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## A fanciful reminiscence of Otford as it was in the year 1520



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My name is Carter, William Carter and I am His Majesty's head groom at the Palace of Otford. I am in charge of the Great Stables as well as the other two stables here. I've worked in the Palace, man and boy for some eighteen years. I've served three masters in that time, two archbishops and now my king. Now, I ask you, could a man want for better?

I remember my first sight of the Palace as a lad of fourteen. The year was 1520 and the palace had only been finished two years earlier. I'd come to Otford from my home in Shoreham. I was told that my uncle was going to find me work. He had been a carpenter throughout the four years it took to build the Palace. That morning he was taking me to meet his cousin who worked in the Steward's house inside the great Palace itself.

We came into Otford over the ford and walked past the cottages towards the Church of Saint Bartholomew. I was getting more and more nervous with every step. I never imagined I would be visiting the place about which I'd been told so much. Uncle started telling me the story of how the great Palace came to be here, so far from London Town.

It seems that the archbishops of Canterbury had had their manor house here since the earliest times. They had been given land in Otford in 821 and built a simple timber manor here with a moat round it - a bit like a wooden fortress in those days. Since then, of course, they had built and re-built the manor and had added many extra buildings and even extended the moat. Archbishop Warham was to change all that though but he was a very special man, my first master. He was not only the Archbishop of Canterbury but had been made Chancellor for the whole of England in 1503, during the reign of the last king, Henry VII

This meant that not only was he head of our Catholic church and all the lands it owned, but he was next to the King himself in importance and had to receive all kinds of important visitors from other countries as well. So, he chose his manor at Otford to become his power base, as he called it, midway between his cathedral in Canterbury and his Chancellor duties at Court.

According to Uncle, they tore down all the old buildings, except the Great Hall and the Chapel. Building on the new Palace started in the year when I was eight. That was 1514. It took four years to build - and according to Uncle, it kept every single mason, brick-layer and carpenter busy between here and Canterbury for all that time.

As we stepped over the little stream that fed the horse pond and I got my first sight of the Palace of Otford. Before us stood great walls of brick adorned by criss-cross patterns of darker brick stretching either side of a massive gatehouse. There were tall towers on either end of the walls and a gatehouse of the same height. I had never seen so tall a building in my life if you don't count our church tower and as we approached, a guard stepped out from the massive shaded archway.

Uncle seemed to know him and we were waved forward past the tall oak doors and into a cavernous passage-way. Another guard and a gateman greeted uncle as we walked by. I was fourteen remember and I was feeling very apprehensive. But nothing had prepared me for what met my eyes as we came out into the sunshine of the Inner Court. It was like I had been transported into a fairyland. I stood rigid.

“You’re looking at the biggest Inner Court in all England,” said the gateman.

“You’re looking at the biggest Palace in all England,” said my Uncle, proudly.

“Some say that Cardinal Wolsey’s new Palace at Hampton Court is bigger,” said the guard who had joined us.

“Don’t you go believing everything you’re told,” replied the gateman. “They say that he just wanted to prove that anything His Grace could do, he could do as well. But that don’t mean it’s bigger.”

It was vast. A great grassed courtyard with, what my uncle called, cloisters running all the way round. Hundreds of beautifully arched openings and I could occasionally catch sight of brightly clothed gentlemen and ladies strolling in the shade beneath them: The Long Galleries, I later learned to call them. But it was the Palace itself which left me speechless.

There it stood, facing me, stretching from one side of the Inner Court to the other. Ranks of tall bay windows reflecting the sun and crowned by a line of battlements along the skyline. Everywhere I looked there were towers and turrets pointing skyward. And still further, far beyond it over to the left, a massive, tall, embattled tower, looking down on it all. It put me in mind of a great castle.

“Mind yourself!”

Uncle’s warning came just in time as a rider galloped though the gate toward the Palace, his mud-spattered cloak flying behind him. “A King’s messenger, that,” said Uncle. “Come along lad, you can’t stay daydreaming all day or we’ll be late,” and I followed him across the Inner Court toward the Palace. “Every piece of stone you see had to be carted all the way from the quarries at Tonbridge or Sevenoaks,” he said. “Except for the bricks of course. We baked them just down the road a way.”

“What are those?” I asked, pointing to a line of rooftops I could see beyond the cloisters on our right. “Is it another village?”

Uncle laughed. “You could think so, couldn’t you?” he said. “They look like nine grand timber houses from the other side, but in fact they are all private apartments for the guests who come and stay here. Twenty-seven separate rooms I believe there are. And very grand they are too, I’m told. The doors to the rooms are all along the cloisters there, see?”

We passed a group of bowmen setting up their targets as we approached the broad bridge which led to the entrance of what my uncle referred to as the Great Gallery. I stopped. “What is that building?” I asked, pointing to my left where a wide stone building stood with a line of haylofts high under its roof line.

“That? Why that’s the Great Stable, lad. They can stable almost forty horses in there. Can’t you smell them?” and he tugged my arm, laughing.

As we crossed the wide bridge to the entrance gate, I saw that the messenger’s horse was being led into the courtyard beyond by a stable lad about my own age. Again, my uncle conferred with the two-armed guards and we were waved forward. “Up those stairs are the Staterooms,” he whispered as we passed a great arched stairway on our left. “That’s where the Lords and the foreign Ambassadors go to meet the Archbishop. That’s where the king goes, even.”

“The king?”

“Oh, yes. Our King Henry has been here often. So has his sister, Princess Mary Rose. The Palace is big enough to cope with all their court people they need to bring with them, you see.” He pointed across the Inner Courtyard toward a noble house of brick which faced us. “There’s where we’re going. That’s the Steward’s house. That’s where my cousin works. Now you stay here while I go and find him.”

Unsure and feeling very small in this home of giants, I glanced back over my shoulder. There, across the way, was one of the longest and most unusual buildings I had ever seen. It must have been three storeys tall and seemed to back along the length of the Staterooms. Some men were rolling barrels into one of the doorways opposite. Two broad staircases ran up the outside to a higher level where they gave entry to the Great Hall, for so it was, through two massive, carved doors. “They can seat two hundred people for dinner in there, so they say.”

My informant was the stable-lad who I had seen earlier. “That first staircase, there, that’s to His Grace’s table. The High Table they call it. Those other ones, they’re called the Low Table stairs and that’s where I will go, when I am old enough. They have court in there every three weeks and sometimes they even have entertainments where they dress up. It’s true, I’ve seen them. Are you going to work here?”

“I believe my uncle would have it so,” I replied.

“C’mon, I’ll show you something,” and pulling me after him, he led the way across the courtyard to our left. A high wall led between a tall church and one of the biggest houses I had ever seen. “That’s the Archbishop’s House,” he said. “You don’t want to be caught outside there.” He paused beside an ornate iron gate in the wall. “Look in there. Go on,” he whispered. I peered around the corner, cautiously.

Inside was a beautiful, grassy courtyard with what I took to be a fish pond in its centre. More cloisters lay beyond but it was the soaring windows of what I later learned to call the Chapel, which took my breath away. And there, leading into the chapel, was the most wonderful, carved stone porch. It fascinated me. I had entered a world that I could never have imagined before. I could not tear my eyes away.

“Lovely, is it not?” The old man, his dove-white shirt gleaming beneath the long black cloak, stood quietly on the other side of the gate. “Do you know that those carvings were done by a master mason from France, almost one hundred years ago. They seem to be as alive as the day God first guided the mason’s chisel to create them, don’t they?” He straightened. “Now you have work to do, young man, as I do” he said as he turned away, his cloak sweeping the grass as he walked.

A hand pulled me back against the wall. My new friend was ashen-faced. “Do you know who that was?” he whispered urgently. “That was His Grace, you fool! That was Archbishop Warham”

“He seemed so nice” I replied.

“More a man of God than a man of the Court, so my Gran always says. C’mon! We’d better get away from here quick”

There was a shout from across the courtyard and I saw my uncle waving at me. I turned back but my friend had disappeared and somewhere in the distance, I heard a door slam.

Looking at the two men together, they looked like brothers but my uncle's cousin was dressed in far finer clothes. "We have just learnt that His Majesty will be arriving at the Palace in two weeks time, so I am a little busy at present. I won't have time to take you round every building but I'll give you a bird's-eye view instead. You'd like that wouldn't you, William? Come along," and he strode off with both of us following.

We entered a long arched walkway which formed a grassed square bounded by the tall stone buildings which formed into a corner, surmounted by the great tower I had seen from the Inner Court. We passed a monk in heated discussion with two other men. "These are our land offices", called my new relative over his shoulder.

"We have to deal with all the property held by Mother Church – and that's most of the land in the west of the county, right up to London. Every tenant is registered here and all the rents have to be collected regularly. And of course, everyone has problems, whether it's their boundary or their neighbour. They all come to us for settlement. I don't suppose you can write well, can you William? We always have need for new scribes in the Land Offices." He didn't wait for my reply but winked at my uncle. "Now here we are, the Great East Tower," and he opened a door to allow us through. "Up you go, right to the top. Go on. We'll follow"

The stone staircase went up and up, round and round. I just kept climbing until at last, out of breath and giddy, I opened the latch of the door facing the last of the steps. A wind must have caught it for it suddenly swung open violently, with me still holding tightly onto the latch. I was flung out into a new world.

I was suddenly looking out over Otford from a height I could barely imagine and I fell to my knees in fright. I was at the very top of the Great East Tower. I was a bird, perched on this wide expanse of leaded roof, with nothing between me and the clouds. Me, William Carter, who had never climbed higher than our haystack. I started to laugh.

Before long I had got my bearings. Over there was Otford and I was so high I could almost believe I could see our farm at Shoreham. Behind me, yes, that was the Great Park I'd heard about from Uncle, stretching all the way to the Sevenoaks Hills. And down there was a herd of deer grazing near one of the pools. Gingerly I crept to the edge and looked down over the wall. Water!

A wide stretch of water ran right beside the Palace walls beneath me. The narrow moat we had crossed when we had entered the Palace beneath the Great Gallery, was a stream by comparison. This was really wide. And there was even a real drawbridge over it. As I watched, a cart, piled with barrels rattled over the bridge and disappeared into the gatehouse below. And there, round the corner, I could see another drawbridge like the first, leading onto the Great Park. There must be drawbridges on every side of the Palace.

Beyond the moat, I could see a farm and I wanted to wave at the people harvesting in the fields below. Then my eye was caught by two giant barns below me. We had barns at home but you could have put two of our barns into one of these. They must have been for storing the grain and hay for the whole Palace. Far below, I heard frantic barking.

"Must be lunchtime at the kennels." My uncle and his cousin had emerged from the stair doorway. "The kennels. See them? Down there beyond the Great Stable. The dogs are used for hunting when the guests aren't out hawking, that is. Now, see that

smoking chimney just beyond the kennels? That's the farriers. He looks after the shoeing of all the horses. In fact he looks after everything that's made of metal throughout the Palace."

"Where's that cart going?" asked my uncle pointing to a cart laden with wood turning opposite the farrier's.

"That's the way to the wood yard," his cousin replied. "Just count the number of chimneys you can see about you. There's fifty-seven of them. That's a lot of wood that needs burning, come a cold winter's day. We've got eight woodmen down there collecting and cutting timber throughout the year. The farrier needs charcoal but the kitchens need wood to burn every day of the year. There are the kitchens, William, see?" He pointed to a tall building with high chimneys positioned at the end of the Great Hall below me.

"We keep the kitchens separate from the Hall just in case of fire. There are two big ranges in there and fourteen kitchen staff. They don't just feed us of course. When guests are visiting you can have over two-hundred people sitting down to a feast in one sitting. Imagine. Don't suppose you'd like to work in the kitchens or be one of the serving boys, would you? Free food?" He glanced at my uncle and laughed, not waiting for an answer.

"What is that building with the tower between the Archbishop's House and the Chapel?" asked my Uncle.

"Those are the ecclesiastical offices. Need to be near His Grace, you see. A lot of very clever men work down there, reading all kinds of languages as well as Latin. Don't forget that His Grace is responsible for all the priests and churches throughout the land. That takes some running, I can tell you. But that's the half of it. There are messengers coming and going all day either to the Court in London, or even to the Pope in Rome. That's why he has his own stables and gatehouse beyond the Chapel there. You see? And that green bit you can see on the right? That's part of his private garden. No one is allowed in there but him."

Somehow, I felt pleased that that old man had somewhere quiet to go. He seemed to have an awful lot to think about, what with all the land and the churches and the Court. No wonder he looked tired. And no wonder he needed a Palace like this to run everything from. He could never do it all on his own.

"See over there?" asked our guide, pointing to the roofs of the guesthouses off the Inner Court. "See that garden beyond the guest-house roofs? That's our famous Knot Garden." I could see there was some sort of formal garden there, where all the shrubs and bushes had been arranged to look like twists of rope. It was very clever and I'd never seen anything like it in my life. What got my attention, though, were the ponds, each with its own fountain which formed the centre of the pattern. Those and the little houses and the dovecote dotted around the garden made it look a very peaceful and wondrous place.

"They do say Cardinal Wolsey is copying our garden for his new palace at Hampton Court. I don't suppose gardening would interest you, Will?" The two men smiled again at one another as if sharing a joke hidden from me. This game was getting boring. "There's only one thing for it, then. Come back over here. What's down there?"

"The kitchens", I replied

“Now look at that archway beyond the kitchens” and he pointed. “Where does that go?”

“Through the wall and into the moat,” I said.

“Now if there was a bridge beyond that archway, where would you end up?”

“In the Great Stables.” Suddenly I realised how my friend had managed to stable the messenger’s horse and get back so quickly

“And how many horses do you think can be stabled there, Will?”

“Uncle says forty.”

“Horses interest you, do they, Will?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I replied, too excited and apprehensive to say more.

“Then horses it shall be. You can start as a stable-lad here in five days time. I’ll discuss details with your uncle.” He glanced at the sun. “This won’t do. I have work to attend to. The King, you understand,” he said importantly. “Now off you go and meet your uncle by the kitchens. He can show you around your new workplace”

I flew down the stairs, shouting out loud. Never mind about His Majesty or even the Archbishop. I was to be a stable-lad at the Palace of Otford. Me, Will Carter. Oh yes, I remember that day very well indeed.

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