

PASTON HALL - A NEW APPRAISAL

by

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A CONTEXT FOR RECONSTRUCTION

The aim of this document is to consolidate the evidence we have in terms of making an educated guess at what the old Paston Hall may have looked like. It will provide a context for the 3D reconstruction of the Hall as it may have appeared shortly before it was abandonment in 1598.

David Yaxely brings most of the available sources together in his book 'A Portrait of Norfolk', and provided an excellent starting point in re-assessing the sources he refers to and those that have come to light since, including the original water-colour by Josiah Boydell.

Of course, we have tantalising glimpses from the letters themselves, but nothing that provides anything of substance, other than the mention of a malting and fish ponds. We can of course extrapolate that malting on the site would require a specialist building or buildings, but whether it was part of the Hall complex or located nearby remains unknown at present.



Fig.1 'the great rose-coloured mansion'

One of the most revealing of sources is the 'great rose-coloured mansion' that appears in a portrait of Sir William Paston (1528–1610). Whether this portrayal of Paston Hall is merely a token building or something that is actually representative of the Hall remains unclear. Personally I believe it shouldn't be dismissed altogether.

The crenellations over what seems to be the porch, shouldn't be there as no evidence has been found to date of a license to embattle, and the house seems a little too isolated unless this is a portrayal of the mansion that William Paston built in insolation from the other ranges that would have existed.

I am sure that more documentary evidence exists that may fill in some gaps or add a little more detail, but for now, I have scrutinised the available sources, tried to reduce the ambiguity and suggest possible interpretations.

Many questions remain unanswered in terms of the detail and resolution of conflicting accounts and assumptions, however, the Ground Penetrating Radar survey undertaken in April 2013 has helped enormously in resolving some of these, not least the actual location of the Hall!

The following pages essentially address my thoughts on the evidence we have to hand. With such ambiguous and incomplete evidence there is the danger of chasing one's tail in an effort to create something definitive, indeed, I have always come back to the 3D model and changed large chunks of it after further thought.

The reality is that the 3D model can only be something representative of a building that had late Medieval origins and was substantially changed and extended over the course of its lifetime. I will draw upon as much contemporary building evidence as possible.

TILNEY-SPURDENS AND BOYDELL

By far the most helpful source we have in terms of describing the Hall complex, is the testimony of the **Reverend John Tilney-Spurdens** with his thoughts on the print which appears as a plate within the Fenn Papers vol 5 (fig.2). This print was based on based on Josiah Boydell's 1790 watercolour.



Fig.2 The print that Tilney-Spurdens refers to

north and south sides of a courtyard, and we could interpret this as a series of buildings or rooms making up the service wings, within which, the day to day running of the mansion was carried out. He said that the mansion itself occupied the east of the courtyard (with the hall to the left and the kitchen on the right) and a large turreted gateway to the west.

Tilney-Spurdens said that the print was 'very inadequate' in terms of conveying an idea of the ruins when he visited them around the year 1796, six years after Boydell painted them. He describes a layout which would fit the typical plan of a Tudor Mansion (fig.3) or College and Anthony Norris (1711 - 1786) who compiled detailed, but unpublished, histories of the eastern hundreds of Norfolk, said that the hall,

*"much resembles that of a college and indeed, the marks of its ancient magnificence are still everywhere to visible"*¹

Tilney-Spurdens recalls that the 'offices' flanked the

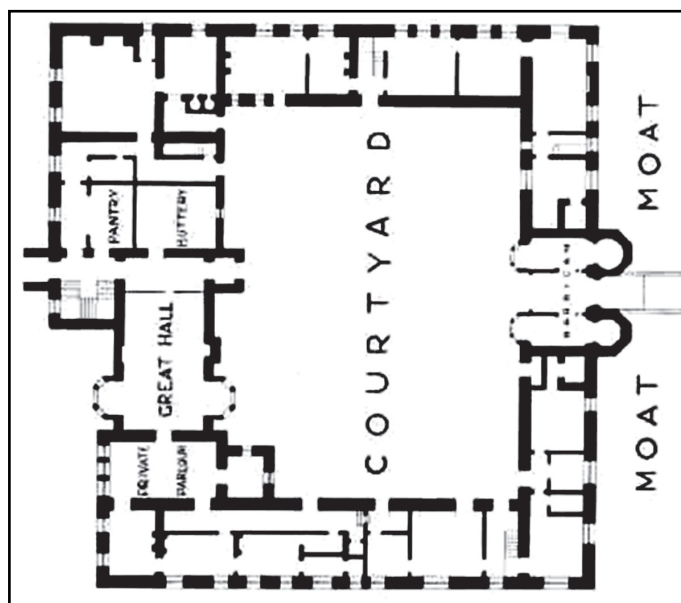


Fig. 3 Oxburgh-Hall layout

Francis Blomefield (1705-1752) visited the site sometime during the 1730's and stated that;

*"the buttery hatch, with the hall, is still standing, but the chamber over it, and the chapel, are in ruins."*²

The buttery hatch was a half door between the buttery/kitchen and the hall. The term 'Hall' often referred to the whole mansion even though it was a distinct room within the mansion.

So we can suppose that the hall had a chamber over it, and that there was a distinct chapel.

1 The Educated Pin by Marjorie Mack p.16

2 An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: vol 11 (1810), pp. 57-59

So taking all three sources into account, it seems we can be fairly certain that the Hall complex was the standard type based around a central courtyard where everything is expected to be.

However, enter Josiah Boydell in 1790.

His watercolour sketch (Fig.4) presents us with a confusing picture. Although we can only see parts of the north and east sides of the complex, and it seems that there is very little we can pin down in terms of the previous descriptions of the ruins. I believe we need to think of in terms of where the scene was painted and what is missing.



Fig.4 Josiah Boydell's watercolour sketch dated 1790

In short, I believe Boydell is positioned in the south western corner of the courtyard. The Barn and Church enables us to get a quick location fix, but I also believe that the well within the 'inner court' that Blomefield refers to below, is the structure just in front of the low wall.

*"The old hall of this family stands near to the church, and had two courts; in the inner court there is a well;"*¹

On later maps, a well is indicated in this vicinity and is possibly still be seen today as a concrete slab in the grass in front of the new hall.

In terms of the 'inner court', it is possible that Blomefield is interpreting the northern range as a separate court defined by the low wall in Boydell's picture. We cannot be sure that this wall is in fact anything to do with the original complex and may be a later addition for agricultural purposes as it doesn't seem ruinous enough.

However, we cannot discount the idea that the northern range was essentially another courtyard containing service buildings. Indeed, the building with the chimney (used as a blacksmith's shop at the time of the painting) does look as though it had always been a 'standalone' building and not part of a wing, and it seems to bear a scar where a perhaps a tall enclosing wall may butted against it.

1 An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: vol 11 (1810), pp. 57-59

Tilney-Spurdens never mentions two courts – just ‘the court’, and we can be sure that he means the space in the foreground of the Boydell print because he also states that the building used as a blacksmiths’ shop was taken down to its string course and used as ‘a passage from the court to the farm buildings’. The farm, of course, was to the north.

So now that we have established where the picture was painted, we can now assess what we should be seeing.

Clearly the large flint gateway to the west is missing because it’s to the left of the scene and ‘out of shot’. Yet we should have a clear view of the eastern range which contained the mansion. We can see ruins of a building or buildings that are maybe three stories high and we can be fairly sure that these have something to do with the mansion. But where is the Great Hall and kitchen, that both Blomefield and Spurdens recall?

Tilney-Spurdens account may help us. He states that; *‘There is a turreted porch in the centre of the front’*.

It is not entirely clear what he is referring to; ‘the centre of the front’ of what? But I believe he is talking about the Mansion, specifically what we see in the middle right of the Boydell watercolour (Fig.5).



Fig.5

There seems to be an entrance (the gap with the church visible) flanked by two small turrets. This gap is certainly in the ‘centre of the front’ of this ruin and there even seems to be the suggestion of steps leading up to an entrance. Blomefield made reference to a staircase out of the hall;

“Over a door of the great staircase, out of the Hall, the arms of Berry are carved.”¹

I don’t think it is any coincidence that the Church can be seen within this gap. It is my opinion that Boydell has omitted the greater

part of the mansion ruin in order to accommodate a view of the church – a large slice of artistic license.

With that in mind, the context of Tilney-Spurdens remarks take on a different significance. Rather than Boydell’s painting lacking because it does not show a better view of the Mansion ruins, perhaps it is lacking because he has chosen to omit the greater part of the Mansion ruins. As Tilney-Spurdens said;

“The view of Paston Hall on the title page of this volume conveys a very inadequate idea of the ruins of that ancient mansion as I remember them.”²

As mentioned earlier, Boydell’s watercolour was redrawn and used as the title plate for the Fenn Papers Volume 5, and the ‘Account of the Plates’ when referring to the title plate states that;

This seems to corroborate the point that Tilney-Spurdens was making, so although nearly 60 years had passed since the visits of Norris and Blomefield, it seems likely that the ruins had not changed a great deal at the time of Boydell and Tilney-Spurdens. In this regard I think we can be fairly confident that Boydell has omitted the Great Hall, Kitchens and the first floor chambers.

1 An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: vol 11 (1810), pp. 57-59

2 Original letters...John Fenn published 1823 page lxxv

The question is, what else is artistic license? It appears that the building with the chimney (the forge), the low wall and the well are represented faithfully, as these can possibly be seen on the enclosure map and the well plotted in later maps.



Fig.6

What about the ‘turreted gateway’ (fig.6) seen at the back of the picture? Could this be another case of artistic license by Boydell? Tilney-Spurdens only mentions one turreted gateway;

“There were some traces of a turreted gateway on the west. It was a large building of flint with quoins of freestone, very irregular in its plan, with very spacious vaulted cellars.”

The ‘Account of the Plates’ from the Fenn Papers Volume 5 states that the gateway seen in the print was used as a blacksmith’s shop, and I believe that it was referring to the building with the chimney (fig.7). It seems much more likely that a blacksmith would use an intact building rather than a ruin.

We also know that Tilney-Spurdens referred to the building with the chimney as ‘*the arched gate*’ and that it was “*a passage from the court to the farm buildings*”.



Fig.7

As it was destroyed down to the string course and used as a pig sty during his visit, we can safely assume that it was no longer used as a blacksmith’s shop by 1796.

So what is the ruinous building in fig.6? To me it does not seem to sit comfortably in the scene. When trying to reconcile the Boydell ruins in 3D, this building appeared to be beyond the limits of the Hall and far too close to the barn.

Is it possible that there was a northern turreted gateway which has gone unmentioned in the contemporary accounts? Or it is possible that Boydell has sprinkled another large dusting of artistic license?

We now know that Boydell was painting with an aesthetic motivation rather than a faithful one. With this in mind, it is not inconceivable that he has actually painted the turreted gateway to the west (as it was too good a subject to leave out) and ‘shoehorned’ it in at the top of his painting.

Another curious, but considerable ruin, is the ‘tower’ seen at the back of the mansion. Could this be the chapel as mentioned by Blomefield?

LORD GEORGE ANSON

Another assumption that needs to be examined is the influence of Lord George Anson who acquired the Paston estate sometime after the death of William Paston in 1732. The current understanding is that Lord Anson knocked down the ruins and built a new house which incorporated parts of a Tudor farmhouse. The earliest reference to this I can find is from ‘The Educated Pin’ in the following passage:

“The whole estate of the Pastons was bought by Lord Anson on his return from the famous voyage round the world. He it was who demolished the ruins of the old fifteenth century hall and the Tudor farmhouse and built the original part of the new hall on the cellars probably of the latter..¹

1 The Educated Pin by Marjorie Mack p.16

We must remember that at the time of the Anson acquisition, Paston Hall would have been part of the Paston estate which primarily included Oxnead Hall. William Paston moved the Paston seat to Oxnead in 1598.

When talking about Oxnead, Blomefield states that:

*'After the death of this Earl [William Paston (1653/4-1732), who left his estates to pay his debts, this agreeable seat, with the park, gardens, &c. soon run into decay, the greatest part of the house was pulled down, the materials sold, only a part of it left for a farmer to inhabit, and was sold to the Right Honorable Lord Anson.'*¹

So with Oxnead came Paston, although at this stage, the old Paston Hall would presumably have been derelict since its abandonment in 1598.

At this point we need to put Paston into context with Lord Anson.

Lord George Anson was a very rich man with an enormous property portfolio following his fame at fortune obtained from his successful naval career. The Anson family seat was at Shugborough in the heart of Staffordshire, where Anson funded the transformation of a medium sized country house there, to a magnificent Georgian Mansion between 1745 and 1748. In 1752, Lord Anson bought the great Palladian mansion at Moor Park and commissioned Capability Brown to landscape the gardens. Lord Anson died there in 1762.

We must think of the Ansons as the estate owners and the Paston estate belonging to a very large property portfolio which, in Norfolk, consisted of the following when his son, Thomas, sold them between 1822 and 1824

*Oxnead Hall, the park then disparked, Paston Hall, manors, farms, advowsons etc. in Oxnead, Swanton Abbott, Buxton, Hevingham, Marsham, Lyng, Bassingham, Gresham, Paston, Mautby, Skeyton, Burgh-next-Aylsham, Lammas, Matlaske, Barningham, Bacton, Happisburgh, South Burlingham, Beighton, Runham, Southtown and Gorleston, Meyton, Reepham, West Beckham, Gresham, Aylmerton and Cromer, Oxnead paper mill, Buxton water mill, and Lyng water mill.*²

Lord Anson acquired Oxnead and Paston shortly before his death. He certainly could not have demolished the Hall as stated by Susannah Mack, because the ruins were still visible well after his death and I cannot see why Lord Anson would have any reason to demolish the already derelict Hall. Paston was small fry in the grand scheme of things.



Fig.8 Oxnead Hall in 1807

As mentioned earlier, Blomefield tells us that Oxnead was dismantled prior to the Anson acquisition in order to sell materials to clear debts, but Oxnead (fig.8) was enormous in comparison with Paston at this stage.

It seems that Paston Hall escaped such demolition from both the Pastons and Lord George Anson.

So it seems very likely that Lord George Anson had no material influence at Paston whatsoever, it was just one of many estates in a burgeoning property portfolio.

1 An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: volume 6 477-496

2 Abstracts of Title and copies of conveyances affecting the title of Thomas William, Viscount Anson, NRO MC 488

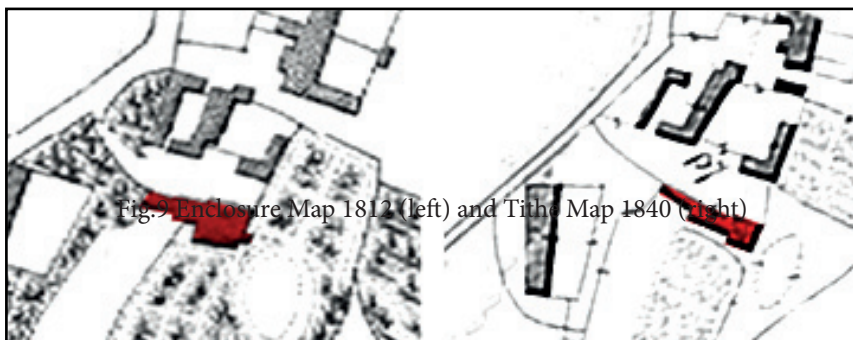
JOHN MACK AND THOMAS ANSON

The current understanding is that John Mack built the current Paston Hall after he acquired the estate in 1824. Present owner Steve Clark, who has conducted extensive restoration of the house has his own thoughts on the date of the Mack house.

In truth I have always understood the house to be circa 1824, everybody locally seem to think John Mack built the house. If I was to guess though I would have thought it was a little older rather than younger. To me it seems more Georgian than Victorian although I am sure houses were still built in Georgian style much later.

There is a lead roof above the porch to the front door (now at the rear of the house) and there are some hand and footprints scratched in the lead with Children's names, they are dated 1836. I think it is entirely possible that John Mack didn't actually build the house and that it already existed when he purchased in 1824. I have always thought it strange that Admiral Anson was meant to have built a house here sometime after his purchase in the 1760's and then John Mack is meant to have built a new house in 1824. I think it is more likely that the house was built by Admiral Anson or his descendants sometime before 1812 and John Mack's purchase.

Just to muddy the waters a little bit, when we had the roof redone the builder thought that the house had been substantially added too at some point. He felt that all the roof timbers were very old but that the main house timbers were much older than the timbers over the Kitchen and rear part of the house. Could it be that John Mack added to what was already there?¹



Although the cartography of the Tithe Map (right) is less well defined than the 1812 Enclosure Map (left), it does appear to be the same building with a stretched configuration aligned east-west. If it is the same building, then it must have been built before John Mack bought the estate in 1824.

The question remains, when was this house built and what went before it?

Again, the Rev. John Tilney-Spurdens gives us a starting point when he stated that the offices *'flanked the two sides of a court, north and south'*. To me, this suggests that north and south of the courtyard, there may have been Tudor buildings that were still being utilised, as borne out by the blacksmith's shop in Boydell's print.

It is entirely possible then, that the 'Tudor Farmhouse' as referred to by Susannah Mack, could be the southern service wing of the old hall. The wing may have evolved over the years as it's role changed to an agricultural one, but could have remained a long building or string of buildings, perhaps some intact others ruinous.

We can see a direct parallel here with Oxnead as the current Oxnead Hall is a two-storey service wing which was left to the farmer as stated by Blomefield.² So it is possible that the southern service wing of the old hall was still in lived in by the farmer or farm workers after the Pastons moved to Oxnead, and utilised as the 'farmhouse'.

1 Email to James Mindham January 2014

2 An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk: volume 6 477-496

Crucially, the ‘account of the plates’ from the Fenn Papers Volume 5 states that; *“a modern farmhouse has been erected on another part of the site”*. This volume was published before John Mack acquired the estate in 1824, and so it seems likely that the ‘modern farmhouse’ must have been built by Thomas Anson and improved on and not built by John Mack.

Based on the striking similarity of the houses drawn on both the Enclosure Map and the Tithe Map, it is very probable that they are ostensibly the same building. If this is the case then we can conclude that the ‘modern farmhouse’ was built sometime between 1796 and 1812 and it seems likely that all traces of the old hall and associated buildings were removed during this period.

Susannah Mack’s theory that the ‘modern farmhouse’ incorporated the cellars from the Tudor service wing has been dismissed by Stephen Heyward (Historic Buildings Officer at Norfolk County Council). However, if the orientation of the ‘modern farmhouse’ matches that of the old hall buildings, then the theory becomes more creditable.

ARCHAEOLOGY

So far, the first recorded archaeological evidence for the hall was mentioned by Marjorie Mack in her book, the ‘Educated Pin’

“So indeed we doted on asparagus; nevertheless, when the emergence of a little fragment of tiled floor beneath the asparagus bed in the flint walled kitchen garden coincided with the arrival of a party of young guests for a long Easter week-end, the temptation to tear this old secret out of the earth was too great. Coats were flung off, asparagus roots and earth were flung aside, and the shovelling proceeded feverishly till a whole perfect little tiled hexagonal chamber stood revealed to the April sun.”¹

The asparagus bed was within the kitchen garden running north-south and somewhere slightly west of centre. Just where the hexagonal chamber was found remains unknown at present, but at least we can be sure of an approximate location for the mansion.

In May 2012, several test pit were dug within the kitchen garden as part of the ‘Dig and Sow’ event. Nothing of significance was found within these pits, although it seems likely that they may have only scratched the surface.

In April 2013, a small exploratory trench was opened against the kitchen garden wall in order to try and establish a possible date for the older part of the wall. The construction trenches for both walls cut into a layer containing 16th century stoneware. The older phase contained re-used stone to form a foundation for the flint and brick wall, it was suggested by Stephen Heyward that this stone would have come from Bromholme Priory.



fig.10 The older wall to the left containing re-used stone from Bromholme

The same stone can be seen re-used on the southern side of the wall immediately south of the church.

The later phase which clearly butts up against the older wall, may have been built around the same time that the ruins were finally pulled down and the new house built. The wall can be seen on the 1812 Enclosure Map, which suggests that this was the case, rather than John Mack building it after he acquired the estate in 1824.

A further test pit was opened for the Paston Open Day event in April 2014. The pit was located a flower bed next to the coach house conservatory, following the report by owner that she had dug up some mortar whilst planting.

The test pit revealed that the mortar was associated with the backfill of a service trench. However, further excavation revealed broken peg tiles used as a make-up layer for the floor of an early 19th century agricultural building, which itself appeared to use Tudor bricks as a floor.

“The broken tiles from the first make-up layer, seem to be typical peg tiles from the Tudor period. Some of these tiles are pointed and could have been used to create an alternating pattern. These tiles would have been readily accessible and ideal to use as a make-up layer. It is difficult to imagine another scenario which would argue against these tiles being from the Hall or associated buildings.

Although the excavated agricultural building clearly post dates Hall, it seems likely that the bricks used for the floor are from the Hall itself. The dimensions and fabric appear consistent with a Tudor brick, but the most compelling evidence is that these bricks have been re-used. Traces of mortar were found on all sides of these bricks which suggests that they were originally bonded in another structure before being re-used in the floor of the agricultural building.”¹

During the underpinning of the south eastern corner of the Coach House, a large foundation was seen running east west within the trench dug for the underpinning. Also, another large area of mortar was reportedly found in the Coach House garden when a palm was planted.

It is apparent then, that traces of the old hall complex can still be found, although it is unclear at present just how extensive these traces are. These isolated finds are just pick pricks of light in the darkness and just offer an occasional tantalising glimpse of what remains.



fig.11 Jason Gibbons in the Kitchen Garden

GROUND PENETRATING RADAR

There is enough evidence to make a best guess at how the hall complex would have looked before its abandonment, but there are so many unanswered questions. Luckily the offer of a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) survey was made by Michael de Bootman and Jason Gibbons.

Could two days of surveying, 183 depth slices and 400 depth profiles begin to answer the following questions?

- Can the GPR pinpoint anything seen on Boydells watercolour?
- What is the orientation and position of the complex?
- Did the complex have two courtyards?
- How did the complex relate with the road to the church?
- Can anything be seen of the east and southern ranges?
- Is there a relationship between the new house and the old?

Surveying in the Kitchen Garden was problematical because of various obstacles and inaccessible areas, however, the going was better in front of the house and within the lawned areas surrounding it.

Initially, it was thought that the GPR survey was relatively unsuccessful, however, close scrutiny of the results enables us to draw important conclusions and offers indications of how the layout may have been.

At first glance, the Interim Interpretation suggests a fragmentary response from solid masonry and rubble, combined with possible drainage features that post date the Hall (fig.12).

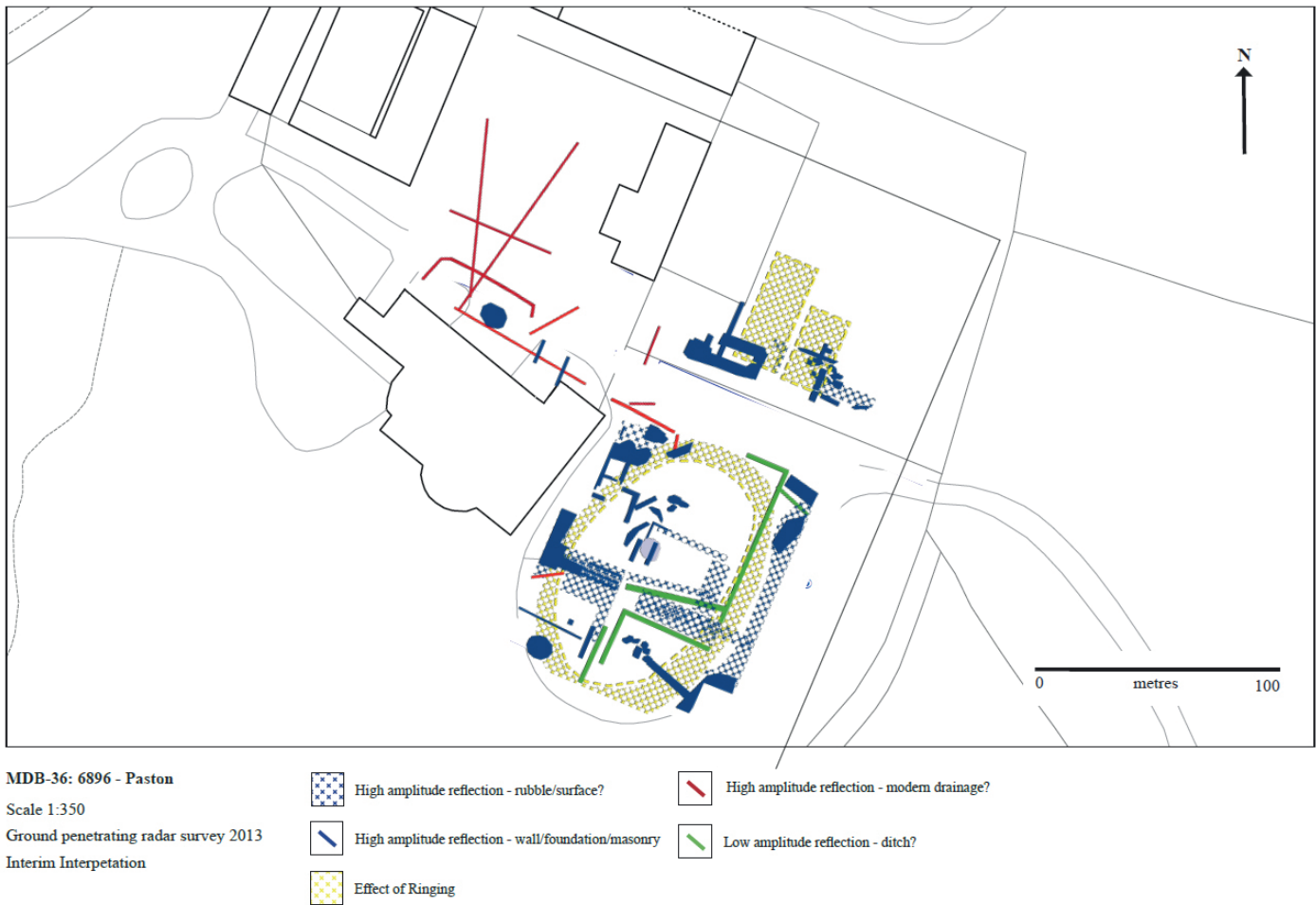


fig.12 GPR Interim Report

In response to whether it is possible to 'get a fix' for the Boydell painting, I think we can identify the low wall and the well seen in the painting. We know the wall is mapped on both the Enclosure and Tithe map, and the well is indicated on the 1885 map, although, by this time the wall had gone.

The lowest depth slice (fig.13), at just over 3 meters, suggests 3 potential wells that can be traced consistently through the profile. I have indicated what I believe could be the well and the wall (which appears at a higher slice - fig.14) in the Boydell painting.

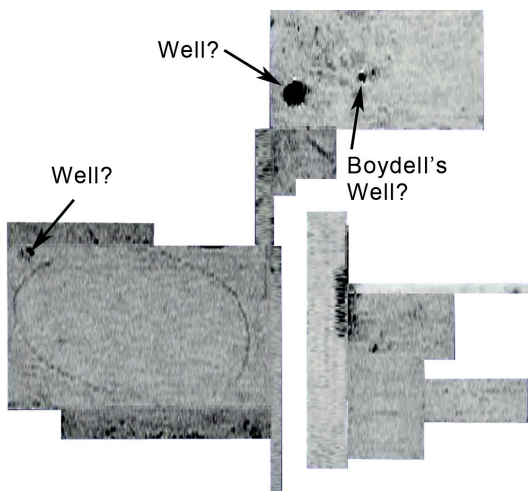


fig.13 Depth slice at 3 meters

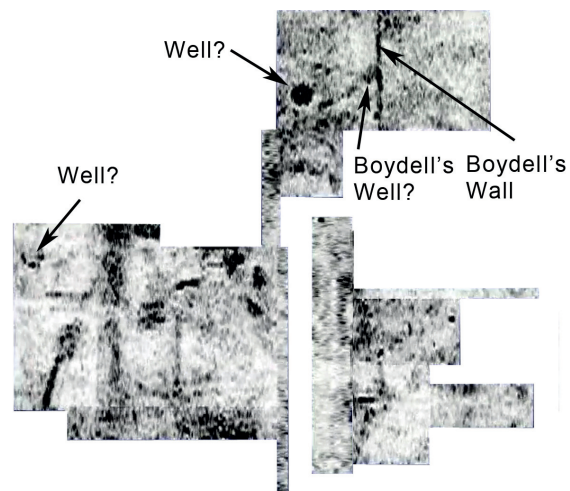


fig.14 Depth slice at 1.6 meters

If the well and the wall are those I have indicated, then it confirms the previous assumption that Boydell was painting from the south west corner of the present day courtyard and gives us a useful fix.

The GPR results have also confirmed that the orientation of the Hall is the same as the barn and surrounding buildings which seem to have respected the old orientation. It is obvious that the new hall is on a completely different alignment and adds weight to the argument that the cellars within the new hall are contemporary rather than Tudor.

I also believe that the GPR results reinforces Blomefield's assertion that there were two courts. Before the GPR results, I had assumed that Tilney-Spurdens described a single courtyard with the mansion to the east of it, I now believe that this may be the 'inner court' as mentioned by Blomefield and that the mansion itself had a courtyard. Norris' description of the Hall resembling a college makes much more sense now.

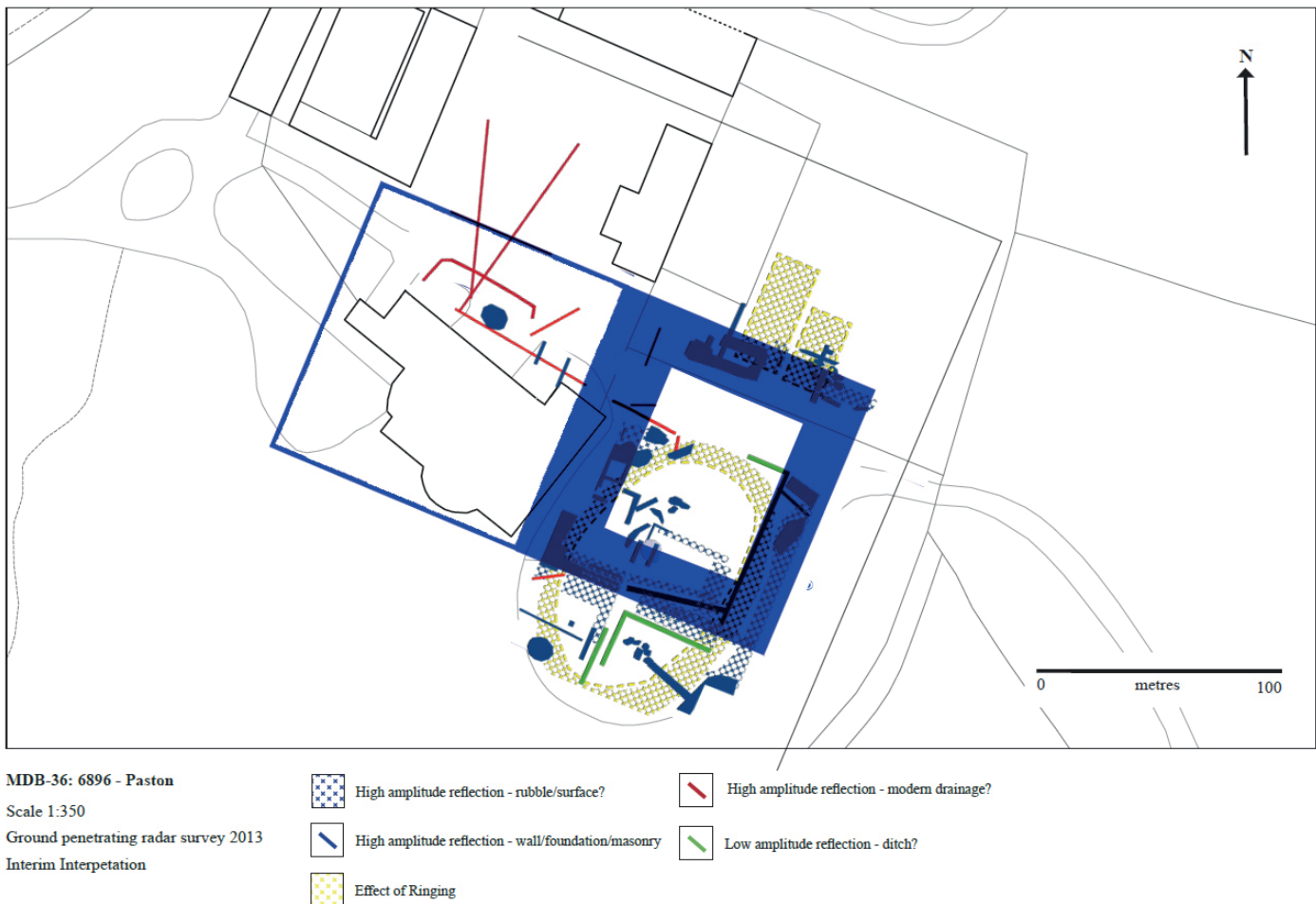


Fig.15 Conjectural plan of the courtyards

Figure 15 above, maps out what I believe to be the likely layout of the hall based on the available evidence. The road to the church heads out from the northern side of the inner court and one can now easily imagine why the Pastons fought so hard to change the route!

Unfortunately, the eastern range of the hall is less well defined, and although there is a lot of 'building noise' in the GPR results, no definitive edge could be discerned as the noise continued beyond the GPR survey limits.

However, the southern range is much more interesting and suggestive. A long 'block' is seen running west-east forming the southern range. At the centre of this block, two parallel short lengths of wall are seen extruding to the south from what is likely to be the centre of the range (Figure 16).

My feeling is that this range could be the relate to the part of the Hall seen in the William Paston portrait.

The two parallel walls seem to enclose a path heading south - maybe a path to the gardens with the walls defining some steps leading up to the southern wing.

I created an impression of what this may have looked like and how it compares to the building seen in the Paston portrait.



Fig.17 The southern wing

The impression (Fig.17) of the hall is based on the GPR results and inspiration from the Hall seen in the William Paston portrait (right). Its quite possible that the building seen in the portrait is only the southern wing.

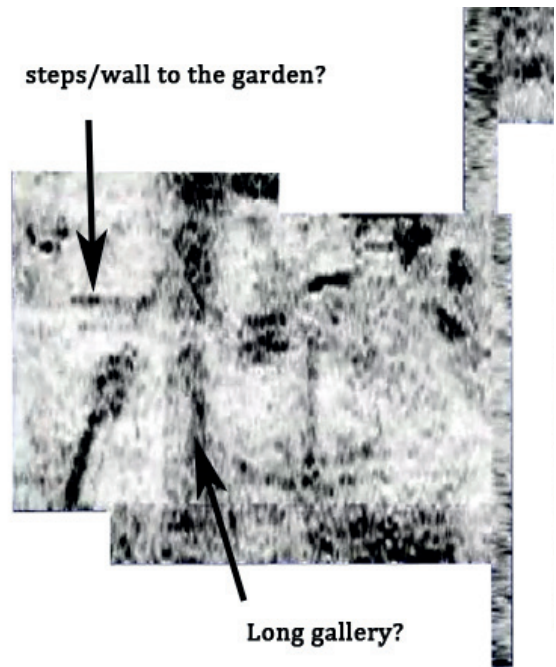


Fig.16 The long gallery



OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

At the very beginning of the project, there was very little known in terms of what Paston Hall looked like. We could draw inspiration from contemporary buildings, we had pin pricks of light in the darkness from various chance discoveries, but an overall impression based on anything other than guesswork was seemingly unobtainable.

Now, using the GPR and bringing together all the disparate snapshots, I think we can at least attempt to build a picture with a little more confidence.

We know where the hall is - that in itself is a major step forward. We know that the modern hall bears no relation to the Paston Hall in both alignment and age. We know the likely extents of the hall and that the literary references can be trusted to a large degree. Although Boydell is somewhat liberal with his interpretation, he does provide crucial evidence in terms of architectural detail and suggests that the brick rebuild was more extensive than previously thought. We also know why the Dig and Sow test pits did not find anything - they simply did not dig deep enough, although the placement was spot on!

The next step is for me to bring the hall back to life through 3D modelling. Although I have been working on this for some time, a final iteration is still some way off as I've tended to write off large chunks of modelling after many rethinks and drawing additional inspiration from other contemporary buildings.

However, I can see it in my minds eye - a gloriously eclectic set of buildings beautifully lit by the late summer sun, and although largely fictional, it is hopefully representative of Paston Hall.