

Old Abbey Farm, Risley

Building Survey and Excavation at a Medieval Moated Site

Richard Heawood

and

Christine Howard-Davis

Denise Drury

Mick Krupa

with contributions by

Nigel Neil, David Hodgkinson, Harry Kenward, Paul Hughes,

Allan Hall, Charles Lee, David Michelmore, Nigel Nayling,

Alison Plummer, W John Smith, Wendy Carruthers,

Caron Newman, Colin Peacock, Shaun Rainford

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Front Cover: Reconstruction of the Phase 2 timber hall

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Contributors

- Richard Howwood
AOC Archaeology Group, Edgefield Industrial Estate, Edgefield Road, Loanhead, Midlothian, EH120 9SY
- Denise Drury
Archaeological Project Services, The Old School, Cameron Street, Heckington, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 9RW
- Mick Krupa
85 High Street, Snainton, Scarborough, Yorkshire YO13 9AJ
- Nigel Neil
Nigel Neil Archaeological Services, 5 Hillside, Castle Park, Lancaster, LA1 1YH
- Christine Howard-Davis
Oxford Archaeology North, Storey Institute, Meeting House Lane, Lancaster, LA1 1TF
- David J Hodgkinson
Wardell Armstrong, Lancaster Building, High Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire ST5 1PQ
- Harry Kenward
Environmental Archaeology Unit, Department of Biology, University of York, PO Box 373, York YO10 5YW
- Paul Hughes
School of Geography, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1Bf
- Allan Hall
Department of Archaeology, University of York, The Kings Manor, York YO1 7EP
- Charles Lee
Building Conservation Services, Horbury Hall, Church Street, Horbury, Wakefield WF4 6LT
- David Michelmore
Building Conservation Services, Horbury Hall, Church Street, Horbury, Wakefield WF4 6LT
- Nigel Nayling
Department of Archaeology, University of Wales Lampeter, Ceredigion, SA48 7ED
- Alison Plummer
Oxford Archaeology North, Storey Institute, Meeting House Lane, Lancaster, LA1 1TF
- W John Smith
30 Pembryn Avenue, Alkington, Middleton, Manchester M24 1EQ
- Wendy Carruthers
Sawmills House, Castellau, Llantrisant, Mid Glamorgan CF72 8LQ
- Caron Newman
Egerton Lea Consultancy, Victoria Hall, Main Street, Grange-over-Sands, Cumbria LA11 6DP
- Colin Peacock
Department of Biological Sciences, Faraday Building, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YQ
- Shaun Rainford
Collex Waste Management Pty Ltd, Level 4, Bay Centre, 65 Pirrama Road, Pyrmont, NSW 2009, Australia

Summary

During the 1990s Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology North) carried out a large-scale programme of archaeological investigation on behalf of UK Waste Management Limited (now Biffa Waste Services Limited and previously Wimpey Waste Management), at Old Abbey Farm, Risley, Warrington Borough (SJ 6624 9356) in the present day county of Cheshire. The farm was the site of a moated platform, thought to be medieval in origin; a Listed seventeenth century brick farmhouse stood on the platform, and a Listed brick barn was sited a short distance to the south-west, beyond the line of the moat. Archaeological investigation of the site began in 1990, following an application to Cheshire County Council to extend the adjacent landfill facility. The fabric of the farmhouse and barn was evaluated; several trial trenches were cut by machine, and the potential of relevant documentary sources was assessed. Subsequently, planning permission for the landfill extension was granted and Listed Building Consent gained for the demolition of the structures, and a programme of archaeological recording was put in place to allow the 'preservation by record' of the site.

The mitigation investigation consisted of two main components, carried out in 1994-5: the controlled demolition and recording of the farmhouse and barn, and the excavation of large open areas both on and off the moated platform. However, multi-disciplinary analysis of the results of the building survey and excavation, and a programme of dendrochronological sampling, has allowed an account of the chronology and development of the site to be constructed. Specialist study of re-used timbers dated by dendrochronology has suggested that a late thirteenth or possibly very early fourteenth century open hall formerly stood on the site of Old Abbey Farm. The hall is thought to have been fully aisled, with a steeply-pitched hipped roof, but all the timbers from this phase were found re-used in secondary positions, so that many aspects of the building's form and appearance remain uncertain. In the late medieval period it is probable that the aisles were removed, with new timber-framing built below the arcade-plates. A clay floor found by excavation either relates to the modified hall, or to an earlier structure. The medieval hall stood on a moated platform; the moat and platform could not be independently dated, but appear to be at least as old as the re-used timbers. It is not clear how the moat was crossed earlier in the medieval period, but waterlogged timbers were recovered demonstrating that a substantial timber bridge was constructed in the mid fifteenth century. Documentary sources indicate that the site lay at the centre of the manorial estate of Pesfurlong, created in the mid thirteenth century.

A crosswing was added to the medieval hall in the mid sixteenth century; elements of the timber frame were found within the farmhouse, and represent the earliest *in situ* remains found within the standing structure. The footings of a sandstone bridge may also date to this period. Subsequently, the house was subject to piecemeal underpinning and rebuilding in brick, beginning in the early to mid seventeenth century, and was extended in the mid eighteenth century. The brick Lancashire-type barn was also built at this time.

The project provided a rare opportunity to excavate below a standing structure that had been archaeologically recorded. In order to examine the effectiveness and validity of the twin techniques of building survey and excavation, and the inter-relationship between standing structure and buried evidence, a unique research experiment was designed, whereby the two elements of the project were carried out by separate teams of archaeologists, who did not communicate until the completion of the fieldwork stages. The results of the experiment formed the basis of a television documentary compiled for the BBC's 'Countryfile' programme.

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Any excavation or building survey report represents a collective effort. However, the present project team is particularly indebted to the individuals who conducted the fieldwork elements of the programme, but who moved to new employment before the completion of the project. Mick Krupa directed the building survey of the Listed farmhouse and barn, whilst Denise Drury was responsible for the excavation. They jointly carried out the archaeological assessment of the archive, beginning the interpretation of the site and formulation of the phasing.

These major phases of fieldwork were the culmination of several years of work carried out on behalf of the client. Initial evaluation of the buildings, the below ground deposits, and the available documentary sources, was conducted for Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology North) by Nigel Neil in 1990. Subsequently, Rachel Newman assisted Aspinwall and Company with the preparation of the client's Environmental Statement, represented the client at public inquiry, and wrote the project design for mitigation excavation in response to a brief from Adrian Tindall. Jason Wood prepared the brief and specification for building recording and controlled demolition, and the integrated project design. He also acted as the client's managing agent, chairing all site meetings with assistance from Sarah Fitchett. The building survey was managed by Jason Wood, and the excavation by Mark Fletcher. Additionally, Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) would like to thank all the field staff who worked at Old Abbey Farm, particularly David Hodgkinson, Ian Scott, Richard Short, Rebecca Smith, and Chris Wild (building survey), and Richard May, Ian Miller, Karen Miller, Jon Ormrod, and Jeff Speakman (excavation).

The report was compiled by Richard Heawood, but contributions by other OA North staff and by several external specialists have been incorporated directly into the text. These include Denise Drury, David Hodgkinson, and Mick Krupa (formerly LUAC); Harry Konward, Paul Hughes, and Allan Hall (Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York); plant and invertebrate macrofossils; Charles Lee and David Michelmore (Building Conservation Services; historic carpentry); Nigel Nayling (University of Sheffield: dendrochronology); Nigel Neil (Archaeological Services; documentary study); Alison Plummer (LUAC; vernacular architecture); Christine Howard-Davis (coordination of finds); and W John Smith (brick foundations). Free-standing contributions have also been made by Wendy Carruthers, Nigel Neil, Caron Newman, Colin Peacock, Shaun Rainford, and W John Smith. OA North wishes to thank all the above, and also John Carroti, Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York, who liaised over the environmental evidence, and the staff of Warrington Museum, who provided archival information regarding unpublished excavations. Other specialists contributed to earlier stages of the project, including Cathy Groves (University of Sheffield: dendrochronology); Phil Howard (University of Durham: geophysics); and C Stephens (Geophysical Surveys of Bradford: geophysics).

The CAD drawings were produced by Mark Tidmarsh. Artist's impressions of the house in Phases 1 and 2 were by Anthony Padgett, and the finds were drawn by Karen Cuffogg. The illustrations for the publication were produced by Emma Carter, following conventions from Adkins and Adkins (1994). Project management of the post-excavation analysis was by Richard Newman and Alison Plummer, both of whom gave support and encouragement during the writing of the report, and edited the text. Particular thanks are due to Jennifer Lewis, Nigel Neil, Rachel Newman, Adrian Tindall, Ian Miller, and Jason Wood for their detailed comments on the draft text, but any errors or omissions which remain are the responsibility of the authors. Jennifer Lewis also very kindly provided the draft text of a forthcoming publication (Lewis *et al* forthcoming).

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