



The Bermuda National Trust Verdmont Archaeology 2007



Significance of Verdmont

Standing proudly in Smith's Parish off Collectors Hill, Verdmont is one of Bermuda's most significant historic treasures. Built c. 1710, Verdmont is a unique example of early Georgian architecture. While the exact date of the building is a mystery, what is remarkable is that the footprint of the house has remained virtually the same over almost 300 years. What is also remarkable is that it was lived in until 1951 without plumbing or electricity. It was subsequently purchased, restored and opened as a museum in 1957 that is maintained by the Bermuda National Trust.



An unbroken line of ownership of the property can be constructed from Governor William Sayle, 1633, to the present. From deeds, wills, assessments, manuscripts, letters, maps and previous studies, the genealogy of the owners of Verdmont is fairly well known, as are some details of their interests.

Figure 1: Detail from the 1901 Ordnance Survey (the Savage Map) of the property

However, very little is recorded and known about the enslaved members of the household: their roles and contribution to the household and community; and their social, familial and personal details. Yet as a featured site on Bermuda's African Diaspora Heritage Trail, it is through archaeology that we can try to learn more about these persons and gain a better understanding of the island's heritage.

As part of Verdmont Museum's Golden Anniversary, the Bermuda National Trust embarked on a programme of archaeological investigation of the site during June/July 2007 made possible through a generous grant for \$10,000 from the Bank of Bermuda Foundation.

Archaeological Investigations

In 2006 a field school from Ironbridge Gorge Archaeological Unit conducted a series of small test pits or trenches throughout the property. These revealed a post hole and rock cut along the eastern side of the property which warranted further scrutiny. It was decided that in 2007 an archaeology dig would focus on this area to search for a number of buildings that are recorded in archival documents but no above ground structures have survived. Furthermore archaeologists were looking for evidence to illuminate the social history of the site.

Organized by the Archaeology Committee and run by Brent Fortenberry with Travis Parno, both Historic Archaeology postgraduate students from the University of Bristol, the excavations were staffed by Bermudian archaeology students and local volunteers. Work began at the beginning of June and ran for five weeks. All post excavation work was completed at the Archaeology Lab at Reeve Court in St. George's to ensure all artefacts recovered remained in Bermuda.

The Lawn

The formal north lawn presented a conundrum in that the eastern wall was built twice the distance from the main building than the western structures. Therefore two small trenches were excavated, one against the lawn's perimeter wall and another in a more central location, to determine whether a structure had existed. While the latter contained no artefacts and was very shallow, the wall trench revealed a number of early ceramic pieces and was three times the depth. Alan Rance from Bermuda Waterworks then conducted a non-invasive survey of the area using Ground Penetrating Radar. The survey did not reveal any further evidence, so the formal lawn was spared further unwarranted excavation and efforts could be directed elsewhere.



Figure 2: Surveying the North Lawn with Ground Penetrating Radar

The Privy

Another question that needed to be answered was why the privy or outhouse was located so far from the main house (over 30 metres). Once the old, rotten seats were removed and the surface was cleared of modern rubbish it this became readily apparent: the privy had been built on a natural cave or sinkhole feature, which provided a ready-made cess pit. Core samples taken from the sandy bottom revealed a depth of over one metre while the diameter of the top of the cave feature was some five metres. Because of the large area and depth as well as the sandy context a considerable amount of time would be required to excavate the privy safely and so it was decided to return at a latter date. Privies are unusual rich sources of archaeological information and even the surface finds yielded an intact Pioneer Dairy milk bottle. Therefore returning to excavate the Verdmont privy is a priority for the Archaeology Committee.



Figure 3: The cave beneath the privy



Figure 4: Local volunteer Andrew Baylay surveying the privy

The Eastern Boundary

The 2006 season revealed both a post hole and a rock cut wall along the eastern boundary which are indicative of some type of man-made structure. Therefore the project concentrated in this area. Both 2006 trenches were re-opened and expanded while eight additional trenches were excavated. A second post hole was discovered six yards from the first and the rock cut wall was revealed to be a significant rectangular chamber with clear evidence of 18th century occupation. The large quantity of animal bones recovered suggest that this feature was associated with animal husbandry and might have been an animal enclosure with the post holes supporting an associated fenced area.



Figure 5: The main feature discovered: a possible animal enclosure



Figure 6: Travis Parno drawing a plan of the enclosure

Artefacts

Some fifteen cubic feet of artefacts were recovered from the Verdmont dig in 2007. Work is currently being undertaken to formally identify the artefacts and interpret their significance. Generally the finds dated from the 18th and early 19th centuries, which is what we would expect to find from a house built around 1710.



Figure 7: Ceramic Assemblage



Figure 8: Bone Token



Figure 9: Ornamental Ceramic Shell



Figure 10: Clay Pipe Bowl



Figure 11: Iron Key



Figure 12: Faunal Assemblage (Animal Bones)

What is significant however is the wide range and number of very early artefacts, from clay pipes to large coarseware storage jars. Many of these are rare finds in Bermuda, which accords with the importance of the site. Furthermore, the huge number of animal bones recovered can tell us not only about the diet of early Bermudians but may help us to understand the complex social patterns surrounding those who lived and worked at Verdmont.

Open Day

As with all BNT excavations, an Open Day was held at the end of the dig on the afternoon of July 7th with approximately 100 persons attending. Tours were given by the archaeologists and the Friends of Verdmont to members of the public of the site, the house and the excavations.



Figure 13: Archaeology Committee Chairman, Richard Lowry, showing off a sheep's tooth

Report

The Excavation Director, Brent Fortenberry, is currently writing up the report of the dig as part of his postgraduate research for the University of Bristol. His dissertation will be ready by September 2007 and copies will be provided to the Bank of Bermuda Foundation, the Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs and the Bermuda Archives.



Figure 14: Excavation Director, Brent Fortenberry, discussing the dig