

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERVENTION
AT
THE FORMER SACK HOUSE, WANTAGE

On behalf of
Oxley Conservation

MAY 2010

REPORT FOR	Oxley Conservation Ltd 8a Friday Street Henley-on-Thames RG9 1AH
PREPARED BY	Gwilym Williams
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ENQUIRES TO	<i>John Moore Heritage Services Hill View Woodperry Road Beckley Oxfordshire OX3 9UZ Tel/Fax 01865 358300</i>
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Summary

Following an assessment of the contents of the former Sack House, Wantage by Kirsty Rodwell, John Moore Heritage Services monitored the removal of a sack-weighing machine and associated sacks from the building and ensured the deposition of such at Downland Museum. A level 1 record was also made of the structure, comprising photographs, a plan and two internal elevations.

Introduction

This report completes the previous report on the contents of the former Sack House, King's Wharf, Mill Street, Wantage. This was commissioned by Oxley Conservation consequent to an *Overview Condition Assessment Report* (2009, para 4.5, p6). The building is not listed but is of historic interest as it lies within a conservation area on a former wharf that served a branch of the Wilts and Berks Canal.

The building is currently undergoing renovation, although at the time of the previous report had a large number of objects stored within it. For its protection prior to repair the building, which is in poor condition, was fully enclosed by hoarding; there are currently no available survey drawings, although limited building recording was carried out during this intervention (Fig. 1). The interior was too congested to allow the examination of all the contents at the previous stage and it was recommended that some items would need to be cleared before examination could be completed.

History

The building, which probably dates to the early 19th century, has an enamel sign mounted on its principal elevation reading 'The West of England Sack Hiring Company Ltd'. It served as a depot for hiring sacks of a standard size to farmers, corn merchants and the like who wished to transport their goods over more than local distances by canal or railway (Wilkinson 1984). The company was set up in the earlier 19th century and took on the GWR contract for counties from Cornwall to Buckinghamshire; it was liquidated in 1920 (London Gazette 10/12/1920). Initially sacks were deemed to hold a standard four bushel measure, subsequently sacks were individually weighed and a table of weights per bushel for different crops established



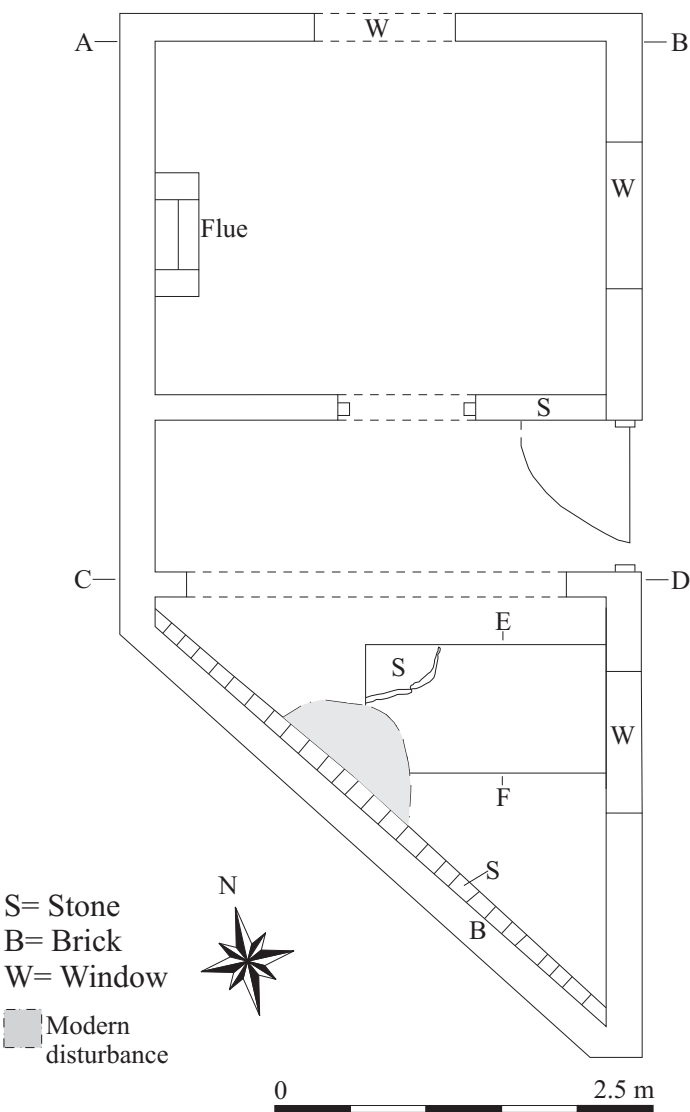
Fireplace in west internal elevation



West elevation and
stone wall in passage



Brick chamber for weighing machine
looking south



East elevation (Oxley Conservation)

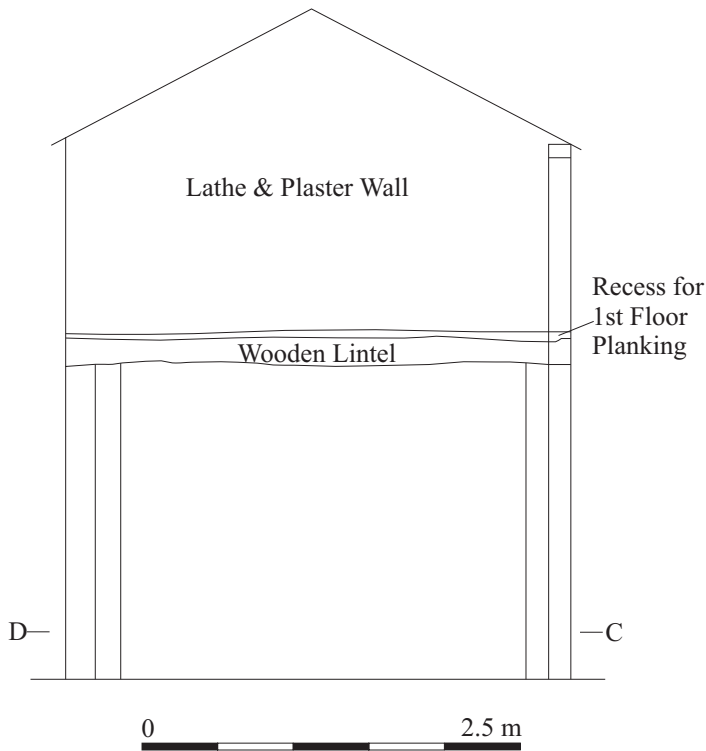
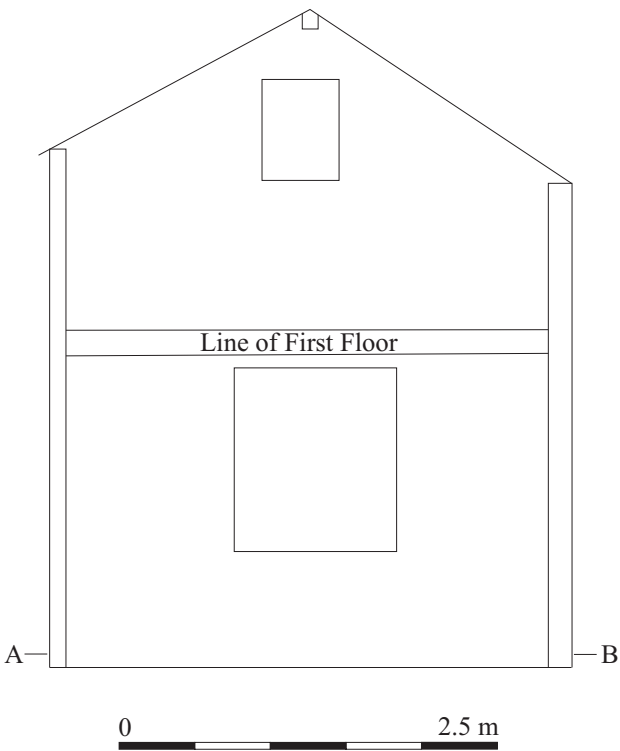


Figure 1. Plan, cross-sections and photographs

(Wilkinson 1984). The basic requirements of the building were space for sack storage and an office for conducting the hire transactions.

Description

Building (Figs. 1 & 2)

The sack house is built of brick with a Welsh slate roof and the principal elevation faces east; it bears an enamel sign reading 'The West of England Sack Hiring Company Ltd'. The rear west elevation is built off a pre-existing stone boundary wall and the south end of the building is wedge-shaped following the line of the path (Fig. 1 & 3).

There were two windows either side of the central door on the west elevation; on the north elevation, there were two windows, one at ground floor level, and the other at the first floor. The central door lead into a passage with two rooms on the north side of the building, one on the ground floor and a second on the first floor. The internal wall of the northern end of the building was built of cut stone. The wall extended half the height of the building. The ceiling, which extended over the passage, had been removed previously. The north ground floor room had been an office and the room on the first floor was a storage loft, open to the roof. The office had a fireplace in the west wall and plastered walls and ceiling above a boarded wooden dado. The ladder against the west wall probably provided access to the first floor room (Fig 2).

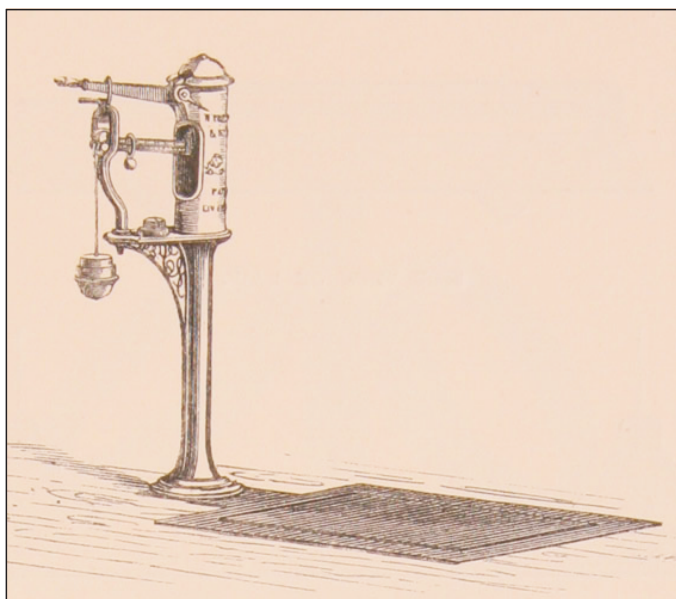
On the other side of the passage there was a wide opening through into the triangular south end of the building where the walls were plastered and the space is open to the roof. The floor was slabbed. Beneath the south window was a brick-lined pit, with a stone step, which probably functioned as an access chamber for the sack weighing machine. Due to the unstable nature of the west wall below the window this was not examined extensively. It appeared that the pit may well extend beyond the external face of the west wall although this could not be confirmed.

Contents (Fig. 2)

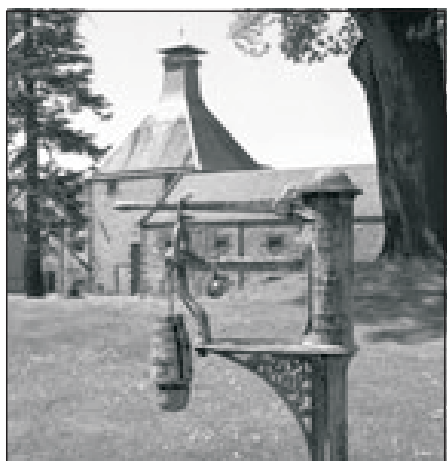
An archaeological presence was maintained during the clearance of the building, primarily to establish whether there were any further parts of the Pooley weighing machine.



Weighing machine by Pooley & Son
propped against south wass of Sack House



1862 London Exhibition catalogue



Aberfeldy distillery
(Perthshire; RCAHMS, C/35428)



Advertisement in Kelly's Directory, 1884



Malvern station platform (Worcs; geograph)



Photograph taken during assessment
showing ladder to first floor

Figure 2. Illustrations of weighing machines; photograph of ladder

Stacked in the acute-angled corner at the south end of the building were lengths of timber, iron and old guttering. Following removal of the stacked material under archaeological supervision, it was inspected and those pieces of metalwork and timber which had a potential archaeological interest were set aside for the Downland Museum. This comprised a further hessian sack, chains, and planking with iron teeth. None of the material, except for a third hessian sack (in addition to those noted below) was retained by the museum.

Next to the door there was a piece of cast iron machinery comprising a columnar base, a narrow platform at right angles supported by an ornamental bracket and a cylindrical upper section with a moveable arm (Fig 2). The cylinder had raised lettering; H POOLEY & SON PATENTEES LIVERPOOL around a coat of arms. This was identified as a weighing machine (see below). Pooleys were a firm of mechanical engineers founded in Liverpool in the 18th century who began to make platform scales c.1835 and came to dominate the market for weighing machines throughout the 19th and into the 20th century (gracesguide); and were extensively used by railway companies. This object was a platform weighing-machine, as illustrated in trade catalogues (Fig 2) and preserved at Malvern station (Worcs; geograph) and Aberfeldy distillery (Perthshire; RCAHMS). Behind it was an old sack. The weighing machine and sack were deposited at the Downland Museum.

In the passage was an assortment of guttering and scaffold poles and an old wooden ladder-type staircase missing several treads and out of position. Below this was the remnant of a second sack containing a quantity of large old handmade square-section nails. In the office was an assortment of 20th century building materials, an iron bed frame, a modern doorframe and a 19th century boarded door decayed at one end. Only the sack was accepted for deposition.

When the floor in this corner of the building was cleared it was examined to establish that the weighing machine was mounted here and the function of the channel. A record should be made of the fabric.

References

Geograph; www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1427478

Gracesguide; www.gracesguide.co.uk/wiki/1862_London_Exhibition:_Catalogue:_Class_V.:_H._Pooley_and_Son

Oxley Conservation, May 2009 *The Former Sack House, King's Wharf, Mill Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, Overview Condition Assessment Report*

Wilkinson, R, (1984) *Sacks for Hire*, Vale and Downland Museum; Local History Series www.wantage.com/museum/Local_History/local_history.php