

# Excavations at Sutton House in Hackney 1990-92

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## The excavations

SUTTON HOUSE is the oldest surviving house in the east end of London, and a rare example of a National Trust urban property. It stands at the west end of Homerton High Street, on the corner with Isabella Road (TQ 3258 8508, see Fig. 1). It was built in the 16th century, and had a continuous history of occupation until the 1980s; now it has been given a new lease of life in the 1990s.

Excavations at the House were undertaken by the Department of Greater London Archaeology, and latterly by the Museum of London Archaeology Service, following recording of the standing structure by English Heritage and in advance of refurbishment by the National Trust. The excavations took place in three stages: in the summer of 1990, in February 1991 and in September 1992. In that time they covered most parts of the House (except the two front cellars), and also the front yard, the courtyard and the gardens. Excavation was limited to those areas and levels due to be disturbed by the renovations. Some of the excavation was therefore shallow (generally 0.45m), in advance of the lowering of floors, and some deeper in advance of the laying of service pipes. All stages of the excavation were directed by myself, and were conducted in a spirit of fruitful cooperation with the National Trust and with the Sutton House Society.

The excavations presented an unusual opportunity to examine a domestic archaeological sequence of the post-medieval centuries. Post-excavation analysis distinguished 11 phases of development, stretching from the period before the foundation of the House until the building of major additions in 1904. Before Sutton House was built on the site, it was part of an arable field, ploughed repeatedly in strips from north to south from the 12th to the 16th century. The undulating surface of the ploughstrips or *selions* was traced from the levels of the ploughsoil at various locations all over the site. There was little sign of other early activity, except for a few ploughed-out rubbish pits, and there was no direct evidence of any previous structures.

## A courtier's house

The House was built on the east side of the village of Hackney in about 1535 and occupied by Sir Ralph

Sadler, a courtier of Henry VIII, who served him as ambassador to Scotland. It was originally called *Bryk Place*. The name *Sutton House* is a misnomer applied by the Victorians, who mistakenly believed that it was the home of Thomas Sutton, the founder of Charterhouse school; in fact he lived next door. The construction date has been proved by dendrochronology, which has dated the main structural timbers.

The House was a classic Tudor brick-built H-shaped house, but with its wings twisted slightly to conform to the shape of its building plot. The plot was formed of the north ends of two selions of the common field. The distorted shape can clearly be seen in the plan of the original House (Fig. 2). The walls which have been investigated in the excavations are shown in black. All the walls were laid out at once, and their brickwork bonded together at the corners. It was therefore all of one build, including the cellars in the fronts of the two wings. Some of the post-holes and slots which supported the builders' scaffolding were traced around the rear of the wings. The Hall was not divided, except perhaps by a Screens partition near the east end. The ground to the north and the east was levelled up over the selions to form gardens, although the land to the east may not have belonged to the Sutton House property at this time.

All three building ranges originally had mortar floors. The Kitchen was in the rear of the East Wing. Its fireplace was originally 1.9m wide, under a timber *bressumer*. On the west side of the fireplace was a doorway leading out to the garden behind the house (Fig. 3).

The ground floor of the West Wing was originally divided by a substantial cross-wall one metre thick, later demolished. This tied the two sides of the wing together and created a square ground-floor room to the south which could only be entered from the courtyard. It incorporated in its thickness a base for a fireplace, which served the room to the north, and a garderobe shaft, which must have served the upper floors, though with a cleaning entrance on the ground floor (Fig. 4). Some fine glassware was found in the fill of the shaft. The square room at the rear of the wing may have had

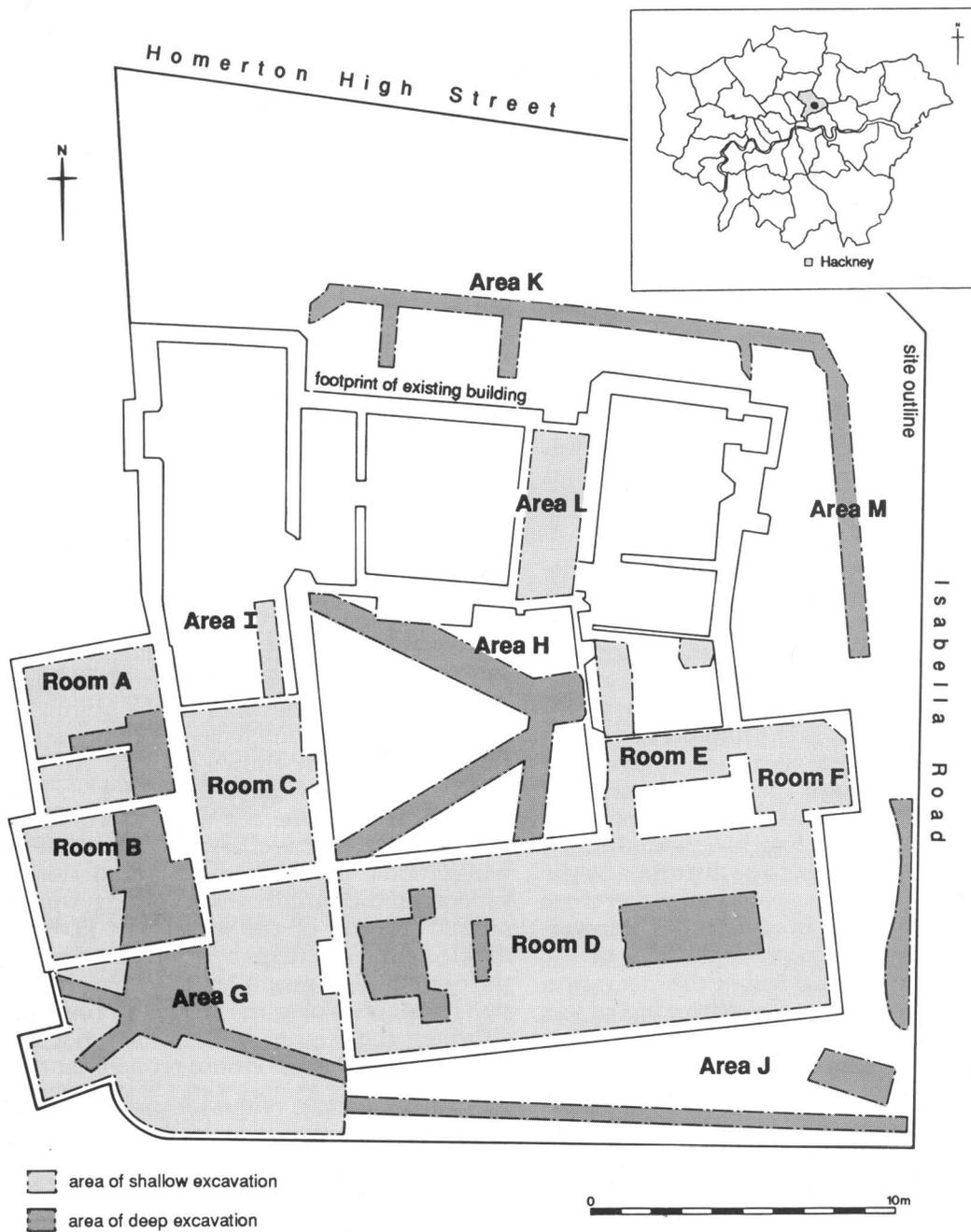


Fig. 1: the location of Sutton House

some small-scale industrial function, involving glass waste and a small brick feature inserted into the floor.

Contemporary with the building was a well to its south-west. This actually stood just inside the property of the next house to the west, which was called the *Tan House*. When found during the excavation, it was 4m deep down to the water table, and it still had water in the bottom. To its north was a yard, also belonging to the *Tan House* property.

### A merchant's house

In the early 17th century, when the House was occupied by a merchant family, a boundary wall was built between the *Tan House* and Sutton House properties. It was built about 1605 by Thomas Sutton, who owned the *Tan House*. It ran parallel to the West Wing and was aligned with the east side of the well. An outbuilding was built against the west side of the wall. Its walls were partly made of re-used ragstone and greensand blocks, perhaps derived from a medieval structure on the site of

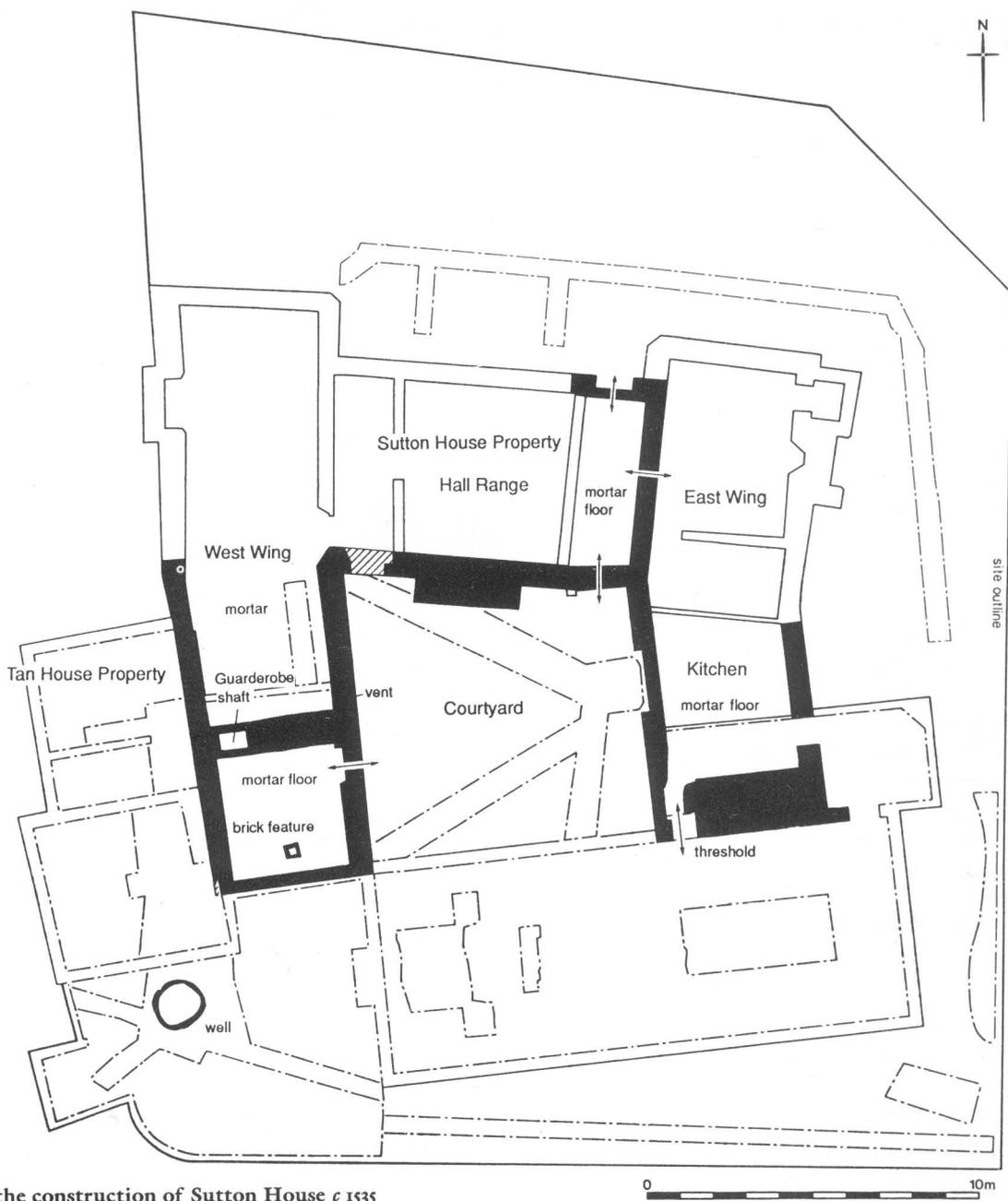


Fig. 2: the construction of Sutton House c 1535

the Tan House. A brick hearth was built in the chimney end, against the boundary wall. Later in the century it was remodelled with a timber floor and a new hearth. Only fragments of the structure survived its demolition. A similar boundary wall was built to run northwards from the north-east corner of the house to the Homerton High Street frontage. It was also a retaining wall, the ground level being lower to its east than to its west.

At this time the central courtyard area was laid out as a garden, drained in the centre by a small sub-

circular brick sump. Behind the House a garden terrace was added, with a rammed gravel surface fronted to the south by low brick walls. It had a projection to the south opposite the entrance through the Hall Range, probably leading to steps descending into formal gardens. These stretched all the way down to Hackney Brook. Originally the terrace measured 4.5m from north to south, and 18.5m from east to west, across the width of the two wings and the courtyard, perhaps with a low stone balustrade crowning the brick walls. Little

remained of it to be excavated, as it was severely truncated by later features. It must have been the dominant feature of the garden during the first part of the House's history.

In the middle of the 17th century, timber floors were laid in the Hall and the West Wing, resting on joists bedded into the ground. The boundary wall to the west, with the adjacent out-building, and the retaining wall to the north-east, were all demolished late in the century, and the Sutton House property was extended to the west. A lean-to structure was then built against the west wall of the House over a double cess-pit, across the line of the boundary wall.

### **A house divided ...**

The cross-wall in the West Wing was removed in about 1700 and partially robbed out, creating one long room from the rear of the Wing to the end of the room with the linenfold panelling at the front. A new doorway was made at its south end, leading out onto the terrace. This fundamental remodelling led to a structural weakness in the Wing, by removing its main cross-bracing element, which meant that its rear had to be taken down and rebuilt in the middle decades of the 18th century. A new yard was then laid out to its west, bounded by a retaining wall on its south side and an open-sided coal-house on its north side.

At this time the House was divided into two properties by walls built to run across the front yard, through the Hall Range creating an entrance passage, across the Courtyard, and on through the Garden. The West Wing and the Hall Range became the Western house, and the East Wing and the entrance passage became the Eastern house (Fig. 5). These changes were reflected in the Land Tax assessments of the middle of the 18th century. The property division across the courtyard and



**Fig. 3: 16th-century kitchen fireplace, narrowed in the 18th century**

between the two gardens was built of blocks of 16th-century masonry, derived from the partial demolition of the West Wing. The terrace to its east remained in use. As part of the changes in the garden of the Western house, the west end of the terrace went out of use and the 16th-century well was capped. The capping had a double arch of brick, with end walls to seal it off. Garden soil was levelled up over both the capping and the redundant terrace to establish a garden at the south-west corner of the House. Water continued to be drawn from the well through an inserted lead pipe. The west part of the courtyard was surfaced as a yard, and the east part was levelled up as a garden.



**Fig. 4: 16th-century cross-wall in West Wing showing garderobe shaft, demolished in the 18th century**

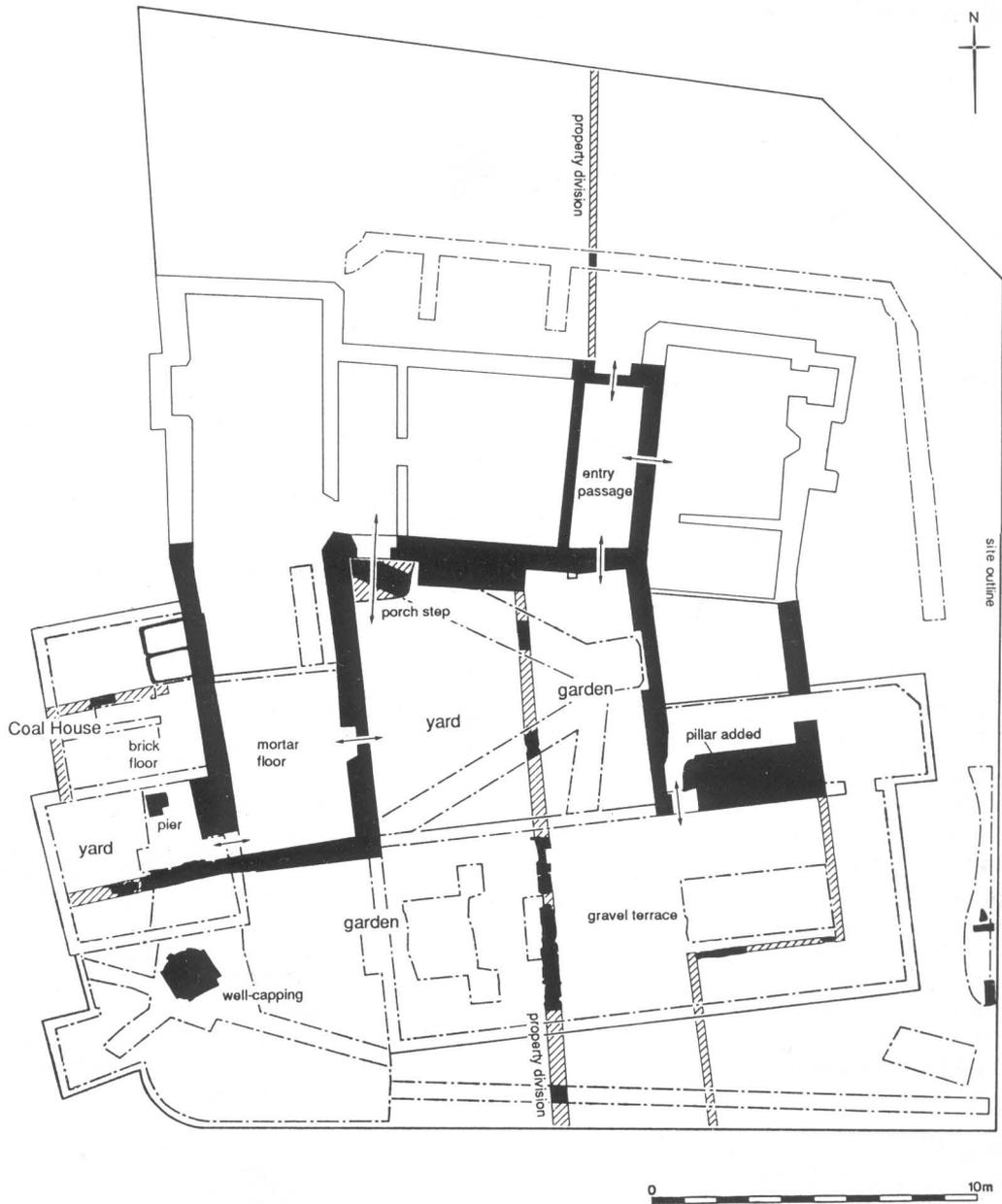


Fig. 5: West Wing rebuilt and House divided, c 1740-1760

In the last part of the 18th century, suspended wooden floors were laid in both wings and in the entrance passages. The joist of the new floors were supported on small brick piers in the West Wing, and the door-sills were raised by the height of four brick courses. The East Wing probably had the same arrangement. Here the former Kitchen fireplace was narrowed to a width of 0.75m by brick blocking (Fig. 3). Fireboxes were installed in front of the fireplaces in both wings, corresponding in height to the new floor levels. The fire-box in the

West Wing was found still full of ashes, buried underneath the Edwardian fireplace (Fig. 6). At this time the coal-house to the west of the House burned down and the remains were demolished.

To the rear of the East Wing a new Small House was built over the former terrace area, probably in the 1790s. It stretched from the west wall of the Wing to the Isabella Road frontage to the east. The west wall of the Small House incorporated in its foundations pieces of masonry from a 14th-century doorway. They probably derived from the

demolition of of St. John's church nearby in 1791. The Small House had a brick and mortar floor throughout the 19th century. When it was demolished the bricks were all removed, leaving their impressions in the mortar. The lines of internal partitions were also traceable. The Small House was extensively remodelled during the course of the century, involving the reconstruction of the entire eastern half.

### ... and re-united

In the early 19th century an outhouse was built in the garden, overlying the well capping near the south-west corner of the House. It had a brick and tile floor, and probably served as another coal-house. It was the first of a series of outbuildings which ran to the west along the rear of the Sutton Place gardens. The garden of the Western House originally stretched along here. A garden path ran to the north of the outhouse, composed of gravel edged with brick. A conservatory was also built over the eastern part of the courtyard, served by a central brick and tile drain.

In the mid-19th century an outside lavatory was built in the Courtyard, against the west side of the wall which still divided the two properties. This was one of the later structures excavated on the site, and presented no problem of interpretation, as the U-bend was still *in situ*. Gas and water supplies, and new drains were also laid to the two houses.

In c 1890 the House was re-united and used as a church institute. The dividing walls and their associated structures were taken down. Most of the garden to the south of the house was sold as the site of a school. The current boundary wall was then built along the south side of the House. A new surface of York stone and gravel was laid across the courtyard, and in the garden to its south a small concrete goldfish pond was built. The painted conch shells which decorated it were found in its backfill. In 1904 the Small House was stripped out and demolished to make room for the construction of the Wenlock Barn. This was built across the rear of the East Wing to the corner of the West Wing, fully enclosing the courtyard for the first time. Other structures were added to the outer walls of the two wings.

The House was given to the National Trust in the 1930s and then used as Union offices by ASTMS. By the mid-1980s it was semi-derelict and occupied by squatters. Extensive refurbishment by the National Trust began in 1990, and is now complete.

Excavation at Sutton House has revealed a sequence of occupation and adaptation from its construction c 1535 to the early part of this century. The investigation described briefly above can only refer to events on the ground floor of the House, its courtyards and gardens. On this site, because it is a standing building, there is an opportunity to combine this with other sorts of evidence to understand the whole history of the House. Excavation results therefore need to be considered together with the standing structure analysis by English Heritage, the documentary research by the Sutton House Society, and the dendrochronological analysis undertaken by MOLAS. A publication blending all these elements is being compiled as a joint English Heritage and National Trust monograph under the editorship of Victor Belcher, and is expected to be available in 1999. A subscription list has been opened and your name can be added to it by contacting Carole Mills at Sutton House (0181 986 2264).

It is well worth making the journey to Hackney to visit Sutton House, which is open to the public from 11.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesdays and Sundays, and from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays, from the beginning of February until the end of November.



Fig. 6: 18th-century firebox and Edwardian firebox