

Baguley Hall, Manchester

by Laurence Keen

Baguley Hall, now almost totally absorbed within the growing conurbation of Manchester, is one of the most important medieval timber-framed houses of south Lancashire and Cheshire. It has received the close attention of J. T. Smith and C. F. Stell who suggested that the 'boat-shaped' plan of the building indicated the use of pre-Conquest building traditions in the fourteenth century.

The Hall is now in the care of the Department of the Environment who asked the writer to undertake a limited excavation prior to consolidation work on the building to ascertain the relationship between the timber-framing and the foundations on which it was placed. The excavation, which took place in November 1971, was severely restricted by scaffolding which determined the shape of the excavation areas: features which could not be examined properly were left unexcavated. Since the results of the excavation suggest that other interpretations of the structure are possible this short paper attempts to reassess the layout of the building and describes the archaeological evidence uncovered.

A series of plans and elevations prepared by the Department's drawing office between 1969 and 1971 already indicated that the plans used by Smith and Stell were not altogether accurate. Smith's main argument is based on a series of internal measurements taken, it would appear, at wall-plate level giving measurements of 27'6" (8.387m) at the spere truss and north wall, 29'3" (8.921m) at the open truss and 28'3" (8.612m) at the south end, a variation of up to 1'9" (0.534m). The same measurements from the Department's plan (fig. 33) give the measurements at plate level of 27'5" (8.362m) at the north end, 28'0" (8.54m) at the spere truss, 28'9" (8.769m) at the open truss, and 27'10" (8.489m) at the south end—an overall variation of up to 1'4" (0.407m). This set of measurements is a little surprising: one would have expected any discussion of a building plan to be based on measurements taken at *ground level*. If this is done, the internal measurements

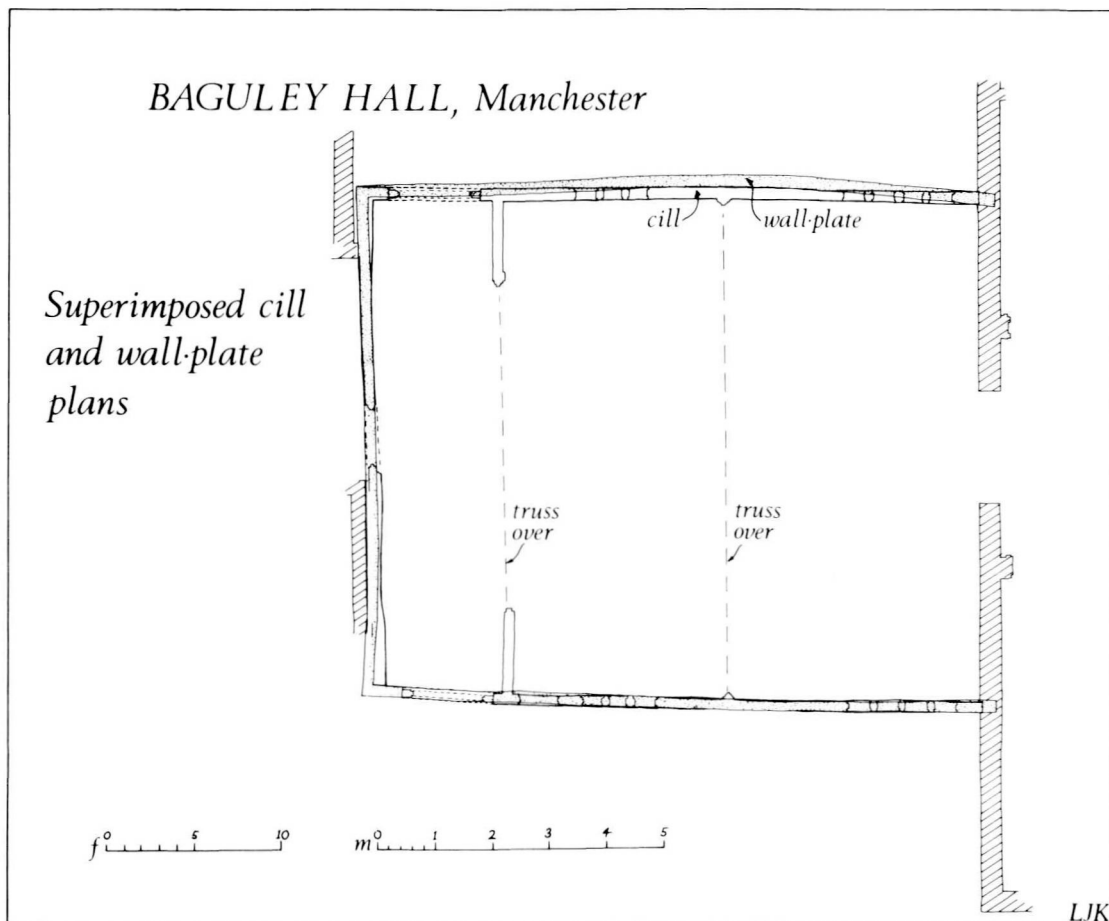


Fig. 33

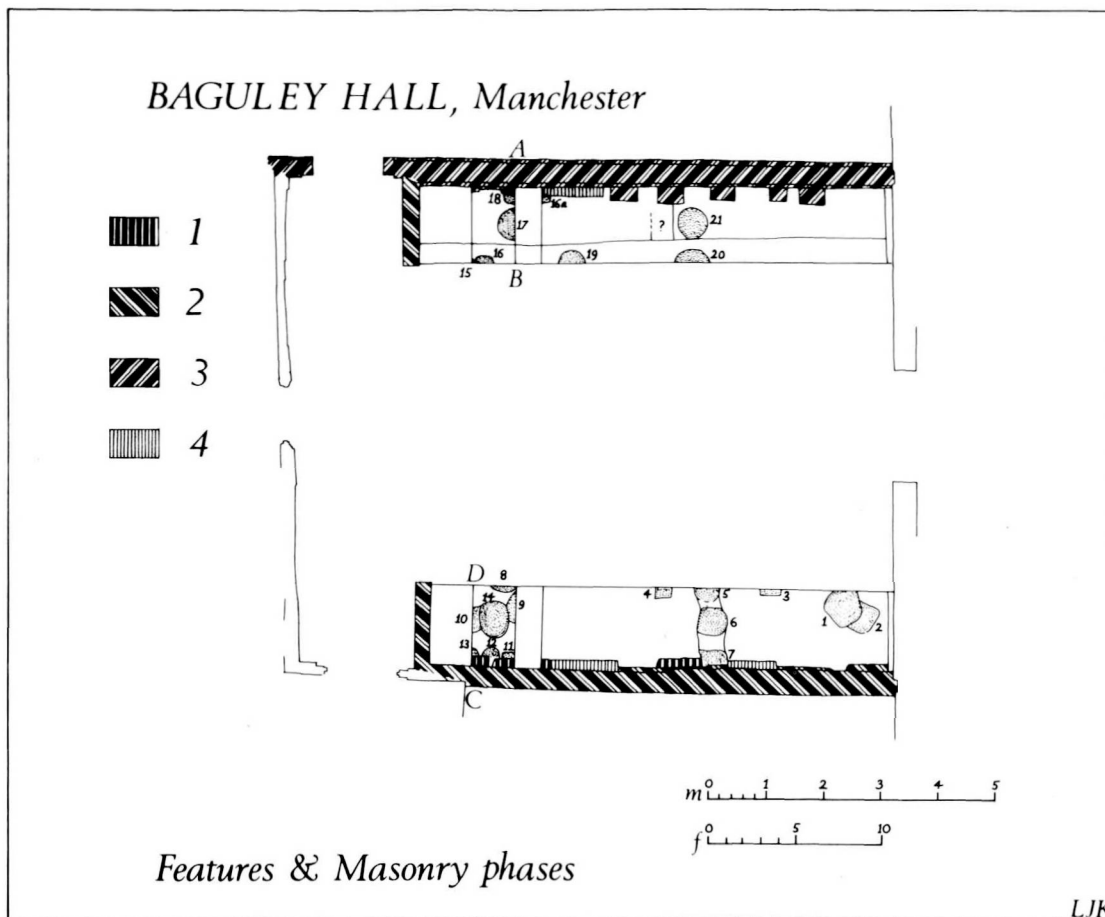


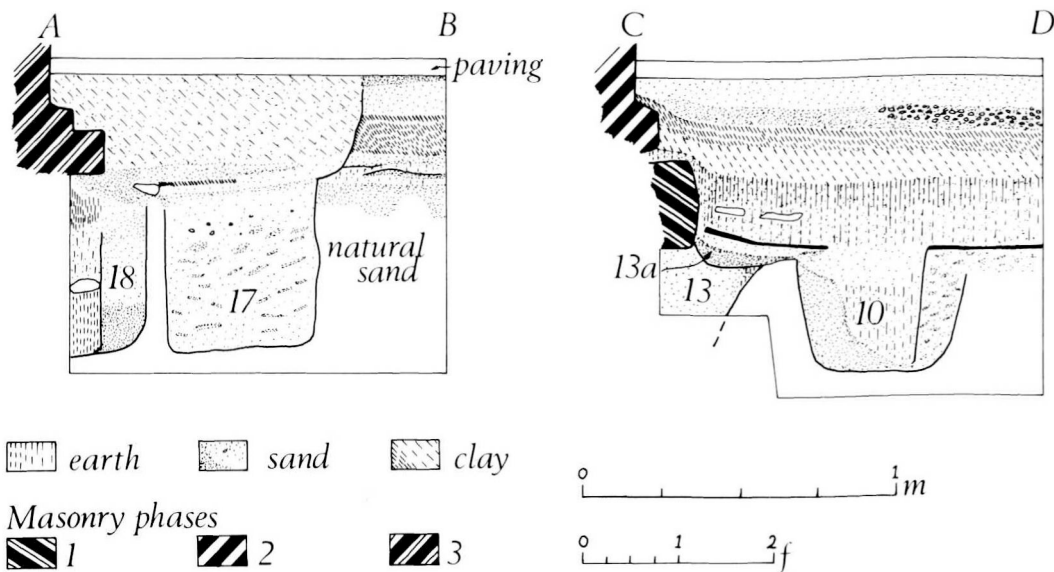
Fig. 34

at the wooden cill level give 27'5" (8.362m) at the north end, 27'10" (8.489m) at the spere truss, 28'4" (8.642m) at the open truss and 28'1" (8.565m) at the south end—a maximum variation of 11" (0.279m). Similar measurements at the same points taken between the topmost courses of the stone wall base (fig. 34) give the measurements, 27'3" (8.311m) at the spere truss, 27'8" (8.438m) at the open truss and 27'8" (8.438m) at the south end—an overall variation of 5" (0.127m).

Smith and Stell's observations fail to take into account fully the stone bases for the timber-framed walls, which on the plan they publish, follow the bend in the timber wall. The Department's plan shows clearly that the east wall base is, for intents and purposes, straight on both its internal and external faces. The west wall does bow slightly, but with a variation of no more than 4" (0.102m). The most important measurements are those of the stone base walls which show very little variation. A preliminary examination of the wall timbers shows that both south ends have been repaired considerably and much has been replaced (fig. 36 and 37). It is significant that the east wall towards the door, with the spere truss is set out at a right angle.

In view of Smith and Stell's claims the excavation was undertaken to see if any construction trenches for the stone base wall were distinguishable and to determine their plan. Two trenches were laid out about 4'6" (1.372m) wide and extending from the south end to the spere truss. In each trench a further trench was dug right into the subsoil to obtain immediate sections. No construction trench for the stone base was discovered in either of these deeper trenches. Instead they revealed another masonry wall, a complex series of postholes and occupation levels all earlier in date than the stone base of the present building.

In the east trench the relationship of these features to each other and to the present building was obscured by a trench some 3' (0.915m) wide which cut through the most recent levels to a depth of about 1'3" (0.381m) below the present stone paving which sealed the trench. When the filling, which contained no datable material, had been removed, the stone base of the east wall was uncovered. At its lowest level, set out from the wall face, were irregularly placed stones going under the wall base but with gaps filled with earth between them. Many of the stone blocks of the stone base had herring-bone tooling; this and the fact that the trench was cut through the more recent levels suggested that the stone base of the east wall had been more or less completely rebuilt in recent times (Phase 3). The replacement and repair of many of the timbers would appear to



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Fig. 35

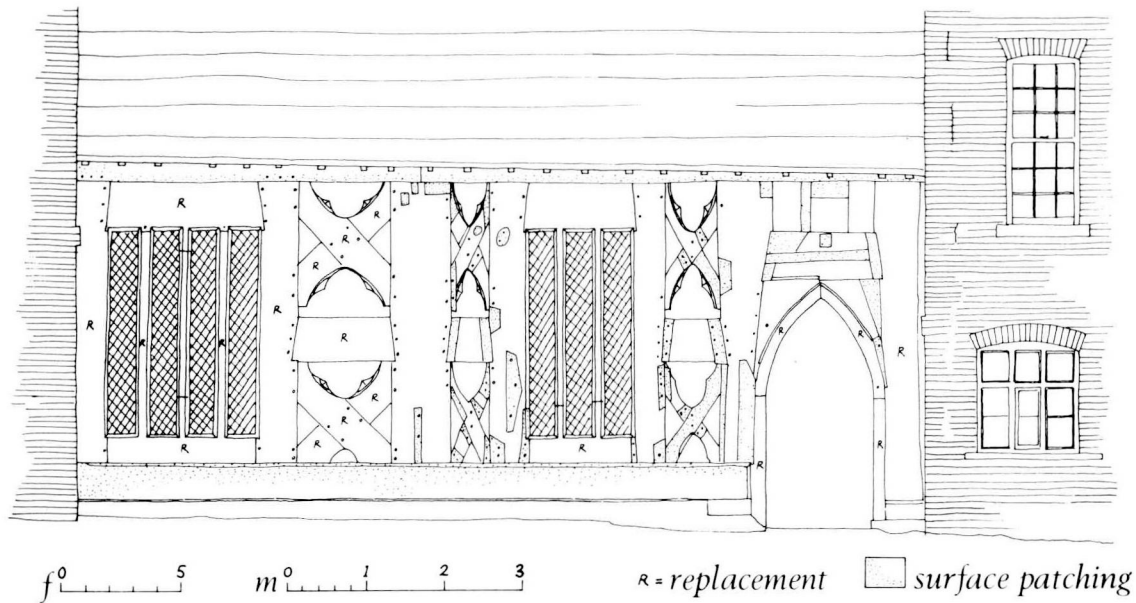
belong to the same work, which could be placed in the second half of the nineteenth century, since a water colour drawing by J. C. Buckler of 1826 in Wythenshawe Hall shows the hall interior with features such as the moulded base of the open truss still intact—not cut off as now. It would have seemed appropriate to think of the erection of the internal buttresses as contemporary with this work, but the trench to take the stone base on the east side cut through the filling of the trench which is associated with the rebuilding of the base wall. Clearly if the buttress were contemporary, its stone base would have been set up before the trench had been backfilled. Whatever the date of the erection of these internal buttresses they appear to be contemporary (Phase 4) with the present stone paving since the tops of the three base blocks are all carefully placed level with the paving.

The bottom of the nineteenth-century trench revealed a complicated palimpsest of postholes and other features cut into the sand: these were not investigated. The only additional work in this long trench was the removal of the topmost layers which appear to be consistent throughout the Hall, though until the entire area is uncovered it is impossible to relate layers both sides of the building. On the east these were: an inch or two (2-5cm) of loose sand (the bedding for the 2" (5cm) thick stone paving), a layer of fine grey sand, varying in thickness from 2" to 6" (5-15cm), this overlying a level of compact red-brown clay varying from an inch to 6" (2-15cm) in thickness. The removal of this last showed a thin level, barely $\frac{1}{4}$ " (.06cm) thick with slight indications of occupation resting on softer brown clay varying in thickness from 2" to 7" (5-17cm). Beneath this was an occupation level visible in section as a line not more than $\frac{1}{2}$ " (1.04cm) thick resting on grey sand, in turn resting on natural sand. Only further excavation will show the full extent and character of these levels. Clearly there are at least two periods of occupation.

Except for the deeper trench the earliest occupation level was not excavated. The deep trench showed four postholes, three of which it was possible to investigate fully. Feature 18 (see Section AB, fig. 35) was partially covered by the stone base wall but showed in section the line of the post that filled it originally. Feature 17 lay close to it but the relationship between them was not clear. Feature 16 appeared in section to have been cut through the same layers as Feature 17. These three postholes varied in depth from 1'6" to 1'9" (0.457-0.534m) indicating a fairly substantial building. It was not possible to investigate Feature 15 as it was right in the corner of the trench. Two other postholes, Features 19 and 20 were sealed by a covering of brown clay; it was not possible to ascertain from which level they had been cut or to excavate them fully.

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East Elevation

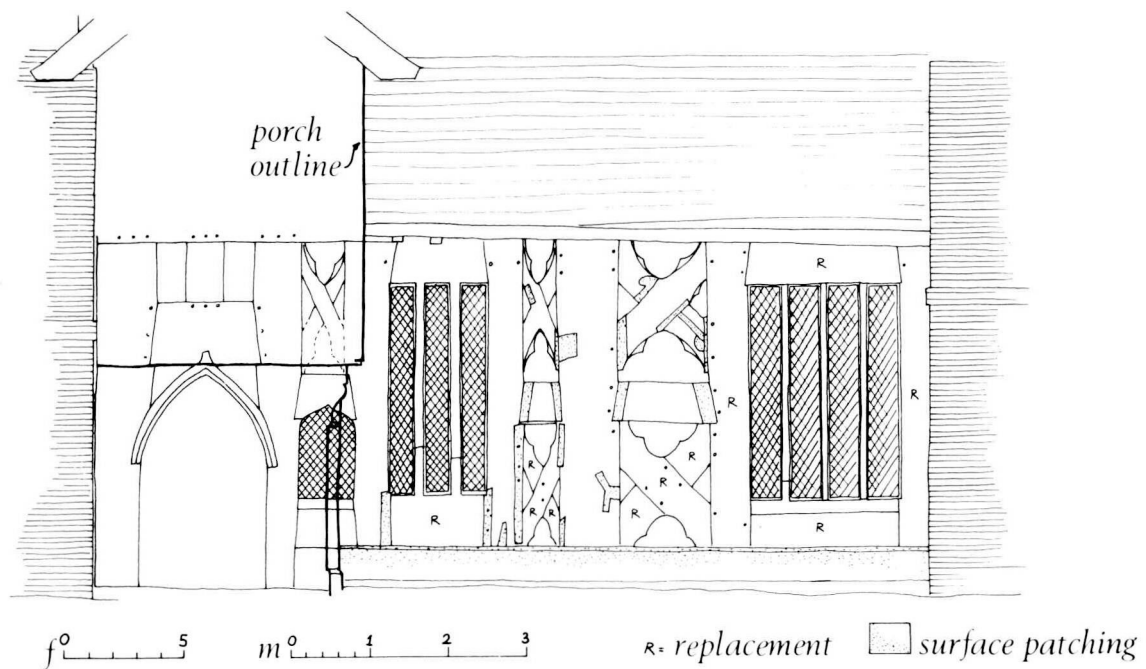


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Fig. 36

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West Elevation



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Fig. 37

The west trench showed that there had been no major rebuilding of the base wall. Beneath the stone pavement there was found a thin layer of loose sand resting over a consistent spread of harder sand varying in thickness from 3 to 7 inches (7.62-17.8cm). Cut into this were two small postholes, Features 3 and 4, which it was not possible to excavate since they were too close to the side of the trench. This sand appeared to cover a uniform spread of brown clay varying in thickness from 2" to 10" (5-25.4cm), which over the northern half of the trench overlay a slight occupation level on top of a layer of reddish clay some $\frac{3}{4}$ " (1.9cm) thick; a similar sequence to that in the east trench. In the south half of the trench the clay beneath the sand rested immediately on the earliest occupation which covered the natural sand. Conditions prevented a careful examination of these occupation levels which have therefore been left for future work. Only the two highest floor levels in the very south of the trench, associated with the stone wall base, were removed. These were not consistent over the width of the trench, but merely filled hollows. However, it seemed that the floor levels in the south half of the trench merged into and were contiguous with a more silty layer which was associated with, and overlay a series of stones, one course high (phase 1) which is clearly earlier than the wall base of the present structure (phase 2); this may have arisen as the natural sand appears to slope slightly northwards.

In the main trench only three features other than 4 and 5 were excavated, there were 6, a posthole about 1'9" (0.534m) deep cut into natural sand, and 1 about 1'6" (0.457m) deep. Feature 6 and 1 would appear to belong to Features 17, 21 and 14. Feature 2 was a slight depression only 2 or 3 inches (5-7.6cm) deep. Features 5 and 7 were not excavated.

The stone wall base as excavated was rather eroded and presented a very irregular appearance. However, plotted at medieval floor level the line of the internal face assumed a straighter appearance. The deep trench presented a cluster of postholes, which could not be examined more thoroughly. But the section C-D fortunately yielded an important relationship between three of them and also showed how they related to later phases of building. Feature 13 was too close to the section to investigate fully, underlying the single course of stones referred to above. It is presumably to be put with Features 11 and 12 which were not excavated. Feature 13 was covered by a shallow beam slot (Feature 13a) running right across the trench. This in turn was cut for the construction of Feature 10, a posthole 1'3" (0.381m) deep which in section showed the line of the original post and the occupation level which built up against it. No occupation level was clearly associated with the earliest posthole sequence—13, but the grey sand immediately overlying the natural sand may belong to it. Feature 14, an impressive posthole 1'10" (0.759m) deep appears to cut both Feature 10 and another equally large posthole, Feature 9, about 1'8" (0.508m) deep. Feature 8 was too close to the trench side to investigate. The section C-D showed clearly the thick spread of sandy loam which abuts against the single course of stones (phase 1) and overlies it, as it does in the middle of the trench.

The conclusions which may be drawn from this limited investigation, carried out in conditions which were far from favourable, are that the stone base on the west side has weathered considerably but nonetheless shows clearly that the internal face was undoubtedly laid out in a more or less straight line with no more than an inch or two (2.5-5cm) of variation, and the east wall was not far from parallel with it. Furthermore the base of the spere truss is nearly at right angles to the west wall. It is impossible to know if the timber-framing of the hall was designed as a straight sided structure or indeed if it was conceived as such, how it was set up. However, the stone bases on which it was set indicate that there was no obvious provision for a bowshaped structure to be placed on them.

The excavation has revealed a complex series of postholes and the indications of another masonry building. The postholes themselves show that there were at least three timber buildings, probably with postholes recut many times. With the medieval timber-framed building of the north wing, which replaced the original service quarters of the present hall, the sixteenth-century porch and the subsequent building of two brick wings, themselves with modifications and alterations, the buildings at Baguley have an enormous potential for revealing what would appear to be a continuous sequence of occupation from perhaps the pre-Conquest period to the present day. No finds which date any of the structures discussed above were recovered from the excavation.

REFERENCE

1. J. T. Smith and C. F. Stell, 'Baguley Hall: the survival of Pre-Conquest Building Traditions in the Fourteenth Century', *Antiq. J.* XL, 1960, 131-151.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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