Bishop's move

Clive Orton pays a visit to the newly restored Fulham Palace

Our article last year on the archaeology of conservation work at Fulham Palace (Vol 11, no 12, Spring 2008) reminded me that it was high time that I saw this Grade I listed building for myself. In a sense, I'd always known it was there, but in the context of other events – Neolithic and Roman occupation, the possible over-wintering of a Viking army in AD 880, and the largest medieval moated site in England: 36 acres (15 ha) with a moat a mile long. But the Palace itself was another matter.

So we set out from Putney Bridge underground station to find the Palace. Passing All Saints' Fulham and through the Bishop's Park that lies between it and the Thames, we could see through the trees the evidence of an ornamental garden and a walled garden, on the other side of what we presumed to be the filled-in moat. Turning north at Bishop's Avenue, we soon reached the entrance, which faces west and is flanked by a pair of very ornate lodges.

RIGHT: Interior courtyard with fountain
BELOW: Extensive restoration work won the RICS London Award for Building Conservation in 2008, and continues with projects for the landscape, gardens, lodges and stable.

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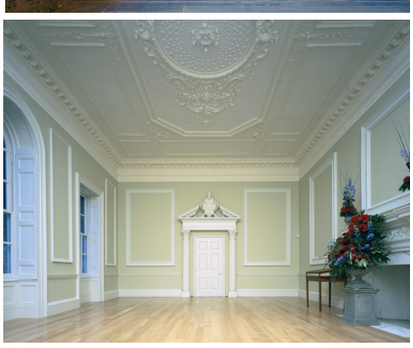

First, a brief historical note. The Manor of Fulham was granted to the Bishops of London in AD 704, and remained one of their residences (and latterly their sole residence) until 1973. In 1975 the bishops moved out and the building was leased to the Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, but major repair and restoration had to wait until substantial funding was available in 2004–2006. Although traces of medieval buildings are known, the earliest surviving building is the Great Hall which dates from *c.* 1480 and is part of the Tudor Western Courtyard. There was little development in the 17th century, but in the 18th and early 19th centuries a series of bishops made additions and alterations, eventually resulting in the formation of the smaller Eastern Courtyard. The final major addition was the chapel built to Butterworth's design in 1867.

We approach from the Tudor west front, with options of turning left or right into the extensive gardens. Through the central archway is the Western Courtyard, decorated with a Victorian ornamental fountain. As most of the surrounding building has been converted into offices, we enter the house on the opposite side of the courtyard, where we are greeted with a map of the house and a range of leaflets. A recommended walking route through the house goes chronologically from the Tudor Great Hall, through the 18th-century additions and rebuilds, to the shop and café at the back of the house. A scale model in the Great Hall makes the chronological development clear; following the progression of architectural styles is one of the delights of the visit. Some of the rooms are used for museum display, while others, like the beautifully-restored Bishop Sherlock's Room, are given over to educational activities. Here we found a showing of a 40-minute DVD on the recent programme of restoration. Few such programmes will hold my attention for 40 minutes, but this one did, even if it tended to treat the archaeology as something to be dealt with as quickly as possible and tidied out of the way. Finally, we reached the café, for a well-earned cup of tea and slice of cake, overlooking the gardens.

So how does a Grade I Listed Building, which has recently had about £4 m spent on its restoration, earn its living? Partly from commercial rents, as in the Western Courtyard, but not from public admissions (which are free). There is an active programme of charged tours, walks and events, and the café must make a useful contribution. The DVD suggest that the Fulham Palace Trust is pinning its hopes on the corporate hospitality market – in normal times this would be an excellent venue for all sorts of events, but these are not normal times and one can only wish them well. From the point of view of the ordinary punter, is it worth a visit? I would definitely say yes; there can be few 15th- to 18th-century manor houses surviving in a relatively untouched state, and certainly not this accessible from central London. 'London's hidden jewel', as it calls itself, deserves to be better known and more widely used.

Fulham Palace Museum
Open 12 to 4 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, 11 am to 2 pm on Saturdays and 11.30 pm to 3.30 pm on Sundays. Café open daily 10 am to 4 pm.