



Professional Archaeological Services

The Former Avonmouth Bus Depot, Avonmouth, Bristol, BS11 9EG

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Client: Stokes Morgan Planning

Project: Historic Building Recording Report



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Non-Technical Summary

In line with current government guidelines and national legislation, the Archaeology Service of Bristol City Council has asked for an Historic England Level 2 standing building survey report on the former Avonmouth Bus Depot, Bristol, BS11 9EG. The study area is located on the north side of Avonmouth Road between Smyths Close and the Portway Roundabout. This Standing Building Survey Report was required as a condition of planning consent and listed building consent to convert the present building from a disused gym to a furniture workshop.

The results of this survey are set out in the following report and summarised here.

The present building was constructed in 1915 to a design by W H Watkins. It was a purpose built bus depot and garage.

The surviving building consists of a rectangular single-storey brick-built structure, aligned roughly ENE-WSW, with the southern face fronting Avonmouth Road and the western face fronting Smyths Close. There are two entrances; a set of double doors on the junction of Smyths Close and Avonmouth Road, together with a large set of original folding wooden doors fronting Avonmouth Road. The latter are considered an important surviving feature of the original building.

Of particular note are the decorative features on the exterior of the building, in an Arts and Crafts movement interpretation of a late Tudor/Jacobean house, surmounted by a clocktower. No significant alterations to these features have been proposed.

At the time of this survey land to the rear of the study area (formerly part of the bus depot, but not listed), was under development for housing. Part of the tram shed complex fronting Smyths Close (the complete building frontage is L-shaped) is also outside the present study area.

As a result of this project a record has now been made of the former Avonmouth Bus Depot. The associated documents, plans and digital media will in due course be deposited with the Bristol City Council museums service for long term curation and public access.

1. Introduction

Background



Figure 1. Location of the study area, indicated in red.

- 1.1. In April 2018, Heritage Planning Services Ltd was commissioned to produce a historic building survey report of the former Avonmouth Bus Depot, Avonmouth, Bristol, BS11 9EG (centred NGR ST 5185 7805). The study area occupies a 273m² rectangular polygon of land. This work was requested in advance of the conversion of the study area from a disused gym to a furniture workshop, with the addition of a mezzanine floor (planning references 18/00686/F & 18/00687/LA).

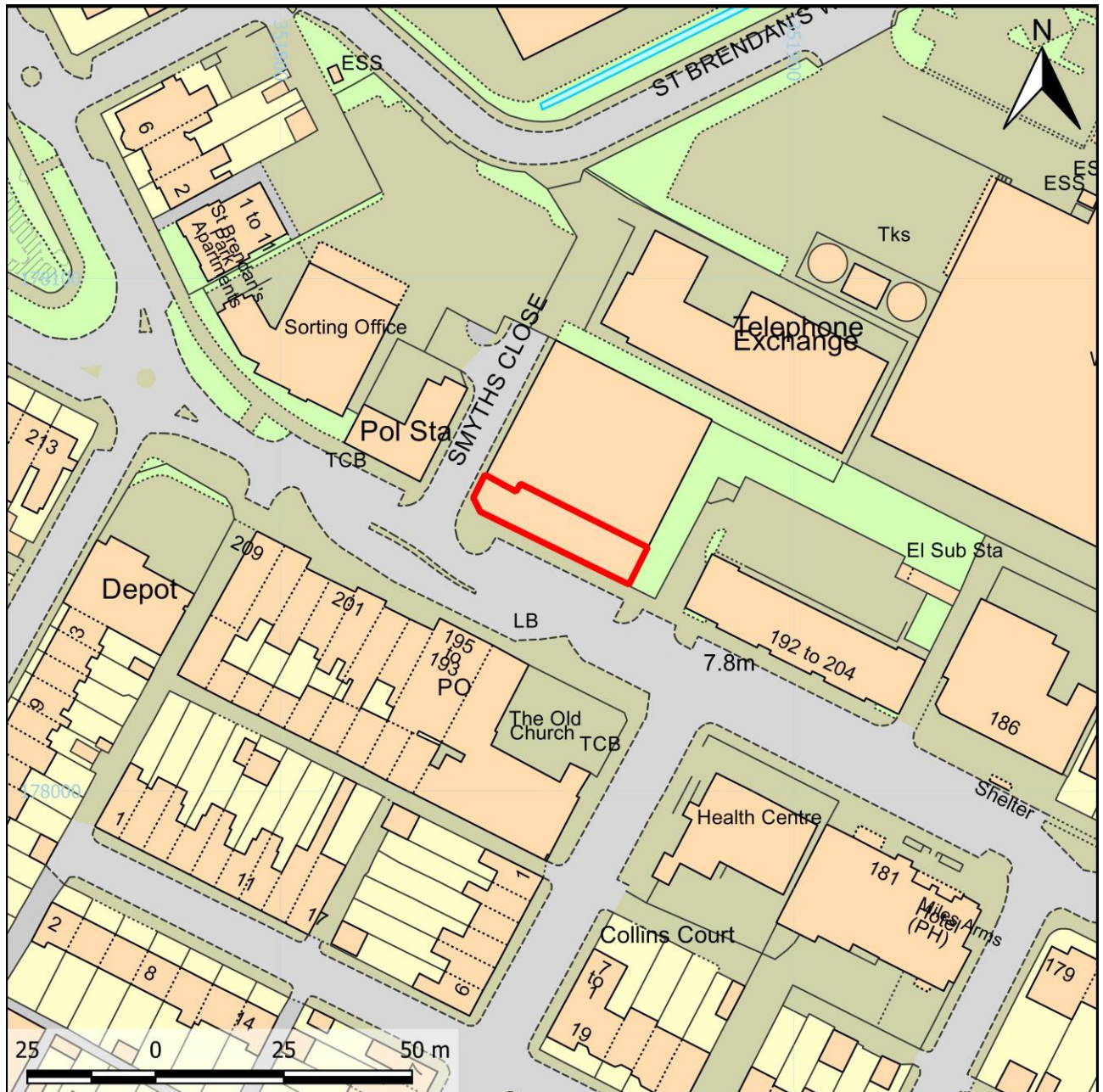


Figure 2. Detail of the study area (outlined in red).

- 1.2. This exercise was undertaken following a request from Stokes Morgan Planning (the Agent), in order to fulfil a condition of listed building and planning consent for a programme of historic building recording at the Historic England Level 2 specification.
- 1.3. The project was carried out to a brief and specification devised by Heritage Planning Services Limited and approved by the City Archaeological Officer.
- 1.4. This report has been compiled by David Etheridge BA, MPhil. and is completed under HPS project reference HPS274/18. All work was managed by Sam Driscoll, MA, MCIfA.



The Project Site and Study Area

- 1.5. The study area lies within the City of Bristol unitary authority, c. 8.6km northwest of the city centre. It is located on land fronting Avonmouth Road, at NGR ST 5185 7805, on the east side of Smyths Close, in the angle between the two, on level ground below the 10m aOD contour.
- 1.6. The underlying geology of the study area consists of mudstone and Halite stone of the Mercian Mudstone Group, laid down in the Triassic period, overlain by superficial deposits (drift) of clay and silt (tidal flat deposits) laid down in the Quaternary Period up to 11.8 thousand years before present (BGS 2018).
- 1.7. The settlement of Avonmouth was established in the later 19th century to serve the Avonmouth Dockyard, an important industrial development in the region, which allowed Bristol to continue functioning as a port city by providing berths for shipping too large to navigate the lower reaches of the River Avon. The settlement continued to expand well into the 20th century, together with related industrial development, but the core settlement is still defined by rows of late 19th and early 20th century brick-built terraced housing.



Baseline Survey: The Archaeological Recording

The Recording

1.8. The site was attended on the morning of 24 April 2018. The conditions were cool and overcast.

1.9. The study area comprises part of the former Avonmouth Bus Depot, constructed in 1915 and now a Grade II listed structure on the Heritage At Risk register. The surviving structure forms an L-shape in the angle between Smyths Close and Avonmouth Road, with the main depot entrance on the Avonmouth Road frontage, with former offices in the Smyths Close frontage. The study area comprises only that part of the building fronting Avonmouth Road and the vestibule that forms the pedestrian entrance between the two wings and is surmounted by a clock tower.

1.10. It should be noted that views of the study area were impeded on both frontages by vehicles parked on either side of both roads.

1.11. The main architectural interest in the building lies in the frontages, which appear to be largely intact since the building was erected c. 1915. It should be noted that the building appears to be single-storey throughout, but the walls of the hipped roof over the depot area are raised to accommodate double-decker vehicles. To the rear of that frontage there was an undercover parking area formed of two parallel hipped roofs extending back the length of the Smyth Road frontage and running parallel to it (Google Earth 2013). This structure had been demolished by September 2014 (Google Earth 2014).



Photo a. The Avonmouth Road frontage, looking north from the south side of Avonmouth Road.



Photo b. The Smyth Close frontage, looking east from the west side of Smyth Close. Scale 2m.



Photo c. View of the Smyths Close frontage looking southeast.



1.12. Since the majority of the Smyth Road frontage is outside the study area, it will be dealt with briefly here, only in so far as it informs the remainder of this study. The frontage is approximately 34.5m long, with a ceramic tiled hipped roof, punctuated by two blind dormers. These are of interest, because in place of windows they each bear a moulded design in relief (painted over, so the material is uncertain). The northerly one bears a shield bearing the letters AD, surmounting a wreath; the southerly one a similar design but bearing the Arabic numerals 1915, in a monogrammatic style, with the 1 of 15 passed through the central 9. These would appear to reference the date of construction: AD 1915. The font is a late Arts & Crafts/Art Nouveaux style.



Photo d. The clocktower looking east from the north side of Avonmouth Road. Scale 2m.

- 1.13. The cross windows occur in pairs, with the exception of the windows to the entrance vestibule, and appear to be of wood. Their proportions are reminiscent of the style popularised by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. There is one doorway on this western side of the building, located just south of the northern dormer for which the chief detail is the moulded brick voussoir arch with a plain brick tympanum above the door. The springers in brick are also highlighted.
- 1.14. From sill level upwards the walls are rendered, with exposed red brick in Flemish Bond below sill level. Where the material is visible all detailing is of red brick; no use of stone was evident.
- 1.15. Moving towards the road junction, the centrepiece of the building is the double-door entrance vestibule surmounted by a clock tower, which lies entirely within the study area. The tower stands at the meeting point of the two frontages aligned at a diagonal to the square on which the other two wings appear to be based. From ground level at Avonmouth Road to the top of the roof, excluding the mast, the tower measures c. 9.08m tall; the sloped turret roof of the tower is c. 2m tall.
- 1.16. On the WSW face of the tower are the double doors. These formerly glazed timber doors appear to be of some age, though it is not clear if they date to the construction of the building. The glazed panel areas are boarded up and the doors covered with wire mesh, as are the former rectangular skylights above the door. At the entrance there is a single low step up.
- 1.17. About 0.6 m above the doorway is a false brick arch with selected moulded brick voussoirs and keystone in relief and a decorative tympanum constructed from narrow bricks laid together in



rectangles, where the rectangles are laid diagonally with no side touching a rectangle with bricks on the same alignment.

1.18. Above the arch is the single clock face, with Roman numerals in black on white, the whole face set within a moulded renaissance style wreath. This motif is repeated twice above the garage doors.

1.19. On either side of the tower is a section of projecting walling surmounted by a partially castellated parapet; these walls appear to denote the extent of the entrance vestibule.

1.20. Each wall comprises three rectangular windows, with the larger central window surmounted by a moulded brick arch with highlighted keystone. The arch contains a smaller brick tympanum in the same style as the clocktower arch. The smaller windows each have a moulded brick segmental arch with highlighted keystone.

1.21. Along the corners of each wall are four projections of brick, each five courses high, mimicking stone quoins. This motif is repeated on the piers between the three windows; it is repeated again on the piers between the garage doors. The overall effect is to create a horizontal linear banding, which is reminiscent of the Bristol Byzantine style, and potentially places this monument within that category.

1.22. As previously noted, the southwest face of the depot, fronting Avonmouth Road, is taller than the northwest face, for the obvious reason that it was designed to accommodate double-decker electric trams. This face is divided into four approximately equal bays of c. 6.40m width each, divided by the aforementioned brick piers. In each of the bays is a large wooden fan-folding door; each door consists of six approximately equally sized panels. Each entrance is approximately 5.70m wide and 4.57m tall.



Photo e. The central sets of folding garage doors, looking NE from the south side of Avonmouth Road.



Photo f. Inside the depot, looking west. No scale.

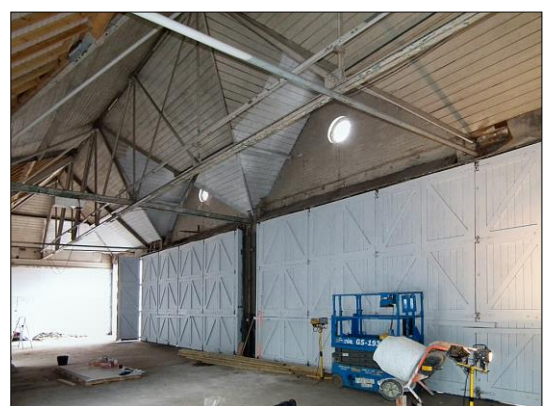


Photo g. Interior of the depot looking SE, scale 2m.



1.23. Above each of the two central bays is a large dormer the width of the bay, each punctuated by a central porthole of c. 0.5m diameter, set in a moulded wreath inside an incised equilateral triangle with bevelled corners.

1.24. At either end of the depot roof is a rectangular brick-built pier, each surmounted by a miniature moulded ceramic obelisk.



Photo h. Interior of the entrance vestibule, looking southwest. Scale 2m.

1.25. In contrast, the southeast facing wall of the depot is an almost featureless brick wall, with one projecting rectangular pier. Towards the southwest end are the traces of a bricked-up double doorway.

1.26. The northeast face of the depot has been heavily modified. There appear to have been four bays mirroring the entrance bays on the main frontage, with plain red brick piers between them. The spaces between these bays have now been filled in, with each bay provided with a fire escape door.

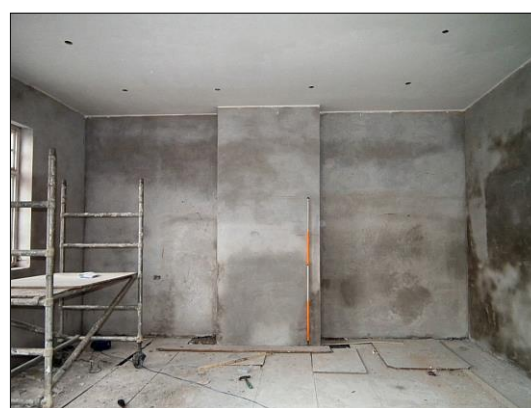


Photo i. Interior of the entrance vestibule, looking northeast. Scale 2m.

1.27. Land to the rear of the depot is not part of the present study area; though it was formerly part of the depot structure it is now being developed for housing.

1.28. Access to the interior of the depot was gained through the folding doors in the eastward bay; these have retained some functionality, though it was noted they required at least two people to open them. The interior of the depot was a large open space with no internal divisions. The floor was of poured concrete, with no trace of tram rails, contra to the suggestion the building was initially a tram shed. In the southeast wall the blocked entrance was outlined by the internal use of breeze blocks.

1.29. The main features of interest are the roof supports and construction. The roof appears to have been supported all round by reinforced steel joists resting on the brick piers. However, the southeast wall does not appear to have been load bearing; the weight in the northeast corner was instead taken by a cast iron pillar. Along the northeast face of the depot the original joists and roof structure appear to have been replaced, probably when the bays were infilled.



- 1.30. No joists cross the width of the building, instead there are tubular steel cross ties between each of the bay piers at front and back. The remainder of the roof support is a bolted steel girder construction running the length of the building.
- 1.31. Attached to the piers and walls were various redundant cast-iron pipework and steel cable ducts. It was evident that the guttering on the main frontage fed internal drainpipes that ran down the piers. On the northwest wall of the building was the remains of an electrical junction box, standing adjacent to the stepped entrance into the vestibule, which was under refurbishment at the time of recording.
- 1.32. The main features of the vestibule were the windows, street entrance (both already described) and the blocked fireplace on the northeast wall. There was no evidence for a doorway into the northeast wing of the building (now outside the study area). The flat ceiling of the vestibule was of a relatively normal height. There was no ceiling or evidence for one in the main depot.

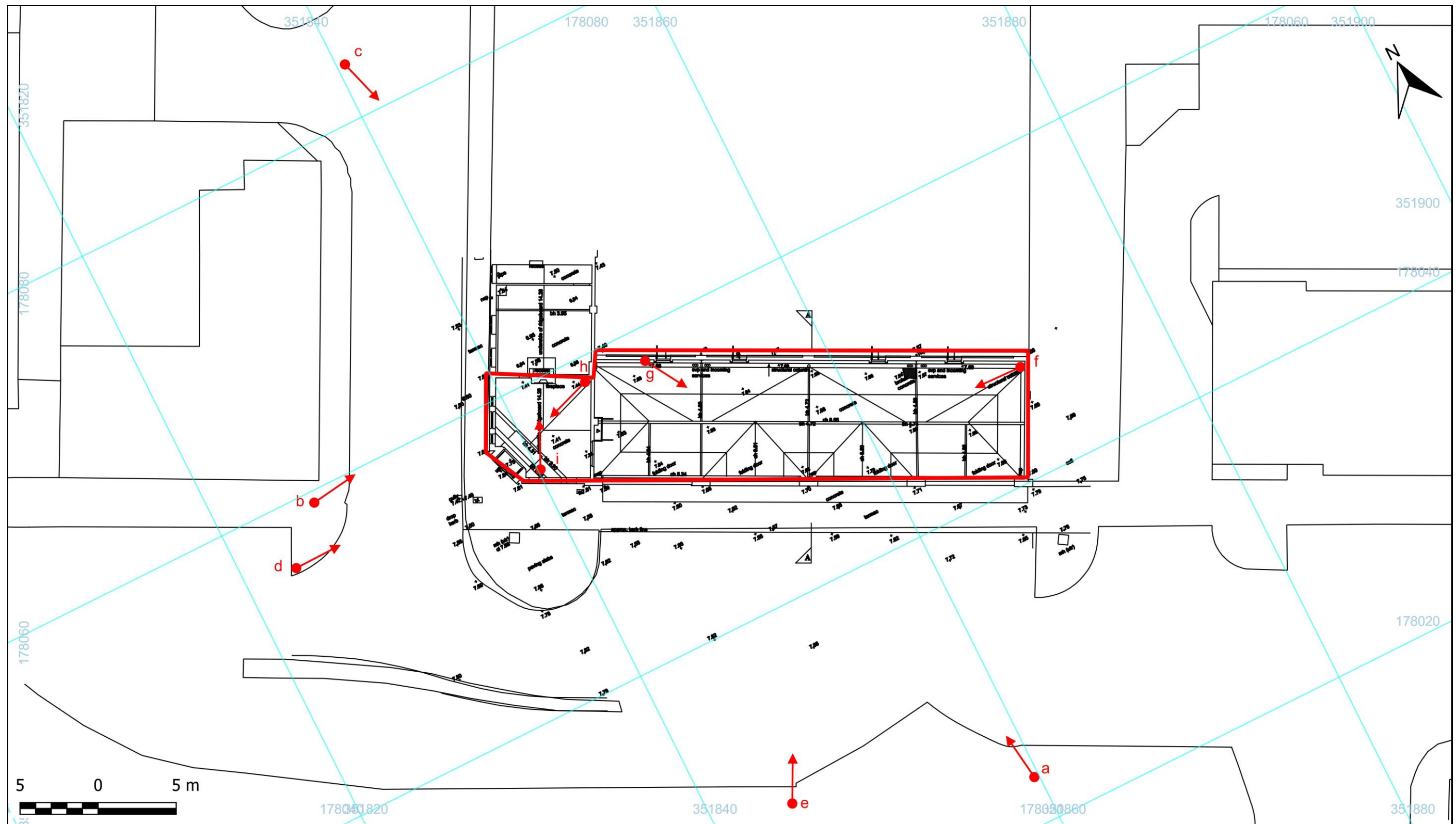


Figure 3. Survey of the study area after a drawing by Clifton Surveys Ltd, showing the location of each photograph illustrated in the text.

2. Baseline Survey: Archaeological and Historical

Introduction

- 2.1. The information presented here is derived from sources including the Bristol Historic Environment Record, the Historic England National Monuments Record database (PastScape), the National Heritage List for England (NHLE), the Historic England Archive, and surviving cartographic resources, along with other published or documentary sources.
- 2.2. Trawls of the National Heritage List for England, Magic.gov.uk, PastScape, the Historic England Archive and the Bristol HER have revealed the following:

Statutory Constraints

Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas

- 2.3. The study area is part of a Grade II listed building, the former Bristol Tramways Company Avonmouth Depot, possibly designed by W H Watkins and built 1915.

Scheduled Ancient Monuments and other Heritage Statutory Constraints

- 2.4. There are no scheduled ancient monuments or other statutory constraints within the study area or in the vicinity.

Non-Statutory National Constraints

- 2.5. There are no non-statutory constraints within the study area or immediate vicinity.

Non-Statutory Local Constraints

- 2.6. The study area is on the Bristol Heritage at Risk register.

HER Events

- 2.7. No previous archaeological or heritage based work has been undertaken within the study area or the immediate vicinity. Archaeological recording and a building survey were undertaken at the former St Brendan's Church on St Andrews Road.



Monuments

- 2.8. There are five Bristol HER records associated with the study area. The primary record is that which notes the Grade II listing of the building. Two records in the community layer post photographic views of the study area taken in November 2008. A further record notes its presence on the Bristol Heritage at Risk register, and its previous use as a gym. The final record notes the building on the Monuments layer, as 3181M.

3. Historic Development of the Project Site

- 3.1. The study area currently lies within the City of Bristol unitary authority, although historically it lay within the ancient parish of Shirehampton, in the County of Gloucestershire. In the 1840s the area was entirely rural, and the study area lay between the Avonmouth Road and the old sea bank.
- 3.2. By the 1880s the first large dock had been built; this had attracted the railways and a small amount of terraced housing had been constructed, but the area was still largely rural and the study area remained part of a field in front of the sea wall.
- 3.3. By c. 1900 a large part of Avonmouth had become a detached part of Bristol, though the study area lay just outside the county boundary. Urban expansion was significant, though it had not spread into the study area. As a result of this expansion a police station had been built on the south side of Avonmouth Road, opposite the study area. There had been further urban development by c. 1914, with the establishment of what is now Smyths Close. Terraced housing and a Methodist Church had been constructed opposite the study area.
- 3.4. An illustration from The Building News, 16 April 1915, shows an architect's drawing for the study area, signed W. H Watkins (Watkins 2018). This illustration confirms Watkins was the architect and indicates that although the garage was built for the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company Limited, it was always intended as a bus garage, since only early single-decker busses are illustrated using the garage (ibid).

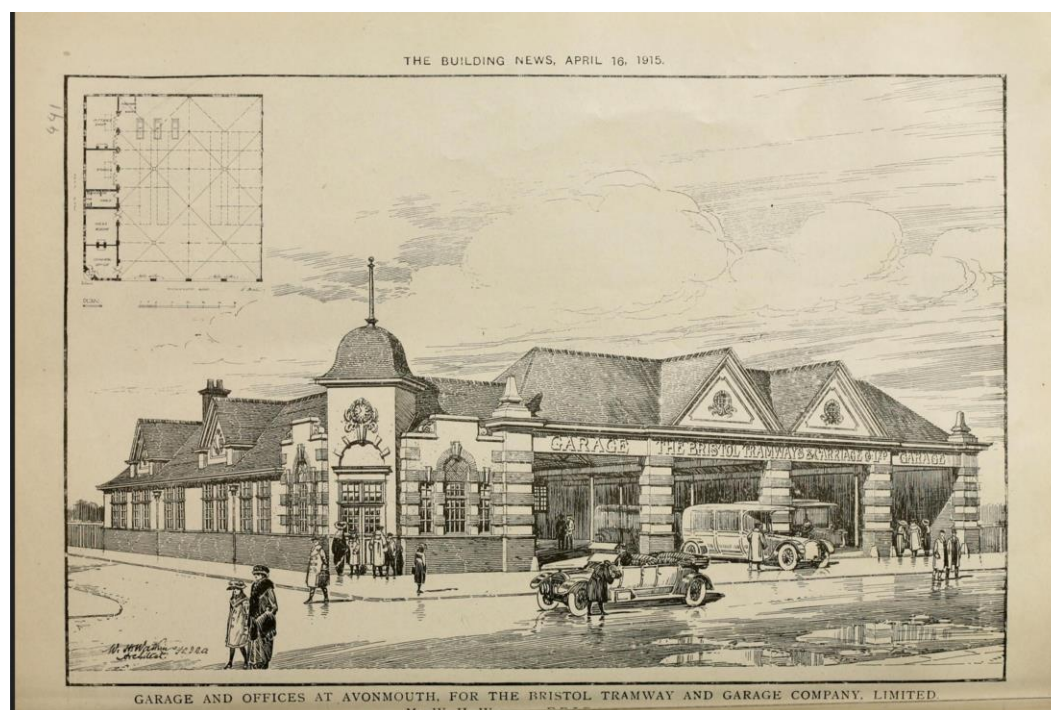


Figure 4 Garage and Offices At Avonmouth, April 16, 1915. Source Know Your Place, Bristol.

4. Summary

- 4.1. Historic building recording of the former Avonmouth Garage, Avonmouth, Bristol, was undertaken during conversion of a substantial part of the redundant bus depot to a furniture renovation workshop. In line with the National Planning Policy Framework, this work was required by Bristol City Council as part of listed building and planning consent, in order to record historic features that would no longer be visible after the conversion.
- 4.2. Recording was undertaken to the Historic England Level 2 specification, where the building is photographed both internally and externally to record overall views and highlight significant details, while the position and angle of each photograph is marked on a scale plan. This recording was undertaken to a written scheme of investigation compiled by Heritage Plan Ltd and agreed with the City Archaeological Officer.
- 4.3. The former bus depot is a Grade II listed structure built 1915; the architect is believed to be W H Watkins. The building was found to be constructed of brick in the Arts and Crafts style, utilising moulded brick for the external details, contrasted with painted rendering over much of the walls. Although built during the First World War, this building dates from the early part of the war,



before conscription and the consequent rise in casualties had impacted national and local optimism.

- 4.4. Internally the study area was divided in two: the large depot area fronting Avonmouth Road, with four large fanfold doors for busses; and a smaller entrance room located beneath the clocktower in the angle between Avonmouth Road and Smyth Close. Nothing was found that indicated the building had ever been used for trams.
- 4.5. Despite the external decoration the interior of the depot was highly functional, with a girder framed roof supported by reinforced steel joists on the load-bearing walls. The rear exits from the depot into the yard behind have now been in-filled. The small entrance room exhibited a blocked fireplace in the northwest wall, but no other details were visible.
- 4.6. Images and records created by this exercise will be deposited with the Bristol City museums service. No artefacts were retrieved from this exercise.



5. Conclusion

- 5.1. A historic building exercise on the Grade II listed Avonmouth Bus Depot has created a record of the structure that includes internal features that may be hidden following redevelopment.
- 5.2. Analysis of the building has confirmed that it is an early 20th century structure built primarily for a functional use, but in an era where external decoration was still popular. Though it was thought to have been designed as a tram shed, no evidence for the presence of trams (e.g. overhead cables, rails) was found; the surviving fixtures, fitting and floor surface are commensurate with use of the building as a bus depot. This corresponds with a published architect's illustration from 1915 that shows the building in use as a bus depot. A signature on the illustration confirms the architect was W H Watkins.
- 5.3. Beyond the entrance room no recording of the interior of the northwest wing was undertaken, since this lies outside the study area; it is suggested that future development work in this area should include a provision for historic building recording.
- 5.4. The record of this building will ultimately be made available for the public to access.



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