

THE FORMER DRILL HALL,
YORK ROAD,
GREAT YARMOUTH
SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

HISTORIC BUILDING REPORT

Katie Graham



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SUMMARY

This report examines the former Drill Hall on York Road, Great Yarmouth, built in 1867 for the 2nd Volunteer Battalion Norfolk Regiment. The structure is comprised of three parts, the front block being constructed in flint and red brick in the Gothic Revival style, whilst the hall and rear block are more simply constructed in red brick. The rear block was heavily altered and extended in c.1880.

CONTRIBUTORS

Photography by Kathryn Morrison.

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INTRODUCTION

Drill halls came into existence following the formation of large numbers of rifle and artillery volunteer groups in 1859/60. These militia required a large, open space within which to practice, as well as secure storage for weapons. Given that they were expected to train for between 21 and 56 days during the summer,¹ and given the often inclement nature of British weather, it was generally felt that a covered area for drilling would be preferable to the use of an outdoor space. Although many of the earlier volunteer groups made use of existing buildings such as village halls, adapting them to their needs, a purpose built drill hall was considered the most desirable option. Drill halls therefore began to emerge as a distinct building type which, although no two are identical, may be considered to have three essential elements: firstly, administrative rooms such as offices, stores and an armoury; secondly, the large, open training area of the hall and associated target range; thirdly, accommodation for the caretaker or drill instructor.² In addition to these three basic elements may be a number of optional extras in the form of social space. In an early drill hall the social spaces of the building were often extensive – drill halls, during the early decades of their existence, were seen as exclusive military clubs and therefore the building often served as a social centre as well as a military establishment.

The York Road drill hall in Great Yarmouth was designed in 1867 by JT Bottle as the base for the 2nd Volunteer Battalion Norfolk Regiment.³ The 1912 edition of *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk* includes the following description of the building:

The Drill Hall of the Great Yarmouth rifle detachment of the Territorial Force, erected in 1867, on the York Road, covers a space of ground 147 feet in length by 65 feet in width; the large hall is roofed in one span with elliptic ribs, and is lighted chiefly by a skylight at the apex of the roof.⁴

The Illustrated London News ran an article on the newly built drill hall on 1 February 1868 which described the general character of the building and which listed the front block as containing 'the armoury, orderly-room, and sergeant's quarters, with the necessary adjuncts and offices' and the hall as being 'about 120ft by 64 ft' but makes no mention of the galleries or rear block.⁵ The *RIBA Directory of British Architects 1834-1914* includes a brief article on Jonathan Tebbs Bottle.⁶ This states that no list of works was included in his RIBA nomination papers, which would suggest that he was not considered to have designed any buildings of great note. This is not surprising given that he was very much a local architect, although he did design the 1870 Congregational Church on Middlegate Street, Great Yarmouth, which is Grade II listed.

THE BUILDING

The former drill hall comprises three parts: the residential front block which provided the accommodation for the drill sergeant; the drill hall itself, and a rear block containing offices and store rooms. The front block and the hall were both built in 1867, the construction being commemorated in a foundation stone laid by the mayor (and Captain of the A Company),⁷ Captain Youell, on 24 May 1867 at the northern end of the east wall of the hall. The rear block is a latter addition, evidenced by the straight construction joints, but had been built by 1885 (as seen on the 1885 OS town plan, Fig. 1) and appears to have replaced an earlier structure.

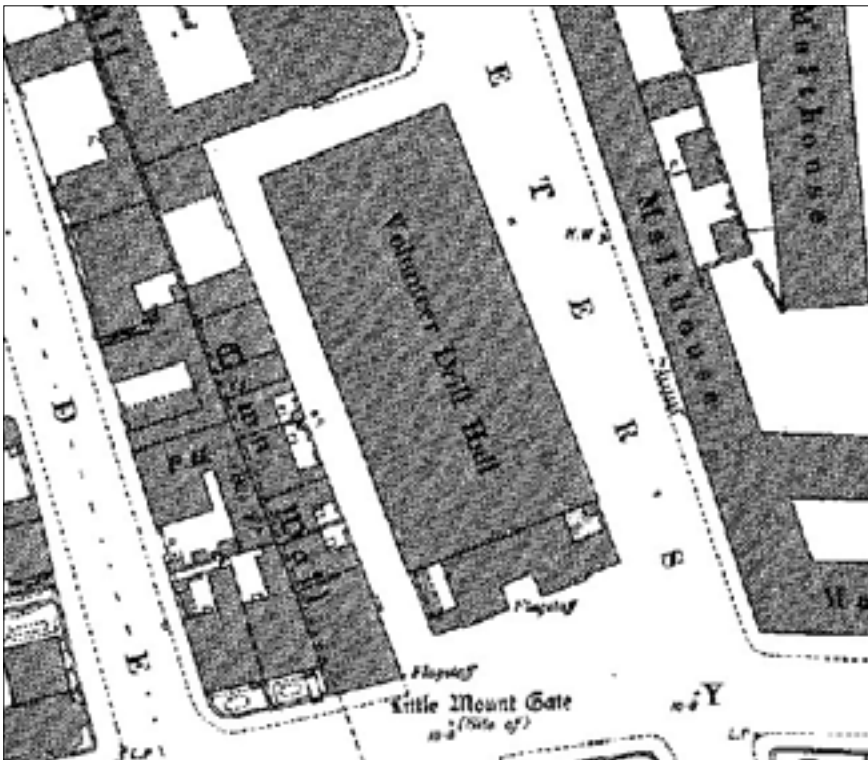


Figure 1. The 1885 Ordnance Survey Town Plan. 1:500

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The Front Block

The residential front block is symmetrical in appearance and formed from two two-storeyed gabled bays connected by a central linking bay at the first-floor level, flanked by single storeyed bays (Fig. 2). The capping stones of the end bays conceal flat roofs which creates the appearance of walled yards rather than solid structures. The central bay forms a porch below, accessed by a four centred open arch (once containing gates) and providing access to the hall behind. The crow-stepped gable wall of the hall rises behind this central bay with an oculus clearly visible above the gabled dormer – forming the central focus of this façade.

The building is highly decorated with a polychromatic Gothic Revival style formed by the facing of uncoursed knapped flint with dressings of red brick, yellow brick and some ashlar. The red brick is used for quoins, window and door surrounds, chimney stacks, horizontal bands at first-floor and eaves level, and to edge the steps of the gable. The



Figure 2. Southern facade of the drill hall.

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porch arch is formed from moulded red brick with the addition of moulded stone spandrels. Stone is also used for the ashlar window sills and lintels although some have been replaced in concrete due to weathering. The windows themselves largely contain attractive Edwardian glazing with two lights to the lower sash and a more detailed upper sash containing a number of smaller lights. Several single light windows (Fig. 3) retain the original Gothic glazing with cusped heads and pierced spandrels. This original glazing is shown in the 1868 engraving of the property (Fig. 4) and had been replaced by the time that the time a photograph (Fig. 5) was taken in c.1911. The principal windows have very decorative heads with polychrome segmental and pointed brick relieving arches. The pointed arches contain herringbone brick infilled tympana with plain stone shields whilst the segmental arches are filled with radiating brickwork. The gables are surmounted by ornamental stone finials with decorative wrought iron terminals. The pitched roofs are covered in slate.



As may be seen in the OS town plan of 1885 (Fig. 1), the end bays of the block were not originally rooms but were yards with small outbuildings and access directly from/to the hall via doors which are now blocked. Although not shown in the early engraving (Fig. 4), the windows and doors to the side wall of

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Figure 3. The original glazing style.

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Figure 4. An engraving of the drill hall from the Illustrated London News, 1 February 1868. Private Collection.



Figure 5. The drill hall shown in a postcard of c.1911. Private Collection.

the west bay appear to be original and may have provided access and light to urinals for the men. The doorway (now window) and window to the side of the east bay are of a different style to those in the west bay and the small window to the north appears to have originally lit a water closet for use by the officers or possibly by female visitors.

Internal access was gained via independent doors to either side of the central porch. The accommodation consisted of a single room per floor on each side, that to the west having first-floor access to the gallery in the hall. The rooms to the east were probably more residential and private in function than those to the west, although the room in the central bay seems to have allowed direct access from one side to the other. Few features of note remain other than a few very plain fireplaces.

The Hall

The stepped southern gable wall of the hall forms the rear of the front block and accordingly is constructed from matching red brick and flint. The apex of the gable is topped with a finial to match those on the front gables, whilst the circular window containing quatrefoil glazing has a polychrome brick surround to its upper half and a plain red brick surround to its lower half, continuing to either side as a band. The main structure (Fig. 6) is 10 bays long, constructed from red brick in Flemish bond on a brick plinth with no windows or doors along the west wall and a single doorway in the fifth bay from the south along the east wall. The hall is lit from above by a skylight running the length of the hall along the apex of the roof. Whilst this is not an original feature it replaced an earlier version which, as may be seen in Fig. 4, was originally in the form of a ridge lantern.



Figure 6. Front block with the drill hall behind.

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The roof is supported on composite or laminated timber curved braces set within a simple frame with small king posts with diagonal braces rising from the collar to support the modern ridge beam (Fig. 7). The lightweight metal tie beams and the timber arrow-shaped finials projecting from the trusses increase the visual impact of the roof itself which arches in a single span across the entire width of the hall – a distance of some 65 ft. *The Illustrated London News* reported that 'the ribs, principals and purlins are stained of a brown colour relieved with borders of ivory white and with gilding, so as to bring out the constructive features'.⁸

The wooden floor appears to be original and is laid on top of concrete so as to minimise the noise from drill marches. At first-floor level along the south wall are the remains of six timber supports for a viewing gallery (no longer extant) with a blocked two-centred arch headed doorway on the first floor to the west side. As galleries were generally used by the public it would appear that the eastern part of the front block allowed access to this gallery and was not, therefore, part of the private accommodation. A matching gallery existed at the north end of the hall (although this has been replaced) and was accessed via a pair of doors at first-floor level. A two-centred arch headed doorway is found to either side of this end wall, matching those seen elsewhere, whilst two further doorways are found nearer the centre of the wall. Central heating in the form of substantial hot water pipes, heated by a boiler in the rear block, runs around the room at floor and head height and, if not an original feature, is certainly not much later than 1867.



Figure 7. Interior of the drill hall looking north.

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The Rear Block

The block to the rear of the hall (Fig. 8) is constructed from red brick and was built in a number of phases, as evidenced by the various building breaks and changes in the character of the brickwork. The arrangement of the doorways leading from the hall, and the presence of the gallery above, suggests that there was always a building to the centre rear of the hall which contained a staircase allowing access to the gallery



Figure 8. The rear block.

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above. However, the fact that the outermost doorways contain heavy external doors suggests that they opened onto a yard or open area (similar to the arrangement seen to the front of the building) rather than into another building. Fig. 4 shows the rear gable of the hall as originally being stepped, matching that at the front, making a similar arrangement which incorporated matching yards to the rear yet more plausible. It would appear that this central block was replaced with one which ran the width of the hall, and that the upper storey was replaced at a later date with the present structure which projects considerably beyond the ground floor and is supported by steel girders which run through the building and into the hall beyond, supporting the replacement gallery. Externally, the ground-floor windows to the east are in their original position whilst those in the centre and to the right appear to be original windows reset into new positions, as evidenced by the lack of quarter-batts. A patch of white glazed tiling at first-floor level, of a type commonly seen in light wells etc, is as yet unexplained.

Internally, the doorway to the far west of the hall provides access to the staircase to the first floor – a doorway on the west side of the rear block allows direct access to this staircase from outside. The next doorway from the hall opens into an office with early reeded glass in the windows; these are barred – suggesting that this office or store was intended to be secure. This room was never plastered, although the salient framing around the windows suggests that it was originally intended to be. The far west room, the boiler room, is accessed through this office. The boiler is not original but the function of the room seems original and there is only one, small, window in the west wall. The second room from the east, now lavatories, appears to have been offices although few features remain – the door here (Fig. 9) is an external one which has been



Figure 9. External door reset in an internal doorway.

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removed from its original location and re-set. The doorway to the far east of the hall provides access to a room with a number of decorative details such as an alcove, skirting and a blocked fireplace. The width of the threshold into this room, and the drop in the floor level, clearly demonstrates that this part of the rear block is a later addition.

There is a single long room to the first floor with a wooden dado, with tongue and groove panelling. On the west wall is an Edwardian fireplace in an Art Nouveau style with an inserted window beside it. There is a clear break half way along the room where the height of the dado changes; there is also a lack of any panelling to the east wall – this seems to suggest that this upper room was originally two separate rooms, each with access to the gallery, with that to the west being of a higher quality. Above the staircase entering the western half of this room the ends of two roof trusses, with chamfered timbers, can be seen, indicating that the roof was originally open and visible although the rest has since been concealed by a false ceiling.

It seems likely, given the styles and materials seen, that the rear gable and block was rebuilt c.1880 following the Cardwell reforms – particularly given that the block occupied its present footprint by the time of the OS town plan in 1885. Given that we know the original armoury was located in the front block of the property, and that these rooms do not appear to have been particularly secure, the details of the Cardwell reforms concerning the storage and security of weapons and ammunition would have required the construction of a new armoury on the site - which may well explain the barred windows in the rear store.

CONCLUSION

The building has a number of the characteristic features of a drill hall: it has the drill hall itself with the associated accommodation and office space; it has a pair of entrance doors wide enough for four men abreast or for vehicles to enter; it had an armoury; it had a solidly built floor to minimise the noise from marching; it had skylights; it had heating and it had galleries. Many original features such as doors, windows and hinges remain and whilst adjustments have been made over time the original design is very much in evidence.

However, a number of questions remain. Given that this drill hall was constructed for a rifle division, the apparent lack of firing range is most unusual. It is possible that the men used an external range of some kind although the only clear space close by of a suitable size appears to have been the formerly open St Peter's Plain to the south. The exact arrangement of the offices to the rear is a little confusing also, although the presence of bars and reeded glass in the one room could suggest that this served as the armoury – although the proximity to the boiler seems unwise if ammunition as well as guns were ever stored here. The exact nature of the first building to the rear of the hall is also debatable.

Whilst earlier purpose-built drill halls (e.g. that belonging to the 25th Kent Rifles, erected in 1862, no longer extant) were constructed, the York Road example may be one of the finest early drill halls still standing. Although, as already stated, drill halls first came into being during the 1860s, many date from the 1880s, or later, following the Cardwell reforms of the Territorials. A survey carried out by Mike Osborne revealed that out of a total of 1863 known drill halls in England, 476 were built prior to 1900 and of these only 309 are still standing.⁸ Given its size at 147 ft by 65 ft, the York Road drill hall compares favourably with some of the very largest drill halls in the country. Sheffield had a drill hall, constructed between 1878 and 1880, measuring 180ft long by 90ft wide which was far larger than the average size of around 80ft by 40ft (e.g. Stourport which was constructed in 1911 and measured 80ft 5in by 40ft 2in). Chester's drill hall, constructed 1868, was described as lofty and spacious at 100ft by 60ft, so the Great Yarmouth example may be considered to be a comparatively large example, with one of the closest examples in size being that in Derby, constructed 1869, which measured 150ft by 75ft. Whilst detailed descriptions of comparable buildings are scarce, the use of timber for the roof structure, along with the width of the span and the level of decorative detail, appears to be particularly notable.

ENDNOTES

1. M. Osborne, *Always Ready: The Drill Halls of Britain's Volunteer Forces*, Partizan Press, Leigh-on-Sea, 2006, 87.
2. *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, Kelly's Directories Ltd, London, 1912, 568.
3. W. White, *Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk*, 1890, 952.
4. A. Brodie (ed), *RIBA Directory of British Architects 1834-1914*, Continuum, London, 1990.
5. *The Illustrated London News - Volume 52, Volunteer Drill-Hall, Great Yarmouth, The Illustrated London News*, London, 1 February 1868, 105.
6. M. Osborne, *op. cit.*, 27.
7. *Kelly's Directory of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk – Part 2: Norfolk*, Kelly's Directories Ltd, London, 1892, 276.
8. *The Illustrated London News, op. cit.*, 105.
9. M. Osborne, *op. cit.*, 110.



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