

ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
SERVICES  
DURHAM UNIVERSITY

on behalf of  
Northumberland County Council

Morpeth Leisure Centre  
Morpeth  
Northumberland

archaeological building recording

report 5136  
September 2019

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## **1. Summary**

### **The project**

- 1.1 This report presents the results of basic archaeological recording conducted in advance of the proposed demolition of Beechfield and The Willows, two houses on the site of the proposed Morpeth Leisure Centre, Gas House Lane, Morpeth, Northumberland. A photographic survey of the exterior of the houses has been carried out.
- 1.2 The works were commissioned by Northumberland County Council and conducted by Archaeological Services Durham University.

### **The buildings**

- 1.3 The houses were built as a near-identical pair in 1853 for Nicholas Wright and George Brummell, two prosperous Morpeth businessmen. They were private houses until the 1930s when they were purchased by Northumberland County Council. They were used by ARP personnel and the Red Cross during the Second World War, and subsequently by the Council. From the 1950s they were used by the Library Service.
- 1.4 Both house have been disused for some time and they are in a poor state of repair. A photographic survey of the exterior of both buildings has been carried out. No internal access was possible.

## 2. Project background

### Location (Figures 1 and 2)

- 2.1 The houses are on the south side of Gas House Lane, Morpeth, Northumberland. The Ordnance Survey grid reference is NZ 2025 8592. The site is irregular in plan and covers an area of approximately 0.86 ha. The River Wansbeck is to the south and Gas House Lane is to the north. Immediately west of the buildings is the site of the 1966 library building; this was demolished in 2017 and the site is used as a car park. On the east side of the site is a group of three 1990s bungalows known as The Willows.

### Development proposal

- 2.2 It is proposed that a leisure centre should be built on the site.

### Objective

- 2.3 The objective of the project was to provide a basic record of the buildings in their present state.

### Specification summary

- 2.4 The works have been undertaken in accordance with a written scheme of investigation provided by Archaeological Services Durham University and approved by the Northumberland County Council Conservation Team.

### Dates

- 2.5 The buildings were examined on 16th August and 5th September 2019. This report was prepared for September 2019.

### Personnel

- 2.6 Research, survey and report preparation work were carried out by Richard Annis, with assistance from Andy Platell. The illustrations were prepared by Janine Watson.

### Archive/OASIS

- 2.7 The project archive is currently held by Archaeological Services Durham University and will be transferred to the Great North Museum in due course. Archaeological Services Durham University is registered with the Online Access to the Index of archaeological investigationS project (OASIS). The OASIS ID number for this project is **archaeol3-366377**.

## 3. Landuse, topography and geology

### Landuse

- 3.1 At the time of this assessment, the proposed development area comprised car parking, two derelict Victorian buildings and three residential bungalows with open grounds. The surrounding land contains houses and flats, a medical centre and ambulance station, and car parks.

### Topography

- 3.2 The generally level site lies at approximately 25m above sea level and is within Natural England's Mid Northumberland (12) National Character Area. This area is described as a plateau of undulating farmland with a series of ridges and enclosed river valleys in the north and a flatter landscape in the south (Natural England 2013). The River Wansbeck is just to the south of the site and has been prone to flooding in

the past; recent flood alleviation works included the construction of a large embankment, about 12m wide, along the south side of the site.

### **Geology and soils**

- 3.3 The bedrock is Carboniferous mudstone, siltstone and sandstone of the Pennine Lower Coal Measures Formation. These rocks are overlain by river terrace deposits of gravel, sand and silt.

## **4. Historical and archaeological development**

- 4.1 The site's history has been set out in an earlier assessment report (Archaeological Services 2019). This is summarised below.
- 4.2 The site lies a little to the east of the historic centre of the town. The earliest plan of Morpeth is William Haiwarde's *Description of the Towne and Castell of Morpitte*, of 1604. This shows the site as open ground; it is labelled 'Borough', showing that it was a part of the town. The small triangular plot immediately to the west, now the Terrace car park, is labelled 'Tenter Green'. The leat is shown, with an unspecified mill close to the tenter green and a fulling mill at the downstream end. These names suggest that the area was used for work connected with Morpeth's textile businesses. The land just north of the proposed development area is marked 'Dobmill yards'.
- 4.3 John Wood's 1820 map of Morpeth show the site as an open field called Barker's Close; this was one of four fields in an area called Mill Island that was separated from the town by a mill leat. In 1828, this land was acquired by William Ord of Whitfield Hall. The tenant recorded on the tithe apportionment in 1843 was a Thomas Weightman. An indenture of 1853 (Northumberland Archives reference Q/C/D/19) records the sale of Barker's Close; this is the foundation date for the present buildings. The purchasers, Nicholas Wright and George Brummell, paid £500 for the 2½ acre (1.01ha) site. These men were prosperous citizens. The 1843 tithe apportionment records that Wright owned farmland to the north of Morpeth. He was a timber merchant, and served twice as Mayor of Morpeth; when he died in 1886, his estate was valued at £18,462 (NRO wills). George Brummell was a solicitor. Whellan's Directory of Northumberland listed George and Francis Brummell as clerks to the county, with premises at 15 Bridge Street (Whellan 1855, 755). Their practice was established in 1770 and is still at the same premises today, under the name Brummell Sample.
- 4.4 The Barker's Close plot was divided equally between the two buyers. The indenture stated that the land was to be occupied by two houses and would only be used for dwellings, with no commercial business to be carried out in the premises. The plan included in the indenture depicts the two identical houses with small structures attached on the north sides to the rear of the buildings. The properties were surrounded by boundaries which defined the former Barker's Close. Curved walls on Gas House Lane formed an entrance to a common drive. The document was signed and sealed in the presence of Francis Brummell, solicitor.
- 4.5 The gas works just east of the site were established in 1832. Wilson's 1884 *Handbook to Morpeth* recorded that "on the 19th of November, 1833, the Morpeth Gas Company commenced lighting the town with gas, to the great satisfaction of the

inhabitants". The land just north-west of the site, presently covered by flats, is shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map as a timber yard and a saw mill. The proximity of these sites to the rather grand new houses is typical of the development of the town at that time. A local history says that

"In Morpeth ... rich and poor still lived cheek by jowl in the mid-19th century. There were few socially homogeneous areas. Not one exclusively middle-class street can be identified before the 1850s ... only a very few of those active in the town's professional or business affairs lived outside the town" (Willis 1996, 85).

- 4.6 Something of the original arrangement of the houses can be seen from a 1910 auction catalogue (NRO ZSA/50/58G) for The Willows. This describes the property in three lots and includes a plan. The house and garden formed the principal lot; the other two lots were the gardener's house, coach house, stables and paddock, all on the north side of Gas House Lane. The catalogue provides this description of the house:

"The house contains, on the ground floor, an Entrance Hall; Drawing Room, 18' by 21' with white marble fireplace and large bay window opening onto the lawn; Dining Room, 18' by 21' with carved stone fireplace and similar bay window; Library, 17' by 16'; Kitchen, 17' by 16½' with close rage (Walker); Scullery with hot and cold water; Pantry and two store closets; Enclosed Yard with cart entrance, WC and usual conveniences. On the first floor, five large Bedrooms and Bathroom, full-length bath (Morrison's Patent) and lavatory basin with hot and cold water; two Servants' Bedrooms with separate staircase. Above are roomy Attics and in the Basement a Wine Cellar with brick-built bins. The rooms are spacious and lofty, with charming outlooks over gardens and fields. The sanitary conveniences and hot and cold water supply are up to modern requirements, and the whole is in excellent condition".

- 4.7 Steps led down from the bay windows to a terrace above a sunken lawn, with a large herbaceous border along the boundary with Beechfield. A rockery with a summer house ran along the south side, near the river; on the south-east side was a pond, a bog garden and a larger summer house. A timber verandah linked the south-east corner of the house with a glasshouse and vinery. North of this was an area of flower beds with a large trellis at the east side of the house. The sale catalogue says that the grounds had been laid out by Backhouse and Sons of York.
- 4.8 The two houses were bought by Northumberland County Council in 1930 and for a time they were then under threat of demolition. In 1938 they found a new use, becoming the headquarters for the town's Air Raid Precautions service; they were also used by the Red Cross. Following the Second World War they were employed by the County Council for various uses and in 1952 they became the headquarters of the County Library Service. A modern public library was built on the west side of Beechfield in 1966. After suffering flood damage, the building was demolished in late 2017. In 1995, three care home bungalows were opened on the east half of the garden of The Willows.
- 4.9 The Willows and Beechfield have been derelict for some time. They were noted as 'historic buildings at risk' in the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan Heritage Group 2013 bulletin. Theft of lead and copper has caused damage to the roofs and interiors. A number of stones have fallen from the bay window copings on the south side.

## 5. The buildings

- 5.1 When the buildings were photographed their condition was poor. It was not possible to gain access to the interior of either. Two photographs were taken through a window in the south side of Beechfield. Parts of the south face of each house were concealed by vegetation; the yard behind The Willows was thickly overgrown but accessible. The owners have no recent plans of the buildings. The plans reproduced in this report are adapted from 1951 proposal drawings for electrical work in the buildings.
- 5.2 Flood embankments and trees restrict the view of the site from the Telford bridge, at the south entrance to the town centre (Photograph 1). The two houses are now only clearly seen from the west end of Gas House Lane, across the temporary car park that occupies the site of the 1960s library (Photograph 2). This area, together with the row of trees that separate the study area from the larger car park, were formerly part of the grounds of Beechfield, the western house. The recently enlarged flood embankment runs across the south side of the site behind some large trees; the one immediately south of Beechfield is, fittingly, a copper beech (Photograph 3). This is probably part of an early planting scheme. The site plan shows two houses, more or less mirror images of one another, separated by a shared yard (Photograph 4). The 1990s cul-de-sac at the east end of the site, formerly the garden of The Willows, is confusingly also named The Willows (Photograph 5).
- 5.3 The two houses were very similar, but not identical. The main part of each is a double-pile structure, exactly square in plan with two floors and a twin-gabled attic. The front doors opened into an open paved yard between the houses (Photograph 6). This had a shared central gate for vehicles at the north end, flanked by separate pedestrian entrances; a curved wall at the south end had two more gates leading to the gardens. This wall was replaced by a linking corridor before 1951. The gardens, originally divided by a hedge, are overgrown. Each house had a pair of bay windows looking onto the garden from the ground-floor reception rooms. The shape of these bays is the only significant difference between the main parts of the two buildings. The Beechfield windows are shallower than those on The Willows and the masonry is slightly different (Photograph 7).

### **Beechfield**

- 5.4 The masonry is brick in English Garden Wall bond, with a moulded plinth and projecting quoins. The mullioned windows have sandstone architraves; projecting lintel and sill bands run across the full width of each face, and a coved string course marks the roof line. The south face of the house (Photograph 8) has a crenellated stone parapet with gabled dormer windows to the attic. The mullioned first-floor windows have 4-over-4 pane sashes and the ground-floor bays are boarded up. The corridor that links the two houses is a utilitarian flat-roofed passage of rendered brick (Photograph 9). The entrance front is the east side; the details here are the same as on the other sides of the house (Photograph 10). The door has a moulded and rusticated surround and a bracketed hood (Photograph 11). The rear range has small windows onto the entrance yard and the mark of a later low shed on its north side (Photograph 12). There is a brick-walled service yard at the north-west corner (Photograph 13). The north face here has the features seen elsewhere, together with a touch of antiquarian detail in the shouldered lintels of the yard doors (Photographs 14, 15). The view from the west shows the pattern and detailing of the building most

clearly; this is the only view that shows the surviving tall octagonal chimneys (Photograph 16). On the ground floor, the central opening is a door. The roof scar of the 1960s building cuts across this and the windows at either side (Photograph 17). The ground level here is higher than at the south of the house, where the moulded plinth can be seen (Photograph 18). A broken window in the east bay allowed the only view of the interior of the house. The wall that once separated the drawing and dining rooms had been removed before 1951 and these are still one large open space. Two fireplaces remain here; the one at the west appears to have a timber surround while the one at the east has a plain surround of grey marble (Photographs 19, 20).

### The Willows

- 5.5 The house is very similar to Beechfield; apart from the bay windows, the south face is identical (Photograph 21). The east face is slightly different, in that there is a window rather than a door at the middle of the ground floor (Photograph 22). At the south-east corner, the outline of the wooden verandah that linked the house to the vinery can be seen (Photograph 23). The rear range has a 20th-century extension into the yard with a small cellar beneath it (Photographs 24, 25). The yard has a stone wall and a low shed with a hipped roof (Photographs 26, 27); this matches the mark on the wall of Beechfield, shown in Photograph 12. The entrance front of The Willows is the same as that of its neighbour, and the house has a similar door (Photographs 28-31). The rear range is slightly different, with two-light windows on the first floor and a door below (Photograph 32).

## 6. Sources and references

- Archaeological Services 2019 *Morpeth Leisure Centre, Gas House Lane, Morpeth, Northumberland: archaeological desk-based assessment*. Unpublished report 5061, on behalf of Northumberland County Council.
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- Willis, I, 1996 *Morpeth: a Northumbrian Town in the Nineteenth Century*. In T E Faulkner (ed.) *Northumbrian Panorama: Studies in the History and Culture of North-East England*. London: Octavian Press Ltd, 77-96.
- Wilson, D, 1884 *Handbook to Morpeth and Neighbourhood: illustrated with woodcuts*. Reprint 1996, Morpeth: Newgate Press.

## Appendix: Catalogue of photographs

The photographs were taken by Richard Annis on 16th August and 5th September 2019, using a Nikon D3300 digital SLR. Filenames are 01-31\_Morpeth\_Leisure\_Ctre\_5136.

No.	Subject
1	The site seen from the south end of the Telford bridge. The brick wall of The Willows can just be seen between the trees, left of centre; modern flood banks hide the former gardens
2	The site seen from the end of Gas House Lane, before the trees were removed. The car park was formerly part of the garden of Beechfield, the house shown here
3	The houses seen from the flood bank at the south-west corner of the former garden. Note the large old copper beech at the right. The small building left of the main block was the coach house and stable for The Willows
4	The south face of the two houses, showing the courtyard cut off by the modern link corridor
5	The view from the north-east. The brick bungalows are on the site of the garden for The Willows
6	The shared yard between the two houses. The wall is a 20th-century alteration. A view looking south
7	The different depths of the south-facing bay windows can be seen here. A view looking north-east
8	The south face of Beechfield. One light of the right-hand bay window is open; this allowed a limited view of the interior, shown in Photos 19 and 20
9	The 20th-century corridor between the two houses replaced a curved wall with gates at either end. A view looking north-west
10	The east face of Beechfield. The main entrance is left of centre. There are no first-floor windows in the service wing at the right
11	The front door of Beechfield
12	The service wing at the rear has the mark of a pitched roof for a vanished shed
13	The service yard at Beechfield. The brick wall seen here and in the previous is a 20th-century addition
14	The north wall and the yard
15	The east side of the service yard; note the difference in the treatment of the windows
16	The west face of Beechfield
17	The central door in Beechfield's west wall. Note the black roof scar and the joist sockets from the 1960s library
18	The moulded plinth at the south-west corner of the house
19	The former dining and drawing rooms at Beechfield, seen from the south-east
20	The marble fireplace in the former drawing room
21	The south face of The Willows
22	The east face has no central door, as seen in Photo 17
23	The outline of the later verandah at the south end of the wall shown above
24	A 20th-century extension in the service yard at The willows
25	Steps to a small cellar in the extension
26	The service yard at The Willows retains the original boundary wall and stone gate piers
27	The stone shed at the north end of the service yard; compare with the wall mark seen in Photo 12
28	The west face of The Willows

<b>No.</b>	<b>Subject</b>
29	Bushes and young trees hide the 20th-century corridor and mask the front door
30	The upper floors on the west face
31	The front door matches that of the opposite house
32	The service wing is different from its neighbour, opposite



Photograph 1: The site seen from the south end of the Telford bridge. The brick wall of The Willows can just be seen between the trees, left of centre; modern flood banks hide the former gardens



Photograph 2: The site seen from the end of Gas House Lane, before the trees were removed. The car park was formerly part of the garden of Beechfield, the house shown here



Photograph 3: The houses seen from the flood bank at the south-west corner of the former garden. Note the large old copper beech at the right. The small building left of the main block was the coach house and stable for The Willows



Photograph 4: The south face of the two houses, showing the courtyard cut off by the modern link corridor



Photograph 5: The view from the north-east. The brick bungalows are on the site of the garden for The Willows



Photograph 6: The shared yard between the two houses. The wall is a 20th-century alteration. A view looking south



Photograph 7: The different depths of the south-facing bay windows can be seen here. A view looking north-east



Photograph 8: The south face of Beechfield. One light of the right-hand bay window is open; this allowed a limited view of the interior, shown in Photos 19 and 20



Photograph 9: The 20th-century corridor between the two houses replaced a curved wall with gates at either end. A view looking north-west



Photograph 10: The east face of Beechfield. The main entrance is left of centre. There are no first-floor windows in the service wing at the right



Photograph 11 (left): The front door of Beechfield

Photograph 12 (below): The service wing at the rear has the mark of a pitched roof for a vanished shed





Photograph 13 (above): The service yard at Beechfield. The brick wall seen here and in the previous photograph is a 20th-century addition



Photograph 14 (left): The north wall and the yard



Photograph 15: The east side of the service yard; note the difference in the treatment of the windows



Photograph 16: The west face of Beechfield



Photograph 17: The central door in Beechfield's west wall. Note the black roof scar and the joist sockets from the 1960s library



Photograph 18: The moulded plinth at the south-west corner of the house



Photograph 19: The former dining and drawing rooms at Beechfield, seen from the south-east



Photograph 20: The marble fireplace in the former drawing room



Photograph 21: The south face of The Willows



Photograph 22: The east face has no central door, as seen in Photo 17



Photograph 23: The outline of the later verandah at the south end of the wall shown above



Photograph 24: A 20th-century extension in the service yard at The willows



Photograph 25: Steps to a small cellar in the extension



Photograph 26: The service yard at The Willows retains the original boundary wall and stone gate piers



Photograph 27: The stone shed at the north end of the service yard; compare with the wall mark seen in Photo 12



Photograph 28: The west face of The Willows



Photograph 29: Bushes and young trees hide the 20th-century corridor and mask the front door



Photograph 30: The upper floors on the west face



Photograph 31: The front door matches that of the opposite house



Photograph 32: The service wing is different from its neighbour, opposite

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 site location

0  750m  
scale 1:15 000 for A4 plot

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Northumberland County Council

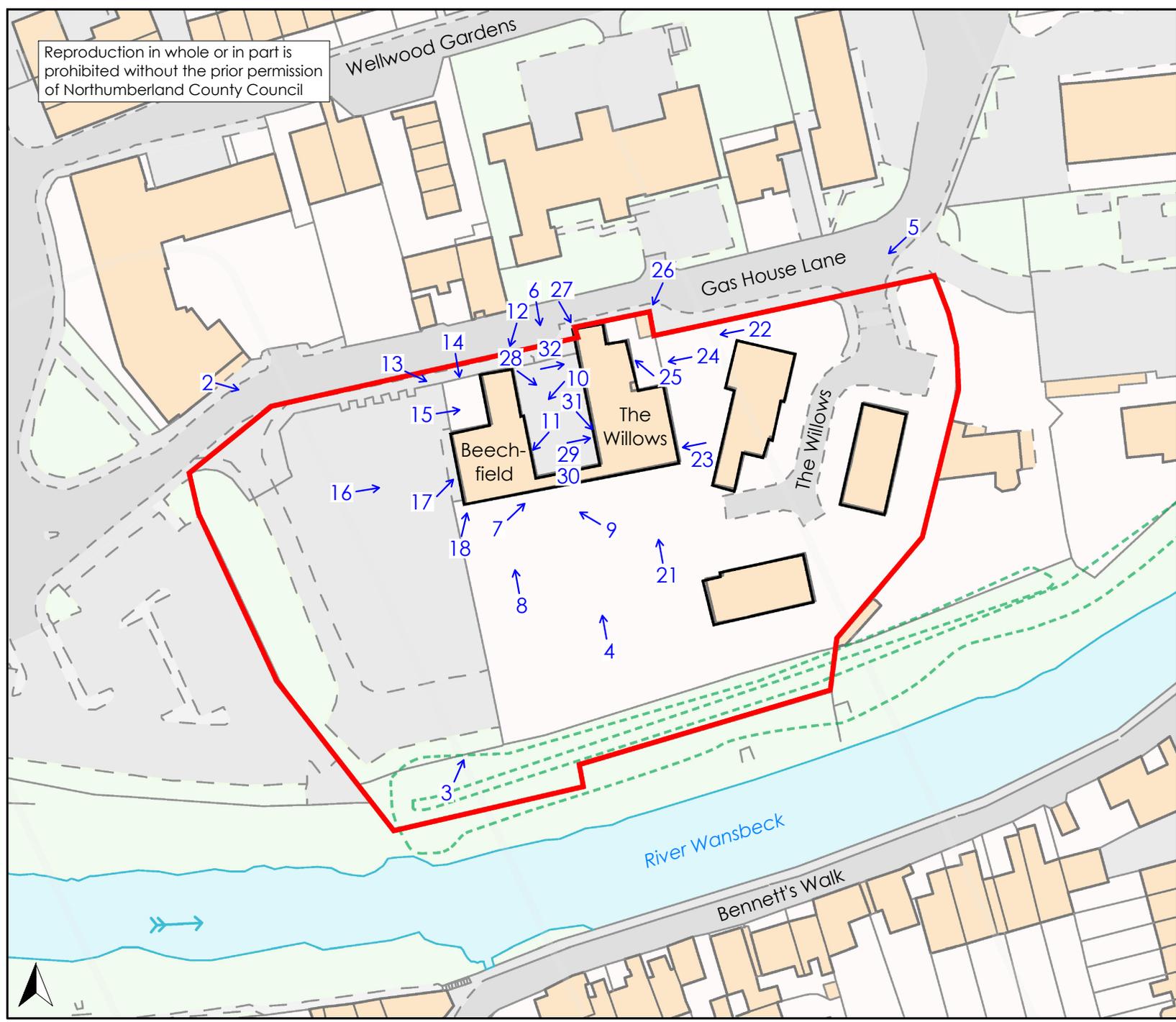
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Morpeth  
Northumberland

archaeological building recording  
report 5136

Figure 2: The site and the buildings



-  site boundary
-  photograph



River Wansbeck

Bennett's Walk

Gas House Lane

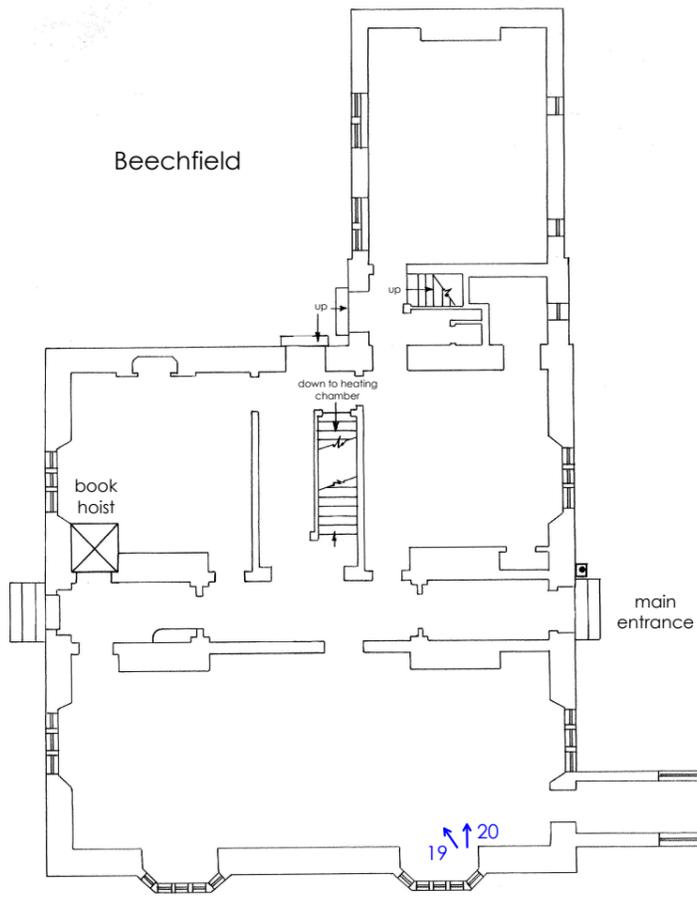
Wellwood Gardens

Beechfield

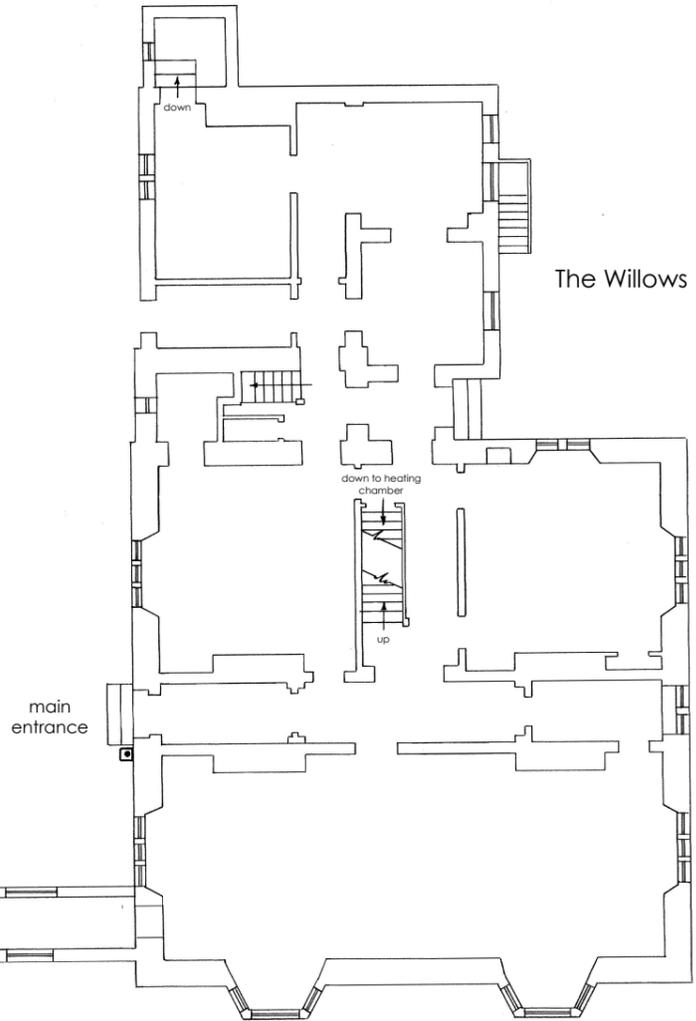
The Willows

The Willows

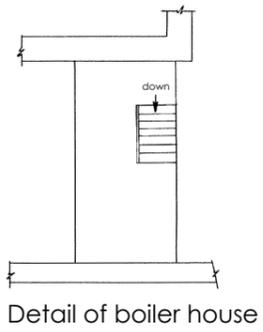
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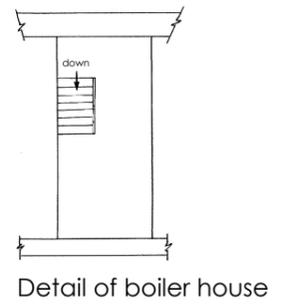
Ground floor plan



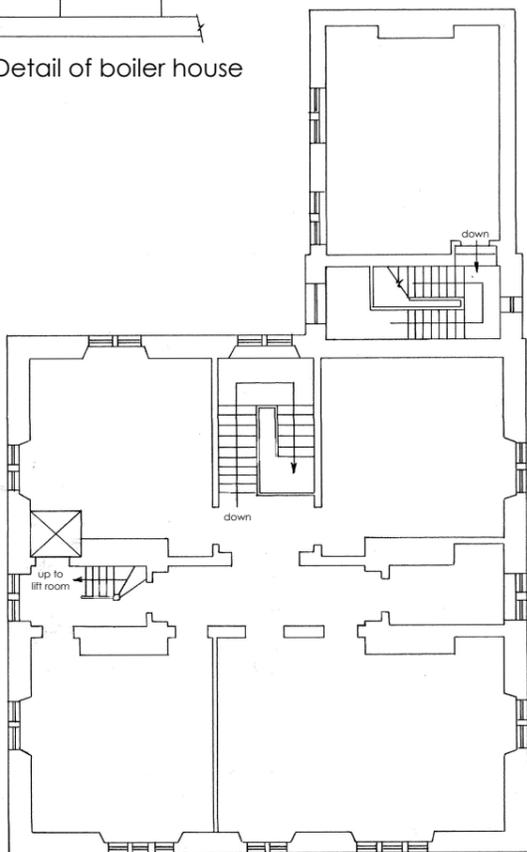
Ground floor plan



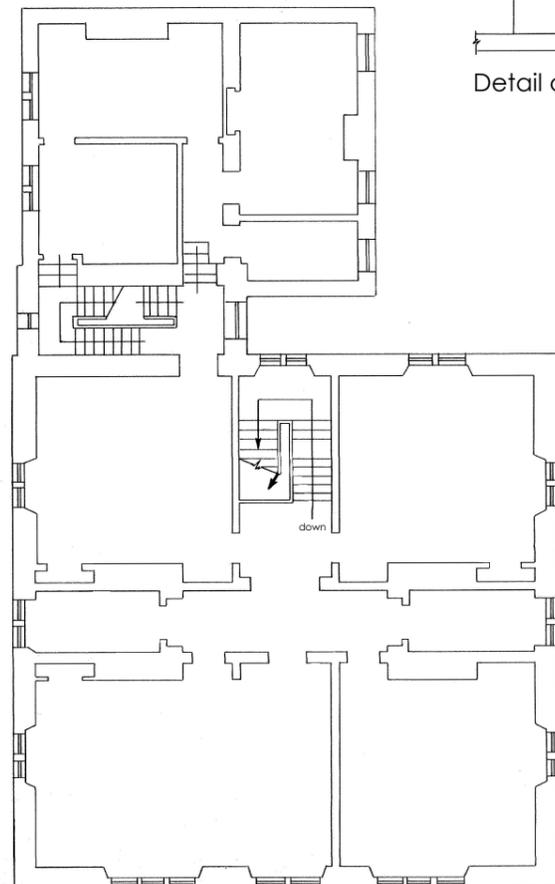
Detail of boiler house



Detail of boiler house



First floor plan



First floor plan

