

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SHIPPON AT ACCRINGTON

AN agricultural building of unusual plan and construction stands near the centre of Accrington, a Lancashire cotton town. It is in Black Abbey Street, at the rear of Clarkson's Tyre Company (formerly the Red Lion), Abbey Street. It is hoped that this publication may bring to light similar buildings elsewhere, and draw attention to the structural, social and economic problems involved.

The building is apparently a shippon and forms the undercroft of a small barn, being built into the ground on two sides, and internally it measures 24' × 15'. The ceiling, which forms the floor of the loft above, is of heavy stone slabs and is held up by a series of stone arches which run across the building and also serve to divide the five stalls. Each one consists of a narrow arch over the feeding passage; then, between each stall, a wall with an arched opening; then a wide archway over the back walk. The arches are built of thin flagstones and the floor is also flagged (see Plate 15).

Running along the front of the stalls is a low wall pierced with small square holes (see Plate 16), and behind each stall is a narrow slit window with a wide sill on the inside. In the ceiling at one end of the feeding passage is a square hole now blocked by a flag. Presumably it was for pushing down hay from the barn above. There is a 2" step from the standing to the back walk, and the standings themselves are 4' 0" to 4' 3" wide and 7' 10" long.

The building can be dated to the late eighteenth century because of the complete absence of timber in its construction. Large timber was very scarce in the industrial Pennines at this time, and stone was adapted to the most unlikely uses as, for instance, at Old Town Hall, near Heptonstall (about fifteen miles away), where a barn of similar construction has huge stone arches replacing timber roof trusses. At Hapton, four miles away, there is a one-aisled barn with square stone piers in place of timber aisle posts. The plain sill of the stall openings and on top of the feeding passage wall also suggests late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, as does the moulding of the door lintel. The barn above gives little assistance in dating. It can only be inspected from the outside, two sides are

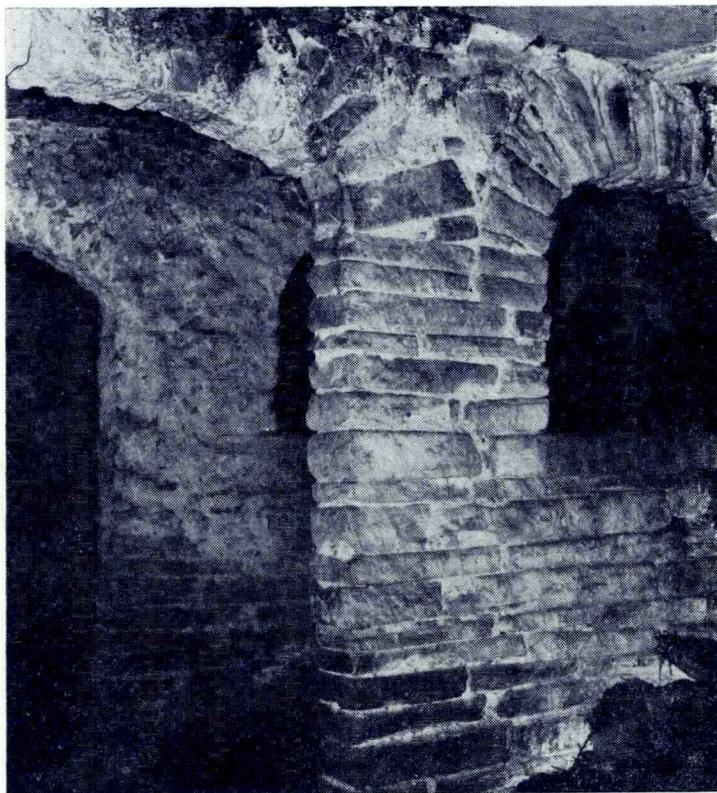


Plate 15. GENERAL VIEW OF THE INTERIOR OF
THE SHIPPON

Note the thin flags used in the construction and the heavy
flagged ceiling.

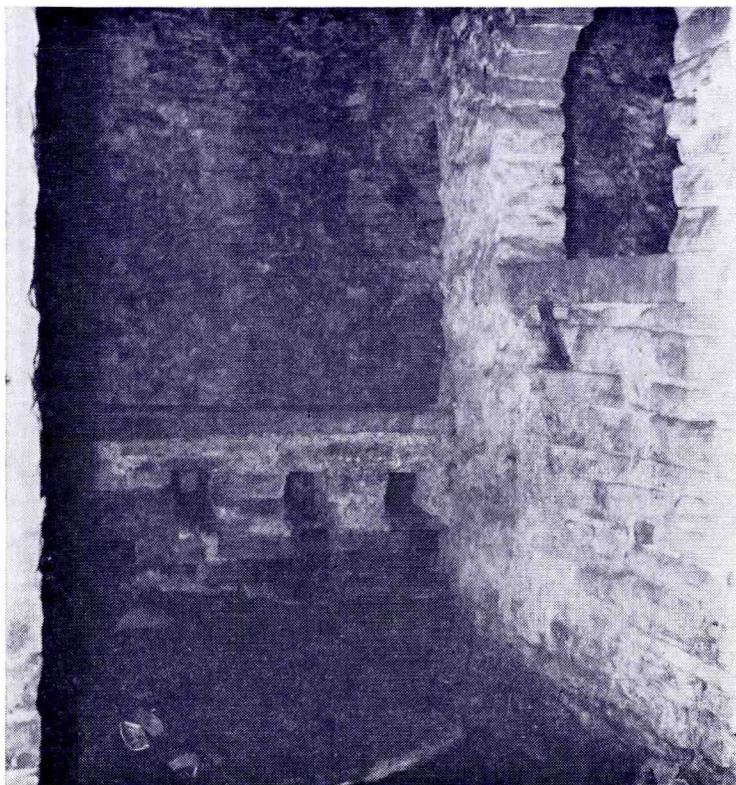


Plate 16. A STALL IN THE SHIPPON

Note the low wall at the front, the narrow arch over the feeding passage and the arched opening in the side of the stall.

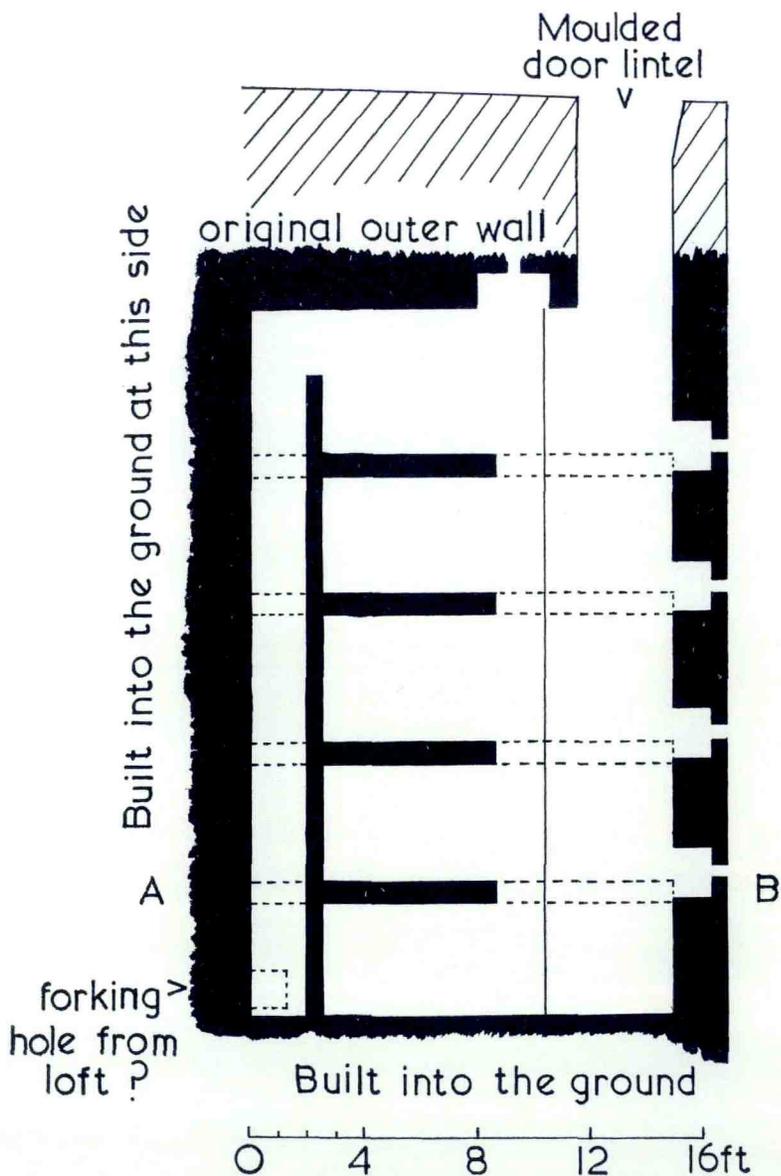


Figure 15.

GROUND PLAN OF THE SHIPPON

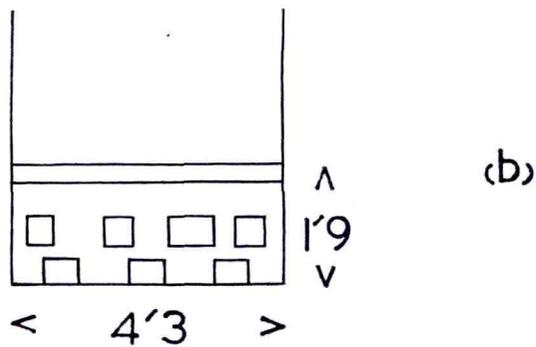
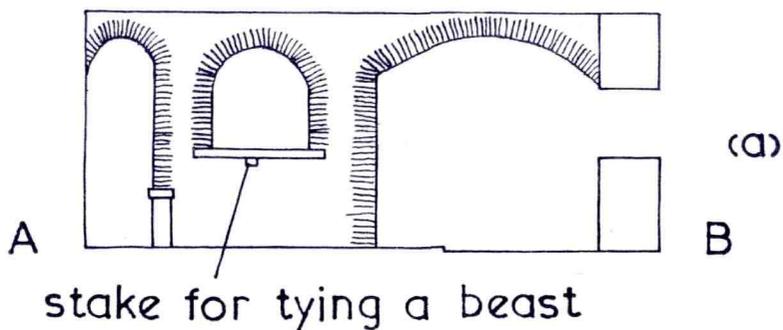
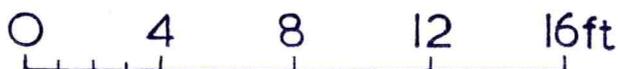


Figure 16.

(a) Section A-B (b) Section of low wall at front of each stall (c) Moulding of door lintel.

concealed by adjoining buildings, and what can be seen appears to have been practically rebuilt.

The building is described as a shippon because it conforms to the usual shippon plan. A feeding passage runs along the front of the stalls separated from them by a partition, in this case a wall. At the rear of the stalls is a step to the back walk.

There are, however, some unusual features. One is the fact that the stalls are for a single animal only. In this locality cattle are tied in pairs in a double standing, usually with a pole or much smaller partition between them. A single stall may be used at one end of a shippon to fill a narrow space, but I have not seen another shippon composed entirely of single stalls. The explanation may be that four arches were necessary to hold up the heavy slabs of the ceiling and to construct double standings would have meant using only three arches more widely spaced.

The dimensions of the stalls too are rather lavish. In older shippons a pair of stalls may be as narrow as 6' (admittedly double standings allow less space per cow), and today the Ministry of Agriculture recommends only 3' 3" to 3' 6" for single stalls, depending on the breed.⁽¹⁾ These are 4' 3" wide which may not be a drawback from a husbandry point of view, but it does mean that only five cows can be housed in a building long enough for seven or eight. This extra width may be explained as allowing more room for hand milkers or as a consequence of having to divide a 24' building into five stalls. If this is so, however, it is difficult to see why the building had to be that particular length. Perhaps it was planned on conventional lines to house eight cows in double standings, dividing them with timber partitions (which take less space than stone arches) and having a timber ceiling, but when this stage was reached timber was found too expensive and replaced by stone.

The unusual length of the standings is still unexplained, however. The 7' 10" from front to heelstone includes "manger space" as well as actual standing room, because there are no mangers in traditional shippons. Hay is heaped on the floor in front of the cow, but space must be allowed for this to prevent it being dragged underfoot. The standings in old shippons vary in length from 6' 6" to 7' 0" and are only 7' 3" in a 1937 building. This is a critical measurement because cattle cannot lie comfortably in stalls that are too short, and if they are too long dung falls onto the standing instead of into the gutter and they cannot lie clean. Three inches will make a considerable difference and

⁽¹⁾ *Farm Buildings Pocketbook* (H.M.S.O. 1960).

these standings are 7" longer than modern ones and over a foot longer than most older ones. Without extravagant use of bedding, which is always in short supply in the Pennines, it would be almost impossible for the cattle to keep their flanks and tails clean, particularly as they were probably smaller than today's popular dairy breeds.

It has been suggested that these stalls are of a suitable size for pack ponies, but there are a number of objections to this. The layout of the building is unsuitable. A stable with a feeding passage is unheard of, and it is usual to provide mangers and hayracks. The low wall at the front of the stalls would be dangerous for horses—they would bang their knees or get their legs over it—but it would be quite safe for cattle. It is not usual to have a step to the gutter in a stable, a shallow groove is adequate.

In the side wall of each stall is a bolt to take a stake on which slides a tethering ring. Horses are tied to the front of the manger but cattle to the side of the stall. Furthermore, these stakes were on the left side of the stall so that the animal would be handled from the right. Horses have always been handled from the left, but it is customary, in this district at any rate, to handmilk cows from the right.

Since its points of resemblance to more conventional shippons far outweigh its differences from them it must be concluded that the building was for cows. Its purpose so near the centre of Accrington may be explained by the rapid growth of the cotton towns in the late eighteenth century. Increasing use of machinery meant a change from hand-weaving and spinning in cottages and farmhouses, and people left the high poor land to live in towns and work in the mills. This created a demand for fresh milk and cowkeepers became established—men who housed cattle in towns all the year round to provide milk for the new factory workers. It seems likely that the Accrington building was an early cowkeeper's shippon.

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