



# Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**A Level 2 Archaeological Building Record on  
former shoe factory premises at Bowler's Yard,  
Earls Barton, Northamptonshire**

**Joe Prentice, Charlotte Walker and Iain Soden**

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## Archaeological Buildings Recording at Bowler's Yard, Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire 2015

Joe Prentice, Charlotte Walker and Iain Soden

### Summary

The former boot and shoe factory located within Bowlers Yard on the south-east side of the High Street has undergone considerable changes to its fabric, both during its original life as a boot and shoe factory and subsequently, as a pie factory, wine importing warehouse and joinery workshop. The latter appear to have all taken place during the second half of the twentieth century and each phase no doubt caused further changes to be made although it is impossible now to determine their sequence with any certainty. Distinctive features such as extensive racking (mostly pre-formed Dexion-type metal or timber shelving) bearing the names of various vineyards relate to the most recent use of the core buildings. No fixtures or fittings remain from the boot and shoe period of the buildings' use.

### Introduction

Planning Permission has been granted to Red Box Developments, for the demolition of single storey modern warehouse buildings, the conversion to housing of historic factory buildings, together with nearby new housing (WP/2013/0350/FM), to which a condition (No 13) was applied in respect of provision of archaeological buildings recording. The requirement was set out in a '*Brief for a programme of archaeological building recording*', dated 28 January 2015. It was mirrored in a Written Scheme of Investigation by Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd and approved by Northamptonshire County Council as advisors to Wellingborough Council.

The site comprises a three-storey former shoe-industry factory dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its original and evolving place within the wider Northamptonshire boot and shoe industry is little-understood and it has been put to numerous uses in terms of manufacturing. It is not a statutorily listed building but has been considered to be an Undesignated Heritage Asset in terms set out by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The site lies south of the High Street, and is tucked away behind frontage buildings (NGR: SP 8536 6386; Fig 1). The land falls away markedly to the south and the building is probably terraced into the hillside to some extent.

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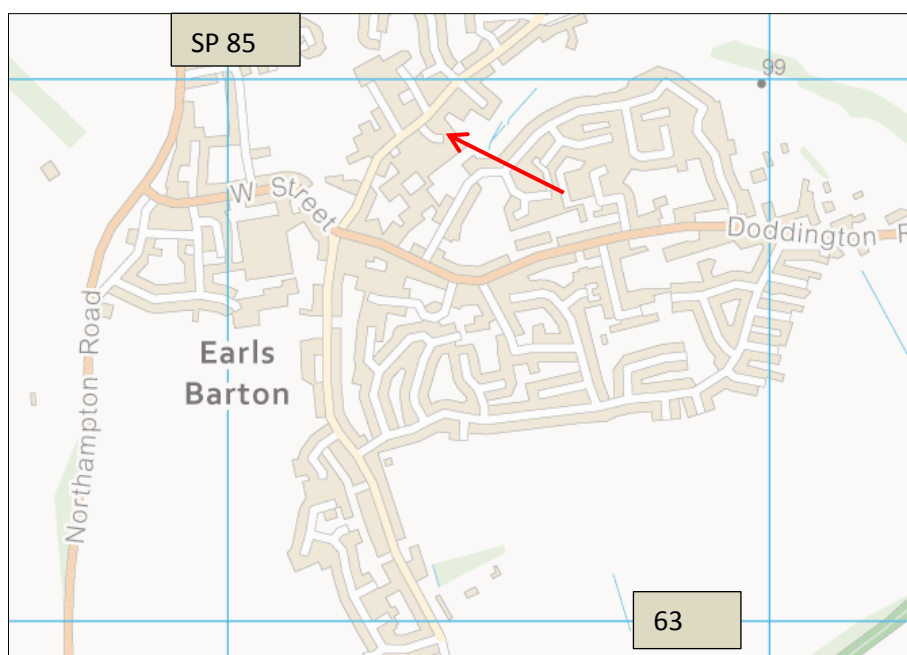


Fig 1: Site location (arrowed). Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown Copyright and database right 2015

### Historical Background

The factory buildings were originally built as part of the boot and shoe industry, for which the county is renowned. However, the factory was not recorded as part of the former English Heritage's Boot and Shoe Survey (2001), possibly because it was only briefly associated with this trade. Similarly, there is little documentary evidence associated with the origin, use or development of the factory.

Buildings are first depicted on the rear part of the site in the late 19th century. Prior to this date, the site had been part of a back-plot associated with buildings fronting onto the High Street (Fig 2); it is likely that the area had been similarly laid out since the medieval period. In 1885 the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map shows a narrow building aligned north-east to south-west along the former property boundary. It is shown with a possible carriage arch (for which no physical evidence has been seen) through the central part of the building with a number of smaller sheds at the southern end (subsequently lost). By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, the building had been altered. A larger, square-shaped addition had been added at the north end of the building and a smaller addition had been made to the rear. The factory is thought to have been the premises of Austin boot and shoe makers, although there has been no definitive historical proof. In 1890 and 1893, an Austin and Brooks is listed in Trade Directories for Earls Barton. By 1896 an F W Austin was noted as a shoe manufacturer and in 1898 it was listed as Austin Brothers. After this date there is no further mention in available directories.

In the 1930s and first half of the 1940s the building was in use by Birtle's Crisps, but this company went into liquidation in 1947 (The London Gazette, 29th August 1947). By 1968, a single-storey warehouse to the east had been added. On the 1976 Ordnance Survey map, the building is marked as a Wine and Bottle Warehouse.

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Fig 2: 1838 Inclosure map of Earls Barton, showing approximate location of factory, at that time an open plot

(Courtesy of Northamptonshire Record Office: Map 2886)



Fig 3: First Edition Ordnance Survey map, 1885



Fig 4: Second Edition Ordnance Survey 1901

### Limitations of the evidence

The portion of the existing structure which is the focus of this report comprises a long range aligned roughly north-south along its long axis with a short east-facing (added) projection at the northern end and giving the earliest surviving (red brick) fabric a broadly L-shaped configuration. The whole of the eastern side and southern end of this range has been built against; as a consequence the original structure on those sides has been almost entirely engulfed. These later additions have made it impossible to observe the early exterior of the building from ground level, the only part of this side that could be seen was part of the upper storey seen from the yard to the east (Fig 5) and part of the same observed through first floor windows within the complex.



Fig 5: The only restricted view possible from the factory yard on the east, overwhelmed by adjoining Post-War sheds.

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None of the southern end could be observed from the exterior at all since the only viewpoint was from a school playground lying immediately adjacent on that end; this gable elevation had also been built against by twentieth century additions. The northern end abutted adjoining private properties which are built so close as to afford no views (Figs 6 & 7).



Fig 6: The glimpsed north-eastern corner



Fig 7: The north end/western side, hemmed in

Part of the north end of the west side was seen from the yard of a nearby property although the southern end of the same side was obscured by a modern house built close against it (Fig 7). Therefore the majority of the recording had to be undertaken from the interior of the building, an exercise further impeded by the fact that many original openings had been blocked and there was no electricity supply which meant that completely windowless rooms had to be investigated only by hand-held torches. Many internal wall surfaces retained modern paint and washes or tiling which precluded any observation of the original structure. The upper floors fortunately retained their windows (the majority of which were not blocked) and permitted daylight to afford adequate levels for full observation.

The phased plans which have been drawn for the buildings have deliberately omitted the modern brick sheds on the east, which have obscured the core buildings and which, on entering, have a great capacity to confuse. Like most of the core Victorian structure, they too had had most windows and internal doors (to allow for divisible commercial premises) blocked in brick, making any natural flow around the building impossible.

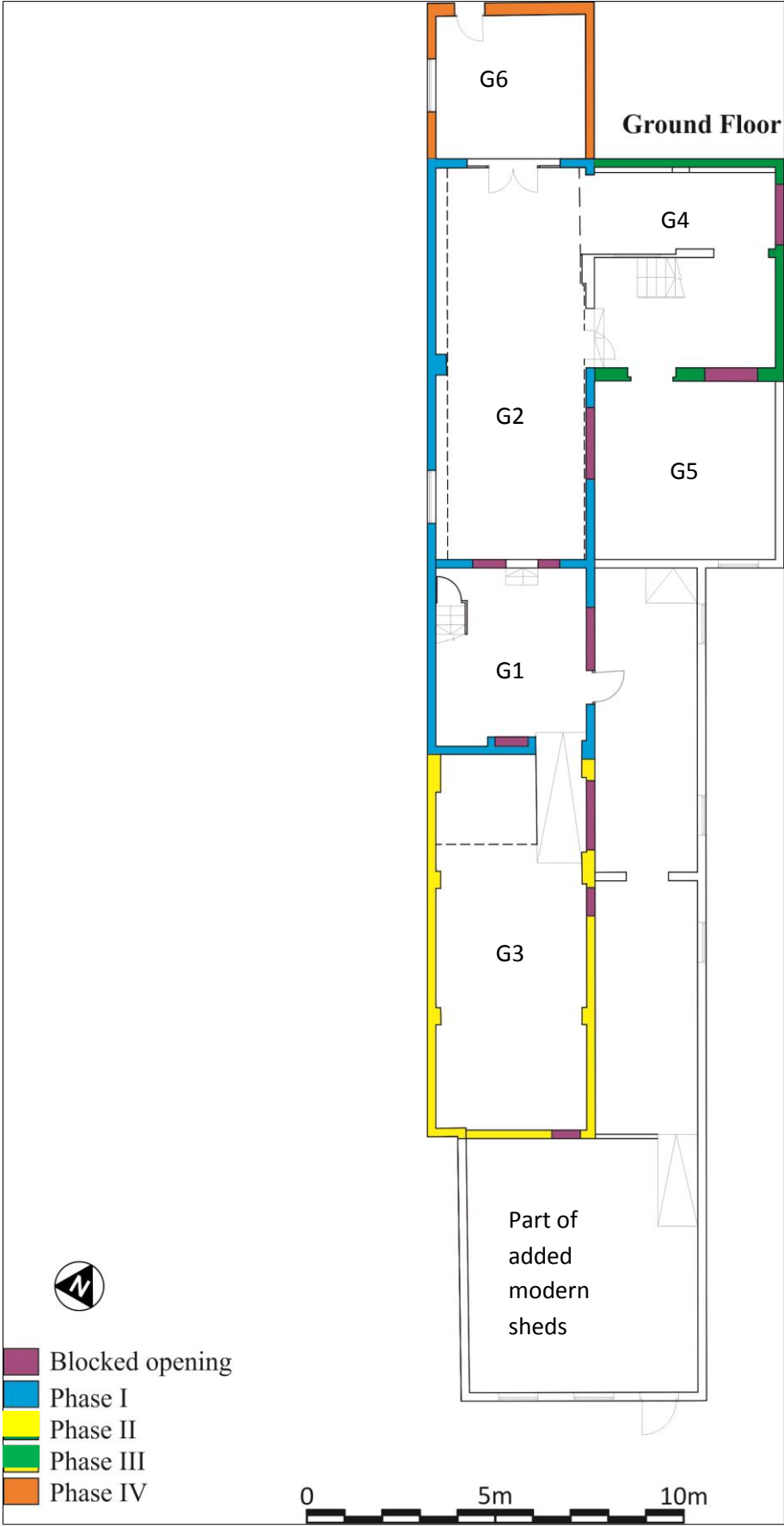


Fig 8: The core factory buildings: Ground Floor, phased (further modern sheds on the east)



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## Phase I (constructed by 1885)

Currently accessible through an internal doorway which appears to not be an original opening, the first phase of the building was found to be the northern part of the north-south range with a later eastward-projecting wing (Figs 8, 12 & 19). Built of red brick (232mm x 112mm x 80mm, 9 1/8 x 4 3/8 x 3 1/8 inches) bonded in lime mortar, it had only one window in the western, none in the southern side and probably none in the northern, the latter altered by a later addition (see below, phase IV). Therefore nearly all of the openings, both doors and windows, and mostly now blocked, were located in the east elevation. The reason for this configuration is not clear; it might be that there was another, since demolished, building close by to the west which precluded the inclusion of doors and windows on that side or the presence of openings almost exclusively on the east side was for the purposes of excluding too much sunlight (in reality the side described here as east-facing is aligned more towards the north-east, but the main cardinal points have been used for ease of description; thus, windows on one side only would provide a more even light, useful in the days before good artificial lighting). In only two ground floor rooms was the original floor surface visible and there it comprised red brick. The remainder of the ground floor was either covered by, or was composed of, modern concrete.

### *Phase I, room G1*

Room G1 contained a chimney breast built against the south wall. Although the fireplace opening has been infilled, its presence suggests that this room was most likely the building's office since it appears to have been the only heated room. A doorway exists in the north wall which now leads into room G2; this narrow doorway is located within a wider area of blocking suggesting that at an earlier date, if not originally, it was much wider, allowing almost full access into the adjoining space.



Fig 9: The inserted north doorway through an older, wider opening from G1, looking north into G2. Note the level change and the brick corbels and trimmed joists above which facilitated the doorway-height

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Quite how this would have worked is unclear as the rooms are at different levels and if G1 was the office some degree of privacy would have been expected, however, it might be that the originally wider opening was largely or entirely glazed to allow visual monitoring of the larger space (G2) whilst retaining office privacy. Currently entirely windowless, there must have been windows in the east wall although this has been much rebuilt with a large section of the wall subsequently infilled with Fletton brick through which the current entrance doorway has later been inserted. There are no indications that there were ever windows in the west or south walls.

Against the west wall a timber staircase gives access to the floor above; this appears to be an original feature. It is of simple construction with the steps comprising treads, but no risers, half-tenoned into plain pine strings on either side. The room side (including the underside of the treads) of the staircase has been simply boarded in and all of the woodwork painted white. The underside of the ceiling is also painted white; this simply comprises the joists and undersides of the floorboards with no indication that the room was ever plastered. A short flight of steps leads up from this room into G2 which lies immediately to the north (Fig 9). This later interconnecting doorway (previously mentioned above), is also evidenced by the alterations to the ceiling joists above the doorway. Rooms G1 and G2 are positioned at different levels, G1 being approximately 0.6m lower so that when the present doorway was created there was not enough headroom to allow a full height doorway to be made within the height of the north wall into G2. To overcome this, the upper portion of the doorway had to be cut into the lower part of the room above (F1) and a section of the floor removed to give the necessary headroom; this borrowing of space is simply boxed in within the room above (see below, F1). In order to support the truncated joists small brick corbels were built into the north wall which support the trimmed joists located against that wall, the adjacent joist being supported on inserted trimmers which have had their south ends tenoned and then pegged into the next uncut joist (Fig 9).

### *Phase I, room G2*

Originally a large rectangular room of double height, now partly subdivided towards the east side at the northern end (Fig 8, see below room G4). Built of red brick of the same sizes as described in G1 the west wall is raised on a dwarf wall of Northampton Sand with Ironstone which could only be observed from the exterior (present in Fig 7). The room rises through two floors and seems to be contemporary with G1. The lower portion of the north, west and east walls was covered to a height of approximately 2.5m by modern Formica-type sheet material with a faux tile pattern which was presumably added for hygiene reasons to provide an easily cleanable surface. This suggests it might date to the period when the factory was used for the production of pies or as a wine importing warehouse. The south wall did not retain this covering and was simply the structural brickwork over-painted. There is evidence for a wide blocked opening in the east wall though this was only visible from the other side of the wall (from G5). There is only one window located in the west wall; it is fitted with a timber frame and comprises three lights each fitted with three panes of glass which appear to all be fixed. A further (probably original) timber casement window high in the east wall now affords little light since that wall has been built against at first floor level and therefore now only borrows lights a later room there. Apart from modern shelving and a single conveyor belt/ramp fitted with rollers there is no evidence for any original fixtures or fittings which might relate to the room's original use.

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### *Phase I, room F1*

Located directly above G1 and of the same size, this room is accessed via the timber flight of stairs located against the west wall (see above). In this room the stairwell is protected by a simple boxed-in hand rail. There are two windows in the east wall, they both retain their two-light timber frames, each light fitted with six panes of glass, all fixed. The windows are set beneath timber lintels and have external sills made of bullnose bricks laid on edge. In between is evidence of a third window, now blocked. Against the south wall is the chimney breast which contains the flue from the fireplace in G1 though there is no evidence that this room had a similar fireplace. The underside of the ceiling is boarded with plain tongue and groove planking suggesting that this room might also have functioned at some point as an office; it is the only room with such boarding. Against the north wall is a crude timber box which was added when the doorway was created in the wall below; this box provides the headroom space necessary for that doorway.

### *Phase I, room F2*

This is in reality the upper section of room G2 and is therefore part of the same room; it is numbered separately here purely for clarity on the plan (Fig 10). The ceiling is simply the underside of the room above (S2) and comprises joists laid east-west across the room covered by floorboards. It is painted white.



Fig 10: east facing fenestration of F1 and S1 above (right); F and S to left



Fig 11: Boarded-out chimney breast rising through F1, looking south into F beyond

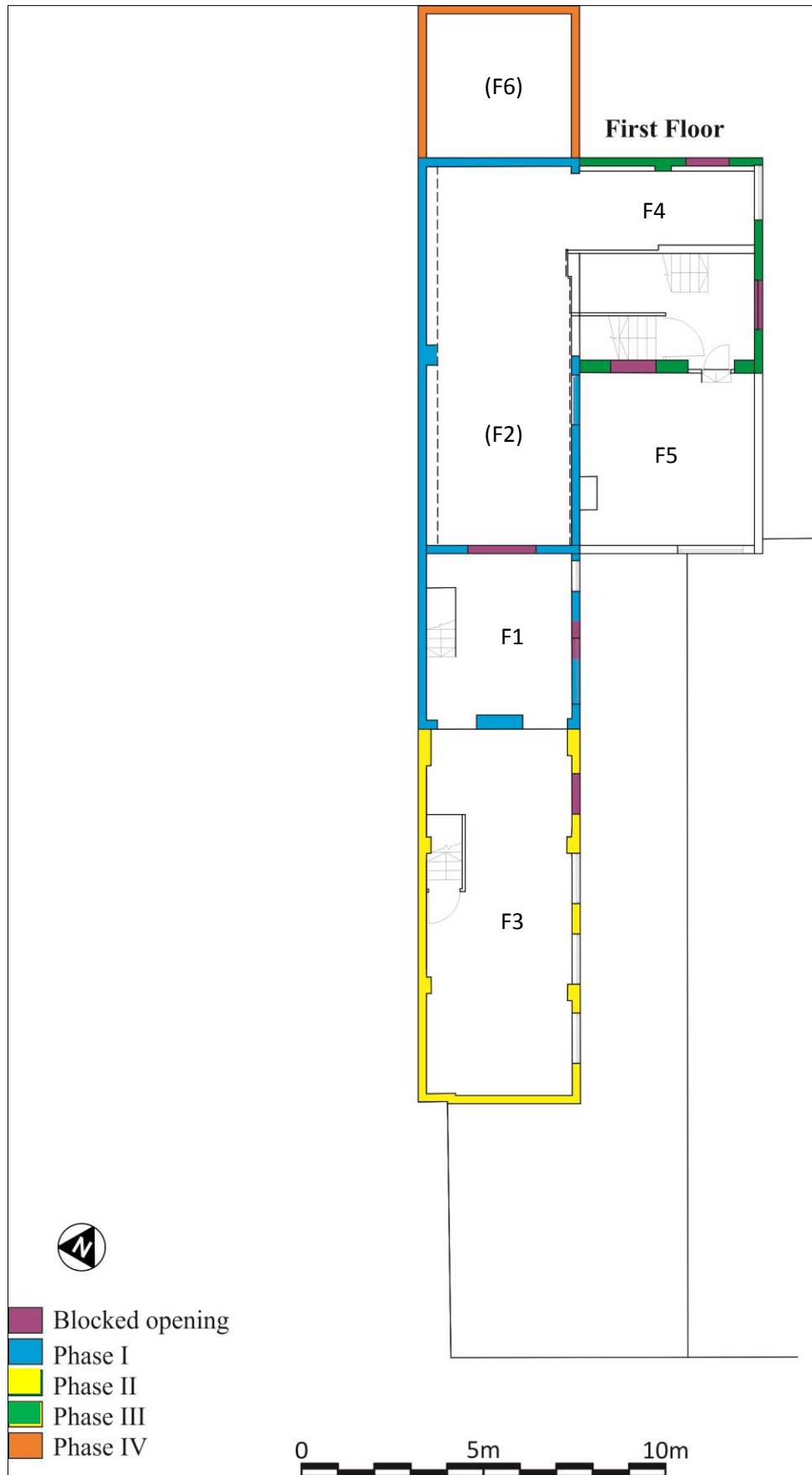


Fig 12: The core factory buildings: First Floor, phased

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### Phase II (constructed by 1885)

This phase comprises two elements which are presumed to have been carried out at about the same time. It includes the addition of a three storey rectangular range to the southern end of the original two storey building and the addition of a further floor level above the original double-height north end of the first phase.

#### *Phase II, room G3*

A red brick range added to the south side of phase I and of the same width (Fig 8). The brick sizes are 228mm x 115mm x 70mm (8 7/8 x 4 1/2 x 2 3/4 inches) bonded in lime mortar. This added range followed the same pattern as the original block in that there are no windows on the western side and none in the north elevation since this wall was originally the south wall of the Phase I building. The south wall (Fig 13) retains evidence of a tall, narrow opening (0.6m, 2 feet) which does not appear to have been a doorway since it seems too narrow to have been practical; it is more likely to have accommodated some form of mechanical equipment although what remains unclear – possibly a belt drive or shaft. Above it are two small windows, both set beneath concrete lintels and both now blocked. Neither is original and their date is uncertain, but is most likely twentieth century.



Fig 13: G3, south wall with blockings, viewed from a later room to the south

The east wall currently contains no openings although previously there were two; one was a large, wide opening located towards the northern end now entirely infilled with Fletton brick. The other was a low (c1m high) opening at floor level; its limited size suggests it may also have accommodated some form of mechanical device, perhaps a drive belt from machinery located to the east since it appears to be too small for a loading door and oddly positioned for a window. The room is currently accessed via a concrete ramp which leads down from the floor of G1 which is situated 0.8m higher

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than the floor of G3. This does not appear to be an original feature. The floor of the room is of red brick and slopes gently towards the south though the reasons for this are uncertain but may be for drainage if wet processes were carried out here; however no drains were observed at the lower end of the room. Currently entirely unlit, this room contains only modern racking probably installed when the building was a wine importing warehouse; the racks retain wine labels indicating various vineyards. The ceiling comprises the joists supporting the floor above and the underside of the floorboards, all painted white.



Fig 14: The unlit room G3, looking south down the ramp; fully decked out with wine-racks

### *Phase II, room F3*

Located directly above G3 and of the same dimensions, it has no windows in the west or south walls and originally had four in the east wall; the northernmost is infilled with brickwork, the three southern examples are fitted with timber three-light frames, each light fitted with three panes of glass, all fixed. The windows opening are formed beneath segmental brick arches and have bullnose brick sills externally (Fig 15). When this block was added it was not furnished with a staircase from the ground floor, rather doorways were created in the south wall of phase I, room F1 either side of the chimney stack located there and thus first floor access to this addition was via the staircase which rises from room G1 (Fig 16).



Fig 15: The secondary block with F3 and S3 to left; note possible blocked loading bay doorway at second floor level



Fig 16: F3 Interior, looking north towards the back of the chimney breast in F1; boxed-in stair to left

### *Phase II, room S3*

Located above room F3 and of the same size, this comprises the upper floor of this three storey added range. Like the floor below it only has windows in the east wall; the northernmost appears to have been a large loading bay doorway rather than a window as evidence by the blocking seen from the exterior (Fig 15). There are three windows located to the south of this; all retain timber two light frames, each light fitted with three panes each, all fixed. They are set beneath timber lintels set at eaves level. The room is accessed via a staircase which rises from F3 and is located against the west wall, a simple construction comprising plain strings fitted with treads but no risers. It has been subsequently boarded in screening it from the room below. The northern end of this room is formed by the south wall of the original building and like on the floor below access has been provided to the added third floor room (S1) located above F1. At this level there is a single doorway situated to the west side of the chimney stack. There is modern shelving along the east and south sides of the room.

### *Phase II, room S1*

This added floor is situated above F1 of the original phase of building and was created by the raising of the east and west walls and the raising of the roof, though it is not clear if the original roof was removed and then re-set or a new roof made. Like the remainder of the building there are no windows in the west wall and a single window in the east wall. It retains a fixed two light timber frame, each light fitted with two panes of glass. It is situated directly below the wall plate under a timber lintel. The roof trusses comprise simple A-frames of narrow planks of a flimsy construction – merely two thin timbers bolted side by side. They are supported on internal buttresses built integrally into the construction of the raised side walls. Each truss has raking struts, the upper ends of which also partly support the purlins which are also supported on cleats (Fig 17). The whole is painted white. At the ridge there are two angled purlins/ridge boards, also supported on cleats which supported the roof which is now re-covered in corrugated asbestos sheet. There was

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originally a doorway through the north wall which gave access to the room (S2) added there above F2 when that section of the original building was raised.



Fig 17: The roof in Room S1, showing the simple and relatively flimsy truss

although this opening has been infilled when Phase III was added and a staircase created there (see below).

### *Phase II, room S2*

A large rectangular room added above the double-height room beneath (room G2 and F2) which forms the main part of the phase I building. This added floor is most clearly seen when viewed from the west side high up where the change in brick colour and pointing can be seen (Fig 7). Like the remainder of the building there are no windows in the west and north walls and just two in the east wall. Each contains timber three light frames, each with three panes of glass. There are two simple A-frame trusses with raking struts as described previously. This section of roof retains its slate covering.

It is likely that this raising of the roof took place almost at the same time as the addition of Phase II/III (below); in detail the two are inseparable.

### **Phase II/III (constructed between 1885 and 1901)**

This phase comprises primarily the small, roughly square, range added at the north end of the original phase on its east side (Figs 8, 12 & 19). It contains a stair at its core.

### *Phase III, room G4*

The ground floor room of this phase comprising three external walls (north, east and south) with the original east wall of Phase I having been removed so that this addition became incorporated into one large L-shaped space (Fig 8). Where the east wall of Phase I was removed the original second floor wall plate was supported on a tall cast iron column. In turn this supports the added third floor subsequently added, potentially at almost the same time as Phase II. Room G4 originally had



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windows in the east and south walls, both subsequently infilled; it is therefore not known what configuration those windows took. In the south wall there remains a doorway set beneath a segmental arch with recessed internal jambs indicating the presence of a door frame, since removed. The inner arrisses of the doorway comprise bullnose brick. Within this added range is a timber staircase giving access to a landing (F4) and then a third floor room above (S4) which is incorporated into the added level, S2, previously described. Thus it appears that this additional range seems mostly to have been built to provide a more adequate access route to the upper floors since it provides little additional floor space, indeed almost none at first floor level.

### *Phase II/III, F4*

As indicated above, this level essentially provides no more than a landing between the ground and third floor levels. This whole level is constructed of timber (pine) and is unpainted. It was originally lit by two windows in the south wall, one of which was subsequently made into a doorway allowing access to room F5, the other remains; it retains a metal framed (Crittall-style) window set beneath a segmental arch. In the east wall is a blocked opening, presumably another window, now infilled with brickwork. The stairs lead to the third floor above.

### *Phase II/III, room S4*

This third-level room set beneath the roof retains four wide, shallow windows; two in the north wall, one in the east and one in the south walls. They all retain the same timber frames comprising four lights each containing a single pane of glass. There was originally a fifth window in the east wall of the same size; this has been infilled as has a further, higher window in the same wall set beneath the ridge line. There is a single truss supporting the roof, this is constructed of well-dressed pine with chamfered edges in a king post configuration with raking iron tie-struts (Fig 18).



Fig 18: The part-covered roof truss at the junction between S2 and S4, viewed from S4. Unlike all other roof elements, it is chamfered (if only simply) and varnished. Its upper reaches are boarded-in and hidden.

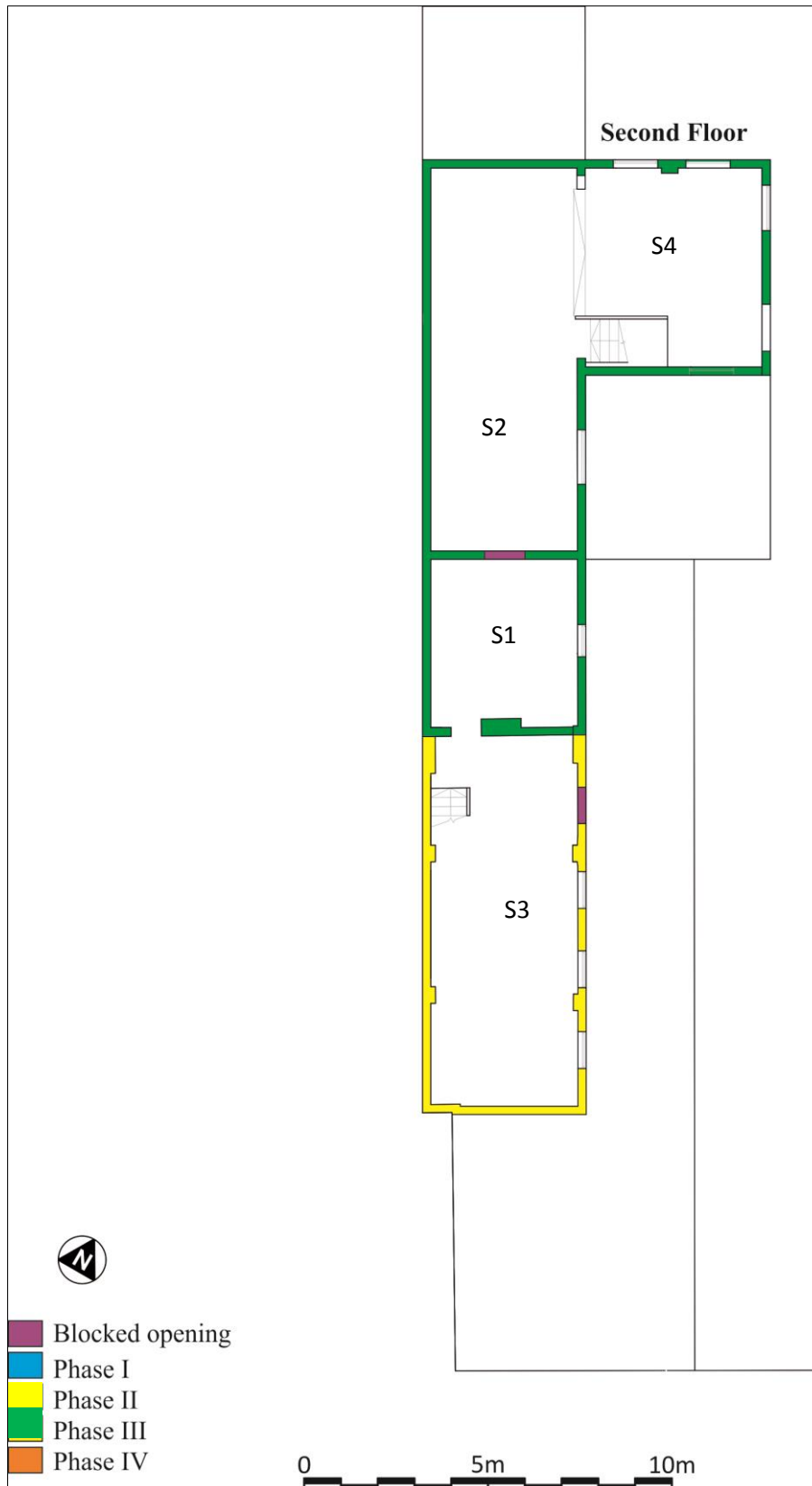


Fig 19: The core factory buildings: Second Floor, phased

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## **Phase IV** (probably constructed after 1901, possibly after World War II)

### *Phase IV, room G6*

A single, small room of almost double height added against the north end of the phase I building (Figs 7 & 8). Built of various brickwork, suggesting it was constructed using partly re-claimed materials its internal walls provided little information since they were largely covered by modern white tiles. The roof could not be observed due to the presence of an inserted false ceiling. The only feature which appears to be contemporary with the build is a cast-iron sixteen light window in the west wall (Fig 7). Probably re-used, like the majority of the brickwork, the window is set beneath a segmental arch constructed of Fletton brick suggesting a post-World War II date. The roof is covered by blue slates.

## **Phase V** (Post-World War II)

### *Phase V, room G5*

A roughly square room built on the south side of G4 and apparently only ever accessible from the latter. It has no windows suggesting it was utilised as a store room only.

### *Phase V, room F5*

Located directly above G5 and of the same date, this appears to have been used as an office. Accessed by the inserted landing within F4 it is lit by a single window in the south wall with a timber frame and internally fitted with vertical iron bars for security. The latter suggest that this was used as an office where perhaps money or other valuable items were stored. It is not known how the roof of this section was constructed as it could not be observed from the exterior and internally there was a false ceiling. The floor was of vinyl tiles over floorboards. The creation of this room made a former original window high in the east wall of G2 redundant although it was retained to borrow light in both directions.

## **Later buildings**

A range of large brick buildings all date to the post War period and apart from peripheral inclusion in general photographs have not been recorded. They are of standard construction and have no historic value.

## **Conclusion**

The former boot and shoe factory at Bowlers Yard, The High Street, Earls Barton is a much altered and, as a consequence, much denuded architectural resource. It lacks any definitive documentary record and escaped the previous English Heritage county-wide industry survey entirely. Difficult to record due to the limited access to most external elevations, the phasing of the building has been undertaken largely by observation of the plan, butt-joints and slight changes in brick colour where they could be observed. Map regression has helped confirm only basic phasing.

Little is known of the specific works undertaken at different stages during the working life of the building, apart from generalisations gleaned from trade directories and the inclusion of the building in the wider context of the Northamptonshire Boot and Shoe industry. It has been recorded that in

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1861, out of a population of just over 1,500 people, between one in two and one in three of all males in the parish and one in three females was a shoemaker (Horn, 1976). It is therefore unsurprising that there would have been a large number of dedicated buildings devoted to such work although much would have been carried out in domestic properties as well. Certain related processes such as tanning were carried out further afield.

The precise nature of work carried out at Bowlers Yard is uncertain, and even less so is what specific component was carried out in which room due to the high level of depletion of the internal spaces. Not a single fixture or fitting remains which might relate to original usage. As a result little more can be reported upon than the basic structure of the various phases. The fact that nearly all of the windows are fixed suggests that the processes did not require high levels of ventilation and no air vents were observed either in the walls or roof spaces. The double height space of the Phase I building perhaps suggests storage, but if this is the case then the majority of that phase must simply have been a warehouse since the only other art of that phase are the two small offices located immediately to the south. The later addition of Phase II/III which contains mostly staircase again seems an odd use of space, again creating a double height room to the immediate north which must have been hard to use and access.

It is possible that individual rooms were utilised for a variety of purposes over a period of time, and perhaps even during the working year, in much the same way that farm buildings were constructed in a simple way so as to provide flexibility of working conditions in one building.

The large amount of alteration suggests that the processes undertaken at the end of the buildings' shoe-making life were not consistent with the purpose for which it was originally created, neither was the scale of the works undertaken. Its subsequent warehousing uses have dominated the interiors and the exteriors alike, resulting in a total loss of all but the basic shoe industry-related structure.

### Reference

Horn, P, 1987 *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside*



IS Heritage, 15 April 2015