



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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**A Building Record of Ley
Hill House,
Northfield, Birmingham**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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**A Building Record of Ley Hill House,
Northfield, Birmingham**

by
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1.0 Summary

In March 2002, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit undertook the recording of Ley Hill House, Merrit's Hill, Northfield, Birmingham, for Birmingham City Council in advance of demolition. Documentary research was undertaken in addition to a photographic record and a written description of the building. The house was the home of the Adkins family, for whom it was built circa 1877, and was later owned by the chocolate manufacturer Christian Kunzle. A lodge was added circa 1900 and extra accommodation in the form of a 'temporary bungalow' in 1905 designed by the Birmingham architect W. De Lacy Aherne. The property was acquired by Birmingham City Council in 1939.

2.0 Introduction

In March 2002, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit undertook the recording of Ley Hill House, Merrits Hill, Northfield, Birmingham, for Birmingham City Council. The house was the home of the Adkins family, for whom it was built, and later belonged to the chocolate manufacturer, Christian Kunzle. Documentary research was undertaken in addition to a photographic record and a written description of the building.

The project was carried out in accordance with a brief issued by Birmingham City Council (Birmingham City Council 2002), and with the Code of Conduct, standards and appropriate guidelines and practices of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA 1999). In addition, the work conformed to a methods statement prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU 2002).

3.0 Site Location

Ley Hill House is situated on the south side of Merrits Hill, Northfield, in south Birmingham at NGR SP003807 (Fig.1).

4.0 Objectives

The aim of the archaeological work was to provide a basic record of the building prior to demolition, through a combination of visual and photographic survey, supplemented by documentary research and building analysis.

5.0 Method

The archaeological record consisted of a visual inspection, written notes, and documentary and cartographic research into the overall development of the building. Documentary records in the Central Library Archives and Local Studies departments were consulted, as well as the deeds kept by Birmingham City Council Property Services. A full photographic survey was carried out using 35mm format black and white print

film. This was supplemented by colour print photography for inclusion within this report, and by selected colour transparencies for presentation use. All photographs were clearly labelled and numbered.

6.0 Historical Background

In 1840, the site on which Ley Hill House stands was part of a large field described in the tithe apportionment as 'Big Cumberflat' and as being under arable (Northfield Parish Tithe Map). It formed part of the holding of John Green, tenant of nearby Ley Hill Farm, and was owned by John Spittle. An indenture of 23 October 1862, listed amongst the deeds for Ley Hill House (BCC. 6243), between a John Spittle and Henry Adkins, probably concerned the purchase of the land on which the house stands, for a series of subsequent references in the deeds suggests that the Adkins family were the owners of the Ley Hill estate from that time until 1918. It was almost certainly for them that the house was built.

By 1877 (Robbins' map of Northfield, Fig.2), an anonymous square building, isolated in the north-west corner of the field, was occupying the position of the main apartments to the existing house. In 1884, however, (Ordnance Survey 1st edition, Fig.3), the house appeared in its present form, annotated as 'Ley Hill', and situated within a large wooded garden entered from Merrit's Hill. There were no outbuildings within the immediate grounds, but a little further to the west, on the opposite side of a lane that formed the western boundary of the garden, and entered separately from Merrit's Hill, was a rectangular enclosure with buildings defining the east and west sides. It is possible that these buildings represent the stables and coach house that must have existed to serve the house.

By 1904 (Ordnance Survey 2nd edition, Fig.4) the land to the south of the house had been landscaped, and a lake created, and a lodge had been built at the entrance to the grounds of Ley Hill House. This lodge survived at least until 1957 when it was photographed.¹ The photograph shows a brick building of *circa* 1900 displaying diminished echoes of vernacular revival. The upper storey was decorated with applied timber framing, and the lodge had steeply pitched plain tile roofs. A gabled single storey porch on the east side faced east towards the drive. The south and east sides were open but the north side was closed with a screen, consisting of a fretted, diamond patterned upper part, and a single-panelled lower part. Towards the road (north) was a large 2-storey gable, and to the right (west) of it a lateral external chimney stack.

On 23rd March 1905 Ley Hill House was taken on a fourteen year lease by Charles Henry Palethorpe Esquire.² An inventory was made of the fittings belonging to the owner, Henry Adkins, in which a number of rooms were mentioned. These were the back hall, servants' hall, kitchen, pantry No.1, pantry No.2, lavatory, entrance hall, breakfast room, smoke room, drawing room, dining room, bedroom No.1, Bedroom No.2, dressing room, bedroom No.3, W.C., bedroom No.4, small bedroom, store room, back landing, three

¹ Warwickshire Photographic Society, Birmingham Local Studies WK/N2/183.

² BCC 6243. Typed transcript of indenture between Adkins and Palethorpe

back bedrooms, courtyard, gardens and orchard, stable yard, carriage house, and saddle room.

Palethorpe was not to make any structural alterations, but, owing to the house having insufficient accommodation for his requirements, was given permission to erect a two-storey bungalow. This building, which was to house a recreation room, billiard room, gun room and sewing room,³ was designed by the Birmingham architect W. De Lacy Ahern, whose drawings show a substantial 2-storey timber framed building with high roof, attached to the south-west corner of Ley Hill House (BBP 1903). It faced south towards the garden, and had a balustraded verandah approached by a flight of steps. There was a large gabled projection on the right hand (east) side. This building appears on the third edition of the Ordnance Survey map of 1916 (Fig.5). By this time too, a boat house had been built next to the lake, and the courtyard to the west had had buildings added to it.

On 30 December 1918, the Ley Hill estate changed hands when Henry Adkins, Esquire, now of Little Birch, Herefordshire, sold it to Christian Kunzle, Chocolate Manufacturer, of Broad Street, Birmingham for £8,600.⁴ The Kunzle family's interest in Ley Hill House was short lived, for on 23 February 1939 Christian Kunzle sold the estate for £21,5000 to the City of Birmingham to whom it still belongs.⁵ An agreement of tenancy was drawn up on the same day whereby Kunzle leased the property from the City for a term of one year from 25 March 1939. The agreement was terminated on 25th March 1940 by notice given 7th September 1939.⁶

The next recorded tenant was Air Training Corps 2016 (Weoley Castle) Squadron who took out a lease on 23 August 1944 for an initial period of six months, and thereafter on a quarterly basis.⁷ A plan accompanying this document shows that some of the buildings in the stable yard were now garages, and that Palethorpe's 'temporary bungalow', though it was still in existence when the fourth edition of the Ordnance Survey map was issued in 1935 (Fig.6), was no longer extant.

Description

Ley Hill House (Plate 1) is a large dwelling with stuccoed walls, incised to suggest ashlar (Plate 2), and steeply pitched slate roofs. It is aligned east-west, faces north, and comprises a main block to the east containing the principal apartments, and a service wing to the west. Communication within the main block was originally centred on a large entrance hall containing the principal staircase. At ground level this hall gave direct access to the principal rooms, and to the service wing, and, via the staircase, to the first floor landing. The landing communicated with the main bedrooms and the service wing. At both ground and first floor levels a corridor extends through the entire length of the

³ BBP 1903, letter from W. De Lacy Ahern, architect, to A.W. Cross, Engineer and Surveyor, King's Norton and Northfield UDC.

⁴ BCC 62/13, conveyance.

⁵ *Ibid.*, conveyance.

⁶ *Ibid.*, letter from Evershed & Tomkins, solicitors, 6243.

⁷ *Ibid.*, agreement for tenancy.

service wing, the two being linked directly by a service stair on south side. This stair was housed within a turret.

The two storey house has an irregular entrance front, roughly eight window bays in length, the roof line being broken up towards the left hand (east) side by a series of gables with decorative barge boards and external king post trusses and pendants. It has plate glass sash windows with horns (Plate 3). Two corrugated stucco bands (Plate 4) link the heads of the ground floor windows and the sills of the first floor windows. The main apartments are to the left (east) and the service wing is to the right (west). The service wing is plainer in character but differs from the main house in having segmental-headed windows (Plate 5). To the rear, and standing high above the roof, is the pyramidal roof of the three storey turret that houses the service stair. The east and south elevations were lit by a series of large bay windows.

The focus of the main front is the gabled entrance bay (Plate 6) towards the left hand (east) side of the elevation. At ground level it incorporates an elaborate porch of ornate timber framing in a fantastic Gothic style with hints of chinoiserie (Plate 7). Unusually, it has two doorways; the main one to the right is set beneath a half hipped gable, which has decorated barge boards containing fretted quatrefoils in squares with raised borders (Plate 8). At the apex, fitted through one of the quatrefoils is a bracket for a lamp. Gables in a similar style ornament the east and west ends of the porch. The main door is essentially an eight-panelled structure onto which a large central diagonally placed square panel has been superimposed. At the centre is a large brass door knob. The second doorway, to the left (east), has lost its original door. Above the porch is a large tripartite window with leaded lights.

Interior

The main entrance to the ground floor is now through the left hand doorway. This gives access to a porch with decorative tiled floor (Plate 9) and moulded dado rail to the left hand side. This rail is now interrupted by a panel containing a radiator. Ahead is an open round-headed entrance arch leading to the hall. This is two stories in height, and the staircase and first floor landing balustrade, both of which are now boxed in, originally extended respectively along its west and south sides. Four pendants are suspended from the ceiling, and must be connected with the first floor landing. The main staircase can now only be reached from the main doorway or from upstairs.

From the hall four original doorways lead respectively east to the dining room, south to the drawing room (east) and breakfast room (west), and west to the service wing passage. The doorways have moulded architraves with plain stops, and the same type appears to have been used throughout the building (Plate 10). Above the door to the service wing is an overlight containing leaded glasswork in a floral design. The staircase is a straight flight leading directly from the front doorway. It retains a few turned balusters in a mid-seventeenth century style, and has large newels at ground and first floor level with heavily embossed heads (Plate 11).

The *dining room* occupies the north-east corner of the house, and was lit by a large square bay window that filled most of the east wall. This has a moulded timber surround linked to a panelled dado which extends all around the room. The panels contain diagonally placed slats. Although it has been cleverly integrated with the window surround this dado does not seem to be original. Suspicions are aroused by the treatment of a wide square headed opening that has been broken through the west wall from the entrance hall. The dado continues across the northern side of this opening, whereas on the south side the dado rail of the hall is continued. In addition, there is now no fireplace in this room, but originally one must have been situated in the centre of the west wall, which corresponds with the position of a chimney breast in the hall. The dado, however, covers this place, and must have been inserted after the fireplace went out of use. Above the dado the walls are divided into large plain panels fielded by timber surrounds.

A large inserted opening in the south wall leads to the *drawing room*, a chamber of similar proportions to the dining room. This room also contains a wooden panelled dado., the panels being slightly recessed within moulded surrounds. Here again, the dado seems to be an insertion. The fireplace must have been in the east wall where there is an external chimney, but there is no break in the dado. The arrangement of the feature is irregular, the panels being of at least three different sizes (1ft square; 1ft x 19½"; 1ft 1"x 1ft 2"), disposed asymmetrically.

The upper wall is divided into panels with moulded plaster surrounds. These too are irregular in their disposition. The original doorway from the hall, in the north-west corner of the room, breaks into one of panels, and another panel fits the area over the inserted opening from the dining room. The room is lit to the south by a large full height canted bay window with seats around the side lights. A three tier sash window fills the central light, allowing access to the garden.

In the west wall is an inserted six-panelled door with moulded architrave which now leads into what was probably the *breakfast room*, lit by a full height canted bay window with three tier sash in the centre. Around the south side of the room is a Jacobean style plaster frieze (Plate 12), depicting scrolls, flowers and cartouches. This room was entered from the hall. There is no fireplace, but this must have been in the west wall where there is a chimney breast.

Two inserted doorways to the west now lead into what must have been the *smoking room*, but it was originally entered from the passage in the service wing. This room has a Tudor-arched fireplace in the south wall (Plate 13) with panelled spandrels. 'Crossthwaites Patent No.2496' is embossed on the cast iron hood above the fire box. The hood incorporates an ogee-arch which terminates in a fleur-de-lys. Either side of the fireplace is a tall sash window, and there is a moulded picture rail around the room.

The service rooms were situated on the north side of a passageway leading from the hall to a doorway at the west end of the house. None of them retains any distinguishing features. Situated roughly mid-way along this passage, and housed in a square turret, is a service staircase with stick balusters that leads to the first floor.

First Floor

From the head of the main stair, a doorway on the west side led to the service wing, and a large semi-circular arched opening on the east side, similar to the entrance from the porch to the hall, gives access to the balustraded landing that overlooked the hall. From this landing doors opened south and east to the principal bedrooms situated over the ground floor apartments. The largest is over the dining room and is entered independently from the landing. It retains a fireplace with marble surround (Plate 14) in the west wall. The south doorway led to a lobby which then gave access to three smaller chambers. The westernmost of these had a fireplace in the west wall, with marble surround, badly damaged at the time of the survey, and a moulded plaster cornice. It was lit to the south by a canted bay window.

As at ground level, the service wing contained a passageway. This gave access to a large bedroom on the south side and to a number of small rooms, probably servants' rooms, on the north side. The area beyond the service staircase was not accessible at the time of the survey.

7.0 Discussion

The cartographic evidence suggests that when the parish was mapped in 1877, Ley Hill House was under construction, the main apartments being the only part to have been erected at that point. The service wing and ancillary buildings were yet to be started. This seems to pinpoint the date of the house fairly accurately to *circa* 1877, a date that is not incompatible with the architectural evidence.

8.0 Acknowledgements

This project was managed for BUFAU by Steve Litherland. The recording work was carried out by Malcolm Hislop assisted by Erica Macey. Malcolm Hislop also undertook the documentary research and compiled this report.

9.0 Sources

9.1 Cartographic Sources

Northfield parish tithe map 1840 (Birmingham Local Studies, 299991)

W. Robbins map of the parish of Northfield 1877 (Birmingham Local Studies, 244264)

Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1884

Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 1904

Ordnance Survey 3rd edition 1916

Ordnance Survey 4th edition 1935

9.2 Primary Sources

BBP 1903: Kings Norton and Northfield UDC Building Plan No.1903 (April 1905)
Birmingham City Archives.

BCC 6243: Birmingham City Council Property Services, Packet 6243: Deeds relating to
Northfield Parish.

Northfield parish tithe apportionment 1838 (Birmingham Local Studies, 299990)

9.3 Secondary Sources

Birmingham City Council. 2002. *Brief for Historic Building Recording of Ley Hill House*

BUFAU. 2002. *Method Statement, Ley Hill House*

IFA. 1999. *Standard and guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of
standing buildings or structures.*

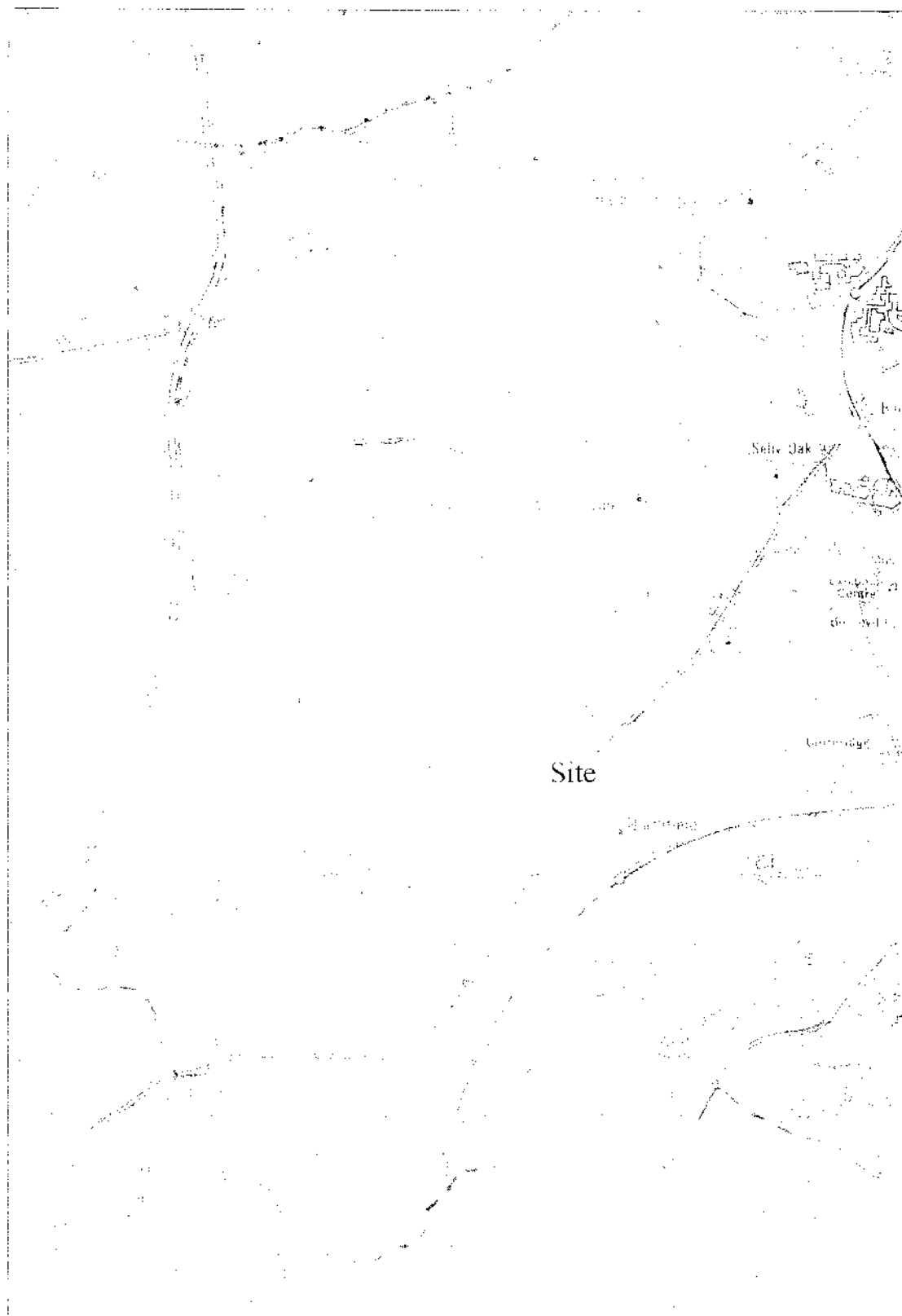


Fig.1

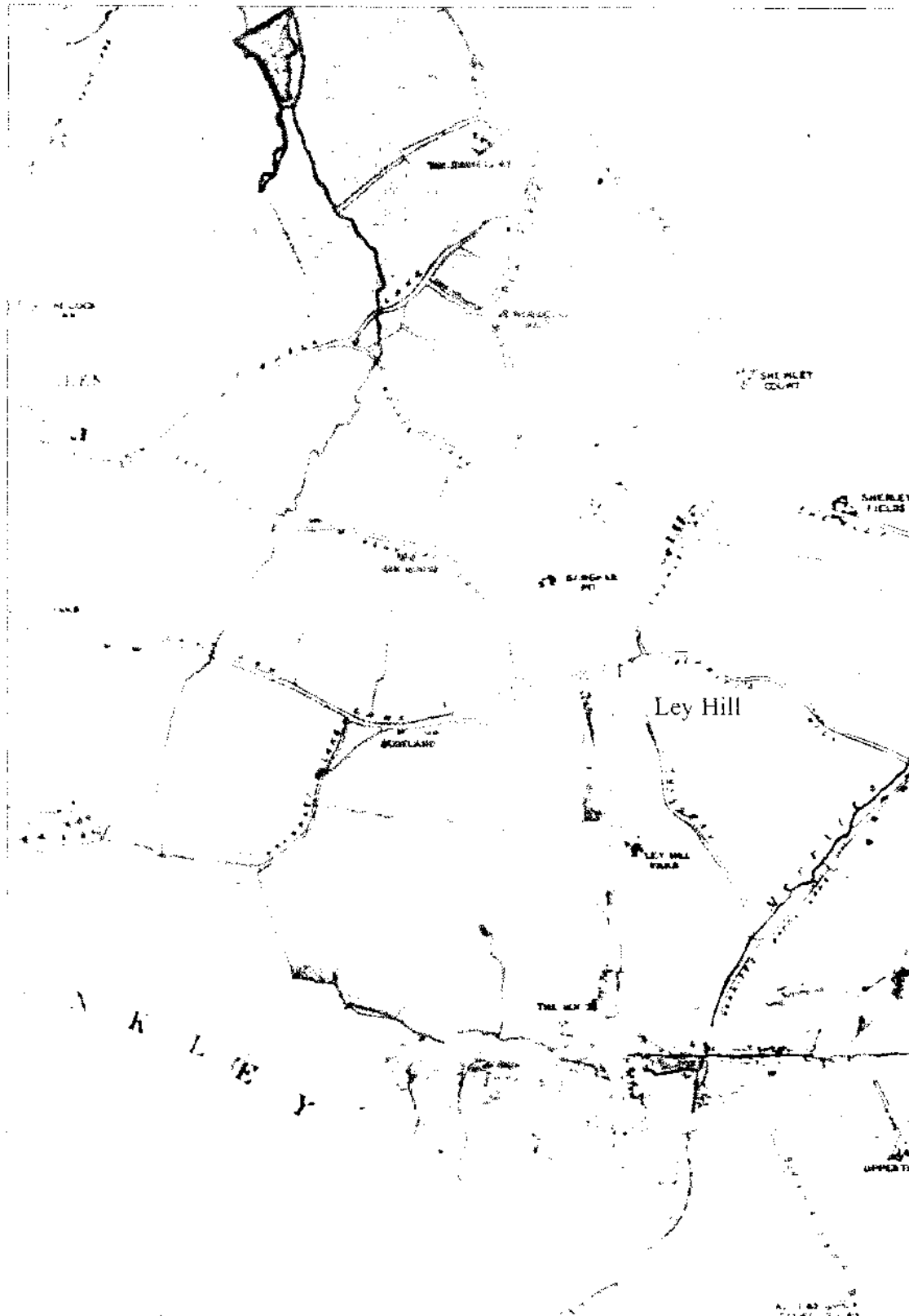


Fig. 2.

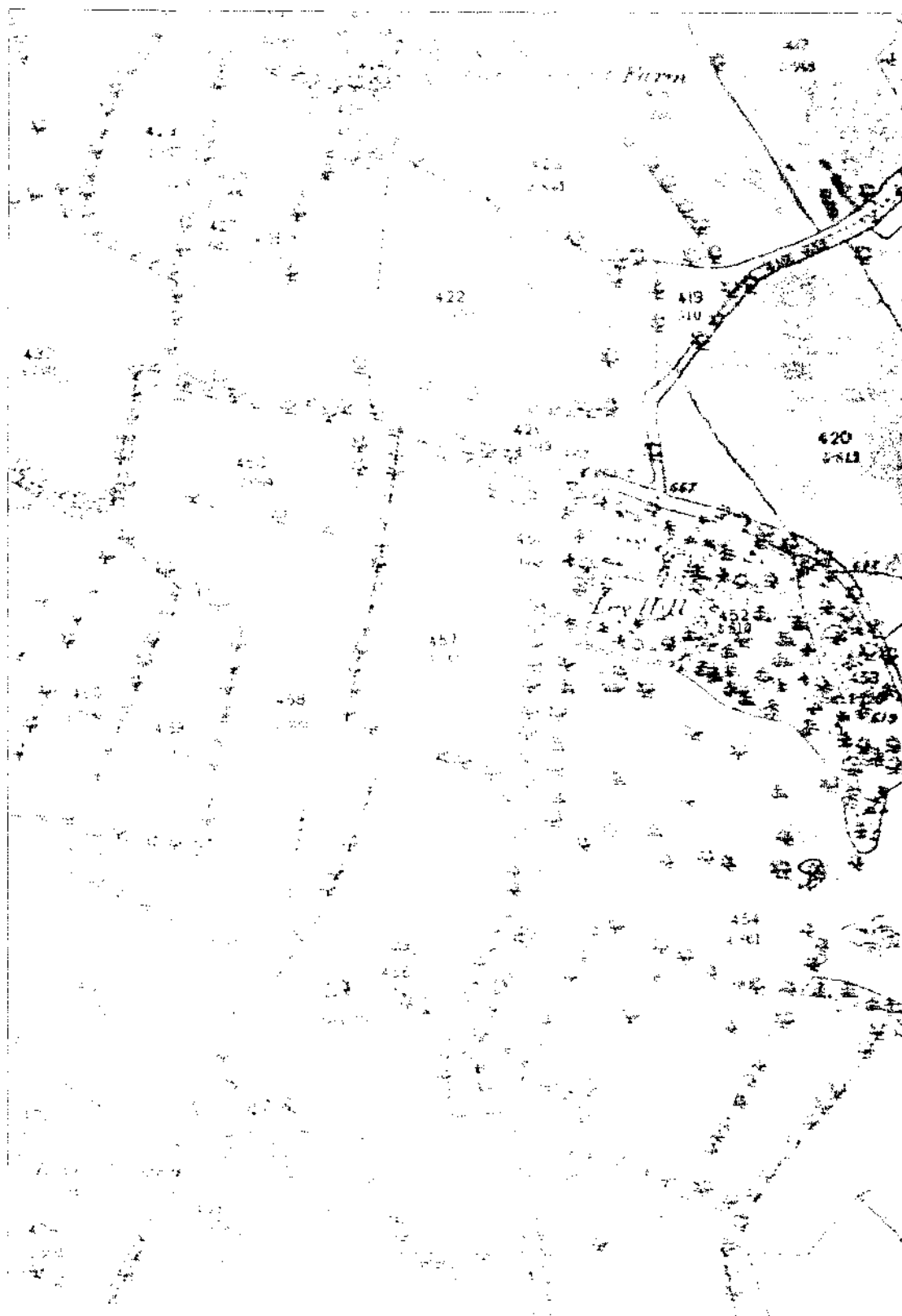


Fig.3.

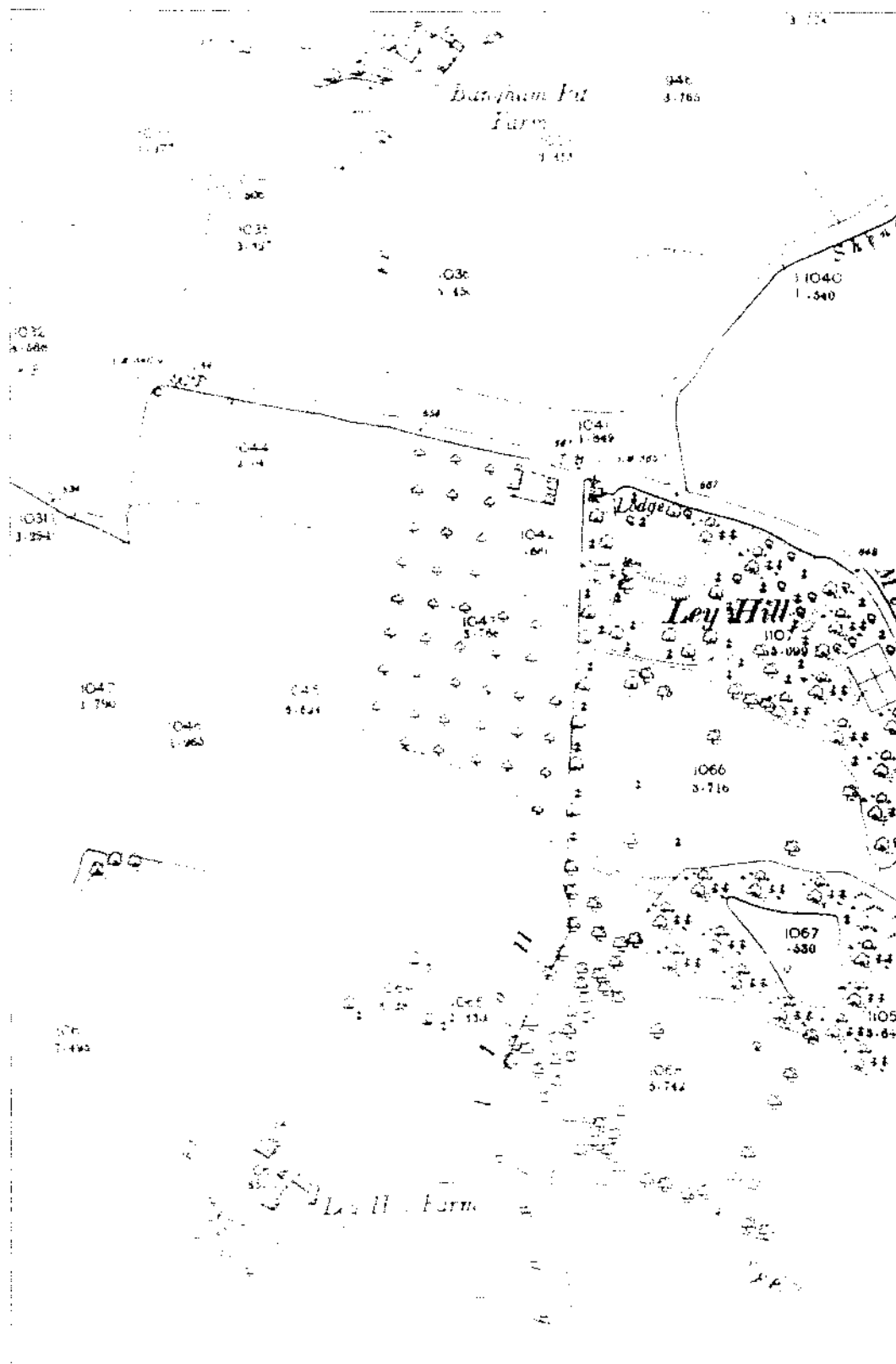


Fig. 4.

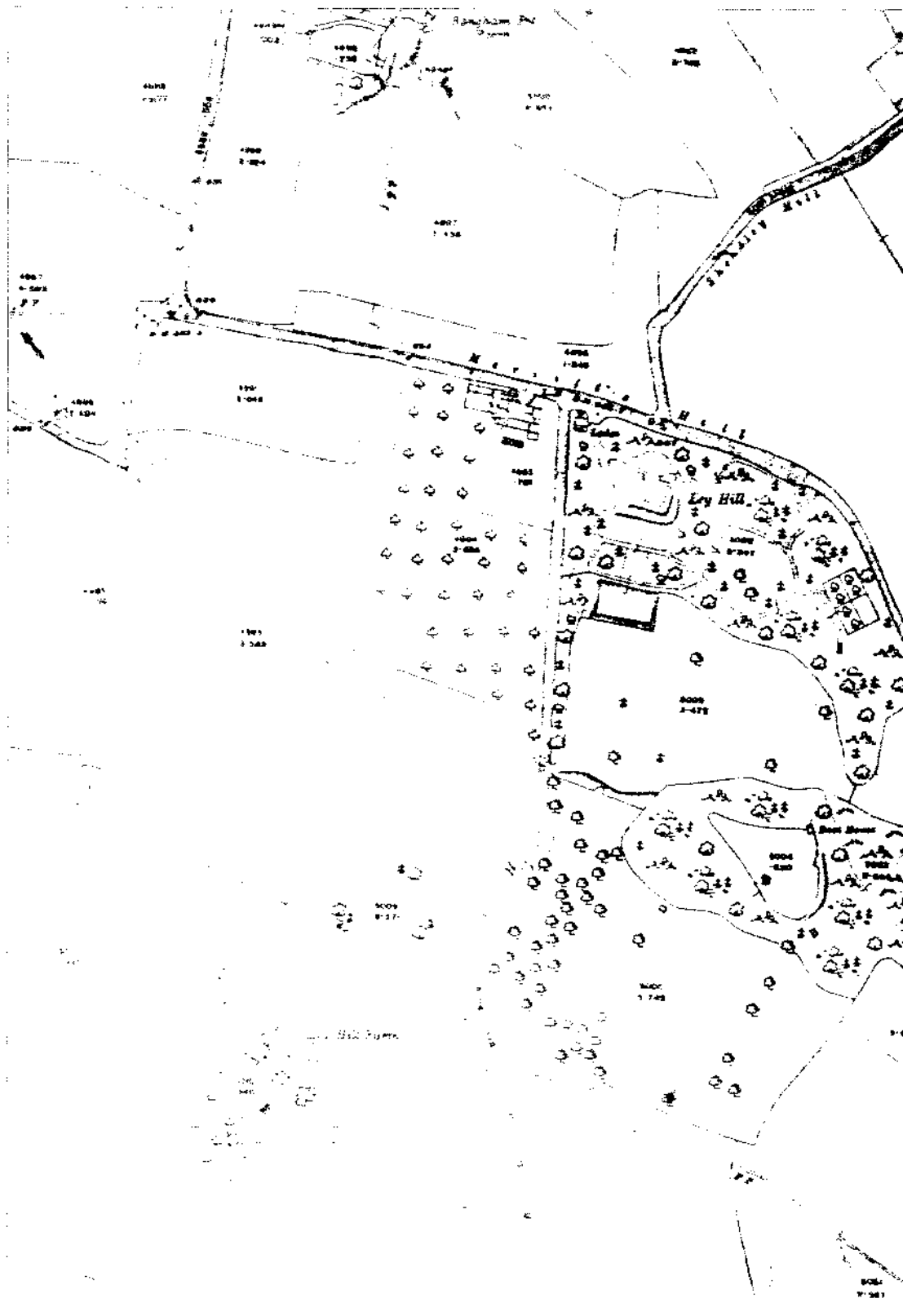
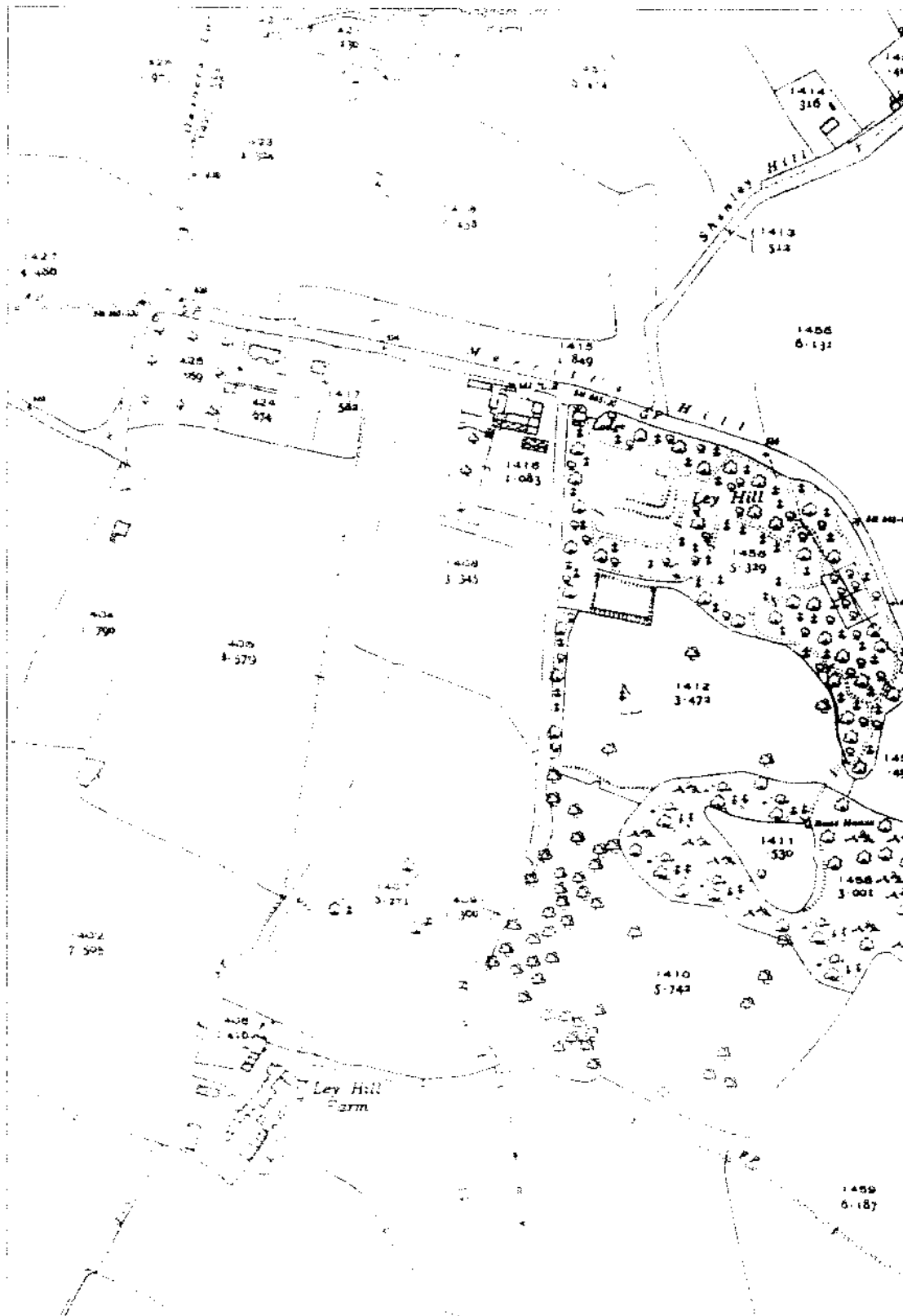


Fig 5.



119.



Plate 1.

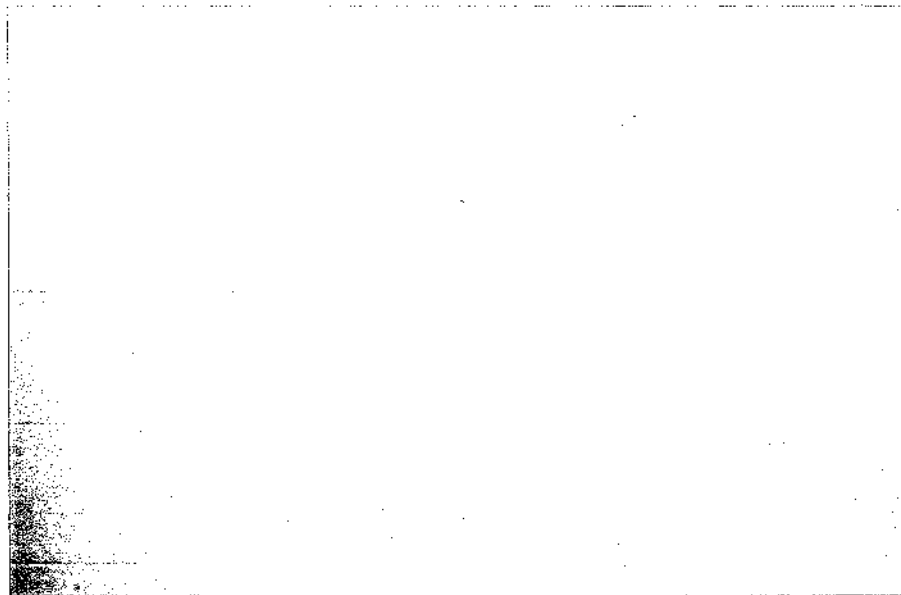


Plate 2.

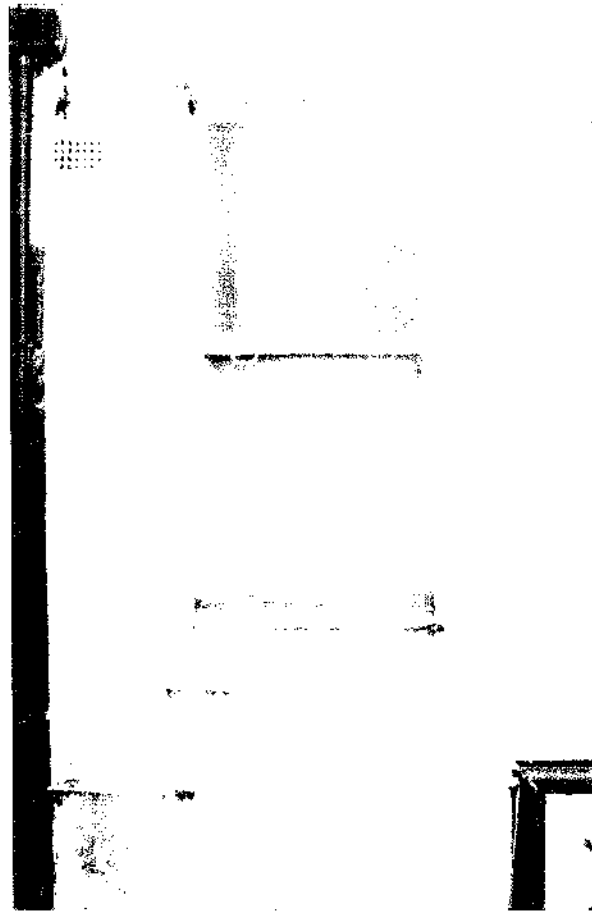


Plate 3

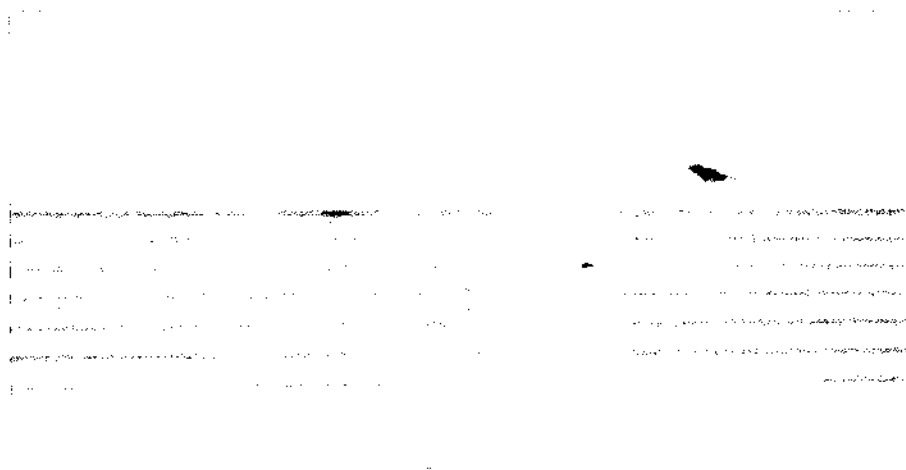


Plate 4.

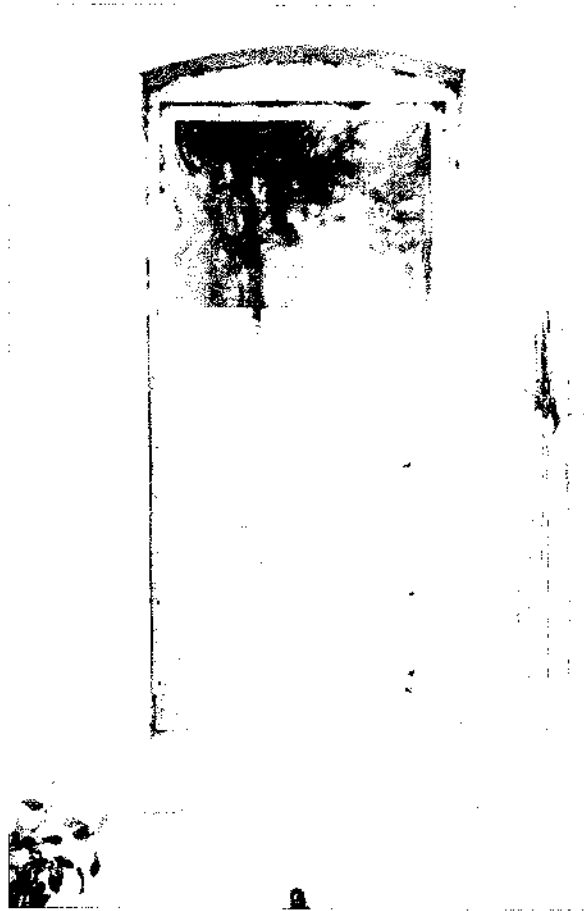


Plate 5.



Plate 6.



Plate 7.



Plate 8.

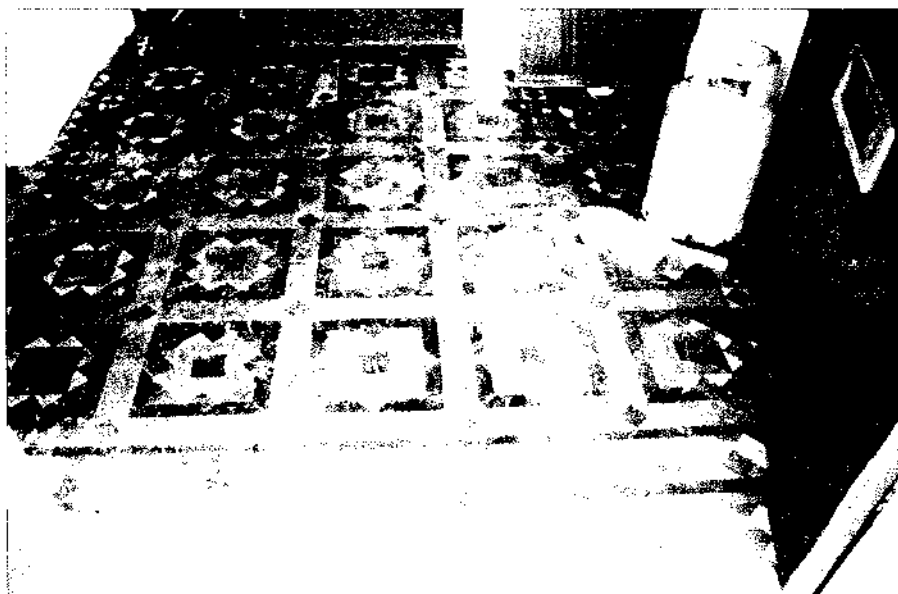


Plate 9.

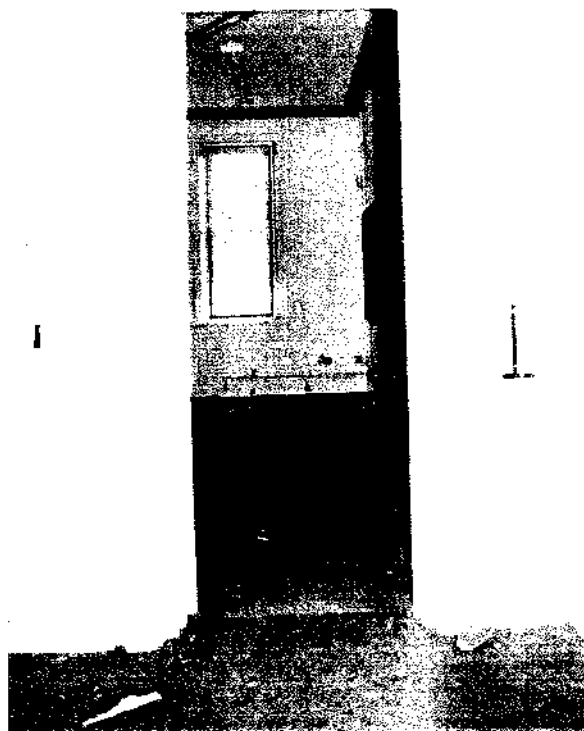


Plate 10.



Plate 11.

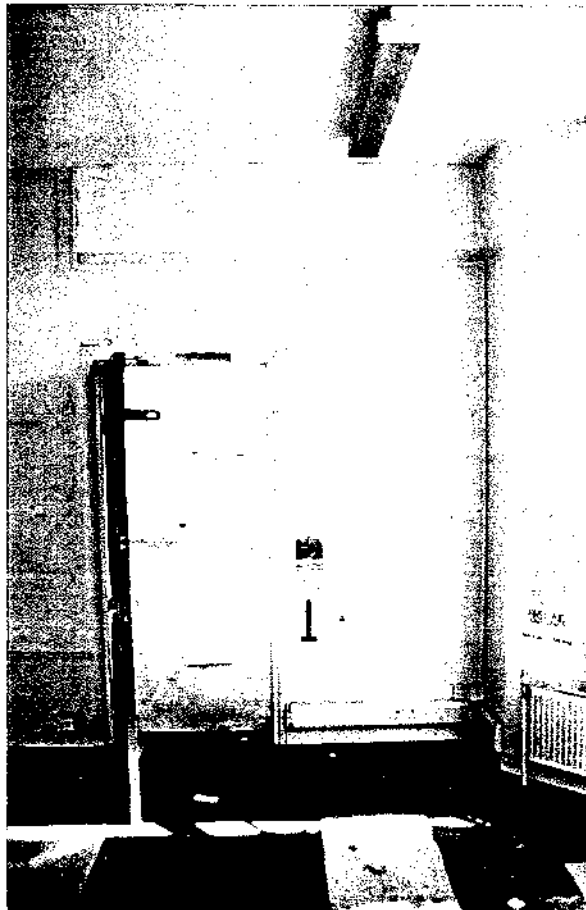


Plate 12

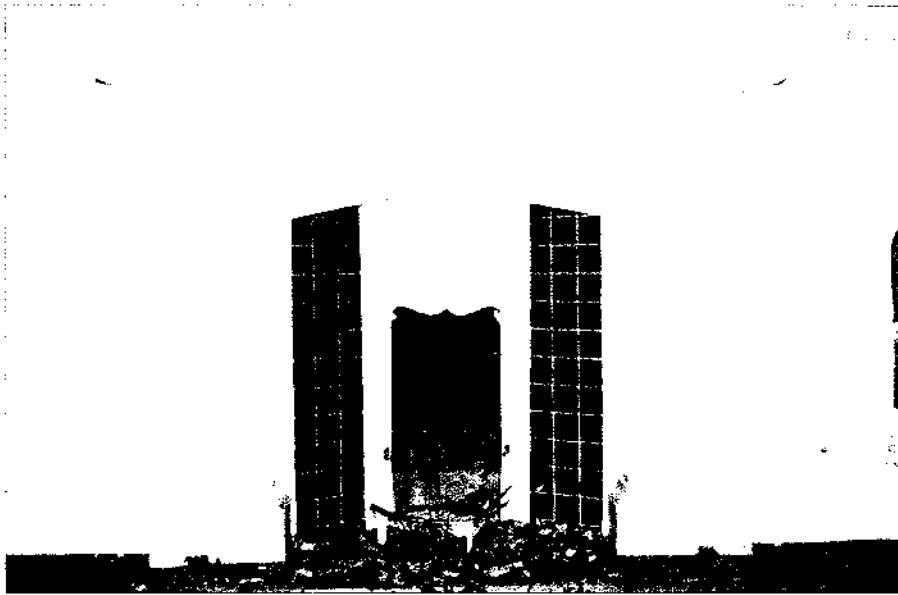


Plate 13.

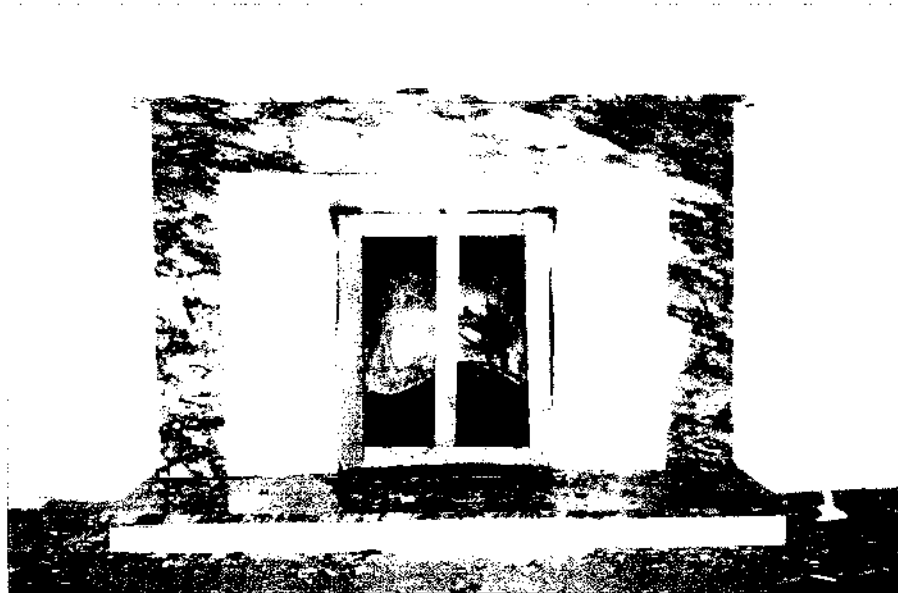


Plate 14.