

# How medieval is a medieval house?: Whitestaunton Manor, Somerset

by

MICHAEL HEATON

*This essay presents speculative interpretations of archaeological observations made by the author during the structural and decorative refurbishment of Whitestaunton Manor House near Chard in Somerset between 2004 and 2011. The bulk of the data recorded during the intermittent 'watching brief' operation conforms to received models of historical building development and would be of little interest to readers of this journal, but three ensembles of archaeological details challenge conventional explanation, whilst a fourth is of methodological significance for others engaged in this sort of work. The author suggests, tentatively, that Whitestaunton Manor House displays, inter alia, evidence of non-economic re-use of salvaged fabric and structures in the 17th and 18th centuries for polemical purposes, comparable to the use of spolia in continental Europe.*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The interpretations presented here arise from the author's study of historical architectural salvage for an MPhil.<sup>1</sup> which was in turn prompted by recurrent identification of such material during his work as a buildings archaeologist in south-west England. The comparators offered here, therefore, are not geographically representative of Britain, or even England, but it is hoped the piece encourages others to look again at buildings or survey records from elsewhere. The primary data were recorded under 'watching brief' conditions during the active structural refurbishment of the house, and not in anticipation of publication. Photography, in particular, was undertaken in extremely dusty environments with no opportunity for follow-up shoots. As a result, some of the photographs reproduced here are not of the standard architectural historians are accustomed to. The primary archaeological records – drawings, written notes and photographs – on which this essay are based are summarised in a 'grey literature' report that has been deposited with the Somerset County Council Historic Environment Record and will be deposited in full in due course at the Somerset Heritage Centre – formerly known as the Somerset Records Office – at Norton Fitzwarren on the outskirts of Taunton. Copies of the thesis have been deposited with the records offices of Somerset, Wiltshire, Devon and Dorset. The following text, with one exception, adopts the format used for archaeological reports: the evidence is presented without interpretation, followed by analyses in the discussion at the end of the essay.

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Michael Heaton is a professional, self-employed buildings archaeologist; a member of the Ancient Monuments Society and of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain and a trustee of the Construction History Society.



Fig. 1

Whitestaunton Manor House, Somerset, north elevation (September 2017).

## INTRODUCTION

Building development is a commonplace of history that needs no explanation here. Changes of layout, fabric or style evident in most old buildings can usually be demonstrated to have evolved in a comprehensible, chronologically linear manner as manifestations of documented historical themes. Archaeological observations facilitated by the comprehensive seven year long structural refurbishment of Whitestaunton Manor house between 2004 and 2011, however, identified three aspects of a complex structural and decorative history that do not fit that received model neatly and have, hitherto, frustrated attempts to identify a convincing chronological and architectural development of the house. Those three characteristics are: the medieval re-use of standing, possibly Roman, masonry; post-medieval conservative re-building of medieval fabric; and the architectural use of salvaged materials throughout the building's post-medieval life. Rather than responding to the inexorable linear flow of history, Whitestaunton Manor appears to have evolved through a series of retrospective eddies.

The house (Fig. 1) stands next to the parish church of its eponymous village, at the source of the River Yarty in the south-facing slopes of the Blackdown Hills near Chard in southern Somerset, within landscaped gardens. The geological base is extremely complex

with extensive outcrops of cretaceous limestone and chalk, from which the placename is derived, amongst otherwise wholly Jurassic strata. Local sources of building stone and lime are abundant. It is one of Somerset's larger historic houses but, with the exception of the relatively recent studies of Penoyre,<sup>2</sup> the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group<sup>3</sup> and *Time Team*,<sup>4</sup> it has received little detailed historical analysis, possibly because most of the estate accounts were destroyed in a solicitors' office during a Second World War air raid on Bath.<sup>5</sup> Archaeological excavations in c.1845 revealed that the village is of at least Roman origin, with a bath house complex adjacent to a naturally warm spring known historically as St Agnes' Well that now forms the centrepiece of the house's restored 18th century water garden. Prior to Domesday it was referred to as *Stantune*, acquiring the 'white' prefix in the early 14th century. For most of the medieval and post-medieval centuries it was held by two branches of a single family, the Hugyns and the Bretts, until sold in 1718 to Sir Abraham Elton. The Eltons held the manor and the advowson of the church until 1925, when these passed successively to Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Reynolds-Mitchell, Colonel Couchman (1945), Mr A.E. Dobell (1947) and then Mr and Mrs Stuart Moore in 2003 who spent a considerable sum on correcting nearly a hundred years of neglect and ill-considered interventions.

We know little about the Hugyns or the early 20th century owners, but the Bretts and the Eltons are historically interesting, even atypical of their times. The Bretts were Recusants and later 'crypto-Catholic' associates of Henry Howard of Northampton,<sup>6</sup> particularly the last female occupant, Anne Brett. Her brother Robert (d.1666) was a Jesuit known as 'the papist in arms' who built an oratory over the front porch of Whitestaunton Manor,<sup>7</sup> which now accommodates a bathroom. If the Bretts became, perhaps, relics of the pre-Reformation past, the Eltons were heralds of the post-Reformation future. Their family history possibly extends back to medieval Herefordshire, but the first certain mention of the Whitestaunton branch is at Bristol in 1646 where Isaac Elton baptised his first son Jacob. Within three generations the Eltons were one of the wealthiest families in Bristol, with interests in just about every trade and industry hosted by the port and city; holding civic and eventually political offices; and prodigious builders who commissioned new buildings and comprehensively altered others; bought estates throughout Bristol's rural hinterland and became generous patrons of the arts and of artists. Abraham Elton, by then 1st Baronet and prospective Member of Parliament for Bristol, bought Whitestaunton in 1718 for his son Isaac to legitimise the latter's candidacy for the rural Somerset seat. Throughout the politically turbulent years of the later 17th and early 18th centuries the Eltons trimmed their sails adroitly: Radical Dissenters, they hid their sympathies so as not to compromise their business and political ambitions; entertained lavishly with a penchant for civic display; and made substantial high profile donations to Crown projects such as the Ulster Plantations.<sup>8</sup> Isaac Elton and his direct descendants lived at Whitestaunton, extended it and in 1875 employed John Dando Sedding to refurbish the church, remodel the gardens and antique the stables.<sup>9</sup> It is likely he worked on the house as well.

Whitestaunton Manor is a Grade I Listed Building. The List description identifies four principal construction phases (15th century, late 16th century, 17th century and 19th century); finely decorated overmantels and medieval roofs; a 'good 17thC stair'

and decorative plasterwork. The decorated hammer-beam roof of the first floor Hall is considered to be 'one of Somerset's finest'<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 2); the decorative plasterwork includes an 'extraordinary frieze' dated to *c.*1630;<sup>11</sup> whilst the unpublished field records of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society consider Whitestaunton, generally, to be of 'outstanding architectural and historical significance'. It is a palimpsest of structural and decorative fabric, commenced, according to dendrochronology of the hammer-beam roof, in *c.*1446-78.<sup>12</sup> The Victoria County History<sup>13</sup> and the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group have identified the broad outline of the building's probable development, from a late medieval cross-passage house, but disagree on the detail of the medieval layout and on the generality of the post-medieval and 18th century development. Specifically, neither authority has been able to produce a convincing medieval plan form, despite the existence of the hammer-beam roof, because of significant

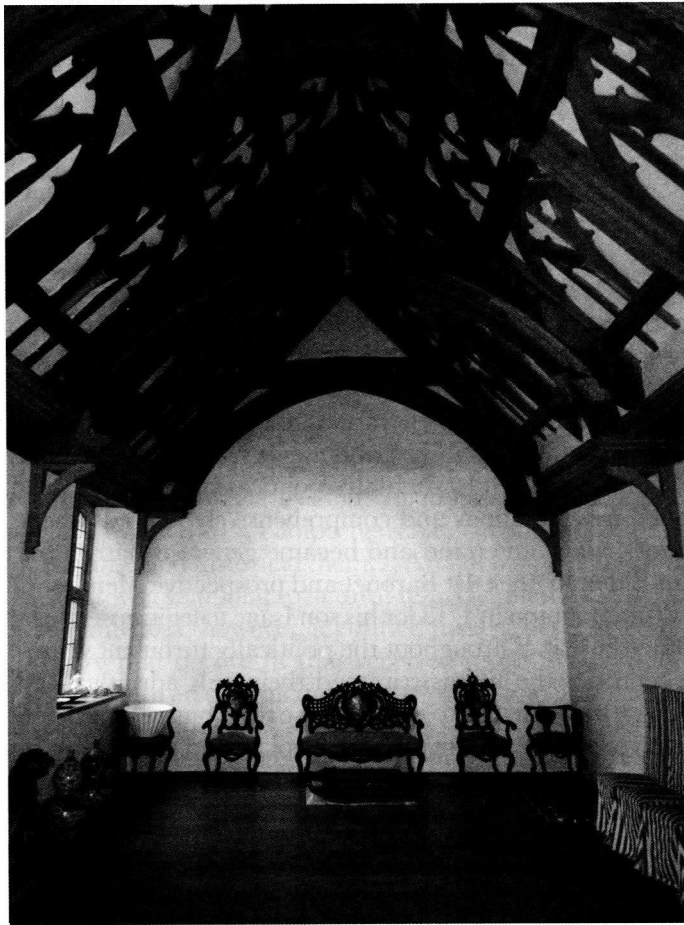
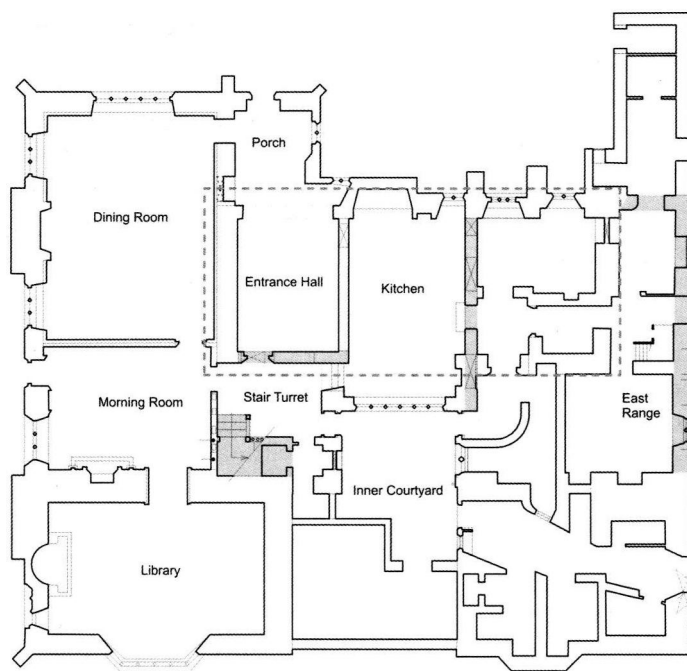


Fig. 2

The hammer-beam roof of the first floor Hall, after restoration. The pale timber is new and the knee braces are temporary.



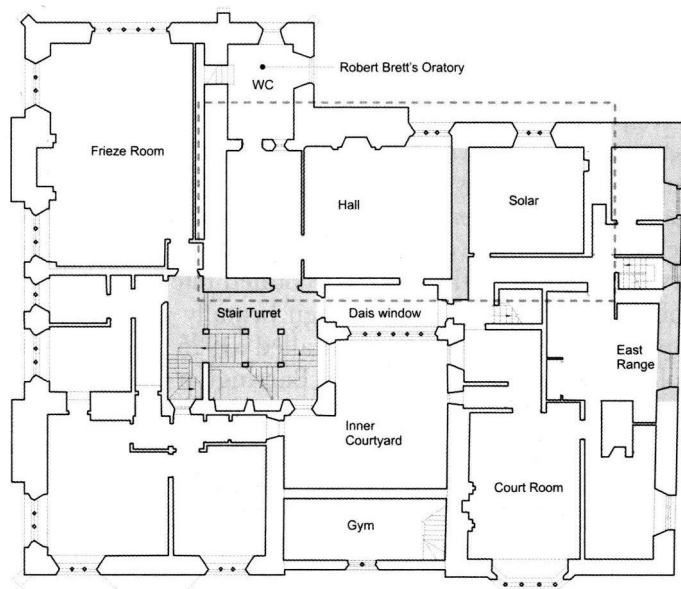


0 1 5m

drawing originated by John Malaiperuman RIBA

Structural fabric referred to in the text  
Received outline of the medieval hall and solar

Fig. 3  
Ground floor plan (2003).



0 1 5m

drawing originated by John Malaiperuman RIBA

Structural fabric referred to in the text  
Received outline of the medieval hall and solar

Fig. 4  
First floor plan (2003). Note that the partition across the Hall was removed prior to the photograph for Figure 2.

variations in wall thickness (Figs 3 and 4), fabric and floor level; while analysis of the later development of the house has been frustrated by a lack of spatial patterning of the decorative detail. The present author's observations, derived from archaeological analysis of the layout, fabric and form,<sup>14</sup> undertaken during complete stripping of most of the wall surfaces and extensive excavations for new floor structures – circumstances not available to any of the foregoing analysts – explain some of those variations and demonstrate that this building, at least, did not develop in a chronologically linear or logical manner.

### ARCHITECTURAL USE OF SALVAGED MATERIALS

Dismantling necessary for structural repair and overhaul of the services revealed that most of the internal decorative fabric, such as panelling, door and window assemblies, and plasterwork friezes had been used elsewhere before installation at Whitestaunton. This is not, in itself, exceptional: nearby Barrington Court is a well-known example of a medieval house completely refitted in the early 20th century with salvaged decorative assemblies; Montacute House, also in Somerset, incorporates the porch and associated decorative detailing removed from Clifton Maybank in Dorset in 1785; and John Harris has documented comprehensively many other examples of the post-medieval and modern trade in external and interior decorative detailing.<sup>15</sup> But three aspects of the use of salvage at Whitestaunton are significant for methodological and possibly historical reasons.

Firstly, the decorative plasterwork friezes in the Dining Room and the Frieze Room one of which is described, presciently, by Jane Penoyre as 'extraordinary' and dated to *c.*1630 on the basis of its physical association with a datable heraldic device over the fireplace, are composites of broken pieces held together on a substrata of expanded steel mesh and machine-sawn softwood battens fixed to fully rendered wall surfaces (Fig. 5), in places retaining fragments of flock wallpaper. They were well-executed: the joins between the short, repeated lengths of the patterns are discernible only at close quarters, whilst the substrata became visible only during dismantling of the panelling below it. Neither Penoyre nor anybody else could have seen it. Penoyre's study of the plasterwork of Somerset, in which the Whitestaunton examples feature, is one of several important typological studies that use 'dated' examples such as this to establish a chronological and stylistic sequence against which less-securely dated examples can be compared. The Whitestaunton example may well have been created, first, in 1630 and possibly for this house, but that cannot be proved. There is no evidence that either of the two rooms ever had friezes or any other type of decorative fixture fixed to their walls prior to the 20th century. In contrast to the highly decorated interiors acquired by the Moores, Whitestaunton Manor appears to have been brutally austere. In all likelihood the friezes were acquired from elsewhere and installed *c.*1925 by Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds-Mitchell, following the fashion of nearby Barrington Court. Whilst this reveals the hitherto unrecognised interior character of the house prior to the early 20th century, its significance relates primarily to the art-historical typological study that informs architectural history generally, for the purposes of which it is of fundamental importance that the provenance of a dated piece be established. The provenance of the Whitestaunton friezes is unknown and, as Harris and others demonstrate, it is unlikely that they are unique instances.



Fig. 5

The plaster frieze in the Frieze Room, showing it clearly separated from the rendered wall face by sawn, softwood roofing battens. The thin grey layer within it (not clear here) is expanded metal lath (EML).

Secondly, the ‘good 17th C stair’ is – or was – a composite of re-positioned 16th, 17th and 18th century components within a collapsing framework of late 19th and 20th century construction (Fig. 6). It was neither ‘good’ nor ‘17th century’ but appears to have been re-configured, first in the 18th century when access to the newly converted roof spaces was created for the new owners, the Elton family. Leaving aside the inaccuracy of the List description and the problems which that caused Mr and Mrs Moore, the staircase is interesting for two reasons. Archaeological and metric analysis of the re-used 17th century components allied with chronological plan-form analysis of the rest of the house, undertaken to support the Moores’ case for re-modelling the stair, revealed the original form of the Jacobean staircase and the layout of the stair turret that accommodated it. Rather than the claustrophobic and poorly-lit Escheresque winder stair inherited by the Moores, the Jacobean stair had been an elegant, well-lit open-well structure that ascended three sides of the stair turret to alight on a balustraded internal balcony landing that ran the full length of its west side and opened into the principal first floor reception room of the Jacobean west range. It was extended to the roof space, probably by the Eltons in the 18th century, and then the balcony closed-off and its balustrading re-used serially throughout the later 18th and 19th centuries to form the inelegant and



Fig.6

The main staircase during investigative dismantling. Note that the newel post (marked by white label) is merely cosmetic.

structurally incompetent structure acquired by the Moores.<sup>16</sup> The authors of that re-configuration left no documentary record of their intentions, but building a new stair would have been easier and more successful – architecturally and structurally – than re-using the components of the existing, and easily within the means of the Elton family. The author is not aware of any published examples of a main staircase in a Grade 1 Listed Building that display this degree of modification. This appears to have been a purposeful and sustained act of material conservation by the Elton family, but to what end? This is addressed in the Discussion.

The authorship of the third and more public expression of retrospective building design – the east elevation of the east range – is equally uncertain. It is a narrow suite of rooms added to the east side of the house and accommodating the back stairs to the upper floors, extending northwards the east wall of what was probably a detached medieval

kitchen now at the southeast corner of the house. The Victoria County History ascribed to the east range a late 16th century date; the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group places it in the late 18th – early 19th century. It was added before the tithes survey of 1840; clear structural joints demonstrate that it post-dates the 15th century Hall; its mono-pitch roof structure is of simple principal rafter form; and its functional window and door surrounds, which are replacements of earlier assemblies, are of exactly the same stone, weathering and detailing as those installed in the 17th – 18th century stables by John Dando Sedding in 1875. The author concludes that the east range was probably added by Isaac Elton shortly after 1718. Removal of the external render of its eastern elevation (Fig. 7) facing onto the stable yard, revealed a number of ‘archaeological’ details that do not relate to present or past layouts and, more definitely, do not penetrate the full thickness of the wall. They are integral – exactly contemporaneous – to the masonry fabric enclosing them, but they could never have been functional doors or windows. They are unlikely to be incidental inclusions within the rubble because any mason would have hidden them or at least laid them horizontally, and they are self-evidently not antiquarian architectural embellishments. They must therefore have been incorporated for visual effect, but to what end? This, also, is addressed in the Discussion.



Fig. 7

Part of the east elevation of the east range, showing the *faux* archaeological details. The Hamstone windows were probably installed under Sedding's direction in 1875.



## POST-MEDIEVAL CONSERVATION

One of the problems facing analysts of Whitestaunton, heretofore, has been the lack of a convincing plan form supporting the ‘finest’ hammer-beam roof in Somerset. As the plans (Figs 3 and 4) demonstrate, the accepted outline of the 15th century hall and solar wing is defined by walls of varying thickness and outline. Furthermore, removal of renders during 2004-11 – an opportunity not afforded earlier researchers – revealed the walls to be also of varying fabric and construction. Some are probably medieval, but others are definitely not.

Removal of the renders also revealed an intriguing difference between the north and south walls of the 15th century first floor hall (Fig. 8). In addition to self-evident rebuilding of the north-west corner, probably by Robert Brett during his addition of the oratory,<sup>17</sup> the south wall lacks the vertical sockets for the knee braces of the hammer-beam trusses, three of which survive in the north wall. Those braces had been removed to accommodate the ceiling and partitions that, until January 2007, hid the roof structure from all but the most flexible of contortionists, but their sockets survived in the soffits of the surviving hammer-beams (Fig. 9). Unless the roof had been built asymmetrically, which is unlikely, the only plausible explanation is that the south wall was rebuilt prior to or during installation of the ceiling and partitions, the earliest fabric of which is of trestle-sawn oak studs connected with hand-made iron nails. A likely occasion was the insertion of the dais window in the ground and first floor south walls, and possibly

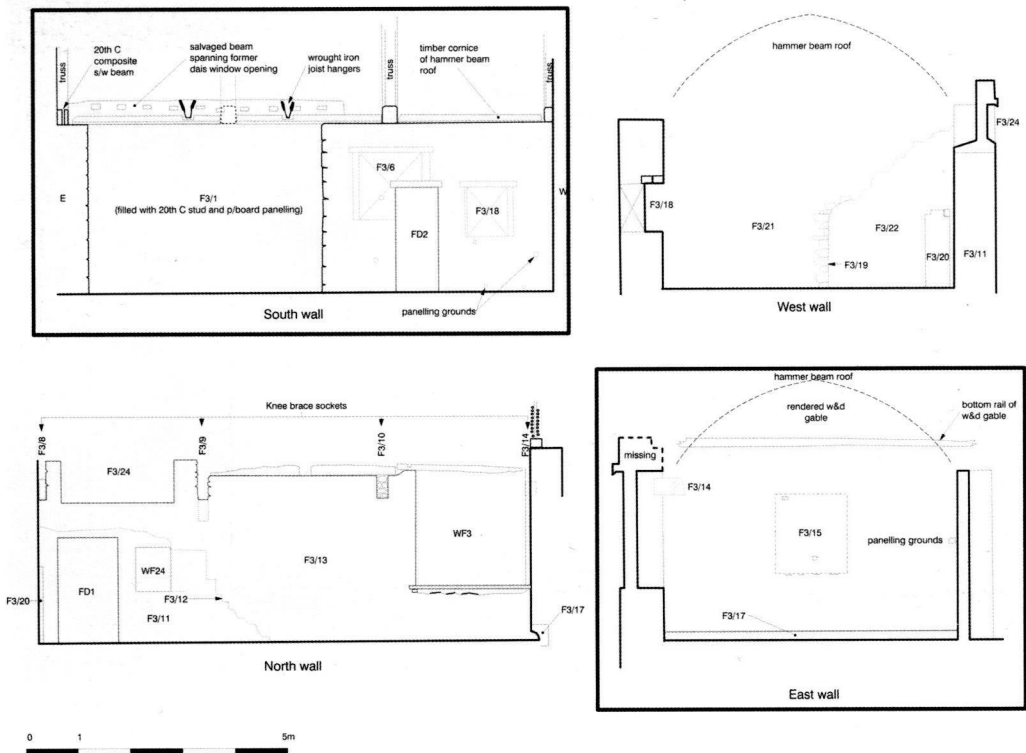


Fig. 8

The internal elevations of the first floor Hall showing the differences between the south and north walls and the archaeological details therein.



Fig. 9

The roof space over the first floor Hall showing one of the hammer beams with later ceiling joists let into its soffit. Note the missing knee brace.

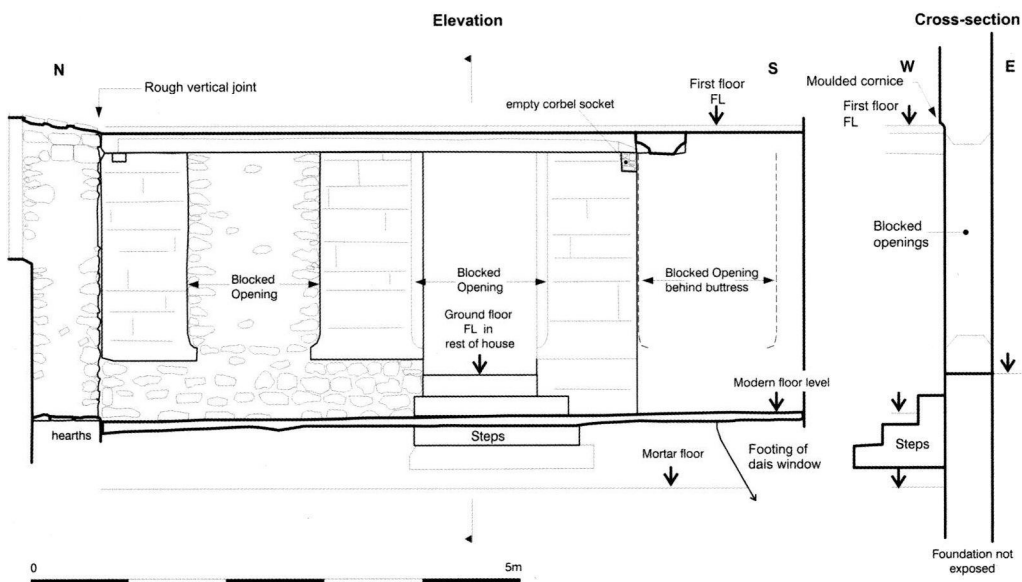


Fig. 10

West elevation of the east wall of the kitchen, showing the three openings and the four floor levels.

the associated bay extension, responsible for the large gap in the south wall of the first floor hall (Fig. 8). The underfloor stratigraphy in the kitchen confirms that the dais bay is indeed an extension,<sup>18</sup> to which the Victoria County History and the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group ascribe a late 16th century date, whilst the first floor ceiling of the dais bay is a wholly salvaged fragment of a larger coffered structure of late medieval form, cut down to fit, so the dais bay extension was probably of late 16th or perhaps early 17th century date. The significance of this conservative post-medieval rebuilding is addressed later.

### MEDIEVAL USE OF STANDING ROMAN MASONRY

A willingness to retain and incorporate pre-existing fabric and structures appears to have been initiated by the house's late 15th century builders, in this case the east wall of the present kitchen that formed the structural division between the hall and the solar wing, both being two-storey ranges. The layout of the wall is slightly anomalous (Fig. 3) in extending south beyond the nominal limits of the first iteration of the medieval hall and in not being structurally connected to its north wall. The modern ground floor level of the kitchen lies, still, c.400mm below that of the adjoining rooms, but together these support the same roof structure and are assumed to have formed the medieval house of c.1446-78. No one, to date, has volunteered a convincing explanation for the ground floor of the east end of the medieval hall being three feet lower than the rest of the house.

Figures 10 and 11 illustrate the west elevation of the wall and its relationship to the floor levels. Trial pits revealed that the modern floor lay on a 500mm thick layer of compacted rubble of chalk and painted plaster that extended southwards beyond the house and into the inner courtyard. At the base of the rubble is a compact, 200mm thick, pale brown mortar surface that runs contiguously into a pitched slate hearth between massive limestone block abutments, also c.500mm below the current fireplace hearth level and nearly one metre below the floor level of the rest of the house. Though not established conclusively in the small exposures possible, the mortar surface appears to be structurally associated with the east wall of the kitchen. The wall face is formed of punch-finished rectangular ashlar blocks of cretaceous limestone on a rubble base; its north end stops cleanly 800mm short of the north wall of the kitchen and its elevation is pierced by three identical tall blocked openings, of which the northernmost has survived unscathed. Each is 1.34m wide x >2.0m high and has chamfered reveals with plain run-out stops at the bases and tops. If these are doors, they relate to none of the existing or known former floor levels or room configurations; if they are windows, they conform to no known medieval or post-medieval type. At first floor level, this wall also incorporates a projecting hollow masonry moulding (Figs. 8, 10 and 12) in its west face that runs across the full width of the room, partially obscured by the existing ceiling/floor structure and carrying a slight offset of the wall face. It is not a string course or drip moulding of medieval type, it is on an internal wall and it does not relate to the floor configuration of the two storey medieval hall – it pre-dates the upper floor.

One of the objectives of the *Time Team* investigations was to find the Roman villa to which the bath house is ancillary. In that respect, they failed, but they concluded that it must lie under the medieval manor house.<sup>19</sup> The chalk and plaster rubble extends



Fig. 11

Composite photograph of the west elevation of the east wall of the kitchen, taken in a dusty atmosphere, showing two of the three openings, one filled with rubble, the other partially filled with rubble and an inserted door opening.



Fig. 12

The hollow moulding integral to the east wall of the kitchen and first floor hall. The scaffold boards are resting on the 15th century upper floor structure.

southwards beyond the limits of the hall, so pre-dates the 15th century house; whilst the fabrics of the plaster fragments and mortar surface are very similar to Roman fabric the author has excavated in Dorchester and Bath. The mortar surface lies nearly a metre below the floor levels of the rest of the house and clearly relates to an earlier and very different building. It is the east wall, however, that proves the greatest challenge to interpretation as a medieval structural element. Whilst it is difficult to date masonry by visual inspection alone, most medieval masonry is 'boasted' – finished with a flat bladed chisel – not 'punched' with a pointed chisel. And, whilst the three-opening screen is, of course, an archetype of the service end of medieval hall houses, this wall incorporated a decorative detail similar to a dais canopy above the openings, so is unlikely to have been the service end. Furthermore, the openings do not relate to any of the existing or former floor levels so cannot have been doors. A possible explanation is presented below.

## DISCUSSION

### **Overview**

Most published archaeological analyses of historic buildings concentrate on the chronological and typological development of the structure; the secondary and decorative fabric is invariably overlooked. The art historical analyses of architectural historians, which do give the decorative ensembles due weight, tend to concentrate on major buildings with the best detailing and for which there are good archival sources. The non-structural fabric of smaller or less-important buildings tends to slip through the publication net, yet it consumes most of the time of those charged with management of historic buildings. Whitestaunton Manor is such a building. Neither its chronological development nor architecture, alone, warrant academic publication, but it exhibits three characteristics that the author believes are potentially of interest and relevance to others. The interpretations offered here are conjectural and vary slightly from those presented in the author's descriptive 'grey' literature report, following wider reading and consideration of the evidence. It would, nonetheless, be easier to dismiss the eccentricities of Whitestaunton as economic expediency or whimsy, or simply ignore them, but that would seem to diminish the value and purpose of buildings archaeology.

It is a commonplace of architectural history and buildings archaeology that buildings are modified and extended, and that those changes relate to the changing cultural, political, economic and technological milieu in which those buildings were designed and used. Generally, we assume those changes were progressive: the buildings became bigger, better or newer in an ineluctable flow and buildings archaeology in particular can become pre-occupied with identifying and documenting such linear progressions and their typological exemplars. That there might have been retrospective eddies in that flow; that the owners or builders might deliberately incorporate older fabric or structures for reasons other than economic expediency, casual eclecticism or romantic aesthetics is not widely recognised by British scholarship or building conservation orthodoxy. Our continental cousins, on the other hand, deal with it everyday. There, architectural salvage and *in-situ* re-use is an established subject of academic study, in which Britain hardly features. The re-use of materials and details recovered from older buildings – in some circumstances



known as *spolia* – and the incorporation of pre-existing structures was widespread in late imperial Rome<sup>20</sup> and its early medieval successors,<sup>21</sup> was instrumental in the development of Renaissance architecture in Italy<sup>22</sup> and continued into the early 18th century, but the extent and manner in which that operated in Britain has not been addressed as fully. Whilst several authors<sup>23</sup> have identified the re-use of building materials here, mainly with regard to Anglo-Saxon churches and the 16th century dissolution of the monasteries, few<sup>24</sup> identify anything other than economic utilitarianism or antiquarianism in the practice and fewer still are specific about examples.<sup>25</sup> Yes, materials have always been salvaged and the re-use of fireplaces and ornate door frames, for instance, for aesthetic antiquarian affect was relatively commonplace, but the details incorporated in the east wall of Whitestaunton Manor are not aesthetic, re-building the hall walls could not have been simple, nor the incorporation of a pre-existing one convenient, whilst the re-modelled staircase is neither aesthetic nor utilitarian by any stretch of the imagination. Another explanation is warranted.

### **Spolia Britannica?**

Britain is, admittedly, at the outer edge of the classical and Renaissance worlds and a late recipient of their influences, but Moss has demonstrated that salvaged Romanesque details were used as *spolia* by the Protestant Ascendancy in 17th century Ireland<sup>26</sup> to confer political legitimacy on themselves and the buildings that represented their power. The political and cultural turmoils they weathered were analogous to those of their English cousins across the Irish Sea during the late 16th century and throughout the 17th and early 18th centuries. As Ireland is geographically more distant from the classical world than Britain, there is no obvious geographical reason for the apparent absence of *spolia* from medieval and post-medieval Britain.<sup>27</sup>

On the contrary, the author has identified convincing evidence of the purposeful use of salvaged architectural details for plausibly polemical effect at several places in south-western England. For instance, Netherhams Farm at Low Ham near Langport, built c.1689 for John Stawell and probably influenced, if not designed, by a French architect,<sup>28</sup> incorporates many architectural details of an earlier building. Some are arranged semi-functionally, such as window or door jambs, but others perform neither a functional nor a convincing aesthetic function, the best example being a blind door surmounted by part of a window frame, also blind, in the elevation of the main barn facing the house. The *spolia* probably came from the unfinished house of Stawell's father-in-law, the so-called Hext Mansion. The undercroft and tower of what is left of the patently non-monastic extension of Bradenstoke Priory in Wiltshire, present in 1732 and probably built for John Danvers during the early 17th century or perhaps for Germanicus Sheppard in the early 18th century, incorporate salvaged details for deliberate visual affect. Similarly, the barn known as Beauvoir Court at Cerne Abbas also incorporates salvaged decorative masonry at its south end facing the house and a roof structure formed of salvaged trusses of slightly varying form taken from several buildings. Accepted as being a relic of the monastery from which the parish takes its name, and one of several buildings within the former precincts that have clearly been re-modelled,<sup>29</sup> it would have been visible from the three viewing mounds, or 'Pleasaunces',<sup>30</sup> surveyed in 1768,<sup>31</sup> from which the re-modelled monastic

ruins would have formed a *beau voir* indeed. A similar mound – Clack Mount – stands at the centre of the former monastic precincts of Bradenstoke Priory. We do not know the identity of the owner of Beauvoir, but Stawell, Danvers and Sheppard were Catholics or married to Catholics; whilst Stawell and Danvers were also actively influenced by Mediterranean culture.<sup>32</sup> This might be purely coincidental, but equally, it might not be.

The Catholic Bretts were financially distressed by the late 17th century and unlikely to have embarked on major building works. They probably installed the salvaged ceiling and rebuilt the south wall of the hall, but the most likely author of the east range and the staircase is Isaac Elton. A prodigiously wealthy Dissenter recently arrived in conservative rural Somerset, seeking political legitimacy, his circumstances were directly analogous to those of the Anglo-Irish landlords his father was sponsoring in Ireland. If Moss is correct in her assertion that the Protestant Ascendancy used *spolia* in Ireland for deliberate polemical effect, why not the Eltons at Whitestaunton as well? They were perfectly capable of affording a new staircase, but chose to remodel – rather than replace – the historic fabric of the house's architectural centrepiece. This might seem bizarre to us now, but if the Renaissance and Baroque populations of Italy and France interpreted *spolia* as expressions of cultural conservatism, why not the population of early 18th century rural Somerset? Visitors to the house, whose support Elton needed for his political ambitions, would surely have interpreted this as an architectural expression of conservative political and cultural orthodoxy. The archaeological details created in the wall of the east range, though perhaps unconvincing to modern eyes, and the conservative remodelling of the staircase, are directly analogous and contemporaneous to the use of *spolia* in Ireland and continental Europe. The author suggests, therefore, that these characteristics of the house are early 18th century English manifestations of *spolia* and that, far from being exceptional, the phenomenon is likely to be far more widespread than hitherto recognised.

### ***In-situ* re-use and retention**

The Eltons were, perhaps unknowingly, following a trend set by the Hugyns and the Bretts. The Hugyns' incorporation of a pre-existing wall within the otherwise newly built mid-15th century house, matches patterns of re-use identified on the continent almost exactly. In Italian and French towns it was arguably enforced, at least in part, by continuity of use and lack of space, but no such constraints affected the location of Whitestaunton Manor house: it could have been built anywhere, easier. Incorporation of the pre-existing wall was therefore deliberate and purposeful.

The three-opening partition wall is an archetype of the service end of the medieval hall, and it is also an archetype of Roman provincial architecture, as illustrated, for example, by the reverse sides of several Roman coins recovered at Alexandria.<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, Alexandria is at the other end of the Empire, but coinage moved throughout the Empire and was widely copied, as was Roman architecture. We know little about the masonry construction and elevational detailing of Roman provincial buildings in Britain, even less about the mechanics of stylistic diffusion under the Empire, but the Alexandrian coins demonstrate the existence of Roman buildings with three-opening elevations, whilst excavations at Greyhound Yard in Dorchester<sup>34</sup> and Silchester, among others, have identified convincing stratigraphic evidence that Roman buildings were

used and rehabilitated during the Middle Ages, as was common in continental Europe.<sup>35</sup> The wall and mortar floor were certainly constructed before the 15th century house that now incorporates them, and the wall fabric is compatible with Roman *opus quadratum* construction: it is not impossible, therefore, that the east wall of the present kitchen is a standing relic of the Roman villa, subsumed within – or exploited by – the medieval manor house.

If the wall is Roman, it suggests the builders – the Hugyn family – sited and designed the house for its associational value with Roman history and culture. As archaeology has already demonstrated that many medieval settlements were located on or immediately next to Roman villas,<sup>36</sup> it is not stretching the evidence too far to suggest that, perhaps, individual houses of this status were similarly located and that they incorporate Roman fabric.

The Brett's conservative rebuilding of part of the hall *in situ* beneath a substantial roof structure, on the other hand, would have been an onerous undertaking. In addition to the technical wherewithal necessary, which has not hitherto been demonstrated for Britain, it also suggests a post-medieval desire to retain the form and fabric of the medieval building when rebuilding anew might have been easier and more fashionable. Charles and Horn have identified the same contemporaneous phenomenon at Frocester Court Farm in Gloucestershire,<sup>37</sup> where 17th century builders replicated the form of medieval timbers to retain the architectural form of the medieval barn. We can only guess at the motives of the Frocester Court builders, but the recusancy of the Bretts might easily have translated into architectural conservation. That practice is additionally significant for today's architectural historians and buildings archaeologists struggling to make layouts and fabric fit received chronological narratives, for whom an episode of post-medieval *in situ* rebuilding would be very convenient, if difficult to prove. Whitestaunton Manor demonstrates that it could have happened.

### **Replication**

The late 19th and early 20th century owners of Whitestaunton were undoubtedly influenced by less quixotic motives. But, whilst their replication of panelling and friezes might justifiably earn the contempt of contemporary historians and critics, analysts and conservators of such buildings need to be alert to the existence of this material. All chronological analyses of building development and typological studies undertaken without close inspection of the structural and decorative fabrics stripped of cosmetic finishes, need to be qualified with well-worded caveats. And, whilst such material might not warrant preservation, its presence certainly needs to be recorded. Furthermore, as the staircase and friezes demonstrate, even if the structures and fabric themselves are of no aesthetic or historical value, archaeological analysis of them can elucidate their original form, the layout and appearance of associated structures, and their meaning.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is, of course, no such thing as a 'medieval building'. There are many that retain much of their medieval fabric and many more that retain or emulate medieval appearance, but all have been modified to a lesser or greater extent. Where those modifications are

visually distinct and appreciable in their own right, they might be considered to be 'part of the building's history' and of equal or at least comparable importance as the medieval fabric. But where they are not distinct or where they appear to be imitative of earlier fabric, we are on less certain ground. Other cultures hold different attitudes to historical authenticity than ours, but the evidence at Whitestaunton does not fit the criteria of, for instance, Japan's Ise Shrine or the wholesale rebuilding of German *Alte Städte* after the Second World War. Indeed, it does not fit the patterns evident in British buildings, but it does bear similarities to the continental use of *spolia*. Most buildings archaeologists, including the author, on encountering such material in their surveys, would dismiss it as a manifestation of simple economic utilitarianism or, at best, amateurish antiquarianism. The history and material fabric of Whitestaunton Manor suggests other, more nuanced, reasons for the historical use of such material that warrant more open-minded consideration. That, perhaps, Whitestaunton Manor demonstrates a cultural continuity with the continent, not otherwise evident in the English manor house.

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