

**Straits House,
Tennyson Road,
Lower Gornal, Dudley,
West Midlands**

**An Ornamental Audit
and Building Record**

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Straits House, Tennyson Road, Lower Gornal, Dudley, West Midlands
An Ornamental Audit and Building Record

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Summary

An ornamental audit and building record was made of Straits House, Lower Gornal, Dudley, a former house, latterly a public house, dating from around 1820-30. The work was occasioned by a condition attached to planning permission to demolish part of the building and to convert the main element to residential apartments. The exercise recorded a significant Regency period gentleman's residence, which had been substantially altered during its time as a public house, including an unsightly extension, and internal remodelling, but which nevertheless retained a good deal of its original character, including the ornamental stucco treatment, the bow windows, and small-pane sashes. Original features to have survived internally include moulded window and door architraves, window shutters, plaster cornices, the principal staircase (lately vandalised).

Straits House, Lower Gornal, Dudley, West Midlands

An Ornamental Audit and Building Record

1.0 Introduction

In August 2007 Birmingham Archaeology undertook an ornamental audit and building record of Straits House, Lower Gornal, Dudley, a former house, latterly a public house, dating from around 1830. The work was occasioned by a condition attached to planning permission to demolish part of the building and to convert the main element to residential apartments. The recording was carried out according to a written scheme of investigation prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (2007), and was guided by the advice of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA 2007) and English Heritage (2006).

2.0 Site Location

Straits House is situated on the north side of Tennyson Road, Lower Gornal, Dudley, West Midlands, at NGR SO 9029 9199, set back from the road within a spacious plot, formerly gardens, but now largely given over to car parking.

3.0 Objectives

- To complete an ornamental audit of the property prior to any further alterations being carried out.
- To make a drawn and photographic record of the building prior to any demolition taking place.

4.0 Methods

Written Record

An analytical written record of the building was compiled in the field on *pro forma* building and room record sheets, noting details of building type, date(s), materials, plan, and elevations.

Photographic Record

The photographic survey comprised both general and detail shots, and was carried out using a 35mm camera with black and white film, and a high resolution digital SLR camera, and incorporated scales where possible. All photographs were recorded on a *pro forma* record sheet detailing subject, direction, photographer and date.

Drawn Record

Existing scaled drawings were checked for accuracy and annotated with archaeological and structural information.

5.0 Building Description

Exterior

Straits House dates from around 1820-30, but has been subjected to later alterations and additions. A rectangular main block, aligned roughly east-west facing south, is elongated in its southern half by a pair of bow windows projecting to east and west (Fig. 3). There are three 19th-century rear (north) wings aligned north-south and roofed separately from the main block, a 19th-century extension to the rear wing, and a later 20th-century single-storey extension on the east side. The whole complex now has a rather rambling and accretive character, but as built would have had a good deal of symmetry.

The principal (south) elevation of this brick-built, stuccoed house comprises a symmetrical three-bay front articulated by recessed window bays (Fig. 4A, Plate 1). In the centre is a single-storey porch with a central recessed entrance (blocked) flanked by simple pilasters (Plate 2). The channelled rustication of the ground storey is contained by a first-floor band bearing horizontal reeding which is carried around the blocking course of the porch. Above this band, over each of the two ground-floor windows, is a segmental-arched recess. Over each of the first-floor windows is a dentilated band surmounted by a wide but shallow stepped eaves band. An oversailing hipped roof is covered in 20th-century interlocking tiles.

The east side elevation consists of the two-bay main block to the left (south) and two-bay rear wing to the right (north) (Fig. 4B, Plate 3). There is no discernible departure from the rather plain detailing apart from the single-storey bow window to the left (south), which lit one of the principal reception rooms within the main block. The two bays of this feature are articulated by twin, panelled, pilasters, and there is a dentilated frieze to a moulded cornice and panelled blocking course (Plate 4). This elevation is marred by the addition of a later 20th-century single-storey pub extension of no architectural merit.

The west side elevation of the main block is similar to its eastern counterpart, the principal feature again being a bow window to the right (south) which lit the other principal front room (Fig. 4C, Plate 5). This side of the main block is more visible than the east side, the continuation of the rustication and other horizontal demarcations being quite clear. The principal difference is in the treatment of the rear wing, which, in common with the rear wall of the main block is of painted brick here rather than being stuccoed like the east front. The wing is in two parts with a two-bay block to the right (south), mirroring the east wing, with a single-bay recessed extension to the left, the dichotomy being emphasised by differences in the character of the brickwork. In the angle between the main block and the wing is an original doorway with a 4-panelled door. It is flanked to the left (north) by a window, obscured at the time of the survey by breeze block screen.

The rear (north) elevation comprises the east wing to the left, the west wing to the right and a deeply recessed central entrance wing of two storeys and attic (Fig. 4D, Plate 6). The central wing has an early 19th-century doorway to the right (west) with overlight, pilastered wooden doorcase and cornice hood. A window to the left (east) is an original opening with a stone sill and segmental-arched head, but the window

frame has been replaced. The two first-floor openings both contain late 20th-century frames, but otherwise appear to be original; the smaller left hand (east) one has a segmental brick arch over, and the larger right hand (west) one a blocked semi-circular arch. A small attic window is also original with stone sill and 19th-century 4-pane frame

Interior

Basement (Fig. 3A)

The basement was divided into four barrel-vaulted rooms modernised as beer cellars with low plinths to accommodate the barrels. Other than the main structural aspects, there are no significant historic architectural features.

Ground Floor (Fig. 3B)

The internal arrangements at ground level have been a good deal altered during the public house phase when several sections of original walling were removed to create a more open plan, and bars and other pub fittings inserted, thereby destroying some of the 19th-century features and obscuring the original layout. However, it seems that the main entrance gave access to a large porch (G1) from whence a door would have opened to the entrance hall (G11). G11 led directly to a pair of large living rooms, G2 (west) and G3 (east), each of which terminated in a large bow window, and to the central area (G8), which contained the main staircase, access to the two rooms which lay to the north of G2 and G3 (G4 and G5 respectively) and a broad passageway leading to the back and side (west) entrances and to the rear wings. G9, within the northwest wing is the most likely candidate for the kitchen.

G1 (Porch)

G1 has been divided into a central passage flanked by 20th-century lavatories associated with the public house phase. Nothing of historic or architectural significance survives.

G2 (Drawing Room)

G2 retains a number of early 19th-century elements, including moulded skirting boards, a chimneybreast on the north wall, a moulded plaster ceiling cornice, and a tripartite window to the south and bow window to the west both with small-pane sashes, boldly projecting moulded architraves and panelled shutters. The east wall, however, has been removed to extend the room into G11, the former entrance hall, and all other fittings, including the quarry tile floor, the upholstered bench seating and picture rail are later 20th-century in date and not of special interest.

G3 (Dining Room)

G3 to a great extent mirrors G2. It too retains early 19th-century skirting boards a tripartite window to the south (Plate 7) and bow window (Plate 8) to the east both with boldly projecting moulded window architraves, panelled shutters and small-pane sashes, a moulded plaster cornice (Plate 9), and a chimney breast on the north wall

(Plate 10). All other fixtures and fittings are late 20th-century in date and not of special interest.

G4 (Reception Room)

The east wall of G4 has been removed in order to insert a bar, and the east end of the south wall has been opened out to create greater communication between G2 and G4. Most of the fixtures and fittings date from the mid to late 20th century including the quarry tile floor, the plank dado, picture rail and bar. Surviving early 19th-century features are the skirting boards, the west window with its boldly projecting moulded architrave, the chimneybreast, and the ceiling arrangement which comprises a coved plaster cornice and two cased beams with coved plaster sides.

G5 (Reception Room)

No features of historic or architectural interest survive.

G6 (Public House Extension)

Late 20th-century extension. No features of historic or architectural interest.

G7

Latterly public house lavatories, the conversion to which has obliterated any features of historic or architectural interest that may have existed.

G8 (Central Area)

The central area is now partly obscured by the insertion of a bar and fittings and the consequent enclosure of the staircase, and the former west wall has been removed to allow bar access from G4 to the west. Towards the south end of the east wall is an original entrance retaining an early 19th-century architrave, with a late 20th-century door. It is likely that this doorway was mirrored on the west side of the area by one giving access to G4. The early 19th-century staircase survives in the north-east corner of G8. Access was originally from the south, but this has been closed off and the stair is now reached from the north via a short flight of inserted steps which has covered over the still surviving foot of the early-19th century stairs. The staircase itself has a panelled casing, open string with carved tread ends, ramped skirting board ascending in step with the stairs, stick balusters, shaped hand rail and a square sectioned foot newel (Plate 11). A good deal of damage has been inflicted recently by vandal action, as a result of which, a large section of the balustrade has been destroyed. At the north end of the staircase an early 19th-century 4-panel door opens to the head of the cellar steps (Plate 12). The north wall of G8 is pierced by a 3-centred open archway springing from moulded plaster imposts, the soffit of the arch being wood panelled (Plate 13).

G9 (Kitchen)

Probably to be identified with the kitchen, the room is fitted with the trappings of a late 20th-century kitchen, and no features of historic or architectural interest survive

except for the chimneybreast on the north wall. A small room entered at the northeast corner of the room, now a lavatory, may have been a larder or pantry.

G10 (*Rear Entrance Hall*)

G10 formed the rear entrance hall, with access from the rear (north) and west doorways, it gave access on the west to the kitchen (G9), on the south to G8 and thence to the main house, and on the east, via another, but less ornate archway (Plate 14), to a small lobby (G13).

G11 (*Entrance Hall*)

An opening in the south wall, probably the original front doorway, is now devoid of any distinguishing features. In the east wall is an original doorway with moulded architrave and 4-panelled door. An inserted partition contains a reused early 19th-century door architrave of similar type, probably taken from elsewhere in the house.

G12

A small room, latterly a lavatory that contains no features of interest.

G13 (*Lobby*)

A small lobby serving as a thoroughfare between the rear entrance hall (G10) and the east wing, but also giving access to G12.

G14

The north end of the west wing, which has here been given the designation G14, was not accessible at the time of the survey. This area provided storage at ground level and access to the first-floor. It was probably part of the service quarters and is unlikely to retain any features of significance.

First Floor (Fig. 3C)

F1 (*Landing*)

The first-floor landing originally extended from the staircase to the north as far as the front of the house to the south, but the southern portion has been partitioned during the 20th century to form another room. The balustrade to the stairwell has been destroyed by vandal action and the only surviving features of architectural significance are the 19th-century small-pane sash in the south wall, a 19th-century moulded plaster ceiling cornice and an ornate 19th-century plaster ceiling rose over the stairwell (Plate 15).

F2 (*Bedroom*)

Bedroom F2 is entered from the landing (F1) to the east via an early 19th-century 4-panelled door. Other original features include the beaded skirting boards, chimney breast (north wall), two 12-pane sashes (south and west walls), and the moulded

plaster ceiling cornice (Plate 16). The tiled fireplace dates from the early to mid-20th century.

F3 (Bedroom)

Bedroom F3 has 19th-century skirting boards, a chimneybreast on the north wall with early to mid-20th century tiled fireplace, 12-pane sashes in the south and east walls, and a plaster cornice (Plate 17).

F4 (Bedroom)

This room was not accessible at the time of the survey, but it retains a chimneybreast and, as a major room, it is anticipated that it might contain original skirting boards and a plaster cornice.

F5 (Bedroom)

The skirting boards have been replaced in the mid-20th century except in the inserted cupboards to the south where early 19th-century skirting survives. A chimneybreast projects from the north wall with an early to mid-20th-century fireplace, and there is a 12-pane sash window in the east wall. The west wall, which is a stud partition, contains a 19th-century 4-panelled door (Plate 18).

F6

F6, which is situated within the east wing, is now divided into 4 sections by stud partitions. 19th-century skirting boards survive in the two northern divisions but elsewhere are of 20th-century date. There is a chimneybreast on the north wall with a tiled early to mid-20th-century fireplace. In the east wall are two 12-pane sashes. The tiled fireplace dates from the early to mid-20th century.

F7-F10

None of these rooms were accessible at the time of the survey, but, being situated over the service wing, are likely to have contained servants bedrooms, and it is not anticipated that they would contain significant architectural features.

6.0 Conclusions

Straits House is a significant Regency gentleman's residence, which has suffered considerably from its conversion to a public house, but which nevertheless retains a good deal of its original character. The elevations of the main block are largely intact, and the principal alteration to the exterior has been the construction of the 20th-century pub extension to the east, and the accompanying opening out of the east wall at ground level. Windows have been replaced here and there, but generally the outward appearance of the house has not suffered too badly, and is capable of being restored.

It is the interior that has borne the brunt of 20th-century attrition, particularly the insertion of bars, the opening up of walls and the general remodelling of the plan to

accommodate the change in use. Notwithstanding these changes, the general disposition and lines of communication can be readily reconstructed, and the inventory of surviving early 19th-century elements outlined above shows that a good deal of significant detail remains, and that much of the former character of the house could be reconstructed from these enduring features.

The fireplaces have gone but the chimneybreasts survive, a substantial amount of decorative plasterwork remains, and although many of the original doors have disappeared, those that are still *in situ* suggest a uniformity that would lend authority to any restoration. One of the main features of the house, the central staircase, survived largely intact until after the pub had closed, when vandals caused a great deal of damage. However, its character can still be read, and the broken pieces still lie strewn about the central area, are available to be reconstructed.

Of the later alterations, none have any special architectural or historic interest, and could be swept away with impunity. The demolition of additions, and the sweeping away of recent internal partitions and fittings, would go a long way towards ridding Straits House of some of the more deleterious effects of its public house phase and towards restoring to it some of the tasteful elegance it has lost.

7.0 Acknowledgements

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8.0 References

Birmingham Archaeology 2007, *Written Scheme of Investigation for an Ornamental Audit and Building Record of the Straits House, Lower Gornal, Dudley, West Midlands.*

English Heritage 2006, *Understanding Historic Buildings: A Guide to Good Recording Practice.*

IFA 2001, *Standard and Guidance for the Archaeological Investigation and Recording of Standing Buildings or Structures.*



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Fig.1

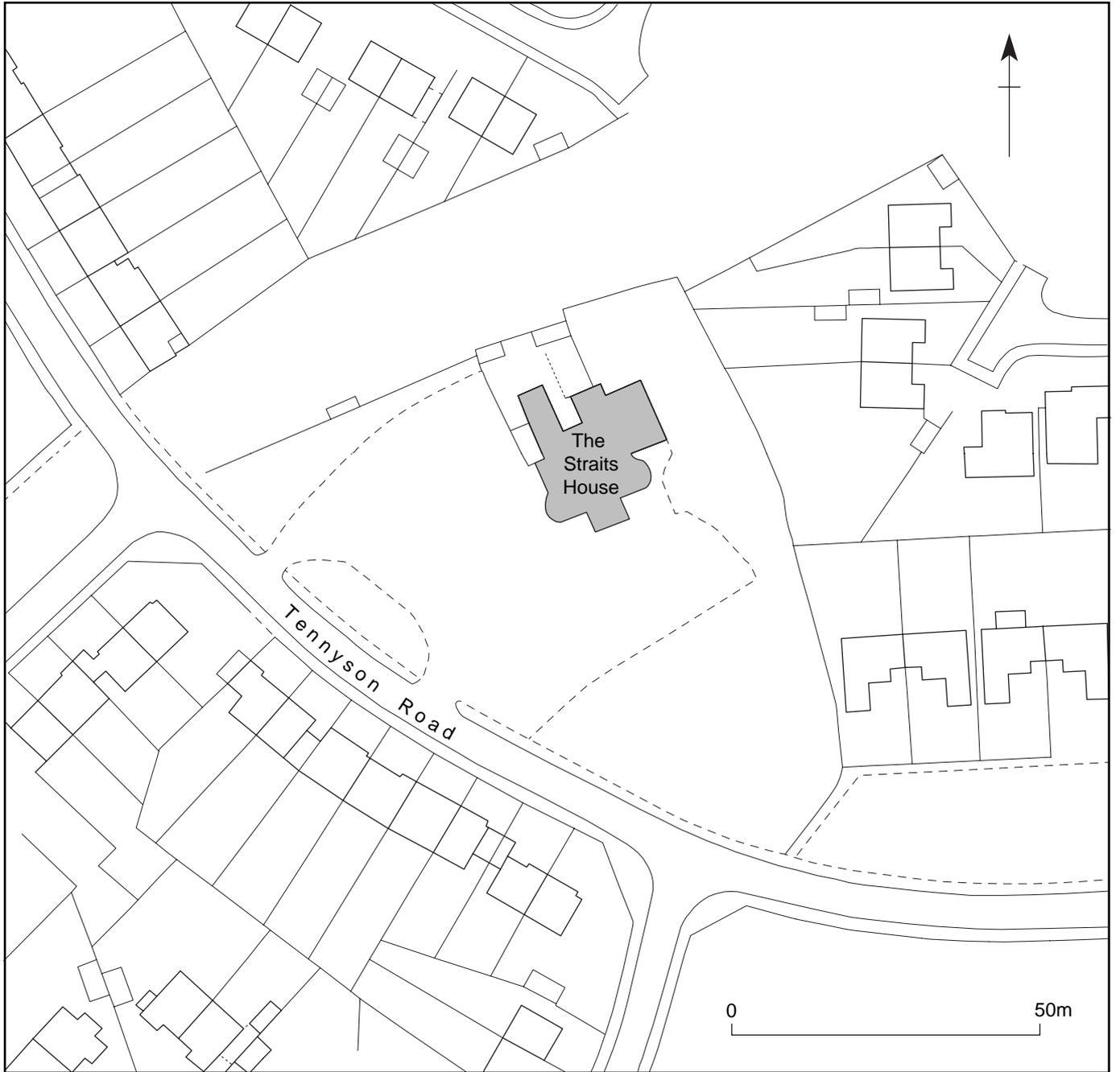


Fig.2

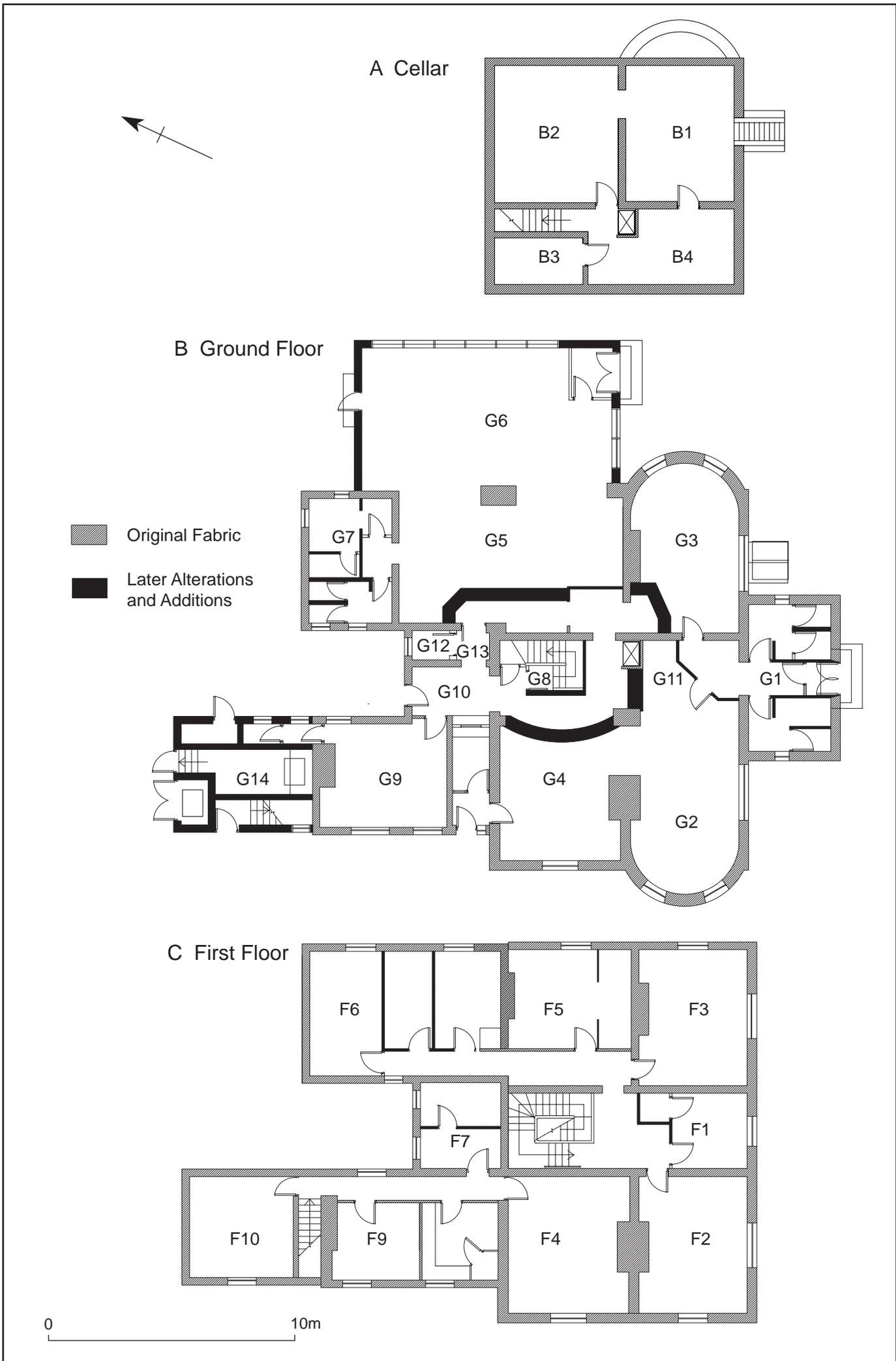
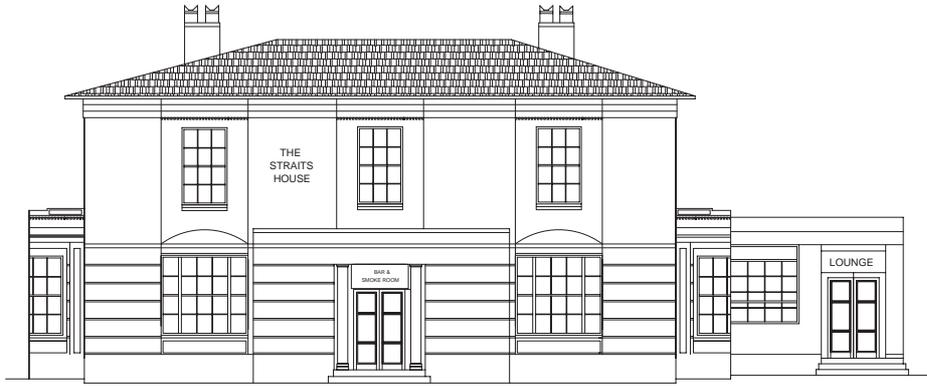


Fig.3



A South Facing Elevation



B East Facing Elevation



C West Facing Elevation



D North Facing Elevation

0 10m

Fig.4



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12



Plate 13

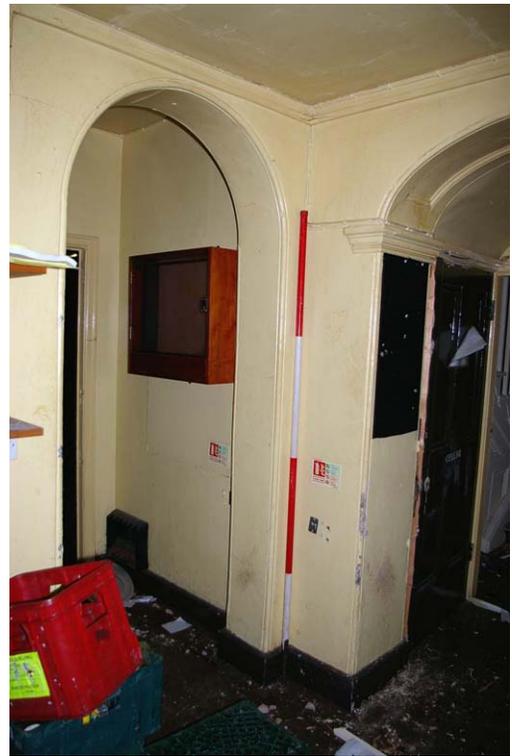


Plate 14



Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17



Plate 18



Plate 19