

EXCAVATIONS AT THE SITE OF A MEDIEVAL HALL-HOUSE AT NORTH CRAY

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INTRODUCTION

In *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvii (1972), 9–14, Mr. P. J. Tester published a detailed description of a medieval hall-house at North Cray which was removed in the interests of road widening in 1968. The following report summarizes the result of an excavation subsequently undertaken by the present writer on the site of this house which was known locally as 'Woodbine Cottage'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SCOPE OF THE EXCAVATION

The foundations of Woodbine Cottage were examined, except for an area close to the road. The ground within the existing boundaries of the site to the north and south of the house was investigated and showed evidence of occupation. The area to the east of the house showed only modern garden disturbance. The work was limited by the time available before the development of the site, and considerable difficulty was caused by frequent fly-tipping of rubble, soil and rubbish on the site.

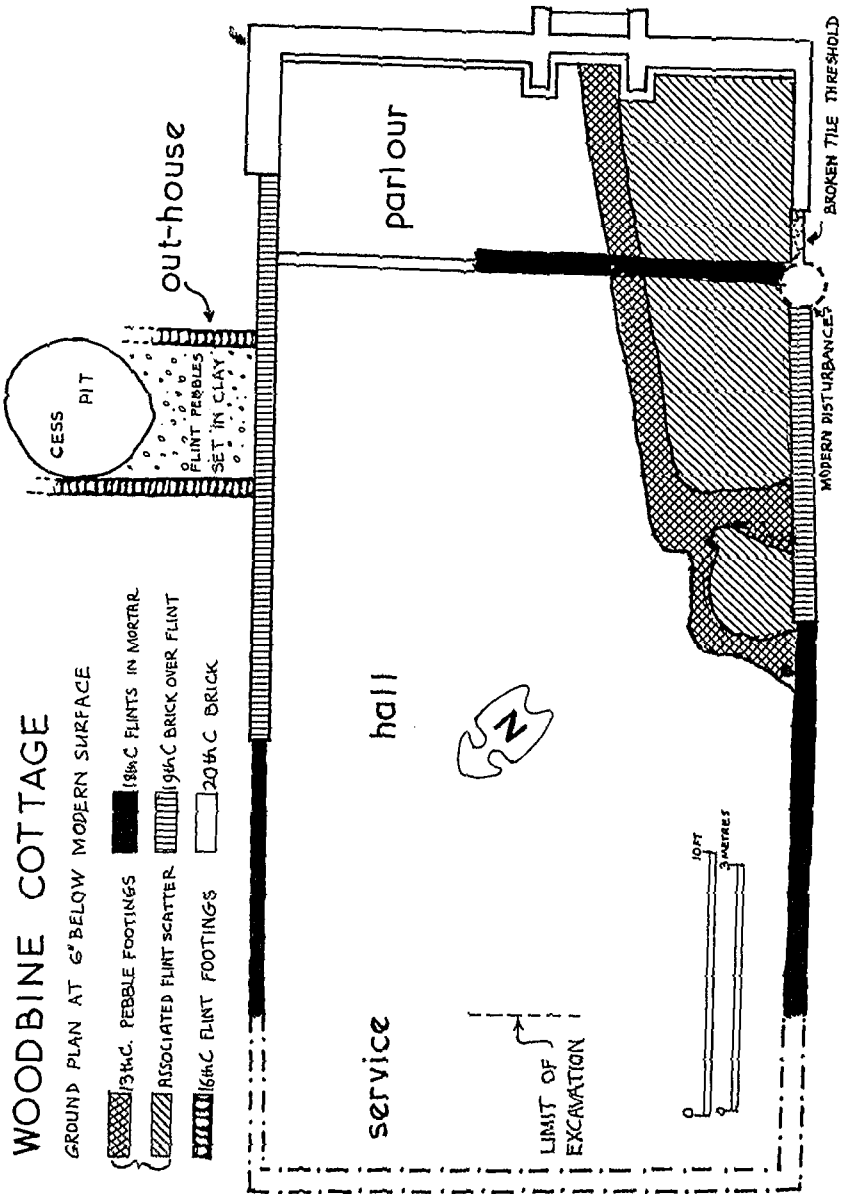


Fig. 1. Ground Plan of Woodbine Cottage.

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RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

Period I: c. 1250–1300

The earliest features on the site were connected with a rectangular building lying partly under the south-east part of Woodbine Cottage itself. The remains consisted of shallow foundations made up of medium-sized flint pebbles set into the surface of the yellow clay sub-soil. Originally, the foundations were at least three courses deep. The building was aligned approximately east–west; the north wall lay just south of the east–west centre line of the later cottage, the west wall lay close to the north–south centre line. The north-west corner of the early building and the parts of the west and north walls which lay within Woodbine Cottage had survived. The north wall was regular, but the west wall had a further spread of pebbles, which would seem to have been the foundations for a small out-house. With the pebbles were large quantities of mussel-shells, with a few cockle- and oyster-shells. Several plain tile fragments were found in the earliest deposits.

Associated with the early features were pot-sherds datable to the second half of the thirteenth century, and stray sherds of a similar date were found elsewhere on the site. It would seem reasonable to suggest that this earlier building was occupied *c.* 1250–1300. As with Woodbine Cottage, this earlier building seems to have faced towards the south as the majority of the stray sherds of this date were found to the south, with only a few to the north.

Period II: c. 1300–1400

The medieval pottery from the site falls into two distinct groups: the earlier consists of the sherds associated with the occupation during the second half of the thirteenth century. The later group contains sherds from *c.* 1400 onwards. It would seem that the site was abandoned for much of the fourteenth century. This was a period of widespread plague with a disruptive effect on medieval society; the break in occupation was probably connected with this.

During this period the pebble foundations and interior of the early building became covered with a shallow layer of topsoil. As seen elsewhere on the site, the original topsoil, when buried, becomes a soft brown loam, and here this brown soil had become mixed with the pottery and shell of the first occupation.

Period III: c. 1400–1575

At some time close to the start of the fifteenth century, the building, which became known as Woodbine Cottage, was built a little to the

north-west of the earlier building. Possibly the change in siting reflects the break in occupation in that knowledge of the site of the earlier building had been lost. The date of construction derived from the earliest pottery found after re-occupation agrees with the date derived from the architectural features of the building itself.¹ No trace remained of the original sleeper walls, and no medieval features were found outside the walls of the cottage.

The ground level within the building sloped down slightly towards the south. Probably in an attempt to level the floor, the topsoil was removed only from the higher (northern) part of the interior, the yellow subsoil then becoming the floor in this area. At the lower (southern) part, a thin layer of topsoil was allowed to remain; this overlay had preserved the earlier foundations and part of the interior of the first building. This situation remained much the same until c. 1575, a Nüremberg token of that date being the latest object found with the brown soil inside the house.

Period IV: Late sixteenth century

At about 1575 a layer of yellow clay with small chalk fragments was laid over the inside of the hall of the house, levelling and raising the floor, and covering the remains from the first building. Two farthings of Charles I were found in the upper part of the clay giving an indication that the floor was in use for at least a century or so. It seems probable that the floor remained in use up to the early nineteenth century.

At about the same time (i.e. mid- to late-sixteenth century) an out-house was built out from the rear (north) of the house; it contained an oval cess-pit, 6 ft. 6 in. × 6 ft.-wide, and 8 ft. deep. The walls to support the ground-cills were made of large flints set cross-wise in a little mortar and clay. There was a rough floor of broken flints on which lay a few items of early eighteenth-century date, possibly from the last use.

These improvements can be seen as part of one general scheme, which included the installation of a chimney, and the insertion of an upper floor in the hall.²

Period V: Mid-eighteenth century

At about the middle of the eighteenth century, a further series of improvements was undertaken. The original underpinning (if any) of the walls was withdrawn, and sleeper walls of flint and mortar inserted

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvii (1972), 12.

² *Ibid.*, lxxxvii (1972), 13.

from the outside. The foundation of the internal wall between the hall and the parlour was treated in a similar fashion. The wall at the north of the house was rebuilt in a straight line, that at the south was rebuilt on two alignments, which met at the point where the main truss had stood.

At the front (south) of the house, the ground originally fell away down a slight slope, with a lesser slope from east down to west. Both Woodbine Cottage and the earlier building had been sited at a point where the more or less level ground began to slope down. During the first four centuries of occupation a quantity of pot-sherds, metal objects, and brick rubble accumulated in the topsoil in front of the house. About 1740 nearly all this topsoil was stripped off. It seems possible that at least some of this material was used to fill the cess-pit noted above, which had now gone out of use. The date of the latest material in the filling of the pit dates to *c.* 1740, which is the date of the earliest material found in the deposits on the stripped surface. Not all the topsoil was removed, some remained in a strip along the front of the house, and some remained on the eastern margin of the area cleared. As inside the house, this buried topsoil became bleached out to a soft brown loam.

On the subsoil of yellow clay exposed by the stripping was laid a surface of rounded and broken flint with a little gravel. The point of this work was probably to improve the wet conditions at the lower part of the area. As the area is bounded by the road on the west side, an improvement in the road itself would have interfered with the normal drainage. In any case, the flint surface would have provided a safer, drier footing on the slope.

Over the next century or so a certain amount of soil and débris accumulated on the flint yard surface, particularly at the lowest corner at the south-west, which must have become quite messy.

As noted above, the cess-pit at the rear (north) of the house was filled-in at this time. The filling was the same soft brown loam seen in earlier deposits, and the finds range from early-medieval to eighteenth-century in date. This is consistent with the material, which would have been removed from the front (south) of the house. The sides of the pit showed no signs of staining or any lining. However, the fill included mortared brick rubble, which could have come from such a lining. There were tip-lines in the fill, but the filling was carried out at one time, the latest material being distributed throughout. The tip-lines showed that the walls of the out-house must have been removed by this date. The work associated with the underpinning of the north wall of the house had cut through the walls of the out-house. This had included the provision of a drip trench, which had been lined with fragments of plain tile.

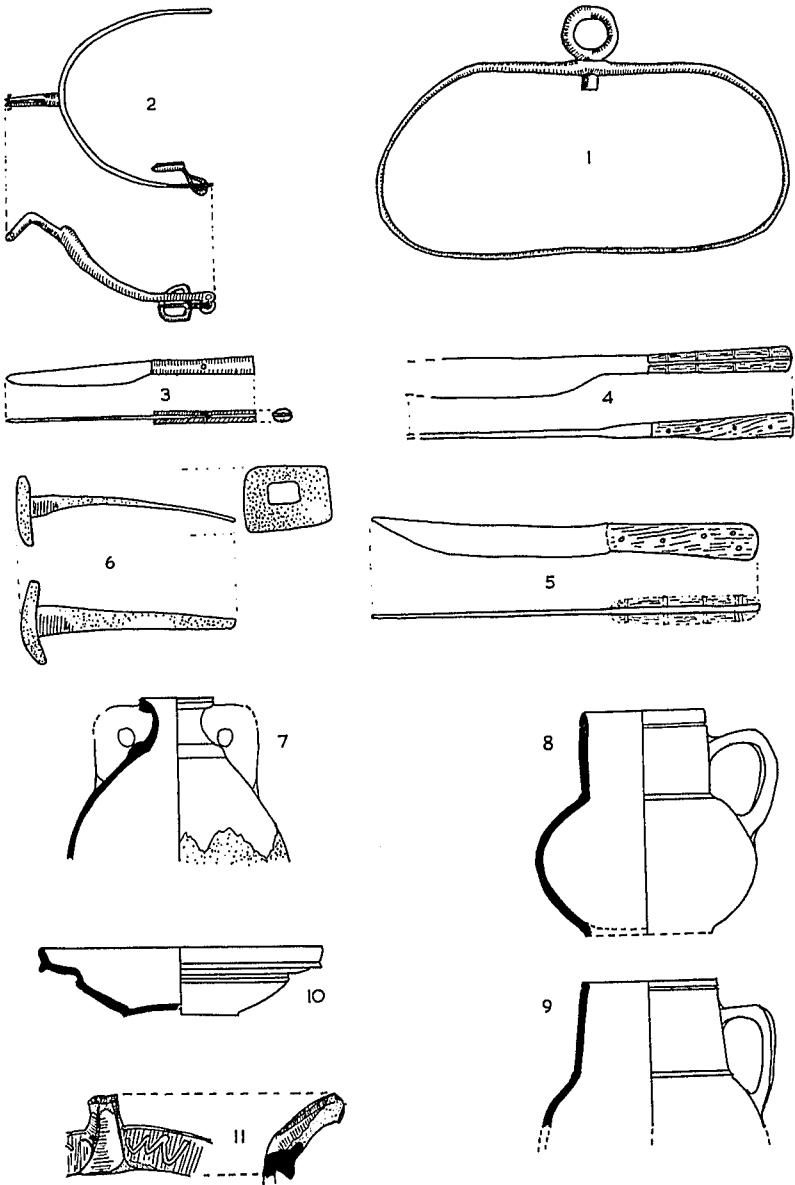


Fig. 2. Late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century Material from Woodbine Cottage (Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$).

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Against the east wall of the house a deep, steep-sided pit had been dug at this time. It was not possible to determine the full extent of the pit, but its fill was very similar to that in the cess-pit. It is difficult to see the purpose of a large pit so close to the house.

Period VI: The nineteenth century

During the early part of the nineteenth century a row of cottages was built to the north of the house. To the south, the area was made level by dumping earth and débris over the flint yard at its lower end. Within the house, cement and brick floors were laid, and a large cellar inserted at the western end.

FINDS FROM THE CESS-PIT

The material from the cess-pit at the rear of the hall-house contained several interesting items from the late-sixteenth, or early-seventeenth, century. Some of these are illustrated in Fig. 2:

1. Rowel spur, late-sixteenth century.
2. Purse frame, late-sixteenth century.
3. Knife, English, late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century, bone handle.
4. Knife, English, late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century, traces of wooden handle.
5. Knife, English, late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century, trace of wooden handle.
6. Large headed iron nail from a door, seventeenth century.
7. Part of a costrel, brick-red fabric with a grey core, dark-brown glaze over top third of vessel, sixteenth century.³
8. Small jug, light brick-red fabric, with light brown glaze containing small black flecks on the outside, late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century.
9. Jug, similar to 8, but larger, with a lighter brown glaze on the outside. Late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century.
10. Small plate, pale pink-buff fabric, with a pale yellow glaze on the inside, sixteenth century.
11. Fragment from chafing dish (?), brick-red fabric with wide grey core, outside has a pale-brown glaze, the upper surface has a speckled yellow glaze. Dutch slipware, sixteenth century.

³ This can be compared to the costrel neck illustrated in *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvii (1972), 172, Fig. 6, no. 65. The example from Woodbine Cottage has wheel-marks, which are in the same plane as the base, and has a more developed neck form than that of the reconstruction of the Hareplain costrel, which is some seventy-five years older.

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The finds and the records of the excavation have been passed to the Libraries and Museums Department of the London Borough of Bexley.

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