



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.

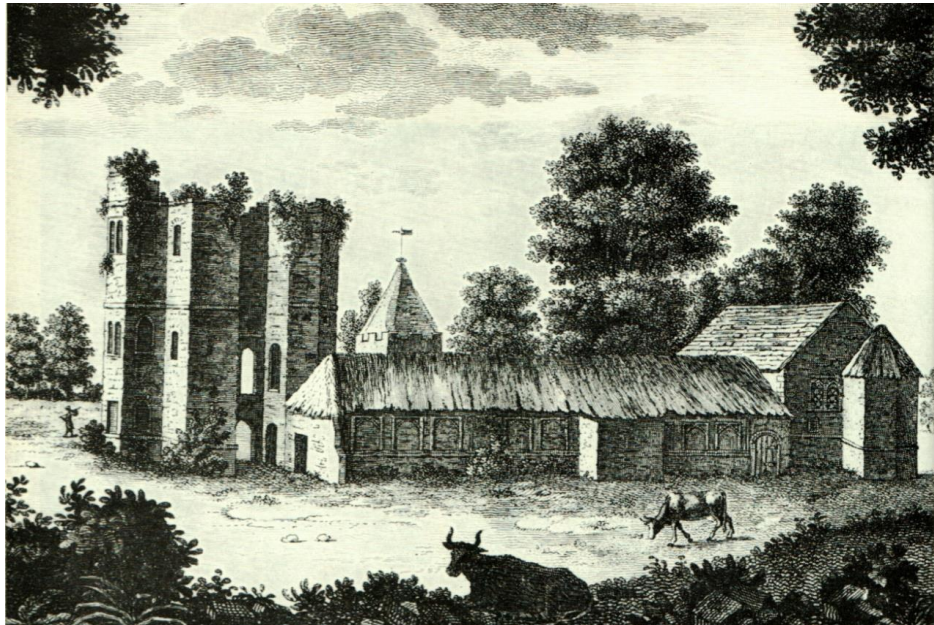


Figure 2: The view of the Palace from the South West in the 18th Century, from an engraving by I. Bayly (in the Otford Heritage Collection)

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.

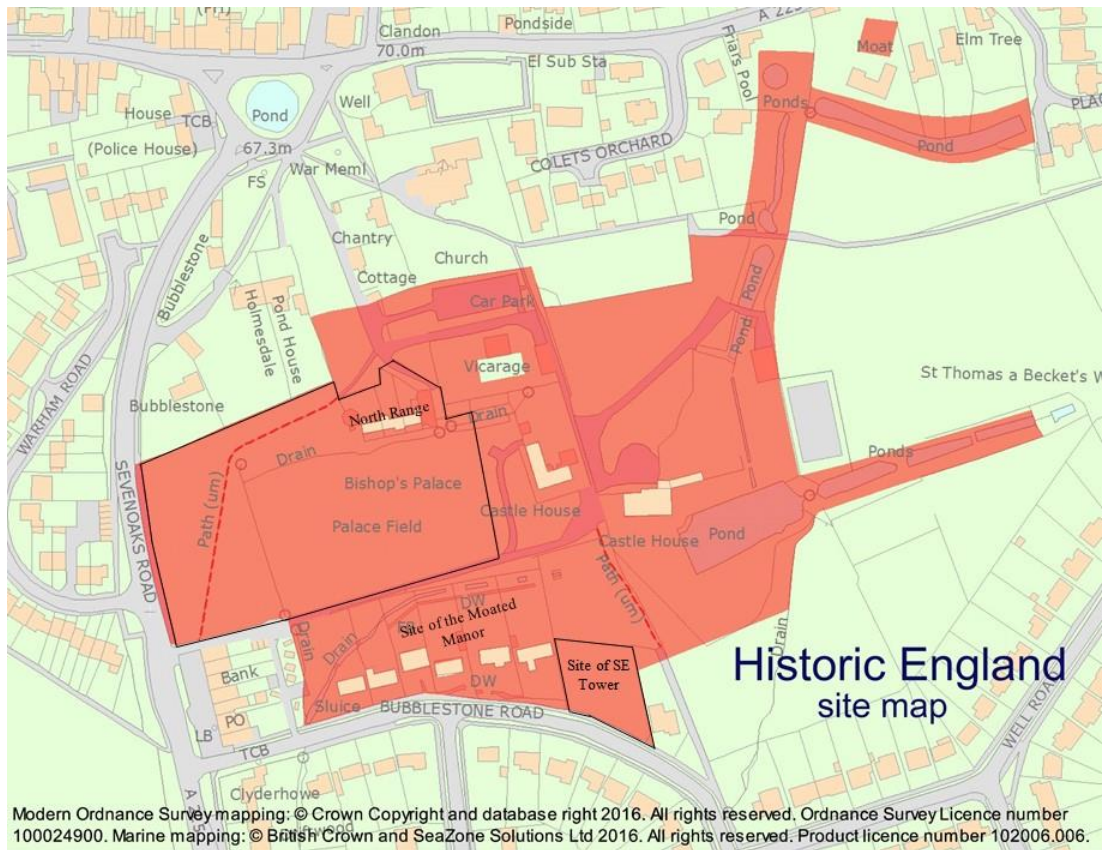


Figure 3: The area of the scheduled monument showing (outline in black) the part leased to the APCT

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?

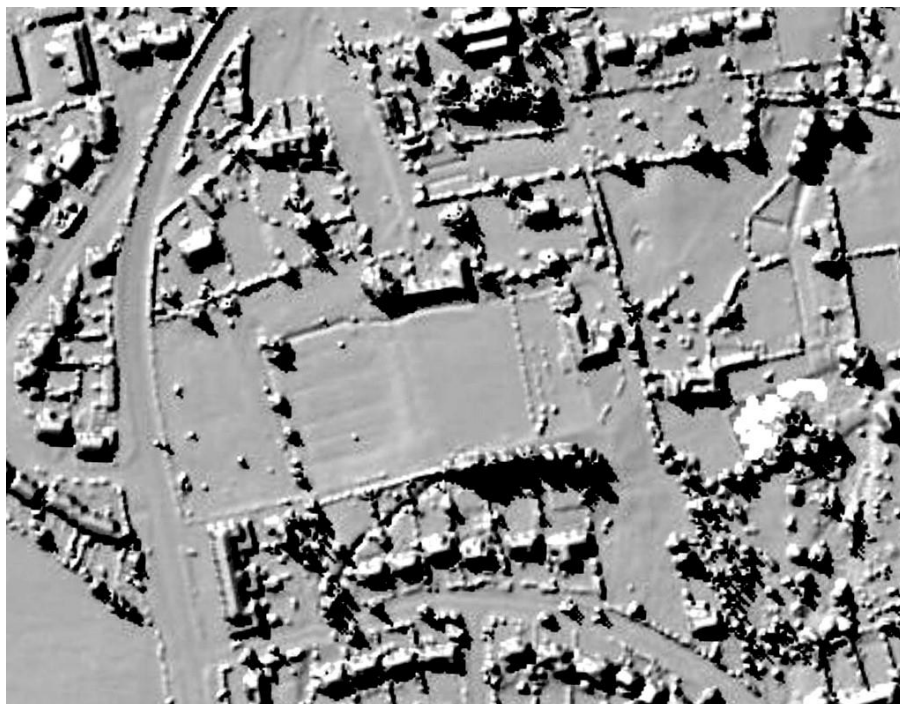


Figure 4: A LiDAR image of the Palace area (© Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme)

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).

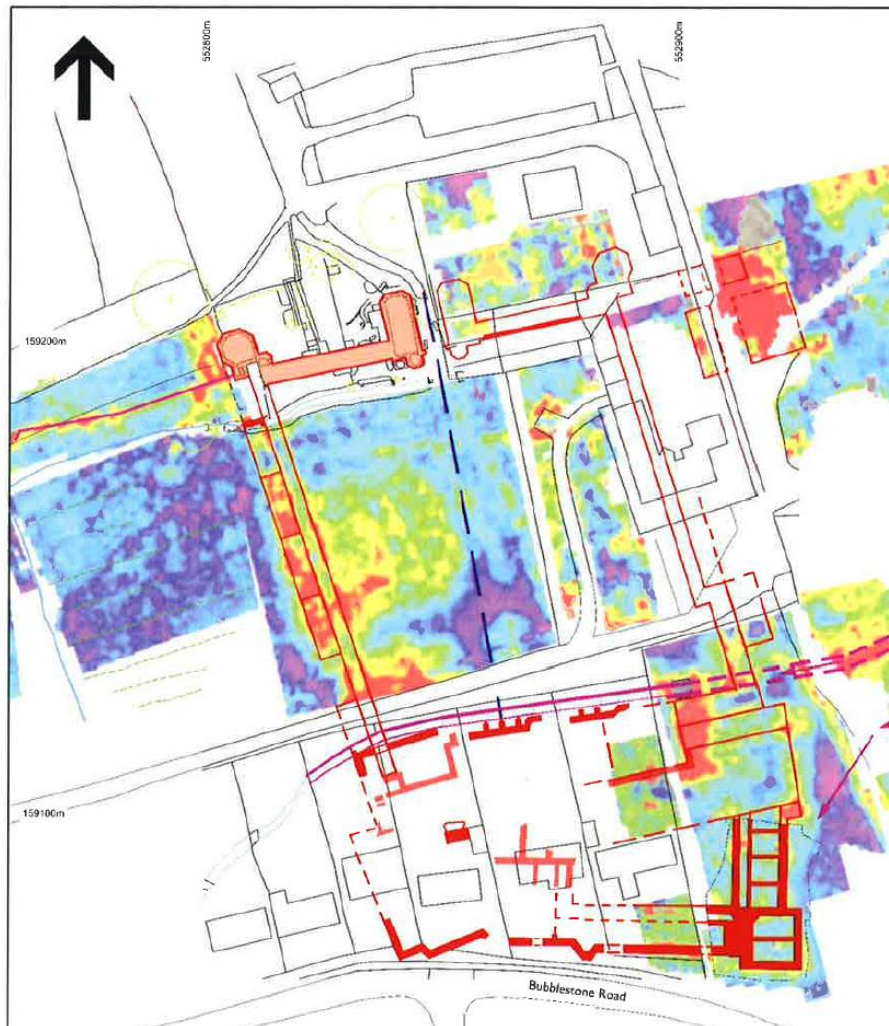


Figure 5: The overall plan of the Tudor Palace against the background of the geophysical survey

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.

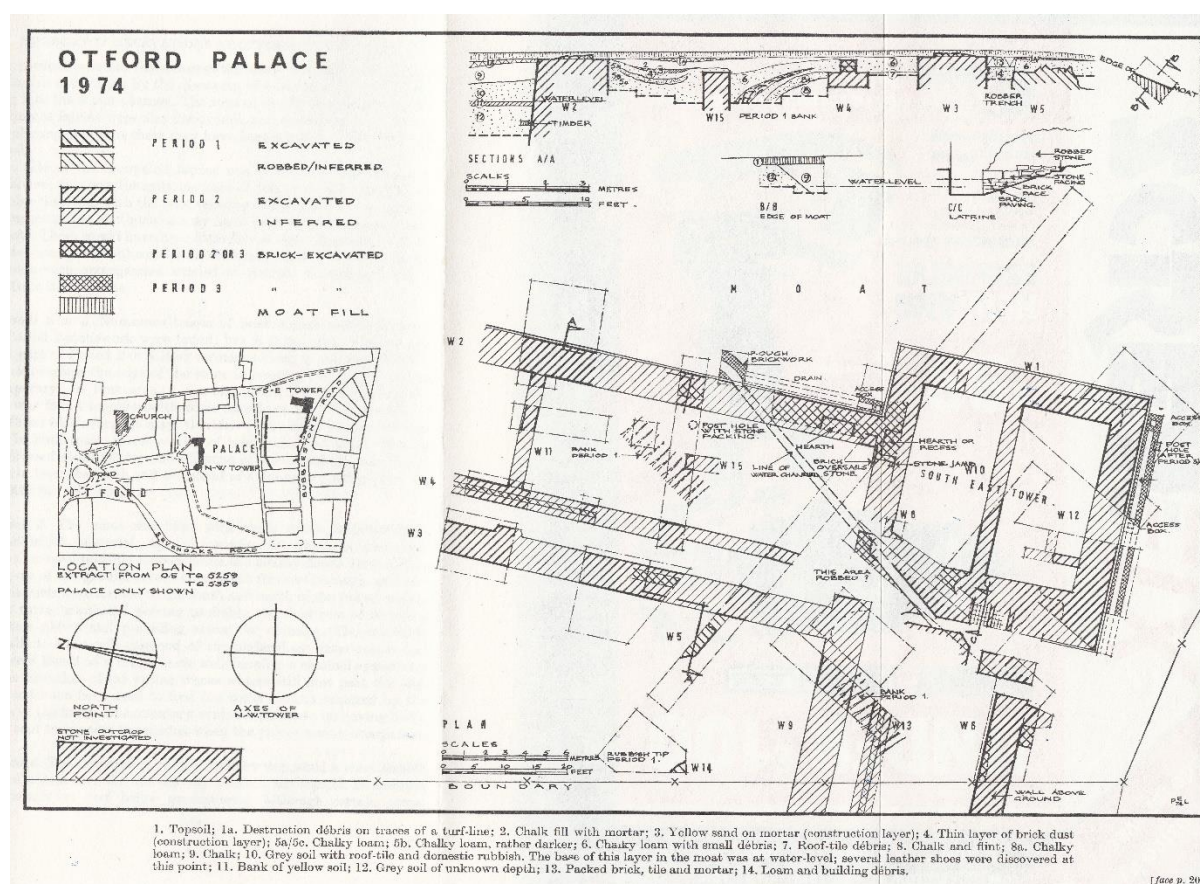


Figure 6: Plan of the south-east Tower. (From Philp, 1984)

Excavations for a French Drain on front of the main door to the North-West Tower (March 2023) showed that the area immediately in front of the NW tower door had been previously dug (probably in 2017) when a water-drain had been inserted running from the interior, beneath the door and to the exterior. This drain had been placed on a cut in a metallised sub-surface, and the trench had then been refilled with rubble. As would therefore be expected, below the top surface there was no clear-cut stratigraphy noted on this watching brief.

The trench fill contained a random mixture of soil, rubble, kilograms of stones, brick and tile, and only very small amounts (grams) of metal, glass, pottery and bone. Most of the brick and tile fragments were likely Tudor, with a few pieces of medieval tile. However, the fill also included some modern bricks, concrete and glass. ²

Between April and June 2023, a small team of volunteers working alongside the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme community archaeologist carried out a geophysical survey across the known extent of the ruins of Otford's Archbishop's Palace in Kent. This work was commissioned initially in order to investigate the exposed archaeology and buried

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

² <https://otfordpalace.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/French-Drain-installation-watching-brief-report.pdf>

features within Palace Field, which had previously been subjected to a lower-level electrical resistance survey by West Kent Archaeological Society, but was extended to incorporate all surveyable land within the footprint of the moated manor site primarily located along Bubblestone Road. Many of the features of interest were apparent in the previous survey, including the masonry foundations of the former palace, although more detail of the internal arrangement and room layouts of the Tudor palace are apparent through the new areas surveyed, including the north-west tower, south-eastern courtyard and eastern complex of the moated area. A notable aisled hall structure has also been revealed at the eastern end of Palace Field within the western half of the original great inner court which appears to possibly pre-date the Tudor phase of the site.³

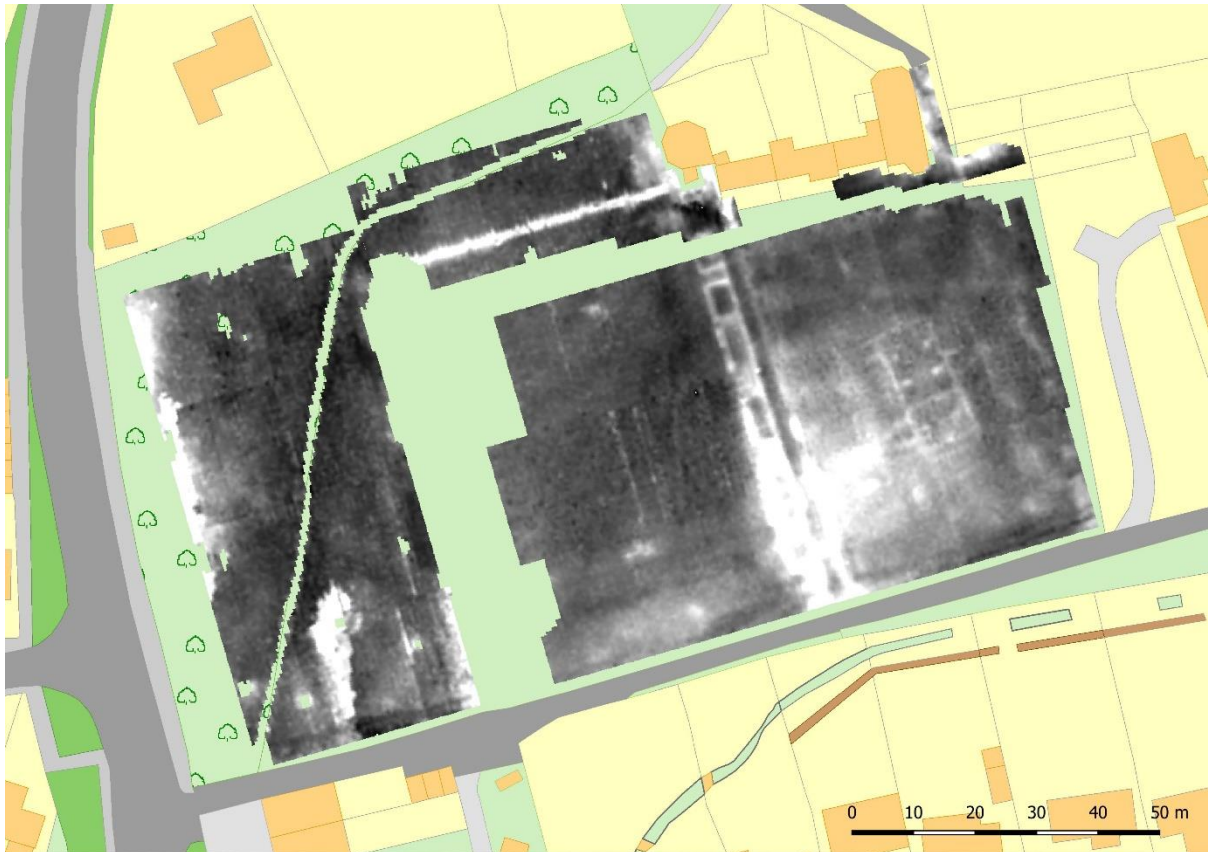


Figure 7: Geophysical survey of the Great Inner Court, 2023

The site of this medieval building was investigated in April 2025. The two exploratory trenches revealed the foundations and a section of tiled floor outside the south-wester entrance. The date of the building is between 1250 and 1350: a more accurate carbon date is awaited.

³ <https://otfordpalace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/OPF-OPB-geophysics-report-with-redacted-figures.pdf>



Figure 8: The exploratory trench on the site of the medieval building in the Great Inner Court

Before the planting of the new trees in the heritage orchard in June 2024, the material excavated from the holes was assessed. Nothing of significance was found.⁴ The 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.

A trench (Figure 9) was dug in April 2025 for an electrical cable to provide power to the Tower.

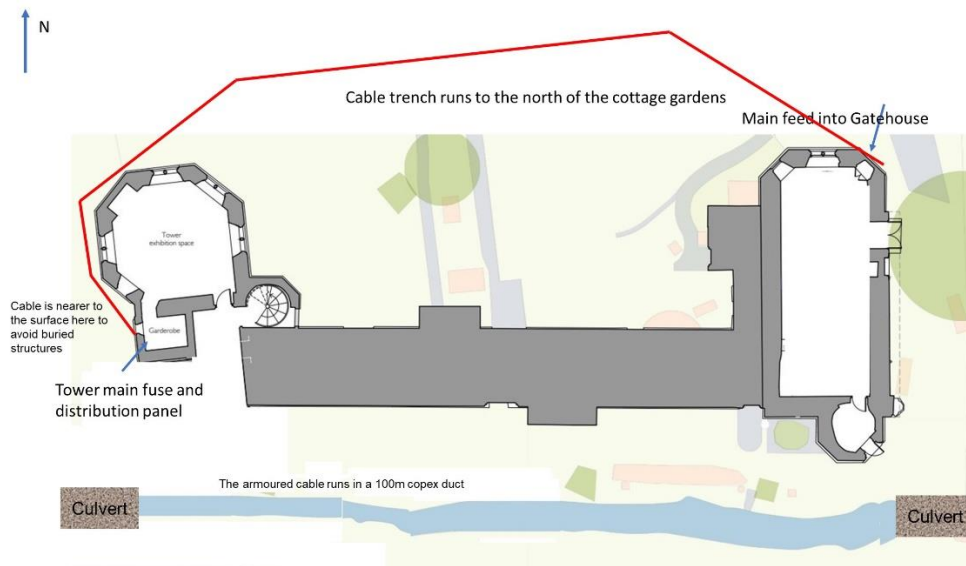


Figure 9: Route of the electrical cable trench

⁴ <https://otfordpalace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Report-of-archaeological-watching-brief-for-Otford-Palace-Orchard-S00245414.pdf>

A full report is in preparation but there were few significant finds the predated the 20th C. The excavations on the western side of the Tower revealed some ragstone steps close to the Garderobe Tower, but provided no evidence about possible drains in the area.

Before any plans could be drawn up for the reinstatement of the ground floor of the Tower, the Trust needed to determine what, if anything, lay beneath the mud and cow dung resulting from 350 years of use as a farm building. A team from Archaeology SouthEast were commissioned to dig an exploratory trench and two test pits, one in the Garderobe and the second outside the eastern wall of the Garderobe Tower.

A full report on the investigation ⁵ showed that, under the mud overburden of about 6-15cm) there was a mortar layer on a thin bed of sand. Beneath this layer was each with some ceramic building materials (mainly brick fragments).

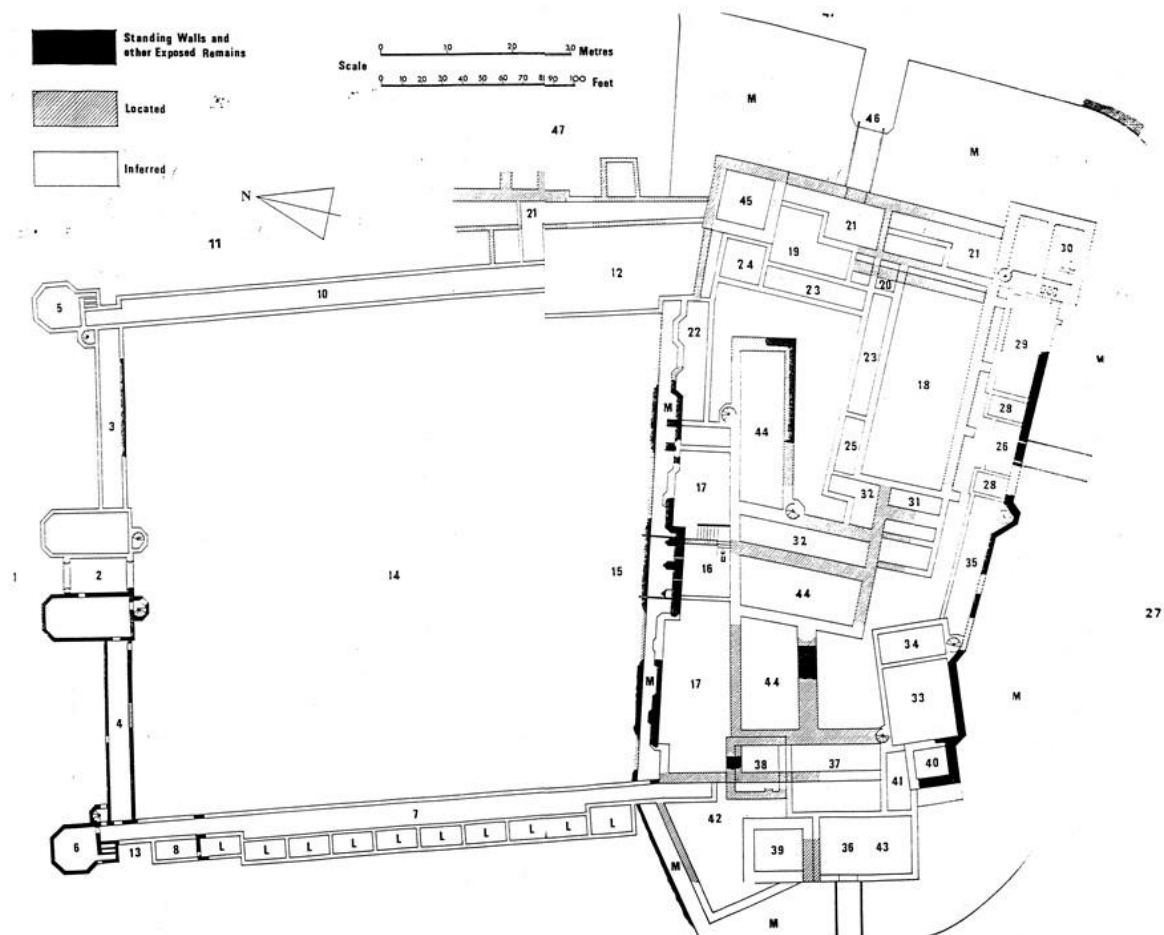


Figure 10: Plan of the Archbishop's Palace (Existing structures are in black)

The test pit in the Garderobe found that the area had been filled with brick and yielded nothing of significance. The Garderobe had been excavated by the Otford and District Archaeological Group in the 1970 and a verbal report stated that there as an exit from a drain that appeared to run under the three adjacent cottages to a pit in the Garderobe. This could have been for water to flush the pit. Unfortunately, no written records exist of the

⁵ May, L (2025) Archaeological Evaluation Report North-West Tower Otford Palace, Otford Kent. ASE Report No: 2025241 Archaeology SouthEast, Portslade

1970s dig. The test pit in 2025 could not confirm the presence of the drain.

The test pit on the east wall of the Garderobe Tower yielded little of significance. It is likely that this area was badly disturbed by contactors who were straightening the course of the Scitta Bourne in 1967.

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 10. 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. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. A Community Archaeology dig of an exploratory trench across the West Range.
- d. A Community Archaeology exploration of the pleasure gardens beyond the west range.