

NEW PALACE YARD, Westminster, has been undergoing mechanical excavation since the summer of 1972 for an underground car-park to be used by M.P.s. In February 1973, at a depth of about one foot below ground surface, the foundations of the Great Conduit or fountain that stood opposite Westminster Hall, were uncovered.

The 'excavation' itself has been a source of some controversy and embarrassment to the D.O.E. Official policy was to avoid archaeological excavation on any scale, but instead to keep "a careful watching brief while being ready to take every possible opportunity to record the position of any structures that might be disclosed and to salvage any significant finds." However, salvage operations under difficult conditions among active heavy machinery are inadequate on any site, a fact no doubt clear to the Inspector of Ancient Monuments and his assistant who have been in daily attendance on the site since July 1972.

In a letter of 29 November 1972, addressed to Mr. Tam Dalyell (M.P. for West Lothian), Mr. Paul Channon, Minister for Housing and Construction said that an archaeological excavation delaying the construction of the car-park would be expensive and inconvenient, and that: "We could only have justified that sort of interference if we had really important and closely defined archaeological objectives in view." However, archaeological sites have a disconcerting tendency to produce the unexpected—witness the unanticipated bulk of structures found on the Baynard's Castle site—results that cannot be exactly or "closely defined," or assessed in importance before hand, except by eyes capable of probing the soil.

A press release issued by the D.O.E. in February 1973, summarized the information salvaged from the site. This was presented as a written answer to the House of Commons by Mr. Channon, in reply to questions raised by Mr. Dalyell. He said: "A guide trench excavated round the perimeter of the car park for the diaphragm wall provided a cross-section of successive layers of leveling material and road surfaces, and showed that the area had been an open space since the end of the 11th century. However, the whole of the upper surface of the Yard has been cleared cautiously with machinery so that work might be stopped immediately if remains were encountered. When this happens facilities are available for the thorough examination of the remains. Prior to the discovery of the Great Conduit or fountain, work was halted twice for periods of 24 hours to enable stone and brick channels and drains to be examined.

## The Fountain at New Palace Yard

"There is no evidence of Norman or pre-Norman buildings.

"The Great Conduit or fountain referred to in my answer of 9 February to my Hon. Friend the Member for Cannock is of Plantagenet origin. Richard II's ceremonial entrance to Westminster Hall flanked by two Exchequer buildings lay on the southern margin of the Yard outside the paved area and the site of the car park. Records suggest that the houses of the Vicars who served St. Stephen's



New Palace Yard in 1647 by Wenceslas

# rd, Westminster

RHODA EDWARDS

Chapel and the Star Chamber building lay to the east of the Yard, again beyond the site of the car-park.

“The Tudor Augmentation Office, demolished in 1793 lay to the south-west of the Yard. Traces of its foundations were located, measured and photographed in the autumn 1971.

“Various minor domestic buildings, including taverns, encroached on the Yard in the Stuart period. The foundations of some of them were dis-

covered, recorded and photographed in the trench for the diaphragm wall.”

The location of the Grand Conduit or fountain was somewhat in the nature of a discovery of a six-pence hidden in the ruins of a rich plum cake. Its archaeological significance is perhaps not as great as its publicity value in drawing attention to an historical landmark of Westminster.

The fountain has been illustrated several times, firstly as a small sketched gazebo-like structure on Braun and Hogenberg's map of London of about 1560, published in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* in 1572. Wenceslaus Hollar made the etching illustrated in 1647, showing New Palace Yard, Westminster Hall and the fountain with its onion dome, probably Tudor in date. Inside the superstructure tiered basins seem to be shown, down which the water would cascade. The tower on the right of the picture housed the bell known as Edward of Westminster, which rang the time for Parliament and the Law Courts. Other views of Westminster taken from the Lambeth side of the Thames show this dome rising behind the roof of the Star Chamber building, which means that it must have stood at least fifty feet in height.

The dome and supporting pillars were demolished in about 1670, though the foundations and brick conduits leading into it survived further major building operations in the area until rediscovered this year. From the constructional details of these conduits, a date range of 1440-80 seems possible. In 1443, the rebuilding of a “conduit house” at Westminster is recorded, describing its stone base and timber superstructure with vaulted roof decorated with the arms of Henry VI. As this structure was described as a rebuilding, the foundations were likely to be of a previous date. Fountains are particularly mentioned as being decorated for the coronation of Henry IV in 1399, and of Edward II in 1307, when one of the conduits ran night and day with wine instead of water.

The hydraulics of this fountain are at present a mystery, of how the existing water supply of a small stream rising in Hyde Park, could be converted to sufficient pressure to produce a cascade at least twenty feet high. It was, of course, a public conduit, from which the inhabitants of Westminster could collect drinking water for use in their homes.

It is hoped that when the car-park is completed, and the courtyard grassed or paved, the conduit's stone base will be re-assembled, and may even be fed with water to produce a fountain, which, one suspects may display only a shadow of its former magnificence.



Wenceslaus Hollar, looking west.

(Print: Guildhall Library)