

WEAG NEWS

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From the Research & Excavation Committee

(1) WEAG's first Field School: held at Copped Hall 11th – 22nd August

The field school format, aimed at giving people who already knew the basics of excavation and recording further experience in a structured learning environment, seems to have worked. Real progress was made with the archaeology of old Copped Hall, both on the Lower Great Lawn and in the Rose Garden. At the Copped Hall Trust's Open Day on 24th August visitors could see excavation in progress, new finds being processed in the Bothy, and a display in the "new" mansion (built in the 1750s) showing the best of the finds of the last seven years.

The Lower Great Lawn (Trench P)

Our objective was to examine some of the archaeological deposits around the enigmatic Tudor circular brick structure as well as the Victorian path overlying it on the north side.

Cleaning the area around it revealed a spread of gravel with a north-to-south edge on the west side. This seems to correspond with the path shown in the 1735 bird's-eye view of the house drawn by Farmer and in the sketch drawn at about the same time by Newdigate. The gravel path extended over the demolition material of the round feature, showing that this feature had gone out of use before the laying out of the 17th/18th century garden.

The brick structure itself was also revealed in further detail, although its remains on the west side are a little more complex than expected and will require further consideration next year. As to its function, we are still missing the crucial archaeological evidence that tells us exactly what it was intended for. A dovecot is one possibility, with nest boxes incorporated into the thick walls. Interestingly, there is also a good parallel for the arrangement of the foundations – a round wall with a large circular foundation within – in the water tower at Canterbury Cathedral. That had water pipes leading to it and running away from it. Perhaps this is what we will find in work next year.

The Rose Garden (Trench G)

Good progress was also made here. More of the clay paths were removed, as was some of the backfill introduced when this part of the old mansion was modified or demolished.

All the bricks seen in the walls exposed so far have been dated to the Tudor period. The earliest features appear to be the dais bay at the west end of the "hall" (so named on Newdigate's ground-floor plan) and the octagonal stair tower, which have been dated to approximately 1500. We have now cleared enough of the backfill within the stair tower to reveal four steps of a spiral stair, almost down to cellar floor level, with part of a brick foundation also visible beneath. The steps are 8 inches high and a maximum of 13.5 inches deep; the full internal radius of the stairway is 69.5 inches. Fragments of render may be seen on all internal faces. The levels suggest that ground level at the south of the house would have been that of the present Lime Tree Walk.

On the north side of the dais bay there is evidence in truncated foundations for an intermediate phase, in which the original hall of about 1500 was extended but before the mansion reached its final form with the construction of the large east and west wings shown in the Newdigate floor plan. The walls of this phase do not coincide with the floor plan: either this "proto" wing did not extend above cellar level or, more likely, it was swept away by a grander rebuild in the Heneage period.

Having protected the masonry with straw bales and an earth backfill, our tasks now are to check the excavation records and process the finds. Next year's digs could be even more interest

The Field School was directed by Christina Holloway and Lee Joyce, who supervised the work in the Rose Garden trench, assisted by Angie Holmes and Alan Hague. Work in the Lower Great Lawn trench was supervised by John Shepherd in the first week and Sara Woollard in the second. Alan Hemming oversaw the surveying and gave refresher courses in levelling when needed. Work on finds in the Bothy was organised by Pamla Lamb, assisted by Jean Hemming and Dawn Chambers. The lunches were prepared by Nicola Munday and Katy Tibbitts (both members of the Friends of the Copped Hall Trust). Practical assistance outside the trenches was provided by David Tingey, Odette Nelson, Peter Dalton and Nick Bateson. Ruth Delehar and Odette were our first-aiders on site. Pauline Dalton, Judy Weatherley, Anne Stacey and Theresa Pell were responsible for publicity and the bookings system prior to the Field School. Key support throughout came from Alan Cox and the Copped Hall Trust. WEAG is most grateful to all these - and, of course, to the students but for whom there would have been no Field School.

(2) Geophysics at Writtle on 20th/21st Sept

WEAG was invited by Heritage Writtle to carry out a non-invasive investigation of one corner of a field which has produced many Roman artefacts. A team surveyed the site using ground-penetrating radar, resistivity and magnetometry. The results led to no immediate whoops of joy but are still being studied. The team members were Eileen Handley, Ralph Potter, Lee Joyce, Peter Lilley, Chris McKenna and Diane Butterfield.