



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

HISTORIC BUILDING ASSESSMENT

ON

20 NORTHMOOR ROAD

OXFORD

NGR SP 51146 08301

SEPTEMBER 2023

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ILLUSTRATION BY Tom Gouldbourne

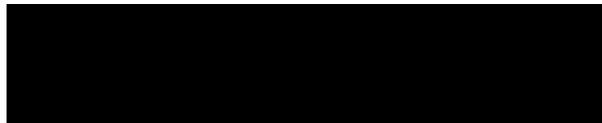
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SITE VISIT 4th September 2023

REPORT ISSUED 6th September 2023

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JMHS Project No: 4973



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of the Report

This report was commissioned by Riach Architects. The purpose of the report is to provide an assessment of the existing solid floor of 20 Northmoor Road (as encountered in the Boot Room).

1.2 Location and Description

20 Northmoor Road is situated on the eastern side of Northmoor Road, within the North Oxford suburbs (NGR SP 51146 08301). The building is a substantial late Arts and Crafts style house, commissioned in 1924 by Basil Henry Blackwell (of Blackwell's book store), and designed by Frederick Evelyn Openshaw. From 1930 to 1947 the house was occupied by internationally significant author J.R.R. Tolkien, during which time he wrote *The Hobbit* and a substantial part of its sequel *The Lord of the Rings*. As a result, the building is Grade II listed (List Entry Number: 1391361).

1.3 Proposed Development

Planning permission was granted by Oxford City Council for:

Demolition of existing garage and replacement with a new workshop. Erection of a single storey side and rear extension. Formation of 1no dormer and 2no rooflights to rear roofslope in association with loft conversion. Erection of a rear outbuilding for use as a gym/pool area. Alterations to landscaping. Internal alterations to include; re-configuration of ground floor service rooms to create access to new extensions, re-configuration of first floor rooms and installation of a new staircase to the second floor. (22/02917/LBC, 22/02916/FUL).

During works associated with this permission a trial pit was opened in the existing boot room in order to determine the makeup of the sub-floor. The floor falls below modern standards, with no damp proof membrane, and as such it is proposed for removal and replacement. The purpose of this report is to establish, as far as is possible, the nature and origin of the sub-floor.

2 METHODOLOGY

A trial pit measuring approximately 0.2m in width by 0.3m in length was excavated against the external wall of the boot room. The trial pit was subject to a visual assessment following excavation and an annotated sketch section was produced.

3 RESULTS (Figure 1)

A representative section of the layers identified in the trial pit is detailed in Figure 1 (S.1); each layer was assigned an individual number. The lowest deposit identified in the trial pit was a firm mid to dark yellowish brown clayey silt (5). This deposit was c.200mm in thickness, and appeared to extend below the limit of excavation. The interpretation of this deposit is uncertain; its composition suggests a former subsoil

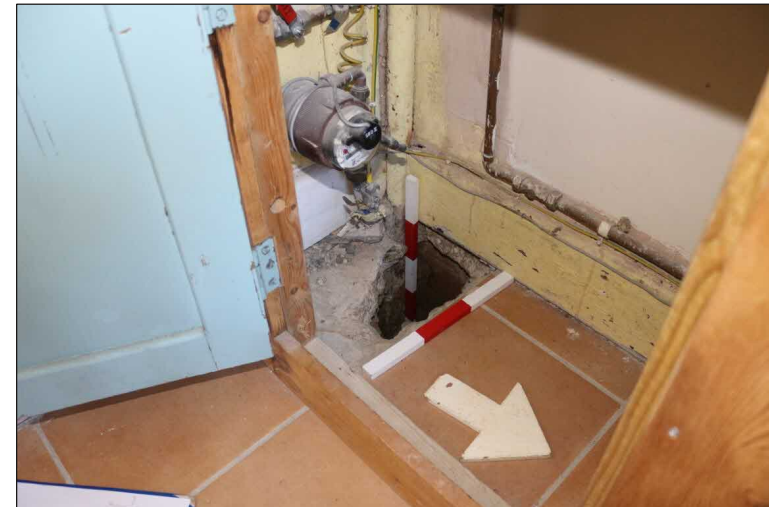
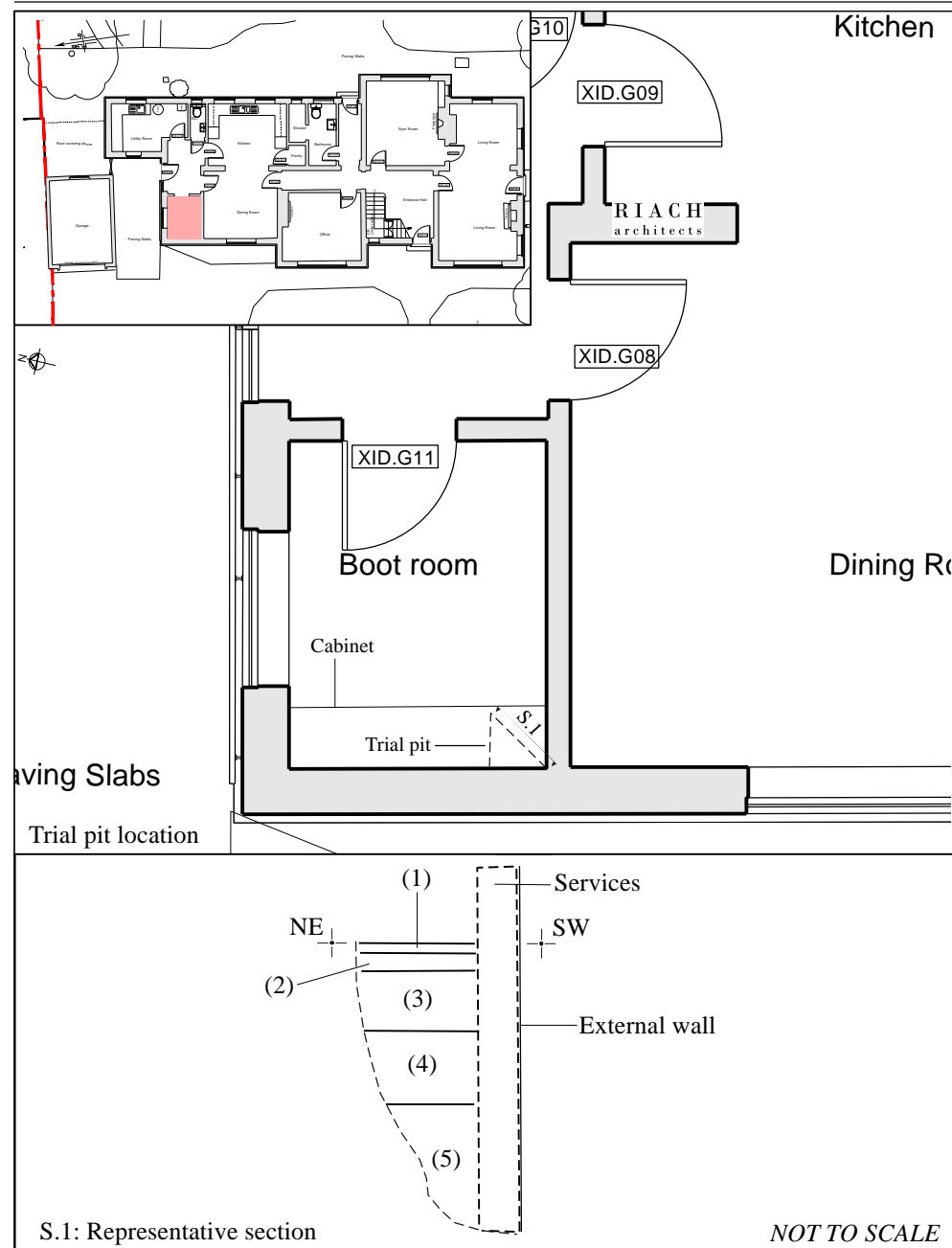


Plate 1: Trial pit location within Boot Room



Plates 2, 3: Trial pit (Scales 0.3m, 0.5m)

Figure 1: Trial pit; location plan, section and images

that pre-dates the construction of 20 Northmoor Road, however interpretation as a levelling deposit or similar, associated with construction of the building, cannot be ruled out. This was overlain by deposits associated with the sub-floor of 20 Northmoor Road. An indurated deposit of gravel (hardcore) bonded with concrete c.100mm thick (4) was overlain by a concrete slab c.80mm in thickness (3). These layers were in turn overlain by screed c.20mm thick (2), onto which the current tiles were set (1).

Two service pipes were located in the corner of the trial pit, extending down into the ground adjacent to the external wall. There is no reason to assume that this is not the original ingress point for the services as the concrete slab did not appear to show any evidence for modification to accommodate the services, which one may expect if they were retrofitted.

4 DISCUSSION

Investigation of the sub-floor in the Boot Room, as revealed in the trial pit, indicates that it is likely to be contemporary with the construction of 20 Northmoor Road. It must be noted however that due to the very limited nature of the investigation the conclusions reached here may not apply to the solid floors elsewhere on the ground floor.

The sub-floor construction in the Boot Room appears to comprise a concrete slab bedded on a layer of hardcore; this sits upon a pre-existing subsoil. A layer of screed overlies the concrete slab. The tiles are a later replacement, presumably associated with the remodelling of the service areas undertaken in recent decades. However, there is no evidence to indicate that the slab and underlying hardcore have been disturbed or have been subject to modification. No evidence of a damp proof membrane is present; if the floor is contemporary with construction of the building this would not necessarily be expected, as these were not installed routinely until later in the century (Marshall and Dann 2005, p.69). This may therefore provide further evidence that the floor is contemporary.

The sub-floor is therefore likely to be a historic structure that may provide some contribution to the wider evidential value of the listed building. A Heritage Impact Assessment has previously been produced by Worlledge Associates to accompany applications 22/02917/LBC and 22/02916/FUL; this detailed report outlines the history and significance of the building. A Statement of Significance was included within this report; regarding the evidential value of the building, the following is noted (Worlledge Associates 2022, p.36):

EVIDENTIAL

Commissioned in 1924 by Basil Henry Blackwell, bookseller, and designed by Frederick Evelyn Openshaw, architect, it provides evidence of the development of the post WWI parts of St John's College North Oxford estate, including Northmoor Road, first planned and laid out in 1891, but due to the interruption of WWI, not fully developed until well into the mid-late 1920s. As a seven-bedroom architect designed house built on a double plot, it provides evidence of the growing prosperity of Basil Henry Blackwell, bookseller, and of the superior level of accommodation and lifestyle he sought for his growing family, which was enjoyed between 1924 and 1930.

Lived in from 1930 to 1947 by JRR Tolkien and his family, the drawing room, formed by combining two reception rooms, provides evidence of how the house was adapted to provide a substantial academic library and study suitable for an Oxford academic and author.

The sub-floor has some limited evidential value, illustrating the preferred construction techniques and materials in use in the early 20th century. However, it does not provide a meaningful contribution to the overall significance of the listed building. By its very nature the concrete sub-floor is and always has been an inaccessible part of the building; unlike other material elements of the building, such as internal walls or floor finishes, its removal and replacement is unlikely to result in a change to the character of the building.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This Historic Building Assessment considers the origin of the concrete sub-floor of 20 Northmoor Road, as encountered in the Boot Room. It is thought likely that the floor is contemporary with the building and was laid during its construction in 1924. The floor has some limited evidential value, relating to the construction methods and materials of the period, but does not provide a meaningful contribution to the overall significance of the listed building.

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