnance Survey:

1887 1:2500 Staffs. Sheet LXII.12
1902 1:2500 Staffs. Sheet LXII.12
1918 1:2500 Staffs. Sheet LXII.12
1938 1:2500 Staffs. Sheet LXII.12
1956 1:1250 SO 9698 NW
1957 1:2500 SO 9698

Others

1797 Godson's Map of Lands Belonging to the Chapelry of Willenhall
1841 Tithe Map of Willenhall

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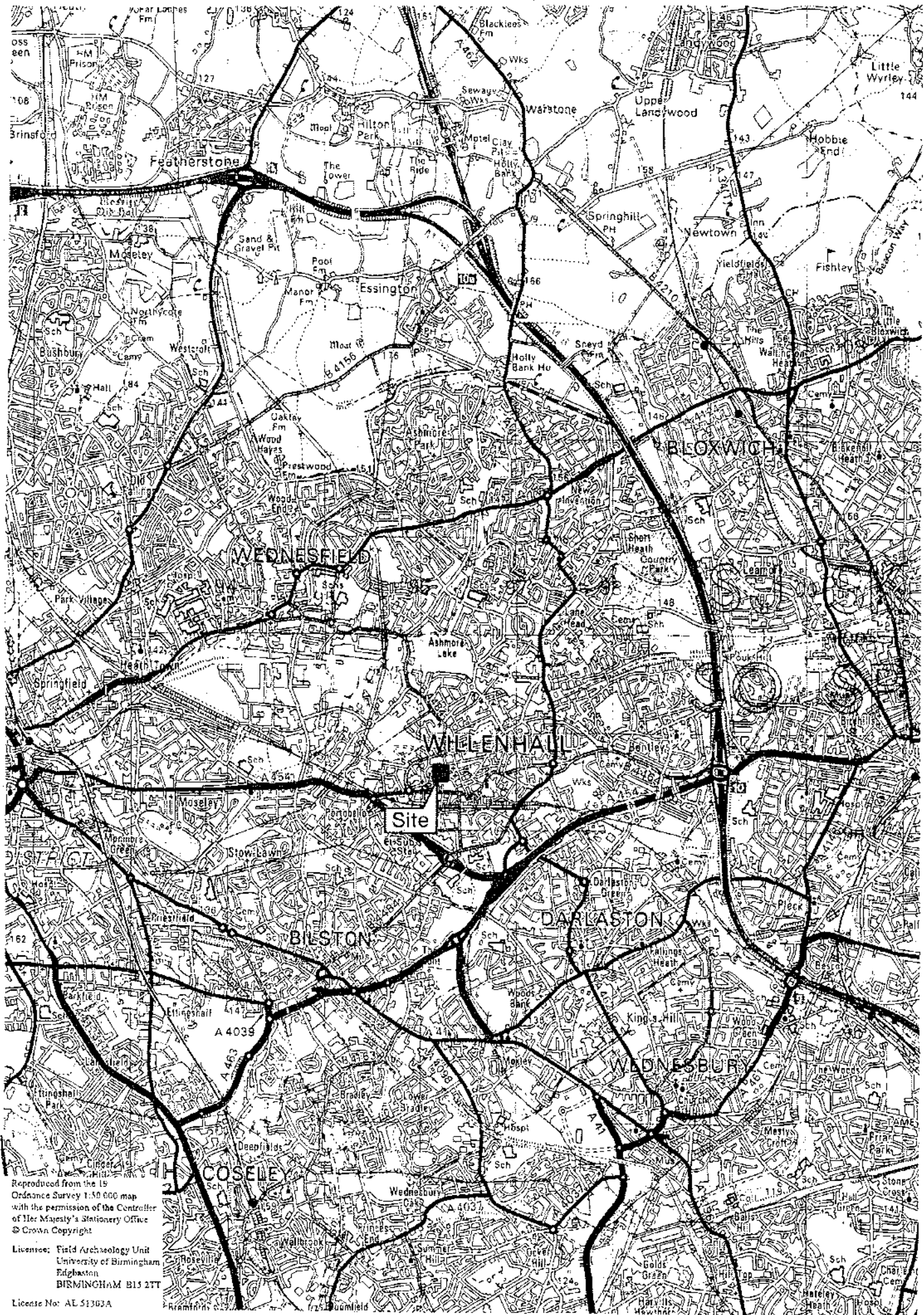
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Fig. 1

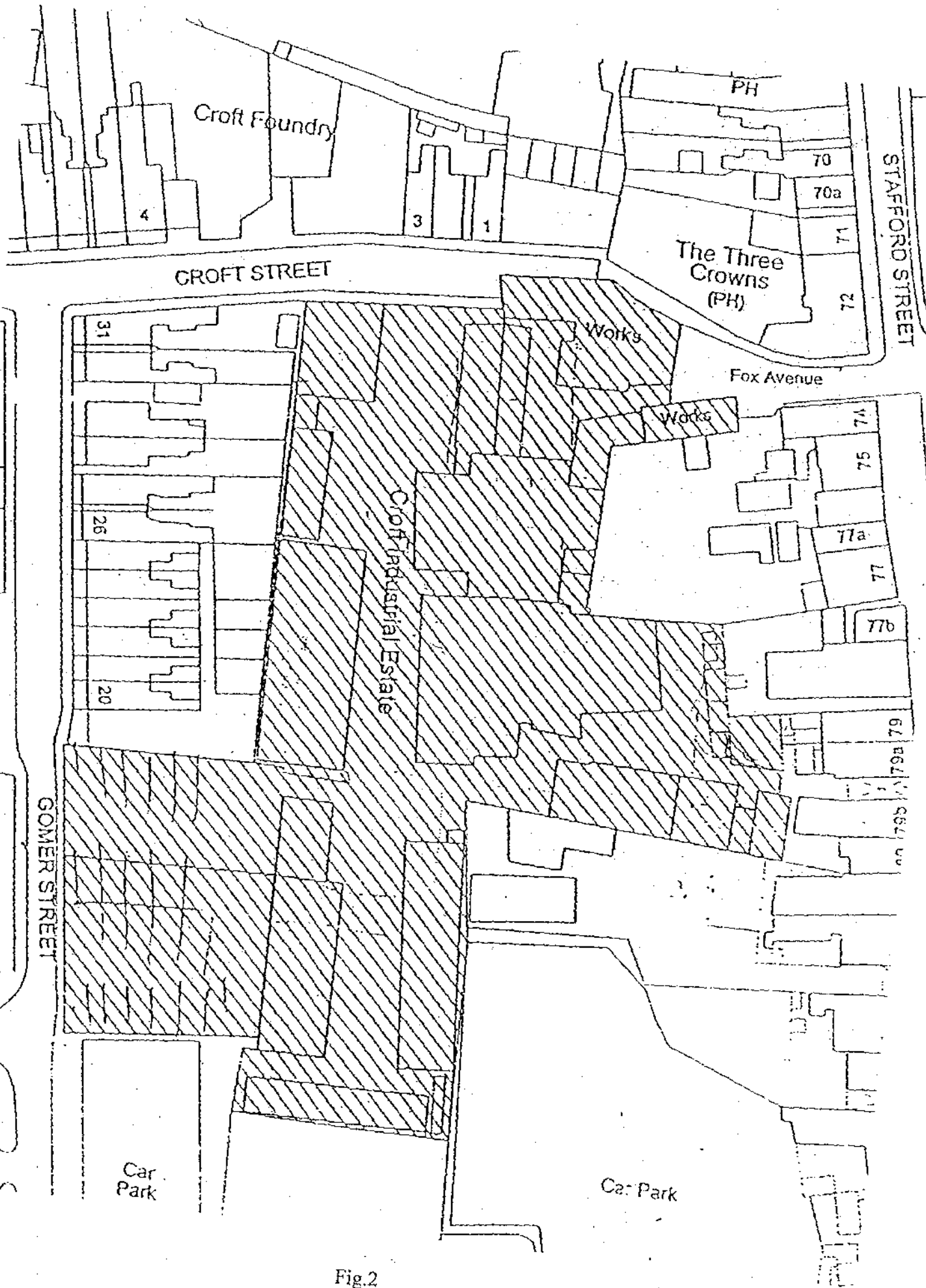


Fig.2

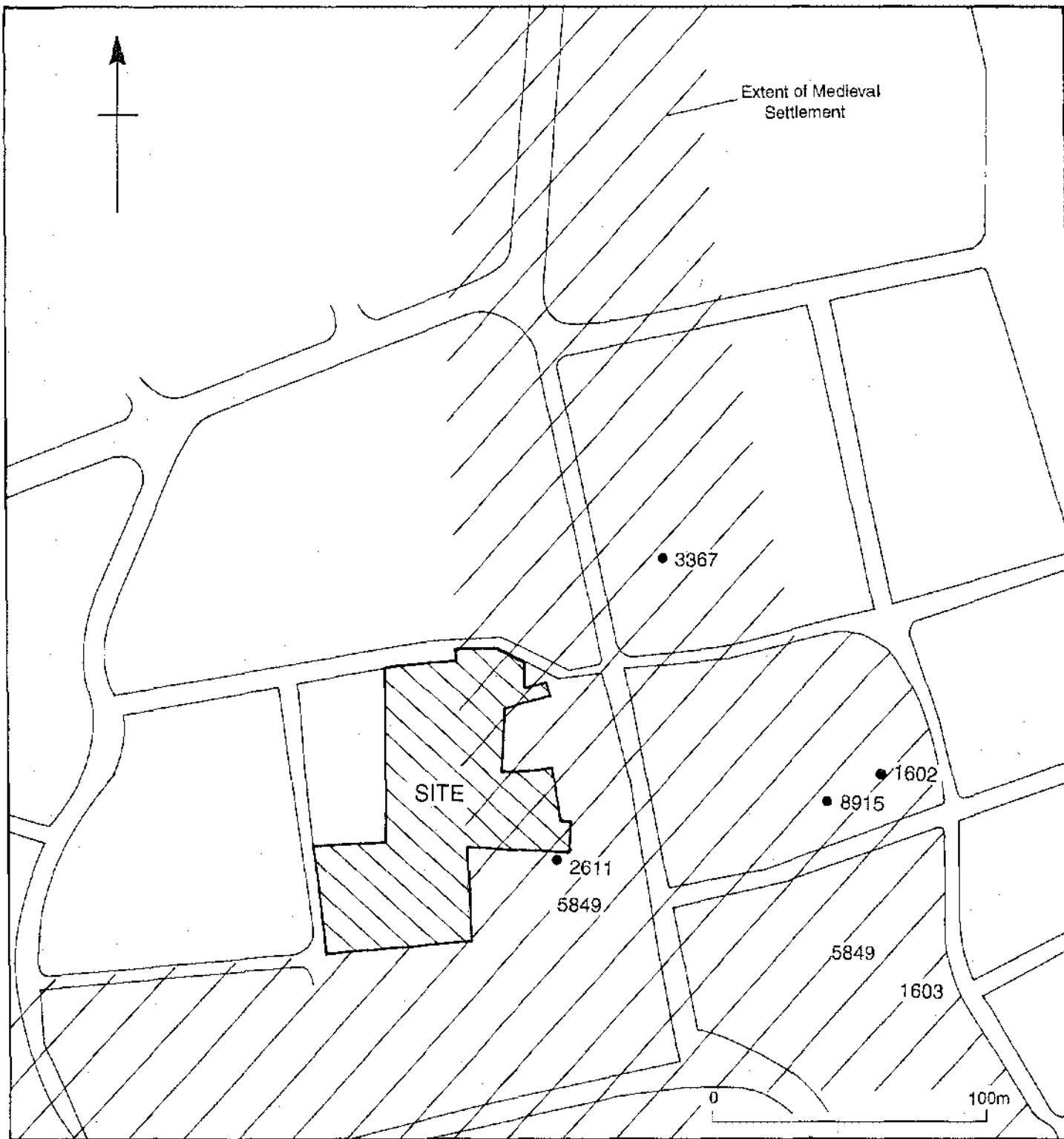


Fig.3

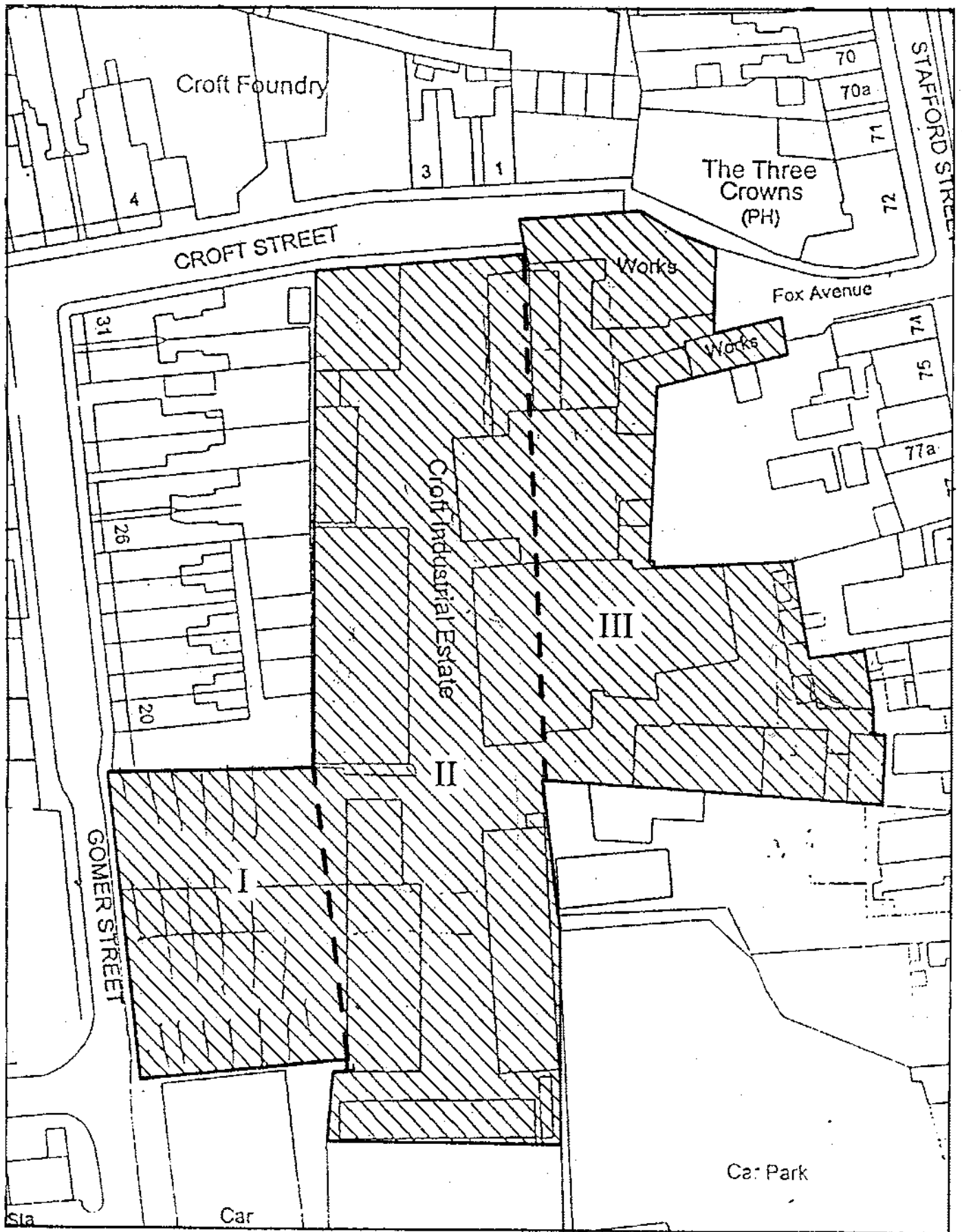


Fig.4

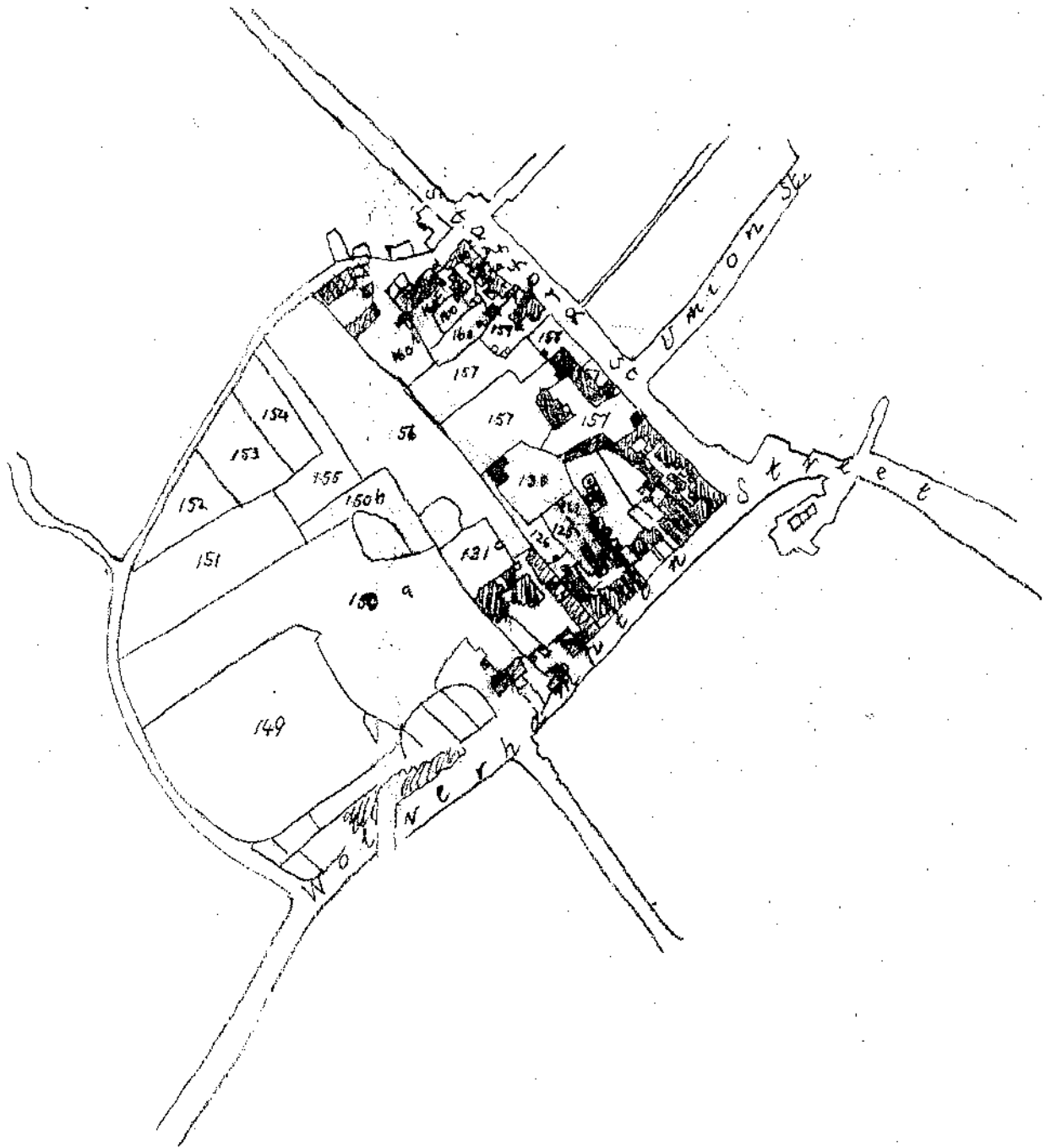


Fig.5

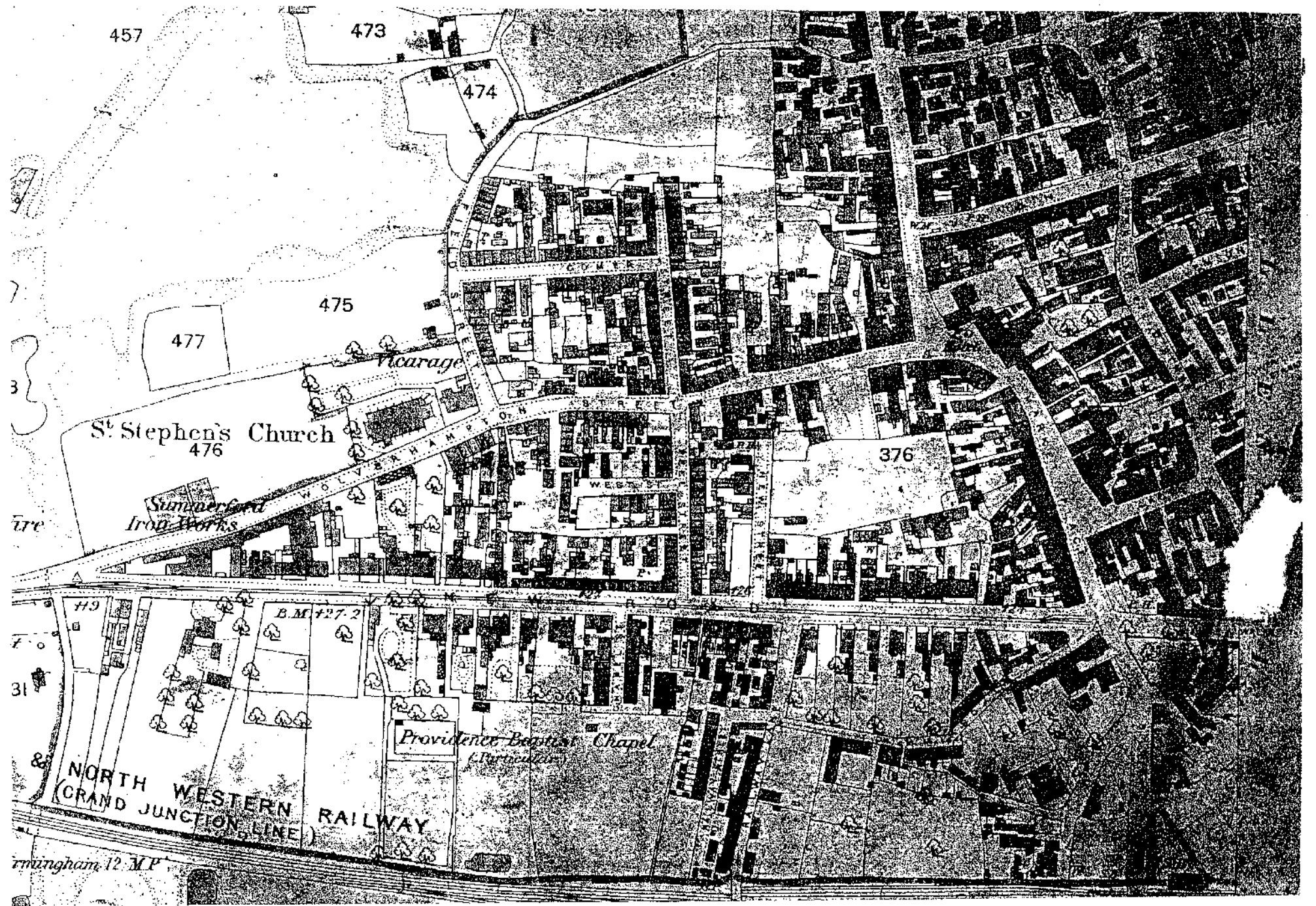


Fig.6

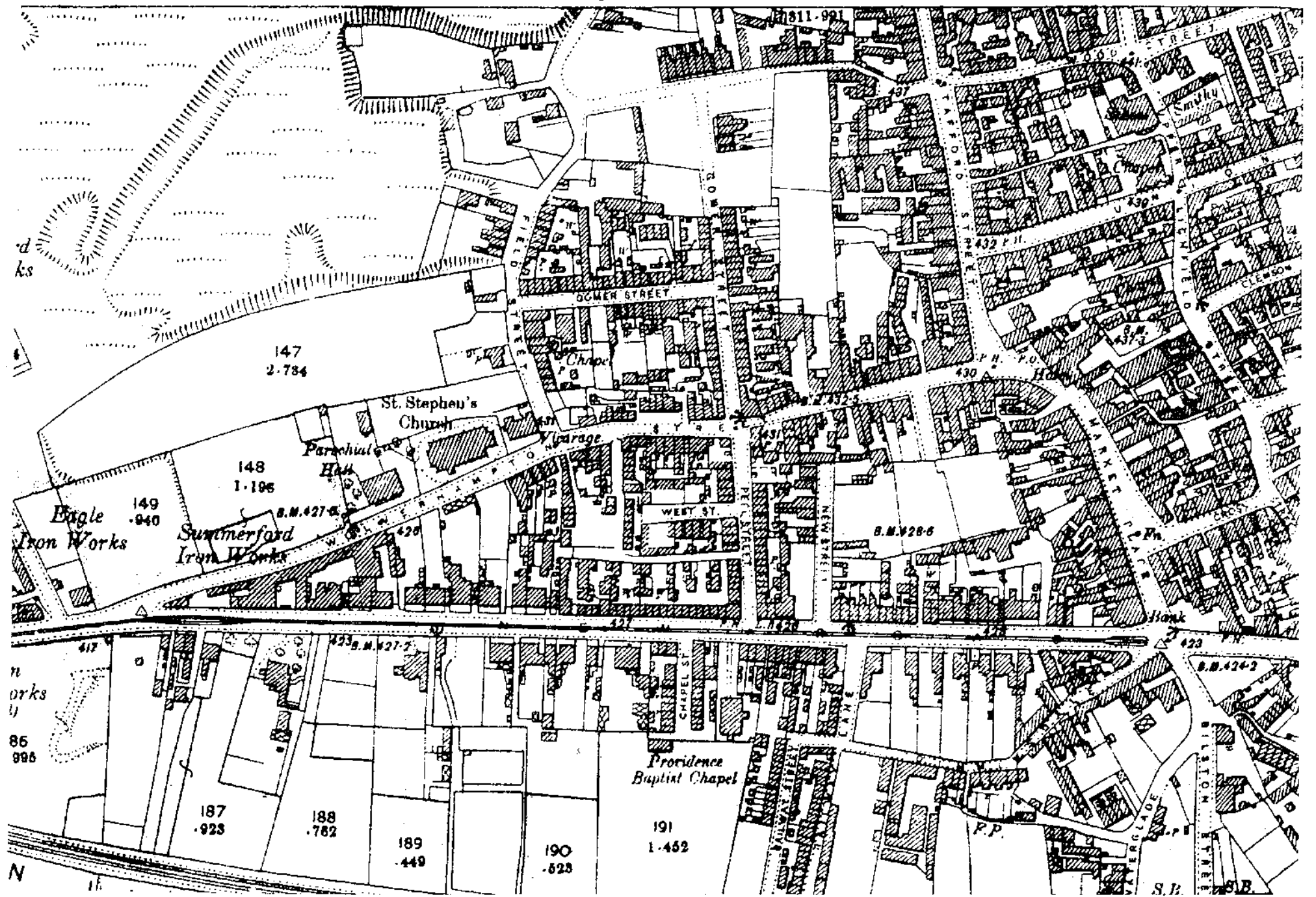


Fig. 7.

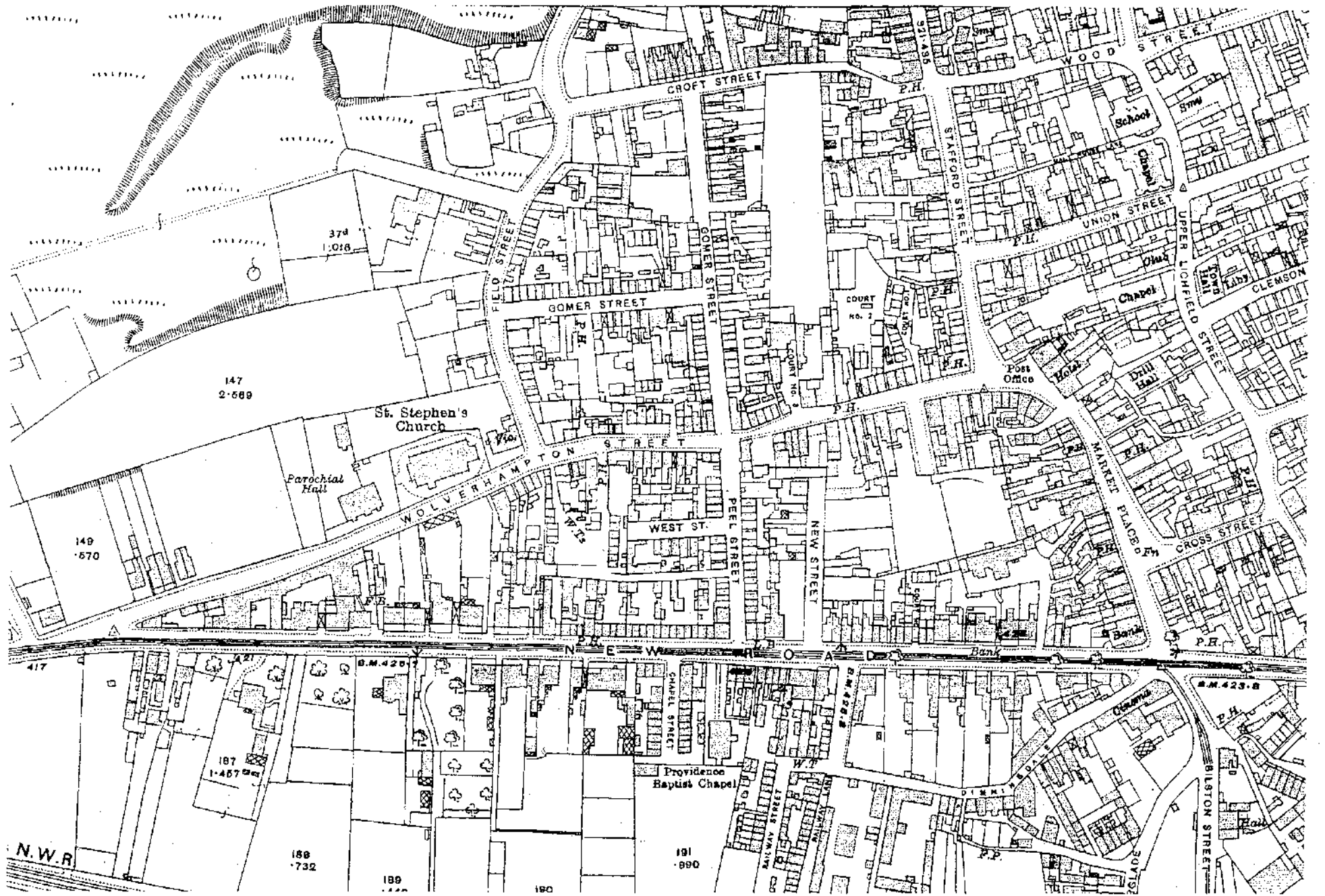


Fig.8

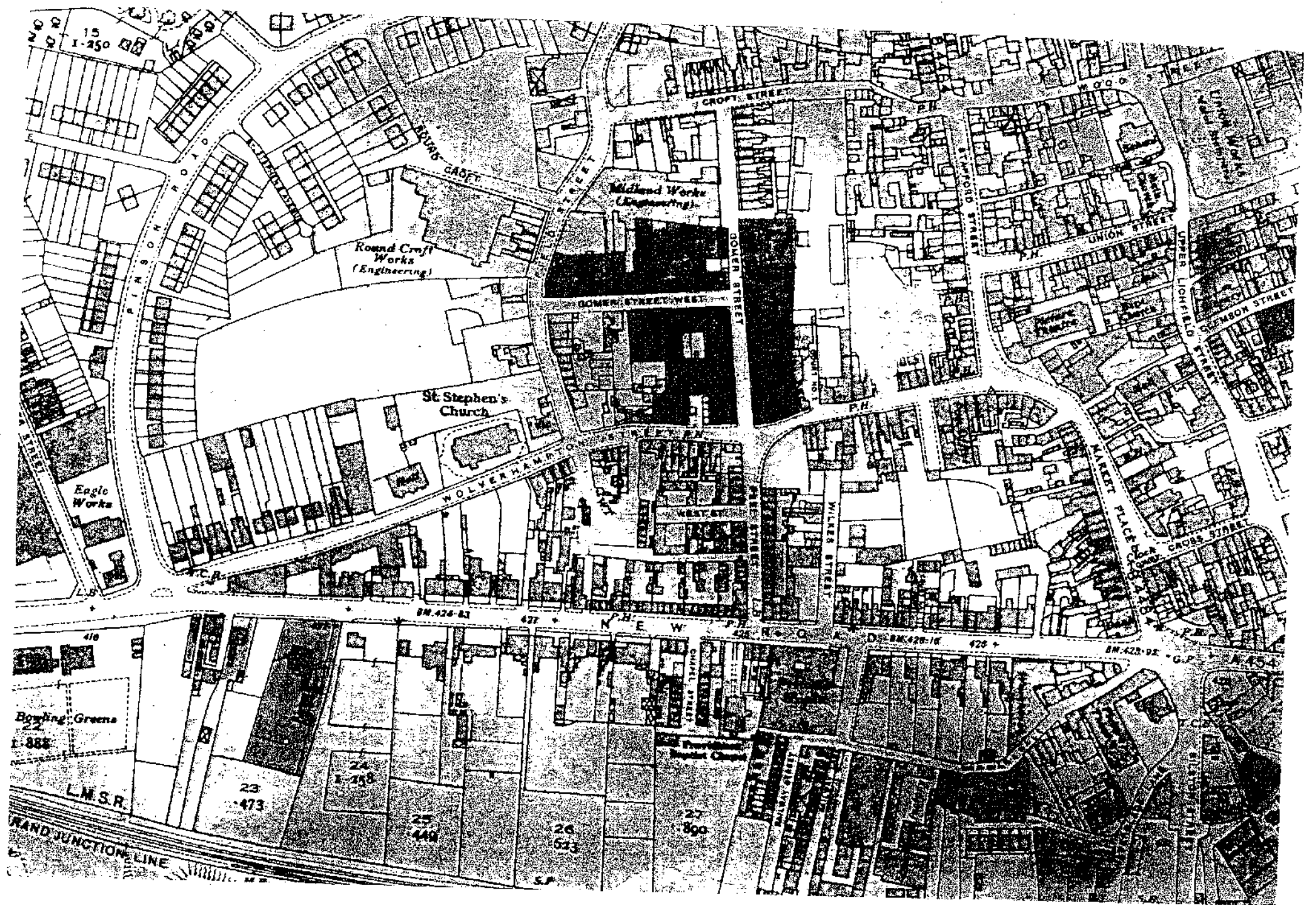


Fig.9

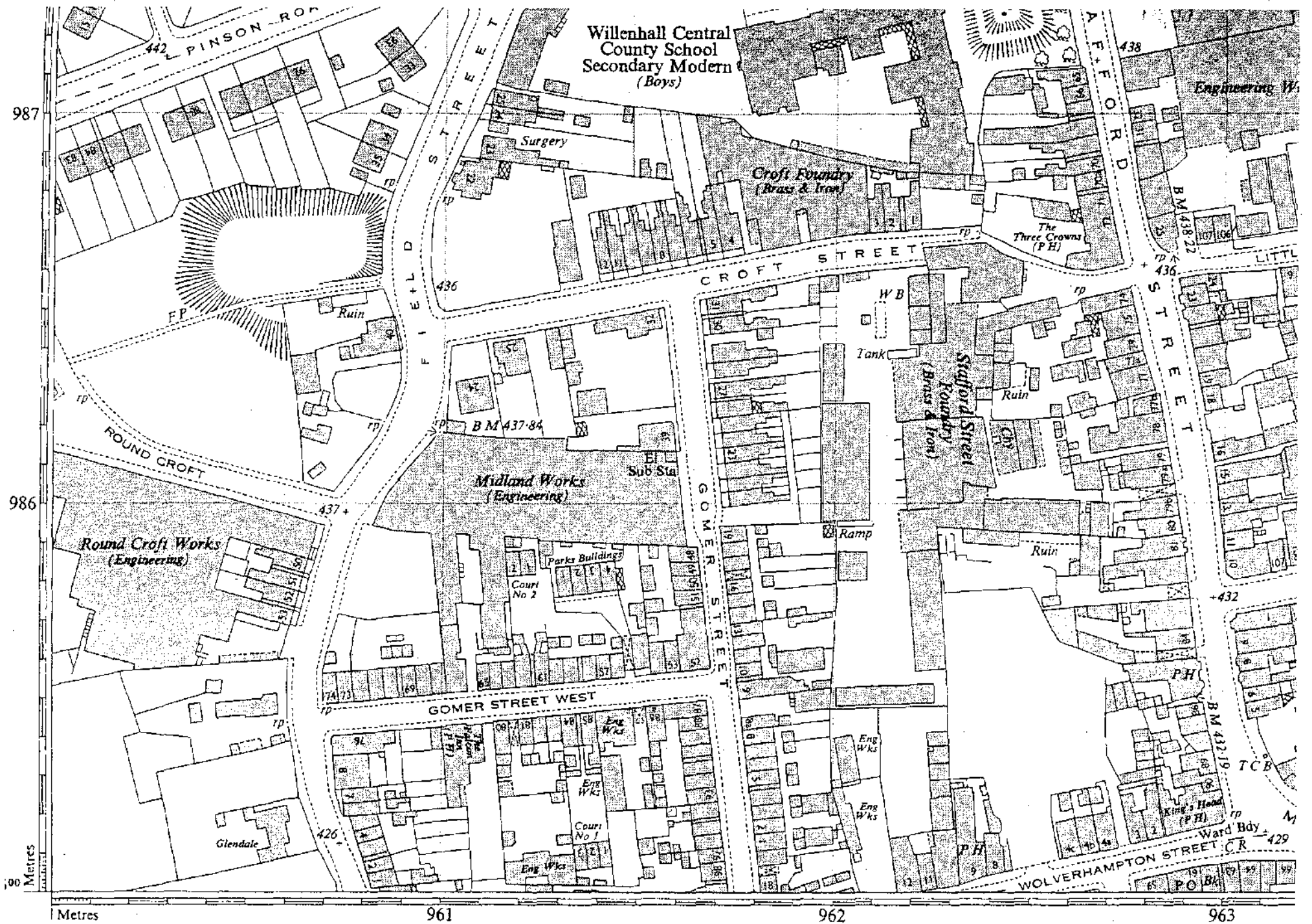


Fig.10

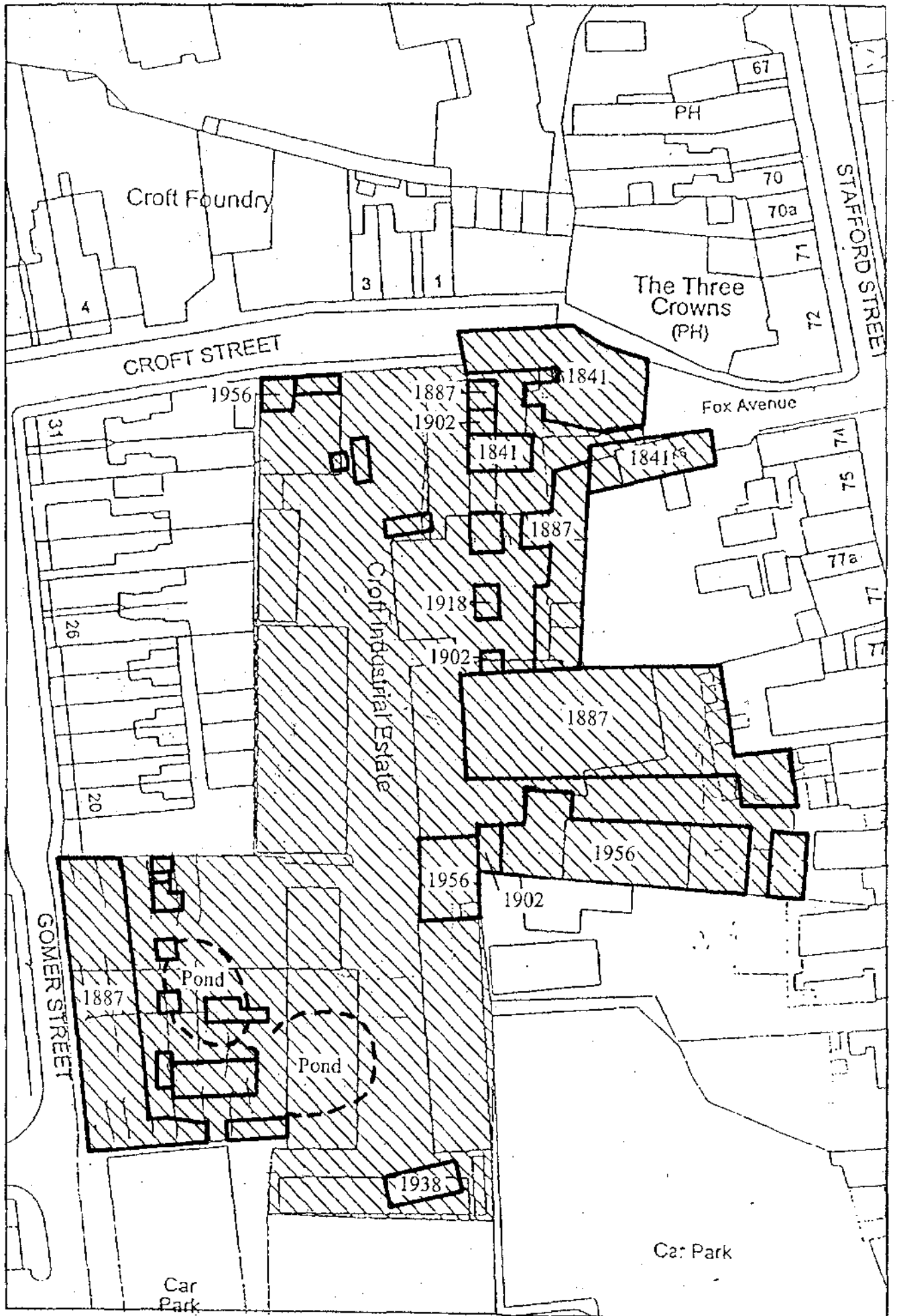


Fig 11