

## NOTES

# An excavation at Shoelands, Puttenham

### Introduction

Shoelands house and its grounds lie within the parish of Puttenham (SU 913 477 centred) close to the parish boundary with Seale, and south of the road linking Puttenham and Seale (fig 1, inset). The earliest surviving documentary evidence of the estate dates from the 13th century (*VCH*, 3, 55). An estate map of 1793 (in private hands) shows that at that time the grounds extended either side of the Puttenham/Seale boundary, occupying an area of nearly 150ha. The external brickwork of the present house is visibly of several builds (one, almost certainly not the earliest, bearing a 17th century date), but conceals evidence of a 15th century timber core (DBRG 1984). Early in 1992 a length of moulded chalk column was found *c* 110m to the south-west of the house within an area once bordered on three sides by water features and formerly believed to have been a moated site (*VCH*, 4, 400). Though this interpretation had subsequently been considered doubtful (Turner 1977, 94), the interest aroused by the find led to excavations being carried out between October 1992 and June 1993 within this area, shown on the estate map of 1793 to be part of Pigeon House Mead (fig 1). During the excavations the water features were confirmed to have been fishponds (D Turner, pers comm).

### Documentary evidence

The existence of a medieval dovecote on the estate might be inferred from the field names Lower and Upper Colverase (fig 1), immediately south of Pigeon House Mead, probably derived from 'culver house' an early name for a dovecote (McCann 1991, 152). A will dated 1730 (SHC G43/350) refers to a 'pigeon house' belonging to the owner of Shoelands though not necessarily on the Shoelands estate. A map of the parish of Puttenham, known only from a photograph (SyAS Huband Collection 5/17/3a, 28) appears to show the existence of the building whose foundations were uncovered. The map, stated by the Rev Huband to be a copy made in 1816 of an original from 1765, is not now in the possession of the family said to own it (SyAS Huband Collection 5/17/3a, 16); neither the original nor another copy has been located. The copy is reproduced on the photograph at a scale too small for the field names included upon it to be deciphered, but sufficient for a building to be clearly seen at the location of the excavation. The estate map of 1793 shows neither a dovecote nor any other building in Pigeon House Mead.

### The excavation

A line of three 3m x 1m trial trenches were opened (fig 1, T1–3) and revealed that on this part of the estate there was a sandy loam topsoil layer, an average of 0.5m thick and consistent in texture and colour throughout. This soil overlay a bed of peat, the thickness of which is greater than could be determined by probing with a hand auger.

An identical topsoil layer was found in subsequent excavations (fig 1, T4–8) carried out in a locality highlighted by a resistivity survey and where, despite restrictions imposed by the presence of trees and hedges, the large part of the foundations of a square building 8.2m x 8.2m overall with no internal walls was uncovered (fig 2). Prior to the erection of this building, an area of at least 10m x 10m of peat had been exposed and surfaced with a bed of clay upon which the foundations stood. These were of Bargate stone incorporating small quantities of broken roof tile; the minimum width of the foundations was 0.6m with the corners enlarged and angled as if to have accommodated external buttresses. A drop in level in the north-western side, 1.1m long with internally splayed jambs, may indicate the position of a door opening (fig 2). The clay had been surfaced inside the building with an irregular spread of mortar embedded in part with

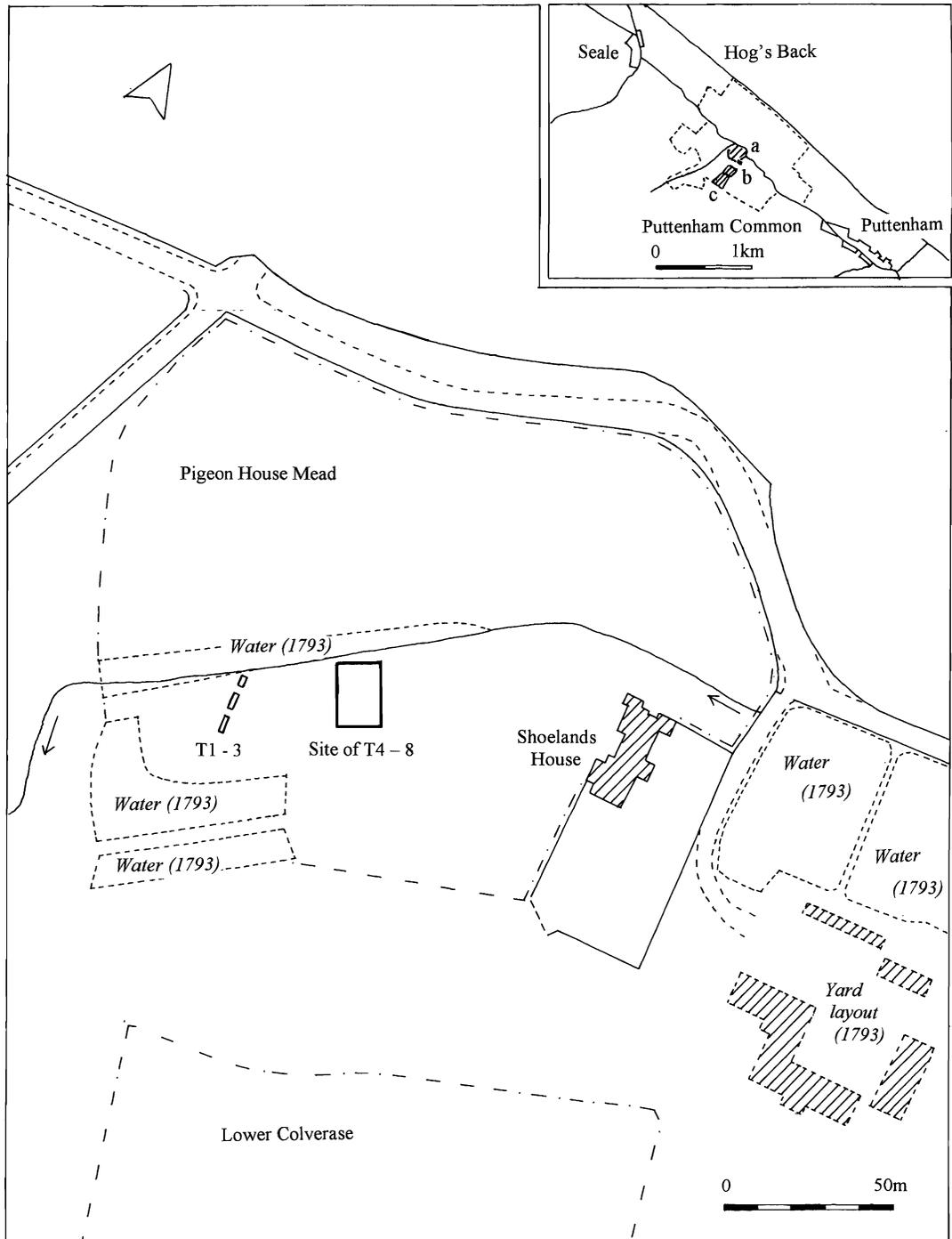


Fig 1 Shoelands, Puttenham: location plan. Inset shows: the extent of the estate in 1793 (dotted line) with (a) Pigeon House Mead, (b) Lower Colverase and (c) Upper Colverase

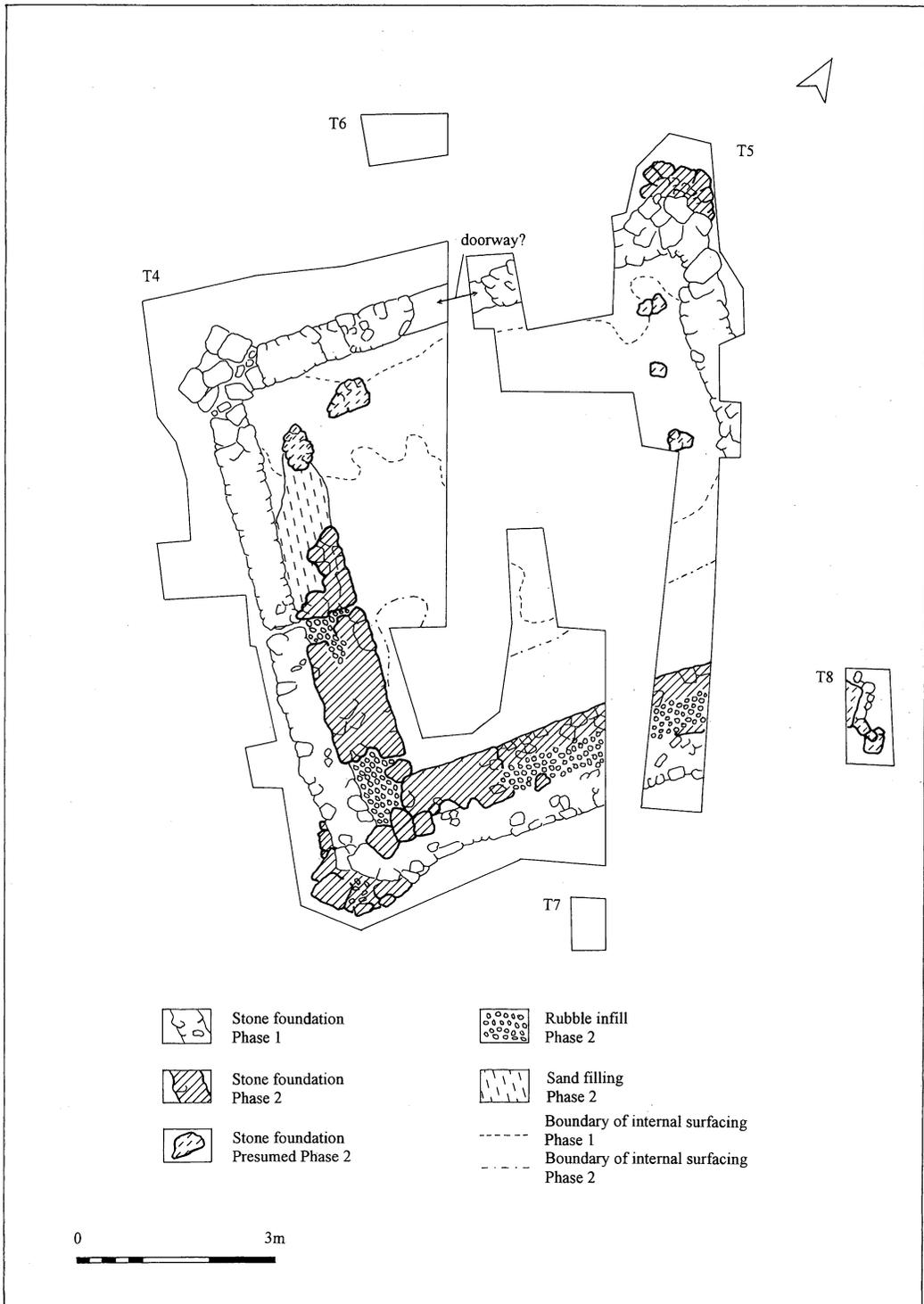


Fig 2 Shoelands, Puttenham: plan of trenches 4-8 showing the foundations of the building

small stones and brick and tile fragments. Outside the building, the clay had been surfaced with several layers of broken roof tiles, which had been laid on the clay to form a solid bed.

A deliberate break in continuity was found across the whole width and depth of the foundation at the midpoint of the south-western side, though nothing indicated its purpose; the opposite side could not be excavated to see whether it contained a similar break. At some stage the building suffered extensive damage such that the foundation uncovered south of the break was found to have tilted inwards while to the north it remained undisturbed.

A second phase of foundation work was recognized, indicating that extensive repairs had been undertaken to remedy the damage. Two, perhaps three, of the external corners were enlarged while a new Bargate stone foundation was laid down alongside the tilted length of the original. This new foundation varied in width, partly overlapping the original in some places while in others the gap between the two had been infilled with a mixture of mortar and rubble. The new foundation also had a break in the stonework at the midpoint of the south-western side, beyond which it became less substantial and soon petered out in the form of a few flat stones on a bed of sand. The sand was continued some distance further alongside the undisturbed foundation, occupying a depression in the clay that may have been dug out for an intended continuation of the new foundation that was never executed. The overall width of the double foundation in all cases measures 1.5m. A number of irregularly spaced small clusters of stones bedded on the clay, adjacent to the undisturbed foundation, were too insubstantial to be of constructional significance. However they may have been associated with the second phase of work since they were in positions relative to the foundation to maintain the 1.5m overall width. Adjacent to the new foundation the clay inside the building was surfaced with firmly packed tile fragments incorporating one localized area of crushed brick and another of unmortared brick paving.

No indication of settlement in the original foundation was found, while the fact that the foundations for the repair work were of similar construction and similarly founded on the clay points to the damage being unrelated to the ground conditions. The appearance of the disturbed foundation suggests the cause to be some considerable lateral force from a southerly or south-westerly direction, with the damage limited to one side of the break or breaks in continuity across the foundation.

A demolition layer consisted predominantly of roof tile but included small amounts of brick, one complete example being of identical dimensions on face to the bricks in the 17th century and earlier fabric of the house itself. Bricks surfaced with a grey/green glaze, of which fragments were present in the demolition layer, have no parallel in the house walls. A local concentration of fragments of window glass was found at the southern end of trench 5.

Dating material of any sort was scarce. Three sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the clay and may have been brought to site already embedded therein. A single sherd of Tudor Green ware and some 80 sherds of Borderware of *c* 16th–18th century date, found scattered throughout the soil above the clay, were otherwise the only relevant ceramic material.

## Discussion

Brick and tile were found in the demolition layer mixed in a way that points to the presence of both at the time of the final dismantling of the building. There can be little doubt that at this time the roof was tiled, but the construction of the walls remains uncertain. The noticeable scarcity of brick compared with tile in the demolition layer permits interpretations ranging from walls of brick that had been largely salvaged for re-use elsewhere to walls predominantly of timber. However, the whole layer was not uncovered and the area sampled need not be representative of this whole; neither need the repair works have been carried out in identical materials to those in the original walls.

Despite its location in Pigeon House Mead, nothing found in the excavation confirms the building to have been a dovecote and such a use has been questioned both on grounds of size, for this building, if a dovecote would have been one of the largest on plan recorded in Surrey (Joan Harding, pers comm), and of particular architectural features suggested by the presence

of glass and glazed bricks in the demolition layer. Glazed windows are not unknown in British dovecotes but, with only three examples given by McCann (1991, 134), would appear to be extremely rare, while decorative bands of glazed bricks or tiles are not uncommon on dovecotes in southern France but have never been reported on such buildings in Britain (*ibid.*, 103). Furthermore, the suggested position of the door does not conform to a seemingly widespread belief that the door of a dovecote would be in the wall facing the house; however, in discussing doorways McCann (*ibid.*, 135) says nothing concerning their position while elsewhere he notes only that a writer as late as 1735 advised that the door should be visible from the house (*ibid.*, 127), perhaps signifying that sometimes it was not.

None of these architectural features that raise doubts as to the building being a dovecote favour without question alternative interpretations such as a granary, cart house or stable. Dual-purpose buildings, with a dovecote placed above one of these others, and which are generally larger than freestanding dovecotes, tend to be later in date (McCann 1991, 98). In addition, such structures might be expected to have been located among farm buildings grouped around a yard (Harvey 1984, 75) where such a layout existed, and a yard layout at Shoelands is found to the south-east of the house, though its existence cannot be confirmed prior to 1765.

Pigeon House Mead occupies in part some of the lowest-lying ground within the estate, a seemingly unlikely location for a dovecote. Many early examples were sited on the highest ground available at the edge of an estate (McCann 1991, 129), which at Shoelands suggests that the inferred medieval structure might have stood near the boundary of Upper Colverase and Puttenham Common. Some later examples are found in positions sheltered from the wind and near to a fishpond so that the doves could bathe (Spandl 1998, 6). These conditions appear to be met at Pigeon House Mead which, occupying some of the lowest-lying ground within the estate, is sheltered from cold winds by the Hog's Back and also had fishponds by 1765. Later it became fashionable for brick dovecotes to be treated as one of a range of ornamental buildings (McCann 1991, 127) and as such they are often sited near the entrance to a property. At Shoelands the possible prior existence of the pond adjacent to the driveway could have prevented the siting of a dovecote in such a fashionable location, but it may be that the dovecote that must surely have given its name to Pigeon House Mead was built before this fashion was introduced.

Ceramic evidence suggests that the particular building excavated in Pigeon House Mead did pre-date the fashion, though that any building of substance was constructed in that area at any time is surprising given the nature of the subsoil. The clay bed would have spread the load of the building widely over the peat while, in supporting this engineering solution, the building itself may have been larger on plan than comparable structures raised off more suitable ground conditions. However, the foundation seems fundamentally flawed by inclusion of the break or breaks in continuity that permitted the two parts to act independently of one another, though the introduction of a similar break in the foundations to the repair work suggests that the importance of retaining this feature outweighed any thought of a change in design that might improve the stability of the foundation and prevent a repeat of the damage. The very act of repair suggests also the importance of the building, whatever its purpose, to the Shoelands estate. No evidence could be found in surviving records of the estate to indicate either the cause or the occasion of this damage. That the cause may have been a particularly ferocious and well-recorded storm of the early 18th century was considered a possibility. However, a search for circumstantial evidence from elsewhere within Puttenham was taken no further than a perusal of the journals of Rev Charles Kerry (Bierton 1990, 91). Additional effort was considered fruitless for, though Kerry transcribed a contemporary record from Ash that spoke of uprooted trees, blown-down chimneys and overturned barns in that nearby parish (SyAS Kerry Manuscripts, 180/2, vol 4, 99), even he had located no account of the effects — if any — of this storm upon Puttenham.

The pottery sequence would seem to indicate that the building was in use from about the 16th to the 18th century. Its existence in 1765 is confirmed by cartographic evidence, and its probable disappearance by 1793 similarly suggested. Certainly this latter date would fit with the general decline in popularity of dovecotes, from *c* 1800 onwards (McCann 1991, 98).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are offered to Sarah Webster, Gillian Drew, Audrey Monk and Ron Martin for assistance during the excavation; to Tony Clark and Dennis Turner for advice and continued interest; to Kevin Fryer for commenting on the pottery; to Clive Webster for organizing the reinstatement of the site; to Melanie Wilkinson for typing various drafts and to Glenys Crocker, Pat Nicolaysen, Audrey Graham and Elizabeth Whitbourn for assistance in bringing this report to fruition.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bierton, G N, 1990 To the Great Common ... for a little spade exercise, *SyAC*, **80**, 91–103  
 DBRG 1984 Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey), archive report no 3105  
 Harvey, N, 1984 *A history of farm buildings in England and Wales*  
 McCann, J, 1991 An historical enquiry into the design and use of dovecotes, *Trans Ancient Monuments Soc*, **35**, 89–160  
 Spandl, K, 1998 Exploring the round houses of doves, *Brit Archaeol*, **35**, 6–7  
 Turner, D J, 1977 Moated sites in Surrey: a provisional list, *SyAC*, **71**, 89–94  
*VCH: The Victoria history of the county of Surrey* (ed H E Malden) 1902–12, 4 vols

GRAHAM BIERTON and GRAHAM HAYES