

A watching brief
at
RYCOTEWOOD COLLEGE
THAME
OXFORDSHIRE



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for
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REPORT ON A WATCHING BRIEF AT RYCOTEWOOD COLLEGE, THAME, OXFORDSHIRE

Introduction

The Rycotewood College site, formerly the Thame Union Workhouse, a Grade II listed building, has been acquired by Berkeley Homes (Oxford & Chiltern Ltd) for conversion to residential accommodation. As a condition of planning consent, a watching brief was maintained on the historic fabric during the stripping out of 20th century finishes in the spring of 2007.

The site has previously been the subject of a *Historic Building Assessment* by Oxford Archaeology (June 2004) and a *Historic Building Record* by John Moore Heritage Services (January 2005). These reports described the historic background to the site, made a detailed record of the historic fabric and assessed the development of the building complex over time. An *Impact Assessment Report* by John Moore Heritage Services (October 2005) examined the impact of the proposed redevelopment scheme upon the historic fabric.

The current report presents a record of the historic fabric after stripping out had taken place and is therefore largely confined to interiors. It updates conclusions about the development of the historic fabric but does not repeat the detailed information contained in the earlier reports.

Historical summary

- Thame Union Workhouse was built in 1835 to designs by George Wilkinson and opened in 1836 (OA 2004, 2.1.1; JMHS 2005, 3). It had a quadrilateral courtyard plan radiating from a central hub.
- The earliest plan of the building dates to 1850 (OA 2004 fig 2; JMHS 2005, figs 2-3), by which time the accommodation had been increased and some other improvements made (OA 2004 2.1.5; JMHS 2005, 6). Further improvements were made in the later 19th century.
- The workhouse closed in 1935 and lay empty for a number of years before being used as a school (OA 2004 2.1.7).

- In the late 1950s the buildings were given to Oxfordshire County Council for use as a residential college which subsequently became Rycotewood College. Most of the workhouse buildings were modernised but elements of the outer courtyard were demolished and many new buildings constructed on the site (OA 2004. 2.1.8).

Description

The historic fabric is described in detail in the *Historic Building Record* (JMHS 2005). The surviving elements radiate from a three-storied central hub to form an augmented H-plan; to the south there is a single-storey kitchen wing; to east and west there are two-storeyed ranges (spokes) linking to three-storeyed east and west wings. There were originally staircases at the junction of these ranges. The following notes record the extent of the stripping-out and any features revealed, cross referenced to their fuller description in JMHS 2005 and to the photographic sequence below. The locations of photographs are shown on plans Figs 1-3.

Kitchen range – (JMHS 2005, 17) modern finishes were retained and only the substructure of the central lantern exposed. In the entrance hall to the south the 20th century partitions were stripped and the floor substructure exposed; Fig 4.1-3.

Central hub, ground floor - (JMHS 2005, 19) modern finishes were retained and only the ceiling joists were exposed. The six original cast iron columns have wide base-plates set on brick foundation piers; Fig 9.43-44.

Central hub, first floor - (JMHS 2005, 19) wall plaster was retained and the skirtings temporarily removed; the ceiling joists and two transverse beams were exposed. The fireplace is late 19th century in style and the room appears to have been refitted at this period; Fig 6.19-20. In the room to the north modern plaster was retained over the blocked fireplace, ceiling joists were exposed; Fig 7.24.

Central hub, top floor - (JMHS 2005, 21) modern plaster was retained with the studwork of 20th century partitions; the original fireplace is blocked but the hearth slab is visible. The ceiling joists were exposed and the single king-post roof truss was visible (JMHS 2005, 11); Fig 6.21-2.

West spoke, ground floor – (JMHS 2005, 22) no finishes were stripped; it is the mirror of the eastern spoke and originally housed the women's dining hall.

West spoke, first floor - (JMHS 2005, 25) 20th century partitions were stripped and the ceiling joists exposed but modern plaster was retained. The ceiling joists run longitudinally and there are 6 roof trusses of king-post type with iron straps to the tie beams, single edge-set purlins and a ridge-board. The three-storied link room at the west end originally housed a stair and the upper walls are painted brick, white over green. To the south of the second floor west door there is a diagonal black-painted line with a band of stencilled guilloche above forming a dado to the former staircase (OA 2004, 3.4.4; JMHS 2005, 26); Figs 5/6.14-18.

West wing, ground floor – (JMHS 2005, 34) modern partitions were stripped and the ceiling joists exposed; there was no change at the south end; Fig 4.4.

West wing, first floor – (JMHS 2005, 39) 20th century partitions were stripped and the ceiling joist exposed but modern plaster retained. There are inserted staircases at each end and three fireplaces in the west wall; one blocked, one removed and one set in the corner of a former room. This and the staircases are late 19th or early 20th century in style; Figs 4/5.5-9

West wing, top floor – (JMHS 2005, 39) 20th century partitions were stripped and the ceiling joist exposed but modern plaster retained. The inserted staircases rise to this level and there are two pairs of blocked corner fireplaces in the west wall. The roof is of machine-sawn pine with hipped ends and of common rafter construction with low collars acting as ceiling joists and a single tier of edge-set purlins with a ridge board; every 7th pair of rafters is slightly larger; Fig 5.10-13.

East spoke, ground floor – (JMHS 2005, 23) this has exposed brick walls above dado level and a row of four segmental-headed arches in the north and south walls; the pairs at either end were originally open to the yards beyond. The east wall to the former staircase has an original central door flanked by a pair of blocked windows. There is a similar pair in the west wall of the central hub; one is now a door but there

is no evidence for the third window shown on the 1850 plan. There is an adjoining blocked door in the north wall and another, now a window, in the south; both are shown on the 1850 plan. The intermediate partition with a double door is butt-jointed at both ends; Figs 8/9.36-42

East spoke, first floor - (JMHS 2005, 24, 26) 20th century partitions were stripped and the ceiling joists exposed; the roof construction mirrors the west side; the walls are painted brick; Fig 7.24-6.

East wing, ground floor – (JMHS 2005, 27) this was retained as three large rooms with modern finishes; only the ceiling joists were exposed, heavily reinforced with RSJs; Fig 8.34-5.

East wing, first floor – (JMHS 2005, 29) a large open-plan space without fireplaces; the staircase at the north end is like those in the west wing. Ceiling joists were exposed; the walls are painted brick. The added room to the north had the ceiling stripped to expose the former external wall in the roof space; this is Flemish bond brickwork with the corners of two window cills to the top floor. The roof is of common rafter construction; Fig 7.28-30.

East wing, top floor - (JMHS 2005, 30) 20th century partitions were stripped and the ceiling joists exposed; the roof construction mirrors the west side; the walls are mainly painted brick and there is one corner fireplace. The link room at the head of the former stairs is painted brick without further decoration, Fig 8.31-3.

Exteriors – external elevations were discussed in detail in JMHS 2005. Demolition has revealed blocked windows in the west wall of the east range south of the spoke; Fig 10.45-48.

Conclusions

- The building was extensively modified in the second half of the 20th century and the majority of internal finishes date to this time. Partitions and ceilings were stripped in the current renovation programme but the majority of wall plaster retained, so that new information about the layout of the historic

interiors has been limited; in general evidence for these appears not to have survived later alterations.

- The conclusions of the previous reports are confirmed in that the shell of the workhouse has good historic survival but the interior contains few indications of the earlier 19th century layout and the 1850 plan remains the principal guide to this (JMHS 2005, 41-3).
- There is a solitary survival of what is probably original decoration at the head of the former stair adjoining the west range. The guilloche stencil ornament would be consistent with a date of c.1836.
- The two-storied north end of the east wing is confirmed as an early extension, built by 1850 onto the original external elevation.
- There is evidence for extensive late 19th or early 20th century alterations to the layout. The first floor room in the central hub has a late 19th century fireplace and other fittings. The wings were reorganised with new staircases and fireplaces in a series of rooms which survived until the 1950s.

Captions to photographs

- 1) *Kitchen range* – kitchen looking north showing stripped lantern
- 2) *Kitchen range* – kitchen looking north showing stripped lantern
- 3) *Kitchen range* – entrance hall showing stripped partitions
- 4) *West wing, ground floor* – looking north
- 5) *West wing, first floor* – looking north
- 6) *West wing, first floor* – corner fireplace
- 7) *West wing, first floor* – outline of fireplace
- 8) *West wing, first floor* – staircase at north end
- 9) *West wing, first floor* – looking south
- 10) *West wing, top floor* – looking north
- 11) *West wing, top floor* – corner fireplace detail
- 12) *West wing, top floor* – east wall of original stairwell; painted brick
- 13) *West wing, top floor* – looking south
- 14) *West spoke, first floor* – detail of king post roof truss
- 15) *West spoke, first floor* – roof abutting west wing
- 16) *West spoke, first floor* – looking east

- 17) *West spoke, first floor* – roof detail
- 18) *West spoke, first floor* – painted dado with guilloche ornament on second floor of original stairwell
- 19) *Central hub, first floor* – principal room looking north
- 20) *Central hub, first floor* – principal room looking north; late 19th century fireplace detail
- 21) *Central hub, top floor* – partitions in principal room looking south
- 22) *Central hub, top floor* – partitions in principal room
- 23) *Central hub, first floor* – blocked fireplace in north room
- 24) *East spoke, first floor* – looking east
- 25) *East spoke, first floor* – looking west
- 26) *East spoke, first floor* – king post roof truss
- 27) *East wing, first floor* – looking north
- 28) *East wing, first floor* – looking north, stair detail
- 29) *East wing, first floor* – northern extension, looking south
- 30) *East wing, first floor* – northern extension, external wall and window cills in roof space
- 31) *East wing, top floor* – looking south
- 32) *East wing, top floor* – looking south
- 33) *East wing, top floor* – looking north
- 34) *East wing, ground floor* – looking south
- 35) *East wing, ground floor* – north end, looking south
- 36) *East spoke, ground floor* – east wall with two blocked windows
- 37) *East spoke, ground floor* – looking south-east
- 38) *East spoke, ground floor* – looking west, central partition
- 39) *East spoke, ground floor* – looking south-west, central partition
- 40) *East spoke, ground floor* – north-west corner; blocked window in west wall and blocked door in north
- 41) *East spoke, ground floor* – west wall; blocked window converted into door
- 42) *East spoke, ground floor* – blocked door in south-west corner
- 43) *Central hub, ground floor* – looking east
- 44) *Central hub, ground floor* – looking north-east
- 45) *Exterior* – general view from south-east
- 46) *Exterior* – west side of kitchen wing; outbuildings demolished

- 47) *Exterior* – junction of east spoke and east wing, SE corner showing blocked windows
- 48) *Exterior* – detail of 47

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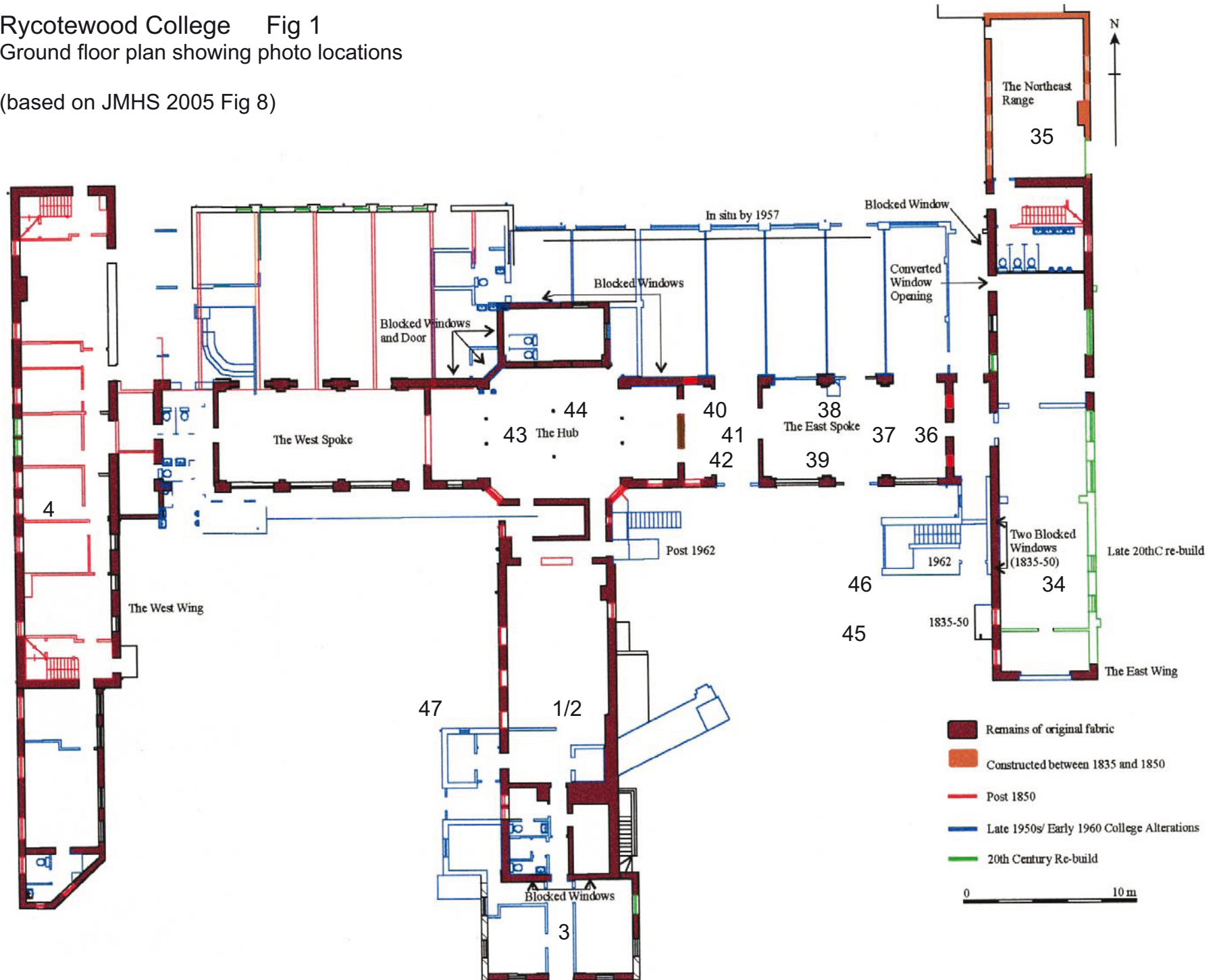
- Fig 1** Plan showing photo locations: ground floor
- Fig 2** Plan showing photo locations: first floor
- Fig 3** Plan showing photo locations: top floor
- Fig 4** Photographs 1-8
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References

- JMHS, 2005 (January) *Rycotewood College, Thame, Oxfordshire: An Historic Building Record*, John Moore Heritage Services
- JMHS, 2005 (October) *An Impact assessment of Rycotewood College, Thame, Oxfordshire*, John Moore Heritage Services
- OA, 2004 *Rycotewood College, Thame, Oxfordshire: An Historic Building Assessment*, Oxford Archaeology

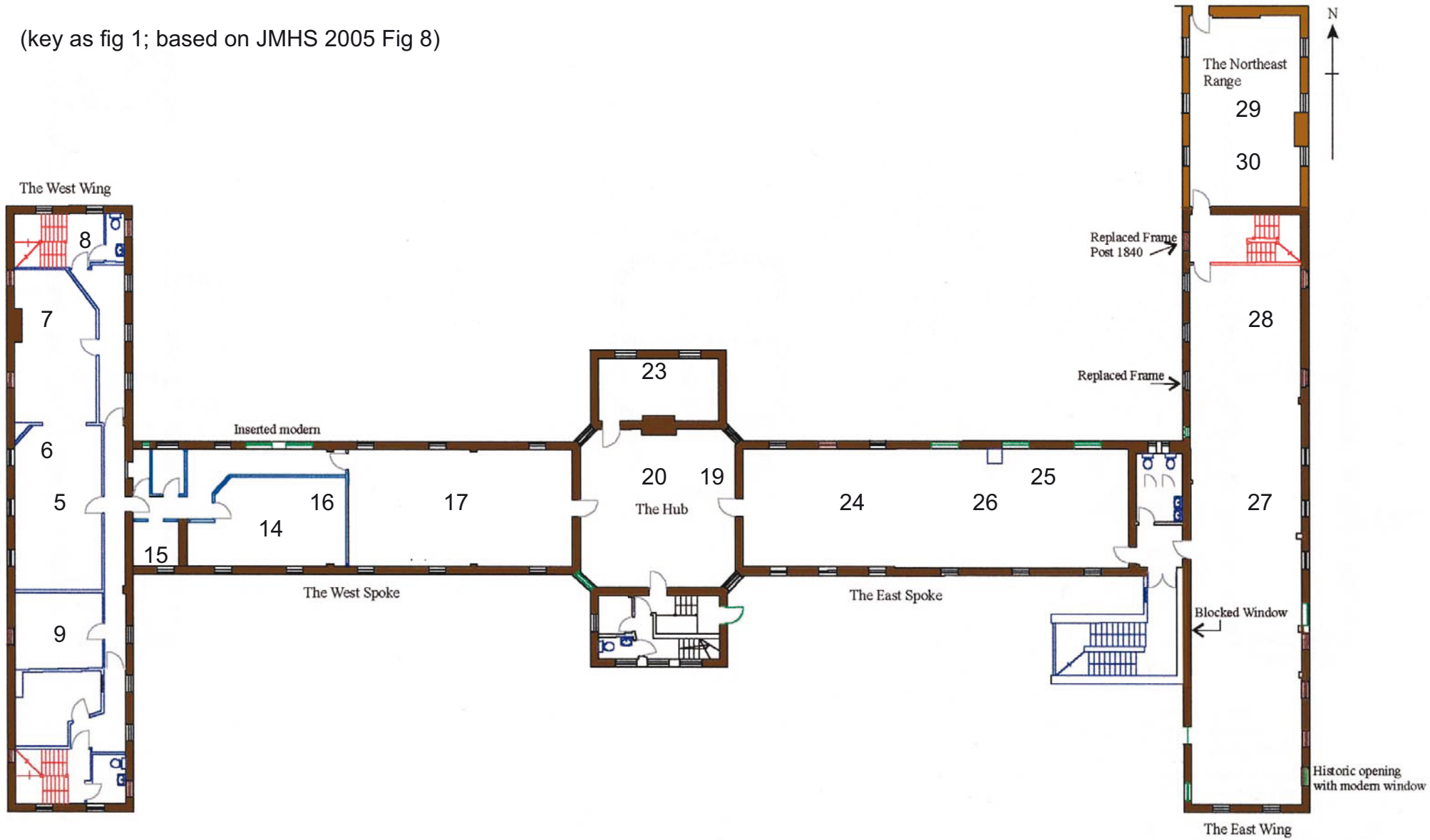
Rycotewood College Fig 1
 Ground floor plan showing photo locations

(based on JMHS 2005 Fig 8)



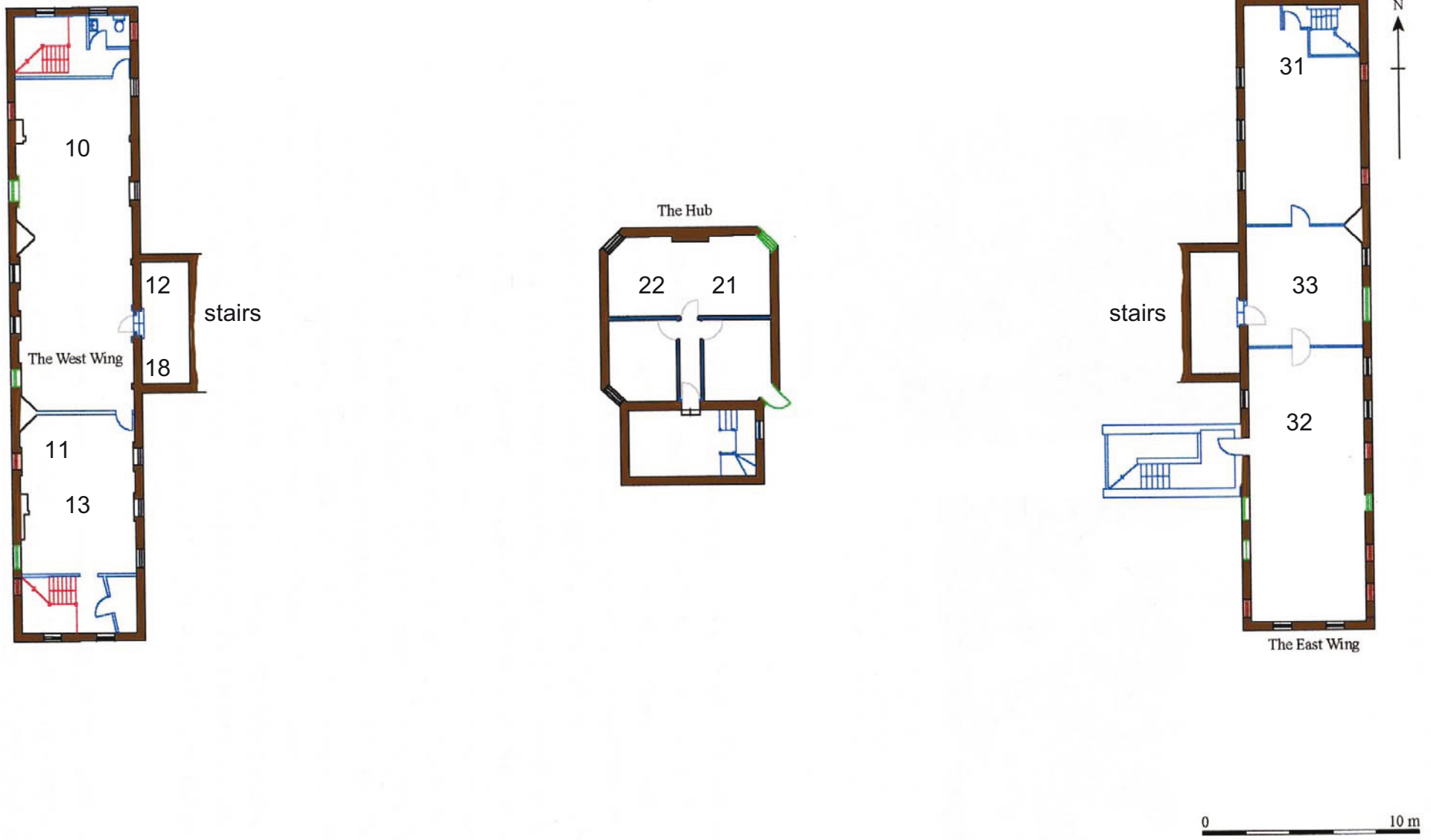
Rycotewood College Fig 2
First floor plan showing photo locations

(key as fig 1; based on JMHS 2005 Fig 8)



Rycotewood College Fig 3
Top floor plan showing photo locations

(key as fig 1; based on JMHS 2005 Fig 8)





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Rycotewood College
Fig 4



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Rycotewood College
Fig 5

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Rycotewood College
Fig 6



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Fig 7





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