

Excavations at Eltham Palace, 1976

HUMPHREY WOODS

Photography by Jenny Tinker

LATE in 1975 permission was sought and obtained by the Department of the Environment from the Institute of Army Education, who hold the lease of Eltham Palace from the Crown, to carry out excavations under their front lawns and circular driveway with the intention of exposing the footings of King Henry VIII's chapel and placing them on permanent display to the visiting public.

Excavations by Dr. Donald Strong and Mr. Peter Curnow in the fifties had revealed a considerable expanse of the Royal Apartments on the western

side of the Great Court and running southwards from the Great Hall. These were found to incorporate part of the Manor House built in the late thirteenth century by Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham and Patriarch of Jerusalem, which in 1305 he presented to Edward, Prince of Wales, son of King Edward I and later to become Edward II.

The history of the Royal Apartments seems to have been one of continual additions, modifications, rebuildings and alterations, from the time of Isabella, Edward II's Queen, to the setting up of a "fair front



Fig. 1: The footings of the tower to the queen's apartments, and the excavated scaffold bases for its construction. All scales are 2 metres.

over the moat" by Henry VII, and it was anticipated that the 1976 excavations would encounter a similar multiplicity of building phases in the area of the chapel and chaplain's building.

What was not anticipated was that the excavations — which ran from January to April, 1976 — would expose underneath Henry's chapel the back-filled undercroft of a domestic building in an exceptionally fine state of preservation which on stylistic grounds has been dated by Mr Stuart Rigold to the 1290's, which must mean that it is part of Bishop Bek's manor.

As remarkable was the discovery of a building in the area between the Chapel and the Great Hall with an intact pavement of inlaid decorated tiles which has been dated by Mrs Elizabeth Eames of the British Museum to the thirteenth century. This building, then, must also be the work of Bishop Bek.

It was known from documentary records that in the reign of King Henry IV part of the chapel was

sited over a cellar, but Henry VI rebuilt the chapel and his chapel in its turn was swept away when in 1528 Henry VIII gave orders "to take down our olde Chapell and a new to sett upp and made of Tymbr worke sett upon a vawte with a foundation of Stone . . . and the same Chapell to be sett xij feet nearer to hall than the old Chapell."

The plan of the palace after Henry VIII's alterations is shown on two survey plans drawn in 1590 by the Elizabethan surveyor John Thorpe.

The excavation showed that his plan of the chapel was broadly accurate. It measures 33.90m long by 12.34m wide. At the western end are two towers connecting the chapel to the upper storeys of the King's and Queen's apartments on the south and north respectively. The Queen's tower is by far the better preserved of the two (Fig. 1).

Only one of the two apartments of the chaplain's building shown on Thorpe's plan could be excavated, as the other lies under a car park. The dimensions of the excavated apartment are 9.75m by 6.80m.

The undercroft is 22.54m long by 9.30m wide. For most of its length it is sealed under Henry's chapel (Fig. 2) but it projects 3.90m beyond the west wall of the chapel underneath the Royal Apartments, from which there is access to it by a stair — though the stair is not of Bek's period.

The depth of the undercroft (bottomed to natural sand at 56.184m OD, modern turf level being at 60.434m OD) made it impossible to empty the undercroft in one season. Accordingly only that part of it which lies west of the chapel and one quadrant of the area overlain by the chapel were excavated in 1976, the remainder being left for further seasons.

The undercroft had a barrel vault of chalk. Though the vault has gone, its line can be seen on the west wall, and the springers survive (Fig. 3). Along each side of the undercroft run drains constructed of red brick. Although yellow brick is used in Bek's structures, the calibrations of the bricks in the drains differ from those in Bek's walls, and a fourteenth-century date seems likely. Ventilation shafts were found in the north and south walls. Massive relieving arches in the western wall were dug into the natural sand. These were traced as far as the present water table, but were not bottomed.

Only part of the building containing the tiled pavement was within the 1976 area of excavation, so it was decided to backfill the pavement until the whole building could be stripped at a later date.

Towards the end of the excavation a meeting was held with the Army to request permission for two more seasons' work on the site. This was given and excavation will recommence in January 1977.

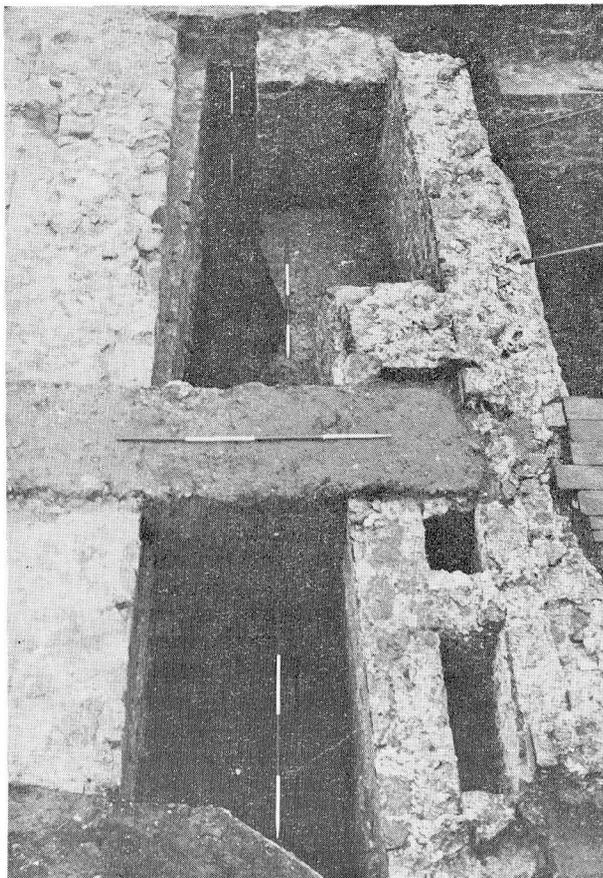


Fig. 2: The south wall of Bek's building and, left of picture, the south wall of King Henry VIII's chapel.



Fig. 3: The western end of the undercroft, showing the relieving arches, the springers of the vault and the ghost of the vault itself, the doorway and drains.

Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, DUA, 71 Basinghall Street, E.C.2. (01-606 1933/4/5). For information on post-excavation work, contact Pam White at this address.

Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group.

(1) A site in the grounds of Fulham Palace, producing Neolithic and Roman material and features. (Sundays only).

(2) Possible Neolithic site, Lygon Almhouses, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. (Saturdays only). Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6. (01-385 6038).

Inner London Boroughs, by the Inner London Unit. Several rescue sites in various areas. Enquiries to Irene Schwab (01-242 6620).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston. (01-546 5386).

North-East Greater London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

Putney, by Wandsworth Historical Society. Two acre site at junction of Felsham Road and High Street lies on Roman and medieval settlements. Alternate weekends. En-

quiries to Nicholas Farrant, 7 Coalecroft Road, S.W.15. (01-788 0015).

Shadwell, by Inner London Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Irene Schwab (01-242 6620).

Southwark, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1. (01-407 1989).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Society. Enquiries to David Bird, Field Officer S.A.S., Castle Arch, Guildford, Surrey. (0483-32454).

Waltham Abbey, no premises for working but expert help needed on analysis of animal and human bone, environmental study, botany, etc., and artistic reconstruction of buildings on paper. Contact: P. J. Huggins, 27 Grange Court, Waltham Abbey, Essex.

GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £2.50, post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 7 Marylebone Road, N.W.1.