

## Southwark Bacon Drying Company, 59 Great Suffolk Street, SE1

"Bacon is our favourite for breakfast. It is made from pigs' flesh which has been soaked in brine and then smoked, a process which differs little today from when it was almost the only practical method of preserving meat. Ham is produced in much the same way, except that it is treated with sugar or molasses." Thus it was in 1936, as outlined in *The Wonderland of Knowledge*, a children's encyclopaedia. By the mid 1970s three factors had altered the picture – changes in breakfast preferences, growth of a demand for unsmoked (green) bacon, and development of cheaper techniques for artificially, or chemically, flavouring bacon. All these led to a fall in demand for traditionally cured bacon and a reduction in the number of firms involved. The Southwark Bacon Company, visited twice in 1977-78, retained traditional methods until its closure in 1980.

The firm became the Friars' Bacon Company almost immediately, continuing with that name until 1926, when the premises were taken over by a new undertaking, the Southwark Bacon Drying Company Ltd. The Chairman, Mr. E.H.C. Cook, was already Chairman of Williamson's Ltd, which ran a wholesale grocers' business and some ten associated shops in the London area, thus providing an immediate customer. Building works were soon put in hand to enlarge the capacity of the firm within its existing site. Part, formerly used as a single storey storage area, was converted to contain two more stoves. To compensate for this, the first floor of the office/WC section was extended over the previously open yard which gave vehicular access, and a further storey added above (Plate 1). Some nine years later the adjacent site, No. 57, was included, an archway being cut



Plate 1. Exterior view of site from the south. The extension, No. 57, is not visible

### History

Until 1914 there were several houses at the corner of Gravel Lane (later Great Suffolk Street) and Pocock Street SE1. In that year, new, purpose-built premises were erected for the Empire Bacon Curing Company; these contained six bacon stoves, as the kilns are called in the trade. The site was reasonably located – within a mile of Smithfield Market and a lesser distance from the main riverside wharves through which meat was imported. These included Hay's, Hibernia (Montague Close), Crown (off Bankside), Union and Nelson's (Upper Ground) and several off Upper Thames Street. Four other bacon curers already had premises in the vicinity, as well as Sainsbury's, who had stoves at their depot nearby.

through the party wall. The single-storey building on that site was already used by a wholly-owned subsidiary company, the William Harris Bacon Company, although it did not carry out smoking. This subsidiary continued to trade from No.57 until about 1949, when it moved to Wimbledon; two additional stoves were then built in this section.

Some time in the mid-1960s, the firm, whilst continuing to trade under its own name, became part of the Fitch Lovell Group (Fitch & Sons had always owned some of the shares), which produces a variety of foodstuffs – eggs, meat products, bread and cakes – from its sites throughout the southern half of England. At least one of these sites, that of Fitch & Sons (Export)

Ltd, West Ferry Road E14, also contains stoves. By 1978 the number of staff at Great Suffolk Street was down from 16 to 4 and the throughput of bacon sides down from 7000 to 1000 per week. The premises eventually closed in 1980. Currently, June 1982, a hopeful "For Sale" sign hangs over the broken windows.

gas-fired boiler. All sides were dusted with pea flour (a small pea grinding mill was noted for this), "tagged" and a butcher's hook inserted before being conveyed to one of the stoves. The main purpose of pea flour was to improve the appearance of the sides – particularly the bone – after smoking. A plan of the site



*Plate 2. Interior of stove, looking upwards to lower level of bars, partially occupied; light is entering from open door at upper level*

### **The process**

Smoking bacon achieves three objectives in one process:-

- i) drying the bacon, which helps to preserve it;
- ii) giving a distinct flavour;
- iii) depositing an agent of formaldehyde and phenols which inhibit enzymic breakdown by bacteria.

This can be either 'cold' smoking – at about 30°C, or, as was the case at Great Suffolk Street, 'hot' smoking at about 90°C. The total time for smoking was from 8 to 36 hours; it was then several hours before the stove could be emptied. The actual time depended on the number of sides placed in the stove and the weather.

Bacon sides received for smoking might first need to be thawed and/or washed. Such sides were placed on a special slab in a small tiled room, and hosed with hot water from an adjacent

prepared in 1935 shows that an overhead rail was used to "run" sides from the washing room to the stove entrances, but in 1978 this movement was on a stillage carried on a wheeled pallet or by small electric fork lift, these being able to enter the stoves and afford direct conveyance to or from road vehicles outside – at that time these did not enter the building or use the loading bay off Loman Street, to the north of No.57.

Each stove, which was operated completely independently of its neighbours, was some 11ft x 25ft x 24ft high (the two added in 1926 were of non-standard size). Within the stove were grids of bars at two levels from which the sides were hung – up to 112 at the top level and 224 at the lower (Plate 2). Further bars along the sides of the stove were used for gammon (about 70 pieces per stove). After the bacon had been hung, a quantity of sawdust, traditionally oak, although other hardwoods were used, was placed in two long heaps on the floor of the stove and ignited. The smouldering sawdust gradually raised the temperature in the stove, and as this happened so fat dropped on to

it from the sides to add to the smoky atmosphere. A full stove would have three successive 'firings' over 36 hours. A forced draught had been tried at one time, but was not a success, and so the doors of the stove at lower or higher levels, and shutters beneath louveres along the roof, were opened as needed to regulate air flow and temperature. Once cooled, sides were returned to the customer and the stove floor thoroughly cleaned.

### The site

A plan of the site and of a typical stove are given as figs. 1 – 3 and this section thus gives more of an impression than details. The tallest part of the site, of three storeys, had, at ground floor level, a vehicle entrance, although it was not actually used as such, alongside which was a cosy, somewhat chaotic, office

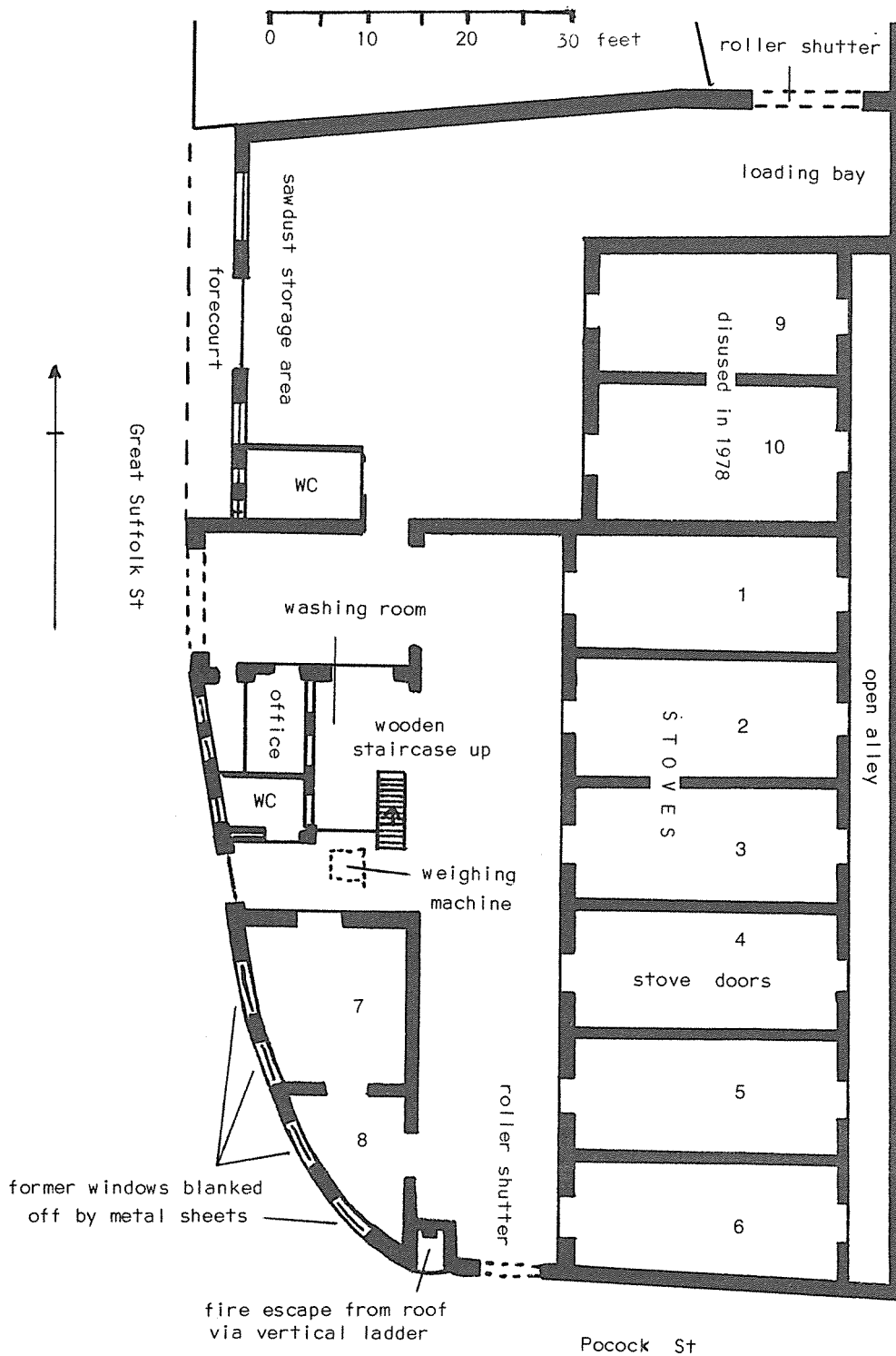


Fig. 1. Ground floor plan. The wall thicknesses are slightly exaggerated. Stoves 1 - 6 were those built in 1914, 7 & 8 added in 1926, 9 & 10 added in former No. 57 in 1950

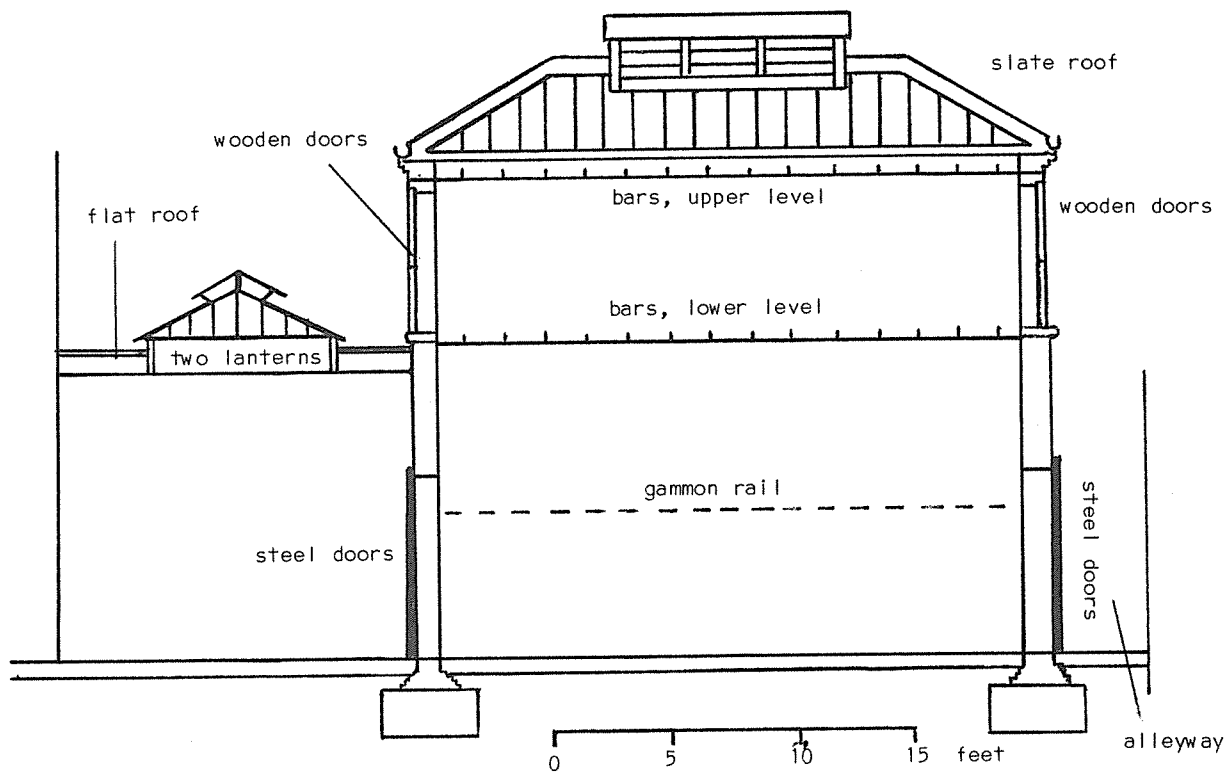


Fig. 2. Longitudinal section of stove in range 1 - 6. From plans prepared in 1926.

occupied by the site manager. Adjacent was the washing area referred to earlier – a rather stark raised slab surrounded by white brick walls and floor, made by Doulton. The two floors above had goods doors facing the street, the upper having a projecting girder along which ran an electric hoist. Within this area were mess rooms, storage space, the pea mill and a staircase which gave access to a flat roof, off which in turn were the upper doors of the stoves. As well as regulating draught in the stoves and helping dispersal of smoke, these doors allowed staff to stand on the lower level of bars within the stove in order to hang sides at the higher level, these being raised from below, using a block and tackle. Behind the entrance arch, running the length of the original site, was a wide corridor along which were the stoves, some with their blackened doors open, with clusters of hooks on the inside; further hooks and ‘tags’ were hung off a shelf to one side. Glazed rooflights allowed shafts of sunlight into the delightfully pleasant haze. The interior of a stove just before smoking took place was an impressive sight – bright and fresh sawdust on the dark floor, sides of bacon hanging above in closely packed surrealistic rows, a mixture of pale pink, creamy white and blue colours, and the walls deeply encrusted with a black greasy smoke deposit, thickly sticky to the touch.

**Acknowledgements**

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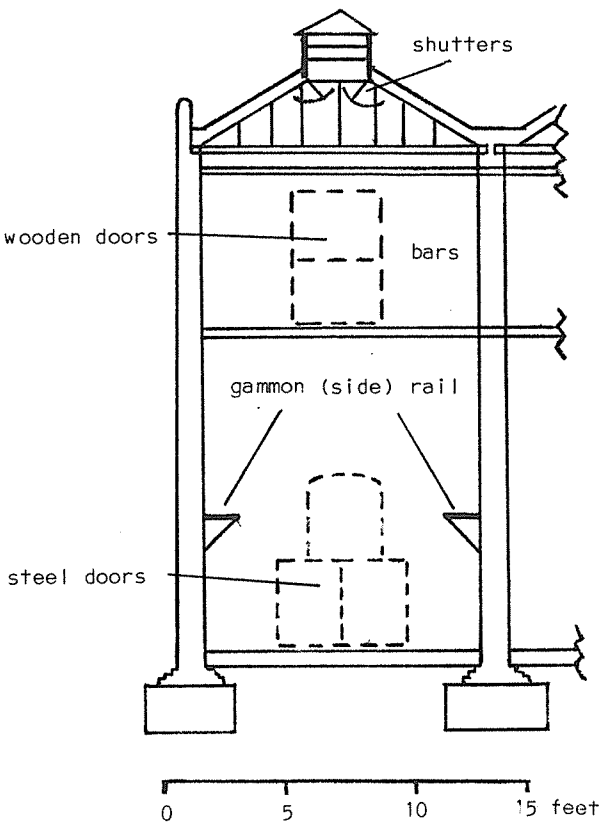


Fig. 3. Cross-section of stove No. 6, from plans prepared in 1926