THE SITE OF THE BISHOP'S PALACE, WOOKEY

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INTRODUCTION

The remains of the medieval palace of the bishops of Bath and Wells at Wookey are incorporated into the farmhouse and precincts of Court Farm (ST 518457), some 85 m SSW of the parish church.

A study of the site has been made by Wookey Local History Group using three approaches: a survey of the precinct of the site was led and reported on by James Bond for the Group; existing architectural evidence was evaluated on the basis of a Vernacular Architecture Group report by R.G. Gilson and of additional recording on site; and documentary evidence was considered, including medieval sources and a survey of 1557. The survey describes the site and the house in great detail.[1] It is intended for publication in a forthcoming volume of the Somerset Record Society, but an extract is given below since it is the basis for the conjectured reconstruction of the palace.

The Wookey tithe map of 1839 shows several features now vanished. At that date, the principal moated enclosure contained the presently-existing farmhouse, another substantial building immediately to the south, and an L-shaped pond to the west with another small rectangular pond inside the south-west angle of the moat (Figs 1 and 2). There were a subsidiary moat, two ponds and two small paddocks to the west. These features all lay within tithe map parcel 195 and were described as 'houses, barton and land'. Beyond the moat to the south a further paddock, parcel 194, identified as 'old orchard', may also be regarded as part of the complex. Most of the site survived as agricultural land until the early 1960s when the houses and gardens of Abbey Close were built over the north-western quarter of the main moated enclosure and over the subsidiary moat, pond and some of the paddocks to the west. To the south of the present house, a large quantity of topsoil was brought in and levelled off to keep flood water away from the building, and this must also have contributed to the present lack of landscape features in this area.

THE PRECINCTS OF THE PALACE, from a report by James Bond

The interpretation of the site is particularly difficult because of the disruption caused by later buildings and by the continuing agricultural use of the remainder, and it is doubtful whether even the major earthwork, the moat, could be identified today without cartographic evidence (Fig. 1). For this reason some of the detail from the tithe map has been transposed on to the survey plan as an aid to interpretation. A 'best fit' plot has been attempted with the Ordnance Survey bases and the field plan with the aid of a Grant projector, but this is liable in places to an error of several metres.

The earthworks were surveyed over a period of three days in March–April 1992. In the

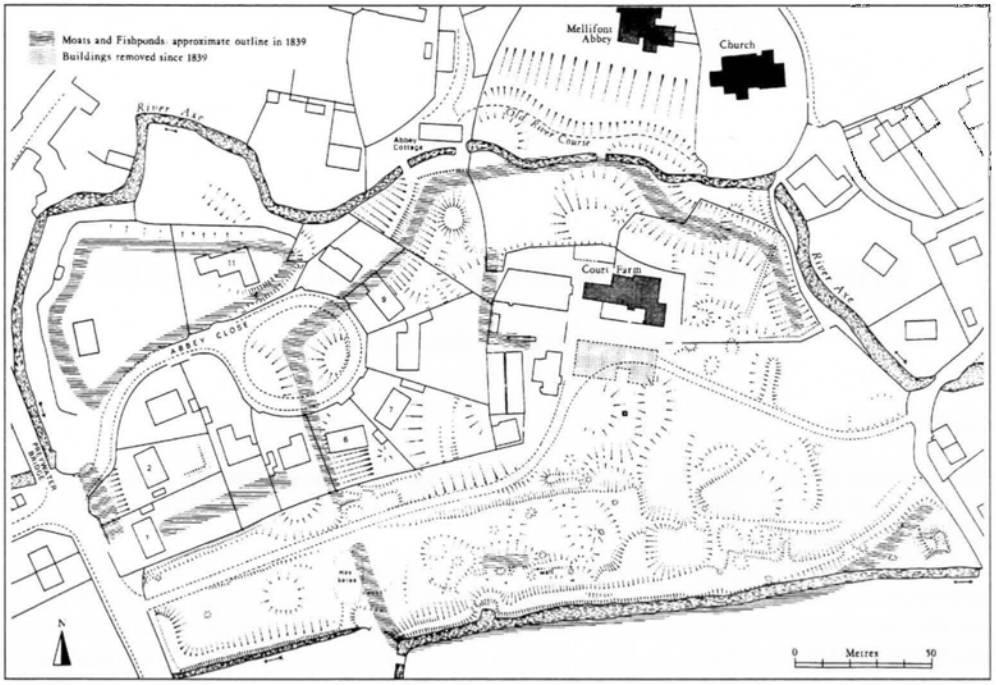

Fig. 1 Site plan. (C.J. Bond)

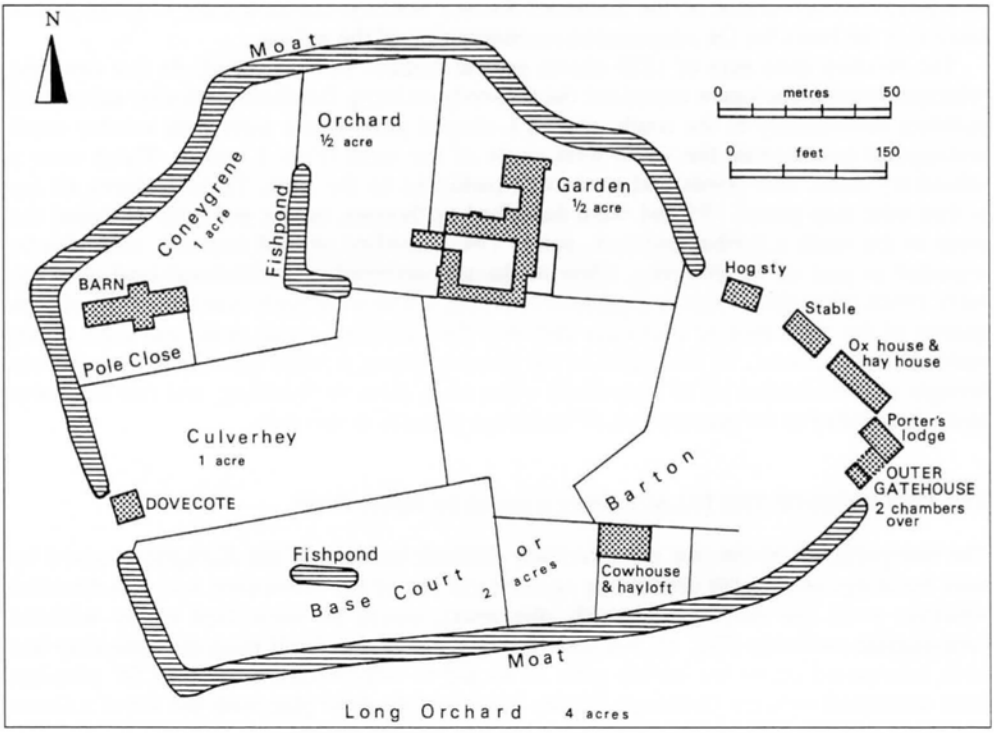

Fig. 2 Conjectural reconstruction of site plan in 1557–8. (C.J. Bond)

largest field south of the farmhouse a 30 m grid was used. In the smaller paddocks and gardens a more *ad hoc* system of offsets and triangulation from convenient plot boundaries was employed. In view of the indeterminate nature of many of the earthworks, the lesser accuracy of this method is not thought to be significant. In spite of the difficulties, the following features emerged from the survey:

1. The larger of the two moats, that surrounding the present farm, was of somewhat irregular polygonal shape, and enclosed a little over 5 acres. It was, therefore, towards the upper limits of the normal size for medieval moats, as befitted its status. No part of the circuit is particularly well preserved, but it was most clearly visible as a sinuous, shallow depression in the paddock north-east of the house, continuing westwards into the grounds of the former rectory, now known as Mellifont Abbey. Within its grounds, the course of the moat as projected from the tithe map would be intersected by the present course of the River Axe. The river, however, is known to have been realigned at some time between 1839 and 1885, and the line of the old valley bottom can be traced immediately to the north, below the present garden terrace of the house. The angle at the west end of the northern side of the moat could be traced clearly across the garden of Abbey Cottage, where its outer lip is separated from the river by a stone-revetted terrace in the eastern part and by a low bank further downstream beyond the corner. There is a prominent circular mound in the inner angle of the moat at this point, probably the result of landscaping. The inner lip of the moat can further be traced as a break of slope across the back garden of 9 Abbey Close. The western-most angle of the moat lies beneath the oval traffic roundabout in Abbey Close, passing between two low mounds: whether this is a genuine survival of an archaeological feature or the result of landscaping is difficult to assess. The inner lip of the south-western stretch of the moat is again quite clearly visible in the rear garden of 6 Abbey Close, but, surprisingly, it cannot be seen in the pasture field to the south. The tithe map suggests that there was a causewayed entrance over the moat to the south of the rear garden fence, roughly on the line of the present farm track, and beyond that point the ground is very disturbed. A large stack of hay bales rendered the likely course of the outer lip of the moat inaccessible at the time of the survey, and the ground immediately to the east appeared to have been made up with dumped material, probably a deliberate infilling of the moat. The whole of the southern length of the moat, still shown as a long narrow pond on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1885, has been incorporated into the watercourse marked as the 'Lower River Axe' on the edition of 1970, but in fact now a part of the mill leat system. Only at the east end, where the original moat changed direction to head north-eastward towards Court Cottage, does a portion of the original earthwork survive, with a prominent bank on its inner side. This bank does, in fact, continue the whole length of the inner southern side of the enclosure, but it is wider alongside the present watercourse, perhaps as a result of dredging. No trace of the eastern side of the moat could be found. It is unfortunate that the eastern and western sides have suffered so much damage, since this is where there should have been evidence of inflow and outflow leats.

2. The general outline of the subsidiary moat west of the main enclosure is preserved by the line of a long brick wall on the north and west which is dated by an inscription to 1794 in the grounds of 11 Abbey Close. A small portion of the moat's southern side towards the eastern angle may be represented by a shallow and rather narrow depression in the same garden.

3. The site of one of the two rectangular ponds shown on the tithe map to the west of the principal moat is indicated by a prominent slope in the front garden of 2 Abbey Close; the further side is cut by the line of Preywater Road. No trace of the second external pond was seen.

4. The site of the small rectangular pond within the south-western quarter of the larger moated enclosure can be related to a depression recorded in the survey, but the ground here is much disturbed, and it is doubtful whether this could have been identified as a pond without the tithe map evidence. No clear trace was seen of the other internal pond west of the farmhouse, unless the break of slope in the extreme south-western corner of the Mellifont Abbey grounds represents its northern end.

5. Many of the numerous earthworks within the larger moat appear to relate to casual dumping of soil, while the angular mound in the south-eastern corner of the large field, which was viewed initially as a possible location of a gatehouse, proved to be a dump of spoil. Other small rounded depressions, particularly in the centre of the large field, appear to represent grubbed out tree roots.

6. Some fairly major division within the moated enclosure is represented by a long continuous break of slope, dropping down towards the north, just south of the farm track in the western part of the moated enclosure. This changes direction through a double angle south of the farmhouse to continue eastward roughly parallel with the watercourse.

7. A slightly more regular pattern of earthworks immediately south of the eastern part of the above-mentioned bank, and apparently partly overlain by the upcast from the dredging of the watercourse, could be interpreted as a group of buildings (perhaps the cow house; *see* Figs 1 and 2).

8. Farther west, and east of the small rectangular pond, a length of stone wall was discovered extending for some 15 m in an east–west alignment. A couple of stones were just visible above the surface of the grass, and the remainder could be recognised from stunted grass growth and parching. No re-entrant angles were found, and there is insufficient evidence to identify it as a building.

9. At the western end of the moated enclosure is a rectangular platform, particularly strongly defined to north and west. This is believed locally to have been a dovecote, and the size of the building would be compatible with this function (*see* Figs 1 and 2).

Documentary evidence concerning the precincts supports some of the identifications made above. The 1557 survey places the main gatehouse in the south-east of the site. On the right as one entered the precinct were an ox and hay house, a large stable and a hog sty; and on the left a six-bay cowhouse and two acre base [i.e. lower] court or barton, 'walled about'. The survey also describes half an acre of garden at the 'backsyde' of the house, half an acre of orchard, a 'cony grenne' of one acre with a thatched barn on it, a barton called the Pole Close containing three roods, and the Culverhey of one acre with the culverhouse on it. There is no mention of the moat in the survey.

THE PALACE

The following documentary references are relevant to the dating and architecture of the bishop's palace:

1. In 1224, Bishop Jocelin received licence from the king to bring ten oaks from Cheddar forest 'to repair his houses at Wookey' ('decem frusta ad domos suas de Woky reparandas').[2]

2. It was recorded by the author of the *Historia Minor* of Wells in the 1330s that Jocelin 'built magnificently the chapels and chambers of Wells and Wookey' ('capellas etiam cum cameris de Wellys et Woky nobiliter construxit').[3]

3. In 1418, Bishop Bubwith was 'in a certain ambulatory [a place to walk, or perhaps a cloister] between the hall and the chapel of the manor of Wookey' ('in quodam deambulatorio inter aulam et capellam manerii de Wokey').[4]

4. In 1461–2, the hall was re-roofed with lead, walls were plastered and other work carried out. It has been suggested that John Stowell, the master mason for Bishop Bekynton and consultant for the cathedral in 1458 was in charge of the work at Wookey.[5] The reeve's account survives,[6] and among the wages under the 'expenses of the hall' is the entry 'To John Stawell stone-cutter for making a washbasin below the ewer cupboard, for 2 days, 6d a day' ('Johanni Stawell lathamo pro facta lavatery subter cubord ewerie per 2 dies, per diem 6d'). If this is the only ground for identification, it is clearly very doubtful, especially as 'lathamus' is not a term usually applied to a skilled master mason. If it were Stowell and he was in charge then a major reconstruction would be indicated; but in any case a lot of work was done.

5. The survey of 1557 contains the following description:

> And entryng in to the mannor howse [from the precinct] ys a great payer of brood yates wythe a wycket and yate howse and a portors lodge under yt and oon chambere over yt wythe a chymny in yt ledyng throughte a lytle courte buylded 4 square aboute to a great hall covered wythe leade wythe a chymny in yt and 3 screns in yt perteyning to the hall wythe a parlar parcell of the hall oon newe chamber over the same parler and oon jakes wythin a lytle chamber longyn to yt covered wythe tyle oon neaw parler wythe a butterye in the same and a lytle rome for wyne adioyning to the myddest of the hall and over the same parler and buttery 3 chambers bwylded uppon the olde cloyester percell of the quadrant being este and weste and at thende of the chamber oon galory called the armory at thend of the cloyster or neaw lodgyns is a chappell covered all wythe leade adioyning to thende of the hall a chamber called the broode chamber vauted wythe celles rownde a boute and under yt and covered all wythe leade and in thend of the broode chamber 2 lytle howses called gallerise and covered wythe leade adioyning to the neaw chamber and ther is two large chambers theon wythe a chymney in yt and a jakes in yt being uppon the right hand of the yate parcell of the quadrant cowrte oon the right hand lying southe and northe and uppon the lefte hand of the yate the dayrye howse and stable or henhowse wythe two chambers over yt and at the nether ende of the hall 2 kychyns lytle and oone brewhowse 2 larders oon great and oon lytle oone cellor for howsehould bere all tyled oon close yarde wythe water ronnyng throughte and walled aboute wythe 2 stone trowes for to kepe and water fyshe in yt.[1]

The existing architectural evidence for the period to the end of the 16th century consists of:

1. Two 13th century doorways, D1 and D2, both two-centred, D1 with fine mouldings, dated by Pevsner to *c.* 1230.[7]

2. Four probably 16th century doorways, namely D3, two-centred and lightly moulded, perhaps re-used; and D4, D5 and D6, four-centred, depressed.

3. Windows, W, of the late 15th or early 16th century.

4. An 11 ft shaft, P, at the western end of the present house. T.S. Holmes thought this to be 'part of the east wall of Jocelin's Camera and a little to the north side of the east window';[8] but it may equally well have been part of the chapel.

5. The remains of two relatively wide spiral staircases, S1 and S2, are also clear: part of S1 is visible with short risers, as is the stair shell of S2.

6. There are medieval spandrels, heads and corbels incorporated in 'Mellifont Abbey', together with a late 15th century oriel window. These are likely to have come from the palace site.[9]

Conjectural Reconstruction

The conjectural reconstruction plan (Fig. 3) differs markedly from the theories postulated by Holmes.[10] It takes into account the architectural details and other internal evidence such as the thickness of the walls. However, it is also based on the account of 1557 which was not available to Holmes (although he may, of course, have had other site evidence which has since disappeared). The dimensions of the hypothesized buildings are necessarily arbitrary. The 20 ft span for the main range has been postulated, with a three-bay hall and a 15 ft two-bay chapel, and with other buildings to suit. The detailed internal arrangements of the domestic block are speculative. Possible arrangements of the 'little galleries' are shown, but their function and precise location are not clear in the survey. The plan is of the ground floor except where shown. The 'celles' under the broad chamber are likely to have been above ground. The ranges beside the gatehouse are assumed to have been described from inside the courtyard, which again gives a convenient location for the dairy and a sensible layout for the water flow.

It is suggested that the present house is the 'new lodgings', parlour and buttery, with chambers over, built on the old cloister. When the rendering was removed in 1992, before replastering, the butt join to the chapel at the end of the 'lodgings' was revealed, as was the two-stage building of this range (the quality of the stone on the ground floor, although not ashlar, is very much better than that above). The two medieval doorways would open in the correct direction: D1 into the hall and D2 into the old cloister. The remains of the windows, other doorways and stairs are also in logical positions. The old cloister would have provided the 'ambulatorium' between the hall and the chapel, and the chapel (where Holmes postulated the camera) would duly be east–west from the remains of the shaft on the north side of the east wall. The weakness of the suggested plan is the somewhat marginalised position of the great hall (but the hall was built long before the cloister was converted into the new lodgings), the rather large size of the 'little court' and the distance to the chapel, particularly if the main entry were on the west or south. It is also assumed that the hooded Tudor windows on the present north–south building (in a wall not shown on the plan) were part of a post-1557 reconstruction.

While alternative reconstructions are possible (although difficult to reconcile with both the architectural evidence and the 1557 survey), verification of any theory is likely to be achieved only by excavation or, more feasibly, by use of a resistometer or magnetometer, in the hope that it would detect further foundations.

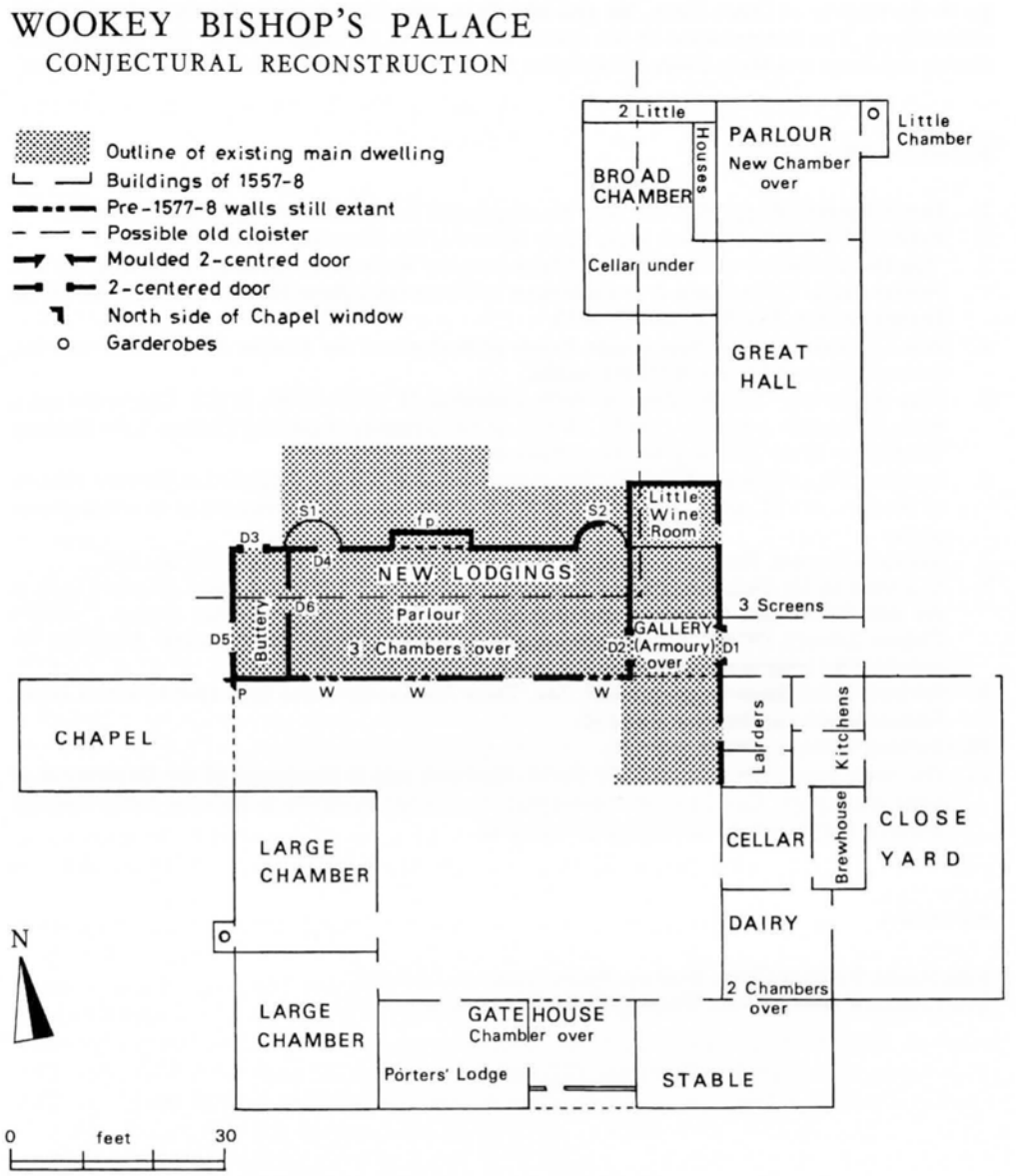

Fig. 3 Conjectural reconstruction of plan of Bishop's Palace. (C.J. Bond)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are most grateful to the Maltwood Fund for the grant which made the land survey possible. We would like to thank James Bond for his report and plan and for leading the field work; and Frances and Richard Neale for joining us in the survey. Earlier work by East London Polytechnic was also helpful.[11] Ron Gilson generously shared his architectural expertise with us until he moved from the area: he cannot be held responsible for our suggested reconstruction! Above all, our thanks must

go to the tenants of Court Farm, Mr and Mrs Hale, who have been endlessly forbearing and encouraging. The interpretation of the site of the house is the suggestion of Tim Belben, Joan Hasler, and Brian and Mary Luker. Brian Luker drafted the final version of the reconstruction plan.

REFERENCES

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2. Revd C.M. Church, *Chapters in the Early History of the Church of Wells* (1894), 139.
3. 'The Historia Minor and the Historia Major from the Wells Liber Albus II', in Prebendary T.F. Palmer (ed.), *Collectanea I: a Collection of Documents from Various Sources*, Somerset Record Society, **39** (1924), 48–71, at 55.
4. *Two Cartularies of the Augustinian Priory of Bruton and the Cluniac Priory of Montacute*, Somerset Record Society, **8** (1894), xxxiii.
5. John H. Harvey, 'The Buildings of Wells Cathedral, II: 1307–1508', in L.S. Colchester (ed.), *Wells Cathedral: a History* (1982), 76–101, at 101. (Harvey is quoting Thomas Scott Holmes, *The History of the Parish of Wookey* (1886), 49.)
6. Lambeth Palace Library, ED 1133. The account is translated and published in Holmes, *History of Wookey*, 41–52, although occasionally, as in this case, minor omissions or inaccuracies occur.
7. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), 344.
8. In a letter to Mr Dickinson dated 17 January 1884 Holmes writes: 'It had a detached shaft at the side eleven feet long on a lias base and a freestone capital and lias abacus...' (Wells Chapter Library, DC/PL 37). We are grateful to Frances Neale, the Cathedral Archivist, for drawing this letter to our attention.
9. Pevsner, *North Somerset and Bristol*, 344. These features have also been seen by James Bond, Frances Neale and Warwick Rodwell.
10. Holmes, *History of Wookey*, 23–5.
11. The work was undertaken in 1991 by M. Hardwick and P. Hammond of the Department of Land Surveying, East London Polytechnic. It was not designed to pick up archaeological features, but provided a useful background plan.

AUTHORS

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