



Otford Palace

The Archbishops Palace Conservation Trust

Otford Palace Orchard watching brief (OPO24)

In Summer 2024 a watching brief was held for the planting of fruit trees in the Otford Palace Heritage Orchard. This is part of the scheduled area associated with the site of the Tudor palace (SM KE 9, HA 1005197). The orchard already contained some long-established fruit trees in the north of the area. There are also some specimen trees growing in the general area (eg Tilia, Acer, Metasequoia and Liquid Amber). In a project jointly organised by the APCT (Archbishops' Palace Conservation Trust) and The Otford Society 16 heritage fruit trees were newly planted in this area. Trees planted included varieties of apple, pear, plum, crab-apple, gage, quince and damson.

The Area

The Archbishops of Canterbury had a medieval moated manor to the north of what is now Bubblestone road. In the early 16C archbishop Wareham built a large Tudor courtyard adjoining and to the north of the old palace. After centuries of decay the main visible areas now are the Tudor NW tower and a gallery running east to join the truncated remains of the western half of the gatehouse. There are no standing remains of the western or eastern ranges. A stream runs just to the south of the northern range in a westerly direction before turning at right angles to run south, forming the eastern edge of the present orchard area (Fig 1).

An early 16 C survey mentions that there was a garden to the west of the western courtyard range. This consisted of *“four square alleyes sett about with all manner of quicksett on both side with dyvers knottes of herbes, and in the same be trees of dyvers Fruitts, and in the garden be three lytle houses of pleasure with seats, and in the said garden is Currant a Bryke of freshe water issuing out of the aforesaid springe”* (Clarke & Stoyel ,1975, p104)

It is not known whether the Tudor formal garden was limited to the area between the western range and the small stream running north to south, or whether the garden also included some of the area to the west of the stream (the existing orchard field) (Fig 1).

The tithe map of 1844 shows that the present orchard site was a field at that date and was described as “meadow”. The tithe map and subsequent OS maps and aerial photographs show no buildings on this site. Fig 2 shows the present field shortly before the new orchard was planted.



Figure 1 A schematic map of the palace site remains. The earlier Heritage Orchard is shown. The path G-H crosses the field to the west of the palace, and the new orchard was planted to the left (west) of this path. (Map by Cliff Ward).



Figure 2 Palace Orchard seen from the south, before the new orchard was planted. The Otford-Sevenoaks Rd runs behind the hedge on the left (west). The path on the right (east) is that shown in Fig 1 as G-H.

In Summer 2023 a high resolution 0.5x 0.5m resistivity survey of the palace site was conducted by Anne Sassin and volunteers from the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership (DVLP). This did not show any suggestion of archaeological remains in the palace orchard area (fig 3). However, had there been flower beds in that area these would not necessarily now be visible on the geophysics survey.



Figure 3 Detail from 2023 resistivity survey showing the orchard site. The Otford-Sevenoaks Road is on the left (west) and the stream runs N-S through the green area on the right (east). There are no obvious linear archaeological features in the orchard. There are non-specific high resistance areas adjacent to the road and in the south. The linear high resistance line in the NE shows the presence of a known underground water conduit. (Image Copyright, courtesy of Anne Sassin and DVLP, and not to be reproduced without permission.)

The watching Briefs

1. Preliminary holes 24/6/24

On 24/06/2024 the contractor, in my presence, manually dug 5 preliminary pits in positions previously marked out for plantings (Pits 5,6,8,9 and 16). These pits were to ascertain the

nature of the soil and to get a "feel" for the likelihood of finds. Fig 4 shows a sketch produced prior to the planting, with the 16 prospective planting positions numbered.

Three of the pits, nos 5, 6 and 8 were dug 0.3m deep with a circular diameter of 0.3m. Pit 8 contained no finds, and the topsoil contained many roots and organic matter. Pits 5 and 6 were on the easternmost side of the orchard, near the hedge line (Fig 4). There was no clear stratigraphic demarcation here between the topsoil and the subsoil. At the base of pit 5 was some unworked stone rubble (Fig 5). In pit 6 at 0.25m depth was a portion of a buried modern concrete paving slab, which was left in situ. The geophysics on the eastern side of the orchard show a general area of high resistance (Fig.3). It is possible some of this is due to deposition in the 20C when the Otford to Sevenoaks Road was widened.

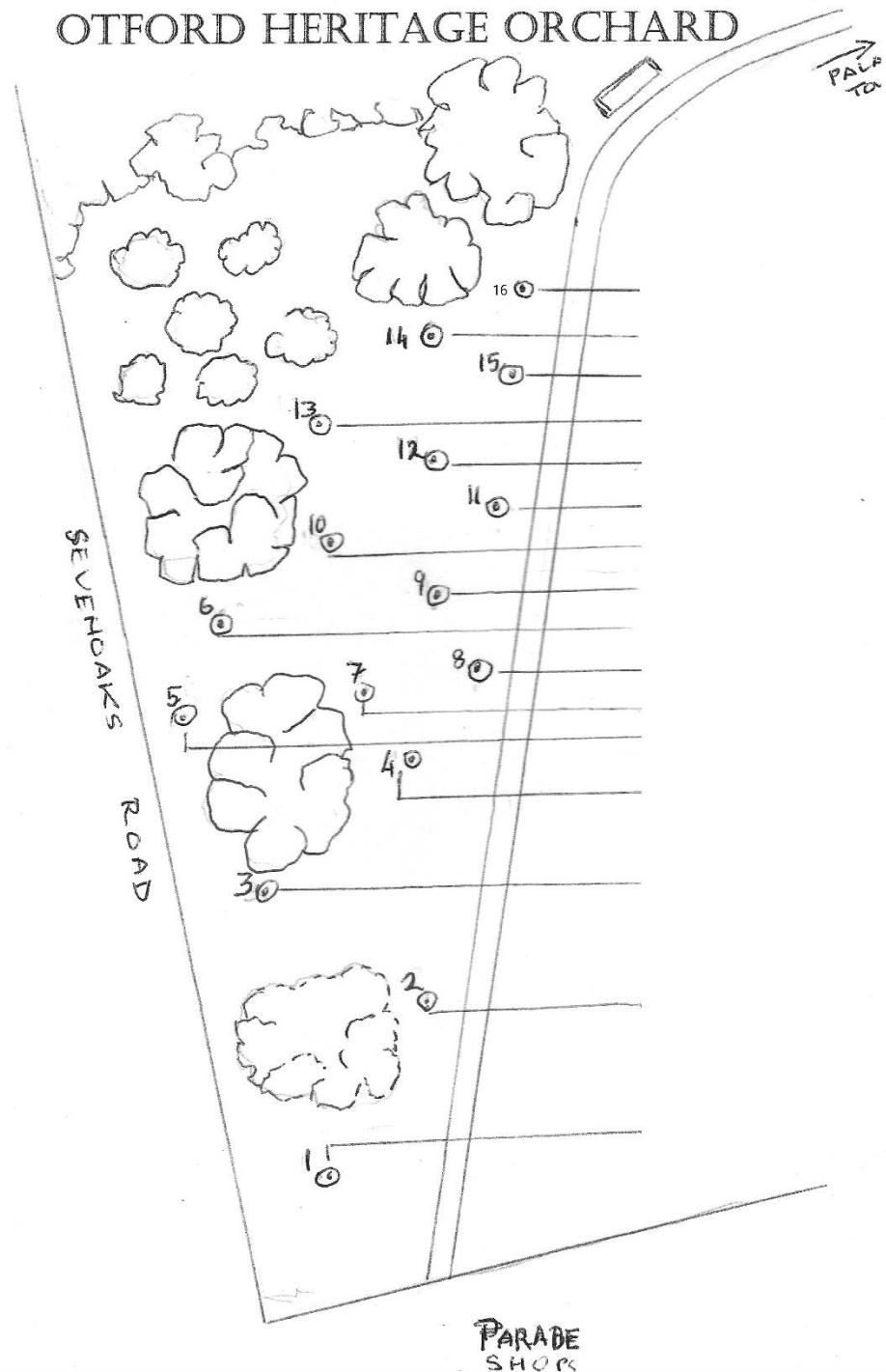


Figure 4 Sketch of numbered sites for planting of fruit trees (Courtesy of Rod Shelton).



Figure 5 Unlike the pits on the eastern side of the orchard, Pit 5 on the western side, near the hedge, contained some rubble in its base.

Pits 9 and 16 were 0.3m deep, but square in shape, 0.4 x 0.4m. They contained rich soil throughout and were notable for the lack of finds and the lack of clear stratigraphy (Fig 6).



Figure 6 Pit 9 contained rich soil and was devoid of finds

The five preliminary holes were backfilled, as a safety precaution (trip hazard) prior to the scheduled later planting on 29 & 30 June. The few finds from these pits are described below with the finds from the tree planting on 29-30/24.

2. Planting of fruit trees 29-30/6/24

The area covered by the planting was roughly triangular in shape (Fig 4) with its apex to the south (TQ 52732 59107), and its base to the north, TQ 52715 59208 to the west and TQ 52747 59209 to the east.

At the time of the preliminary digs I explained to the contractor that the definitive holes should be dug by hand and all finds preserved. As I was away on pre-arranged holiday on these dates the planting was overseen by Rod Shelton of the Otford Society who has some archaeological experience and was briefed to keep all finds. The APCT is extremely grateful to Rod Shelton for his help.

Sixteen planting holes were dug (five for the second time) and the soil replaced as backfill around the rootballs of the trees. No holes were deeper than 0.3m, the limit allowed for gardening activities on this scheduled site. No hardstanding or archaeological features were encountered. Excavation was easy as the soil was rich in organic matter with no obvious stratigraphy. The few finds were saved by pit number, subsequently cleaned, and have been retained by the APCT.

The finds from these pits are listed and discussed below.

3. Insertion of information plaque 27/10/2024

Later in the year on the eastern edge of the Orchard an illustrated information plaque was installed, supported on 2 metal poles (Fig 7). I inspected all the soil from these 2 small augers. There was no metallated surface below the grass and the soil was dark with slight clay. No artefacts were found. There were a few small and medium sized unworked flints.

It is important to note that the numbers given to the trees on this plaque and on the tree labels differ from the numbers of the pits on the original sketch (Fig 4). The pit numbers referred to in this report are those in Fig 4.



Figure 7 Information plaque showing the varieties of the various trees.

The Finds

The finds are outlined below. The most striking features were the homogenous nature of the soil in the pits, and the relative *lack* of finds.

Bone

The only bone was found in pit 14, consisting of 4 small fragments of mammalian bone (14g), with no butchery marks.

Metal

No metal was found in any of the pits. This is in contradistinction to the copious metal found in 01/24 in a small pit behind no 3 Castle Cottages, the site of a 19-20C farmyard (report on APCT website).

Stone

One small piece of calcined flint (13g), possibly prehistoric, was found in pit 14. It is not unusual to find these in Otford. Pit 8 contained a small 5.6 mm thickness piece of slate (21g).

Pottery

Pit 13 contained the base of a creamware bowl (63g), 19C. Pit 12 contained part of a jug handle (24g), possibly late medieval. A specialist opinion will be sought for this sherd.

Glass

Pit 6 contained 5 pieces of modern glass, 44g, (4 clear bottle glass, 1 amber bottle glass)

Ceramic building material (cbm)

For an area of this size very little cbm was found.

Pit	No. pieces	Weight (gm)	Nature	Date
5	3	112	fragments- 2 roof tile, 1 brick	unknown
6	1	23	roof peg tile	modern
10	2	26	Roof tile	unknown
13	3	97	1 concrete tile, 2 roof tile	modern
16	1	74	burnt roof tile	post-medieval

Discussion

By the mid 16C the palace was in a state of disrepair. It was sold by Queen Elizabeth in the early 17C and subsequently the manor was divided and sold as three different farms. By then it is likely the Privy Garden and formal beds would have gone, and the present orchard field has probably since been used as pasture, up to the 20C. With the approval of Historic England, a Heritage Orchard was planted in the NW corner of Palace Field in 2013 (Ward C, 2017, p35).

Resistivity survey does not indicate possible structures in the orchard field to the west of the stream. The 16 pits scattered over this field did not uncover archaeological features and there was a paucity of finds when compared to those uncovered by recent watching briefs on holes dug nearer the palace itself.

In summary, the lack of archaeological finds is compatible with this site having not been used for buildings and having been used for many centuries as pasture.

References

Clarke C & Stoyel A, (1975) *Otford in Kent*, Otford and District Historical Society.

Ward C, (2017) *A Guided Walk around Otford Palace*, Otford and District Historical Society.

CD Shee (Chair APCT Collections Committee)
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