

Valentine's Day: archaeological investigations during the Valentines Mansion Restoration Project

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Disembarking from the tube under the barrel-vaulted ceilings of the underground station at Gants Hill a decade ago would have brought you a short distance from one of the most important but neglected treasures of Ilford: Valentines Mansion (Figs. 1 & 2). The mansion, situated within the northern part of the 125 acre Valentines Park, was in a fairly unprepossessing state following a period of disuse after the departure of the Housing Department of the London Borough of Redbridge in 1993. However, thanks to the support of Redbridge Council, the enthusiasm of the Friends of Valentines Mansion, and a £5m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund the Grade II* listed mansion and Grade II listed park have undergone a detailed and successful process of conservation and restoration. This restoration project provided an excellent opportunity for archaeologists to examine the fabric of Valentines Mansion itself and various aspects of the parkland during the renovation of the site. This report will attempt to elucidate the results of archaeological investigations undertaken on the site by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. since 2000 and reveal the differing architectural elements that reflect the evolution of the mansion.

Historical background

The area that would become Valentines Park lay within a gently undulating rural landscape, much of it heavily wooded, the area north of Ilford being part of the Hainault Forest; however woodland clearance began in the 17th century and continued into the 19th century. The name Valentines was attributed to an 8 acre copyhold estate and also 120 acres of land to the east of the site, known as Valentines Farm.¹ The single reference to the origin of the name is found in a manuscript written

by Smart Lethieullier in which it is stated that the original property that occupied the small estate was a cottage 'inhabited by a poor family of the name of Valentine'.²

The evolution of Valentines

Mansion as it is today and its parkland truly commenced in 1696 when the 8 acre copyhold estate passed into the hands of Elizabeth Tillotson. Tillotson was not only niece to Oliver Cromwell on her mother's side, a relative by



Fig. 1: site location (showing positions of Valentines Mansion, the wash lodge and the bowls pavilion)

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Fig. 2: photo of Valentines Mansion (south facing, showing porte-cochère)

marriage of a former owner of the land Toby Palavicino, but also the widow of the James Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury. Elizabeth Tillotson, with the support and advice of her son-in-law James Chadwick,³ built the core of the mansion and its grounds financing the work by selling her husband's sermons until she obtained a small pension from the Crown.

Following Elizabeth's death in 1702 the estate passed into the hands of the Finch family who in turn sold the copyhold to Robert Surman in 1724. Surman, deputy cashier to the notorious South Sea Company, did not only retain enough money when the bubble burst to buy and make improvements to Valentines Mansion, including substantially enlarging the property and added the two-storey bay on the east side of the building, but also enough to purchase the larger Valentines Farm to the east from its owner John Lethieullier and unite the two into one large estate. He was also responsible for the creation of the Rococo landscape within the Park which would have included many features still extant in the Park today such as the canals, shell grottoes and the Alcove Seat.

Charles Raymond, who made his fortune as a captain in the East India Company and was a founder of a bank, purchased the entire estate from Surman in 1754. Raymond is thought to have further enlarged the house on the western side, added two bay windows to the south and built the orangery, a popular feature for many of the monied East India traders and the addition of the east bay window (Fig. 3). These additions and the re-facing of the

building in London Stock brick produced the Georgian appearance the mansion has today. As the mansion was expanded so were the grounds it stood in; in fact by the time Donald Cameron let the house during the 1770s the parkland covered an area of approximately 400 acres.

However, by the time the house was sold to Robert Wilkes in 1797 (Fig. 4), the estate itself had been broken up following the death of his predecessor, and the grounds encompassed a much reduced 174 acres. The estate passed to Charles Welstead in 1808 who repaired and significantly modified the house, notably switching the main entrance from the south to the north side of the building with the addition of a vestibule and the porte-cochère.

Charles Holcombe, who acquired the property in 1838, bequeathed it to his niece Sarah Ingleby who proceeded to make further improvements and additions to the property, such as the

two-storey wing on the north-east of the property in 1871. Sarah Ingleby sold the southern part of the grounds in 1899 to Ilford Urban District Council, whereupon it was used as a public park. Following Mrs Ingleby's death in 1906 the Council bought further land and then the house and a further 37 acres of land was acquired in 1912 to create the park more or less as it is today.

As the park has been used for a variety of recreational and communal purposes since its purchase by the Council so has the mansion itself including housing for Belgian refugees during the first World War, changing rooms for a number of sports clubs and as offices initially for the Public Health Department and then in 1964 the Housing Department. After the Housing Department's tenancy ended in 1993 Valentines Mansion stood empty.

The Restoration Project

In 2000, seven years after the house became empty, the Friends of Valentines Mansion was set up, receiving charitable status in 2004. They recognised that Valentines Mansion was of national importance as one of the few remaining early 18th-century mansions in a rural setting. Their ultimate aim, as stated in their Constitution, was 'to support and assist in the preservation and improvement of the listed building Valentines Mansion in the London Borough of Redbridge for the benefit of the public, and the promotion of its use by the public through the activities of the group of Friends'.⁴

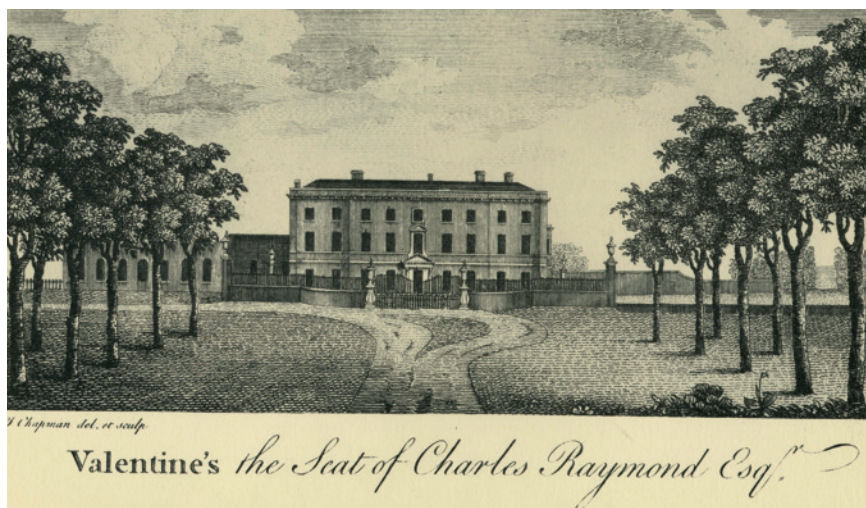


Fig. 3: engraving of Valentines Mansion from 1770 [Taken from Dudley History of Essex Volume 4 (1770)]

Working in partnership with the Friends of Valentines Mansion, Redbridge Council obtained two grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund which enabled them to proceed with restoration works to both the park and the mansion itself.

Due to the nature of the site, Valentines Park and Mansion form part of an Archaeological Priority Area as defined by the local Unitary Development Plan, with the result that all significant groundworks on the site had to be archaeologically monitored. To this end both Richard Griffiths Architects, in 2000 and 2004, and the London Borough of Redbridge, at various points between 2006 and 2009, appointed Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. (PCA) as archaeological contractor to monitor and record a variety of aspects of the project and satisfy the aims of the archaeological mitigation.⁵

The extent of the refurbishment works which required archaeological supervision both within the mansion and the historic core of the park was substantial. They included excavations for drainage along the south side of the servants' wing; new foundations for the Bowls Pavilion; a pipe trench in the porte-cochère; exploratory trenches around the exterior of the mansion, the servants' wing, the basement, the Gardener's Cottage and the Wash Lodge; underpinning in the library, servants' hall, the coal yard, room G11 and in the basement; the excavation of a new lift shaft; removal and installation of beams; general opening-up of areas of floor and wall and removal of interior walls within the mansion; demolition of structures in the coal yard and butler's pantry.

Such extensive operations granted the archaeological team a unique opportunity to examine the fabric of the mansion and related structures within the parkland and also investigate the potential for archaeological remains that pre-dated the post-medieval mansion and park. This was achieved by a combination of historic building recording and archaeological watching briefs.

Archaeological results

Several previously unknown building elements both on the exterior and interior of the mansion were identified

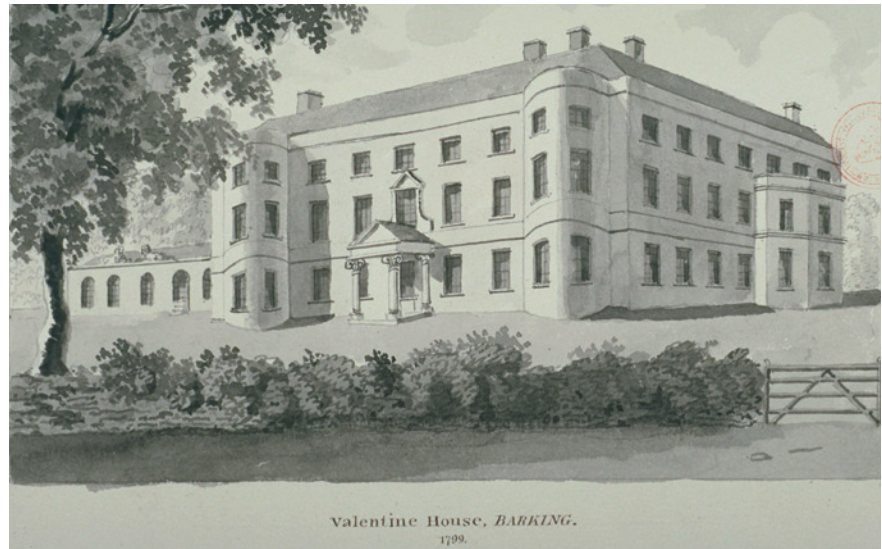


Fig. 4: painting of Valentines Mansion (1799)

during watching briefs on underpinning works, exploratory trenches, demolition works, drainage excavations and general opening-up of floors in 2000,⁶ 2004,⁷ 2006⁸ and 2008⁹ and during historic building recording of wall and render removal, beam replacement and investigatory holes in 2006 and 2008. These discoveries, together with new data collected from previously known structures, allow for an increasingly sophisticated insight into the construction of Valentines Mansion

There were only slight traces of archaeology that pre-date the post-medieval period within the footprint of the mansion. The structures that made up the coal yard and basement had truncated any earlier features as only natural sand and gravels consistent with the local geology of the area were encountered. Similar natural terrace gravels were the only deposit found to pre-date the 20th century during the evaluation performed in the vicinity of the Wash Lodge.¹⁰ However, the survival of natural subsoil within test pits in the library, the servants' hall and the modern stairwell suggested that earlier archaeological deposits could survive beneath the western part of the house at least. Subsoil was also revealed during the watching brief at the Bowls Pavilion, but no archaeologically significant features were found within it.¹¹

Before 1724 Valentines Mansion was a classically designed Palladian house based around a central staircase at the rear of the property, with an associated Venetian glass window on

the first floor (Fig. 5 top). The entrance to the building would have been centrally located on its southern face. Excavations within the library revealed several masonry structures, including walls and a brick floor surface that appeared to pre-date 1750, especially one large substantial garden wall foundation.

After 1724 under the ownership of Robert Surman the mansion underwent major modification (Fig. 5 middle). Part of this work was the addition of the two-storey bay on the eastern side of the house. Decorators' signatures and calculations were discovered on the wall of the east bedroom dated 1723 and 1724 suggesting that this work took place at that time and may have been undertaken to provide a view of the canal and grotto in the gardens, which are features characteristic of the late 17th and early 18th century.

During the ownership of Charles Raymond, who acquired the mansion from Surman, in 1754 a new extension was added to the west of the original house together with two bay windows on the building's south wall. Work in the library would suggest that the foundations of the new western part of the house were dated between 1750-1769, and the date on a lead rainwater-head on the north wall of the house would seem to confirm the work to have been completed by the latter date. The extension also re-used elements of the earlier garden features, particularly the large garden wall foundation as a sleeper for the floor and a support for the fireplace. Part of this new extension

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was likely to have served as a dining room due to the proximity of the kitchen. In order to hide the deviation from the original classical layout of the house the exterior of the building was re-faced with London stock brick and a porch was constructed to complement the new entrance to the mansion on the south façade of the building. The remains of the porch encountered during excavation indicated that it was constructed from re-used and contemporary materials, which was thought to be indicative of the porch being built from material belonging to an earlier structure. The limited pottery found suggested this earlier building was mid-17th century in date.

Another of Raymond's main contributions to the property would have been the addition of the orangery which attached to the west side of the kitchen to the north-west of the main house (Fig. 5 bottom). The kitchen in this location may originally have been a separate building to the north-west of the house as indicated by the brickwork beneath the plasterwork and the construction of the ceiling. The stone surround to the main kitchen hearth is of typical mid-18th century design which might suggest that the kitchen was moved there during the works of Raymond but it is possible it might have been moved from the main part of the house earlier during Surman's major modifications in the mid-1720s.

Pictorial evidence suggests that the orangery itself may have originally been two bays larger than it is now (Fig. 3); however there is currently no archaeological evidence to confirm this theory. Internally excavations and building recording revealed alterations to the structures in the western part of the house after their establishment. Examples of this would include the movement of the fireplace on the eastern wall in the servants' hall prior to 1848, a possible earlier brick floor surface within the library, and the addition of a yellow stock brick stepped footing to the western wall foundation.

One of the most radical changes to the property occurred during the ownership of Charles Welstead after

1808. The southern entrance to the mansion was abandoned and the northern façade became the new approach to the mansion with the construction of the porte-cochère and its vestibule (Fig. 6 top). The porte-cochère was slightly smaller than it is today consisting of only five bays and had an earlier brick floor which was found during excavations for a small pipe trench.

A plan showing the layout of the mansion in 1848 when it was owned by Charles Holcombe shows several adjustments to the building owned by Welstead (Figs. 6 middle, 7). The addition of a conservatory on the east wing has supplanted the orangery, which by 1848 had been converted into various rooms for use by servants. It is possible that there were originally service buildings against the north elevation which had to be cleared to make way for the construction of the portico and it was from that time that the former orangery was used as a kitchen wing. The wing still reflects its original function as the shapes of

the large window openings were still visible on both the interior and exterior of the building. The end part of the building also appeared to have been shortened by this time.

Charles Holcombe was involved in refining coal tar for use in paint and varnish and the extant structures of the coal yard were found to have dated from this

period. It is not surprising that he would be among those who would both desire and could afford the new coal technology in his home. This reflected the trends of the time, displaying status by the addition of fashionable areas within older buildings:¹² new heating and cooking techniques, the conservatory and the billiard room were amongst other changes.

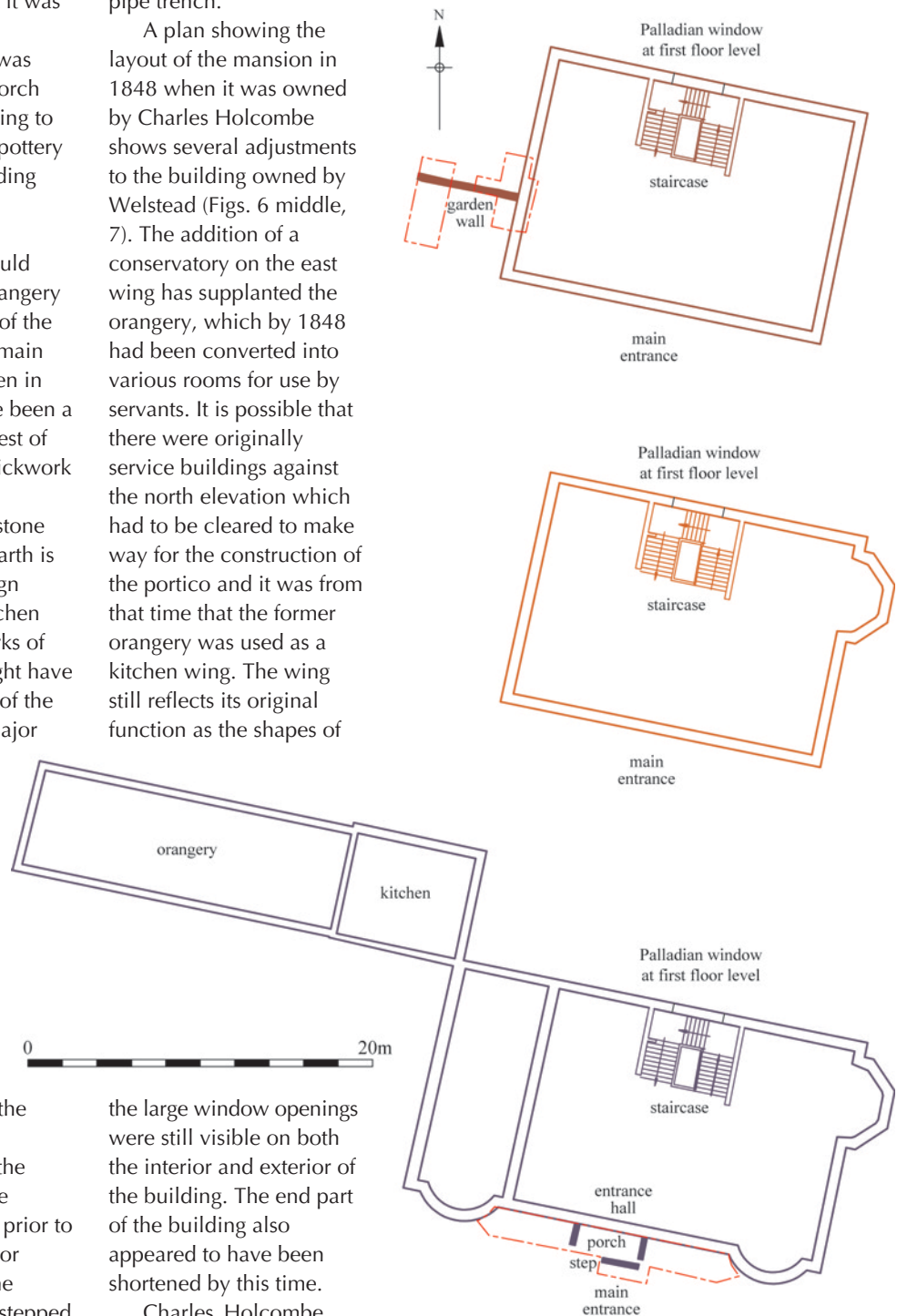
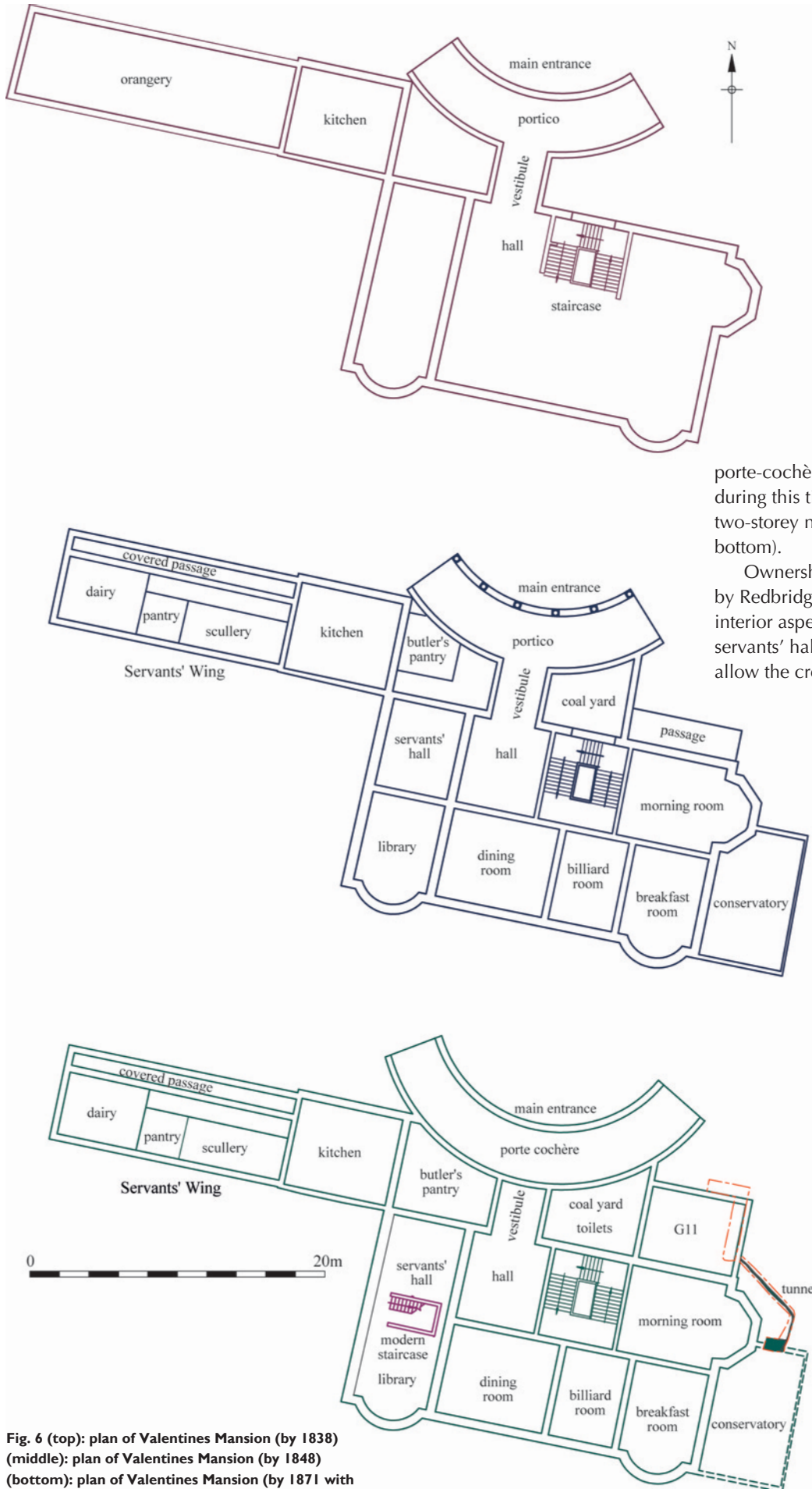


Fig. 5 (top): plan of Valentines Mansion (pre-1724)
(middle): plan of Valentines Mansion (post-1724)
(bottom): plan of Valentines Mansion (c. 1800)



The last private owner of Valentines Mansion, Sarah Ingleby, in addition to constructing a two storey wing on the north-west of the property was also responsible for building a tunnel beneath it, exposed during the recent investigations, which would have enabled domestics to access the conservatory without blocking the view from the morning room and room G11 in the new wing. The new floor and extra two bays of the

porte-cochère were also constructed during this time perhaps to screen the two-storey north-east addition (Fig. 6 bottom).

Ownership of Valentines Mansion by Redbridge Council modified some interior aspects of the building: the servants' hall was foreshortened to allow the creation of a new staircase in the western part of the mansion (Fig. 6 bottom), a fire escape sealed the tunnel to the conservatory, which itself was demolished and modern remedial works were evident in the areas investigated on the ground, first and second floors. Modern metal joists were found supporting areas of timber floor joists particularly within the bay window areas. One final change of use was the conversion of the coal yard into a toilet block for the Housing Department offices.

Valentines Mansion has undergone many changes, reflecting the changing fortunes of the owners, their architectural tastes and the broad evolution of domestic usage, developing the building from a large farmstead to a fully-functioning mansion of the gentry.

Fig. 6 (top): plan of Valentines Mansion (by 1838)
 (middle): plan of Valentines Mansion (by 1848)
 (bottom): plan of Valentines Mansion (by 1871 with 20th-century additions)

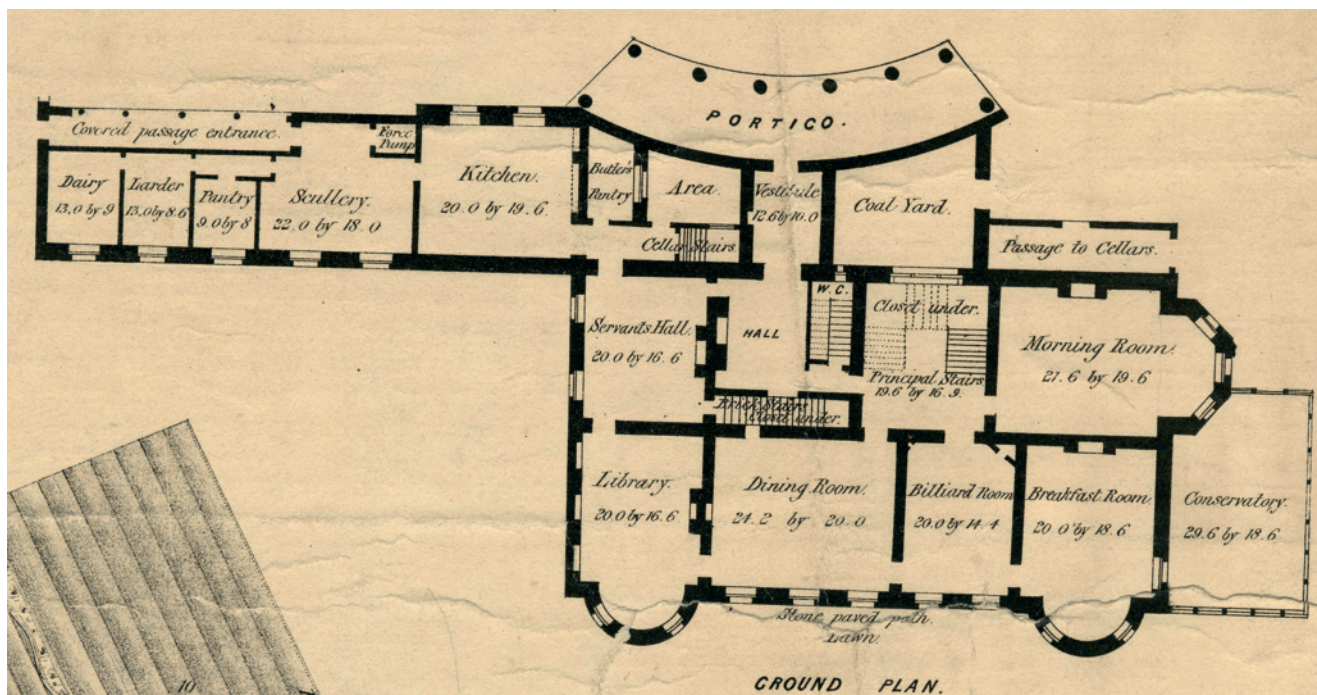


Fig. 7: 1848 plan of Valentines Mansion

Discussion

The archaeological investigation of Valentines Mansion permitted only a limited interpretation of features, due to the nature of the renovation and demolition works. For example, while the demolition of structures and underpinning in the coal yard enabled the archaeological team to establish the phases of development the yard went through, this was less possible when dealing with the underpinning within the library and servants’ hall often due to truncation or re-working by later features.

While further historical research on the mansion was undertaken using the archives of the Local Studies & Archives, Redbridge it was not possible to acquire documentary or cartographic evidence that would have helped clarify the nature or function of the garden remains that pre-dated the 1848 mansion connected with the conservatory.

While the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the mansion was originally much smaller there are no historical sources, plans, engravings, paintings or even written descriptions to confirm this. The same is true for the re-working of the porte-cochère by the Inglebys.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Nick Truckle and David Divers (Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service-English Heritage) for monitoring the project and the various contractors who assisted the archaeologists at various points: Richard Griffiths Architects, Sindall Ltd., Crispin and Borst Ltd., HOK International Ltd. and Seax.

He would also like to thank the various members of Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. staff who took part in the work on site, especially Kari Bower, who also provided invaluable

assistance with the phasing in this article, John Brown, Chris Pickard, Denise Mulligan, Aidan Turner, Neil Hawkins and Ken Sabel under the project management of Chris Mayo and Jon Butler. The illustrations in this report were produced by Josephine Brown and Strepchon Duckering.

The archaeological work was jointly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and The London Borough of Redbridge. Invaluable assistance was given by the Local Studies & Archives, Redbridge, particularly in sourcing many of the historic illustrations within this report. The restoration project and all of the earlier work was directed by Nigel Burch of Redbridge Council. *James Langthorne is currently an archaeological supervisor with Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. He has extensive excavation experience in London and, as a trained osteologist, is especially interested in the excavation of cemeteries of all periods.*

1. There are few documentary records regarding the various phases of building at Valentines Mansion. Such records as there are, are collated in Land Use Consultants Valentines Park: Historic Survey and Restoration Management Plan (1999); Richard Griffiths Architects with The Architectural History Practice Valentines Mansion: Conservation Plan (2003); and the Friends of Valentines Mansion website www.valentines.org.uk/valentines_mansion.
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