

THE BISHOP'S PALACE AT WOOKEY

BY JOHN H. WINSTONE

INTRODUCTION

Since SANHS published a report on the site of the Bishop's Palace at Wookey in the 1993 Proceedings¹ Court Farm has been sold to owners appreciative that the article had played a considerable part in the decision to Schedule all 12 acres described in a survey of 1557. In 1997 they became the first owner-occupiers since 1549². All freeholders and their tenants since that time were involved in reducing rather than aggrandising what had by then become a courtyard house and economically modernising the enclave into a farm. Small wonder then that the grade II* farmhouse needs extensive repair, a process which when properly understood, requires a very different motivation. Close consideration of the standing fabric for the first time (which evidence, like the objective photograph, must take precedence over documentary sources, although for the most part these aspects work in tandem) has produced a plan for Bishop Jocelin's 'houses' of c.1230 that may suffice as a working hypothesis, and a revised and detailed arrangement of the house in its fully developed courtyard plan as described in the 1557 survey. It was thought therefore timely to update the postulations of 1993.

ANALYTICAL STUDIES

In order that the consents necessary for the repairs should be properly informed, several studies have been undertaken of the building and site. For the new owners RCHME prepared a report and survey of the standing fabric in 1997/8, with a parallel geophysics survey of the greater part of the moated precincts undertaken by the archeometry department of English Heritage in 1998, both at the request of the EH Inspector for the South West³. In addition, as a condition of Scheduled consent for reduction of ground levels adjacent certain external walls, archaeology and recording was undertaken by Post-Excavation Services of Bristol. A great deal has been achieved since 1993, too, with written records. Joan Hasler has edited and SRS have published the court rolls in *Wookey Manor and Parish 1544-1814* (Vol 83) and the same authors of the 1993 SANHS report have published their *The Parish of Wookey: A New History*, 1997. These deal very fully with the freeholders and their tenants from 1554. In 1999 a trial excavation of the moat was undertaken as a precursor to creating a holding for flood water. This paper concentrates on the time of the bishops until sequestration by Edward VI in 1549.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Bishop Jocelin of Wells (1206–42) and his elder brother Hugh (bishop of Lincoln, elevated slightly later than his younger brother) were deputy chancellors of King John. This unusual instance of brotherly *familiars* brought them into direct contact with the king's inventive taxation methods and required both men to retire to France after unsuccessfully attempting to stay John's excommunication. Returning for the king's last years and their mid-careers, they were unable to recover in full from John their sequestered emoluments. Nevertheless, they were both able to raise full-blooded Early English palaces in the following decade⁴, and Jocelin an outlying palace at Wookey, due west of and within sight of his great achievement, the fantastic and then still rising west front of Wells Cathedral. Whether the grant of a licence for repairs with oaks from Royal Cheddar granted to Jocelin in 1224 was for a pre-existing manorhouse at Wookey remains uncertain. Documents survive for both the bishop's deer park at Westbury to the north of Wookey (1178) and a vineyard at Coxley to the south (both closer to Wookey than Wells), also dating from the 12th century. The Wookey site shared the construct of an axis and distant view of the cathedral as well as enjoying these nearby adjuncts. It was from Wells and this palace, nearest manor to the much earlier, holy house of Glastonbury (then recently brought down by fire in 1184), that Jocelin and his successors for the next hundred years continued the long running entrapment of the Glastonbury lands.⁵

THE PALACE AT WELLS

We should consider the plan-form and vaulted bays of Jocelin's principal palace at Wells. This takes the form of a single vaulted front range buttressing a great audience chamber in a rear range set over a vaulted undercroft 2 bays wide, and an east-facing projection, perhaps the original chapel. The front range was entered in the third bay of a 7-bay buttressed range, apparently divided into 1, 3 and 3 vaulted bays—see figure 1.⁶ West of this appears to have been a walled entrance court and gatehouse and presumably detached service buildings. This group lies immediately south of the cathedral, just as the palace at Wookey lay immediately south of the parish church, one due west of the other and surely very much a powerful construct across the landscape.

THE WOOKEY PALACE PLAN

From the surviving fabric and indications on the geophysical survey it appears that the Wookey plan-form may have similarities, surviving now only as a truncated cross-range, also running north–south. The arched entry to this narrow cloister or gallery (as the 1557 survey describes it) and another arched door to a putative parallel wider range on the east side match the placing of doors at Wells—see walls in solid black in a plan as in 1557; figure 2—and are very suggestive of narrow and wide parallel ranges. The surviving, inner doorway is so similar to the minor doorways in the west front of the cathedral (although single ordered) that a date of c.1230 can safely be attributed. Where not later mutilated it is otherwise pristine, for it has never been weathered, facing as it did into the cloister range, which following demolition of the wider range now lies effectively in an external wall. There are faint consecration crosses on each door jamb and it appears the doorway may have led to Jocelin's offices and chapel. This originally common wall is 37" thick. The chapel probably lay at the northern end of the wider range, facing east although the geophysics has failed to be conclusive. A length of polished Lias shaft was recovered when reducing

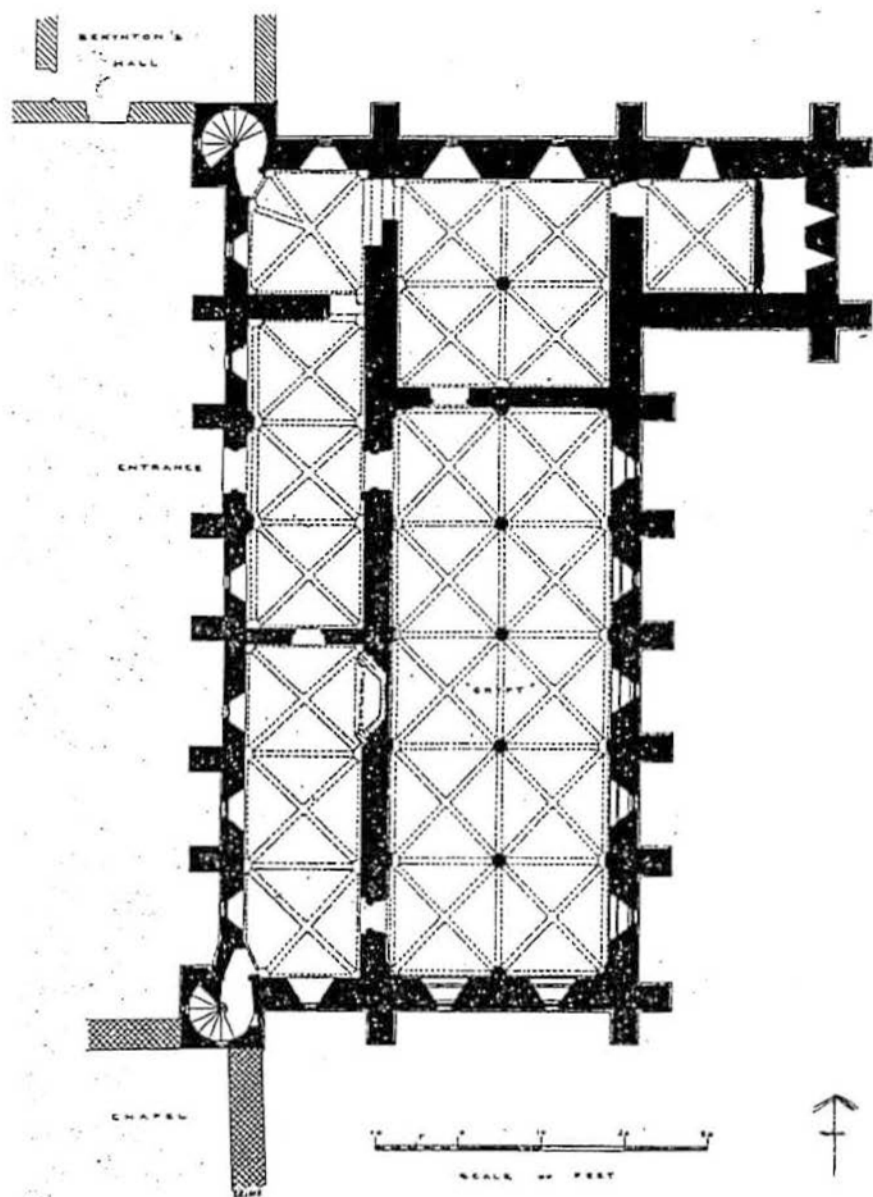


Figure 1 Edmund Buckle's plan of the palace at Wells published in SANS, 1888.

external ground levels in 1997. It seems very likely that such a narrow 13th-century cloister had a stone quadripartite vault, as at Wells, otherwise the proportions of the great doorway would sit unhappily and the massive, high walls and the single surviving 13th century-style buttress on the west wall could not be justified. By 1557 the putative vault of this narrow cloister had been pulled down and a floor inserted, although the chapel still stood, and there

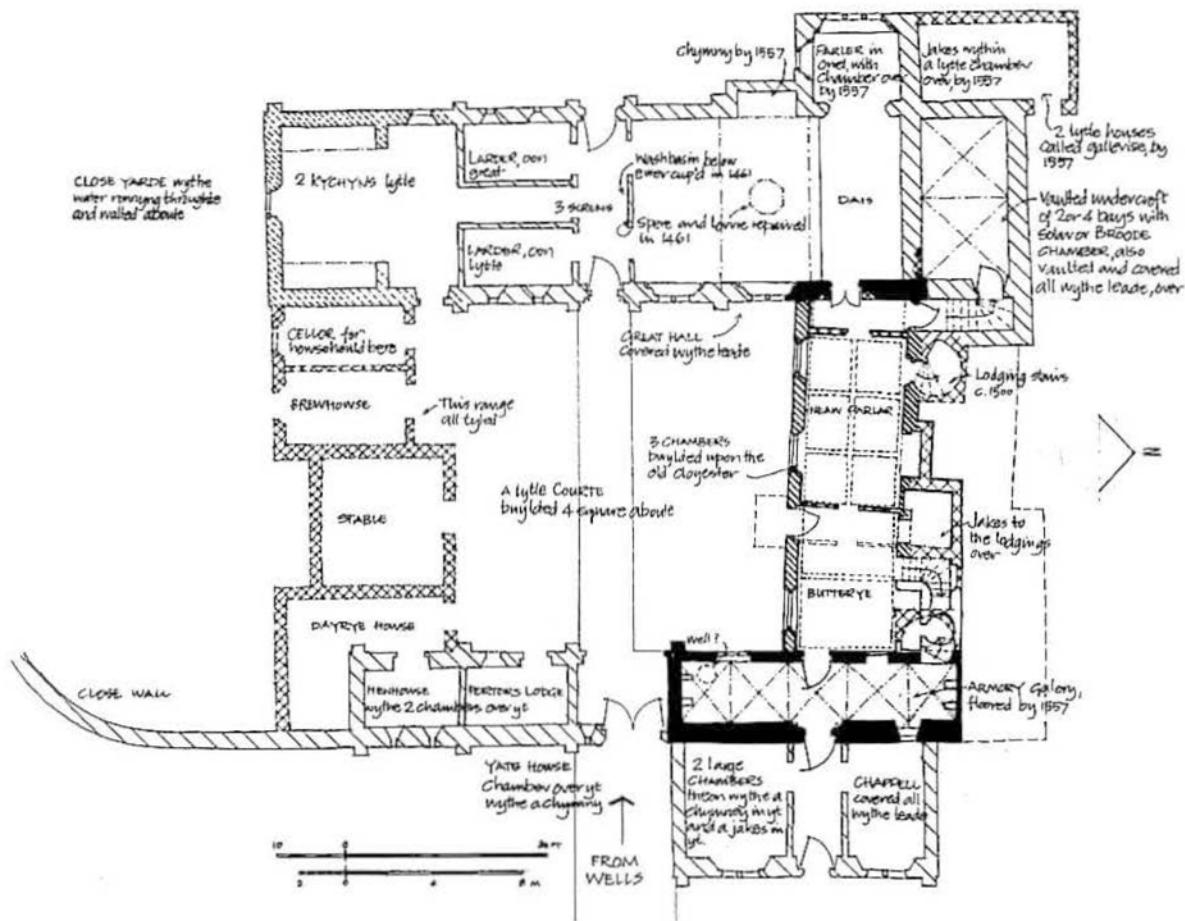


Figure 2 Plan of the palace in 1557, based on the 1557 survey. Extant 13th-century walls (Bishop Jocelyn) shown black; demolished work in wide hatching. 14th-century walls (the east-west cloister in particular) close hatching. Where demolished shown dotted close hatching. 15th and 16th-century range and stair turrets cross-hatched. 18th and 19th-century outshuts etc. dotted. Presumed stone vaults and bay divisions shown dot/dash. Note the deviation in orientation of the 14th-century cloister which characterises this phase. It is conjectured that Jocelyn's kitchen block would have been impermanent and was brought into the hall range by the 14th century. The south range was demolished some time after 1771.

was a heated chamber in the same vicinity. In about 1700 an attic storey was added to the surviving range.

At the western end of Court Farm is a further massive masonry wall of equal height 33" thick which at first sight appears to be a gable end wall, backing on to a stable added in c.1700. Unblocking a chamfered doorway and archaeology have disclosed a barred stop of thirteenth-century style to a former arched doorway in this wall, approximately in line with the two cross-range doorways described above. North of this wall is the toe of a 13th-century vault impost of similar detail to those supporting the vault ribs in the undercroft at the Wells palace, here to an undercroft of a solar (the vaulted "broad chamber" of the 1557 description). This massive wall is surely the side wall of the hall of the 1544 lease to Thomas Clerke (brother of Bishop John and at Wookey from 1524) and of the 1557 description "...throughte a lytle courte buylded 4 square aboute to a great hall covered with leade . . ." Medieval planning suggests that chapel and hall would have been discrete in the 13th century, but the direction of the door opening requires a porch to encompass the doors to the hall and solar stairs. Disclosure and examination of fabric will be required before this can be ascertained. Cases were variously heard in the bishop's "court, chamber or chapel" (first reference in 1338). Bishop John Harewell, 1367–86, is recorded in his principal chamber and Bishop Bekynton, 1443–65, held ordinations in the chapel on numerous occasions. Was it built, like many episcopal halls, for entertainment or had this always been the hall of hall-based medieval life in this manor?⁷ The altered doorway with its barred stop would have been at the high end of the hall with the first window to the south, which is now seen as just a tall, nooked jamb in a projection, again of 13th-century style.⁸ At the south end lay the usual "3 screns [or doorways] in yt" of the 1557 description leading to kitchens (see SANHS Vol.137 for full text of the 1557 survey).

REPAIRS

Valuable insights may be had from building accounts for major repairs during Bishop Bekynton's time in 1461–2.⁹ This lists "Expenses of the Hall" starting with "8,250 lbs of lead for it", and lists the labours of reboarding and releading the hall roof, plastering the soffit and reboarding the smoke lantern, making a washbasin and other stonework in the hall and tiling the cloister roof (1 man/day), by 11 named craftsmen, amounting to 168 man/days, excluding payments made to suppliers for converted material. The ratio of materials to labour cost was approximately 84:16, compared with 40:60 ratio more usual today. If there had been no reuse of old lead the quantities would cover a hall roof with parapet gutters some 32' long by 22' wide; rather on the small side. But the accounts reckon up sizeable weights of scrap lead, suggesting that the balance of old lead might have been recast making for a sizeable hall.¹⁰ Interestingly slightly less than half came from the bishop's own lead mines on Mendip and this too is included in the total for new lead of £17 15s 11d. The remainder, of superior quality, came from Derbyshire.

PLAN DEVELOPMENT

By 1557 when the house was described in the survey Court Farm had developed into a full courtyard plan with inner gatehouse on the east of a square court, about where the extant cross-range ends, opposite the entry to the hall on the west side of the court—see figure 2. A barn range formed the southern side of the courtyard and a 2-storey range the north side, consisting of lodgings at first floor and forming the bulk of the present house. Compare the

view of this house from the tower of St Matthew's as seen in *c.*1500, with the same view sketched today—figures 3 & 4.

The north range has proved very much to be the key to understanding the development of the building. By 1447¹¹ and perhaps by *c.*1350 Jocelin's putative double pile ranges to the east and the 13th-century hall to the west had been joined by a single-storey cloister with a roof with ashlar pieces.¹² This can be deduced by 4 lengths of moulded, inner wallplates buried in the side walls at first floor level and now carrying the framed ceiling below the first floor lodgings which had been added by 1557. Examination of bedding mortar over these plates has shown that by the time the cloister was raised they were already badly eaten away by Death Watch beetle. Whether Jocelin joined his ranges by a more modest pentice cannot yet be ascertained. It is clear from separation of the rubble core in the surviving section of hall wall that when the lodgings floor was introduced the high, 2-centred arch of the doorway was removed where its head was to be cut by the inserted floor. Repairs to the lodgings floor have so far revealed a fragment of medieval stained glass in loose rubble, the bronze dish of a tiny medieval crucible and a number of late coins.

Below the lodgings (their original dividing partitions replaced in the 18th century when the roof was again raised), the cloister was modernised by 1557 as a 3-bay parlour and a 2-bay buttery (now cut by cross-passage XP2). A small trapezoidal 'cross-passage' (XP1) formed at the west end (continuing to provide entry to the solar stairs) makes up the geometric error in the 13th century alignments and affords a square-ended parlour. A stone newel (later robbed) was added in a turret to access the new lodgings at the west end, but having no value in survey terms this as usual is not mentioned in 1557. The lodgings were provided with a jakes alongside the parlour stack. The lack of punctuation in the survey makes spatial arrangements especially difficult to follow, as the punctuator authors found, but it can all make a coherent, compact plan, without undue gymnastics. The 'armory' newel off the north-west corner of the cross-range, so termed because it gave into a room described as such in the 1557 survey, was also required to be removed when a large kitchen stack was formed in the buttery. In fact the flooring of the 13th-century cross-range, which required the dramatic removal of the stone vault, seems to have been carried out before the addition of the lodgings for a small first floor window in the west wall of the cross-range was cut by the front wall of the lodgings. The construction of Bishop Bekynton's lodgings seems likely to have been of indifferent quality, as the lodgings newel could never have been closed fully at first floor level with the manner of the hanging of its door.

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Geophysics indicates that the large moat was not a complete circuit to the east where the land was highest, whereas the western part would have outfallen downstream to the river—see figure 5. High resistivity also suggested the north-easterly arm of the moat was walled on the inside and possibly also at the southern arm. Similar readings might indicate a close wall running south from Jocelin's eastern range and turning west across the present Home Ground, affording added security to the house as distinct from farm buildings within the moat. The moat was filled to the north-east and where passing through the grounds of Mellifont Abbey (an ancient site given by the bishop in the 12th century to the dean¹³) to the north the river Axe takes the course of the moat, rather than running as a separate watercourse, doubtless giving more scope for gardens. By then, if subsequent increases in ground level to overcome waterlogging are any guide, one might surmise the abandonment of the site's water management system, even now not at all well understood, and of the undercroft and all limestone floors owing to water penetration.

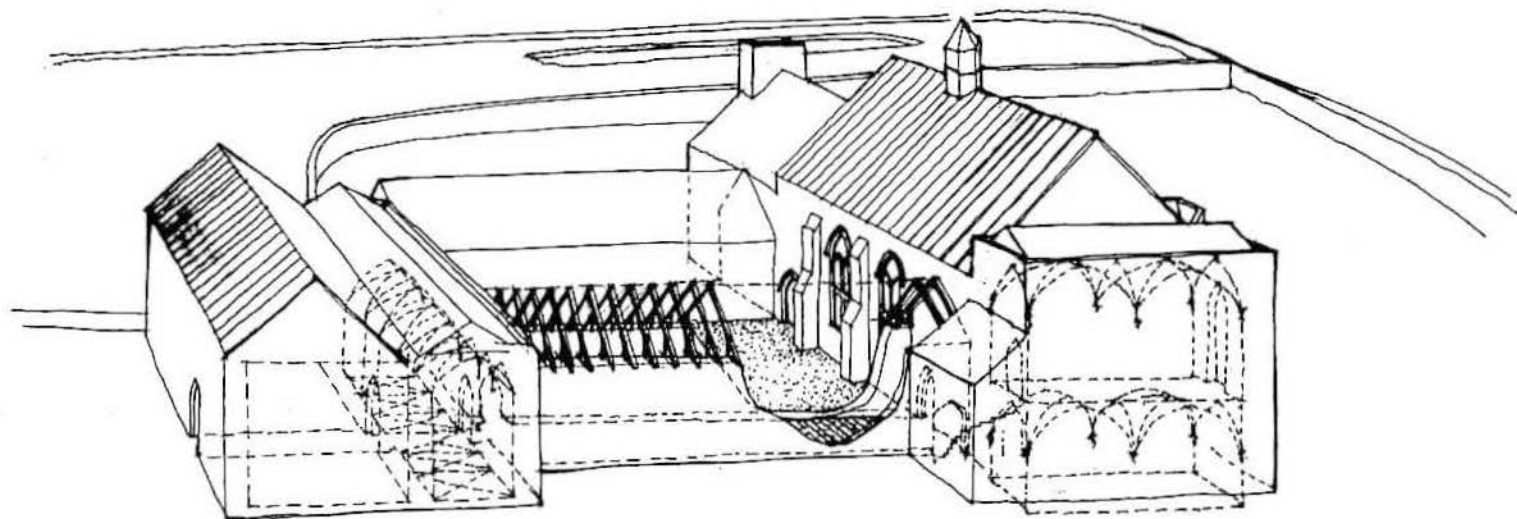


Figure 3 View of the palace as seen in c.1500 from the top of the church tower, looking south. From left to right, chapel and offices range abutting a vaulted cloister. Centre, the north range, a later cloister, to which a first floor of lodgings was added by 1557. Beyond, an internal courtyard with stables range forming the south side by 1557. Right, a vaulted solar of great chamber above a vaulted undercroft with the medieval hall running south into a kitchen block. To the south a close wall, with fishpond and moat beyond.

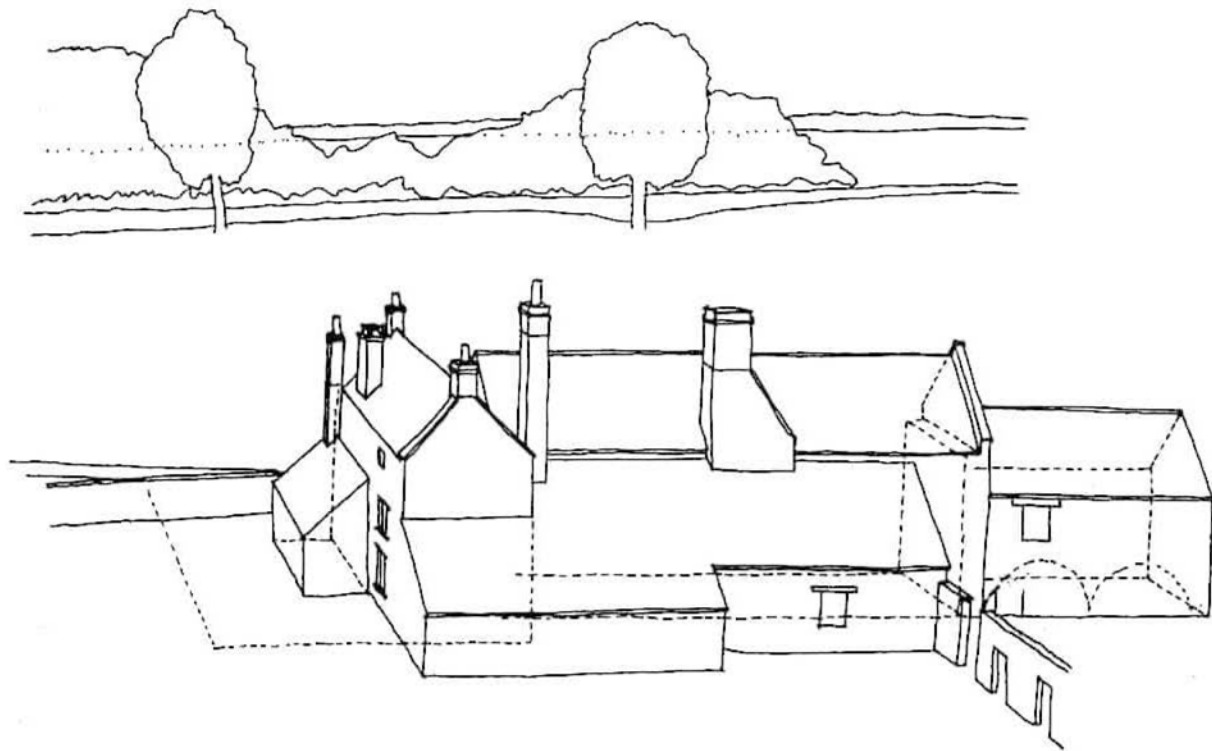


Figure 4 The same view of Court Farm in 1999. Left, dotted, the footprint of the demolished chapel and offices. The cloister of c.1230 with attic storey added. Centre, the north range, with lodgings floor. The gable end of the north range, formerly part of the side wall of the 13th-century hall and far right a stable block of c. 1700 on the site of the hall. The former moat, now millstream to south and filled to west.

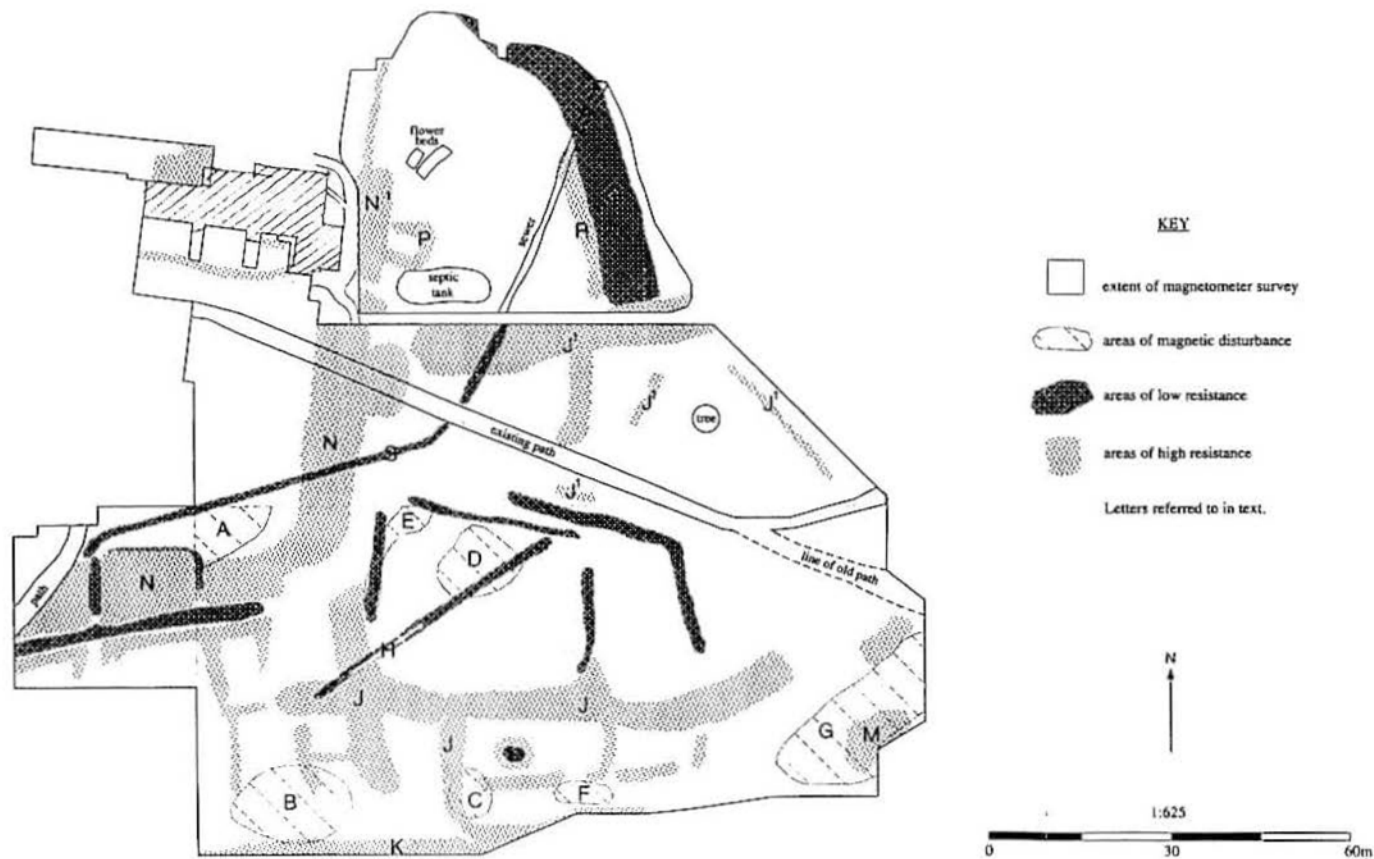


Figure 5 Geophysics by English Heritage, 1998. Low resistance showing filled moat to the NE corner at Q, with inner wall at R and possibly to the south at K. Probable walling debris to the east and south of the cross range at N, running round to the west perhaps following the line of the close wall.

TRIAL EXCAVATION OF MOAT 1999

Two trenches were cut in the walled garden by Strode College Archaeological Society under the direction of Peter Leach, archaeological consultant (see Leach, forthcoming), under a Scheduled consent to excavate to the bottom of previous filling of the moat. Recut and possible original faces were established on the inner faces of the moat, prior to the laying in of ground drains when, possibly contemporary, carboniferous conglomerate rubblestone was tipped in at the inner edge which had given the high resistance reading initially suggestive of an inner wall. Broken burnt pantiles were also found in plenty from a similar period at the same level. The centre of the 11 metre wide moat was augered to a total depth of 2.2 metres below general garden level. Redeposited finds from the backfilling included a medieval penny, sherds of Roman Samian pottery and Neolithic flints. Coupled with a chance find the same year of a flint arrow head under the framed partition of the New Parlour, these finds provide evidence for occupation of the site long before the 13th century.

POST-1549

The reasons for modification post-sequestration which ran through all successive centuries are unclear. The works were very reductionist however as tenancies took over with total loss of the west and south sides of the courtyard. In the 18th and 19th centuries the emphasis was on building attached and detached appurtenances; stable, brewhouse, dairy, cider-cellar, post-tithe barn and, in the 20th century, a detached stable block. The Wookey palace had started as discrete buildings, developed into the ubiquitous, compact late medieval courtyard plan and reduced to a linear layout. It is now a matter of putting further flesh on historical bones, making good discontinuities and caring for aged fabric.

REFERENCES

- 1 J. Hasler and B. Luker
- 2 Mr & Mrs J. Winstone. The author-owner is an English Heritage commissioned architect practicing on his own account.
- 3 The owners are grateful to English Heritage for this form of support.
- 4 Jocelin's brother, Bishop Hugh (1209-1235) was completing his predecessor's 4-bay aisled hall and detached kitchen (another Hugh, d.1200) with a royal writ for 40 trees from Sherwood Forest from the young Henry III, also in 1224. Lincoln City & County Museum Information Sheet, archaeology series no. 18, *The Bishop's Palace, Lincoln*, 1980.
- 5 First moves made against Glastonbury by Bishop Savaric in 1192, finally ending in 1340. See for instance, Agreement signed at Wookey 17th August 1251 between Bishop William and Abbot Michael of Glastonbury; SRS vol. 64, p.712 and an Indenture signed at Wookey 3rd November 1327 by Bishop John and the abbot of Glastonbury, Gl. Chartulary p.112.
- 6 Plan by Edmund Buckle SANHS, 1888, Vol. 34, *Wells Palace*, pp. 54-97.
- 7 Elsewhere in the accounts of 1461-2 (see 8 below) is mention of 'making le sperys in the hall for the lord's table'. Although there is a 12th-century precedent for an aisled hall in the form of a barn in Wells, there is nothing to suggest that this hall was aisled.
- 8 A letter dated 17th January, 1884 from Rev'd T Holmes to Dickinson of Kingsweston, reports that this jamb 'had a detached shaft at the side 11 feet long on a lias base and a freestone capital and lias abacus. Mr Freeman has seen it. . .'
- 9 *History of Wookey*, Rev'd T Holmes, 1886.
- 10 Compared with the 82 cwt of new lead, there seems to have been 27 cwt of scrap lead, so the remainder might have been recast, giving a potential maximum total of 137 cwt, enough for a hall 48' x 25' at 45 degree pitch although the accounts do not indicate that there was any enlarge-

ment of the hall. Accounted separately under repairs are 1,500 tiles for covering the roof of the camera and bakehouse.

- 11 Report of Bishop Bubwith being seen in a certain ambulatory running E-W.
- 12 Thanks to RCHME for deducing this from the wallplate mortices, although they hesitate to be categoric as unfortunately dendro-dating of these plates so far has not proved productive.
- 13 *Mellifont Abbey, an Assessment for Planning Purposes*, 1997, the author.

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