

**A medieval encaustic tile from  
Chawton House, near Alton,  
Hampshire**

**NGR: SU 709 370**

**by  
Christopher K Currie  
BA (Hons), MPhil, MIFM, MIFA  
CKC Archaeology**

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

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### **Summary statement**

A medieval encaustic tile fragment recovered at Chawton House is of a design that is generally considered rare in Hampshire. It is thought to have once paved part of the manorial complex of the St John family or its adjoining church. This manor was much frequented by Henry III and his son, Edward I as a stopping off point between the royal palaces at Guildford and Winchester. One of these rare tiles is to be found in the parish church of Farringdon, the neighbouring manor to Chawton, also held by the St John family. The discovery of the tile at Chawton may help to explain why the tiles in Farringdon church are not normally found elsewhere in the area. It would seem that this particular design, St Cuthbert's Cross, is normally only found at sites of some exceptional status. Considering the proven connection between royalty and the St John manors of Chawton and Farringdon, it is possible the tile itself has some royal connection yet to be fully explained.

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 Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2001 the author was asked to visit Chawton House to watch foundations being dug for a conservatory at the rear of the Old Stables. This proved to be largely uneventful. Whilst on site, the Restoration Project Manager, Adrian Thatcher, gave the author a large fragment of a medieval encaustic tile, found during recent clearance at the side of some 19<sup>th</sup>-century outbuildings. This note reports on the tile, giving examples of parallels, and suggests an approximate date.

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### **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 womens' writing, and make it available for research. On Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2001 the author was asked to visit Chawton House to watch foundations being dug for a conservatory at the rear of the Old Stables. This proved to be largely uneventful. Whilst on site, the Restoration Project Manager, Adrian Thatcher, gave the author a large fragment of a medieval encaustic tile, found during recent clearance at the side of some 19<sup>th</sup>-century outbuildings. This note reports on the tile, giving examples of parallels, and suggests an approximate date.

### **2.0 The site**

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, 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)

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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 The context of the find**

The tile was found in dumped soils alongside some brick outbuildings to the east of Chawton House. This dump was a dirty loam containing much 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century material. It would seem therefore that the tile was dumped here with rubbish at sometime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, possibly concealed amongst the soil and unrecognised. The loamy nature of the soil, together with frequent flowerpot sherds, suggests the original deposit may have been somewhere within the gardens of Chawton House.

### **4.0 The tile**

*Description:* The tile is a quarter section of St Cuthbert's Cross, a cross contained within a circle and decorated by trefoils. Over three-quarters of the tile survives intact, with the top right and left corners missing. Sufficient of the tile survives to allow the form of the design to be clearly seen.

*Size:* 140mm by 140mm? by 24mm thick (5 1/2 inches x 5 1/2 inches x 7/8 inch)

*Keys in back:* four

*Fabric:* Dull red-brown (Munsell colour 2.5YR 3/4), moderately sandy fabric with occasional pieces of grog and hematite; well fired.

*Depth of inlay:* 35mm (5/32 inch)

*Glaze:* clear reddish-yellow (Munsell colour 7.5YR 6/8)

*Notes:* A fragment of ceramic about 27mm by 20mm is stuck to the upper surface of the tile on its left side, obscuring part of the design. It is thought this became attached to the tile through another tile touching the upper surface during firing in the kiln, and subsequently becoming fused to it. The glaze shows little sign of wear, suggesting the tile was either only in use for a short period, or that it was in a part of the building that was protected in some way or little used (such as a corner of a room).

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## 5.0 Discussion

The design of this tile is to be found at Winchester College. It is reported by Norton (1967, 26, 29) as Winchester College pavingtile number 19. Norton dates these tiles to around 1300, which suggests that Winchester College (founded 1382) acquired tiles of this design second hand from elsewhere, possibly after the Dissolution. Many such tiles might then have become available from the various monastic institutions in the town. Norton considers that the design is part of a group that post-date the earliest tiles to be found in Winchester College. This is on the grounds that they are not found in the Retro-choir of Winchester Cathedral.

However, these tiles are found elsewhere in Winchester Cathedral, as well as at St Cross and St Deny's Priory, near Southampton (Greenfield 1893, A7). The latter is reputed to have been founded by Henry I (Blake 1981, xxxv) *c.* 1127. All these sites seem to have originated as high status foundations. Although St Denys subsequently declined to become a minor house by the time of the Dissolution, its position as a royal foundation was once probably significant. It is notable that this design is otherwise rare in Hampshire, and is currently only known at one other site, in Farringdon church (Knapp 1954, 294, 308). Knapp comments that the Farringdon tiles are rare in the Alton area, and are designs that are not normally found elsewhere within it.

Farringdon was another St John manor. In 1292 Edward I spent nearly three weeks in the Alton area, mainly moving between the manors of Chawton and Farringdon (Chancery Warrants 1244-1326, 31; Close Rolls 1228-96, 220-21, 258; Patent Rolls 1281-92, 477-79; Fine Rolls 1272-1307, 305-06; Inq. Misc. 1219-1307, no 1584). It is not surprising to find, therefore, that a tile pattern that was only originally found at Farringdon or at three high status sites in the Winchester area, should be found at Chawton. It seems that this pattern is to be found associated only with exceptionally high status sites, apparently with royal or episcopal connections. The St Johns, at the time this tile dates from, were amongst the most powerful courtiers in the land and amongst the most trusted royal servants. Before the discovery of the royal connection with Chawton, one might consider the Farringdon examples of this design oddities. The strong relationship between Henry III and his son, Edward I, with the St Johns and Chawton enables us to understand the presence of an otherwise rare tile design there. The discovery of the Chawton tile makes it clear that this design was used somewhere in a medieval building nearby. It seems, therefore, that when the St Johns acquired the tiles for Chawton, they also took the opportunity to use part of the batch at Farringdon. It is even possible that the tiles may have been obtained through some royal connection yet to be more fully identified.

The exact location of the tile can only be guessed at. On present evidence it is not possible to state for certainty if it originated somewhere in the medieval manor, or had come from the medieval church. The latter was completely rebuilt by Sir Arthur Blomfield in 1871 (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 163). The almost complete removal of any earlier fabric might explain why no tiles similar to those at Farringdon had been found previously.

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## **6.0 Conclusion**

A medieval encaustic tile fragment recovered at Chawton House is of a design that is generally considered rare in Hampshire. It is thought to have once paved part of the manorial complex of the St John family or its adjoining church. This manor was much frequented by Henry III and his son, Edward I as a stopping off point between the royal palaces at Guildford and Winchester. One of these rare tiles is to be found in the parish church of Farringdon, the neighbouring manor to Chawton, also held by the St John family. The discovery of the tile at Chawton may help to explain why the tiles in Farringdon church are not normally found elsewhere in the area. It would seem that this particular design, St Cuthbert's Cross, is normally only found at sites of some exceptional status. Considering the proven connection between royalty and the St John manors of Chawton and Farringdon, it is possible the tile itself has some royal connection yet to be fully explained.

## **7.0 Archive**

The archive for this work will be deposited with the Hampshire County Museum Services (acc no A1998.2). Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the Hampshire County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), The Castle, Winchester, Hampshire, and the National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon, Wiltshire.

## **8.0 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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