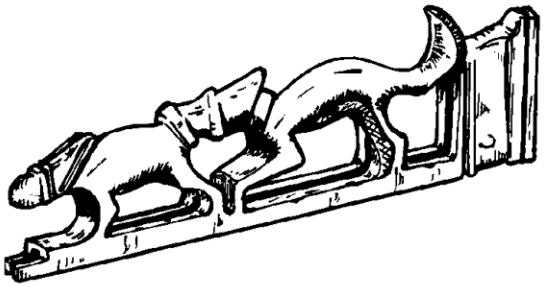
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

An Archaeological Evaluation of a World War II Air Raid Shelter at the Old Rectory, Hills End, Eversholt, Bedfordshire.

1997

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An Archaeological Evaluation of a World War II Air-raid Shelter at the Old Rectory, Hills End, Eversholt. SP 979 331.

Abstract.

A member of the society reported that he had a friend with an Anderson shelter in his garden, at the Old Rectory in Eversholt. The owner was interested to know why such a structure had been erected in a garden of a quiet country village in Bedfordshire. An initial investigation suggested that it was a high quality shelter, which should be fully recorded and its background researched.

1. The Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society carried out the evaluation in 1997 with the kind permission of the owners Mr. & Mrs. Peter Smith.
2. The structure, which had recently been thoroughly cleaned out, was built entirely underground in a bank covered by the garden lawn. Only the entrance, which consists of two blast walls either side of some concrete steps and a manhole set in the lawn, are visible.
3. The accommodation area was basically an Anderson shelter. It was remarkable however for the construction and layout of the entrance, its blast walls and the escape duct with a ladder and purpose built manhole. This constituted a much larger and secure structure than the domestic Anderson shelters found elsewhere in the area.
4. The site is in the garden of a Georgian Rectory at Hills End, Eversholt. The house and garden is shielded from the road by a high hedge and the area around is well wooded.
5. The Rectory, a private house since the 1920's, is large with three stories surrounded by stables and out buildings. The Duke of Bedford owned it as a part of the Woburn Estate during the Second World War.
6. It is situated beside a narrow country road within a half-mile of Woburn Park.

Method

The shelter was measured throughout and recorded. No attempt was made to ascertain the thickness of the shuttered concrete walls, as this would have entailed excavation and served little purpose. Photographs were taken of all relevant areas.

Observations on Site

The shelter was placed near to the house taking advantage of a garden layout that slopes naturally down from the South. Construction was probably carried out in a pre-dug trench and then covered on completion, blending it in with the rest of the garden. The whole structure is in a remarkably good state of preservation; the galvanised steel sheets show virtually no rust and the maker's name is clearly visible. A new door has been fitted at the bottom of the steps; presumably a similar door was there originally. No real evidence was available so it has not been recorded.

Escape Manhole Details

The manhole cover is 700 mm x 660 mm and hinged. It is perforated with eight air holes, which could be covered from below with a hinged, cast iron, door latched into position. Handles to assist lifting were included in the casting above and below. Four hand-operated levers, one at each corner, securely held down the cover from below. In an emergency a key could be used to open the cover from the outside. Cast into the top of the cover is the maker's name "Dudley & Dowell Ltd. Cradley Heath Staffs", AIR RAID SHELTER manhole, and patent No 1689/39.

Galvanised Steel Sheets

The heavy duty corrugated galvanised steel sheets were bolted together at the top by two rows of galvanised bolts 21mm across flats, 80 mm apart, each with a square sheet metal tab washer underneath the head. Eight bolts fix each sheet, which is 720 mm wide.

The sheets are marked BRITISH MADE with a drawing of a sheep and MERINO. All above the Home Office sign of H O.

Conclusions

From the patent number on the manhole cover it is reasonable to conclude that the structure was finished in 1939 or later during World War II.

It is in an area which the general population believed to be safe countryside and did not attract elaborate precautions against air attack. Even a small surface Anderson shelter in the garden was rare in rural Bedfordshire. This suggests that the Old Rectory had a special use to warrant a shelter of this quality.

It is now known that Woburn Abbey served as a headquarters for much secret work during the war and many war leaders including Mr. Winston Churchill, General Eisenhower and General de Gaulle were visitors. It is also known that big local houses were used to house important visitors overnight. The ownership of the property and its position relative to Woburn Abbey would support the association. A similar argument could be made for an association with Bletchley Park Cryptology Unit or even with both establishments.



Photo 1. Back view of the Old Rectory 1998. Taken from the earth bank covering the shelter. The escape manhole is bottom right.



Photo 2. Entrance to shelter, the decorative ironwork on the anti-blast walls is a later feature.



Photo 3. Concrete steps into the shelter. The entrance passage is to the left at the bottom of steps.

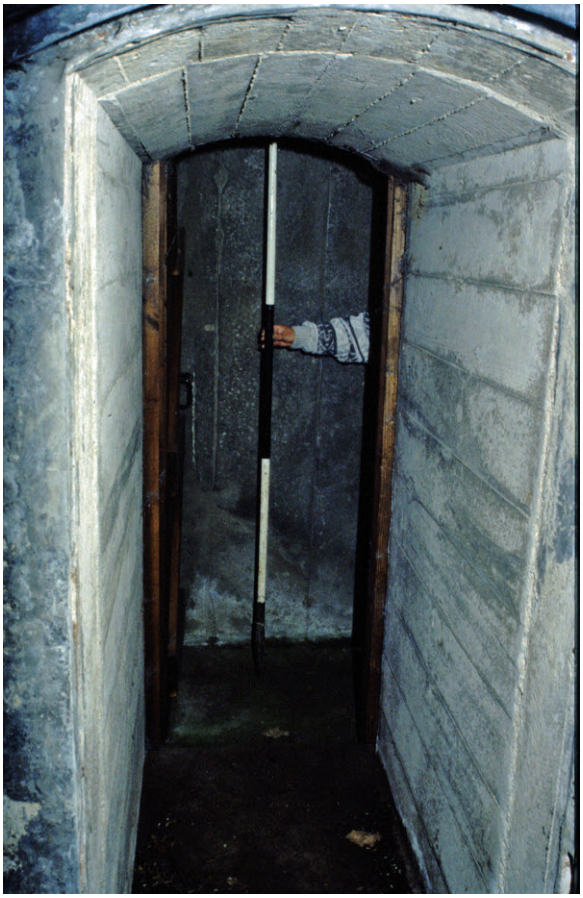


Photo 4. Entrance to main chamber, of concrete construction the signs of shuttering are clearly visible, it was obviously built in position.



Photo 5. Interior of main shelter, galvanised corrugated steel sheets bolted together at top to form the chamber. Set in the concrete wall the entrance to the escape hatch almost a metre from the floor.



Photo 6. Makers Trade Mark and Home Office Logo on the galvanised steel sheets.



Photo 7. Sump or drain cover just inside main chamber. The structure was remarkable dry.



Photo 8. Escape Hatch, again cast in shuttered concrete. An iron ladder set in the end wall.

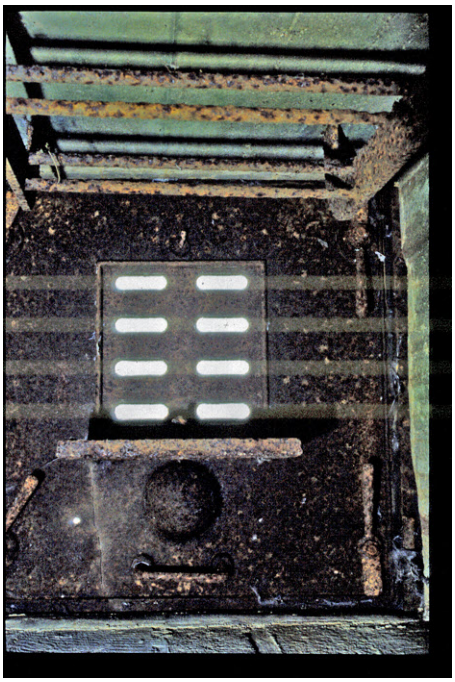


Photo 9. Escape manhole cover and shaft from below, showing four release handles for opening and an air vent that could be closed during air raids.



Photo 10. Purpose made manhole cover which can be opened from the outside with a key. AIR RAID SHELTER and the manufacturer's name and address were included in the casting



Photo 11. Shelter mound set in lawn, escape manhole in the foreground.

Since this report was first published in 1997 a remarkable book has been published by Bedford Chronicles written by Stephen Bunker, "*Spy Capital of Britain" Bedfordshire's Secret War 1939-1945.* Stephen found that the Old Rectory played an important part in the clandestine work carried out in Bedfordshire during the Second World War. In the early years it was the scene of many meetings to discuss and plan a psychological warfare campaign. One of the main organisers Reginald (Rex) Leeper who like Winston Churchill was an anti appeaser and spoke openly of his views as early as 1934; was moved from being Assistant Under Secretary at the Foreign Office where he headed up SO 1 (propaganda dept.) to Director of Country House H.Q. at Woburn. He lived in the Old Rectory with his wife and their ankle nipping dachshund Mitzi.

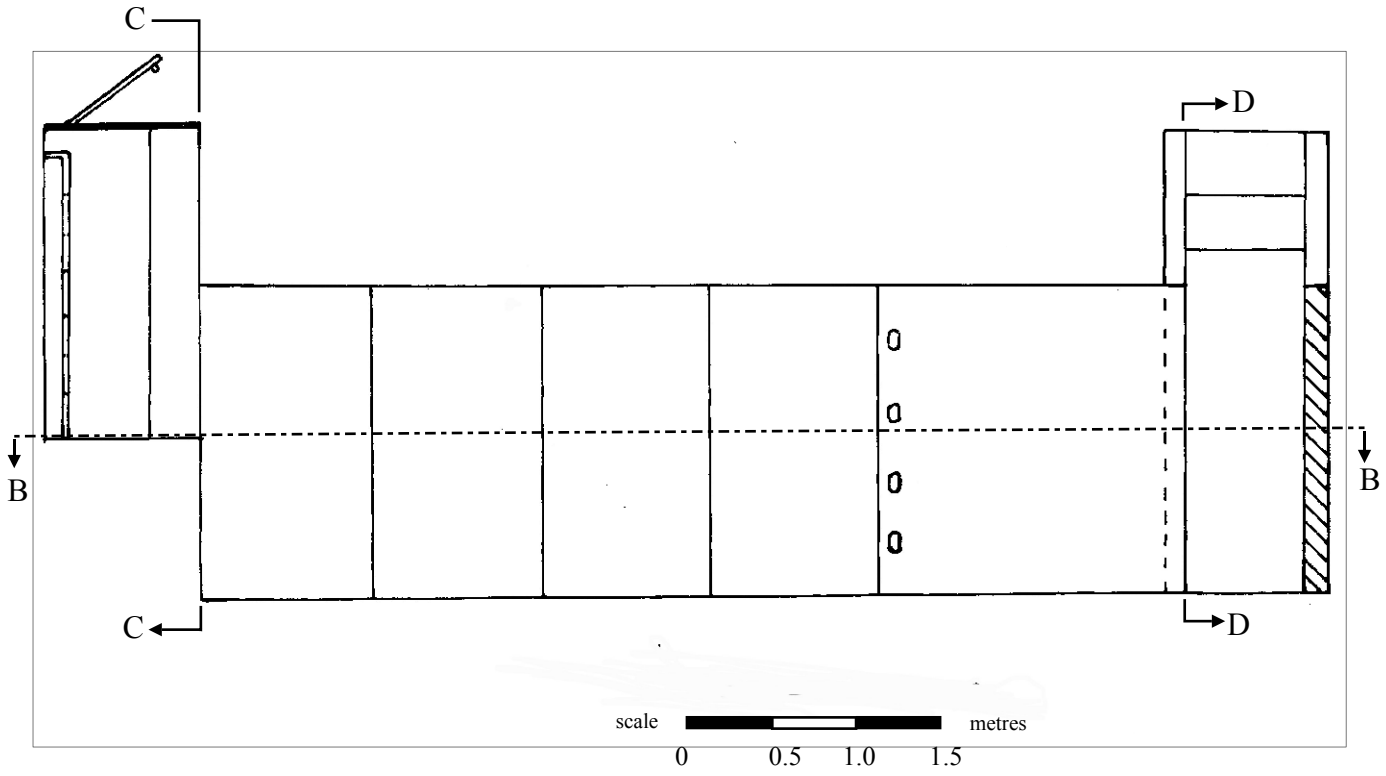


Fig 1 Front Elevation Section AA

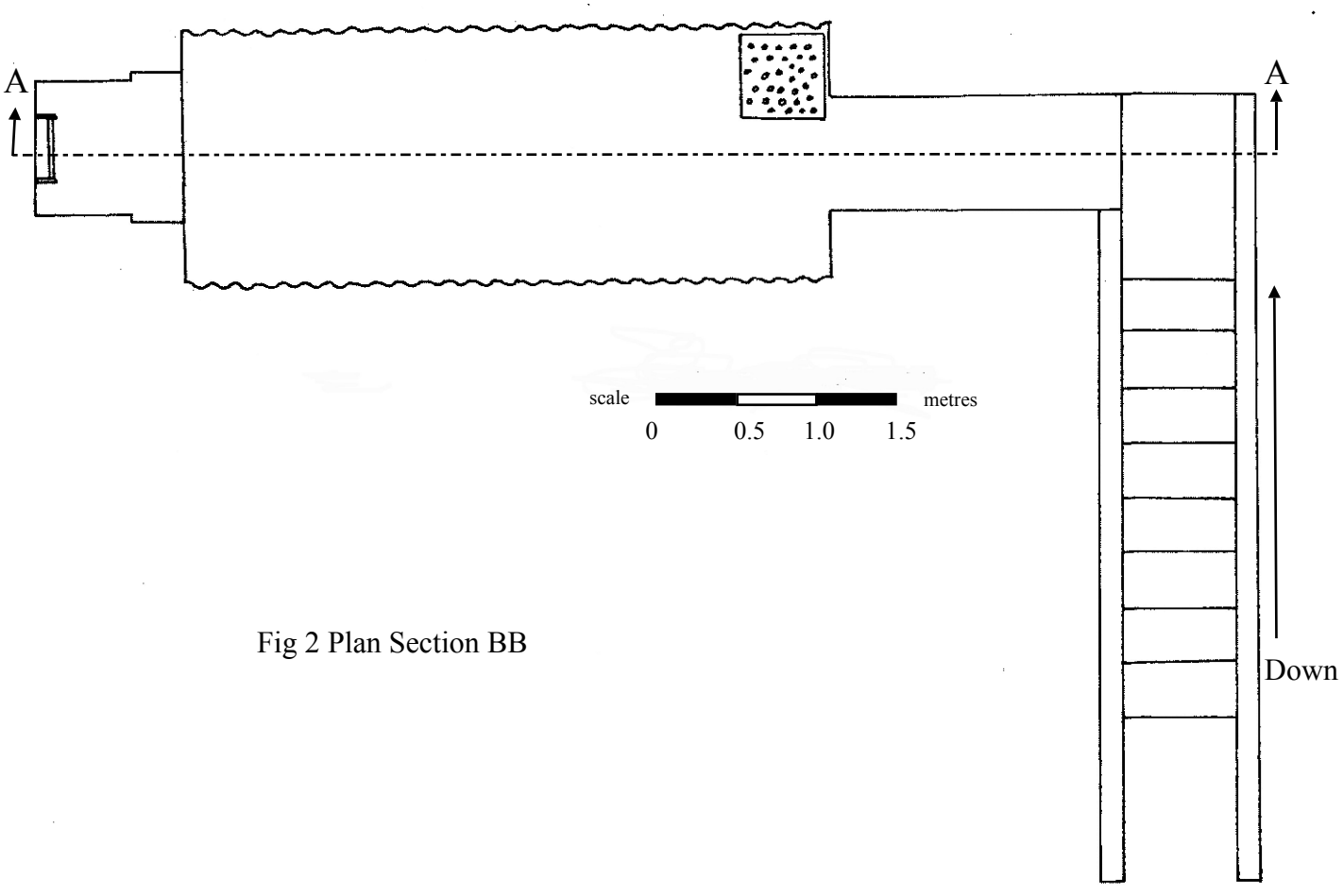


Fig 2 Plan Section BB

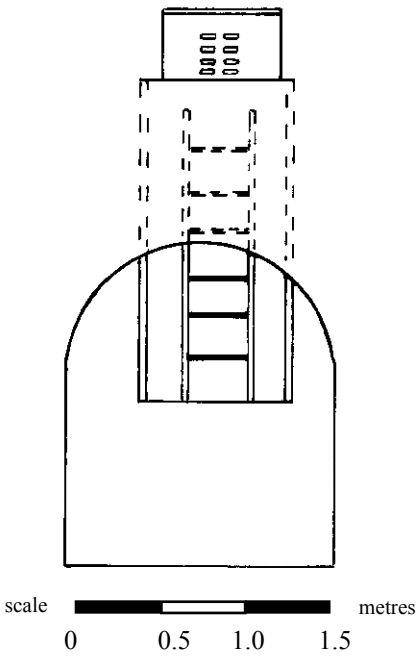


Fig 3 End Elevation Section CC

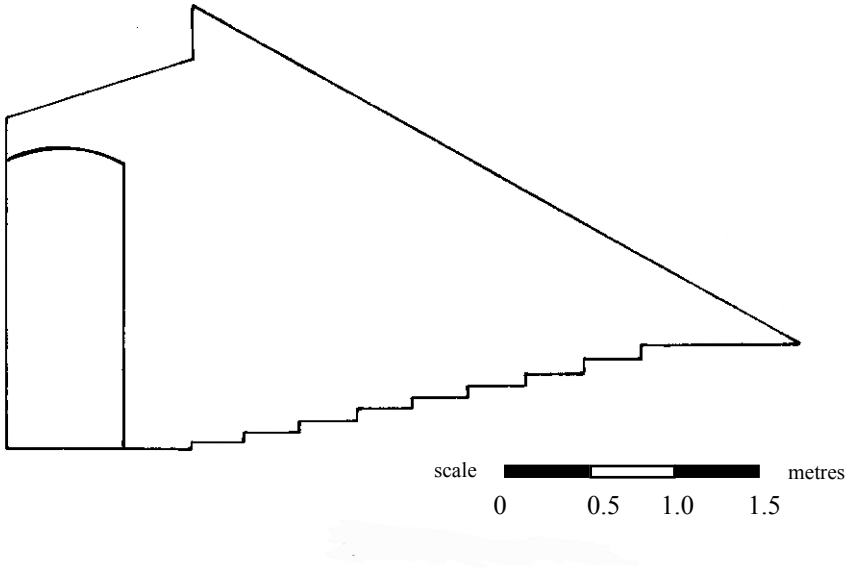


Fig 4 End Elevation Section DD

The Society is very grateful to Mr. & Mrs. P Smith for permission to investigate the Shelter in their lovely garden.
Also to Stephen Bunker whose book *"Spy Capital of Britain"* Bedfordshire's Secret War 1939-1945. ISBN 978-0-906020-03-6 gives credibility to our early assumptions.
All photographs were by the author.