

## EXCAVATION AT SOUTHCOTE MANOR, READING, 1964

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### SUMMARY

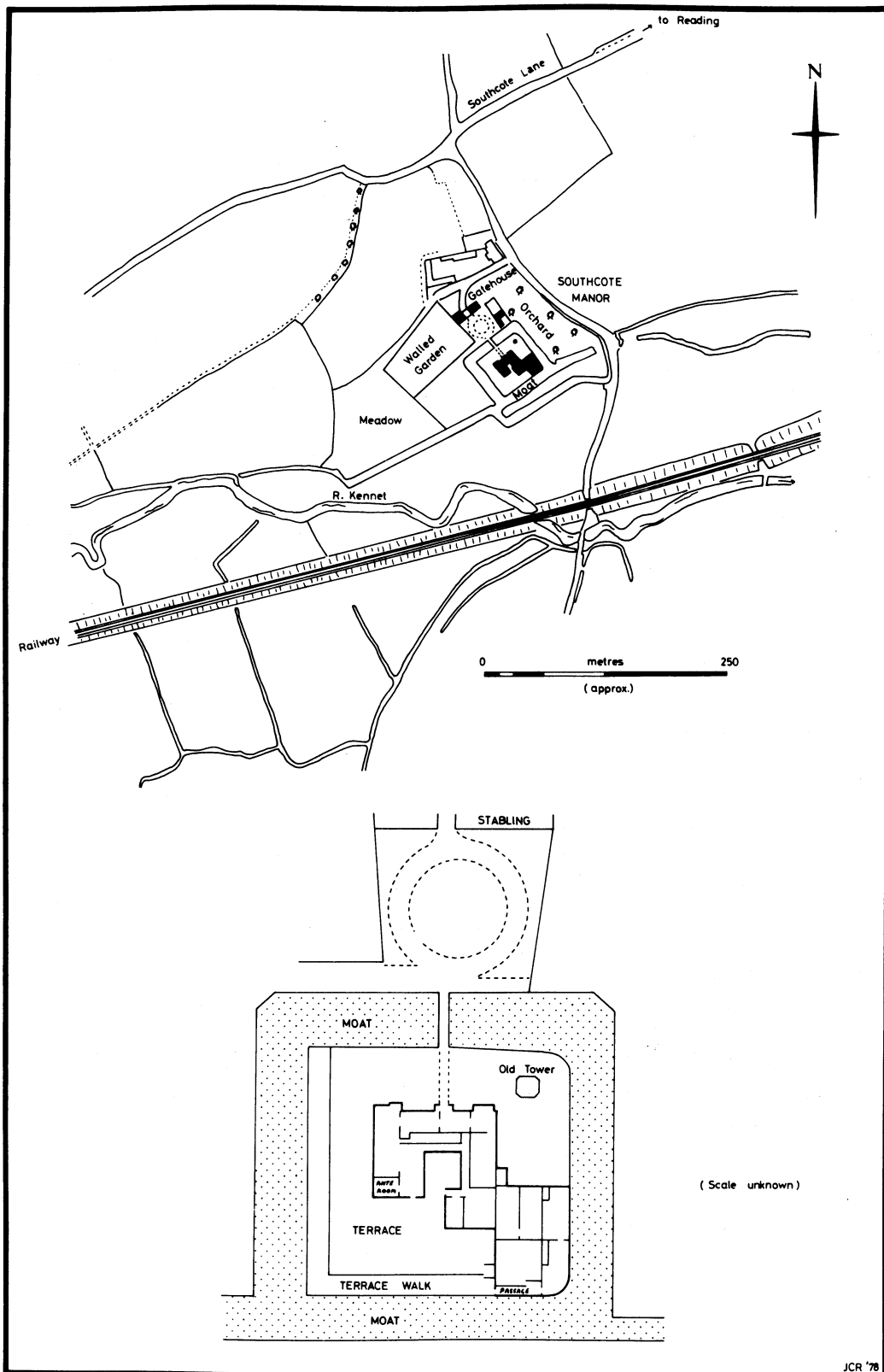
A limited investigation was made into this raised, moated site. The rectangular platform seems to have been created in the thirteenth century, and foundations on it are of all periods from medieval to nineteenth century. Material from the excavation has been deposited in Reading Museum.

### INTRODUCTION

The first known holder of the manor of Southcote was Bricward under Edward the Confessor, but in 1086 it was recorded as being held by William de Braose. By the early thirteenth century it was held as an undertenancy by the Belet family, which was probably responsible for the original construction of the mound and the first house on it. It continued in their male line until the mid-fourteenth century; but for a century and a half thereafter it seems to have descended in the female line. Walter Sambourne, who acquired it by marriage in the fifteenth century, or his son, Drew, was probably responsible for the building or rebuilding which took place in that period, including the construction of the guard tower. In the early sixteenth century it went by marriage to the Windsor family, who let it. By the middle of Elizabeth I's reign that family had sold the property to Anthony Blagrave whose father, John, had acquired the considerable property of William Grey in and around Reading. Anthony was still alive in 1610 and it is probable that major rebuilding operations took place sometime after that when his son John, later knighted, inherited; and for a brief time, in 1643, it housed the headquarters of the Earl of Essex. It continued in Blagrave hands, and considerable building and rebuilding took place in the nineteenth century; but by 1902 it was occupied by a caretaker for its owner lived in

nearby Calcot Park. The sale catalogue of that year shows that the house was in need of extensive maintenance, and probably because of this, it failed to be let or sold. It continued to decay, and in 1926 was demolished, although the stable block beyond the moat remained until 1960.

The house (SU 692717) was situated between the Bath Road (A4) and the River Kennet, some 700 m south of the former, some 500 m north of the latter. It was on the edge of the floodplain just below the 45 m contour. The nearest flowing water was the Holy Brook about 100 m to the south, and it was once connected via a drainage ditch with the south side of the moat. The moat was about 10 m wide and it had been filled in, or silted up, to above water level. It enclosed a platform some 55 m square and about 3 m higher than the land surface beyond the moat. The sides of the platform had been strengthened by brickwork, some of 2 in. brick, and a very pleasant terrace walk had been constructed at a lower level on the south. The front of the house faced north, overlooking the stables and gardens that lay beyond the moat. By the time of the excavation both these had gone under a housing estate that had spread round three sides of the site. During the 38 years since the untidy demolition of the house the surface rubble had been consolidated by vegetation, including trees, and it had become an unofficial playground.



*Fig. 1. Top: Location. Bottom: Plan of house, 1902.*

By 1964 building operations were planned to extend over the site of the former house as part of the general housing development in the area; and as a prelude to this much of the overlying rubble and vegetation was mechanically cleared. It was agreed by Reading Museum, the Berkshire Archaeological Society and the Ministry of Public Building and Works that the site required investigation. The builders gave permission for work to take place in the summer of 1964, but, unfortunately, no money was available for the kind of investigation such a site merited. In the outcome the M.P.B.W. met expenses for travel and expendable items of equipment and Reading Museum provided other equipment. But all work was voluntary and unpaid and so almost totally confined to weekends between May and August 1964, with planning being done mainly in October and November. The work force was composed of a small but consistent element from the Berkshire Field Research Group; small parties of students, making a total of five visits, from Reading University, Bulmershe College and Eton College; and children from the nearby housing estate. Mr Richard Hart acted as administrative assistant with responsibilities that included equipment, recording and watching the site between times of excavation. Mr and Mrs Hart allowed equipment to be stored on their premises. Thanks are due to them and to all others who took part undaunted by the disparity between work to be done and resources available. The excavation was directed by the writer of this report.

The site has now been built on, but the mound (now carrying the houses), the stump of the Tudor Tower and the moat survive.

## THE EXCAVATION

The state of the site and the limited resources enforced a very selective policy. Much of the demolition debris had been cleared by machine but much remained, and in the clearing operation lowest parts of walls, as distinct from footings, had been broken down

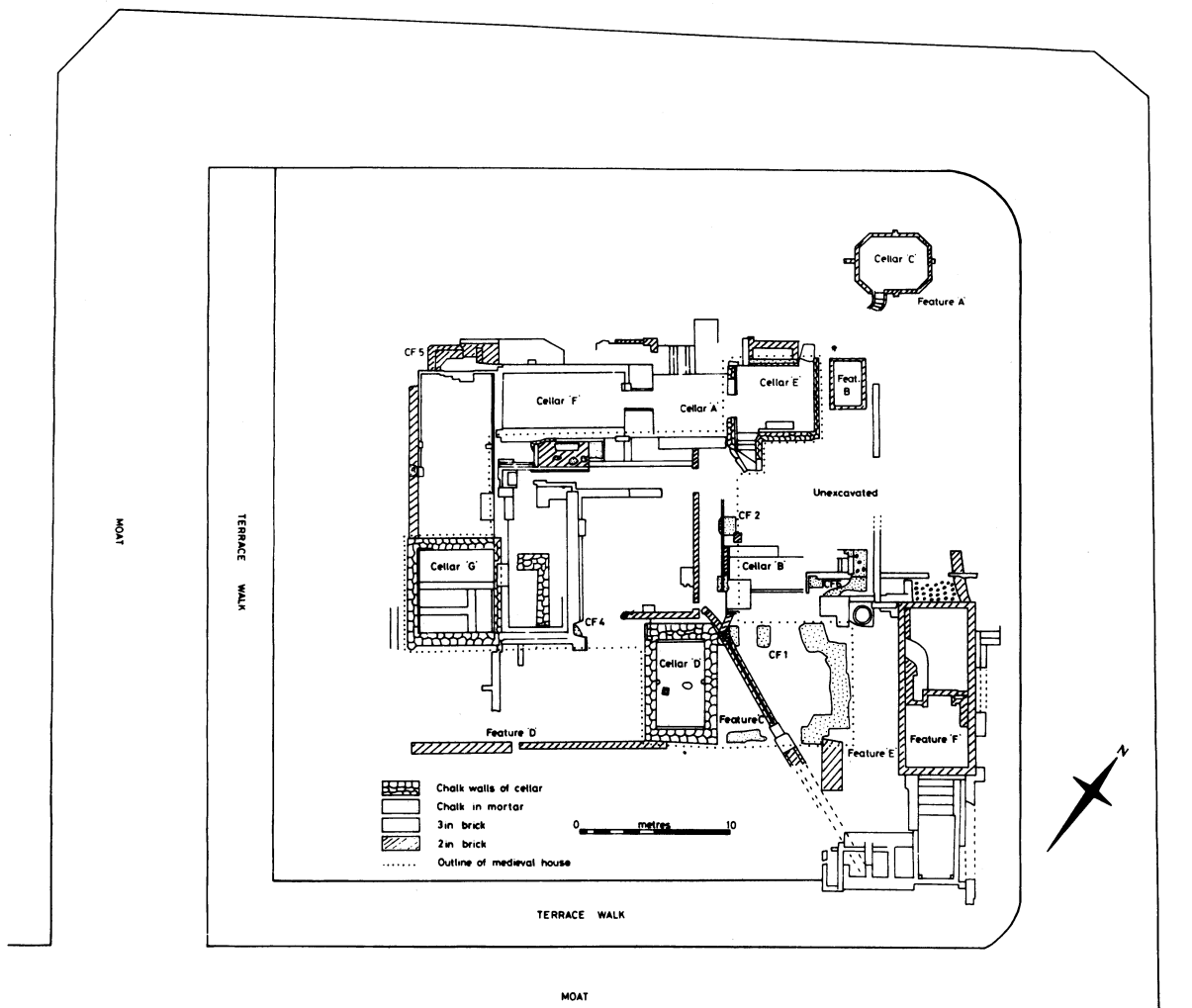
and spread around. It was clear that extensive investigation in depth was beyond both existing resources and the constructors' tolerance. A policy of extensive investigation was thus followed, the aim being to examine the upper parts of foundations for dating evidence and for the incorporation of older material in later building. This policy was modified early on when it was found that there were six cellars whose fill was more easily moved than was much of the surface debris. As these would have needed consolidating before any new building no objection was raised to their being partially cleared, and in three cases it was possible to dig small sections through the cellar floors to the original ground surface. The inevitable result was that extensive clearing could not be completed, although more than three-quarters of the actual house site was exposed. But this loss was far outweighed by even the small penetrations made through the build-up of the mound.

Excavation techniques were simple. Overlying debris was removed by shovel, although where brick predominated it was more easily moved by hand. Features had to be cleared by trowel even if they seemed to promise little of archaeological importance. Cellar fill could usually be shovelled, even that of the nineteenth century in Cellar E. The three sections through the mound were removed mainly by trowel in view of the necessity of locating every bit of dating evidence.

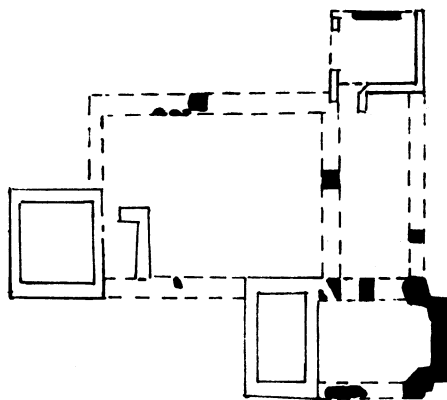
As the leaving of a site hut and contents on the excavation would have been unwise, all work except the most immediate had to be done off the site.

## FEATURES

The majority of the features do not require discussion. They consisted of brick of various periods and only the tops were normally exposed. They can be seen generally on the Plan (p. 52). The features described below were subjected to further investigation as they seemed to offer most potentiality for the elucidation of the site.



*Fig. 2. Plan: The dotted area represents the medieval house extracted in Fig. 2a.*



*Fig. 2a.*

## CELLARS

*Cellar B*

The cellar itself consisted entirely of 3 in. brick, including the floor. The walls, where examined, were two courses thick, and it had a barrel roof. It had been built in an area of chalk footings (C.F. 2) which had been largely destroyed in the building. A section was cut through its floor into the mound (p. 55).

*Cellar D*

The existing internal dimensions were 5.7 m by 3.15 m, and the north and south walls were internally faced with a single thickness of 3 in. brick. Behind these, and exposed on the other walls, were facings of chalk blocks. These were ashared and laid in courses, and were between 36 and 54 cm long, 27 cm wide and about the same deep. Behind them was rammed chalk, the total width of this and the facing varying from 67 cm to 105 cm. The north wall had two beam-slots, 21 cm deep and filled with concrete; the south wall had one, but the wall had been destroyed where the other would have been. At between 1.28 m and 1.70 m from the existing top was a floor of rammed chalk which coincided with the base of the facing of 3 in. brick. During November frosts the faces of the exposed chalk blocks bubbled and disintegrated.

The rammed chalk floor was c. 20 cm thick and rested on a sandy floor 5 cm thick which had left a dark line on the faces of the chalk blocks. Under this floor was layer 2 of mound build-up (p. 55) into which had been inserted the roughly squared chalk block footings that projected 22 to 30 cm inwards. In and below this lower floor were four small features. Two postholes (1 and 2) were covered by this floor: one was c. 30 cm square by about the same deep, the other's fill was much less clear but it was probably of similar dimensions. These, coming in the centre of the long walls, represent early roof supports or uprights for a partition. No. 3 was a stone block with a chamfered edge: it was partly let into the lower floor, and on its top was a dark rectangular stain 20 cm by 15 cm, obviously the base for a

squared timber to support the roof although it did not coincide with the lines of postholes or beam-slots. No. 4 had its top level with the top of the floor. It was well made with 2½ in. brick and a tile base and its internal dimensions were 22.5 by 22.5 by 40 cm. Its off-line position denied its most obvious function, that of socket for a wooden roof support, and its contents of c. 100 tiny fragments of bone of which seven had metal staining, four small pieces of iron, seven sherds of eighteenth century redware were more those of a soakaway. The fill of the cellar consisted of chalk rubble topped with a layer of flint and gravel, and its contents were predominantly nineteenth century pottery.

*Cellar E*

The existing internal dimensions were 4.8 m by 4.2 m and the walls survived to a height of some 1.3 m. Three of them were faced internally with 3 in. brick, that on the east with 2½ in. brick. Behind the bricks on the south and west walls were chalk blocks with chalk rubble backing. The east wall had chalk rubble only, the facing chalk probably having been removed. The north wall incorporated a length of chalk pieces in mortar. The north entrance was probably made in the nineteenth century; but that on the south, with its chalk block and chalk rubble walls, had been made at the same time as the cellar although the steps were not original. There were seven of these consisting of stone slabs 7.5 cm to 10 cm thick resting on 2½ in. brick; the slabs may have been re-used. The floor was butted against the walls and consisted of red clay tiles 23 cm square.

*Cellar G*

The internal measurements of this were 4.6 m by 5.4 m, the external 6 m by 7 m. Originally the walls consisted of internal chalk blocks with chalk rubble behind, but there had been some refacing inside. The latest was with 3 in. brick on the south part of the east wall, and similar brick was used for the dividing walls. These went down as far as a mortar

floor at 0.6 m below the existing top. Below this floor level the north and south walls had facings of 2–2½ in. brick cut into the chalk block and going down 0.45 m to a floor of 2 in. brick. Under this was a thin layer of mortar and one of brown clay 20 cm thick containing small bones and oyster shells. The chalk block walls went down as far as this, but there was no evidence of the original floor. The footings for the chalk walls consisted of chalk lumps in mortar, about 30 cm deep and projecting 15 to 22 cm inwards, and were in the chalky soil that marked the top of the mound build-up. The chalk blocks of the walls were about 2 cm thick and varied in surface measurement from 15 by 15 cm to 45 by 37 cm, showing somewhat more variation than those in Cellar D. They were usually coursed. On the west the line of the chalk continued north with footings of 2 in. brick, but chalk did not appear to underlie them. The fill above the top floor contained much nineteenth century debris; that between the two floors had, surprisingly, a similar content.

The upper parts of the chalk feature just to the east of Cellar G were of the same construction. Unfortunately this feature could not be taken down below a late brick floor. Possibly it was the original entrance to Cellar G.

#### CHALK FOOTINGS

These consisted of chalk rubble or chalk pieces in yellow mortar and are marked C.F. on the plan (p. 52).

#### C.F. 1

These, to the east of Cellar D, were the best preserved. Their width varied from 0.75 to 1.5 cm and their surviving depth from 10 to 20 cm. They rested on the chalky build-up of the mound.

#### C.F. 2

These occurred in the area between C.F. 1 and Cellar E, and consisted of traces embedded in later features. It is not known how far north they extended on the east side, as time did not

allow the clearing of the quantity of modern debris.

#### C.F. 3

These were in and under the brick features that extended west from the south end of Cellar E and are by the south wall of the later Cellar F. The east section seemed to consist of re-used chalk in mortar pieces, possibly from footings on that line. In the west section among much construction in 2 in. brick the bottom 15 cm of chalk in mortar footings patchily survived.

#### C.F. 4

These consisted of a small but significant piece embedded in a later wall between the north wall of Cellar D and the south wall of Cellar G. No more survived in the area between the cellars.

#### C.F. 5

These at the north-west corner of the house, consisted of a patch of large chalk lumps, unmortared, under 2 in. brick.

#### C.F. 6

The three patches composing these lay to the north of the well and their shapes had been much affected by later building. Connecting two of them was a rectangular patch of flint in mortar that was utilized as the top step of Cellar B. To the east of this was a patch of flint in dark soil.

#### THE MOUND

The existing surface consisted of areas of soil or of chalk—both very compacted—and the cellars had been dug into the build-up. Three sections were taken through the floors of cellars—B, D and E—and into the pre-mound topsoil. The sections below Cellars B and D are given (p. 55) and they show the layers making up the mound. The soil layer (5) was probably topsoil in the area of the moat, for the finds match those on the original ground surface. The chalk in the build-up was almost certainly dug from the moat, which

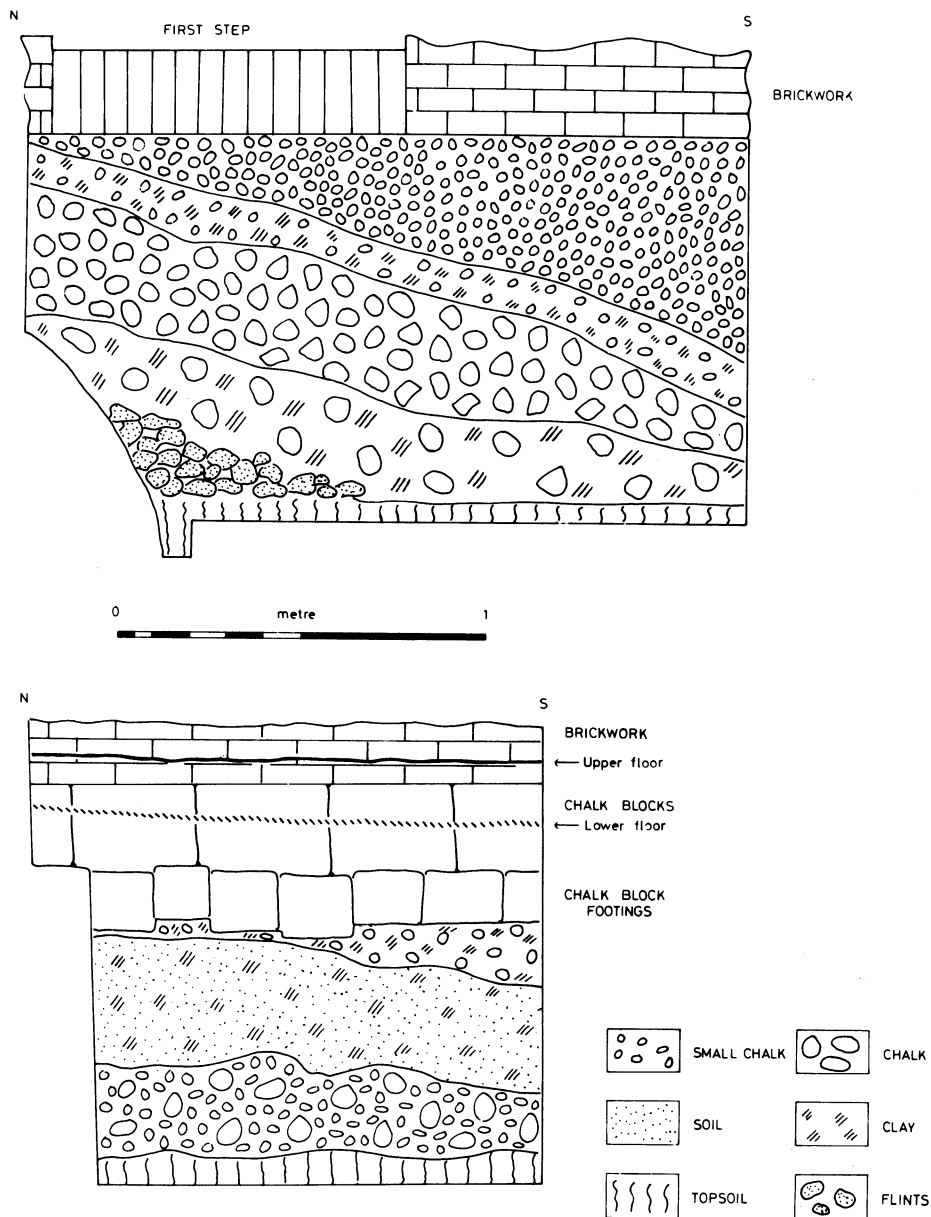


Fig. 3. Sections through mound. Top: Under Cellar B. Bottom: Under Cellar D.

would account for the absence of finds. The mound was a little under 3 m thick. The original ground surface (7) and a penetration of just over 20 cm into it gave a scatter of finds (p. 58) that suggested cultivation rather than intensive domestic occupation. The loose flints with adhering mortar on the surface of layer 7 below Cellar B came from some demolished pre-mound dwelling either on the site or brought from nearby as build-up: they were certainly not *in situ*.

#### THE WELL

This was 1.05 m in diameter and was made of roughly squared flint in mortar. It was filled with demolition rubble and of modern times had been surrounded by an area of concrete and 3 in. brick.

#### BRICK FEATURES

The three following features were investigated for medieval elements. None were found, but the features deserve mention in their own right.

##### *Feature A*

This was the so-called Tudor Tower in the north-east. This was built of 2 in. brick but investigation outside the south and east walls showed repairs below ground-level had been done with 3 in. brick. The trench had been refilled with soil and debris that included much nineteenth century pottery, metal objects and bone. Below this, and undisturbed in those operations was a layer of soil that contained a few objects, including a piece of clay pipe stem, a sherd of local redware of seventeenth-eighteenth century, and a medieval handle (No. 22). The steps down to the underlying cellar were cleared: its fill included nineteenth century debris.

##### *Feature B*

This fragile building was not shown on the 1902 plan. It had been filled in, probably in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century judging by pottery at the bottom of the fill. The debris inside included a layer of brick and tile rubble

1 m thick, which probably came from the demolished upper level of the building. Its total depth below existing ground level was 2.75 m. It was built of 2 in. brick. It would seem to have been constructed as part of the Tudor phase.

##### *Feature C*

This ran from the north-east corner of Cellar D towards the south-east corner of the moat. Its north part was square in section with base and sides of 2½ in. brick: towards the south it increased in size and its top was domed. It was a large drain or sewer. The earliest dated object it contained was a Nuremburg token of the early seventeenth century, the latest a small silver fork hallmarked for 1863-64. There were some sherds of eighteenth century pottery and much broken nineteenth century china. There were also pieces of metal, bone, glass, clay pipe stems, coal and oyster shells. This drain would seem to have been part of the early Stuart reconstruction and to have run from the kitchen, draining into the moat.

#### INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Nothing is known of the manor house, if any, that preceded the one excavated; and it was on a new site, previously under cultivation, that the platform was built. Pottery evidence on the former surface and in the build-up suggests that this occurred in the thirteenth century. The platform, originally of uniform height and without lower terrace walks or brick revetment was constructed of material from the moat. This consisted of topsoil with chalk underlying, and it was placed haphazardly in building the mound, which seems to have been constructed in one operation. Presumably the constructing of the platform was soon followed by the building of its first house, which can also be dated to the thirteenth century. This had footings of chalk in mortar that varied in width from 0.6 to 1.5 m, were about 30 cm. or less deep, and were slightly cut into the top of the mound. Nothing can be presumed about the above-ground



appearance of the building, but below ground were three cellars, their walls faced internally with ashlarred chalk. Such material is well known in medieval and Tudor England<sup>1</sup>, and the placing of cellars D. and G indicates that they were part of the original house, if not of the original building operation. The entrance to Cellar D must have been by internal wooden steps. That to Cellar G may be indicated by the chalk wall to its immediate east: alternatively this might represent a small cellar off the main one. The existing entrance to Cellar E included some later material but was probably in the same place as the original.

The possible layout of this first house is indicated on the plan and inset (p. 52). There is no trace of its west footings. These would have been wider than the existing brick footings on the far west, but no trace of overlap was found. It therefore seems likely that they were on the same line as the next wall to the east which continued the line of the east wall of Cellar G; the brick footings of this wall were wider than any chalk ones, which would therefore have been destroyed in building operations. The absence of chalk footings in other areas does not prove they never existed, but those discovered are sufficient to hint at the possible plan of a dwelling, consisting of a hall c. 14 m by 12 m, and, on the east side of it, a private area flanked by two smaller rooms, conventionally garderobe and chapel. There is nothing to indicate that the north room was a garderobe, but the slightly apsidal footings at the east end of the south room possibly suggest its use as a chapel. The similar construction of the three cellars suggests that they were built at the same time, although, as has been said, it is impossible to decide whether they were part of the original building or an addition to it. No specific kitchen area was located but there

were some traces of chalk footings at the east end of the hall (C.F. 6) near the well; or, assuming another well, a possible site for the kitchen might be indicated by a trace of chalk lump footing in the north-west (C.F. 5).

Resources did not permit detailed investigation of building that took place between the fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Nor was it possible to differentiate phases within that period by different size of brick. Later tradition placed the surviving Guard-tower (Feature A) at c. 1450: this was of 2 in. brick with substantial repairs below ground in 3 in. brick. Nothing was located of other corner towers, unless the lump of 2 in. brickwork in the south-east corner (Feature E) had once been part of one. But the surviving top of a length of possible surrounding wall in 2 in. brick lay further west (Feature D). The main rebuilding was reputed to have taken place in the early seventeenth century, and if the foundations of 2 in. brick be taken as representing this then it was essentially as the later house and quite different from its predecessor, the drain and culvert (Feature C) suggesting that the Stuart kitchen was in the area of the former hall, the dwelling areas now being to the west and north. The purpose of the large rectangular building of 2 in. brick on the east (Feature F) is unknown. The cellars of the former building (D, E, G) certainly remained in use. During the nineteenth century footings of 3 in. brick show the considerable rebuilding or repair, but the outline of the house was left much as before although Cellar D completely and Cellar G partly went out of use, and new ones (A, B, F) were constructed; a 'gothic' tower was constructed in the west front (pl. 1); and the domestic offices were transferred to the south-east corner. The house then decayed until its demolition, which left the site deep in building debris.

## FINDS

These extended in time from Roman to twentieth century and consisted of building and domestic debris. Debris of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was there in great

<sup>1</sup> For example the hall at Weaverthorpe, constructed early in the thirteenth century and with associated rooms to the south, west and north. A good Tudor example of chalk ashlar, 1538-47, occurs at Nonsuch (*Med. Arch. V*, 1961, p 328; *The Quest for Nonsuch*, J. Hutchinson, 1962, pp 79-81).

quantity, but that of earlier centuries was sparse. On two modern occasions objects were brought to the site: old tombstones from St. Laurence's church, probably including that of Charles More (ob. 1697) found on the surface, were used for steps in the kitchen area; and in Feature B the fill, dated from late medieval to eighteenth century, included floor tile, glass, stone and pottery that could have been scooped up from the ruins of Reading Abbey, much of which was Blagrove property.

The only feature showing significant stratification was the mound, and all objects from this are listed (nos. 1-18). The other objects mentioned are those that could certainly be identified as medieval or earlier.

#### MOUND

##### *Layer 5*

1. Two sherds: brown surfaces with black centres; soft, shell-gritted fabric; water worn. Not later than twelfth century. Below Cellar D.
2. Three sherds: grey inside surfaces on red; external mottled green glaze. Thirteenth century. Below Cellar D.
3. Small sherd: hard red fabric; thin medium-green glaze internally. Possibly thirteenth century. Below Cellar E.
4. Roof tile, five pieces, of which three from one tile: c.  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick; four with reduced centres. Medieval. Below Cellar E.
5. Daub, two small burnt pieces. Below Cellar E.
9. Small sherd: light ochre interior, grey exterior, shell-gritted. Twelfth century. Below Cellar B.
10. Small sherd: light ochre interior, grey exterior; hard, sandy fabric. Twelfth century. Below Cellar B.
11. Small sherd: light orange surfaces, grey centre; hard, sandy fabric: dull green glaze on outer surface. Probably thirteenth century. Below Cellar B.
12. Small sherd: hard grey ware. Romano-British or early medieval. Below Cellar B.
13. Sherd: hard fabric; slightly pink. Romano-British. Below Cellar B.
14. Small sherd: red, with white slip internally and externally with external green glaze: horizontal band of small, raised semi-circles. Possibly thirteenth century. Below Cellar D.
15. Roof tile, five pieces: c.  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick; three have reduced centres; one has traces of glaze on its internal surface. Medieval. Three below Cellar B, two below Cellar D.
16. Roof tile, seven fragments of which five show traces of reduced centres. Medieval. Below Cellar B.
17. Daub, three small pieces of which two burnt. Below Cellar B.
18. Glass: one small triangular fragment  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. thick; white with slight green tinge; outer surface slightly rough. Probably medieval. Below Cellar B.

#### SURFACE

19. Rim sherd: Oxford ware. Fourth century.
20. Two small sherds: pink exterior, ochre interior: slight gritty external yellowish glaze with green spots. Thirteenth century.
21. Floor tile, two pieces of which one is encaustic. Medieval.

##### *Layer 6*

6. Roof tile, three pieces, of which one from ridge tile: two pieces, including this, had reduced centres. Medieval. Below Cellar D.

##### *Layer 7*

7. Rim sherd: light brown surfaces with reduced centre; slight shell gritting. Twelfth century. Below Cellar B.
8. Two sherds from same vessel: light brown interior, black exterior, grey centre; hard, shell-gritted fabric; one surface slightly abraded. Twelfth century. Below Cellar B.

#### FOOTING TRENCH OF SOUTH WALL OF FEATURE A

22. Handle: slashed; buff fabric with small white grits; partial green glaze. Thirteenth century. Found in association with

seventeenth–eighteenth century redware and a clay pipe stem.

These were with miscellaneous finds of sixteenth–seventeenth centuries.

LOWER PART OF FILL OF FEATURE B

23. Five body sherds: hard fabric with colours varying from red to buff. Late medieval.
24. Floor tile, one piece 33 mm thick: slightly bevelled edge; white slip with yellow glaze over. Medieval.
25. Window glass, four pieces; thickness 1.5 to 3 mm, light green, patinated, one a quarry.

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