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Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from Astley Hospital, Church Road, Astley, Manchester

R E Howard, R R Laxton & C D Litton

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Summary

Twenty-five samples from the roof and second-floor ceilings of this building were analysed by tree-ring dating. This analysis produced a single chronology consisting of nine samples, its 144 rings spanning the period AD 1507-AD 1650.

Interpretation of the sapwood, and the relative positions of the heartwood/sapwood boundaries on the dated samples, would indicate that the timbers represented were all felled between late AD 1649 and early AD 1650.

Given that a carved stonework plaque commemorating work in AD 1650 is found over the front porch, it is probable that this is the felling date for the majority of the other timbers also. The building thus appears to be of one phase of construction dating from the mid-seventeenth century.

Keywords

Dendrochronology Standing Building

Author's address University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD

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Introduction

Astley Hospital, formerly known as Dam House (NY991391; Fig 1) is a grade II* listed brick and timber-framed house of three storeys with a long gallery at attic level. It is believed to date from the late-sixteenth century and, if correct, would thus be a rare survival of its type in north-west England. Other examples of purpose built brick halls with long galleries in Manchester are Hough End Hall, Withington, built around AD 1596 and New Hall Farm, Wythenshawe, built around AD 1590. The long gallery becomes much less common in the late-sixteenth century.

Dam House is unusual for a number of reasons. Firstly it is not lavishly fenestrated, bay windows and large central windows only providing light into the long gallery, rather than a continuous window. Secondly, the gallery is shorter than other examples, being only 64 feet long (most other examples are in the region of 100 feet long). Finally, the long gallery at Dam House is uncommon in that, rather than being a long wide corridor, it has rooms off it.

The house is believed to have undergone alteration and addition in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In the seventeenth century for example a three-storey porch was added to the front. Above the door of the porch a stone cut inscription reads "Erected by Adam Mort and Margaret Mort 1650".

Sampling and analysis by tree-ring dating was commissioned by English Heritage prior to proposed renovation and repairs. The purpose of this was to provide information on the historic development of the house particular as regards the primary construction of the floors of the Hall range, and the roofs of the east and west cross-wings, and the roof of the long gallery. The brief also included a request to sample the timbers of the porch and a fireplace lintel.

The Laboratory would like to take this opportunity to thank Richard Bond for his help in interpreting the various phases of this site and Robina McNeil of Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit for providing drawings upon which the location of samples could be shown. Finally we would like to thank John Norris of Sanderson Watts Associates Ltd for his help and cooperation in sampling.

Sampling

After discussion with Richard Bond and Robina McNeil on the probable phasing of the buildings and the timbers available, and in conjunction with the brief provided by English Heritage, a total of twenty-five core samples was obtained. Each sample was given the code AST-B (for Astley, site "B") and numbered 01 - 25.

Eight samples, AST-B01 - 08, were obtained from beams in the Hall range to the south or front of the building, these being in the ceiling of the second floor. These beams, whilst being substantial timbers some 30 by 30 cms square, had rather wide, and thus relatively few, growth rings. The timbers were also chamfered and trimmed, and in most cases where sapwood might once have existed, it had long since been defrassed. The positions of these samples were marked at the time of coring on plans provided, reproduced here as Figure 2.

The remaining seventeen samples were obtained from timbers in the roof spaces. Three samples, AST-B09 - B11, were obtained from the only timbers available in the roof of the east cross-wing. Fourteen samples, AST-B12 - 25 were obtained from the timbers of the roof space of the long gallery.

The roof of the west cross-wing contained no suitable timbers, the presumably original timbers having been replaced in the nineteenth century by an assortment of pine, and in the twentieth by modern softwood rafters. Likewise the porch provided timbers which were unsuitable for analysis by dendrochronology. The lintel of the fireplace was also unsuitable; an exposed end showing that it had only about twenty-five growth-rings.

The timbers selected for sampling were those considered the most suitable for dendrochronological analysis which were also believed by Richard Bond and Robina McNeil to be associated with the primary phase of construction.

Those timbers that were not sampled were generally unsuitable for analysis because they contained too few rings. This was often because the rings were too wide, as was the case, for example, with most of the posts in trusses 1 - 4, or the timbers were too small or cut too thin, as was the case with the majority of elements in the timber-framed walls. In some cases both conditions applied.

Details of the samples are given in Table 1. The roof trusses have been numbered from east to west and the positions of the cores were recorded at the time of sampling on the drawings provided. These are reproduced here as Figs 3a-f.

Analysis

Each sample was prepared by sanding and polishing and the growth-ring widths of all twenty-five were measured; the data of these measurements are given at the end of the report. The growth-ring widths of all the samples were compared with each other by the Litton/Zainodin grouping procedure (see appendix).

At a minimum *t*-value of 4.0 nine samples cross-matched with each other at relative positions as shown in the bar diagram Figure 4. The growth-ring widths of these nine samples were combined at these relative off-set positions to form ASTBSQ01, a site chronology of 144 rings. Site chronology ASTBSQ01 was compared with a series of relevant reference chronologies giving it first ring date of AD 1507 and a last measured ring date of AD 1650. Evidence for this dating is given in the *t*-values of Table 2.

Site chronology ASTBSQ01 was then compared with the remaining sixteen ungrouped samples. There was, however, no further satisfactory cross-matching and all ungrouped samples were compared individually with a full range of relevant reference chronologies. There was, again, no satisfactory cross-matching.

Interpretation

Analysis of samples from Astley Hospital has produced a single site chronology, ASTBSQ01, of nine samples, its 144 rings spanning the period AD 1507 – AD 1650. This site chronology contains samples from both the ceiling of the second floor and the roof of the south range. Three of the nine samples, AST-B05, B13, and B15 have complete sapwood, each having the same last measured complete sapwood ring dates of AD 1649. Under the microscope it is possible to see that a large proportion of the summer cell growth for AD 1649 has taken place on these three samples. It is thus possible that the trees they represent were felled late in that year, or in the very early part of AD 1650, before the spring cell growth for that year began.

This probability is enhanced by the fact that a fourth sample with complete sapwood, AST-B16, has a last measured complete growth-ring dating to AD 1649. However, on this sample it is possible to see that the spring cell growth for the year AD 1650 is just starting.

Conclusion

Following analysis by tree-ring dating it has been possible to obtain dates for some of the timbers in this building. This shows that a number of the beams are from trees felled in late AD 1649 – early AD 1650. These dated timbers all appear to be associated with what was assumed to be the primary construction phase, apparently suggesting that the house dates to the mid-seventeenth century. Documentary evidence points strongly to the presence of an earlier building, dating to the late-sixteenth century, that was subsequently modified, according to the date stone, in AD 1650 by Adam and Margaret Mort. There is no dendrochronological evidence to indicate the presence of timbers felled in the late-sixteenth century so the results either indicate that the present house was constructed shortly after the timbers were felled in AD 1649-50, or that the dated timbers represent a substantial remodeling of an earlier structure.

Sixteen samples remain ungrouped and undated. Of these sixteen only one sample, AST-B20, has more than 60 rings, the remainder having fewer rings and are less suitable for reliable analysis.

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Table 1: Details of samples from Astley Hospital, Church Road, Astley, Manchester

Sample number	Sample location	Total rings	*Sapwood rings	First measured ring date	Last heartwood ring date	Last measured ring date
	Hall range, second floor					
AST-B01	East - west beam to bay window of east room	54	h/s			
AST-B02	Central east - west beam of east room	55	h/s			
AST-B03	Eastern north - south beam, centre room	54	h/s			
AST-B04	Western north - south beam, centre room	71	2	AD 1554	AD 1622	AD 1624
AST-B05	East - west beam to bay window of west room	66	20C	AD 1584	AD 1629	AD 1649
AST-B06	Central north - south beam to west room	54	h/s			
AST-B07	North - south beam (west) to west rear room	111	33c	AD 1538	AD 1615	AD 1648
AST-B08	East - west beam (south) to rear west room	58	h/s			
	Roof of north-east wing					
AST-B09	Ridge-beam	44	7			
AST-B10	East purlin	46	h/s			
AST-B11	West purlin	42	16C			
	Roof of south (front) range					
AST-B12	North top rail, truss 1 - east gable	52	h/s			
AST-B13	Ridge to south dormer, truss $1-2$	82	24C	AD 1568	AD 1625	AD 1649
AST-B14	North principal rafter, truss 1	125	h/s	AD 1507	AD 1631	AD 1631
AST-B15	South principal rafter, truss 1	110	16C	AD 1540	AD 1633	AD 1649
AST-B16	Ridge to south dormer, truss 3 - 4 '	120	31C	AD 1531	AD 1619	AD 1650
AST-B17	Lower south purlin, truss 3 – 4	73	h/s	AD 1548	AD 1620	AD 1620
AST-B18	Lower south purlin, truss $2 - 3$	73	h/s	AD 1548	AD 1620	AD 1620
AST-B19	Lower north purlin, truss $1-2$	33	14C			

Table 1: Continued

Sample number	Sample location	Total rings	*Sapwood rings	First measured ring date	Last heartwood ring date	Last measured ring date
	Roof of south (front) range					
AST-B20	Valley rafter, front range / north-east wing	65	h/s			
AST-B21	South mid-rail, west end bay	44	10			
AST-B22	South wall-tie, truss 2	32	h/s			
AST-B23	Stud post, south side, truss 3 - 4	38	no h/s			
AST-B24	North queen post, truss 1	50	h/s			
AST-B25	South lower purlin, truss 1 - 2	52	h/s			

*h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary is the last ring on the sample
c = complete sapwood on timber, all or part lost in sampling.
C = complete sapwood is retained on sample, last measured ring date is felling date of timber

Table 2: Results of the cross-matching of site chronology ASTBSQ01 with relevant reference chronologies when first ring date is AD 1507 and last ring date is AD 1650

Reference chronology	Span	of chronology	t-value	
East Midlands	AD	882 - 1981	3.4	(Laxton and Litton 1988)
England	AD	401 - 1981	5.7	(Baillie and Pilcher 1982a unpubl)
Scotland	AD	946 - 1975	6.3	(Baillie and Pilcher 1982b unpubl)
CHDASQ04	AD	1551 - 1608	6.7	(Howard et al 1996 unpubl)
Colston Bassett, Notts	AD	1465 - 1609	5.1	(Howard et al 1995a)
15 St John's St, Wirksworth, Derbys	AD	1586 - 1676	5.6	(Howard et al 1995b)
Hoyles Farm, Bradfield, Derbys	AD	1469 - 1613	5.4	(Howard et al 1994)
Fair Flats Farm, Bradfield, Derbys	AD	1492 - 1633	4.2	(Howard et al 1994)



Figure 1: Map to show general location of Astley Hospital

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Figure 3b: Elevation of the south wall of the roof space to show position of samples

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Figure 3d: Truss 2 in the roof space to show position of samples

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Figure 3e: Truss 3 in the roof space to show position of samples

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Figure 4: Bar diagram of samples in site chronology ASTBSQ01

White bars = heartwood rings, shaded area = sapwood rings h/s = heartwood/sapwood boundary is last ring on sample c = complete sapwood on timber, all or part lost in sampling C = complete sapwood retained on sample Data of measured samples - measurements in 0.01 mm units

AST-B01A 54

200 142 187 160 157 90 72 84 60 60 64 62 81 95