

Castle House 12 September 2012

Somerset Buildings Preservation Trust has appointed Coombes as the main contractor for the refurbishment work which began early in July. Scaffolding has been erected by agreement with the Castle Hotel, and after some discussion a good (not to say vital!) arrangement for access, parking and waste management was also negotiated with the Hotel. This entailed a new temporary opening in the southern brick boundary wall, which is essentially modern and was in poor repair in any case. Work has progressed at the expected rate, and the steering group has the view that there are no particular concerns arising so far.



Removal of modern fabric and opening up have revealed some structural problems requiring straightforward intervention that was not detailed previously but not outside expectations, and on the other hand restorable parquet floors have been unexpectedly found that mean significant saving of new flooring that was planned originally. The previously blocked external doorway through the South curtain wall into the lobby from the moat courtyard was unblocked as planned but unsound jambs needed to be rebuilt. This doorway will be essential to the use of the Vivat tenants, and a further blocked doorway from this room has been found in the old partition at the foot of the stairs which will also prove a very safe and convenient separate route for the tenants. Further west in the curtain wall the temporary removal of the Elizabethan panelling in the crockery cupboard has interestingly revealed the back of a bread oven, and also that the stonework above was dangerously unsupported!

Stripping of recent wallpaper has revealed many layers of historic papers, stencilled painting, generations of plasterwork, doorways and alterations. Inspection gives the impression that the building has even greater fragility than anyone had anticipated, but that the builders are taking intense personal interest in the work to a man, that immense care is

being taken to preserve old fabric where possible, and that the site is safe, tidy and well managed. The Architect and Engineer in particular provide a capable confidence that all is well. Archaeologists can be seen recording the fabric as it appears with attendance by students, and other students are securing an extensive photographic record.

My impression to date is that SANHS should feel greatly reassured at this point that a wonderful rescue of this part of its estate is under way in the nick of time. An enjoyable Open Day last Saturday, 8 September, was held to which SANHS members were also invited. Over a hundred visitors signed in and unexpected donations came to £50. A visit for SANHS members for closer inspection is anticipated in the near future. Drawings and schedule of works are available to see if requested.

Anthony Bruce