

**THE SECOND WORLD WAR
AIR RAID SHELTER
AT SELSTED
CHURCH OF ENGLAND
PRIMARY SCHOOL
WOOTON LANE, SELSTED
DOVER, KENT**

A survey and report

Victor Smith

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**AN AIR RAID SHELTER AT
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DOVER, KENT
(NGR TR 2221.4461)**

Historic Building Survey

Victor Smith

INTRODUCTION

In December 2009, Mr. Kevin Bailey, Head Teacher of Selsted Church of England Primary School, Wooton Lane, Selsted, nr. Dover, Kent, asked the writer to undertake an historic building survey of a Second World War air raid shelter on the school premises. The work was undertaken in February 2010.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The survey was carried out in fulfilment of a requirement by Kent County Council for the historic recording of the shelter before its conversion into an art studio and a facility for extended school activities. Kent County Council provided a specification for the survey and report.

METHOD

The following elements are included in this report:

- A measured survey to create a set of drawings
- A photographic survey
- A limited study of readily available documentary sources
- A written survey

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The shelter formed part of extensive civil defence preparations made during the period immediately before and during the Second World War for the protection of the population and of the personnel of military and infrastructural assets against the threat of German air bombardment. The origins of these measures may be traced to the first preparations in 1935, followed by the Civil Defence Acts of 1937 and 1939, with associated statutory instruments, regulations and guidance.

An Air Raid Precautions map of Kent dated 1st April 1939, shows that the county was then divided into four categories of perceived vulnerability to air attacks. In descending order these were:

1. Shelter Areas (those within which there was priority for shelter protection)
2. Group 'A' (a vulnerable area but one without a stated need for shelter protection)
3. Group 'B' (ditto)
4. No vulnerability stated

Selsted was within a Group 'B' area and, under the assumptions of April 1939, only schools in shelter areas would have received them. Schools outside those areas would have been initially advised to tape windows against bomb blast and, in other respects, adopt the precautions at a low level specified in the advice of the Ministry of Home Security to householders. However, as the war progressed there was an expansion of the areas for which shelter protection was given. Selsted was just 3 miles away from RAF Hawkinge, which came to be attacked during the war, and the areas around it were at risk.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Selsted School was called the Swingfield, Wooton and Denton Church of England School, indicating its general catchment area. The number of children then at the school is unknown but in January 1938 it had been 61. The school was closed during the summer holidays in 1939 and for the first two weeks of September, reopening on the 19th of that month. It was then the recipient of fifteen children from Richmond School, Gillingham who had perhaps been evacuated on account of the Medway Towns having the highest vulnerability to air attack. The number of children at the school in January 1940 was 77. By end of May 1940 most of the children from Gillingham had departed to be followed by the last six on the 31st of the month, scheduled to go to South Wales on 2nd June, although part of their destination area was itself to become a target for German bombing.

Although in the first 6 months of the war there was little air bombing of Britain contingency arrangements must have been in place for the children at Selsted school to take cover during an air raid alert, if only by ducking under their desks. The threat and reality of bombing increased during the summer of 1940 and the Battle of Britain, when German airfields were closer, now just behind the French coast. Parents and managers (the term used at the time for school governors) were clearly becoming anxious about the frequency of air raids in the vicinity, and during them, the presence of flying 'pieces of shrapnel' and the use of 'machine-gun bullets'. This led to the holding of a public meeting at the school on the evening of 25th July 1940 to discuss these concerns. A resolution was passed unanimously, asking Kent Education Committee to consider the question of a shelter, and one was subsequently provided. This is one of a growing number of instances now becoming known in which school shelters were built only after persuasion by the parents and management of the school concerned.

The date of the shelter's construction is not precisely known, the only reference to it in the school logbook being one of 14th July 1941 which noted that workmen came to point its bricks. This could have been either to finishing the construction of the shelter or work to a structure already existing.

By January 1942 there was an increase to 98 children at the school. The reason for this is not known. The threat of gas warfare remained and on June 11th of this year two members of the Elham Rural District Air Raid Precautions organisation came to examine the children's gas masks and to change the faulty ones.

In January 1943 the occupancy of the school was only slightly down at 95 and diminished to 91 in January 1944. From the summer of 1944 there were new risks arising from the German V1 offensive. Perhaps as a result of this, on the 22nd August 1944 the children were assembled at the school, to be given leaflets to take home inviting parents to have their children evacuated to a safer area if they so wished. The Head Teacher and assistant teachers were present on the following day, the 23rd to register any requests for this but there were none.

By January 1945 the occupancy of the school had declined to 86. To mark and celebrate VE Day, on 8th and 9th May, the children were given two days holiday. The air raid shelter had probably already been decommissioned.

Thereafter the use to which the shelter was put appears uncertain. Typically, shelters became used for school storage. For this and other possible potential purposes they were often viewed as being too valuable a resource to be knocked down. Seemingly in the early post-war period the shelter was used for the storage of garden tools. Perhaps it was then that the outer airlock frames at either end of the shelter were replaced with a vertical frame on which were hung single leaf latticed doors, one of which was later covered in board. From 1971 the northern half of the shelter was used as a changing room for a newly built school swimming pool, the floor being tiled in the process.

Subsequently, the central dividing wall of the shelter was demolished, presumably to create a larger usable space. The eastern long wall of the shelter was breached with metal-framed rectangular windows. More recently these were replaced with timber-framed ones. As part of the current project for creating an art studio the structurally unsound northern end of the shelter has been demolished and a large glass door for disabled entry inserted.

The tables and benches along the inside of the eastern long wall as well as the other items stored inside the shelter have appeared since about 2000.

DESCRIPTION (see plans and plates)

The north-south orientated air raid shelter was erected just 10 m away from the Victorian school, from which it was reached up a short staircase. It is a single-storey rectangular surface building of yellow and red brick having a poured concrete floor. Entrances near either end of its long east wall led in either case through an airlock to the inside of the shelter which was divided into two rooms by a once-existing transverse central wall. Through this there had been a connecting opening. In either case the end walls of the shelter enclosed a latrine.

Externally the building measures 15.2 m x 3.65 m with an internal height of 2.15 m, and a roof of an uncertain thickness because a timber frame on which is fixed an asphalt-sheet covering obscures the evidence. Following the line of the underlying concrete, the top of the roof slopes from the front elevation to drain off at the rear. The shelter's 34-cm thick walls are constructed in English Bond. Other than its two entrances and several gas-proofed air vents the external walls were unrelieved by openings, the four windows in the south wall and the door in the east end wall being post-war interventions.

Neither entrance to the shelter was originally closed with a door, only an outward sloping timber airlock frame, from whose lintel was to be unfolded and lowered when needed during a gas attack a chemically impregnated fabric gas screen. The scar lines of where the frame had been fixed may be seen. In the opening from the right-hand turn from either entranceway into the interior of the shelter a second sloping frame was fitted. In both cases this has survived. The latrines, entered from the airlocks, had two positions in each, one to the right and left of their entrances. The northern latrine was removed with the demolition of the northern end of the shelter but the southern one survives and retains a tubular steel runner for a privacy screen. The latrines would have been provided with steel Elsan toilet buckets. The brick sleepers in the west cubicle of the surviving latrine are thought to have originated as supports for a post-war pottery kiln.

The shelter's dividing wall and its connecting opening to either shelter room are traceable as a scarline on the floor and the ceiling. The interior wall faces may originally have been unpainted, the present decoration of walls and ceiling being of post-war date. A notable example is the southwest internal wall, decorated in 1981, in commemoration of the marriage of the late Princess Diana and Prince Charles. There is some surviving evidence that the ceiling was originally whitewashed for reflection of light. The floor of the eastern room presents with a covering of white tiles, a legacy of having been used as the changing room for the school swimming pool. The two ventilating apertures in the long west wall and the one surviving one in the east wall display traces of their internal wooden frames and doors, the latter being fitted with a lining of felt which formed a gas-tight seal when closed and locked into position. A fourth ventilating aperture survives in the latrine. It is probable that the shelter was provided with electric light and there are possible traces of the fixings of a Second World War cable run along the centre of the ceiling and on the two end walls of the shelter rooms. Hurricane lanterns were provided for emergency lighting and at the junction of the walls with the ceilings are several L-shaped steel brackets on which they could be hung.

All electrical circuits, power points, consumer units and lighting are of late post-war date.

There is no clear evidence of there having been fixed seating for the shelter's occupants. Seating may have been provided in the form moveable timber benches or chairs, an approach typical of many other school shelters.

Finally, a number of vertical or near-vertical hairline cracks may be seen in the walls at the northern end of the shelter, implying that some degree of subsidence has taken place, more serious at the former northern extremity, resulting in its earlier demolition.

DISCUSSION

General

The shelter is a typical example of the many surface air raid shelters built on school premises during the Second World War. Its design is also similar to the profusion of shelters built in streets and in other areas for the general civilian community.

The thickness of walls met Ministry of Home Security standards for protection, which had been worked out by scientific experiment in pre-War years. Although because of the obscuring presence of later roof coverings the thickness of the concrete roof is uncertain, 25 cm was not uncommon.

The shelter would have provided adequate security against splinters and blast from a bomb exploding nearby but a direct hit might have killed everyone inside. In a general civilian context this design of shelter initially attracted a poor reputation. This was because such shelters built in London had performed poorly during the raids of 1940, apparently on account of the mortar used for the bonding of bricks.

The provision of airlocks and gas-sealed doors for ventilators reflected the possibility of communities having to face attack with airdropped gas bombs or sprays, although this did not happen. However, against the possibility of such an attack, children and teachers were also issued with gas masks. Typically, teachers were given some degree of anti-gas training and, just as with a fire evacuation drill, both they and the school children would have been practiced in transferring to the shelter from the school, going through and securing the airlocks, and in putting on their gas masks. If gas attack had been a feature of air raids on Britain resources might have been found for better airlock protection and protective arrangements. As air raids did not employ the use of gas, children and teachers would have occupied the shelter without wearing their masks but having them with them as a precaution.

Logbook entries for the school do not appear to record the frequency of raids which might have led to a need to occupy the shelter. Moving into the shelter would have been a consequence of a general air raid warning alert for the area in which the school was situated. It is probable that occupation of the shelter was not infrequent, although the school is not known to have been bombed. Although there are recorded instances of schools being bombed and strafed this is not known to have been a policy of the German air force and, where occurring, seems to have been impromptu acts of individual pilots. For the most part bombing of schools appears to have been accidental, either because of poor bomb-aiming at another target or the result of the random unloading bombs by enemy raiders being turned back by air defence fighters before they could reach their targets.

Air raids could be disrupting to education but when school children were ordered into air raid shelters it was intended that some degree of teaching should take place. This was difficult in the narrow covered trench shelters at some schools but easier within a larger space such as at Selsted. It is not yet known how much teaching was undertaken in the Selsted school shelter but typically a blackboard would have been provided and perhaps bench seating or individual chairs for the children. Both types of seating are recorded in interior photographs of other surface shelters during

wartime years. From informal discussion between the writer and several teachers and wartime school children in other areas, teaching using the blackboard was typically arithmetic and spelling. Teachers might also read stories to the children or lead them in singing. From recollections of a former pupil, the girls hated the Selsted shelter because of its smell, but the boys were less concerned.

By local arrangement school shelters were sometimes made available for use by nearby residents in out of school hours. It is not known whether this was the case for the Selsted school shelter or even whether there were such local residents close enough to use it who did not already have shelter protection within or next to their homes.

For the most part school air raid shelters survived the post-1945 rush to demolish wartime military and civil defence structures. As has already been noted they could be too useful to be without, especially the surface shelters which could be employed for a variety of purposes, not only as stores for the school but as spaces for teaching. Breaching of shelter walls for windows to admit daylight could occur in either case.

During the Cold War when the possibility of shelter provision for the population was being considered it was noted that the greatest numbers of wartime shelters remaining in public ownership were in schools.

Historic value

The survey of the air raid shelter has been helpful in contributing to the wider historic record of shelters, whether for schools or in the broader civilian and military sector.

Because of its typical design and the significant interventions that have been made (removal of its central dividing wall, demolition of its northern end and the insertion of modern windows and a door) the shelter has limited remaining structural historical value. In that context further interventions proposed by the school hardly matter.

Nevertheless, the school have recognised that the space within the historic setting presented by the interior of the shelter offers an opportunity for teaching and discussing with the children the Second World War, air raids and shelters. It would also be feasible to recreate one of the rolled up anti-gas curtains, which could be fixed to the lintel of a surviving inner airlock frame and lowered to demonstrate how it was to work.

SOURCES

Extracts from the logbook for Swingfield, Wooton and Denton School from June 1926-February 1971 (EKA C/ES363/1/4), consulted and transcribed by Kevin Bailey.

Air Raid Precautions – Vulnerable and Shelter Areas – Map of the County of Kent as at 1st April 1939, in the collection of the Centre for Kentish Studies.

W.L. Platts, Kent – *The County Administration in War, 1939-1945*, Kent County Council (1946).

Discussion of civil defence in Basil Collier, *The Defence of the United Kingdom*, HMSO (1957).

Recollections of Ms June Bayly and Ms Joyce Calthorp.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FIGURES AND PLATES

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Fig. 1 Location map

Fig. 2 Plan and elevations

Fig. 3 Isometric view of the inner airlock frame at the north end of the shelter

Plates

1. The eastern elevation of the shelter, viewed from the south-east
2. The eastern elevation from the north-east
3. South entrance in the eastern elevation
4. North entrance
5. Later window insertion in eastern elevation
6. Western elevation from the south-west
7. South-western corner of the shelter
8. Northern elevation containing the disabled entrance, viewed from the north-east
9. The interior of the shelter looking north
10. The interior looking south
11. Inner airlock frame at the northern end of the shelter
12. Upper part of the same
13. Scarline of the vanished outer airlock frame at the northern end of the shelter
14. Inner airlock frame at the southern end of the shelter
15. One of the brackets for the hanging of an emergency lantern
16. The ceiling of the shelter at its junction with the demolished transverse wall
17. Entrance to the southern latrine, showing the tubular runners for the privacy screens and the air vent.

Fig. 1

The Second World War
air raid shelter
at Selsted C.E.
Primary School

Location map

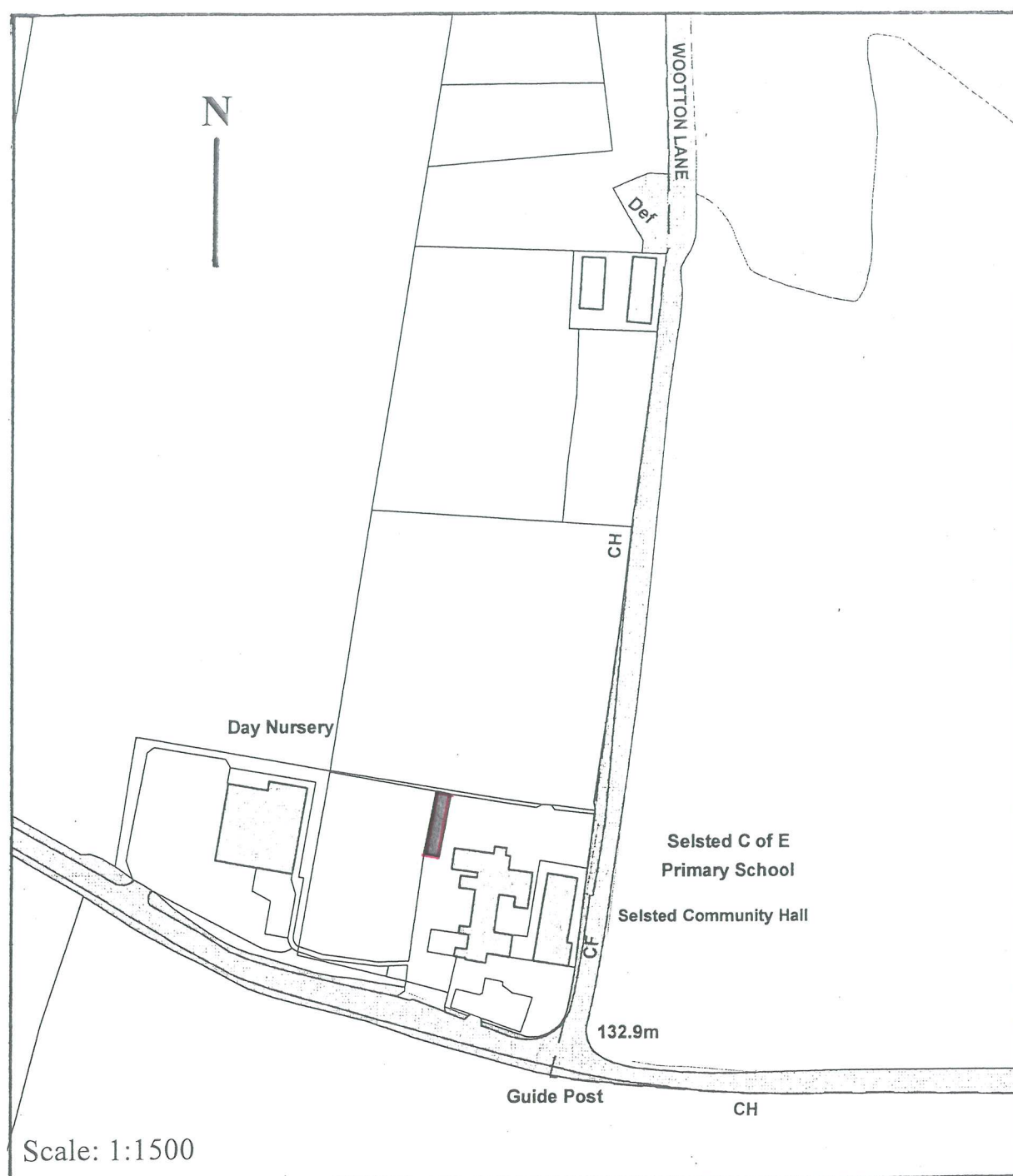


Fig. 2

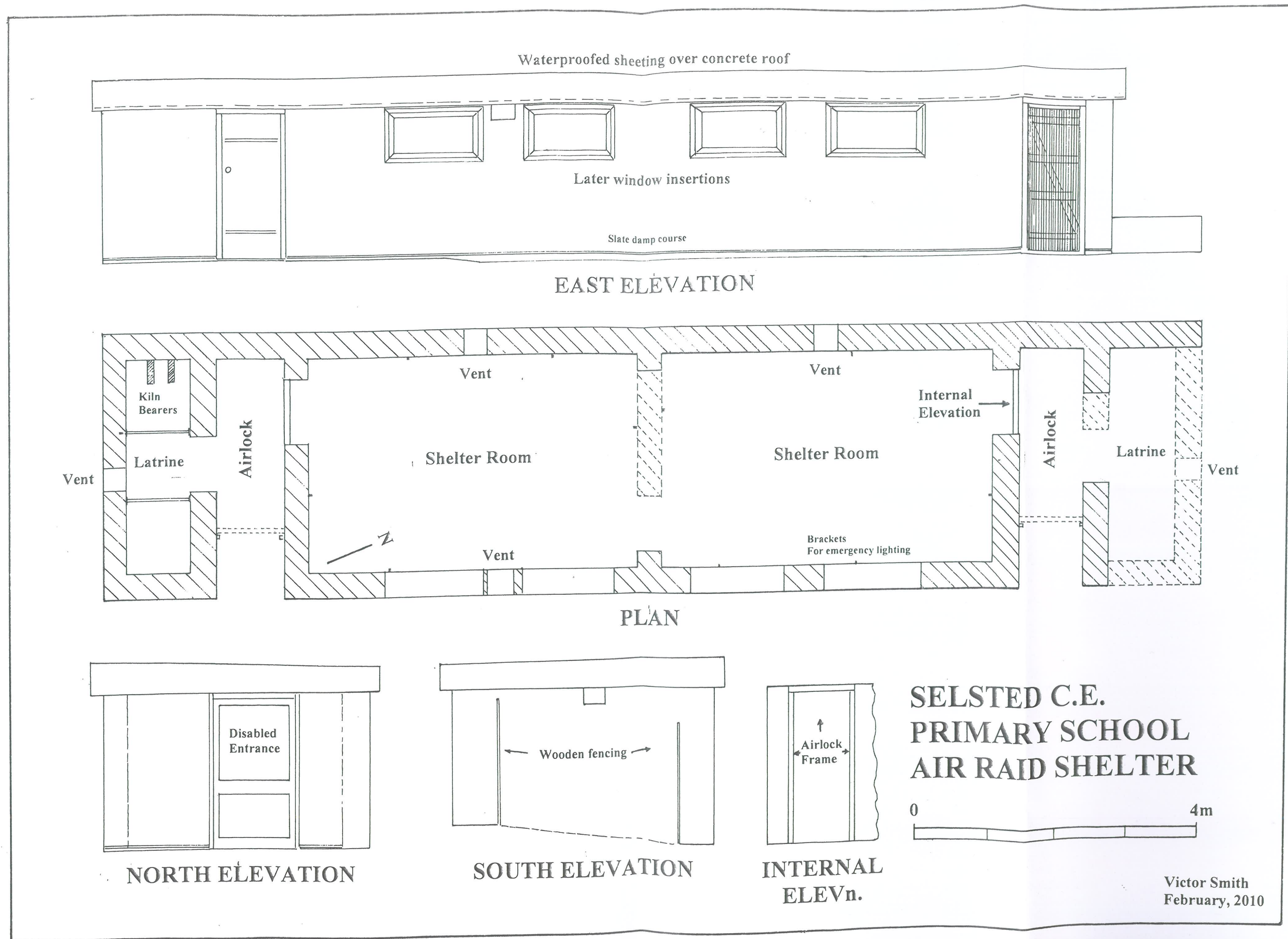
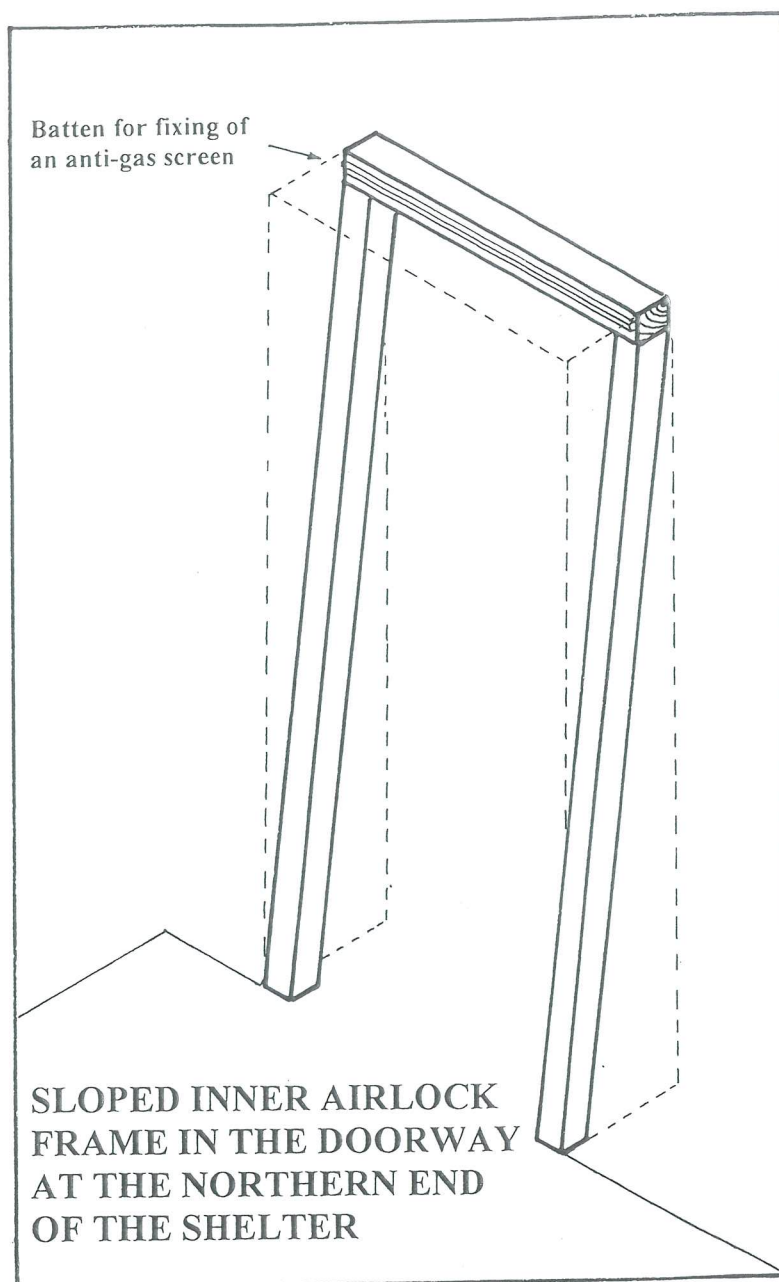


Fig. 2

Fig. 3





1. The eastern elevation of the shelter, viewed from the south-east.



2. The eastern elevation from the north-east.



3. South entrance in the eastern elevation.



4. North entrance.



5. Later window insertion in eastern elevation.



6. Western elevation from the south-west.



7. South-Western corner of the shelter.



8. Northern elevation containing the disabled entrance, viewed from the north-east



9. The interior of the shelter looking north.



10. The interior of the shelter looking south.



11. Inner airlock frame at the northern end of the shelter.



12. Upper part of the same.



13. Scarline of the vanished outer airlock frame at the northern end of the shelter.



14. Inner airlock frame at the southern end of the shelter



15. One of the brackets for the hanging of an emergency lantern.



16. The ceiling of the shelter at its junction with the demolished transverse wall



17. Entrance to the southern latrine, showing the tubular runners for the privacy screens and the air vent.