Excavations at the Royal Manor House of Guildford Park in 1972–5

Introduction

Four seasons of archaeological investigations were carried out at the moated site of the Royal Manor House of Guildford Park between 1972 and 1975. Brief interim reports on these excavations were published annually by the present author (Crocker 1973–7) and other articles, mainly on the history of the park, have been published more recently (eg Crocker 2005). A full report on the excavations has now been produced and copies deposited in several libraries (Crocker 2014); the present account provides a considerably abbreviated version of this. The excavations were directed by the author and administered by the former Centre for Adult Education at the University of Surrey. The site, which has no significant standing buildings, forms part of the garden of Manor Farm and is owned by the University. Circumstances have resulted in the final report being prepared over several decades and some of the analysis may be outdated. However, an extensive archive of material has been prepared and is to be deposited at Guildford Museum (acc no AG 24275).

The site

Guildford Park was enclosed in 1154 and the manor house was described as ‘pulde downe & defaced’ in 1607 when the park occupied about 656ha (Norden 1607). The site of the moated manor house (SU 9691 4931) is near the south-west corner of the park, immediately east of the present farmhouse (fig 1). The island formed by the moat is roughly rectangular, being c 50m north–south and 28m east–west. The moat still contains water on the north side where it is retained by an embankment. There is also water – and in places deep thick mud – in much of the east side, where there are remains of revetment walls on both the inner and outer edges, and where the moat is still an impressive feature. On the south side, the moat is almost full of dry mud and thick vegetation, but along most of the remaining west side it has been infilled and forms only a slight depression in the lawn of the farmhouse garden. It lies on Reading Beds clay about 100m north of its junction with the chalk. This clay is impermeable but becomes fluid when saturated, so retaining walls were essential.

Surveys

Topographical surveys showed that the island sloped downwards at a 1 in 25 gradient to the north-north-east but had been levelled at its northern end. The moat is 8m wide on the east, 13m wide on the north and at least 5m wide on the west and south sides of the island. There is a prominent embankment retaining the moat at the north.

Twin-electrode and double-dipole earth resistance surveys were carried out over the island and the infilled sections of the moat, and extended at the west up to the farmhouse building. The readings ranged by a factor of more than ten, the highest being associated with the infilled western side of the moat. This suggested that it contained loose, dry, building rubble from the manor house that originally occupied the island. Fairly high values were also found on several parts of the island, particularly near the south-east corner, and also near the farmhouse.

Some 550m of hedges were recorded in the neighbourhood of the manor house and 30m sections were found to contain up to nine different species. It was concluded that some lanes could date from the foundation of the park in the 12th century and some from about 1300
Fig 1  Guildford Park Manor. Location maps, (a) and (b) and site plan, (c), grid north being indicated in each case. The structures excavated in the shaded areas A and B of (c) are shown in more detail in figure 2.
when the manor house was probably first built. One lane, along a footpath, may date from
the establishment of the farms in the 17th century.

A water-divining survey gave 24 reactions over the northern half of the island, five of
which were quite strong.

Building surveys were carried out by the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey) who
concluded that the farmhouse is Georgian, built around an earlier 17th century cottage and
that the five-bay barn, since demolished, was a puzzling structure (Harding 1974; Harding
& Blair 1974).

The excavations

INTRODUCTION

The areas to be excavated (fig 1c) were determined after consultations with the tenant farmer.
The principal aim in 1972 was to investigate the fill of the moat at the western edge of the
island. The 1973 season was mainly concerned with excavations near the north-west corner
of the island, and in 1974 these were extended to the north-east corner. The final season in
1975 was aimed at clarifying the results of the previous three years, but a small new area near
the south-east corner was also excavated.

The excavations on the island were based on a 3m-square grid with its origin located
at the south-west corner (fig 1c). There were 138 such squares of which 24 were fully or
partially excavated leaving 0.6m baulks, some of which were removed after sections were
recorded. In practice about one-half of the 216m² area occupied by these 24 squares was
excavated. The remainder of the excavation was carried out in twelve trenches occupying a
total area of about 60m². An outline plan of the excavations is shown in figure 2. Detailed
plans, sections and descriptions of all the features can be found in the full report (Crocker
2014).

THE MOAT

An east–west 1m-wide trench was cut across the moat, 31.7m north of the origin, through
loose mortar, flints and broken tiles until water was reached at a depth of about 1.8m from
the surface. The top of the outer revetment wall was revealed at a depth of only 0.2m but
the inner wall, which has substantial footings, had been robbed to a depth of about 1.3m
(fig 2, 1a). Clearly these footings carried an outside wall of the manor house in addition
to acting as a retaining wall to the moat. The top of a brick pier (fig 2, 1b) was found at
water level at the western end of the trench and, to investigate this, the trench was widened
adjacent to it and the water pumped away continuously. This allowed the original bed
of the moat to be found located about 2.8m below the surface. At the eastern end of
the trench, a structure built of chalk blocks was found projecting from its north face and
consequently the trench was widened. This structure proved to be a garderobe pit and is
described below (fig 2, 1g).

The trench was also extended on to the island and revealed an embankment pre-dating
the construction of the wall and garderobe pit. Further small trenches were excavated on
each side of the moat to provide more information on the alignment and structure of the
retaining walls. On the west side about 3m of the wall (fig 2, 5) was found c 6m north of
the original trench but not farther north. Also, a circular brick garderobe pit was found
(fig 2, 5g). Four trenches excavated on the east side of the moat all revealed features of
the retaining wall of the moat (fig 2, 1–4), continuing the alignment in the first trench
northwards. However, it narrowed twice indicating that the major buildings of the manor
house did not extend to the north-west corner of the island. What appeared to have been an
approximately square garderobe pit was also discovered and excavated (fig 2, 2g).
Fig 2  Guildford Park Manor. Outline plan of the excavations. In area A, note (1) the substantial foundations of the wall of the manor house at the western edge of the island, (2) the garderobe pits on both sides of the western side of the moat and (3) the network of brick drains at the north-east, the foundations of several small buildings at the north-west and the remains of a pavement at the north. Area B shows the south-east corner of the manor house. The actual locations of areas A and B are shown in figure 1.
THE GARDEROBE PITS

The three garderobe pits discovered are shown in figure 2 (marked ‘g’). The circular one at the edge of the island (fig 2, 1g) was 0.75m in diameter and 1.7m deep and built of seven courses of smooth chalk blocks. The base was constructed of thin bricks and wood and there was a drain running into the moat. The pit contained rich black soil and a fascinating range of finds dating from the early 16th century.

The square garderobe (fig 2, 2g), about 1m across, had walls constructed largely of chalk blocks. It was only excavated to a depth of approximately 1.5m, corresponding to the water level in the adjacent moat; no drain into the moat was discovered. The upper part contained a 60cm layer of charcoal surmounted by a crude horizontal flue associated with splashes of lead. Pottery dated the pit to the 13th century and three late 15th century French jettons and a blue on white tin-glazed maiolica tile were found in the charcoal beneath the hearth. Pottery associated with the hearth itself indicates that it dates from the early 16th century.

The third garderobe (fig 2, 5g), on the western side of the moat, was circular, c 80cm in diameter and 1.8m deep. The top 80cm was constructed mainly of bricks and the lower part of chalk blocks, suggesting that it had been rebuilt. There was a brick drain leading into the moat. It was last filled in the early 16th century and contained a large quantity of animal bones, teeth, antlers and shells. Its location suggests that it served buildings on the west side of the moat, possibly those indicated by high resistance readings.

THE MANOR HOUSE

The aim of the excavation did not include detailed investigation of the manor house, but some information was obtained. In addition to the 8.5m of substantial foundations of a wall of the house along the western edge of the island, the resistivity surveys gave an indication of where other walls may have been located. In particular, there were high values near the south-east of the island, where a corner of the house must have been located and near the mid-point of the southern edge, suggesting a gatehouse and bridge. A small excavation near the south-east corner (fig 2, Area B) revealed partially robbed foundations of the corner of a substantial wall, much pottery, a large number of fragments of decorated floor tiles and window glass and several lengths of glazing bar (cames).

A larger area was excavated near the north-east corner of the island. Flint foundations of a substantial east–west wall (fig 2, 6a) and several robber trenches were revealed. The finds included Penn tiles, one with the legend SIGNUM SC'E CRUCIS, suggesting that a chapel, known to have been built on the site in 1369, was nearby.

GARDEN FEATURES AND OUTBUILDINGS

Apart from near its north-east corner, the main buildings of the manor house did not extend to the northern edge of the island. As far as possible, the remaining eighteen squares were fully or partially excavated (fig 2) and revealed that this part of the site was occupied by surface drains, workshops and pavements. However, these had been greatly disturbed by robber trenches, rubbish pits, building rubble, the roots of ornamental trees and supply and drainage pipes for a modern garden pond. Some of the robber trenches and 18m of interconnecting open drains, constructed from thin bricks, suggested an alignment for the north wall of the manor house (fig 2, 7a–b).

Near the north-west corner of the island the stone foundations of what were probably timber workshops were discovered (fig 2, 4a). One of these had a baked clay hearth with related stakeholes and late 13th century pottery. Other finds associated with these structures demonstrate that this part of the island was occupied from the early 13th to the late 16th centuries. Several areas paved with Horsham slabs were discovered along the northern edge of the island (fig 2, 6b). Beneath these slabs was found the remains of a clay embankment
about 30cm high, presumably cast up from the moat. Beneath this was the original topsoil and undisturbed clay. Two groats of the second reign of Edward IV were found nearby.

The finds

The pottery discovered during the excavations included large quantities of shell-tempered ware, much redware and whiteware, particularly some very large storage and cooking vessels, many sherds of fine green-glazed ware including Tudor cups, a large Beauvais ware bowl, most of a decorated Renaissance jar, large quantities of Raeren and Frechen stoneware jugs, numerous sherds of Surrey-Hampshire border slipware platters, some commemorative Staffordshire and Lambeth stoneware and also Victorian ‘china’ (Nelson 2013).

Many different types of building material were discovered during the excavations, including stone, bricks, paving tiles, roof tiles, mortar, timber, window glass, lead and iron. The stone included chalk, flint, Bargate stone, Horsham slabs, sandstone, Purbeck marble and ‘Carrara’ marble. Most of the bricks discovered were a rich red colour and measured 9.8 x 4.3 x 2.0 inches (25 x 11 x 5cm). Three types of paving tiles were found: a large number of decorated lead-glazed Penn tiles, a few decorated tin-glazed maiolica tiles and undecorated tiles. Again, three types of roof tiles were found: a large number of plain tiles, a part of one ridge tile and a part of one gutter tile. A large quantity of loose mortar was found on the site and also much mortar attached to other building materials. The only timber found during the excavations was from below water level in the moat, but many pieces of charcoal were discovered elsewhere on the site. There were many fragments of window glass, usually very corroded and blackened, but some of better quality with painted decorations, and solidified lumps of molten lead were excavated. An interesting iron plate or gate was located in situ at the outer end of the drainage channel at the bottom of one of the garderobes. Many hand-forged, wrought-iron nails were also found.

Small finds included two groats of the second reign of Edward IV (1471–83), three late 15th century French jettons, a lead alnage seal and a lead bale seal, a small triangular sheet of lead bearing an engraving of an eagle, iron and copper-alloy objects including three horseshoes and three buckles, fragments of good quality glass objects and many broken clay pipes.

Large numbers of animal bones were discovered including ox, sheep/goat, pig, rabbit, chicken, duck and red deer. Shells included oysters, cockles, mussels, common snails and ramshorn snails, together with numerous fish bones.

Discussion

The structural remains that were excavated in 1972–5, including wall foundations, robber trenches and garderobe pits, were consistent with the partly erased illustration of the manor house on the King James version of Norden’s 1607 map of Guildford Park held at the British Library (Norden 1607). In particular, the map shows buildings around a small courtyard with a gatehouse at the centre of the southern side. It appears to cover about three-quarters of the moated site, leaving space for service buildings and workshops at the northern end.

Not surprisingly, the pottery forms excavated cover the period from when Guildford Park was enclosed in 1154, or perhaps earlier, up to the 20th century. The sherds from the manor house include some very good quality material whereas those from the farmhouse are mainly Surrey-Hampshire border ware and Victorian ‘china’. Unfortunately, most of the pottery and small finds were excavated from soil that had been disturbed continually for over eight centuries.

Endnote

The author is aware that the full report (Crocker 2014) was finalised some 40 years after the excavations took place. It was however prepared gradually over this long period and
therefore the presentation may contain unfortunate inconsistencies. Some of the procedures
and techniques adopted and described will also be outdated. To these reservations must be
added the fact that most of the volunteers had not been involved in an excavation previously.
Any interpretation of the results must therefore be considered cautiously. However, it is
hoped that publication of this report will encourage others to re-examine at some time in
the future the finds and the extensive archive of other material and be able to deduce a
more coherent understanding of the site. Indeed, this could result in enthusiasm for carrying
out further excavations. The archaeological archive that is to be deposited, consists of the
material finds, site notebooks, drawings of plans and sections, drawings of pottery and finds,
photographs and correspondence with authorities.

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