

A RESISTIVITY SURVEY ON THE SITE OF THE RESIDENCE OF THE MEDIEVAL BISHOPS OF BATH AND WELLS AT BLACKFORD

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SUMMARY

The medieval bishops of Bath and Wells had a manor house at Blackford (Somerset SMR 10879, SAM 456) in Wedmore parish which was in use from at least the early 14th century until it was demolished during the episcopate of John Harewell (1367–1386). Slight earthworks of a moat survive at the probable site of the manor house to the north of the village (ST 4102 4788). In November 2001 these earthworks were recorded and a resistivity survey of the site was carried out. The fieldwork provided information on the position, size, layout, and surrounds of the episcopal palace.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE FOR THE EPISCOPAL MANOR HOUSE

The manor of Blackford had belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, but during the episcopate of Savaric (1191–1203), abbot of Glastonbury as well as bishop of Bath, a number of manors including Blackford came into the control of the bishopric (Ramsey 1995, xxx). The manor was held by the bishopric until July 1548, when it was sold to Edward, Duke of Somerset, with other property (Baildon 1914, 267). Bishop Walter Haselshaw (1302–1308) signed a document at Blackford in 1306 (Hunt 1893, ii, no. 636) and it is possible that he was staying in the episcopal manor house there. John Drokensford (1309–1329) signed 36 separately dated documents at Blackford, the earliest from February 1315 (Hobhouse 1887, 114). At least one entry was signed at Blackford during most years of Drokensford's episcopate until his death in 1329. Although a house is not mentioned specifically, the volume of documents signed at Blackford indicates a likelihood that this bishop resided on occasion at his own accommodation in the village. The surviving parts of the register of Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury (1329–1363) suggest that he too used the episcopal residence at Blackford fairly often, sometimes for several weeks or more at a time. For example, between 10th July and 24th August 1332, eleven separately dated and evenly spread documents were signed at Blackford (Holmes 1896, 422–7, 429–31, 433, 434). No other entries are dated elsewhere through this period, suggesting that the bishop stayed at the manor house throughout these seven weeks. Shrewsbury appears to have stayed at Blackford for a time during most years in the early part of his episcopate. His visits became less frequent from 1337. The register of Bishop Shrewsbury mentions the manor house's hall (Holmes

1896, 606, 692) and its chapel (Holmes 1896, 577, 1582). The chapel was adjacent to a chamber (Holmes 1896, 577).

There is no register or itinerary available for Bishop John Barnet (1363–1366). Dunning's itinerary for John Harewell (1367–1386) suggests that this bishop did not stay at the episcopal manor house at Blackford (Dunning 1963, appendix 8). Ralph of Shrewsbury is therefore likely to have been the last bishop to use the residence. A manuscript dating from 1391 from the Wells Dean and Chapter archive reveals the fate of the manor house. The document records the Dean of Wells's consent to Bishop Ralph Erghum (1388–1400) to 'dispose of all the remaining materials of houses and buildings of the bishop's manor of Blackford, to the demolition of which by John Harewell late bishop they [the Dean and Chapter of Wells] had previously consented' (Bird 1907, 303). So, the initial dismantling of the house probably took place during the episcopate of John Harewell (1367–1386) and any remaining material was removed from the site at some point between 1391 and 1400. The reason given for the demolition reveals the general character of the episcopal residence at Blackford: the building had 'been formerly erected on a sumptuous scale, and though in no way necessary, absorbing yearly large sums in repair' (Bird 1907, 303).

Blackford is located only a few miles from the episcopal manors of Wookey and Banwell, both of which also had accommodation for the bishop's use and it is surprising that the medieval bishops would invest in the building of all three manor houses so close together. It is possible that an abbot of Glastonbury had built a manor house on the site at Blackford before the estate came into the possession of the bishopric. However, the residence was not demolished until almost 200 years after the manor was obtained by the bishopric and may not have been constructed until the episcopate of Bishop Drokensford, over a century after the manor was acquired from Glastonbury.

THE SITE OF THE EPISCOPAL RESIDENCE

The traditional site of the episcopal manor house at Blackford is a field behind the old blacksmith's workshop, just to the north of the village. According to Rendell (1963, 72), the field has the traditional name 'The Bishop's Palace', although on a 1791 map of Blackford (SRO D/P/Wed 13/10/17, plot 2111) and in the 1842 tithe apportionment it is called 'Paradise' (SRO, D/D/Rt329 A, plot 215). The field is currently under pasture; the trees that are shown on the 1885 six-inch Ordnance Survey map and are visible on early MoD aerial photographs (e.g. NMR Library no 1229, sortie 540/640, December 1951) have been removed. Paradise field contains some slight earthworks of an approximately square moat, the interior of which was formerly about 80m across. This feature certainly fits with the 'sumptuous' description of the residence outlined above. Research into moated sites has shown that 'most moats correlate with the existence of seigniorial demesne, whether in lay or ecclesiastical ownership' (Hey 1996: 315), so it seems likely that the site has been correctly identified.

Nine trenches of varying dimensions were excavated inside and around the moat in Paradise field over three one-week seasons in 1955, 1956, and 1957 (Rendell 1963, 72–8). A number of walls, robber trenches, and floors were identified, mainly in the north-west corner of the island. Most of the pottery finds were 13th to 14th century, suggesting that the residence had been built and was in use before the evidence from the earliest register. Other finds included a silver penny of Edward I (1272–1307), roofing material, and roofing nails. The variety of roofing material was taken to mean that there were several buildings within the moat (Rendell 1963, 78). The area within the moat is quite large so it is possible that there were residential and service buildings within.

The only clear earthwork remnant of the moat is at its south-east corner and there are no archaeological features visible inside or outside it on aerial photographs. Slight traces of the

south and west sides, the north-east corner, and a slight bank inside the south-west part of the moat are also discernible; these earthworks were surveyed in November 2001 using a Total Station. In the short excavation report that appeared in *SANH* for 1962–3 (Rendell 1963, 74), the plan of the site appears to indicate that the earthworks were more distinct in the 1950s. The moat was visible on all four sides and there was a slight bank around the enclosed area. The Ordnance Survey first edition six-inch map (1885) depicts the east and west sides of the moat as still containing water and the northern ditch was also distinct. There was a pond at the south-west corner of the moat, which was still in existence in the mid 20th century. At least two episodes of the dumping of rubble into the moat have occurred, the first before 1966 and the second in 1981 (Somerset SMR 10879). These must have resulted in the obscuring of some of the old earthworks, as must the growth and removal of trees from the orchard.

THE GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

A resistivity survey using a Geoscan RM15 was undertaken on the site of the moat in November 2001, to assess the position, layout, and size of any remains. Twenty-two 20m square grids covering the interior of the moated area were laid out using tapes and triangulation. Readings were taken every metre along zigzagged traverses spaced at 1m intervals. The location of the survey area within the field was surveyed using a Total Station and the resistivity readings were downloaded into Geoplot version 3 for Windows. A shade plot of the data is shown in Fig. 1 and in Fig. 2 the plot has been superimposed onto the Ordnance Survey second edition 1:2500 map.

The resistivity survey revealed a large stone building, over 50m in length, in the northern part of the moat's interior. This seems to have been the only structure within the moat, although there may have been other more transient wooden service buildings in the southern half that would not have been picked up by the geophysical survey. The main approach to the building appears to have been from the south through a gatehouse (Fig. 2, A), and there was a wall or bank that surrounded the manor house approximately parallel with the line of the moat (Fig. 2, B). Another gatehouse may have broken the northern part of this boundary (Fig. 2, C), although the survey has not revealed a pathway leading north from here. The area of high resistance in the south-west corner of the plot (Fig. 2, D) coincides with the old pond depicted on the early large-scale Ordnance Survey maps, possibly indicating that this feature was filled with rubble. Similarly, there are patches of high resistance in the north-east corner and the western edge of the plot in the line of the moat (Fig. 2, E), which might also reflect the dumping of rubble. The earthworks and the southern part of the geophysical survey suggest that the moat was around 10m wide.

The pathway from the southern gatehouse leads directly to the largest discernible room within the complex, presumably the great hall (Fig. 2, F). There is no obvious porch, although the south wall may have had external buttresses. As many as eight ground floor rooms can be tentatively distinguished to the west of the hall, although the internal divisions are not very clear. In the typical manor house, the kitchens and offices would be expected at this end if the screens passage extended north through from the pathway. There were additional rooms here too, and probably another floor above, where the lord's and other chambers would probably have been found. Alternatively, the kitchen may have been at the east end of the hall, extending north. The east-facing room to the east of the hall may have been the bishop's chapel (Fig. 2, G). This would have been a similar arrangement to that at the nearby Banwell residence, where the chapel also projected from the east end of the great hall, as can be seen on Buckler's 1827 drawing (Pigot Collection no. 5.13, SANHS library). To the north of the hall are more rooms, however it is unclear whether there is another rectangular room of dimensions approaching

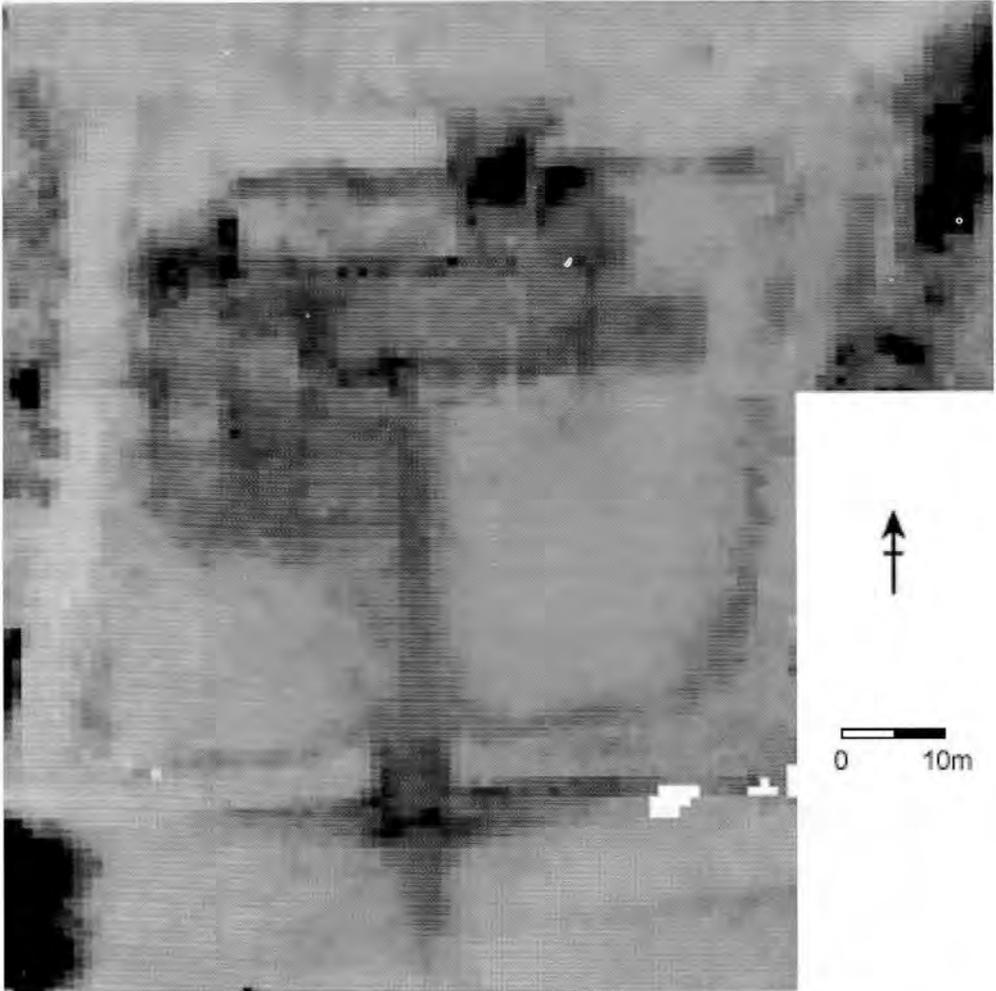


Fig. 1 Shade plot of the geophysics data

those of the great hall, or whether this is an enclosed courtyard, surrounded by the continuation of the boundary wall around the whole complex (Fig. 2, H). The smaller room to the north of the east end of the hall (Fig. 2, I) could perhaps be the chamber adjacent to the chapel that is referred to in a document in Bishop Shrewsbury's register (Holmes 1896, 577).

CONCLUSION

The geophysical survey has revealed an extensive domestic complex within the moat at Blackford, which would certainly have cost the bishop 'yearly large sums in repair'. A wall or bank apparently encircled the interior of the moat and the residence was approached from the south through a gatehouse. There may have been separate service buildings associated with the manor house inside the southern part of the moat, for example stables or workshops, but as nothing was visible here on the geophysical results these were presumably not stone-built.

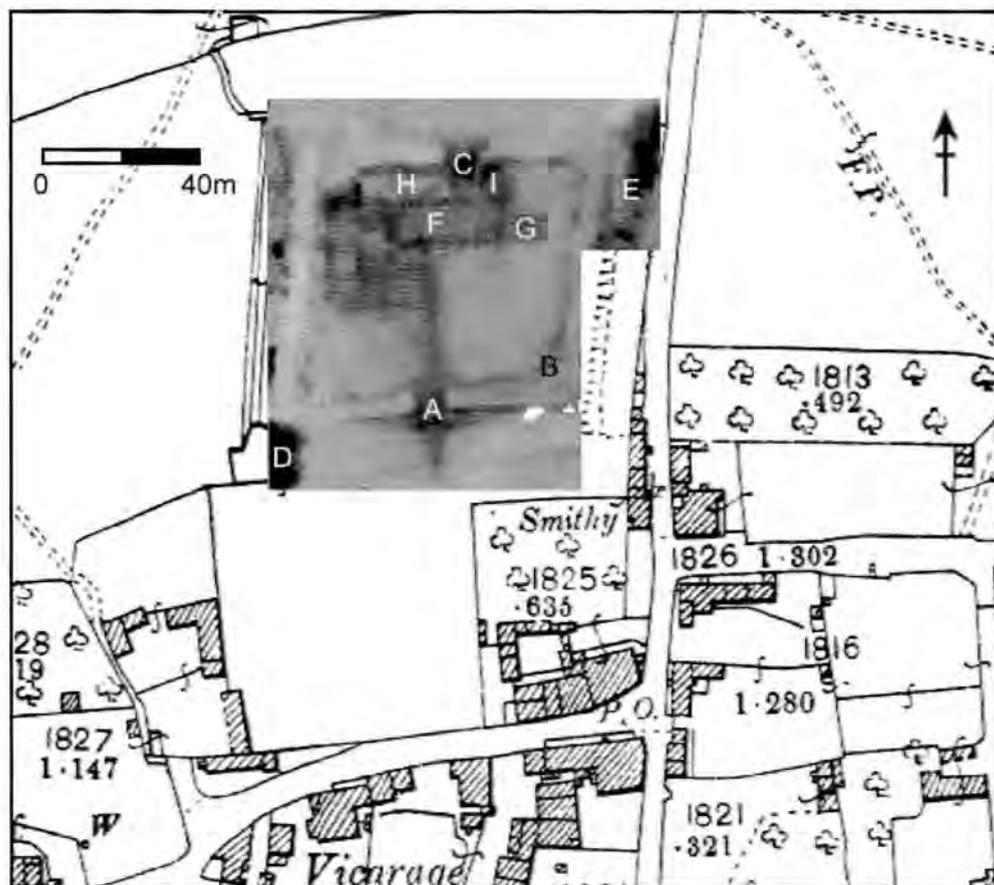


Fig. 2 Superimposition of the resistance data onto the 1904 OS 2nd edn. 1:2500 map (not to scale)

There are no documentary references to an episcopal barn at Blackford, but if one existed it would probably have been outside the moat, at the bishop's demesne farm headquarters.

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