

Excavations at Willmer House, West Street, Farnham

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Summary

Rescue excavations during building work and subsequent controlled trenching produced evidence for extensive occupation of the site, starting in the 13th century with the construction of a small kiln and continuing in the 14th century, when the slope was terraced and built on at both levels. The terracing work seems to indicate a surprising shortage of suitable building sites at this period and may also indicate that ribbon development to the west of the medieval town was much earlier and more intensive than had previously been thought. The fact that the terracing also passes under at least one of the existing property boundaries indicates that these are likely to be post-medieval in origin. The split in levels continued in use through subsequent centuries, with evidence for further industrial activity, until the property was levelled and converted into the existing garden and town house in the Georgian period.

Introduction

During 1992 Waverley Borough Council commissioned major building repairs to the fabric of Willmer House, currently the home of the Museum of Farnham. The house itself is a grade one listed Georgian building, dating to 1718, with a large garden to the rear. During the course of the repair works the remains of a cobbled surface were exposed under the floorboards of the south-west ground floor room, facing the garden. In the garden itself, a hole dug for a concrete soakaway revealed a medieval stone retaining wall and an associated depth of over 1.5m of occupation deposits.

The following year permission was given for a controlled excavation to take place in the garden and a trench was laid down to one side of the soakaway. The work took place over two weeks in June 1993 and was undertaken by volunteers from the Farnham & District Museum Society under the direction of the authors. The site archive and the finds have been deposited at the Museum of Farnham.

Geological and topographical background

The medieval town of Farnham, and its later extension along West Street, is built along an east-west gravel terrace deposited by the river Wey, which runs to the south of the town. To the north, the town has extended over Gault Clay, but Willmer House (SU 8362 4667), sited to the west of the town centre, lies on the southern edge of the gravel which, at this point, is capped with a thin layer of alluvium.

The position (fig 1) means that the garden slopes to the south and that the site, vegetation permitting, commands views across the flood plain of the river, whilst itself being well drained and high enough to avoid the risk of flooding.

Historical background

Willmer House is sited on West Street, the main western approach to Farnham and lies some 400m distant from the medieval town and its surrounding ditch (Poulton, forthcoming;

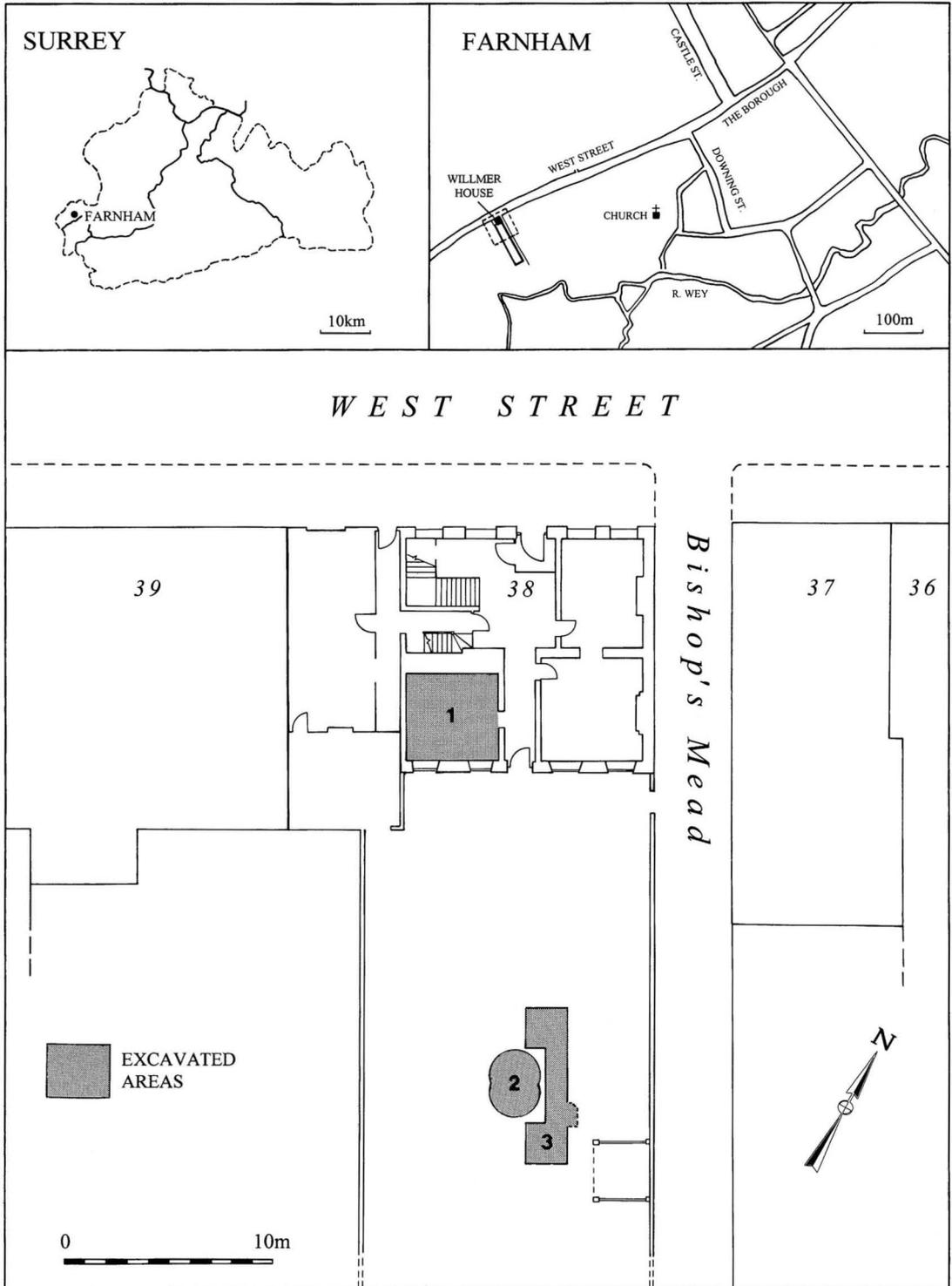


Fig 1 Willmer House: location and site plan

Robo 1939, 186–7). It is therefore well outside the core medieval settlement and the site probably represents ribbon development along the road. The Winchester Pipe Rolls — medieval bishopric accounts which include the hundred of Farnham — refer to fines being paid in respect of a number of properties along West Street from the 13th century onwards, but the exact locations are not specified (Brooks). It is however certain that by the late Tudor/early Stuart periods, West Street was largely developed and many of the buildings that stand today are of that period, albeit with Georgian brickwork cladding on the street frontages.

Evidence for an earlier building on the site of Willmer House is based partially on the following archaeological evidence and partially on documentary sources held by the Museum of Farnham which have been studied by Mrs P Parks (pers comm). A deed (137/A/10, 4 December 1678) describes ‘a certain messuage, garden, hopgarden etc, called Arundells, lying in Farnham’. An abstract of title (137/B/20, 25 January 1763) relates various transactions from 1710 onwards which indicate that Arundells later became the site of Willmer House. John Thorne is listed as paying £90 for the property in 1711 and is considered likely to be the builder of Willmer House as the initials ‘J.T.’ and date 1718 appear on rainwater heads at the rear of the existing building. A detailed architectural description and historical background to Willmer House can be found in Temple (1973, 166–70).

The rescue excavations

For list of context numbers, see table 1.

I THE SOUTH-WEST ROOM (fig 1, area 1)

As part of the programme of renovations, the contractors lifted wooden floors in several of the downstairs rooms of Willmer House itself. Presumably as a result of disturbance in the Georgian period, no archaeological levels survived, except in the south-west room, which lies to the rear of the building and overlooks the garden. While digging out soil, prior to laying a concrete floor, the workmen exposed an area of stone cobbling, which they left untouched for proper investigation.

On removal of the remainder of the 25cm-thick layer of dry earth overburden, it became clear that a substantial area of well-laid clunch and flint cobbling (fig 2) remained intact in the centre of the room. The cobbling had, however, been destroyed around the edge of the room, by the footing trenches dug for the construction of the existing building c1718. The cobbling therefore predates Willmer House and must relate to an earlier structure on the site. A strip of flagstones had been laid, on a roughly north–south alignment through the cobbling, to form a pathway, both ends of which were again truncated by the Georgian footing trenches.

Underlying the cobbles was a 20cm-thick layer of earth, containing tile fragments and general domestic rubbish. This may have acted as a form of hard-core, but in any event, from the pottery and clay pipe stems found with the tile, the cobbling can have been laid no earlier than c1600 and obviously must have gone out of use by 1718 at the latest. If, as seems likely, the cobbling represents an external yard surface, then the flagstone path should indicate the position of the rear door of the associated house. In this case the general proportions — the door being one third of the way across the width of the building plot — might possibly fit that of a house built lengthways on to West Street and occupying the front half of the site of the later Georgian building, albeit that no direct traces appear to remain of such a structure. However, a section of the existing cellars are thought to pre-date Willmer House and yet partially intrude into the area of the cobbling (fig 2). It therefore seems likely that several phases of construction took place on the site in the 17th century, prior to the erection of Willmer House itself.

Underlying the ‘hard-core’ layer was a 14cm-thick band of soil which contained a scatter of abraded potsherds of 13th/14th century date. Beneath this, at a depth of 95cm below the existing floor levels, lay the natural gravel. No features cut the gravel, though it seems likely that the general area was occupied at this period, given the evidence from the garden (see below).

TABLE 1 Description of layers shown on figs 3a, 3b and 4 or mentioned in the text

<i>Layer</i>	
100	Topsoil = modern garden deposit; same as 200
101	Brick, tile and mortar rubble (not illustrated)
102	Dark brown soil (not illustrated)
103	Yellow gravel and soil (not illustrated)
104	Yellow gravel and soil = pit? (not illustrated)
105	Thin layer of clunch (not illustrated)
106	Yellow-orange clay = bonding of wall 108, same as 209; medieval
107	Dark brown soil = pit?
108	Clunch block wall = medieval terrace wall; same as 209
109	Yellow gravel = laid surface, medieval?
110	Brick lined well = Tudor?
111	Brown soil = pit, date?
112	Brown soil = pit, date?
113	Small deposit of ash and charcoal (not illustrated)
114	Brick drain, backfilled with gravel = 19th century; same as 207
115	Brown clay/soil layer = terraced soil
200	Topsoil = modern garden deposit; same as 100
201	Soil with fragments of brick, tile and mortar = recent deposit; same as 101
202	Yellow-orange gravel = 19th century garden path
203	Light yellow clay = 19th century deposit
204	Dark brown garden soil = probably 18th century garden levelling
205	Mid-brown garden soil = probably 18th century garden levelling
206	Mid-brown soil = fill of pit, possibly for tanning, late 17th century
207	Brick drain, backfilled with gravel = 19th century; same as 114
208	Rammed chalk layer = late medieval floor
209	Clunch block wall = medieval terrace wall; same as 108
209a	Clay with clunch rubble = medieval backfill from construction of wall 209
210	Void = stakehole, 17/18th century?
211	Brick, tile and mortar rubble = 18th century demolition infill
212	Dark brown soil with fragments of brick and tile = 18th century demolition infill
213	Brick rubble = 19th century base for drain 207
214	Dark brown soil = 17th century
215	Brown soil and clay = medieval
216	Flint cobbles = laid surface, 17th century
217	Soil, tile and clunch masonry fragments = 15th/16th century well infill
218	Brick, stone and mortar wall = 17th century building
218a	Yellow mortar with brick imprints = 17th century boundary or yard wall
219	Dark brown soil and gravel = medieval post hole
220	Dark brown soil with pot and tile fragments = 14th/15th century well infill
221	Brown soil = medieval pit
222	Dark brown soil = medieval post hole
223	Orange brown clay = medieval; purpose uncertain
224	Brown soil and gravel = post hole?
225	Ash, burnt clay and reddened sandy clay = 13th century? kiln flue
226	Brown soil = 14th/15th century shallow pit
227	Dark brown soil, ash, pottery = 13th century occupation layer
228	Gravel with clunch chippings = infill layer
229	Brown soil with clunch fragments = silting layer
230	Clunch rubble = silting layer
230	Brown soil = silting layer
231	Gravel and soil = silting layer
232	Brown soil = silting layer

Either the site was levelled at some stage in the late medieval period, removing any features, or it lay immediately to the rear of the medieval buildings fronting on West Street and was therefore kept as an open backyard.

Apart from the cobbles, the excavation also revealed two low brick walls on either side, but not forming part of, the existing Victorian? small cast iron fireplace (fig 2). These walls, which appear to be contemporary with the construction of Willmer House and which form low

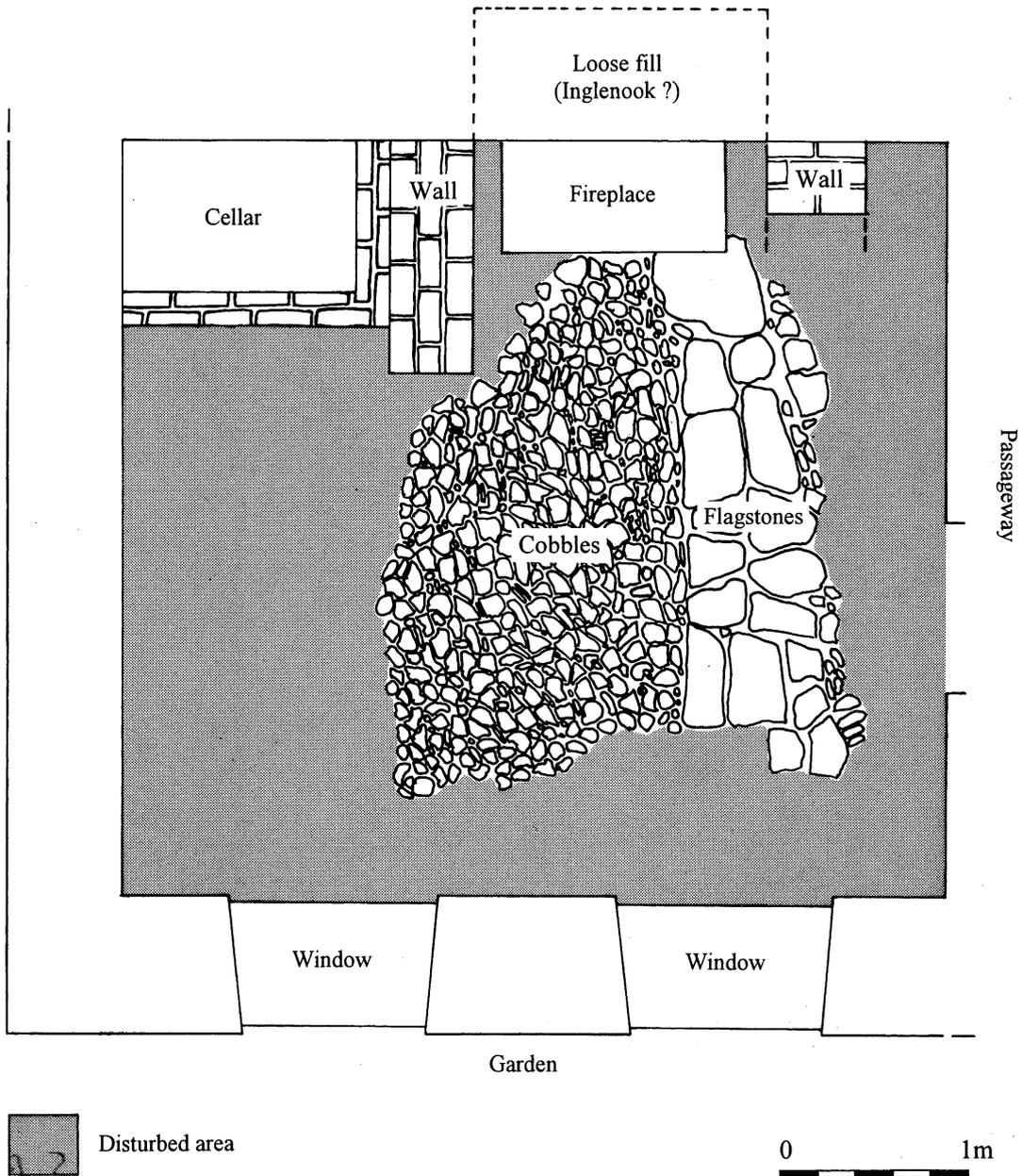


Fig 2 Willmer House: Area 1: plan

'footings', had no obvious structural function. Probing with a narrow rod in the loose plaster around the existing fireplace showed that it had been set into a larger recess, between the walls, which had then been filled in with loose rubble and plastered over. It seems likely that this was originally the site of an inglenook fireplace or cooking range and the two sub-floor walls had functioned as supports for the front part of the hearth. The room has always been referred to as 'the kitchen', perhaps with more reason than has previously been apparent.

2 THE SOAKAWAY (fig 1, area 2)

As part of the general programme of works the contractors dug a circular soakaway pit with a diameter of 2.40m, in the centre of the lawn to the rear of the house. This revealed the top of a solidly constructed clunch-block wall, at a depth of 0.6m below present ground surface.

On investigation, the wall (108) proved to be approximately 1m high and to have been bonded with clay. It ran on an east-west alignment, approximately parallel to the existing building, and appeared to have been set into a cut in the natural gravel. The upper layer of stones partially capped the gravel to the rear, presumably to key the wall into the face of the cut (fig 3b).

At this stage it was not possible to examine the layers to the north of the wall but to the south, where the gravel had been cut away, a depth of approximately 1.5m of occupation deposits had accumulated, commencing with an apparently levelled surface yielding 13th/14th century pottery. This primary surface had been covered by later deposits and cut by a number of pits and by a brick-lined well. It was difficult, however, to date and sequence these features as most had been disturbed by the contractors. It was equally difficult to interpret the section, given the double curve outline of the trench, but a drawing has been deposited with the site archive.

The general conclusion was that the entire site had been terraced in the medieval period and that a retaining wall had been built to stabilize the feature. Subsequently the accumulation of deposits to the south of the wall had returned the ground surface to the same level as that to the north of the wall, thus effectively burying the medieval works.

No further recording was possible at this stage, though the contractors kindly dug a second soakaway pit, again exposing further features, slightly offset from the first to avoid damaging the medieval wall, thus giving the figure-of-eight shaped trench shown in figs 3a and b.

The controlled excavation

The following year, 1993, a trench was laid down immediately to the east of and partially surrounding the soakaway (fig 1, Area 3), in an attempt to determine the sequence of the deposits first noted in 1992, and to bracket the medieval terracing wall. It should be remembered, however, that the area examined was small, given the physical constraints of the garden, and that the conclusions must, of necessity, be tentative. This section of the report starts with the earliest occupation phase on the site (apart from the discovery of re-deposited Mesolithic material) and progresses forward in time.

PHASE I (figs 3b, 4)

The earliest deposits pre-dated the terracing work and survived only to the north of the retaining wall, having been destroyed by the terracing works to the south of it. These consisted of a small flue (225) with the remains of parallel chalk walls and a reddened clay floor covered in ash, which dipped down to the north and cut, at its lower end, into the natural gravel. The flue would presumably have led originally into the main body of a kiln which, however, had been completely removed by a later pit (206) to the north.

To the south, the flue had again been cut by a disturbed area (226) with no distinct edges, which yielded a few sherds of 14th/15th century buff coloured coarseware with thumb decoration around the base. The kiln therefore pre-dates this material and hence appears to belong to the 13th century, since it is stratigraphically equivalent to the layer of soil (227) that overlies the natural gravel and which produced a light scatter of tile, ash and 13th century pottery. The function of the kiln is uncertain, though the flue is too small to have formed part of a pottery kiln — possibly it was used for metal working, though no slag was found.

PHASE 2 (figs 3b, 4)

The first major structural activity within the area of the trench comes with the terracing work itself. The ground, within and beyond the lower two-thirds of the trench, was completely

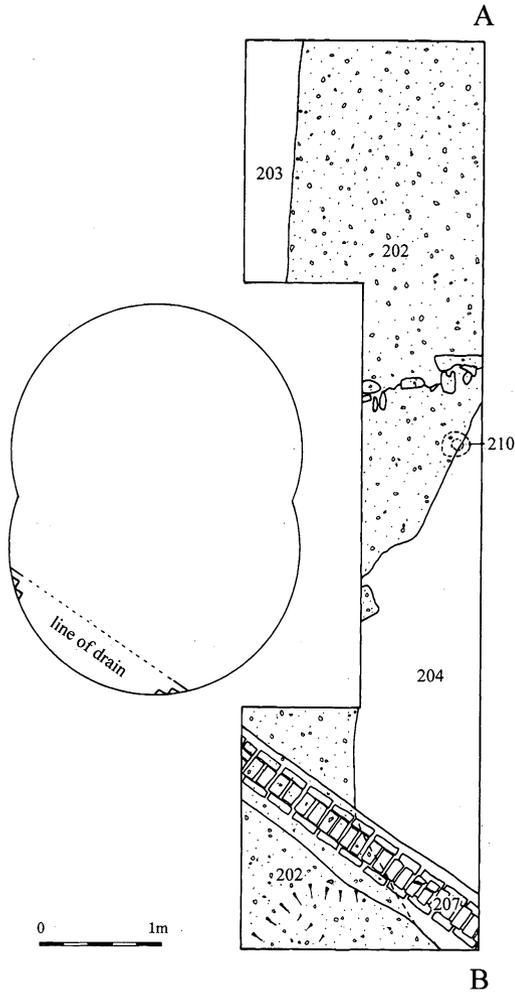


Fig 3a Willmer House: Areas 2 and 3: upper levels

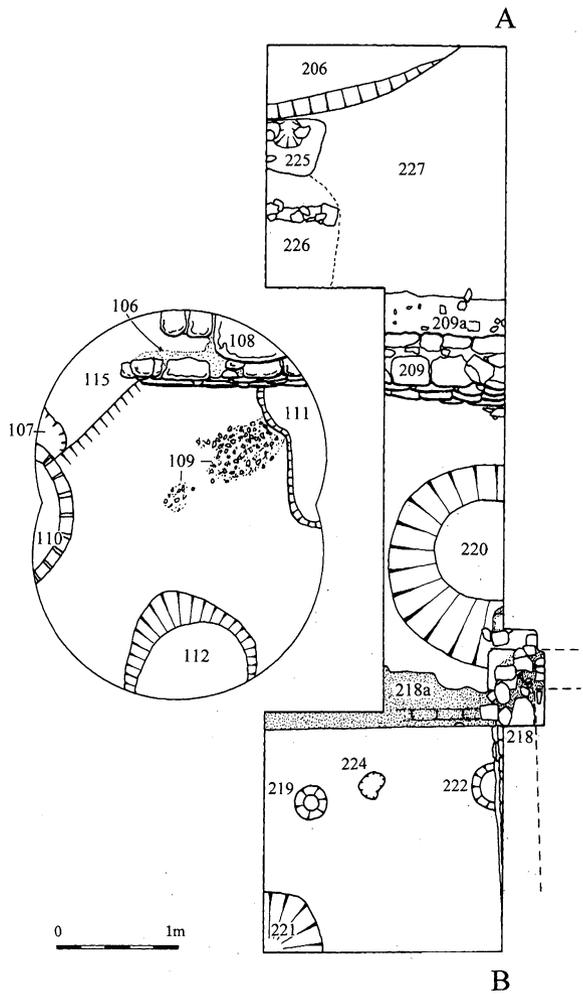


Fig 3b Willmer House: Areas 2 and 3: lower levels

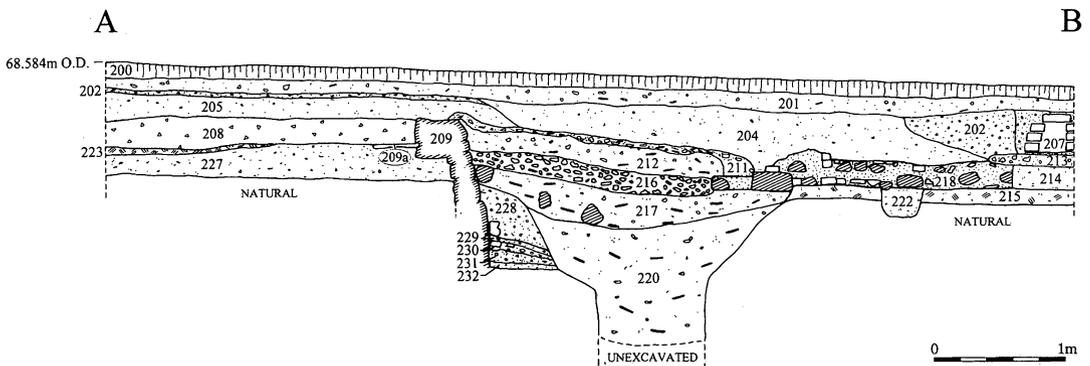


Fig 4 Willmer House: Area 3: section A-B

removed to a maximum depth of about 1m, leaving a level surface of clean natural gravel. A well built clunch wall (209, fig 5) was constructed along the 10° off-vertical face of the resulting cut. The wall was bonded with clay and keyed in to the ground behind it by means of an overlapping upper layer of larger stones. Above the wall, to the north, a chalk rubble layer (208) was laid over the earlier kiln, pit and soil levels and packed down to form a hard surface, level with the top of the terracing wall. No postholes were noted within the small area exposed in the trench, but the relatively clean nature of the surface may indicate that it formed the floor of a building. A few sherds of 14th/15th century pottery, some nails, brick fragments, and oyster shell were recovered from the top of this surface and again may give an indication of date.

In the southern half of the trench, the gravel surface, which resulted from the terracing work, had three postholes (219, 222, 224) and a pit (221) cut into it. The only datable material came from the pit in the form of a few 14th/15th century potsherds, found together with animal bone and oyster shell.

A narrow strip at the base of the wall itself was approximately 60cm lower than the main gravel surface and, given the accumulation of various sediment levels (228–232), must have remained open for a period of some years. It perhaps formed a flat bottomed drainage ditch running parallel to the wall and separating it from the timber structure to the south. At this phase, therefore, it seems likely that buildings existed at both levels of the terracing, above and below the retaining wall itself.

PHASE 2A (figs 3b, 4)

Over an undetermined, but relatively short period of time, several layers of deposits (228–232) built up in the ditch(?) at the base of the wall, though none contained any finds. At this point an 80cm-wide well shaft was dug, partially cutting through these deposits and into the natural gravel. The shaft (220) was only sampled to a depth of 2.22m below modern ground surface, for reasons of safety, and it is therefore not possible to date the construction of the feature itself. However it exhibited the V-shape, characteristic of the collapsed tops of unlined wells and appeared to have been deliberately filled in by the late 15th/early 16th century. This fill layer (220) produced the bulk of the finds from the site, yielding reasonable quantities of glazed and coarseware sherds, as well as a number of small finds including an iron candle bracket and two knives complete with wooden handles and brass fittings. All the material was however re-deposited and also included residual 13th century sherds. The upper level of the capping (217) contained roof tile and a number of fragments of clunch masonry, which must have come from the demolition of some building in the general vicinity.

PHASE 3 (figs 3b, 4)

This consisted of a building constructed of brick and re-used stone (218), and an associated cobbled surface (216), exposed in the southern end of the trench. Only one corner of the building was exposed by the trench; most of the structure, therefore, lay to the east of the excavated area. A narrower wall (218a), the imprint of which showed on a layer of mortar, ran from the corner of the building at right angles across the trench. This, given its alignment, may form a boundary or yard wall and represent a continuation of the split of the site into two sections, though whether these represent separate properties is unknown. To the north, the area of cobbling (216; shown in section only) remained intact, but to the south no features were noted other than an accumulated layer of soil (214) covering the earlier medieval postholes. No datable finds were recovered from any layers associated with this building, but from the size of brick and the lack of any frogging, a date in the late 16th/early 17th centuries seems likely.

To the north of the terrace wall, the trench exposed the edge of an apparently substantial pit (206), which was approximately contemporary with the brick building (218) since both were ultimately sealed by the same fill levels (204, 205) — see below, phase 4. The pit itself could only be emptied to a depth of 65cm, since only an edge appeared within the trench — the full extent



Fig 5 Willmer House: the clunch terracing wall (209) seen from the south

of the feature is therefore unknown. If, however, the exposed curve continues as a full circle, the pit must have had a diameter of approximately 6m and have been a very substantial feature to the rear of the building on the site now occupied by Willmer House. A number of sherds of late 17th century pottery were recovered from the fill, together with a badly worn coin of William and Mary. The pit seems too substantial to have been used for domestic purposes and may possibly be connected with the tanning industry, which is known to have been sited along West Street at this period (Parks 1989).

PHASE 4 (figs 3b, 4)

Re-deposited material (211, 212) continued to accumulate below the terracing wall until, at some time in the late 17th/early 18th centuries, the brick building was demolished and the whole area, including the large pit (206, see above), was levelled by the deposit of a thick band of soil (204, 205). This contained a number of fragments of clay pipe stem as well as oyster shell, a few potsherds and a scatter of tile and brick. Thus, for the first time in several hundred years, the medieval terracing work disappeared completely from sight, though the line appeared to continue in use, as a stakehole (210) was found above the buried wall. This perhaps formed part of an east-west fence, possibly indicating the continuing division of the site into two parts.

PHASE 5 (figs 3a, 4)

At this point and possibly connected with the levelling works in phase 4, the site was converted into a formal garden lying to the rear of the Georgian town house built in 1718. A certain amount of brick and tile debris was recovered from the upper parts of the levelling fill, and may well come from the construction of Willmer House itself.

The area has remained in use as a garden up to the present day and the upper levels noted during the excavation related to gravel paths (202), shown on mid-19th century maps, and to other garden features. The only exception to this rule was the construction of a brick drain (207) which cut the gravel path and ran diagonally across the southern end of the trench. The latest garden features to be recovered were a set of cast iron tennis court markers, probably dating to the inter-war period.

Conclusion

The earliest evidence for use of the site, other than in the Mesolithic period, comes in the 13th century with the recovery of abraded potsherds from soil levels inside of Willmer House itself. This may well result from manuring scatter and indicate agricultural activity at that period. Towards the end of the century the first direct occupation of the site takes place, with the construction of a small kiln, the flue of which was found in the 1993 excavation. The site therefore appears to have been used for industrial purposes, which may well have been associated with as yet unlocated buildings in the area.

The first major occupation for which evidence survives comes in the 14th century with the construction of the terrace wall and associated timber buildings. This project involved large-scale earth moving operations and must have been the result of a pressing need for level building space. This is very surprising at this period, especially given the fact that the site is well clear of the centre of the medieval town. Equally surprising is the indication that the terracing wall appears not to be confined to the grounds of Willmer House alone. Probing under the existing garden wall to the east indicates that the terracing wall passes underneath it. Interestingly the gravel road, which runs parallel and to the east of the garden wall, shows a distinct dip over the likely line of the terracing wall. This would seem to indicate firstly that the levelling works were extensive and secondly that the existing property boundaries are post-14th century in date.

Following the construction of the terracing, occupation continued at the two levels with the digging of the 15th century well and the construction of the brick building and possible tanning pit in the late 16th/early 17th centuries. These features are probably associated with the building which existed on the street frontage and which was demolished and the site levelled to make way for the existing house. In 1718 the site underwent a complete change in use when it was converted, possibly from two properties, into a formal garden and Georgian town house. This arrangement has remained essentially the same until the present day, though the use to which the building has been put has varied over the last two centuries or so. Given the history of the site, little of which was known before the excavation, it seems particularly appropriate that it now houses the Museum of Farnham.

The finds

The finds, which include a small assemblage of bones, are held by the Museum of Farnham under Accession No A993.28.

THE POTTERY

Very little pottery was found in primary contexts and where it did exist only small sherds survived. For this reason the report, based on comments by Phil Jones, covers the only reasonably large assemblage recovered, that from the upper fill levels of the well shaft (217, 220). All the

material was re-deposited and consisted of a collection of 459 small sherds, none of which was considered to be worth illustrating.

The collection is dominated by late medieval types of vessel forms and fabrics, and all of the major ceramic traditions and types that were current during the 15th century in west Surrey are represented. These include late medieval whiteware and its red/white variant, which together account for 43% of the collection by sherds, Tudor green fine whiteware at 23.75%, and one body sherd of a Raeren stoneware drinking mug. The remaining sherds were of various grey/brown sandy ware variants, some of which seem typical of 13th or 14th century types, although most seem more likely to be of later medieval finer grey sandy types. A few sherds of coarse sandy whiteware were also present and are more likely to have belonged to 13th or 14th century vessels. Most, however, were eroded and are likely to be residual. Only one sherd belongs to an early medieval ceramic tradition and that is an eroded sherd of greyware that is tempered with quartz sand and some chalk and flint.

Three rim sherds are from cups that were over-fired, so that the glaze has boiled and, in places, turned into a pale buff crust. This probably occurred in a domestic hearth, but it is possible that the rims represent wasters from the manufacture of Tudor green glaze pottery.

SMALL FINDS

The iron knives, by John Price

Two iron knives (fig 6) were found close together in the infill of the well (fig 4, 220) and therefore appear to have been discarded by the late 15th century. Although similar in size and manufacture, they are obviously different in some respects. Both are heavily corroded and, being covered with a hard accretion, required X-radiography before further work could proceed.

The X-ray plates showed clearly the copper alloy attachments and rivets that held the wooden parts (called the scale) of the handle together. They also provide evidence of the original iron surfaces and the state of corrosion of the ironwork. Unfortunately, because of the thickness of the accretions with some small pebbles embedded, it has not yet been possible to identify with clarity any cutler's mark. These marks were often stamped into the blade with a unique non-ferrous metal design identifying the maker. Cutlers' marks were common in Europe during medieval and later periods and became compulsory for knives produced in the City of London. In later times, knives were often sold in pairs, one for holding food, the other to cut and transfer it for eating. When this practice started is uncertain but it existed in the early 17th century (Cowgill *et al* 1987).

When cleaning is partly completed it may be necessary to radiograph the blades again to investigate the possibility of finding any cutler's marks, as they can sometimes be difficult to locate.

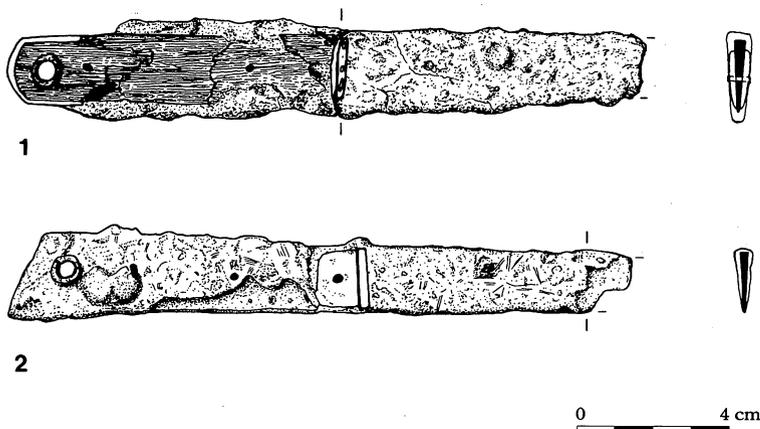


Fig 6 Willmer House: two knives from the infill (220) of the well. (1:2)

Knife 1

This survives to a length of 170mm, the handle just under 18mm wide with a slight taper. X-ray shows four rivets holding the substantial remains of the wooden handle, about 90mm long, to the iron tang. The cutting blade is triangular in section and there is a hole, with copper alloy reinforcement, about 10mm from the handle terminal for attaching the knife to a belt. The terminal is surrounded by a substantial band of copper alloy which covers about 20mm of the narrow side edge of the handle.

Knife 2

Just under 170mm long, this is not quite so elaborate and has three rivets on the handle which is about 93mm in length and which tapers from about 23mm to 17mm. The hole for a belt attachment is smaller but still made from copper alloy (wire?). The handle appears to be covered in wood and the blade is again of triangular section.

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