

# The Metropolitan Palaces of medieval London

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MEDIEVAL LONDON was crowded with the town houses of bishops, nobles and kings. Most of these residences were generally known to contemporaries as Inns. Although we now use the word palace widely to describe the homes of monarchs, princes and bishops, no building in the London area except Westminster was called a palace before the 15th century. Nevertheless some of these buildings were sufficiently distinctive to be considered as palaces, and by virtue of their relationship to the capital city formed a class of metropolitan palaces.

## The purpose of the palace

What were these metropolitan palaces for and how did they work? Bishops were intimately involved in the inner circles of the government of medieval England. Occupants of the richest and most powerful sees, such as Canterbury, York, Winchester and Durham, frequently served the king as Chancellor or Treasurer. Both they and the leading nobles expected a place on the royal Council. All prelates and peers needed access to the law courts and parliaments held at Westminster, and all of them from the King downwards were peripatetic, taking their household retainers and equipment with them in a ceaseless round of journeys. Bishops were particularly mobile. Their London houses lay at one end of their established itineraries, and were not permanently occupied at full capacity.

Archaeological excavations have increased the known evidence of the physical forms of these buildings and these investigations have been supported by research into documentary sources. The site which has been most investigated is Winchester House, the residence of the bishops of Winchester, and this may serve as a model for an analysis of the whole class of metropolitan palaces.

This residence lay across the Thames from the City of London in northern Southwark, a little to the west of London Bridge and the Priory of St. Mary

Overy. The site came into the hands of the bishops in the episcopate of Henry of Blois, the powerful brother of King Stephen. In a document of the 1140s he described the

“many inconveniences and losses that I and my predecessors have sustained through lack of a house of our own to use when called to London on royal or other business”<sup>1</sup>.

In order to remedy this he bought land with an adjacent dock in Southwark at the extreme north-east of his diocese, and built a residence there. The house was finished and occupied by 1170, when Thomas Becket stayed there on his final journey to Canterbury<sup>2</sup>.

The house that Bishop Henry built was partly excavated in 1983-4. The complete complex was probably in the form common to other early medieval palaces, a collection of separate buildings joined by covered ways, as at Clarendon<sup>3</sup>. It was set in a precinct of some seven acres, enclosed with walls and palings, and including the kitchen garden, pleasure gardens and fishponds.

Despite Bishop Henry's stated reason for acquiring his Southwark property, it seems likely that the purpose of many of the early residences was as much economic as political, particularly those on the south bank or on the City waterfront close to London's commercial centres. Residences were established by the archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth and by the bishop of London at Fulham by the 12th century<sup>4</sup>. The archbishop may also have had a house in Southwark before the Conquest. The abbot of St. Augustine's at Canterbury bought one here in 1215. In the 12th century the prior of Lewes had a first-floor hall in Southwark over a vaulted stone undercroft, which was exposed by building work in 1832<sup>5</sup>. Further east along the river bank, the abbots of Battle in Sussex and Malling in Kent had properties with tide-mills on them, the former adjacent to the abbot's town house, established in the late 12th century. These houses provided accommodation and storage for those en-

1. Public Record Office E40/6112 no. 5.

2. M Carlin 'Winchester Palace, Southwark: Documentary History, 1100 to 1550' in D Seeley *A Palace in Southwark of the medieval bishops of Winchester: excavations at Winchester Palace, Southwark, 1983-1990* part 2, in prep.

3. M Wood *The English Medieval House* (1965) 28; T B James *The Palaces of Medieval England c 1050-1550* (1990) 17.

4. R S Rait *English Episcopal Palaces: Province of Canterbury* (1910) 53, 92.

5. Wood *op cit* fn 3, 21, 82.

gaged in the everyday affairs of a house or see, such as selling produce or buying goods. Performing this function they were perhaps a development of an earlier role of royal and episcopal palaces as centres of production.

In the first quarter of the 13th century, the bishops of Winchester were using their Southwark residence as a depot for livestock and produce from their other manors, especially those in the Thames valley. Foodstuffs were delivered there in great quantities, and sold, given away or distributed to other episcopal estates. Only a small proportion was consumed at the Palace. Wool was also brought there from all the bishops' manors for sale on the London market. The bishops' exchequer, where the yearly audit of all the manorial accounts was held, was also at Southwark at this time. To the north-west of the precinct the bishop had two tide-mills, which needed constant attention and fairly frequent rebuilding<sup>6</sup>.

At this period Winchester House was rebuilt. The most prominent of the new buildings was a massive hall range built parallel to the Thames. The hall is known to have been built by 1221, but was still being roofed with tiles in 1225. The range was built on three parallel foundation walls laid over oak piles driven into the marshy ground. Dendrochronology provides felling-dates of between 1190 and 1235 for these piles. Timber was sent to Southwark for building work in 1215-16 from the bishop's Hampshire manor of Highclere, accompanied by a carpenter<sup>7</sup>.

The completed hall range ran parallel to the Thames opposite the City. The overall length was 78.5m, and it must have presented a formidable facade to the inhabitants of London across the river. The hall itself was at first floor level over a vaulted undercroft, and was entered by means of an external stone stairway and porch at the south-west corner. It measured 40.5m by 9.2m internally, making it one of the largest such halls in the country.

After 1226 the large-scale deliveries of food and animals decreased rapidly. Southwark was no longer an agricultural depot, indicating a change in the distribution system of the manors of the see of Winchester. By the second half of the 13th century the Southwark precinct had ceased to be a trading-post and stockyard, and became a stately

residence and centre of administration. In the middle of the century the east and west ranges of the inner courtyard were built to house the bishop's knights and clerks, squires and valets (yeomen or grooms), all part of the large retinue which travelled around with the bishop. To the south lay the outer courtyard, surrounded by stables and prison buildings. When the bishop was in residence, the stables held fifty or sixty horses.

In the first half of the 14th century a new wall was inserted at the west end of the hall, including in its gable a magnificent rose window to light the hall, which can still be seen today. Coloured light must have streamed down through its painted glass panels into the hall from the westering sun, lighting the bishop's banquets below. To the north of the bishop's Privy Garden, east of the inner courtyard, a new two-storey chamber block was built for the bishop in 1357. The bishop's new apartments had a private postern gate through the precinct wall to St. Mary Overy's Dock to the east (Fig. 1).

### The location of the palace

In the first half of the 13th century there began a new fashion in the siting of these residences. The movement was away from the commercial zones of the south bank and the City, and towards Westminster. The greatest concentration of Inns spread from Holborn and Fleet Street westwards along the Strand, mostly by 1300. Proceeding westward along the River Thames, the abbots of Tewkesbury, Faversham and Wincombe had houses near the Fleet; then came the Inn of the bishop of Salisbury, the Whitefriars and Temple precincts, the Inns of the bishops of Exeter, Bath, Llandaff, Coventry and Worcester, the Savoy, and the houses of the bishops of Carlisle, Norwich and Durham. Further west was York Place, the house of the archbishops of York<sup>8</sup>. Ralph Neville, bishop of Chichester and Chancellor of England, started the trend before 1225, and most of the Strand Inns of the bishops followed in the 1230s. The archbishop of York acquired York Place in 1240.

There has been little excavation of the Strand residences. In 1972 a 14th-century undercroft was excavated on the site of the largest, the bishop of Bath's Inn<sup>9</sup>. In more recent years some small sites and test-pits have been dug along the south side of the Strand, but they have found little indication of

6. H Hall (ed) *The Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester for the fourth year of the pontificate of Peter des Roches 1208-9* (1903) xviii, 13, 15, 30, 34; N R Holt (ed) *The Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester 1210-11* (1964) xxii-xxiii; Carlin *op cit* fn 2.

7. B Yule 'Winchester Palace excavations' *London Archaeol* 6 no 2 (1989) 31-9; Hampshire Record Office nM59/B1/5.

8. John Stow *The Survey of London* (ed C L Kingsford 1908) 2 92-100; D Pearce *London's Mansions. The Palatial Homes of the Nobility* (1986) 15-16.

9. M J Hammerson 'Excavations on the site of Arundel House in the Strand, WC2, in 1972' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 26 (1975) 216-19.

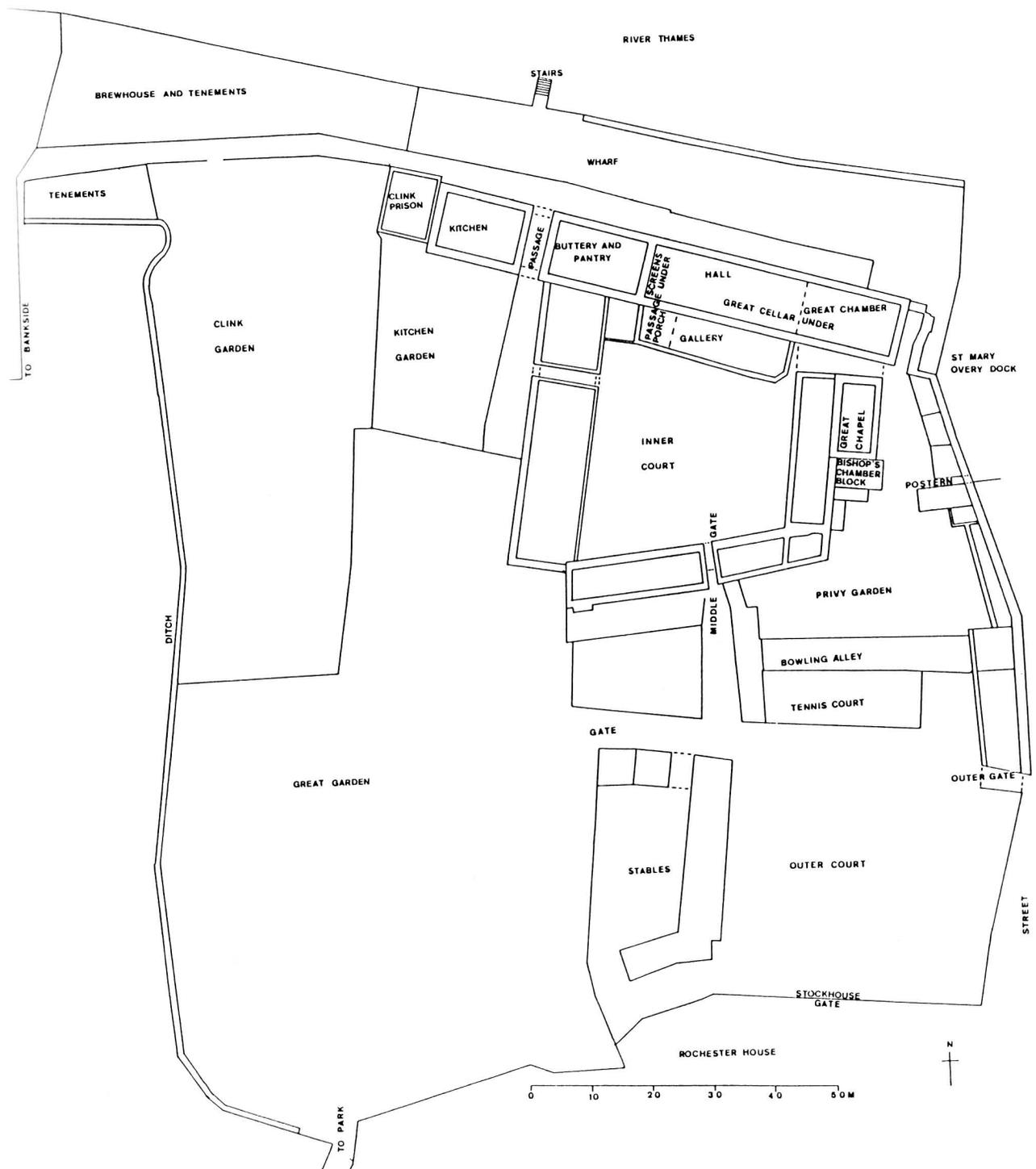


Fig. 1: reconstruction of the plan of Winchester Palace *c* 1550, based on documentary and excavated evidence. medieval buildings. The area seems to have suffered from severe terracing. Savoy Manor, granted to Peter count of Savoy in 1246, and rebuilt by Henry duke of Lancaster in 1349-61, was the most stately of the Strand group, built around two courtyards stretching down to the river. It was burned down during the Peasants Revolt of 1381, because of the unpopularity of its then owner John of Gaunt, and not fully rebuilt until Henry VII established a hospital on its site.

Further north the house of the bishops of Ely was built in Holborn in 1285-90. Ely Place had a courtyard entered from the street by a gatehouse, with dormitories and stables for the bishop's entourage. This led to the hall, and beyond was a cloistered quadrangle, the chapel of St. Etheldreda raised on an undercroft, and a garden behind including vineyards. This was the most closely comparable structure to Winchester House. John of Gaunt used it as his London home after the destruction of the Savoy<sup>10</sup>.

The episcopal houses were probably based ultimately on the cloistered monastic plan, and this in turn influenced royal builders. The plans of the bishop of Winchester's houses at Wolvesey in the 12th century and Southwark in the 13th look like secular versions of monasteries, which were laid out according to the monastic Rules. Royal houses began to follow suit in the 14th century<sup>11</sup>.

The movement to the Strand followed the increasing centralisation of royal government into the Palace of Westminster. By the 14th century the concentration of the central administration there was complete. The king and his ministers therefore had to spend a greater proportion of their time in houses around London. To this end Edward II acquired King's Langley (Hertfordshire), Eltham (Kent), and Byfleet and Sheen (Surrey). Edward III rebuilt Sheen, and acquired Kennington for his son, the Black Prince, and the manor of Rotherhithe for himself, where he built a house in 1353-61. Excavations took place here in 1985-1987 and 1989-1991 on the Platform Wharf site<sup>12</sup>.

Edward III spent much time in his later years at Rotherhithe. Eltham continued to be a favoured royal residence from late in his reign until the end of the 15th century, with frequent alterations and additions. Sheen was favoured in Edward's later years and was Richard II's most preferred residence until he ordered its destruction in 1395, following the death of his first queen there. It was later rebuilt by Henry V. Kennington was also visited often by Richard and his Lancastrian successors<sup>13</sup>.

Further along the river bank to the west of Rotherhithe, Edward II had a house called the Rosary

built in about 1325<sup>14</sup>. It is not yet clear how long it was occupied. Immediately to its east, Sir John Fastolf built his house Fastolf Place in the 1440s. Excavation in this area on as many as eighteen sites in the 1980s and 1990s has revealed the moated enclosures of the two houses and other related water-courses<sup>15</sup>. Further upstream, Bishop Booth of Durham built a fortified house at Bridgecourt in Battersea in about 1471-4, subsequently bequeathed to the archepiscopal See of York as York House, and recently excavated<sup>16</sup>.

### The essence of the palace

What were the essential characteristics of the medieval metropolitan palace, which distinguished it from mere trading-posts, manor-houses and residences? Its distinctiveness as a class of structure can be examined through its form and its function.

It was fundamental to the political function of metropolitan palaces that they had direct access via the river to Westminster. Therefore they all needed river wharves. There were three successive wharves associated with Winchester Palace, the first of about 1200 made of beech timber, the second of oak timber dated to 1354 by dendrochronology, and the third wharf built in the 15th century of ashlar blocks, with a set of landing stairs in its centre. A dock associated with Sir John Fastolf's house was excavated in 1992. Fastolf's interests in London may have been commercial as much as political. He engaged in trade and is known to have bought ships<sup>17</sup>. These wharves were the main means by which supplies reached the riverside palaces, including the materials from which they were built. This was certainly true of the building of the Lollards' Tower at Lambeth in 1435 and in the early 16th century of Cardinal Wolsey's works at York Place, and Henry VIII's at Bridewell Palace<sup>18</sup>.

It was a requirement of any palace that it should be of sufficient size for a great lord's retinue and sufficient grandeur to impress the outside world. The Winchester House hall provided a suitable setting for ceremony, a frequent function of palaces. It was the scene of the wedding feast of James I of Scotland and Joan Beaufort in 1426, when the bride's uncle Cardinal Henry Beaufort was bishop of Winchester. Priests were ordained in the halls of

10. G G Scott 'Remarks on Ely Place, Holborn' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 5 (1881) 498-9; Pearce *op cit* fn 8, 39-40; James *op cit* fn 3, 103; J Schofield *The Building of London from the Conquest to the Great Fire* (1993) 65; B Barber & K Pitt *Archaeological Excavations at 33 Ely Place*, ECI unpub. DGLA report 1990.

11. J Steane *The Archaeology of the Medieval English Monarchy* (1993) 89-90; James *op cit* fn 3, 17-18, 46.

12. S Blatherwick *A Royal Residence at Rotherhithe: excavations at Edward III's manor house at Platform Wharf, Rotherhithe*, SEI6, 1985-94 in prep.

13. H M Colvin *The History of the King's Works. The Middle Ages* (1963) 2 930, 934-5, 968, 989, 990-1, 993-4, 997-8; J Steane *op cit* fn 11, 83.

14. Colvin *op cit* fn 13, 1 508n.

15. D Bluer 'Excavations at Abbot's Lane, Southwark' *London Archaeol* 7 no 3 (1993) 59-66.

bishops' palaces, and they therefore had a sacred role. In the hall of Lambeth Palace councils and convocations of the clergy of the Province of Canterbury were assembled, and consecration banquets were held there for newly-created bishops in the province<sup>19</sup>.

Royal palaces were the venue of a sacral kingship. Westminster Palace owed its site to the close proximity of the Abbey and its associations with Edward the Confessor. In a similar way, Henry V set out to rebuild Sheen as one of the chief royal houses in the kingdom and to found three new religious houses in the vicinity. Building work on all these projects proceeded concurrently<sup>20</sup>. It was as if Henry was equipping his political powerhouse with spiritual batteries. If completed, the scheme might have been a forerunner of the Escorial of Philip II of Spain.

Another characteristic of palaces was an administrative or judicial role. This often meant that they included prisons. In the outer courtyard of Winchester House there was a prison for women by 1409. This housed mainly prostitutes from the Bankside brothels, another aspect of the bishop's economic interests in Southwark manor. Later in the 15th century the women's prison was amalgamated in one building with the men's. By 1504 the combined prison was known as *The Clink*, and hence the term passed into the English language.

Palaces also needed an area which functioned as a public open space for contact with the surrounding populace. Almoners gave out food to the poor at the gates of bishops' palaces and crowds were addressed in their courtyards. The outer courtyard of Winchester Palace was used by the people of Southwark, perhaps in the same way as the churchyards of St. Paul's Cathedral and St. Mary Spital Priory were to the north of the river. Alms were distributed to the poor here to mark Henry VII's funeral in 1509<sup>21</sup>.

Which of the buildings that have been mentioned met all or most of the diagnostic requirements of the metropolitan palace? Rotherhithe, the Rosary and Fastolf Place were too small, similar to manor houses. Fulham, Eltham and Sheen were too far from the centre of events at Westminster; they

were effectively country palaces near London. Even Kennington was more of a retreat from Westminster than its dormitory. In 1389 Richard II retired there after a disagreement with his council; the councillors were obliged to follow him there the next day and give in to his wishes<sup>22</sup>. Eltham was a staging post on the royal route from London to Dover and France. Croydon was also a stopping-point on the archbishop's itinerary which ended at Lambeth. Only the London termini of royal, episcopal and noble itineraries can be considered as metropolitan palaces.

Therefore the class includes the royal residences at Westminster and the Tower, the episcopal houses of Lambeth, Ely Place and Winchester House, and probably some of the Strand Inns about which little is known, and the single noble residence of the Savoy. This was, however, the home of John of Gaunt, the most powerful noble in the land, who also considered himself to be king of Castile.

How did these palaces function internally? This question can be examined through a reconstruction of the plan of Winchester Palace at its fullest stage of development in 1550 (Fig. 1), based on excavated and documentary evidence combined, and a diagram of the access between its spaces, as far as this can be known (Fig. 2).

South of the hall range the Palace consisted by 1550 of a series of structures grouped around two courtyards, with the Kitchen Garden, the Great Garden and the Clink Garden to the west. The Clink prison had now moved from the outer courtyard to the building to the west of the Great Kitchen. The diagram indicates the means of access from the outside world into the rooms and open spaces of the palace and distinguishes those areas used primarily by the general public, servants, the bishop's retainers and the bishop himself. Movement into the complex is downward on the diagram.

The degree of access to the king or lord was clearly of great importance in a palace. In 1519 the Venetian ambassador reported approvingly that Wolsey had "a very fine palace, where one traverses eight rooms before reaching his audience chamber"<sup>23</sup>.

At Winchester Palace one was required to proceed through two gatehouses, two courtyards, the porch

16. D Hawkins with A Douglas, A Harris & V Ridgeway 'The Archbishop of York's Battersea Mansion' *London Archaeol* forthcoming.

17. British Library, Additional MS 36988 f v.

18. Rait *op cit* fn 4, 59; J H Harvey 'The Building Works of Cardinal Wolsey' *J Brit Archaeol Assoc* 3rd series 8 (1943) 51-2; T Dyson *Documents and Archaeology. The Medieval London Waterfront* Museum of London Annual Archaeology Lecture (1989) 8.

19. Rait *op cit* fn 4, 55; M Howard *The Early Tudor Country House. Architecture and Politics 1490-1550* (1987) 27-8.

20. Colvin *op cit* fn 13, 2 998-1000; James *op cit* fn 3, 139-40.

21. C J Phillpotts 'Winchester Palace c 1550-1814' in Seeley *op cit* fn 2.

22. *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council* (ed H Nicolas 1834) 1 12c-d.

23. Quoted by Steane *op cit* fn 11, 131.

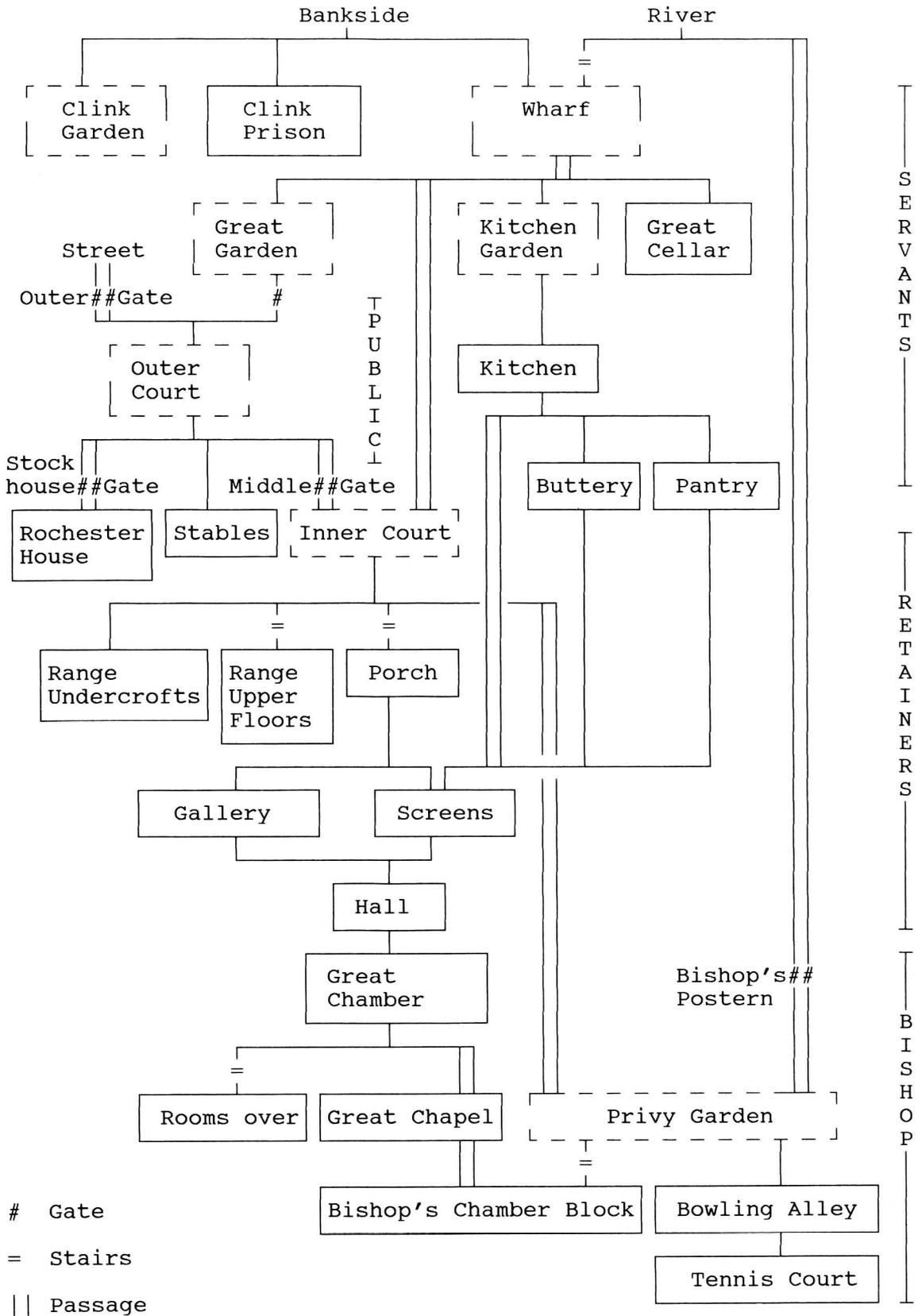


Fig. 2: access diagram of Winchester Palace c. 1550.

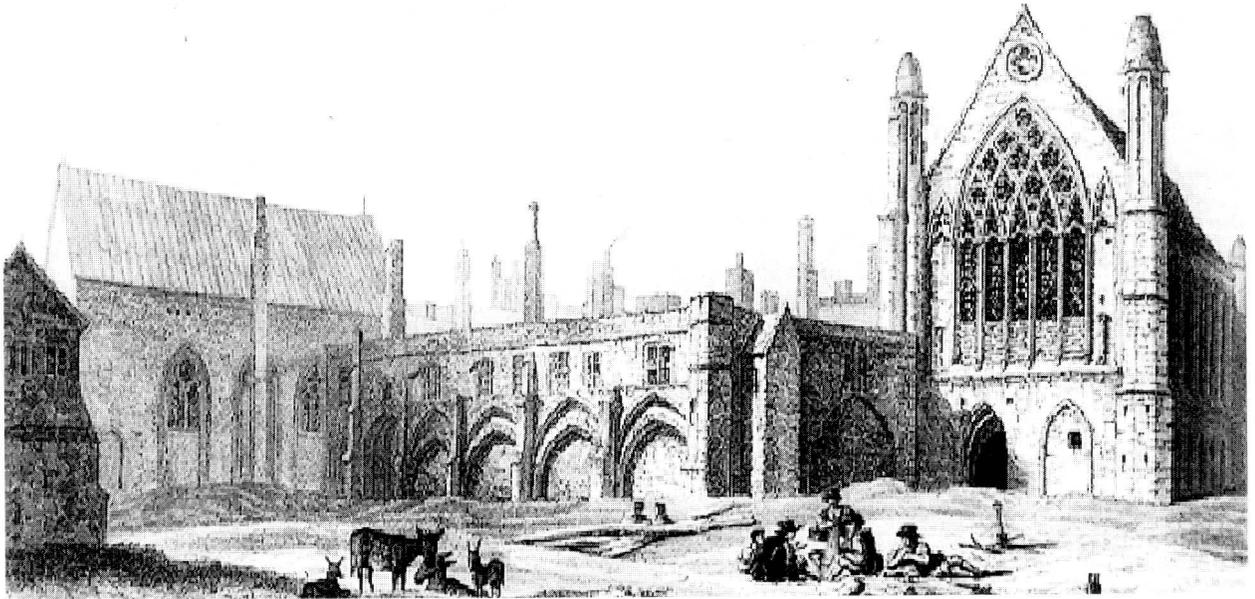


Fig. 3: the chapel of Ely Place.

and the screens passage to reach the hall, and there were several more barriers to pass through before attaining the bishop's private rooms. These rooms and the Privy Garden were the deepest spaces in the whole complex. However, the bishop had a direct route out through his postern gate to the river. At Lambeth the archbishops similarly had a landing-stage at the Palace entrance and a private river-stairs descending from the Lollards Tower, through which they entered their barges. The royal lodgings at the Tower of London also had postern gates for direct river access, at all stages of their evolution<sup>24</sup>.

The complex structure of Winchester Palace should be compared to the conservatively-planned Kennington. This was built by the Black Prince in 1340-1363 in a way that was already old-fashioned, at the same time as his father was building Rotherhithe. The main buildings were still separate and strung out in series, presumably linked by covered ways<sup>25</sup>. This does not suggest sophisticated access routes and ceremonial sequences of rooms.

### The new palace

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries there was a spate of building by the Yorkist and Tudor kings at their residences around London, including Edward IV's hall at Eltham, rebuilding by Henry VII at Richmond, Greenwich and Baynard's Castle, and by Henry VIII at the new Bridewell Palace. This was accompanied by episcopal building. Arch-

bishop Morton built brick gatehouses at Lambeth and Croydon. Bishop FitzJames built the oldest surviving parts of Fulham Palace. These new and refurbished palaces retained the typical features of their medieval predecessors, but also began to include new forms and functions<sup>26</sup>.

Little of the fabric of the pre-1500 palaces now remains above ground, owing to the alterations of the early modern period. Ely Place was partly demolished in 1659, then allowed to decay. All that remains above ground is the chapel of St. Etheldreda, hemmed in by offices, which can still be visited (compare Fig. 3 and front cover). By 1800 the remaining medieval walls of the Winchester House hall and service range were buried in the structures of warehouses covering their sites. They were exposed again in a fire in 1814, and can still be seen today, including the magnificent rose window. Outside Westminster, nothing else is now visible of the metropolitan palaces of medieval London.

### Acknowledgements

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24. Rait *op cit* fn 4, 59; S J Thurley *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England. Architecture and Court Life, 1460-1547* (1993) 4, 9, 33.

25. G J Dawson *The Black Prince's Palace at Kennington, Surrey* Brit Archaeol Repts 26 (1976).

26. Rait *op cit* fn 4, 60, 95; J A Wight *Brick Building in England from the Middle Ages to 1550* (1972) 309-11, 380-2; Howard *op cit* fn 19, 209-10; Thurley *op cit* fn 24, *passim*.