

SPEKE HALL: ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EAST COURTYARD, 1989

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In November 1989, with the final phase of repairs at Speke Hall, came the opportunity to examine the archaeological potential of the courtyard east of the Hall (see Higgins Fig. 1, page 49). This phase of work involved the relaying of services to the Hall across the east bridge and courtyard. At the same time the whole of the cobbled surface of this courtyard was to be re-laid and a service trench through the Tea Room Passage into the south garden was to be relocated for the purpose of replacing a water pipe. It was hoped that features noted during previous repair work would be revealed in plan and that it would be possible to consider their relationship with the present Hall. However, no facility was granted for intrusive archaeological investigation though features visible in the sections of new service trenches were available for recording. Consequently, interpretation of the chronological sequence could be attempted only by reference to the surface relationships of features, occasionally supported by evidence from sections.

The work was funded by the National Trust and facilities for archaeological recording were made possible through the co-operation of Messrs William Tomkinson and Sons and their sub-contractors. Carol Thickins, architect for Donald Insall and Associates, gave much helpful advice and provided plans relating to earlier and current building work. Contractors' work was carried out under archaeological supervision by Jen Lewis and Jeff Speakman for Liverpool University Field Archaeology Unit. The site archive and finds are held by the Unit.

East Courtyard (Fig. 1)

The courtyard is bounded by the east range of Speke Hall and, on the south side, by a range now used as Tea Rooms by the National Trust. It is approached by a stone bridge across the north-east arm of the moat and adjacent to which there are the remains of a sandstone dovecote. The area available for investigation was focused in the centre of the courtyard; there was no opportunity for archaeological investigation in the immediate vicinity of any of the enclosing walls. In 1979, sandstone masonry had been noted during work to lay an electricity cable across the yard and evidence for a sandstone drain had been recorded in 1988 whilst builders were checking the drainage close to the eastern boundary of the yard.

The cobbles and upper levels of bedding material were removed by 'JCB' under archaeological supervision. The lower bedding layers were excavated archaeologically, by hand, to expose the underlying layers. The bedding material consisted of firmly compacted dark brown soil with brick and coal fragments throughout and to a

depth of no more than 400mm below the upper surface of the cobbles. Pottery from the bedding layers ranged in date from the 16th to 19th centuries but it was not possible to relate the pottery with any certainty to the exposed features. In several areas the bedding material lay directly over a soft yellow/brown sand which appears to be similar to the natural sand found generally in the vicinity of Speke Hall.

Structures A and B

The earliest evidence was for at least two structures, though each had been levelled or robbed-out prior to setting the cobbled surface. Structure A included fragments of red sandstone with the occasional yellow sandstone roofing flag. This was interpreted as evidence for a wall (17, 36) set at right angles from the Tea Room, which could be seen for a total length of c. 6m, though it had been cut by a contemporary or later drain trench (11). At its northern limit it seemed to turn west, though another series of trench cuts (23, 32) (the latter relating to the 1979 cable trench) obscured the evidence. A small spread of red sandstone rubble (18) was probably contemporary with the wall and was immediately overlaid with material containing 18th century pottery. Also associated with the wall were more general spreads of grey sand (20) and a thin layer of clayey sand (35), the latter suggesting possible evidence for the remains of a deliberately laid clay surface.

Structure B was also built of red sandstone and lay at the northern end of the yard. It consisted of a line of red sandstone rubble with occasional complete blocks of masonry at least two courses high (48), which ran westwards from and at right angles to a second sandstone wall (50). Each had been extensively robbed out. A third wall (51) was implied by another spread of sandstone rubble. Both 50 and 51 were clearly associated with an area of red sandstone flagstones (49). Small spreads of yellow sandstone roof flags and grey slates (53) lay below a layer of sandy rubble adjacent to walls 48 and 50. At least two courses of sandstone masonry (42) were recorded in the sections of a modern service trench (41) a little to the east of wall 51, with which they may have been associated.

Although highly likely, the association of structure A with a cruck-framed building (JT1, JT2) recorded in the Tea Room range (Lewis, 1988) cannot be confirmed due to the insertion of a service trench alongside the north wall of the Tea Room range. Other service trenches have effectively destroyed any possible relationship between the two structures, A and B, though in plan it appears that they might have formed a continuous line of sandstone walling across the yard.

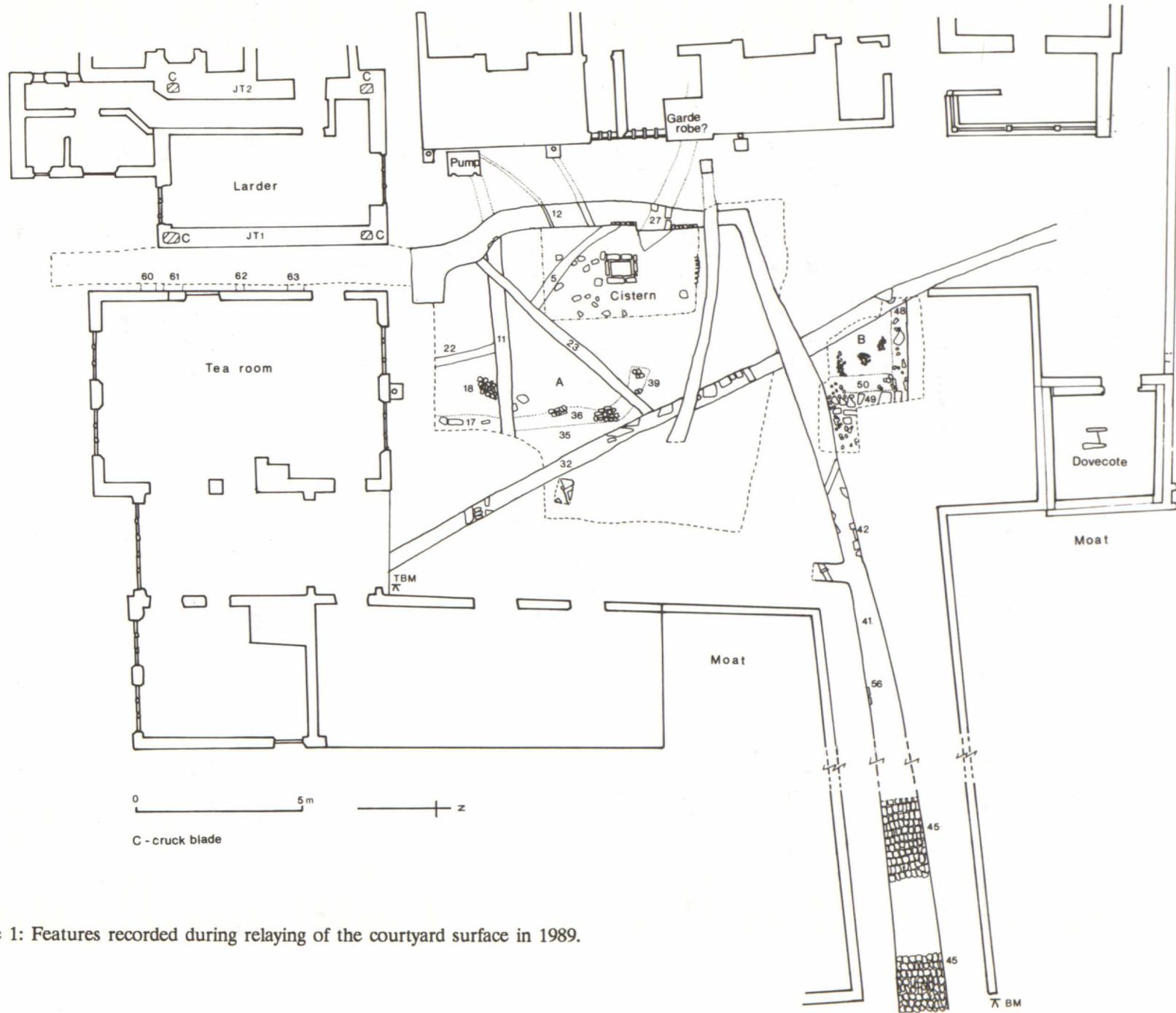


Figure 1: Features recorded during relaying of the courtyard surface in 1989.

The argument is supported by the sandstone masonry recorded in 1979 when the cable trench (32) was dug across the yard. The spreads of roof material, sandstone floor and possible clay surface together suggest that the walls were associated with roofed structures but it is not possible to determine whether they were major walls or partitions within a structure.

The proximity of structure B to the east bridge over the moat might suggest that it was a porter's lodge or even a gatehouse. It may also have been associated with the sandstone building now known as the dovecote where the north face of the exterior wall is strangely buttressed. Within the dovecote there was evidence for a floor of red sandstone flags on to which the south and west walls were laid (see below).

The spreads of roofing material appeared to be a consequence of natural decay and collapse rather than demolition. Possibly the buildings were only partly dismantled and the walls were robbed out some time after they had fallen out of use. From the evidence of the pottery found over feature 18, and the absence of a building in this part of the east courtyard on a survey plan of 1781 (see Addison's map in Nicholson 1983, fig 3), it seems likely that they were finally demolished in the 18th century before the yard was cobbled.

Documentary evidence suggests that structures in the east yard might be expected in the 17th and early 18th century (Nicholson 1983, 33-34) when "the chamber next the newe bridge where the gardeners lye" (1624) and "the Servant's Chamber at the Back Bridge" (1700) were recorded. This accommodation is likely to have been in proximity to the kitchen range rather than next to the principal entry over the north bridge. A Porter's Chamber was noted in 1624 (Saxton, 1946, 128) and a room over the back gates was recorded in 1700 (Saxton, 1945, 125) providing further documentary evidence for structures, possibly a back gatehouse, in this location.

Cistern, drains and early service trenches

A large, brick lined cistern was constructed in the post-medieval period - probably in the 18th century after structures A and B had been demolished. Its external dimensions are c. 4.7m x 3m. It has a capping of red sandstone rubble overlaid with sandy clay and it seems likely that the stones around the opening have been reset on at least one occasion. A pipe, set high into the north wall of the cistern may have acted as an overflow, but no evidence for an associated pipe trench was seen on the surface. Fresh water was taken off from the cistern by a lead pipe (12) to the water pump which is still set against the east range wall.

A drain, lined with red sandstone slabs (27), appears to have been associated with a supposed garderobe shaft (Lewis, 1988) immediately next to the north sandstone chimney stack on the east range. It ran into the cistern. Since the cistern obviously functioned as a collecting

point for fresh water, this suggests that the function of the garderobe had been altered. There is, however, a second gully opening at the bottom of the garderobe where it is integral with the kitchen wall. It is possible that rain water from the inner courtyard was channelled beneath the kitchen out to the east yard, originally as a means of sluicing through the garderobe and subsequently as a means of taking water from the inner court into the cistern.

A drain (11), constructed of large slabs of red sandstone, may be contemporary with, or at least have functioned at the same time as, structure A. The drain ran eastwards from the pump at the east range. Part of the drain may have been exposed during building work at the east end of the yard during 1988. If so, its line must have altered to run in a more north-easterly direction. Almost certainly, it functioned as an overflow from the pump by carrying waste across the yard to the moat. From the nature of layers along the line of the drain it seems likely that it had been opened up and backfilled on at least one occasion. It was overlaid by a later trench (23) the function of which was not established though it may have carried off rainwater from the east range.

An unexplained linear feature (22) may have been linked to drain 11, or, it could have been associated with a shallow cut (5) into the upper surface of the cistern capping and linked to feature 23. Fragments of Cistercian-type pottery and of green-glazed roof tile were recovered from the bedding layer for the cobbles in this part of the yard.

Dovecote (Fig. 2)

The dovecote is approximately square in plan and stands at the north-east corner of the yard. On the outer face of the north wall is a pair of shallow buttresses between which is a recessed sandstone wall. Above the recess the wall projects slightly, and shows evidence for a blocked opening. At the base of the buttressed wall is a series of flat flagstones. West of the buttresses, at present ground level, is a drain channel which opens into the moat. Examination of the stone work on the outer face of the north wall appears to indicate that the upper courses including the buttresses, have been rebuilt upwards from the courtyard level. If so, the nesting boxes must be contemporary with or later than this rebuilding. The nesting boxes line the north, east and south walls and consist entirely of sandstone masonry which shows little indication of keying into the walls. The floor of the dovecote has been robbed out but the occasional flag of red sandstone survives beneath the walls and suggests that the south and west walls overlie an earlier feature, possibly structure B already noted above. A layer of soft mortar along the west and north walls indicates that the floor was partly re-laid at a slightly higher level than the earlier surface. A pair of linear sandstone slabs in the centre of the floor area may indicate the lining for a

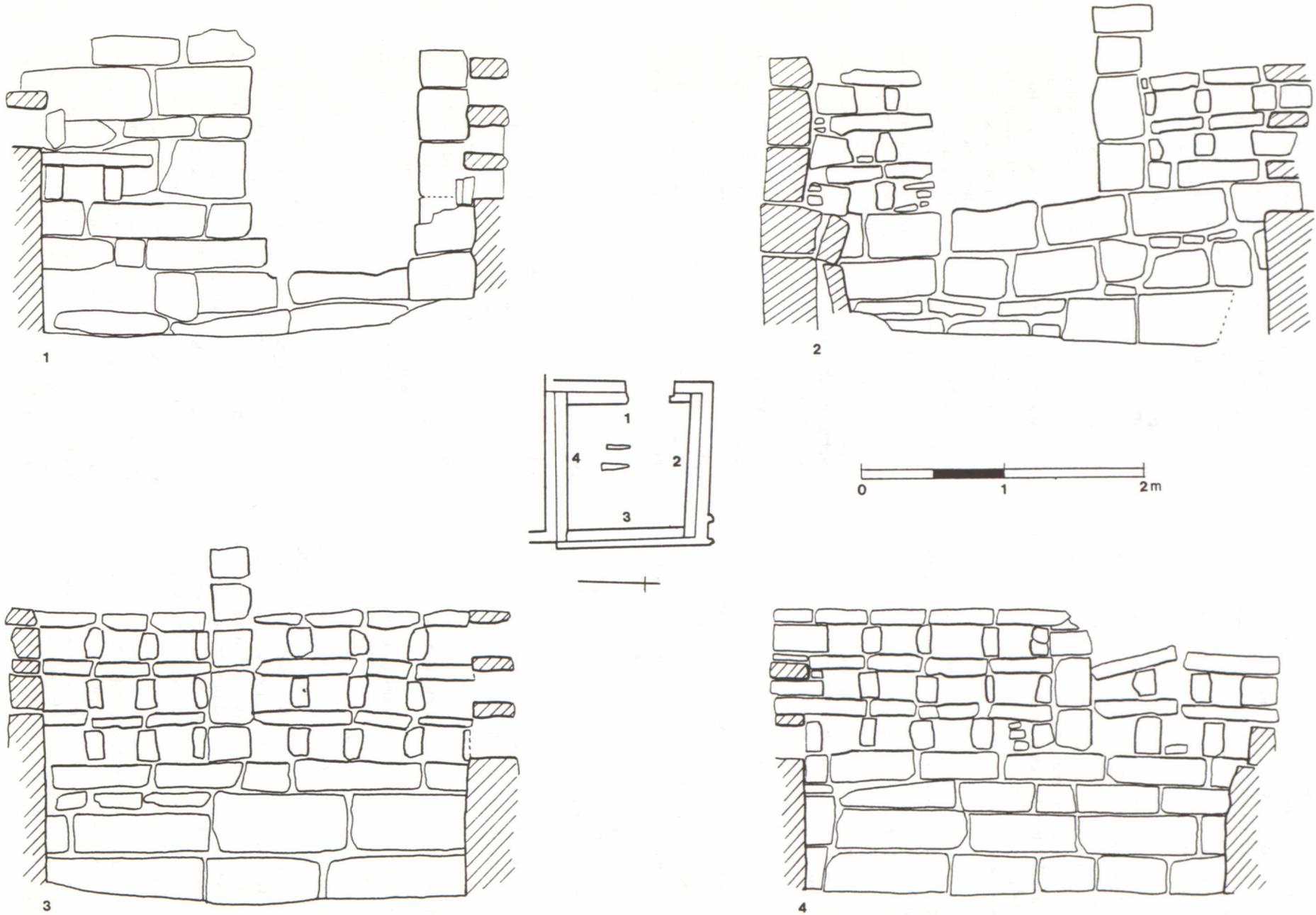


Figure 2: The dovecote: elevations (reproduced by permission of the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside).

sump or support for the roof.

Dating of the dovecote is uncertain. We cannot be sure that it was associated with the dovehouse chamber, which, when recorded in 1624 (Saxton, 1946, 129), contained a bed and bedding and, presumably, stood adjacent to the dovecote. Although the evidence is difficult to interpret, the chamber seems to be listed under a general heading of 'new building' which included a series of work rooms and servants' chambers.

The buttresses seen on the north wall can be compared with a series of sandstone buttresses which still survive on the west range. They are associated with the plinth course upon which the timber-framing on the west range is supported. David Higgins' investigations in the Billiard Room and Library showed that the stonework overlay an earlier ditch which had been infilled by the 15th century (see page 52). With the buttressed walling we see, perhaps, the creation of a new revetment wall in the 16th century along the inner edge of the west and part of the north arms of the moat but it is noticeable that the buttressing is lacking from the north range itself. With such evidence, there is perhaps a hint that the walling into which the dovecote was inserted is contemporary with the west range. If we can find that the present dovecote is that implied by the 1624 inventory we start to see a sequence of events which would allow demolition of the courtyard structures. It may, therefore, be proposed that they were demolished at the time of 'new building' referred to in 1624, a date rather earlier has been suggested above.

East Bridge

Re-excavation of a service trench across the bridge provided evidence for a surface of stone setts (45) apparently set directly on a layer of yellow/brown sand similar to that found in the courtyard. The stone surface seems to have followed the profile of the outer bank of the moat, but evidence for its full extent was not ascertained. The setts were overlaid by a series of levelling layers which also overran an area of sandstone masonry (56), possibly *in situ*, and seen only in the trench section.

The function of the setts is not known. Either they represent a defined access across the moat or they may have been a revetment of the outer bank. If the former, a possible link with the sandstone feature might suggest that it was a structure associated with entry to the courtyard. The relationship of the setts with the present bridge walls was not established. However, it seems likely that its walls are contemporary with the levelling layers and, therefore, a consequence of bridge building to improve or create access between the farm, which lay to the east and outside the moat platform, and the Hall.

Building accounts for the period 1710-1719 included 'pailing the Wood Bridge' (1712), 'paveinge on the

stone bringe (sic)' and 'Filling rubbish at Bridge end' (1713) and 'Setting A Gate att Moat side' (1719) (Nicholson 1983, 34). The wooden bridge might have been that leading to the east yard and rebuilding might be suggested by the rubbish filling of 1713.

Tea Room Passage

The trench through the passage contained a lead water pipe. This trench had been re-opened on at least one occasion when repairs were made with copper piping.

The west wall of the Tea Room Passage preserves one of the cruck frames (JT1). From structural evidence visible within this part of the Hall it was known that the cruck-framed building had originally extended further east (Lewis, 1988), and it was hoped that this trench would supply evidence for the wall lines of this early building. The 1989 section along the west side of the builders' trench showed that the brick wall, which encapsulates the cruck frame and forms the wall of the present larder, had cut through any archaeological layers.

The east section of the trench did, however, produce evidence for a series of cuts and infills (fig 3). Natural material consisted of yellow boulder clay (57) overlain with a yellow/brown sand (58), similar to that seen in the east courtyard. In the Tea Room Passage the sand was, obviously, natural. At the south, undisturbed, end of the section it was overlaid with a layer of brown sand (59) which had been cut by a pair of shallow gulleys or pits. One of these (61) lay directly below the projected wall line of the cruck-framed building and it is suggested that this represents evidence for a sill beam trench aligned on an east-west axis. The other (60) was just to the south but its function could not be determined. Each was filled with very dark brown sand. The chronological sequence suggests that both survived until the south wall of the Tea Room was built. Its construction was represented by a flat-bottomed cut and rubble fill (84). Modern pottery in the fill shows that it was built no earlier than the 19th century.

Two other pits or gulleys (62, 63) were also identified. These cut the natural yellow/brown sand and were overlaid by the same layer of brown sand (70) which sealed the supposed sill beam slot. Their function could not be identified, but they may represent post holes for timber uprights associated with a partition wall or screen. Probably they were removed in the same phase of work which saw the removal of the beam slot and construction of the south wall of the Tea Room.

At the north end of the section there was evidence for rebuilding. This was, almost certainly, associated with the construction of the north wall of the Tea Room and a pipe trench (74) was probably inserted during this phase. This work had effectively destroyed any evidence for wall lines associated with the timber building. Following its construction the area was sealed by a

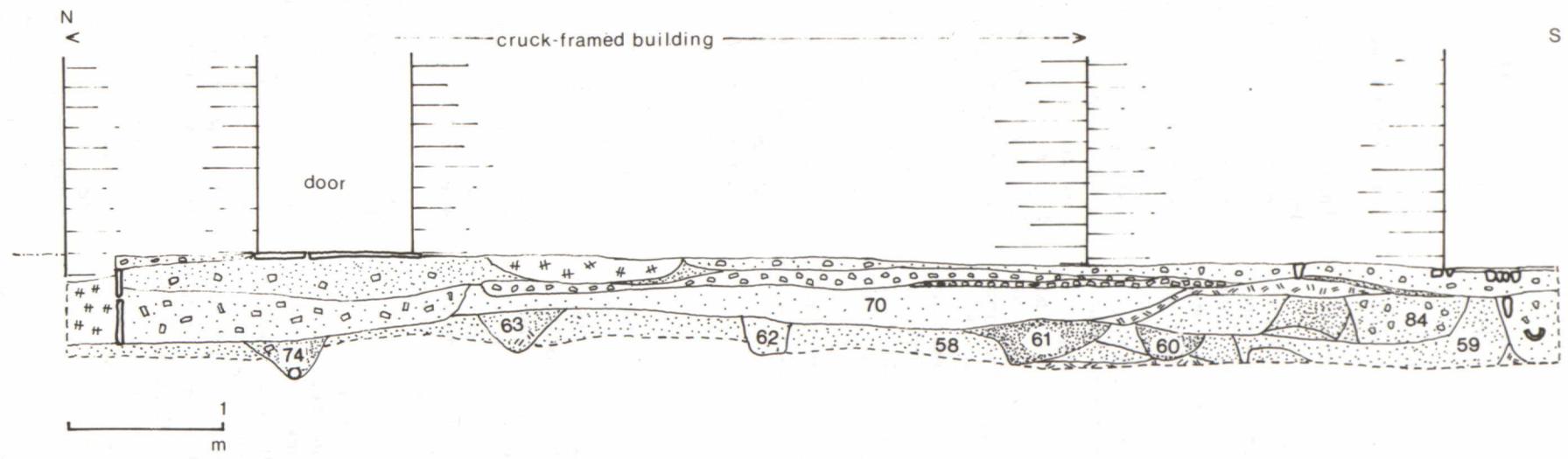


Figure 3: The Tea Room Passage: east section.

series of layers containing brick rubble and cinders. However, the evidence suggests that construction of the north wall of the Tea Room was, perhaps, later than the south wall. Layers of rubble marked the final phase and sandstone flagstones and concrete sealed all deposits.

Finds

Finds recovered included a variety of pottery types, glazed roof tile, clay pipes and bottle glass ranging in date from the 16th to 20th centuries. Since they were derived only from the cobble bedding layer and immediately above the exposed layers and features, they are of little value in dating these levels and can only suggest a *terminus ante quem* for the cobble surface, demolition of the sandstone structures, the construction of the cistern, subsequent repairs to the drains or even to the insertion of modern service trenches. However, the survey of the east range has shown at least three major phases of rebuilding (Lewis, 1988) followed by the construction of the two sandstone chimney stacks. The infill between them, which incorporates a double row of round-headed windows, came later. The finds could relate to any of these building activities.

Discussion

The lack of opportunity to undertake intrusive archaeology in the east courtyard at Speke Hall is regrettable since it has not been possible either to date features or to link them satisfactorily with the standing structure. Despite the fragmentary nature of the archaeological remains it is clear that the east courtyard contained a series of hitherto unknown structures though their function remains unclear. A sequence of demolition and adaptation of walling for the creation of a dovecote seems apparent. At least some of the structures might have been dismantled by 1624; almost certainly all except the dovecote and, perhaps, the east bay or bays of the cruck-framed building at the south of the courtyard had disappeared by the last decades of the 18th century. Although the evidence is slight, interpretation of features seen in section in the Tea Room passage, adds strength to the argument that the cruck-framed building had extended eastwards by at least one bay. It may also have been associated with a building which stood in the east courtyard.

In terms of local archaeological research, the work demonstrated that even though an area is supposed to have been extensively damaged by relatively modern building work, the potential for survival of archaeological features should not be ignored. It would, however, have been quite impossible to judge such potential on the basis of trial trenching; by stripping the courtyard down to a level surface it was possible to see some indication of the plan of earlier structures. It seems highly likely that further excavation would have provided evidence for the sequence of building activities,

despite their proximity to the surface and disturbance by later intrusions.

With the example of Speke Hall, it is clear that the building itself contains not only a series of different structural phases, but also that it was associated with ancillary structures which eventually became obsolete to its needs. Documentary evidence for occupation at Speke Hall indicates that buildings dating from the 13th century, if not earlier, might be expected. Post-medieval probate inventories, whilst presenting the challenge of interpreting the disposition of the rooms within the Hall, offer a greater challenge in the identification of what appear to have been detached structures of some archaeological potential. Work in the east courtyard has succeeded only in begging further questions of the features exposed and has found few answers. Apart from the north west corner of the Hall, where excavations have been undertaken in the billiard room and library (Higgins, this volume pages 47-52), the overall association of the Hall with the moat is still not known. Elsewhere, for the time being the dating of early structures, including the cruck-framed building, must remain speculative.

References

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