

Report on From Bishop's Deer Park to Southampton Merchant's Mansion: 300 years at Hursley Park Talk by Jane & Andy King, WARG

Jane King: History of the house and park

Hursley Park is now owned by IBM UK who have built a modern facility within the 100 acres of grounds (unfortunately covering some of the original formal garden). The original house was built in the 17th century, and had several reincarnations. The site started life as a deer park in medieval times, probably with some sort of hunting lodge. The park surrounded a Norman house belonging to the Bishop of Winchester, which was replaced by a Tudor house named the Great Lodge, probably comprising house, stables, formal garden and parkland.

In the mid-seventeenth century this property came into the ownership of Richard Cromwell (son of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell) through his marriage to Ann Major. It was sold by Cromwell's daughters to William Heathcote who commissioned the current house, built in 1771-1774. He was Mayor of Southampton and owned several houses there. He was a close friend and ally of Oliver Cromwell.

In 1881 the house was sold to Joseph Baxendale, founder of Pickfords Removals and (later) Logistics; and again sold in 1902 to Sir George Cooper, when it was redeveloped into its current form. During WW1 part of the house was used as a military hospital and, after the bombing of Supermarine's Woolston Spitfire factory in 1940 the property was requisitioned by Vickers Aviation. Several buildings were erected to house the design and manufacture of part of the Spitfire aircraft. The property was not maintained after the war and was bought by IBM UK in 1945.



Following research by interested employees of IBM, WARG initially carried out Geophysical surveys to locate a stable block near to the current house. During hot summers, parch marks were noted on the lawn which were believed to relate to this stable block. The season took place over three weeks, and was extended to two further seasons of excavation.

Volunteers at work during the final season on the lawn of the 18th century mansion. Credit: WARG

For all three seasons, archaeology societies in Hampshire were welcomed to help, as well as some IBM employees and students of the University of Winchester. The team held site visits each season which were well attended.

Further parch marks were used to pinpoint the geophys results, indicating a large building which could have included one or more ranges. During the first season, work focused on anomalies to provide the best information on the character of the

site. After the 2022 season a clearer impression of the house plan was revealed, with two wings and a courtyard, and further discoveries were made during 2023. By the end of this season the outline of the house as suggested by the geophysics was confirmed. The original house had been thoroughly and systematically demolished, and much of the material used for the foundations of the new property or spread to level the surface. Over the three seasons of excavation, evidence was found of 15th/early 16th century use during the Bishop's residence.

In the **north wing** of the house, cellars and basement rooms were found and an entrance porch projecting to the north. Some of the vaulted cellar was uncovered during the initial 2021 season, showing that the roof was some 8m high. At the western end were basement rooms with windows and stone sills just above ground level. Patterned brick was found 1.5m below ground level, indicating wooden screens possibly separated this area. These basement rooms were finished to a good standard with render, plaster and brick mullions with stone sills which shows they were for domestic and storage use. Unusually, the main entrance was not central internally, where double walls were assumed to have supported a staircase.

At ground level the **west wing** contained two rooms with a brick wall and stairs at the end. A well was found to the west with a flint capping above a metre void, filled with rubble lower down and not fully excavated. The lawn above was perfectly flat, which created a hazard and it has been professionally capped. The well would provide water for cooking, laundry and brewing. It had a brick surround, possibly covered by a brick building. This wing had a circular brick hearth and two fireplaces, indicating the domestic service area, and was connected to the north wing by a walkway.



The well discovered in 2022.

Credit: S Hanna

Connecting to the north wing, the **east wing** was divided in two by a modern service trench. There were possibly wooden floors at ground level, and two rooms with a shared chimney stack between them, thought to have been part of the living area. The foundations could have carried two/three storeys and the exterior walls may have featured decorative quoin work. This wing also shows different styles of brickwork, which could indicate that the house had been extended.

Externally the roof had cockscomb ridge tiles and walls with decorative bricks and patterned diaper work. Black and green floor tiles were excavated together with part

of a stone fireplace dated 1588. Documentary evidence shows that the house had 28 hearths and rooms including a long gallery, parlours and sleeping chambers. The **stables** were built during an earlier ownership. It is suggested that the stone wall footings and fireplaces were from the earlier west wing, which could have had a timber framed structure on top.



The **courtyard** had cross walls with cobbled and chalk areas and brick-lined water conduits, including one which may have fed a water feature in the garden. A water feature was partly excavated with rectangular sloping sides, clay lined and filled with demolition materials – possibly a Tudor water garden. It was quite large: the short side around 8m long. The north side of the courtyard had a number of brick walls and surfaces, perhaps remodelled a number of times.

Part of the Courtyard showing brick-lined channels and possible evidence for different phases of remodelling.

Credit: S Hanna

Andy King: The Finds

A large quantity of CBM (construction and building material) was found, much of it difficult to identify with historic periods, so dating often depends on other artefacts.

The **north wing** occupation deposit had 15th/early 16th century pottery in it. A map shows a modest original house, and some of the stonework found was architectural and obviously reused. Merton Castle, built by Henry de Blois (Bishop of Winchester, brother of King Steven and grandson of William the Conqueror), was located nearby and some of the stone may have come from there. A ditch, deer bone, antler and pottery from 15th/16th century was found, indicating the original use as a deer park. The property probably had flint wall footings and could have supported a timber framed lodge. Finds are still being sorted.

43 *aglets* (*lace ends*) were found throughout the site. Many garments were laced, such as bodices and jerkins. Doublet and hose were often fastened together with lacing (also found in the Mary Rose exhibition at Portsmouth). There were two methods of making them which help to indicate the chronology. First were wire loop fasteners, (60 found) and second was the use of strap ends and chains. Loops allowed the laces to pass through them.

Pomander: to be held to the nose to cover bad smells out of doors.

Bodkin: head dress ornament. These were extensively used by the Dutch and would have been imported.

All **iron objects** have been x-rayed. These include keys and internal parts of locks. One particular selection included an arrow head used for deer hunting; a knife to cut the carcass; a spade shoe for digging foundations; a cold chisel for demolition – the whole site in four tools!

Inevitably, ~50 kilos of pottery were found and are still being cleaned. This was mostly 15/16th century and late 17th/early 18th century. There was also some more exotic and elaborate marbled ware from Pisa and lusterware from Iberia.

Remains of clay pipes were uncovered which can be easily dated, but none were earlier than 1630. A stamp on the base of one pipe appeared as “EXS” (otherwise unknown), probably an error for ESX, First Earl of Essex who was a Parliamentarian.

Fragments were found of a late 17th/early 18th century Venetian pilgrim flask: such finds show the high status of the brick house. Wine bottle fragments included shaft, globe and onion bottles, together with three bottle seals. These showed a rampant lion with a banner, thought to have been from a “Lion” named tavern. Some were found to have initials on them, “OC” – probably Oliver Cromwell; and “RM” which could refer to Richard Major. Jars, bottles and phials were also found, together with remnants of wine goblets.

Venetian glass fragments. Credit: S Hanna



More unusually, a jeton or coin like token was found dating from the late 15th/early 16th century, which appears to be unique. A ring made of fine threads which have the appearance of hair, coiled and wrapped with strips of gold was found within the demolition materials, with no meaningful context. Another mystery object is a decorated cylinder with an internal thread at each end: it's suggested this could be the handle of a walking cane, possibly ivory but this is not yet confirmed. It would have had a pomander or vinaigrette on it so it was probably a lady's cane.

After three seasons, having answered the questions within our original remit, it was decided to call a halt on these excavations and leave any other remains for future investigation. Analysis is now underway and a report should be produced in 2025.

The remains of nearby Merdon Castle and the wider park need to be surveyed, which may be WARG's mission later this season.

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