

The Bishop's Palace, Sonning.

By Harold Brakspear, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.

A BISHOP'S house or palace, as it is more usually called, was for the two-fold purpose of housing the bishop and his servants and accommodating his guests on a lavish scale. Most bishops had a house on each of their chief manors, and there are remains of a number of these buildings in various parts of the country. A bishop's house of the middle ages differed but little from those of his lay peers. It consisted of a great hall with pantry, buttery and kitchen, a great chamber for the use of guests, a private set of chambers for the bishop and his household with a chapel, all surrounded by a high curtain wall, defended where space allowed by a ditch, and entered by a strong gatehouse.

The manor of Sonning belonged to the church from the earliest times, and for many years the bishops of the divided diocese of Winchester resided there. At Domesday it was held by Osmund, bishop of Sarum.

Though there must have been a bishop's house in these early times it is questionable if it was on the site of the later building or nearer the parish church. Certain it is that nothing remains in the later palace earlier than the thirteenth century except a few twelfth century stones used as building material.

The thirteenth century house was placed parallel to and on the steep southern bank of the Thames, and though altered by later works is traceable in the northern range of the later building. The house was raised upon a sub-vault and closely resembled the palace built at New Sarum by bishop Richard Poor about the same time.*

In 1337 bishop Robert Wyvill obtained a license to crenellate the manor house of Sonning, together with his other houses of Sarum, Bishops Woodford, Sherbourne, Chardstock, Potterne, Cannings, Ramsbury, and Fleet Street *in suburbis*.^(v) This inclusive license was confirmed to his successor, Ralph, by King Richard in the first year of his reign,^(v) which suggests that none of the works had by then been completed. Though all these buildings could not have been undertaken at the same time, even by so rich a prelate as

* The Sonning building had a hall 55 feet by 25 feet, and in the Salisbury palace the hall was 54 feet by 24 feet.

^(v) *Calendar of Patent Rolls* II. Ed. iii. m. 6.

^(v) *Ibid.* I. R. ii. m. 26.

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the bishop of Salisbury, the house at Sonning was most certainly very much enlarged about this time, though nothing remains of any defensive nature beyond the ditch.

In 1337 the castle of Sherborne, which had been in the King's hands since the fall of bishop Roger, was granted to William Montacute, earl of Salisbury, for services rendered to the crown. Bishop Wyvil, taking advantage of its transfer to private hands, brought an action against the Earl for its recovery. The question was referred to trial by single combat, and the champions of both parties were prepared to engage when a royal order was received to defer the trial to another time. The dispute was afterwards arranged, and the earl restored the castle to the see on the payment of 2,500 marks.^(*) In 1352, just before this arrangement was settled, the bishop gave to our lord the King nine great pieces of timber for beams for the roof of his chapel at Windsor, and they were taken from Sonning to Windsor in eighteen carts, namely, for each piece two carts with sixteen horses.†

A second great re-building of the palace was undertaken in the middle of the fifteenth century, and embraced a new hall with its entrance porch, oriel, and staircase, which must have been a magnificent piece of work. The date of this building and its details so closely resemble those of St. George's Chapel at Windsor that it is not unreasonable to ascribe the work to bishop Richard Beauchamp, who was made surveyor of the King's works at Windsor in 1473.‡ He is also said to have built the great hall at the palace of Salisbury.§

The private portions of the house were altered from time to time, and the great gatehouse was rebuilt in Henry VII.'s reign with the walls surrounding the forecourt, and possibly the water gate on the north.

Leland visited Sonning in 1541, when

"yet remaineth a fair olde house there of stone even by the Tamise ripe longging to the Bisshop of Saresbyri and thereby is a fair parke."||

In 1574 the manor of Sonning and Eye was given to the crown by bishop Edmund Gheast in exchange for many rich manors in the

(*) *Calendar of Close Rolls* 29. Ed. iii. m. 331.

† W. H. St. John Hope's *Windsor Castle* (London, 1913), 139.

‡ *Ibid.* 238.

§ The Sonning hall was 74 feet by 36 feet, and the Salisbury hall 75 feet by 38 feet.

|| Leland's *Itinerary* (1907) i. 109.

diocese of Salisbury.* To what use the Queen put the house, or whether any alterations were made thereto, is impossible to say, as nothing of this period was discovered. It seems ultimately to have been allowed to fall into decay and a new house built to the southward with the old materials. This in its turn has disappeared. The site for many years has been marked by considerable mounds, but not a stone remained above ground.

It is entirely due to the energy and generosity of Mr. C. E. Keyser, F.S.A., that the late excavations were undertaken, and the plan, so far as it goes, of this interesting house has been revealed. Much has been accomplished, but much more remains to be done, as nothing has been found of the brewhouse, bakehouse, stables or barn or curtain wall, which must have existed and still await some future enterprise before the plan of the bishop's house at Sonning can be called complete.

The house was an irregular group of buildings surrounding a court, placed on the steep south bank of the river and defended on the other three sides by a ditch, which is still traceable on the west. In front of the house was a large forecourt, entered by the main gateway on its west side and another from the river on the north. The hall was in the middle of the east side of the forecourt, and behind it was the inner court with two-storied ranges of buildings to the north, east and south. The kitchen was a detached building to the south of the hall.

The forecourt is $179\frac{1}{2}$ feet from north to south by 143 feet from east to west, and was surrounded by a wall 18 inches thick, built of brick and having an internal and external chamfered plinth.

The great gatehouse was almost in the middle of the west side, and measured 50 feet in length by 22 feet in depth over all. It had the gateway of entrance in the middle flanked on either side by a large room forming the porter's lodge. The whole was built in brick and had octagonal turrets at the angles and on either side the gateway arches. Those at the north-east and south-east angles were for use, the former having contained a wardrobe and the latter a vice, but the remainder were mere ornaments, similar to the work at East Barsham, in Norfolk. The entrance was 11 feet wide and had a doorway with a deep chamfered member at either end. There is

* Rev. H. Pearson's *Memorials of Sonning* (1890) 166.

no indication how the side chambers were entered, but they were probably gained by small doorways on either side the entrance.

The northern chamber has the remains of an inserted fireplace in the west wall, in the hearth of which was a circular sinkage. In the south-east angle of the room was a boldly projecting block for abutment to the inner arch of the entrance.

The southern chamber is smaller than the northern, the west wall being $9\frac{3}{4}$ feet thick. This contained the pits for two garderobes from the floors above which discharged over an arched drain $5\frac{1}{4}$ feet wide that ran along the outside of the forecourt wall. Under this chamber was a cellar with a pointed arched recess in the north-west angle, inside which is a small arched opening into the drain apparently for the disposal of rubbish. The north wall has a construction arch of two courses of bricks of its full length to support a thickening of the south side of the entrance above.

There are indications of an older building having been incorporated in this gatehouse, but the remains are so slight that they give no clue to its size or character.

On the north side of the court is a slightly earlier gatehouse 16 feet wide by 20 feet deep over all. This has diagonal buttresses at all the angles except the south-east, where there was a vice for access to the upper rooms. All the foundations are in flint, which have been strengthened in places with brick.

When the house was disbanded the gateways were removed, but the old walls of the forecourt were left standing and were continued across the sites of both gates to form a walled garden. There is a flight of steps in connection with this work in the south-west angle of the court leading up to another garden to the south. Running at an angle south-eastward from these steps is a stone-built wall 33 inches thick, which seems to be a retaining wall in connection with the later gardens.

The great hall was internally 74 feet long by 36 feet wide. The whole of the west side, with porch and oriel, the north and a considerable part of the east wall have been traced by excavation. The south end has entirely gone.

The first hall on this site was probably erected in the fourteenth century, but was re-built, or very considerably re-modelled, in the fifteenth century.

The hall would be covered by an open timber roof divided into five bays, and had deep buttresses opposite each couple on the west

side. The north gable was built in front of the earlier north range of buildings and has left a massive foundation six feet wide. This, built of chalk rubble, is of the fifteenth century re-building. The foundations of the east, and northern end of the west walls are built of flint, apparently of the fourteenth century.

The dais was at the north end of the hall, was 11 feet wide, and though the step has gone its position was clearly marked in the flooring. The floors of the hall and dais were covered with large square tiles, apparently without patterns, set square with the building. In the middle of the hall, between the second and third bays, was a hearth for the fire, 7 feet square, with stone curb and laid with tiles on edge. Over this in the roof would have been an open louvre. At the south end of the hall were the screens protecting the entrance, and there would be doors in the gable wall to the kitchen, pantry, and buttery.

The oriel was at the west end of the dais, and has been destroyed to the foundations. These, however, are unusually massive, and built in chalk rubble. They indicate that the superstructure was square on plan, and had a vice on its north side. The whole may have been carried up as a tower.

The porch, which protected the entrance to the hall at the west end of the screens, was $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet square with walls only 28 inches thick. Each external angle has double buttresses formed of square piers set diagonally and joined up to the angles with straight pieces. The plan is very unusual, and may have been intended for pinnacles with little flyers, in the manner of the top of a Somersetshire church tower, or the square piers may have been pedestals supporting beasts carrying shields of arms. The buttresses had a moulded plinth of three courses, of which only the lowest course was carried along the side walls.

The outer arch has gone, but stones of its jambs have been found, and these were of very small mouldings resting on moulded bases with octagonal plinths. The opening had no rebate for a door.

Internally the porch was vaulted, and there were delicately moulded shafts to support it in each angle. The inner doorway is $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, with two members of the same delicate moulded work on small bases. This door was built up with masonry and an eighteenth century drain cut across the porch at its west side.

The hall, porch, and presumably the oriel, were built with rough flint and chalk walling faced with cut flints, and finished with dressings of very finely wrought and moulded stonework.

The hall of a bishop's house seems to have been required for entertaining a greater number of guests at one time than were those of the largest castles. At Lincoln, Wells and Farnham the hall was arranged like the nave of a church with aisles; but at Salisbury, Eltham, Mayfield and other places it was of the ordinary type with one span of roof. Of the first type Wells was the largest with a hall of 115 feet by 60, and of the latter Eltham and Durham were almost the same size, being 101 feet by 36 and 101 by 34 respectively.

The northern range of building was 123 feet long by 25 feet wide. It was roughly divided into two parts, of which the western is the earliest work in the palace, in fact it seems to embrace the whole house that was built in the thirteenth century. This house consisted of a hall, placed east and west, and a cross building at the east end projecting southward; it was carried on a sub-vault. The sub-vault of the hall was of two divisions, and the south wall retains an internal chamfered plinth.

The western division was $29\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 25 feet, and was entered from the south by a doorway of a single member next the west wall. Just to the east is the internal sill of a lancet window with splayed jambs. There is a cut in the plinth at 16 feet from the west end which marks a sub-division of this chamber. The room was probably a cellar, and had a column in the middle to carry the vaulting.

The eastern room had in the south wall the jambs of a doorway of two hollow chamfered members, and there are indications of another lancet window to the west. The dividing wall between this and the western room was four feet thick, but has been destroyed. This room may have been the kitchen with a fire in the west wall or on the north side, and vaulted to a middle pier. The east wall was not traced.

The sub-vault of the cross building had a small chamber in the north-east angle, occupying half the width of the building and 10 feet from north to south. Next this was a passage three feet wide with a doorway at either end, and off it to the south was a vice to the floor above. The southern part of the wing was one room, possibly the pantry. Externally the north end had a buttress opposite the east wall and another in the middle.

The arrangements of the first floor can only be surmised. The hall in the first place probably occupied the whole space over both kitchen and cellar, and was entered at the south-east angle by a straight flight of external steps. In later times, probably before the fourteenth century re-modelling, the west end was parted off for a high chamber and a wardrobe added on the north side. The north end of the cross building was probably the chapel, next would be a passage from the top of the vice to the hall for service from the kitchen, and over the pantry would be the bishop's solar.

In the fourteenth century re-modelling this old house seems to have been left with little alteration for the private use of the bishop. At the north end of the hall screens was added a large wardrobe of three divisions, having square shoots discharging into an open recess covered by an arch formed of tiles. When first opened this was perfect, but fell before it could be photographed.

The eastern part of the northern range was occupied without much doubt by the chapel, 48 feet long by 25 feet wide, built during the fourteenth century enlargements. It was probably on the ground level and one story in height, entered from the central court, though it is just possible it was over a sub-vault, like the bishop's chapel at Salisbury. The north-east angle had been strengthened by buttresses, owing apparently to the thrust of the arch over a large east window.

Opposite the oriel in the hall was a very substantial building of probably bishop Beauchamp's work. It consists of two parallel walls 5 feet 5 inches and 4 feet 10 inches thick respectively, and 6 feet 2 inches apart, built in between the hall and the west side of the projecting part of the first house. The northern of these two walls is $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet away from the north range, and the old doorway to the kitchen was left as access to the space thus formed. On the south side are two large buttresses with chamfered plinths. The building evidently contained a staircase from the hall to the first floor of the northern range, made in the place of the old straight flight of steps to the hall of the first house. When this staircase was built a small vice was inserted in the north-east angle of the hall down to the sub-vault of the northern range, and its position suggests the staircase was carried up as a tower with this vice as access to the rooms in the upper part.

The south side of the staircase was continued in front of the projecting part of the first house, to a point in line with its east side, and enclosed a chamber 14 feet by 6 feet entered by a door-

way from the court. The old wall on the north of this chamber was narrowed and a door inserted at its west end to the sub-vault of the northern range. The eastern wall is built on a construction arch apparently over soft ground.

The central court was roughly 59 feet from north to south by 50 feet from east to west, and was surrounded by a covered walk similar to a monastic cloister. Most of the inner wall of the walk was found on the north, and a return of that of the west side.

The eastern range of building consists of three rooms on the ground floor which apparently corresponded to rooms of equal size on the first floor. How this latter was gained is not easy to understand, but it was probably by a gallery in line with the staircase from the hall.

The northernmost room was 32 feet long by 21 feet wide, and was entered from the court by a small doorway of a single member, now blocked. On the east side of this room, occupying the angle formed by the projection of the chapel, was an added chamber 18 feet by 13 feet, which is possibly the substructure of the bishop's private oratory or pew overlooking the chapel.

The middle room, 27 feet by 21, was entered by a narrow doorway in the extreme south-west angle from the court. Externally, in the middle of the east wall, was a bold buttress, with canted splays in its re-entering angles, suggesting the support for a large bay window in the room above, similar to that in the prior's house at Castle Acre.

The southernmost room was only 14½ feet by 21, and was not entered directly from the court, but was probably gained from the middle room. In its south-west angle is a fireplace 4½ feet wide built in coursed brickwork with stone jambs. Externally this angle has a bold diagonal buttress. In the south wall is an inserted doorway intended for a wooden frame leading to an added wardrobe over a pit.

There is little doubt that this eastern range of buildings was added for the personal use of the bishop when the original house in the north range became too small with the altered fashions of the times. The bishop's rooms would be on the first floor, and those on the ground floor would be for his personal servants. The range dates apparently from the end of the fifteenth century, the walls being built of flints mixed with bricks and stuccoed externally. The west wall next the court may have been earlier than this range.

The range of buildings on the south side of the court is apparently part of the enlarged scheme of the fourteenth century, but has left very scanty remains. It was 100 feet in length by $20\frac{1}{2}$ feet in width.

On the ground floor the portion opposite the south end of the great hall would contain the pantry and buttery, with a passage between leading to the kitchen. There would also be a stair to the upper floor. The eastern portion of the range is occupied by two rooms, of which the eastern was the more perfect. It was $21\frac{1}{2}$ feet from east to west, and was probably entered from the court, though no remains of a doorway were found. In the middle of the south wall is a fireplace four feet wide with back and ends built of tiles placed herring-bone wise.

The rooms on the first floor would be for the accommodation of guests. The westernmost was disturbed when the hall was re-modelled and its end gable was apparently intended to be re-built on a new line, but this was abandoned. Advantage was taken of this incomplete gable to insert a garderobe of which the pit remains and discharged into a small external cesspit.

Running southward from about the middle of this range was a narrow building, 42 feet by 16, with a range of gardrobes at its south end. A precisely similar building of almost equally generous proportions exists at Great Chalfield in Wiltshire, but its original use has there been altered.

A wall in line with the west gable of the range was continued southward, and there must have been a room, south of the pantry, which had a great fireplace occupying its north side. The tiled back and one end of this remains.

At 118 feet directly south from this end of the hall was the south wall of the great kitchen. This most indispensable and always interesting building has left only very fragmentary remains consisting of the south wall and part of the east.

It was apparently 35 feet square, and the outer walls were no less than $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick, built of flints and chalk rubble and faced with flint and chalk in a rough attempt at checker work.

In the south wall were two great fireplaces 9 feet wide with tiled backs laid herring-bone fashion. In the east wall was a doorway of a single chamfered member. Projecting southward opposite this east wall is a great buttress four feet wide which has a chamfered plinth.

On the east side of the kitchen was a contemporary building nine feet wide, of which the south, east and north walls remain. The south wall is of the same thickness and in line with the south wall of the kitchen. The east wall is only $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick and has a great buttress, four feet wide, with chamfered plinth at 13 feet from the south angle. This, though of the same date as the wall, is the only buttress on this side.

The domestic kitchen was of various shapes and forms, though in early and large examples it was detached from the house and roughly square on plan. It was covered by a roof of stone or wood thoroughly well ventilated.

The kitchen in connection with the abbot's house at Glastonbury is $33\frac{1}{2}$ feet square on plan, with walls four feet in thickness, having only shallow buttresses externally. It has fireplaces in the angles and is covered by a stone roof with an octagonal stone louvre at the top.

The kitchen of St. Mary's hall at Coventry is roughly 25 feet square with walls five feet thick. The fires, four in number, are side by side in the south and east walls. There is a flat roof of wood with a large wooden louvre.

A charming kitchen still remains at Stanton Harcourt. It is 25 feet square with three-foot walls without buttresses. It has a pair of fireplaces in one side with ovens in the opposite wall. The roof remains and is octagonal on plan with a range of openwork louvres in the lower part.

Considering the thickness of the walls and the great buttresses, the kitchen at Sonning might readily have been finished with a stone roof and louvre like Glastonbury, but the two fireplaces side by side in the same wall would almost preclude that arrangement.

The kitchen was an unusual distance from the hall, and if the whole of this end of the house was of the 14th century re-modelling the reason for the plan is difficult to understand, though in the early sixteenth century building at East Barsham a similar arrangement occurs.

In some Devonshire houses the kitchen is on the opposite side of the court from the hall, and only connected by a pintise.

At the present time the sites of the bishop's palace and the succeeding house are within the area of Home Park, and have nothing to indicate their positions but mounds and depressions in the ground.

Though the excavations have revealed the general features of the bishop's house itself little or nothing has been uncovered to shew its surroundings.

A survey of the gardens and plots immediately around the house when exchanged with the crown in the sixteenth century is in the Record Office, and gives some idea of the extent of the premises.

Translated the survey runs as follows :—

That the house called the Inner Porters Lodge, being a portion of the house in the same place called the Bishops Howse (with the exception of the lower sleeping apartment in the aforesaid house called the Inner Porters Lodge on the left hand of one entering the said house) contains a chamber or cellar called a vaute, one other lower house on the right hand of one entering the gate, and one other house on the east side of the said house, called a Cutting . . . adjoining the upper sleeping room, and the clear value per annum to let to anyone is 5/-.

And that half the barn situate on the south side of the outer court containing in length 60 feet and in width 27 feet is worth per annum if let to anyone 6/8.

And that the stable for six horses, adjacent on the south side of the said outer court, is worth per annum over taxes and repairs 2/-.

And that the piece of land called the northe gardine, estimated to contain $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres, adjoining, on the north side the mansion house called the Bishop's place, on the east side a certain river called the Thames, on the south side a certain piece of land called Gunhole Eyot, on the west side a certain close called the Church Close, in the tenure of Humfrey Burdett, gentleman, is worth clear per annum 5/-.

And that the piece of land called the sowthe gardine, estimated to contain one acre, adjoining on the south side a certain piece of land called the Dovehowse gardine in the tenure of the said Humfrey Burdett, and on the north side a certain park called the Home Parke, and on the west side a certain piece of land called the Ruckhoulds, otherwise the Rockheyase, and on the east side a certain path leading from the village of Suninge to the town of Readinge, is worth per annum 2/-.

And that piece of land called the Weare Plott, estimated to contain $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres, adjoining on the north side the aforesaid park called the Home Park, on the west side a path leading

from the village of Sunninge to the town of Readinge, on the east side a certain water course there, on the south side the outer court of the aforesaid mansion house called the Bishop's Place, is worth per annum 3/-.

And that the portion of meadow called Hooke More, otherwise Hooched More, estimated to contain $3\frac{1}{2}$ acres of meadow, in the meadow called Suninge Meade, adjoining on the west and north sides a certain parcel of meadow by estimate 20 acres in the tenure of the said Humfrey Burdett, and on the south and east sides the aforesaid river called the Thames, is worth clear per annum 14/-.

And that the piece of land called the Rockehoulds, other wise the Rackehayse, estimated to contain 3 acres, laying on the south side, near a certain pidell called the dove-howse piddell, in the tenure of the said Humfrey Burdett, and on the north side a certain ditch with a quick-set hedge dividing the aforesaid piece of land from the park there called the Home Park, extending on the west side over land in the tenure of the said Humfrey Burdett, called Great Parke North, and on the east side over a certain piece of land called the sowthe gardine, is worth clear pr. an. 6/-.

This survey, though most minute in its descriptions, is impossible to follow until it is noticed that the surveyors' north point is actually west. When this is remembered the gardens and plots fall into their correct order with, however, two exceptions, and these are the barn and stables, which are described as being on the south side of the outer court. If this outer court was the forecourt of the palace, which is reasonable to presume, then the barn and stables could not have been on the surveyors' south side, which would have been the actual east, as that was occupied by the palace itself. If, however, there was a further court westward of the forecourt the barn may have been as specified, though no sign of it was found near the gatehouse.

The gatehouse, or inner porter's lodge as it is called in the survey, is carefully described with a room on either side of the gate, and on one side was a cellar, something evidently unusual for it to be so specifically mentioned. "The house to the east called a cutting . . ." is unfortunately not clear, as the two following words are illegible.

* * P.R.O. *Exchequer*. Special Commission. 25 Eliz. No. 393.

The north garden, the south garden, the Weare plot, the Rock-holes and the church close seemed to have formed the immediate precincts of the house, being bounded on the north by the river, on the south-west by the Home Park, on the south-east by Sonning village, and on the north-east by the vicarage and the church. The whole of this covered about ten or twelve acres.

The bishop's palace was succeeded by another house, erected presumably towards the end of the seventeenth century, placed to the south of the old kitchen and facing south-west with a straight drive to the present entrance to Home Park from Sonning village. Nothing of the earlier house was retained save some parts of the kitchen and the wall on the south side of the forecourt. This was continued across the site of the palace to the east side of the south gardeobe block and then returned north as far as the outer side of the old palace, where were some garden steps to the lower level towards the river. A circular ice-house was made on the site of the chapel.

A plan of this house, though on a very small scale, with its surroundings are shown on "A plan of an estate situate in the parish of Sonning and county of Berks belonging to Daniel Rich, Esq., surveyed and delineated by James Crow, Anno Dom. 1752," which is here reproduced (plate 16).

The gardens and "Park" seem to include the same land as formerly belonged to the bishop's palace, though entirely re-arranged after the date of the Elizabethan survey.

A Surbey of Wallingford in 1550.

(Continued from page 113, Vol. 21).

Folio 4—continued.

The High Street on the south side, beginning at the west gate.

- (1) Robert Warfelde holds one garden in the parish of Holy Trinity there, between the alley (*venellam*) leading from the high street into Cany Crofte on the east side and another alley belonging to the said Robert on the west