

**Archaeological observations during  
floorboard removal at Chawton  
House, near Alton, Hampshire**

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**Report to Sandy Lerner and the Chawton House Library**

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### **Summary statement**

Renovation works have been continuing on Chawton House and its grounds since 1995. The building is being repaired and restored for use as the Chawton House Library, in order to house Sandy Lerner's collection of manuscripts of early English women's writing, and make it available for research. On Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2001 C K Currie of CKC Archaeology was asked to visit Chawton House to record the archaeology revealed by the removal of the floorboards in certain rooms on the south side of the house. This report is part of an on-going series of reports on the archaeological findings at Chawton House.

Removal of floorboards in the SW and SE rooms of the main house allowed an examination of the south cellar wall to be made. This wall appears to have been made in the post-medieval period. There appears to have been a void on its south side that was backfilled. It is thought that this was the result of a foreshortening of an earlier cellar arrangement. This hypothesis was supported by the discovery of an underground compartment containing what may have been a set of exterior steps leading into the cellars in the SW room of the house. These steps seem to have been made as part of the late Elizabethan work, and may have fallen out of use before 1650-60, possibly following an extension of the house southwards.

These discoveries have important ramifications for the phasing of the present house, and the results given here need to be assessed in relation to the on-going analysis of that structure. Until this has been done, the conclusions reached here must be considered provisional.

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## **Archaeological observations during floorboard removal at Chawton House, near Alton, Hampshire**

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This report has been written based on the format suggested by the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (Birmingham, 1994). The ordering of information follows the guidelines given in this document, although alterations may have been made to fit in with the particular requirements of the work. All work is carried out according to the *Code of Conduct* and By-laws of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, of which CKC Archaeology is a IFA-registered archaeological organisation (reference: RAO no. 1).

### **1.0 Introduction**

Renovation works have been continuing on Chawton House and its grounds since 1995. The building is being repaired and restored for use as the Chawton House Library, in order to house Sandy Lerner's collection of manuscripts of early English women's writing, and make it available for research. On Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2001 C K Currie of CKC Archaeology was asked to visit Chawton House to record the archaeology revealed by the removal of the floorboards in certain rooms on the south side of the house. This report is part of an on-going series of reports on the archaeological findings at Chawton House. Previous work has been reported in Currie (1995, 2000 & 2001).

### **2.0 Historical background**

Chawton House is a large brick country house 0.5km to the SE of Chawton village. Its earliest surviving fabric dates from the late Elizabethan period, when the medieval manor was replaced with the current building by John Knight. The building has since been much added to, and contains Jacobean and 19<sup>th</sup>-century fabric. Recent research on the site has revealed that it was an important stopping off point for the king, Henry III (1216-72), on his journeys between London/Guildford and Winchester. Between 1229 and 1264 this king is recorded at Chawton on 22 occasions, with at least another twelve possible visits suggested by the delivery of royal supplies, such as tuns of wine (Currie 1995, appendix 2). The kings continued to visit Chawton during the reigns of Edward I (1272-1307), Edward II (1307-27), and during the early part of the reign of Edward III (1327-77).

The popularity of Chawton, besides its convenience midway between Guildford and Winchester, rested largely on the good relationship between the manor's owners, the St Johns, and Henry III and his son, Edward I. John de St John was one of Edward I's most trusted servants, being made lieutenant in Gascony from 1293 until his capture by the French at Bellegarde in January 1297. Following his release from captivity, he continued to find royal favour, and was appointed governor of Scotland in July 1302, just two months before his death. After this, the favour shown the St John family seems to have declined. By the time of the extinction of the male line in 1347, the king's court had become less itinerant,

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settling permanently at London. The last recorded royal visit to Chawton was made by Edward III in November 1331.

In order to entertain the king's court on so many occasions between 1229 and 1331, it should be assumed that the manor house at Chawton was a well-equipped and extensive complex of buildings. Excavations to date have failed to find the site of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century manor, but extensive redeposited medieval materials have been discovered in the built up ground on which the post-medieval manor was constructed (Currie 2000). These discoveries show previous views that Chawton was an unimportant place in the medieval period are erroneous (Leigh & Knight 1911, 5)

Little is known about Chawton House between 1331 and Nicholas Knight's purchase of the manor in 1578. The Knight family have continued to hold the estate ever since. The Knights were related to the Austen family, resulting in the last true Knight in the male line adopting Edward Austen, the brother of the writer, Jane Austen, as his heir in 1783 provided that he took the name Knight. The area has since become associated with Jane Austen, who lived with her mother and sister in the bailiff's cottage, part of the Chawton estate, from 1809 until a few months before her death in 1817 (Wade 1996). By the early 1990s the family had ceased to live in the property for some time, and it was becoming dilapidated until the present owner, Richard Knight, sold a long lease on the property to the wealthy American, Sandy Lerner.

### **3.0 Strategy**

The strategy follows that of Currie (2000), which was based on the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief*. (Birmingham, 1994). The present work was undertaken mainly to examine if the cellars walls had been part of a well-documented earlier medieval manor known to be either on this site or nearby.

### **4.0 Results**

Three main areas were examined. All were connected to the south wall of the known cellars under the present house.

#### **4.1 The former library**

The south wall of the cellar was seen under the floorboards in this room. About 0.3m of soil on the south side of it was excavated to get a clearer impression of both the nature of the wall and some dating evidence for it. It was notable that the south cellar wall did not sit below the south wall of the house, but, in this room, was set 1.65m back to the north. The soil examined between the cellar wall and outside (south) wall of the house was loose, being made up of redeposited chalk and mortar. Occasionally brick fragments were found within it. On exposure, it was observed that the cellar wall was made entirely of chalk blocks, many unfaced and of irregular shape. Also mortared into the wall was a large fragment of clay roof tile. Once it was established that the soil between the cellar wall and the south wall of the house was redeposited backfill, it was decided to stop excavating.

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## 4.2 The south-west room

The soil on the south side of the south wall of the cellar was examined. This seemed to be more compacted than the soil in the former library. However, this proved to be superficial. Once the top 20mm was removed, the soil underlying also proved to be redeposited chalk. The cellar wall was set back further from the south wall of the house than in the former library. This was over 2m back (north), and in places up to 2.5m. A large timber beam overlying the cellar wall, into which the floor joists were set, was noted only to having mortises on the north side. The joists to the south were set into this beam using what appear to have been later peg insertions.

In the SW corner of this room, the removal of the floorboards revealed a brick-lined compartment below the floor joists. This was partly filled with soil, and partly from other debris, including what appeared to be the remains of a lath-and-plaster ceiling to the compartment. Despite the very narrow space between the joists, and the restricted area beneath, it was decided that the archaeologist should squeeze into the compartment and excavate the soil therein.

The compartment proved to be approximately 2.08m on its N-S axis and 1.18m on its E-W. The walls were all made of brick, most of which appeared to be early types 60mm or less thick. Only the west wall appeared to be as originally built. This was made of thin bricks in a pattern of mainly alternate courses of headers and stretchers, although there were some minor irregularities to enable the bonding pattern to fit the space. The south wall was not bonded into the east wall, which may have been a later blocking wall. It did, however, exhibit a regular bonding pattern and was generally well made. This was opposed to the north wall, which was very crude, and clearly a later blocking wall. The SW corner of the existing cellars lay behind this latter wall.

The east wall showed two different builds. The northern half of the wall appeared to have been built first. This was had irregular bonding of alternate headers and stretchers, although there were at least two instances where there were two course of stretchers before the next course of headers. There did not appear to be any regularity in this deviation from the pattern. About midway along the wall was a clear joint. This was not completely straight, and therefore did not butt against the other part of the wall, but appeared to have been put in to a partly dismantled wall.

Removal of loose soil within the compartment revealed a series of steps cut into the underlying chalk. There were four steps ascending to within 0.6m of the existing ground floor level. The bottom of the steps appear to be approximately in line with the joint dividing the two halves of the eastern wall. The underlying chalk was reasonably compacted, but it was not completely certain if this was (undisturbed) natural or a redeposited chalk layer that had become compacted over time. There was no finds in the overlying soil or debris other than brick and tile fragments. It was noted that all the surrounding walls were built directly onto the chalk steps, and appeared to have no foundations cut into that layer.

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## 5.0 Discussion

It was hoped that this work might find evidence that the south chalk wall of the cellar was of medieval origin. This proved to be disappointing. Not only was no evidence found, but the results that were forthcoming suggested that the wall was of post-medieval origin, and, therefore, likely to have been built as part of the late Elizabethan house. No clear explanation was found for the chalk infill between the south wall of the house and the present south cellar wall. The space between them, between 1.65 and 2.1m, was too narrow to account for another cellar. It is possible that the cellars may have once extended further south, but, for reasons unknown, it was decided to foreshorten them and infill the former void. Exactly when this was done is uncertain, but the evidence observed suggests that this was fairly early in the chronology of the existing house.

The evidence for this seems to stem from the compartment discovered under the floor in the SW room of the mansion. All the brickwork here, including the apparently later blockings on the north and south sides, contained early bricks. It would therefore seem that this compartment was built and then blocked on the south side before the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The compartment itself clearly once contained a set of steps. The entrance seems to have been on the south side, and may have been the original entrance to the cellars. It was certainly built before about 1650, and its presence would suggest that the void between the south wall of the cellar and the south wall of the house may have already been backfilled before this set of steps was built. At some time, again apparently before about 1650-60, the entrance on the south was blocked. The presence of this compartment would suggest that the steps may have been once outside the house. This is suggested by the failure of the step imprints in the chalk to reach to the floor level. Anyone entering the compartment within the house would have had to drop 0.6m (about two feet) before reaching the top step. Prior to the south blocking wall being put up at least two further steps would have been necessary to bring them up to contemporary ground level. To do this sensibly, there would either have been a door in the south wall at this point, or the steps were originally outside the house. This latter point is seemingly supported by the lack of mortises on a beam overlying the south cellar wall within the present SW room of the house.

Despite this apparent evidence for an outside set of steps, there is other evidence to contradict it. On the upper floors, it is understood that joists have mortises on both sides of a similar beam (Adrian Thatcher peers comm.), although the author did not see this for himself. Another possibility is that the two builds in the east wall of the underground compartment indicated that the steps may have originally extended through a right-angle to the east, allowing access from inside the house. However, if this was the case, it might be expected that the imprint of the steps would have shown this turn. They did not, apparently heading due south, and possibly blocked when the present south wall in this room was built.

The evidence is contradictory and will need further investigation to resolve. The most pressing question is whether the step imprints can be found extending past the south blocking

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wall. It is unlikely that this will be possible in this phase of the works, but it should be taken into account if the south wall of the house is ever disturbed again in this vicinity.

Whatever the answers to this conundrum, the presence of an early set of steps south of the present south wall of the cellars strongly suggests that the void between the south cellar wall and the present south wall of the mansion had been backfilled at an early date. If this is really the case (and the matter is not entirely proven), it is difficult to imagine the foreshortening of the cellars in such a short period after the original construction of the late Elizabethan house. It is possible that the reason might be related to some earlier structure on the site. That is that there existed earlier cellars on the site that extended beyond the line required during the late Elizabethan construction. Could these have been the cellars of the elusive medieval manor, so far unlocated? The question is intriguing, and requires a marrying of the evidence given here with that being undertaken by Edward Roberts, the historic building consultant for the project. At present his work remains incomplete, and the detailed analysis of the house so far has not been seen by this author. This evidence would be crucial to determining if the cellar steps discovered here were originally external, or can be explained in some other way.

Once the steps ceased to be used as such, it would appear that a lath-and-plaster ceiling was inserted at ground level over the void. This would suggest that the area was then still accessible from the cellars, and may have served as a storage area. At a later date this was abandoned and the northern blocking wall built that hid the compartment until recently. It is not known when this was done, but the wall visible on the compartment side contains early bricks. It is therefore possible that the entire episode of outlined above all occurred within less than a century from the 1580s. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider that the very crude nature of the blocking as seen from the compartment side might suggest these early bricks could have been reused, thereby dating the bricking up of the compartment to a much later date.

## **6.0 Conclusions**

Removal of floorboards in the SW and SE rooms of the main house allowed an examination of the south cellar wall to be made. This wall appears to have been made in the post-medieval period. There appears to have been a void on its south side that was backfilled. It is thought that this was the result of a foreshortening of an earlier cellar arrangement. This hypothesis was supported by the discovery of an underground compartment containing what may have been a set of exterior steps leading into the cellars in the SW room of the house. These steps seem to have been made as part of the late Elizabethan work, and may have fallen out of use before 1650-60, possibly following an extension of the house southwards.

These discoveries have important ramifications for the phasing of the present house, and the results given here need to be assessed in relation to the on-going analysis of that structure. Until this has been done, the conclusions reached here must be considered provisional.

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## **8.0 Archive**

The archive for this work has been deposited with the County Museum Services. Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and the National Monuments Record in Swindon, Wiltshire.

## **9.0 Acknowledgements**

Sincere thanks are given to all those involved with this project. In particular, Adrian Thatcher who runs the day-to-day building operations at Chawton, and the staff at Chawton House. All the various contractors and their staff, too many to mention individually, are thanked for their generous co-operation and assistance. The site was monitored by Ian Wykes for the Archaeology Section of Hampshire County Council.

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