

# **birmingham archaeology**



**THE UNIVERSITY  
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**Shannon's Mill, Walsall  
Archaeological Assessment  
Supplement**



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**Shannon's Mill, Walsall**  
**Archaeological Assessment Supplement**  
**2003**

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## Contents

	Page
Summary	1
1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Location of Study Area	1
3.0 Objectives	2
4.0 Method	2
5.0 Geology and Topography	2
6.0 Present Character	2
7.0 Archaeological and Historical Background	3
8.0 Conclusions	5
9.0 Provisional Recommendations	6
10.0 Acknowledgements	6
11.0 References	6
Appendix I	
List of Sources	

### List of figures

Fig. 1	Location Plan
Fig. 2	Study Area
Fig. 3	1763 Map of Walsall (from Lewis and Woods 1987)
Fig. 4	Ordnance Survey 1 <sup>st</sup> Edition 1886
Fig. 5	Ordnance Survey 2 <sup>nd</sup> Edition 1912
Fig. 6	Ordnance Survey 3 <sup>rd</sup> Edition 1930
Fig. 7	Ordnance Survey 4 <sup>th</sup> Edition 1963

List of Plates

- Plate 1 High Street and Market House 1845 (from Lewis and Woods 1987)  
Plate 2 High Street 1861 (from Lewis and Woods 1987)

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## **Summary**

*A desk-based assessment was conducted on land either side of the top end of the High Street, Walsall centred on Shannon's Mill in Walsall town centre (NGR SP 0135 9825). The work was undertaken as a supplement to a previous desk-based assessment conducted on adjacent areas, and was carried out in September 2003 by Birmingham Archaeology in advance of a retail development by Norton and Proffitt Developments Limited. The development potentially affects a significant proportion of the urban core of medieval Walsall and presents a valuable opportunity to expand our knowledge of the town prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

*The study area has been highlighted as having the potential for being one of the earliest areas of occupation and activity of medieval Walsall. Below ground archaeology may survive beneath the High Street itself, and the car park located to the north of the High Street adjacent to Upper Rushall Road. Any archaeological remains encountered within these areas have the potential to answer important questions concerning the medieval planning and layout of the historic town centre, and to add to our knowledge about the specific usage and development of the High Street plots during the medieval and post-medieval periods. The south side of the High Street has been severely truncated by the construction of the modern Sainsbury's building and archaeological remains are unlikely to have survived here.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

This report outlines the findings of an archaeological desk-based assessment of an area supplemental to a previous desk-based assessment centred on Shannon's Mill in Walsall town centre (Conway and Litherland 2001 and Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Brownhill Heyward Brown Architects and was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology in September 2003. The archaeological assessment forms the first part of a staged archaeological response to the development and is a condition of planning permission for the scheme.

## **2.0 Location of Study Area**

The previous study area covered a significant component of the historic core of Walsall town centre, comprising three zones based on established street blocks (Fig 2). This assessment covers an area not included in the original desk-based assessment (Conway and Litherland 2001) that comprises the area now occupied by Sainsburys, a cobbled car park opposite and the top of the High Street between them.

### **3.0 Objectives**

The objectives of this assessment were to identify areas within the additional study area where archaeological deposits relating to the early history of Walsall could be expected to survive. This included the compilation of potential deposit maps and an assessment of the extent to which these deposits may have been damaged or destroyed by later building activity such as cellaring, terracing, and levelling. Once the extent of potential archaeological survival was established, areas requiring further archaeological work were identified and a set of provisional recommendations proposed.

### **4.0 Method**

A site inspection of the study area was carried out and documentary research on primary and secondary records and maps (Appendix I) held by Birmingham Archaeology, the Walsall Local Studies Centre and the University of Birmingham Library was undertaken. The Black Country Sites and Monuments Record had previously been consulted and only sites relevant to this assessment have been included in this report.

### **5.0 Geology and Topography**

Walsall town centre straddles a shallow stream valley which runs north-east – south-west. A large outcrop of limestone known as Church Hill dominates the south side of the valley. The study area is located immediately to the west of Church Hill and comprises land either side of the High Street. The geology on which the town sits is highly varied, ranging from sands and gravels at the bottom of the valley (including Digbeth), clays and clay subsoils on the sides of Church Hill (including Dudley Street and Ablewell Street) to limestone bedrock on the summit of Church Hill (Baker 1989, 9).

### **6.0 Present Character**

The present character of the Study Area as a whole has been discussed in detail, and will therefore not be repeated here.

The modern Sainsburys building has been cut into the natural slope, Peal Street is significantly higher than the base of Sainsburys and the car park to the west, and the majority of the slope along the High Street has also been cut away. Where the base of the lower floor of Sainsburys is higher than that of the slope of the High Street, an additional level of small retail units exists beneath the Sainsburys building to the north-west, again cutting into the natural slope. The top of the High Street approaching Peal Street and Upper Rushall Street has been pedestrianised, with access denied to vehicles from the east by the use of steps and barriers. Early photographs and sketches demonstrate that this end of the High Street was previously one continuous slope up towards the church steps, Upper Rushall Street and Peal Street. Comparisons of known levels and maps suggest that this landscaping is a relatively

late occurrence, and that to create the steps, the level of the High Street in this area has been reduced. The extent of the reduction is, however, less than one metre deep.

Cartographic evidence also reveals that Peal Street has been realigned and widened. The car park, located at the corner of the High Street and Upper Rushall Street, was created following the demolition of properties that included 15-21 High Street, the Roebuck Inn, as well as other properties along Upper Rushall Street. The car park itself sloped downwards to the west, following the slope of the High Street at a similar level. The properties adjacent to the car park, 13-14 High Street (SMR 1569), are Grade II listed buildings dating to the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century with 19<sup>th</sup> century shop fronts and are still utilised as retail properties. Enquiries within the shops confirmed they possessed cellars. The floor level of these buildings corresponded with the highest point on the slope, suggesting that they had been constructed on a built up terrace, rather than a terrace cut into the natural slope.

## 7.0 Archaeological and Historical Background (Figs. 3, 4, 5 and 6, Plates 1 and 2)

The general history of Walsall and the study area in particular has been discussed in detail previously, and will therefore not be repeated here.

Although there is some evidence of earlier settlement, the granting by the Crown the right to hold a weekly market to William le Rous in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, confirmed Walsall as a medieval market town. The High Street has been suggested as one of the earliest streets in Walsall, and is characteristic of a medieval planned market street, with rectilinear straight-sided properties either side (Baker 1989). Rushall Street is also likely to be another early street, though slightly later than High Street, as is Peal Street. The backplots of the High Street and Peal Street fit together in a dovetail pattern, suggesting that they may in fact be contemporary, though no archaeological evidence has been uncovered yet that can confirm this. There is also little evidence for the size of the original burgage plots, due to later alterations.

A Guildhall was present on the High Street by 1416, presumably on the site still occupied by a later Guildhall (Lewis and Woods 1987,17). In c.1547 Richard Dyngley, Master of the Guild, moved out and the Guildhall became the Town Hall (*ibid*, 24). A market cross or Old High Cross, at the top of the High Street, is known to have existed from 1386 (VCH, Staffs., 17,213; SMR 2653). This was replaced c.1580 by a market cross that had a room above it, which was used as a guildhall. King's plan of Walsall (dating to 1679) refers to the cross but does not pinpoint its location. It also identifies the old Town Hall further down the High Street, this is likely to correspond to the present Guildhall building. In 1691 the market cross was demolished and a new building erected, a half-timbered structure that continued to serve as a market cross and guildhall. This building is shown on a map dating from 1763 (Fig. 3), and Snapes plan of 1782, as being located in the centre of the top of the High Street, directly opposite the steps up to the church. This building was in use until 1734 and stood until 1802 (SMR 2653). Thomas Mason's plan of 1824 demonstrates that the building was indeed no longer present at this time, but also illustrates the presence of a building immediately to the right of the church steps (looking up at the church). A building or buildings in this position are also present on maps dating from 1763 and 1782, though it is unclear whether this was the same

building. An engraving of the High Street from 1845 (looking towards the church, plate 1) also depicts an open galleried building to the right of the church steps labelled the Market House. An engraving dating from 1861 (plate 2) shows that this building was no longer there, but does show the new layout of Church Hill.

The historical and physical evidence demonstrates that this area of the High Street underwent many changes from its beginnings in the early medieval period. Although outside this specific study area the original Guildhall building was renovated and rebuilt several times, and the ownership and usage of the building, from Guildhall to Town Hall, and from inn to prison to shops, changed accordingly. It is likely that the buildings within the study area underwent similar changes.

Although it is known that, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the metal trades in Walsall were firmly established, their location and the distribution of other activities remains unclear (Baker 1989). It has been suggested that the metal trades were concentrated in Rushall Road, Hole End (Peal Street and Dudley Street) and the Church Hill area and the High Street were mainly reserved for 'drapers, mercers, grocers, butchers, lawyers, and innkeepers' (Homeshaw 1960 *cit.* Baker 1989). By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Walsall lornery, the manufacture of saddlers' ironmongery, for which Walsall was to become increasingly famous, had already found more than a purely local market (Lewis and Woods, 1987). These industries, amongst others, became increasingly specialised, and were carried out on a small scale in little workshops (*ibid.*). An early limestone mine, possibly dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was identified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Church Hill (*ibid.*), and extensive caverns were discovered leading off cellars belonging to the old Shakespeare Inn, on the corner of Church Hill and Peal Street, adjacent to the study area. It is possible (though not documented) that this mine continued on the other side of Peal Street within the area of the present day Sainsbury's building.

From the History and Directory of Walsall by Thomas Pearce in 1813 it can be seen that the High Street at this time was still occupied by drapers and other light industrial trades. Although it has not been possible at this stage to chart the progression of specific plots within the study area, the Roebuck Inn was present within the study area, fronting onto Upper Rushall Road by 1818 (Parson and Bradshaw's Directory of Staffordshire) and existed until at least 1912.

By the 1900's the area as a whole was generally falling into disrepair and the clearance of slum housing was underway. Comparison of the Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1886 (Fig. 4) and the Revised Ordnance Survey 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition 1916 (Fig. 5) shows that during this period the triangular area of land formed by Peal Street, Church Hill and Church Street had been cleared (including the Shakespeare Inn). By the 1930's the part of the study area adjacent to Peal Street and Upper Rushall Street had also been cleared (Fig. 6), and by 1963 much of the area now occupied by Sainsbury's had been turned into a car park (Fig. 7). The car park opposite Sainsbury's was also in existence by this time.



## 8.0 Conclusions

The supplemental study area assessed by this report has been highlighted as possibly one of the earliest areas of occupation and activity of medieval Walsall. Although a convincing model for the physical development of medieval and early post-medieval Walsall exists, as yet very little corroborative archaeological evidence for this model has been found. Therefore, the current development represents a valuable opportunity to test this model and increase our knowledge of this important period. Any archaeological deposits that survive in the area would be invaluable to the understanding of the early development of the town. In common with most urban archaeological sites it may be anticipated that preserved archaeological deposits within the development area will be localised, surviving as 'islands' between areas of later disturbance from cellars and foundations. These deposits are most likely to survive in areas previously occupied by the backplots of the medieval tenements. Previous excavations of such backplots have usually produced evidence for pitting and rubbish disposal associated with the occupation of the adjacent houses, and frequently produced evidence for small-scale industrial activity.

Within the area now occupied by the Sainsbury's building, adjacent to the High Street and Peal Street, there is likely to be little survival of below ground archaeology relating to previous occupation of the area. This is due to the extensive truncation and terracing of the area prior to the construction of Sainsbury's and associated car park. The proximity of the possible 17<sup>th</sup> century limestone mine on the opposite side of Peal Street should also be borne in mind, and there remains the potential for some archaeological evidence relating to this activity to survive in the area despite severe truncation due to later activity.

Within the area of the top of the High Street itself, the foundations and associated deposits relating to the Old Market Cross may survive beneath the existing road surface. Although there is evidence for some landscaping and truncation at the junction of the High Street, Upper Rushall Street and Peal Street, this in itself is limited. There is also the possibility of earlier roads surviving beneath the present road surface.

In all probability the area of the car park, at the corner of the High Street and Upper Rushall Street, has the highest possibility of containing surviving archaeological deposits as the ground level here appears to have been built up rather than cut away. This area also encompasses backplots from both the High Street and Upper Rushall Street frontages. The slope of the car park also suggests that the only truncation to have occurred in this area would have been from the buildings themselves rather than from later landscaping. The importance of any surviving archaeological deposits from all periods in this area should be underestimated. Significant questions concerning the size of the original burgage plots, the date of, and the relationship between, the High Street and Upper Rushall Street road layouts may be answered. A better understanding of the specific use of individual plots during the medieval and post-medieval periods could also be obtained. It is also possible that the remains of deeply cut features such as cellars and wells, dating to the medieval period, may survive even if later disturbance is substantial.

## 9.0 Provisional Recommendations

Recommendations concerning the area as a whole have been suggested in the original desk-based assessment and will therefore not be repeated here.

In relation to this specific study area, further work that may be conducted could include:

- Monitoring of geotechnical works in the area presently occupied by Sainsbury's in order to identify any remains associated with the limestone mine.
- Trial excavation on the High Street and within the car park area to assess the preservation of below ground remains.
- Further desk-based research assessing the deeds and documents concerning properties on the High Street, Upper Rushall Street and Peal Street to try and identify individual plots, ownership and usage.

## 10.0 Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by Brownhill Heyward Brown. Thanks are due to the staff of the Walsall Local Studies Centre for their help in the compilation of this report. The site inspection was conducted by Eleanor Ramsey who wrote this report. The report was edited by Steve Litherland, who managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology. The figures were produced by John Halsted.

## 11.0 References

Baker, N. J. 1989 *The archaeology of Walsall* BUFAU Report No. 97

Conway, C. and Litherland, S. Shannon's Mill, Walsall: Stage 1 Archaeological Assessment BUFAU Report No. 801

IFA 1999 *Standards and guidance for archaeological desk-based assessments*

Lewis, M. and Woods, D. 1987 *The Book of Walsall*

VCH 1976 *The Victoria County History of Staffordshire* Vol. XVII, University of London

## APPENDIX I

### Primary Sources

Thos. Pearce The History and Directory of Walsall 1813

Parson and Bradshaws directory of Staffordshire 1818

Pigot and Co.'s Directory 1835

Slaters directory of Staffordshire 1849

Whites directory of Staffordshire 1855

Kelly's Post Office Directory of Staffordshire 1868

### Cartographic Sources

1679 Gregory King's Plan of Walsall (50 poles to an inch)

1763 Walsall Town Centre (from Lewis and Woods 1987)

1782 Map of Central Walsall by John Snape

1824 Thomas Mason's plan of Walsall

1886 Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (1:500)

1903 Ordnance Survey 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (1:2500), and subsequent editions of 1916, 1930  
and

1963.



Fig.1

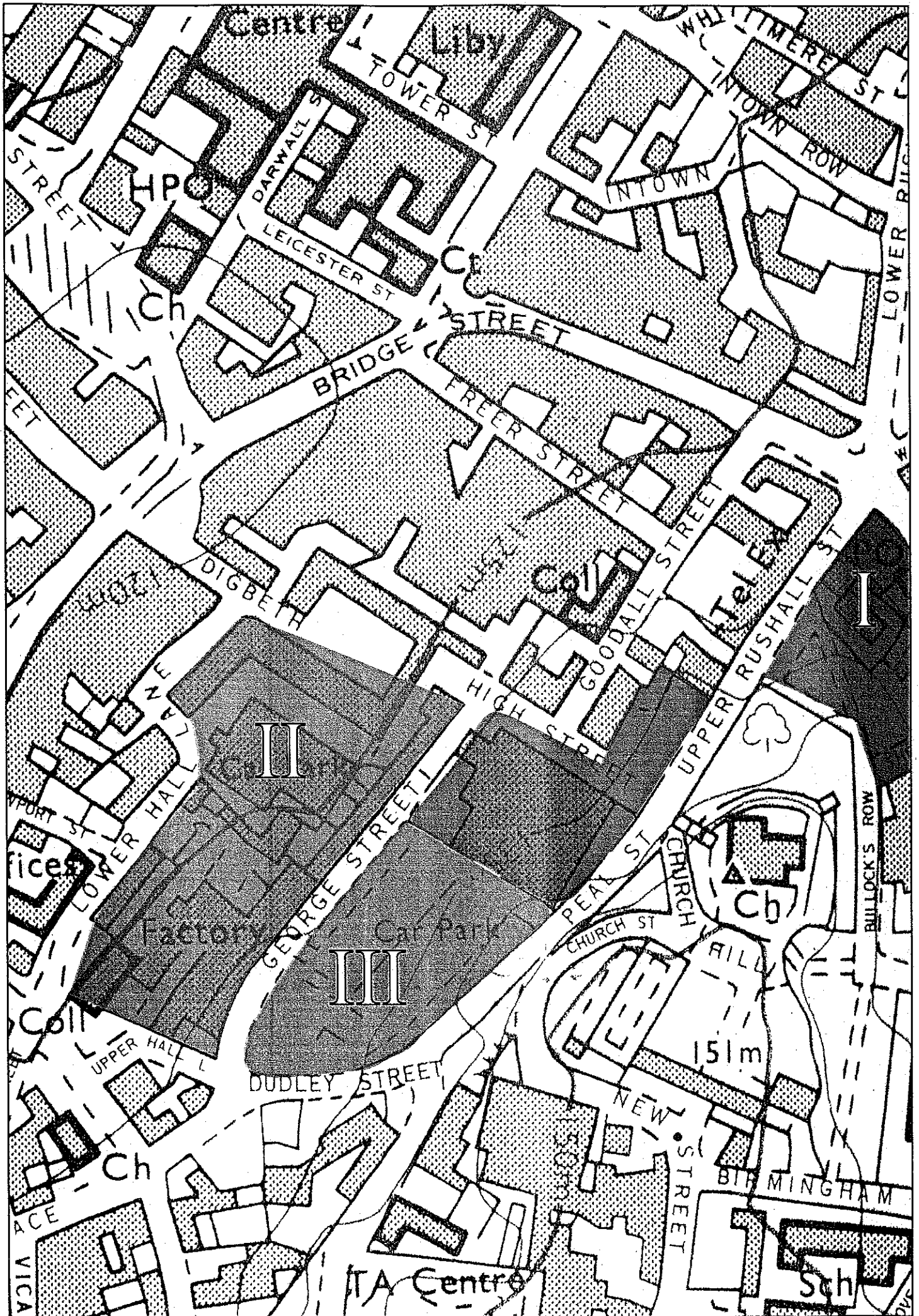


Fig.2



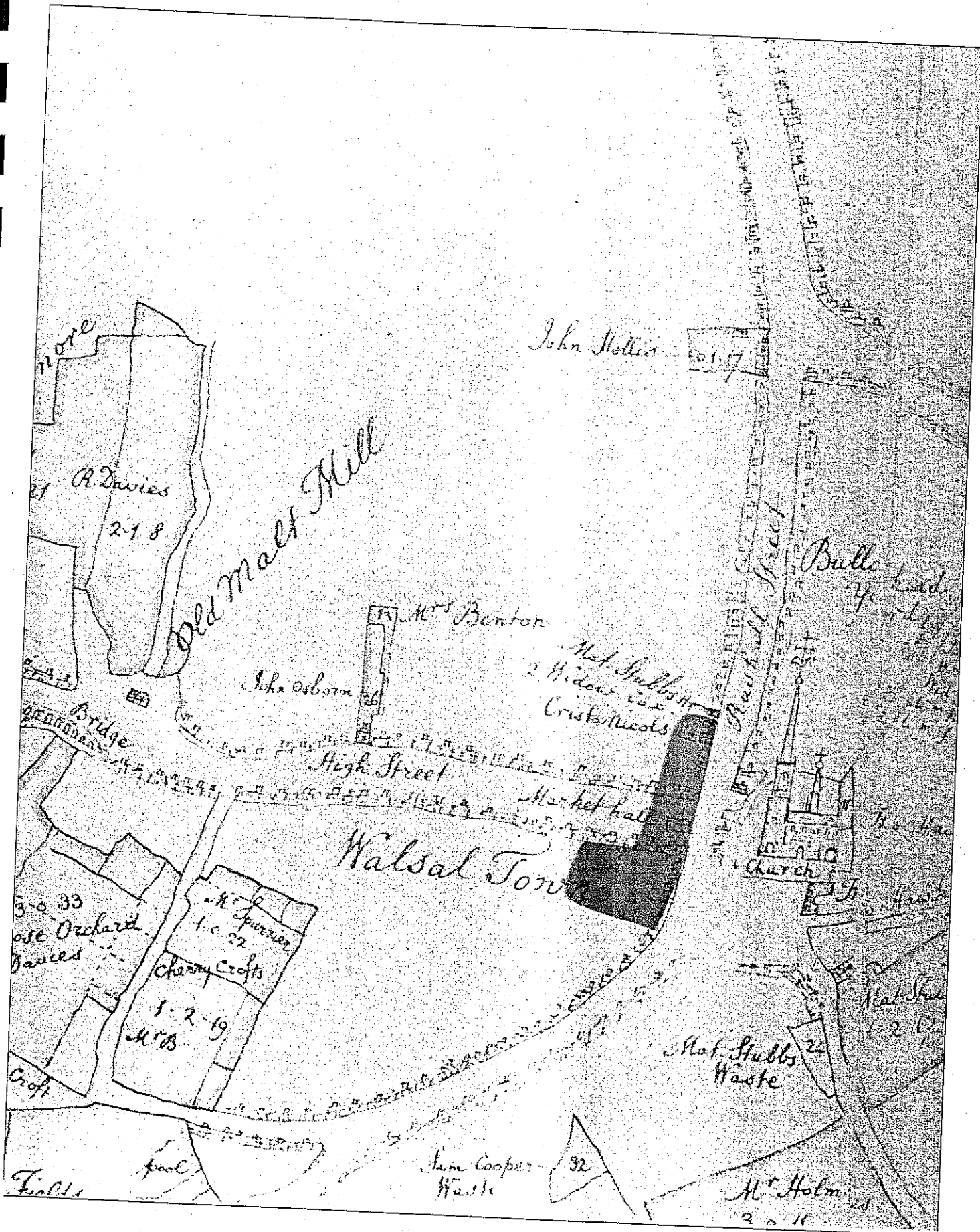


Fig.3

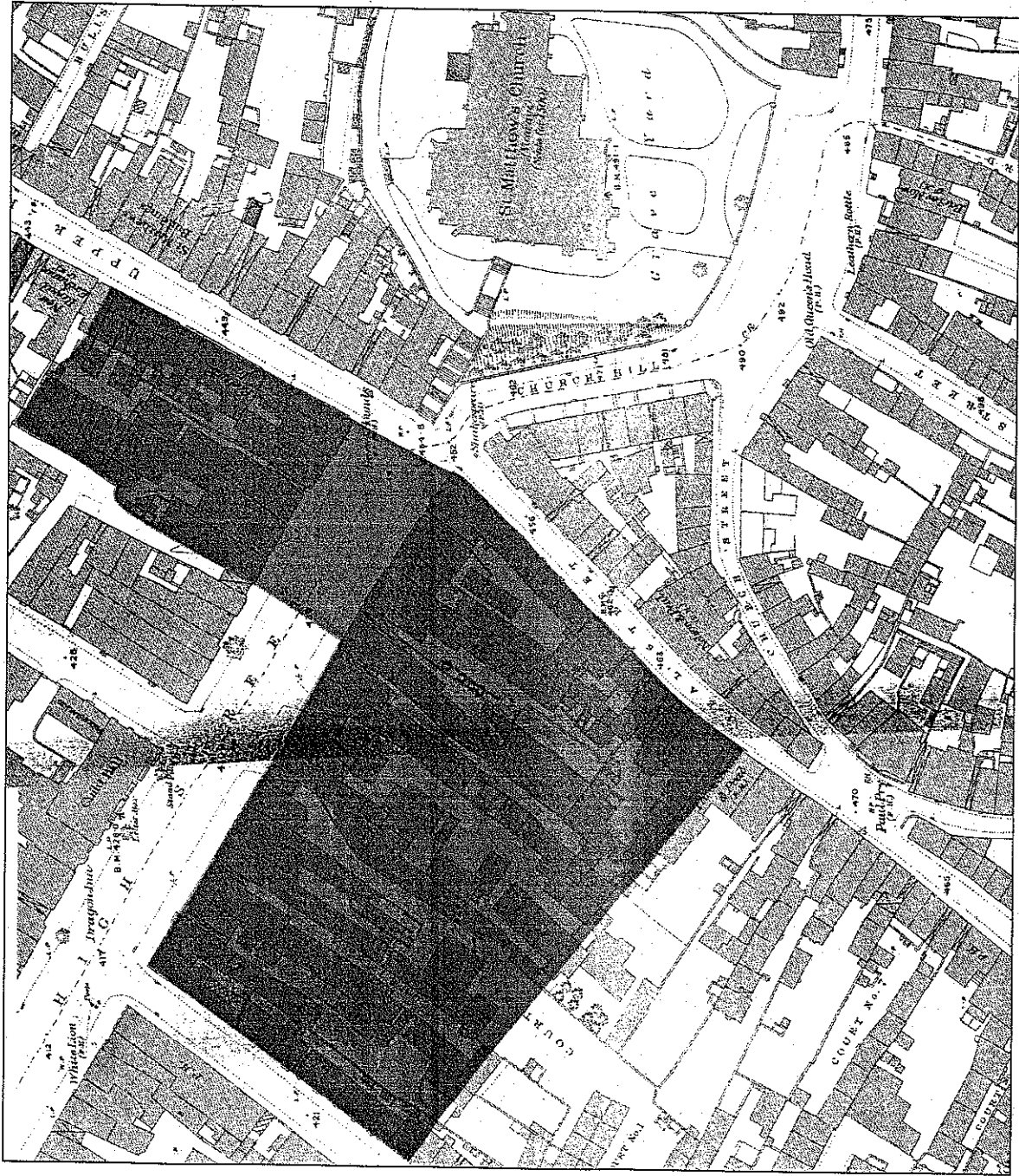


Fig.4

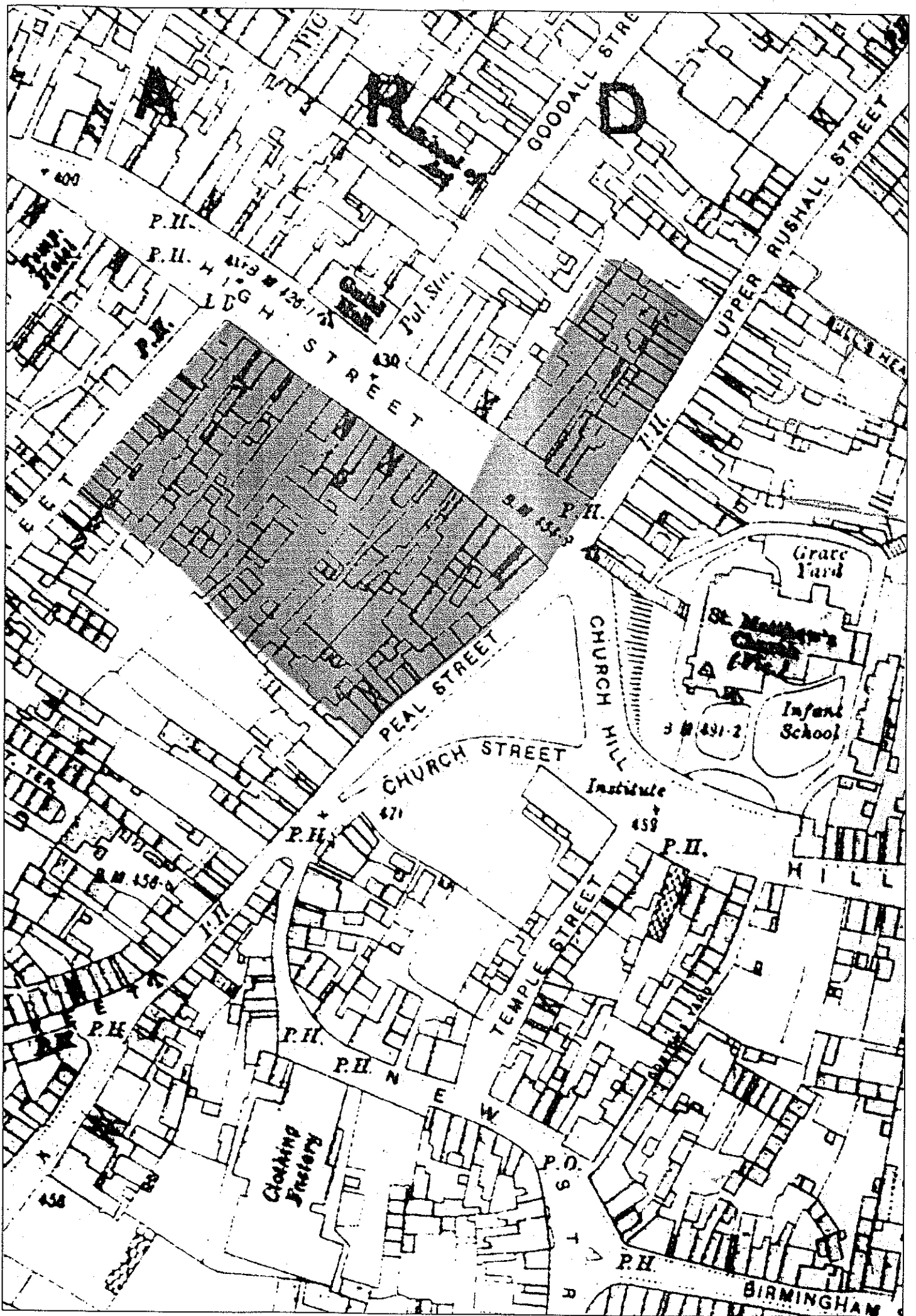


Fig.5



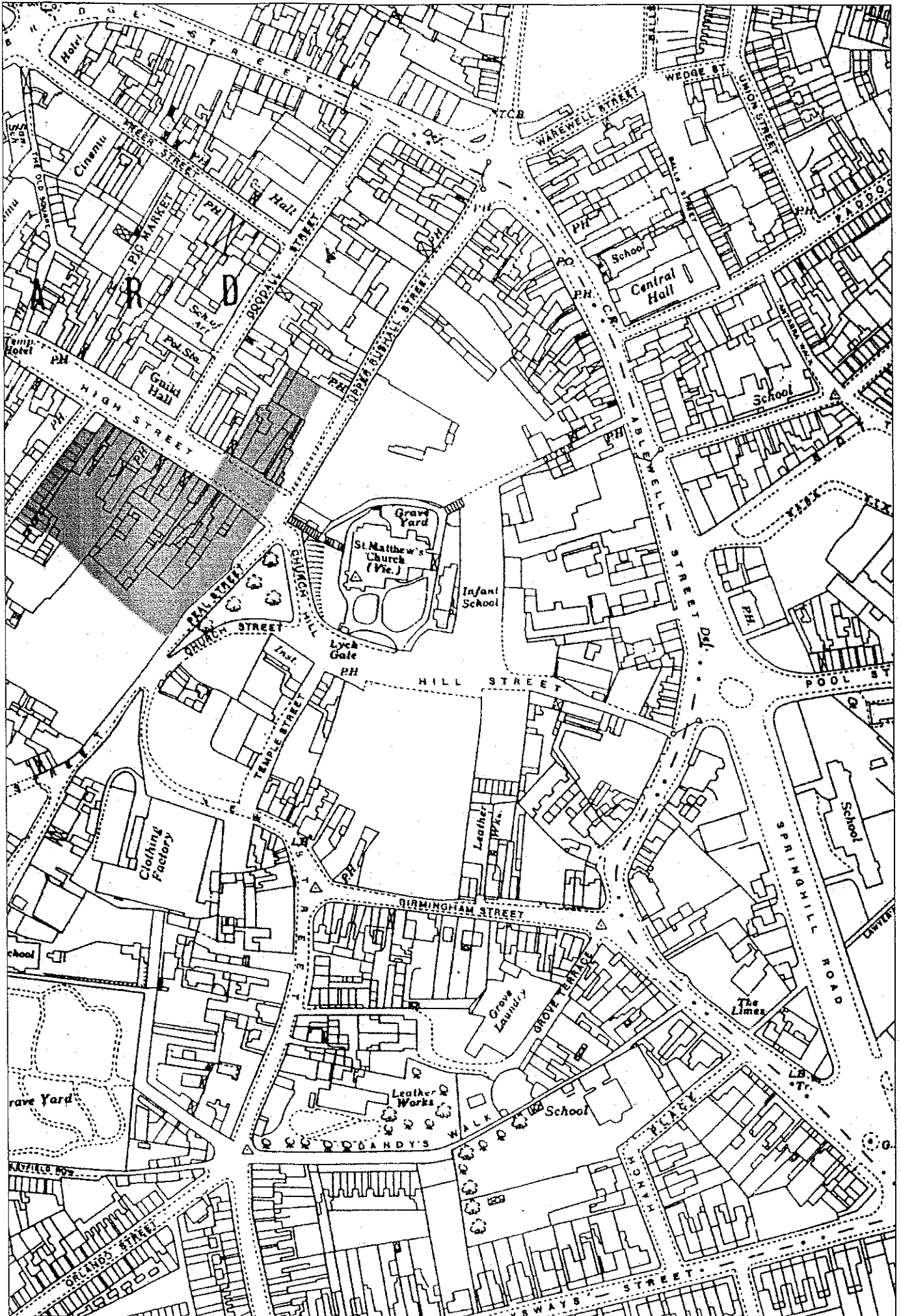


Fig.6

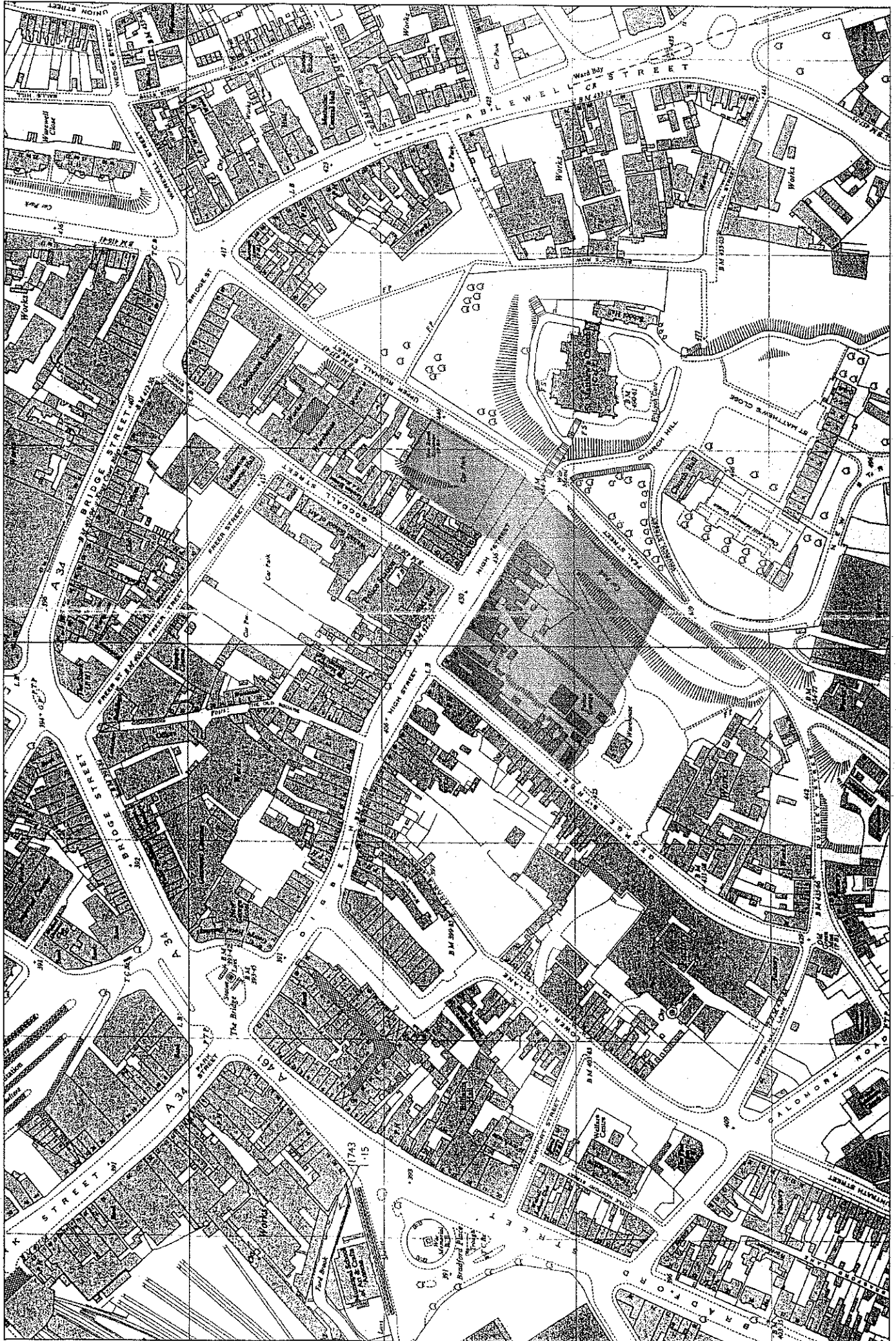


Fig.7

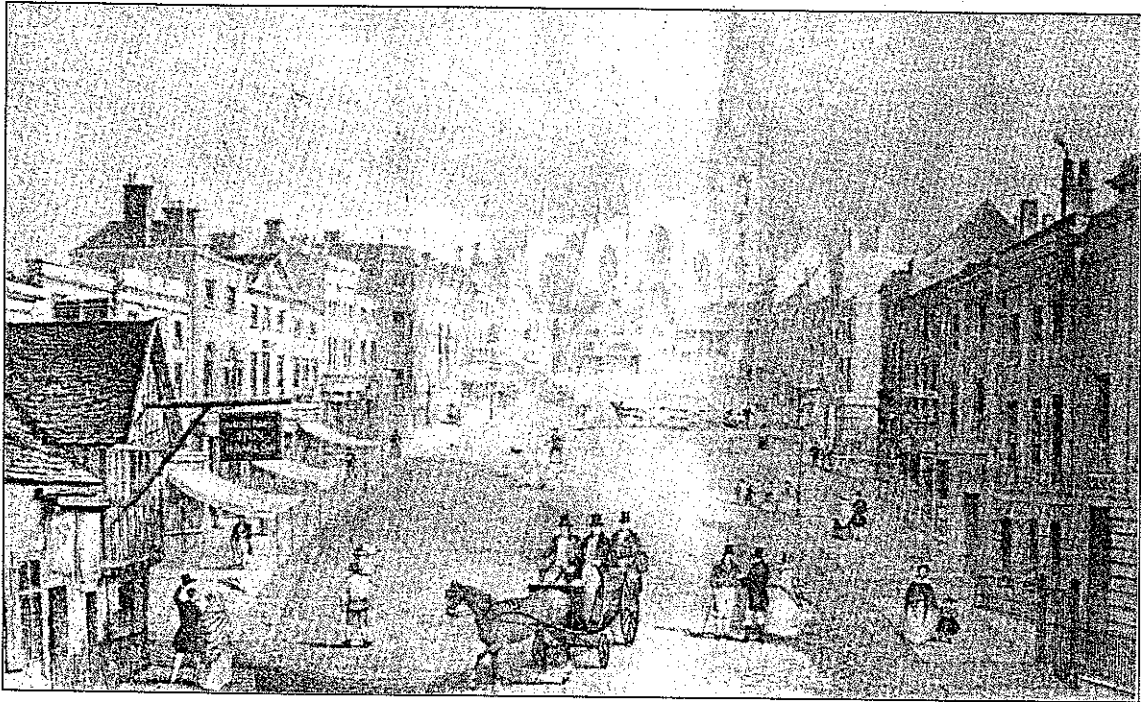


Plate 1



Plate 2