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analysis and reporting in the basements of
Delapré Abbey, Northampton:**

**The evaluation of an accumulated soft layer beneath
The Drawing Room**

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First phase archaeological excavation, recording, analysis and reporting in the basements of Delapré Abbey, Northampton- the evaluation of an accumulated soft layer beneath the Drawing Room

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Summary

The part-excavation of an accumulated layer of material was undertaken in the sub-floor compartments beneath the 18th-century drawing room of Delapré Abbey. Originally thought to be a centuries-long, gradual accumulation of material, the excavation has shown that it is more likely to have been a demolition deposit associated with 18th/19th century re-building of the south wing of the house.

The excavation has revealed a length of wall that formed part of the 'lost' 16th -17th century south wing built by the Tate family after The Dissolution. A range of finds from the demolition layer around it include architectural fragments dating from the medieval abbey and that lost Post-Dissolution wing, together with fittings relating to its former post-medieval interior décor.

Introduction and background

Planning and Listed Building consents have been granted for the conservation and re-presentation of Delapré Abbey, Northampton.

Delapré Abbey is the site of a former Cluniac Nunnery (later elevated to Abbey status), which lies on the south-east side of Northampton town centre. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1539) it became a gentrified country house and underwent considerable re-building. The Abbey core lies at NGR: SP 7595 5908 and is surrounded by parkland, which includes the Registered Battlefield of the Battle of Northampton (1460). The Listed Buildings of the abbey are undergoing major conservation and internal re-ordering for public presentation.

In order to inform the proposals for re-ordering, a series of test pits were dug, both in the abbey basements and outside the buildings. The test-pits were archaeologically monitored and recorded in accordance with the archaeological sensitivity of the site (Soden 2014). Some of the test-pits were dug deeply into the natural geology, in order to verify the depth of the foundations. Others stopped at the surface of the natural ground. A few verified the current build-up of soils and made no attempt to test the full sequence down to the natural geology.

In one of the sub-floor compartments (the southern half of Basement 6) beneath the Abbey Drawing Room, a specific extensive soft layer was tested with two test pits (B5 and B6). The layer appeared to have considerable finds-potential and the discovery of two unbroken glass phials dating to the 19th century indicated that the layer had remained undisturbed. The layer may overlie earlier remains connected with the monastic church. This layer needs to be removed to allow for the insertion of a plant-room in the same space.

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A further compartment (the northern half) had been sealed since building works dating to the 19th century and was seen for the first time when a doorway was cut through in its west end as part of the first phase. Architectural fragments from the door-cutting showed that the wall had closed up the sub-floor space in the 19th century, showing that the accumulated soft layer was predominantly later in date than first thought. At c1m-thick or more, the 'soft' layer (so-called due to its dry, dusty and relatively un-compacted nature) in this compartment was found to be substantially thicker than in the first. The later accumulation of the layer meant that it was not as archaeologically sensitive as previously thought and it was agreed that only a sample need be removed archaeologically. The remainder will be removed by ground-works contractors, with archaeological screening of the up-cast for finds and artefacts.

Historical and archaeological background

The following historical development of Delapré is taken from Wake and Abel Pantin (1975).

Delapré (meaning *of the meadow* and an allusion to the abbey's location on the south bank of the Nene) was founded by Simon de Senlis, second Earl of Northampton, in about 1145. The land, situated in the parish of Hardingstone, was granted in a charter by St Andrews Priory to him 'on which to build a monastery of St Mary where nuns may serve God and the aforesaid Virgin'. As St Andrew's, the nunnery was of the Cluniac order (ruled from the Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy), one of only two or three nunneries of this order in the country.

There is little documentation regarding the nunnery from its foundation until the Dissolution in the 16th century, but it appears to have been fairly small and poor. A list of nuns present in the Chapter House at the Bishop's visitation in 1530 records only eleven nuns and at Dissolution, a total of nine were pensioned off.

Substantial repairs were undertaken in the 13th century, when grants of timber from local forests were given by the King, including ten beams in 1232 for the repair of the church and five oaks in 1258 for making the refectory. While the early abbey buildings would have undoubtedly been of timber construction, they would have been gradually replaced by stone buildings, although there is today little evidence for these. It is generally accepted that the internal courtyard represents the former cloister court and the corridor around three sides of the courtyard is the remains of the cloister walk, though now enclosed. Two stone lanterns set into the corners of the cloister walk may be medieval in origin. Some of the thicker stone walls may be medieval; many of the surviving examples are located on the north side of the cloister walk. Traditionally the church was located on the north side of the cloister and it has been suggested that these walls are the remains of the former church nave (although female communities often preferred churches to the south of the cloister). Some of the walls in the basements may also be of medieval construction, or at least have medieval cores or foundations.

The south range, under which the sub-floor compartments that are the focus of the current investigation lie, would have likely been the location of the refectory.

After the Dissolution, the buildings and demesne lands of the abbey were initially let in 1539, but were exchanged for land in 1543 by the Crown to John Mershe. Mershe quickly sold the property on to the Tate family, who were to remain at Delapré for over two centuries. There is little evidence of

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the 16th century remodelling of the nunnery buildings, but it is likely that the church buildings were the first to be modified, given their unsuitability for general domestic life. Thus the internal divisions in the north range and the two doorways and newel stair on the north side of the cloister were probably created during this period.

Zouch Tate, born in 1606, appears to have been responsible for much of the transformation of the site from medieval nunnery to post-medieval stately house. In his *Sufferings of the Clergy* (1714), Walker stated that Zouch Tate *built on the Scite of the Nunnery and Part of the Church; turned other parts of it to Prophane Uses. Particularly, the Chancel, to a Dairy, Buttery, and other such offices. In digging and altering, he violated the Ashes of many great Personages: and among them Simon, sometime Earl of Northampton, the Founder of the nunnery, who lay interr'd there in a vault*.

Tate was responsible for much of the surviving west front of Delapré, including the porch. On the east side he built kitchens and on the site of the chancel of the convent church (on the site of the Abbey Cottage to the east of the abbey) he constructed a dairy and other outbuildings. During these works a vault was apparently disturbed. An empty stone coffin found in 1940 during works to convert the outbuildings into the cottage, may have originated from this vault. It is not known whether he altered the medieval buildings of the south range, but if he did achieve this they were demolished when the south range was largely rebuilt in the 18th century, probably around the time when Mary Tate married Admiral Charles Hardy in 1749.

The western gable of Zouch Tate's 17th century entrance front was retained with the 18th century south front rising behind it (Fig 1). An 18th century plan of the buildings suggests that the south front housed the *Eating roome, Drawing roome, Shilloon* (Saloon) and *Little Eating Room*, perhaps an unintended echo of where Wade and Pantin felt the monastic refectory had once lain.



Fig 1: 1818 illustration of the 17th century west front of the abbey, with 18th century south front behind (to right)

In 1756, the house was advertised in the *Northampton Mercury* to be let. The advert stated that a coach-house and stables for 20 horses had been recently built. The estate was eventually sold in 1764 for £22,000 to Edward Bouverie.

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In the early 19th century the 17th century south-west wing was rebuilt as a large library, the main staircase was rebuilt and a large conservatory was added to the east end of the south wing, uniting it with the 18th century orangery. Around 1871, a limestone balustrade was added to the roof of the 18th century south front. The surviving decoration of the rooms in the south front also dates from this period.

Delapré was requisitioned by the War Office in September 1940 and Miss Bouverie moved to Pond House, Duston. All the furniture was auctioned at a three-day sale a year later. In 1942, Miss Bouverie asked to be allowed to die at Delapré and rooms in the stables were prepared for her. The last of the Bouverie's of Delapré died there in January 1943. Delapré Abbey and 586 acres of land were sold to Northampton Corporation in 1946. The War Office relinquished it in 1948, when it was requisitioned by the Ministry of Works. The County War Agricultural Committee moved in and remained until 1953. In 1957 the building was adapted for use as the Northamptonshire Record Office and remained as such until 1992.

There has been little archaeological investigation in the close vicinity of the abbey buildings apart from the recent monitoring of a series of test pits dug to inform current proposals (Soden 2014). Of the test pits dug in the basements, two were excavated through deposits in the sub-floor space beneath the Drawing Room. These cut through a very dry stony and sandy layer which contained a variety of finds from the life of the range, potentially including its construction. Within the test pits this layer, which seems to extend throughout the entire sub-floor space, was 200mm thick. It lay directly upon natural ground. A further test-pit immediately outside this area exposed an archaeological feature cut into the natural ground which lay directly beneath a supposed medieval wall. This indicated that remains may survive of the pre-stone phase of the Abbey, and that the old exposed natural ground may contain other cut archaeological features.

Objectives and methodology

The aim of the archaeological fieldwork was as follows:

- To determine and understand the nature, function, character and formation of the already-identified soft, dry archaeological layer which underlies the current Drawing Room of Delapré Abbey;
- To expose and better appreciate the extent and layout of any archaeological features or deposits that may be exposed by the layer's removal. To make initial records which locate and facilitate their assessment for future attention, possibly by means of excavation;
- To retrieve finds, which the soft layer is expected to contain, conserve and store them as appropriate and report on them for planning purposes and make this available for plans related to the re-presentation of the Abbey to the public.

The relevant research themes believed to be pertinent to this layer particularly are related to the conversion of monastic buildings to secular use and the ongoing uses of those buildings (as discussed in contributors to Gaimster and Gilchrist 2003), together with furthering understanding of relationships between country houses and their estates with, in the case of Delapré Abbey, its relationship with the town of Northampton and its markets.

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The area of the fieldwork comprised the uppermost level within the footprint of the proposed new plant-room. This comprised two similarly-sized sub-floor spaces, the surface lying some 1.2m below the joists of the C19th drawing room above. Each space measures in full c10m x 2.5m.

The layer was removed by hoe and mattock and taken in buckets to adjacent basement areas.



Fig 2: Northern compartment, prior to excavation, looking east

All further archaeological deposits encountered during the course of excavation were fully recorded. The surface of any features were cleaned by hand to enhance their definition and planned to scale. A plan of the exposed archaeological features was prepared to a scale of 1:50. Finds were set aside, bagged where appropriate, and set aside for assessment.

Photographs were taken as 35mm monochrome negatives for archive purposes and digital media for reporting purposes. Black and White was also utilised in digital format too, since the temporary low-lighting led to a colour-imbalance in reproduction.

In terms of survey, general levels of layers and horizons were noted and physically marked on site, relative to known parts of the surrounding walls and buildings.

Results

Two new doorways were created through existing basement walls to improve access and connectivity for the works. The stone walling was largely removed by hand under archaeological scrutiny (Fig 4). A small number of architectural fragments were recovered from the wall make-up; these dated from the medieval and post-medieval periods.



Fig 4: One of the new doorways during cutting works, vaulted cellar, looking west

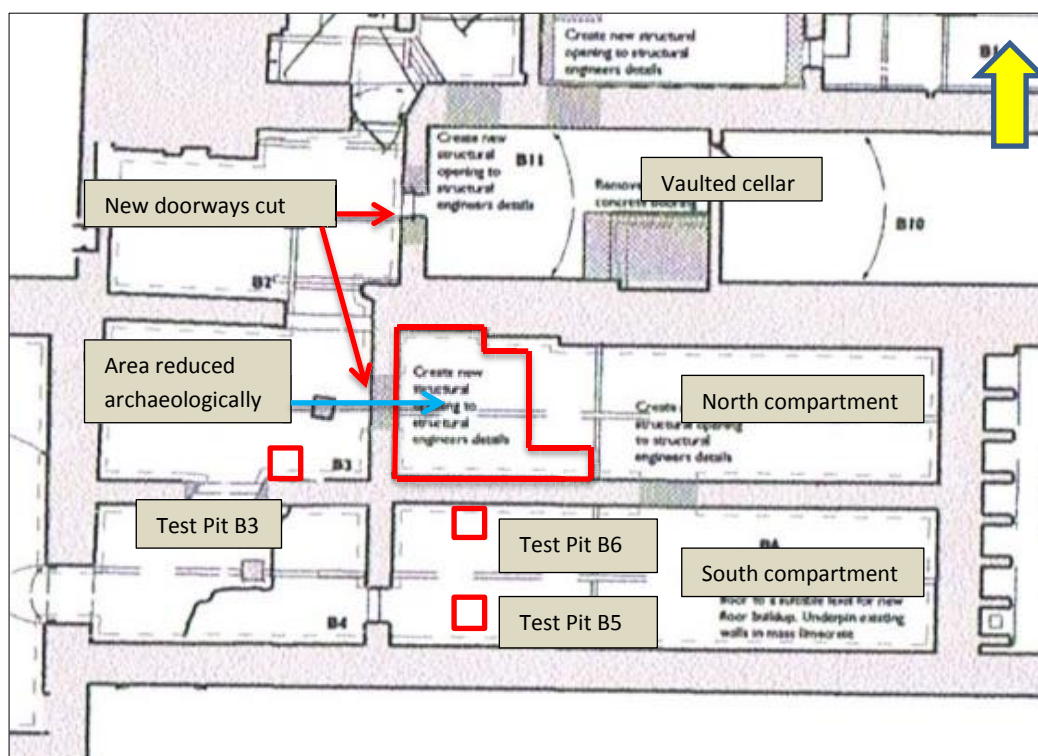


Fig 5: Basement areas and interventions mentioned in the text. Image c/o Purcell and original survey information produced by Foster Surveys

Removal of the 'soft' layer of material was primarily concentrated in the newly accessible northern compartment and comprised c20% of the whole in that compartment. The layer removed was largely made up of a very dry, sandy material rich in lime mortar with frequent fragments of ironstone. Within the layer were numerous fragments of brick, tile and other architectural remains. These remains were retained for archive (see below). This layer directly overlay (and very readily peeled off onto-) the natural ironstone geology, which had been levelled, compacted and used as a surface at some point in the past.

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A coursed ironstone rubble wall was uncovered which aligned approximately north to south and was founded directly upon this layer, without any dug foundations (Figs 6 & 7). The wall, which survived across the entire width of this basement compartment (2.5m), survived to an average 800mm high and was 500mm thick throughout, although it had subsequently been widened at the middle of the exposed length by the addition of a shallow ironstone buttress against its west side, doubling its width at this point. This buttress had very well-turned ashlar quoins down one side. It appears never to have been plastered on either side.



Fig 6: The wall, added buttress in front, looking east; Scale 1m

To the north the freshly-uncovered wall ended abruptly at the northern wall of the compartment, with which it made a butt-joint, probably truncated. There remained a construction trench for this other wall, 0.15m wide and at least 0.15m deep, which was cut through the compacted natural surface and formed the side wall of the adjacent vaulted cellar. By contrast the southern wall of the compartment appeared to have been built around and over the north-south wall and incorporated a large residual block of medieval architectural moulding (Fig 8).

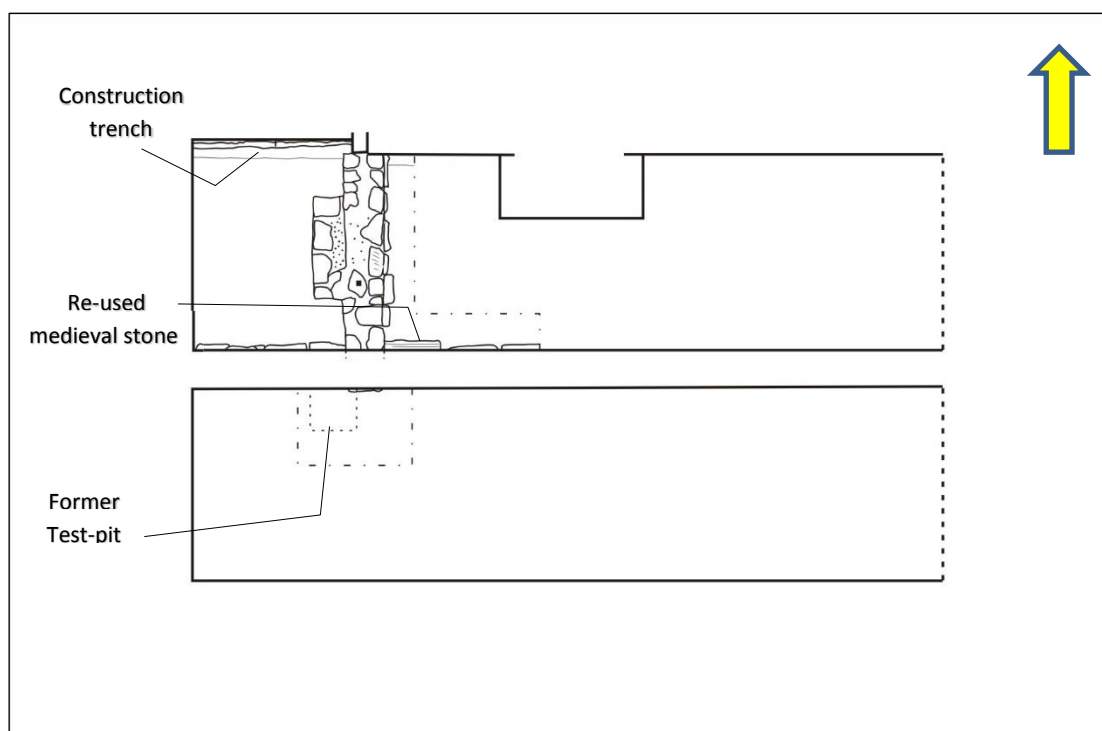


Fig 7: Plan of the two compartments with the newly exposed wall in detail (Scale 1:100)

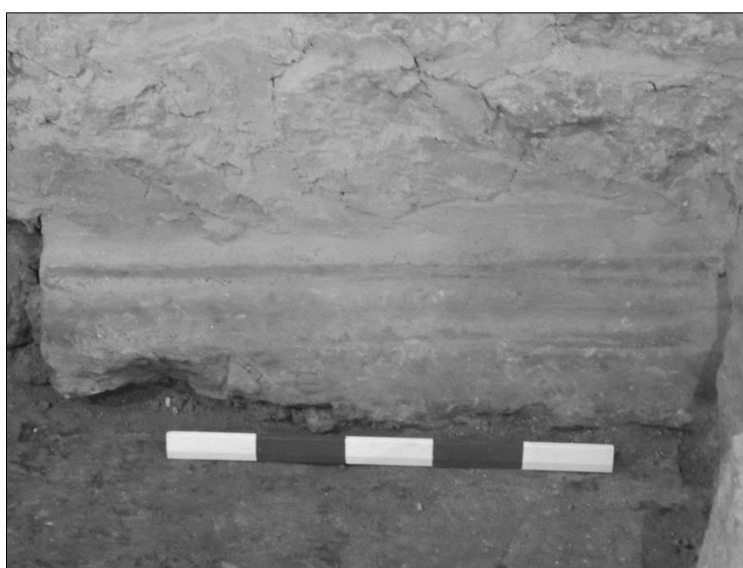


Fig 8: Re-used medieval architectural moulding in base of compartment wall; scale 50cm

A small area of the 'soft' layer was removed in the southern compartment to find any continuation of the north-south wall. A stub of the wall was recorded within the southern face of the compartment wall, but it did not continue any further into this compartment (Fig 9). The compacted natural surface was, however, found to extend into this compartment. It is unclear whether this was truncated/removed or never extended in this direction, since no trace survives on the surface below.

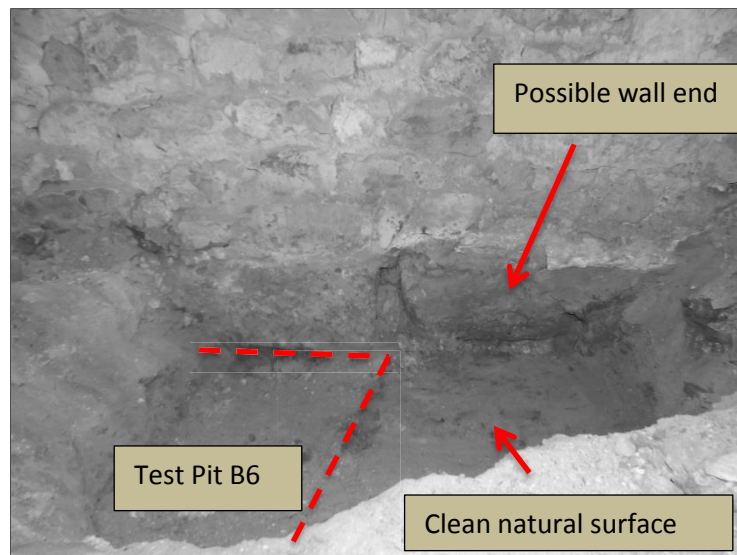


Fig 9: Former Test Pit B6, the flat compacted natural geology (common to both areas) and the (?truncated) end of the north-south wall incorporated in the east-west example, looking north in southern compartment

Finds

The evaluation produced numerous bulk finds, as follows:

From door-cutting

- Medieval and 16th /17th century architectural fragments, comprising door-mouldings, probable hood-mould or label-stop, ovolo window jambs, mullions/transoms (medieval lozenge and post 1570s ovolo cross-section).

From the soft layer

- 16th-17th century architectural fragments, primarily ovolo-section window jambs
- Complete hand-made bricks (amongst numbers of broken brick-bats)
- Collyweston-type roofing tilestones, one still with peg intact
- A single decorated ceramic hip-tile (possibly medieval)
- Flat ceramic tiles (fragmentary)
- A single (joining fragments) of a stone floor tile.
- Fragments of lime-ash flooring
- Plain lime-washed wall-plaster (very fragmentary)

The above begin to give indications of the 16th/17th century Tate wing demolished c1750. The numbers present in the small area of evaluation suggest that the remainder of the 'soft' layer contains very many more.

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More individual finds from the same layer suggest further detail in respect of the former wing which was demolished and some of the people who lived and worked in it or workmen who helped to dismantle it:

- Iron bracket
- Iron fixing anchor for wall-panelling (Fig 10)
- Window glass
- Clay tobacco pipe fragments
- Shoe leather fragments, including a heel, plus a leather handle from a suitcase
- Fragment of black marble (probably from a former fireplace)



Fig 10: Two finds relating to interior décor: iron panelling-anchor and polished black marble fragment; scale 10cm.

The numbers retrieved from the evaluation, which accounted for some 20% of the volume present in the north sub-floor compartment, suggest that very many more of these generic types (and perhaps an even greater variety) will still survive within the remaining 80%, proportionately four times as many again.

In the southern compartment, the potential for finds has already been demonstrated from the test pits, which produced the two glass phials and other material. Ninety-five percent of this compartment, still only minimally-accessible, remains unexcavated. The material and sequence are almost identical to those in the north compartment.

Structural remains retrieved during evaluation have been set aside within the abbey cellars in the short term, in consultation with the Northampton Borough Council Conservation Officer and Northamptonshire County Council Principal Archaeological Adviser. Their detailed analysis has been deferred until the full body of material is retrieved and the best-preserved bulk items selected for publication, retention and ongoing storage.

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Conclusions

No *in-situ* medieval remains or cut-features have been found in the area of the natural ground which the evaluation exposed and cleaned. Following the identification of such a feature under a cellar wall during previous test pitting (Test Pit B3 in Soden 2014), this more controlled approach of evaluation perhaps suggests that there is a relative scarcity of such features in the two principal sub-floor compartments.

Evaluation and watching brief during door-cutting has demonstrated a wide variety of medieval and early post-medieval architectural fragments survives both in the rubble and re-used in the construction of later foundations. More are undoubtedly still to be retrieved in areas as yet unexcavated and walls yet to be dismantled or pierced in future works.

Initial excavation has revealed a north to south-aligned wall likely to be part of a 16th-17th south wing built by the Tate family. The wall was founded on the natural ironstone geology that had been levelled and compacted at some point prior to the construction of the wall. There may be one or more other walls on the same alignment further east, buried within and below the soft layer. Most of the material excavated in the 'soft' layer is probably derived from this 'Tate' south wing and is thus dated between c1600 (construction) and c1750 (demolition), subsequently added to in later alterations, probably as late as the last major re-decoration of the drawing room c1870.

Upon inspection, the remainder of this layer appears to exhibit the same makeup as that removed in evaluation. This is a 'forgiving' and relatively 'insensitive' layer which peels off very easily onto the natural geology. Its significance remains in the numbers and variety of structural remains, and other finds which it contains, almost certainly spread across both sub-floor compartments, the retrieval of which has the potential to be widely instructive concerning the structure, layout, makeup, decor and perhaps even furnishing of the otherwise lost Tate south wing, both inside and out.

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