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Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from Westenhanger Castle, Stone Street, Westenhanger, near Folkestone, Kent

R E Howard, Dr R R Laxton and Dr C D Litton

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Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from Westenhanger Castle, Stone Street, Westenhanger, near Folkestone, Kent

R E Howard¹, Dr R R Laxton² and Dr C D Litton²

Summary

Thirteen samples from the rafters of the conical roof of a dovecote tower at Westenhanger Castle were analysed by tree-ring dating. All samples cross-matched with each other to produced a single site chronology of 213 rings spanning the period AD 1338 - AD 1550. Interpretation of the sapwood on the samples would suggest that the timbers represented have an estimated felling date in the range AD 1560 - 80.

Keywords

Dendrochronology Standing Buildings

Authors' addresses

¹University Of Nottingham, Archaeology Department, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD. ²University Of Nottingham, Department of Mathematics, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD

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Introduction

Westenhanger Castle has been described as a fragment of a large moated and fortified house of the fourteenth century. It lies about eight miles west of Folkestone and about three miles north west of Hythe (TR 123372, maps Fig 1 and 2). A licence to crenellate was granted in AD 1343 to John de Kiriel, but he may not have undertaken the work immediately. The surviving remains show that it was of similar appearance to Bodium Castle, which was not licensed until AD 1385, and the work at Westenhanger might be of similar date.

Parts of the remaining walls at Westenhanger still reach a considerable height and are almost complete towards the north-east corner. These walls and the remaining foundations clearly represent a rectangular structure of substantial proportions; the internal courtyard was about 130 feet across. At three corners stood external round towers, the fourth, at the south-east corner, was square. Midway along the north and east walls stood external square towers. There appear never to have been towers midway along the south and west walls, but it is in the west wall that the main entrance is found. A plan of the site is given in Figure 3.

The Castle underwent considerable alteration in the early sixteenth-century when it was converted into a mansion. This work was probably undertaken by Sir Edward Poynings who died in AD 1522, with the work still incomplete. His son, Sir Thomas continued with the programme of conversion but in AD 1540 the house was given to Henry VIII in exchange for other property. Documentary evidence suggests that Henry himself did very little work here and it was therefore probably largely complete by the time he came to own it. As far as is known Henry only stayed here twice.

In AD 1552 the property passed into the hands of Sir Richard Sackville of Buckhurst in Sussex, Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations. It is known that he was certainly in residence here in AD 1565. In AD 1585 the site was acquired by Thomas Smythe esq, farmer of the customs of the port of London. Between this date and his death in AD 1591 Smythe is said to have greatly increased the beauty of the mansion and to have made magnificent additions.

The ownership of Westenhanger changed several times during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when it was much reduced in size, quantities of material being taken from the site for other building projects. It was much reduced in size and grandeur by the eighteenth century when it was converted again, this time into a modest, though fine, Georgian country house.

Sampling and analysis by tree-ring dating were commissioned by English Heritage who are currently funding a programme of repairs to the ruined portions of the site. The purpose of this analysis was to establish, if possible, a date for the north-east tower which has been used as a dovecote. One view is that that an existing tower was converted to this use in the sixteenth century and given a new roof. An alternative view is that the tower was built in the fifteenth century specifically as a dovecote and that the roof is of this date also. A cross-sectional drawing of the north-east tower is provided in Figure 4.

The sampling of some *in-situ* floor timbers from the sixteenth-century cross-wing, preserved within the eighteenth-century house was also requested.

The Laboratory would like to take this opportunity to thank the owner Graham Ford and his family for their great help, cooperation, and enthusiastic support for this project. We would also like to thank David and Barbara Martin, consulting site archaeologists, of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London for their help with this project. This help relates specifically to being on site at a time to suit sampling, but also for providing copious notes and helping with the above introduction and particularly, as ever, for providing excellent drawings upon which to plot sample locations.

Sampling

The conical roof of the dovecote in the north-east tower contains twelve sets of frames. Each frame set consists of a main rafter rising from the wall-plate to a ring near the apex. To either side of each main rafter there is a spur rafter rising from the wall plate and joining the main rafter about three-quarters of the way up.

Attached to the wall plate near the foot of each main and spur rafter are sole pieces from which ashlar pieces rise. Within the roof space there is also a tiebeam running roughly east-west from one side to the other. The remains of a second tie beam may be present, but it has been cut and only the two ends are in place. A plan of the roof is shown in Figure 5, with an illustration of a frame set being shown in Figure 6.

Archaeological examination of the roof timbers strongly suggests that many of them, particularly the ashlars, but also most of the sole pieces, and a number of the spur rafters are later insertions. A number of the main rafters appear to be more modern replacements. It is likely that the two tiebeams are also later insertions.

Thus, from those timbers available which appeared as certainly belonging to a single cohesive roofbuilding phase a total of thirteen core samples was taken. Each sample was given the code WHC-A (for Westenhanger Castle, site "A"), and numbered 01 - 13. The position of the timbers cored was recorded at the time of sampling on a drawing provided by English Heritage, reproduced here as Figure 7. In this drawing the timber context numbers assigned by the site archaeologists are also shown. Details of the samples are given in Table 1.

An assessment was also made of the possible sixteenth-century timbers remaining in the eighteenth-century house. Unfortunately all those seen had too few rings for satisfactory analysis and core samples were not obtained from them.

<u>Analysis</u>

Each of the thirteen samples was prepared by sanding and polishing and their growth ring-width measured. These measurements were then compared with each other by the Litton/Zainodin grouping procedure (see appendix). At a minimum *t*-value of 4.5 all thirteen samples cross-matched with each other at relative positions as shown in the bar diagram Figure 8. The growth-ring widths of these eight samples were combined at these relative off-set positions to form WHCASQ01, a site chronology of 213 rings. Site chronology WHCASQ01 was then compared with a series of relevant reference chronologies for oak, giving it a first ring date of AD 1338 and a last measured ring date of AD 1550. Evidence for this dating is given in the *t*-values of Table 2.

The average heartwood/sapwood boundary date on the samples is AD 1545. The usual 95% confidence limit for the number of sapwood rings on mature oaks from Kent is 15 - 35 rings. Using these figures would give the timbers represented by these samples an estimated felling in the range AD 1560 - 80.

Interpretation and conclusion

Tree-ring analysis has produced a single site chronology from the sampled timbers of the roof of the dovecote. It would appear that all those timbers that were sampled were felled in the mid to later part of the sixteenth century, estimated as being between AD 1560 - 80. The felling date proposed on the basis of dendrochronology would equate with the ownership of Westenhanger by Sir Richard Sackville. It would thus appear that while the tower itself may still be of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century date, the roof is certainly not that early.

Two observations might be made about the material from this site. Firstly some of the samples, particularly WHC-A01 and A07, and samples WHC-A02, 05, 11, and 13, represent a very coherent group of timbers in

that they cross-match very well with each other. Cross-matches with *t*-values of 10-plus are found between a number of these samples. This suggests that a single woodland source was used and that the felled trees were growing very close to each other. It might also be noted that samples WHC-A02, 05, 11, and 13 -eem to come from the inner sections of trees that were much older when they were felled than those used for the rest of the rafters.

The second feature is that the site chronology created from the Westenhanger material cross-matches poorly with reference chronologies from Kent and the south, apart from Restoration House, Rochester, and how well it cross matches with reference chronologies from elsewhere in England. It cross-matches with *t*-values of only 4.1 against Kent-88, and with Southern England, despite its overlapping date-span but matches with higher *t*-values against material from Gloucestershire, Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

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Sample no	Sample location and context number	Total rings	*Sapwood rings	First measured ring date	Last heartwood ring date	Last measured ring date
WHC-A01	Main rafter, 0307.1	71	h/s	AD 1470	AD 1540	AD 1540
WHC-A02	Spur rafter, 0307.4	122	no h/s	AD 1338		AD 1459
WHC-A03	Spur rafter, 0308.7	77	h/s	AD 1469	AD 1545	AD 1545
WHC-A04	Main rafter, 0309.1	55	h/s	AD 1495	AD 1549	AD 1549
WHC-A05	Spur rafter, 0309.4	136	no h/s	AD 1346		AD 1481
WHC-A06	Spur rafter, 0309.7	60	4	AD 1490	AD 1545	AD 1549
WHC-A07	Main rafter, 0310.1	78	h/s	AD 1473	AD 1550	AD 1550
WHC-A08	Spur rafter, 0311.7	120	h/s	AD 1426	AD 1545	AD 1545
WHC-A09	Spur rafter, 0312.7	95	h/s	AD 1451	AD 1545	AD 1545
WHC-A10	Spur rafter, 0314.4	97	h/s	AD 1442	AD 1538	AD 1538
WHC-A11	Spur rafter, 0314.7	135	no h/s	AD 1353	4	AD 1487
WHC-A12	Main rafter, 0315.1	56	h/s	AD 1355	AD 1546	AD 1546
WHC-A13	Spur rafter, 0315.7	125	no h/s	AD 1355		AD 1479

Table 1: Details of samples from Westenhanger Castle, Near Folkestone, Kent

*h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary is the last ring on the sample

Table 2: Results of the cross-matching of site chronology WHCASQ01 with the reference chronologies when the first ring date is AD 1338 and last ring date is AD 1550

Reference chronology	Span of chronology	t-value		
MGB-E01	AD 401 - 1981	6.1	(Baillie and Pilcher 1982 unpubl)	
East Midlands	AD 882 – 1981	6.9	(Laxton and Litton 1988)	
England London	AD 413 – 1728	5.0	(Tyers and Groves 1999 unpub)	
MC10H	AD 1386 - 1585	6.2	(Fletcher 1978)	
Restoration House, Rochester, Kent	AD 1378-1505	5.4	(Howard et al 1997)	
High Street, Kinver, Staffs	AD 1431 - 1562	6.1	(Howard et al 1995)	
26 Westgate St, Gloucester	AD 1399 - 1622	5.9	(Howard <i>et al</i> 1998)	
Station St, Mansfield Woodhouse, Notts	AD 1432 - 1621	6.9	(Howard et al 1997)	
Tusmore Park, Oxon	AD 1359 - 1545	5.4	(Howard et al 1992)	
Southern England	AD 1083 - 1589	4.1	(Bridge 1988)	
Kent-88	AD 1158 - 1540	4.1	(Laxton and Litton 1989)	



Figure 1: Map to show general location of Westenhanger Castle

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Figure 2: Map to show specific location of Westenhanger Castle

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Figure 3: General plan of Westenhanger Castle (after David Martin)



Figure 4: Cross-section of the north-east tower (after David Martin)



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SCALE

Figure 5: North-east tower plan of roof timbers (after David Martin)



Figure 6: Sketch drawing of a frame set (after David Martin)





Figure 7: North-east tower showing timbers sampled (after David Martin)





Figure 8: Bar diagram of samples in site chronology WHCASQ01

White bars = heartwood rings, shaded area = sapwood rings h/s = heartwood/sapwood boundary is last ring on sample

Data of measured samples - measurements in 0.01 mm units

78 60 64 44 41 64 47 65 76 87 65 72 91 71 80 91 64 62 77 78

WHC-A13A 125

 165
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WHC-A13B 125

164 137 133 159 128 107 108 70 116 111 107 97 96 113 91 107 94 99 62 104 80 115 73 102 99 92 71 76 80 68 81 89 85 94 59 77 75 69 79 75 71 90 76 84 72 87 78 82 73 97 104 90 73 101 125 90 79 88 129 70 68 62 78 115 97 86 118 70 106 89 99 75 63 103 75 121 120 111 75 89 109 125 121 123 93 67 73 58 85 74 76 71 78 102 89 79 91 70 63 81 64 86 67 74 66 70 62 70 75 62 76 74 64 116 98 102 75 84 75 88 90 117 66 90 113