

Archaeological Evaluation at 45 Castle Street, Farnham

INTRODUCTION: During the summer of 2011, the authors were invited to carry out an archaeological investigation of the garden to the rear of no 45 (Fig 1; SU 83894 47104) prior to the construction of an extension to the house and subsequently to monitor the footing trenches during building works.

SUMMARY: Little evidence was found for any domestic occupation of the site prior to the 18th century, but a resistivity survey showed a band of low resistance running north-south about two thirds of the way down the garden (Fig 2). This may be a continuation of the line of the medieval town ditch previously located just north of The Borough (Poulton 1998). Test pits and later examination of the contractor's footing trenches located two pits and provided evidence that the site had been extensively terraced.

BACKGROUND: No 45 lies on the east side of and towards the northern end of Castle Street (Fig 1). From documentary evidence and following a building survey (Heather 2011), the existing house appears to date to the late 16th century, but with a brick frontage added around 1720. The house forms one of a group of larger and more elegant properties facing onto this section of the street. The garden to the rear is long and narrow and extends eastwards to the footpath that leads into Farnham Park from the top end of Bear Lane.

The property, with its immediate neighbour to the north (Guildford House), is described in 18th century rental lists as being within the Borough of Farnham, in contrast to properties further up the hill, which lie outside the Borough. This may have significance in that the medieval defensive ditch, found elsewhere in the town, could thus reasonably be expected to include no 45 (and Guildford House) within the area enclosed by the earthwork. It might therefore also be expected that no 45 formed one of the original burgage plots of the 12th century planned town of Farnham (Parks 1998).

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY: The topography of the site is relevant in attempting to understand the stratigraphy recorded during this evaluation, although perhaps less helpful in explaining the apparent contradiction between the documentary and archaeological evidence.

In its natural state the land on which Castle Street is built forms a distinct slope which steepens northwards as it approaches the castle. At the top end of the street the land also falls eastwards, albeit more gently, ie along the line of the garden of no 45. To the west of the street, the ground is more level. Over time, Castle Street has cut into the northern end of the slope, leaving many of the houses (including no 45) at a higher level than the modern road surface, while at the bottom of the street there has been an accumulation of material over the medieval levels.

While most of the town of Farnham is built on river terrace gravels, the upper third of Castle Street lies on a band of heavy Gault clay.

THE EVALUATION: Prior to the commencement of building works a resistivity survey was carried out along the length of the garden. As already mentioned this showed a band of low resistance about 9m wide running across the garden (Fig 2). A small test pit was excavated in the centre of this feature which revealed a 70cm-thick band of topsoil sitting on a deposit of disturbed yellowish clay. This layer was tested to a depth of 1.9m below the modern ground surface and found to contain a scattering of ash, small fragments of coarse tile and the very occasional fist-sized lump of clunch. While the natural clay underlies the whole site, it had obviously been disturbed at this point to an unknown depth. Whether this represented the backfilled bank of the medieval town ditch is uncertain. The dimensions and position of the area of low resistance fit well with the projected line of the town ditch based on excavations further south between Castle Street and Bear Lane (Poulton 1998), as would the documentary evidence for the site being within the Borough. Only a deeper excavation would establish the truth of the matter. A subsequent resistivity survey was carried out in the garden of Guildford House immediately to the north, but unfortunately the lawn did not extend far enough eastwards to allow any northern extension of this feature to be detected.

A second small test pit (not shown on Fig 2) was opened within the area of the proposed extension at a point approximately 10m east of the rear of the house. This showed a 28cm-thick layer of topsoil overlying the natural Gault clay which, in one place had been cut by a shallow pit – probably a hole for a garden plant. Within the topsoil the remains of an east/west gravel path was found running across part of the trench. This was, no doubt, part of the arrangement of garden paths shown on the 1839 tithe map (Fig 1). The only finds from the trench were two small sherds of medieval grey ware, one sherd of post-medieval glazed red ware, some bottle glass and a few oyster shells. Given the almost complete lack of features or finds no further work was undertaken.

The site was, however, visited twice during building works to inspect the footing trenches and soakaway system. These works extended about 24m into the garden from the rear of the house. Where they abutted the northern boundary wall (Fig 2, feature 1) an earlier footing trench (Fig 3) was partially exposed. This cut through the natural clay and contained the remains of a mortared column of bricks and underlying hardcore – neither obviously connected with the existing brick boundary wall, but which underlay it, and therefore probably had been the footings for a buttress of an earlier garden wall.

The footing trenches also cut through a concave pit (Fig 2, pit 1 and Fig 3) approximately 2.5m across the exposed face and 65cm deep. This had been cut into the natural clay and lay just beneath the topsoil which was, again, about 30cm thick. The pit contained two thin parallel curving bands of clunch rubble, a small amount of ash and a few oyster shells, but no datable material (Figs 2 and 4). Perhaps more interestingly the soakaway, some 8m to the east, appeared to have been cut into the fill of a much larger pit (Fig 2). While the extent of the pit is unknown it was tested to a depth of 1.9m where the underlying natural Gault clay was found. The pit contained a light scatter of brick, tile, bone and oyster shells but no pottery or other material. The tile and brick were entirely consistent with that visible in the existing house and probably date to some period within the 18th century. It would seem likely that the pit was used to dispose of domestic refuse and is certainly earlier than 1839, as the gravel path shown on the tithe map and found in the earlier test pit (see above) was also visible in the section running over the top of the pit fill.

Soil from the footing trenches was examined on both visits but very little pottery was found and all dated to the 18th century or later.

CONCLUSION: While the question of the town ditch must be left open at present, it is surprising that virtually no pottery was found in the garden from a period earlier than the 18th century. This is unusual as most other sites examined in the centre of Farnham have produced reasonable, and sometimes large, quantities of medieval and Tudor pottery. There is, therefore, little archaeological evidence that the site was occupied prior to the 18th century. This of course contradicts the evidence of the recent building survey and, more particularly, that of the documentary sources.

Given that the soil level in Guildford House, immediately to the north, is nearly 1m higher than that in no 45, it would seem likely that both gardens sit on east-west terraces that have been cut across the north-south hill slope. It may also be significant that the topsoil thins considerably at the house end of the garden of no 45 but is nearly 70cm thick at the east end. It was suggested above that Castle Street at its upper end has cut down into the hill slope leaving the site of no 45 and its upper neighbours in a somewhat raised position relative to the road surface – which to an extent they still are. Possibly prior to the construction of the existing house, this section of the site was deliberately levelled to create a suitable building platform. This would have had the effect of removing any traces of earlier occupation and might also explain why the topsoil in the garden is shallowest near the house but deepens considerably further away to the east. Even so, the lack of earlier pottery or features of any sort is difficult to explain and might equally be taken to mean that this part of the town, on the heavy clay, remained undeveloped until relatively late in the history of Castle Street.

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REFERENCES:

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45 Castle St

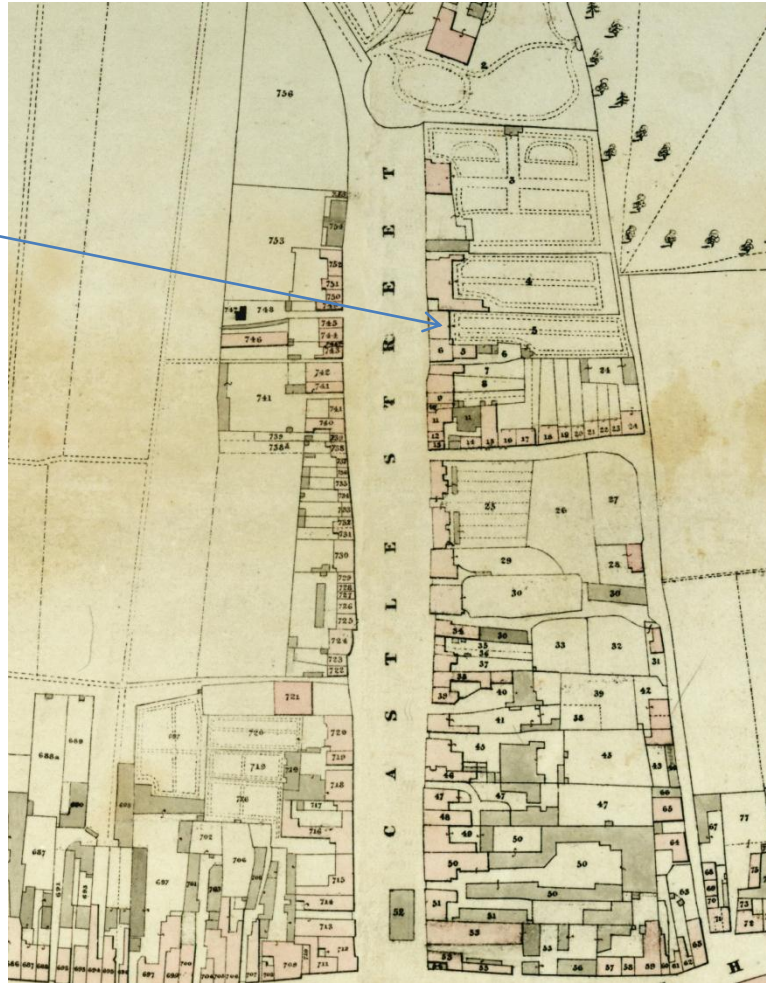


Fig 1 Location of 45 Castle Street, Farnham (Tithe Map 1839)



Fig 2 45 Castle Street: plan

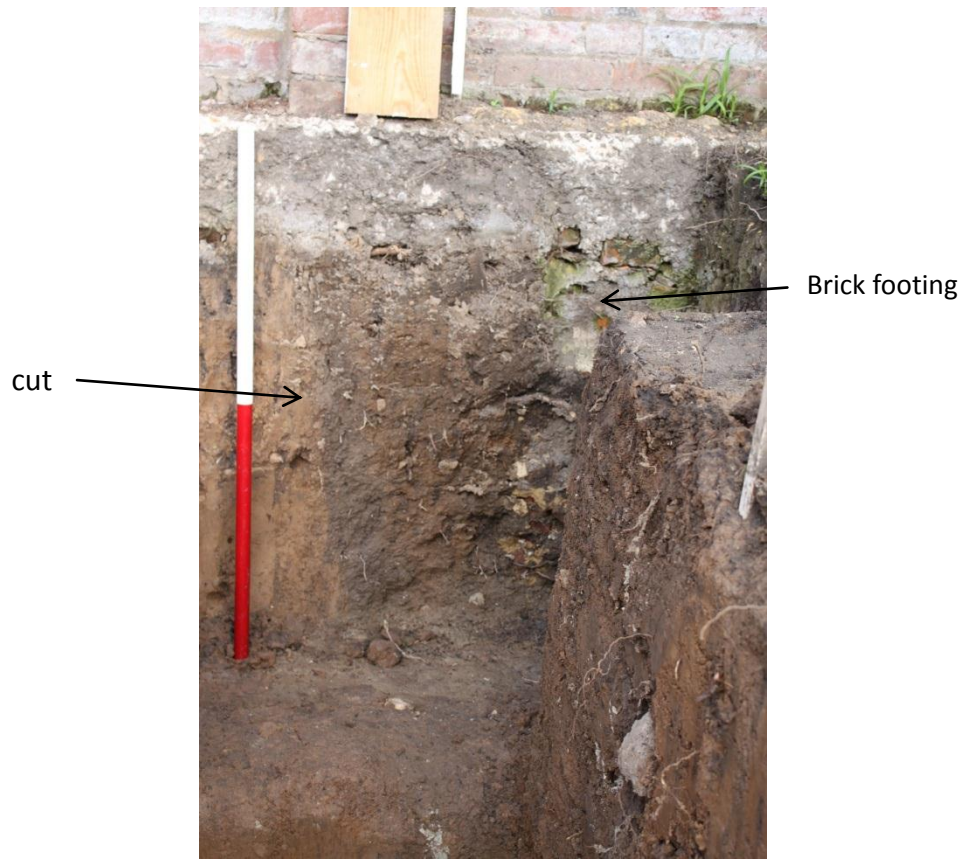


Fig 3 45 Castle Street: Feature 1



Fig 4 45 Castle Street: Pit 1