

**THE VALLEY SCHOOL
STEVENAGE
HERTFORDSHIRE**

HISTORIC BUILDING ASSESSMENT

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All photographs by Albion Archaeology

Preface

Every effort has been made in the preparation of this document to provide as complete a report as possible, within the terms of the specification. All statements and opinions in this document are offered in good faith. Albion Archaeology cannot accept responsibility for errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by a third party, or for any loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in this document.

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Structure of this report

This report presents the results of an historic building assessment of The Valley School. After an introductory section and sufficient historical background to place the building in context, the results of the assessment are described. A selection of photographs and plans are included to illustrate the text. A synthesis of the results and the conclusions of the assessment are presented. Section 4 contains recommendations for further work.

Plans are based on photographic copies of original architectural drawings and site plans provided by Hertfordshire County Council's Terrier Department.

Non-Technical Summary

Vincent and Gorbing are gathering baseline information on several schools involved in the Hertfordshire Building Schools for the Future programme. Under the BSF plans The Valley School will give up its existing campus and move to a new purpose-built site co-located with the Marriots School in its expanded grounds.

As part of this programme, Albion Archaeology produced a desk-based assessment (2008) which identified the need for an assessment of the buildings at The Valley School. Albion carried out this assessment in January 2009 and this report describes the results. Its purpose is to characterise the nature, condition and development of the standing buildings and architectural setting of The Valley School and its campus. It also advises on the most suitable techniques to record the buildings and their setting prior to the re-development of the site.

The Valley School was built between 1966 and 1968 part of the large-scale post-war school building programme that had led to the development of pioneering techniques of prefabricated construction, in which Hertfordshire County Council had played a leading role.

An inspection of the school and an examination of the original architectural plans has shown that the school has not changed considerably over time. In terms of external form, function and layout of the buildings it is still very much as it was designed 50 years ago. Internally, apart from the necessary upgrades and modernisations of school furniture and equipment many of the original fixtures and fittings have remained in place.

The school is a good, but standard, example of the 2'8" Hertfordshire prefabricated construction system that was prevalent in the county from circa 1962 onwards. It is also part of a generic group of buildings that played an important part in the evolution of school construction with the combination of the architectural form of a school building with ideas prevalent in educational theory and town planning.

The report recommends that the school buildings and their architectural landscape settings should be recorded to English Heritage Level 3 standard prior to demolition.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Planning Background*

Building Schools for the Future (BSF) is a large government initiative to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in England within the next decade. Funding for this programme will be introduced in a number of phases. Within Hertfordshire the total number of secondary schools, secondary deemed middle schools and all-age special schools have been split into seven groups. Stevenage, which incorporates seven secondary schools and three special schools, has been chosen as the first area in Hertfordshire to implement the BSF programme.

Vincent and Gorbing are gathering baseline information on several schools involved in the Hertfordshire Building Schools for the Future programme. The importance of school buildings has recently been highlighted by an English Heritage policy paper (English Heritage 2005) which urges the consideration of schools of historical and architectural significance as part of the planning process.

Under the BSF plans The Valley School will give up its existing campus and move to a new site co-located with the main Barnwell School in its expanded grounds. The extant buildings at The Valley School are earmarked for complete demolition and the area of the campus will be developed for housing.

As part of this programme, Albion Archaeology produced a desk-based assessment (2008) which identified the need for an assessment of the buildings at The Valley School. Albion Archaeology carried out this assessment in January 2009 and this report outlines the results. The purpose of the assessment is to characterise the nature, condition and development of the standing buildings and architectural setting of The Valley School and its campus. It also advises on the most suitable techniques to record the buildings and their setting prior to the re-development of the site.

1.2 *Site Location and Description*

The Valley School campus is located in the Shephall Neighbourhood, one of the initial six units of the New Town of Stevenage (Figure 1). It is c. 2.23ha in size and centred on (NGR) TL 2478 2283.

1.3 *Aims and Objectives*

The purpose of the work was to provide an assessment of the significance of the buildings and to recommend an appropriate level of pre-demolition mitigation. In order to achieve this, the following objectives were set:

- Understand the historical context and development of the building through rapid overview of documentary sources
- Describe the structure and development of the buildings through a walk-over survey
- Provide illustrative material for the report in the form of low-level jpeg format photographs.
- Produce a suitably illustrated report to describe the results of the work.

Note: the digital photographs taken as part of this survey are for illustrative purposes and do not represent a full archival quality photographic survey.

2. ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 *Post-war school building and “The Hertfordshire System”*

In 1944 the Education Act (Butler Act) increased the school leaving age to 15 and gave force to pre-war policy guidelines which had not only set out the separation of primary and secondary education, but also the sub-division of secondary education into grammar, technical and modern schools. This, together with the rising influx of population moving from London out into the neighbouring counties and predominantly into Hertfordshire, put pressure on the authorities to provide increased educational facilities.

Hertfordshire County Council became one of the first counties to come under the chief education officer, John Newsom, and had its own County Architectural Department by 1946. The team responsible for building primary schools in Hertfordshire throughout the 1950s also included a number of people who went on to become influential figures in the ‘new school building movement’ (e.g. Bruce Martin, Mary Cowley, David Medd).

In order to combine the vision of the new educationalists with the need to provide a structural system with great flexibility, and on an economical scale adaptable to the post-war shortage of labour and raw materials, Hertfordshire took the pioneering decision to adopt a “Meccano” style system of prefabricated parts which could be constructed in factories and assembled on site (Aslin 1949). This consisted of a light steel frame based on a standard module to which other structural elements such as walls, doors and windows were merely bolted on.

The advantages of this approach were that it was flexible and allowed the informal approach to the planning of new schools that was so favoured by the new educationalists.

The first system of prefabricated parts consisted of a steel frame, set out on an 8’3” grid, and became known as the “Hertfordshire System”. Initially devised for primary schools the use of the system was soon expanded to include colleges, police stations and municipal buildings. To allow the greater flexibility in design that was needed for the requirements of many secondary schools, a 3’4” grid system was developed in 1951 and was further adapted to an even more flexible 2’8” grid. From 1962 onwards the 2’8” grid was used almost exclusively in school buildings in Hertfordshire (Educational Facilities Laboratories Inc. 1963).

In 1963 Hertfordshire joined with Kent and Essex to form the South-Eastern Architects’ Collaboration (SEAC). The Hertfordshire Systems, in amended form, continued to form the basis for subsequent school construction but a terminology of various “Marks” of SEAC was now being used, rather than the previous grid system (Saint 1987). Thus after 1965 the HCC Terrier Department lists all schools as being built using a MK. 2, 2A or 3 brick or steel type construction.

2.2 School Building in Stevenage

The small town of Stevenage, with its medieval core and small-scale Georgian and Victorian development, was designated as the site of the first New Town to be created after the Second World War. The New Towns were part of a vision to create a series of satellite towns around London that were able to house London's increasing and overflowing population. It was first developed by Patrick Abercrombie in 1944 and the New Town Committee was formed in 1945 (Thomson 2005).

The Stevenage Development Corporation was formed in 1946 and the first Master Plan setting out the design of the New Town was formulated in 1949. This envisaged six neighbourhoods or 'units', which were based on existing hamlets, and a new pedestrianised town centre. Each neighbourhood was to have its own focal point, public amenities and facilities such as churches, primary schools and community centres.

The Master Plan began to be implemented immediately but due to the exponential population growth of Stevenage it was revised first in 1955 and several times thereafter until 1978 in order to accommodate further residential and employment areas, roads, educational facilities and other much needed services (*ibid* 2005).

Schools were a much needed part of the development of Stevenage and the building programme benefited from the progressive vision implemented by Hertfordshire County Council's Educational and Architecture Departments and the Stevenage Development Corporation.

The "Hertfordshire System" and successive prefabricated building systems are clearly in evidence in the school buildings of Stevenage's secondary schools. Barclay, the first school to be built in Stevenage in the post-war era was initially conceived as part of a non-standard design but the plans were altered and adapted to the 8'3" Hertfordshire System before construction began in 1947 (Miller 2008). Heathcote, another early school, built between 1953 and 1955 also conforms to the 8'3" system while the Nobel School is a late example of that grid. From 1962 onwards most schools were built almost exclusively using the more adaptable 2'8" grid (School Planning Laboratory 1962).

2.3 The Valley School

The Valley School was originally named "Fairlands 3 FE" and built as a comprehensive school. It was part of Hertfordshire County Council's 1965 secondary schools programme and is first marked on the 1966 Stevenage Master Plan. The school was designed by Alex Gordon & Partners and built between 1966 and 1968. It is one of three special schools within Stevenage and caters for pupils aged 11-16 with moderate learning difficulties.

The original plans of the school shows it to be a dense cluster of buildings centred around a large assembly hall, covered courtyard and dining area (Figure 2). A free-standing sixth form block and a swimming pool are situated to the north and north-east of the school (Figure 3). By 1970 the school had been renamed "Stevenage School for Girls" and, in 1991, it became The Valley Special School.

A plan of 1990 shows that the buildings at the back of the school and fronting onto the playing fields were occupied by the Education Advisory Service. At the time of inspection these buildings now housed the North Hertfordshire Youth Offending Team. The Valley School also shares its site with the Stevenage Music Centre, which is located in a pavilion between the main school building and the former 6th form block.

3. ASSESSMENT

3.1 Methodology

Throughout the IFA *Standard and Guidance for the Archaeological Investigation and Recording of Standing Buildings and Structures* and English Heritage's *Understanding Historic Buildings* (2006) have been used for guidance. All work has been done in accordance with the IFA Code of Conduct.

The site survey comprised an examination of the buildings and a low-level photographic survey. A selection of the photographs and reproductions of one of the original architectural plans have been reproduced to illustrate the text.

3.2 General Description of Site and Buildings

The Valley School was built between 1966 and 1968 using the Hertfordshire 2'8" System that was in common use at the time. The school consists of a dense cluster of buildings, centred around an assembly hall, dining area and covered courtyard. The buildings interconnect, with short, glazed walkways leading from one block into the other. A free-standing 6th form block, swimming pool and pavilion are situated to the north and north-east of the school.

Small, planted courtyards exist between the building clusters, however, the main outdoor recreational areas, apart from the school playing fields, consist of a tarmac playground and tennis courts to the north of the school.

The teaching blocks are of a two storey construction, with the exception of a single-storey longitudinal block that runs along the access road to the school and houses the main entrance. All buildings are constructed using a lightweight steel frame with a façade of large windows and green painted steel panels. The ground floor windows are lined with a reflective foil. A horizontal band of wooden panelling divides the floors and is repeated as a fascia at the top of each building along the flat roof line. All buildings are sitting on a low plinth of dark brown brick.

The gymnasium is the only building of the school that is almost entirely built of brick, utilising the same dark brown brick that appears in the plinth. Thin vertical windows joined by steel panelling break up the brick façade and are providing natural light to the interior of the building.

A low, one storey pavilion is situated between the former 6th form block (now Music Centre) and the main school. This mirrors the design of the gymnasium and is similarly built of dark brown brick. It has a band of continuous glazing running below the wooden roof fascia, and in places its brick façade is further broken up by large window openings and glazed double doors.

The interior of the school displays many of the original fixtures and fittings. Most of the original doors, windows and internal partitions are still in place. Of particular note is the serving hatch in the dining area that still sports its original

shutter. An internal view of one of the school corridors also shows one of the freestanding steel columns, indicative of the Hertfordshire 2'8" system (Figure 5)

The school buildings are located adjacent to a residential area with only a narrow border of trees between the access road and the neighbouring semi-detached houses. The entrance to the school is via the dual carriageway Broadhall Way, but the exit leads straight into the residential area. The entrance of the school also faces the residential section. This ties the school well to the surrounding community.

The playing fields are situated at the back of the school. Here, the ground is landscaped so the school buildings are elevated on a low bank of earth at the edge of the playing fields. Approaching via the dual carriageway from the west, the school is a noticeable feature in the landscape, proudly displaying its steel and glass panelled façade (Figure 4).

3.3 Development and Phasing

The earliest drawing of the school, a three-dimensional sketch dating to 1965, shows the main cluster of buildings consisting of gymnasium, assembly hall and the teaching blocks (Figure 2). The freestanding 6th form building, swimming pool and pavilion must have been added to the design soon after as they are marked on the original architects' plans dating to 1967 (Figure 3).

A "possible site for future extension" to the north of the 6th form block is also marked on the 1967 plan. This extension was never realised as the form and layout of the school today is very much as it was at the completion of building works in 1968.

The original plans clearly show the internal layout of the building with the provision of classrooms and a multitude of specialised teaching areas, utilised for example for art and pottery, housecraft and advanced biology with dilution chambers and specialised laboratories.

When the building was taken over by the Stevenage School for Girls new subjects were being taught and the classrooms were now utilised for graphic design, product design and print making, and a food and fabric studio was also installed. While this may have led to an alteration in some of the equipment and certainly an update in furniture, most of the interior fixtures and fittings of the building itself remained unaltered.

Similar alterations may have taken place when the Education Advisory Service and later the North Hertfordshire Youth Offending Team moved into the western teaching blocks of the school. The interior of this part of the school was not inspected at the time.

Externally, most of the look and feel of the school has remained unaltered since its construction. Only in isolated areas some of the doors and windows were replaced with PVC components.

3.4 Form and Design

The Valley School was built between 1966 and 1968 and represents a late example of the 2'8" prefabricated construction system. It was built at a time when a gradual shift to the SEAC Mark 2 steel frame construction system was taking place.

Looking at the school buildings as they stand today, the components of the Hertfordshire System are very apparent in its steel frame, extensive glazing and the layout and patterning of the external facades. Only in isolated places have some of the original metal window and door frames been replaced by PVC components. This does not greatly affect the visual impact of the school.

The form and layout of the school have remained largely unaltered since its construction between 1966 and 1968. One of the main changes in function of the school have been the occupation of the former western teaching blocks by the Education Advisory Service and now the North Hertfordshire Youth Offending Team, which provides essential services for the school pupils as well as the wider community.

Centred around a dining and assembly area, gymnasium and courtyard, the layout of the school reflects the tradition of integrating a school's architecture with ideas of educational theory and pedagogy that had been developed from the 1920s onwards.

These ideas emphasised the importance of the architectural space in the creation of open, progressive and creative learning environments and also used the design and layout of schools, with a relaxed grouping of classrooms, the provision of community spaces and shared halls, to foster a community-based approach to learning (Smith 1997). Some of these approaches were developed by Henry Morris and first expressed architecturally in the design of the Cambridge Village Colleges, such as Impington College (Walter Gropius and Maxwell Fry).

The increasing emphasis on secondary schooling from the Butler Act (1944) onwards also sought to provide specialist classrooms for the new subjects like engineering, crafts and home economics. All of these ideas are reflected in the original design, layout and provisions of The Valley School.

The very compact layout of The Valley School, with short circulatory patterns for pupils around the teaching and communal areas, can further be attributed to the cost-cutting exercises that were introduced in the early 1950s and sought to reduce the size of school buildings as a way to reduce costs. It was calculated at the time that a reduction in floor space, mainly achieved by reducing the space solely used for circulation rather than a reduction in teaching space, would be the most effective way of doing so (Bullock, no date).

It is of note that The Valley School seems to have remained close to its original shape and form and has not changed considerably over time. Its generic quality in terms of the architectural expression of the design features of the 2'8" Hertfordshire System as well as educational and structural planning ideas at the

time make it a good but standard example of a Hertfordshire School of the late 1960s.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that The Valley School should be recorded to the standard of an English Heritage Level 3 survey (EH 2006). This survey should largely comprise a photographic survey of its exterior as well as interior views and a record of its contemporary fixtures and fittings. It is normally recommended that the photographic survey should include larger format black and white photographs in addition to high quality digital images stored in tiff format.

The drawn record should make use of existing plans with the record of elevations and architectural detail largely covered by the photographic survey. The report should include documentary and cartographic research and an analysis of existing archive plans.

The Valley School should also be set in a descriptive context with other contemporary secondary schools in Stevenage as in terms of form, function, use of space and social history it forms very much part of a group of buildings that were part of the post-war educational building programme in Hertfordshire.

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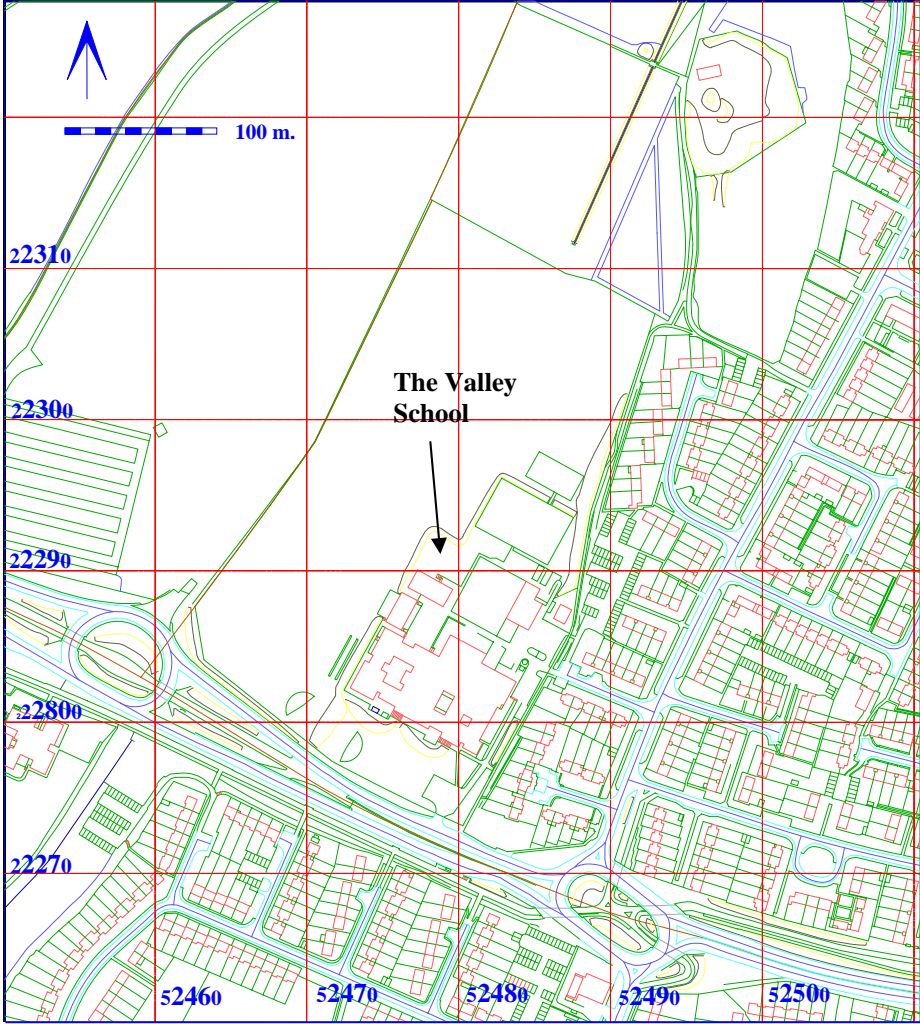
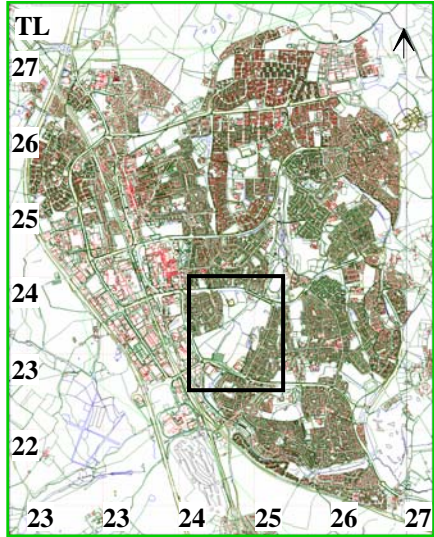
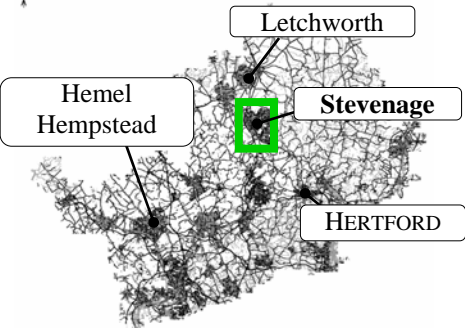


Figure 1: Site location map

Base map reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Land-line Map (2004), with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, by Bedfordshire County Council, County Hall, Bedford. OS

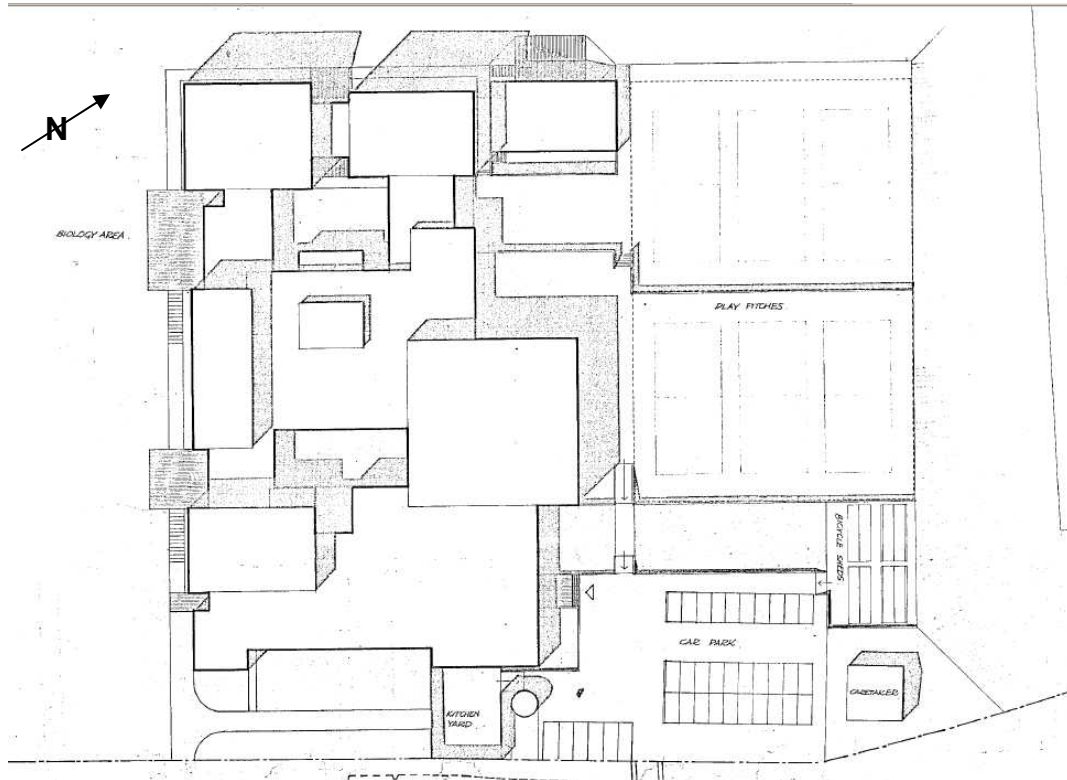


Figure 2: 3D sketch of original school layout (1965). Plan ref. L783.SK50.

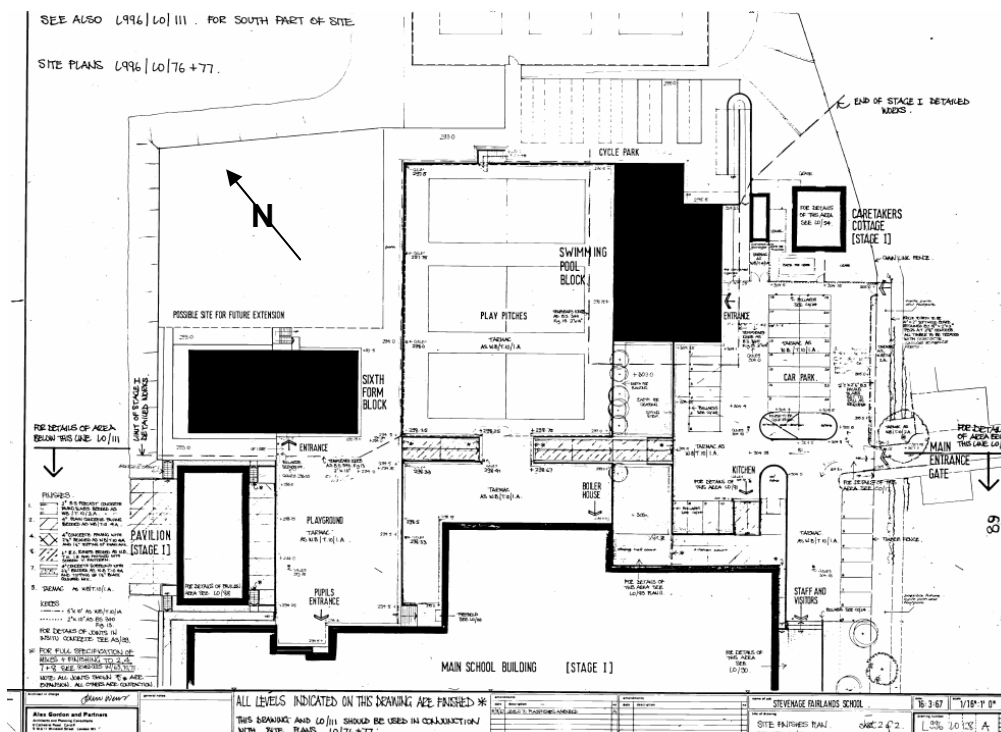


Figure 3: Architect's plan of original school layout (1967), showing 6th form block, swimming pool and pavilion to north of school. Plan ref.: L996.LO.28.A



Figure 4: View of school from the west, across playing fields



Figure 5: School corridor internal fixtures and fittings. Note freestanding column, a feature of the Hertfordshire System's steel frame.