

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT THE WAKES, SELBORNE, HAMPSHIRE, 1992–4

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ABSTRACT

Excavations were undertaken on the former gardens of the famous naturalist, the Reverend Gilbert White (1720–93). A number of features were recovered that were thought to be associated with his gardening activities, including the foundation trench for his Fruit Wall, possible remains of his Alcove, an unidentified stone feature, and a ditch. Post-White alterations were noted around the southern end of the ha-ha and elsewhere. The recovery of residual medieval ceramics on the site attest to the medieval origins of The Wakes.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological excavations were undertaken during the last two weeks of October 1992 by C K Currie of CKC Archaeology (Gardens Archaeology Project), to evaluate the archaeological potential of the garden of The Wakes (NGR SU 741 337). Particular attention was paid to the location of features recorded in the writings of the Reverend Gilbert White (1720–93), the famous naturalist and a previous owner of the property, who had kept detailed records of his activities in the *Garden Kalendar* between 1751 and 1767, and in the *Naturalist's Journal* between 1768 and his death in 1793.

Following tree removal in the spring of 1994, rubble was encountered by the gardener, David Standing, near the conjectured site of White's Alcove. The author excavated a further trench (Trench 12) in May 1994 to examine this discovery.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although The Wakes and the village of Selborne have become best known as the home of the naturalist, the Reverend Gilbert White, their history stretches back beyond White's time.

A settlement is recorded at Selborne in Domesday Book (Munby 1982, 1:7;47:3), where it states that the king gave half a hide of this manor and the church to Radfred, a priest. This settlement probably became one of the more significant in the area following the foundation of a small Augustinian priory nearby by Peter de Roches, Bishop of Winchester in 1233. A study of this foundation has been made by Le Faye (1975, 1990), and its charters were published by Macray in the last century (1891).

Although the priory was never large, and was dissolved early, in 1484, it doubtless contributed much to the local economy. Despite the poverty of that part of north-east Hampshire in which Selborne stands, the village appears to have developed a form of open field system, as is evidenced from surviving strip-shaped enclosures on the Tithe Map of 1842 (HRO Tithe map and award; Meirion-Jones 1972, 5–7). Open fields are relatively rare in Hampshire, and dispersed settlement dominated much of the landscape off the chalk downlands.

Following the dissolution of the priory in 1484, the lordship of the manor passed to Magdalen College, Oxford, who still held it, together with the advowson of the church, in the time of Gilbert White. A study of the buildings of the village by Meirion-Jones (1972, 1983), has identified a number of late medieval secular buildings, and the church contains substantial twelfth-century work in its structure. However, the majority of the earliest buildings date from the period c 1570–1700 (Meirion-Jones 1972, 25–26). A more detailed study of The Wakes indicates that the earliest part of the present structure dates from c 1500, with substantial additions between c 1777 and 1910 (Meirion-Jones 1983, 167–68).

The Wakes seems to have taken its name from

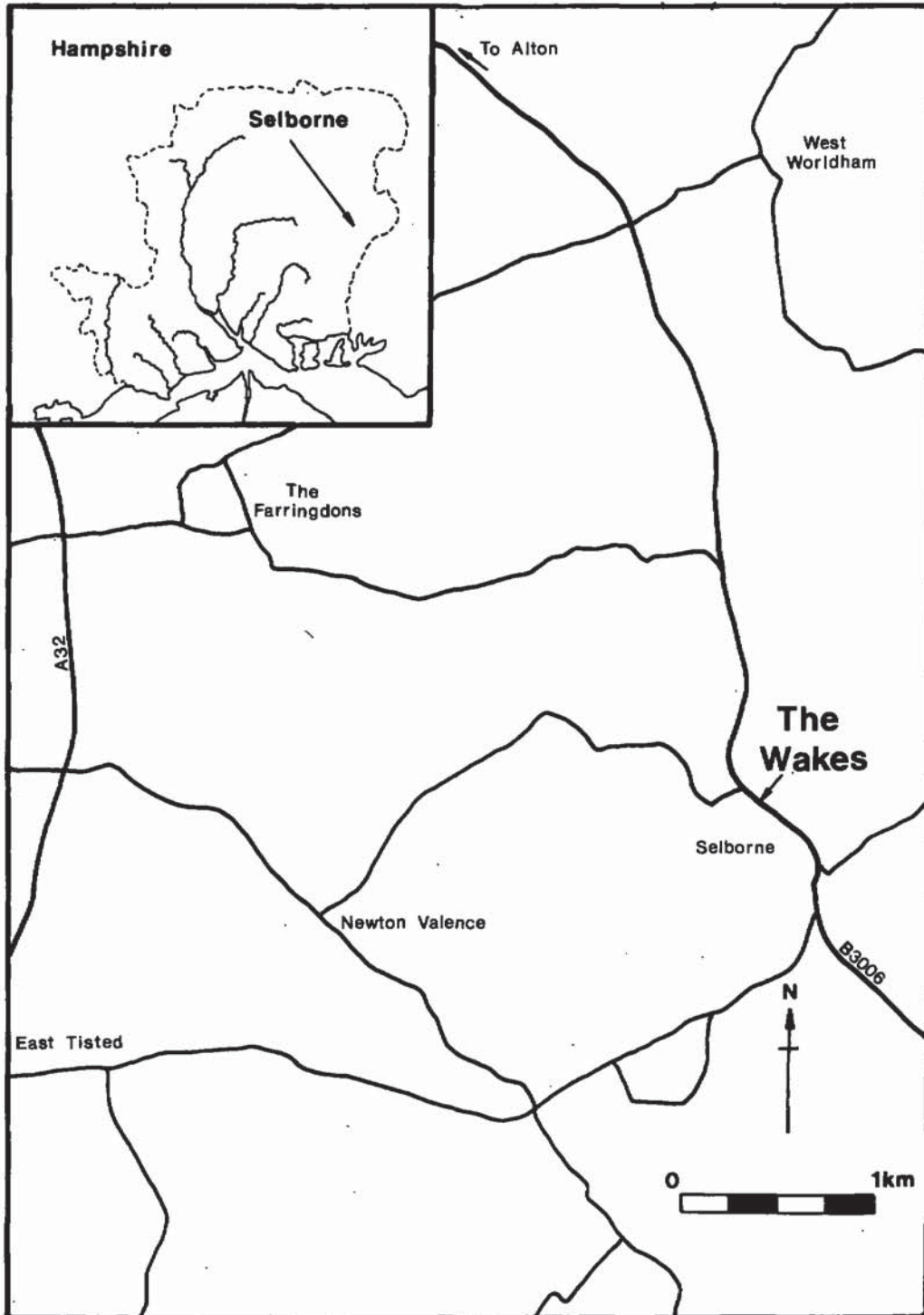


Fig 1 Location of Selborne and The Wakes.

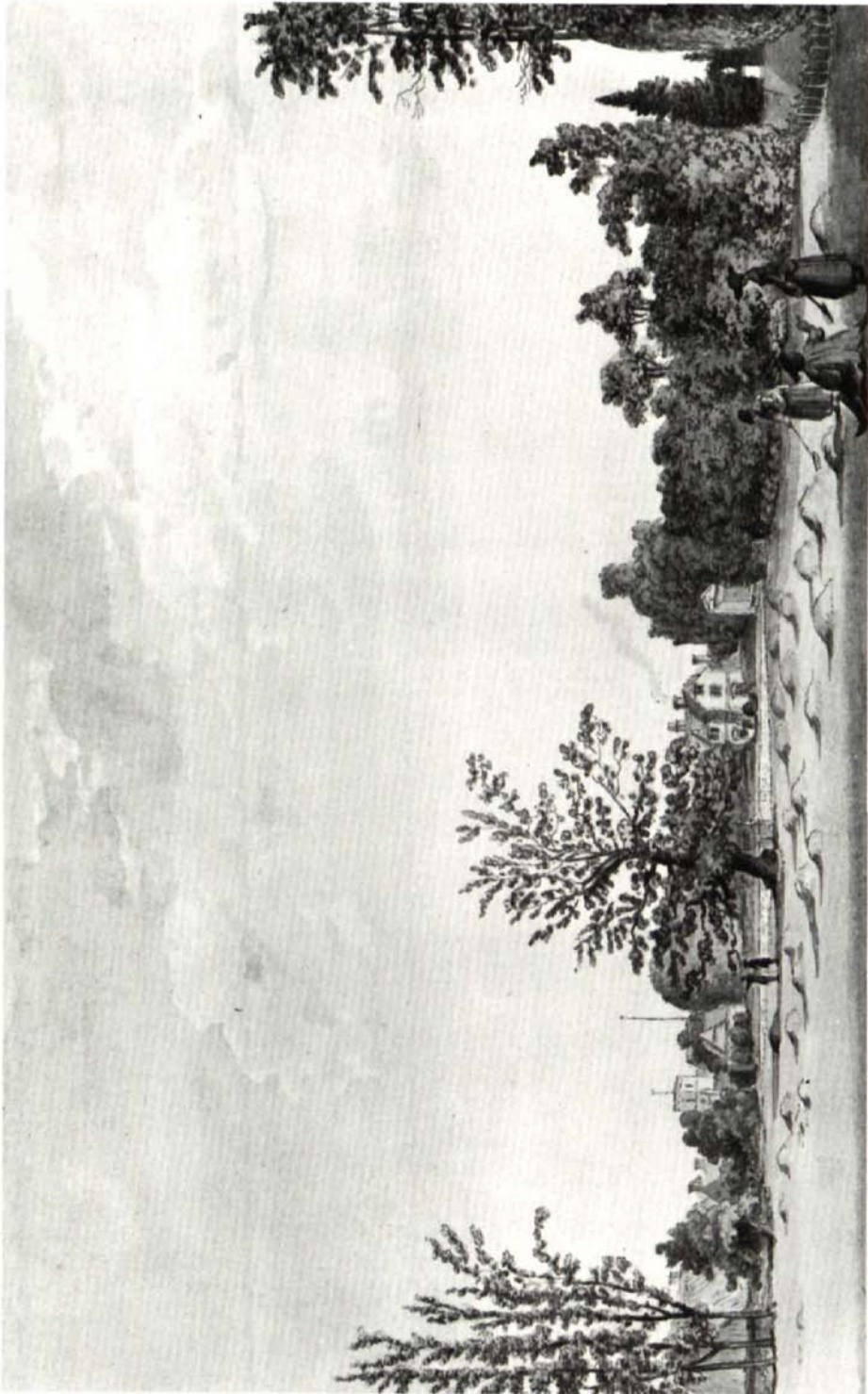


Fig. 2 Print by Grimm of The Wakes from the Great Mead, showing The Alcove in the middle distance (reproduced by permission of Harvard University Library).

the Wake family, who appear to have lived there in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Meirion-Jones 1983, 145). The White family are first associated with the village when Gilbert White's father, another Gilbert White, was appointed to the living in 1681 (Mabey 1987, 16). The family lived at the Vicarage until the elder Gilbert died in 1728 or 1729, leaving his widow to move across the street to The Wakes (Mabey 1987, 19).

The younger Gilbert went to Oxford in 1739, but by 1749 he had returned to Selborne, where he was to spend much of the remainder of his life. His interest in gardening is shown by the rigorous entries he made in his *Garden Kalendar*, a journal of his activities from 1751 to 1767 (Greenoak 1986). During the course of his life White became increasingly interested in natural history, and in 1789 his *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* was published. This work has gone on to lay claim to being the fourth most published book in the English language (Mabey 1977, frontpiece).

White was never a wealthy man, and, despite his Oxford education, never held a living in his own right, being a country curate all his life. He was curate at nearby Farringdon from 1761 until 1784, when he took on the curacy of the village of Selborne itself, a position he held until his death in 1793 (Mabey 1977, xii). However, this unambitious career allowed him to undertake detailed studies of the natural history of his locality, for which he became famous after his death.

White's earliest writings describe his garden activities. The earliest garden at The Wakes was much different in area from that of the present day. In the 1750s, much of White's gardening took place in the area known as Baker's Hill, and that adjoining part of the present pasture field on the west slope of the hill. In June 1760 White purchased an old orchard to the west of the house, and proceeded to lay out a new garden which terminated in the present ha-ha, and was bounded on the north by a brick wall, known as the Fruit Wall, only a fragment of which survives today (Standing 1986, 14). The present garden north of the Fruit Wall was probably added in the later nineteenth or early twentieth century, when the house was expanded in that direction (Meirion-Jones 1983, 147-150).

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Eleven trenches were excavated during the 1992 evaluation, with a further trench excavated in the spring of 1994. The results are given below for each trench.

Further plans and sections are illustrated on Microfiche Plates 1 and 2.

Trench 1 (Fig. 4)

This was a large irregular trench of approximately 40 square metres excavated on the summit of Baker's Hill. The remains of a path were located crossing the hill-top in a NW-SE direction. This path was relatively poorly defined, comprising an irregular, shallow mixture of gravel, small ragstone fragments and general hard-core. It followed roughly the line of the present grass path ascending the hill, and was less than a few centimetres beneath the surface in places.

On the northern edge of this large trench, a drystone structure (04) was located. This was made mainly of local ragstone with the occasional flint block or fragment of brick within. It was approximately 2 m by 0.5 m in extent, and the excavated portion was about 0.2 m high. The structure was aligned roughly E-W, and appeared to have been deliberately constructed with a terminal at its west end. The east end was more irregular and appeared to have been disturbed, suggesting the feature had once continued eastwards. Small fragments of creamware ceramic were found embedded between the stones of the structure.

Discussion: Excavation revealed that the path had been disturbed in the past. Although nineteenth and early twentieth century materials were found embedded in the surface, the remains were so close to the surface that these could have resulted in recent contamination. The disturbance suggested that the path was deliberately abandoned for a grass walk, with the possibility that gardening activity has taken place over it subsequent to its abandonment. This gardening was not known to be associated with the very modern gardening undertaken on the site of Trenches 2, 3 and 9 by Jenny Streeter, the head of the Field Centre associated with the Museum.

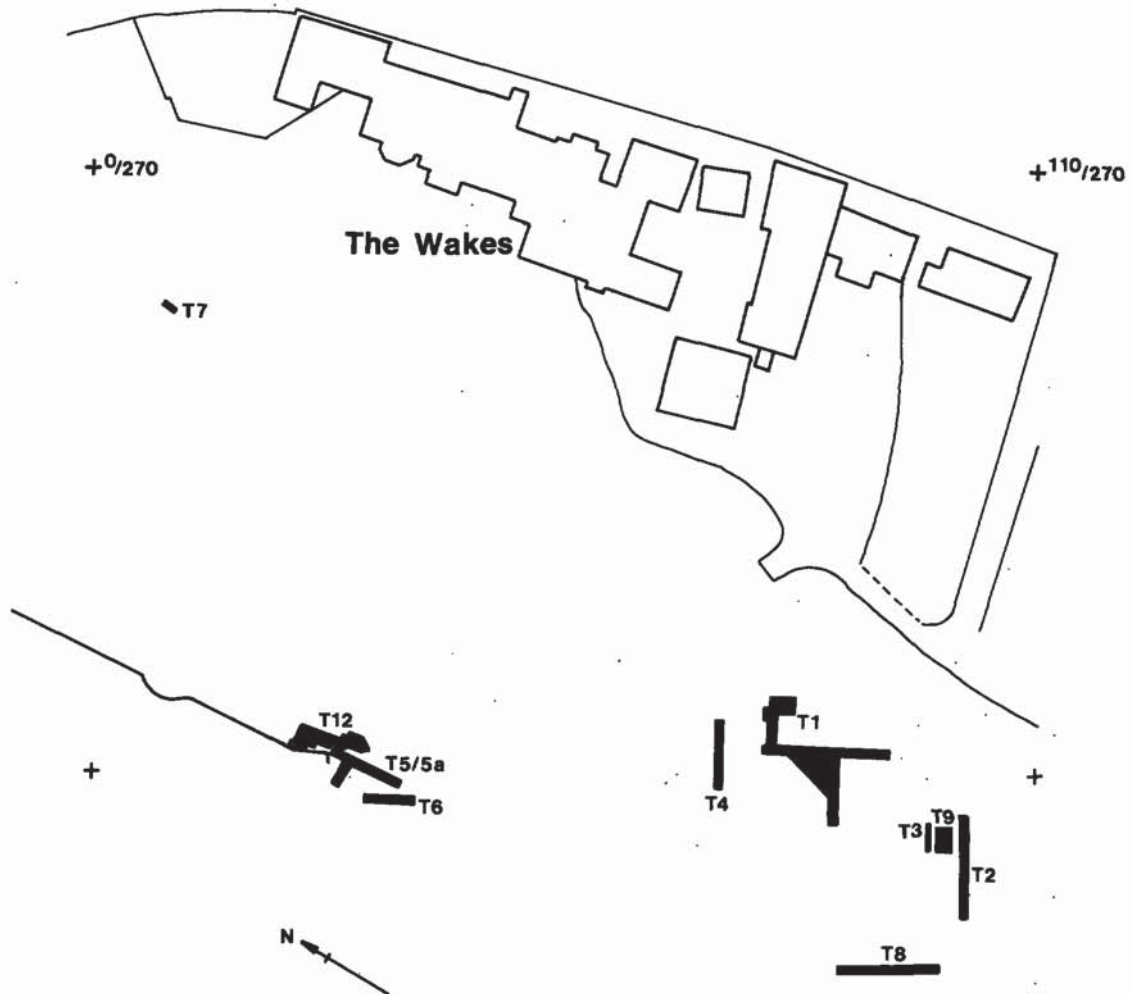


Fig. 3 The Wakes, Selborne, showing location of excavated trenches.

If the creamware fragments embedded in the top of the stone structure were not residual losses, they suggest that it had fallen out of use by 1830. This points to the structure being of late eighteenth-century date, and possibly contemporary with White's occupation of the site. It is not possible to offer any conclusive explanation of this structure as it does not fall into any known building tradition previously encountered. It is recorded that a barn in this vicinity was jacked up and moved by White in

1766 (Greenoak 1986, 172), suggesting that it was a timber framed structure sitting on a stone sill or saddle stones. This feature could therefore be a sill connected with this barn, a foundation of an associated wall or part of a stone path leading to it.

Note: Further excavations undertaken in October 1995 by the author at the invitation of the trustees revealed further stretches of this structure, which can now be interpreted more clearly as a serpentine path.

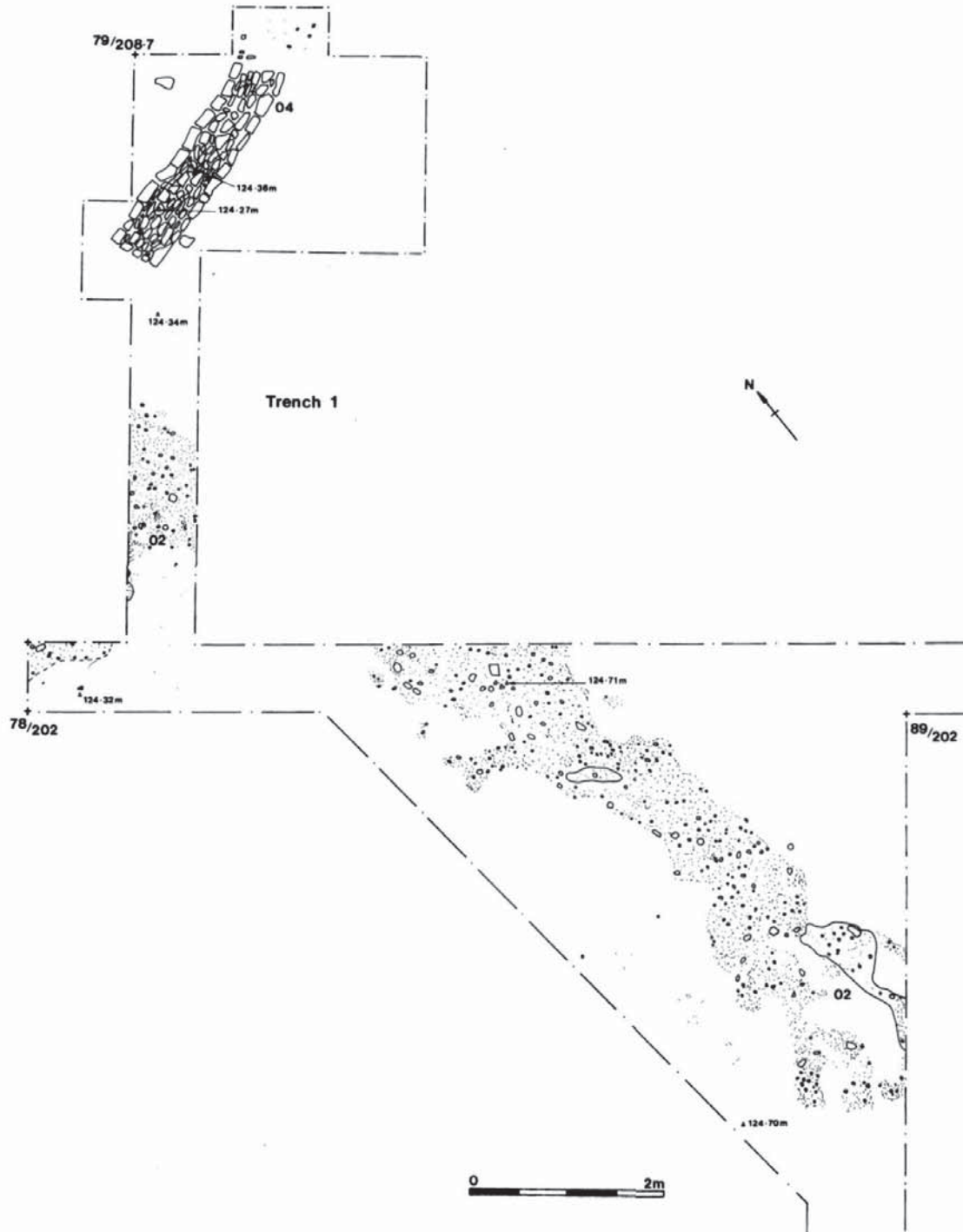


Fig. 4 Trench 1 showing remains of path and drystone structure (04).

Trench 2

A linear trench 12 m by 0.7 m located further south than Trench 1 on the summit of Baker's Hill. This was much disturbed over its NE end by gardening activity, which was identified as a modern vegetable patch dug within recent years by staff of The Wakes Museum. As a result the line of the path found in Trench 1 could not be found, and it was not possible to conjecture if it came this far.

Trench 3

A small linear trench 3 m by 0.5 m located across the conjecture alignment of the path found in Trench 1. This trench was located between Trenches 1 and 2. Further traces of the modern vegetable patch were located immediately beneath the topsoil at the NE end of the trench. The path found in Trench 1 appears to have been located to the SW of this, although it was badly disturbed.

Trench 4

A linear trench 8 m by 0.5 m on the upper slope of Baker's Hill to test if a second path descended the hill parallel to the present fence. On removal of the turf, a clay loam sub-soil was encountered. No features were found either over the top of this or cutting into it. After excavating for about 0.35 m undisturbed clays were located.

Trench 5/5a (Fig. 5)

This was a T-shaped trench excavated at the bottom of Baker's Hill at the end of the present ha-ha. It was designed to locate White's Alcove, and to determine the nature of the brick path.

A large irregular hole (033), was excavated about a metre to the north of the brick path. The bottom of this hole was filled with demolition rubble that contained a mixture of material of various dates from the sixteenth/seventeenth to the twentieth century. The demolition materials contained a number of frogged bricks, which probably date from the later nineteenth century.

Evidence was found for the levelling of the 'terras' recorded by White in the 1760s. This comprised of two dumps of clay soils, separated by a lens of chalk rubble. About a metre from the end of the present ha-ha a small dump of ragstone, chalk, tile and mortar fragments (025) were found about 0.3 m below the present ground surface. At the far north end of the trench were the remains of a tile land drain that appears to have emptied into the ha-ha ditch.

The brick path (014) was found to have been slightly wider once, with a stone edging (026) on the north side. There was a compacted dark soil about 0.07 m thick beneath the path. The soils to the south of the path appear to have been undisturbed. As in other undisturbed areas excavated, the clay loam sub-soil gave way to undisturbed clays after 0.35 m.

The only other feature located was a post-hole to the north of the path at the west end of Trench 5a. This was roughly sub-circular, about 0.2 m in diameter and 0.4 m deep with a clay loam fill. The fill contained a large brick fragment. This post-hole seems to have been cut from the present ground surface.

Discussion: The path would appear to be roughly on its original alignment, although it clearly has been altered slightly at the point of excavation because the original stone edging seems to have been forgotten. A gap of 0.1 m between the edging and the present path confirms either the very slight alignment change, or a narrowing of the path. This stone edging can still be seen in position close to the Bird Hide (removed in 1994) in the field beyond, but here the path is the same width as elsewhere.

The ground to the north of the path appears to have once sloped downwards, but has been subsequently built up to the level of the present ha-ha. This work seems to have been carried out in the eighteenth century, and would tie in with White's recorded activities in building the garden 'terras' and ha-ha in his new garden in 1761 (Greenoak 1986, 94–96). The small quantities of building materials buried within the dump at the north end of the trench may have been associated with the building of the original ha-ha wall, or the Alcove itself.

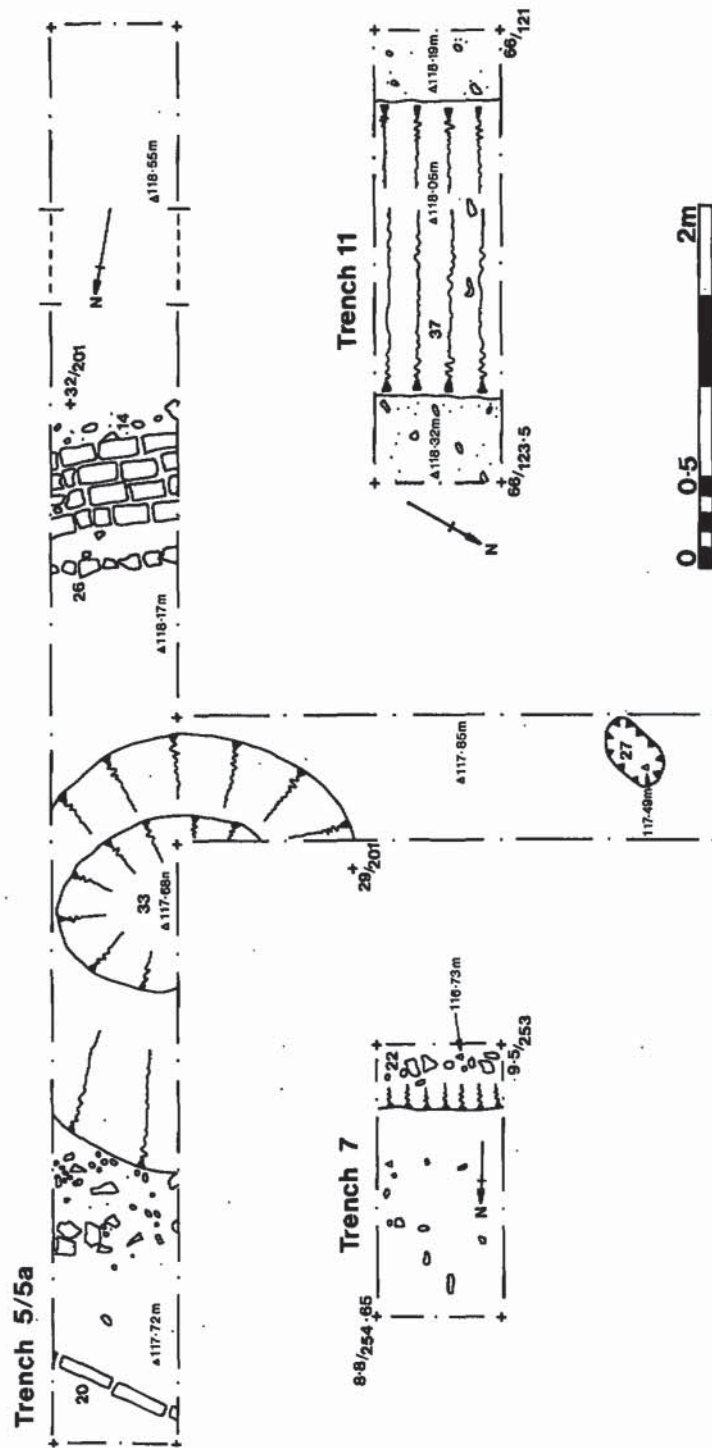


Fig. 5 Trenches 5/5a, 7 and 11.

Trench 6

A linear trench 6 m by 0.7 m parallel with the modern fence, but within the pasture field to the west of the garden. This contained no features whatsoever. Undisturbed clays were encountered within 0.35 m of the turf.

Trench 7 (Fig. 5)

A very small trench 1.5 m by 0.7 m located within a flower bed on the conjectured alignment of the Fruit Wall to the NE of the remaining fragment.

A linear cut (022) was located about 0.4 m below the present surface, dug into undisturbed sub-soil. The full width of the cut was not found because further excavation south-eastwards was prevented by the present yew hedge. The width of that part of the feature excavated was 0.4 m. The cut was filled by ragstone rubble.

Discussion: It was concluded that this cut represented the robber trench to remove the foundations of the Fruit Wall, confirming that this feature once extended further to the NE in the direction of the house than the wall existing at present. The absence of brick fragments in this trench suggests that the Fruit Wall may have been built on a stone foundation. White records building the wall between 14 May and 25 July of 1761, noting that he had trouble with the coping bricks surmounting it, as they were 'full of flaws' (Greenoak 1986, 104–6).

Trench 8

A linear trench 12 m by 0.7 m in the field to the west of Baker's Hill, but across the conjectured alignment of the 'cross-walk'. No features were found in this trench. Moderate quantities of charcoal were found in the topsoil, together with much residual medieval pottery. Undisturbed soils were within 0.4 m of the surface.

Discussion: The discovery of relatively large quantities of charcoal in the topsoils suggests that this area had been enhanced with ashes for gardening in the past. As White refers to his own

'ash-house' for this purpose (Greenoak 1986, 58), and records sowing various crops in the vicinity of this trench, it can be assumed that this material is confirmation of the area being planted in the eighteenth century. The medieval pottery is residual, probably finding its way into the soil from past husbandry-related practices, such as manuring.

Trench 9

Another trench 2 m by 3 m on the alignment of the path found on the summit of Baker's Hill; it was sited between Trenches 2 and 3.

This trench was heavily disturbed by the modern vegetable patch noted in Trenches 2 and 3. Although some gravel and other path-like material was observed on the path alignment, it was so badly disturbed that it was not possible to draw any conclusions.

Trench 10

This was a linear trench 8 m by 0.76 m descending the west side of Baker's Hill in the field beyond the garden. It was suggested that it might cross the line of an early ha-ha. It was excavated as close to a fallen tree in the vicinity as possible.

No features were located here. Undisturbed soils were within 0.35 m of the turf. Spreads of charcoal within the topsoil throughout this trench (as in Trench 8) suggests it was within the area gardened in the eighteenth century.

Trench 11 (Fig. 5)

A small linear trench 2.5 m by 0.7 m was excavated across the alignment of a slight ditch-like earthwork at the bottom of the slope of Baker's Hill, about 20 m beyond Trench 10.

This trench revealed a shallow ditch (037) following the base of Baker's Hill. Although only about 0.35 m deep, it was clearly cut into the local sub-soil, which appeared to have been thrown up to the NE to provide a low bank, now almost completely degraded. The ditch-fill contained ceramics that dated its silting-up to the mid-eighteenth century.

Discussion: This feature was on the alignment of an old hedge line observed further south in the field. The date of the feature may coincide with White's gardening on Baker's Hill, and it is suggested that it represents the western limit of his garden. Although it is possible that his ha-ha was on this line, the shallow nature of the feature suggests that it was only a field boundary at this point. A few metres to the north are the earthworks of a later tennis court. It is possible that the remains of the early ha-ha continued the line of this ditch to the north, but has now been covered over by the earthworks of the later tennis court.

Trench 12 (Fig. 6)

This trench was excavated in May 1994 immediately to the east of Trench 7, and to the west of a feature known as the Brick Walk. Initial cleaning of brick and stone rubble discovered by the Head Gardener indicated a linear stone feature (041) on an approximate north-south alignment. The irregular shape of the excavated trench is the result of trying to follow that alignment, together with an extension excavated to look at the construction details of the back of the ha-ha wall where there is a change in direction of that feature.

The rubble level (040) first encountered comprised mainly moderate-sized pieces of ragstone with about six large pieces of brick (either whole or fragments of at least 50% of the entire brick). To the immediate north and south of the main rubble area was a thin layer of clay containing abundant chalk fragments (046). Further north, this disappeared under the Brick Path, but to the south, it was observed to be approximately 1 m wide.

With the clearance of the rubble, the linear stone feature became better defined, proving to be approximately 2.6 m in length, and comprising a single line of ragstone pieces about 0.1 m wide. At its north end it was truncated by a later cutting for a circular tile drain (044). There was no evidence to suggest that it had extended beyond this cutting. At the south end was a well-defined, but shallow, feature (042) about 0.2 m by 0.6 m. It cut no more than about 0.12 m into the

surrounding soil, but it was thought that a further 0.1 m or so of the feature had been truncated by later activity. On excavation the western 0.3 m of the feature proved to be substantially deeper than the rest.

Excavation behind the ha-ha wall recovered evidence for substantial build-up of soils (048, 051). Immediately behind the wall was a darker soil representing the fill of an irregular cut (049) that could be explained by the presence of a flower bed along the edge of the wall in recent memory. This was up to 0.3 m deep and about the same dimension in width. Beneath was evidence of redeposited clays containing many ragstone fragments (048). These overlay a layer of green-grey clay at a depth of about 0.55 m. The trench was not excavated further although it was doubted that undisturbed horizons had been encountered.

The wall itself, although presently faced with flint, was found to comprise many ragstone pieces of variable sizes behind the outer face. Most were of moderate size, but at least one fairly substantial block was encountered. These were thought to be mainly reused materials. Blue-and-white glazed fine earthenwares in the soils behind the wall suggested it had been refaced or rebuilt in the nineteenth century.

Discussion: The linear stone structure (041) adjacent to the Brick Path was initially thought to be part of a stone edge to an earlier Brick Path. The presence of large pieces of brick of probable eighteenth-century date seemed to support this. However, on clearing the rubble away to leave only the *in situ* stones, it was revealed that the alignment did not extend far enough for it to fit this interpretation, although relaying of the Brick Path elsewhere may well have taken place. The latter would account for the presence of the redeposited bricks. Furthermore, the presence of a possible post-hole (042) at the exact south end of the feature suggests the stones may have been associated with a wooden structure.

It could be argued that this hole was not of sufficient depth to enable it to take a large post, but it should be remembered that the soils appeared to be slightly truncated in the vicinity. White recorded that his Alcove blew over in a

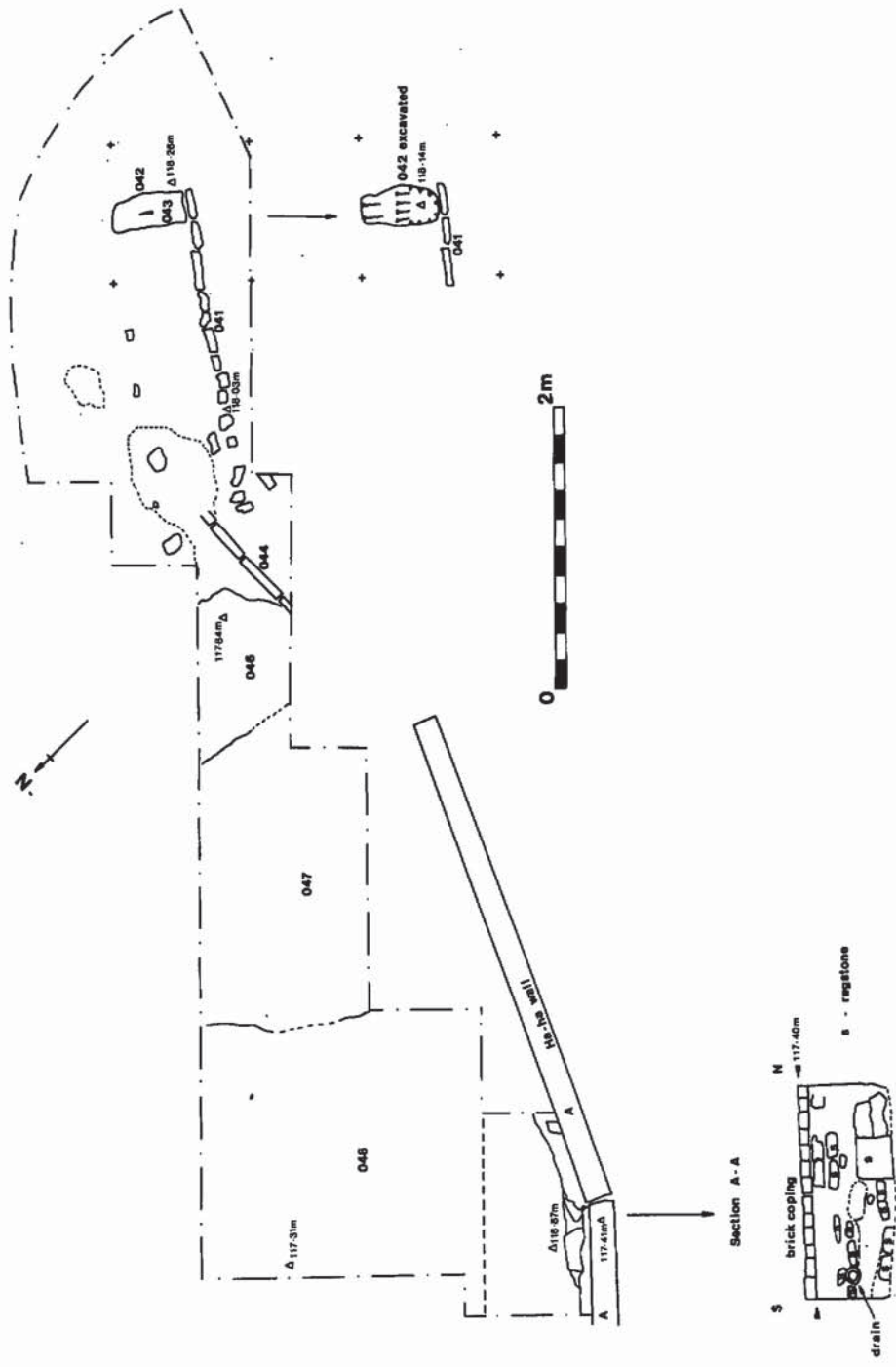


Fig. 6 Trench 12.

gale (David Standing pers. comm.), and this suggests that although the post contained in the pit appears to have been reasonably substantial, the structure itself was constructed in a rather insecure manner. The dimensions of The Alcove are estimated to be 2.6 m N-S, and less than 1.25 m E-W. The line of stones might be part of an edging to the open side of this structure.

From what is known of White's gardening, his activities were restricted by lack of finance to home-grown solutions. The nature of the remains of the recovered feature seem to fit this interpretation. The ragstone edging is typical of his work, and the direction that the structure appears to face, plus its location, coincides with that shown in the Grimm drawing. The evidence suggests that The Alcove was little more than a covered seat. The cutting of a land drain across the northern end of its site seems to have been done in the nineteenth century. It is not thought that the structure still stood when the drain was laid. Its cutting may have removed any evidence for a post-hole matching that at the south end.

One question that needs to be answered is the fact that the eighteenth-century ha-ha wall, as seen in the Grimm print, seems to extend at least as far as the centre of The Alcove. The present ha-ha does not extend this far. There are a number of explanations for this. Although Grimm may not be exactly accurate, the most likely solution to this problem is that the ha-ha has been subsequently shortened.

Measurement of the two sides of the ha-ha wall from the sundial (assumed to be its original centre) shows that the original north side is somewhat longer than the south. Further, the south side is not entirely straight, bending inwards for its last 3.6 m or so. The excavation behind the ha-ha wall suggests that the present wall has been rebuilt. If this is the case, it seems possible that the original ha-ha has been truncated. Certainly the bending inwards of the last 3.6 m is not shown on Grimm, and the excavated evidence, although not conclusive, points to this having been done after White's time, probably in the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations recovered a number of features that could be associated with Gilbert White and his garden.

Amongst the evidence recovered was a path along the summit of Baker's Hill. Although this was one of the most conspicuous features found, there is no archaeological evidence to link it with White's time, and there is a possibility that it may be a later feature. However, evidence from White's writing suggests that a path did follow roughly this alignment in the eighteenth century.

Other features can be more hopefully linked with the naturalist. The stone structure on Baker's Hill appears to have been in existence in White's day, and is probably associated with his recorded barn. Whether the structure is a stone foundation of a timber barn or a path is uncertain, and only further archaeology might determine this problem. (See previous note.)

The excavations confirmed that the Fruit Wall once exceeded its present limits, and identified its alignment. Again further work could define its extent both towards the house and the ha-ha.

A structure thought to be part of the Garden Alcove was found in May 1994, less than a metre north of a 1992 trench dug to try to locate it. This may have been a relatively insubstantial timber building, with a stone edging along one side. There was also evidence to suggest a post-White remodelling of the ha-ha. Considerable dumps of earth were also found for the 'levellings' of the terrace in the new garden in the 1760s to the north of the Brick Walk. Part of the Brick Walk was found to be edged with stone.

Finally, enhancement of garden soils with ashes was identified in the field to the west of the garden. This appears to have been spread over a wide area. Although the earlier ha-ha was not located, a ditch was excavated that appears to have been the western limit of White's garden. It is possible that the ha-ha was built further north on the same alignment as this contemporary ditch.

THE FINDS

The finds were generally unremarkable, and consisted largely of fragments of ceramic.

Building materials

Fragments of building materials were found in most of the trenches, although these were more common in the trenches closest to the house. These materials included fragments of local ragstone, brick, slate and ceramic tiles, both for roofing and for the laying of drains.

The pottery

The pottery proved to be the most useful class of material found, as it allowed some rough dates to be put on some of the features found. Both the ditch, thought to be at the western end of White's garden, and the stone structure found on Baker's Hill are thought to be datable as a result of pottery fragments found associated with them.

A number of points arise from the pottery evidence. The relatively large quantities of medieval coarsewares found all across the site attest to Selborne's medieval status as a thriving local settlement. Those

fragments found outside the present gardens probably came to be taken out into the fields with farmyard manure. This suggests that the area later known as The Park or Great Mead may have been an arable field at some time in the high medieval period.

The relative lack of high status eighteenth-century ceramics fits with what is known of White's relatively humble position and limited income.

The pottery recovered is given in Table 1, both by the number of sherds of each fabric type and by the weight, and then by the percentages by count and by weight of the total. No attempt was made to distinguish between the different medieval coarsewares present in that assemblage. It is sufficient to note that the corpus of these sherds were almost entirely sand-tempered fabrics, with flint tempered wares being rare. This suggests that the medieval ceramics were of local manufacture, and the kilns were located close to the Greensand soils nearby. It is perhaps surprising that flint tempered wares, which are generally associated with the chalky regions of Hampshire, were so few, considering the proximity of the chalk downlands with Selborne. Such findings suggest that the medieval economy of the village looked more to the Greensand regions of the east than the chalklands to the west.

Table 1. Pottery found during the excavations.

Fabric type	count		weight	
	no	%	wt. in grms	%
Creamware	11	5.7%	44	2.8%
Unglazed earthenware	15	7.8%	104	6.5%
Glazed medieval	15	7.8%	77	4.8%
Medieval coarseware	54	28.1%	259	16.3%
Glazed post-med. earthenware	23	12.0%	342	21.5%
19/20th century 'china'-types	18	9.4%	215	13.5%
Flowerpot	19	9.9%	173	10.9%
Pearlware	13	6.8%	108	6.8%
Stoneware	6	3.1%	89	5.6%
Porcelain	5	2.6%	33	2.1%
Mocha-ware	3	1.6%	6	0.4%
Surrey whiteware	3	1.6%	28	1.8%
Midland Black	1	0.5%	16	1.0%
Salt-glazed stoneware	2	1.0%	7	0.4%
Tin-glazed earthenware	2	1.0%	9	0.6%
Ceramic pipe (Modern)	2	1.0%	81	5.1%
Total	192		1591	

Clay pipe

Only a relatively small quantity of clay pipe was found. This was far less than would normally be

expected in post-medieval contexts. Those pieces that were found were small pieces of unmarked stem.

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