

WESTMINSTER TOPOGRAPHY

I

Being a lecture delivered to the Society on 10th March, 1950

By LAWRENCE TANNER, M.V.O., M.A., F.S.A.,

Keeper of the Muniments and Library, Westminster Abbey

My subject this evening is "Westminster Topography" and I start with two things, (1) the tusk of a wild boar which was dug up at a great depth in the Precincts of the Abbey some years ago, and (2) an almost square piece of parchment, yellow with age, but with the writing upon it almost as clear as the day it was written perhaps nearly twelve hundred years ago. Some 600 years later one of our monks in an idle moment scribbled on the back of it the curiously modern-looking endorsement: "Telegraph of Offa King of the Mercians A.D. 785"—*telegraphus* being the medieval Latin word for an ancient charter dealing with land—and that bit of parchment has been handed down from generation to generation among our records and is the oldest document we possess.¹ Whether it is in fact quite as old as it purports to be or a slightly later copy—it cannot be much later—may be disputed. But in substance it may reasonably be accepted and it tells us this, that: "I, Offa . . . King of the Mercians . . . have given to St. Peter and to the people of God who live in Thorney (that is, the Isle of Thorns—*insula spinarum*) in the dreadful place which is called (and here from Latin he bursts into Anglo-Saxon) *aet Westmunster*, a piece of land at Aldenham" in Hertfordshire; and he adds somewhat naively that in return the Abbot of Westminster has given him 100 pieces of gold on a bracelet—so you see, both sides were satisfied.

Now I draw your attention to this charter for two reasons, (1) because it is, I believe, the first time that the word "Westminster" is known to appear in writing, and (2) because it tells us something of the site on which the Abbey was built. "In Thorney, in the dreadful place which is called at Westminster"—so runs the Charter and I think there can be no doubt that it means that, even at that time—roughly contemporary with Charlemagne—the island of Thorney, on which this Abbey Church was built, was regarded as a place apart, a holy and

sanctified spot, producing feelings of dread and awe, the sacred centre round which, in fact, all that is now known as Westminster has grown.

The Island stood at the north-east corner of a low-lying plain which was intersected by dykes and marshes and covered the ground now known as Pimlico and Belgravia. It stretched fan-wise from the Abbey to Chelsea and beyond. This plain was bounded by the Thames on one side and on the other by a well-defined ridge (rising ultimately to the Hampstead hills) which can be traced to-day from the Strand westwards by way of Piccadilly (one can realise it best by standing at the top of St. James's Street), Knightsbridge (where it was cut by the valley of the Westbourne), Campden Hill, Hammersmith and beyond. In this plain the only outstanding feature was a small rise—and it was little more than a mound—known as the Toot Hill (about where is now St. James's Park Underground Station) which gave its name to Tothill Street and to the Tuttle Fields. *Toot* is an old English word meaning a look-out place or a stronghold and we get it, to give one example, in the Wycliffe version of the Bible, where the verse in the Authorised Version "David took the stronghold of Zion" is rendered "David took the Totehill Syon." In later days a chapel was erected on the mound and dedicated to St. Armil or Armine of Brittany, a saint whom Henry VII believed to have miraculously preserved him from shipwreck, and the name is preserved in the modern St. Ermin's which stands on the site.² Apart from the Toot Hill the only other natural features of this plain were two streams, the Westbourne and Tybourne (both rising in the Hampstead hills). The Westbourne came down through the modern Westbourne Grove, through Hyde Park, and from there by way of the Knights Bridge and Sloane Square (where the pipes which contain it are carried across the Underground Station), and so to the Thames by the modern Chelsea Bridge.

The other stream, the Eybourne or Tybourne, came down through Mary-le-bourne, by the Marble Arch, along Brook Street, Conduit Street, across Piccadilly (where the dip in the roadway marks its bed) and the Green Park, under Buckingham Palace and so by way of Tatchbrook Street to the Thames by the modern Vauxhall Bridge.

I have dwelt on these natural features at some length because throughout medieval times, and indeed much later, they remained unaltered and Westminster itself was little more than

a village clustering round the precincts of the Abbey and the Palace, whose buildings dominated the countryside for miles.

The Isle of Thorney or Thorns, on which these buildings came to be erected, was not itself directly connected with Tybourne, but was an island surrounded by the tidal waters of the Thames, which served it as a moat and effectively cut it off from the mainland. This fact was not without importance; not only from the point of view of defence, but because it partly explains the peculiarly close and intimate relations between the Palace and the Abbey and also because in the great eras of building it enabled stone and other materials to be brought by water and landed on its wharves. The limits of the Island can be briefly indicated by the modern New Scotland Yard, Princes Street, Smith Street and College Street.

We do not know at what period a little band of Benedictine monks settled on the Island and built a primitive church, but we can push its history back beyond that, indeed to the very dawn of history, for, from time to time, the bones of elk and red deer, of wild ox and boar have been found beneath its soil and point to a time when it was indeed an "*insula spinarum*," an island of thorns and thickets, a wild and desolate spot.³

It used to be said that in Roman times Westminster was important as the place where Watling Street crossed the Thames at Lambeth.⁴ Modern research, however, has rather moved away from this view.⁵ It was based on the now disputed ideas (1) that Roman roads were invariably straight and never diverted except by formidable obstacles, and (2) that any isolated Roman burials necessarily implied an important road near by. The modern view is that the main crossing was undoubtedly near London Bridge and that it is exceedingly unlikely that there would be another important crossing within two miles of it at Westminster. It is not, however, disputed that the Thames was fordable at Westminster. It is a curious fact that I have myself been told by one whose father was at the School about the time of the Battle of Waterloo that at that time at very low water the Westminster boys used to wade across the Thames by Westminster Bridge and that it did not come above their knees. Furthermore, it seems likely that there was a primitive track—the line of it can be traced to this day past the North Door of the Abbey and down Tothill Street and Petty France, where it turned north somewhere by Buckingham Palace—and that this track connected Verulamium (St. Albans)

with the Channel ports. There was also undoubtedly a small Roman settlement on the Island, for Roman foundations have been found from time to time under the floor of the Nave and elsewhere, and fragments of Roman brick may be seen built into the medieval walls along the east side of Dean's Yard. In 1869 a large Roman sarcophagus—6 feet 10 inches by 1 foot 6 inches, of Oxford Oolite—dating from the 4th century and with an inscription stating that it was in memory of Valerius Amandinus and erected by his sons Valerius Superventor and Valerius Marcellus, was discovered beneath the turf outside the north wall of the Nave. It was probably not, however, in its original position, for, possibly in Saxon times, it had been re-used for Christian burial and a cross had been cut in relief on its top surface. It is now preserved in the vestibule of the Chapter House.

It is not, however, from the Roman settlement that the continuous history of Westminster can be traced, but from the building of the Abbey Church and of the Palace near by. This is not the time to trace the development of the Abbey Church and it will be sufficient for me just to remind you that the primitive Saxon Church was succeeded by the great Church of Edward the Confessor of which no trace now remains above ground; that that Church gave place in the 13th century to the Choir, Transepts and East End of the present Abbey Church; and that in the 14th and 15th centuries the present Nave was added to form one harmonious whole.

Like the Church itself, the buildings of the Monastery followed the usual Benedictine plan, that is to say that they combined accessibility with privacy. From the 14th century they were approached by way of a gatehouse, which stood outside the West Door of the Abbey a little to the west of the present column which commemorates the Westminsters who fell in the Crimea and in the Indian Mutiny. It consisted of two vaulted entries standing at right angles to each other, one leading from Tothill Street to the Sanctuary on the north of the Abbey, and the other to the outer court of the monastery now represented by Dean's Yard. In this outer court were the buildings and granaries of the home farm with a wharf by the stream at its eastern end; to the west was the almonry and to the east were the guest-houses, the entry to the monastic kitchen, and the offices of the cellarer who managed the farm. Beyond this range of buildings—which still exists—was the cloister and the

inner part of the monastery, where no one but the monks penetrated and where they could carry on with their work undisturbed by the constant coming and going in the outer court. To the south again, beyond the mill-stream (now represented by College Street), lay the gardens and vineyards and the open fields stretching to the village of Chelsea.

The upper part of the gatehouse was used as a prison throughout medieval times and indeed until 1776. Twice at least it gave rise to immortal verse; for there in October, 1618, Sir Walter Raleigh spent the night before his execution, which took place in Palace Yard, and wrote the sonnet which begins:—

Even such is Time, that takes in trust
Our Youth, our Joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with earth and dust. . . .

and again, a few years later, when Richard Lovelace, while confined there, wrote the poem "To Althea from Prison" with the lines:—

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free;
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

The gatehouse gave access to the Sanctuary,⁶ which comprised roughly the area between the north side of the Abbey Church, the modern Prince's Street, Great George Street and the Palace of Westminster. The right of sanctuary had been granted to Westminster by Edward the Confessor, and those who sought it were safe provided they kept within that area, or within the church, or even probably for some distance to the south towards Chelsea. Among our muniments there has been preserved the actual form of the oath to be taken by a fugitive.⁷ He was required to declare on oath the true cause of his coming and the names and condition of those he had wronged; to behave himself faithfully and honestly while within the Sanctuary and defend the laws, privileges and customs of the place; to submit himself to the President or Keeper, to carry out any contracts he might enter into, to satisfy his creditors as soon as might be, if he was a debtor, "without garrulousness and opprobrious terms"; not to sell bread, beer or victuals within the Sanctuary without licence to do so; not to admit other fugitives or

suspected persons into his house; not to carry weapons nor to go out of sanctuary by day or night unless he had settled with his enemies, not to defame "falsely, craftily or maliciously," not to do violence to any other inmate. All these things he was to promise "faithfully to observe, as God shall help him, and God's Holy Gospels."

Provided he observed his oath he was safe, and no man except at his peril would dare to violate the Sanctuary. The most famous of those who took sanctuary at Westminster was Edward IV's queen, Elizabeth Wydville. Twice she sought safety there in the troublous times of the Wars of the Roses. On the first occasion she gave birth to the future Edward V at a house within its walls. Twelve years later she returned again and there she unwillingly agreed to surrender her younger son in order that he might join his brother in the Tower of London.

It is obvious that the privilege of sanctuary, however safeguarded, was liable to abuse, and there were in fact times when the inmates seem to have used it as a convenient centre from which to sally out and terrorise the neighbourhood. But with certain vicissitudes it lasted on and was not finally abolished until 1623, and to this day the High Bailiff of Westminster holds also the office of Searcher of the Sanctuary—though he might find it difficult to define his exact duties.

Let us turn for a moment or two to the Palace of Westminster. At first all this area was bounded only by the streams which surrounded the Island and there was no very clear division between the Palace and the Monastery, though to the south of the Abbey they were roughly separated by a narrow lane leading to the abbot's mill (which stood on the site of the Victoria Tower Gardens and gave its name to Millbank). On the Palace side of this lane, however, there was a veritable "Naboth's vineyard" in the shape of an enclosure and garden which belonged to the monastic infirmary, but abutted on "an angle of the king's private palace." On this ground the king, Edward III, cast covetous eyes and about 1370 "with the free licence of the Abbot and convent" he acquired it and built thereon the tower which is still known as the Jewel House.^a There is no doubt that the transaction left a bitterness behind. The monks were exceedingly jealous of any encroachments on "the soil of St. Peter." Scarcely had the king completed the building of his tower when, in 1374, the monks decided to prevent any further encroachments by building a stone wall—of

which large portions still exist in College Street—round their infirmary garden, the Precincts and the Sanctuary. As this wall, which is over 20 feet high, comes to within a few feet of the tower and partly surrounds it, it effectively preserved the privacy of the monastery and completely spoilt the view from the tower on that side.

In this great wall there were two main gates, the gatehouse to Tothill Street of which I have already spoken and a gate leading to King Street which was the main approach to the Palace and to the monastery from London.

There is some slight evidence to show that there was a Palace at Westminster in the time of Canute; it is certain that Edward the Confessor either built or rebuilt a Palace on the site in order that he might personally watch over the building of his great Abbey Church near by. Throughout medieval times it was not only the principal residence of our sovereigns, but it was also the seat of government, the centre for the administration of the law, and the meeting place of the Great Council, which was to develop into the Houses of Parliament.

It was inevitable, therefore, that those whose office or position required constant attendance at Westminster should tend to have a permanent residence within easy reach and, since the river was the great highway in medieval times, a series of palaces grew up on its banks. The best known, I suppose, was and is the Palace of Lambeth across the river, which has been the residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury since 1197. Others scarcely less well known have disappeared, but have left their names as a memorial. Such were the palace of the Kings of Scotland or their representatives on the site of Scotland Yard; Savoy Palace in the Strand, originally built by Peter, Earl of Savoy, uncle of Queen Eleanor, wife of Henry III, but better known as the residence of John of Gaunt and the Dukes of Lancaster and still the property of the Duchy of Lancaster; and Durham House on the site of the Adelphi, the London residence of the Bishops of Durham.

Nor was it only the greater nobles who were drawn to Westminster. As Surveyor of the King's Works the poet Geoffrey Chaucer leased a house on the site of the present Henry VII's Chapel—and the counterpart of the lease is among our treasures in the Abbey Muniment Room⁹—and later again William Caxton set up his printing press within the precincts in order that he might enjoy the patronage of those about the Court.

I have dwelt on these details for two reasons. In the first place it must be remembered that until the 16th century Westminster *as a town* consisted for all practical purposes simply of the Abbey and the Palace and their precincts and of the two streets, Tothill Street and King Street. Beyond these lay the open fields with a few scattered manor houses and farms. To the north lay the village of Charing—we have only to think of St. Martin-*in-the-Fields*; to the west and south the Hospital of St. James founded in the 12th century for 14 “mayden lepers,” which maintained a somewhat precarious and not entirely edifying history¹⁰ for some four centuries until Henry VIII seized it and converted it into a palace; and beyond again the Manor of Hyde, which belonged to the Abbey until Henry VIII forced us to exchange it, together with the convent garden, now Covent Garden, for the little Priory of Poughley in Berkshire—a very poor exchange for us!¹¹ Further to the south were the abbot’s favourite manor of La Neate close to the modern Ebury Bridge by Victoria Station and the Manor of Ebury.

The second reason I have dwelt on these details is that it is almost impossible to over-estimate the influence of the Abbey and the Palace on the history and development of Westminster. Their buildings dominated the landscape; they were the centre to which all men came; and on the fields and farms which had once belonged to the monks arose the City of Westminster as we know it.

In the 16th century the Palace of Westminster ceased to be a royal residence, though it was to open a new page in its history by becoming the meeting place of the House of Commons, which had hitherto held its sessions either in the Chapter House or in the refectory of the Monastery. The reasons for the change were twofold. In the first place a fire in 1512 had destroyed a large part of the residential portion of the Palace and little attempt had been made to restore it; and in the second place Henry VIII was casting covetous eyes on the fine new palace which Wolsey had rebuilt in Whitehall.

That site had had an interesting history.¹² Originally belonging to the Abbey, it had been purchased in or about 1223 by Hubert de Burgh, the famous Justiciar at the time of Magna Carta, who is perhaps best remembered by the scene in Shakespeare’s *King John* in which he attempts to blind Prince Arthur, but is dissuaded by the prince’s piteous entreaties. In 1230 Hubert transferred the property to trustees “to deal with

as best they could for the succour of the Holy Land, and to redeem the vow which, on taking the Cross, he had made to proceed to the Holy Land in his own person, unless he met with some lawful impediment."¹³ The trustees sold it to the Archbishop of York, and as York Place it became for nearly 300 years the London residence of the Archbishops of York. It was thus that it became the home of Cardinal Wolsey, who greatly enlarged and improved the property. On his fall from power in 1529 Henry sent him a curt message that "the king's pleasure was to have his house at Westminster . . . intending to make of that house a palace royal." Wolsey's response was that he "would in no wise disobey, but most gladly fulfil and accomplish his princely will and pleasure in all things"—but he could not resist adding, evidently with an eye to those who broke the tenth commandment, that he humbly desired "His Highness to call to his most gracious remembrance that there is both heaven and hell."

Thenceforth York Place, renamed Whitehall, became the principal London residence of our sovereigns and remained so throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, indeed until that November day when James II, who had anxiously been watching the weathercock which he had set up on the Banqueting Hall—which may still be seen—to indicate the direction of the wind while he was dreading the approach of the Dutch fleet, learnt that his worst fears were realised and that Dutch William had actually landed at Tor Bay. A month later he knew that the game was up and fled by night from Whitehall dropping the Great Seal of England over the side of the boat as he crossed the Thames by the horseferry at Lambeth.

The removal of the Court in Tudor times from the Palace of Westminster to Whitehall had had other results also, for not only did the government offices tend to group themselves round the new palace—where they have remained ever since—but Westminster began to extend towards the west.

It had been one of the inducements to Henry VIII that the site of York Place was much more spacious than Westminster and by taking into his hands the lands of the old hospital of St. James's he was able to provide the new Palace of Whitehall with a large park which he stocked with deer. Rather more than a hundred years later Charles II developed part of this land into what we now know as St. James's Park with its artificial canal, decoy for ducks and broad gravel walks. On the

south was the aviary, which bequeathed its name to Birdcage Walk, and on the north were the smooth gravelled alleys where Charles II and his Court played the game of Pall Mall. Later the Mall became the fashionable place for walking and it remained almost unaltered until it was swept away at the beginning of the present century.

The original Pall Mall ground was rather more to the north on the site of the present street of that name. It began to take its present form as a street about the reign of Charles II, or a little earlier, and among its early inhabitants was Nell Gwyn, who shocked Evelyn on one occasion by holding "familiar discourse" over her garden-wall with the king in the Mall below. Other inhabitants were Sir William Temple and later the great Duke of Marlborough, who built the house still known by his name. At the same time St. James's Street and St. James's Square began to become a fashionable centre of residence.

At the far end of St. James's Park stood Goring House, which had been built by George, Lord Goring, in the reign of Charles I. It was pleasantly situated on the banks of the Eye Bourn and adjoined the orchard (now part of the gardens of Buckingham Palace) which James I had had planted with mulberry trees in a laudable attempt to foster the silk-weaving industry. At the Restoration Goring House passed into the possession of that Lord Arlington who was a member of the famous Cabal ministry, and ultimately into that of John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, who built a new house on the site which was eventually acquired by George III and rebuilt as Buckingham Palace in 1825.¹⁴

NOTES

1. West. Abbey Muniments III.
2. There is a statue of St. Armine among those in Henry VII's Chapel.
3. Cf. Stanley, *Memorials of Westminster Abbey*, p. 7, n. 3.
4. V.C.H. (London), p. 29.
5. See R. E. M. Wheeler in *R.C. on Hist. Monuments*, Vol. III (Roman London), pp. 49-51.
6. For the Sanctuary see H. F. Westlake, *Westminster Abbey*, Vol. II, Chap. xxvi.
7. W.A. Muniments, *Liber Niger*, Cartulary f.cxxxix.6.
8. The Jewel House by L. E. Tanner in *The Times*, 2.9.36.
9. W.A. Muniments, LVII.
10. See V.C.H. (London), p. 542 seq.
11. Widmore, *Westminster Abbey*, p. 127.
12. *L.C.C. Survey of London*, Vol. XIII (Parish of St. Margaret, Pt. II), Chap. I.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.
14. H. Clifford Smith, *Buckingham Palace*, pp. 12-38, and C. T. Gatty, *Mary Davies and the Manor of Ebury*, pp. 99-109.