

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 1999

In July 1999 the Group excavated the brick foundations of a substantial 18th century 'Summer-house' in the grounds of the National Trust owned Wimpole Hall near Cambridge. The site was one of a pair of Summer-houses whose location was known from parch marks in the current grassland. Design plans and drawings from the early 18th century of the proposed buildings showed multi angle buildings which did not correspond to the square outline of the parch marks. No drawings or paintings exist showing what was actually built, but it is known that they were built circa 1721 and deliberately destroyed circa 1767 when landscaping of the park was carried out.

The excavations revealed the brick foundations for a square building approximately 6 metres by 6 metres which had a depth of 1.2 metres and were up to 1.0 metre wide. These substantial foundations probably indicate that the house was more than a single storey.

Sparse evidence of the walls etc was found, but fragments of window glass and a few pieces of structural limestone suggest that the house was substantial. Two small finds were of particular interest. The first was the broken base of a typical 18th century black glass bottle, which was found lying in the demolition rubble. It had possibly been deposited by one of the demolition workers after he had drunk his pint of ale. The second was an unusual find of a Neolithic tanged flint arrow head probably re-deposited when the site was covered over with earth during the subsequent landscaping.

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 2000

Following on from the Groups excavation In July 1999 of the brick foundations of a substantial 18th century 'Summer house' in the grounds of the National Trust owned Wimpole Hall near to Cambridge (see 1999 Excavations), The Group was again invited to Wimpole Hall by the National Trust to locate and excavated one section of the extensive garden walls that bounded the gardens that existed in the late 18th century and which were replaced by open parkland when the estate was landscaped. Also a section of old trackway that served the hamlet that was moved when the estate was set up was excavated.

When the garden walls were demolished the contractor was scheduled to remove all trace of them so that subsequently no parch marks would show up in the grassland that replaced the gardens. However it was not known whether the foundations were actually removed.

Our excavation showed that indeed virtually all the wall and its foundation were removed. A most surprising discovery was that in the garden the flower beds had been dug out to a depth of around 4 feet and the clay soil replaced with a more fertile soil.

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 2006 - Fountain and drains.

For the seventh year running C.A.F.G. were invited by The National Trust to carry out an excavation at Wimpole Hall near Cambridge. Starting on Saturday 15th July 2006 during National Archaeology Week, the excavations were open for viewing by the public. Excavations were carried out on Saturday 15th, Sunday 16th, Saturday 22nd and Sunday 23rd. The site was open for viewing throughout this period but no excavations were carried out, except on the dates given.

Excavation was directed towards investigating the water supply to and drainage of, the circular fountain shown on Kip's drawing of 1707 in the centre of the formal garden. The outer wall of the now demolished 18th century garden fountain was found during excavations by C.A.F.G. in 2005.

The results of geophysical surveys made in 2005 were used as a guide to suitable targets and the relationship of the fountain to features possibly belonging to an earlier garden were examined.

16th July 2006

So far we have found two sections of the foundations of the outer wall on the Northern side of the Fountain pond either side of the centre line of the gardens. The section in between is missing and appears to be where the pipe feeding the Fountain/Pond entered. No pipe remains but as this was probably lead and valuable it would have been salvaged at the time of demolition of the Fountain/Pond. Adjacent to this entry point, but not directly connected to the outer wall foundations, are the foundations of an approximately square brick enclosure, which seems to be either a sump or a housing for control valves etc.

29th July 2006

Further work over the weekend of 22/23rd revealed the full extent of the walls of the sump enclosure, and exposed the water inlet pipe. A small fragment of a wood plank was found at the bottom of the existing excavation in the enclosure. There are no theories yet as to what it might be.

The inlet pipe further excavated, revealing the small diameter lead pipe, which has a flange on the lower right end. It is not now connected to the main inlet pipe, but may have been in past. There was also a single brick course shelf running around the enclosure which may have supported a wooden cover.

Other points of interest are:-

The small flanged pipe of the inlet appears to have been sawn at its end, so what was connected to it and between it and the entrance to the main pond? Was there a control valve there? Did the enclosure have other functions? Why is the enclosure so large and substantial? Did the enclosure have a brick roof?

The brickwork of the outer walls of the pond is in Flemish Bond, but the walls of the enclosure are a mixture of Flemish and English bond. This, plus the fact that the enclosure is not integral with the pond outer wall, probably indicates that the enclosure was built later than the pond outer wall and by a different builder.

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 2007

With the agreement of Angus Wainwright, East of England archaeologist for the National Trust, we further explored the features seen on the geophysics at Wimpole Hall. Two main trenches were placed over features thought to be earlier than the fountain. In one trench we saw again the drain from the fountain, broken brick filling a trench on the line of east-west features seen on the geophysics and a square brick foundation, perhaps for a statue. The second trench revealed a substantial brick wall that may be part of a walled garden predating the fountain (i.e. c1680s). The archaeological outcome was a significant contribution to our understanding of the structures remaining under the grass of the Park; certainly they suggest that Thomas Chicheley built an enclosed garden to go with his new house in the 1640s.

Members of the Group had the experience and, we hope pleasure, of the excavation and at least 500 people visited the site over the days we were there.

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 2008

In July we were back at Wimpole to investigate further the features we believe are from the garden built by Thomas Chicheley in the 1640s. Much hard work showed the drain from the fountain cutting through the earlier walls, unfortunately it had destroyed the junction of these walls making phasing very difficult. But we have established that there is at least one period of rebuilding of these earlier walls and that this is the same relationship which we saw in trenches in 2006 and 2007. It is reasonably certain that we are exploring previously unrecorded garden features.

Excavation at Wimpole Hall July 2009

We were pleased to welcome several local students to the 2009 excavations, including two of the 2009 Val Whittaker prize-winners, who were at various stages of their university studies in archaeology. They certainly helped to lower the average age of the team quite considerably, while gaining valuable practical experience.

This year will be remembered as the '**Year of the Shark's teeth**' (two shark's teeth were recovered from the brick fill). They may originate from the underlying Gault clay, or perhaps from Cambridgeshire greenshale sands, brought in to make up the garden paths.