

Fowlescombe

Archaeological Notes



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Shilstone, Modbury, South Devon, PL21 0TW

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Site Description

The site, on the boundary of the parish of Ugborough is occupied by the remains of a large Tudor mansion and associated outbuildings. The house faces south east and is built into the bottom of a steep sided valley with walled gardens to the west and farm buildings to the east. A number of small springs feed the extensive landscape park and the remains of what appears to be a water garden consisting of a series of ponds within the trough of the valley.

The mansion is currently covered by dense vegetation which when combined with its ruinous state makes interpretation problematic (figure 1). The walled gardens are in a similar state as are the lower three ponds to the south west of the house. Most of the interpretations are thus based on limited structural features, similar examples and the evidence presented by many historic documents. The rest of the estate shows continued development particularly the farm buildings to the east of the house which remain in use. Since 1998 a major restoration project has been underway at Fowlescombe by the current owners with the help of their son, an architect.



Figure 1

Exterior (left) and interior (right) shots of the mansion covered by dense vegetation.

Site History

The mansion at Fowlescombe was built by Thomas Fowell (sometimes spelt Vowell) in 1537 although this is challenged by Estelle Holloway as being 1517(Holloway 1987: 30). Even so

it is thought the Fowell family had been resident at the site since before the Norman Conquest and by the C12 at the latest. It is likely therefore the mansion was built on the site of, or near an earlier dwelling, it is possible parts of the original building were incorporated into the mansion. Suggestions for earlier structures include a hall house with central hall and symmetrical projecting wings, these types of building were popular in England from the C13 but as yet no archaeological evidence at the site supports this notion.

Little is known about the actual development of the house, the Fowell family however are well documented which is helpful for determining potential periods of change at the property. In Ugborough Parish Church a C16 memorial brass for Elinor Fowell and gold leaf screen funded by Thomas Fowell both suggest a period of great wealth coinciding with the construction date of the mansion. Fowlescombe was the principle seat of the family for a further two centuries with other potential developments occurring after 1661 when they were made baronets.

Several generations of the Fowell family lived at and owned the Fowlescombe estate during this time, many of whom are recorded in chancery inquisitions. From 1692 the house was held by Fowell sisters in co-parcenary, one was married to George Parker of Boringdon Hall and the other to Champernowne of Dartington. In 1711 a partition occurred and Fowlescombe was brought under the sole ownership of Margaret, wife of Champernowne. This branch of the Fowell family resided at Fowlescombe until the mid C18, in 1758 the son of Fowell and Champernowne sold the mansion in favour of his fathers' inheritance, Dartington.

The Fowlescombe estate was subsequently bought by a Mr Herbert, but his son George is said to have disposed of it to the King family fairly soon after inheriting. The exact date of exchange is unknown but the Herbert family were still resident in 1765 when Herbert Esq., was listed as proprietor in Benjamin Donn's map of Devon.

It is understood during the late C18 and early C19 at least three generations of the King family occupied the mansion and made considerable agricultural improvements to the estate. The last of the family, John borrowed large amounts of money from Servington Savery for which he mortgaged his life interest in Fowlescombe for approximately £10 000. Failure to repay the loan resulted in the loss of the estate to the Modbury based solicitor in 1839.

John King regained Fowlescombe from Servington Savery in 1856 following a legal battle at chancery court. It is believed some features including a Jacobean staircase, panelling and a turret clock had already been removed by Savery. Nearly ten years later, King's finances had diminished and he could no longer afford the upkeep of Fowlescombe, the estate was put up for sale and was soon deserted. The mansion was no longer inhabited and along with some of the outbuildings began to fall into a state of disrepair.

It is understood Fowlescombe was bought by the Reverend Gordon Walters in 1890 but few records of this period survive. The two estate farms, Ladydown and Bolterscombe were then sold as separate lots at an auction in 1919; the empty mansion was sold as part of the Bolterscombe lot and bought by a Mr Reginald Nicholls.

In 1948 the ruinous mansion and outbuildings were sold again with Bolterscombe, the main dwelling of the estate to the Burden family. Mr and Mrs Barker then bought Bolterscombe Farm, now Fowlescombe Farm in 1998 and have been gradually restoring the buildings often using reclaimed material discarded on the site. The modern designs are intended to correspond to the original structures as far as possible and where practical.

Form

Beneath the vegetation, the remains of a large Tudor mansion with later additions can be found at Fowlescombe. The original building is thought to have been a hall house which with

later additions and extensions both in the east and west developed into a larger and imposing E-shaped mansion (Figure 2).

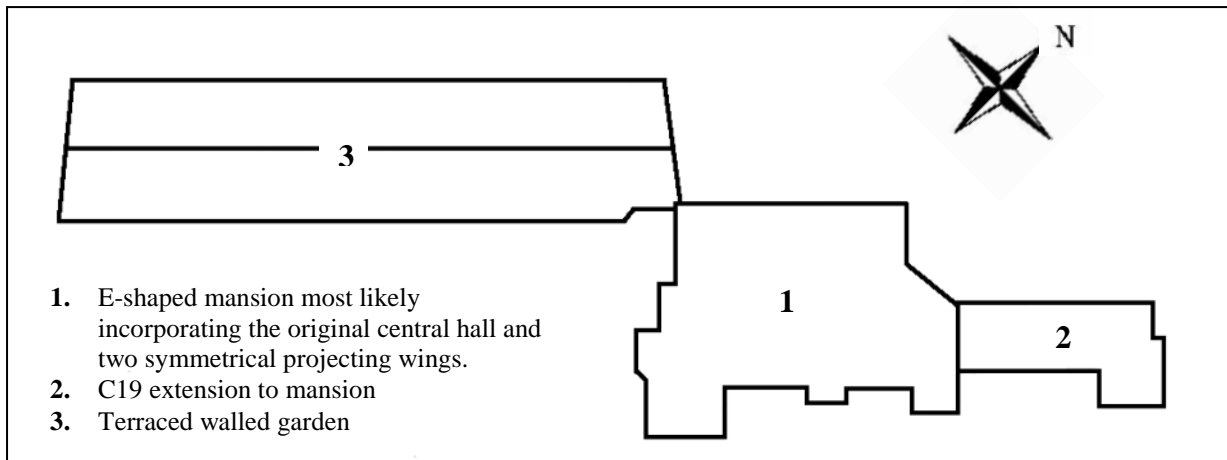


Figure 2:

Footprint of the house and walled garden at Fowlescombe as depicted on the 1880s Ordnance Survey Map.

A terraced walled garden abuts the house at the south western corner and is on an identical alignment to the mansion. The wider landscape contains evidence of former ponds at irregular intervals in the trough of the valley with connecting streams. These are crossed by a collection of simple, low lying slab walkways as well as more elaborate arched bridges.

Stone built agricultural buildings including the stable block survive to the north east of the house and have been heavily renovated in recent years for their own preservation. Other agricultural buildings within the estate have been completely replaced by modern barns. Two entrance lodges are present, one in the north east and one in the south west of the estate while kennels, quarries and cottages are located a distance from the house to the west.

A number of farmsteads belong to the estate including Ladydown and the farmhouse of Bolterscombe which is now known as Fowlescombe Farm. The deserted house and associated buildings remain in their landscape setting in the steep valley with natural springs and woodland.

House

The property is built of ashlar, a masonry made of large square cut stones that could be held together by thin mortar joints. Some parts of the building may be made of local stone and rendered with stucco, but this is uncertain without closer inspection. Standing two storeys

high, the current structure is approximately one hundred and fifty feet long. The mansion faces south east across two lawns separated by an off centre causeway. Based on photographic evidence most of the windows of this fortified mansion are square and mullioned and the doorways arched.

It is thought the original C16 building at Fowlescombe was in the style of a traditional hall house, with a courtyard mansion layout (figure 3). This erection possibly replaced an earlier, simpler dwelling. This was likely to have been the southern half of the property which is shown in the C19 print to have a pitched roof behind the later crenellations. The roof on the northern half of the property however, appears to be flat, its contrasting appearance would imply a different date. The nature of the building material used on the south end of the mansion would support this theory.

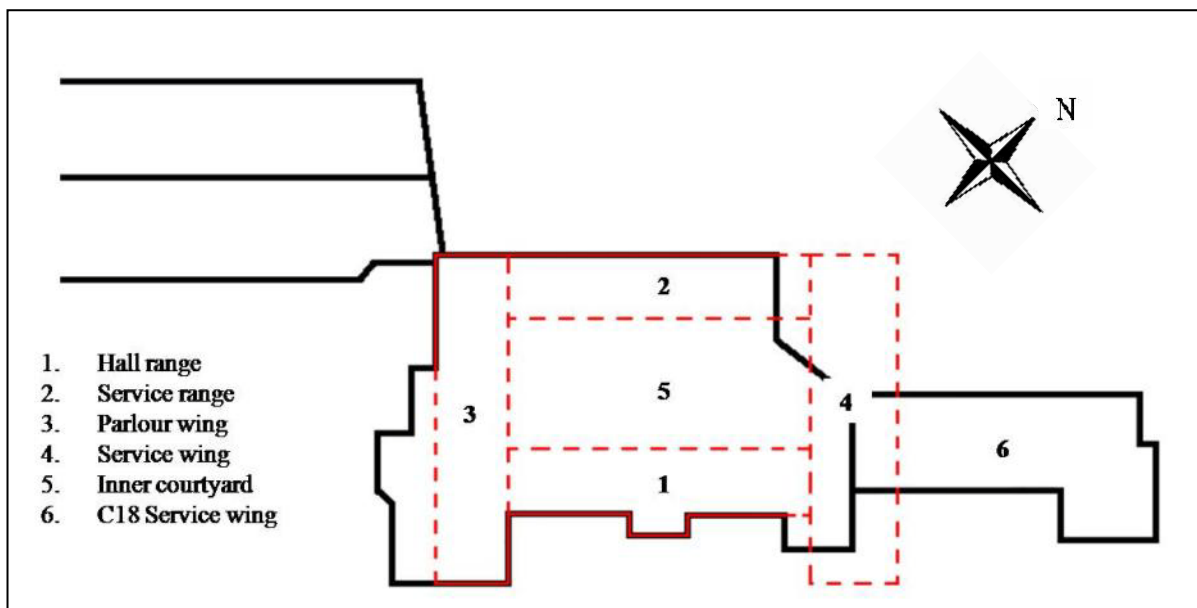


Figure 3

Possible layout of the 1537 house at Fowlescombe showing a central courtyard, hall range, service wings and parlour wing.

The date for this part of the building is given as 1537 due to this date and the initials of Thomas Fowell being engraved into a fireplace façade within the house. This seems to be a reasonable assumption as Thomas has long been credited with building the house in the C16. Of course it is important to note this date could just mark when alterations were made to an

existing building or even just when the fireplace was inserted. Previous interpretations choose to accept this date freely and there is no evidence to the contrary.

Other than what appears to be the initial phase of building, the chronological development of Fowlescombe is uncertain. Records show that in the mid C19 Servington Savery removed a Jacobean staircase from the house, if this is true there is no doubt it would have been inserted by the Fowell family in the early C17. Further alterations to the mansion are likely to have occurred in the late C17 when they were created baronets. There is a possibility the Fowell family were modifying the property throughout their two hundred and twenty year ownership.

The next major phase of development was at the end of the C18 under the ownership of the King family who are also credited with many agricultural improvements. The L-shaped wing was added to the north presumably as a service range for the rest of the mansion, at the same time it is possible the existing structure was truncated in the north to make room for the new wing. This would have established the elongated E-shaped mansion which still stands albeit hidden by vegetation. Other alterations were carried out to the southern end of the main wing including the addition of a porch.

As well as structural alterations during this period there were also changes to the external appearance of the mansion. Stucco hood mouldings were added to many of the windows and would have given an impression of C16 /17 décor to the mansion. The late C18 / early C19 also saw a revival in gothic architecture such as the addition of crenellations to some buildings including Fowlescombe. These would have been decorative rather than functional and seen as a status symbol which would have created a masterful impression on any visitors.

The final phase of Fowlescombe was its desertion in the mid C19.

Gardens

The walled garden is cut into the hillside to the south west of the house and stretches approximately two hundred and twenty feet (Figure 4). The garden contains two parallel

terraces set behind the house but abutting its south west corner. The top terrace is backed by a high wall which steps down with the natural contours of the valley. Both levels of the garden are approximately twenty five feet wide and separated by a retaining wall. The bottom level is also supported by a retaining wall. There is a doorway on the north and south end of both levels. Built from similar material to that of the stable block, it is likely both are of late C17 date.

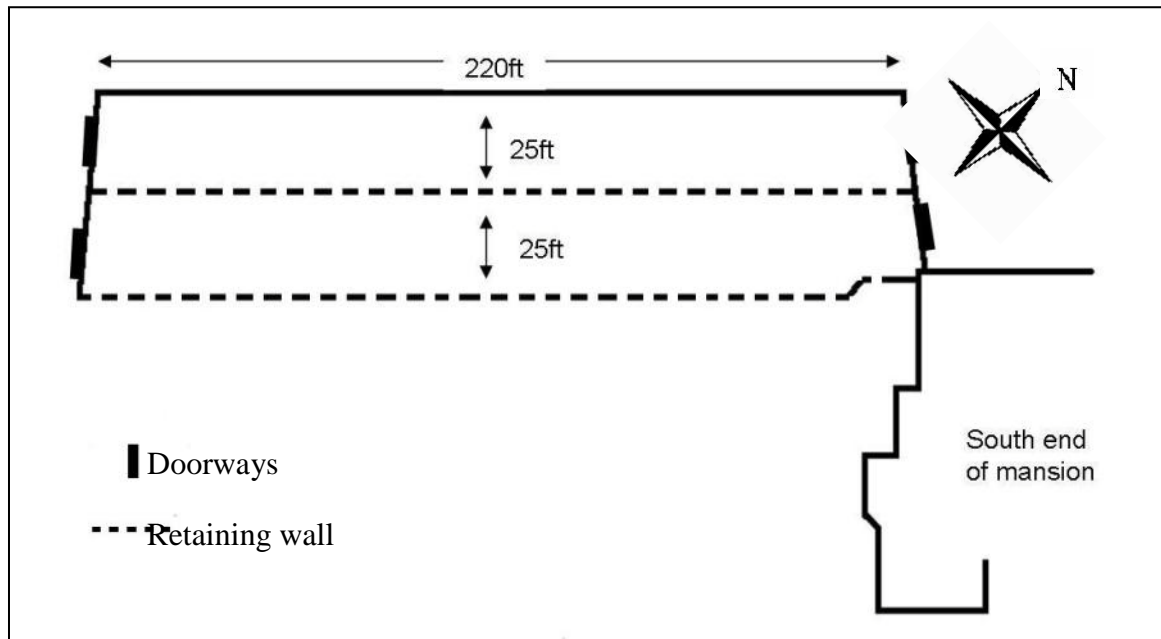


Figure 4:
Plan of the walled garden

The position of the garden would have enabled the sun to enter throughout the day. It has been suggested vines were grown within the perimeter of the garden a plant that would have thrived with the continuous presence of the sun in the growing season.

A kitchen garden is shown adjacent to the south end of the walled garden on the 1842 tithe map and apportionment.

Landscape Park

Directly in front of the house would have been the main lawn, separated from another lawn by an off-centre causeway which joins the main drive. At the convergence the causeway

takes the form of a large, late C18 bridge over two large and roughly square ponds. The southern pond is supported by a retaining wall which is interrupted by sluice gates to control the volume and flow of water down the valley. These features are fed by a number of natural springs throughout the estate.

A further three ponds are situated at intervals in the trough of the valley and are fed by small streams from the top ponds (Figure 5). These could be ornamental, similar to those at nearby Shilstone which provide a rare example of an early C17 water garden. It is thought the series of terraced ponds there were laid out by Thomas Savery owner and garden designer in about 1689. There is no direct link between the properties but there was interaction between the Fowells and Saverys' at this time following a marriage. This might account for the similarity between the landscapes of the two houses.

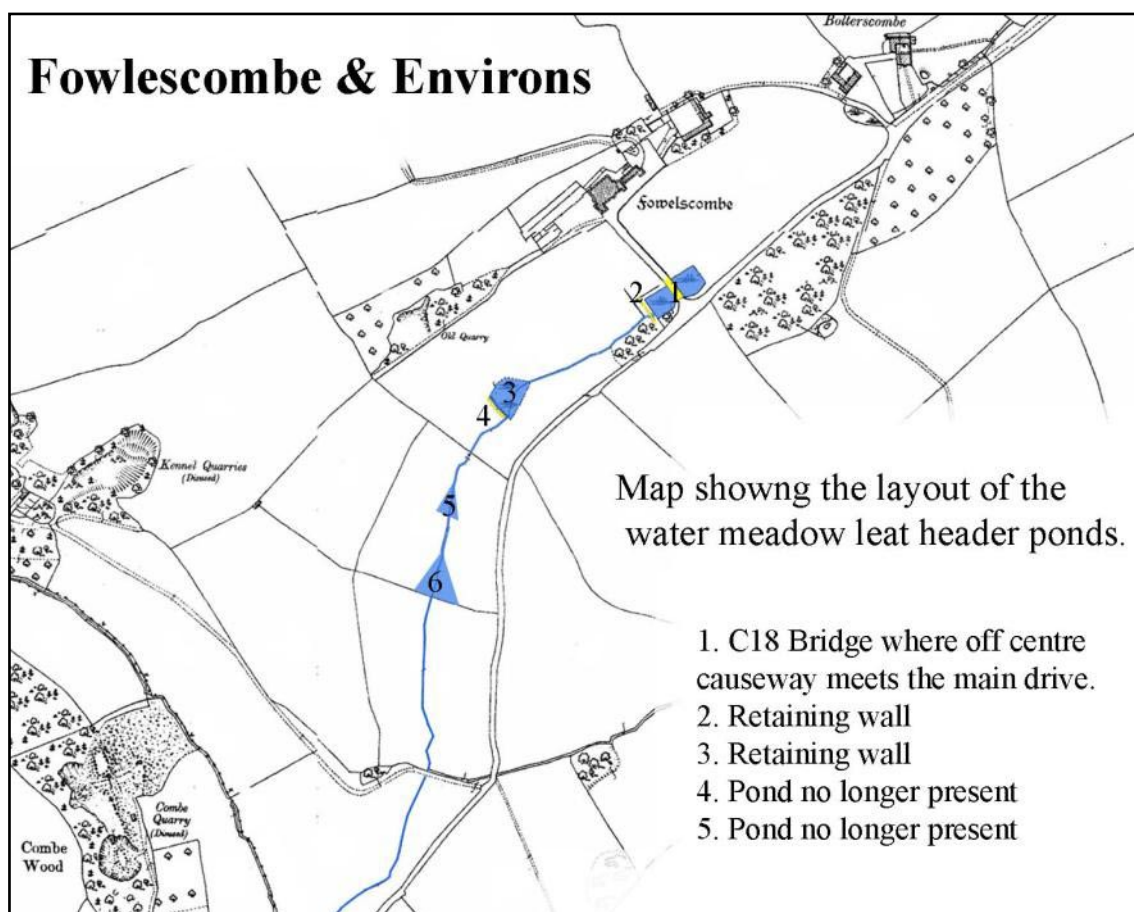


Figure 5

Even so it is unlikely these ponds were ornamental, it is probable they were water meadow leat header ponds created in the early C18, a theory supported by their simplistic design. The bottom two leat header ponds were present on the 1842 tithe map but were no longer clearly

defined on the Ordnance Survey map of 1880. Later maps show them to be boggy areas around a small stream.

Two bridges cross the stream further south, one is constructed merely of slabs laid in the stream whilst the other is an elaborate double arched structure.

A ha-ha is present in the south of the estate but no date has been ascertained for this feature.

A Holm oak avenue was planted along the drive probably some time in the C18 / C19 and is shown as mature in the 1905 Ordnance Survey map.

Farm Buildings

Stable Block

The stable block is to the north of the mansion and is thought to have been erected in the C17, possibly on the site of an earlier structure. The King family are understood to have made improvements to the structure in the C18. The 1842 Ugborough tithe map shows a large building centred round an internal courtyard which was cobbled. The 1880s Ordnance Survey map shows the courtyard to only be enclosed on two sides, the south and east, this layout seems to survive. This structure has been renovated in the last decade.

Other agricultural buildings on the estate such as a threshing barn and shippon were also likely to be C18 improvements of the King family but have since been replaced by modern structures.

Butterwell

The butterwell is another piece of evidence relating to the agricultural life of the site and would have provided a cool storage area for dairy products produced on the estate. The current structure has been rebuilt on the site of the original and is believed to be an exact replica in both material and design. The butterwell is built into the bottom of the south east facing slope below what was the shippon and behind the mansion. Built of stone and slate some of which is recycled material from the mansion, the butterwell is a substantial feature and has a large flat top and recess for storage. An internal channel, fed by one of the many springs on the site, runs through the structure and would have maintained a cool temperature. As none of the original butterwell remains in situ it is difficult to accurately date the structure but basing the information available on knowledge of developments at Fowlescombe it is likely to be late C18 to early C19. This date would coincide with other agricultural activity related to the King family.

Fowlescombe Lodge

The main lodge is situated at the north east tip of the estate adjacent to the road that connects the B3207 to the B32210. It appears to be of simple plan and most likely of late C18 or early

C19 date coinciding with other developments on the estate. Like many of the buildings on the site the lodge has been the focus of a restoration programme, before this it stood empty for thirty years.

At the southern most point of the Fowlescombe estate there is another ruinous and roofless building concealed by trees and adjacent to a public highway. It is most likely a small, one storey building with central fireplace and chimney stack and has commonly been identified as a second gatehouse or lodge. There is also a smaller building just north of this structure which is roughly square in plan.

It is necessary to highlight the structures resemblance to a toll house in its design which consists of three square sides and a semi-octagonal front. The bay front was a popular design for toll houses of the early C19 and would have provided the pikeman with a clear view of the road in both directions. The adjacent road is now rather inconspicuous but leads to the nearby town of Modbury, an important centre for wool in the Georgian period lasting from about 1714 to 1830. This time bracket appears to correspond to the probable erection of the building.

The abolition of tolls by an act of Parliament at the latter end of the century could account for the ruinous condition of the building as it would no longer have been necessary to maintain the building.

It is possible the structure merely emulates a popular and contemporary design as there is no documentary evidence to suggest otherwise. Even so, owing to the layout of the structure, its position on a main route to a prominent town and the given time period, the likelihood of it being used as a toll house should not be ruled out.

Phasing

(Shown on map overleaf)

- Pre C16 Possibly a small dwelling on the site although there is no archaeological evidence to support this.
The Fowell family from which the site took its name are thought to have been present before the Norman conquest.
Hall house possibly in place from as early as C13.
- C16 Large fortified Tudor mansion constructed by Sir Thomas Fowell in 1537.
Datestone added to fireplace
- C17 Staircase thought to have been added in what was possibly a great period of internal modifications.
1661 Fowell family created Baronets; their new status is reflected in the house and grounds with some additions made including the stable block and walled garden.
- C18 Existing building truncated in north and L-shaped service range added.
Southern end of existing mansion altered and porch added.
Various agricultural modifications.
Estate lodges erected.
Stucco hood mouldings added to windows.
Mansion castellated.
Date of Ha-Ha unknown but likely to be during the C18 (earliest in England = late C17).
Bridge constructed at end of causeway where it meets the main drive.
Ponds laid out
Holm oak avenue planted, 1905 OS map shows the trees to be mature.
- C19 Jacobean staircase, panelling and turret clock removed by

Servington Savery

House deserted around the mid C19 along with the lower lodge.

Sold with Bolterscombe to Mr Nicholls

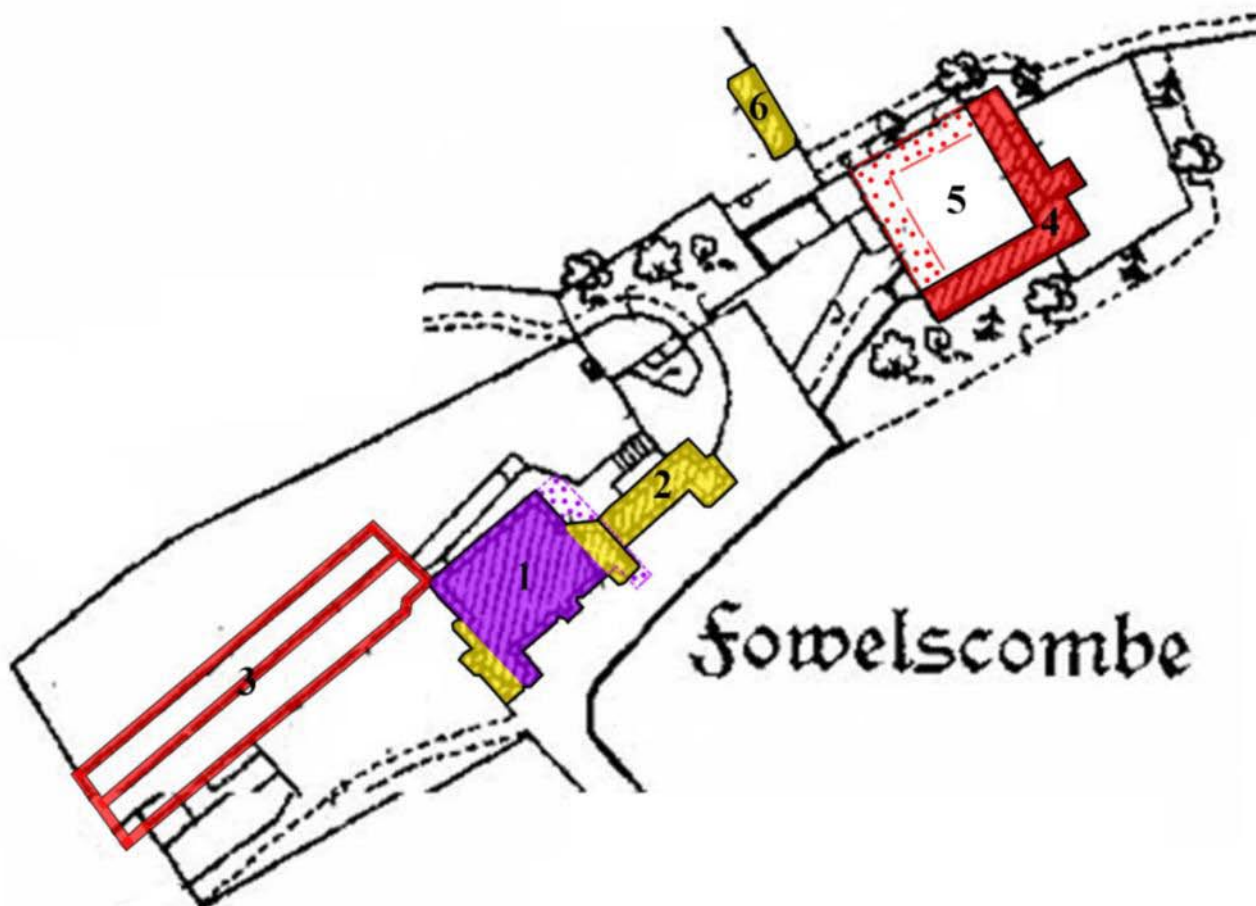
C20

Major restoration work undertaken from 1998 on the agricultural buildings and Bolterscombe / Fowlescombe Farm, the C16 house remains ruinous and covered in Ivy.

Fowlescombe

Initial Interpretation

Using the 1905 Ordnance Survey Map



Key



C16



C17



C18



No longer present

1. E-shaped mansion built round inner court
2. C18 Service wing
3. Terraced walled garden with internal retaining wall
4. Stable Block
5. Inner courtyard of stable block
6. Shippon

Conclusions

The site of the Fowlescombe mansion has an extensive and complex history stretching back to at least the C12 when the Fowell family are believed to have settled there. Even so documentary evidence for the development of the house is sparse as most references relate to its many owners and or occupants. In spite of this there is no doubt the Fowlescombe mansion is testament to multiple changes in fashion and use having been subjected to considerable alterations throughout its occupancy. The house is now in a ruinous condition and covered in vegetation, the evidence this conceals is likely to be an amalgamation of several periods.

The most datable part of the house is a C16 fireplace, inscribed with both the date of 1537 and the initials of Thomas Fowell. Much of the remains appear to be of C18 / 19 including the addition of the east wing and some ascetic changes to the building. The desertion of the house shortly after in the mid C19 was an unfortunate episode in the history of Fowlescombe and is responsible for its current ruinous and overgrown condition. To remove the vegetation at this stage would provide an opportunity for a full building survey to be carried out which would yield more information regarding the internal layout. Even so the removal of roots could threaten the stability of the building and therefore requires greater consideration.

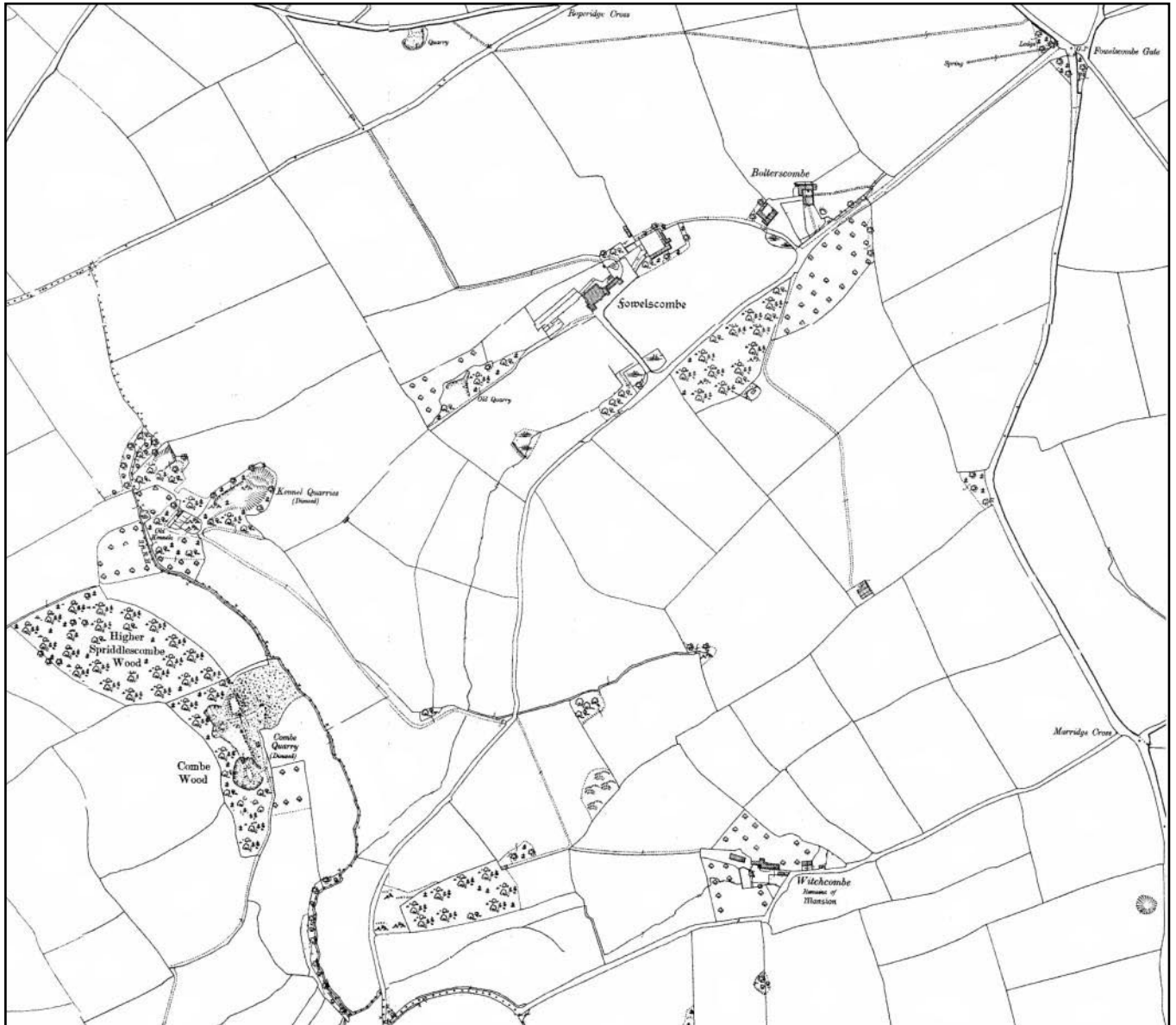
Appendix



Extract from the 1842 Ugborough tithe map.

The mansion can be seen in the centre and faces south east across. The eastern extension is already in place which supports the theory of a late C18 / early C19 addition.

The stable block to the east is completely enclosed at this time.



Extract from the 1905 Ordnance Survey map

Full extent of the Fowlescombe estate can be seen from the north lodge to the south lodge

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