

birmingham archaeology

The Tanyard, Shifnal,
Bridgnorth, Shropshire

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SUMMARY

In April 2006 Birmingham Archaeology undertook an archaeological desk-based assessment of the site of a former tanyard, Shifnal, Shropshire. The work was commissioned by Morris Homes in advance of a proposed residential development. Shifnal is a typical Shropshire market town, developing to supply its local hinterland and acquiring the trappings of a Victorian township without ever becoming a major seat of manufacturing. Historically, the town supported the local agricultural community, but was close enough to the main road from Holyhead to London, Watling Street (the modern A5), to become one of the principal coaching posts en route to London in the 18th century. Documentary research has shown that there is certainly evidence of a tannery on the site between 1828 and 1929. However, it is not impossible that tanning predates these documents, and given its location at the core of the planned medieval settlement there could be any number of features associated with early industry or domestic occupation that could potentially date from the 13th century onwards.

From a research perspective, there are important socio-historical links associated with small scale industries of this period. This site therefore offers a good opportunity to learn more about one, very important aspect, of market towns of this period; one of its industries, from a period of great flux and innovation in industrial terms. The tannery fell out of use in the inter war period, and was eventually demolished in the 1950s. The site has been used for light industrial purposes up to the present. At some point in its history the whole site was levelled up from the surrounding area, and there is as much as a 2m drop to land to the south, and the stream to the west. The buildings that occupied the site at the time of the assessment were all typical of the mid-20th century, and were generally light framed with insubstantial foundations. It is therefore likely that should archaeological deposits survive on the site the below-ground preservation is potentially very good. It is therefore recommended that a programme of trial trenching be undertaken to target early industrial features identified by the cartographic research.

THE TANYARD, SHIFNAL, BRIDGNORTH, SHROPSHIRE

1 INTRODUCTION

In April 2006 Birmingham Archaeology undertook an archaeological desk-based assessment of the site of a former tanyard, Shifnal, Shropshire (hereafter referred to as the Study Area). The work was commissioned by Morris Homes in advance of a proposed residential development (Planning Application Number 05/0863).

This report outlines the results of the assessment, which was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment (IFA 1999).

2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The tannery site lies to the west of the High Street, formerly called Broadway, which runs on a north-south orientation through the market town of Shifnal (centred on NGR SJ 7480 0802, Fig. 1). The Study Area is defined to the east by a small stream called Wesley Brook, and is otherwise surrounded by residential development dating to the 1970s. The underlying geology consists of glacial till and sand overlying Triassic sandstone.

The site at the time of the assessment was being used for light industrial due for demolition, with associated car parking, offices and workshops, and areas of hard standing.

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the project was to assess the survival and potential significance of any archaeology within the study area by collating existing archaeological and historical information for the site and its immediate environs and placing it in its local, regional and national context.

More specific aims were to:

- Identify what period a tannery was established on the site.
- Identify, where possible, the names of those associated with the tannery.

This information will be used to inform a mitigation strategy for future archaeological work on the site (see Section 8 below).

4 METHODOLOGY

A search of all relevant and readily available published and non-published documentary sources, including historic maps and photographs, was carried out in Shrewsbury Record Office and the Library of the University of Birmingham. The Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record, the main source of archaeological information for the county was also consulted. In addition, a walkover of the Study Area was undertaken in order to assess the topography and any above-ground archaeology, including standing buildings.

5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the Roman Road, Watling Street, forms part of the boundary of the parish today, no evidence for Roman occupation has been found in the locale. The Saxon name for the settlement was Idsall, and early documents reveal that it was an important ecclesiastical centre in the Late Saxon period (Watts 2006). A spur off Watling Street, linking Wombridge and Shifnal is known to have existed by 1335 when a grant was given for the collection of tolls (VCH Shropshire, Vol. XI, 1985, 198). This medieval development is evident in the burgage plots which were laid out as part of the planned town in the 13th-14th centuries, that align this main thoroughfare. This early linear settlement (still evident in the town plan today) then developed into a small market centre for local farming communities.

Today, it is a typical Shropshire market town within the Bridgnorth District Council area, 18 miles from the county town of Shrewsbury. It never developed into a major seat of manufacturing, although paper was produced here which was not just for the local market. Historically, the town supported the local agricultural community, but was also close enough to the main road from Holyhead to London, Watling Street (the modern A5), that passes two miles to the north of the town, to have had fairly good links with other towns in the region. Watling Street and the Shifnal branch were turnpiked in 1726, and Shifnal developed into one of the principal coaching posts en route to London in the 18th century. The Shrewsbury and Birmingham railway, which came to the town in 1849, brought with it further opportunities for expansion, and remains a major transport route today.

It is described in detail in 1871 in Cassey and Co's Directory:

"Shifnal, anciently called Idesall, or Idsal....in the Brimstree hundred, and diocese of Lichfield.....There are several handsome monuments of the 15th and 16th centuries, to the memory of persons of distinction...[for longevity of life].. There is a National School for boys, girls and infants.....and there is also a Grammar School....The Catholics have a church and school here. There are places of worship for Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, and Baptists. The Gas Works were opened on the 13th of December 1847. A Market Hall, with public room, was erected by a company in 1808; the market day is Tuesday. Fairs are held the first Monday in April, the 5th of August, and the 22nd of November, principally for cattle.....The population of the parish in 1861 was 5,923 and the area is 11,434 acres gross, estimated rental, £38,753; rateable value, £32,684".

(Cassey and Co. 1871, 302)

The National school, market hall, and gas works are all evidence of Shifnal's status as a fully fledged small market town, in common with many others during the Victorian period across the country.

6 DETAILED HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY AREA

The site of the tannery (SMR No. 07301, MSA No. 3930) lies in the historic core of the medieval town, to the west of the High Street, which runs north-south, and is sometimes referred to as Broadway. Bounding the site to the east is a small stream called the Wesley Brook. Adjacent to the tannery are a malthouse (SMR 13841, MSA 8074, now 47 Broadway) to the east, and the Wheatsheaf Public House (13843, MSA 8075) to the north. Both these buildings are listed Grade 2, the Malthouse is believed to be of 16th-century date and the coaching Inn 17th-century. It is possible that the tannery could date from this period, however, it may pre-date these structures.

The earliest cartographic evidence is a map of the district by Rocque in 1752 (Fig. 2). This shows the settlement of Shifnal as being a fairly substantial small market town, predominately laid out along a spur off the main routeway to London, Watling Street. By this period the town had grown, probably from a linear settlement, into a small market town with good road links into its surrounding hinterland. Baugh's map of 1808 depicts the town with a wide linear market place into which three buildings have been inserted. This is typically a late medieval and early post-medieval phenomenon, and is therefore likely that the buildings predate the date of this particular map, but were not depicted by Rocque. By 1827, when both Greenwood's Map and an early edition of the Ordnance Survey were drawn up, small scale settlement had spread further along the web of roads leading into the town centre. Unfortunately, these maps are at a very small scale and the tannery is not annotated, neither can it be precisely identified. However, burgage plots fronting onto Broadway can be clearly seen, and one version of Rocque does show two small, rather indistinct, buildings on the probable site of the Tannery.

The earliest documentary evidence of the tannery is from the trade directories of the period. Both Tibnam's Salop Directory (1828) and Pigot and Co's Directory (1828-29) list William Cotton as a 'tanner' under the trades section. Pigot's also lists William Cotton as a 'maltster'. By 1835 Pigot & Co's Directory lists Sarah Cotton (perhaps the wife or widow of William) as the owner of the tannery. This is borne out through the Tithe Map Apportionment which also lists the owner of the Tannery and Malthouse as being Sarah Cotton. The tenant of the tannery is a James Child (listed as 56 year old shoemaker in the 1851 census) and the tenants of the malthouse were Pigeon & Lello. The map itself clearly depicts a single building on an east-west orientation which is annotated as being the tannery, in the backplot area to the rear of the malthouse and Wheatsheaf Public House (Fig. 3).

Trade directories between 1835 and 1861 make no reference to tanning in Shifnal; however, the 1849 Pigot & Co's Directory refers to a Samuel Fenn with the trade of a skinner. Harrods Directory of Shropshire dated 1861 lists Richard D. Summers as a tanner. Additionally, Summers' appears in Cassey's 1871, Kelly's 1891, 1895 & 1913 Directories. The 1895 Kelly's Directory also refers to Summers having tanning interests in the High Street, Dawley. Census records for the period 1841–1901 make no reference

to anyone living at the Tannery, which is not unexpected due to the rather noxious nature of the processes being undertaken there. However, the 1901 census lists the occupation of a Charles Pointon – who is the 34 year old son of the landlord (William Pointon) of the Wheatsheaf Public House - as a tanner. Later Kelly's Directories (for 1926 and 1929) list the Summers' as having a partner; H Cecil. There are no trade directory references to a tannery in Shifnal after this date.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey Map (dated to 1882, Fig. 4) depicts a complex set of buildings occupying the site of the Tannery. Access to the site was gained, as it is today from Broadway. Two ranges of buildings defined the northern and southern limits of the burgage plot. Situated between the buildings at the western end of the site (closest to the stream) were a series of smaller ancillary structures and open tanks. The tanks may have been used for liming the skins which involved immersing the hides in a suspension of lime in order to remove the remaining flesh and hair (Thomson 1981). The buildings are likely to have been single storey with louvered windows and roofs for ventilation as was typical in a 19th-century tannery (Palmer and Neaverson, 1998). The main tanyard complex may also be linked with a two-storey building on the opposite side of the brook, which appears to be L-shaped in plan. There would have been the need to stretch the skins out to dry, and due to demands on space on the eastern side of the brook it is possible that they utilised the fields beyond to accommodate this.

The town itself had developed quite substantially by this period, and the trappings of its expansion are witnessed in its Gas Works, Swimming Bath, the building of suburbs, and further encroachment and construction of civic buildings into its market place. This expansion was most probably associated with the arrival of the Shrewsbury and Birmingham Railway which was opened in November 1843, and which later became part of the Great Western Company (Cassey and Co. 1871, 302).

By the time that the Second Edition Ordnance Survey Map was drawn up in 1902 (Fig. 5) several of the ancillary buildings close to the stream had been demolished. However, the principal ranges of buildings, and three tanks, continued in use, with the addition of another building at the eastern end of the northern range. The tannery is still annotated on the 1938 Ordnance Survey Map, but probably became redundant very shortly after this. By 1957 the tanyard complex had been demolished, and replaced with a single large structure in the centre of the site (Fig. 6). Later Editions (Figs 7 and 8) show the subsequent development of buildings and changes in layout across the site.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In recent years historical analysis has recognised that despite widespread industrialisation and expansion in towns the majority retained their localised crafts base until the mid-19th century, and that it was only after circa 1850 that the production of consumer goods such as clothing, footwear, and foodstuffs began to be mechanised to such a level that they came to be factory produced for national markets (Trinder, 2002, 75). In the same article Trinder notes that 'almost every town listed in the Universal British Directory of the 1790s included a tannery, although during the 19th century the industry was increasingly concentrated in London, Merseyside and Leeds' (Ibid, 79). He also notes their distinctive quadrangular layout, usually surrounding the soaking pits. The site in Shifnal, however, is limited by the

long thin burgage plots of the medieval town, which has imposed itself upon the layout of the tanyard.

However, the location of the tannery at Shifnal is entirely consistent with the geography and status of the market town. The site itself is close to a flowing water source, which is necessary for tanning. Its location on the periphery of the medieval town is also commonplace given the noxious and smelly nature of the processes. The tannery is likely to have supported associated trades such as saddlers and shoemakers, and it is worthy of note that in the 1828-29 Pigot & Co. Directory, and Slaters Directory of 1868, four saddlers are recorded in the town, and in 1835 there were seven boot and shoe makers (Pigot & Co. 1835). Additionally the published census (1841 to 1901) list, many other residents actually working in these trades. Whilst not being particularly large-scale, this local industry would have supplied the surrounding, predominately farming, hinterland with saddles and harnesses, as well as the passing coach teams.

Documentary research has shown that there is certainly evidence of a tannery on the site between 1828 and 1929. However, it is not impossible that tanning predates these documents, and given its location in the core medieval settlement there could be any number of features associated with early industry or domestic occupation that could potentially date from the 13th century onwards.

What is interesting about this particular site is the relationship between the tanyard proprietors and the Malthouse. William Cotton appears in the trade directories under both trades from 1828, and (presumably upon his death) his wife then leased both the premises out until circa 1840. This level of entrepreneurism was not uncommon during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Recent work on the market town of Banbury, for instance, has shown that it was commonplace for better off individuals to hold interests in the running of several smaller scale commercial concerns (Trinder pers. comm.). There are obvious links between malting and inn keeping for example, but the drinking places of the day were also used to conduct business and so an individual with interests in tanning, malting, and the drinks trade would not have been at all unusual in the early Victorian small market town. This socio-historical link, and the potential it has to inform how these small scale industries functioned is often overlooked. This site therefore offers a good opportunity to learn more about one, very important aspect, of market towns of this period; its industry, from a period of great flux and innovation in industrial terms.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

The site visit revealed that the Study Area has, at some stage in its history, been raised above the surrounding area, and there is as much as a 2m drop to land to the south, and the brook to the west (Plate 1) which has many old willows along its course. The buildings that occupied the site at the time of the assessment were all typical of the mid-20th century, and were generally light framed (Plate 2). The footings of these units, which cover a range of periods from the 1950s onwards, would not need particularly substantial foundations, and it is therefore likely that below-ground preservation is potentially very good across the site. It is therefore recommended that a programme of trial trenching be undertaken to target the early industrial features identified by the

cartographic research. Suggested target areas are shown on Figure 9. The 30m long trench would locate the two ranges of the tannery, and the tanyard itself with the tanks. The trench to the west could potentially locate buildings that are only depicted on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1882 and therefore belong to the earliest phase of the Shifnal tannery. Earlier archaeological deposits may also be present here, given its location at the very rear of the backplot area, and its proximity to a water supply. The trench to the east is located closer to the focus of activity of the burgage plot; the frontage. There may be evidence surviving here of domestic life in Shifnal from the medieval period onwards, as well as earlier industries which were often concentrated in workshops on, or close to, the frontage of the plot.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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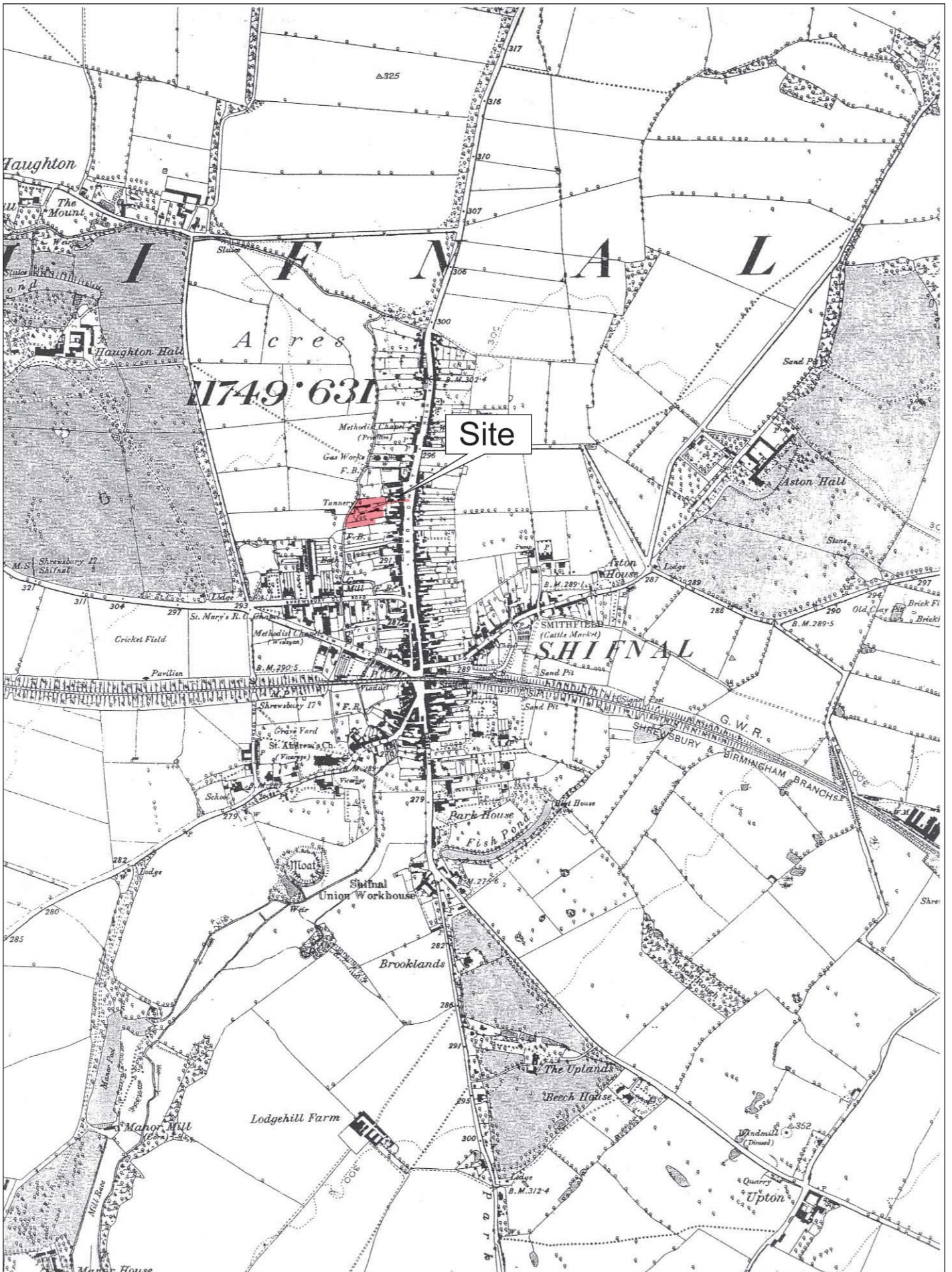


Fig.1

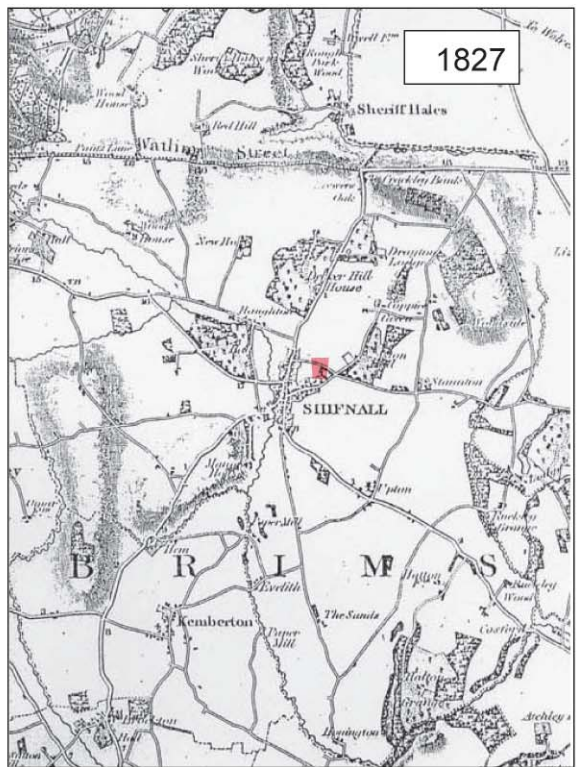
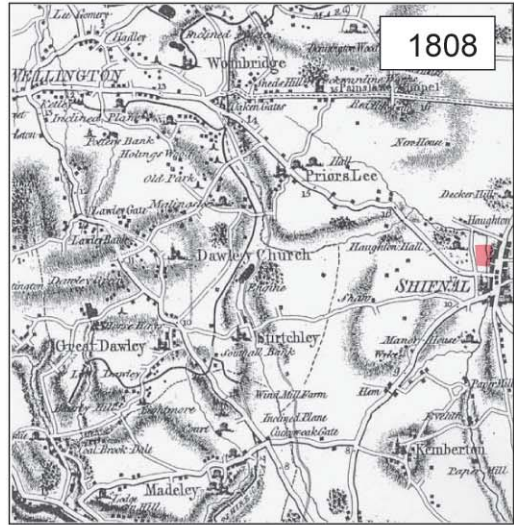


Fig.2

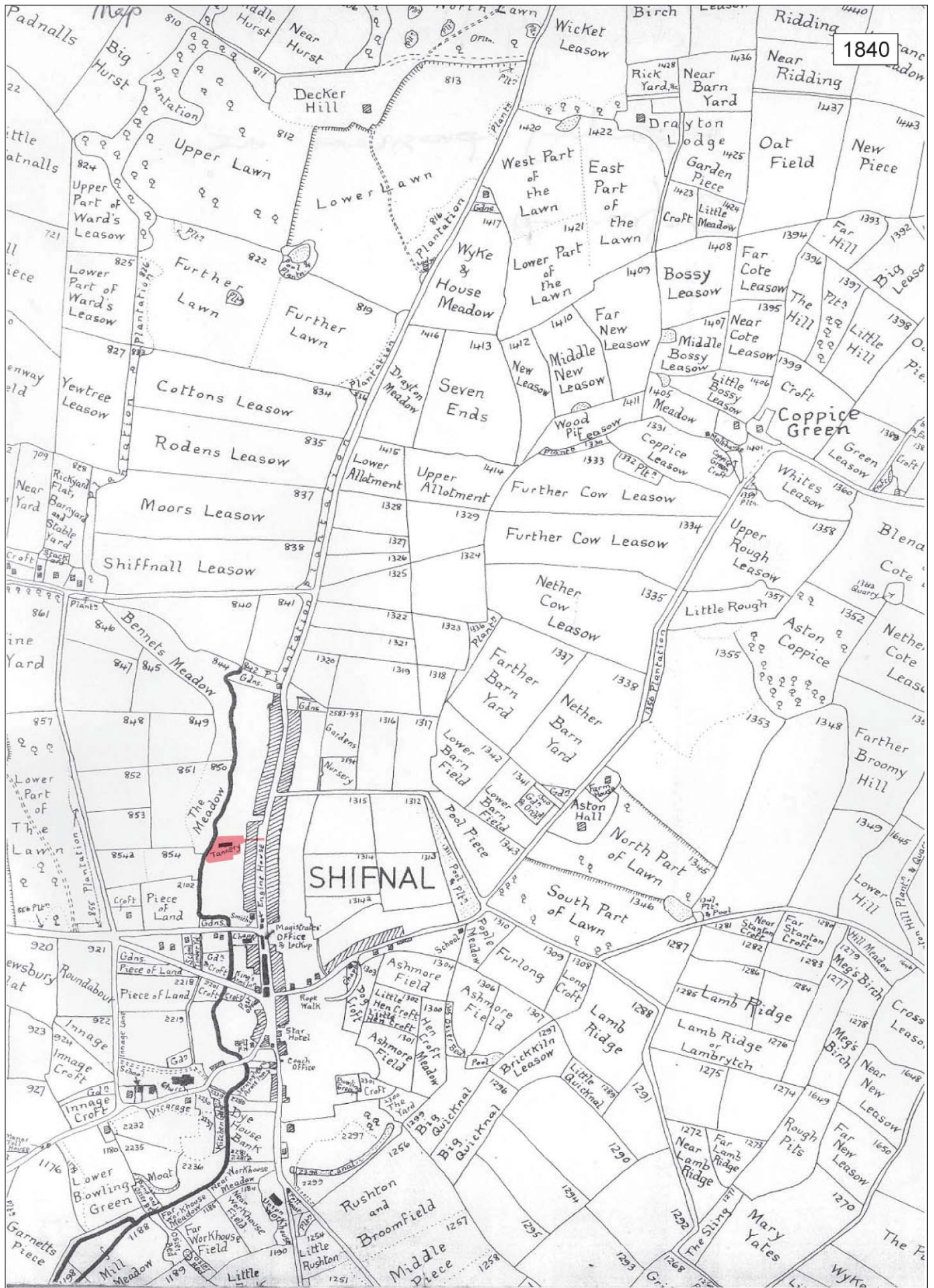


Fig.3

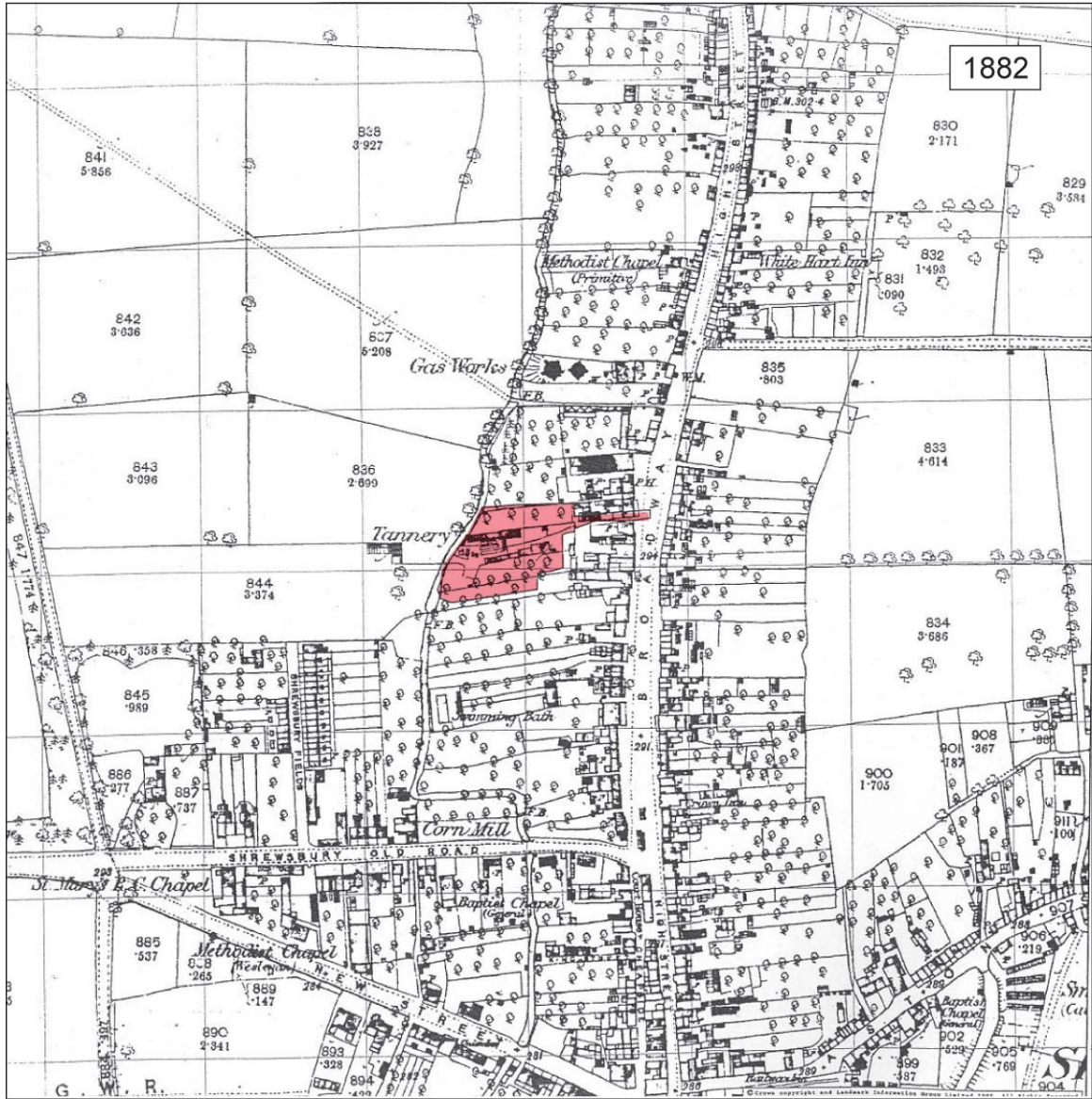


Fig.4

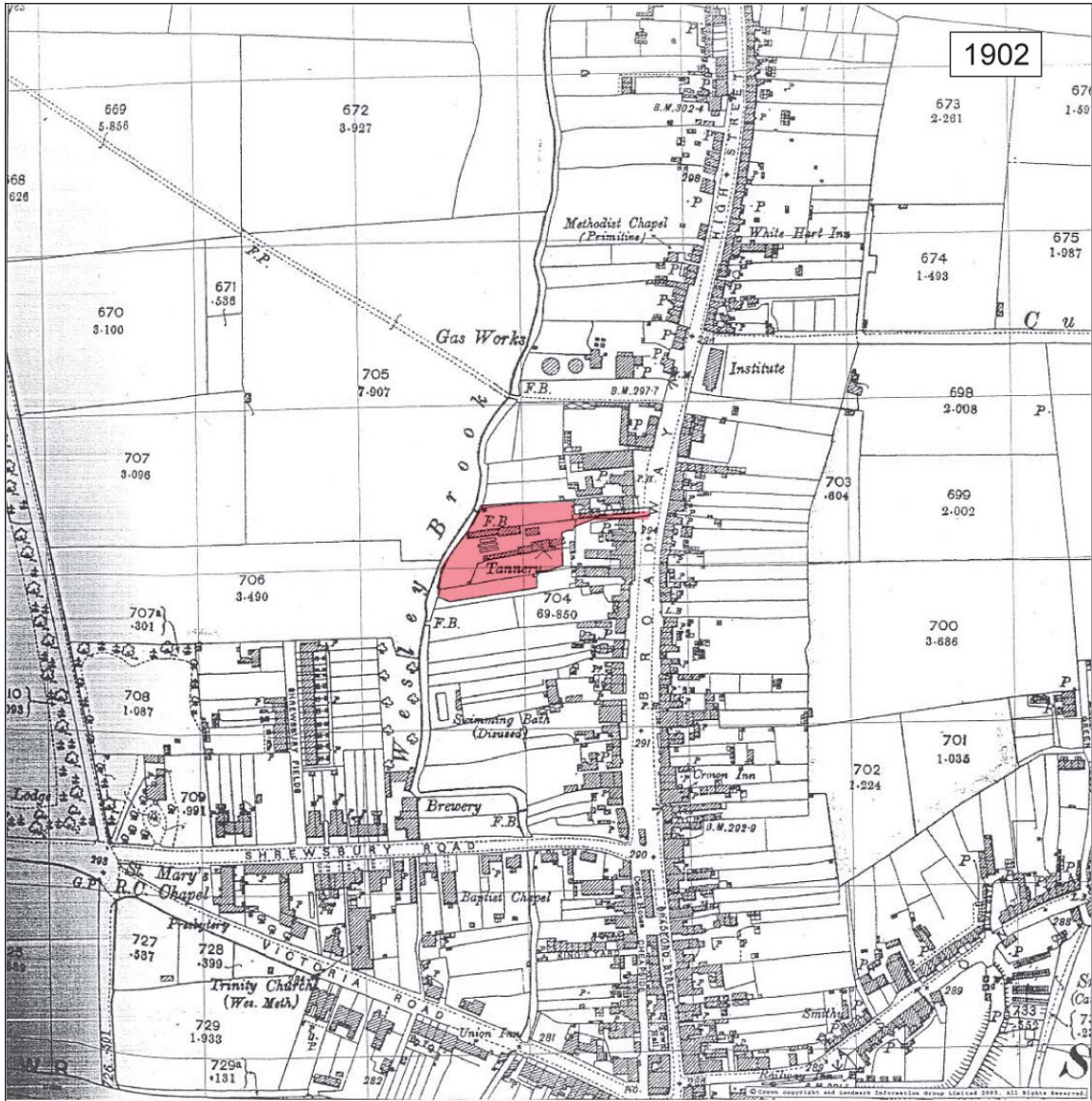


Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7

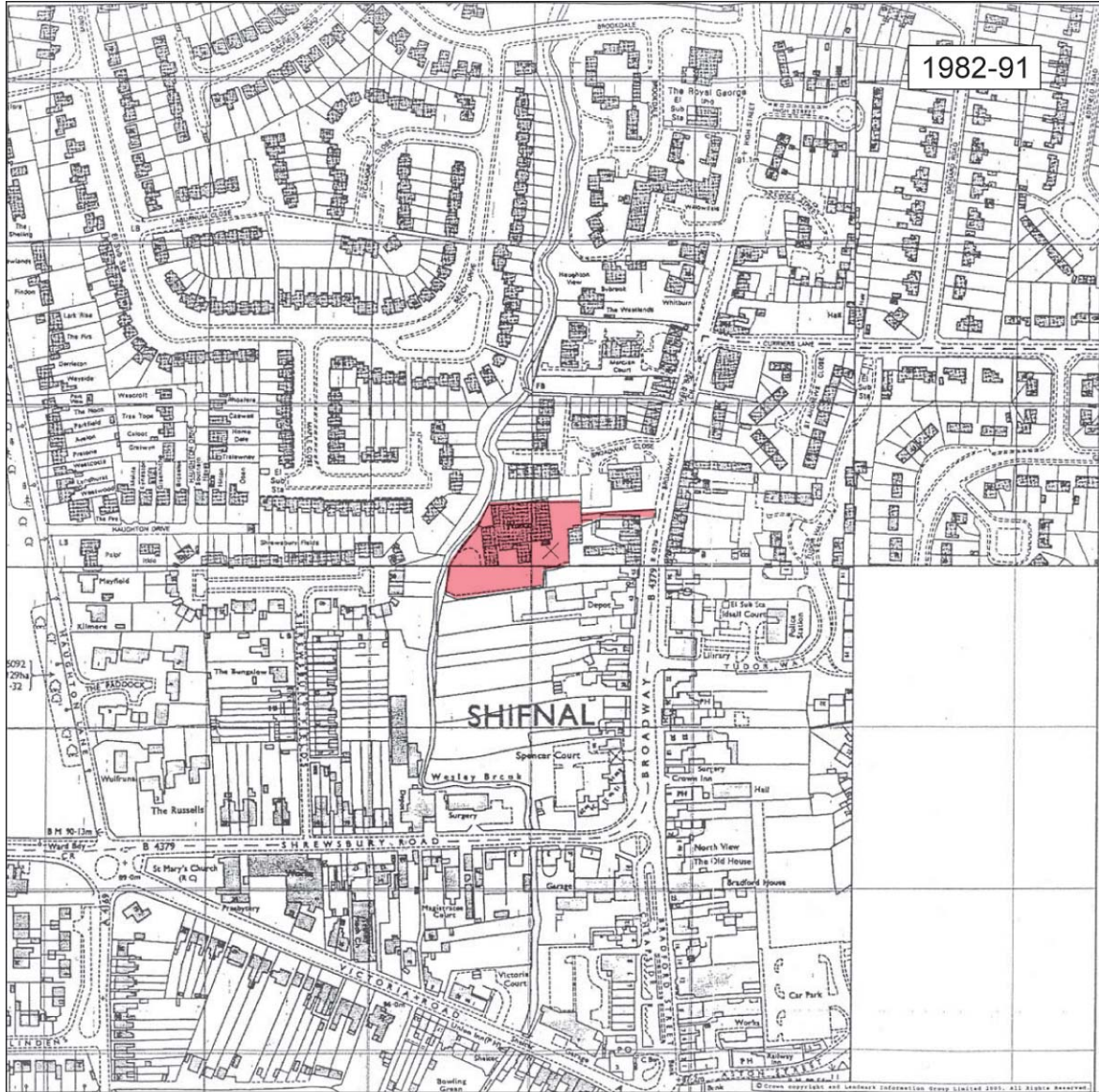


Fig.8

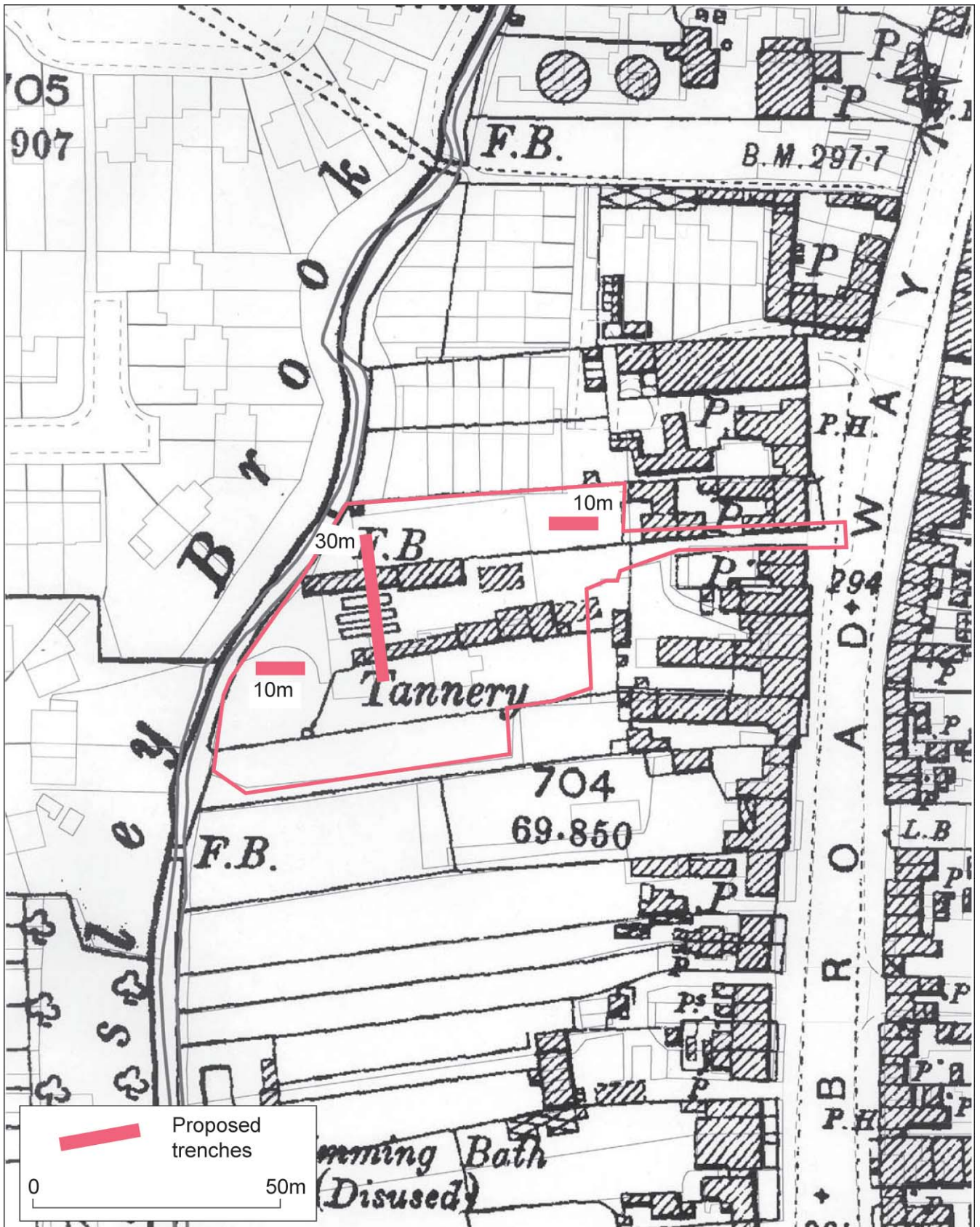


Fig.9

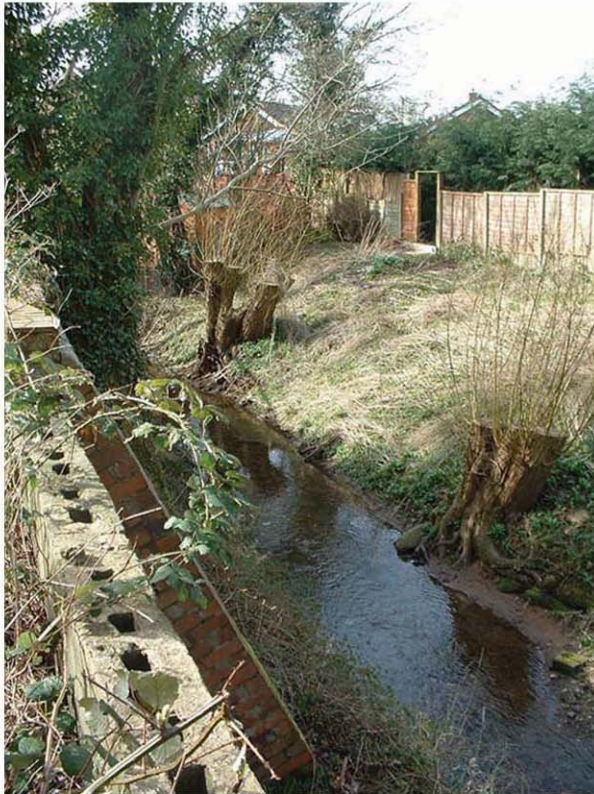


Plate 1 Wesley Brook



Plate 2 Mid 20th Century light-framed industrial unit



Plate 3 Survival of burgage plot boundaries in gardens to the south of the site