

Excavations of a Medieval Manorial Complex at Chazey Court Farm: An Interim Note

Excavations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at Chazey Court Farm on the Mapledurham Estate were conducted during 2008 and 2009 prior to a proposed development by Westfield Estates Ltd. The site (centred on NGR SU 6913 7520) is c.2 km to the west of Caversham (now part of Reading) and c.1.5 km east of Mapledurham House (Fig. 1). It sits on a low-lying floodplain at c.39.50 metres OD, at the eastern end of a large southwards loop of the River Thames. The river, which flows downstream to the north-east and contains a small group of eyots (St Mary's Island and Buck's Eyot) at this point, lies c.200 metres to the south-east of the site. Around 100 metres to the north, the ground rises steeply to Gravel Hill which forms part of the wooded Chiltern foothills that define the northern edge of this part of the floodplain. Excavation took place in two open areas: Area 1, to the north, and Area 2, to the south.

Construction of the new buildings that prompted the excavations did not eventually take place, and although the fieldwork was fully funded by the developer, no detailed post-excavation assessment or analysis work has yet been possible. The following is therefore an interim summary based principally upon the structural remains without any significant artefact or ecofact data studies. Dating evidence is therefore minimal. It is hoped that the means to fully publish this significant site will become available.

The excavations in Area 1 uncovered a significant portion of the principal stone and timber buildings belonging to a part-enclosed medieval manorial complex. The complex belonged to the Domesday manor of Mapledurham Chazey which was part of the honour of Wallingford and lay within Langtree hundred. The remains uncovered probably date from the twelfth century onwards, and the complex was demolished at the end of the sixteenth or beginning of the seventeenth century to make way for a farmstead erected in c.1611–15 (Fig. 2). An estate map of 1587 accurately depicts the excavated buildings in some detail (Fig. 8).

Some of the structures from the early seventeenth-century rebuilding survive at the site and flanked Area 1 to the west and south. These structures are principally timber-framed with brick infill, and include stone elements some of which are reused medieval architectural materials probably derived from the original manorial buildings.¹ To the west of Area 1 is a Grade II* listed north–south range of four abutting structures. From north to south this range consists of a two-storeyed three-bay house (dendro-dated to 1611), a two-storeyed three-bay nineteenth-century brick house, which probably replaced the northern extent of the next structure to the south, a one-and-a-half-storeyed raised-cruck timber-framed building, formerly of seven bays, surviving as three bays (dendro-dated to 1612–13), and a brick stable sometimes referred to as 'the chapel' (dendro-dated to 1615). To the south-east sits a large Grade I listed brick barn orientated east–west (dendro-dated to 1611).² All these buildings are roofed with red ceramic peg tiles.

The excavated elements of the manorial complex consisted of a north–south aligned hall, with open spaces or courtyards to the east and west (Figs. 2 and 3). The open space to the east was defined by a large post-built structure on its northern side, probably a barn. The courtyard to the west was formed by a post-built kitchen to the north-west of the hall, and a chamber house south of the hall. The buildings were enclosed to the west by a curvilinear ditch. The initial phase of construction for the hall was a single central room (11 metres by

¹ 'Chazey Court Farm, The Warren, Mapledurham', unpublished OA report (2003).

² *Vernacular Architecture*, 35 (2004), 95–6. All dendro-dating by Dan Miles, Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory, as part of a long-term dendro-dating project in Mapledurham.



Fig. 1. Site location. Illustration by Matt Bradley.

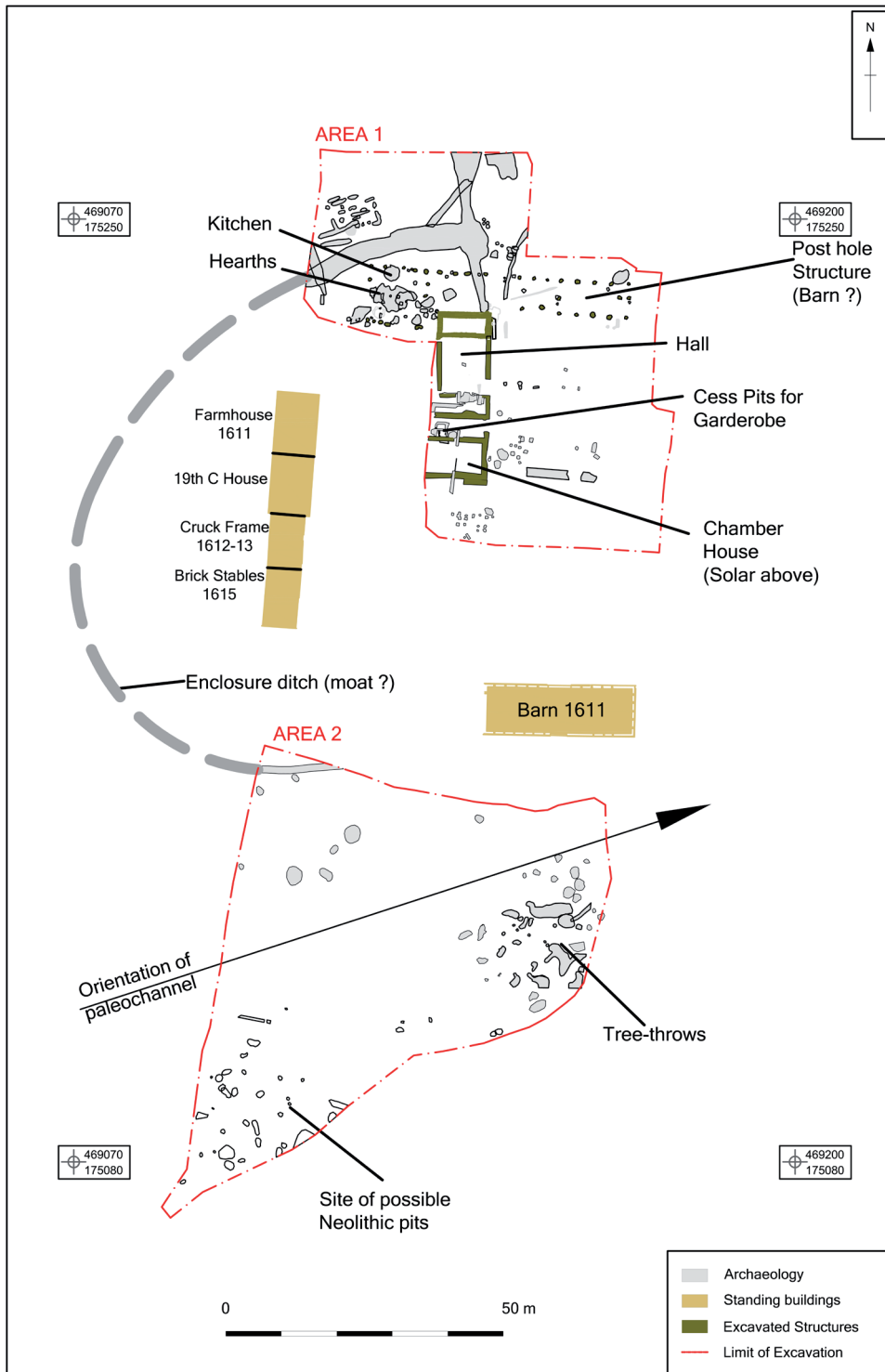


Fig. 2. Plan of all archaeological features and standing buildings. Illustration by Matt Bradley.



Fig. 3. General view looking south of the excavations with the Grade II range on the right and Grade I barn in the background. Adam Stanford, Aerial Cam Ltd.*

10 metres) with one-metre wide chalk and flint foundations. Equal sized rooms measuring 4 by 10 metres were added to the north and south, the abutting relationship of their chalk and flint foundations to those of the central room may either reflect enlargement at a later date or possibly a contemporary construction technique (Figs. 2 and 4). Together these three rooms gave the building a full length of 19 metres.

The central room contained a large floor-set hearth, set centrally towards the northern end, with lines of postholes perhaps indicating the existence of benches along the north, south and east walls. In the southern room a series of hearths and evidence for subdivision of the space was recorded. From deposits associated with a phase of remodelling complete limewashed rectangular plaster panels measuring c 0.30m by 0.90m were recovered (Fig. 5). The back of the panels retained distinct wattle impressions. Evidently elements of the hall's superstructure were half-timbered with close-set studwork infilled with plastered panels.

A three-metre gap separated the southern wall of the hall from a large east-west orientated stone building which was only partly excavated. This structure was narrower than the hall, being 7.5 metres wide and more than 11.25 metres long (its eastern extent lay beyond the western limit of Area 1). It had no internal divisions and consistent metre-wide chalk foundations. There were no signs of a hearth in its apparently earthen floor, which had been overlain by a substantial demolition layer of broken roofing peg tiles. Within the gap and abutting the northern wall of this building, opposite the south-west corner of the hall, was a pair of large stone-lined rectangular pits which probably served as cess pits for garderobes (Fig. 6). This building has been interpreted as a chamber house, and the cess pits perhaps indicate a two-storeyed structure with a solar on the upper floor containing garderobes in the north wall. Also in the gap, to the east of the cess pits, were two small stretches of narrow chalk wall which indicate that a small structure (perhaps a single-storeyed building) occupied the area between hall and chamber house.

Immediately to the north and extending westwards from the hall were the remains of a



Fig. 4. Aerial view of the hall (left) and chamber house (right). Adam Stanford, Aerial Cam Ltd.



Fig. 5. Plaster panelling from the southern room of the hall.



Fig. 6. Stone-lined pits between the hall and chamber house (showing tile courses within the north wall of the chamber house), looking south.

separate building constructed from timber posts, measuring about 10 metres by 10 metres. It contained a flint-floored keyhole-shaped oven or hearth (to take a large cauldron), as well as a succession of open pitched-tile floored 'roasting' hearths (Fig. 7), strongly indicating this building, although timber-framed, was the manorial kitchen. Directly east of the kitchen and north-east of the hall was a post-built building measuring c.22 metres by 8 metres which was probably a large barn on the north side of an open space to the east of the hall.

Short stretches of ditch to the north and south of the manorial complex may link to earthworks to the west of the early seventeenth-century farm buildings and suggests the western side of the medieval complex was defined by this feature. Elements of this ditch would probably have seasonally flooded but its small size and apparent absence to the east of the complex indicate that it should not be considered as a moat.

In the northern half of Area 2 a wide paleo-channel orientated broadly east-north-east to west-south-west and filled with banded deposits of gravelly sand charts the course of a relict channel of the Thames. To its south were two distinct groups of features: to the east a group of tree-throw holes which yielded mixed date flint assemblages from the Mesolithic to Bronze Age, and to the west some potential deliberately dug Neolithic scoops, one of which contained pieces of a human skull.

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Fig. 7. The base of the kitchen oven and in the background several phases of roasting hearths, looking north-east.



Fig. 8. Detail view from the south-west of the manorial complex from the Mapledurham estate map of 1587. Photo by Dan Miles; copyright the Mapledurham 1997 Trust. Permission to reproduce kindly given by Mr J.J. Eyston.

