

Knowle Hall Revisited

An Investigation by Solihull Archaeological Group

May – September 2011

Directed by Malcolm Pheasey



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Introduction

Solihull Archaeological Group (SAG) conducted an investigation of the site of Old Knowle Hall and its moated site predecessor between 1994 and 2000. The excavations were directed by Dr Lance Smith and described in two Reports in the Transactions of the Birmingham & Warwickshire Archaeological Society¹.

During the last season a stone mass was found that appeared to be positioned on top of, and on a different alignment to, some fine ashlar stones. The tops of these stones were just above the water table and further investigation of what might have been a substantial building of a further phase of construction was not pursued at that time.

Our 2011 excavations were designed to investigate this mass and the ashlar blocks in further detail

Acknowledgements

The Mound is located on land owned by Mrs Pat Everitt and farmed by Rupert Inkpen. We are most grateful for their kind permission for SAG to carry out this investigation. We are also grateful to Margaret and Peter Phillips' kind permission to use their forecourt for car parking

We acknowledge the generous financial support provided by the Solihull Community Foundation.

We are particularly grateful for the grant for the carbon 14 dating assessment from the Council for British Archaeology's Challenge Funding, which is supported by English Heritage. We are grateful to the Scottish universities Environmental Research Centre for carrying out the dating exercise and for Professor Gordon Cook's assistance in interpreting the results.

We are grateful for the provision of two reports on the early history of the Knowle estate provided by Jean Powrie².

Solihull Archaeological Group

SAG is an independent, amateur archaeological society founded in 1969. It conducts excavations, organises visits to sites of archaeological and historical interest, and arranges a series of evening lectures on relevant topics, mostly by practising archaeologists, between September and June each year.

¹ Transactions 109 (2006) pages 39-53 and 111 (2008) pages 43-65, Birmingham & Warwickshire Archaeological Society

² The Knowle Estate Part 1 1208-1291, Jean Powrie, 2009; and Part 2 – Under Westminster 1291-1555, Jean Powrie; 2011.

Location

The current Knowle Hall lies on the outskirts of Knowle in the Borough of Solihull about ½ mile east of Knowle parish church beyond the Grand Union canal (originally the Warwick & Birmingham canal) – grid reference SP192761. It lies to the south of but facing the Kenilworth Road, set back some 100 yards or so from the road. To the south of the Hall are the buried remains of the previous hall (demolished 1834). These were excavated during the 1990s and into 2000 by SAG and it was established the previous hall (constructed between 1659 and 1664) was only the last in a series of building phases.

Dr Smith determined there had been five phases and that the earliest phase was represented by a moated site. The earlier remains lay in water-logged conditions (which had helped preserve the early timber moat revetment, dated by dendrochronology to the early 13th century) and the previous owner of the site confirmed that the water table in the area fluctuates significantly. Late in the last (2000) season of excavation a stone mass was found in the southwest corner of the site standing on top of some high quality ashlar blocks. The blocks were mostly covered but it did appear that they and the stone mass were on slightly different alignments (photo 1).

Photo 1: Excavation in 2000 - area of interest

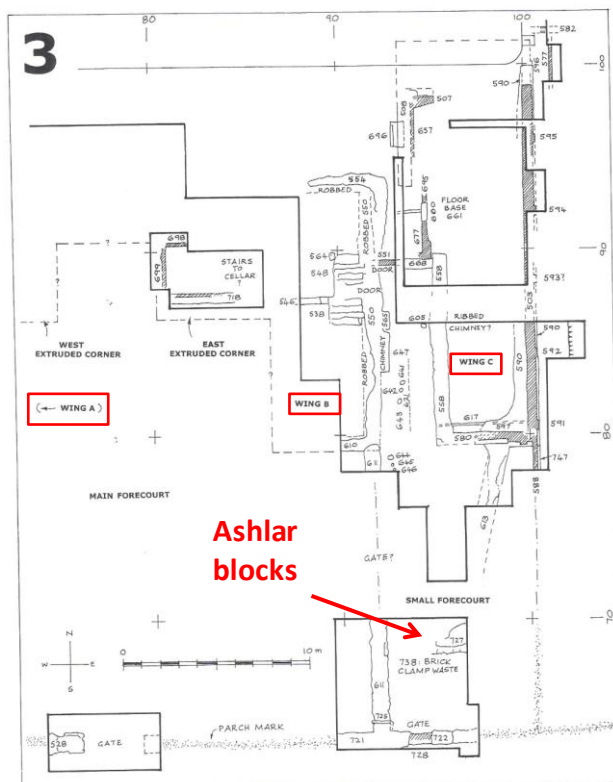


These particular features were not ascribed to any particular phase in the reports and may have represented two separate phases of construction. Significantly however it was concluded that the stone mass lay just outside the inner edge of the earlier moat in its southeast corner. Our 2011 excavation set out to rediscover these features and to seek to understand how they related to the rest of the site.

Position within site

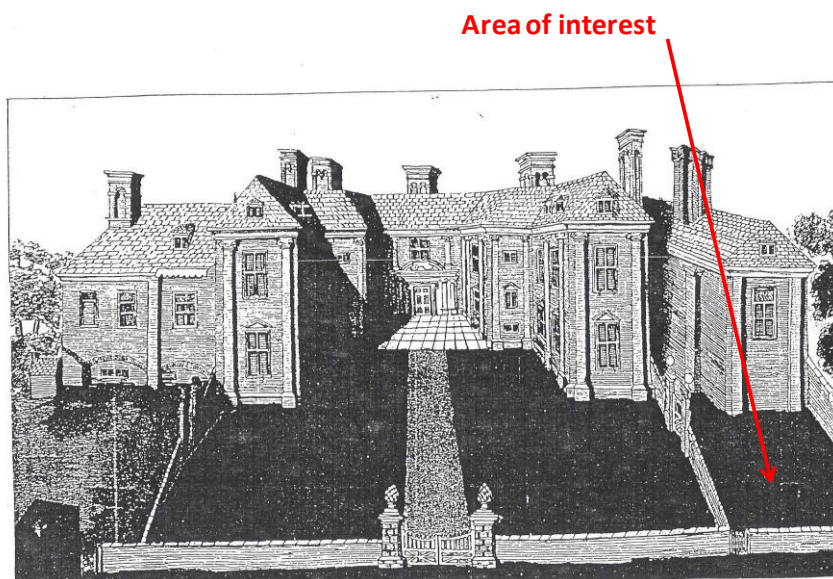
Shown below (figure 1) is the overall site drawing prepared in 2000 from Lance Smith's Report, with the area of interest shown.

Figure 1: Phase 3 drawing - 2000 excavation



The area is also highlighted on the Warde sketch of 1834 (figure 2) from which it can be seen that it underlies the south eastern courtyard within the boundary walls with no structural features showing. The boundary walls and the small access gate were located in 2000 and lie to the south of the area of interest

Figure 2: Warde drawing of 19th century Knowle Hall



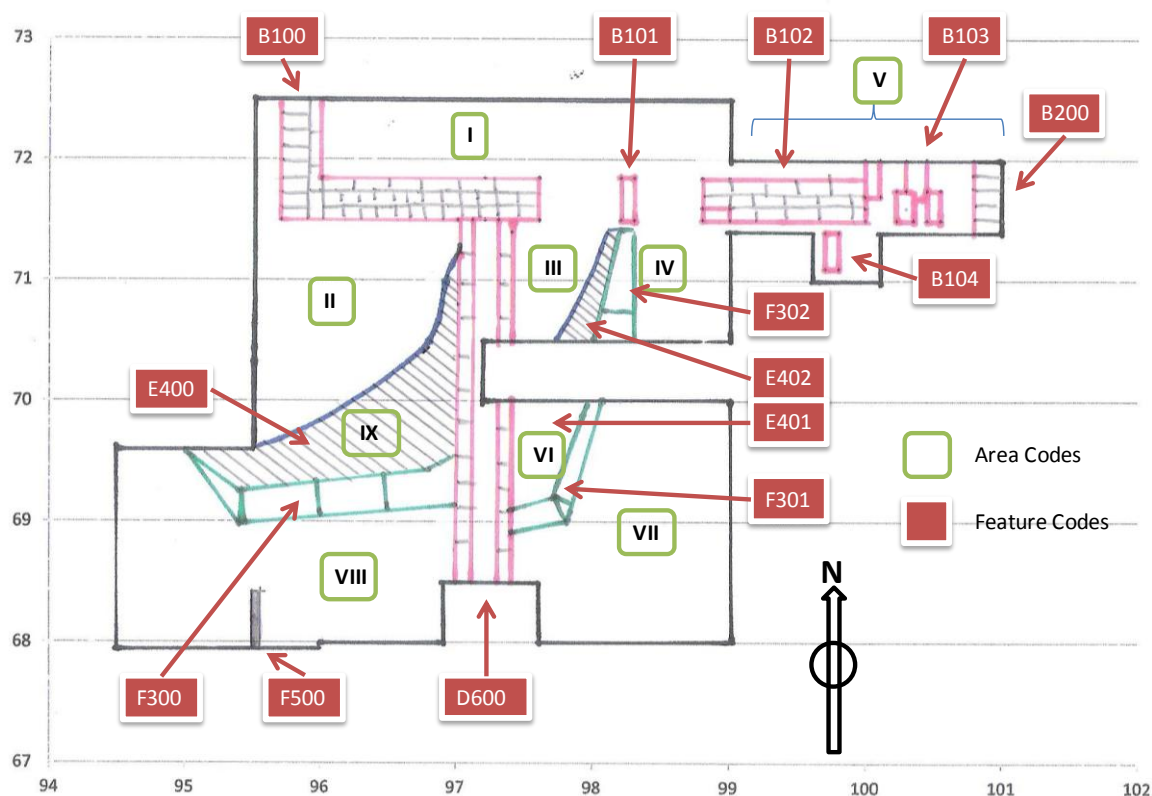
2011 Excavation

A substantial area of trenches was opened. The stone mass and ashlar blocks were rediscovered and the extent of the features established by extending the trench. Fortunately the water table had fallen significantly since 2000 and thus it was possible to explore the base of the ashlar block feature.

The area found in 2000 was excavated quickly as it was entirely backfill. Small finds within the fill were useful in identifying the nature of finds found in 2000 for reference purposes once excavation of the new areas was started but these were not separately recorded. Once needed excavation beyond the area previously exposed commenced, more care was taken with recording the various finds. However it became clear as the excavation progressed that the whole area had been subject to previous filling with demolition rubbish - bricks, tiles, household waste (broken pottery) etc - which made any attempts to date levels by stratification likely to be misleading. Finds were consistent with those from the earlier excavations.

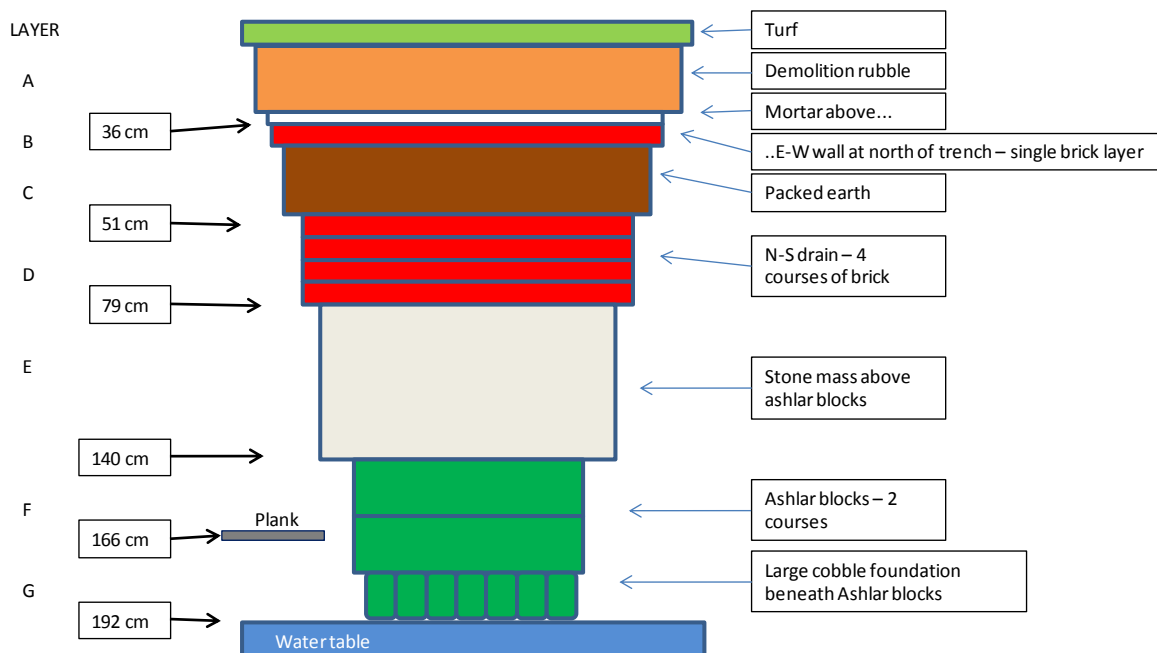
Shown below (figure 3) is the overview plan of our excavation and each of the features is described further on subsequent pages.

Figure 3: 2011 excavation overview



We also show below (figure 4) the vertical relationship of the various structural features. Note that these have been displaced horizontally for clarity.

Figure 4: Vertical relationship of features



Ashlar Block feature (centre & west) **F300**³

The ashlar blocks were confirmed as appearing on a different alignment from the stone mass that overlay them (photo 2). This should be compared with photo 1 - note the much lower water table.

Photo 2: 2011 'area of interest'



³ References in **this** format refer to Figures 3 and 4 where the letter defines the depth and numbers in the same sequence (n00 etc) indicated related features

The ashlar blocks were formed of two courses founded on large cobble stones (photos 3 & 4) which appeared to be laid on natural earth (the water table was encountered at this level)

Photo 3: 2 courses of Ashlar blocks



Photo 4: Cobbles beneath ashlar blocks



The ashlar blocks were found to continue to the west and east of the north-south brick culvert (D600). Those to the west continued for approximately 1.5 metres and then a clearly chamfered edge appeared (photo 5). Excavation in a northerly direction confirmed the continuation of this feature. Extension of the trench to the west demonstrated that the ashlar feature did not continue in that direction. This point was therefore taken as the west end of the feature.

Photo 5: West end of stone mass/ashlar feature



It was in this area, and level with the upper ashlar blocks, that a significant wooden plank was found (covered by the tray in the photo 5). Further details are given below.

Stone Mass feature (centre & west) E400

It can be seen from photo 5 that the alignment of the stone mass is no longer so different from that of the ashlar blocks.

Ashlar Block feature (east) F301

Excavation of the area to the east of the brick culvert established that the ashlar blocks and stone mass continued but almost immediately turned to the north, thus establishing an eastern limit to the feature (photo 6). The orange material overlying the ashlar blocks was interpreted as the mortar beneath a further block/stone mass that had been robbed out. It was also considered that the remaining lower block had become displaced from its original position.

Photo 6: Ashlar blocks to east of brick drain



The continuation northward can clearly be seen in photo 7.

Photo 7: Evidence of the corner of the feature



Stone Mass feature (east) **E401**

This is just visible in the top left of photo 7 and lies within the boundary of the ashlar block feature. It was concluded that this area represented the east end of the abutment. This area had not been excavated in the 2000 season. The stones referred to were overlain by demolition rubble including a collection of soot-covered bricks (photo 8).

Photo 8: Soot covered bricks in situ and excavated



There was no evidence of a hearth or similar feature and it was concluded that the demolition of a hearth had resulted in all the associated bricks being dumped together. It was assumed that the hearth lay within wing C of the later hall where domestic and kitchen activity had been found.

Stone Mass feature (north-west) **E400**

Excavation was carried out to the north of the exposed stone mass to determine its extent. This was found to be bounded by very dark earth (photo 9) and, consistent with SAG's interpretation in the earlier excavations, was taken to be evidence of the location of the inner edge of the moat.

Photo 9: Northern extent of stone mass



This was further confirmed by a small, but deep, excavation alongside its northern face. No ashlar blocks were found underlying the stone mass on the northern side (photo 10).

Photo 10: Deep trench confirming extent of stone mass



Stone mass feature (north)

A trench was excavated to the north of this area which revealed the continuation northwards (but not further east) of the stone mass (**E402**) situated on ashlar blocks (photo 11)

Photo 11: Stone mass to north of excavation

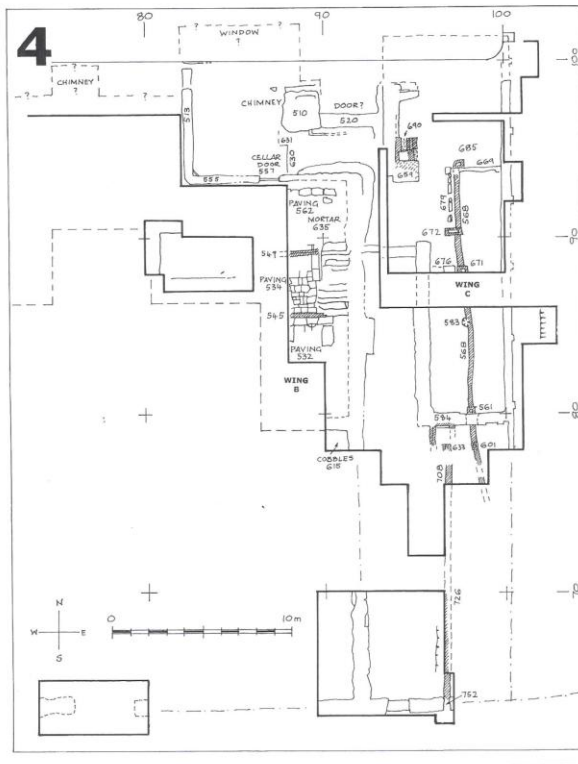


Our interpretation is therefore that the stone mass, positioned on top of quality ashlar foundations on the south side was the core of an abutment with good quality stones (since robbed out) to the visible south and east sides and holding back the earth forming the moated platform. As this side was covered by earth there was no need to provide a quality appearance.

Brick drain feature **D600**

The north-south brick drain had subsided south of the stone mass. This is most clearly seen in photo 1. It was deduced therefore that the drain post-dated the stone mass rather than being contemporary with it. Thus the drain was not a part of the drainage of the moated platform of which the stone mass was assumed to be a corner abutment. The drain continued to the north directly in line with feature shown as 762/726/708 on the Phase 4 drawing from the 2000 excavation report (figure 5).

Figure 5: Phase 4 drawing - Knowle Hall 2000



The drain was subsequently excavated (photos 11 & 12) but was entirely full of earth. No finds at all were contained within it and so the feature has not been able to be dated. The drain was formed of longitudinal bricks placed over base bricks laid perpendicularly. It was assumed a layer of tiles was placed on top but no evidence was found for these.

Photo 12: Brick drain interior and exterior

Upper brick feature **B100/101/102/103**

An unexpected feature was a brick wall running east west across the north end of the excavation (photo 13).

Photo 13: East west wall at north end of excavation



There had been no sign on this in the previous excavations, nor was there any record of a structure in this area on the Warde drawing (figure 2). Extension of the trench revealed this to be a feature of $1\frac{1}{2}$ bricks wide and comprising only a single course of bricks. The feature turned north at the west end and continued in the same form northwards (photo 14). This photo also shows the feature clearly overlying the north-south drain indicating that it was a later feature.

Photo 14: North wall turning northwards B100



Reference to the 2000 season excavation indicated that this feature had been discovered slightly to the north (photo 15).

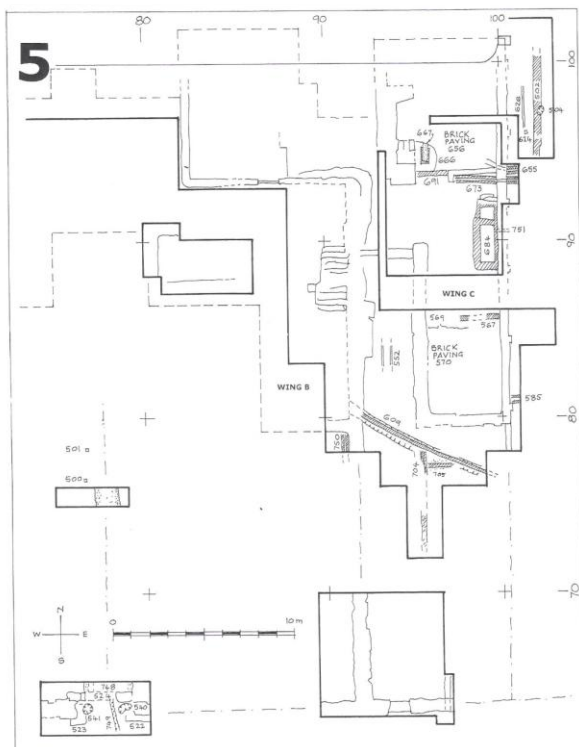
Photo 15: 2000 excavation to north of 2011 trench (looking south)



North-south wall feature in 2000

This was recorded on the Phase 5 drawing from the 2000 excavation (figure 6) as the southerly extension of feature 704 (at location 96.74). No further interpretation was included in that report.

Figure 6: Phase 5 drawing - 2000 Report



Further excavation of this feature was carried out to establish its eastern edge. Part way along the feature a double gap with a central concreted stone was found (photo 16).

Photo 16: Possible doorway in northern wall B101



This was interpreted as a possible doorway comprising two narrow doors such as might be found on a greenhouse or similar garden feature. The orangery at Warwick Castle is shown in photo 17 as an exemplar.

Photo 17: Warwick Castle orangery showing doorway



The feature continued to the east (**B102**) and ended on top of a boulder placed a short distance from a separate north south feature (**B200**). This latter was directly in line with, and interpreted as, the eastern garden boundary wall – see vertical dotted line at grid line 100 to bottom right on Phase 5 drawing (photo 18). The boulder was interpreted as an additional support for the corner of a building. Individual bricks labelled **B103** and **B104** are interpreted as displaced bricks forming part of the demolition rubble and not any separate feature.

Photo 18: East end of northern wall feature B102



Evidence from finds

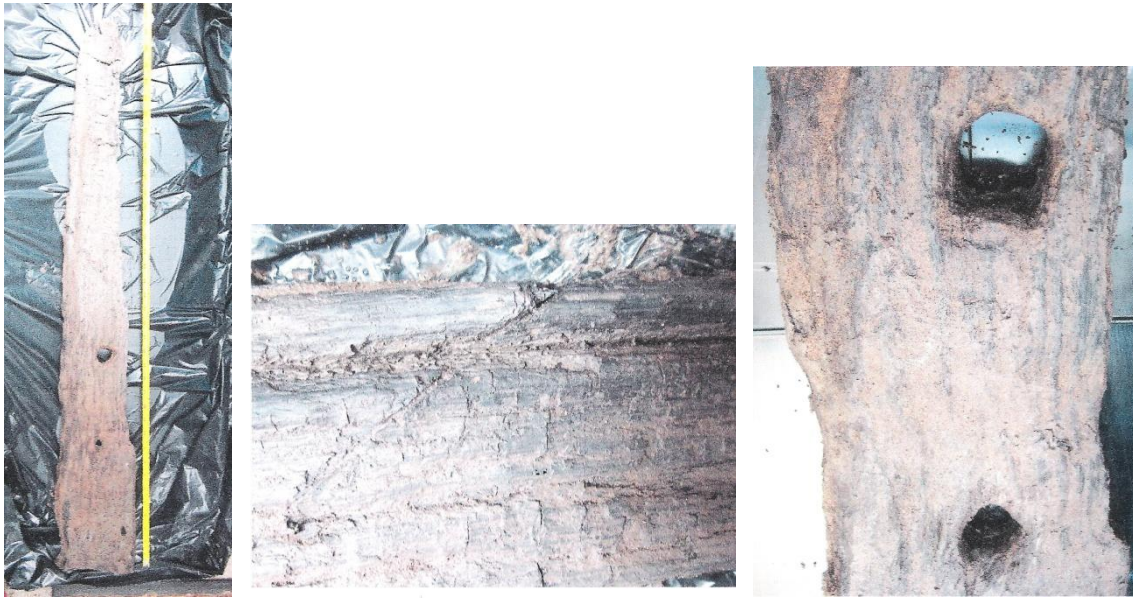
As indicated previously, the area newly excavated this year showed clear evidence of dumping of both domestic and demolition rubbish. No specific dating conclusions for any level can be made but it is clear that all the finds are consistent with the previous excavation's findings and with the phasing hypothesis described by Dr Smith in his two reports.

The plank of wood (F500 - photo 19) preserved in a low waterlogged level at a depth of 1.66m below ground level has been identified from its dimensions and from the clear man-made square holes in it as probably forming part of the decorative framework for half-timbering of a house fascia. A trace of a diagonal plank overlaid on it was also identified (photo 20)

Photo 19: Plank in situ



Photo 20: Plank with detail of cross-member and peg hole



A similar piece of wood has been found on an extant building (Paycocke's, Coggleshall, Essex) (photo 21)

Photo 21: Half-timbering at Paycocke's



This is an important find for the whole site as it is the first evidence for a house with a half timbering feature. The wood was not suitable for dendrochronological assessment. However, a sample was submitted for carbon 14 dating. This resulted in two possible date ranges for the felling of the timber: either 1305-1365 or 1384-1431.

Documentary evidence

We have documentary evidence⁴ of a stone mason being employed to build a wall 'under the chamber near the bridge' in 1294/5, and also of the demolition of a house outside the gate next to the

⁴ The Knowle Estate, Part 2 – Under Westminster 1291-1555; Jean Powrie, page 10, referencing the Knowle estate accounts for 1294/5 in the Westminster Abbey Muniment 27694.

moat and its re-erection on the moated platform⁵ in 1408/9. Both of these activities are consistent with the dates of the wooden plank and also attest to significant activity on the moated platform, which may well have required some reinforcement of the corner of the platform.

Conclusions

Stone mass/ashlar wall

We conclude that the ashlar block wall, comprising two courses on a boulder foundation, with clear corners to east and west, formed the base of a stone revetment to reinforce the south-east corner of the moated platform. Documentary evidence exists for building activity around the 14th century, and we believe it is probable that this corner feature was constructed at that time. We believe the stone mass was associated with this base wall, comprising the rough infill of the feature, ie **they are contemporary and are not from different buildings or phases** – this was a key issue the excavation sought to resolve. We believe the ashlar blocks probably continued up the outside face of the stone mass but that these were subsequently robbed out. The high water table probably precluded further ashlar blocks being removed.

Because the feature was the external corner of the moated platform, the platform itself would cover the feature on its inside. There was thus no point in going to the expense of facing the inside (north) face of the stone mass and our finding of only clay on this side, including going below the level of the ashlar base blocks on the outside, supports this view. Our finding of the inner face of the moat, as identified by Dr Smith, lying inside this stone mass, adds support to our conclusion that the mass was the corner reinforcement installed when the platform was refurbished to take greater building intensity in the early 15th century. This corresponds to Phase 2 as identified by Dr Smith.

North –south brick drain

This feature is interpreted as post dating the stone mass and thus belonging to a later phase of development of the hall buildings. By reference to the report of the earlier SAG dig, it is taken as being a Phase 4 feature dating to the late 17th century.

Northern brick foundation

This newly explored feature is regarded as a very late feature. It was probably a garden building of light construction given the very insubstantial foundations (one course of bricks laid directly on the ground). A possibility is that it was a glasshouse but there is no evidence for this other than from the narrow doorway. As this did not appear on the Warde drawing sketched in 18XX and is thought to have existed between then and the hall's demolition in 18YY. It is also possible that it had existed and been demolished before Warde's drawing ie in the early 19th century. However the Hall at this stage was in decline and it seems unlikely that someone would have gone to the bother of demolishing the building – it is unlikely that it would have had any second hand value and so is not likely to have been dismantled for sale.

⁵ The Knowle Estate, Part 2 – Under Westminster 1291-1555; Jean Powrie, page 31, referencing the Knowle estate accounts for 1408/9 in the Westminster Abbey Muniment 57067.