

South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group
in association with the
Oxfordshire Buildings Trust

ASCOTT PARK : 2018-20

Excavations on a 17th century manor house site at Stadhampton, Oxfordshire

PROGRESS SUMMARY 2018 AND PROPOSALS FOR 2019

PROJECT OUTLINE

Ascott Park was once a country seat of the Dormer family who resided there for many generations. William Dormer (d.1683) commissioned a new manor house and extensive remodelling of the grounds c.1660 but the house burnt down in 1662 when close to completion and was never occupied. Despite much recent research and fieldwork by and for the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust, culminating in an excavation in 2009 on the 'traditional' site of the 1662 house, its location remains disputed and unconfirmed.

The 'traditional' site is marked by a large rectangular hollow (a former cellar or basement) which fronts a linear earth bank (a former terrace) overlooking what were once formal garden terraces to the south. The two earlier excavations on this site: the first by Oxfordshire Museum in 1969, directed by Susanna Everett (now Dr S. Wade-Martins) and the second by Oxfordshire Buildings Trust in 2009, directed by Brian Dix, both gave inconclusive results. A large-area geophysical survey by the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group in 2013 concluded that the traditional site is still by far the most likely location. An alternative interpretation of the archaeology revealed by Everett and Dix was proposed that supports this conclusion.

The alternative interpretation is based upon two premisses: (i) that the basement of the house was masonry vaulted and thus escaped destruction in the fire and (ii) that the terrace was not fully backfilled until sometime after the fire and so contains evidence of that event and the subsequent clear up. If these are proved to be correct, the difficulties Everett and Dix had in reaching a positive conclusion can be largely overcome.

In 2018 a new excavation was approved to test SOAG's working hypothesis: that William Dormer's new house was built on the traditional site and that the archaeology of that site is what remains of that house (Clarke & Reed 2018). The excavation is over three years 2018-20. All data will be recorded on a QGIS database.

PROGRESS SUMMARY 2018

The work in 2018 was focussed on recovering the ground plan of the terrace and house (including a possible 'annexe' on its east side) and examining their structural relationships. We also hoped to begin to understand the constructional style of the basement. Progress in the first few days was slow as we had difficulty in locating Susanna Everett's 1969 trench and were unable to find a key locational feature on the line of Brian Dix's 2009 Trench 7. These setbacks were eventually overcome and meanwhile the surviving masonry of well-constructed terrace retaining walls and the south wall of the house began to emerge from our new trenches.

Below is a brief summary of the key findings. [Note: A more detailed summary is contained in a working document: *Ascott Park – progress summary of 2018 and proposals for 2019*, available on request.]

- The terrace retaining walls [**Fig 1**] are of brick on a limestone foundation (as previously found by Dix). The foundations appear to have survived largely undisturbed and significant brickwork remains along the northeast section and towards the southwest end. The terrace overall width is 10.1m (33ft or 2 poles) and the length appears to be c.59.4m (c.195ft or just under 12 poles) giving a length/width ratio of very nearly 6:1. The retaining walls are confirmed as generally 1½ bricks thick (c.14in or 0.35m) on a c.18in (0.45m) wide limestone foundation.
- The house wall [**Fig 2**] on the south side of the basement hollow (as previously found by Everett) is of rough-hewn, randomly-coursed limestone with a rubble core, well dressed on the inside but undressed on the outside facing the side of the hollow. It is 0.85m (2ft 9in) thick and survives towards its eastern end to a height of probably 1.8 – 2.0m.

- The unbroken inner face of the south house wall [Fig 3], the upper courses of which we exposed for just over half its length, shows no evidence of internal dividing walls. This provides *prima facie* evidence that the basement was vaulted with the springing being above the surviving masonry, although we cannot yet say what form the vaulting took.
- Based on the evidence available so far, the house is a compact rectangle in plan, being a minimum of 18.3m (60ft) wide (possibly up to 18.9m (62ft)) and an estimated 15.0m (49ft) deep. Both figures have yet to be confirmed and may increase. The west, north and east walls are almost certainly robbed out but we have not yet revealed their foundations.
- The outside face of the south house wall is in line with the north terrace walls, not set back. The south house wall and northeast terrace wall (western end) foundations appear to be of integral construction. The northwest terrace wall (eastern end) foundation also shows evidence of probable integration with the south house wall, although the latter has here been robbed out.
- The NE terrace retaining wall [Fig 4] extends right up to the end of the south house wall and is supported at this point on a deep foundation, the inner (north) face of which has been robbed out exposing a rough core. This foundation being also the retaining wall of the 'annexe' basement, the robbed-out face may possibly be from the demolition of a vault but more work is needed to be certain. If there was an annexed building it must have been built behind the northeast terrace wall, i.e. set back from the line of the house. Equally, the 'annexe' may be an underground extension at cellar level only, or even simply a sunken yard.
- A post-excavation effort finally located the elusive Dix feature, a '1.35m deep steep cut', on the line of his Trench 7, the latter being close to the western end of the house. This appears to be an original construction cut for the basement hollow as the ground behind the cut is undisturbed natural. Unexpectedly, it proved to be aligned with the inner (north) face of the south wall, so any continuation of the south wall here must have been built at a higher level. This requires further investigation.

PROPOSALS FOR 2019

Our effort in 2019 will focus on completing the work of recovering the ground plan of the house, 'annexe' and terrace and in answering the various questions posed by the 2018 results. To achieve this, five of the 2018 trenches will be reopened and extended, and up to eight new trenches are proposed. The latter will be prioritised so that only those necessary and sufficient to achieve the aims are opened. As in 2018, some trenches will be little more than test pits to locate surviving masonry and obtain coordinates.

We will also hope to progress the search for evidence of basement vaulting, although final confirmation of the style of such vaulting (by a large open-area excavation of the basement floor) has been postponed to 2020. Sectioning the earth bank is also rescheduled for 2020.

Although the results of 2018 were encouraging, progress was slower than intended and consequently we missed some of our targets. This was in part due to the aforementioned difficulties in locating the Everett trench and a key feature in Dix Trench 7 but also due to the sheer scale of heavy digging required. The former difficulties have been overcome but the problems of the latter remain. Contributing factors were the diversion of effort into cutting back areas of tall and coarse grass/weeds (established since the park ceased to be used for grazing) together with the time and effort of lifting turf and removing significant depths of backfill and overburden in the trenches. Although heavy digging is an expected part of excavation, the extremely hot and dry conditions of 2018 inevitably limited the time diggers could go on using heavy tools.

For 2019, to ensure that skilled digging resources are used more efficiently and we have a better chance of meeting our targets, it has been agreed that in advance of the diggers coming on site:

- (i) the site will be adequately cleared of long grass/weeds and
- (ii) the trenches will be marked out and opened using a mechanical excavator.

Additional funding will be required to cover the costs of this. If sufficient funding can be found, the mechanical excavator will also be made available on one or more days of the dig to assist with removal of backfill and overburden in the trenches.

REFERENCE

Clarke I & Reed R, 2018: *Project design for a research excavation on the presumed site of the 17th century Ascott Manor House, Stadhampton, Oxfordshire, 2018-20*, South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group, pdf accessible on the SOAG Ascott Park Project page : <http://soagarch.org.uk/projects/ascottpark/ascottpark2018.html>



Fig 1 The southwest terrace retaining wall on its stone foundation close to the SW corner



Fig 2 The south house wall. The deep excavation is on the line of Everett's 1969 trench



Fig 3 The unbroken inside face of the south house wall, looking east from the estimated mid-point



Fig 4 The western end of the NE terrace retaining wall where it meets the south house wall