

THE MERCHANTS' WAREHOUSE, CASTLEFIELD, MANCHESTER

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The Merchants' Company Warehouse in Castle Street is the oldest surviving warehouse on the Bridgewater Canal in Manchester (The Grocers' Warehouse, which was built 1775-1780, was demolished in 1960). Its precise date of construction is unknown but it does not appear on any maps until Pigot's of 1829, which suggests a construction date of sometime in the period 1827-1828.

From that date the Merchants' Warehouse had an eventful history, much of which can only be surmised due to the fact that little has been written about it. Unlike other warehouses in Castlefield - Kenworthy's or the Duke of Bridgewater's, for example - it is rarely named on maps or in rate books or street directories of the period; it is not even known if the warehouse was originally built for the Merchants's Company or if



Plate 1 Merchants' Warehouse from the north-west

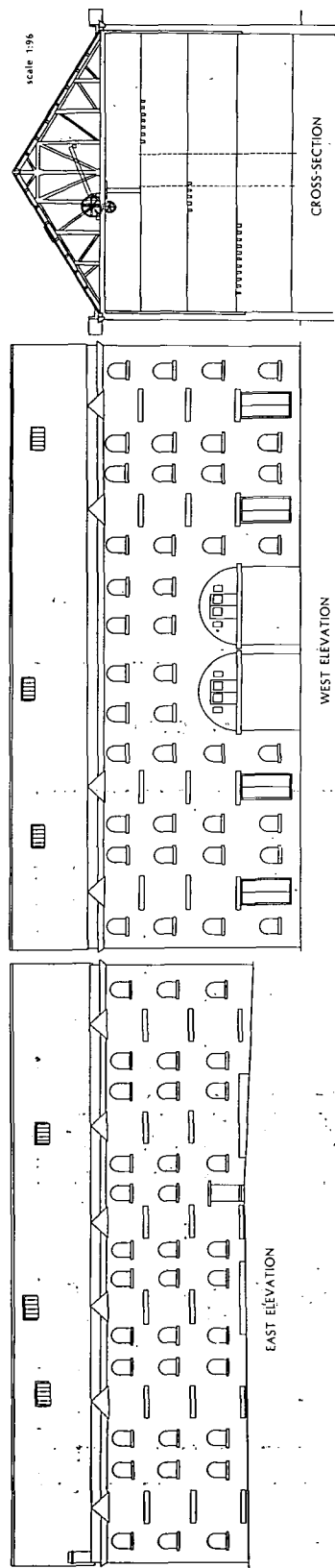
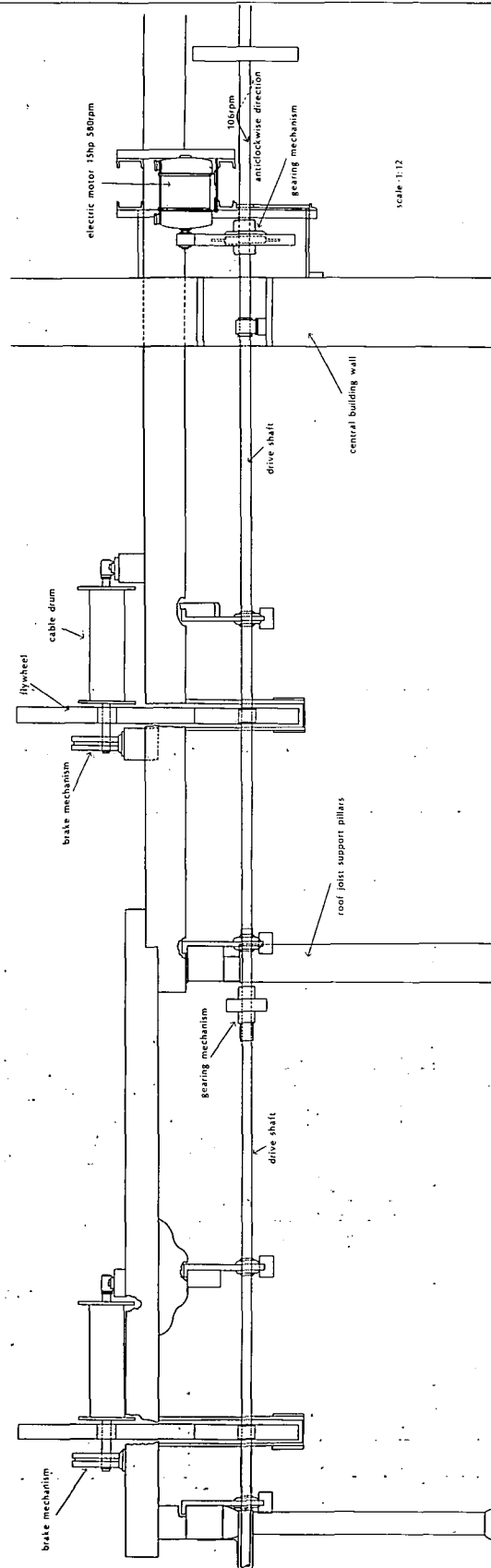


FIG. 1 THE MERCHANTS WAREHOUSE : ELEVATIONS (ABOVE)
AND SECTION THROUGH HOIST MECHANISM (BELOW)



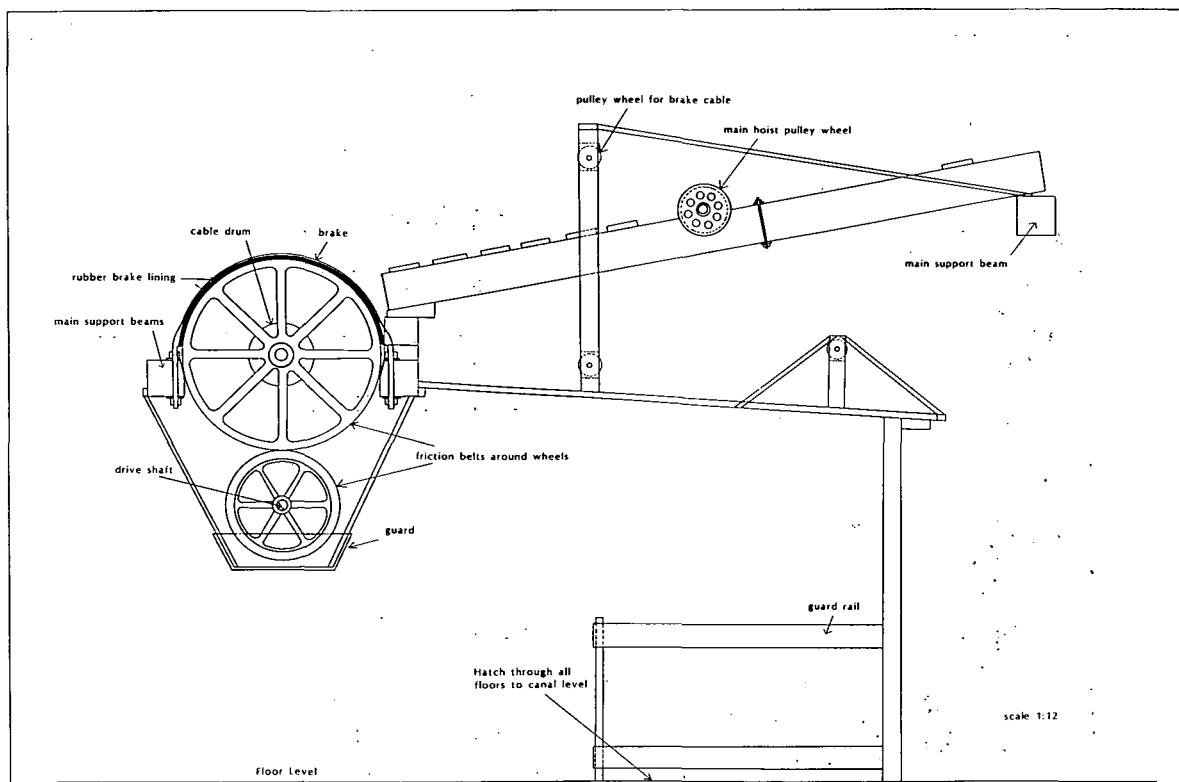
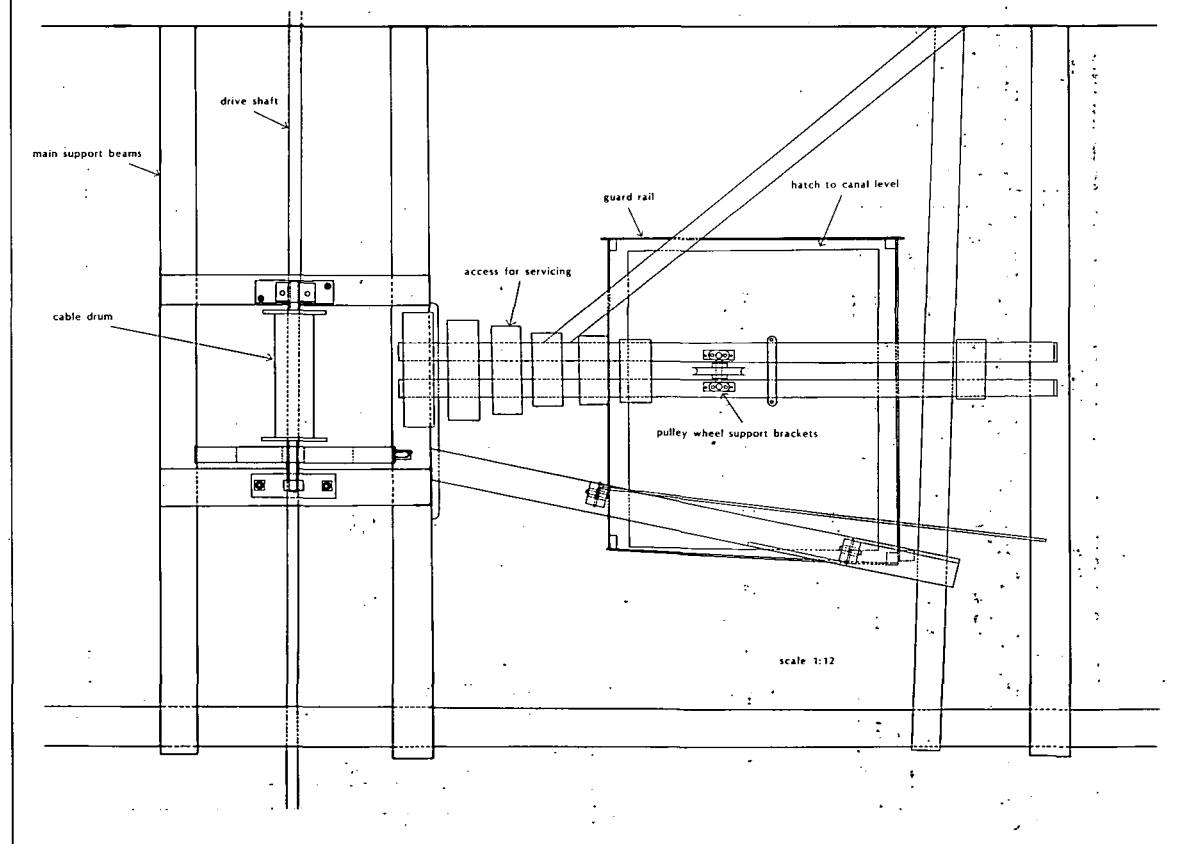


FIG 2 THE MERCHANTS WAREHOUSE: MAIN HOIST MECHANISM IN SECTION (ABOVE) AND PLAN (BELOW)



they took it over at a later date.

However, it is known that the Merchants' Warehouse played an integral part in the life of the Castlefield Basin during the 19th century, receiving and shipping goods on both the Bridgewater and Rochdale Canals. The building was taken over this century by The Manchester Ship Canal Company, who in fact took over the whole of the Bridgewater Canal. Their records show that in 1941 the warehouse suffered war damage: many windows and doors were broken, the former being replaced and some of the latter bricked up. It is a fairly safe assumption that the damage was caused by the bomb which is known to have exploded further up Castle Street. In 1971 the northern end of the warehouse was badly damaged by fire, leaving half the building all but gutted. The rest of the building was saved only by a brick wall much thicker than some of the others and built specifically for that purpose.

Structure

The Merchants' Warehouse (Fig 1) is a brick building, which is three storeys high on the Castle Street frontage. In its original state it had six vertical loading bays of 'loopholes', each crowned by a wooden hood or 'cat head' containing the hoist. On the canal frontage the warehouse steps down to a lower ground floor, where there are two shipping holes centrally located. These extend for a short distance both beyond the wall of the building and under Castle Street. Shipping holes were a common feature in Castlefield warehouses, and although the Middle Warehouse has blocked examples, the Merchants' Warehouse contains the only intact examples left in Castlefield. There are also four more 'loopholes' facing the canal and a further one on the northern side facing the towpath. Internally the building is divided into units by transverse brick walls at 23ft (7m) intervals, which also support the floor joists. One of the few remaining fittings in the Merchants' Warehouse is the hoist (Fig 1 and 2), situated on the top floor and running the entire length of the building. It was originally a gravity friction hoist which, as the name suggests, employed the friction between the driving and the driven wheels, as opposed to using cogs. It powered all the hoists at the top of the eleven 'loopholes', as well as two that went down through trapdoors in the floors, enabling goods to be unloaded under cover from barges in the shipping holes. In 1941 an electric motor was installed in the middle of the drive shaft; when it ceased operation is unknown.

The present owner of the warehouse has ambitious plans for its refurbishment, whilst attempting to retain as much of the original fabric as possible. It remains to be seen however whether sufficient funds will be found for the project, and the future of the Merchants' Warehouse therefore remains hopeful but uncertain.

The drawing of the motor in Fig 1 is traced from Manchester Ship Canal Company drawing No S317; the remainder of Fig 1 and others of the hoists were measured and drawn by T Jones, D Longthorne, and A Percival of the Castlefield Project.

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|---------|---|
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