A medieval manor house rediscovered: excavations at Longforth Farm, Wellington

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A MEDIEVAL MANOR HOUSE REDISCOVERED: EXCAVATIONS AT LONGFORTH FARM, WELLINGTON

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Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Bloor Homes Ltd to undertake excavations at Longforth Farm, Wellington, Somerset (NGR 311403 122148), in advance of proposed large-scale housing development (Fig. 1). The excavations, carried out in 2012 and 2013, represented an element within a staged programme of archaeological work that began in 2010. This included a geophysical survey and a trial trench evaluation, the former not very informative and the latter revealing only a small number of prehistoric and medieval ditches and pits.

The earliest find during the subsequent excavation was a large Terminal Upper Palaeolithic blade made from Greensand chert, in very good condition, which appears to belong to a Long Blade tradition, dating to around 9500–8500 BC. A concentration of Mesolithic flint blades was found around a former stream channel, perhaps the focus of a later temporary camp site. The first settlement was in the Middle Bronze Age, when several ditches were dug to define fields or enclosures. No buildings were found, but the focus appears to have been another stream channel. A dump of burnt stone may have come from a cooking hearth, and pottery included a large part of a Trevisker Ware vessel. In the Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age, further agricultural settlement was represented by a double-ditched enclosure, field system and trackway probably associated with raising animals and stock control.

Surprisingly perhaps, there was virtually no evidence for Iron Age and Roman activity on the site, and nothing of Anglo-Saxon date.

The principal discovery was the remains of a previously unknown high status medieval building complex which lay approximately 1km north of the centre of Wellington, by the road to Nynehead and overlooking the River Tone to the north. This complex is thought to have been a manor house, with the surviving foundations indicating that this covered an area measuring approximately 40m east–west by 30m north–south (Fig. 1). Although heavily robbed, key elements within the stone building have been fairly certainly identified through comparison with other medieval manor house sites. There is no indication of a precursor or indeed any significant earlier medieval activity at the site and, furthermore, there is only limited evidence for any construction sequence or alterations amongst the various building remains. It appears from the plan at least, with one exception, to largely represent a single main phase of construction.

The evidence we have suggests that the hall was at first floor level and faced north, entered by way of a flight of steps from the forecourt. A buttress on the south wall may indicate the location of a fireplace, and the ground floor space was probably used for storage. To the west of the hall and also at first floor level was the solar, the principal chamber which provided a private apartment and bedroom. Connected to this at the west end of the building was a garderobe, while to the south was a flight of steps providing access to the courtyard to the rear. A small private chapel may also have been located in the south-west corner on the first floor of the building. To the east of the hall were the service rooms, including the buttery and pantry, and this area may also have provided additional accommodation for visitors. The arrangement of foundations at the east end suggests that the original service area may have been doubled in size by adding a further wing to the existing building.

At the west end, the size and construction of the ground floor block of the garderobe (which survived more intact than the other elements of the building) shows a relatively sophisticated arrangement (Fig. 2), designed to be periodically flushed by rainwater via a series of drains, though it would also have required regular cleaning out.

A forecourt lay to the north of the principal building and to the south was a courtyard with at least one ancillary building, also built largely in stone, and a possible detached kitchen. To the east was a complex of enclosures and pits and beyond this a fishpond.

The limited environmental evidence included threshing waste from the enclosure ditches and charred plant remains indicative of processed grain from the service range. The faunal assemblage is also small, but there is certain to have been a combination of arable agriculture and animal husbandry. Unfortunately it is the nature of many such high status sites that they were kept relatively

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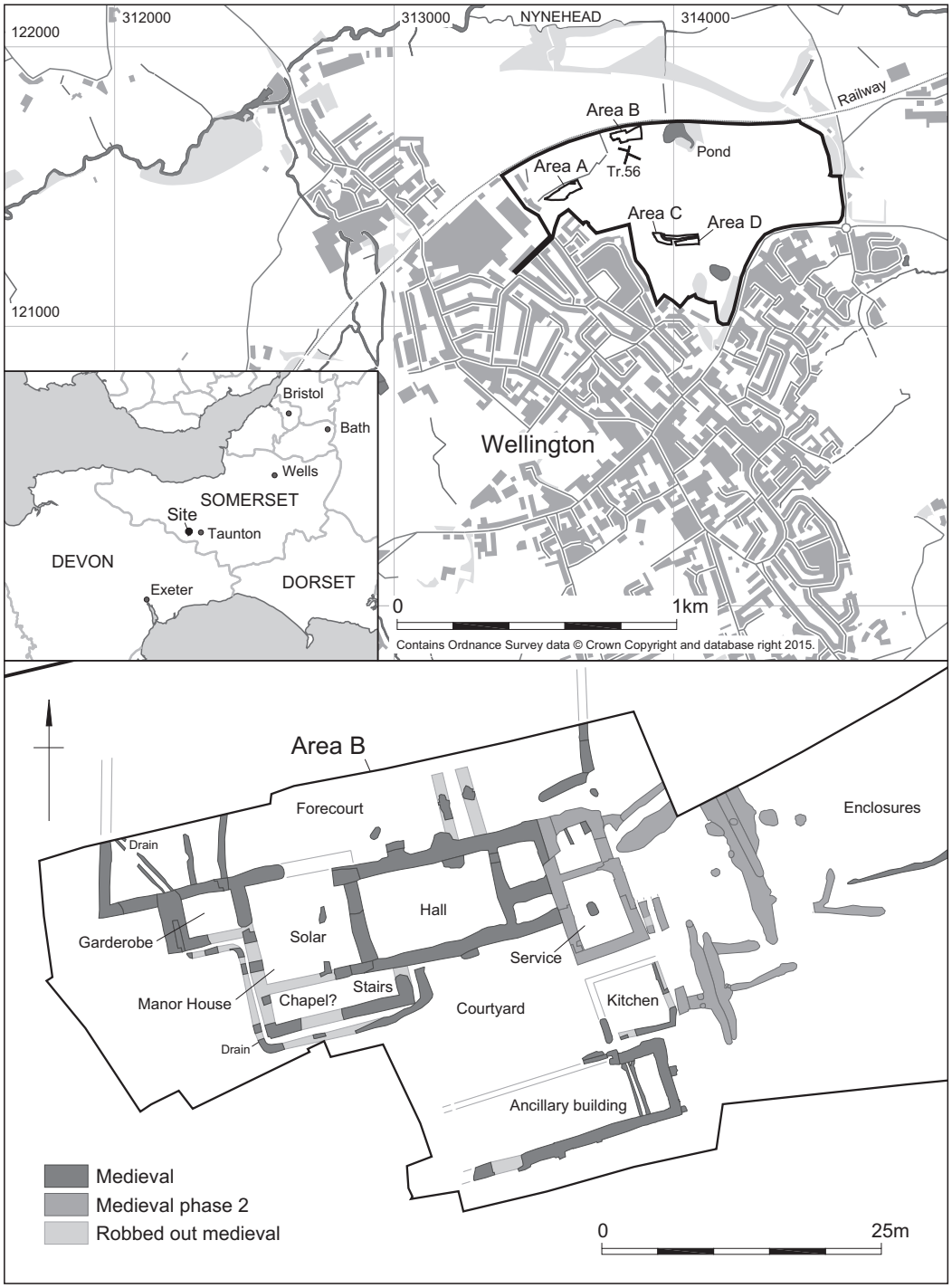


Fig. 1 Site location plan showing archaeological investigation areas and plan of manor house complex

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Fig. 2 Detail of garderobe block at south-west corner of the manor house. View from south-east

clean, with domestic debris disposed of on middens, of which no trace has survived, or directly on to fields, and the few pits produced very little.

There was a restricted range and number of medieval finds, but together these suggest that occupation spanned the late 12th/early 13th century to the late 14th/early 15th century. There was a notable group of medieval roof furniture and floor tiles, the parallels for the latter in Somerset all being from ecclesiastical sites, in particular Glastonbury Abbey but also Wells Cathedral. However, documentary research has (so far) failed to identify the owners and any records relating specifically to this important building. One possibility is that it belonged to the Bishops of Bath and Wells, and was perhaps abandoned around the end of the 14th century when they may have moved their court to within the nearby and then relatively new market town of Wellington.

A notable success of the project was the exceptional level of local interest generated by the discovery of a previously unknown medieval manor house. In response to this a series of events was organised over a single week in early July 2014, including a community open day, school workshops and tours for local groups, and this proved to be extremely popular, with local, national and even international interest. Over 250 children from four local schools took part in the on-site workshops, and more than 1400 people attended the open day.

The full report on the archaeological investigations is available as a Wessex Archaeology occasional paper – *A Medieval Manor House Rediscovered. Excavations at Longforth Farm, Wellington, Somerset* (Flaherty *et al*. 2016), and the project archive will be deposited with Somerset County Museum, Taunton, under the accession code TTNCM 90/2012.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT CANNINGTON COURT, CANNINGTON, 2013–14

Steve Thompson

Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by EDF Energy to undertake a programme of archaeological works, comprising evaluation, excavation and watching brief, at Cannington Court, Cannington, Somerset, centred on National Grid Reference (NGR) 325745 139570 (Fig. 1). This was carried out prior to and during the renovation of the Grade I listed former Priory and the restoration of the grounds by EDF Energy for a new training facility. The work followed an earlier programme of archaeological evaluation and historical building recording (the latter undertaken by McLaughlin and Ross llp).

Domesday records that in 1066 Cannington was a royal manor with an estate belonging to Cannington church, this church, possibly of Anglo-Saxon origin, being replaced by the current St Mary's Church in the 14th century. In 1138 Robert de Courcy founded Cannington Priory for Benedictine nuns. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 the Priory was granted by Henry VIII to Edward Rogers and his family who greatly altered the Priory to create a grand Elizabethan Manor House, before it passed to the Clifford family towards the end of the 17th century.

The excavations in 2013–14 were concentrated to the west of Cannington Court, the former lay wing of the Priory, comprising four ranges with medieval origins arranged around a rectangular courtyard (Fig. 1). The lay wing was situated to the north of the probable site of the Priory church, which may have had a small cloister to the north, and been subsequently linked to the north side of the chancel of the later St Mary's Church. The main excavation areas also lay immediately in front of the new, Elizabethan entrance to Cannington Court. These excavations were augmented by a number of watching brief areas both inside and outside the former Priory lay wing which later formed the core of the Elizabethan house.

The excavations were successful in identifying several phases of activity related to the foundation and development of the Priory, as well as its subsequent post-Dissolution use. The earliest archaeological remains appear to predate the Priory foundation and comprised a series of small, 11th to 12th-century pits and a ditch which may have formed part of an enclosure surrounding the postulated site of a Late Saxon church, the probable precursor to St Mary's.

The early ditch was cut into by a lime kiln, part of the ditch fill being removed to create the two opposing flues of the kiln. This was probably one of several such kilns located in the immediately vicinity of the Priory lay wing, built to supply lime for use in the construction of the religious complex.

A small part of a floor of encaustic tiles was exposed during renovation work at the south-east corner of the existing Cannington Court building. This floor, of probable 14th-century date, is likely to have lain towards the east end of the Priory church or within an adjacent chapter house, corroborating the suggested location for the church.

Within the northern wing of Cannington Court

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