

birmingham archaeology

31 Commercial Street,
Birmingham

A Desk-Based Assessment



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By

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For

The Birmingham Development Company Limited

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Summary

Documentary research was carried out to elucidate the construction history of No. 31 Commercial Street (Shaw Munster Ltd), Birmingham. The property is a sub-division of a plot of land that was developed c. 1862 as a sawmill and timber yard, by a man called Alfred Bullock, and included the whole area now occupied by Nos 25-31. By 1888 Bullock had raised buildings along the northwest and southwest sides of the plot, the latter being on the site of the present No. 31 and adjacent to the pre-existing Washington Foundry (on the site of the present Nos 37-45). Around 1890, the Washington Foundry premises were taken over by the Adamant Company Limited, lime cement manufacturers, an event which prompted some rebuilding of the old works. Architect's plans of 1897 for the reconstruction of what is now Nos 37-45 Commercial Street show that an 18 in thick northeast-southwest wall was to be built up against an existing northeast-southwest wall on the adjacent plot (now No. 31) to form the boundary with Alfred Bullock's property. This boundary wall of 1897 appears to have remained in situ ever since.

In 1899 Alfred Bullock erected some new buildings on his land, including a range of shopping facing Commercial Street which was later to become the front range of Nos 25-29. The southwest end of this street range, which still exists, appears to have been built up against an existing structure on the site of No. 31. During Alfred Bullock's ownership and occupancy of the site several other businesses were based here, but it is difficult to be certain about the spatial distribution of these operations, nor is it possible to say whether the site of No. 31 formed a distinct entity at this time.

After 1907 Bullock no longer appears in the records, and the property seems to have been acquired by the Adamant and Asphalte Co. Ltd, which may have based its asphalte manufacturing operation here for a while. In 1919, a company called the Prima Co. Ltd, motor accessories manufacturers, appeared in the records for Commercial Street, and probably occupied the site of No. 31 from this date. Certainly, by 1936 its address was recorded as No. 31 Commercial Street. The Prima Co. was based here until 1951, and Young's (Lifting Apparatus) Ltd between 1956 and 1958. After this there was another hiatus in the occupancy of the property, but by 1964 J. Shaw & Co. (Birmingham) Ltd, metal small-ware manufacturers (Jayesco Works) was trading from Commercial Street. This seems to have been the forerunner of the current occupier of No. 31, Shaw Munster Ltd, metal smallware manufacturers (Jayesco Works). The date of its appearance in the records is compatible with the architectural character of the existing street elevation.

It is evident from an aerial view of the site that No. 31 comprises several different structural phases, and it is probable that, in addition to the late 20th-century front and a mid-20th-century rear block, the complex contains earlier structures, possibly dating back to the 19th-century use of the site as a sawmill.

1.0 Introduction

Documentary research was carried out for the Birmingham Development Company Limited to elucidate the construction history of No. 31 Commercial Street (Shaw Munster Limited), Birmingham. Owing to the fact that the present numbering system for Commercial Street only came into existence in the mid-20th-century, identification of the current No. 31 in the historical records has not been an entirely straightforward matter. In the absence of a dependable consecutive numbering system, reliance has been placed on the practice of listing properties in trade directories and rate books in topographical order. In the case of the directories, the sequence is generally from southwest to northeast, but, in the case of the rate books, from northeast to southwest. However, the process of deduction is not always as clear-cut as might be expected, owing to the irregular character of the study area, not least the existence of canal wharfs on the northwestern edge of the study area, which are also listed under Commercial Street, and the multi-occupancy of some of the Commercial Street sites, including that of which Nos 25-29 and No. 31 originally formed part; these factors have, to a degree, compromised the certainty of the method. Needless to say, the developmental sequences of the adjacent properties (Nos 33-45 and Nos 25-29) are also significant in extrapolating that of No. 31; consequently these have been given due weight in the following report.

2.0 Site Location and Description

No. 31 (Shaw Munster Limited) is situated on the north side of Commercial Street, Birmingham city centre, and on the south side of the Birmingham and Worcester Canal at NGR SP 0641 8634 (Figs 1 and 2). An aerial view of the site shows a disparate collection of buildings which suggest an accretive development (Plate 1), which is in some measure borne out by the later 20th-century brick frontage (Plates 2 & 3) and the mid-20th-century rear block (Plate 4), but these are probably only the most recent additions to the complex, and it is probable that earlier structures survive within.

3.0 Methods

A search of readily available published and unpublished documentary sources was carried out at Birmingham Central Library Local Studies, Birmingham City Archives, and the library of the University of Birmingham. Sources consulted included general histories, historic maps, trade directories, rate books, and building plans.

4.0 Historical Development

4.1 Introduction

The early history of Commercial Street is bound up with that of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, which was built between 1791 and 1815, and which forms the northwestern extent of the properties fronting Commercial Street. Initially, the canal terminated in this area, but in 1814 it was linked to the main Birmingham Canal network, and a whole series of wharves evolved at the junction between the linked waterways. Piggot Smith's map of 1828 shows the main line of the Worcester Canal following a northeasterly route almost parallel with the later line of Commercial

Street then turning abruptly to the southeast and almost immediately again to the northeast where it forms a short terminating basin (Fig. 3). At this turn, the canal is joined from the northwest by the link to the Birmingham Canal. Commercial Street does not yet seem to have come into existence and the map depicts the area to the southeast of the canal, including the site of No. 31 Commercial Street, as one of gardens and orchards, laid out on a gridiron pattern, belonging to Miss Colmore (Fig. 3). However, although Commercial Street did not exist as such, its later position seems to have been determined by the layout of the gardens.

4.2 Development of Nos 37-45 Commercial Street

Commercial Street first appears in the cartographic record on J. Piggott Smith's Board of Health map of 1848-62. On the site immediately to the southwest of the present No. 31 Commercial Street (Fig. 4), the map shows a group of buildings arranged around a central courtyard, standing on their own and occupying the northeastern half of the property now known as Nos 37-45. The front (southeast) range was divided into four units, three of which had short rear wings within small rear (northwest) yards, and the appearance of a row of terraced houses. The fourth unit, which was slightly narrower, and which had no appendages, may have been a covered entrance. Certainly, there is no other obvious access to the yard from Commercial Street. On the southwest side of the courtyard was a long narrow range, on the northwest side a much wider range, and on the northeast side a medium width range with a small annexe at the southeast end. The impression is of a collection of separate buildings rather than of a unified entity.

This complex of buildings was the Washington Foundry, which seems to have come into existence *c.* 1857. Commercial Street does not appear in the *Post Office Directory of Birmingham* for 1856 but Richard Nash and William Allen are recorded as ironfounders with premises on nearby Washington Street. Nash and Allen seem to have relocated to Commercial Street by 1858 (*Hulley's Birmingham Directory*), when they were described as engineers, iron founders and stove grate manufacturers, carrying on their business at the Washington Iron Foundry, Commercial Street, Worcester Wharf. The new foundry is described in the 1860 rate book as being owned and occupied by Richard Nash and William Allen, and as comprising a foundry, steam engine, machinery, shops, yards and premises. A second entry for Nash and Allen shows William Allen as the occupier of three separate units each comprising house and premises, perhaps a reference to the three units along the Commercial Street front, and a fourth unit comprising show rooms and premises.

This layout had changed by 1888 when the survey for the Ordnance Survey 1:500 map was undertaken (Fig. 5). This map shows an extended complex now occupying most of the present site. Described as the Washington Foundry ('Iron and Brass') it is shown as an irregular collection of buildings forming four ranges surrounding a courtyard containing a crane close to its northwest corner. There were covered carriage (east) and pedestrian (west) entrances from Commercial Street, but no access is shown to the canal wharfs which lay on the north side of the complex. Adjoining it to the west was a large yard, entered from a gateway at the junction of Commercial Street (east) and Granville Street (west), and containing a smithy on its east side, adjacent to the Washington Foundry.

In the 1881 rate book William Henry Allen was the occupier of No. 9 Commercial Street, comprising house, show rooms, office, shopping, stabling, foundry, steam engine, machinery and premises. There is a second entry at the same address for shopping and premises. In 1882 W.H. Allen was listed at Nos 11 and 12 Commercial Street (*Post Office Directory of Birmingham*), and in 1883 two ironfounders are recorded on Commercial Street: William Henry Allen and William Allday, Son and Co. (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*). William Allen does not appear in Kelly's 1884 directory, but Allday is still listed, and in the rate book William Allday ('and Onions Company Ltd' written in a different hand) is recorded at Nos 9, 19 and 11 Commercial Street, with wharf land frontage, house, offices, warehouse, manufactory, engine and premises. He also owned houses at Nos 7 and 8.

No iron founders are listed on Commercial Street in 1888 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*), but by 1890 Adamant and Co. Lime Cement Manufacturers had appeared (*Ibid.*). In the 1891 rate book the Adamant Co. Ltd had engine and premises at No. 11 Commercial Street, owned by William Allday. The company also held wharf land and canal frontage from the Worcester Canal Company.

The appearance of a this new type of business at the Commercial Street premises seems to have prompted two documented phases of building work. The first was the 1895 scheme for new shopping designed by Birmingham architects Bateman & Bateman (BBP 10883; listed in the Birmingham Central Library Catalogue, with Adamant Co. as the client, but these plans were unfortunately missing). The manufactory was further altered and added to in 1897, by another Birmingham architect, William Henman (1846-1917). Henman's plans are also listed in Birmingham Central Library Catalogue (BBP 13378), but also these too are missing, copies obtained in the 1990s were supplied by the Birmingham Development Co. (Figs 6-7).

It is clear from a detailed comparison of the 19th-century maps and Henman's plans that a major reconstruction of the site took place between 1888 when the 1:500 Ordnance Survey map was surveyed, and 1897, when Henman's plans were drawn up for the Adamant Co. Limited. This reconstruction took place shortly after the change of use from foundry to cement manufactory, and it is probable that Bateman and Bateman remodelled the site in order to accommodate the new business, a process that was furthered by Henman. Henman's drawings, which comprise a block plan, four floor plans, and two sections, show the layout of the factory in detail. Unfortunately, it is not certain whether they represent the factory as it existed at the time, or whether they illustrate Henman's proposed alterations. In many respects, it is evident that the present layout corresponds very closely with Henman's plans, the main area of discrepancy being the south front, where the configuration recorded on the 1897 plans is different from that of the existing elevation.

4.3 Development of Nos 25-31

The property now known as No. 31 Commercial Street first appears in the cartographic record on the Ordnance Survey 1:500 map of 1888 (Fig 5), as part of a larger property also incorporating the site of Nos 37-45, which is described on the map as 'Saw Mills'. This larger property consisted of a walled compound with a concentration of buildings along the northwest and southwest sides, the former

backing onto the adjacent canal wharf, and the latter on the site of No. 31, hard up against the north-east wall of the Washington Foundry. The buildings occupying the position of No. 31 consisted of a small entrance block with a long narrow open-sided range to the rear linking it with a more substantial L-shaped block at the northwest end of the site, which extended into the areas now part of Nos 25-29.

Henman's 1897 plan of the street block (Fig. 6) depicts the same arrangement, and it is evident from the more detailed Henman drawings of the proposed new factory buildings for the Adamant Co. that although the new works were to abut the existing buildings on the site of the current No. 31 Commercial Street, they were to be structurally independent, with a new 18 in (0.45m) thick wall planned along the boundary between the two properties.

These premises occupying the sites of Nos 25-31 seem to have come into existence c. 1862. There is certainly nothing that might be identified with the plot in the 1860 rate book, nor is the presence of a sawyer recorded on Commercial Street in the *Corporation Directory of Birmingham* for 1861, although in the 1863 edition, 'Alfred Bullock, sawyer, Commercial Street' is listed under the names, and 'J. Bullock' is listed under Commercial Street immediately before (northeast of) Nash and Allen. In the 1864 edition of the *Post Office Directory of Birmingham*, 'Alfred Bullock saw mills' appears immediately before (northeast of) 'Nash & Allen, ironfounders'. The same sequence appears in the 1871 rate book, where Alfred Bullock's property on Commercial Street is described as shedding, stabling, steam engine, machinery and premises. The 1896 Rate Book lists Alfred Bullock under No. 12 as having a warehouse and canal frontage, house, office, sawmills, engine, shopping and timber store. A second entry for Alfred Bullock under No. 12 is as a tenant of the Worcester Canal Co., the premises consisting of wharf, land and canal frontage.

During the last quarter of the 19th century three planning applications were made for building works at Bullock's Commercial Street premises. The earliest of these, made by Alfred Bullock on 9 April 1878, was described as 'Additions to saw mills' (BBP 1061). The second, for 'Saw mill shedding' was made by Thomas Bullock and dates from 9 May 1882 (BBP 3215). Finally, an application was made on 22 February 1899 by the Birmingham architect, G. R. Faulkner, for the owner, Alfred Bullock, to erect 'Shopping' (BBP 14619). Unfortunately the plans for the first two applications are no longer extant, and although the 1899 drawing survives, it was in too fragile a condition to examine properly, although the limited view obtained suggested that part of it represented the front (southeast) elevation of the current Nos 25-29 Commercial Street. The new buildings appear on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1904, as a range along the Commercial Street front, and a northwest-southeast aligned wing attached to the rear (Fig 8). The configuration of the buildings on the site of No. 31 Commercial Street, however, appeared to have remained unchanged.

In the 1901 rate book before the entry for the Adamant Company Ltd, there are three consecutive entries for land owned by Alfred Bullock, which appear to equate with the site of Nos 25-31. The first is for a timber yard occupied by Alfred Bullock, the second an office and shopping occupied by John Abernethy, and the third, also occupied by Alfred Bullock, consisted of a house, office, saw mill, storerooms, engine, shopping and premises. This sequence given in the rate book appears to be contradicted by *Kelly's Directory of Birmingham* for the same year, for the entry for Abernethy & Co., fancy leather goods manufacturers, is placed between the Adamant

Co. to the southwest and Alfred Bullock to the northeast and the entries immediately following Bullock are for James Fell and Thomas Walsh, both wood turners of Bullock's Mill.

The wood turning ventures appear to have been short-lived, and by 1906 Bullock's Mill was occupied by Alfred Davis & Co., stationers' sundries manufacturers (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*). 1907 was the last year in which either Alfred Bullock or Bullock's Mill appeared in the trade directories. The following year Alfred Davis and Co. were listed under No. 12 Commercial Street, but occupied the same position in the sequence as in previous years, so it seems that No. 12 is to be identified with Bullock's Mill and the current Nos 25-9. The trade directories give no indication as to what happened to Alfred Bullock's premises between 1907 and 1919, but the rate book for 1911 suggests that it came into the hands of the Adamant and Asphalte Company Ltd, who were recorded as the owner occupiers of two properties on the site of Nos 25-31, one a timber yard, and the other an office and shopping, in addition to maintaining their original premises to the southwest.

By 1914 the site of Nos 25-31 had been completely infilled, being shown on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map as a solid block (Fig. 9). *Kelly's Directory of Birmingham* for the same year lists the Midland Adamant Co. Ltd, plaster makers, then Alfred Davis at No.12, then the Asphalte and Cement Co., asphalte makers. It seems that the former Adamant Company Ltd had split into two divisions, the plaster division being situated in the old premises identifiable with Nos 37-45, and the asphalt business in Alfred Bullock's old premises. The two companies were listed again the following year (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*), but by 1917 the Midland Adamant Co. had disappeared, and from this point forward only the Asphalte and Cement Co., asphalte manufacturers, were recorded in the directories, listed after Alfred Davis at No.12.

1919 saw the first appearance in the trade directories of the Prima Co. Ltd, motor accessories manufacturers (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*). No street name is given, but the firm is listed immediately after the Asphalte and Cement Co. and from 1936 onwards was listed as No. 31 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*), so it may well have been on the same site from the beginning. The Prima Co. last appears in 1951 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham and Smethwick*), and there is no entry for No. 31 in 1952-4.

Alfred Davis was still in possession of No.12 in 1920 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*), but by 1925 a firm called the Commercial Engineering Company who manufactured safety lamps, was listed at the address (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham and Smethwick*), but from 1940 took the same address as the Prima Co., that is to say, No. 31 Commercial Street. The 1937 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 10) labels the whole of the Nos 25-31 site as 'Engineering Works', a description that is not incompatible with the name of this company, which was last listed in 1946, nor with that of the Prima Co. The first appearance of Nos 25-29 Commercial Street in the records was in 1952 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham and Smethwick*) when G. S. Brough Ltd, washer manufacturers were listed at the address, a company that was still operating from here in 1974 (*Kelly's Directory of Birmingham*), and whose name still adorns the front of Nos 25-29.

On the Ordnance Survey 1:1250 map of 1954 (Fig. 11) a clear division is shown between Nos. 31 and Nos 25-29, the former being designated 'Eades Works (Lifting Appliances)' and the latter 'Camden Works (Gaskets)'. Nos 37-45 were described as 'Engineering and Shotblasting Works'. Between 1956 and 1958 a company called Young's (Lifting Appliances) Ltd was listed at No. 31. After this date, however, no more entries appeared for No. 31, but by 1964 a firm called J. Shaw & Co. (Birmingham) Ltd, metal small-ware manufacturers (Jayesco Works) was trading from Commercial Street being listed immediately before (southwest of) Nos 25-29. This seems to have been the forerunner of the current occupier of No. 31, Shaw Munster Ltd, metal smallware manufacturers (Jayesco Works). The date of its appearance in the records is compatible with the architectural character of the existing street elevation.

5.0 Conclusions

The origins of No. 31 Commercial Street are as part of a larger plot encompassing the current extent of Nos 25-31 and first developed c. 1862 as a sawmill and timber yard by Alfred Bullock, sawyer. There have been buildings on the site of No. 31 since 1888 at the latest, which seem to have been respected by building carried out on the adjoining sites of Nos 37-45 in 1897, and Nos 25-9 in 1899. However, we have no convincing evidence that it became a territorial entity in its own right until c. 1919. Rebuilding of the northwest end of No. 31 seems to have taken place in the mid-20th century, and of the southeast end in the early 1960s, but it is probable that earlier structures survive within the complex.

6.0 Sources

6.1 Primary Sources

Abbreviation

BBP - Birmingham Building Plans (City of Birmingham Archives)

City of Birmingham Archives

BBP Registers 1878, 1882, 1895, 1899

BBP 13378 Additions to manufactory, William Henman for Adamant Co. October 1897 (Drawings missing, but copies supplied by the Birmingham Development Co. have been used in the preparation of this report).

BBP 14619 Shopping, G. R. Faulkner for A. Bullock 22 February 1899 (Drawings extant but too fragile to be examined properly).

Rate Books

St Thomas's Ward 1856, 1860 (Vol. 11), 1871 (Vol. 16), 1881, 1886, 1891 (Vol. 23), 1896 (Vol. 23), 1901 (Vol. 23), 1906 (Vol. 23), 1911 (Vol. 23).

Trade Directories

Business Directory of Birmingham 1862

Corporation Directory of Birmingham 1861, 1863, 1864

Hulley's Birmingham Directory 1858, 1870

Kelly's Directory of Birmingham 1868, 1883, 1884, 1886, 1888, 1890, 1897, 1901, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1914, 1915, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, 1927, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1940, 1941-3, 1969-70, 1973-4

Kelly's Directory of Birmingham and Smethwick 1925, 1933, 1937, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1949, 1951, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1958, 1963, 1964, 1965

Post Office Directory of Birmingham 1845, 1856, 1860, 1864, 1871, 1882 (Part 1)

White's Directory of Birmingham, 1855

6.2 Secondary Sources

Hislop, M. 2006, *Former Adamant Co. Works, 37-45 Commercial Street, Birmingham: Building Recording and Documentary Record* (Birmingham Archaeology Report No. 1448).

VCH *Victoria History of the County of Warwick* VII.

White, A. 2005 *The Worcester and Birmingham Canal*.

6.3 Cartographic Sources

1731 Westley

1750 Bradford

1778 Hanson

1828 Piggot Smith

c.1860 Piggot Smith

1889 Ordnance Survey 1:500

1890 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1904 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1914 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1937 Ordnance Survey 1:2500

1954 Ordnance Survey 1:1250 SP 0686 SW



Fig.1

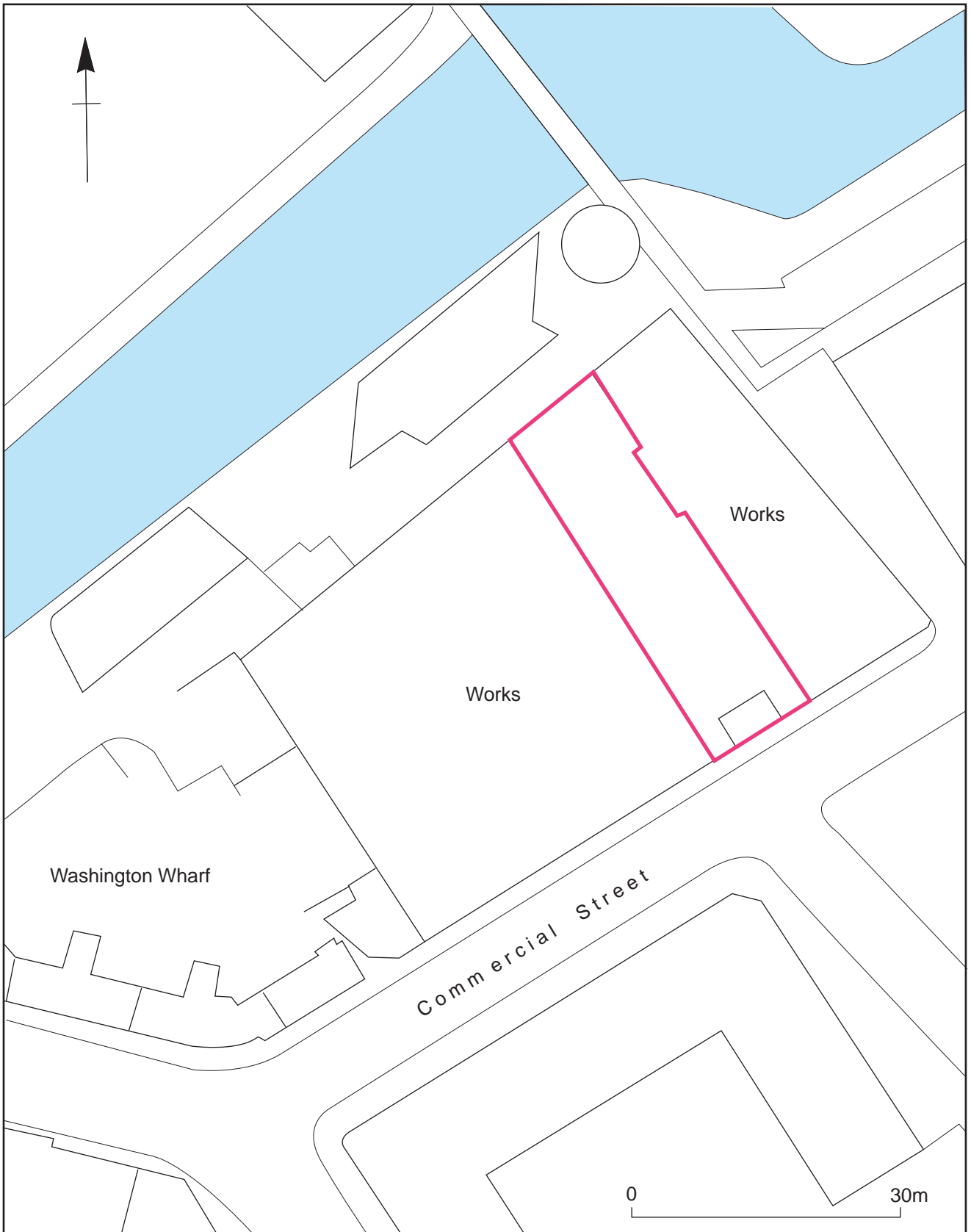


Fig.2

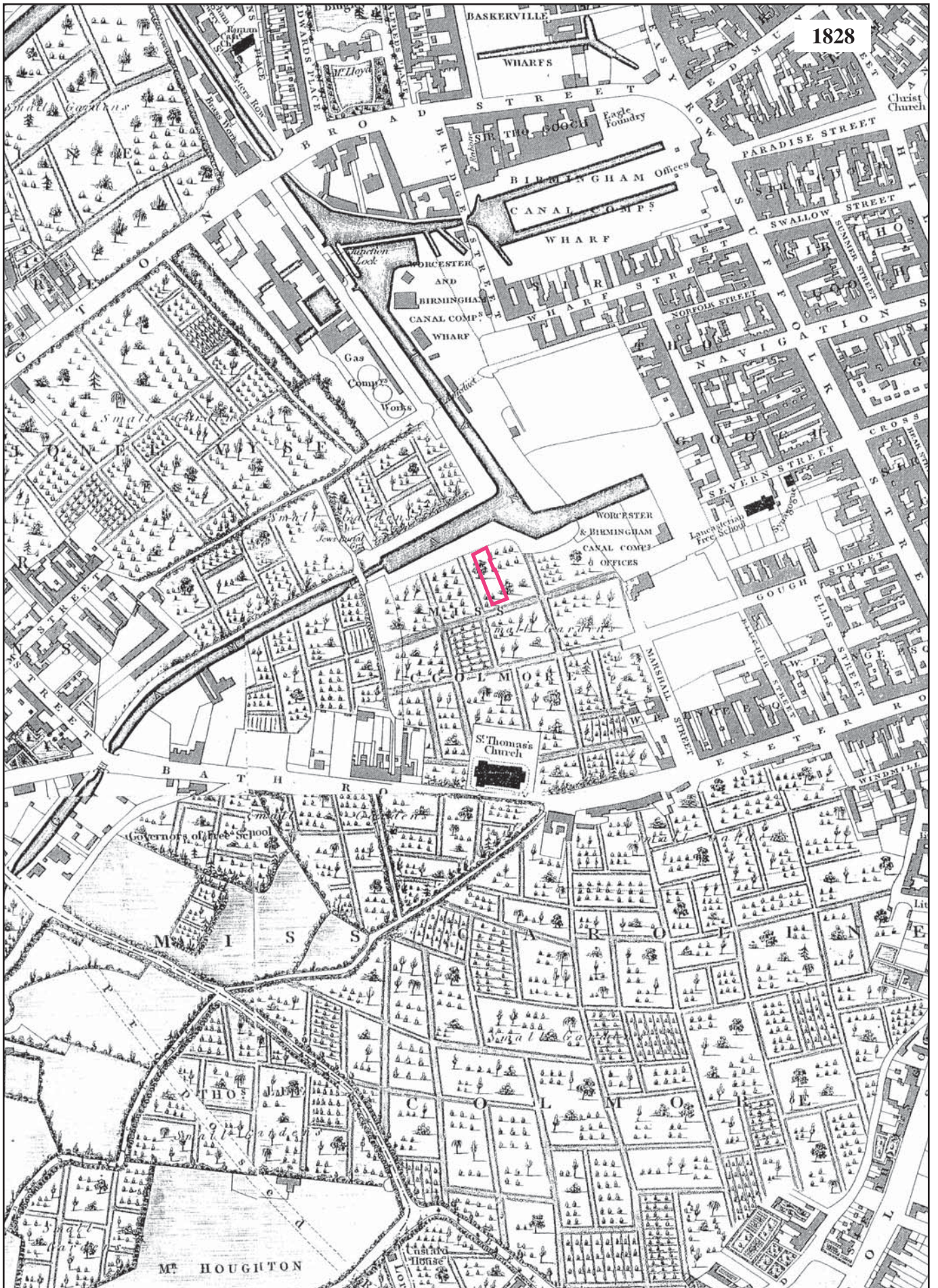


Fig.3

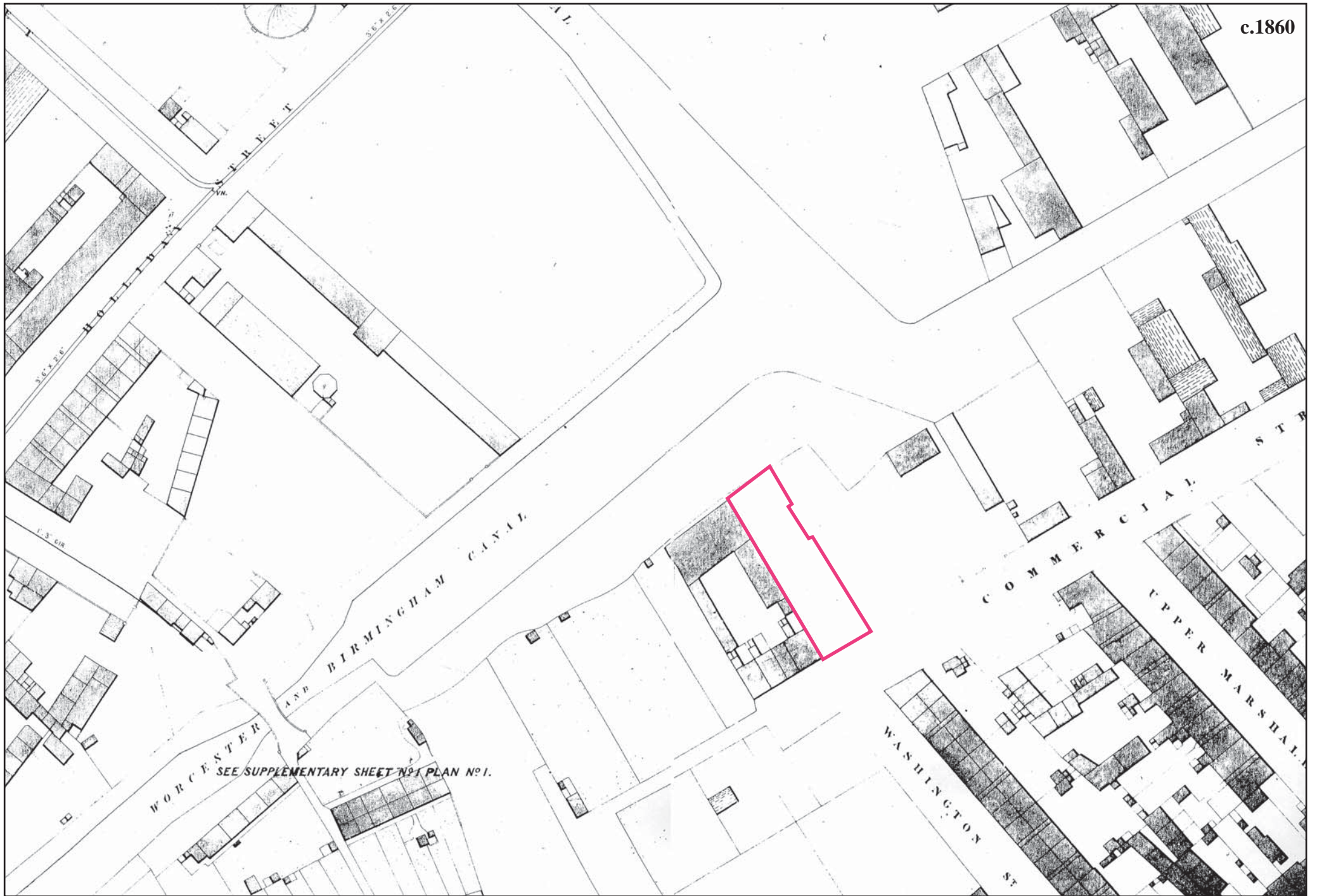


Fig.4

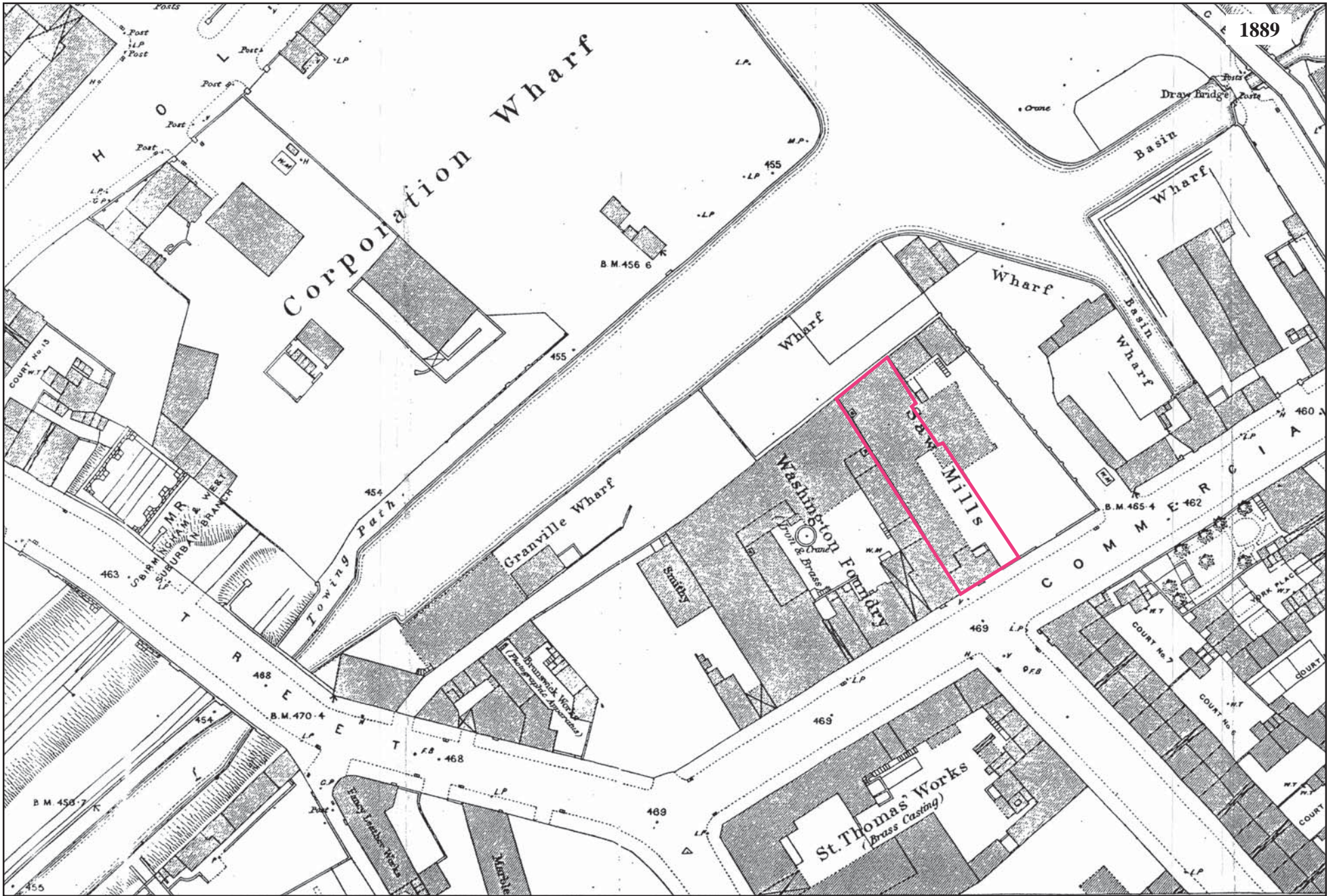
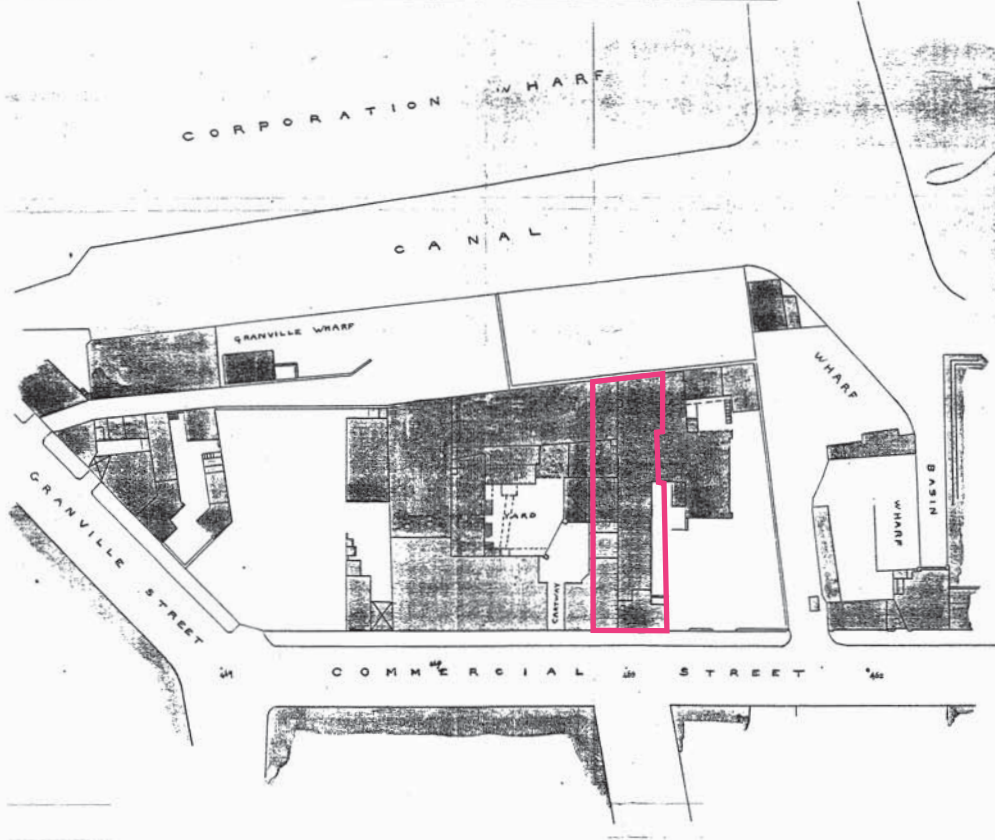


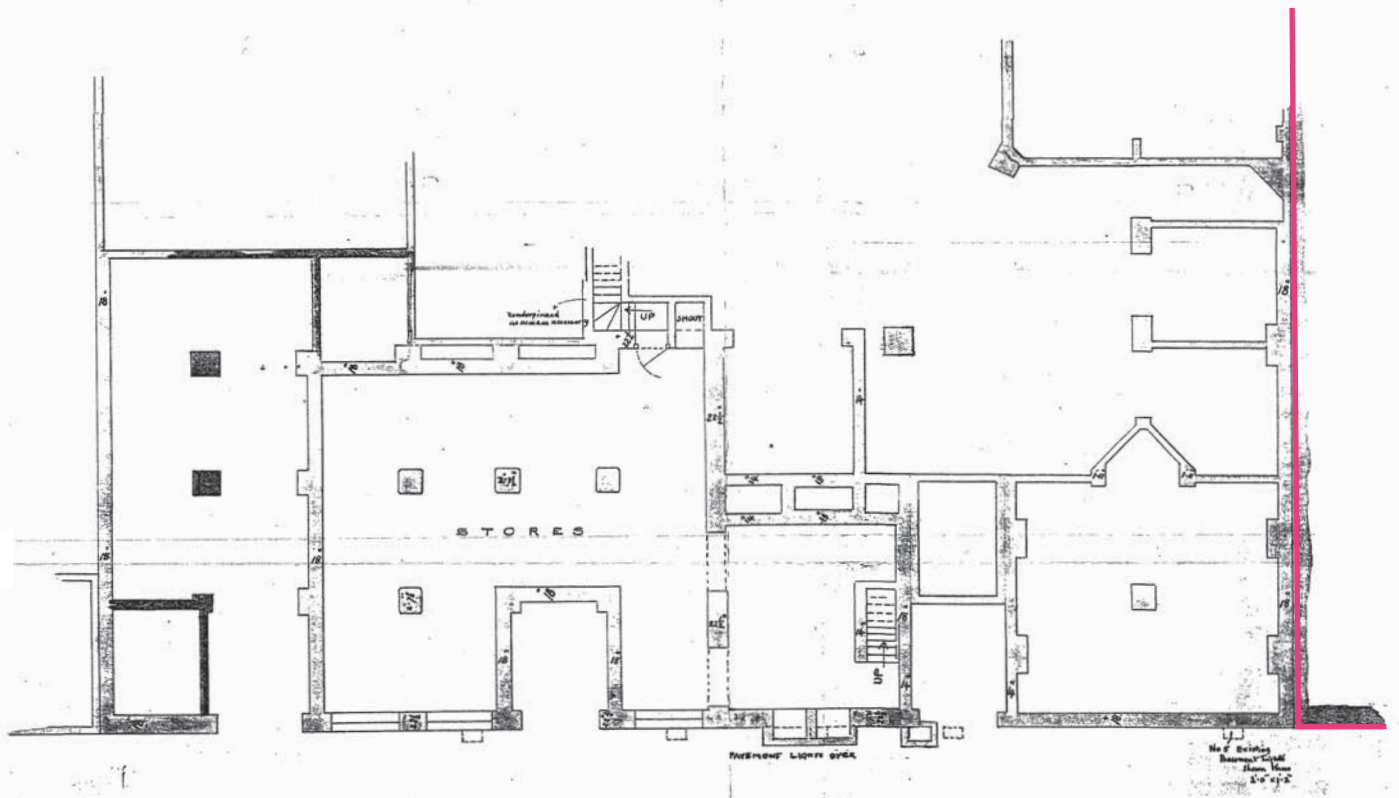
Fig.5

THE BIRMINGHAM ADAMANT CO. LIMITED.
COMMERCIAL STREET. BIRMINGHAM.

Nº1.



BLOCK PLAN
SCALE 41.66 FEET = 1 INCH



BASEMENT PLAN.
SCALE 8 FEET = 1 INCH

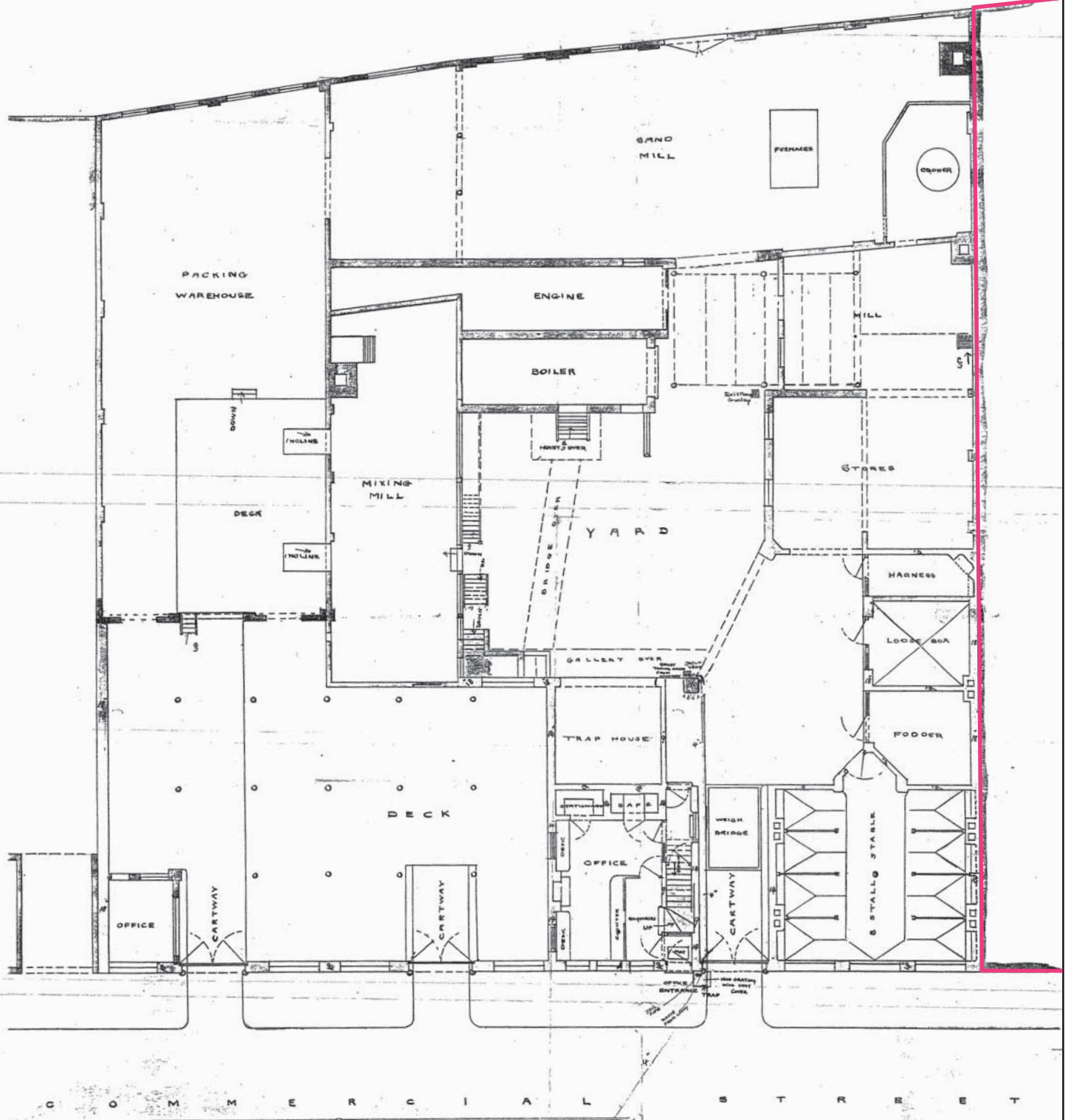
MAY 1857

Fig.6

SCALE OF 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 FEET

WHARF

John P. ...



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Fig.7

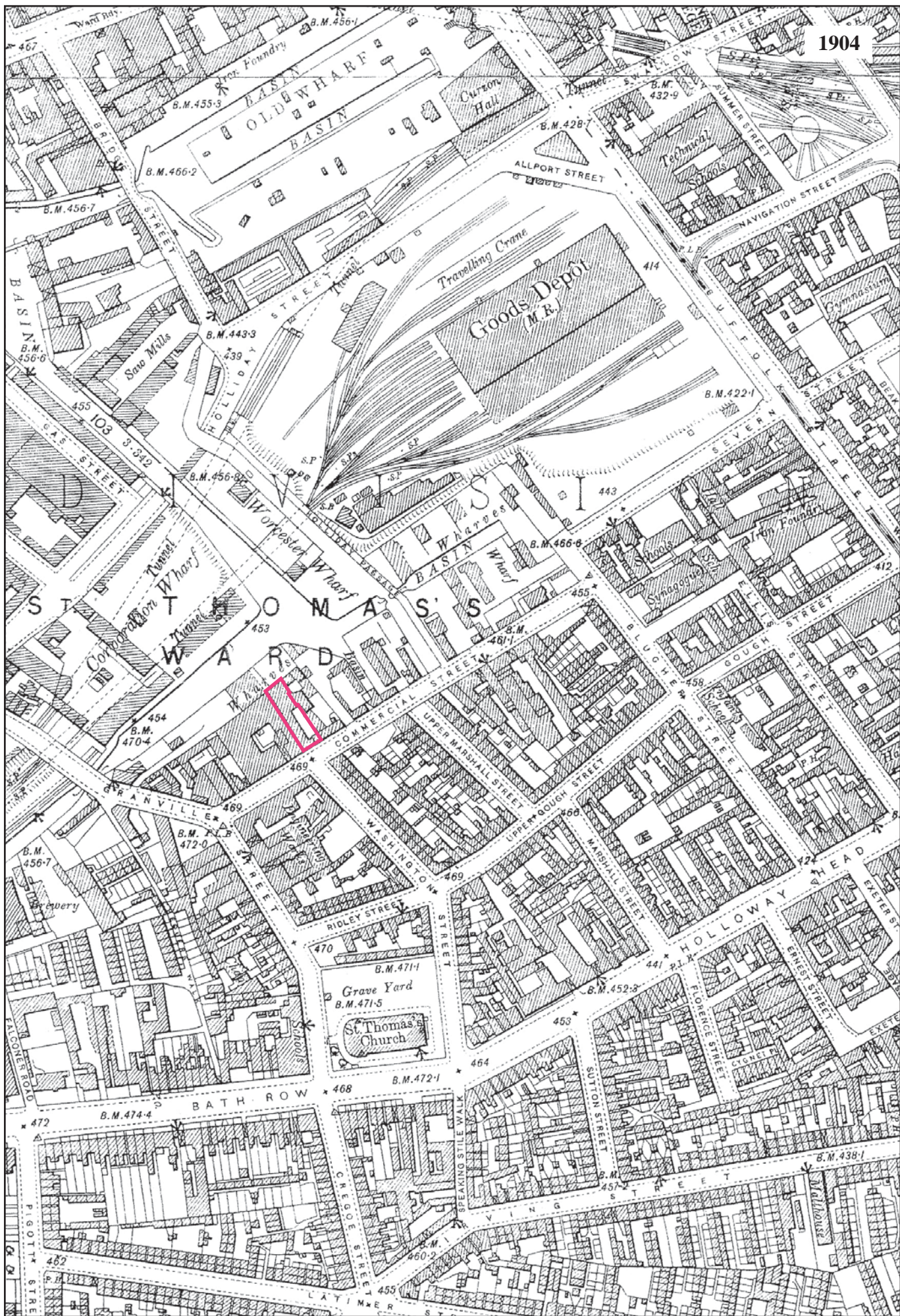


Fig.8

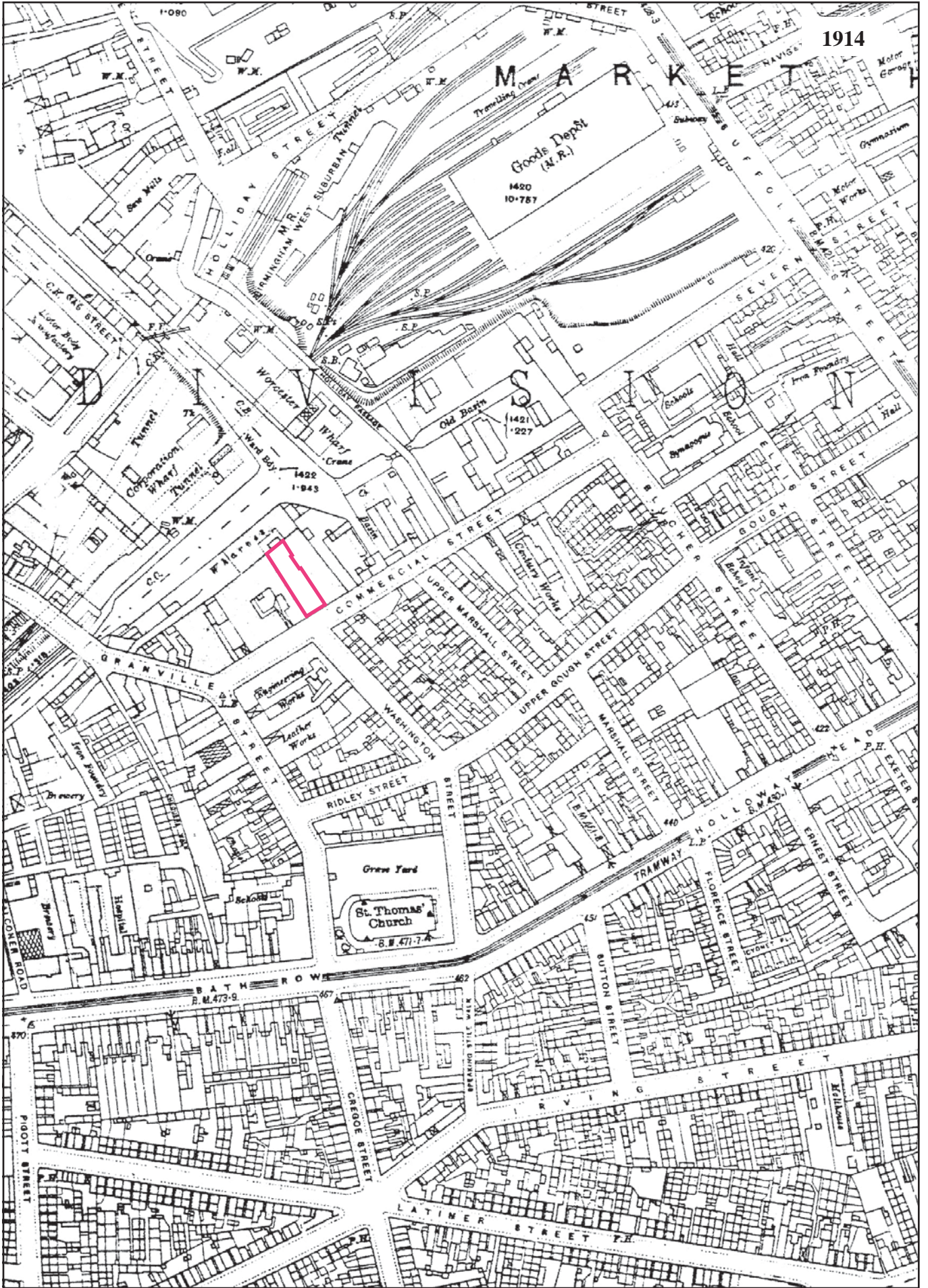


Fig.9

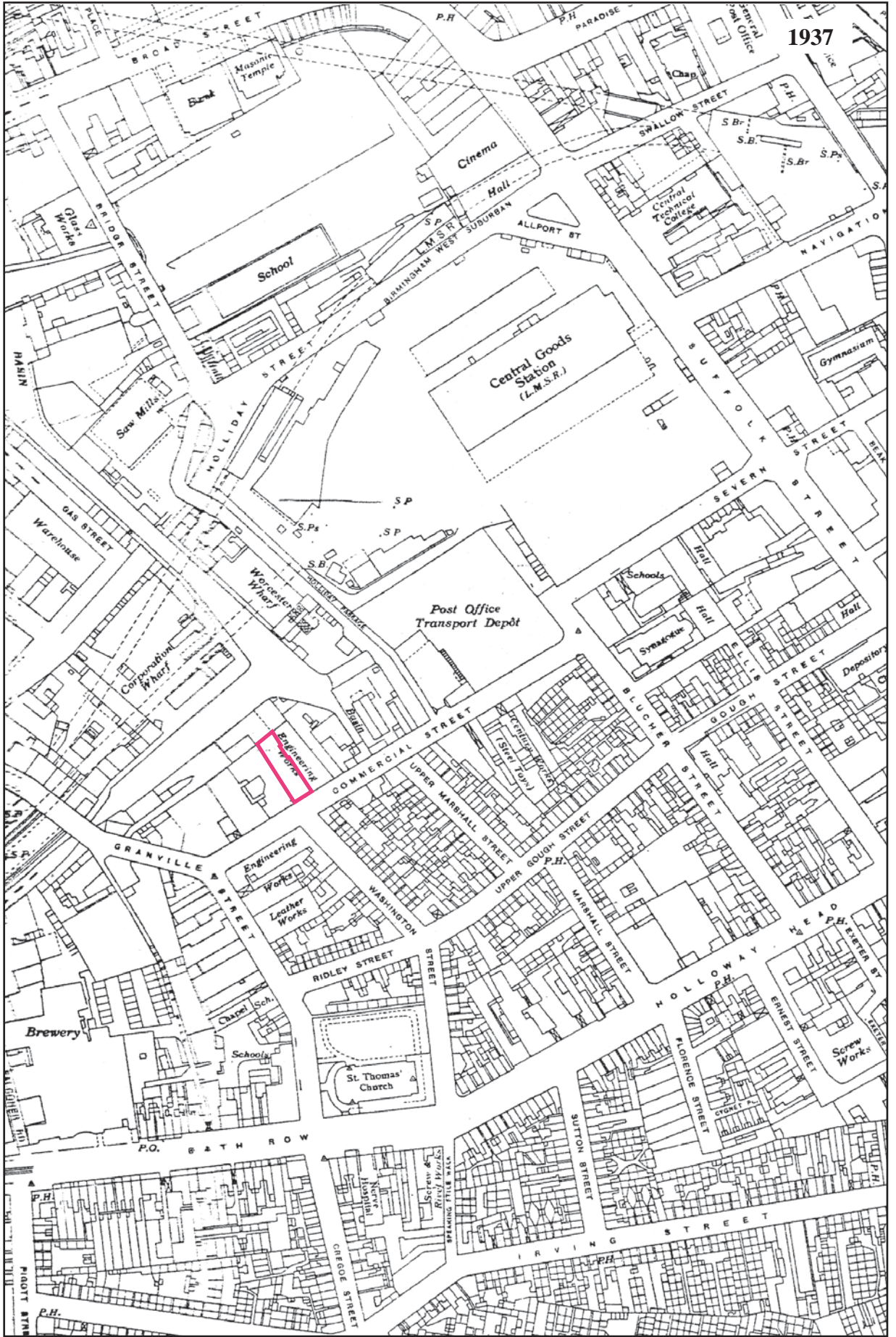


Fig.10

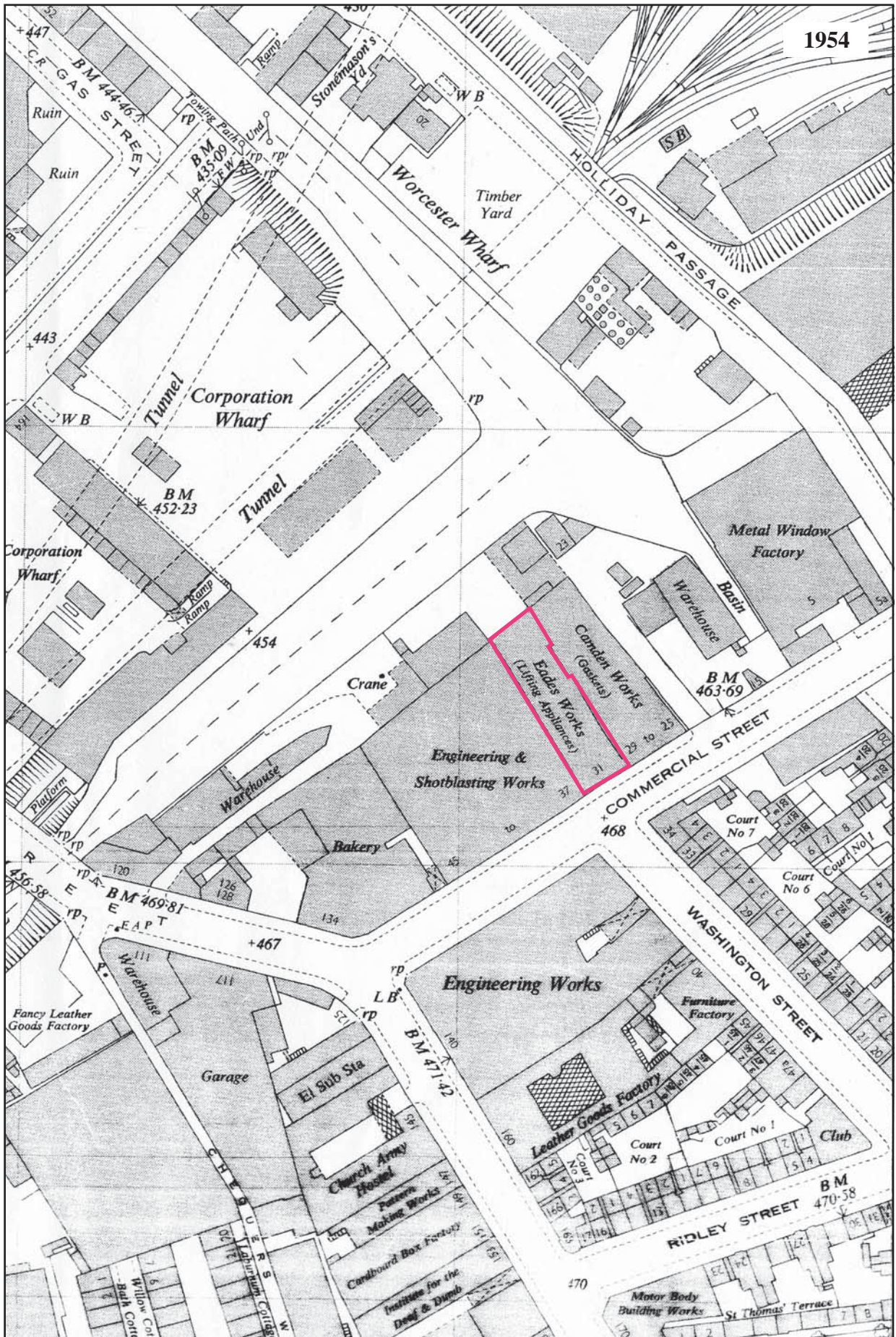


Fig.11



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4