

THE OLD POLICE HOUSE IN DEBENHAM: AN UNIQUE SURVIVAL FROM THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by TIMOTHY EASTON

AT THE NORTH end of Debenham's old market-place a quiet back street leads away to the east of the bridge which crosses the river Deben. Water Lane is so named because the river flows along the road for the first fifty yards during the wet seasons of the year. Half-way along this lane, and situated on its northern side, is an undistinguished-looking Victorian red brick building. This is the old police house, constructed in 1849.

Viewed from the west, this two-storied house can be seen to have been added to a timber-framed cottage (Fig. 141). When viewed from the east, a second two-storied brick structure is visible, attached to the east wall of the cottage and connected to the house only at one corner (Fig. 142). This is the cell-block, but it was built slightly later than the main house, as the junction of the walls is not properly bonded together. It may have been a deliberate calculation when planning the building almost to detach the two brick buildings in this way, perhaps to cause the resident policemen the least possible inconvenience if the cell contained a rowdy inmate. The original cell door was positioned next to the back entrance of the old cottage (Figs 143-145).

The walls of the upper storey of the cell-block consist largely of the 'rat-trap' bond, which is not found in the rest of the building (Figs 142 and 145). This could indicate a second phase of building, to raise the roof of the cell-block, but a more likely explanation is that this might be a form of economy in a cell-block which was two-storied from the start. The ground-floor walls are a brick and a half thick (13.5in) for security reasons, while most of the walls above are 9in thick; the gable is only a half brick thick (4.5in).

Samuel Dove of Debenham recorded in his notebook that at Woodbridge Quarter Sessions on 12 March 1849 the building of a new police station in Debenham was discussed: 'The committee appointed at a recent Sessions to make enquiries for a site reported that they selected one that was eligible and that Mr Jessup would erect a station, the rent of which would not exceed £10 per annum. The report was received and adopted' (Knowland 1986, 24). *White's Directory* of 1855 confirms this date (White 1855, 455).

In the first year after the adoption of the 'permissive' Police Act of 1839 only twenty of the fifty-two counties of England and Wales established a police force. That of the Eastern Division of Suffolk was created in 1840 and that of the Western Division in 1845 (Prescott 1967, 1-46). Debenham's station, being built only eight years after the trial station at Saxmundham was planned, may prove to be the oldest surviving intact complex in the country. The archives of the Suffolk Constabulary and those at Scotland Yard have no record of any structures in Britain surviving from before 1860.¹

The living accommodation for the policemen was provided by building the two-storied brick block onto the south side of the existing 18th-century cottage, which contained a garret in the roof-space (Figs 141, 143 and 145). The upper floor over the cell-block provided a further bedroom (Figs 142 and 143). *White's Directory* of 1855 records the names of the two policemen living in Debenham as Louis Elliot and Stephen Norris, and affirms 'A Police Station, with a residence for two policemen, was built here in 1849' (White 1855, 455).

At some time early in the building's life it was found necessary to subdivide the single lock-up by inserting a brick dividing wall which split the only window-space in two. The recommendations in the circular of 1846 'On the construction of station houses and strong rooms for the use of the rural constabulary force', which suggested that two lock-ups were

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FIG. 141 – Western side of the mid-19th-century police station at Debenham, seen from Water Lane in 1985
(photo: author).



FIG. 142 – Eastern view of the parlour entrance with the cell-block to the right *(photo: author).*

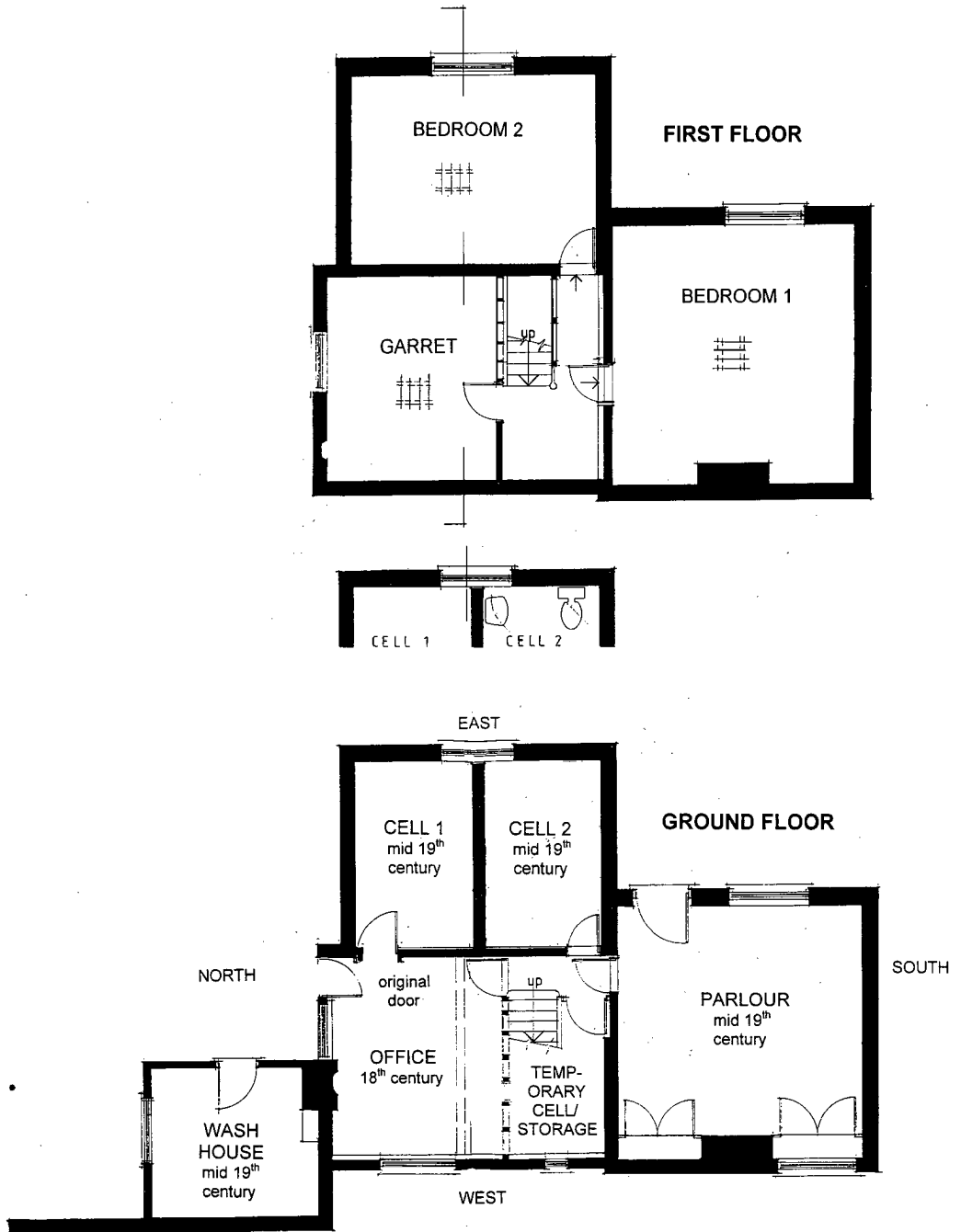


FIG. 143 – Plan of both floors before renovation in 1989.

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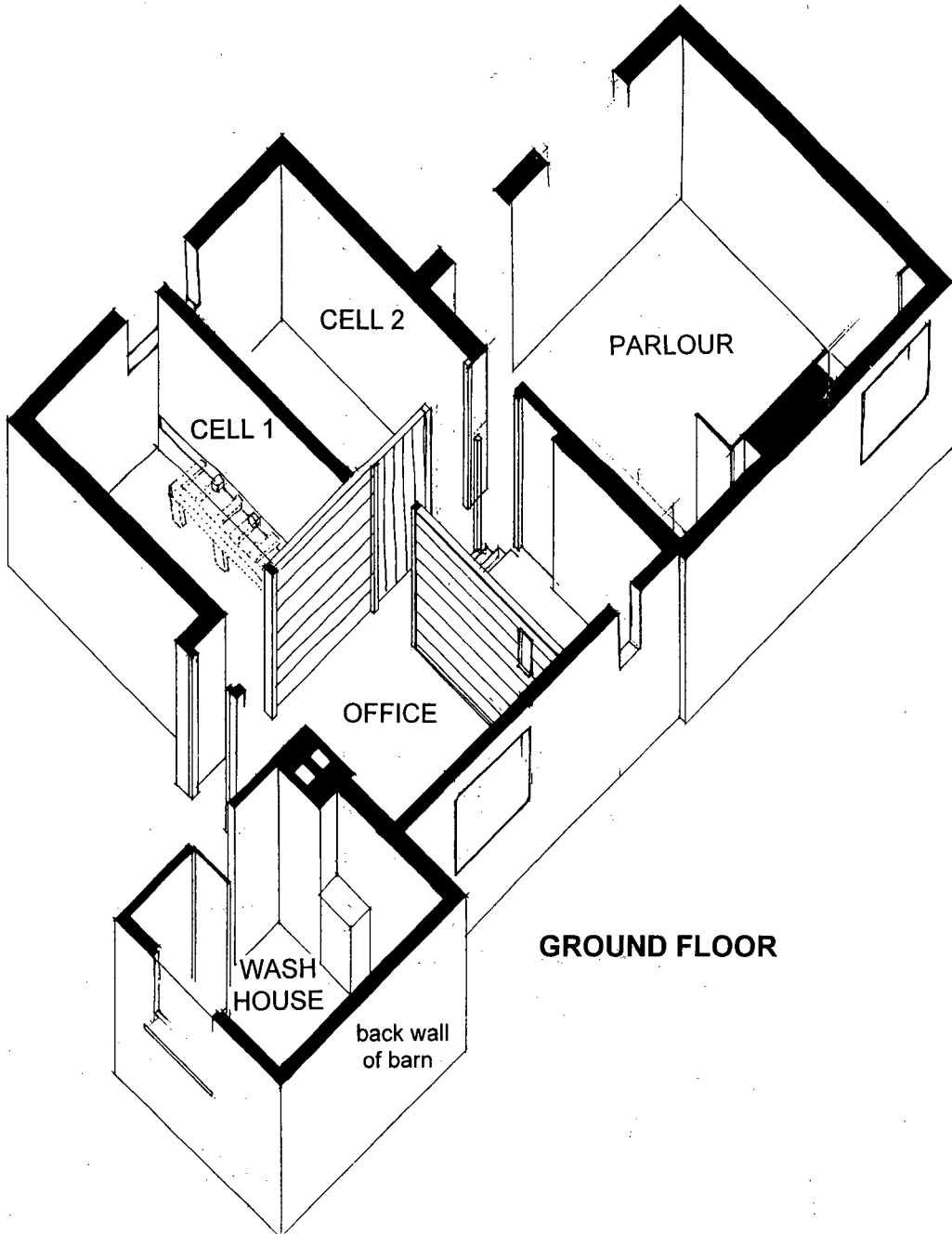


FIG. 144 – Aerial view of ground floor viewed from north-west corner, showing the boarded walls.

desirable, were only complied with later here with the insertion of the dividing wall. Nor were the recommendations relating to the actual structure followed in full. The sizes of the lock-ups at Debenham, after being sub-divided, are 9ft 5in by 6ft 2in by 6ft 6in, very nearly up to the recommendations (9ft by 6ft 6in by 8ft 6in high; Prescott 1967, 29), though the walls do not measure up to the 'two feet of stone', and the sub-dividing wall of the two is only 9in thick. No fireplace was provided in either cell, as was suggested in the recommendations,² although the late 19th-century single cell which survives intact at Saxmundham's second police station, 2 Albion Street, has a blocked-in fireplace. The 1846 circular also recommended the provision of a water-closet and a wooden bench in each cell. The bench, on which the prisoner could sleep, should be at least 2ft wide. The bench in the Saxmundham cell is still there (1988) and the evidence for one at Debenham survives as a horizontal wooden beam about 14in above the ground in cell 1, with a row of sawn-off ends of timbers 2.25in square which formed the base of the bench (Fig. 144).³ The evidence is obscured by a bath in cell 2, and no exit for a water-closet could be seen at either Debenham or Saxmundham.

The door to the original cell at Debenham (Figs 146 and 147) is noticeably different in detailing from the other (Fig. 148), being cross-planked, with a generous distribution of nail-heads. The front face is made from one piece of oak, 24.75in wide. The later door, which has single-thickness planks with ledges across the back, is of a type more familiar in domestic buildings, but the planks are 1.5in thick: twice the thickness usually expected in a house. A large sheet of metal has been sheathed internally over the lock and secured all around with nails. This was done because, unlike the lock on the older door which is housed in the planks, this one was found to be vulnerable to tampering. Both doors are provided with a large lock and a viewing hatch. The upper pintle, on which the top hinge of the original door is hung,



FIG. 145 – North gable of cottage and cell block with rat-trap bonded brickwork on upper floor. Wash-house to right and garden building with chimney on left (*photo: author*).



FIG. 146 – The original studded cell door with its inspection window, locks and bolt. The front is made from a single plank on oak 25 inches wide (*photo: author*).

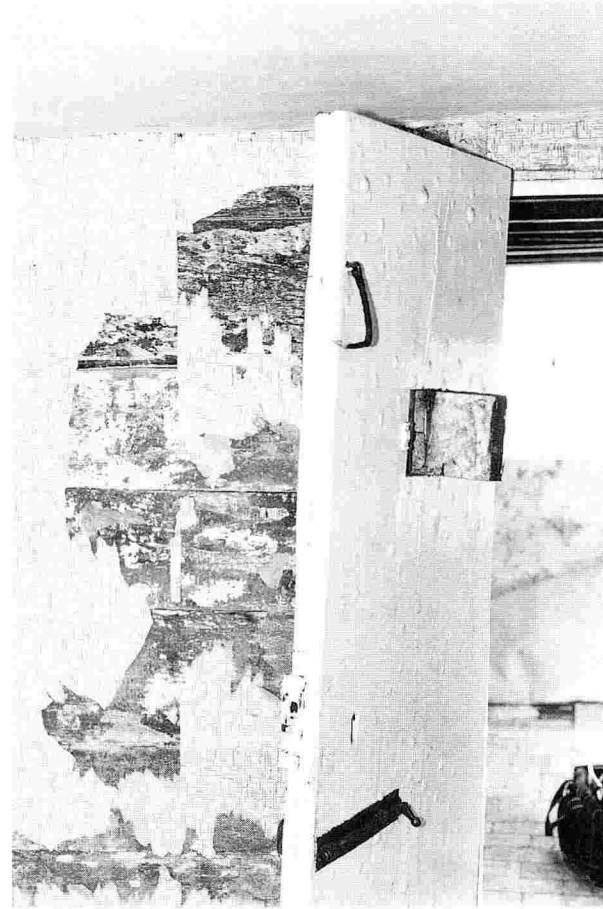


FIG. 147 – The original cross-planked cell door and horizontal planked walling in oak and elm (*photo: author*).

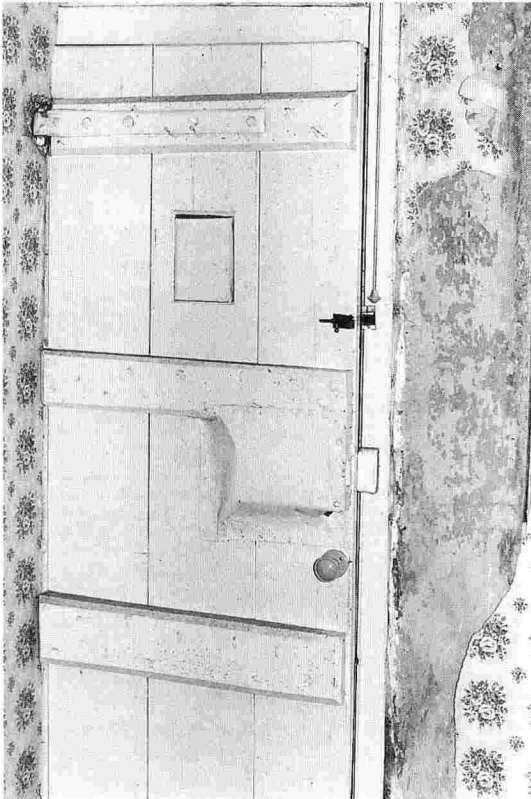
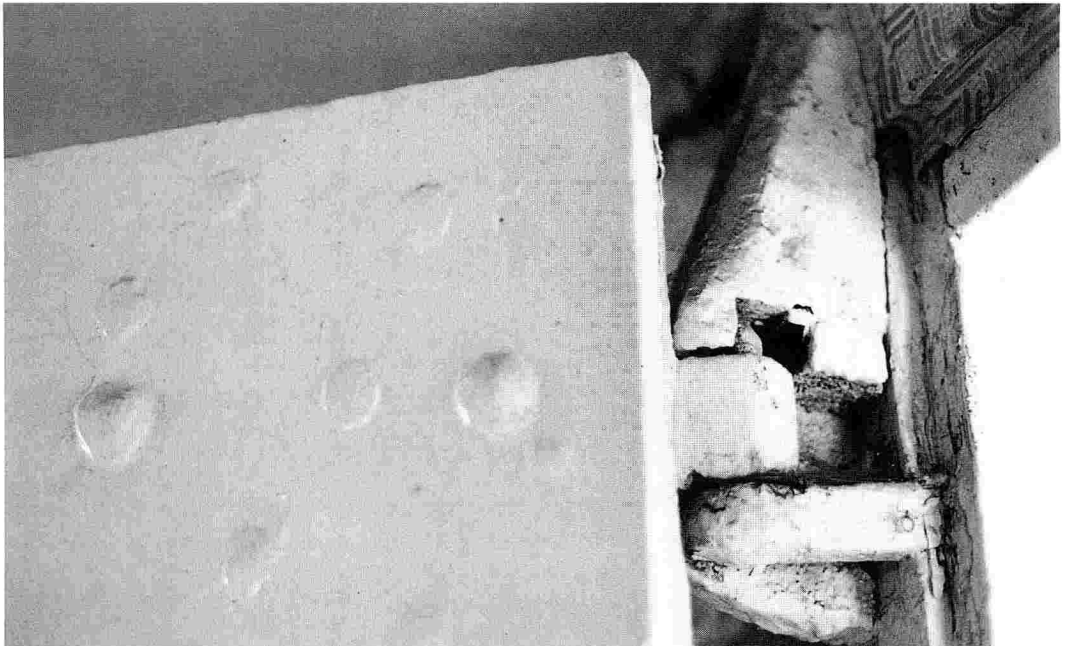


FIG. 148 – The later door to the second cell is made with three planks 1.5 inches thick, fixed on ledges, and has a covered lock-plate of sheet metal (*photo: author*).

FIG. 149 – The wooden casing over the upper pintle to the original cell door prevents its being lifted upwards (*photo: author*).



has an effective wooden casing fixed over it (Fig. 149): this prevents the door being lifted off by a prisoner. The common walls between the cells and the old cottage are planked horizontally for cell 1 and vertically for the second cell. A mixture of oak and elm has been used (Figs 144, 147 and 148). Rather surprisingly, there are no inscriptions in the wood carved by the inmates, although one mark, *TA*, is carved into the dividing wall in cell 2. James Cornish, the vicar's son, recalls that one of the regular occupants of the 'lock-up' during the last quarter of the 19th century was Dick, the village poacher, who had a gift with animals and was persistently daring in his ability to whistle away other people's dogs to seek out tired hares after the Duke of Hamilton's harriers had held a meet in the district. Dick was also regularly confined after becoming drunk and quarrelsome (Cornish 1990, 42-44).

Another entrance into the police house is on the north-east corner of the parlour and leads *via* a short passage into the older cottage room, which is presumed to be the office area (Figs 142 and 143). The 1846 recommendations were for a court room to be incorporated into each police station, to make it easier for a constable to give evidence (Prescott 1967, 29). This office-room, or possibly the larger parlour, may have been used for this purpose. There is also a small L-shaped room behind the stair in the cottage, lit by single internal and external windows (Figs 143 and 144). This may have been used for a short period as the temporary lock-up while the cell-block was awaited, and later became a storage area. The little internal window may be a later feature in the plank walling of the 18th century built around the staircase to the garret (Fig 144). The pine door into this space does not show any locking system to support this possibility, but there is a recess in the wall between it and the parlour where an earlier entrance may have been. Alternatively, it is always possible that there was a pre-existing lock-up in the village which continued in use while the new cell-block was being constructed. The main ceiling-beam of the older structure is of good-quality oak with chamfers and lambs-tongue stop mouldings at each side. The cottage may always have been only a single-cell unit.

It was, perhaps, following the general complaints in 1857 from the public about the difficulty of finding the police residences (Prescott 1967, 30), that the painted tablets, which are still visible on the west and south of the station, were added to the brick walls facing the street, in black and white lettering. The tablet nearest to the market-place reads 'POLICE HOUSE', and the other could be read until a few years ago as 'PRIORY HOUSE', after Priory Lane, which runs along the garden boundary.⁴

A wash-house is attached to the north-west corner of the cottage, and another outbuilding stands to the north-east of the house (Fig. 145). A generous piece of ground which went with the house, on which a large barn was built up to the brick wall attached to the wash-house (Fig. 141), has recently been subdivided to enable two other houses to be constructed on it.

In 1988 concern was expressed by a number of local residents, following a prolonged period of deterioration of the external fabric of the building after the house was sold in 1985. The severe storm of October 1987 caused further damage, and representations were made to Suffolk County Council, and through them to the Department of the Environment, to consider adding this house to the Listed Buildings schedule for Debenham. The unique nature of the complex was recognised by the D.O.E., and it was given a Grade II listing in June 1988.

This article, with the illustrations and photographs, was originally prepared for publication in 1988, and so describes the building at that time. Since then, the building has been restored and modernised, but the main features described in this article have largely been respected and integrated into the new plan.

NOTES

- 1 Personal correspondence from the Chief Constable of the Suffolk Constabulary (Feb. 1988) and from the Metropolitan Police Museum (Mar. 1988).
- 2 Prescott 1967, 29. Precautions were to be taken to prevent communication by means of the flues.
- 3 The information about evidence for the beam and bench was given to me by James Vinten, the owner and builder, who bought the police house in 1989. This area is now (1999) obscured with plaster and paint, so the evidence shown in Fig. 144 is hypothetical.
- 4 Another police house for Debenham was established in 1918 in the 19th-century building at the bottom of London Hill now known as the Red House. It is assumed that the police house in Water Lane became a private residence in or shortly after 1918.

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