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Archaeological Investigations 2004



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**14-18 High Street, Sutton Coldfield,
Birmingham**

Archaeological Investigations 2004

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SUMMARY

An archaeological investigation was carried out in March 2004 in advance of the construction of flats to the rear of 14-18 High Street, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 1215 9641). The work was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology for Portland Properties Ltd. The area excavated was to the rear of The Bank, 14-18 High Street; a 1900 Grade II listed building. Limited archaeological evidence for occupation in the medieval period was located during the investigations. The majority of the activity identified related to the 19th century, when the site was subject to a substantial raising of ground level associated with the construction of outbuildings to the rear of the High Street frontage.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the results of an open area excavation of land to the rear of 14-18 High Street, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham (centered on NGR SP 12159641, hereafter the site, Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Portland Properties Ltd., and was undertaken in March 2004 by Birmingham Archaeology. The excavation was undertaken in an area to the rear of 14-18 High Street within a former car park adjacent to Midland Drive (Fig. 2). The archaeological fieldwork was undertaken in advance of development in accordance with Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG 16, Department of the Environment, November 1990), and Policy 8.36 of the Unitary Development Plan of Birmingham City Council. The fieldwork conformed to the requirements of Design Brief (Birmingham City Council 2004) and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2004) approved by Birmingham City Council.

2 TOPOGRAPHICAL AND GEOLOGICAL SETTING

The site was located in Sutton Coldfield Town Centre, approximately 9km to the northeast of the centre of Birmingham (Fig. 1). The site was set back from the junction of Midland Drive and High Street in a parcel of land to the rear of the street frontage of 14-18 High Street (Fig. 2). The site lay on a ridge of land running north-south, and continuing southward towards Birmingham. The land to the east sloped gradually downwards, but to the west it sloped more dramatically down the line of Mill Street to the valley of Plant's Brook. The ridge is formed by the underlying geology of Keuper Sandstone falling away to a mix of Keuper Marls and Arden Sandstones to the east and Bunter Pebble Beds to the west. There was a general trend of overlying glacial drift deposits within the area which is likely to be less deep and pronounced on the exposed ridge (Lea 2003, 3).

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site was located within the medieval town centre of Sutton Coldfield, north of Holy Trinity Church. The town of Sutton Coldfield had been part of the manor of Sutton since the time of Edward the Confessor and had changed hands between the crown and various members of the aristocracy over the succeeding 500 years. It eventually became incorporated in 1528, becoming the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield. A market had existed in the town by Royal decree since 1300 and this appears to have been the economic mainstay of the town throughout the medieval period (VCH 1969, 233-236).

The buildings that line High Street and Coleshill Street in the vicinity of the site date predominantly to the 18th and 19th century, but behind the street frontages there may be potential for the survival of earlier structures. Increased transport links in the early to mid 19th century, and the economic migration associated with industrialisation led to the growth of Sutton Coldfield. The roads were turnpiked in 1807, and by 1817 Mill Street had been established. The arrival of the railway in 1862 had the greatest effect on the town, changing it from an economy based predominantly on agriculture to industry. A second railway line located to the northeast of the site was established by 1879, largely for goods transport (Lea 2003, 117-126).

Archaeological fieldwork associated with development within the surrounds of the site has been limited due to the establishment of High Street and Coleshill Street as a conservation area in 1973. Archaeological work has been limited to examination in small plot areas. These revealed the remains of a 13th to 14th century oven on Coleshill Street/Rectory Road. Work between Mill Street and Reddicroft revealed evidence of possible structures on the Mill Street frontage (Jones 1989).

4 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY (FIG. 2)

4.1 Aims

The general aim of the archaeological investigations was to record all surviving archaeological deposits that would be disturbed by the proposed development.

The specific aims of the archaeological excavation were to:

- establish the presence or absence of archaeological deposits and features within the site.
- define the nature, extent, significance and date of surviving deposits and features.

4.2 Methodology

All topsoil and modern overburden was removed using a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket, working under archaeological supervision to expose the uppermost surviving archaeological horizon. The 19th century floor and wall surfaces encountered were recorded, surveyed and photographed prior to their removal. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was done by hand. Spoil from machine excavation was removed from site.

The northern and southern boundaries of the site were defined by the pavement alongside Midland Drive and the raised pillared extension to the rear of 14-18 High Street to the north. The area of excavation was stepped in from the surrounding walls for safety, and in places the edges of the excavated area were battered at an angle of 45 degrees for additional stability.

The site was excavated in three areas (A, B, and C, Figs. 3-4) separated by a service trench running from the southeast corner of the site to the northwest, before turning to the west (F110). The largest area, Area A (Plate 6 and 7), located in the southwest was excavated to a depth of 125.99m AOD. Area B (Plate 5) was initially excavated to a depth of 126.78m AOD and was later extended. It was further tested by a 1.5m square, machine-dug sondage dug to a depth of 125.78m AOD. Area B was excavated to a depth of 125.64m AOD. Area C (Plate 4) was in the northwest of the site. The general slope of the original ground level ran south to north from a height of 128.01m AOD at the street level to 126.97m AOD at the northern extent of excavation.

All deposits were sample excavated in order to understand their stratigraphic relationships. All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned, and sections were drawn through all features and stratified deposits. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Monochrome and colour slide photography supplemented written records and scale plans. Finds were washed, marked, bagged and conserved, as appropriate. These records comprise part of the site archive.

A monitoring visit was arranged during the fieldwork at which it was established that the development would not penetrate the medieval horizon identified, and, accordingly no further hand-excavation was undertaken.

5 RESULTS (FIGS. 3-5, PLATES 1-4)

The site was excavated to a depth of approximately 2m below the present road level to expose a layer of mid-dark brown-red silt-sand natural subsoil (1003, Fig. 5). Within Area A (Fig 4, Plate 4), this layer was truncated by three features. One was an irregular pit (F100). The second (F102) was a vertically-sided foundation trench, with a maximum width of 0.70m, and maximum depth 0.52m. This ran east-west. The third feature, a large post-medieval pit (F101), with a maximum excavated diameter of 1.50m was located to the southwest. This feature was only partly excavated.

In Area B (Figs. 4-5, Plate 4) a layer of cobbles, measuring a maximum extent of 0.8m (east-west) by 0.4m (north-south) overlay the subsoil. The cobbles had a maximum diameter of c. 0.2m. The cobbles were mixed with a light brown sand (1012). This layer contained sherds of medieval Coventry-type ware, dated to the 12-13th century (dating provided by Stephanie Ratkai). Lying adjacent to the cobbles was a mixed rubble layer (1011, not illustrated).

The natural subsoil was overlain by a mixed brown sand-silt garden soil layer (1004, 1005, not illustrated; 1010, Fig. 5), recorded in all three areas, and measuring a maximum depth of c. 0.3m. The majority of the surviving brick walls lay within foundation trenches cut into this layer, or directly overlaid it. An exception was wall F105 which was built directly on top of existing wall foundation F106. The wall foundations formed a series of three roughly contemporary structures (Fig. 3).

Structure 1 (Fig. 4) lay in the east of the area investigated. The southern side of this structure was represented by wall F103 which ran east-west for c. 2m before curving to the north for c. 2.5m. The southern end of north-south aligned wall F109 joined wall F103, forming a right-angle. Wall F109 ran for c. 3.7m, forming the west side of a small court. A later build within this structure was the footings of a chimney base (F111), measuring 1.7m by 1.6m, which abutted wall F109. This wall also formed the eastern side of Structure 2, which was rectangular in plan. The remaining walls of this building were formed by feature F104, a wall which ran for c. 2.5m east-west, before turning north-south for c. 1.8m. Feature F104 was heavily truncated by modern services. Located adjacent to the western edge of excavation were two walls that

formed Structure 3. One (F105) represented a chimney base measuring 1.6m by 1.4m in plan, and overlying brick wall F106. Abutting this and located to the north was the remains of a truncated L-shaped wall (F107), which ran north-south for a distance of 1.3m before turning to the east for 1.3m.

A deep episode of mixed build-up covered the site (1014, 1029, 1030, not illustrated) to a maximum depth of c. 0.9m. Above this layer was a mixed layer of banded coke and sand (1013, not illustrated; 1016), which formed a foundation for the yard surfaces above. The overlying yard surfaces (1015, 1020, 1021, Plate 2; 1022, 1023, Fig 3, Plates 2-3) were of similar construction. Each comprised stretcher bonded hand-made bricks laid on-edge with no mortar. Brick surface 1019 (Plate 1) was an internal yard associated with Structure 1. Surfaces 1020 and 1021 (Plate 2) were internal yards associated with Structure 2. Surface 1022 was probably associated with Structure 3. Later yard surface 1023, made of machine-cut bricks on-side was probably not associated with this structure. The level of the yard surfaces were c. 126.80 AOD, approximately 1.2m below street level. In Area C the floor level (1015, Plate 2) was lower (c. 126.50 AOD). Wall F103 curved around to a series of two steps at the southern end of Structure 1, leading in the direction of Midland Drive. The walled structures, floor surfaces and the intermediate build-up layers appeared to be broadly contemporary.

A post-demolition layer (1002) of mixed black-brown silt and rubble covered the whole area of excavation to a maximum depth of c. 0.8m. A layer of imported red sand (1001) acted as a bedding layer for the metalled tarmac ground surface (1000).

6 DISCUSSION

The earliest encountered deposits suggest limited medieval activity (1002) had survived at a depth of c. 2.4m below the present street level. Even at this depth the majority of activity was associated with the post-medieval period.

The majority of activity identified by excavation may be dated to the 19th century. The cartographic evidence from the late-18th century suggests development occurred in a linear form along the street frontage of the High Street (Snape 1765). There is no evidence of Midland Drive on the Corn Rent Map of 1824 (Fig. 6) and it is not depicted until the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1889 (Fig. 7). The 19th century buildings encountered during these investigations correlate closely with those depicted on the map of 1889, and it would appear likely that these were constructed during the mid-19th century. They probably consisted of two separate outbuildings with brick floors (Structures 2 and 3, Areas A and B) with a yard running north-south leading from Midland Drive to the area at the rear of High Street (Structure 1, Area C).

The cartographic evidence and secondary sources suggest the mid-19th century was a period during which extensive expansion occurred in the town centre.

“By the early nineteenth century, in many of the plots behind the High Street houses, outbuildings had been converted into dwellings, or rebuilt as houses to be occupied by artisans, servants and labourers” (Lea 2003, 151).

The date for the laying-out of Midland Drive is unknown but probably occurred during, or after, the construction of the LNWR railway line to Sutton Coldfield in 1862, and certainly by 1879 when the Midland Railway line was completed (Lea 2003, 124-5). The Drive appeared to respect the line of both these railways. The 1889 map shows the area behind and to the east of High Street as being terraced. It is possible that the terracing occurred when tunnelling and cutting associated with the construction of the railway created substantial quantities of waste material. The build-up of the ground level by upwards of two metres from the natural levels certainly suggests that substantial quantities of material were imported to the site.

The majority of the buildings from this period had been demolished by 1900 (Fig. 8) when the Bank is known to have been constructed. By 1938 (Fig. 9) the area to the rear of High Street is open ground until the construction of the buildings presently located on site and due for demolition.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Portland Properties Ltd commissioned the project. Thanks for the assistance of Adrian Yeomans and Pat Flynn of Winfield Construction. Thanks also to Mike Hodder who monitored the project for Birmingham City Council. Rob Barnett, Kristina Krawiec and Erica Macey-Bracken carried out the work on site. Chris Hewitson supervised the site and produced the written report, which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds and was edited by Alex Jones who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

8 REFERENCES

Birmingham Archaeology 2004 *Written scheme of investigation, archaeological excavation, 14-18 High Street, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham.*

Birmingham City Council, 2004 *Design brief for archaeological investigation, 14-18 High Street, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham.*

Jones, A, 1989 *Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham An Archaeological Evaluation* BUFAU report No. 55.

Lea, R, 2003 *The Story of Sutton Coldfield*, Stroud, Sutton.

Salzman, L F, (ed.) 1969 *Victoria County History of Warwickshire* Vol. IV, 230-245.

8.1 Maps

1765 John Snape's Survey of Sutton Coldfield

1789 Yates map

1824 Corn Rent map

1889 1st Edition Ordnance Survey 6" County Series

1903 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey 6" County Series

1914 3rd Edition Ordnance Survey 6" County Series

1938 4th Edition Ordnance Survey 6" County Series

Figures

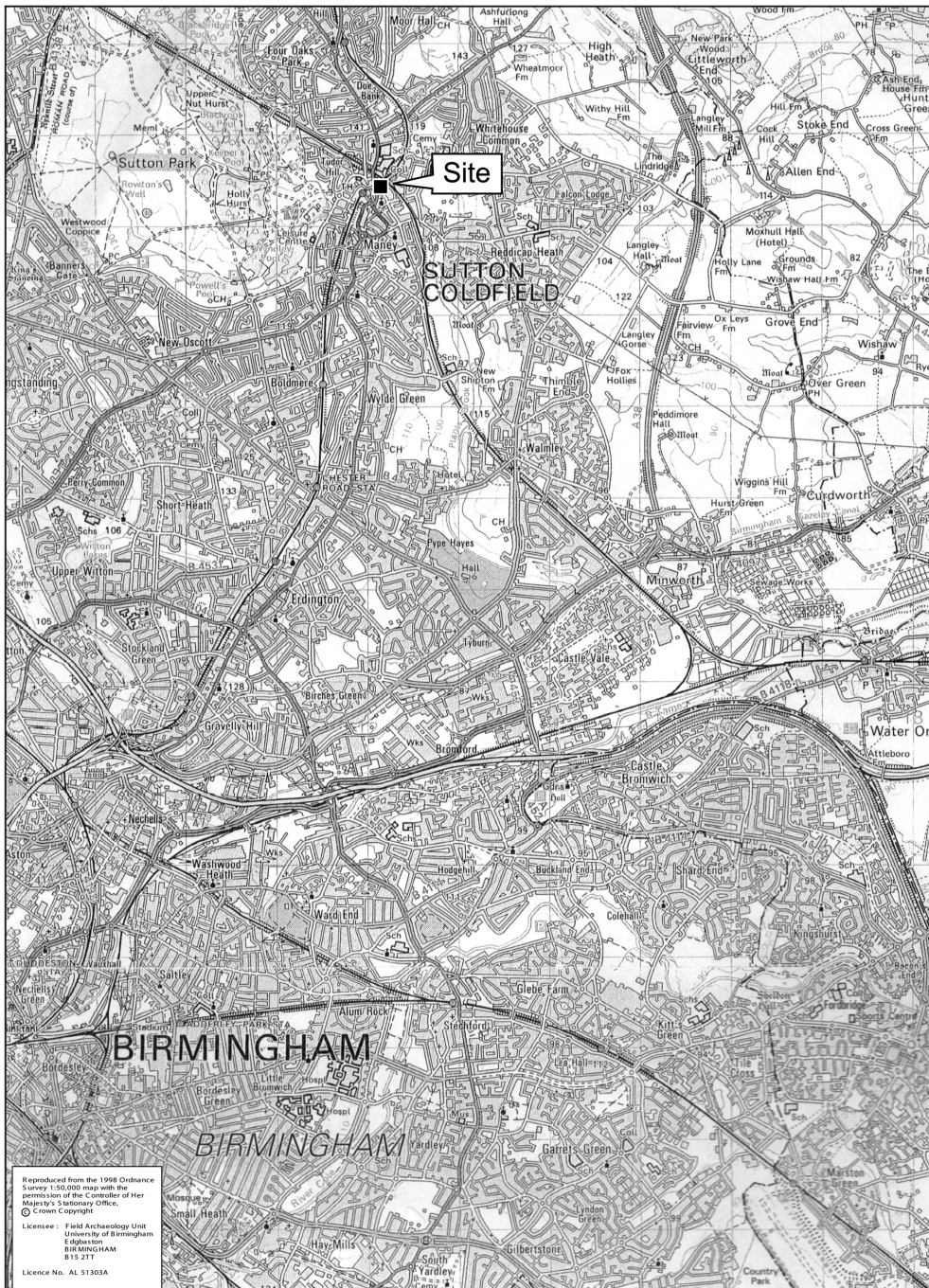


Fig 1 Site location



Fig 2 Development area and area of excavation

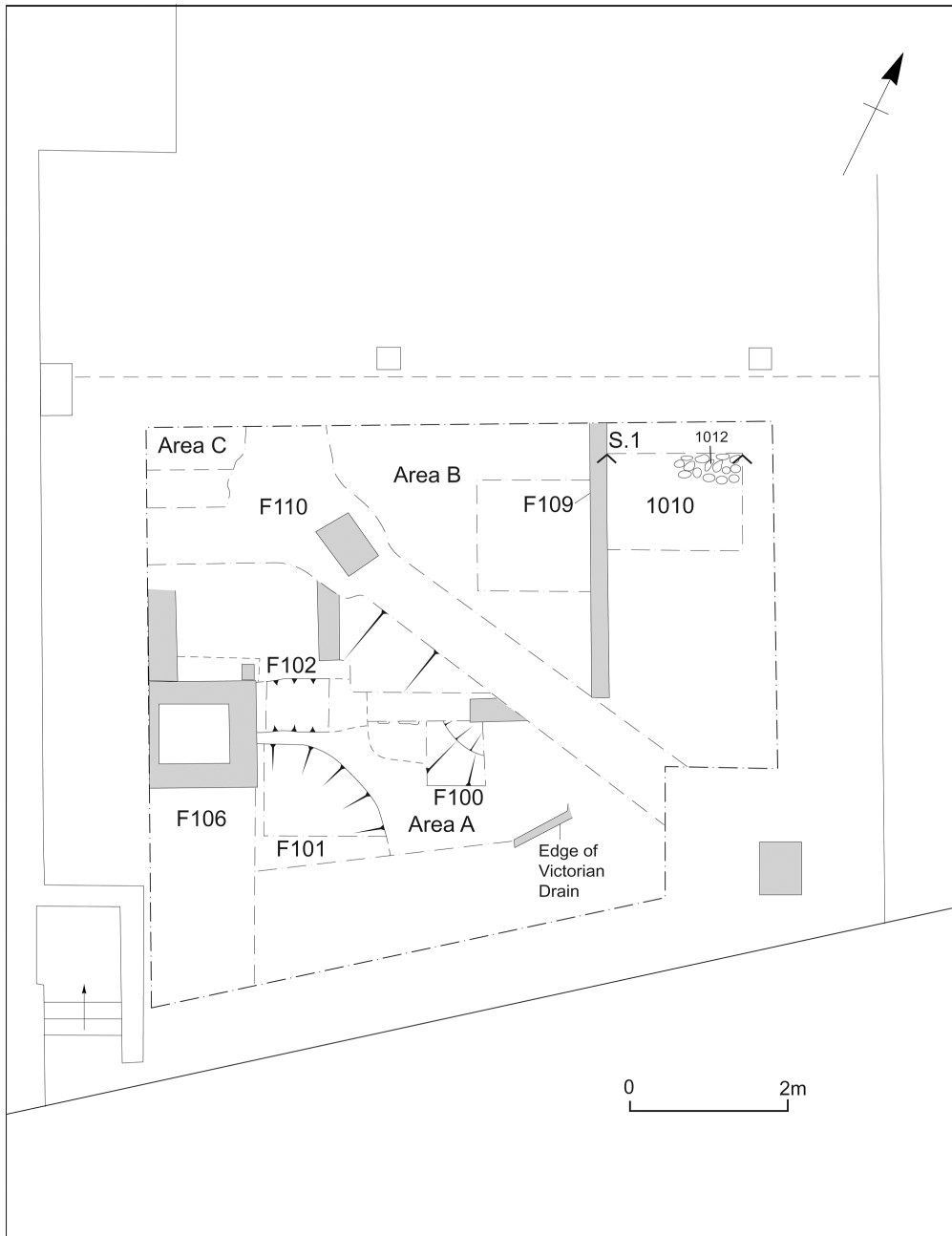


Fig 3 Earlier features

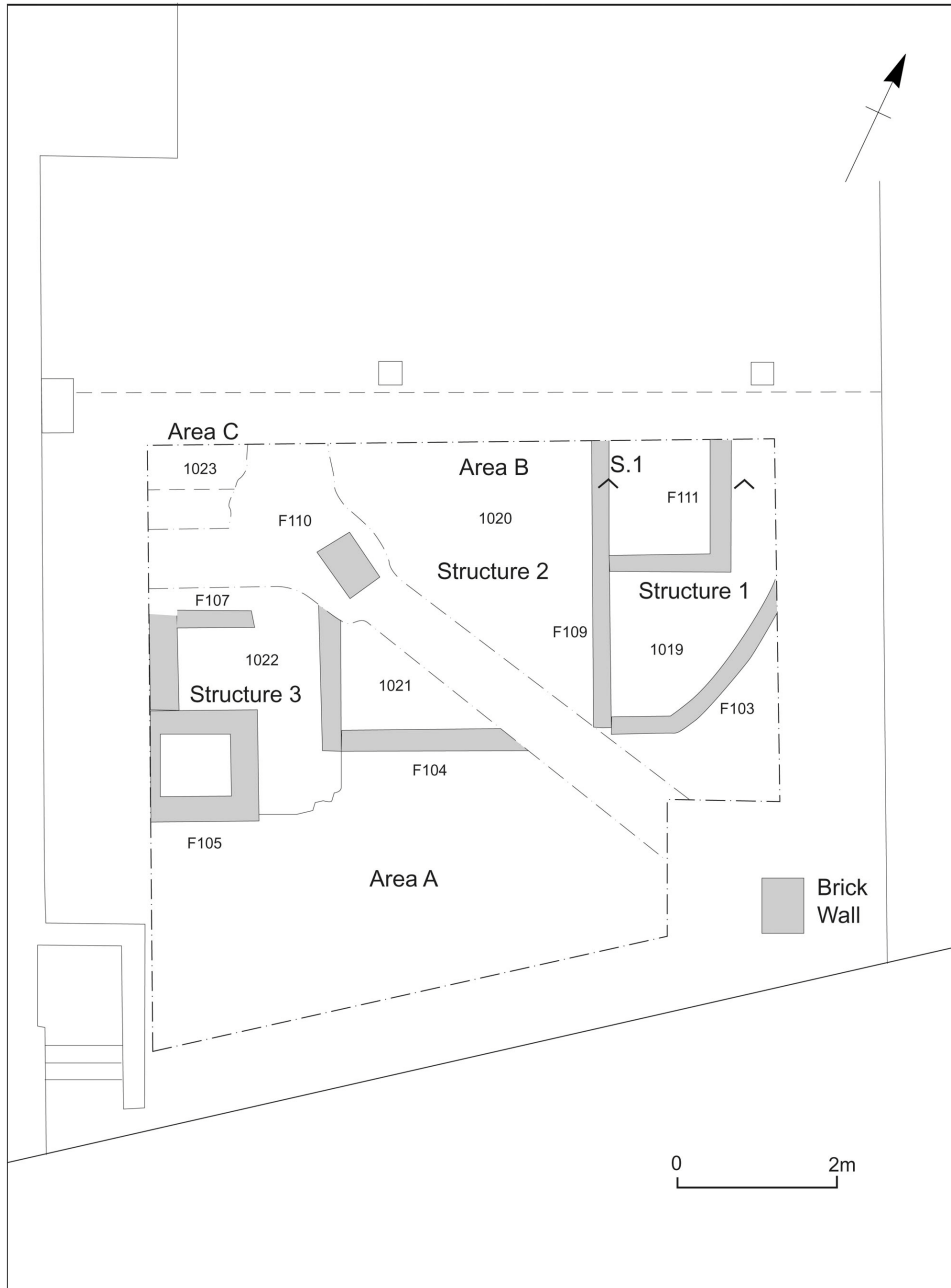


Fig 4 19th century structures

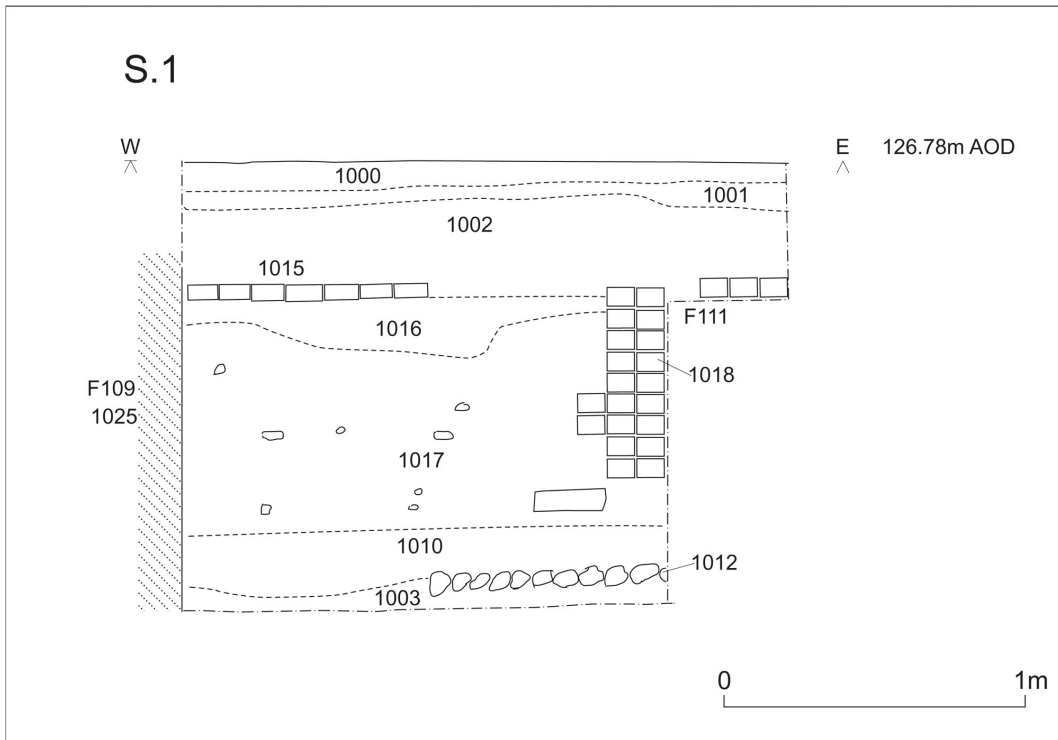


Fig 5 South facing section Area C

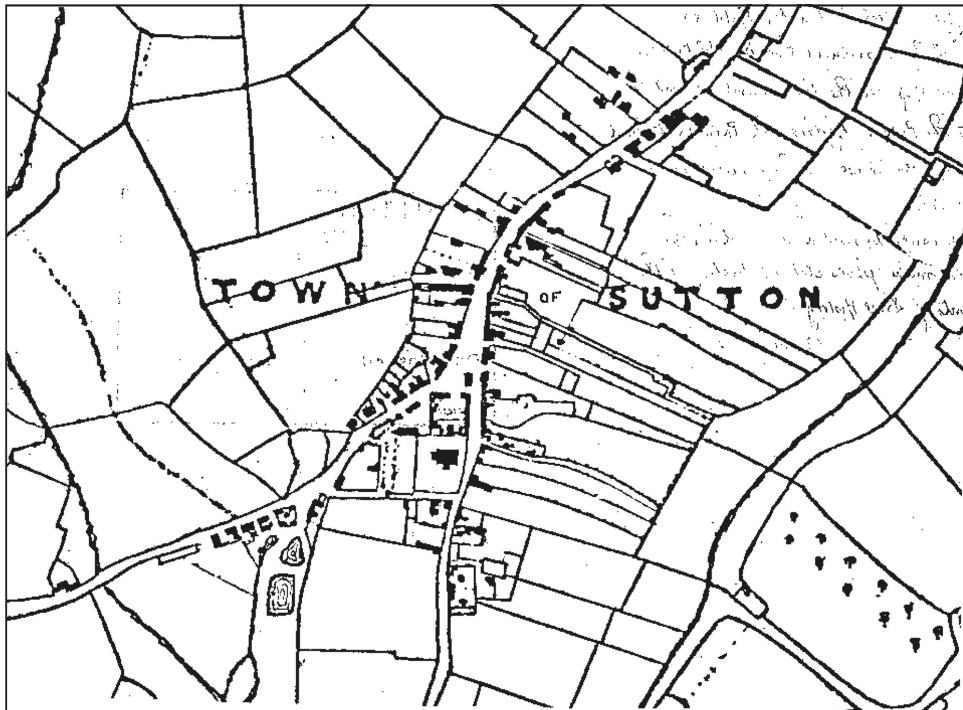


Fig 6 Corn Rent map 1824

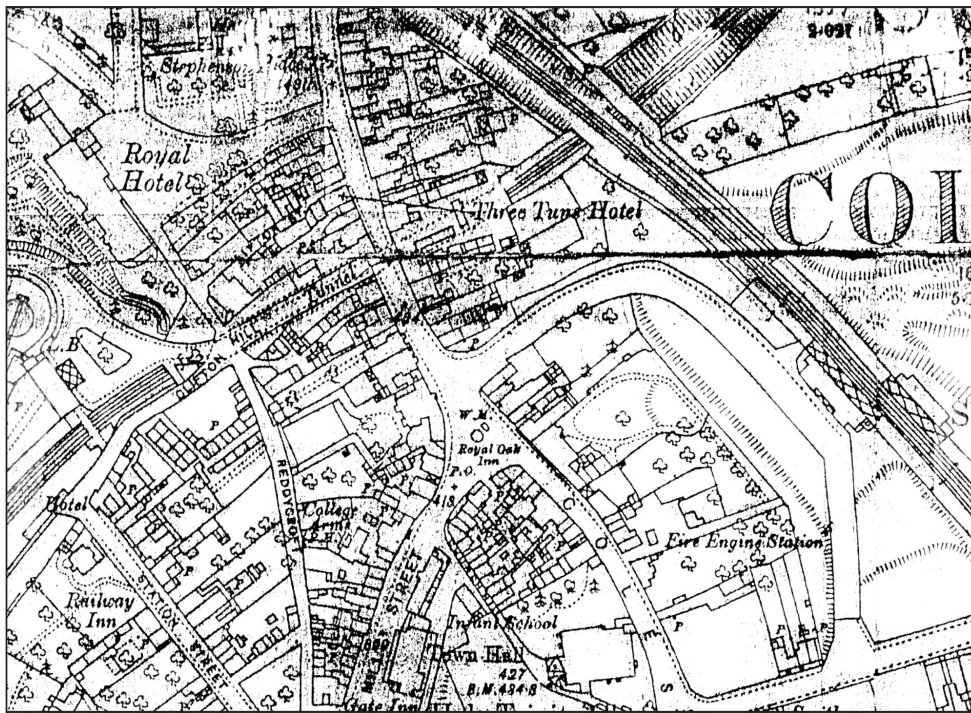


Fig 7 Ordnance Survey 25" 1889

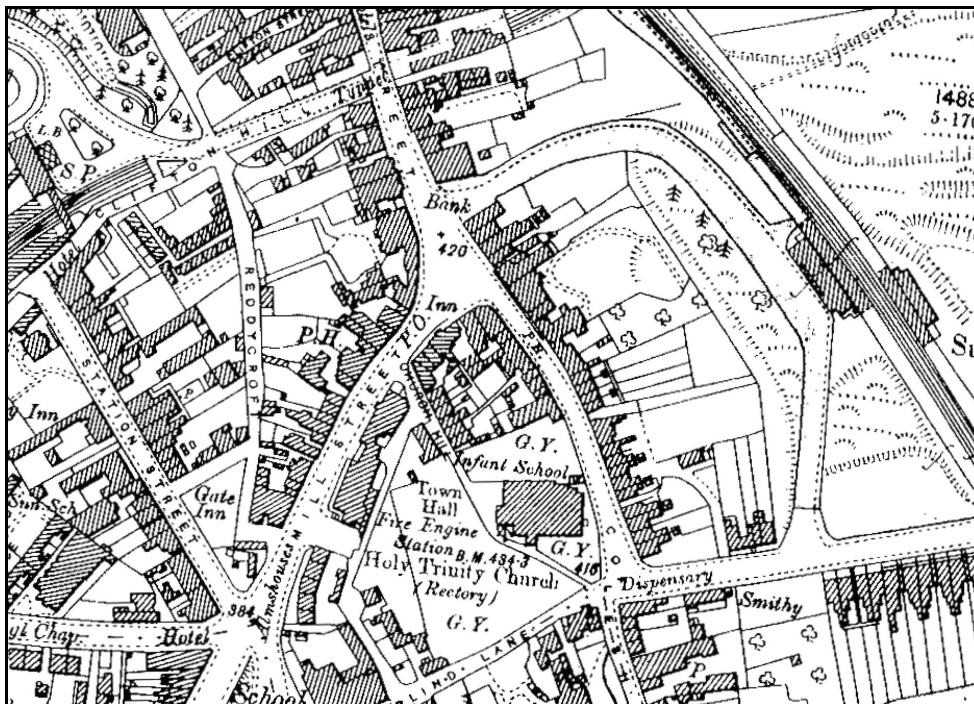


Fig 8 Ordnance Survey 25" 1903

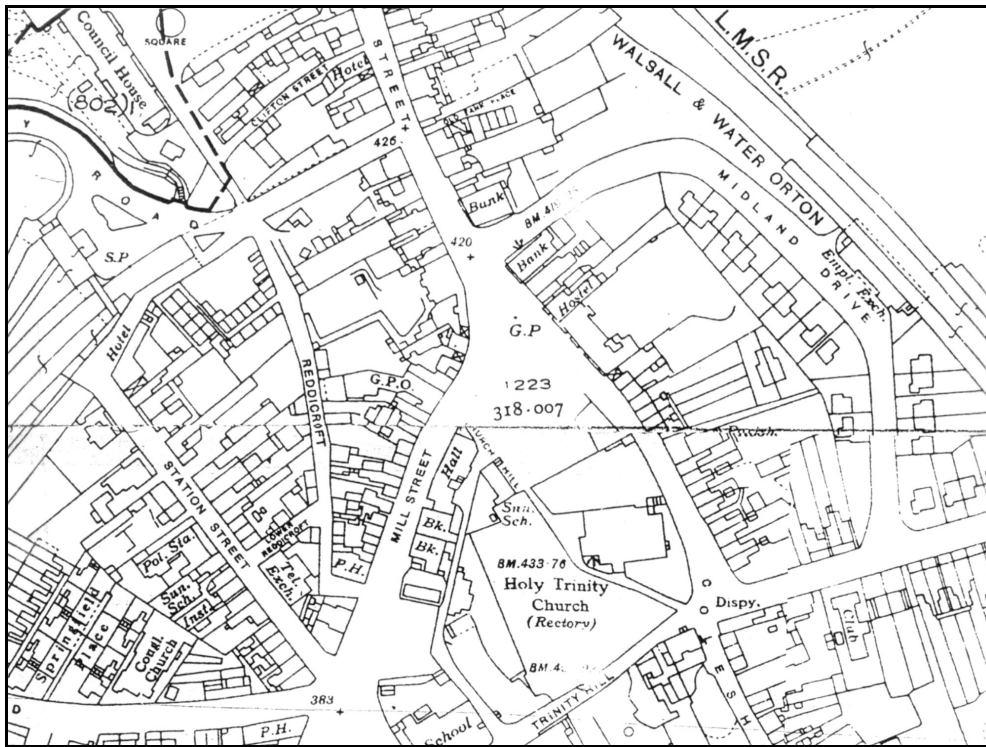


Fig 9 Ordnance Survey 25" 1938

Plates



Plate 1 Floor surface 1019



Plate 2 Floor surfaces 1020 and 1021



Plate 3 Area C post-excitation



Plate 4 Area A post-excitation