

## A sawpit in Farnham Park

### Background

The Farnham Cricket Club grounds are located north-east of Farnham Castle and are bounded to the south-west by the outer defensive ditch of the castle and to the south and east by Farnham Park (fig 1). In 2006 the club received permission to expand the grounds slightly over the south-eastern boundary of the park, to permit the construction of additional practice nets. As part of this project the authors were asked, by Waverley Borough Council, to open a series of archaeological test trenches in advance of the work itself.

The trenching, with the help of a mechanical digger, took place in July 2006. Three evenly spaced cuts were made across the line of the proposed extension. The first two produced no signs of archaeological deposits but the third, nearest the postern gate of the castle, exposed two closely spaced parallel brick walls from a previously unknown structure. The trench was expanded by hand, showing that the walls formed a rectangle some 4m long and 1.5m wide (figs 2 and 3; SU 8381 4738). The interior appeared to have been backfilled with rubble, in the main consisting of tile but mixed with the occasional pot sherd, bone and clay pipestem.

While the bricks themselves appeared to date from somewhere around the end of the 17th century, the purpose of the walling was unclear, so it was decided to empty a small section of the interior at the north-west end to try and find any floor. In the event the floor was finally found at a depth of 1.6m and, following discussions with the Weald and Downland Museum, it was decided that the structure must have been a sawpit – albeit a very well-built one. The Rural Life Museum, Tilford, then expressed an interest in lifting the entire structure and removing it to the museum for public display. The excavation was therefore backfilled and the site left to await events. By late November the required funding had not been found and, at the request of the Borough Council, further excavation of the site was undertaken with the aim of recording the pit, backfilling it and preserving it under the new practice nets. This was undertaken in December 2006 under cold wet conditions, but it was nevertheless possible to empty the pit and, with the aid of a mechanical pump, keep it clear of water long enough to allow the structure to be recorded. The pit was then backfilled, capped with a protective layer of sand, and is now preserved *in situ* under the new practice nets.

### The sawpit

In plan the sawpit is rectangular in shape being, as already noted, 4m long, 1.5m wide and 1.6m deep (figs 3 and 4). The walls were constructed in the main of re-used squared medieval masonry malmstone and a few clunch blocks, all of which showed signs of tooling and several of which showed architectural features. In places the walls had been repaired with bricks and the whole circuit capped by a layer of up to five courses of bricks. The bricks themselves were slightly variable in size but were in the region of 9 inches long x 4½ inches wide x 2½ inches thick. A series of recessed footholds had been built into the south-west and north-eastern walls at their junction (fig 4) to afford access to and egress from the pit. A finely constructed recess had a brick floor and rear wall under an arch formed of two tiles and had been built into the south-east wall at its western end (fig 4). There were no signs of soot within the recess, so presumably it was not used to hold a candle or lamp. The centre of the north-western wall had a second, rather larger, recess under a poorly preserved wooden lintel. The back of the recess was constructed of brick with some, now collapsed, masonry above. Sturt (1934, 58) refers to such recesses being used to ‘hold an oil-cup, and wedges for the ‘saw box’, while at Holme next the Sea, Norfolk, a similar recess was ‘said by an old carpenter to be for standing a pint of beer for the man below’ (Norfolk HER: 19448).

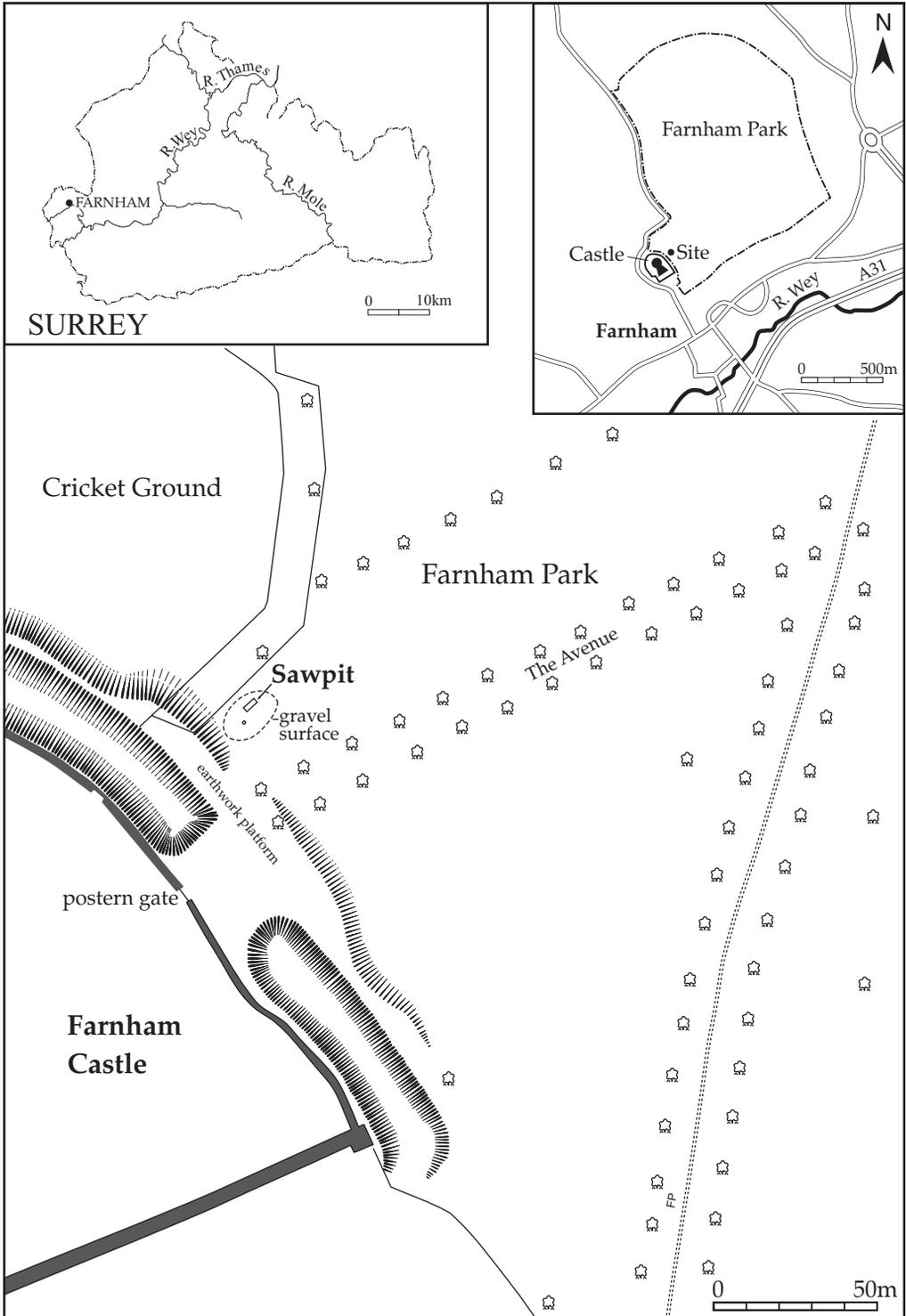


Fig 1 Farnham Park sawpit. Location plan.



Fig 2 Farnham Park sawpit. Photograph of the sawpit looking south-west.

The floor of the pit was constructed of stone cobbles (fig 2) with a stone and brick lined drainage hole or sump, of unknown depth, at the junction of the north- and south-eastern walls. There was no obvious sign of decayed sawdust or wood chippings on the floor, though a very thin black deposit on the cobbles might have originated from this source. The only find relating to the use of the sawpit was that of an iron ‘dog’ for gripping the timber, which was found immediately overlying the floor.

Two graffiti had been carved into the stonework of the walls. The first read ‘RM 1764’ and was found to the left of the larger recess while the second was at the top right-hand corner of the south-west wall and read ‘RM July 21 1764’ (fig 3). Who ‘RM’ was is uncertain, but a local historian has commented that a James Mothe was a wheelwright with premises at 91/92 West Street and was succeeded by his son Richard over the period 1750–80 (Pat Heather, pers comm). Perhaps ‘RM’ was Richard Mothe, as elsewhere (eg Cressing Temple, Essex), wheelwrights’ shops are associated with sawpits.

The area surrounding the sawpit was trowelled in an attempt to locate any postholes or post bases from a superstructure or associated building. In the event no such features were found with the possible exception of a  $c$  0.75m square deposit of brick and stone rubble  $c$  3m

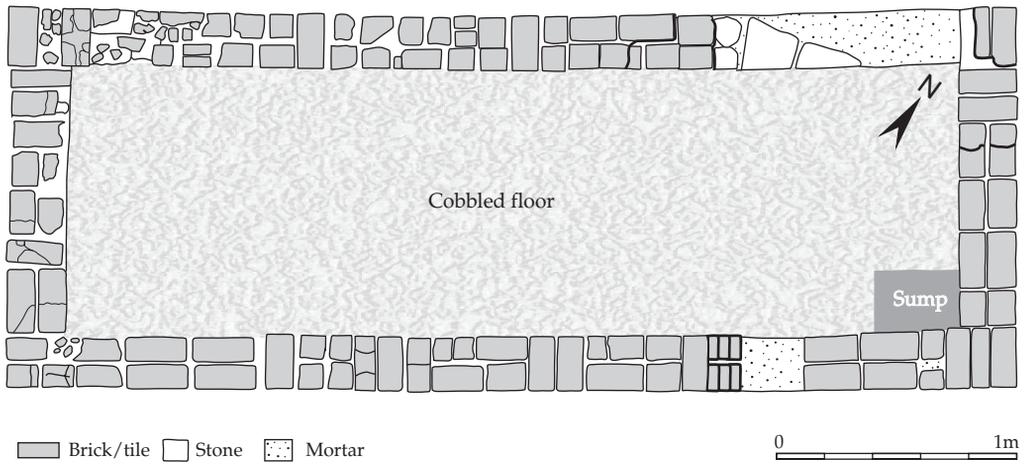


Fig 3 Farnham Park sawpit. Plan.

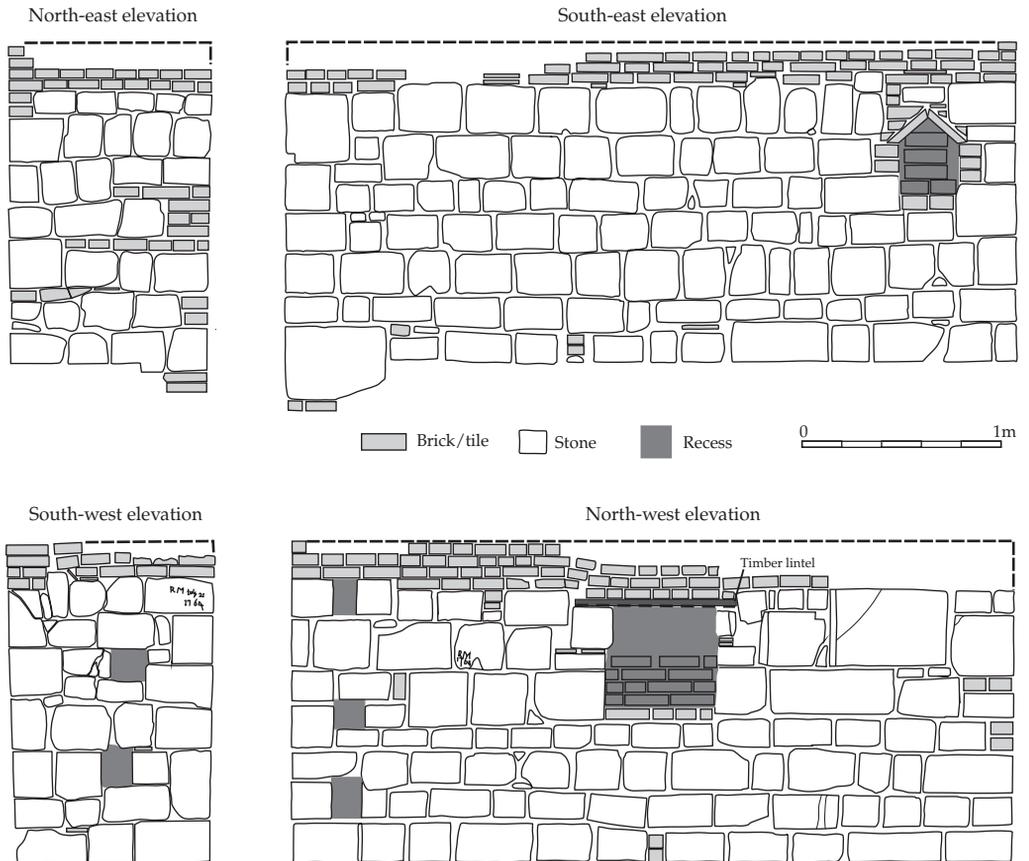


Fig 4 Farnham Park sawpit. Elevations.

from the south-west corner of the pit. The sawpit was surrounded by a laid gravel surface, the approximate extent of which is shown on figure 1. This layer was level with the upper course of bricks and was therefore probably laid at the end of the 17th century. Whether the gravel has sealed any earlier features in the area is an open question.

## Conclusions

The structure found in Farnham Park is undoubtedly a sawpit, albeit of much finer construction than is usual with such pits. Similar sawpits were operated using wooden trestles to raise the log being sawn above the head of the undersawyer, as must have been the case at Farnham. The pit would have been a permanent feature and have continued in use for a considerable period. While the brickwork used in the pit is consistent with a late 17th/early 18th century date, it is quite possible that this represents a repair to a pre-existing structure with the two recesses being inserted at the same time. The masonry blocks used in the walls are certainly medieval and in all probability come from one of the phases of building work in the castle itself. The date for the construction of the pit is therefore uncertain, but it may well have been built during the medieval period. If this interpretation is correct the refurbishment of the pit may have been carried out in the late 17th century to allow timbers to be cut for the extensive repair work to the castle, which is known to have taken place after the Restoration (Parks 2000). In any event the pit was certainly open in 1764, but appears to have gone out of use towards the end of the 18th century as the latest pottery recovered from the backfill was Staffordshire creamware.

It is now certain that this area, immediately outside the postern gate, functioned as a timber yard, no doubt in part for works within the castle. Such a well-constructed and long-lived sawpit of the period is most unusual and a brief search through the literature has failed to find any parallels. It is, however, of interest that the roof of Westminster Hall was fabricated in Farnham at the end of the 14th century (Price 1995). While the exact site of the 'frame' (carpenters' yard) for this remarkable work is unknown, it is not inconceivable that it might have been located in this area of the park. Whether or not there is any connection between the sawpit itself and the construction of that roof must remain pure speculation.

For now the pit remains preserved *in situ* under the Cricket Club's practice nets. Perhaps some time in the future, the Rural Life Museum at Tilford will raise the funding to allow the sawpit to be moved and put on public display.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DAVID and AUDREY GRAHAM