Mid Pleasures and Palaces: Archaeological Work at the Royal sites of London

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IN JULY 1976 I found some mid-17th century pottery lying in a heap just by the back of the Treasury in Downing Street. A low bank had just been cut back, exposing a post-Tudor wall of Whitehall Palace, and chopping into one or more rich rubbish pits.

Some archaeological interest had been shown, since the pottery was put in a heap, but obviously the work was not done under full archaeological control. A closely supervised minor dig here could have produced close dating evidence and made it clear which of the notable figures who lived in this part of the Palace — Cromwell, Albemarle and Monmouth are all possible — actually used the pots. It could have been a good opportunity to throw archaeological and cultural light on the political history of the 17th century.

Did Cromwell himself pour wine for his associates from the stoneware “greybeard” mug of which I have a fragment on my table? Or did he eat off the actual delft plate of which I have a rimsherd?

It struck me that our politicians and bureaucrats need a good deal more encouragement than we are giving them to make the best of these central Royal sites and, in the archaeological field, to achieve the long-term aims for which they exist, as well as the essential job of being seen to be busy.

The Department of the Environment (and its various predecessors back to the Office of Works) have notably tackled the general architectural and documentary study of the “Kings Works”, but their production of detailed archaeological reports on sites in their own care have yet to reach the same standard.

While the overall achievement in publishing archaeological site-reports is running at a bare 15% of

1. I have since been informed that this site had been watched and recorded by members of the Inner London Archaeological Unit, on contract to the DoE, while work was in progress in March/April 1976. The Department’s own officers also did some recording work. Builders’ work was then suspended, and had not been resumed when I visited the site. The pottery had obviously been found unofficially while work was suspended.

excavation work done officially on these sites may suggest some of the needs.

The earliest unpublished Ministry excavation of a Palace site for which I have found any surviving records was done in 1744 by Henry Flitcroft, nicknamed "Burlington Harry" from his leanings towards Palladian architecture and classical studies, who was Clerk of the Works at St. James's and later Comptroller of the Works. He excavated the courtyard of Buckingham Palace, then Buckingham House, in 1744 and drew (Fig. 1) an excellent record plan. The excavation was done and the plan was produced for a Chancery case about the different Crown leases under which the Buckingham family held the house and had encroached on St. James's Park. The foundations show Goring House of about 1630 rebuilt as Arlington House after a fire in 1674. Flitcroft was obviously appearing as a royal official representing the Crown as the ground landlord, although it was 15 years before George III bought in the lease to live in Buckingham House himself.

The 1800's saw the publication of Capon's record-survey of discoveries in the Palace of Westminster during piecemeal rebuilding between 1793 and 1823, but this was demolition-record rather than excavation, and the unpublished field-records of Soane, Buckler, Blare and other architects and antiquaries and the published details of Carter and Smith, give a very good idea of what was being pulled to pieces before the fire of 1834. The point here is that a great number of skilled observers were sketching and planning every scrap of medieval walling which

3. Public Record Office, MPE 381.
4. H. M. Colvin, "Views of the old Palace of West-

Fig. 2. Westminster Palace: excavations south of the Jewel Tower, 1962. (Photo: Crown Copyright)
they could recognise, and making superb records themselves, instead of just moaning.

The next direct record of an excavation which I have traced on one of these sites is the cautious stripping and consolidating of St. Peter ad Vincula in the Tower in 1876-77, which was carried out under Queen Victoria's precise instructions, according to Lord Redesdale's lively account. The finds included Queen Anne Boleyn and other memorable victims, and the detailed medical report together with the "plan on vellum" which was "deposited among the records of the Tower", well deserve publication in the centenary year of excavation.

Major clearance works of 1910 at Hampton Court and of 1936 at the Tower can only be mentioned briefly. The major finds, the bridge across the moat at Hampton Court and the outer entrance works to the Tower, are still there, but the sequence of fill, the finds themselves and the true profile of the ditches may have been recorded, and would be worth publishing.

These two can only have been part of steady trickle of restoration work on the royal sites. It would be well worth tracking them down in the

Public Record Office, where most of these office files now seem to be, and from the memories of people who took part since the value of personal memory, which even now can go back as far as 1910, is immense. The Whitehall dig of 1937, of which we hope to publish more details later, seems to be the only one with any kind of adequate interim report.

Since the war much more excavation has been carried out. At Westminster the Jewel Tower at the south-west angle of the palace site was underpinned and the moat opened gradually in 1948-59: more work was done and the dock south of the moat cleared and recorded in 1962-59 (Fig. 2). More central to the palace, the public furor of 1972-3 over the rescue works in New Palace Yard\(^\text{10}\) for the car park, rather tended to rush up the fact that equal damage was being done inside the Houses of Parliament by new offices in the courtyards. These cut up the surviving medieval foundations of the Palace in a number of places. We would all welcome a detailed account of all these finds at the soonest convenience. The Inner London Unit's even more recent work around Westminster Hall has already

been published.  

At the Tower work was in progress round the foot of the White Tower in 1953-4 (Fig. 3), at the "Jewel House" in 1955, against a wall in 1956, under the Queens House and in the Wakefield Tower in 1957, at the Bloody, Byward, and Wardrobe Towers and St. Thomas' Gate in 1958, again at St. Thomas' Gate in 1959, and in the east moat in 1960. In 1963 I saw the early inner ditch north-west of the White Tower, and work has continued in 1971 inside the Wakefield Tower, at Traitor's Gate again in 1973, and by the Wakefield Tower in 1974-5.

At the more distant Palaces a good deal of digging has been done, much of it generated by the work for the Kings Works volumes. Even before that, desultory work started at Eltham in 1952, which has left a good deal of foundations visible.

The vast enterprise at Nonsuch in 1959-60 was rather more of an independent than a public enterprise, as was Elsyng in 1964. King's Langley in 1969 and 1970, Oatlands in 1968 and Green- (1962 and later) of the MPBW and DoE: see also Medieval Archaeol 2 (1958) 201 and 8 (1964) 255-6.


12. Some of these recent campaigns have never been noted in print and some only in the rather unsatisfactory Annual Reports of the Ancient Monuments Board (1954 and later) or the Excavations Annual Reports of the MPBW and DoE: see also Medieval Archaeol 2 (1958) 201 and 8 (1964) 255-6.


17. CBA, Calendar of Excavations, 1968 Summary 16.
wich\textsuperscript{18} in 1970 were undertaken more directly by the “Ministry” in one form or another. The excavation of Kennington Palace in 1965-7 by S.A.E.C. and S.L.A.S. has recently been published (see Books).

Where are all the finds from these innumerable digs? Some of the Jewel Tower finds are on show there, but others are said to be lingering on top of the craft-cupboards in a school in W.14. Many boxes of pottery are doubtless safely tucked away in Ministry stores and cellars, but the condition of finds, particularly from the earlier excavations, must be a legitimate cause for concern. Even under the best of conditions finds can deteriorate, and and removals from one building to another only add to the problem. Excavation records too are always vulnerable and they are continually “at risk” until final publication.

The whole problem of too much excavation being forced upon us, with too little energy and space to write it up, is best seen at Whitehall. When the Cabinet Office and Treasury were largely demolished and rebuilt behind the existing facades in 1961-4 (Fig. 4), very little was observed under the main buildings but a great deal from the peripheral areas, as the authorities gradually realised what was being lost: Roman sherds, the Saxon timber hall (Fig. 5), the medieval pits, the massive Tudor palace-footings and rubbish deposits were pulled out by almost private initiative within the Ministry\textsuperscript{19}. But where were the present-day versions of the Carters and Bucklers of the 1820’s?

Working then in Oxford I quite failed to understand just how inadequate the resources being put into Whitehall were, and how lethargic the local response in practical assistance and influence.

We must urge the Department of the Environment to take all chances to improve our wider knowledge of the past, and to push on with publishing all the work I have mentioned, and no doubt a dozen more digs which I have missed. One person, with some help, can do most of the work, but we need to see a start made, not yet another inter-departmental committee reporting on what needs to be done.


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**R. C. H. M.**

**THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON HISTORICAL MONUMENTS (ENGLAND)** has a vacancy in the Air Photographic Unit of the National Monuments Record Office.

The work includes the identification and planning of archaeological sites from air photographs. Archaeological knowledge and any previous experience with air photographs is desirable.

The post is graded as “Cartographic Draughtsman” for which three passes at “O” level are required in relevant subjects, i.e. mathematics, geography, art, technical drawing and comparable subjects and surveying.

The salary scale is £2767 at age 21, rising to a maximum of £3928 which includes London Weighting and Supplement. After a satisfactory probationary period this post becomes a pensionable appointment.

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