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A REAPPRAISAL OF FOXCOTTE AREA G

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ABSTRACT

The excavation report on the deserted medieval village of Foxcotte (Russel 1985) included a house site known as Area G. This area had been almost wholly excavated by voluntary labour, provided mainly by the Andover Archaeological Society, working under the supervision and direction of the Test Valley Archaeological Committee's Field Director. Plans prepared by the author at that time for the purposes of independent research are published here for the first time, together with further discussion of the buildings. The southern building in particular is reinterpreted as a 14th–15th century cruck building, part of a modest complex that included a detached kitchen.

INTRODUCTION

Area G of the Foxcotte deserted medieval village related to a medium-sized house platform cut into the natural hillslope at the south end of the settlement area, which on excavation revealed evidence of three separate buildings lying immediately below topsoil level (Russel 1985, 177–86). Although their shallow depth made it impossible to establish any stratigraphical relationship between the structures, their close proximity on the same platform must confirm a common association.

Originally, the platform seems to have been only a modest rectangular terrace, probably adequate to accommodate a single structure set centrally along its length. Excavation disclosed the footings of a fairly substantial building, referred to as the Southern Building, set along the outer (downslope) flank of the terrace, whose lip was actually revetted by the south wall of the structure. At some period, the eastern end of the terrace had been cut back into the hillslope to provide space for a secondary structure referred to as the Northern Building. A third structure, the Western Building, was set on the undisturbed natural hillslope behind the Southern Building immediately west of the Northern Building.

THE SOUTHERN BUILDING (Fig 1)

The footings of the Southern Building were generally well-preserved, and took the form of low, unmortared flint sleeper walls defining a structure having an internal length of 12.8m and a breadth of 4.5m. The whole structure was overlain by a thin spread of broken tile which sealed a thin depth of brown soil within the footings. Excepting slight traces of charcoal and a few fragments of carbonised timber, there seemed little significant evidence of destruction by fire. There was, however, a deep accumulation of burnt debris piled up against the external face of the south wall, this material including large quantities of burnt daub, ash and charcoal, and containing various potsherds and iron objects, including several pairs of hinges. Whilst this debris would support suggestions of destruction or severe damage by fire at some period, the absence of any debris within the building or against other external wall faces, could indicate a deliberate cleaning-out of the structure in anticipation of reconstruction. The resiliance of cruck blades to fire destruction can be demonstrated by a recent instance at Overton of blades surviving serious fire damage and being reused in subsequent reconstruction. A 13th/14th century deposit spreading under the sleeper walls would suggest a 14th-century dating for the structure which, on the basis of pottery evidence, seems to have survived until the later 15th century.

Interpretation of the structure invites discussion, particularly in view of earlier

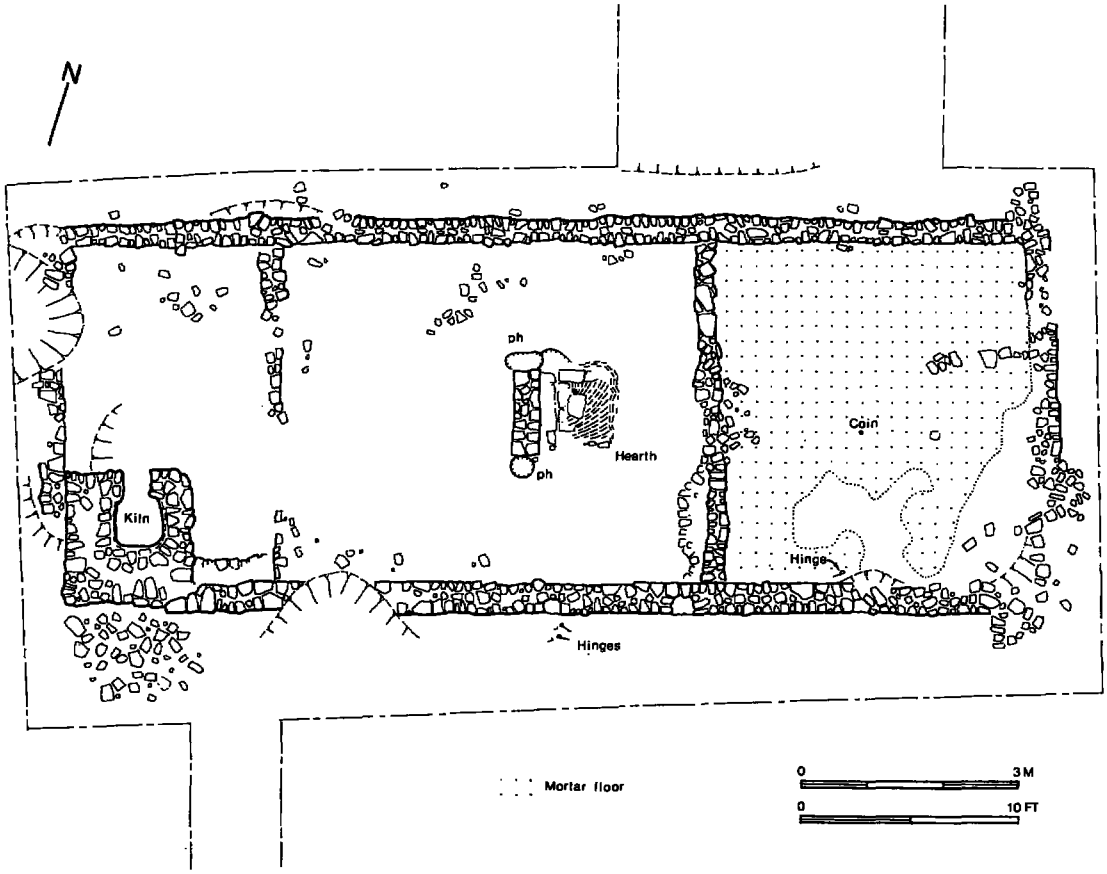

Fig 1. Foxcotte, Area G: the Southern Building.

comments regarding the possible framing design. The flint sleeper walls would have supported the cill plates of a fully-framed building which evidently had daubed infill panels. There was no evidence of any pads or postholes that might be related to any structural posts immediately within the curtilage. Of particular interest were a series of irregularly-spaced slots, apparently to accommodate small posts, along the external faces of the flank walls. These have been suggested as evidence of an arrangement of structural posts and interrupted cills. The irregular spacing of the posts, their small size, and their setting on the face rather than within the walls, would argue against their function as primary structural elements in an interrupted cill. There is an absence of any conclusive evidence for the use of interrupted cill construction in this region during the later medieval period. An alternative explanation may be that the small posts represent simple reinforcement stakes provided as a precaution against collapse of the flint sleeper wall, particularly along the south flank where it was of greater height and also acted as a retaining structure. The writer has observed the use of reinforcement stakes to flint sleeper walls in a number of local buildings; the practice evidently persisting into the 17th century. The frequency of later

renewal or underpinning of sleeper walls makes it impossible to ascertain how commonplace or well-established this practice was during the later medieval period. Reconsideration of the suggested interrupted cill arrangement broadens the scope of possible superstructure framing design, and the earlier suggestion that the framing cannot have been of a cruck type throughout seems open to reappraisal.

The evidence of surviving later medieval rural dwellings in the region provides strong indication that the cruck form of construction was perhaps the prevalent form adopted for construction of better quality rural peasant dwellings, of which this structure would seem to be a further example. The fairly generous span appears compatible with a cruck form, and normal practice in the region was for the cruck blades to be supported on a continuous cill plate, which also supported the framing of the outer walls. Although only of secondary structural importance, regional practice seems to have been for fairly robustly framed outer walls. In theory, the adoption of crucks would resolve the problem of any lateral thrusts being directed onto the cills, but in practice, particularly in the context of an open cruck frame without the benefit of a low-set tiebeam or with poorly-shaped blades, the likelihood of slight spreading of the blades and consequent transmission of lateral thrusts to the cill plates and sleeper walls cannot be overlooked. Accordingly, the suggestion of stake reinforcement of the sleeper walls would not seem incompatible with cruck framing. The earlier report concedes the possibility of cruck-framed gable ends, although this is based upon the interpretation of post sockets at the wall angles as being cruck blade anchorages. As mentioned above, regional practice was for the cruck blades to be set onto the cill plate rather than onto independent bases. Structures featuring a combination of cruck- and box-framed construction can be cited in the region, particularly good examples being known to the writer in Romsey and Wokingham, but in such instances the cruck frames are located internally to span an open hall within an otherwise wholly box-framed structure. Such combinations seem to generally originate from the mid-15th century.

The surviving plan of the building suggests it to have originally been a fairly typical arrangement of three equal sized bays, those in the centre and east end forming an open hall with a hearth set towards the western end and possibly backing onto a cross passage zone, an arrangement paralleled at 'Lords and Ladies', Dogmersfield (Mercer 1975, 163). A framed smoke-hood is unlikely, but cannot be wholly discounted. The western end bay would have formed a service room, possibly with loft above. The absence of any evidence of a separating crosswall between hall and service room could indicate an open-plan ground floor, which arrangement can be cited in surviving structures of the period. There was, however, slight evidence of a possible later crosswall division inserted just within the western bay. In the south-west angle of the service room was a flint-built kiln or charging hole for an oven which seemed to be a later insertion. The character of the flintwork was more crude than that of the adjoining sleeper walls, and it was apparently constructed against the inner face of the gable wall, presumably to avoid disturbance of the end frame, but intruded through the south flank sleeper wall. The latter was accordingly rebuilt at this point and without any need to incorporate reinforcement posts. The cutting-away of part of the cill plate to accommodate the kiln could again point to a primary structural reliance upon cruck frames rather than continuous posts associated with an interrupted cill.

Evidence of later remodelling survived at the eastern end of the structure, in the guise of a rather crude flint sleeper wall inserted between the central and eastern bay, presumably to support a new crosswall dividing the Hall into its separate bays. In consequence, the original hearth, marooned uncomfortably close to the new crosswall, required remodelling to suit. The new eastern end room was provided with a raised floor of poor, sandy mortar, embedded in which was a silver coin of 1450–53 (Russel 1985, 179, where it is

erroneously described as being a topsoil find). In common with the rest of the interior, the room was fairly clear of debris, but lying towards the eastern end were the sherds of a fine pitcher (Russel 1985, Fig 11, No 57). The formation of an additional end chamber by the reduction of the Hall is not uncommon, and examples can be cited in a number of surviving cruck dwellings in the region, one example being Lime Tree Cottage, Crondall (Mercer 1975, 163).

Along the north side of the building, the yard surface seems to have been to some extent protected by an eaves overhang of up to 45cm. Although thatch was undoubtedly the more common roofing material in the rural situation, there is evidence to suggest that this building may have had a tiled roof in its final phase, which would be a further indication of a better quality dwelling. The tile debris was spread evenly over the whole length of the building, and the earlier suggestion that it originated from some sort of hearth superstructure or flue seems difficult to substantiate. It seems reasonable to suppose that, following the collapse of a tiled roof, the serviceable tiles and ridges would be salvaged for reuse, to leave only a spread of shattered tile debris. The fact that the tile spread was confined to the immediate area of the building obviously precludes it being part of any general later spread of debris from elsewhere. The recovery of numerous iron nails within the spread must further support suggestion of the collapse of a tiled roof.

THE NORTHERN BUILDING (Fig 2)

The northern building occupied the inner end of the platform, here cut back into the hillside whose scarped faces enveloped the building on all except the southern flank. Despite a greater depth of topsoil covering, it was relatively poorly preserved, evidently on account of later disturbances. The structure was again represented by low flint sleeper walls, indicating a fully framed building borne on continuous cill plates. Although the earlier report described it as being of irregular trapezoid plan, it was in fact a regular rectangular plan measuring 7.5m internal length and 4.5m internal breadth. It was set parallel to the southern building, with the east gables of both buildings in an exact alignment. This, added to the fact that both structures were of identical span, suggests a common build and association. The earlier interpretation of the building as being a detached kitchen seems reasonable, particularly on account of the large oven set against the east gable. There is considerable documentary and archaeological evidence for the widespread practice of provision of detached kitchens in rural establishments of manorial status, but how far this practice descended the social scale is less certain. In this instance, there seems to be clear evidence of a good quality peasant dwelling complete with detached kitchen, both structures being apparently of one build.

The proportions of the structure indicate a two-bay form, most likely cruck-framed to match the southern building. It has been suggested that two post holes, identified one at each end of the north wall, fulfilled a primary structural function associated with this building. Although their positioning at the wall angles is unlikely to be coincidental, their relatively small size and the fact that the eastern end post hole was wholly overlain by the sleeper wall would argue against their function as supporting main structural posts associated with this building. They could conceivably belong to an earlier structure, and in this respect it may be significant that the eastern end post hole retained the stump of a burnt timber post, sealed by the unburnt sleeper wall above. It is also possible that the post holes accommodated short timber piles to reinforce the angles of the sleeper walls which were particularly vulnerable to displacement consequent of the more acute end loadings of the corner posts or cruck blades. In the absence of any angle padstones in the guise of sarsen stone, greensand or tabular flint, the provision of timber piles would seem a plausible substitute; an example of such an arrangement being recently observed by the writer in a

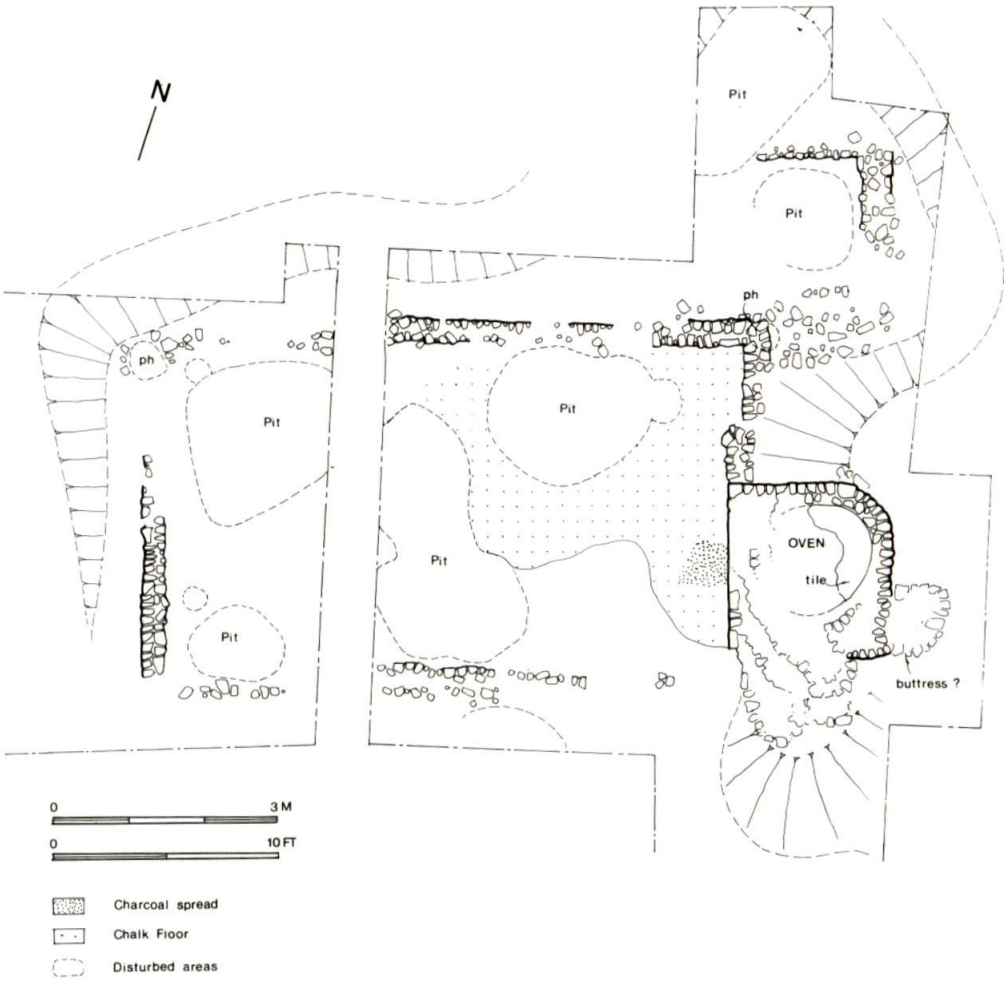

Fig 2. Foxcotte, Area G: the Northern Building.

late 16th century cottage at Quarley. The earlier suggestion of an association of earth-fast posts and cill plates seems unlikely. Although the practice of earth-fast posts perpetuated in some areas until a much later date, the available archaeological and surviving structural evidence in this region suggests that the tradition of earth-fast posts was being increasingly superceded by continuous cill-plate supporting structures after the 13th century. The insertion of a large flint-built oven against the east gable clearly necessitated extensive replacement of the sleeper wall and considerable interruption of the cill plate; which alterations could have been accommodated without undue difficulty in a cruck framed gable condition. The differing character of the oven flintwork, and the differing alignment of its internal face with that of the gable sleeper wall, are obviously indicators of its later addition.

As noted in the earlier report, the clearance of the building revealed comparatively little destruction debris, and although a thin spread of tile fragments were recorded, this probably

originated largely from the tile inner lining of the oven. In common with the southern building, there was little evidence to support the suggestion of final destruction by fire. The virtual absence of daub could point to a wattled panel infill, and the more meagre tile spread would favour a thatched or shingled roof finish; all features suggestive of a secondary status for the building. The floor retained traces of a thin puddled chalk surface, heavily damaged by the insertion of later pits. The latter were also responsible for damage to the sleeper walls, and extended across the yard towards the southern building. It may be significant that the pit disturbance did not extend into the area of the southern building, which by inference could have remained in use after abandonment of the northern structure. Potsherds recovered from the pits pointed to a possible early 16th century date. It could even be suggested that the northern building was dismantled for the possible utilisation of its framing for the repair of its fire-damaged neighbour in the mid-15th century.

Traces of a small secondary structure were located adjoining the northeast angle of the northern building, represented by a fragmentary alignment of flint sleeper wall of very indifferent quality forming the internal angle of a structure extending 2m north of the parent building, and 1.2m further eastwards. The configuration of the hillslope precluded its extension the whole length of the building. Initially, a well-head or latrine was supposed, as it appeared to overlie a pit feature. Excavation of the latter confirmed an irregular pit 1.5m depth, but devoid of finds of any sort or evidence of latrine deposits.

Clearance of the building produced various potsherds and metal items lying above the floor level, including a complete pair of iron shears (Russel 1985, Fig 26.19) whose location was earlier unspecified.

THE WESTERN BUILDING

The western building was set on sloping ground slightly above the level of the other two structures, its shallow topsoil protection contributing to the poorer state of preservation and the apparent loss of the southern end. Its irregular alignment suggests that it was a later addition, the failure to prepare a properly levelled platform being perhaps indicative of some urgency or haste. It was clearly of quite small size, but the inclusion of an internal hearth indicates that it was not necessarily of inferior construction. Again, the structure was evidently supported by cill plates laid over unmortared flint walls. Its exact function is conjectural. During clearance, a thin spread of tile fragments was found overlying the interior, and whilst these might originate from a hearthback, the possibility of a tiled roof cannot be discounted. Again, there was a noticeable absence of daub. The pits covering the site of the northern building stopped short of this structure, suggesting that like the southern building it continued in use after the demise of the northern building. It would seem a plausible possibility that this represents a replacement detached kitchen or service block, but why it should not have been sited on the more convenient platform of the northern structure cannot be ascertained.

EVIDENCE OF EARLIER STRUCTURES

The interiors of both the northern and southern buildings were carefully examined for evidence of earlier structures, and although some scatters of flint seemed apparent, no recognisable patterns or alignments were evident. The yard area between the two buildings was more productive, and suggested a trampled chalk surface overlain by a thin grey occupation layer containing 13th and 14th century potsherds which extended under the flanks of both adjoining structures. This confirms the earlier origin of the platform, but evidence of any actual earlier structure remains elusive. However, had any earlier structure depended upon support by cill beams laid directly onto the ground surface, the structure could have been easily removed without leaving any archaeological trace what-

soever. Numerous features observed beneath the central section of the southern building were interpreted in the earlier report as being stakeholes, but their very small size and irregular spacing makes this doubtful. Despite their convincing appearance, the features are more likely products of natural solutioning of the chalk, representing a fairly common and deceptive phenomenon on many chalk sites. The only obvious candidates for possible earlier origin would seem to be the two postholes under the wall of the northern building referred to above. The awkward siting of the southern building, set along the outer edge of the platform rather than centrally, may have significance. It could be that the grey occupation level in the centre of the yard represents the site of an earlier building. Had the latter relied upon continuous cills for support as did its successors, then the absence of postholes is simply explained. The positioning of the southern building could therefore have been dictated by the presence of an earlier structure, the latter being removed immediately upon completion of the successor to allow construction of the northern building. This practice can still be observed in the context of surviving rural structures in the area, in certain cases the earlier building being retained for secondary use alongside its successor. Good examples can be cited in the nearby villages of Thruxton and Appleshaw.

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