

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Land off Rich Way, Brecon

DESK-TOP ASSESSMENT

CPAT Report No 661

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DESK-TOP ASSESSMENT

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Report for Radley House Partnership

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In early August 2004 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by the Radley House Partnership (of Winchester, Hampshire), represented by Mr N Pritchard, to prepare a quotation for undertaking an archaeological desk-top assessment on land adjacent to Rich Way in Brecon in southern Powys. A detailed desk-top archaeological assessment had been recommended by the Brecon Beacons National Authority in their capacity as the local planning authority, in advance of the submission and determination of a planning application, and the Radley House Partnership were keen to progress this element as soon as possible.
- 1.2 A quotation for the assessment was submitted on 13 August and accepted, and the assessment was undertaken in the same month.

2 LOCATION

- 2.1 The area of the assessment (at SO 04722834) - henceforward termed 'the development area' for the purposes of this report - lies in the south-eastern suburbs of Brecon, fronting on to the south side of what is termed The Watton, the main street running out of Brecon towards Abergavenny. Rich Way, bounding the area on the north-west, is a modern street created to serve the new theatre and government offices beside the canal, while the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal itself runs immediately to the south of the development area. On the south-east are the gardens and houses running off Conway Street.

3 DESK-TOP METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The desk-top assessment has involved the examination of all the readily available primary and secondary documentary, cartographic, pictorial, and photographic sources. Repositories consulted included: the Regional Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) held by CPAT in Welshpool, the National Monuments Record held by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Aberystwyth and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.
- 3.2 A search of the SMR and NMR identified only a few details of archaeological and historic significance. Historic cartography is of rather greater assistance, and in terms of historical depth, Brecon is without doubt one of the best mapped towns in Powys, a series of maps throwing some light on the development of the town over the last four centuries.

4 THE HISTORY OF THE SITE

- 4.1 The Watton has been recognised as a distinct, extra-mural suburb of Brecon since the Middle Ages. The development itself lies little more than one hundred metres down the Watton from the town walls of Brecon.
- 4.2 The date at which the town of Brecon came into existence is unknown. When, in 1093, Bernard de Neufmarche defeated local Welsh rulers close to the present town, there may already have been some sort of settlement here. Alternatively, the castle

which controlled the strategically important river crossing, was itself soon in place and settlement will have developed around it. How much later, though, were the beginnings of the town on the opposite, east bank of the Honddu is still in debate. When it was besieged by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth in 1217, the burgesses bought him off, revealing not only that the town had defences by that date but also that it had its burghal charter, even though the first surviving charter dates from 1276. An origin in the 12th century thus seems undeniable.

Medieval Watton

- 4.3 The expansion of the town outside its walls is not at all well-documented. Watton (or Waketon as it also appears to have been termed) was one of several extra-mural suburbs to develop, Oldaport and Llanfaes being the others. However, the size and development of this suburb in the medieval period and even in the 16th century has yet to be determined with any precision.
- 4.4 Yet, despite this lack of frequent corroborative documentary references, there is no doubt that Watton did exist as a suburb of Brecon in the Middle Ages. Prior to 1372 two tenants in Watton died of the plague and in 1399 five burgages were washed away when the River Usk flooded. Significantly, at that time Watton was referred to as a 'new borough' suggesting perhaps that settlement outside the walls of the town was not of particularly long duration. Yet the town charters and particularly that of 1308 seem to reveal that there was already some extra-mural activity at the beginning of the 14th century.
- 4.5 The only specific extra-mural building that is known to have existed in Watton was St Catherine's chapel which was attached to a *hospitium* and might perhaps be expected to have been isolated from the town itself. The precise position of the chapel is not known – it is said to have been replaced by a barn known as the Spittle by the late 17th century, and was undoubtedly further down the Watton to the south-east, for one source implies that it was a little less than a quarter of a mile from the east gate out of the town.

Post-medieval Watton

- 4.6 It was during the 16th century that Brecon reputedly saw major population growth. In 1536 it was designated as one of the four regional administrative centres in Wales, reinforcing its significance at that time, and Leland penned a lengthy description of it during his travels in the 1540s. In 1563, diocesan returns seem to indicate that more people were living in the suburbs of Brecon than in the town itself, and it is reasonable to assume that Watton was amongst these suburbs. Equally, there is some evidence to indicate that barns utilised for storage and perhaps other work were a particular feature of Watton.
- 4.7 Significantly, however, not a single building on The Watton appears to retain any structural detail known to be earlier than the later 17th century. The properties adjacent to the development area – nos 44-47 The Watton (Grade II listed buildings) have early to mid 19th-century facades, but were considered, when they were listed, to have a basic structure that was probably late 17th-century or early 18th-century. This pattern continues further along The Watton, moving away from the town centre, with those houses that have been examined by specialists being largely 18th- and 19th-century constructions. No. 47, for instance, which lies in front of the most-south-easterly part of the development area was by 1834 the Lamb Inn, but does not appear to be any earlier than the rest.

- 4.8 Thus, while it may be assumed from the historic building stock along The Watton that originally there was perhaps a 17th/18th-century building on the street frontage of the development area, it is not possible to extrapolate further back in time.
- 4.9 The earliest cartographic depiction of Brecon and its suburbs is John Speed's plan, inset on his map of the county of Brecknock published in his *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* in 1611/12. Taken at face value this would indicate that there were dwellings along both sides of The Watton, immediately outside the town walls at the beginning of the 17th century, and that, although the scale is too small for certainty and there is inevitably a level of stylistic licence in Speed's depiction of houses generally, we might assume that there was probably a dwelling on or immediately adjacent to the development site at that date.
- 4.10 Notwithstanding this apparently clear evidence, some caution needs to be adopted, for Speed's draft plan of September 1606, a more significant guide, does not depict any houses on the Watton. This does not indicate that they were not present, rather that they were added to the plan afterwards, either by Speed himself or by his engraver. The implication then is that the housing layout of the suburb (or Watton Ward as it was termed in 1606) is not in any way accurately depicted. Furthermore, a close examination of both maps reveals that the engraver simply tailed off the street, now known as The Watton, on the published plan, and it is thus impossible from Speed's mapping to determine how far along the street housing had extended by the early 17th century.
- 4.11 There is one further point to make about Speed's map. Running off the road that ran below the town walls and what was later to be called Captain's Walk was another lane which ran roughly parallel to The Watton and had one house on it. This was drawn in by Speed on his draft plan. The precise location of this lane cannot now be ascertained for by 1744 (see para 4.12 below) it appears to have been reduced to a boundary, and on the 1761 map (para 4.13 below) it was not shown at all. Conceivably it might bear some relation to the lane that ran along the south side of the canal and probably served the race course (see para 4.14 below), in which case its relevance to the present application is minimal. However, if as seems perhaps more likely it was a lane which fell out of use in the 17th or 18th century, it could have lain further to the north and the southern end of the development area might conceivably overlie it.
- 4.12 One hundred and thirty years separates Speed's mapping from the next depiction, that of the surveyor Meredith Jones in 1744. This map was illustrated in Theophilus Jones' *History of Brecknock* at the beginning of the 19th century, and has been reproduced in print on several occasions since, but we have not been able to track down the whereabouts of the original plan. Theophilus Jones' reproduction suffices, however, to suggest that Meredith Jones may well have used Speed's earlier map as a base to which he added further detail. Whether this extra detail was carefully surveyed in or not is a moot point. What Jones' map reveals is that by the mid-18th century there were dwellings all along The Watton.
- 4.13 There is another pair of broadly contemporary manuscript maps which may also be by Meredith Jones who at this time was probably the leading surveyor in Brecknock. One of these is dated to 1761 while the other, a much larger but less elaborate version, is undated, but looks to be a working estate map for William Morgan of Tredegar, while the former was drawn largely for display. Regrettably copies of these cannot be included in this report for copyright reasons. Block tones were used on these maps to indicate housing and other buildings, and it is quite clear from these maps that there were buildings all along The Watton, including the road

frontage of the present development site. That the remainder of the development plot was owned by a Captain Awbrey is significant only in as much that, because the land did not fall within the estate holdings of the two largest landowners in the Brecon area in the late 18th century – Morgan of Tredegar and Lord Camden – it was not shown in any detail in the estates maps prepared for those two magnates by the Glamorgan-based surveyor Edward Thomas in the early 1780s.

- 4.14 When John Wood drew his detailed plan of Brecon in 1834 the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal had been in place for a little more than three decades, and between it and the river lay Brecon racecourse. Dwellings lined The Watton, the development area coinciding on the street frontage with some owned by C Powell, Esq. The land behind these buildings fell into two plots, one owned by Major Price, the other by Mrs Davies. A few years later, at the time of the Tithe survey – 1838/39 – Major Price's land was classed as meadow. Wood's map shows one small building in the extreme south-eastern corner of Mrs Davies' plot. This was still apparent on late 19th-century Ordnance Survey maps with some small associated structures attached to its western side – steps? – and indeed a structure still exists here and is believed to have been recently refurbished. Opinions vary on its origins: it has been suggested that it might be associated with the canal, perhaps a wharfmaster's office or the like, but in the absence of any material evidence to support that contention, the alternative belief that it was a gazebo at the bottom of a garden is more credible.
- 4.15 Large-scale Ordnance Survey maps from the late 19th century reveal that Major Price's meadow had been sub-divided by this time and part of it was semi-wooded or perhaps even an orchard. There were features here, too, in the south-east corner of the plot at the end of the 19th century, but it is assumed that these have now been demolished.
- 4.16 Rich Way itself is a late 20th-century phenomenon, as are, it is assumed, the several buildings shown on the development area lying back from the street frontage and indeed the building on the frontage (unless of course this integrates an earlier structure, something which cannot be established from a desk-top analysis alone). No attempt has been made to put a date on when Rich Way or the buildings beside it were constructed, although no doubt this will be possible from council records.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 It is known that there was extra-mural suburbs to Brecon in the medieval period and that dwellings existed along The Watton, though probably in small numbers. It is possible, given its proximity, to the walled town, that one may have occupied the street frontage of the development area, but other than by excavation, there is no way to confirm this.
- 5.2 Speed's map of Brecon from 1606 suggests that there were buildings on the Watton in the vicinity if not on the actual site of the development area in the early 17th century, although the veracity of his depiction is open to question. What is not in doubt, from both the surviving buildings nearby and the historic maps of Brecon, is that the early 18th century, or perhaps the late 17th century, was a significant period in the expansion of the Watton. Activity, however, was largely on the street frontage.

- 5.3 From the available map evidence it appears that the ground behind the street frontage, which constitutes a significant proportion of the development area, may have been open land – perhaps meadow and pasture, until the 20th century. However the continuing presence of a small building, perhaps a gazebo, in the south-eastern corner of the development area, as well as uncertainties about features on Speed's map means that the area was not entirely undeveloped into the 20th century.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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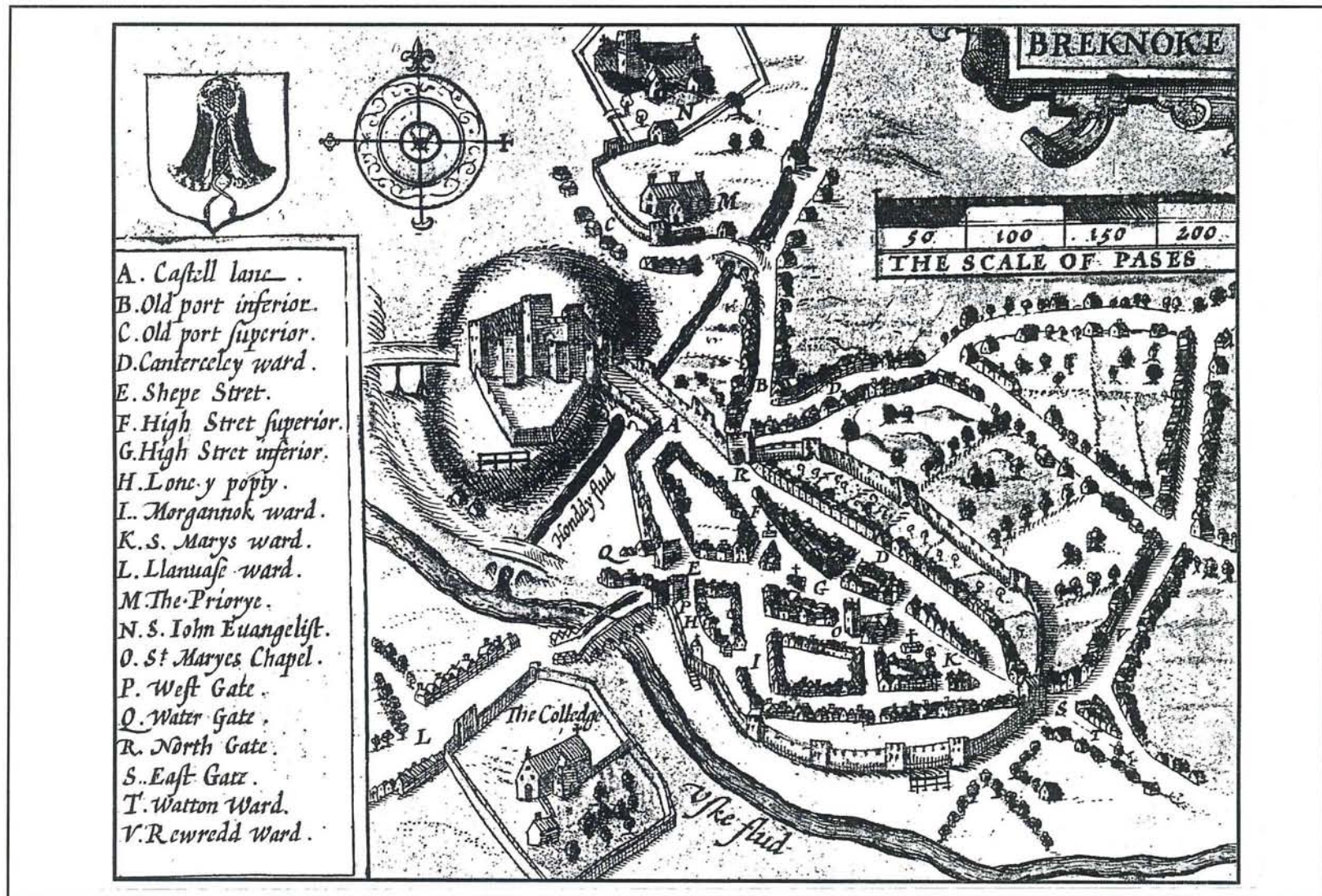


Fig 1 John Speed's Map of Brecon, 1611-12

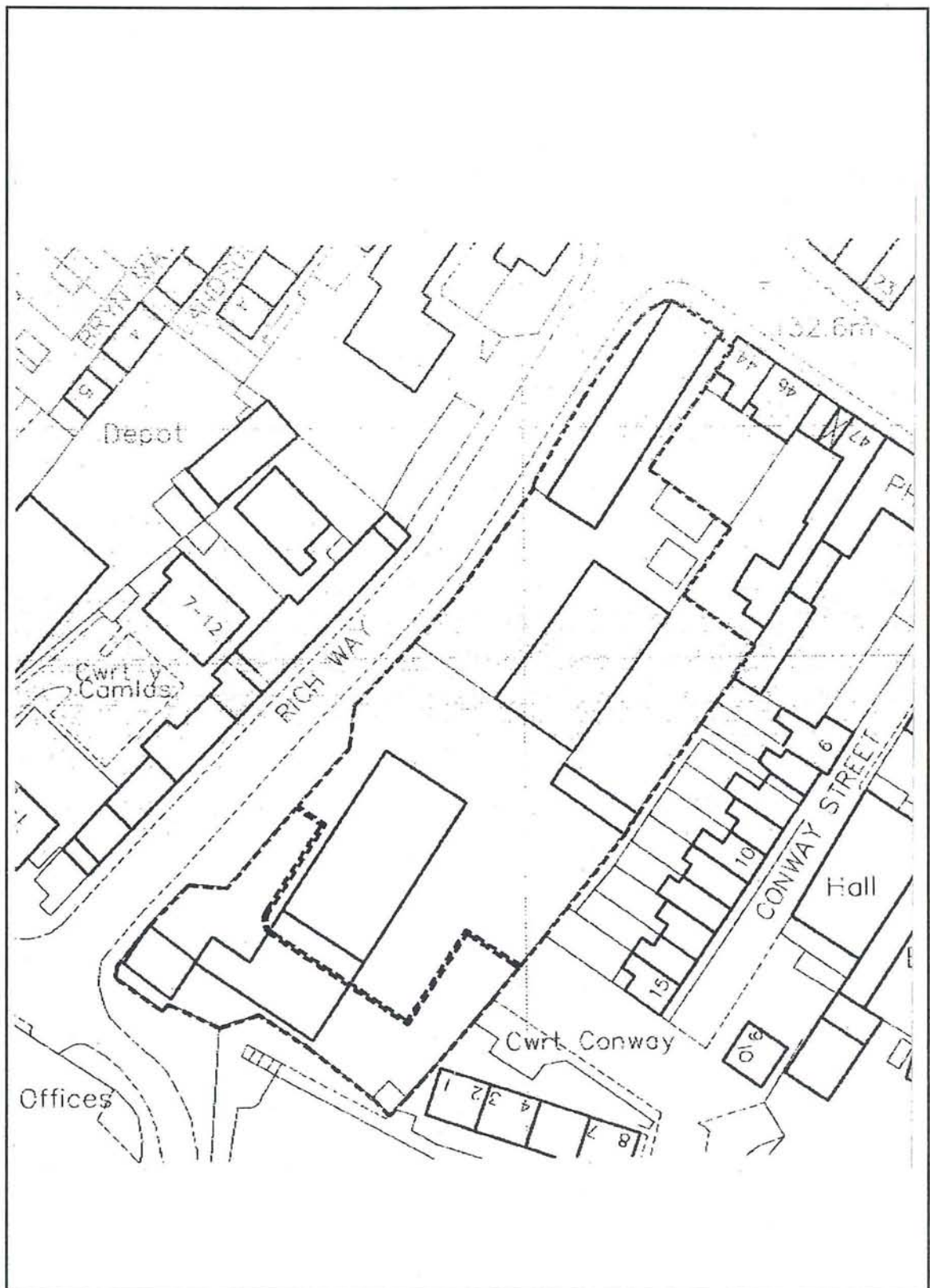


Fig 2 Proposed development area adjacent to Rich Way, Brecon (from information provided by Radley House Partnership)

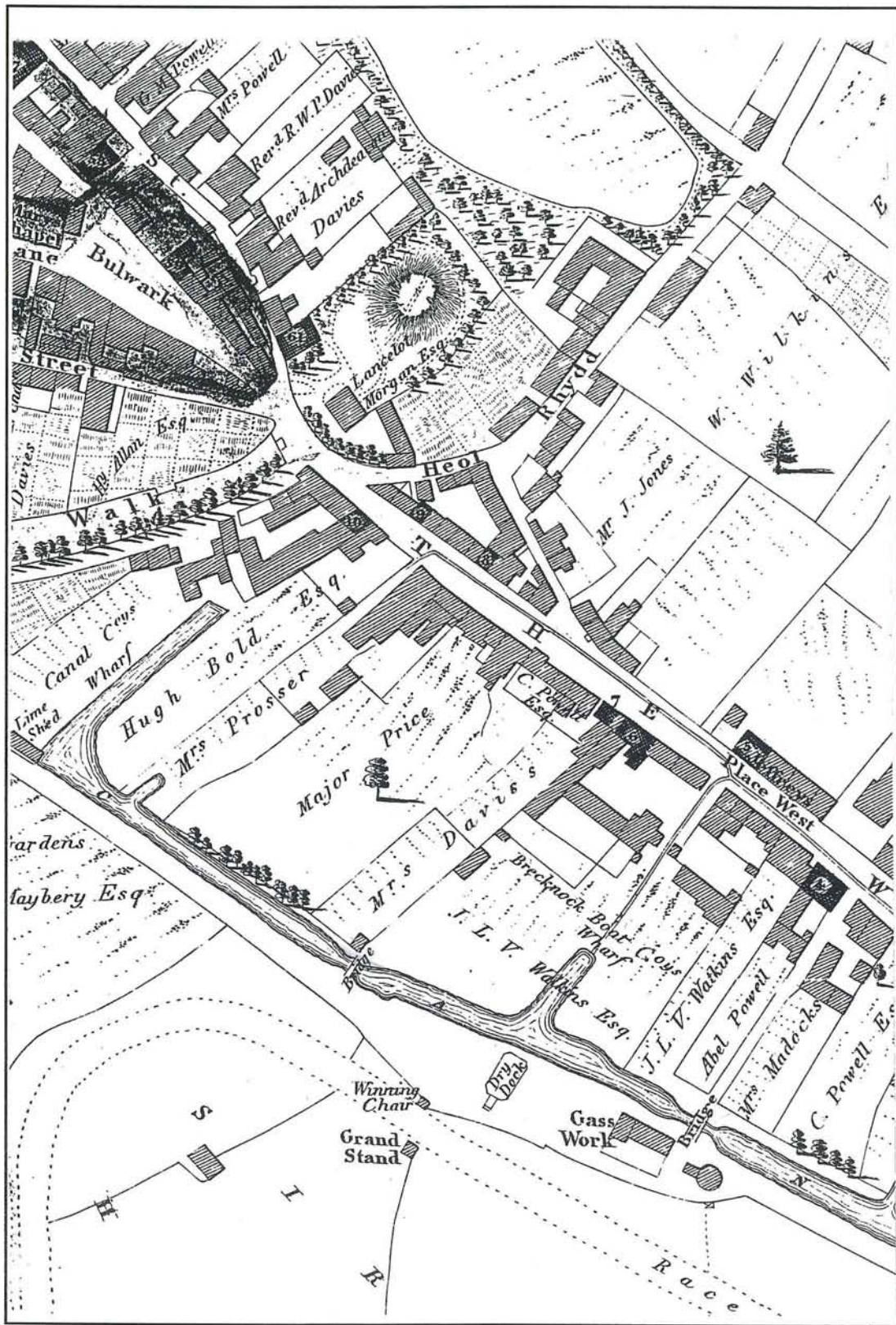


Fig 3 John Wood's map of Brecon in 1834. The position of the development area has not been shown because inaccuracies in the map do not allow a precise match.

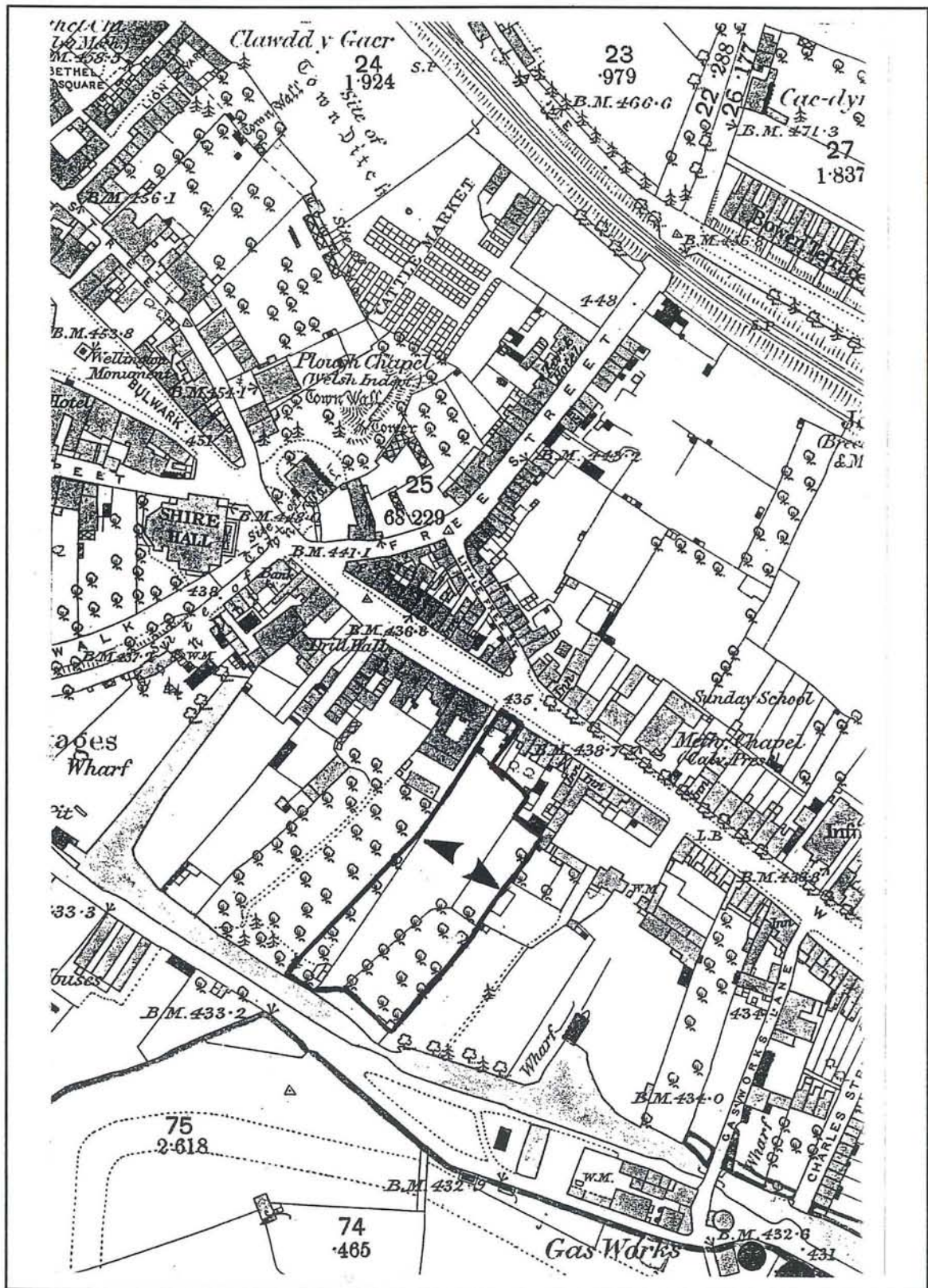


Fig 4 Approximate position of development area superimposed on the 1st edition 25" Ordnance Survey map of Brecon in 1889