

BLACKFORD (WEDMORE), 'THE BISHOP'S PALACE'

BY I. M. RENDELL, B.A.

THE SITE (Grid Ref. ST 410418)

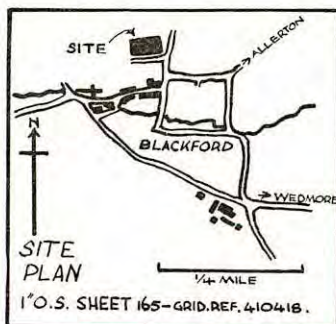


FIG. 1

SITE OF THE BISHOP'S PALACE, BLACKFORD
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With the kind permission of Mr. F. W. Duckett and the Trustees of the Bruton Estate, I was enabled to dig the site of the 'Bishop's Palace' at Blackford, Wedmore, for three short seasons of a week each, in 1955, 1956 and 1957. I was assisted by Miss Margaret Barnes, Miss Angela Vowles and by pupils of Sexey's School, Blackford.

The site is an orchard, lying behind the junction of the village street and Blacksmith's Lane. It is surrounded by a moat, the eastern and western sides of which still contain water. The area, which is rather rhomboid than square in shape, is approximately 300 feet from moat to moat, measured in each direction from the outer banks. Traditionally this orchard is known as 'the Bishop's Palace', while the ground bordering it on the west is known as 'Paradise'.

The translator of the Somerset portion of Domesday identifies BLACHEFORD, part of the lands of the Abbot of Glastonbury (*Victoria County History of Somerset*, vol. I. p. 462), as Blackford near Wincanton, but Morland (*Proc. S.A.S.*, vols. 99 and 100, p. 45) argues that this entry must refer to Blackford, Wedmore. There is no doubt, that it is the latter manor which is mentioned in the agreement of 1219 dissolving the union between the abbey and the bishop of the diocese, and that of 1275, by which there was a 'modi-

fiction of the bishop's patronage and of his feudal mediacy between King and Abbot'.¹ In each agreement Blackford is named as one of the manors retained by the bishop. The distinction between the two Blackfords in 1284-5 is shown clearly in the list of knights' fees for Somerset printed in *Feudal Aids* (H.M.S.O. Record Series), vol. IV. On page 276, under the heading *Hundredum de Bempston*, which includes Wedmore, occurs the following entry: *Robertus, episcopus Bathoniensis, tenet Blakeford de domino rege, pertinentem ad episcopatum Bathoniensem*. The entry *Alina de Blakeford tenet villam de BLAKEFORD de domino Rogero de Meles, et Rogerus de abbate, et abbas de domino rege in baronia*, under the heading *Hundredum de Whitelegh*, must refer to the Blackford near Wincanton. Even so late as 1822 the area around this Blackford appears distinctly on Greenwood's map of the county as a detached portion of the hundred of Whitley.

There is evidence in the bishops' registers that documents were signed at Blackford (which would be the manor in Wedmore), by John de Drokenford in 1321 and 1326 (*Som. Rec. Soc.*, vol. I), and Ralph de Salopia in 1332-4 (*Som. Rec. Soc.*, vol. 9). In Bishop Ralph's register other entries refer to certain mandates being drawn up '*in capella domini episcopi juxta cameram manerii sui de Blakeford*' (p. 149) in 1333, the 'hall of his manor of Blakeford' (p. 173) in 1334, and the 'chapel within the manor of the bishop at Blakeford' (p. 426) in 1340. The registers of the succeeding fourteenth century bishops of Bath and Wells have not survived. Numerous references to Blackford occur in the *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells* (Historical MSS Commission). Confirmation in 1308 of an agreement to quitclaim rights of inter-commoning of cattle on the moors within the bishop's manor of 'Blakeford' and the dean's manor of Wedmore is recorded in vol. I, p. 219, and a significant reference to buildings is made in the record (p. 303) of the chapter proceedings of 1391. This entry shows that Thomas de Sudburia, dean of Wells, and the chapter gave consent to Ralph [Erghum], bishop of Bath and Wells, to dispose of the remaining materials of houses and buildings of the bishop's manor of Blackford.

¹ Watkin, *The Great Chartulary of Glastonbury* (*Som. Rec. Soc.*, vol. 59, p. xlviii), and Section V of the editor's *Descriptive Analysis* in this volume generally, where reference to further sources of the history of the relationship between the abbey and the diocesan are given (p. xl).

It is noted in the proceedings that they had consented previously to the demolition of these buildings by Bishop John Harewell (1367-86), 'such buildings having been formerly erected on a sumptuous scale, and though in no way necessary, absorbing yearly large sums in repairs.'

The pottery discovered on the site can be assigned firmly to the 13th and 14th centuries, except for a scatter of late medieval material such as is found all over the district, one or two pieces which are possibly as early as the 12th century, and three pieces of Romano-British date. The evidence suggests, therefore, that the 'Palace' at Blackford is, in fact, the episcopal manor house demolished in the latter part of the 14th century.

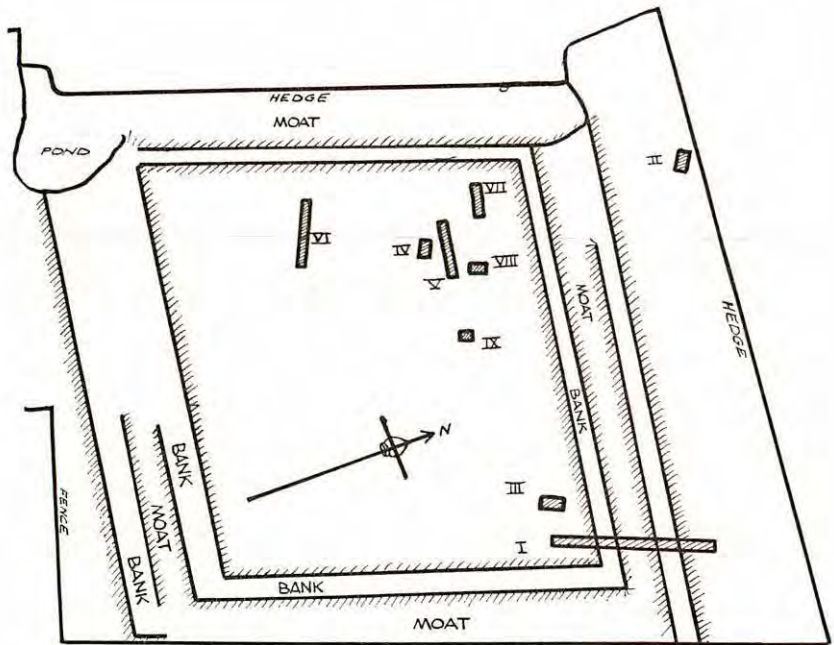


FIG. 2
PLAN SHOWING LOCATION OF EXCAVATION TRENCHES,
BISHOP'S PALACE, BLACKFORD

1955

TRENCH I, in the N.E. corner of the site, was 93 feet long across the moat. It cut through an L-shaped mound which had been made by a deepening of the moat at two different periods when the debris which had slipped into it was thrown up to make a bank.

From 4 to 5 feet below the present surface of the bank was a thin layer of natural lias, such as is found all over the district. It appeared also on the opposite side of the moat. Below it was the natural yellow clay. There was no trace of wall structure here, but a rim (13th to 14th century) of pottery was found on the lias.

Also a piece of Romano-British mortarium was found here, while a hammering stone and a rim of hard grey ware (3rd-4th century) were found just below the turf outside the moat, at the northern end of this Trench.

TRENCH II, a small trench outside the moat, near the boundary hedge, produced nothing, not even the natural lias, although it was dug to water level.

TRENCH III, was 18 feet west of Trench I at its south end. Small pieces of glazed tile were found to a depth of 18 inches, then lias and shale.

TRENCH IV was a final effort at the close of the week to locate the main building in the N.W. corner, in a patch of nettles. Wall-spread of lias slabs, lumps of free stone, some of which had been worked to a bevelled edge, mortar and plaster appeared just below turf-level. The reddish colour of many of the stones suggested that fire was used to assist in the demolition.

1956

In this season we had very bad weather; so, although we opened two trenches — one parallel with Trench IV and the other some distance to the south of it — we soon closed the second trench (VI) and concentrated on Trench V.

TRENCH V. Here were found robbed wall trenches, and, at the eastern end, the lower course of a stone wall partly robbed. A part of a floor of lias slabs was *in situ* at a depth of 20 inches. Sealed beneath this were small fragments of 12th or 13th century red pot together with ox-bones. The pieces of pot were too small to date accurately.

Parallel with the face of the wall, 5 inches away from it and continuing under the floor, was a line marked by the colour of the clay which was grey next to the wall and yellow further away from it. It suggested either a facing of dressed stone that had been removed from the wall, or an alteration to the original building, or the edge of the wall trench.

TRENCH V

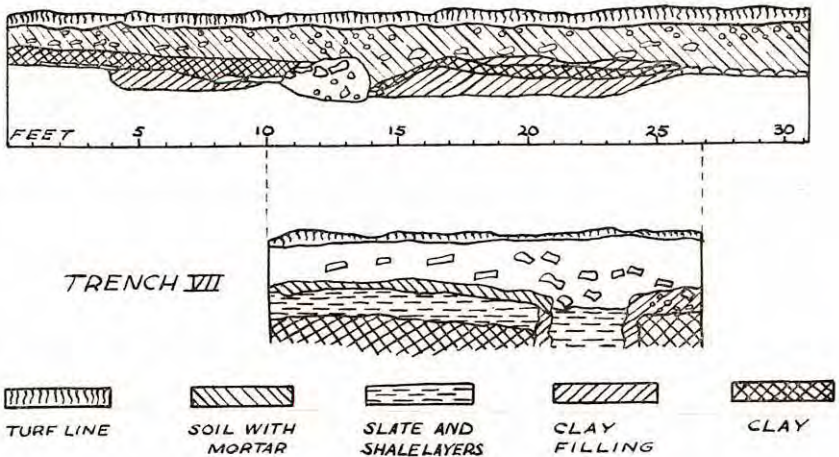


FIG. 3
SECTIONS OF TRENCHES V AND VII

The general direction of the wall was N.-S. and this tied up with the E.-W. direction of the wall trenches found in 1957.

At the western end of the trench the foundation of another floor was found at a depth of 2 ft 6 ins. This was of somewhat rounded pieces of lias. A similar foundation was found in 1957 in Trench VII.

Much reddish soil here suggested again the use of fire in the destruction of the building.

A hole, 3 inches in diameter, was found under a large stone at the inner edge of the 'cobbled' floor foundation. It contained pieces of wood, but these could not be identified. This was probably a post-hole associated with the building; it could have been a root or animal hole, but the fact that it was very straight-sided suggested that it was man-made.

1957

TRENCH VII, parallel with and to the N.W. of Trench V, was very difficult to dig because of the amount of rough stone encountered. This must have been wall-spread from the northern outside wall of the building. We did find the robbed trench of the external western wall. The original garden level was 2 ft 3 ins. below the modern surface, and the interior floor level was an inch or two higher. The wall was 3 feet wide and the floor had a foundation of rather cobbly shale similar to that in Trench V. The direction of the wall was approximately E.-W.

TRENCH VIII, situated near the eastern end of Trench V, gave another wall-trench running E.-W.

TRENCH IX, about 27 feet east of Trench VIII again gave a wall-trench running W.-E. In this trench was found a coin of Edward I, and a rim and sherds of a large vessel.

FINDS

COIN

A silver penny of Edward I (series Va) minted at Canterbury.

Obverse — EDW. R. ANGLI. DNS HYB

Reverse — CIVITAS CANTOR. (B. A. Seaby Ltd.)

Found in Trench IX at a depth of 1 ft 9 ins. in a layer of mortar and slate debris.

METAL OBJECTS

A number of nails of various sizes, some very large and square-headed, some roofing nails.

ROOFING MATERIALS

Pieces of slate with nail holes.

Green glazed tiles and ridge-tiles.

Brown glazed tiles and ridge-tiles.

Finials (very small scraps, but identified by G. C. Dunning).

Lias slabs with nail holes.

POTTERY (Dated by A. D. Hallam, Asst. Keeper, Taunton Museum).

- (1) Rim of red ware 13th-14th century.
- (2) Rim of coarse red ware of a very large vessel, with a diameter of perhaps 21 inches (Trench V).
- (3) Rim of coarse brownish ware (3 pieces) of a similar large vessel (Trench IX).

- (4) Two sherds of similar ware which show the angle between the side and the base (Trench IX).
- (5) Sherds of fine green glazed ware, decorated with lines and dots.

OTHER SMALL OBJECTS

Scraps of glass, fine, thin and flat. A glass rim.

Whelk and oyster shells.

Ox and chicken bones.

Worked freestone, part of a window frame. A tiny scrap of window putty attached to a fragment of the wood.

A small piece of wattle and daub.

ROMANO-BRITISH FINDS (Trench I)

- (6) Pear-shaped hammering stone 4.5 ins. \times 4.8 ins.)
- (7) Rim of hard grey ware (3rd to 4th century A.D.)
- (8) Rim of red mortarium and a sherd of red mortarium.

CONCLUSION

While not enough digging has been done to recover the plan of the Manor House on this site, the finds have been sufficiently consistent for us to conclude that there were extensive buildings of the late 13th to 14th century. Although it is probable that the best building material was sold at, or soon after, the demolition of 1380-1390, the slight foundations and the little evidence of fine stonework suggest that this was a half-timbered house. The variety of the roofing materials indicates that not one but several buildings stood inside the moat, and doubtless the green and brown glazed tiles, roof ridges and finials must have looked very fine.

Romano-British remains, few though they be, suggest that the site was inhabited at least in the earlier centuries of the Christian era.

It would be interesting to recover a complete plan of the buildings and to make a more thorough search for a Romano-British settlement.

We are grateful to Mr. Duckett, who has allowed us to dig in his orchard; to Mr. Raleigh Radford, Mr. and Mrs. A. D. Hallam, Mr. Stephen Dewar, Mr. Stevens Cox and many others who have encouraged us by their visits and helped us by their advice; to Mr. I. P. Collis for his help with the historical research; and finally to David Jones and Mr. E. Silcox whose assistance in preparing the diagrams has been invaluable.