

**A Desk Based Assessment of
Nos 17-23 Hall Street, Bilston,
Wolverhampton, West Midlands
2003**

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Summary

An archaeological desk-based assessment and building assessment of 17-23 Hall Street, Bilston (NGR SO 95019641) was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in September 2003. The work was carried out in response to concern expressed by Wolverhampton City Council about the derelict and dangerous condition of the historic buildings currently occupying the site. The properties lie within what was the medieval centre of Bilston in an area that has been designated an Area of Archaeological Importance. The desk-based assessment examined all the available documentary and cartographic evidence, which revealed that the plot had been occupied from at least 1699, and had a continuous sequence of occupation since this time. The assessment further highlighted the importance both historically and archaeologically of the rapid expansion of population and industry within Bilston during the early 19th century. Analysis of the cartographic evidence along with the on-site building assessment confirmed that the properties of 17-23 Hall Street date from this period. The additional rarity value of surviving courtyard properties of this period in the region as a whole increases the importance of those surviving within the Study Area.

1.0 Introduction

The following report details the results of a desk-based assessment and building assessment of 17-23 Hall Street, Bilston (NGR SO 95019641, Figs 1 and 2) undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in September 2003. The work was commissioned by Central Design Consultants Ltd and was carried out in response to concern expressed by Wolverhampton City Council about the derelict and dangerous condition of the historic buildings currently occupying the site. The work adhered to the guidelines set down in the Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999) and to a written scheme of investigation prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (2003).

2.0 Site Location (Figs. 1 and 2)

The town of Bilston forms part of the City of Wolverhampton. It lies on a knoll of boulder clay that overlies the Staffordshire middle coal measure. The study area comprises a rectangular block of land on the west side of Hall Street within the historic heart of Bilston. The buildings comprise a U-shaped block with the main range fronting Hall Street and rear wings extending towards the west to enclose a rear courtyard.

3.0 Objectives

The objectives of this report were to:

- Assess the likely survival and significance of archaeological remains within the study area.
- Assess the historic and architectural significance of the buildings currently occupying the site.

4.0 Method

An inspection of the Study Area was carried out in order to assess current conditions and to evaluate the building in respect of its historic/architectural interest. A record was made of the exterior of the structure by means of written notes and photographs. Documentary research of primary and secondary sources, including maps, was undertaken at Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies. The Black Country Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), the primary source of archaeological information for the county, was also consulted.

5.0 Results

5.1 Desk-based Assessment

The Historic Core of Bilston has been designated an Area of Archaeological Importance, particularly with reference to its place in the Domesday Book. The historic centre, including the High Street, comprises an Area of Archaeological Potential, as defined by the Bilston Archaeological Survey (Brereton 1996).

General Historical Context

Prehistoric to Roman

No sites of this date were recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record for the Study Area. However, there is an account of the discovery of a hoard of Roman coins from the reigns of Commodus and Antoninus, described as having been found in a beautiful state of preservation in Bilston (Lawley 1893).

Saxon

Little is known of the Saxon period in Bilston although the place name is first recorded in 985 in a grant of land by Aethelred to Lady Wulfruna. A second charter of 994 recording lands granted by Wulfruna to the church at Wolverhampton describes the boundaries of Bilston in more detail. These boundaries broadly correlate with those of Bilston shown on the Timmis Map of 1839 (Brereton 1996, BCSMR 5810-BL711). The Domesday Book of 1086 records that Bilston was owned by the King and was made up of eleven households. These households are recorded as eight villeins and three bordars with three ploughs, though there is no knowledge of where these people may have settled within Bilston, or of whether they lived together in a nucleated settlement or separately in clearings from woodland.

Medieval and Early Post-Medieval

In the medieval period Bilston was part of the ecclesiastical parish of Wolverhampton and lay within the royal, or Stowheath, manor which comprised most of the east side of Wolverhampton. A deed of 1378 gives land for the support of a priest of Bilston, suggesting there was a chapel here by that date. A chapel, dedicated to St Leonard, was certainly in existence by 1458 when a chantry was founded there by Sir Thomas de Erdington. At this time, several gentlemen of Bilston, including John Mollesley, Richard Tomkys, William Pipe, John Pye and William Perry all surrendered lands to the chantry (Bissell 1988). These families were to remain important landowners around Bilston for at least another 300 years.

There is some cartographic evidence to indicate that medieval settlement in Bilston (BCSMR 5810) may have been planned around the High Street/Church Street axis. The medieval settlement presumably lay around the chapel, principally along Church Street and, to its west, High Street, and perhaps south down towards a crossing of the Bilston brook at the bottom of Bridge Street. Both Church Street and High Street show evidence of possible deliberate planning with burgage-style properties. Archaeological evidence to corroborate this, however, has proved elusive (Lee and Nichol 2002). In addition the dog-leg formed by Wolverhampton Street – High Street/Church Street – Bridge Street (to the north of the Study Area) may suggest that the main north – south road has been deliberately diverted to come along High Street/Church Street (BCSMR 5810). From the cartographic evidence it may be suggested that Hall Street was initially an access road to the back of the burgage plots fronting High Street/Church Street, that underwent increasing development as the town expanded. The original date of the road, however, is unknown, and the proximity to the aforementioned dog-leg and the unusual ‘horseshoe’-shape formed by Church Street and Hall Street may be indicative of a different purpose.

As with the elusive archaeological evidence for the medieval and early post-medieval development of Bilston, historical evidence also appears to be relatively sparse. By the time of the Tudor period Bilston was a pleasant village with a number of good houses of timber, plaster, thatch and leaded windows (Cope undated). The Greyhound and Punchbowl Inn (BCSMR 443), formerly the Stow Heath Manor House built c.1460, still retains a restored west wing on the High Street (Lee and Nichol 2002). As Cope has described them, the inhabitants were engaged in agricultural pursuits, but more men were using coal and iron to manufacture small items to meet local needs and learning the skills of working and fashioning metals for which Bilston was to become increasingly famous (Cope undated).

The likely character of Bilston during this period is nicely summed up by Price (1835) when he says “Writers on Staffordshire, have said but little upon Bilston, which appears to have been occupied for centuries by Gentlemen living upon their own Estates.... until the introduction of trade about the time of Elizabeth”. Certainly many of the families which surrendered lands to the Chantry in the 15th century were still around in the early 18th century. The men of Bilston were granted freedom of toll by Edward III as the vill was an ancient demesne of the crown, but it is not listed as a market in the *Gazetteer of Markets and Fairs in England and Wales to 1516* (Samantha Letters pers. comm. from BCSMR 5810).

Sir Richard Pipe was sheriff of London in 1572 and served Queen Elizabeth as Lord Mayor of the city in 1578 (Cope undated, 10). At the same time we find his name heading a list of the tithe rentals for the town of Bilston, and his family coat-of-arms was in Bilston Chapel. The population of Bilston steadily increased during the Tudor and Stuart period. A Hearth Tax return for 1695 gives the population of Bilston, including children, as 1002 with some 180 houses (*ibid.*).

The fortunes of St Leonard's chantry were not so auspicious. About eighty years after the foundation of the chantry, the Reformation took place. It was under an Act passed in 1545 that the property surrendered to the Chantry of Bilston was seized to the King's use and the chapel itself was sold. The church records as described in *The History of St Leonards* (Bissell 1988) reflect the chantry's dissolution, as there are no known benefactions to the church from 1494 to 1699.

The Rev. Richard Ames was curate at Bilston from 1684 till 1730. It is from his records (repeated by Lawley 1893) we know that in 1699 there were fifteen customary tenements at Bilston. At least three of the families that surrendered land to the chantry at St Leonard's occupied one or more of these tenements. Samuel Pipe, descendant of Sir Richard Pipe, held a customary tenement called Hume's tenement that has been identified at the present location of Roar Night Club, previously Pipe Hall Hotel (BCSMR 440), immediately to the south of the study area. It was described by Lawley as 'a half-timbered house situate in Hall Fold, near the Angel Inn, from whence the place derived its name. The present Pipe Hall was built in the last century, by the last of the Pipe family resident here.'

The Victoria County History of Staffordshire states that by the early seventeenth century a picture emerges of a well-established iron industry in the county. The availability of cheap coal and iron, with additional good quality sand and limestone contributed greatly to the industrial development of Bilston, and the region in general. The type of work carried out within the county as a whole was to some degree localised and organised as a domestic industry, such as Wolverhampton and Willenhall with locks, and Dudley and Sedgley with nails etc (Cope undated). Bilston made chapes and buckles, though at the height of the industrial revolution during the early 19th century, this staple industry was nearly extinct (Whites Directory 1834). From the records of the Rev. Richard Ames, we know that from the period 1716-1730 there were about 100 bucklemakers, over fifty chapemakers, and a few toymakers, boxmakers, hingemakers, tinder-box makers, locksmiths and japanners (Cope undated). These early 18th-century craftsmen worked in their own homes or small backyard 'shops' or premises, and were sufficiently established enough to take apprentices. Very often they would also have interests in the land and livestock, raising crops, getting coal and minerals, felling timber and keeping and keeping the odd cow and a few pigs and fowls (*ibid.*, 15). The small number of freeholders who voted at the general election of 1747 suggests that Bilston at this time was still strongly tied to the manor.

The List of Indentures shows the local trades named over and over again. A few names worthy of note are Sarah Mason and Thomas Mason, bucklemakers in 1706, George Hartill, bucklemaker c.1750, and James Hartill, toymaker c.1750. From the Birmingham Directory of 1781 we know that John Mason was a chapemaker, and

John Hartill was a japanner. These families continue to live and work within the region of the study area until the beginning of the 19th century.

Industrial Revolution

As with every village, town and city in the county, the industrial revolution had a massive effect on the development and growth of Bilston. In 1695, a census taken for an Act of Parliament counted 1002 people living in Bilston, and by 1771 this had risen to 3875. The first national census of 1801 recorded 6914 inhabitants, and ten years later this number had risen to 9646. By 1821 the population was over 12000 (Collins 1991). The natural resources of the Black Country were exploited to the full, and mines, furnaces and workshops dominated the area.

As the need for communication and movement increased, so did the transport systems in and around the town. From the early 18th century onwards a number of improvements were made to the local road network and new roads were built, though the Bilston network was not fully 'turnpiked' until 1766. Oxford Street, to the north of the study area, was constructed in 1809, bypassing the previous principal east – west thoroughfare into the village by Bridge Street. The canal to the south-east of Bilston was authorised by an Act of 24 February 1768 and engineered by James Brindley. It linked the centre of Birmingham with the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal, then under construction (*ibid.*). Hall Street and the Study Area is situated between the main Church Street/High Street road and the canal and would have certainly experienced redevelopment and an increase in activity due to the new transport systems in the vicinity. Much of the development of Bilston at the time took place parallel to the main north-south road of Church Street/High Street and the main east-west road of Oxford Street/Lichfield Street, and the town was still a relatively rural settlement surrounding laid along these roads.

Detailed History of the Study Area

Hall Street and the Study Area first appears on a map of 1799 (Fig. 3). The study area is labelled 'buildings and gardens', as is most of the Bilston conurbation. Under the powers contained in a Market Act of 1824 Bilston was created a market town and empowered to hold a market every Monday and Saturday. A map of 1832 (Fig. 4) illustrates the position of the market place as between Church Street and Hall Street, south of the study area. The 'horseshoe' shaped area of land created by Church Street and Hall Street appears to have been divided into smaller blocks. A new road runs off Church Street to the west named Hall Entry. This is likely to be associated with the present Pipe Hall, which was built by the last of the Pipe Family around 1810 (BCSMR 440). Another new road appears to run north-west – south-east from the top of Church Street. Although not named on this map, this road is known as the Orchard, and was probably part of the family property (*ibid.*).

The Commercial Directory of 1818-1820 mentions Hall Street by name. At this time, the Angel tavern was in existence, the location of which is likely to be directly between Pipe Hall and the study area. The proprietor of the Angel was a Mr John Bowen. Industries noted along Hall Street include tin plate working and a currier and leather cutter. William Hartill, a japanner, was also resident on Hall Street. By 1827 new industries had developed. The 1827 Directory of Wolverhampton mentions a

miner and net maker, a boat builder, a nail forger, a shoe maker and a tin plate worker all having workshops along Hall Street. John Bowen and William Hartill were still resident in their respective trades.

Bridgen's Directory of Wolverhampton in 1833 further adds new trades to those already present at Hall Street. These include a flour dealer and an awl blade maker. The Angel Inn was now occupied by Thomas Bowen, while William Bowen was a Brass Founder at nearby Pipes Meadows. Whites Staffordshire Directory of 1834 and Pigot and Co.'s Directory of 1835 again show continuity of industry types and of residents at Hall Street, whilst adding a grocers (Thomas Bowen), a boot and shoe maker and several beerhouses to the occupations of the Hall Street inhabitants. The Bowen family is a good example of a family being involved in a diverse number of trades. Pipe Hall at this time was occupied by Mr John Mason, a solicitor, though when it was sold by the Pipe family is unknown. Although it is unproven, it is possible that this John Mason was related to Sarah and Thomas Mason, who were present in Bilston as bucklemakers over a hundred years previously.

Bridgen's Directory of the Borough of Wolverhampton from 1838 shows significant change and increase in the trades and industries present at Hall Street. Alongside many of the stalwart occupations such as tin plate maker, brewer and currier and leather cutter, there are grocers, confectioners, butchers, dressmakers, flour dealers and Hucksters, suggesting Hall Street was taking on a more commercial aspect. One cause of this may have been the establishment of the market in 1824 that would have increased the trade in the area anyway. John Mason, the solicitor, was still present at Pipe Hall at this time, but by 1845 when the Post Office Directory of Birmingham, Warwickshire and parts of Staffordshire was compiled, Pipe Hall had passed on to Edward Bagnall Dimmack Esq.

It was around this time that the buildings of 17-21 Hall Street were constructed. The tithe map of 1839 (Fig. 5) lacks specific building detail, however, the courtyard area of these properties is visible as a J-shape to the west of Hall Street, with the properties surrounding the courtyard following the same pattern for the next hundred years. Although it is not possible to determine precisely the inhabitants and occupations of these individual properties, the general character of the area would have been as above, a mixture of domestic, commercial and industrial. It may be suggested that the properties within the study area may have been more likely commercial, due to the proximity to the new road and the intersection of the two main roads through the town, with the industry gradually moving away from the town centre towards the canal.

The rapid growth of industry and increase in population had a serious effect on the social aspect of Bilston. Descriptions of the town and its occupants in the first half of the 19th century from the Staffordshire Directories and writers such as Samuel Sidney were ones of a hot, noisy and dirty place inhabited by rough, brutal and unhealthy citizens (Collins 1991). One effect of this was the Cholera Epidemics of 1832 and 1849. These were well documented, and also paint an appalling picture of the town (*ibid.*).

The Bilston Improvement Act of 1850, however, established a body of Commissioners and a Local Board of Health for the purpose of paving, lighting,

watching, cleansing, sewerage and otherwise improving the town (*ibid.*). Gas lighting was introduced in 1847 through the formation of the Bilston Gas Light and Coke Company, and an example of this survives today at the Lichfield Street end of The Orchard (BCSMR 8627).

By the time that the First Edition OS Map (Fig. 6) was surveyed, in 1887, the town had developed into part of the large conurbation that characterises the Black Country today. A massive period of expansion and prosperity occurred following the arrival of the railway during the 1850's, which cut a swathe through the centre of the town, and brought with it major changes in the transportation of both raw materials and finished goods. It is this period in the life of the town, from the mid-1800's onwards, that the town acquired the trappings of a prosperous Victorian town, such as a station, theatre, town hall, police station and other 'modern amenities' that included public baths and washhouses and a library (Lee and Nichol, 2002).

On this map, nos. 17-23 Hall Street are clearly shown as a group of properties sandwiched between terrace housing to the north and a public house, probably the Angel Inn to the south. There were other attached buildings to the west. The courtyard was entered from Hall Street via a tunnel and possibly also from an alleyway to the west. On the west side of the courtyard was an outhouse.

The Ordnance Survey editions of 1903, 1919 and 1938 (Figs. 7, 8, and 9) all demonstrate that there was little change to the property boundaries of 17-23 Hall Street from the time of the First Edition to 1938, although some alteration is likely to have occurred and properties adjacent to the Study Area were no longer present in 1938. The individual buildings visible on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map are each still visible on subsequent editions until 1938. Various editions of Kelly's Staffordshire Directory from this period show that Pipe Hall was no longer used as a private residence, and was by this time a Hotel and wine and spirit merchant, managed by several different people over the years. No specific reference in these directories was made to the individually numbered properties, though the overall character of Hall Street remained commercial. By 1965 (see Fig. 10) alterations to the properties were evident, though some of the original plot boundaries appear to still be maintained.

5.2 Building Assessment by Malcolm Hislop

General Character

The north end of Hall Street, in which the Study Area is situated, has a predominantly later 19th and early 20th century character. Immediately opposite, Nos 2-8 comprise a row of shops with early 20th-century frontages, but the street is dominated by a small number of large public buildings. Barclays Bank occupies the northeast corner of Hall Street, the Post Office is the opposite side of the street to Nos. 17-23, and the Roar night club, formerly a hotel associated with the railway is located to the southwest of the Study Area next to the railway bridge. These generously planned buildings, together with the entrances to two car parks on the east side of the street and a small recreation area adjacent to No.23, contribute to a sense of spaciousness.

Nos.17-23 Hall Street represent an earlier phase in the street's development. They comprise a block of eight former cottages of 1830s character, though they have been subjected to considerable later alterations, including a major early 20th-century remodelling of the Hall Street frontage. The 19th-century structure is built of 9" x 4½" x 2¾" red brick, laid in Flemish stretcher bond, and slate roofs. The complex comprises three ranges configured in a U-shaped plan, grouped around a courtyard. The front range is aligned roughly north/south and faces east towards Hall Street. The two rear wings face north and south respectively towards the courtyard. There were four two-storey cottages fronting Hall Street and another two in each of the two wings fronting the courtyard. The characters of the Hall Street properties have been considerably altered through the conversion into shops during the early 20th century, but the original arrangements of the cottages in the rear wings can be readily deduced.

Exterior

East (Hall Street) Elevation (Plate 1)

The front was completely remodelled in the 1920s. It is articulated by brick buttresses into 2:3:2 bays, the plain parapet stepped up over the central section. The ground storey is treated with painted render, and given over to shop fronts incorporating plate glass windows with decorative steel-framed fretwork patterns in the head, and ribbed fascias. The first floor has a skin of brown brick laid in Flemish bond, though breaks in the brickwork show earlier material behind. The first floor windows were boarded over at the time of the survey and details could not be discerned but they have flat brick arches. A concrete ribbed parapet band echoes the pattern of the shop fascias and is surmounted by plain parapets of bricks on end capped by headers to the sides, and of basket weave to the centre.

West Facing (Courtyard) Elevation (Plates 2 and 3)

Much of this elevation has been rebuilt though there are patches of the 19th-century brickwork. At each end of the elevation is a deep narrow recess containing at ground level a single-storey formerly open-fronted lean-to with timber lintel, but now bricked up and incorporated into the range. There is a blocked segmental-headed doorway to the right of centre, and a blocked doorway with wooden lintel in the centre, the entrance to the former tunnel leading from Hall Street. The windows are all of 20th-century date, mostly steel-framed casements.

North Facing (Courtyard) Elevation (Plates 4 and 5)

This elevation is the best preserved of all the fronts and the original arrangement is clear. There was a doorway at each end under a wooden lintel giving separate access to the two cottages. Between them were two large segmental-headed windows (all ground floor openings blocked at the time of the inspection). Four first-floor windows were square-headed with chamfered blue brick sills. One of them retains a 12-pane horizontal sash window, another retains a fragment of a similar window.

South Facing (Courtyard) Elevation

The south facing elevation is similar, though not identical, to the north facing elevation, with a door under a wooden lintel at each end and one large segmental-headed window and two tall square-headed windows with chamfered blue brick sills, both insertions.

Interior (Plate 6)

An internal inspection of the front (east) range revealed little of interest, the rooms having been completely remodeled in the 1920s. The two rear wings had been incorporated into numbers 17 and 23 Hall Street respectively, however, both retained enough of their 19th-century character to allow a reconstruction of their original arrangements. Each range contained two cottages which at ground level comprised one large room and one very narrow room. The main room had a large fireplace against the back wall with a timber mantle beam. There was a staircase on one side of the stack winding up to the first floor. The second ground floor room was situated at the end of the range and was probably a scullery/pantry. One of the cottages in the south range retains a cast iron kitchen range, whereas one of the cottages in the north range has a fireplace with 1920s features.

The Air Raid Shelter (Plate 7)

In the southeast corner of the courtyard was a flat-roofed rectangular brick and concrete structure of mid-20th century character rising approximately 1m above the existing courtyard level. The top of a doorway with a concrete lintel could be seen in the centre of the northeast front. This entrance must have been approached by a staircase so it is evident that the structure covers an underground chamber, and it seems probable that this is a World War II air raid shelter.

Conclusion

17 – 23 Hall Street represents a type of dwelling that was once common in the West Midlands conurbation and which made a major contribution to its character. Court housing developed from the need for cheap accommodation for a rapidly expanding urban population where land was at a premium. The first half of the 19th century witnessed a rapid expansion of this type of housing, which by 1850 covered large areas of the industrial towns of the West Midlands. Large-scale slum clearance after World War II, however, drastically altered the townscapes of the region so that court housing is now exceedingly rare. The Court 15 Back-to Backs in Birmingham, which are Grade II listed and which are now being restored by the Birmingham Conservation Trust, are thought to be the only surviving example of court housing in the city. 17-23 Hall Street Bilston is one of very few others, possibly the only one, to survive within the conurbation.

6.0 Discussion

The rare nature of the surviving properties at 17-23 Hall Street gives these buildings local, regional and possibly national importance. Although originally built as cheap dwellings and workhouses, they constitute an important element of the development of Bilston, which in turn is an example of the industrial development of the region as

a whole. The lack of alteration and change within the buildings themselves and within the courtyard area also has serious implications for the survival of below ground archaeology from both this time, and from previous periods in the history of Bilston.

Many small scale excavations and evaluations have been conducted within Bilston over the years, but so far, these have merely proven the scale of later disturbance and redevelopment. As archaeological deposits relating to the specific industries undertaken at 17-23 Hall Street from the 1830s onwards are likely to have survived within the courtyard area, any excavation undertaken here has a high potential for further understanding the nature of the industrial development of the Study Area and Bilston as a whole.

Further more, it is possible that archaeological features and deposits relating to the earlier Pipe Hall may also have extended within this area, and still survive. The proximity of the Study Area to the church, and to the main road dating from the medieval period, may suggest it is also possible that archaeological remains associated with the earliest development of Bilston survive here. The importance of archaeological deposits relating to any original burgage plots or buried soils from this period cannot be underestimated.

7.0 Acknowledgements

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8.0 Sources

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8.3 Cartographic Sources

1799 Map of Bilstone Liberty (copy)

1832 (Cholera) Map of the Town of Bilston

1839 Map of the Township of Bilston (Tithe Apportionment map) surveyed by R. Timmis

1887 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1903 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1919 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1938 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1965 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

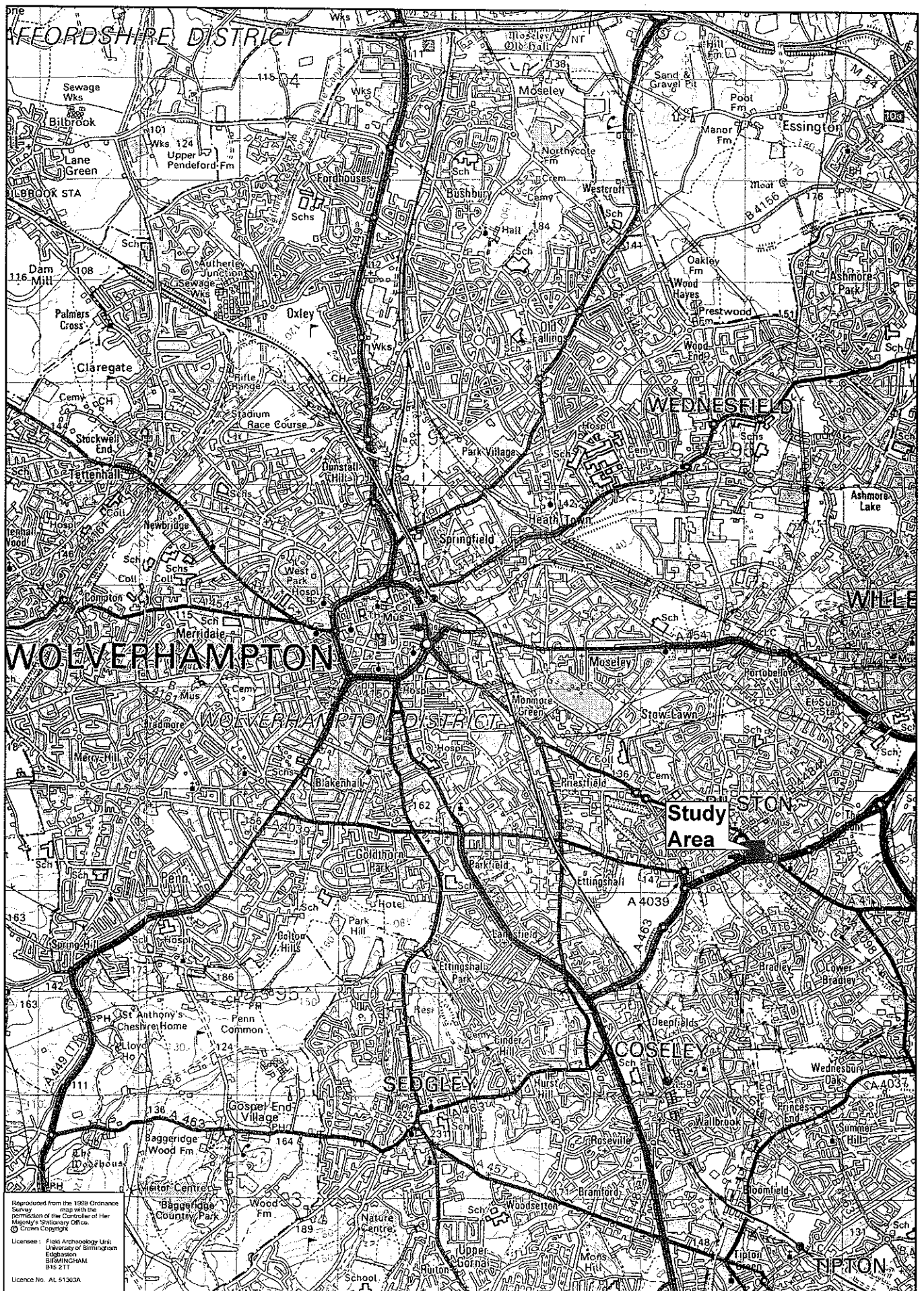


Fig.1

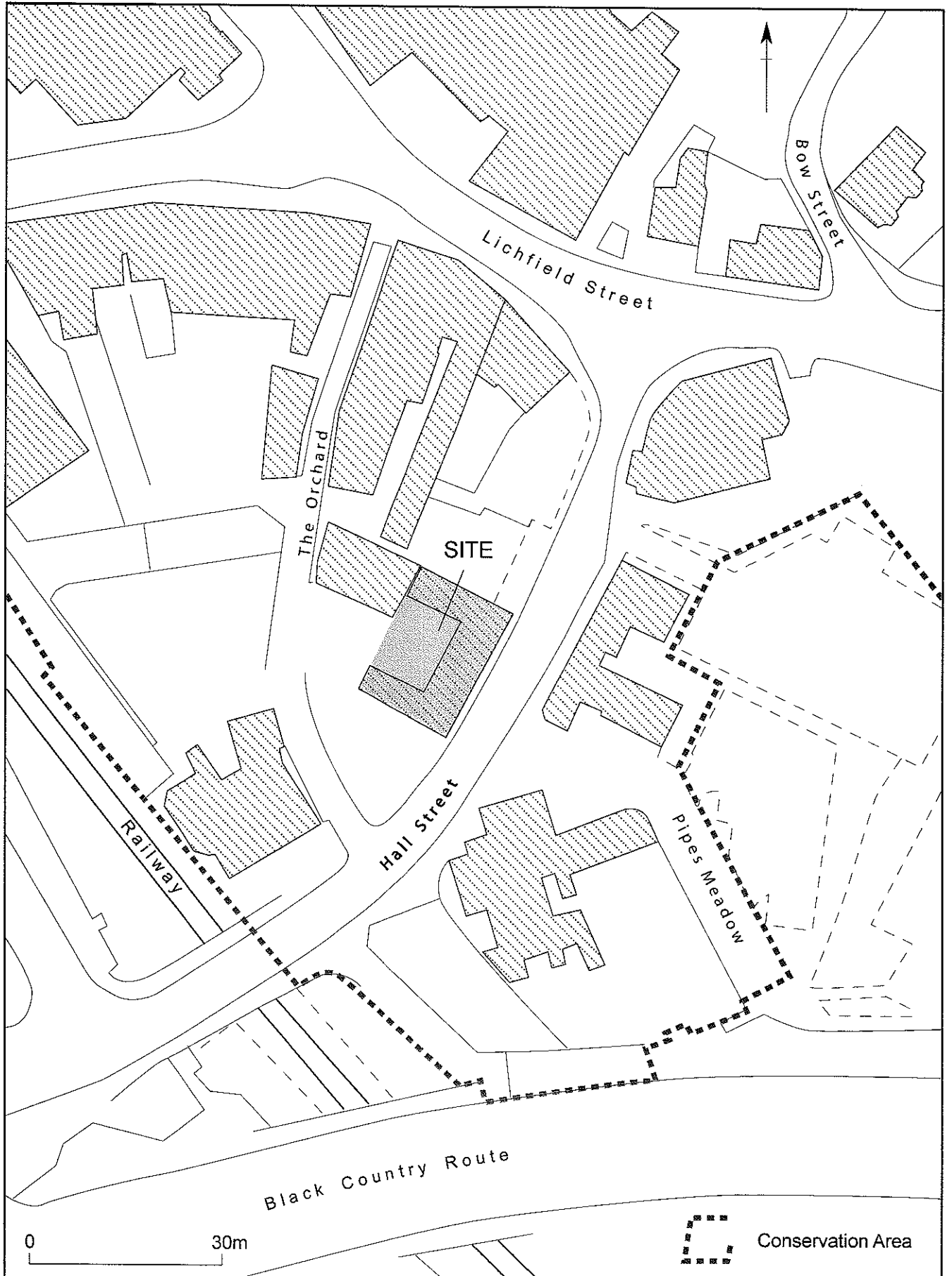


Fig.2

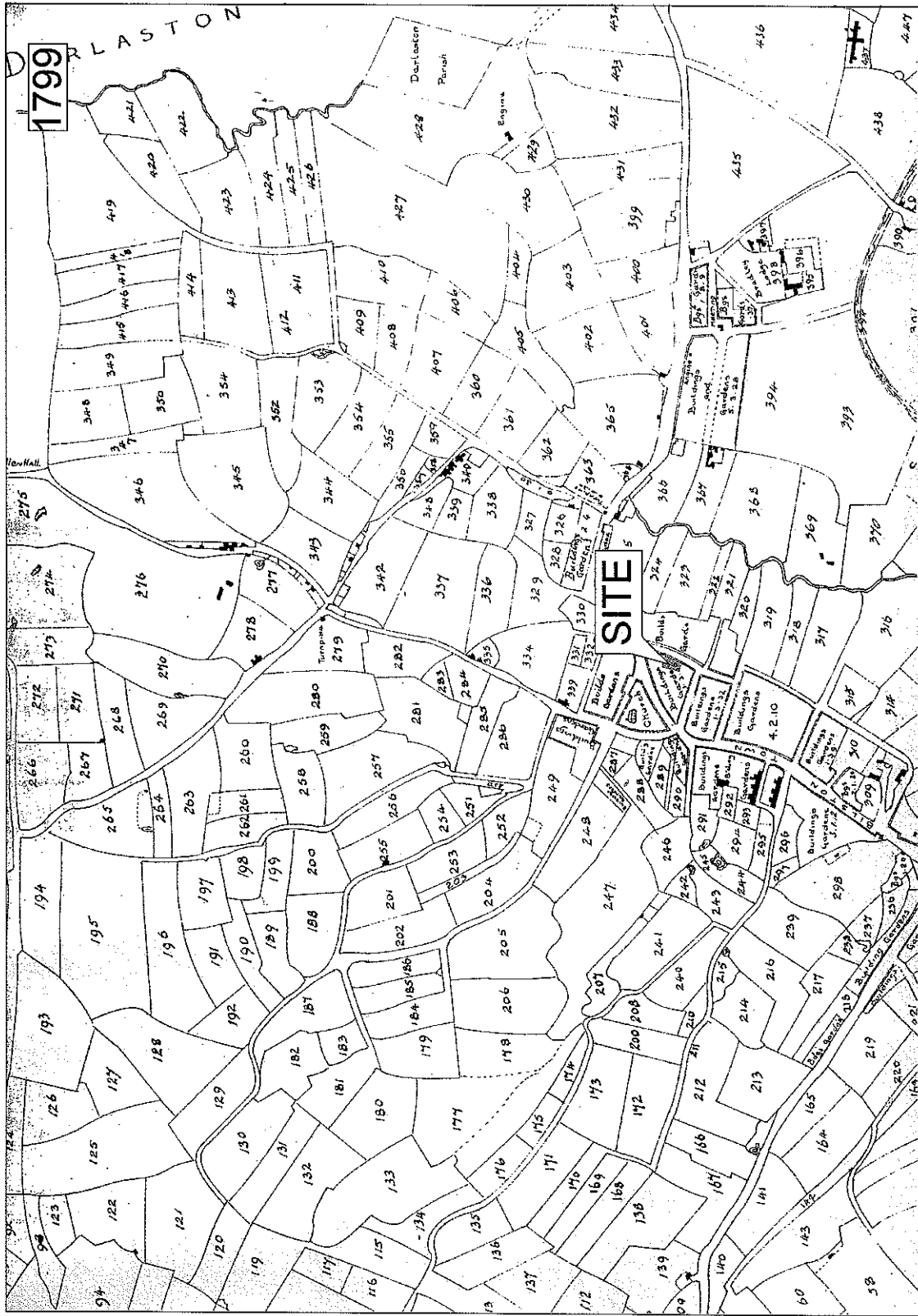


Fig.3

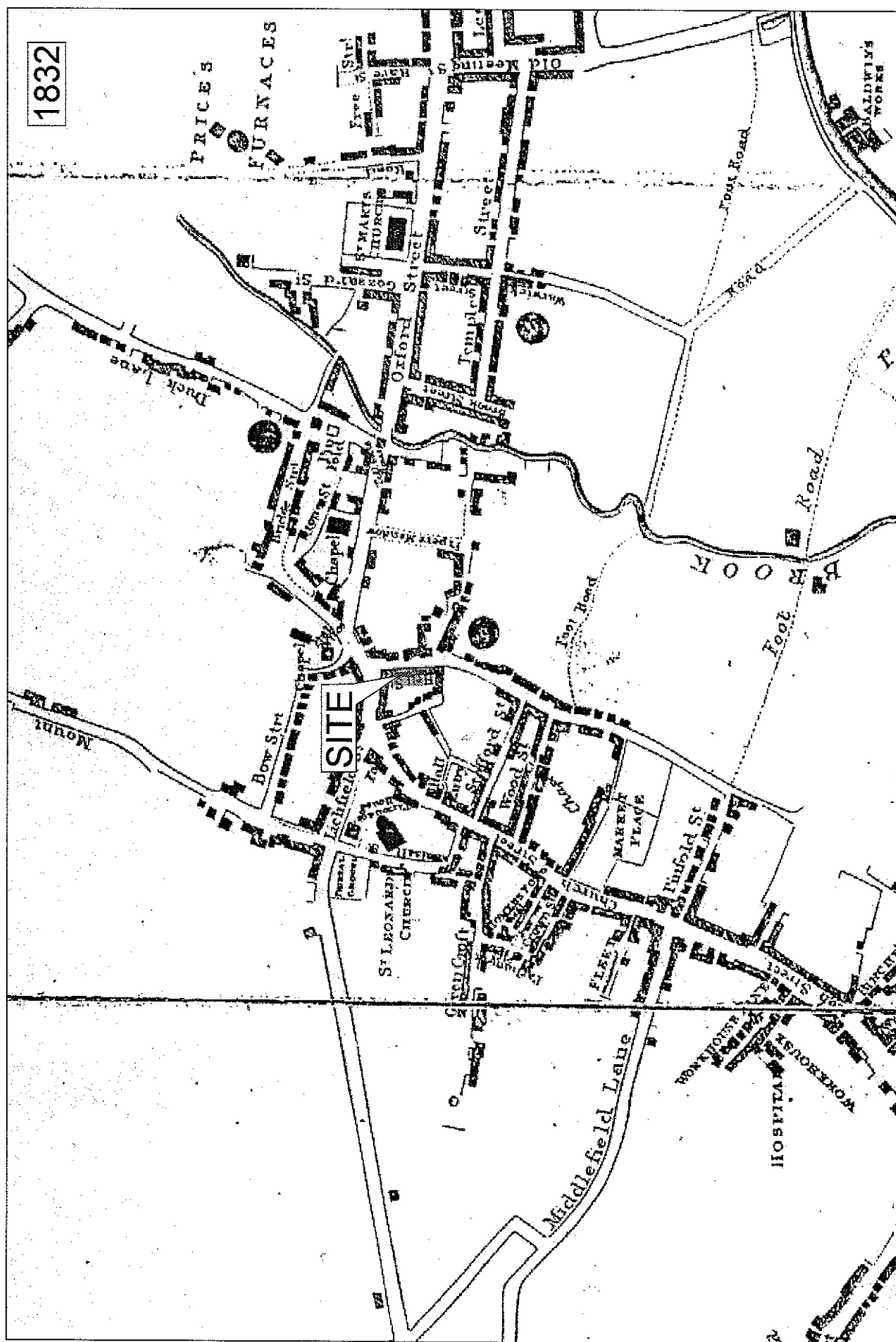


Fig.4

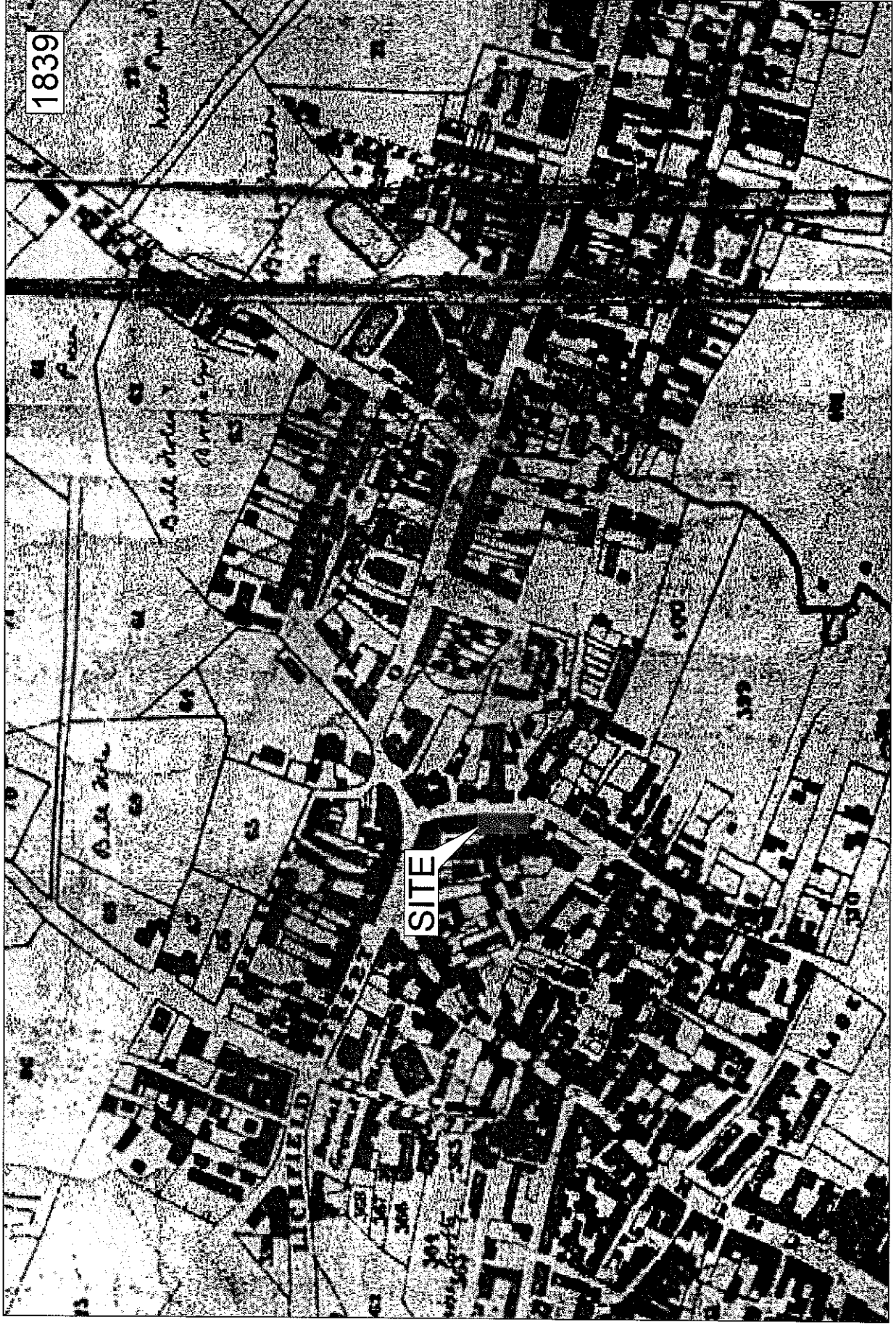


Fig.5

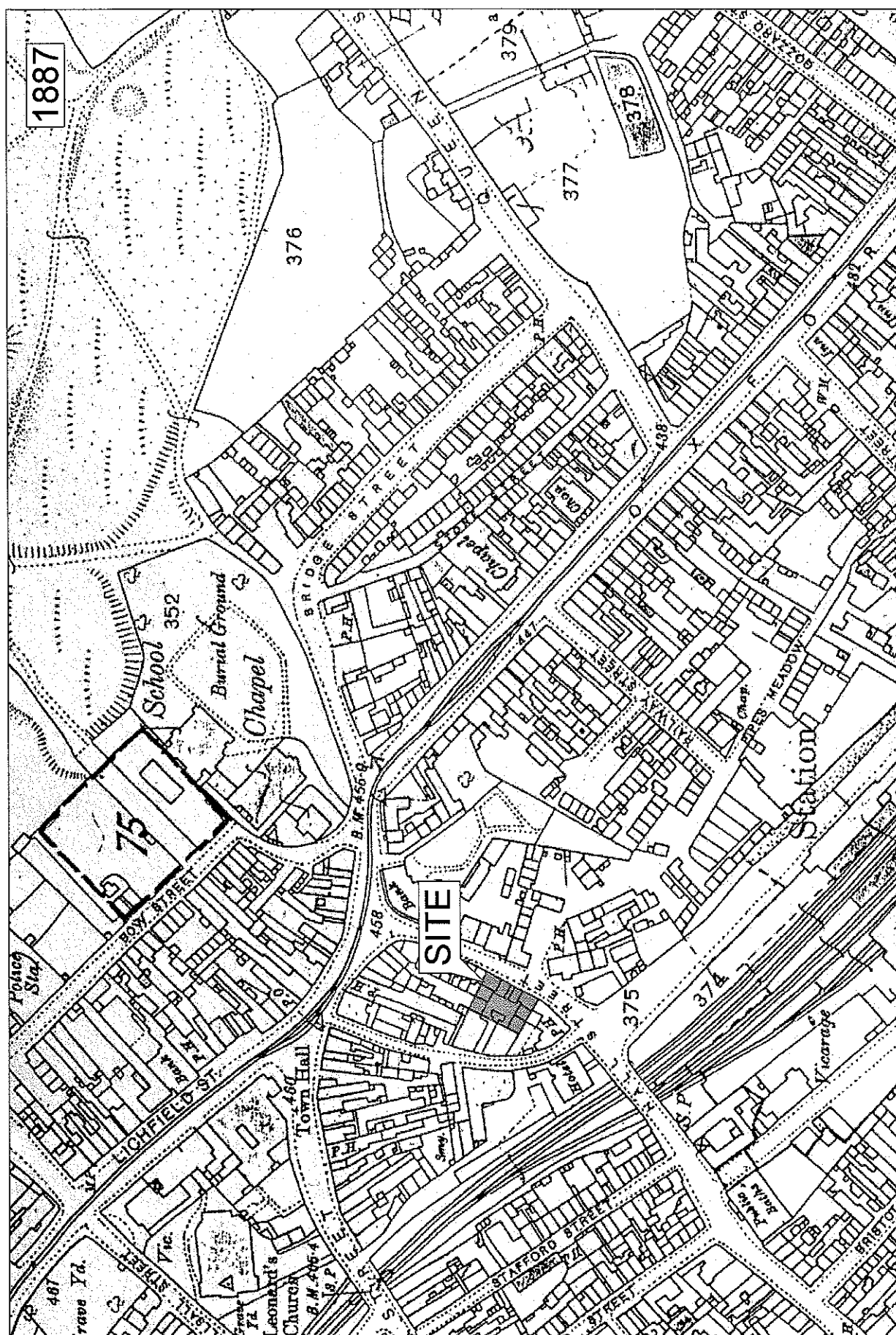


Fig. 6

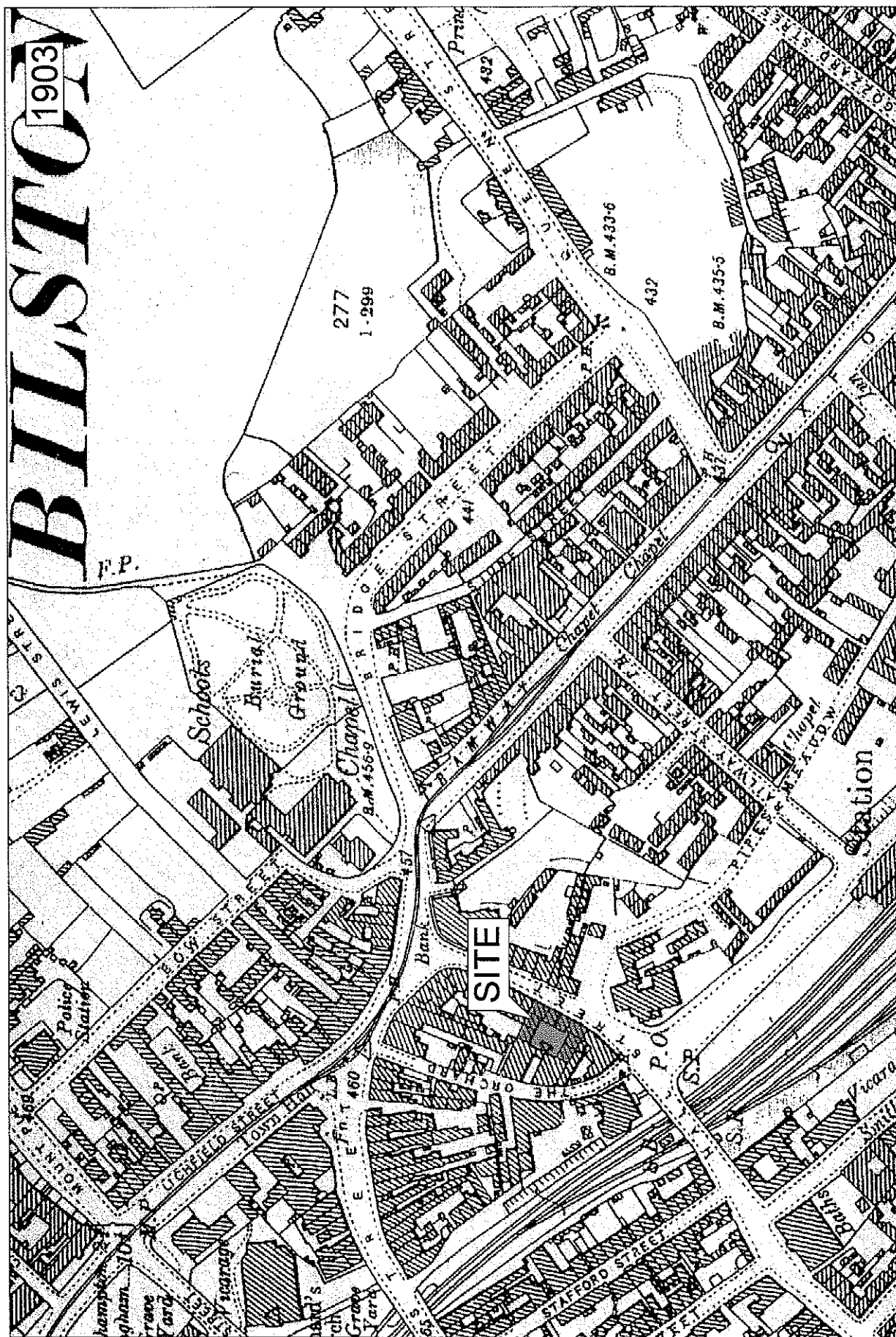


Fig.7

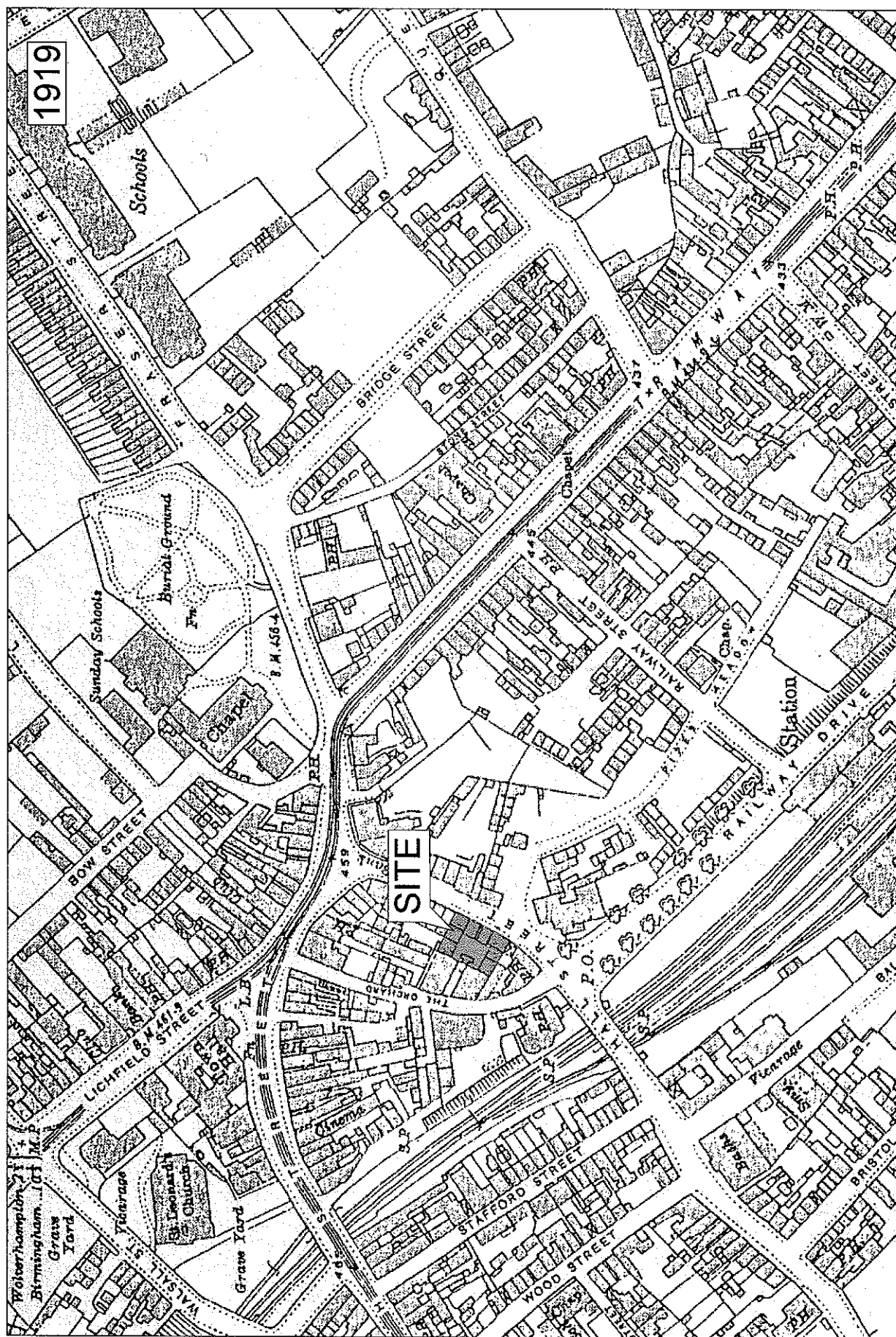


Fig.8

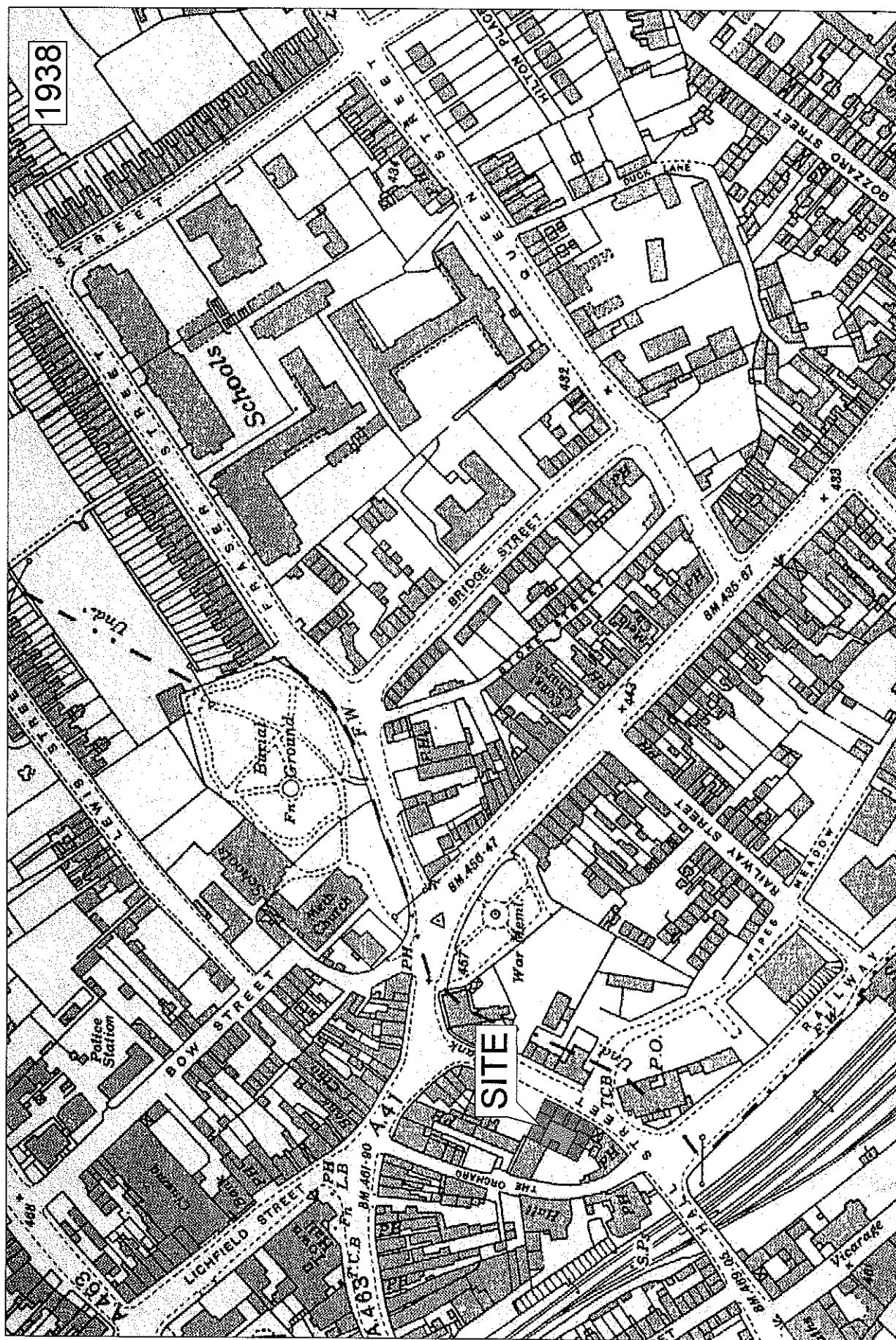


Fig.9

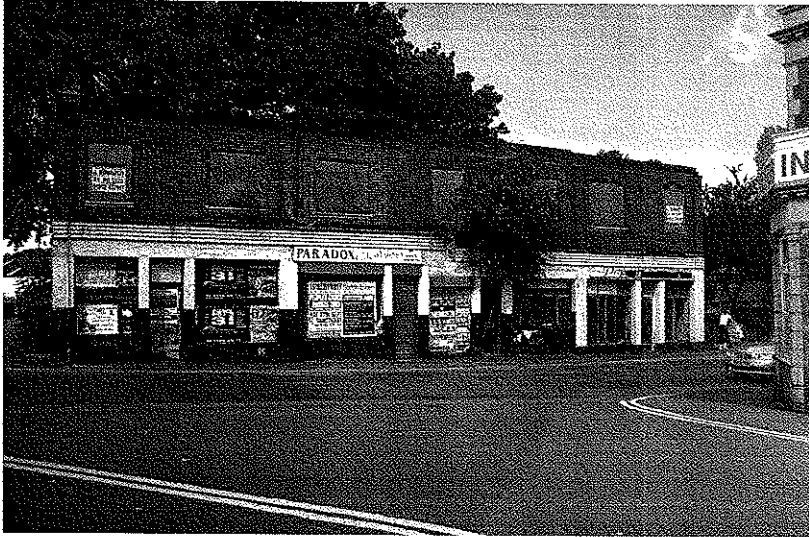


Plate 1

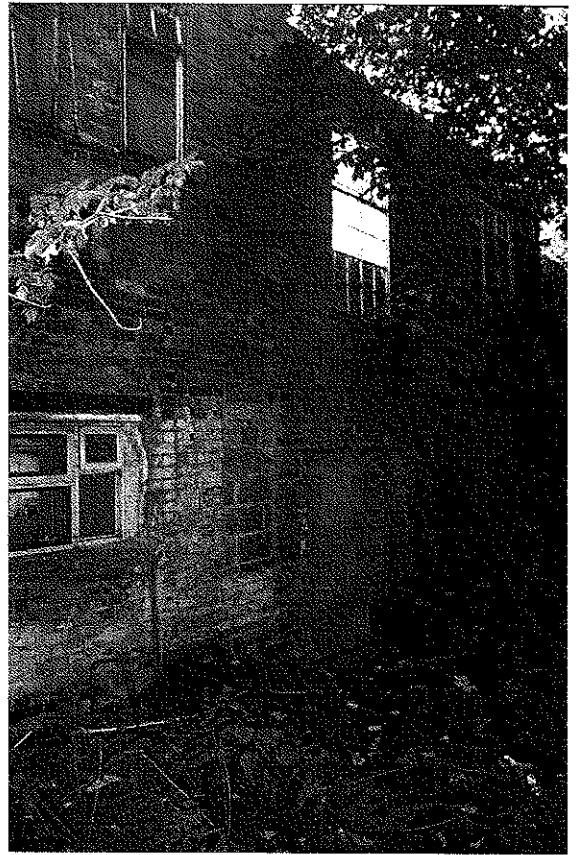


Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4

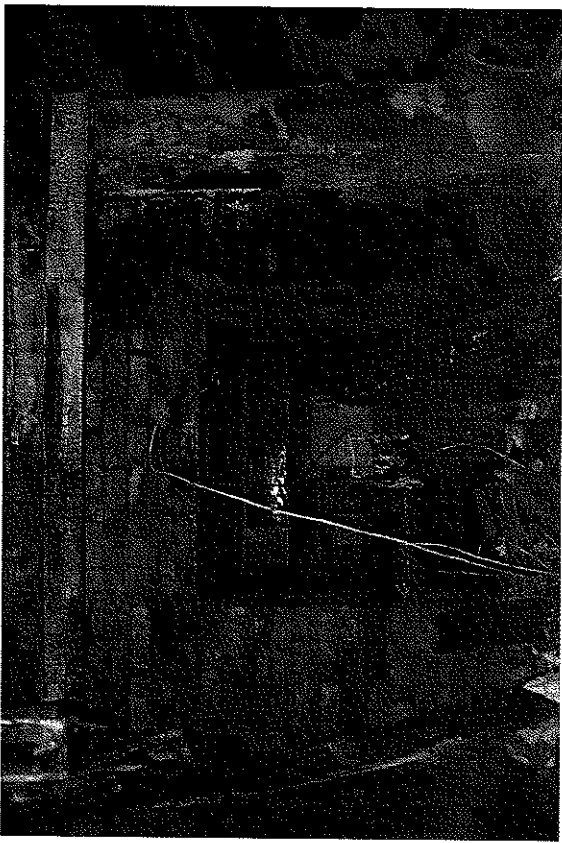


Plate 5



Plate 7



Plate 6