



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**Building Analysis and Recording adjacent to
the former kitchen gardens of
Ecton Hall, Northamptonshire**

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Building Analysis and Recording adjacent to the former Kitchen Gardens of Ecton Hall, Northamptonshire

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Summary

Ecton Hall's kitchen garden was laid out just before 1781. A small selection of apparently unrelated buildings was erected for horses and other livestock on an adjoining plot before c1850. Others were built subsequently. These either went out of use gradually or were converted piecemeal to horticultural uses in the late 19th century and early 20th century, being joined progressively by a number of purpose-built horticultural structures by 1926. At this stage there were seven gardeners employed. It is unlikely that any animal-related activity continued after c1935. The gardens dwindled after the 1950s and the last gardener was working there in the 1970s. Some subsequent clearance took place in the 1980s but the plots and buildings became increasingly overgrown until clearance and recording in 2013.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was carried out on site by Iain Soden, Joe Prentice and Tom Soden for I S Heritage Ltd and on behalf of Seagrave Developments Ltd. The help of Colin Sotheby is gratefully acknowledged, as is the correspondence of John Crane of Ecton Hall Management Ltd.

Introduction

Ecton Hall and its former gardens lie just to the east of the village of Ecton, east of Northampton. The village lies astride a main street which is south of the A4500. The Hall and gardens cannot be seen from the main street but lie tucked away to the east in their own former grounds. The hall and most of the former outbuildings are now in a variety of ownerships and no longer exist as a country house with integral grounds. Wellingborough Council gave Planning and Listed Buildings Consents to Seagrave Developments Ltd for the demolition of former 19th-century garden buildings at Ecton Hall (WP/2013/0406/F and WP/2013/0407/LB; NGR: SP 8287 6371), with the condition that the buildings become the subject of Building Recording and Analysis, in accordance with the wishes of Northamptonshire County Council.

Ecton Hall Gardens



Fig 1: Site location (arrowed)

Previously Northamptonshire County Council Records concerning the gardens were scant, and the origin and development of the gardens was unknown before their first detailed and easily-available depiction on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map of 1885.

The gardens lie north-west of the former Ecton Hall, previously the family seat of the Sotheby family and their forebears, the Isteads; it is now a commercial holding. The plot under consideration was only recently sold by Colin Sotheby to the current owners and planning applicants. Mr Sotheby's insights and memories back to the 1970s, shared during a visit to watch recording are greatly appreciated.

Methodology

The various buildings which once served Ecton Hall's kitchen garden were recorded in accordance with a brief issued by Northamptonshire County Council's Assistant Archaeological Advisor, dated 17 October 2013 and a Specification by I S Heritage Ltd, dated 24 October 2013. The recording adopted English Heritage procedural guidance Level 2 as its basis (EH 2006), adapted on site to meet the circumstances of the garden as it was uncovered by a major clearance operation. The gardens were previously extremely overgrown. Many of the buildings had to be stripped of ivy in order to see them and they could not be approached because of 30-40 years of mature trees and undergrowth, in some areas, potentially longer.

Once the interiors were visible it was quickly realised that some recording would have to rely primarily upon written and photographic records, rather than drawn. This was for two reasons: firstly some were of such simple construction or so denuded (such as Buildings 6, 7 10 and 11) that drawn records added nothing to what could be easily seen when compiling level 2 notes; secondly Building 1, 4, 5 and 9 were so dilapidated and in a state of collapse that even entering them in parts

Ecton Hall Gardens

was dangerous. Some steps could be taken, such as wearing PPE, but the greenhouses (Buildings 4, 5 and 9) were too far gone, with dislodged glass panes teetering overhead, balanced on briars and other undergrowth, so that after careful consideration, it was decided that prolonged or intensive interior work was inadvisable. Their records were written and photographic as a result.



Fig 2: Building 9 (Greenhouse) with typical dense undergrowth; note the teetering glass panes above



Fig 3: Recording within the collapsing roof of the eastern half of Building 1 (Stables)

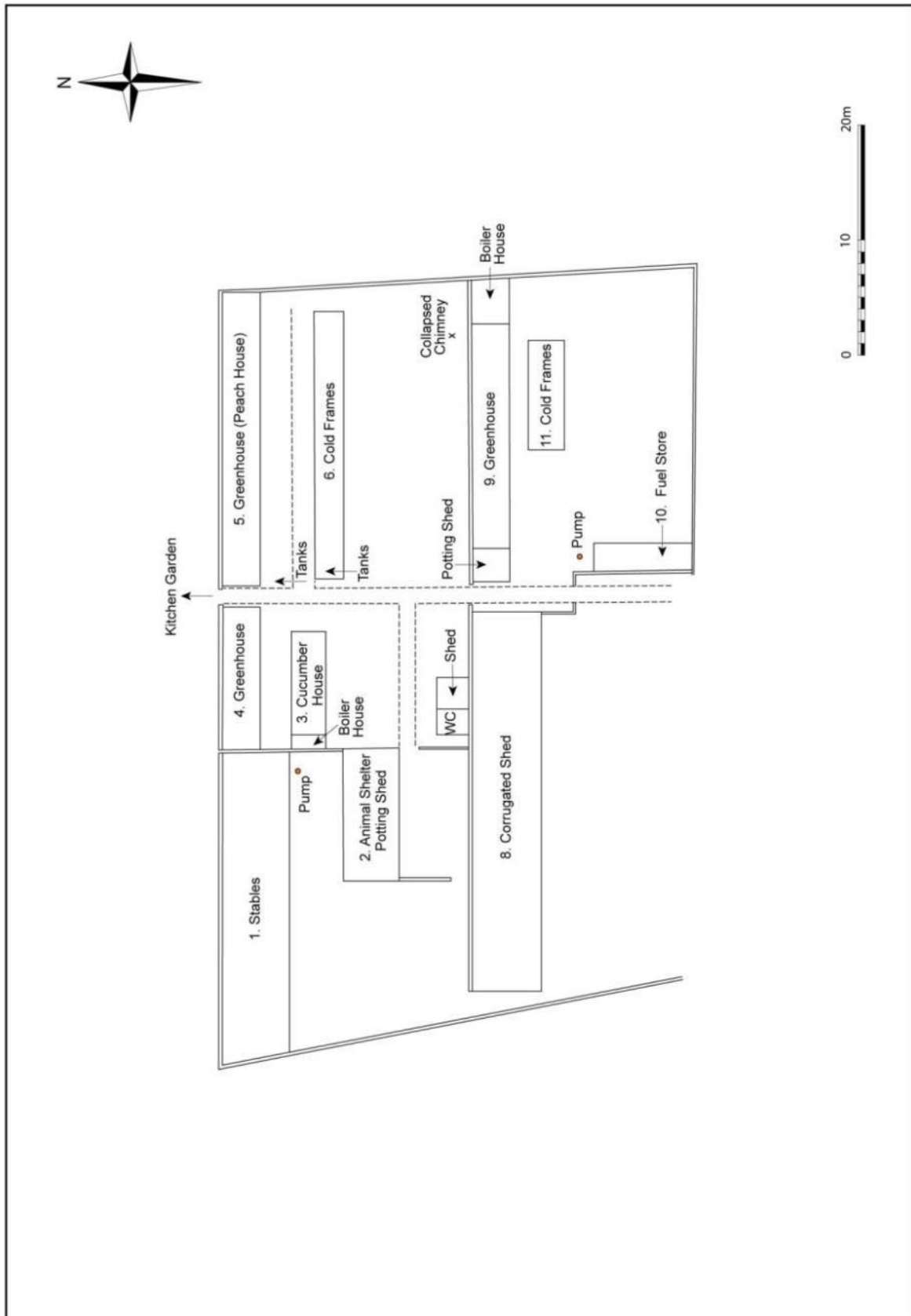


Fig 4: The layout of the gardens with the building numbers and nomenclature used throughout.
Illustration by Candy Stevens

Ecton Hall Gardens

Historical Background

The site has been well mapped on a number of regularly-spaced occasions: before 1781, c1850, 1885, 1900 and 1926, which shows the development of the plot in some detail.

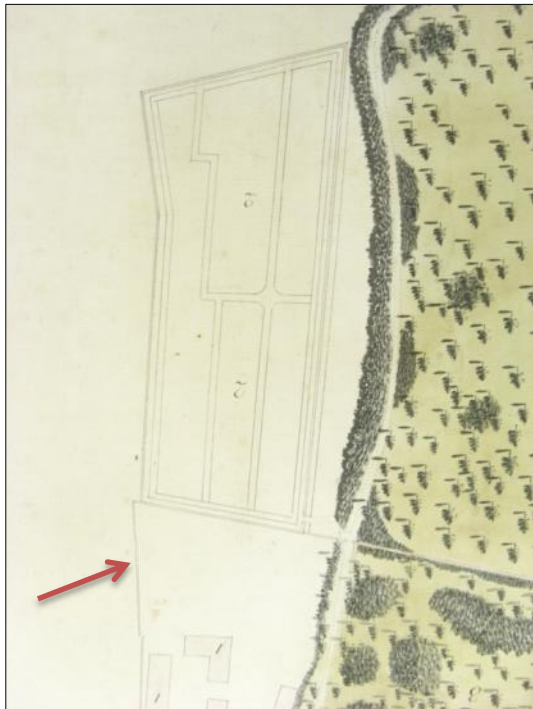


Fig 5: The new garden 1781 (NRO Map 2119)

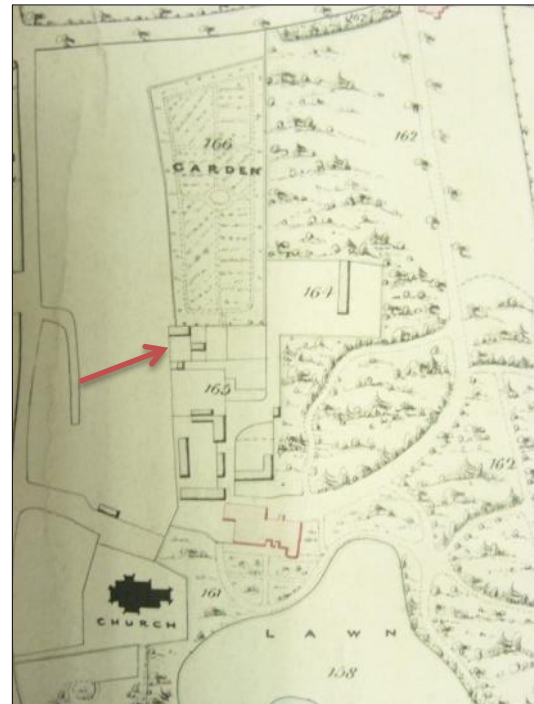


Fig 6: The site mapped c1850 (NRO Map 685)

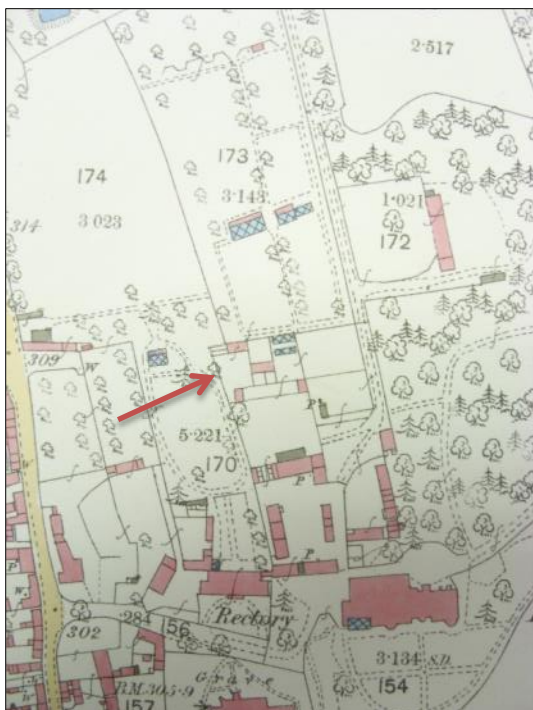


Fig 7: 1st Edition OS map 45.4 (extract) 1885

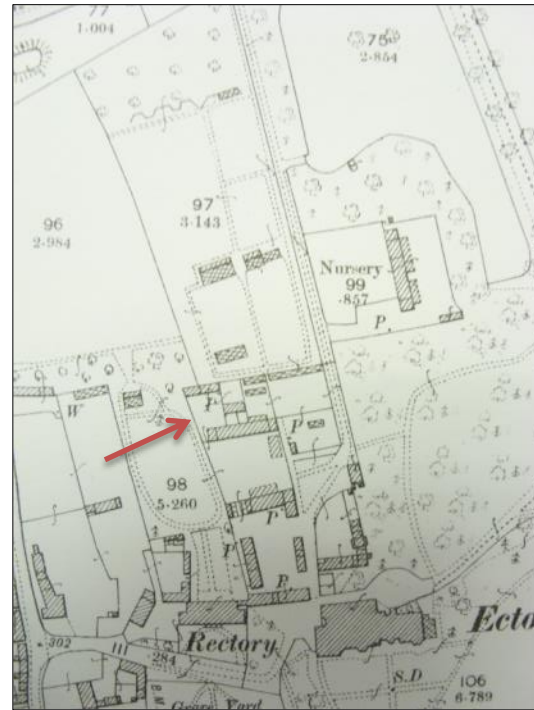


Fig 8: 2nd Edition OS map 45.4 (extract) 1900

Ecton Hall Gardens



Fig 9: 3rd edition OS map 45.4 (extract) 1926: The garden buildings at their maximum extent

In each of the above map extracts (Figs 5-9) the western side of the site is arrowed in the same location. Overall the formal landscape gardens of Ecton Hall have been addressed previously by Foard (1993) and looked at previously by Hohnholz (1964). The buildings of the current application site and the development of the kitchen garden were not included in that work, however. Other plans and maps exist of the Hall and its gardens, but these are almost invariably the more planned, formal and landscape gardens of the Hall, for which most alterations and plans were recorded (eg NRO: Maps 2115-2139, 2151-2162). Other than these a huge number of former Sotheby archives were sold at auction (ironically at Sotheby's) in 1955 and their whereabouts are no longer known. It is not known if there were garden catalogues or records of purchases/horticultural diaries.

The gardens, and the plot which is the subject of the current recording were laid out in the 1760s or 1770s, as deduced by Foard (1993, 350). Certainly it has to be before 1781 as the Map shown in Figure 5 (above) was drawn up for Mr Ambrose Istead, who died in that year. A modern bird's eye re-drawing of an estate plan, purported to be of c1830, was shared by John Crane of Ecton Hall Management Ltd, and this appears to show the full extent of Building 1 in place, but with the adjoining Building 4 added (John Crane *pers comm*). This juxtaposition is considered potentially suspect when compared with the clear mapped sequence of Figs 5-9 above, so is archived without further comment. The estate map of c1850 is probably the first reliable depiction.

Although neither the buildings, nor the kitchen gardens are mentioned specifically, the gardens were described briefly on one occasion in the early period:

Ecton Hall Gardens

'Attached to the house are flower-gardens, plantations and grounds otherwise diversified by ornament, and laid out in a style worthy of the taste of [Lancelot (Capability)] Brown; in one of the former is a summer-house from a design by the celebrated Inigo Jones' (Cole 1825, 42). It should be noted that there was never any doubt that the location of the summer house is not on the current application plot.

The standard series of three editions of the Ordnance Survey (Figs 7-9) shows the successive appearance of the garden buildings, including the stylised but consistent cross-hatch depiction of greenhouses and other glass-topped structures.

The buildings ensemble of the gardens reached their zenith by 1926, at which time there were as many as seven gardeners employed there (Colin Sotheby *pers comm*). The growth of the buildings was directly related to the successive inheritances of Charles Sotheby (in 1881), Major General Frederic Edward Sotheby and his wife Edith (in 1889) and Lieutenant General Herbert George Sotheby (in 1921). The payment of massive death duties in 1925 tipped the fortunes of the family into difficult times and this, with the Ordnance Survey Map of 1926, marks the apogee of the estate (Ingram and Dicks 2013; NRO-Topographical File).

Ecton Hall was unoccupied from 1952 and was giving great concern to conservation authorities as late as the 1980s (NRO: Topographical file). The gardens did receive some care after 1952, when the kitchen garden and the last gardener was producing Christmas wreaths and cut flowers for sale to the public, with a production line set up in the former estate laundry (Ingram and Dicks 2013, entry 99).

The Buildings

The annexe to the kitchen garden contained eleven buildings or structures which were recorded as follows:

Building 1 (Stables and tack room, with later potting shed use; Fig 13)

This building measures 26.5m east-west x 4.9m north-south, and is brick-built against the south side of the ironstone wall which forms the southern side of the kitchen garden. There are two surviving stalls, one for two horses, and the other for a single animal. The stall division is probably elm, lime-washed. There is a continuous brick trough, wooden hayrack and ventilation openings still retaining wooden shutters (Fig 10). There are iron tethering rings throughout. There is a drainage gully just south of the heelpost.



Fig 10: Building 1, surviving stall with trough and hayrack; ventilator above

In south wall in either side of central doorway there are two segmental arched openings, one retaining a six light panel to each half of a horizontal Yorkshire/Norfolk sash. Both windows have horizontal iron bars internally and externally. The sills are of bull-nosed bricks. To the immediate east is a small tack room with single six-light window (Fig 11). Nine timber saddle or bridle hooks set in east and west walls. The door was of pine, ledged but not braced with iron fittings. The roof is of softwood. There is a pulley set in each of the gable ends, and above there was a blue slate roof covering.

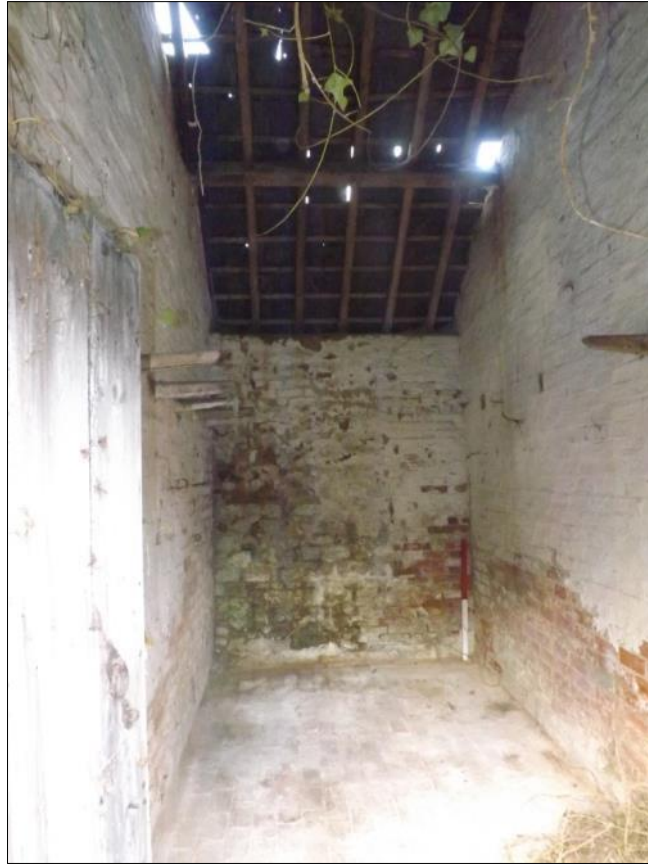


Fig 11: Tack-room

To the east, another double doorway at the midpoint of range created a cart-access to the kitchen garden. The eastern half started as an inexact repetition of the west but for the stable being of three bays divided by two king-strut trusses; this has been later (post-1935) converted to a potting-shed with staging and the introduction of a dated heating boiler where the line of brick feed troughs had been interrupted. There was a cobbled floor with a secondary, redundant chimney in the north-east corner of the east-end room. This end room may have been another tack store (but heated, unlike the first). An OS Map (Fig 8) shows a pump (well) once stood just south of the easternmost room, but there was no visible evidence of this at the time of recording.



Fig 12: The eastern half of Building 1 in a state of collapse; the boiler in the background is named 'Perkins Jubilee 1935 Derby England', and is Jubilee no 04944/2.

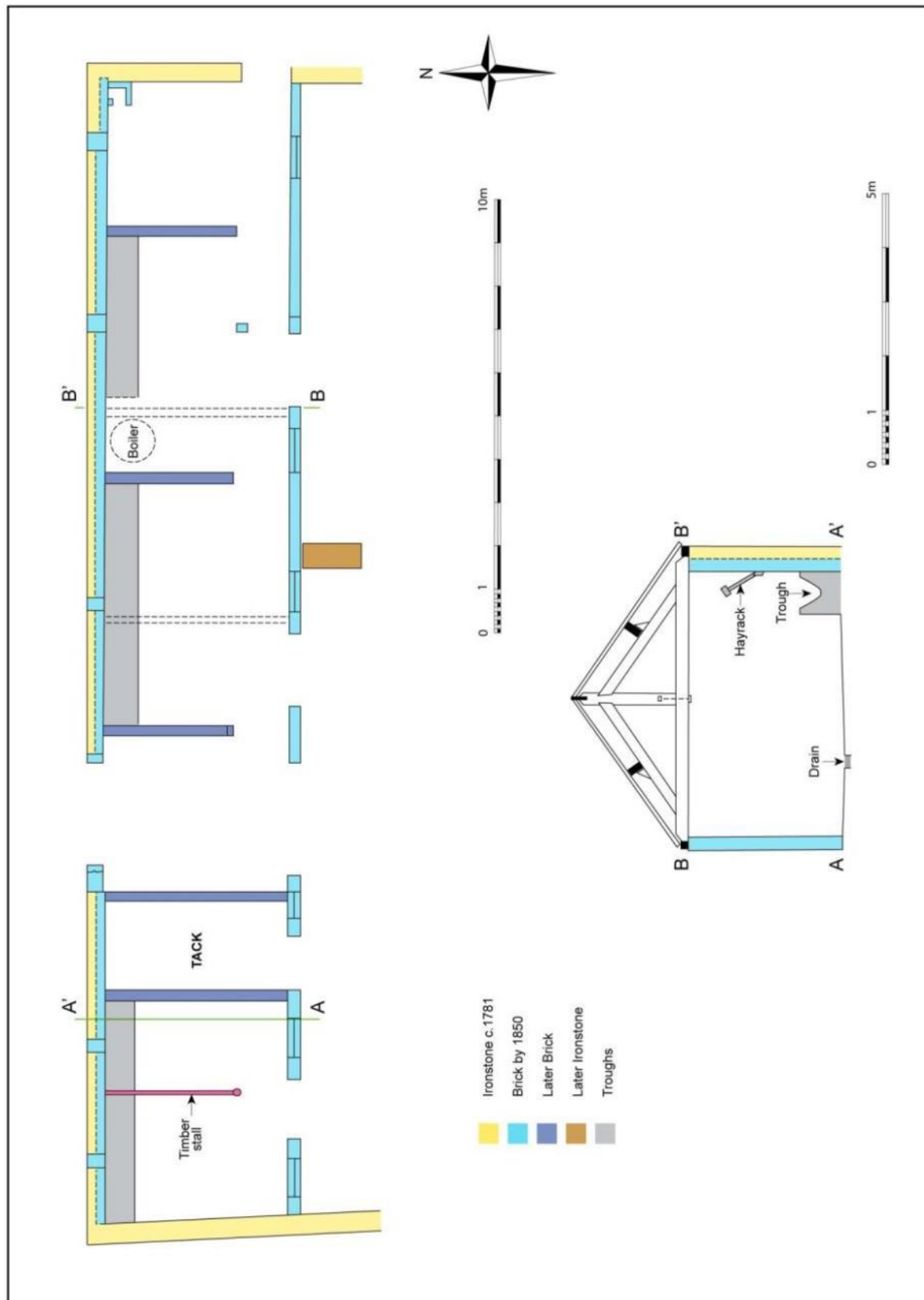


Fig 13: Building 1: the stables and tack room, plan and composite cross-section at AA' and BB', later partly converted into a potting shed. Illustration by Candy Stevens

Ecton Hall Gardens

Building 2 (Animal Shelter, later Potting Shed)

The building measures 11.2m x 4m and comprises roughly-coursed ironstone north, east and west walls, with the infill in red brick of the once-open south wall. There is a Welsh slate roof and a concrete floor.

Originally open on the south side, probably as an animal shelter, the structure was subsequently infilled in brick with a high-level ventilation-slot, typical of pig-keeping, and with a single door. In the angles of the south wall against the two gable ends were formerly two cast-iron troughs, only one of which remained. The low level at which they were set is also in keeping with use by pigs.



Fig 14: Building 2, south wall. Left half brick in-filled for pigs, leaving a ventilation slot; right half re-adapted for potting; scale 1m

Over half of the south-facing front was again re-built, with the insertion of three windows to create a potting shed. During this last phase and iron 'copper' was inserted. The fire box door has Johnson & Wright, Northampton in the casting.



Fig 15: Building 2, the inserted copper; scale 1m



Fig 16: Building 2 interior, as abandoned potting shed; old doors formed the staging

Ecton Hall Gardens

Building 3 (Cucumber House)

This specialist, brick-built structure, sunken by almost a metre, measures 9.9m x 3.1m and comprised a single space with a small integral boiler house on its west end.

Its low brick walls supported a formerly glazed roof on six cast-iron trusses, each of which had an opening mechanism for whole-side opening, with a separate, moveable ridge-louver. The frames had all rotted away. From there are fixed a trellis framework assembly for the training guides and longitudinal wires for cucumbers at a nominal 9 inches from the glass. The main growing area comprises long, low growing beds which were formed merely of raised hillocks of open compost on slate tables either side of a central walkway (Watson 1933, 85). Both the under-table and glazed parts of the house were heated directly from separate sets of pipes, fed from a small boiler house at the end of the building. The cast iron boiler still survived, stamped “Kinnel house, Foster and Pearson, Beeston, Notts.”

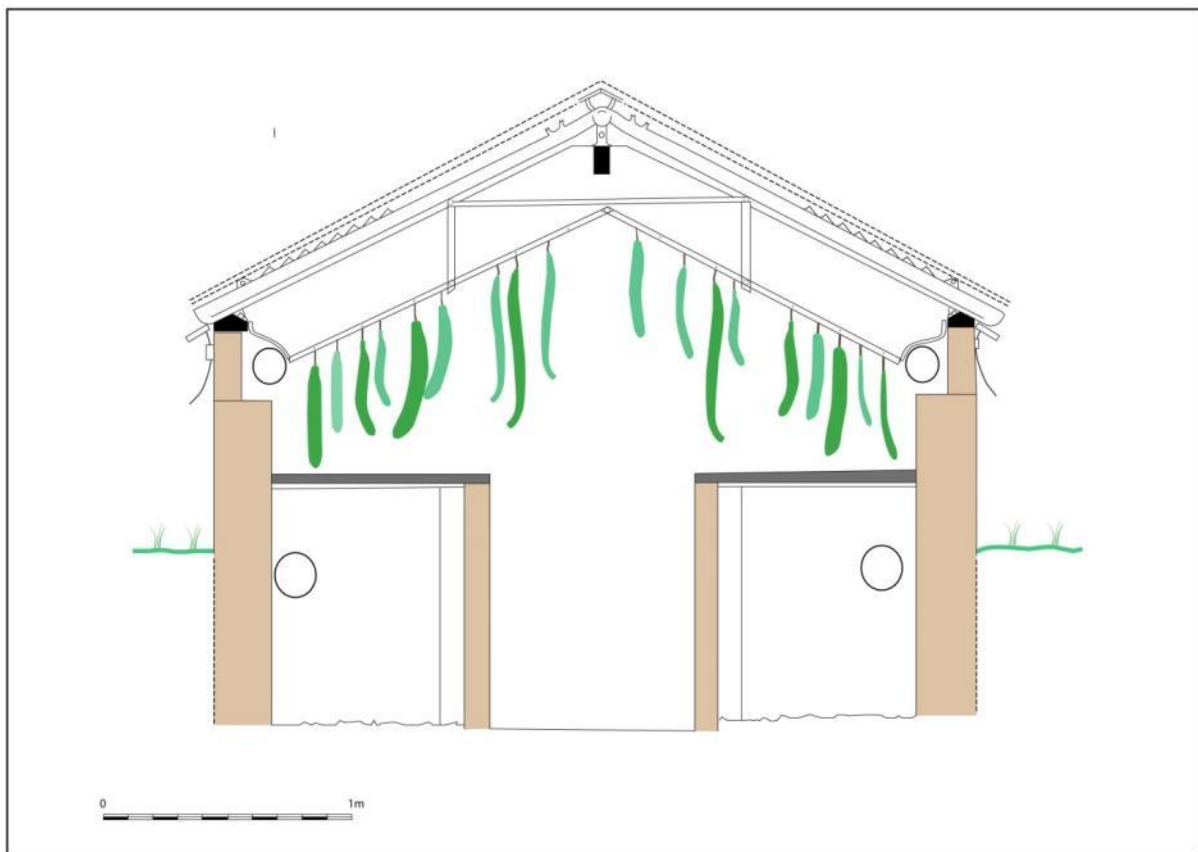


Fig 17: Scale cross-section of the simple structure, with crop added to show the culture used, taken from Watson (1933, fig 90). Illustration by Candy Stevens.



Fig 18: Building 3, Cucumber House, south side. Note the cast-iron trusses and steady iron ridge-pole; scale 1m

Building 4 (Greenhouse)

This former building measured 12.4m x 3.7m in plan, laid out in brick to waist-height, but almost no timber superstructure survived, where it once stood against the north wall of the garden, above which it was built to protrude. There had been sunken beds either side of a central pathway. There were training wires on the south-facing wall and heating pipes to a broken-down boiler house at west end which had barely survived.



Fig 19: Building 4, Greenhouse. The least-well preserved fragment of the broken-down greenhouses; scale 1m

Ecton Hall Gardens

Building 5 (Greenhouse [Peach House])

This desperately-collapsing greenhouse, known in its most recent use as The Peach House (Colin Sotheby, *pers comm*), once measured 24.7m long x 3m wide. However, only the western half had survived, with the eastern half taken down completely some time ago.

The superstructure had been apparently identical to building 4 greenhouse, but had been constructed on low brick foundations. Some were spanned on arches, suggestive perhaps of a vine-house design originally, for which this characteristic is often reserved, to enable the vines to have their roots outside, but their fruiting boughs enclosed. The south-facing rear wall was limewashed.



Fig 20: Behind galvanised water-tanks, greenhouse (building 5, viewed from the west) was in an advanced state of collapse; scale 1m

Building 6 (Cold Frames)

These possible former cold frames survived only as single outlines of bricks on the ground. Their location can be seen in Fig 4, but there was no extant superstructure.

Ecton Hall Gardens

Building 7 (WCs and shed)

These crudely-assembled outbuildings measured 3.17m x 5m in total and comprised a roofless and collapsing, two-cubicle outside brick toilet with a timber shed built onto the back of it, which had brick-nogged panels between uprights. The whole was in an advanced state of decay and had been built onto the back of the corrugated tin barn (8).



Fig 21: The collapsed WC and brick and timber shed, viewed from the north-east; scale 1m. It was constructed against the north wall of Building 8, of which a brick-diaper ventilator can be seen.

Building 8 (Corrugated manège/shelter)

This building was by far the largest on the site, measuring 33.2m x 6m. It employed north and west walls of ironstone with brick on the inner face. The north wall began as a simple garden division and had been lengthened to the east by one bay and increased in height to establish the barn eaves level. Louvers and a diaper pattern of open brickwork alternated to form ventilators at just below eaves all along the north wall. Brick was used to create gables over which was laid a corrugated tin roof in an arc with simple scissor-frame braces. The south wall was of corrugated tin but for one bay at the east (which was part of the eastwards extension). Two pairs of sliding double doors opened onto the south side and alongside there were four casement-windows, all blocked. There was a concrete floor.



Fig 22: The southern, corrugated tin wall of Building 8; the brick bay on the right (east) is an extension.

Inside the building were a number of tethering rings high in the north wall, and it is said that the building was originally used as a manège, for training horses, with a large square open courtyard in front of it (to the south, partly where modern bungalows now stand).

This unusual building with its distinctive use, built between 1885 and 1900, may have been part of a military building pattern available to Major General Edward Sotheby, since a very similar building of similar size and identical construction was built as the new 'Gun Shed' between 1889 and 1905 (contemporary with Building 8) at the old Napoleonic cavalry barracks, at that time recently converted to horse artillery, at Coventry (Soden 2001, 55). The Coventry example was painted by a local artist, C L Stait, before it was eventually demolished. His painting shows how similar the two structures were, down to the barrel roof and the huge sliding doors which in Coventry, were designed to admit 13 pounder field guns and their limbers.

During World War Two Building 8 was used for meetings of the local Home Guard Unit, of which Lt Col Sotheby was nominally head. When they were stood down in 1944 after D-Day, it was given to the successor Ecton Hall Miniature Rifle Club, for whom it continued as an indoor shooting range. Sotheby remained the patron. It was last used as such c1970 (Colin Sotheby, pers comm; Ingram and Dicks 2013, entry 238).

Between Building 8 and Building 9 stood a gateway with a wrought-iron pedestrian garden gate bearing the initials FES and EMS and the date 1906. The initials are those of Major General Frederick Edward Sotheby and his wife Edith May Sotheby. They inherited the estate in 1889 and Frederick dies in 1909. It is perhaps reasonable to consider that of the Sotheby's, Frederick was the most proud of the gardens as they were approaching their zenith, and works after 1889 are attributable to him.

The gate spanned an axial pathway which bisected the gardens and which had on its west side a former Yew hedge, cut down some years ago. The size of the trunks and stumps suggest this had been planted around the time the gate was put in, c1906.



Fig 23: The focal wrought-iron gate across the axial path, monogrammed and dated 1906.

Building 9 (Greenhouse)

This greenhouse comprised the most extensive surviving remains of this type, measuring in plan 24.8m x 3.6m. The entire superstructure was severely dilapidated and collapsing. It had been a heated greenhouse on the same construction principles as Buildings 4 and 5. A potting bay lay at the west end and a sunken boiler house at the east end. The surviving boiler was an oil-fired 'Robin Hood Junior'. Unlike the glass-construction of the rest, the boiler-house bay was of corrugated asbestos, and therefore probably dating to the 1950s. This probably replaced an earlier boiler-house, since there was a near-complete collapsed brick chimney with chimney-pot still attached, lying in the north-east quadrant of the garden amongst undergrowth (See Fig 4 for location). Too large for transportation on a barrow or cart, this structural feature can only have fallen from the boiler house position.

Inside the greenhouse the beds were not of the deep variety, unlike the other greenhouses and the greenhouse base was made partly of concrete block-work and post-War Fletton bricks suggesting that the whole had been substantially rebuilt in the modern period.



Fig 24: The potting bay at the west end of Building 9 (Greenhouse)



Fig 25: The Robin Hood boiler serving Building 9 (Greenhouse); scale 1m

Building 10 (Fuel Store)

This was a small, collapsing timber and brick shed, which measured 8.3m x 2.1m. It was very ramshackle, built against a garden wall and discernibly in three equal-sized portions.

- 1) The northern part- comprising a timber frame, including railway sleepers for uprights. Within were numerous fuel bottles/drums.

- 2) In the middle, brick piers supporting a pan-tiled roof and which contained a large galvanised steel safe, possibly for storing seed originally, but given the storage of flammable fuels, may have been used to store corrosive or poisonous substances, such as weed-killers and sterilising fluids beloved of 1950s gardeners.
- 3) The southern end, a timber frame under which was parked an Allen-scythe and fuel bottles/drums.

Ordnance Survey maps show a pump location just north of Building 10, just inside the wrought iron gate, but this was no longer visible at the time of recording.



Fig 26: A galvanised steel seed-safe taking up most of Building 10's centre bay

Building 11 (Cold Frames)

These denuded brick structures lacked any covering but are thought to have been stand-alone deep beds or cold-frames which could be heated by a jury-rigged pipe system on a spur from Building 9 (Greenhouse) and its boiler close to which they stood. They had been prised apart and collapsed when a tree had been allowed to grow inside. One side had collapsed completely, while the other survived only in part. There was a narrow access passage between the two.



Fig 27: The former cold frames (Building 11); scale 1m. To the right Building 9 (Greenhouse)

The development of the garden buildings

All the buildings and structures in the gardens are dateable as they are successively depicted in reliable maps and surveys from 1781 to 1926.

Ecton Hall's kitchen garden was laid out just before 1781. A small selection of apparently unrelated buildings was erected for horses and other livestock on an adjoining plot before c1850 (Buildings 1 and 2). A possible military-pattern building may have been introduced in the form of Building 8, which probably never acquired a horticultural function. The livestock-related buildings either went out of use gradually or were converted piecemeal to horticultural uses in the early 20th century, being joined progressively by a number of purpose-built horticultural structures by 1926. At this stage there were seven gardeners employed. After 1926 they went into decline. It is unlikely that any animal-related activity continued after c1935, the manufacture-date of the boiler which was put into the former stable of Building 1.

The gardens dwindled after the 1950s and the last gardener was working there in the 1970s. Some subsequent clearance took place in the 1980s but the plots and buildings became increasingly overgrown until clearance and recording in 2013.

The figure below (28) shows the development of the gardens, phased with colour-codes as deduced from the historic maps.

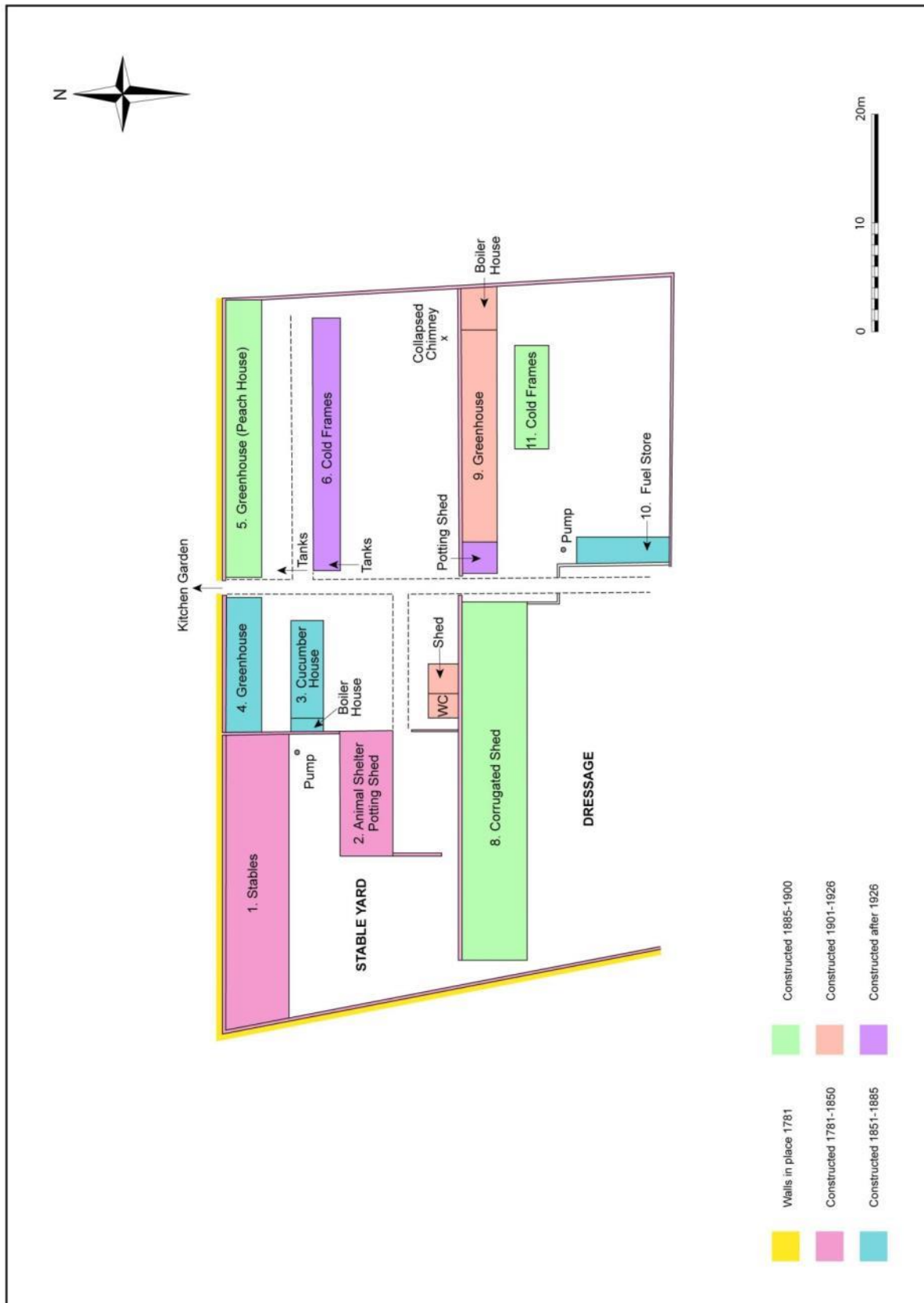


Fig 28: The development of the garden structures, phased

Ecton Hall Gardens

Significance

The group of buildings recorded at Ecton are far from ordinary. They do not fit naturally into a clear-cut thematic thread for research purposes, spanning horticultural, agricultural and possibly military-inspired buildings in the context of an old and established managed (and relatively formal) landscape. Thus they may make small contributions to each of these aspects as set down by Knight *et al* (2012), although none of them conclusively or collectively. Originally intended to be recorded as buildings related solely to the kitchen gardens for Ecton Hall, some of the most notable and imposing clearly did not begin their lives as anything to do with gardening at all, but served the hall in respect of livestock and, in particular, horses, as specialist agricultural buildings. As a stable, Building 1 was never focal, (nor was it the principal stabling for the hall) whereas Building 8 was a curiosity of potentially military origin.

The true garden buildings were adapted and added to piecemeal. This seems not to have been the product of a Sotheby grand gardening dynasty but the workaday product of sensible, aspirant gardeners looking to get the most out of a changing estate, eking the best out of a motley collection of converted buildings when financial pressure and changing times demanded.

The greenhouses, hot-beds/deep-beds, and most notably, the specialist cucumber house, relate to the greatest aspirations the gardens enjoyed, if only for a short period either side of c1900.

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