

On the Campden Hill Spur: excavations at Vicarage Gate House, Kensington, W8

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A distinctive feature of the landscape of Kensington is the high ground of Campden Hill,¹ which extends eastwards as a spur from Holland Park, between Kensington High Street to the south and Notting Hill Gate to the north, towards Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park (Figs 1, 2). The area between the parks is built up with mansions, mews and an occasional palace. The mid- to late-19th-century construction, and high quality, of much of this property has ensured its survival, aided by local and central government conservation measures. Such preservation of course has meant that little in the way of new construction has taken place in the past 100 years, with a resultant lack of archaeological information or understanding of the area.

Latterly, the very preservation of such a distinctive architectural setting has increased its desirability, with a resultant pressure to build new accommodation. This development pressure has forced engineering and architectural ingenuity and design to create new spaces, with high design expectations, within existing spatial restrictions.

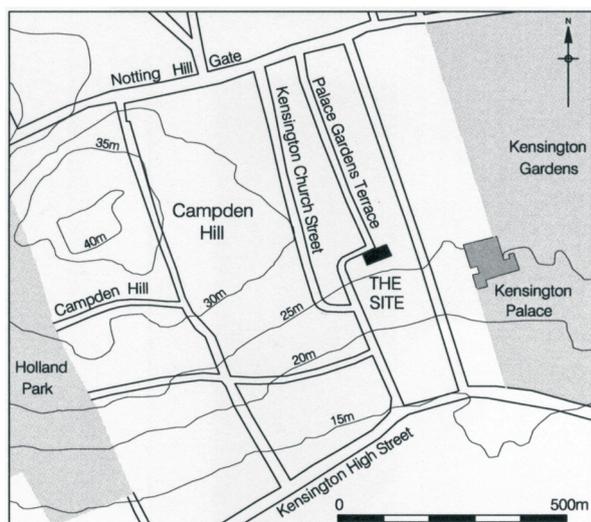


Fig. 1: site location

At the same time other factors, such as the movement out of the area of certain educational and nursing facilities, has provided additional land for residential accommodation. Under PPG 16 Guidance these new constructions have included archaeological investigations, and, despite the small size of the sites, a hitherto unsuspected archaeological landscape has now been recognised and investigated.

A series of archaeological investigations by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. (PCA) was therefore commissioned by Eric Norton, Norton Thompson Associates, on behalf of Vicarage Gate Ltd., in advance of their proposed redevelopment of land at Vicarage Gate House, Vicarage Gate, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (NGR TQ 2565 8010).² In 2003, a watching brief on a geotechnical investigation and an evaluation demonstrated that linear features dating from the prehistoric period survived in certain areas of the site, along with evidence of 18th/19th-century agriculture and the foundations of a church built in 1887. An excavation ensued comprising five trenches located firstly to avoid as much as possible the disturbance caused by the foundations of both the church and the current building, and secondly to further investigate the prehistoric activity on the site. The archaeology was found to be disturbed and segmented by the church and modern foundations, and the environmental assessment showed no survival of ecofacts. However, taken with the results of the other recent excavations in the vicinity, the Vicarage Gate House archaeology can now suggest a model for the prehistoric to Roman usage of this spur of land, effectively setting a research brief for all future work in this area.

The site lies at the centre of the spur on a relatively flat terrace at *c.* 24.50m OD.³ The British Geological Survey (sheet 270) show the underlying geology to be Lynch Hill Gravel

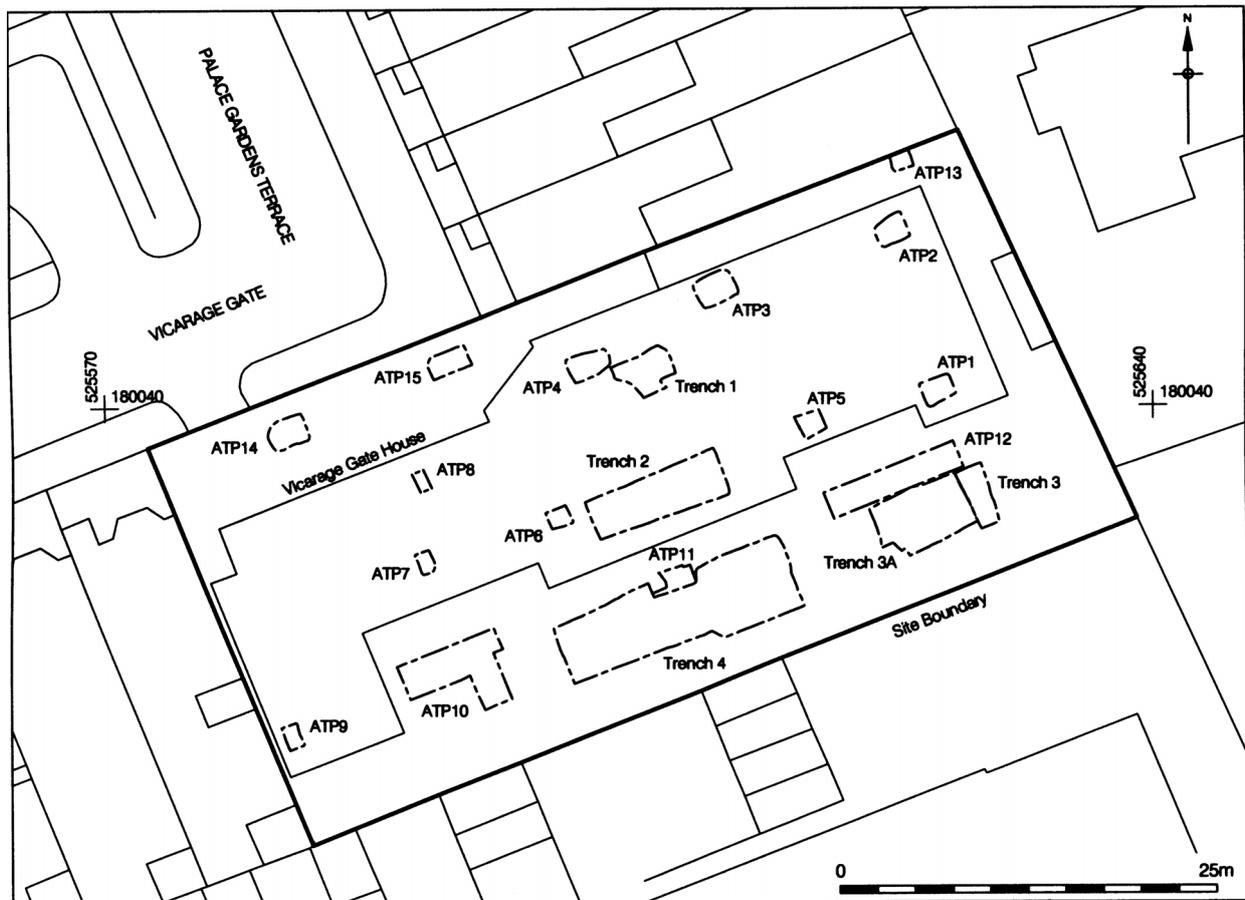


Fig. 2: trench locations. Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number PMP361110309

overlying London Clay, but the excavation showed that the Lynch Hill gravel did not extend this far south and that brickearth deposits overlay the London Clay. All the excavations so far undertaken on the Campden Hill Spur lie on its southern side, overlooking the Thames floodplain.

Archaeological Background

The recent exploration of the Campden Hill spur started with an excavation at the Phillimore's⁴ (CNA00), some 500m west of Vicarage Gate House (Fig. 3), which revealed two pits cut into a hollow containing sizeable quantities of burnt flint (the remains of a "burnt mound") and Bronze Age pottery. An excavation conducted at the adjacent Sir John Atkins Building (CIH02) then revealed a large sub-rectangular Early Iron Age structure, Late Iron Age ditches (recut in the

Roman period), postholes and pits.⁵ Further evidence of prehistoric (primarily Bronze Age and Iron Age) activity in the vicinity consists of a Late Iron Age coin hoard found in the north-western corner of Kensington Gardens and a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age ditch identified nearby. A Bronze Age metalwork hoard, comprising parts of axes, knives, gouges, a bronze sheet "button" and casting jets was found south-west of the study site during railway works in 1866, and a Neolithic stone axe was recorded from the same location.

The Vicarage Gate site lies midway between the suggested courses of two Roman roads running westwards from the city, along the lines of Kensington High Street and Notting Hill Gate.⁶ Recent excavations by PCA at the very end of the spur, for the Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Fountain, in Hyde Park (WTG02), identified at

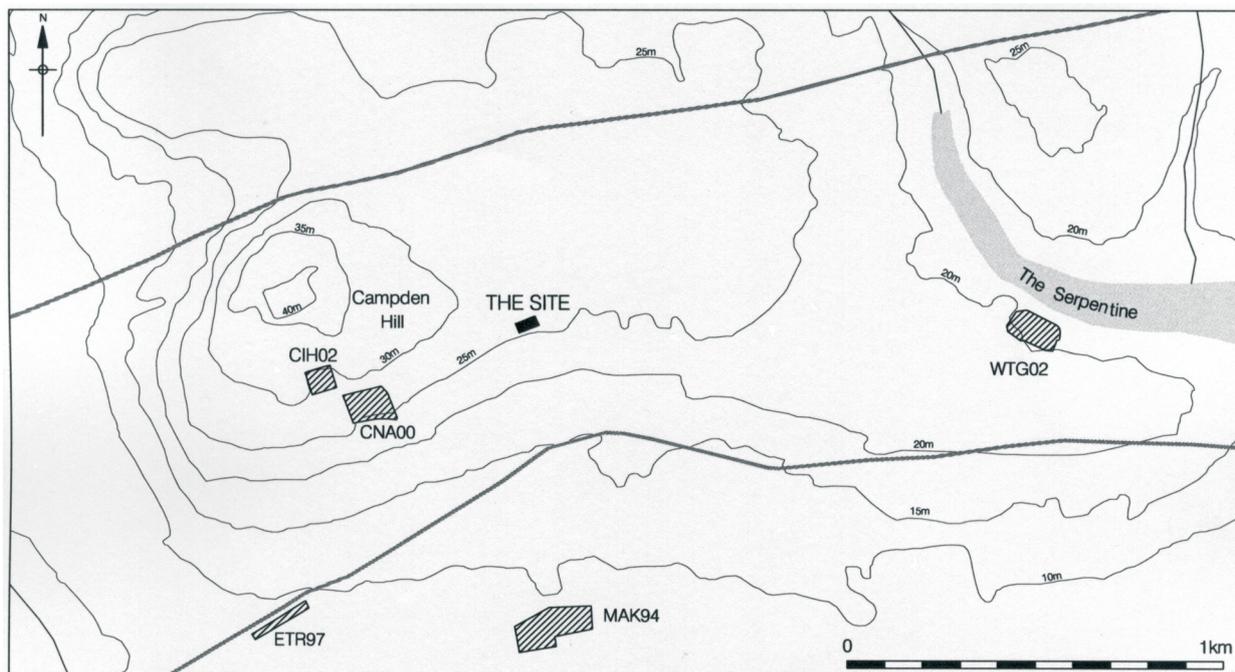


Fig. 3: the site related to topography, Roman roads and other sites in its vicinity. CIH02 (Atkins Building, Campden Hill; CNA00 (The Phillimore, Campden Hill Road; ETR97 (Earls Terrace); MAK94 (St Mary Abbots Hospital) and WTG02 (Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Fountain site, Hyde Park)

least three phases of Roman activity, including two parallel enclosure curving ditches dated to the early- to mid-4th century containing large amounts of roof tile and pottery.⁷ Possible Roman farm buildings were found during excavations at St Mary Abbots Hospital,⁸ south of Kensington High Street, while a possible Roman roadside ditch was recorded during excavations at Earl's Terrace, Kensington High Street (ETR97).⁹

The Earls Terrace site is the only one with evidence for early medieval settlement, with mid-Saxon pottery, 11th- and 12th-century pits, gullies and structural remains. By the 13th/14th century the area had been turned over to farm land. It seems that the settlement had moved to the Kensington High Street/Kensington Church Street and Notting Hill Gate locations known to have been settled by the early post-medieval period. The area was known for both gravel and brickearth extractions in the 17th and 18th centuries, but by the 19th century was extensively developed with large houses and villas. The first iron church in London was built on the site in 1855. Constructed by Hemmingway and Co. of Bow of corrugated galvanised iron, its fabric soon

began to deteriorate, and construction of a new brick church by Arthur Baker E.C. Howell and Son of Bristol and Lambeth commenced in July 1887. It was severely damaged during WW II and was subsequently replaced by a nursing home.

The Archaeological Sequence

Early Prehistoric

Sixteen struck flints were recovered residually and have been tentatively assigned to the Mesolithic/Early Neolithic period, indicating short-term or sporadic activity in the vicinity rather than occupation.¹⁰

Bronze Age

A wide, shallow, north-south aligned, hollow way was recorded in the western part of the site, while the butt end of an east-west ditch with a similar fill was recorded in the central area of the site and interpreted as a field boundary (Fig. 4). These features contained nine pieces of burnt flint, twelve residual Mesolithic/Early Neolithic flints and one more typical of the Bronze Age. This suggests that the site was in agricultural usage during this period with a possible routeway

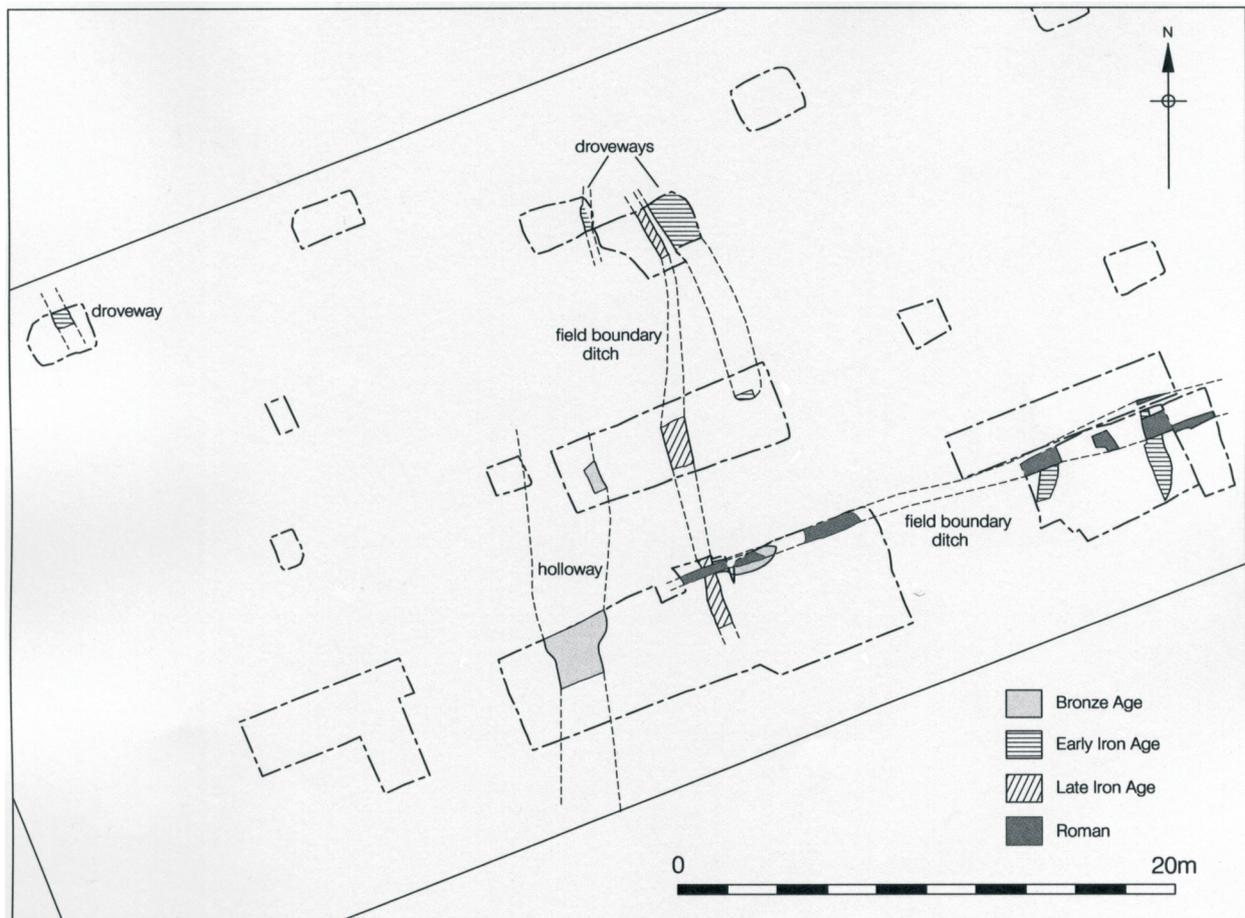


Fig. 4: phase features

running through it. The fill of the hollow way was sealed by a colluvial layer of very similar composition, containing four pieces of struck flint, tentatively ascribed to the Bronze Age, and two fragments of burnt flint, suggesting it formed soon after or simultaneously with it filling up. The paucity of Bronze Age finds strongly suggests that deliberate manuring was not taking place on the site. It seems most likely, therefore, that this area was in use for animal husbandry rather than arable agriculture. The hollow way, and the perpendicular field boundary, is reminiscent of the similar droveway recorded at Flag Fen. This was interpreted as a route for animals being seasonally driven from the higher ground winter pasture to the more lush summer grazing of the wetlands. While the relative height differences are greater at the Vicarage Gate site, and the ground drier, such seasonal herd movements between the higher ground and the

floodplain environments would still be valid. Indeed, the evidence of herd management systems found at Flag Fen may be echoed in the clear narrowing of the hollow way to the south of the ditch, this narrowing possibly being a 'race' for the sorting of the herd.¹¹ The sealing of the hollow way by a layer of colluvium may have resulted from erosion caused by intensive grazing further up the slope.

Early Iron Age

One possible north-east to south-west, three north-south and one fragmentary north-south aligned linear feature, all with very similar fills (Fig. 4), were found to contain one sherd of Early Iron Age pottery and two pieces of burnt flint. These are interpreted as field boundary ditches in an animal management system, where the north-south double-ditched nature of the features again suggests small droveways on the Flag Fen model.

It is possible that the filling of the hollow way with hill wash led the herdsmen to adapt to ditched drove ways to help better control their livestock.

Late Iron Age

A north-south 'v'-shaped ditch was recorded in the central area of the site containing four residual pieces of struck flint, twelve pieces of burnt flint, fifteen residual sherds of Early Iron Age pottery and three sherds dating from the Late Iron Age. This ditch was again interpreted as a field boundary. However the differences between this phase and the earlier phases suggest a change in the agricultural organisation of the area. Firstly, there is only one feature and no suggestion of drove or hollow ways; secondly, fifteen sherds of pottery were collected from this one feature compared to one sherd in all the earlier features and deposits combined. This suggests that the area may now have been manured with domestic detritus, with the previous animal management systems replaced with agricultural fields. While the basis of agriculture may have changed, some continuity is suggested by the Late Iron Age field boundary respecting the line of the Early Iron Age western drove way.

Roman

In the south of the site, an east-west running ditch was found to contain two sherds of abraded Late Roman pottery (AHFA and Oxfordshire Red Colour-coat) and much daub.¹² This feature was identified as a field boundary, which did not respect the Late Iron Age alignment. The fact that it is very close to the Bronze Age ditch and perpendicular to the Iron Age features is probably more a reflection of their position on the slope of a hill, where field boundaries follow both contours and slope. While a building was probably located nearby, the lack of finds suggests that it was not domestic, nor that manuring of arable fields using domestic rubbish was taking place.

Post-Medieval

Late post-medieval (probably 18th/19th century) features were recorded, relating to arable usage and brickearth extraction. In the southern area of the site a terrace of made ground was deposited in the 19th century, presumably to level the area before the construction of the iron church.

Features cutting this deposit were tentatively associated with the building of this structure. A further terrace of made ground was constructed on the south side of the site before the construction of the brick church.

Conclusions

There is a background 'noise' of mesolithic material from the Vicarage Gate site, and the other sites on the Campden Hill spur, but these reflect an ephemeral use of the area over a long period of time. During the Bronze Age the spur may have been used for animal husbandry, with livestock seasonally being moved between the higher ground and floodplain resources. The burnt mound and cooking activities near the south-west summit, with its strategic views, may indicate a boundary marker, while the later metal hoard from the southern base of the hill shows a certain level of local wealth and technology. The pastoral usage continued into the Early Iron Age, perhaps with an increase in activity, although evidence of a possible storage pit within a structure near the south-west summit may indicate diversification into more mixed farming practices. In the Late Iron Age the rural economy seems to have changed with an increase in the arable element. The Roman period saw a more intensive use of the area with farmsteads being suggested at the Diana Memorial site, and to the south at St Mary Abbots Hospital. Both these farmsteads were situated on low ground at or near the base of the spur, suggesting a shift in focus to facilitate access to the floodplain and hillside resources. The presence of roads to the north and south of Campden Hill would have ensured the integration of the local economy into *Londinium's* hinterland, with farm produce moving into the urban centre and trade goods moving out. This is a first tentative model of the prehistoric to Roman exploitation, use and settlement of the until recently little understood Campden Hill area, which we hope will improve with further work.

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1. Formerly called Notting Hill; B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert (eds) *The London Encyclopaedia* (1983).
2. F. Sadarangani and J. Leary, *Archaeological Desktop Assessment of Vicarage Gate House, Vicarage Gate, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, W8* (2003); E. Wragg, *Assessment of an Archaeological Excavation at Vicarage Gate House, Vicarage Gate, R.B.K.C., W8* (2004) PCA unpublished reports. (Site Code VGH 03)
3. There is an anomaly between the contours shown on the OS map and the actual height of the site.
4. P. Moore, T. Bradley and B.J. Bishop, 'A Late Bronze Age Burnt Mound Site at the Phillimore's, Campden Hill Road, Kensington', *London Archaeol* **10**, no. 7 (2003) 179–186.
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6. I.D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1955).
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10. B. Bishop, 'Lithic Assessment' in Wragg *op cit* fn. 2.
11. F. Pryor, *Farmers in Prehistoric Britain* (1998).
12. M. Lyne, 'An Assessment of the Pottery' in Wragg *op cit* fn. 2.

Letter

Medieval measurements

The following comments refer to the article by Peter Huggins in the Autumn 2005 issue.

The medieval rod or perch was certainly in use as far back as the Anglo-Saxon period, as has been established by Warwick Rodwell and Birthe Biddle, amongst others. It is when you look at the relationship between it and other measurements of the period and later, that you find there is one that goes beyond coincidence, starting with the smallest, the *nail* (2¼ inches) up to an *ell* (45 inches), and rod or perch (198 inches), the smallest dividing into and the others dividing by a *span* (9 inches), a measurement arrived at as the distance between the little finger and the thumb. The *ell* is a measurement in the Statute of Henry I in 1101. In a Statute of Edward I in 1303 an inch is measured by three grains of barley.

The division of the rod into thirds, mentioned in the article, can be seen on the tomb slab of Hugues Libergier (architect) in Reims Cathedral, showing him holding his staff. Divisions can be seen marked on its upper end; going by the scale it could well be a third of a rod. This would solve the problem highlighted in the article.

It is worth considering that the span went out of use, and that the measurement of a foot came into being as the norm, possibly by the start of the 14th century if not earlier – it certainly occurs in a Statute of Edward I (1303). The major problem is

deciding what is actually stated in comparing these measurements against the modern equivalent; as it can be seen, the early ones were based on body measurements, so that when we see a modern measurement of an older structure given in feet and an excess of inches, is it because the inches are in fact an error of comparison between the two? After all, we are dealing with buildings, and over a considerable length they would surely not bother with inches.

This brings us to the problem at Mucking with the shorter rod; surely this is a case in point where the rod at that time was a multiple of a measurement. Was their actual foot or span smaller than we are led to expect here?

The length and width of the dock can be divided by the *span*! Regarding the actual beam sizes, would not this be down to the available wood?

The use of geometry for laying out buildings is well established, it is worth obtaining a copy of the British Museum publication *Masons and Sculptors* by Nicola Coldstream. It shows examples of rotating squares, which are drawn from Mathes Roriczer's 15th-century *Booklet on Pinnacles*, showing how to rotate squares, etc.

Regarding the laying-out of the building, surely this would follow the normal practice of stringing out a datum line and marking off post positions; the same would then apply when trenching for a beam slot, the sleeper beam and the upper structure raised as one.

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