

Going Down the Drain; the story of the Marks Hall excavations

John Mallinson, CAG

19 October 2015

Report by Carole Colbron

John talked about the CAG excavations at Marks Hall Estate, 2011 - 2014. A lot of holes were dug in the four years!

On the A120 north of Coggeshall, the Marks Hall Estate is beautiful and includes woods with snowdrops. It had been owned by Thomas Phillips Price from the end of the nineteenth century until his death in 1932. In his will the estate, a lot of which was deer park, was left to his wife during her lifetime, after which it was to be given to "the nation". In 1969, the Trustees of Marks Hall Estate took over and there is now a visitor map of the site.

In preliminary research Google mapping was used together with Morant's 1763 records which note that in 1562 the land had been sold to John Cole and in 1605 Robert Honywood began to create the house. In 1942 the estate had been occupied by the Air Force. Unfortunately the house was demolished in 1950. Luckily, however, Country Life Magazine had visited and published articles in 1902 and 1923. Most photographs were taken inside but a sketch of the ground-floor plan proved most useful for locating walls and working. At the back buildings still exist, including the coach house and cottages.

The excavation objectives were to confirm map evidence. As the land had been covered with three feet of topsoil to grow sugar beet, this had to be removed first. A digger was used for this and the rubble was hand dug. There was no stratigraphy and only at depth was anything found - three cellars up to two metres and a bay window. Drains were found in abundance outside the footprint of the building so the Tudor drains were tapped into. Some were box drains with tiles or slabs on top. One drain was created from previously worked limestone. The floor was cut by a drain. In the kitchen area, the drains were barrel vaulted.

Findings were:- Medieval remains of a hearth. Flint foundations for supporting wooden sill beams. Ditch contents were early 12th century to early 15th century. Medieval Hall with hearth and screen. Pottery dating back to at least 1200. Crushed brick foundations. Tudor hearth. Tudor brick foundations. Tudor over original former medieval hall with Tudor cellar stairwell and walls. Tudor coin under floor.

Destruction rubble contents were no help with dating but included:- coins; medieval tokens; seal from neck of bottle. Most pottery was from the medieval ditch and included Hedingham ware pottery, green glaze, high status as well as some hand painted dated to about 1900, the time of Thomas Phillips Price. A lot of bottles were found, many with the Honywood seal, and one with the seal of Francis Husband of Stockton, 1723, who was a Quaker import/export merchant. Bricks included Tudor long, Jacobean and modern. A tangle of wire proved to be a bell-pull system; a boar tusk and remains of a WW1 mess tin were other finds. Although unconnected with the mansion, the star find from the medieval ditch was a Neolithic hand axe.

Oral history from 1938-45 records that items were auctioned off and there was plundering so there is no record where antiques ended up. Reportedly books and manuscripts were dumped in cellars.

A Tudor well four to five metres deep was found which the estate will utilise for watering the garden.

CAG excavations established 98% of outline and the position of the 1609 building was confirmed.

The group presented Marks Hall Trust with a plan which may be used to lay out shrubs as markers on the ground to create a visual impression.