

**26-28 St. Nicholas Street,
Coventry**

**Archaeological Evaluation
2005**

Project No. 1291

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2005**

by
Kevin Colls

With contributions from Erica Macey-Bracken
and Stephenie Ratkai

for
Benfield Homes Ltd

For further information please contact:

Alex Jones (Director)

Birmingham Archaeology

The University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 5513

Fax: 0121 414 5516

E-Mail: bham-arch@bham.ac.uk

Web Address: <http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

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Summary

Site Name:	26-28 St. Nicholas Street, Coventry.
Project Number:	291
Location:	NGR SP 3324 7969
Type:	Archaeological Evaluation
Date:	March 2005
Planning Ref:	39184/C
Accession No:	NS05
SMR/SAM No:	N/A

In March 2005, Birmingham Archaeology undertook an archaeological assessment and evaluation at the request of Benfield Homes Ltd at 26-28 St. Nicholas Street, Coventry. In compliance with an approved Written Scheme of Investigation, three trenches were excavated within the proposed development area.

The evaluation proved successful in characterising the nature and quality of the archaeological remains located within the site. No structures or features of a medieval date were encountered during the course of this fieldwork. A brick well was identified in Trench 2 dated to the late 17th century. The lack of medieval archaeology may indicate the presence of a trackway allowing access from St. Nicholas Street to Draper's Fields.

A number of archaeological remains were identified dating to the 19th century, including two pits, a gully, and a possible foundation trench. During this time the St. Nicholas Street frontage was reoccupied after the economic decline and the subsequent population contraction. It is likely these features are associated with what must have been an intense period of redevelopment.

26-28 St. Nicholas Street, Coventry: An Archaeological Evaluation 2005

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This report describes the results of an archaeological assessment and evaluation carried out by Birmingham Archaeology in March 2005 for Benfield Homes Ltd. at 26-28 St. Nicholas Street, Coventry (NGR SP 3324 7969). The work was undertaken to fulfil a condition of planning permission for the development of apartment blocks and residential properties on the site (Planning Ref: 39184/C).
- 1.2 The evaluation conformed to a *Brief for Archaeological Investigation* produced by Chris Patrick, Planning Archaeologist, Coventry City Council, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2005) also approved by Mr Patrick. The fieldwork followed the *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations* issued by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA 1994).

2.0 Location and geology

- 2.1 The site is located to the north of Coventry town centre in the area of Draper's Fields (NGR SP 3324 7969, Fig. 1). A basin of the Coventry Canal is located approximately 150 metres to the south. The site is bounded by St. Nicholas Street to the west, residential properties to the north and east, and car parking and Draper's Field Road to the south (Fig. 2).
- 2.2 The underlying geology consists of Triassic Keuper Maul overlying red sandstone which, in turn, seals Carboniferous coal seams.
- 2.3 Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, the house and commercial premises that occupied the site were demolished.

3.0 Aims and objectives

- 3.1 The objective of the evaluation was to determine the character, quality, date, significance and extent of any archaeological remains surviving within the site. This information will assist the Planning Archaeologist in making an informed judgement on the likely impact upon the archaeological resource by the proposed development.
- 3.2 More specific aims were to:
 - Define the nature and date of the earliest development of St. Nicholas Street.
 - Assess the evidence for the decline of the suburb following the Dissolution of the Monasteries.
 - Define the nature and extent of the re-occupation of the suburb in the post-medieval period.

4.0 Methodology

Trial Trenching

- 4.1 Three trenches were excavated across the proposed development area totalling 100m (5% sample of the total area). Two trenches were located close to the St. Nicholas Street frontage (Trenches 1 and 2) whilst Trench 3 was located across the centre of the site (Fig. 2). After discussion with the planning archaeologist, Trench 3 was relocated to avoid live services.
- 4.2 All trenches were excavated using a JCB excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. All machine excavation was undertaken under direct archaeological supervision to the top of the first significant archaeological horizon or the natural substrate, whichever was encountered first. Where archaeological deposits were identified, they were excavated by hand.
- 4.3 All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. A comprehensive written record was maintained using *pro-forma* context cards. Plans and sections were produced at relevant scales supplemented by colour, monochrome, and digital photography where appropriate. These records comprise part of the site archive, which will be deposited with the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Accession Number NS05).
- 4.4 All work was undertaken in accordance with the Health and Safety at work Act (1974) and the Management of Health and Safety regulations (1992).

Historic Environment Record (HER) Assessment

- 4.5 Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a detailed HER assessment was undertaken to provide historic information for the site and its environs. This assessment included consulting all available historic maps and archive material as well as completing a search of the local sites recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). The results are integrated below.

5.0 Archaeological and historical background

Historical background

- 5.1 Evidence for Saxon Coventry is equivocal; the earliest records date to the mid-11th century and relate to the founding of the monastery. However, recent speculation has suggested that the origins of the settlement may be even earlier (Demidowicz 2003, 9). The town that grew up around the Priory was, by the 12th century, of great commercial importance, attracting both baronial sponsorship and industry. Under the patronage of the Prior and the Earl of Chester, Coventry's markets grew and flourished attracting further interest from the church, resulting in monastic foundations. By the 14th century Coventry was one of the richest and

-
- most influential towns in the country (*ibid.* 13), with most of its wealth coming from the woollen cloth industry. A defensive wall with twelve gates and twenty towers surrounded the city.
- 5.2 The site itself lies to the north of the historic core of Coventry, and is thought to have Saxon origins (Patrick 2005, 4). Following the expansion of Coventry in the 12th-13th centuries the district became one of four suburbs of the city, and was centred upon St. Nicholas' Church. Records survive pertaining to properties on St. Nicholas Street in the 12th century, and by 1410-11 it is recorded that most properties on the street were cottages with tenter grounds or barns to the rear (VCH 1969, 24-43). This practice of hanging cloth out to dry is reflected in the name of the modern suburb, Draper's Fields.
- 5.3 Following the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, a decline set in. As Coventry fell upon hard times, there was a decrease in population resulting in much of the town gradually shrinking back to its historic core. The site, mapped for the first time by Speed in 1610 (Fig. 3), shows both sides of St. Nicholas Street lined with properties. Information from the Cellarer's and Pittancer's Rentals (in the Register of Coventry Priory dated 1410) states that located on the east frontage of St. Nicholas Street, in the area of the site, were:
- "..more than 20 cottages, including 3 (towards the north) roofed with tiles and another three (towards the south) which were said in 1410-11 to be on the site of a former stone tenement."*
- 5.4 By the mid 18th century, as shown by Bradford's map of 1748-9 (Fig. 4), further economic decline had led to a greater contraction of the population and the properties aligning St. Nicholas Street had disappeared.
- 5.5 During the 19th century, the St. Nicholas frontage was reoccupied. Sharp's map of 1807 (Fig. 5) depicts a number of properties and formal gardens, and Eagle's map of 1810 (Fig. 6) indicates that the site was located between land belonging to Folly House to the north and Hill House to the south. Eagle's map is intriguing as it suggests that the site is located on what may have been an access route from St. Nicholas Street to the land owned by The Drapers Company. This thin plot of land is shown as being owned by B. Reynolds, a silkman, who also owned land at Folly House to the north.
- 5.6 Later mapping, namely the 1851 Board of Health Map (Fig. 7) and the Ordnance Survey maps of 1888 (Figs. 8) and 1905, demonstrate that the site frontage was occupied by buildings with gardens to the rear. These remained largely intact until World War Two, when the Blitz of 14/15 November 1940 and the later raid in 1941 did great damage to the city. Although the commercial premises to the rear remained largely unchanged, the property fronting the street on the 1936 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9) had been replaced by the time that the 1950 Ordnance Survey map had been drawn up (Fig. 10) with a smaller, square
-

property marked as number 26. This house is known to have been built in 1946 and was demolished as part of this development.

Archaeological background

5.7 Previous archaeological work in the vicinity of the site includes a small excavation in 1978 undertaken by members of the Coventry and District Archaeological Society during a programme of redevelopment of the canal basin (Wallwork 1985). The excavation was located in the grounds of Hill House, situated just to the south of this study area (Fig 11, Plates 1a-1d). The excavation identified well-preserved medieval archaeological remains. These included post-holes, beam slots, pits, metal working hearths as well as sandstone foundations and cobbled surfaces associated with properties fronting onto St. Nicholas Street (CADAS 1978). Similar remains were also identified in a second small excavation at a hereto unidentified location along the St. Nicholas Street frontage in the same year (*ibid*).

6.0 Results

6.1 This section provides an overview of the evaluation results; detailed summaries of the recorded contexts and finds are to be found in Appendices 1 and 2. All heights are expressed as metres Above Ordnance Datum (m AOD).

Trench 1

6.2 Natural sand and clay **1002** was identified at a depth of 0.68m below current ground level (98.94m AOD) sealed by modern overburden **1001**. No archaeological features or deposits were identified (Fig. 2).

Trench 2

6.3 Natural sand and clay **1002** was identified at a depth of 0.74m below current ground level (98.88m AOD) sealed by modern overburden **1001**.

6.4 A Brick well (**1031**) (Fig. 2, Plates 2 & 3) was identified towards the centre of the trench. Constructed without mortar, the character and dimensions of the bricks suggest a 17th century build.

6.5 Somewhat later, several of the bricks from the upper two courses of well **1031** had been removed to allow the construction of a barrel-vaulted roof/well cap. Constructed from mortar bonded bricks, the dimensions of which suggest an 18th/19th century date, the cap appears contemporary with drain **1029** which runs into the well from the northeast.

6.6 Several features were identified cutting the natural substrate (Fig. 2, Plate 4). Two pits (**1019,1021**), a gully (**1023**), and a possible foundation trench (**1025**)

were recorded at the north-eastern end of the trench. All produced evidence dating to the late 18th / early 19th century, although residual medieval material was recovered from fills **1022** and **1024** (features **1021** and **1023**).

- 6.7 A possible infilled cellar **1032** (Fig. 2) was located at the southwestern end of the trench. Although no cellar walls survived, demolition rubble was removed to a depth of 98.44m AOD before excavation ceased due to health and safety considerations.

Trench 3

- 6.8 Natural sand and clay **1002** was identified at a depth of 0.63m below current ground level (96.26 m AOD) sealed by modern overburden **1001**.
- 6.8 Several features were identified cutting the natural substrate (Fig. 2, Plate 5). A total of six pits (**1003**, **1005**, **1007**, **1009**, **1011**, and **1017**) were distributed across the trench. Although only three of the features contained finds dating to the 19th century, the homogeneous nature of the fills suggests these are all contemporary.
- 6.9 Two ditches (**1013** and **1015**) were identified towards the eastern end of the trench. Both contained modern material.

7.0 Discussion

- 7.1 The evaluation proved successful in characterising the nature and quality of the archaeological remains located within the site. No structures or features of a medieval date were encountered during the course of the fieldwork. Only three sherds of medieval pottery and one tile fragment were recovered, all of which were clearly residual. Indeed, the absence of medieval archaeology is in itself intriguing as the archaeological assessment and evidence from previous nearby excavations all point to dense concentrations of medieval activity along the St. Nicholas Street frontage. One possible explanation may lie on Eagle's map of 1810. If the thin plot of land owned by Reynolds was a trackway, allowing access to Draper's Field, then it is possible that this may have much earlier origins and may explain the lack of medieval structures along the frontage at this point (Demidowicz *pers.comm*). Although Speed's map of 1610 shows houses on the street frontage, the quality and the schematic nature of the map makes it difficult to use as a useful source when examining an area in detail.
- 7.2 Excluding the modern features, the majority of the archaeological remains appear to date to the 19th century. During this time the St. Nicholas Street frontage was reoccupied following the economic decline and subsequent population contraction. It is likely that these features are associated with what must have been an intense period of redevelopment. The pottery is consistent with some occupation in the later 18th or early 19th centuries rather than

reoccupation in the later 19th century suggested by the documentary and map evidence.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by Benfield Homes Ltd, with thanks to Pip Ellis for his support. Thanks are due to Chris Patrick, who monitored the project on behalf of Coventry City Council, for his co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Work on site was directed by Kevin Colls, assisted by Keith Hinton and Jessica Bryan. The documentary research was undertaken by Leonie Driver and Kevin Colls. This report was written by Kevin Colls, with illustrations by Nigel Dodds. This project was managed for Birmingham Archaeology by Kirsty Nichol, who also edited this report.

9.0 References

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Wallwork, R. 1985 *Excavations at Hill House, Coventry*. Unpublished interim report.

Appendix 1 Context Database

Context No	Description
1001	Modern overburden present across the site. Mixed topsoil and rubble 0.56m in depth.
1002	Natural substrate. Red clay with occasional sand patches.
1003	Pit cut. Rectangular in plan with vertical sides. 0.5m by 0.4m. Filled by 1004.
1004	Pit fill. Dark brown silty clay with occasional pebble inclusions. 0.2m in depth.
1005	Pit cut. Sub-circular in plan with shallow sloping sides. 0.8m by 0.25m. Filled by 1006.
1006	Pit fill. Dark brown silty clay with charcoal inclusions. 0.1m in depth.
1007	Pit cut. Circular in plan with shallow sloping sides. 1.1m by 0.30m. Filled by 1008.
1008	Dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional charcoal inclusions. 0.1m in depth. Pit
1009	cut. Irregular in plan. 0.85m by 0.75m. Filled by 1010.
1010	Dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional pebble inclusions. 0.05m in depth. Pit
1011	cut. Square in plan. 0.6m by 0.6m. Filled by 1012.
1012	Dark brown sandy clay with occasional gravel inclusions. 0.2m in depth.
1013	Cut for modern linear feature. 3m in width, unknown depth. Possible service trench or location of grubbed out foundations. Filled by 1014.
1014	Dark brown sandy clay with modern inclusions. Depth unknown.
1015	Cut for modern linear feature. 2.5m in width, unknown depth. Possible service trench or location of grubbed out foundations. Filled by 1016.
1016	Dark brown sandy clay with modern inclusions. Depth unknown. Pit
1017	cut. Irregular in plan. 0.6m by 0.5m. Filled by 1018. Light brown
1018	sandy clay. 0.3m in depth.
1019	Pit cut. 0.9m by 0.5m. Filled by 1020.
1020	Dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional charcoal inclusions. Unknown depth.
1021	Pit cut. Irregular in plan. 0.7m by 0.4m. Filled by 1022. Dark grey-brown silty clay.
1022	Unknown depth.
1023	Gully cut. Aligned east to west. 1.3m by 0.4m. Filled by 1024.
1024	Mid orange-brown sandy silt (redeposited natural). 0.32m in depth.
1025	Cut for possible foundation trench. Post-medieval in date. 2m by 0.5m. Filled by 1025.
1026	Dark grey-brown silty clay with frequent brick fragments. 0.23m in depth. Cut for
1027	service trench. 6.5m in length, 0.5m in width. Filled by 1028. Red-brown sandy clay.
1028	Unexcavated.
1029	Cut for brick drain. Vertical sloping sides. 0.7m in length, 0.23m in width. Filled by brick drain 1030. Runs into well 1031.
1030	Brick drain. Constructed from hand-made orange red bricks 220mm by 100mm by 70mm. Bonded with brown-grey lime mortar. Runs into well 1031.
1031	Brick well. Unknown depth (at least 11m below current ground level). 1.5m in diameter. Two phases of construction. The well itself constructed using unbonded bricks measuring 240mm by 110mm by 60mm. The well was capped over using bricks similar to drain 1030 bonded with lime mortar to form a barrel vault roof.
1032	In-filled cellar. At least 2m in length and over 1.4m deep. Backfilled with mixed clay and rubble.

Appendix 2 The Artefacts

Context	Pottery	Brick	Tile	Clay Pipe	Glass	Slag	Slate	Animal Bone
1004	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-
1012		-	2	-	-	1	-	16g
1018	3	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
1020	3	-	-	-	5	-	-	3g
1022	1	-	-	3	-	-	1	26g
1024	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
1031		2	-	-	-	-	-	-

Pottery by Stephanie Ratkai**Context 1004 Date 19th c?**

1 x coarseware or flowerpot fragment

Context 1018 Date late 18th c

1 x wheelthrown whiteware sherd with external thin orange slip
 1 x blackware sherd 1 x
 creamware sherd

Context 1020 Date late 18th c (residual 14th century sherds)

1 x ?Cannon Park ware (WCTS Sq23.2), internal pale olive glaze, external soot
 1 x ?Cannon Park ware (WCTS Sq23.2), unglazed body sherd
 1 x creamware sherd

Context 1022 Date c1250-1300/1325

1 x Chilvers Coton A jug sherd (WCTS WW01)

Context 1024 Date mid 13th-14th c

1 x glazed roof tile (Chilvers Coton A fabric)

WCTS = Warwickshire County Pottery Type Series

There was scantth ceramic evidence for medieval occupation. There was no pottery earlier than the mid 13 century, the earliest possible sherd being from a Chilvers Coton 'A' ware jug (Mayes and Scott 1984). The two probable Canon Park ware sherds are not closely datable but probably belong to the 14th century. It is clear however, these medieval sherds are residual. The glazed roof tile may indicate that a good quality building once stood in the area but one tile affords rather slight evidence. The remaining pottery is consistent with some occupation in the later 18th or early 19th centuries rather than reoccupation in the later 19th century suggested by the documentary and map evidence.

Small Finds by Erica Macey-Bracken

Other finds from the site included ceramic brick and tile, clay pipe, glass, slag, slate and animal bone. The assemblage was quantified by count and weight, and examined macroscopically for the purposes of this report. The assemblage was fragmentary, but the fragments recovered were generally unabraded, although a degree of iridescence was noted on some of the glass.

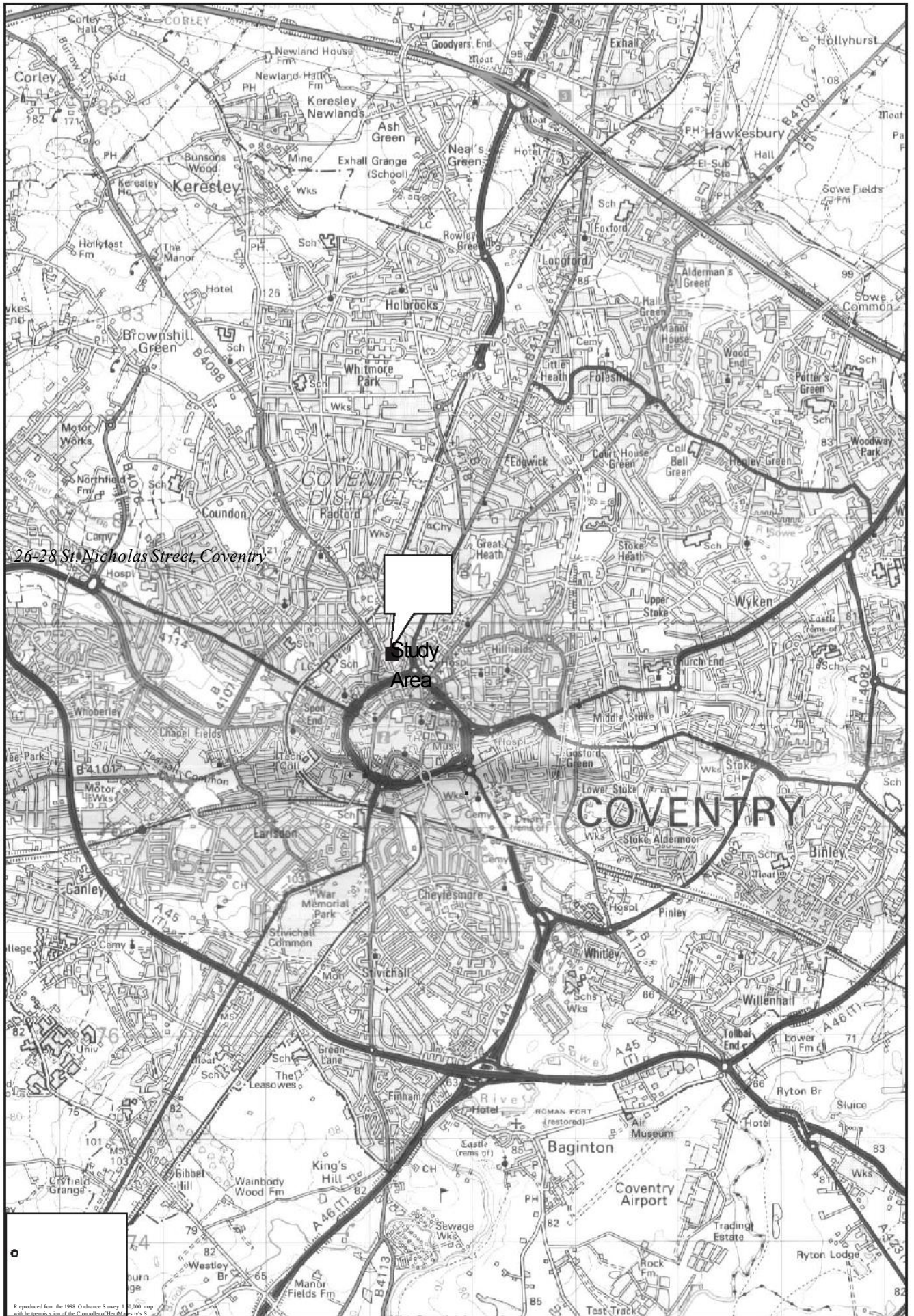
Five fragments of tile were recovered, including one partially-glazed fragment (1024) in a coarse grey-white fabric. Three of the other fragments (1004, 1012, 1018) were composed of a dense, well-fired dark red/orange fabric of post-medieval appearance. The other fragment (1012) was composed of a dense, smooth black fabric of modern appearance.

Three clay pipe stems were recovered (1022), one of which show signs of sooting on the external surface. No diagnostic or datable elements were recovered.

The glass assemblage consisted of three fragments of vessel glass (1020 x 3) and three fragments of window glass (1004 x 1, 1020thx 2). Two of the vessel glass fragments were from a very thin clear glass phial of late 19th century date (R. Bracken *pers. comm.*), and a very small, undiagnostic fragment of green bottle glass (1020) was also recovered. The two largest fragments of window glass, both of late 19th century date, were olive-green in colour and showed traces of iridescence, whilst the other fragment (1004) was clear, and was of modern appearance.

The animal bone assemblage consisted of part of a cow humerus (1012), a probable sheep rib (1020) and part of a longbone from an unidentified species. No cut marks or other pathologies were noted (E. Hancox *pers. comm.*).

Other finds from the site included a piece of slag (1012) with one flat surface, suggesting that the piece may have been part of a hearth lining. Two pieces of slate (1004 x 1, 1022 x 1), one of which had a nail hole surviving, were also recovered.



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Fig.1

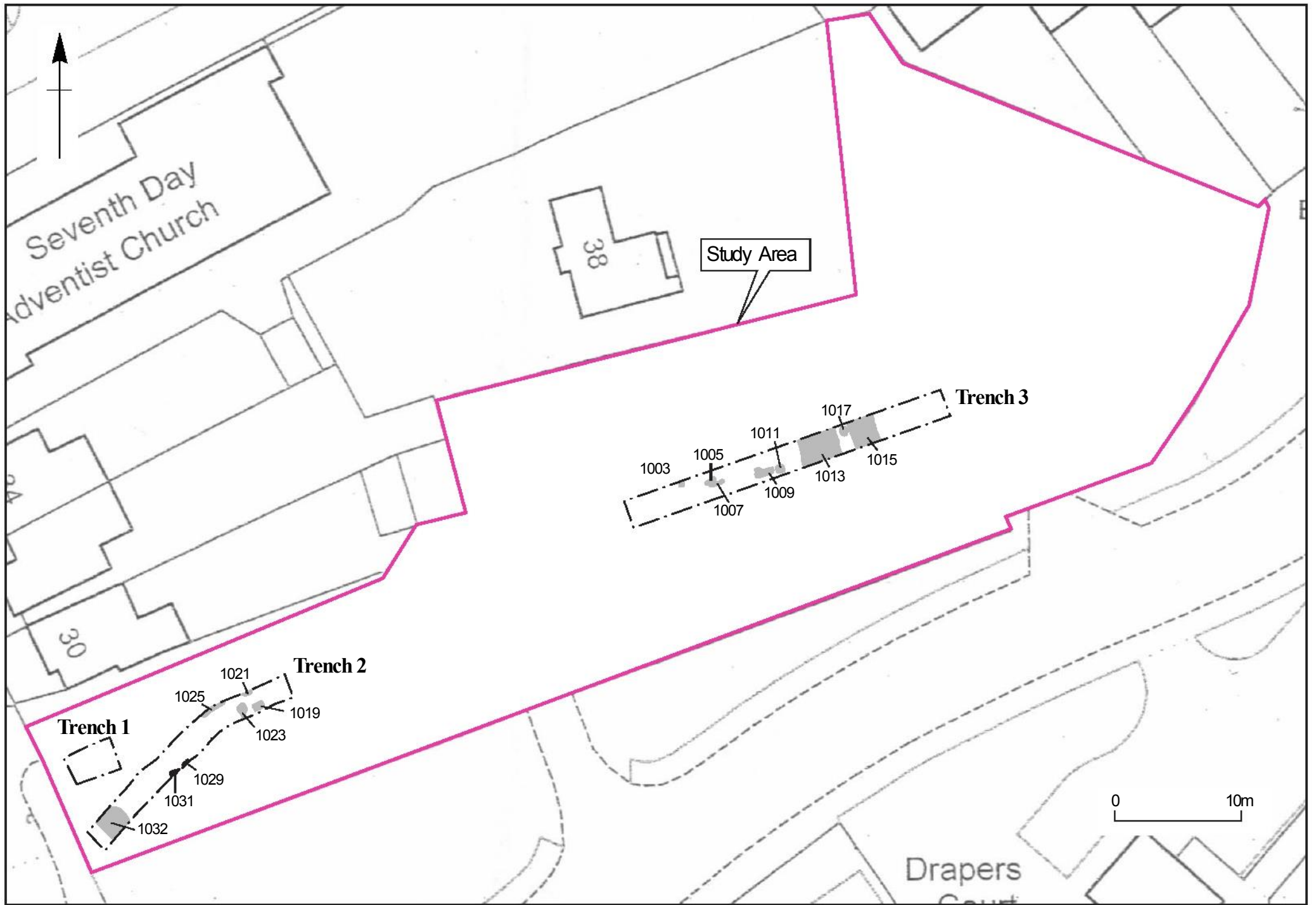


Fig.2

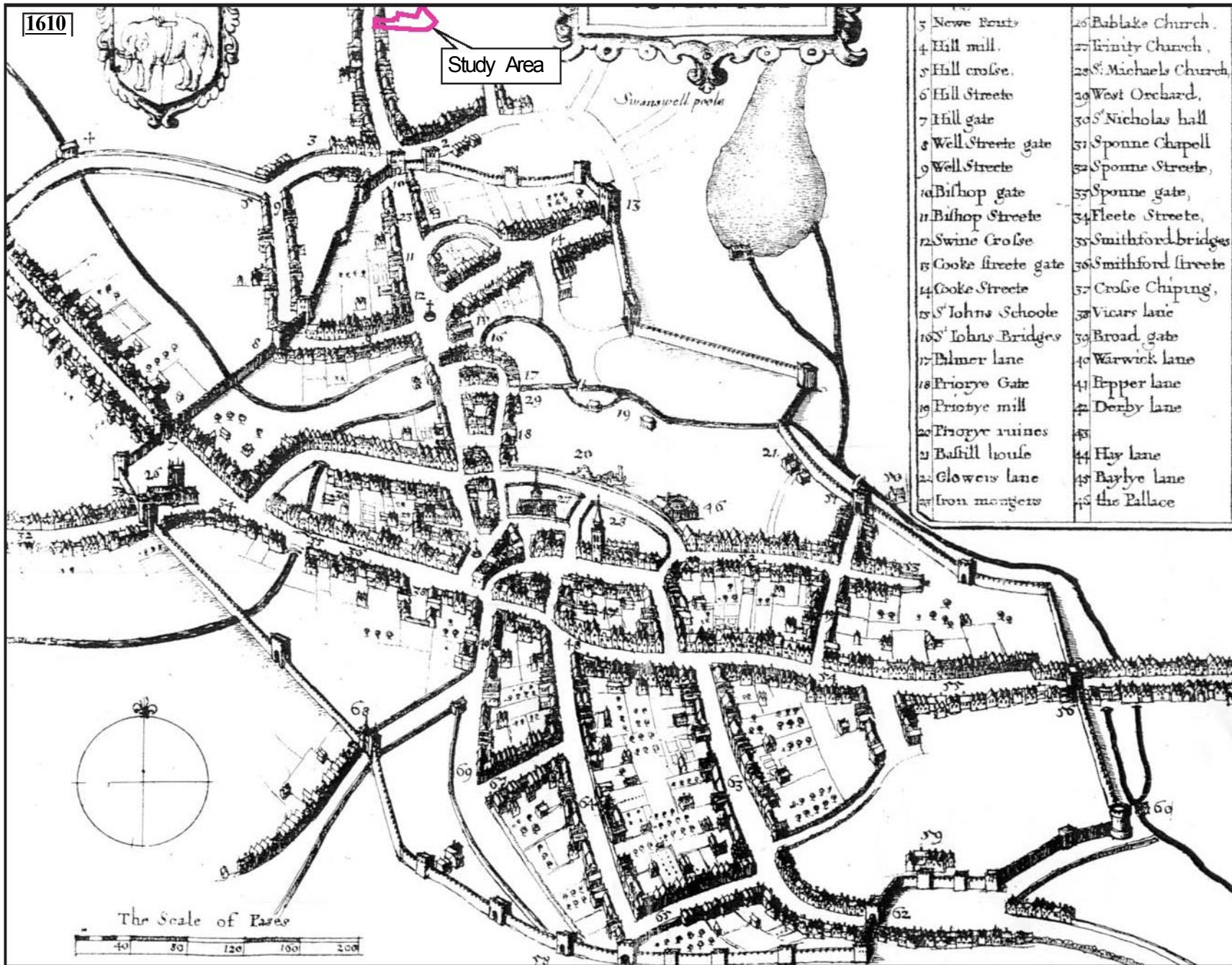


Fig.3

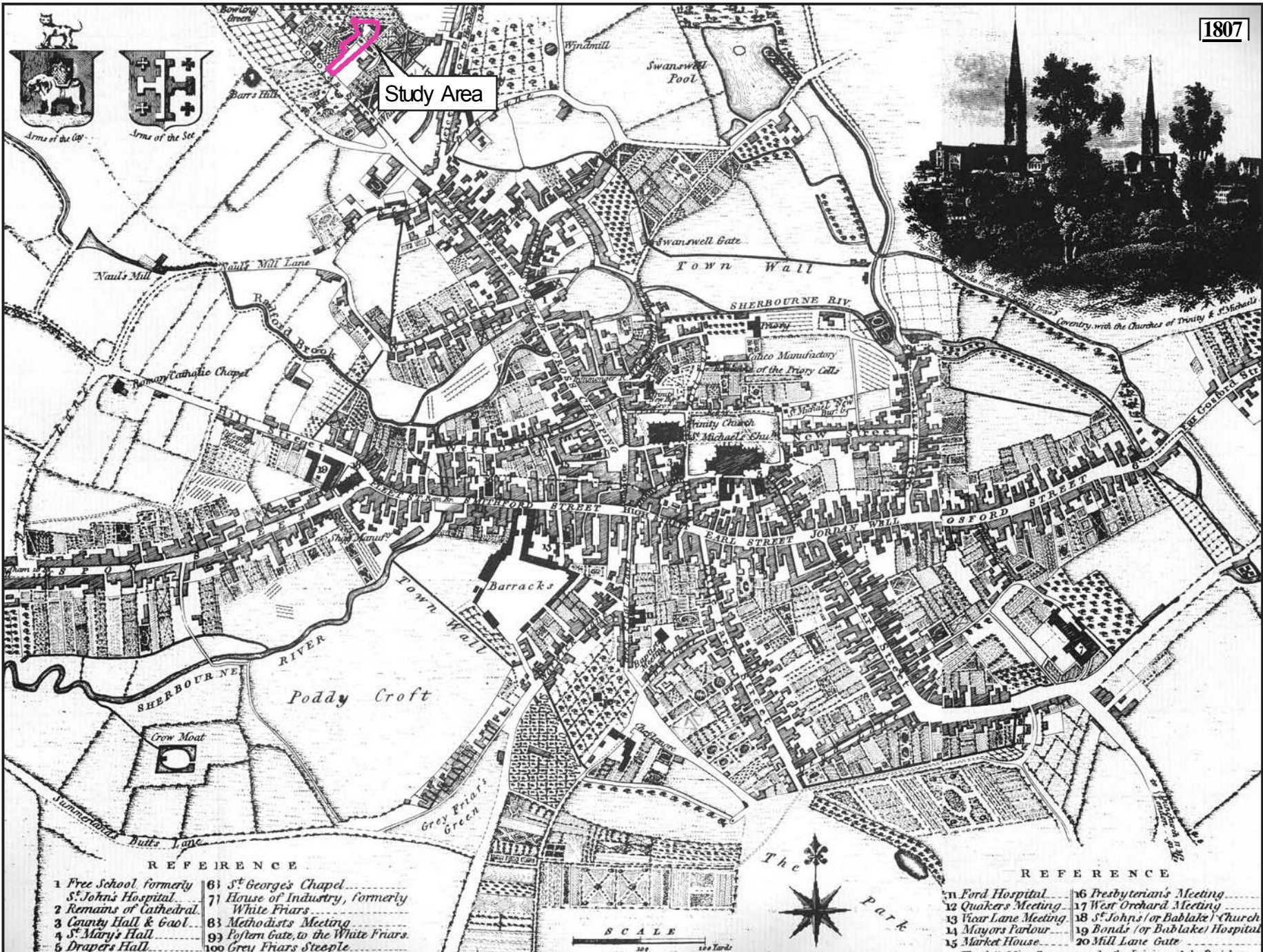


Fig.5 Fig.5

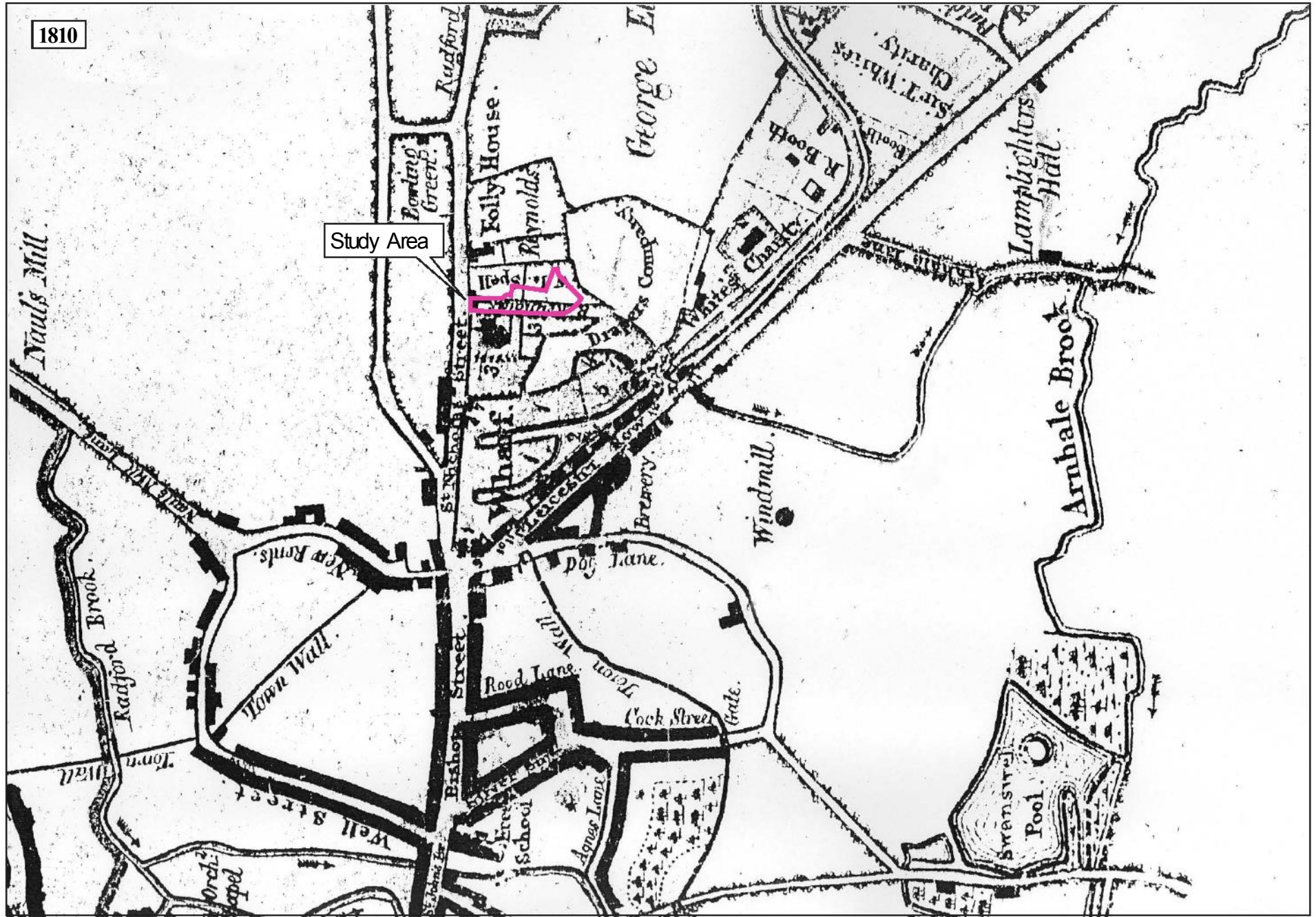


Fig.6

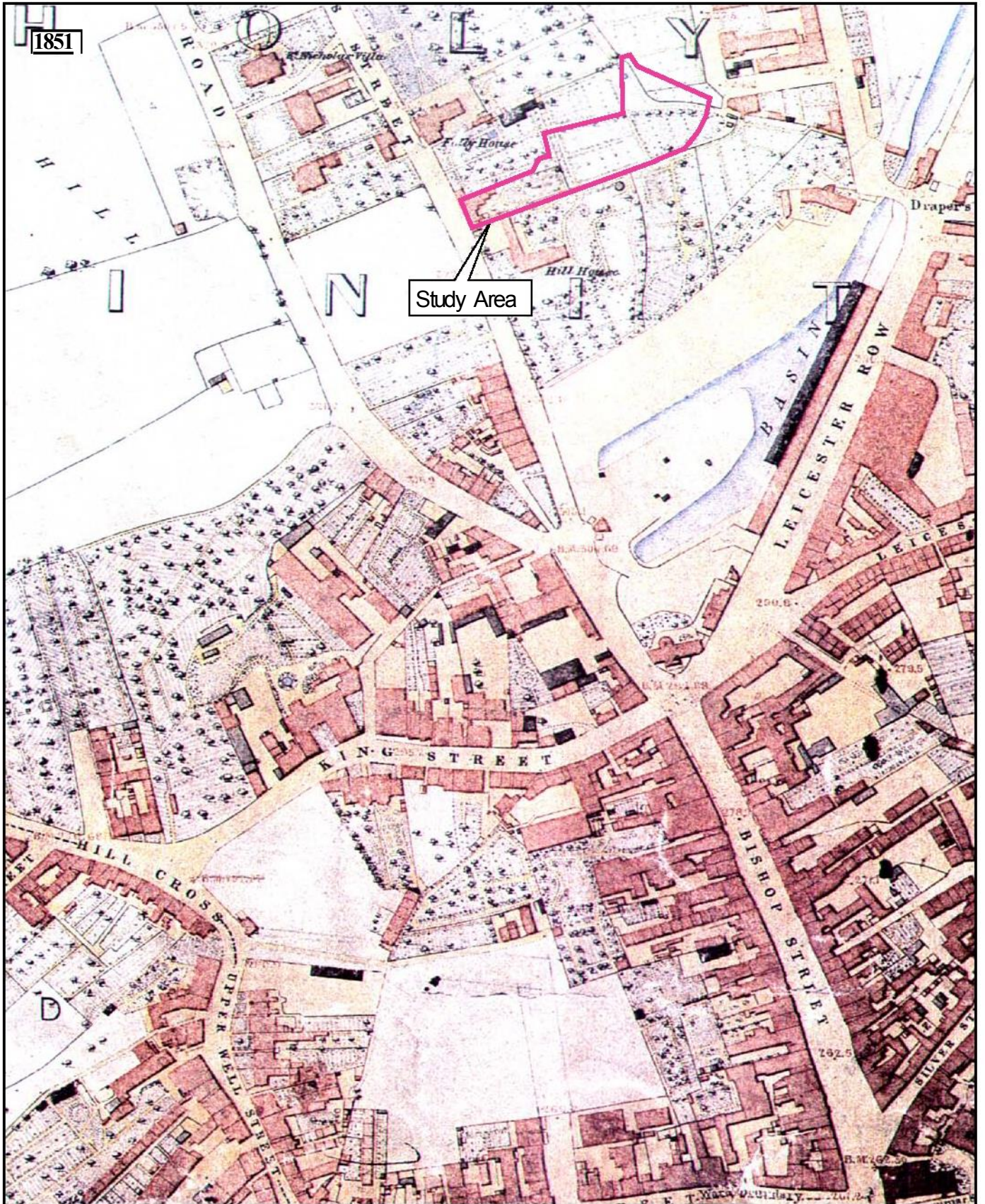


Fig.7

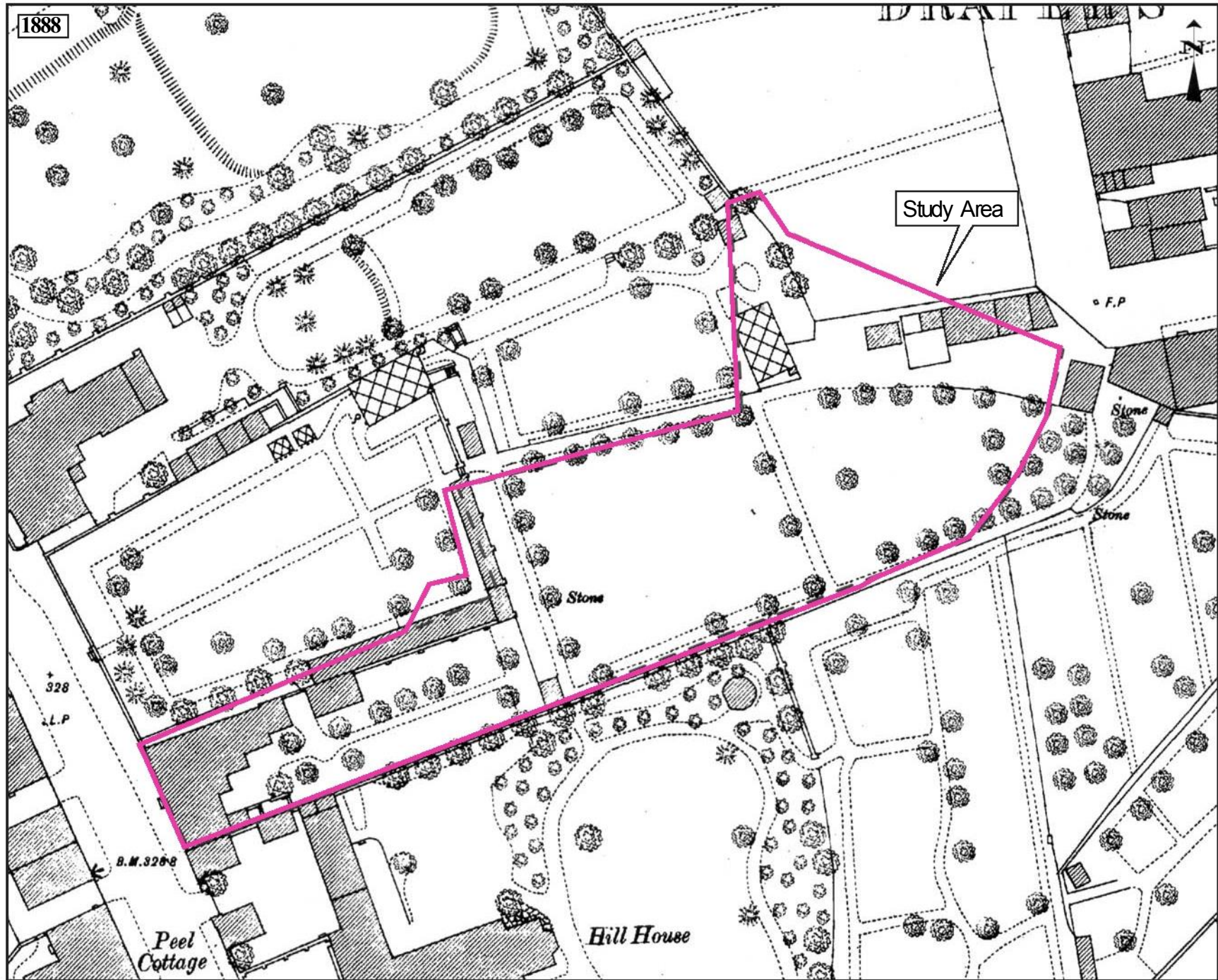


Fig.8

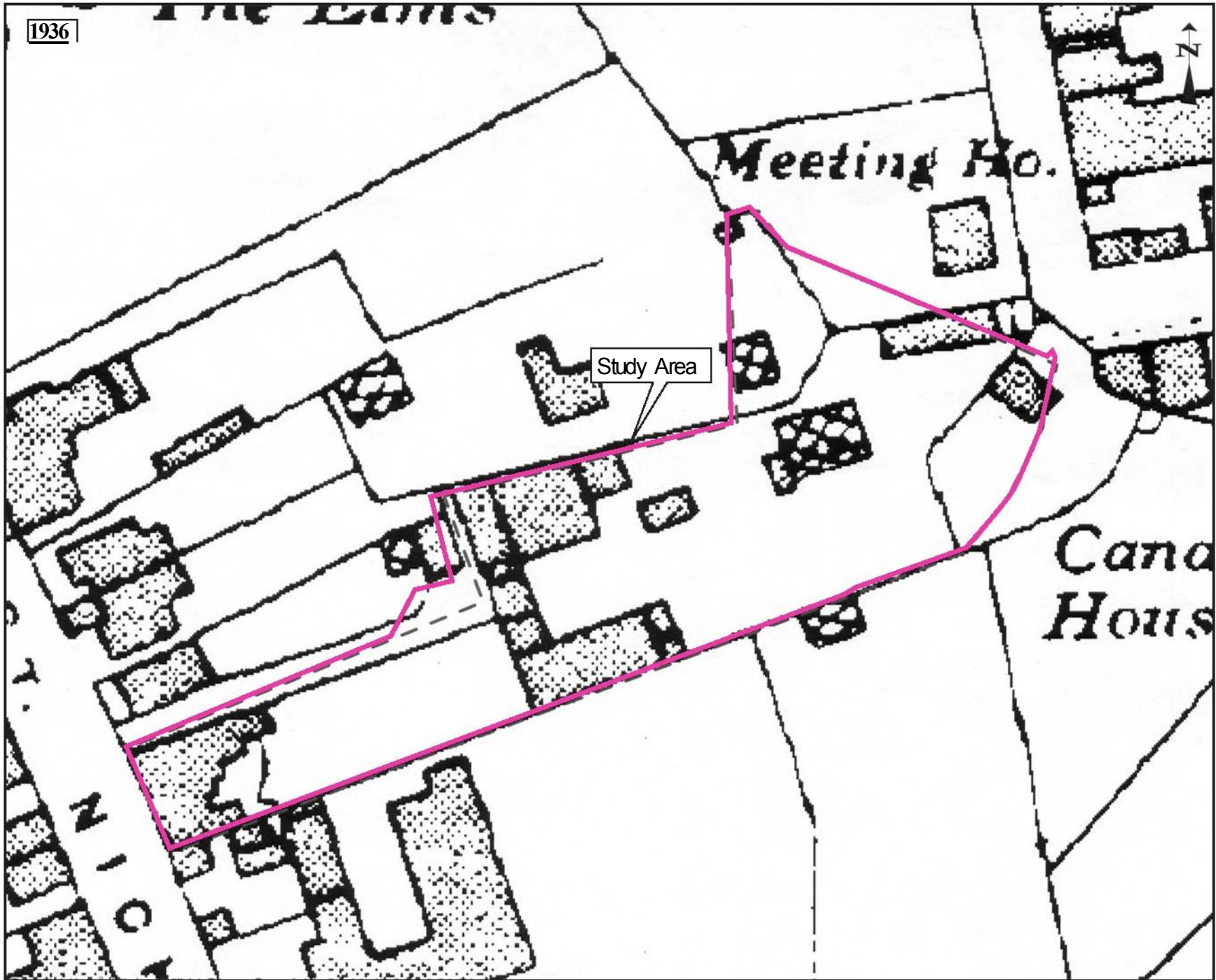


Fig.9

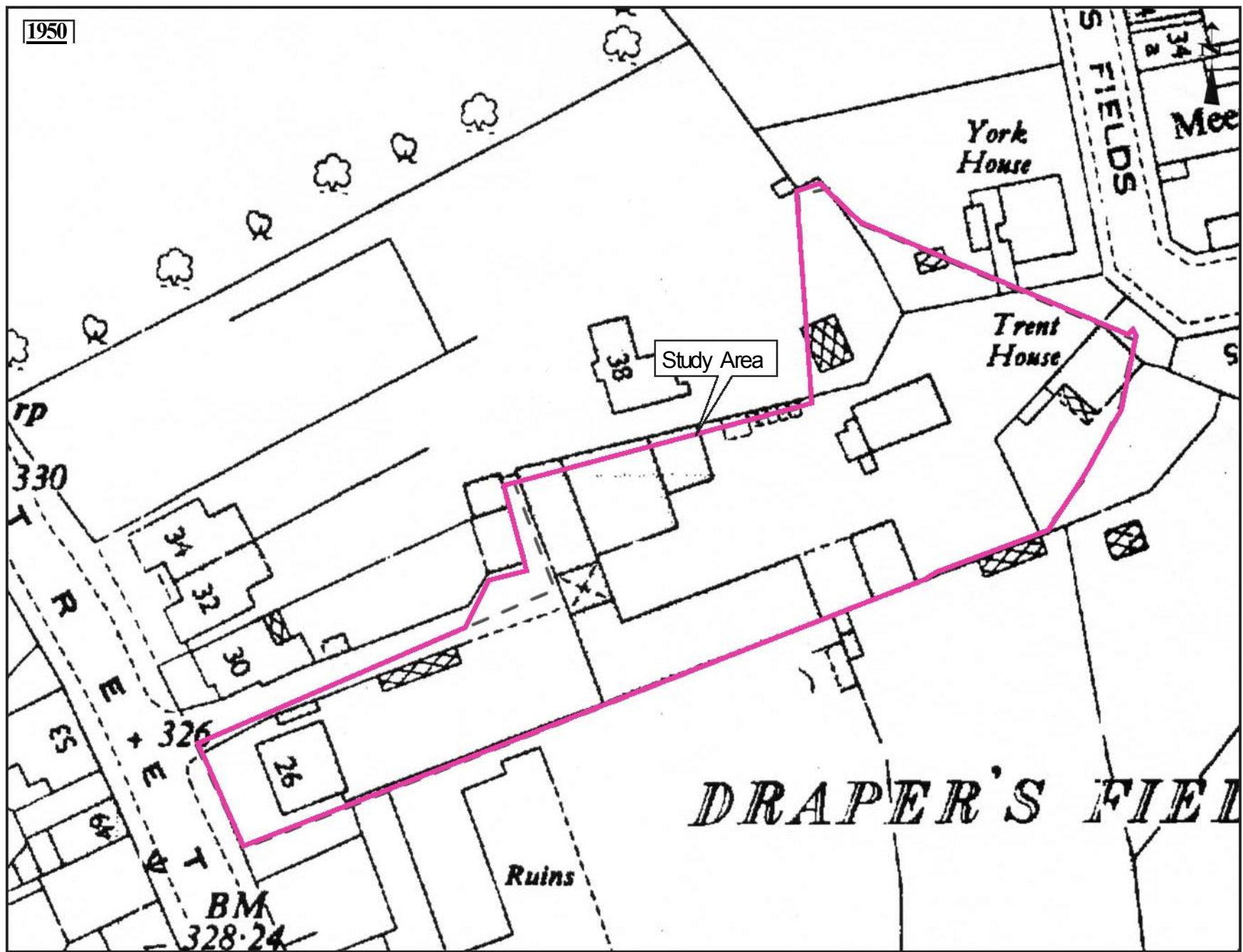


Fig.10

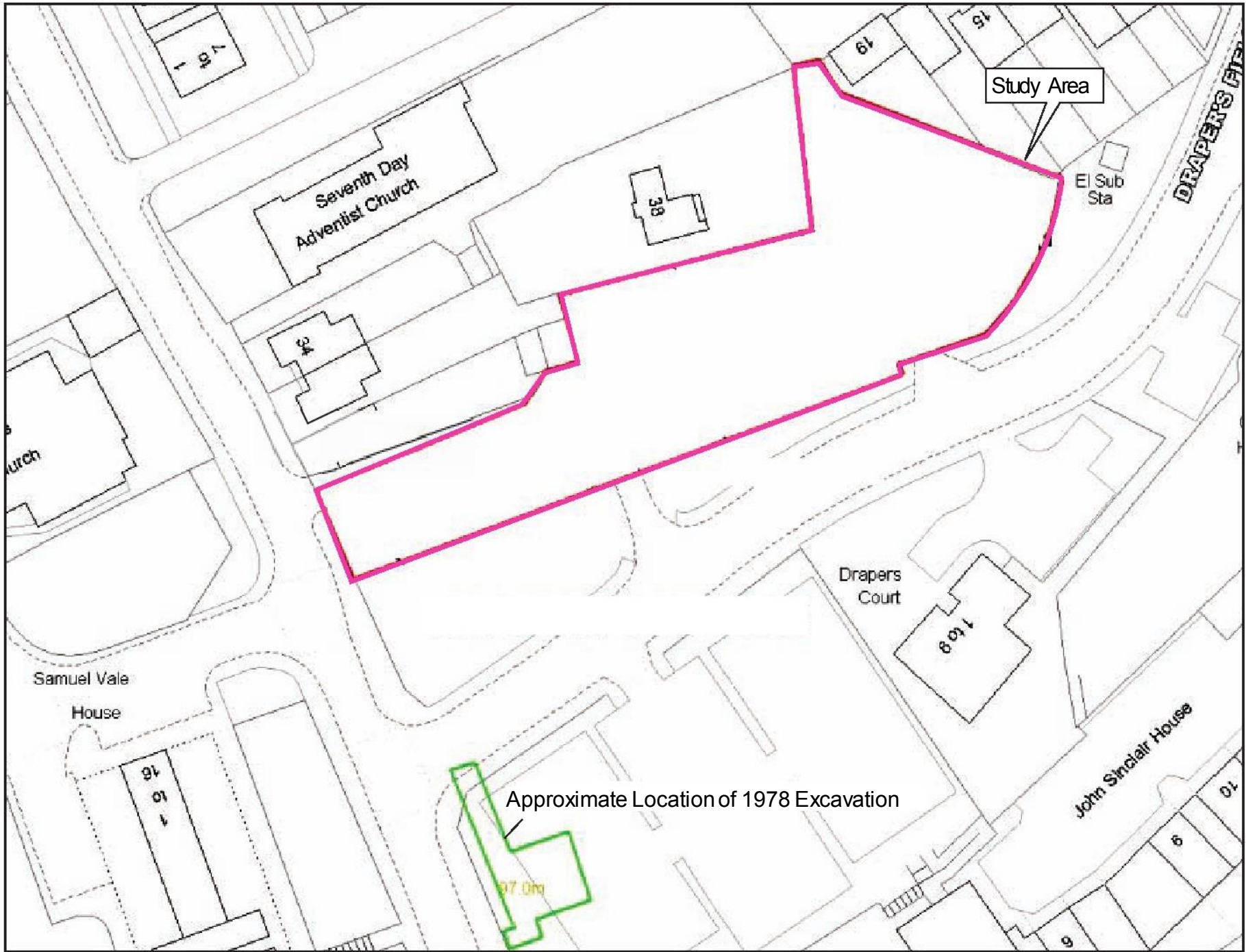


Fig.11



Plates 1a to 1d



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5