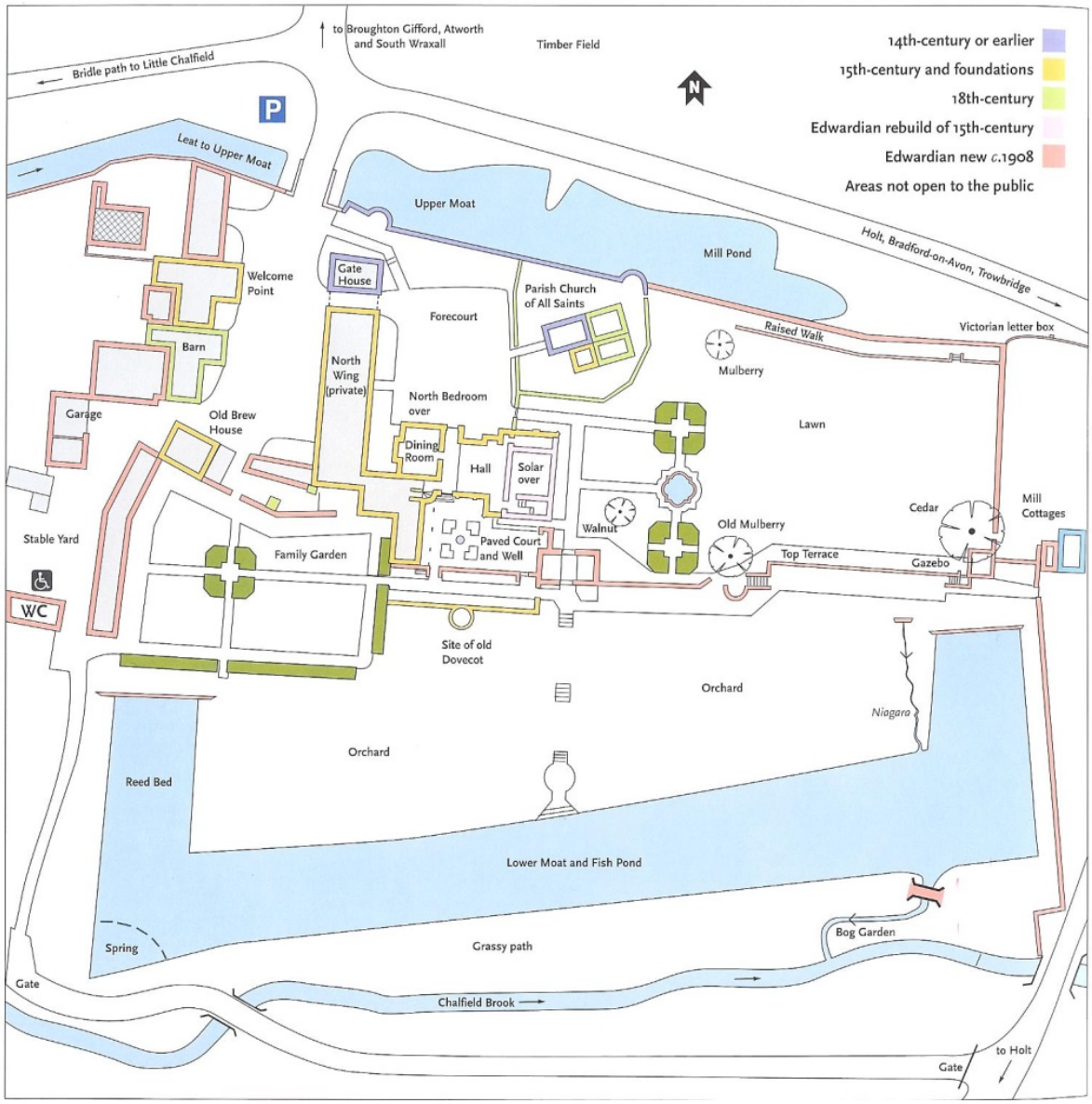
Great Chalfield, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

Great Chalfield manor belonged to a branch of the Percy family in the Middle Ages. One of them probably had the moat dug and the internal stone wall, of which a part survives, built, possibly in the thirteenth century. Its bastions have the remains of arrow-slits, unless those are later romanticizing features. The site would have been defensible, though without a strong tower could hardly have been regarded as a castle; the Percy house was a courtyard, with a tower attached to one range, but its diameter is too small for that to have been much more than a staircase turret. The house went through various owners and other vicissitudes, but was rescued by a Wiltshire business-man, who employed W. H. Brakspear as architect (see Paul Jack's contribution, below). It is now owned by the National Trust (plan reproduced with permission of NT Images).



Security rather than impregnability is likely to have been the intention of Thomas Tropenell, the builder of most of the surviving house. He was a local man and a lawyer who acquired the estate seemingly on a lease, and subsequently and after much litigation by purchase, during the late 1420s/60s (Driver 2000). In the house is the large and impressive cartulary that documents these struggles, which are typical of the inter- and intra-family feuding that characterized the fifteenth century, even below the level of royal battles and hollow crowns. Tropenell was adviser to Lord Hungerford, the dominant local baron; he was not therefore going to build anything that looked like a castle to challenge nearby Farleigh. (The contemporary Paston letters show a similar society.)

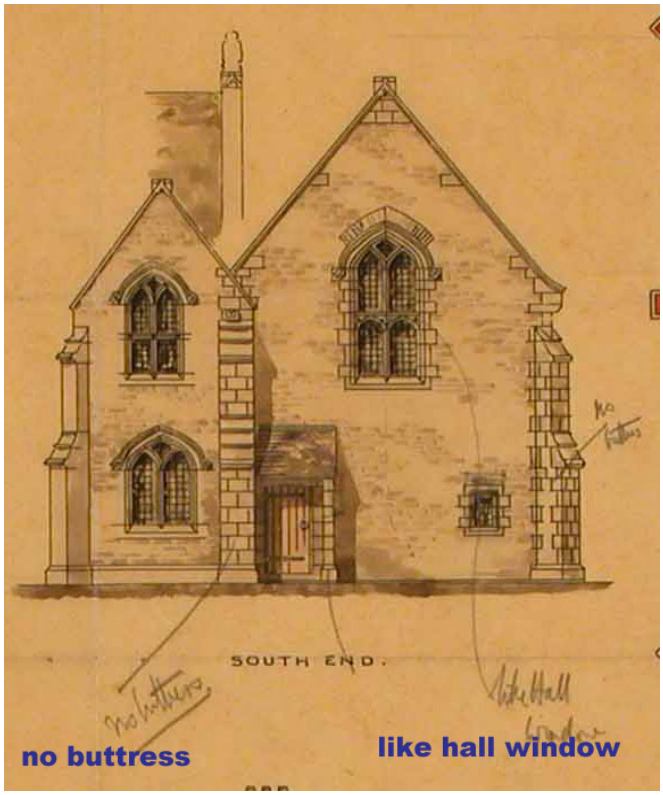
From the 1460s onwards, Tropenell built the house that is visible today (Emery 2006); this was a new range fronting the courtyard, retaining the Percies' other enclosures (illustration:

painting of 1823 by J.C. Buckler). A two-storey porch leads into the hall, originally presumably with a screens passage – there is a 'minstrel's gallery' above. Unusually, a chamber, 'the parlour', occupies the space on the other side of the screens passage, where service-rooms would normally have been. These were presumably accessed from the door in the corner leading to the side range, and 'the parlour' may have been a private dining room for the lord's family which meant that their food did not have to be taken through the hall. The hall is interesting for what it was not – it is quite wide and high, but had a ceiling, not an open roof, and a side fireplace not an open hearth. It probably did not have a dais, just the owner's table near the fireplace and lit by windows which are not full-height oriels, but are within two small projecting blocks that are vaulted over at first-floor level. The windows do not have elaborate cusps, putting more emphasis on the light coming through the glass. On the outside, the projecting chimney-breast on the main front breaks the precise symmetry of the building, which had two cross-wings for chambers, the upper ones with fine semi-circular oriel windows. Features include unusual mask-like squints into the hall – if they are part of the original building, were they for security or so that servants could see without being seen?

Changes made since Tropenell's time include the insertion in the mid sixteenth century of fine plaster-work in the parlour; a most unusual painting may date to that period, unless it is a portrait of Tropenell himself. Various outer buildings, including the gateway and a timber-framed lodgings range, were added (Garnett 2013, 16-24). Less happily, three of the inner courtyard ranges were destroyed in and after the 1640s Civil War, when the house was garrisoned and besieged, though no bulwarks can be seen today. The hall was subdivided with an inserted floor in the nineteenth century, when the solar (east) wing was largely demolished.

The Restoration of Great Chalfield Manor, 1904-12. By Paul Jack

Great Chalfield manor aroused considerable interest amongst 'Gothic Revivalists' in the early nineteenth century and in 1836 Pugin's colleague Thomas Larkins Walker published a fine series of drawings, the originals still remaining in the house. The building had by then been converted into a farmhouse, and continued to decline until Robert Fuller persuaded his father to allow him to attempt a reconstruction. G.P. Fuller, whose brewing interests had enabled him to add the manor to his local portfolio in 1878, agreed on condition that Harold Brakspear was used as the architect. The survival of over two hundred drawings made by Brakspear as well as the four hundred pages of letters he wrote to Fuller, with the recipient's draft replies often scribbled on the back, have given me an unusual opportunity to recreate the fascinating relationship which developed between architect and client over several years. What emerges is a fruitful collaboration interspersed with major disagreements reflecting contrasting approaches to the increasingly controversial activity of 'restoring' historic buildings.



Drawing by W. H. Brakspear, Dec. 1905, with hand-written comments by Robert Fuller (annotated in capitals below for clarity)

Harold Brakspear was a pioneering archaeologist with a particular interest in monastic buildings. His family had moved to Wiltshire from Cheshire to escape the stigma associated with his illegitimacy – his father had married his dead wife's sister – but he had succeeded in forging significant local contacts, was a competition winner for RIBA, a member of the RAI and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. None of this shielded him from damning criticism from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings for his 'restoration' of Malmesbury Abbey (see separate on-line entry). SPAB's insistence that all new work should be made distinctive certainly influenced his approach to his first major secular commission at Great Chalfield. However, Robert Fuller, while keen to use Walker's drawings as a detailed model, was more inclined to create an overall medieval feel by 'matching in' – the sort of stylistic unification championed by Viollet-le-Duc and, rather less academically, by Alvray Tipping at *Country Life*. Moreover it became increasingly clear that a plan which provided for the requirements of comfortable living – gender-segregated servants' quarters, an integrated but remote kitchen, a smoking-room and a sprung dance floor - was bound to have massive implications for the external fabric.

Both men were content to remove the Victorian ceilings and fenestration in the hall and were excited about reusing archeological remains where they could be discovered as, for example, the Great Chamber fireplace. However, Fuller rejected Brakspear's use of distinctive heavy mortar in the reconstructed east wing, insisted that the unusual wind braces above be 'as before', and attempted to ensure that the extra chimneys in the servants' quarters be modelled on one dimly visible in a Buckler painting. They appeared not to have worked, so were pulled down and replaced by large contemporary stacks.

North façade, with Brakspear's distinctive dining-room window bottom right (photograph by permission of the National Trust:NT Images/Andrew Butler)

Dining-room window showing use of the distinctive Box stone (photography by Paul Jack)

Although Brakspear's use of a yellow weathering stone from Box rather than Hazelbury ensured that some of the new work is distinctive, the overall 'feel' of the house owes most to Fuller's determination. The result is a mostly genuine medieval facade, especially towards the north, complemented by cleverly contrived attractive fakes elsewhere.

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Great Chalfield church was referred to as a chapel in 1316 but as a parish church in 1346 (Chandler and Parker 2006). The nave may have Norman origins, rebuilt in the fourteenth century, and the font, if original, implies early parochial status. Behind the pulpit is a carved stone that may be pre-Norman and would certainly repay study. Whatever its status, its location within the moated enclosure would have made it seem like a family chapel, and Thomas Tropenell created within it a chantry chapel emblazoned with heraldry showing his family connections, albeit that apart from the Percies they were not particularly distinguished. Wall-paintings appropriately showed the sufferings of St Catherine, the patron saint of lawyers because she successfully advocated Christianity against the best philosophers of her time. Other fittings are seventeenth-century, and much restoration was done by the Fuller family at the time that they were restoring the manor-house and creating the gardens.

References and further reading

CHANDLER, J. AND PARKER, D. 2006. *The Church in Wiltshire*, East Knoyle: Hobnob Press
DRIVER, J. T. 2000. A 'Perilous, Covetous Man': the career of Thomas Tropenell Esq. (*c.* 1405-88), a Wiltshire lawyer, Parliamentary burgess and builder of Great Chalfield, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 93, 82-9
EMERY, A. 2006. *Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales 1300-1500. Volume III Southern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
GARNETT, O. 2013. *Great Chalfield Manor, Wiltshire* (London: National Trust)

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The RAI is grateful to Paul Jack for his contribution to these notes, and to him, to Anthony Emery and to Robert Floyd for acting as guides when the RAI visited. The notes were prepared by David A. Hinton; other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.