

Excavation Report - Old Hall, Castle Field, Erpingham

April 18th and 25th, 2015

Background

It has long been known that the field next to the Village Hall in Erpingham known as 'Castle Field' (Fig. 1), contains evidence of a medieval moat with the remains of a medieval flint and tile bastion and retaining wall. A section of this wall can still be seen in the southeast corner of the site (Fig. 2 and Plates 1-2). The site, known principally as 'Old Hall' is thought to be the location of the manor house where Sir Thomas Erpingham was born.

This report outlines the results of a geophysical survey which was carried out at the site a few weeks prior to an archaeological excavation on Saturday 18th April (10am-1pm) and Saturday 25th April (10am-1pm).

Aims

The main aims of the survey and excavation were:

1. To locate the outer walls of the site on the northern, southern and western sides and see how these relate to the standing remains in the southeast corner of the field.
2. To be able to estimate the size of the site.
3. To identify whether a moat existed on all sides of the site.
4. To see what remains of any inner structures and recover finds relating to the domestic occupation of the site.
5. To find some dating evidence for the site.

Strategy

A geophysical survey was carried out by David Crease and two colleagues from the Loddon History Group prior to the excavation. The survey showed a linear feature running roughly north-south along the fence line of the field and possibly a return wall running west-east adjacent to the Village Hall (Fig. 3). These are assumed to be the west and north walls and/or moat of the site, something which would need to be confirmed through archaeological excavation. The survey did not reveal any obvious features in the middle of the field.

In the first week of the excavation (Saturday 18th April), four trenches were initially opened in the field (see Fig. 4) to try to pick up the moat and outer wall of the site (Trenches 1, 2 and 3) based on the line of the existing remains in the southeast corner of the field (see Plates 1-2), and to determine whether there are any remains of domestic occupation in the middle of the site (Trench 4). A further trench (Trench 5) was opened during the morning in the middle of the site, perpendicular to Trench 4.

The second week (Saturday 25th April) focused on anomalies seen in the geophysical survey. Three further trenches were opened (Trenches 6, 7 and 8) and Trenches 1 and 3 were re-investigated (Fig. 4).

Further excavation was carried out subsequently (Friday 1st May) by a small group to try to confirm the full extent of the site at the northern end of the field (Trenches 9 and 10).

The disturbed plough soil (c.40 cm) was removed from all of the trenches using a digger prior to excavation.

Trench 1

Trench 1 (measuring 1.4m x 8m) was opened on the eastern side of the site. It was hoped that this trench would pick up the wall and moat based on the line of the existing remains of wall in the southeast corner of the site. Finds of tile, a nail and some later material was found below the plough soil. Approx. 50cm below ground surface traces of mortar were found in the soil with some being attached to loose flints. At a depth of 90cm traces of wall were found although time prevented us investigating this further.

The trench was re-opened the second week. A larger part of the wall and moat was revealed. The remains of the wall consisted of flints and mortar (Plates 6 and 7) and a few pieces of tile, and a course of knapped flints was revealed near the base (see Plate 8). The moat on the outside of the wall was clearly seen as a darker layer and bottomed out at a depth of approximately 2m (Plate 9).

The finds from Trench 1 included brick and roof tile (2.65kg), as well as six pieces of what appeared to be floor tile, lumps of mortar, two nails, some bone and shell, pottery and a piece of clay pipe (Plates 10-12). A silver coin (Plates 13 and 14) was found in the topsoil adjacent to this trench, although the date of this is yet to be confirmed.

Trench 2

Trench 2 (1.4m x 7m) was placed east-west extending from the fence line towards the middle of the site. The plough soil was removed revealing a thick layer of undisturbed clay. It was hoped that this area of the site would not have been too disturbed by the plough because it was close to the fence line, but during the excavation very few finds came from this trench and it was closed down.

The finds from this trench consisted of a few pieces of roof tile.

Trench 3

Trench 3 (1.4m x 10m) was placed north-south adjacent to the fence line, hoping to pick up the return of the standing wall (running east-west) preserved behind the vegetation in the southeast corner of the site (Plates 3 and 4). The finds from this trench consisted mostly of roof tile. At a depth of 1.1m a concentration of tile was discovered, possibly indicating the upper layer of a robbed out wall, although time prevented further investigation. This trench was re-opened the following week. The wall was found 1.5m below the ground surface and was 0.4m at its widest part (Plates 15, 16 and 17). It consisted of rounded flints, some brick and mortar. The moat was clearly visible on the outside of the wall.

The finds included brick and roof tile (10.65kg), lumps of mortar, two nails, two pieces of clay pipe, and eight sherds of pottery (Plates 18-21).

Trench 4

Trench 4 (1.4m x 3m) was opened in the middle of the field at the highest point of the site. Approximately 30cm of topsoil was removed. No structural features were found and the finds seemed to be concentrated in the top 60cm of soil.

Finds included brick and roof tile (1.7kg), a quantity of bone and teeth, three shells, three sherds of pottery, including one large piece (see Plate 23) and a single piece of glass (Plates 22-25).

Trench 5

Trench 5 (1.4m x 2.5m) was opened perpendicular to Trench 4 and extended down the slope to the west. No structural features were found in this trench.

The finds from this trench included a large quantity of roof tile and floor tile (2.55kg), a number of metal artefacts and some pottery (Plates 26 and 27).

Trench 6

Trench 6 (1.4m x 20m) and was positioned to take account of anomalies seen in the geophysical survey, namely a light linear feature which was presumed to be the moat and wall on the western side of the site. The remains of a wall were found 1.13m below the ground surface and, at its widest, measured 1.6m across (see Plate 28). The wall consisted of rounded flints, brick and mortar. The moat lying adjacent to the wall could clearly be seen as a much darker layer (Plates 28-31) and was found to a depth of 2.36m.

The finds from this trench consisted primarily of roof tile and brick (38.75kg), lumps of mortar, three nails, three sherds of glass, three pieces of clay pipe and some animal bone (see Plates 32-34). One piece of curved roof tile may in fact be a ridge tile (Plate 33).

Trench 7

Trench 7 (1.37m x 9.5m) was placed across another anomaly seen in the geophysical survey. Located in the northwest corner of the site, the survey had shown a break in the line of the wall/moat. A layer of compacted flints and gravel was found just below the topsoil which may explain the anomaly. No wall was found in this trench.

The finds included roof and floor tile (13.25kg), pottery (including a glazed piece), two sherds of glass, two nails and animal bone and teeth (see Plates 35-37).

Trench 8

Trench 8 (1.4m x 5m) was placed in the middle of the site, adjacent to Trench 4. Very few finds (2kg of tile and brick) came from this trench and it was soon closed down.

The finds included brick and roof tile.

Trench 9

Trench 9 (1.4m x 4m) was opened to try to locate the northern extent of the site. This work was carried out by a smaller work party (myself, Alan Witham and Rob Alston) on Friday 1st May. Traces of compacted mortar and tile were found at a depth of approximately 50cm (Plate 38). This is most likely the remains of the foundations of the northern wall based on similarities with the remains of the lower walls found elsewhere on the site, with everything above having been robbed out.

Finds from this trench included pieces of floor tile (Plate 39), a large quantity of brick and roof tile (13.25kg) (Plate 40), a single piece of clay pipe, a sherd of glass, a possible sherd of medieval pottery and a number of sherds of post-medieval pottery (Plate 43). A few knapped flints were also found in this small trench (see Plate 42) as well as lumps of mortar and a large piece of metal (Plate 41).

Trench 10

Trench 10 (1.4m x 2.2m) was placed where we estimated the northeast corner of the outer wall of the site should be found. Sixty centimetres below the ground surface a distinct area of red was uncovered in the soil which appeared to be soft brick (Plates 44 and 45). It is now clear that this trench lies outside the predicted line of the outer wall based on the findings from the other trenches (see Fig. 4) and may therefore be the remains of an ancillary building. This would require further investigation in the future.

The only finds from this trench were roof tile (0.4kg) and a single decorated pottery sherd (Plate 46).

Summary

The outer walls of the site were located in Trenches 1, 3, 6 and 9 and, therefore, we have been able to estimate the size of the site as 43m x 67m or 2,881m². Some knapped flints were recovered from Trench 9 and were revealed on the outer face of the wall in Trench 1, but clearly most of the knapped flint has been taken from the site after the manor house was abandoned for re-use elsewhere.

Although no internal structures were found in any of the trenches opened in the middle of the site, a large quantity of roof tile was found which indicates that roofed structures were present on the site. The many examples with one or two holes in them (Plates 19, 32 and 40) indicate that these were peg tiles, i.e. held in place with nails or pegs as opposed to nibbed tiles (held in place with clay nibs). There is a possible example of a curved ridge tile from Trench 6. Although there are no complete tiles, the largest example from the site (Trench 6, Plate 32), with two intact edges, measures 15 x 18cm giving us a likely minimum size for the original tiles.

Floor tile was found in a number of trenches (Trench 1, 5 and 7, Plates 10, 35 and 39), many of which had patches of a distinctive yellow coloured slip. The makeup of these tiles is very different from the roof tile as can be seen in the tile profiles.

Relatively little evidence for the domestic occupation of the site was found during the preliminary excavations. Animal bone and teeth were found in Trenches 1, 4, 6 and 7 (Plates 24, 34 and 37). Medieval pottery was found in Trench 1, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 9, although the identification and dating of these sherds will need to be confirmed by a medieval finds expert (Plates 12, 21, 23, 27, 35, 36, 43 and 46). Sherds of glass were found in Trench 4, 6, 7 and 9 although, again, these would need to be confirmed as medieval in date by a finds expert (Plates 25, 27, 34 and 43).

Future work at the site

The excavation achieved a number of its objectives but there still remains much to learn about the site and there is great potential for further study.

From the walls revealed in Trenches 1, 3, 6 and 9, the site is much larger than was previously thought. Given more time and funding, it would be important to expose larger areas of the walls, examine their structure and form, and determine whether more bastions exist as found in the southeast corner. More detailed investigation of the moat fills would also be a priority.

Likewise, clearing the vegetation around the standing remains in the southeast corner of the site, and possibly excavating in the moat adjacent to the wall, would also be something that should be considered for any future works at the site.

There is still much work to be done in the centre of the site to uncover evidence for the existence of domestic structures, whether of stone, brick or timber construction, and recover datable finds within sealed contexts.

A further geophysical survey of the entire field and possibly the surrounding area beyond the current fenced off area, would also be important.

From the point of view of the local community the excavation has been a huge success, generating a great deal of excitement and interest. The children from Erpingham Primary School not only came to participate in the excavation, along with their parents, but also spent time cleaning the finds and carrying out further research on the history of the site back at school. The older residents of Erpingham and surrounding villages also took part in the dig, including many who have grown up in the village familiar with the history of the site and its remains.

The six hours of excavation, plus additional work by the smaller work party, has shown the huge potential of the site for future investigation and there is definitely a commitment from all those involved to undertake further works.

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Fig. 1. Map of Erpingham showing the location of Castle Field (Dollin 1982 survey).

Fig. 2. Remains of wall and bastion in the southeast corner of the site (Dollin 1982 survey).

Fig. 3. Results of the geophysical survey carried out by the Loddon History Group.

Fig. 4. Location of trenches at Old Hall, Castle Field, Erpingham.