

*Historic Building Record*

# Old Mortuary and Nature Study Museum

St. George in the East  
London  
E1 0BH  
National Grid Reference TQ 34824 80808



*View from Northwest (Photo © Author)*

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Cohort 4





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View of East elevation, from Northeast (Photo © Author)



### Summary

The Old Mortuary and Nature Study Museum at St. George in the East is a peculiar case set in the shadow of Nicholas Hawksmoor's famous church. Burials in the churchyard stopped in 1854, and starting in 1875 the ambitious and visionary Rector Rev. Harry Jones steered through a project to create public gardens out of the disused churchyard. The Mortuary was created in 1877 as part of the works as the parish slowly committed to burial and sanitary reform. The building saw many bodies on their way to the new out-of-town cemeteries, and in 1894 was specially adapted to cope with those who had died from infectious diseases. It served the parish thus for nearly 25 years.

Next came an odd convergence of opportunity and local government reorganisation, as the gardens were again refurbished and the building was transformed into a municipal nature museum in 1904 under the guidance of newly-formed Stepney Borough Council. Local residents, hemmed in on all sides by the frantic metropolis, would escape the noise and grime for the solace of St. George's churchyard, and local children would see live animals and plants up close at the Nature Study Museum. The museum survived the First World War, re-opening in 1920 after a short intermission. World War Two proved too much, however, as live specimens became impossible to source and many local children were shipped off to safety in the far corners of the Empire.

The building has not seen use since 1942, and the three-quarters of a century of decay has taken its toll whilst virtually no conservation efforts have been made. A recent refurbishment of the churchyard managed to miss out repair or re-purposing of the Old Mortuary, and the building still stands as a shattered hulk awaiting either rescue or complete ruin.



*Panorama of interior of main mortuary chamber, facing North (Photo © Author)*

### Acknowledgments

The assistance of Mrs. Fiona Lawrence, Parish Administrator at St. George in the East, is gratefully acknowledged; she provided full access to the parish archives held at the church, gave numerous verbal accounts of the mortuary's late-20<sup>th</sup> century history, and allowed access to the roof of St. George in the East itself to facilitate the high-level photography. Mr. Khalid Seydo of KSSI architects kindly arranged access to the mortuary and advised on current redevelopment efforts.

The author would also like to thank staff at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives, Cambridge University Library, and – last but not least – Dr. Adam Menuge for his teaching and his support throughout.



I. Introduction

The Old Mortuary and Nature Study Museum is located in the Southeast corner of the churchyard of St. George in the East, 14 Cannon Street Road, London E1 0BH – National Grid reference TQ 34824 80808 (fig. 1). The area is densely built up, with period and post-war buildings competing for space. Cable Street and The Highway run parallel to each other North and South of the site respectively, with Cannon Street Road connecting them just West of the church; Shadwell station is approximately ¼ of a mile to the Northeast. Administratively the site sits within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and the Stepney Area of the Diocese of London.

The building itself is single-storey and constructed on a rectangular plan (fig. 2) with a small entry vestibule at the Northwest corner. It is orientated broadly East-West. Scaffolding currently props up what remains of the timber-framed roof and lantern, the Southeast corner is hoarded off with plywood, and the whole of the building is completely derelict and in an unsafe condition. It is not listed either on the National Heritage List for England or at Local Authority level, however, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets does recognise it as a ‘building at risk.’<sup>1</sup>

It appears briefly in Pevsner’s Architectural Guide for East London, as the ‘former parish mortuary of 1877, inscribed “Metropolitan Borough of Stepney Nature Study Museum”’; opened as a museum in 1904 under the direction of the rector, with living specimens so that East End children could observe nature at first hand.’<sup>2</sup>

It was indeed originally the parish mortuary, built in 1877 to replace an existing ‘dead-house’ at the easternmost edge of the churchyard.<sup>3</sup> It served this purpose industriously, accepting between two and five bodies per week from 1884 to 1900 (see section 3. *Mortuary*). The churchyard of St George in the East has functioned as a public park since 1877,<sup>4</sup> and in 1904 the mortuary was repurposed as the Metropolitan Borough of Stepney Nature Study Museum.<sup>5</sup> The whole site was something of a natural oasis in the urban desert of East London, where local residents could get up close to living specimens such as birds, fish, and exotic plants. This use continued until 1942, when wartime conditions made the acquisition of live specimens for the museum impossible and it was closed.<sup>6</sup> The building has been vacant and derelict ever since, despite numerous schemes for its repair and redevelopment appearing from the late-20<sup>th</sup> century to present day.

St. George in the East church was designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor and consecrated in 1729. It was hit by an incendiary bomb in the Blitz and gutted by fire, and its interior rebuilt to the design of Ansell and Bailey in 1964;<sup>7</sup> it is Grade-I listed and well-covered by documentary sources, even featuring as the cover photo of the most recent edition of the Pevsner Architectural Guide for East London.

This report is written to correspond broadly with level 3 of the English Heritage (now Historic England) guidelines laid out in *Understanding Historic Buildings: A Guide to Good Recording Practice*.<sup>8</sup> Site surveys were carried out on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April and Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015 to photograph and measure the building. Internal inspection was made on both visits and the weather was fair and clear. Investigation of the surviving roof structure was not done in great detail due to the precarious nature of the surviving timbers. Measurements such as rafter spacing and the size of the lantern, for example, are estimates as direct access to the roof was severely restricted by the presence of the scaffolding and serious safety concerns. Full-scale drawings are found in Appendix 1 and further photographs in Appendix 2.

Documentary evidence was sourced from archives stored at St. George in the East, from the Tower Hamlets Local Studies Library and Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Cambridge University Library.

<sup>1</sup> London Borough of Tower Hamlets Website; Buildings at Risk (accessed 10 March 2015).  
<sup>2</sup> Pevsner, Nikolaus, Cherry, Bridget, and O’Brien, Charles, *The Buildings of England: London 5; East*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 486.  
<sup>3</sup> Pevsner, Nikolaus, Cherry, Bridget, and O’Brien, Charles, *The Buildings of England: London 5; East*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 486.  
<sup>4</sup> Tower Hamlets Local Studies Library and Archives (THLA), 1877; *The Twenty-First Annual Report of the Vestry of the Parish of St George in the East, pursuant to the Metropolis Local Management Act, 18 & 19 Vic. Cap. 120* (1877). Many of these vestry reports were used in the production of this historic building record; for brevity they are hereafter abbreviated by their number, the initials VR and the year – e.g. 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877).  
<sup>5</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877).  
<sup>6</sup> ‘Municipal Museums in the East End’, *Stepney Municipal Journal*, 15 January 1904.  
<sup>7</sup> THLA, LC12730 Box 2. Letter from Borough Librarian to Council Chairman, 10 March 1942.  
<sup>8</sup> Davies, Colin, ‘A Fresh Look at Hawksmoor’, *Blueprint*, December-January (1992), 24-25 (p.25).  
<sup>9</sup> Menue, Adam, *Understanding Historic Buildings: A Guide to Good Recording Practice* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2006).

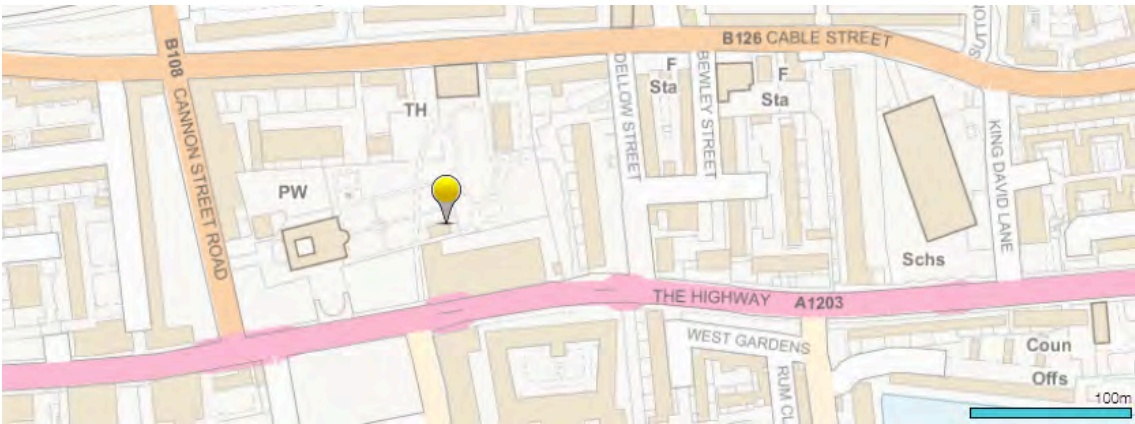


Figure 1: OS Map (© OS Website)<sup>9</sup>

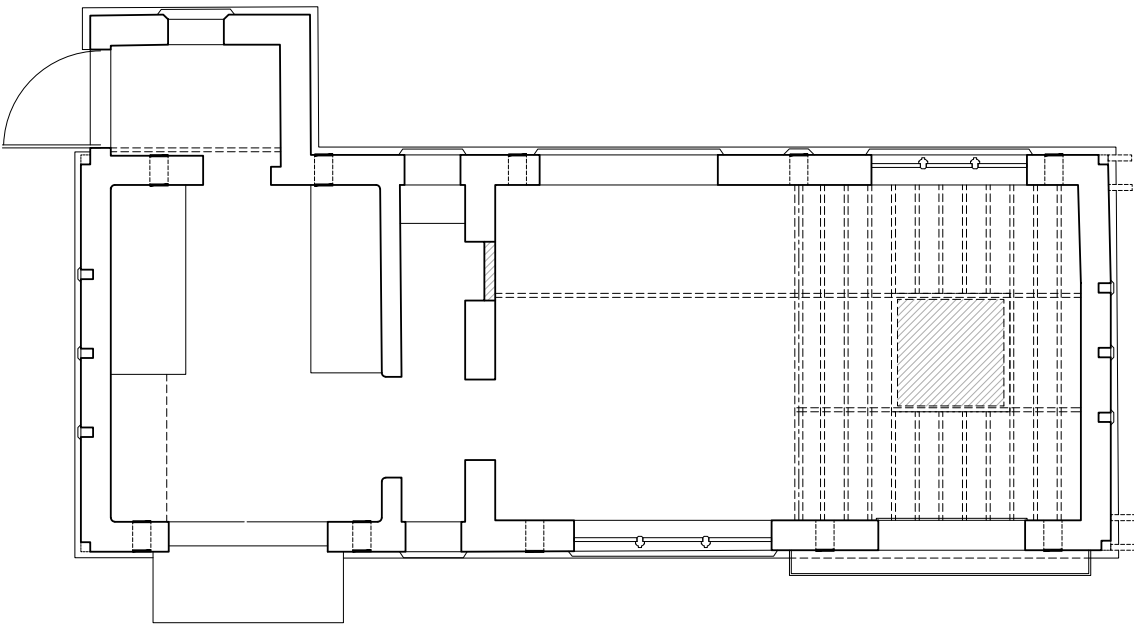


Figure 2: Plan (© Author); Full-scale annotated drawings are found in Appendix 1

<sup>9</sup> Ordnance Survey Website (accessed 23 April 2015).



2. Historical Background

It is thought that the Romans originally built a road along the route of The Highway.<sup>10</sup> The case for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>-century occupation of the immediate area is supported by the discovery of Roman funerary remains in the churchyard of St. George in the East in 1827, but the provenance of these artefacts is not certain, as the exact location of the find is unclear.<sup>11</sup>

Documentary sources suggest Saxon settlement at Ratcliff and Shadwell, but there is no archaeological evidence to support this.<sup>12</sup> In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Bishop of London held the Manor of Stepney. Ecclesiastical ownership persisted from Domesday in 1086 until Bishop Nicholas Ridley surrendered the lands (roughly comprising the present-day London Borough of Tower Hamlets) to Edward VI in 1550.<sup>13</sup>

The appropriately named Cannon Street Road was built up with entrenched defences during the Civil War in 1642,<sup>14</sup> and by the time of Faithorne and Newcourt's map of 1658 (fig. 3) the extents of the present-day churchyard were beginning to form. Houses delineated its Southern boundary, the Civil War defences were gone without trace, and the future churchyard site was then farmland with an orchard to the North. This seemed to be the status quo in 1682 as well (fig. 4). By 1746 St. George in the East had been built and consecrated, the houses cleared from the South edge of the site, and a churchyard formally delineated (fig. 5). By the time of Horwood's map in 1819 (fig. 6) a terrace of houses had been re-established on the South and West site boundaries, and significant development had occurred in the surrounding area. The threads of the dense urban fabric surrounding the mortuary were already being spun.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the population of the parish of St. George in the East had risen to approximately 40,000, and its churchyard – measuring just shy of three acres – was hopelessly too small to cope with the number of burials.<sup>15</sup> It was far from the worst case in the East End, however: St. Matthew's Bethnal Green was working with two acres for nearly 70,000 parishioners, and St. Mary's Whitechapel had less than one acre to accommodate burials from a population of 35,000.<sup>16</sup>

To summarise Victorian sanitation reform is far beyond the scope of this report, however, a few salient points relating to the old mortuary building and public mortuaries generally are worth noting. The scientific understanding of infectious disease at that time was, we now know, wide of the mark. As Brooks says, campaigners like Chadwick and Walker were, however, 'unerring in identifying the social sources of disease and contagion: the terrible living conditions of the labouring classes, the polluted water they drank, the unsewered and unventilated buildings they inhabited [...] It was against these enemies that the early Victorian warriors of sanitary reform pitched themselves, and among their foes [...] were the urban burying grounds.'<sup>17</sup>

Burial costs at St. George in the East in 1840<sup>18</sup> were expensive for the working poor (fig. 7), and numerous studies have shown that dead bodies would sit for days on end in rooms inhabited by living families until sufficient money could be saved up to arrange a burial. Despite these horrors, however, the idea of prohibiting urban burial as suggested by Mackinnon's 1842 parliamentary bill<sup>19</sup> was met with resistance. The Bishop of London, ultimately responsible for St. George in the East, stated that burial in the urban graveyards so already full to the brim with bodies caused 'no real detriment to the health of inhabitants.'<sup>20</sup>

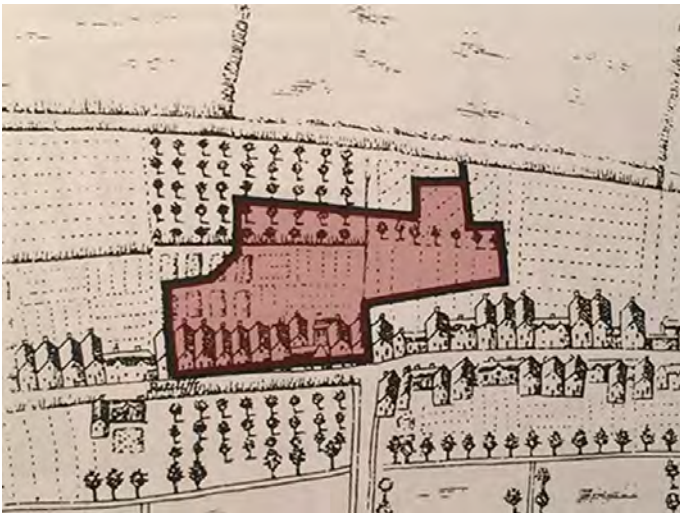


Figure 3: Faithorne and Newcourt Map 1658 (extract)<sup>21</sup>

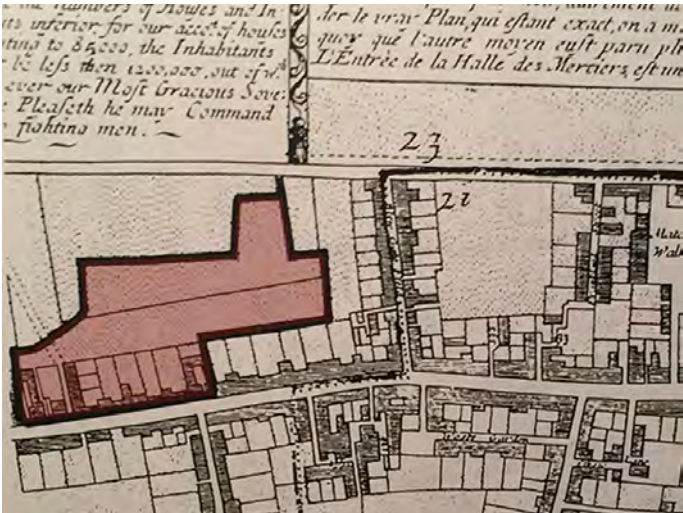


Figure 4: William Morgans Map 1682 (extract)

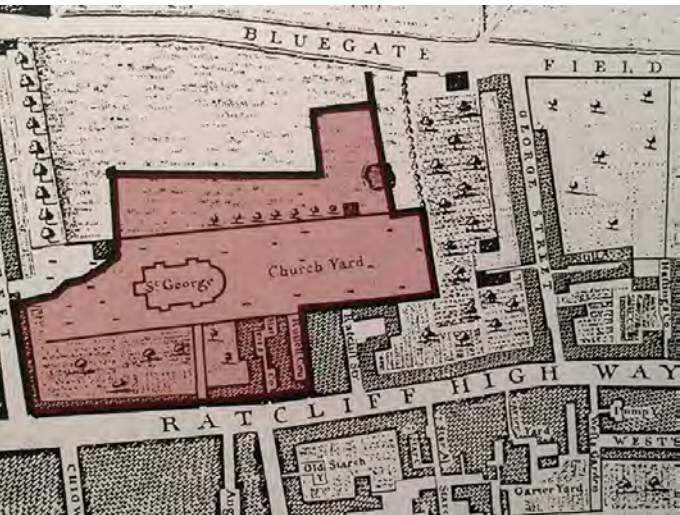


Figure 5: John Rocque's Map 1746 (extract)

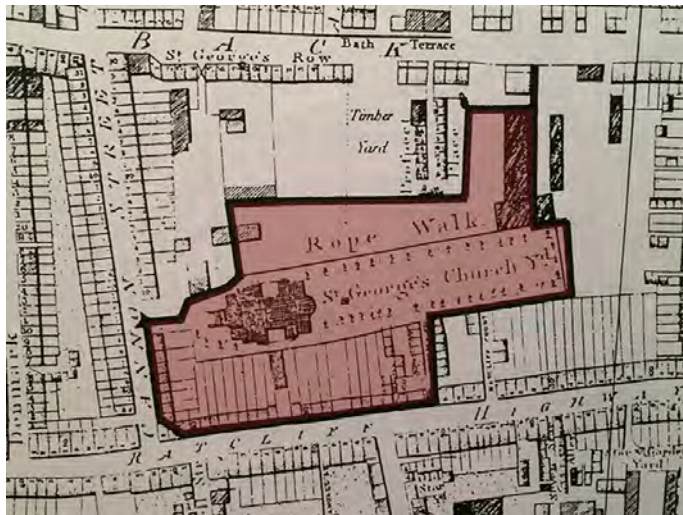


Figure 6: Horwood's Map 1819 (extract)

ST. GEORGE'S EAST, RATCLIFF HIGHWAY.			
	Parishioners.		Non-Parish.
Upper Ground .....	£.1	10	0
Lower ditto .....	0	10	0
Middle ditto .....	0	18	0
Public Vault .....	6	9	0
Church Service .....	0	16	0
Bell, 5s. and .....	0	12	6
Flat Stone .....	3	15	0
Head and Foot ditto .....	2	3	0
Bury on Week-days, at ½-past 3—Sundays, ½-past 2 o'Clock.			
Early Dues, Fittings.			
Mr. Cook, Sexton, 17, Cannon Street.			

Figure 7: Burial Fees at St. George-in-the-East Churchyard, 1840<sup>22</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Askew, Portia, *St. George's-in-the-East Gardens, Wapping, E1; London Borough of Tower Hamlets; An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Museum of London Archaeology Service, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, Catharine, *Necropolis: London and its Dead* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, Chris, *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery* (Exeter: Wheaton, 1989), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Cauch, John, *The Funeral Guide; or, a Correct List of the Burial Fees, & c. of the Various Parish and Private Grounds, (Including Many Places Never Before Published,) in the Metropolis, & Five Miles Round* (London: published by the Author, 1840).

<sup>19</sup> Brooks (1989), p. 33. In 1842 Chadwick also published his *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Classes of Great Britain*, which was one of the key drivers of sanitation reform in Britain at the time.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, James, *Health of Towns: An Examination of the Report and Evidence of the Select Committee; of Mr. Mackinnon's Bill; and of the Acts for Establishing Cemeteries Around the Metropolis* (London: John Snow, 1843), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> The land outlined in red shows the extents of present-day St. George's Gardens. Map extracts provided in Askew (1997), photography and graphics © Author.

<sup>22</sup> Cauch (1840), p. 4.



St. George in the East's then Rector Rev. Harry Jones writing in 1875 stated: '[the] general impression I received of the East of London was in respect to its spaciousness [...] the tenants get plenty of elbow-room.'<sup>23</sup> He goes on to say that 'many people entertain a vaguely erroneous idea of the crowded "slums" of the East.'<sup>24</sup> The ordnance survey map of 1868-1873 (published in 1880), however, disagrees, and shows the sheer intensity of urbanisation surrounding the site (fig. 8). Burials at St. George in the East ceased on 1 October 1854,<sup>25</sup> following the introduction of a raft of legislation prohibiting interment of bodies within the metropolis. The tiny 'dead-house', a prototypical mortuary barely larger than a shed, is just visible on the Eastern fringe of this map.

Edwin Chadwick, the great 'hero as bureaucrat'<sup>26</sup> health campaigner stated that 'the emanations from human remains are of a nature to produce fatal disease.'<sup>27</sup> He recommended the provision of public mortuary buildings as early as 1843,<sup>28</sup> and by 1875 St. George in the East was one of many parishes named and shamed by the British Medical Journal for inadequate provision of mortuary space.<sup>29</sup>

1875 was also the year the Vestry of St. George in the East took the decision to purchase the (also disused) burial grounds of the Wesleyan Chapel to the Northeast of the site and to convert the combined area into a public garden. This required no small amount of politicking, but ultimately succeeded by using the powers of the Vestry to order 'street improvements'<sup>30</sup> in the absence of powers to create a garden, and thanks to the help of an ally at the Metropolitan Board of Works.<sup>31</sup> The Curate Rev. R. H. Hadden wrote in 1880 that this was 'the achievement of which, in my opinion, the Vestry has most cause to be proud.'<sup>32</sup>

The Wesleyan land was purchased for £2,712<sup>33</sup> and conveyed on 19 October 1876;<sup>34</sup> the churchyard was converted later that year. The gardens opened on 25 January 1877 with a formal ceremony attended by the Lord Mayor of London, Members of Parliament, and local dignitaries.<sup>35</sup>

That same year 'a commodious Mortuary [was] built in the Churchyard, and the old Deadhouse pulled down.'<sup>36</sup>



Figure 10: Invitation Ticket to Gardens Opening 1877  
Photo © St. George in the East



Figure 8: OS Map surveyed 1868-1873, published 1880 (extract) showing dead-house  
(Source: National Library of Scotland Website<sup>37</sup>, Graphics © Author)



Figure 9: OS Map published 1896 (extract) showing mortuary and public gardens  
(Source: NLS, Graphics © Author)

<sup>23</sup> Jones, Rev. Harry, *East and West London: Being Notes of Common Life and Pastoral Work in Saint James's, Westminster and in Saint George's-In-The-East* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1875), pp. 5-6.  
<sup>24</sup> Jones (1875), p. 8.  
<sup>25</sup> Hadden, Rev. R. H., *An East-end Chronicle: St. George's-In-The-East Parish and Parish Church* (London: Hatchards, 1880), p. 83.  
<sup>26</sup> Brooks (1989), p. 33.  
<sup>27</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1843 (509), XII, *Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, p. 197.  
<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 199.  
<sup>29</sup> British Medical Journal, 'Mortuaries for the Metropolis', *BMJ*, 25 December (1875), 802-803, p. 802.  
<sup>30</sup> Hadden (1880), p. 77.  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 79.  
<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 77.  
<sup>33</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> VR (1876), p. 6.  
<sup>34</sup> St. George in the East, Private Archives. Typed facsimile of the conveyance documents for the purchase of the Wesleyan chapel burial ground dated 14 July 1876.  
<sup>35</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877), p. 9.  
<sup>36</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> National Library of Scotland Maps Website (accessed 17 April 2015).



### 3. Mortuary 1877-c.1900

Londoners, ever inventive and commercially minded, found creative ways of accommodating the new burial legislation. Private entities like the London Necropolis Company, for example, provided mortuaries in railway arches at Waterloo station<sup>38</sup> for storage of bodies due to be buried out of town.<sup>39</sup> Despite the perseverance of Chadwick and others, however, the mortuary as a building type was slow to gain traction. Part of this was down to cost and space considerations,<sup>40</sup> and NIMBYism from local residents surely played a part.<sup>41</sup> There is no specific record of either of these issues at St. George in the East, but by not building until 1877 the parish was a relatively late adopter of the idea of a dedicated mortuary.<sup>42</sup>

The current plan form appears to be the original without extension or demolition. There are no visible scars joining either the smaller wing onto to the larger, nor the vestibule to the main body of the building, and the brickwork is continuous and matches in colour and weathering. The OS maps support the idea of a single-phase build, as the post-1880 maps show the same footprint as exists today. This is deceptive, however, and will be revisited on the next page.

The mortuary, the public garden walls and railings, and entrance were built by Messrs. Manning and Dowdney at a contract cost of £1250, but the Vestry accounts show the total paid was £1929 15s 11d,<sup>43</sup> £650 of which was charged to the sewers account.<sup>44</sup> Forming the public garden, planting it, and laying the paths were carried out by Messrs. Veitch & Sons at a cost of £406 11s.<sup>45</sup> The architect of mortuary and churchyard is not known, but it seems likely that the visionary Rev. Jones would have been involved in driving the project forward as *de facto* patron.

The mortuary's external walls are formed of polychromatic brickwork laid to English bond, decorated with stone dressings to the window sills and corners, and a pair of terracotta string courses run in parallel around the building. A flared plinth skirts out at the base of the external walls, and a terracotta chevron detail intermittently decorates the exterior just below eaves level.

Both East and West elevations are essentially flat gable-ends, each punctuated by three blocked lancet windows with stone sills and arched brick heads – the East elevation with a superimposed circular window. Remnants of large stone mullion and transom windows are found in both the South and North elevations. The large sizes of these windows was presumably to provide natural light for post-mortem examinations, but considering the prevalence of body-snatching in 19<sup>th</sup> century London they would also have posed a security risk. Victorian corpses were valuable commodities, and breaking and entering of public dead-houses to steal bodies for sale to medical schools was common.<sup>46</sup>

There are scant remnants of a timber-framed roof and lantern (figs. 15 & 16), as well as fragments of stone coping at the top of the westernmost gable end. Most of the rafters are missing from over the larger chamber and there is no roof at all over the smaller. A single purlin survives full-length across the large chamber, and an iron tie-beam crosses at approximately the mid-point. The roof lantern, in combination with the numerous cast-iron grates dotted around the external walls, would have provided thorough ventilation of the interior.



Figure 11: Aerial view of West Elevation (Photo © Author)



Figure 12: North Elevation from Northeast (Photo © Author)



Figure 13: Mullion and transom window, Southeast corner (Photo © Author)



Figure 14: East Elevation (Photo © Author)



Figure 15: Remnants of roof (Photo © Author)



Figure 16: Detail of lantern (Photo © Author)

<sup>38</sup> Curl, James Stevens, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks (1989), p. 47. The London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company buried their 'customers' at Brookwood, Surrey, a 2000-acre cemetery that remains the largest in Britain to the present day.

<sup>40</sup> Fisher, Pam, 'Houses for the Dead: The Provision of Mortuaries in London, 1843-1889', *The London Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 1, March (2009), 1-15, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 4. By comparison, St Anne Soho provided a mortuary in 1856, 21 years before St. George in the East.

<sup>43</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877), p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> VR (1877), p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Richardson, Ruth, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 65.



In its first year of its opening, 28 bodies were brought to the mortuary by parish sanitary inspectors; these were forced removals of bodies from properties where they were considered a health risk, usually due to their advanced state of decomposition and/or proximity to the living.<sup>47</sup> Figure 17 shows the number of bodies that the mortuary dealt with from 1877 to 1900 (where records were available).

1885-1886 saw the conversion of the remainder of the churchyard to public garden, and was also the year the headstones were moved from their original positions to their current locations along the perimeter walls. This was accompanied by the usual – and considerable – ecclesiastical paperwork comprising Petition, Citation, and Consistory Court judgment, eventually culminating in a Faculty being granted for the works on 17 August 1885.<sup>48</sup>

The body of Elizabeth Stride, a victim of Jack the Ripper, was brought to the mortuary prior to her funeral in 1888,<sup>49</sup> coincidentally the same year that St. George in the East was recorded as the worst parish in Tower Hamlets for public health.<sup>50</sup>

Section 8 of the Infectious Disease (Prevention) Act 1890 made it illegal for 'persons who have died from infectious disease [to remain] unburied in dwelling places longer than 48 hours.'<sup>51</sup> The response from the vestry in 1894 was 'to have the existing public Mortuary, in the parish Churchyard, altered and enlarged by the removal of the existing toolhouse and offices at the West end thereof, and by the construction in their place of a separate infectious chamber with cells to accommodate 10 bodies.'<sup>52</sup> Messrs. John Sparks & Sons carried out the works at the price of £335.<sup>53</sup> The 'infectious chamber' is fully lined internally in glazed brick, and remnants of the cells and slabs are still *in situ* (fig. 18). As the plan footprint appears unaltered, it seems that the infectious chamber was 'slotted in' as an internal skin to what was the mortuary's former office block. The unusual secondary East wall, different in thickness to any others, was added internally, and the former doorway between office and mortuary blocked up. The vents and two door openings were probably knocked through at this time as well: a small one into the former toolshed (now the entry vestibule) and the larger one between the main mortuary wing and the new infectious chamber. Insertion of the infectious chamber in this fashion would also explain why there are no joints or scars visible on the exterior brickwork.

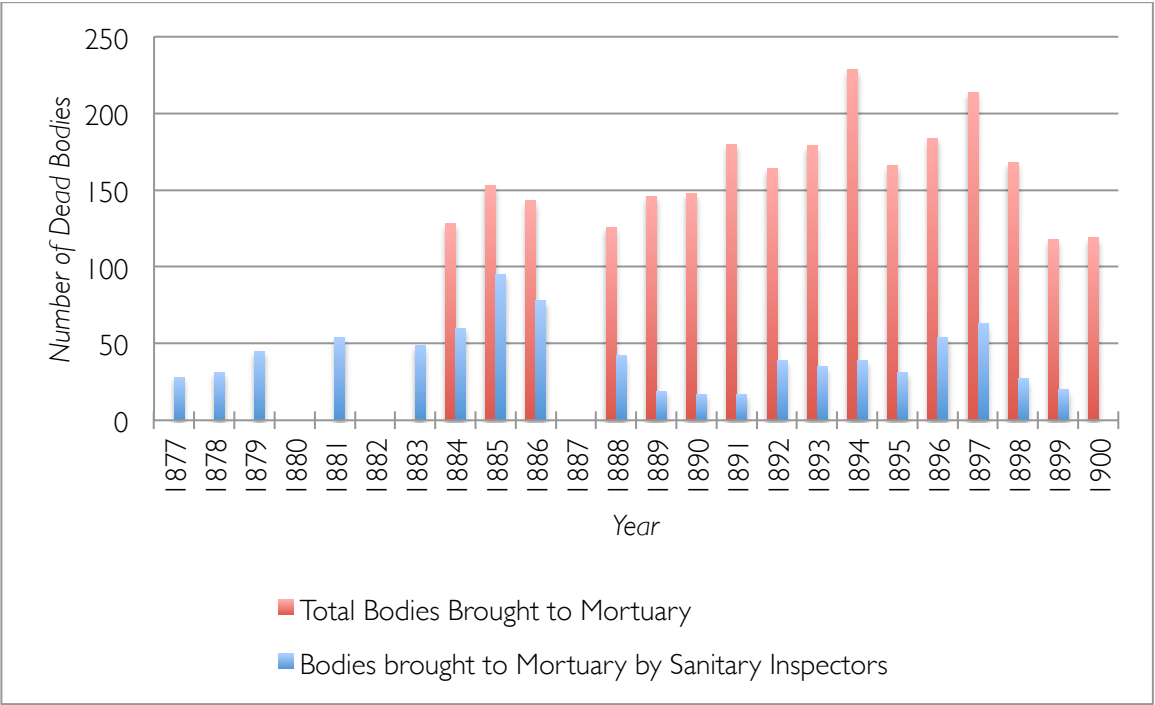


Figure 17: Dead bodies delivered to mortuary between 1877 and 1900

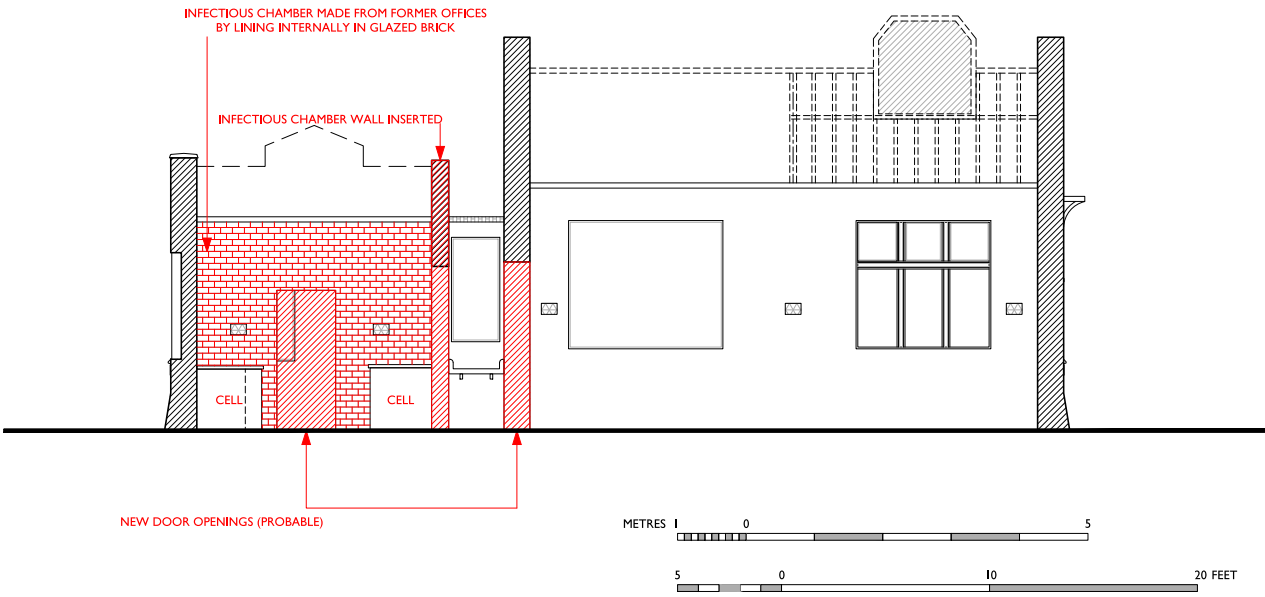


Figure 18: Section showing inserted infectious chamber and new doors openings added in 1894 (© Author)

<sup>47</sup> The numbers of dead brought to the mortuary are listed in most of the Annual Reports of the Vestry from 1877 to 1900.

<sup>48</sup> THLA MS18319/11

<sup>49</sup> Casebook.org Website: Daily News 1 October 1888 (accessed 23 April 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Fishman, W. J., *East End 1888: A Year in a London Borough Among the Labouring Poor* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> As cited in 35<sup>th</sup> VR (1891), p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> 37<sup>th</sup> VR (1893), p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> 38<sup>th</sup> VR (1894), p. 47.



Considerations around the treatment of dead bodies were not solely limited to public health legislation. It was also clear that 'notions of memory and, significantly, issues of decency, dignity, and respect'<sup>54</sup> were important. Holding on to the body of a departed relative was emotionally valuable to the surviving family, even if it was unhealthy or unclean. Forced removal of bodies on health grounds by sanitary inspectors was therefore resisted as undignified,<sup>55</sup> and so mortuary design came to carefully consider not only public health issues like security and ventilation but also decorum. At St. George in the East, new access was provided directly from Ratcliff Street (i.e. away from the public gardens) in 1894.<sup>56</sup> As the large doors to both the mortuary wing and infectious chamber are in the South elevation, this arrangement, combined with the high wall along the South end of the churchyard, would have provided privacy and propriety to arriving bodies. The cost of altering the approach was £55 9s 5d.<sup>57</sup>

In 1890 the British Medical Journal again lambasted the lack of suitable mortuary accommodation in the capital,<sup>58</sup> and by 1900 had recommended new technology for mortuaries, based on a French design, to assist in the safe storage of bodies.<sup>59</sup> Despite some internal refurbishment in this year ('Painting and Alterations' by Mr. John Gibbs, Junr. at a cost of £51<sup>60</sup>) the St. George in the East mortuary was destined for a strange and different use and would never see such major changes implemented.



Figure 19: Infectious chamber panorama, centred towards Northeast (Photo © Author)

<sup>54</sup> Strange, Julie-Marie, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>56</sup> 38<sup>th</sup> VR (1894), pp. 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> British Medical Journal, 'Morgues for London', *BMJ*, 26 July (1890), 212-213, p. 212.

<sup>59</sup> British Medical Journal, 'Mortuaries in Connection with Cemeteries', *BMJ*, 17 March (1900), 657-658, p. 658

<sup>60</sup> 44<sup>th</sup> VR (1900), p. 96.



4. Nature Study Museum 1904-1942

Ironically, despite its dense urbanity this part of London has a long-standing connection with exotic wildlife. Rev. Jones stated in 1875:

*There is no other place in the world where a domesticated parson could ring his bell and send his servant round the corner to buy a lion [...] my near neighbour, Mr. Jamrach, always keeps a stock of wild beasts on hand [...] four young elephants, and a camelopard, beside the usual supply of monkeys, parrots, and such small deer [...] beyond them twenty-four large and perfectly white cockatoos standing in two precise rows.*<sup>61</sup>

In 1903, Rev. Daniel Greateorex, vicar of St. Paul's Whitechapel, donated a large and miscellaneous number of items including a human skeleton, stuffed birds of prey, and a turtle carving from Papua New Guinea, to the tiny Whitechapel Municipal Museum (essentially a room bolted onto the side of the Public Library).<sup>62</sup>

The previous year, Stepney Borough Council had taken over the churchyard and continued its use as a public garden.<sup>63</sup> As the Council had control over the now-disused mortuary building,<sup>64</sup> they took the decision to convert it to a proper museum for the display of this collection. The conversion included stonework, sash windows, new doors, and a skylight over the old infectious chamber (fig. 20). The building was also wired for electric lighting (fig. 25), linoleum laid on the floors, and glass specimen cases installed. Works cost £253 1s 2d<sup>65</sup> in total, and the new Nature Study Museum opened on 3 June 1904 (fig. 21). The Schools Nature Studies Union brought around 400 children for nature-study lessons at the museum each week in 1907,<sup>66</sup> and also donated specimens, including an observatory beehive believed to be the first 'public' beehive in London.<sup>67</sup>

The Museum operated until WWI when it was boarded up, but re-opened after a light refurbishment in 1920<sup>68</sup> and continued to be a popular attraction. By the 1930's it had increased its collection of specimens to include a live monkey (who was fond of biting<sup>69</sup>) and added a full-time attendant to assist the curator.<sup>70</sup> A 1937 plan to extend the museum's East elevation 'to the iron railings which separate the Churchyard from the Recreation Ground'<sup>71</sup> never materialised, likely due to the imminence of WW2. The museum finally closed on 10 March 1942, hit by the double blow of an inability to source live specimens<sup>72</sup> and the emigration of many East End children to the colonies for their safety during the Blitz.

The building has been vacant ever since.



Figure 20: 1910 Photograph of Nature Study Museum (Photo © St. George in the East)

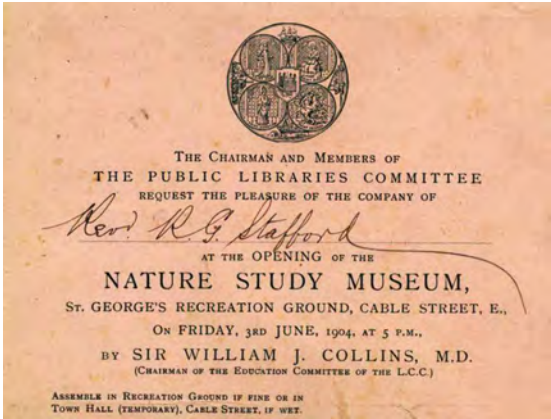


Figure 21: Invitation to Opening of Museum (Photo © St. George in the East)



Figure 22: Painting Specimens, unknown date (Photo © THLA)



Figure 23: North Elevation, unknown date [c. 1904?] (Photo © THLA)



Figure 24: Children observing specimens, unknown date [c. 1910?] (Photo © St. George in the East)



Figure 25: Electricity connection point from 1904 refurbishment (Photo © Author)

<sup>61</sup> Jones (1875), pp. 127-129.

<sup>62</sup> 'A Municipal Museum. "Nature Study" in Stepney. A Unique Institution. Training the Young Idea', *Stepney Municipal Journal*, 4 September 1903.

<sup>63</sup> 'Consistory Court of London. (Before Dr. Tristram, K. C., Chancellor of the Diocese of London.)', *The Times*, 12 August 1902.

<sup>64</sup> Several newspaper articles from 1902-1907 reference the 'disused' mortuary, but it is not clear when exactly between 1900 and 1902 it ceased to perform its original function.

<sup>65</sup> THLA LP2827/851. Manuscript accounts of conversion costs, dated 4 July 1904.

<sup>66</sup> Hibbert-Ware, A., 'The Autumn Term at the Nature-Study Museum', *School Nature Study*, No. 46, Vol. 12, January (1917), 1-2, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Brooks, M., 'The Teacher's Point of View', *School Nature Study*, No. 4, Vol. 2, January (1907), 6-7, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> THLA LP2827/851. Curator's report on the resuscitation of the Borough's museums, dated 1 January 1920.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Letter dated 29 December 1937. The monkey was disposed of due to safety concerns, as it had bitten the curator and visitors.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Letter dated 15 January 1934.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Letter dated 13 April 1937.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Letter dated 10 March 1942.



### 5. *Dereliction and Hope 1942-2015*

There is no evidence of any use at the building from 1942 to the present day. A portion of the old mortuary's roof lead was stolen in 1947, prompting the removal of the remainder for safekeeping and sheeting over of the roof to keep it weather-tight.<sup>73</sup> This appears to be the only meaningful conservation effort in the past 73 years, as reflected by the building's current dilapidated state (fig. 26).

St. George in the East's congregation dwindled as the ethnic and religious composition of London's East End changed beyond recognition in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1986 there was even a suggestion that the Hawksmoor church itself could cease to function as a place of worship and become a museum.<sup>74</sup>

In 1991 Lord Palumbo launched a £4m appeal to restore the church and churchyard<sup>75</sup> and by 1995 an application for Heritage Lottery Funding to restore the churchyard and old mortuary had been made. £400,000 was sought, part of which would go to 'restoring the former Nature Study Centre building.'<sup>76</sup>

After much difficulty a refurbishment of St. George's Gardens did go ahead in 2005, but, paradoxically, omitted any works to the old mortuary. The building now stands almost as a strange version of the romantic, picturesque sham ruins of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, ancillary to the grandeur of the church and surrounded by landscaped gardens.

A planning application for restoration of the building and conversion to use as a counselling centre was granted on 23 March 2015.<sup>77</sup> A digital rendering of the proposed refurbishment scheme is shown in figure 27.



Figure 26: Interior Panorama facing East (Photo © Author)



Figure 27: Approved scheme for refurbishment and conversion of the old mortuary to a counselling centre (Image © KSSI Architects)

<sup>73</sup> THLA LP2827/851. Letter dated 28 August 1947.

<sup>74</sup> 'Church to be Museum?', *Greater London and Middlesex Newspapers*, 31 January 1986.

<sup>75</sup> Brooks, Adrian, 'Appeal to Save Historic Church', *The Times*, 27 September 1991.

<sup>76</sup> Kelly, Mick, 'By George!', *East London Advertiser*, 23 February 1995.

<sup>77</sup> London Borough of Tower Hamlets Website; Planning Applications Search (accessed 21 April 2015).



## 6. Conclusion

The history of the Old Mortuary and Nature Study Museum can be summarised in five main phases:

1. Inception and Construction 1875-1877
2. Use as Mortuary 1877-c.1900
3. Use as Nature Study Museum 1904-1942
4. Dereliction 1942-2015
5. Hope for Conversion and Refurbishment 2015-

Its origin needs to be considered in the context of its landscape setting, in one of the first London churchyards to be converted to a public garden, as well as against the fast-paced and wide-reaching public health reforms sweeping through Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It is not known exactly when or why the building ceased to function as a mortuary between 1900 and 1904, but its rebirth as a municipal museum must surely rank as one of the strangest conversions in London's architectural history. War closed the museum twice, once in 1914 and again, permanently, in 1942. Its deterioration since closure is nearly total, but perhaps not surprising given the lack of any coherent conservation efforts. With the grant of the recent planning application there is hope for this charming little Victorian building to again undergo a bizarre metamorphosis and serve the local community once more.



Figure 28: Churchyard panorama facing East with nature study museum circled (Photo © Author)



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\* Most of the annual reports of the vestry from 1864 to 1900 were used in the production of this document. Even where not directly referenced they provided statistical information such as the number of bodies brought to the mortuary in a given year. For brevity in the bibliography, entries post-1864 are abbreviated to report number and year only.



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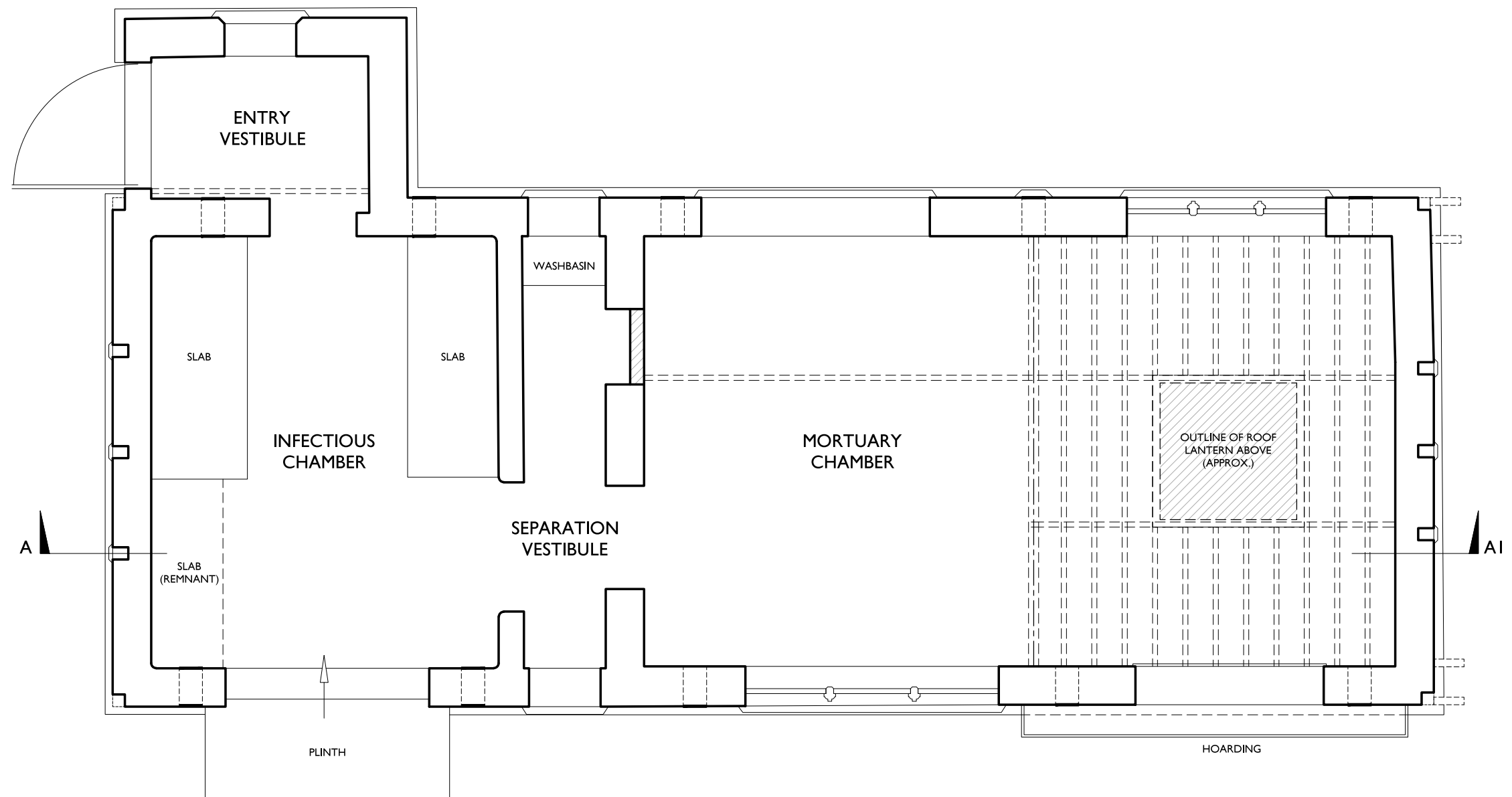
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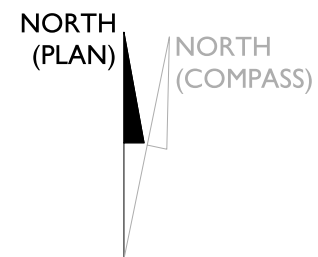
Appendix I: Drawings



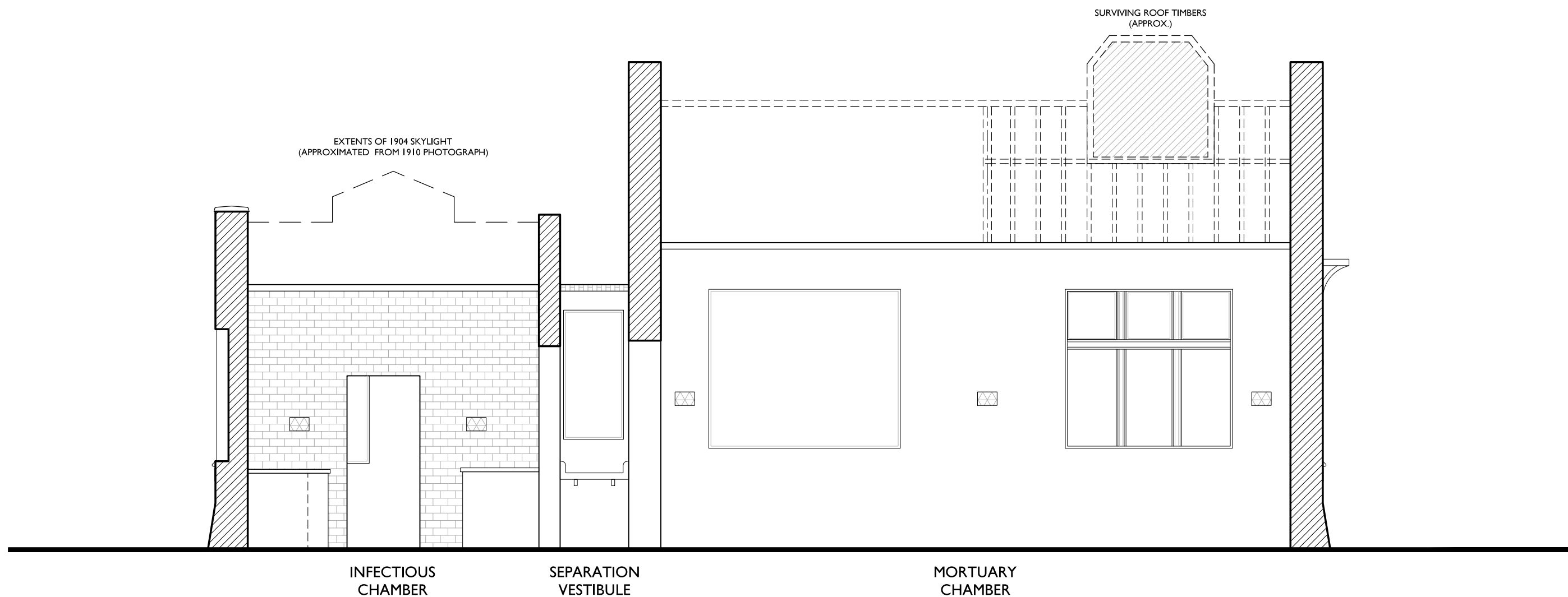


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NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE TQ 34824 80808

PLAN  
SCALE 1:50 @ A3  
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24 APRIL 2015







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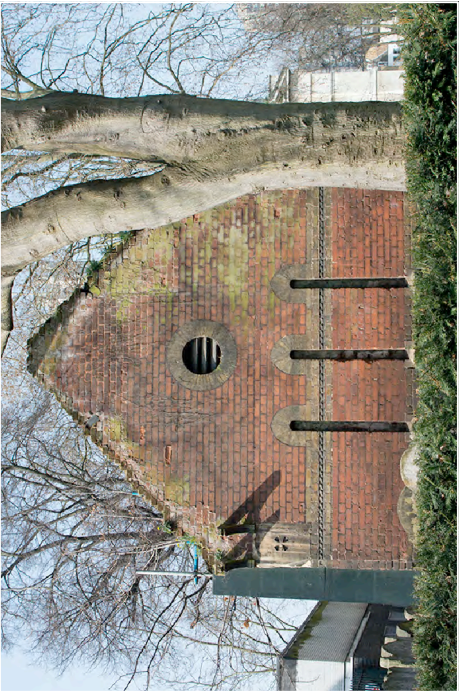
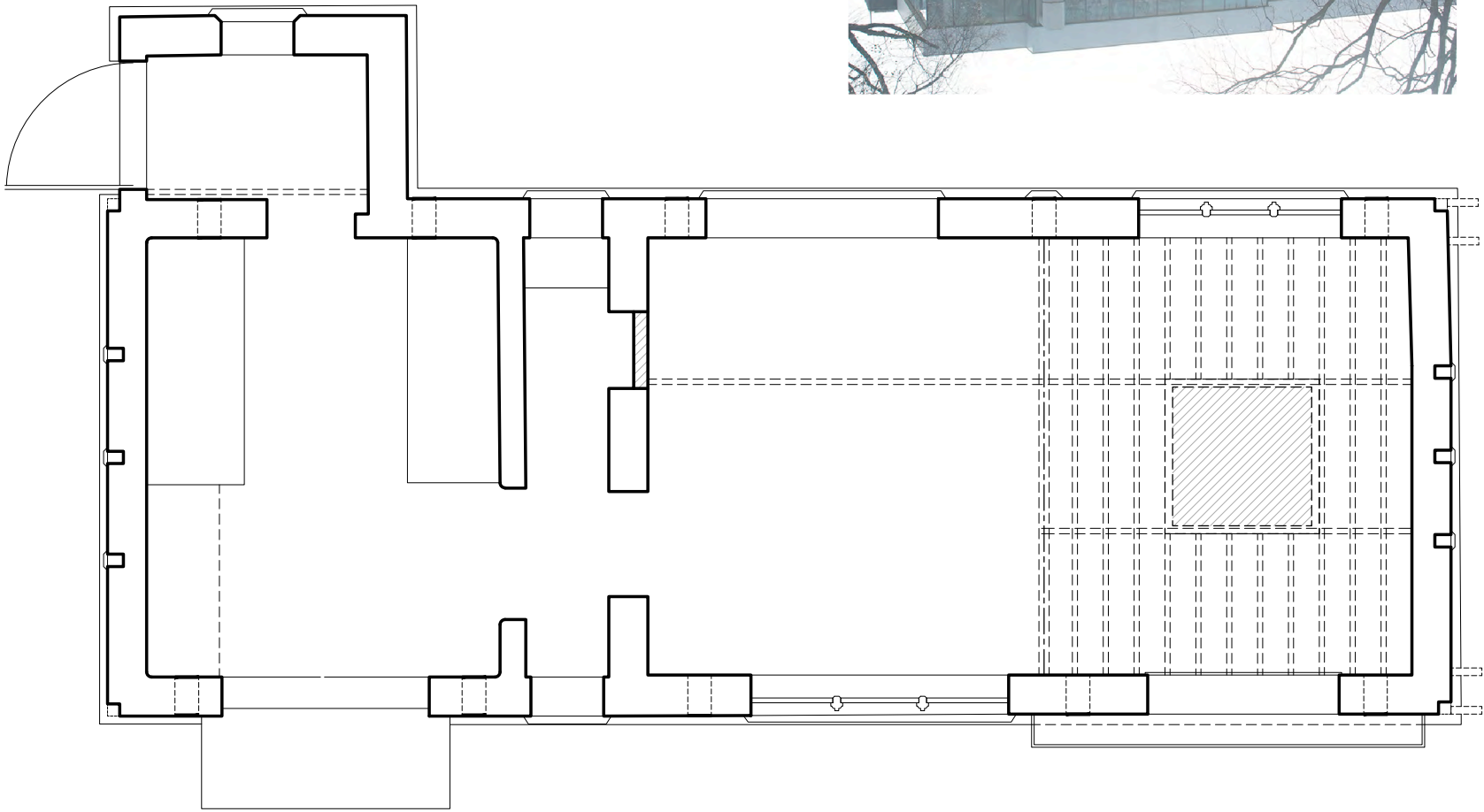
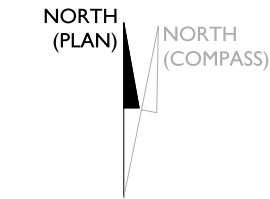
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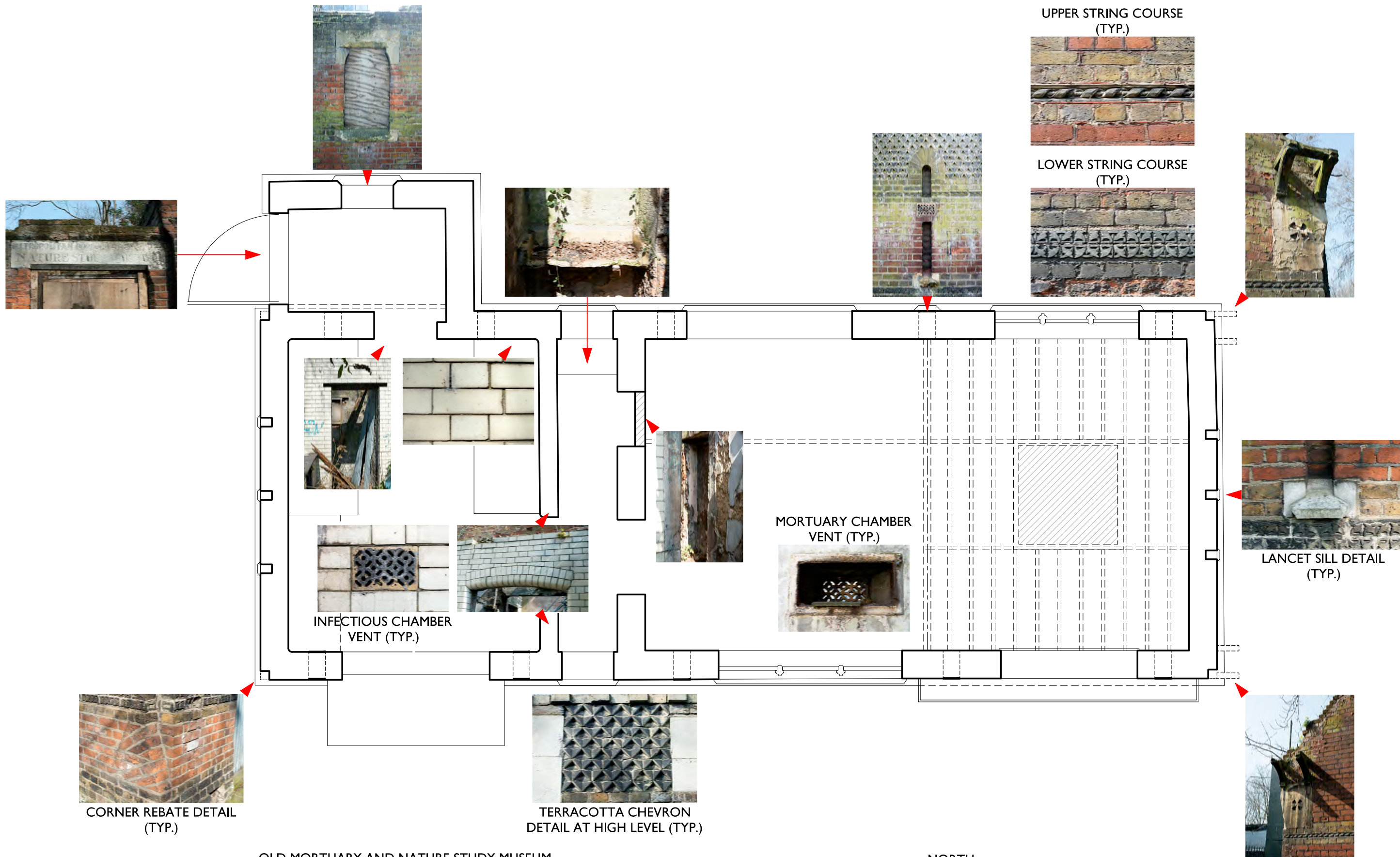
Appendix 2: Further Photographs

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PHOTO FOLD-DOWN ELEVATIONS  
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