

Collaborative Doctoral Award

The Evolution of Audley End

Research area: Archaeology

University Partner

University of Sheffield, Department of Archaeology

Project Summary

Audley End house, currently in the care of English Heritage, is one of the most important country houses in England, and yet its archaeological archive (produced from excavations in the 1980s) has received surprisingly little academic attention.

Located on the site of a medieval Benedictine Abbey, Sir Thomas Audley converted the former monastery into a mansion which remained occupied until 1603 when its then current owner Thomas Howard, the Duke of Suffolk rebuilt the house to create the largest private mansion in the country. During the course of the 18th century much of this latter house was in turn demolished, resulting in the property that survives today.

Whilst it has long been appreciated that following the Dissolution many former monastic sites were converted into domestic secular dwellings, the process by which this was undertaken is still relatively poorly understood. The archive from Audley End provides a rare opportunity to study the transformation of an ecclesiastical house and its wider landscape into a secular estate, as well as the material culture of the associated institutions. Furthermore, given that much of the later Jacobean mansion was also subsequently been demolished, further research into the archive will enable improved understanding of this phase.

This seeks to address three interrelated questions that are broad enough in nature to allow the student to mould the project to a certain degree to suit their interests. The first question concerns understanding the initial nature of the conversion of the monastery into a house by Thomas Audley in the 1530s. Whilst it has been suggested by Drury (1982) that the monastic cloister formed the core of the subsequent Tudor courtyard house, this has not been demonstrated archaeologically. The project will see if this suggestion is borne out by the archaeological evidence and provide the first tentative reconstruction of the Tudor house.

The second aim is to provide a more complete understanding of the later Jacobean mansion. Combining the archaeological evidence with the surviving architectural plan and landscape features, the student will produce a more holistic reconstruction of the later house which can directly aid in its current interpretation and presentation to the public.

The final aim is to provide a contextual summary to the material culture of the successive households. Great houses of the Tudor and Jacobean periods were not just architectural entities, but populated with a range of objects that reflected everyday activities. The project will provide an overview and interpretation of 16th and 17th century life in the country house as reflected by the ordinary objects revealed through excavation.

Contact Details

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