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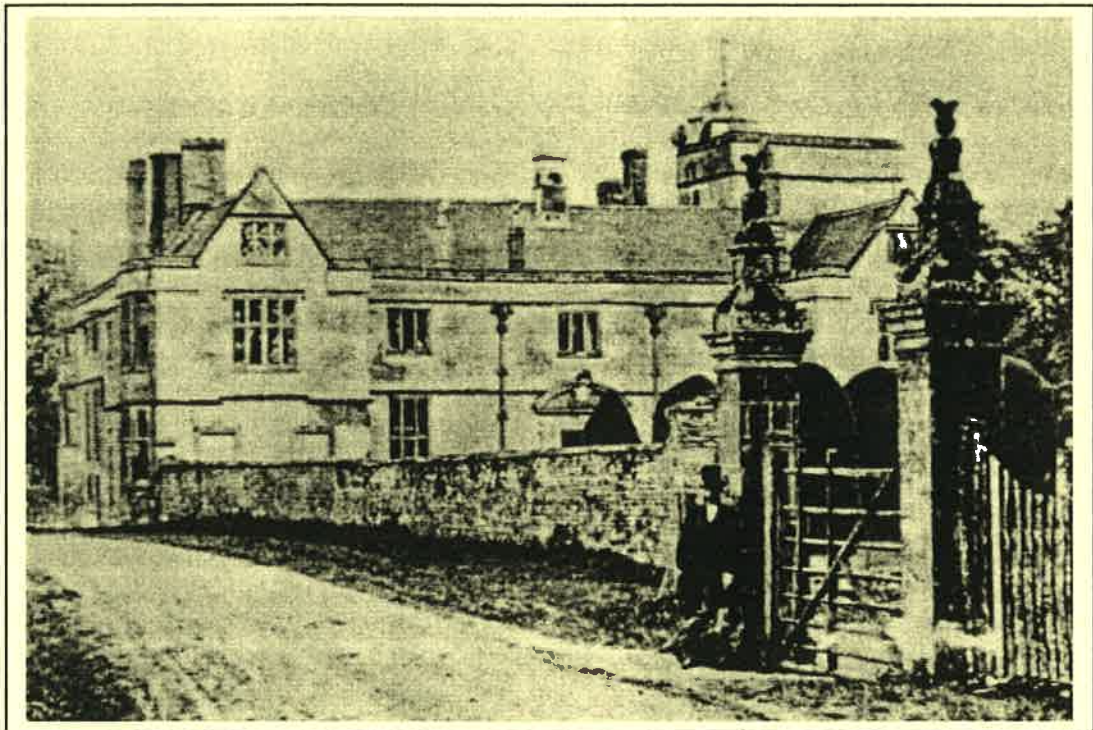
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Rodney Melville and Partners

# Canons Ashby House Northamptonshire

REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



March 2001

Rodney Melville and Partners

# Canons Ashby House, Northamptonshire

Report on Archaeological Watching Brief

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Oxford Archaeological Unit  
March 2001

CANONS ASHBY HOUSE, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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## Canons Ashby House, Northamptonshire

### REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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#### *Summary*

*The installation of an environmental control system at Canons Ashby necessitated the digging of trenches outside the house, and some internal opening up. Observation of the trenches revealed no evidence for the former entrance drive, but a number of minor features including drains outside the kitchen. Internally the lifting of floorboards revealed a possible earlier fireplace in the Tapestry Room, and a lower floor in the Drawing Room, while redundant features behind panelling were noted in the Dining Room and Tapestry Room. The stonework collection was examined and found to contain some significant items of medieval decorative masonry.*

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The installation of environmental controls at Canons Ashby necessitated the digging of trenches outside the house, and lifting of floorboards in some rooms. The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was asked by Rodney Meville and Partners on behalf of the National Trust to undertake a watching brief on these works, and in addition to investigate the collection of worked stone in the house.
- 1.2 In November 1997 three service trenches were opened to the southwest, northwest and northeast of the house and a watching brief of the work was undertaken; a total of four site visits took place during this time. In December 1997 the rooms with raised floorboards were investigated, and the stonework was assessed subsequently on the basis of a rapid photographic survey.
- 1.3 No formal historical research has been undertaken by OAU beyond what is contained in the National Trust guidebook (Jackson-Stops 1989), and the recent RCHME work on *The Country Houses of Northamptonshire* (Heward and Taylor 1996). However the transcript of a relevant historic document was forwarded to the OAU by David Adams of the National Trust and this information has been incorporated into the report. Further descriptive notes made by Mr Adams when the Spenser Room Floor was lifted in January 1998 have also been incorporated into this report.

## **2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Canons Ashby derives its name from the 12th-century priory of Augustinian canons, whose medieval church still survives in truncated form, some 100m to

the south of the present house. After the Dissolution the church and the rest of the priory estate passed to the Cope family, and by marriage to the Drydens, who remained at Canons Ashby thereafter. The core of the present house was built in the 1550s, and probably incorporated parts of an earlier farm on the site. The H-shaped red-brick house of the 1550's consisted of a great hall range, built with a kitchen at one end and a tower at the other. The house was extended in the 1590's, when the courtyard was enclosed for the first time. The last major alterations to Canons Ashby were made in 1708-1710 when the southern front was almost entirely faced in stone. The gardens were also given their present appearance around this time, with descending terraces, flights of stairs and stone walls set with vases. In 1980, the house, gardens and church passed to the care of the National Trust.

### **3 RESULTS OF OBSERVATIONS ON TRENCHES**

#### **3.1 Summary Description (see Figure 1)**

For the purposes of this description the house is taken to be facing west onto the Green Court, north onto the road, and south onto the garden. Trench 1, to the west, was empty of archaeological features; Trench 2, to the south, revealed two possible stone-lined drains at the eastern end of this trench and a possible wall stub or garden feature some 4m to the west of these; Trench 3, to the north of the house, contained a stone built drain running west to east with many modern services at a higher level.

#### **3.2 Trench 1**

This trench was taken across the Green Court on the west of the house (the former entrance court) measured 0.40m wide with a maximum depth of 0.73m and revealed a mixed silty loam beneath the present topsoil. No archaeological features were noted here.

#### **3.3 Trench 2**

3.3.1 Trench 2 was located along the line of the present gravel terrace at a distance of approximately 1.00m from the southern house frontage. This trench was typically 0.60m wide with a maximum depth of 0.75m. Three features were found within this trench: a short wall stub (3) appearing in the northern section and the capping stones of two possible drains or culverts (4) and (5) at the eastern end of this trench.

3.3.2 The capping of possible drain or culverts (4) and (5) ran NNW to SSE and NW to SE respectively and consisted of rough red sandstone blocks measuring up to 0.45m across which covered a hollow space measured to be approximately 0.50m in depth. As excavated the trench only partially revealed the top of these cappings at a depth of between 0.50m and 0.70m beneath the present ground surface. The area above and between this stonework was occupied by a very

mixed dark ashy silty loam (9), and no definite cut associated with these features could be ascertained against this material despite limited exploration and cleaning up of this area. Large stone rubble abutted the present southern house wall outside of the 'book room', filling a cut measuring 0.60m wide against the exterior of the building. It is thought that this is backfill after the remodelling of the southern range and gardens in c.1708-1710. This rubble is overlain by the same dark silty loam (9) that obscures stone constructions (4) and (5) mentioned above.

- 3.3.3 A very large red sandstone slab projecting from the northern section overlay smaller sandstone fragments, some of which appeared partially decayed. There was no discernible bonding between any of this stonework and the whole structure appears to be either a poorly constructed wall or possibly part of a former garden feature. This structure (3) does not continue to the opposite section.

### **3.4 Trench 3**

- 3.4.1 Trench 3 ran close to the northern side of the house along the road verge and typically measured 0.40m wide with a maximum depth of 0.65m. A stone drain (17) ran across part of the trench at a depth of 0.50m beneath the present ground surface. A total length of 4.50m of this drain was exposed within this trench and it appears to have been partially robbed out to the west and east for the subsequent insertion of a 20th-century drainage pipe and electricity cable. Above this level the general soil type is a mixed reddish brown loam (11) containing moderate amounts of stone rubble overlain by topsoil. There is extensive disturbance within this trench due to the insertion of modern cables and pipework, some of which connect to the inspection manhole near to the centre of the trench.

### **3.5 Discussion**

- 3.5.1 Trench 1 was empty of archaeological features, and thus produced no evidence for the former driveway and approach to the house. Within the confines of Trench 2 it was not possible to determine whether stone capped features (4) and (5) are covered drains or culverts and their function remains unclear but they seem to have gone out of use by the time of the rebuilding of the southern front and garden remodelling in c.1708-1710. Stone rubble (6) found adjacent to the present southern range is probably a backfilling after refacing work dating to this period. A sandstone construction (3) protruding from the north eastern trench section post-dates this remodelling and may represent a garden feature (such as a plinth) incorporated within the extensive garden alterations made after refacing of the southern range.
- 3.5.2 An undated stone drain (17) within Trench 3 appears to run from the outside of the Great Kitchen and Winter Parlour to the north of the house. This was later replaced by a slightly higher clay drainage pipe on the same alignment indicating

prevalent poor drainage around the northern wall foundations. These no doubt relate to kitchen drainage, or possibly the opening in the north wall at this point.

#### **4 INVESTIGATIONS BELOW FLOOR-BOARDS WITHIN THE HOUSE.**

##### **4.1 Introduction**

The lifting of panelling or floorboards in several rooms for the installation of environmental controls gave an opportunity to look at the pattern and character of floor joists, the study of which is of some importance in a house with a complex history like Canons Ashby.

##### **4.2 Dining Room (G14)**

4.2.1 Removal of a mirror above the fireplace has revealed a brick stack (narrow bricks in brown mortar) filling the straight-sided stone opening of the former fireplace, and a later area of brick and grey mortar perhaps related to the insertion of the present marble fire surround, perhaps in the 19th century. The panel surround of the fireplace has on each side identical repairs to small areas previously cut out; probably the traces of a former mantel-shelf.

4.2.2 To the east side of the fireplace an almost square recess (1560 wide by 1570 high, 490 deep) stands 300 mm above the floor. It has plastered stone reveals, and timber lintels, but shows no obvious signs of being either a blocked door (into the hall) or a window. It may have been a panelled recess for a dresser, or a feature matching the former window (now blocked) on the west side of the fireplace.

##### **4.3 Tapestry Room (F16)**

4.3.1 Five floor boards raised across the room reveal the existence of one principal joist spanning the room on the west side of the fireplace, and the equivalent one to the east replaced by a pair of RSJs. The common floor joists are deep and narrow (60 x 290 with double tenons) and spaced 380 mm apart. Against the south wall is a final common joist which is interrupted for a width of 1650 mm, where series of planks are attached to the penultimate joist; this may just possibly be the remains of support for a hearthstone for a presumed chimney in the south wall at this point.

4.3.2 The cupboard at the east end of the north wall contains the sill and lintel of a timber opening, with matching pairs of mortices for timber jambs. This is might have been a window, but is most likely to be a door through to the west wing.

##### **4.4 Drawing Room (F18)**

4.4.1 A single long board in front of the fireplace revealed two principal joists (260 x

320) spanning the room on either side of the fireplace, with two sets of oak joists:- an upper set (90 x 140 with diminished haunch joint, 410 apart) to carry the floorboards, and a lower set (70 x 10 with central tenon) to carry the ceiling. A later set of elm joists was later added to raise the floor around 90/100 at the fireplace (nil next the south-west door). The flanking columns of the fireplace have wooden bases added to respect the new floor level, but behind these are the primary stone bases which (with the painted wall adjacent) that respect the original floor.

- 4.4.2 An unusual feature exposed was a set of vertical slates close to the fireplace and this is explained by a document held by Sir Henry Dryden a copy of which is in the Northamptonshire Record Office (D[CA]474/1/3). The document is a note of work undertaken on the floor in 1878 when bad smells were emanating from the floor around the fireplace. Three dead rats were found and they made 'an inclosure of slates upright a short distance off the fireplace'. The document also confirms one of the main findings of the current project that the primary floor had been raised 3½ inches with the insertion of a secondary set of joists.

#### **4.5 Spenser Room**

- 4.5.1 In January 1998 floor boards within the Spenser Room were lifted to allow their repair and although the OAU did not observe the work descriptive notes on the floor structure were made by David Adams of the National Trust and these were forwarded to the OAU. Boards covering the southern half of the floor were lifted and these revealed a single principal joist (240 x 200) spanning from the external east, stone wall to the west stone wall adjoining the Drawing Room. Upper floor joists (130 x 80 @ 420 centres) span between the principal joist and the south wall. The joists slot into notches cut in the shoulder of the main beam. Beneath these joists, and parallel to them, are three secondary beams which support east-west ceiling joists. 'Sliding tenons' are used to secure both the secondary joists to the principal joist and the ceiling joists to the secondary joist. These consist of long horizontal grooves cut in the face of the holding beam into which conventional central tenons in the head of the joist are slid at an angle of c. 30°.

#### **4.6 Discussion**

- 4.6.1 The deep floor joists are of the standard large house type, introduced in the mid-16th century, often (as in the case of the Drawing Room) to carry the plaster ceiling below as well as the floorboards above. The features revealed by other openings indicate the sort of information that can be obtained about former doors and fireplaces by 'keyhole' investigations of this sort. The full import of the possible fireplace and blocked door/window cannot immediately be understood without further consideration of the development of Canons Ashby.



## 5 WORKED STONE

### 5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The cellars of Canons Ashby contain a collection of worked stone, and a number of single items are to be found around the house. Some of these have been recovered in modern repair and restoration works, but it is likely that some form part of an historic collection perhaps made by Sir Henry Dryden (†1899). As part of the current work, the stone pile was investigated, and after removal and discard of the majority of rubble and plain items (e.g. paving slabs) the remaining pieces were placed on pallets in the cellar. (See Figure 2)

### 5.2 Description

5.2.1 The stones should in due course be properly surveyed and related to fragments or standing parts of the abbey church and the house, and reported in an inventory. As an interim measure, the stones (recently placed on pallets in the cellar) have been photographed and a rough list made to indicate the range of material; a brief list follows (these are informal numbers for the purposes of this report, and are not marked on the stones or intended as permanent):

#### 5.2.2 *Pallet I*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 Medieval window tracery                               | 2 Post-medieval mullion                  |
| 3 Med. vault rib with fillets                           | 4 Med. tracery with nail-head decoration |
| 5 Med. corbel   | 6 Post-med. marble (cf §19)              |
| 7 Post-med. cornice                                     | 8 Post-med. console                      |
| 9 Post-med. console                                     | 10 Med. rib                              |
| 11 Post-med. cornice/base                               | 12 Ditto                                 |
| 13 - 14 Ditto   | 15 Post-med. 'pineapple'                 |
| 16 Med. sunk quatrefoil panel with lettered inscription |  |

#### *Pallet II*

- |                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 17 Med. rib                      | 18 Post-med. ? as next    |
| 19 Marble bolection moulding C17 | 20 Med. window tracery    |
| 21 Post-med. scroll decoration   | 21a Ditto                 |
| 22 Post-med. fluted urn base     | 23 Post-med. cornice/base |
| 24 ?Post-med floral decoration   | 25 C13 shaft base         |
| 26 Post-med. polygonal base      | 27 Post-med. cornice/base |
| 28 as §26                        |                           |

#### *On floor*

29 Tile; 30-32 Stone slabs; 33-38 Bricks

*Pallet III*

39 Med. mullion	40 Post-med. as §21
41 ?Med. window tracery	42 Med. vault rib with fillet
43 Med. ditto	44 Uncertain
45 Med. shaft base	46 ?Post-med. floral decoration
47 Post-med. cornice/base	48 Ditto

**5.3 Discussion**

- 5.3.1 The medieval fragments are of interest and their decoration suggest 13th and 14th-century dates, while they presumably derive from the church or major buildings of the abbey. The inscribed panel (§16) is of special interest. The post-medieval fragments may come from house repairs or garden features and are not generally of great significance, though they may be of value for future detailed studies of the building.

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March 2001

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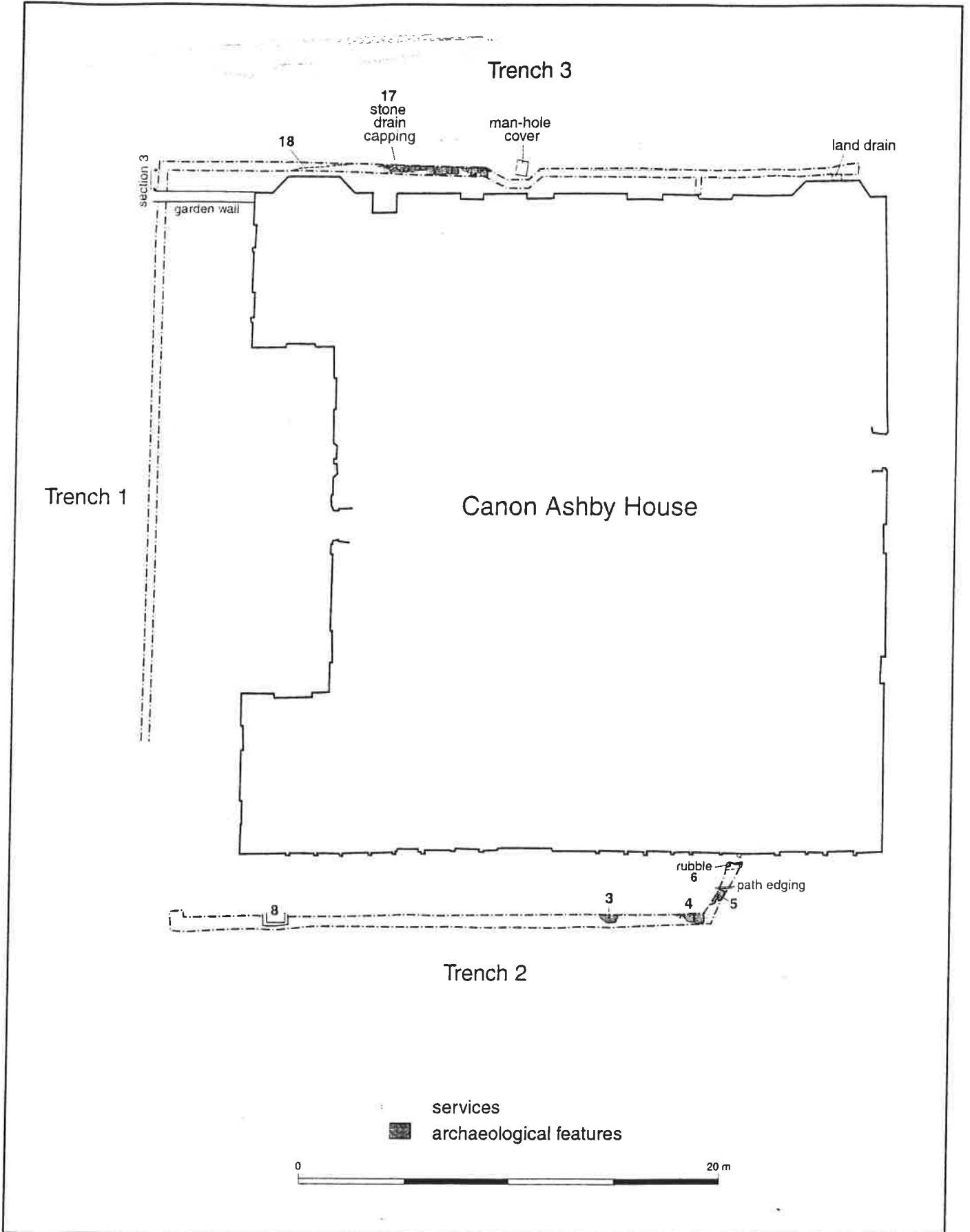
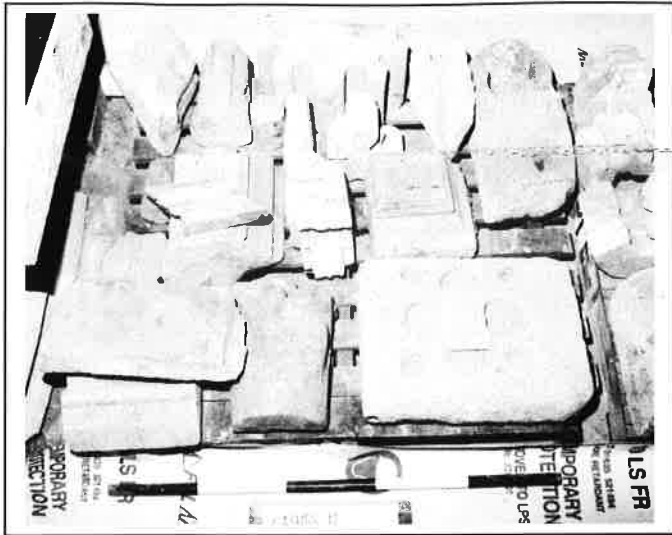
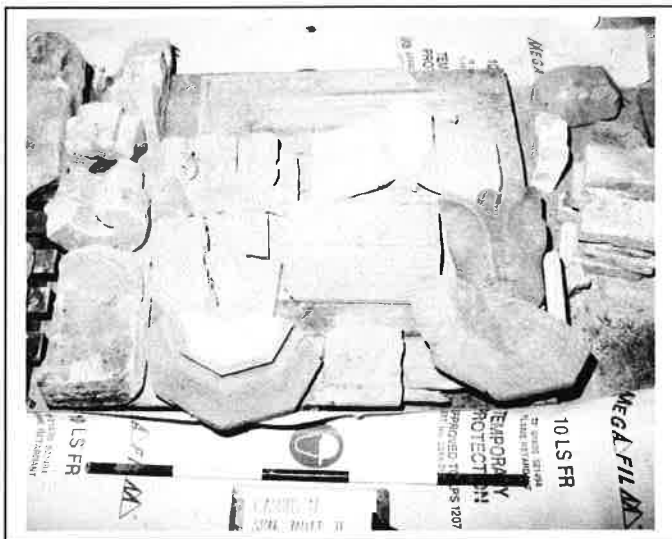
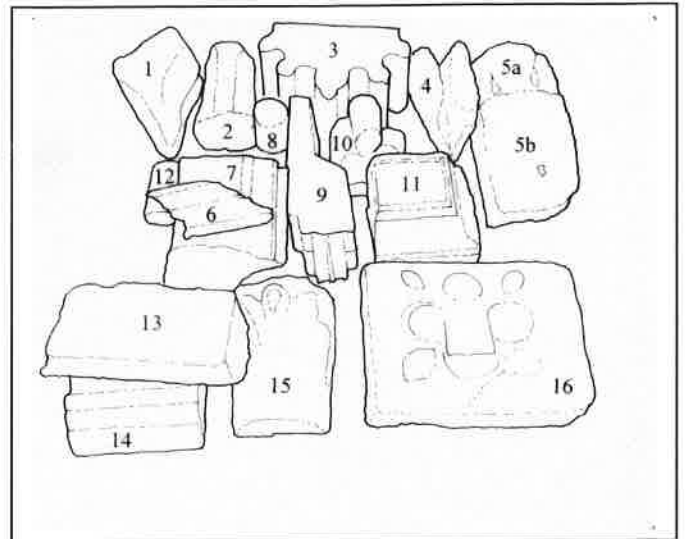


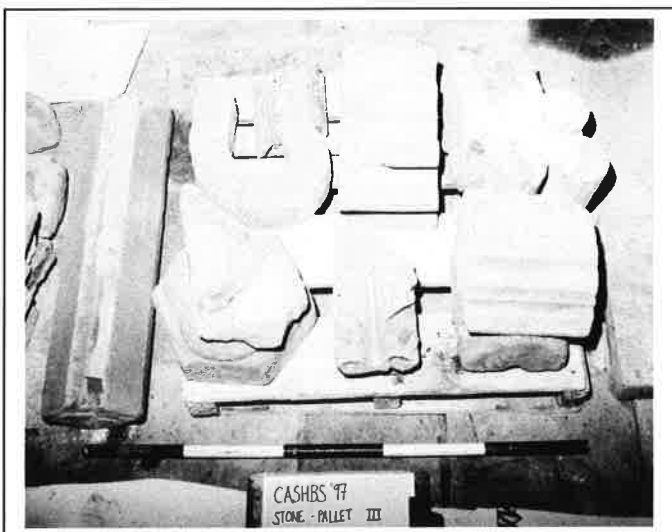
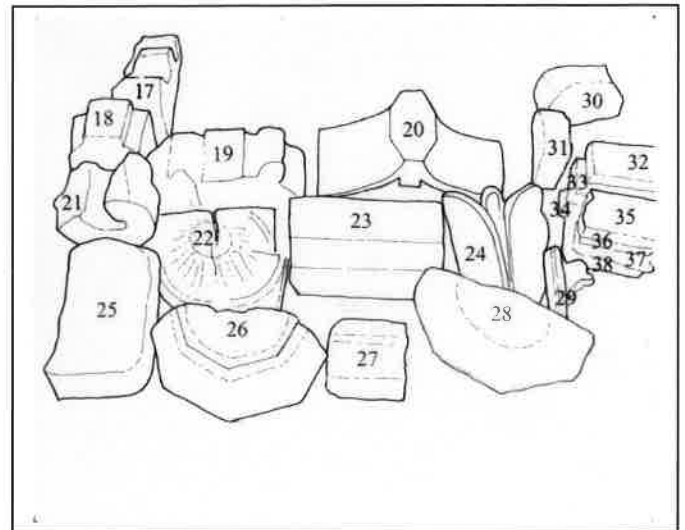
Figure 1: trench location plan



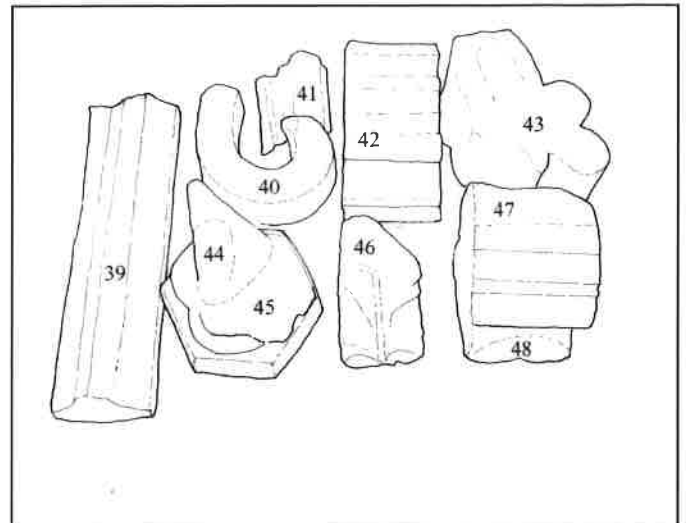
Pallet 1



Pallet 2



Pallet 3



**Figure 2:** Pallets of worked stone. (Refer to section 5.2.2 of report for identification of stones)

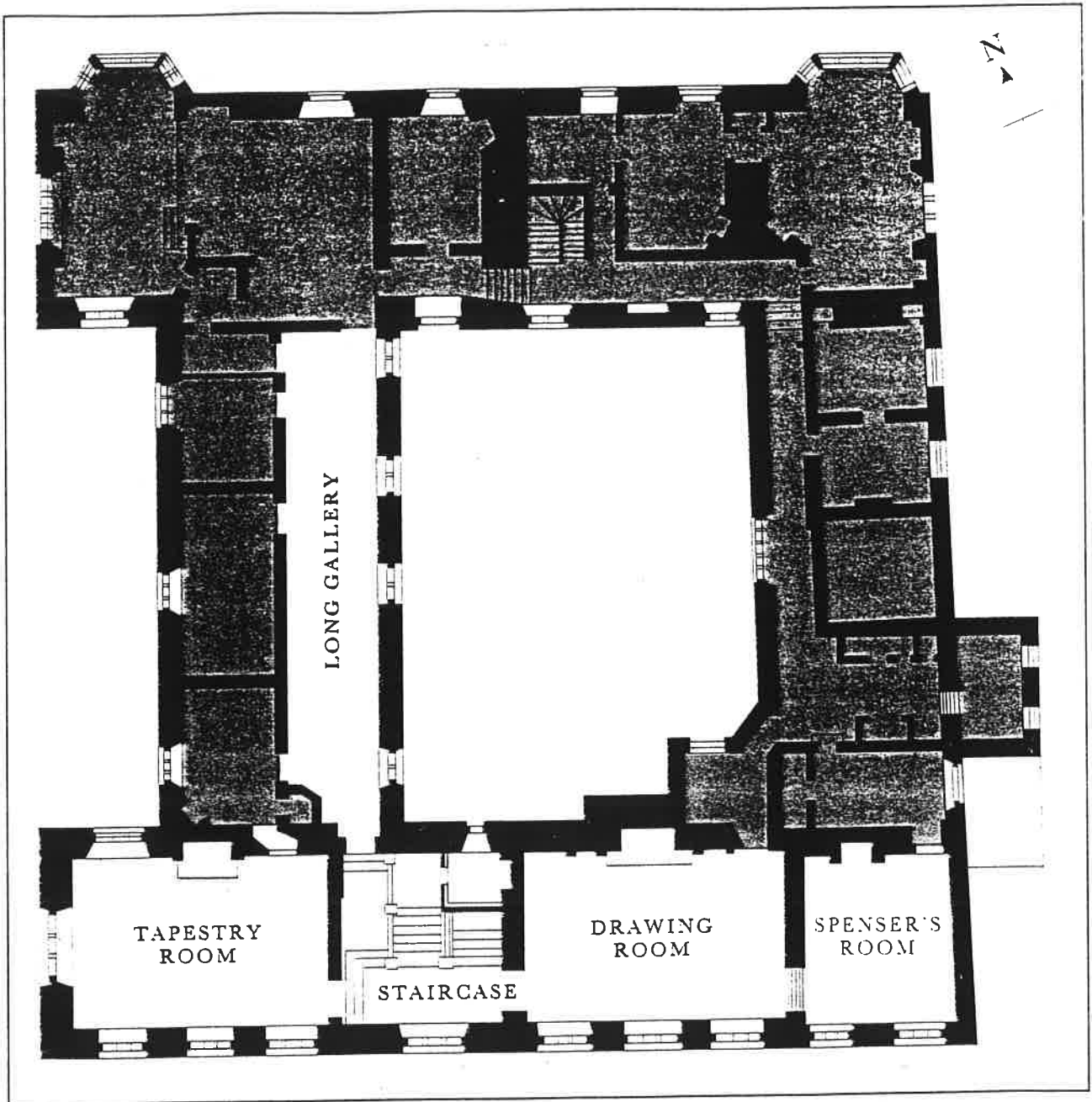


Figure 3: First floor Plan (From The National Trust Guide to Canons Ashby)



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