

**LONSDALE SPECIAL 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 Lonsdale Special 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 in Section 4.

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 Lonsdale Special 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. The existing buildings at Lonsdale 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 Lonsdale Special 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 Lonsdale Special 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.

Lonsdale Special School is a purpose-built special school that was built between 1969 and 1971. It was 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.

The school was built using the standard SEAC system of prefabricated construction that was utilised for all school building in Hertfordshire from 1966 onwards. The system was deemed flexible enough for the demands of a special needs school and seems to have served its purpose well over the last few decades. Apart from small scale internal renovation and alterations, the school buildings have changed little since their construction.

The school is a standard example of a SEAC MK2 brick and steel type construction and its interest lies in the utilisation of this system for the purposes of a special needs school.

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.

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As part of this programme, Albion Archaeology produced a desk-based assessment (2008) which identified the need for an assessment of the buildings at Lonsdale Special School. Albion carried out this assessment in January 2009 and this report describes the results. The purpose of the assessment is to characterise the nature, condition and development of the standing buildings and architectural setting of Lonsdale Special 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 Lonsdale Special School campus is located in the Pin Green Neighbourhood, one of the initial six units of the New Town of Stevenage (Figure 1). It is *c.* 2.98ha in size and centred on (NGR) TL 2477 2520.

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 **Lonsdale Special School**

The provision of special schools arose from the 1944 Butler Education Act that guaranteed secondary school education to all. However, it was not until the early 1970s that the responsibility for the education of handicapped children was transferred from hospital schools to state schools which were then the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science (Penton 1974). With this change the provision of the school buildings fell into the remit of the local educational councils.

Lonsdale Special School was designed by B. J. Woodthorpe, project architect for Hertfordshire County Council, and built between 1969 and 1971 using a standard SEAC "MK. 2 Brick/Steel" construction. Its project name was "Stevenage Pin

Green Residential School for Physically Handicapped Children” but it was soon re-named Lonsdale Special School.

Lonsdale Special School is set in open grounds and consists of a teaching and hydrotherapy block adjacent to a cluster of residential units. Although a purpose-built special school, an early decision was made to utilise the standard SEAC system for its construction as it was thought flexible enough to adapt to the requirements of the handicapped pupils (Penton 1974). Apart from small-scale internal renovation and alterations, the school buildings have changed little since their construction.

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

Lonsdale Special School is situated in the Pin Green residential area of Stevenage and shares an area of open grounds with Larwood School and the Pin Green Primary School to the south. Lonsdale Special School consists of two main elements: a teaching block that also houses a therapy pool, main hall, dining area and administrative facilities; and a more multi-faceted residential unit that consists of several self-contained flats, further classrooms and staff and administrative areas (Figure 4).

The teaching and hydrotherapy block consists of a single-storey rectangular building with three central courtyards that provide natural light for the therapy departments, swimming pool and main hall. One of the courtyards is now roofed over (see section 3.3). The main hall, hydrotherapy pool, physiotherapy area and library cluster are in the centre, with classrooms, staff rooms and additional facilities arranged around the perimeter.

The building is constructed using a lightweight steel frame with a façade made up of large windows, lined with reflective adhesive foil, and steel panels. Steel frames are used for the windows and doors. The roof is flat with a continuous wooden fascia.

The main approach to the school is by an access road from the west, leading up to the main frontage of the teaching block. Here, a large free standing canopy marks the main entrance to the school and hydrotherapy pool for pupils and members of the community. A visitor's and administrative entrance is to the left of the main entrance and is signposted "Reception".

The residential blocks are situated to the rear of the school, connected by a short corridor. They consist of several self-contained flats for the pupils, as well as further classrooms and play areas. Visually, the residential blocks differ from the teaching block in that they consist of large sections of yellow brickwork, interspersed with vertical panels that accommodate openings containing metal-framed windows and doors of the same type as the ones used in the main teaching block. The residential blocks are also single storey with a flat roof and the same wooden fascia along the top of the façade as the teaching block.

Apart from access ramps for wheelchairs and a continuous wooden handrail along the corridor walls there is little within the fabric of the building that differentiates it as purpose-built. Utilising the widest door span of 1.0m, available within the SEAC system, was one of the few concessions the designers made for the special purpose of the school (Penton 1974). Sliding doors are also noticeable throughout the building. The lattice style beams, that are a hallmark of the Hertfordshire Systems, are visible in the internal roof space of the assembly hall (Figure 5).

The landscape around the school buildings consists of grassy and planted courtyards and borders. A large play area is provided adjacent to the school in the south. The school grounds are demarcated with low wooden fences.

3.3 Development and Phasing

Architecturally, Lonsdale Special School has remained virtually unchanged over the last three to four decades. The layout and form of the buildings today is still very much as it was on the original architectural plans dating to 1969 (Figures 2 and 3). Design plans dating to 1993 that show a proposed three classroom extension to the north-east of the teaching block and a smaller primary classroom extension to the south-west, never seem to have been realised. It seems that only the new recreation area to the south of the school, also indicated on the 1993 plans, was put in place.

Internally, some changes have taken place to the layout of the building. When the school was built, the Residential Block was purely made up of clusters of self-contained flats. Over time, the area used for residential purposes has become smaller, and some of the hostel units are now teaching spaces, play areas and specialised classrooms. For this purpose some internal walls have been altered and one open space between the flats has been enclosed and turned into a CDT room. PVC frames have replaced many of the original steel window and door frames in the residential quarters.

In the Teaching Block, the easternmost courtyard was roofed over and turned into a library and wheelchair charging bay. Plans showing the design of a new charging bay date from 1995.

With the exception of the modernisation of elements like lighting and specialised equipment, most of the original fixtures and fittings still survive, down to the small detail of labelling plaques on classroom doors.

3.4 Function and Design

Lonsdale Special School was built in the early 1970s as part of Hertfordshire County Council's remit to provide schools for special education within its county wide school building programme.

In terms of architectural form and function, the buildings are a standard example of the SEAC MK2 type construction, employed within Hertfordshire from *circa* 1966 onwards. The steel frame, glass and steel panelled façade and lattice beams of the Main Teaching Block bear all the hallmarks of the Hertfordshire Systems on

which the later SEAC systems were based. The architectural components of this building have remained virtually unchanged since its construction.

The Residential Block, also a standard example of the SEAC brick type construction at the time, is largely built in brick. Some of its original steel framed doors and windows are still in place, but a large number have been replaced by PVC components. Some internal alterations to the layout of the Residential Block have also taken place over time. These mainly consist of the construction of an additional classroom, by filling in the space between two existing building clusters, along with the alteration of some internal walls and doors.

Apart from some modernisation of electric and specialist equipment the internal fixtures and fittings of the buildings have remained unchanged.

The interest of Lonsdale Special School comes from the utilisation of the standard SEAC system of construction for a school catering to specialised needs. Few design guidelines existed in the early 1970s for the construction of special schools and architects often had to draw on previously built examples to inform their own designs (Penton 1974).

In Hertfordshire the decision was made that the standard SEAC system was flexible enough to adapt to the needs of specialist education. One of the concessions made to the special purpose of the school was the utilisation of the widest 1.0m door spans available within the system to facilitate wheelchair access. Another design feature is that the Main Hall, Dining Area and principal access spine of the Teaching Block all open into each other (Figure 5) and provide a space that is particularly suited for wheelchairs and other aids (Penton 1974).

One of the criticisms levelled at the building at the time was that its interior fittings lacked detail. The design of interior fixtures and fittings being of principal importance in the furnishing of special schools as they are a large factor in determining movement and development of children with physical disabilities (Penton 1974). However, for the most part, the design of the building seems to have been well suited to its use as a special school.

Debates on whether to build purpose-built special schools or whether to design integrated special units within standard state schools were ongoing at the time Lonsdale was being built, although there was a general move towards a more integrated approach of special education with the wider community. The siting of Lonsdale Special School within open grounds in a residential area of Stevenage, and adjacent to other schools fits in with this approach. Also the standardised design of the school, which is in most respects similar to other state-built schools, may be a facilitating factor in its integration within its surroundings and acceptance by the wider community (Penton 1974).

Lonsdale Special School is an interesting example of a standard Hertfordshire System (in its later SEAC incarnation) adapted for special educational needs.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Lonsdale Special 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 photographic survey of this type should include larger format black and white photographs and 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.

Lonsdale Special 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. The adaptation of the SEAC architectural form of the school to its special educational needs should be given due consideration.

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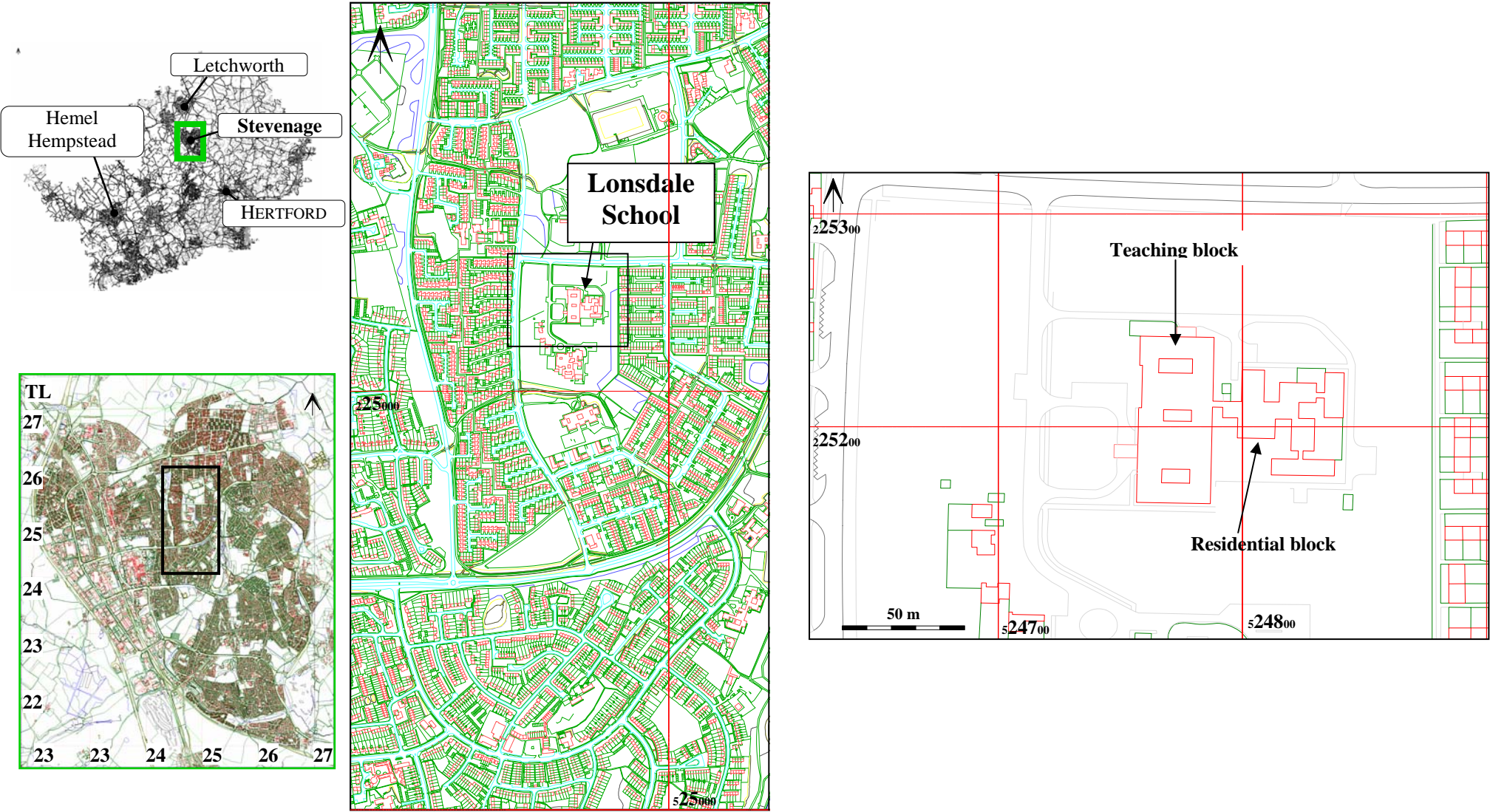


Figure 1: Site location map

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

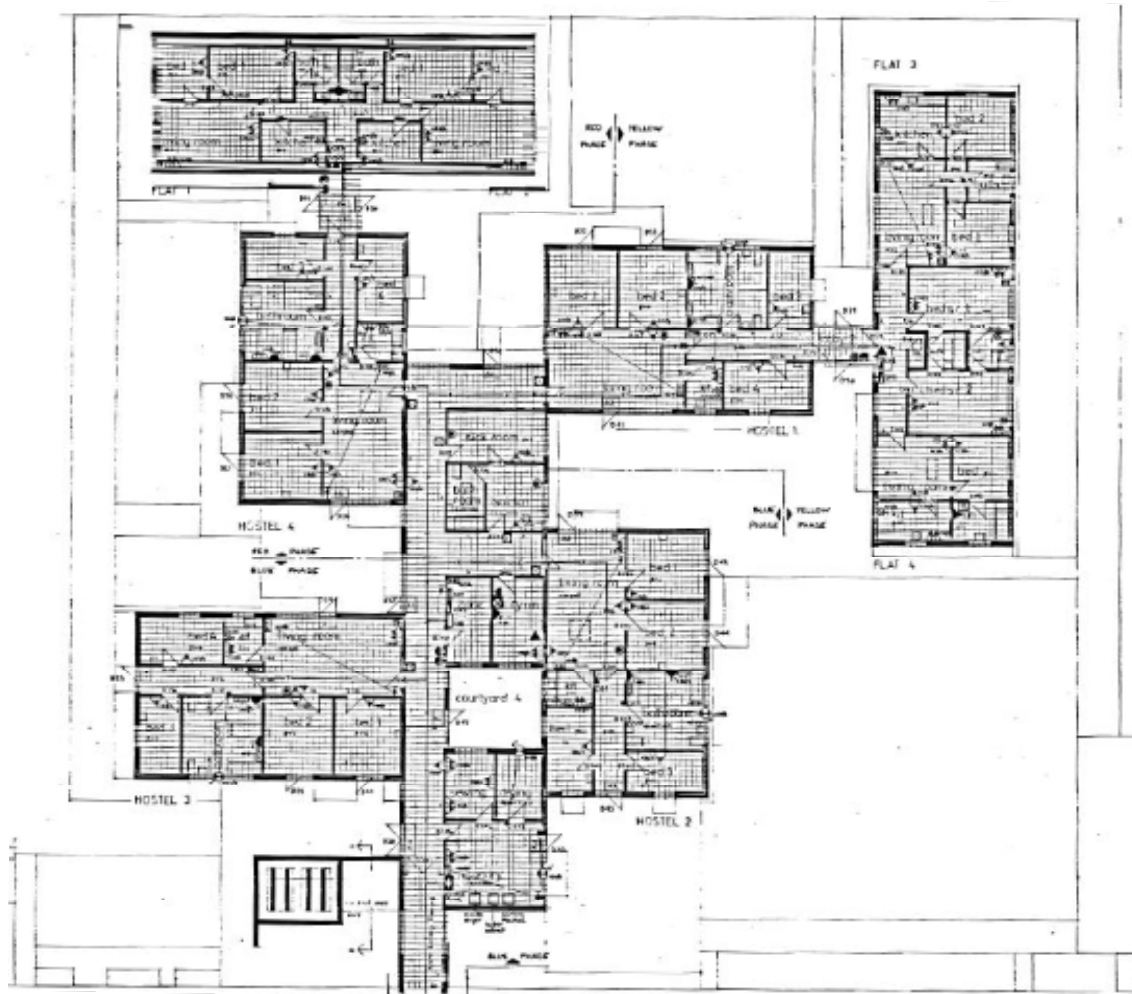


Figure 2: Architect's plan of original school layout, residential block (1969).

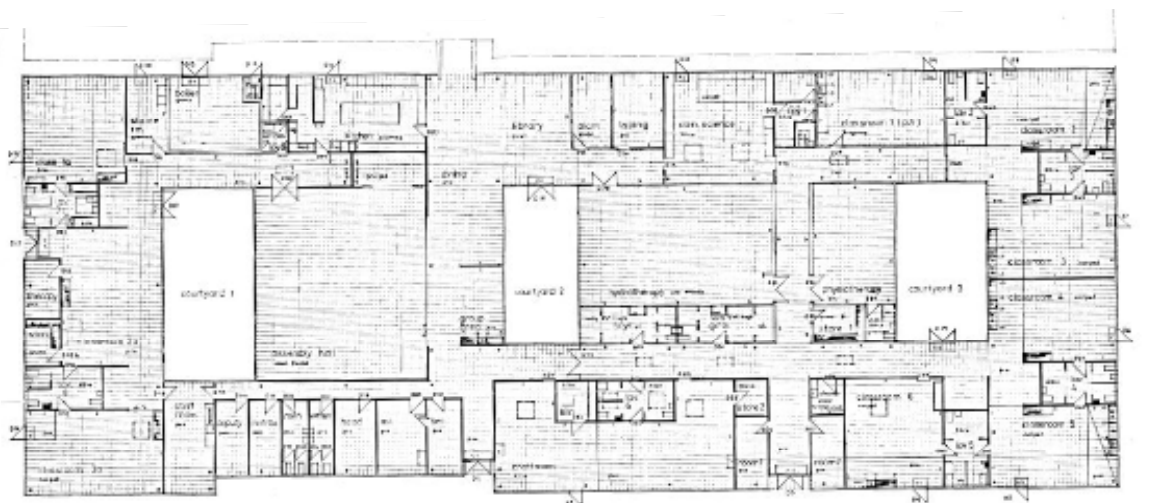


Figure 3: Architect's plan of original school layout, teaching and hydrotherapy block (1969).



Figure 4: Brick residential block (foreground) and steel framed teaching block (background). Original metal frames and PVC replacements are in evidence in teaching block.



Figure 5: Assembly hall and central access spine. Lattice beams are visible in ceiling of assembly hall.