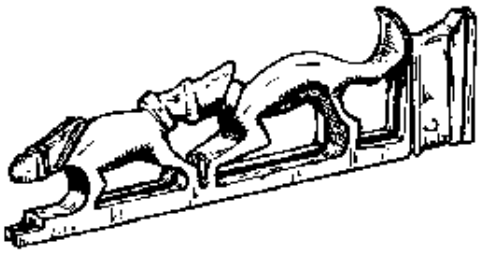
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society



A 19th Century Slaughterhouse Behind 2 Woburn Street Ampthill

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Photographic Survey of a Small Slaughterhouse in Ampthill Bedfordshire

In the 19th Century there was a growing awareness that disease was caused and spread by poor sanitation and infected food. This was exacerbated by the water supply which often came from wells close to the source of the contamination, including slaughterhouse effluent. Killing animals, and dressing their meat was of critical concern in Urban areas.

As early as 1828 slaughterhouse reformers in London campaigned to abolish private urban slaughterhouses altogether and establish public abattoirs. These would be large municipally owned facilities that included a slaughter hall, lairage (where animals were housed before slaughter), and facilities for processing livestock by-products. Due to vested interests and opposition from butchers it was 1899 before laws were passed*. Ampthill, a typical small town, was affected, and the problems in London were reflected here.

In 1893 after considerable discussion, and opposition the Ampthill Urban District Council was formed, they had multiple roles, but their main concern was with public health. Their priority was to install adequate drainage and provide clean water.

It was with this in mind I was delighted to accept an invitation from Mr. David Thomas, to photograph a small slaughterhouse at 2 Woburn Street in the centre of Ampthill. The building had been cleaned up for a change of use but still contained the trappings of a slaughterhouse. With no knowledge of the building's history, the photographs were taken with the objective to work out how the system worked, when it was built and how the animals were treated.

Initially after the photographic survey, little historical information about the Slaughterhouse was found, we were informed verbally that the adjoining building was a butcher's shop in the 1940's run by a Mrs Tansley. Stories were also told of bullocks being led through the town for slaughter at about the turn of the 20th century.

A recent search in the Bedfordshire Archives revealed a planning application for a "Proposed Rebuilding of a Slaughterhouse, Stables Etc." in Woburn Street, Ampthill for Mr. F. N. Tansley, dated 1893.

This led to a revision of the Society's objectives. Was the planned work completed as per the proposal? Was it really a "rebuilding" as the title suggests, if so, do we have any evidence of a slaughterhouse on the site prior to 1893?

The photographs below unless otherwise annotated were all taken on the same day. They are compared with the original plans throughout the text.

* For more in-depth reading, you can explore the research article titled "A Bloody Offal Nuisance: The Persistence of Private Slaughter-Houses in Nineteenth-Century London".

The Slaughter House



Ph 1. Windlass in the roof space (not shown on plan) for hauling up animal carcasses prior to cleaning and butchering. Note. The steel rail suspended in hooks is not a part of this system but was used elsewhere (See Ph 10.). Also note the T&G (Tongue and groove) boarding to ceiling.



Ph 2. Close up of windlass. Note the heavy beams supporting the structure shown on plan and the substantial axle where the hoisting ropes (one either side) would have been wound as the carcass was raised. An operating rope around the perimeter of the wheel would have given a mechanical advantage allowing the slaughter man to pull up the weight.



Ph 3. The wheel is made from timber except for the spindle, it is held together by wooden dowels. High quality carpentry.



Ph 4. A cast iron sleeve on the axle, to avoid wear from the lifting ropes, there was capacity for one each side of the wheel, the axle was squared in the centre to give maximum purchase for the wheel. The spindle ran in a simple bearing on the timber supports.



Ph 5. Two lighter weight beams run under the wheel supports, with hooks to take the car-casses. All four beams are let into the wall.



Ph 6. The hooks, two on each of the lower beams, are attached to hangers with a wheel on top running on steel strips let into the beams, an ingenious system to prevent wear. A modern system would have used RSJ's (Rolled steel joists).



Ph 7. Two windows in the north wall (front of building). The upper appears to be original, the lower one inserted post slaughterhouse use. The recess above this window suggests an earlier door-way bricked up.



Ph 8. A substantial ring set in west wall. Probably used to secure rope wound around the windlass. A water tap in corner for washing down the floor.



Ph 9. A patch of emulsion scraped off wall revealed white glazed bricks in slaughter room wall.



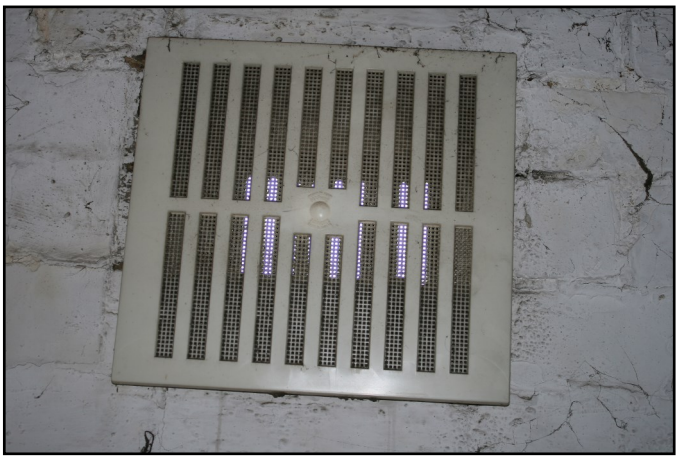
Ph 10. The steel rail suspended on the hooks was almost certainly attached to the wall running round the inside of the slaughter room. It would have been used to hang joints from the carcass as it was butchered.



Ph 11. A wooden staircase to the loft, obviously built after the slaughterhouse closed down.



Ph 12. A ventilation grating in south wall, with inside grille missing, the outer grill has vertical bars.



Ph 13. A similar grating also in south wall, with an inside grill, complete with fine wire mesh to keep out flies.



Ph 14. Wooden beam in north wall cut off flush to make way for the staircase. The beam probably supported the steel rail (see Ph 1.) to store cuts of meat when dressed.



Ph 15. A substantial beam let into wall bottom left of window; cut off leaving approx. 2.0 inches. Thought to be top of partition for a bullock fasting pen and a pig pen. This only became apparent when the original plans were discovered.

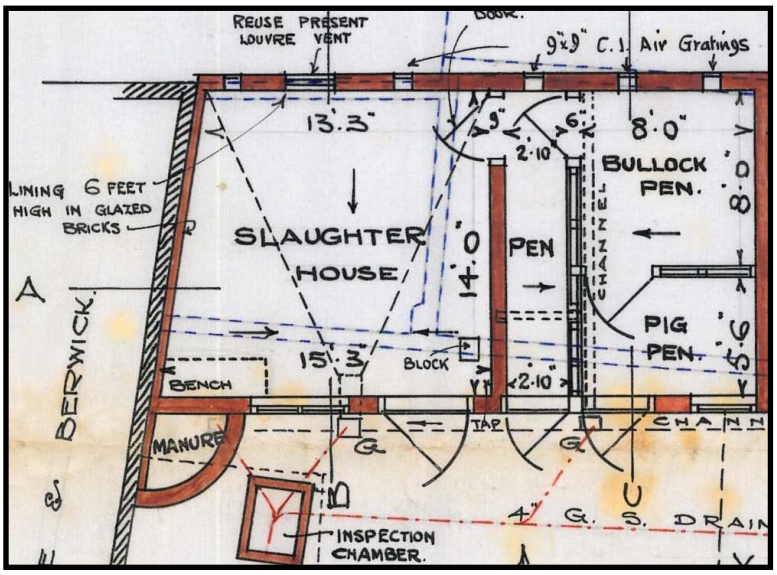


Fig 1. The original plan of the Slaughterhouse shows in outline the earlier building, (dashes) before partial demolition. “The air gratings” and “present vent” were in the retained part. The separate fasting pens for pigs and bullocks were not detected when the photographs were taken). The water tap in the corner wall still remained (Ph 8.). The “6 feet high in glazed bricks” were confirmed (Ph.9). The chopping block shown in the corner of the slaughterhouse would tie in with the suggested rail position (Ph 9.).

The Loft



Ph 16. The loft space looking East, the doorway was probably cut through when the wooden stair-case was built. In the background the windlass can be seen at high level in the slaughterhouse.



Ph 17. Northeast corner of loft, an outside door for delivery of fodder for the horses. Access to the loft would have been through the trap door in stable see Ph 20.

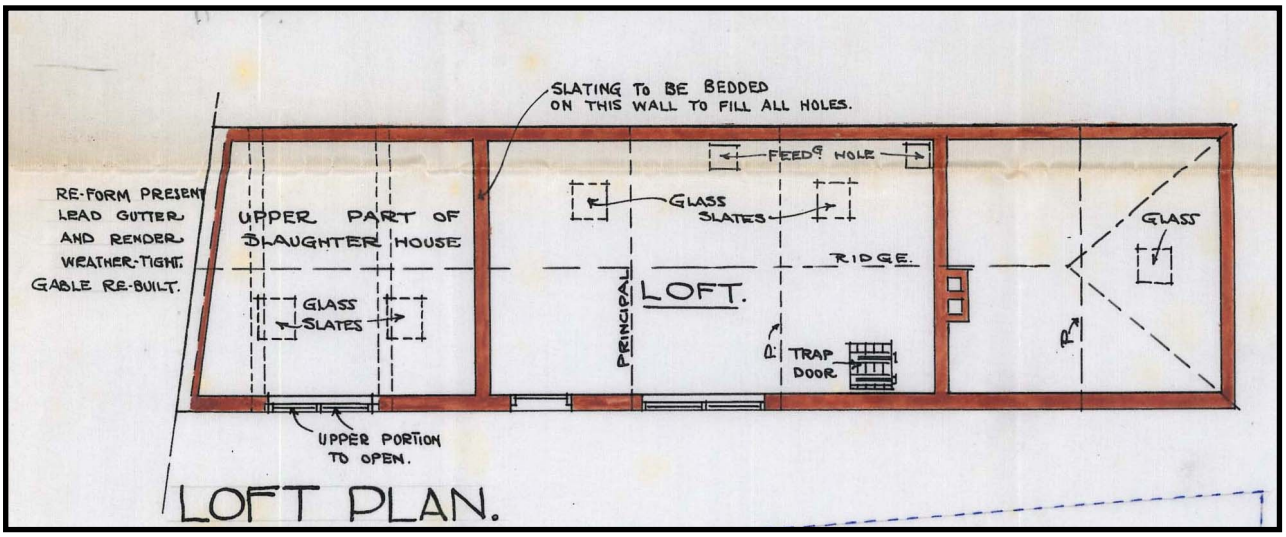


Fig 2. The loft plan shows the relative position of the slaughterhouse (open to the board lined roof), the hay loft and store room. "Re-forming lead" indicates changes to an existing building. The trap door for access by ladder is located. "The Feeding holes" were not observed during photographic survey. There was no access from the hay loft to the space over the store room. There is a double chimney shown above the store room.

The Stable Stores and Yard



Ph 18. A hay rack in corner of adjoining stable block. Note ring on wall for tethering, and an air vent with fly guard above.



Ph 19. A similar hay rack in righthand corner with a tether ring.



Ph 20. Faint vertical trace of a central partition between the hay racks indicate two stalls as in plan.



Ph 21. Herring bone struts down E/W centre line above stalls. Were they to strengthen the loft floor?



Ph 22. Trap door into the loft. The nails would have secured a baton to support an iron ladder for access as per plan.



Ph 23. Stable style door into the store room, with a surprising etched glass panel, probably reused glass to allow more light into the stall area.



Ph 24. Outer door of store room to the left of the fireplace. Note window light above.



Ph 25. Large fireplace in store room, too large for heating room.



Ph 26. The outer grille of the grating in the back wall of the store room has ornate ironwork as opposed to the straight vertical bars elsewhere. Typical Victorian.



Ph 27. The outside of the storeroom door and window are of particular interest, The architectural style is late Victorian good quality moulded bricks around the arch, window and doorway. To the right of the door, a door size opening has been filled with common bricks.



Ph 28. An outside copper, set in the wall between the stalls and the store room. The fire would have been stoked from below. The chimney is shared with a fireplace inside the store room (Fig 2.).



Ph 29. The copper, probably used to render down fats, obviously not used for a long time.

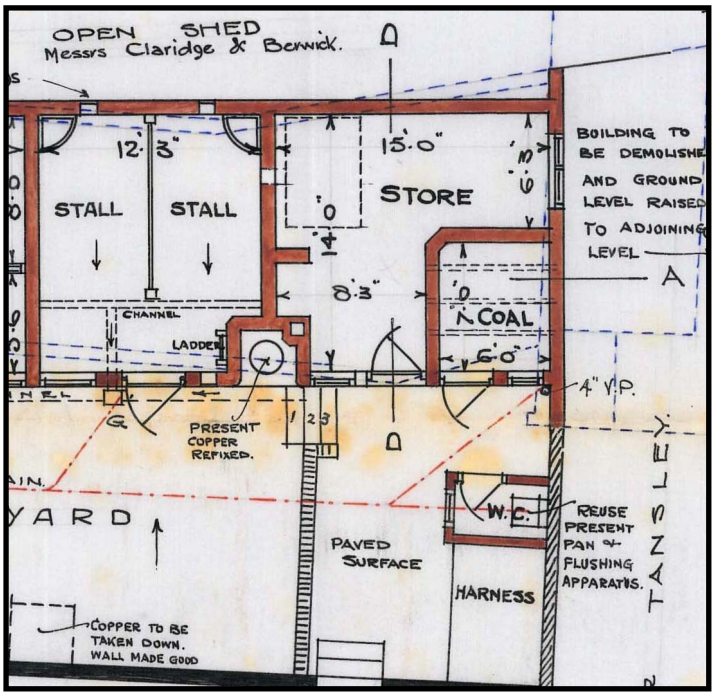


Fig 3. Ground plan of Stable, Store and Yard. This view ties the system together, an agreement must have been made with Messrs Claridge & Berwick to straighten the south boundary to allow the wall to be built. The ground level was changed in the store area so it must have been erected at the same time, together with the outside copper, previously attached to the house. A ladder is shown on the inside of the copper- housing wall for access to the loft. The coal store was built but since removed, evidence the doorway bricked up using common bricks (Ph 24.). The outside toilet is interesting as it is a water closet. The instructions were to reuse the pan & flushing apparatus, this must have used water collected from a well or more likely from a rainwater tank. Mains water was not available in Ampthill until 1907.

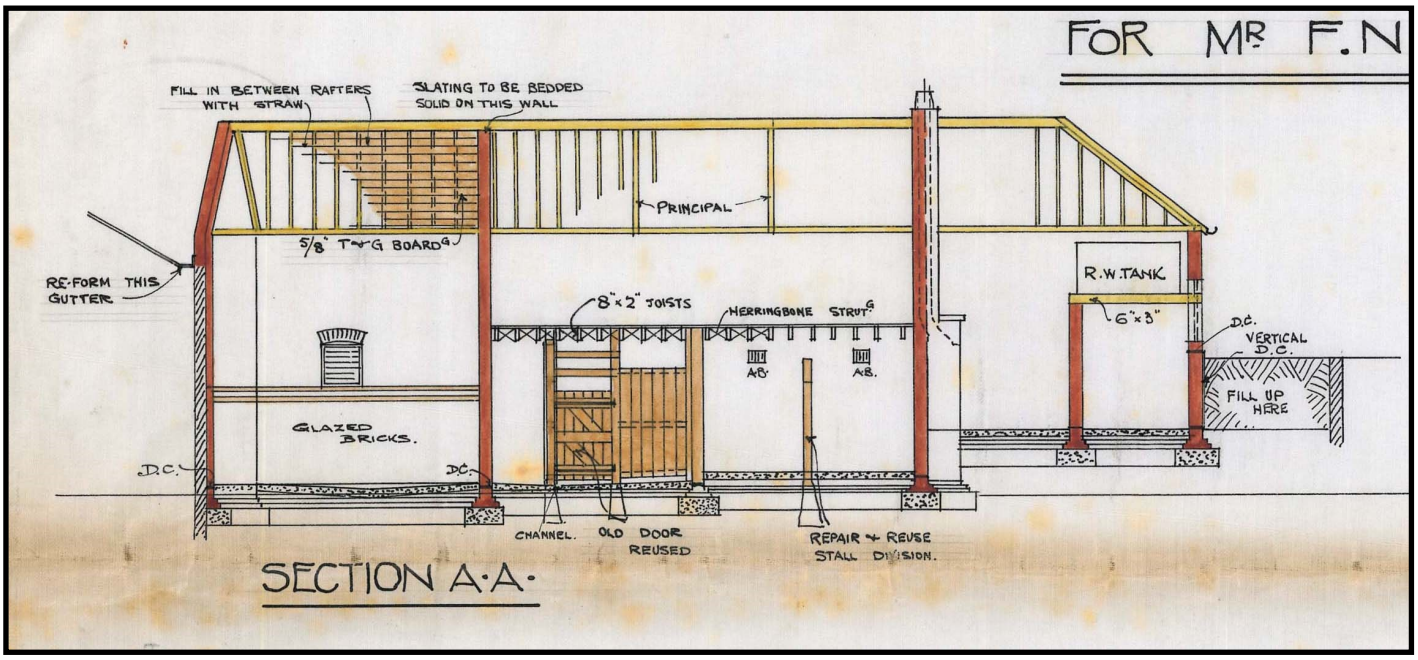


Fig 4. Section through the whole building, The "Present vent" (see Fig 1.) located at the back of the slaughterhouse is evidence for a slaughterhouse prior to the 1893 plans, the glazed bricks are specified. The herringbone struts (Ph 9.) supporting the loft are shown, as is a rainwater tank above the coal area.

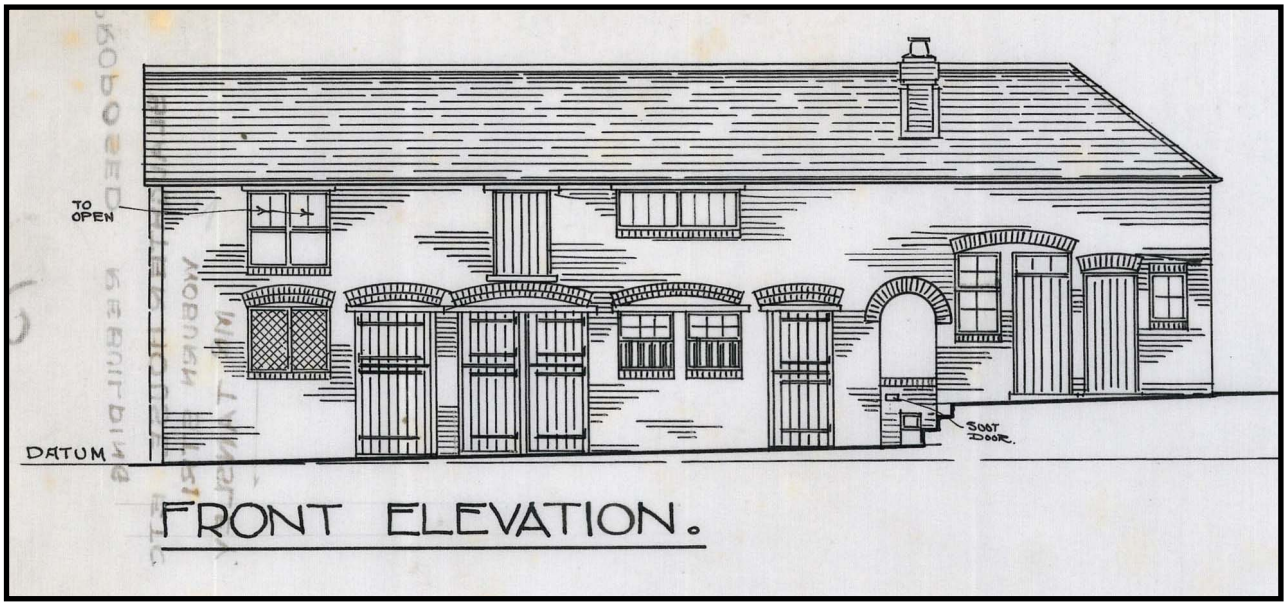


Fig 5. The front elevation. Unfortunately, the photographic survey did not include a comprehensive view of the building on the outside, except for the store area. The evidence there confirms the building was true to the plans. The coal store door has been blocked off. Evidence for the arches over the doors and windows can be seen in the background of the inside photographs. The door to the loft for delivering fodder and high level windows still exist.

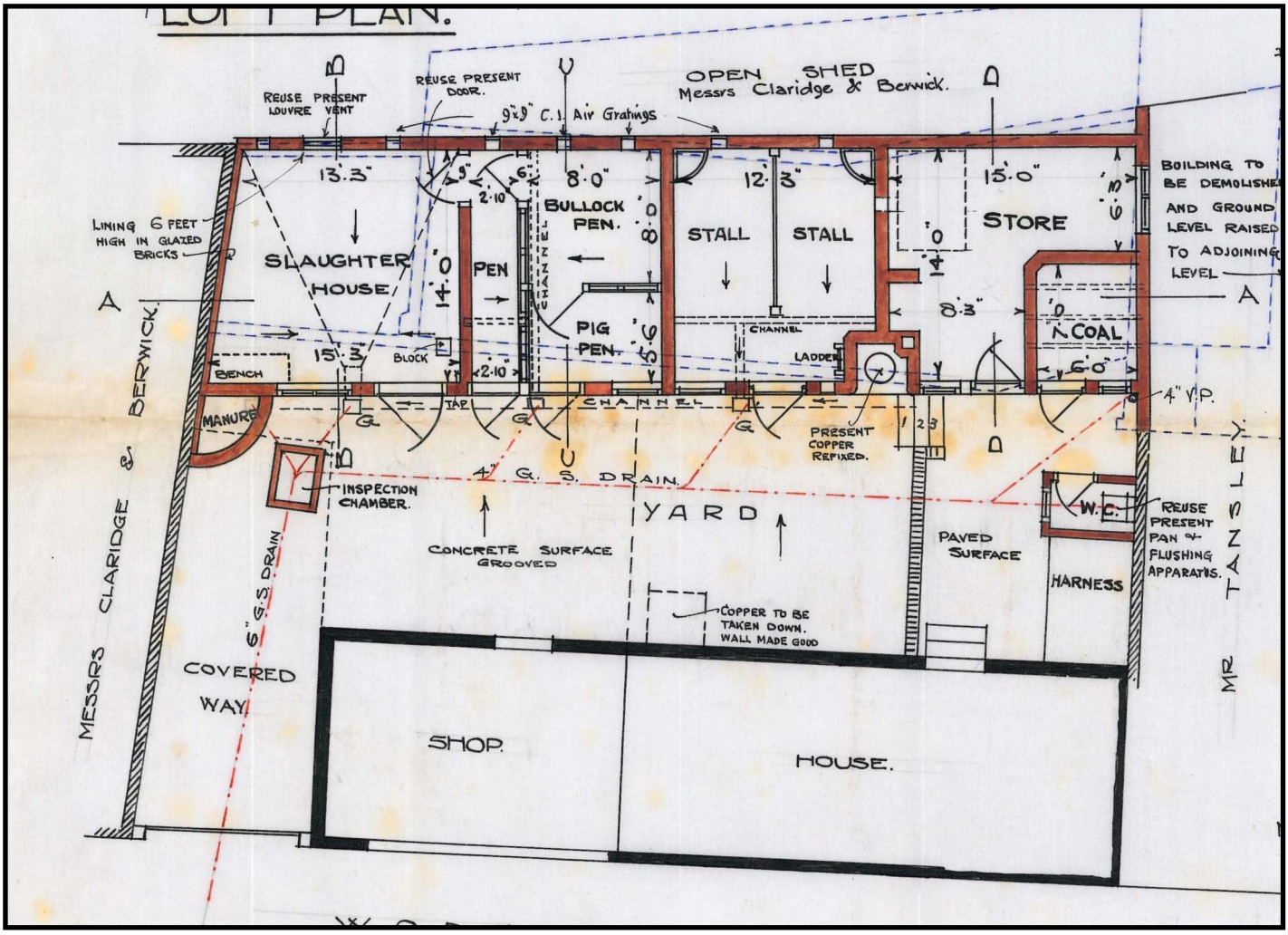


Fig 6. The complete ground plan shows the slaughterhouse and its relationship with the house and butcher's shop. The original slaughterhouse is in dotted outline with the proposed slaughterhouse, stable and store superimposed. Some walls were retained while others were modified. A new drainage system was installed with a 6"G.S. (6" Sewer & Drain pipe) outlet to the road.



Ph 30. This photograph taken in the early 20th Century shows Mr. Tansley's house and shop. They open straight out onto Woburn Street and are very little changed structurally today.



Ph 31. House and shop as it is today, the roof of the old slaughterhouse can be seen in the background. The premises is now a thriving Café/Bar accessed through the entrance on the left.



Ph 32. Close up of shop with Mr. Tansley's name above the window, Note the rail above where carcasses would have hung as was the custom at the time. Was that Mr. Tansley in the doorway?



Ph 33. Shop today, now part of the Hide Café/Bar with the board and window illustrations advertising what is on offer.



Ph 34. The Café/Bar, decorated for Halloween, is situated beneath the windlass.

Discussion

It soon became obvious that the building plans recently discovered were very comprehensive and fully complied with the slaughterhouse regulations under considered in the 1890's for animal welfare, and overall hygiene. Two good examples of detail are the five-eighths of an inch T&G boarding in the ceiling above the windlass to avoid dust. (Ph 1.) and the glazed bricks in the walls (Ph 9.) Both called for on the plan adding expense to the building.

No actual slaughtering equipment was specified in the plan, but the building was designed to take it. The height of the ceiling for the windlass, together with the massive beams confirms this. The windlass itself which still exists is an excellent example of Victorian craftmanship.

The outside of the storeroom and boiler walls are as per the plan and show the quality of the building.

Relevant to this survey are the layout of the drains and the water supply. The plan was drawn in 1893, fourteen years before mains water became available, and the town drains and sewage system were subject to considerable discussion and unrest. The drainage from the animal waste and the water closet in the yard (see Fig 6.) was built to the edge of the property. Water, essential to run the business could only be obtained at the time from wells or rainwater. Fig 4. shows a RW (rainwater) tank above the coal store which undoubtedly collected water from the roof. Reference to the early photograph of the house and butcher's shop (Ph. 30), shows the gutter down pipes crossing to the back of the house in the direction of the storeroom.

The necessity for the improvements in animal slaughter in Ampthill is illustrated in Home Rule for Ampthill. "In 1894 the inhabitants of Dunstable Street complained that Mr. Evans the butcher was slaughtering animals in his back yard".

Conclusions

As the title on the plans suggest there was a slaughterhouse on the site prior to the building in its current form. The outline of the original building where it was knocked down is shown, the retained part of the walls still had the features such as the vent and air grating in position in the survey.

There is no evidence to show how the slaughtering process was carried out in the earlier building, but it is obvious it necessitated the rebuild.

Acknowledgements.

Grateful thanks to Mr. David Thomas who allowed the photographic survey.

Thanks to the staff of Bedfordshire Archives Service who located and copied the No 2 Woburn Street Ampthill Slaughter house plans.

Thanks to Mr John Winfield who ran errands for Mrs. Tansley in the 1940's and helped with washing up. He remembers looking out the window just above the pavement, see (Ph 30.). He also provided confirmation to some of the assumptions drawn from the photographs.

All the information on local water and sewage development came from Home Rule for Ampthill by Andrew Underwood published by Ampthill Urban District Council in 1974.

The Hide Café /Bar are to be congratulated for incorporating the main features of the Slaughterhouse in their décor.

Photographs (Ph 30), (Ph 32) came from Images of old Ampthill, Ampthill Tradesmen / Tansley's Butchers.

All other photographs were taken by the author.

Related information

The slaughterhouse was in use until 1961, later it was used to store antiques and soft furniture *Early Closing Tuesday* Janette Waller page 119.

Rural Sanitary Authority (RSA) Public Health Act 1872 took responsibility for a sewage system that was inadequate and badly maintained. *Home Rule For Ampthill.*

In 1894 The inhabitants of Dunstable Street complained that "Mr. Evans the butcher was slaughtering animals in his back yard". *Home Rule For Ampthill*.

A Mr R H Evans took over the shop and Slaughterhouse from the Tansley's, it may not have been the same man. *Home rule for Ampthill*.

From the same source the Claridge and Berwick's Property referred to in (Fig 3.) comprised of an extensive grocery business with a small factory producing candles.