



The 1930s Douglas Garage at 46-50 Sheep Street, Northampton

by

MICHAEL WEBSTER AND STEPHEN PARRY

SUMMARY

Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out building recording and analysis, along with desk-based assessment of the former Douglas Garage, 46-50 Sheep Street, Northampton, prior to proposed demolition of existing structures and its redevelopment as dwellings. The buildings mostly date to the construction of a purpose-built garage in 1937, which comprised show rooms and offices at the front with accommodation above and workshops at the rear. Subsequent alterations, particularly to the workshops were also noted. In addition, earlier structures were found to have survived adjoining the property to the north (52 Sheep Street) but too little remained to indicate how the earlier garage, which was established in 1928, operated.

EDITORIAL NOTE by Andy Chapman

To maintain our new tradition of presenting the archaeology of the 20th century in the journal, following articles on pre-fabricated housing at Wickstead Park in Volume 34 and a pre-fabricated classroom at Cranford and

a ‘tin tabernacle’ in Desborough in Volume 35, we now offer a contribution on the archaeology of motoring.

The presentation of this report in the journal is also a first, in that the published text provided below acts as a mere introductory taster for the full report, which is provided as a pdf file on the attached CD. By this means we have been able to include all of the additional material that was generously provided by the Douglas family. As a result, the inevitably dry account recording the empty shell of the garage has been brought to life with photographs of the garage in its heyday (Fig 1), and other miscellaneous material, even including an old company blotter from someone’s desk (Fig 2) and the booklet celebrating the opening of the garage in 1937 (Fig 3, sample page).

The presentation of this report also adds the above-ground archaeology to the buried archaeology on this plot, which has been previously published in the journal (Brown 2006).

INTRODUCTION

Planning permission was granted by Northampton Borough Council for the demolition of the Swan Motors



Fig 1 The facade of the garage, after 1953 (family collection)

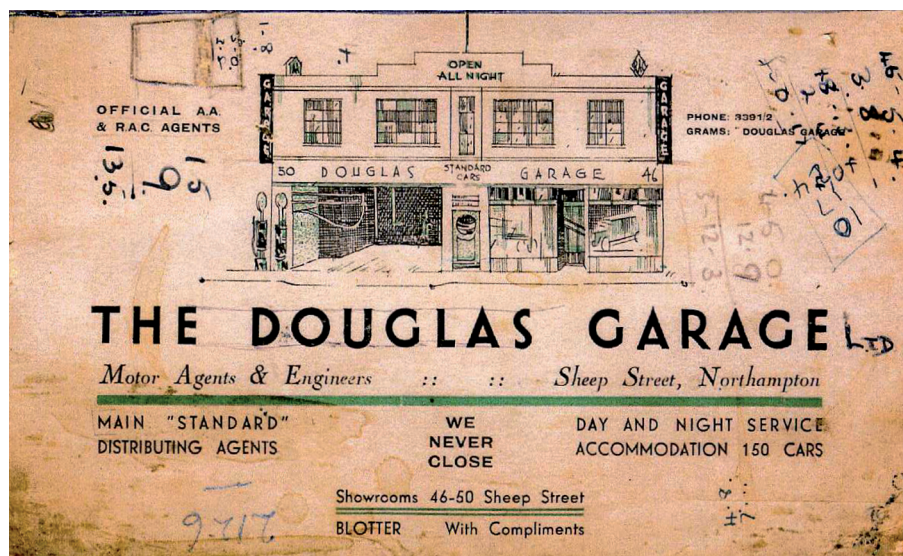


Fig 2 The Douglas Garage blotter (date unknown, family collection)

garage premises at 46-50 Sheep Street, Northampton (NGR SP 7537 6082), and the redevelopment of the plot as residential dwellings. The garage buildings were considered to be of interest because they represented a reasonably intact example of premises purpose-built in the 1930s for the sale and maintenance of cars. Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook building recording and analysis of the garage during December 2002 and January 2003, prior to demolition.

The building recording was undertaken to meet the requirements of an Archaeological Evaluation and Recording Action Brief issued by the Historic Environment Team, Northamptonshire County Council and dated 13 June 2002. The Brief required that a written and drawn record was made of the buildings in accordance with level two of the former RCHM(E)'s *Recording Historic Buildings: A Descriptive Specification*, third edition, as well as excavation to determine previous land use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Northamptonshire Archaeology would like to thank Mr John Elwood Douglas, grandson of the founder of the garage Mr Wilfred Edward Douglas, for his kind assistance in providing details and photographs of the history of the garage and family. In particular the booklet which celebrated the opening of the garage in 1937 provided a wealth of detail showing the original décor and use of the buildings.

The project was managed by Stephen Parry, the fieldwork was carried out by Michael Webster and Giles McFarland, and the illustrations were by Mark Roughley.

A SHORT HISTORY OF 46-50 SHEEP STREET

There were buildings constructed along either side of Sheep Street from at least 1610. During the 19th century it was described as an 'eclectic mixture of minor gentry,

professionals, shops and artisans' (Soden 2001, 5) and it appears that a similar combination of commercial premises and residences continued later. For the most part, the areas to the rear of buildings fronting the street continued to be used as gardens and yards for the individual properties.

Into this neighbourhood Mr W E Douglas founded *The Douglas Garage Ltd* in 1919, after returning from Egypt following the First World War (Mr J E Douglas pers comm). Originally the garage was situated on the west side of the street at 37 Sheep Street close to its junction with Bull Head Lane. The enterprise was a success and Mr Douglas moved first to No 29/31 and then in 1928 the garage was moved across the road to No 50 where it occupied a single tenement. This was the garage address in Mark's Northampton Directory of 1928, page 426 and 1929, page 470 (the later edition as 50a Sheep Street). At the same time Mr Douglas rented the adjacent property No 52, also known as Lococks Hill, as the family home. In 1930 the company became distributors for Standard Cars, a relationship that was to last over 40 years, latterly with its successor Triumph.

The 1925 Ordnance Survey map shows land use prior to establishment of the garage at No 50 and suggests that this tenement was narrow with a building forming a continuous frontage with adjoining properties, a situation which was unchanged from the first edition map of 1885. It is uncertain what modifications were made to the existing structures to accommodate the garage. However, it is likely that access was made to the rear of the property and that of No 52, to allow storage of cars. An advert in Whipple's Directory 1936, 22, proudly proclaims that the garage was the largest in the South Midlands with accommodation for 150 cars. The series of small buildings and yards attached to No 52 may have been built at this time to provide a reception and office for the burgeoning company.

In 1937 two further tenements were brought (Numbers 46 and 48), allowing for the enlargement of the premises.

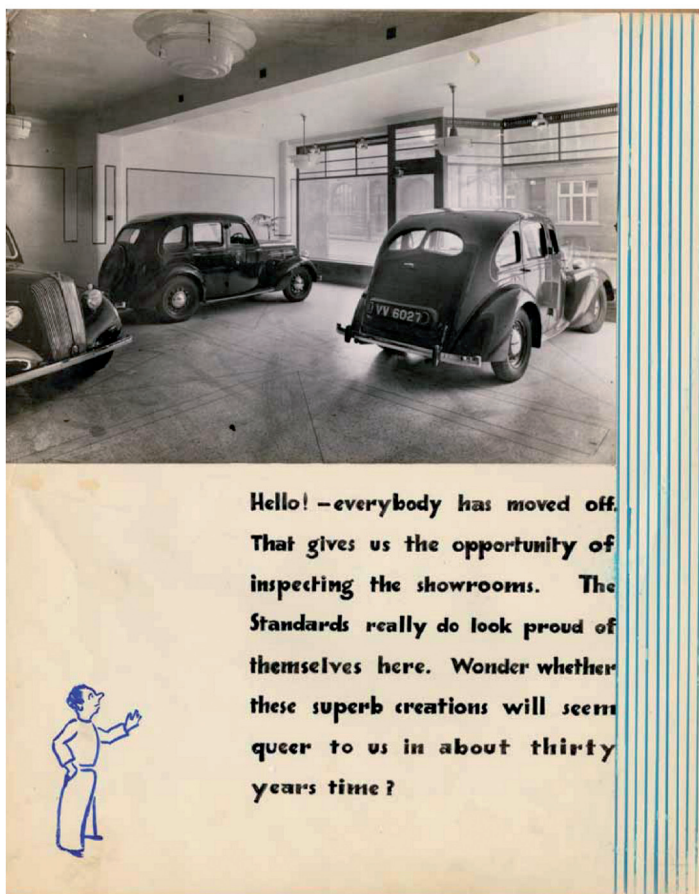


Fig 3 A page from the booklet celebrating the opening of the garage in 1937 (family collection)

The old buildings were pulled down and the present garage was constructed. The success of the company is clearly apparent in the size and embellishment of the new showrooms and living quarters above. The architect was Frank Cole of Long Buckby who was clearly aware of the contemporary fashions in architecture and how to apply the principles to commercial buildings.

The 1938 edition Ordnance Survey Map shows the transformation in the fortunes of the garage since the full extent of the property was built over, comprising the garage and covered yards for car storage and maintenance. The entry in Kelly's Dictionary of 1952 gives the address as 46-50 Sheep Street. In addition to the principal business of selling and repairing cars, the garage also sold petrol to the public from pumps adjacent to the street, until new safety regulations prevented the continuation of this practice. Subsequently, a petrol pump was kept for garage use only.

During the Second World War the showrooms and workshops to the rear were used by the Ministry of Supply for storage (Mr J E Douglas pers comm). The garage continued in business and occupied the series of small buildings to the north of the entranceway, which had been retained from the earlier premises. The garage was mostly involved in servicing vehicles for the RAF.

The property was sold in 1997 and was taken over by the Swan Motor Company, and was only finally closed for business shortly before demolition in 2004.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, J, 2006 The Archaeology of 46-50 Sheep Street, Northampton, *Northamptonshire Archaeol*, **34**, 103-138
 Soden, I, 2001 *Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment of a site at 46-50 Sheep Street, Northampton*, Northamptonshire Archaeology report



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