

INTRODUCTION

THE GROUP

When I decided to set up DDCAG I was determined that this was not to be a hobby society. The word 'community' in our title indicated that our main aim was to engage the people in our excavations wherever we found ourselves working on archaeological sites. It wasn't just my heritage or the groups, it was everyone's, especially the people who found themselves living in the same area, on the same land, as those that lived there hundreds and thousands of years before them.

Many of the group's early members came from my adult education classes in archaeology, but that was only the nucleus as we rapidly increased in numbers by going to various local events with our table and various artefacts I had collected for teaching, spreading the word about Dorset archaeology.

As with many such groups luck plays a part in kick-starting what can be a long process of building membership and trying to find a project that will stimulate the interest of existing and future members.

I was approached in my village cafe by an acquaintance that had heard of the group and suggested that we could have a look at a brick structure on the hill, as no one could remember what its function had been or how old it was. So this became our first project. It gave me an opportunity to teach some basic excavation techniques on a site, I believed, would not produce much in the way of real archaeology. But as we worked we found that the structure was attached to a much larger building with chalk and flint foundations surviving under the large mound of rubble, one that had two rooms, one of which was half cobbled. With all the metal objects we unearthed it suggested to us this was a workshop for mending cart wheels and various horse equipment. We had site visits and an exhibition in the village hall and cafe explaining how we had dug the site and our interpretation of the building and its function.

This laid the foundations for our next project, the Roman camp at Nether Compton and then our search for the mediaeval Priory at Yenston. This latter project helped to introduce us to people on the border of Dorset and Somerset which in turn led to the subject of this booklet, the Stalbridge Manor House project. With the success of this year's digging we hope to continue to unearth the hidden history of this important structure next year.

I hope that you will find this little booklet of interest and perhaps you will become one of our members and take part in finding our past in the future.

Chris Tripp

November 2018

THE EXCAVATION OF STALBRIDGE HOUSE 2018



Fig.1 Stalbridge House, north-west facing elevation.

COLLABORATION

It was Colin Biddlescombe who suggested that I come and have a look at the site of the Manor House in Stalbridge Park. Although called a 'park' it has always been private land. He had been involved in the search for the priory at Yenston, just over the border in Somerset, which we are still searching for. The same landowner held this area of parkland and farm in Stalbridge, so Colin asked permission for us to walk over the site. We were told by Stalbridge History Society members that the house had been owned by Robert Boyle, the famous 17th century scientist then by the Earl of Uxbridge, who famously had his leg shot off at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. I could see that the area where the house had stood was still visible due to the flatness of the ground between a walled garden, contemporary with the house, and a linear bank. Looking east toward St Mary's church the view was stunning from this high vantage point, which turned out to be exactly 99m above sea level.

The Stalbridge History Society (SHS) was interested in the site and its history and much research had been carried out by them over the years. However, they decided that they needed some new substantial evidence of the nature of this structure that could only be answered by archaeology. Only one drawing and one painting was known to show how the house looked before it was demolished in the 1820s, and most drawings are invariably inaccurate representations. SHS asked DDCAG to come in and suggest a way of excavating the site and find out if these images matched reality.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MANOR HOUSE

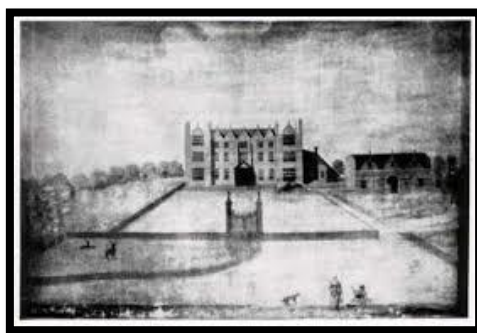


Fig. 2 Stalbridge House, north-east facing elevation.

In 1618 Mervyn Tucher, 2nd Earl of Castlehaven, inherited the area of land called Stalbridge Park from his father and decided to build a house on his new estate. Moving the tenant farmers out the Earl built a Jacobean style house, the fifth largest in Dorset. As the 2nd Earl was a ‘thoroughly bad man’, as *1066 And All That* states about bad men in history, on his death his son sold the house to the 1st Earl of Cork who set about some much needed refurbishments, paying in 1638 one Isaac de Caus £5 “*for drawing me a plot, for contriving my new bwylding over the great sellar at Stalbridge*”.

His seventh son, Robert Boyle, the famed scientist, inherited the house during the Civil War and with his head firmly down, to avoid possible separation from his body as the country went through this turmoil, he lived at Stalbridge Manor for the next ten years undertaking many of his writings and scientific experiments.

After Robert Boyle’s death the Estate and House passed into the ownership of one Peter Walter *circa* 1699. He very usefully carried out a survey of the estate in 1705 and another in 1719 and is mentioned as improving the house, but with no details. The estate remained in the hands of the Walters, with the area of land owned growing by ten times. By 1780 no heirs meant that the estate passed to the Paget family of Plas Newydd in Anglesey by the will of the original Peter Walter.

Lord Paget held over 100,000 acres in Wales and Staffordshire and was created Earl of Uxbridge in 1784. The house was one of many they owned and was thus neglected, with damage to the house and park walls left untended. The second Earl, he who lost a leg at Waterloo, oversaw the taking down of the house in the 1820s. There were five sales of materials from 1823 to 1825 and much stone and lead taken to Bristol and Milborne Port.

The site remained stripped of all its magnificence for generations, apart from the walled garden that would have supplied much food for the manor house during its occupation over two hundred years, until Colin and I visited in 2018 and developed a plan to excavate this grand old structure and see what remained of the fifth largest house in Dorset.

THE GEOPHYSICS

One of the things that archaeologists do not do is go into an excavation blind. Yes, we did have the location of the house on old maps and we did have one painting and one drawing (Figs. 1 & 2), but like most old drawings and maps they can be inaccurate, so the first thing we did was to undertake a geophysics survey to see what remained under the green grass, cropped by cows, horses and Doris the Donkey. The results were quite dramatic.

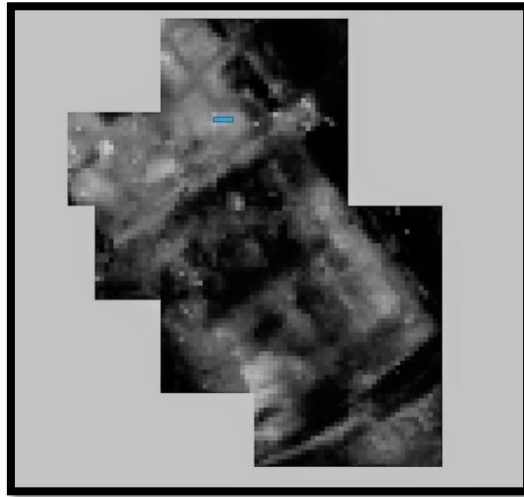


Fig. 3 The house is oriented NW-SE.

It could be said with some certainty that we had the layout of the foundations of the manor house! Stripping the whole of the site would follow in commercial archaeology, but this area was not going to be developed for a housing estate so we had to think of a strategy that would answer our questions and minimize disruption to the farmer. Some of the questions were:

- What is the exact location and orientation of the house?
- What is the house mostly made of?
- What is the internal configuration and measurements of first floor rooms?
- Is the house rectangular or does it have an internal courtyard?
- Is there evidence for the refurbishments and what are the dimensions of the original walls?
- What are the dimensions of the new walls?
- With the front of the house facing north-east is there evidence of the older parts of the house facing south-west?
- Where was the 'Great Sellar' situated, if it exists?

We decided that we would locate the north corner of the house in our first 10m x 10m trench (G1) and the location and dimensions of the north-west facing doorway in a 5m x 5m trench (C3). In 2019 we will locate and dig the west corner of the house and also place a trench in the centre of the building.

THE EXCAVATION

It is always with some trepidation when any archaeologist undertakes the first machine stripping of a site. No matter how good the geophysics results are it is possible that one can miss the intended target or do one of two things; strip too shallow or strip too deep. The former means that the archaeology cannot be seen, due to the covering of subsoil left in place, the latter to the archaeology being destroyed!



Fig. 4 The first cut, but hopefully not the deepest!

In this case the archaeology started to come up quickly and clearly in trench G1, with the hard noise of steel scraping cold grey stone. The house was still there! It had been assumed from the records that most of the material had been systematically dismantled and used in the villages in the immediate area for building, so the chance of anything remaining could be slim.



Fig. 5 Our first look at Stalbridge House in 200 years.

As the machine continued to take off the subsoil in the north corner of the trench it was hoped that more of the surviving foundations would be unearthed, but with a sinking feeling it was becoming apparent with each sweep of the bucket further south that the stone was disappearing and the rest of the trench was unearthing a backfill of soil and rubble. When the machine hit natural clay we knew that the chances of finding any more foundations were at an end for this trench.



Fig. 6 Disappointment followed.

The machine is very efficient, but now it is the job of our volunteer diggers to get down on hands and knees to excavate the remains in a more careful way.



Fig. 7 The hard work begins.

Luckily the corner of the house was still there, but unluckily it ran under the baulk (to the left in Fig. 7), so we had to manually extend the trench slightly. The stones of the foundation were large and well laid and would have borne quite a large wall, but it was the extra remains of a very large drain that surprised us all. It was *inside* the house wall and obviously contemporary with it, the capping stones having fallen in and the whole space filled with dirt.



Fig. 8 The Great Drain, with the house wall to the left.

From the soil in the drain we had our first finds and they turned out to be of all different materials, including oyster shell, iron and tile one of the best being this nice piece of worked stone.



Fig. 9 Finds.

An important part, if not the most important part, of archaeology is recording, because excavation is destruction, but in an organized way. When a 'feature', be it a wall, pit, posthole or grave, has been excavated it needs to be cleaned and photographed using a scale, photo board (number of the feature, date and site code) and north arrow. The feature is then drawn from above, the plan, and this is done at 1:20 scale. If the feature is a pit which has had half its dirt, the 'fill', dug out the archaeologist can then draw the section, the 'profile', of the pit at 1:10 scale. These drawings are tied into the site grid (5m or 10m squares) or one can use a GPS (Global Positioning System) that locates the site and all the features into the landscape. We then use a dumpy level to record the height above sea level of all the features. As one can imagine this takes time, but is vital for the archive where all of the information is deposited.



Fig. 10 Drawing the wall and great drain at 1:20 using a planning frame and permatrace paper.

We continued to excavate the walls to see how deep the courses of stone went into the ground. One puzzle was the absence of any 'bedding' trench, where the wall has been inserted into a trench to give it stability. In fact we found that the walls had been built on a rough foundation and that was straight onto the silty-clay natural. No wonder the house needed constant repairs.



Fig. 11 The wall sitting on rough stones and natural.

One of the main questions we wanted answering was directed to the text records that indicated that the structure of the house was altered in its two hundred year life. Much of this work was due to changing fashions in architecture, but also due to structural problems, which are confirmed by the shallow foundations used in its build. Toward to the end of digging in G1 one of our volunteers came across this smaller wall inside the larger one, which means that this wall must have been earlier. The larger wall was a rebuild, to take the weight of the bay windows that we see in the painting and drawing.



Fig. 12 The main wall and drain (top left) with the narrower wall (foreground).

As the summer rolled on we entered a period of very dry and hot weather which carried on for some weeks. This created a situation where the grass became very stunted and all over the country fields dried out and marks began to appear that could be picked out from the sky by drones. On our field we also had these ‘parch-marks’ appearing.



Fig. 13 The drone recording where the parch marks are clearly visible – the N arrow is wrong.

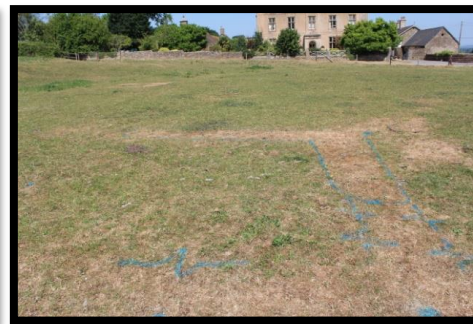


Fig. 14 The parch mark of the ‘porch’.

This was the area where our geophysics indicated a doorway into this part of the house and the parch-marks appeared in the shape of a rectangle. This was an opportunity to excavate this part of the structure and record the dimensions of this entrance porch and to see if any fabric remained, so we opened trench C3. Things didn’t quite work out as expected.



Fig. 15 An unexpected void!

After we had literally put our foot in it we realised that this was the large drain structure we had uncovered in trench G1. So we carried on excavating and found that the drain was configured as a rectangle.



Fig. 16 The Great Drain turns south-east.

It was seen to form the shape that had been the parch-mark at this point, so it was not the porch that had created it. In fact the drain followed the shape of the porch exactly, once again as in trench G1 it was inside the main structure of the house. This was confirmed by our extensions to this trench, where we found the remains of the porch foundations.



Fig. 16 & Fig. 17 The porch foundation with plaster facing. The wall runs to bottom right.

The column fragments that we found would probably have sat on these bases, with the steps shown on the painting running up and over the wall seen here. The drain is inside these structures. The main wall running away south-east from this base was nicely preserved and led to the remains of an internal floor surface, none of which survived in trench G1. We think that once through the entrance on this side of the house one would have been in the entrance hall with a stone floor, a door would have been on ones left and led to a large room facing the church to the north-east. It is highly likely that this room had a wooden floor, probably oak, and even oak-lined panelling on the walls. It was lit by the bay windows, as seen on the painting.

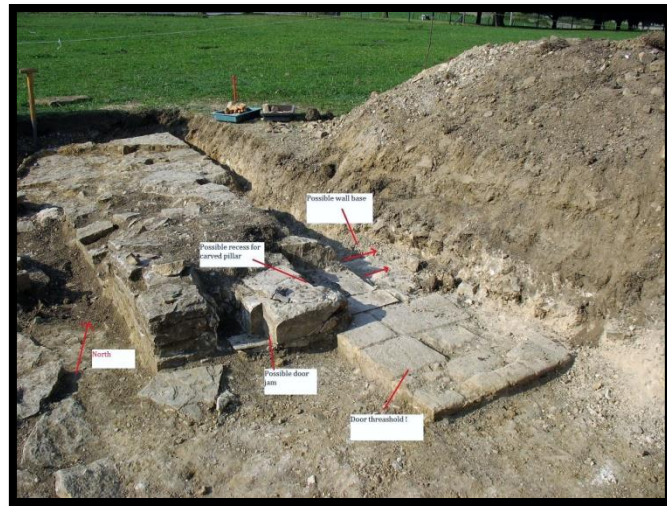


Fig. 18 The wall and floor surface.



Fig 19 Trench C3. Looking south-east.

As can be seen here the drain follows the shape of the porch and is inside it, and the top of the picture shows the drain coming in from the right with the porch drain heading to meet it. The drain at the top carries on heading north-east until it emerges in trench G1.

Trench C3 was smaller than the 10m x 10m G1, but it showed us a great deal about how the entrance to this side of the house had been constructed, and once again surprised us with how the drain first unearthed in G1 was constructed in relation to the main structure of the house.



Fig. 20 Part of the stone facade of the house, found in C3.

Conclusions (2018)

This year's excavations have been a great success, in that our research questions for this session have mostly been answered.

- What is the exact location and orientation of the house?

The trenches G1 and C3 successfully found the remains of the walls and a large drain.

- What is the house mostly made of?

The remains of the walls showed that they were made of large stone slabs and in-filled with stone rubble. The Great Drain was made of small brick-shaped stone.

- What is the internal configuration and measurements of the first floor rooms?

Unfortunately the demolition workers were very careful to use nearly all the materials they could when taking down the house and the remains of internal floors in this part of the excavation drew a blank, except for the small fragment in trench C3. Next year's digging may answer this question.

- Is the house rectangular or does it have an internal courtyard?

This question will hopefully also be answered next year.

- Is there evidence for the refurbishments and what are the dimensions of the original walls?

The finding of a small wall internal and parallel to the larger wall indicates that the structure was refurbished and extended at least once in its life.

- What are the dimensions of the new refurbished walls?

The finding of surviving walls in trench G1 and C3 answered this question. Further trenches will add to this information.

- With the front of the house facing north-east is there evidence of the older parts of the house facing south-west?

This will be our plan for the next two years of work. We will look at the south-west facing elevation to find the corner and possible entrance on this side of the house.

Dorset Diggers Community Archaeology Group and the Stalbridge History Society welcome new members, especially youngsters, so if you have found this booklet of interest and wish to help with further excavation and research into Stalbridge House, the 5th biggest house in Dorset at the time, please contact us.



Acknowledgements

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