The Historical Development of the Court of Noke Estate, Pembridge, with an Archaeological Assessment of the Associated Water Features

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Introduction (Fig. 1)

Court of Noke is a 17th-century and later brick house that is a Listed Building Grade II*. It stands half a kilometre SE of the small village of Staunton on Arrow (SO 37155958) in the old county of Hereford, now Hereford and Worcester. It stands on the south bank of the River Arrow at a height of about 106m AOD. From its size and nature, it would seem to have been the home of a member of the county gentry class. Robinson claims that it belonged to the Brace family in the 16th century, passing to the Weldish family in the 17th century.[1] The house appears to be of two main builds, the main front and NE wing being erected *c.* 1700, with the SW wing being of a later farmhouse appearance. The roof appears to have been renewed in Welsh slate in the later 19th century. The Department of the Environment listing states that it is a 'Rectangular plan with central entrance and axial stacks, extended to rear giving half-H-plan during C19. Two storeys and attics. Entrance front: string course, detailed eaves's cornice. Central pediment. Two C19 gabled dormers to attic with 2-light casement windows. 2:3:2 glazing bar sash windows. Central Doric portico with C19 part glazed inner door.'[2]

The house is surrounded by outbuildings and gardens covering approximately 2.4 hectares (six acres). The gardens have been largely neglected during second half of the present century, and it is not possible to say much about their original form. It would seem that much of the garden area was composed of orchards in the later 19th century.

The most interesting feature remaining is a canal-like waterway on the north and east side of the property. This seems to have been a series of three ponds used to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the gardens, and may have had bridges and garden buildings associated with it. The feature leaves the main garden area to feed a mill building attached to a range of farm buildings on the south of the site. The latter was created in the 19th century to grind feed for the cattle kept on the farm.[3]

This study is divided into three main sections. First, the historical context of Court of Noke is discussed -- questioning a number of long-held beliefs about the estate and uncovering a more complex tenure than had been previously allowed. Secondly, the descriptive results of an archaeological assessment of the site, carried out as part of the recent restorations, are analysed.[4] And finally, the historical and archaeological evidence are collected together in order to suggest an interpretation of the chronological and spatial development of the formal garden and water features.

1. A History of the Court of Noke Estate

Research on Court of Noke is hindered by the lack of a serious study of the larger parish of Pembridge in which it stands. This parish suffers from the absence of a Victoria County History (VCH) chapter for the hundred of Stretford. Neither did the eighteenth-century antiquarian John Duncumb's uncompleted county history reach this part of Herefordshire.[5] .Any study done on this property and its estate needs, therefore, to start from scratch, making many conjectures that only the benefit of a longer-term study may be able to clarify.

There is no known record for Pembridge in the Anglo-Saxon period, but a charter of King Edgar, dated 958, survives for the neighbouring parish of Staunton-on-Arrow.[6] Considering the proximity of Court of Noke to this parish, it is possible that the boundary marks described follow the northern edge of the property. Whitelock has provided a translation of these bounds. That part near Noke states that:

> First from the mill ford along the Arrow, then to Washford; from Washford along the arrow round the top of Holnig..[7]

The manor of Pembridge, of which Court of Noke was a part, had been held by Earl Harold before the Norman Conquest. From the description given in Domesday Book, it was a wealthy agricultural community. It had a value of £16 before 1066, but it later became waste, probably as a result of border warfare in the years immediately after the conquest. It had recovered somewhat to be worth £10 10*s*. in 1086.[8] In this year Pembridge was part of the estate of Alfred of Marlborough, but by the time of King Stephen (1135-54) the de Penneburge family appear to have held the manor.[9] They were succeeded by the Mortimers, who obtained a royal charter in 1240 to hold a market and a fair, thus making the settlement into a small town.[10]

This development suggests an element of centralisation within the manor. Common fields are recorded in historical documents. However, a study of the local map shows that there were a number of scattered farms within the large parish. Many of these may have had medieval origins, and might suggest that there was an element of dispersed settlement within the manor.

According to Coplestone-Crowe there was at least one sub-manor within Pembridge.[11] This was the previously unidentified manor of 'Alac'. He identifies this with Noke. The argument for this is based on the origin of the word. Bannister's earlier study of the place-names of Herefordshire recognises that 'Noke' derives from the Old English, 'atten oke', at the oak tree.[12] Coplestone-Crowe traces the name 'Alac' to Le Aka by 1286. This latter seems to be a plausible alternative for 'The Oak'. Later medieval records change the spelling slightly again to '(La) Noke', thereby completing what is a logical evolution of the name.[13]

There is strong support for Coplestone-Crowe's deduction in the Lay Subsidy of 1334 for Hereford. This lists the following sub-manors under Pembridge; Weston and Bury, Morcote and Helde and 'Akes and Leone'. Post-medieval documents cited below demonstrate that Noke and Leen were intimately connected. A document of 1749 refers to a third part of the Court of Noke estate as being in 'Noke Leene'.[14]

This evidence would seem to show that Noke originated as a sub-manor within Pembridge. When Noke appears in post-medieval documents, it is found with survivals of its own common field system. The hamlet of Nokeland Head records this in its name, the settlement standing at the NW end of a continuous boundary that represented the NE edge of these fields. This 'headland' not only occurs in the hamlet name, but in local field names. Tithe map field 535 'Long Headlands Orchard' stands next to this long boundary, and further reinforces the description in its name.[15] Noke is frequently referred to as a 'township', and a study of the settlement pattern extending along Noke Lane is suggestive of an interrupted row community. Noke itself is not a single house site, but sits dominant amongst a scatter of cottages that were part of its estate at the time of the tithe map.

This is supported by 17th century documents. The Hearth Tax returns of 1665 records 21 houses paying tax in the township of 'Noke, Leene and Strangway'.[16] A Suit Roll for 1663 lists 35 inhabitants of the township liable to attend the manor court.[17] It would seem that the 'township' extended beyond the immediate confines of Court of Noke to include settlements around Strangworth Mill and Farm, Northwood Farm, Nokeland Head, and Leen Farm.

The contentious Domesday manor of 'Alac' was held by Gruffydd Boy. Godwin held it from him, with Alfward being the previous owner. It was rated as one hide, with one plough in lordship and two slaves. It was valued in 1066 and later at 10*s*. Gruffydd also held an unnamed ½ hide, that Alfward held from him. This had one plough, but was waste after the conquest. It was worth 15*s*. in 1086. It is not known if the latter holding was connected with Alac, but the occurrence of the same personal names suggests a possible connection.[18]

Coplestone-Crowe argues that by 1137-39 'Alac' had become part of the extensive estates of the powerful Marcher lords, the Braose family.[19] The male line of the Braose family became extinct in 1230, and the third of their lands that contained Alac passed to the Mortimer family, and became part of another powerful Marcher estate. When Roger Mortimer died in 1354 an inquisition at Hereford found that his lands included 'Noke'. It records that he had held this 'manor' of the king in chief, but it was not known by what service he held it. The 'manor' was said to have rendered the abbot of Reading 40*d*. a year and suit at his hundred of Leominister.[20]

This inquisition specifically refers to Noke as a manor. Despite the strong overlordship of the Braose and Mortimer, which might suggest centralised control, the settlement pattern is essentially dispersed. This suggests that the settlement pattern had developed before these powerful lords came into possession. The later minor nucleation, with open fields, around Court of Noke might be attributable to developments under these overlords.

A study of the medieval history of Noke should not be undertaken without some caution. Although both Coplestone-Crowe and Bannister seem happy to attribute certain medieval documents with Court of Noke, the place-name 'Noke' or 'Oke', derived from 'oak', seems to have been a common one. A royal grant of 1334 gave Hugh Tyrel, a king's yeoman, free warren in all his demesne lands at 'la Noke' .[21] Bannister considers this refers to the Pembridge Noke, but as there was an estate near Bromyard called 'Okes' that was also held of the king, we should not overlook the possibility of confusing these two estates.[22] Despite this caution, the present evidence does seem to suggest the present attributions by Coplestone-Crowe and Bannister to the Pembridge Noke may be admissible. In 1459 the king allowed Cecily, Duchess of York, to retain certain lands for the relief of her children during her life, following her husband's treason. These included both the manor and borough of Pembridge and a tenement called 'Nook' in Herefordshire.[23] The correlation of these two names in the same document suggests that the Noke referred to here is that one in Pembridge. Furthermore, there are a number of Court Rolls in the Public Record Office in London and elsewhere attributed to the Pembridge Noke. These include rolls for 1529/30 and a series running from 1547 to 1552.[24]

By the late 16th century, the Noke estate was in the hands of the Brace family.[25] Francis Brace, gent, and Dorothy Brace, a widow, appear as tenants in Walter Mason's house at Noke in 1651.[26] Francis was buried at Pembridge on 4th July of that year.[27] Exactly how the estate descended after the medieval period is not known, as it is often difficult to distinguish owner from tenant. This is further complicated by the other houses in the hamlet, all of which are referred to as at 'Noke'. The hearth tax assessment of 1665 lists six men holding houses of substance under the heading of 'Nooke, Leene & Strangway'. These are listed as follows, with the number of hearths given in brackets after the name: Thomas Hopwood (4), Walter Mason (5), George Penreece (4), Thomas Willish (6), William Wall (6), Miles Lurcott (6).[28] Which of these houses was the predecessor of the present house is uncertain.

However, it is known that William Halhead received a third part of the estate of 'Court of Noke Farm' in 1749 as part of his marriage settlement to Frances Caswall, daughter of John Caswall of Weswall in Oxfordshire.[29] That this refers to the capital message known as Court of Noke today is reasonably certain from the reading of this document, and another of 1757 concerning the use of certain watercourses on Court of Noke Farm.[30] The marriage settlement recites that property settled on William Halhead was derived from the estate of Elizabeth Halhead, his mother. Her right to the property seems to have originated in a document of 1718 referred to in the above marriage settlement.[31] According to a family tree deposited with miscellaneous deeds relating to land at Noke, Nathaniel Halhead, of Petersham in Surrey, had married Elizabeth Mason, a grand-daughter of Walter Mason, who held lands at Noke in the second half of the 17th century. Elizabeth was the daughter of George Mason, 'gent'.[32]

Although it can not be determined exactly, it would appear that the Halhead's had received their share in Court of Noke from the Mason family. It is possible, therefore, that Walter Mason's house of five hearths recorded in the 1665 Hearth Tax was on the present site. The parish registers record that this Walter Mason's son, Thomas, was baptised at Pembridge church.[33] Walter died *c.* 1673, and the property passed to his son, George Mason. A Court Baron for that 3rd April 1673 records, not only this event, but the uncertainty, even then, that surrounded the origin of the estate:

> Item, Wee present the death of Walter Mason gent & Dorothy his wife who holds certayne freehold lands & Tenements lying within this manor, but how much or what yearly Chief Rent is paid for the same wee cannott informe or solve. Therefor whereas there happeneth to the Lady of the Manor one yeares Chief Rent for a relief. And that George Mason gent is sonne & next heire of the said Walter & Dorothy, The said George being of the age of sixteen yeares or thereabouts.[34]

The Mason family seems to have had strong local connections. Walter Mason had married Dorothy Penrice of Noke.[35] She was probably the daughter of 'George Penreece', who had a house of four hearths in Noke township in 1665.[36] Walter Mason's daughter, Ann, married Henry Taylor, a glover of Noke, and these held property in the area that included 'Kirwoods Farme' in 1678.[37] It is possible that these family connections may have helped the Masons to build up a substantial estate in the area.

George Mason seems to have been resident in the parish after succeeding to his father's property. The parish registers record a number of his children being baptised at Pembridge church before 1690. These include Edward (1679), Anne (1682), Francis (1686), and Dorothy (1690).[38] He also had at least two other children, George and Elizabeth.[39] He seems to have remained a resident of the parish until at least 1704 when another daughter, Mary, was buried at Pembridge.[40]

Other records suggest that this George Mason was a resident of the manor. In 1681 and 1687 he was sworn in as petty constable for the 'township' of Noke Leen, Lowe and Strangworth. In 1688 he passed the position on to Thomas Vaughan, who was sworn constable 'in the room of George Mason'.[41] Mason's name is also found signing the court proceedings, or as present at court, during the period 1677-92.[42] Court records could not be found for the years following 1692, and so it is not possible to know how much longer he was active in the parish.

It would seem that if Walter Mason's house was on the site of Court of Noke, it was rebuilt *c.* 1700, but there does not appear to be a record of this action. The conjectured date ties in with George Mason I's residence in the parish, and so it is reasonable to suggest that he was the probable builder. When the property next appears in the records it had been divided into thirds. Such division of an estate usually occurs because there are only daughters left to inherit on the father's death. Although George Mason is known to have had three sons, George II, Francis and Edward, it seems likely that they had all died before their father, or been disinherited. Both George II and Edward were still alive in 1703, as they are cited, together with their father, in a local land dispute.[43] It would seem unlikely that the fine house presently standing was built when the property was in divided ownership.

Although events in Noke before 1749 must remain largely conjectural, it is possible that all of George Mason's sons died without issue leaving the property to be divided between three surviving daughters.[44] If this is true, then it would seem that George Mason I may have lived in Noke from 1673 until *c.* 1718. One of his surviving daughters, Elizabeth, who had married Nathaniel Halhead, seems to have inherited a third of her father's estate in 1718. It is only from hereon that it is possible to pick up the thread again with any certainty.

According to the marriage settlement of 1749, the Noke properties mentioned therein were leased to Thomas Harris, husbandman, from 1744 for £150 per year.[45] The reference to Court of Noke as a 'farm' in this document might mean that from that date the property became a tenanted farm, and ceased to be lived in by a descendent of the Mason family.

Around 1770 the estate was reputedly sold to the King family by a Mr Stanley.[46] However, land tax returns of 1811 suggest that King may have only come by the 'Brick House' from Stanley. Although previous researchers have equated this with the present property at Court of Noke, this may have been elsewhere in Noke. The name was not uncommon in the locality as there seems to have been another house in Pembridge called 'Brickhouse in Poolmeare' in the nearby manor of Marston.[47] At the time of the tithe map, there was a field called 'Brick House Orchard', with a cottage (since demolished) adjoining on the south side of Noke Lane 150m SE of Court of Noke. Adjoining this building was another plot known as 'Brickyard' .[48]

By the 1790s James King was letting land at Noke taxed at £18 5*s*. 5¼*d*. to Thomas King, a relative.[49] At this time, there were only two other properties of any substance at Noke. These were taxed at £16 16*s*. 0*d*. and £12 6*s*. 0*d*. In 1811 they were held by John Hill and Lord Oxford, otherwise known as Earl Mortimer, respectively.[50] The latter title is interesting as it might reflect a reminder of when the whole of Noke may have been part of the medieval Mortimer lordship. The Oxford lands seem to have been around Leen Farm to the east of Noke, and historically considered part of that township.

The Kings seem to have been taking a number of the smaller tenant holdings attached to Court of Noke back into their own hands during the later 18th and early 19th centuries. The Court Books record a number of instances of surrender to James King. The first of these is made by William Halhead himself in 1772, probably surrendering one of the subsidiary properties mentioned in the 1749 marriage settlement. This is referred to as 'the Kitchen being part of the House wherein John Taylor did lately inhabit'.[51] It is not known if this was part of the present Mansion House, thereby suggesting it may have been inhabited as a divided property before this date. Other customary tenancies followed in 1774, 1778, 1780, 1782 and 1794.[52]

Thomas King ceased to be the tenant of Noke Farm after 1817, and was replaced by John Turner, who still held the combined estate of 280 acres at the time of the tithe award.[53] By 1822 James King seems to have died, and the property passed to 'Mrs King', probably his widow.[54]

An abstract of title traced back to 1822 refers to the estate as 'the Manor or reputed manor Mansion house farm and lands called the Court of Noke together with the Lower House and buildings then in the occupation of Mr John Turner with several cottages then in his occupation or his undertenants...'. After 1831 James Simpkinson of Kingston-on-Thames in Surrey and his heirs, beneficiaries of Mrs Margaret King, adopted the name of King, and was thereafter known as James King-King. The Noke lands came as part of the Staunton Park estate in the adjoining parish of Staunton-on-Arrow.[55]

At the time of the tithe map for Pembridge in 1841, 'Noke Farm', as it was known, contained just over 280 acres.[56] There were six cottages on the estate as well as the main house. Five of these were grouped to the NW of the mansion, with the outlier being in the small hamlet of Nokeland Head 800m to the west. The main house is referred to as 'Homestead, Lawn etc.' being the house, the lawn in front and area around the canal totalling 6-0-38 acres. The 'canal' is shown quite distinctly on this map as three separate units, or ponds, but on later maps these merge into one sheet of water divided only by a footbridge next to a curious building that had half of its extent jutting out over the water. To the NW of the house, with the 'canal' on its north side was a moderate sized enclosure called Barley Close Orchard, being 5-2-14 acres in extent.

The main group of cottages behind (SW) the main house were on the north side of Noke Lane, the only cottage south of the lane being next to Brick House Orchard. To the south of this is a series of largish fields called Quicksetts, Cockshute Bank, Poke Field, Town Meadow and Sixteen Acres. Beyond these fields is an extended boundary stretching nearly all the way from the main road to Nokeland Head. This is the old boundary to the former common field of Noke. Its purpose is described by an adjoining plot of land called Long Headlands Orchard.

The King family continued to hold the estate until 1884 when it was sold to Joseph Charlton Parr. At this time the Noke estate was described as being 279-3-16 acres in extent. The Sale Particulars state that the Court of Noke is:

> ... a fine old red brick structure somewhat in the style of the Mansion, and was occupied by one of the King family up to 1818; it stands back from the road, is approached by a Carriage Drive through the Paddock, studded with Fine Spreading Oaks and other Timber, and ornamented by Deodara Cedars and a Sheet of Ornamental Water.

They also state that there is '... excellent Water Power with Machinery', a reference to the feed mill created after 1841.[57]

The estate continued to be held by the Parr family until 1924 when it was sold again.[58] From 1927 until after 1992 the Court of Noke portion was owned by the de Quincey Quincey family. The estate of around 280 acres survived largely intact until quite recently when the lands south of the old headland at Nokeland Head were sold off. The lands to the north still remain in the hands of the Bulmer family, the present occupiers of the Court of Noke.

2. Archaeological Recording During Restoration of the Canal-Like Water Features

The archaeological recording carried out during 1997 has enabled a consolidation of the historical context of Court of Noke, and allowed for an assessment of the formation and development of the formal garden and water features on the site. This section describes the recording prior to and during the restoration of the garden.

The survey of the 'canals' prior to restoration (Fig. 2)

Prior to restoration, a measured survey of the earthworks of the canal-like features was made. This is shown in figure 2. For a description of the earthworks, the reader is referred to the archive report.[59]

The results of the archaeological recording during restoration (Figs. 3-6)

Trench 1 (Fig. 3)

Dredging in Pond 1 revealed what appeared to be a cobbled surface on the bottom of the pond adjacent to the drystone revetment that faced the pond on the house (west) side. A cleaned area (approximately 2m x 1m) revealed a surface of large stone cobbles similar to those still existing in parts of the adjoining farmyard. This was made of mainly rounded blocks (*c*. 20cm x 8cm) of local stone, with occasional larger blocks (35cm x 14cm). These were set close together in clay less than 10cm deep which overlaid undisturbed gravelly soil.

The cobbled surface showed clear evidence of being artificially-laid, with the majority of the stones being laid with their long axis on an E-W alignment. The laying was neatest against the revetment wall, with the appearance of being butted up against it. The further east from the wall, the cruder the cobbling became. Those which could be considered 'neat' extended to between a third and half way across the width of the pond. East of this the surface became increasing crude, degenerating into a semi-natural layer of gravel with the occasional larger stone embedded in it.

Trench 2 (Figs. 3 & 6)

Following the discovery of the stone lining to the main pond (Pond 1), a section was cut through the east bank of the pond to see if any form of revetment existed on this side. This was not entirely conclusive, but the evidence seems to suggest the bank here had been given a slope of about 45 degrees without revetment, although there was some evidence to suggest that this may have been a later recut.

The section revealed a layer of loam (05) about 10cm deep on the surface. This overlaid a brown clay loam (06) that appeared to have slumped forward over the stone cobbling of the original pond bottom (04). This latter layer was 25cm thick nearest the pond, tapering down to nothing about 2m back from the pond edge.

At the east end of the section a layer of brown clay (10) appeared to be the undisturbed soils into which the pond was cut. About 2.5m east of the present pond edge there appeared to be a cut (18) through the soil horizons, although this may have been an animal burrow. However, the nature of the stratigraphy to the west of this cut suggests construction of some sort. .

This is suggested by the fact that layer 09, an apparently undisturbed clay loam, seems to have slumped forward over another clay layer (08) that contained human-introduced elements in the form of three separate lumps of charcoal and a piece of slag seen in the section. It would seem that this layer had slumped forward west of the putative cut (18) at some time, as layer 09 above seems to have slumped, in turn, over it. This layer had then, also in turn, been cut (20) to form a sloping bank to the pond. Layer 06 had then slumped forward to form the present bank. This edge of the pond appears to have once been about 1.5m east of the present alignment.

Trench 3 (Fig. 4)

Trench 3 comprised a cleaning up of the surface layers on a small 'island' at the junction of Pond 1 and Pond 2. This 'island' was thought to have been extended eastwards, probably in the present century. Excavation revealed an earlier stone edge to the island that matched that shown on 19th century maps. This edge was very crude, being little more than a line of stones at ground level, with soil below. Elsewhere, on the north, south and west sides, there was a drystone revetment along the edge of the island. In places this seemed to overlie a possibly earlier brick revetment. This was particularly notable on the west side. On the south side of the island was a narrow stone-lined channel, about 50cm wide, dividing the island from the southern edge of the pond.

Late 19th-century plans of the site had shown a small building on the island. Machine clearance of the undergrowth on the island revealed stone foundations of this structure. The topsoil was cleared to a depth of about 15cm around this structure to reveal the outline plan.

This excavation revealed two later phases overlying the ruins. First, an unmortared line of bricks (14) had been placed on top of the demolished south stone wall of the structure, thus making a new top to the edge of the stone channel between the island and the garden. These bricks seem to have been reused from elsewhere on the site. Partly overlying these a stone path had been laid from the garden across to a bridge on the north side of the island. This partly overlaid the western wall of the structure, leaving the top portion of this more disturbed than elsewhere.

The structure (11) itself was of a curious design. The back wall appears to have been the west wall. This was about 2m in length, 45cm wide, and made of irregularly shaped local stone mortared together with the faced edges outwards. The SW corner of the structure was not excavated, being beneath a heavy slab in the later path. However, this appeared to have a long southern wall extending east from it. This may have extended all the way to the east edge of the island, but, on present evidence, the wall seems to have stopped about 1m short of this. The south edge of the wall was also the southern revetment of the island, and so it was not possible to be absolutely certain about the end of this wall. The wall was of similar mortared stone to that on the west side, but it contained two brick fragments at its east end.

The north wall of the structure was only 1.2m long and 35cm wide. The east wall crossed between this wall and the south to form a rectangular cubicle 1.2m by 45cm internally. Such a narrow 'room' seems too small to allow people to enter it comfortably. It is thus possible it acted as a store of some sort behind the main body of the building.

Following the alignment of the north wall, there was a gap of about 20cm between the NE corner and what appeared to be a mortared stone base (13). This was not a true square, having its SW corner cut across at an angle. However, the two straight sides of this structure were approximately 50cm square.

The tithe map seems to show a small building on the edge of the garden adjoining the site of the island. At this time only a dam or partition is shown dividing Ponds 1 & 2. An island is not shown until the OS 25" map of 1886.[60] This shows an L-shaped building, with the largest part sitting over the channel between the island and the garden. This might suggest that the 'south' wall of the structure is not the south wall at all, but the north wall of a structure based on the garden side of the pond overhanging the channel, with the other arm of the structure on the island. This building continued to be shown on the 1903 OS 25" map. Such a structure could have been an outdoor toilet, although the elaborate ornamental nature of the ponds evidenced elsewhere may not correspond with this utilitarian function.

The stone base (13) on the island strongly suggests that there was a further structure on the island itself. This base seems to have been a pillar supporting a roof on a structure or room that was otherwise open on the north and east sides. This would imply that the 'room' beneath was a covered seat, giving a view eastwards to the end of the pond. The structure on the garden side of the channel may have been partly designed to shade the features on the island from the sun.

Trench 4 (Fig. 5)

This trench was cut to examine the remains of a possible sluice in the NE corner of Pond 1. The area was very heavily disturbed by large roots from mature trees on both sides of the conjectural sluice site. Excavation suggested that the sluice had been deliberately destroyed. A fine brown loam (16) that made up the topsoil continued to a depth of 60cm in places. This was full of large stones, apparently once part of the sluice structure. For the most part this was broken up and scattered over a large area around the sluice site. In some places it was possible to remove the debris to reveal intact structure beneath. The intact structure was embedded in a more clayey soil (17), with a redder colouration than the more disturbed soils above. This appears to have been part of the original clay bank that may not have been disturbed when the sluice was deliberately destroyed.

The structural remains comprised a mortared stone wall (21) lining the inner bank of the pond, and was up to 50cm high and 1m thick. It was set at a slight inward angle to the bank, channeling water towards the outlet. The north end of this wall seems to have been deliberately made as an end, thereby suggesting that the sluice channel passed through it at this point.

A gap of about 35cm was on the north side of this, followed by the rubble remains of a further structure (22). This had been considerably damaged, but that part excavated seemed to show that it was set at a similar inward angle to the corresponding wall to the south. The bank was 3.6m wide at this point. Excavation revealed a length of mortared stone wall about 70cm thick, with an apparently deliberate 'end' on its south side (23). There then followed some large stones making up unmortared debris. These stones overlay what appeared to be a stone revetment (24) running along the back of the bank. Behind this wall a 80cm length of iron drain pipe was found dumped under a rubble pile. The structures found seemed to be remains of a stone sluice. The stone structures (21, 22) on the inner face of the bank seem to be deliberately angled to form the 'wings' of a sluice. Angling wings in this way was commonly undertaken on sluices to channel the water towards the gate, and relieve the pressure on the bank.[61] Many modern sluices incorporate this feature, although historic wooden examples previously excavated by the authors did not have the angled wings found here.[62]

The nature of the gate itself can only be surmised. It is possible it was a simple wooden gate, set between the two wings leading into an open channel behind. There was no direct evidence for this channel although the deliberate end in the back revetment wall suggests some sort of channel through the bank. It is possible that a length of pipe passed through the bank. However, an unobstructed pipe alone would not have made a sluice needing stone wings, and so we must assume a more complex arrangement obstructed the water before it was channeled into the pipe. There was probably a sluice chamber behind the gate placed across the wings, but all trace of this is now gone.

The evidence showed conclusively that there had been an early sluice here. Pottery found in the demolition layers was mainly of 18th century date, but a large fragment of a transfer-printed bowl suggests the destruction had taken place after 1800. This would have tied in with the conversion of the main pond into a pool to feed a mill between 1841 and 1884. From this time, it may have been considered unnecessary to have a sluice exiting into the old diversion channel, and the structure was destroyed.

Judging from the substantial nature of the surviving masonry, the sluice had been a sophisticated structure that must have been the main water exit for the ponds. If this was the case, it confirms the important part that the diversion channel played in the control of water within the earlier system, and shows it to have been contemporary with the ponds in their pre-millpond phase.

Further reinstatement works after the watching brief had finished revealed an iron grill in the stone wall at the back of the sluice. This was at a greater depth than the present level of silt in the diversion channel, and demonstrates that the channel was a much more substantial feature than appears today from the surviving earthworks.

Trench 5 (Fig. 3)

Dredging on the west side of the island between Ponds 1 and 2 revealed an *in situ* timber and a series of eight vertical stakes. These appeared to be part of a timber framework associated with a small dam between the two ponds. This filled the gap at the west end of the island. The ponds narrowed down to a width of less than 2.5m here, making it an ideal location for a dam bank between them. The stakes did not seem to make any specific pattern, other than forming a roughly semi-circular alignment. Other stakes had been observed in front of these being removed by the machine before dredging was stopped. For the most part the surviving stakes were about 30cm in length, with sharpened ends pushed into the underlying ground. The stakes seemed to be surrounded by a layer of blue-grey clay , possibly the remains of the dam bank between the ponds.

To the west of the stakes was a well-preserved water pipe made from a hollowed tree-trunk. This structure was of some complexity, having chamfered edges, and a sophisticated 'trap door' cut into its upper surface near its west end. That part of the pipe excavated was 1.3m in length, and was approximately 27cm square in its main body. 45cm before its west end, the pipe had been deliberately cut to step in to a narrower width, being 25cm x 2.15m. The hollowed area was off-centre, being 16cm in diameter, and only 3cm from the top of the pipe, but 9cm from the bottom. The 'trap door' in its upper surface was set 13cm from its west end. It was a rectangle cut out of the top of the pipe, being approximately 21cm x 11cm. The wood cut out of this slot had been carefully fashioned into a close fitting 'lid', sealing it if required.

The dredging allowed the west side of the island to be examined. This was a well-made brick revetment at the lowest level, up to five courses high. Above this was the drystone revetment to the island noticed elsewhere. The brickwork extended right across the entrance to the channel on the south side of the island, but only two courses were observed here. These remains suggest a modification to the island at a later date. The brickwork would imply a date contemporary with the house, with the stone work being possibly later. However, it should be stressed that there was no evidence seen that excludes the possibility of the brickwork and drystone work being of the same date. The extension of the brickwork across the face of the channel need not be significant on its own. It is possible that this represented the base of a sluice-type structure that might be expected at this point.

The discovery of stakes that may have been within the dam bank, rather than just revetting it, should not be considered unusual in historic contexts such as these. A large number of post-medieval treatises recommend the use of timber frameworks into which the clay is rammed to form a secure dam. These include Markham, Mortimer, and Hale.[63] This practice also seems to have been much-practiced in the medieval period.[64]

The making of hollowed wooden pipes was also in keeping with construction techniques in historic times. Janus Dubravius recalls how the Roman writer, Pliny, had recommended them.[65] In the early 18th century, both John James and Stephen Switzer record their use, the latter denting the rural tradition that elm was always used for water structures by arguing that oak was the 'superior' wood for these purposes.[66]

Archaeology has recorded at least two published examples of pipes similar to that found at Noke. At Baddesley Clinton, Warwickshire, nine such pipes were found associated with ponds and a moat. The Baddesley examples included a number of sophisticated variations. Pipe number 4 here contained a hole in the side, possibly for a bung. Pipe number 9 contained a valve device that opened when water was flowing forwards, but would close when water tried to flow back the wrong way. It was not possible to date these examples, but their similarity to those described in early 18th century treatises made a contemporary date seem plausible.[67]

Another similar wooden pipe was recorded within the water control devices associated with a large and complex formal cascade at Gnoll in South Wales. This latter work was dated to the later 1720s, thereby increasing the possibility that similar pipes found elsewhere date from the period around 1700.[68] Such a date would accord with the conjectural date of *c.* 1700 for the Noke ponds.

The 'trap door' in the top of the Noke example was unique at the time of the discovery. Since this recording was undertaken, a similar example has been examined by the author at Arlington Court, Devon. This appears to date from the later 18th century, and although it lacked the recessed lid, can be clearly demonstrated from the estate archives to have been connected with water control.[69] It was not possible initially to see exactly how this Noke example functioned, but the later discovery of a second pipe between Ponds 2 and 3 seems to have resolved this problem (see below).

Other observations made during dredging (Fig. 2)

Brick debris in the main pond

Amongst the most interesting remains found during this work was the discovery of two patches of brick debris in Pond 1 east of the house. The southern patch showed distinct impressions of a straight edge on the west and south sides. The brick debris had been disturbed by the machinery before it was fully appreciated but allowing for this, both patches seemed to be about 1m square, although the waterlogging of the bricks had caused some degeneration of their condition. What was most noticeable about these patches was their symmetrical positions, being equi-distant either side of the front door of the house. They were also roughly in the centre of the pond width ways.

These remains were not isolated. The area to the east contained much stone rubble with patches of rammed clay that formed a large platform extending over most of the eastern half of the pond in front of the house. *In situ* structural remains were not found but its position suggests deliberate siting.

A stone edge to the area of cobbling on the floor of the pond was 12.7m from the southern edge of the pond, and extended from the stone revetment only as far as a line running through the brick debris noted above. The area to the south of the stone edging was also higher than that to the north in front of the brick debris, forming an L-shaped platform with the raised area to the north of the brick debris.

It seems that the L-shaped platform of shallower water and the brick debris were related in some way. The most obvious solution to the symmetrical brick debris was the site of plinths for statues, or a similar form of ornamentation. Such structures were commonplace in garden pools *c.* 1700. Examples can be seen locally at the National Trust property of Westbury Court, Gloucestershire[70]. The poor condition of these remains can be explained by earlier dredging of the ponds. Furthermore, the features may have been deliberately removed in the past, possibly when the pond was altered to feed the mill to the south after 1841. Pottery found in the pond around the clay platform was largely of 19th century date, seemingly supporting this dating. Furthermore, the north patch of brick debris contained a sherd of salt-glazed stoneware embedded within it. This type of ceramic was common in the period *c.* 1720-90. Although it may have been associated with the building of the conjectural plinth, it was more likely to have been deposited after demolition. However, if the sherd was associated with the construction of the plinth, it makes a date of *c.* 1720-40 most likely for these features.

This may have once seemed late for the making of the formal ponds overall, but recent research has shown that formal gardens continued to be made later than previously thought. The dating of parts of the walled gardens at Castle Bromwich to the period *c.* 1730-47 initially caused much controversy. This was only finally accepted when a newly discovered account book was found to support the archaeological findings.[71] Since then a number of late formal gardens have been worked on by archaeologists. The substantial formal cascade at the Gnoll in South Wales was begun *c.* 1727-28, with the report on this site citing a number of similarly late parallels, including the large formal cascade at Stanway, Gloucestershire dated to *c.* 1730.[72] Although it should be stressed that an individual sherd should not be seen as good evidence for a post-1720 date, the possibility can not be discounted.

Part of a wooden structure in the main pond

This was found on the bed of the northern arm of Pond 1. It was about 7m west of the garden corner, and about 2.5m from the stone revetment edging the pond here. It comprised a single thick wooden plank or 'sleeper' 2.35m long and 25cm wide, that seemed to deliberately embedded into the floor of the pond. It contained three rectangular slots (14cm by 7cm) equi-distant along its length. These were possibly supports for vertical posts.[73]

Although it is possible that these timbers came here by chance, it is a coincidence that they seem to be exactly opposite where a small thatched building is shown on photographs dated *c.* 1880-90.[74] The 1886 OS 25" map also shows a small rectangular building on the edge of the pond at this point. It is possible therefore that the timber structure was associated with this building.

A second timber in line with the other suggests the feature was a bridge, although it is unlikely a bridge was necessary at this point, when the ponds could have been crossed more easily at the dams between them. If it was an original feature, it might have been an ornamental arch, framing the view to the sluice at the east end of the pond, and Noke Bridge beyond. It is possible that it was a later feature put after the ponds had been merged into a more continuous waterway, or after its more ornamental phase had ended. That is, it was a 19th or early 20th century feature. The conclusion, therefore, is that the feature dates from before 1884. This would seem to suggest it was contemporary with the formal garden phase, although it is not impossible that it may be a relic of an earlier, possible medieval, system such as a bridge over a moat. Although there was no other evidence for this latter suggestion, it can not be entirely disregarded.

The division between the middle pond and the third pond

The tithe map seems to show a dam bank between Ponds 2 and 3. Observation here expected to find a similar clay and timber dam to that found between Ponds 1 and 2. Although no clay was found a spread of stone rubble amongst brownish loamy soil, and the remains of two vertical timbers with the remains of a more substantial wooden beam (within 50cm of the N edge of the pond) would tend to confirm that there was some type of revetment here. This was probably removed during the 20th century to make a single, continuous waterway.

A further hollowed timber, similar to that found between Ponds 1 and 2, was found approximately 1.6m farther west that the western end of the walled garden, and about 3.5m from the southern edge of the ponds. This made it roughly half way across Pond 3. The timber itself was 1.61m long, 35cm wide at its west end, but only 30cm wide at its eastern end. The latter end appears to have been damaged in some way, truncating the timber. This suggests it may have been originally about the same length as the timber between Ponds 1 and 2. There was a square opening near the west end with a recessed lid. Again, this was similar to the design of the other hollowed timber. There was a split along the entire north side of the feature, and a wooden bung in the west end.

The discovery of the bung allows us to determine how the pipes functioned. It prevented free flow of water, although the recessed lid could be removed to allow water out of the pond. Under normal conditions the weight of the water kept the recessed lid in place. It would seem that the lid had to be removed by hand, possibly by somebody wading into the pond, and reaching down to remove it. This suggests that water flow between the ponds was only occasional, as required, the system being closed at other times. From this discovery, it would seem that the front of the dam was near the west end of the pipe. The timbers that were found behind it during the watching brief were probably part of a revetment at the back of the dam.

3. Interpretative Conclusions

This final section attempts to harness the available historical and archaeological evidence discussed in the first two sections in order to frame an interpretation of the site. The archaeological evidence suggests that the ponds at Court of Noke made up a series of ornamental water features on the east and north sides of the house. It could be suggested that the gardens at Noke be considered 'water gardens' as the water element would have dominated the overall design. This does not exclude the possibility that the ponds may have been converted from earlier fishponds serving a conjectured medieval manor, or even a former moat.[75] However, as there was no evidence for any medieval activity on the site, it must be considered that the water features were largely of a post-medieval date.

The exact date must remain conjectural at present. An earlier report by Currie suggested the house and the ponds in their present form were contemporary, and very likely to be the work of the Mason family.[76] A date of *c.* 1700 was given as the most likely, although this can be stretched to include the period *c.* 1660-1740. In stylistic terms, formal features of this type were most common between 1680 and 1730, although it is not impossible to find them in the years either side of this range. There is some very tentative evidence that one of the conjectured statue plinths in front of the house may have dated to after 1720. Although these plinths could have been added to a pre-existing design of 20-40 years earlier. On balance, a date *c.* 1700 is preferred, with the entire design being executed in one build during the occupation of George Mason.

It would seem that the main pond was a T-shaped canal, forming a much more formal shape than in the 19th century or later. The use of the east side of Pond 1 as a cattle drink has since eroded the original form of the banks here. These may have had timber revetments originally, but there is no reason why simple sloping grass banks were not present. The contemporary garden writer, Stephen Switzer, seems to prefer these to stone-edged ponds, and recommends an even gradient sloping down to the pond bed.[77]

Pond 1 would have been an impressive sight in front of the house -- a partly stone-lined T-shaped pond kept relatively clear of silt by the diversion channel. This would have meant that in its early days the water would have been clear. Rising symmetrically from the pond would have been two statues, probably depicting mythological figures associated with water. Behind these there seems to have been a large platform. From the stone debris found on this, another structure may have existed here. This was possibly a partially submerged wall or balustrade on which other ornaments may have sat, although this remains conjectural.. A fountain might be suggested, but this would need a raised reservoir to work it. In the northern arm of the T there may have been an ornamental bridge, with a covered seat or summer house on an island between Ponds 1 and 2. We can not ignore the possibility that these features may have been 19th century additions, but they have a good chance of being contemporary with the formal garden. The 'covered seat' may have given a view along the northern arm possibly to Noke Bridge beyond. This was probably clear of the invasive tree growth now covering the area in the early 18th century. At the far (east) end of this arm was a stone sluice. The nature of the stonework here was substantial, possibly more so than was necessary for the sluice alone (although such features were often built to thorough specifications in historic times). Some form of stone ornamentation intrinsic to the sluice is suggested.

Beyond Pond 1, it is not possible to describe how sophisticated the ornamentation may have been. It is possible, as this was at the back of the house, that it was minimal. Ponds 2 and 3 do not appear to have been stone-edged, nor do they seem to have deliberate cobbled linings. The bottom is made up of more natural stone and gravel, although even this may have been deliberately introduced. From early maps it seems that the third pond extended into an oval basin originally, but as the sides do not appear to have been stone-lined, this may have quickly lost its shape.

Some suggestions concerning management of the original ponds can be attempted from the evidence available. Water passed from Ponds 3 to 2 and Ponds 2 to 1 by way of relatively unsophisticated wooden pipes. Although these were extremely interesting in their own right, they were a crude method of water control compared with the elaborate stone sluice exiting Pond 1 into the diversion channel. This would suggest that the two most westerly ponds merely emptied into one another when required. Although they could be separately drained if necessary, the crude water exits suggested that for most of the time they were a closed system. That is, water is unlikely to have flowed through the system freely except at times of draining down. The ponds, therefore drained into one another, with the final exit being from the stone sluice in Pond 1 into the diversion channel. However, it must be stated that the system as seen would be prone to flooding during heavy rain. It was probable that a simple emergency overspill existed in the dams of Ponds 2 and 3, but the wooden pipes were necessary to drain the ponds down. It is possible the channel behind the island in Pond 1 acted as one of these overspills, with water falling over the brick wall blocking its west end during times of flood. A similar feature may have existed between Ponds 2 and 3, but this had been entirely removed before this present work commenced.

It would seem, therefore, that only Pond 1 was connected directly to the diversion channel. There would appear to have been a gradual drop in levels between Ponds 3 and 1 that would have aided the passage of water through the system should it have been required to open the sluices, either for drainage (for fishing and repairs), or to revitalise stagnant waters in hot weather.

The elaboration of ornamentation and sluice control in Pond 1 suggests it may have been of greater importance than the other two. Its position near the house and size seems to confirm this. It would seem the primary purpose of the ponds was ornamental, although it is not impossible that the sub-division aided fish-keeping. It was sometimes necessary to keep different species of fish separate. For example, pike for the table were often kept separate from other fish because of their predatory nature. Carp and pike were the most popular table fish in the post-medieval period, and it would have been useful to have separate ponds to keep them in.

The overall impression of the Noke canals was probably similar to the formal canals at Westbury Court. The way the ponds turned around the house, encompassing what would have been all the main garden areas, is reminiscent of Roger North's contemporary lament for the revival of moat gardens:

> The View of it [the moat] is a Delicacy the greatest Epicures in Gardening court, and we hear of it by the Name of Canal. Then the moving upon it in boats... after a Romantick Way; and thus Circling an House, taking in the Variety of Walks and Gardens here and there... are Pleasures not given to be understood by any, but Statesmen lain aside for their honesty, who by their Experience are taught the Variety of Greatness, and have an understanding to distinguish the true Felicities of Life.[78]

By 1749 the property had passed into divided ownership, and by the end of the 18th century, it was little more than a tenanted farm. The 'window' in which it had pretensions as a gentleman's residence was therefore probably restricted to the occupation of George Mason senior (*c.* 1673-1718). As Mason was only 16 years old when he inherited the estate from his father, it is unlikely that he started on improvements until after he reached his majority (in 1678).[79]

At some time between 1841 and 1884, the diversion channel was abandoned as the exit for the ponds. A new leat was dug to the south, feeding a mill for grinding animal fodder, and the emphasis of the ponds shifted to a more utilitarian function. It is possible that the ponds were neglected before this date, but it seems likely that the symmetrical statues, and what was on the platform behind them, had been removed by 1884.

From 1886 onwards the ponds seem to have been gradually neglected as ornamental features. By the 1930s the buildings adorning the north arm of the T-shaped canal had disappeared, and the ponds gradually silted up. Any attempts to halt their decline after this date were merely holding actions, and no effort seems to have been made to undertake more than the minimum maintenance. Within the last 30 years or so, they became almost entirely neglected.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are given to all those involved with this project. In particular, Edward and Emma Bulmer are thanked for their invaluable discussions and continuing interest throughout the project. The archive for this work will be deposited with the local Museum Services. Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) at Worcester, and the National Monuments Record (NMR) at Swindon, Wiltshire.

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Other Abbreviations:

CchRolls -- *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, 6 vols (1903-27).

IPM -- *Inquisitions post-mortem*, 15 vols (1904-1995).

PR -- *Patent Rolls*, 73 vols (1901-86).

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