Longforth Farm

A Medieval Manor House Rediscovered

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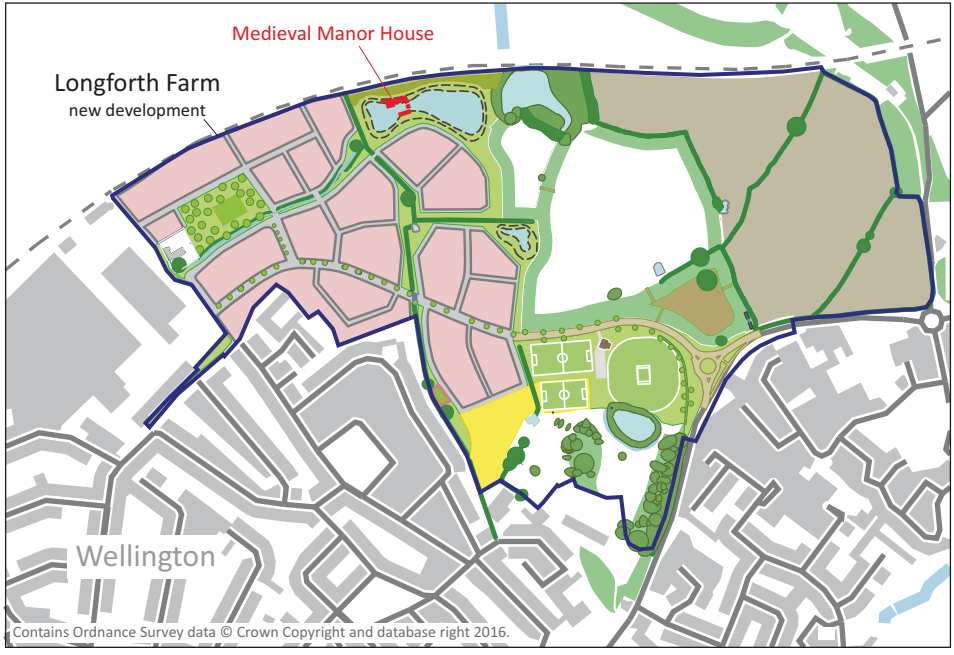
wessex archaeology

Introduction

Proposals by Bloor Homes Limited for a large housing development at Longforth Farm on the northern edge of Wellington led to a programme of archaeological investigations and an unexpected and important discovery.

The archaeological work was required as part of the planning process and began in 2010, ahead of house construction. Because of the extent of the proposed development several stages of archaeological investigations were undertaken.

Longforth Farm new development



Relatively little was known about the archaeology of this area beforehand. Wellington developed as a settlement in the medieval period, perhaps soon after the Norman Conquest, and was granted town status in 1215. Its earlier Anglo-Saxon history is obscure, and what lay in the surrounding area was poorly understood.

Preliminary investigations at Longforth Farm comprised geophysical survey and a series of evaluation trenches, which revealed only a small number of prehistoric and medieval ditches and pits. However, this was enough for the County Archaeologist to request further excavation in three areas of the site where these features had been found.

Bloor Homes subsequently appointed Wessex Archaeology to carry out these excavations, which took place in 2012–13.

Marc Cox
Somerset County Council
(now South West Heritage Trust)

Community Open Day

The discovery in the summer of 2013 of the remains of a previously unknown medieval manor house generated an exceptional level of local interest. In response to this a series of events was organised in early July 2013, including a community open day, school workshops and tours for local groups. This involved staff from Wessex Archaeology, Bloor Homes and South West Heritage Trust (Somerset County Council), and proved to be extremely popular, generating local, national and even international interest.

Over 250 children from four local schools took part in the on-site workshops, and the week of events culminated in an open day when more than 1400 people took the opportunity to be shown around the site to discover more about Wellington's heritage.

Displays about these discoveries were mounted in the show-home of the new development and at Wellington Museum. Subsequently, talks and lectures about the site have been given at local, regional and national events.

Over 1400 people came to visit the site

Archaeology of the site

Prehistoric – The earliest evidence for human activity on the site – and indeed the region – is a Terminal Upper Palaeolithic blade dating to around 9500–8500 BC (left). This stone tool, made from Greensand chert, would have belonged to a hunter-gatherer passing through the area after the last Ice Age. It could have been used for chopping or cutting meat.

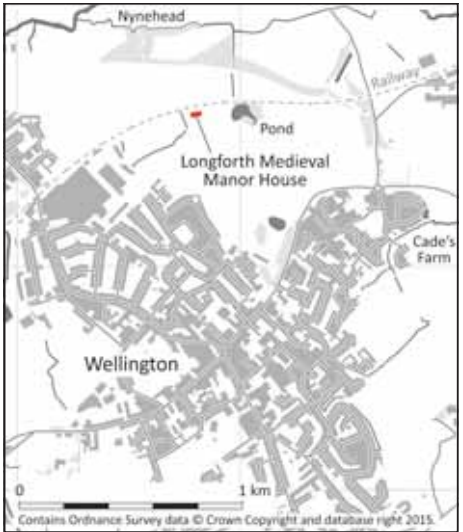
The first settlement was in the Middle Bronze Age (1600–1100 BC), when ditches were dug to divide up the land into fields for crops and enclosures for animals. No buildings were found, but the focus appears to have been a stream channel which would have provided a source of water. A dump of burnt stone may have come from a cooking hearth, and pottery included a large part of a Trevisker Ware vessel; these decorated vessels (above right) were first recognised in Cornwall.

A few centuries later, in the Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age, further signs of agricultural settlement

appeared with a double-ditched enclosure, field system and trackway probably associated with raising animals and stock control.

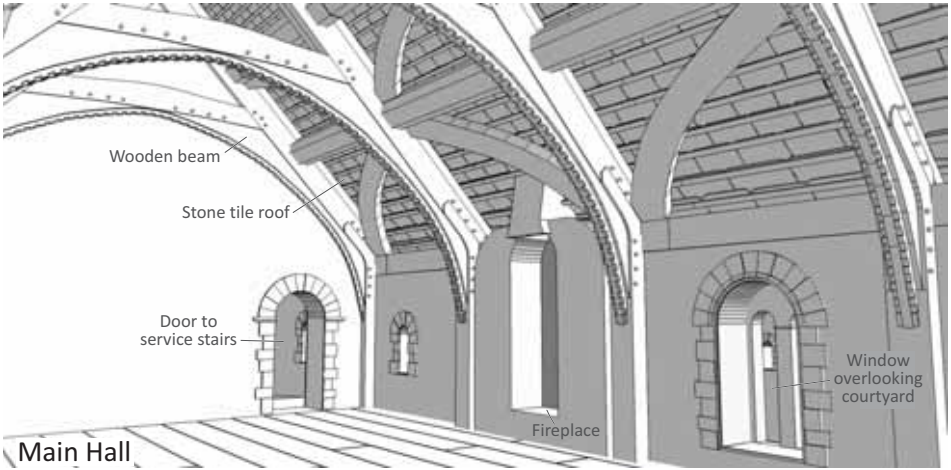
Surprisingly perhaps, there was no evidence for later Iron Age or Roman activity on the site, and nothing of Anglo-Saxon date. So, for over 1500 years, between around 500 BC and 1000 AD, we presume that the area was largely used for grazing. However, Iron Age and Roman remains have been found nearby at Cade's Farm and also further to the south during construction of the M5.

Medieval – The uncovering of the stone foundations of a substantial and extensive complex of medieval buildings was completely unexpected. This exciting and important discovery was also the cause of a mystery. What were the buildings, when were they built, who were they built for, and when and why did they disappear. Documentary research has failed to identify the owners and most of the reusable stone had been taken away after the buildings were abandoned.



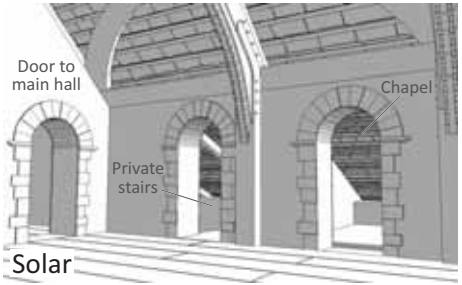
From the pottery and a few other finds we can be fairly sure that the building complex was constructed around 1200 AD and was probably in use for no more than two centuries, to around 1400 AD or just after. The size and layout of the buildings has led to the conclusion that they formed a manor house complex, and from what information we have we believe this may have belonged to the Bishop of Bath and Wells. The manor house would have provided accommodation for the bishops when they were visiting their outlying holdings.

The manor house lay approximately 1 km north of the centre of Wellington, by the road to Nynehead overlooking the River Tone to the north. Hobby Pond, perhaps originally a fishpond, still lies only 150 m to the east, and may represent the only surviving element of the manor house complex. Interestingly, the field immediately to the north was called Culverhays, the name suggesting that it might once have contained a dovecote.



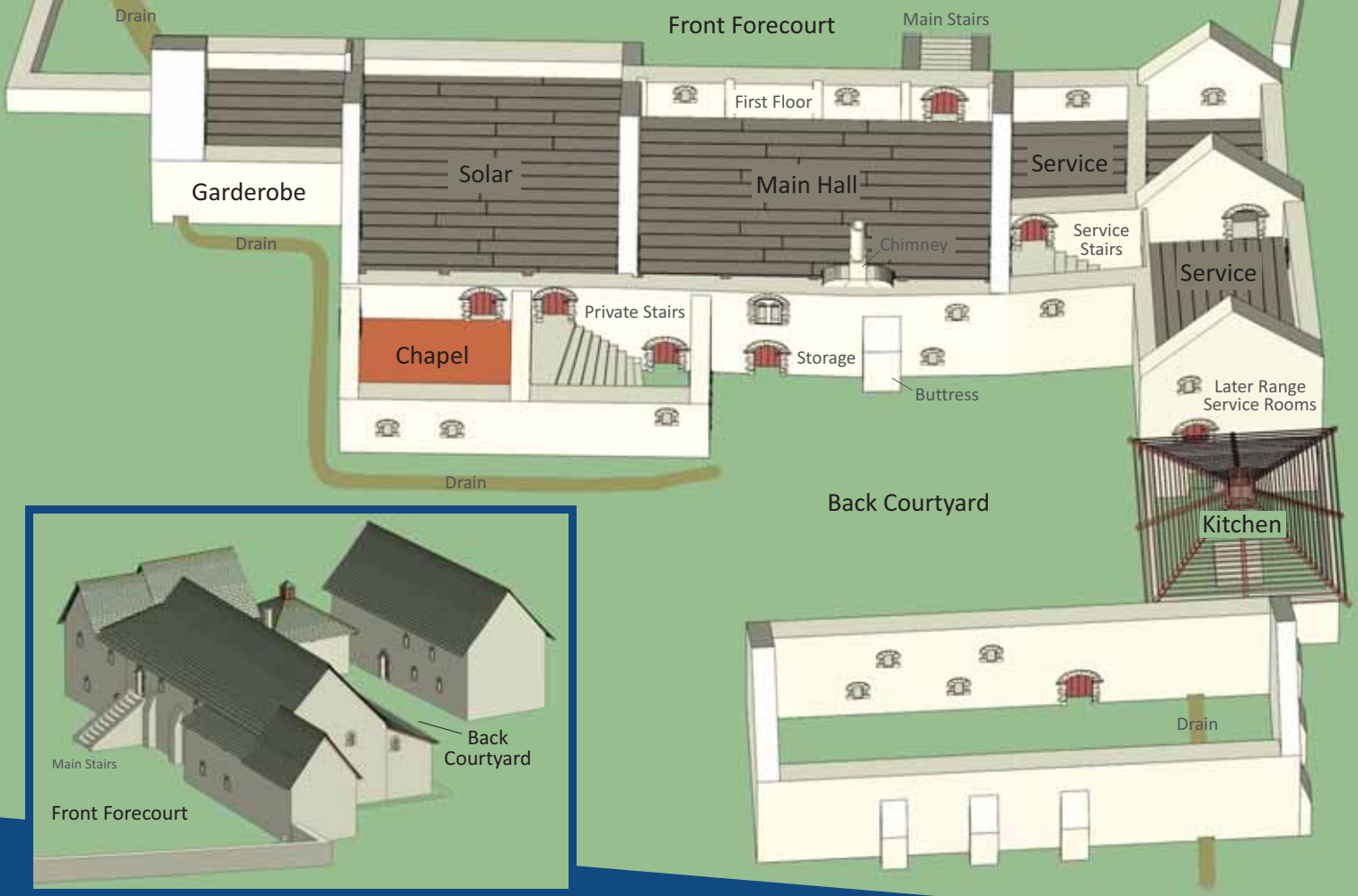
At the heart of the building complex was the hall, where meals would have been taken and visitors entertained. The evidence suggests that the hall was at first floor level and faced north, entered by way of a flight of steps from the forecourt. A buttress on the south wall may indicate the location of a fireplace, the ground floor space below was probably used for storage.

To the west of the hall and also at first floor level was the solar, the principal chamber which provided a private apartment and bedroom. Connected to this at the west end of the building was a garderobe or toilet chamber, while to the south a flight of steps provided access to the courtyard at the rear. A small private chapel may also have been located in the south-west corner of the building on the first floor.



To the east of the hall were the service rooms, including the buttery and pantry where food was stored and prepared. This area may also have provided additional accommodation for visitors. The arrangement of foundations at the east end suggests that the original service block may have been doubled in size by adding a further wing to the building.

Together, the hall, solar and service rooms created an impressive manor house, with a similar layout to other medieval manor houses in the country during the 13th and 14th centuries.



Layout of the medieval manor house complex

Reconstruction showing the front entrance of the house, with a staircase leading to the main hall on the first floor

The manor house and associated buildings were made largely of stone, which was readily available in the surrounding area. Local chert and shillet from the Brendon Hills to the north-west provided the stone used in the foundations and walls, but neither would have been suitable for making the finer mouldings required for the door and window frames.

Nothing of these frames survived, all having been removed for re-use elsewhere when the manor house was abandoned, though limestone from the Ham Hill quarries in Somerset is a likely source. Perhaps too, the exterior of the rough shillet walls was rendered with mortar, but we have no certain evidence for this.

Substantial oak timbers provided the frame of the roof structure which supported the weight of the stone tiles. A large number of broken roof tiles were found during the excavation, left behind because they could not be reused. These stone tiles also came from the Brendon Hills, possibly from quarries at North Wiveliscombe or Treborough.

There were also many fragments of ridge tiles, ceramic rather than stone, with knife-slashed decoration, crested tops and finished in a variety of green and yellow glazes. This detail is another indicator that the house was both impressive and of high status.

Above: Reconstruction of main hall

Left: Decorative ceramic ridge tiles

Extensive robbing of reusable materials and subsequent ploughing has left us with little evidence of what the interior of the manor house looked like. However, we have one or two clues.

At the west end, in the area of the solar or principal chamber – and perhaps from the private chapel – was a group of glazed floor tile fragments (below right), all manufactured around 1250–1300. There are seven designs amongst the decorated fragments, including heraldic examples of the St Barbe family and another showing Richard I and Saladin.

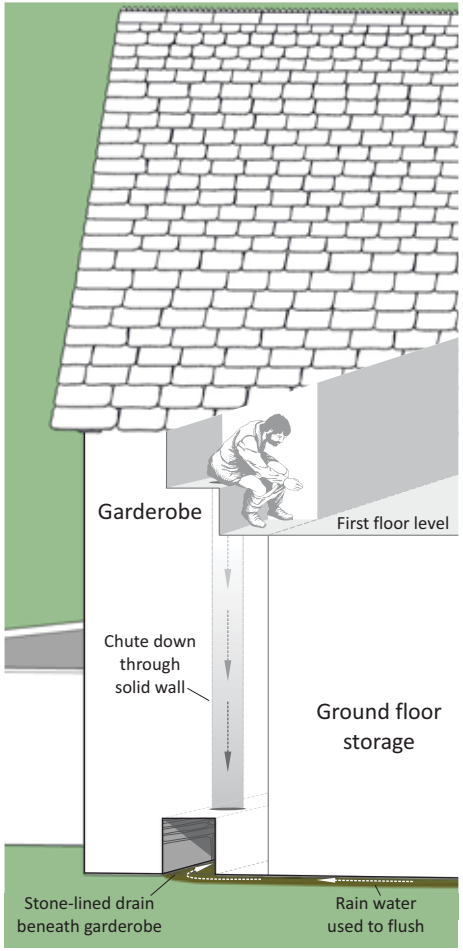
All of these designs are found at Glastonbury Abbey, as well as Wells Cathedral, Bridgewater Friary and Cleeve Abbey. Tiled floors would have been expensive, and were most commonly found in buildings with an ecclesiastical connection, supporting the suggested link of the manor house with the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

Elsewhere in the house only the hall is likely to have had a fireplace, though braziers may have been used for heating in some other rooms. The walls, particularly in the principal chamber and hall, were probably hung with textiles both for decoration and insulation.

Furniture was made almost entirely of wood, and wooden vessels such as barrels, bowls and platters would have been widely used but have not survived. However, amongst the pottery were fragments of jars and several jugs, at least one of which came from south-west France. There were also two costrels, unusual vessels for holding liquids which copied leather containers, and were suspended from the belt (below).

Private entrance with stairs leading to the solar and chapel

Rear courtyard showing the drainage system for the garderobe on the left



The garderobe or toilet block survived better than any other part of the manor house, and its presence is another indicator that the medieval building complex was one of high status.

The toilet adjoined the principal apartment of the solar at the west end of the building, and in this location was only available for use by the most important occupants. Waste would have dropped down a shaft in the wall from first floor level into an arched channel with a stone-slabbed floor at ground level.

What was particularly unusual about this example was that it was designed and built to be flushed by rainwater. A drain around the north side of the courtyard carried rainwater from the roof of the hall and solar, which then passed through the garderobe channel and out through a large stone-lined drain that crossed the forecourt. However, the garderobe channel would occasionally have required cleaning out to keep it clear.

This garderobe was a surprisingly sophisticated arrangement for a rural manor house, many of which had only a simple form of chute.

It can only be wondered why so much of the base of this structure was left in place when it would have provided suitable stone for reuse elsewhere. Perhaps its former use was clear to the people stripping stone from the remainder of the building and they decided to leave it alone!

Medieval Manor House complex from the east, showing the later service block and separate kitchen

To the rear of the manor house were at least two other buildings arranged around the courtyard, which was entered from the Nynehead road immediately to the west.

South of the service range at the east end was the kitchen. During the medieval period it was common to have a detached kitchen, so in the event of a fire the flames were less likely to spread to the main building. Although little survived, the kitchen would have had a central hearth for roasting and boiling and an oven for baking. The cooked food was then carried into the service rooms of the house in preparation for serving.

Along the south side of the courtyard was a substantial building, beneath which ran a drain. This building may have served more than one purpose, perhaps providing accommodation for servants or estate workers, stables or a brewhouse, all of which would be expected in such a complex.

To the east of the buildings were a series of animal enclosures, pits for quarrying clay, and what may have been the foundations of a pig sty. Beyond this was a large pond that probably supplied the house with fish.

Most of the rubbish from the manor house, along with animal dung and other waste, would have been used for manuring the surrounding fields. From analysis of burnt plant remains, we know that cereals and a variety of other crops were grown in these fields.

The manor house seems to have disappeared around the end of the 14th century. Its abandonment possibly coincided with when the Bishop of Bath and Wells stopped coming to Wellington, preferring instead another country retreat elsewhere.

Unlike some former manor houses it did not see later use as a farm, but was stripped down to its foundations of all re-usable building materials. A few possible wheel ruts cutting through the remaining foundations may be evidence of the carts used to carry away the stone, roof tiles and timber.

We cannot be sure where this material was taken, but it is unlikely to have been far, and perhaps some was used in the construction of St John the Baptist church in Wellington. Another destination may have been a successor to the manor house, probably also in the town – a 15th century Borough court house is thought to have lay close to the High Street.

In conclusion, we still don't know for certain who built the manor house and why it was abandoned, but it is a remarkable and unexpected discovery. Perhaps one day in the future a researcher will find documents lying undiscovered in a church archive or library somewhere that will provide answers to this medieval mystery.

Further information

A full account of the Longforth Farm investigation is published in 'A Medieval Manor House Rediscovered. Excavations at Longforth Farm, Wellington, Somerset', by Simon Flaherty, Phil Andrews and Matt Leivers, 2016.

For further information about this and other Wessex Archaeology publications and projects visit our website at:

www.wessexarch.co.uk

Tile design showing Richard I and Saladin

Wessex Archaeology is very grateful to Bloor Homes Ltd, and especially Christopher Davis, for commissioning and funding the project. Steven Membery and Tanya James of Somerset County Council (now South West Heritage Trust) are also thanked for their help and advice.

The project was managed on behalf of Wessex Archaeology by Caroline Budd and Matt Leivers. The excavations were directed by Simon Flaherty, with the assistance of Darryl Freer and Ray Kennedy, and undertaken by a team of more than 30 people. Overhead images (pages 15 and 16) were provided by Aerial-Cam, and we would like to thank Adam Stanford in this respect.

We are particularly grateful to Mary Siraut for undertaking the documentary research, using the facilities available at the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton.

The programme of community engagement activities was organised and run by Laura Joyner, with assistance from Marc Cox of Somerset County Council (now South West Heritage Trust). This programme was supported and entirely funded by Bloor Homes, facilitated in particular by Michele Rose. Rob Perrett of Image Construct is thanked for photography during the open day (pages 2 and 3).

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the unprecedented interest and support provided by the people of Wellington and the surrounding area, which greatly raised the public profile of the important discoveries made at Longforth Farm in 2013.

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The text was written by Phil Andrews. Design, reconstructions and additional illustrations by Karen Nichols.

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BLOOR HOMES

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Archaeological investigations in 2013 at Longforth Farm, Wellington unearthed a previously unknown medieval manor house complex, constructed around 1200 AD.

Most of the stone had been removed for re-use elsewhere after the buildings were abandoned, probably around 1400. However, the floor tiles, the roof tiles and other surviving structural remains indicate a residence of high status.

Documentary research has, so far, failed to identify the owner, but it may have been the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and perhaps one day in the future this medieval mystery will be solved.