

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXIII

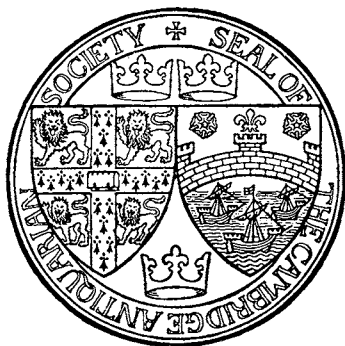
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CONTENTS

Officers and Council of the Society, 1983-84

Obituary: Joan Liversidge, 1914-1984 MARY CRA'STER, TIMOTHY POTTER and others	1
Antler Cheekpieces from Edmundsoles, Haslingfield, Cambs. WILLIAM J. BRITNELL	5
Rescue Excavations at Cow Lane, Godmanchester, Cambs. during 1984 DAVID HAIGH	7
A Roman Stone Coffin from Stuntney and Gazetteer of Similar Coffins in Cambridgeshire ALISON TAYLOR	15
Three Anglo-Saxon Cremations from Girton, Cambridgeshire C. J. ARNOLD and J. L. WILKINSON	23
The Churches of Ashley and Silverley ROBERT HALLIDAY	29
Excavation of the Town Ditch at Swavesey, 1984 DAVID HAIGH and others	45
Excavation of a Medieval Bridge and Twelfth-century Cross Shaft at Kings Ripton, Cambridgeshire, 1983. DAVID HAIGH	55
Excavations at Cromwell House, Huntingdon, 1984 DAVID HAIGH	65
The Tomb of Bishop William de Luda: an Architectural Model at Ely Cathedral P. G. LINDLEY	75
<i>Index</i>	88

EXCAVATIONS AT CROMWELL HOUSE, HUNTINGDON, 1984

DAVID HAIGH

A small excavation was undertaken during March 1984 within Cromwell House in Huntingdon, at the request of developers who were converting the house into a private clinic and nursing home. The main aim of this excavation was to re-examine the remains of the Augustinian Friary which had been noted here in 1922 by the local historian and diocesan architect S. Inskip Ladds. The excavation confirmed that substantial remains of the thirteenth-century friary buildings still survived and that major rebuilding had taken place shortly after their initial construction. The remains seem to be part of the west range of buildings, although it was not possible to confirm the function of any of the rooms which were revealed. At the Dissolution major alterations were made to the buildings, followed by a major rebuilding of the site; it was the house as then rebuilt that belonged to the Cromwell family.

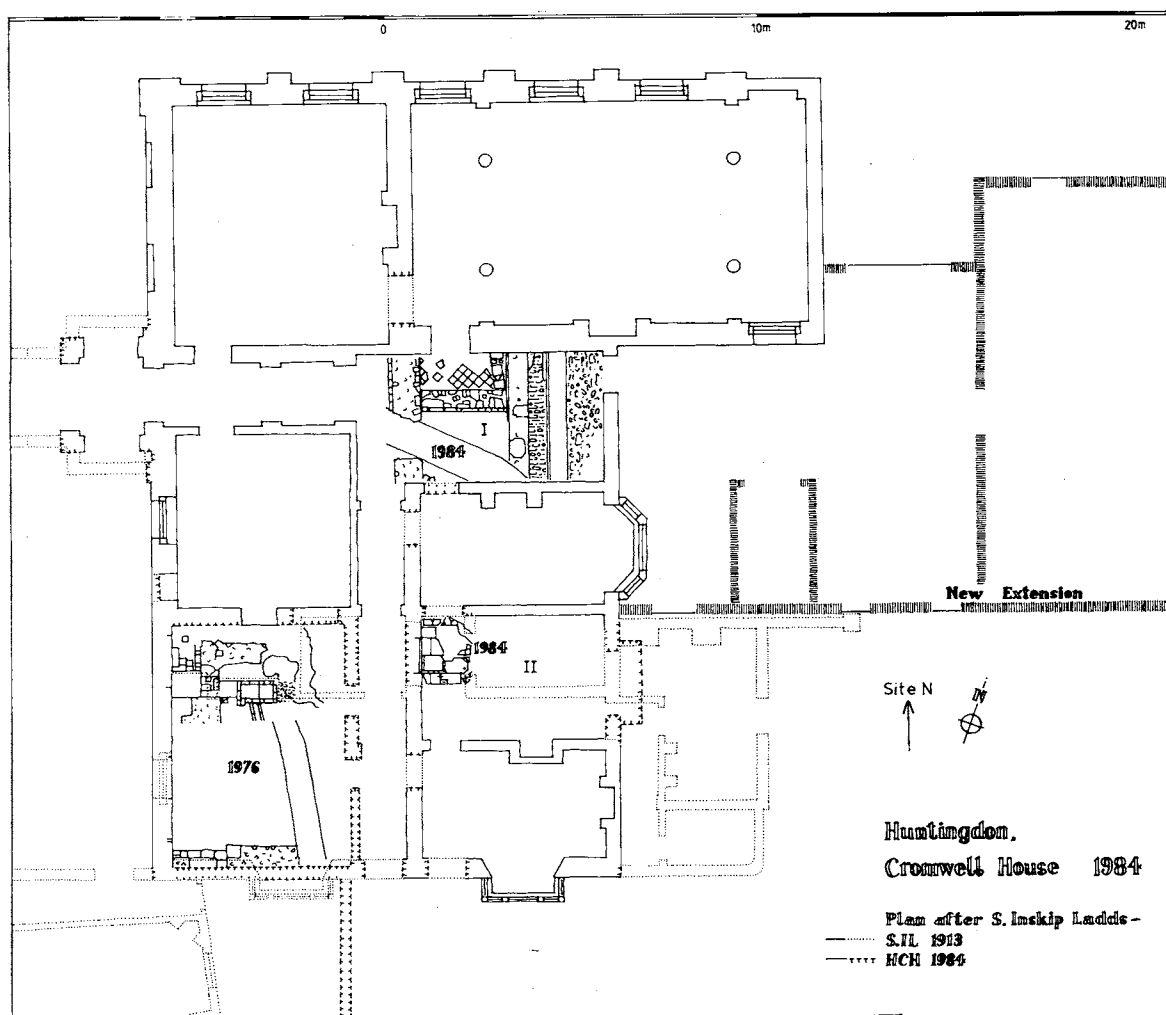


Figure 1. Cromwell House, showing the trench locations.

THE EXCAVATIONS

By the time that we were asked to carry out excavations at the site the foundations for the new medical wing had already been laid and work within the house was well advanced; despite this the building staff provided every assistance to us during our work. Excavation was limited therefore to cutting two small trenches within the confines of the house itself (Fig. 1). Within these two trenches several different phases of building were noted, but it proved impossible to excavate either area completely due to the proximity of the house foundations. The work therefore mainly involved the clearance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debris overlying the medieval remains and the cleaning and recording of these underlying structures. It is to be regretted that after our departure from the site one of the developers removed the flagged floor on the east side of the thirteenth-century doorway revealed in area 2, and dumped the now broken flags in the garden where they have since been destroyed.

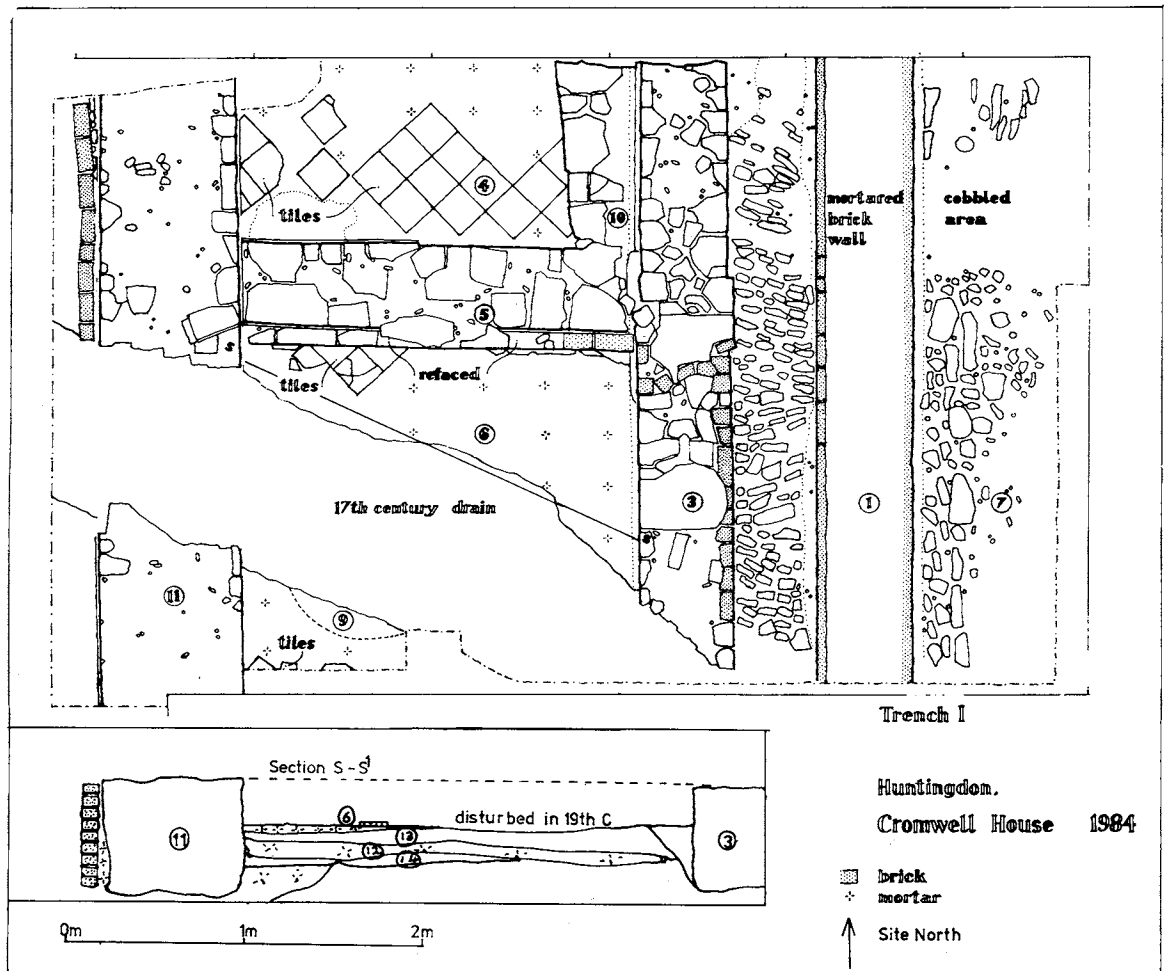


Figure 2. Trench (1) (within the hallway).

Trench 1 (Figure 2)

Within the hallway an area 7×4 m was examined prior to the laying of a new concrete floor. The earliest feature revealed here was a substantial wall of dressed stone and mortar with plastered faces (11) that ran from north to south across the hallway. This had been incorporated by the builders of the present house into the foundations of the east wall of the passage leading from the hall to the former kitchen and scullery (see Trench 2). Remains of a mortared floor which would originally have been tiled were exposed on the east side of this wall (4). Finds from a pit (9) cut into this floor would suggest a thirteenth-century date for the two features, implying that they formed part of the earliest phase of the Friary buildings which was constructed c. 1258.

At a later date a second, thinner wall (5) was built at right-angles to this thirteenth-century wall and this incorporated a number of re-used stones including pieces of geometric tracery. New tiled floors (4) and (6) were bedded in mortar on either side of this wall and some of these tiles still show traces of a dark green patchy glaze (Plate 1 *a*). The pit had been filled and was now sealed below these floors. It seems likely that this took place *c.* 1286 when the buildings were substantially rebuilt after a major fire. At a later date, but still within the life of these tiled floors, the north-south wall was strengthened by the addition of a layer of stone to its west face. Probably at the same time, the thinner wall was partly rebuilt and strengthened in the same way with another layer of stone built against the south face, which rested on the adjacent tiled floor (Plate 1 *b*). This wall had what appeared to be a further addition (10) built on to it at the west end, which ran northwards at right angles to it some 2 m to the east of the main north-south wall. This additional wall was heavily damaged when a new wall incorporating handmade bricks of the seventeenth century was laid running north-south across the hall, with a cobbled surface on its east side. This surface was cut by a later wall that appeared to be contemporary with the Georgian house of 1810 which was replaced during the alterations of 1913. On the east side of this wall were the remains of a cobbled surface which was earlier than the immediately adjacent walls, and which may have been associated with the friary buildings.

Inskip Ladds had seen two stone doorways apparently along the line of the main north-south wall somewhere to the south of this trench. He recorded that the doorways could still be seen below the floor of the passage leading from the hall of the present house. In the light of this information a small area was exposed at the possible site of the northern doorway in order to confirm their positions. We were permitted to open an area 2 × 1 m in the former scullery, 4.5 m south of the point where this wall was exposed within the hall. The door and adjacent worn stone paving was revealed just as described by Inskip Ladds (Plate 2 *a*).

In the back wall are two doorways; one of them is nearly in the middle of the wall, and the old paving stones, which remained near it, were considerably worn by the feet of people passing into the northern room, which stood approximately on the site of the present study, which would point to the room being used very frequently. The doorway was of late 13th century date, and had a simple hollow moulding worked on the jamb, which is finished, near the floor, with a simple stop.

The other doorway appears to be about three metres further south along this wall judging from a photograph taken during the alterations of 1921. Its position is marked on a sketch of the house kept with the measured plan made by Inskip Ladds in 1921 as approximately underlying the doorway to the former kitchen. We were however unable to reveal more of this north-south wall, which would have allowed us to relate these doorways to the rooms formed by the thinner dividing walls that ran at right-angles from this wall, two of which appeared in our trenches.

Trench 2 (Figure 3)

The flagged floor was of Barnack stone 0.33 m below the present tiled floor, and 0.07 m below the top of the stop of the splayed and chamfered door jambs. The flags were irregularly shaped and included re-used stones including at least one capital, and were heavily worn next to the blocked doorway. At right-angles to this door and adjacent to the south side of it were a line of narrower blocks which may have formed an edging to a path from the door even though they were flush with the rest of the paving. The remains of two blocked triangular shallow grooves may be the remains of a setting for a handrail or similar guide rail from the door.

As in Trench 1 a narrower wall (15) was revealed which ran at right-angles to the north-south wall, just to the north of the blocked doorway. This wall had been used as the foundation for the north wall of the present scullery and could not therefore be examined closely. The wall had a plastered face which had been re-plastered after the stone floor was laid, but the first layer of plaster ran down the side of the flagged floor. This shows that the sequence of construction was that the main north-south wall was built and then plastered before the dividing wall was added. This wall was also plastered before the stone floor was laid. It is suggested that all these events happened during the construction of the first phase of the friary buildings.

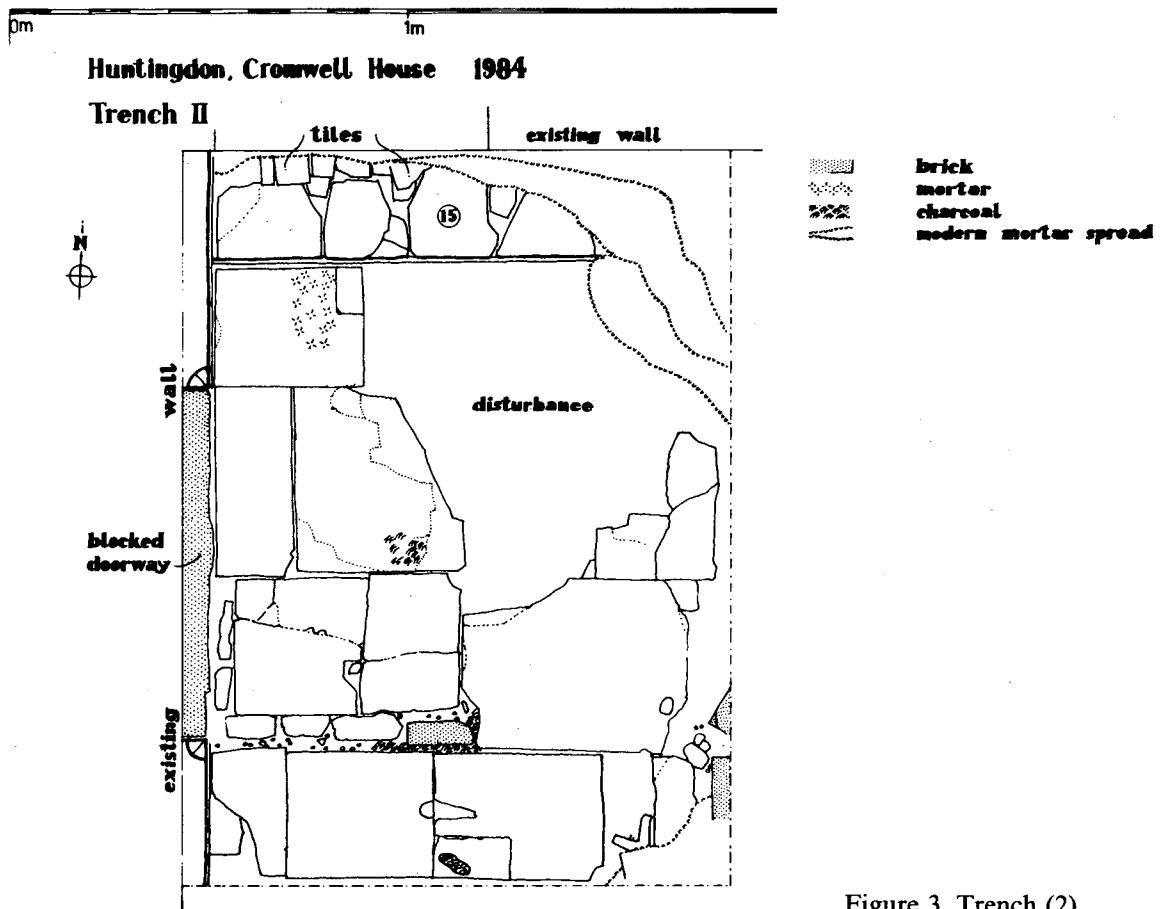


Figure 3. Trench (2).

DISCUSSION

Both Inskip Ladds and Dickinson had put forward theories for the layout of the friary buildings here, based on the evidence that was revealed during the alterations in 1913 and 1976 respectively. As a result of what he had seen, Inskip Ladds suggested that the ground-floor plan of the southern part of the Georgian house had been laid out in 1810 to conform as far as possible with the layout of the visible remains of the priory buildings. He felt that this explained the slightly odd plan of the house and the frequent correlation between the line of the medieval stone walls and of the walls of the present house. Certainly the evidence of the present excavations would seem to confirm this, although the house had undergone several major alterations since then.

In the late 1970s P. G. M. Dickinson produced a plan of the friary buildings based not only on the evidence from the site, but also on his knowledge of monastery plans. He erroneously assumed that the friary would have a standard layout, and having located the remains of some of the buildings, he felt that the rest of the plan could be drawn fairly exactly. He suggested that the excavated area in Cromwell House lay on the west side of the cloister walk, and that the north-south wall with the thirteenth-century doorways was the east wall of a range of buildings forming the west side of the cloister. Inviting though this explanation is, the results of the present excavation do not support this. It is unlikely that the cloister would have been blocked by two parallel stone walls, or that a pit would have been cut into the floor of the cloister walk. Furthermore, we were unable to find any evidence of contemporary buildings or their robbed remains to the west of the main north-south wall. This suggests that the wall formed the west wall rather than the east side of a western range of buildings as Dickinson proposed, and as it has been impossible to find further evidence to support Dickinson's interpretation, his plan must be discarded.

From the evidence of the finds, it is clear that the earliest part of the friary revealed here dates from the thirteenth century. The buildings adjacent to the east side of the main wall were repaired and their

plans changed during the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century and then survived without further alteration until the Dissolution. It may be that the flagged area in the southern trench was part of either the cloisters or the church itself, as the building was of high quality and was not apparently repaired.

It seems that we revealed the west wall of the friary buildings and that the main part of the friary lay further to the east. Much robbing had taken place after the Dissolution of the friary and it is possible that little of the masonry of the friary buildings has survived to the east of our excavations. We were however not able to follow up the claim that remains of floors and of robbed walls had been visible within the sides of the foundation trenches for the new extension, as these had already been filled in by the time that we arrived on site. It seems likely that the new extension was laid out in the middle of the site of the friary and that there were at least traces of buildings surviving here. For this reason it is especially unfortunate that it was not possible to examine the area now covered by the new extension to the house, despite the fact that it was well known that finds of this nature were to be expected here.

There was a small excavation carried out at the site during the late 1970s by the Huntingdon Local History Society under the supervision of the county archaeologist (Fig. 5). The work was carried out

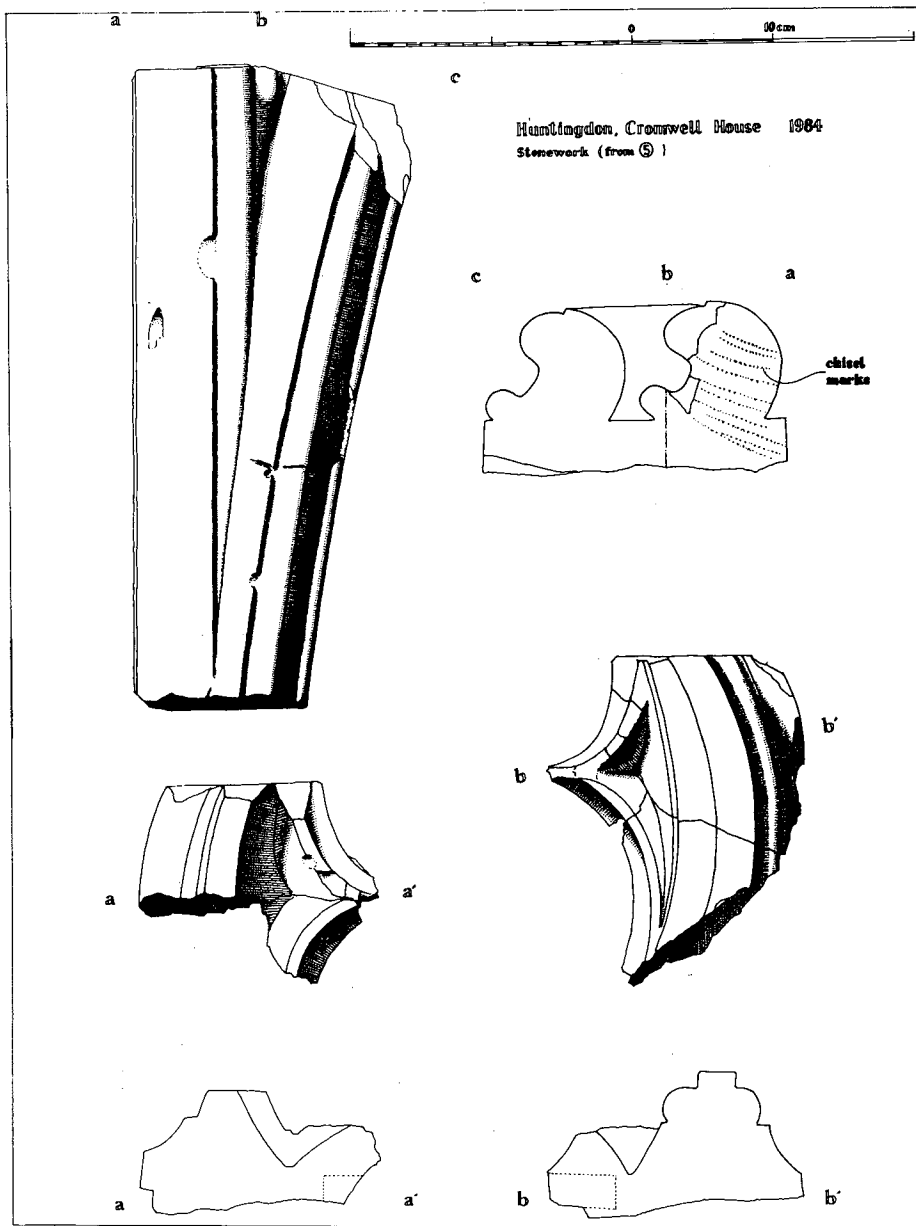


Figure 4. Stone tracery from trench (1), wall (5).

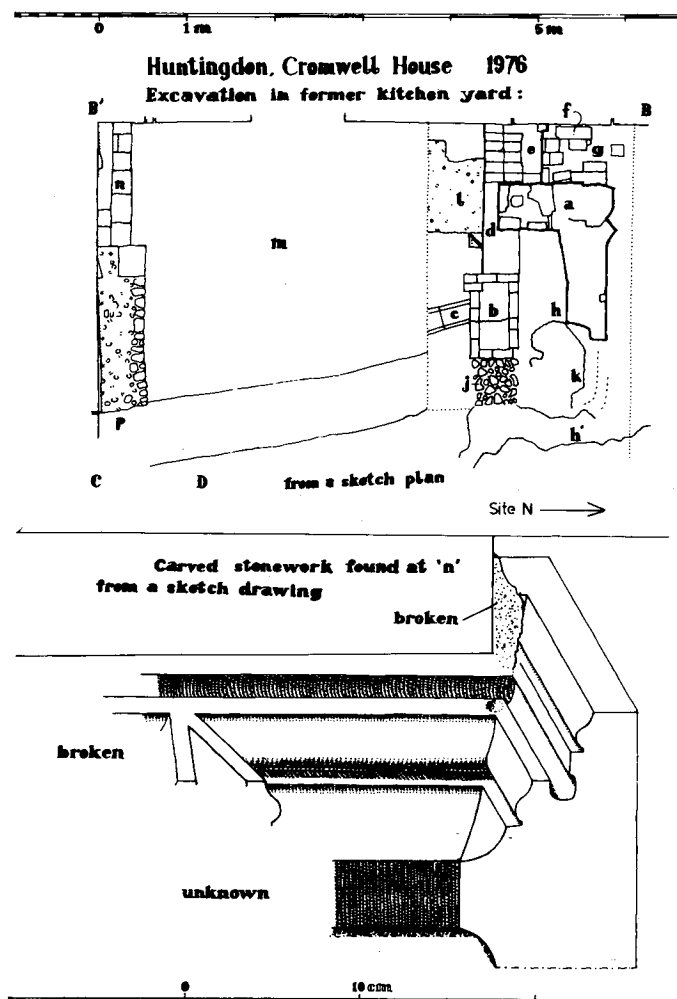


Figure 5. The 1976 excavation.

when the former kitchen garden was built over. Fragmentary remains of part of the post-Dissolution house foundations were revealed, re-using stone from the friary buildings. At least one hearth of the same period was also uncovered within the adjacent study, but no feature belonging to the friary was found. (A summary of the stratigraphy is at the end of this report.)

The documentary evidence for the site is concisely assembled by F. Roth in his study of the Austin Friars (*Augustiniana* xiv (1964), 680–3). They show that the friary appears to have been founded shortly before 1258, when Henry III granted four oaks to the friary for the buildings. A major fire seems to have taken place c. 1286, as a further grant of eight oaks was made in this year towards the repairs to the buildings damaged by the fire. These repairs were completed by 1293 when the alters in the friary church were rededicated. There is little known of the buildings other than that they were able to provide room for Augustinian Friars studying at Cambridge, and that there were twenty brethren in 1335.

In 1363 permission was granted for the construction of an underground conduit leading from a well on Spring Common through the town to the monastery. This was seen in the nineteenth century and was apparently of brick construction and was supposed to have contained human skeletons. However, what seems to have been the conduit was also exposed nearer to the friary where it was seen by Inskip Ladds, who reported that it was built of stone and that it ran beyond the south side of the present house. It was hoped that this might be examined during the course of the present excavations, but this proved impossible.

At the time of the Dissolution in 1538 when the house was suppressed by Richard Hinsley, it was described as being very poor, but 'metely leaded'. There does not seem to have been an inventory of goods prepared as with other houses, and the only recorded possessions were a dove close, six acres of meadow in Brampton and a tenement in St Peter's parish. It was sold by the Crown to Thomas

Arden and Richard Long, from whom it was purchased by the Cromwell family. It is recorded that on the site, and out of the ruins of the friary, a dwelling was built, which was sold by the Cromwell family in 1631. The post-Dissolution history of the site seems to accord with the evidence revealed during the limited excavations.

One other result of these excavations has been to confirm the opinion of Inskip Ladds concerning the overriding question about the site in the minds of earlier antiquaries – was the room that Cromwell was born in incorporated into the Georgian house? The answer is of course no, as it is clear that Cromwell's house, like that of the earlier friary, was demolished to ground level before the construction of the later building.

The excavations were conducted by David Haigh for Cambridgeshire County Council and the Manpower Services Commission, at the request of the county archaeologist Alison Taylor. Members of the Huntingdon Local History Society provided valuable help throughout the course of this work, and the assistance of their chairman David Cozens is particularly noted. The finds have been deposited with the Norris Museum, St Ives.

The stratigraphy

The two excavated areas were called Trench I and Trench II. The site code used was HCH/84/I/...; this was to differentiate the finds from those of the earlier excavation.

Trench (1) (the hallway of the present house).

(1) Mortared wall of handmade red bricks which runs from north to south across the east end of the hallway. This butts against the footings of the hall walls and is contemporary with or later than these. It cuts the cobbled surface on its east side and was set in a narrow foundation trench that was packed with fragments of contemporary tile. This was the latest feature on the site with the exception of the general layer of eighteenth-century rubble that filled the whole area under the floorboards. This rubble layer had been mostly removed by the builders converting the house prior to our arrival.

(2) Cobbled surface formed from tightly packed limestone fragments laid on edge on a beaten earth bed. It abuts and is therefore contemporary with wall (3) and is therefore of seventeenth-century date. Cut into by wall (1).

(3) Wall foundation of mortared rubble and handmade brick which predates the existing house. It is earlier than wall (1) and later than wall (10), which is tentatively identified as a post-Dissolution alteration to the friary buildings. The wall cuts away part of (10) and the tiled surface which it rests on, and is slightly battered on its east face.

(4) Tiled floor on mortar foundation, underlies wall (10) and butts against wall (11). Predates the construction of wall (5), which cuts it. First phase of priory building associated with the construction of wall (11). Of c. thirteenth-century date.

(5) East-west wall with what appears to be a tiled door jamb within it. The west end of the wall was rebuilt when wall (10) was added. At some date prior to this the wall was thickened by the addition of a layer of stone against the south face. The wall contained several re-used pieces of thirteenth-century window tracery of Barnack stone (Fig. 4), and was probably built during the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, with a sixteenth-century rebuild.

(6) Mortared bed with tiled floor set on it on the south side of wall (5). This floor is contemporary with the first phase of the wall although the additional stone facing was built over it. Of c. fourteenth-century date.

(7) Cobbled surface to the west side of the site. Probably thirteenth–fourteenth century.

(8) Course of former drain, c. seventeenth century. This postdates the friary but predates the construction of Cromwell House. It cuts surface (2).

(9) Circular pit or well cuts floor (12) associated with the first phase of the friary, but sealed by floor (6). Of late thirteenth to early fourteenth-century date. If Dickinson is right, this pit was cut into the cloister walk. This is unlikely and is one of the reasons why Dickinson's plan is rejected here. The pit contained fragments of Lyveden Ware and a fragment of a green-glazed vessel similar to Scarborough Ware, and of identical date.

(10) Later addition to wall (5) running at right-angles to it. This wall seems to be constructed from re-used masonry and is roughly built. It is seen as a foundation rather than the lowest courses of an exposed wall. Probably of sixteenth-century date, and may have been part of a short-lived adaptation of the priory to secular use after the Dissolution.

(11) Substantial wall of dressed Barnack stone with a mortared rubble core. The wall was plastered at least twice on both faces, and was strengthened with an additional row of stones added to the south side after the first and before the second coat of plaster was added. This wall was exposed in both excavated areas and incorporated two stone doorways, one at least of which is of thirteenth-century date. The wall is associated with the earliest phase of the friary buildings and the earliest phases of the tiled floors.

(12) Mortar foundation for tiled floor below floor (6) and wall (5). Possibly contemporary with (4) but unlikely as it was c. 0.14 m below it. The remains of a tiled floor that was cut through by pit (9). A fragment of Lyveden Ware and other slightly earlier fragments including four of the St Neots type wares suggest that this deposit should be dated to the early–mid thirteenth century.

(13) Build-up of debris below (6) and above (12).



Plate 1*a*. Trench (1), wall (5) and tiled floor (4) looking east.



Plate 1*b*. Trench (1); wall (11) cut by a later drain, and wall (5).



Plate 2*a*. Trench (2); blocked thirteenth-century door and worn paving.



Plate 2*b*. Trench (2); worn paving with wall (15) at the top.

(14) Clay loam with mortar deposits below floor (12), possibly the debris from the plastering of wall (11) before floor (12) was laid.

Trench 2

(11) Wall (11) continues into this trench and is associated with a flagged surface (now destroyed), and a contemporary wall running eastwards parallel to wall (5).

(15) Wall parallel to (5) plastered on both faces with the plastering carrying round on to the already plastered face of (11). This wall butts (11) and is technically later than it. The flagged surface was laid after the wall was built, but as this appears to be contemporary with the doorway in wall (11), the cross wall is clearly contemporary and we are just seeing the sequence of construction.

The 1976 excavation (Figure 5)

(A) Substantial mortared rubble and brick wall footings.

(B) Ashlar and brick wall overlying brick and rubble footings, of similar date to (A) and probably seventeenth century.

(e-m) Seventeenth-century brick floors and their mortar foundations, heavily robbed and damaged by the insertion of later drains.

(b', b, c and d) Nineteenth-century brick-lined drain.

