

Excavations of the Lodge on Lodge Hill, Westbury-sub-Mendip

Barry Lane

Extracted from the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for 2016.

Volume 160

© 2017 Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society and the authors.

Produced in Great Britain by Short Run Press, Exeter.

ISSN 0081-2056

EXCAVATION OF THE LODGE ON LODGE HILL, WESTBURY-SUB-MENDIP, SOMERSET

Barry Lane, Westbury Society

SUMMARY

Excavation produced structural and pottery evidence of a deer park hunting lodge at the centre of the deer park created by Bishop John of Tours in the 12th century. Sixty sherds (55% of the ceramic assemblage) of a lobed cup or cups of Tudor Green Border ware of late 16-17th century date were recovered. This pottery was fashionable at the Inns of Court in London. Documentary evidence links the local Rodney family with the Middle Temple from 1585–1608. A George Rodney (1508–1586), the youngest son of Sir John Rodney, moved into the village from neighbouring Rodney Stoke to establish himself there as an independent gentleman, and leased part

of the deer park from the bishop, making him the possible builder, with his son Sir John or grandson Sir Edward, the likely visitors. Sherds of several other glazed medieval jugs of 13-14th century date suggest that the site may well have been used for a similar purpose by earlier bishops. Indeed, the find of two flint debitage flakes may indicate that the site on a small promontory with spectacular views overlooking the fields and moors, was used as a look out point for hunting parties from prehistoric times.

LOCATION

Lodge Hill lies about one kilometre to the south west of the church of Westbury-sub-Mendip village.

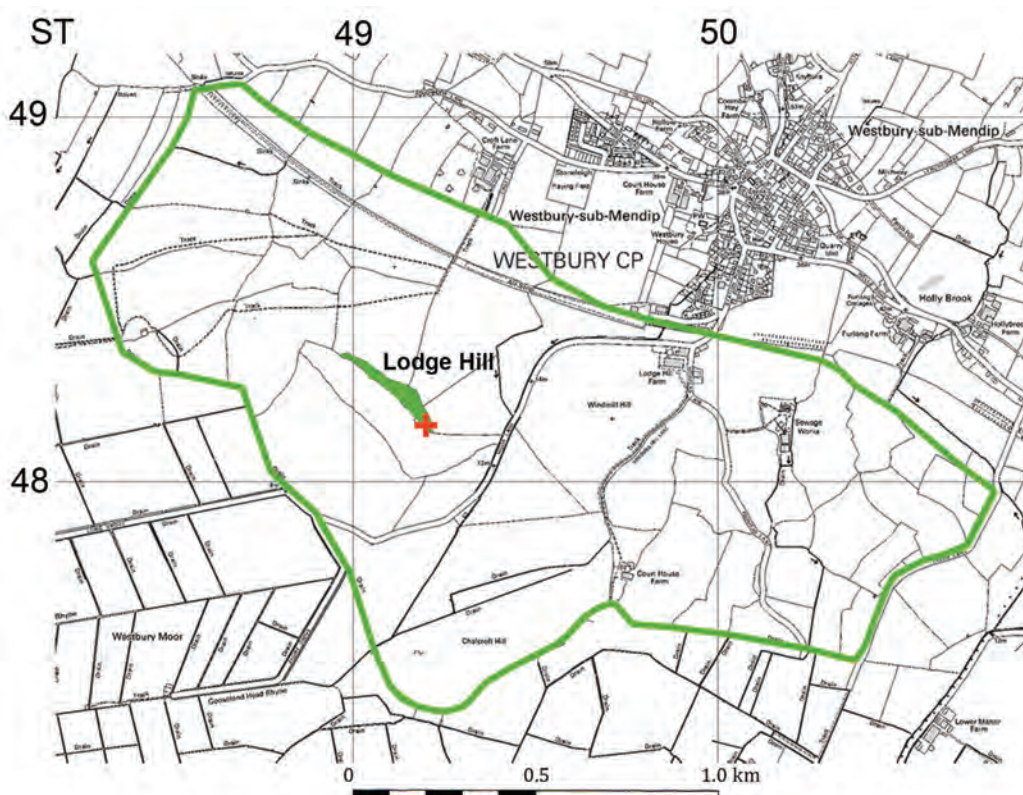


Fig. 1 Location of Lodge Hill, south west of the village, with the lodge site marked with a red cross. Lodge Hill Wood is coloured green and the medieval deer park boundary shown in green. Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100048971

The lodge site excavated lies on a small promontory at the south east end of the hill at ST 491 481.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The manor of Westbury was held by Bishop Giso of Wells at the time of Domesday and a deer park was created in the 12th century, probably by Bishop John of Tours (Nott 1996). The boundary of the park was investigated and established by Mendip caver and archaeologist Christopher Hawkes in 1974, as part of a parish survey for European Heritage Year, see Fig. 1 above. At the same time the visible cornerstones of the 'lodge' were photographed by J.R. Ridges and included an album of the history of the village called "A Doorway to Westbury-sub-Mendip" produced in 1976. Both the park boundary and 'lodge' building were later added to the Historic Environment Record with PRNs 24861 and 24860 respectively. Three prominent cornerstones of the building were visible in 2009 when a measured survey of the site was undertaken by the Westbury Society.

EXCAVATION AIMS AND FIELDWORK

The aims of the excavation were to recover any artefacts that might enable a date or function of the building, indicated by the surviving structures, to be identified and to assess the nature of the structure itself. Hand excavation took place over the period 18 March to 3 June 2015 during a fairly dry period. A trench measuring 5m by 2.5m was laid out and parts excavated to the natural underlying yellowish Mercia Mudstones below.

Plan, contexts and artefacts recovered

Excavation revealed a more or less right-angled corner of a wall, mostly of two or three courses over a stepped out foundation on the eastern side. Under the southern wall the foundation stones were large – 700mm wide by 300mm high and decreased in size towards the north-east. The wall on the southern side was about 600mm wide and on the eastern side 550mm wide, with the step about 200-250mm wide. The overall external dimensions of the rectangular structure, based upon the upstanding visible corner stones, were approximately 5.20m by 8.65m.

Both walls were rubble built of the locally available Black Rock limestone with lime-stabilised



Fig. 2 Excavation and conjectural plan of the lodge building

earth binding the structure together. Inside the building the floor was an irregular surface of the underlying yellowish mudstone, with no evidence of any prepared floor. The same geology formed the natural bedrock outside of the building. One side only of a doorway was identified on the eastern wall; the other jamb had collapsed, or had been robbed, and its location was not clear. There were slight indications in the bedrock that the doorway may

have been about 1100mm wide. Externally there were two small areas of in situ lime mortar plaster on the face of the wall close to the southern corner, and some larger pieces of detached plaster were found inside the building showing the impressions of the joints between stones on one side and flat on the other. A small quantity of grey-green slate was also found within the building rubble.

Only two archaeological contexts were observed across the site – the topsoil of about 20cm depth and a second of stone wall tumble inside and outside the walls. This tumble consisted of small to large sized rough limestone rubble stones mixed with an earthy soil containing flecks of lime. This context often also included whole garden snail shells (*Cornu aspersum*) which had survived uncrushed between the collapsed stones.



Fig. 3 Three sherds of a copper-splashed slip-coated sgraffito ware possibly from East Somerset of similar date to the Border ware

Finds

Two small flint debitage flakes were found in amongst the tumble; one white and heavily patinated, the other translucent black. Neither showed secondary working nor any features that were dateable.



Fig. 4 Fragments of one of the lobed Border ware cups from the excavation. Photograph by Brian Irwin

Twenty fragments of handmade iron nails, with a total weight of 87gms were also found in the topsoil or tumble, which suggests that whatever structure they were part of pre-dates the introduction of industrial machine-made nails in about 1820.

Over 340gms of ceramic fragments were found of which 98% were glazed medieval jug and cup forms. The unglazed sherds were not dateable, but the glazed sherds fell into two distinct groups – 9 sherds of a single green-glazed jug, see Fig. 3 above, and the rest fragments of one or two lobed cups of Tudor Green Border ware of late 15th to 17th century date (Pearce), Fig. 4 below.

In addition, two sherds of a mottled green glazed 13-14th century Bristol Redcliffe ware jug were found in the topsoil about 10m south of the excavation (not illustrated).



Fig. 5 An example of a lobed cup of Border Ware from Pearce Fig. 34

Bone/antlers

A total of 42 grams of bones, including one sheep's tooth, were found. Most of the fragments were too small for clear identification, but 18 gms were parts of young deer antlers, species not identified. (Steve Toft, pers. comm).

INTERPRETATION

There is also very little evidence about the sizes and construction of lodges, apart from the most lavish. This structure on Lodge Hill was built on a 1 in 9 slope towards the south, at which end substantial foundation stones had been dug about 300-400mm into the underlying mudstone to provide increased stability, showing considerable sophistication in construction. Although no internal floor surface was found it is possible that any rammed earth that may have been used to create a level surface may well have dissolved back into the natural soils around. The amount of tumbled stone that

was excavated would not have been sufficient to construct walls of any height indicating two possibilities. Either that the walls had not been very high, or that considerable robbing of the stone may have taken place after the collapse or demolition of the building. The latter is perhaps unlikely given that the nearest buildings in the village are almost a kilometre away, and the site itself fairly inaccessible. The evidence of the in situ plaster on the external wall down to foundation level indicates something fairly special. It seems likely then that the building had low walls on which a wooden structure had been erected. The top and upper slopes of Lodge Hill still support coppiced woodland today and almost certainly did so in the medieval period. Timber for building any superstructure would have been readily available.

The hand made nails could have been used to construct the wooden walls and roofing structure. The slate found may have been used for the roof, although reed thatch would also have been readily available from the nearby moor. The grey-green slate that was found visually matches samples from the quarry at Treborough, near Dunster, and which is known to have been available to the bishops and others from the medieval period (Rodwell, 30). However, the amount of slate recovered was far too small to suggest a complete roof of the material. Again, robbing may account for this. The slate and lime wall mortar strongly suggest that the building was substantial and important, but none of this evidence offers any clear date for the construction of the building. The crude lime-rich mortar containing <12mm aggregate of angular grey carboniferous limestone and soft red calcareous mudstone, and coal ash could be of 13/14th date, but would not be out of place in a 16/17th century building (Peter Ellis, Rose of Jericho Ltd., pers. comm.).

The glazed medieval pottery indicates relatively high status visitors to the site, although such visits may not have been frequent, given the small number of vessels identified. However, they do span several centuries. According to Tony Nott's research he found no documentary evidence for elite hunting parties in his research on its history (pers. comm.).

The dating of the Border ware lobed cups is broadly 1480-1700 (Pearce). The potters at Farnborough, where these fine lobed cups were produced, began to concentrate on their production after they received regular large orders from the Inns of Court in London. By the 1550s the use of 'green pots' had been adopted by all of the Inns, replacing wooden mugs and ashen cups (Pearce

167). The nearby family of Rodneys, living in Westbury and in the neighbouring parish of Rodney Stoke, had strong connections with the Middle Temple. George Rodney of Rodney Stoke (1569–1601) was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1585, but died without issue. Another George Rodney (1508–1586), son of Sir John Rodney (1460–1527), had moved into Westbury in the late 16th century. His son Sir John Rodney (1540–1612) had been admitted to the Middle Temple in 1571, and his son Edward was admitted in 1608. Writing in 1655 about his experience there this Edward recorded that “he saluted only the law affare off, and misspent his time” (SWHT, DD/TB Box 20/1). Furthermore, three of his sisters married lawyers who had also been admitted to the Middle Temple – Sir Theodore Newton, John Trenchard and James Kirton.

When George Rodney (1508–86), second son of Sir John Rodney of Rodney Stoke, moved to Westbury he took over the farm immediately to the south of the church, now called Westbury House. He also leased part of the bishop’s deer park in Westbury which he could look out over to the south and probably upgraded the farmhouse. The lawn in front of it appears to have been laid out as a bowling green, and a nearby field set aside for archery practice. This is still called The Butts. These pastimes were those expected of a gentleman at this time and a hunting lodge would have been appropriate for him too.

George also had a model in that his father, Sir John Rodney, had extended his own deer park in 1516 in Rodney Stoke (Bond, 58) and later built himself an elaborate Elizabethan summer-house or guest house overlooking this park (Somerset Historic Environment Record PRN 21934). After George’s death in 1586 his son Sir John Rodney “bought in ye other partes of Westbury parke, and tooke a new lease of ye whole parke, and certaine demesne lands for one hundred and twenty yeares” (SWHT, DD/TB Box 20/1). Sir John moved to Pilton where he also leased the deer park there.

The Rodney family therefore had experience of the drinking culture of the Inns of Court, where they would have seen and admired the fashionable lobed drinking cups. They probably brought some

down to Westbury and used them at a hunting party at the lodge on Lodge Hill. It therefore appears very likely that the lodge building and lobed cups fall within the period 1580–1620.

The presence of two flint flakes confirms that even prehistoric hunters valued this spot for its views over the landscape and the animals there.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence suggests that the site was an ideal site to be used as a look-out spot for animals for several thousand years, and that socially elite groups visited the spot to watch, or participate in, the hunting of deer for the bishop’s table and later for the Rodney family. The lodge building is undated but was probably constructed in the late -16th or early 17th century, when the Rodney family set out to impress others with their wealth and social standing. The 550-600mm wall thicknesses are consistent with such a date. It would also seem certain that the building gave rise to the name of the hill, Lodge Hill, which is first recorded on a map of the Park Manor of Westbury dated 1759 (SWHT, DD/CC/T/11686).

REFERENCES

- Bond, J., 1998. Somerset Parks and Gardens. A Landscape History. Somerset Books.
 Nott, A. W. G., 1996. The Park of the Bishop of Bath and Wells at Westbury Somerset MA thesis, University of Bristol.
 Pearce, J., 1992. Post-Medieval Pottery in London, 1500-1700: Border Wares. HMSO, London.
 Rodwell, W., 2001. Wells Cathedral, English Heritage Archaeological Report 21

SWHT indicates original documents in the South West Heritage Trust, Taunton.

A full copy of the excavation report has been deposited with the HER

Sadly, Barry Lane died before this volume went to press.