

CPAT Report No. 1293



The School House, Chirbury, Shropshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



YMDDIRIEDOLAETH ARCHAEOLEGOL CLWYD-POWYS
CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Prepared by:	Checked by:	Approved by:
		
Kate Pack Project Archaeologist	Nigel Jones Senior Project Archaeologist	Paul Belford Director
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Summary

The Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was commissioned in September 2014 to undertake a watching brief during groundworks at The School House, Chirbury, Shropshire in relation to the proposals for a change of use and refurbishment, with a view to bringing the building back into use by the school.

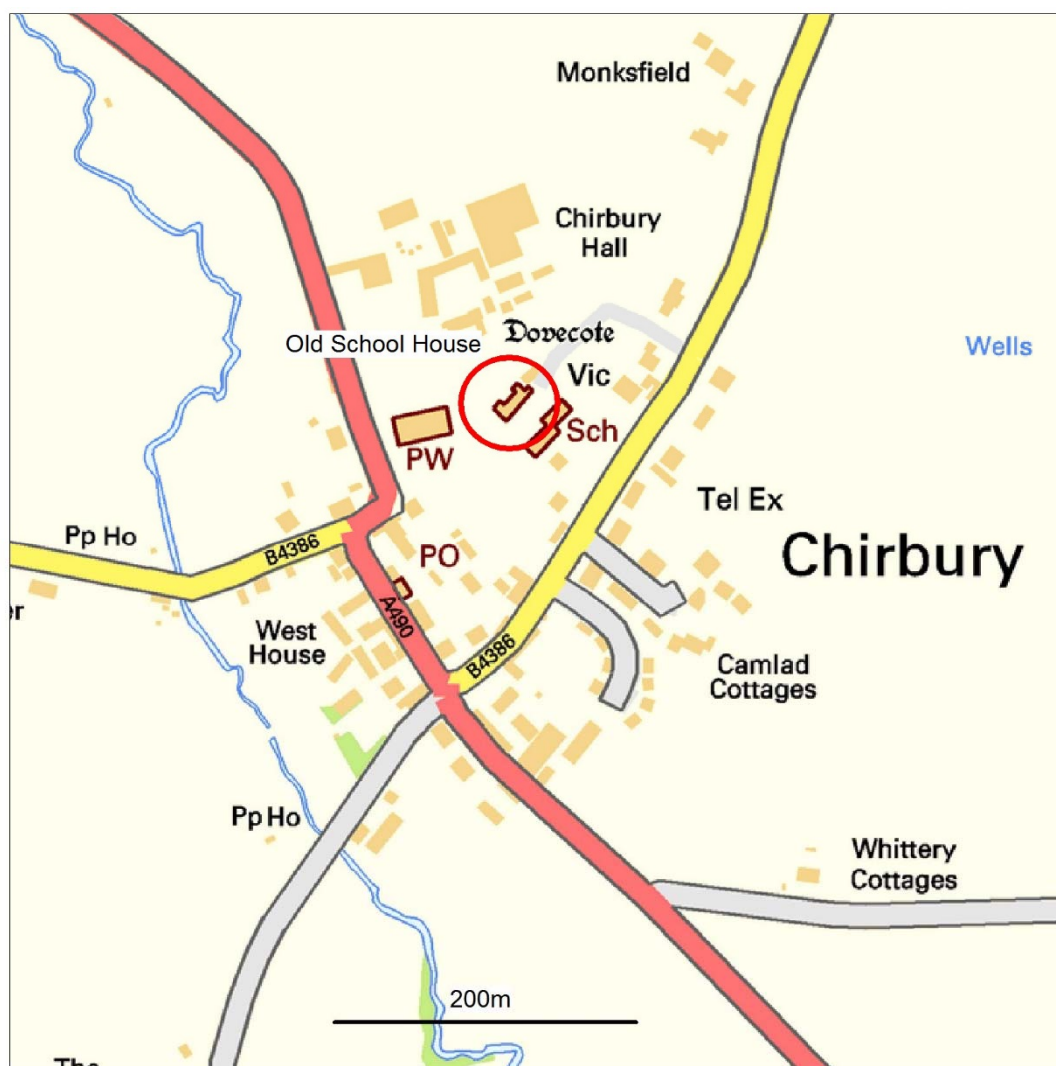
Hand excavations in the entrance of the hallway revealed a 17th to 18th-century earthen floor and cobbled surface divided by a partition for a possible doorway. To the rear of the hall a suspended timber floor was removed to expose a sunken flagged-stone floor and the base of a blocked arched doorway that originally led to the 19th-century cellared school room to the north. Adjacent to the base of the stairs another passage had been in filled with dry stone walling. It is possible this was part of the original staircase.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was commissioned by Philip Humphreys Architects in September 2014 to undertake a watching brief at The School House, Chirbury Shropshire in relation groundworks associated with a change of use and refurbishment (SO 26212 98543). Planning permission (14/01513/FUL) was granted in April 2014 with the inclusion of Condition 3, relating to the cultural heritage, which states:

‘No works associated with the development hereby permitted shall commence until the applicant/owner/developer has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (WSI) which shall first be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure that any evidence associated with known archaeological features and sites is investigated and recorded satisfactorily, in accordance with Policies CS6 and CS17 of the Shropshire Local Development Framework Adopted Core Strategy.’



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Fig. 1 Site location plan, aligned north.

- 1.2 The work involves re-opening the porch to provide access to the present classroom and the former living room, which will become a teaching area. Because of problems providing disabled access to the upper floors, it is initially proposed to use the rooms on the first and second floors for storage associated with the school. It is proposed to refurbish the classroom at the rear and reinstate the staircase from the present classroom, which was taken out to provide a storage cupboard. The external steps will also be rebuilt. The building is in a poor condition and requires extensive repair work and upgrading including the provision of a heating system and re wiring.
- 1.3 The watching brief was conducted at the request of the Historic Environment Team at Shropshire County Council and discussions between the client and the Senior Archaeological Advisor, Mick Krupa, have determined that the following areas of proposed ground disturbance needed an archaeological watching brief during ground reduction in three areas: adjacent to front porch; the foundations for a wall to the steps; and the hallway below the suspended floor.

2 Background

- 2.1 Built on the site of the Augustinian Priory, The School House lies to the north-east of St Michaels Church and Churchyard. The building has been used as a school since it was first built and currently forms part of Chirbury Primary school. The School House is a timber-framed building dating from the 17th century and was listed in 1951 at Grade II (English Heritage Building ID 257372). Documentary evidence would suggest that it was built specifically as a school by Edward Lewis in 1675. Consisting of three bays on the first and second floors and two on the ground floor, there is evidence that the staircase from the ground floor originally may have started from the classroom. In 1866 an additional classroom was added to the west of the original building. This is of stone construction with a tiled roof. A further classroom was added to the rear of the school house in the late 19th century. This addition is built of brick with a slate roof. The ground floor room to the south of the entrance porch was presumably the original classroom and remains a classroom to this day. The remainder of the original building was the residence of the headmaster. The building has been occupied as a dwelling until about five years ago.

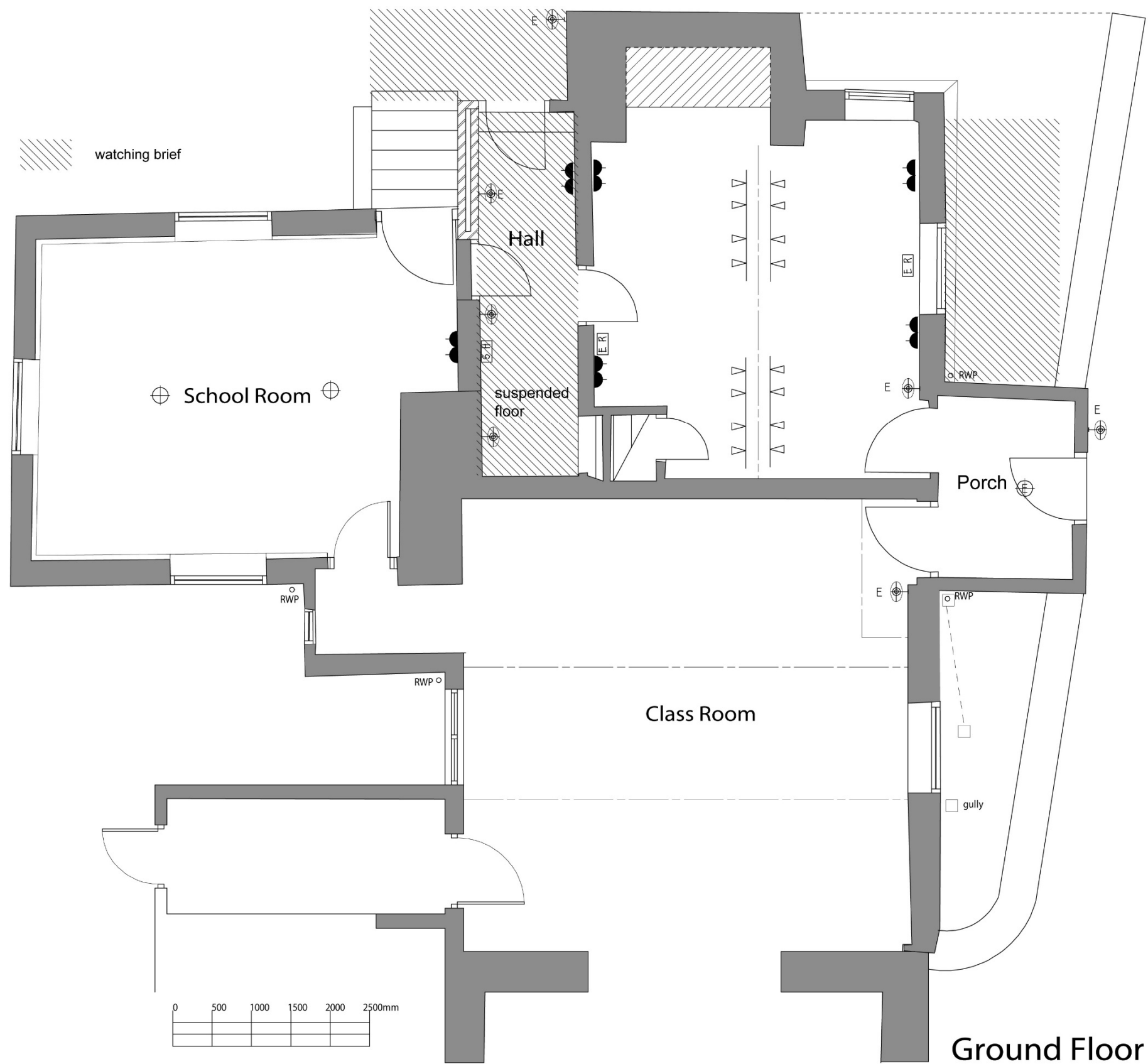


Figure 2. Plan of the original eastern end of The School House showing the location of the watching brief

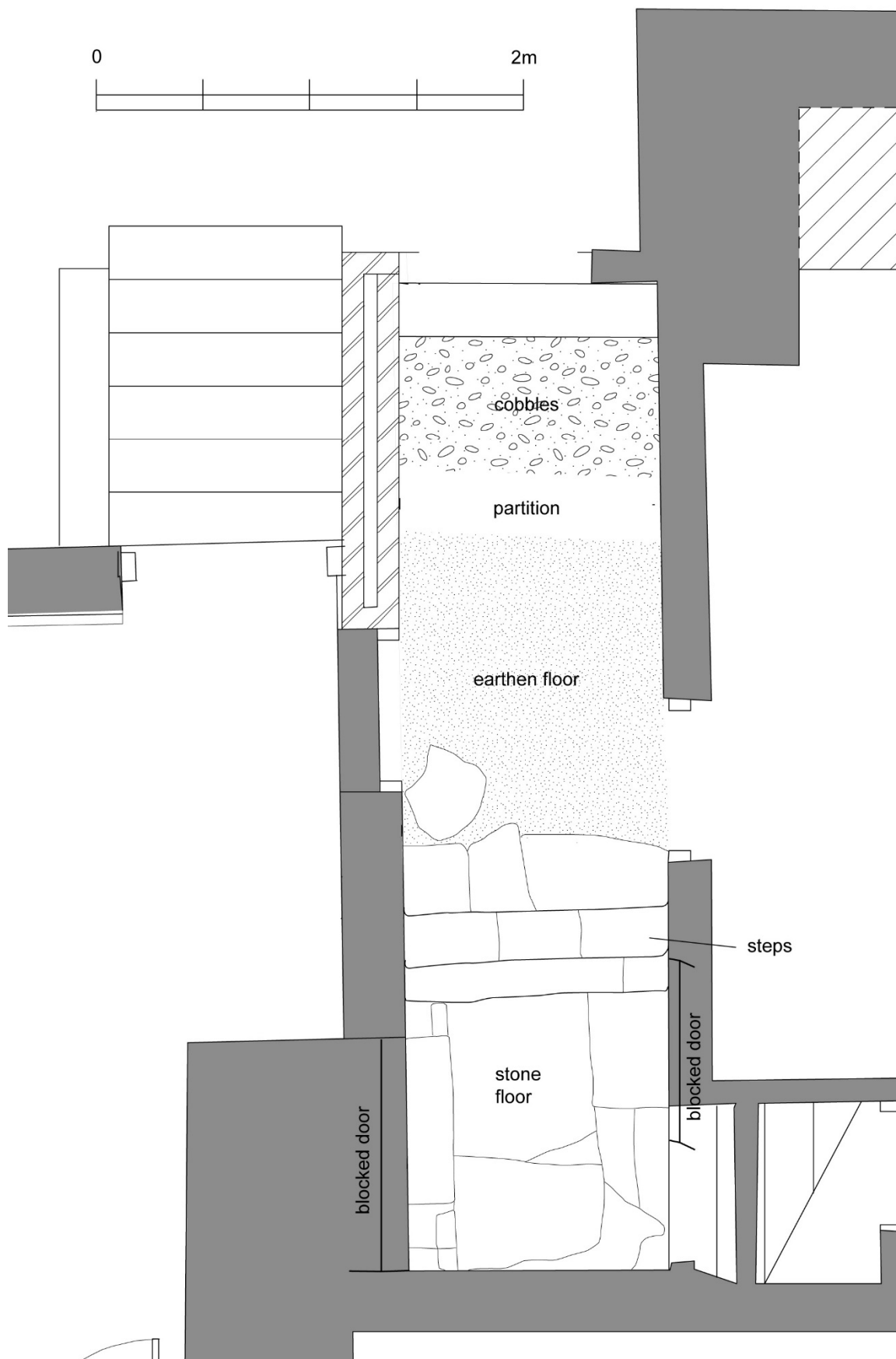


Fig. 3 The entrance hall and area beneath the suspended floor

3 Watching Brief

- 3.1 The watching brief was conducted on 2nd September 2014, monitoring groundworks in three areas.

Area adjacent to the porch

- 3.2 To the north-east of the porch ground clearance had been undertaken prior to the commencement of the watching brief (Fig. 4). A slight reduction in levels exposed a brown loam which later investigation determined was of no archaeological significance and no features or artefacts were noted. No further ground reductions were planned and no additional archaeological work was therefore undertaken.



Fig. 4 The area to the north east of the porch, viewed from the north east.
Photo CPAT 3888-0025

The entrance hall

- 3.3 The northern wall of the entrance hall had been removed prior to the commencement of the watching brief, although this area was later subject to archaeological excavation. The careful removal of around 0.25m of fine brown silt in the entrance of the hallway revealed a cobbled surface and an earthen floor, both with associated Mottled Ware and Buckley-type ware dating from the 17th to 18th centuries. These surfaces were divided by a shallow slot, perhaps marking a former partition or doorway, which was 0.3m in width and 40mm in depth, with a fill of loose brown silt, charcoal and clinker. The cobbled surface and the slot both abutted the internal wall of the house (see Fig. 4), respecting the layout of the main room. These features represent an earlier layout within the entrance hall layout which was later modified.



Fig. 5 The hall entrance, viewed from the north-west. Photo CPAT 3888-0002



Fig. 6 The hall, viewed from the north-east. Photo CPAT 3888-0021

Beneath the suspended floor

- 3.4 To the rear of the hall a suspended timber floor had been inserted. This was removed to reveal further brown silt, with occasional 19th-20th century china, tobacco pipe stem and bottle glass. The removal of 0.2m of silt exposed two stone steps, each 0.2m high (Fig. 7). At the base of the stairs full excavation of 0.75m of silt revealed a sunken flag stone floor in poor repair, being patched with red bricks, and the base of a blocked arched doorway that originally led to the late 19th-century subterranean school room to the north-west (Figs 9 and 10). The lower infill of the blocked doorway was of red bricks and hard concrete, which was constructed up to the panelling, to act as a retaining wall for the infilling below the suspended timber floor. Other 20th-century upgrades included a new doorway to the adjacent cellar, to the east of the original blocked doorway.
- 3.5 Adjacent to the base of the stairs another passage had been infilled with dry stone walling (Fig. 8). This entranceway, constructed within the stone walls of the house, very slightly curved to the right. It is possible this was part of an earlier staircase, as the present stairs were constructed from the higher level of the removed 20th-century suspended timer floor. This feature was obscured by the boarding above and infill itself.



Fig. 7 The stone steps and flag stone floor revealed beneath the suspended floor, viewed from the north-east. Note the blocked doorways to left and right. Photo CPAT 3888-0006



Fig. 8 The blocked entrance, viewed from the north-west. Photo CPAT 3888-0010



Fig. 9 The blocked original doorway to the 19th-century school room in the cellar, viewed from the south-east. Photo CPAT 3888-0007



Fig. 10 The blocked original doorway from the cellar, viewed from the north-west.
Photo CPAT 3888-0013

4 Conclusions

- 4.1 The watching brief was conducted during groundworks around the entrance and hallway, as well as an external area adjacent to the porch of the Old School House. Although the building lies on the site of an Augustinian Priory no archaeological features, artefacts or deposits were revealed which relate to the medieval or earlier post-medieval periods.
- 4.2 However, the watching brief did uncover limited evidence for an earlier layout of the building. A cobbled floor was identified in the entrance hall which was separated from an earthen floor within the building by a slot, perhaps for a doorway. Artefactual evidence suggests that the floors may have been in use during the 17th- to 18th-centuries. The removal of a suspended floor revealed a short flight of steps leading down to a stone-flagged floor, to either side of which were blocked doorways. One door would have led into the cellared school room, which was an addition to the building dating from the late 19th century. It is possible that this was also when the hall entrance layout was altered.
- 4.3 It was also evident that reorganisation of the building during the 20th century included the blocking of the original doorway to the northern cellar room and inserting a new door to the east, modifying the stairs and inserting a suspended floor.

5 Acknowledgements

- 5.1 The author would like to thank Peter Humphreys and the building staff for their co-operation during the archaeological watching brief.

6 Sources

Humphreys, P., 2014. *Heritage Statement School House, Chirbury C.P.School, Chirbury*
Montgomery: Philip Humphreys Architects.