

THE CHURCHYARD OF ST DUNSTAN, STEPNEY

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

by

Roger Bowdler

Historical Analysis & Research Team
Reports and Papers 38
2000



ENGLISH HERITAGE

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LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS



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Stepney Church.

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1 Outline Account of the Church

According to the 13th century chronicler Matthew Paris, an existing church was rebuilt in 952 by St Dunstan himself, while Bishop of London. St Dunstan (924-988) was a Wessex-born Archbishop of Canterbury and statesman, who oversaw reforms of English monasticism and raised the standards of pastoral care. Canonized in 1029, the double dedication is thought to date from that date. This is one of five churches in Greater London dedicated to him.

St Dunstan's Stepney was the principal church of the medieval East End, and served a colossal parish.¹ The present church [fig. 1] is largely of a 15th century date, incorporating earlier elements (especially in the chancel). It is among the largest surviving medieval churches in the London area, but this was only to be expected, given the huge area that the parish served. The church fell into very poor condition after the Reformation: the vestry minutes in 1632 talk of how 'the ruines of the church appeare to be exceeding great'.² A west porch, Artisan Mannerist in style and Laudian in its High Church tone, was added soon after. The church was drastically restored in 1808. Again, in 1881-82, it underwent major restoration at the hands of Newman and Billing, when post-medieval excrescences such as the outer gallery stairs and the 17th century porch were swept away, and the octagonal vestry added to the north-east. Internal alterations had no sooner finished than a major fire damaged the interior in 1901. War damage was repaired in time to celebrate the parish millennium in 1952. Further internal works were carried out in 1967.

2 The Parish of Stepney

Stepney, the principal parish of London's Whitechapel became a separate parish in 1338, and as early as 1311, a chapel-of-ease was built to serve the east end of the parish: this became St Mary, Bow. During the mid-17th century, a period of marked population growth, alternative places of worship (and burial) were being constructed: St John at Wapping opened in 1617; St Paul, Shadwell was opened in 1656, shortly after the Poplar Chapel (now St Matthias, Poplar).

According to Lysons, writing in 1795, the population of the parish of Stepney had grown by thirteen times over previous two centuries.³ The parochial situation had become hopeless by the early 18th century. The 1711 Act for New Churches enabled new parishes to be formed out of Stepney: these were opened as follows:

- 1715 Limehouse (St Anne)
- 1727 St George in the East
- 1728 Spitalfields (Christ Church)
- 1743 Bethnal Green (St Matthew)

¹ On the church, see Hon. Walter C. Pepys and Ernest Godman, *The Church of St Dunstan, Stepney* (*Survey of London* 6th monograph, 1905); John Stow, *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster* (6th ed., 1775) II, 758 ff.; D. Lysons, *Environs of London* III (1795), 418 ff.; D. Hughson, *London* VI (1810), 313 ff.; Gordon Barnes, *Stepney Churches* (1967).

² Barnes, 45.

³ *Op. cit.*, 446.

St Dunstan's retained its place as the mother church of Stepney, and acquired an extra responsibility when it was decreed that all persons born at sea on British ships were to be regarded as belonging to the parish of Stepney. But it also gained a reputation for the sheer quantity of burials it had to deal with. In few places are the morbid consequences of early modern London's expansion as grimly clear as in the burial records of St Dunstan's.

3 Stepney's Grim Demography

Stepney is exceptional in the sheer volume of interments it has received. According to Lysons, the following numbers of burials were performed during the major epidemics of the 17th century:⁴

	Total Burials	Plague Victims
1603	2,257	650
1625	4,191	2,978
1665	8,598	6,583

So great was the pressure on the vicar in 1625 that the Bishop of London granted a license permitting the parish clerk to hold burial services himself.⁵ Even a large graveyard like Stepney's could not receive this quantity of corpses, and graveyards were opened in Spitalfields, Wapping, and Shadwell. Other plague pits were almost certainly dug elsewhere in the parish, it still constituted a phenomenal quantity of interments.

In 1665 the last major epidemic of the plague hit Stepney very badly. No fewer than 6,580 persons were buried in 1665-66, a number unsurpassed elsewhere in London. Shortly after, however, the churchyard had returned to a sufficiently tranquil condition for Pepys to kill time in June 1667 by 'spending time in the churchyard, looking over gravestones'.⁶

Daniel Lysons' interest in demography led him to undertake a statistical analysis of many London parish registers, and the fruits were included in his *Environs of London*. Like many metropolitan parishes, Stepney saw far more deaths than births, as his figures made clear.

	Average births per year	Average burials per year
1580-90	184	230
1624-33	649	1322
1680-84	1064	2058
1720-24	1437	2755
1780-84	350	460

⁴ Lysons, 448-49.

⁵ *Survey of London*, 40.

⁶ Diary entry for 3rd June 1667.

Stepney's remarkable burial rates had been noted in Strype's 1755 edition of Stow's *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster*. Having recited dozens of epitaphs, it described the dense arrangement of memorials:

All these, with a great many more, lie buried under the fair Grave-stones, or raised Tombs in Vaults made for the respective Families. Whereby it comes to pass that the Ground of the Churchyard is better improved for Graves: For, by digging these Vaults deep, therer is more Room for Burial of Corpses: Which the Churchyard, tho' large, is scarce able to contain. For they bury 2000 People, or upward, every year. In the Year 1703, from *December* the 13th to *December* the 14th, 1704, were buried in *Stepney Church and Churchyard* 2150. Sometimes they bury more in a week in this single Parish, than are buried in that Space of Time in all the Parishes of *London* within the Walls.⁷

Strype supported this remarkable assertion by giving the burial figures for the week of September 5-12th, 1704: 48 burials in Stepney, 45 burials within the City walls. The figures cited by Lysons above indicate how the opening of new churches in the East End took some of the pressure off St Dunstan's. Nevertheless, a remarkable quantity of London's dead had been deposited here by the time the graveyard was closed for burials in 1854.

4 History of the Churchyard

At nearly seven acres in extent, the churchyard of St Dunstan's is exceptionally large in London terms. The reason for this is obvious: it had to serve a very large, very populous, and often very poor parish, and had to accommodate a startling quantity of bodies. Stepney churchyard thus contains a number of plague pits, which had been dug in response to the epidemics of 1603, 1625 and 1665.⁸ The areas close to the church present –or used to present-- conventional groups of tombs, but the empty areas at the edges of the churchyard mark dense deposits of the dead.

The earliest detailed depiction of the churchyard dates from 1615. A survey of lands belonging to the Mercers' Company [fig. 2] shows the church essentially in its present form. The northern part of the churchyard had already assumed its present form; the southern part was occupied by 'the Parsonage Ground', open space which included two ranges of buildings and a pond at the southern end. The large parsonage stood due east of the church. A range of buildings also stood along the north-western perimeter of the churchyard. The churchyard was enlarged substantially to the south as a result of the plagues of 1625 and 1665. A parish resolution in 1655 challenged 'all idle and disorderly persons whoe walke upp & downe on the lords daye or lyers on the ground in the churchyard' and a 'cage and a pare of stocks' were accordingly set up in the churchyard.⁹ By the time of Joel Gascoyne's *An Actuell Survey of the Parish of St Dunstan Stepney* (1703) [fig. 3], the churchyard had assumed much of its present form. The buildings to the west and south had been cleared, and the churchyard extended over all of the 'Parsonage Ground'. Paths ran from the west and north-west to the church to the east, but not to the south. Such a path (as well as one leading from the north-east corner) had appeared by the time of Roque's map of 1745, however [fig. 4] which showed a sprinkling of chest tombs across the entire churchyard. In

⁷ Op. cit. II, 760.

⁸ *Survey of London*, 40.

⁹ *Survey of London*, 41.

1753 the Vestry Minutes make mention of an agreement to maintain the pavement which led from the west stile to the north-west corner.¹⁰ 1753 is also the date of the earliest reliable depiction of the graveyard [fig. 5]. This shows how the ground was randomly covered with a variety of chest tombs, ledgers, head- and footstones; the chest prominently positioned in the right foreground has disappeared and cannot be identified, but was clearly exceptionally sumptuous. The gravel-strewn paths are shown, as is a brick archway along the eastern perimeter, leading to the old rectory, and a palisaded northern perimeter fence with a gateway.

In 1778 the perimeter wall was to be repaired, 'rationall gates' installed and the carriageway widened. The paths were covered with gravel. The 'herbage' of the churchyard was valued at £2/2/- annually in 1780. The 1799 edition of Horwood's map [fig. 6] showed avenues of trees planted along the paths from the north-east and north-west corners which led to the church; a small enclosure is shown along the south-eastern wall which may have been a sexton's store, a mortuary or even a bone-house. The rectory had been demolished by this time, and its former grounds given over to market gardens. Numerous views were now being taken of the churchyard. Among the better ones were an etching by J.P. Malcom in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May 1792 [fig. 7] which shows far fewer tombstones than in the 1753 view. It also shows how mature the trees to the north-west of the church had become. The roughness of the ground is suggested in the etching [fig. 8] which accompanied Lysons's 1795 account of the church in *The Environs of London*.

A major programme of clearance and tidying was carried out in 1802. The ground level around the church was lowered so as to be level with the west porch. All of the 'sunk and waste stones' were to be taken up and laid as a pavement 12 feet wide around the church. The trees around the perimeter of the churchyard were to be taken down, and every alternative poplar tree which lined the walks within the churchyard was to be felled.¹¹ Boundary stones were to be erected which differentiated between the 1st, 2nd and 3rd burial grounds.

Samuel Woodburn's view of 1809 [fig. 9] shows how the tombs of higher status burials were concentrated close to the southern side of the church, giving rise to the nick-name 'Quality Hill'. Just how unreliable these views are in relation to detailed depictions of tombs is demonstrated by comparing Woodburn's view with an 1804 engraving after G. Shepperd [fig. 10]. Perhaps the most vivid view of the churchyard is the 1815 engraving by Hobson, after J.P. Neale [fig. 11]. The jumbled stones, standing at irregular angles, and the broken ground suggest how many burials had gone on here. Visitors are shown contemplating tombs.

Horwood's 1819 map [fig. 12] showed that the avenue of trees had been extended to run the whole length of the churchyard, down to the entrance in the southern tip. A new path had been laid out which led from the north-east corner to the east end of the church. The northern part of the former rectory grounds was now occupied by a terrace of small houses called Church Row. Wooden railings had been erected which ran alongside the paths in 1826. The rural atmosphere of the churchyard is clearly

¹⁰ The Vestry Minutes are deposited at the London Metropolitan Archives. The following extracts were noted, unsourced, by GLC historian Peter Gotlop and are found in London Region historians' file TH 67.

¹¹ Vestry Minutes, resolution of 4th October 1802.

indicated in the undated engraving of c.1820 after G. Shepherd, which shows the church from the south-west, behind the screen of poplars [fig. 13].

The boundary wall had long been a source of concern. The Vestry Minutes for May 1825 stated that 'the Boundary Wall of the Churchyard is not in a state to afford sufficient security thereto'. Not until November 1843, however, was a parish rate agreed to which would set this to rights. This would raise £1,500 which would be used to 'take down and reinstate parts thereof on the east, south and west sides and to place an iron railing on the top of the same with entrance gates – to fence in with an iron railing on the top of the same with entrance gates to fence in with an iron railing on the north side'. The dead house in the north-east corner was also rebuilt at this time [fig. 14].¹² The gates and railings [fig. 15] are among the very best erected at any London churchyard and are already listed in their own right. They are inscribed on the base of the gate piers with the name of the vicar: the Rev. D. Vawdrey, the name of the parish surveyor, A.R. Mason, and the names of the founders: Deeley and Clarke, of Whitechapel.

5 The Victorian Churchyard: Closure and Alteration

The churchyard was closed for burials in 1854.¹³ This ties in with the great wave of urban burial ground closures, for which Orders in Council were passed. Tower Hamlets cemetery had opened in 1841, thereby taking the pressure off St Dunstan's over-stuffed graveyard. Burials were allowed to take place in existing vaults, however, and the last burial is thought to have taken place in 1886.¹⁴

Stanford's Library Map of London of 1862 [fig. 16] showed that the churchyard, by the time of its closure, had been extended considerably to the east by the absorption of the former market gardens which lay to the south of the gardens of the Church Row houses. This may have been a last-minute addition to the burial ground: a Vestry meeting in October 1854 decreed that burials would be allowed in the new ground up to 1856, as soon as it had been consecrated.¹⁵ It also shows trees planted around the western perimeter of the churchyard, and alongside the new path, which ran east from outside the southern porch of the church. An early photograph, dated to c1865, shows the immaculately maintained lawn of the churchyard to the east of the church, freshly planted with young evergreens [fig. 17].

The churchyard continued to provide a much-needed area of open space within the densely developed East End. It was also used as an illegal quarry: an article called 'Destruction of Monuments in Stepney Churchyard' in the *Tower Hamlets Independent* for 3rd February 1872 told of how a local antiquary had found fragments of old tombs built into the fabric of recent houses round about.

The High Victorian movement to convert disused graveyards into public gardens led to the foundation of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in the mid-1880s. In March 1886 the churchyard was transferred into the care of the MPGA, and, having

¹² Vestry Minutes, 16th November 1843.

¹³ *Tower Hamlets News* vol. 4 [n.d.], 37.

¹⁴ *Daily Herald*, 21st June 1937.

¹⁵ *Survey of London*, 41.

obtained a faculty in 1885, work commenced on the levelling and tidying-up of the ground. The ground, choked with centuries of burials, had risen considerably in level; part of the 1880s work consisted of lowering the ground around the church:

In 1885-86 the ground was excavated immediately about the church so that it could be entered on the level and in order that dampness might not affect the fabric. This has produced a moat-like effect on three sides... this peculiarity is accentuated by the iron railing which was put up to keep the inner sunken space free from the intrusion of loiterers from the public recreation garden that was then formed out of the old and neglected churchyard.¹⁶

This work was viewed with alarm by some sensitive observers: the *East London Advertiser* for 10th April 1886 reported of the Thames Police Court that

A respectable looking man applied to Mr Sanders for his advice, and complained of the desecration of the dead going on at the churchyard. A hundred men were engaged in digging the ground up and strewing human remains about, which could be seen all over the ground. He saw what appears to be human skulls, and he wanted to know if he could not take a shovel, and cover them up with earth, as it was a violation of law and decency.¹⁷

He was told to take the matter up with the parish; what the outcome was is unknown, but the question does arise of what became of the huge quantity of human remains deposited here: the smooth sward belies the bone-laden nature of the soil beneath. According to Mrs Basil Holmes, uncoffined remains were encountered in the south-west corner of the churchyard, and it is thought that this marks the site of the plague pit.¹⁸ Alternatively, it might simply be the location of the poorer burials which would have been denied the lavish sepulture of those persons who were laid to rest in brick-lined vaults upon 'Quality Hill', the area to the south of the church where the best monuments were located.

The MPGA was very busy in East London at this time: the converted graveyard of St Paul's Shadwell was re-opened as a public garden in May 1886. According to Mrs Basil Holmes, the Stepney churchyard was re-opened as a garden in 1887, one of the thirty that the association was to convert: 'it is a most useful and shady ground, and is very neatly kept by the L.C.C.'. A photograph in her book¹⁹ showed the main path as flanked with benches and young trees, and an early 20th century post card shows how manicured the graveyard had become [fig. 18].

However, the creation of a new public garden came at a price, and it was the monuments which were sacrificed. The MPGA called for the clearance of numerous tombs, but before this was implemented a survey was undertaken of them, and a plan drawn up [fig. 19]. Where the survey was deposited has not come to light. This was lamented by John Page in 1896: 'to those that knew old Stepney Churchyard, with its forest of gravestones, before it was laid out as a public garden and placed under the jurisdiction of the London County Council, the number of stones now intact seems very small indeed'.²⁰ The number of monuments left standing was very much greater than is now the case, however: the *Survey of London* volume of 1905 listed over three

¹⁶ 'St Dunstan Stepney', The Commercial Gas Company, *The Copartnership Herald* (n.d.: c.1905), 40 (offprint in the NMR).

¹⁷ Loc cit., 3.

¹⁸ *The London Burial Grounds* (1896), 126.

¹⁹ *The London Burial Grounds*, 235 and 300.

²⁰ *Stepney Churchyard*, 1.

dozen older tombs, with legible inscriptions. Hardly any of these survive today. The frontispiece to the *Survey* consisted of an etching of the church seen from the north-west, and showed children playing in the graveyard against the backdrop of the venerable church [fig. 20].

6 Twentieth-Century History

One early addition to the churchyard was a cross. This was formed out of charred timbers, taken from the church (which had suffered a major fire in 1901). This cross (which has disappeared) was used as an open air preaching platform.²¹ Another addition to the west of the church was the small granite war memorial in the form of a cross; so numerous were the names of Stepney's dead that they had to be listed inside the church in a book of remembrance.

The biggest change to the churchyard in recent decades was the installation of a children's playground in the south-west corner, above the site of the mass grave. A faculty for this was granted in June 1937, and a shelter and drinking fountain were erected as well.²² During the Second World War, Stepney was subjected to extensive bombing; a faculty for an air raid shelter was granted in 1940. A map showing bomb sites in the borough²³ reveals that two bombs fell to the south-east of the church, two bombs fell on the south-west perimeter, and a V2 rocket fell to the west of the church, close to the western entrance. Not all of the empty spaces within the churchyard are the result of deliberate clearance, then. The post-Blitz appearance of St Dunstan's and its environs is depicted in Hugh Easton's east window within the church of 1949: the damage in surrounding streets is immediately clear; so too is the number of tombs that still stood in the churchyard [fig. 21].

Such was the extent of bomb damage in the Stepney area that grandiose schemes for the formation of a new public open space, with the churchyard at its heart, were drawn up by the LCC in the mid-1950s.²⁴ The MPGA remained freeholders of the churchyard, and in 1956 asked that the better monuments be preserved in situ. Repair work to the boundary railings was carried out in 1957-58, using funds from the War Damage Commission. The London Diocesan Fund, in 1958, requested that the LCC leave alone all standing intact tombs: this followed an appeal from John Betjeman in *The Spectator* in early 1957. It ran:

One of the most repulsive forms of Subtopia is the current fashion for turning old country churchyards into semi-recreation grounds. A fate like this awaits one of the most remarkable and attractive Georgian country churchyards I know, and oddly enough it is in East London. It is that of the old parish church of St Dunstan, Stepney. Extensive bombing has turned the area beyond the churchyard into open country littered with prefabs. When the area comes to be rebuilt it should be possible for the LCC to create plenty of open space while keeping the churchyard the countrified place it is and retaining undisturbed the clustered Portland-stone Georgian headstones of various elegant outlines and commemorating dead merchants and sea captains as the charming and essential foreground the are to the old church. Perhaps it is not too late to suggest this, and St Dunstan's will be the first churchyard to be treated as

²¹ *Survey of London*, 42.

²² *The Daily Herald*, 21st June 1937.

²³ Bancroft Road Library, map 1706: *Stepney Air Raid Damage Map* (c.1945).

²⁴ Bancroft Road Library, file TH/8254/59: *Stepney Churchyard Open Space* (c.1956-60).

something of beauty and not merely as something of antiquarian interest or a crazy-paved 'garden of rest'.²⁵

However, neither Betjeman's nor the LDF's appeals were to prevail: extensive clearances of tombs were carried out in 1958 following the granting of a faculty for such work.²⁶ The LCC's plans for a mega-park were still being considered in 1963, but by 1966 a far more modest scheme was afoot which would have added a new open space to the east, consisting of the former site of Maroon, Lanyard and Cayley Streets. This scheme too was finally shelved in 1969, and the churchyard has thus retained its wholeness and character.²⁷ The surrounding area has undergone great alteration through the construction of housing estates. Considerable swathes of open space survive to the west of the church, however, which stand as reminders of the ferocity of bombing, and the radical post-war plans for the area's rebuilding. The town farm nearby exudes an unexpectedly rustic aroma.

By the 1970s the churchyard was becoming a cause of concern. In 1974 vandalism had badly damaged the playground shelter and the playground attendants were in despair.²⁸ It was subsequently demolished. The GLC became involved here in the mid-1980s, and in 1987 the re-laying of the main pathway (with York stone flags, salvaged from the Courage Brewery in Southwark) was completed [fig. 22].

7 Epitaphs at Stepney

Pepys would have found much to read, for Stepney was renowned for its epitaphs. Writing in *The Spectator* in October 1712, Sir Richard Steele paid a handsome tribute to the graveyard's many verses:

Since I am talking of Death, and have mentioned an Epitaph, I must tell you Sir, that I have made discovery of a churchyard in which I believe you might spend an afternoon with great pleasure to yourself, and to the publick. It belongs to the church of Stebon-heath, commonly called Stepney. Whether or no it be that the people of that parish have a particular genius for epitaph, or that there be some poet among them who undertakes that work by the great, I can't tell; but there are more remarkable inscriptions in that place than in any other I have met with; and I may say, without vanity, that there is not a Gentleman in England better read in tombstones than myself, my studies having laid very much in churchyards.²⁹

The 18th century histories of London recite page after page of quirky commemorative verse which testifies to the richness of Stepney's tombstones. Two lost inscriptions must stand for many. One commemorated a sailor, Captain John Dunch (d.1696):

Tho' Boreas' Blasts, and Neptune's Waves,
Have toss'd me to and fro;
In spight of both, by God's decree,
I harbour here below;
Where I do now at Anchor ride
With many of our Fleet
Yet once again I must set sail

²⁵ *Spectator*, 15th February 1957.

²⁶ Guildhall Library, MS 18319/156.

²⁷ Bancroft Road Library, file TH/8254/60: *Stepney Churchyard Extension* (c.1960-70).

²⁸ *East London Advertiser*, 25th January 1974.

²⁹ *The Spectator* no.518, 24th October 1712.

Our Admiral Christ to meet.³⁰

Steele was the first of the many anthologists to cite the shortest epitaph of all at Stepney:

Here lies the Body of Daniel Saul
Spittle-fields weaver, and that's all.

In 1833, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* could somewhat exaggeratedly claim, 'what Londoner has not visited, or heard of the poetic fame of, Stepney churchyard, and the tributary tear of its mortal muses'.³¹ One of the most remarkable Late Georgian inscriptions was to be found on a tall headstone (with attached body stone) erected to Betsey Harris, who 'died suddenly while contemplating on the beauties of the moon on the 24th Aril 1831 in her 23rd year'.³²

Regrettably, only one early 18th century inscription remains legible at Stepney, that of Rear-admiral Sir John Leake (d.1720). Already, by the time of the *Survey of London* monograph of 1905, it was stated that 'all, without exception, are now partly or wholly undecipherable, and many are missing'.³³

8 Notable Persons Buried in the Churchyard

A number of persons of note were buried at St Dunstan's. In most cases, nothing remains of their memorials.

Captain Richard Swanley d.1650

Swanley, an East India Company captain, gained celebrity as a Parliamentarian naval officer. He invested the Isle of Wight, and ensured it came over to Parliament; he helped in the capture of Portsmouth and Southampton and prevented Irish Royalist forces from reaching Wales. He retired to Limehouse.³⁴

Roger Crab d.1680

Crab was a celebrated crank known as 'the English Hermit'. He renounced animal products in 1641 and lived off roots, leaves and bran. Having suffered a head wound during the Civil War he adopted an ever more fanatical commitment to vegetarianism and mysticism, endured spells in prison, and became a hermit living in a cottage at Uxbridge. He wrote a pamphlet in 1655 which described the *psychomachia* between body and mind. In later years he acquired a reputation for prophecy and sanctity.³⁵ His tomb was surprisingly elaborate: 'a very handsome tomb was erected to his memory in the churchyard... which being decayed, the ledger stone was placed in a pathway leading across the Churchyard to Whitehorse-street, where it still remains, but the inscription is almost defaced'.³⁶ Part of it ran:

³⁰ John T. Page, *Stepney Churchyard: its Monuments and Inscriptions* (reprinted from *East End News*, 1896), 10.

³¹ Op. cit., 16th March 1833, 161-3.

³² Page, 5.

³³ Op. cit., 42.

³⁴ DNB.

³⁵ DNB.

³⁶ Lysons, 454-56.

Wouldest thou his religion know?
In brief twas this: to all to do
Just as he would be done unto.
So in kind nature's law he stood
A Temple undefil'd with blood,
A friend to everything that's good...

Nothing remains of it today.

The Rev. Timothy Cruso d.1697 (no. 27)

'A little northward from the church, on a spacious marble stone, is along Latin inscription to the memory of [Cruso], an eminent dissenting minister'.³⁷ A Presbyterian, he published numerous religious works and was a prominent City preacher.³⁸

The Rev. Matthew Mead d.1699

This tomb [fig. 23] still stands, close to the south porch, but has lost the inscription 'in gold letters on black'.³⁹ Mead, formerly curate of Shadwell, was ejected in 1662 and became a Dissenting minister: from 1671 he was closely associated with the Stepney Meeting, the burial ground of which (first used only in 1790) was located just to the south of St Dunstan's Churchyard.⁴⁰ Suspected of complicity in the Rye House Plot in 1683, he fled to Holland but was exonerated. Mead helped bring about the amalgamation of the Presbyterian and Congregationalist bodies in 1690; it did not last. He published numerous sermons as well as *The Young Mans Remembrancer* and was noted as a preacher in London and Holland. Mead occupied the brick entrance gateway of the former Worcester House, to the east of the churchyard, opposite the rectory.⁴¹ His better known son, the doctor and collector Richard Meade,⁴² was buried in The Temple.⁴³

Rear Admiral Sir John Leake d.1720

This is one of the best surviving tombs of all, but it has lost its railings [figs. 24-25]. Rotherhithe-born Leake was the son Richard Leake (d.1696), Master Gunner of England and Keeper of H.M. Stores at Woolwich, a hero of the Dutch Wars. His son rose to prominence as a naval commander. His lengthy epitaph, still mainly legible, recounts his principal feats. These included the relief of the siege of Londonderry, 1689; the destruction of a French fleet of 51 ships off Newfoundland and the capture of a settlement, 1702; the defeat of a French fleet off Malaga, 1704; twice relieving sieges of Gibraltar, and capturing 13 ships; the relief of the siege of Barcelona, and the seizure of 90 grain ships; the capture of Carthage, Alicante, Sardinia and the Balaeric Islands. He sat as MP for Rochester in 1708-14, and ended as Chairman of the Board of Admiralty. The monument was erected in his lifetime.⁴⁴

³⁷ Hughson, op. cit., 315.

³⁸ DNB.

³⁹ Hughson, 316.

⁴⁰ See HART *Reports and Papers* 27.

⁴¹ Lysons, 427.

⁴² He was 'possessor of one of the most valuable collections of books, manuscripts, antiques, paintings etc. that ever centred in a private individual': Lysons, 435.

⁴³ DNB.

⁴⁴ DNB.

Alexander Johnson d.1775

'Late housekeeper' of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Johnson was a figure of the Georgian stage and was particularly 'celebrated for his performance of 'Gibby' in 'The Wonder''.⁴⁵

9 Lost Monuments of Note

The numerous early views of the church show the churchyard to have been filled with a range of standard tomb types: chests, ledgers, head and footstones. Few of them are known to have been exceptional. One, however, deserves note. A drawing in Tower Hamlets local history library [fig. 26] shows a chest tomb with projecting corner scrolls and a highly unusual relief of a *Vanitas* scene, with skull, urn, candle, bubbles. According to John Page, this probably commemorated Captain William Wildey, mariner (d.1679).⁴⁶

10 Survey of Surviving Tombs

The monuments are listed from north to south, running from west to east.

1 W.H. Hawkins 1822

[Fig. 27] Large Portland stone square chest on raised base, with Soanian detail and an anthemion finial. Reeded angle pilasters, fielded inscription panels with quarter circle paterae at corners. Extensive remains of black and white paint. Railings gone. Inscription on east side of base 'THE FAMILY VAULT OF W.H. HAWKINS 1822'. Hawkins died in 1863 and his wife in 1867 so presumably commemorates an infant.

2 Susan Rigby n.d.

Portland stone ledger on stepped base; probably the remains of a collapsed chest. Inscription very worn.

3 Frances Francis d.1832

York stone headstone with scallop-headed top. 'An excellent wife and a careful mother'.

4 Robert Oldfield d.1816

York stone headstone with clear inscription. He was 'Boatswain of his Majesty's Ship Acorn'. Epitaph reads: *From toils and troubles on the Main, / Death kindly set me free / That now of God I may obtain / Eternal life from thee*'.

5 Mrs Christian Boote d.1821

Portland ledger over a yellow brick chest, standing on a stepped base of Portland over a wider brick plinth; much restored.

⁴⁵ Lysons, 437.

⁴⁶ *Stepney Churchyard*, 5: a decayed altar tomb 'formerly elaborately carved on the sides with skulls and other ornaments'.

6 **Alice Dunnett d.1841**

Arch-headed York headstone, laminating at foot. Inscr. At top 'WATCH AND PRAY'. Epitaph: *Death like a wing'd arrow quickly came / And call'd to dust this frail, this mortal frame, / The unfetter'd spirit left the house of clay / To live and reign with Christ in endless day.*

7 **Captain Henry Mudd d.1692**

[Fig. 28] Grey granite ledger on a Portland stone base. Inscr.: 'This Tomb was rebuilt at the sole Expencc of the CORPORATION of the TRINITY HOUSE, of Deptford Strond, in the year 1776, as a grateful Testimony of his benefactions to that Charity... Restored 1876'. History: Mudd donated the site of the Trinity Almshouses in the Mile End Road. The tomb was seemingly wholly renewed in 1876.

8 **Anon.**

Unidentified: a heavy Pennant stone ledger on a low brick base.

9 **Strevens Family c.1840**

Tall pediment-topped headstone of Portland, inscription weathered in upper sections. Dates of death range from 1840s to 1860s.

10 **Anon.**

Portland stone ledger on a low stepped base, formerly surrounded with railings.

11 **Mr Easter**

Heavy Portland stone ledger on stone base, over brick plinth, formerly surrounded with railings.

12 **Richard Drake d.1811**

[Fig. 29] Yellow brick chest with Portland stone ledger, inscription panels to sides and ends, and base, set on York stone capping to a wider plinth of yellow brick with ventilation openings. Spearheaded railings set between urn-capped posts.

13 **Esther Markham n.d.**

Portland stone chest with arched inscription panels at each end, standing on a York stone-capped plinth of plum brick.

14 **Edmund Snell d.18(?)70**

Pennant stone ledger (?re-used) on low Portland stone base with sloping cement surround.

15 **Sarah Ann Samuels d.1841**

[Fig. 30] Portland stone headstone with pedimental top, containing relief of a rose; at the foot is an oval relief with a drooping rose.

16 **Anon. c.1760**

Worn Pennant ledger on heavy moulded Portland base. Dates of death in the 1760s just legible.

17 **David Oldis d.1835**

Toppled York stone headstone, behind illegible standing Portland stone.

18 **Anon.**

Heavy Portland ledger on a sunken base.

19 **War Memorial**

Celtic Cross of granite with IHS monogram and interlace, standing on rough masonry base with steps (for the laying of wreaths). No names: they are mentioned inside the church. No mention of the 39-45 war either.

20 **Mrs Sarah Daplyn d.1834**

[Fig. 31] Yellow brick chest (repaired) with Portland stone ledger and end inscription panels, standing on a stepped base of Portland, over a brick plinth (rendered in parts). Good spearheaded railings set between urn-capped posts.

21 **Anon.**

Portland stone ledger over yellow and pink brick base.

22 **Thomas Holt 183-**

[Fig. 32] Older Pennant stone ledger set on top of a thick and wide capping of Portland stone, formerly with railings set in, with the inscription on the west end 'THE FAMILY VAULT OF THOMAS HOLT, 183-'. Sides of plinth much repaired; probably originally of a light brown sandstone.

23 **Mr Christopher Horne d.1841**

Portland stone chest with reeded angle pilasters and ledger, set on Portland base formerly with inset railings. Recently restored.

24 **Patrick Foy d.1849**

Arch-topped York stone headstone, delaminating. Set in front of a mid-18th century ledger, with weathered inscription.

25 **John Timney d.1818**

York stone ledger with faded inscription on low base. The son of Thomas Timney of the Hamlet of Ratcliff, undertaker.

26 **Anon.**

Portland stone chest and ledger, with armorial relief. Fluted angle pilasters, sides and ends with oval framed panels. Railings formerly set into base, now gone.

27 **Matthew Mead MD d.1699**

[Fig. 23] Pennant stone ledger over Portland stone chest. Angle balusters enriched with cherub heads and gadrooning. Renewed inscription panel on north side. Tall Portland stone base, formerly with railings. History: Mead was a prominent Non-Conformist minister.

28 **Anon. c.1840**

Tall Portland stone headstone, inscription weathered.

29 **James Smith d.1830**

Portland headstone with arched top.

30 Mary Harris

Portland headstone, lying flat on ground.

31 William Whittle Johnson d.1820

Stepped Portland stone ledger, formerly surmounted with railings, upon a wide brick plinth with York stone capping and ventilation openings.

32 Gallilee c.1826

Portland headstone with arched top. Worn inscription names Samuel Searle Gallilee d.1826.

33 Robert Lemon d.1858

[Fig. 33] Portland chest with heavy angle balusters and a shallow pyramidal ledger. Base of York stone.

34 Henry Lane d.1858

[Fig. 34] Portland stone chest with rusticated angles, inset side and end panels, on a sloping two-step base. Lane was 'of this parish, shipbuilder'. The monument is signed R. Garbutt jnr, Wapping'.

35 Samuel Somes d.1828

[Fig. 35] Tapering Portland stone sarcophagus with fluted frieze and shallow pyramidal cover. Also to Joseph Somes d.1845, sometime MP for Dartmouth. Same design as no. 47.

36 Thomas Ward d.1847

[Fig. 36] Tapering sarcophagus of Portland stone with shallow pyramidal cover, with an oak leaf wreath on the east and west ends; three-stage base, with guilloche enrichment to the upper level. Heavy iron railings with pyramidal spikes. Biblical inscriptions accompany the epitaph, which describes Ward as 'late ship owner and merchant of the City of London and sixty years an inhabitant of the Parish of Stepney'.

37 Rear-Admiral Sir John Leake d. 1720

[Figs. 24-25] Portland stone chest with Pennant stone framing. Curved marble end panels with long inscriptions. Angle balusters of unusual scrolled form. Extensive cement repairs. Pre-war photographs show ornate iron railings: these would have been early examples. History: Leake was a noted naval commander who played a leading part in the War of Spanish Succession and retired as chairman of the Board of Admiralty.

38 Alfred Head d.1880

Grey granite coped ledger with raised foliate cross. A very late memorial for a graveyard which closed for burials in 1854.

39 Sarah Kippins d.1854

Slate headstone with arched top, delaminating.

40 Rogers

Portland stone headstone, arched and scrolled top. Inscription very weathered; c.1810?

41 Mrs Mary Coucher d.1841

York stone headstone, delaminating, to the wife of John Coucher of Limehouse, shipwright. The word SACRED is carved at the top, within a wreath.

42 Peter Bere d. 1721

[Figs. 37-38] Portland stone chest with Pennant stone ledger (with weathered armorial cartouche). Angle balusters of Pennant flank raised and fielded inscription panels commemorating other members of the Bere and Anselme families. Inscription panel on the north side sports crossed palm fronds. Recently conserved.

43 Charles Aslat d.1808

York stone headstone with arched top, delaminating.

44 Henry Thompson d. 1848

Arched Portland stone headstone, with accompanying footstone.

45 Frederick Wade d.1828

Weathered plain Portland headstone.

46 Sophia Ezzard

Weathered Portland headstone with arched top.

47 Carpenter c.1830

Portland stone tapering sarcophagus with fluted frieze and shallow pyramidal cover, similar in design to no. 35.

48 Mr James Crockford d.1787

Very large York stone slab marking the resting place of several persons disinterred from St Katherine's-by-the-Tower, prior to that church's demolition in 1825.

49 Henry Leatherwhate ?1854

Tall Portland headstone with base, placed over a low chest with York stone ledger and rendered sides.

50 ?John De...

Very weathered early C19 Portland stone chest with shallow pyramidal cover and fielded side and end panels. A separate Portland stone chest lid lies behind.

51 Charles Blewitt c.1830

Weathered York stone headstone with arched top.

52 Richard ?Perrins c.1820

Portland stone headstone with pedimental top containing a weathered relief. Worn inscription suggests he was a Royal Naval officer.

53 Turner Corle d.1843

Plain Portland stone headstone. Inscription weathered but states he was a native of Ramsey, Isle of Man: 'He filled an office in the Court of Chancery upwards of thirty years. Beloved and respected for his amiable disposition by all who had the pleasure of his society'.

54 Sarah Ann Michie d.1808

Plain Portland headstone with arched top to a girl who died aged one. Very dirty.

55 Peter ?Kent

Rebuilt yellow brick chest with Portland ledger, standing on a two-stage stepped base of Portland which formerly housed railings. The south side of the base is inscribed FAMILY VAULT OF MR PETER ?KENT.

11 Overall Assessment of Surviving Monuments

The clearances in the 1880s and 1950s have left only a small proportion of monuments in situ. Of these, only a handful are notable in their own right, but nevertheless all of them play their part in establishing this as a graveyard, and in providing a visual foil for the church. A completely cleared lawn, denuded of tombs, deprives a graveyard of a funerary presence, a presence which evokes the memory of the dead. Even humble tombs, therefore, play an important part in bringing the dead to life. This is particularly the case with tombs that bear legible inscriptions.

Considerable efforts have been made in the past to conserve the monuments. Some repairs have been rather crude, but the recent campaign (only just completed) is greatly to be welcomed. Such work is all too rare in London churchyards.

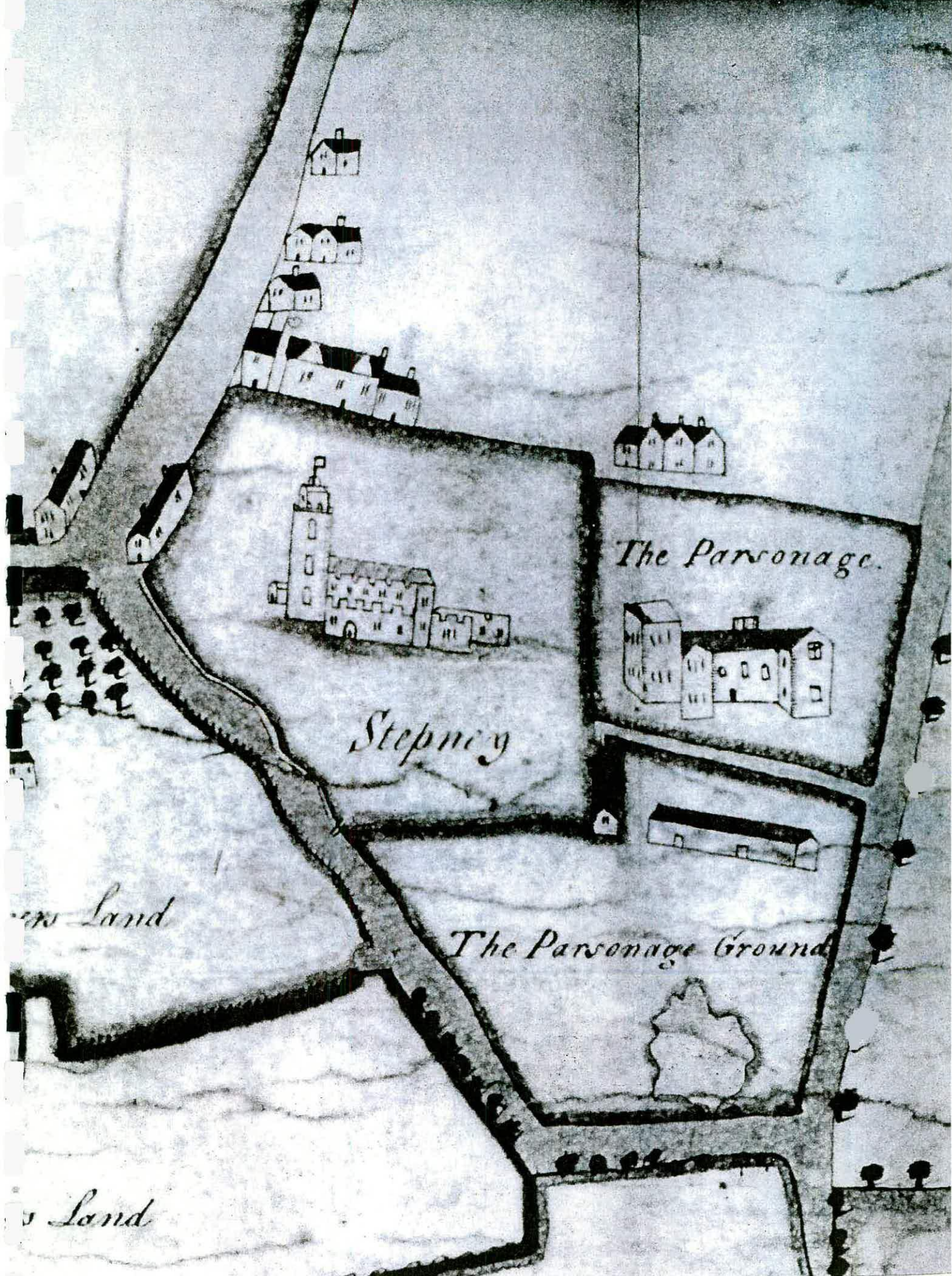
At present only the church is listed (recently upgraded to Grade I), and the railings (Grade II). There are several tombs which deserve listing in their own right. These are numbers 12 and 20, the Drake and Daplyn chest tombs, for their railings; 27, the Mead chest, for its early date, sculptural richness and historical interest; 36, the Ward sarcophagus, for its crisp Neoclassical design and unusual railings; 37, the Leake chest, for its unusual polychromy and design, and its considerable historical interest. The Bere chest, 42, is also unusual in terms of its contrasting polychromy and its early date.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team

25th October 2000.

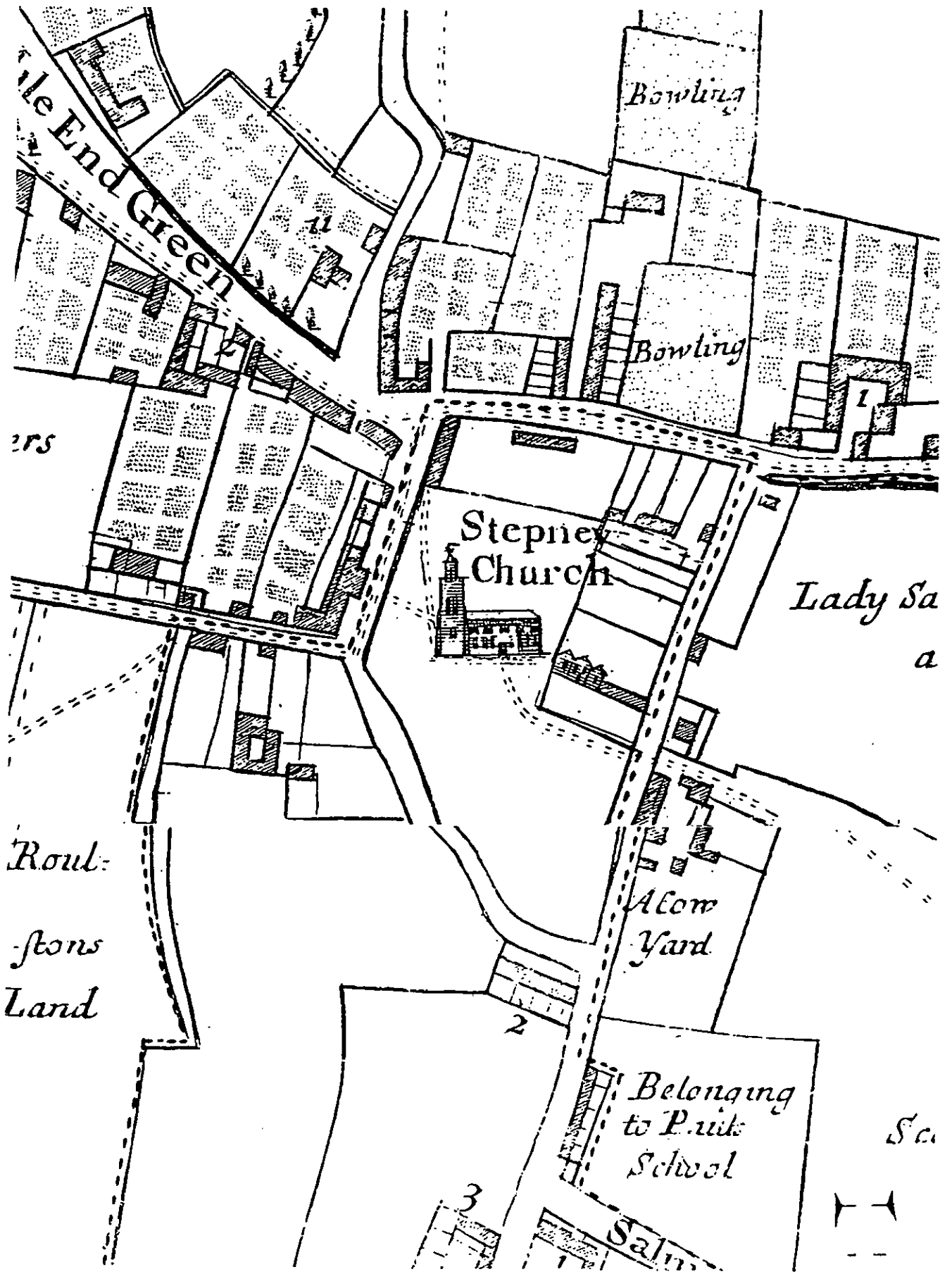


1 St Dunstan's, Stepney from the south-east in 1969 (E.H.)

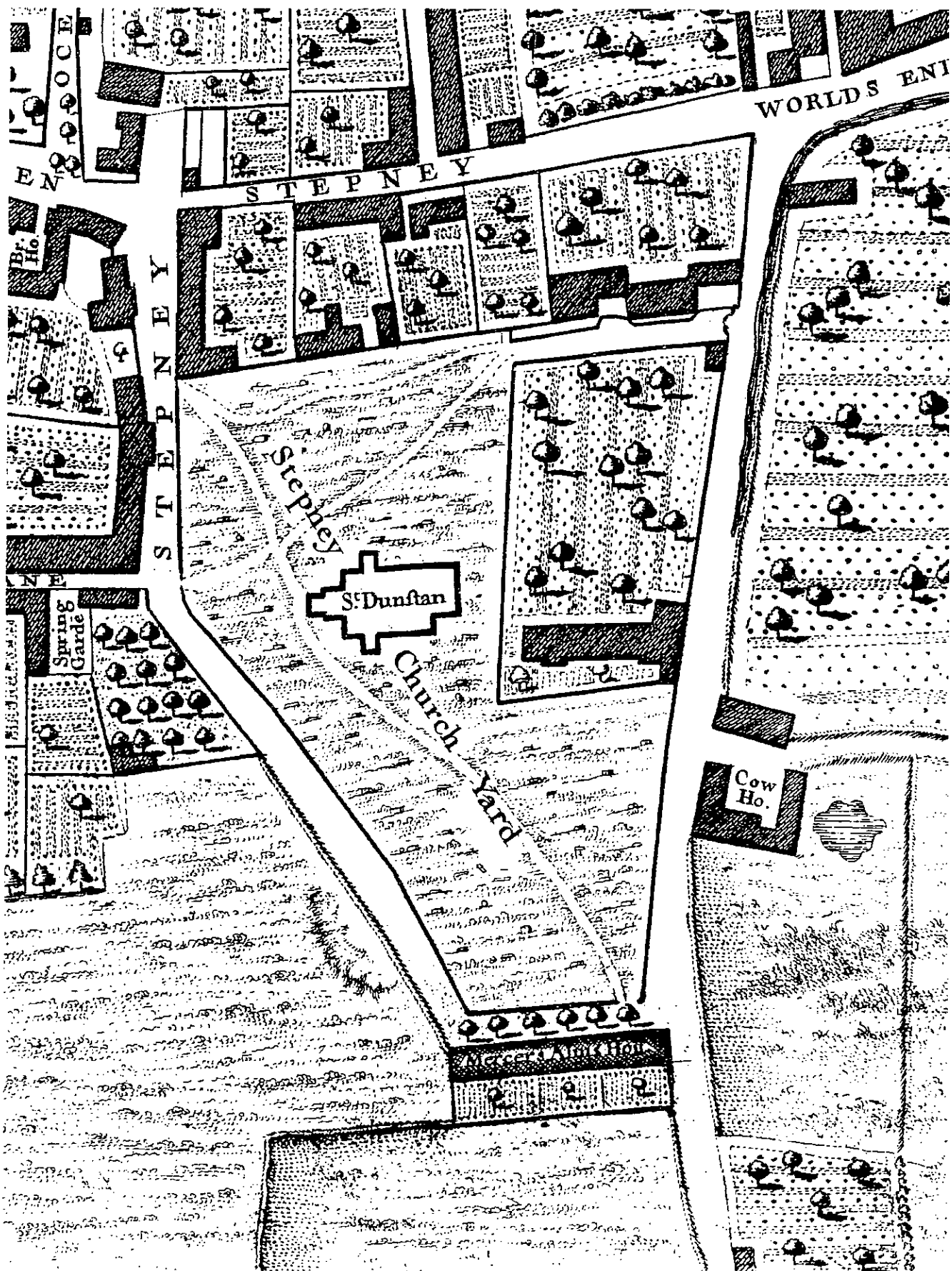


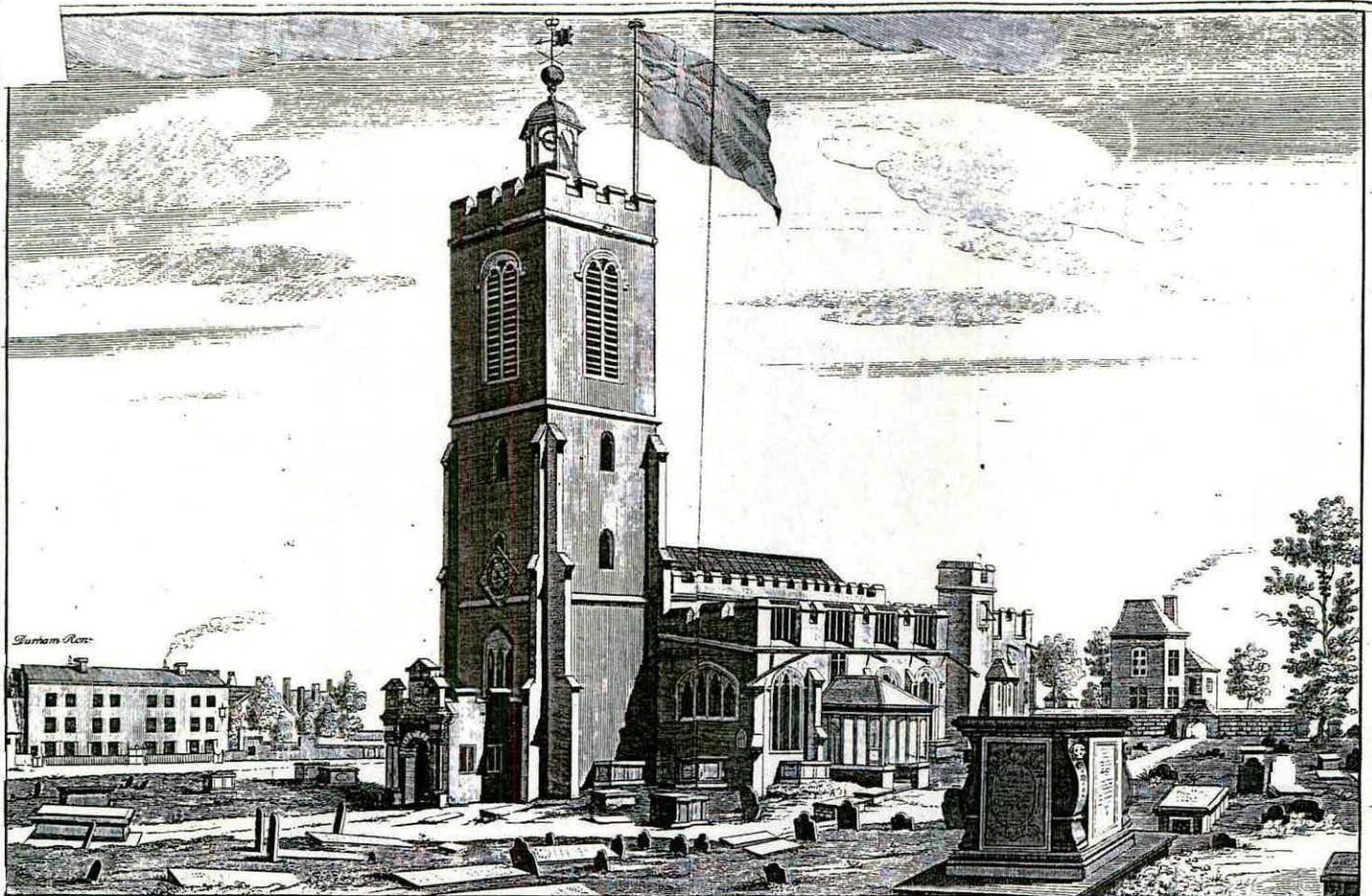
2 Detail from a Platt of such lands as belongeth to the Right Worll. Company of Mercers... in Stepney, 1615 (Mercers' Company)



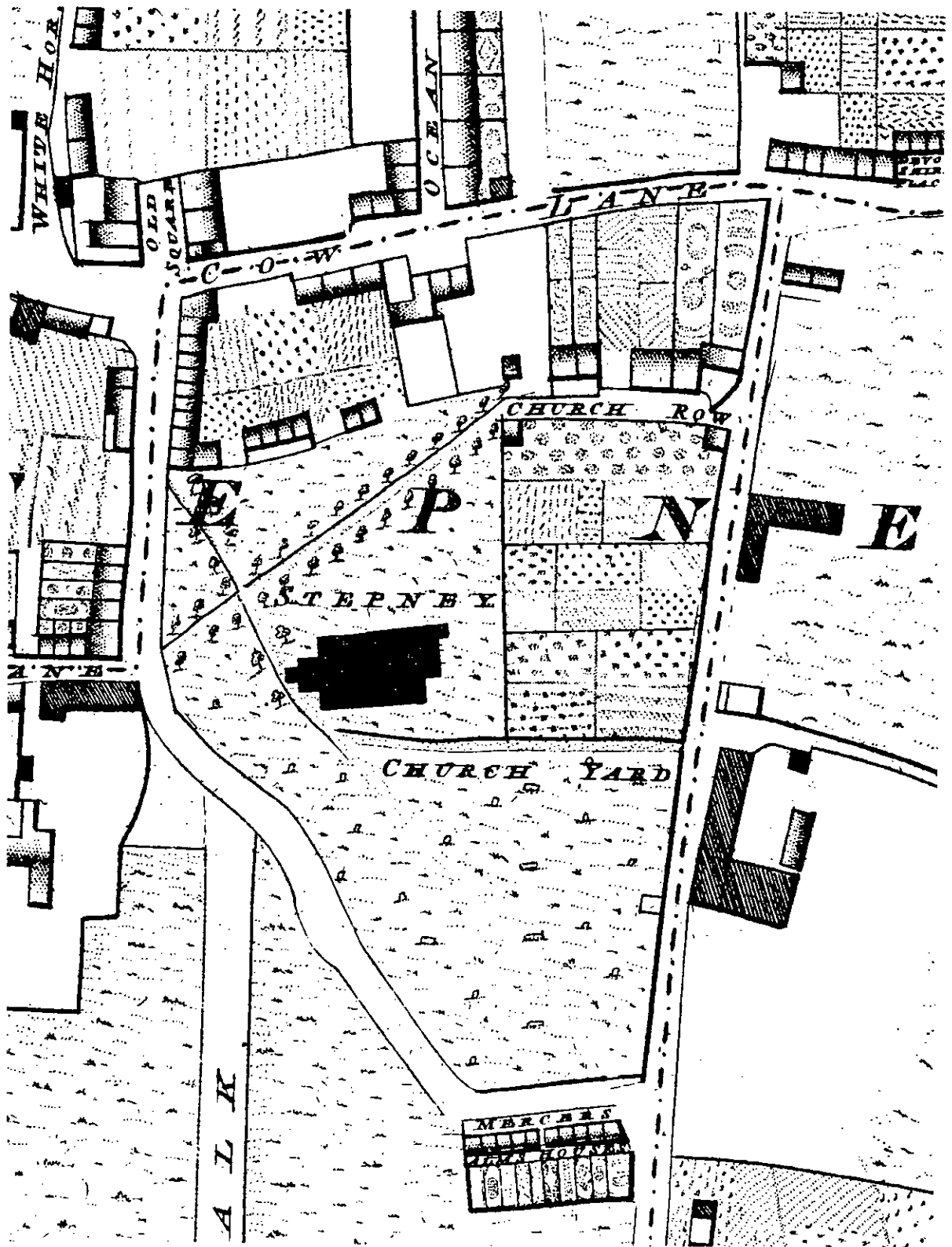


3 Detail from Joel Gascoyne's *An Actuell Survey of the Parish of St Dunstan Stepney*, 1703





A South west Prospect of S^t DUNSTAN'S Church at STEPNEY humbly inscrib'd to the Gentlemen of the VESTRY. 1755.

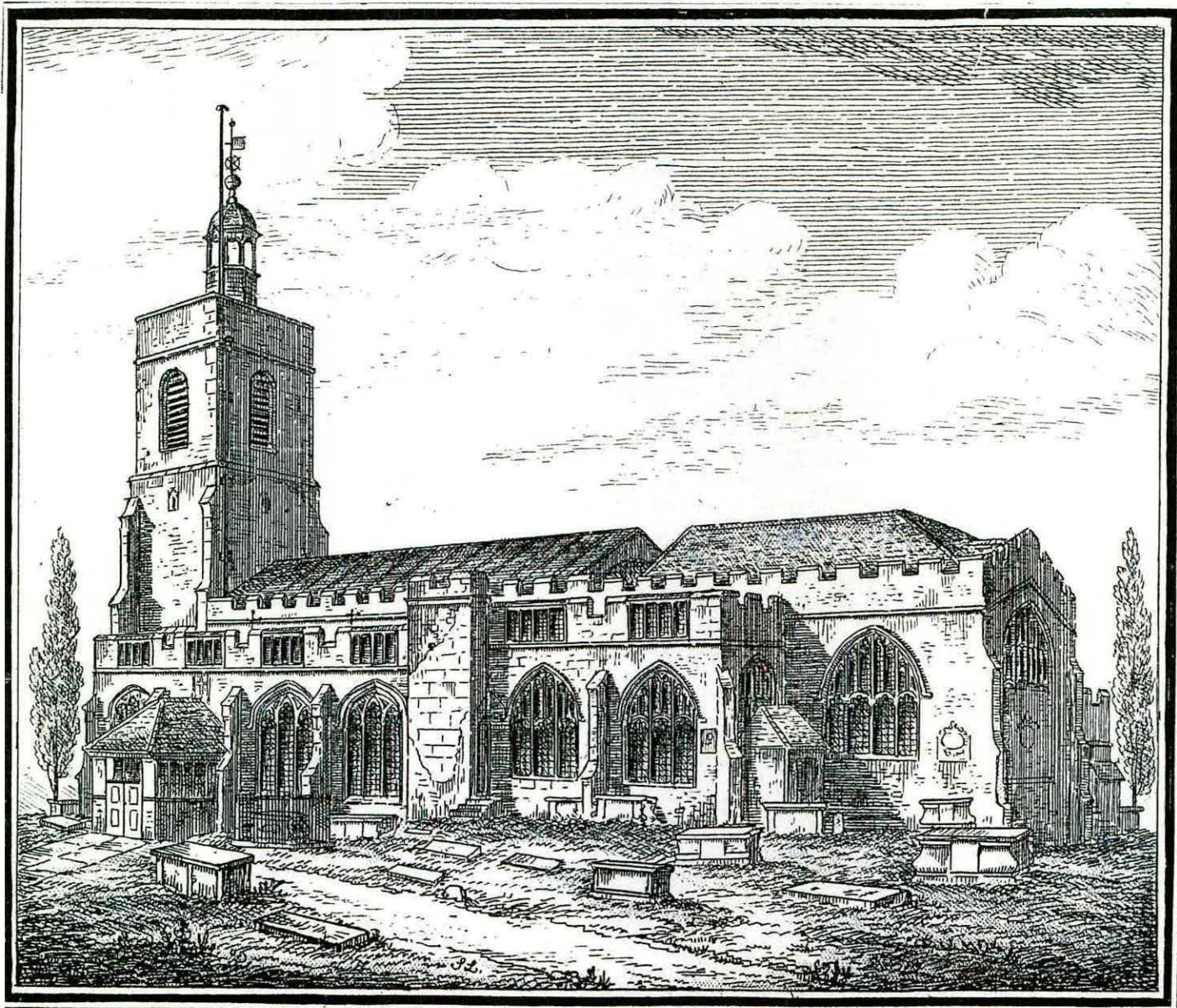


6 Detail from Richard Horwood's *Plan of London Westminster Southwark and parts adjoining*, 1799



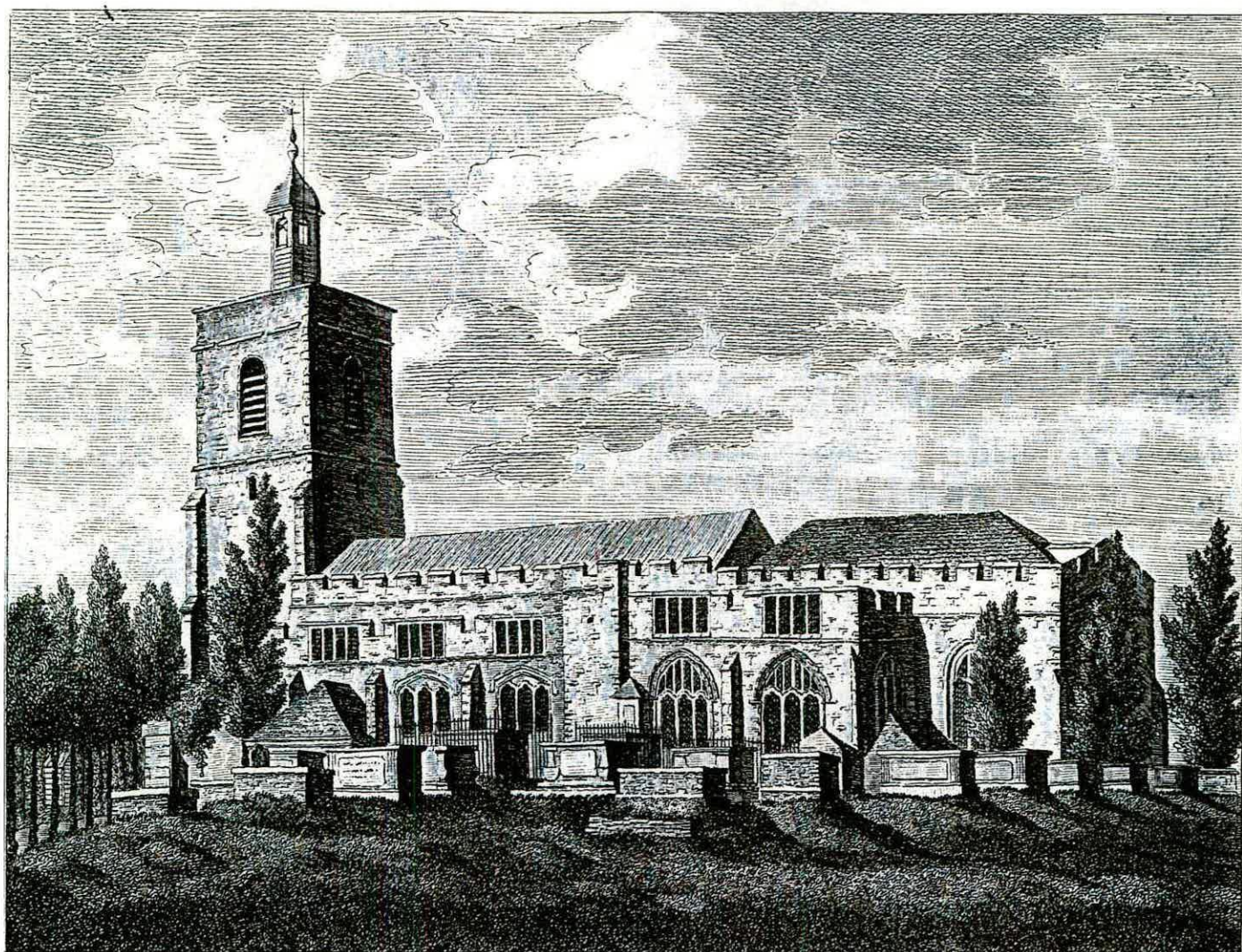
Stepney Church

J.P. Malcolm del. sculp.



Stepney Church.

Published May 1795 by T. Cadell, Junr and W. Dancer.



STEPNEY. MIDD^X

Pub. Feb. 4, 1809, by S. Woodburn, N^o. 112, S^t. Martins Lane, London.

63

- 9 Samuel Woodburn, *Stepney, Middx.* Etching of 1809 (Tower Hamlets local history library)



Engraved by J. Storer, from a drawing by G. Shepherd.

S.E. View of Stepney Church,
MIDDLESEX.

London, Published 1804, by Venue & Hoed, Booksellers, in Strand, & J. Girding, Chapel Street, Butchwell.

10 J. Storer after G. Shepherd, *S.E. View of Stepney Church*. Engraving of 1804 (Tower Hamlets local history library)

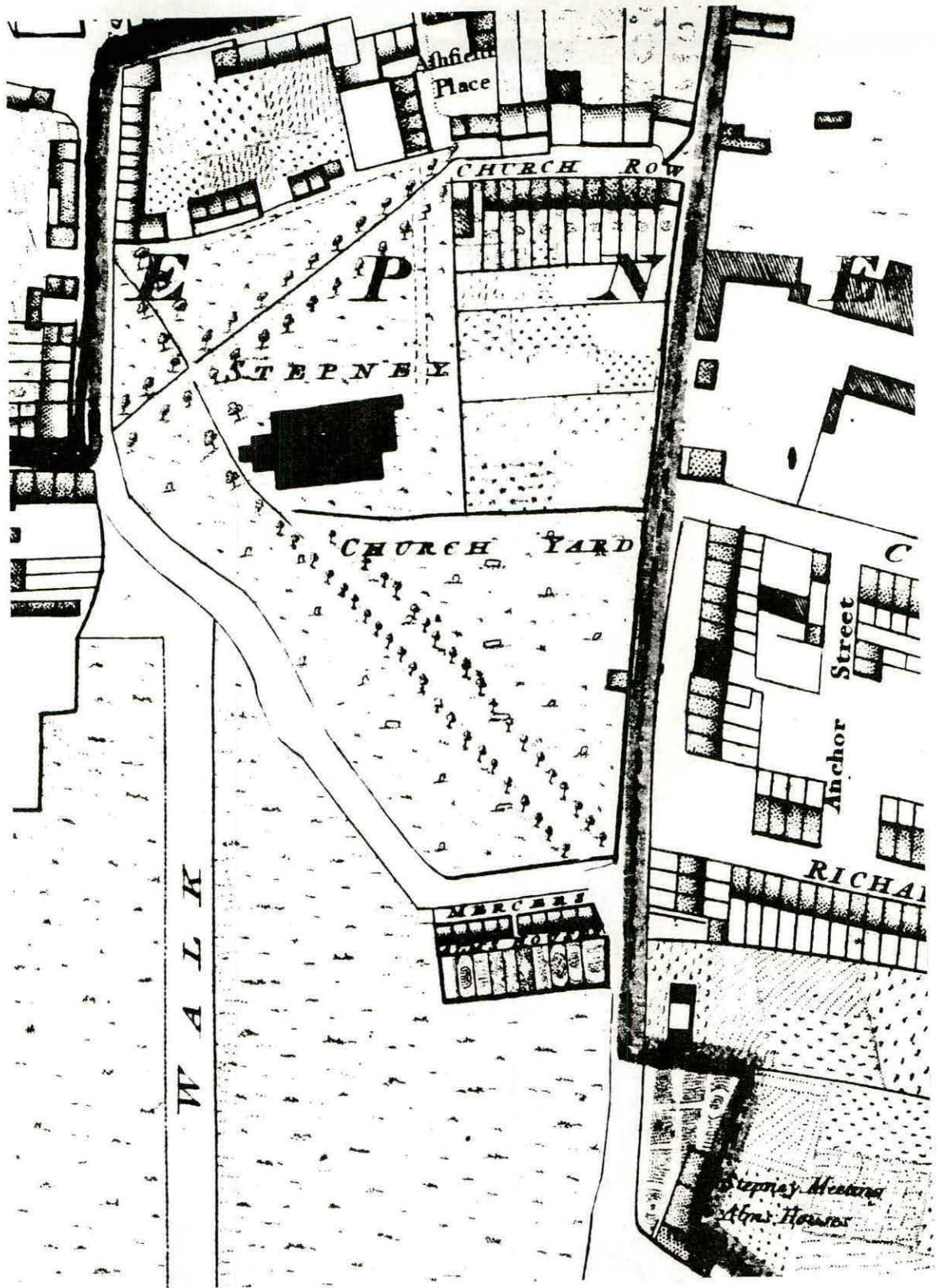


Engraved by Hobson, from a Drawing, by J.P. Neale.

for the Beauties of England & Wales.

STEPNEY CHURCH,
Middlesex.

London: Published by John Harris, St. Pauls Church Yard, Feb. 1. 1815.



12 Detail from Horwood's *Plan of London*, 1819 edition



Drawn by G. Shepherd, & Engraved by T. Dale for the Architectural Series of London Churches.

ST DUNSTANS STEPNEY.

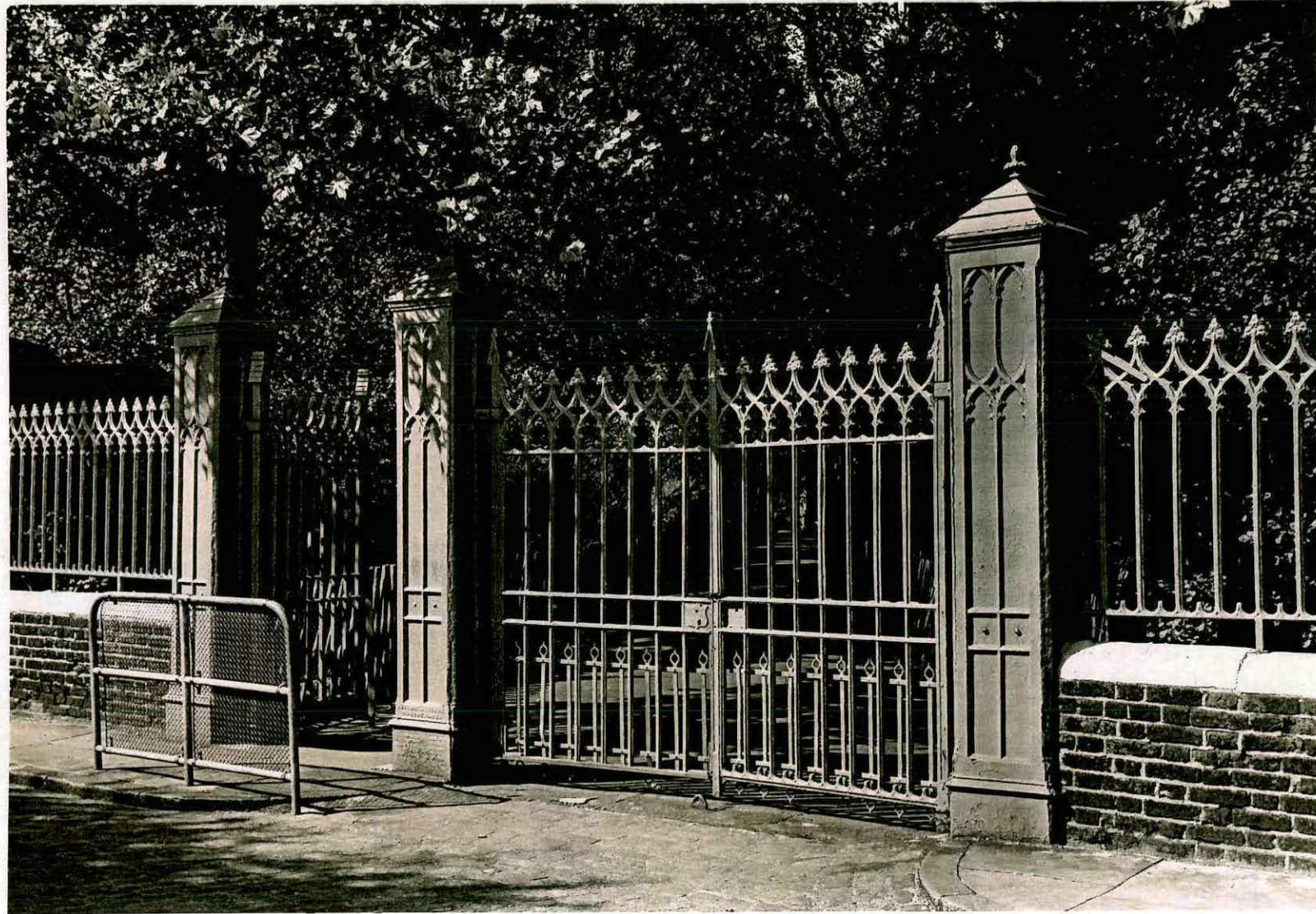
*Situated N. of Whitehorse St. is of great antiquity, a Ch. being here in the time of the Saxons, when it was called the Church of all Saints *Ecclesia Omnium Sanctorum*. The exact date of the present Fabric is not preserved, but the body of the Ch. has the character of the 14th Century. This parish was antiently of very considerable extent, as many of the contiguous parishes have been taken from it.*

Rev.^d Thomas Barneby B.D. in 1815 succeeded the Rev.^d Gen. Harper.

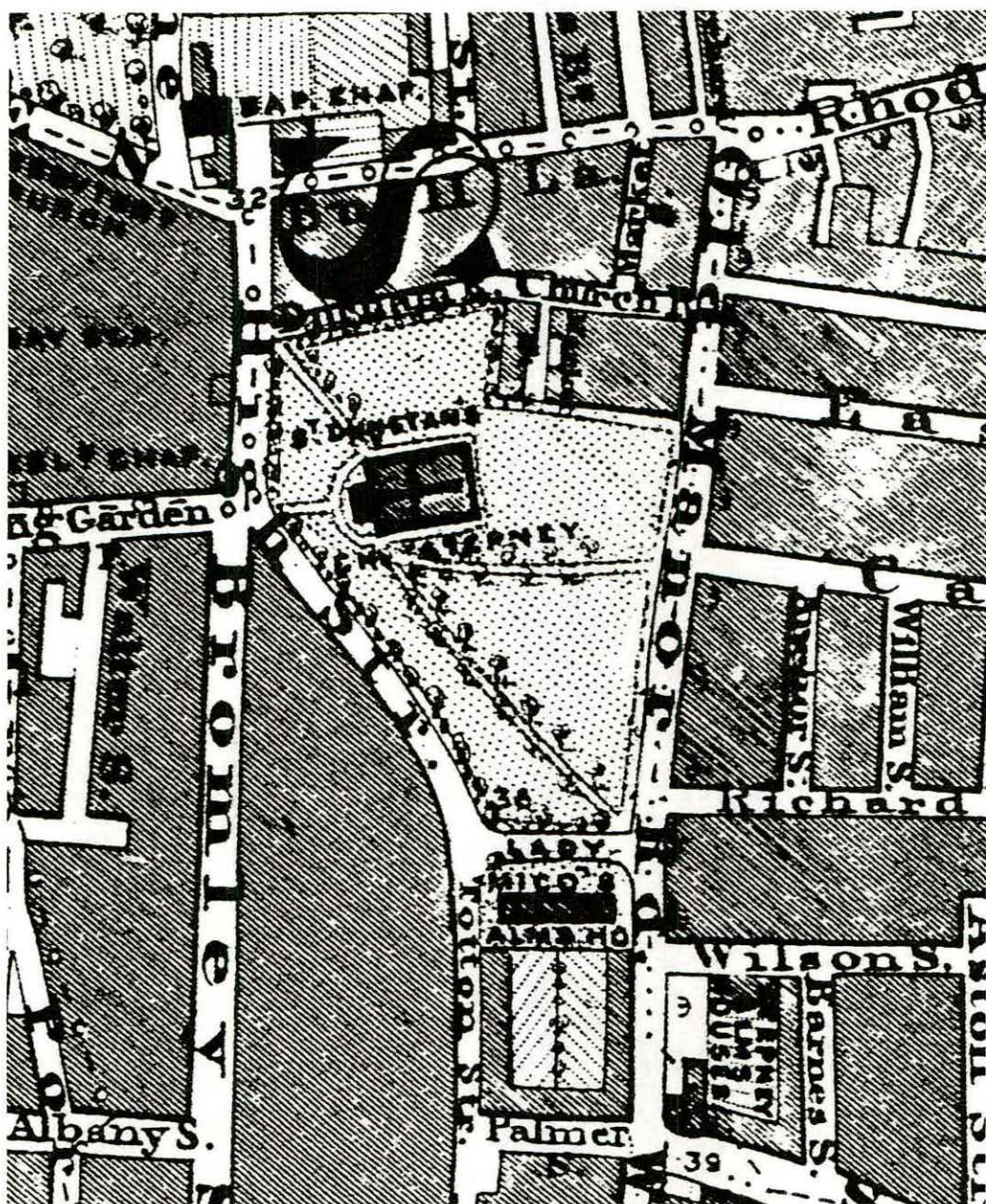
- 13 T. Dale after G. Shepherd, *St Dunstan's Stepney*. Engraving of c.1820
(Tower Hamlets local history library)



14 The Dead House to north of the church built c.1844



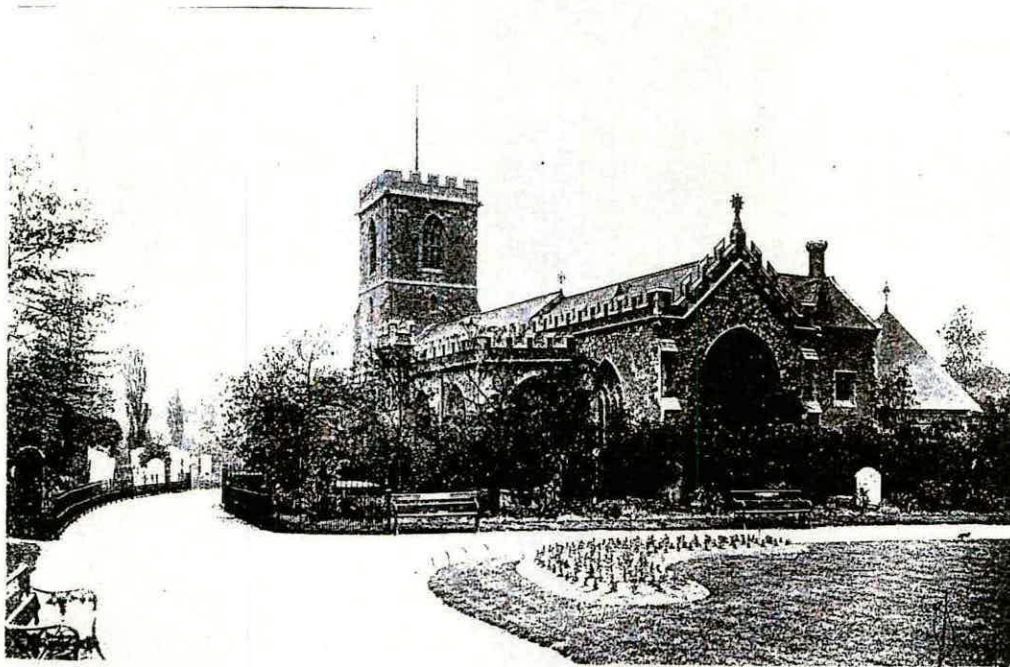
15 The 1844 railings and southern gates in 1959 (E.H.)



16 Detail from *Stanford's Library Map of London* of 1862

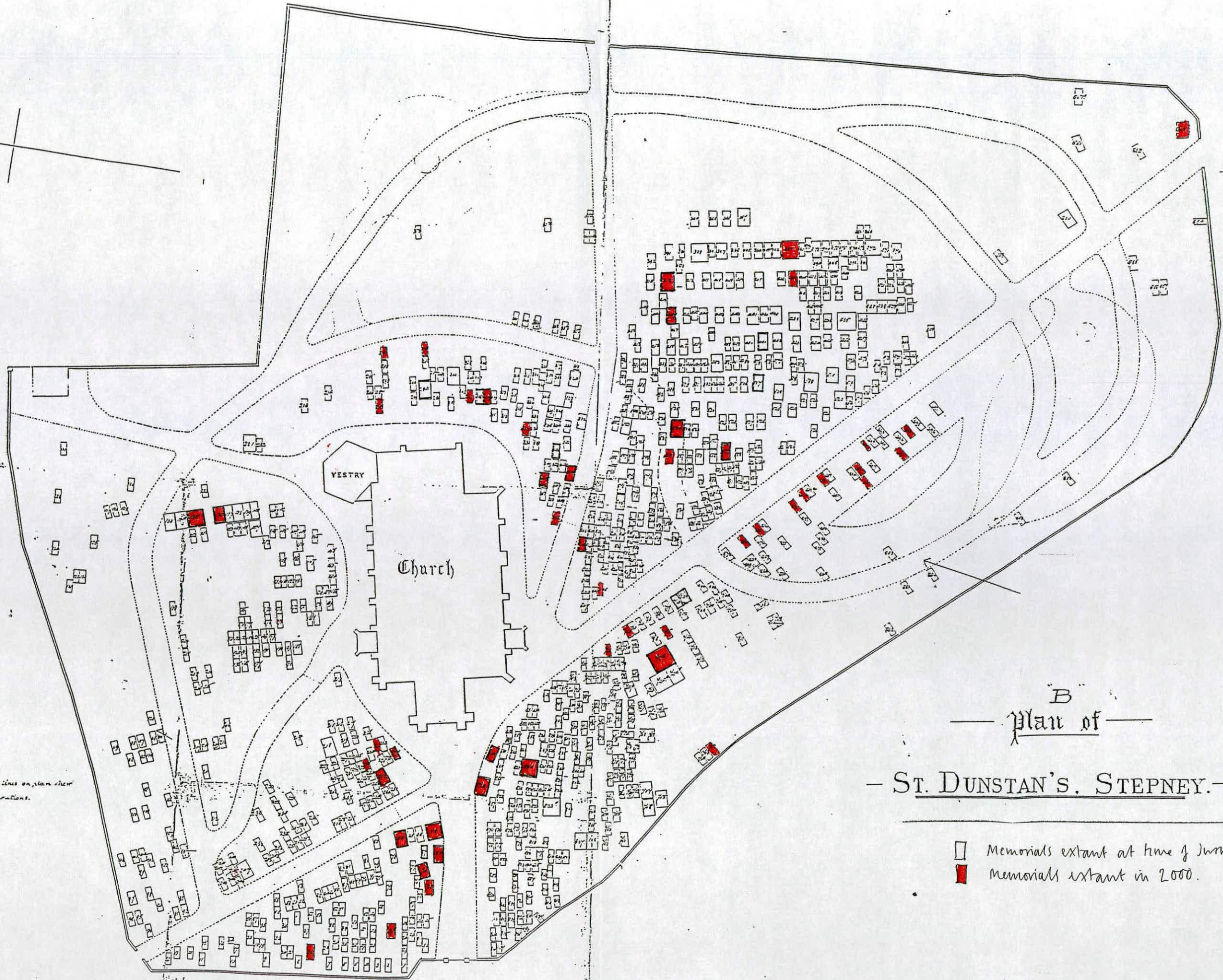
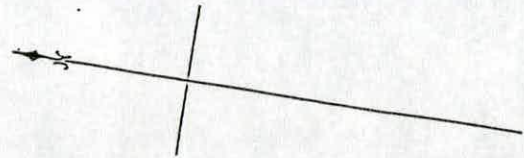


17 Stepney church from the east. Photograph of c.1865 (Tower Hamlets local history library)



St. Dunstan (Parish Church). Stepney, London, E.

18 Stepney church from the east. Postcard of c.1900 (Tower Hamlets local history library)



NOTE. The red dots show the proposed alterations.

Scale: 22 Feet to an Inch.

B
Plan of

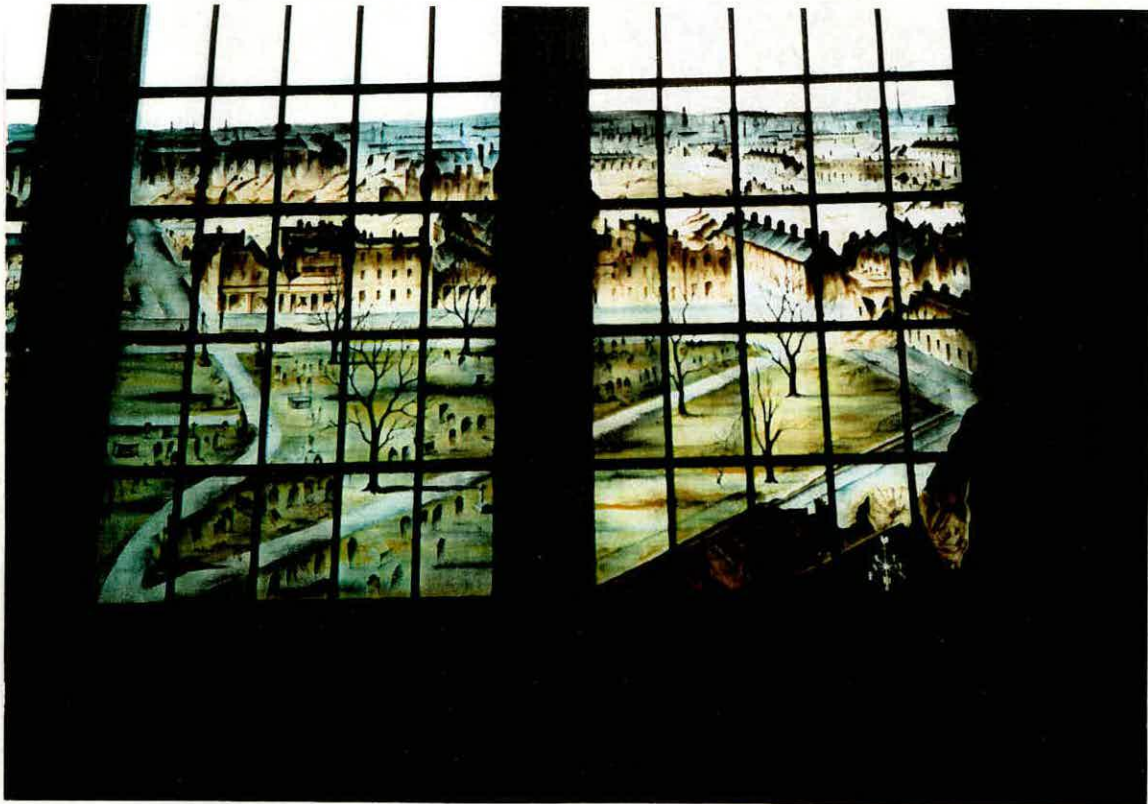
— ST. DUNSTAN'S, STEPNEY. —

- Memorials extant at time of survey c.1885
- Memorials extant in 2000.

R.T. WREATHALL
Surveyor
33, WALSROOK, E.C.



20 Jessie Godman: *Stepney Church*. Etching of 1905. Frontispiece from the 1905 *Survey of London* monograph *the Church of St Dunstan Stepney*.



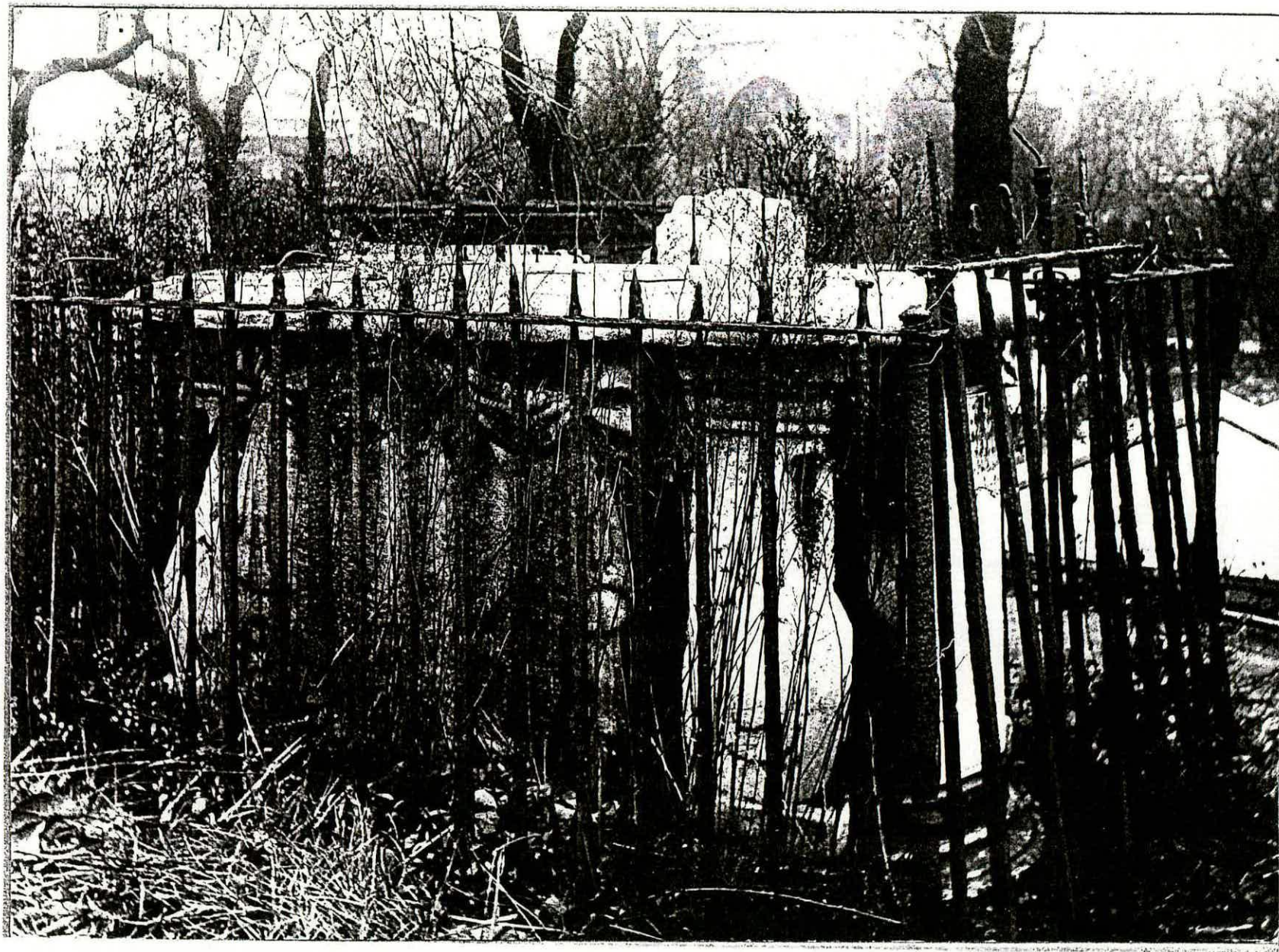
21 Hugh Easton: detail from the east window of St Dunstan's, showing post-Blitz Stepney and the churchyard, 1949



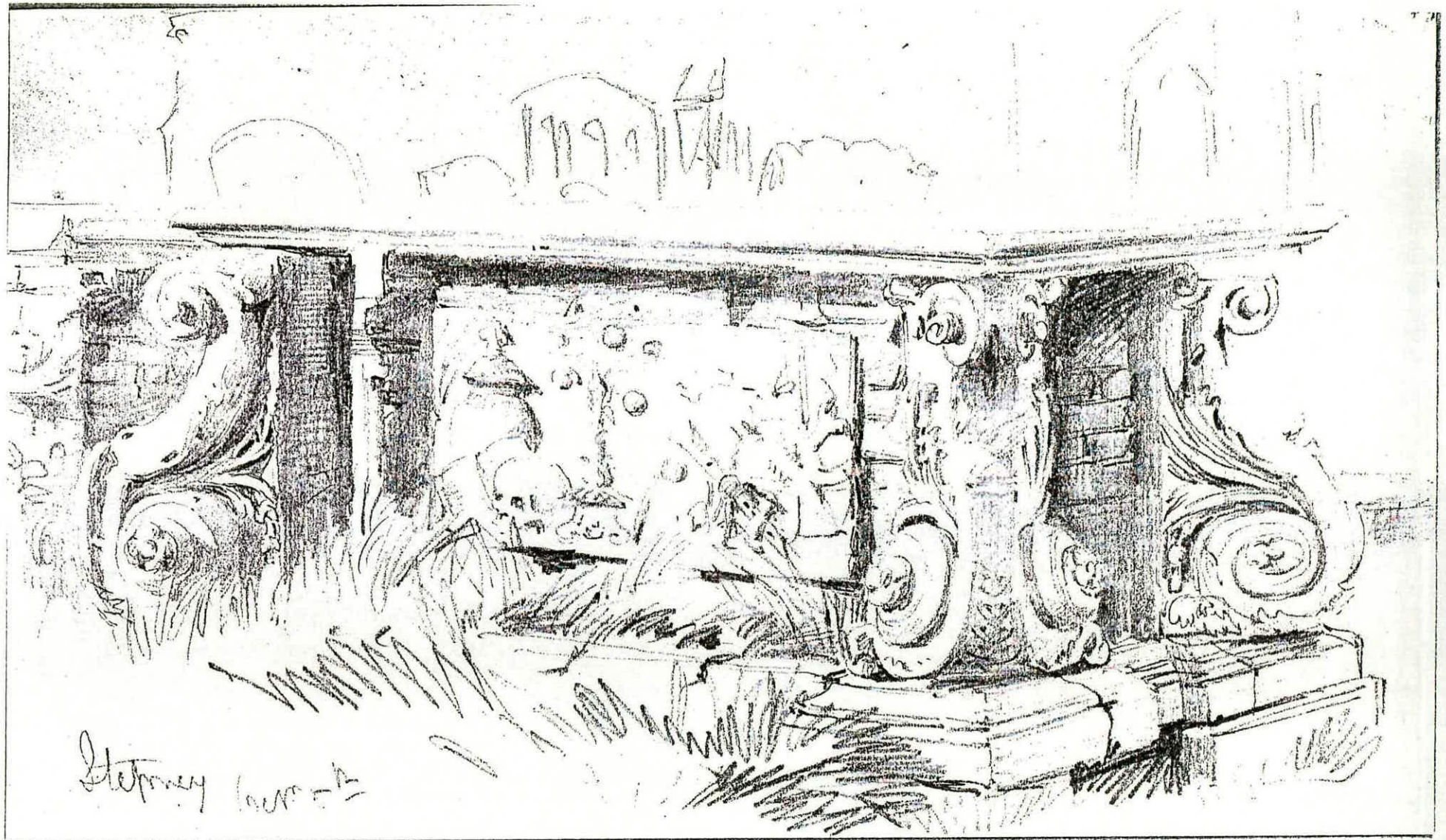
22 The church path and southern area of Stepney churchyard, 2000



23 The tomb of Matthew Mead MD (d.1699)



25 The Leake tomb, showing railings prior to removal. Photograph of c.1930
(Tower Hamlets local history library)



26 Anonymous sketch of now-lost chest tomb with *Vanitas* relief (Tower Hamlets local history library)



27 Tomb of W.H. Hawkins, 1822 (no. 1)



28 Tomb of Capt. Henry Mudd (d.1692), renewed in 1876 (no. 7)



29 Tomb of Richard Drake (d.1811) (no. 12)



30 Headstone of Sarah Ann Samuels (d.1841) (no. 15)



31 Tomb of Sarah Daplyn (d.1834) (no. 20)



32 Tomb of Thomas Holt, 1830s (no. 22)



33 Tomb of Robert Lemon (d.1858) (no. 33)



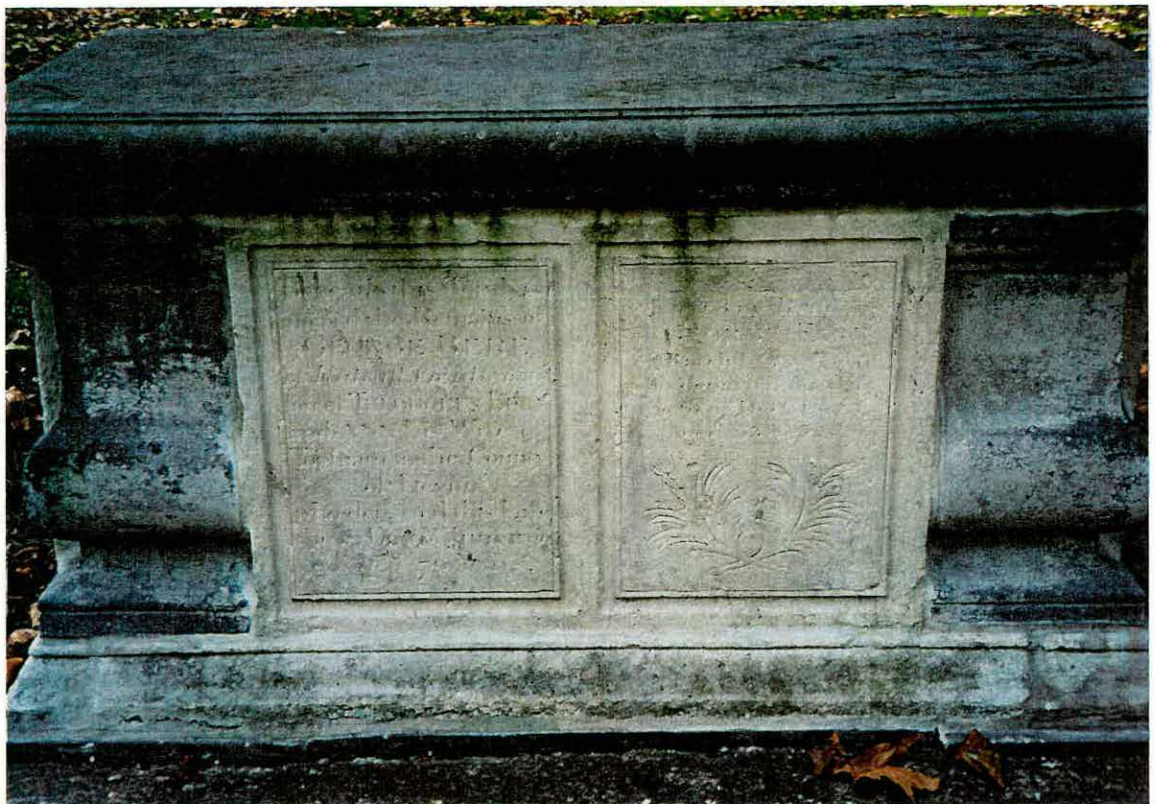
34 R. Garbutt: tomb of Henry Lane (d.1858) (no. 34)

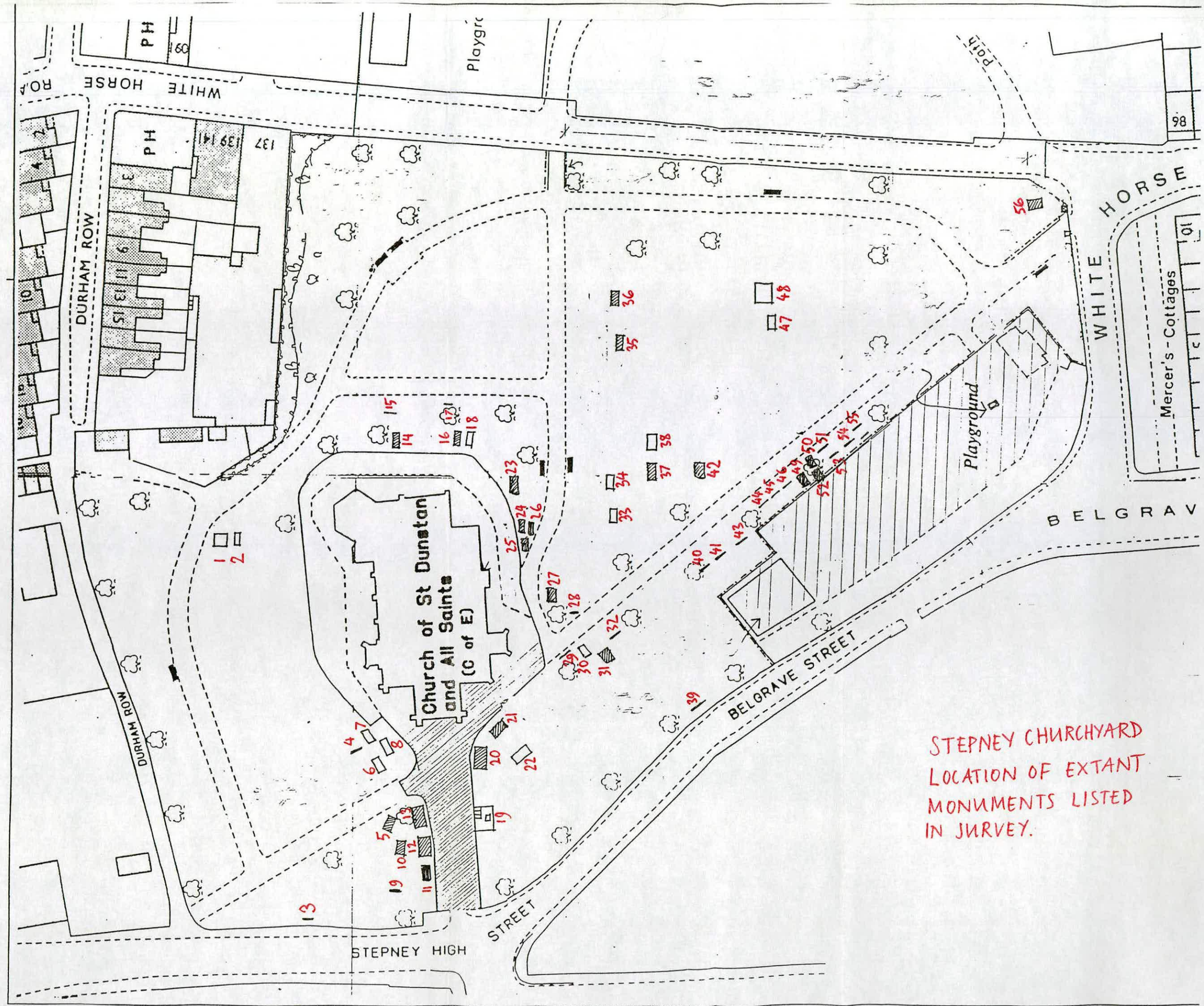


35 Tomb of Samuel Somes (d.1816) (no. 35)



36 Tomb of Thomas Ward (d.1847) (no. 36)





STEPNEY CHURCHYARD
 LOCATION OF EXTANT
 MONUMENTS LISTED
 IN JURVEY.