

A Re-appraisal of the Architectural and Historic Significance of

Wolfhall, Wiltshire

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The current Wolfhall is a multi-phase building, comprising a substantial brick and timber-framed Tudor range, with a mid-18th century Georgian north frontage and a Victorian extension. It incorporates architectural features of the Tudor villa of Wolfhall, which in turn was built on the site of earlier medieval buildings.

Primary Issues

Documentary Evidence: Is the current Tudor range part of the Henrician Building?

Incidental Tudor accounts of minor repairs at Wolfhall, as documented in the Seymour papers at Longleat, (with further detail of significant repairs in 1556) show that it was a double courtyard house. It had a King's Chamber, Great Chamber, Broad Chamber, two Galleries including a Long Gallery, a Gatehouse with a Garret Chamber above, a Treasury House, Armoury, Chapel (with resident priest) and Kitchen (Longleat House: Seymour Papers, volume 9, f63,73,75; NA SP15-7). There were two wells and a well-house. Presumably there must have been service rooms, servant's quarters, a nursery (with five nurses) and family rooms. The scale of the house is inferred from the Longleat papers which describe that Edward Seymour, later Duke of Somerset, removed 30 beds from Wolfhall to Beauchamplace (later Somerset House) in London (Seymour Papers, volume 4, f156-170).

The base court included stables, dairy, kennels, the great barn and other barns, malthouse, brewhouse, hop kiln, and two dovecots 'under one roof' (WSA 1300-90, WSA 192-53, WSA 1300-6574, WSA 9-22-40). There were eight gardens, including the primrose garden, box garden, great paled garden (1 acre), my young lady's garden, my old lady's garden, privy garden, and an arbour, and also eight orchards, including the coalhouse orchard (NA SP15-7, Seymour Papers, volume 9, f73; Jackson, 1875).

Repairs were undertaken in 1556 and 1568. The widowed Duchess of Somerset was granted licence to undertake repairs and install culverts to 'make dry the house' when her son Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford was a ward of court, in 1556 (NA SP15-7). In February 1568, during his ten-year imprisonment (and then confined at the house of Sir John Spencer at Althrop), Hertford heard that Wolfhall would be 'in way of utter ruine unlesse some speedie repaying be thought upon for the same'. He wrote to Sir John Thynne, his father's steward, asking him to 'consider thoroughly of the state thereof, and so to make an estimate what stone, tymber, brick, lyme, sand and such other necessaries appertaining to building will be needful for the reparation of the same' (Longleat House: Thynne Papers, volume 1, f41).

The next surviving letter, written after Hertford's release, in which he states that he has taken his tower down, was written 19 months after Hertford had asked Thynne to effect repairs, and there is no reason to link the contents or believe that it refers to Wolfhall (Longleat House: Thynne Papers, volume 1, f43). An alternative explanation is revealed by soil marks on aerial photographs showing a courtyard tower on Crofton Hill, a parcel of the manor of Wolfhall (Aerial photograph NMR 921/402: Bathe, 2006).

Claims that Wolfhall was derelict at and abandoned in 1571 (in the Listing entry) do not reflect the full picture, and above-ground parts of the building survived into following centuries. Hertford's son was writing from Wolfhall in the 1570s, (Seymour papers at Longleat, vol 5, 45,46d), and Wolfhall was still described as a 'capital messuage or principal mansion' in c1580 even after Tottenham Lodge had been built (WSA 1300-90, WSA 192-53). It is unclear whether any part of Wolfhall was demolished to provide building material for Tottenham in the 16th century. Part became a farmhouse, and a further part, comprising two Galleries, the Armoury and Evidence House (plus Hop Kiln, Brewhouse, Malthouse and Dovehouse) were retained by the estate, and were still standing in 1637 when they were excluded from the lease of the capital mansion house of Wolfhall to Edward Savage (1300-6574). Of these, the Evidence House and Gallery adjoining (plus Hop Kiln and Brewhouse) were again excluded from the lease to Edward Savage in 1673, but the Malthouse and Dovehouse, were now included in the lease (WSA 9-22-40). The Armoury and additional Gallery, which were neither mentioned as excluded nor included within this lease, may have been

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demolished at this time. Aubrey, writing in 1672 just one year before the lease was signed, claimed that the house had been much bigger previously, but that 'a great part had been pulled down in the previous ten years to build Tottenham' (when it was being restored, perhaps after a fire). However, clearly parts were still standing at that date. Although Aubrey cites Camden as evidence for claiming that Wolfhall was 'but a timber house', Jackson points out that Camden does not mention the materials of which the house was built (Jackson, 1862)..

Hence there is prima facie evidence that significant parts of Wolfhall survived, with the likelihood that the current Tudor range is derived from a modified part of the Tudor Wolfhall mansion, and was let as a farmhouse thereafter. There is no documentary evidence of building a new (extremely large) farmhouse at Wolfhall, at the same time that there were so many Tudor buildings demonstrably standing.

In 1777 the tenant stated that the oldest part of Wolfhall was now 'so old and decayed that it would be better husbandry to rebuild than repair it' and offered to spend £400 doing this if he could be given £20 pa off his rent, and given a 20-year lease (WSA 1300-2022). However, this was not done, and instead the house was repaired 1778-1780 (WSA 9-1-295 to 9-1-297). There was no rebuild in the 18th century after the date of the 1777 letter (WSA 9-1-294 to 9-1-315), suggesting that 'the oldest parts of Wolfhall' were retained, and hence survive today, albeit in an altered form.

The Tudor Sewers

Documentary sources are corroborated by the survival of a remarkably intact Tudor network of brick-built sewers (with an arterial layout accessible for over 100m). This is possibly one of the best-preserved Tudor systems surviving in Britain (hitherto not properly assessed in the Listing). Other Tudor systems at Bekesbourne (Canterbury), Whitehall and at other royal palaces survive only in relic form (Tatton-Brown, 1980; Thurley, 1993; Thurley, 1999).



Figure 1. Two views along the extensive intact Tudor sewers.



Figure 2. Plan of the underground sewers, relative to existing overground features. The current Ordnance Survey map does not give the boundaries of the property quite accurately, which are redrawn here. The Tudor range is represented by the southern part of the main house. The main arterial drain has been overlain by the Victorian extension at the north-eastern corner of the current house. The plan also shows geophysics imagery revealing earlier rooms to the north and west.

The layout of garderobe drops within the sewers suggest the former layout of Wolfhall as a courtyard house. These sewers are situated under the surviving building, and change direction immediately on passing through the eastern wall, suggesting that this alignment reflects the contemporary Tudor layout. The presence of secondary culverts constructed alongside and through the surviving property, interpreted as part of the drainage system to 'make dry' the house of Wolfhall in 1556, again suggest that the current Tudor range is original (NA SP15-7).

Interest in the remarkably-intact, brick-built, Tudor drainage system at Wolfhall, is enhanced by the extremely well-preserved, brick-built Tudor water supply system for a great mansion being built for the Duke of Somerset at Bedwyn Brail (nearby) in 1548-50 (Bathe, Holley and Clarke, 2014). There is some evidence of the same workmen being involved in the construction of the Brails conduit, and the installation of Wolfhall culverts in 1556 (NA SP15-7; Seymour Papers volume 9, ff92-145).

Additional Issues of Significance

Tottenham Park was focused on Wolfhall until c1720

When replaced by Tottenham Lodge as the Seymour family seat in c1575 (actually built in a distant part of the same large manor of Wolfhall), Tottenham Park remained focused on the ancestral home of Wolfhall, with The Great Walk leading from Tottenham Lodge towards Wolfhall (WSA 1300-372). It was only upon the construction of the Flitcroft and Burlington mansion in 1720 that the focus of Tottenham turned away from Wolfhall and faced Savernake, with the Broad Walk (which later became Column Ride) and the Long Plantation (which later became the Grand Avenue) leading towards the forest.

Wolfhall as a Domesday Manor and site of Medieval Houses

Wolfhall was a manor, mentioned as Ulfela in Domesday, and occupied by medieval manor houses until Tudor times. Recent (ongoing) archaeological excavation in the grounds of Wolfhall has revealed footings with many sherds of medieval glass (pre-1400) suggesting that the current house is on the same site.

Wolfhall as the centre of Savernake Royal Hunting Forest

At the time of Domesday Richard Esturmy, a sergeant of the king, held Burbage, Harding, Grafton, and Huish. Burbage had been held by Aelfric the Hunter in Saxon times. All these areas became incorporated within the royal hunting forest of Savernake. Richard Esturmy is likely to have been the ancestor of all hereditary warden of Savernake (Esturmy, Seymour, Bruce, Brudenell-Bruce), and his descendants, Bruce-Binney, still occupy Wolfhall today.

It was the family home and centre of administration of the Esturmy and Seymour family, hereditary wardens of the royal forest of Savernake, who held their office from (at least) 1130, and whose descendants still hold this office. The establishment of Savernake as a royal hunting is probably linked with the construction of Marlborough castle. Savernake is first mentioned in a stray Pipe Roll of 1130, and the castle is first recorded with certainty in 1138, but both probably had earlier origins. Savernake was not mentioned in Domesday. However certain documents claim that the hereditary wardens and hereditary foresters-of-fee, hold their office '*anciently from the conquest of England*' (NA 146-2-33). As the seat of the Esturmy and Seymour hereditary wardens of Savernake, Wolfhall was central to the administration of Savernake until the 16th century. At its greatest at the end of the 12th century, Savernake covered about 250 square kilometres, and extended from the Kennet south along the Ridgeway to Pewsey, Collingbourne, Chute, and east to Inkpen. Wolfhall was centrally placed within that area, and adjoined the division of bailwicks at Southmere (Seymour pond) where the West Bailey, Southgrove and La Verme met. Wolfhall itself fell within La Verme, and the warden was also entitled to privileges as a forester-of-fee in this bailiwick.

Royal and Historic Links

Wolfhall was the birthplace and childhood home of Queen Jane Seymour, Edward Seymour Lord Protector and Duke of Somerset, and Thomas Seymour Lord Admiral. It was visited by Henry VIII in 1535 and 1539.

Further and Unresolved Issues

The Georgian architectural historian John Harris, who studied Tottenham House, claimed that the Georgian wing of Wolfhall was known as the Henry Flitcroft wing, 'so called because Wulf Hall was made habitable for use while Flitcroft and Lord Burlington were rebuilding Tottenham Park in 1720' (Harris, 1998). Flitcroft's links with Tottenham are well attested (eg Harris, 1982). Certainly, the lunette window below the pediment of the Wolfhall Georgian frontage became a signature trade-mark of Flitcroft, but was not unique to him. Building accounts for the Savernake Estate suggest that the only significant building work undertaken at Wolfhall in the 18th century was from 1750 to 1753, when £257 was spent on bricklaying, carpentry, plastering and glazing, presumably the origin of most of the northern Georgian frontage (WSA 9-1-252 to 9-1-315). An unsigned, undated drawing, apparently (but not certainly) of Wolfhall, features among other (undated, unsigned) designs for Savernake Lodge known to be by Sir John Soane in 1795. It is not clear why this was made, or whether it represents a proposal or existing frontage, possibly with a view to modelling Savernake Lodge in the same style. The Victorian extension appears linked to the occupation of Wolfhall by Charles Frederick Brudenell-Bruce 1849-1936, who held Wolfhall from 1881, and discovered the Jane Seymour stained glass within the current building (now mounted in St Mary's church, Great Bedwyn).

References

Original Documents

Longleat House

Seymour Papers, volume 4
Seymour Papers, volume 5
Seymour Papers, volume 9
Thynne Papers, volume 1

National Archives (NA)

NA SP15-7: Repairs to Wolfhall 1556
NA E 146-2-33: Forest pleas for Wiltshire Forests presented at Wilton 1245.

Wiltshire and Swindon Archives (WSA)

WSA 9-1-294 to 9-1-315 Savernake Estate Accounts (including Building Records) 1698-1800
WSA 9-22-40 Lease of Wolfhall, John Duke Somerset (1) to Savage (2) 1673
WSA 192-53: Survey of Wolfhall and Easton c1580
WSA 1300-90: Survey of Wolfhall and Easton c1580 (very similar to 192-53)
WSA 1300-372, map by Charles Price, 1718
WSA 1300-1959 Undated, unsigned sketch apparently of Wolfhall, amongst architectural plans by Sir John Soane for Savernake Lodge, c1795.
WSA 1300-2022 Letter Charles Bill to Lord Bruce 1777
WSA 1300-6574: Survey Demesne Lands Wolfhall and Bowdens 1637, early 20th century handwritten notes by H.C. Brentnall relating to indentures which have not since been traced.

National Monument Record (Historic England)

Aerial photograph NMR 921/402.

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