

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*Nantclwyd House, Ruthin
Denbighshire*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



CPAT Report No 766

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Report for Denbighshire County Council

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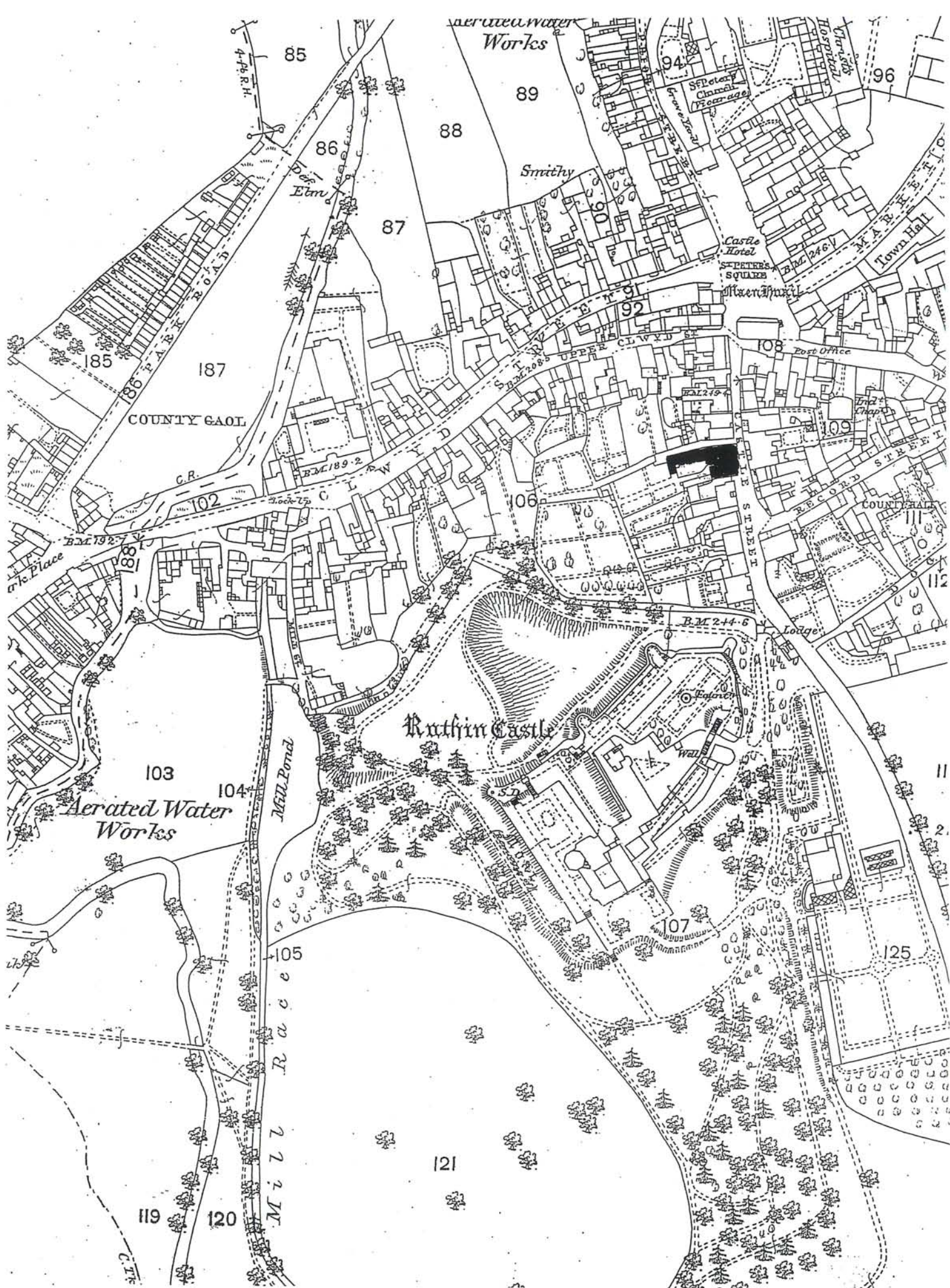


Fig. 1 Ruthin town centre showing the location of Nantclwyd House, based on the 1st edition of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Nantclwyd House (SJ 1236 5818), one of the most historic houses in Ruthin, lies on the west side of Castle Street, one of the streets running off the market square, southwards to the castle (Fig 1).
- 1.2 It was originally constructed as a three-unit hall house and had its long axis aligned with the street from north to south. Its construction is now put somewhere around the year 1500, although there is documentary evidence identifying the owners of the property as a whole in the 15th century (Morriss 2002). In the intervening six centuries the building has undergone considerable modifications that included the addition of a front wing and porch, and a range of rooms at the rear of the building, so that the main axis now appears in plan to be east to west.
- 1.3 In recent years the house has undergone considerable if intermittent restoration, led by the local authority (initially Clwyd County Council and now Denbighshire County Council), who are the owners of the site.
- 1.4 In 1991 as part of the restoration process the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) excavated and recorded the archaeological deposits beneath the floor of the south parlour. Most of the earlier floor levels and general stratigraphy had been removed when the existing wooden floor had been inserted, but a line of post holes appeared to belong to a structure or building that pre-dated the hall-house (Brassil *et al* 1991).
- 1.5 In 2002, the well-known building historian, Richard K Morriss, was commissioned to produce an architectural and archaeological assessment of the development of the building (Morriss 2002), and at the same time its documentary history was researched by the former Clwyd County Archivist, Chris Williams (2002).
- 1.6 In January 2005, Donald Insall Associates Ltd of Shrewsbury invited CPAT to tender for a watching brief during further conservation work at Nantclwyd House. A brief had been prepared by the Denbighshire Archaeological Service (part of the County Council's Countryside Service) in the same month which identified the archaeological works to be undertaken, namely to monitor all ground works within the development area, and to preserve, by record, any archaeological remains revealed during the work.
- 1.7 The programme of conservation work on Nantclwyd House was scheduled to take place over a period of at least twelve months, and it was clearly impracticable as well as uneconomic to maintain an archaeological presence on site throughout that period, particularly as groundworks were likely to occur over relatively short periods during the overall works programme.
- 1.8 In practice, it was agreed with the on-site contractors, Chester Masonry Group, that they would alert CPAT when groundworks were due to start, in order that an archaeologist could be present, and the system worked reasonably well, although some minor groundworks did take place without archaeological supervision, notably external drainage works in the rear courtyard or garden.
- 1.9 The archaeological work that was undertaken was: a) a watching brief on ground disturbance in the alleyway that runs along the north side of Nantclwyd House; b) a record of the roof truss(es) in the hall (at the request of Donald Insall Associates); and c) observation of the large wall edging the south side of the garden at the rear of the property. In addition, the county archaeologist, Mrs F Gale undertook an emergency watching brief when an internal floor was lifted in mid-January before CPAT had been appointed as archaeological contractors.



Fig. 2 Plan of Nantclwyd House indicating position of watching briefs

- 1.10 The full photographic record is included on a CD at the back of this report. A catalogue of the photographs is also included on the CD.

2 **The Watching Brief (Fig 2)**

The Alleyway

- 2.1 Excavations took place in late January along the alleyway that runs beside the northern front of Nantclwyd House. Initially, a rectangular pit, 1.9m north to south by 1.3m east to west was dug by machine, and this was subsequently extended in length to 5.45m with a variable width. The approximate centre point of the trench lay at SJ 12351 58191.
- 2.2 The uppermost material, tarmac (60mm deep), overlay a cobbled surface (90-150mm deep) which extended over all of the excavated area, except where relatively recent services had been put in. It seems likely that this cobbled surface extended over the full width of the alley.
- 2.3 There had been considerable disturbance by services at lower levels (Fig. 3). Where undisturbed the natural subsoil was a brick-red sand, as elsewhere in Ruthin. Occasional 'plates' of red sandstone hinted at the bedrock lower down. In addition to the backfilled service trenches, one or possibly two features were identified.



Fig. 3. Typical levels of disturbance in the alleyway on the north side of Nantclwyd House.

- 2.4 Feature 1, so disturbed by service trenches that it was impossible to gauge its extent, was at least 1.6m long and dropped to 1.05m below the modern ground surface. The matrix of grey-

- 2.4 Feature 1, so disturbed by service trenches that it was impossible to gauge its extent, was at least 1.6m long and dropped to 1.05m below the modern ground surface. The matrix of grey-brown silt contained lumps of cinder, shell and stone, and occasional fragments of bone. One potsherd of probable 19th-century date, perhaps came from the fill, although such was the later disturbance that this could not be fully confirmed. Whether this was a pit or a trench there was no way of knowing, but it did seem to extend the full width of the excavation.
- 2.5 Feature 2 may have been a separate feature lying to the south-west of Feature 1, or possibly no more than an extension of it. Sticky brown silt incorporated flecks of charcoal, mortar, small lumps of sandstone and occasional pieces of bone, assumed to be animal. No dating evidence was identified and it is not clear whether this was a pit or a truncated linear feature.
- 2.6 Further work was done in the alleyway in late February when the cobbles were removed from the rest of the alleyway as far east as the pavement on the street frontage, and the underlying deposits shaved off to produce a more shallow gradients. It is estimated that up to 0.38m of material was removed towards the west end of the excavations.
- 2.7 The cobbles were set in a matrix of brown soil which contained fragments of coke and coal and was considered to be of no great age. Beneath this was the thick layer of reddish sand identified in the earlier works. It contained inclusions of variable quantity including mortar flecks, occasional fragments of slate, fragments of bone and lumps of pinkish clay, all of which tended to become less common at greater depth, and also pockets of more dirty 'soil'. The relationship of this layer to the north wall of room G05 of Nantclwyd House (immediately to the west of the hall house) could not be established, because of disturbance associated with the replacement of the sleeper beam in the modern era.
- 2.8 The wall foundations of the hall-house itself were of good quality stone, with the sleeper beam set on top of them, the stone dropping down at least 0.69m. However, beneath the gable a thin layer of bricks topped the wall beneath the beam, but only for a distance of two to three metres in length. It is assumed, though without any proof, that these were inserted.
- 2.9 Further east towards the road, the reddish sand, below the cobbles and their matrix of dirty soil, became increasingly homogeneous with relatively little in the way of foreign material incorporated into it. There were, however, at least two service pipe trenches running up the alleyway.
- 2.10 The house on the north side of the alleyway had limestone foundations to a height of 1.14m (with the wall continued in brick above it), and the sub-surface courses outset by 40mm. This appeared to be set in a linear feature which contained many slate and mortar fragments and also one piece of blue and white china. Its width which exceeded 0.50m from the wall in places suggests that this may have been a service trench rather than the foundation trench for the south wall of the building, particularly as further to the west it was filled in a cleaner sandy soil.

The Floor of Room G04.

- 2.11 This was taken up in mid January 2005 (Fig. 4). Mrs Gale recorded that a under the clay tiles was a floor of large slates bedded on loose rubbly material. It contained one fragment of probably 18th-century pottery, but also some 19th-century china. This rubbly material was removed to a depth in excess of 200mm. It contained handmade-brick fragments, slate fragments and cobbles. There was no convincing evidence of earlier structures at the depth reached. (A full set of notes remains with the site archives)

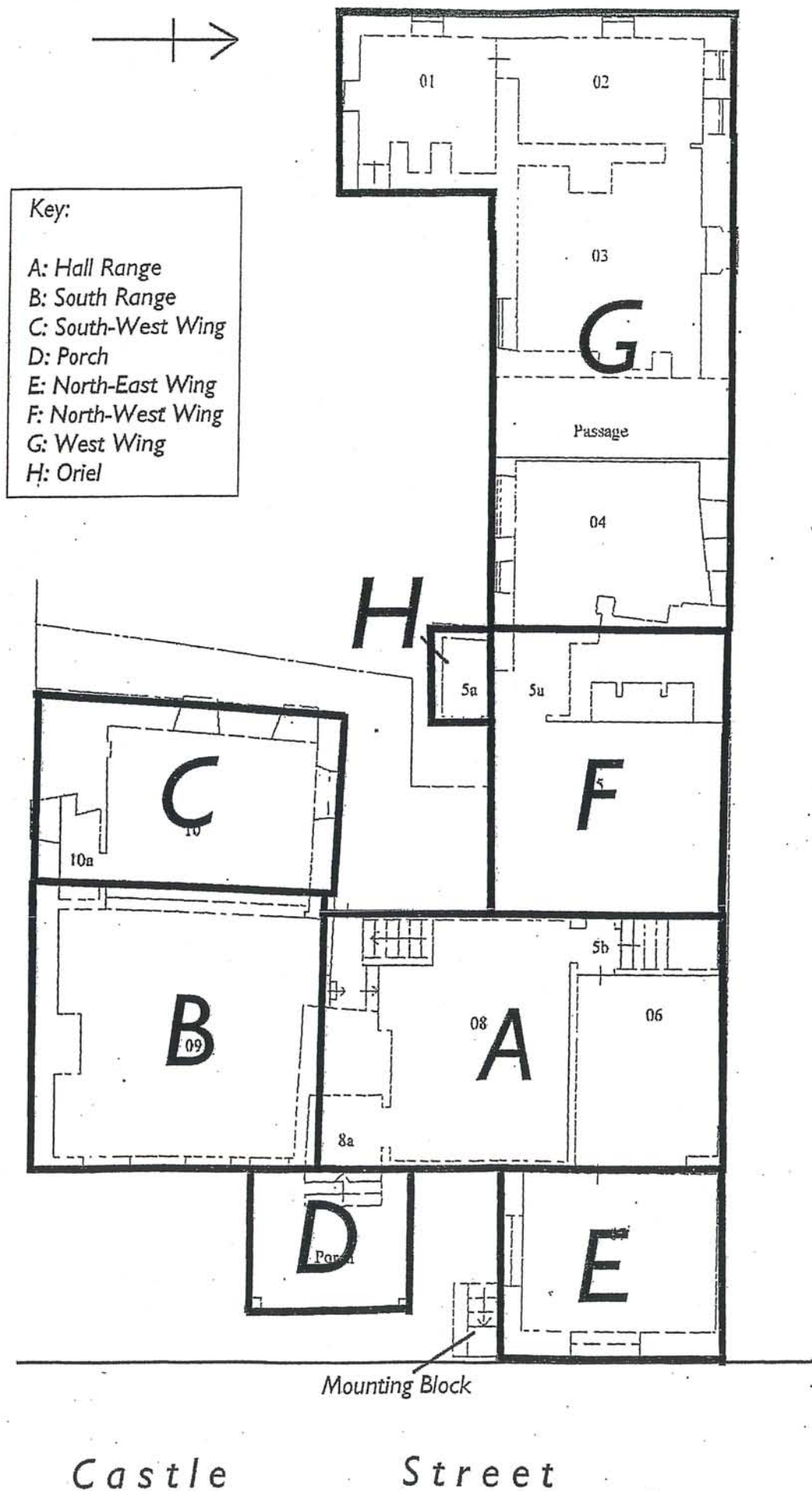


Fig. 4 Sketch plan showing the basic building components of Nantclwyd House. Taken from R. Morriss (2002).

The Passage

- 212 In the passage (centred at SJ 12347 58187; Fig 4) leading from the alleyway into the courtyard area behind the street frontage, and immediately to the east of Room G04, the slate floor had previously been lifted to reveal a red sand, and the surface revealed had become much compacted by foot traffic, presenting an uneven appearance. Some areas of discoloured soil were also visible. Limited cleaning in late January 2005 indicated that in some places at least the red sand had probably been introduced to provide a bed for the slate slabs, and beneath it was a darker 'soil' with occasional fragments of charcoal, bone and the like. One discoloured area close to the surface contained cinder and rootlets and looked to be of no great age, but no excavation was undertaken there.

The Roof of the Hall House

- 2.13 The roof of the hall house is described in some detail in Morriss 2002, 16, and the reader is referred back to that report for further information. The trusses of the hall-house became available for inspection in February when scaffolding was erected in Room G08.
- 2.14 Four trusses supported the roof. At the southern end of the roof was an enclosed chimney stack rising from ground floor level to the ceiling. The distance from this to the first truss was one metre.
- 2.15 **Truss 1. A jointed cruck.** This comprises base cruck blades which are jointed at springer level to further blades that rise to apex level; the truss is completed by a collar and arch braces. The height from the existing ground floor level to the underside of the ridge purlin is calculated to be 6.92m (Fig 5).

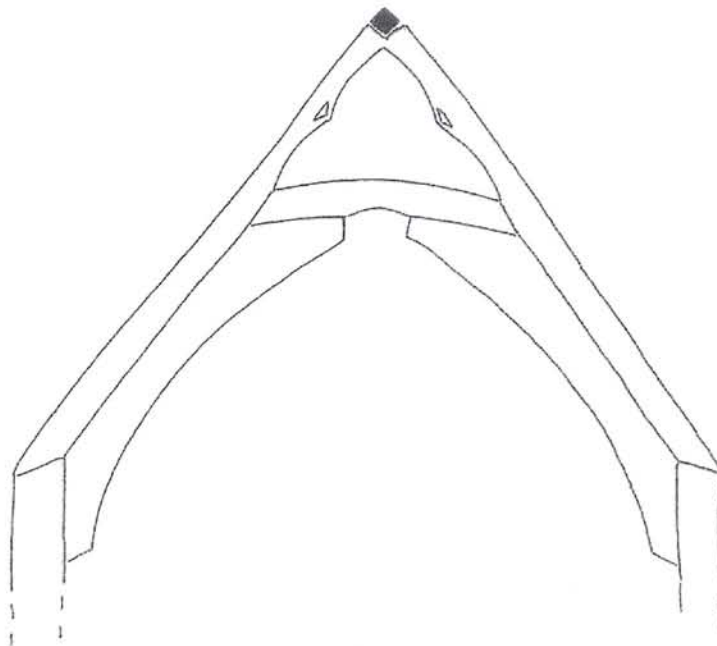


Fig. 5. Truss 1, sketch based on measurements



Fig. 6. Truss 1, upper part showing the cusped blades.

- 2.16 The *base cruck blades* rise from the floor. Mortice holes in both the blades and the arch braces hold tenons linking them, and peg holes correspond to these. In one case the tenon has gone but pegs are still in place.
- 2.17 The *collar* rests simply on the arch braces. On both sides tenons rising from the arch braces; the mortice holes on the collar, however, are much larger than required, perhaps indicating later modifications. Over time the arch braces have dropped and wooden wedges have been inserted. In addition tenon pieces have been slotted into mortice holes (200mm x 40mm) and kept in place by wooden pegs, nine to each brace.
- 2.18 Both the visible lower part of the collar and the soffits of the arch braces have quarter-round edge mouldings. Stains on the collar indicate where the former coved ceiling abutted it.
- 2.19 The *arch braces* have original moulding and pegs as noted above. Further flat tenons have been slotted through the arch braces into the base cruck blades and then pegged, two or perhaps more on both sides towards springer level. Modern timber wedges have been inserted between the arch braces and the base cruck blades.
- 2.20 The upper *blades* rise to the apex and above the collar both are cusped (Fig. 6). Their edges are chamfered, and the spandrels are hollowed out. There is some indication of burning (or perhaps staining) on the cusped blades. Slots in the blade sides, about 400-500mm long and 40mm deep, originally held windbraces, now gone. (cf existing windbrace mortices in F16, and in Truss 2 in this room where a fragment of the windbrace remains in place).

- 2.21 **Truss 2.** The width of the bay from Truss 1 to Truss 2 is 1.85m. Truss 2 is of entirely different form.
- 2.22 It comprises principal rafters rising from wall plates, with a collar socketed in. There are no obvious pegs, and no visible evidence of mortice and tenons. The collar lacks any braces and is slightly coved on the underside, but there is no decoration on it. A slot/niche has been chiselled out to take a new missing king post. There is some burning high up on the principal rafters, and the coved ceiling has left some staining. The roof purlin has broad chamfered edges.
- 2.23 **Truss 3.** The width of this bay is 1.74m and this truss is partly disguised by a plaster partition.
- 2.24 The principal rafters are basic, without any chamfers, and are smoke blackened. Likewise, though the collar is slightly coved, there is no decorative embellishment. A deep socket has been cut through it, though not perhaps for a king post.
- 2.25 The hall roof continues through to the next room to the north, a first-floor room. The partition wall contains both a tie beam and a collar. and a board records that the room was restored in 1934. The room has two further bays (or sub-bays), the one .173m wide, and the final one (to the external wall truss, 1.82m).

Room G10

- 2.26 In July 2005, Mr G Broster of Donald Insall Associates contacted CPAT about work that was to take place in Room G10, primarily the laying of new concrete bases for roof support columns. After consultation it was decided that because this area had been thoroughly excavated in 1991 (Brassil *et al* 1991) there was little to be gained by a further watching brief during the course of the new works. That nothing new of archaeological interest was uncovered during the limited excavations for the bases was confirmed in a letter of 22 August 2005 from Donald Insall Associates.

The southern boundary wall

- 2.27 Scaffolding was erected against the southern boundary wall in April 2005 to facilitate reconsolidation work and rectify a slight lean to it. The wall was approximately 5m high and 14.5m long, and built of thin limestone blocks, of a size averaging 0.5m by 0.06m thick, with occasional re-used red sandstone blocks. A lime mortar, with black shale/coal inclusions, had been used to bond the stonework. The mid and upper courses had been repointed, perhaps in the late 18th or 19th century. The upper courses had been re-built incorporating hand-made bricks and finished with cemented (modern cement) coping stones along its entire length. It was these upper courses that were to be removed, lowering the wall's height to approximately 4m, subject to the success of the reconsolidation process.
- 2.28 Features visible in the wall included: a) a bricked-up doorway at the east end; b) a re-used sandstone finial, high up in the coursework and just below the coping; c) a slight buttress on the north-facing side of the wall towards the west end; d) the juncture with the south gable of the house, where it appears that it was once tied in with the house wall at lower levels.



Figure 7. North face of southern boundary wall.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 The watching brief during groundworks was limited to a few locations within the curtilage of Nantclwyd House. These limitations together with the nature of the groundworks restricted opportunities for identifying earlier activity on the site or indeed modifications to the building itself, and the watching brief failed to provide much in the way of new information.
- 3.2 The building works did, however, facilitate a closer examination of the hall-house roof and the boundary wall, and detailed records were made of these features.

References

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