

**Oswestry Railway Lands
An Archaeological Desk-
Based Assessment**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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by
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Oswestry Railway Lands: A Desk Based Assessment

1.0 Summary

An archaeological assessment of former Cambrian Railway lands at Oswestry, Shropshire (centred on NGR 2948297), was commissioned by GVA Grimley, as part of a feasibility study for the regeneration of the site, carried out on behalf of Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency. The assessment, which was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) in July 2002, comprised an evaluation of the historic documentary and mapping evidence for Oswestry together with a walkover survey of the site. This study concluded that remains of Wat's Dyke, and associated earthworks of medieval and sixteenth century date, might survive below the present ground surface, and it is recommended that archaeological evaluation precede any ground breaking activities in order to assess the extent of any survival. Otherwise, the Study Area does not appear to have been developed until the mid-19th century with the coming of the railway system, when it became the site of the Cambrian Railway headquarters. Several buildings from the Cambrian Railway complex survive, notably a station, locomotive works and engine shed, all of the 1860s, and a later 19th century signal box and footbridge, all of which are Grade II Listed Buildings. This collection of structures from a railway headquarters is unusually extensive, and represents a particularly significant grouping, the preservation of which is vital to retaining the historic character of the Study Area.

2.0 Introduction

In July 2002 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit carried out an archaeological desk-based assessment of former Cambrian Railway lands at Oswestry, Shropshire, on behalf of GVA Grimley, as one element of a wider feasibility study by Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency, that will inform the production of a master plan for the site. The lands in question form a vacant/derelict town centre brownfield site, 6.7 ha. in area, which the Borough Council wishes to see developed as part of their vision for the future vitality and viability of Oswestry town centre. Part of the scheme involves a proposal by the Cambrian Railway Trust to attract visitors to the site through the development of a heritage railway facility.

The assessment was informed by the Advantage West Midlands brief (2002) and carried out according to the guidelines set down by the Institute of Field Archaeologists in the *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-based Assessments* (IFA 1999). Recommendations about the archaeology and historic environment have been made within the framework of national planning policy as outlined in Planning Policy Guidance Notes 15 (DoE 1994) and 16 (DoE 1990).

3.0 Site Location (Figures 1-4)

The Study Area is located on the western outskirts of the historic town centre of Oswestry, Shropshire (centred on NGR 2948297). It comprises an elongated strip of land

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aligned northeast-southwest and centred on the former Cambrian Railway line. The northwest boundary closely follows the line of the railway, and abuts the main road to Gobowen towards the north, and by Oswald Road towards the south. The southeast boundary is more irregular but is also defined by the property boundaries of the former Cambrian Railway.

4.0 Objectives

- To define the likely extent, survival and significance of archaeological remains, including historic buildings, in the Study Area.
- To determine the need for further archaeological assessment by field evaluation in advance of consideration of development proposals.
- To determine the need for preservation of archaeological remains including historic buildings, and/or further work in advance of or during development.

5.0 Method

A walk over survey of the Study Area was carried out in order to assess current conditions and to evaluate the standing buildings and monuments in respect of their historic/architectural interest. Documentary research of primary and secondary sources was undertaken at Shropshire Records Office and at the library of the University of Birmingham. Shropshire SMR, the primary source of known archaeological information for the county, was also consulted.

6.0 Present Character

The Study Area is no longer used by the main railway system. Most of the tracks have been taken up, though one line extends through the entire site and some sidings remain towards the south end that are used by the Cambrian Railway Society. A strip of land on the northwest side of the Study Area, running from Whittington Road at its northeast apex, to Llwyn Road, is largely open ground, devoid of buildings, though used by the Cambrian Railway Society to display some of its rolling stock.

To the southeast of this section is the former Cambrian Works, a locomotive manufactory, which is in a good state of preservation and maintenance, and now given over to a number of different activities, of which the most prominent is an antiques business. In front of this building, approximately one third of the width of the is occupied by a car park.

Most of the remainder of the Study Area south and southwest of the former Cambrian Works is apparently untended and overgrown, and used by local people for exercising their dogs. This area includes the former railway station. The station buildings on the west side of the track, which face the town, survive remarkably well, though they are

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currently empty and awaiting refurbishment. The station on the east side of the track has been largely demolished, though the remains of a brick platform can still be seen.

To the south of the station the surviving railway lines are occupied by rolling stock belonging to the Cambrian Railway Society. Adjacent to these in the extreme southwest of the Study Area lies the former parcel shed, now occupied by the Oswestry Transport Museum, and a former signal box, currently disused and in a poorly maintained state.

7.0 Historical and Archaeological Development

Pre 19th Century

In the Iron Age the area in which the town of Oswestry now stands fell within the former territory of the Cornovii. This tribe occupied the area now covered by Shropshire and adjoining parts of Cheshire, Staffordshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, and Wales, before, during and after the Roman period. To the north of the present town of Oswestry is Old Oswestry, one of the largest of Cornovian hill forts. The territory of the Cornovii appears to have formed the nucleus of a post-Roman kingdom centred on the civitas capital of Wroxeter, that was absorbed by the Anglo-Saxons of Mercia during the seventh century (Webster 1991 13, 134-140).

The place name Oswestry means 'Oswald's tree', and the town, or a place near to it, is traditionally associated with the site of the battle of *Maserfelth* of 642 in which Oswald, king of Northumbria was defeated and killed by Penda, king of Mercia, and his British allies. However, the place name expert, Margaret Gelling, is sceptical, and is of the opinion that 'Oswald's Tree' refers to a boundary marker rather than the wooden cross that King Oswald is said to have erected before the battle, and that the association of Oswestry with the battle was the result of a mis-translation of Oswestry as 'cross of Oswald' (Gelling 1992, 74-5).

It is usually to the Mercian period that Wat's Dyke is attributed. This substantial linear earthwork extends from the River Morda at Maesbury near Oswestry to Basingwerk on the Dee estuary. It lies immediately east of the town and traverses the Study Area. King Aethelbald of Mercia (716-757) is generally believed to have been responsible for its construction, and it is thought to have functioned as a boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and its Welsh neighbours (Rowley 1972). However, a recent excavation on the Dyke at Mile Oak, Oswestry, recovered a charcoal sample from the buried ground surface beneath the monument which produced a radio carbon date centred on AD 446. This has prompted the suggestion that the Dyke may be of 5th century date, and related to the post-Roman kingdom of the Cornovii. Although the Dyke is no longer visible within the Study Area, an 80m length survives in good condition immediately to the south. This part of the dyke, is scheduled as an ancient monument; so too are two cultivation terraces and a hollow way which lie immediately to the east. These earthworks are of indeterminate date but seem to represent a pre-enclosure landscape.

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At the time of the Domesday Book (1086) the manor of *Meresberie* (the name survives as modern Maesbury, a hamlet two miles south of Oswestry) had a priest, a church and a castle. During the Middle Ages the Maesbury estate was held by the FitzAlan family and developed into an important regional centre, that had expanded beyond its walls by 1400 (Dalwood 1996, 3). When John Leland visited Oswestry around 1536-9 he found that although the 16th century town comprised four main streets there were also four principal suburbs. One of these was Beatrice Street which lies to the north-west of the Study Area, and which formed part of the main route to the north. It was sufficiently well developed to contain one hundred and forty barns (Toulmin Smith 1964, III, 75), and it is possible that the origins of its settlement date back to the Middle Ages.

19th and 20th Centuries

In 1838, when the tithe apportionment map (Fig.1) was drawn up, the area was largely occupied by fields. The line of Wat's Dyke appears quite clearly traversing the Study Area. On the north side of the Holyhead Road, it is shown as a lane, and on the south side, that is to say, within the Study Area, as a field boundary. Immediately east of Wat's Dyke was a large field known as 'Shelf Bank Field'. To the northeast of this were two long narrow fields, aligned northwest-southeast and divided by a lane. They were called 'Ysabor Ward' and 'Slang'. To the northeast of 'Slang', and extending beyond the junction of the Holyhead and Ellesmere roads at the northeast apex of the Study Area was 'Fingerpost Field'. To the west of Wat's Dyke were a number of small properties, largely crofts and gardens. Several of these were long narrow properties which appeared to extend back from Beatrice Street, and may therefore represent some of the properties that were in existence in Leland's day.

By 1848 the railway age made its impact on the landscape with the opening of the Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Chester Junction Railway (Cathrall 1855). In 1862 the Oswestry and Newton Railway (O&N) was constructed and a second station built at Oswestry, and in 1864 the Oswestry section of the Oswestry, Ellesmere and Whitchurch Railway (OE&W) was opened. By this date the O&N and OE&W had merged within the new Cambrian Railways company which made its headquarters at Oswestry, and which, in 1866 opened a locomotive and carriage works, built to the design of John Robinson of Manchester (Morris 1991).

The 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map, published in 1875 (Fig.2) shows that these activities had transformed landscape depicted on the Tithe Map. The railway line now ran straight through Watt's Dyke. The whole of the northeastern arm of the Study Area was taken up by railway tracks, apart from a narrow strip of land between them and the Holyhead Road. On the southeast side of the Study Area the large rectangular mass of the Cambrian Works is clearly shown. Two railway stations are shown, one towards the south of the Study Area, apparently with buildings on both sides of the track (Fig.2, A), and the other approximately 100 yards to the north, and just outside the Study Area. Both stations were approached from the southwest by a new road, Oswald Road. At the southwest extremity of the site was a building on a northwest-southeast alignment, with sidings running towards it; this was the parcel shed (Fig.2, C).

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The Ordnance Survey 2nd edition of 1901 (Fig.3) shows that no major changes had taken place, though the signal box appears to have become a more substantial structure than the one shown on the 1st edition, three lines of sidings had appeared to the southeast of the station, and a footbridge had been built across the railway tracks between Beatrice Street and the Cambrian Works. The only further development to have occurred by 1926, when the 3rd edition of the Ordnance Survey map (Fig.4) was published, was the increase in the number of sidings to the southeast of the station, which necessitated expansion of the railway lands into the fields west of Wat's Dyke.

8.0 Historic Buildings Assessment

Railway Station (Grade II Listed)

Imposing, and somewhat Italianate in appearance, the former railway station building (Plate 1) dates from the 1860s and is constructed of red brick (Flemish bond) with stone dressings, and slate hipped roofs. It is two stories in height with rusticated quoins, moulded first floor band and moulded brackets to a moulded cavet cornice supporting the oversailing roof. The building is articulated vertically by two boldly projecting wings flanking the central entrance to produce a window rhythm of 5:4:4:4:5 bays. There are two entrances flanked by a pair of windows. All windows visible (ground floor windows were boarded up at time of survey) are glazing bar sashes (mostly 8-pane) with moulded stone sills, and moulded stone strings from which spring moulded semi-circular heads with raised key stones. Between the ground floor windows and first floor string are a series of horizontal panels. To the rear (platform front) is a full height canted bay window in stone.

Locomotive Works (Grade II Listed)

The former locomotive works (Plate 2), also of the 1860s, is built in red brick with blue brick dressings, and is roofed mainly with corrugated iron. The plan is an irregular rectangle aligned northeast-southwest, facing northwest towards the railway line, the block being made up of a series of separately roofed sheds mostly aligned northwest-southeast.

The centre piece of the main, northwest, front is a symmetrically arranged block of five coped gables, diminishing in height from a three and a half-storey centre to single storey outer wings. The block is articulated in a rhythm of 2:3:2:3:2 bays. The three centre sections contained office accommodation, whereas the two-bay outer wings were engine sheds with large semi-circular arches. There are slightly smaller ground floor openings to the offices, now mostly containing late 20th century glazing, though one carriage entrance is retained to the left. All ground storey arches spring from imposts or impost bands. The offices retain small-pane, fixed light windows with semi-circular heads and painted sills, and each of the gables contains a circular oculus, in most instances blind.

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To left and right of the central block are further engine sheds, those to the left taking the form of a low single-storey, seven bay range, aligned northwest-southeast, whereas those to the right present a further three gables to the fore, equal in height to the second tier of the main block. The southeast elevation has twelve bays of semi-circular arches, all containing blocked semi-circular arched windows except one with a locomotive entrance

A footbridge (Plate 3) dating from between 1875 and 1901 links the Cambrian Works with Gobowen Road and is included in the statutory listing. It is made of steel with some brick supports. The bridge is in two sections, a south eastern section with segmental-arched, latticed balustrade on brick supports, and a north-eastern section, with plain balustrade, supported on steel columns.

Parcel Shed (Grade II Listed)

The parcel shed (Plate 4) was also built by 1875 in a more utilitarian style than the station buildings and locomotive works. It is constructed of orange brick (English garden wall bond) and has a slate roof. The plan is rectangular and the shed is aligned roughly north-south. To the north a small rectangular office building has been added. Wagons entered from the south and were loaded from a platform that occupied the east side of the shed. The east wall has two high loading bay double doors with basket arches. To the left hand side of the north gable end is a 16-pane glazing bar sash window. To the right is low, single-storey, lean-to weighbridge office building of between 1875 and 1901 with small-pane horizontal sash windows and corner chimney stack. There is access to the platform through this building. Inside the platform survives complete with the original parcel crane, and the seven-bay roof is carried on queen post trusses.

Signal Box (Grade II Listed)

The signal box (Plate 5) of between 1875 and 1901 has a red brick (English bond) substructure, a partially weather boarded superstructure and a slate roof with decorative wooden barge boards. It is aligned north-south with an entrance to the south. This two-storey building stands on a brick plinth. There are two blind semi-circular arches at ground level, and continuous glazing bar windows along the north and east elevations. To the south a straight flight of steps leads to the door of the viewing gallery.

9.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

There are two important archaeological elements to this site. The first is Wat's Dyke which formerly extended right across the Study Area. This earthwork does not survive above ground level, and although it is probable that, during the construction of the railway, the ground level has been lowered to some extent, this does not appear to have been of sufficient magnitude to preclude the survival of remains beneath the present land surface. Wat's Dyke is regarded as a monument of national importance; it is therefore imperative that any groundworks in its vicinity, be preceded by archaeological evaluation in order to assess the extent of its survival and that of any associated pre-enclosure field

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The signal box (Plate 5) of between 1875 and 1901 has a red brick (English bond) substructure, a partially weather boarded superstructure and a slate roof with decorative wooden barge boards. It is aligned north-south with an entrance to the south. This two-storey building stands on a brick plinth. There are two blind semi-circular arches at ground level, and continuous glazing bar windows along the north and east elevations. To the south a straight flight of steps leads to the door of the viewing gallery.

9.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

There are two important archaeological elements to this site. The first is Wat's Dyke which formerly extended right across the Study Area. This earthwork does not survive above ground level, and although it is probable that, during the construction of the railway, the ground level has been lowered to some extent, this does not appear to have been of sufficient magnitude to preclude the survival of remains beneath the present land surface. Wat's Dyke is regarded as a monument of national importance; it is therefore imperative that any groundworks in its vicinity, be preceded by archaeological evaluation in order to assess the extent of its survival and that of any associated pre-enclosure field

systems and property boundaries. It is probable that during the construction of the railway, the ground surface has been lowered

The second significant element comprises the structural remains of the Cambrian Railway. The importance of this group of buildings lies in its coherence (all date from between 1864 and 1901), in its rarity as a surviving railway headquarters, and in the architectural quality of the principal structures. All the buildings described above are statutorily listed, and there is no doubt that their retention is of paramount importance in maintaining the historic character of the Study Area. Any proposals for alterations to the buildings, therefore, should have sound justification, and an archaeological record be made prior to any such works.

10.0 Acknowledgements

This report was written by Malcolm Hislop and edited by Steve Litherland who also managed the project. Nigel Dodds prepared the figures, and Edward Newton the plates. The author is grateful to Rail Property Ltd for granting access in order to carry out the walkover survey.

11.0 Sources

11.1 Textual Sources

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11.2 Cartographic Sources

1838 Oswestry tithe apportionment map

1838 Oswestry field name map based on the tithe apportionment map

1875 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.

1901 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.

1926 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.

Toulmin Smith, L. 1964. *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales*, 5 vols (Centaur edition).

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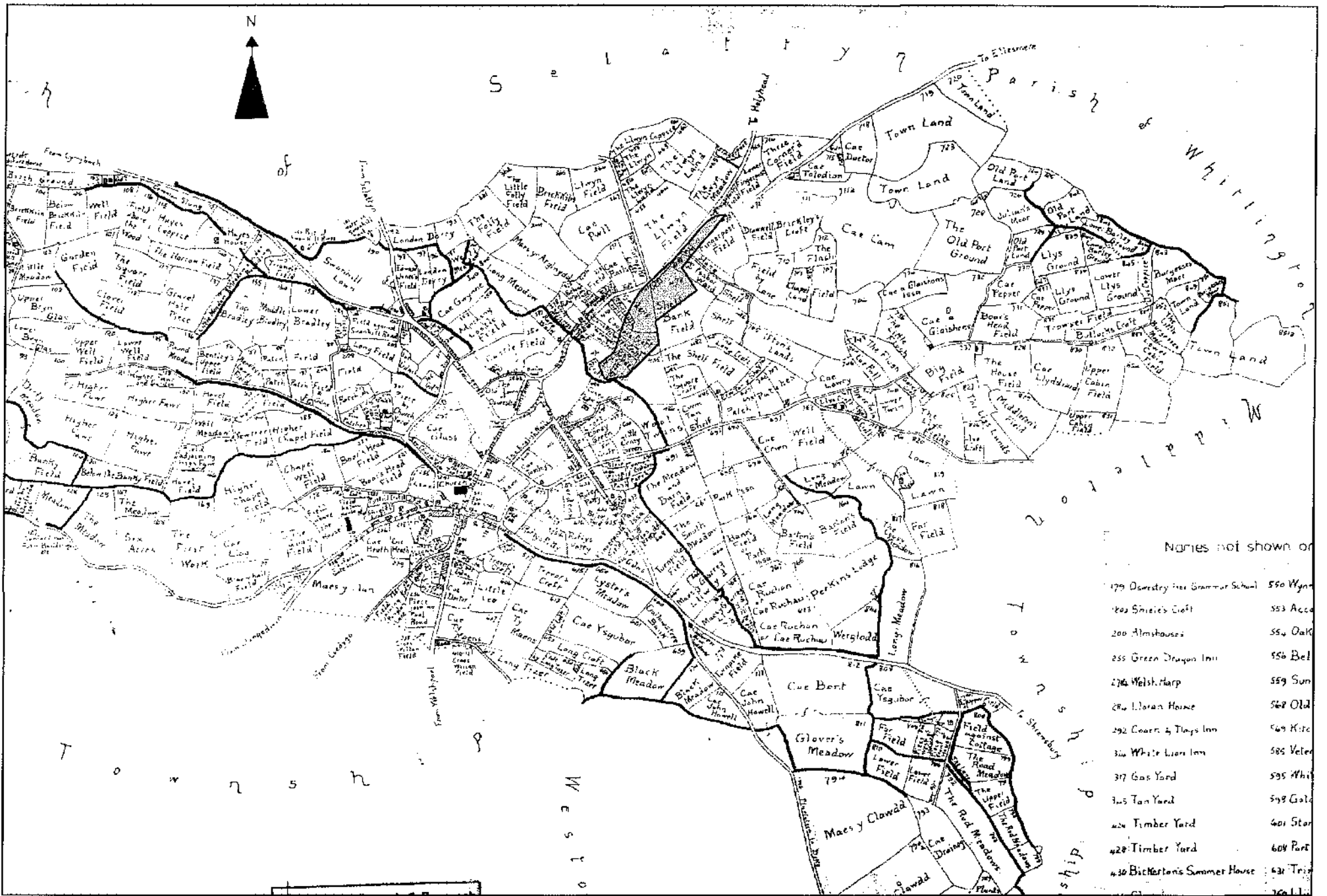
1838 Oswestry tithe apportionment map

1838 Oswestry field name map based on the tithe apportionment map

1875 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.

1901 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.

1926 Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Sheet XXII.14.



Names not shown on

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| 179 Dorestry free Grammar School | 550 Wynt |
| 182 Smele's Croft | 553 Acca |
| 200 Almshouses | 554 Oak |
| 255 Green Dragon Inn | 556 Bel |
| 276 Welsh Harp | 559 Sun |
| 284 Llanan House | 562 Old |
| 292 Covert & Tings Inn | 569 Kite |
| 316 White Lion Inn | 585 Veler |
| 377 Gas Yard | 595 Whit |
| 325 Tan Yard | 598 Gal |
| 424 Timber Yard | 601 Star |
| 428 Timber Yard | 604 Part |
| 430 Bickerton's Summer House | 632 Tri |
| | 700 L |

Fig.1 (1838)

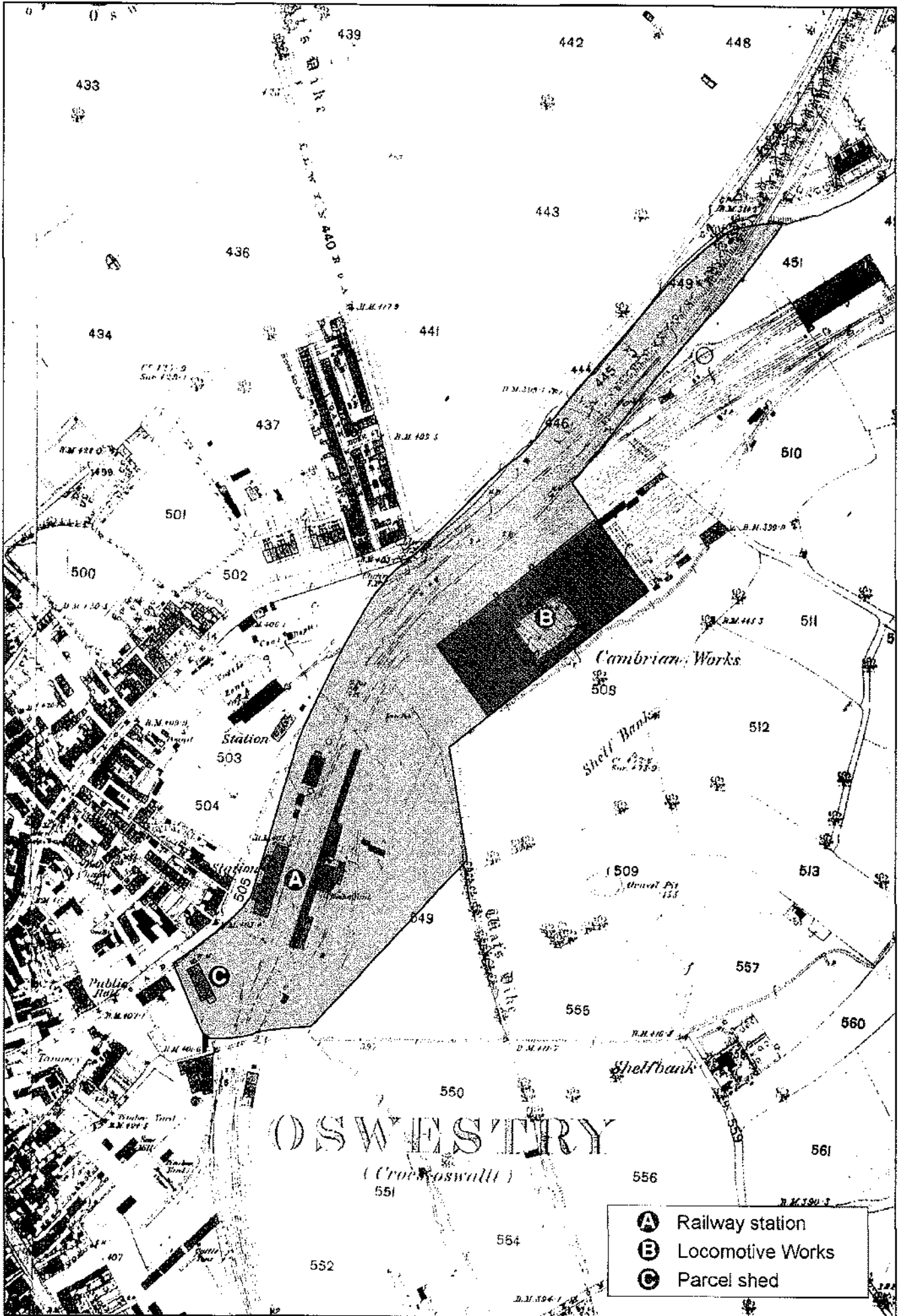


Fig.2 (1875)

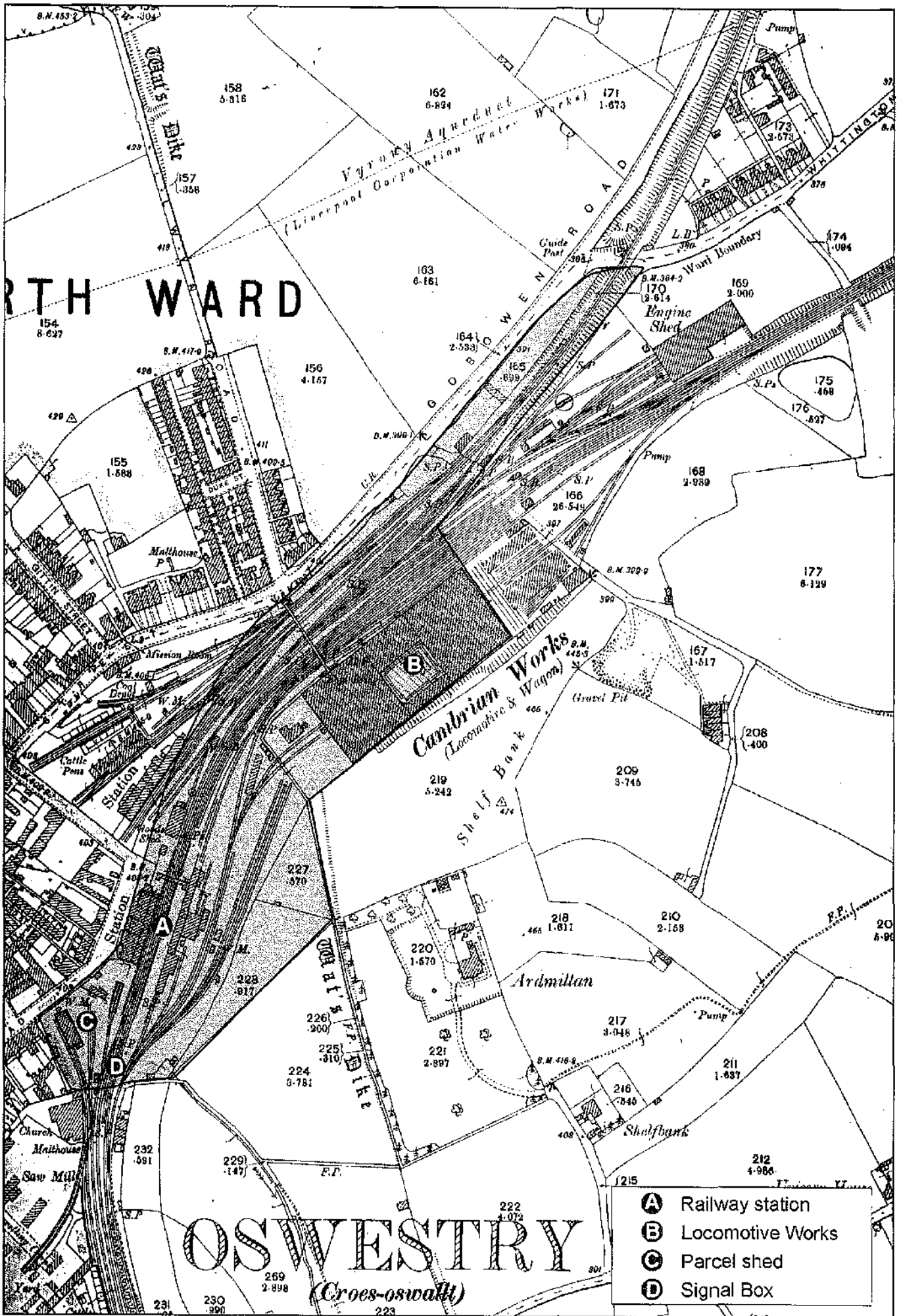


Fig.3 (1902)

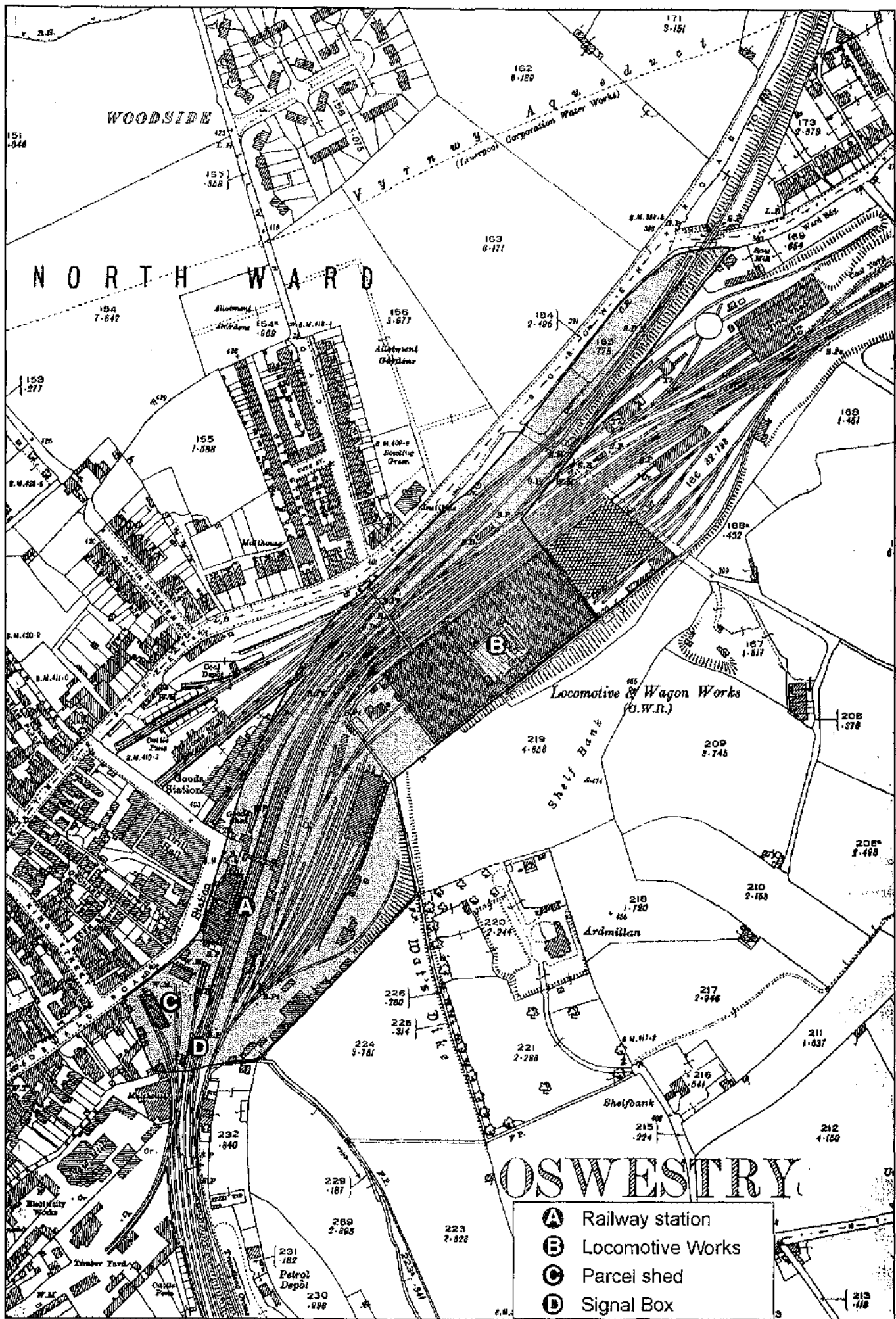


Fig.4 (1926)



Plate 1: The railway station.

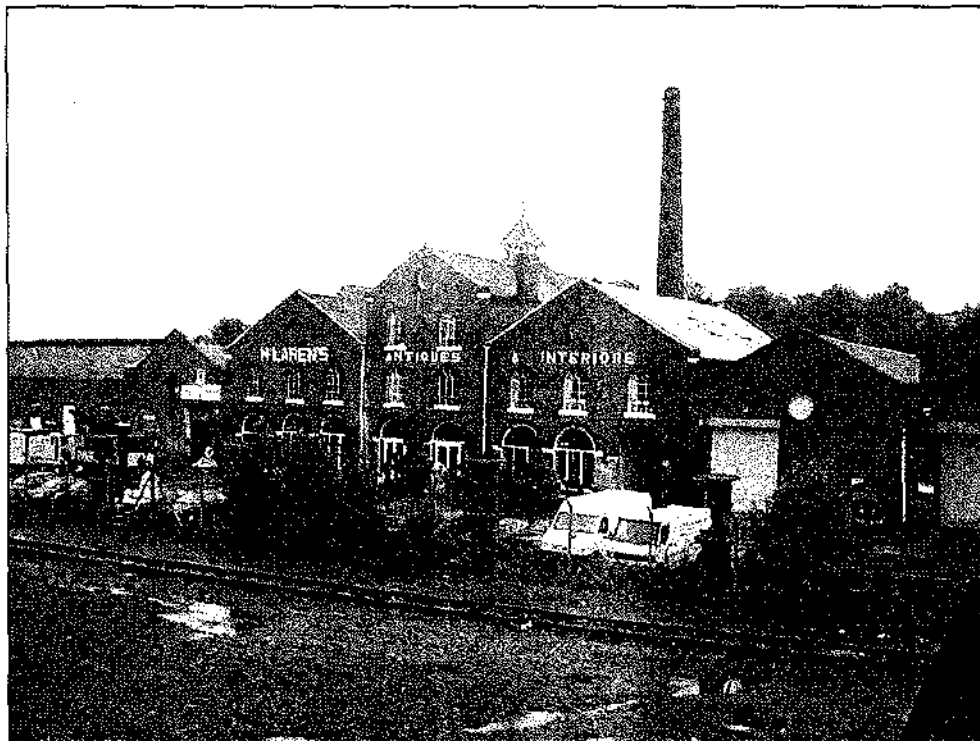


Plate 2: The locomotive works.



Plate 3: The footbridge.



Plate 4: The parcel shed.



Plate 5: The signal box.