



THE UNIVERSITY  
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**A desk-based assessment  
of Priory Hall, Dudley,  
West Midlands, and its  
environs**

*Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit*



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**A desk-based assessment of Priory Hall, Dudley, West Midlands,  
and its environs**

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# **A desk-based assessment of Priory Hall, Dudley, West Midlands, and its environs**

## **Summary**

*In June 2003 a desk-based assessment of Priory Hall and its environs, Dudley, West Midlands (NGR SO 942910) was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology in advance of a proposal for a major extension to the Hall, including the construction of an underground car park. Priory Hall, the former house of the earl of Dudley's agent, is a Grade II Listed Tudor Gothic-style house of 1825 built to the design of the architect Thomas Lee. It lies to the east of Dudley Castle, within Priory Park on the periphery of one of the most important medieval landscapes within the West Midlands conurbation, which incorporates both the Priory and Castle of Dudley. Priory Park, which is on the Register of Historic Gardens, was created for the house and contains the remains of the buildings belonging to the Priory of St James as well as the extensive earthworks of the former pools that once surrounded the Priory. The ruins were utilised as part of a romantic approach to the Hall, which occupies a high point overlooking the park and which lies immediately south of the parish boundary. Map evidence suggests that the parish boundary itself may have formed part of the monastic precinct. A large earthen mound immediately to the northeast of the house was in existence in 1835. It is possible that it represents a spoil heap connected with the cutting of the Dudley Canal Tunnel of 1792 and later used as a feature within the landscaped park, but other, earlier origins cannot be ruled out, and an alternative hypothesis is that the mound represents a 12<sup>th</sup>-century motte, perhaps a siege castle, that was subsequently landscaped and adapted as a park feature.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

In June 2003 Birmingham Archaeology (formerly BUFAU) undertook a desk-based assessment of Priory Hall, Dudley, West Midlands and its environs. The work was carried out for Mott MacDonald Limited in advance of a submission for planning permission to convert the premises into a catering, leisure and tourism academy (T[he] H[ospitality] A[nd] T[ourism] Academy), a project that would involve major extensions to the Hall and the construction of an underground car park.

The hall, a grade II listed house of 1825, stands within an area of historic and archaeological sensitivity, being on the outskirts of one of the most extensive and well preserved medieval landscapes in the West Midlands conurbation, which incorporates the Scheduled Ancient Monuments of Dudley Priory and Castle, and the Castle Hill Special Landscape Heritage Area. In addition, Priory Park, within which the Hall is situated, is on the Register of Historic Gardens.

The principal issues in respect of the proposed development were the extent to which it would affect the original fabric of Priory Hall itself, the underground archaeology (particularly with regard to the Priory), and the integrity and character of the historic landscape of Priory, Castle and Hall.

## **2.0 Site Location and Setting (Figs 1 and 2)**

The Hall is situated in Priory Park, Dudley, West Midlands at SO 942910, immediately to the northwest of the medieval ruins of Dudley Priory and its

associated earthworks. The park is a green open recreational area bounded by Woodland Avenue to the north, by The Broadway to the south, by Paganel Drive to the east, and by Priory Road to the west. The Study Area is related to Dudley Castle, which lies towards the east, both visually and historically and constitutes an important medieval landscape centred on the ruins of the priory buildings and including extensive medieval earthworks, evidence of former water features. Immediately northeast of the Hall is a circular earthen mound of unknown origin approximately 35m across.

### **3.0 Objectives**

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

### **4.0 Methods**

An inspection of the Study Area and its environs was carried out in the company of John Hemingway of Dudley MBC in order to assess current conditions and to evaluate any above-ground archaeological features. Documentary research of primary and secondary sources, including maps, was undertaken at Dudley Archives, and at Birmingham University library. Dudley Sites and Monuments Record, the primary source of known archaeological information for the city, was also consulted. The work was carried out in accordance with the guidance offered by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA 1999).

### **5.0 Historical Background**

Before the Conquest Dudley was held by Edwin, earl of Mercia, but, after his involvement in the rebellion of 1071, was granted to William Fitz Ansculf who held it in 1086 (Page 1913, 90). By this time the castle was in existence, as the *caput* of an honour, supported by a casteltry (Stenton 1971, 627). When the male line of the Fitz Ansculfs died out in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, the lordship was inherited by Fulk Paganel, probably through marriage to the Ansculf heiress.

The Priory of St James was founded by Fulk's grandson, Gervase c.1161 (Twamley 1868, 5). It was a Cluniac foundation, a daughter house of Wenlock Priory in Shropshire, and the community was never very large, numbering no more than four or five at any time, including the prior. The early church comprised only transepts, crossing and a short apsidal presbytery, and apsidal transept chapels (Fig. 3; Radford 1940, 450), though a late 12<sup>th</sup>-century sculptured tympanum from the site (Barker 1988) suggests that the quality of the work was far from utilitarian, and that, like

Wenlock Priory, the architectural embellishment of the church reflected the elaborate rituals of the Cluniac order.

On Gervase's death in 1194 the lordship passed to his nephew, Ralph de Somery, the de Somery lordship lasting until 1322, during which time a considerable amount of building work was carried out at Dudley including, between 1264 and 1323, the rebuilding of the castle, which had been destroyed by Henry II after the rebellion of the king's sons in 1174/5. A nave was added to the priory church during the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the choir was rebuilt on a much grander scale during the second half (Radford 1940, 453).

On the death of John de Somery in 1323, the male line of the family came to an end, and the lordship of Dudley Castle descended to de Somery's son-in-law, John de Sutton. The de Suttons were responsible for adding, c. 1400, a chantry chapel to the south side of the choir, and for the remodelling, c.1500, of both the chapel and the choir (Radford 1940, 456).

John Sutton, Lord Dudley, sold Dudley Castle soon after 1532, and it came into the possession of Sir John Dudley, later duke of Northumberland. When the Priory was dissolved in 1540, the site was granted to Sir John, but after his execution both castle and priory reverted to the crown, and were granted by Queen Mary to Sir Edward Sutton, Lord Dudley (Radford 1940, 458). Some thirty years later the priory was visited by Sampson Erdeswick who found many sepulchral monuments in the church, but both building and monuments had been defaced (Twamley 1868, 111-112), and the story thereafter is one of decay. The Bucks' view of 1731 shows the church a roofless empty shell with remnants of the claustral west range attached (Plate 1). By 1776, when Francis Grose visited the priory, only the church survived to any great extent, though large pools of water were evident both to the east and west of the ruins 'seemingly the remains of a moat which once encompassed the whole monastery'. To the north were 'traces of several fish ponds' (Twamley 1868, 113-4).

These extensive water features, which are also attested to by a number of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century pictures (Plates 2 and 3), were fed by three streams (pers comm. John Hemingway) and the site would have provided a source of power. This may be one reason why several different kinds of industrial process were being carried on in the grounds of the Priory, at least from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1776 Grose found that one of the 'offices' had been adapted for the purposes of a tanner, though by that time it was occupied by a thread manufacturer. In 1780 one John Arch, a bleacher, had his premises at the Priory (Birmingham Directory, 102), and by 1801 a building on the site was occupied by a manufacturer of fire irons, Timothy Nicklin, who used ground glass from manufactories in the town for polishing his products (Twamley 1868, 113; Radford 1940, 458). In 1822 James and William Benson, cut glass manufacturers, and Andrew Marsh and son, fire iron and fender makers, both conducted their business at Priory Mill. A lithograph by Coote, published in 1783 shows that the south transept had been roofed and converted into a dwelling, and that industrial buildings occupied the site of the cloister or beyond (Plate 2), though a haystack next to the nave suggests that the site supported a mixed economy. Indeed a painting of the Priory of 1822 depicts a scene that is as much pastoral as industrial (Plate 3).

This industrial phase lasted until 1825 when ‘a number of small workshops, and low buildings’ (Twamley 1868, 113) were swept away preparatory to the building of Priory Hall and the creation of a park from the grounds of the former Priory (Plate 4). The house was built by the earl of Dudley for his agent, Francis Downing, mayor of Dudley in 1818, 1819 and 1831 (Chandler and Hannah 1949, 192). Thomas Lee was the architect (Colvin 1995, 605-6) and, as with his commission of 1822, Eggesford House in Devon, he adopted a Tudor Gothic style for the Hall, though some of the larger windows incorporate late 14<sup>th</sup>-century tracery patterns (Plate 5, cf. Winchester College great hall, c.1387). Lee went on to design a number of churches in the Dudley area including Sedgeley (1826-9), Coseley (1827-9) and Netherton (1827-30).

In 1926 the site of the Priory was bought by the Corporation, and in 1928 an Act of Parliament enlarged the boundaries of the borough to include the castle and priory sites. The following year a plan was drawn up for a large housing estate in the vicinity of the Priory, to be known as the Priory Estate, in what was open land at the time (Prentice Mawson 1929). It was built in the 1930s and created a built up area to the north and west of Priory Park with some partial development to the east. The park itself became a place of public resort. In 1939 the priory ruins were cleared and some archaeological investigation carried out (Radford 1940), which resulted in the recovery of the plan (Fig. 3). 218 medieval tiles were laid into concrete at the east end of the church at this time. Owing to deterioration they were removed by archaeologists in 1984, consolidated and recorded (Linnane 1984; Ratkai, 1984).

## 6.0 The Map Evidence

On the parish map of 1787 (Fig. 4) the Priory ruins are shown in a broken line as a single irregular block. To judge by the shape of the complex the cloister buildings were still extant. The ruins were situated within the southeastern corner of a large irregularly shaped field, whose north side constituted the parish boundary with Sedgeley. It is possible that this field division represents the priory precinct. To the west of the priory buildings was a large pool, also shown on the map by a broken line. Along the northwest side is a solid line, annotated ‘Pool Dam’, the line of which continues towards the northwest where it meets the field boundary.

A more detailed plan of 1809 (not illustrated) shows the ruins of the church, and, to the north of them, a complex of buildings, possibly one of the industrial concerns that had come into existence by the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. The large pool on the west side of the priory buildings is named as the ‘Priory Pool’. The putative priory precinct had been divided by this time into a number of small properties, several of which seem to have contained gardens, including two small divisions immediately south of the church.

In Smith’s plan of 1825 (Fig. 5) the priory church is depicted, so too is the complex of buildings to the north of it that appeared on the 1809 map. However, there were now two other substantial buildings to the north of the Priory Pool dam. The line followed by the dam and its extension shown on the 1787 map are here shown clearly as a trackway connecting with a road leading south towards the town (approximately on the line of Trinity Road). In the northwest corner of the putative priory precinct the plan of Priory Hall has been pencilled in together with Priory Road, and a driveway leading south across the Priory Pool to meet it.

The most interesting aspect of this map is that it shows a series of pools still circling the priory buildings. Apart from the Priory Pool to the west there were two other large pools, one to the north, and one to the east almost lapping up against the east wall of the conventual church. In addition, there was a smaller pool to the south of the western one, and an arm of water emanating from the north angle of the Priory Pool. In contrast to the surrounding fields, the area of the putative precinct had been parcelled out into small plots of land. The seemingly eccentric lines of some of these divisions may be indicative of the former extent of the pools.

In 1831 J.C. Brettell drew up a plan for a proposed crescent (Fig. 6) that was to have faced northwest towards Priory Hall and to have extended in a quarter circle from Castle Hill to Shaver's End. The ruins of the church appear, but only two of the pools, the large eastern one, and the small southern one, those within the park having been drained or filled in. The Hall, named on the map as 'Priory House', was in existence, as well as Priory Road and a looped drive leading to and from it. The house itself was of an irregular plan. There was a courtyard to the west of it with north and west service ranges, the latter returning for a short distance towards the east. Between this return and the house proper, there was a large opening from the drive to the yard.

On Treasure's map of 1835 (not illustrated) the rounded outline of the existing mound can be seen to the northeast of the house (Plate 6). The significance of this feature is unclear, though it has been suggested that it might be connected with the cutting of the Dudley Canal Tunnel (Dudley SMR 7002) which runs directly beneath the mound, and which was opened in 1792 (Eaton, 2002; pers. comm. John Hemingway, Dudley MBC). However, a number of things need to be taken into account in a discussion of its date and function .

The first is that the mound was situated right in the southwest corner of a field hard against the parish boundary, a position that seems too precise to be accounted for by a random dump of spoil. It may indicate either that the mound was in existence before the field system was laid out, or that it was deliberately tucked away in that position so that the disruption to the agricultural use of the field would be minimised. Secondly, the mound is in very close proximity to the house, suggesting, perhaps, that it was in some way connected with it. Certainly, it was utilised as part of the landscape, and is unlikely to have been built after the house was in position unless it were connected with it. A third point is that, like the house, the mound occupies a high point in the surrounding landscape. This is unlikely to be coincidental, and it may have been so placed in order to command the surrounding countryside. One reason for this would be to provide an observation point for the inhabitants of the Hall, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that the mound is military in origin, and that it represents an abortive, slighted or landscaped motte, perhaps a siege castle from Stephen's attack on the castle in 1138. The dimensions would not be incompatible with a motte, and it is strategically well placed in respect of Castle Hill (Barker and Higham 1992, 132-4, Figs. 4.7 – 4.9).

By c. 1840 (Tithe map) the pool to the east of the priory church had been filled in and a driveway to the Hall, now called 'The Priory', had been driven through the north transept of the church and the site of the cloisters (Fig. 7, Plate 7), probably to create a romantic approach to the house. In addition, a westward extension had been built at



the southeast corner of the west service range, lodges had been built on the opposite side of the drive to the southwest corner of the Hall proper and next to the drive at the Priory Road entrance, and six outbuildings had appeared to the north of the house. The largest of these, a long range on the northern edge of the mound, had an access road to it from Priory Road. Two other buildings were situated respectively on the western and southern edge of the mound. Two small ponds were still visible, one to the north, and one to the south of the priory ruins.

By 1884, when the first edition of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map was published, only the pool to the north remained, and further structures, including greenhouses, and perhaps farm buildings, had been built to the north of Priory Hall, and a long detached range erected immediately to the west of the north service range (Fig. 8). By 1904 the entrance on the south side of the courtyard had been closed, and there was now a carriage entrance on the north side (Fig. 9). On the west side of the extension to the west service range was a path, flanked on the east side by a small square building. The latter had disappeared by 1919 along with the west end of the west range extension and a large greenhouse had been built onto the west end of the north service range (Fig. 10).

The 1938 Ordnance Survey map illustrates the considerable changes that had occurred in the surroundings of the site including the construction of the Priory Estate, Dudley and Staffordshire Technical College to the southeast of the Priory ruins, and a new road system to the south of the park including the Broadway and a roundabout at its junction with Priory Road. Contemporary with this work was creation of tennis courts and bowling greens to the north of the Priory. By this date too the lodge to the Hall had been demolished (Fig. 11).

## **7.0 Discussion**

### *The below-ground archaeology*

The assessment has highlighted two areas of below-ground archaeological potential within the vicinity of the proposed development. Firstly, there is a possibility that the Hall stands on the boundary of the monastic precinct, which may have been coterminous with the parish boundary. The latter extends along the north side of the Hall and then turns southeastwards to meet the road. It is possible, then, that the remains of a medieval bank and/or ditch lie within part of the development area, and despite subsequent small-scale development having taken place, there is a strong probability that at least parts of such a feature remain well-preserved. The second area of archaeological interest is the mound northeast of the house. This feature was in existence by 1835 but is an unknown quantity. It would be necessary to evaluate it if it were proposed to include it within the area of development.

Finally, there is the question of pedestrian access across Priory Park between the proposed academy and Dudley College. Any new route or upgrading of existing routes to include lighting, would almost certainly have implications for the medieval archaeology. The existing earthworks and ruins together with map evidence tell us part of the story, but there is much that is unknown about the extent and character of the priory, and any such development within Priory Park would have to be preceded by archaeological evaluation.

### *The above-ground archaeology*

Priory Hall lies within part of the medieval landscape that was centred on the castle, and although there has been limited development between Priory Park and Castle Hill, the visual relationship is largely intact. This is an important historic landscape, unparalleled in the West Midlands conurbation, and one which should be preserved at all costs. Important too, and inextricably linked with the Priory is the later park associated with the Hall. The approach to the hall across Priory Park was created to obtain maximum dramatic and romantic effect, the route being deliberately driven through the ruins of the priory before turning towards the Hall situated on a rise at the far end of the park. The experience of seeing it for the first time must have been memorable. The main consideration regarding the effect on the landscape, then, is the extent to which the proposed development will be screened from the Priory site, and, in particular, whether the Gothic outline of the house as it was intended to be seen across the park, in a deliberate evocation of past times, will be compromised.

The house and its associated outbuildings have been assessed by Eaton (2002). This report has nothing to add to his observations and recommendations other than to emphasise that although the rear courtyard buildings that remain were mostly in existence by 1831, and although they have been subjected to various degrees of unmeritorious alteration, they represent part of the original scheme for Priory Hall, and without them an understanding of the house would be diminished.

## **8.0 Acknowledgements**

This project was undertaken by Malcolm Hislop, and the report edited by Richard Cutler. Thanks are owed to the staff of the Dudley Archives Service and to John Hemingway of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds.

## **9.0 Sources**

Abbreviation: DA – Dudley Archives

### **9.1 Original Sources**

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- 1809 C.P., P.R. and W.R., Plan of lands ... belonging to the trustees of John Keeling esq. (DA 308c)
- 1824-5 J.C. Brettell, Map of the parish of Dudley (DA 901c)
- 1825 J.P. Smith, Plan of the Priory and adjoining property (DA 1629c)
- 1828 Anon, Map of the Priory (DA 594c)
- 1831 J.C. Brettell, Plan of a projected crescent in the Priory grounds (DA 1056c)
- 1835 J. Treasure

c.1840 Dudley tithe map (DA 660c)

1857 H. Roper, Plan of the parish of Dudley (DA 849b)

1884 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1904 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1919 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1938 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

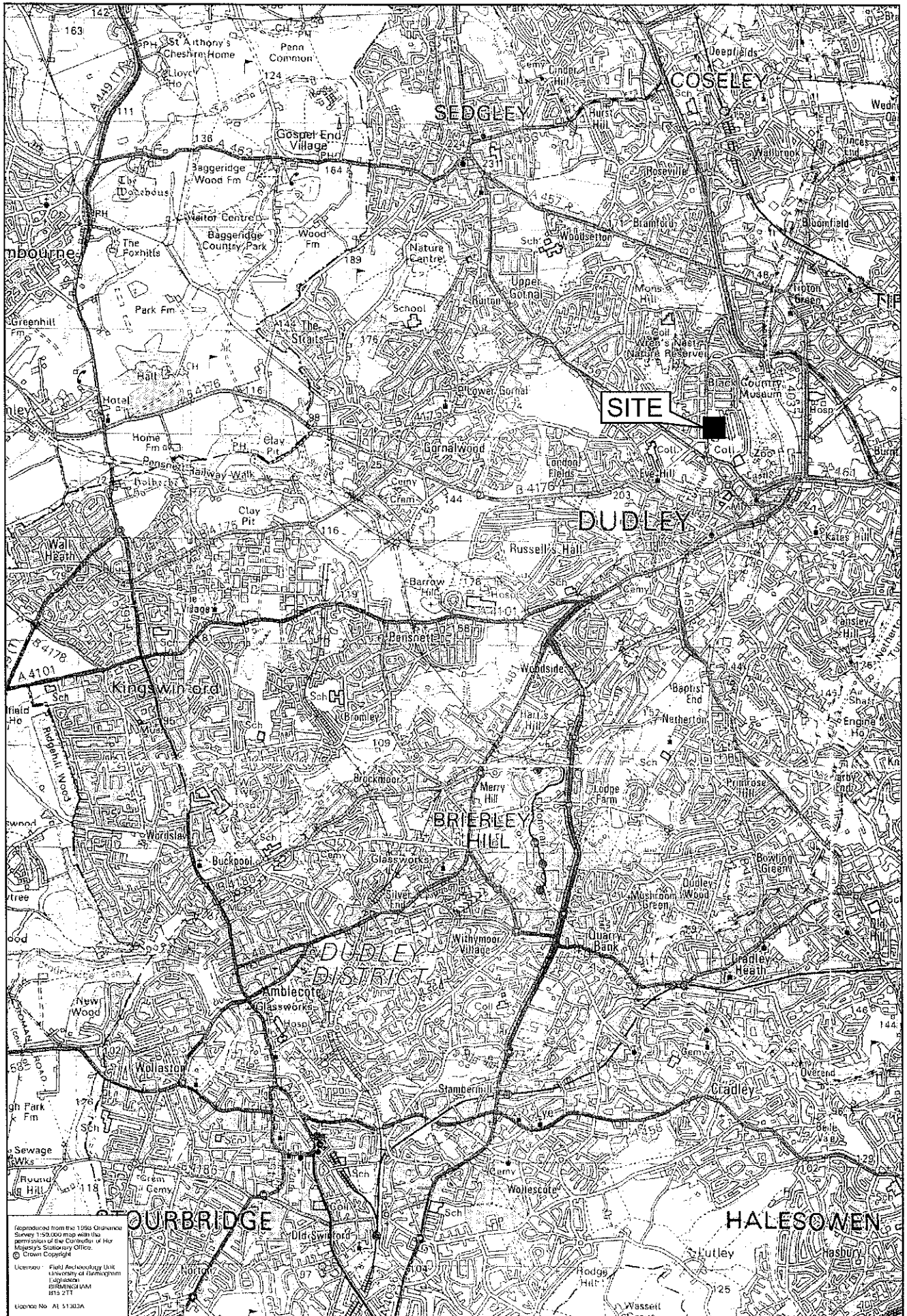


Fig.1

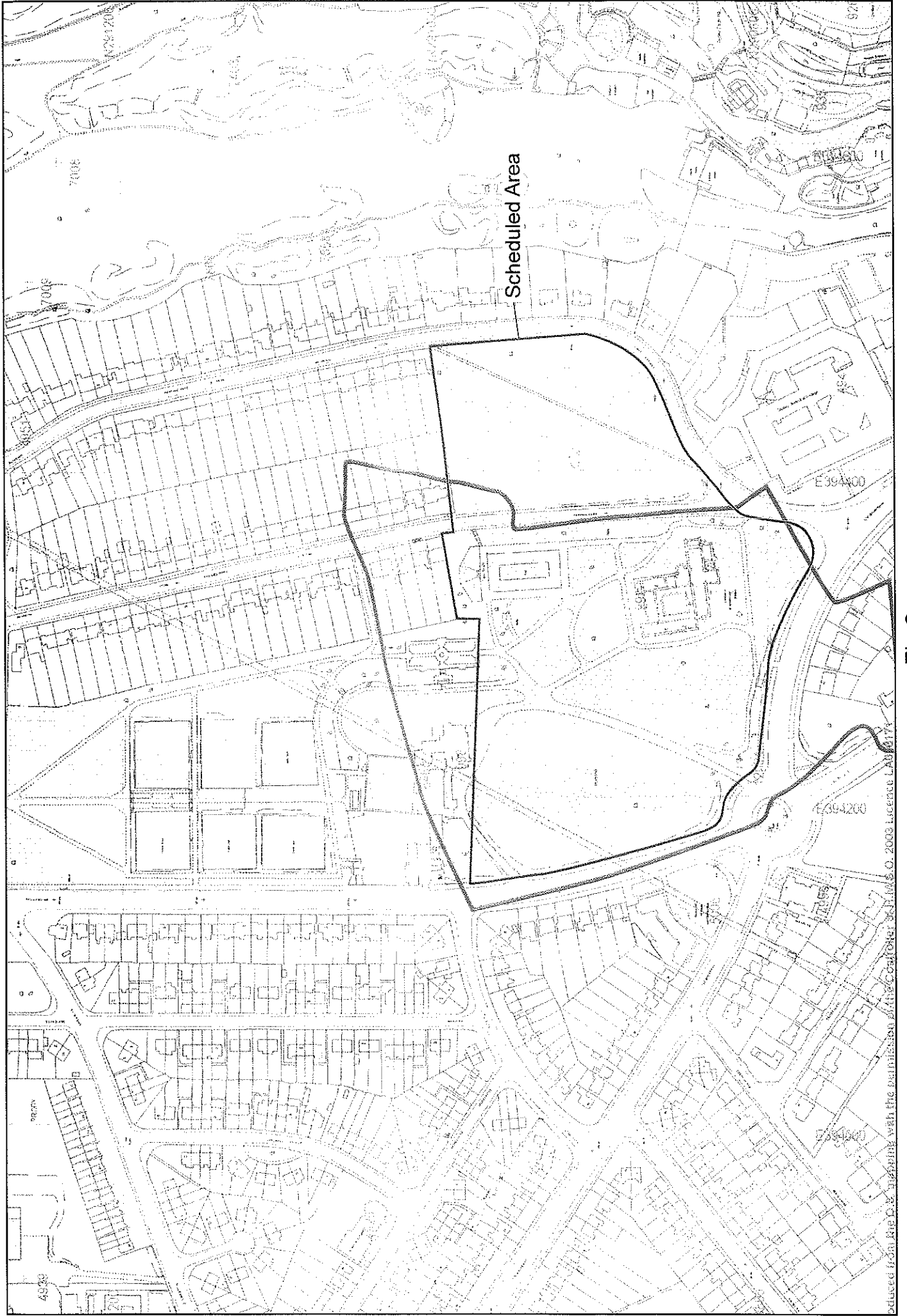


Fig.2

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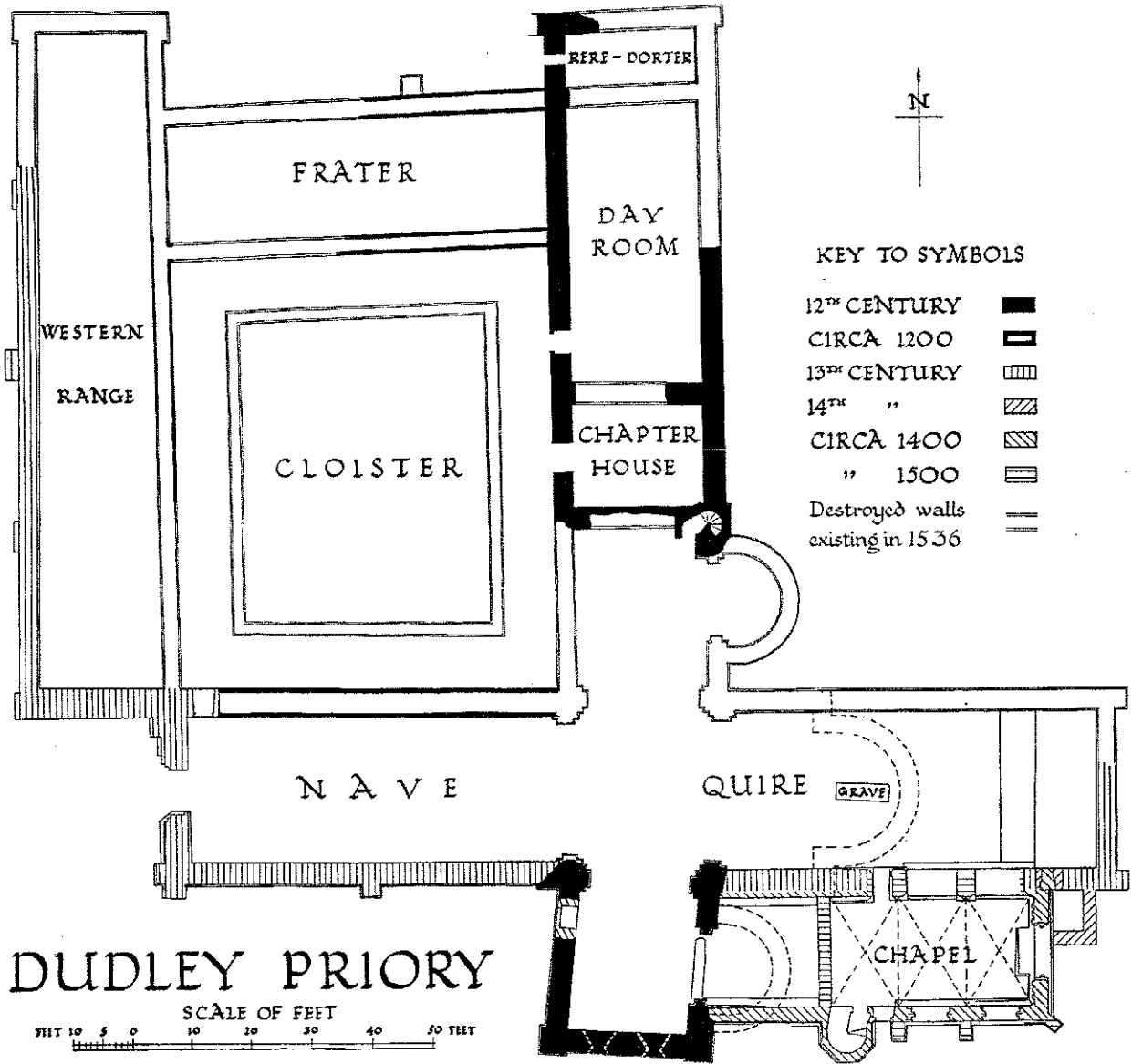


Fig.3

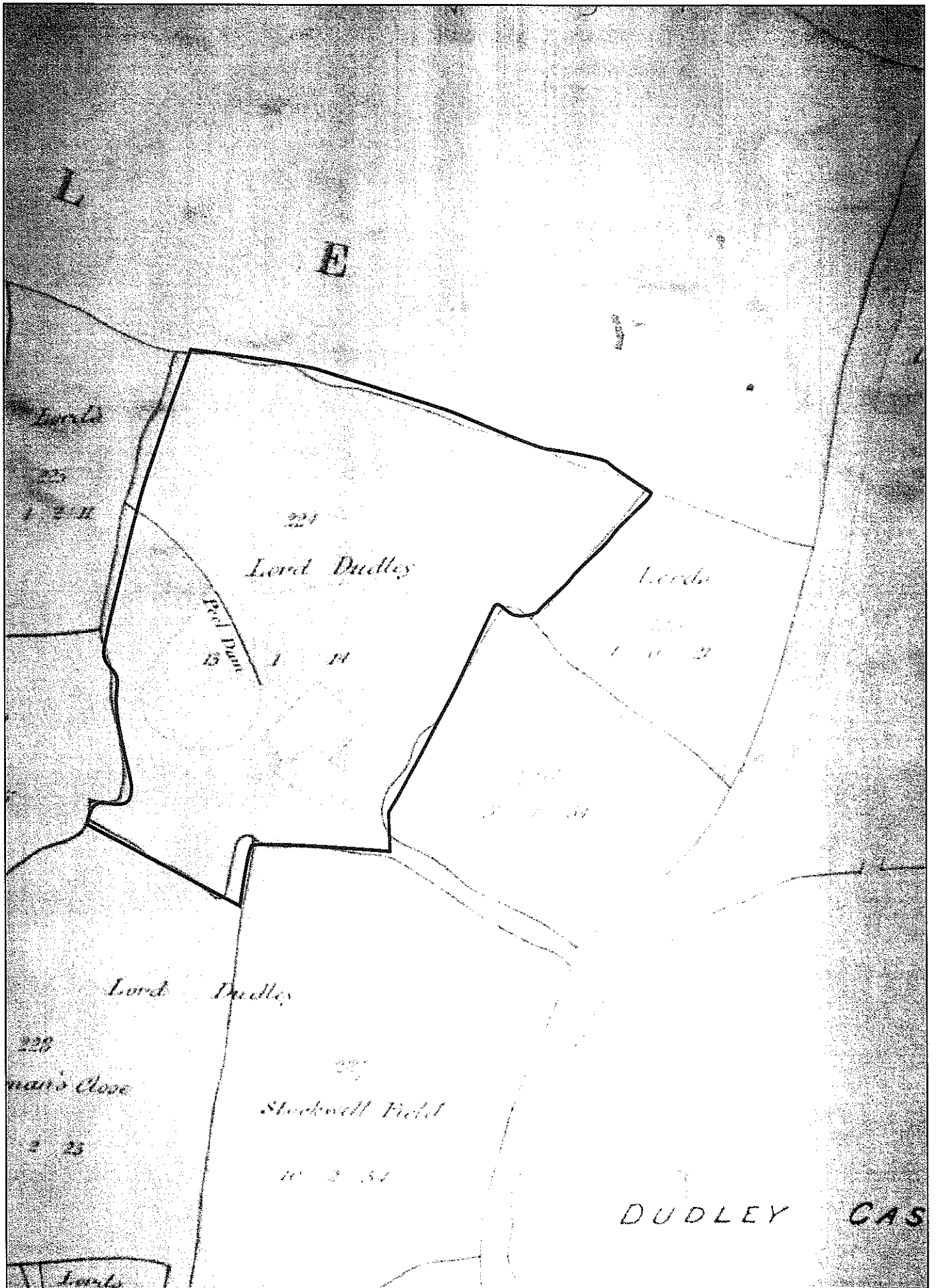


Fig.4 (1787)



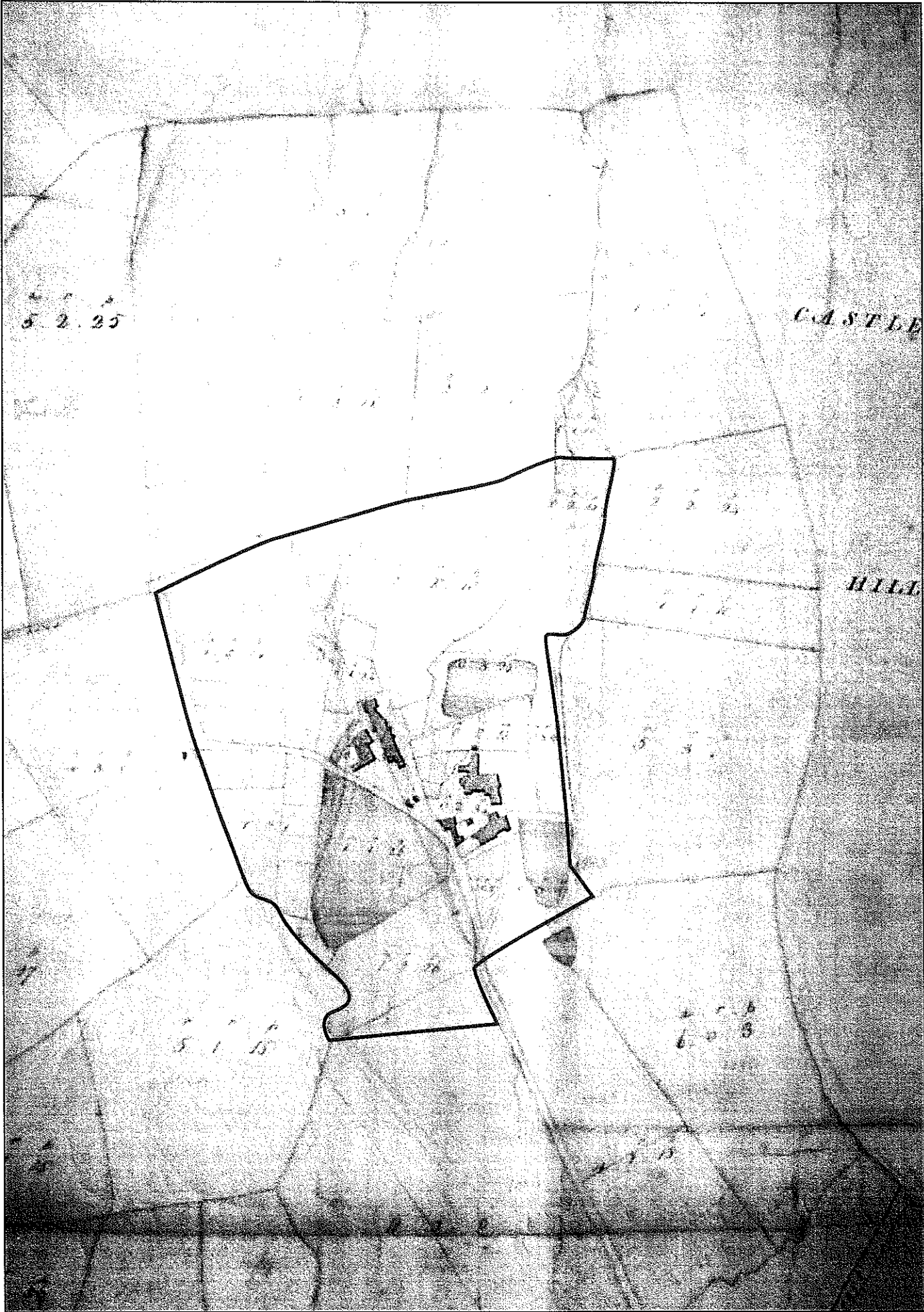


Fig.5 (1825)

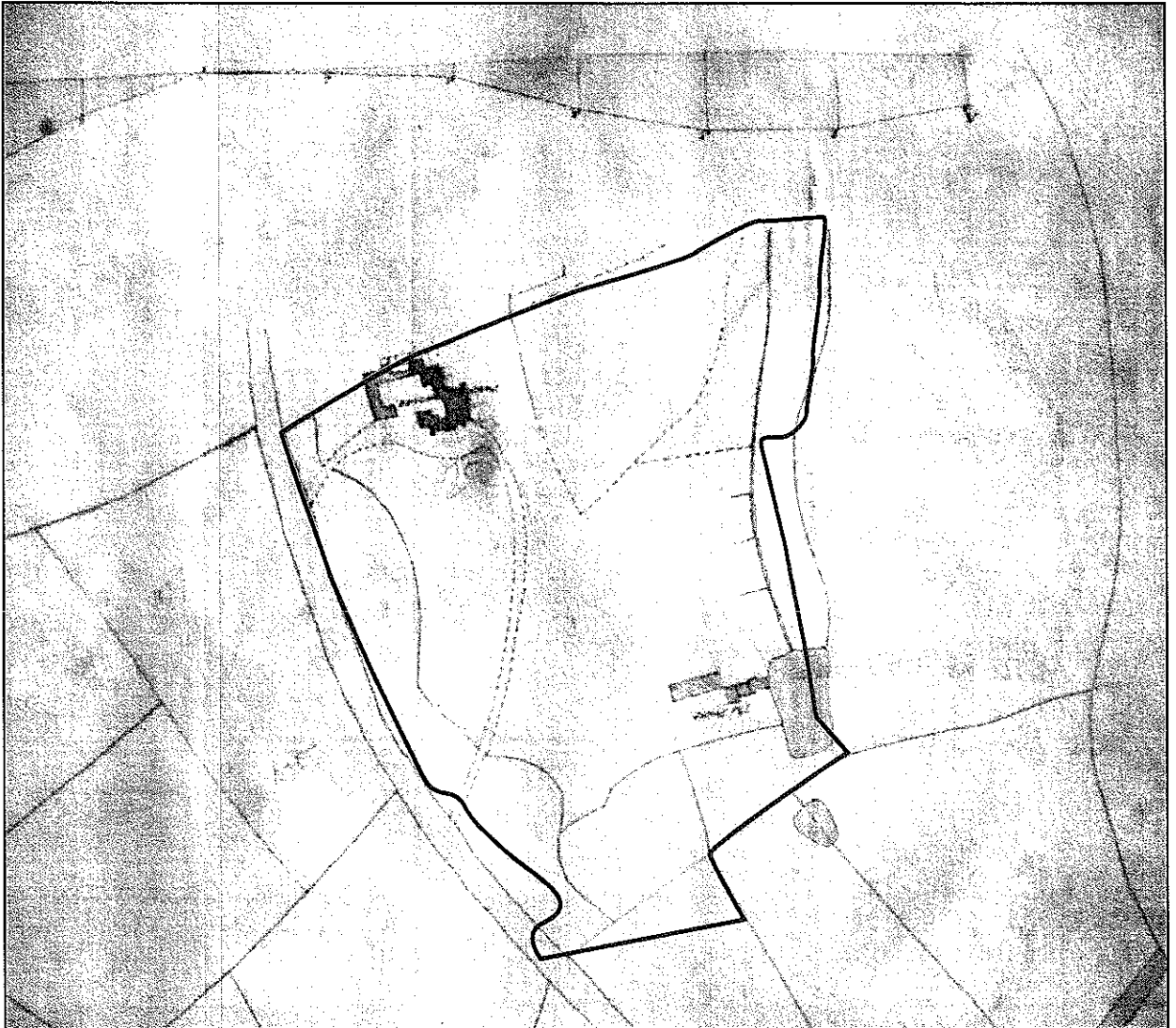


Fig.6 (1831)

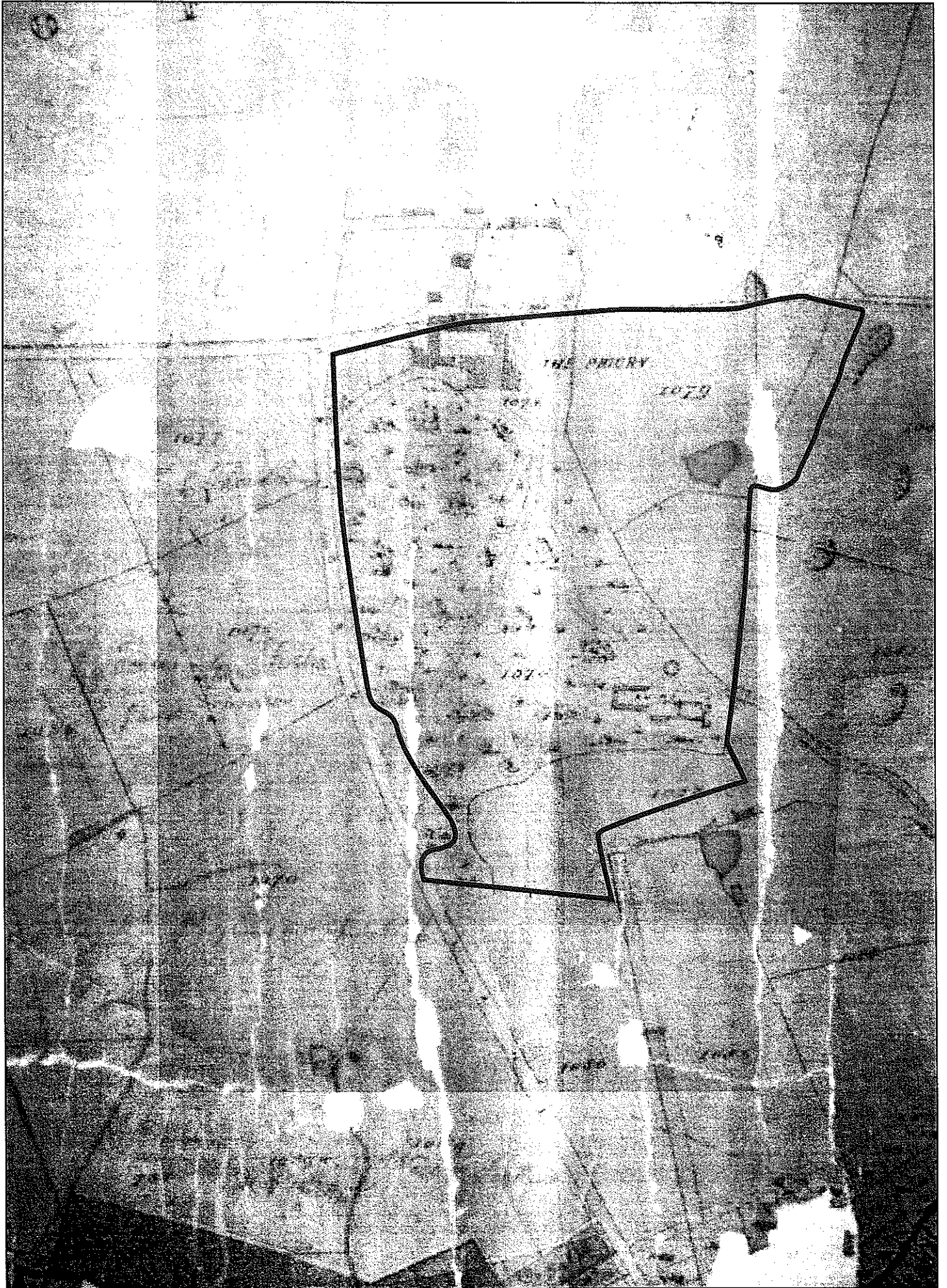


Fig.7 (1840)

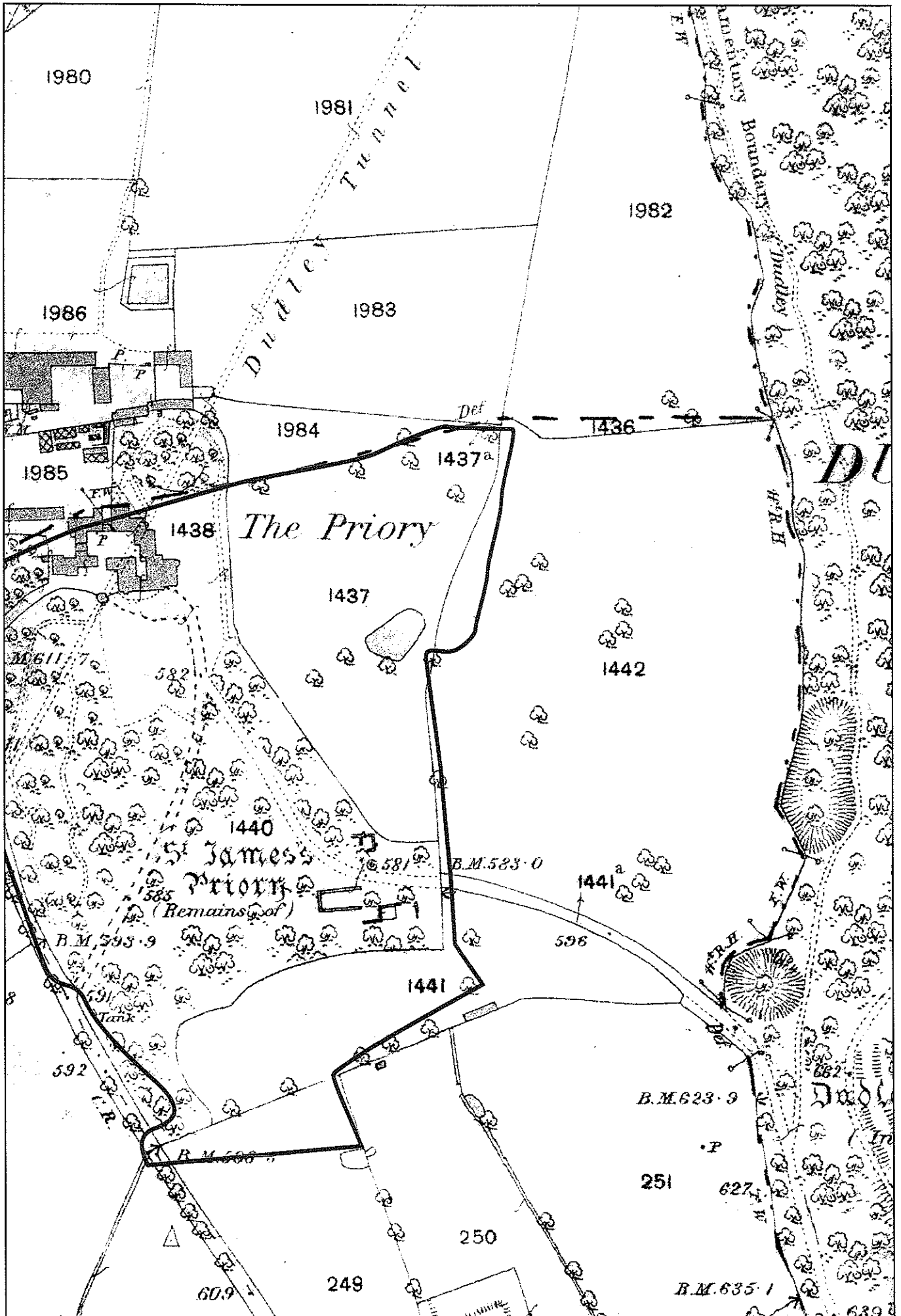


Fig.8 (1884)





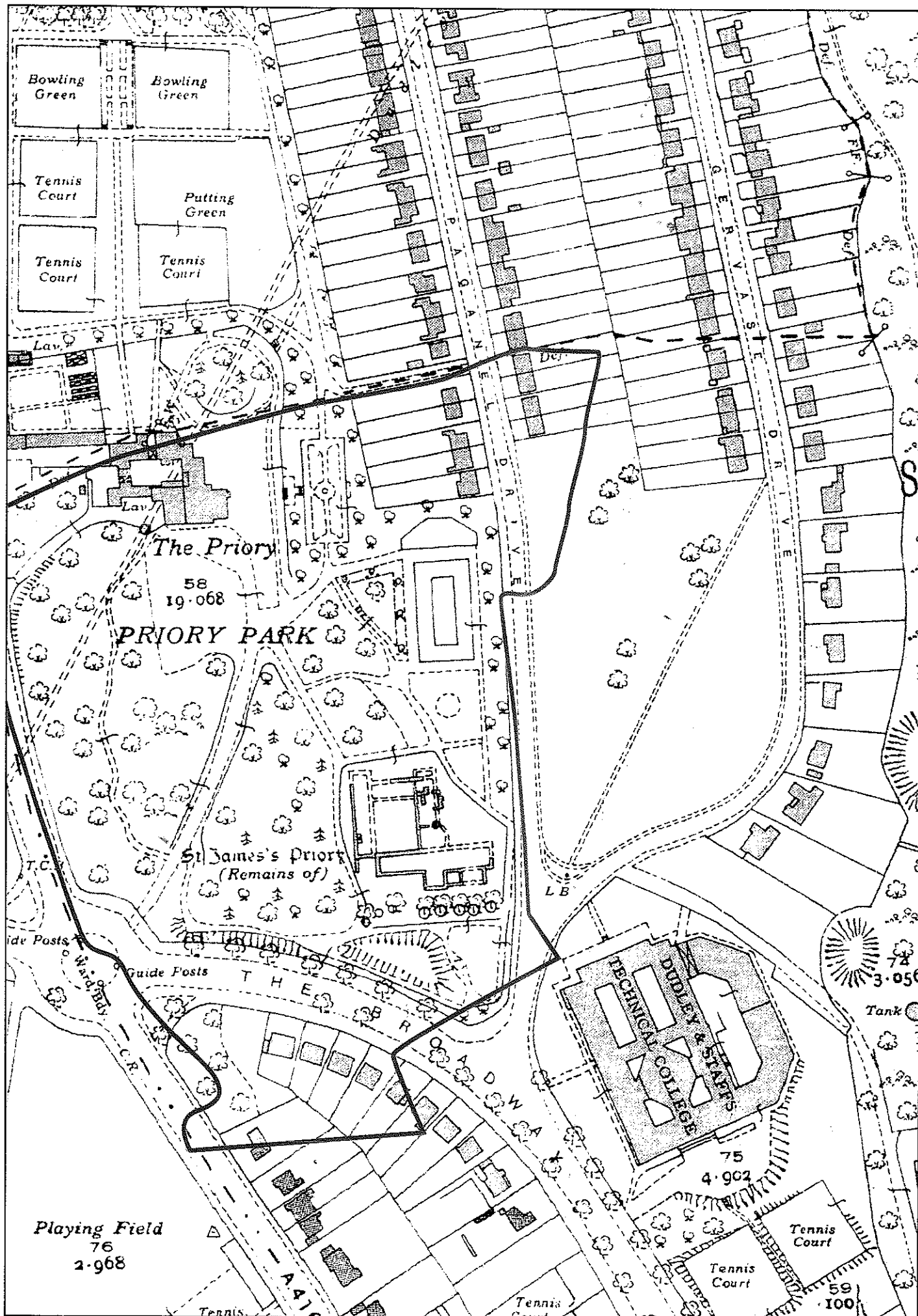


Fig.11 (1938)

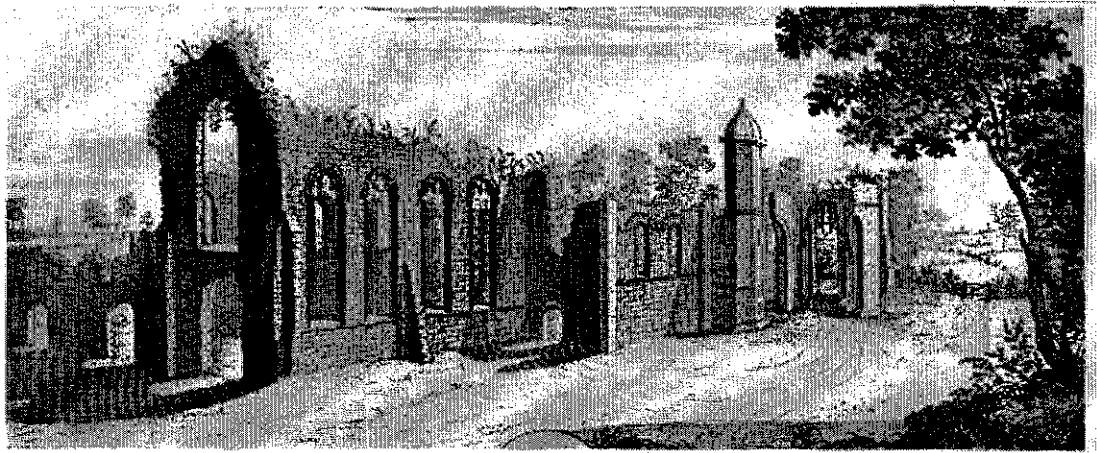


Plate 1 Dudley Priory in 1731 from the southwest (Buck)

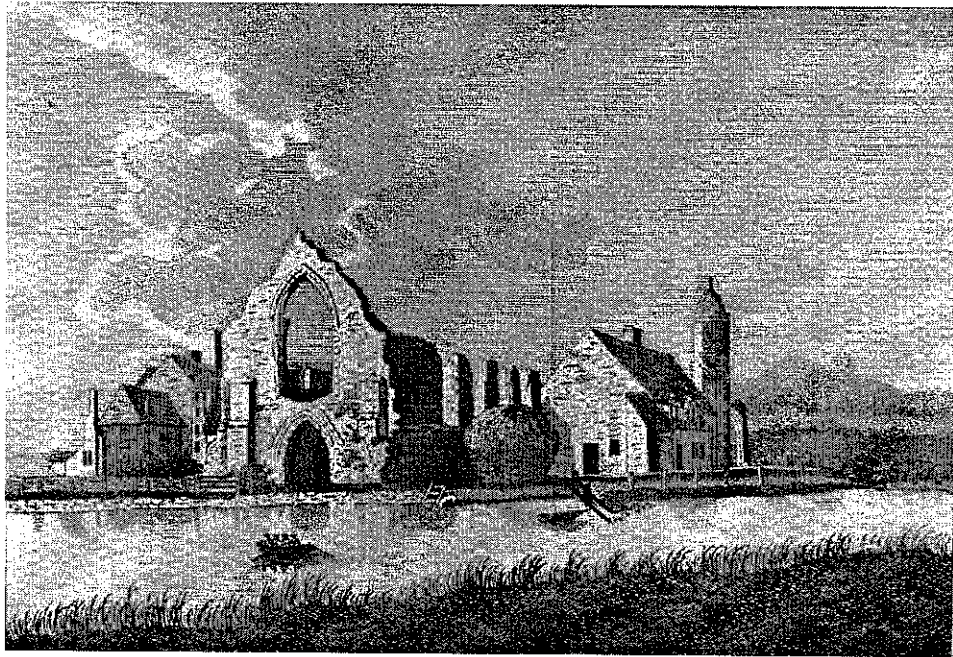


Plate 2 Dudley Priory in 1783 from the southwest (Coote)

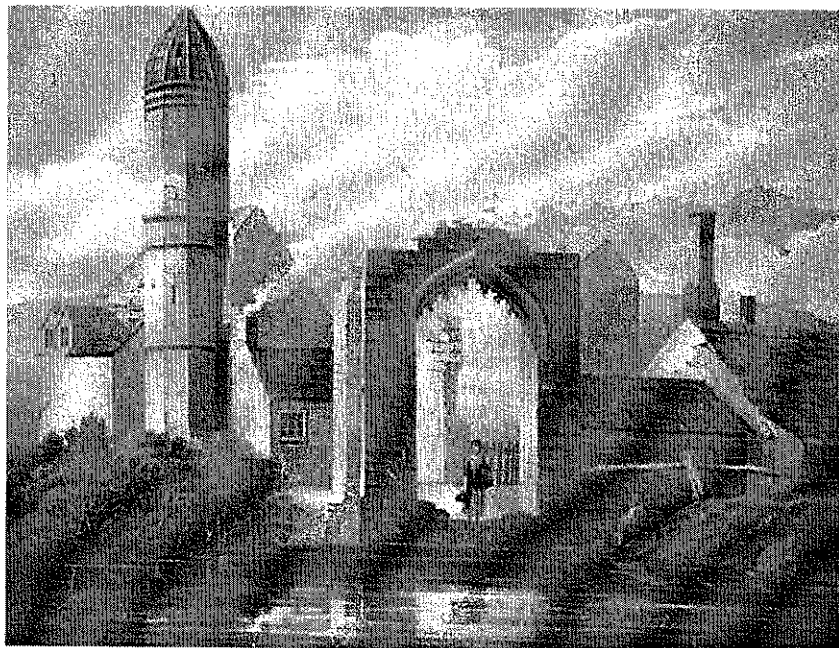


Plate 3 Dudley Priory in 1822 from the east (Cox)





Plate 4 Priory Hall from the southeast



Plate 5 Priory Hall window detail



Plate 6 Mound to the northeast of Priory Hall



Plate 7 Position of former driveway through Dudley Priory ruins