

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Knights Hospitaller at Quenington

by R. Reece
1974, Vol. 93, 136-141

© The Society and the Author(s)

The Knights Hospitaller at Quenington

by RICHARD REECE, F.S.A.

Background to the excavation

IN THE hot summer of 1958 Mrs E. M. Clifford was led to excavate on the lawn surrounding Quenington Court by a series of intriguing burn marks.¹ Her excavation located domestic deposits from the 12th century onwards, which translated the historical records of the commandery of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (the Hospitallers) into archaeological terms. In 1971 Mr and Mrs Frank Gollins, new owners of the site, were planning substantial building operations, and the opportunity arose for further excavation.

The manor of Quenington passed to the order of St John in c. 1193 as a gift from Agnes Laci or de Lucy.² Much documentary work remains to be done on the commandery and its inhabitants. A preliminary investigation in the archives of the Order which were left behind in Malta, by order of Napoleon when the knights were expelled, shows considerable material which might yield information. One example, drawn up in 1538 by Fra Philip Thame, prior of England, lists the lands of the Order with the properties of each centre or manor. Although it was published in the 19th century³ I understand that a new edition, transcribed and edited by the Chev. Galea (archivist of the Royal Malta Library) is to be published by the Institute of Historical Research, and it will therefore soon be readily available for consultation.

It is reasonable to assume that a manor would be given to the Order in full working order, with living accommodation, farm buildings, animals and presumably some farm workers. From the moment of gift the manor came under the jurisdiction of a professed knight whose aim was to administer the estate so as to provide the maximum revenue for the Order. The knight would have taken his vows in England, then served at the court of the Order (originally in Palestine, later Cyprus, then Rhodes and finally from 1530 in Malta) and would have been privileged to return to a commandery in his native country.⁴ These points are mentioned to give a background to the buildings which might be expected at Quenington. There should be evidence of 12th-century, or earlier, buildings of the secular manor, succeeded by substantial buildings of around 1200 erected for a knight, or knights, who may well have seen service in Crac des Chevaliers or one of the many other great Hospitaller castles of the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem.

The end of the Order of St John in England came finally in 1558 with the death of queen Mary, though the Order had been suspended in England from 1540 until the death of Edward VI. What actually happened to the buildings at Quenington is not yet clear. We do know that the commandery was revived under queen Mary for one of the most famous English knights was appointed to hold it.⁵ Whether Sir Oliver Starkey ever lived in the buildings we do not yet know; we know far more of his career after 1558 when he returned to Malta and later became latin secretary to grand master La Vallette. He fought with him through the Great Siege of Malta by the Turks in 1565 and it is often said that he was the only English knight to fight in the siege, but I understand from the Chev.

1. E. M. Clifford, 'Quenington, Gloucestershire', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LXXX (1961), 93-98.

2. *V.C.H., Gloucestershire*, II, 113.

3. Barking and Kemble, *The Knights Hospitallers in England*, Camden Society, 1st series, LXV (1857).

4. Very brief details of the Order and its workings together with a complete bibliography may be found in 'The Order of St. John in Malta', *Catalogue of the XIIIth Council of Europe Exhibition* (Valletta 1970).

5. *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Philip and Mary 4 + 5*, 2 April 1558.

Galea that this is not so. Starkey lived through the siege and built himself a house in the newly founded city of Valletta; the house, on the corner of Merchants Street and St Lucia Street, has since been demolished, but a plaque commemorates the last commander of Quenington.

Even the most recent guide-books allow Starkey's burial in the crypt of the ornate conventual church and now co-cathedral of St John in Valletta; the only person below the rank of grand-master to be so honoured. The Chev. Galea however dissents, pointing out that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find evidence for this view before about 1812. Since the island of Malta became a British possession in 1806 Starkey's burial with the grand-masters may prove to be a British invention.

Work on the fate of Quenington after the death of queen Mary has been started, together with work on the Malta archive, but it seems best to put the archaeological evidence in print quickly, rather than to wait until all available historical evidence has been collected. It is hoped that the documentary evidence will provide material for a future paper. Mr C. Hewitt is at present at work on a study of the structure of the surviving gatehouse of the commandery so that further evidence can be hoped for in the architectural field. The pottery from the excavation will not be discussed fully here as it is to be studied in detail together with material of similar date excavated at Ewen (1971-2) and the small collection of medieval pottery in the Corinium museum, Cirencester, in an effort to establish a local medieval sequence.

Whether there will ever be enough evidence to describe the full extent and function of the commandery cannot be guessed. A good example of the working and layout of a rather larger property of the order can be found in the literature on the German commandery of Burgsteinfurt.^{6,7}

Description of the excavation

Three main trenches were dug on the SW side of the modern house as shown on the plan, FIG. 1. Also shown on the plan are the position of the ashlar walling found by Mrs Clifford in 1958, and burn marks on the lawn by the hot sun of July 1971. Trench I showed only a simple dry-stone wall on the line of the burn marks so it seems very likely that the ashlar walling returns NE at a point NW of trench I. This would give a compact building of internal dimensions c. 25 ft by 17 ft. When it is remembered that the painted glass shown in FIG. 2 was found in trench I there could be a case for suggesting that this building was the chapel. Against this identification is the religious character of the whole complex, in almost any building of which a cross would be appropriate and the present church which existed before 1193 to the NE. Only further excavation can solve the problem.

The most obvious feature in trenches II and III is the wall running NW from trench I and turning to the NE in trench III. As can be seen from the section AB in trench II, FIG. 3, the foundations of the wall were cut through layers of river deposited clay and silt, and through the old turf line of brown clay, down to a firm bedding on natural gravel. The foundations of the wall, 4 ft 6 ins wide, consisted of three layers of pitched stone in herring-bone formation. This technique of pitching is known in the immediate pre-Roman Iron Age, for it is the construction used for the main platform at Bagendon;⁸ it continues through the Roman period both in town houses such as those excavated at the Beeches site Cirencester by Mr A. D. MacWhirr in 1971 and 1972, and the country farms such as Frocester⁹ and Barnsley. Herring-bone masonry is an accepted feature of Cotswold church architecture around the 11th century (Duntisbourne Rous and Coln St Dennis), although little is known about its use in foundations, and Scott records portions of walling in this technique which came to light in the restoration of Cirencester parish church in the 19th century.¹⁰ This last point brings the technique into the middle of the 12th century; since it seems to die out with the romanesque style of architecture it would be reasonable to accept the date of gift of

6. B. Regelmeier, 'Die Johanniter-Kommende in Steinfurt', *Zeitschrift für vaterländische Geschichte*, LXIX (Münster, 1911).

7. W. G. Rödel, *Das Grosspriorat Deutschland des Johanniter-Ordens im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Reformation* (Köln, 1966), 381-8.

8. E. M. Clifford, *Bagendon, a Belgic Oppidum* (Cambridge 1961).

9. H. S. Gracie, 'Frocester Court Roman Villa', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LXXXIX (1970), 15-86.

10. Bingham Public Library, Cirencester, Manuscript notebook.

QUENINGTON COURT FARM 1971

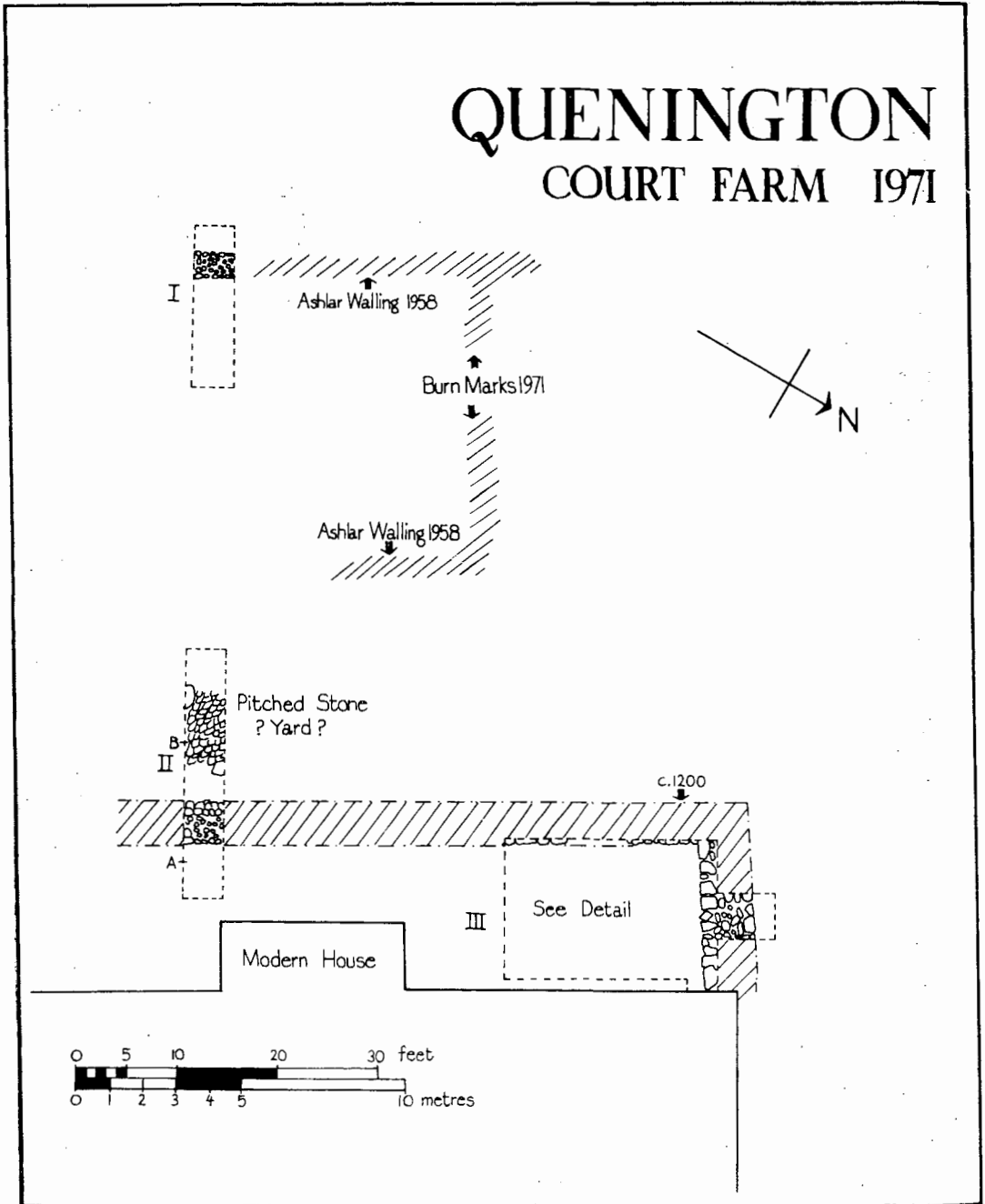


FIG. 1

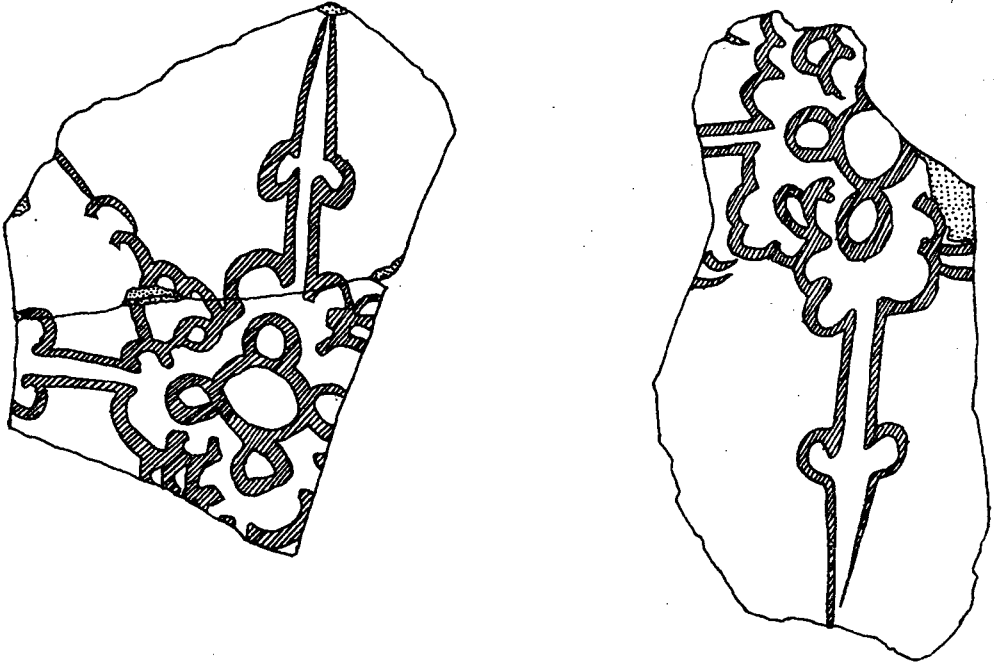


FIG. 2. Painted glass. Scale 1:1.

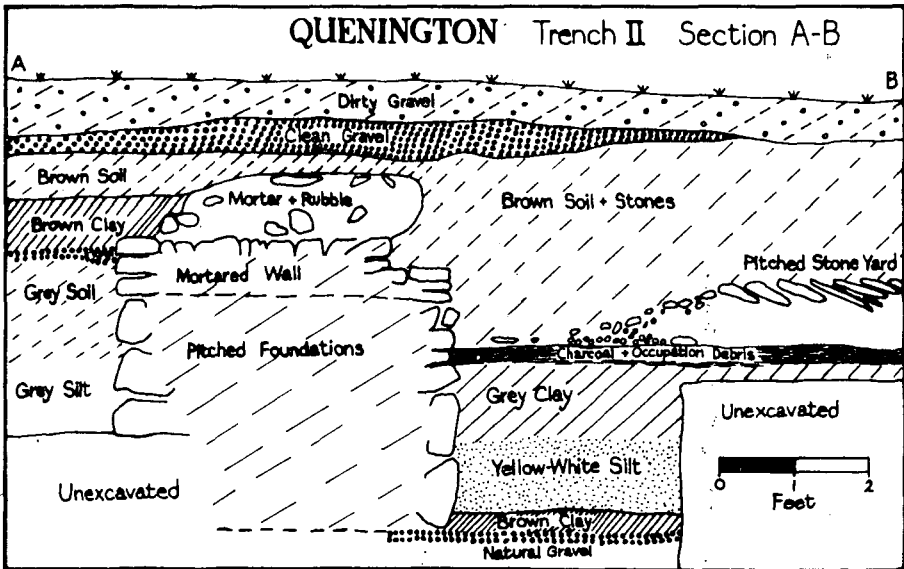


FIG. 3.

Quenington to the Hospitallers of 1193, and to assign the building to the years just before 1200. A nine-inch offset is visible on the SW face of the wall; if a similar offset existed on the NE, or inside, then the wall above foundation level would be reduced to 3 feet. Even then it forms part of a very substantial building over 60 feet long.

FIG. 4 shows the detail of structures found in trench III. The main wall of c. 1200 cut into the angle of an earlier wall made of stones set in a fine yellow clay. This technique of building seems to be rare in the Cotswolds. Pottery associated with this early phase was heavily gritted, poorly fired, and uniformly without any trace of glaze. It is hoped to discuss it in detail elsewhere, so that for the present all that need be said is that the very simple rim and base forms allied to the lack of glaze fit well into the period before 1200. Food bones in this phase provided several lower jaws of pig but no traces of the upper jaws and skull. One stone, cross hatched in FIG. 4, remained to show the floor of the 12th-century building. All the evidence would fit an explanation of the early phase as buildings of the estate handed over to the Hospitallers in 1193.

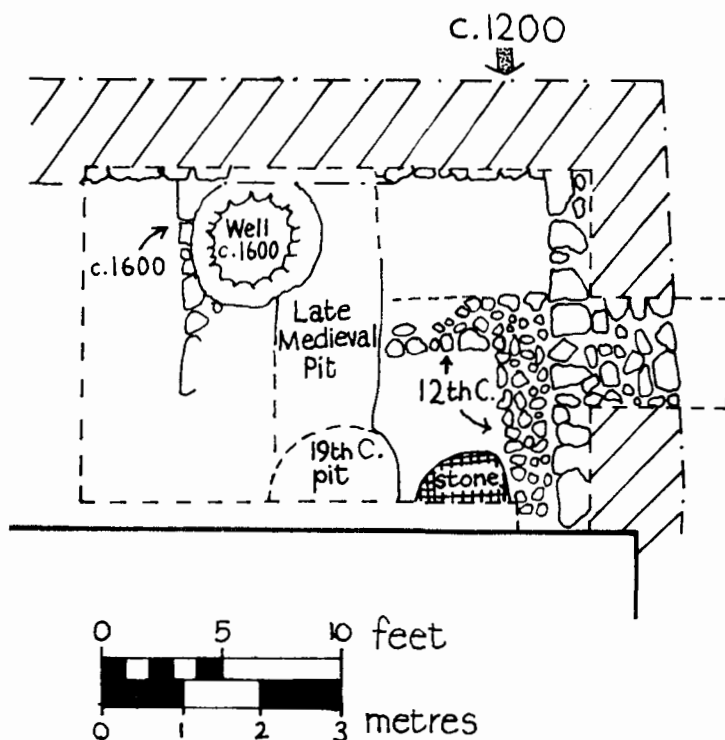


FIG. 4. Detailed plan.

Using the section, FIG. 3, a sequence of events on the site can now be constructed. The brown clay which overlies the natural gravel appears exactly the same as the turf-line in Cirencester which underlies the Roman town. The early walls were cut slightly into this clay and the floor-stone was laid on top of it—this was therefore the first recorded building activity on the site. Silt built up against these walls and elsewhere and can be seen at the bottom of the section. Perhaps the activities due to the settlement caused the nearby river to deposit these silts and clays due to diversion, flooding or general tampering with the watercourse and natural drainage.

By about 1200, foundation trenches for the new walls had to be cut through these deposits. Outside the wall (to the SW) occupation debris accumulated and then a pitched yard was laid down. Inside the walls there is no trace of floor, nor make-up for a floor, nor sign of disturbance. This suggests that the floor of the building was of wood, raised well off the ground; and would explain the lack of an inside floor at the same level as that outside. It is difficult at this stage to avoid calling the building a hall.

Judging by the few scraps of pottery incorporated in later structures such as the well, and fragmentary flooring, the hall was partly demolished and turned into outbuildings or sheds with stone cobbled floors. Some architectural fragments exist in modern outbuildings and one fragment was rescued from the lining of the well. While it is easy to say that the curves and mouldings are not romanesque it is probably impossible, in their battered state, to narrow down their dates within the range 1250-1550.

At one stage, perhaps in the 17th century, parts of the 'modern' house were used in connection with these outbuildings, and the NW wall of the house stands, at least partly, on the NW wall of the hall. The present NW façade belongs to the years around 1800, but it can easily be seen from the SW wall that this is a late stage in the history of the building.

None of the later medieval or post-medieval pottery, apart from a few small fragments of 17th-century salt-glaze, was stratified. It can show us that the site has been continuously occupied since the 12th century, and when its origins are known, it can give information on medieval and later trade patterns, but it cannot help in dating the sequence of events on the site.

I wish to thank my team of excavators, Bob Downey, who also produced the final drawings, David Mackenzie, Andrew Millin and Tim O'Leary, and, in turn, we all wish to thank Mr and Mrs Gollins for the opportunity to excavate and excellent facilities whilst doing so. Mrs E. M. Clifford and Mr David Verey kindly visited the site with the result that there were far fewer problems after their visits than before. Funds for the excavation came from a grant from the Russell Trust whose help is here gratefully acknowledged.