

Observations on wall repairs at Woodspring Priory, Kewstoke, North Somerset

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Collapsed section of wall on east side of cloister, Woodspring Priory

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Abstract

Two sections of walls within the monastic area of Woodspring Priory had been giving serious concern on structural grounds before 2020. The torrential rains and flooding of 2019/2020 brought further concern, and so in September 2020, sections of wall were repaired or demolished and rebuilt. Structural analysis shows that the wall in the cloister is almost certainly early postmedieval, while the repaired corner inside the main gatehouse included an eroded 16th century fireplace fragment as a quoin near the base of the structure.

Acknowledgements

This watching brief was carried out as a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent for the repair of the walls at Woodspring.

The watching brief was carried out in September 2020 for the landowners, the Landmark Trust. We would like to thank Orchard Stonemasons for their helpful co-operation, Mel Barge at Historic England for making a decision within minutes about the fireplace fragment, and local tenant, the Toogood Partnership.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

Site location

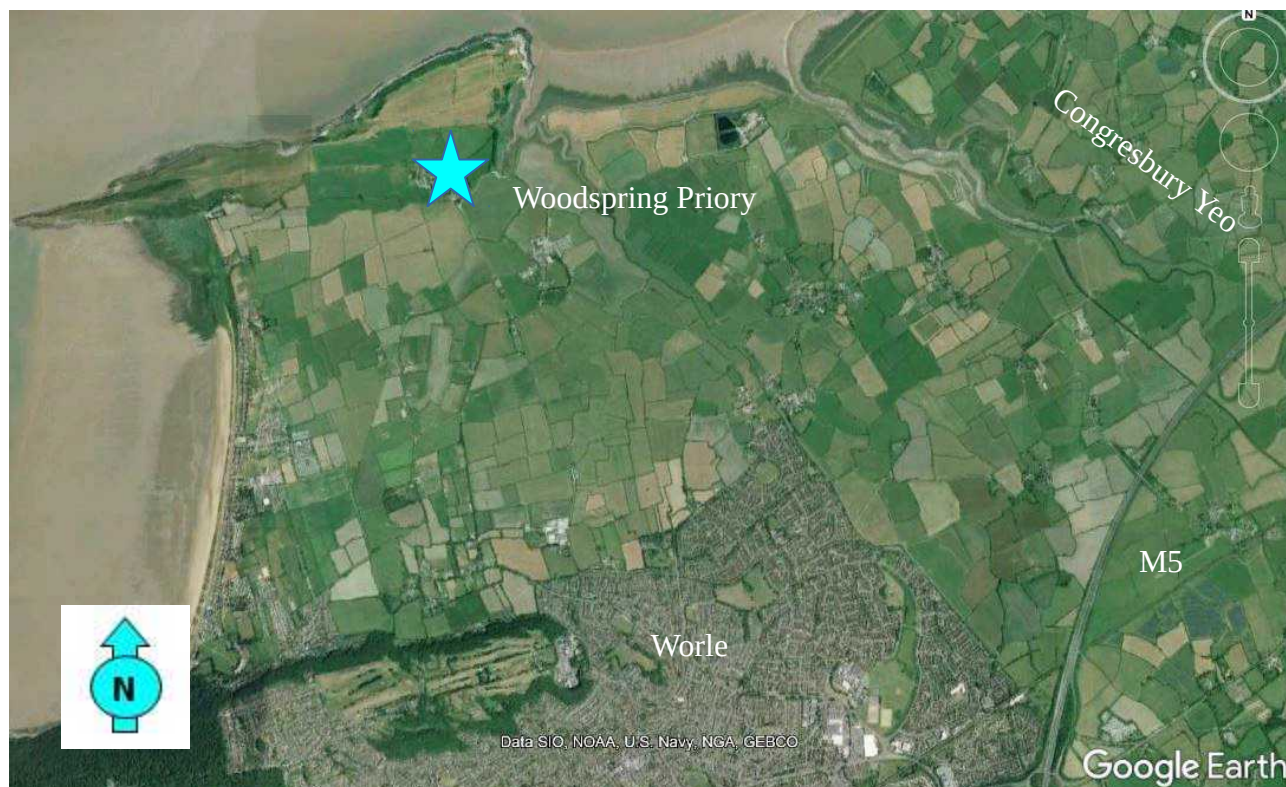


Fig 1: Location of Woodspring Priory

Woodspring Priory, a former Victorine Priory, lies at ST34366615, some 4.6km NE of Weston-super-Mare. It is in the parish of Kewstoke, in the Unitary Authority of North Somerset.

Land use and geology

The site is typically mostly used for grazing of sheep, although the old Farmhouse at the site is let by Landmark Trust on a weekly basis. The site is usually mostly open to the public, although at present (mid-September 2020) it is currently closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The area lies on the Blue Lias Formation – at this site, it consists of interbedded Mudstone and Limestone.

The whole site is a Scheduled Monument (List UID: 1012722: 'Woodspring Priory and associated fishponds and field system', designated 31st October 1994). It also contains a number of Listed Buildings:

Priory Church	LBI
Gatehouse, gates etc	LBI
East cloister wall (<i>recte</i> West)	LBI
West wall of chapter house	LBI

Infirmery	LBI
Barn and well	LBI
Farmhouse range	LBII*

The two areas the subject of this report are both directly attached to Listed Buildings.

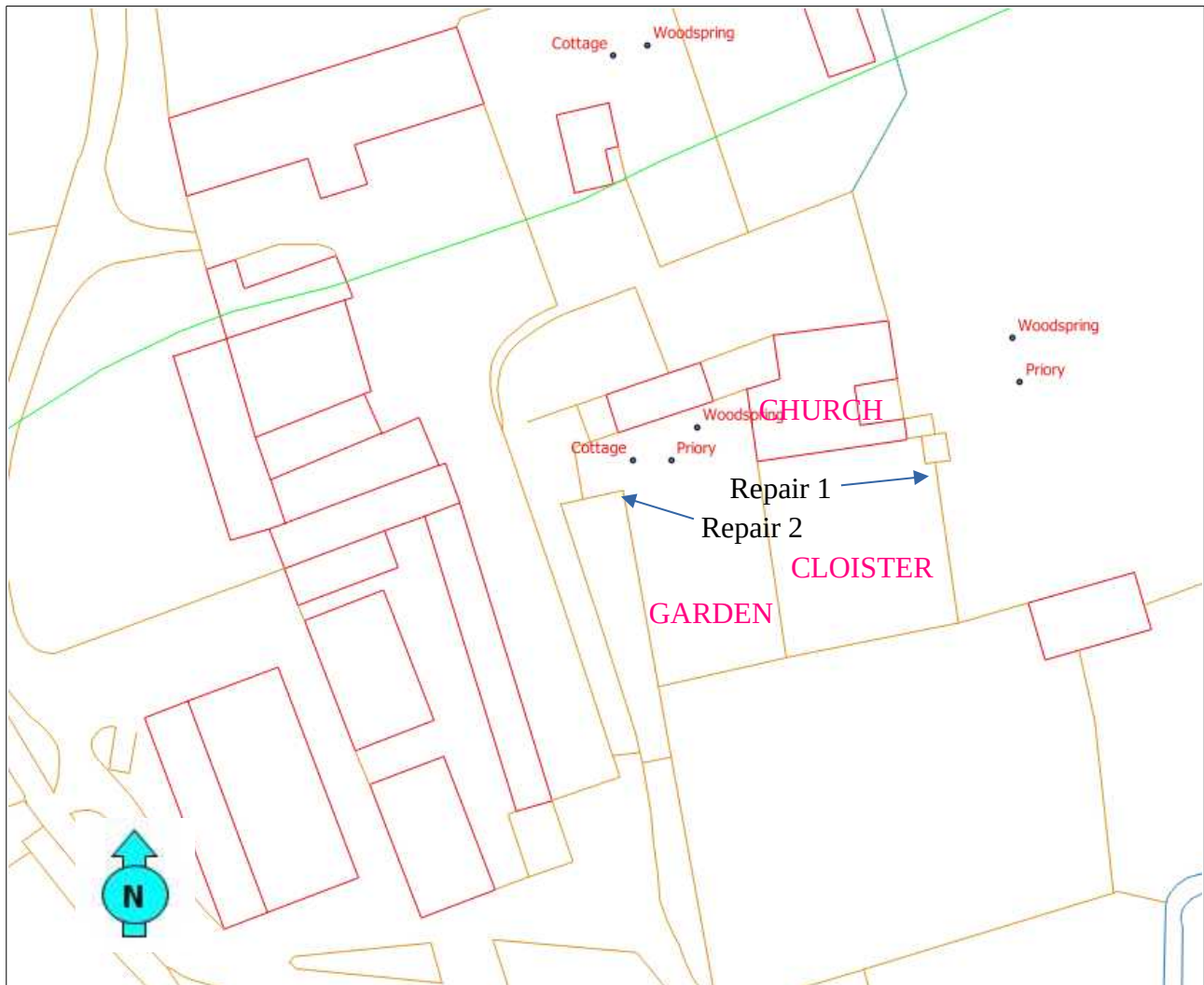


Fig 2: The sites of the two repairs

Historical & archaeological context

The detailed history of Woodspring Priory can be found at ycccart.co.uk/index_htm_files/Woodspring%20report%20final%20v2.pdf

Survey objectives

The purpose of the watching brief was to record the pre-existing state and appearance of the walls, and to record the works, including any revealed archaeology or artefacts.

Methodology

The watching brief was carried out on 15-16 September 2020.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

Photographs were taken by members of YCCART.

The repairs

Two sections of wall were found to be in need of repair.

The first wall

The first was a section of wall on the north-east side of the cloister, where a section of wall had collapsed, almost to the full width of the wall. The wall seems to have been tacitly assumed to be of medieval origin in the past. The view from the church tower in 2013, however, shows it to be different in width from the adjacent chapter-house wall (Fig 3).



Fig 3: Wall repair 1: Photograph taken in 2013 from church tower

On the ground, it can be clearly seen to be butted up against the two adjoining buildings, including the Chapter house wall on its south.

The top of the wall was quite heavily vegetated at the time, as can also be seen from a ground photograph of 2012 (Fig 4).



Fig 4: Wall 1 in 2012, vegetated, but pre-collapse

By 2020, however, a collapse of the face of the wall had occurred.

On close examination, it was clear that the wall was not of the same age as the adjoining chapter house wall, but seems to have been created to stop up a gap in the wall where the sacristy had once stood, something understood to have been demolished at, or soon after, the Reformation (Tomalin and Crook 2007: 38).

On closer examination (Fig 5-6), the wall can be seen to butt against the buildings on either side. It's lower part is bonded with a yellowish-red (5YR 5/6) earth, with occasional lime flecks. The upper third, however, consists of an initial pour of a white hard mortar (Gley 1 8/N), and the stones above are bound with the same mortar.

Worked freestone was available at the time the wall was built, and some fragments were built into the wall.



Fig 5: Collapsed face of wall, August 2020

The radical difference in the bonding of the two sections of wall may imply some passing of time between them, but the hard mortar is not intrinsically datable, other than to say it does not seem to appear elsewhere in the Priory.

After discussions with Landmark Trust and Orchard Stonemasons, it was agreed that the wall would be subject to repair and building up only, with no associated demolition.

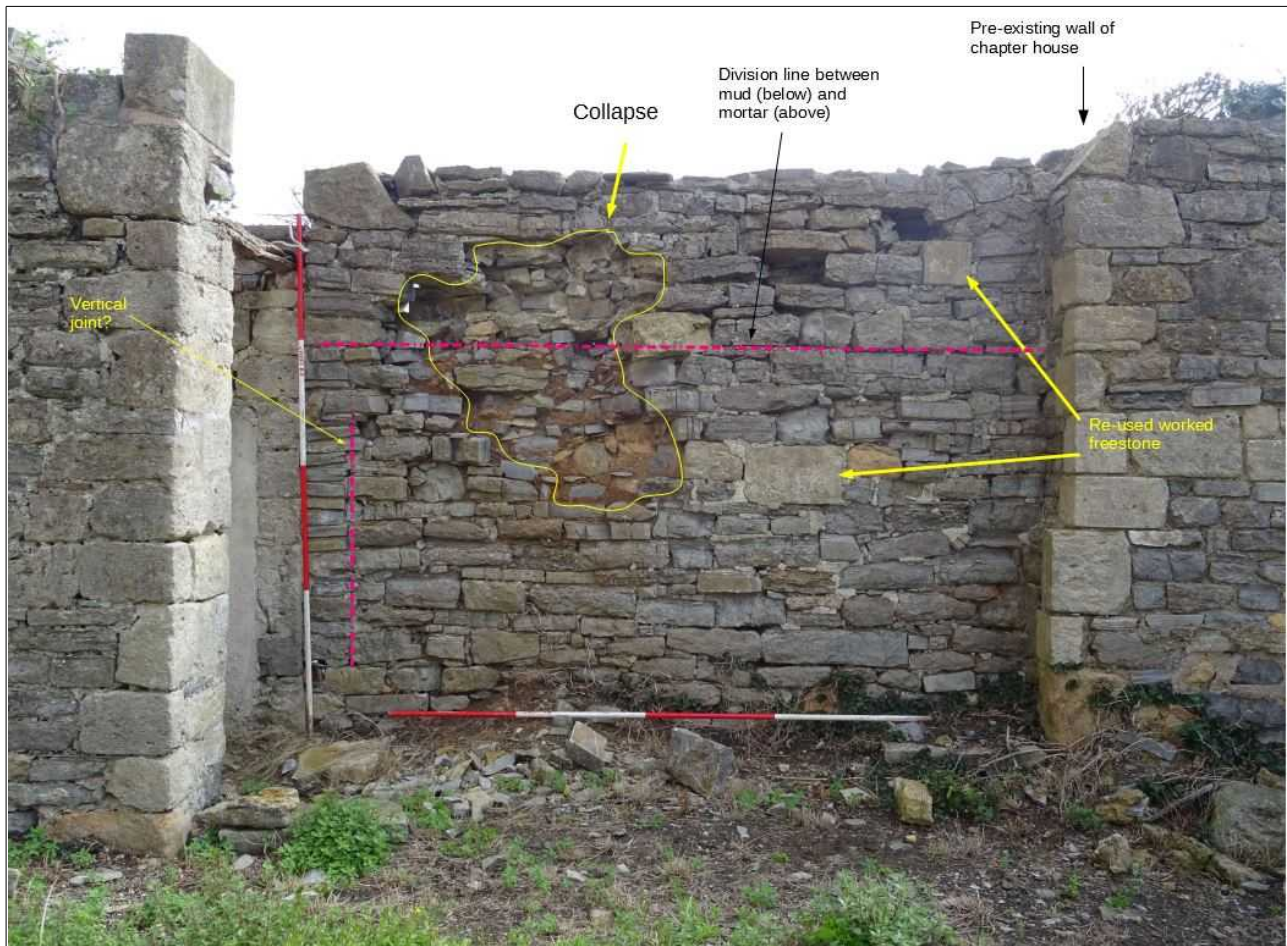


Fig 6: Analysis of wall and collapse

The second wall

Cracks in this wall corner were already evident in 2013 (Fig 7)



Fig 7: Site of repair 2 from church tower, 2013

The alarming crack on both sides of the corner were beginning to cause serious fears of collapse by 2020, and a programme of controlled demolition and rebuilding of the corner, including internal steel clamps to prevent recurrence of the problem was agreed.

The demolition (entirely by hand) was to remove the corner loose stones back to solid surface, and prop this until the corner could be rebuilt.

Evidence during the demolition revealed that root and water penetration had largely washed away the mortar from the top 1.5m of the wall, leaving loose stones in a matrix of dry brown dust, which could be picked out by hand.

The stonemasons made a rough tracing of the stones in their current positions, so they could be replaced as closely as possible to the present arrangement.

The wall in general is a coursed and random rubble structure, largely of Blue Lias, with the use of freestone quoins, but also including small amounts of Pennant Sandstone. The wall has been repointed so thoroughly that nothing of the original mortar can be seen.



Fig 8: Repair 2 site, section east-facing, August 2020



Fig 9: Repair 2 site, north-facing section, August 2020

It was clear the wall had a complex history. Buckler's drawing of 1829 shows it as much lower (Fig 10 below): assuming this is not artistic licence to make features of the church and farmhouse visible, the wall has at some point been raised by at least a metre. Buckler's drawings are meticulous and correct: his interest in the site led to his being the architect for its restoration in the 1820s and 1830s.



Fig 9: Buckler's drawing of 1829, showing a much lower wall at the site of repair 2 than today

The demolition began by propping of the lower part of the wall to prevent collapse during demolition, and a more and more complex succession of internal props to hold the sound pieces of wall until the rebuilding.

All freestone recovered from the wall was checked for signs of previous working, and a number of fragments were identified (see below). Much of the Lias, especially the internal rubble, was fractured into small pieces and not reusable.

Two iron plant-support spikes were found in demolishing the wall; these were hand-made, and may have been 19th century in date.

The corner of the walls was demolished completely to ground level, and the rest back to sound structure before rebuilding (Fig 10).



Fig 10: Increasingly complex propping as demolition proceeds



Fig 11: Section of ovolo-moulded widow column, with sloping sill (approximately 45cm long)

Several small pieces of previously worked Dundry freestone were recovered: a fragment of door upright with a *cyma reversa* moulding 30cm in length; two other fragments with similar moulding, also approx 30cm long (none fitting together); a complex fragment of what appears to be part of a carved widow (see Fig 11 above), a flat section of stone with a rebate in one side (possibly a column base? (see Fig 12), and finally, at the base of the wall a corner of a Tudor freestone fireplace (see Fig 13, and discussed below).



Fig 12: Freestone block with rebate: possibly a column base or plain corbel: re-used in wall as quoin. Length 45cm.



Fig 13: Upper right corner of Tudor fireplace, with quatrefoil settings, corner vegetative spandrel and apparent 4-centred mouldings. Re-used as lowest quoin in the corner of the wall, where it can be clearly seen in Figs 8 and 9

Apart from the stone in Fig 11 and this stone, all other freestone was either undecorated quoin, or used as fill in the centre of the wall.

In wooden analogues of this carving, it is usual to assign a 16th century date (which seems logical given the subjects).

The left-hand complete quatrefoil seems to have a central feature, perhaps converting this (when painted) into a fashionable white and red Tudor Rose.

The stone is very worn, and may have been exposed to the weather, or even adapted for a different use subsequent to being a fireplace, as its back has been chiselled hollow (see Fig 17), possibly for use as a surface drain.

The stone is a maximum of 58cm across, 43cm high and 28cm deep. Some mortar is retained in the photographs, because (ironically) this was concrete hard and was deliberately not removed for fear of damaging the stone further.



Fig 14: Spandrel carving at lower right of stone (2cm scale)



Fig 15: Two complete quatrefoils, with evidence for other structures in their centres.



Fig 17: Crudely hollowed out back face of stone.



Fig 18: Close-up of quatrefoils and damage to face of stone

The quatrefoils have deep hollows with flared rims: could these have held affixes? There seems from the faint marks on the lower edge of the face, some attempt to either mutilate the stone, or possibly, to prepare it for plastering over.

This is (or was) a high-status object. Several grand manor houses on Mendip (for instance, Manor Farm at Charterhouse on Mendip, or Moat Farm at Ubley gained new grand fireplaces with elaborate carving in the mid-16th century (Jamieson 2015).

I am not aware of any local exact parallels to this fireplace.

Speculation as to where it was originally erected is somewhat pointless: it may have come from Woodspring itself (there were many major changes in the 16th centuries with first the St Loe, and then (in 1566) the Carre families owning the site) with the adaption to a private residence.

The finished repairs

Wall 1



Fig 19: Wall 1 repaired

As expected, the finished result at this site has restored it to the condition seen in 2012 (Fig 4 above), although the difference between the two mortars seen in August 2020 is no longer visible.

The detailed examination of the walls to the east of the cloister seems to show little medieval material remaining: it is intended to carry out detailed rectified photographic recording and mortar analysis in the winter to test this suggestion.

Wall 2



Fig 20: Wall 2 east-facing section repair



Fig 21: Wall 2 north-facing section repair (the spots of light are due to reflection from the farmhouse windows)

Comments

This project has been very successful not just from a curatorial point of view, but the exercise has revealed significant re-use of carved stone in the walls around the garden and cloister.

The surviving walls at Woodspring clearly have long and complicated histories, as the map of 1768 shows (Fig 22 below)

A moment's inspection shows immediately that (for example) the E-W wall running from the infirmary building to the external wall on the west, along the south of both the cloister and the garden, butts up to both the infirmary building and to the external wall (and it also contains fragments of re-used carved freestone. There is also insufficient room for the stair in the south-west corner of the cloister to be complete.

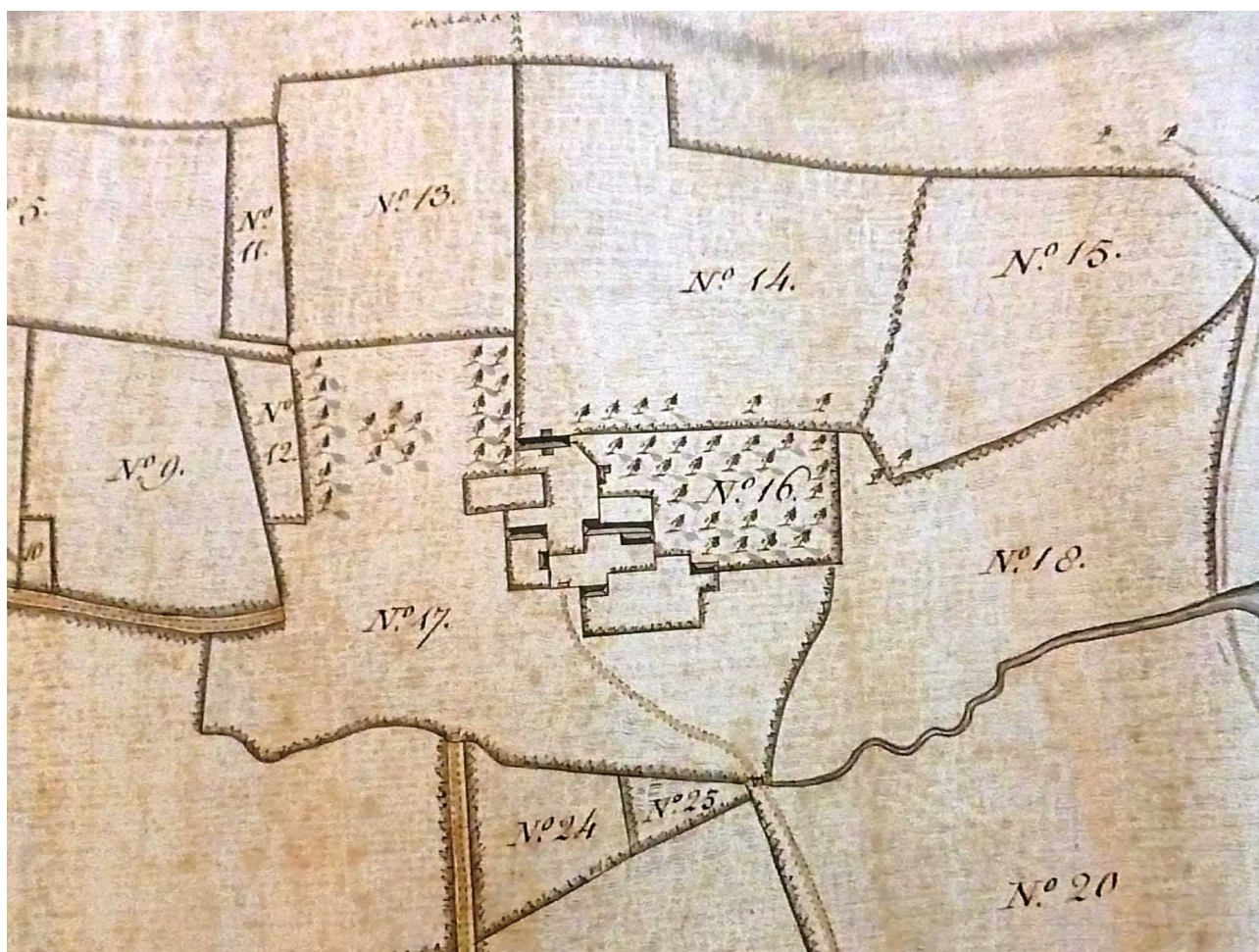


Fig 22: 1768 Pigott map of Woodspring, showing very different wall-lines to those present today.

Some further thought will need to be given to the understanding of this.

Recommendations for further work

Sufficient overlapping photographs were taken of the stone fireplace to at some stage create a software 3D reconstruction. These will be stored in the YCCCART archive until required.

References

Jamieson, E. 2015	<i>The Historic Landscape of the Mendip Hills</i> , Historic England
Tomalin, D. & Crook, C. 2007	A guide to Woodspring Priory, Landmark Trust

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Date

2020-09-16