

**DEVON VALLEY MILL
HELE, BRADNINCH, DEVON**

**HISTORIC BUILDING EVALUATION
OF FORMER OFFICE BUILDING**

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Martin Watts

1 Trinity Cottages
Cullompton
Devon
EX15 1PE

Project 226

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Summary

An historic building evaluation of a former dwelling house at Devon Valley Mill, a paper mill at Hele, Bradninch, Devon, was carried out in support of a planning application for its demolition. The house, which was built after a fire in 1821, was originally occupied by the mill owner and comprised a principal dwelling and two rear ranges, including service buildings. The building was converted to offices in the second half of the twentieth century and any significant period or historic features of its domestic use appear to have been systematically removed. The building has now been disused and unoccupied for at least eight years and is now in a dilapidated state.

Generally

This evaluation has been compiled at the request of Helen Smart of SLR Consulting Limited. It follows a Method Statement based on a brief prepared by the Devon Historic Environment Team (DHET reference ARCH/DM/MD/19914) for an historic building evaluation to be carried out at Devon Valley Paper Mill, Station Road, Hele, Bradninch, Devon, in support of an outline planning application for the erection of three dwellings following the proposed demolition of a former office building (MDDC 12/01741/OUT).

This evaluation is based on a site visit made by Martin and Susan Watts on 27 March 2013. It is intended to be read with the drawings and photographs attached. The plans and elevations (Figures 9, 10 & 11) are from survey drawings of the existing building prepared by West Country Land Surveys Limited for Chris Dent Planning, reproduced with acknowledgement.

The principal objectives were to evaluate the former office building in order to determine the impact of any subsequent development upon its historic fabric and setting, and, should consent be granted, the requirement for and scope of appropriate archaeological work required in mitigation for this impact.

None of the buildings on site are listed. The site appears in the Devon Historic Environment Record under Monument ID MDV 1304.

The OASIS identification number martinwa1-145278 has been obtained for this evaluation.

Location

The subject building occupies the south-west corner of the paper mill site, at the junction of Strathculm Road and Station Road, at NGR SS 9934 0247. The complex stands on the floodplain of the river Culm at about 39 metres above Ordnance Datum.

Historical background

Hele may possibly be identified with the small manor of *Bernardsmore*, which was recorded in Domesday Book (1086) as having a mill valued at 5 shillings (Thorn & Thorn 1985, 16.105; Collings 2011, 273-4 and pers comm.). The use of water-power at this site is therefore likely to have early origins. Available research to date has not identified any clear documentary references before 1765, however, when Francis Gwyn of Forde Abbey

leased three grist mills to Edward Collins of Topsham for thirty years at a yearly rent of £19. Collins was first to manufacture paper at Hele, converting part of the grist mills for that purpose (Croslegh 1911, 309). The reference to three grist (corn) mills at this time is likely to refer to three milling plants each driven by its own waterwheel; such groups have been recorded elsewhere in Devon and usually reflect a milling complex which expanded from an established mill site in the late medieval/early post-medieval period.

A number of date stones are built into the fabric of the mill buildings, mostly dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rebuilt into a stone wall in one of the workshops backing on to Strathculm Road, behind the former dwelling house, is a stone inscribed

W
T W
1666

This is presumed to have been moved from an earlier building somewhere on the site and indicates activity here at least a century before paper-making commenced.

The descent and ownership of the paper mill through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been covered by Croslegh (1911, 309-15) and through the twentieth century by Nash (2001; 2005). The following notes summarise some of the available information relating to the former dwelling house.

'Hele Mill' is marked on Thomas Budgen's 1801 map, prepared for the Ordnance Survey, but no detail of the layout of the buildings at that time can be discerned.¹ The subject building, a dwelling house which was converted into offices in the later twentieth century, appears to have been built or rebuilt after a major fire on 27 June 1821. A contemporary newspaper reported that 'Yesterday afternoon, between the hours of two and three o'clock, a fire broke out in Heale Paper Mill, in the parish of Bradninch, Devon, the property of Mr John Dewdney. The flames raged with great fury, and were not got under until the whole of the extensive manufactory, together with a large stock of paper, &c. several out-buildings, and upwards of two hundred bushels of wheat had fallen a prey to the devouring element. The dwelling-house is also nearly destroyed.' (*Exeter Flying Post* 28 June 1821, 4b). A slightly later report indicates that the fire spread to other properties to the west and that three dwelling houses were destroyed (*The Alfred* 3 July 1821, 3e). The principal south-east elevation of the rebuilt house is shown on a drawing or print of c.1822 (Figure 1) which 'conveys a finely constructed house with elaborate portico' (Nash 2001, 36). The plan of the house is outlined on an engineer's survey drawing of 1848 (reproduced in Nash 2001, 34-5) (Figure 5), where it is marked as 'The Dwelling House'.

The mill complex is shown on the Bradninch tithe map of c.1840, which is unfortunately damaged and the layout of the buildings is not very clear (Figure 3). It is referred to in the tithe apportionment as Heale Mill Tenement, owned and occupied by John Dewdney. The plots numbered 1583, 1584 and 1592 are grouped together as 'Homestead Paper Mill Yard &c.', covering a little over an acre, the whole holding being just over 5 acres (2 hectares) in extent. A plan of 1852 (Figure 4) may have been taken from the tithe map and gives a clearer representation of the outline of the buildings at that time. Nash states that Charles Robert Collins, who took over the mills in 1853, lived in the house in the mill yard (2001, 31). He subsequently moved to Strathculm House, situated some distance away to the west of the site, which was built for him and completed in 1863 (*ibid* 119).

¹ www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/ordsurvdraw/c/, accessed 18 April 2013

The layout of the house is shown in some detail on a plan of 1925 (reproduced in Nash 2005, 18) (Figure 6). The key accompanying this plan lists it as offices, although this appears to be a later interpolation, as the building apparently continued in use as a residence into the second half of the twentieth century.

Part of the south-east front of the house appears on a photograph dated to the 1950s (Nash 2005, 55), which shows a wide window at ground floor level and that the extension on the north-east end was at that time single storey with a lean-to roof. According to Irene Pring (in Nash 2005, 151-2) Wiggins Teape, the paper-makers who took over the mill in 1920, relocated their sales and marketing department from their head office in Basingstoke to Hele in 1984. 'As additional office space was required for this it resulted in the taking over of the house, Ringmer, in which Mr and Mrs Passmore lived. Mr Passmore had retired after working in the Mill all his life and had assumed he would spend his retirement in his own house. It was a sad and difficult task to help him accept a move to a house bought for him in Bradninch.' (*ibid*). (The location of the house occupied by Mr & Mrs Passmore is confirmed on a sketch plan of the occupants of Hele in Nash 2001, 55). The final conversion to office use therefore appears to date from the 1980s. Much of this was achieved by removing original walls and inserting new lightweight glazed partitions and false ceilings. The building ceased being used as offices in 2004-5, and is now unoccupied and disused.

Description of the building

Exterior:

The former house comprises a two-storey block orientated south-west - north-east, with its main elevation facing south-east, with two two-storey ranges extending to the north-west behind it with a small courtyard between them (see plans, figures 9 & 10).

The principal, south-east, elevation is rendered and painted. The centrally-placed front door has a moulded timber architrave and panelling to the reveals, and an arched head, with a classical portico supported on two round timber columns. The front door leaf has been removed and replaced with a plywood sheet. There are two lettered granite plaques fixed to the front elevation, between the ground and first floor windows, which commemorate 13 men from the mill who gave their lives in World War I and four in World War II. The ground floor window openings on this elevation have been considerably enlarged and contain metal-framed double-glazed units. The windows to the ground and first floor of the extension at the north-east end are timber sashes with arched heads, but the first floor side windows to this extension are steel-framed.

The north-east rear range has a rather bland appearance on both elevations. The walls are rendered and painted white. The north-east elevation, facing the mill, has metal-framed windows and a steel fire escape stair from the first floor, giving it an industrial rather than a domestic appearance. The south-west elevation to the small yard retains some timber-framed windows and doors, and there is a steel fire escape stair from the first floor to the yard (see photographs). The rear of the south-west range also has an external steel fire escape stair to the yard.

The principal elevation of the south-west rear range fronts Station Road and has a cottage-like appearance, with a lower roof line than the main front block and a single-storey lean-to tiled roof extension, with timber-framed sash windows. The front door is half-glazed, with

a leaded coloured glass roundel showing a primrose plant with the words Devon Valley Mill around it. There is a small garden area behind a stone wall which faces Station Road. At right angles to the north-west end of this range is a two-storey block with its gable end to the road. This has a random rubble stone base, with a bench mark cut into one stone, and is rendered and painted above. Some brickwork is visible at the higher level where the render has broken away.

The roof of the main block is fully hipped at both ends and slated. The extension at its north-east end has a flat roof. The roofs of both the rear ranges are slated and hipped with lower ridge lines than the front block. The ground floor extension on the south-west elevation has a lean-to tiled roof.

Interior:

Generally, no early or original features appear to have survived the office conversion. Many of the floors are still carpeted and most spaces have false ceilings inserted below and covering up the earlier ones. No original fireplaces remain, although there is a large chimney breast towards the rear of the north-east range and two brick chimneys survive at the rear of the south-west range. Several internal walls have been removed and replaced by lightweight glazed partitions and the main staircase, which rises from the front entrance hall, is also a modern insertion (see photograph). This is the only internal staircase.

The front range has solid floors at ground floor level. Near the centre of this range, towards the back wall, is a small, very solidly built room, with no natural light or ventilation. It has been suggested that this was inserted as an air-raid shelter, which is possible, although it may simply have been a strong room. At the rear of the front range, in part of the former yard between the two rear ranges, are several WCs. There is a step up into the ground floor of the north-east rear range, which has a suspended timber floor, latterly clad with chipboard which has decayed badly in places. There are further WCs on either side of the ground floor side entrance, which is towards the rear of the extension on the north-east end of the front range.

The ground floor of the south-west range was latterly used as a reception area and the reception desk remains in place. This area was entered through the door in the lean-to extension on the south-west side, which has the decorative roundel with the primrose. A large section of the original south-west (front) wall has been removed. A roller from a paper machine for water-marking Fry's chocolate wrapping paper has been mounted on the back wall of the reception area as a feature. There is a small office with a fake classical fireplace surround and a tiled grate on the wall that backs onto the front range and also a small arched recess in the north-east wall. At the north-west end of this range is an inserted WC and small kitchen.

At first floor level many of the original walls have been opened up or removed to create large, open spaces for office use. The floors retain their coverings and most of the ceilings have been inserted below the originals.

No roof structure was visible or accessible in the front range. From limited access and visibility, the roofs of both rear ranges appear to be divided into bays with A-frame trusses, the principals lapped at the apex, a ridge purlin set diamond-wise, with common rafters and close boarding under the slates. The feet of the truss principals in the north-east range at the rear are visible below ceiling level, the back part having three bays.

Discussion and dating

The dwelling house appears to have been substantially rebuilt after the 1821 fire. The illustration of *c.*1822 (Figure 2), shows the south-east elevation as double-fronted with a central doorway and sash windows. The portico is not shown on this drawing or on the 1848 plan (Figure 5). This is the earliest detailed plan of the building which, although somewhat stylised, suggests that the south-eastern block of the house was built in front of some existing buildings including a rag store. The house plan shows two ground floor rooms, one on each side of a central entrance hallway with a stair rising to the first floor, which can still be seen in the surviving building. The walls of the ranges at the rear are rather sketchily shown with broken lines, but the north-east range appears to contain a large chimney breast, so was perhaps the kitchen. The circular feature shown in this range, which scales at about 4 feet (1.22m) diameter, may have been a well. It seems likely therefore that these buildings were in light industrial use, serving the paper mill and also providing service facilities for the mill owner's house. As the 1848 plan is provided with a drawn scale, it is possible to relate it to the surviving layout, the original south-east front being about 14.5m long. This plan further suggests that the building marked RAG STORE was wider than the present wing which has its gable end to Station Road. If this is an accurate representation, then this wing appears to have been rebuilt, possibly by being incorporated into the house before the survey was carried out for the first edition 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map of 1889 (Figure 7). Further changes to the north-west wall of this building also appear to have taken place between 1889 and 1905 (see Figure 8).

The extension at the north-east end of the main elevation is not shown on the second edition map of 1905 but does appear on the 1925 plan (Figure 6). At that time and into the 1950s it was single storey (see Figure 2). The use of steel-framed windows at first floor level on its north-east side suggests that the second storey with its flat roof was added in the 1960s. The single storey extension with the tiled roof on the south-west elevation was added after 1925, stylistically perhaps in the 1930s. The coloured glass roundel in the front door of this range, showing primroses and the name Devon Valley Mill is an interesting period detail, representing the earlier practice of sending bunches of locally-picked primroses to clients of the paper mill in springtime (see Nash 2001, 63).

The final conversion of the former dwelling house to offices in the 1980s resulted in the wholesale removal of some original internal walls and other features, including fireplaces. Only the external south-east and south-west elevations retain a domestic appearance, although the window openings on the south-east elevation have been considerably enlarged. The final conversion of the former dwelling house to offices in the 1980s resulted in the removal of some original internal walls and other features, including fireplaces.

Requirement for further recording

The external rendering on the walls has obscured details of their construction and possible evidence of building breaks. Further information about the age and phasing of the building may therefore be revealed during demolition works, if consent for demolition of the building is granted. In addition the 1848 plan indicates that part of the dwelling house site was in use as a rag store and further evidence of this and earlier industrial or mill buildings may also be exposed. The location of the house, close to the roads that define to north-west corner of the site, make it less likely that there are disused culverts or watercourses under this area, although the foundations of earlier buildings and possibly a well may also be revealed during demolition and subsequent development of the site.

It is considered, therefore, that, if consent for demolition of the building is granted, an archaeological watching brief be kept during the demolition process and also during subsequent groundworks, so that the opportunity may be taken to record any features that may contribute not only to further understanding the construction and development of the house but also to the earlier development of the paper mill site as a whole.

Martin Watts
April 2013

Acknowledgements

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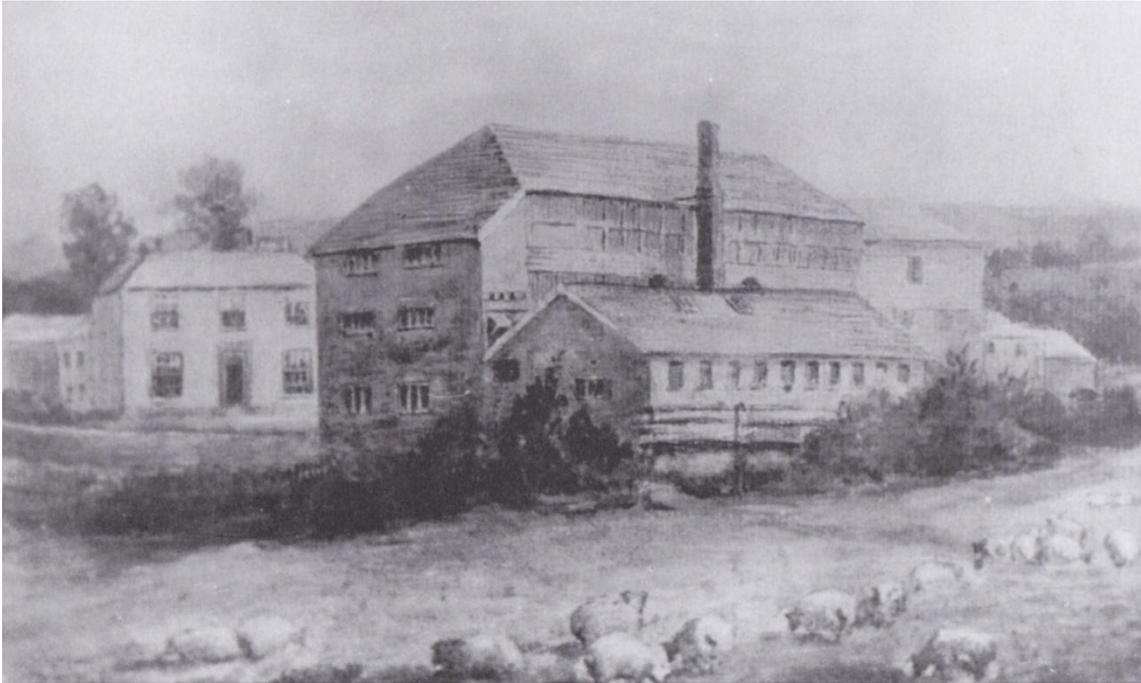


Figure 1. Hele paper mill, as rebuilt in *c.*1822 (Nash 2001, 36). The dwelling house is shown on the left hand side.



Figure 2. The yard at Hele mill, showing part of the south-east front of the house on the left (Nash 2005, 55). One of the commemorative plaques is visible between the ground and first floor windows. Note the extension on the north-east end is single storey with a lean-to roof.

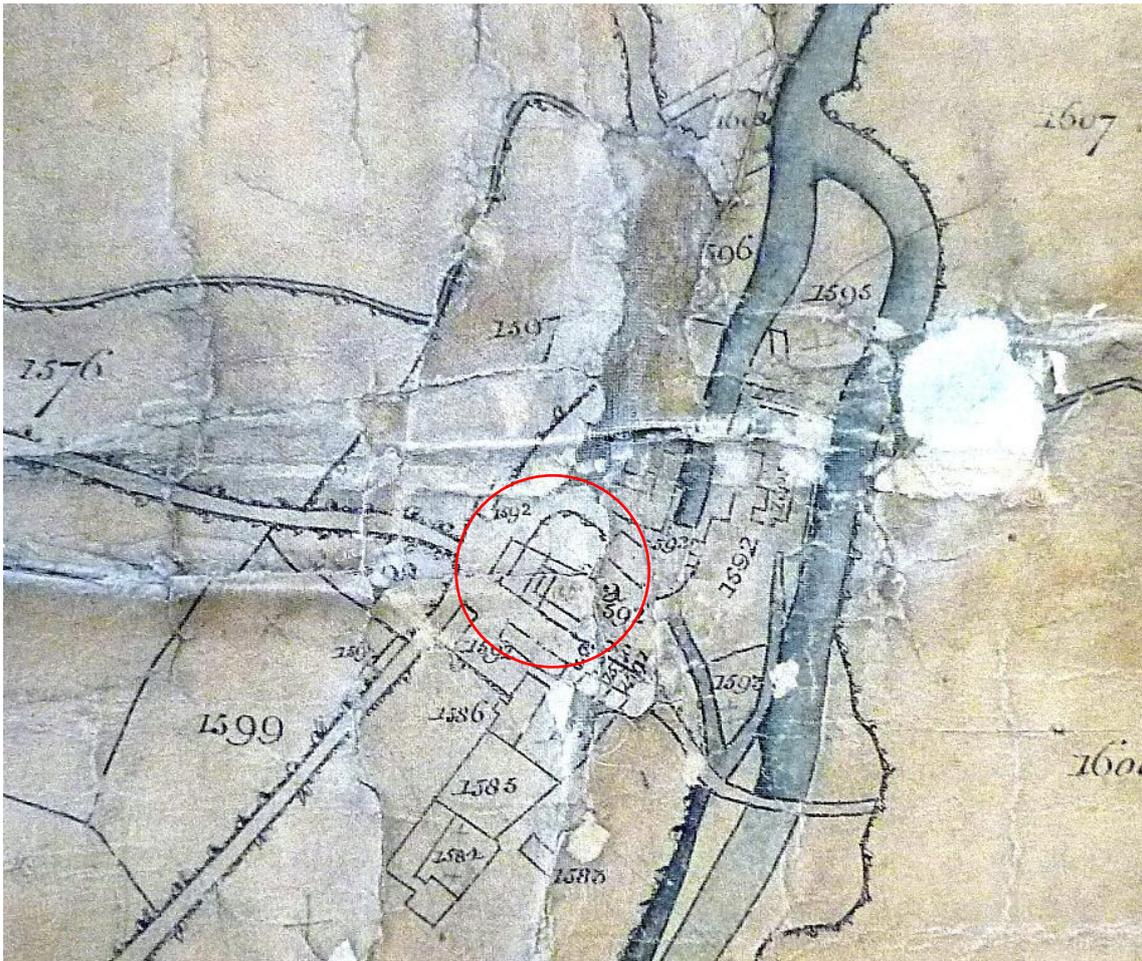


Figure 3. Hele paper mill from the Bradninch tithe map of 1840. The map is damaged but the outline of the house can be discerned. The whole site, which covered just over 5 acres (about 2 hectares) was owned and occupied by John Dewdney.

The plots numbered 1583, 1584 and 1592 were recorded as Heale Mill Tenement [sic] and described as 'Homestead Paper Mill Yard &c' in the tithe apportionment of 1838

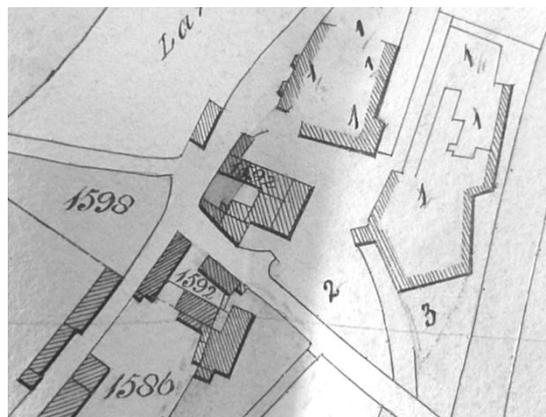


Figure 4. Hele Paper Mill, with the dwelling house numbered 1592, from a map by W. Dawson, Exeter, dated 1852. The outline of the building may have been taken from the tithe map as the plot number is the same (Devon Heritage Centre DRO 74B/MP12)

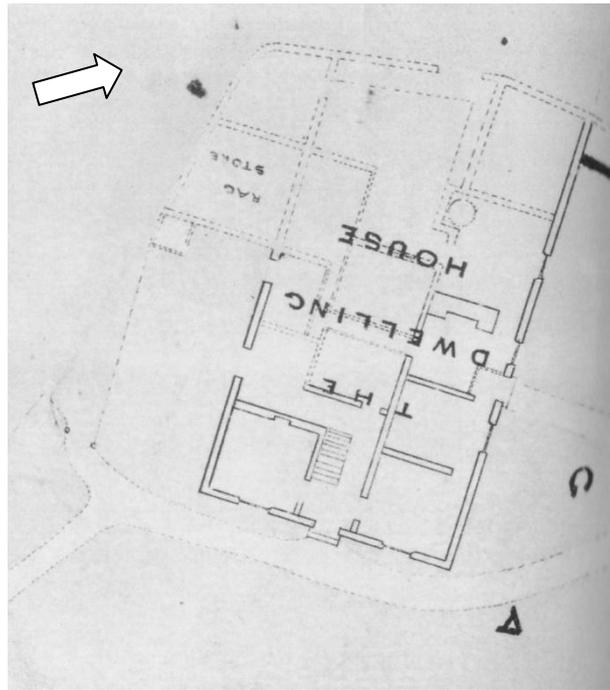
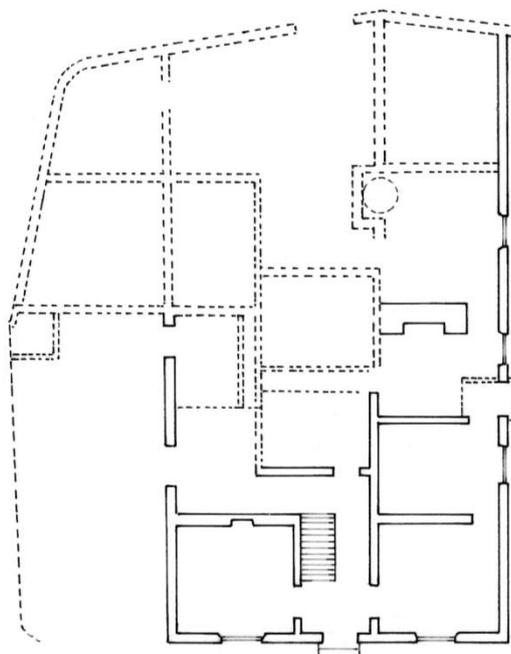


Figure 5. Plan of dwelling, extract from an engineer's plan of the paper mill of 1848 (Nash 2001, 34-5). The plan is stylised and the house is drawn in outline only, without the detail of the paper mill buildings. Note the RAG STORE shown in the position of the present rear wing which has its gable end to Station Road and the circular feature within the north-east range



5 metres

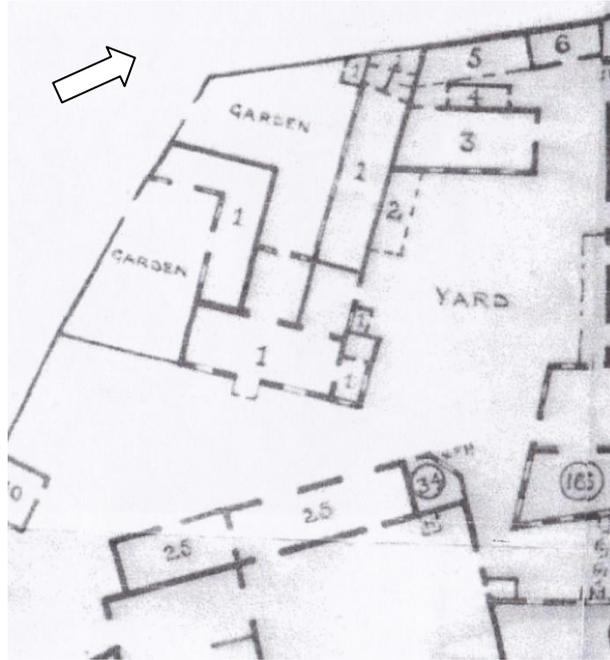
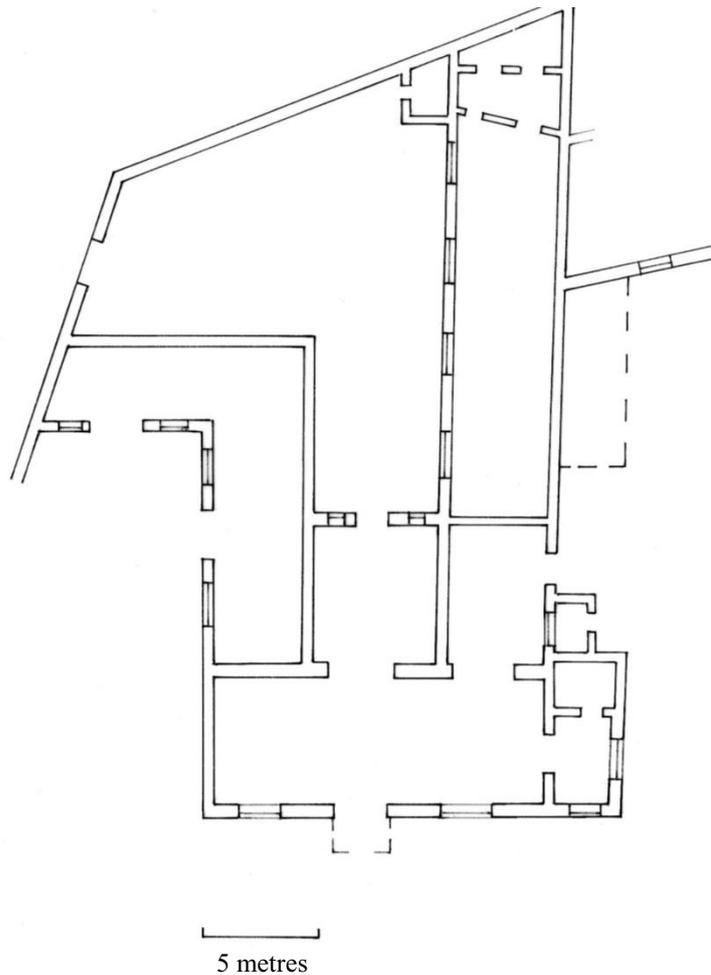


Figure 6. Part of a layout plan of Hele mill, 1925 (Nash 2005, 18), Note the extension has been added to the north-east end of the main block



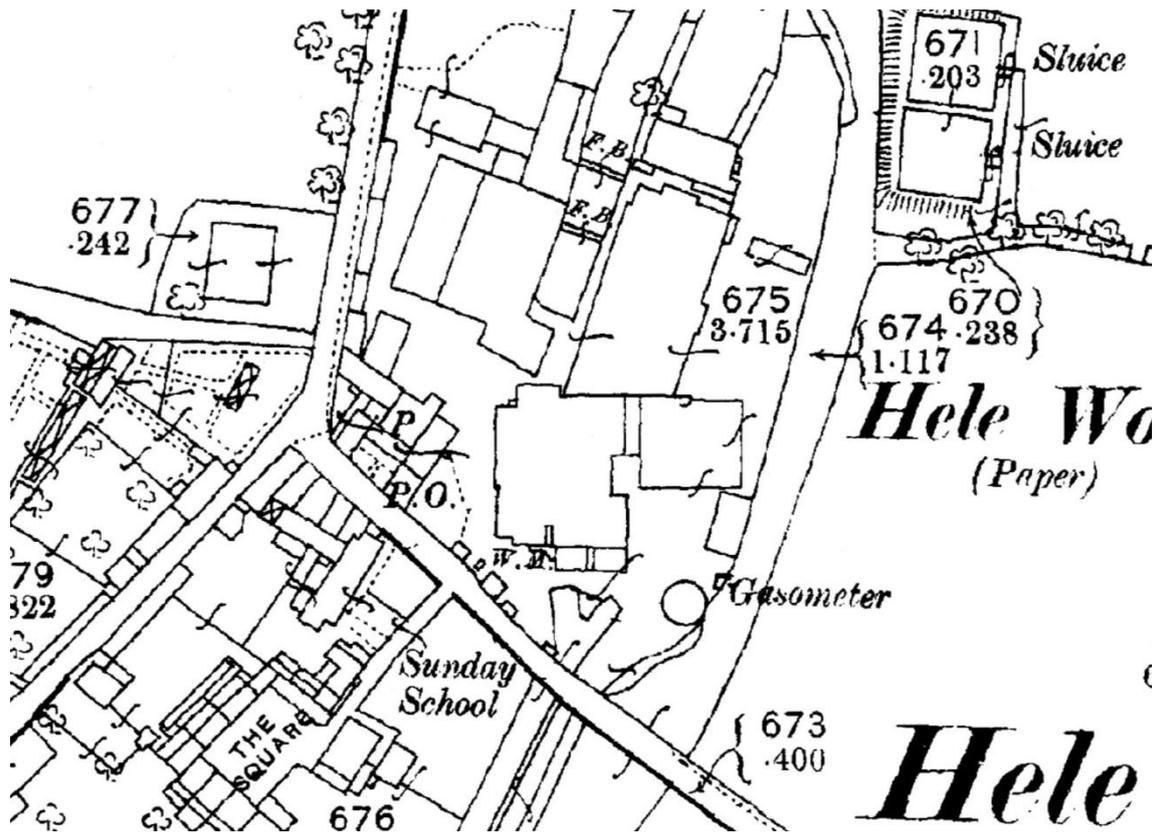


Figure 7. Hele. Ordnance Survey 1:2500, first edition, 1889. Not reproduced to scale

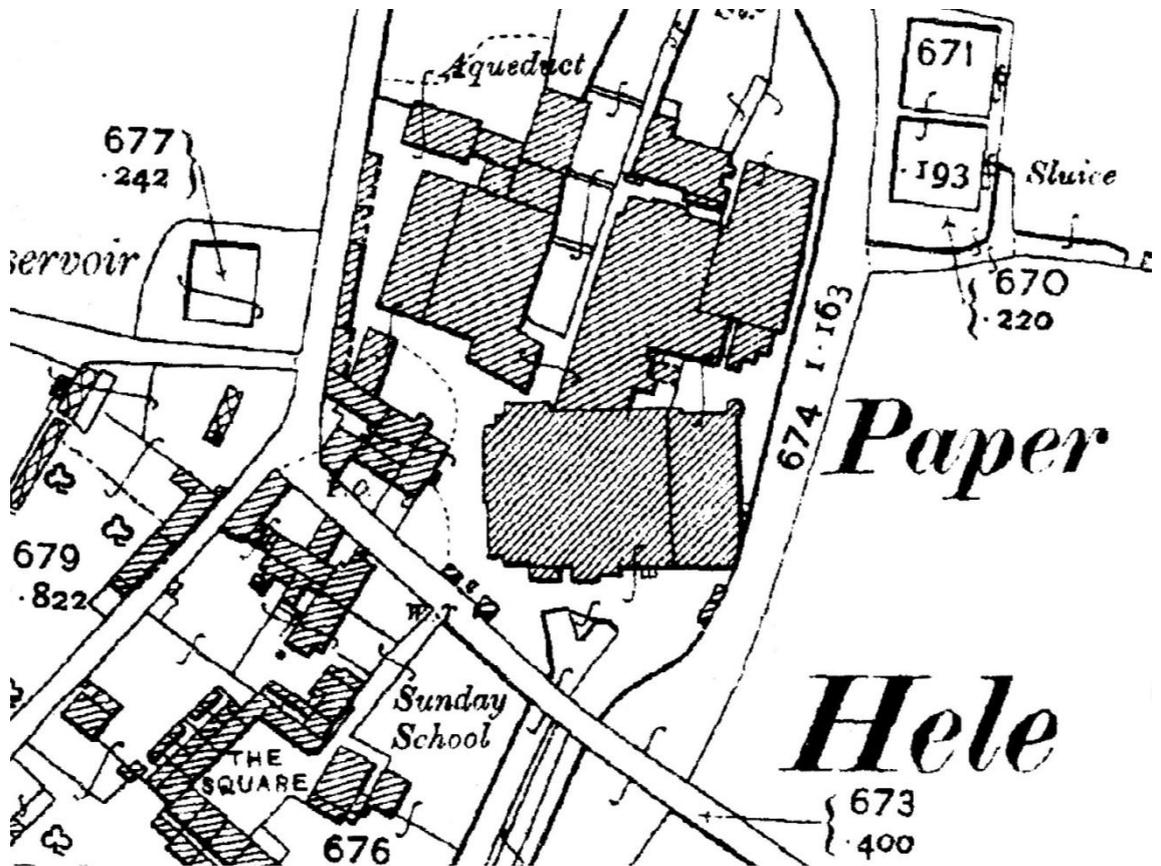


Figure 8. Hele. Ordnance Survey 1:2500, second edition, 1905. Not reproduced to scale

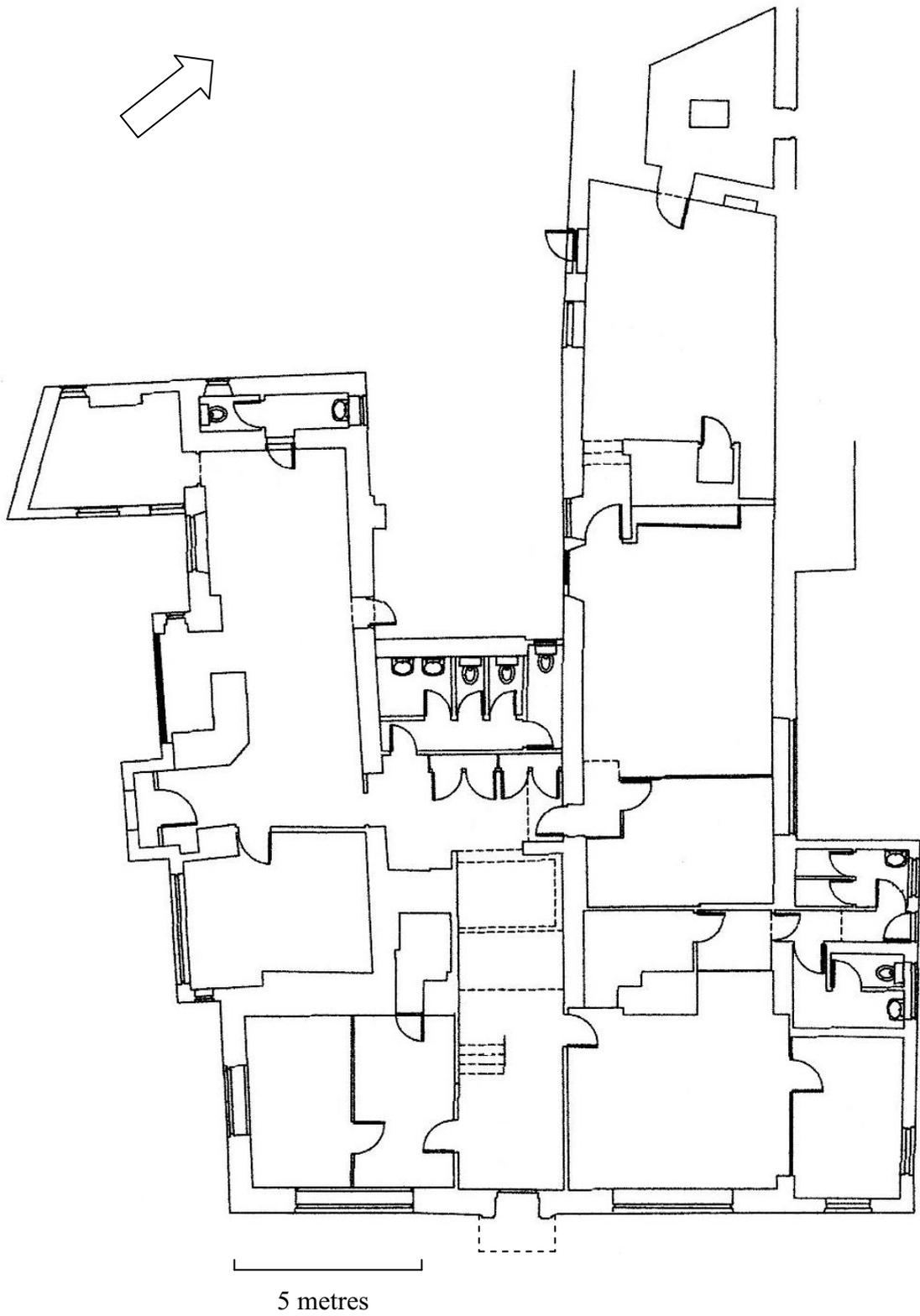


Figure 9. Existing ground floor plan

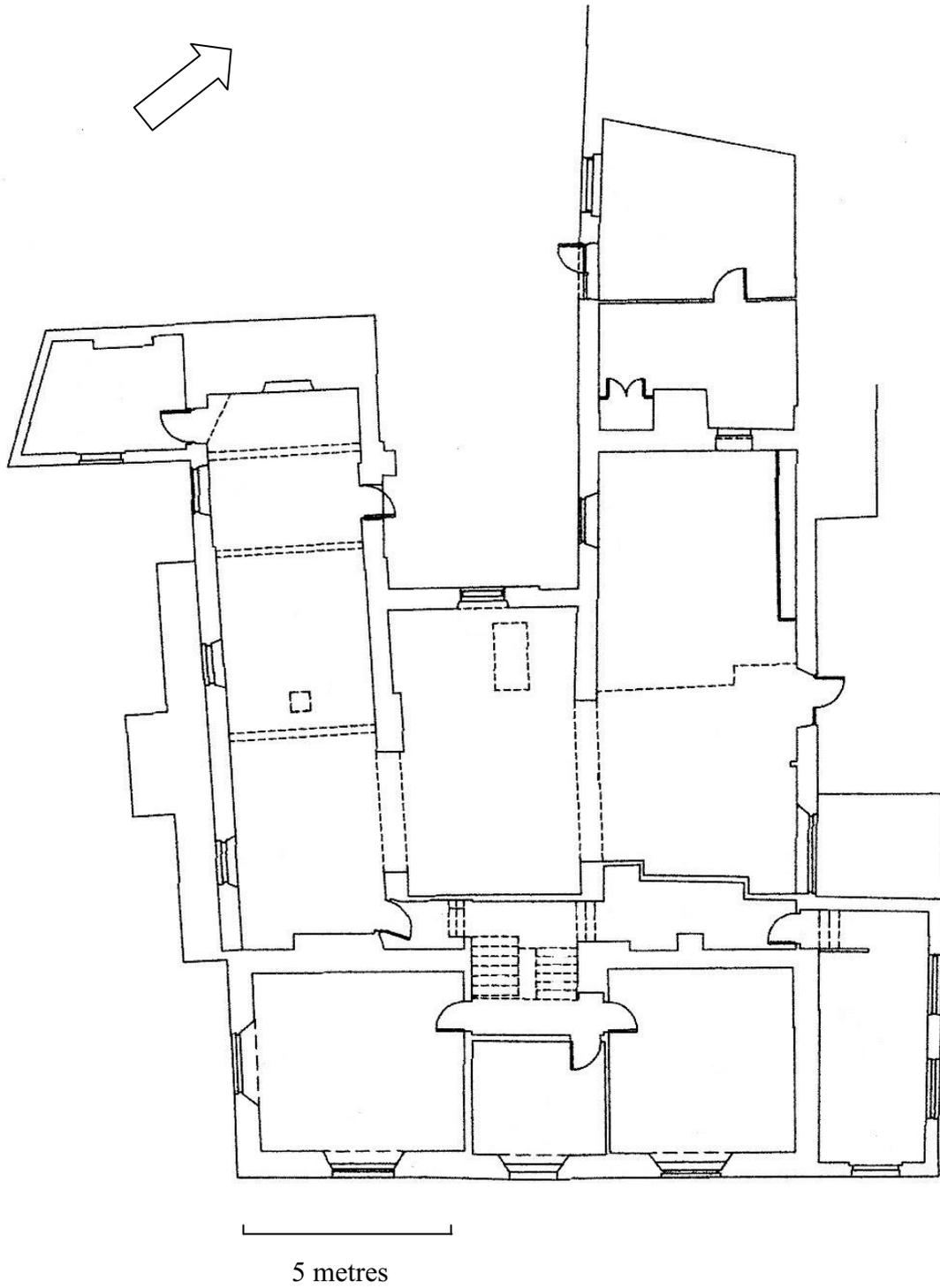


Figure 10. Existing first floor plan

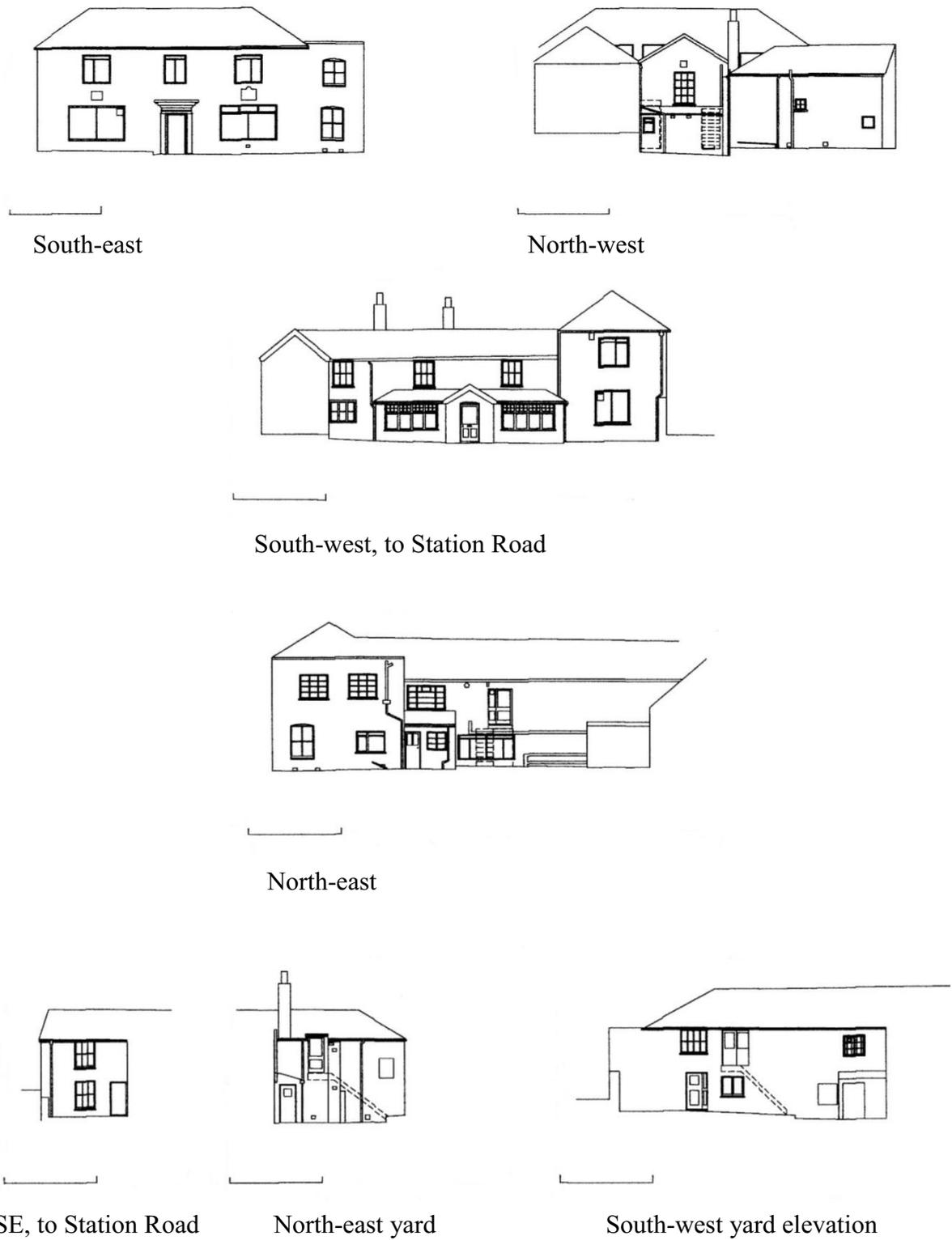


Figure 11. Existing elevations. Scale bars = 5m



South-east (principal) elevation



North-east elevation, facing mill



Rear yard, north-west elevation



South-west elevation of east range



South-west elevation, facing Station Road



South-west elevation with lean-to extension and porch to front door



Ground floor interior in west range, with reception desk and glazed front door to right



First floor, former Managing Director's office in extension at north-west corner



Entrance hall and modern staircase to first floor



First floor, former open office space at rear of main block, looking north



First floor rear, east range. Note the foot of the principal and the hip rafter projecting below the false ceiling