

Seeking the medieval village

The remains of a considerable village must lie somewhere in the park. Although the medieval village of Parham was cleared and its inhabitants moved to nearby Rackham as recently as 1778-9, no record exists of where the village stood within the parish of Parham or of where buildings that belonged to the monastic grange of Westminster Abbey might have been located.

Geophysical surveys in 2006 and 2008 have provided tantalising clues about the nature of the site when Robert Palmer acquired it in 1540 and during the following three centuries. The surveys identified some features which suggest the area has been occupied perhaps since prehistoric times. They also indicated the position of boundary ditches and tracks and suggested that, church and churchyard might have stood in a slightly different position. Most intriguingly, they may have uncovered traces of a predecessor to the house begun by Thomas Palmer in 1578.

Geophysics, often in the form of a resistivity survey, is the principal non-invasive archaeological technique for locating lost structures and landscape features. The resistance meter passes an electrical current between two probes inserted into the ground and the amount of resistance encountered by the current is recorded. Readings are taken systematically at one-metre intervals within a grid which is surveyed to correspond to the ordnance survey national grid. High resistance readings usually indicate features such as walls, stonework, rubble, roads or natural geology, the last of which can confuse the picture of man-made features and may have done so at Parham. Low resistance readings often locate damper ground conducive to the passage of electrical current, indicating pits, ditches and even graves. Each reading is given a greyscale shade, depending on the level of

resistance encountered, and located using computer software within the survey grid to produce a greyscale plot. High resistance features appear white on the plot while low resistance features are black.

The geophysical survey and trial excavations carried out in the picnic area to the east of the house identified a series of damp, roughly circular features (1). These features could represent rubbish pits or the result of water pooling in the centre of rooms where houses may have stood. Because no wall foundations were found, it may be that ephemeral wooden buildings occupied this area of the park. At the very least these findings seem to represent fragmentary evidence of occupation, if not the site of the medieval village of Parham.

The area south-west of the house was surveyed in 2008 by Worthing Archaeological Society, and a number of features associated with the medieval parish church were identified. Within an area of drier ground, rows of damp, rectilinear, low resistance features almost certainly represent the grave cuts of its churchyard (2). Associated anomalies (3) may represent the two buildings shown within the churchyard on a pre-1779 estate map, although they are aligned slightly differently. The discovery of the graves could indicate that the fifth Sir Cecil Bisschopp, in an attempt to improve the view of his park, rebuilt the church in a new churchyard, reusing some material from the medieval church, including the base of the 15th-century tower, the Palmers' 16th-century south chapel and the arcade from a lost north aisle. The re-siting of the church seems to be corroborated by the 1832 terrier (Figure 71), which shows the church in a rectangular rather than circular churchyard and sites it further to the east than is shown on the pre-1779 map.



Figure A: Archaeologists from Archaeological Prospection Services of Southampton University carrying out a geophysical survey using a resistance meter in 2006. The probes of the resistance meter are clearly visible in this photograph, as are the measuring tapes which mark the survey grid.

Figure B: Survey plot produced by Ian Allison of Worthing Archaeological Society, showing in greyscale areas of resistance met by the geophysical survey. The survey areas and features are numbered in red. The location of the house and church is shown in outline.

Further geophysical survey adjacent to the present church would test this hypothesis. If the foundations of the north aisle were found it would confirm that the church has always stood on this site. It would also indicate that the grave cuts belonged to a churchyard which was once much larger, rather than to an old churchyard which was superseded by the present one round a re-sited church.

Survey work on the lawn terrace immediately south of the house also produced interesting results. A substantial rectangular feature, on a similar alignment to that of the current house (4) and enclosing two smaller features (5, 6), might be the courtyard and

gatehouse of a pre-1578 house whose site lay within the footprint of the present house, or at least a garden wall belonging to a phase before the lawn and ha-ha were laid out.

Geophysical survey is really only a form of archaeological prospecting and although the results are highly suggestive, firm conclusions can only be drawn following excavation of what has been identified. Despite the limited success of an initial campaign of excavations, it is hoped that further work might lead to the discovery of medieval pottery in the excavation trenches, and that Parham's lost medieval village might eventually be found.

