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# An Archaeological Excavation at Firwood, Alexandra Road, Formby, Merseyside Final Report Site Code 125

*Prepared for Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership*

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## **Non-Technical Summary**

This document is the final report on the results of an archaeological excavation conducted on the site of 'Firwood', a Victorian house situated on Alexandra Road, Formby, Merseyside. The project was undertaken as a community archaeology event in partnership with the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership.

The site is located to the south-west of Formby in an area of woodland and sand dunes.

Firwood was constructed in 1853 for Dr. Richard Formby, founder of the Liverpool Medical School. It was a large, two storey, Victorian 'villa' type residence with attached conservatory and single storey extension. The house stood until the early 1990s when it was demolished.

The excavation found that there was some evidence to confirm that the original house was much smaller than that shown on mapping and photographs from 1893 onwards. This consisted of a brick built cistern used to collect rainwater and incorporated into the kitchen area. Cisterns of this type collected rain water for washing and laundry and were generally located outside the house. The location of this example, below a passageway floor, suggests that the house had been extended some time before 1893.

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# **An Archaeological Excavation on Land at Firwood, Alexandra Road, Formby, Merseyside Final Report**

## **1. Introduction**

This report describes the results of an archaeological excavation conducted on the site of Firwood, a Victorian house situated on Alexandra Road, Formby, Merseyside. The project was undertaken as a community archaeology event for the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership. It is the final report on this project.

The cooperation of the landowner, Mr. Mike McComb, in agreeing to allow access for this project is gratefully acknowledged.

## **2. The Site**

The site is located at to the south of Alexandra Road (centred NGR SJ 357 918) in an area of woodland on the eastern fringes of the coastal dune belt (Fig. 1).

The underlying geology consists of drift deposits of wind blown sand.

## **3. Methodology**

A full Project Design was not produced for this project which was conducted as a Community Archaeology project under the wider Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership. Outline methodologies were produced as part of the original planning of the Community Archaeology project.

The excavation took place in June 2012.

All excavation was by hand and was restricted to exposing *in situ* walls and floors.

The positions of trenches is given in Fig. 5.

Notes on the early history of the house were provided by Dr. Reg Yorke.

The principal aim of the excavation was to allow amateur access to archaeological fieldwork and to provide training in basic archaeological methods.

The principal archaeological aim was to determine the construction sequence of the house.

In addition it was intended to record the internal layout of the building and surrounding garden features.

The excavation was project managed by Mark Adams, site supervisors were Clare Ahmad, Kate Sarbutt, Sam Rowe and Alison Burns. Will Moody and Fiona Sunners from Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership provided support.

Volunteers were Iwan Allardes, Rose Barcas, Meg Blanchard, Jude Campbell, Aless Castagni, Tomas Castegni, Alan Cooper, Dave Cox, Ann Cox, Caroline Finch, Lesley Finlayson, Ian Fyles, Ged Gallagher, Ceri Gardener, Martin Horton, Carl Hewitt, Almudena Inesarchilla, Lorna Jackson, Rolf Jordan, Helen Hunter, Alexandra

Keating, Colin Massey, Jack Meacher, Pauline McKenna, Joanna Munro, Sue Munroe, Bill Nixon, Renne Orme, Daniel Pearce, Sam Pearson, Judith Plunkett, Glennis Poole, David Poole, R. Rooney, Mike Rothwell, Janice Russell, Christine Settle, John Settle, Victoria Shevloff, Danielle Soper, Andrew Stockell, Joanne Swift, Callum Westaway, Tracy Whitehead, Aaron Whitehead and Corrine Wright. Apologies to anyone omitted, any omissions or mistakes are the author's.

In addition to those taking part directly the excavation was visited by many local people, some of whom remembered the house. Pupils from local primary schools also attended sessions aimed to provide them with an opportunity to participate directly.

#### **4. Archaeological and Historical Background**

No desk-study was conducted for this project, the following notes were compiled from readily available published documentary sources, historic images and maps.

The site is located in an area of sand dunes stabilised by the planting of trees in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It lies on the south-western fringes of the modern town of Formby and mapping from the late 18th to mid 19th century shows the site as sand dunes whose only economic use was as rabbit warrens.

The best evidence for prehistoric activity from the area consists of Late Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age human footprints and animal trails preserved in clay beds on the Beach at Formby Point. Roman activity is hinted at by occasional stray finds from the beach, though the nature and extent of this presently remains unclear.

There is documentary evidence that the site lies on or close to the site of Old Formby, the precursor to the modern town, which was overwhelmed by sand dunes in the Late Medieval to early Post-Medieval period. The placename suggests that the settlement had Norse origins, though earlier activity cannot be ruled out. Evidence from leases, indentures and a map drawn in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century suggests that the village was centred in the area to the south and west of the modern church of St. Luke's which would place it broadly in the area around Alexandra Road and Albert Road, though its precise nature and extent remains poorly understood.

However, any deposits relating to these earlier periods is probably deeply buried below deposits of wind blown sand and were unlikely to be exposed by the present fieldwork.

Firwood was built in a westward extension of the original woodland (the first on the Sefton Coast) which was planted by the Rev. Richard Formby at some date prior to 1776 (R. Yorke pers. comm.). The house seems to have been constructed into a circular hollow created by sand extraction (Harrison 2012) and the remnants of this topography can be seen in the steep bank which now forms the western site boundary. The house is not shown on the Tithe map of 1845 or the first edition OS 6 inch Survey of 1848 (Fig. 2), first appearing on the OS map of 1893 (Fig. 3). The layout shown on the 1893 map does not change until the house was demolished in the early 1990s.

Documentary evidence shows that Firwood was built by Dr Richard Formby (son of the Rev. Formby) in 1853 following his retirement from medical practice in Liverpool, where he had been a physician and co-founder of the Liverpool Medical School (Cecil Gray 2003). At about the same time he built and came to live in the neighbouring property Shorrocks Hill. It is said that he built Firwood House as a

'shooting lodge' for members of the extended Formby family. The 1861 census shows that Richard (then age 70) and his wife Charlotte were living at Shorrocks Hill, together with their daughter Ann Lonsdall and barrister son, also Richard (R. Yorke, pers. comm.). Firwood was occupied at that time by Arthur Ashton, aged 40, a member of the Liverpool Stock Exchange, his wife, son and daughter (aged eight) together with a sister-in-law and a governess, and other servants including two housemaids and a cook.

Dr Richard Formby died on 15th of December 1865 and was buried in the nearby St Luke's churchyard leaving his property and land to his wife Charlotte and thereafter to his son Richard Jr, Charlotte died four years later.

The 1871 census shows that Arthur Ashton still occupied Firwood but by 1881 Firwood was occupied by Edwin Hollins, a cotton broker together with his wife, brother and two young daughters. Arthur Ashton now described as a stockbroker's agent was however back in Firwood in 1891 aged 70.

By 1901 Jonathan Formby aged 41, Barrister at law, grandson of Dr Richard Formby was in residence at Firwood (Harrison 2012 dates the move to about 1902) and rented the house from his brother, Miles Formby. Firwood cottage was occupied by Robert Eccles, Gardener, Ann Lonsdall Formby was still living at Shorrocks Hill. Jonathan Formby, remained at Firwood, at least until 1937. Robert Eccles was also still at Firwood Cottage, later described as gamekeeper.

Jennifer Harrison (nee Formby) has provided an evocative description of life at Firwood in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, including some of the earliest photographs of the house in 1917 (Harrison 2012).

The later occupancy of the house is unclear, Harrison (2012) states that the Formby's were still living there during World War II but from 1974 to 1985 it was occupied by the Heathcliffe-Core and Kirby families. Although the families were related, the house was effectively split into two separate dwellings, the southern half occupied by the Kirby's grandmother, the northern half by the Kirby's (Fig. 4). Although no internal photographs survive the Kirby family were able to provide anecdotal evidence about the house and its setting. Perhaps the most interesting was that they believed the north-western corner of the main house, around the kitchen, was the oldest part of the building (Naomi Kirby, pers. comm.). This appears to be supported by different floor levels within the building. The house was abandoned in 1985 and while the precise date at which the house was demolished has not been established aerial photographic evidence suggests a date of 1990-3.

Several images of the exterior of the house survive, all dating from the 1970s and 1980s. These show the main house as a substantial detached two storey Victorian 'villa' type house with a slate roof. The main elevation faced to the east and there was a lawned garden to the south. The western side of the main house was abutted by a timber framed conservatory which led from the main house to a single storey structure to the west. This had a hipped slate(?) roof and south facing bay with French doors and was known to the Kirby's as 'The Ballroom' but was known by the Formby's as the 'Billiard Room' (Harrison 2012).

Prior to the start of excavation the majority of the house's foundations were partly exposed, though the western side was clearly better preserved. A depression c. 3-4 m wide and 0.5 m deep ran parallel to the north and east walls of the main house and represented a possible garden feature.

## 5. Results of the Excavation

Deposits are described in reverse chronological sequence beginning with the oldest.

The locations of trenches are given on Fig. 5 though deposits are only referenced to trenches for the purposes of location.

All of the walls were constructed in hand-made brick measuring 230-250 x 110x70-80 mm. The mortar consisted of a coarse sandy lime mortar.

### 5.1 Phase 1

This phase was identified from a brick vaulted water cistern (context 34) situated to the south of the kitchen, below the floor of a passageway leading to a rear door to the house (Figs 4 and 5. Plates 1 and 2). It measured 2.74 x 1.80m in plan and had a barrel vaulted roof constructed in hand-made brick. Its interior could not be investigated in detail because the only access was via a circular opening, c. 0.5 m in diameter, in its upper surface. It had been filled with deposits of sand though it was not clear whether this had been deposited when the cistern went out of use or whether it was in-wash following demolition of the house.

There was some stratigraphic evidence that the cistern was broadly contemporary with the cellar to its south, a 'niche' of uncertain function connected to a blocked opening in the northern cellar wall (Plate 2) and appeared to relate to the cistern, though its function was uncertain. However it was not possible to examine the direct stratigraphic relationship with the cellar and it remains possible that it in fact related to a structure to its north.

It is likely that this was originally an external feature, the circular opening in its upper surface was probably for access for cleaning and could have been accommodated within the passageway. However, water was probably extracted using a hand pump which is unlikely to have been in use when the passageway floor above was *in-situ* and in use. In addition similar cisterns observed on excavations on Merseyside have always been situated outside any buildings on the site (e.g. Adams 2012) and although little has been published on post-medieval water cisterns of this type, most appear to have been intended to collect 'grey water', usually collected from gutters fed from the roof. This therefore strongly suggests that the passageway and kitchen were later additions to the house.

Cisterns, were quite common in 19th century houses, often using the roof as a rain collection surface, gutters and downspouts delivered water to the cistern. Keene (1918) discusses similar cisterns and provides a cross-section of a typical example (Fig. 6). Generally they appear to have been located outside the house, though examples inside are not unknown (e.g. Compass Archaeology Limited 2009, though this appears to have collected ground water to alleviate drainage problems) and there are late 19th century references to the problems caused by cisterns constructed under houses, in one example a '... brick floor and the foundation-walls formed the cistern; the joist and floor of same forms the cover or top. The cistern not being arched with bricks, at times there is an offensive odour of decayed mud coming up through the manhole.' (The Sanitary Engineer (1889)). However, this seems, even in the 19th century, to have been regarded as bad practice and a cause of damp (ibid).

A 'well' to the west of the cistern could not be investigated for health and safety reasons, though being concrete lined appears to be a relatively late feature and may in fact relate to site drainage. It had apparently been capped by a quarry tile floor, part of which survived in the doorway to the passageway. The capping had collapsed during the early 1980s when the house was occupied (N. Kirby pers. comm.). Its location immediately, outside a door, is further evidence of significant restructuring in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, it is not clear which part of the house was the earliest. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the kitchen to the north was earlier, though there was no structural evidence to support this and evidence that the cistern was bonded to the cellar wall to its south suggests that they were contemporary and that the rooms above the cellar were therefore the earliest. In addition a short section of cast iron pipe embedded in this wall and probably feeding the cistern hints that this was originally an external elevation.

Documentary evidence suggests a date of 1853 for this phase.

## **5.2 Phase 2**

The evidence above suggests that there was a significant rebuilding of Firwood prior to 1893 when OS mapping shows the house in its final form (Fig. 3). It is not clear from the limited stratigraphic evidence whether this involved total demolition of the original house or whether it was incorporated into the new structure.

The 'ballroom' or 'billiard room' and conservatory were part of this rebuilding and the northern conservatory wall was bonded with the east wall of the main house which suggests that the rebuild involved almost total demolition of the original house.

The northern and eastern walls to the conservatory featured shallow gullies constructed in 2-3 courses of brick (Plates 3 and 4). Their function is unclear but being internal is unlikely to relate to drainage. It is likely that they carried pipes, perhaps hot water to heat the conservatory.

Internally little survived of the floor surfaces apart from small areas of quarry tile flooring in the kitchen (Plate 5). Otherwise few structural features survived other than the foundations to chimney breasts. The hearth to a fireplace was located in Trench VI (Plate 6) and its position suggests that the floor surfaces were c. 0.5 m above current ground levels. Although there was little other structural evidence this suggests the use of timber floors in all rooms other than the kitchen.

The best survival was in the kitchen where the fireplace base and small areas of flooring were excavated. The fireplace included a cast iron boiler with a copper water pipe (Plate 6).

The depression along the northern and eastern sides of the house was investigated with three trenches to establish its function. None of these found evidence of revetting to support its interpretation as a garden feature. In Trench VIII a drain feeding a brick lined soakaway at least 1m deep (Plates 7 & 8) had been truncated by this feature suggesting that it related to the demolition of the house.



## **6. Finds**

The vast majority of the finds consisted of fragments of architectural ironmongery and late 20th century debris typical of abandoned demolition sites.

The only significant find was a clay tobacco pipe bowl found in Trench II (Plate 9). It's precise context is uncertain (it was found after the trench was given over to school groups) but is likely to be from below the foundations of the east wall to the main house.

The pipe was assessed by David Higgins and is of a type certainly in use by c. 1860-65 since there are a couple of similar examples in a dump of that date from Big Lea Green (Towel & Philpott in prep) and there is an example from the Williamson Tunnels, which were being filled between 1840 and 1870. Given that the style was certainly current by the early 1860s (there are at least two different mould types represented at Lea Green). This style of pipe was still being illustrated in Davidson's catalogue of c. 1880 (Glasgow) and it is likely to have continued in production until around 1900. So, a date of c1850-1900 for the use of this style is probable. Unfortunately this date range does not assist with dating the construction of that part of the house.

## **7. Conclusions**

Firwood was originally constructed by Dr. Richard Formby in 1853 as a shooting lodge or summer residence. However, there is strong evidence that it was substantially remodelled at some date prior to 1893, perhaps being at least partially demolished and totally rebuilt.

One of the outcomes of the project was that it generated significant public interest and the excavation was visited by many Formby residents who remembered Firwood in its heyday. These included an anti-air craft gun parked in the drive, recollections of the asparagus farmer who lived there, memories of people who played at Firwood as children when it was occupied and others who remember playing in the derelict house.

## **9. Recommendations for Additional Work**

No further fieldwork is required on this site.

## **10. References**

Adams M. 2012 *An Archaeological Watching Brief on Land at Hilary Breck, Wallasey, Wirral, Merseyside. Final Report.* Unpublished report prepared for LSP Developments

Cecil Gray T. 2003 *Dr Richard Formby: Founder of the Liverpool Medical School I.* Royal College of Physicians, London

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Farrer W. & Brownbill J. 1911 *The Victoria History of the County of Lancaster.* Volume 4

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Harrison J. 2012 Memories of Firwood Formby. Unpublished report.

Keene E.S 1918 *The Mechanics of the Household*. New York, McGraw-Hill book company

The Sanitary Engineer 1889 *Plumbing Problems*

## **11. Figures**

Fig. 1. Site Location

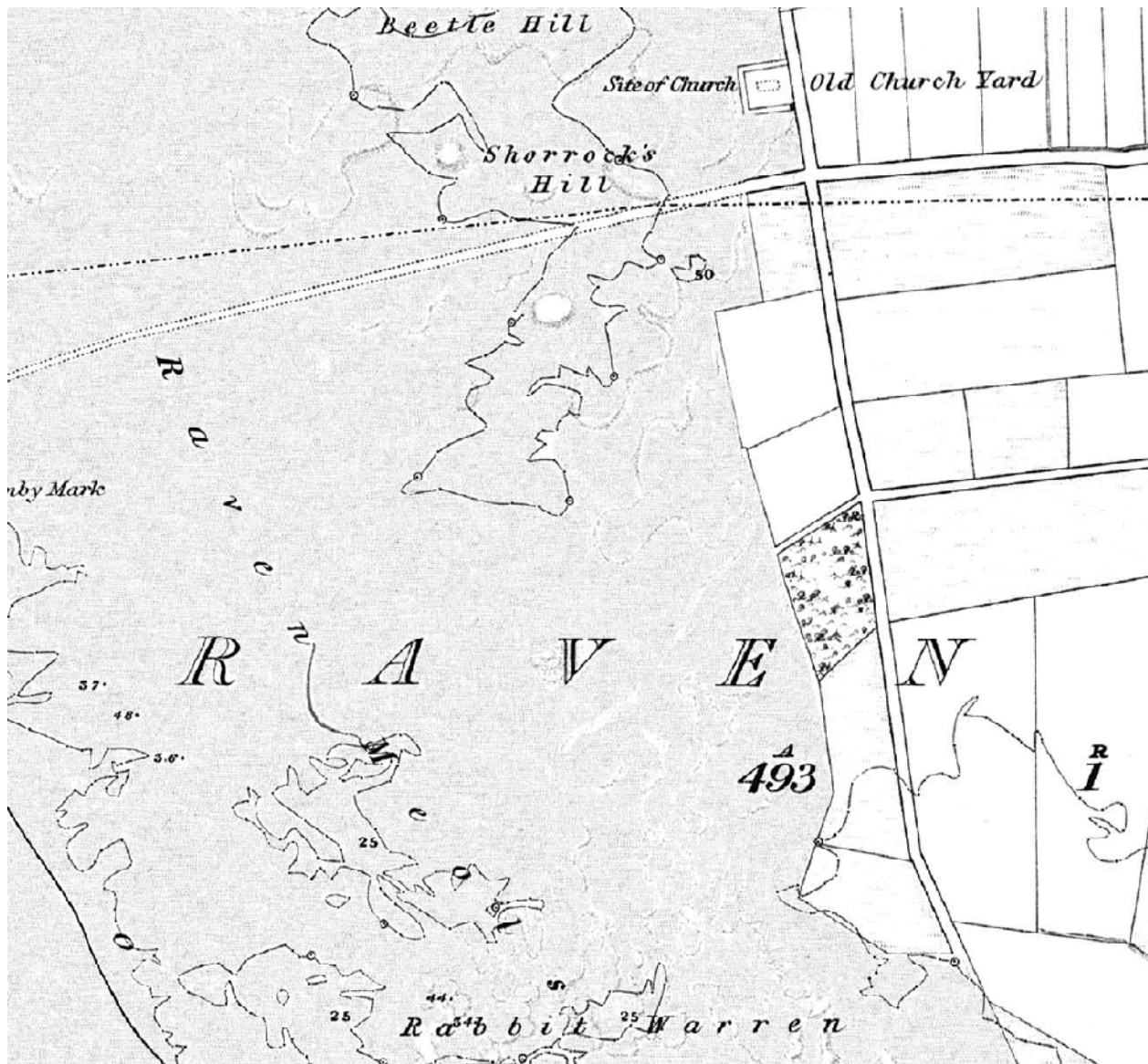


Fig. 2. Part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition OS 6 in to the mile sheet surveyed 1845-6, published 1848. Firwood was situated just above the letter E.

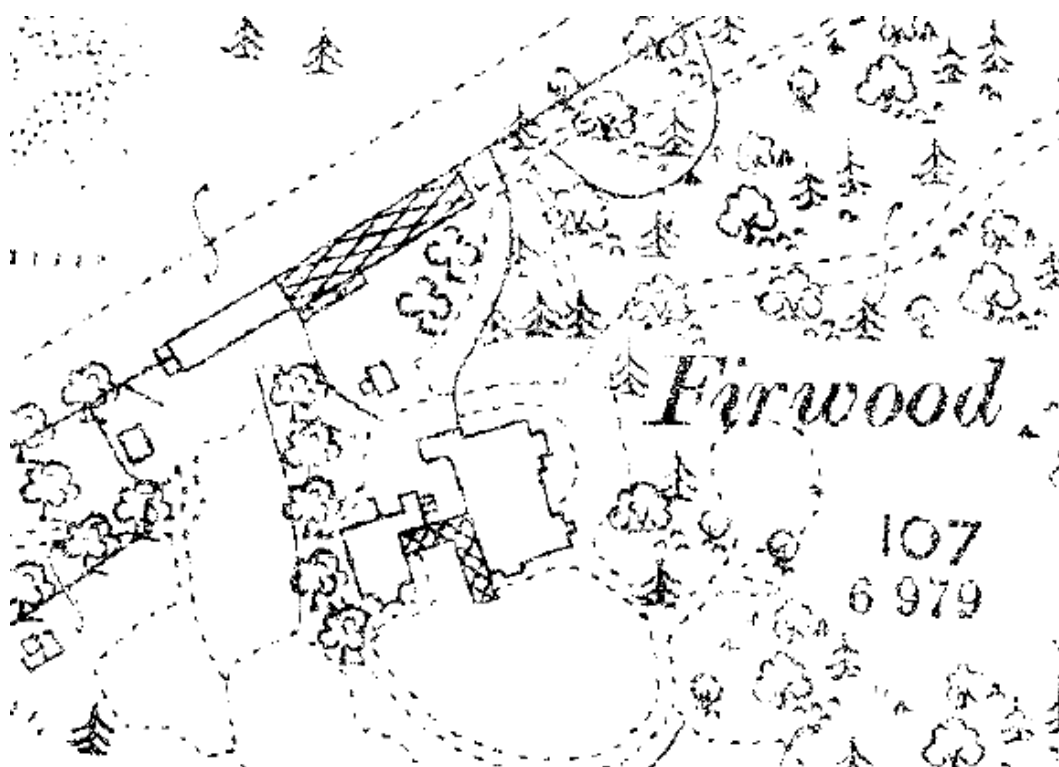


Fig. 3. Firwood as shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition 25 in to the mile OS sheet surveyed 1892, published 1893.

The Heathcliffe-Core and Kirby family lived at Firwood, from 1974-83. There was Mum, Dad, 2 daughters and Nan. Below are notes on what Naomi remembers about the house when she lived there.

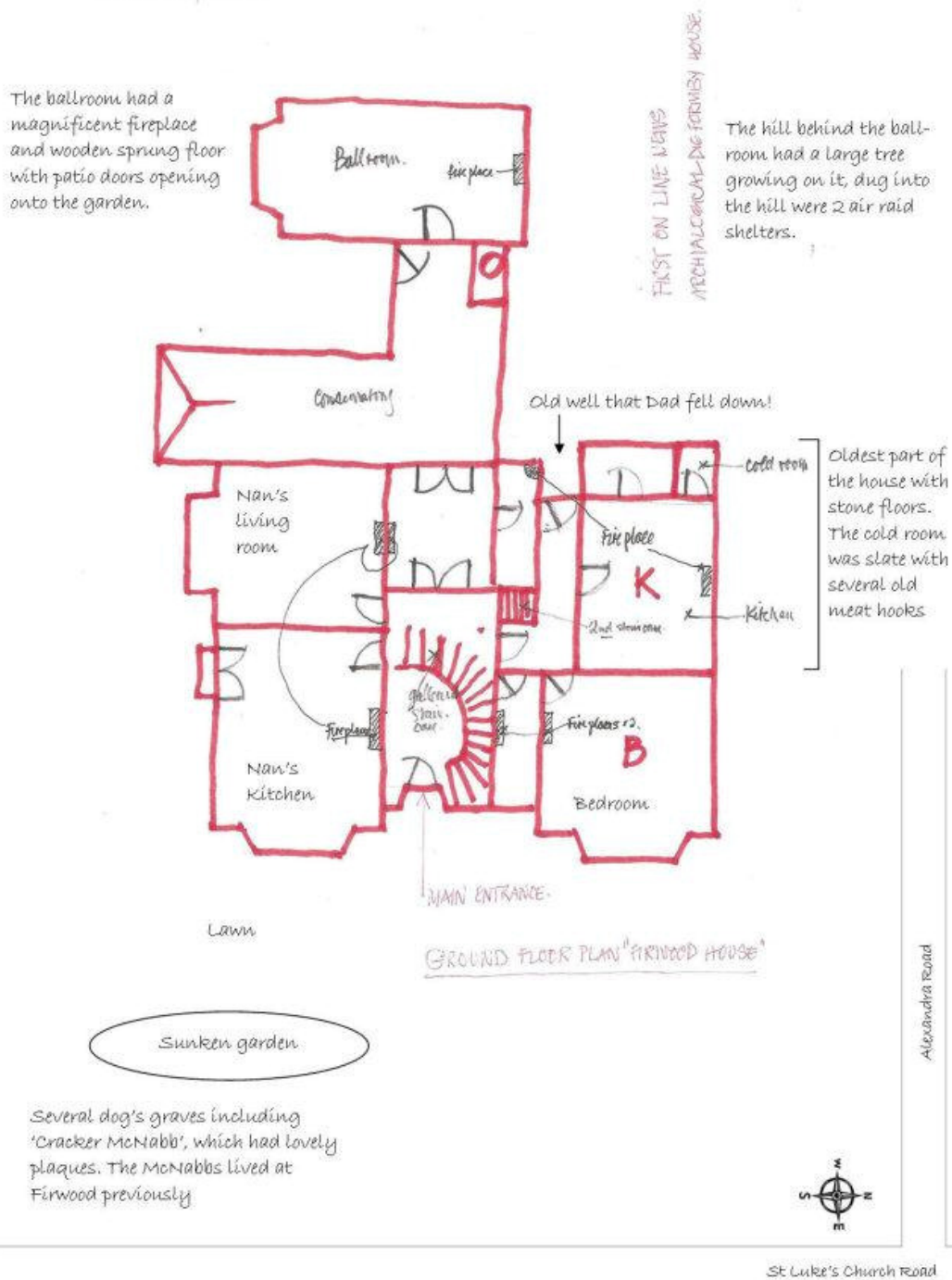


Fig. 4. Sketch Plan of Firwood and its internal layout c. 1970-1980 (Naomi Kirby 2012)

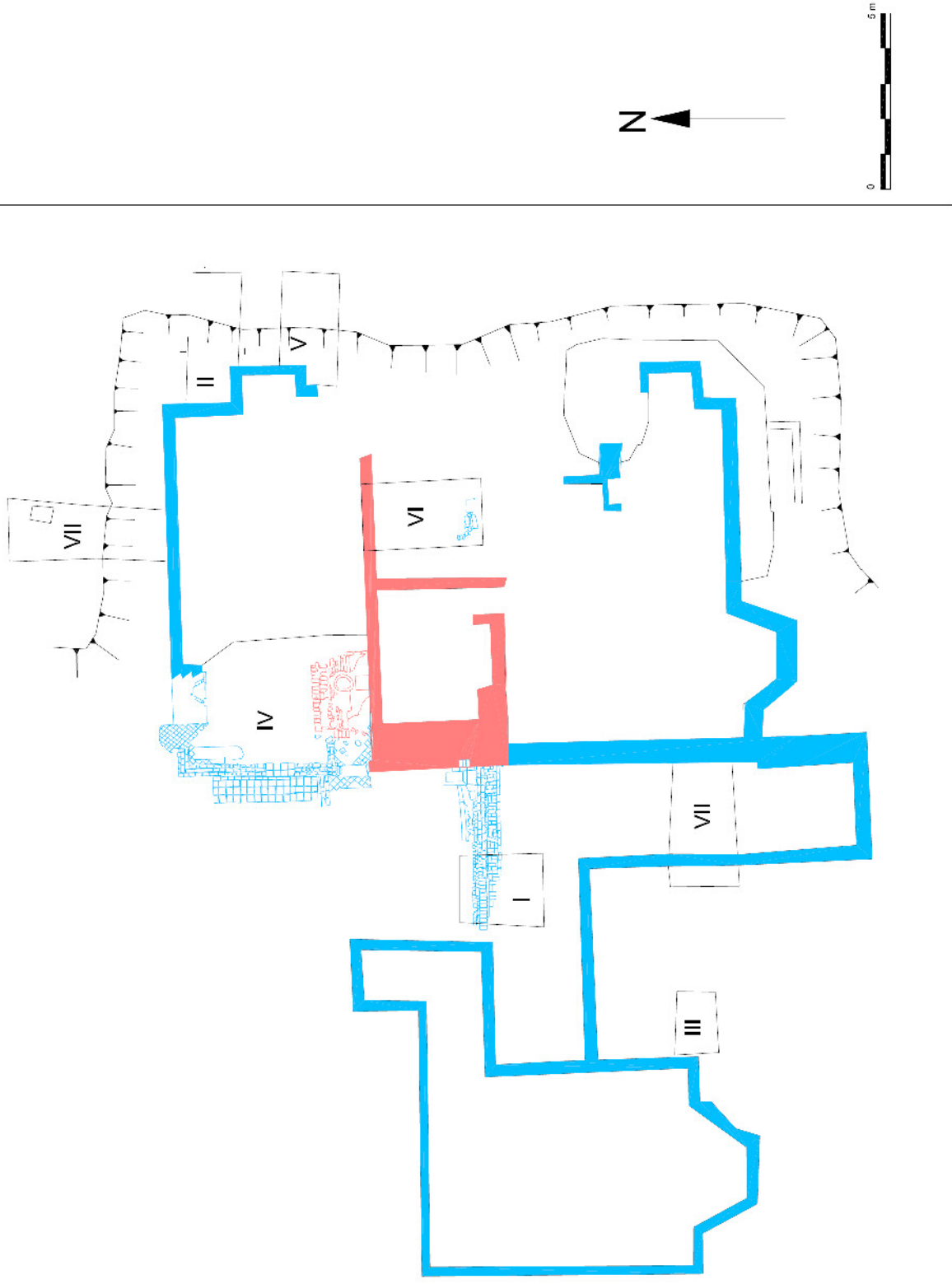


Fig 5. Site plan. Red=Phase I, Blue =Phase II.

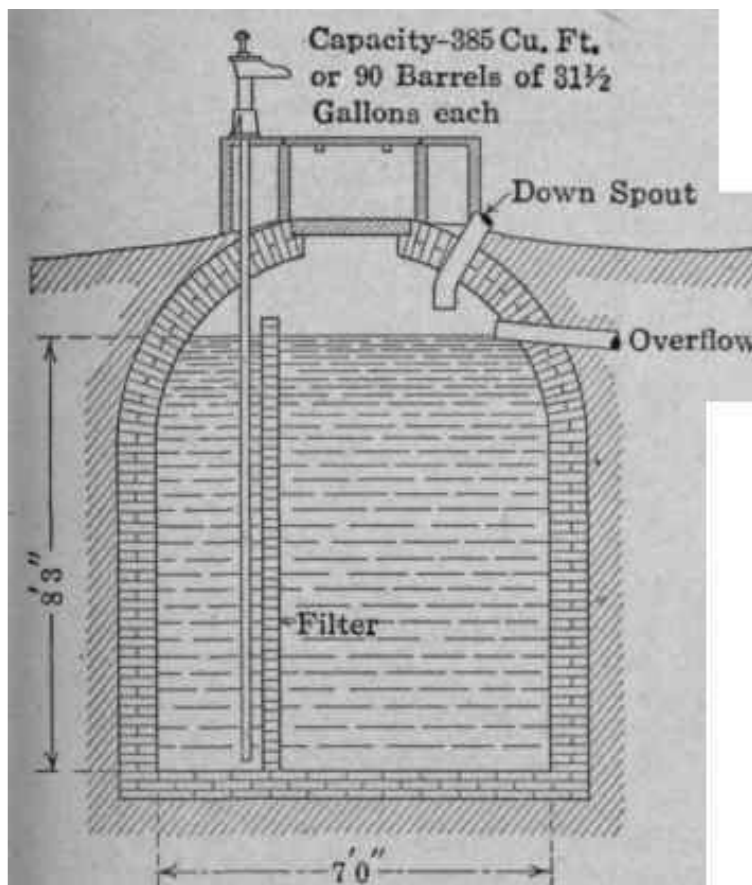


Fig. 6. Cross-section of a brick curbed cistern with a brick filter wall. (From Keene 1918, 153)



## 12. Plates



Plate 1. Rainwater cistern, Trench IV. View looking west.



Plate 2 . Opening in upper surface of rainwater cistern and connection to cellar.



Plate 3. North wall of conservatory. View looking east.



Plate 4. East wall to conservatory Trench VII. View looking south.



Plate 5. Kitchen fireplace and quarry tile flooring. View looking north.



Plate 6. Remains of hearth, Trench VI



Plate 7. Flagstone capping soakaway in Trench VIII.



Plate 8. Brick lined soakaway in Trench VIII



Plate 9. Clay tobacco pipe bowl.