

# birmingham archaeology

Alma Street, Coventry.

An Archaeological Desk-based  
Assessment

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**Alma Street, Coventry.**

An Archaeological Desk-based Assessment 2007

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**ALMA STREET, COVENTRY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT 2007**

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## SUMMARY

In June 2007, Birmingham Archaeology carried out a desk based assessment of a site at Alma Street, Coventry (NGR SP 3416 7914). The work was commissioned in advance of a proposed redevelopment of the site as student accommodation. A search of all relevant and readily available published and non-published documentary sources, including historic maps and photographs, was carried out at the Coventry City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, and the Library of the University of Birmingham. The Coventry Historic Environment Record, the main source of archaeological information for the city 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.

This assessment has revealed information about a site with an interesting history. It appears to have been as undeveloped pasture land probably from at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the surrounding area was developed for residential and industrial purposes. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the study area was occupied by terraced housing on each side; this was eroded away by industrial development towards the end of that century. Firstly, it was occupied by Apollo Cycle works, and then by various tyre manufacturers including Dunlops, until the factory was taken over and extended by British Thomson Houston Company Ltd who were eventually taken over by GEC, who constructed the current factory buildings on site. It was also found that recent excavations at nearby Lower Ford Street yielded some interesting medieval archaeological deposits. Given the potential for medieval and post-medieval deposits, recommendations were made for future archaeological work.

## **ALMA STREET, COVENTRY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT, 2007.**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

In June 2007 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological desk-based assessment of a site at Alma Street, Coventry, Warwickshire (Fig. 1, Plate 1). The work was commissioned by Victoria Hall Ltd. in advance of a proposed redevelopment of the site as student accommodation.

This report outlines the results of the assessment, which was carried out between the 1st and 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2007, and which was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment (IFA 1999).

The assessment was required by the Planning Archaeologist, Coventry City Council (Patrick 2006) to assess the impact of the development on archaeological remains in advance of consideration of development proposals. The assessment is in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

### **2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY**

The study area is located at the corner of Alma Street and Hood Street, Coventry, and occupies a site of c. 0.4 hectares. It is located to the east of Coventry City centre, which is approximately 18 kilometres north of Warwick, 30 kilometres southeast of Birmingham and is centred on NGR SP 3416 7914 (Fig. 2).

According to the Solid and Drift map (British Geological Survey 1967) the underlying geology consists of Keresley Member (KRS) which is a red-brown mudstone and red brown sandstone, with mudstone dominating the lower part, and becoming increasingly sandy in the upper part. It is likely that in this part of Coventry that the upper sections of the geological strata are of Corley sandstone; pebbly sandstone found at the top of Keresley member.

The present character of the study area is hardstanding, and it is occupied by a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century factory building (Plates 2 to 6). The site is bounded by Alma Street to the northeast, Hood Street to the southeast, and Lower Ford Street to the southwest. Adjacent to the study area along Lower Ford Street and Alma Street are sections of mid to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century housing and a much altered 19<sup>th</sup>-century public house 'The Fruit Bat', formerly known as the 'Spittlemoor', on the corner of Hood Street and Lower Ford Street (Plate 7). Adjacent to the study area to the southwest along Hood Street are three late 20<sup>th</sup>-century industrial units. On the other side of Alma Street is what appears to be a converted late 19<sup>th</sup>-century factory; whilst the other side of Hood Street is occupied by a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century warehouse building.

### **3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The overall objective was to define the likely extent, survival, and significance of archaeological remains and historic buildings in the area of the proposed development by collating existing archaeological and historical information for the site, so that the archaeological implications of the proposed development can be assessed. This information can then be used to inform the design and decision making process.

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

A search of all relevant and readily available published and non-published documentary sources, including historic maps and photographs, was carried out at the Coventry City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, and the Library of the University of Birmingham. The Coventry Historic Environment Record, the main source of archaeological information for the City 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 PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK**

A search of the Coventry Historic Environment Record shows that there has been no previous archaeological work carried out at the study area. Three archaeological events have taken place in the vicinity of the study area; these include a series of archaeological investigations at Lower Ford Street, HER ECT 328 (Birmingham Archaeology 2005a) (Fig. 3), archaeological building recording at the Former Lea Francis Works in Lower Ford Street, HER ECT 328 (Birmingham Archaeology 2005b), and an Archaeological Desk-based Assessment at Godiva Place, HER ECT 374 (not illustrated on Fig. 3) (ULAS 2006). The excavations at Lower Ford Street revealed activity dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>-century, and more intensive activity, characterised by a series of dug pits, in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>-century. There are no scheduled monuments, or listed buildings in the vicinity of or at the study area.

## **6 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **6.1 Prehistoric**

Prehistoric activity of a transitory nature has been recorded in what is now the city; however no settlements have been identified.

### **6.2 Roman**

Until recently there was no evidence for Roman settlement at Coventry. However, a probable Roman ditch and Roman finds have been recorded adjacent to the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Pers. Comm. Laurence Jones). There is also possible evidence for a Roman road at Cox Street, which is located c.200 metres to the west of the study area. Excavations here in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century uncovered a possible Roman river crossing for a putative road running from Mancetter to the north and Baginton to the south, HER MCT 15141 (not illustrated on Fig. 3).

### **6.3 Anglo-Saxon**

Continuous settlement began in Coventry in the Anglo-Saxon period. Onomastic evidence supports this with the name Coventry almost certainly being Anglo-Saxon or Old English in origin, meaning "tree of a man called Cofa" (Mills 2003, 135), Cofa itself being an Old English personal name. Further indications of its Anglo-Saxon origins are the prevalence of the endings 'ley', or 'leah': a wood or clearing, in the names of its hamlets and nearby parishes such as Pinley, Shortley, or Canley (VCH VIII, 1-23). Despite the high incidence of 'ley' suffixes, it is no longer believed that the Coventry area was once impenetrable forest, which was later gradually cleared by the Anglo-Saxon settlers. It is thought that the relatively low population density recorded in the Domesday Book may be due to the difficulty of ploughing the underlying

geology of heavy clays, which ensured that Coventry may only have been a large scatter of hamlets or farmsteads across an extensive manor (Demidowicz 2003, 10). There is very little evidence regarding the development of Coventry prior to the Domesday Book, which recorded an agricultural settlement of up to 60 households. George Demidowicz recently argued that Coventry was the centre of a large estate, and since large estates often contained a minster church, Coventry must have had one (Demidowicz 2003, 9). The original location of the early medieval agricultural centre of Coventry is unknown. However, there was a 12<sup>th</sup>-century suburb at Spon to the west, and beyond Gosford to the east. Settlement in the wooded river valley at Spon or in the well-watered Gosford area, would have been more in character with the known practice of the Anglo-Saxons (VCH VIII, 1-23). Human remains dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century have been recorded beneath the cathedral arcade of St. Mary's.

In about 1043 a Benedictine house, consisting of an Abbot and 24 monks, was founded at Coventry by Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and his wife, the Countess Godifu (Godiva) It is likely that the whole of Coventry belonged to Godiva in her own right, and that the abbey was founded within her territories and was endowed by Leofric with lands in Warwickshire and elsewhere (VCH VIII 1-23).

#### **6.4 Medieval**

After the compilation of the Domesday Book in 1086, the whole city was granted to the Earls of Chester, who founded a castle in the town, and took control of the Coventry estates by 1147. By the 12<sup>th</sup>-century the town that grew up around the Benedictine priory (which had by then become Coventry's first Cathedral) had gained considerable commercial importance. The town's wealth, which had been accrued from trading high-quality wool from Warwickshire flocks, brought other religious orders to the town. These included the Franciscans in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century, and the Carmelites and Carthusians in the 4<sup>th</sup>-century. By this time the church dominated life in the city, and remains of all the monastic houses can be seen above ground today (Soden 2005, 51-98).

Despite the fact that the whole city had been granted to the Earls of Chester in 1088, by 1113 the priory was claiming roughly half of Coventry as its own. Thus the medieval division of the Prior's half and the Earl's half. After the mid 13<sup>th</sup>-century the Priory's influence waned and the town was once again unified under Queen Isabel who came into the possession of the manor of Coventry in 1330.

In 1329 a licence was granted to the priory and men of Coventry to levy murage for building a wall round the city, however work does not seem to have started for some time. It was not until 1363 that licence to crenellate was granted, and this was followed 22 years later by a licence to complete the work. Parts of this wall, though badly preserved and largely rebuilt survive to the south of the study area (VCH VIII, 1-23). The wall was finally completed in the 1530s (Demidowicz 2003, 13). Twelve gates were erected at strategic points, further demonstrating that Coventry at this time was a hub of communication.

Coventry's wealth was founded on the cloth trade, which was flourishing by the 14<sup>th</sup>-century (Soden 2005, 143-147). At this time the city was the fourth largest in the country (Demidowicz 2003, 11-13). In 1334 and 1344 charters exempted Coventry merchants from toll, pavage and other duties throughout the kingdom.

Following the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, Coventry experienced a period of general decline. A series of complex economic disasters hit the city, resulting in contraction of population, shrinkage of the suburbs back to within the historic core and the general dereliction of structures within the town. Although recent archaeological work in the city has



revealed that this was not the case in Far Gosford Street where there was a renewed building programme (Soden 2005, 36). This suggests that not all fortunes were in decline in the late medieval period.

## 6.5 Post-medieval

Following the Civil War Coventry's trade and industry suffered further decline. However, a revival of fortunes came about in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries due to the introduction of new types of cloth and the beginnings of the ribbon industry. The new industries were small scale, labour intensive, and unmechanised, and were squeezed into the existing urban fabric (Demidowicz 2003, 15).

From the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main lines of industrial development in Coventry were in ribbon weaving and watchmaking, followed after less than a century by the emergence of the city first as the cradle of cycle manufacture and later as an important centre of the motor industry and its ancillary trades. It was the cycle industry that ensured that once again that Coventry became prosperous (Demidowicz 2003, 15).

The introduction of the canal system, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then the railways ensured that Coventry maintained its position as a hub of communication and a strong industrial base throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the pace of the town's economy quickened in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century, the first industrial revolution based on iron and coal largely passed Coventry by (Demidowicz 2003, 17).

For the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, watchmaking and silk ribbon weaving were the staple industries of the town and its northern hinterland. As both manufacturing activities needed plenty of light, but remained domestic in scale, houses with large windows on the front or rear became a characteristic building type in Coventry.

The onset of the cycle industry and later the motor car industry demonstrated Coventry's "time-honoured ability to pull a new industry out of the hat when it desperately mattered" ([www.coventry.gov.uk](http://www.coventry.gov.uk)). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were no fewer than 100 workshops devoted to making bicycles in Coventry, with over 3000 citizens employed in the trade (Stewart 1983, 22). By 1911 most of the leading cycle companies had diversified into the making of cars and motor-cycles. In some cases, firms were making all three.

The success of Coventry's motor industry made it a target for the German Luftwaffe in World War Two, causing innumerable damage to Coventry's historic fabric and infrastructure.

## 7 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY AREA

Alma Street is located in the historic district of Harnall, which was later renamed Hillfields in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The district, which was first mentioned in the Coombe Abbey Charter as being in the bounds of the Prior's half of Coventry in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (VCH VIII 71-77), is bounded by Leicester Row and Foleshill Road to the northwest, Great Heath to the north, Swan Lane to the east, and Far Gosford Street to the southeast. It is situated in an area immediately to the east of the former town wall, and to the north of the River Sherbourne, which ran through Harnall from west to east. The river had an important role in Coventry's economic life until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when "there were as many as fourteen mills exploiting a four mile stretch of the

Sherbourne, between Spon End and Stivichall, though not all of them were in existence at the same time” (Birmingham Archaeology 2005a, 3).

There is little or no documentary or archaeological evidence regarding the use form or function of the study area prior to the medieval period. Most of Harnall was claimed by the Coventry Priory in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century as part of its original endowment. Harnall became one of the estates of Roger de Montalt in 1279, when the property “consisted of six cottages, and a number of crofts and other pieces of land” (Birmingham Archaeology 2005a, 4). It is also known that the Benedictine Hospital of St. John the Baptist, which was founded in 1165 as a descendant of St. Mary’s Priory, had land at Harnall, which in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries encompassed the area between Swanswell Pool to the north and the town wall to the south; an area which may have included the current study area. Later documentary sources refer to the area as Harnall Fields, which was being used to feed stock destined for Coventry market. It is known that a butcher had beasts on pasture in Harnall in 1365, and there were 60 sheep and cattle in a field there in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (VCH Vol VIII, 71-77).

John Speed’s map of 1610 (Fig. 4) provides little insight into the function and use of the study area in the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century. Speed obviously believed the area to be unimportant or undeveloped, as he decided to place his Key over much of the district of Harnall. It is likely that there was no development here at this that time, and that it was still being used for pasture. Similarly Samuel Bradford’s plan of 1748 (Fig. 5) shows the area as being undeveloped grassland to the east of the ever encroaching town, following the destruction of the town wall in the previous century. There does not appear to be any further development in the study area or in the vicinity by the time of Sharp’s map of 1807 (Fig. 6) nor in the 1831 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 7).

In 1844 an Act of Parliament was obtained that enabled the dams belonging to various water mills on the River Sherbourne to be demolished. This alleviated the serious problem of flooding in the Harnall area, and “paved the way for the ground between river and the Hillfields ‘new town’ (that had begun to be developed in the 1820s and 1830s and was largely occupied by ribbon weavers) from the 1850s onwards” (Birmingham Archaeology 2005b, 1). In fact this proved to be a continuation of function and tradition in the Hillfields area as many French ribbon and silk weaving refugees settled in the area in 1685 ([www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk)). Hillfields itself was developed as a mainly ribbon weaving suburb of Coventry in 1828, and by 1850 there were 13 ribbon manufacturers, 120 ribbon weavers, and 5 machinery manufacturers in Hillfields alone ([www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk)).

In the 1849 tithe apportionment, the area surrounding the study area was divided up into Far Spittlemore (south) HER MCT 9234 and HER MCT 9325 (Fig. 3), which was described as a pasture or a meadow; Middle Spittlemore HER MCT 9238 and HER MCT 9240, which was described as a meadow; and Ling Meadow HER MCT 9233 (not illustrated on Fig. 3), which was a meadow or pastureland; and Garden Meadow HER MCT 9232, again being a meadow or pastureland. This agricultural function is attested by the area still appearing undeveloped in the 1851 Board of Health Map (Fig. 8). These fieldnames obviously contributed to the area continuing to be referred to as the Spittlemoor for years to come. Alma Street (after the Battle of Alma) and Raglan Street (after a British Commander at the Battle of Alma) were laid out in commemoration of the Crimean War (1854-6); the distinctive fan shape of these streets as well as that Lower Ford Street, which was laid out as part of an earlier development, is a “modest Victorian interpretation” of Napoleon III’s Parisian town planning (Birmingham Archaeology 2005b, 1).

The 1861 census provides an excellent insight into the occupiers of Alma Street at the time; these included a brass and iron works, ribbon weavers, a silk trimmer, dressmakers, and a

watchmaker. The 1871 census, which provides house numbers, suggests that numbers 38 to 54 Alma Street (Table 1), where the current study area now stands, were initially occupied by houses like those still extant at Alma Street (Plates 8 and 9) prior to a factory being built on the site in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

No.	Name	Occupation
38	William Watson	Carpenter and joiner
39	Edward Daniel Friswell	Warehouse man
40	William Russell	Gardner
41	John Slaughter	Iron fitter
42	William Russell	Tailor journeyman
43	Thomas Killington	Watchmaker
44	Louisa Wright	Tailoress
45	James Greenway	Ribbon Weaver
46	Jane Bacon	School Mistress
47	Joseph Lockington	Unknown
48	Thomas Windridge	Watchmaker
49	John Ingram	Printer
50	Joseph Hackleton	Keeper of Billiard Room
51	Michael Goodman	Iron turner and fitter
52	Richard Mills	Tailor
53	Thomas Claridge	Watchmaker
54	Sarah Parkes	Grocer

**Table 1**

The 1889 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9) shows a row of c.17 houses in the northwest corner of the study area facing onto Alma Street. The southern part of the study area is taken up by one end of terrace of houses and trees/open land. Eastern part of site was taken up largely by the Apollo Works (Bicycles), which appears to be a rectangular shaped building adjacent to a row of c.6 houses along Hood Street. Across Hood Street to the east is the Premier Works (Bicycle). In 1896 Kelly's Directory notes that the Apollo Works were replaced by the Pneumatic Tyre Company (cycle tyre manufacturers), which was in turn replaced by the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Co. by Kelly's Directory 1900.

The 1905 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9) shows that the plot had been taken over by Dunlop Works (Pneumatic Tyre) which appears to have added to and extended the existing factory. The houses to the northwest and east had been removed whilst the southern part of the study area remains unchanged. Across Hood Street to the east is the Premier Works (Bicycle) and an Auto Machinery Works. Dunlops was considered as one of the most important of the new firms attracted to Coventry by cycling boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and "soon extended its operations to include all stages of manufacture" (Thoms and Donnelly 2000, 19).

Very few changes had taken place by the time of the 1914 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9), and the Dunlop Works (Pneumatic Tyre) is still present, Dunlop's also appear to have constructed a factory on the north side of Alma Street by this time, removing a number of houses in the process this is marked Dunlop Works (Rim and Wheel). Across Hood Street is the Premier Works (Cycle and Motor) and an Auto Machinery Works. Dunlops soon transferred its business to Fort Dunlop in Birmingham, and Kelly's Directory of 1924 states that the factory complex had been taken-over by British Thomson Houston Ltd. electrical components company (Plate 11). The company made different electrical components such as magnetos, electric motors, headphones, loudspeakers, lamps, amplifiers, and electrical windings ([www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk))

(Plates 12-14). BTH began the manufacture of 'talkie' equipment for cinema projectors in 1929 and demonstrated an early form of 3D film-projector at the 1951 Festival of Britain ([www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk)). In 1937 (Fig. 9) the factory building appears to be the same as the previous map with an extension constructed towards Lower Ford Street, it is now an Electrical Engineering Works. The factory on the other side of Hood Street is also an Electrical Engineering Works, whilst the works on the north side of Alma Street has changed to the Singer Raglan Works (Motor Car). It is clear from the records at Coventry Archives that the Alma Street area received some bomb damage in the blitz during World War Two, the industrialised nature of the Hillfields area ensured that it was a viable target. The BTH Company planned accordingly, creating a number of air raid shelters at their plants, including that in the current study area. Plans show that they constructed three air raid shelters on the Lower Ford Street side of the Alma Street plant (Plate 10). These had enough space for 161 people in total and may still be extant. BTH was later taken over by AEI, and later by GEC, who built a new premises on the site, which was until recently occupied by Lucas Aerospace ([www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk)).

There were very few changes to the study area until the 1984 Ordnance Survey map (Fig 10) where it would appear that the factory building seen on the previous Ordnance Survey map had been demolished by this time and replaced by a new works building which conforms to the current ground plan.

## **8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This assessment has revealed information about a site with an interesting history. It appears to have been as undeveloped pasture land probably from at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the surrounding area was developed for residential and industrial purposes. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the study area was occupied by terraced housing on each side; this was eroded away by industrial development towards the end of that century. Firstly, it was occupied by Apollo Cycle works, and then by various tyre manufacturers including Dunlops, until the factory was taken over and extended by British Thomson Houston Company Ltd who were eventually taken over by GEC, who constructed the current factory buildings on site.

Whilst the Alma Street site may not lie in the historic core of the city of Coventry, the study area's proximity to the medieval town wall, the River Sherbourne, and the fact that recent excavations at the nearby Lower Ford Street have yielded significant medieval deposits, indicates that some form of archaeological mitigation may be necessary. Therefore it is suggested that the following recommendations are taken into account:

### Standing Buildings

There does not appear to be any trace of the former factory buildings remaining above ground level. Therefore, there is no requirement for any programme of historic building recording above ground. However, it may be useful to examine if there is any access route to the air raid shelters from inside the current factory buildings prior to demolition.

### Subsurface Archaeology

It is recommended that an archaeological evaluation is carried out following the removal of the current factory buildings, this is important in order to investigate for the presence of, and subsequent possible truncation of archaeological deposits. If such a scheme of works proves ineffective it is recommended that a watching brief be undertaken during any future subsurface intrusions. In addition to this, if the presence of Second World War air raid shelters under part

of the site is verified, they should be recorded by a suitably qualified archaeologist to a level decided by the Planning Archaeologist, in accordance with PPG 15 (DOE 1994). Any final decision on further archaeological work should be made by the Planning Archaeologist, Coventry City Council.

## **9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **10 SOURCES**

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1871 Coventry City Census

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### **10.3 Cartographic Sources**

1610 John Speed's Map of Coventry.

1748 Samuel Bradford's Plan of Coventry.

1807 Thomas Sharp's Plan of Coventry.

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[www.hillfields.org.uk](http://www.hillfields.org.uk)



Fig.1

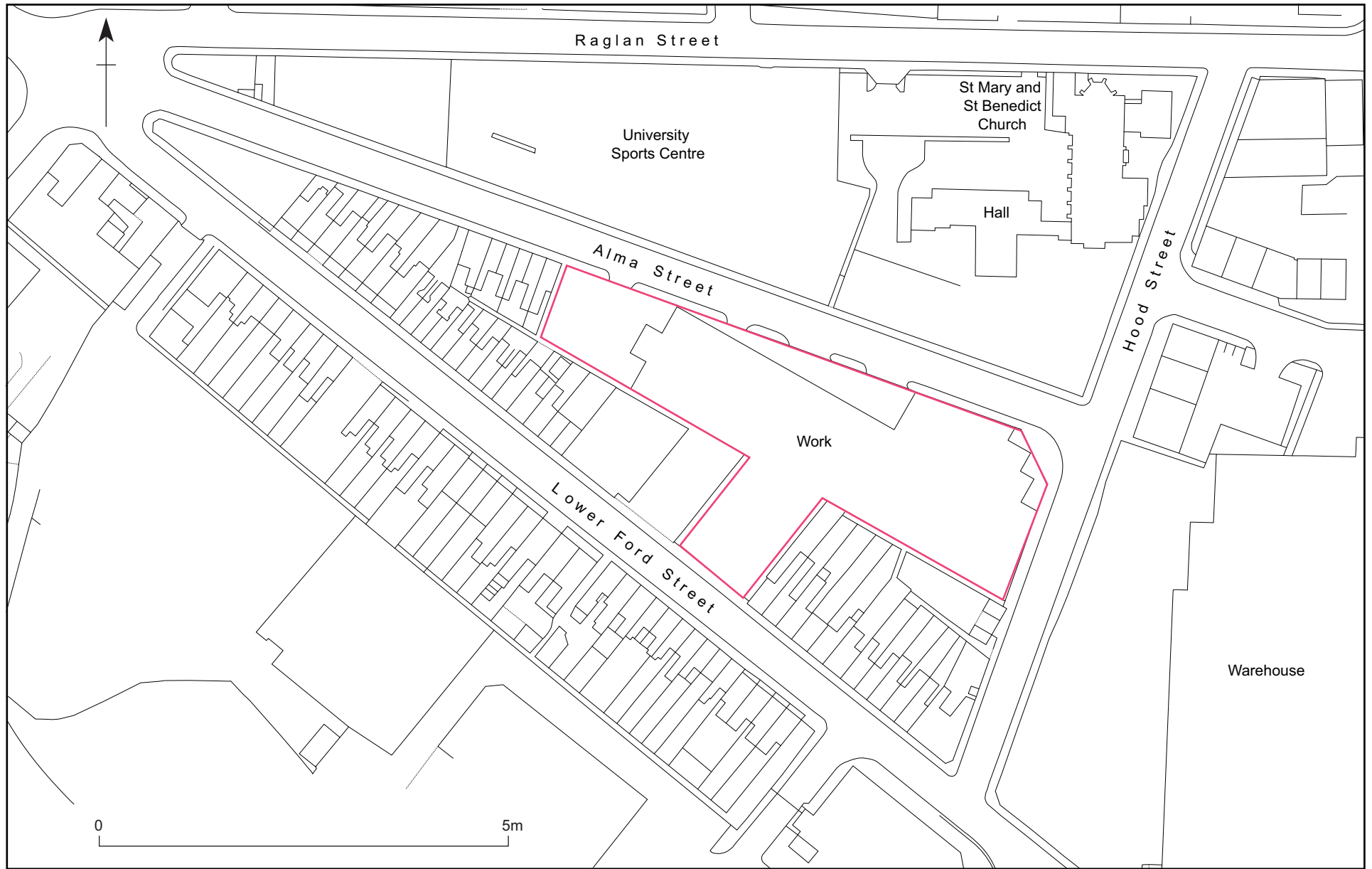


Fig.2



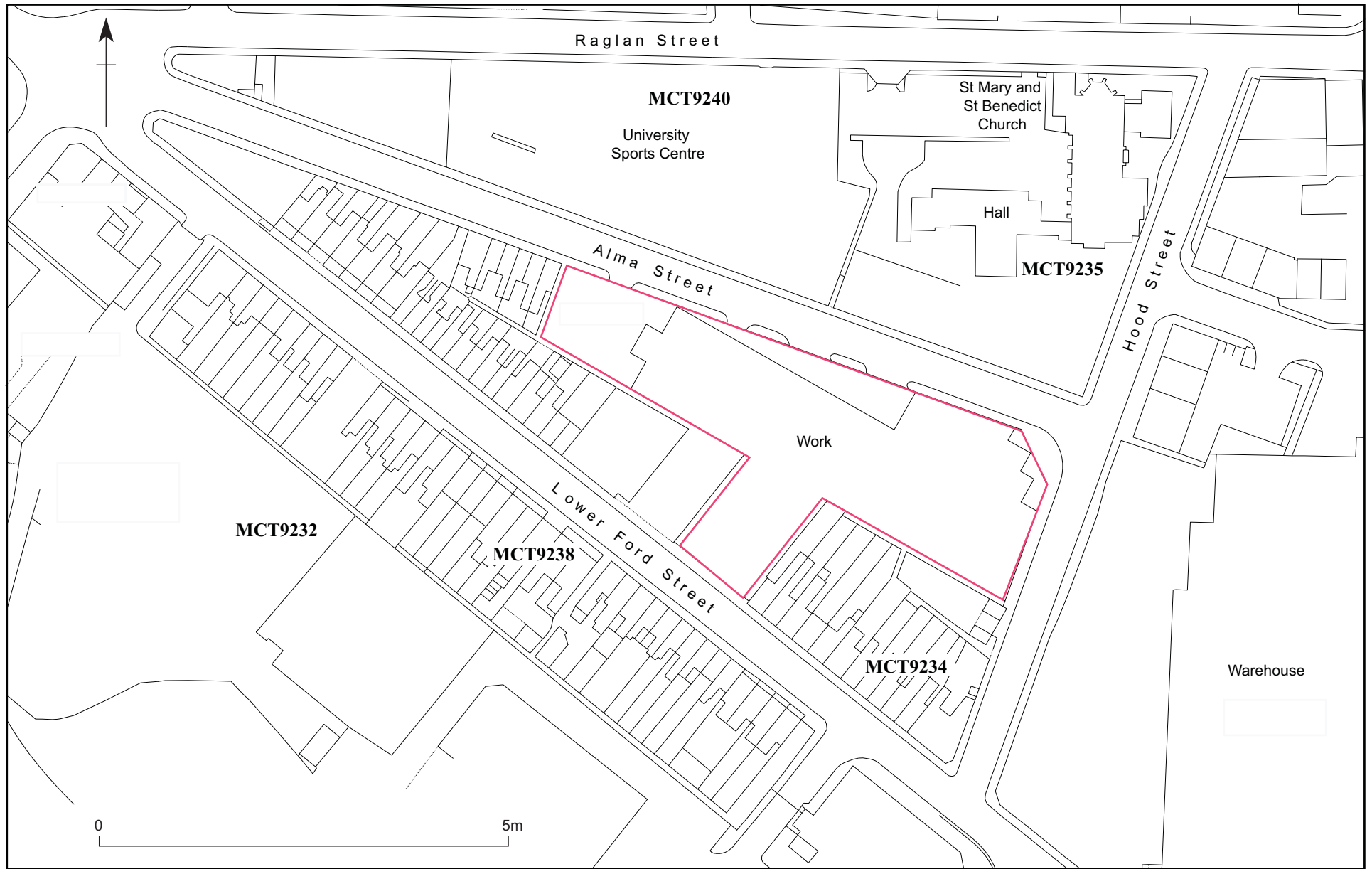


Fig.3

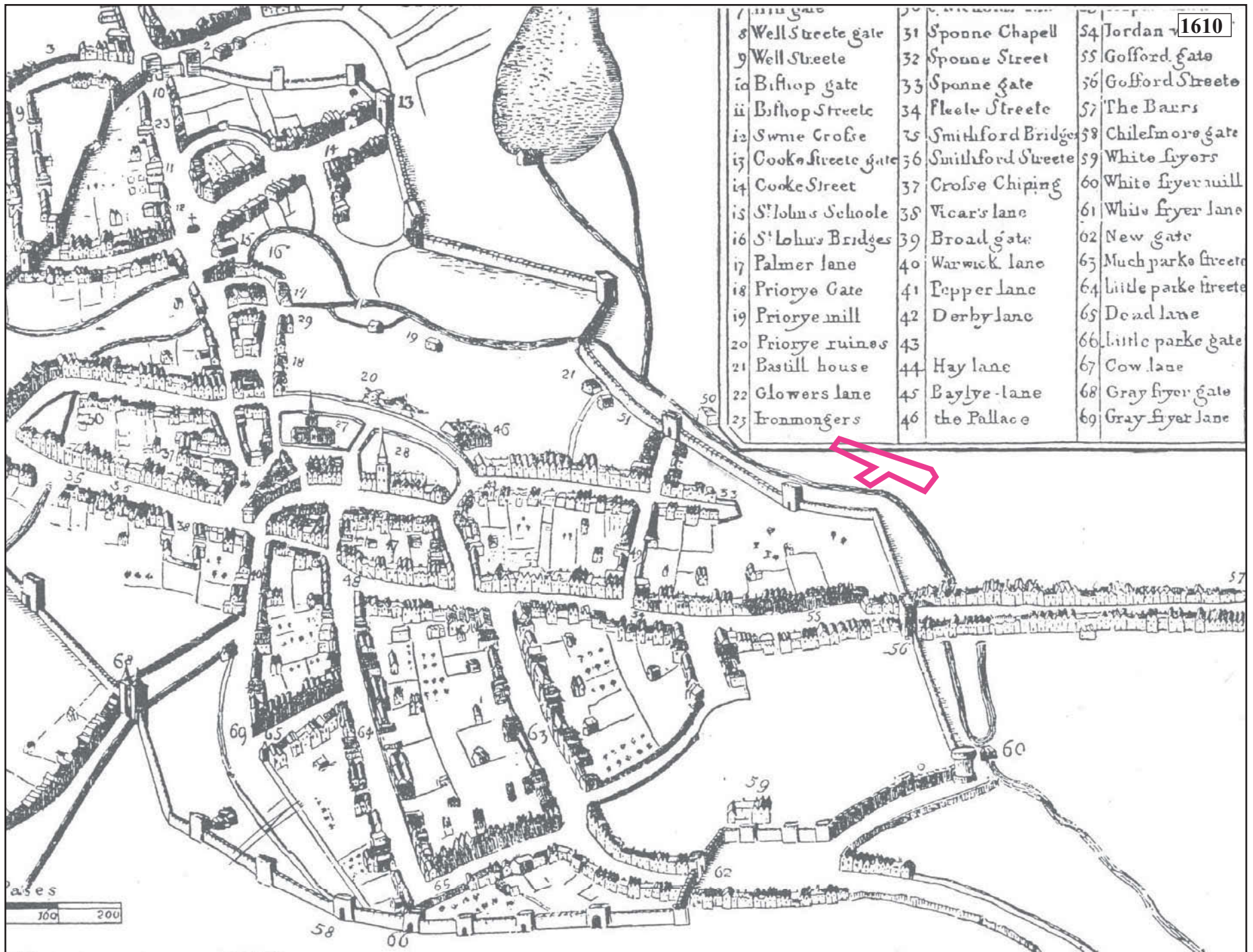


Fig.4

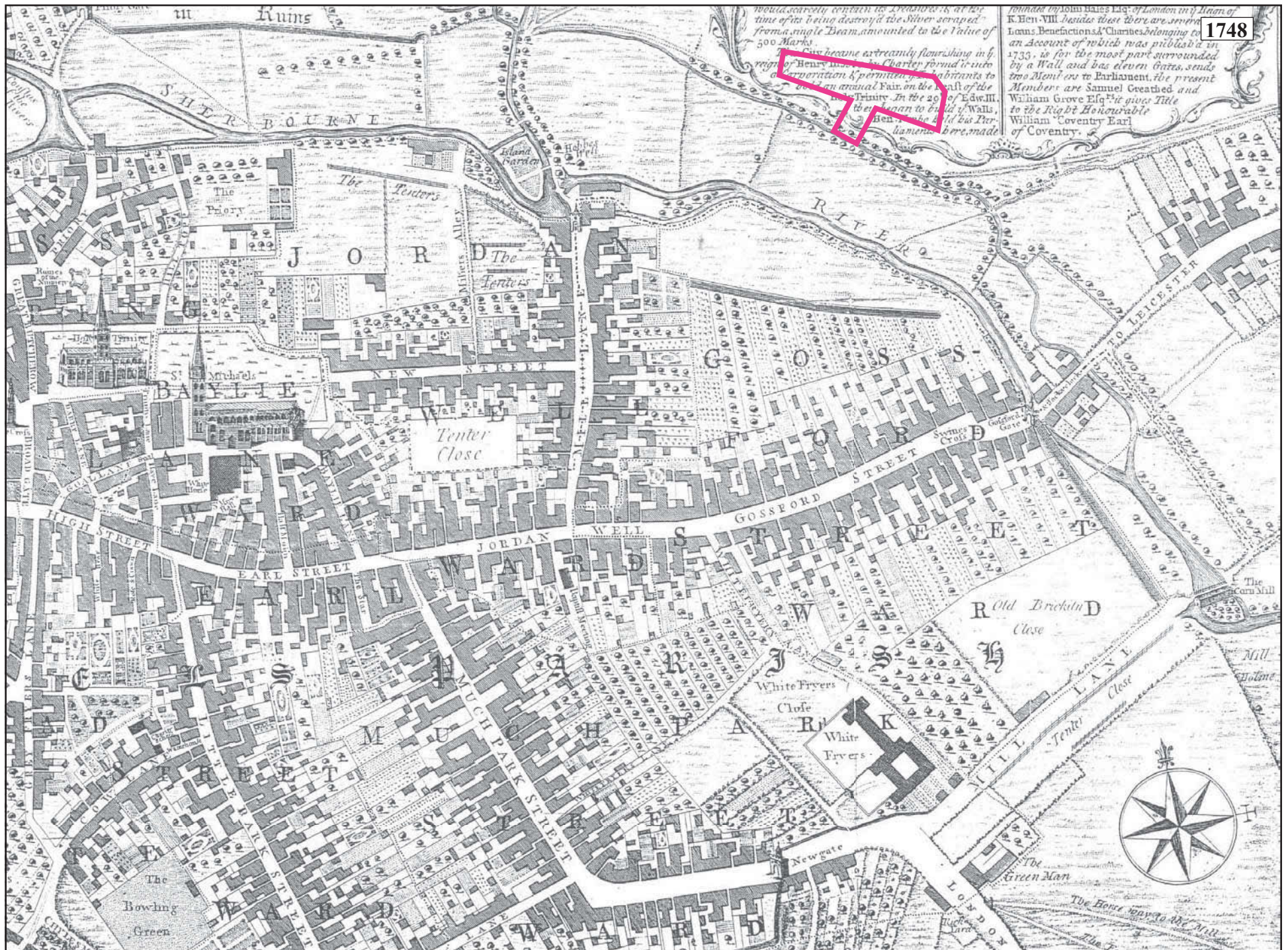
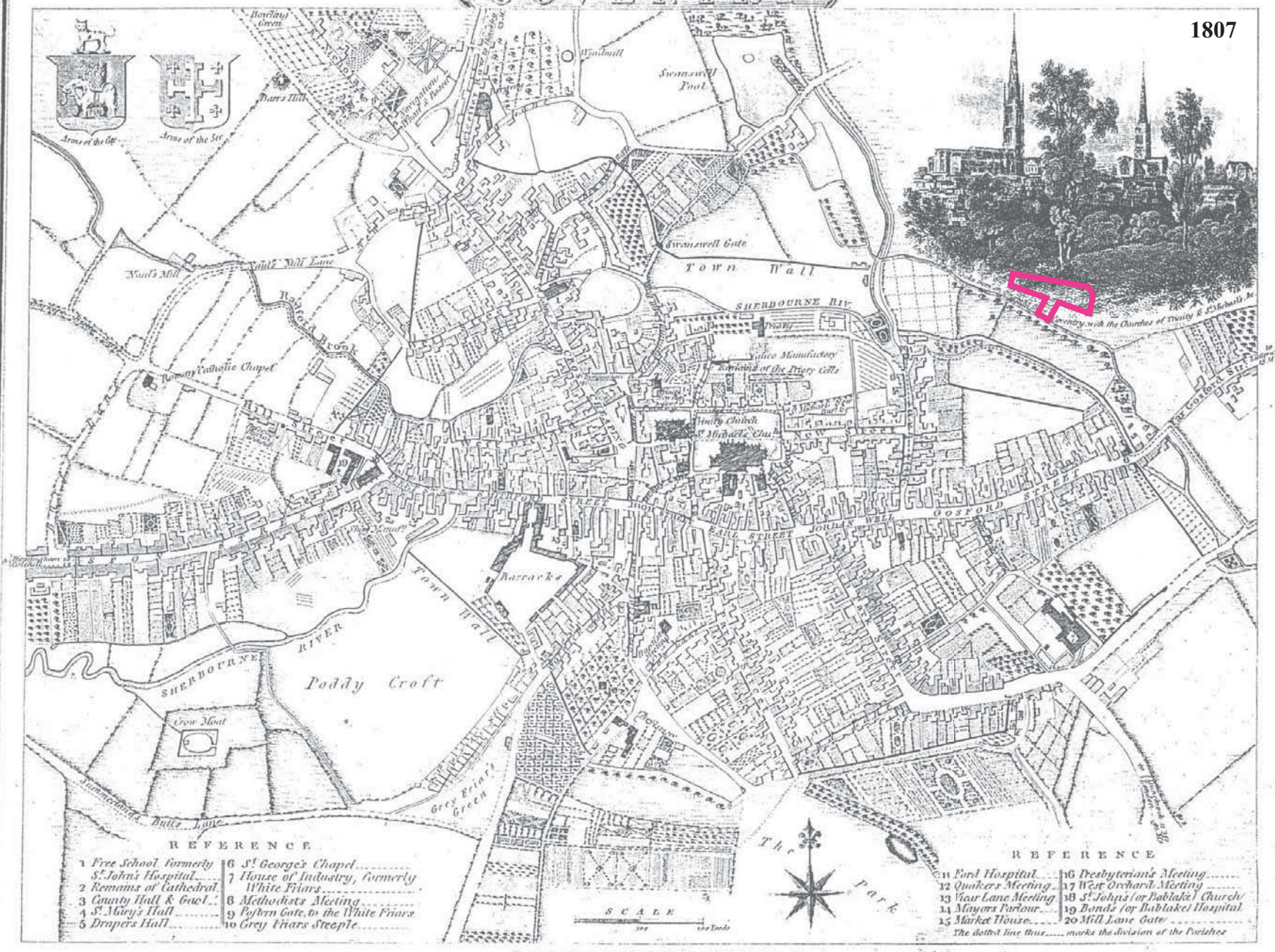


Fig.5

# COVENTRY

1807



Drawn and Engraved under the direction of E. W. Dingley.

Engraved by J. Rogers from a Drawing by Tho: Shoop

London Published for the Proprietors, by Turner, Hoell & Sharpe, Pall Mall, May 2<sup>d</sup> 1807.

to accompany the Beauties of England & Wales

Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8

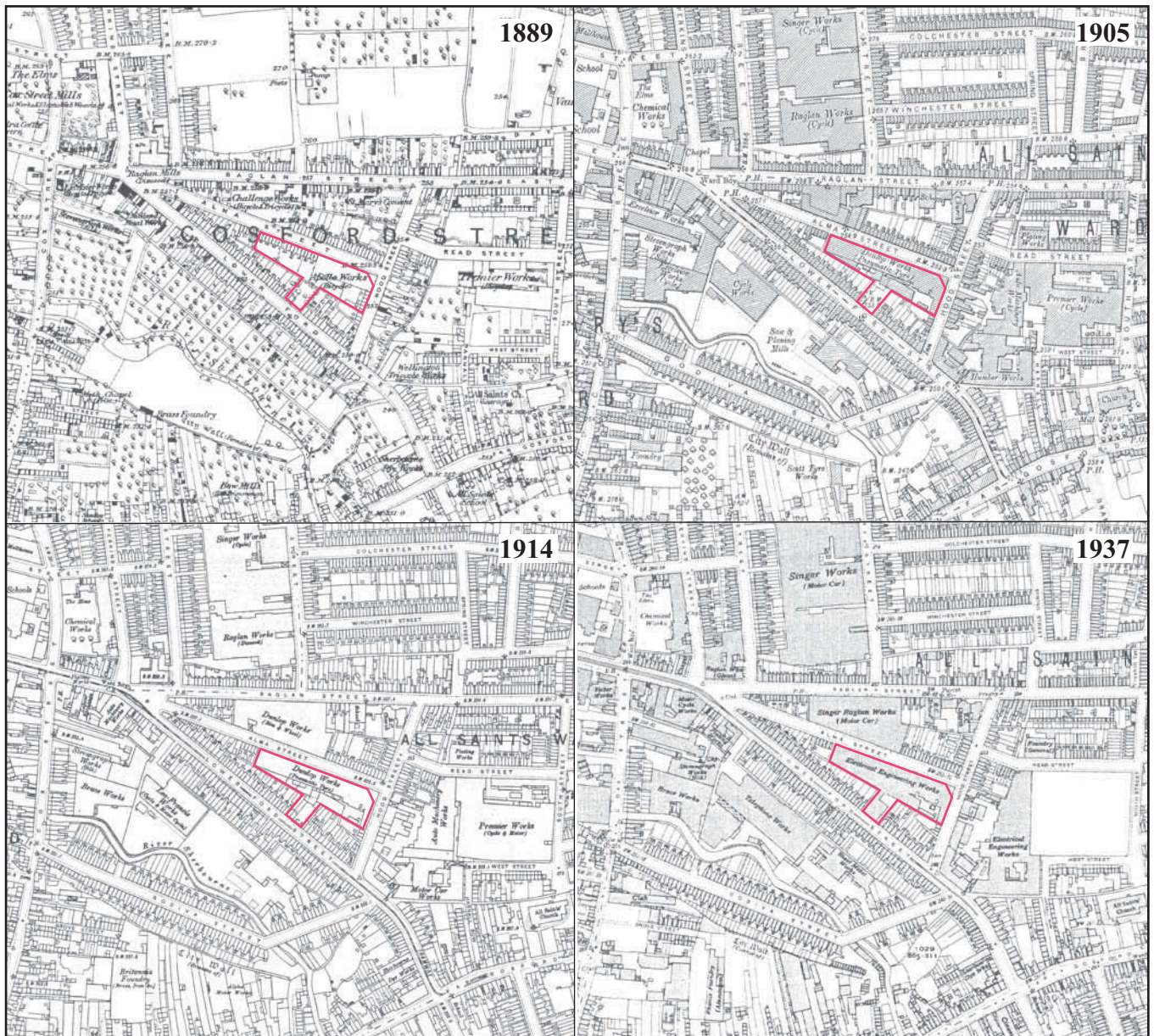


Fig.9



Fig.10





Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10

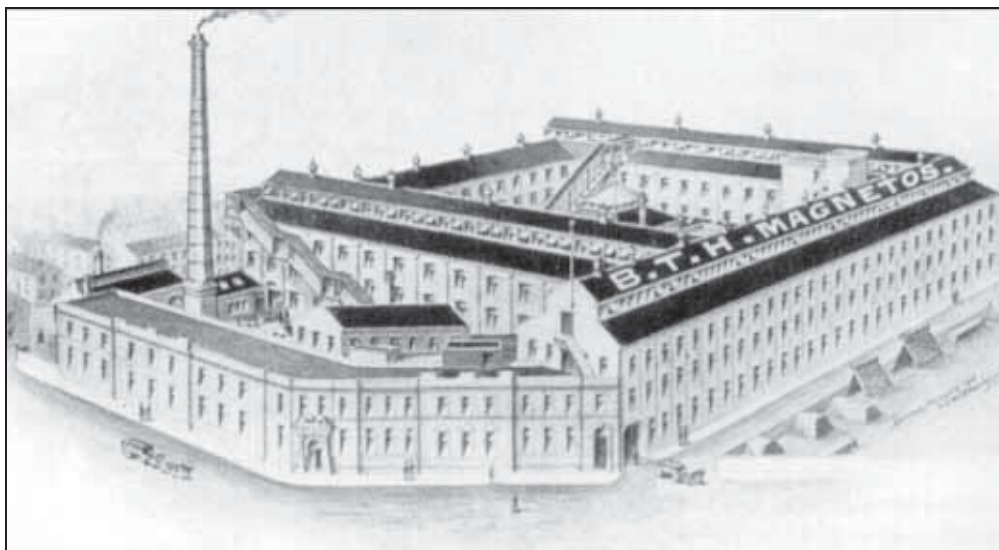


Plate 11



Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14