

**BISHOP BLACKALL SCHOOL,
PENNSYLVANIA ROAD, EXETER
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY**

**Prepared for
Morgan Sindall (Construction) Ltd**

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Exeter Archaeology

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of historic building recording undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) in December 2010 and January 2011 of the former Bishop Blackall School in Pennsylvania Road, Exeter (SX 92375 93386). The investigation was commissioned by the design and build contractor, Morgan Sindall (Construction) Ltd, and was required under condition 11 attached to the grant of planning permission (Exeter City Council, no. 10/0631/03) for the conversion of the former educational establishment into student accommodation. Guidance on the required work was provided by the Exeter City Council Archaeology Officer in an e-mail dated 26 August 2010.

Although not on the statutory national List, the former school building is identified as a “Building of Local Importance” in the Local Plan (Exeter City Council, 2005a, 100-104), and as making a positive contribution to the character of the Longbrook Conservation Area (Exeter City Council, 2005b, Plan 3).

2. AIMS

The principal aim of the project was to make a record of the pre-1939 fabric of the building prior to its conversion. A second aim was to recover information on the history and development of the site through observing and recording any remains found during any groundworks, should these be required. The latter was to be targeted on the front of the site adjacent to Pennsylvania Road, a Roman road leading out from the military fortress and later city.

3. METHOD

The fieldwork was undertaken in line with a *Written Scheme of Archaeological Work* (Passmore 2010), which was formulated in response to the guidance provided by the Exeter City Council Archaeology Officer and was formally approved by the local planning authority under the planning condition. There were three elements to the project: a rapid appraisal of published and documentary sources, historic building recording, and a watching brief.

3.1 *Historic appraisal*

The following sources were consulted:

- 1:500 scale ordnance Survey maps held by EA;
- Richard Parker’s 2004 article in the Devon Buildings Group *Newsletter* 22;
- The *Design and Access Statement* produced by Wilmore Iles Architects; and
- Copies of the original and later architect’s plans held at the Building Control department of Exeter City Council.

3.2 *Historic building recording*

The historic building recording was undertaken prior to works commencing. However, before this took place (and before the contractor took over the building) parts of the building had already been stripped of historic features including fireplaces, paneling and wall coverings, and ceilings (although removal of the latter had exposed the roof structures). The following method was employed:

- Inspection of internal rooms and spaces of the pre-1939 building, including thorough annotation of locations of surviving historic fabric and features on to copies of the architect’s as existing floor plans.

- Photography, using black and white print film and a colour digital camera, of the best and most representative examples of surviving historic fabric and fittings from the pre-1939 building. The record also includes quality photos of historic spaces, such as of the first floor hall and typical school rooms and the main stairs, as well as the external elevations. The photographs were indexed and cross referenced to the site plans.
- A basic written description outlining the development of the building and key historical features from each period, supplementing the annotated architect's plans.

3.3 *Watching brief*

No major groundworks were undertaken at the front of the site and recording was limited to the monitoring of a test pit adjacent to the front wall of the building. In addition, a visit was made to prepare a photographic record of a chimney that was to be removed as part of the conversion.

4. THE SCHOOL AND ITS DEVELOPMENT (Figs 2-10; Photos 1-12)

4.1 *Episcopal Middle School For Girls 1888* (Figs 2-5; photos 1-8)

The management committee for the school was established in 1876 using funds from the Episcopal Charity Schools founded by Bishop Blackall in 1709. The school opened in 1876 in the Old Post Office buildings in Queen Street. Designs for the new building on Pennsylvania Road were prepared in 1884 and the foundation stone was laid on 4 October 1888 (Parker 2004, 32, 35).

The building was designed by James Jerman in a Flemish renaissance style with a front elevation articulated by brick pilasters with swagged Ionic capitals framing pairs of tall windows. The main doorway has a freestone surround surmounted by a cartouche and, prior to a fire in 1979 the front was surmounted by an ornate gable containing a coat of arms under an open pediment. The building was constructed using orange-red brick with Portland stone dressings, using a cavity wall technique with two skins of brick. The site slopes down to the south and the wooden floors are suspended on brick sleeper walls. The first floor of the north east and south east wings is also lit by arched dormers and was, until the 1979 fire, ventilated by a spiky cupola (*ibid.*, 35).

This original building was two storied and in plan comprised a range fronting Pennsylvania Road (the north east and south east wings) with a rear corridor leading to two further ranges – the west and north west wings (Figs 2-3). The school catered for infants and well as older children, and on the ground floor separate classrooms and cloak rooms were provided for each. The presence of a vestibule marked on the architect's plan probably indicates that the infants also had their own entrance from the west side of the building. On this floor there was also a head mistresses' room. The first floor was dominated by the 'school room' or hall in the south east and north east wings, which also functioned as a 'galley' (kitchen) and a dining room. In the rear ranges was a further classroom, further toilets and caretaker's and Assistant Mistresses' rooms.

Below the north west wing was a basement containing a boiler room with coal stores (Fig. 4-5). The building retains much of its original encaustic tiled floor (although in some rooms this is hidden by later floor coverings), as well as a grand tiled staircase to the first floor complete with iron balusters. The principal rooms were heated by fireplaces with stacks passing through both storeys. An original 19th-century chimney on the north west wing was to be

reduced in height owing to cracks that had developed in the stone capping. This was recorded prior to removal and its description (below) is typical of the 1880 chimneys.

The substantial brick structure had two open flues with a possible blocked, third flue in the centre. The chimney brickwork was constructed using English bond with two decorative moulded string courses also in brick. Additional embellishment adorned the elevation in the form of twisted rope-style string courses set within a slightly recessed panel. On the contemporaneous west wing much of the decorative work was placed on the more visible south-western elevations. The moulded Portland stone capping was topped with upstanding vertical plates that separated each flue. These rectangular plates had mouldings on the upper corners and were apparently made from a cast imitation stone that matched the buff-coloured capping.

Later chimney stacks were also constructed of brick but were less ornate with fewer twisted rope-style string courses and without the vertical plates above the capping. Ceramic chimney pots adorn the capping.

In 1905 it was noted that the space at the school was at a premium with the hall being divided into three classrooms by curtains, and classes being taught in the corridors and headmistress' room (*ibid.*, 35). It should be noted, however, that the hall and dining room were partially divided by a wall (Fig. 3), and use of the dining room for teaching could have easily been achieved from the outset.

4.2 *The Middle School extension of 1908* (Fig. 6; Photo. 9)

The first extension to the school was added to the west wing in 1908. This addition – a science wing – was also designed by James Jerman and its execution is architecturally very similar to that of Jerman's original building (cf Parker 2004, 41 for a detailed architectural description). The main difference is the use of a red brick with smooth surfaces contrasting with the slightly rougher bricks of the original building.

The proposals were for a 'new laboratory, kitchen, class and other rooms'. The first floor plan (Fig. 6) depicts a laboratory, classroom, balance room, store and toilets. The ground floor plan does not exist, and this area has been substantially altered. However, from the surviving fittings, its plan would have been identical to the first floor. The teaching rooms would have comprised a kitchen, characterised by large fireplaces probably for housing cast-iron ranges, and a smaller classroom, possibly also a kitchen since this also had a wooden floor (although this may actually be an architectural feature of this extension rather than a reflection on the room's function).

The architect's drawing also proposes the conversion of an existing first floor classroom into an art room. In fact the whole of the first floor of this wing was altered (these changes had taken place by 1935 and almost certainly form part of the 1908 extension). The existing classroom, Assistant Mistresses' room and caretaker's room were removed and replaced by a new art room and a smaller room, probably an office (see Fig. 10). The fireplace in the south wall of the classroom was removed and replaced by a fireplace in the newly-erected south wall. The art room was originally entered via a separate corridor to the laboratory. A former external window in this classroom has since been partially reopened.

4.3 *The Middle School extensions of 1908 and 1912* (Fig. 6; Photo. 10)

A further two-storey extension was apparently added in 1912. Unfortunately the architect is unknown and the plans have not been located. This extension was added to the north side of the building (Willmore Iles Architects 2010, 5.7, following Parker 2004, 41), and comprised an art room and classrooms. The north east wing was extended by a bay to the northeast, as was the corridor behind, and the north wing added to the rear. The provenance of the quoted construction date is unknown, and the 1908 plan (Fig. 6) shows the two-storey extension of the north east wing along with the corridor extension. It also shows the north wing in outline probably indicating that it was proposed, but not actually constructed at this date.

On the ground floor three classrooms were provided, whilst on the first floor a new classroom and an art room were created. The latter is characterised by tall windows with dormer windows above, along with internal windows into the adjacent corridor. All rooms were heated by fireplaces, either flush with the walls or angled into the corners of rooms. Further small rooms were created at the north-east end of the corridors, but their original functions are unknown.

In the northwest wing a first floor was added above the rear room and entered from the half landing of the stairs. This originally comprised a single large room, perhaps a classroom or more likely a School Master's or Mistress's office. The room was subsequently divided into two smaller rooms. The date of this room is not known but could well be contemporary with the 1912 extension.

4.4 *Bishop Blackall School extension of 1935* (Figs 7-8; Photos 11-12)

By 1935 the name of the school had been changed to Bishop Blackall, and a further two-storey extension was proposed. This new south wing was added to the south side of the south east wing. The architect's plans show the provision of classrooms and a gymnasium (Figs 7-8). The gymnasium was located on the ground floor separated from the earlier building by changing rooms and showers. The latter retain their original tiled floor and walls and scars of removed fittings. There is also a scar of a lobby into the gymnasium, although this is almost certainly a later feature.

On the first floor four classrooms were provided, separated by a corridor. The rooms were divided by a mixture of solid brick walls and timber framing containing windows overlooking the corridor. The latter have been removed, but scars indicating their original positions survive. The roof was supported on wooden trusses, supplemented by three steel trusses.

The architect's plan of the ground floor (Fig. 7) also shows that by that date – possibly in 1908 or 1912 – the ground floor fireplaces in the north east and south east wings had been replaced by new fireplaces set in the northwest angles of the rooms. These have subsequently been removed.

4.5 *Later history of the school*

The later history of the school is beyond the scope of this work, but in summary, in the later part of the 20th century ownership passed to Exeter College. A new separate music room was constructed to the rear of the site, along with a small addition on the north side of the 1908 extension. Internally, the historic layout of the building was retained, although some facilities were upgraded, and many of the historic floors covered over. After 1971 alterations were

made to the small rooms on the north side of the 1912 extension, and further repairs, mainly to the first floor, were made after the 1979 fire.

5. WATCHING BRIEF

An exploratory test pit was dug at the front of the school against the east-facing wall of the main frontage. The pit measured 1m by 0.70m wide and was dug to a depth of 1.65m. The vertical brickwork of the offset plinth at the base of the wall continued to a depth of *c.* 0.80m below the surface. Rough brick footings commenced from this depth. At 1.37m below surface, the footings flared out from the wall face by *c.* 0.25m, just where natural reddish brown clay arose in the trench section. Above the natural clay was a mixed layer of purplish brown clay with frequent small slate stones and occasional mortar fragments. Above this were a 0.30m thick mid-brown sandy clay, and the modern tarmac surface and make-up (0.15m thick).

6. DISCUSSION

The Episcopal Middle School for Girls on Pennsylvania Road was purpose built in the late 1880s. It is clear, however, that despite the 'Middle School' name provision was made for the education of (younger) infants. The layout of this original building survives remarkably intact, with the main alterations occurring in the west wing and to the fireplaces in the south east and northeast wings. Damage to the roof and other architectural features to the northeast and southeast wings were caused by the 1979 fire. The building remained in educational use until recently, and conversion to student accommodation will maintain this link with education.

In the late 19th century teaching was undertaken in standard classrooms, although it is possible that one room was dedicated to teaching science (the evidence for this may though relate to later use of the room). Staff offices and an assembly hall were also provided. Other ancillary parts of the building such as toilets remained in use until closure.

In the early 20th-century more teaching space was required, and provided with the construction of further classrooms. In addition, dedicated teaching space including science rooms and an art room were also added. These rooms were finished with tiled walls perhaps partially reflecting the art deco architecture of the period, but also the need for hygienic or easily cleanable surfaces. A gymnasium and library were also added, and are characterised by large rooms, as well as a dedicated changing room and showers serving the former room.

No substantial ground works occurred on the Pennsylvania Road frontage, and therefore no observations were made of any buried remains relating to any earlier activity on this site.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project was commissioned by Morgan Sindall (Construction) Ltd and managed by Jason Sharp for Morgan Sindall (Construction) Ltd and Tim Gent for EA. The documentary research was carried out by Pru Manning, the fieldwork undertaken by Andrew Passmore and Gary Young, and the report illustrations prepared by Tony Ives. Thanks are due to Jason Sharp and Steve Booth (Morgan (Sindall) for their enthusiasm for the historic building and for facilitating site access.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Exeter City Council Building Control records:

59/8 Middle School for Girls (1887)

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347/35 Bishop Blackall School for Girls Pennsylvania Exeter Proposed Gymnasium & Classrooms (1935)

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653/71 Conversion of Classroom No. 8 into Craft Area (1971).

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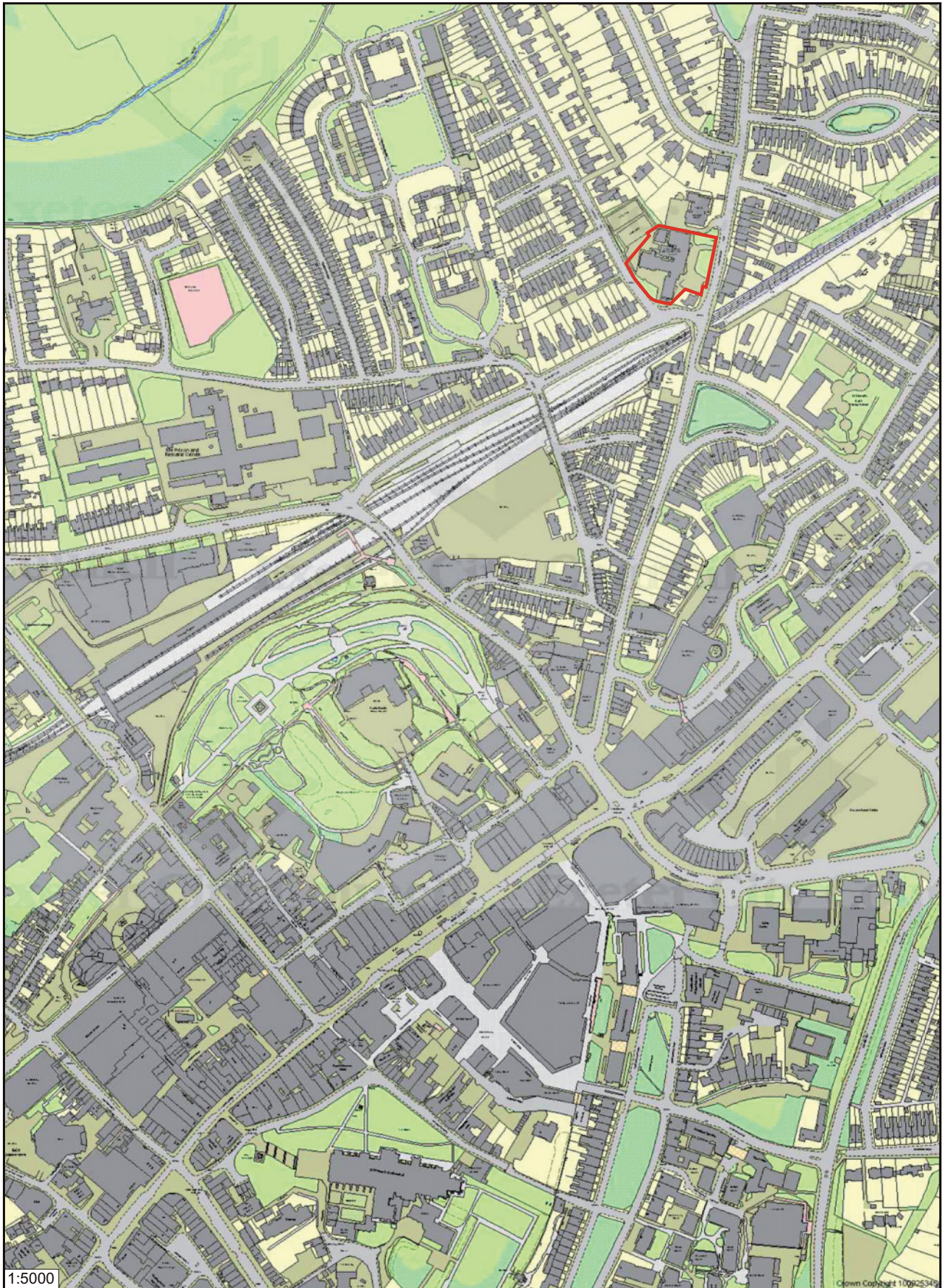


Fig. 1 Location of site.

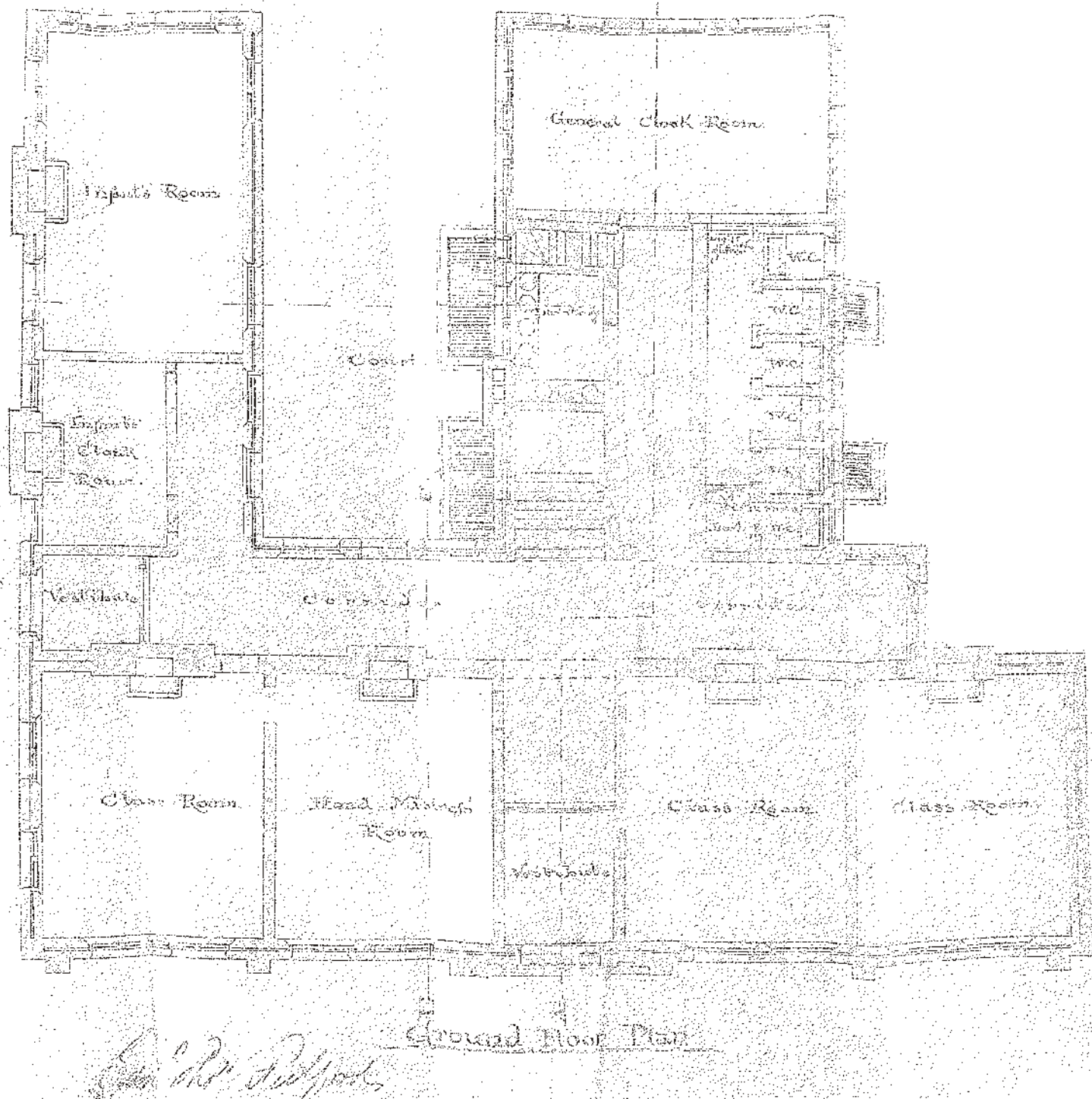
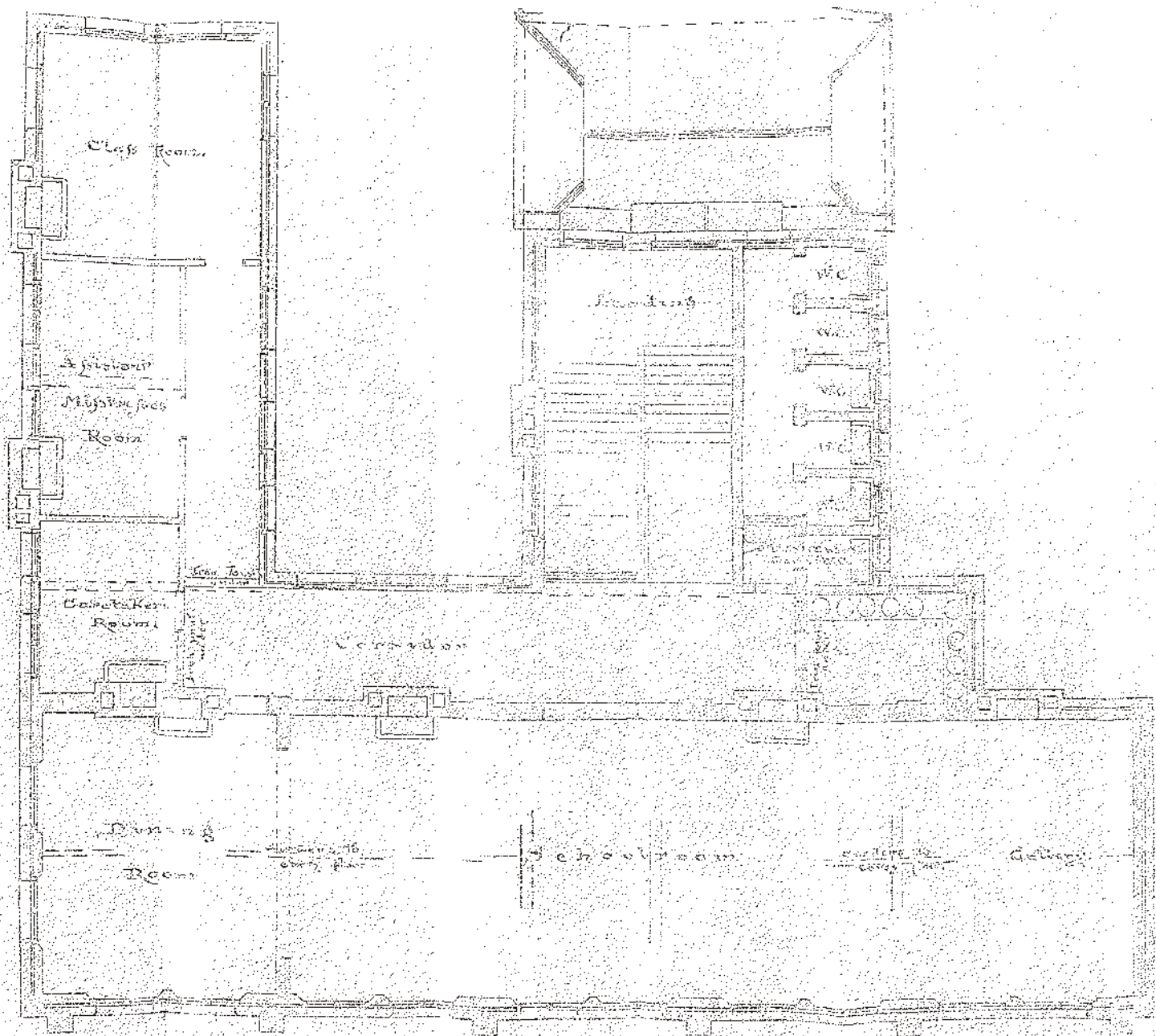


Fig. 2 Ground floor plan of 1887



First Floor Plan.

Edwin R. Murphy

Fig. 3 First floor plan of 1887.

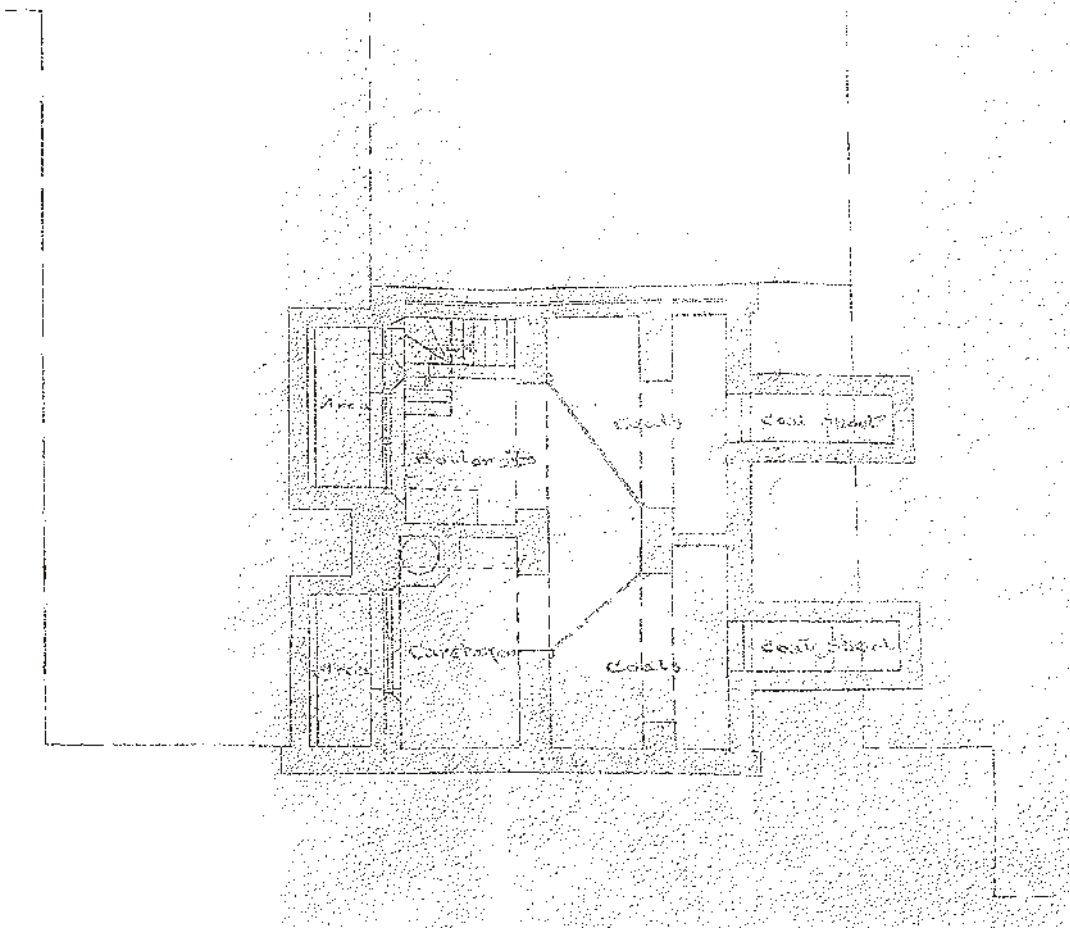
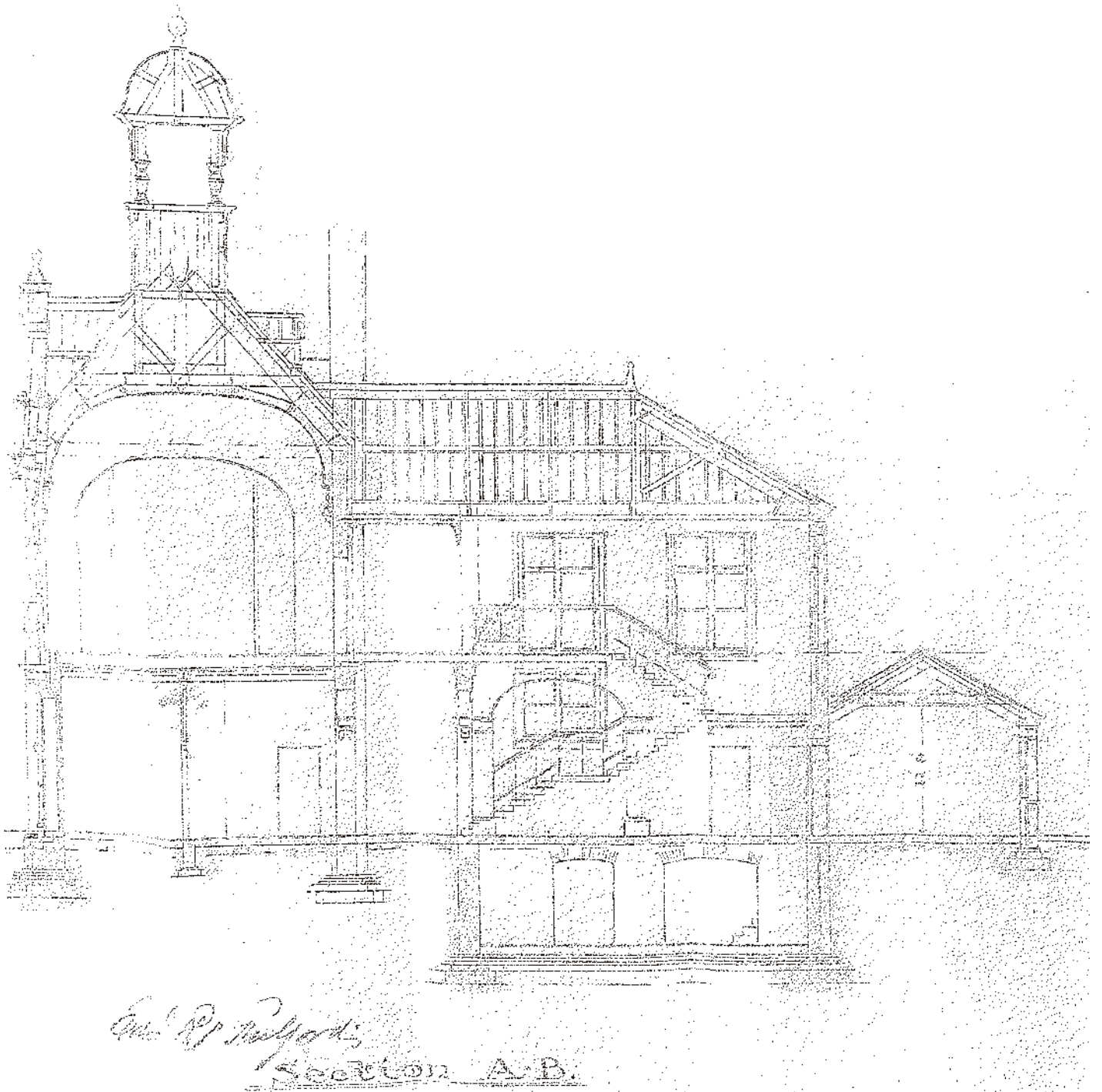


Fig. 4 Basement plan of 1887.



Geo. P. Rulford
SECTION A-B.

Fig. 5 Section through building, 1887.

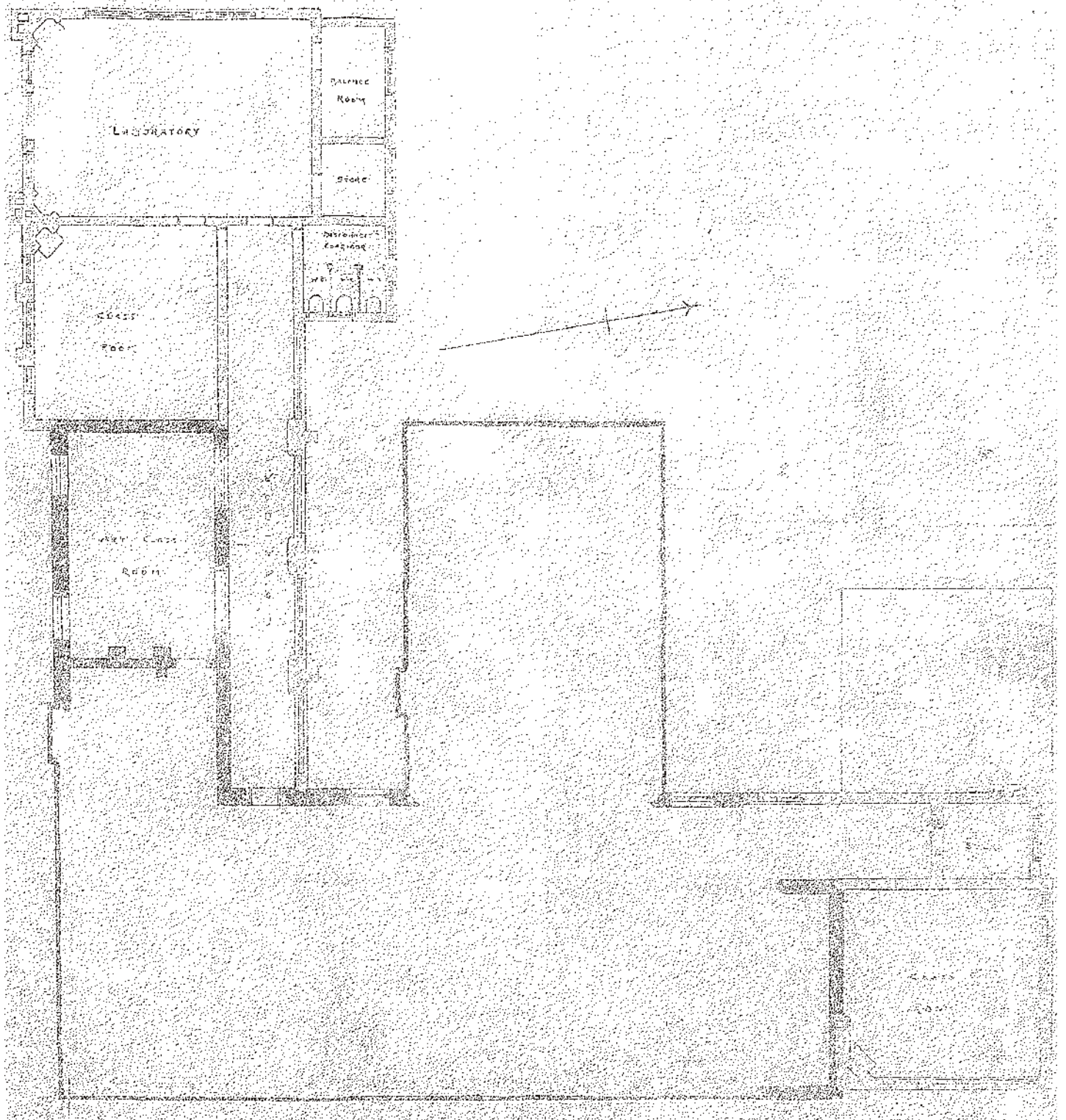


Fig. 6 First floor plan of 1908.

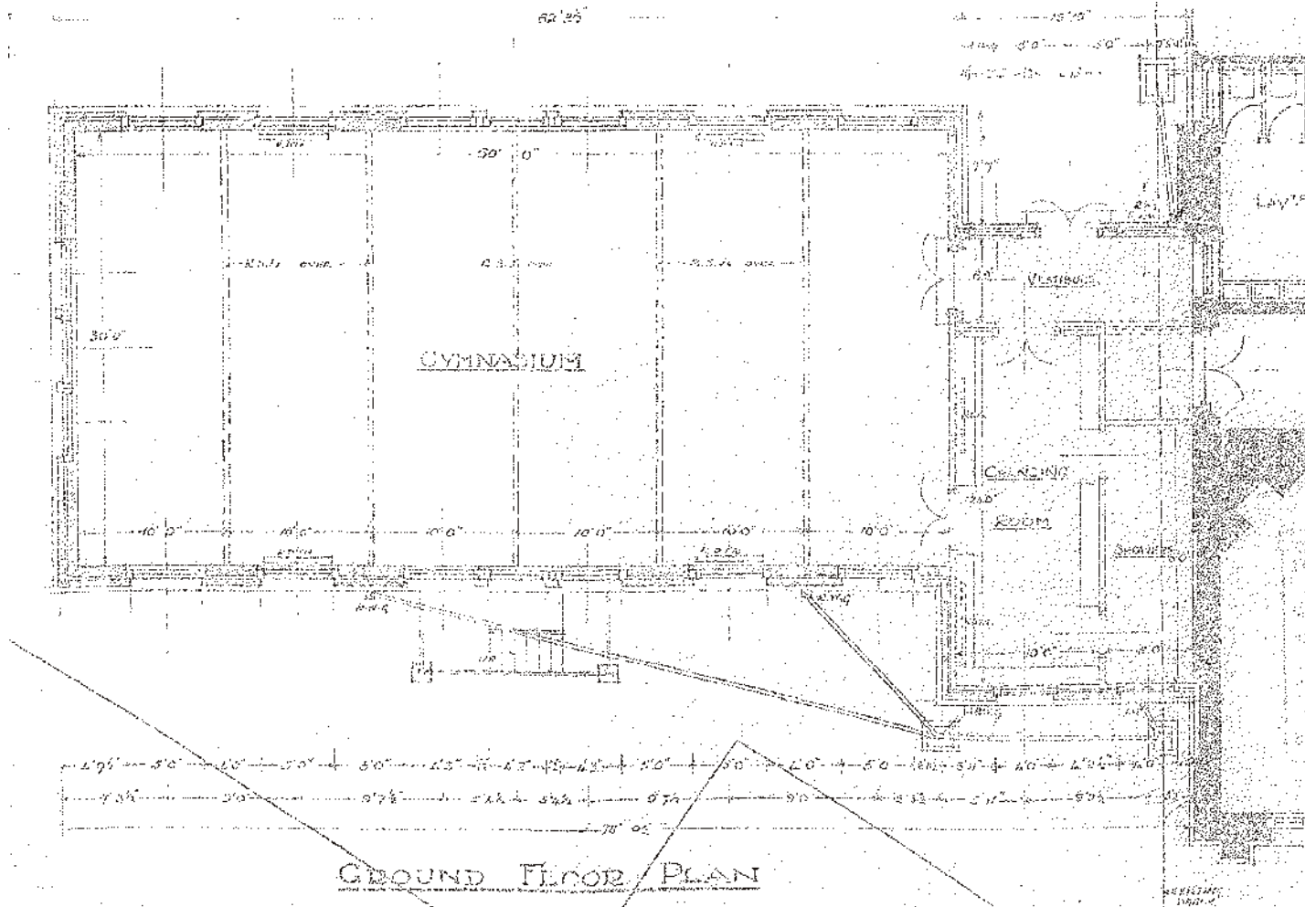


Fig. 7 Ground floor plan of 1935 extension.

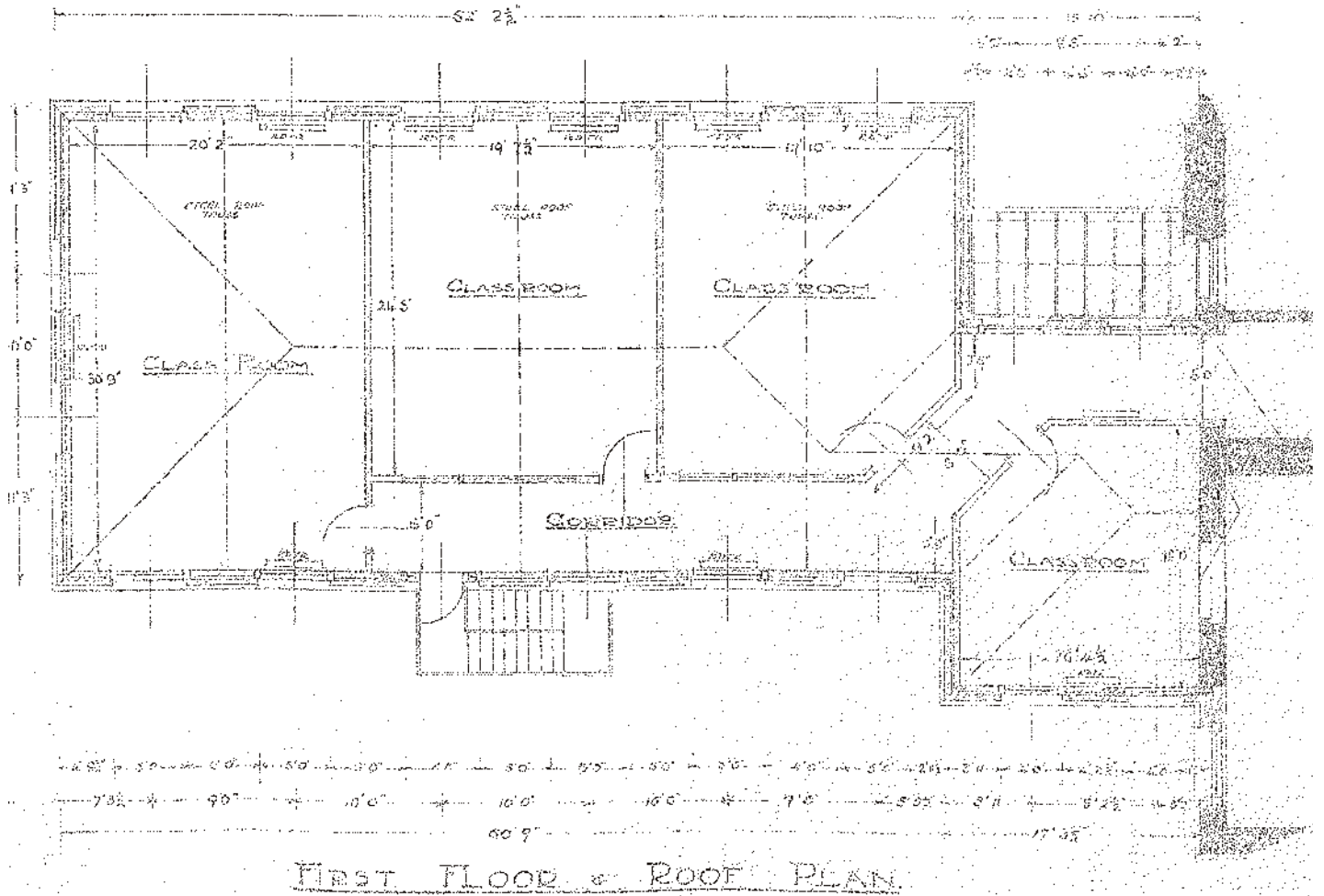


Fig. 8 First floor plan of 1935 extension.

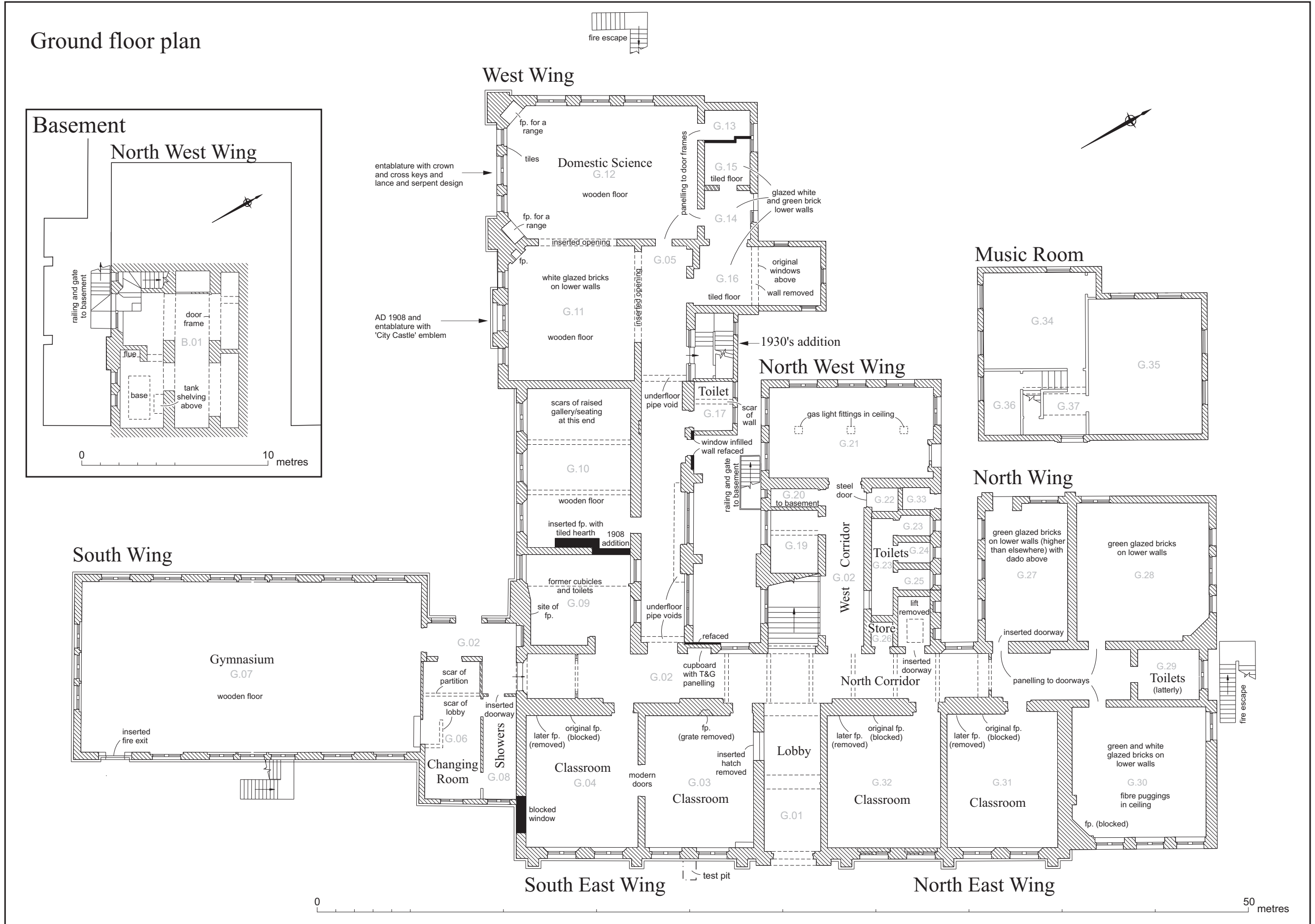
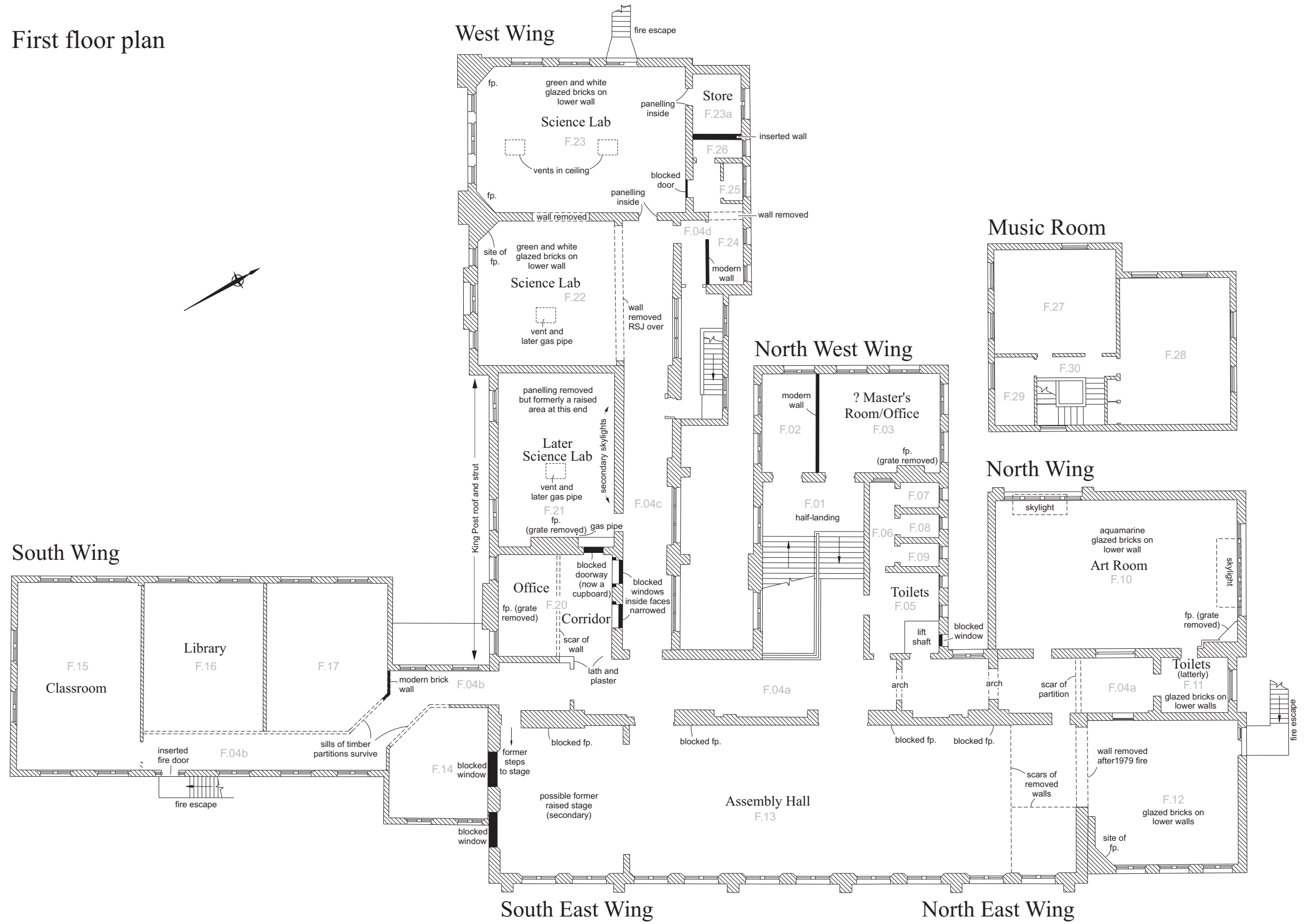


Fig. 9 Ground floor plan of the school.

First floor plan



0 50 metres

Fig. 10 First floor plan of the school.



Fig. 11 Phased plan of the school.



Photo. 1 The north east and south east wings, fronting Pennsylvania Road, looking north west. 1m scale.



Photo. 2 The north west wing, showing the west elevation, looking east. 1m scale.



Photo. 3 A ground floor classroom, showing altered fireplaces, looking west. 1m scale.



Photo. 4 The first floor hall, looking southwest. 1m scale.



Photo. 5 The main staircase, looking south east. 1m scale.



Photo. 6 The basement, showing coal cellar, looking south east. 1m scale.



Photo. 7 Original chimney stacks, looking south.



Photo. 8 Chimney stacks of 1908 and vent above science rooms.



Photo. 9 The 1908 ground floor science rooms, showing fireplaces and tiled walls, looking west. 1m scale.



Photo. 10 The art room of 1908/1912, looking north. 1m scale.



Photo. 11 The changing room and showers in the 1935 extension, looking east. 1m scale.



Photo. 11 The first floor of the 1935 extension, showing blocked window in the original school building, looking north east. 1m scale.