

Assignment 3: Contextualise and Synthesise Data and Results

This essay makes specific reference to a historic building record made in 2019 by Cornwall Archaeological Unit (hereafter CAU). The results of this project have been contextualised within the South West England Archaeological Research Framework (hereafter SWARF) (2006) and the Historic England (hereafter HE) Research Agenda (2017).

Port Eliot in St Germans, Cornwall (Figure 1), is a large country house of 18th century appearance but with earlier origins incorporating the fabric of a medieval priory. The earliest part of the building dates to the 13th century and the site has been the home of the Eliot family since the 16th century when the priory buildings were converted into a house (Dudley et al 2020, p. 24). In the late 18th century the house was remodelled to the designs of an architect named John Johnson, and the external appearance of the house has been little altered since this remodelling, apart from the west elevation (Dudley et al 2020, p. 13). Designs were also put forward by Humphrey Repton in one of his red books however only the designs for the landscaping were taken up (Dudley et al 2020, p. 26). At the beginning of the 19th century the principal rooms of the house were designed and remodelled by renowned architect John Soane, and the house is a rare surviving example of his work. About 20 years after Soane's alterations a new west front and service wing were added to the building to the design of architect Henry Harrison (Dudley et al 2020, p. 13). Following damage from a water leak affecting three stories of rooms in the house, a historic building survey and watching brief were undertaken, recording the affected area before and during the restoration.



Figure 1 The front of Port Eliot, with the extent of the water damaged area indicated by the scaffolding © Cornwall Council.

The work contributes to one of the research questions in the “#conserve” theme of the HE (2017, p. 34) Research Agenda, which asks “How do we ensure the mitigation of harm to heritage assets from catastrophic threats and emergencies, such as fires, flooding, or structural failure?”. In this case the harm caused by the water damage was mitigated by undertaking high level recording of the surviving affected structure, as well as investigation into and presentation of original architectural plans and other drawings which were made in the early 19th century to show how specific parts of each room had been designed and used in the past (e.g. Dudley et al 2020, p. 53-55). A phased plan of the building was also created which showed the probable date of fabric within the building.

Research Aim 7 of the SWARF is to “increase and develop the recording of the built environment and improve the recording of archaeological collections and other information sources”. More specifically the aim states that recording buildings should “embrace recording evidence and analysis of current and active use of space”. The project took advantage of recording not only the physical evidence in the building but also recording and analysing the wealth of documentary evidence which survives and directly relates to the house. This included documents in the Cornwall Records Office (hereafter CRO, now renamed as the Archive and Cornish Studies Service, Kresen Kernow, hereafter ACSS) and those in the John Soane Museum archive in London (hereafter SJSN). The project developed the recording of the built environment by undertaking a Level 2/3 historic building record on a selected area of the house, affected by the works and a watching brief during opening up works in the same area. The watching brief made a record of the floor joists when floorboards were taken up, and a detailed phase plan of floorboards was created and published in the report (Dudley et al 2020, p. 195-196). Each room description took into account the current use of each space. These uses were

largely the same as each room's historic use, except, for example the Drawing Room (Room 9) which had previously been used as an eating room and a library (Dudley et al 2020, p. 34). The concept of recording and phasing the floor joists during the opening up of floorboards is unusual and could be considered innovative, and therefore can also be contextualised within Research Aim 15 of the SWARF: "Use innovative techniques and methodologies to ask sophisticated questions of Post-Medieval to Modern artefacts and buildings". This data collection certainly asked the sophisticated question of how the floor/ceilings were constructed, with the research identifying multiple phases of joists, beams and boards, and complex but accurate drawings were created of these structures (Dudley et al 2020, p. 89-90). This method of recording also contributes to the "#understand" theme of the HE Research Agenda (2017, p. 10). In particular to the research question "How can we better understand the scale and pace of change that affect the significance of historic town centres, individual buildings and open spaces?" (Historic England 2017, p. 10). The investigation into the floor joists revealed how and when the floor structure had been adapted throughout the centuries, with three specific phases being identified dating to the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries respectively (Dudley et al 2020, p. 40-41). This indicates the pace of change to the building, which seems to have undergone alteration every 100 years or so. The documentary and physical evidence also shows that the building underwent a series of significant changes during the 18th and 19th centuries, with it being altered by several architects.

The watching brief undertaken also involved the recording of an ornate plaster ceiling which was heavily damaged by the water leak. The composition of the ceiling was identified and recorded, revealing it to be constructed of a flexible brown earth, hair and lime base pressed into the laths, on top of which was placed a thick rigid white lime plaster with a lime wash over. This investigation into the make-up of the ceiling contributes to the "#conserve" theme of the HE (2017, p. 34) Research Agenda which asks "How can we identify building materials used and understand their performance, causes and rates of deterioration, and develop non-destructive techniques for assessing condition and diagnosing faults in building fabric and structures?". Unfortunately in this case the investigation was destructive because of the nature of the work being a restoration after damage, however the recording of the materials used helped inform the restoration and reinstatement of the ceiling. It was thought that the performance of the underlayer was to bond to the hot laid plaster surface on top (Dudley et al 2020, p. 40). The "#innovate" theme of the HE Research Agenda is also relevant to this part of the work, where it asks about the prioritisation of investigating "date, origin, function and degree of preservation" (Historic England 2017, p. 47) of materials, and which materials should be focussed on. In this case the choice of which materials to focus on was dictated by the damage to the structure, and although the exact date was not determined, the function was ascertained.

Research Aim 8 of the SWARF is to "utilise the survival of Medieval and later artefacts and buildings to their full extent". The aim states that it is important to take an "interdisciplinary approach in future research" which exploits "the survival of buildings, landscapes, artefacts, archives and the availability of oral testimony". The project analysed the surviving medieval fabric within the building, which is confined to the centre of the building on the ground and possibly first floor. The project concluded that the refectory range of the priory had been retained and incorporated into the existing building, with three 13th century lancet windows surviving within a wall in the basement (Dudley et al 2020, p. 28). Although not an urban site, the existence of these windows and walls can be placed within one of the "#understanding" questions in the HE (2017, p. 10) Research Agenda, which is to understand "how much unrecognised medieval building form and fabric is hidden within later redevelopment of structures in historic towns?". In this case there appears to be a significant survival of hidden fabric of the walls within the basement/ground floor, as evidenced by the windows but also by wall thicknesses.

The project made use of specific archival resources to inform the work, such as entries from Lord Eliot's Account Book titled "Materials delivered by Mr Jebell in 1805 and Mr Chubb between 1805-6" (*Lord Eliot's Account Book* 1805-1806), which were held at the John Soane Museum. These documents detailed the specific materials and quantities used in the alterations made to the house by John Soane. This included the bricks used in the work, plaster, lead, oils, pigments, windows etc. and also detailed work undertaken such as the insertion of windows (Dudey et al 2020, p. 95-96). The documents were utilised to their full extent to inform the analysis of the building and furthered the understanding of the later alterations to the structure. The interrogation of these documents contributed to the "#diversify" theme of the HE (2017, p. 22) Research Agenda, which seeks to understand "the influence of individual tradespeople (for example builders, gardeners and craft workers) on the historic environment". The documents state clearly what work a local tradesperson, Mr Chubb, undertook in 1805 (*Lord Eliot's Account Book* 1805-1806 and Dudley et al 2020, p. 96), and the influence and impact he had on the building, such as inserting new plate glass windows, replacement of doors and painting of specific rooms. Personal correspondence between Humphrey Repton and John Soane were also exploited to greater the understanding of the building. These personal accounts reveal the opinions of Repton on the house's architecture, describing it as having "been made of no Character except that of Islington & Clapham where a pointed window of a notehead parapet is deem'd Gothic" (Repton 1804). A list of rooms was also consulted, which had been written down in 1742 (*List of rooms at Port Eliot*). These primary sources also contribute to Research Aim 9 of the SWARF which aims to look at social archaeology.

Reports of this nature and the data produced by the report usually contribute to Research Aim 12 of the SWARF: Improve access to, and synthesis of, "Grey Literature", as well as some of the research questions within the "#inform" theme of the HE (2020, p. 38) Research Agenda which asks how sharing of historic environment data and information can be better disseminated. However in this case this has not happened. The report should have been made publicly available via the ADS website, but at present there is no record in the ADS archive, and at the time, film photography was still being used by CAU and so only the negatives have been archived at the county archive (Archive and Cornish Studies Service, Kresen Kernow) and therefore require an appointment and visit to be made to find the images. Cornwall Council maintains an HER online mapping site where a record of reports are made, however at this time the report is not available via this website either, and in the meantime only a draft of the report can be accessed via the Cornwall Council Online Planning Register page (Cornwall Council 2019). This part of the project should contribute to the "#inform" theme in the HE Research Agenda as it provides very poor access to this heritage information (Historic England 2017, p. 38). The project does sit well within the subsection (12b) of the SWARF which states that "HERs provide a vital index into the growing amount of archaeological information". The aim states that HER coverage of Post-Medieval sites is uneven, however interrogation of the Cornwall Council mapping site (Cornwall Council 2024) shows that many post medieval sites are recorded, including sites which have no formal designation, and there are three records on the site of Port Eliot house and many other records in the surrounding gardens and priory. This site and project cannot be properly contextualised within Research Aim 56 of the SWARF: "Utilise surviving buildings and records to understand liturgical and social change in Post-Medieval to Modern places of worship and cemeteries". This is because the liturgical fabric within the building is medieval and the change that has taken place to the building in the Post-Medieval period was secular.

Bibliography

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