



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**The Graham Sutherland Building and its environs,
Coventry University, Cox Street, Coventry**

An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment

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Summary

A prominent site on the corner of Cox Street and Gosford Street is today at the core of the modern Coventry University, whose predecessors the Lanchester and Coventry Polytechnics developed it from the mid-1960s onwards. The site was previously behind medieval thoroughfares with historic frontages, but was severely damaged in the Second World War Blitz of November 1940 and cleared. The modern, University frontages lie some way back from the old ones on both streets and overlie areas of back-plots with yards and outbuildings in which bomb damage was widespread, with attendant clearance. Both the University buildings and their related external landscaping from the 1960s have created considerable further disturbance of what remained below ground. The footprints themselves have no potential due to extensive basements while services run to their rear (east).

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to Coventry University for their commission, through their agents RPS. My gratitude goes to Graham Tait, Historic Environment Officer for Coventry for his search of the HER. I also express my gratitude to Gary Collins, University Archivist. Many thanks go to the staff of Coventry Archives, whose familiarity with the city's records is matchless.

Introduction

Coventry University is considering development on an open, but landscaped square in front of their Graham Sutherland Building on the corner of Gosford Street and Cox Street, Coventry city centre, the home of their Faculty of Arts and Humanities (CV1 5PH; NGR: SP 33869 78909). It is set back some way from both roadside pavements and kerbs. The square was first landscaped in the mid- to late 1960s when the Sutherland Building was first constructed, since when it has been altered further and trees planted on it have matured.

To the north and east lie university buildings and one of the Coventry Ring Road fly-overs, while to the west lies the Cox Street thoroughfare. To the south is Gosford Street, across a flying stairwell which gives a distinctive first floor gangway entrance to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

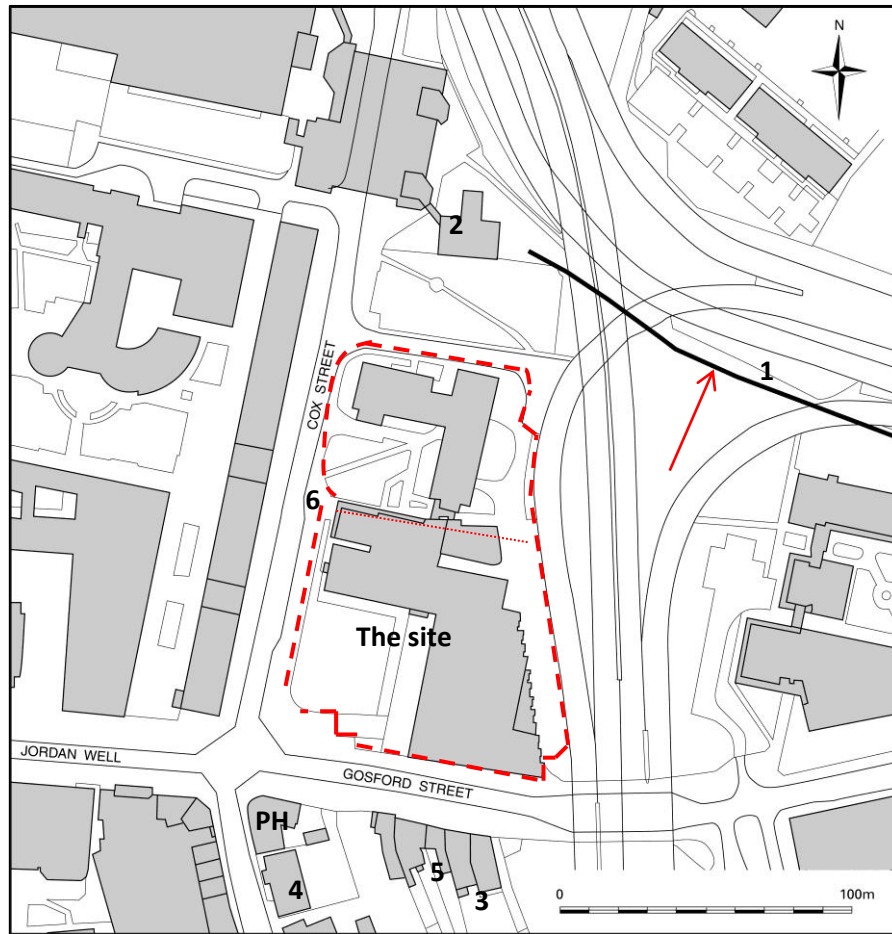


Fig 1: Site location (southern 60% of that within red dashed line); note visible town wall (arrowed). PH is the former Sir Colin Campbell built in 1906 and present on all OS maps back to 1912. Drawing by Andy Isham.

Historical Background

Cox Street was for centuries known as Mill Lane or Earl's Mill Lane, taking that name from the water mill at its foot on the river Sherbourne, and its ownership by the Earls of Chester, who held half of Coventry from the 11th century until 1237 (Soden 2006, 2009).

In 1411 the monks of Coventry Priory claimed that the west half of the street marked the end of an orchard once owned by Ranulf, 6th Earl of Chester (earl 1187-1232), who gave it to his gardener, who then conveyed it to the priory, and in which the tenants held their land from the priory. The priory asserted that they built half of Mill Lane at their own expense (Coss and Lancaster Lewis 2013, 399). In 1539 the priory was dissolved and its lands passed into private hands. A reconstruction by Alcock (in Coss *ibid*, 2013) suggests that Cox Street might have had a discontinuous frontage at that point, some of it perhaps still awaiting its first development.

During the 15th century the foot of the street became the location for one of the twelve gates of the medieval city wall Mill Gate, also known as Bastille Gate. This stood until the 18th century when it was demolished to widen the carriageway access, along with most of the other gates.

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Previous Archaeological Enquiry

Two archaeological excavations have taken place in the vicinity in the past. In 1970 W Ford carried out excavations on an upstanding length of the medieval city wall along the former Godiva Street. The street no longer survives but that section of wall remains the longest portion left visible above ground and is today a Scheduled Monument. Those excavations were never written up and so the detail of their results is not known. A short note only was published by Eileen Gooder (1971). The wall is not visible from the Cox Street site which lies some way beyond the Graham Sutherland building. This is marked 1 on Fig 1.

In 1976 John Bateman and Mark Redknap excavated further trenches on the town wall and ditch close to the current sports centre north of Grove Street. This elucidated the creation of the town wall in this area, a relatively late medieval construction, and threw further light upon the silting of the town ditch before the walls were slighted in 1662 (Bateman and Redknap 1986). This site is not in the purview of the putative Cox Street development but is marked 2 on Fig 1.

In 1987 excavation at the rear of 114-5 Gosford Street (the former Whitefriars PH), found evidence that frontage buildings on this part of the street were built in the mid-14th century and that the former fields of Coventry, before it was defensively walled, came right up to the roadside of Gosford Street hereabouts (Wallwork R, and Stokes M, note in *West Midlands Archaeology* **30** (1987), 64-5). This is marked 3 on Fig 1.

In the mid-1990s and later, in 2005-6, excavations behind what was then the Sir Colin Campbell PH (now The Phoenix) on the corner of Gosford Street and Whitefriars Street showed that there were medieval outbuildings and yards, containing pits, wells and underneath 14th-century quarry pits behind the Gosford Street south frontage. At their deepest these lay about 1m from the modern surface (Soden 2006, 156 [fig 48] and <https://www.mola.org.uk/archaeological-excavation-68-70-whitefriars-street-coventry>). Just behind the frontage, the historic levels lay closer to the surface (The author visited these (unpublished) 1990s excavations which were by J Edward Dickinson for Coventry Museum). This is marked 4 on Fig 1.

More recent, unpublished work by Coventry and District Archaeological Society shows that similar yard usage was the case behind what is now Gosford Books (Marked 5 on Fig 1).

Views of some of the last medieval buildings which once stood on Cox Street (such as no 22, marked 6 on Fig 1) can be found in the Historic England archive in Swindon (the so-called former 'Red Box archive'). These are available to view online at:

[https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/englands-places/gallery/11775?place=Coventry%2c+Coventry+\(Place\)&terms=coventry&searchtype=englands-places&i=0&wm=1&bc=0|13|16|17](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/englands-places/gallery/11775?place=Coventry%2c+Coventry+(Place)&terms=coventry&searchtype=englands-places&i=0&wm=1&bc=0|13|16|17)

These buildings were box timber-framed on sandstone dwarf walls, and dating from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries (the ogee-headed doorway in the above link to the former 22 Cox Street is 16th century). However, these buildings had little in the way of foundation-mass. The dwarf walls were slender and easily removed, the floors often only beaten-earth, or often replaced in brick or tile. Their presence on the street was often lost to the slightest ground reduction. Though many stood

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for 400 years their timber-framed superstructure could be lost in a single conflagration, as the events of 14/15 November 1940 showed so pointedly when hundreds were lost *en masse* to enemy incendiaries

Enquiry into this part of the city suggests that while it grew considerably in the later 14th century and throughout the 15th century, prior to that it had enjoyed a sort of green-belt feel, (although that is not to confer on it a status in any modern sense). It was the edge of the countryside and the edge of the city prior to c1350, probably with clear views across to Hillfields. By 1411 it may still not have been a particularly busy thoroughfare.

Historic maps

The street was mapped a number of times in 1610 (John Speed) 1749 (Samuel Bradford) and 1807 (Thomas Sharp) but not with sufficient detail and clarity as to suggest the nature of occupation.

The east side of Cox Street (Mill Lane) was perhaps a discontinuous frontage in 1610, which is unusual in the bustling Coventry of the later middle ages, but might be in keeping with the results of a plot reconstruction by Nat Alcock (in Coss and Lancaster Lewis 2013, 45), in which Priory holdings might suggest open gaps in the built frontage and perhaps just gardens. It is certainly shown infilled by 1749 and again in 1807 (the latter not illustrated here).



Fig 2: Extract from Speed's map 1610. Note the city wall and gate and the mill outside. The site is ringed (approximately)

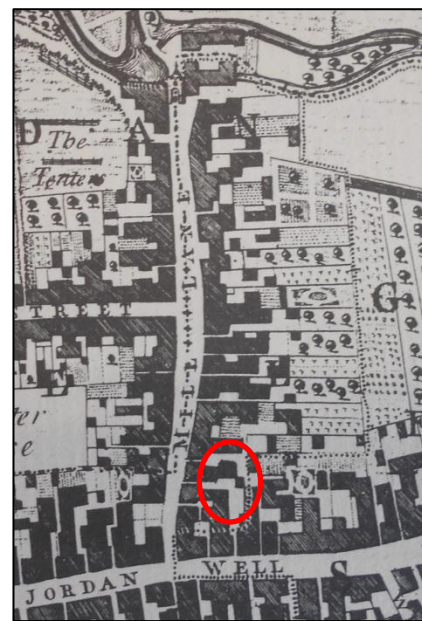


Fig 3: Extract from Bradford's Map 1749. Both the old city wall line, Bastille Gate are shown and the mill. The site is ringed (approximately)

The first reliable map of the city is the 1851 Board of Health Map, for which Sheet 18 covers Cox Street. The map was produced to aid the construction of a new sewerage system for the city which was beset by poor sanitation and disease from fouled water supplies. The survey was levelled in accordance with the Ordnance Datum (then at Liverpool Dock, rather than at Newlyn, Cornwall as it is today). Many of the buildings were the surviving timber-framed examples of the late medieval

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period and their doorways still related to the pavement levels outside. Every interior (ground) floor was ascribed a level too. To all intents and purposes it was the medieval city being surveyed.



Fig 4: Extract from the Board of Health map 1851, sheet 18. Gosford Street junction is at the south, while Grove Street can be seen at the north. This still survives as access to Grove Street Car Park. Note the markedly-narrowed carriageway at the south end of Cox Street.

The loss of the medieval frontage

The Cox Street frontage in 1851 is distinctive where it approaches Gosford Street. It narrows very considerably indeed as it approaches the junction in a difficult bottle neck. By the time even of the 1st edition Ordnance Survey (1886), this narrowing had been re-planned and the frontage thrown back to produce a workable 'modern' thoroughfare. Being no figment of the surveyor's imagination the narrowing was shown again in detail in Coventry Archives book of plans SLA/2/4/4/1 p20 in about 1869 or soon after.

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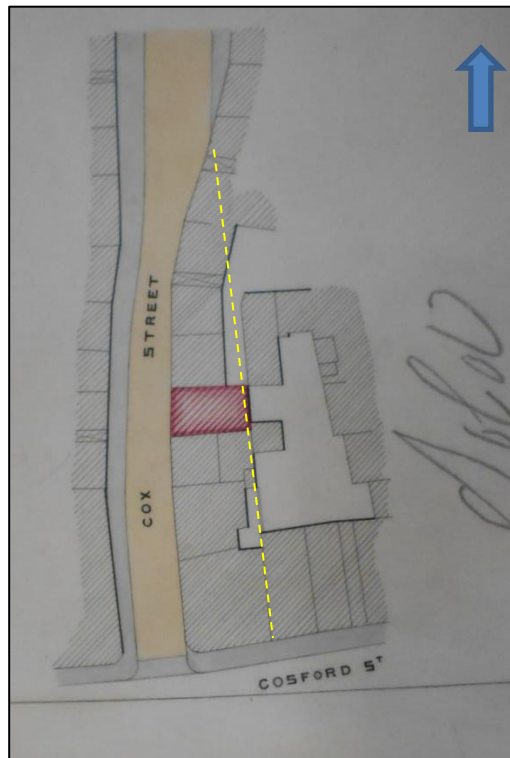


Fig 5: Dating to 1869 or just after, this Board of Health plan showing a Corporation estate, shows the distinctive narrowing of the medieval street towards the Gosford Street junction (CA: SLA/2/4/4/1 p20). The whole corner building and at least the first seven properties along Cox Street were soon demolished and became part of the new carriageway (dashed line).

The remaining building line, actually that of the first house on Gosford Street, became the front of Court no 1, with a plan seen distinctively in 1886 Ordnance Survey. Thus from sometime between 1869 and 1886 the top part of Cox Street lacked any frontage of its own, but merely had the side of a Gosford Street property fronting onto it. Further north, at least three new properties were built to make a new frontage on the new, widened line.

By 1886 this bottle-neck had clearly been lost and the road widened eastwards. This had been the corner site of the medieval Girdlers Pageant House as noted by Alcock (in Coss 2013); it is today in the middle of the carriageway and the road junction!

In 1886 and again in 1903 the city was surveyed by the Ordnance Survey and sheets produced at 1:500 scale, a size ideal for looking at the streets on a plot-by-plot basis. (1st and 2nd editions, sheet XXI.12.



Fig 6: Two joining sheets of the 1:500 2nd edition Ordnance Survey. The new Whitefriars Street has just been pushed through at the bottom left (+), but the Sir Colin Campbell is not yet built on the new street corner. In yellow is the frontage lost between 1869 and 1886 and in red the new properties of the same period.

The third edition of the Ordnance Survey (1912) is particularly useful since it shows the pre-Second World War Gosford Street which by then had acquired the newly re-built public house The Sir Colin Campbell on the corner of the recently-laid out Whitefriars Street. It is this juxtaposition of pub, new street and their joint survival which allows the historic and present frontages to be lined up on the page.

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The loss of the second frontage and modern redevelopment

The second historic frontage was lost in the late 1940s and early 1950s, mostly from clearance after bombing.



Fig 7: Cox Street on the Ordnance Survey of 1912. Note the surviving pub (PH) on the SE corner

Coventry was heavily bombed on 14/15 November 1940 as part of a month-long blitz, and was again hit heavily in April 1941. Cox Street was badly hit in the November blitz and a map was made which showed the sites in which the frontage dwelling houses and factories were destroyed or later demolished as a result, as were parts of the Gosford Street frontage.

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Fig 8: Central Area Reconstruction map, based on the early 1950s OS base.

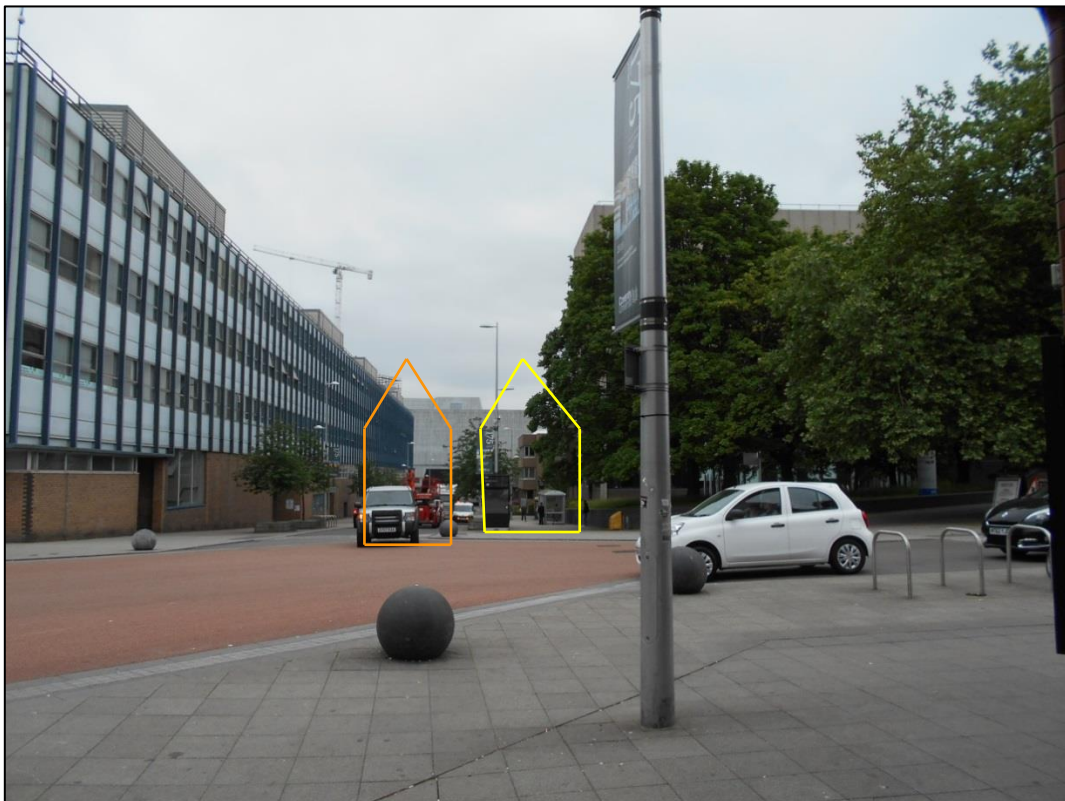


Fig 9: Lined up from 'The Phoenix' (the former Sir Colin Campbell), the photo shows the former location of the two lost frontages of Cox Street's east side. In orange is what was basically the medieval frontage mapped in 1851 and 1869 while in yellow is the second line adopted between 1869 and 1886, cleared after 1940.

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The Graham Sutherland Building of the Arts and Humanities faculty was built as the Art College of the former Lanchester Polytechnic in 1966-7, planned by Donald Gibson and built by Arthur Ling (Gould and Gould 2016, 70-71). It was furnished with extensive basements.

The remainder of the Gosford Street frontage was demolished, including the post-war Lynes Stores only recently built on the corner plot. This was left under the new wider pavements of a widened Gosford Street.

The attendant landscaping involved the creation of a wide grassplat cutting down the former ground levels to a level which can still be seen in part today in the angle of the two arms of the main building. This is 2m below the level of the demolished Gosford Street frontage and probably about the same below that of the Cox Street frontage. This down-cutting extends to the basements which underlie almost all parts of the Graham Sutherland building. A sloping bund of up-cast was created along the back of Cox Street, which is probably partly rubble up-cast and partly an imported growing-medium.



Fig 10: Aerial photograph (1969) for NGR SP 3378 showing the site with its newly landscaped grassplat. Almost the whole of the university buildings shown here are basemented and the levels of the landscaping relate to their exterior access.

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Fig 11: View of 2018 north west from **A** in Fig 10. This is the 1966-7 landscaping which reduced the ground level by 2m.

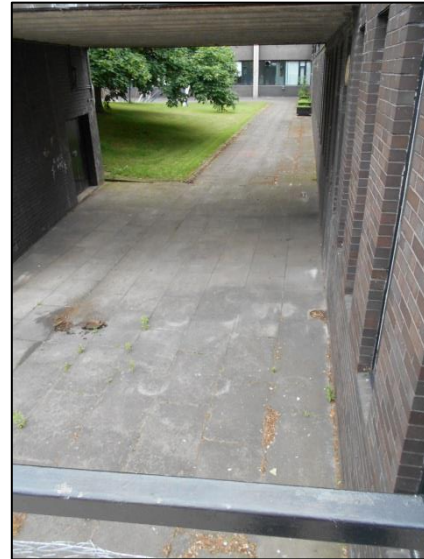


Fig 12: View of 2018 north from **A** in Fig 10. This is the 1966-7 landscaping which reduced the ground level by 2m, serving at floor-level the basements to east and north (see window reveals).

The Coventry Historic Environment Record (HER)

There is little recorded in the HER on the east side of Cox Street which has not already been covered, above. Most of the following are mentioned:

MCT 236/MCT 10314 Excavations in 1976-8 on the town wall and ditch (Bateman and Redknapp 1986) (ECT 127 and 128)

MCT 241 The town wall at Godiva Street, location of excavations in 1970 (ECT30), but sadly never written up. The whereabouts of the archive is unknown.

MCT 604 The site of the medieval Dergate or Bastille Gate, at the foot of Cox Street

ECT 624 Excavations in 2009-10 by Phoenix Consulting. 11th-17th century back-plot pitting where not destroyed by cellars, but there preserved by thick, modern upcast. (Unpublished *Phoenix Consulting* report in HER).

MCT 423 The PH of The former Sir Colin Campbell, now called 'The Phoenix'

MCT 17173 The Graham Sutherland Building

Two entries remain of note, however.

- MCT 15227 notes that J B Shelton, Antiquarian, recorded environmental evidence for with-making during development (or possibly bomb-clearance) off Godiva Street. This might back up the assertion (above) that much of the land was open ground, not heavily developed, in the medieval period. There is unfortunately no suggestion of dating.

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- MCT 16940 notes that nine medieval pits and a well were located (by whom is not stated) under what is now the Bugatti Building during a watching brief in the 1950s (ECT 636). This is unlikely to be a reliable statement for a number of reasons:
 1. Coventry did not acquire a City Archaeologist (the late Charmian Woodfield) until 1957 so the authorship of the so-called watching brief is unknown. If the late JB Shelton, he was a very old man in the 1950s.
 2. The Bugatti Building was not constructed until 2002. It was constructed up against The Graham Sutherland Building which itself was not constructed until 1966.
 3. The site of the Bugatti Building still lay open in 1969, as an aerial photo (above) shows. There was no piling there in the 1950s.
 4. The work is attributed to The Coventry Museum Field Archaeology Unit. This name did not exist until 1990.

The HER entry also notes the presence of a contemporary plan showing the pits in relation to piled foundations. If 1950s, then it can only have been a building on the other (west) side of Cox Street, perhaps what became the Laboratories.

Remaining archaeological potential

Map regression shows that the medieval frontages to this plot (Gosford Street and Cox Street) stood in what are now the carriageway and have as likely as not been shredded by modern sewers and other utilities. Along Cox Street, these were successively thrown back to the location the 'frontage' enjoys today. On Gosford Street these lie under the wide pavement amid modern services.

That same regression shows that the later (second) Cox Street frontage, thrown back between 1851 and 1886, and with it the yards and rear wings of the old medieval frontages, now lie under the modern pedestrian footways, subject to further utilities. This was the frontage demolished after the bombing in 1940.

Sub-surface bomb-damage and disturbance anywhere on the site cannot be discounted.

Under the landscaped area in front of the Graham Sutherland building once lay rear gardens, allotments, sheds, outbuildings and waste disposal areas. However, this area has been reduced in the 1966 landscaping by some 2m below the historic frontage (which still survives on the south side of Gosford St including the 14th-century 117-8 Gosford St). Landscaping programmes relate partly to the fact that the gentle but pronounced slope of Cox Street has been flattened by widespread terracing and landscaping at this higher, south end. The site notably lacks the extensive build-up which preserved archaeology on The Hub site nearby.

In view of the absence of the frontages from the site and the wholesale reduction of ground by landscaping and basements, the landscaped area is felt to have a low potential for the preservation of widespread medieval or post-medieval archaeology. Much of the area is likely to be devoid of remains. If any survives, it is likely to be in the form of wells or the deepest-cut pits cut into the natural substrate. It is unlikely that medieval building foundations will have survived unless those buildings were themselves cellared.

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The Graham Sutherland buildings are extensively basemented, covering some 70% of the wider site. Both their footprints and a working swathe to their east and north of perhaps up to 3m are very likely to have no remaining archaeological potential at all. Because of the basement depths, many service lines have been pushed east of that, in the lee of the Ring Road flyover, and so any sliver of remaining archaeology (without basements) is likely to have been riven by these before the huge concrete pads on which the flyover feet rest are encountered.



Fig 13: The last sliver undeveloped between Graham Sutherland and the flyover (looking north) is open...



Fig 14: ...but (looking south) is riven with many buried services dog-legged out to avoid the basements

Conclusions

The corner of Cox Street and Gosford Street is today unrecognisable as that mapped only a century before. The historic buildings still present on the plot in 1966 when the Graham Sutherland Building was being planned were few-and-far-between.

The medieval frontage of Cox Street at this point was lost between 1869 and 1886 when Cox Street was widened. Its replacement of that same period was lost as a result of enemy air raids in 1940.

All the historic frontages, rear wings and yards lie under the carriageways and the wide, open pedestrian pavements which characterise these streets today.

The 1966 buildings which stand today are placed well back behind those elements of the older Cox Street frontage and its yards which had survived until the 1940s. Extensive basements have left the footprints with little or no archaeological potential, while a sliver of apparently undeveloped land up against the flyover is riven with services directed around the basements as a result.

Probably equally damaging was the landscaping of 1966 which accompanied the Graham Sutherland Building and which reduced the ground surface behind the Cox Street and Gosford Street frontages by some 2m over a wide area in order to access the basement level. This would have been the area of back gardens, poor 19th century court housing and their yards.

Map regression allows for the suggested ground plan of the current corner landscaped plot to be superimposed on the 1851 Board of Health map as follows. While this is instructive in plan, it must be remembered that the ground level has today been reduced considerably, and was also a 1960s

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building site accessing new basements. Demonstrably bereft of its frontages and reduced by 2m, this entire site is considered in archaeological terms to be a denuded resource, and to retain limited archaeological potential, and perhaps then only in discrete islands of preservation, most likely (if at all) under the western half of the landscaped corner grassplat.



Fig 15: The landscaped corner plot superimposed (best fit) on the 1851 Board of Health plan.

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Appendix

OASIS data

Project Name	The Graham Sutherland Building, Cox Street, Coventry and its environs (Corner of Cox Street and Gosford Street, Coventry)
OASIS ID	iainsode1-320736
Project Type	Desk Based Assessment
Originator	Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd
Project Manager	Iain Soden
Previous/future work	Unknown
Current land use	Landscaped open space
Development type	University buildings and extensions
Reason for investigation	NPPF
National grid reference	SP 33869 78909
Start/end dates of fieldwork	n/a
Archive recipient	n/a
Study area	2500 sq m



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