

NONSUCH

A Lost Tudor Palace

By PHILIPPA GLANVILLE

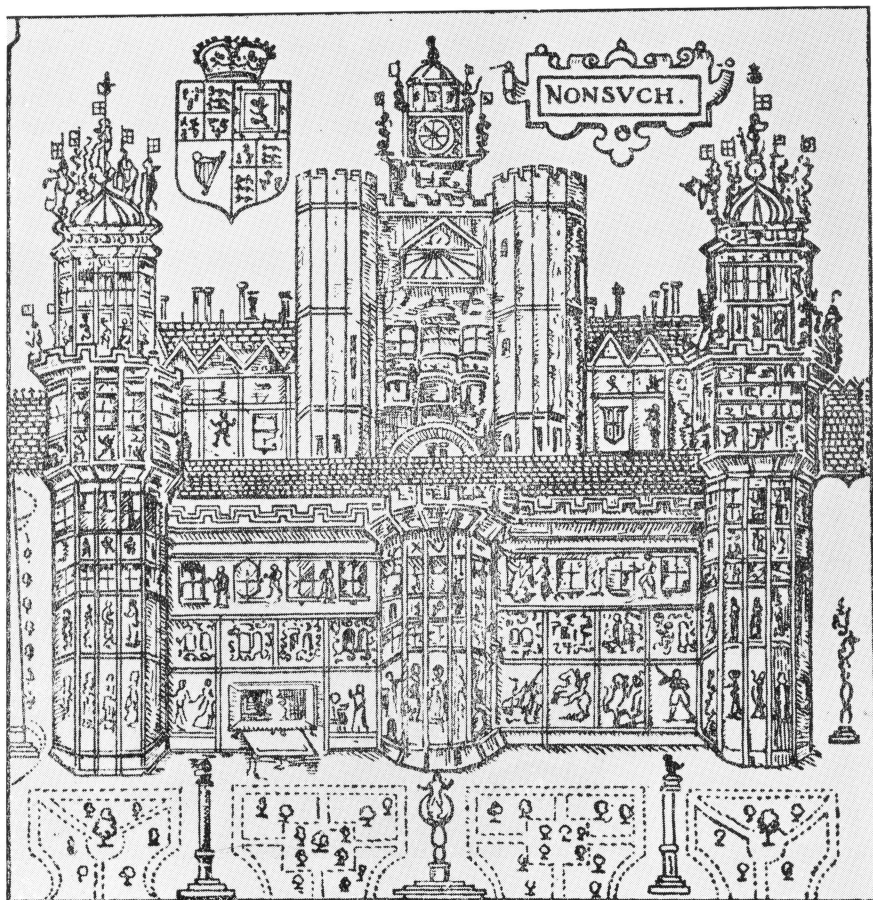
IN 1538 Henry VIII owned 13 places in and near London. Unlike most of these, Nonsuch was built entirely as an Henrician venture, to satisfy the King's desire for a great hunting estate close to London and to his riverside palace at Hampton Court.

The splendid Renaissance extravaganza Henry built has now vanished below the pleasant park of Nonsuch. The site itself was lost until John Dent¹ and Martin Biddle independently worked out its probable location from documentary sources. Excavations in 1959 and 1960, directed by Martin Biddle, recovered both the ground-plan and fragments of its magnificent architectural detail². Only a small selection of the finds from these could be included in the present London Museum exhibition.

The palace was constructed on a plan of two storey buildings ranged round inter-connecting open-air courts, a traditional form on which a riot of Renaissance decoration was lavished. Henry vied with Francis I of France in luring Italian crafts-

Illustrations:
London Museum

1. J. Dent, *The Quest for Nonsuch* (1962).
2. M. Biddle, "Nonsuch Palace 1959-60: An Interim Report" *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 58 (1961)



The south front of Nonsuch Palace from John Speed's map of Surrey, 1610. It shows the front laid out with formal gardens and statuary, the carved slate freize by Bellin and the towers topped by weather vanes.

See also plan on page 113.



Carving of a ram's head in stone, from the excavations

men to his court. From Fontainebleau, his rival's pride, Henry secured the services of Nicholas Bellin of Modena³, who was creator of the fantastic stucco reliefs framed in elaborately carved slate, which ran round the walls of the Inner Court and along the south front of the palace.

Within a short time of finding a suitable site near Epsom in Surrey, Henry had arranged the clearance of the village and church of Cuddington. The patron of the church, Merton Priory, had been dissolved with other monastic houses only a week before. In April 1538 cartloads of carved stone from the priory building were shifted to provide foundations for Nonsuch. Some of this reused stone, including a magnificent gilded and painted boss, can be seen in the exhibition. The Inner Court was built over the site of the church itself, the plan of which, and many graves were excavated.

The name "Nonesuch," which appears in the first building accounts, indicates Henry's characteristic urge to create a palace without compare in Europe. Nonsuch was to attract foreign visitors, some of whom left vivid descriptions, adding much to our detailed knowledge of its appearance. Surprisingly, it was a small palace, less than 150 yards long, and would have fitted into a modern football field.

Sadly, however, Henry seems to have rarely visited his brain-child, perhaps finding riding increasingly painful. From the beginning it was put in the care of a Keeper, who maintained it for occasional royal visits, supervised foreign visitors and the hun-

ting of the thousand fallow deer in the parks. It also became a glorified furniture repository, to be drawn upon when the resources elsewhere were strained.

Under Mary the palace left royal ownership for nearly forty years. She disliked hunting, the principal amenity, and was considering demolition, but in 1556 exchanged it with the Earl of Arundel for Suffolk estates. Arundel embellished the house and laid out the gardens, filling them with classical statues.

Queen Elizabeth stayed frequently at Nonsuch, first on her summer progress of 1559. After Arundel's death in 1579 his son-in-law, John, Lord Lumley inherited the palace, creating a splendid library of 3,000 books and a renowned collection of astronomical instruments. A fragment from an armillary sphere, possibly from this collection, was found in the excavations. The library later passed to James I's eldest son Henry, and now forms part of the Royal Library in the British Museum. A well in the kitchen court contained a set of pewter plates bearing the arms of Lord Lumley.

After the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the palace was given to James I's queen, Anne of Denmark. James himself made use of it mainly to indulge his passion for hunting, and his sons Henry and Charles I enjoyed both the sport and the pleasant environs.

Charles I spent considerable sums on repairs, but with the coming of the Civil War ceased to visit



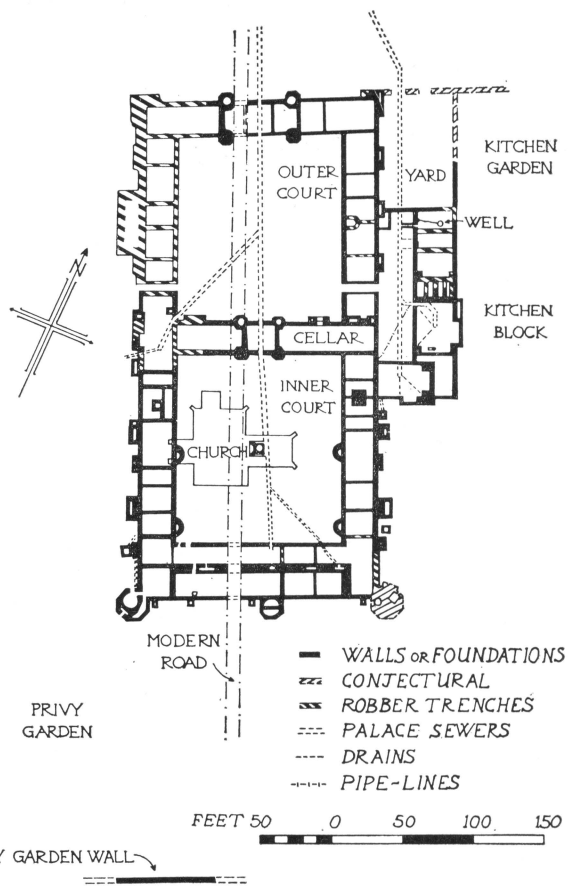
Another stone fragment, the head of a cherub

3. M. Biddle, "Nicholas Bellin of Modena" *J Arch Assoc* 29 (1966).

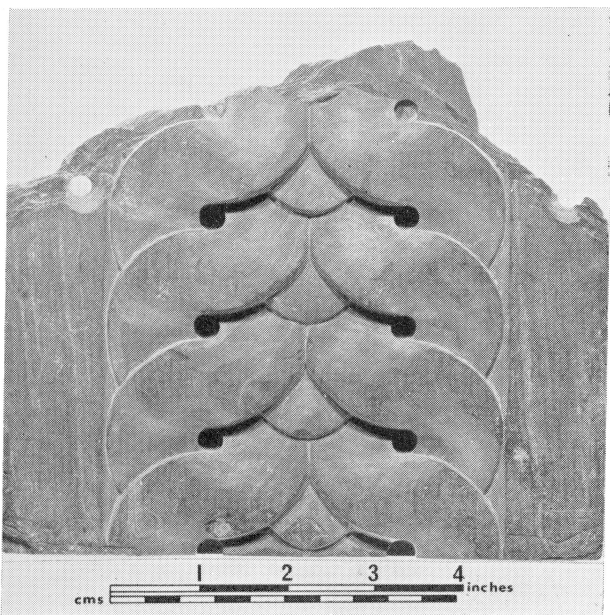
Nonsuch. In 1649, the year of his execution, all royal properties were confiscated and sold by the Parliamentary Commissioners. In 1650 a survey was made of the palace and grounds, which survives in the Public Record Office and is a unique record of its complexities.

The last stage in the history of Nonsuch followed the death of Henrietta Maria, Charles I's widow, when Charles II gave it to his wildly extravagant mistress, Barbara Castlemaine. She had no intention of occupying the old hulk of a palace and in 1682 decided to rid herself of a liability. The Keeper, Lord Berkeley outbid a speculative builder named Frith, who built much of Soho. He proceeded to demolish the Inner Courts, using the stone to build Durdans, his house in Epsom, where fragments of the re-used stones from Merton are built into the cellar walls. The demolition continued, destroying the Outward Court and leaving the towers to crumble, so that a sketch of 1702 shows only a ruin.

The finds from the Biddle excavations, apart from fragments of carved and gilded slate and pieces of carved plaster from the Inner Court walls and the re-used stone, consisted mainly of domestic refuse, pottery, glass, pewter and bone. The biggest source of these finds were the series of garderobe pits which lined the east and west walls. These pits were regularly cleared out until about 1650, and possibly in 1665 when extensive repairs took place, but not again until the palace was finally abandoned and demol-



Plan of the 1959-60 excavations



Fragment of carved slate from the frieze

ished in the 1680s. These dates are confirmed by the series of clay pipes, stoneware and two dated sherds of 1650 and 1671. The bulk of the pottery exhibited at the London Museum is glazed earthenware, with some delft, including a Netherlands majolica jug of about 1550, a pair to one already in the museum.

After the 1959-60 excavations, the sites of Nonsuch palace and its Banqueting House were back-filled. The only visible trace is the chalkpit outside the early 19th century mansion house, now overgrown with grass and trees, from which Henry VIII's workmen cut the foundation blocks for his palace half a mile away. Visitors to Nonsuch Park entering from the London Road can walk up the avenue past the site, a grass covered ruin.

The Nonsuch Park Excavations Committee generously gave the finds to the London Museum, to ensure their preservation and eventual display. The present exhibition is open until April 1970. It is hoped to use some of the material from Nonsuch in a larger exhibition devoted to royal palaces in and near London.