



Notes on Excavations carried out on the Site of the Palace of the Bishops of Salisbury at Sonning.

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IT was of course a matter of common knowledge that as early as the tenth century the Bishops of Sonning had been possessed of an important residence at Sonning in Berkshire, and their successors in the See, first of Old Sarum and then of Salisbury, continued to hold and occupy this as their palace down to the time of Queen Elizabeth, when an exchange was made with the Queen for property in Wiltshire, more conveniently situated and nearer to the Cathedral City. Many important documents were issued by the Bishops during their stay at Sonning, and numerous references as to events which occurred here, have been duly chronicled. Perhaps one of the most touching episodes connected with the palace is the fact of its having been selected as the place where Isabella, the child queen of King Richard the Second, was kept in custody for some considerable time.

As has been stated the existence of the Bishop's Palace was generally known but the exact site had been forgotten, and considerable diversity of opinion prevailed as to the spot where any discoveries were likely to be made. There was no doubt that it stood near the Church and river, and within the domain of Holme Park, and when a drive was made in recent times from the lower gates up to the present mansion numerous foundations of buildings and walls were laid bare. These however did not seem to belong to a large and important residence, and as the road follows a depression with

higher ground towards the river, it was hardly likely that here were to be found the remains of the fortified house, which Bishop Ralph Ergham obtained permission to crenellate in the 14th century.

In 1912 the Holme Park Estate was in the hands of a syndicate and through the kind offices of Mr. Mervyn E. Macartney, F.S.A., I obtained permission from Messrs. Beadel and Son to examine the ground, and carry out any work which might conduce to the accomplishment of the task I was prepared to undertake. Accordingly after a careful examination of the ground, I decided to investigate a fairly level plateau about one hundred yards to the north of the drive, between the road and the river, slightly raised above the land all round it. There were numerous patches of nettles and thistles, but no visible sign of any walls or foundations to guide one in making a start. So having obtained the help of three men and with the invaluable supervision of Mr. A. J. Mayne, the local representative of Messrs. Beadel and Son, I embarked on what was undoubtedly a somewhat uncertain venture. A leading local resident who had seen the foundations laid bare during the construction of the drive, assured me I was commencing at the wrong place, but nothing daunted I was prepared to back my opinion, and a trench was started in a westerly direction with the result that before it had been excavated more than about six yards, the stone buttress near the south-east corner (Fig. 15) was discovered, and from this point the whole scheme as shown on the ground plan was worked out.

Many and perhaps unusual difficulties were encountered. In the first place the walls and foundations were at a great depth below the surface, varying from four to eight or ten feet. An enormous amount of soil had to be excavated and great banks raised on the sides of the trenches, as there were no means of carting the soil away, and this made the work difficult and the progress slow. The ground was largely composed of the *debris* of the original and later buildings, great quantities of flints and chalk having to be thrown out before the various parts of the structure could be properly exposed. Secondly, it was clear that at least one house, and perhaps two, had been built on the site of the original palace, and late brick and flint walls were supported on, and in some cases cut through, the foundations of the earlier buildings.

And thirdly there was the difficulty of obtaining the necessary labour. The formation of the Golf Links at Sonning in 1913 attracted most of the available men, and this was accentuated in 1914 by the commencement of the terrible war in which unhappily

we are still engaged. Still, it is hoped that something has been accomplished, and a fairly clear knowledge has been obtained of another of the palatial residences which were necessary for the accommodation of our great ecclesiastics in the Middle Ages.

As I have stated, almost immediately on starting the work we hit off the lower portion of a stone buttress near the south-west corner of the buildings. On following up the wall to the southward we soon came on the angle, so carrying on the trench westwards before we had gone far we discovered two large fireplaces with the backs as usual formed of tiles set in herringbone fashion. This has since been identified as the kitchen. A modern wall cuts through between the two fireplaces, and a clump of large elm trees prevented our continuing our exploration westwards. We therefore returned to our buttress and carried our trench along the line of the wall in a northerly direction. Here we found the foundations of a later brick wall on an earlier flint foundation, and as a support to this later wall a large number of carved stones had been inserted. Part of a beautiful canopied niche (Fig. 17) with remains of colouring, and several well-moulded capitals (Fig. 18), evidently from the porch of the great hall, besides other large fragments, were unearthed along this line. The lower part of a brick bow window proved that one of the later houses had been erected over this part of the former foundations. A large collection of animals' bones was also found outside this east wall. A considerable number of encaustic tiles (Fig. 19) came to light throughout the whole course of the excavations, all, with the exception of some green ones on the dais of the great hall, which were still *in situ*, lying about loose, mostly in a fragmentary condition. There was a great variety of patterns and dates, and many of the rooms and passages must have been paved with them. Large quantities of broken pottery and of iron work (Fig. 20), mostly of comparatively modern date, have also been brought to light, and are awaiting the advice of an expert in order that the best specimens may be picked out. There can be no doubt that here have been the rubbish pits of the several mansions, from very early down to quite recent times, and some skill will be required in sifting out anything valuable from the mass of fragments now collected together. A few very nice quarries of white, and one piece of ruby glass, probably from the Chapel or Hall, have also been unearthed. From the promiscuous distribution of all these fragments, it seems probable that the palace was allowed to fall into decay, or that it was entirely dismantled and pulled

down, and became useful as a quarry during the construction of the later houses. It is singular that very few coins have been found. One silver penny (Fig. 18) has been pronounced by an expert to be of the 15th century date, and to have been minted at York. There are half-a-dozen Nuremberg tokens, very thin, and, though they have different inscriptions, seem to be of about the same date. The most perfect one has on the obverse in capital letters "HANNs KRAVWINCKEL IN NVRNBE," surrounding a pretty device with three crowns and fleurs-de-lis alternately round a central rose. On the reverse is the motto "VERBVM DOMINI MANET IN ETERN." This surrounds a cusped trefoil enclosing a cross on an indented plinth. Another token has the following inscription, "HANS SCHVLERS FOKIE," with the same ornamentation in the centre, and on the reverse the following mystic characters, "ONVFNONVFHTOBLKCI." This also has the cross within the trefoil in the centre. A farthing of Charles II., date 1672, and a half-penny of George II. were also found.

Very few fragments of the earliest buildings have been discovered. Part of a shaft and two voussoirs (Fig. 21) with deeply-cut zigzag moulding are relics of the residence of the Bishops in the 12th century, and another stone with the dogtooth ornament of those of the early part of the 13th century. The sill of a large window on the north front, and possibly the head of a beautiful tabernacle niche, belong to the 14th century, while the large number of moulded stones with engaged shafts and pretty foliated capitals clearly belonged to the porch of the new hall erected in the latter part of the 15th century.

During the progress of the excavations, which were specially visited by the members of the British Archæological Association and the Berkshire Archæological Society, the advice of numerous experts was solicited, and careful observations were made by Sir William H. St. John Hope, Messrs. Mill Stephenson, F.S.A., C. R. Peers, F.S.A., J. W. M. Colyer, of the Reading Museum, and others, and many valuable suggestions were made and acted upon in carrying out the exploration work. I am, however, mainly indebted to Mr. Harold Brakspear, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., who has a world-wide reputation for his practical knowledge of these buried edifices, and of the best method of recovering the site and design of the former buildings, for the great personal interest he has taken in the excavations, the several visits he has paid to them, the very comprehensive ground plan he has worked out, and as a fitting conclusion to his

labours the excellent paper which he has read to our Berkshire Archaeological Society and has now handed over for publication in our Journal. This has saved me the trouble of undertaking the full description of the work myself, which, I do not hesitate to admit, I could not have done in the same masterly fashion as has been exhibited in Mr. Brakspear's paper.

I may, however, perhaps be allowed briefly to recapitulate the most interesting results of my efforts. I have for simplicity adopted Mr. Brakspear's phraseology, using the words north, south, east and west for the description of the different sides of the building, though what we call the north front points considerably to the north-west, and the other sides are at right angles or parallel to this.

As I have stated, I struck the foundations at a buttress near the south-east corner, and working first south and then west laid bare the two great fireplaces in the kitchen. Numerous walls of varying age and thickness were subsequently uncovered in this section, enclosing small chambers, which have all been designated by Mr. Brakspear. In the long excavation along the east side towards the north front the foundations of a later house with brick bow window were passed, and towards the north-east portion many cross walls, which were followed up later on. Farther north a room has been cleared out with stone stairs leading down to it (Fig. 11), and the sides of an angle turret, also of stone. There is a fireplace with tiles at the back and the original hearth with fragments of charcoal still remaining. Continuing on a large angle buttress of stone and brick was found, and on the inner side in this angle of the room is a fireplace with brick back and brick and stone cheeks. Close to it is a doorway leading to a large vault on the outer side, with stone walls and brick vaulted ceiling, perhaps for a garderobe. The wall from here shows many right angle turns, and the plaster on the surface indicates the situation of several rooms in this quarter, which have been duly appropriated by Mr. Brakspear. The walls at the north-east corner are somewhat fragmentary, and the foundations very deep down. Following the face of the wall westward, through a domed-in ice well of brick of much later date, we come to the best preserved portion of the wall, though as shown on the plan here are parallel walls of two or three different dates. There is some plastering on a cross wall (Fig. 9), and the base and lower jambs of a doorway leading to a small oblong room with stone walls. Close to this are seven stone steps of a newel staircase (Fig. 10) leading up to the dais of the great hall. There is a stone plinth to this part of the wall, and

farther on the sill and jambs of a window, portions of which have been dug up close by. Beyond this is another doorway, but this has been blocked up and the stone work filling it in has been plastered over. Here the wall turns slightly to the north and is then carried on westwards as before. It is of very rude material, large blocks of chalk widely jointed, and appears to be of very early date, and at the western angle are the foundations of a turret with large buttresses and a circular pit for a garderobe. This has been described as a porter's lodge to the path leading down to the river.

Returning along this wall to the north of the great hall was a square projection or turret, with the foundations of a staircase leading down to a lower level and, I think, traces of a fireplace. This has been designated a garderobe. In the early stages of the excavations we struck on a higher level a floor paved with green, yellow and red tiles, with a step-up on the north side, and the enclosure for a hearth in the centre (Fig. 6). This was no doubt the floor of the banqueting hall, and on starting again at right angles to the north wall, we first found a square space, conjectured to be the foundation of an oriel window, and then a series of buttresses in flint and stone supporting the outer walls. We then struck the porch to the hall, which must have been of great beauty. The bases of the outer angle buttresses (Fig. 7) were in richly moulded stone, and the flint foundations with stone plinth (Fig. 8) of the outer north and south walls remained in perfect condition. The jambs of the inner doorway and bases of the vaulting shafts, showing numerous small members attached to the main piers were still in situ, and there can be no doubt that the numerous fragments with elegantly carved capitals, dug up during the earlier stages of the work, came from this porch or other portions of the hall. To the south of the porch is a shaft in the wall, with a channel carried under it to a small square pit on the outer side, which may have been a garderobe. This hall is clearly an addition of late 15th century work. Considerable excavations were carried out on the south and east sides, but nothing more could be found. On the east side a great deal of rubbish was got out, and the stone buttresses (Figs. 12, 13, 14) of a narrow building on a lower level than the hall were found in good preservation. There seems to have been a small courtyard on this side.

In 1914 the property had been sold, and there was not much further opportunity for carrying on the exploration. Mr. Brakspear was confident that the great gateway could be discovered, and

accordingly a long trench was carried outwards from the west porch. This venture was crowned with complete success, as in due course, but not quite in line with the porch, the main gateway was unearthed (Figs. 1 to 5). This consisted of a central arch flanked by a tower on either side. The bases of the buttresses and the foundations were all of brick, and there were large subterranean vaults, etc., which have been fully described by Mr. Brakspear.

Such is a very brief account of the ambitious task undertaken and the work actually accomplished. Perhaps under more skilled supervision more might have been found, and no doubt much ground remained to be explored, but the new landlord on the advice of his agent was anxious to have the ground reinstated, so all has been covered up, not a stone is now visible, and once more the site of the palace will be all that remains of this favourite residence of the Bishops of Salisbury and their predecessors. It is probable that the foundations laid bare on the lower ground to the south of the main buildings belonged to the great barn, stables and other necessary accessories to the great house.

In conclusion I can only hope, as I said at the beginning, that though the work is incomplete, and the result possibly not so satisfactory as might have been anticipated, the labour expended has not been in vain, and something has been done to further elucidate the habits of our distinguished predecessors in the middle ages.
