

BERKHAMSTED & DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Ashridge Gardens

Proposals for a Resistivity survey and possible excavation

To discover any remains that connect with the original monastic site.

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Ashridge

The Foundation and History of Ashridge.

The 13th century was a fairly late period for the creation of new religious houses, although there were notable exceptions in the creation of three royal foundations. Henry III established Netley Abbey in Hampshire in 1239, his brother Richard, Earl of Cornwall founded Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire, in 1246, and on his father's death Edmund succeeded to the Earldom and founded Ashridge College in 1283. A phial of the precious blood of Christ had been brought back from Germany by Edmund Earl of Cornwall, and one portion was given to each of Ashridge College and Hailes Abbey. The charter from Edward I established the foundation of the college for 20 brethren, of whom between 7 and 13 were to be priests. The endowment included the Manors of Ashridge, Pitstone, Little Gaddesden and Hemel Hempstead. It became his greatest work, he even preferred to reside there to living in Berkhamsted Castle. It became his administrative centre for all of his estates, and it was at Ashridge that Edmund died on 25th September 1300.

The name of the brethren was the Bonhommes, which was a corruption from the Latin Boni Homines, and they followed the Augustinian rule. There were seven foundationers whose names have not been preserved, although the first rector, Richard of Watford, is known. The terms of the charter of Edmund Earl of Cornwall, confirmed in 1286, declared his intention to found a church in honour of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.

Further endowments were made establishing the foundation as a major land owner in the area, bringing financial security and with the expectation of the canons playing a significant part in the administration of justice within the boundaries of their lands.

The final valuation of the Ashridge estates in 1534, five years before the Dissolution, was £415 16s 4d per year. The Bonhommes were not to prove martyrs to their faith; they were prepared to settle. The rector and sixteen brethren signed the Acknowledgement of Supremacy on the 14th September 1534 and the end was not to be delayed long. The second Act of suppressing the larger monasteries with an annual value above £200 became law five years later, and Ashridge was finally surrendered on the 6th November 1539.

Following the dissolution most of the monasteries fell to wholesale and wanton destruction. Ashridge seems largely to have escaped this probably on account of the King's interest. An Inquisition dated 20th October 1575 states "no damage or spoliation of the mansion house of Ashridge". Certainly John Norris, a gentleman farmer, was given custody of the house and former monastery together with about 160 acres of arable land. Robert Eme also had a lease and occupied the dairy house, cottages, barns and buildings outside the gates of the monastery. Their tenancy continued until 1550

when Ashridge was conveyed to Princess Elizabeth. However the presence of royalty at Ashridge was limited to a very short period of less than fifteen years. The value of the estate had now risen considerably, which indicates that it must have been properly maintained. In an Indenture dated 13th March 1556, the Princess granted a lease for twenty-one years to Richard Combe. It included the oversight and custody of the college or monastery of Ashridge with the entire house, barns, stables, the dovecote, orchards and gardens within its precincts. The tenancy passed through several families until on 21st October 1604 ownership passed to Sir Thomas Egerton and his son Sir John Egerton. Thus Ashridge became the principal residence for this family for the next two hundred and fifty years. In the Egerton archives at Belton House there is an inventory that was taken on 29th April 1701. The value of this inventory lies in its naming and description of the functions of the various rooms and offices, enabling a picture to be gained of a house of which no actual plan has been found. It indicates a mansion of considerable size, including two lodges. White Lodge was then the name of the old monastic gatehouse and stood a little to the north of the present main entrance. Red Lodge, at the western end, still remains, though it has been greatly modified and enlarged. The 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, Francis Egerton, inherited the estate in 1748 at the age of eleven.

Francis had already decided that there was no possibility of repairing the old buildings of Ashridge and began demolishing them. Two auctions were held, the first in 1800 and the second in 1802. Mr Ellis of Whitechapel conducted the first that included the sale of furniture, household items, timber and the remaining pictures. The second was of building materials, paving stones, lead, iron and so on. The final demolition of the old buildings was not completed until 1804 – 1805, just after the duke's death. John William Egerton inherited the estate and began the task of rebuilding. The only buildings left were the White Lodge, the greenhouse, the Red Lodge and the stables. Building commences in 1808 and the main structure was completed by about 1810. The interior fittings and furnishings took another three or four years to complete. Lord and Lady Bridgewater moved into their new mansion on 14th October 1814.

James Wyatt's chapel was completed and first used in 1817. During the previous year White Lodge was demolished. This left the way clear for an extension eastwards, providing more intimate family quarters and leading to a long orangery. A new and more imposing porch was added. Finally the property was sold in 1928 to be presented to the Conservative Party for an educational and political training centre.

Documentary information.

From the foundation of the monastery until about 1800 there appears to have been little or no change in the building's construction, apart from changes in use and the inevitable modifications. Any alterations would have been to improve the household comfort and would affect primarily the internal structure, with only repair and maintenance rather than wholesale modification to the exterior.

The Hertfordshire sheet of the Ordnance Survey, which shows Ashridge House, published in 1878 shows the county boundary between Buckinghamshire and

Hertfordshire running through the western side of the main building. Henry Todd's drawing of the internal layout shows the boundary on the service side of the house. It also seems to show that the house is composed of three rectangular blocks that sit in a row. Working from the orangery side there is a block containing the living quarters of the family, with the grand staircase as the central feature. The next block contains the silver, servant's hall, housekeeper etc. The third block contains the kitchen, larder, pantry etc. These both show the building as developed by James Wyatt and then by Jeffrey Wyatville. Grey's estate map of 1762 predates this and shows the original building with the county boundary to the west of the main block of buildings. Assuming that the county boundary is in much the same position at both moments in time, the original monastery building must be on the Buckinghamshire county side. This would put the monastic buildings under the section of the modern house that contains the principle rooms. Unfortunately the detail in Grey's plan is inadequate to reveal the layout of the buildings. What must be borne in mind is that the monastery would not be simply a church, but would have included everything necessary for an independent religious life. An enclosing wall most probably surrounded it. If the religious parts of the monastery are under the existing building, what may be found are the auxiliary buildings that were inside the enclosure of the monastic site. To the south of the main buildings the Grey's map shows a boundary wall, with perhaps orchards or gardens. In front of the main block of buildings is an open area with what appears to be a gatehouse. This would lie somewhere to the north of the current main entrance.

The Project

Background.

The Berkhamsted and District Archaeological Society was approached by Mick Thompson from Ashridge, to see if the Society would be interested in trying to discover the footings of the monastic site. Gardeners, when renovating a rose garden recently, had found a quantity of building material that was thought to have come from either a garden or from a building wall. Some previous resistivity work had been carried out and a suggested overlay of the gardens attached to the terrace was thought to be a likely candidate for the wall or building shown to the south of the monastery in Greys's estate map.

Aim

Ashridge house is a listed building that is in constant use. It is therefore unavailable for study. The gardens are available for non-intrusive investigation with a possibility of small-scale excavations over possible hot spots. A systematic resistivity survey of the grounds emanating from the building outwards could show the extent of the monastic enclosure, and any wall that probably surrounded the site. If there were remains of the footings of any buildings these should be visible in such a survey. Small-scale

excavations could prove any suggested feature. As the buildings and gardens at Ashridge are in constant use any work must be as un-intrusive as possible. Monasteries consumed a vast amount of water both for consumption and in hygiene. The only known source of water to Ashridge was the well. A geographical survey of the area may indicate further sources of water or its conservation. Any geographical, or resistivity survey would be relatively quick to undertake and un-intrusive. If any excavations were kept to very small scale, perhaps one metre squares, they could be completed and the hole refilled within a weekend.

Proposals

1. To undertake a full geographical survey of the grounds and gardens, in an attempt to understand the conversion of a monastic site to a residential one. To identify any sources or uses of water that would have been available at the time of the monastery.
2. To undertake a resistivity survey of the grounds of Ashridge house emanating away from the house into the grounds but not including planted areas. As previous work has shown areas of high resistivity in front of the terrace this would be the best starting point. This work to continue in whichever direction the investigation develops. This could be done in small stages over a number of days.
3. To continue the documentary investigation with the aim of developing a plan of the monastic site.

References

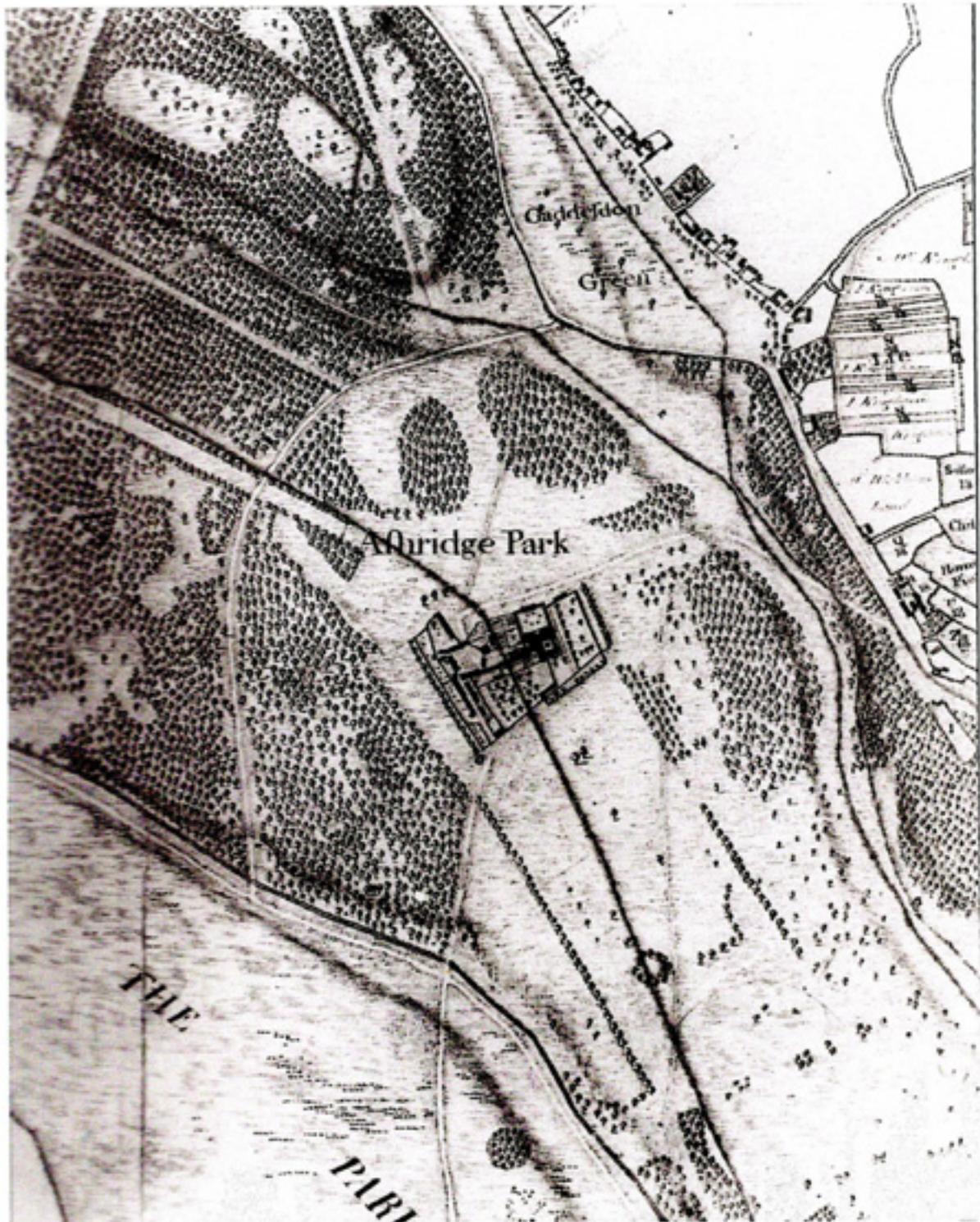
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A History of the College of Bonhommes at Ashridge. By Rev. Henry Todd.
Grey's Estate Map of 1762.
Ordnance Survey Map of Hertfordshire 1878.
Resistivity Survey carried out by the National Trust.

Ordnance Survey map 1878

Ashridge
on Site of
Abbey



George Grey's estate map of 1762



Resistivity survey carried out by the National Trust.

