Cotswold Archaeology

Nesscliffe Training Camp
Wilcott, Shropshire

Historic Building Recording

Report prepared for:
Reds10

On behalf of:
The MoD

CA Project:CR0683

CA Report: CR0683_1

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date	April 2021
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issue	**1**

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SUMMARY

Project Name:	**Nesscliffe Training Camp Historic Building Recording**
Location:	**Wilcott, Shropshire**
NGR:	**337450 318281**

In 2021 Cotswold Archaeology was commissioned by Reds10 on behalf of the MoD to undertake a programme of historic building recording of Nissen Huts at Nesscliffe Camp in Wilcott, Shropshire. The Huts are due to be demolished as part of a programme of building upgrade work. The level of recording is Level 2, according to Historic England guidelines, which is described as a 'descriptive' recording.

The Huts were constructed during the latter part of WWII to house prisoners of war (POW). The site was formerly an army camp serving an ordnance depot prior to it being converted to a POW camp. It was decommissioned in 1948 and became an army training camp.

The building recording has identified that the Huts are typical of the Nissen Hut typology, being constructed in a half circle composition formed of metal ribs clad in corrugated metal. Due to the more permanent nature of these Huts, they have been built on concrete bases with brick front and rear elevations, some with a central spine brick wall too. Internally they are clad in plasterboard or thin boarding fixed by timber battens.

Most of the Huts have been upgraded over time to include uPVC windows and gas heating. Evidence of former stove heating was seen in the repair of stove flue openings and chimneys in some Huts. Some of the Huts also retain more original features, such as metal Crittall style windows and panelled doors. The Huts have a range of uses, ranging from classroom to residential, and generally speaking the Huts used for residential purposes had been given the most upgrading treatment. Given the Huts are very similar in core construction but vary in detail and thermal performance according to use, this assessment has recorded Huts by use type, noting different features inherent in the Huts based on their function.

This building recording report will be archived with OASIS and the Warwickshire Historic Environment Record.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. In March 2021, Cotswold Archaeology (CA) was commissioned by Reds10 on behalf of the MoD to undertake a programme of historic building recording of military buildings at Nesscliffe Training Camp in Shropshire (Fig.1). The buildings (hereafter called the 'Buildings') are Nissen Huts erected during WWII to house prisoners of war (POW) and those being recorded comprise huts 71-79 and 85 -105 (as annotated on Fig.2). The site of the camp is located west of the A5, south of Wilcott village (NGR 337450 318281). The Buildings are due to be demolished as part of a programme of modernisation of army accommodation buildings and seven new large capacity, low carbon barrack units are to be built in their place (planning application reference 20/05389/FUL).

1.1. The purpose of the report is to record the Buildings to a Level 2 standard prior to their demolition. The work will 'preserve the Buildings by record' and will ensure that an appropriate archival resource is created to mitigate their loss.

1.2. Cotswold Archaeology is a Registered Organisation with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA). This report has been prepared in accordance with the 'Standard and guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures' published by the CIfA (2019), and with the aforementioned Historic England guidance on historic building recording (Historic England, 2016).

Site

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PROJECT TITLE

Nescliffe Training Camp, Wilcott, Shropshire

FIGURE TITLE

Site location plan

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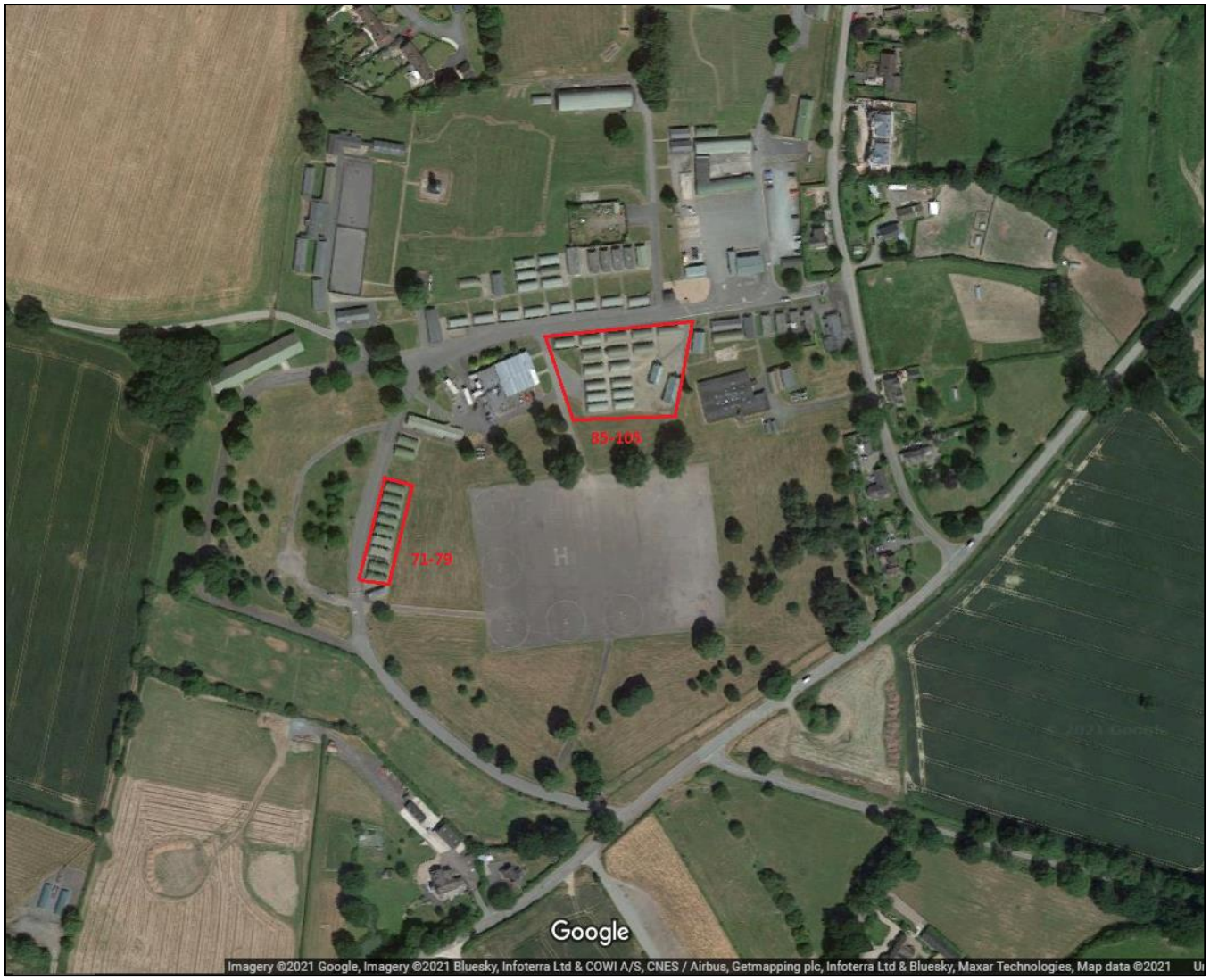


Fig.2 Aerial image of the site with the Buildings to be recorded

2. METHODOLOGY

Evidence base

2.1. This Level 2 Historic Building Recording has been informed by sources which are referenced throughout the report and in the Reference section at the end of this report. Particular reference is made to Cotswold Archaeology's Heritage Desk-Based Assessment (2020) which examined the whole site.

Level 2 Building Survey

2.2. In accordance with the aforementioned Historic England guidance, the survey comprises a Level 2 'Descriptive Record' of the building. A 'Level 2' survey is defined within the Historic England publication '*Understanding Historic Buildings; A guide to good recording practice*' (Historic England 2016) as a 'descriptive record' The record will include an introductory description and discussion of typology followed by a systematic account of the Buildings' context, origins, development and use. The main part of the recording will incorporate a description of the interior and exterior of a selection of the Buildings following site survey. As the Buildings are virtually identical structurally, a selection of the Buildings representing different camp uses have been described, so as to create a concise record without undue repetition. It will also include all the drawn and photographic records required to illustrate the Buildings' appearance and structure and to support the historical analysis.

2.3. As per the above guidance, the drawn record includes:

- A site and location plan; and
- Plan of the location of the Buildings with photographic location points

2.4. The photographic record includes:

- A general view / views of the Buildings in their wider setting;
- The Buildings' external appearance; and
- The overall appearance of the interiors and any features or fixtures

2.5. The written record includes:

- The precise location of the Buildings as an address and in the form of a National Grid reference;

- Introductory text on the development of the Buildings' typology and the historic context in which it is located, this includes historic cartography;
- The date when the record was made, the name of the recorder and the location of any archive material;
- A summary of the Buildings' internal and external forms, plan forms, features and fabric, their materials and possible dates; and
- Building on the above, a summary of the Buildings' form, function and sequence of development, as well as any discernible associations.

2.6. The Level 2 building recording was undertaken on site by Historic Building Consultant, Sacha Hunter on 30 March 2020.

Consultation

2.7. This recording has been undertaken on the request of Jane Raymond, Planning Case Officer for Shropshire Council (*pers.comm* 7 April 2021) in response to feedback from Karen Rolfe, Conservation Officer for Shropshire Council, that a Level 2 building recording of the buildings to be demolished should be undertaken.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Landscape context

3.1. The Site comprises a parcel of land within the Nesscliffe Training Facility which is currently comprised of Nissen Hut accommodation blocks, brick facility buildings, and ancillary structures, part of a wider campus style military facility (Photos 1-4).

Photo 1: Image taken from the eastern edge of the Site, looking west down the main access road through the centre of the site

3.2. The wider area is comprised of enclosed agricultural fields, dispersed agricultural buildings and settlement, and the village of Wilcott to the north. The A5 lies c.1km to the east of the Site.

Photo 2: **Image taken from the centre of the Site looking south-west at the Nissan Huts in the south of the Site**

Photo 3: **Close up image of a Nissen Hut within the Site**

Photo 4: **Image of the brick building in the south-east of the Site, looking south**

Historic context

3.3. The first record of the site is the 1848 Tithe Map which shows the site as part of two regular field parcels related to agricultural and possible brick kilning activity. The cartographic record shows no change to the site between in the first and second OS maps, surveyed in 1881 and 1902 (as shown in appendix 3 of CA's 2020 HDBA). There is then a gap in the cartographic record until 1954, likely as a result of the World Wars. No military camp is depicted in the OS maps of 1954 or 1966 (see appendix 3 of CA's 2020 HBDA) whereas aerial photographs record an army camp at the Site in 1946 (not reproduced). Nesscliffe Training Camp is the known location of a WWII POW camp which explains the discrepancies in the cartographic record as it was likely excluded from the OS mapping in order to remain a secretive location.

3.4. Nesscliffe Training Camp (No.591) was initially established as an army camp set up in WWII as an ordnance depot. The camp was then utilised as a POW camp until 1948 and survives in near complete state. Aerial photographs have identified that the current Nissen Huts within the Site were extant prior to 1948. The camp is currently in use by the MoD as a training centre and contains a number of military barracks and buildings.

3.5. Aerial photographs from 1946 to 1971 depict the Site as comprising 36 Nissen style huts with three rectangular brick huts. These are in the location of the current buildings within the site with an additional six Nissen Huts in the north-west corner of the site which now comprises grass and a rectangular brick building.

3.6. Nesscliffe Training Camp is shown on the 1973 OS Map (Fig. 3). This shows the six Nissen Huts in the north-west corner have been demolished and replaced with grass and a single rectangular building in an east/west direction.

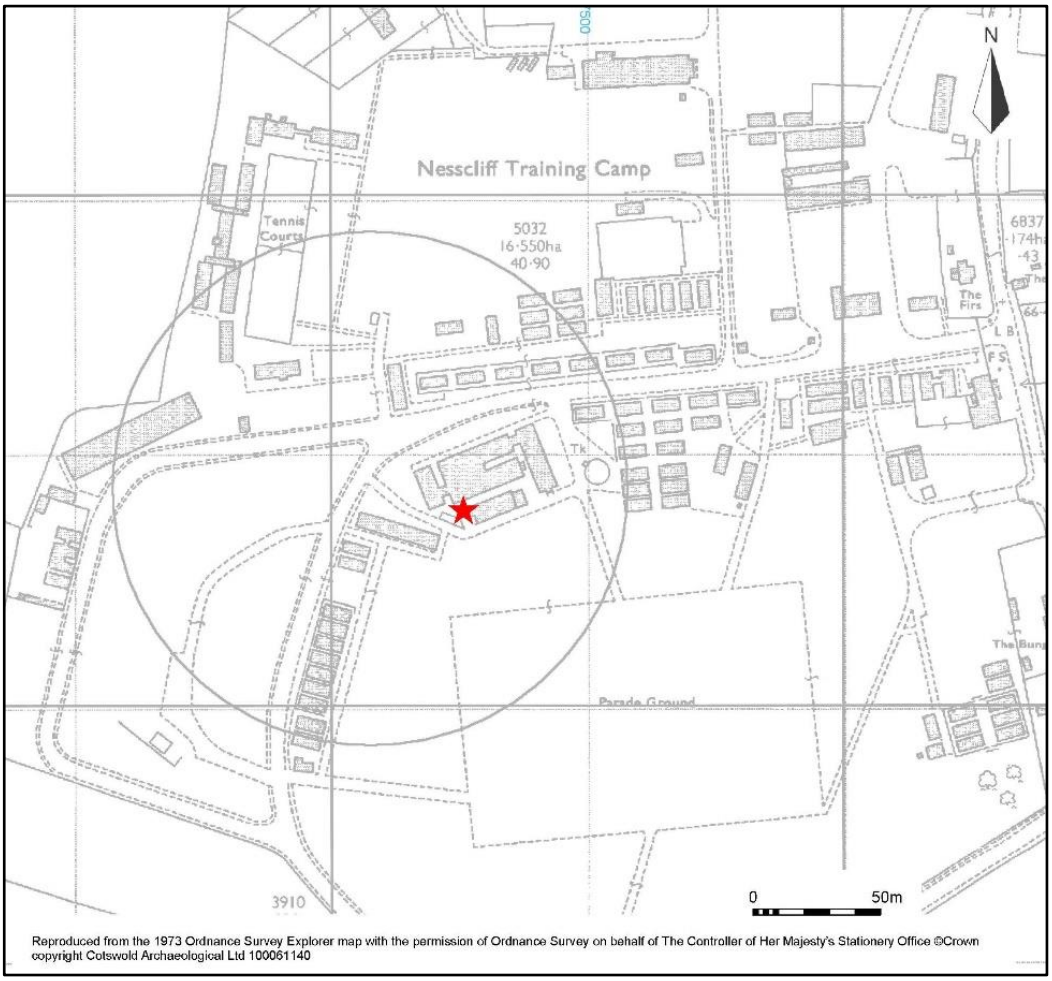


Fig. 3: 1973 OS Map

Building Typology

3.7. The first iteration of the Nissen Hut was seen during the WWI as the Nissen Bow Hut and the Nissen Hospital Hut. They were designed by Peter Nissen (1871-1930) who was an American who moved to the UK in 1910. He was allowed to join the British Army (the Royal Engineers) and served in France. It was while on active duty that he designed the Nissen Hut, a semi-circular hut constructed of timber and

corrugated metal. It was designed to be portable but also sturdy enough to provide more and better shelter than an ordinary field tent (Draper 2017).

3.8. The design incorporated horizontal wooden purlins jointed to steel T-shaped ribs (creating the curved frame) and bolted by hook bolts. The exterior was then covered in corrugated sheeting with the interior clad in more sheeting or matchboard lining. The two ends were constructed of timber and the floor was typically, in early iterations, of wood. Heating was via Canadian stoves (*ibid*). Each hut was built in five-foot sections up to 16 foot, extended to six-foot sections during the WWII. Over 110,000 Nissen Bow and Hospital Huts were built in France in WWI.

3.9. Peter Nissen claimed royalties for his hut design after WWI and set up Nissen Buildings Ltd which continued to manufacture and sell the Nissen Hut during the interwar years. With the onset of WWII, the Nissen Buildings Ltd waived their royalty fee and Nissen Huts moved into mass production (*ibid*).

3.10. The WWII version of the Nissen Hut had developed from the early versions. Key changes were, where portability was not required, it was built on a concrete base, and had brick or concrete block ends, with some having dormer windows. Variations in cladding fabric were also common, given the squeeze on materials in wartime, though generally speaking the huts were always covered in a corrugated material; metal being the best given its malleable properties.

3.11. The Nissen Hut is an iconic wartime building typology, quickly and easily erected, both static and portable, and has become a generalised term for military huts, despite there being many hundreds of different wartime hut types. Many thousands of huts were erected in the UK during WWII. Those at Nesscliffe Camp survive well having seen little alteration beyond repair and they form a coherent historic group.

4. BUILDING RECORDING

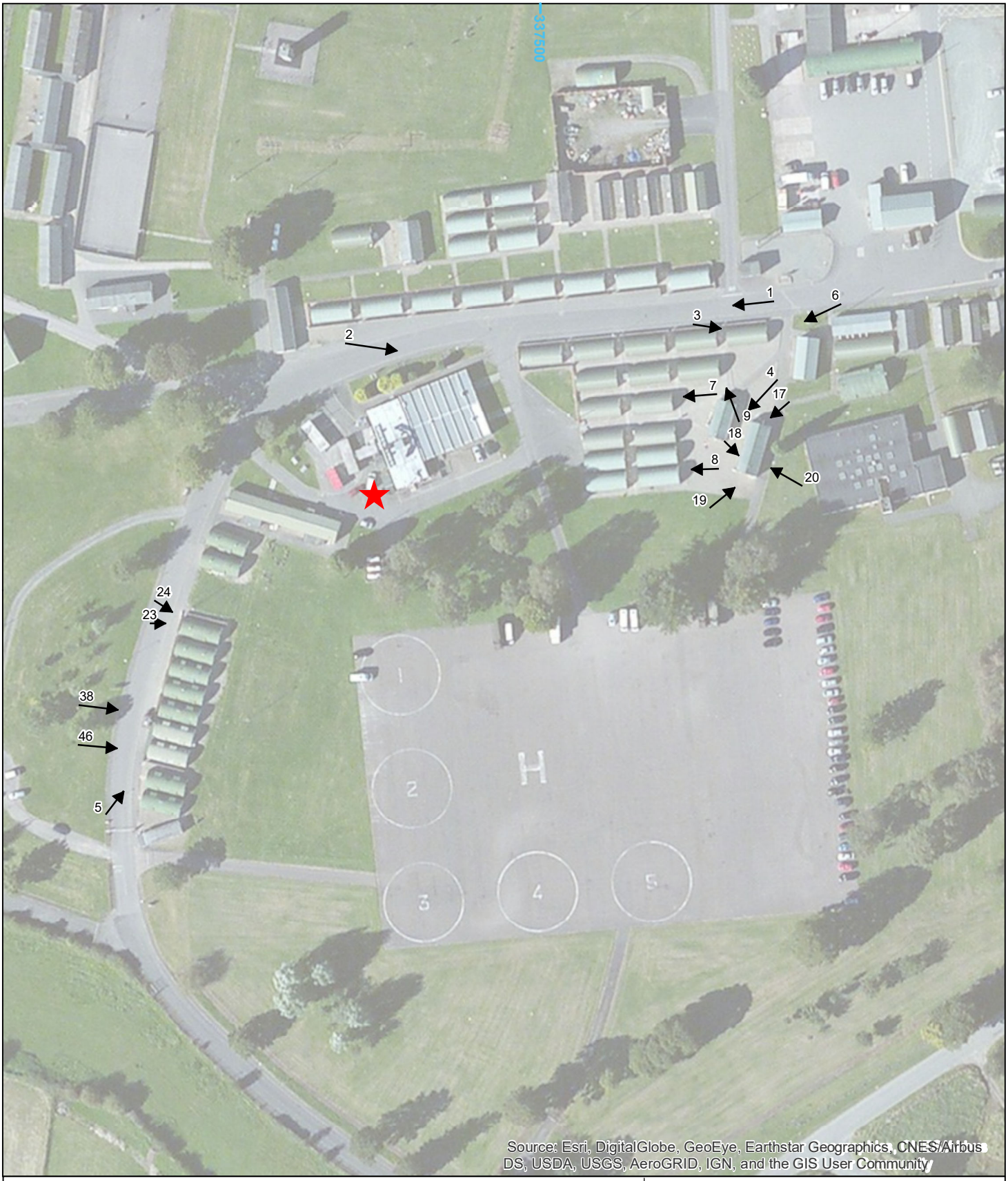
4.1. A number of the Buildings were inspected as part of the building recording, as well as wider views of the Buildings within their camp environment. The Buildings were divided into use types, with each use type being recorded:

- Barracks
- Medical centre
- Classroom
- Toilet and ablutions
- Offices and storage

4.2. Buildings 85 to 105 are essentially residential barrack blocks, with the other uses being ranged along the main access road in Buildings 71 to 79. The general views of these Buildings can be seen in Photos 1 to 2. An aerial view of the Buildings to be recorded is seen in Fig.2 and with photographic location points in Fig.4.

Photo 5: View of Huts 71-79 (image taken looking north-east)

Fig.4 Aerial view with photographic location points



Site

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Photo 6: View of Huts 89-105 (arrowed)

Photo 7: View through Huts 103 and 102

Buildings 85-105

Accommodation blocks

4.3. Buildings 85 to 105 comprise residential accommodation buildings. They are built of brick to each end with a central brick spine wall and measure 10.1m long, 5.1m wide and 3.1m tall. The front and rear elevations comprise a brick façade with a central doorway flanked by a pair of top opening uPVC windows with brick sills. The windows are clearly replacements of earlier metal versions, part of the ongoing modernisation of the structures over time. The lintels to both door and windows are concrete, as seen in Photo 8 below. The doors are flat without panels and with modern door furniture and are again no doubt replacement for earlier versions, those being likely braced and ledged or plainly panelled timber doors. The Building is built on a concrete plinth with brick facing. Air bricks are incorporated into the brick façade at floor and apex level. Newer insertions of gas venting and gas heating services are evident; the Buildings would once have been heated by an internal stove.

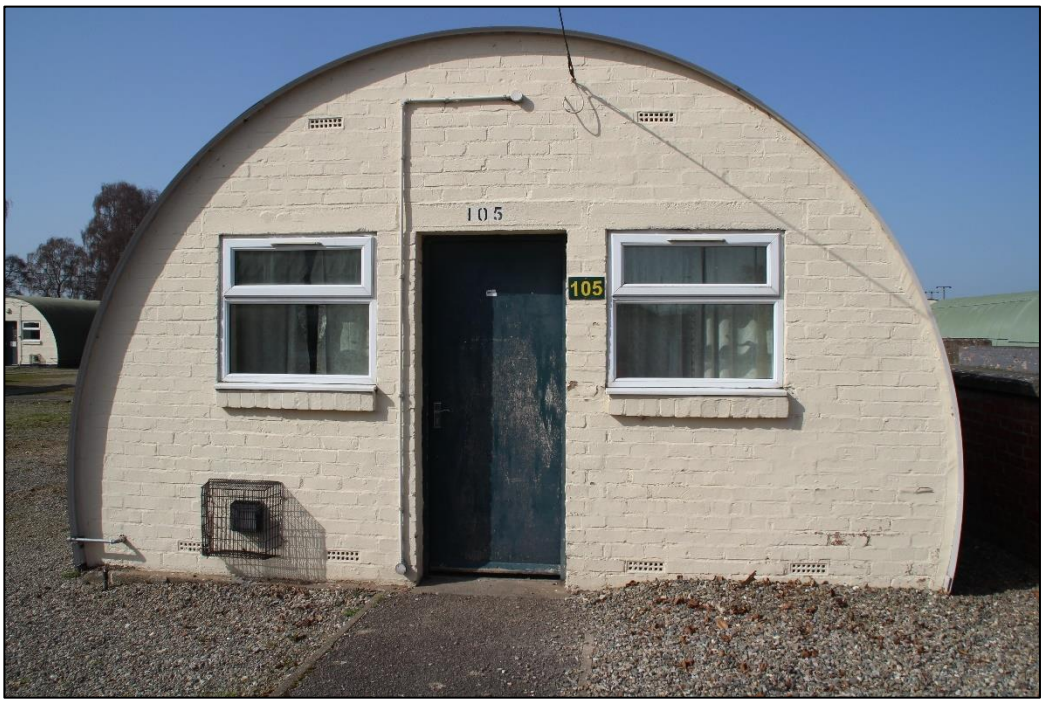

Photo 8: View of front elevation of Hut 105

4.4. Buildings 85-105 have been re-clad in the recent past in a coated metal corrugated sheeting laid vertically over the structure, this is best seen in Photo 9.

Photo 9: View of Hut 105 from the side angle

4.5. Internally the Building forms two plain and functional sleeping spaces, each holding four beds, the central spine wall is painted brick with a timber framed doorway off centre providing access to the second room. The floor is concrete with a polished patina that no doubt comes from age and historic floor varnish or paint (Photos 10 and 11).

4.6. The interior of the Building is cladded in a matchboard material, battened with timber joists in a grid pattern. The metal rib pieces are evident at *c.*180cm intervals with the battens abutting the ribs, which are bolted together in lengths (Photo 12). Also evident in the interior fabric is patching where the stove flue hole would have been located.

Photo 10: **Internal view of Hut 105 looking west**

Photo 11: **Internal view of Hut 105 looking east**

Photo 12: **View of cladding to wall in Hut 105**

Photo 13: **View of the roof apex with flue hole cover arrowed**

4.7. The Buildings' have obviously undergone some alteration to improve their thermal performance, both plastic lining and rock wool were evident in the void between the matching boarding/battening and the external metal cladding as seen in Photos 14 to 15. Also evident was the insertion of a concrete plinth internally running along

the sides of the hut. This creates a sort of rim to the internal concrete floor which was no doubt installed to make the huts watertight and mitigate draughts. Other huts elsewhere in camp which were inspected for this recording did not have such a plinth and were actually suffering from gapping between the concrete base and the bottom of the corrugated structure where timber plinths had degraded.

Photo 14: View of the plastic lining and rock wool in Hut 103

Photo 15: Detail of match boarding used as internal cladding

Photo 16: Detail of concrete 'rim' to floor

Toilet and wash blocks

4.8. Blocks 106 and 104 are brick-built toilet and wash blocks. It is not clear when they were built, but they are likely to be mid-20th century in date based on the evidence of their materials, fixtures, and construction. They are rectangular in plan with a shallow pitched roof with gable ends. Each roof truss is supported by an additional brick pier visible on the exterior. Lean-to porches have been added to the northern elevations constructed of concrete blockwork with felt roofs. Block 106 has a buttress built on its south-western corner, presumably to correct a structural weakness.

Photo 17: View of toilet and wash block 106, image taken looking south

Photo 18: View of western elevation of Block 106

Photo 19: View of southern elevation of Block 106

Photo 20: View of eastern elevation of Block 106

4.9. uPVC windows have been inserted within the former window openings, and flue openings have been inserted into the exterior walls to accommodate gas heaters internally. Blocked doorways were seen on both buildings, with concrete steps and lintels denoted the location of the doors. They were presumably blocked up when

the concrete blockwork porch entrance was added. The roof is formed of standing seam metal cladding. Internally there is evidence of former skylights being blocked up when the building was reroofed.

4.10. Internally the buildings are formed of two spaces, one being the shower area, and one being the toilets (all cubicles) and washroom. Photos 21 to 23 give an overview of the interior. The sanitary fittings have a mid-century character. The floor is concrete with a central drainage channel, and the roof is a simple exposed king post truss with a boarded ridge. The shower area is formed of brick painted with a waterproof coating with wall mounted shower fittings and a concrete floor, again open to the exposed painted roof truss.

Photo 21: View looking south in Block 106

Photo 22: View of the interior of Block 106 looking north

Photo 23: View of the shower area in Block 106

Buildings 71-79

4.11. These Buildings line the eastern side of the access road into the camp, near the gatehouse. They have mixed uses, including classrooms, office and storage, a medical centre, and toilets/washrooms. In general, they are less well maintained than the residential blocks, presumably because they were not used for sleeping

and rest. As a result they exhibit more visible functional alterations and original features than the barrack blocks, including metal windows and retained stove flues. Their corrugated roofing has also not been replaced.

Classrooms (huts 79 and 78)

4.12. There are two classroom huts within this enclave of buildings. Hut 79 has original metal windows with a ledge timber door. It retains its metal stove flue and has a dormer window on its southern elevation.

Photo 24: External view of Hut 79, looking east

Photo 25: **External view of south side of Hut 79**

Photo 26: **Detail of metal Crittall window in Hut 79**

4.13. Internally, the classroom hut is functional and basic. It is clad in painted corrugated metal, with tongue and groove to the dormer cheeks, the windows of which have been replaced in uPVC. The floor is concrete block and there is no dividing wall at the centre of the hut.

Photo 27: **View of the interior of Hut 79 – classroom hut – looking east**

Photo 28: **View of the interior of Hut 79 looking west**

4.14. The interior metal cladding has been clipped into the metal ribs as seen in Photo 29. A central timber ridgepiece holds electric lighting and forms a longitudinal rib. There was no insulation apparent in areas where the metal had been removed for investigations. The opening for the stove flue was evident in the apex of the ceiling as seen in Photo 31.

Photo 29: View of the roof apex with longitudinal rib

Photo 30: View of cladding and interior void

Photo 31: **View of the former stove flue hole**

4.15. Areas of rotted timber were seen encircling the concrete base, in some areas creating gapping between the exterior cladding and the exterior ground and the concrete floor (Photo 32).

Photo 32: **View of timber plinth to concrete floor and gapping to the exterior**

Office and storage huts

4.16. Two of the huts were obviously used as office and storage facilities until recently. They differ from the classroom hut in that they have a central brick wall division as seen in the accommodation huts. The general construction and features are similar to that of the barrack hut, with smooth concrete floors. Hut 77 features two small dormer windows in each room section, plus regular horizontal battens fixing the interior cladding in place. The repair covering the stove flue is still evident in the roof section as seen in Photo 34. The dormer cheeks are tongue and groove, with the dormer windows themselves of timber, suggesting they earlier than the uPVC phase and later than the original metal window phase.

Photo 33: Interior view looking east of one of the office huts (77)

Photo 34: Interior view of the covered flue hole in the office hut (77

Photo 35: View of dormer with timber window and tongue and groove cheeks (Hut 77)

4.17. An interesting cross section is shown in Photo 36, showing how timber ‘purlins’ are braced within the frame between the interior and exterior cladding. Clearly this building has been plaster boarded internally between the battens, presumably for insulation.

Photo 36: Internal detail view in office hut 77

4.18. The rear room is identical to the front (west room), with a dormer, two metal windows in plain reveals and a braced and ledged timber door. It is clear from the flue chimneys to the roof that each room had a stove sat up against the central wall. Like elsewhere in the camp, these have been removed and gas heaters installed.

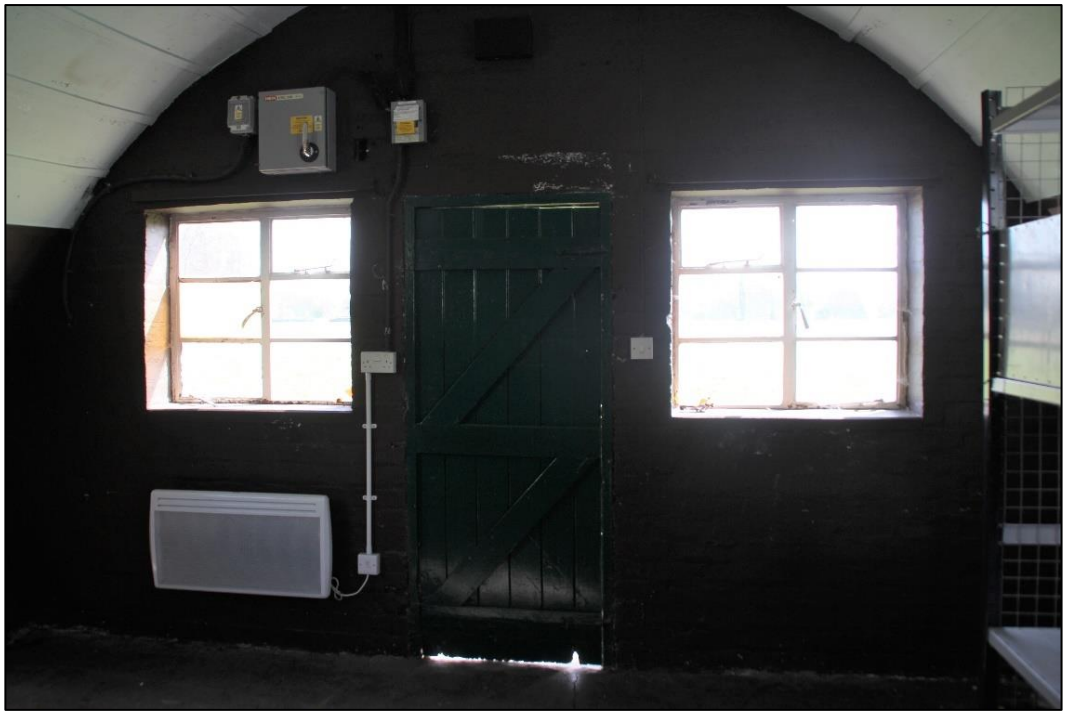

Photo 37: Eastern room of office hut (77)

Medical hut

4.19. The medical hut has been refurbished to provide a degree of comfort befitting its use. It has been altered on the front (west) elevation with a covered open porch to provide shelter over the entrance doorway as seen in Photo 38. It is also divided into two spaces, one being a waiting room area and the rear (east) room being a small treatment room. It follows the same constructional typology of the other huts, with timber battens securing short sections of cladding in place, themselves secured to the metal ribs. There is a dormer in each room, each with uPVC windows and the front door and windows to each elevation are also uPV*C.*

Photo 38: **View of the front (west) elevation of the Medical hut**

4.20. An original four panelled door is present in the doorway between the waiting room and the treatment room. The floor is assumed to be concrete but is carpeted. The rear (east) door is a modern version with a glazed window.

Photo 39: **Internal view of waiting room – Medical hut**

Photo 40: **Internal view of treatment room – Medical hut**

Photo 41: **View of internal central wall – Medical Hut**

4.21. The interior cladding has clearly been upgraded since its original construction, with plasterboard sections and rock wool inserted in the void between the exterior and interior cladding (Photo 42).

Photo 42: Detail of rock wool insulation and plasterboard cladding – Medical hut

Toilet and washroom hut (Hut 73)

4.22. This hut has toilet and washroom facilities. Externally it is connected to Hut 74 through the addition of the covered walkway between the two as seen in Photo 38 above. A concrete spine wall separates the main space from a small rear room which was not accessible but is apparently a cleaner's cupboard; the fact it has been created with concrete blockwork suggests it is a recent alteration and that the hut was originally open plan like the classrooms.

4.23. The general arrangement is seen in Photo 43 and 44. The internal cladding is corrugated metal, with brick-built toilet cubicles and traditional style washbasins. The cubicle doors are original four panelled doors, whilst the windows and dormers have been replaced with uPV*C.*

Photo 43: **Internal view of the Toilet hut looking east**

Photo 44: **Internal view of the Toilet hut looking west**

Photo 45: **Internal view of the upper areas of the Toilet hut**

Photo 46: **View of toilet cubicles with panelled doors**

Huts 72 and 71

4.24. It was not possible to ascertain the function of huts 72 or 71 (Photo 47) however in appearance and construction there are identical to the office and storage huts. They have metal windows to front and rear, and timber to the side dormers. The

front doors are modern timber versions, however the rear doors are the original braced and ledged versions.

Photo 47: Huts 72 and 71 – western elevations

4.25. Internally the buildings have the traditional central brick spine wall with off centre door (Photos 48 - 52). The doors are the original four panelled versions. The internal cladding is similar to that in the other huts, with regularly spaced battens pinning plasterboard/thin board cladding in place, punctuated by the metal ribs. The covered stove flue pipe is evident. The floor is concrete and there does not appear to have been any insulation inserted as evidenced in Photo 49.

Photo 48: Internal view of hut 72

Photo 49: View of cladding and void, hut 72

Photo 50: **Internal view of hut 71 looking east**

Photo 51: **Detail of internal and external cladding in hut 71**

Photo 52: Internal view of east room in hut 71

4.26. Overall Huts 71-79 had a range of non-residential uses which dictated their internal layout, fixtures and finishes. The addition of dormers added light to the rooms, which suggests that originally they were functional spaces rather than spaces for sleeping. Clearly rising standards in residential welfare has dictated the refurbishment and upgrading of Huts 89 to 105, including the insertion of insulation and other interventions such as UPVC windows to improve thermal performance. All the huts though retain much or all their original timber and metal structural frame and fixtures, including, in Huts 71-79, metal Crittall style windows, dormers, stove chimneys and panelled doors.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. This report presents the results of a programme of historic building recording of Nissen Huts nos. 89 -105 and 71-79 at Nesscliffe Training Camp. The huts, which were built in the 1940's to house prisoners of war from WWII, are due to be demolished as part of a programme of upgrades of accommodation at the camp. This record is to preserve the buildings in situ prior to their loss. An historical background has also been included in this recording to provide a context to the Nesscliffe site and the Buildings and an overview of their typology.

5.2. The Nissen huts have several functions, predominantly residential, but they also house washing and toilet facilities, a medical centre, classrooms, and offices. They form a coherent group of distinctive and functional WWII buildings, built initially as temporary structures, but adapted and upgraded over the years to house many thousands of army trainees and other personnel.

5.3. The huts have a consistent structural typology but with some adaptations to suit their uses, for example the classroom huts do not contain a central spine wall so as to keep the space open plan. Some original features survive, particularly in huts 71-79 which have not been upgraded in the same fashion as the barrack residential huts. These include metal windows, stove chimneys and four panelled doors.

5.4. The results of this historic building recording will be deposited with OASIS and the Warwickshire Historic Environment Record in due course.

6. REFERENCES

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