

Strong, Rawle & Strong, Fellmongers

20-24 MOROCCO ST., LONDON SE1

by David Thomas

A fellmonger's trade is the process of separating hair from skin; and making both fit for use. In Britain this is usually wool from sheepskins. I thoroughly enjoyed the two GLIAS visits to this site, tucked away down a cul-de-sac in the one-time heart of Bermondsey's leather industry. It was so different from other visits and the impressions remain as vivid now as they were then, in 1974. For this reason, I have left the description in the present tense, although virtually all was demolished a decade ago.

The firm

Strong, Rawle & Strong was a successful family firm. It began in 1853 when William Strong travelled to London from the family home in Dunster, Somerset, establishing himself as a hide and skin merchant at Bermondsey Skin Market. He was soon joined by his brother, James. The Partnership was extended to include A. H. Rawle in 1889 after he had married William's daughter. The firm flourished. In 1893 it took over the disused site of James White's tanyard at 24 Lower Russell St., (as present-day Morocco St. was then called), and a further similar adjacent site, 20-22, in 1905. Valuation plans identify all buildings seen in 1974 as dating from 1902 onwards, with the majority from the period 1902-1922. These were used as one for fellmongering until the firm moved from the site in 1976.

The main part of this report deals only with the fellmongering activity. For completeness, it should be noted that the firm's original business of marketing of hides and calfskins expanded. By 1936 it had taken over 26 of the 47 "bays" at the adjacent Skin Market, plus a further tanyard site at the rear of 193 Long Lane (which had a back entrance close to their Morocco Street site). Although the Skin Market, badly damaged by enemy action in 1941, ceased to be used in about 1960, Strong Rawle & Strong continued their marketing activities from 193 Long Lane until this too ceased in 1976.

However, cessation of fellmongering and marketing activities in Bermondsey was not the end of the story. The firm had a number of other activities in sheep-farming areas of

Devon and Suffolk, and these, plus the trading name, were amalgamated with activities of a separate branch of the family, based at Rushden, Northants, and now trading as Strong & Fisher (Holdings) PLC. This is the UK's largest manufacturer of clothing leathers, with a pre-tax profit of £4.47m on turnover of £57.72m in the financial year to June 1986.

The location

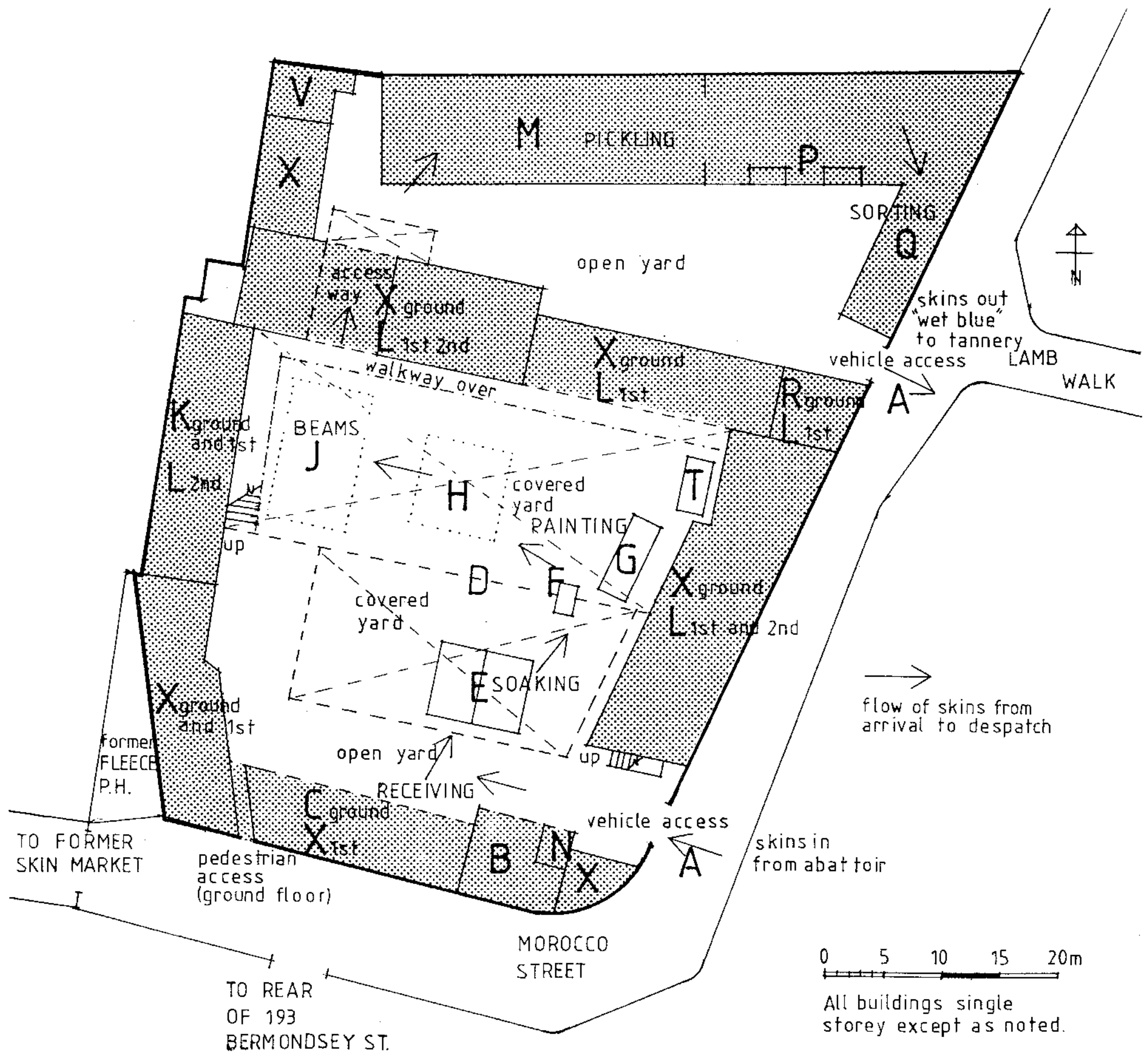
Even in 1988 there are tell-tale signs of Bermondsey's 1850s heyday as the area where one third of the UK's leather was processed. Its siting here was no coincidence. In late medieval times the foul-smelling industries associated with processing the non-meat elements of slaughtered animals (hides/skins, hair, bones), banished from the City and its environs, found ideal conditions in the low-lying, then virtually uninhabited marshes of Bermondsey.

Drainage ditches flushed by the Thames twice daily provided the fresh water (it is above the salt water line) for tan pits and to take away the obnoxious effluents. Whilst tan pits dealt with hides of larger animals (cattle, horses, oxen), fellmongers found employ in the different tasks associated with sheep, whose wool was often more valuable than the skin. They had, of course, a ready source of material from the metropolis' fresh meat markets.

This concentration of activity attracted the Skin Market and associated warehouses in 1833. Market stalls were arranged as an oval with 47 large, covered, bays at which skins/hides could be displayed. It was here that William Strong, undoubtedly already familiar with the skin trade, started his business. Whilst the story of the decline of the trade is too complex to tell here (it includes the effect of railways, refrigerated shipping, urbanisation, war, plastics and environmental/health influences), it is interesting to note that Strong, Rawle & Strong took over the sites of three tanyards - they expanded as the main industry of the area contracted.

The process

What we saw in 1974 was very much a standard, text-book activity. Drawing hair from skin is a tough, tedious, process, which



- A gateway from Morocco St to open yard
- B skins received and salted in open sided shed
- C as B
- D covered yard containing E to J
- E 2no. soaking pits
- F breaking machine
- G painting machine
- H paintedskins on pallets (for 24 hrs)
- J beams with wool baskets
- K wool drying machines and store room

- L wool store/sorting/warehouse
- M 3no. pickling drums plus standby paddle tank
- N salt store
- P 2no. fleshing machines
- Q sorting and grading of skins
- R skin store
- T water tank
- V effluent tanks
- X miscellaneous uses - offices, canteen, toilets, tool store, fitters shop, etc.

Fig.1. Site plan, showing building use and work flow, 1974 (Drawn by Jon Wallsgrove)

does no good to either material. Skin consists of three layers. The outer surface, the epidermis, is the part which flakes off and is continuously renewed. Beneath it is the corium, the true skin, and on the inside a more fleshy part, the adipose tissue. The first and last are of no use, and have to be removed. The wool itself has roots growing from the follicles, set in the corium. By destroying these roots the fellmonger is able to easily separate the wool and skin.

The site - general impression

And now, the clock returns to a Saturday in May 1974, when entering through the gateway (A on Fig 1), the party saw piles of sheepskins lying in a cobbled yard and beyond them a number of men working (Plate 1).

north-western sides of this structure were open to allow freedom of access. Beyond and above some of the salting bays were offices and mess rooms. Along the adjacent north-western perimeter wall was the wool drying building. Along the north-eastern wall, at first and second floor level ran part of the wool storage facilities. This brick structure was lined internally with wood. On the ground floor at this point was situated an open doorway which permitted access to a second yard. At the south-eastern end of the first yard, that is at the end adjacent to Morocco Street, was a 3-storey building used, on the first and second floors, to store wool. Again the beams, flooring and partitions were of wood.

The second yard, which had its own exit onto Morocco Street, (B on Fig.1) was beyond the



Plate 1. Yard with skins waiting to be pressed, seen from gate A (Photo D Thomas).

Initially it was noticed that on the left hand side were six covered bays. The first of these was used to store salt. The other five contained piles of newly delivered skins undergoing the salting process. On the right hand side of the yard were situated those processes leading up to and including the separation of the wool from the rest of the skin. This area was covered by a steel frame supporting an asbestos roof which contained glass lights; the south-western and

north-eastern wall of the first. This yard consisted of an open cobbled space beyond which was a single storey shed where the skins were pickled, finally cleaned off and then sorted. The north-western end of this yard had further staff rooms.

All in all, it was fascinating, with skins in piles everywhere, wet floors and a fairly continuous movement of fork-lift trucks carrying pallets of skins to and fro. A second visit was

arranged to take place on a normal working day to carry out detailed recording. This took place on 4th September 1974 when GLIAS was given much good natured assistance by the management and employees.

Receipt of skins and salting

Skins are delivered by lorry from slaughterhouses in various parts of the Home Counties and the North and unloaded in the yard adjacent to the salting bays. The feet and tails, later sold, are trimmed off and the skins are then salted. The salting is done by laying the first skin fleece down, either in the open yard or in the salting bays, and sprinkling salt on the flesh. A second skin is then taken, laid fleece down on the first, and the process repeated. Thus a pile of skins interleaved with salt is built up to a height of about 3 ft. The salting causes partial dehydration and gives some protection against bacterial action. The bloody liquor drawn from the skin is allowed to drain away on the specially sloped and cobbled yard.

Soaking in the pits

At the time of our second visit two pits were in use. At the time of the first, four had been in operation. In the meantime, two of the pits had been removed to make space for a new machine which replaced both the soaking pits and the breaking machine. The two remaining pits will stay for the time being as stand-bys. The two pits are very close to each other. They are rectangular, with concrete walls approximately 3ft - 4ft high; they are 20ft long and 15ft wide. The wall is wide enough to allow a man to stand upon it and work. The pits contain pure water to dissolve the salt.

Skins are removed from their pallets and thrown into the pits. The man standing on the wall of the pits, wearing waterproof clothing, pushes the skins below water level with a long pole; in turn they gradually rise to the surface and are again pushed down. This is essential as the air held by the wool makes the skins buoyant and if desalting is to be successful then the flesh must remain underwater. Once soaking is completed, which takes 24 hours, the pit is drained and the skins removed to pallets.

Breaking

Following soaking, skins are passed through a breaking machine. The function of this is to remove excess fat, part of the adipose tissue, so that the following painting process may be effective. The machine, driven by an electric motor, consists of two rollers, one of which has a spiral blade that removes the fat. After breaking, the skins are first put onto pallets and then fed to the painting machine. The breaking machine is similar to that used for fleshing.

Painting

In this process lime paste, acting as a holding agent for sodium sulphide, is sprayed onto the flesh side of the pelt. This blue-green mixture penetrates the skin. The machine used, a relatively modern one, with its own electric motor, has a continuously moving mesh-bed conveyor which carries the pelts under the paste spray. The skins are fed into the machine by hand and, once they have passed under the spray, they have the paste layer retouched by one of the machine minders, who uses a brush for the purpose. The men working on this process all wear protective clothing and breathing masks. After painting, the skins are placed, flesh to flesh, on a pallet for 24 hours, during which time the wool roots are loosened or destroyed and the wool thus starts to come loose.

Beams

The beam (Fig.2) is a curved wooden surface, about 3ft 9ins long set at about 40 degrees to the horizontal with two legs 1ft 8ins in length at the rear, on which the skin is placed for the removal of the wool. Two are in use.

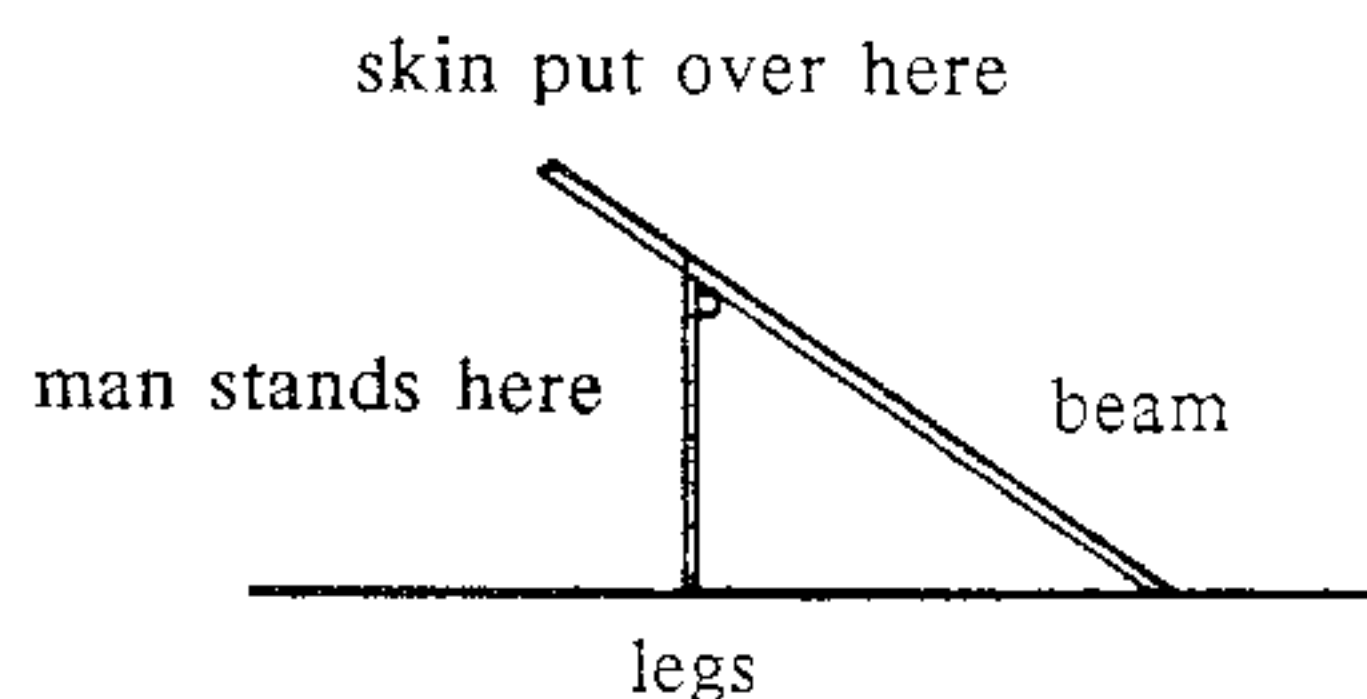


Fig.2. Pulling beam - section

Painted skins are taken from the pallet and placed wool-side up on the beam by the puller who leans forward over the beam. The wool from long-haired pelts is removed by hand pulling. For short hair, he uses a beam knife, which is a curved two-handled blade, sharp on the inner surface. To remove the wool this is pushed firmly down the beam.

After its removal from the pelt the puller grades the wool by eye and throws it into one of a number of wicker baskets arranged in front of him beyond the beams. The round baskets used by the firm were in the main of two sizes, being either 2ft or 2ft 9ins in height. Both types were 2ft 5ins in diameter at the top and 1ft 11ins at the base. The skins are placed on pallets.

Wool processing

The wool, which is the more valuable of the two main products, is taken to one of the two drying machines. From these it is carried across the whole site by being blown through a metal tube approximately 1ft in diameter to the storage area, which consists of wooden walled sorting bays. These are on the top floor of the buildings adjoining Morocco Street. Wool for bagging is dropped through hatches to a bagging section, which uses square cornered large sacks to form bales. The storage floors have slatted metal windows for ventilation. Strands of wool hang through the slats above Morocco Street. A small wall crane on this side can deliver full sacks to lorries in the street.

Pickling

The unhaired skins are conveyed on their pallets by fork lift truck across the second yard to the pickling shed, which in addition to the three pickling drums contains two fleshing machines.

Approximately 3,500 skins are loaded into the drum by a fork-lift truck and soaked for about 24 hours in water. Once the water is drained, pickling commences. Approximately 1,500 litres of a solution of sulphuric acid, salt and water are added to the drum which then rotates about twice a minute for about 24 hours.

To remove the skins the drum is first drained. The effluent is passed through a sieve to remove any hair or loose skin that has become detached and fed into one of three boarded-over tanks. This stage removes as much solid matter as is possible before discharge into a sewer which, we were assured, was still tidal, although fully culverted.

The skins fall from the feed hatch door of the drum into tubs made of plastic. The latter material is used to avoid corrosion from the pickling solution. The tubs are 5ft long, 3ft 10ins wide and 2ft 6in deep. The skins are now taken to the fleshing machines at the far end of the shed.

The drums used have only been in operation

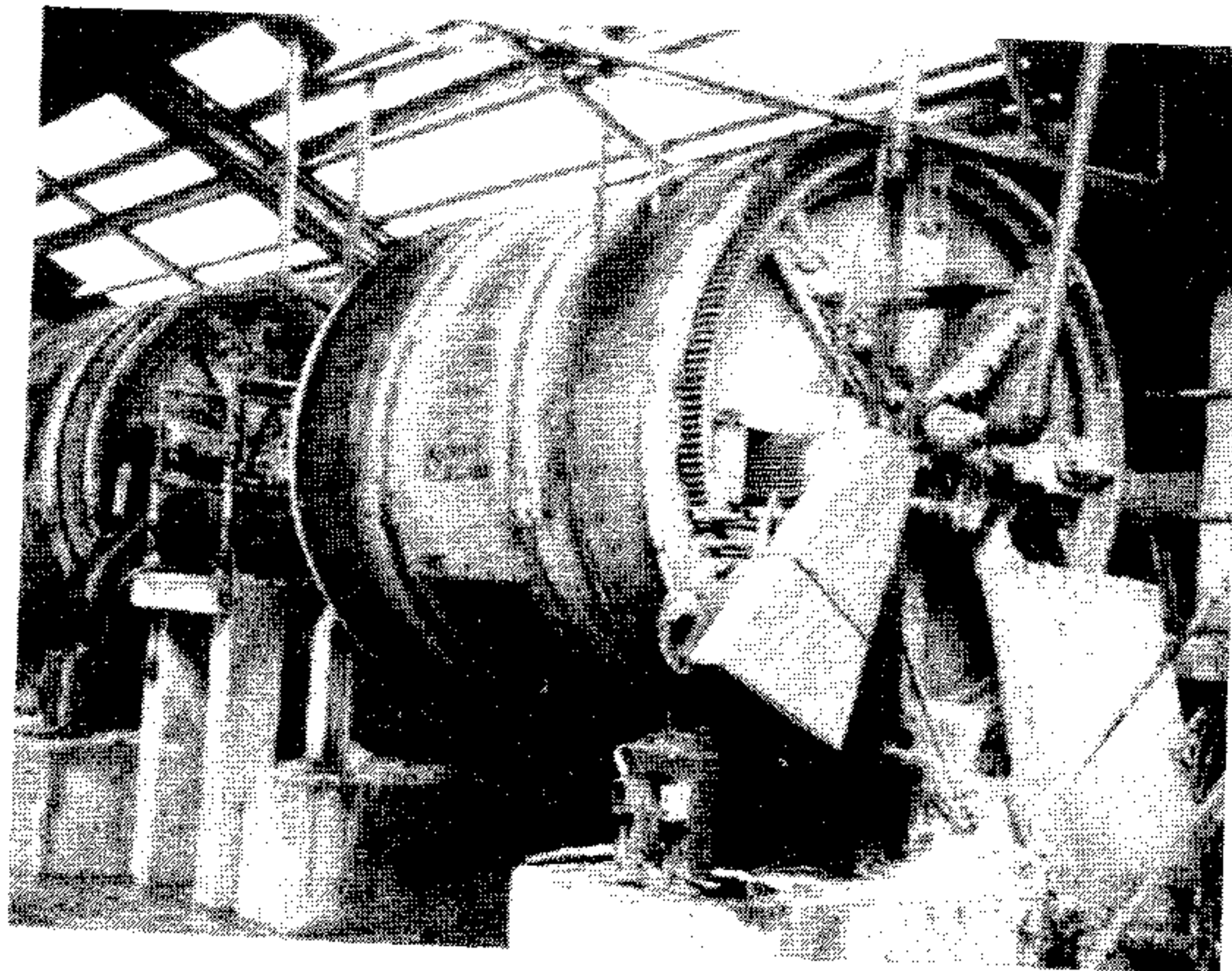


Plate 2. Wooden pickling drum (Photo B Hodinott)

The pickling drums (Plate 2) are used for both washing and pickling. Each drum is made from wooden staves with iron bands, and is set on a stand which allows it to rotate on centrally placed horizontal bearings. The stand is high enough to allow emptying of skins into tubs placed beneath. The drums are driven by an electric motor working through a plastic gear wheel that engages the teeth on the end of the drum. The drum interiors have baffles. The floor of the shed is tiled so that the spillage from the drums can be easily removed.

for less than 10 years. Prior to this, smaller floor mounted fixed wooden vessels were used, each equipped with a top mounted, electrically powered, paddle which moved the skins and solution round the centre board of the tank. One of these machines measuring internally 12ft by 5ft 6ins and 3ft 4ins high (Figs.3,4) remains on the site as a nominal standby, though upon inspection it appears to have been little used in recent times.

Fleshing

The fleshing machine removes any excess material (i.e. fatty substances) left on the skin. The two fleshing machines, 5ft high with rollers 5ft 4ins long, (Fig.5) are basically similar to the breaking machine. The main differences are that the knives are set more closely and the machines are belt driven by an electric motor fixed to the wall above.

To process a skin the operator takes one from a tub and puts it over the rubber covered roller. The two upper rollers are started. The operator depresses the foot pedal which brings the skin and the lower roller up into contact with the cutting roller. Excess material is removed and falls into a chute which carries it through a hole in the outer wall into the yard. The age

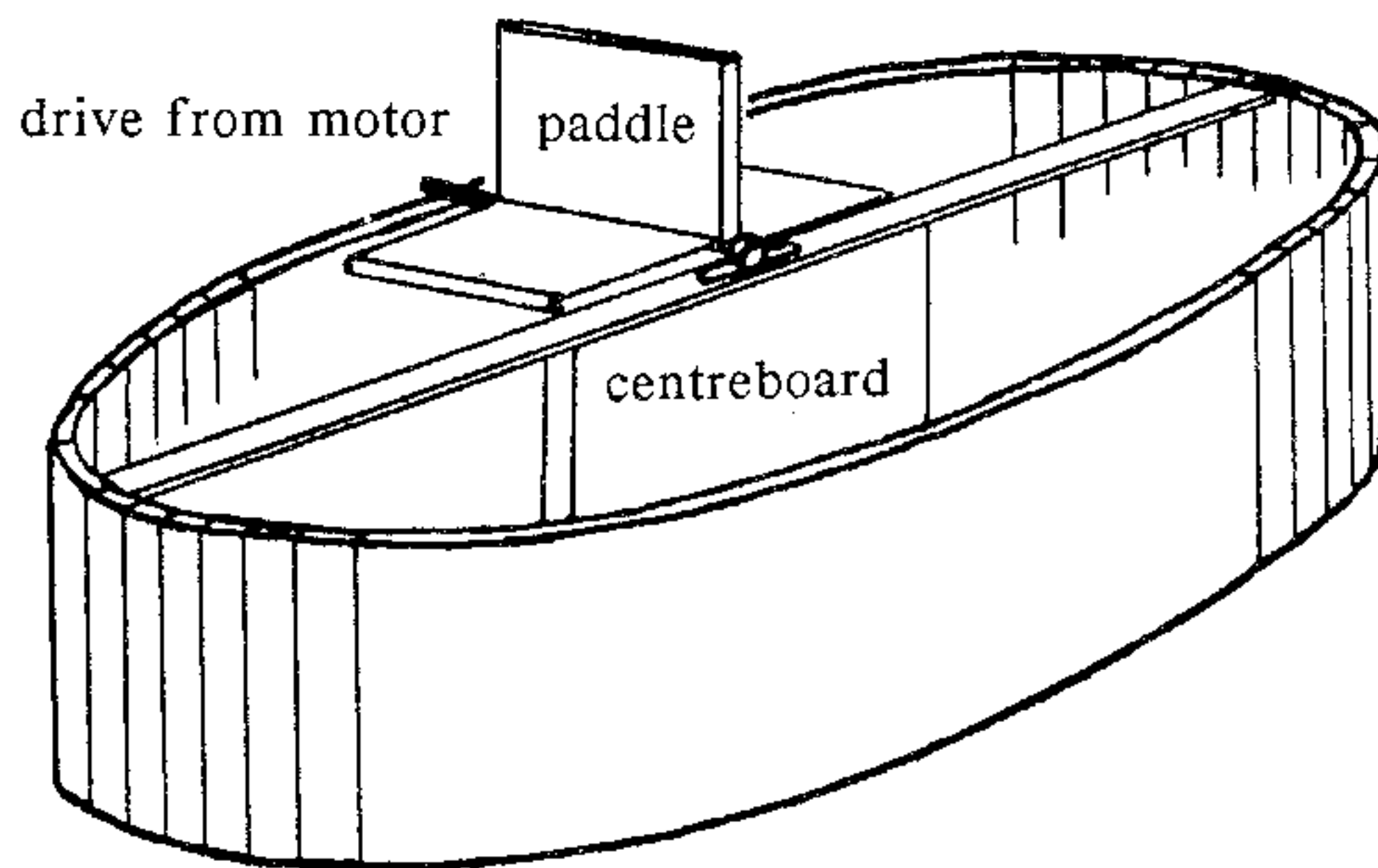


Fig.3. Disused washing and pickling vessel - view

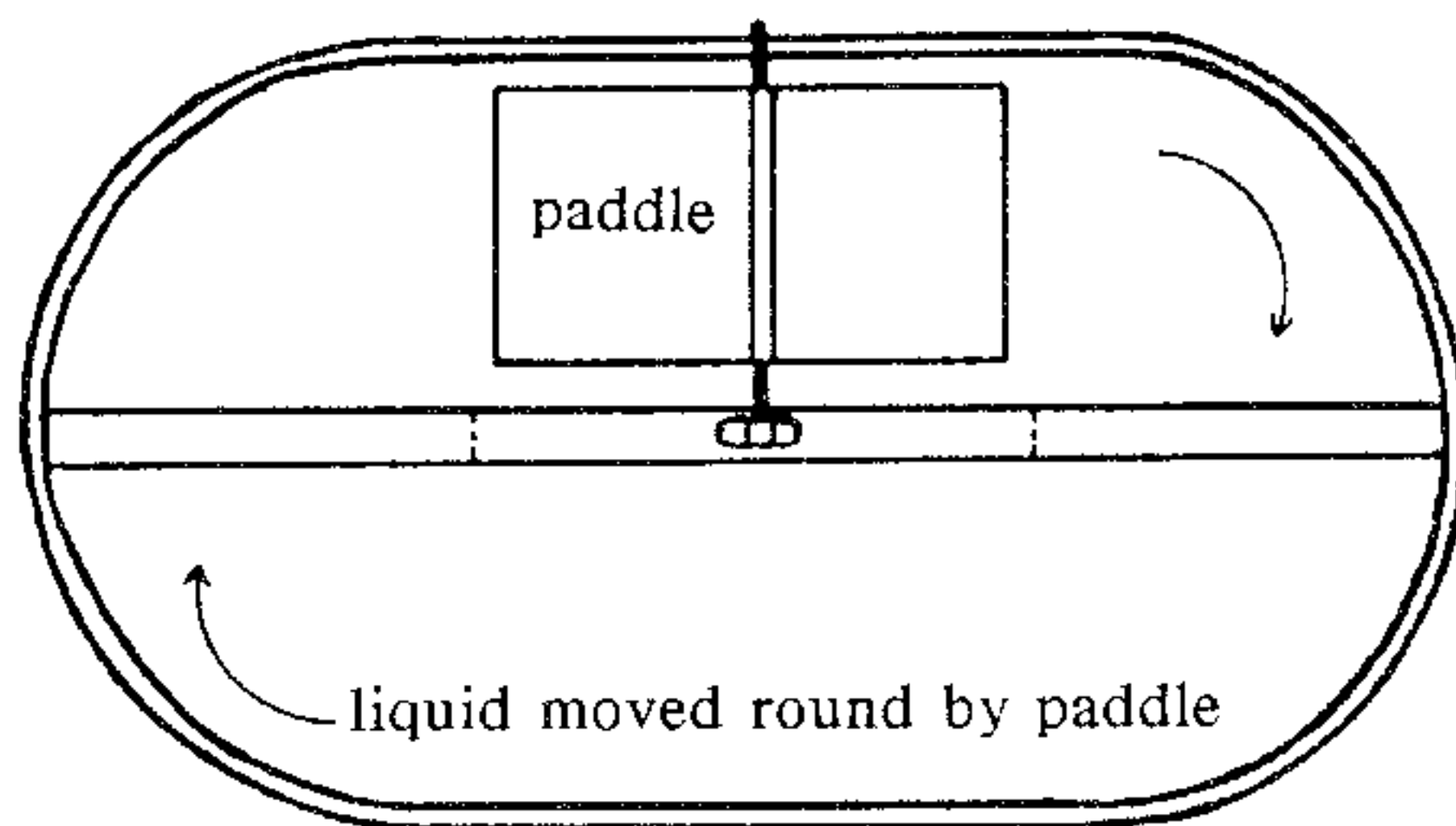


Fig.4. Disused washing and pickling vessel - plan

of the machine could not be determined, nor its manufacturer, but an employee suggested that it was 20 years old.

The skins, which are also stretched by this process, are placed on pallets and taken the short distance to the adjacent sorting room. At this stage they are a light cream colour and translucent.

The sorting room

This room contains 12 pallets arranged to take the skins of different quality. For despatch the sorted skins are packed in their "wet blue" state into second hand wooden barrels 3ft 6ins high and 2ft 3ins diameter at the base. The skins were sold to tanners for tanning, dyeing and finishing, for use by the clothing or shoe trades in the UK and overseas.

The site thus represents a mixture of old techniques and relatively modern equipment. Most of the work involves dealing with damp material in open or semi-open conditions. Nevertheless, the industry is considered by employees to be a particularly healthy one, and several have worked for the firm for upwards of 20 years.

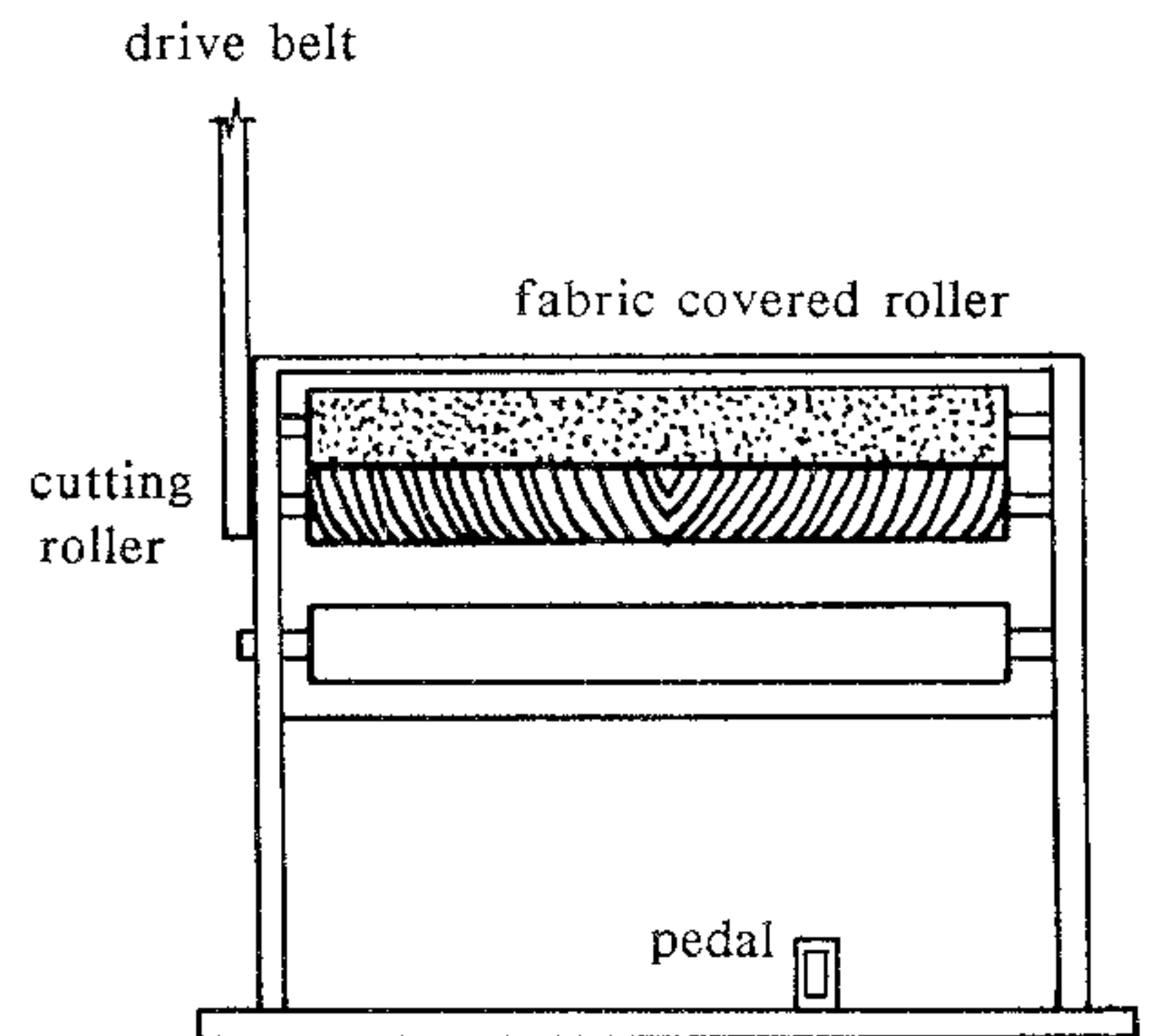


Fig.5. Fleshing machine - section

Acknowledgements

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Further information

Additional documents and photographs are to be deposited in the local history collection at The John Harvard Library, London Borough of Southward, Borough High St., SE1.