THE POLYGON, SOUTHAMPTON – RECENT FIELDWORK

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ABSTRACT

The Polygon development in Southampton was begun in August 1768. It was the focus of a speculative development by the architect and builder, Jacob Leroux, and was designed on a grand scale to rival anything in Bath. Although it found initial favour with the aristocracy the development did not succeed. Bankruptcy and the lack of suitable tenants meant that the development was abandoned and the land sold off. At the end of the 19th century the surviving houses were converted into the building known as the Polygon Hotel.

During the course of 1999 the hotel was sold to Barratt Southampton who secured the recording of the hotel and the remains of the 18th-century buildings incorporated into the fabric of the modern building.

BACKGROUND

The Polygon development in Southampton was a dramatic example of an 18th-century suburban estate. It was in many respects typical of the estate developments of this period. As towns expanded along arterial roads, large areas of land remained unexploited and provided cheap development sites for speculators. Many of these sites were used for industrial development. However, a number were developed as housing estates. The estates were purpose-built and accessible from the main roads. Lying on the outskirts of towns, they were still seen as part of the urban core, providing the opportunity to combine the different pleasures and advantages of the town and countryside in modern houses that reflected the townsman's pursuit of suburban health and relaxation (Summerson 1962, 269–70). This does not mean that they were necessarily avant-garde, as that could be unpopular and ruin the business venture, but they were usually up-market developments, sometimes given the family name or title of the freeholder. (Summerson 1962, 281).

The Polygon fits into this pattern. Its existence depended to a considerable extent on the laying-out of a new turnpike road (now Commercial Road) just to the south. As the visitor's guides boasted, its situation 'commanded a most delightful prospect of Southampton Water as far Calshot Castle, with fine views of the New Forest and the town of Southampton ... and a distant view of the Isle of Wight' (Southampton Guide 1787, 79–80). Something of this situation can be glimpsed, however distortedly, in Figure 1.

The Polygon development is one of a number of suburban developments that had been built in Southampton from the 1720s onwards (Fig. 2). The earliest example of the new suburban estate was Bevois Mount Estate for the Earl of Peterborough dating from the 1720s. Other developments followed including the Belle Vue Estate created by Nathaniel St André (the court physician) in the 1760s; the Portswood Estate of General Stibbert from 1778; the Portswood Lodge property of Walter Taylor (1780s) and Bannister's Farm (created out of the Belle Vue Estate by William Fitzhugh in 1792). These developments all shared the characteristics of Georgian suburbia: rural views and a close proximity to the town (Summerson 1962, 269 – 270).

Nevertheless, in other respects, the Polygon was not a typical suburban development. The estate was designed in the form of a twelve-sided polygon with mansions located in the centre of each face. Gardens were located behind the mansions with a basin of water sited in the centre of
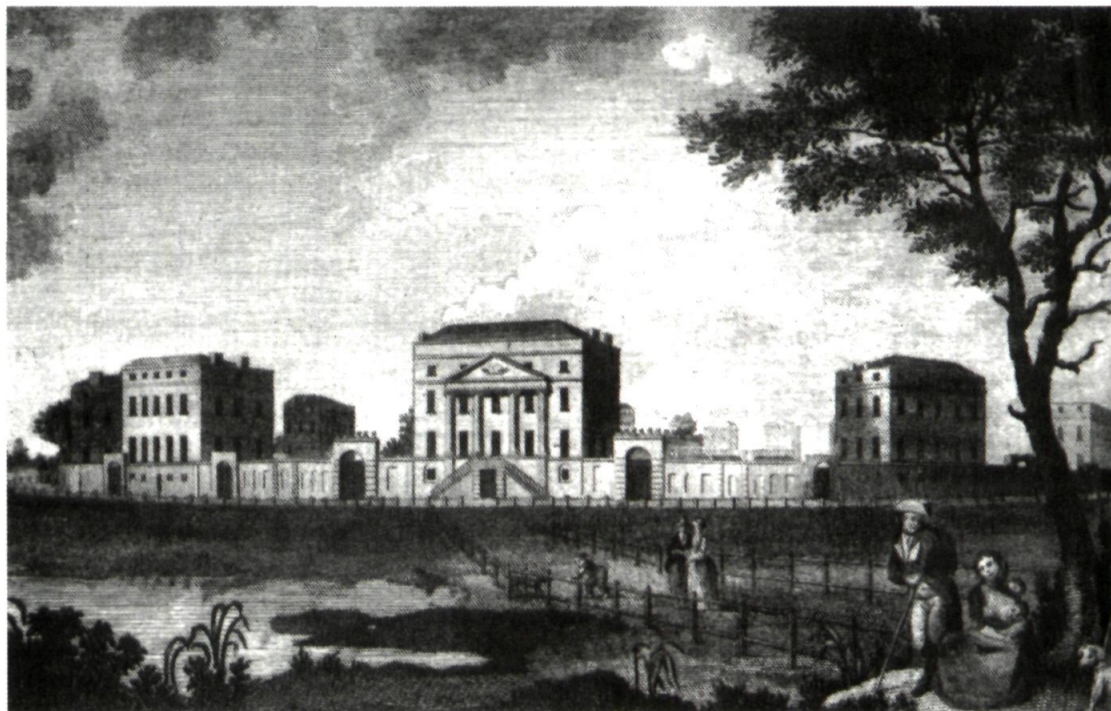
Fig. 1 Engraving showing the Polygon 1783

the design. The whole structure was surrounded by a curtain wall and road and most noticeably of all, each mansion faced outwards (presumably for the views) rather than inwards onto the central water feature. The whole development was intended to rival the famous Royal Crescent development at Bath (Southampton Guide 1775, 39).

Immediately adjacent to the Polygon buildings, the scheme included up-market shops, a colonnaded tavern with card and assembly rooms for the gentry, and a hotel in each detached wing (Leonard 1989, 10). Mazell's map of 1771 shows a building with detached wings located to the north-west of the scheme and this may correspond to the hotel and shops.

Contemporary descriptions of the development survive which provide a dramatic insight into the scale of the undertaking:

The plan … was to consist of twelve sides, having a house in the centre of each, with the proper offices low and detached. The principal fronts were contrived to appear outwards, and the gardens to converge towards a basin of water in the centre, which was to supply the several houses. … Could the plan be completed, it would be one of the finest places in the kingdom, perhaps the world, regarded in the view of modern architecture (Southampton Guide 1795, 135–6).

The involvement of General Carnac in the Polygon and the laying of the foundation stone by Viscount Palmerston and Hans Stanley (Southampton's two MPs) testify to the intended status of the development. The same point is made by the decision in 1771 to stage 'dressed balls' at the hotel, excluding a great many of the

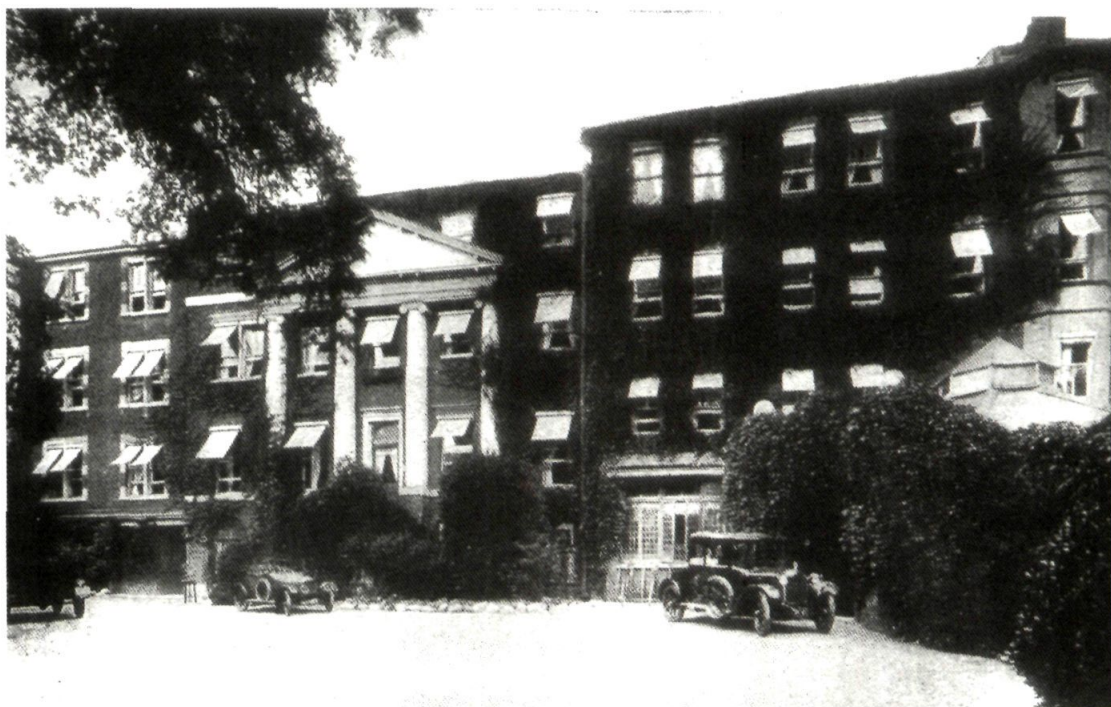Fig. 2 Milne's map of Southampton 1791

Fig. 3 Exterior of the Polygon 1934

people who otherwise attended assemblies in the town itself (Leonard 1989, 11).

An engraving of the Southampton Polygon in 1783 survives (Fig. 1). The engraving shows the Polygon scheme sited within an imaginary, Arcadian landscape. Although the main features referred to by the Southampton Guide are clearly visible the engraving raises a number of issues. It depicts the main aspects of the development, including the central mansions, the curtain wall and surrounding road. The main building shown with a portico is the building that survived within the modern Polygon Hotel. The engraving also shows details that are clearly fantastic. For example it shows that the curtain wall contained implied windows and was broken at regular intervals by gates, and, of the mansions shown, only one has a portico. There is no reason why these features may not have been incorporated into the original design. However, only three mansions were ever built

and the water surrounding the structure is clearly imaginary.

THE POLYGON

The history of the Polygon has already been written and needs only a brief summary here (Patterson 1966; Leonard 1989). Although the details of its history can be questioned, the overall picture is clear. The Polygon development itself came about through the combination of Jacob Leroux, General John Carnac and Issac Mallortie, each of whom brought a particular virtue to the scheme.

Carnac, who had worked closely with Robert Clive in India, returned to England with him in 1767. He bought Cams Hall, near Fareham, which Leroux remodelled for him. Carnac's associations with Clive enhanced the social desirability of what appears to have been a speculative

development, and the fortune that Carnac tried to transfer from India will have been an equally important factor. Mallortie, a local property speculator, was financing the development as well; his bankruptcy in 1773 and the difficulties that Clive encountered transferring his fortune from India effectively brought an end to the building work that had begun five years earlier (Patterson 1966, 45).

There are several gaps in the known career of French-born architect and builder, Jacob Leroux (d. 1799). By 1753, he had been articled to William Jones and in 1771 he exhibited a view of the Polygon scheme at the Royal Academy, followed by further drawings in 1772 (Colvin 1995). He is noted for several London developments including a second Polygon in Sommers Town (Gentlemen's Magazine 1813, 427–9). Although as unsuccessful as the Southampton original and eventually sold for a fraction of its original asking price, the London Polygon is notable as it contained the house of both Charles Dickens and his fictional character, Harold Skimpole, in Bleak House (Weinreb and Hibbert 1983, 626).

Despite its grandiose conception, the history of Polygon House is a history of adaptation and change. The development was begun on the 9th August 1768 but although it had an auspicious start, within five years of its foundation the project had been abandoned and of the twelve proposed houses, only three were completed. The Southampton Guide of 1781 notes:

the scheme was too vast to be executed, without the association of several people of fortune, and consequently did not succeed (Southampton Guide 1781, 57–8).

The crisis in funding was precipitated by Mallortie's bankruptcy in 1773. This was exacerbated by the difficulties Carnac experienced in getting his fortune transferred to England and which necessitated his return to India. Mallortie and Carnac had both occupied two of the three completed houses. The difficulties of Mallortie and Carnac presumably meant that two new tenants were required to take on the leases. As a speculative development, the Polygon would have depended on the continuous generation of income and there are signs that money quickly dried up. Although in 1773 a Mrs. Conelys from London (the Empress of Taste) had taken the hotel on a 30-year lease, she did not reappear in 1774 and no new purchaser could be found for the lease. An effort to maintain the initial promise of the development continued in 1774 when the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland rented the house of Mallortie within the Polygon. The season ended with a grand ball, but that was its swansong. Prices rose steeply during the war with America in 1775 and the building trade in particular suffered (Summerson 1962, 165). The Long Rooms within the town of Southampton continued to enjoy royal patronage but, despite the association of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland, the hotel was eventually pulled down. The materials were disposed of, and the remaining buildings and land sold off (Patterson 1966, 53–55).

As the fortunes of the Polygon declined, it gradually became a select residential area. Even as late as 1808, 40 years after the laying of the foundation stone there remained a cachet to living there. Jane Austen wrote of the wife of Admiral Thomas Bertie: 'Mrs Bertie lives in the Polygon and was out when we returned her visit – which are her two virtues' (Chapman 1969, 235). Another notable visitor to the Polygon was William Thackerary who had his first schooling from 'a horrid little tyrant in the Polygon', presumably after 1817 when he returned to England with his aunt (GHS 1934).

The Southampton map prepared by the Royal Engineers in 1846 shows the first signs of encroachment to the north and south-east of the site. Between 1846 and 1868, Fitzgerald Place was built to a different pattern within the original area of the Polygon scheme.

In the late 19th century, Polygon House was bought by the motoring pioneer, Archibald Dunlop (GHS 1934). He sold Polygon House, which was then converted into a hotel. By 1898, Polygon House was being advertised as a high-class residential hotel, despite the substantial development of the surrounding area that was occurring. At this date, the hotel of 1898 broadly retained the plan of the original Polygon House. An architect's survey of 1936 held within

Southampton City Archives and undertaken prior to redevelopment shows that the first and second floor room layouts broadly conformed to the original 18th-century plan revealed during the recent recording exercise (see below). The hotel did, however, have an additional wing containing a stage and recreation room extending southeast to Devonshire Road, and the courtyards on either side of the 18th-century mansion had been in-filled to contain extra kitchens and dining rooms (Fig. 3).

Plaques within the modern hotel recorded that Polygon House had been used as the headquarters of the British Expeditionary Forces during the First World War but this seems to have had little impact on the internal layout of the original building. Substantial alterations to Polygon House did occur in 1938. This re-orientated the internal layout of the building and involved the strengthening of the structure with RSJ beams (Brading 1999, 7). The pedimented mansion ceased to be the main focus of the hotel and was removed. A purpose-built entrance containing the reception foyer containing lifts and the main stairwell was constructed. This faced east onto Devonshire Road and survived until the hotel was demolished.

The Second World War also had little impact on the internal layout of the hotel. Despite its use by the US Port Authority responsible for the movement of troops through Southampton, the only evidence that had survived for a wartime use were several emergency lights (Robertson 1999, 15).

After the war a new accommodation block adjacent to Handel Road was added to the building. A large ballroom, bar and new kitchen were also added. This resulted in the destruction of any 18th-century material in the ground floor. By 1999 the varied ownerships of Grosvenor, Trust House Forte and Granada had resulted in the loss of the original interiors. It was not until Barratt Southampton funded an archaeological study of the building during the summer of 1999, that the opportunity arose to examine the surviving building in detail.

RESULTS OF INVESTIGATIONS

In 1999 Southern Archaeological Services Ltd on behalf of Barratt Southampton investigated the structure of the Polygon Hotel, concentrating on those parts that probably originated in the 18th century. Preliminary fieldwork indicated that the shell of the building had largely survived. The demolition of the structure was then closely monitored and recorded, in the course of which, it became clear that considerably more evidence had survived than was previously assumed. The following summary of the main points is based upon a more detailed report written by Southern Archaeological Services Ltd (Brading 1999), a copy of which is deposited with the Southampton City Archives. The site archive, including a copy of that report, is curated by Southampton City Museums (site codes SOU 959 and 984).

No evidence for an 18th-century basement was uncovered. Significantly, the investigation could not locate the original foundation, suggesting a very shallow founding for a building of this size. Without a basement, the ground floor of Polygon House may have contained the kitchens for the house above. The alterations to the house in 1938 had destroyed the original layout of the ground floor and a modern bar, inserted into the area of the 18th-century portico, had compounded this damage.

Apart from the ground floor, the external 18th-century brickwork had survived intact on the upper floors and shows that the 18th-century Polygon was built of red stock bricks. Externally the walls were built in Flemish bond and internally, they were English bond. The walls of the 18th-century Polygon House building were incorporated into the structure of the 19th-century hotel and survived until the demolition of the building in 1999. (Fig. 3). Some internal brick partitions also survived within building although the spaces themselves had been subdivided to form hotel bedrooms. The internal Polygon walls were stud partitions and these simply butted the main external walls. The internal walls of the original Polygon House were built first and were pointed. The external walls of the building were then added.

Eighteenth century timber had survived *in situ* within the building including the original joists of Baltic pine. One joist was marked with a probable port mark. This mark consisted of the letters D and B, associated with a diamond figure. Brading
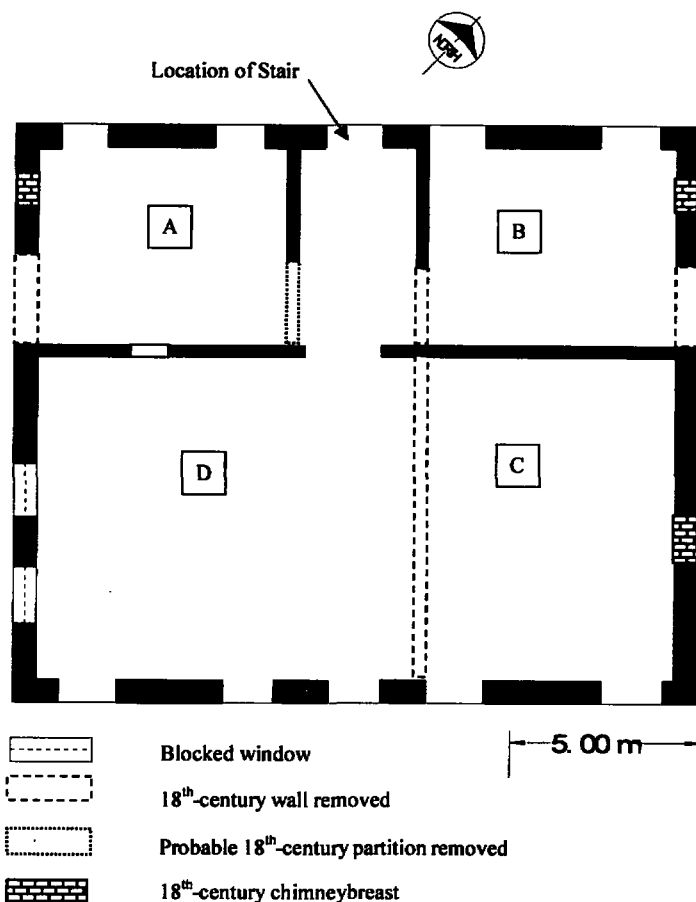
Location of Stair

Fig. 4 First-floor plan of surviving 18th-century elements of Polygon, as seen in 1999

interprets this as a class 'B' timber from Danzig (Brading 1999, 11). Bonding timbers had been incorporated into the south-east wall of the house and brick relieving arches survived over the doors and windows.

On the first- and second-floor levels, blocked 18th-century window spaces were exposed in the south-west wall (Figs 4, 5). These had been blocked during the actual building of the house and seem to represent a change of plan but were not noted in the north-east walls. Full-length window bays were only used in the south-east wall and, although these matched the location of win-

dows on the engraving (Fig. 1), they had been in-filled and reduced in length to fit the modern windows.

The original design of the building was therefore cellular and typical of the 18th century. To meet the fashion of the day for a large reception room and *piano nobile*, the internal room partitions were not located centrally within the building. The arrangement of rooms on each floor was therefore asymmetrical (Fig. 4). External dimensions seem to indicate the proportions of the original design. Room A is based upon a proportion of [1:1], room B is based on [2:1], room C is
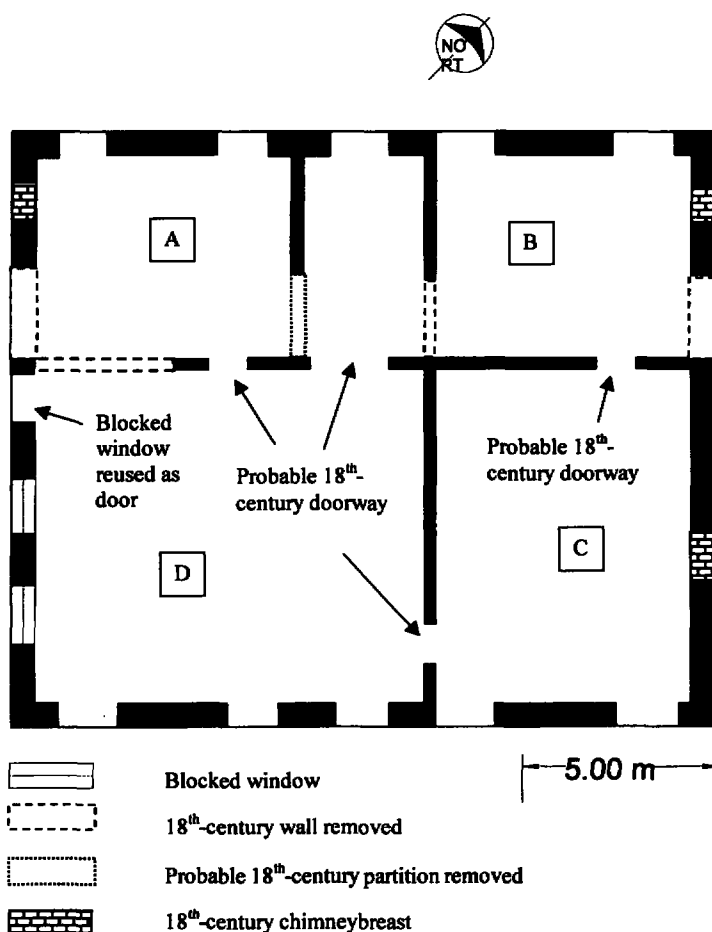
Fig. 5 Second-floor plan of surviving 18th-century elements of Polygon, as seen in 1999

based on [3:2] and room D is based on [4:3], (Brading 1999, 9), (Fig. 4).

The monitoring of demolition works confirmed further details of the 18th-century house. The main entrance to the house was on the first-floor level. The investigation revealed the area of the original entrance beneath a large wooden lintel but, apart from the space itself, no other features of the 18th-century entrance survived. In addition, the layout of the second-floor broadly corresponded to the layout of the first floor and would probably have held a second-floor dining room or ballroom (Fig. 5). Smaller retiring rooms

and bedrooms were located on the north side of the building and the third floor would have contained bedrooms (Fig. 6).

The 18th-century building had three chimney flues in the main walls (Figs 4, 5). There was a chimney flue in each of the smaller rooms but the position of the windows in the south-west wall of the room made a fourth fireplace impossible. Instead, a chimney was located on the internal wall.

The existing staircase had been altered and blocked on the first floor level. The location (directly opposite the 18th-century first-floor
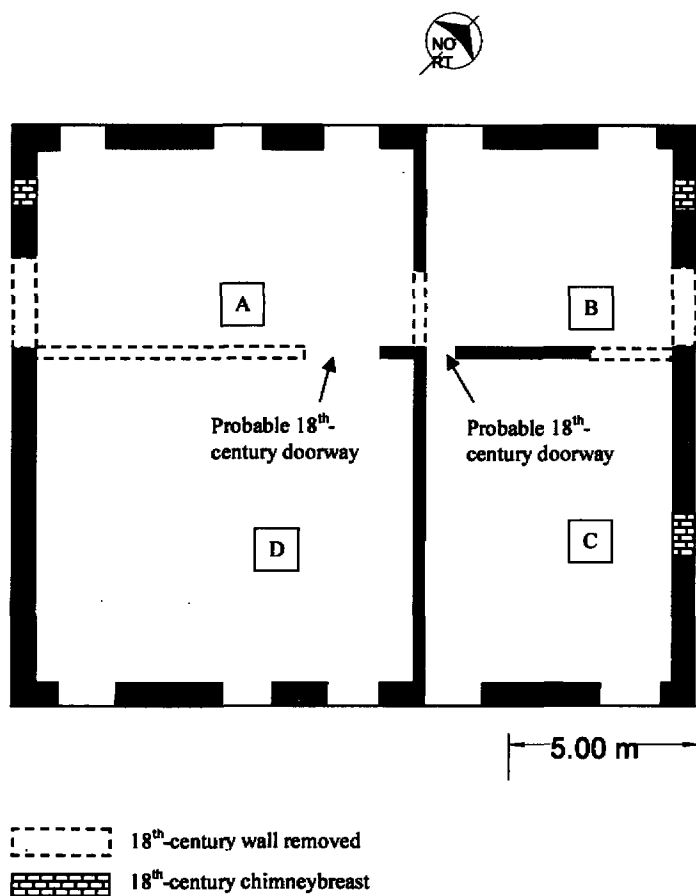
Fig. 6　Third-floor plan of surviving 18th-century elements of Polygon, as seen in 1999

entrance) is, however, original. Access to the roof area was difficult for the purpose of recording. The investigation, however, did determine that the roof structure was probably modern.

The opportunity provided by Barratt Southampton to investigate the site of the Polygon Hotel revealed a substantial amount of 18th-century material surviving in the shell of the building. Although few internal features survived, it was possible to elucidate the plan of the original design. Together with the plan, the documentary records provide an interesting insight into a 18th-century estate development and its place in the social life of the aristocracy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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