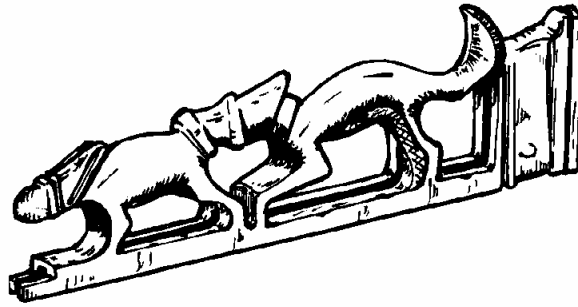


Amphill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

The Orientation of Amphill Old House or Castle

Michael J. B. Turner

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M J B Turner, Ampthill & District Archaeological and Local History Society
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Introduction

There are three main articles published which give details of the Manor of Ampthill, ref.1-3. These articles give a wealth of information regarding the site but appear to have misinterpreted the data in some areas. For example in ref.1 the author mistakenly places the lodge associated with Bryan or Bryant in the Little Park whereas it appears more likely from ref.7 that the lodgings of the keeper of the Great Park, Bryan, were on the main site and that a new lodge was being built and later extended in a New Park. Ref.3 also suggests the New Park is the Little Park whereas the information derived from refs. 5-8 clearly distinguishes three separate parks i.e. the Great Park, the Little Park and the New Park.

Refs 2 and 3 give details of the plans held at Hatfield which are recognised to be those of the buildings in the Great Park at Ampthill circa 1567. Both authors give the probable orientation as being with the Well-house court on the north side.

This report examines the evidence for the orientation presented in these publications and other information obtained including that from some of the accounts of reparation works at Ampthill.

Evidence

The quotations which may give us a clue are :-

1. *"Memorandum that on the 5th of January 1443, in a certain "withdrawing room (camera retractu), namely in the great and principal chamber within the manor or castle of Ampthill of the diocese of Lincoln in the west window of the said withdrawing room," John Geest citizen of London exhibited the testament of the noble lord"* ref.4
2. *"Mending of leads over the great tower standing on the west side of the Manor"* ref.8 p.23
3. *" It apperith by the este wyndow in the chapelle withyn the castelle of Anthille that he (Sir John Cornwall) married yn a noble blood"* ref.2 p.205
4. *"laying of a hollow sluice over the south side of kings privy kitchen"* ref.7 p.28
5. *"mending of eight doors in the lodgings on the east and north side of bass court"* ref.7 p.27
6. *"At the same time tilers were busy ripping and retiling the roofs of the great hall and all the lodgings on the south and east sides of the inner court, while plasterers were repairing broken places on the north and east sides of the base court."* ref. 3 p.41

With these extracts in mind we can now look at the plan shown in ref. 3., figure 1. This is a copy of the plan held in the archive at Hatfield House and has been identified as being the circa 1567 plot of the buildings in the Great Park at Ampthill.

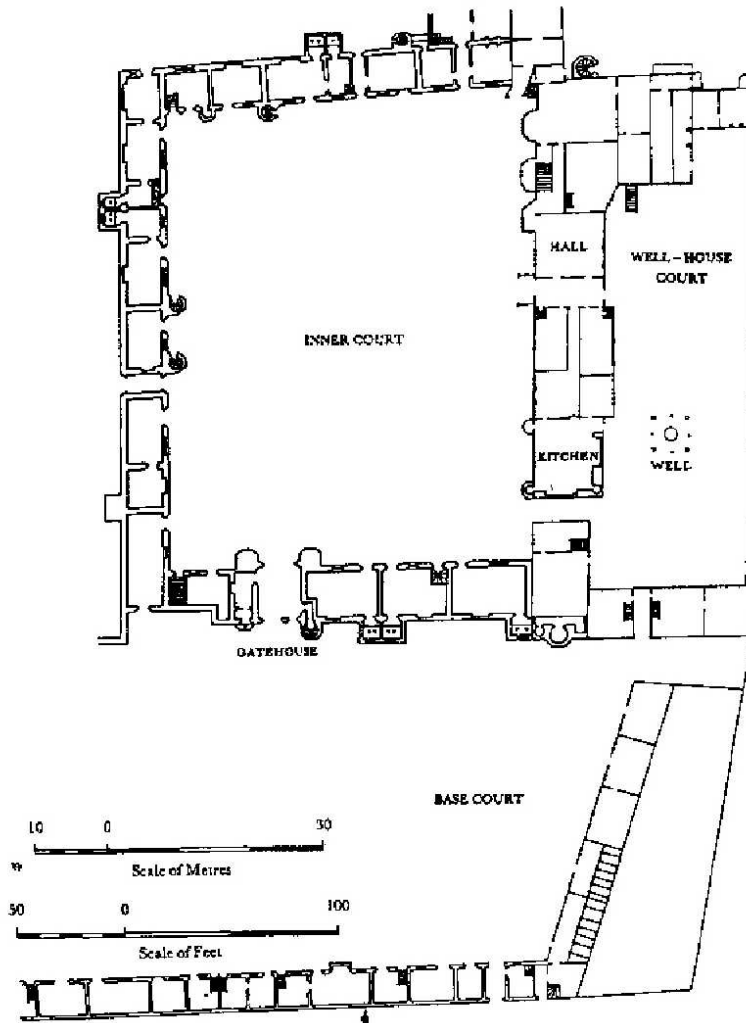


Figure 1. Plan of Ampthill House circa 1567

Regarding quotation 1, the location of the original *withdrawing room ... the great and principal chamber* is difficult to establish with the only guide being the ground floor plan of 1567 drawn some 124 years after the will was read. The only large rooms on the ground floor with windows appear to be in the wing alongside the well-house court. If one of these rooms was the withdrawing room then it would place the wellhouse court on the east side of the site. However the great stairwell may have led to large chambers with windows on the first floor which might indicate a different orientation.

Regarding quotation 2, there are no towers as such shown on the above plan so if Leland is correct in writing in 1538 “four or five faire towers of stone in the inner warde, beside the basse-courte” one must assume he is referring to stairwell towers of which there are several including one very large one, approximately 13 feet by 10 feet, Figure 2. If this is the “great tower” referred to in the accounts as being on the west side of the manor then the orientation is either with the wellhouse court to the north or to the west.

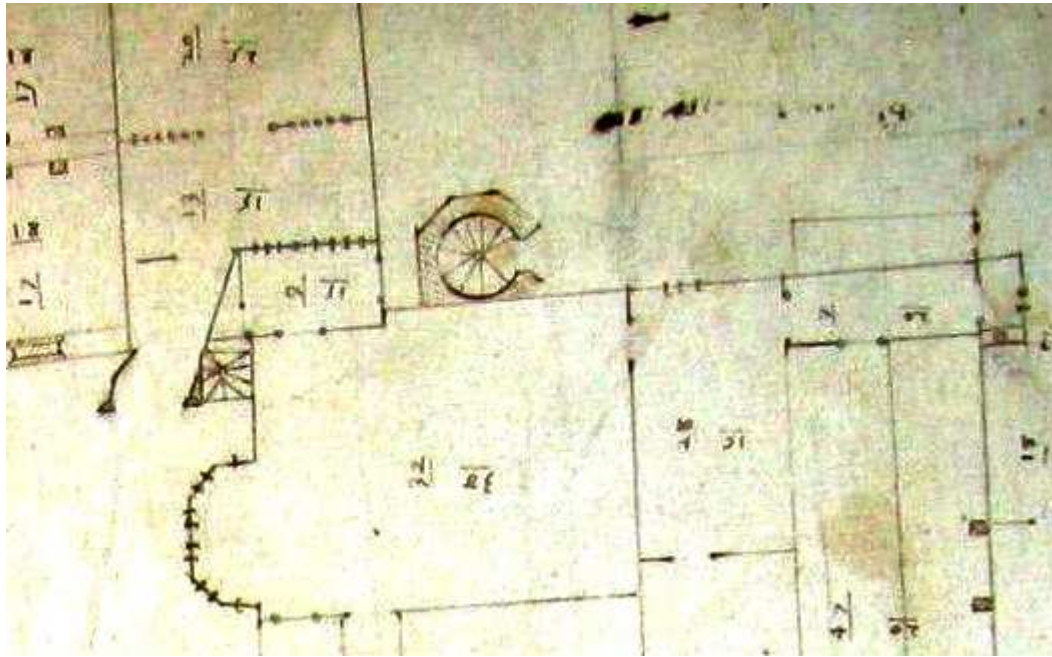


Figure 2. Large stairwell, possibly the great tower on the west side referred to in accounts.

Regarding quotation 3, in the proposed works on the 1567 plan, the chapel, according to Colvin, is shown near to this stairwell. Figure 3.

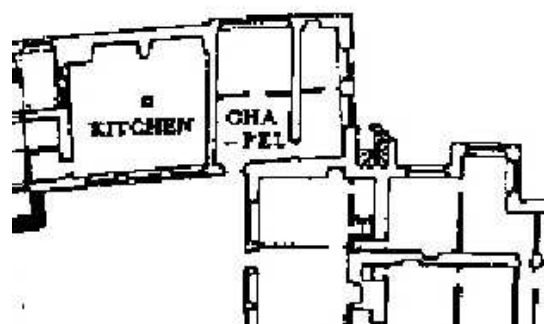


Figure 3. Site of chapel according to Colvin shown in proposed works

The chapel is not very well defined but it is difficult to see how an east window can fit with either of the orientations derived from the “great tower”. However it is worth

noting that on the actual drawings in the Hatfield archive there are no named rooms. If Colvin is correct in identifying the chapel then the orientation most likely to provide the east window is with the wellhouse court on the south side or less likely on the east side.

Regarding quotation 4, the privy kitchen is not identified on the plan so the sluice being on the south side is of no help.

Regarding quotation 5, the bass court is shown with only two sides. If it only had two sides then for these to be the east and north sides the orientation must be with the wellhouse court on the north side.

Assuming quotation 6 to be correctly worded it is reasonable to assume that the great hall was not on the south or east side of the inner court. Only two orientations are then possible one with the wellhouse court to the west, which puts the bass court to the north, or more likely the other orientation with the wellhouse court to the north once again.

Additional Evidence

On the 1567 plans there are two overlays showing proposals for new buildings in and around the wellhouse court. It is significant that the overlays, Fig.4, which show extensive building works, do not propose any building outside the wall of the wellhouse court apart from two jaques and an external stairwell. There must be a good reason for this. Could it be that the wellhouse court was on the north side and almost abutting the edge of the scarp slope?

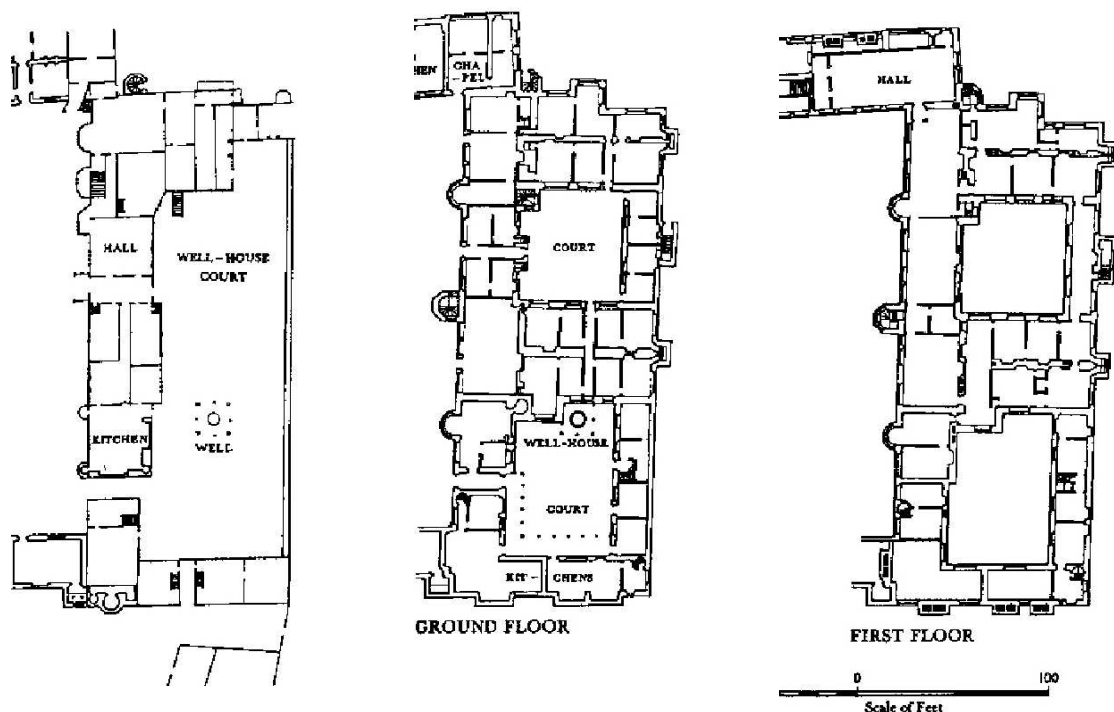


Figure 4. The original plan of the wellhouse court wing and the proposed rebuilding of that area showing the ground floor and first floor. Note the position of the well is respected in the proposals.

Circa 1603 John Thorpe prepared a plan entitled “Amphill Old House enlarged per J Thorpe” which is held in the archives at the Sir John Soane’s Museum. The only part of Thorpe’s plan that roughly coincides with the 1567 plan is the side which has two stairwells in the inner court and two protrusions on the outer wall, probably jaques. See figures 5 and 6. On the opposite wing of Thorpe’s plan one can see written in front of a proposed loggia with a first floor gallery “a very steep hill hear”. If the coincidence of the two plans is correct then this would agree again with an orientation in which the wellhouse court is on the north side.

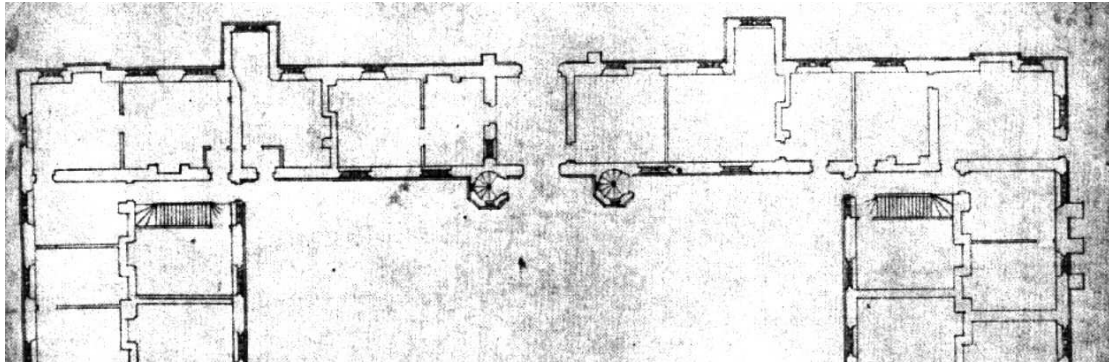


Figure 5. Part of Thorpe’s plan c.1606 based on the ruins of Amphill Old House.

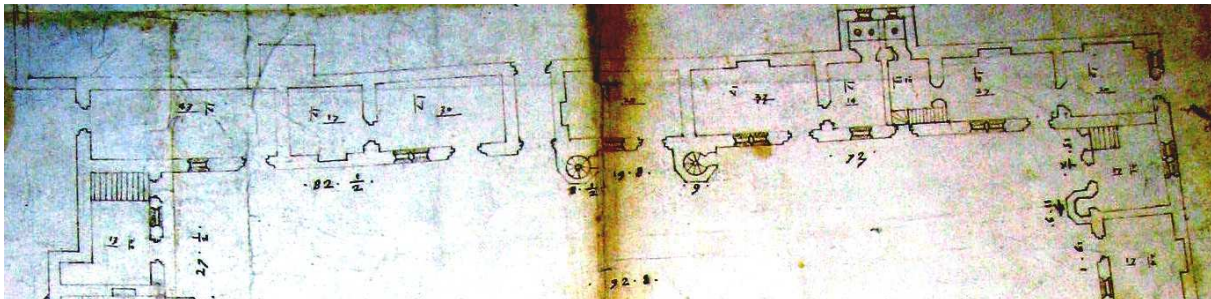


Figure 6. Part of the plan at Hatfield showing parts of the Old House still there in 1567.

There is much to be said in favour of the orientation with the wellhouse court to the north. It would place the main king’s apartments facing south to get the full benefit of the sun. Only two things make one query this orientation. Firstly the presumed chapel seems to be set with no east window. Secondly the well appears to be sited towards the edge of the scarp slope. Whether this is sensible depends on how far back the building was set from the steep slope and how deep the well was. In the accounts we have two records of the weight of the rope used in the great well, ref.7, p.25 and ref.8, p.27. It appears to be 69 lbs or thereabouts. If one assumes a rope of weight of 2 ounces per foot this would give a length of about 500 feet. If it was twice as heavy then the length becomes about 250 feet. It appears it was indeed a great well and thus could have been to the north side.

Conclusion

There appears to be a lot of evidence supporting the case for the wellhouse court to be on the north side of the building. Geophysics performed on the site by the Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society yielded at least two possible locations for the building complex. Ref. 9. The site is very complex having been occupied in various ways since at least the 15th century. Only excavation could give a definite answer.

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