

London's Royal Palaces and Public Buildings: Archaeological Investigations

PHILIP WALKER

DAVID STURDY'S article in the last issue of the *London Archaeologist* (2 no. 16, Autumn 1976), "Mid Pleasures and Palaces: Archaeological Work at the Royal Sites of London," makes a heartfelt plea for "a dramatic change in motivation" where the organisation and publication of Royal Palaces excavations are concerned. Mr Sturdy's enthusiastic attitude towards London's archaeology will be clear to all who have met him, and in this wide-ranging article he makes a number of interesting and telling points. Not all these, however, are conspicuous for their total accuracy as opposed to their punchy delivery. It is the purpose of this article both to reply to some of Mr Sturdy's more contentious remarks, and to outline the Department's plans for the reorganisation of excavations at Royal Palaces and public buildings (a process which, it should be noted, was already well advanced before the appearance of Mr Sturdy's article).

Mr Sturdy rightly dwells on the fact that prompt publication has not, over the years, been one of the most noticeable end-products of archaeological excavations at Royal Palace sites. The background to this situation is discussed below, but at this stage Mr Sturdy's sometimes incomplete presentation of the facts requires comment. Firstly, the Palace of Westminster: the report on the naturally laid strata observed at the New Palace Yard excavations of 1972-74 will incorporate detailed analysis currently being carried out by a soil scientist and a geological specialist, and will be complemented by a study of similar deposits noted during excavations in 1975 at Westminster Hall (carried out by the Inner London Archaeological Unit for the Department of the Environment — see "Westminster Hall Excavation," by David Whipp and Elizabeth Platts in the *London Archaeologist*, 2 no. 14, Spring 1976). Joint publication of these environmental analyses is projected.

Mr Sturdy lists a number of unpublished excavations, many of them done on a small scale, at the Tower of London. Of these, the excavation on the site of the proposed new Jewel House is ready for publication (Mr Sturdy's cryptic "against a wall in 1956" appears to belong to this site), and the report on excavations at the Wakefield Tower in 1957 and 1971 is currently in press. In addition, the report on excavations by St Thomas's Tower (Traitor's Gate) in 1973 has been virtually completed. Mr Sturdy perhaps over-estimates the significance of the results of some of the smaller-scale operations at the Tower: for example, limited work at the Wardrobe Tower in 1958 was begun simply to establish the survival of an early 18th century vault, and work in the east moat in 1960 confirmed, as expected, its 19th-century infilling. The bulk of the medieval pottery from the latter site, and from some of the other smaller investigations at the Tower, was unstratified. This is not to say, of course, that sites of this nature do not warrant publication: rather, it is a plea for a balanced appraisal of their significance. It should be

said that Mr Sturdy omits to mention the account of excavations of the early ditch north-west of the White Tower¹.

Some of Mr Sturdy's remarks on the 18th-century architect, Flitcroft², are somewhat distorted, and savour strongly of the interpretation of historical evidence in an anachronistic way. To honour Flitcroft with the reputation of "the earliest unpublished Ministry excavation of a Palace site" is totally misleading, for the Office of Works in the 1740's was in no sense engaged in archaeological excavations. The whole point of his marking the earlier foundations beneath Buckingham House on his survey was to provide evidence for the Chancery case which Mr Sturdy mentions. To accuse Flitcroft of lack of "publication" in the modern sense is patently meaningless.

It would be short-sighted, however, to wish to pour cold water on Mr Sturdy's call for "effort, enthusiasm and encouragement," for they are clearly needed in the sphere of Royal Palaces excavations, as in any other branch of archaeological work. Yet it remains a sobering thought that Mr Sturdy's outraged sense of archaeological propriety, in its unchecked momentum, led to a disastrously misguided opening two paragraphs (happily amended by footnote 1).

To turn now to the Department's proposed future arrangements for Palaces and public buildings, it should be acknowledged at the outset that work on such sites has not, in general, kept up with the organisational developments which have affected excavations in other spheres. No-one would disagree with Mr Sturdy on this point. Excavations have tended, in the less recent past at least, to be conducted on an *ad hoc* basis, without the full-time staff and back-up resources enjoyed by excavation units. The Department is currently moving towards total reorganisation of this important sector of the country's archaeology: it is proposed to attach one or two archaeologists to the Department's new Central Excavation Unit³, to work specifically on Palaces and public buildings excavations.

The Central Unit, under the direct control of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, provides excavation equipment, post-excavation facilities, and supervision of the format and speed of publication. It is hoped to provide premises for this branch of the Central Unit at Hampton Court Palace. These would be adequate to store equipment, finds and records, and to provide space for excavation and post-excavation work.

Mr Sturdy concludes his article, "... we need to see a start made, not yet another inter-departmental committee reporting on what needs to be done": he may rest assured that considerably more than a start has already been made, and that the Department's excavation policy on Palaces and public buildings was, even as he put pen to paper, being thoroughly reviewed.

Mr Walker is an Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments at the Department of the Environment.

1. B. K. Davison, "Excavations in the Tower of London, 1964," *Chateau Gaillard* 2 (Cologne 1967), 40-43.
2. I am grateful to my colleague Miss Juliet Allan, Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments, for her

comments on Flitcroft.

3. The C.E.U. has been set up partly to excavate in areas where no suitable organisations exist, and on special sites of national importance.