

A Note on the Recording of a Fireplace in the Hall of Jesus College, Cambridge

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During preparations for refurbishment of the Jesus College Hall, several wooden panels were removed from the northeast corner of the room. At the request of the Domestic Bursar the CAU put in a team to record a large fireplace revealed in the north wall. The following note is a largely structural discussion based on that recording. Detailed historical implications will be examined in greater detail following further work in the rooms below the Hall, due to take place later in the year.

Phase I

The fireplace was situated in the long north wall of the Hall, immediately west of the 15th century oriel window in the northeast corner. The main build of the original fireplace was in clunch. Where undamaged this consisted of large dressed blocks, closely set in the structure of the fireplace itself, rather more roughly to either side. It is therefore quite possible that the surrounding plaster is associated with the original fireplace, being scored to give the impression of close set ashlar blocks. Traces of burnt ochre paint were visible on both plaster and fireplace. The fireplace measured 4.00m wide externally (3.50m internally) and, as observed, was 1.20m high. The floor level, however, is now significantly higher than it was originally (see Discussion below). Despite considerable damage it was clear that the clunch frame had been decorated. The sides showed the remains of protruding vertical spines, whilst the panels in the corners between the mantel and the sides bore deeply incised carving (A and B on the figure). Carving A was an abstract rosette design. Preserved within the deepest recesses of the carving were traces of bright mid-green paint, very similar in appearance to green pottery glaze. Carving B was much damaged and was difficult to identify. Enough survived, however, to determine that the pattern was different to that of A. There was no sign of a relief arch in the wall above the fireplace. With the stacks of the double chimney on either side and a window above the mantel such a structural feature may have been deemed unnecessary. However it is possible that one did exist and has since been obliterated by later disturbance, or was above the line of sight allowed by removal of the panels.

Phase IIa

Both sides of the original fireplace were infilled for about 0.50m with hand-made red bricks (average size 220mm long x 50mm high), set in a fine mortar. The purpose of this infilling may simply have been to narrow a fireplace considered too large. Towards the base, however, the bricking is stepped inwards, the purpose of this negative step is not immediately clear. One possibility is that the bricks were built so as to create an inglenook within the

body of the fireplace. Alternatively this may be part of a structural alteration to divert the chimney at the time at which the fireplace went out of use.

Phase IIb

The main body of the fireplace was infilled with poor quality red and yellow bricks (average size 220mm long x 70mm high). At the level which formerly marked the lower edge of the mantel a wooden strut was set in between two courses of bricks. The two courses above this strut infilled an area carved out from the mantel of the clunch fireplace. The infilling of the Phase IIa fireplace and the apparent association with the removal of stone from Phase I, suggests that Phase IIb marks the final decommissioning of the structure. It is probable that the mantel stones and carving on the clunch sides were removed at this stage to facilitate the fitting of the wooden panels. The poor quality of the Phase IIb bricks tends to suggest that they do not serve any structural role, and act only to fill in the open fireplace. If Phase IIa is a structural chimney diversion, then Phase IIb may well be contemporary with it.

Phase III

Above the fireplace was an area of very rough and irregular brick work. The bricks were roughly coursed in a coarse mortar. The mortar was squeezed out on the room side, giving the impression that building was from the other side, certainly that the brickwork was never intended to be seen. This may represent further structural alteration at the time of the decommissioning, or may be associated with later alteration to the window fabric (see below).

Discussion

The only published references to the fireplace so far noted occur in Willis and Clark (1886: 161), and in Gray and Brittain (1960: 67-68). "A large original fireplace, much mutilated, remains in the north wall behind the panel work" may suggest that Willis and Clark considered it to be an original feature of the nunnery phase but, as their main concern is with the form and fabric of the College, it is perhaps more probable that they considered it an original *College* feature. Gray and Brittain do not consider the origins of the fireplace, but rather its position at the centre of Hall life. The hearth was

"a place of much importance, if we may judge from the frequent references to it in the accounts For this fireplace the College set up a 'mantil-tree' and made 'doggs of our own stufte' in 1574. 'A pare of fyre-irons to burn sea-cole for y^e hall' was got in 1572 and bellows in 1600".

(1960: 67-68)

Two other fireplaces have been described in recent archaeological investigations, dated to the period of Alcock's adaptation and rebuilding

(Evans 1995). Both are much smaller than the one in the Hall, and not so highly decorated, being designed to heat individual rooms. They are, however, constructed from dressed clunch blocks, one showing extensive traces of red and ?blue paint (ibid.: 18). The similarity between the construction of the fireplaces tends to suggest that they are contemporary, although it is possible that, if the larger structure is earlier, it may have influenced the style of fireplaces elsewhere in the College.

One of the most significant elements in assessing the fireplace's period of use is the surrounding plaster. The faux ashlar scoring to the sides of the fireplace seems more probably associated with the College than the Convent. Although the plaster may be secondary and a Nunnery date for the structure is not out of the question, it seems more likely that the fireplace is associated with the early College period. In addition there was no trace of plaster over the infilling brickwork. This would tend to support the argument that the infilling was not a narrowing followed by a further period of use - bare brickwork in the Hall would have been unacceptable - but was related to the decommissioning and that this occurred at the time of the panelling (see below).

The Hall was panelled in 1703 (RCHM: 94). This probably gives a date for the suggested chimney diversion, removal of the protruding decoration and final infilling of the fireplace (Phases IIa and IIb). In 1801-2 the sills of the Hall's 15th century windows were lowered (ibid.: 93). Although it was not possible to assess the evidence of this activity below any of the other windows, it seems probable that the rough Phase III brickwork above the fireplace, if it is not related to the decommissioning, is associated with this later work. In 1875 a new wooden floor was laid 12" above the existing Ketton stone slabs and the 1703 panels were shortened (Willis & Clark 1886: 162). This would suggest that the original height of the fireplace was in the region of 2.00 to 2.10m to the top of the mantel.

Potential

Although the basic recording work on the fireplace has been completed, there is a potential for further research to be done. Much of the work carried out so far in the College has concentrated on the ecclesiastical side of the structural history. The fireplace provides an opportunity to examine domestic features and the arrangements within the Hall over time. How does the non-symmetrical positioning of the fireplace relate to the reported commonality of use of the Hall? Was a distinction ~~was~~ made between the importance of one end of the Hall to the other, or is the distinction now marked by the High Table platform a later development of the relationship between Fellows and scholars?

Suggested Phase Summary

Phase	Date
I	Early College
IIa	1703
IIb	1703
III	1801-2

References

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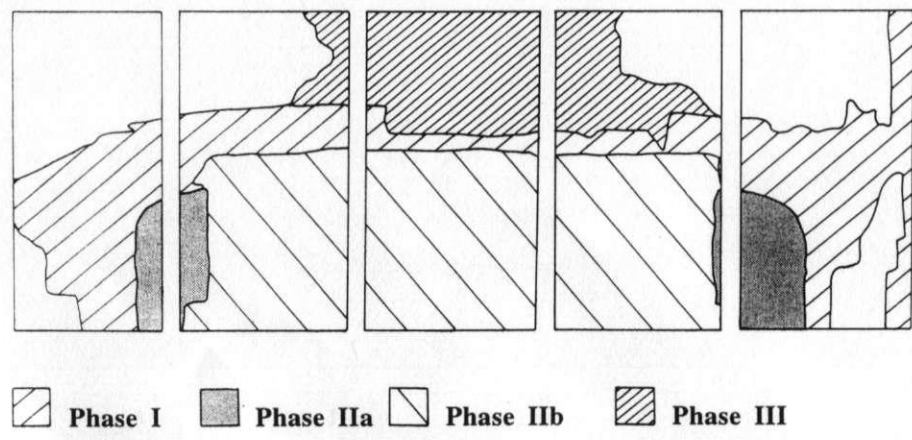
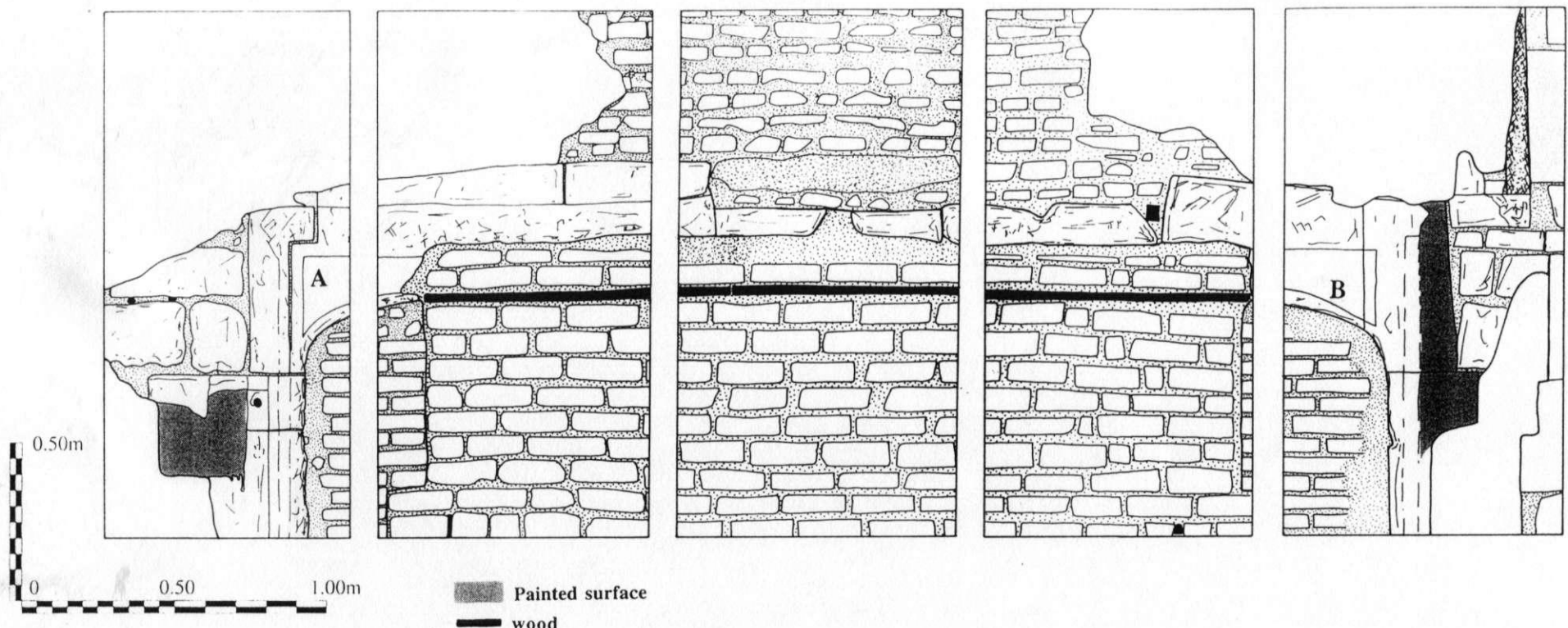
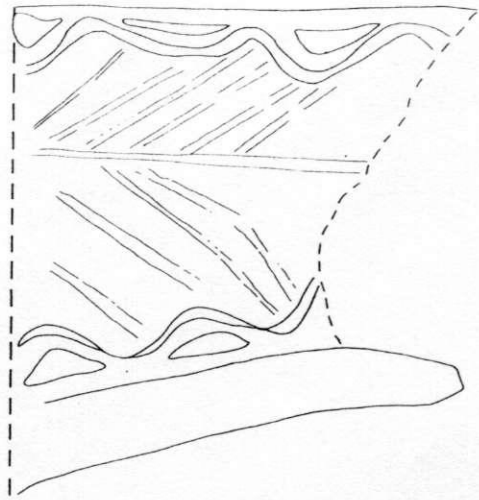
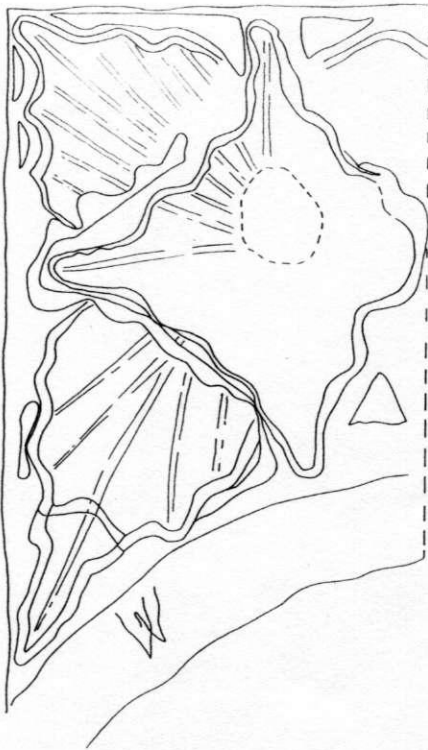


Figure 1 The Jesus College Hall fireplace

A



B



Figure 2a Details of carving on the western side of the fireplace
2b Graffiti below the eastern carving