

A Service Range
at
SOMERHILL, TONBRIDGE, KENT

A Preliminary Report

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Nature of Request

Somerhill is a grade I listed building situated on the outskirts of Tonbridge in Kent (TQ 609452). First built in the early seventeenth century, the house was subsequently modified at least four times: about 1780, 1830, 1879, and once again about 1930. In 1988, Somerhill and its surrounding parkland were purchased for use as a schools complex. The house has undergone a further major refurbishment.

The owners now wish to recommence work on the conversion of the northern range of the 'Old Stable Court', lying to the immediate north of the main house. In advance of this conversion, an outline chronology of the range is required, together with an assessment of its significance.

Background

Somerhill is prominently situated in a picturesque parkland landscape on a hillside to the south-east of Tonbridge in Kent (fig. 1). An undoubtedly prestigious Jacobean mansion, it was initially built for Richard, the fourth earl of Clanricarde (d. 1635), apparently to a plan by John Thorpe (about 1565–1655). The work is thought to date to about 1611–13, on the basis of a number of rainwater-heads bearing these two dates (fig. 2). In his *History ... of Kent*, however, Hasted (1782, 339–40) states that, following his acquisition of the South Frith estate through marriage, Clanricarde 'built a large house, at no small expense, on an eminence on the northern part of this estate, which he did not finish till the latter end of K. James I.'s reign, and gave it the name of Somerhill'. James I died in 1625. Thereafter, in any case, the house interiors were modernized several times, notably about 1780 (probably for William Woodgate), then about 1830 for James Alexander, once again about 1879 for Sir Julian Goldsmid (d. 1896), and finally about 1930 for Sir Osmund d'Avigdor-Goldsmid (d. 1940). As a result of so many phases of extensive refurbishment, it is perhaps not surprising that so little of the original interiors survives intact, though the exterior façades — of a durable and apparently local 'Calverly' ashlar — appear to be almost untouched (fig. 3).

A broad chronology of the works at Somerhill was set out by Avray Tipping (1922), and this is developed by Newman (1976, 536–37). Subsequently, much thought was clearly given to the development of the house during the preparation of the most recent listing entry, with the published list providing important and otherwise unavailable background (DoE 1990, 289–92). In terms of the design of the house, and of its attribution to John Thorpe, this was accepted by Avray Tipping (1922, 314), and the fuller context is discussed in far more detail by Summerson (1964–66, 99–100). Colvin (1995, 979) also appears to accept that the plan of Somerhill was provided by Thorpe.

To the north of the main house there are two service courtyards. That immediately adjacent to the house is known as the Old Stable Court (fig. 4). Here, the three ranges do not appear to be contemporary with one another, and there are indications — as detailed below — that the northern block may have been built along with the house in the second decade of the seventeenth century. The courtyard was certainly complete by 1782 and appears in the engraving accompanying the text on Somerhill in Hasted's *History ... of Kent* (Hasted 1789, 339–41). The interiors were extensively refurbished in the works of

about 1879. The second or outer courtyard, which in its extremities begins to extend down the hillside, and which is dominated by a tall clock tower, was built in its entirety in a single phase in 1879 (fig. 5).

Description of the North Range in Old Stable Court

The range in question is situated along the north side of Old Stable Court (fig. 4), opposite the northern façade of the house. Aligned east–west, it is essentially a narrow rectangular block of two main storeys with full attic spaces. The walls are of coursed ashlar, with dressed-stone windows and doorways, and a tiled roof. The tooling of the masonry is not, however, as fine as that of the ashlar in the main house. By the 1920s, and probably a good deal earlier, the range comprised a pair of cottages, one either side of a central through passage.

The southern façade is arranged symmetrically. At ground floor-level, there are three doorways with four-centred arches, one into each cottage, and another to the passage. A blocked loop above each of the cottage doors probably lit the original staircases. Two tiers of three two-light windows delimit the ends of each cottage; four in all. In each case, the upper window projects from the roof as a tall, gabled dormer.

In 1990, there were indications that the outer or northern side of the range was formerly an open arcade of timber posts (DoE 1990, 291), though at the time the posts were boxed and their date was felt to be uncertain. Currently, the outer wall is part supported on steel stanchions. At either end of this outer face, there is a short projecting wing, one bay deep (fig. 6).

The present state of the interior makes it very difficult to be certain of the detailed chronology. Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the roof may be an original feature. It is of tenoned purlin type (fig. 7), with staggered purlins (fig. 8). The carpenter's marks which feature on the principal rafters give a numbered sequence from east to west. Many of the common rafters are also numbered, although the numbering is out of sequence and the carpenter's marks could be earlier, suggesting the rafters themselves could be of reused timber. The side walls of the stone dormers rest directly over the backs of the principal rafters; the rafters have been reinforced at some later date with additional timbers. The floor beams could also be of early origin, and at the upper level these seem to incorporate the tie-beams of the roof trusses.

Apart from the timber features, there are few other indications of early work at either ground- or first-floor level. Even the late nineteenth-century arrangements have recently been either swept away, or stand ruinous. At the eastern end, however, there is a large fireplace (fig. 9) set into the back (north) wall of the main body of the range. Although there is a large amount of brick infilling, and the surrounding wall is rendered, this could be an original fitting.

Interpretation

Despite certain reservations concerning detailing, the basic layout of the main house at Somerhill does indeed seem to correspond in most respects with the John Thorpe plan (fig. 10). Summerson (1964–66, 99–100) suggests that it should also be compared with other plans by Thorpe of Palladian derivation. In the house as built (fig. 11), the main deviations from the plan are the length of the hall (which in fact projects further east than is shown), and the absence of the rectangular and apsidal bays on the north and south sides (fig. 3). Of greater significance in the present context is the fact that the Thorpe plan shows nothing other than the main house. There is no indication of a service courtyard to the north, or even of a single service range. In itself, this may not be surprising, especially when compared to other known Thorpe plans where very little

outside the principal structure is shown. Avray Tipping (1922, 314) noted as much and suggested that — like the plan of Kirby Hall (for which see Pevsner 1973, 279–83) — it represents a first draft, which became modified during the construction process.

As noted above, not only was the north range of Old Stable Court definitely in existence by the 1780s, the ranges to the east and west, linking it to the main house, had also been built. This much is clear from the engraving which appears in Hasted's *History ... of Kent* (1782). But there are also strong grounds for suggesting that the north range was raised at much the same time as the house, probably in the early seventeenth century.

First, we might begin by considering the form of the roof, which may well belong to the early seventeenth century. The framing pattern and arrangement of timbers within the construction very much suggests the range was built as a separate, detached structure of simple rectangular plan. In support of an early date it is worth noting that, although a great deal of the original roof over the main house has been lost in recent works, where fragments survive they are of a similar form to those in the north range of the Old Stable Court.

This basic conclusion is borne out by the external masonry detailing. The windows are of very similar form to those in the main house, though with slight differences perhaps based on the status of the two structures. The mullions and jambs in the windows of the main house feature a hollow chamfer (fig. 12), whereas those in the Old Stable Court have simple chamfers (fig. 13). On the east façade of the range (fig. 14), there is a prominent lower plinth marked by a string, which terminates either side of the gable. There is also a clear straight-joint between this same façade and the end of the east range of the courtyard. Inside the courtyard (fig. 15), there is again very clear evidence for the termination of the stone plinth and its string, with distinct straight-joints at the junctions with the east and west ranges.

Soon after the initial construction of the range, two short projecting wings were added, one at either end of the northern side (figs. 6 and 14). And it may have been about this same time that the east and west ranges were built, creating the full courtyard to the north of the house. In the late nineteenth century, the projecting northern wings were extended to create the east and west ranges of the north courtyard.

At the east end of the range, there is a large chimney stack with four shafts. The roof timbers appear to be trimmed around the brickwork, suggesting that the chimney is an original feature of the building. The apparently original fireplace at ground-floor level has been noted (fig. 9), and there was another fireplace on the first floor, though the opening is now blocked. There is also evidence — by way of alterations to, and sooting of, the brickwork — of a small fireplace having been added at ground floor on the north side, that is to provide heating for the additional projecting wing at the eastern end of the range. This latter fireplace appears to have recently been removed, or perhaps just blocked, and rebuilt as a simple brick relieving arch.

Summary and Recommendations for Further Investigation

All on site observations were made over a single day, and it is important to emphasize that the interpretations are preliminary. Further work *may* be necessary, especially if there is a need to elucidate the precise date and function of this range and to set its development within the full overall chronology of Somerhill.

In summary, however, there are strong grounds for believing that the northern range of Old Stable Court is of very similar date to the main house, and that its roof and perhaps other timbers may date from the early seventeenth century. It seems to have begun as a freestanding block, perhaps providing services and stabling at ground-floor level, with the

possibility of some domestic accommodation at the upper levels. The central doorway and passage would have provided access to the stables and services, and two staircases lit by small loops would have been accessed from the other two southern doors.

The additional one-bay wings would have added further service space, and, to judge from the evidence of fireplaces, extra domestic accommodation for staff. Later, though perhaps still in the seventeenth century, the east and west ranges were added. With the comprehensive rebuilding programme of the 1870s, and with the provision of new stabling, the original purpose of the range would have been lost; it may even have occurred earlier. Along with the two other ranges of Old Stable Court, these areas were converted for more up to date service accommodation and offices. The ruinous partition walls, cupboards, and later fireplaces all seem to date from this period.

Any scheme of conversion for modern school use should seek to retain, at the very least, the roof and ideally the floor joists. The main fireplace at ground-floor level should also be retained. Although the accommodation and fittings provided for domestic servants in a late nineteenth-century country house are not without interest, much has already been lost and the remainder extremely ruinous. It is perhaps acceptable to let these go.

Alongside the works, it is strongly recommended that a drawn, written, and photographic record be made of those elements which will be lost. As part of the exercise, a more detailed investigation of the roof timbers would be greatly worthwhile. The numbering sequence of the common rafters, and the possibility of reuse, is one area which needs closer inspection.

The opportunity should also be taken for dendrochronological analysis, with samples carefully selected, not only in the north range of Old Stable Court, but also in the main house. The results could prove of enormous value in tying down details of one of the very few John Thorpe houses currently recognized.

NB: In the event of a dendrochronological analysis being carried out, it is important that the contractor should be made aware that the timbers within the roof space have been treated with chemical preservative.

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Fig. 1: The west front of the main house at Somerhill, Tonbridge, Kent.



Fig. 2: A lead rainwater-head on the main house bearing the date 1611 and the initial C for Clauricarde. Other examples bear the date 1613.



Fig. 3: The south front at Somerhill to show the quality of the ashlar construction. The details of the facade vary from those seen in the Thorpe plan (fig. 10), but are the same as those depicted in an engraving of the 1780s (Hasted 1782, 339-41).



Fig. 4: Old Stable Court, looking north-east, with the symmetrical facade of the northern range as the focus of the view. A well-head has been removed from the central courtyard since 1922.



Fig. 5: A view of Old Stable Court and the northern courtyard seen from the south-west. The west range of Old Stable Court is to the right, with the clock tower and ranges of the 1879 northern courtyard to the left.



Fig. 6: The northern courtyard with, to the right, the back or outer face of Old Stable Court. The white blocking fence runs between two single-bay projections which run out from the northern range.



Fig. 7: A general view of the roof timbers in the north range of Old Stable Court, looking west. The construction employs tenoned purlins, with staggered detailing.



Fig. 8: Detail of staggered purlins in the roof of the northern range in Old Stable Court.



Fig. 9: Fireplace at ground-floor level in the north wall at the eastern end of the range.

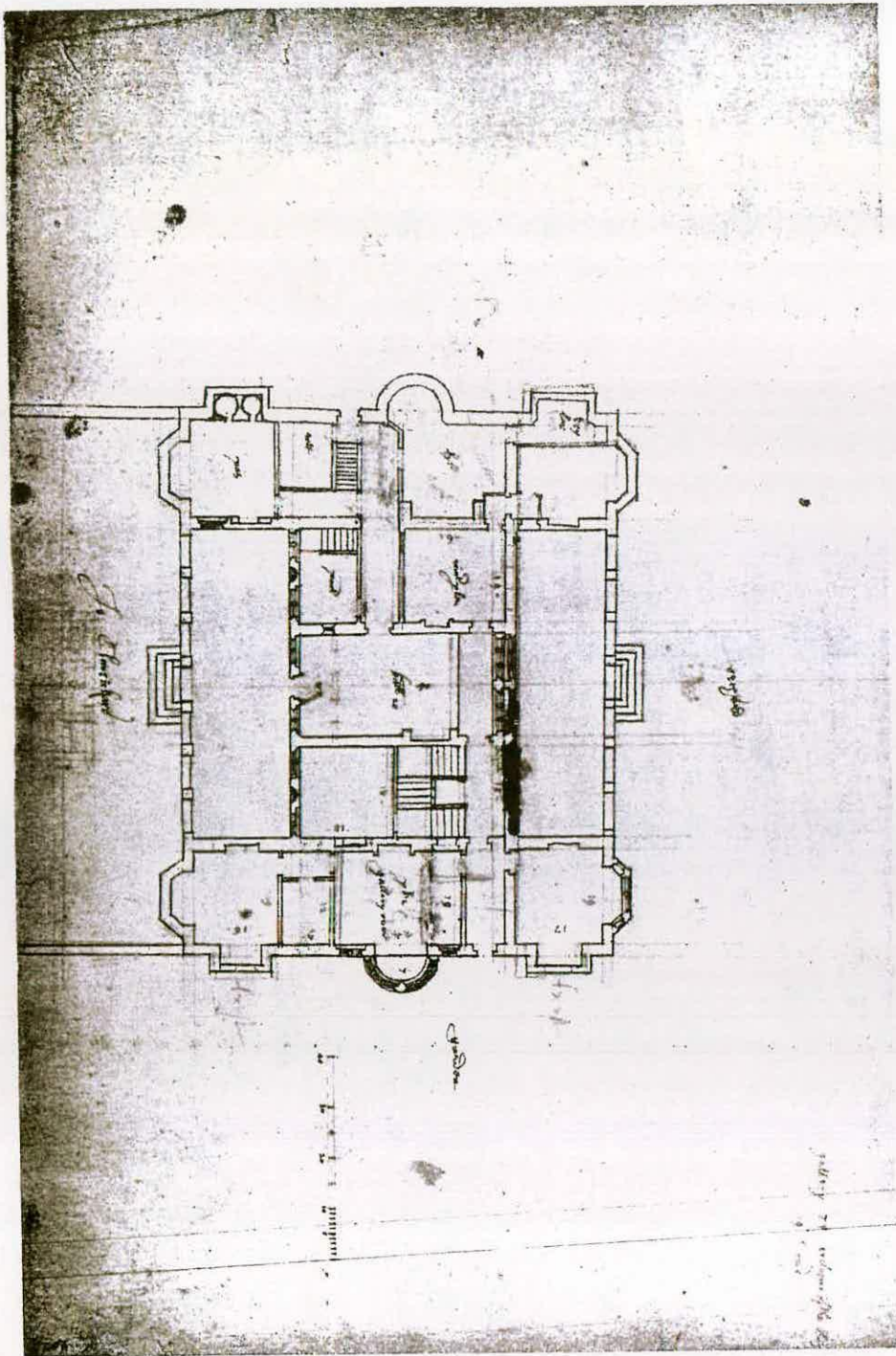


Fig. 10: John Thorpe's plan of Somerhill, from an original at the Sir John Soane's Museum, and reproduced as plate 96 in Summerson (1964–66). As mounted here, north is to the top, south to the bottom, west to the left, and east to the right.



Fig. 11: The east front of Somerhill as built in the early seventeenth century. The bay at the centre has windows looking into the hall at ground level and the saloon above. The John Thorpe plan (fig. 10) does not show the hall projecting out to the east side of the house.



Fig. 12: Two-light window looking into the basement on the north side of the main house. The mullion and jambs appear to be original and feature sunk chamfers.

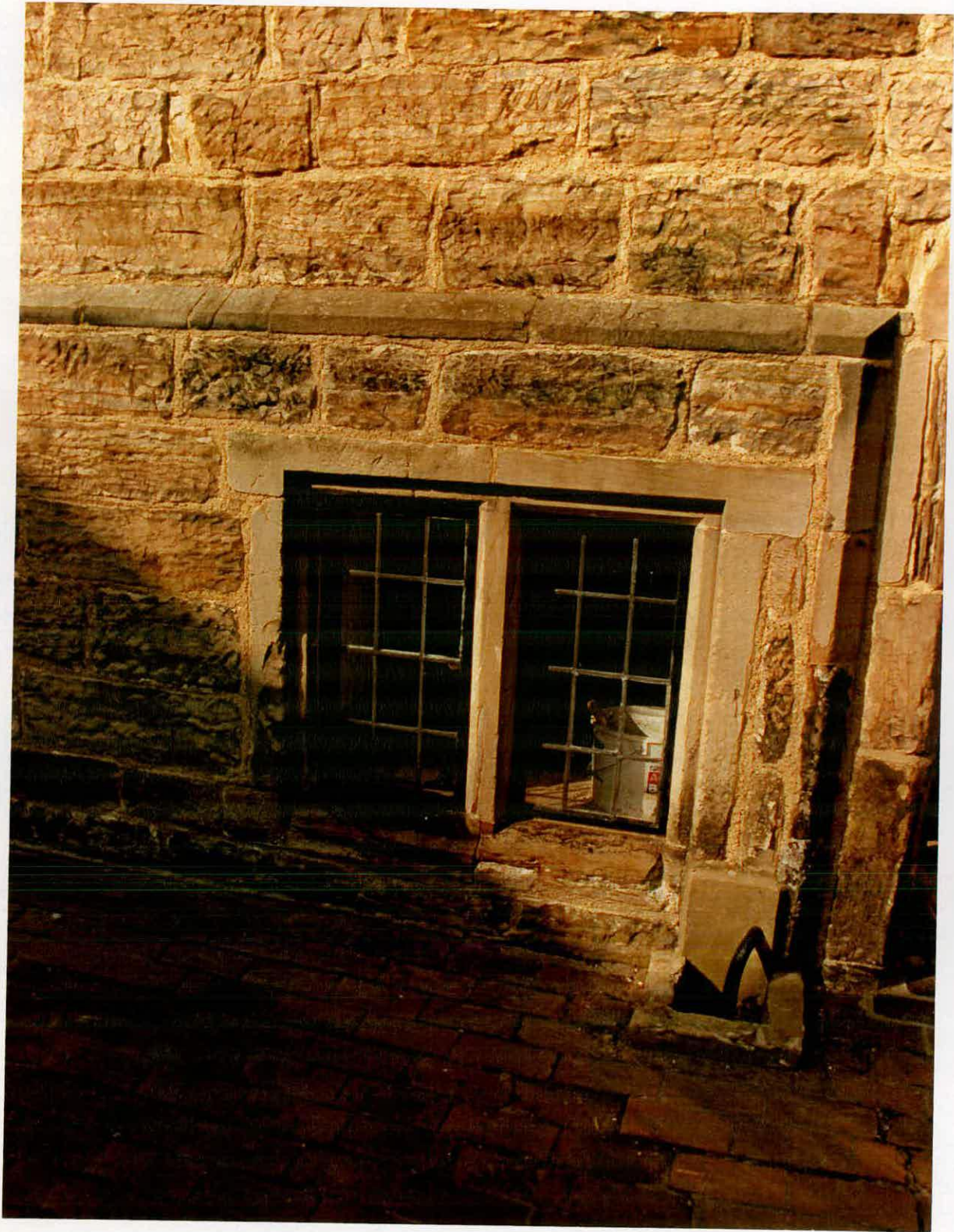


Fig. 13: One of the two-light windows which open from the southern side of the north range in Old Stable Court. Although the mullion has been renewed, there is enough evidence to suggest that the plain chamfer detailing is original.



Fig. 14: The east gable of the north range in Old Stable Court. Note the plinth and its string which continue on to the projecting one-bay extension to the right. To the left, there is a straight joint with the east range of Old Stable Court, where the plinth and string disappear.



Fig. 15: The north-east corner within Old Stable Court. The plinth and string of the north range are cut by the addition of the east range.