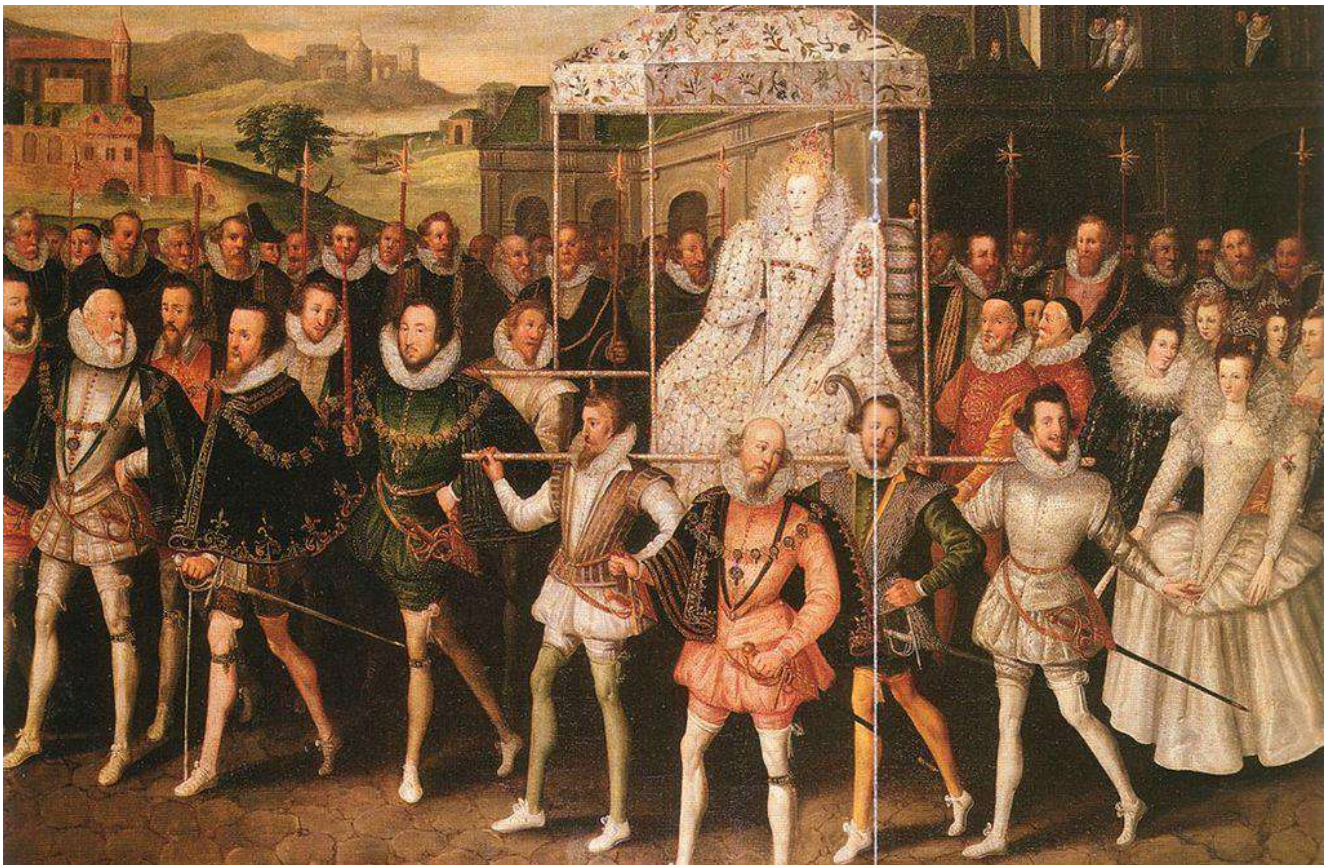




Archbishop's  
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## How did one approach Otford Palace?



Charles Shee

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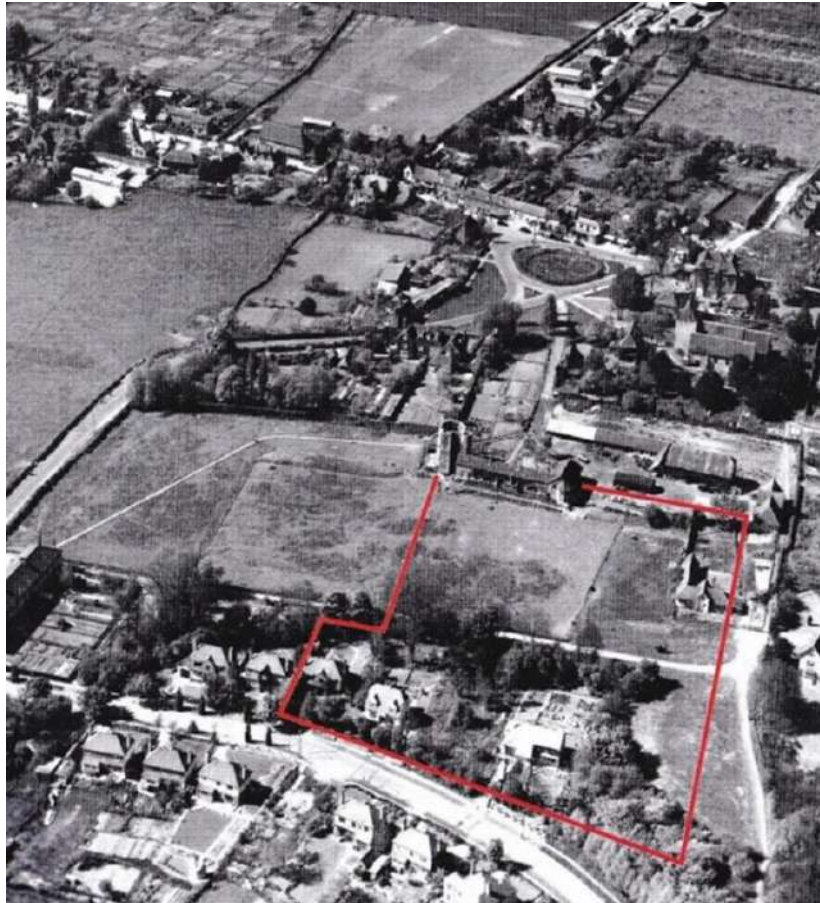
Walking from the Otford pond to the Palace it is easy to assume that the slightly elevated lane that passes Chantry Cottage was the access route to the 16C Archbishop's Palace. However, a moment's reflection suggests that this is unlikely. The present narrow road (Palace Approach) leads towards the remaining north-western Tower, but the original main entrance, the Great Gatehouse, was actually significantly further to the east (Fig 1). The western half of the Great Gatehouse still exists, and is joined to the remaining tower by a row of cottages (Fig 1). Some readers will know the western Gatehouse as the building where the Guides used to meet. The eastern part of the Gatehouse and the long range running east towards the station, along with most of the rest of the Palace, were demolished and cleared away many years ago. Surely the original approach to the grand northern entrance of this magnificent palace must have been further to the east than the existing lane?

None of the known accounts of the Palace tell us how the Great Gatehouse was approached from the north, nor are there any contemporary illustrations. The reconstruction model of the Palace by Rod Shelton (a "must see" in the Heritage Centre) and the guides to the Palace by local historians Cliff Ward and Rod Shelton leave it to the imagination how this approach way might have connected to the vicinity of the Otford pond or High Street.

Earlier historians had speculated on this question of the approach to the Palace. File 22 in the archives contains a few pages written by Mr FR Pateman in 1954 entitled "Possible Old Road to the Gate House". Rob Pateman (died 1958) was a well-known figure in Otford, a local historian and churchwarden, who in 1950 was a founder and first Chair of the ODHS.

It seems Pateman's interest in the road to the palace had been triggered by a talk to the ODHS where a Mr Elliston Erwood FSA (1883-1968), an eminent historian, had pointed out that significant Tudor buildings, such as the Otford Palace, were generally fairly symmetrical with direct rather than oblique access to the main façade.

If the road from the Great Gatehouse had run out at right angles and in a straight line it would have passed just in front of the church (Figs 1, 2, 4 & 11). The road might then have continued in front of the present site of Colets Well House (the large house overlooking the pond). Primed with this thought, in 1954 Pateman was delighted to be asked to have a look at a discovery in the front drive of Colets Well.



*Figure 1: Aerial photograph dating from 1949 looking north-west. The boundary of the former Tudor palace site is outlined in red. Where the line is interrupted one can see the remaining tower to the left and the western Gatehouse to the right. One can just see the remains of farm buildings that then existed to the north of the gatehouse. (Photograph from Ward, 2017, p39)*



*Figure 2: Remains of the western gatehouse viewed from the site of the southern central courtyard. If a road ran out at right angles from the gatehouse it would pass just in front of the church, whose spire is visible in the distance on the right. (Photograph, author 2018)*

In June 1954 the then owner of Colets Well, Mr H Campbell, was making a new garage. On digging a hole he discovered some stones, and summoned Pateman, who wondered if this

could be hard-core from the long lost palace road. Pateman inspected the hole along with Mr Dennis Clarke (co-author with Anthony Stoyel of “Otford in Kent”). Pateman and Clarke enlarged the hole, and made a pit approximately 3 feet by 2 feet, and 2 feet deep. Pateman subsequently typed up their findings and added hand drawn illustrations (File 22, ODHS archives). Various layers were seen in the pit, as illustrated in his diagram (Figure 3). The top diagram shows the layers (stratigraphy) of the east face of the pit. An abbreviated description of the layers seen is as follows: A. Crazy paving with thin sand layer beneath. B. 6 inches of crushed brick. C. 6 inches with less brick and more tile and stone. D. 10 inches of mortared hard core of chalk pieces, tile and brick fragments. E. Large irregular stones about 6 inches across. F. Partial excavation below two of the stones revealed a firm concrete of broken flints. Depth about 4-6 inches. G. Having broken through the concrete with a crowbar the tool sunk into clay (what archaeologists call “the natural”). The lower part of the sketch shows the bottom of the hole.

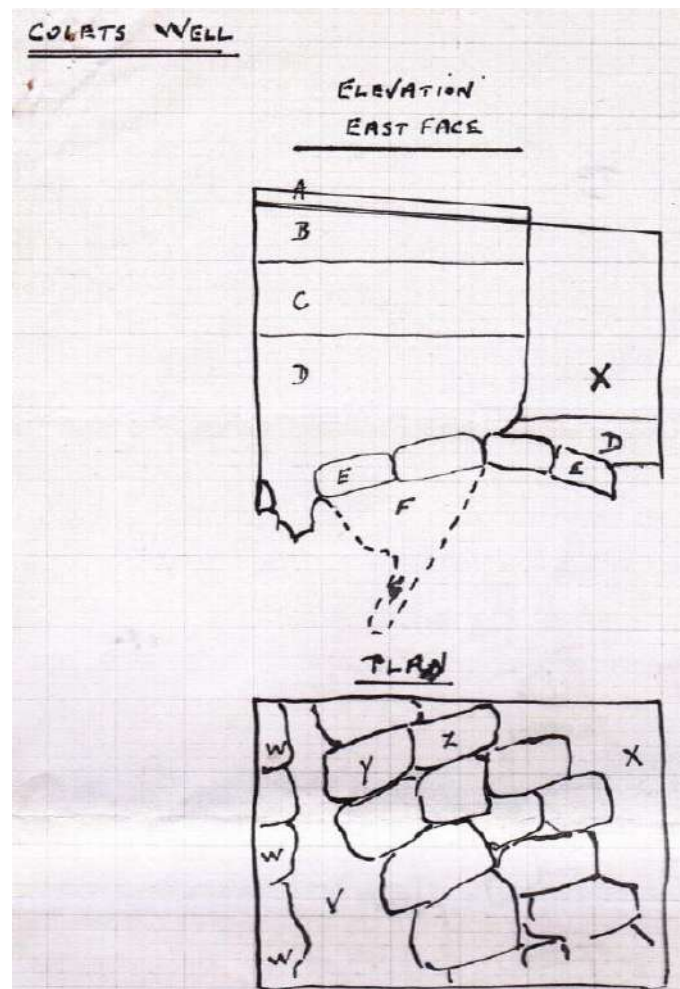


Figure 3: The stratigraphy of the pit at Colets Well (Photograph by author 2018, of a document in file 22, ODHS archives)

Pateman mentions that the west and north sides of the pit showed findings similar to those of the east face. The south face just contained soil, from a rose bed made some years earlier by a previous owner. The lower half of Fig 3 shows a rough plan of the bottom of the hole. Y and Z are the stones removed (see F in last paragraph). W= “These stones appeared to have little connection with the larger and were separated from them by a small gully (V) about four or five inches deep and broad.” X = soil of the rose bed (Fig 3).

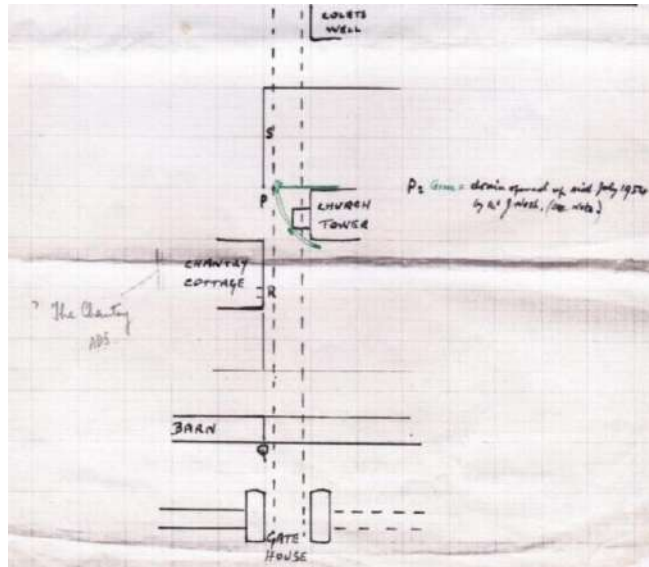


Figure 4: A sketch made by Mr Pateman in 1954 suggesting a possible route for the Northern approach to the Palace Gatehouse. (Photograph by author 2018, of a document in file 22, ODHS archives)

Pateman suggested that the hard-core in the hole at Colet's Well could have been part of a road leading from the Gatehouse direct to the High Street, passing between the Church Tower and The Chantry. He mapped out this postulated route (Fig 4). His map shows Nash's barn (Q), which no longer exists (see also Fig 1). Previous clearing in that area had apparently shown "a scatter of building material, mainly tile and brick which might have been part of courtyard". The building he has labelled Chantry Cottage in Fig 4 is in fact called The Chantry (as pointed out by Mr A Stoyel in pale writing on the left), and is known to predate Archbishop Warham's grandiose rebuilding of the Palace in the early 16C. The green lines show the site of Church drain excavation. There would have been space for an approach road to pass between The Chantry and the Church as the Western Church porch was a post-Tudor addition (Figures 5 and 6). Pateman's map (Fig 4) shows the churchyard boundary is in line (S) and the road could pass in front of Colets Well. The existing house at Colets Well did not exist in the Tudor period (it was probably built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with 19<sup>th</sup> century additions), but there are suggestions a smaller Tudor residence may have predated this.



Figure 5: Views looking north with the Church on the right and The Chantry on the left, looking South with the Church on the left and The Chantry on the right. (Photograph, Author 2018)



*Figure 6: Ditch dug parallel and to the North of the drive connecting Palace Approach and the Vicarage car park. (Photograph, Author 2018)*

Following the findings at Colets Well, Pateman was then informed by a Mr RG Bennett of some digging done to the west of the church porch. Like Pateman, Mr Bennett was a founder member of the historical society, and he subsequently contributed much material to the archives. A drain near the church had been flooding and Bennett had observed the works carried out by J Nash's Contractors in July 1954. The workers dug down about 8 feet and unblocked some drains (green lines drawn by Pateman in Fig 4). The holes were then filled in. The cover of an inspection chamber created by Nash's can still to this day be seen near the porch. Bennett noted that no stones suggestive of a road were found, but only the expected soil and chalk. Careful examination of the soil layers (stratigraphy) in this ditch and that to the South of the drive show no obvious evidence of an old road running North/South at right angles to it. However, Pateman thought this absence of hard-core did not necessarily invalidate his road theory as the area around the church porch had over the years been "much disturbed". Of course, it is also possible that the excavation findings in front of Colets Well may have been post-Tudor, as that area too is likely to have been "much disturbed"!

Indeed, the whole area between the Gate House and the High Street has since the 1950s been further much disturbed. The farm buildings and barn seen in Fig 1 were cleared. The new vicarage and church car park were built in 1968 on the site of these previous farm buildings. No "rescue archaeology" was done there at the time (personal communication, Mr Cliff Ward). There have also been alterations to buildings and gardens to the east of Palace Approach, including some tarring, and construction of a domestic garage.

If there ever was an approach way running between the church and The Chantry and then on to the Gatehouse, as proposed by Pateman (Fig 4), there is now little to suggest it. The large cedar tree just to the north of the Gate House (Fig 2) can be discounted as this is many centuries younger than the Palace. The tarred drive in to the church car park is slightly lower than the surrounding ground level and might have been expected to cut across an earlier palace approach road, but there is no evidence that it did so. There are drainage ditches either side of and parallel to the church car park drive, but careful perusal of the stratigraphy of the soil of these ditches shows no suggestion that they have cut across a pre-existing road (Fig 6). The existence of a Tudor road from the church straight to the Gatehouse must remain "not proven".

Perhaps one needs to question the view that the approach to a grand Tudor palace would always be direct and central? It is instructive to look at Hampton Court, which was an

archbishop's palace almost contemporary with that of Otford, and on a similar grandiose scale (Figure 7). Here, the main façade faces the river, and if one arrived by boat the approach would have been direct. However, because of the shape of the river the major land approach to the palace is, by necessity, at an angle, albeit joining an impressive cleared space in front of the building.



Figure 7: View of Hampton Court (Photograph [discoveringbritain.org](http://discoveringbritain.org))

What about Otford's sister palace at Knole House, only a few miles away, and which was also an archbishop's residence taken over by Henry VIII? I have been unable to find maps or references from the Tudor period describing the approach to the main (west) façade of Knole. The earliest picture I have found is an illustration (figure 8) from Kip and Knyff's 'Britannia Illustrata' (1709). This is about 160 years after Henry VIII is thought to have built the Knole Gate House, and so does not necessarily tell us what the approach was like in the Tudor period. This early 18th century approach was direct but not especially "grand."



Figure 8: Knole House, 1709. ([Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org))



Figure 9: Knole House in the 20th Century (Source pinterest)

By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century tastes had changed and more natural landscapes had become popular. The present approach to Knole’s west front reflects this more “picturesque” style (Fig 9), and the approach to the Gate House is now at an angle. Incidentally, this photograph also shows how easily previously known features can be obliterated from the landscape

Reconstructing in one’s imagination the Otford Palace and its northern approach is difficult. One’s picture is constrained by the presence of so many later buildings. A high status palace would almost certainly have had a large clearing or courtyard in front of it, as was the case with Hampton Court (Fig 7) and Knole (Fig 8). A possible likeness of the Otford Palace is shown in Figure 10, which is a possible view drawn by J Morris in 1975. This was commissioned for the book *Otford in Kent* and can be found in the Otford Heritage Centre. One needs to clear from one’s mind the existence of Holmesdale, the Vicarage and car park, Chantry Cottage and other structures lining Palace Approach. There would then be a large clearing in front of the palace (Fig 10) and the only buildings between that and the pond/High St would have been the church (minus its western porch) and The Chantry. “Colets Well” may have existed as a small Tudor house. A large approach way from the pond area, passing just to the west of The Chantry, could have led slightly obliquely up to the front courtyard and Gatehouse (Fig 11). Perhaps a smaller and more direct way also ran between the church and The Chantry? Whatever the truth (and we will probably never know), Archbishop Warham and the later owner, Henry VIII, are likely to have made sure the principal approach to the Palace would have been a significant and majestic one.



Figure 10: Possible view of Otford Palace by J Morris, drawn in 1975



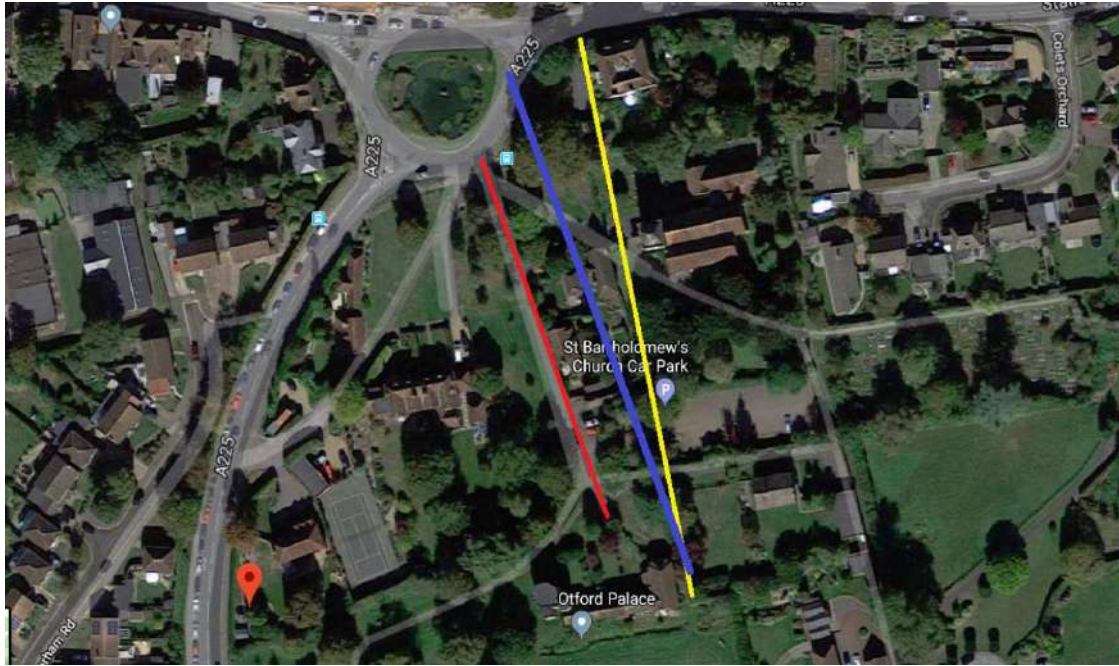


Figure 11: Possible approaches to Otford Palace (Google Earth, 2019)

**Red** = existing road, Palace Approach.

**Yellow** = Road approaches Gatehouse at right angles, having run between church (right) and The Chantry (left)

**Blue** = Road from the pond approaches courtyard in front of Gatehouse having passed to the west of The Chantry (right).

### Notes

There are no pictures or maps of the palace dating from the Tudor period. There is a transcript of a survey of Otford manor, c1541 said by Clarke & Stoyel (1975, p122) to be “in private hands”. The whereabouts of this much cited document are unknown.

### Bibliography

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Ward, C. 2017. *A Guided Walk Around Otford Palace*. Printed by Sevenoaks District Council, Otford and District Historical Society.

Copies of Rod Shelton's and Cliff Ward's books can be obtained from the Otford Heritage Centre, or you can order copies by emailing [info@otfordheritage.co.uk](mailto:info@otfordheritage.co.uk). (Please enquire for post and packing charges. Copies can also be ordered and collected at any Otford and District Historical Society meeting.

Copies of Clarke and Stoyel can be found second hand. The editor suggests you try the Abebooks site at: <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/>