

Talbot Edwards, Holcroft Blood, the Crown Jewels and the Ordnance Drawing Room

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Shortly after I pushed my archaeological trowel into the wet deposits of Traitor's Gate in November 1973, I was asked by the then Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments for London, the wonderful Peter Curnow, to go and have a look at some brick foundations that had been found below the ground floor of the Martin Tower on the north-east corner of the inner curtain defences of the Tower of London. This was my first 'dig' at the Tower, and at the age of twenty-one I was eager to please. I did not realise at the time that the brick foundations I uncovered and recorded were part of a security measure undertaken by the Lord Chamberlain's Office following a notorious incident on 9th May 1671, when a violent assault nearly resulted in the theft of some of the Crown Jewels, and that a series of seemingly unconnected events and discoveries would eventually lead me to the pages of *London Archaeologist*.

The attempt to steal some of the Crown Jewels is the stuff of legends, and arguably one of the few Tower tales that has a properly documented history. Colonel Thomas Blood (1618–1680) was an Irish-born military officer of modest background who at the age of twenty married Maria Holcroft, the daughter of a Lancaster gentleman from Golborne. Having switched from the royalist to the parliamentary side during the Civil War, he was awarded land grants and an appointment as a Justice of the Peace. After a colourful career as an Irish insurrectionist and then a client of George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, following exile in the Netherlands, Blood arrived at the Tower of London in late April or early May 1671 dressed as a parson and with a female companion pretending to be his wife.

During a visit to the Jewel House Blood's 'wife' feigned a stomach upset

that was part of a scheme to befriend the Keeper, Talbot Edwards. The growing friendship led to a dinner in Edwards' apartment on 9th May and the rest, as they say, is history. My involvement in the matter was to

uncover a number of shallow brick walls under the floor of the former Jewel Chamber, some of which formed a strange polygonal shape. Only after these remains were removed – in order to reinstate the original floor level of the



Fig. 1: detail from a collection of twenty Tower stereographs released by the photographer James Davies Burton in 1868. No. 9 in the series this image is labelled 'THE MARTIN TOWER AND THE JEWEL TOWER'. The Martin Tower formed part of the inner defences of the fortress erected in the 1240s for Henry III and, after a long and chequered career, became home to the Crown Jewels and its keeper after repairs and alterations were carried out in 1668/9 by the Offices of the Ordnance and the Works. The external staircase and its railings, providing access to the keeper's apartment in the upper part of the building, were added in 1729 by the contractor Joseph Prat at a cost of £435.10.8d. Access to the Jewel Chamber on the ground floor was via the arch located beneath the landing where the Keeper of the Jewels, Lieutenant-Colonel Wyndham, and his wife, may be seen.

The New Jewel House, on the right, was built under an unusual arrangement between the Ordnance Office and the Lord Chamberlain's Office, who were responsible for the Regalia. The Royal Engineers designed and built the edifice, with their costs to be reimbursed with surplus fees from public admission charges. In the event the building proved to be something of a disaster, and after the Jewels were moved to the Wakefield Tower in 1870 the building was demolished: for all their efforts the Royal Engineers never received a penny.

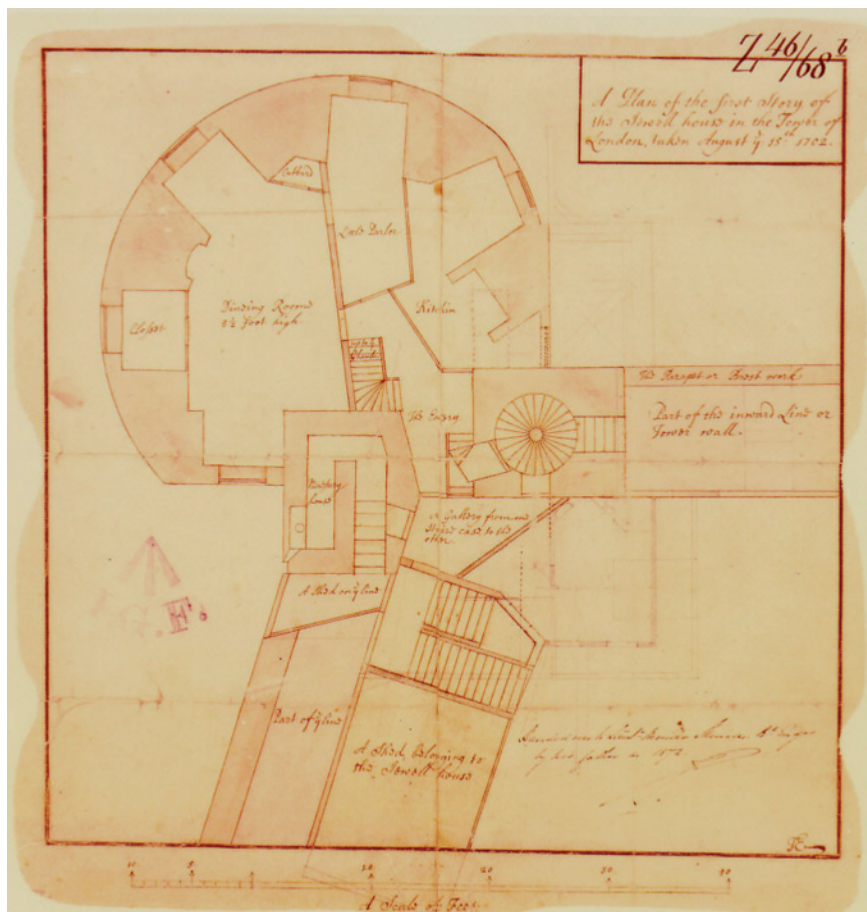


Fig. 2: plan of the first floor of the Martin Tower dated 15 August 1702 showing the arrangement of the Jewel Keeper's apartment

13th-century chamber, and after I discovered the joys of the Office of Works Bill Books – did I realise that the walls were part of a programme of works carried out in the wake of Blood's mischief, which included a division to separate tourists from the jewel display and the foundations for some sort of angular metal cage that can be seen on later illustrations of the Jewel Chamber. I should add that the Ordnance Bill Books reveal that the conversion of the 'Irish Tower' into the 'Jewel Tower' began in 1668 when the demolition of the old Jewel House began and when the Crown Jewels were moved into a temporary home, possibly in the Wardrobe Tower (Fig.1).

As the years went by my efforts at the Tower diversified, and although classified as an 'archaeological consultant' and 'Geoff the Dig' by the body of Yeoman Warders, I began deputising for the Inspectorate at Works meetings, liaised closely with the Tower Education Centre (providing information, lecturing and giving guided tours) and, perhaps, most enjoyably, began to explore the

wonders of the Public Record Office, a journey that led me to a PhD dissertation. Because of my interest in images, in 1981 I was tasked with identifying some examples of the Tower that could be copied, mounted and framed for the official opening of the Martin Tower and the adjoining wall walk by Her Majesty the Queen. Among those I selected was a delightful floor plan of the first floor of the Martin Tower dated 1702 (Fig. 2) and a late-17th-century plan of the Tower showing the proposed addition of artillery bastions and erroneously dated 1668 (Fig. 3). I realised that both, by some strange coincidence, exhibited 19th-century annotations, but I made no mention of them when I subsequently described the Tower plan.¹ This accompanied the issuing of an important detailed survey of the Tower of London that I had dated 1682 and which the London Topographical reproduced in colour and as a near facsimile to support and accompany the article. I should add that I am most grateful to Ann Saunders, the late Ralph Merrifield and Peter Curnow for

encouraging my first foray into the world of cartographic studies.

Shortly after this event I was surprised to see a pristine version of the late-17th-century Tower plan (without the proposed bastions), framed, and hanging on the office wall of the Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Andrew Saunders, at Fortress House, with a date of 1692 added in the top right hand corner (Fig. 4). Andrew kindly allowed me to have the plan photographed (appropriately at the Tower) and I thought nothing more of the matter until the dreaded moment came and the Ancient Monuments Branch became English Heritage and the rot set in. Andrew Saunders was elbowed out of his historic post of Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments and was replaced by a fashionable 'Chief Executive'. My response was to head off to Andrew's old office to find out what had happened to the Tower plan. I had by now established that the plan included the great houses of the Surveyor and Clerk of the Ordnance (on the site of the present Fusiliers building) whose construction was only completed in 1701.² That said, the added date of 1692 on the plan could not be trusted, but for other reasons, however, I was convinced that the drawing could not have been drafted much later than 1701.

The Chief Inspector's room had been cleared and was awaiting decoration. I tracked down Andrew's former secretary who told me that all those 'old prints' were in a cupboard behind the office and were probably destined to decorate the staff canteen! In a reckless move I rescued the plan, and together with some Works bills concerning the furnishings of the state apartments at Hampton Court during Charles' I reign (taken on approval from a bookseller just before the start of the Second World War and somehow never returned) I set off to Kew where I made a presentation to the Public Record Office, who were very appreciative and asked me to bring along anything else I found of interest.

The next chapter in this saga came during the clear-out of the former Historic Plans Room at Fortress House (another dreaded improvement), when I came across an ancient photocopy of a typed list titled 'The Tower of London:

List of Plans forwarded to Office of Works with War Office letter of 1903'. This valuable document lists all the Tower drawings that existed at that time and includes their supposed dates and crucially the War Office reference numbers that were applied to the drawings after the Office of Ordnance, the body responsible for producing the drawings, was dissolved in 1855 and its functions transferred to the War Office.

In the list I noticed the following entry 'The Tower (1668) and Jewel House (1702) with an account of Colonel Blood's attempt on the Crown Jewels (2 sheets and mem:)' in the date and reference margins the dates 1668 and 1702 are rehearsed and the reference Z46/68 added. Scribbled in pencil in the margin is the word 'missing', almost certainly a reference to the three-page memorandum? These were clearly the two drawings I had copied for the Martin Tower display in 1981.

In the mid-1990s I embarked on a detailed examination of the Ordnance records in order to understand the formation and composition of the Ordnance Drawing Room at the Tower, an establishment that made a major contribution towards the training of British military surveyors and draughtsmen during the 18th century, and was responsible for organising and overseeing the great triangulation of the 1790s leading to the mapping and publication of the great survey of



Fig. 3: copy of a plan of the Tower and its Liberties by Holcroft Blood, c. 1701, showing proposed artillery bastions along the outer curtain wall

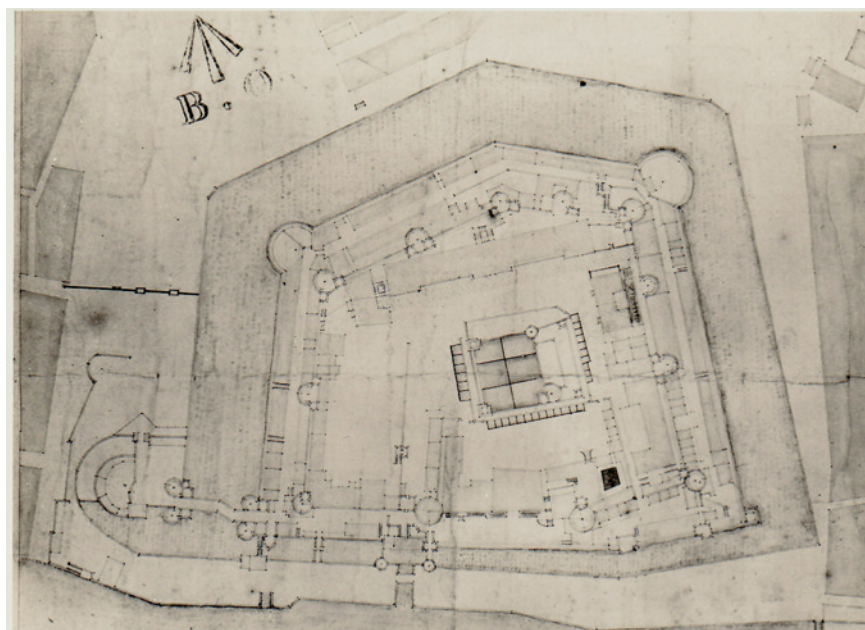


Fig. 4: plan of the Tower and its Liberties by Holcroft Blood, c. 1701

England and Wales during the first years of the 19th century. The Drawing Room was, in fact, formerly established in the great eastern annexe of the White Tower after the Board of Ordnance gave instructions on 16th February 1716 to begin work on the building conversion. This decision seems to have been a response to a report prepared in 1712 by Brigadier Michael Richards, the then Chief Engineer of the Ordnance, that included a recommendation that a draughtsman should be appointed as part of a package of measures to improve the recording and documenting of all activities associated with the Office's building programme.

After my flight from the Tower in early 2009, and the move back to my

native Devon, I resumed efforts to complete my work on the Ordnance Drawing Room and after a delay of many years came close to handing my draft to Ann Saunders.³ However, yet another delay was incurred by new information from a 'REGISTAR of DRAUGHTS in the DRAWING ROOM, 1743' that exists in an obscure corner of the War Office records in the National Archives at Kew.⁴ It would be unforgivable not to discuss the seventy-five drawings of the Tower of London that are listed in this fascinating document presented in this order: a register number, that is entered in the bottom left-hand corner of the original drawing, descriptions of titles, whether the drawings were copies or originals, original authorship or copied authorship, dates of authorship, whether the drawings were stored flat or rolled and last, but not least, the Tower reference number that was applied to the drawings in 1743 and which was also entered in the bottom right hand corner of the original drawing.

As I compiled my catalogue I came across entries for the two drawings that I have described above. No. 2 in the register is described as 'Plan of the Tower, Origin[al]. Brigad[ie]r Blood. and No. 33 the 'Plan of the Jewel Tower. Origin[al]. Mr. Edwards'. Brigadier Blood was none other than Holcroft Blood, eldest son of Col. Thomas Blood,⁵ and an engineer still working for the Ordnance at the beginning of the 18th century when he prepared the Tower plan, and Mr Edwards is almost certainly Talbot Edwards, the Keeper of the Jewels who was assaulted by Holcroft Blood's father, and who was still living in the Martin Tower when the plan of his lodgings was prepared on 15th August 1702. From the annotations on the drawings that I failed to interpret all those years ago I can see that the two drawings, together with the now

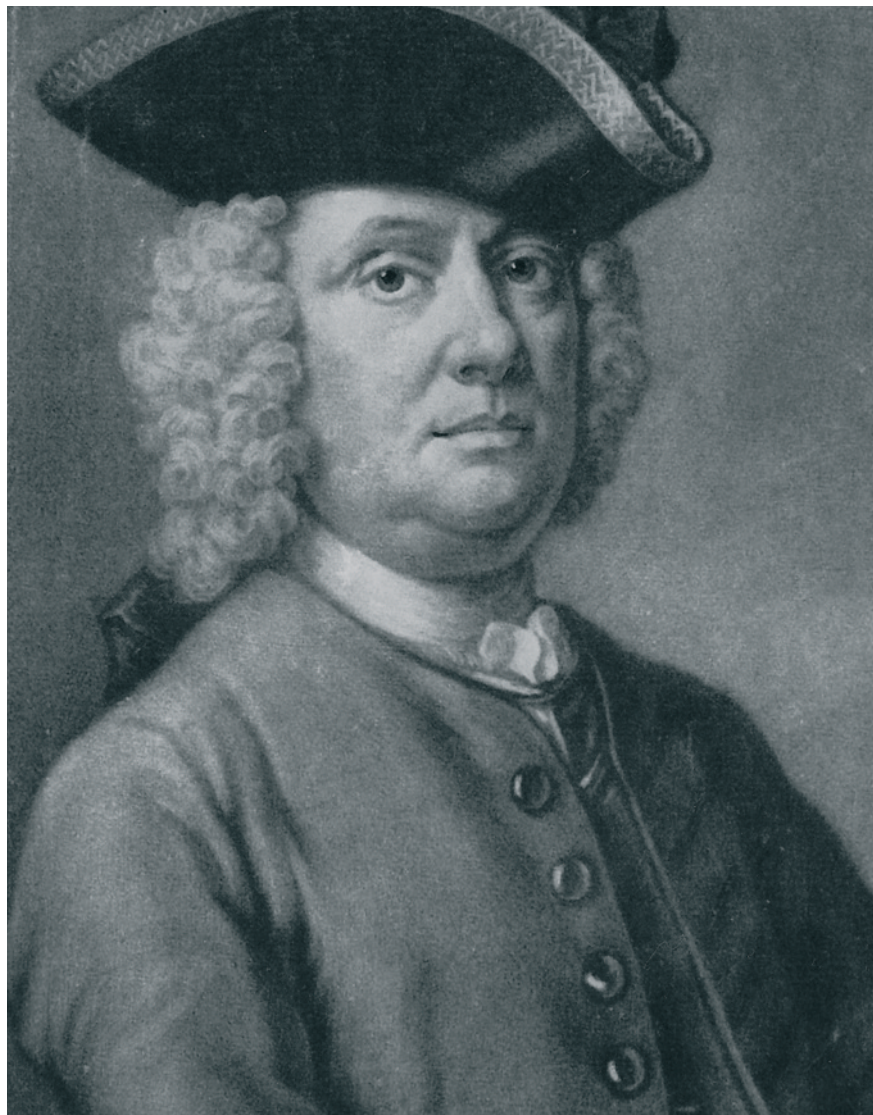


Fig. 5: a late portrait of Clement Lemprière painted by Thomas Frye and engraved by J. Faber junior

missing three-page memorandum concerning the attempted theft of some of the Crown Jewels, were 'Handed over to Lieut. Monier Skinner by his father in 1872' into the office of the Inspector General of Fortification (IMF).

In conclusion, it may be assumed that the drawings and the memorandum formed a family heirloom of the Skinner family. The reason why the donation was made to the office of the Inspector General of Fortifications is that the rogue's eldest son was in fact the Chief Engineer in the Ordnance and part of

the department's civilian branch that within seven years of his death was constituted as the Royal Engineers.

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1. G. Parnell 'Five Seventeenth-Century Plans of the Tower of London' *London Topographical Record* 25 (1985).

2. G. Parnell *The Tower of London* (1993) 75–6.

3. The draft of this work 'The Ordnance Drawing Room at the Tower of London' is now with English Heritage awaiting a final edit before publication in the *English Heritage Historical Review*. A good deal of research has gone into this project since I discovered

in 1978 that the site of my mean, steel, two-drawer, civil service writing desk on the first-floor chamber of the Well Tower had, in 1731/2, been the location of a grand four-poster bed belonging to the great draughtsman, Clement Lemprière, who occupied the post of Chief Draughtsman in the Drawing Room from 1725 to 1746 (Fig. 5). Lemprière's work dominated the Drawing Room portfolio from 1717 to 1740 and is described in detail for the first time in a story that I hope will represent my epitaph at the end

of a life-long study of the buildings and institutions of the Tower – a privilege of a bygone age that is no longer valued or sought in the theme park environment of today's Tower.

4. TNA WO 55/2281.

5. In most of the Ordnance records the engineer's Christian name is spelt 'Holcraft', but the DNB presumably uses other sources and names him 'Holcroft'.