

Archaeological Watching Brief at 23 Castle Street, Farnham

Introduction: In December 2011 the author was invited to undertake a watching brief on building works in the garden to the rear of no 23 Castle Street (Fig 1; SU 83882 47031; site code CSF11). An initial visit to the site was made in late December 2011 and a follow up visit on 4 January 2012.

Summary: Evidence was found that the southern brick boundary wall had been built on top of and on the same alignment as a medieval ditch, which probably marked the line of the original 12th century burgage plot. The ditch had been cut by a later building, possibly 15th/16th century in date, which appeared to extend across width of the garden, and was probably contained within the curtilage of the plot. The upper levels of topsoil contained 19th century and later pottery and glass, but the ditch contained medieval pottery, some bone and large numbers of oyster shells.

Background: No 23 forms part of a row of smaller properties on the west side of Castle Street, more or less opposite the Windsor Almshouses, where a medieval kiln and other evidence of occupation have been recorded (Cole 1982). No 23 is, in imperial terms, just over 16ft wide (5m) and the whole plot is 87.5ft long (26.5m). This size is entirely consistent with the property being a half burgage plot - properties on Castle Street tend to be either 32ft or 16ft wide, almost certainly as a result of this section of the town having been deliberately laid out in the late 12th century. No 23 lies well inside the area of the town described in 18th century rental lists as being 'within the Borough'. As such it probably also lies within the area surrounded by the medieval town bank and ditch (Figs 1 and 2; Parks 1998; Poulton 1998). In the 16th century, John Bookham is recorded as paying for a total of six burgage plots, which comprised nos 11-24. This implies that the plots have been subdivided since that date (Pat Heather, pers comm). The building containing no 23 (Fig 3) appears to be late 18th/early 19th century in date and consists of two properties (nos 23 and 24); both appear to have cellars. The north side of no 23 incorporates a passageway giving access to the land at the rear (Fig 2).

Topography and Geology: No 23 is just over half way up and on the west side of Castle Street and is sited across that section of the street that rises gently northwards toward the steeper approach to the castle. While the centre of the town is built on river terrace gravels, the upper part of Castle Street lies on heavy Gault clay and this forms the natural that underlies no 23.

The Watching Brief: When the site was visited in December 2011 work had just started on removing the topsoil from the section of the garden immediately to the rear of the house. It was noted that a section of ditch intruded into the garden from underneath the southern boundary wall and ran parallel to it (Fig 2). The exposed 45-cm wide section of the ditch was filled with a dark ashy soil that contained numerous oyster shells and bones and also produced part of the 'pie crust' base and sherds from the body of a 13th century Surrey whiteware flagon.

After the Christmas break, work recommenced in early January when the site was revisited and the exposed section of the ditch and adjacent area were hand trowelled and recorded. The ditch was found to be 90cm deep from the existing (but now removed) ground surface, to be nearly vertically sided and to have - as far as could be seen - a slightly concave base. No doubt it continued underneath, and extended on the other side of, the existing brick boundary wall. In other words, the boundary wall has been built on top and on the line of the earlier boundary ditch.

In addition to the animal bone and oyster shells, the ditch contained a number of sherds of finely made thin walled cream and grey coloured vessels, some of which were green glazed, as well as part of a more substantial circular green glazed base of what perhaps was another jug or flagon. Several

fragments of roof tile were also present, all of which had a sanded underside, but no evidence of pegging or nibbing had survived.

At a point 1.86m west of the rear of the house, the ditch had been cut by the clunch block footings of a wall which, at least in the exposed section of the ditch, were 90cm deep. This wall footing appeared to extend across the site more or less at right angles to the ditch and boundary wall and also to have extended westwards underneath the boundary wall for 2.75m before again turning across the site parallel to the first wall (Figs 2 and 4). While it was not possible to excavate under the boundary wall (for safety reasons) the southern clunch footing was tested in places and the western return was also just exposed running along the face of the western edge modern earthmoving works. The inside of the building had been filled with a 35cm-thick layer of gravel that again contained oyster shells, ash, bone and one sherd of a thin walled grey vessel similar to those found in the ditch.

It is therefore reasonably certain that the medieval ditch had been cut by a later building, probably late 15th or 16th century in date, that ran across the width of the plot, though whether it reached the north boundary is unknown as the modern building works had left a wide strip of topsoil intact along this side of the property.

In any event the building represented by these 22cm-wide footings must have been relatively small, probably consisting of a timber superstructure with a tiled roof. It seems likely that the ditch, which could be seen to continue in the garden to the west of the clunch footings, was infilled around this time. There was no evidence for the date of demolition of this small building, but the gravel inside it had an irregular layer of clunch on the surface that probably comes from this operation.

Other than later 19th and 20th century material no evidence of occupation was found, although there is little doubt that the site has been occupied continuously since the medieval period.

Conclusions: Account rolls for the town usually refer to the 'Town and Borough of Farnham', the clear implication being that there are two separate accounting entities. The 'town' is generally thought to refer to the area of the pre-12th century settlement, probably around the parish church, while the 'Borough' refers to Castle Street and The Borough (Parks 1998, fig 4.3). The street layout and width of the various housing plots are very similar to other towns (such as New Alresford, Hampshire) that are known to have been planned and laid out in the 13th century. In the case of Farnham, Castle Street and The Borough was probably laid out by the Bishops of Winchester in the late 12th century - just in the period before records survive.

The fact that no 23 is 16ft wide means that the property is likely to be a half-burgage plot and the survival of the boundary ditch - probably the original 12th century plot boundary, though filled in at a later date - is the first physical archaeological evidence to support the theory of a planned origin to this part of Farnham.

The small clunch footed building, must have lain to the rear of whatever house stood on the street frontage now occupied by no 23. Its nature and purpose must remain unknown. However, the lack of any cooking wares, taken with the presence of jugs and drinking vessels and large numbers of oyster shells on the site, might hint that no 23 was one of the many ale houses referred to in the medieval accounts - at least at one stage of its long history.

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References

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Fig 1 Location plan. No 23 marked in red. Grey stipple shows the known and presumed line of the medieval town ditch.

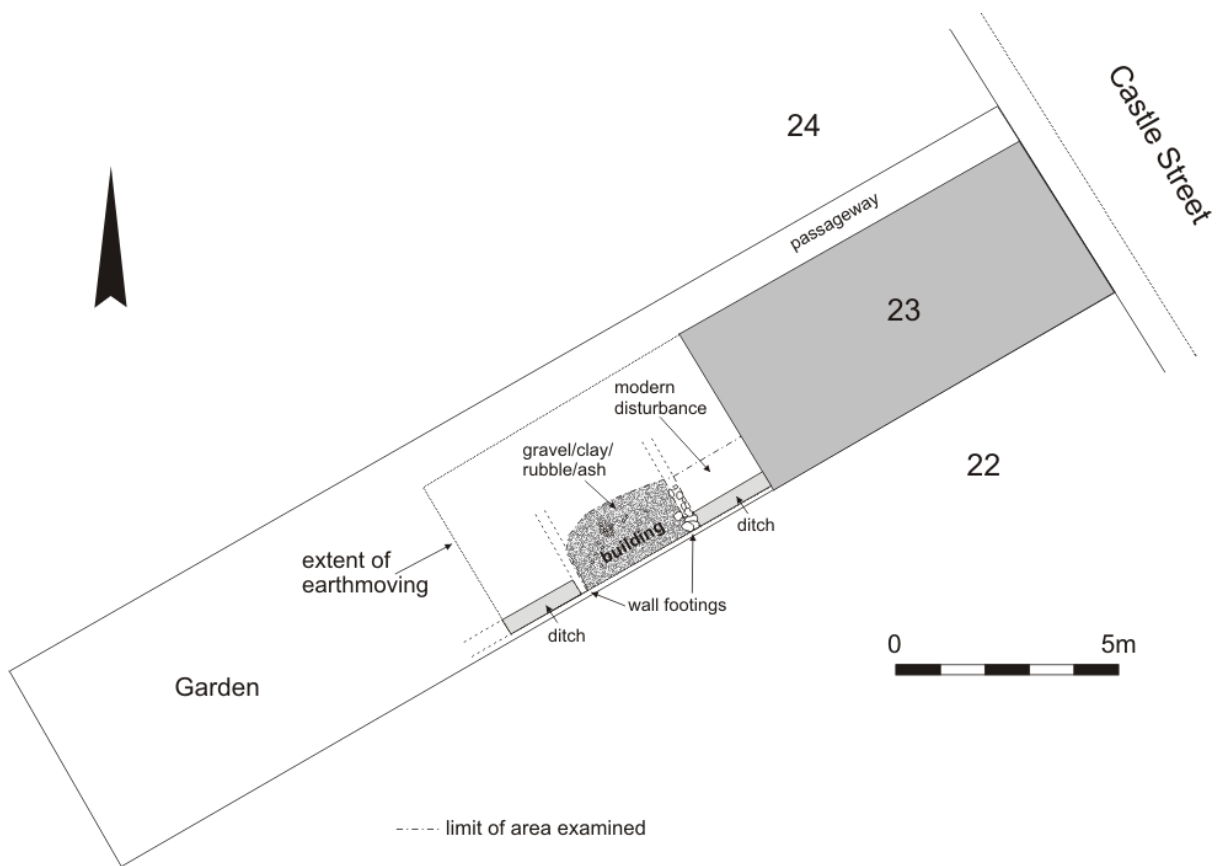


Fig 2 Site plan



Fig 3 View of nos 23 and 24 Castle Street looking west. The door in the centre of the building gives access to the passageway leading to the rear of no 23.



Fig 4 View of clunch wall footing and burgage plot ditch. (1) ditch and sondage; (2) wall footing; (3) gravel interior of building; (4) natural clay.

Appendix - finds list

Context	Find type	Period	No	Wt (g)	Retained
Ditch	White ware	Late medieval	10	68	Yes
	Grey ware	Late medieval	4	32	Yes
	Pinkish ware	Late medieval	4	33	Yes
	Green-glazed wares	15th/16thC	4	93	Yes
	Tile	?	1	56	Yes
Floor of building	Pink/grey ware	Late medieval	1	10	Yes