

The Rediscovery of Bentley Hall, Walsall

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Originally published in *West Midlands Archaeology* Vol 50 (2007), pages 2-5.

Bentley Hall is best known as one of the country houses where Charles II hid during his flight after the Battle of Worcester in 1651. He was sheltered by Colonel John Lane, the owner of the hall at the time, before escaping south disguised as manservant to Jane Lane, the colonel's sister.

The subsequent history of the hall was a sad one. It was neglected and fell into disrepair before being rebuilt on a more minor scale. Finally the surrounding area was mined for coal and the hall was demolished in 1929 amid concerns that it was collapsing into the mine workings. It retained sufficient interest and affection, however, for a cairn to be erected by Walsall Historical Association marking its site in 1934. In 2004, Walsall council decided to renovate the cairn and during the works a short length of possible wall was discovered. This aroused interest in the site

again and, as it lay within a regeneration area, money was found for a campaign of archaeological work. At the time, little was known about the history of the hall, and indeed there was uncertainty over whether the cairn was actually on the site of the hall and whether any remains of the hall had survived the coalmining.



Fig. 1: Bentley Hall in the late 17th century.

The first priority was to find out more about the hall and its surroundings. We are fortunate that a detailed engraving of the hall as it was in the late 17th century was included in Robert Plot's *Natural History of Staffordshire* of 1686 (Fig. 1). This shows an imposing E-shaped brick building of five gables with a central entrance porch. At first sight the building is symmetrical, but when we look in detail the left hand wing is rather wider than the right hand one and its windows are of a different type, suggesting that we are seeing a multi-phased structure (we are grateful to Professor Malcolm Airs, Kellogg College, Oxford, for comments

on the engraving). But what date is the hall? Although often described as Jacobean, the hall is likely in fact to be an Elizabethan structure. An earlier house belonging to Thomas Lane is said to have been burnt down by the mayor and members of the corporation of Walsall in 1580 as part of a dispute over common rights (Walsall Corporation 1882, 110-111). Hence the hall shown in the 17th century engraving is likely to be a late 16th century structure, but perhaps incorporating parts of an earlier building.

There is further supporting evidence for an Elizabethan date if we take a closer look at the drawing of 1682. To the right of the hall is a fantastical square building (Fig. 2), with high chimneys, dormer windows, and perhaps pigeon lofts in the roof. Help was sought again from Professor Airs who was able to suggest that this was a banqueting house, built to surprise and delight in typical Elizabethan fashion, and to point to a close parallel in a building at Bachegraig, North Wales, also now demolished (Louw 1981, 1, Plate 1a). This was built for Sir Richard Clough by Flemish craftsmen in 1567. Clough had close connections with the Low Countries but why a Flemish-inspired building was built in the middle of Staffordshire by Thomas Lane is a mystery.

The subsequent history of the buildings at Bentley is not entirely clear. The banqueting house is not mentioned by any of our later sources and was presumably demolished by the end of the 18th century. Around this time the County Historian Stebbing Shaw talks of the hall having been 'entirely mutilated of late years' and '.. converted into a modern farmhouse for a tenant' (Shaw 1801, 95). There is a further record of the hall '... undergoing thorough repairs' in the mid 19th century (Palmer and Crowquill 1846, 4-5) so that it is uncertain whether the hall which survived into the 20th century contained any remains from, or indeed whether it was in the same location as, the Elizabethan hall.

There are dramatic photographs of Bentley Hall in the 1920s showing an apparently Victorian building with a single east wing with the colliery workings encroaching ever closer (Bott 2000, 53). This photo shows the hall to have been sadly neglected and it is perhaps little wonder that it was demolished soon afterwards.

This is what could be established by documentary study. Further evidence could only be retrieved by fieldwork. Two campaigns of work have taken place. Initial work by Birmingham Archaeology in 2006 comprised geophysical survey (magnetometer and ground penetrating radar survey) and trial trenching. This work demonstrated that remains of the Victorian hall and an associated farm complex to the south east survived (Horsley 2006; Ramsey 2006).



Fig. 2: Bentley Hall - the banqueting house to the east of the main building.

A second season of work was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 2007. Again geophysical survey was undertaken (magnetometer and resistivity survey). The results were disappointing, however, and when trial trenches were opened up it was obvious that a thick layer of recent redeposited material was masking earlier features over much of the area. Accordingly it was decided to position further trial trenches in what appeared to be topographically the most likely areas for the Elizabethan hall. As so often, serendipity played its part, for in excavating a shallow machine trench in order to place an interpretation panel, an early brick wall was discovered. A trench was opened-up around this area and it soon became obvious that we had discovered the southeast corner of the east wing of the Elizabethan building. These comprised stone foundations with a brick wall above. A blocked stone mullioned window may have been for an internal cellar. The Elizabethan wall was subsequently re-used as a foundation for the Victorian hall (McAree 2007)

We can see that a combination of documentary evidence and fieldwork has established Bentley Hall as an important site and that its foundations survive below the present ground surface. It should be emphasised that the use of brick for a building as early as the 1580s is highly unusual and demonstrates a desire on the part of the Lane family to declare their importance and prestige. In this it can be compared with the Great Hall, Wolverhampton - another brick mansion built around the same time (Shaw 2002).

As mentioned above, the Bentley area is currently undergoing regeneration. The archaeological remains lie in open parkland. Hence they are protected for the moment but they also provide an opportunity for community-based archaeological work. The work so far has been undertaken in conjunction with local schools, and great enthusiasm for the work has been shown by the community. Much of the hall lies under the cairn which marks its site, but the banqueting hall lies in a more accessible area and would provide an ideal site for further work.

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The Rediscovery of Bentley Hall, Walsall: Postscript-2009

Since writing this article I have come across further evidence to support the identification of Bentley Hall as an Elizabethan building constructed around 1580. An article in the Staffordshire Historical Collections ('Lane of King's Bromley, formerly of Bentley and the Hyde', *Staffordshire Historical Collections* for 1910, 141-204, William Salt Archaeological Society) publishes extracts from the Inquisitions Post Mortem for the Lane family. These give a long list of holdings of the Lane family. In the case of John Lane, d.1576, he is said to hold the 'manor of Bentley...one messuage...bailiwick of keeping the Hay of Bentley...' His son Thomas Lane, however, died in 1588, seised of the 'manor of Bentley...one messuage...the Hay of Bentley...of the herbage, mines of sea coals, and other profits growing and renewing in the same Hay...the scite of the Mannor or Mansion Howse of Bentley aforesaid...tenementes, milles and Blomesmithies in Bentley'

Hence we can put the building of the hall or mansion house at some point between 1576 and 1588. The IPM also gives a clue as to how the building of the hall was financed, for Thomas seems to have been the first Lane to exploit the resources of coal and iron in the area - a reminder that the history of the exploitation of the mineral resources of the Black Country did not begin with the Industrial Revolution of the mid-18th century but built on an earlier tradition.

I would like to record my thanks to Ruth Vyse and the staff of Walsall Local History Centre for their help in my documentary researches

Mike Shaw, 21st May 2009



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