ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND

HISTORIC BUILDING REPORT

Whitwood Mere Infants' School
Methley Road
Castleford
West Yorkshire

September 1995

National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ
Tel: (01793) 414600 Fax: (01793) 420728

ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND

West Yorkshire **NBR No: 94256**

Castleford **NGR: SE 4142 2555**

Whitwood Mere Infants' School, Methley Road

SUMMARY

Whitwood Mere Infants' School, Castleford, was built in 1939-40 for the West Riding County Council to the designs by Oliver Hill. The design of the school is in the Modernist style, and it incorporates all the new technical and educational philosophies of the time. The single level plan makes the best use of the site by orientating the classrooms to the south, where they gain maximum light from full-width windows. A central corridor runs east to west through the school separating the classrooms from the more functional rooms, the assembly hall, lavatories, cloakrooms, staff room and medical room. At the east end a self-contained nursery school was provided. Hill's intention with this school was to provide a pleasant environment to stimulate their learning.

REPORT

Historical Background

The Hadow report of 1926[1] revolutionised school building design. The main consequence of this report was that new divisions in education were set up separating nursery, infant, junior and secondary children. A vast number of schools had to be built to conform to the new legislation, and the immediate demand for large numbers of spaciously planned but cheap schools called for a new rationale of design based on up-to-date industrial techniques. New schools were to be capable of being easily enlarged, and were to have a life-span of no longer than forty years to prevent the buildings becoming obsolete. The building of schools was also encouraged by Local Authorities to help employment in 1936.[2]

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[1] H Myles Wright and R Gardner-Medwin, *The Design of Nursery and Elementary Schools* (London, 1938), 11.

[2] Malcolm Seaborne and Roy Lowe, *The English School. Its Architecture and Organisation. Vol II. 1870-1970* (London, 1977), 110.

The Board of Education backed the new reforms in the Hadow Report of 1926 and agreed on a number of objectives for school design.[3] These included:

1. Larger sites for all schools, with space for gardens and playing fields.
2. Looser grouping of the units of the buildings, with classrooms capable of being thrown almost entirely open. Classrooms, particularly for the younger children, should be on the ground floor.
3. Book-learning at desks is considered of less importance than before. Fixed desks and heavy furniture of any kind are being abandoned for light chairs and tables.
4. The assembly hall and the library should be given more dominance.
5. More attention should be paid to form, design and colour in school surroundings.
6. Gymnasiums and provision for meals should be included.
7. The buildings should be light, and easily altered or extended. The ideal schools should last 30-40 years.

These objectives led to general approval of open-air classrooms to stimulate more physical activity and practical work for the children. The adoption of modern materials such as steel framing and ferro-concrete was encouraged to achieve such an environment, and this also fitted in with cheaper costs of construction and lighter less durable buildings. It was against this background that Oliver Hill designed Whitwood Mere Infants' School at Castleford.

Oliver Hill (1887-1968) was a practitioner of many styles and has been described as 'the most facile and versatile of our young architects'.[4] He took school building very seriously as he demonstrated by becoming a

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[3] Wright and Gardner-Medwin 1938, 15.

[4] Royal Institute of British Architects, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects. G-K* (Farnborough, 1973), 106.

'After school at Uppingham, worked at Lutyen's suggestion in a builder's yard for eighteen months. From 1907 to 1910 he was a pupil of William Flockart, a Scottish architect with an office in Old Bond Street, and at the same time attended evening classes at the AA'.

'He set up his own practice in 1910, and his first important commission was for the gardens at Moor Close in Berkshire.'

'After service in the First World War, he resumed his practice and was fortunate in capturing an affluent clientele who supplied him with a steady stream of commissions, mostly for houses. Since his first object was to satisfy his client, he rapidly became a practitioner in many styles.'

Buildings designed by Hill include: Cour House, Argyllshire, 1920; Wilbrahim House, London,1922; North House, London, 1930; 40 & 41 Chelsea Square, London, 1930 & 1933; Fox Steep, Wargrave, Berks, 1923; St Mary, Surrey, 1924; Knowle, Warwicks, 1924; Croyde, Devon, 1925; Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary, Surrey, 1931; Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition, 1937; Newbury Park underground station, Essex, 1949.

member of the Council for Art and Industry, which in 1935 suggested to the London City Council that it should oversee the design of new schools. Hill designed the model school for the Council, but it was never built.[5] He was also a founding member of the Sunshine League which promoted many of the planning ideas that were adopted at Whitwood Mere.[6]

Oliver Hill designed two schools for the West Riding County Council,[7]but only the latter, Whitwood Mere Infants' School at Castleford was built. It has been described as remarkable in plan, and is considered as one of Hill's best buildings in any style.[8] It was an attempt to bring high quality architecture into a depressing industrial estate. However the vitality of this design does not intrude with its function and practicality.

Architectural Description

Whitwood Mere Infants' School, Castleford was built in 1939-40[9] for the West Riding County Council to designs by Oliver Hill. At the time of construction the site was surrounded by mine shafts, factories and a housing estate which necessitated the need for a school. The school is an early example, in England, of a building in this pure Modernist style. The school was designed for 290 children[10] on one level with a nursery in the east corner consisting a classroom and cloakroom with lavatories. A central, curved corridor along the whole length of the school separates the five infants' classrooms on the south from the assembly hall, main entrance, cloakrooms, medical room, staff room and lavatories to the north. The frame of the school is of concrete faced in heather coloured brick, with flat concrete roofs.[11]

The roofs vary in height, creating a visible hierarchy of functions within the building from the exterior. The tallest part of the school is the assembly hall followed by the main body of the school, then the infant's

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[5] Alan Powers, *Oliver Hill. Architect and Lover of Life 1887-1968* (London, 1989), 47.

[6] RIBA 1973, 106.

7 *The Builder*, 14 January 1938, 110. The other school was Methley Senior School. Many of the features at Whitwood Mere were repeated in the design for Methley; covered play areas at either end of the south facade, green faience with incised motifs and large areas of sliding windows. This school was built for 240 children.

[8] Powers 1989, 47.

[9] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Yorkshire, The West Riding* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 159 pl.72a. The drawings illustrated in this article varies primarily in the elevation to that actually built.

[10] *The Builder,* 14 January 1938, 110.
This article shows a building significantly different from what was built.

[11] *Architectural Review*, vol 90, 159-162.

covered play area, and finally the covered play area of the nursery. All the fenestration is steel framed, but at the time of survey the windows on the south elevation were boarded up. The orientation of the building on the site maximises the amount of light entering the classrooms on the south side. This is also emphasised by the curved shape of the building embracing the sun. Whitwood Mere Infants' School can be regarded as a physical translation of the Board of Education's objectives for new school design. At the time of survey the building had been empty for two years and was in the process of being converted into offices.

The main entrance to the school is towards the east end of the north elevation. Across this elevation is a green faience tile frieze of running animals by John Skeaping[12] which immediately creates the impression that the school was built for the children, not the teachers.

Through the main entrance there are doors to the left and right which lead into separate girls' and boys' cloakrooms. Through another set of double doors the main hall takes the shape of a cross with rounded corners. The headmistress's room opens from the south-east corner of the cross, from which the central corridor is revealed running west to east through the whole building. Opposite the main entrance is the exit to the garden and field on the south side.

At the eastern end of the central corridor entered through a set of double doors, is the nursery area, which is partially segregated from the older children. The nursery children may have been encouraged to enter the school from the doors from their covered play area rather than through the main entrance with the older children, since nursery children were inspected daily and had to be supervised in their cloakrooms.[13] The nursery classroom is entered through double doors in its north-east corner with a secondary entrance to the north-west which leads directly into the main corridor. A red tiled fireplace with shelving to the side and over it occupies much of the north wall, with additional storage space in a walk-in cupboard in the north-west corner. The window sills accommodate radiators beneath them, and are at a convenient height for children to sit on. The classroom's curved and glazed external wall could be folded completely open, thus fusing the interior with the exterior.

The central corridor acts as the main ventilation vessel through the building. The roof over the corridor is lower than that over the classrooms to enable fresh air to be cross-ventilated over its whole length to the rooms on either side, as well as to provide extra light. The roof over the entrance area is in turn higher than that over the rest of the corridor, allowing light and fresh air to be brought directly into the corridor through windows at ceiling level. The windows are all operated manually from winding gear at an adult reaching height. The central

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[12] Pevsner 1974, 158-9 pl.72a.

[13] Wright and Gardner-Medwin 1938, 23.

corridor has natural light from large circular light-wells in its ceiling. Every room in the school can be entered from the corridor, and at its extreme ends are the exits to the covered play areas.

The five infants' classrooms along the south side are identical to each other. They all face south and have sliding, folding windows which could be fully opened.[14] On entering the classrooms there is a marked contrast from the enclosed corridor into the outward looking classrooms to the garden and field. The side walls contain twenty cupboards for each of the children, and the rear wall has a row of windows at ceiling level to provide light and cross-ventilation. These classrooms had little built-in furniture to enable a free use of the space for different activities.

A shallow terrace runs along the whole exterior of the south front, providing a covered walkway. Above its canopy is a row of clerestory windows which allows more light to penetrate the classrooms, compensating for any reduction caused by the canopy. The canopy expands at either end of the south front to form covered play areas of free parabolic shapes, the play area for the infants, to the west, being higher than that for the nursery children, thus defining the hierarchy within the school. These covered play areas are supported by steel columns cased in concrete. The nursery children's area was also protected from the north by a glass block wall with built-in seating,[15] demolished at time of survey. The children were provided with a field and a garden which was used as an educational space on the south side of the school.

At the north-west corner of the building are the boys and girls' lavatories, which are separated from the corridor by double doors allowing an area for the children to clean up before returning into the main body of the school from the playground. A feature of the lavatories are the centrally located sinks with heated towel rails utilising the hot water pipes.

Further along the corridor is the assembly hall which, due to its size and height, dominates the school. Its east and west walls are both mainly glazed, and the only interior feature are double doors in the north wall to allow large groups of people to exit directly outside. Next to the assembly hall are a staff room and a medical inspection room with a lavatory.

The original colour scheme of the school was very bright with no room having all its walls in the same colour.[16] However at the time of survey the walls had all been painted white. The strongest scheme was used in the corridor in which nobody spent a long time. Here one wall was tan, the other buttercup yellow and white. The dadoes in the classrooms were of lightly mottled linoleum, to which posters could be pinned. The same

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[14] Derek Linstrum, *West Yorkshire, Architects and Architecture* (London 1978), 265.

[15] *Architectural Review*, December 1941, vol 90, 161.

[16] *Architectural Review*, December 1941, vol 90, 161.

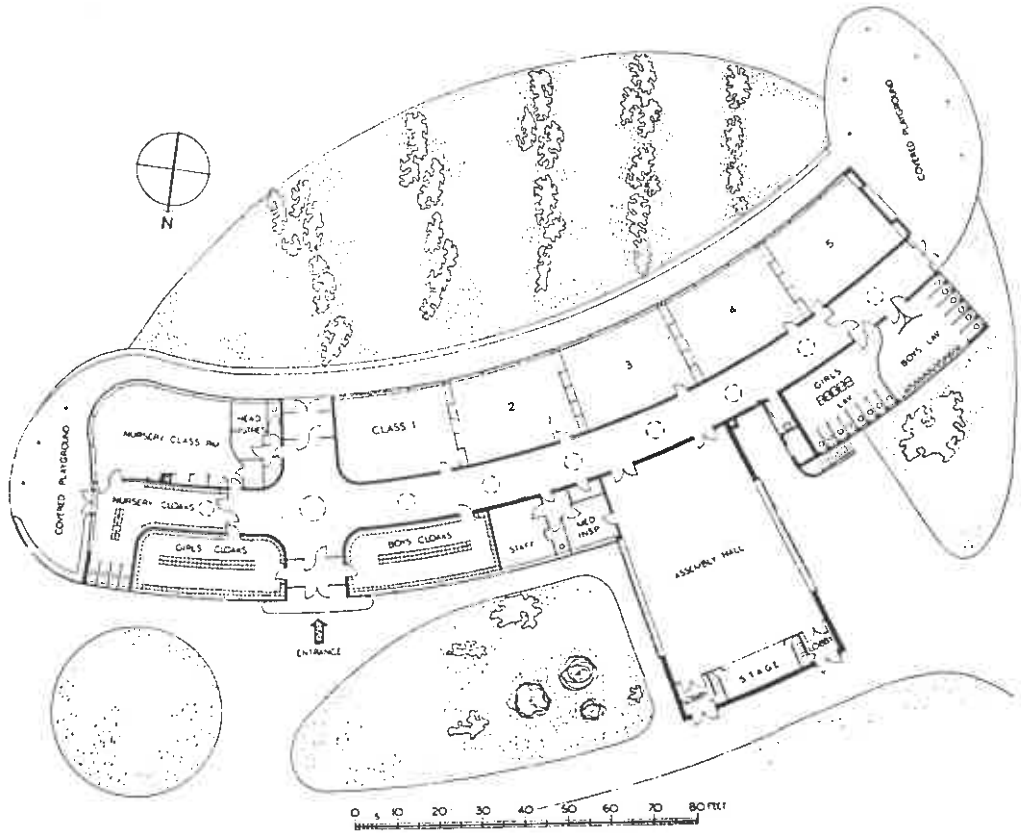
linoleum, in contrasting colours, was carried over the flush-fronted built-in cupboards in the classrooms. The hinged and reversible blackboards were yellow with blue chalk. The floors were laid throughout with polished cork tiles and the floors of the cloaks and lavatories with encaustic tiles. A prominent feature throughout the school are the doors faced with oiled teak with substantial rubber protected edges in metal frames which were originally enamelled bright orange, but at the time survey were painted white. All the doors have two glass portholes, one above the other, so that both adults and children could see through them.

Very few later additions have been made to the school. A disabled toilet has been inserted into the boys' lavatory area, and a scullery added in a space between the girls' lavatories and the assembly hall. A prefabricated building was erected next the school to provide extra classrooms. At the time of survey the building was in the process of being converted into offices.

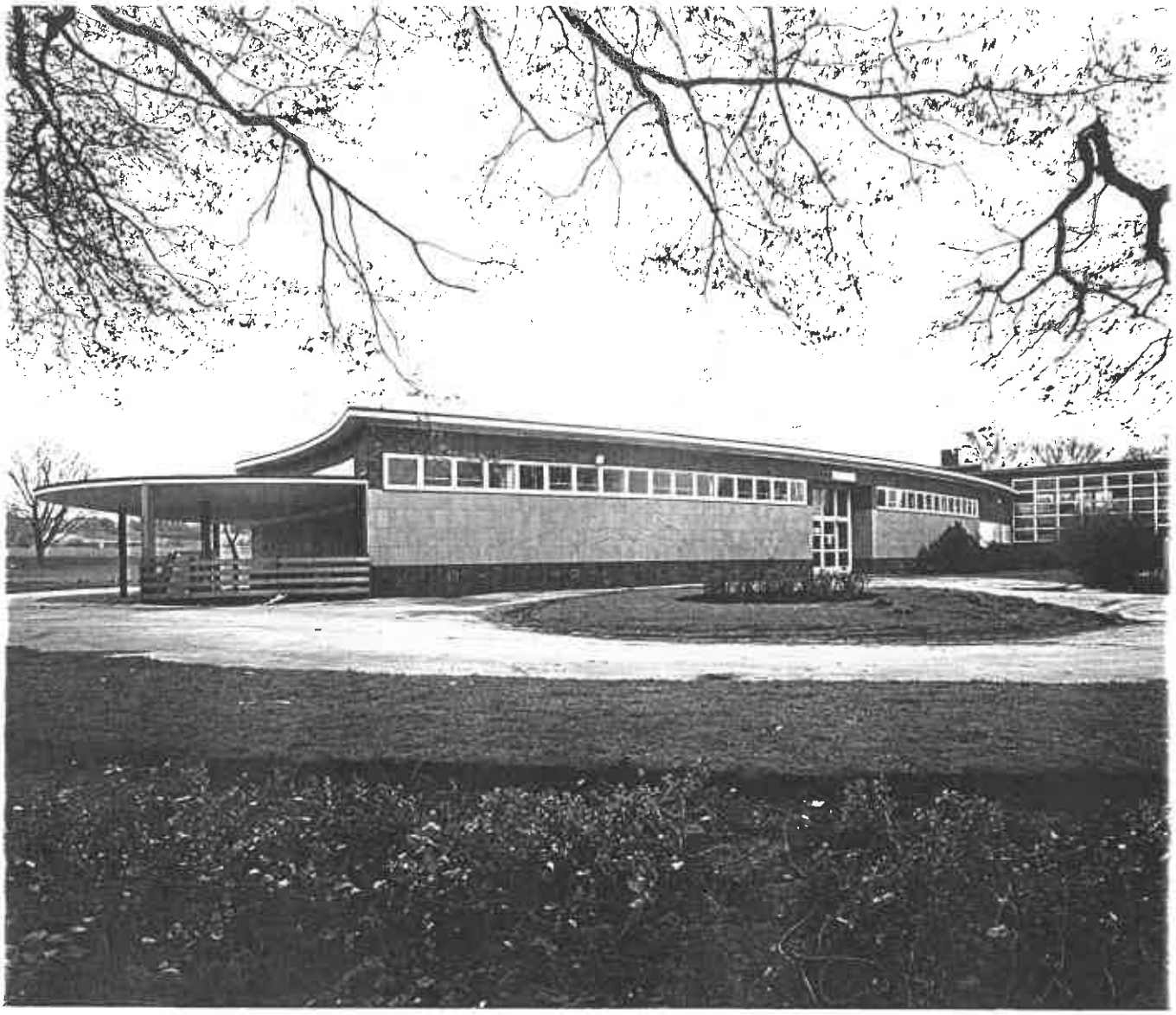
Visited by Gillian Phimister and Tony Perry, 3 April 1995

Report by Gillian Phimister

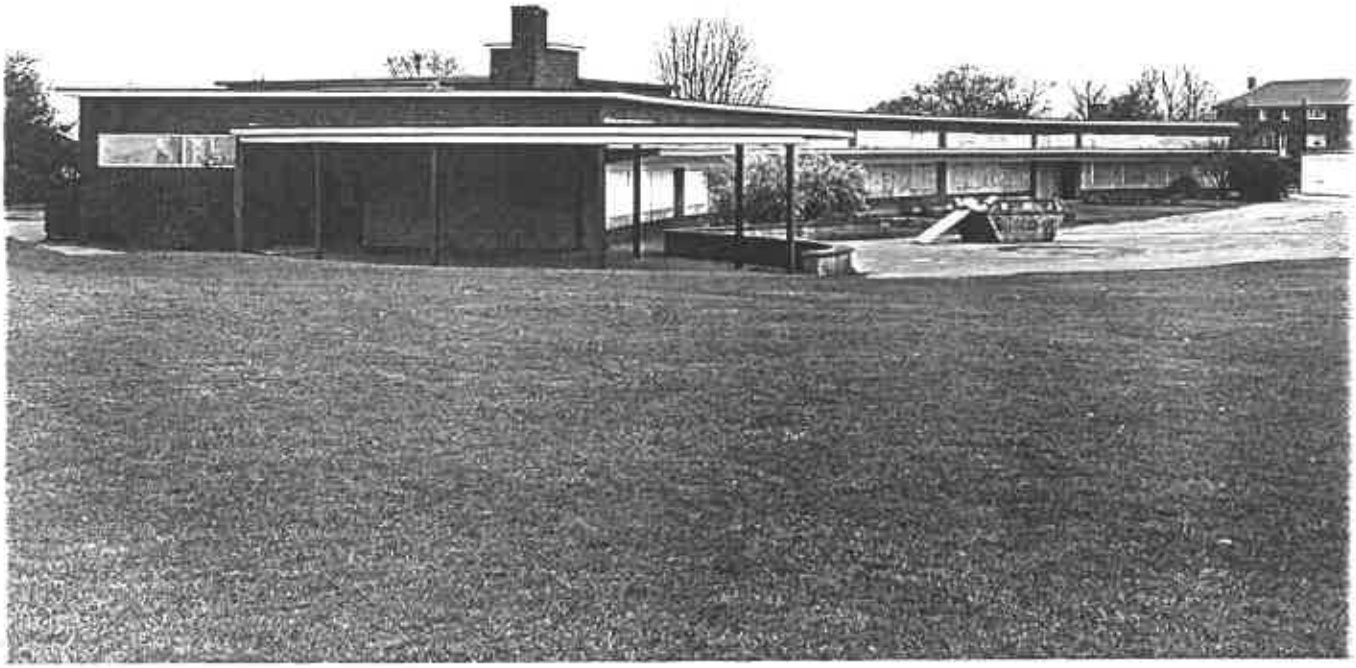
Large format photography by Tony Perry



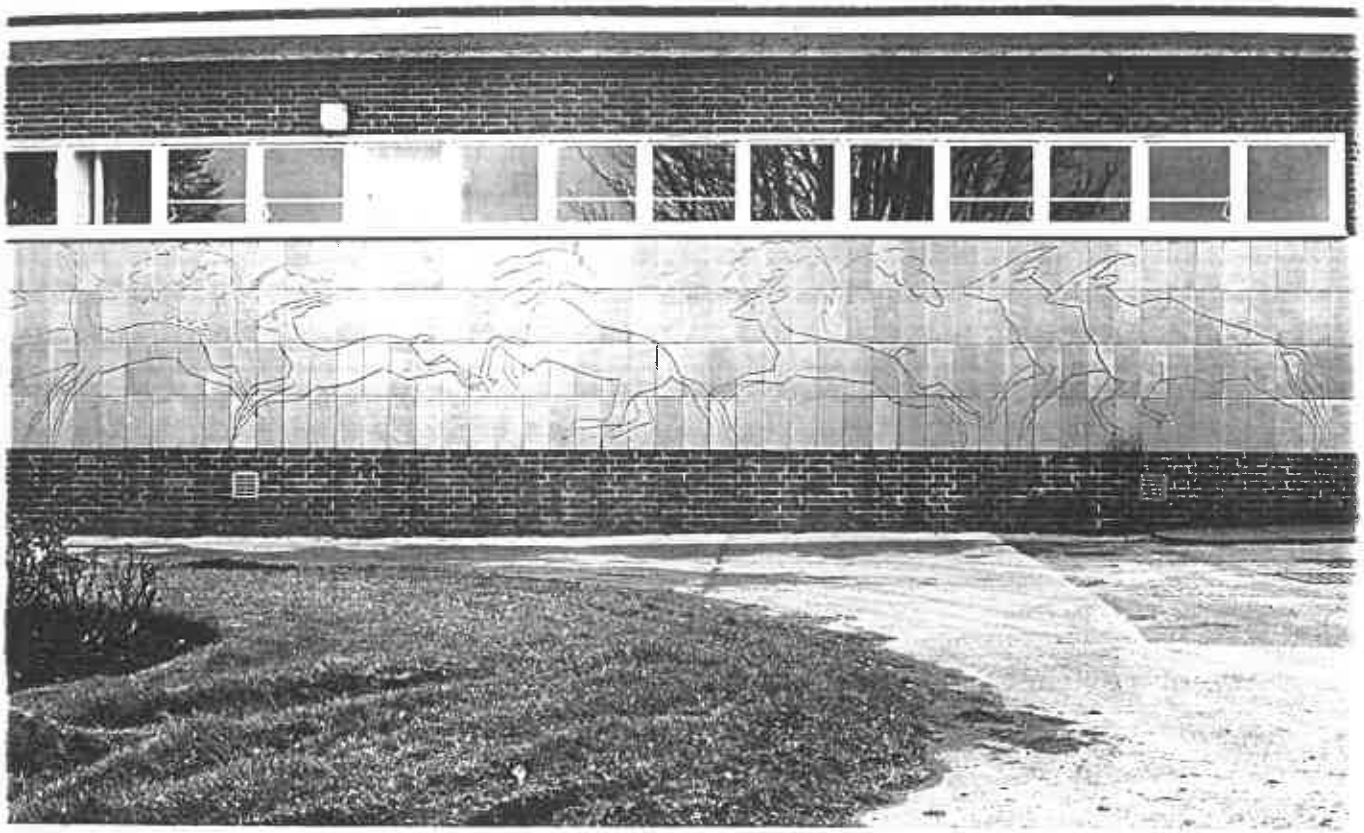
Whitwood Mere Infants' School, Castleford.
Ground-floor plan of school as built (*Architectural Review*, vol 90 (December 1941), 160).



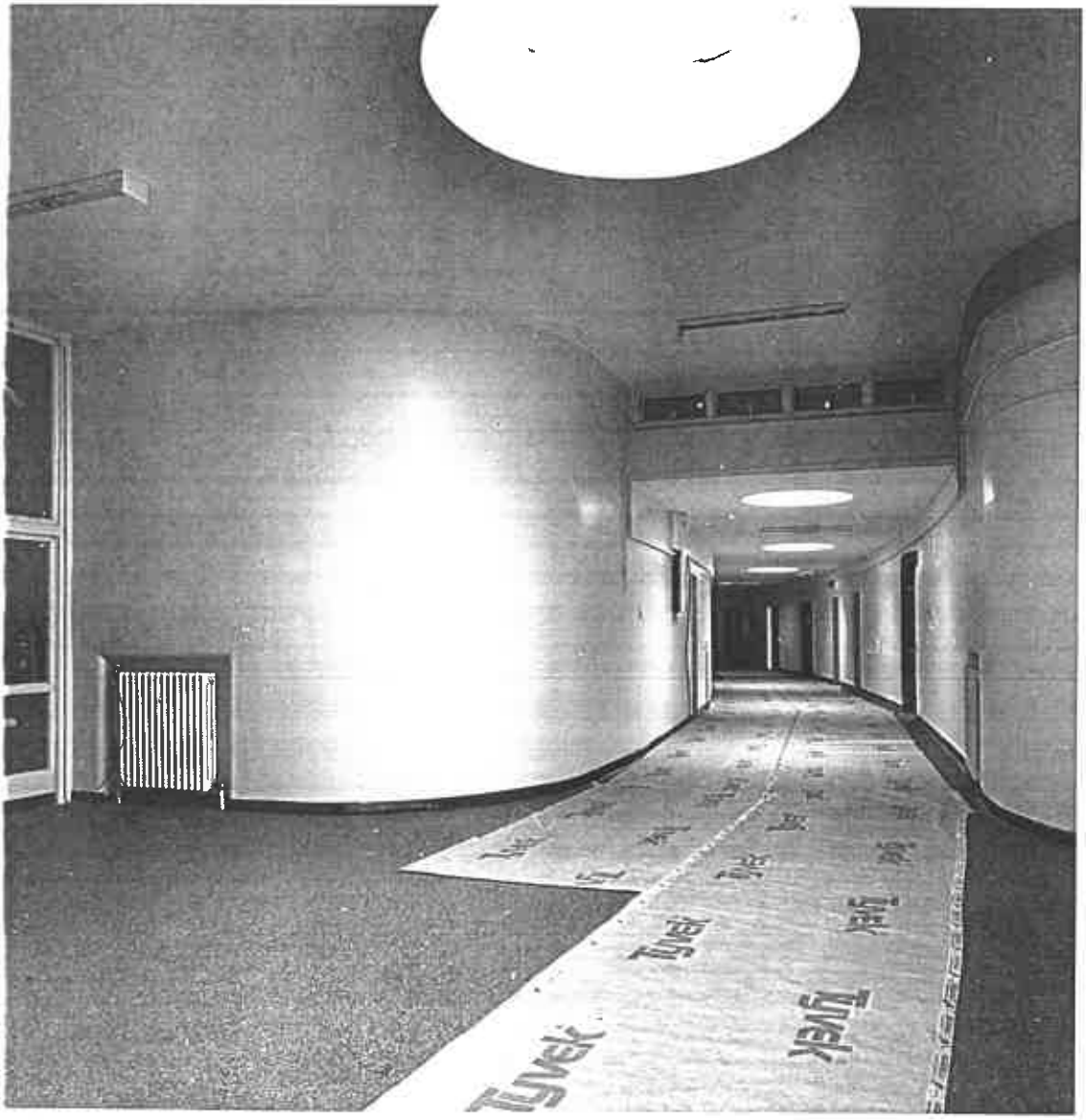
View from north-east (BB95/1316)



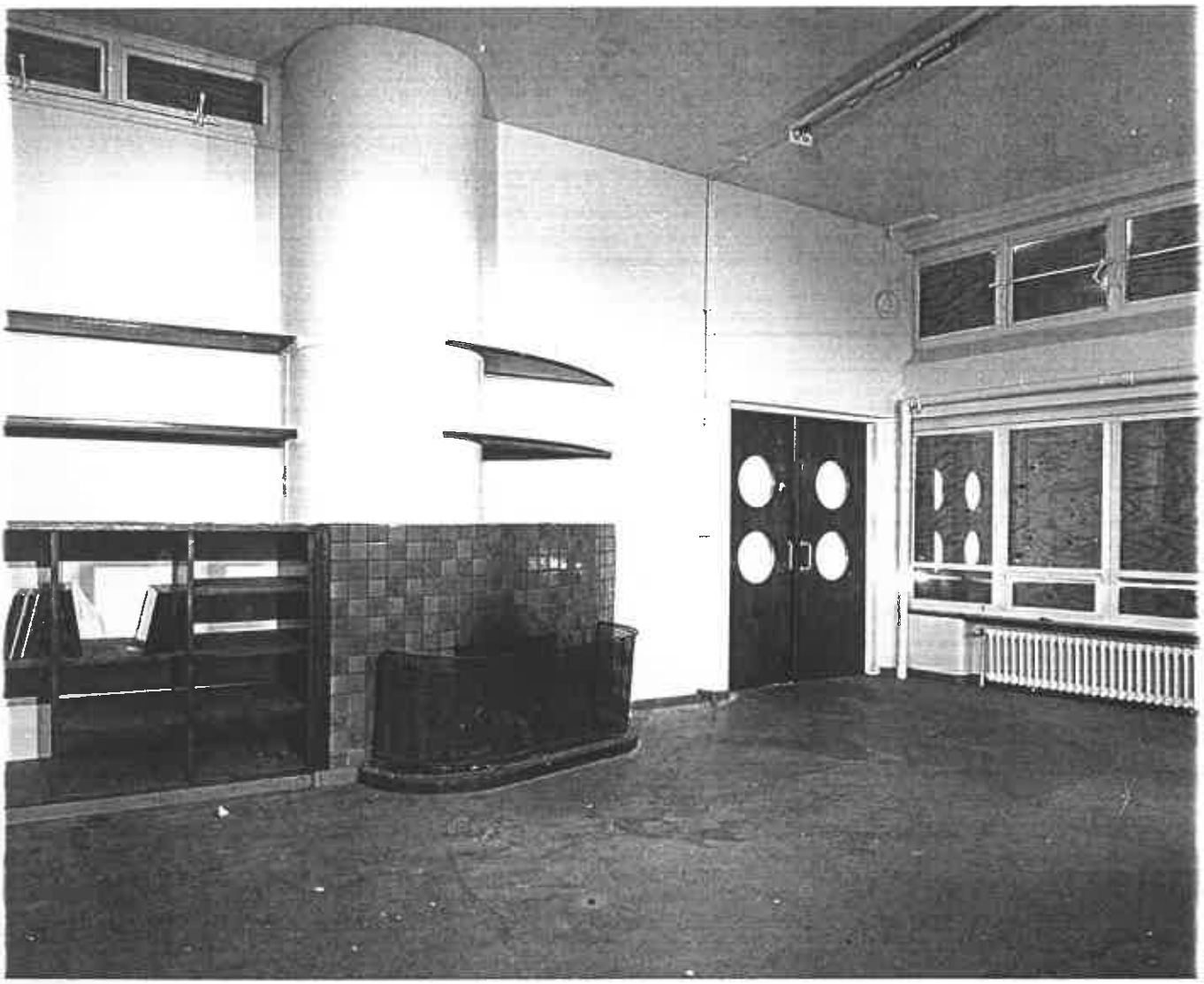
View from south-west (BB95/1315)



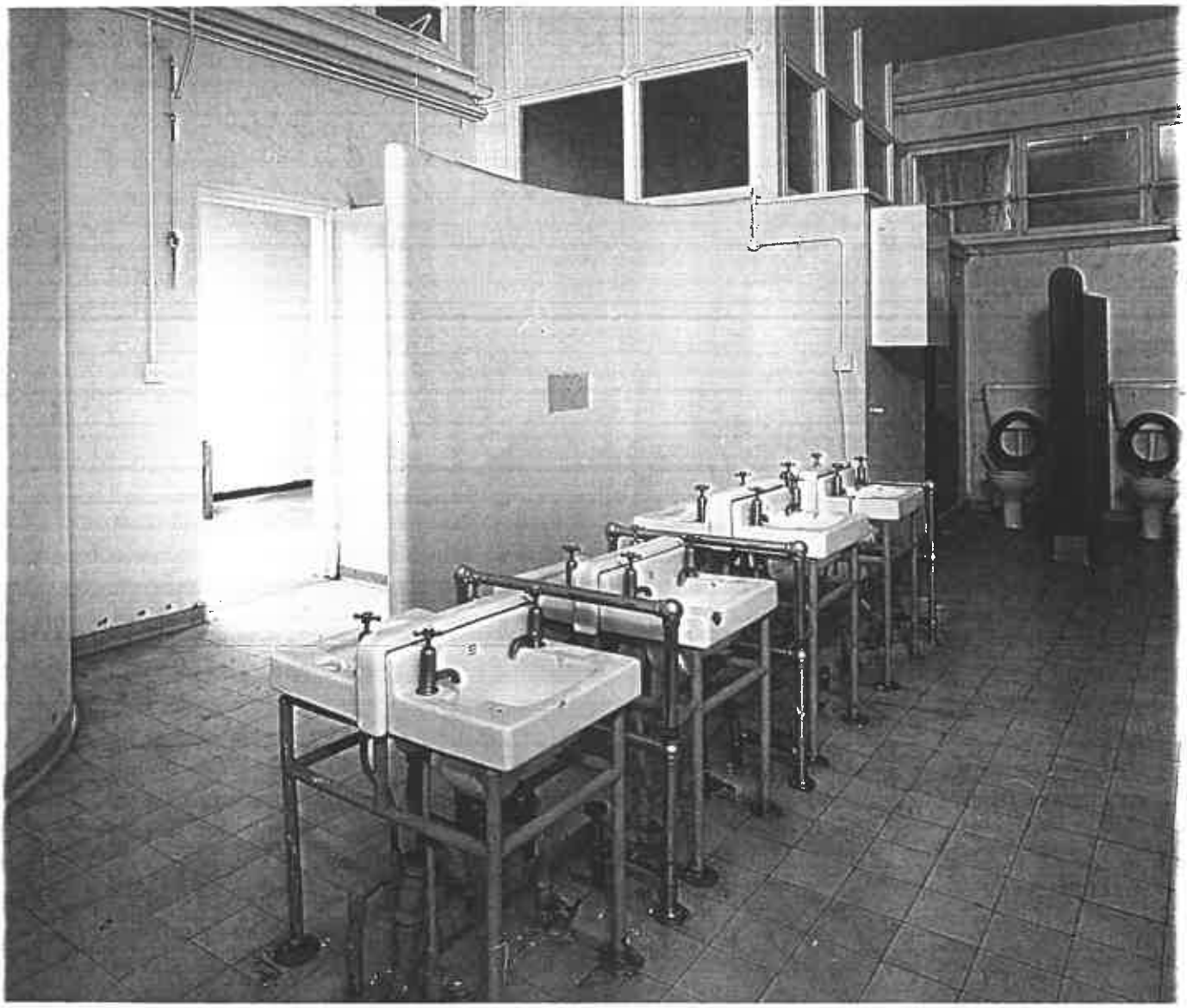
Faience tiled frieze (BB95/1314)



Entrance hall and corridor from east (AA95/776)



Nursery classroom from south-west (AA95/780)



Boys lavatories (AA95/778)

Door to assembly hall (AA95/782)