



# Northamptonshire Archaeology

## Archaeological building recording at Easton Neston House, Northamptonshire



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**Northamptonshire  
County Council**

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Report 11/261

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**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY  
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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING RECORDING  
AT EASTON NESTON HOUSE, TOWCESTER,  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
2007- 2009**

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**QUALITY CONTROL**

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**OASIS REPORT FORM**

<b>PROJECT DETAILS</b>		
Project name	Easton Neston House	
Short description	Easton Neston House, Northamptonshire is a Grade I listed mansion built by Nicholas Hawksmoor between 1685 and 1695. Recently sold, the house was in need of repair and renovation after many years of minimal maintenance and inappropriate alterations. In addition, following the removal of tapestries long associated with the house, there was a need to introduce panelling to fill those voids. A number of twentieth century additions were removed to improve or reinstate earlier layouts. Recording was carried out prior to and during alterations.	
Project type	Building recording	
Site status	Listed, Grade I	
Previous work	None	
Current Land use	Private house	
Future work	Renovations and alterations	
Monument type/ period	Post-medieval house	
Significant finds	No	
<b>PROJECT LOCATION</b>		
County	Northamptonshire	
Site address	Easton Neston House, Towcester, Northamptonshire,	
Study area	The house and Wren Wing	
OS Easting & Northing	SP 70175 49430	
Height OD	c110m above Ordnance Datum	
<b>PROJECT CREATORS</b>		
Organisation	Northamptonshire County Council	
Project brief originator	Brief from Myk Flitcroft, NCC	
Project Design originator	Joe Prentice	
Director/Supervisor	Joe Prentice	
Project Manager	Steve Parry	
Sponsor or funding body	Mr Leon Max	
<b>PROJECT DATE</b>		
Start date	2007	
End date	2008	
<b>ARCHIVES</b>	<b>Location (Accession no.)</b>	<b>Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)</b>
Physical		
Paper		
Digital		
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		
	Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report (NA report)	
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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING RECORDING**  
**AT EASTON NESTON HOUSE**  
**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**

*Abstract*

*Easton Neston House, Northamptonshire is a Grade I listed mansion built by Nicholas Hawksmoor between 1685 and 1695. Recently sold, the house was in need of repair and renovation after many years of minimal maintenance and inappropriate alterations. In addition, following the removal of tapestries long associated with the house there was a need to replace panelling to fill those voids. A number of twentieth century additions were removed to improve or reinstate earlier layouts. Recording was carried out prior to and during alterations.*

**1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Easton Neston House, Northamptonshire is a Grade I listed building, the only surviving country house by the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor. It is located approximately 10 miles (16 kilometres) to the south-west of Northampton (Fig 1, NGR SP 70175 49430). It has recently been purchased by a new owner who has been keen to renovate the house, reinstate areas uncovered by the removal of tapestries and also to remove inappropriate modern elements which were out of keeping with a house of this quality. A written Brief was prepared on behalf of South Northamptonshire Council by Northamptonshire County Council which outlined the requirements of a recording action before and during alterations (Flitcroft 2006). Northamptonshire Archaeology has been engaged by Ptolemy Dean Architects Ltd on behalf of the owner to carry out that assessment. A brief was issued which laid out the requirements for the recording (Flitcroft 2006). The works took place over an extended period of time between spring 2007 and the autumn of 2009.

**2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Easton Neston House is a building of national importance, about which much has been written over the years and it is neither possible, or desirable, to reproduce in detail within this introduction more than a basic summary of the history of the building. The property comprises the mansion dating from the late seventeenth century with, to the north-west, an ancillary wing of the same or slightly earlier date historically (but not necessarily correctly) attributed to Sir Christopher Wren but historically, and hereafter, referred to as the Wren Wing. This wing was formerly mirrored by an identical wing on the south side of the west entrance court though this was demolished in the nineteenth century and replaced by a detached stable block to the north. The Wren Wing suffered a serious fire in July 2002 and was being restored at the time of the building recording of the house; it was subject to a separate recording brief and was not specifically covered by the archaeological Brief which was the guiding document for this report. However, since certain interventions were carried out during the time that recording was carried out on the main house, a verbal agreement that a similar watching brief would be carried out within the Wren Wing rooms was agreed.

The house is of nine bays with the principal front to the west overlooking a formal entrance court, and is principally of two floors above a basement but with a complicated internal layout which includes mezzanine levels between ground and first, and first and second floors (see report cover photo). The overall aspect of the house is one of symmetry with almost no distinction between the entrance and garden fronts (west and east), and the north and south garden elevations.



- 2.2 The house was built between 1685 and 1695 for William Fermor, 1st Baron Leominster. Fermor, who married three times, was related to Sir Christopher Wren through his first marriage to Jane Barker of Fairford Park in Gloucestershire (Zeevat 2003). The chronology and authorship of the house and flanking wings has long been the subject of debate by distinguished architectural historians, and the author of this report has neither the time nor the erudition to add to that subject. The present house was essentially finished by 1719 when it is depicted in drawings by Tillemans although Hawksmoor himself, writing in 1731, described the house as 'not quite finish'd'. The estate passed to the Hesketh family in the middle years of the nineteenth century and in whose hands it remained until sold to the current owner in 2005.

### **3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

- 3.1 The general objectives of the assessment were:

- To provide an appropriate written, drawn and photographic record of the historic building fabric affected by or exposed in the course of the consented works
- To ensure the dissemination and long-term preservation of the information through publication of a summary report and deposition of the record with appropriate depositories

#### **3.2 Methodology**

The house was recorded broadly in accordance with the standards, conventions and specifications defined in the current English Heritage procedural guidance (RCHME 2006) to level III. For appraisal purposes the photographs were primarily of digital media. Plans of the house in its present form, and a second set outlining proposed alterations, were provided by the architects.

The programme of recording was to be carried out in two phases:

- Initial recording of fabric currently exposed, prior to the commencement of the alterations
- Monitoring of alteration work and recording of additional evidence exposed in the course of the works

- 3.3 Specifically the work outlined in the Brief was to be undertaken in relation to:

- The Wren Wing corridor and reception hall
- Ground floor WC beneath the stair half-landing
- The ground floor kitchen
- Master Bedroom panelling
- Master Bedroom en-suite bathroom
- Second Master Bedroom en-suite bathroom
- Master Bedroom 3 panelling

## 4 BUILDING ASSESSMENT

### 4.1 The Wren Wing corridor and reception hall

Located at the north-west corner of the house the corridor links the house with the Wren Wing to the north-west (Fig 3). At the northern end a door leads on to a curving flight of steps which lead down to the floor level of the Wren Wing via a quadrant corridor. Currently the location for two toilets and a washroom inserted almost certainly at the beginning of the twentieth century this room was originally a single space and was connected with the reception hall to the south. The divisions which create the spaces for the toilets and washroom were of brick covered in painted plaster or oak panelling. The panelling appears to have been partly original but cut to size for the new divisions, or contemporary replacements but in the same style as the original pieces. The panels are plain and neither raised or fielded between flat stiles and rails, the walls are divided by a dado (or chair) rail at sill height, while there is a simple skirting board (Plate 1). The only decorated element is an oak box cornice and a small glazed window at the top which allows borrowed light into a small room located to the immediate east. This lack of decoration reflects the 'below stairs' status of the area. It is possible that the panelling which is present along the west wall is part of the original scheme. All that is present on the internal dividing walls of the toilet facilities must by definition be *ex situ* though some of it may be original work re-fitted to the new internal walls, however, due to the extensive reworking and fading by sunlight which has discoloured a number of panels, it is impossible now to determine which was new and which is original. The doors were fitted with brass rim locks.

The floor of this room was originally paved with square limestone flags set diagonally to the walls. The paving was generally in good condition with a certain amount of surface wear, particularly in doorways as would be expected. A series of small brass studs almost certainly indicate the positions of fittings to hold a carpet (or more likely a runner) in place between the former door into the entrance hall and the steps which lead into the Wren Wing quadrant. The original paving remains in the washroom and corridor, within the two toilets the floor has been removed and replaced by Terrazzo (it was not retained *in situ* and covered with Terrazzo since there was no change in level). The ceiling was plastered and flat, the cornice being formed of oak and integral to the panelling.

The sanitary ware was of white porcelain and may be original to the phase of alterations, the style suggesting an early twentieth-century date. Some of the associated pipework is lead with copper pipe in places. None of the porcelain was marked so the manufacturer is unknown. The lock plates on the doors are of brass and may be original but the door knobs appear to be later replacements.

At the south side of the washroom is a door giving access to a cupboard although this was originally the doorway into the entrance hall with a door on each side of the wall plane, a common feature in doors between rooms in large houses (Plate 2). This inter-door vestibule arrangement allowed for additional privacy as the first door could be opened and then closed before the second door was opened, it also gave a degree of sound insulation, perhaps a more important reason here where the 'above stairs' aspect of the entrance hall was required to be separated from the 'below stairs' function of the corridor. The jambs and soffit of the vestibule between the doors were lined with oak panelling of the same configuration as the corridor but without the cornice. The door on the corridor (north) side of the opening is surrounded by a simple moulded architrave of oak. After the removal of the panelling and inserted shelves within the vestibule, and the brick blocking of the doorway on the entrance hall side of the wall, the brickwork of the original wall through which the doorway was positioned was revealed. The brickwork on the west side of the doorway had been crudely cut back indicating that originally the doorway had been either narrower or positioned slightly further east. The eastern jamb was constructed of late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century brickwork. Both jambs supported H-section iron beams which formed the lintel of the doorway indicating that

this doorway had been substantially altered, most likely during major works to the house during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

In the north wall of the entrance hall the former doorway which connected to the Wren Wing corridor can be seen as a scar in the wall (Plate 3). The plaster which covers the former opening is modern pink plaster rather than pale creamy-white lime plaster which further suggests that this blocking is modern and dates to the twentieth century. Above and to the east of the former opening is a further scar, this time in paintwork only, which perhaps suggests the former presence of either a large doorcase, overdoor painting or decorative panel laid onto the surface. This second scar does not appear to have related to the former doorway unless it was of a large doorcase and the door which sat within it was placed asymmetrically. The panelling, which survives at and below dado height, appears to all be modern as it passes seamlessly over the former doorway and the blocked fireplace opening to the east.

In a phase of work not originally planned, the fireplace to the east of the doorway to the Wren Wing corridor was re-opened. The fire surround had been removed and the opening simply bricked up. The flue and position of the grate were indicated by sooting on the back of the opening but no indication of the type of surround remained, neither was the hearth slab present.

#### **4.2 Ground floor WC beneath stair half-landing**

The area beneath the stair half-landing located at the north end of the house was formerly a single room, or vestibule, visually divided into three sections by groin vaulting heavily overpainted with gloss paint (Fig 3, Plate 4). It was not known if this vaulting is constructed of stone or plaster, nor was the date of its installation clear, though it is thought to be of late eighteenth-century date (Dean 2006). The western end of the room has been lost by the insertion of a built-in safe which has required a wall to be inserted which cuts across the west end of the vaulted space; it is accessed from the room situated to the immediate west. The central and eastern sections of the remainder of the room are intact apart from the loss of decorative stops at the lower ends of some of the ribs of the vaults. None of the vaulting was to be altered in the proposals for the room which were to block the doorway at the eastern end currently leading into the present kitchen and to add a toilet in the recess created. A partition screen was then to be added to form a private cubicle within the vestibule. The original floor of the vestibule was of square stone slabs, alternately light and dark stone to form a chequerboard pattern laid diaper-wise though this has been lost toward the eastern end where modern ceramic tiles have been laid.

Since none of the vaulting was to be removed it was not clear how the vaulting had been constructed, however, when works were underway in the adjoining kitchen the west wall of the latter was stripped of modern kitchen units and plaster board wall covering prior to the blocking of the doorway from the vaulted room. This revealed that in the doorway at least, the vaulting was formed of red brick, plastered on the underside (Plate 5). This pointed arch sat within a round arched opening which appears to be part of the original construction of the house and which may formerly have been fitted with a timber door frame. The round arch was apparently necessary for structural reasons and was never intended to be seen, its inner surface was as-built and had never been plastered or painted. The brickwork of the pointed arch was single thickness only bonded in a creamy white lime mortar. The space between the round and pointed arches was empty apart from small pieces of broken brick and mortar, presumably left by the builders.

### 4.3 The ground floor kitchen

Originally three separate, but interlinked, rooms which perhaps originally formed a bedroom suite but which were probably made into one space during the twentieth century (Fig 3). The space formed from the three rooms was occupied by a kitchen and pantry, all fitted with standard late twentieth century mass produced units and appliances. The external walls of the original rooms retain most, or all, of the original wall coverings which comprises panelling between the windows below dado level and plaster above. The windows in these rooms only make use of the lower portion of the external height of the window openings as these rooms have a mezzanine floor above, and both are fitted into the high ground floor proportions of the house. Only two of the internal walls were fully exposed, the south and west walls of the westernmost of the original three rooms adjacent to the vaulted vestibule (Fig 3). Following the removal of the kitchen units the wall plaster was removed from the two walls. This proved to be relatively modern, either of nineteenth- or twentieth-century in date laid on sawn laths or directly onto pine boards at cornice level which indicated that the corning was not original, or at least, not in its original location. The corning comprised a box section made up of variously moulded flat sections of vaguely Tuscan profile although the relatively crude detail and roll mouldings are more suggestive of nineteenth-century date (Plate 6). There were large areas of very modern patching where electricity cables and plastic (polyurethane) pipework had been inserted. In the south wall of the original north-west room there were two blocked doorways, both of which formerly gave access to the stairwell to the south of this room; one was filled with modern breeze blocks, the other with plasterboard over a studwork frame, both indicating that the blocking occurred during the twentieth century. To either side the removed plaster had been laid on a studwork frame nailed to the original wall surface which was also plastered but which retained no paint or paper. The west wall had contained a fireplace, this had been infilled with brick at some stage, perhaps during the nineteenth century given the size of the bricks. More recently a hole had been knocked into the flue above into which an extractor fan had been fitted (Plate 7). The plaster on this wall had been laid on laths nailed to a studwork frame nailed to the wall, although here any original plaster had been removed. In the south-west corner a recess had been formed for some reason but which had until recently been hidden behind the most recent plaster surface. The reason for this is unclear and there is no such recess on the Vitruvius Britannicus plan. To the north of the fireplace was the doorway into the vaulted vestibule. The doorway beneath was fitted with a simple un-moulded oak frame comprising jambs and lintel. The floor to the kitchen rooms was formed of nineteenth-century pine boards.

The south wall of the south-eastern of the former separate three rooms was partially uncovered, this area had latterly been divided by partition walls to create two pantry's. The west wall of this room was covered with panelling which contained a jib door leading to the back stairs though it is not thought that the panelling was original to this area (Plate 8). The south-west corner was uncovered by the removal of plasterboard and wall plaster on laths. This removal revealed the truncated elements of a corner fireplace although nothing remained of the fireplace opening. The only surviving feature was the triangular scar of the hearth set into the floor while the flue had been crudely cut back to allow the new plaster to continue the wall planes into the corner of the room.

### 4.4 Master Bedroom One panelling

The master bedroom lies at the south-east corner of the house on the first floor (Fig 5). Though an original room it has undergone various decorative changes as indicated by photographs (Dean 2006). The room was partially panelled from floor to ceiling but since the recent sale there were two areas of exposed wall where tapestries which were part of an early, and possibly original, decorative scheme, had been removed for sale prior to the present owner purchasing the house. The tapestries were attached to the walls by being pinned or nailed to wooden planks forming a frame (Plates 9 and 10).

These frames were constructed of pine, some squared with others retaining wany edges, and all were painted white.

The former tapestry on the north side of the room occupied the space to the west of the fireplace and lay above the dado panelling but below two shallow panels set beneath the cornice (Plate 10). The frame here comprised a perimeter of boards which also served to support the adjoining panelling with two vertical planks between. The tapestry was only attached to the perimeter boards, the two internal ones appear to have been included to support the panelling above and below. The planks/boards were fixed to the wall by either being nailed to wooden blocks set within the brickwork (suggesting they were part of an original scheme) or by metal spikes driven into the wall. These spikes had flattened heads, each with two holes through which nails were fixed to the sides of the frame. The spikes appear to be secondary features and may have been added later for additional strength. The brickwork of the wall was all painted white and contained no features. The bricks measured 230mm x 110mm x 65mm and were laid in English bond.

The south wall of the same room previously held a much larger tapestry which has also been removed. The opening for the tapestry was framed in the same way as on the north side of the room (Plate 9). The wall behind the framing contains evidence for two tall window openings, each with stone jambs and segmental brick arches (Fig 7). A single course of dressed stone forms a band between the two former openings though its presence does not appear to signify anything other than a constructional detail, perhaps representing a 'lift' or bonding course. The windows do appear to originally have been used, for if the currently blind windows which continue the symmetry of the external south façade were built in that way there would be no need for internal stone jambs or arches on the inner wall plane. The brickwork which fills the window openings is clearly a secondary addition, the brickwork is very poorly laid and must have been added quickly as the courses have sagged (an occupational hazard when using lime mortar which hardens slowly and limits the number of courses which should be laid at one time). No internal sill level could be seen as this lay at or below the level of the dado panelling.

Above each of these former windows were indications of a further set at a higher level; the jambs could be seen aligned directly above those of the lower set though no clear indication of a sill could be seen. It is not known how the upper set was terminated at lintel level as this was obscured by the present cornice to the room. Whether these were built as real or blind windows is unclear. If real there must have been a mezzanine level here although no indications of a former floor could be seen in the form of empty joist sockets. On the exterior there are blind windows at this upper level.

#### **4.5 Master Bedroom en-suite**

This lies to the west of the Master Bedroom past a room recently, and probably historically, used as a dressing room (Fig 5). The dressing room was fully fitted with crudely made modern (late twentieth-century) drawers, shelves and hanging spaces made from dark wood, thickly varnished. Their removal revealed no structural elements, simply wall surfaces.

The room fitted out as a bathroom appears to have been used as such since the beginning of the twentieth century (or at least the 1920s) although its most recent incarnation is likely to date from the last two decades of the same century including a modern mass-produced shower unit. The room is narrower now than originally on the north-south axis due to a new corridor having been created to allow access to a second bathroom to the immediate west of this one (Fig 5). This corridor was partly created at a higher level than the floor level of the two secondary bathrooms, accessed as it was from a landing added above the inserted ceiling of the Drawing Room in the nineteenth century. The whole of this area is perhaps the most altered interior space within the house being created when the double-height hall was floored to provide additional

bedrooms and bathrooms. The access to the second (bathroom) was originally through the west wall of the Master Bedroom bathroom suite and not from the half-landing created to serve two new bedrooms fitted above the Drawing Room. The removal of the corridor and the raised floor in it did not reveal any information other than the fact that the floor beneath was of pine boards and the north wall of the bathroom was of studwork covered in lath and plaster (Plate 11). This flooring and walling all date to the period of the nineteenth-century alterations. The fixtures and fittings of the bathrooms were of twentieth-century date and their removal did not reveal any earlier schemes, either decorative or structural.

#### 4.6 First Floor Bedroom One

This room was not included in the original Brief, but during the pre-alteration visit of the building it was noticed that this room too had had tapestries removed which revealed the underlying wall surfaces and framing for fabric (Fig 5). The room is located to the immediate north of the Master Bedroom (see above, section 4.4), and though it is titled First Floor Bedroom on the architects plan and may have functioned as this originally, it could also have been used as a private study forming a suite with the Master Bedroom. Much of both the north and south walls were exposed (Plates 12 and 13). The north wall, that forming the south side of the cross corridor on the first floor, comprised plain brickwork laid in English bond painted white. Panelled above and below, and extending the full width of the room from the north-west corner to the west side of the door frame, the section of wall now bare of tapestry was sub-divided by five vertical planks with diagonal bracing at the top and bottom of the east side (Plate 12).

The south wall of the same room was similarly configured with no covering from the south-west corner to the west side of the doorway leading into the Master Bedroom to the south (Fig \*, Plate 13). Again panelled above and below, the bare section contained five vertical planks with a bordering frame but with two additional three-quarter height vertical planks towards the east side close to the doorway. This side has in addition diagonal bracing at the top and bottom on the same side. The wide plank on the east side of the wall, fitted just inside the outer frame (which contains numerous nail holes where the fabric had been fitted) retained pencil graffiti (Plate 14). The graffiti reads:

*No 3.*

*Long Gallery*

*Striped Re canvassed*

*Papered for tapestry [sic]*

*February 1921*

*C Field paper hanger*

*J Walker Assistant*

*For Maple and C<sup>o</sup>*

*London*

Maple and Company were one of the top London furnishing stores of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries and also had a store on the Rue Boudreau, Paris. This panel with graffiti must be *ex situ*, referring as it does to the Long Gallery (nowadays simply referred to as The Gallery) which is located aligned east-west across the first floor. The bedroom has clearly never been a part of that long gallery, and therefore the vertical plank appears to have been re-used here, although there also remains the possibility that it came from another property, though this is perhaps less likely since it conforms to the size, timber and finish of all of the other tapestry framing throughout the house. The date suggests that this may have been incorporated into this room in 1921, or even later,

since it cannot be certain that the graffiti was added when the plank was moved. The former seems most likely. However, the lettering of the top two lines is not only apparently in a different hand, but also in a thicker pencil, thus the reference to the Long Gallery and the remainder of the text may be of two different and un-related dates.

The brickwork exhibited evidence of a structural arch, only the west side of which could be seen (Plate 13). The springing of the arch was at a level just above the door lintel and appears to have acted as a relieving arch above that opening. The arch itself is constructed of two widths of brick laid flat (not on edge) and as far as could be seen was a simple semi-circular shape. The infill within the arch appears to be only one brick thick and forms the south side of an inter-room cupboard on the west side of the vestibule between the two doors giving access to the bedroom from the Long Gallery.

#### **4.7 Second Master Bedroom en suite bathroom**

This room is located at the north-east corner of the house at first floor level above the mezzanine floor. It comprised a twentieth-century bathroom with ceramic wall tiling to window sill level and a terrazzo floor, although at the time of the recording the latter was covered with carpet (Fig 5, Plate 15). The proposal was to remove the bathroom fittings and create a dressing room in this location with a new doorway created in the west wall linking it to a small bedroom on that side, and creating a new bedroom there in its place. The east wall of the adjoining bedroom had an existing shallow arched alcove in its eastern wall, the date of which is not clear but does not appear to be an original feature; stylistically this would appear to be of nineteenth-century date (Plate 16). In the south-west corner of the same room a dumb waiter shaft had been added to the room which abutted against, and partly covered, the mantle shelf of a nineteenth-century grey marble fire surround (Plate 17). The existing doorway onto the back stairs adjacent to the dumb waiter shaft was to be infilled. The presence of the grey marble fire surround and shallow alcove arch suggest re-modelling during the mid nineteenth-century.

The removal of the wall tiles in the existing bathroom did not reveal any underlying features, and the insertion of the new doorway linking the two rooms revealed only that the wall was constructed of red brick and appears to have been part of the original scheme of the building.

#### **4.8 Third Master Bedroom, former Tapestry Room**

Located on the west side of the house where the removal of tapestries from the south and east walls revealed the underlying structural brickwork and timber framing to which the wall coverings were fitted (Fig 5). The east wall retains panelling below dado level above which the pine framing was revealed to be similar to that observed in the Master Bedroom (Plate 18). It comprised an external frame with five vertical planks at irregular intervals in between which did not appear to have supported the tapestry but rather supported to top rail of the frame, and perhaps to some extent, the cornicing above. Both the un-plastered bricks of the wall and the timberwork of the frame were painted white, the latter comprising both trimmed and un-trimmed boards. The outer edges of the frame retained many nail holes indicating how the fabric had been attached. The brickwork appeared to be built in a single phase and there were no indications of former openings, repairs or blockings. The framework was closely fitted against the southern side of a corner fireplace located in the angle of the north and east walls.

The south wall of the room was similarly configured with the location of the former tapestry extending from the eastern corner of the room to the east side of the doorway (Fig 5). Configured in the same way as the frame on the east wall with a bordering frame and five vertical planks, irregularly spaced, towards the eastern corner were two diagonal braces, one each at the top and bottom of the frame. The wall and planks were all painted white. Close to the doorway a structural detail was evident within the

brickwork of the wall which comprised the jamb of an opening surmounted by a semi-circular arch, only the eastern side of which was visible since the doorframe and panelling above the latter obscured the remainder (Plate 19). The arch was constructed of bricks laid flat, not on edge, and formed of two bricks in width. The inside of the arch was infilled by further brickwork, less well laid, the courses of the two phases of work not corresponding. Behind the brick infill is a cupboard created within the thickness of the south wall and which is accessed from between the inner and outer doors to the room. The reason for the brick arch is not immediately clear but it is assumed that it is a structural element, in effect a relieving arch, presumably added in order that the great thickness of the south wall was not supported above the south doorway on a simple lintel. It thus allowed the weight of the wall above to be carried over not only the doorway but also the inter-wall cupboard more effectively (Plate 20). Any lateral thrust on the western side would be countered by the fact that the external wall is thicker here since this section of wall projects slightly to form the central entrance bay and also includes the columns which support the entablature over the west front.

#### **4.9 Additional areas**

Other parts of the building, though not specified in the original Brief, were observed during site visits. These included external groundworks for the installation of services, digging of trenches within the basement to allow for the creation of ducting for new internal services, inspection of an enclosed cupboard at first floor level and stripping-out within the Wren Wing prior to reconstruction.

#### **4.10 Service trenches**

Trenching by mini-digger for new services on the north side of the Wren Wing revealed a much disturbed soil with many pipes, drains and ducts of mostly of modern date (Fig 6). The full extent of these features was not revealed since only parts of each were uncovered, and modern elements such as manhole covers and clearly modern services were not recorded. However, there was also revealed a stone drain or culvert of apparently earlier date which was truncated by one of the new service trenches (Fig 6). Approximately 0.25m wide by 0.30m high, the culvert was constructed from roughly dressed pieces of stone of varying sizes up to blocks of c0.2m though mostly smaller (Plate 21). The top of the drain was capped by thin slabs of what appeared to be pieces of York paving which in turn was overlain by more recent brickwork although the latter appears to be unrelated. The floor of the drain appeared also to be formed of thin slabs and the interior was partly choked with soil indicating that it did not function, there being no indication of water having flowed through it recently. Probing of the culvert suggested that it ran northwards for approximately 2.6m before either turning or becoming blocked. It is thought that the fall of the culvert was from north to south. The size of the culvert suggests it most likely served as a drain to carry rainwater away from downpipes located on nearby buildings.

On the south side of the Wren Wing within the north-east corner of the entrance court a service trench was excavated to conduct new services to and from the basement of the house through the centre of the Wren Wing and into the courtyard on the north side (Fig 6). This trench was excavated by mechanical excavator. Beneath the modern turf and topsoil a layer of disturbed, although remarkably homogenous, mixed clay and gravel was uncovered which appeared to represent a levelling layer (Plate 22). This clay and gravel mixture contained occasional pieces of mortar, tile and red brick along with stone fragments indicating that it was not a natural soil, and given that to the west, outside the entrance forecourt the apparently natural ground level drops away, this supports the theory that this layer represents an artificial build-up to create the level western court surface. Apart from other modern services, made obsolete by the installation of the new ones, no features were uncovered. This is what would be expected in this location



since, from the time that the house and Wren Wing were built, the area has always been a grand entrance forecourt created to frame the impressive west front of the house and thus had to be un-obscured by features in front of it. The new service trench, although approximately 0.9m, did not appear to have reached undisturbed natural. No indications were found of any structures which may pre-date the present house and wing.

The drilling of holes in the west wall of the house foundation only confirmed what was already known, that the interior walls were of red brick faced with stone of the exterior (Plate 23). Below ground level they were of undressed or roughly dressed limestone, not fine ashlar which faces the remainder of the house.

#### **4.11 The basement**

The interior of the basement, at the time the present owner took possession of the house, was encumbered by ducting, pipes and wiring which were not only visually obtrusive but which had also damaged the walls and vaulting where they had been attached in a piecemeal fashion (Fig 2). A decision was made to remove what was not necessary and to locate the new replacements within ducting under the floor so that the basement space would become un-obstructed both visually and physically. After flooring slabs (limestone) had been lifted a trench was dug around the circuit of the basement, in most cases using existing doorways to provide a below floor level space in which a brick lined duct was constructed (Plate 24). All new service were then contained within this duct which was covered with the original paving, but which will allow future access and up-grading as necessary. Beneath the limestone paving a layer of hoggin was revealed onto which the stones had been bedded. The full circuit of the new duct was not observed due to the discovery at the same time of asbestos within some of the pipe coverings which restricted access to the basement for those not considered essential staff. However, although the entire route was not seen, there was nothing in those areas observed which indicated anything other than contemporary constructional details such as brick wall footings across the sills of some doorways and build-up layers in the remainder of the areas. No indications were revealed of structural elements which might relate to a possible earlier building on the site. It is likely that when the house was constructed the entire footprint of the building was dug out to create a large, rectangular hole well below the final required basement floor level. The external and internal load-bearing wall footings would then have been dug down from this reduced level and construction started. As the internal and external walls were raised the basement floor level would probably have been installed to provide a level working surface. If so it was probably temporarily protected by boarding in much the same way as floors are in modern building projects.

#### **4.12 First Floor archway and decoration**

During one of the watching brief visits to the house a member of the building team related that he had observed some blocked arches and decorated wallpaper in a cupboard on the first floor (Fig 5). This cupboard was used as a store and housed water tanks. Access was restricted due to the presence of pipes, cabling and the tanks, but it was possible that the space had been created from an arched landing or arcade overlooking the former double-height hall to the west (Plate 25). A strip of brickwork at the western end was exposed; it is not clear if this had previously held a timber frame or a decorated plaster architectural moulding which might have framed the archway, or is the result of some other alteration. The once open west end of the arch is now blocked by the back of a lath and plaster wall which represents the back of the east wall of Bedroom 2 located on the other side to the west. This lath and plaster wall dates to the late nineteenth-century when the double-height hall was floored and the bedrooms created above what is now the Drawing Room. The soffit of the arch was plastered, painted and papered, the paper having a simple printed design of spindly columns

arranged in a row to form an arcade, and beneath each of the arches an urn on a plinth sprouting foliage (Plate 26). Above the arch where the wall plane meets the flat ceiling there is a narrow border strip applied separately comprising an oval cartouche linked by a single line of a scroll. The wallpaper appears to be on ungrounded paper, printed in black and white and most likely dates to c1775-1780 and conforms to the 'Pillar and Arch' pattern (Robert Weston pers. comm.). It is considered by Mr Weston not to be of particularly high quality and its presence here, in what appears must have been a first floor arcade or balcony overlooking the original full height hall, seems at first appearance incongruous. However, it might indicate that although this arcade overlooked the hall it was in fact no more than a service corridor from the long Gallery to the back stairs located to the south, and the paper decoration was only ever seen from the ground floor below, and therefore its relatively poor quality was of little consequence. It is thought that this represents the only known surviving example of decoration of this period within the house.

Although some of the wiring and water tanks were to be replaced, no structural alterations were to be undertaken in this space, and the surface decoration was to be retained.

#### **4.13 The Wren Wing interior**

The majority of the interior of this range had been recorded separately, however, during the stripping out of the some of the previous owner's internal divisions, and the repair of areas affected by the fire, some previously unknown elements were revealed. These were primarily at the eastern end of the building on the ground floor. A double-height room at the eastern end of the range was stripped of wall plaster and the ceiling replaced following damage during the previous fire (Fig 6). The room has three doorways, one at the north end of the west side leading to the exterior, one in the south end of the west wall leading to the north side of the east wall of the Wren Wing and another in the south wall leading to the lobby which allows access to the basement of the main house. In the north wall is another, blocked doorway which perhaps originally led outside, though there is now a later building (the indoor tennis court) located to the north of this wall. The lower portion of the interior of this, and the east wall, is built of coursed limestone, the upper portion of red brick laid in English bond. Externally the wall is entirely built in brick.

In the west wall is a large chimney breast previously fitted with a modern fireplace within a small opening. The stripping of the wall plaster revealed that this smaller opening is a modern insertion within a large, wide arched opening which suggests from its size most likely served as a kitchen fireplace. The jambs of the opening are of red brick and the arch is formed of finely dressed voussoirs of a cream coloured limestone. The keystone projects slightly above the abutting voussoirs but not now out from the wall plane although coarse chisel marks indicate that it originally did so and has been cut back (Plate 27). The infill of the arch indicates that there was an intermediate fire opening, smaller than the large original one, but larger than the previous small one which was fitted with a cast iron fire box fitted with an integral smoke hood set on a concrete hearth slab. There are no indications of any original flooring or hearth slab contemporary with the large arch. The recess immediately to the north of this chimney stack is also arched, though this time in brick and it is possible that this represents another fireplace since the interior of the space above, whilst partly plastered, was smoke blackened. If this was indeed a fireplace positioned adjacent to the other this strongly suggests that this space was indeed a kitchen, as does the double height of the room, a common feature of early kitchens when the constant fires produced an enormous quantity of heat, and though there were no indications due to the loss of the roof in the fire, it may be that there had previously been a louvred vent in the roof to help vent such heat. The construction of a large kitchen, if indeed that is what it was, is interesting since it suggests that this part of the range pre-dates the building of the basement which also contains kitchen facilities. If

this is the case it indicates that at an early stage in the design the kitchens, following an earlier tradition, were intended to be located not within the main house, but to one side. This tradition of locating the kitchens away from the main living quarters was largely due to the risk of fire, however, the inclusion of other kitchen facilities within the basement beneath stone and brick vaults will have reduced this risk. It could also be argued that the kitchens in the eastern end of the (probably) earlier Wren Wing allowed occupation on the site in the period following the demolition of the earlier house, but prior to the completion of the Hawksmoor house and therefore they were intended only to be used for a relatively short period of time. The other option is that they served initially as kitchens but were intended in the long term to be used as a laundry and brewhouse, also important facilities in country houses but which did not necessarily need to be located within the main building.

The recess to the immediate south of the stone-arched fireplace has had the back (west) wall knocked through to make this recess into a doorway which links to the east end of the remainder of the Wren Wing. It is not known when this arrangement was made.

The ground floor room on the east side of the central doorway of the Wren Wing had previously been sub-divided by the previous owner, and these modern divisions were removed, partly to re-instate the layout of the space but also because they had been damaged in the fire and were of no historic value. Again the damaged plaster on the walls was stripped which revealed that the two windows in the north wall had been narrowed, and a further window close to the present central north door had been entirely infilled (Fig \*, Plate 28). It is thought that this was carried out during the early years of the twentieth century. Externally there is no indication of any infilling, and it appears that the entire external wall was re-faced and the door and windows given new stone surrounds (Plate 29).

At the east end of this room a chimney stack is present with evidence of a former fireplace and doorway (Plate 30). Both have been reduced and then completely infilled. The fireplace has a segmental brick arch which has later been reduced in both width and height before being infilled quite recently with grey breeze blocks. The doorway to the south was constructed with a timber (oak) lintel and would apparently have given access to the lobby on the east which leads both down to the basement and up to the quadrant corridor linking this range to the main house. It is assumed that originally there was a wall aligned from the south side of this doorway to the south wall of the range where there is now a doorway.

The reduction of the floor in preparation for the installation of underfloor heating revealed the presence of the stub of a brick foundation for a wall which would have formed a corridor on the south side of the range, mirroring the layout to the west of the central doorways (Fig 6). This wall was 1.75m north of the existing south wall of this range and comprised a wall 0.35m wide of soft, red brick laid in a creamy white lime mortar. Along its length were three spaces within the fabric of the footing, the purpose of which is not entirely clear but which may have provided seatings for timber uprights. At the west end the wall turned through 90 degrees and aligned with the east side of the doorway in the north wall suggesting that there had originally been a cross-passage through the range from north to south.

#### 4.14 Oak panelling in the north facade blind window

A partly blind window, built as such, in the centre of the north elevation revealed that the upper part of this tall sash window concealed re-used oak panelling of probable late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century date (Fig \*, Plate 31). It is located in the upper half of the window located above the vaulted lobby at the north end of the building at the level of the half-landing on the main staircase. The panelling had been painted or stained black and comprised two separate designs, one a classic linenfold pattern, the other of angular interlocking diapers infilled with stylised leaves of quatrefoil and trefoil configuration (Plate \*). The panelling had been cut to fit in various places, most obviously where the decorated ends of the linenfold had been cut off so that a horizontal rail could be inserted. It is not known where the panelling came from originally, or even if it is of the date to which it belongs although stylistically it can be dated to c1640-1680 (Alcock and Hall 1999). There is a possibility that it is nineteenth-century 'Jacobethan', though this does not seem likely since the carving is rather good and charmingly uneven, characteristics often missing from later reproductions. If original it would most likely have been part of room decoration though it is too early to have been incorporated in the current house as by the time the existing building was completed plain panelling was being used as is evident from surviving interiors. It is also not clear at what date it was inserted here, the space behind it could not be seen clearly and it is not known how it was fixed, or what it was fixed to. After the present glass had been removed and the glazing bars repaired the panelling was re-painted and the glass replaced. The panelling remains *in situ*.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The works recently undertaken at Easton Neston house appear to be the first to have been recorded archaeologically even though the property was listed on 1 December 1951. Given the status of the house and its national importance, if correct, it is a matter of regret that previous alterations do not appear to have been recorded, and while it is not clear whether or not structural or decorative detail might have been lost during those previous works, it must be assumed that some indications of earlier schemes are no longer present.
- 5.2 Certainly some structural elements have been lost since it is clear that former wall divisions within the area of the recent kitchen had been removed, and it has to be assumed that these may have retained complete or fragmentary elements of surface decoration. It is not clear at what date these changes had been made, though it is thought that the walls were most likely removed during the late twentieth century, and certainly the use of breeze blocks and machine sawn pine studwork indicates a date in the second half of that century for some of the alterations. Fragments of cornice and panelling on the exterior walls suggest that the suite of three original rooms retained some elements, at least, of earlier schemes. It appears that the layout depicted on the Vitruvius Britannicus plans is correct.
- 5.3 The decision to allow permission for the removal of tapestries from the bedroom suites, though regrettable, has allowed the fabric of the building to be observed and previously unknown details to be recorded. Some of the tapestries, fixed to the frames still *in situ* on the walls, though although not perhaps of the first phase of decoration of those rooms appear to have been in place since at least the middle years of the eighteenth-century while others were clearly inserted at a later date as evidence by the graffiti in Bedroom One which dates some alteration works to 1921, in one instance at least by Maple and Co of London, one of the country's leading interior decorators.
- 5.4 In the Master Bedroom it has been shown that the two currently blocked windows in the south facade were almost certainly originally intended to be functioning openings, though it is not clear if they were actually ever glazed or were infilled during the completion of the fitting out and decoration. Externally, these blind windows have

- plastered (or rendered) finishes with a black background and simple white painted 'glazing bars' added to give the impression of a window.
- 5.5 Structural arches within the thickness of the internal walls at first floor level are not entirely understood, though they appear to be relieving arches, presumably included given the great thicknesses of these walls which would otherwise have to be carried over doorway openings on flat, wooden lintels. There is also the possibility, not established, that they carry flues since both are positioned close to fireplaces, though the locations of chimney stacks on the roof does not in reality support this theory.
- 5.6 The removal of the previous Master Bedroom en suite revealed no more than floorboards and the back of lath and plaster walls, and the alterations within the Second Master bedroom en suite nothing other than late nineteenth or early twentieth century alterations.
- 5.7 The discovery of some late eighteenth-century printed wallpaper was unexpected, and its apparent lack of quality might indicate the true nature of the arcade which it decorated, indicating that it was intended to be seen at a distance rather than close up.
- 5.8 Re-used oak panelling of probable seventeenth-century date was observed set behind glazing in a blind window in the north facade. Stylistically the panelling pre-dates the present house and is unlikely to have come from within the building. Most likely it was simply a section of timberwork that was available and was used to provide a background to cover the brickwork of the blocking. The dates of its insertion here is unknown but the panelling, which may date to the mid seventeenth-century, has been retained *in situ*.
- 5.9 The creation of below-floor ducting in the basement did not reveal any structural elements apart from occasional sections of brick foundation; no previous configurations or layouts were revealed.
- 5.10 External service trenches in the main entrance forecourt revealed levelling layers in that area but no evidence was revealed of structures, in particular any previous building on the site. To the north of the Wren Wing a stone lined culvert of unknown date was revealed although its source and final destination were not determined due to the limited nature of its uncovering.
- 5.11 Within the Wren Wing evidence was uncovered of a large, probably kitchen, fireplace in the eastern full-height room which might support the supposition that the Wren Wing pre-dates the main house and originally housed service areas. Another, smaller, fireplace and blocked doorway was also revealed along with evidence of re-fenestration of the north wall, probably carried out in the early years of the twentieth century. A wall foundation revealed that the internal space had been altered, though the date of its removal is unknown.

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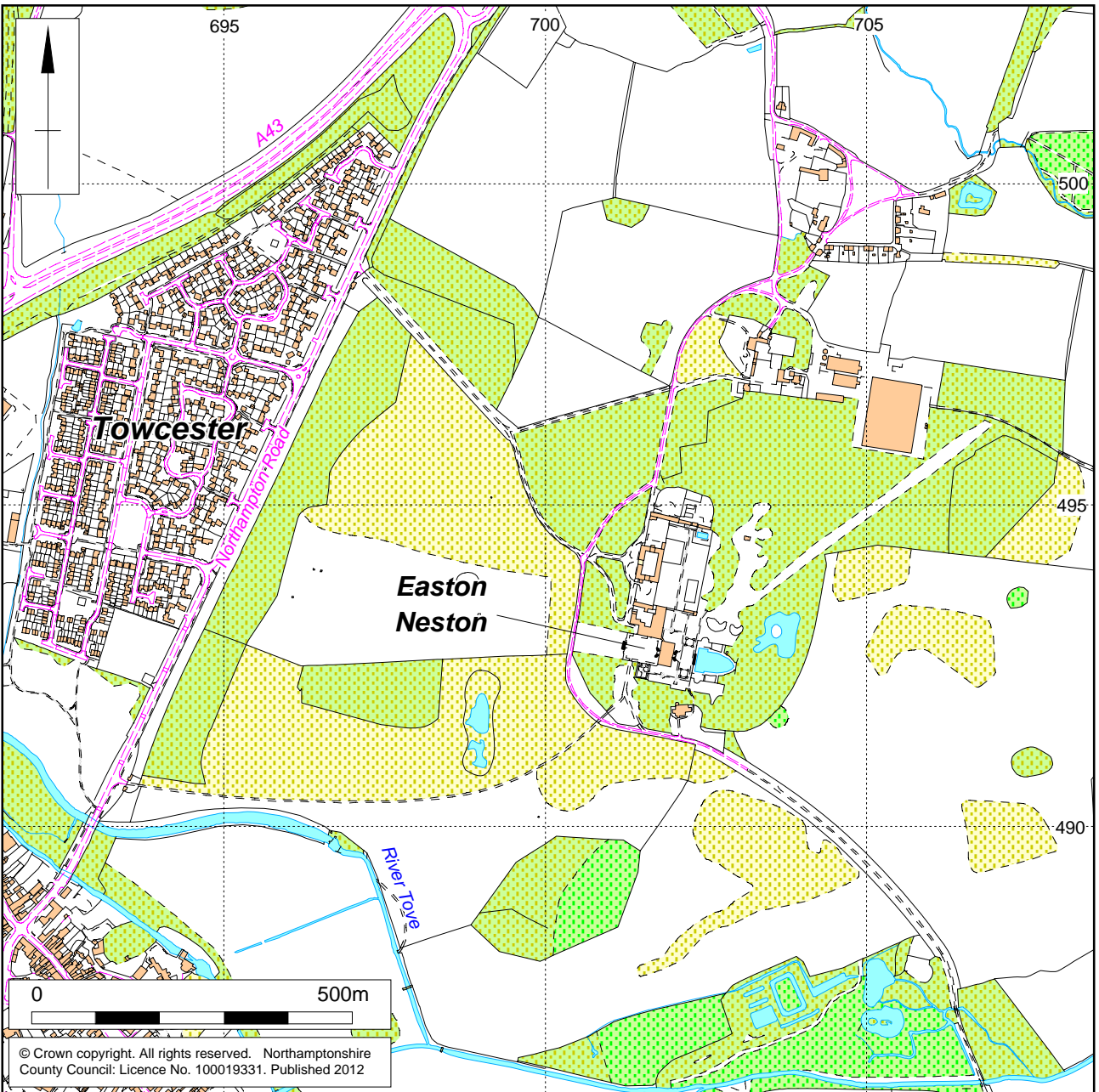
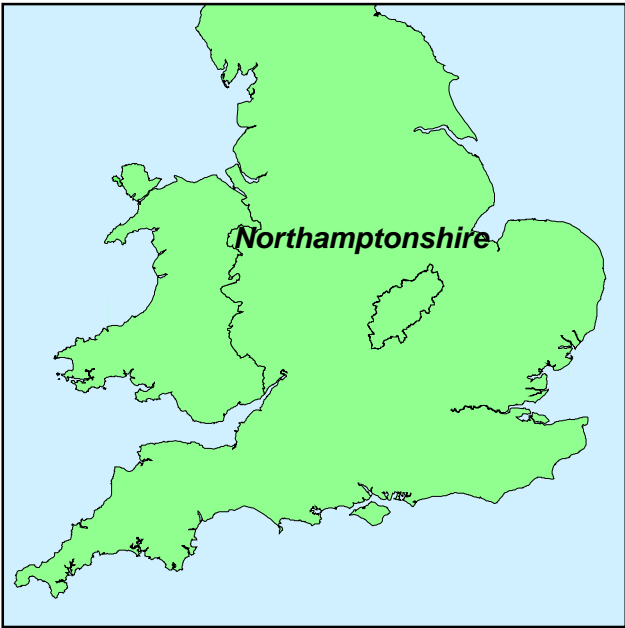
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**Specialist advisor**

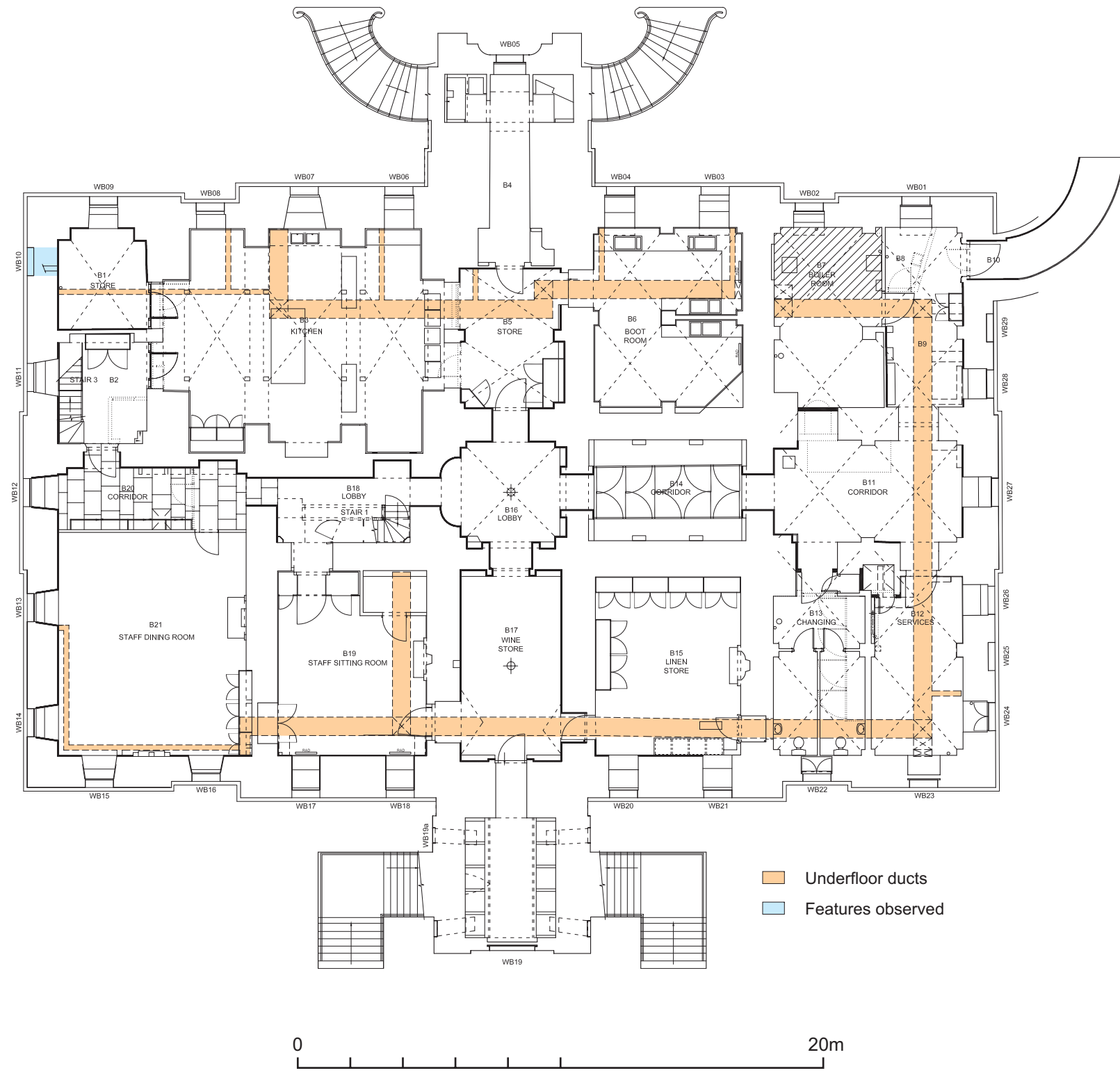
Grateful thanks are extended to Robert Weston, BA, BIA, partner and Design Director with Hamilton Weston Wallpapers Ltd, former architectural historian with the GLC Historic Buildings Division, for his dating and identification of the pillar and arch wallpaper.



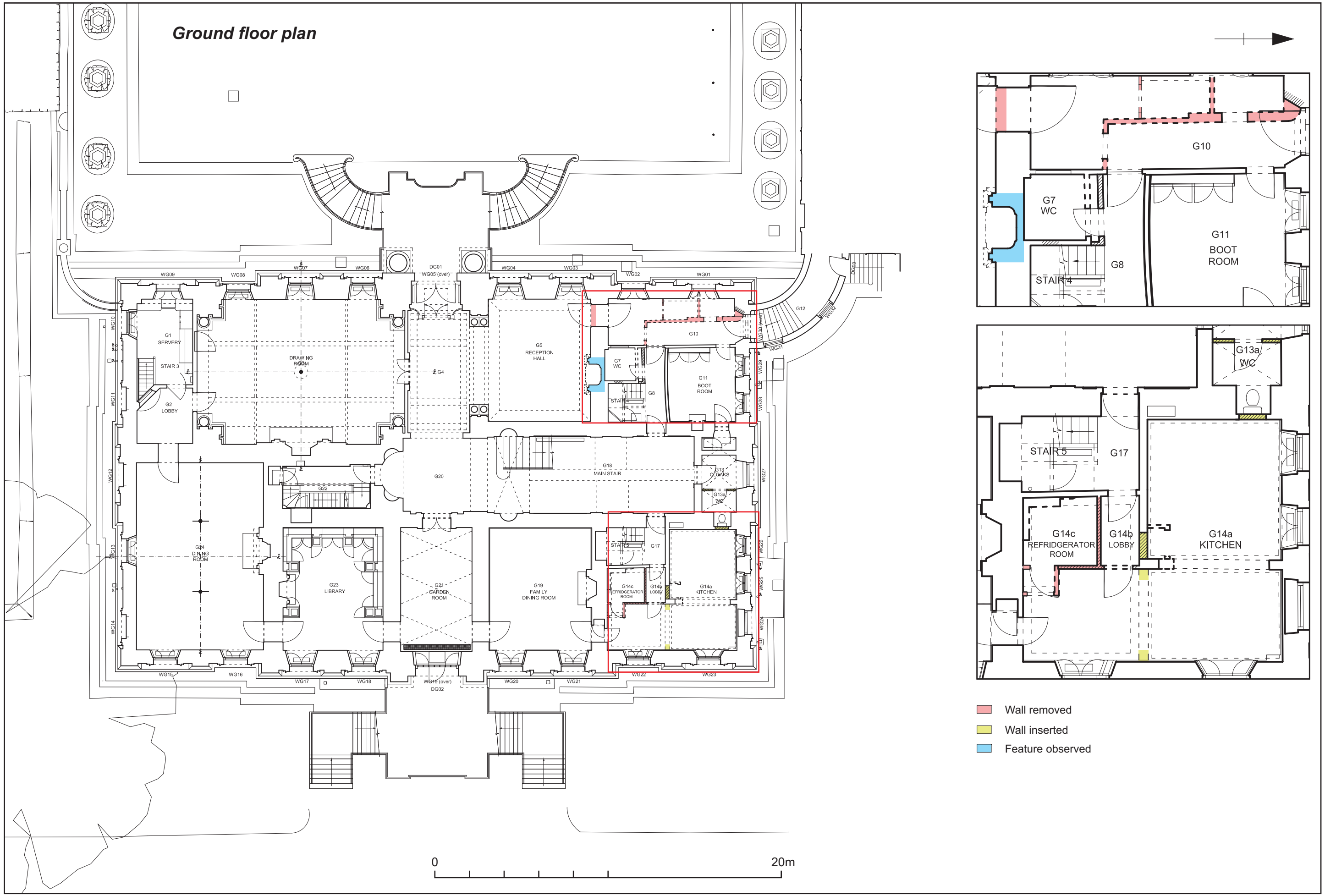
Scale 1:10,000

Site location Fig 1

Basement floor plan



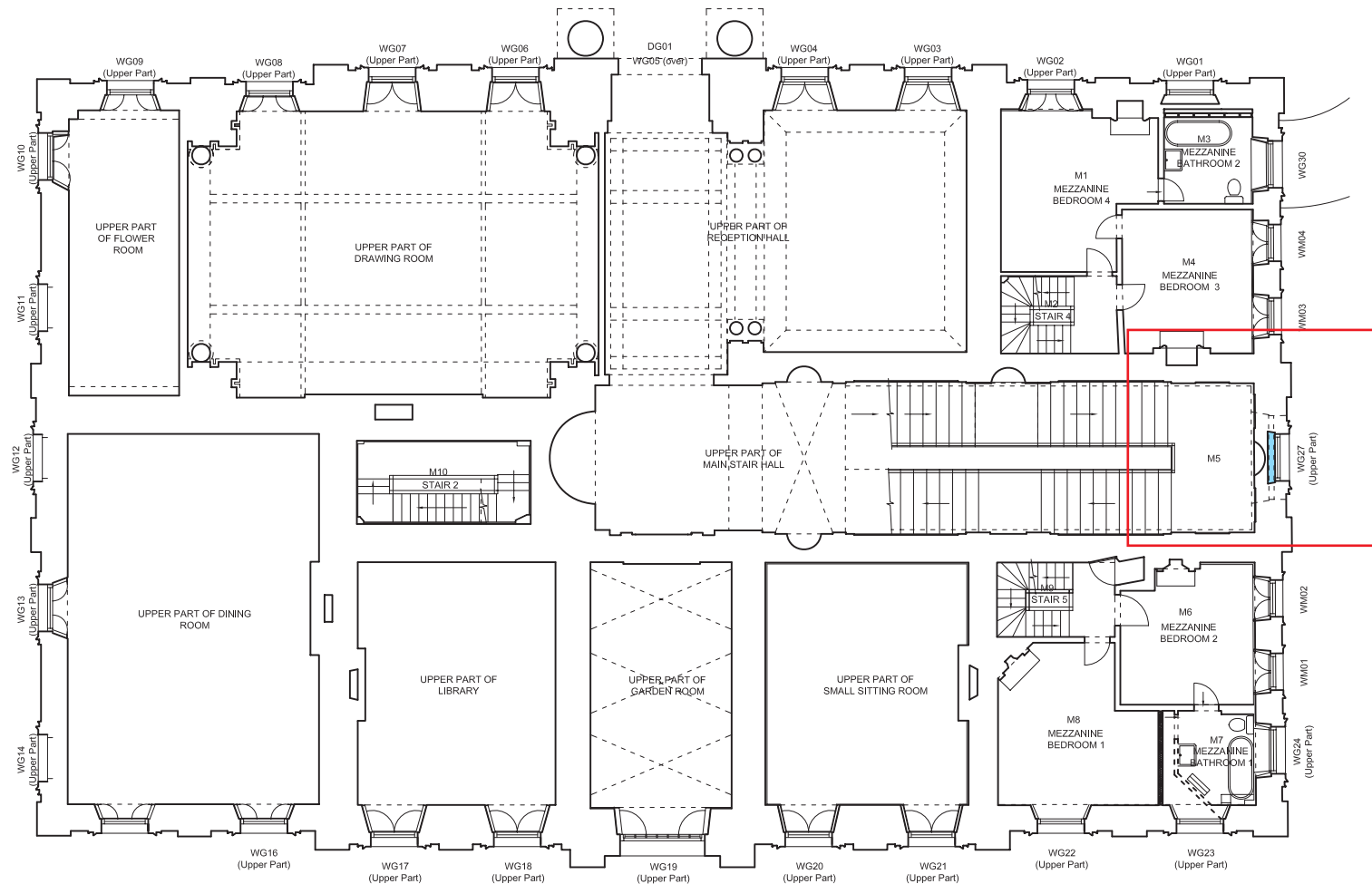




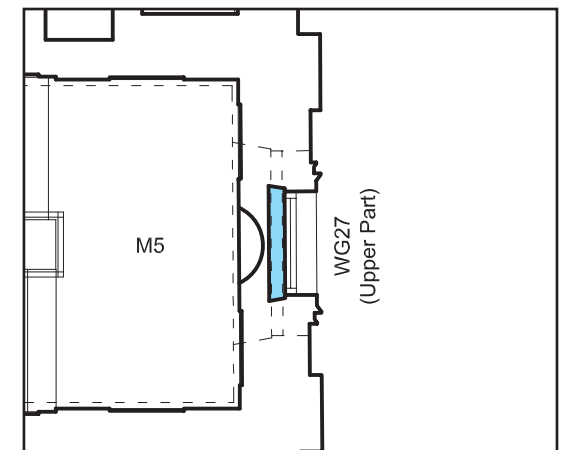
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Ground floor plan of the house Fig 3

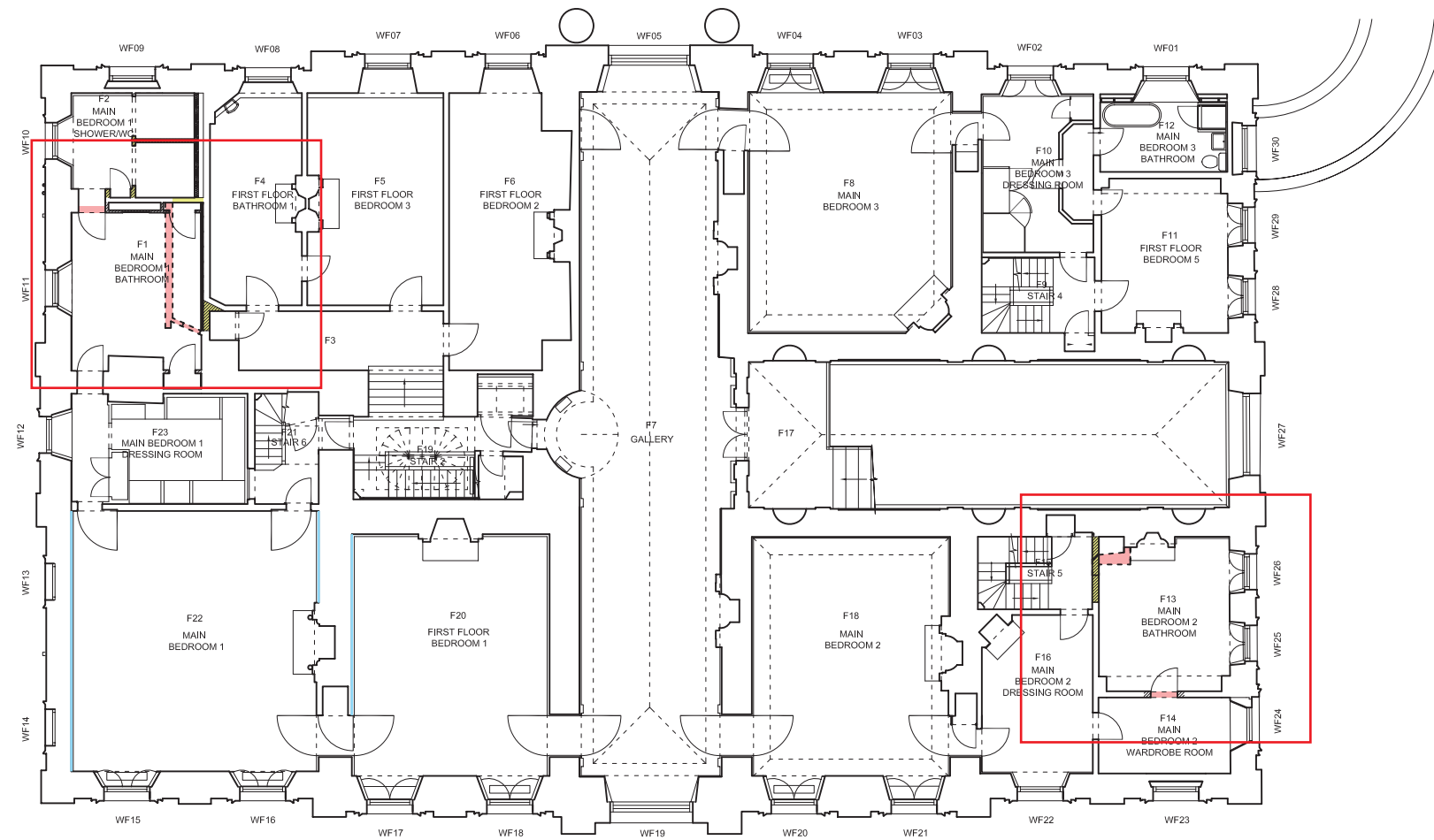
Mezzanine floor plan



■ Feature observed

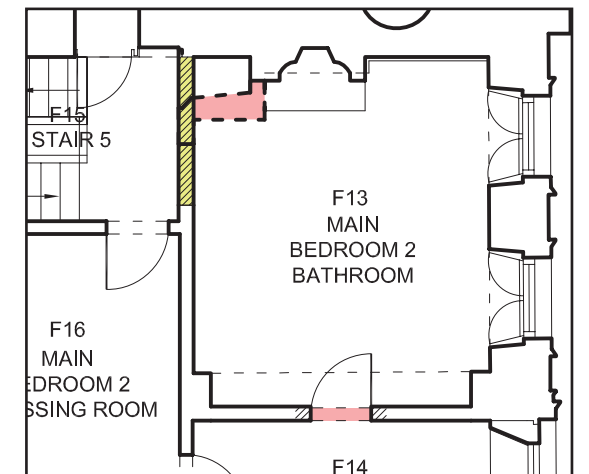
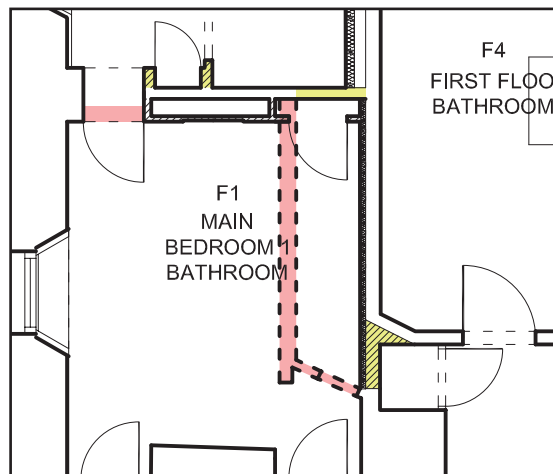


First floor plan



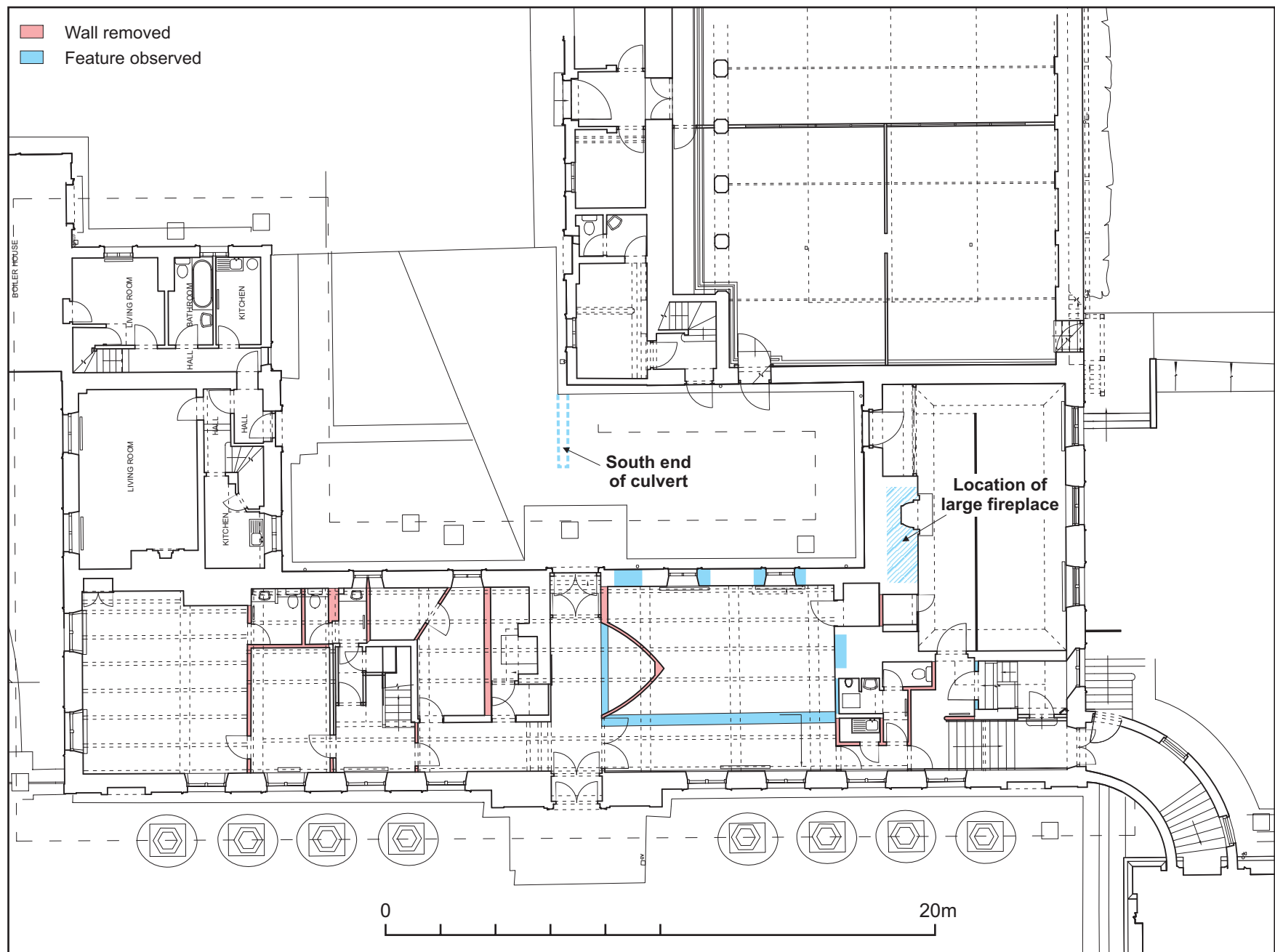
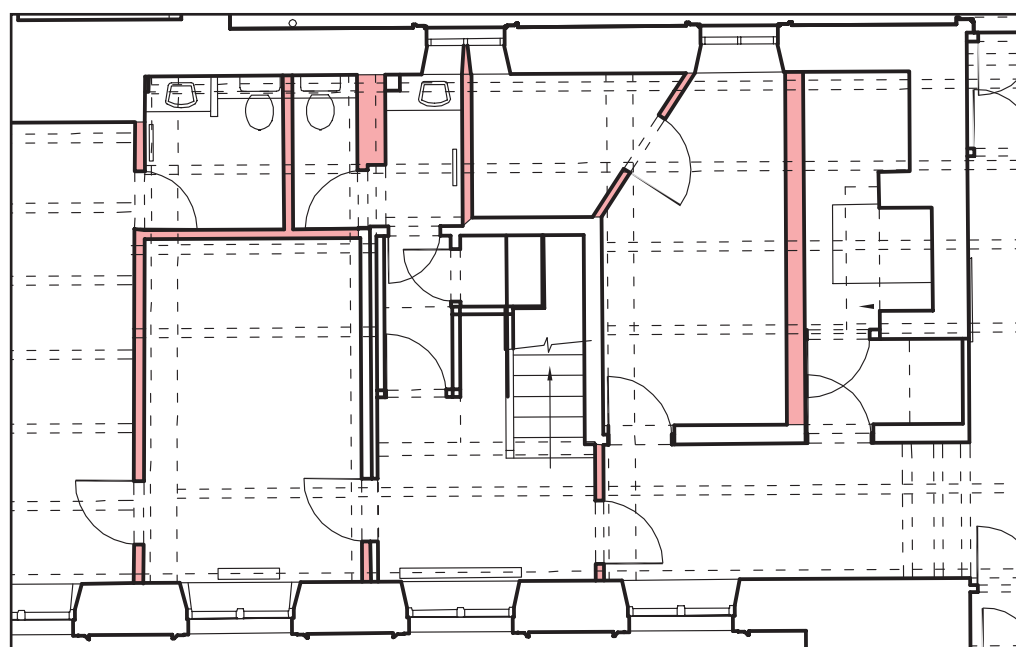
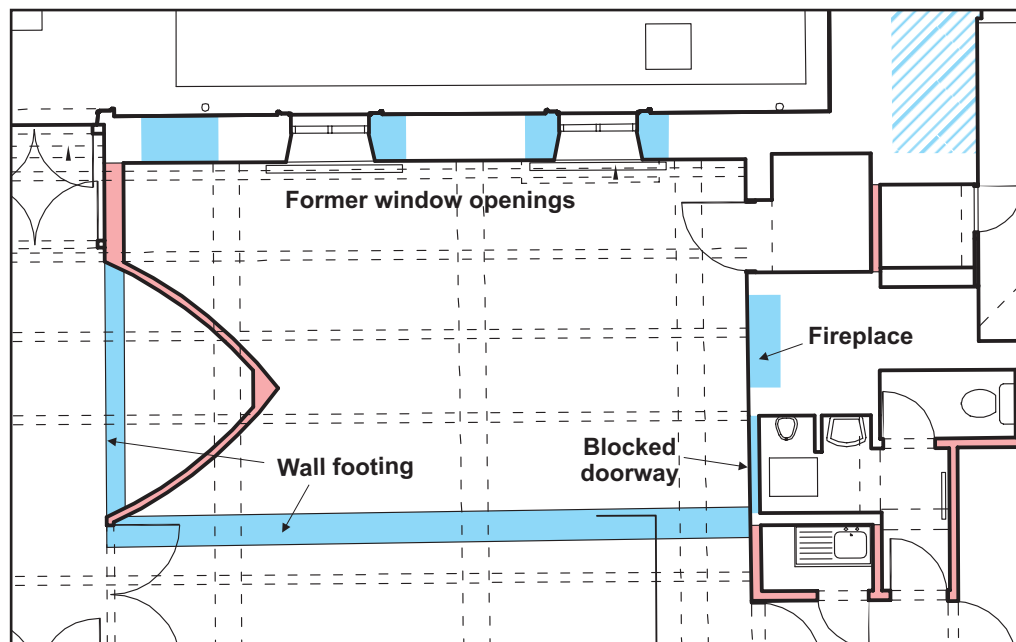
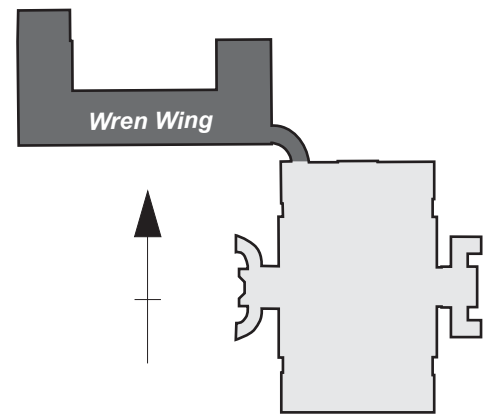
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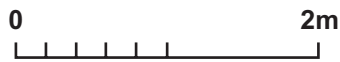
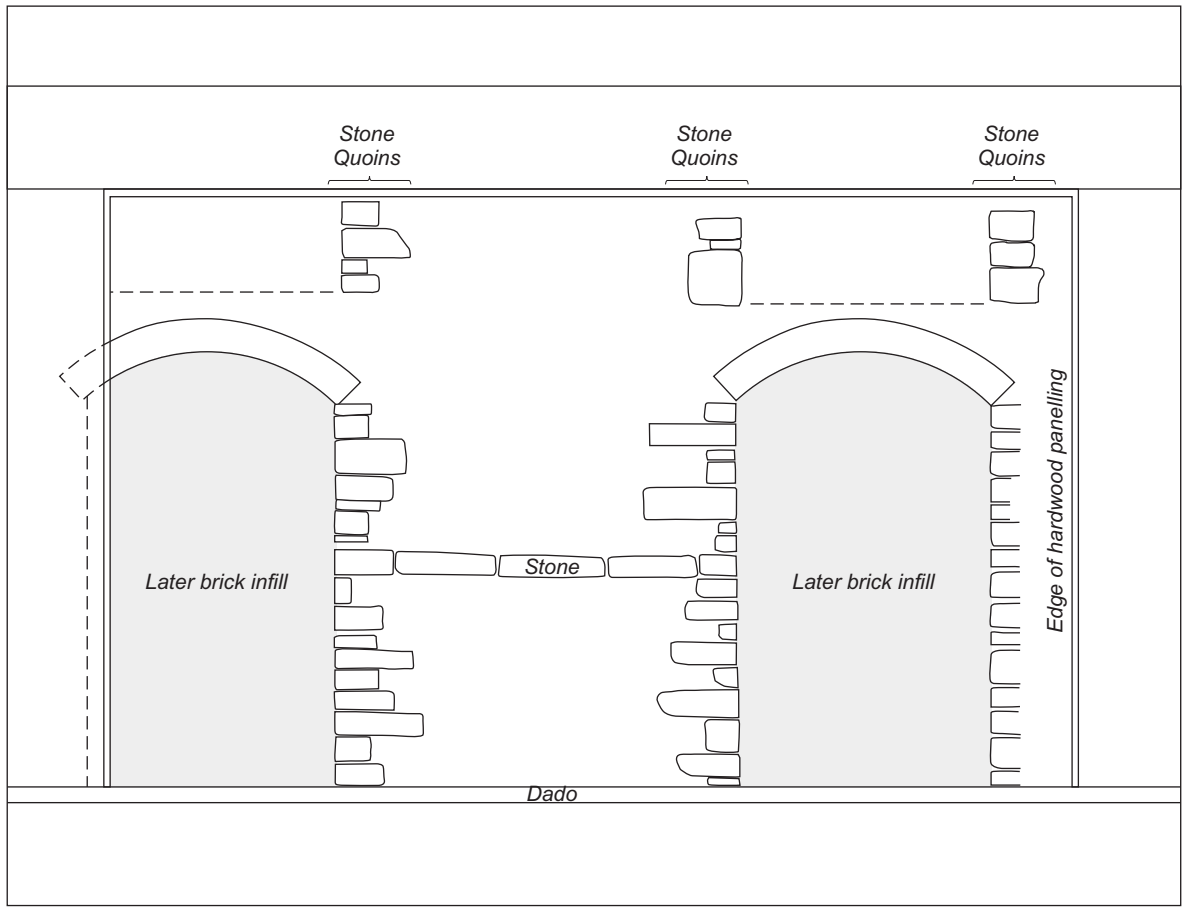
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First floor plan of the house Fig 5



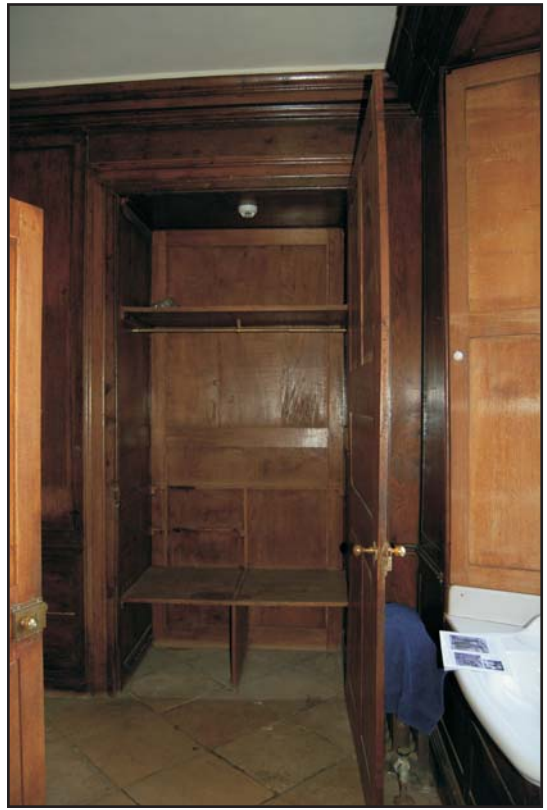
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Ground floor of the Wren Wing Fig 6





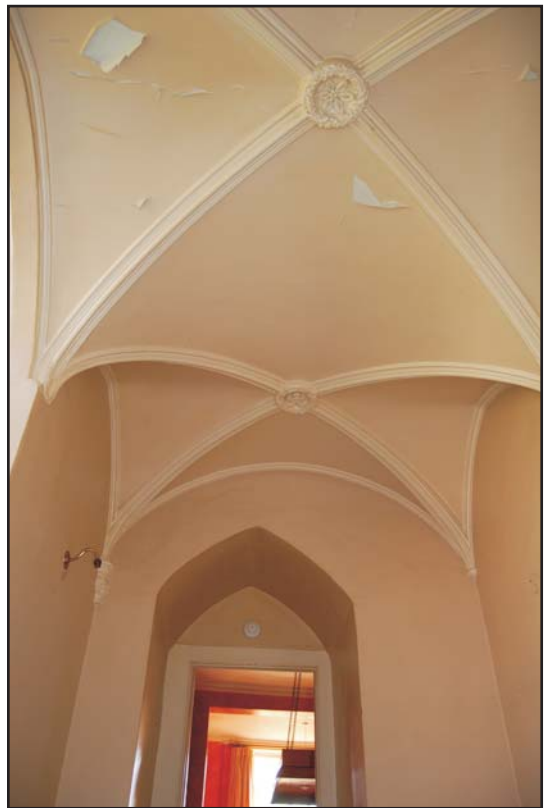
Wren Wing corridor, panelling on the east side, looking east Plate 1



Wren Wing corridor, former doorway to the entrance hall in the south wall, looking south Plate 2



Entrance Hall showing location of the former doorway to the Wren Wing corridor in the north wall, looking north Plate 3



Ground floor WC below stair half landing showing vaulted ceiling, looking east Plate 4





Pointed arch of the vaulted ceiling below the semi-circular structural arch in the west wall of the kitchen, looking west

Plate 5



Detail of the timber box-cornice on the south side of the southern room of the kitchen, looking west

Plate 6



West wall of the northern room of the kitchen showing the blocked fireplace, looking west

Plate 7



West wall of the southern room of the kitchen showing panelling and jib door, looking south-west

Plate 8





South wall of the Master Bedroom on the first floor showing the blocked arch windows and frame for former tapestry, looking south

Plate 9



North wall of the Master Bedroom on the first floor showing the location of the former tapestry to the west of the fireplace, looking north

Plate 10



Void beneath raised floor of the corridor to the second bathroom showing back of plaster wall located to the north, looking west

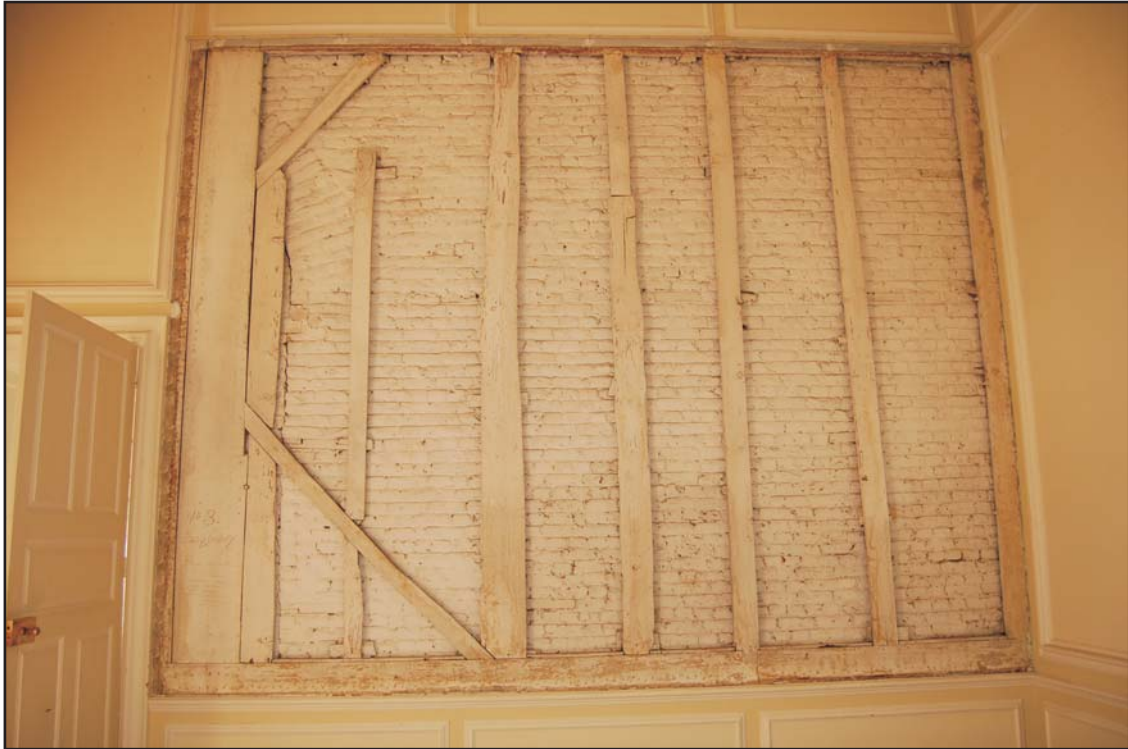
Plate 11



North wall of the first floor Bedroom One showing the location of the former tapestry, looking north

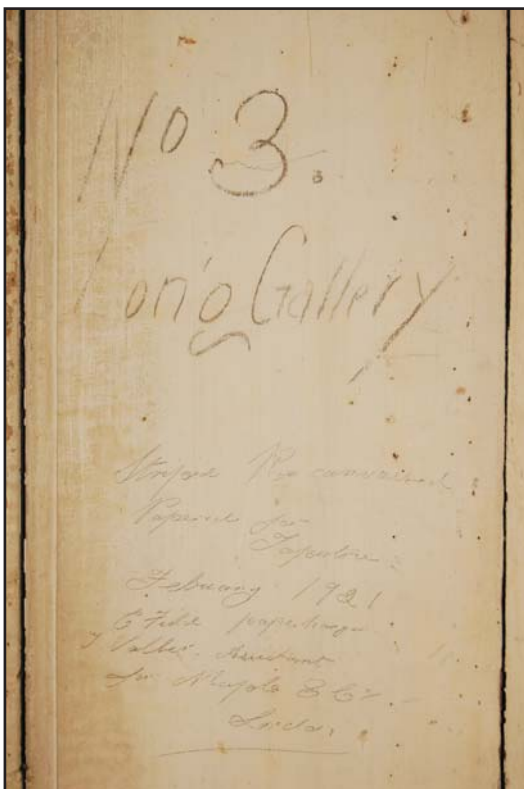
Plate 12





South wall of the first floor Bedroom One showing brick arch to the right (west) of the door and frame for former tapestry, looking south. Note graffiti on the wide vertical plank to the immediate right side of the door

Plate 13



Detail of the graffiti written on the vertical plank on the south wall of Bedroom One  
Plate 14



Second Master Bedroom en suite looking north-east  
Plate 15



Alcove in the east wall of Bedroom Four, looking east

Plate 16



Shaft of dumb waiter built over mantel shelf of fireplace in the west wall of Bedroom Four, looking west

Plate 17



East wall of Master Bedroom Three showing the location of the former tapestry, looking east

Plate 18



South wall of Master Bedroom Three showing the location of the arch to the left (east) of the door and the frame of the former tapestry, looking south

Plate 19





Cupboard located between the door of the cross corridor (foreground) and Master Bedroom Three in the space created by the structural arch on the south side of that room, looking north-east  
Plate 20



Service trench in the main forecourt of the house, looking west along the south side of the Wren Wing  
Plate 22



Stone culvert on the north side of the Wren Wing, looking north

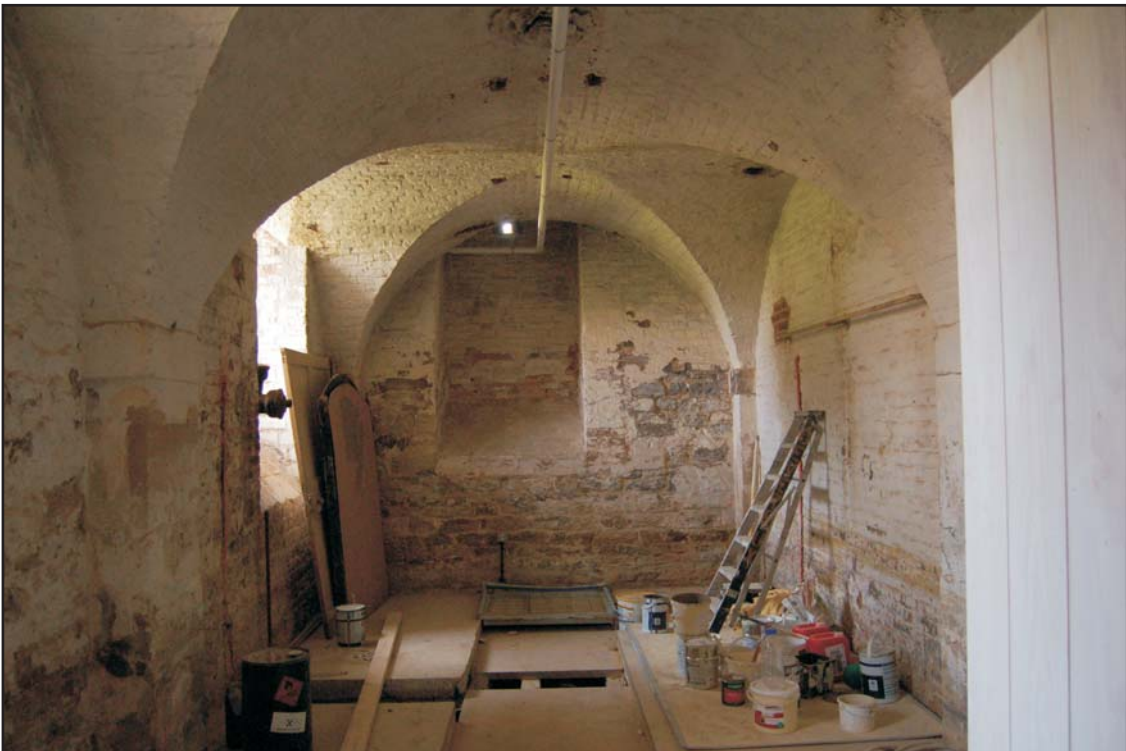
Plate 21





West side of the main house foundation showing drilled holes for new services, looking east

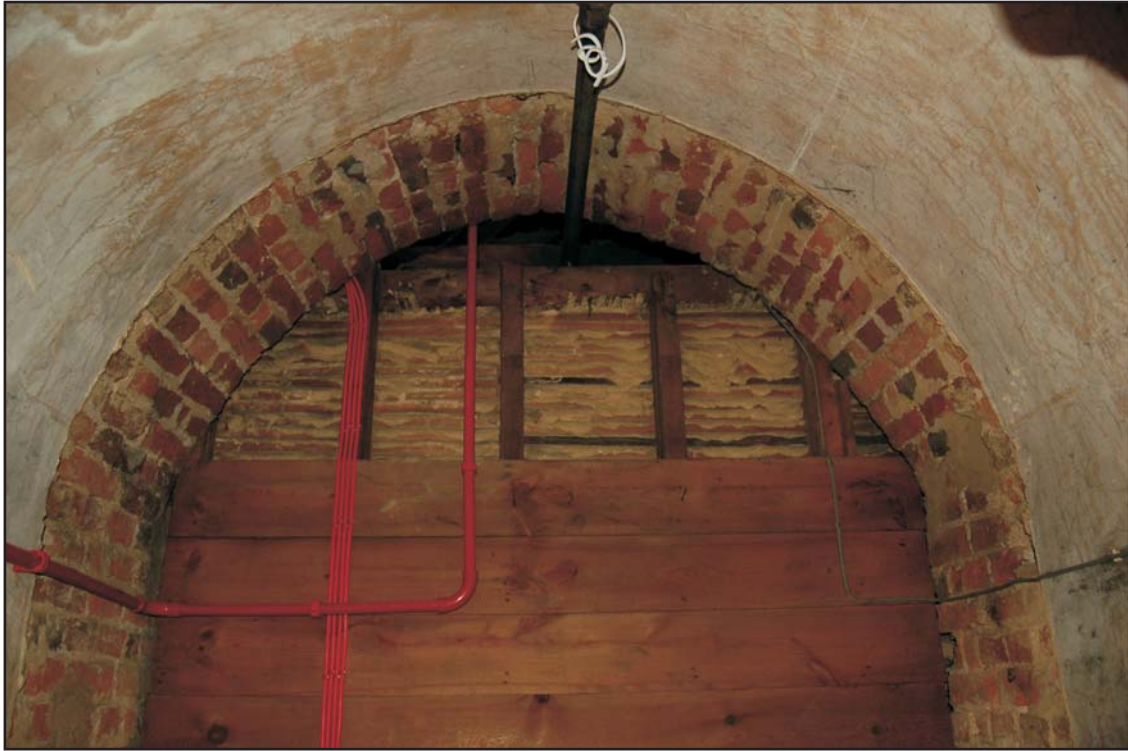
Plate 23



Floor ducting (temporarily covered) in the basement room at the north-east corner of the house, looking east

Plate 24





Archway blocked by the back of nineteenth century lath and plaster wall on the east side of the first floor Bedroom Two inserted above the former full height hall, looking west

Plate 25



"Pillar and arch" pattern wallpaper of c1775-1780 lining archway formerly overlooking the full height hall

Plate 26





Large fireplace opening with stone voussoirs, subsequently infilled and reduced in the west wall of the service room at the east end of the Wren Wing, looking west

Plate 27



Narrowed window in the north wall of the room to the east of the central doorway of the Wren Wing, looking north

Plate 28





Exterior of the north wall of the Wren Wing showing evidence of the re-facing with new brick and stone surrounds to windows and doorway, looking south

Plate 29



Blocked fireplace (left) and doorway (right) in the east wall of the room to the east of the central doorway in the Wren Wing, looking east

Plate 30



Black painted oak panelling behind glazing bars in the blind window in the north elevation of the main house, looking south

Plate 31





Northamptonshire County Council

# Northamptonshire Archaeology



## Northamptonshire Archaeology

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