

Witley Court Worcestershire

Archaeological recording of the loose stones



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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS LTD

Manager: A Boucher BSc MIFA

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Witley Court, Witley, Worcestershire: Archaeological recording of the loose stones

Report By:

A. Boucher, D.Rouse, S.Mayes

For:

English Heritage
The Axis
10 Holliday Street
Birmingham
B1 1TG

Cover picture: 1880 water colour of the main buildings
at Witley Court.

Contents:

1	Summary	1
3	Geology and geography	3
4	Historical and archaeological background	3
5	Aims and objectives.....	6
6	Method.....	7
7	Results.....	7
8	Discussion	7
9.	CD Data base	8
Figure1.....	Location Plan.....	2

1 Summary

Site name: Witley Court, Worcestershire.

Grid reference: NGR SO 775 658

Over the large number of years since Witley Court was ravaged by fire the building continued to decay and crumble. This was in-part due to vegetation that took hold causing large sections of wall to collapse. This decay also affected garden structures and the various pieces of masonry and worked stone that have resulted from this process have been gradually collected and stored in and around the old stable yard. Following the recent partial restoration of the east wall of the west wing the stone store had to be rearranged, partly to gain access to objects that were to be replaced during the repair. The result is a complete lack of knowledge of the current audit of stone work now stored in the yard.

An inspection of the stores during 2006 also demonstrated that some of the identifications were inaccurate and other areas of stone storage had been interfered with in such a way as to again render the existing audits unusable.

The scope of the project was to record all "pallets" of stones and provide as near an accurate quantification and classification as is practicable given the current state of the store, and then provide a record and database of the results from this survey.

The survey work created a data base linked to an AutoCad plan of the locations of the stone pallets, allowing the user to view an image and the location of each pallet of architectural fragments. This Data base and AutoCad plan have been included on a CD with this report.

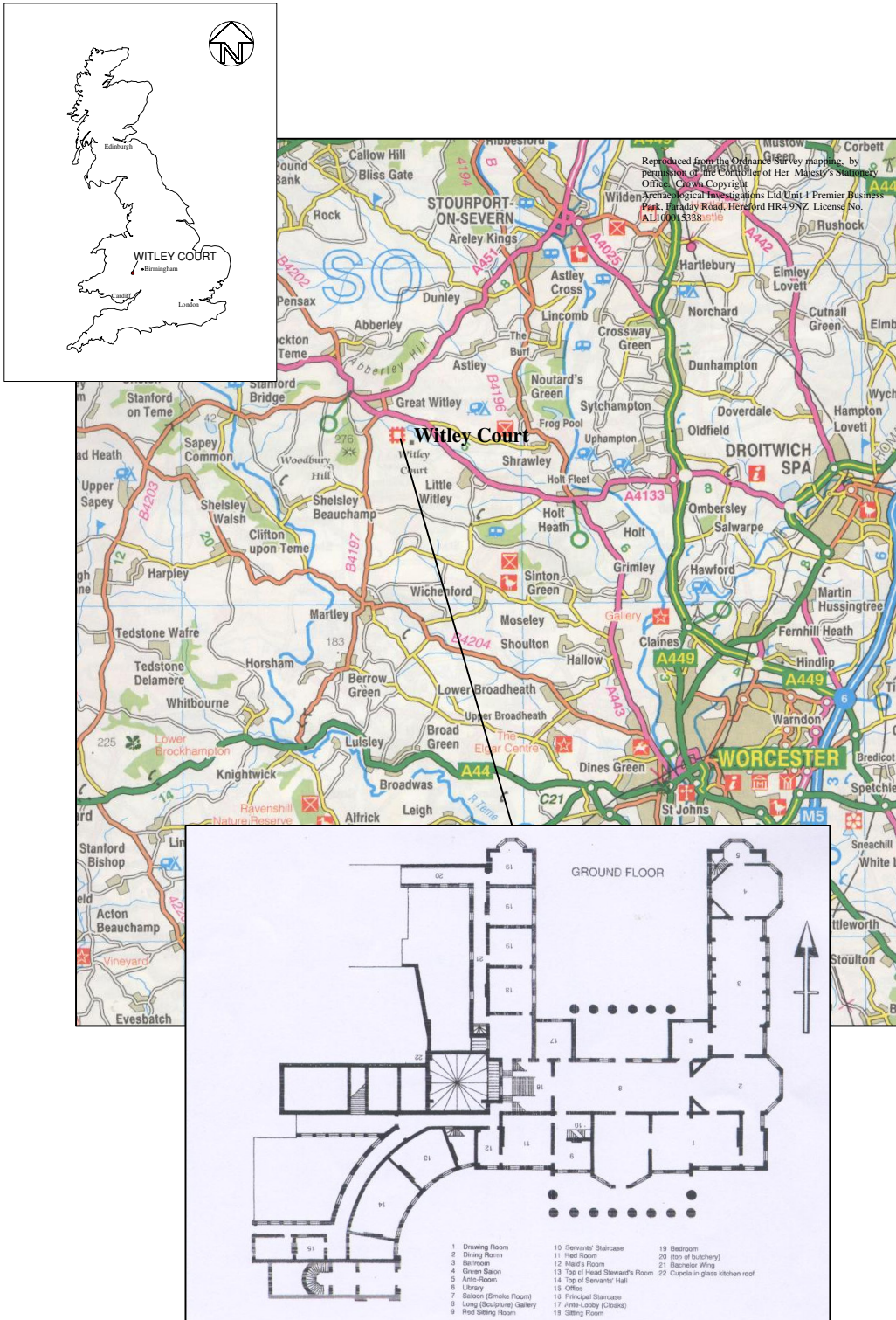


Figure 1 Location Plan

2 Introduction

Archaeological Investigations was commissioned by English Heritage to conduct a recording program, locating the architectural Stones stored around the premises of Witley Court.

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3 Geology and geography

The underlying solid geology consists of ancient pre-Cambrian metamorphic rocks below Devonian and Downtonian Palaeozoic Lower Old Red sandstone.

The topography comprises landscaped park and gardens bisected by a stream valley dammed to make ponds.

Currently the site comprises the ruins and grounds of a former stately home in the care of English Heritage.

4 Historical and archaeological background

Witley Court is a ruined multi-period mansion with elements dating back to the 13th century, once one of the largest private houses in the country and fitting its description as 'a palace, regal in size and grandeur...a supremely splendid shell' (Pevsner, 1968, 171; 173). Its immediate pre-fire appearance owed much to a radical refacing and extension in the 1850's but the building has a very long history.

There is a reference to *Witlege* in the Domesday Survey of 1086, and by the 13th century the manor appears to have been in the hands of the Cooksey family (Walker, 1990, 7). There was a medieval manor house, on the site in the late-13th or early-14th century, as was recently confirmed by the survey and re-assessment of part of the extensive cellars. A substantially intact stone-built two-bay section under the central part of the house, formerly vaulted, was tentatively identified as the undercroft of a long-demolished solar block presumably once attached to a medieval great hall (Morriss, 1990).

In 1498, Robert Russell of Strensham, a member of one of the county's most important families, came into the Cooksey estates (Walker, 1990, 7). Although there is a reference to Great Witley Park in the late-16th century, the first reference to the Court does not occur until the first half of the 17th century when it was the home of Sir William Russell. High Sheriff and Governor of Worcester, he spent much of his wealth in support of the Crown (Gibbons, 1990, 15). Sir William gave his son, Thomas, Witley Court in 1654 but in the following year Thomas sold the 'imposing residence' to Thomas Foley, the iron master, then High Sheriff of the county (*ibid.*).

According to one authority, Thomas Harral in his book *Picturesque Views of the Severn* (1824), Foley, despite his wealth, was content 'with the situation of the old house, repaired it, and made many additions' (*ibid.*). Thomas Foley bought several other large estates in the region before he died in 1677. He was succeeded in turn by his son, Thomas, who died in 1701 and is credited with the building of 'the fair new-built house' mentioned in Camden's *Britannia* of 1695 (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, V, 535; Gibbons, 1990, 15). His son, another Thomas, was one of the infamous Tory peers created by Queen Anne to retain that party's majority in the Lords after the turbulent sitting of 1711/12 (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 535). The new Baron Foley of Kidderminster died in 1733.

Although the Baron had, as part of major improvements to the house and its environs, planned to replace the old medieval parish church that stood a little to the north-west, this had not been carried out at the time of his death. It was his widow, Elizabeth, who obtained permission to demolish the old church that, according to the petition, was '*by reason of its antiquity ruinous and much decayed*'. The new church was built closer to the house, just a short distance from its west wing. It was finished in 1735, and in December of that year, Elizabeth died (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 535).

Its design has been attributed to James Gibb, and the similarity in its dimensions to the private chapel designed by him in 1719 for Canons, Middlesex, appears to have been deliberate. "Canons", the country retreat in Edgware of James Brydges, the first Lord Chandos, was the subject of much interest in the 1730's. Lord Chandos had lost most of his ill-gotten gains in the South Sea Bubble fiasco of 1720 and the house was about to be sold to pay off his debts.

Chandos and its chapel were finally pulled down in 1747 and the second Baron Foley, yet another Thomas, acquired its fine painted windows, ceilings and other fittings, including the organ case. The hitherto plain interior of the new Witley church was thus transformed into one of the finest Baroque spaces in England. The second-hand pieces did not fit exactly, but the Chandos fittings were, on the whole, easily incorporated into the church.

The second Baron died unmarried and the title became extinct. He was succeeded by yet another Thomas Foley. He was the great great grandson of the first Thomas Foley through his son, Paul, who had been given the manor of Stoke Edith, Herefordshire. This Thomas was also an MP and in 1776, the year before he died, was the second Foley to be elevated to the peerage - again as Baron Foley of Kidderminster (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 535).

Towards the end of his life, he began to suffer financial problems, mainly because of the activities of his two eldest sons. It was said that '*His children, by a system of extravagance wherein no one good was done, no one worthy act performed, no one good consequence derived, tore a noble fortune to pieces*' (Royal Register Vol.iv, quoted in Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 536).

His eldest son and heir, Thomas Foley, was a Privy Councilor, Joint Post-Master General - and a notorious gambler; it was he that started the families' gradual decline (Walker, 1990, 10). He died in 1793 and his son, another Thomas, in 1833 (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 536). Shortly after inheriting the title and lands, the next Baron - another Thomas of course - saddled with the debts of his grandfather and a huge house, sold the Witley estates in 1837 for £890,000 (Walker, 1990, 10). He died, in Paris, in 1869 (Gibbs & Doubleday, 1926, 536).

The new owners of Witley were the trustees of William Ward, a minor, who became the first Earl of Dudley in 1860. Until he came of age in 1846 the house was let; between 1843-46 the tenant was Queen Adelaide, widow of William IV (*ibid.*).

When Lord Dudley took possession of the estate he began an ambitious programme of works on both house and gardens and entertained on a lavish scale. His son, another William, inherited in 1885 and for the rest of the century and into the Edwardian era Witley Court was one of the most fashionable private houses in the country, patronised by the rich and the royal. After the tragic death of Lady Ward in 1920 and the general downturn in the post-war economy, the family decided to sell Witley. It was bought by Sir Herbert Smith - but was damaged by fire in 1937. The damage was by no means terminal, and the west wing, chapel, and link block escaped completely. However, the house was allowed to deteriorate due to the activities of vandals and demolition contractors.

A Building Preservation Order was made in 1964 and in 1972, with no obvious improvements in view; the Department of the Environment took the unusual step of taking the ruins into compulsory guardianship. Since 1984 it has been in the care of the Historic Buildings & Monuments Commission - English Heritage.

The City of Hereford Archaeological Unit/Archaeological Investigations Ltd has been involved in recording of the ongoing English Heritage repair work at Witley Court since 1990 and has produced numerous reports on the structural development of the Building and its landscape. The following reports have been produced in the Hereford Archaeology Series:

4.1 Previous archaeological work

4.2 Assessments:

Assessment 1 (1990) An assessment of research, survey and analysis work to date and suggestions for further work. It includes a gazetteer of previously published work on Witley.

4.3 Building Recording:

Phase 1 (1990) **The medieval undercroft:** A detailed analytical survey of the undercroft and the loose stones associated with the structure.

Phase 2 (1993) **The west wing:** A survey and detailed report on the development and dating of the various stages of development of the west wing.

Phase 3 (1994) **The south-west wing:** A survey and detailed report on the development and dating of the various stages of construction of the south-west wing.

Phase 4 (1995) **The link block:** A survey and detailed report on the link block between the main Court building and the church.

Phase 5a (1995) **Assessment of the architectural stonework:** Phase 1 of a full examination of the loose stonework.

Phase 5b (1995) **Recording the loose architectural stone:** Phase 2, providing a record of all the loose stone and its position on pallets.

Phase 6a (1996) **The stables and western gatehouse:** A survey and detailed report on the development and dating of the south wing of the stable court and the western gatehouse.

Phase 6b (1996) **The proposed roofs of 1837:** Plans, specifications, and an estimate for roofing work in 1837 - A brief report.

Phase 7 (1996-9) **The boathouse:** Surveys and report

Phase 8 (1997) **The eastern basement**

Phase 9 (1997) **The Stair Tower**

1997 **Rectified photography in the south range of the basements**

2000	Rectified photography of the churchyard retaining walls 2001-2004	Building recording in the stable yard
2002	Coach houses	
2003	Stair tower and SW wing – archival recording of building detail	
2005	West wing rectified photography and outline survey	
2006	West wing – further recording of detailed elements	

4.4 Archaeological excavations:

Gardens 1 (1996)	The clearance and survey of the balustrade
Gardens 2 (1996)	The excavation of half of the eastern parterre
Gardens 3 (1997)	The north stable ranges and garden paths to the north of the house. The main drive and paths north of the house.
Baths (1997)	Excavation of the bath suite in the eastern basement to determine the state of preservation and details of the plumbing.
Vets room floor (1997)	Excavation in the floor of the vet's room to help establish underfloor drainage.
South parterre (2002)	Excavations in advance of landscape restoration
Kitchen, red room, maids room, staircase room (2003)	Investigation and recording of vault tops and drain runs
West wing (2006)	Trial excavation and radar to establish presence or absence of cellars/voids
East Parterre (2006)	Excavations of the parterre and ballroom steps
West wing (2007)	Watching brief on reduction in floor levels.

4.5 Landscape Analysis:

Phase 1 (1994)	The northern parkland: An archaeological landscape survey of the area to the north of the Court.
Phase 2 (1996)	The southern parkland: An archaeological survey of the area outside the balustrade.
Surveys (1997)	Geophysical surveys in the gardens included Resistivity, magnetometry and radar.

5 Aims and objectives

- To develop a record of stored stone
- To create a Photographic record of each storage location, to the nearest pallet.
- Accurate survey of the storage locations to the nearest pallet
- Brief written description and where possible identification of stored items.
- To help future management of the stores.
- Produce an image linked database of the records.

6 Method

The following approach was devised at a site meeting between Archaeological Investigations Ltd and Tony Fleming of English Heritage (Inspector for the site). The meeting took place on 5th March 2007.

The locations of the pallets containing the architectural stones were recorded using a Leica TCR 1105R total station and plotted onto a schematic plan of Witley Court.

For this purpose each pallet was given a temporary number. Labels were attached for the benefit of the photographic record, but past experience suggested that these were unlikely to survive any great length of time. The aim of the mapping of the pallets is to produce a permanent record that can be used to navigate amongst the pallets.

Additional work to capture information relating to the stones within the store, included Photography using Digital records to produce linked images showing the pallets to the data base of the stone record.

A written record with sketches and annotated measurements was created to assist in comparison/identification of the architectural fragments, both the data base and an original Pdf copy of the paper records is included on the CD.

7 Results

The results of the project can be viewed on the enclosed CD included with this document.

A freely distributed version of Autodesk Drawing True View 2009 is also included on the CD, to enable users to view the AutoCad pallet location plan.

8 Discussion

The current condition of the architectural fragments being stored around the various locations at Witley Court needs to be considered, generally the stones are in good condition, but over time most of the pallets have rotted or been crushed due to overloading and now need replacing (*wooden pallets ,max load 1000kgs,2200lbs evenly distributed*). As a possible alternative to the wooden pallets, a replacement maybe the plastic pallets, both eliminated the disintegration problem and increasing the loading limits, with even load bearing capacities in the region of 3000kgs+.

Generally the pallets have been stacked according to stone typology which allows the identification and recovery of the grouped fragments to be conducted easily, yet unfortunately in an attempt to conserve the limited space are arranged to close to each other.

In some areas 2 or 3 pallets are stacked upon each other; these pallets are unstable and will eventually topple, these both represent a health and safety hazard to people working in the stacks as well as an avoidable cause of damage to the stored stones.

The permanent marking and identification of the individual stones will also need to be considered in the future, as the methods used previously appear not to have worked. Identifying the pallets relies on the pallets surviving and their contents not being removed, while marking the stones individually with a painted mark has also suffered from the effects of weathering.

9. CD Data base