Historic Building Assessment

of

GREAT POTHERIDGE, MERTON, DEVON

By R. W. Parker

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Fig. 1 The south elevation of Great Potheridge.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 **General Description**

Great Potheridge (NGR: SS 5140 1465) is a large house lying a little to the north west of the village centre of Merton, just off the A386 to the south of Great Torrington. The property (Fig. 1) represents the southern and eastern wings of a much larger mansion, which is believed to have been constructed in *c*.1670 for General Monk, Duke of Albemarle, one of the architects of the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and founder of the Coldstream Guards. The house is noted for the survival of a very large and impressive 17th-century staircase with a ceiling featuring plaster wreaths surrounding Baroque paintings, the only ceiling of this type known to survive in Devon (Cherry 1988, 93). The Hall in the northern part of the surviving building contains rich and elaborate late 17th-century woodwork, including panelling, door cases and a large, allegorical overmantel. The house is thus important both for its historic associations and its architectural significance, and this is reflected in its Grade I Listed status.

The house is owned by the Devon Clinton Estates and is at present leased to Encompass Training, who operate an outdoor education centre. The catalyst for the archaeological survey described in this report was a proposal to remove partitions within the ground floor service areas of the house, to enable the creation of a new, larger, dining area. This would replace the present dining room now accommodated within the Hall, improving the relationship of the dining area with the kitchens and reducing the risk of damage to the historic panelling by heavy use. Following the alterations to the kitchen partitions the Hall is to be used as a quiet study area.

1.2 **Method**

This assessment report was commissioned at the request of English Heritage by Steven Sherry, Planning Consultant, on behalf of Encompass Training. The survey of the areas affected by the proposals was carried out by Richard Parker on the 7th of January 2011. The survey was non-invasive, and consisted of a photographic record of the areas affected by the proposals, and a general study of the surviving parts of the whole building, with the aim of understanding the development of the plan form of the house, to place the surviving south and east wings in their proper context and thus establish, as far as is possible, the archaeological potential of the partitions which it is proposed to alter. This report is based upon manuscript notes produced during a single site visit, and draws heavily upon previous work at the house undertaken by Exeter Archaeology in 1993.

2. OUTLINE HISTORY

The history of the site is described in detail by Andrew Pye and Keith Westcott in '*Great Potheridge Farm, Merton, An Archaeological Presentation Survey*' (Exeter Archaeology Report No. 93.10) and may be summarised briefly here:

Medieval Potheridge

Potheridge was originally a Saxon estate, identified in the Domesday Survey of 1086 as *Porriga*. The estate was the largest in the area, apart from Merton and probably included the neighbouring holding of Little Potheridge. By the mid-12th century the property had come into the possession of the Monk family, who retained ownership until the early 18th century. There is certain to have been a medieval house on or near the site, since an oratory within the house was licensed in 1395 (Pye & Westcott 1993, 3-5).

Potheridge in the 17th century

George Monk was born at Potheridge in 1608. He had a distinguished military career during the Commonwealth and was instrumental in the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. After this he was granted the titles of Baron Monck of Potheridge, Earl of Torrington and Duke of Albemarle. He died in 1670 and was succeeded by his seventeen-year old son Christopher, who died without issue, abroad, in 1687. The existing building may have been constructed by either General Monk or his son, or possibly both, since recent interpretations of the house have assumed that it developed in several phases between *c.*1660 and 1672, with the south range either pre-dating the north and west ranges (*Ibid.*, 4; 17) or *vice-versa* (Cherry 1988, 93). The surviving elements, particularly the scale and quality of the interior fixtures, show that the house was an ambitious building, intended for display.

The 18th-century:decline and demolition

Following the death of Christopher's wife in 1734 the house seems to have suffered a dramatic decline in status. The greater part of the house was demolished or gutted, presumably to reduce the mansion to a more manageable size for occupation by tenant farmers. In May 1742 the estate was sold to Henry Rolle of Stevenstone, together with many other properties in the area. An undated 18th-century account of the building, which may have been made at the time of the sale, provides a description of the accommodation which corresponds closely to the surviving fabric. The account describes the house as containing a hall, parlour, kitchen, scullery, a large staircase, six first-floor chambers with garrets over, and a cellar. It also mentions the chapel (which is believed to have been located in the west wing of the house), a very large stable and other buildings, including four large barns (Pye & Westcott 1993, 5). The chapel seems to have been a building of high architectural quality, but was clearly abandoned after the decline of the house; it was already ruinous by 1770 when Polwhele visited it and described its interior with regret at the passing of such rich Corinthian splendour (Polwhele 1793-1806, 414).

The 19th and 20th centuries

Since 1800 further demolition has taken place on the site, including the destruction of further parts of the east and north wings and the chapel. Pye and Westcott argue that parts of the north and east wings, reduced to a single storey, remained standing into the mid-to late 19th century, perhaps in use as a separate dwelling, (Pye & Westcott 1993, 15; 17). In the 19th century the east wing was partially

demolished and replaced by a linhay in the form of a lean-to against the remaining west wall of the wing. The north and west wings were presumably reduced at the same time to mere walls bounding a yard on the site of the presumed entrance court (Fig. 2). A further lean-to containing service rooms was added to the north part of the south range, including a dairy or larder which retains its stone shelving. Between 1886 and 1904 a further small extension, with brick dressings, was added to the north of this (*ibid.*, 15). The upper storeys of the main house may have been abandoned in the late 19th or early 20th century and the cellars beneath the east wing in *c.*1950 (*ibid.*, 16; 19).

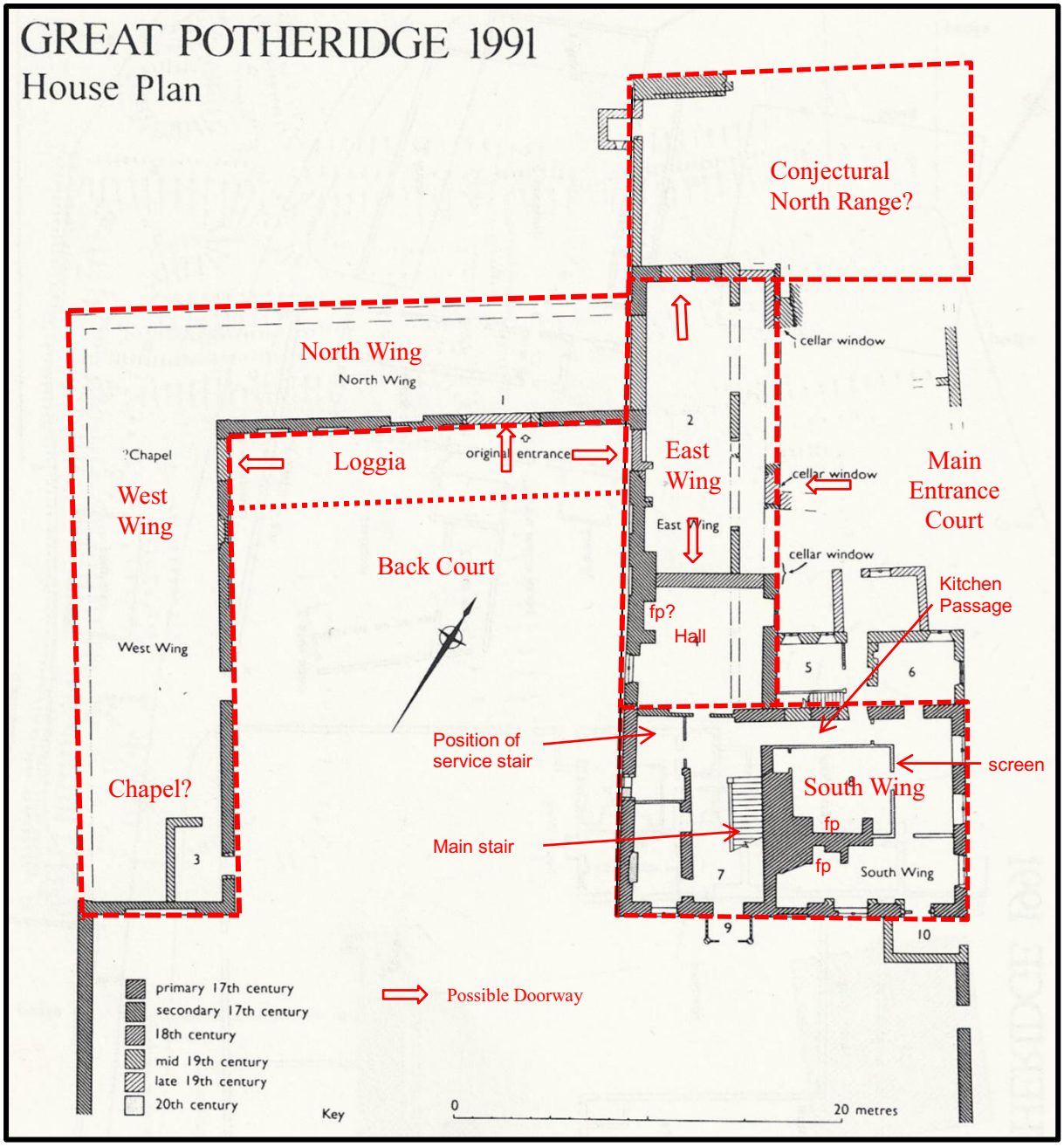

Fig. 2 Plan of the house showing the layout of the ground floor and the approximate extent of the demolished ranges, with phasing, as interpreted by Westcott and Pye in 1991. Red dashed lines and annotations imposed on the drawing show the proposed reconstruction of the original plan suggested by the present writer. Reproduced from Exeter Archaeology Report No. 93.10.

3. BUILDING SURVEY

The demolition of so much of the house and the evident complexity of its development make the buildings at Great Potheridge exceptionally difficult to interpret. The extent and layout of the demolished parts of the building are not known for certain and therefore the plan and room functions of the mansion are difficult to reconstruct. No evidence of medieval fabric has yet been identified in the existing building and it is not even certain that the earlier house occupied the same site. The unusual planning of the rooms and the odd positions of the chimneys of the south wing could imply that the present structure incorporates elements of an earlier house or, alternatively, that its construction was influenced by earlier structures which were later removed. It has been conjectured that the south wing was a 'double pile' wing added to an earlier house to provide additional accommodation (Cherry 1988, 93) and also that the earlier house was subsequently replaced by new ranges (Pye & Westcott 1993, 17); both interpretations might result in a sprawling and unconventionally-planned house like Great Potheridge. The possibility of two late 17th-century phases, of course, provides a very plausible context for any anomalies, since changes in the designs may well have been made during construction. It is by no means certain that the house was ever completed as intended.

3.1 **North Wing**

As most of the rooms in the surviving part of the building are small and awkwardly planned, it is usually assumed that the principal state apartments lay in the demolished parts of the house, presumably in the north, or central wing. The enigmatic and puzzling ruins to the north and west of the house must represent the remains of these apartments. If the interpretation of the plan suggested by Pye and Westcott is correct, the north wing formed the *corps de logis* or architectural climax of the composition, set back between the wings at the rear of a large entrance court. It seems to have had an asymmetrical façade, with the main entrance lying to the east of the centre, but this infelicity was probably disguised by a handsome loggia running the width of the court. The opening of the main doorway survives; this could have opened into a large hall or saloon (Pye & Westcott 1993, 17) and there were presumably other grand reception rooms at ground- and first-floor level, one of which connected with the chapel and ante chapel (in the west wing?) via the 'elegant gallery' described by Polwhele in 1770.

3.2 **East, West and South Wings**

At either end of the loggia doorways opened into the east and west wings, both of which retain large, blocked window openings suggesting that they, too, contained large and handsome rooms. Unusually for the period, these wings did not match each other; the whole composition of the house was irregular and asymmetrical. The west wing was a narrow range terminating to the south at an enormous Palladian window which presumably lit the chapel, whereas the east wing widened at its south end into the surviving south range, which has a five bay front facing south under a hipped roof with a richly-carved modillion cornice and, formerly, dormers lighting the garrets (Fig. 1). Only a single dormer now survives, on the north side of the roof.

3.3 **General Discussion**

The asymmetry and irregularity of the building seems unusual for a grand mansion of the period. There are other inconsistencies too: the south front of the south wing is faced with ashlar, which may confirm this as one of the main fronts of the house; however, the other elevations facing the courtyard are not of ashlar, but coursed rubble, which would be unusual if this was really a formal entrance court. The east and the north façades of the east and south ranges (effectively the rear of the house, if its south front was indeed the entrance facade) have regular fenestration (Fig.3), whereas the west elevation, overlooking the putative entrance court, is irregular; the few large window openings here are concentrated in the northern part of the elevation and the south part is blind (Fig. 4). The modillions of the cornice of the south front are also more irregular than they appear and include some plain brackets. The regular spacing of these modillions breaks down on the western elevation and eventually they dwindle away completely (Fig. 4). The cornice has surely been altered; it is possible that it incorporates elements reclaimed from a grander cornice elsewhere. It is possible that the south front was 'improved' and refaced in ashlar after the truncation of the house in the early 18th century. It may not, in fact, have been intended as the main façade of the mansion.

Fig. 3 View of the eastern and northern fronts of the house, looking south, showing the orderly fenestration, now partially obscured by later extensions.

Fig. 4 View of the western elevation of the south wing showing the irregular fenestration and the clumsy bracketing and interruption of the cornice. Note also the change in the level of the windows in the east wing to the north (left).

An alternative interpretation of Potheridge, suggested by Cherry and Pevsner, is that the main façade of the house actually faced east, and that the north and west ranges were service ranges, the latter perhaps containing the stables (Cherry & Pevsner 1989, 460). This interpretation has the advantage of placing the existing hall and staircase in the surviving east and south wings in a more conventional position in relation to a presumed central entrance, presumably on the same alignment as the loggia, in the east wall of the demolished part of the east range. The fenestration of the east and north façades would also certainly be more suitable for the main front of a house of this date and splendour than the irregular elevations towards the existing courtyard.

This interpretation, however, requires us to postulate even larger areas of lost fabric, including, perhaps, a north-eastern wing corresponding to the present south wing, reflecting the surviving fragment of the mansion to the north of a central, east/west axis on the line of the loggia. The house might thus have had a grand façade facing east, surrounding three sides of an eastern entrance court. The central part of the east wing might have formed the *corps de logis*, an impressive central block, with cellars, flanked on each side by lower sections of the east wing, including the present Hall, and by the projecting wings to north and south. A grander architectural treatment of this part of the eastern range may be suggested by the higher level of the surviving blocked or blind windows in its west wall (Fig. 5).

The existing courtyard might be reinterpreted as a back court surrounded by further ranges, none of which need necessarily have been mean or utilitarian; the loggia against the north range might, for example, have provided a covered ceremonial route from the main entrance to a chapel in the west wing, and the first floor of the north range could well have contained an ‘elegant gallery’ or a suite of impressive reception rooms extending to the rear of the main block and overlooking formal gardens on both sides of the house.

Fig. 5 Part of the west elevation showing the higher level of the windows south of the door to the loggia, perhaps suggestive of a symmetrical central block in the east range forming a *corps de logis* facing east, with a central doorway to the loggia in its rear elevation.

This interpretation would allow Potheridge the kind of formal, symmetrical façade familiar from late 17th-century classical houses such as Belton House in Lincolnshire and Stoke Edith in Herefordshire or, locally, the long-demolished Tetcott House in west Devon (Fig. 6). The model for this type of façade was Clarendon House, Piccadilly, London (Fig. 7). This highly influential, though short-lived mansion dated from 1664-7 and was regarded at the time as one of the most magnificent houses in England (Summerson 1955, 88). During the 1670s Clarendon House was occupied by the Monk family (Pye & Westcott 1993, 14) and it could well have influenced the design of the new buildings at Potheridge. Unfortunately, this very tempting conjecture is as fraught with problems as any other interpretation and could not be tested without further work, possibly including excavations, to recover the plan and layout of the house. The possibility remains that even if such an ambitious house was ever envisaged, it was never completed as intended and, until further evidence emerges, the form of the house must remain a conjecture.

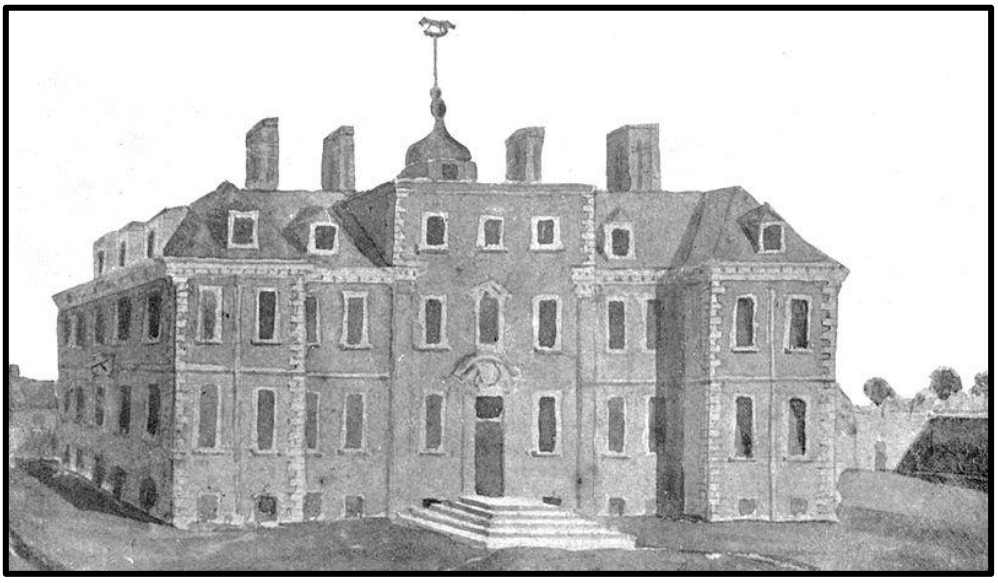

Fig. 6 Painting of a long-demolished mansion at Tetcott in West Devon, constructed in *c.*1700. The east façade of Potheridge may have had a similar central *corps de logis* between projecting wings, of which only the present south wing now survives. Tetcott House may well have reflected the design of Potheridge (Reproduced from Baring Gould 1908).

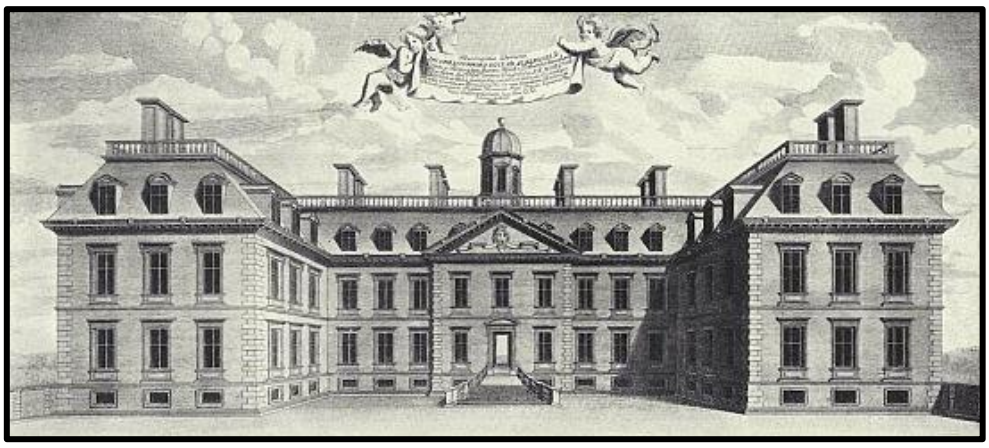

Fig. 7 Extract from an engraving of Clarendon House, Piccadilly, London, (Roger Pratt, 1664-7). This house, demolished in the 1680s, was for a period the residence of the Monk family and might have been the model for the mansion at Potheridge. Engraving by William Skillman *c.*1680

3.4 **The Interiors**

The (secondary) main entrance

The house currently has two entrances, neither of which is primary. The 'polite' entrance in the south façade of the south wing is sheltered by a pedimented porch with Tuscan columns; however, it is clearly a later addition: it is off-centre in relation to the façade of this wing (Fig. 1) and opens into a rather cramped space under the half landing of the main stairs. The doorway was probably created after the reduction of the house by converting a former window opening, but even this putative window is problematic; if the existing staircase is *in situ*, the upper part of this window would have been partially blocked by the half landing of the staircase. In fact, all the ground-floor windows to the east of the doorway are compromised in this way, by a mezzanine floor, which was presumably inserted within the ground floor rooms to provide additional accommodation after the truncation of the mansion or, subsequently, during its use as a farmhouse. The minor staircases rising from the mezzanine floor to serve the inserted rooms have spindly stick balusters and columnar newels and would seem to date from the late 18th or early 19th century. The central windows of the south façade are now blocked, though the first-floor window at least may have remained open until alterations in the late 19th century (Steven Sherry pers. comm.). It is possible that the original 17th-century window frames may survive, concealed within the blocking

The staircase hall

The staircase hall is a long room, relatively narrow in proportion to its length, and very tall. The staircase is an exceptionally grand one and clearly of late 17th-century date, consisting of a dog-leg with a very long, slow ascent of each flight. Its relationship with the presumed window described above and some possible clumsiness in its construction (particularly the relationship between the two newels on the half landing) raise doubts as to whether the staircase is *in situ*; however, the grand late 17th-century plaster ceiling above the staircase, would seem to confirm that this long, narrow and high room is one of the original volumes of the 17th-century house, and that the stairs were designed for this position.

Fig. 8 Detail of the 17th-century staircase showing the high quality architectural detail and the clumsy junction of the two flights.

Fig. 9 View of the late 17th-century plaster ceiling above the staircase, looking north. The shape and position of the ceiling strongly suggest that the staircase is *in situ*. The alignment of the staircase and the ceiling, together with the Hall to the north, suggest a north-south axis for the house, extending to either side of a central entrance in the east wing.

Lesser rooms west of the stairs

The position of staircase within the wing is also peculiar, resulting in unusually-shaped smaller rooms on the western side of the staircase (Fig. 2). At both ground and first-floor level are curiously-shaped long and narrow rooms which seem to have been either carved out of a larger space or, perhaps, to have been 'left over' after the staircase was inserted. As before, the plaster ceiling of the staircase confirms that these rooms must have been original volumes. These rooms were apparently heated (Pye & Westcott 1993, 15) but it does not seem likely that they were ever more than cabinets or closets. Their proximity to the service stair, part of which survives rising up into the garrets to the west of the first-floor landing of the main stairs, might suggest that they were servants' rooms and, as such, it is surprising that they should overlook the presumed main frontage of the house. At first-floor level a false ceiling has been inserted below the levels of the original ceilings, creating a void above the transoms of the window in the south front; it is possible that some plasterwork might survive above this ceiling.

The Hall

To the north of the staircase the present Hall of the house lies in the east range. The doorway from the stairs has an enormous Baroque door case crowned with a cartouche (Fig. 10). A similar door case in the opposite wall now lies against a blind wall, probably as a result of the 19th-century truncation of the east range. The enormous overmantel of this room is quite clearly reset in this position, but the extent to which the panelling is also reset is unclear. The two door cases might be *in situ* in relation to each other (though one may have been moved southwards when the present north wall was built). If the east wing was the central block of the mansion, the two opposed doorways might have defined part of a ceremonial route from an entrance hall in the centre of the east wing, through this room to the staircase, and thence to private apartments on the first floor of the south wing. A corresponding route might have lain northwards to further apartments in the (conjectural) north-east wing, if this ever existed. The east wing of the house might thus have been divided into two parts providing separate suites of apartments in each wing. Such apartments were a feature of domestic planning in formal houses of this period (Girouard 1978, 128-130; 135-136) and could either be utilised as independent sets of chambers for the use of the Duke and Duchess or, just possibly, set aside for accommodating a possible Royal visitor.

Fig. 10 Detail of the door case linking the staircase with the Hall, looking south, showing the panelling. A corresponding door case in the opposite wall, if *in situ*, would appear to confirm a north-south processional route from the main entrance in the east wing to the staircase.

First-floor rooms east of the stairs

The first-floor plan of the south range is very convincingly planned as a suite of private apartments; a sequence of rooms of diminishing size and increasing privacy, each opening out of its predecessor as the visitor turned clockwise in a spiral from the head of the main stairs. This plan is determined by the position of the chimneystacks, one of which is positioned parallel with the south front of the house, and the other at right angles to this, backing onto the east wall of the staircase. These chimneystacks appear to be most irrationally sited in relation to the plan of the house, drastically reducing the width and depth of the southern rooms, but they very effectively divide both the ground and first floors into three distinct rooms: a large rectangular room in the north-eastern part of the range, a smaller square room in the south-eastern corner and a still smaller oblong one in the centre of the south front. It is interesting to note that engravings of Clarendon House (Fig. 7) show pairs of chimneys in almost precisely these positions, though unfortunately little is known of its plan.

All three rooms retain some evidence of grand fixtures. The larger room (which might be interpreted as the 'Withdrawing Chamber' or 'Antechamber') has a handsome box cornice and fine panelling below the dado. The next room in the sequence (perhaps the 'Bed Chamber'), has similar detail but is smaller. The smallest room (perhaps the 'Closet' or 'Cabinet'), is now compromised by later staircases and partitions, but retains part of a plaster cornice showing that, though small, this room was also at one time well-appointed and well decorated. None of the rooms preserves a fireplace, though they must all have been heated as the chimneys would otherwise be redundant. A curious void between the two chimneys, now sealed off and accessible only through the floor of the garrets, has some plastered walls and might suggest that the layout of the rooms in the range has been altered. Alternatively, this void might well have provided a cupboard (perhaps for a close stool) whose door has simply been sealed up and forgotten.

It is perhaps significant that the largest, grandest room in this group does not look out over the south front but rather north and east. This may reinforce the conjecture that the northern and eastern façades of the house were perceived as more important than the southern and western parts, lending support to Cherry and Pevsner's suggestion that the entrance front originally lay on the eastern side of the house and not through the western courtyard and the loggia.

Ground floor rooms east of the stairs

The chimney stacks divide the ground floor of the south range into three similar volumes, though these have been altered, probably after the reduction of the house (Fig. 2). The southern stack features a very large fireplace heating the present lounge, a large room in the north-eastern part of the south range. This fireplace has a chamfered and stopped timber lintel defining a slightly pointed arch (Fig. 11). In the rear of the chimney are traces of a decorative fireback constructed of slates laid in herringbone fashion. Oddly, this does not appear to be central to the opening, but to the east of it; the central part may perhaps have been crudely repaired of the fireplace may have been sub-divided into areas with distinct functions. The eastern jamb may be original, but the western jamb appears to have been altered and a new jamb substituted, truncating a stone-built oven, now largely buried within the thickness of the wall adjoining the main staircase.

The presence of the oven and the size of the fireplace may suggest that this area was the kitchen of the mansion. Its vaguely 'Gothic' arch and the remains of the herringbone-pattern fireback could suggest the survival of elements of the medieval house; however, it is equally possible that the lintel has simply been reused or that the construction of the fireplace reflected vernacular building traditions still current in the late 17th century, which were not felt to be out of place in the service areas of the house.

The eastern room may originally have formed part of the kitchen too. This area is lit by a pair of very handsome mullioned and transomed windows in the east wall, retaining their original shutters, and with massive chamfered frames. The room has been divided from the 'Kitchen' by a glazed screen (See below). In the north wall a doorway leads through into a later lean-to built against the north wall of the house and furnished as a dairy with slate shelves. On the opposite side of the house a timber partition divides the eastern room from two smaller rooms in the southern part of the range; one now in use as a kitchen and the other as a scullery or pantry. These rooms were lit by large windows similar to those of the eastern room. The existing frames are probably later in date, though infilling primary window openings. Two of the windows have been blocked and all are compromised by the mezzanine floor.

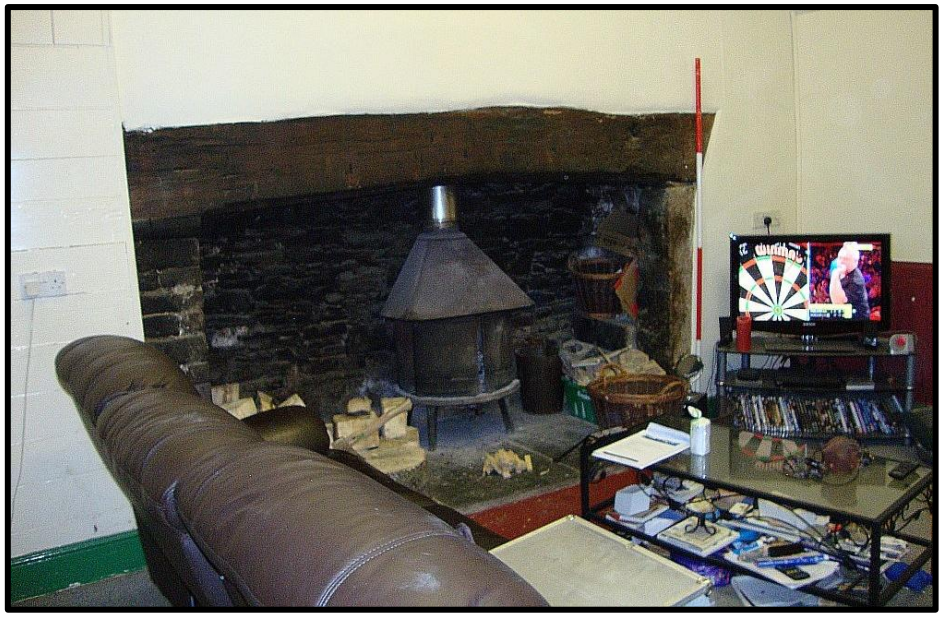

Fig. 11 Detail of the large fireplace in the present lounge, possibly the kitchen of the original house.

Fig. 12 Detail of the minor fireplace to the rear of that shown above, possibly serving a scullery off the original main kitchen.

The small, southern room has a medium-sized fireplace apparently constructed from reused blocks of granite and backing onto the main fireplace to the north (Fig. 12). The space is very narrow and it is possible that this fireplace is an addition, added to the rear of the earlier chimney. A large house such as this might be expected to have extensive service areas, and it is possible that the dubious appearance of the fireplace is simply the result of its being compromised by later alterations. It is evident that, although the first-floor rooms were of high status, the ground-floor rooms were probably not, and may have formed service rooms in the reduced house, if not also in the primary mansion.

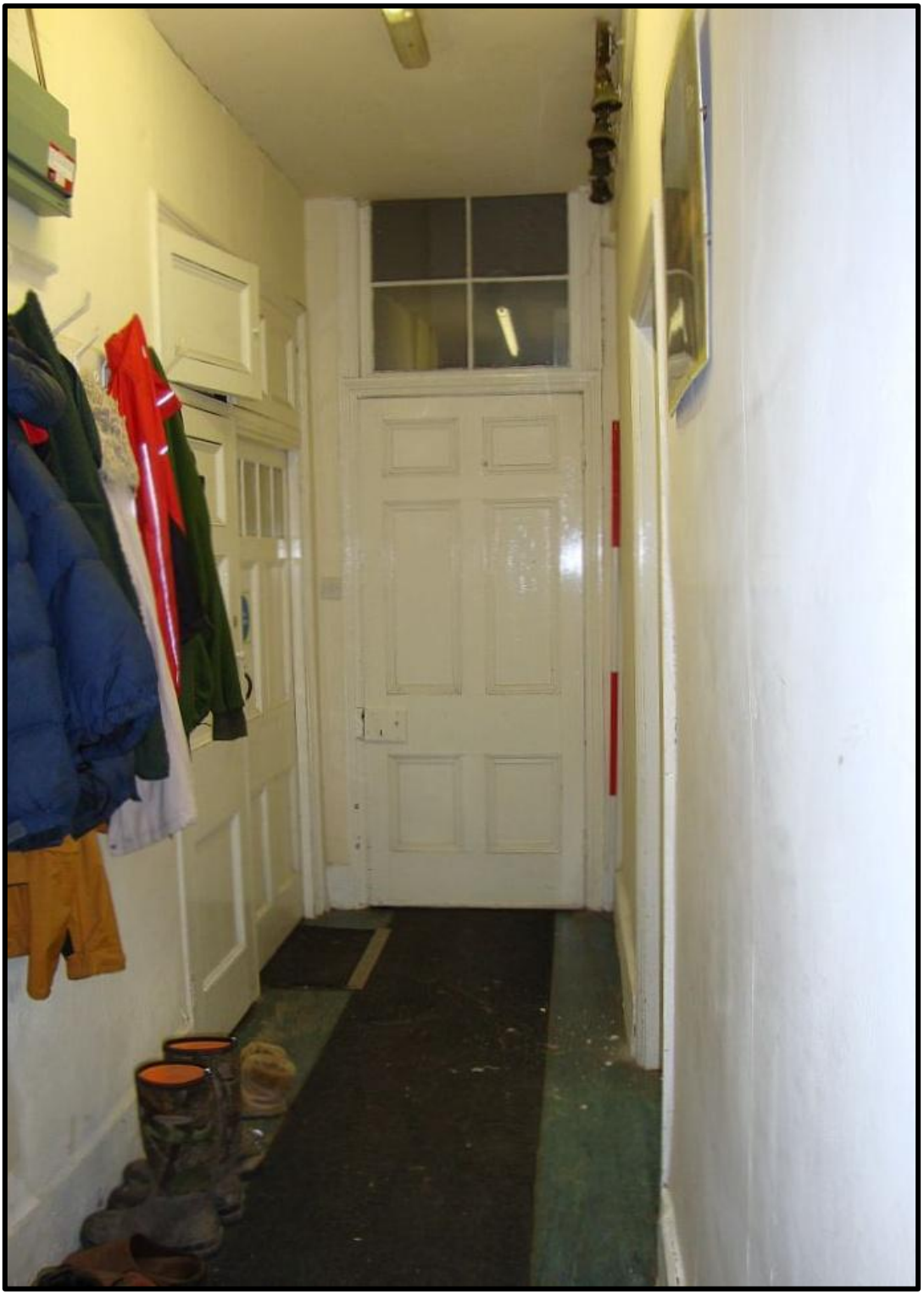

Fig. 13 View of the kitchen passage, looking east, showing the cupboards occupying a partially blocked (window) embrasure to the north (left), the 19th-century kitchen door with over light and the bells for summoning servants (top right).

The kitchen passage

The service rooms are approached from the foot of the main staircase through a green baize-covered door which sits within an oval-headed archway. This archway is probably of late 18th or early 19th century date and may replace an earlier and wider doorway. A visible break in the wall at the foot of the

stairs may reveal that the original opening encompassed both the present archway and the wall cupboard alongside it, which is fitted with a late 18th- or early 19th-century six-panelled door. There was presumably a large doorway in this position opening straight into the kitchen.

The green- baize door opens upon a passage running from west to east immediately within the north wall of the south wing (Fig. 13). The north wall of this passage appears to have been one of the external walls of the house and may contain blocked window openings, now masked by plaster finishes in the corridor and in the adjacent lean-to structures added to the north front of the building.

At the eastern end of the passage the doorway piercing the wall has clearly been contrived from an earlier and larger opening, possibly a window, and it may perhaps be assumed that the three large windows visible at first-floor level corresponded with three windows in the ground floor. Evidence of such windows may be preserved behind the wall plaster and also above the ceiling of the passage, which, at 2.96 m, is 1.8m lower than the ceilings of the adjacent rooms. The presumed window opening is infilled with a curious arrangement of cupboards, all with moulded panels. The doorway infilling the opening is four-panelled, with a built in rectangular overlight. It is possible that this was originally an external door, prior to the construction of the lean-to extensions now lying against the north elevation of the house. At the east end of the passage is a six-panelled door opening into the eastern room. This has panels with planted mouldings and a delicate moulded architrave, which appears to extend above the existing ceiling in the passage. It may date from the late 18th- or early 19th century. High up on the south side of the passage, close to its eastern end are a series of four bells for summoning the servants.

The south wall of the corridor is a partition wall dividing the passage from the lounge. This is one of the areas of the fabric which is considered for removal, to enable the enlargement of the dining area. The partition is presumably constructed of timber studwork and is likely to be inserted; the original room having presumably extended as far as the north wall of the range. The date of its insertion cannot be confidently established but it must have been when the passage was formed through the kitchen. The passage is likely to be contemporary with the door to the eastern room and the doorway within the presumed blocked window opening: it is thus perhaps of late 18th or early 19th-century date. The passage provides a circulation route from the doorway to the yard at the rear of the farmhouse to the foot of the main staircase without having to pass through the kitchen. It may pre-date the addition of the lean-to extensions at the rear of the house.

The partition has suffered some damage; a doorway has been cut through the centre in the 20th century, and supplied with a door replicating the detail of the other doorways, but more crudely built and now falling apart. There is evidence, in the form of a horizontal scar running the length of the passage, that there may formerly have been a dado rail, but parts of the wall appear to have been re-plastered in the 20th century and the dado rail has been removed. A dado survives on the side of the partition facing the lounge and, at its northern end this can be seen to turn northward to meet the jamb of the eastern doorway of the passage. This detail confirms that the ‘lounge’ and the eastern room were formerly one volume, with the passage running along the north side for part of its length and then terminating at the eastern door. Below the dado rail the wall is clad with vertical boarding.

Although the partition is probably of late 18th- or early 19th-century date, the materials from which it is made might well have been reclaimed from demolished sections of the building, particularly the west wing, which may have been demolished at this time. There is some potential for the survival of moulded timbers reused as studwork, as well as historic paint layers and sections of carving. Although the partition is an insertion into the original volume of the room, it has value in its own right as an historic alteration to the service rooms. It also forms part of a useful circulation route and its removal would displace an attractive 18th- or 19th-century door and also the bells for summoning the servants.

The kitchen Screen

The timber screen dividing the lounge or kitchen from the eastern room protrudes into the eastern room, extending the line of the partition by about a metre (Fig. 14). The sides of the box thus formed are also constructed of tongue-and-grooved boarding. The southern side retains a series of shaped housings, probably representing a towel rail or a rack for rolling pins. The eastern side of the screen has three large panels of glazing divided by thin glazing bars into small, square panes. Two of the panels are fixed, while that over the doorway is designed to pivot open for ventilation. Both above and below the glazing are panels of tongue-and-grooved boarding. The supporting frame has chamfered stiles and rails with

stepped, hollow, run-out stops. The glazing bars have delicate mouldings of a different profile to those of the glazing bars in the adjoining overdoor.

The character of the screen, particularly the chamfering and stops, is reminiscent of late 19th- or early 20th century joinery and it is most likely that the screen was inserted to segregate areas of the kitchen for different activities in the period around 1870-1920. As the screen clearly does not incorporate any earlier material, and would also easily dismantle for storage or re-erection elsewhere, the removal of this screen to enlarge the dining area is not likely to have serious archaeological implications.

Fig. 14 The late 19th- or early 20th-century glazed kitchen screen, seen from the lounge area (the former kitchen of the house).

4. CONCLUSION

Great Potheridge is one of the most frustrating houses to survive from its period in Devon. The above assessment has explored some of the possibilities for the original form of the house, in an attempt to understand and reinterpret the fabric and layout of the surviving south wing. No attempt to understand the surviving house could succeed without some comprehension of its overall plan and the relationship of the various rooms. Unfortunately this still remains elusive.

It seems highly likely to the author that the present plan of the south wing closely reflects the original design for this part of the building and (with the exception of the kitchen passage and screen) is not the result of re-planning following the reduction of the house. The plan of the south wing seems designed to supply both a few well-appointed large rooms and a larger number of smaller rooms, which probably represent closets or servants' rooms. At Potheridge it seems likely that the lower storey contained a large kitchen, with a smaller scullery and domestic offices, and the first floor a suite of private apartments, together with a back stair rising to the garrets. The anomalies in the construction of

the main staircase are still puzzling, but its position in relation to the hall and its undeniable grandeur make better sense if it is seen as part of an approach route leading from a lost entrance hall or saloon in the east wing to a suite of state chambers on the first floor, than if it is seen as a remote adjunct to staterooms located in the distant, and now vanished, wing north of the existing courtyard.

With the exception of the ashlar facing and ornate modillions of the south façade, which might be 18th-century improvements, all the elevations to the existing courtyard are irregular, and are thus more likely to have faced the rear of the house than its front. Within the south wing, most of the rooms facing south or west are smaller and less impressive than those facing north and east. Thus it is certainly plausible to argue that the house faced east, rather than south. Symmetry and regularity had been one of the main influences on the design of great houses since the 16th century and for a house aiming at this level of pomp to ignore symmetry seems perverse or careless. It is not unreasonable to assume that the designer of Great Potheridge aimed at a façade comparable to those of other late 17th- and early 18th-century houses in Devon, such as Tetcott (Fig. 6) or Castle Hill; though whether the south wing at Potheridge was ever really balanced by a north-east wing so that the east front resembled a rustic Devonian version of Clarendon House (Fig. 7) remains a mere conjecture, and might be regarded as stretching the available evidence too far; nevertheless this interpretation is offered in Fig. 2.

The contraction of the house in the early 18th century probably involved the demolition of the principal parts of the house, or their abandonment and reduction to the status of farm buildings. Some of the grand rooms were preserved at this time, and the house presumably remained a desirable one. The south wing may have been preserved because it was the most adaptable part of the building, containing useful rooms such as the kitchen and sculleries in addition to sufficient smaller rooms to house the family and any servants. It is unlikely that the kitchen passage was inserted in the first phase of contraction; its character suggests that it was added in the late 18th or early 19th century, perhaps to create an independent circulation route through the service rooms.

The service areas of the house were then expanded by the addition of a lean-to extension on the north of the house, and a staircase rising against the former north wall to the first floor of the east wing. These additions led to the blocking of three of the first-floor windows, and also ground floor windows in the north and east wings. The mezzanine floor in the south part of the range may also have been added at this time, and its floor levels and staircases also led to the blocking of windows. All of these blocked windows have the potential to preserve evidence of the original fenestration. These additions to the house might have been prompted by the further reduction of the remains of the east wing, perhaps to make the house more compact. In the late 19th or 20th century the glazed screen was inserted into the kitchen and throughout the house fireplaces were blocked and chimney pieces were removed.

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