



The Archbishop's Palace Conservation Trust

A Safe pair of hands

Statement of archaeological significance

What was above ground?

The Archbishop's Palace and grounds lie a short distance to the South-East from Otford Village Centre. The Heritage Village of Otford is in the centre of the Darent Valley in a designated area of outstanding natural beauty. Otford itself is a Heritage Village dating back to Roman times with many listed buildings, including the only duck pond in the country with listed status!

A substantial piece of land in Otford was gifted to the Archbishop Wulfred by Offa, King of Mercia in 821. A large moated manor house was built here and enlarged over the following years by 52 subsequent archbishops, so that in 1500 the Court Roll stated that Otford was '*one of the grandest houses in England*.' Then, in 1514, Archbishop Warham extended the buildings to the north with a great courtyard, creating one of the largest palaces in England, covering 1.16ha, comparable in size to Hampton Court.



Figure 1: An artist's impression of the North Range as it was in 1515 (Rob Sherratt)

The Palace was 'given' to King Henry VIII in 1537 who spent lavishly on it. However, in time, he decided that he preferred Knole a few miles away in Sevenoaks, because it was less damp away from the River Darent. In 1601, Elizabeth I sold the Palace to Robert Sydney who used part of the North Range as a hunting lodge. Subsequently the rest of the buildings fell into disrepair and were robbed for building materials. When the area was dis-parked in the 17th century, the remains of the Palace formed the core of one the large farms, being used as farm buildings until the early 20th Century.

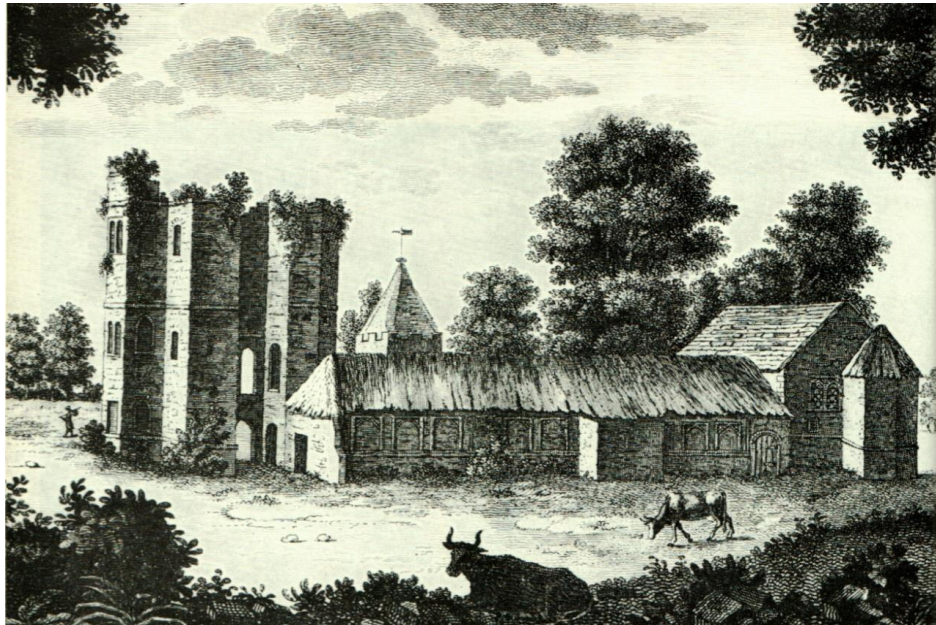


Figure 2: The view of the Palace from the South West in the 18th Century, from an engraving by I. Bayly (in the Otford Heritage Collection)

What remains?

Much of the site was saved from development in the 1930s, but the area on which the moated manor had stood was built upon, with the stone being used to fill in the southern arm of the moat. Now all that remains above ground is:

- Part of the North Range - the North West corner tower, part of the Northern Gatehouse and the connecting wall which was turned into a row of three small cottages.
- Some remnants of the eastern side of the North Range which can be found in the Vicarage garden.
- Sections of the boundary wall in Bubblestone Road (previously the site of the Palace moat).

In July 1935 the site and the buildings were transferred to Sevenoaks Rural District Council (now Sevenoaks District Council - SDC). In the early 1960's following a period of extensive repair work (using cement instead of traditional mortar) the site remained untouched until 2015 when, following much-publicised masonry falls, Sevenoaks District Council eventually carried out extensive repairs to prevent any further deterioration. These works were completed in 2017. A further programme of repair work to the north-west Tower is currently underway.

The site and buildings are in the care of the Archbishop's Palace Conservation Trust on a 99-year lease which will end in 2118. As shown in Figure 3, the part in the stewardship of the Trust is a relatively small part of the whole scheduled area.

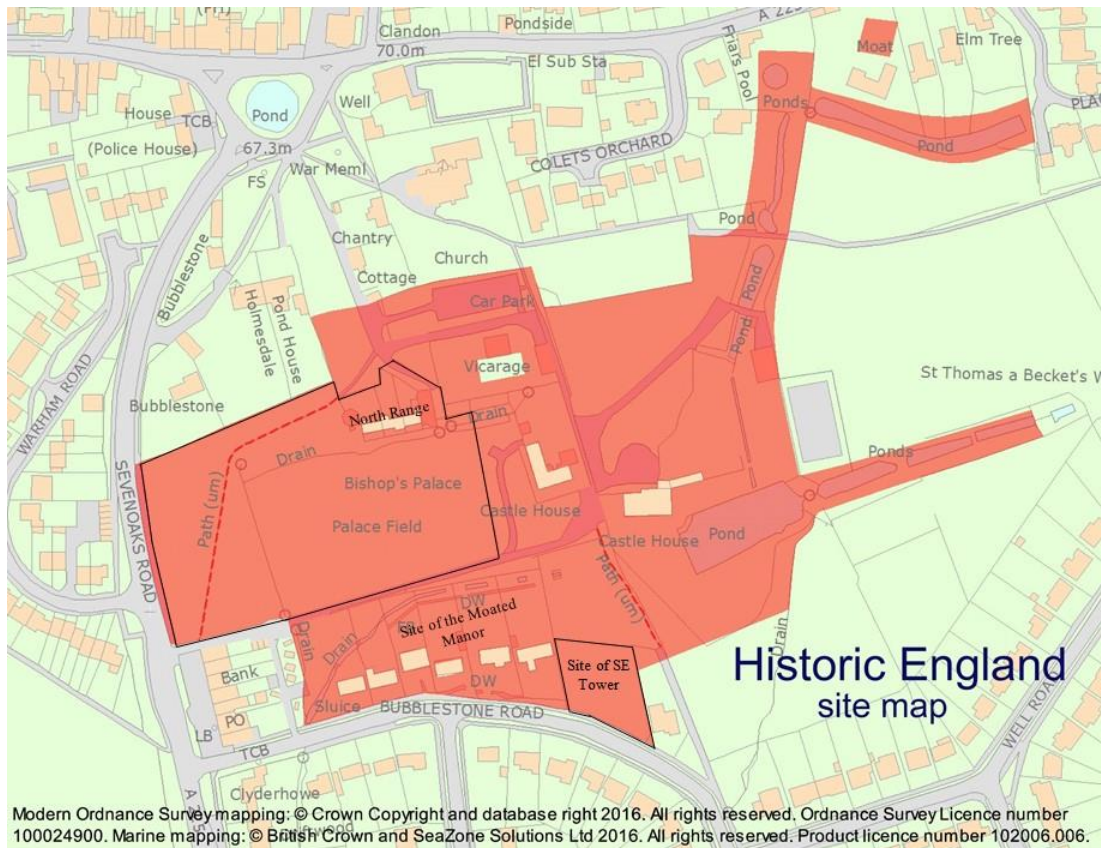


Figure 3: The area of the scheduled monument showing (outline in black) the part leased to the APCT

With this demonstrable long history, Otford Palace, which is designated as an Ancient Monument, is unquestionably a Heritage site of National significance.

What do we know?

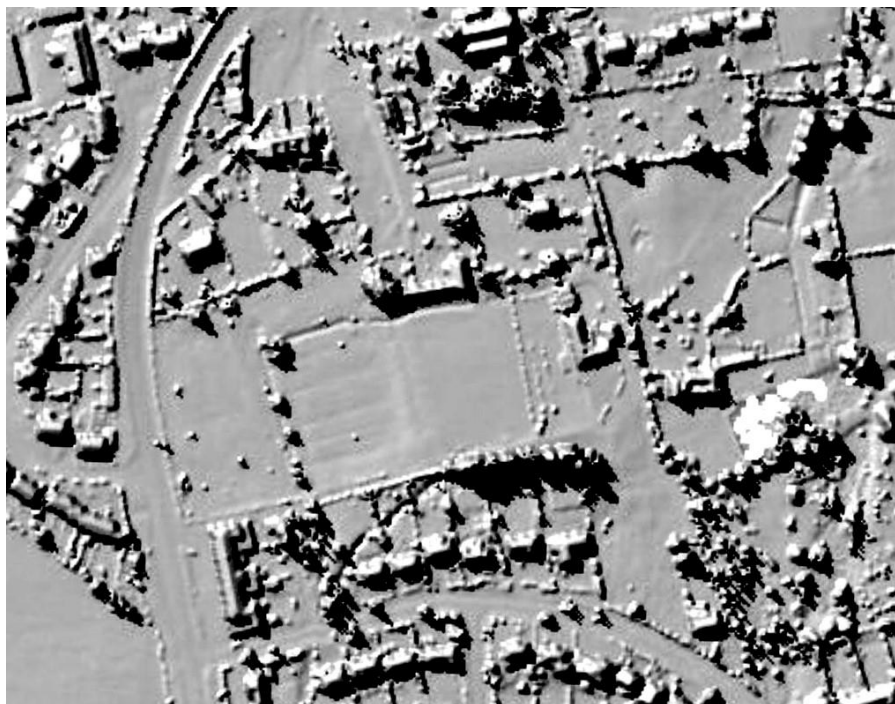


Figure 4: A LiDAR image of the Palace area (© Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme)

Lidar images of the site (Figure 4) show the stream to the south of the North Range and the northern branch of the moat. The location of the western range (where the structures can be found about 10cm below the surface) is clear, but the eastern range is obscured beneath a 20thC cottage. There is some patterning to the west of the Western Range which may be evidence of the gardens that are reported to have been there. The Great Courtyard is devoid of any evidence of buried structures. This is confirmed by the resistivity survey (Figure 5).

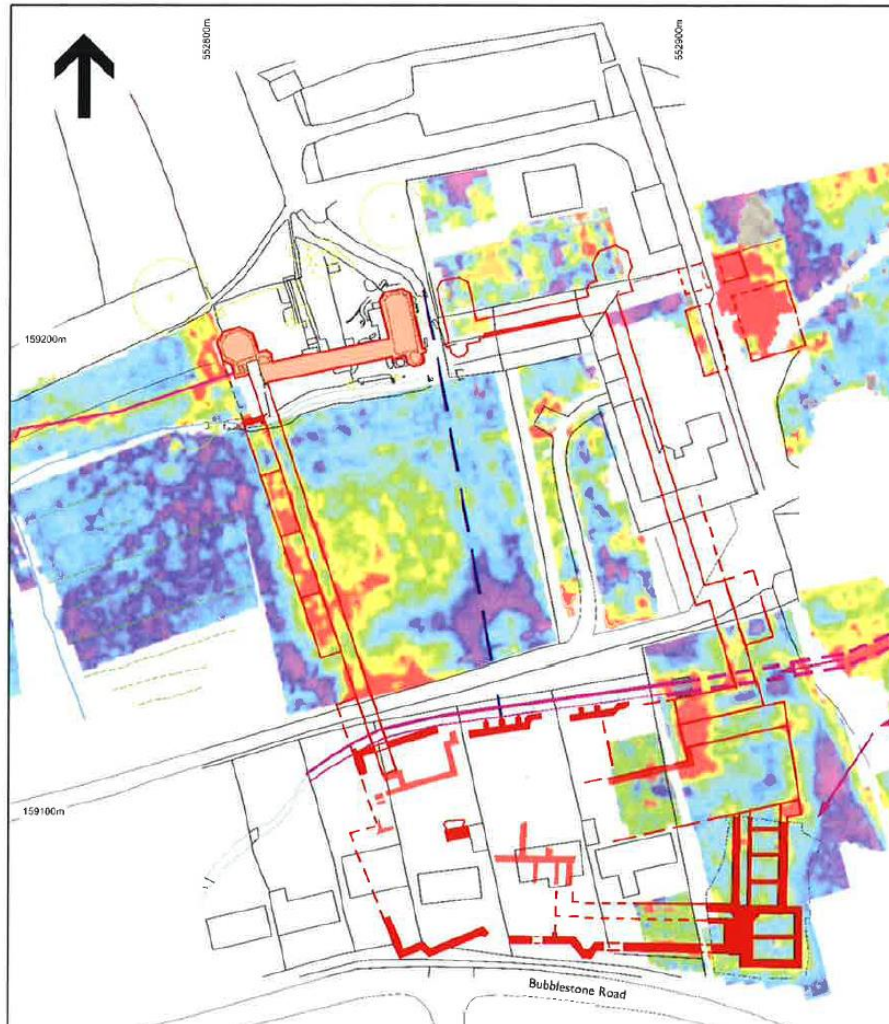


Figure 5: The overall plan of the Tudor Palace against the background of the geophysical survey

Archaeological excavations have focussed on the back gardens of the houses in Bubblestone Road (1971) and on the site of the south-east Tower (1974).

The Otford and District Archaeological Group (ODAG) carried out some opportunist explorations of the rear gardens of houses in Bubblestone Road in the early 1970s. Some important finds were made (for example some lead seals from Papal Bullae were found in an eleventh century drain). Unfortunately, while records were kept of the excavations, no report was published at the time. A team of volunteers is currently reviewing the finds and will be writing a full report in due course.

The investigation of the site of the south-east Tower in 1974 has been well documented,

both in *Archaeologia Cantiana* and in Philp's *Excavations in the Darent Valley*¹.

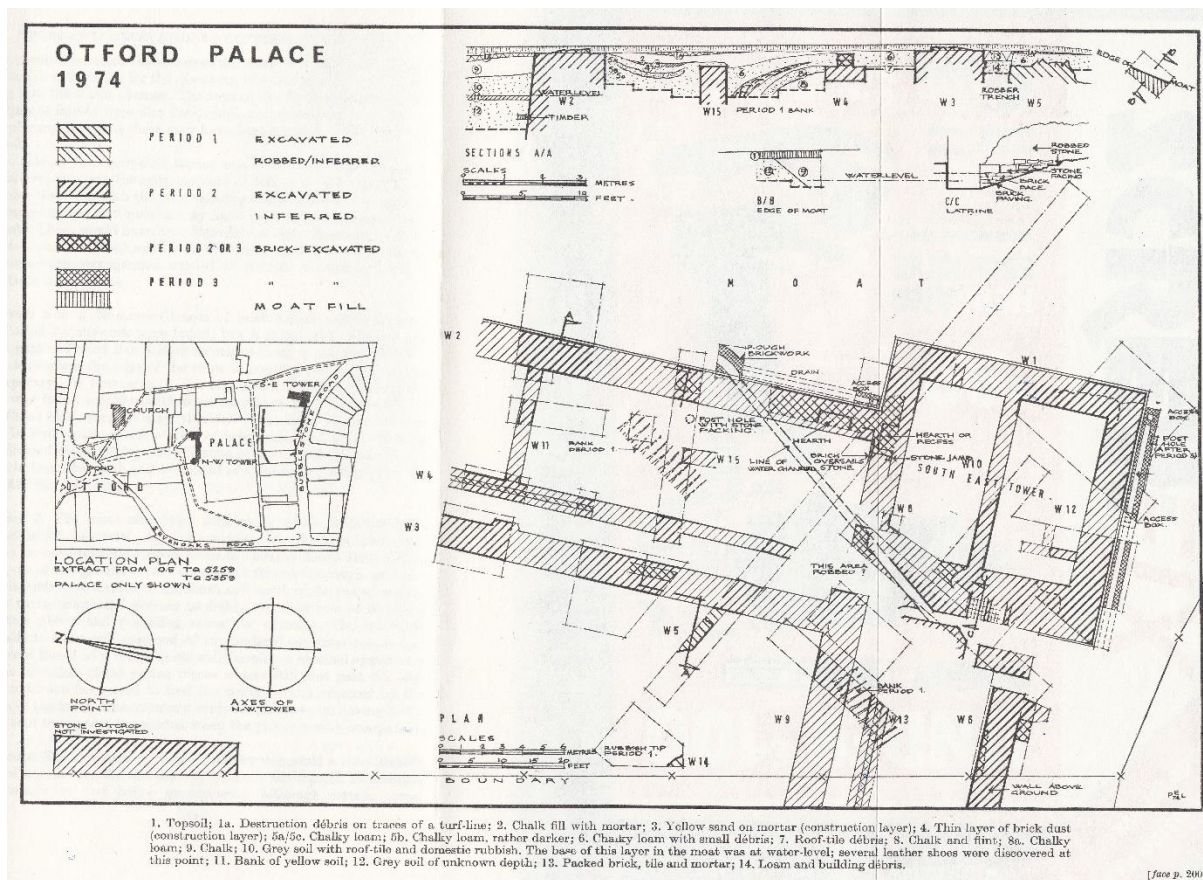


Figure 6: Plan of the south-east Tower. (From Philp, 1984)

What can we infer and what more do we need to know?

From the above-ground structures, the excavations and the geophysics, we can infer that the layout of the Palace was as shown in Figure 7. Given the southern extent of the land leased to the Archbishop's Palace Conservation Trust, much of this, in particular the complex of the Moated Manor on the southern side of the site, lies outside the Trust's control.

Future investigations should be undertaken with:

- A magnetometry survey of the Great Court and the area to the west of the West Range, to confirm that there are no buried structures.
- A detailed investigation of the area between the north-west Tower and the West Range where there are indications of a single storey structure dating to the Tudor period.
- Excavation of the track to the east of the Gatehouse. This was the main route into the Palace from the Church and Otford Pond to the North. A doorway on the side of the Gatehouse indicates that the ground level is 40-50cm higher than it was 500 years ago and there is a strong possibility of finding objects dropped by people going in and out of the Palace.

¹ Philp, B. (1984) *Excavations in the Darent Valley, Kent*. Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit, Dover. Pp 133-220.

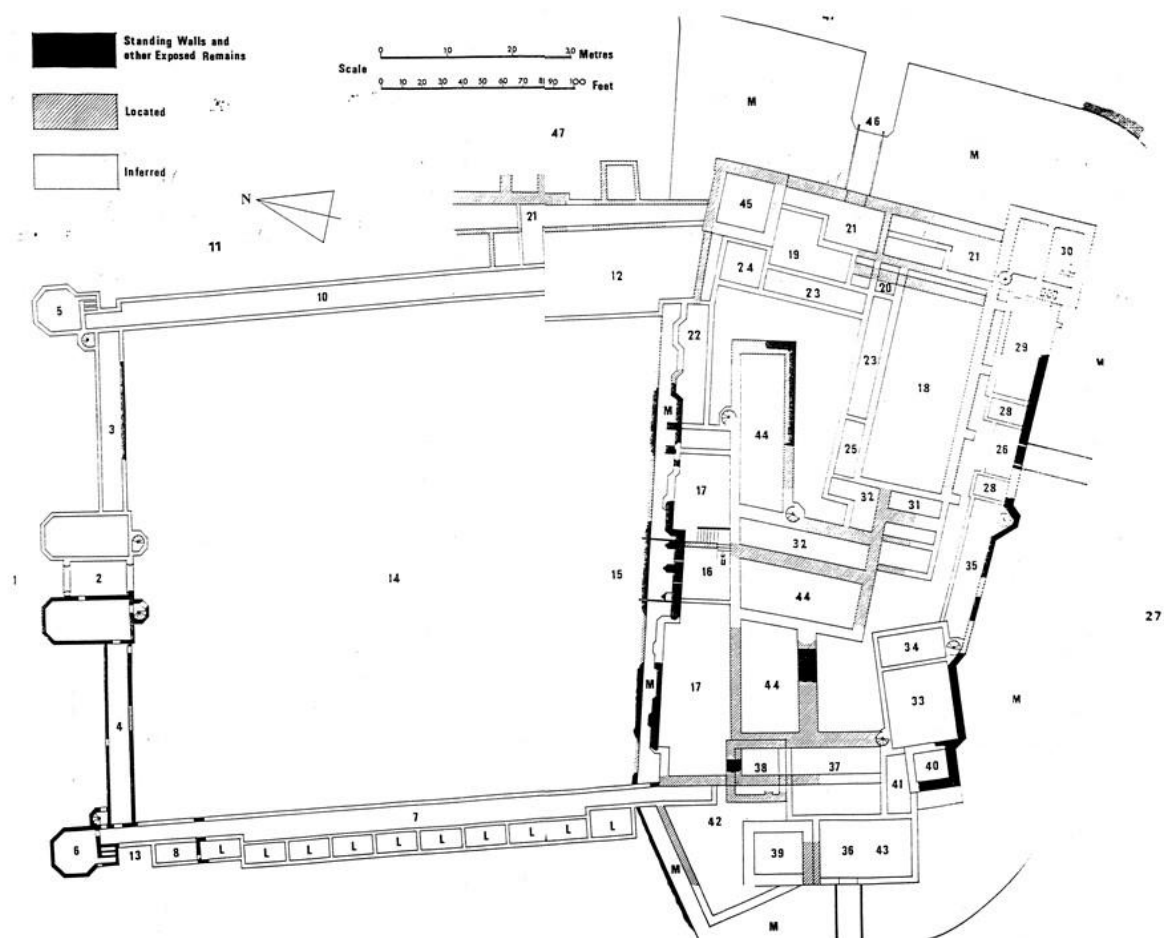


Figure 7: Plan of the Archbishop's Palace (Existing structures are in black)

What is its significance?

Otford Palace is of *exceptional* significance for

- The evidence which it provides for the form and architectural character of what was one of the outstanding buildings of early 16th century England.
- Its archaeological potential to yield much more information about that building, particularly on the moat island, and its medieval predecessors.

Otford Palace is of *considerable* significance for

- The evidential value of the adaptation of the north-west range by the Sidney family.
- Its ability to illustrate the form and scale of a late medieval archiepiscopal palace, despite its fragmentary survival.
- The aesthetic qualities, designed and fortuitous, of the north range building in its open space setting.
- The contribution it makes to the character and appearance of Otford Conservation Area.
- The insight it provides into the character and ambition of Archbishop Warham.

Otford Palace is of *some* significance for

- As an illustration, especially with the archive material, of the struggle for the conservation of historic places during the 20th century.
- Its contribution to the identity of Otford and its community today.