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An Earthwork Survey of Seamer Manor House

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The site of Seamer Manor House in 1852 from the 1:10560 scale Ordnance Survey map (reproduced at 1:5000 scale)

1. Introduction

Over the weekend of 29-30 March 2002, the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society surveyed the site of the medieval manor house on the west side of Seamer village (National Grid Reference TA 0132 8341). The survey was designed to provide a basic record of the main earthwork components of the site in order to assist the Seamer Heritage and Research Project 2000 (SHARP) with their investigations into the development of the village. This project is financed by an Awards for All grant from the Heritage Lottery fund. Technical support was provided by English Heritage.

The limits of the survey were the boundaries of the field in which the manor house is situated and in total an area of 7.3ha was examined. As well as the manor house site, the field contains the remains of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing along with several medieval boundaries and more recent trackways. Standing within the earthworks of the manor is a 12m long section of stone wall from one of the manor buildings. A basic 3D record was made of this wall during the course of the survey.

The manor house complex with an area immediately adjacent to the north and west are afforded statutory protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (RSM No. 28249) whilst the section of stone wall is listed as being of Special Architectural or Historic Interest, Grade II (reference TA 08 SW 4/34). The manor house site is recorded in the National Monuments Record (NMR No. TA 08 SW 6). The pasture field falls entirely within an area subject to a countryside stewardship scheme.

2. History of the Site

The Seamer area is rich in archaeological remains. Some 2.5kms south of the village is the famous middle stone age site of Star Carr dating back to around 7.500bc whilst evidence of Iron Age, Roman and early Anglo-Saxon settlement has been found at Crossgates, 1.5km to the east of the village. The village of Seamer is first mentioned in 1086 in the Domesday Book when the manor is listed among the possessions of William de Percy. The Percy family rose to prominence as the Dukes of Northumberland in the 14th century and the manor stayed with the family until 1537 when it passed to the crown. In 1555 Queen Mary granted the manor to Sir Henry Gate.

Although Seamer was one of the principal Yorkshire seats of the Percy family, very little is known about the medieval manor house. The house is mentioned in 1304 but it could have been founded much earlier, perhaps when the manor first came to the Percy family after the Norman Conquest. The manor house seems to have been fairly extensive, reflecting the fact that the Percy family were frequent visitors to Seamer. The Tudor antiquary Leland, visiting the area in the 1530s, describes it as 'large but of no rich building, the chapel in it is only well-built' and in 1545 the manor house is described as a castle. The Gate family continued to live there in the second half of the 16th century, but it is not known for certain when the house was finally abandoned.

3. History of Research

Despite the historical importance of Seamer manor house and the fact that it survives as a prominent series of earthworks, no detailed archaeological description or interpretation of the site appears to have been published. Most authors mention the fact that a section of wall still survives from one of the manor buildings but little consideration has been given to the form of the surrounding earthworks and how they relate to the layout of the medieval manorial complex. The description accompanying the recent entry in the Schedule of Monuments refers to the existence of 'terraces and banks' up to 1.5m high and that stonework is exposed at a number of places. There are no records of any archaeological excavations having taken place at the site although the backfilled remains of a possible excavation trench was recorded during the course of the survey.

The earliest published plan of the site to depict the earthworks with any degree of accuracy is that issued at 1:10560 scale by the Ordnance survey in 1852. Although the scale is too small to depict subtle detail, the outline of the manor house is shown quite clearly and it indicates the interior was subdivided into three distinct areas by a series of banks. A small building is shown where there is just the isolated section of wall today suggesting that in 1852 this masonry was included within some sort of small structure. The same plan indicates that the earthworks of the medieval manor were far more clearly visible in 1852 than they are today suggesting the site has suffered some destruction during the last 150 years. Subsequent editions of the Ordnance survey map show the earthworks in an increasingly stylised form and are consequently of limited use for interpreting the remains.

The 2002 survey by the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society is the most detailed survey of the earthworks so far undertaken. It has led to a better understanding of the layout of the medieval manor and the extent to which the medieval remains have been effected by later robbing, quarrying and dumping. It also discovered that cultivation remains and boundary banks contemporary with the manor house survive in the field surrounding the site.

4. Geology, Topography and Land-use

The manorial enclosure is at a height of about 30m above Ordnance Datum on a natural eminence formed by glacial sands and gravels which provide a well-drained site. In contrast, low-lying ground immediately to the south and west of the manor house was probably marshland before it was drained for agriculture; the name Seamer is thought to mean 'marshy pool'. The pasture field in which the manor house is situated is mostly bounded by post and wire fences and hedges, though on the east is the stone boundary wall of St Martin's parish church. Part of this is of relatively recent construction following the westward expansion of the graveyard during the second half of the 19th century. The site is under permanent pasture and is used for livestock grazing. There is a permissive footpath running east-west across the field immediately to the north of the manor house site.

5. Description and Analysis of the Earthwork Remains

The interpretative plan included in this report illustrates the following description and analysis of the earthworks of Seamer Manor house and its environs.

5.1 Pre-medieval remains

No definite earthworks pre-dating the medieval period were identified during the course of the survey. It is possible that the broad lynchets noted on the west and south-east edges of the natural ridge could result from ploughing up to the margins of the low lying ground before the manor house was established. Indeed it is possible that the south side of the manor house could have been laid out along a continuation of one of the lynchets visible to the east. The lynchets are easily distinguishable from the medieval ridge and furrow ploughing which is much narrower and far less prominent although this by itself is not firm evidence that they are markedly different in date. One possibility worth considering is that the lynchets result from ploughing in the Romano-British period since there is a settlement of this period less than 1.5km to the east at Crossgates.

5.2 Medieval remains

The principal medieval feature in the survey area is the site of the manor house which consists of a roughly square-shaped enclosure approximately 90m across. It occupies the highest part of the natural ridge from where the manor house would have dominated the immediate surroundings. Several sections of bank to the south and east of the enclosure probably defined the precinct separating the manor grounds from the rest of the village and the surrounding fields. Medieval ridge and furrow ploughing encroaches upon this bank on the south side suggesting the boundary fell out of use when the low-lying ground to the south of the manor was drained and brought into cultivation.

5.2.1 The manorial enclosure

The perimeter of the manorial enclosure

The outer edge of the manorial enclosure is defined by a steeply cut slope which is clearly visible on the south and east sides. On the north and west sides it has largely been obscured by later mounds and has also been partially levelled, particularly on the north immediately adjacent to the present east-west track crossing the field. On the south side it is possible that later ploughing, represented by several parallel east-west furrows (see 5.2.4 below), has encroached upon the base of the slope accentuating its steepness. The slope clearly served to define the perimeter of the manorial enclosure and may have been surmounted by a boundary wall or a fence although no evidence of either is visible on the surface.

On the east side, a short section of bank runs eastwards before being truncated by the west side of the churchyard. The bank, which is quite broad and flat-topped, contains the footings of a stone wall on its summit. This may indicate that there were several small walled plots, such as paddocks, on the east side of the manorial enclosure which were destroyed when the graveyard was extended westwards in the second half of the 19th century.

Entrance into the manorial enclosure

There is no clear earthwork evidence for an entrance into the manorial enclosure although there are at least three possible locations to consider. The present east-west trackway crossing the field can be discounted as a medieval approach route since it probably did not come into existence until after the disappearance of the manor (see below 5.3.4). However, some 20m to its south, a possible causeway formed by a broad, flat-topped ridge approaches the north-east corner of the manorial enclosure suggesting there may have been an entrance at this point, although the actual site of any entrance is obscured by a large mound. This mound could conceivably mark the site of a medieval building which, if there was an entrance at this point, could have been the gatehouse. However, there is no definite evidence that the causeway is medieval in date or that it was an approach route.

A second possible site of an entrance is on the south-east of the enclosure. Here the clear inwards turn of the perimeter on the east side of the enclosure may define the north side of the entrance gap. However any evidence for an entrance will have been destroyed by the large quarry hollow which has removed the south-east corner of the manorial enclosure.

A third possible site for an entrance is in the middle of the south side. Although the actual site has been destroyed by later quarrying the evidence of a slight hollow way on the interior some 40m to the north suggests traffic may have entered into the enclosure at this point. There is also a causeway on the exterior of the enclosure heading approximately towards the same point although this is most likely a later feature (see below 5.3.1).

The interior of the manorial enclosure

The interior of the manorial enclosure was clearly sub-divided into three areas here called (from west to east) the inner yard, the outer yard and the terrace although these subdivisions are now not as clear as they were when the 1:10560 Ordnance survey map of 1852 was surveyed. The boundaries marking the subdivisions survive as discontinuous low stony banks and probably represent the foundations of stone walls. No clear evidence was found of any changes within the enclosure during the medieval period, although alterations in the layout and disposition of buildings are quite likely to have occurred given that the site could have been occupied for anything up to 500 years.

The inner yard

The section of wall stands within the inner yard from which it can reasonably be inferred that this area contained the principal manorial buildings. The yard is L shaped and is defined by the perimeter of the manorial enclosure on the north, east and south sides and by an internal bank on the west but this only survives intermittently. The south-east end of the enclosure as shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map does not survive as an earthwork although its junction with the bank

defining the south side of the outer yard is probably indicated by the distinct dog-leg evident in the latter bank.

The east end of the yard has largely been destroyed by a later quarry into the south side of the manorial enclosure whilst the middle third of the yard is obscured by a series of later mounds up to several metres high. Whilst later dumping on the site could account for some of the build-up, it is likely that the core of the mound is debris from the demolition of the main manorial buildings and upcast from robbing out their foundations.

The standing wall is around 1.5m thick at ground level and stands to a maximum height of 4.9m and incorporates a doorway of possible 15th-century date towards its south end. There is clear evidence of a robber trench stretching some 15m northwards from the end of the wall indicating that the building must originally have been at least 25m long. It is likely that the wall is an exterior wall and that the interior was on the west side where there is a substantial level area although now largely obscured by the build up of spoil. A clear L shaped bank within the accumulated spoil may be the south-west corner of the medieval building in which case the bank is probably the top of a wall buried within the mound of debris. However the bank could also be sitting on top of the mound of debris in which case it possibly belongs to a later structure built against the standing section of medieval wall. A small building is shown in this position on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map. The existence of this later building incorporating the medieval wall probably explains why this one section of medieval masonry survived demolition and the attention of stone robbers. There is a strong possibility that further buildings exist within the inner yard although there are no clear remains visible on the surface.

The outer yard

The outer yard is defined by internal banks on the east, west and south sides and by the perimeter of the manorial enclosure on the north. The yard appears to be largely featureless apart from the hollow way mentioned above. This may be because the outer yard was deliberately left open for the coralling of livestock or for use as

gardens. One possible site of a building is represented by a substantial mound on the north side of the yard which may be formed from demolition debris. The 1852 Ordnance Survey map shows a square-shaped bank at this point projecting forwards from the perimeter of the manorial enclosure which may support the possibility that there was a building here. However, given its proximity to the present track the mound could equally well be relatively recent dumping. A slight square-shaped hollow on the south side of this mound could be the remains of an unrecorded archaeological excavation.

Terrace

A terrace slightly below the level of the outer yard runs along the east side of the manorial enclosure and is defined by an internal bank on the west and by the perimeter of the manorial enclosure on the south and east. The north end is obscured by a large mound which, although possibly increased by dumping, may represent the site of a building. The 1852 Ordnance survey map shows a square-shaped earthwork at this point which supports the possibility that there was some sort of building here. The causeway mentioned above which approaches the north-east corner of the manorial enclosure heads for this mound suggesting, if there was an entrance at this point, any building here could quite likely have been a gatehouse. The terrace itself could have been for coralling livestock but against this is the fact that there is no obvious sign of an entrance onto the terrace. More probably this area was left open for use as gardens.

5.2.2 Possible medieval structure

Some 25m to the west of the manorial enclosure is a prominent sub-circular mound which appears more regular than the relatively recent mounds of upcast and dumped material which obscure parts of the manor site. It is therefore possible that this mound was deliberately created as the platform for a building, whose position might be indicated by a shallow circular depression on the summit. This could conceivably have been the site of a circular structure, such as a dovecote.

5.2.3 The manor precinct

Sections of what was probably the boundary defining the limits of the manor grounds survive some distance to the south-west, the south and the south-east of the manorial enclosure. The section on the south-east side consists of a low spread bank running northwards up to the churchyard wall. It is evident from the 1852 Ordnance Survey map that this boundary originally continued further northwards but was destroyed when the churchyard was extended westwards during the second half of the 19th century. As it provided the original west side of the churchyard, the boundary is clearly of some antiquity and conceivably could be the original medieval division between the manor grounds to the west and the church to the east. The boundary emerges again on the north side of the present churchyard but is simply defined by a post and wire fence with nothing earlier surviving above ground.

The south side of the manorial precinct is less certain on the ground but may be indicated by two separate sections of low stony bank. They are not on precisely the same alignment and could represent separate phases in the development of the manorial precinct. The shorter stretch begins at the south end of the section of bank described above and runs westwards for 45m taking it up to, but apparently not beyond, the present corner of the field. The longer section of precinct boundary consists of a discontinuous low stony bank which starts on the east at the end of one of the broad plough lynchets and continues for almost 200m westwards, virtually to the west side of the present field. Both the south sections of boundary run along the bottom of the ridge and separate the higher ground to the north from what would originally have been marshland to the south. The edge of cultivation to the east, beyond the south-east corner of the suggested manorial precinct, is defined by a straight, shallow ditch with a slight upcast bank to its south. The bank is cut by the medieval ridge and furrow ploughing to be described below.

5.2.4 Ridge and Furrow ploughing

The low-lying ground to the south of the manor boundary described above appears to have been drained and brought into cultivation in the medieval period since the

boundary is clearly crossed by ridge and furrow ploughing typical of this period running in a north-south direction. The remains are fairly slight because the marshy nature of the ground would have stopped the accumulation of prominent plough ridges. However the furrows quite clearly cut the sections of bank defining the south side of the manor grounds suggesting that this boundary went out of use when ground to its south was brought into cultivation.

The ground between the manorial enclosure and the south precinct boundary also appears to have been brought into cultivation since there are the remains of east-west ridge and furrow ploughing immediately to the north of the boundary. It has already been mentioned that this ploughing might have encroached upon the south side of the manorial enclosure accentuating the steepness of its perimeter slope.

5.3 Post-medieval activity

Following the abandonment of the manor house the area appears to have been left as open pasture as there is no evidence that the area has been ploughed to any great extent in recent centuries. Cartographic and earthwork evidence indicates some limited re-occupation of the site took place during the post-medieval period. The manor house buildings appear to have been robbed for stone and the south side of the site extensively quarried. Some dumping might also have taken place.

5.3.1 Possible structures

It has already been mentioned that the standing section of medieval walling appears to have been incorporated in a small building at the time the 1852 Ordnance Survey map was compiled. Aside from this, the survey recorded the sites of several other post-medieval structures. Some 20m outside the south-west corner of the manorial enclosure are two adjacent rectangular hollows less than 0.3m deep which cut into the east-west medieval ridge and furrow ploughing. This relationship suggests the features are post-medieval in date and they probably indicate the sites of temporary wooden structures. They may have been small shelters or possibly they were open pens for livestock. A similar rectangular hollow is visible at the foot of the north-

west side of the manorial enclosure and again is probably the site of a small wooden structure. A series of banks towards the east side of the field is probably the site of a relatively recent livestock pen as is a small embanked rectangular enclosure immediately to the south of the manor house. This second pen has an entrance in the south-east corner and is situated at the start of a causeway heading southwards into the field to the south of the survey area. The proximity of this pen to the causeway may be an indication that the two are contemporary. The position of a sheepwash shown on the 1938 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map is represented on the ground by a curving brick-lined channel and an area of small mounds and banks immediately to its north.

5.3.2 Quarries

Quarrying has taken place on the south side of the manorial enclosure, probably to acquire gravel for use locally. There are two large quarry hollows, the one to the east, (on the site of a possible entrance), appears to be the earlier of the two since it has quite rounded sides suggesting a good deal of weathering has occurred since it was abandoned. The west quarry is much more crisply defined and probably dates to the last 150 years since the 1852 Ordnance Survey map shows a continuous perimeter bank across the site of the quarry hollow. It is possible that material was taken from this quarry to construct the causeway referred to above immediately to the south of the manorial enclosure.

5.3.3 Mounds

Reference has already been made to the large mounds which obscure parts of the manorial enclosure but it is not clear from the surface evidence exactly what the origins of each of the mounds is. There clearly must be a component of demolition debris and upcast from stone robbing in several of the mounds. It is also likely that there has been an element of recent dumping on the site which may, in particular, account for the several metres of build up of parts of the mound north of the standing section of wall. It is likely that most of these mounds have been formed in the last 150 years since there is no hint of their existence on the 1852 Ordnance

Survey map. Other isolated mounds of probable agricultural origin occur elsewhere in the survey area.

5.3.4 Miscellaneous features

The only discernible archaeological features to the north of the manorial enclosure are two slight ditches, one running north-south, the other east-west. They appear on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map defining the west end of one of a series of rectangular fields stretching westwards from Seamer main street. This field probably represents a post-medieval encroachment onto the former manor grounds. Close to the north edge of the field a recent pipe trench is clearly visible which continues into the field to the east.

The trackway, which crosses the survey area from west to east and runs close to the north-west corner of the manorial enclosure, is shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map. In its present form it is unlikely to be medieval in date since it seems inconceivable that the residents of the manor house would have tolerated a route so close to the manor house. More likely is that it came into existence after the manor house was abandoned.

6. Conclusions

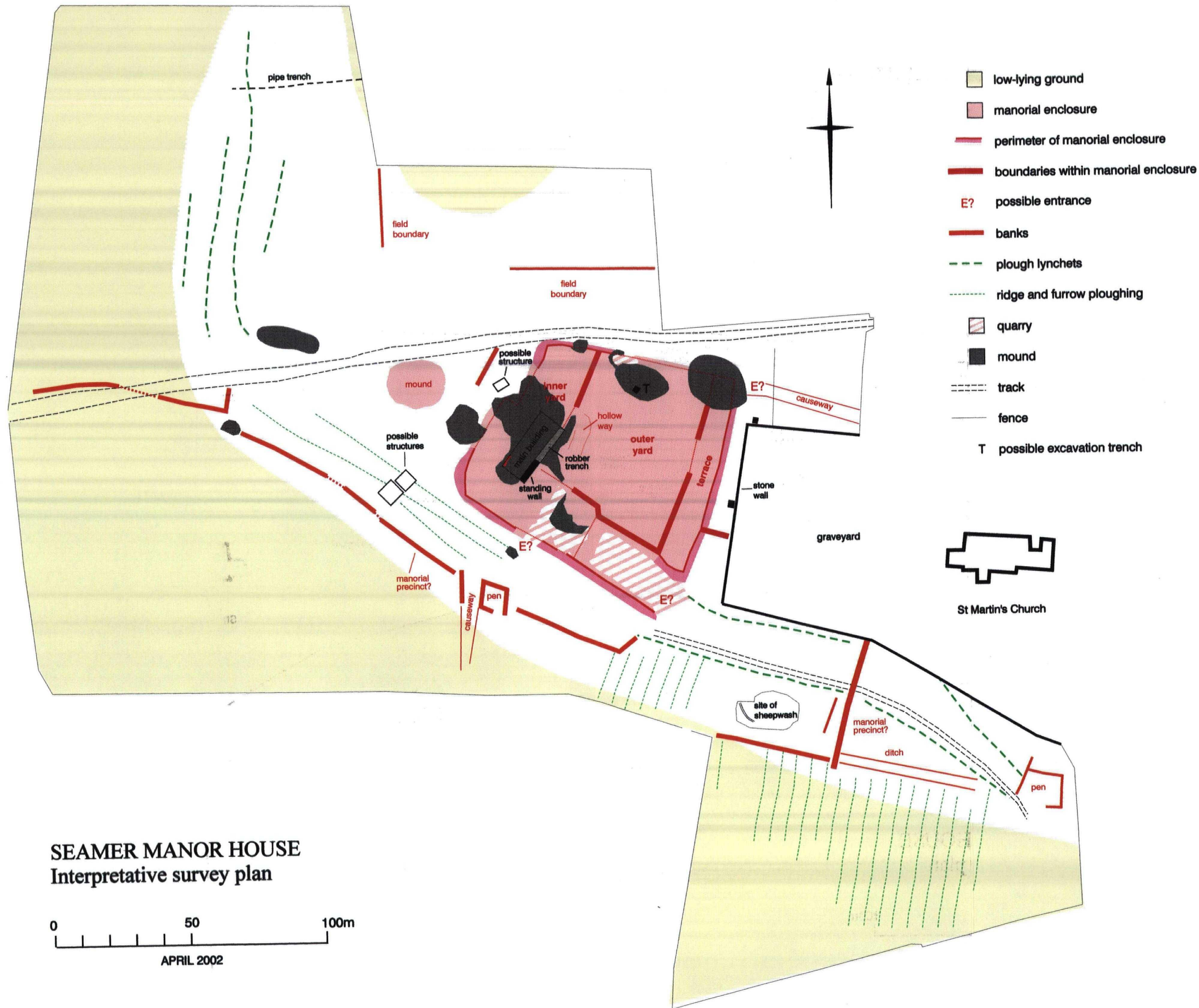
- The site may preserve evidence of pre-medieval cultivation in the form of several broad lynchets around the south and west sides of the natural ridge
- The medieval period is chiefly represented by the manorial enclosure. The enclosure was sub-divided into three areas or yards with the main residential accommodation located in the westernmost or inner yard and the other two perhaps given over to livestock and gardens. The surviving fragment of wall was part of a large building at least 25m in length. There is no clear evidence of any other buildings within this yard or elsewhere within the enclosure although several mounds may indicate the positions of demolished structures. There is no clear evidence of an entrance into the manorial enclosure although at least three locations are possible.
- The boundary defining the grounds of the medieval manor is probably represented by a bank to the south and south-east of the manorial enclosure. The south section of this boundary has been overploughed in the middle ages when the low-lying ground too its south was brought into cultivation.
- In the post-medieval period the manorial buildings were demolished and robbed and the site used for sporadic dumping. The south side of the manorial enclosure was also quarried extensively. There are several livestock pens within the survey area and the hollows left by other slighter structures which may have been wooden buildings or fenced livestock pens. Cartographic evidence indicates that the standing section of medieval wall was incorporated in a small building in the middle of the 19th century which may explain why it has survived.

7. Recommendations

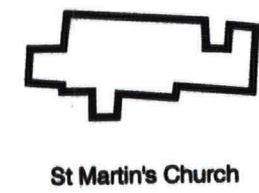
- Further detail about the medieval manor, its development and its immediate environs may emerge from a campaign of geophysical survey. Possible areas to target include the level areas within the manorial enclosure and the its immediate environs.
- The importance of the site in the middle ages probably means that much historical information awaits discovery in archive repositories. This could usefully be brought together to complement the findings of the archaeological research.
- The outline of the manorial enclosure and its interior layout are not easy to make out on the ground. If it is intended to make more of the site as a heritage feature then some form of interpretation panel is needed to make sense of the visible remains.
- The standing section of wall is clearly part of one of the main manor buildings. Despite its importance, it is in urgent need of conservation to preserve it for the future and to prevent any further loss of masonry.

8. Acknowledgements

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- low-lying ground
- manorial enclosure
- perimeter of manorial enclosure
- boundaries within manorial enclosure
- E? possible entrance
- banks
- plough lynchets
- ridge and furrow ploughing
- quarry
- mound
- track
- fence
- T possible excavation trench



SEAMER MANOR HOUSE
Interpretative survey plan

