

Oaks excavation 2011 – initial summery of the results

The main aim of the excavation was to locate a cock fighting pit which was built in the second half of the 18th century for the 12th Earl of Derby in one of the ground floor rooms in the east wing. The pit was an unusual structure as it was set in the floor and the cover opened to form seats for the spectators.

There were two rooms on the ground floor. The northern room was built about 1765 for John Burgoyne to the designs of Robert Taylor while to southern one was built about 1790 by Robert Adam for the 12th Earl of Derby.

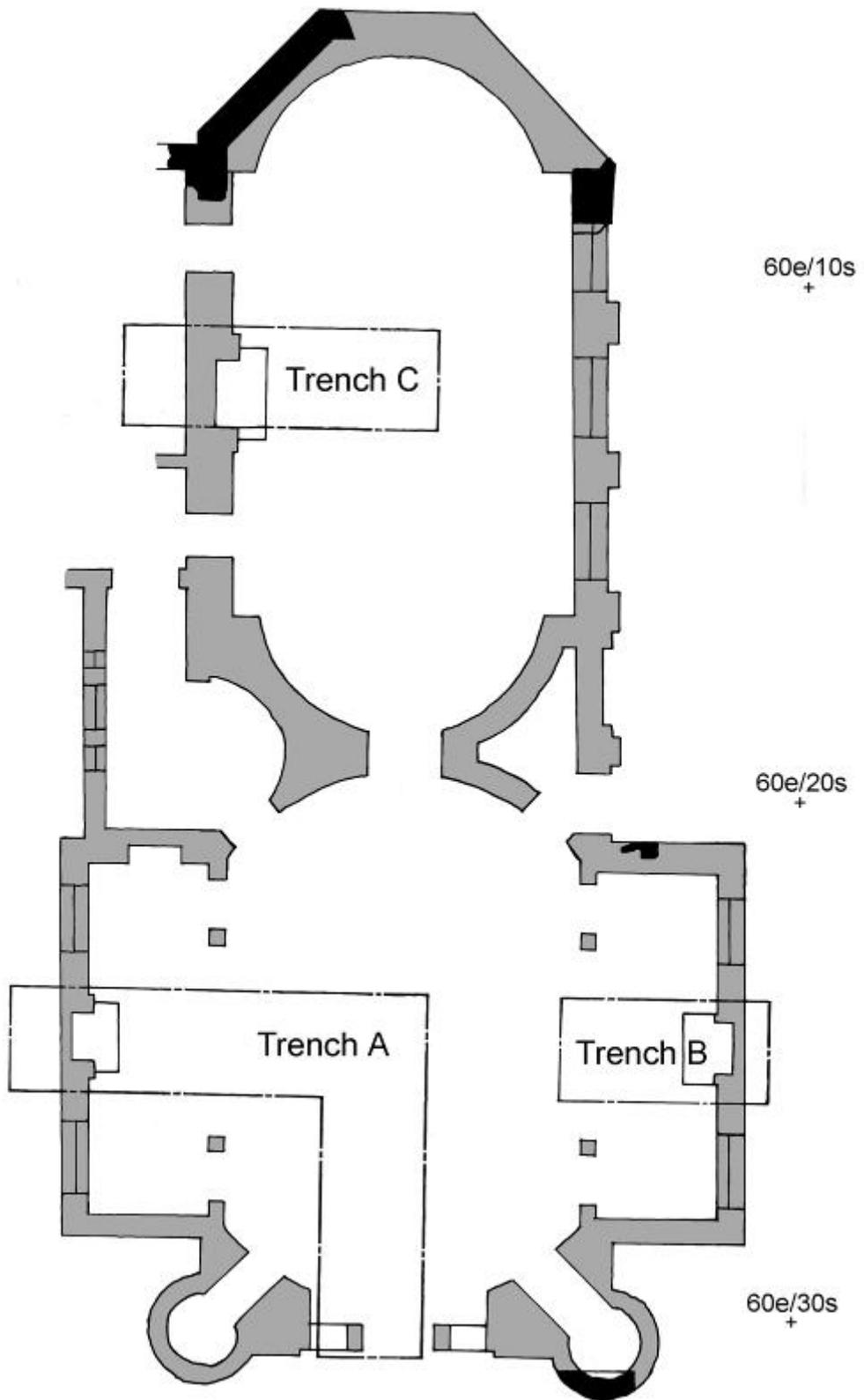
It seemed likely that the pit was in the southern room as this was built for Derby. We therefore opened trench A to look for it and also trench B to look for a mysterious ‘escape tunnel’ – assumed to be a drain.

Trench A uncovered part of the north and west walls of the wing and two brick pillars which probably supported the floor. One of these pillars was near the centre of the room on the presumed site of the cockpit which was evidently elsewhere. At this point trench B had not gone very far and was abandoned as there was no further point in looking for the ‘tunnel’ on the site.

Attention then moved to trench C where we found the west wall of the room and a pillar to support the floor. The rest of the trench was filled with a deep layer of rubble which had been left when this part of the house was demolished in 1959/60. The rubble contained several hundred fragments of plaster which had once decorated the room. When the rubble was clear we found a layer of sandy clay spotted with chalk. This was also present at the bottom of trench A and seems to have been the soil which existed beneath the wooden floors. It may have been deposited in the 1750s for form a level area in front of the house or it may date from the construction of the rooms. The chalky clay at the north end of trench C was flat and packed down and we considered whether it was the base of the cockpit. On balance I think it unlikely. The flat surface is more likely to have been made by the trampling of workmen’s boots when the room was being built.

Overall we have failed to find the cock pit but have found some interesting plaster. This will need to be catalogued so it will be some time before we are able to say more about it.

We have shown that the cockpit was not in the centre of the south room and probably not in the centre of the north one. We also know more about the construction of the house. It is, for example, now certain that there were no cellars below the east wing. We also know more about Taylor and Adams construction methods: the former being much higher quality than the latter. The possible locations of the cockpit are now more restricted and we may return to the problem in the future.



The former east wing with the position of the trenches.



Trench A looking west. The floor supports are marked A and B. The former is close to centre of the room on the proposed site for the cock pit. The west wall of the wing can be seen in the background (C).



Trench C looking west with the pillar to support the floor and the west wall in the background. It is much more substantial than Adam's work exposed in the other trench.



Above and below: plaster from trench A. We do not yet know whether this is part of Adam's decorations or a later modification.





Above and below: plaster from trench C. This is part of Robert Taylor's decorations made for John Burgoyne about 1765. Both pieces would have come from the cornice where the wall joins the ceiling.

