

THE FORMER 'AXIOM' BUILDING, 57-59 WINCHCOMBE STREET, CHELTENHAM

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Introduction

In 2002, 57-59 Winchcombe Street, was empty and offered for sale by its owners Cheltenham Borough Council for conversion or redevelopment (Figures 1 and 2). Over the past twenty years or so the a large brick building has been in use as a community art centre and was most recently occupied by the Axiom, Cheltenham's Art Centre until its closure in February 2000 (Figure 3). However, a local firm of corn merchants originally constructed the building at the end of the nineteenth century. The history of the site goes even further back than this, and the extensive deeds for this building (currently held by Cheltenham Borough Council) cover the ownership of the site for the past two hundred years (1).

Early History of the Site

The earliest record in the deeds suggests that the site was part of an orchard in 1805. By 1814 a carriage house, coach shop, workshops and other buildings had appeared on the site (1). From around 1830 the site of 31 (now 57-59) Winchcombe Street was used as a corn merchants. (2) Across the road was Richard Humphrey's Livery Stables (3). Documentary evidence shows that a neighbouring shop at 33, Winchcombe Street was newly built in 1842 (4) and the previous occupiers of the Axiom building have indicated that it had been built in 1845. However a map of Cheltenham dated 1855 (5) (Figure 4a), which includes the site of 31 Winchcombe Street, shows a different layout to the present with a shop on the north side of the site facing Winchcombe Street with a separate warehouse to the rear and an entrance to the granary at the rear via a yard to the south of the shop (5).

Slater's Commercial Directory of 1858-1859, says about Cheltenham that it 'is not a manufacturing town; its prosperity is wholly attributable to its numerous and respectable class of visitors - to its neighbouring gentry, and other wealthy residents'. A Thomas Mills is registered as a 'Corn and Flour (also Hay and Straw) Dealer' at 31 Winchcombe Street in this directory. Other 'Corn and Flour (also Hay and Straw) Dealers' in Winchcombe Street are John Davis and Williams Charles Henry of 21 and 66 Winchcombe Street respectively. Across the road from no 31, at 70, Winchcombe Street, was the Livery Stable Keepers Humphrey's & Son and there was also Coach Builders & Harness Makers, Arkell & Jackson, at 38, 75 and 76 Winchcombe St.

The 1:500 Ordnance Survey map from 1885 (6) (Figure 4b) shows that at that time the buildings on the site of 31, Winchcombe Street had not been altered since the 1855 map.(5) In 1887 Mr G. S. Chapman of Malvern and William Ride of Cheltenham, trading as W. Ride & Co., bought the property. On August 4th 1887 an agreement was made 'to sell' 31, Winchcombe Street between James Wadley and Francis John Wellesley (also written Welsley) Wadley (vendors) and George Stoddart Chapman and William Ride (purchasers) for £1,100 (1). However, James Wadley died on August 7th bequeathing everything to Daniel Merrett and John Wilkins Smith. Included in the old deeds (1) is a statutory declaration by one William Barron dated 17 September 1887 in which he says:

- He was well acquainted with John Wadley and Elizabeth Ann Wadley his wife.
- That Elizabeth Ann Wadley was the only child of Francis Garrett – a coach and harness maker of 418 High Street, Cheltenham (3) (and Ann Long) and on her father's death on

2nd August 1853 intestate she became entitled to the freehold of 31 Winchcombe St, formerly in the occupation of W Davis and now of Messrs Ride and Co up to the time of her death on 10th August 1856, when James Wadley became entitled to the freehold until his death on 7 August 1887.

- There was one child namely Francis John Welsley Wadley.

The issue of James Wadley's will was resolved as far as 31, Winchcombe Street was concerned and the abstract of title recites an indenture dated 19 Sept 1887 between Daniel Merrett, John Wilkins Smith and Francis John Welsley Wadley (vendors) and George Stoddart Chapman and William Ride (purchasers). After they had purchased the site, the existing buildings – a shop, dwelling house and granary (formerly workshops) (1) were demolished and W. Ride and Co invested their money and faith in the corn and animal feed market, and in the future of Cheltenham, and re-built the granaries which were situated on the rear of the site and the shop to the front. Additionally a covered roof was added to shelter part of the courtyard where Ride's staff would load up their carts and prepare their horses to deliver customers orders.

The building work was complete around 1899 and the historic interest of these buildings lies in the role they played in the economic development of Cheltenham as host to the largest Corn Merchants in the town. In the same way that we rely on oil in the modern world to be able to travel, when this building was built people still relied on horsepower. Ride's had been established on the site of 31 Winchcombe Street prior to their purchase of it, and this huge re-build and investment was rational and showed immense vision and commitment to the future of the business and the future of Cheltenham (Figure 5).

Included in the old deeds (1) was a letter from John G. Villar (Auctioneer, Land Agent and Surveyor of 8, Clarence St, Cheltenham) dated April 6th 1911, which provides valuable information about the building:

To The Manager,
National Provincial Bank,
Cheltenham.
Messrs. Ride & Co.
31 Winchcomb Street,
Cheltenham
Dear Sir,

I have as desired measured up and estimated the Value of the Freehold Premises, belonging to and occupied by Mr. W. Ride trading as above, and beg to report the premises comprise large shop with frontage to Winchcomb Street of 31 feet, and double entrance doors, 16 feet wide making a total frontage of 47 feet to the street.

The premises being immediately opposite the Horse Repository, forms the best position in Cheltenham for a Forage Contractor and Corn & Seed merchant, and this kind of business has been carried on for 80 years continuously on these premises which are well suited for that purpose.

The total ground area is about 7.400 square feet.

The Warehouses adjoining the shop at the rear have half basement, and 3 corn storage floors above.

There is an engine room with gas engine 30 H.P. and large Grist Mill, and set of pulley wheels and shafting complete.

Adjoining the warehouse are the Stables, excellently arranged for 9 horses, with harness room, and next the Stables is a coachhouse with entrance from the occupation road leading into Mount Pleasant, as well as entrance to the main yard of 31 Winchcomb Street, giving the whole premises the advantage of double entrance. Over the stables are Hay and Straw Stores on two floors, with suitable unloading places and large lift.

The floor above the Warehouse is about 9,000 square feet.

There is a large covered in space in the main yard, under which several loaded wagons of Hay, Straw and Corn may be drawn, sheltered from the rain. This roof is constructed of galvanized iron with ample roof lights.

There is an excellent weighbridge fitted in the yard to weigh loads of up to 6 tons.

The premises are lighted by Electric Light in all parts.

The whole of the buildings were erected on the site of original warehouses some 12 years ago, and the work had been carried out in the most approved and substantial manner, the outer walls are eighteen inches in thickness, the floors are supported by iron columns in the centre of each floor, and floors are constructed to carry very heavy loads of corn &c.

The total cost of the premises with the fixed machinery was £4,500. I find that everything has been kept in good repair, order and condition. The premises are rated to the relief of the Poor, gross £210. nett £178.10.0.

I am of the opinion the value of the property as described is the sum of Three thousand, five hundred pounds (£3,500.) but if the value of the business carried on is taken into consideration, then a considerable sum must be added on.

I am, Dear Sir,
Yours Faithfully,

J. G. Villar.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1923 (7) (Figure 4c) shows the site of the present 57-59 Winchcombe Street and it looks much as it does today in terms of buildings on the site. The shop was built to the south of the site with a warehouse immediately behind it and access to the covered courtyard and warehouses via an entrance now to the north of the site where the original shop had once stood.

Despite once being a successful Corn Merchants with several premises in Cheltenham, W. Ride and Co. went into liquidation in 1949. A rival corn merchant, called W. J. Oldacre and Son, had occupied a shop at 40 Winchcombe Street since 1907. However, they had found themselves "up against a neighbour who was the largest of a number of corn merchants in the town. While Oldacres were able to attract the smaller type of customer into their shop, it was difficult to persuade the larger farmers to change their allegiance from W. Ride and Company. It was an uphill task" (8).

W.J. Oldacre had been looking to expand their business and in March 1953 "at a special meeting the directors were told that W. Ride and Company's, shop and warehouse on Winchcombe Street, two further shops and other properties in the town were on the market and the firm agreed that a firm offer of £23,000 should be made for the property, plant and transport plus a sum for the stock at an agreed value". In the three years that followed,

alterations were made to 31, Winchcombe Street by Oldacres and sales doubled as a result of their expansionist policy (9).

From Grain Warehouse to Groovy Art House

The history of the building's use as a grain warehouse came to an end in the 1970s. (16) Following the formation of the Cheltenham Art Centre Trust, which was seeking to set up an art centre in the town, in March 1979 the go-ahead, was given for the former Oldacres premises Winchcombe Street to be used as the venue for this project. At the time planning Officer Mr G.S. Walker said: 'We think this is an ideal use for this building, which is situated away from a residential area. There is no one living close enough to be annoyed by the noise'. (17) 'Enthusiasm key in arts centre plan' was the headline in the Gloucestershire Echo of 6th July 1979 as the local paper reported on a meeting held at the Municipal Offices to discuss the plans for the new art centre. By early 1980 the former Oldacres building was leased to the Cheltenham Centre for Visual and Performing Arts. In the early 1980s Cheltenham Borough Council bought the building for £71,500, continuing to lease the building to the art centre for several years, and MP Charles Irving was appointed as its president.

In the early 1980s the building closed for a while before re-opening again in 1984 renamed the Axiom Centre. In March 1985 plans to turn the Axiom into a major national art centre were jeopardised because the County Council refused to award money towards the scheme, which would enable them to get funding from South West Arts. In 1987 Swan Promotions announced ambitious plans to buy the building and get the Art Centre, which was struggling financially, back on its feet. However, Swan Promotions plans were turned down by the Borough Council, and in October 1987 the centre debts were revealed as £90,000 and Mr Irving quit saying it is a 'financial shambles' (10). In November that year a second rescue package put forward by the new management committee was rejected and in December the Axiom went into voluntary liquidation (14). It was closed down after losing a four-year struggle with mounting debts. In January 1989 a report drawn up by art, media and leisure consultants Boyden Southwood singled out the site as the best location for a new arts centre in the County (10).

In 1993 the building was reopened for three days as part of the Cheltenham International Festival of Music. Cheltenham Borough Council subsequently gave a £25,000 grant for restoration, and a Voluntary Management Committee was given an 18-month rent-free lease to prove the centre could work (10). In 1995 things looked promising as volunteers were granted a 25 year lease at peppercorn rent to expand its range of activities on the back of a 5,000 name petition, and in 1996 the Theatre and gallery were refurbished and a sound system installed. In April 1996 a new committee re-launched The Axiom as a registered charity and promised to clear all debts (10). However, in February 2000 The Axiom was closed for good as police investigated financial irregularities.

A Unique Building of Local Importance

57-59 Winchcombe Street is a 3 bay by 2-storey front elevation, in a polychromatic scheme. There is an Engineering brick base and Turquoise faience ground storey. The ground floor windows have segmental heads and spring from moulded brick imposts. The section above, and including segmental arches, is stock brick. Additionally the building is decorated with blue faience coursing and moulded brick corning. At the first floor are narrow, segmental-headed windows. The warehouse to the rear is a four-storey building of a utilitarian design. The outer walls were constructed approximately 18 inches thick with iron columns in the centre of each floor to support the floors in the warehouse.

The ceilings are exposed timber and the interior walls of the warehouse are bare brickwork, which are now painted white. The pointing of the brickwork looks intact throughout, and there are no obvious signs of past movement in the building. There are two pieces of machinery still in-situ – the line shafting (Figure 6) is on the first floor. On the outside of the building the hoist is still in place, and whilst not particularly rare in the national context it is certainly rare for a building in the centre of Cheltenham. The cobbles in the courtyard have needed some attention for at least the past 25 years and have now become overgrown with vegetation. The original courtyard roof has had the front two struts removed, and it needs some attention too.

From both the outside and the inside of the building it appears that the warehouse at the rear was re-built before the shop at the front was. From the outside, where the overhead roof structure finishes, the bricks appear a slightly different colour. On the inside as one walks through the shop, the original rear internal wall has been removed and stairs, installed about 10 years ago, lead into the raised ground floor area of what was from 1993 the bar area of The Axiom. Near to the upper ground floor bar area is a doorway, which leads through to the next part of the warehouse. That doorway has a rounded edge and the design seems to be original.

On the floor directly above this there is also a doorway, but it looks like it has been cut through more recently and not original. There is also a window and this wall, which is now internal, looks like it was originally the exterior wall of the re-built warehouse. Similarly on the floor above there is a bricked up window, and the doorway on this floor again looks like it is not an original feature. From this it is suggested that W. Ride's first re-built the warehouse at the rear and later re-built the shop and added the newer part of the warehouse with the join being where the overhead roof structure ends.

After lying empty for nearly three years, in 2002, following the recommendation of council officers, members of Cheltenham Borough Council's Cabinet concluded that the building would cost more to repair than replace and was seeking to sell the building for conversion or re-development. Following the sale of the building they intend to set up a cross party working group to see if it is viable to replace The Axiom with a new 'Complementary Art Centre'. It is not a nationally listed building but it is included on Cheltenham Borough Council's Index of Buildings, Structures, Parks and Gardens of Local Importance (15), and it does fall within Cheltenham's Central Conservation area, both of which offer some protection from drastic alteration or demolition.

Concluding Remarks

The building has undergone some adjustments over the years, by Oldacres and for its use as an art centre. However, it still retains its character and many original features such as most of the outside roof canopy structure, floors, doors and windows are still present. This building is one of the most significant elements in the development of the area and the contemporary streetscape and it provides a physical link between the old Cheltenham, the Spa resort where visitors came to take the Spa waters in their carriages pulled by horses, and the car dependant modern world. It is sincerely hoped that it will be restored rather than demolished by whoever buys it and that the future holds a place where we will still be able to peer curiously through the gates of this old grain warehouse into the cobbled courtyard and into another world.

References

- (1) Deeds with Cheltenham Borough Council.
- (2) Letter from J. G. Villar dated 6 April 1911 in (1) above.

- (3) Pigot's Directory for Gloucestershire 1830.
- (4) Gloucestershire Record Office (GRO) Miscellaneous deeds etc given by Mrs. M. Pruen, 14th January 1969 – D 2444.
- (5) GRO, Cheltenham Board of Health Map, 1855
- (6) Ordnance Survey, 1:2500, First edition, 1885.
- (7) Ordnance Survey, 1:2500, Third edition 1923.
- (8) Denys Charnock, *Oldacre: a Gloucestershire family and business 1881-1986*, Book Guild, 1990, p. 37.
- (9) *ibid.* p. 176-177.
- (10) Gloucestershire Echo, 20 July 1998.
- (11) Gloucestershire Echo, 30th March 1979.
- (12) Gloucestershire, Friday March 1st 1985.
- (13) Gloucestershire Echo, Monday 24th August 1987.
- (14) Gloucestershire Echo, 18th January 1989.
- (15) Taken from A Survey of non-Listed Buildings of Architectural or Historical Interest within Cheltenham Borough - courtesy Oliver Bradbury.

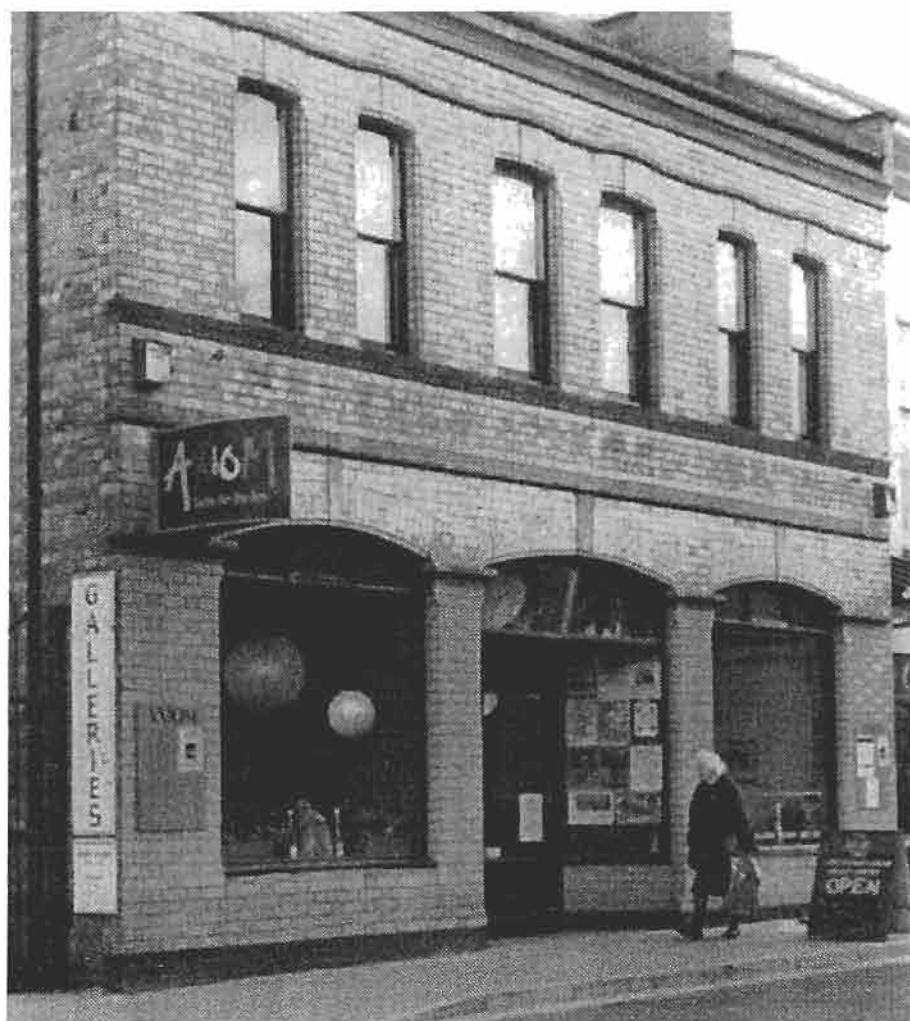


Figure 1. 57-59 Winchcombe Street (North-west elevation)



Figure 2. 57-59 Winchcombe Street (North-east elevation)



Figure 3. Flea Market Held in the Courtyard of the Axiom Building in the Early 1980s

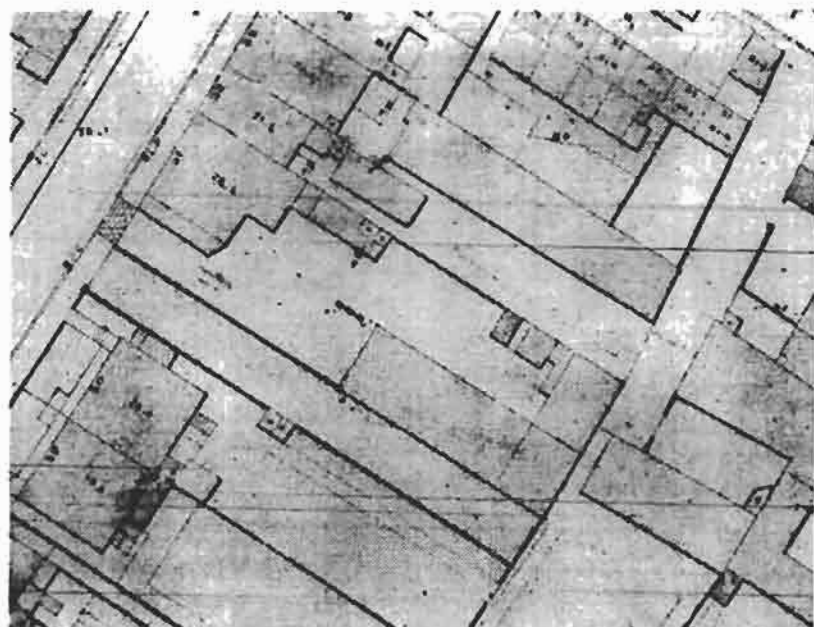
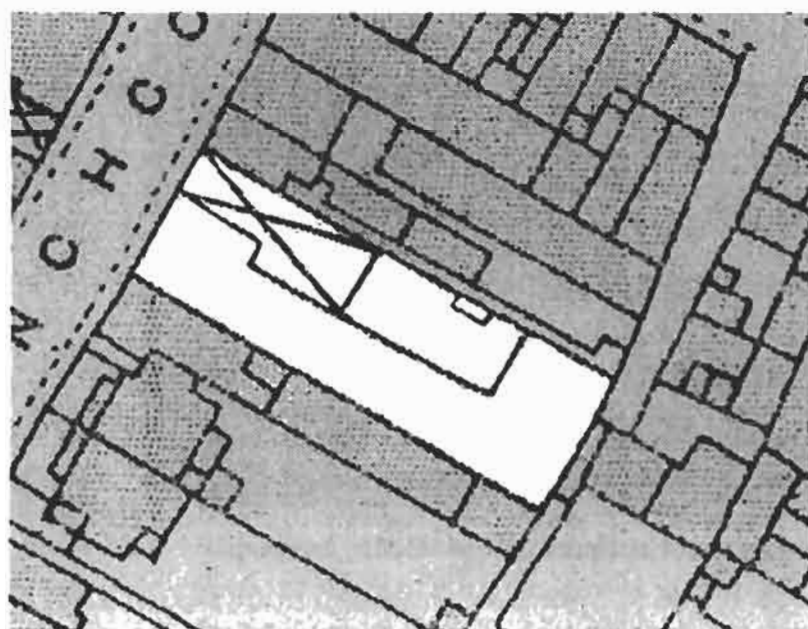
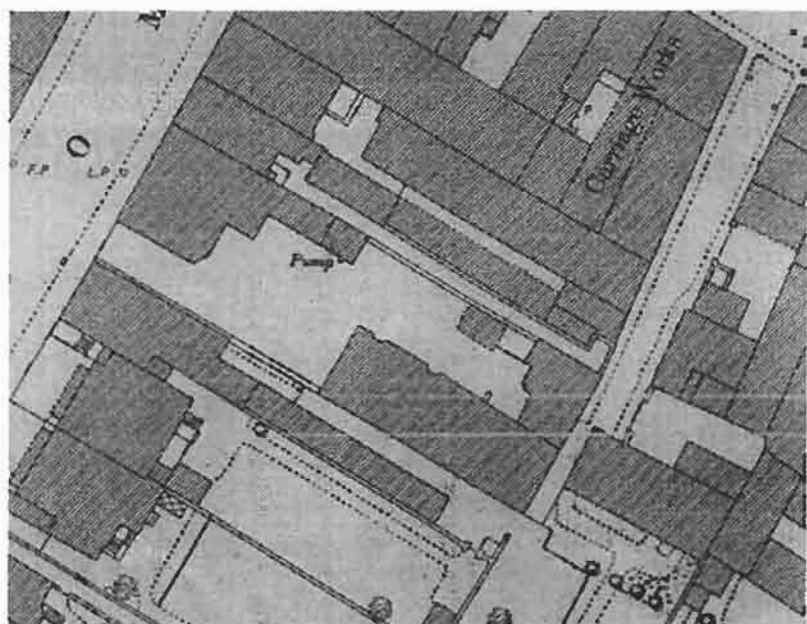


Figure 4.

(A) 1855 Board of Health Map



(B) OS 1:500 Map 1885



(C)
1923 25 inch OS Third Edition

(Site shown in white)



W. RIDE & CO.



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**31, WINCHCOMB STREET and ALSTONE MILLS,
CHELTENHAM.**

Office: Telephone 118.

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Figure 5. Advertisement for W Ride & Co c. 1906 from 'Cheltenham 1906' by Garrett

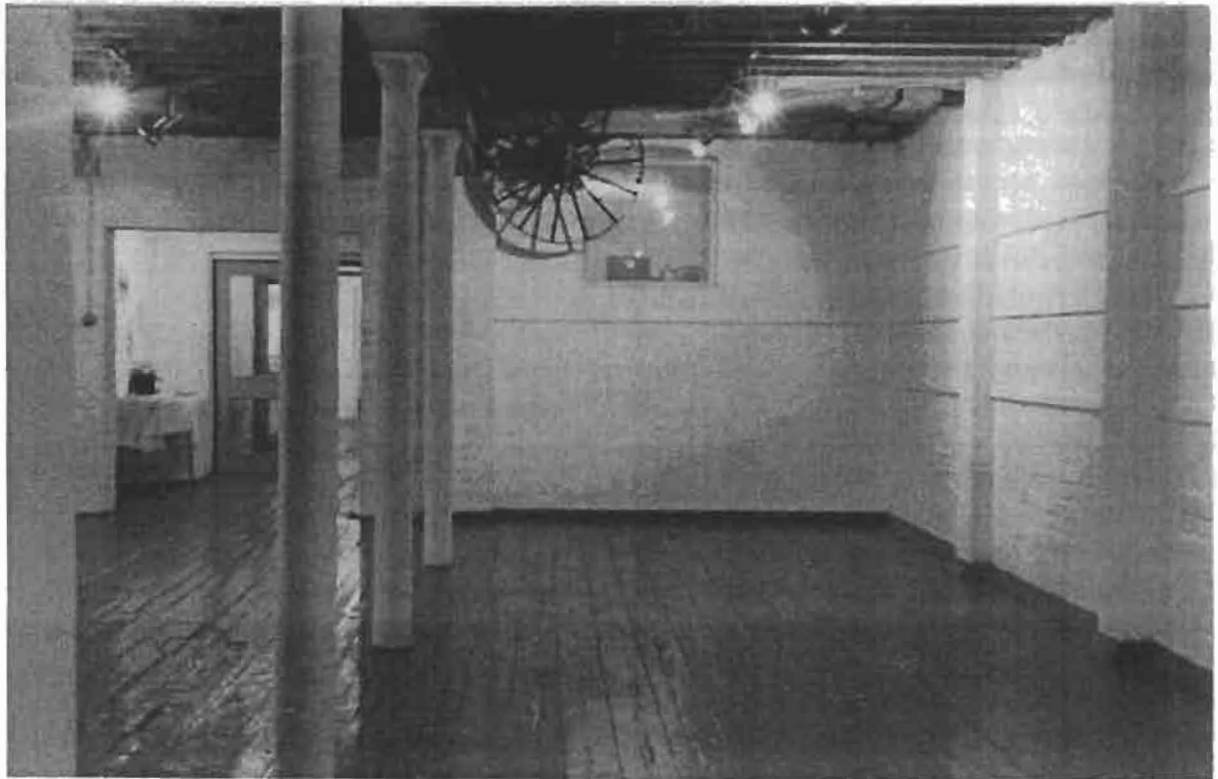


Figure 6. First Floor Gallery in the Axiom Building (Note Line Shaft and Pulley Wheels Still In-situ)