

MOAT AT HUNTINGTON HALL, CHESHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT

NMR no: SJ 46 SW 2



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County: Cheshire

NGR: SJ 4197 6347 (FCE)
District: Chester

Site Name: Huntington Hall and moat
Parish: Huntington

MOAT, the site of Huntington Hall, lies at 20m above OD, in mixed pasture and arable land about 600m E of the R Dee and 2 miles SSE of Chester.

The manor of Huntington and Cheaveley was part of the pre-Conquest endowment of St Werburgh's abbey at Chester.¹ Because of its convenient proximity to the city, it appears to have been held directly in the abbey's hands throughout the medieval period, and the moated residence is probably to be identified with 'the grange of the abbot of Chester at Huntington' referred to in 1348.² Immediately before the Dissolution it was the last of the abbey's manors leased out under pressure of Thomas Cromwell, most reluctantly because 'without it hospitality cannot be kept'.³ That hospitality seems likely to have included a deer park, for in 1514 the abbot enclosed and emparked 1000 acres of the demesnes at Saughton, Huntington and Cheaveley, and field names in the 17th century point to the former existence of Huntington Park.⁴ After the Dissolution, the manor of Huntington became for a time part of the extensive Cheshire estates of Richard Cotton, but in 1589 the moated site was sold to Sir George Beverley, who made it his principal residence. The fortunes of Beuerley's son, Lennox, suffered severely from his allegiance to the Royalist cause in the Civil War, and in a Commonwealth survey the Dean and Chapter of St Werburgh's complained that they had received neither rent nor tithes for Huntington (formerly leased to Mr Beverley) for 30 years past. Lennox was forced to sell Huntington in 1648 or soon after.⁵ Its purchaser, Henry Harpur, maintained the house, paying for 13 hearths in the Hearth Tax of 1663, but how long thereafter the site continued as a substantial residence is not clear as it passed through several families by marriage alliances; but there is a change on early county maps from Saxton and copies of him, who in the late 16th and early 17th century named Huntington Hall, to Robert Morden in 1695 and subsequent maps, who name simply Huntington.⁶ Several aspects of the site are detailed in post-medieval documents. In 1589 the moat is referred to encompassing the hall, which was then evidently a timber-framed building since there was provision for it to be taken down and the materials carted away. In the early 17th century it was described as 'a very neat house of timber', and the sale in 1648 included not only the hall but 'all buildings, dovehouses, pooles, motes, poole banks *etc*'. It is not known when finally the hall was demolished. The present farm, known as Old Hall, stands outside the moat and is apparently of late 18th or early 19th century date.

The moat is a well-preserved earthwork, but covered in deciduous trees and dense untended undergrowth, especially in its W half: the E section has been in more recent and regular cultivation, now an orchard to the N and a rotovated area to the S. Overall the site has a precisely rectangular plan measuring (outer lip to outer lip) 160m-165m E-W, by about 110m N-S at its E end. But whereas the other three arms of the moat are straight, the N arm curves gently inwards in that section W of the E cross-division ('a' on plan), with the result that the moat's W arm is only about 95m long. An explanation for this may lie in the local topography and provision for leading water away from the moat. For the curving line of the N arm is continued westward by a ditch ('c' on plan) that drained into a steep coombe running out to the R Dee. A second ditch to drain the moat from the SW corner looks, in its present form anyway, to be a more recent provision. The moat is now dry, except for: (i) the SE corner and S end of the E arm as far N as the bridge, where the inner bank has been re-formed and the outer scarp removed to form a flat area bounded on the E by rockery and flower beds and on the S by a sloping lawn (a low dam 15m N of the bridge suggests an earlier intention to extend the ornamental water under the bridge); and (ii) the E half of the S arm, which has been recently deepened and the water held against a modern causeway of dumped materials immediately N of the farm. Away from these modifications, the character of the moat ditch is similar throughout the circuit, averaging 10m in width up to 2m in depth and with a steep-sided, flat-bottomed profile. There is an outer bank throughout the

circuit except in the areas of gardening around the SE corner: typically it is 7m-8m broad and 0.4m-0.8m high, and distinctively flat-topped. On the N side it has been altered by being ploughed out by the straight, narrow ridge and furrow filling that triangular field: on the S (in addition to damage by a modern cess pit) the bank changes character, narrowing and losing height, opposite the end of 'a', possibly because to the W it had served as headland for a furlong of ridge and furrow at right angles to it: on the E, where it survives N of the bridge, the outer bank is more massive than elsewhere, with a late hedgebank along its outer lip. A further gap in the outer bank at the NE corner is now occupied by a deep-cut field dyke that dog-legs E to link with a road-side dyke or drain. At the same point an earlier broad ditch or hollow-way, 7m-8m wide and 0.5m-1m, deep, approaches the corner from NNW. It is now largely filled with soil and rubble, and truncated by the Chester by-pass, so that its function - whether boundary or way (*cf* below at end) - is uncertain.

Access to the moat's interior is *via* a single-span bridge of sandstone with segmented arch, located just S of centrally in the E arm of the moat, which may suggest that it is an original feature. The interior is divided into three sections by two N-S ditches, 'a' and 'b' on plan, those to E and W being of similar width at about 50m, while the central one is little over half that. The dividing ditch 'a' is problematic: it is generally 10m-12m wide throughout, but for 30m at its S end its scarps are comparable to those of the main moat (into which it opens directly) while N of that it is only about 0.5m deep and at its N end breaks only into the top of the moat scarp. Within the E compartment defined by 'a' there are no surface features except a slightly hollowed path (not planned) from the bridge directly across the compartment and dividing the orchard from the rotovated plot. Foundations of a building and the remains of a well have been recorded at SJ 4202 6348 within this compartment, but there is no certainty that they formed part of the principal residence. The second dividing ditch, though up to 5m wide, is quite slight at generally less than 0.5m deep, except at its S end where its E scarp is well marked and continues the clear ditch which divides off the S third of the central compartment and forms a sub-division or platform 25m by 30m. In the SW corner of the W compartment, a set of small fishponds are carefully arranged to form 3 sides of a square open to the E. The W pond measures 33m by 6m-7m, the S pond 24m by 7m (both of these are over 1m deep and of careful construction); the N pond is 18m by up to 10m and irregular, perhaps altered. Each of the N and S ponds has a neat dam at its W end, with gaps for water control, and an outlet from the W pond into the moat opens from its NW corner.

There is well-preserved ridge and furrow on 3 sides of the moat. That on the N is clearly late in form and relationships. In the small triangular area to the W, ridge and furrow 8m-10m broad appears to be associated with a broad low headland at its N end and seems to be too short for ploughing and truncated by all surrounding features, including the moat. Ridges in the garden of Old Hall are tree-planting or orchard banks.

A number of details hint at the possibility that the W two compartments of the moat might perhaps represent an extension of its earlier form, namely - the curve on the N arm of the moat, the form of the S part of subdividing ditch 'a' and the change in the outer bank on the S, the relationship to ridge and furrow to the W. But they are not conclusive.

The former location of a park associated with the moat is perhaps indicated by two strikingly continuous curving field boundaries running NW from the NE corner of the moat out to the R Dee. Associated with the outer line there survives in places (*eg* at SJ 4194 6372 and W of SJ 4156 6397) a substantial bank up to 6m across and 0.5m high, though generally such field evidence does not exist. E and SE of the moat, the park seems to have extended E to Huntington Lane (the Chester-Aldford road) to judge from abutment details,⁷

but no good field evidence for its boundary has been noted. The whole area formerly was covered with ridge and furrow of varied form and date, much of which still survives.⁸

The approach to the moat may have been from the NW. A road is shown on OS 1st edition 1" sheets following first one then the other of the continuous boundaries that suggest a park. It may have led to a lost ford of R Dee - Claverton ford at SJ 412 640 on the Claverton-Chester boundary - that is well evidenced in medieval documentation.⁹

Footnotes

1. VCH Cheshire, 3 (1980), 132.
2. As suggested in PN Cheshire, vol 4, 117.
3. VCH Cheshire, 3 (1980), 143.
4. Cheshire Sheaf, 34 (1939), 107, 109, 111.
5. J Beck, Tudor Cheshire (1969), 98; Cheshire Sheaf, 34 (1939), 97, 99; Commonwealth Church Surveys, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, vol 1 (1878), 250-1.
6. Cheshire Sheaf, 14 (1917), 56; D and S Lysons, Magna Britannia, vol II pt II (1810), 617; series of county maps in Chester Central Library.
7. See fn 4.
8. RAF, CPE/UK 1935/2209-10 (17-1-47).
9. PN Cheshire, vol 4, 162.

1:1000

Wington Mot
Huntington
Cheshire

ROYAL COMMISSION HISTORICAL MONUMENTS (ENGLAND)

site name	Huntington Hall	classification	moat
parish	Huntington		
county	Cheshire		
NGR	SJ 4197847	DS	SJ 46 SW
scale	1:1000		
surveyed by	P.E. R.W.N.		22.8.85
			0 10 40metres

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