

# **PUBLIC SPACES & LIFE IN WITNEY TOWN CENTRE**



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WITNEY, OXFORDSHIRE

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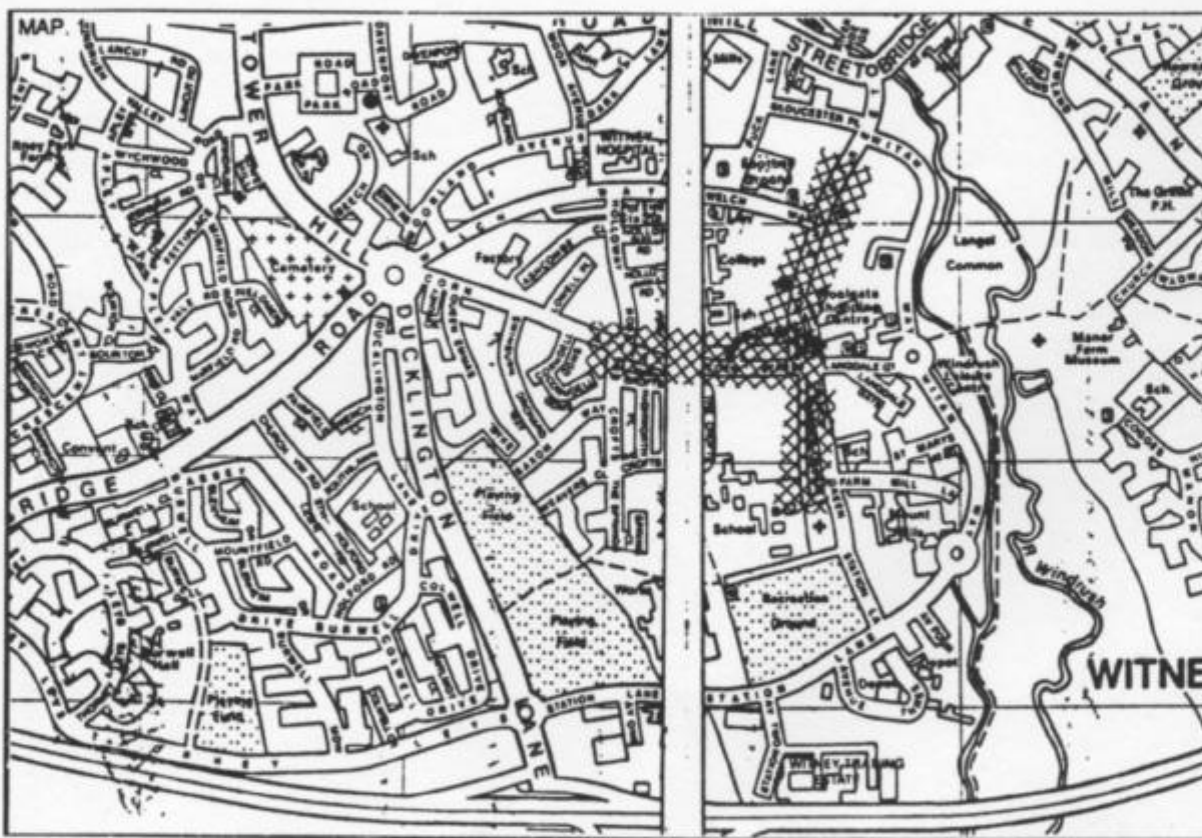
## Part 1. INTRODUCTION

This study on the social life of Witney town centre was carried out during the summer/autumn 1996. This report is part of a series of preliminary analysis of the pedestrianisation project of Witney town centre sponsored by the Local Council and carried out by a team headed by Prof. Tim Pharoah.

The hope is that this survey and the following recommendations will help to achieve a significant improvement in the quality of the public spaces in this town and help the designers and the local authorities to put forward a successful scheme for a liveable and attractive city.

### 1.1 The study area

The Witney study was limited in this report to the town centre and more precisely to the High Street Corn Street and Church Green. (map.1)



### 1.2 Acknowledgements

This study was possible thanks to the help of Prof. Tim Pharoah who helped and supervised my surveys step by step.

The work closely follows the methods and the criteria of the brilliant report "Public spaces & public life in Perth" by Jan Gehl. Without this useful guidance this work would not have been possible.

# SPACES IN THE TOWN CENTRE

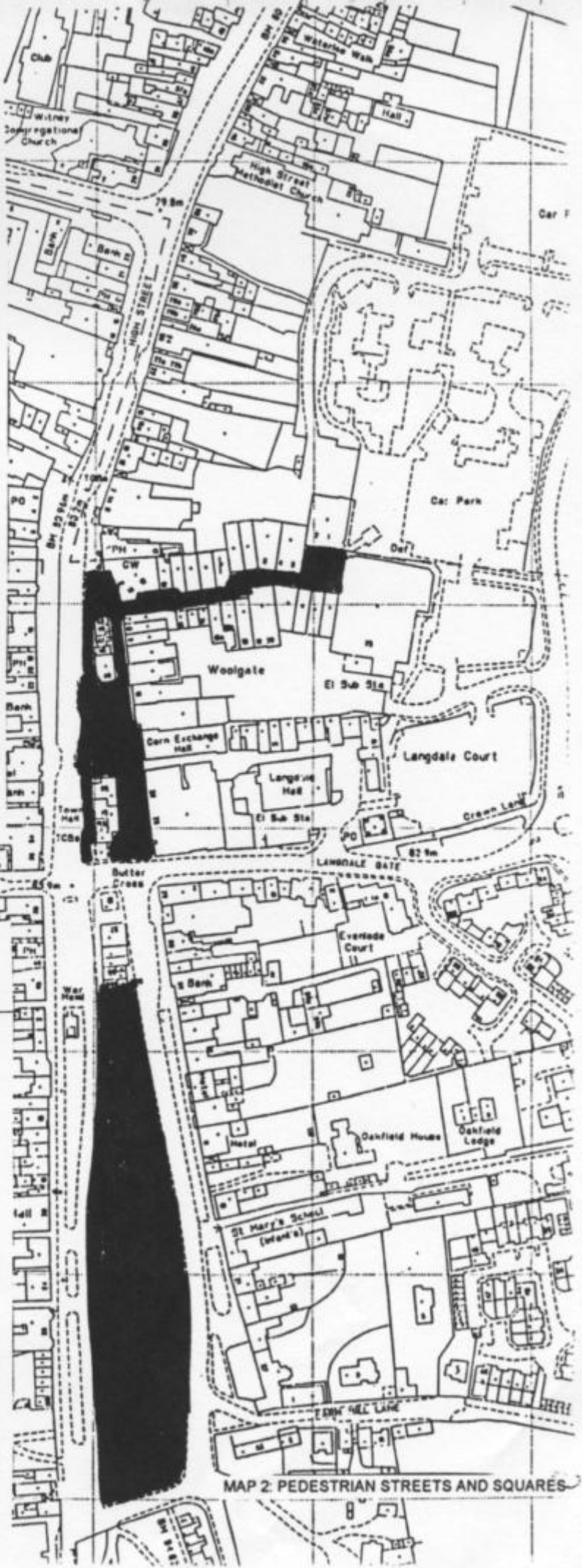
## 2.1 Pedestrian streets and squares (map .2)

Although the town centre is well frequented by pedestrians, as will be explained in the next chapter of this report, Witney centre is lacking in networks of walking and promenading. As map.2 shows the only real traffic free street is the arcade of Woolgate shopping centre. Generally the high street presents rather small sidewalks which do not provide a good environment for pedestrians. Market square is the only real public square in the high street (excluding the pavement widenings in front of the Woolgate centre and in front of the Post office), however on non-market days it is rather underused and unattractive. The Butter Cross, which is an important landmark at the top end of the high street, remains in a isolated position completely surrounded by traffic. The car traffic in Corn Street is regulated by traffic calming measures (plates and carriage restrictions). The traffic is not overwhelming but the pavements are very narrow and it is cramped and uncomfortable for pedestrians, especially the eastern part of the street. The pavements become wider and pleasant, with trees on both sides of the street, close to the Holloway Rd. junction. The high number of parked cars and the end of traffic calming measures, however, result in the area being used more by cars than pedestrians.

Church Green provides a beautiful green area to the mainly built town centre. Here once again, however, the presence of parked cars all over the park side streets spoil the beautiful scenery of the church and the surrounding buildings.

## 2.2 Pedestrian routes and destinations (map. 3)

The high street is the main route for pedestrians participating in a wide range of activities considered (promenading, resting, shopping, etc.). Woolgate centre, although short and self contained, is the other main pedestrian route. Sadly these are the only two real points of attraction of the town centre during the day. The secondary routes showed on the map are mainly routes connecting various car parks to the high street. The most frequented of these connecting routes is Welsh street which is



very busy throughout the day. Corn street can be considered a secondary pedestrian destination during the day due to the presence of retail activities which are slightly less attractive than on the High street. Church Green presents on its east side a pedestrian pathway used by a good number of people. This pathway is mainly used as a connection between the town centre and Station Lane through the recreation grounds on the other side of the church.

**2.3 Buildings and streetscapes.**

Witney is a unique charming town that combines a traditional market town with a peaceful rural atmosphere and a modern commercial centre. This duality is again present in the buildings and architecture of the high street which combines new buildings, restorations and historical buildings. The high street is particularly pleasant, because it presents characteristics on a human scale: low building heights, street alignment, small scale and good architectural details. The presence of the market also adds a charming and traditional atmosphere to the environment. These characteristics must be preserved and enhanced in any future project.

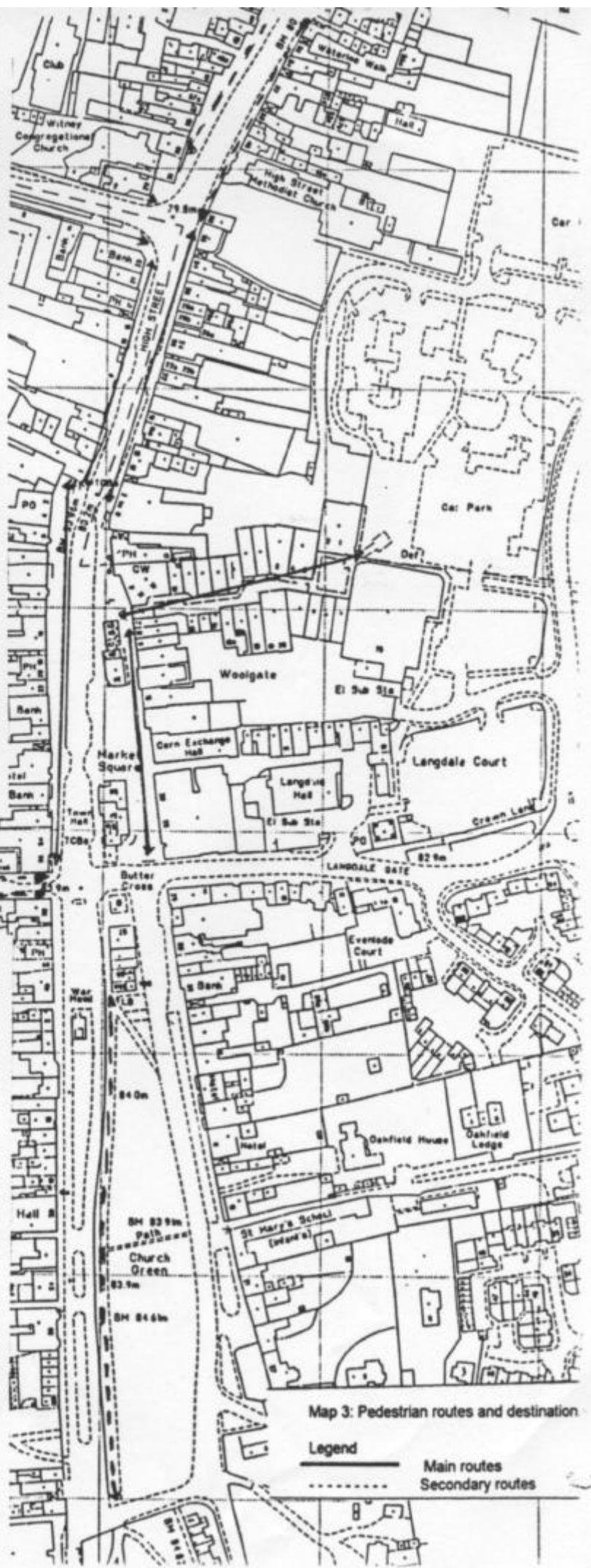


**2.4 The High Street: functions and use of the buildings. (map .4)**

Witney town centre presents a good mixture of functions without subdivisions in mono-functional areas. This is very important for the creation of a lively and safe city.

However, although this mixture of activities is evident, it is possible to identify some differences between the areas. The east side of the high street is characterized by retailing and commerce activities (Woolgate, Market square and several smaller shops). The west side, although retailing activities are still present, is characterized by several banks and the Post Office. The buildings surrounding Market square are mainly dedicated to civic and cultural facilities (Town hall, touristic office, cinema, etc.)

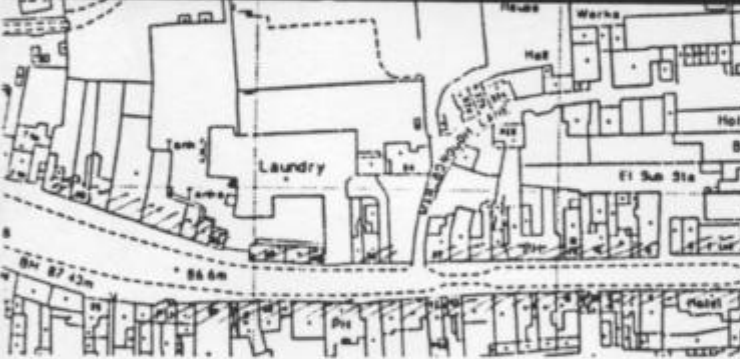
Corn street caters mainly for entertainment activities, although a few pubs and restaurants/take aways are present on the High street, with an impressive number of Public Houses and night



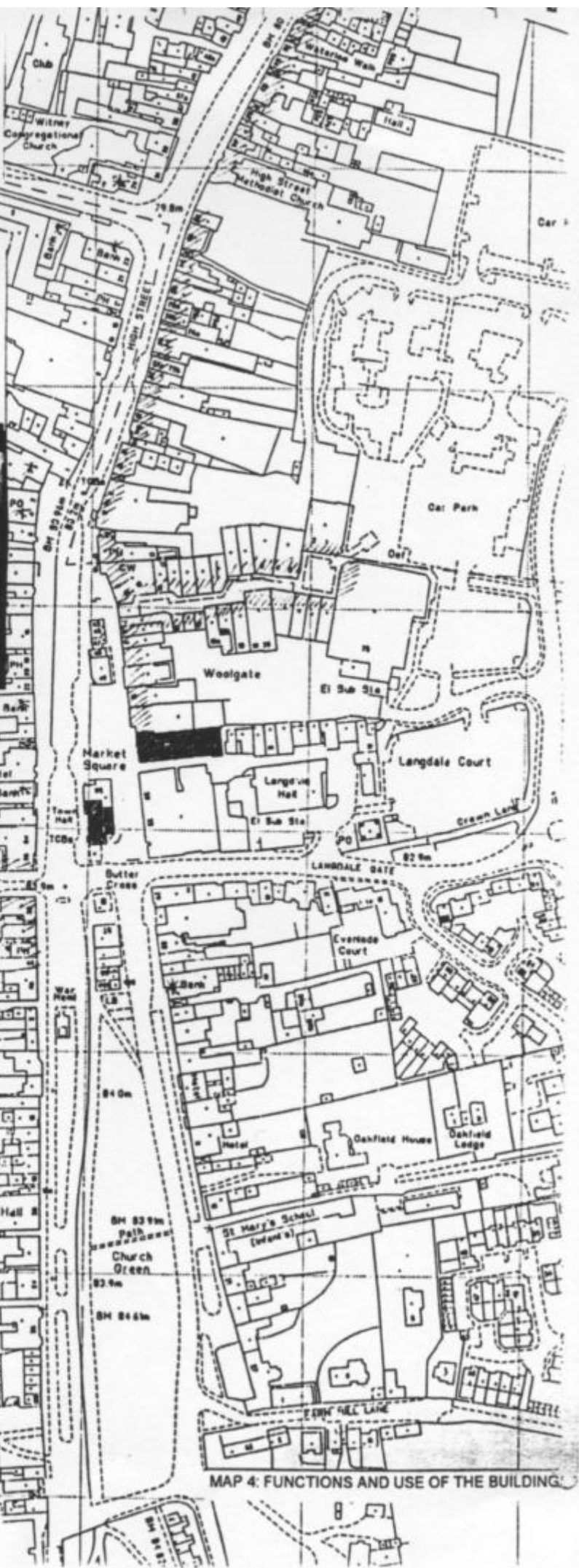
Map 3: Pedestrian routes and destination

Legend  
 — Main routes  
 - - - Secondary routes

spots. The town centre, despite these small differences from area to area, combines a good mixture of city activities.

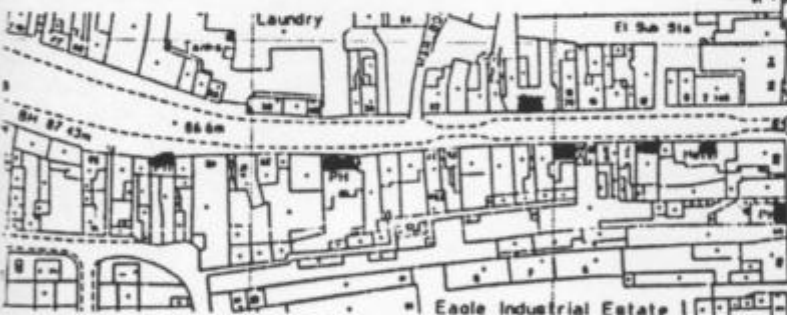


**2.5 Night time activities (map .5)**  
 If during the day time the town centre is lively and crowded, at night time it becomes rather quiet. The high street, in particular, becomes virtually lifeless. Waitrose centre is completely deserted and all the premises are closed. the town centre becomes deserted between 6 and 7.30 pm, then it returns to life. Small pockets of activities can mainly be found around three points: Market Square, Corn street and Butter Cross. There is a slight difference between the people frequenting the town centre during the day and the night. By night most of the people around the public spaces are teenagers. This can be explained by the fact that all the pubs strictly admit only over 18 year olds and a lot of them over 21 year old and there is no alternative place for the under age. Butter Cross, both during the evening and daytime, is the favourite meeting point for teenagers. The Market square benches are well frequented especially the one near the



MAP 4: FUNCTIONS AND USE OF THE BUILDING.

fish&chips shop. At 7.30 pm one of the main points of attraction is the Corn Exchange Hall, now used as a picture house. The other parts of the High street, especially the north side, are practically deserted. Corn street is where the main night life activities are concentrated. Several pubs (eight) and a wide selection of take away restaurants are the main points of attraction. The take aways, however, attract more car traffic than pedestrian activity. This is due to the fact that people mainly use their cars to buy the food from the shops and then to take it back home. This could pose a problem in gaining support from the catering sectors, who will see the project of pedestrianisation of Corn Street as damaging to their businesses. The pubs are in general busy during the evening, with a pleasant mixture of young and older people. Corn street, however, is everything but lively during the evening and the pedestrian movement is reduced to a trickle. There is no activity in the public spaces, such as restaurants or cafes with outside tables or any sort of public entertainment. Significantly the market square, which should be a catering point for activities, is almost deserted with the only establishment still open during the evening being a dank and dingy fish & chips shop.



MAP 5 NIGHT TIME ACTIVITIES ●

## 2.6 Evaluation of the street frontage and ground level activity (map. 6/7/8/9)

This part of the survey attempts to place street frontages into different categories according to how interesting or attractive they are to pedestrians. The following categories are taken from the cited work on Perth by Jan Gehl:

**A Exciting** (as B but more attractive or special)

### **3 Very attractive**

Small units, many doors (15-20 units/100 metres)

Diversity of functions

No closed or passive units

Interesting (pedestrian scale) relief in facades

Quality materials and refined or historic details

### **C Pleasant**

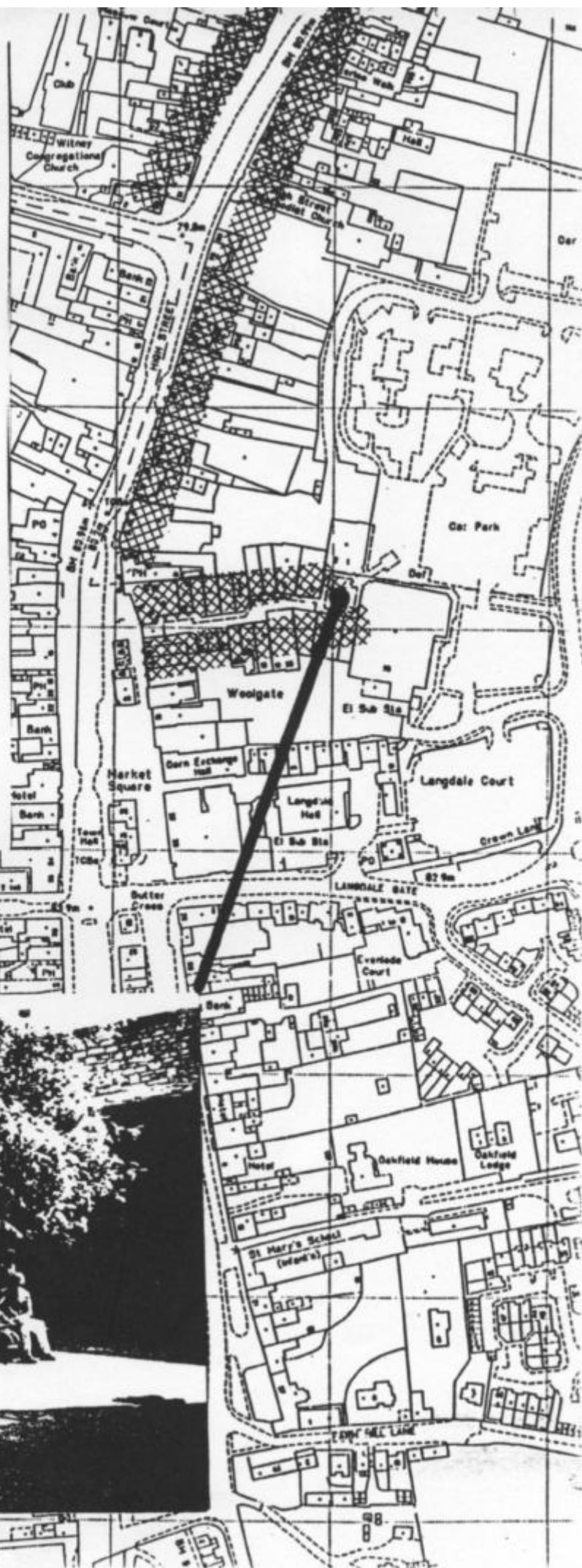
Relatively small units (10-14 units/100m)

Some diversity of functions

Only a few passive or closed units

Some relief in the facade

Relatively good detailing



MAP 6: EVALUATION OF STREET FRONTAGE: B. ATTRACTIVE



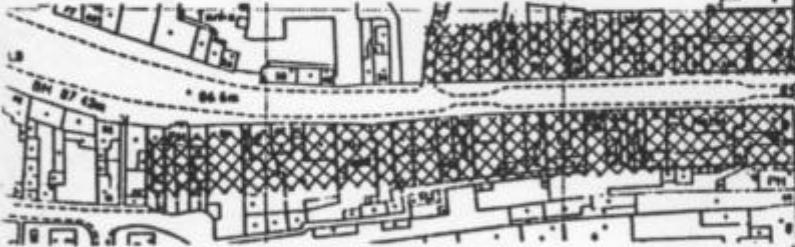


**Somewhere in-between**  
 Mix of small and larger units (6-10 units/100m)  
 Some diversity  
 Only few closed or passive facades  
 Interesting facade design  
 Poor or nondescript detailing

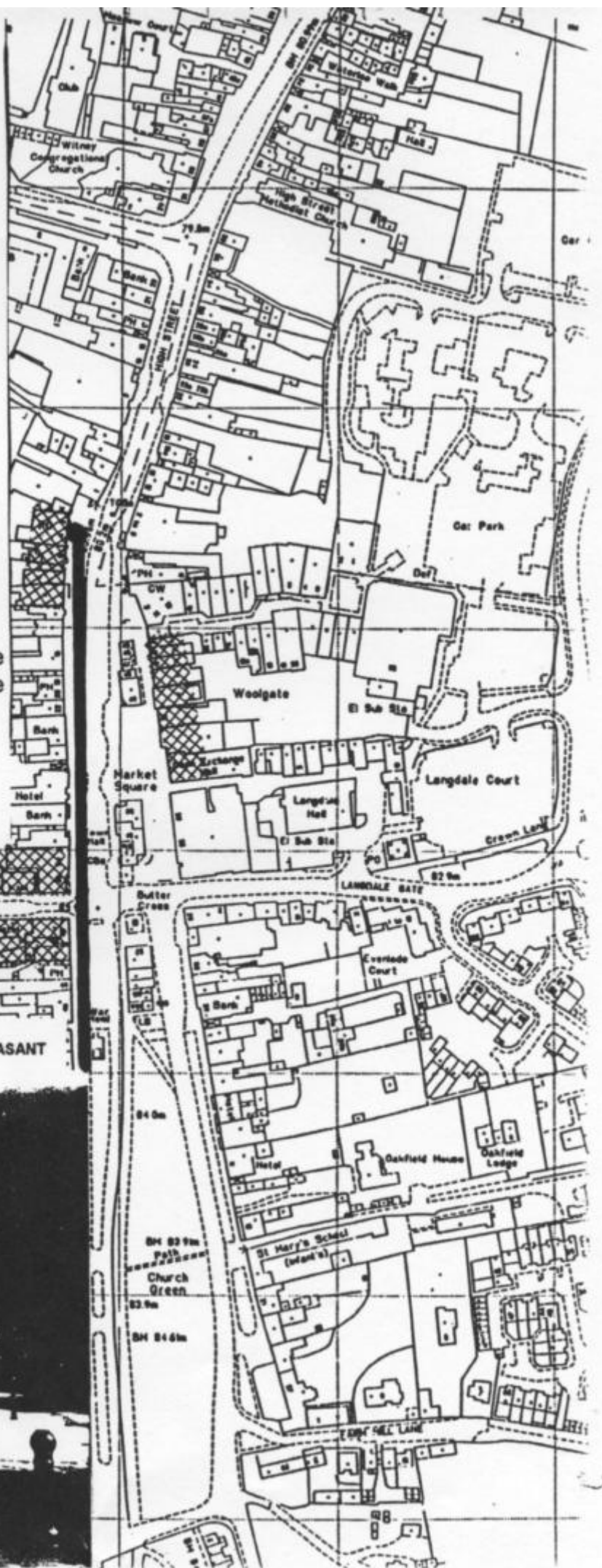
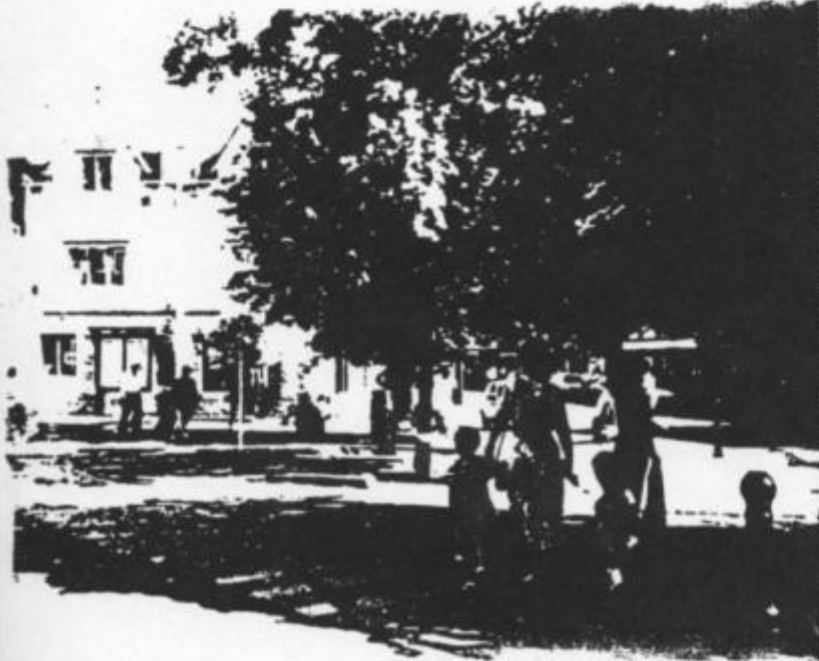
**Rather dull**  
 Larger units with few doors (2-5 units/100m)  
 Little diversity  
 Fairly closed facades  
 Fairly unattractive facades  
 Few or no details

**Very unattractive**  
 Large units, few or no doors  
 No visible variation of function  
 Closed or passive facades  
 Monotonous facades  
 No details, nothing interesting to look at

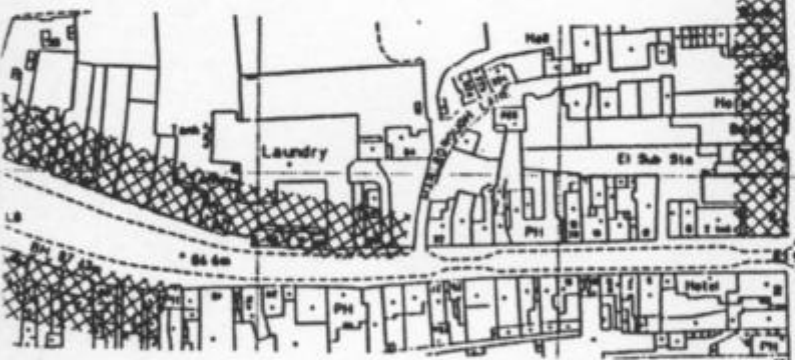
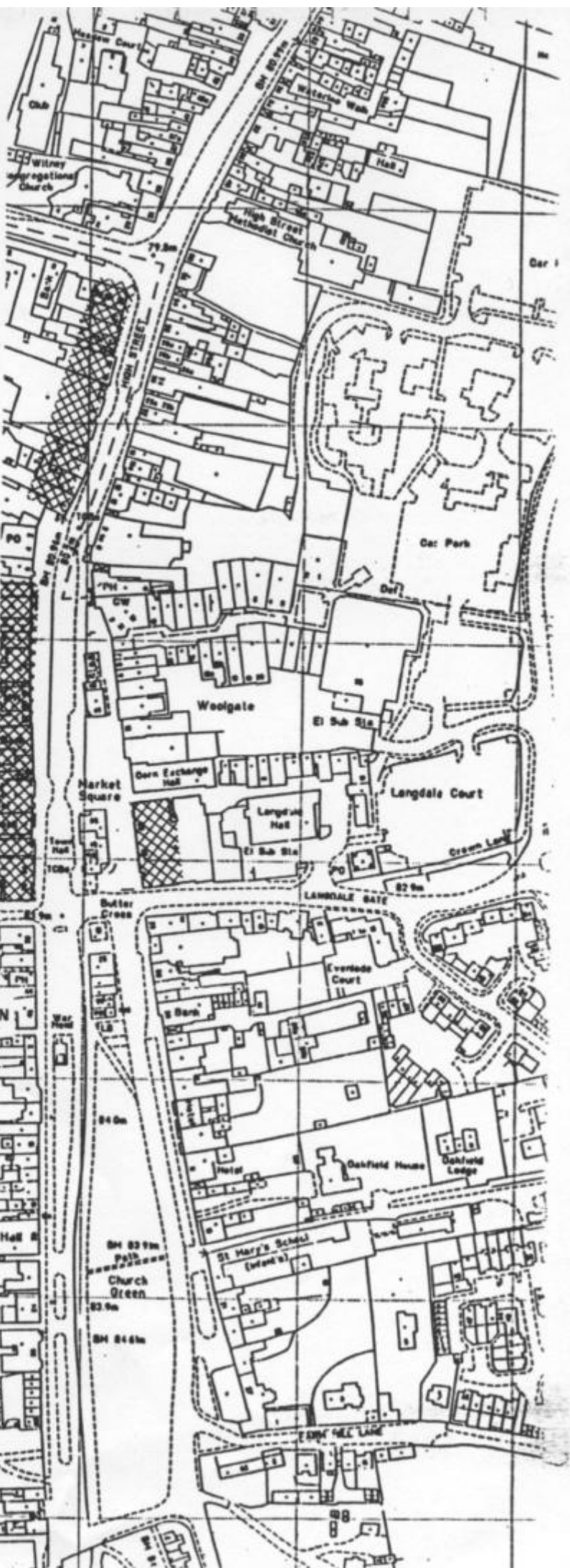
The quality of the building frontages facing the sidewalk is an extremely important factor in the quality of an urban area.



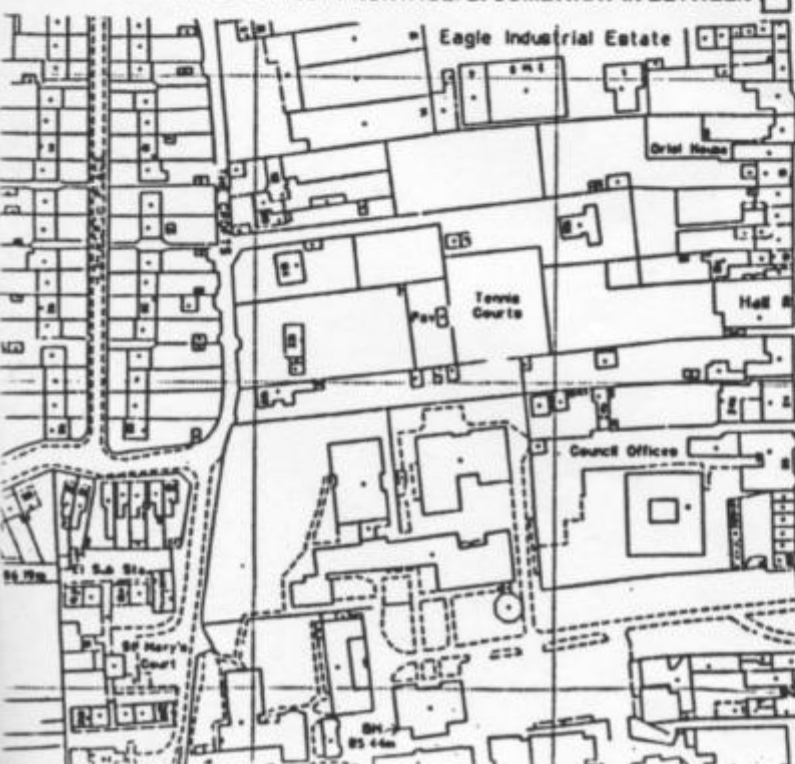
MAP 7: EVALUATION OF STREET FRONTAGE: C. PLEASANT



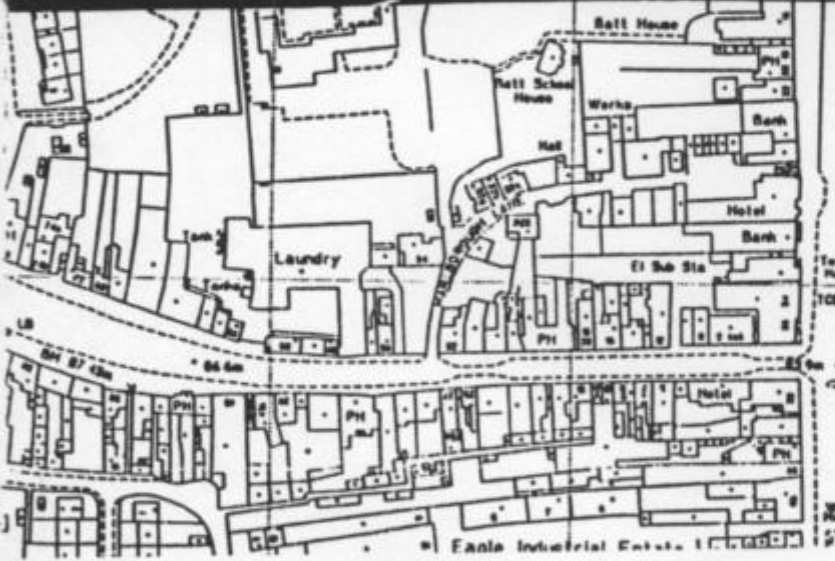
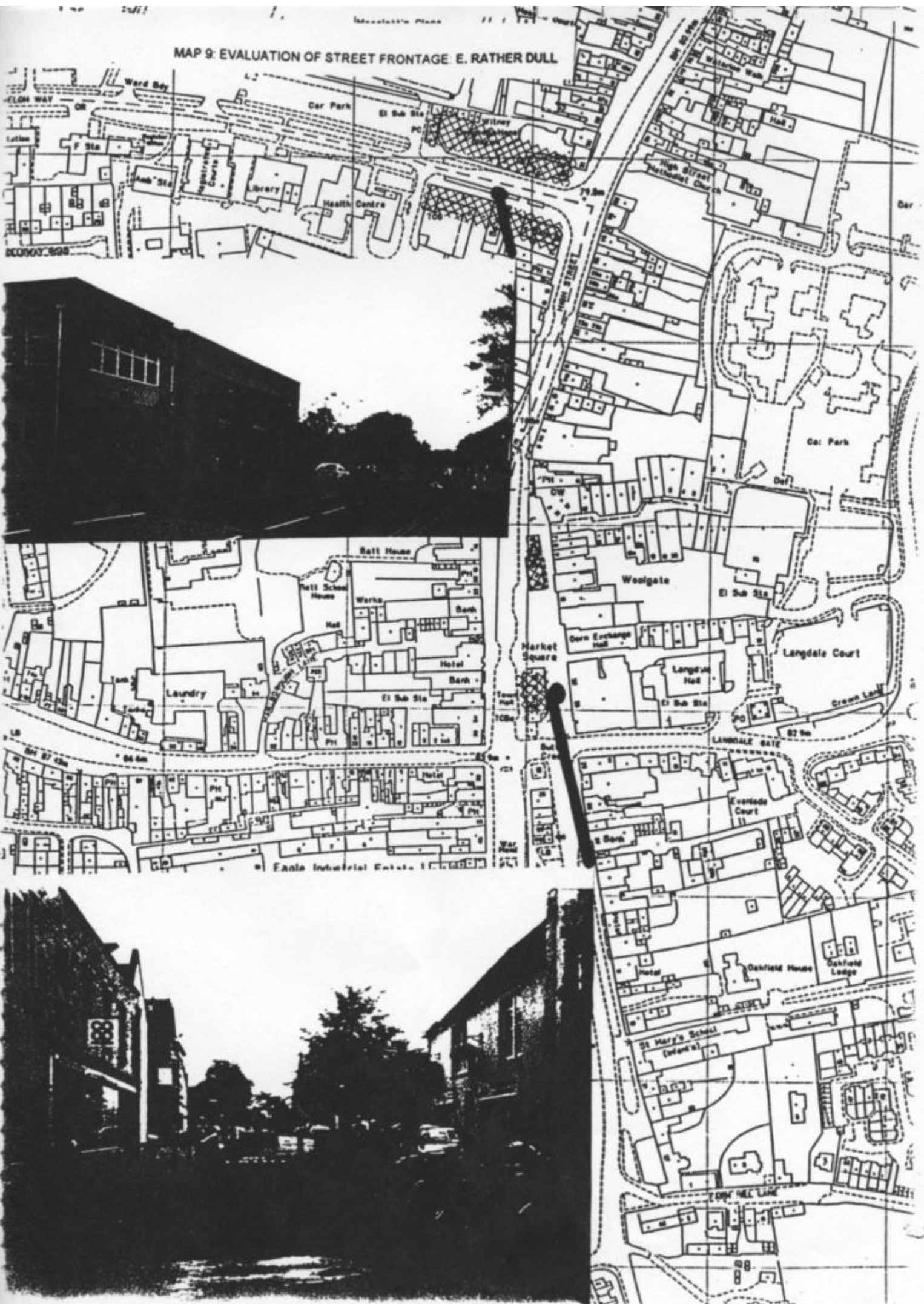
The street frontage evaluation in Witney has given an overall good quality panorama. The east side of the high street and Woolgate mall are assessed as very attractive and pleasant. The west side is of a lower interest for pedestrians but it is still acceptable (assessed as "somewhat in-between" and pleasant). The only part of the High street that has been classified as mainly unattractive is market square and the buildings surrounding it. These buildings, in fact, are in very poor conditions of maintenance, with closed and unattractive facades. Corn Street has been assessed as "pleasant" and "somewhat in-between". The buildings are in good condition and of a lovely human scale. The Public houses are well maintained and preserved in the traditional style. The area was classified in C/D categories due to the fact that the average quality of shops is acceptable, but nothing special.



MAP 8: EVALUATION OF STREET FRONTAGE: D. SOMEWHAT IN BETWEEN



MAP 9: EVALUATION OF STREET FRONTAGE E. RATHER DULL



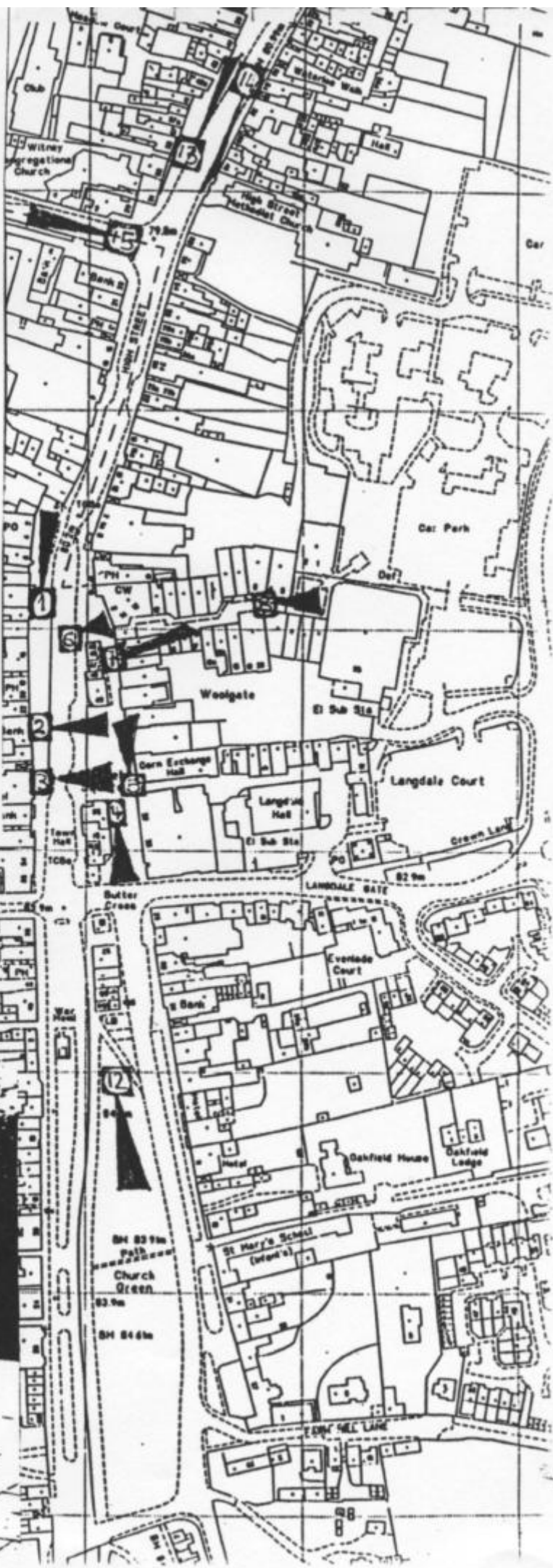
**PART 3 THE PATTERN OF SOCIAL ACTIVITIES:  
HOW PEDESTRIANS USE THE PUBLIC SPACES**

The way the town centre is used by pedestrians is assessed in this section of the report; what they do, whether they sit or walk, if they appear to enjoy themselves, if they feel safe, etc..

This part therefore is essential in our understanding of how to improve the quality of the town centre.

3.1 The survey methods.

This survey aims to establish the number of people present in the high street, Corn street and Church Green between 10am and 7pm. The counting of pedestrian traffic and registration of stationary activities was carried out with the use of photographs taken every hour in particular key spaces. (map .10) The town centre was, furthermore, analyzed in depth through a quality survey of the pedestrian activities. In this section the high street was divided into spaces, which were singularly analyzed.



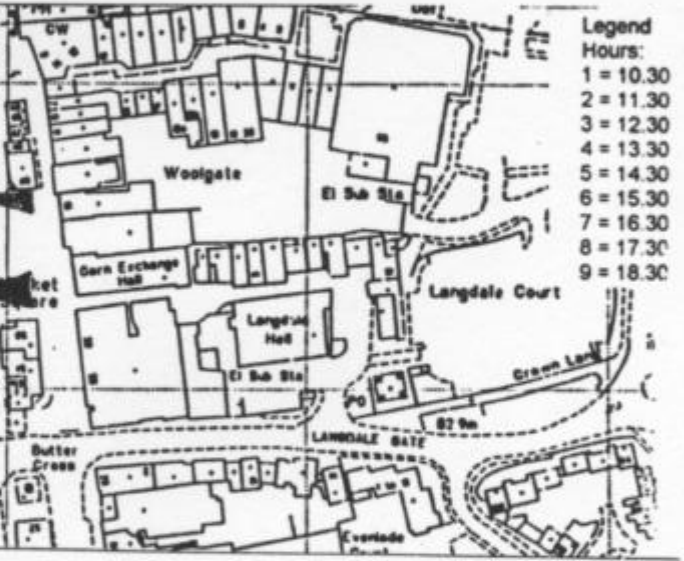
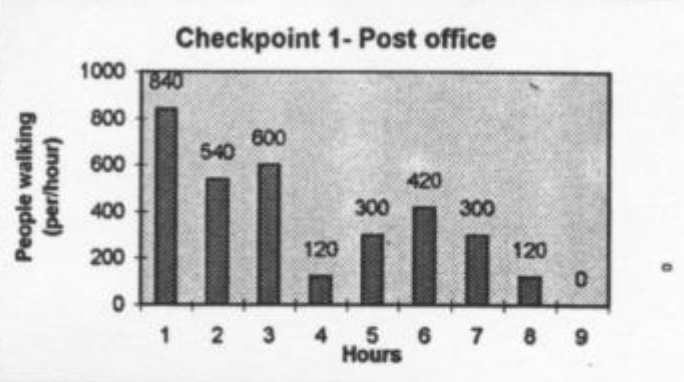
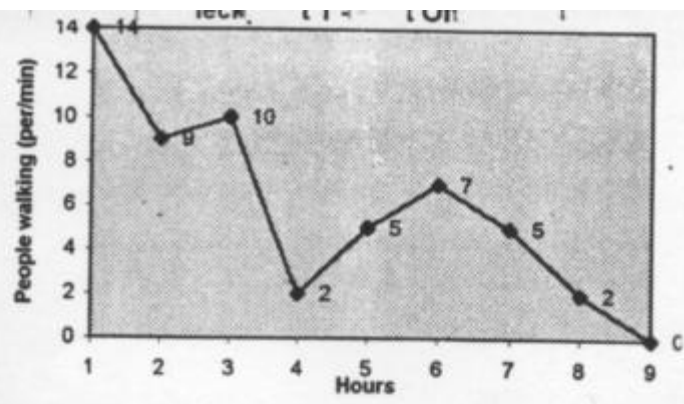
MAP 10: CHECKPOINTS



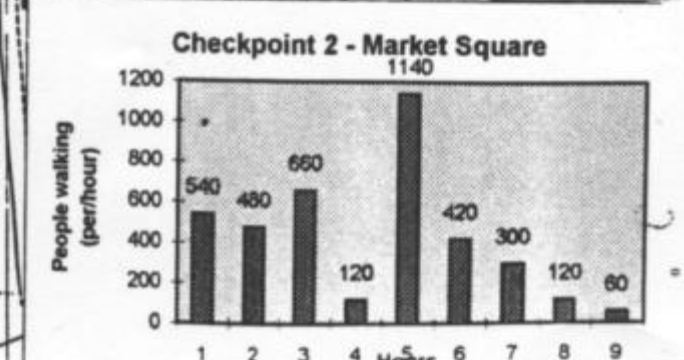
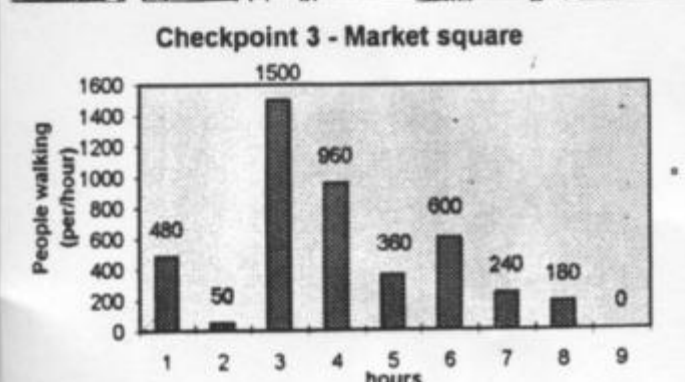
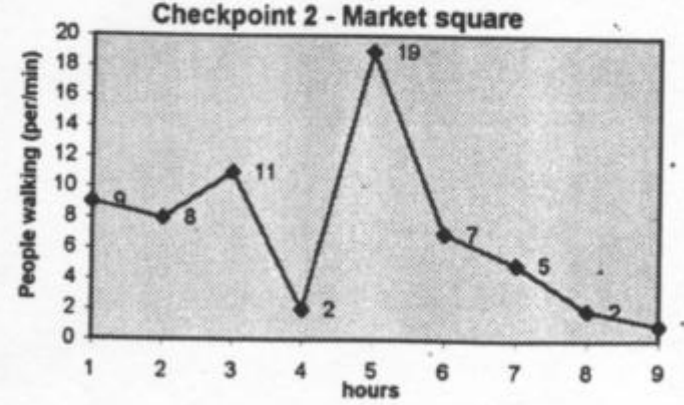
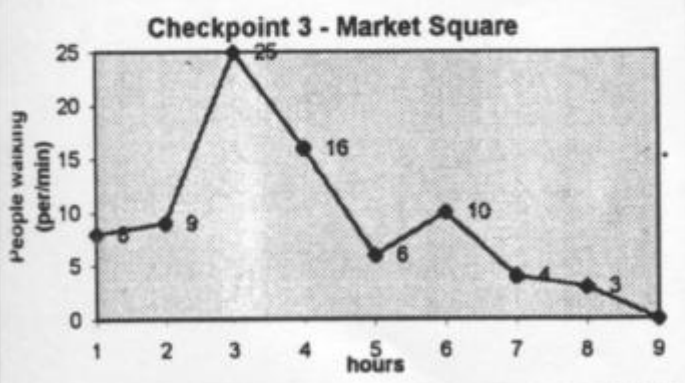
### 3.2 Pedestrian traffic 10am-6pm

The following diagrams show the intensity of traffic in the following key areas: a) in front of the Post Office; b) Market Square c) Top part of the High street east side d) space in front of Woolgate mall e) Woolgate f) Corn street g) Northern part of the High street h) Curch Green.

All the areas show a good level of pedestrian movement in the morning and at lunch time. Woolgate shopping centre is evidently the main point of attraction and is very busy during the first hours of the morning (top level recorded at 10.30am) and remains well frequented throughout the day. After retail hours the mall becomes practically deserted. The east side of the high street is generally much more lively than the west side due to the presence of more attractive shops. The only point of attraction of the west side is the Post Office, especially in the first few hours of the morning. The south side of the High street (Town hall side) is under used and just a trickle of people were recorded throughout the day. The North part of the High street is usually less frequented compared to the rest of the High street. This part, in fact, really suffers from the presence of the car park in Welsh street. Welsh street seems to be the main route of

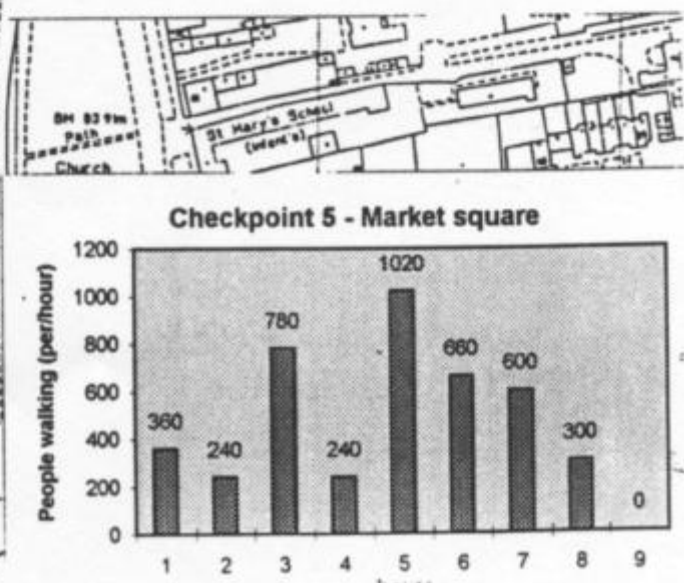
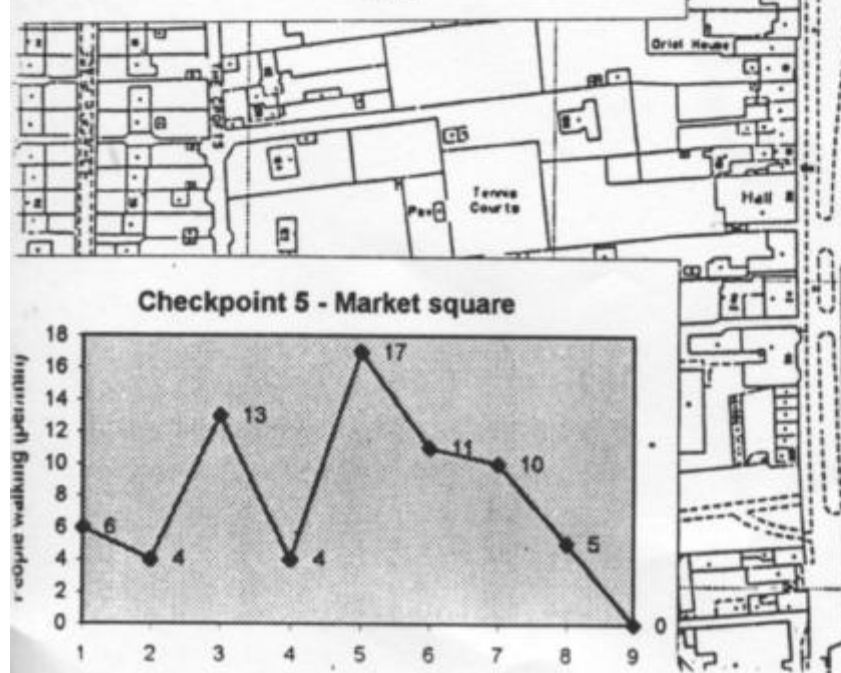
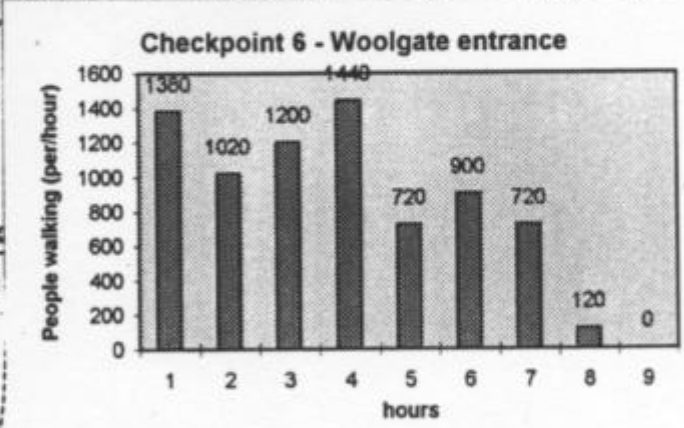
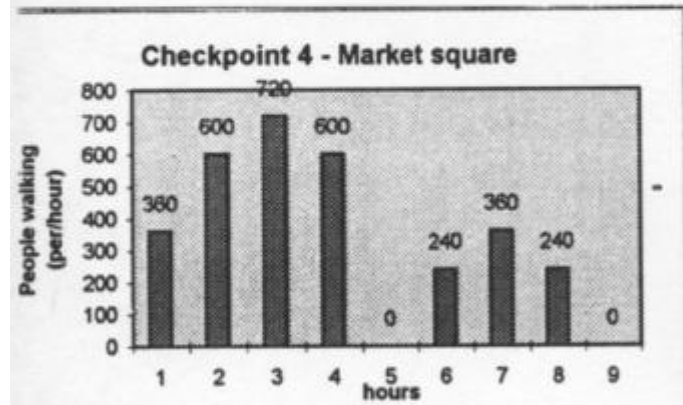
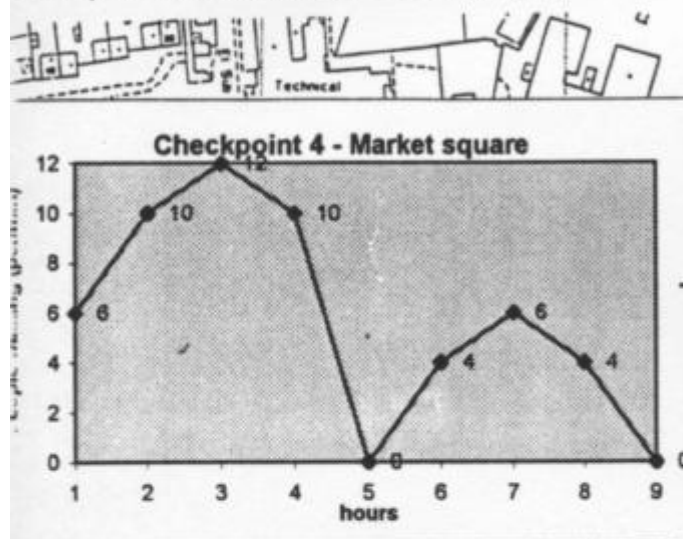
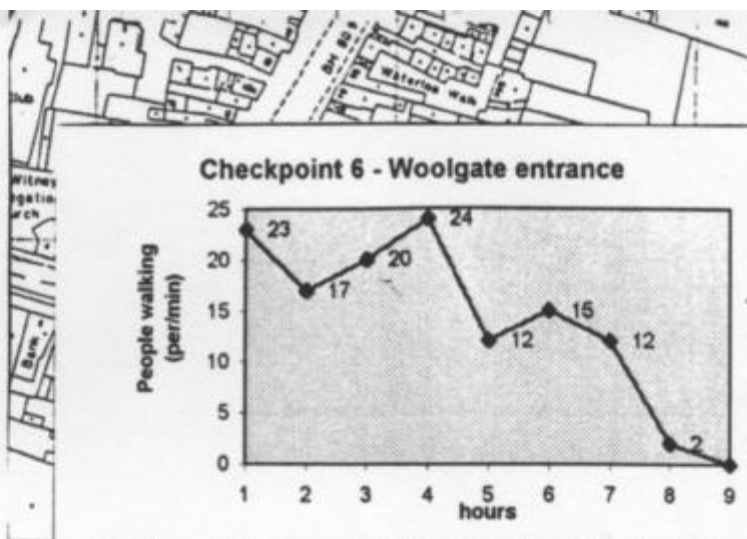


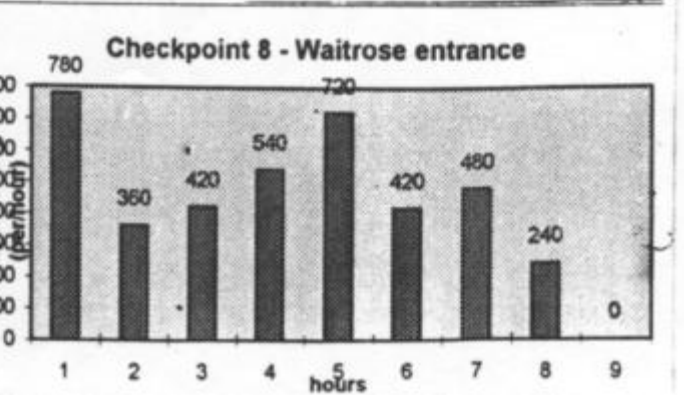
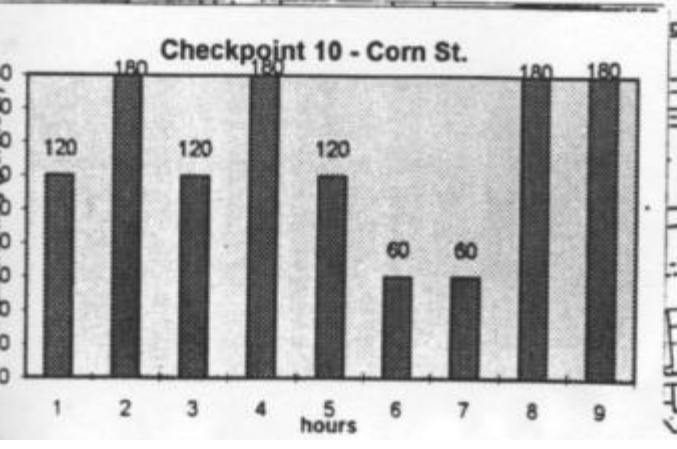
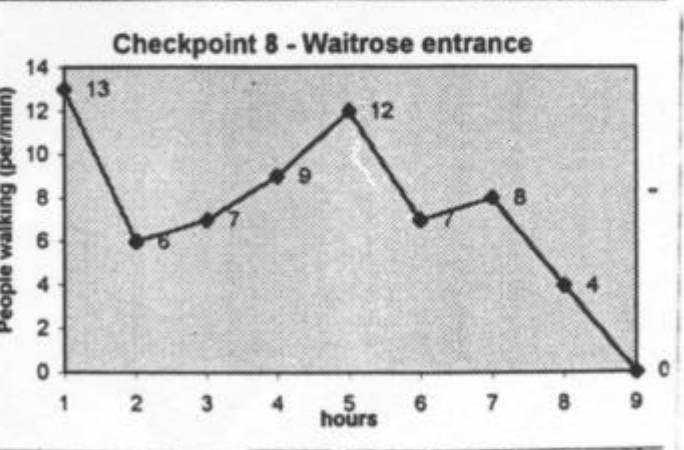
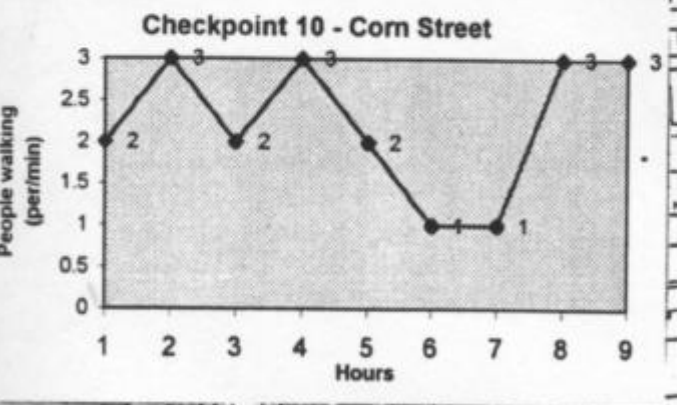
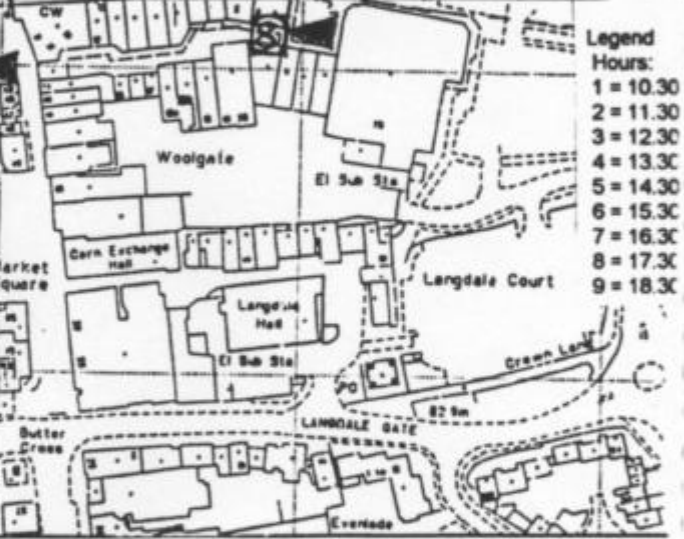
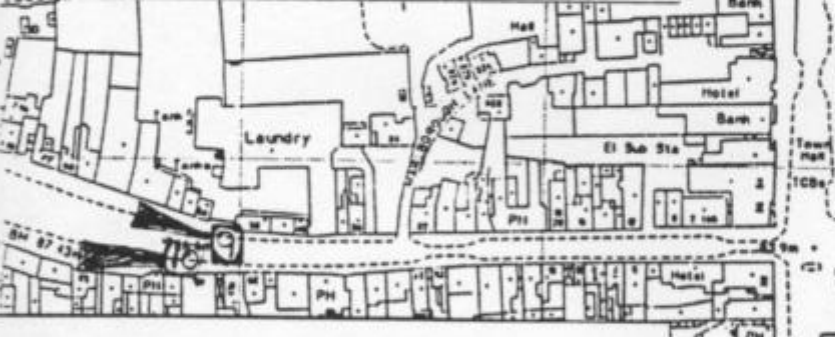
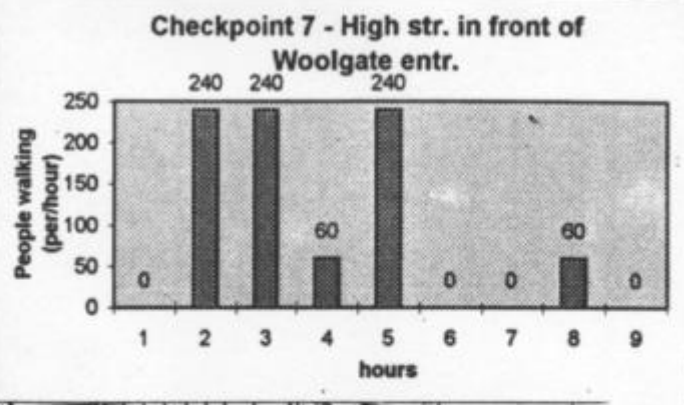
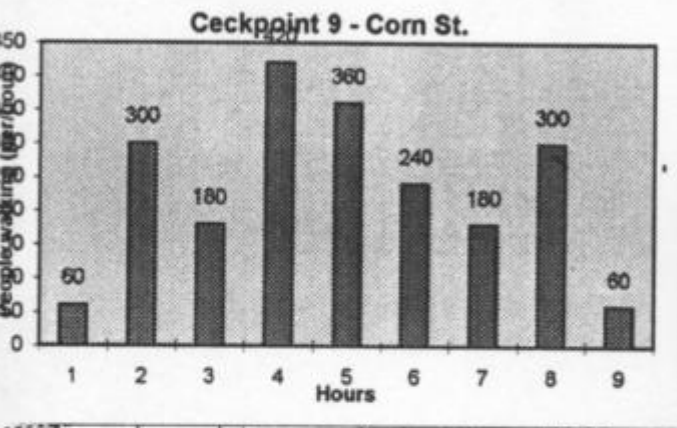
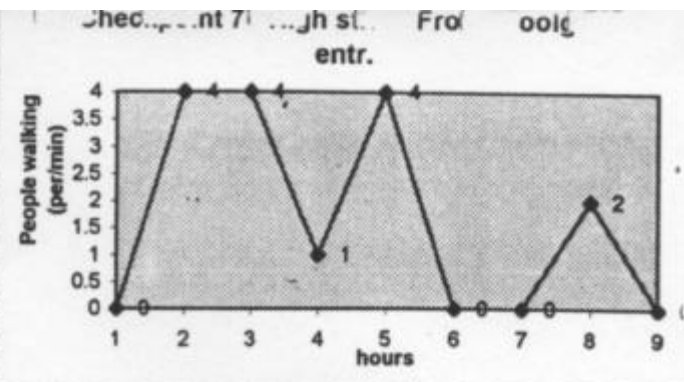
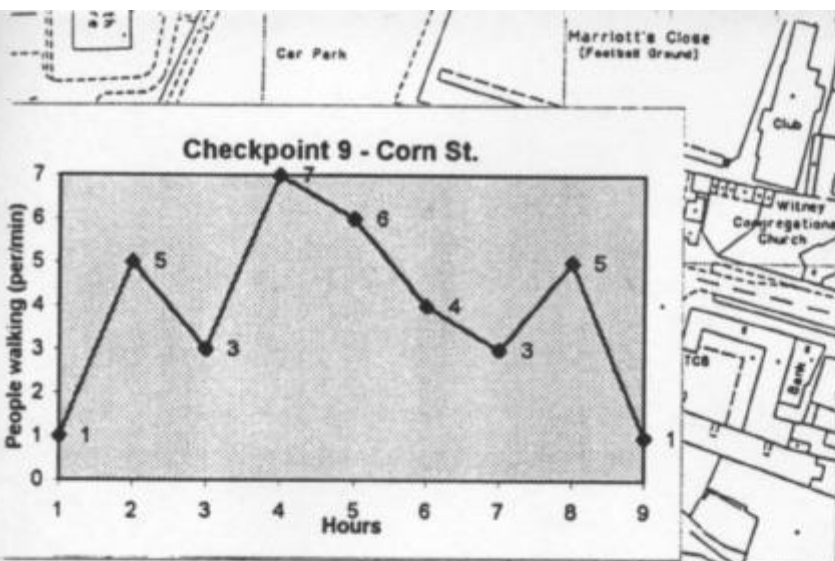
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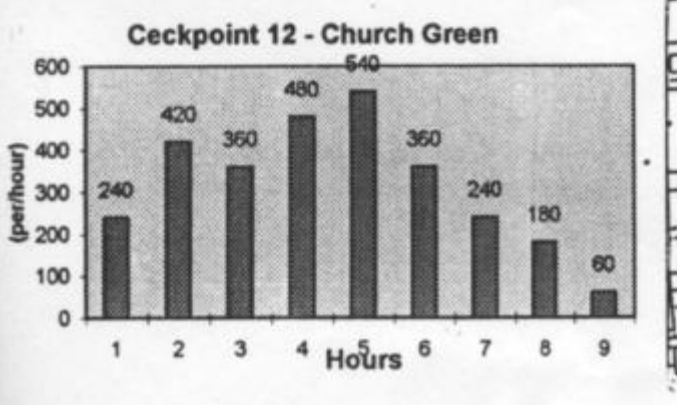
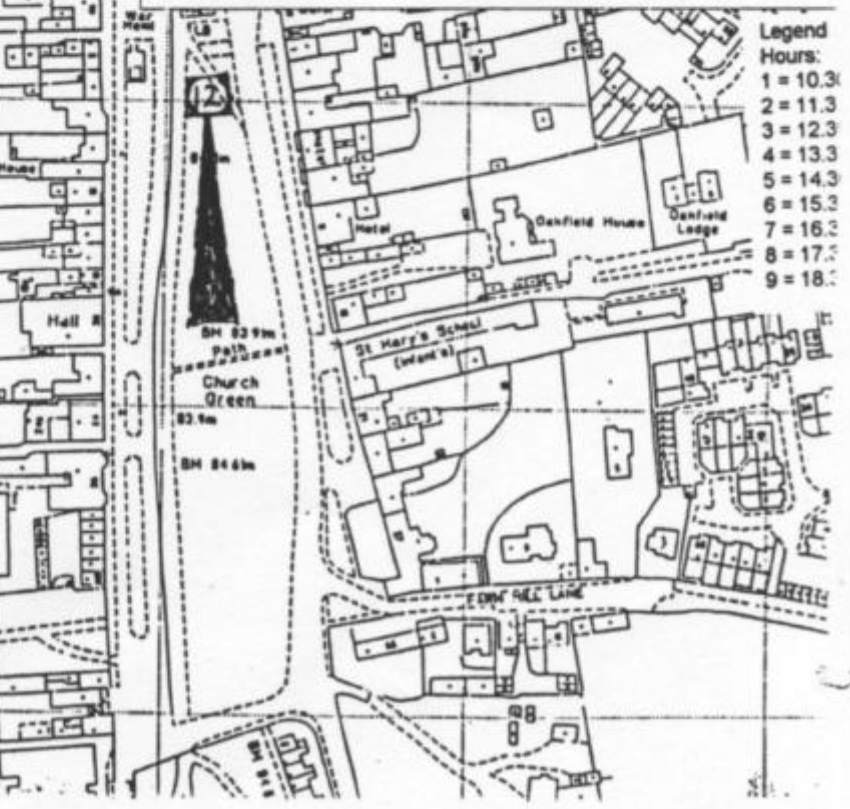
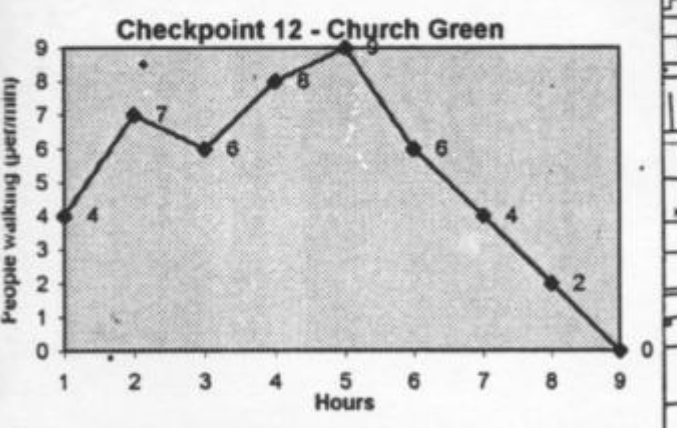
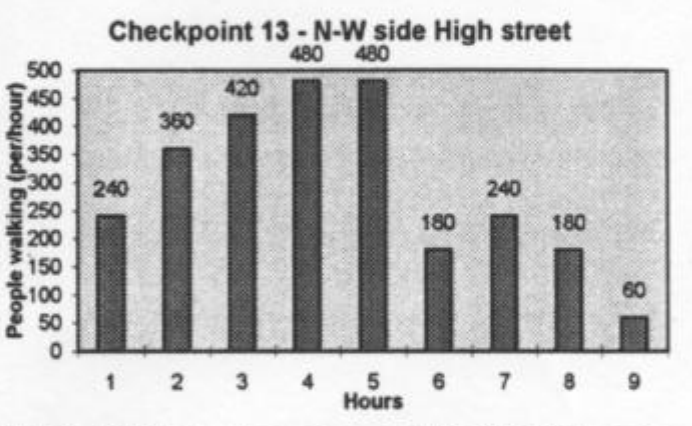
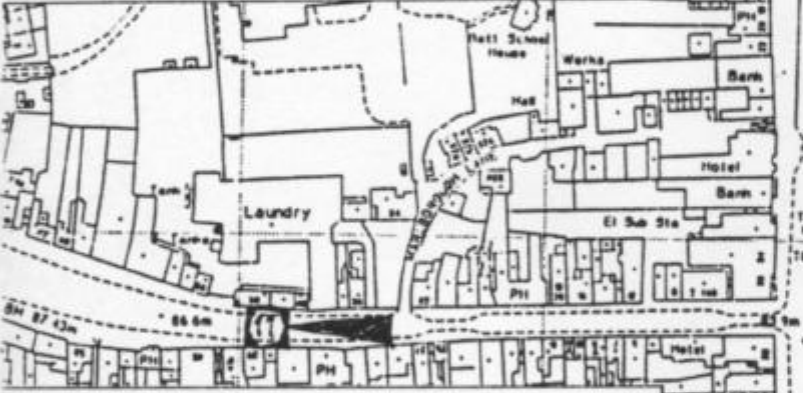
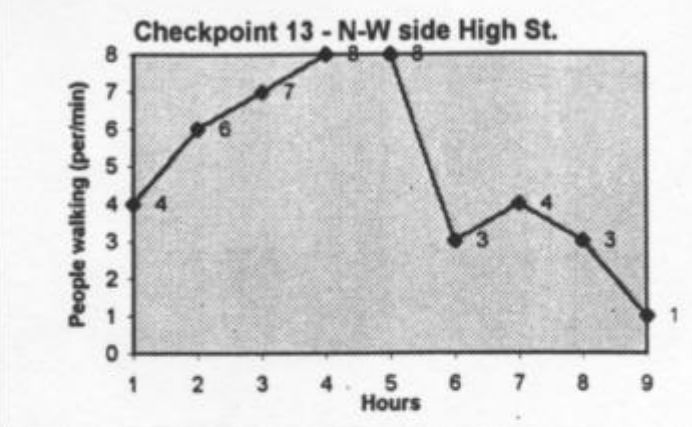
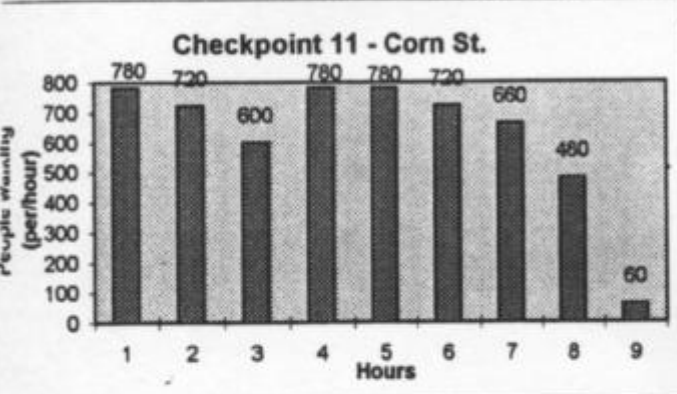
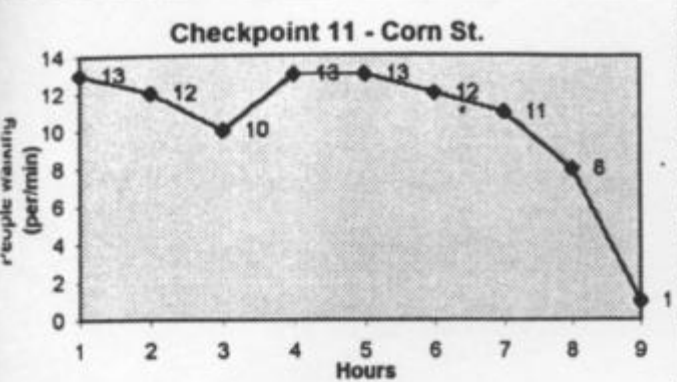
pedestrian traffic to and from the High street (peak of pedestrian traffic 1740 people per hour recorded between two and three pm). This is a real barrier for pedestrian use of the northern part of the High street because most of the people coming from the car parks are converging towards the shopping attractions of the rest of the High street and Woolgate.

Finally, due to the fact that the high street and Woolgate have mainly retail functions, all the checkpoints were deserted after 5.30pm.



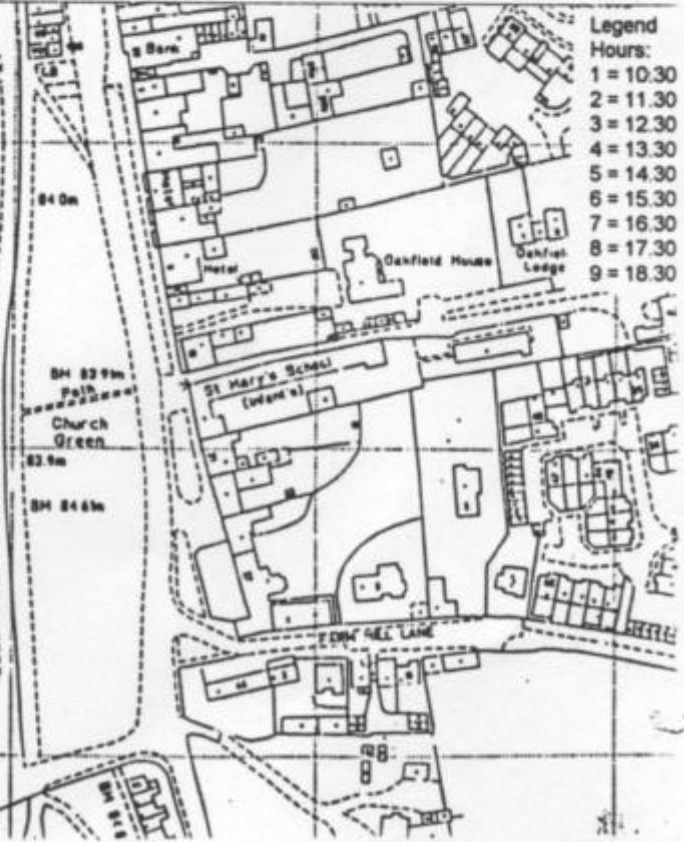
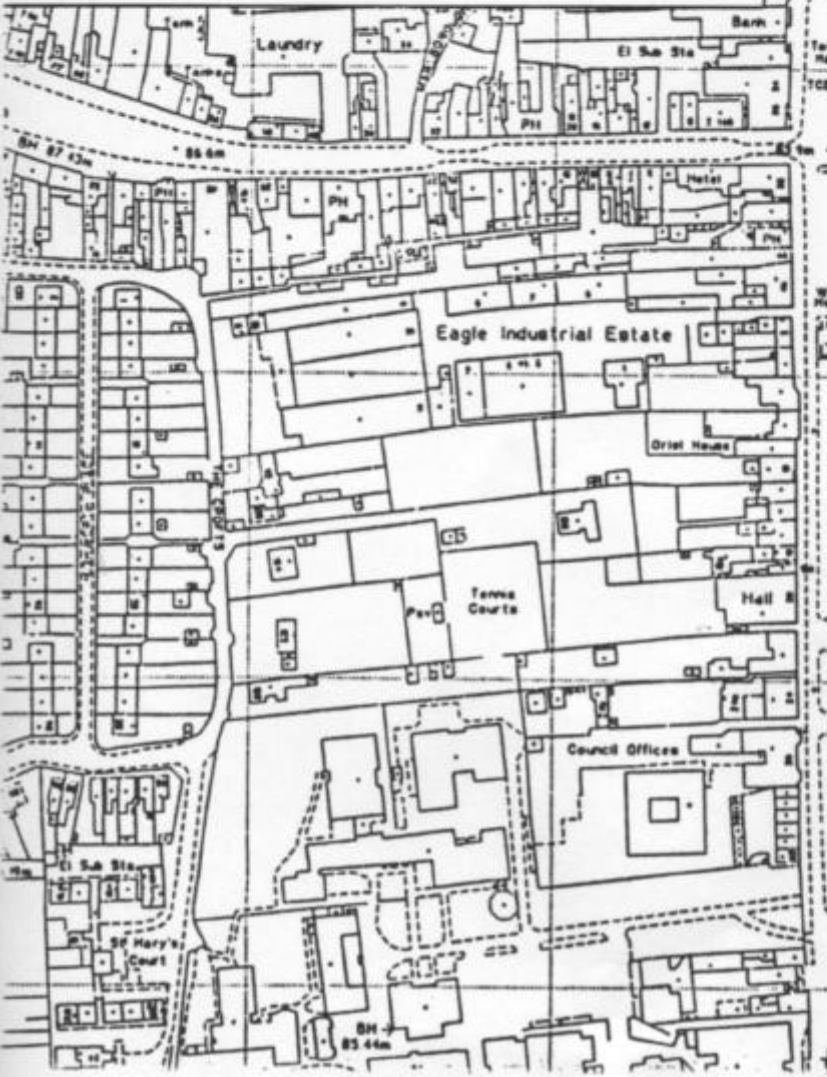
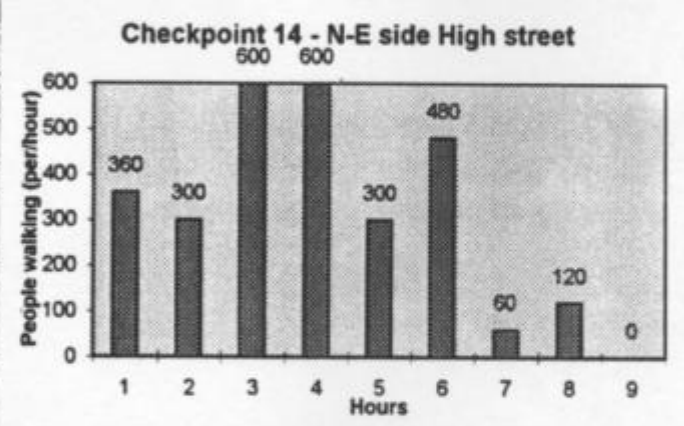
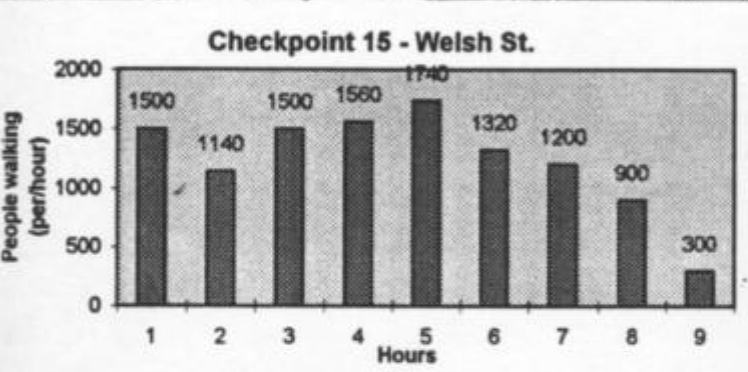
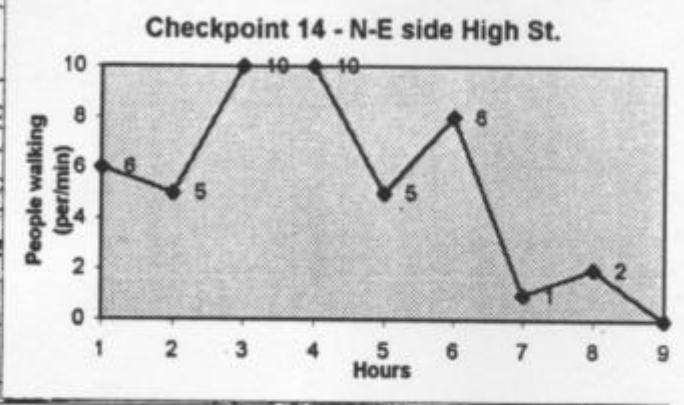
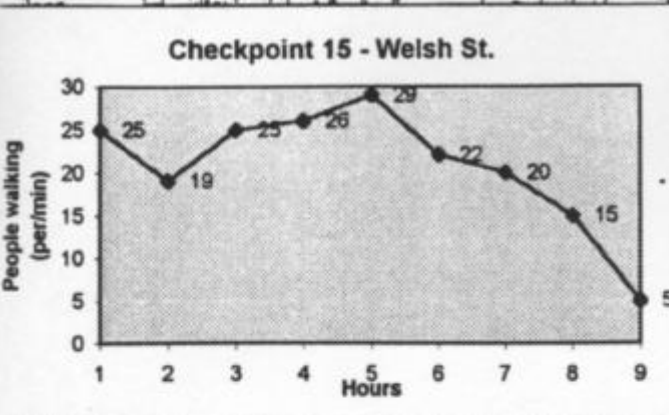
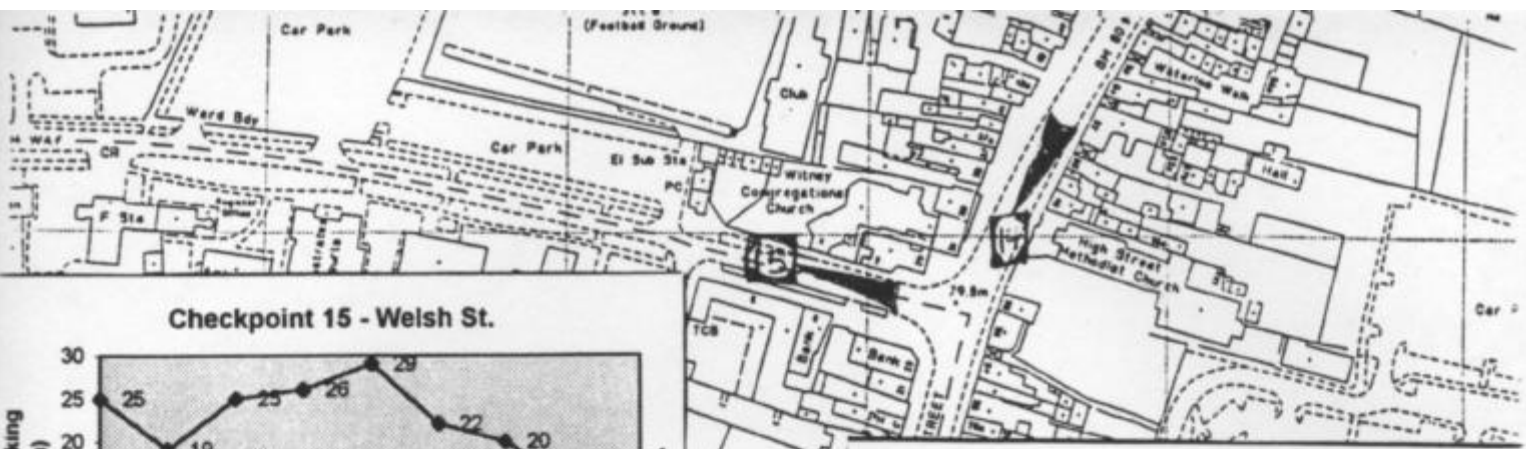


Car Park (Football Ground)



Legend  
Hours:  
1 = 10.30  
2 = 11.3  
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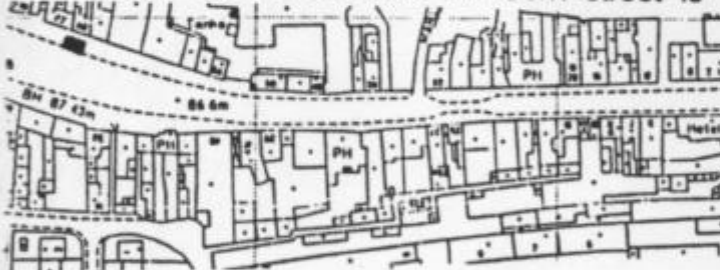
### 3.3 Stationary activities

#### 3.3.1 Public seats (map 14)

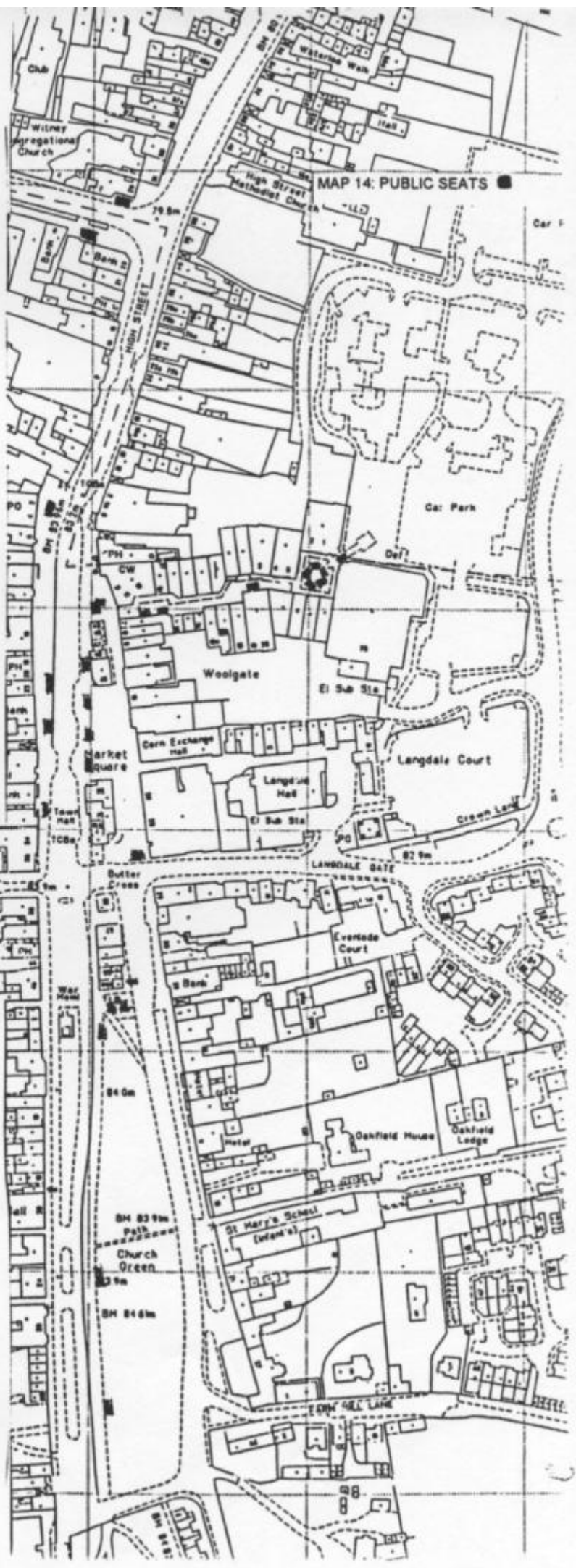
The seating facilities in Witney Town centre are made up of:

- 12 benches on the High street and Market square (average 4 people per bench)
- 9 benches in Woolgate shopping mall
- 4 benches on Church Green
- 1 bench on Corn street

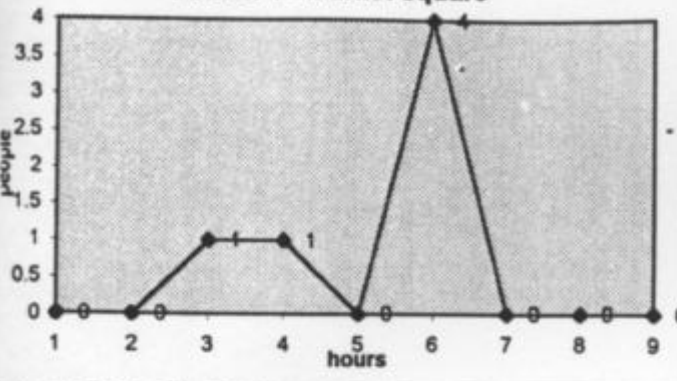
The seating facilities are numerically quite good. The High street and market square present two standard design type of wooden benches and they are usually well positioned in shady areas and protected by trees. The only benches which vary from the standard type that are in front of the Woolgate entrance. These are made in stone with wooden seats and back, they are an interesting design and position but rather uncomfortable and dirty. In Woolgate mall the benches are of a good quality, clean and well positioned (Those in front of Waitrose entrance are especially beautiful and attractive). The only weakness of these benches is the lack of back seat which partly compromises the comfort. The lack of benches on Corn street is



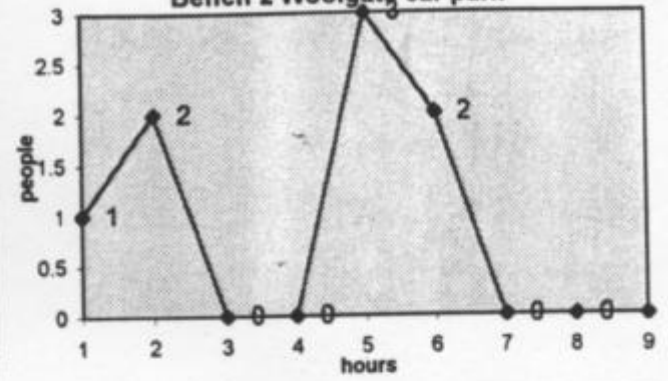
asily explained by the presence of small sidewalks. All the benches face the street. This is rather disappointing especially in Market Square and Church Green. The three benches on Market Square are all facing the traffic and not the square. This results in few people using the benches due to the vast empty space behind the benches creates insecurity and poor quality view. This is striking when compared to the benches on Church Green which are the most frequently used and face the park, while the others which face the pathway and the parked cars are deserted. A more sensible way of positioning the benches will probably provide improvements comfort and frequency of use.



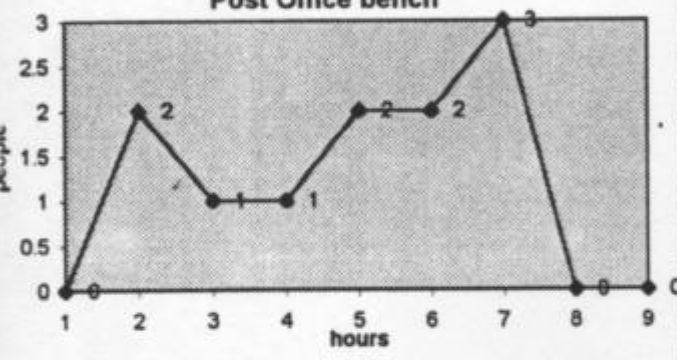
Bench 1 - Market square



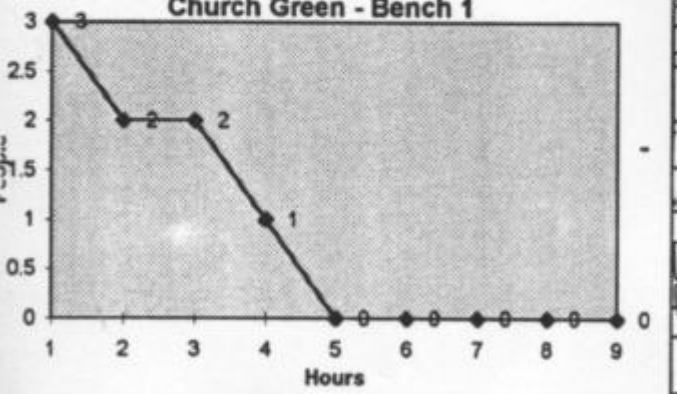
Bench 2 Woolgate car park



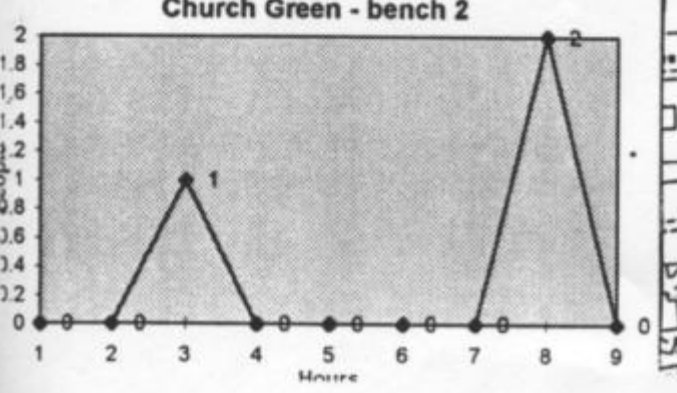
Post Office bench



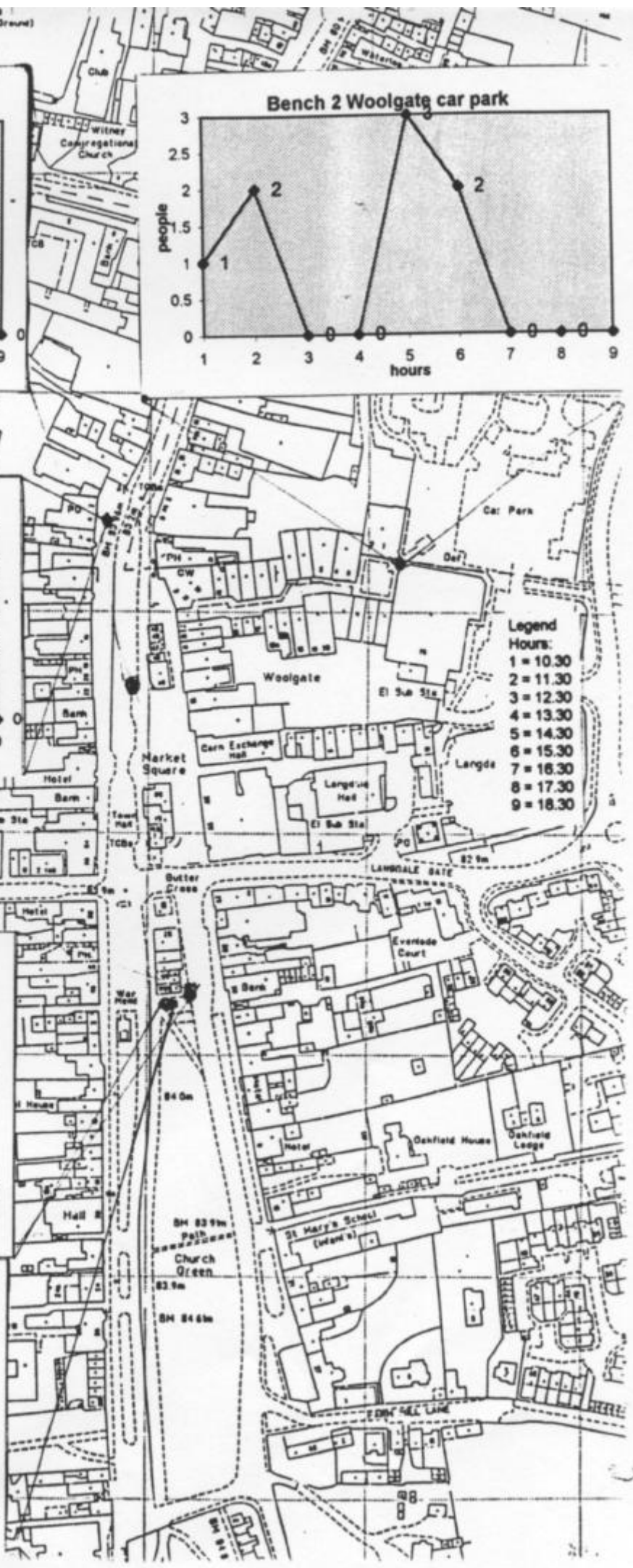
Church Green - Bench 1

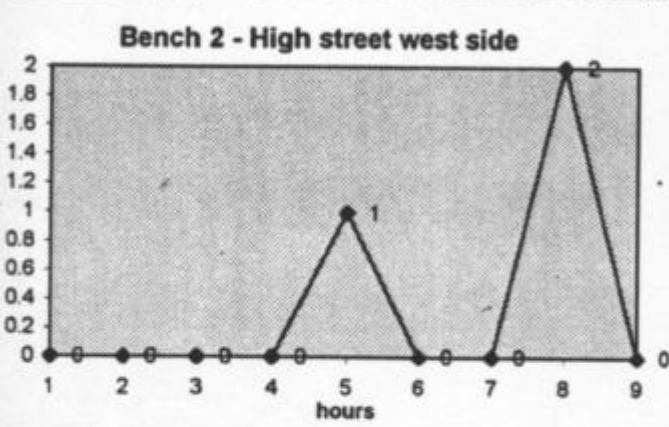
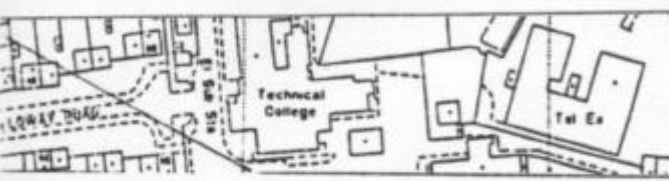
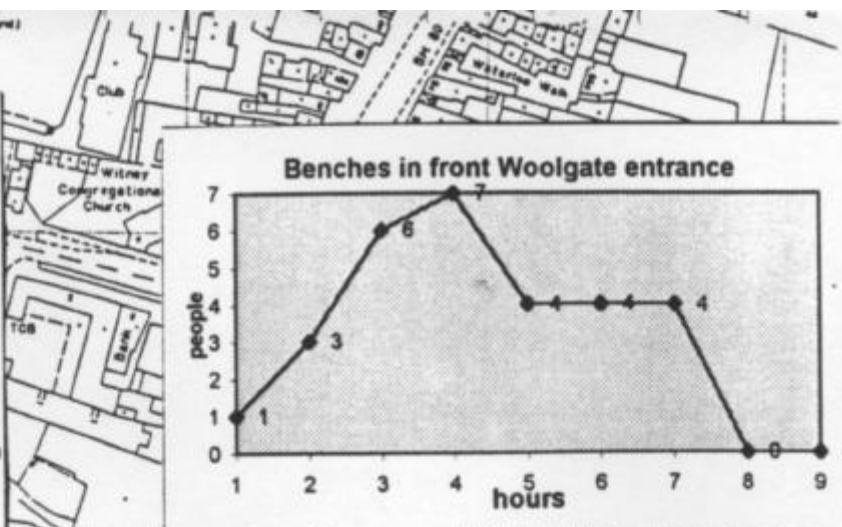
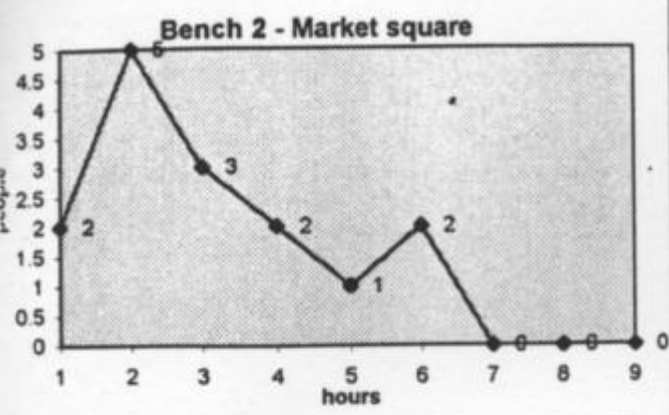
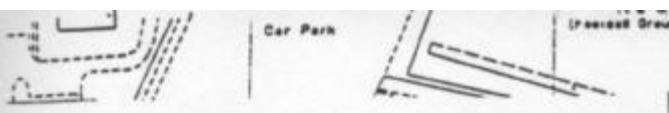


Church Green - bench 2

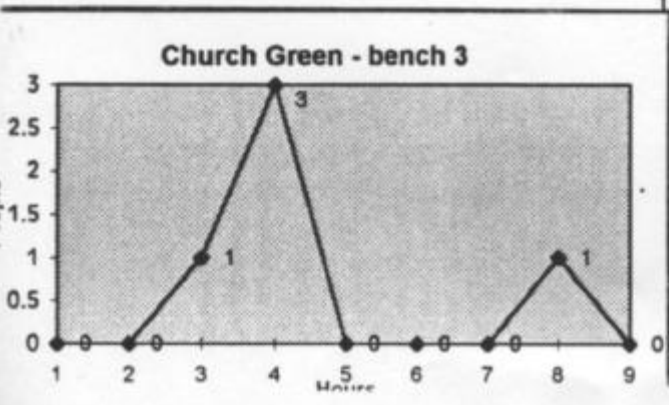
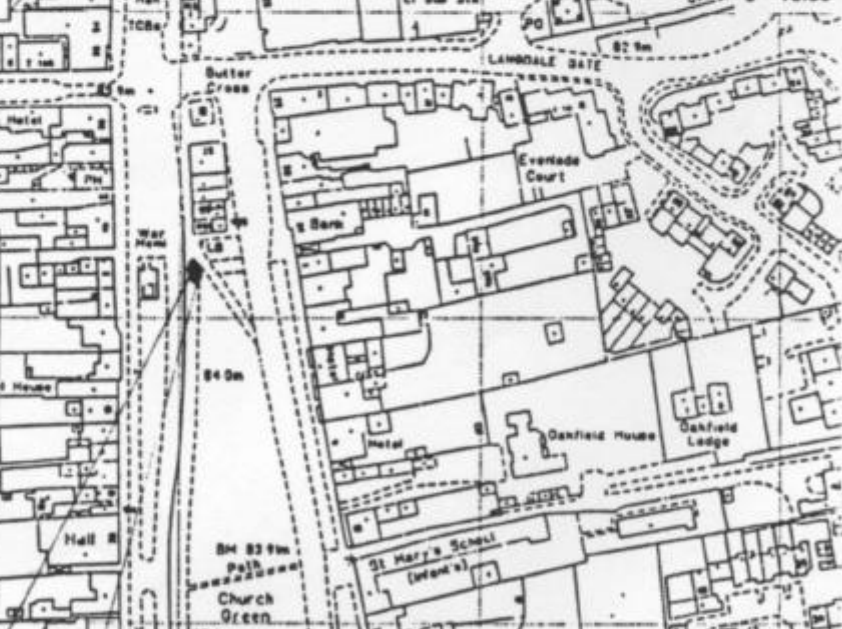
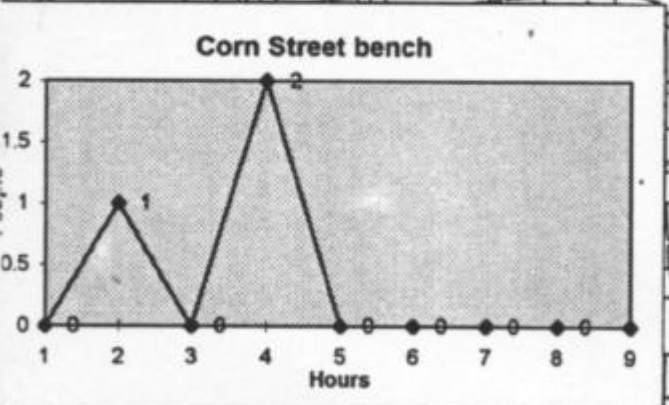
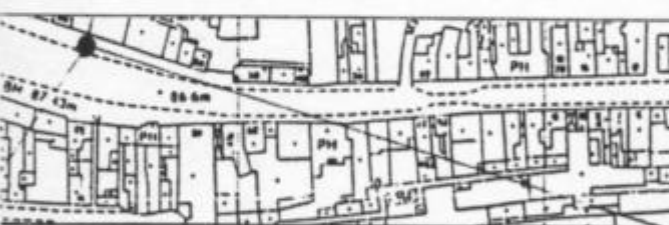


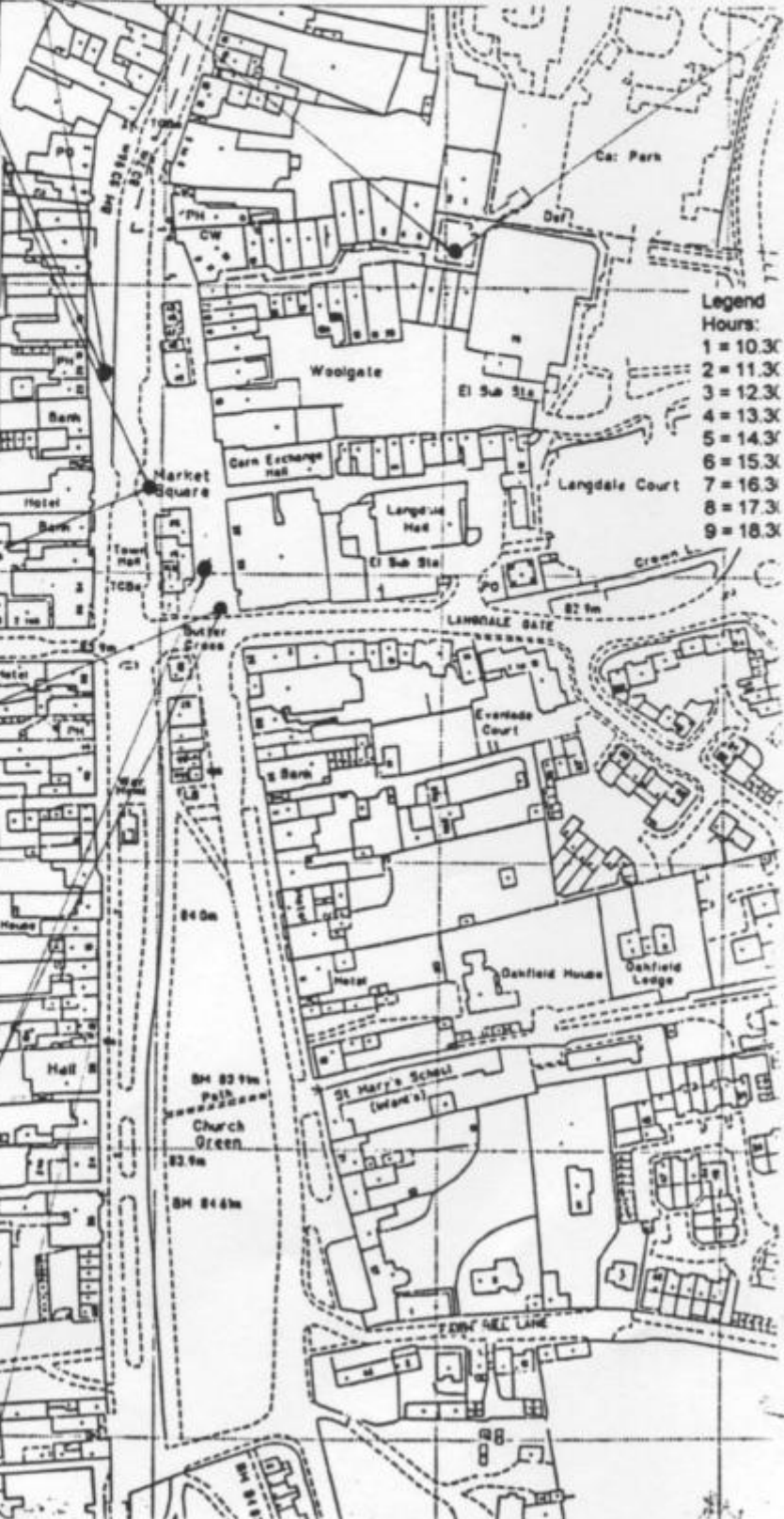
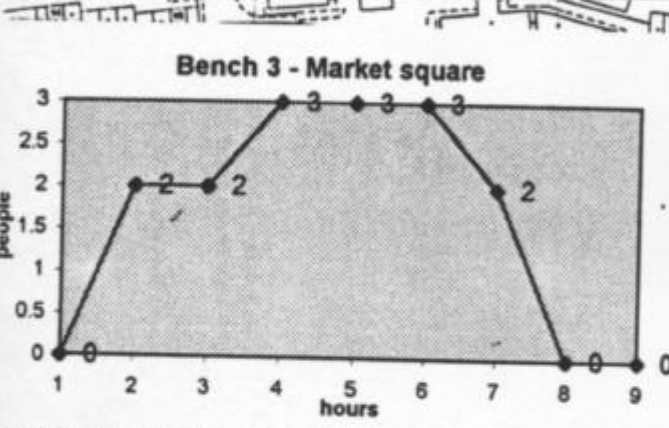
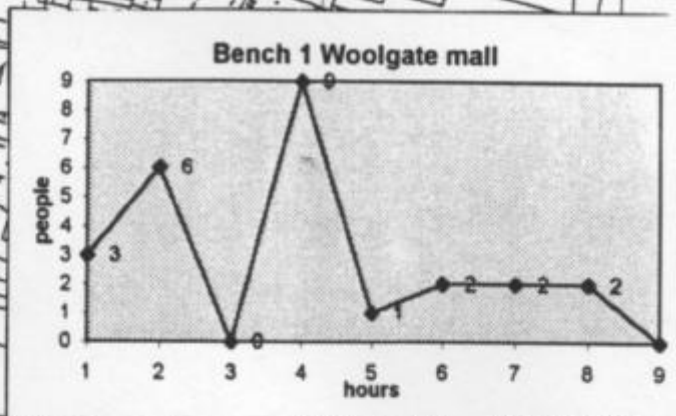
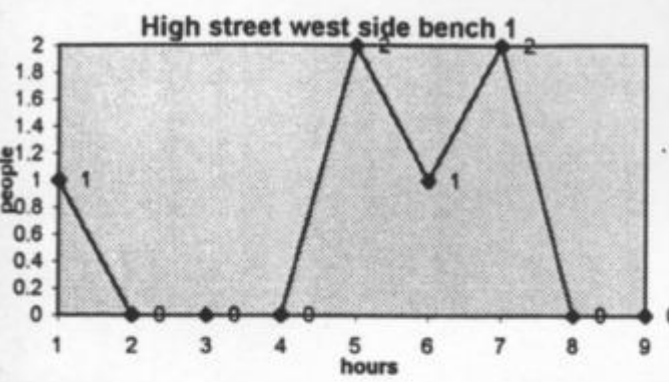
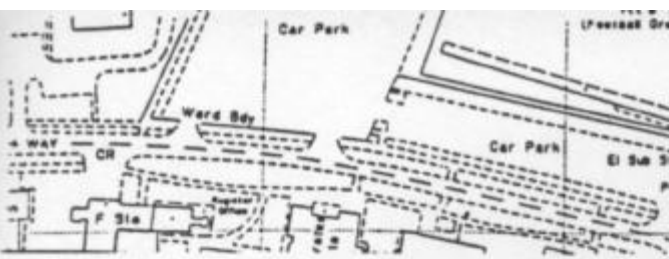
- Legend  
Hours:  
1 = 10.30  
2 = 11.30  
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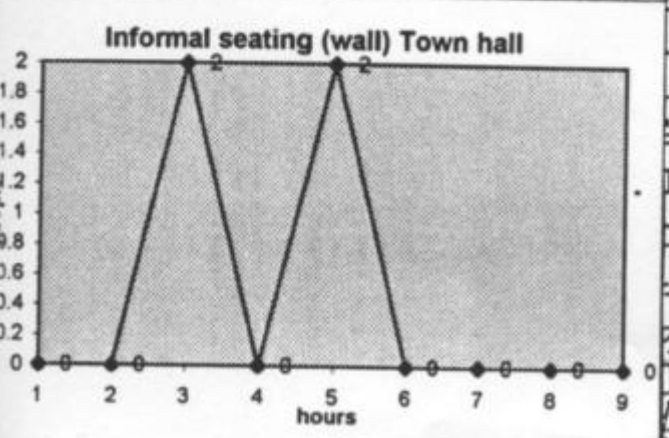
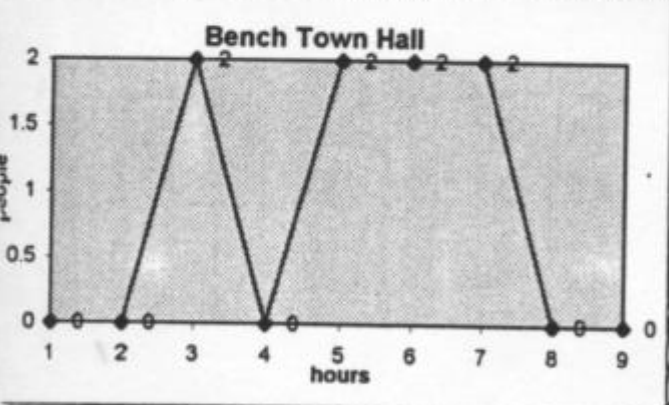
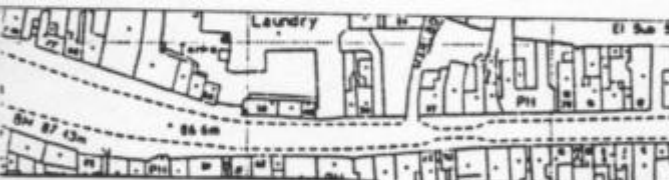


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 1 = 10.30  
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- Legend**  
Hours:  
1 = 10.30  
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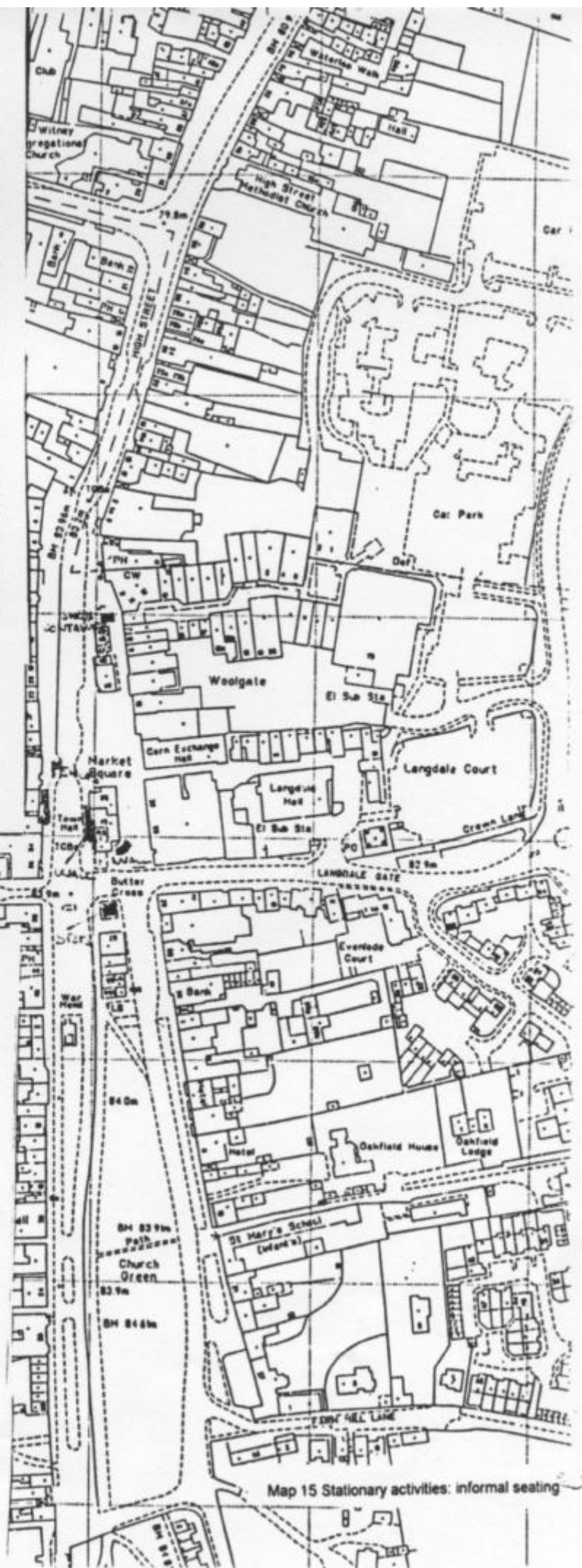
### 3.3.2 Seating options

If the situation of the public seating is quite good, the town centre does not present any alternative option. There are few informal seating opportunities (map.15) such as walls and steps mainly occupied by young people. The real problem is that there is no seating provided by cafes and pubs spilling onto the sidewalk or into the public space. This is a great shame because people, and especially tourists, love sitting, eating and resting in sidewalk cafes. The lack of seating in the market square is particularly notable and for this reason the space is especially under used on non market days. This factor surely has to be improved.

Partly supplementing the lack of sidewalk cafes and seating is the presence of beer gardens in 3 public houses. The charm of these beer gardens, placed in open air courts in the back of the pubs, however is rather limited because they are not offering attractive views of the High street and of the ever changing people environment.

### 3.3.3 Cultural and commercial activities in the public spaces.

The survey of street entertainment and commercial activities in Witney town centre in a normal week day was disappointing. There was no sign of any artistic or cultural activity on the sidewalks. The only commercial activities recorded in the public space numbered three and all were rather unattractive: a stall of a fruit and vegetable shop spilling into the sidewalk, a fundraiser for a cancer research organisation and a food stall (Dinky Donuts) in front of Woolgate mall entrance.



Map 15 Stationary activities: informal seating

### 3.4 Pedestrian activities survey

A high quality town centre is one which has lively and diverse activities which attract people and tempt them to stay and enjoy themselves. This survey aims to note which spaces are used for what kind of pedestrian activities.

There are 3 kinds of activities that have been noted:

#### 1. Necessary activities

(walking to and from the car, the shops, waiting for the bus etc.)

#### 2. Optional activities

Activities which people do when the conditions are conducive and the surroundings are attractive

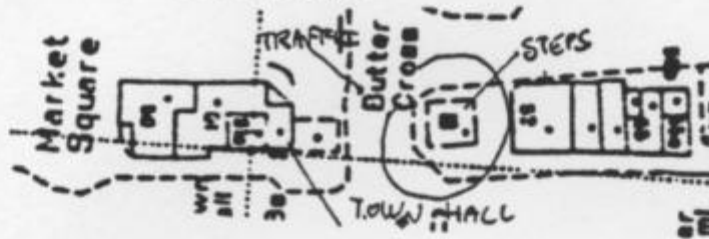
#### 3. Social activities

Otherwise known as circulation and exchange activities: when people move around the same place as passive or active participants in the social scene: chatting, playing, getting together.

The results are shown on map 16 and each site has been analyzed as follows.



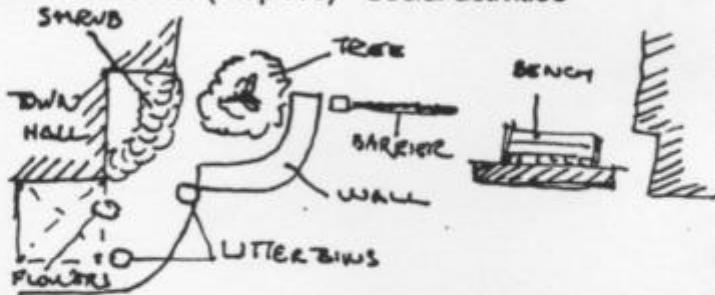
A) Butter Cross - Social activities



This seems to be the place where young teenagers meet. Small company of friends (3-6) aged 12-15.

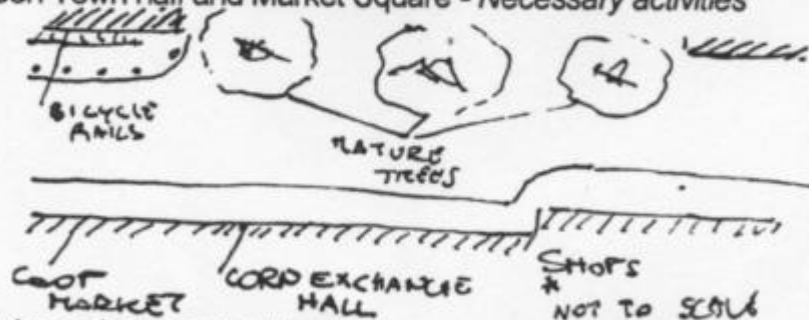
- Nice microclimate/protected and to a degree apart from the rest of the High street
- Informal seating on the central steps of the Cross.
- A place to talk, but nevertheless noisy and disturbed by through traffic (especially lorries).

B) Town Hall corner (map .18) - Social activities



- a- Nice wooden bench, used mainly by elder people to rest and chat after shopping.
  - b-Wall used for informal seating
  - c-This corner is used for chatting and resting beyond the shade of the tree
  - d-Nice street furniture: bunches of flowers, litters and a well designed shrub
- Overall it is a nice environment but Butter Cross is disturbed by car traffic.  
Average time of resting/seating/chatting 10/15 minutes.

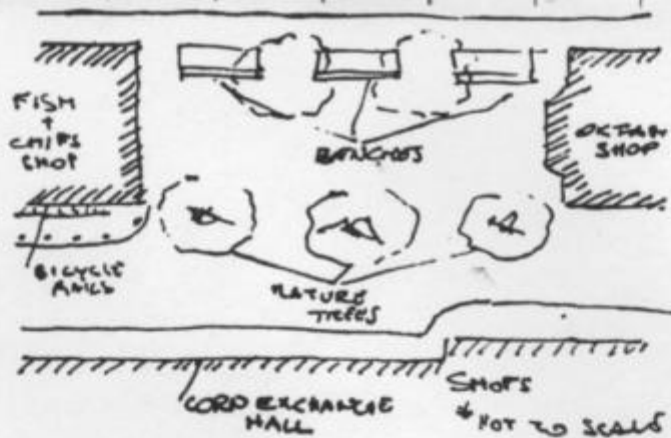
C) Passage between Town hall and Market Square - Necessary activities



- Unattractive, people are just passing through
- Coop supermarket is mainly underused
- Poor window displays
- Poor architectural quality of the facades.



D) Market Square - Social activities



a-3 benches, used for the most part of the day despite facing the passing through traffic. Lovely townscape on the other side of the road characterised by greeneries and good architectural quality

b-beautiful mature trees

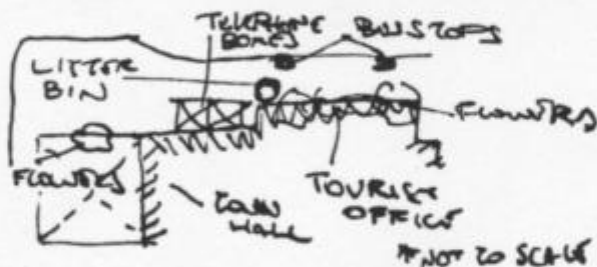
c-Fish+Chips shop poorly decorated and very unattractive

d-facades in poor conditions

e-Good quality street furniture

Overall the market square is mainly underused, except for the benches, for social activities. The square does not provide a point of attraction. There is a strong need for animation in the days when there is no market.

E) Bus stops beside town hall - Necessary activities



-Bus stops crowded with people waiting for the buses

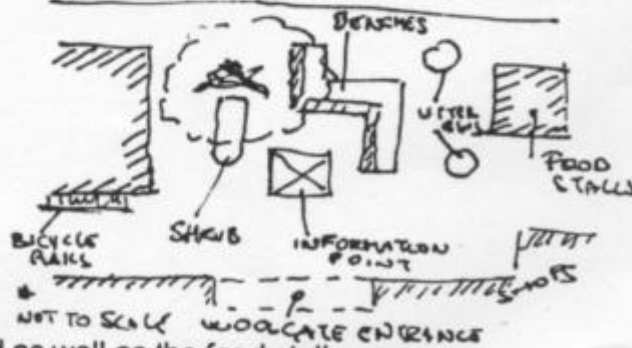
-Lack of seating facilities: people are mainly using the steps of the shop windows and the pavement as informal seating.

Good street furniture (two red telephone boxes and litter bins)

-Tourist information office and other shops create a good pattern of activities

-Nice bunches of flowers in the shop windows.

F) Pavement widening in front of Woolgate shopping mall - Social activities



This is a real fulcrum of activity

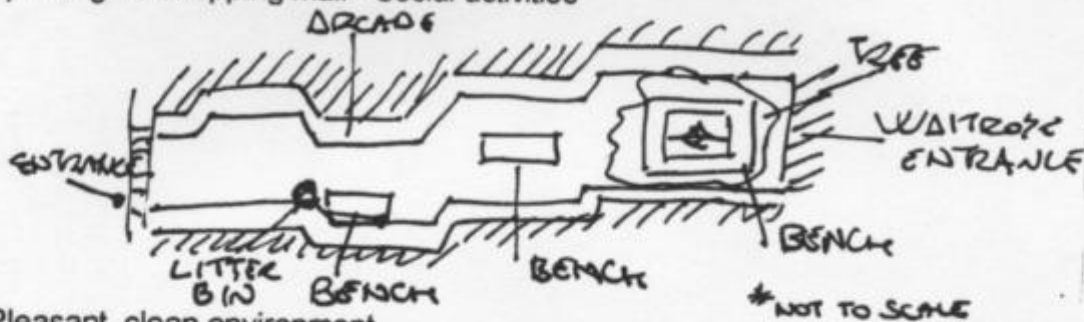
-The benches are frequently used as well as the food stall.

-Pleasant microclimate (shade of a beautiful mature tree)

-Information point full of leaflets and information but in a terrible state of confusion

-Shrub container in poor condition but frequently used for informal seating  
 The area is attractive but the street furniture could be improved. The benches, for example, are quite dirty and there is a lot of garbage around. The major font of disturbance, however, is the annoying presence of taxis queuing on the street with the engines running.

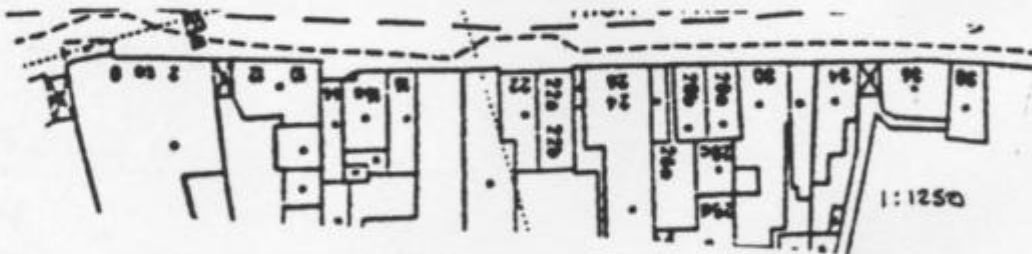
G) Woolgate shopping mall - Social activities



- Pleasant, clean environment
- Good architectural detail and quality
- Nice microclimate
- Good window display and variety

The shopping centre seems reasonably successful and the people like to pass their time in it. The people feel safe thanks to the presence of guards (such as police patrol on foot) and they love to stop, chat, meet other people and shop in the mall.

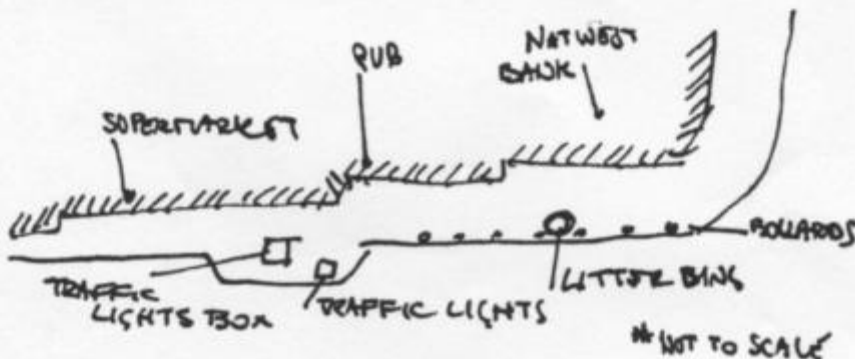
H) High street east side - Optional activities



- Nice shop windows and overall good architectural details
- Fair number of people walking on the sidewalks
- Good variety of different shops.

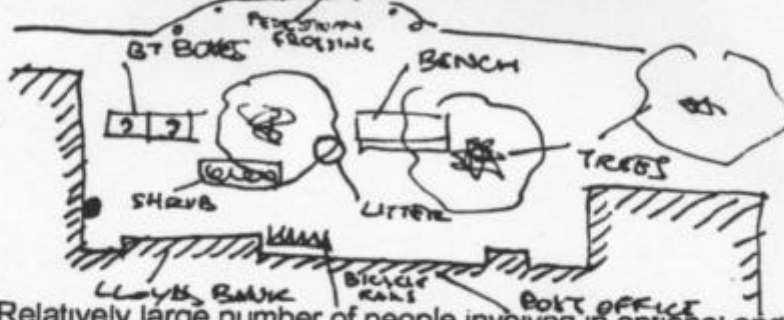
People seem to enjoy their promenading, often stopping to look in the shop windows. In the High street, however, people do not seem to partake in social activities (such as meeting other people and chatting) due to the fact that the pavement, although in good condition, is not wide enough.

J) High street west side - Necessary activities



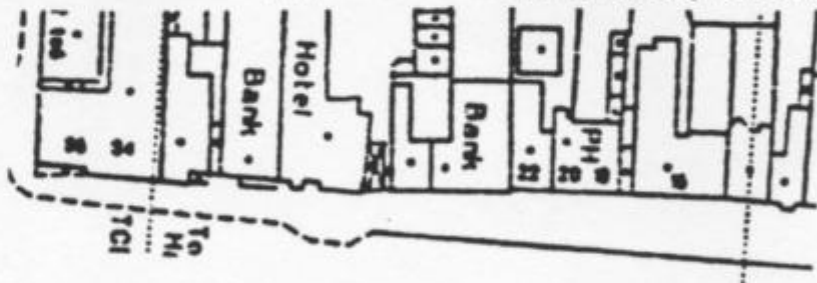
- The Natwest Bank on the corner, with its blank walls and screened window, is a poor example of architectural interaction with pedestrians.
  - Good provision of bollards and litter bins, but the box for the traffic lights is quite ugly.
  - The pavement is clean and in good condition.
- Most people are just passing through going towards the car park or the centre of the high street. The shop windows on this side of the high street are of poorer quality and not interesting enough to attract optional activities.

K) Widening in front the Post Office - *Social activities*



- Relatively large number of people involved in optional and social activities.
  - Nice architecture and details
  - Lovely mature trees
  - The bench is usually crowded for most of the day.
  - Good provision of street furniture (several litter bins, telephone booths, bicycle stalls and shrubs)
- People seem to enjoy this place for resting and socializing. The only sign of disturbance was the noisy presence of the security van loading goods from the Lloyds Bank.

L) High street west side (opposite market square)- *Mostly necessary activities*



This side of the high street is not as popular as the other side, despite the fact that the environment is greatly enhanced by the presence of good architecture and beautiful mature trees. The lack of pedestrian activity is probably explainable considering the lack of attractive shops (just two expensive furniture shops). There are 3 benches, facing the market square, but these are also underused. Overall this part of the High street needs improvements of vitality.

**M) Northern part of the High street - Necessary activities**



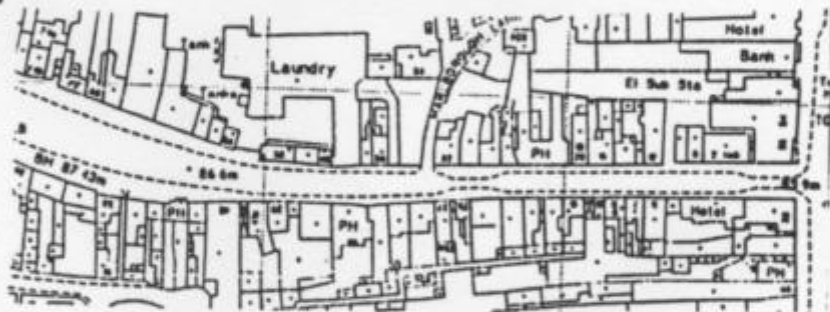
The west side of the street is very attractive and it is characterised by:

- Nice architecture and details
- Lovely mature trees
- Wide pavement
- Food stalls spilling into the sidewalks
- Good street furniture (litter bins approx. every twenty meters)

The east side is pleasant, with nice shop's windows and overall good architectural details. The narrow pavement and the presence of parked cars, however, make pedestrian social activities impossible.

As it has been explained before, this part of the High street, although it is beautiful and attractive, is rather underused. It suffers for the presence of Welsh street, which is a real barrier for the pedestrian use of this part of the High street.

**N) Corn street - Necessary activities**



- Nice and pleasant environment
- Human scale architecture
- Good variety of shops, mostly for night life activities (Pubs, restaurants and take away)

The eastern part of Corn street presents a very narrow pavement. This factor makes social activities difficult and people seem just passing through, mainly heading towards the High street. The pavements become wider and pleasant, with trees on both sides of the street, close to the Holloway rd. junction. This part of Corn street, however, is rather underused, mainly for the lack of attractive shops (most of the buildings are for residential use).

#### **PART 4 - RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE TOWN CENTRE**

The project of pedestrianisation of the High street is highly recommended because it gives the unique opportunity to create a delightful people orientated town centre. Witney has outstanding architectural qualities and a traffic free town centre will exalt its considerable human scale environment.

This project will be the major step towards the creation of a "people city", however, the following recommendations, deducted from this report (personal of the author), serve as possible suggestions in the creation of a liveable and social environment.

- 1** Expand the heart of the town centre improving the connection between the High street, Butter Cross and Church Green, on one side, and towards Bridge street on the other, to create a long and inviting promenade.
- 2** Preserve and enhance the architectural quality of the town centre and if possible encourage fund-raising towards a program of restoration for the buildings in the worst conditions (i.e. surrounding Market square)
- 3** With the pedestrianisation of the High street provide incentive for cafes and pubs to use the pavements for tables and for various other activities. This is especially recommended for Market square, which nowadays is very under used.
- 4** Enhance the role of Market square as the heart of the town centre, expanding it (incorporate the street as part of the square), provide new seating facilities (or simply re-orientate the existing benches towards the square) and create a nice environment with the use of water (i.e. A fountain could be an impressive landmark in the middle of the square).
- 5** Sponsor a programme of street entertainment, such as cultural and musical events and festivals, and encourage groups and organisations to perform in public spaces to attract citizens and tourists towards Witney town centre.
- 6** Make the High street and Woolgate mall in particular lively by night encouraging the presence of evening venues.
- 7** The pedestrianisation of Corn street is highly recommended to create a safe and lively environment for night life activities.
- 8** Create, especially on Church Green, a safe and well-lit environment during the night.
- 9** Improve the connection between the northern part and the rest of the High street and if possible extend the project of pedestrianisation on Welsh street.
- 10** Attract people to live in the town centre (especially young people and further education students) creating an alternative option to Oxford.
- 11** Encourage people to be involved in the planning of the city and to care about the environment.