

An illustration from Luffman's History of London (Fig 5), published at the turn end of the 18th century, shows a large overgrown mound with the River Fleet skirting the base on the western side. The mound appears to extend right up to the road on the southern side where a fence and line of trees defines the boundary.

In the 18th century the site was to become the location of the Coldbath Fields Prison and William Pinks, who's History of Clerkenwell was first published in the 1860s, wrote that:

'The site originally selected was not at first deemed to be the most favourable for such an erection; it was on the eastern slope of the Fleet, the ground, which was swampy, had long been used as a public laystall, and a huge heap of rubbish had accumulated in consequence. Allusion is made to this laystall in a poem entitled "Bagnigge Wells" published in the "Shrubs of Parnassus," in 1760, in which the Old Bagnigge Gardens are described as being 'bounded on the right'—

With summit super-eminent, debas'd
With Dunghill's name inglorious! tho' by some
Than Pindus' Mount more priz'd, or cloud crown'd head
Of strong bas'd promontory. For from thence
Springs richer pasturage, and earth receives
The stercorareous compost with a smile.

The objections which were made to the proposed site of the prison were, however, overruled, the mountain of rubbish was levelled, piles were driven into the morass, the ground was raised considerable, and massive foundations were laid.'

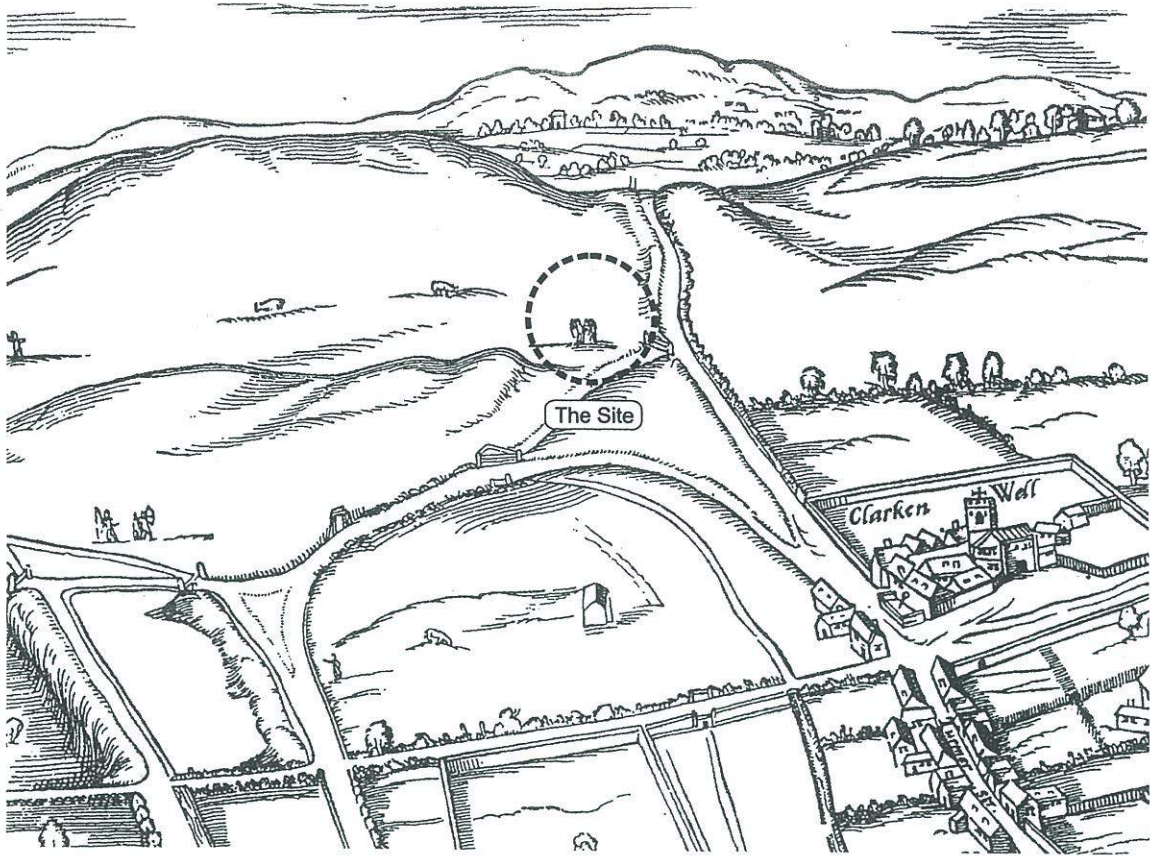


Fig 4 Agas map, 1553

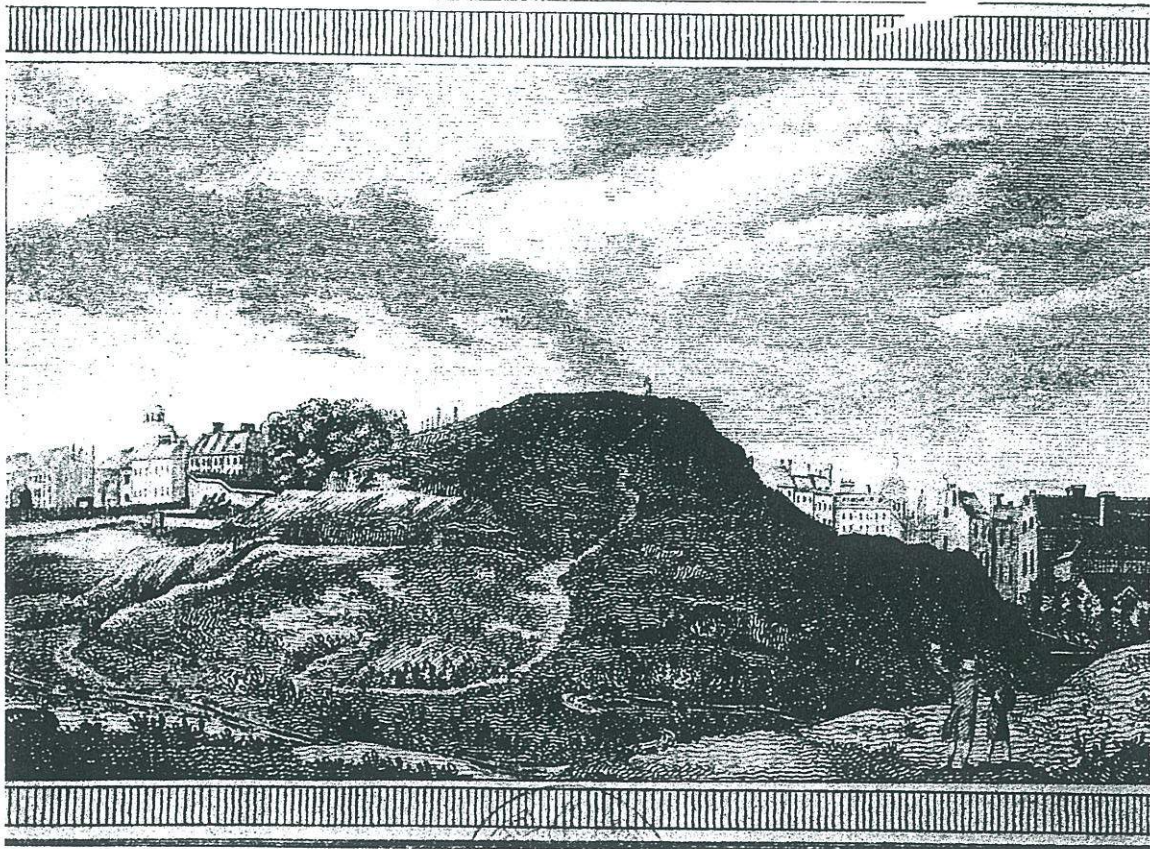


Fig 5 View near Banigge-Wells, published in Luffman's History of London

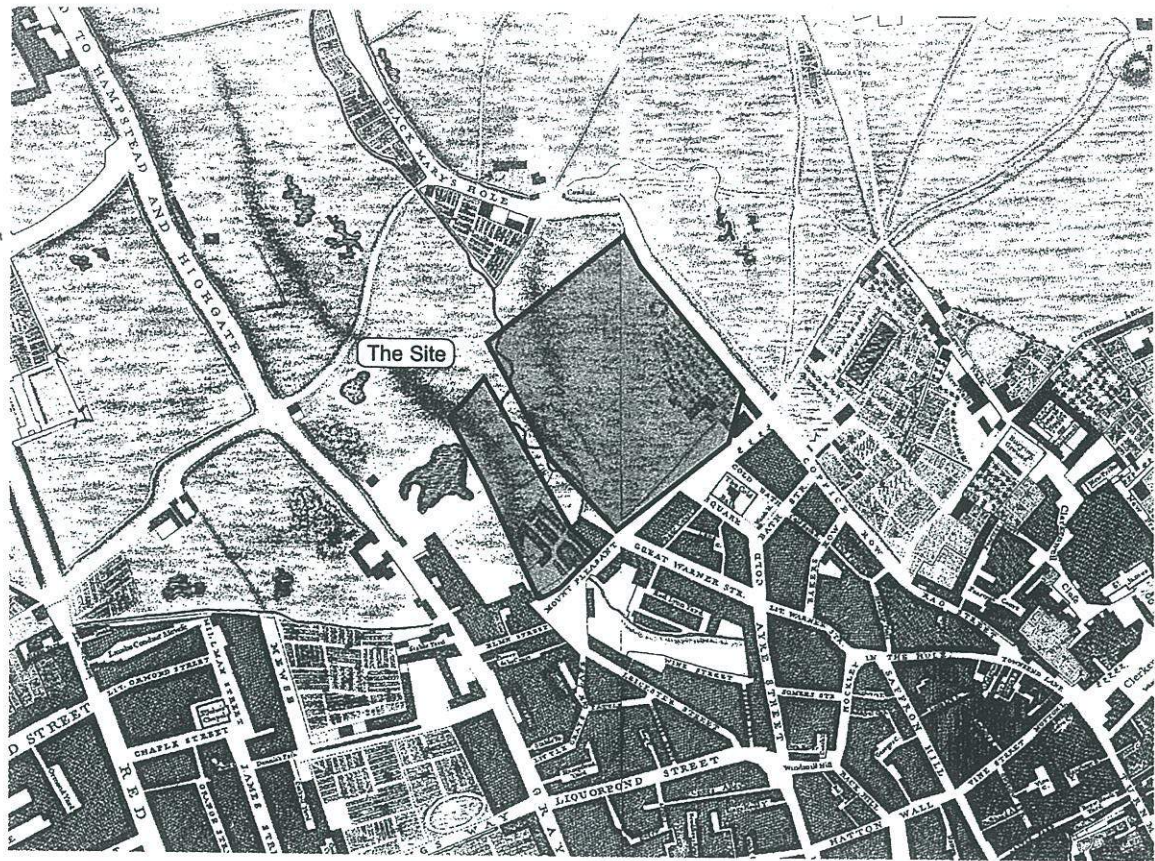


Fig 6 John Rocque's map, 1746

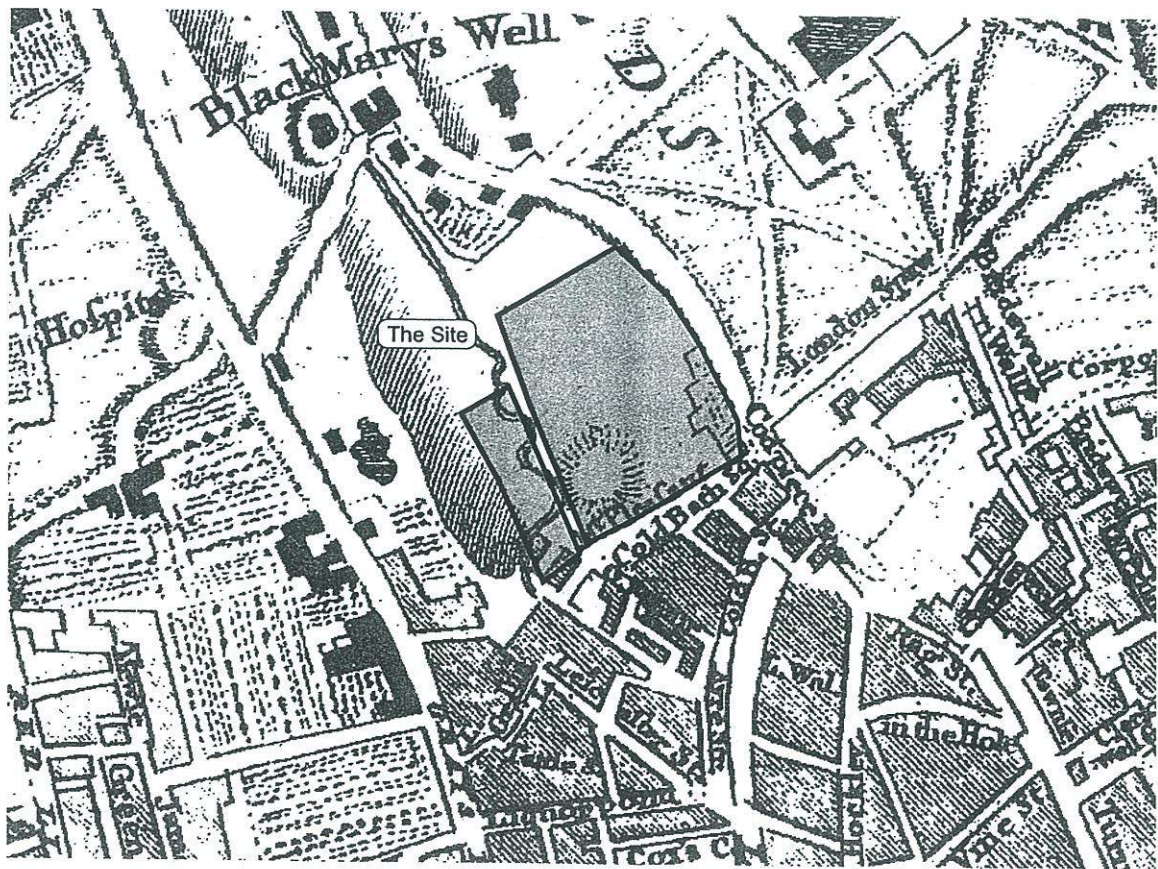


Fig 7 Benjamin Cole's map, 1750

Approximately 775m to the east of the site is Mount Mills, which was similarly described by Pinks as having once been the site of a public laystall. In 1999, an archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service on the site adjacent to Mount Mills at 1-13 Seward Street. The excavation revealed a truncated sequence of dumped deposits. The deposits, which were found to be over 4.2m in depth, consisted of dark brown to black organic silts. Within the deposits were finds of leather, including shoes, animal bone, and pottery and ceramic building material. Pottery recovered was medieval/late medieval in date, indicating these dumped deposits are 16th century at the latest, a notion supported by the absence of clay tobacco pipes, which frequently occur in the following century. Biological and non-biological remains in the deposits suggest that the dumps were being used for the disposal of material from a wide range of domestic and possibly commercial and industrial activities.

The date of the finds corresponds to a time when the reclamation of the City waterfront, which entailed the dumping of refuse behind wooden revetments, was coming to an end. This together with the fact that the Moorfields area, the tradition dumping ground of the 12th and 13th centuries, was being encroached upon, resulted in the refuse generated by an every expanding city had to be disposed of somewhere else. An open area far enough outside the City limits, but not so far as to prove logistically problematic, was needed and it would appear that the areas chosen for the discarding of refuse was Mount Mills and possibly Mount Pleasant.

The earliest known building on the site was the Sir John Oldcastle tavern, which was also known as the Lord Cobham. Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, was the first protestant martyr despite being a friend of Henry V. He was burned in 1417 outside St Giles church for being a follower of Wycliffe and the Lollards. Prior to this he had escaped from the Tower of London and is said to have taken refuge in a house of a parchment maker in Turnmill Street.

The tavern named after Sir John Oldcastle was situated in the southeastern corner of the site and was probably constructed in the early 17th century. It rapidly became famous for the gardens and groves of trees that stood to the north of the buildings and had a reputation for being a place of public entertainment as evening concerts were held there and anglers fished the carp from a well.

Property deeds show that the land in the vicinity of the site was part of the Jervois estate and was owned by Robert Harvey who in 1676 sold it to John Henley and Walter Baynes. Walter Baynes was a property speculator and upon discovering a cold chalybeate spring in one of the fields, claimed great medicinal qualities for the water and said it could cure a vast range of ailments. In 1679 Baynes built a bathhouse with a large walled garden and Coldbath Square grew up around it (Fig 23, ref 35).

3.3.5 *Post-medieval-modern*

Cole's map of 1750 (Fig 7) shows the Sir John Oldcastle tavern on the southeastern corner of the site with extensive gardens along the Codpiece Row frontage. The tavern fell into disrepair and was eventually demolished in 1762. The buildings and gardens of the tavern are shown on John Rocque's map of 1746 (Fig 6). This map also shows buildings on either side of the River Fleet in the area now occupied by Phoenix Place. These buildings appear to be industrial with a row of houses fronting onto Mount Pleasant.

Benjamin Cole's map also shows that the mound was surrounded to the north and west by open ground, which doesn't appear from its depiction to have been cultivated. This is possibly because the area was marginal land susceptible to flooding or that the valley sides were steep. In 1767 John Bevis carried out experiments into the medicinal qualities of Bagnigge Wells to the north of the site. In his account of these experiments he describes the local topography of the area. It would seem from this account that although the area would flood it was not excessively waterlogged:

'The floods, which at times roll down towards this spot all received and carried off quick, without ponding by a rivulet anciently called the River Fleet..'

Jervis also explains the origins of some of the place names that appear on Rocque's map of 1746 (Fig 6).

'A traditional goes that the place of Old was called Blessed Mary's Well but that the name of the Holy Virgin having in some measure fallen into disesteem after the reformation, the tile was altered to Black Mary's Well, as it now stands upon Mr Rocque's map and then to Black Mary's Hole; although there is a vary different account of this later appellations: For there are those who insist they were taken from one Mary Woolaston, whose occupation was attending at a well, now covered in, on an opposite eminence, by the footway from Bagnigge to Islington, to supply the soldiery, encamped in the adjacent fields, with water.'

Pinks tells us that the Coldfield site, which had previously been known as Gardiner's Farm or Field, was purchased of Thomas Clarke Jervois for the sum of £4,350. After the ground was levelled the work could start on the construction of the prison. Excavation on the site in 1992 (Fig 24, Site 3) show that on the western side of the site the alluvial deposits were sealed by at least two phases of dumping. The first was early post-medieval in date which may be remains of the laystall. The second phase appeared to be a deliberate attempt to create a terraced platform, which projected out from the eastern edge of the river valley, on which to build a prison.

The prison was designed by Charles Middleton who, in 1788, published 'Plans, Elevations, and Sections of the House of Correction to be Erected at Coldbath Fields' (Figs 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14).

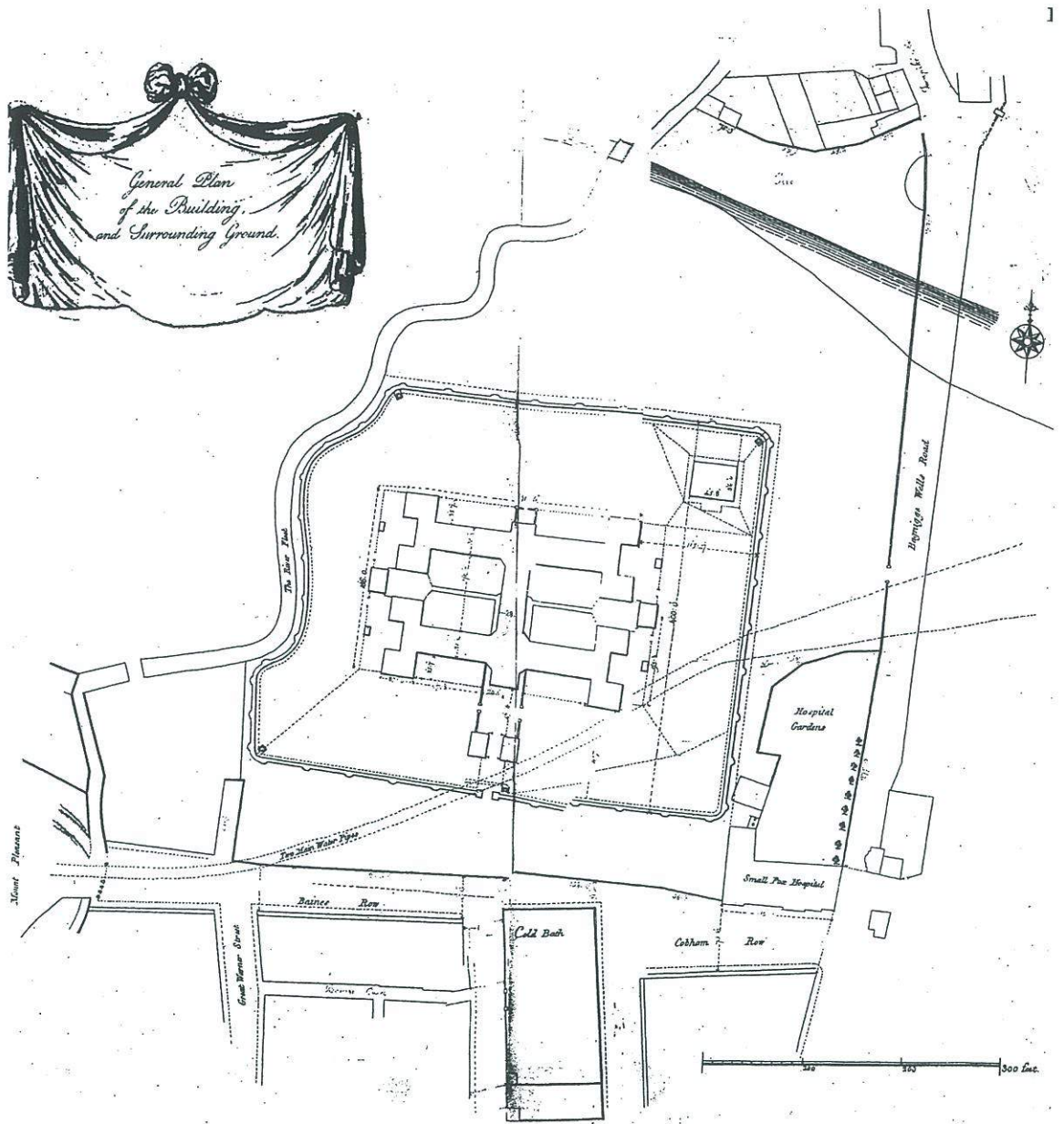


Fig 8 Plan of the prison buildings

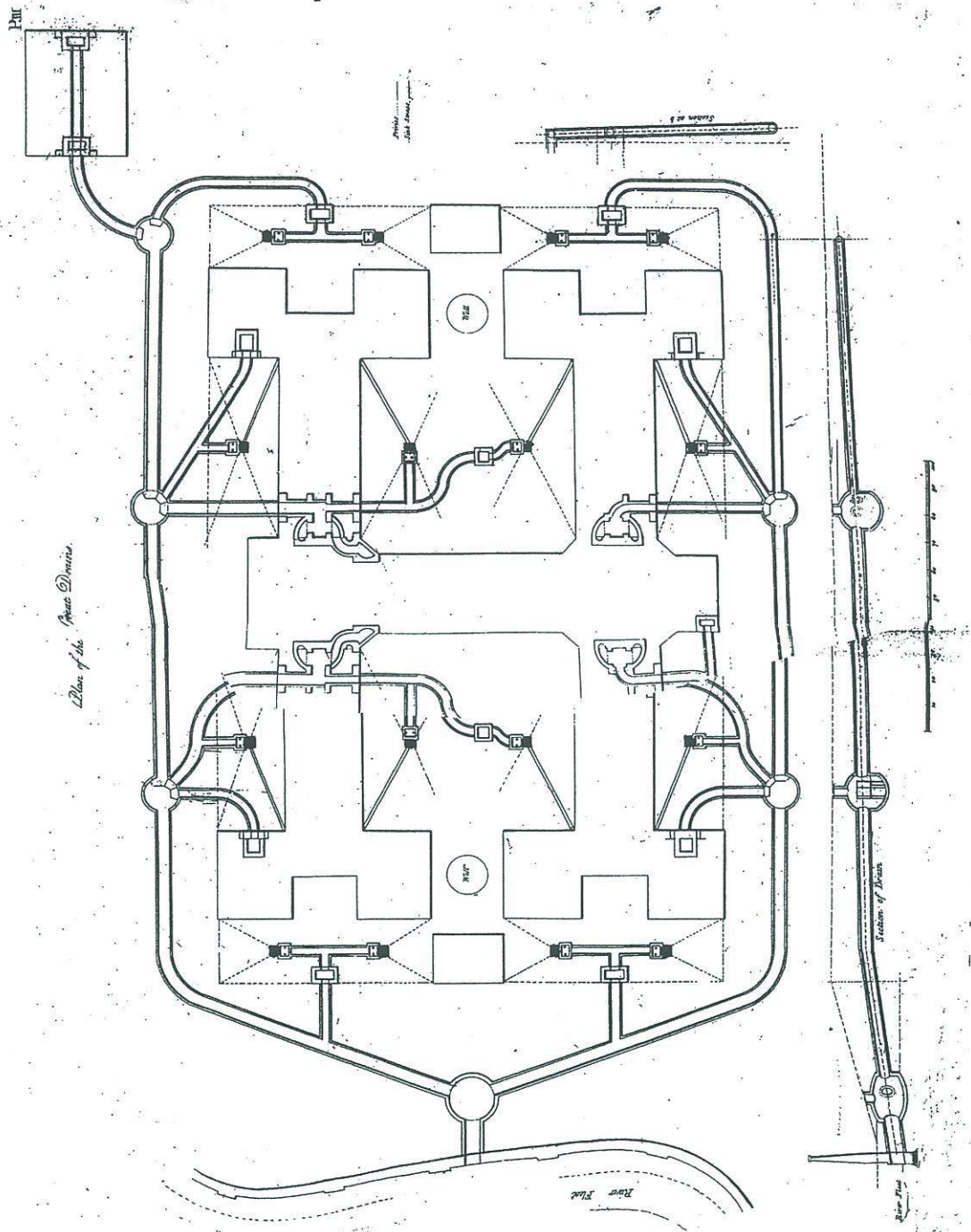


Fig 9 Plan of the drainage system beneath the prison

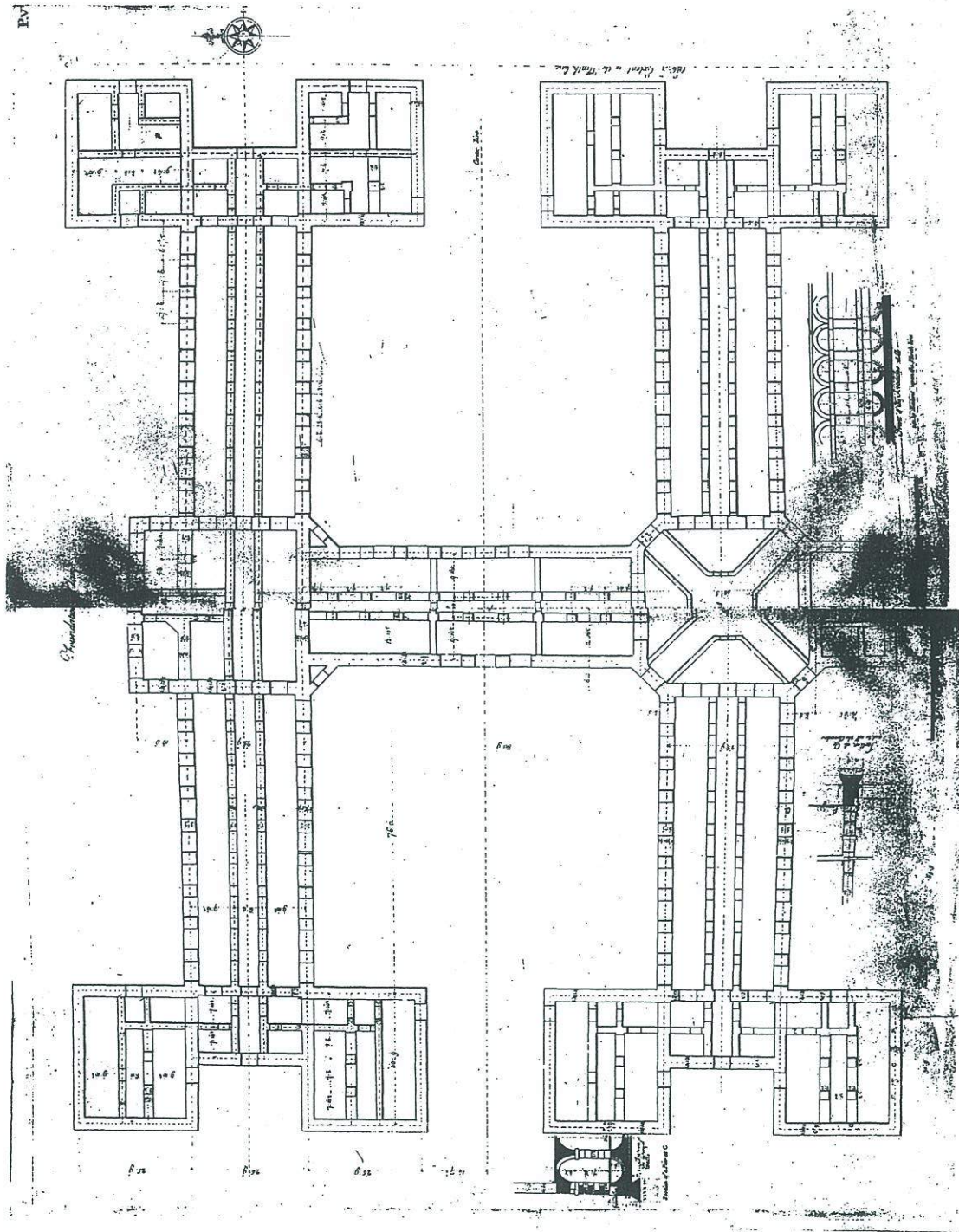
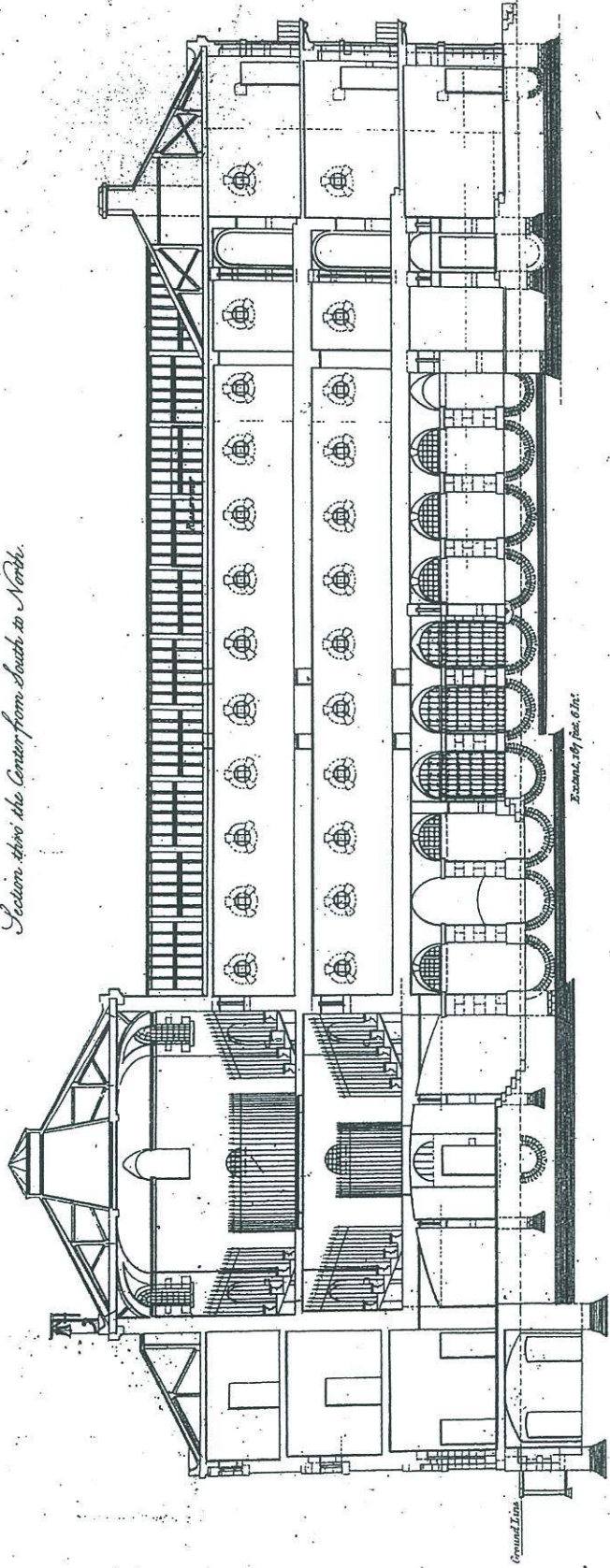


Fig 10 Plan of the prison's foundations

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Section thro' the Centre from South to North.



Engraved by Geo. H. Fox.



Fig 11 East facing section across the prison buildings

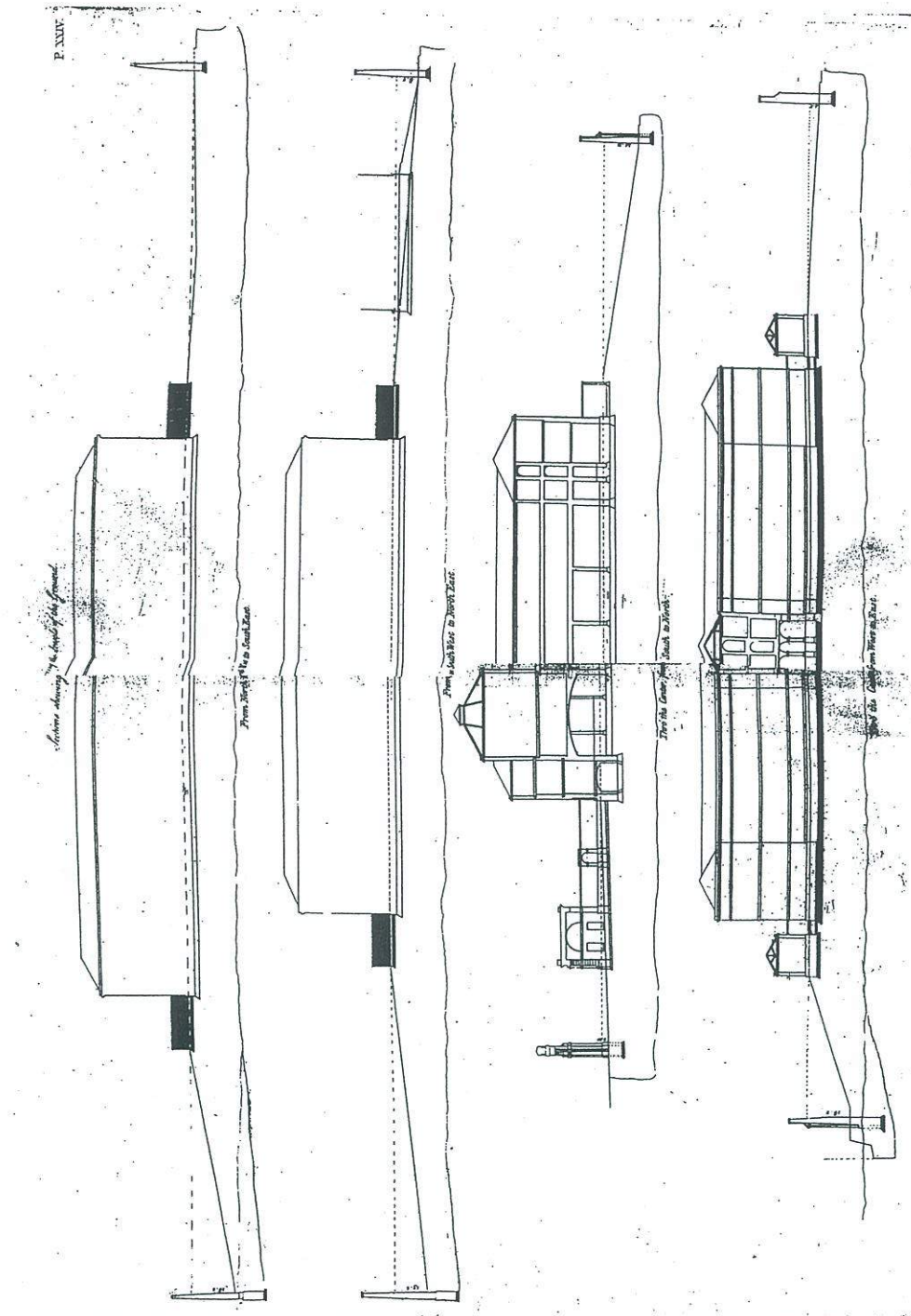


Fig 12 Sections showing ground level in relation to the prison buildings

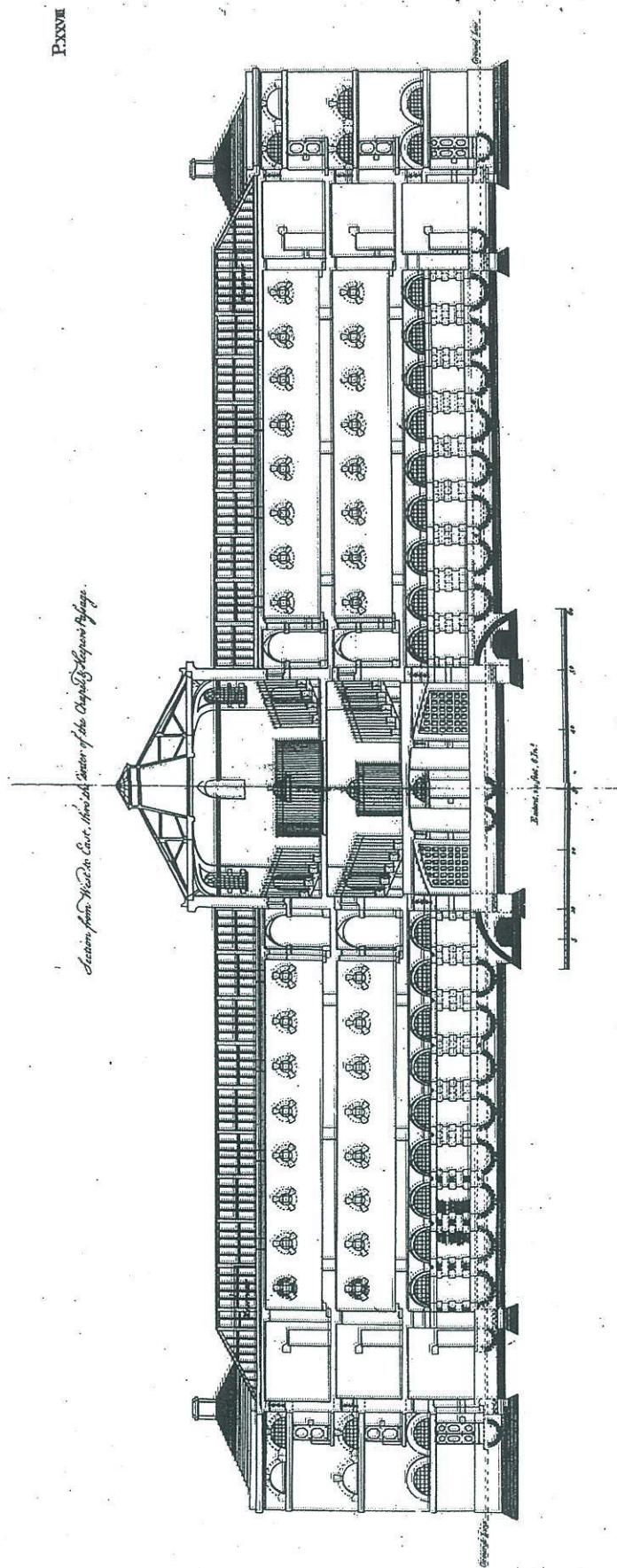


Fig 13 South facing section across the prison buildings

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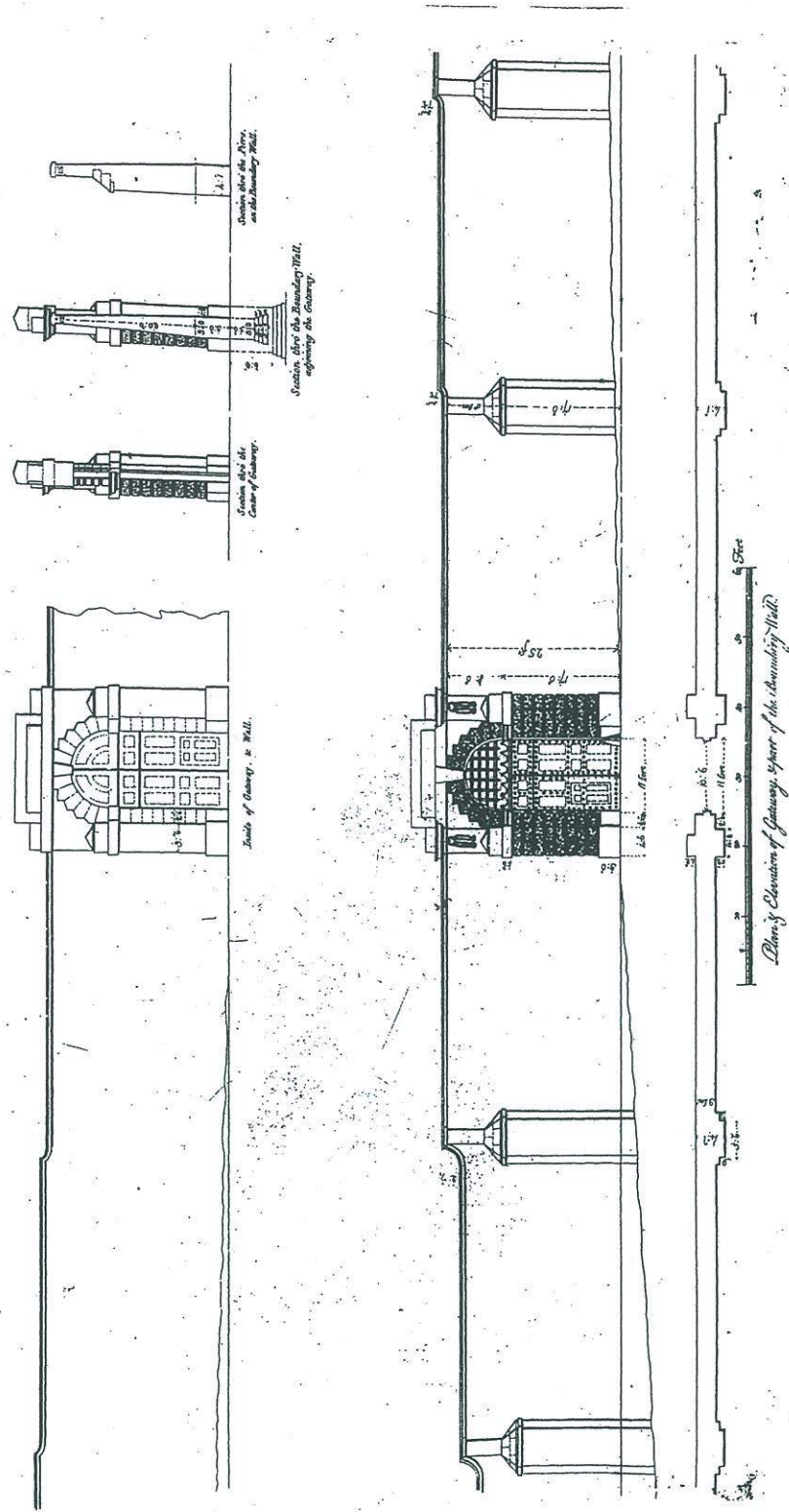


Fig 14 Elevation showing gateway and boundary wall