

Witley Court Worcestershire

Archaeological Survey Record and Analysis of Eastern Parterre Steps

Archaeological Investigation Report





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Witley Court, Worcestershire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RECORD AND ANALYSIS OF EAST PARTERE STEPS

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an excavation of the East Parterre steps at Witley Court, Worcestershire (SO 769 648) on behalf of English Heritage. The excavation revealed the brick bases of the removed limestone steps S8,10, 13, 14 & 15. The limestone capping had been entirely removed on all steps except the ballroom steps (S13), where a remnant remained in situ. The brick bases incorporated a number of fragments of limestone, sandstone, tile and slate. Some worked stone was incorporated which appears to have been reclaimed from the structure of the earlier buildings on site. A range of finds were recovered including chandelier and window glass, architectural fragments, moulded plaster, pot and tile.

1 Introduction

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) has been retained by English Heritage (EH) West Midlands Region, to undertake a programme of archaeological recording in the Parterre Gardens at Witley Court Scheduled Ancient Monument, Great Witley, Worcestershire (Malvern Hills District, SAM 306, NGR SO 769648) The latest programme comprised the excavation of five flights of steps across the east parterre.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 Witley Court lies near the village of Great Witley, Worcestershire and west of the important river port of Stourport. The site lies on a sandstone scarp at c. 85 m OD. The land is presently kept under a basic landscape management policy with the site being open as a public attraction through the Guardianship of English Heritage. The surrounding area is open farmland and woodland.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The gardens at Witley Court were created by William Nesfield in 1854-60 for Lord Ward, at the same time as the house was rebuilt and extended. In the place of Repton's open landscaping around the house two large gardens with parterres and fountains were constructed on the east and south sides. Since the house and church stand on a high platform, the garden falls away from the terrace on each side of the house forming the South Parterre and the East Parterre, each with a monumental sculptured fountain as a centrepiece. The complex plan of the parterres, paths and steps connecting the terraces is best appreciated from Fig. 2. The steps forming the subject of this report are: S13, the main flight from the east wing of the house to the terrace alongside it; S14 and S15 leading down from this terrace to the walk encircling the East Parterre; and S10 and S8, the former giving access from the lawn north of the parterre to the encircling path and the latter leading down from the path to the south lawn.

- 1.3.2 In all there are 29 flights of steps in the garden, and only a few of these are still complete, while most have had their stonework robbed at some point after the abandonment of the house in the 1930s. There are numerous photographs of the gardens before their destruction, and records of their design and maintenance (e.g. the use of blue gravel on the paths). A number of aerial photographs give a clear view of the gardens. In 1937 the house caught fire and was never repaired. Later in the century it was stripped of some architectural details before coming into public ownership.
- 1.3.3 The parterre gardens have been the subject of previous archaeological investigations. In 1996 the City of Hereford Archaeology Unit undertook a programme of architectural recording and archaeological surveying of the house and its surroundings (CHAU 1994 and 1996). These works included a landscape survey of the grounds to the south of the house. Invasive archaeological investigations within the gardens were further carried out by Nottingham University between 1996-7 and these works included the excavation of trenches within the south, east and north parterre gardens, the redefinition of the Ha-Ha that surrounds the gardens balustrade and the partial excavation of the main bed of the east parterre (Heald and McGee 1996 and 1997). The excavations, undertaken within the main bed of the east parterre, revealed significant evidence for the survival of its former interior design. An extensive excavation programme was carried out across the south parterre by OA in 2002 (OA 2004).

1.4 Acknowledgements

1.4.1 Oxford Archaeology would like to acknowledge the help and co-operation of the gardening staff at Witley Court, especially Head Gardener Richard Squires, and English Heritage Project Manager Peter Bassett.

2 FIELDWORK AIMS

- 2.1.1 The aims of the archaeological programme were:
 - to provide information by prior survey and excavation for the repair and reconstruction process.
 - to ensure that all episodes of ground disturbance or fabric intervention are subject to archaeological observation, supervision and recording.
 - to relate the investigation and discoveries to the research questions outlined in section 1.3 and 2.7 of the OA method statement (OA 2002b).
 - to ensure that recording and results are related to previous investigations and records.
 - to ensure recovery and retention of artefacts removed or discovered in the works.
 - to create a record and archive of the investigations.
 - to provide on-site information for visitors about the purpose and results of the investigations.
 - to disseminate the results of the investigations by publication or other means.

3 EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

3.1.1 The archaeological response to the works was driven by the need to provide information by survey and excavation for the repair and reconstruction process; and to mitigate the impact of alterations or loss to the historic character and fabric of the Scheduled Monument by ensuring that records are made and related to current and future research needs for the site.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

3.2.1 The overburden was removed from the steps by hand excavation and the steps' foundations were then archaeologically cleaned. The foundation make-up was planned at 1:20 and further characterised by profiles also scaled at 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D. Wilkinson, 1992).

3.3 Finds

3.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and generally bagged by context. Finds of special interest were given a unique small find number.

3.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

3.4.1 Assessment of the material removed concluded that environmental sampling was unnecessary.

3.5 Presentation of results

3.5.1 The structure of this report documents the results of the investigation works step by step. This is followed by a discussion of the results.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

4.1.1 The site is located on sandstone bedrock which is generally overlain by a sequence of levelling deposits which form the basis of the gardens construction. In a number of areas during the 2002 works these levelling deposits were seen to overlie a humic soil horizon thought to represent evidence of a pre-Nesfield garden/land surface (OA 2004). This was not encountered during the current works. The ground conditions were generally good during the investigative works.

- 5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS
- 5.1 **Description of steps**
- 5.2 **S13 (Fig. 3 & Pl. 1)**
- 5.2.1 Steps S13 were uncovered beneath a thin covering of humic garden soil and turf 1301 (Fig. 3). They were 14m in length and formed access between the west wing ballroom and the upper terrace of the east parterre. They were constructed from poorly fired red-brick with dimensions of 228 mm x 116 mm x 78 mm. A very high percentage of half bats and other broken bricks were noted in the build. The majority of the steps were laid as headers on edges or beds although stretchers were not uncommon along with areas of dis-ordered in-filling, which together constituted a third of the build. A number of fragments of limestone and sandstone were incorporated. Tile and slate was employed to level up uneven areas for the limestone capping which had been almost entirely stripped save in-situ slabs at both ends of the steps. The step base was bonded in a sandy 'salmon'-coloured mortar with occasional sections of a hard, lime based cement. The brick base of S13 was noticeably more dilapidated than the other steps.
- 5.2.2 The steps were flanked by limestone strings 1303 which flared out in a curve by 1.6 m at the base. The strings had shallow sockets 180 mm x 200 mm along their length for stone baluster location.
- 5.3 **S14 (Fig. 4 & Pl. 2)**
- 5.3.1 Steps S14 form the northern half of a pair which provide access between the upper terrace and the east parterre. Its counterpart is S15. Similar construction was employed to that seen in S13. Headers on edges or beds formed the major constituent, showing a greater degree of order than S13. The steps cover a total area of 7300 mm x 6700 mm which is divided into two flights (1405 & the lower 1407 is three steps. The landing is formed from the underlying sandstone bedrock 1406. The step base is flanked by two pairs of limestone strings and newel bases (1401, 1402, 1403 & 1404) a pair for each flight. S14 was covered by a 110mm thick deposit of made ground and top-soil covered in turf (1409 & 1410).

5.4 **S15** (Fig. 5 & Pl. 3)

5.4.1 Steps S15 were of very similar construction to Steps S14 built from headers with little sandstone and limestone inclusions. They covered an identical area. A large cut 1504 had truncated the bottom section of the lower flight. The deposit overlying its fill 1503 contained a wrought iron fire grate measuring 2 m in length, which had associated yellow firebrick fragments.

5.5 **S8 (Fig. 6 & Pl. 5)**

5.5.1 Steps S8 are situated at the north eastern extent of the east parterre and cover an area of 3020 mm x 1580 mm. Their construction differed from all the others in that they were predominantly built from limestone and sandstone fragments with additional brick fragments. They were bonded in sandy 'salmon'-coloured mortar.

5.6 **S10 (Fig. 6 & Pl. 4)**

5.6.1 Steps S10 formed a counterpart to S8 situated at the south eastern limit, and were of the same dimensions. They were constructed from red-bricks regularly-laid as headers on edges and beds which were bonded in a sandy 'salmon'-coloured mortar.

Finds

- 5.6.2 The find have been listed under material and context in Appendix 4. 21 boxes of finds now form the archive, weighing 71.70 kilograms. Of these, perhaps the most significant are the two boxes of glass, followed by the two boxes of plaster. These will add a little to the understanding of the house before the fire. The other pieces will add some detail to the knowledge of the interior furnishings of the house in the early 20th century derived from the photographic coverage from that period.
- 5.6.3 The range and amount of material is very similar to that reported on in OA 2004 and no further detailed report has been provided for the current collection.
- 5.6.4 All retained finds clearly derive from the debris swept out of the house after the fire in 1937. They include: chandelier glass, orangery glass (based on thickness, but it is a long way from the orangery), window glass, iron work, fittings from the Georgian couches, architectural plaster and stone fragments, pot, tile and copper alloy electric light fittings.
- 5.6.5 The only "small" find (1) was a large wrought iron fire grate which had been dumped on steps S15.

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 6.1.1 The investigative techniques employed during the fieldwork were designed in order to produce an integrated and detailed examination and record of the surviving archaeological remains whilst maintaining progress ahead of the reinstatement works. The areas of archaeological intervention were determined according to the needs of the schedule of reinstatement works.
- 6.1.2 The fieldwork has allowed for an accurate record to be made of the steps.

6.2 **Overall interpretation**

- 6.2.1 The remains of the steps were uncovered in their entirety allowing a comprehensive record to be made. The excavation area of each flight was determined by the needs of restoration. Steps S14, 15, 8 & 10 appeared to survive as constructed save the removal of the capping (Figs. 4-6, Pls. 2-5).
- 6.2.2 Steps S13 were dilapidated and showed evidence of localised repairs (Fig. 3 & Pl. 1). This may explain the intermittent lime-based mortar, although this mortar was also used in the primary build for setting some of the limestone capping and strings. The dilapidated state of steps S13 may reflect the heavier wear than the other steps as it provided access between the upper terrace and the ballroom. It was noted on site that wear was greatest in two tracks leading diagonally from the central doorway of the ballroom. As this wear was, of course, on the substructure, it must reflect passage after removal of the stone steps, i.e., during the stripping of the building. As these steps are the main access to and from the building on this side, this is an easily explained observation.
- 6.2.3 S13 had more incorporated re-used architectural fragments than the other steps. The limestone fragments may be discarded material from the mid-nineteenth century build. One piece of worked sandstone may have been reclaimed from an earlier build of the manor, possibly one of the demolished 18th structures. Similarly worked sandstone was noted in the build of the adjacent S16 steps during OA's 2002 programme of works.
- 6.2.4 Steps S14 and S15 had both been built into the underlying bedrock of the site (Figs. 4 & 5, Pls. 2 & 3). The truncation 1504 of S15 occurred after the robbing of the limestone capping or as part of it. Its fill 1503 was sealed by dumped material 1502 which contained debris from the 1937 fire.
- 6.2.5 Some attempt appears to have been made to tarmac steps S8 & S10. The traces of this were removed during excavation. S8 is unique among this excavated group in that is built almost entirely from reclaimed limestone and sandstone fragments with bricks forming the minor constituent (Fig. 6 & Pl. 5).

Summary of results

- 6.2.6 All designated 19th century steps were excavated and fully recorded. As expected all had been robbed almost entirely of the stone steps but the underlying structure was in good condition. The finds were exactly as expected, representing the debris swept out of the house after the fire and during the subsequent stripping of the house for scrap and salvage.
- 6.2.7 This included window glass and plastered brick as well as furniture fittings, unidentifiable iron (or generic such as nails), "brass" and lead fragments and scraps and further pieces of the glass candelabra from the ballroom. White glazed brick suggests an origin in utilitarian rooms, perhaps in the basement.

- 6.2.8 It might have been expected, given the origin of the material, that the great majority of the finds would have come from the ballroom steps, S13, followed in order by S14 and S15, the next closest to the house. In fact the great majority of material, especially the glass, came from S15. This might be related to the greater wear and therefore greater use of S13 for access rather than dump. It may also reflect temporary collection of material in dumps before dispersal.
- 6.2.9 It is not certain whether the presence of sherds of glass with a thickness greater than usual is to be identified as orangery glass, given its promiscuous occurrence with more normal thickness sherds on steps S15 and the great distance from the orangery.

Significance

6.2.10 These five flights of steps complete the step excavations programme begun during OA's 2002 works providing a complete picture of the structure of Nesfield's garden steps and a clear set of information for the restoration of the structures.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench	Ctxt No	Туре	Width (m)	Thick.	Comment	Finds	No./ wt	Date
S8	801	Struct			Stone (and some brick) foundations for steps	None		1850s
	802	Struct			Top newel base and string east side	None		1850s
	803	Struct			Top newel base and string west side	None		1850s
	804	Layer			Natural stone and sand at base of steps	None		
	805	Layer			path makeup at top of steps			1850s to 1930s
	806	Layer			path makeup at top of steps			1850s to 1930s
	807	Layer			path makeup at top of steps			1850s to 1930s
S10	1001	Struct			brick foundations for steps	None		1850s
	1002	Struct			Ashlar string etc for steps	None		1850s
	1003	Struct			Ashlar string etc for steps	None		1850s
	1004	Layer		70mm	Sandy make up for steps (mortar?)	None		1850s
	1005	Layer		70mm	Silty layer over 1001 but under 1006	Pot, glass, metal, CBM		1930s
	1006	Layer		50mm	Burnt debris from house	None		1930s
S13	1300	Struct			Group number for all steps structure	None		1850s
	1301	Layer		100mm	Top soil over steps	Pots, CBM chand. glass		1930s & later
	1302	Struct			Fine ashlar stone steps remaining at sides	None		1850s
	1303	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of S string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1304	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of N string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1305	Struct			Brick and stone foundation	CBM and building		1850s

Trench	Ctxt No	Туре	Width (m)	Thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No./ wt	Date
					for steps	materials		
S14	1400	Group			All steps S14			
	1401	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of S upper string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1402	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of N upper string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1403	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of S lower string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1404	Struct			Fine ashlar masonry of N lower string and baluster base etc	None		1850s
	1405	Struct			Brick and stone foundation for upper steps	None		1850s
	1406	Layer			Probably natural sandstone levelled for middle landing	None		
	1407	Struct			Brick and stone foundation for lower steps	None		1850s
	1408	Layer			Probably natural sandstone levelled for bottom landing	None		
	1409	Layer		110mm	Turf	Glass, metal		mid C20th
	1410	Layer		300mm	Mixed soil and burning debris	Pot, stone, glass, metal, CBM		mid C20th
S15	1500	Group			All staircase S15			
	1501	Layer		120mm	Turf over remains	none		mid C20th
	1502	Layer			Mixed soil and burning debris	Pot, stone, glass, metal, CBM		mid C20th
	1503	Fill	As 1504	200mm	Fill of 1504 similar to 1502	Glass, metal, CBM		
	1504	Cut	3.6 m x 1.3 m	200mm	Ovoid pit cut through 1505			mid C20th
	1505	Struct			Brick etc foundations for upper steps	None		1850s
	1506	Struct			Top newel base of upper S string	None		1850s
	1507	Struct			Top newel base of upper N string	None		1850s

Trench	Ctxt No	Туре	Width (m)	Thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No./ wt	Date
	1508	Struct			Upper N string	None		1850s
	1509	Struct			Lower N string	None		1850s
	1510	Struct			Lower newel base of upper S string	None		1850s
	1511	Struct			Upper newel base of lower S string	None		1850s
	1512	Structure			Brick foundation for S string	None		1850s
	1513	Structure			Brick foundation for N string	None		1850s
	1514	Struct			Upper S string	None		1850s
	1515	Struct			Lower S string	None		1850s
	1516	Struct			Lower newel base of lower S string	none		1850s
	1517	Struct			Lower newel base of lower N string	none		1850s
	1518	Layer	6.9 m x 0.99 m	600mm	Clayey sand levelling bedding for steps	none		1850s
	1519	Layer	6.0 m x 0.57 m	180mm	Clayey sand levelling bedding for steps	none		1850s
	1520	Layer		150mm	Garden subsoil			
	1521	Struct			Lower steps foundation	None		1850s
	1522	Layer			Post robbing deposit over steps foundation	Little CBM		1930s

APPENDIX 2 FINDS LISTING

Site Code	Material	Sherd/fragment count	Weight	Box number
GWWC 06	CBM	95	54684g	BM.01-BM.09
EX	Clay pipe	1	6g	MISC.01
	Slag	3	66g	
	Stone	9	80g	
	Copper alloy	124	0	CA,01-CA.02
	Glass	573	17434g	GL.01-GL.03
	Iron	372	0	FE.03-FE.06
	Lead	17	0	PB.01
	Plaster	42	2989g	PL.01-PL.02
	Pottery	42	1332g	P.01

APPENDIX 3 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS Site name: Witley Court, Worcestershire

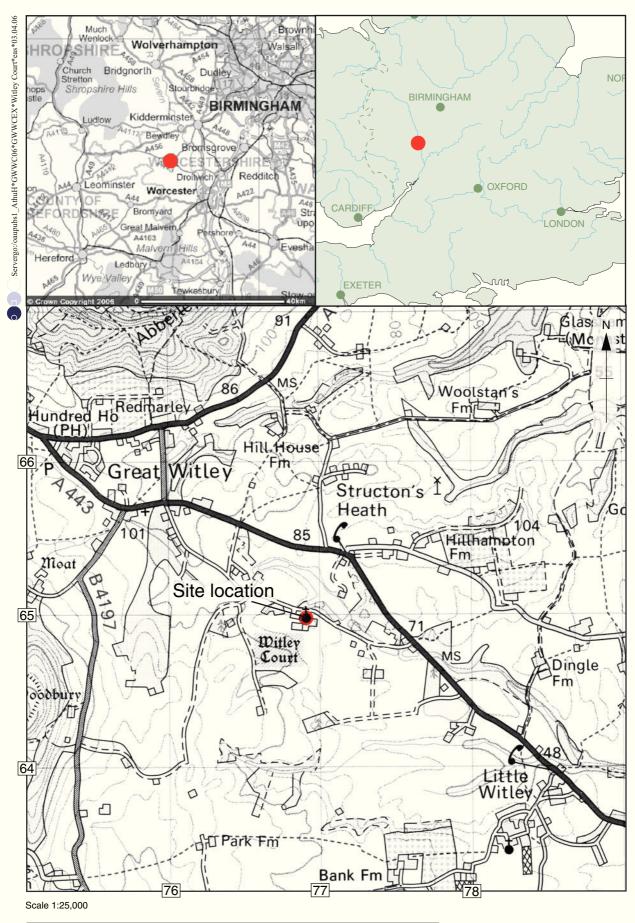
Site code: GWWC06

Grid reference: NGR SO 769 648 **Type of evaluation: Excavation**

Date and duration of project: 8/3/06-24/3/06

Summary of results: The remaining east parterre steps of Nesfield's garden were recorded, generally in a good state of preservation, and this evidence has allowed for a more detailed examination of the garden's design and construction to be obtained. Evidence of later alterations was also revealed. As in 2004, a cross section of material and objects thrown out as scrap from the house after 1937 was also obtained

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with English Heritage West Midlands Region in due course, under the following accession number:



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Figure 1: Site location

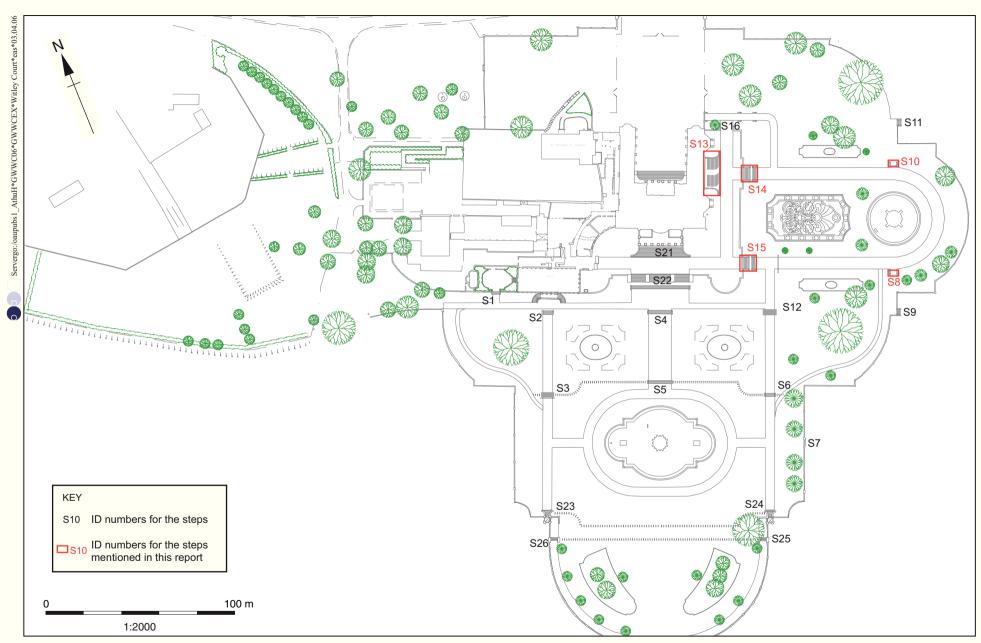
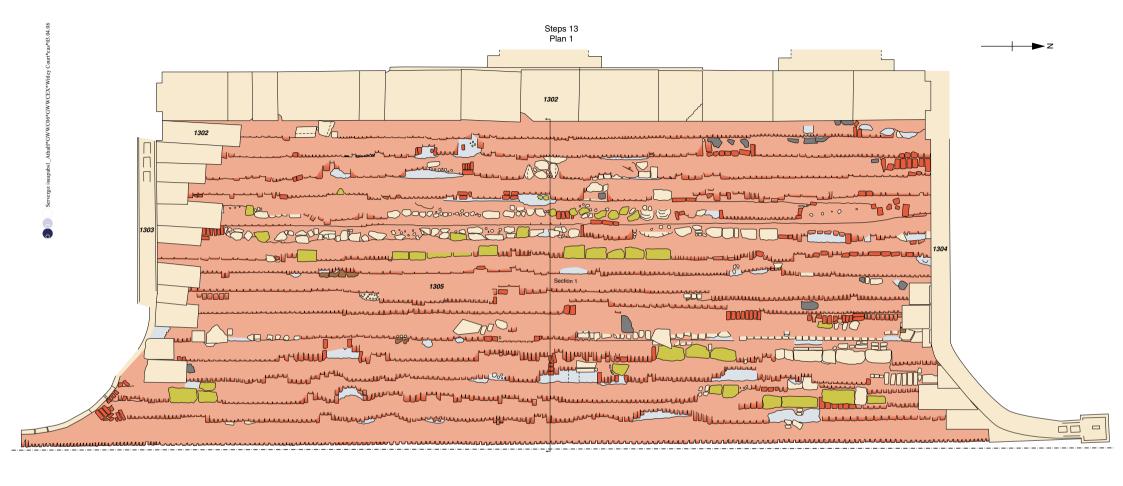


Figure 2: Trench location plan



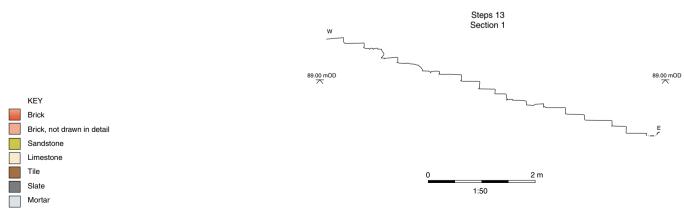
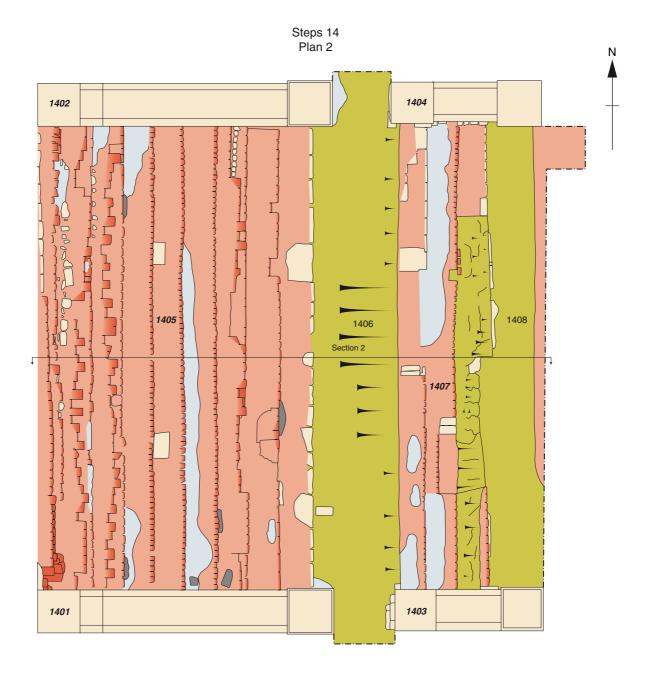
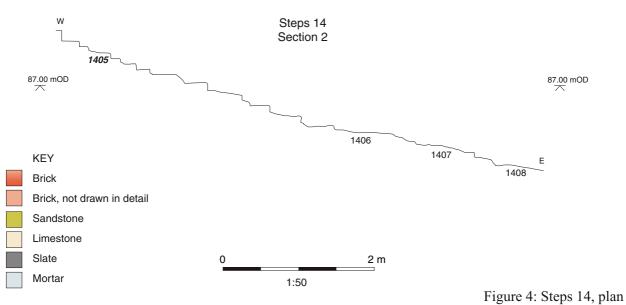
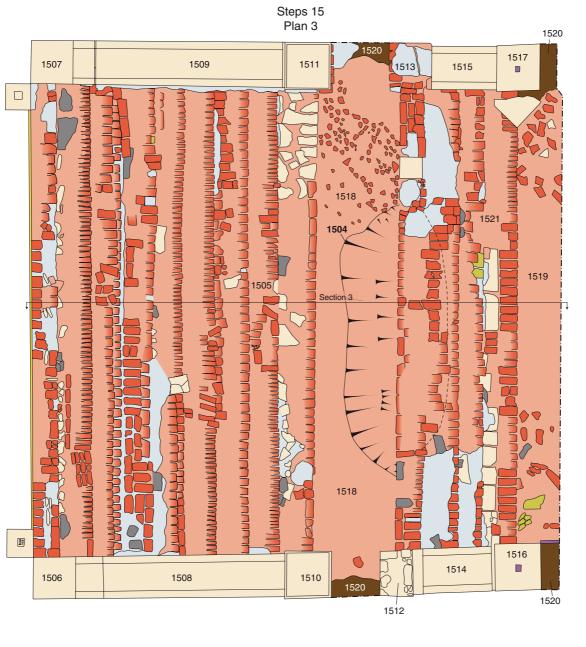


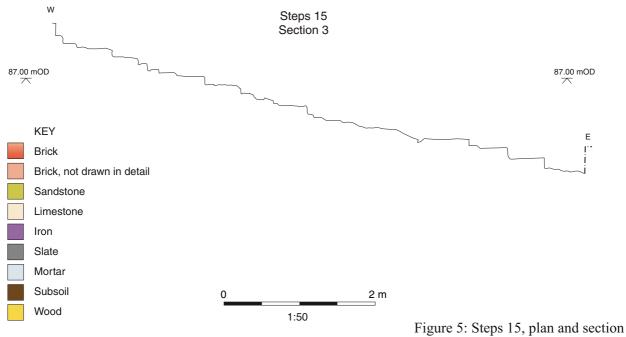
Figure 3: Steps 13, plan and section

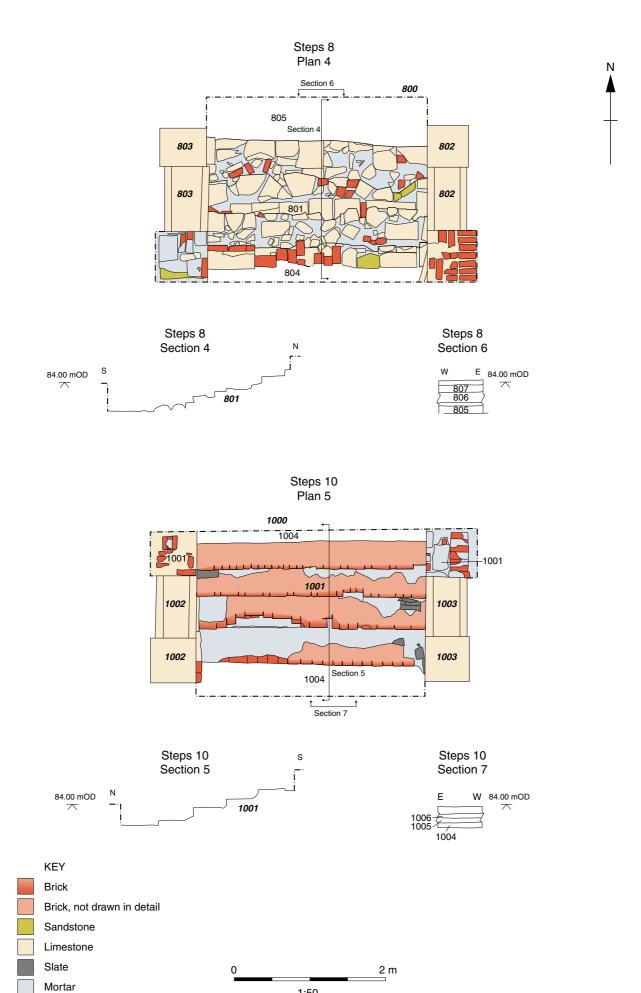






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Figure 6: Steps 8 and 10, plans and sections

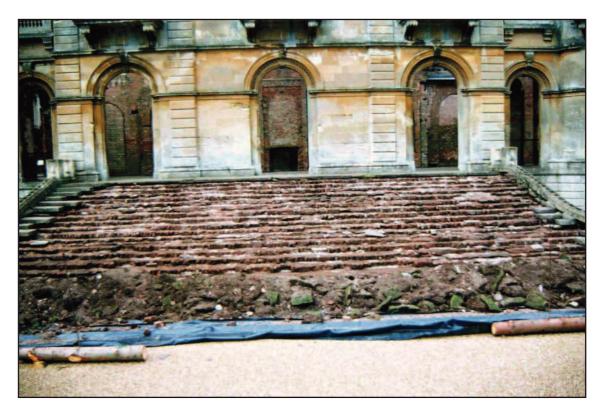


Plate 1: Steps S13 after excavation looking west.



Plate 2: Steps S14 after excavation looking west.



Plate 3: Steps S15 after excavation looking west. The iron fireplace fragment is under the rubble behind the ranging rod.



Plate 4: Steps S10 after excavation looking south-east.



Plate 5: Steps S8 after excavation looking south.