

Excavations at Mount Vernon, Frogнал Rise, Hampstead

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Introduction

THE MUSEUM of London Archaeology Service was commissioned by Wealthstar Limited to carry out an archaeological assessment¹ followed by an archaeological field evaluation² in advance of the proposed redevelopment of the site of the Medical Research Council Laboratories, Mount Vernon, Frogнал Rise, Hampstead, London NW3.

These preliminary stages confirmed the archaeological potential of the site, which led to further work in the form of an archaeological excavation³.

The site, measuring slightly over 1 hectare in area (2.5 acres), was triangular in shape and was located

in the historic area of Hampstead Village (Fig. 1). The site was bounded on the eastern side by Frogнал Rise, to the south by the mainly pedestrian access Mount Vernon and on the western edge by Frogнал. It is approximately 8 km (5 miles) northwest of the City of London, in the London Borough of Camden, TQ 2621 8590.

Historical Background

One of the earliest detailed maps of Hampstead Village is the John Rocque survey dating from about 1746 (Fig. 2). Four buildings are shown of which one (Building 1), in the south-eastern corner, appears to be in a similar position to the

1. K Wooldridge *Mount Vernon, Frogнал Rise, Hampstead London NW3: An Archaeological Impact Assessment* (1995) MoLAS.
2. A Steele *Mount Vernon, Frogнал Rise, Hampstead London NW3: An Archaeological Evaluation Report* (1995) MoLAS.
3. P Hutchings *Mount Vernon, Frogнал Rise, Hampstead London NW3: An Archaeological Post-Excavation Assessment* (1996) MoLAS.

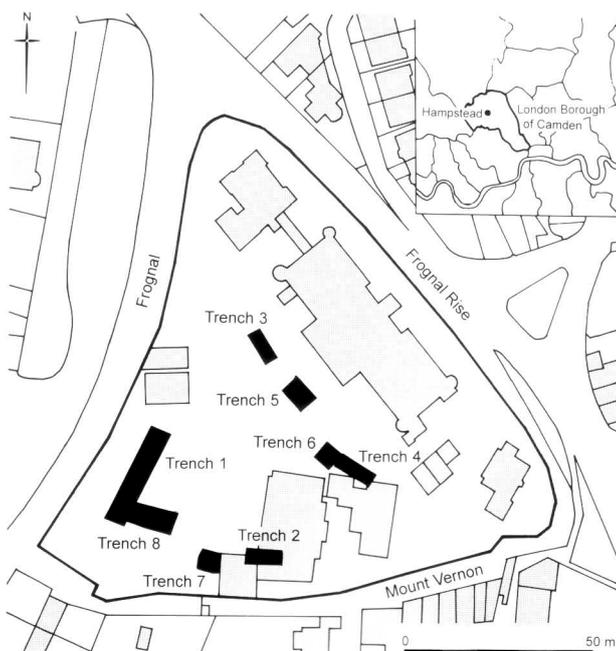


Fig. 1: site location plan

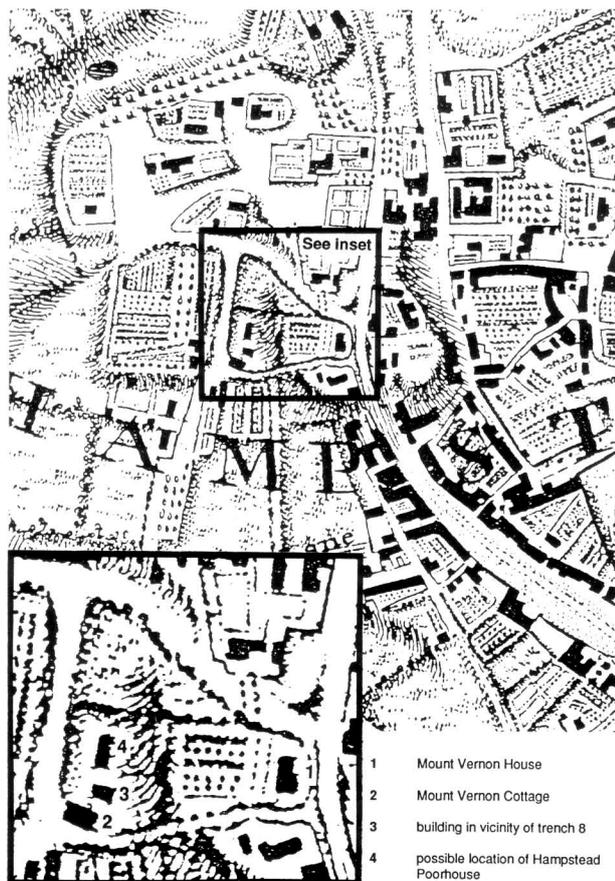


Fig. 2: John Rocque's map of 1746



Fig. 3: drawing of the Hampstead poorhouse (print dated 1805)

present-day Mount Vernon House, a grade II listed building dating from the mid-18th century or earlier. A second building (Building 2) at the south-western corner of the site, approximates to the position of the present-day Mount Vernon Cottage, although the building shown on the Rocque map appears to be larger than the building existing today. Little appears to be known about the history of Mount Vernon Cottage, and the building has not been protected by listing as of either particular historical or aesthetic value. Two further buildings are shown on the Rocque map (Buildings 3 and 4). No remains of these buildings are visible today, but it is likely that the northernmost may have been the 18th-century Hampstead poorhouse (Building 4).

The history of the building which later became the 18th-century Hampstead poorhouse is vague. It was built in the 16th or 17th centuries and appears to have become a boarding house around 1650 and remained so into the 18th century. It was purchased by the Hampstead Parish Guardians in

1729 and was in use as a parish poorhouse and housed paupers, mainly women and children. The poorhouse building fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1801 when a new poorhouse was located in another part of the village.

Drawings of the house dated 1805 (Fig. 3) show a three-gabled, double-chimneyed brick building with a wooden gallery located in the central facade above the main entrance. The rear garden of the building appears to slope upwards suggesting that the location of the house was at the foot of a hill. Ancillary outbuildings can be seen on the drawing, situated to the south of the house.

The medieval features

The underlying geology of the site is London Clay sealed by Claygate and Bagshot Beds, which are deposits of mixed sands and clays. The north-eastern part of the site formed a plateau, from which the ground dropped away substantially towards the south-west. In the north-east the surface of the natural silty clay was at a height of 117.42m

OD but sloped down to the south-west where it was at 108.8m OD. The natural was in places overlain by a 'weathered' natural deposit formed by root action and general erosion.

Cut into the weathered natural were a few features located on the higher ground in the eastern part of the site (Fig. 4). Two parallel linear gullies or ditches up to 0.30m deep were aligned east-west and filled with silty sand. A sherd of medieval pottery dated 1150 to 1300 and a piece of worked Reigate stone with a cut edge, possibly originally part of an ashlar block or stone moulding, were collected from the fills. There were also a few small postholes and a pit 0.80m deep associated with the gullies.

These features represented remnants of what was probably a rural landscape incorporating a medieval field system.

Silty clay deposits overlay the features and were interpreted as hillwash or colluvium. They were

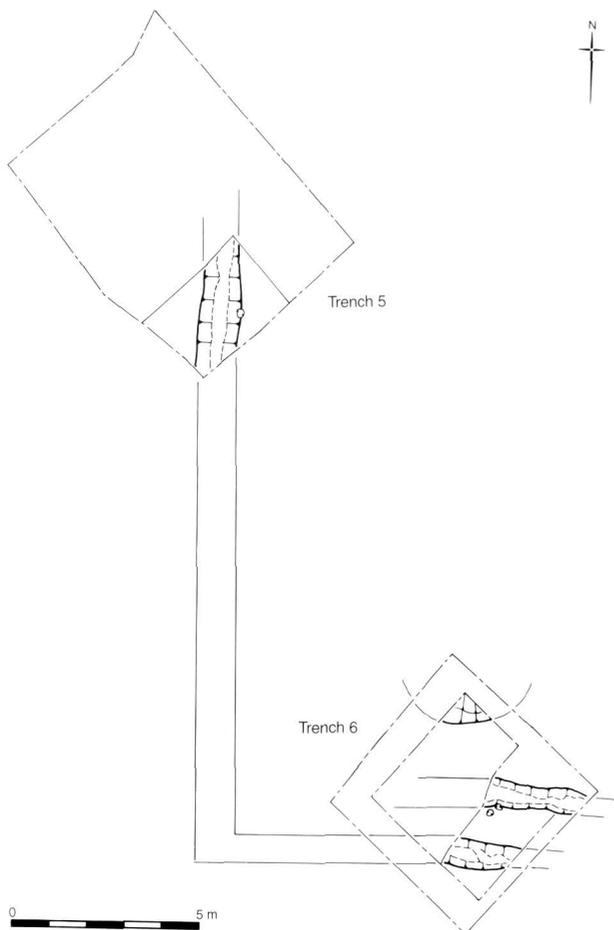


Fig. 4: plan of the excavated medieval field system



Fig. 5: spout in the form of an animal head from a lavabo

up to 0.50m thick and followed the natural profile of the hill. A few sherds of pottery were found in these deposits and were dated 1240-1300, to the late medieval period. The hillwash deposits probably had accumulated over some time; the natural and agricultural processes have resulted in considerable weathering and soil movement down the slope.

There is one highly unusual ceramic vessel from the hillwash which has few, if any, parallels in excavated contexts from London (Fig. 5). It consists of a large spout in the form of an animal head, from a lavabo (a handwashing basin with a handle), in Dutch slip-decorated redware. It was probably imported from Flanders or the Low Countries between 1400 and 1550.

The animal head appears to be a dog or similar beast. The mouth is a deeply incised line each side of a central channel through the head and the lower jaw has closely spaced combing from front to back. The nostrils are two impressed rounded holes, and the eyes and other features are formed from white slip with impressed central holes. The whole head is clear-glazed. It can be related to a small group of decorated basins with handles in the form of human or animal heads made in the Low Countries and in post-medieval slipped redware (formerly Guys ware) found in London and on the Continent⁴. These can probably be best dated to the 15th and early 16th centuries, and

4. D R M Gaimster and F Verhaeghe 'Handles with face-masks: a cross-Channel type of late medieval highly decorated basin' in D Gaimster and M Redknap (eds) *Everyday and Exotic Pottery from Europe* (1992) 303-323.

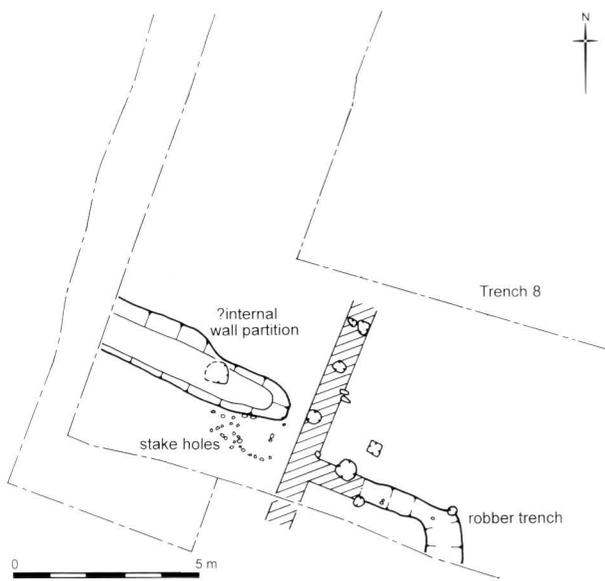


Fig. 6: plan of the Tudor building

appear to have been used as part of the equipment required for the social ritual of handwashing at the table. Ceramic lavabos were made in Flanders and the Low Countries from at least the 14th century onwards and their shape mirrors the metal prototypes which would have been used in wealthy households. The use of lavabos and associated forms may be seen as an 'act of social emulation' by the emerging urban middle classes who were not quite rich enough to acquire the more costly metalwork vessels, but who had sufficient wealth to buy superfluous 'luxury' goods⁶. Ceramic handwashing equipment is occasionally found in London in locally made slipped redware (for example a complete vessel in the Museum of London reserve collection), but this appears to be the first recorded occurrence of an imported lavabo in the area. It is particularly significant that it should have been found in Hampstead rather than in the City as might have been expected.

The Tudor building

A small and insubstantial timber structure was built towards the south-western corner of the site at the base of the slope (trench 8) (Fig. 6). Little remained of the building as it had been truncated by later structures, but several postholes on a north-south alignment had probably formed the

eastern wall. The remains of a shallow construction slot containing a few stakeholes indicated a further wall to the east. This may have been an addition or lean-to against the north-south wall or even perhaps an earlier wall.

Cut into the interior of the building was a slot which may also have been part of the structure as it contained a posthole. Around the edge of the pit were many stakeholes which probably supported a timber superstructure but there was no indication of its function. The backfill of the slot contained pottery of Tudor date (1480-1600). It is possible that these features may have supported internal divisions.

The 17th-century building

The timber building was soon replaced by a brick-built cellared building (Fig. 7) dating to the 17th century. The walls had been heavily robbed and little of the original construction remained. Only the base of the cellar survived up to 0.60m high. A north-south construction cut contained a mortar bed over which was the remnants of a brick foundation. The wall formed a corner with an east-west wall which incorporated brick steps down into the cellar.

A gravel surface (109.51m OD) was laid over the earlier backfilled slot within the interior of the cellar and it is possible that this was merely a levelling layer as it was 0.45m thick and was covered with a mortar floor surface. A fragment of

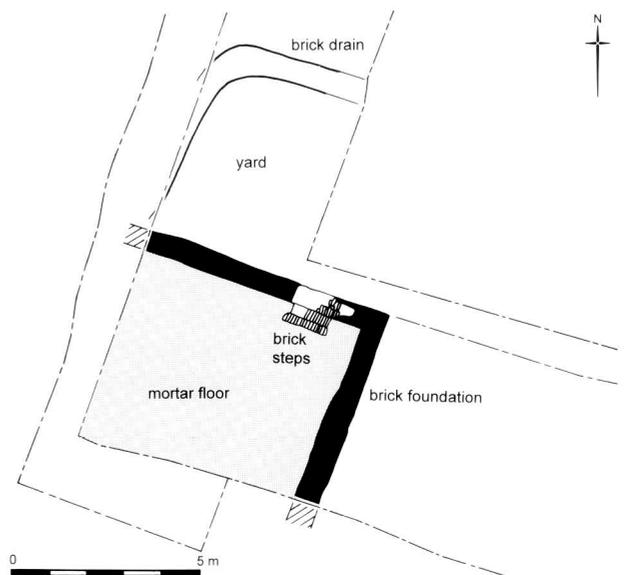


Fig. 7: plan of the 17th-century building

5. *Ibid* fig.12.

6. *Ibid* 317.

7. J. Pearce *Assessment of the pottery from the evaluation at Mount Vernon Hospital, Hampstead* (1995) MoLAS archive report.

tin-glazed floor tile was found within the metalling: it was decorated with a flower decoration in blue, yellow and brown set in a blue diamond-shaped border with a blue fleur-de-lis corner motif. The tile could be either English or Dutch. Tiles with similar border patterns and corner decoration were found at the tilemaking site at Platform Wharf, Rotherhithe which made tin-glazed floor tiles between c. 1638-1661⁸. Tiles of similar type are also known from Holland where they are dated 1640-1670⁹.

The poorhouse was known to be established in an existing mansion house considered to be of Tudor/Jacobean origin. The tin-glazed floor tile may have come from the mansion house.

The brick steps to the cellar seem to have been built onto the mortar floor. Only two of the original steps survived which were constructed of half bricks. A rebuild was later made to the steps to replace the worn brick treads. This time four steps survived and the bricks were laid on edge over a string course of headers and stretchers.

Metalled areas were present both to the north and to the east of the building and may have represented external yard areas. A brick drain replaced the earlier Tudor drain and was situated to the north of the building. A pit or gully in the north of the yard area contained pottery dating from the first half of the 17th century in its backfill. This included part of a cauldron, a pipkin rim and part of a large dish with broad flanged rim and glossy, thick glaze. There are also sherds from a tyg and a mug in post-medieval black-glazed ware as well as several sherds from a chamber pot in post-medieval fine redware. Imports were represented by a sherd from a Raeren stoneware drinking jug and part of a large wall-sided bowl in Dutch red earthenware. The context is of interest in that it represents domestic refuse perhaps from a single household and probably came from the mansion house like the tin-glazed floor tile.

To the east of the building was a construction cut 3.6m deep for a small lead pipe used for drainage. Wooden shuttering had been used in order to prevent the sides from collapsing during the original construction. Pottery with a date range of 1600 to 1750 was retrieved from the construction backfill.

The 18th-century building

After the steps were repaired, the cellar floor was resurfaced with a levelling deposit and two further metalled surfaces. The final surface contained patches of mortar and had a line of large cobbles running north-south along the east side (109.95m OD). Pottery from underneath this surface was dated 1680-1720. There followed substantial robbing of the entire building. The rubble backfill contained pottery dated from 1770 to 1900 which was at about the same period as the Hampstead poorhouse was demolished in 1801.

The area was not further investigated as it was outside the footprint of the proposed new building and was therefore not under threat from the redevelopment.

Conclusions

Substantial terracing into the hillside and associated dumping on the downhill side took place on the site in order to construct a plateau for the main hospital building in the 19th century. Although much of the earlier landscape was destroyed by this, remnants of a late medieval field system had become buried under the later dumping.

The cellared building described above also survived complete truncation. It may well have been the ancillary or outbuilding seen to the south of the poorhouse in the drawing (Fig. 3). There was little evidence from the excavations to indicate a function for the cellared building. It may have been a storehouse for food as the residents grew much of their own produce in the gardens¹⁰. Various attempts to employ the residents in such tasks as spinning mop yarn meant that workshops were added to the premises from time to time.

Remains of the gardens seen on the drawing (Fig. 3) were excavated to the east of the cellared building. These consisted of treeholes, gullies and bedding trenches filled with sandy silt which contained pottery dated to between 1700 and 1900.

At Mount Vernon it has been possible to combine archaeological elements such as that of the excavated building and its associated artefacts with documentary elements from the maps and drawings to build up a more complete picture of the site's history.

8. I Betts *A 17th century Delftware factory, Platform Wharf, Rotherhithe* (1994) Archive Report MoLAS, design 12.

9. J D van Dam *Nederlandse Tegels* (1991) 69, fig. 77.

10. C Wade *Hampstead Past* (1989), 48.