



# Otford Palace

The Archbishops Palace Conservation Trust

## The North-West Tower

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Figure 1: The Tower from the south west

### 1. High status accommodation

William Warham's administrative centre was in the Moated Manor at the southern side of the site. That is where the household was located. However, visitors, even important visitors, were not members of the household and were therefore accommodated outside the Moated Manor. The North-West Tower offered accommodation for high status visitors. The Palace was design to project wealth and power: In Warham's own words, it was his 'House of Power.' In keeping with his ambitions, the Tower was a high-status building for such visitors.

The Tower was constructed with the latest architecture and materials, combined with ancient stone. Each of the three floors boasted a fireplace with separate flues to ensure that those in the top floors were not smoked out by those below them. In his 1577 introduction to *The Firste Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*. (Holinshed, Harrison, and Stanyhurst (1577) Harrison observed "[Old men say] something marvellously altered in England is the multitude of chimneys lately erected, whereas in their younger days there were not above two or three, if so many, in the most uplandish towns of the realm, the

religious house and manor places of their lords always excepted.” ). The availability of fireplaces signalled intimacy, warmth, and hospitality for visitors.

Similarly, there was a garderobe (lavatory) for each floor. This too signalled comfort, wealth and privacy. There were three separate chutes so that those taking with ease on the ground floor would not be inconvenienced by those above them. (We will speak more about the garderobe below.)

The spiral staircase in an adjoining small tower ensured private access to the apartments. This at a time when having your own door was a marker of high social status. Wooden battens let into the interior brickwork (visible today) would have been used to hang tapestries. There is evidence that the ground floor was covered with green tiles, again, symbolic of the high status of these rooms.

As conceived around 1512, the great courtyard was visually anchored on its four corners with substantial towers, of which only the North-West Tower remains substantially intact. The Tower was originally conceived to be seen with substantial ranges of buildings to the north and west, a full stop on the corner, allowing the courtyard to turn through 90 degrees (see figure 2). The tower has lost some of its gravitas by the relatively recent removal and modification of the parapet and the top staircase turret, however it is still imposing, and dominates this corner of the palace field. Today, the northern range is reduced in stature but still gives a tangible hint to the relationship of the range to the tower which remains dominant (Bailey, 2024).

Traces of the foundations of the West Range can be seen on the corner of 1 Castle Farm Cottages and on the banks of the Scitta Bourne which runs to the south of the three cottages.

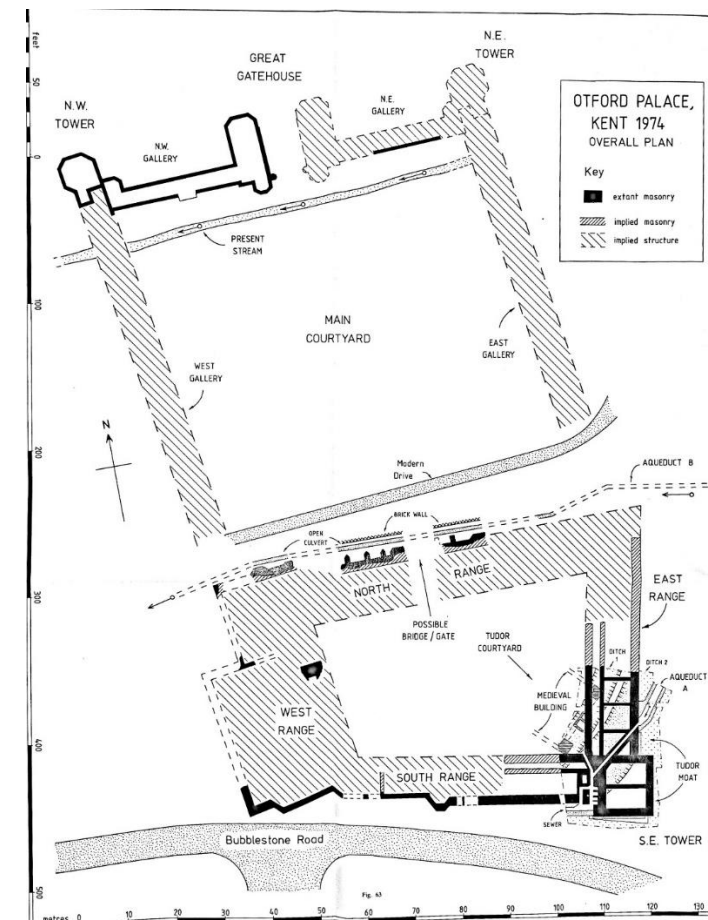


Figure 2: A plan of the Tudor Palace (Philp, 1974)

Images of the Tudor Palace have proved elusive. The drawing in figure 3 comes from Clarke and Stoyel (1975, p105) who describe it as "A conjectural reconstruction", and attribute it to Mr J Morris. More evidence for its appearance comes from the report of the survey undertaken at the behest of Henry VIII (Bolton, 1458), and it is hoped that this will corroborate the description.

As with other Tudor palaces, it is probable that the Tower was crenellated and that there was a stair turret at the top of the stair tower.

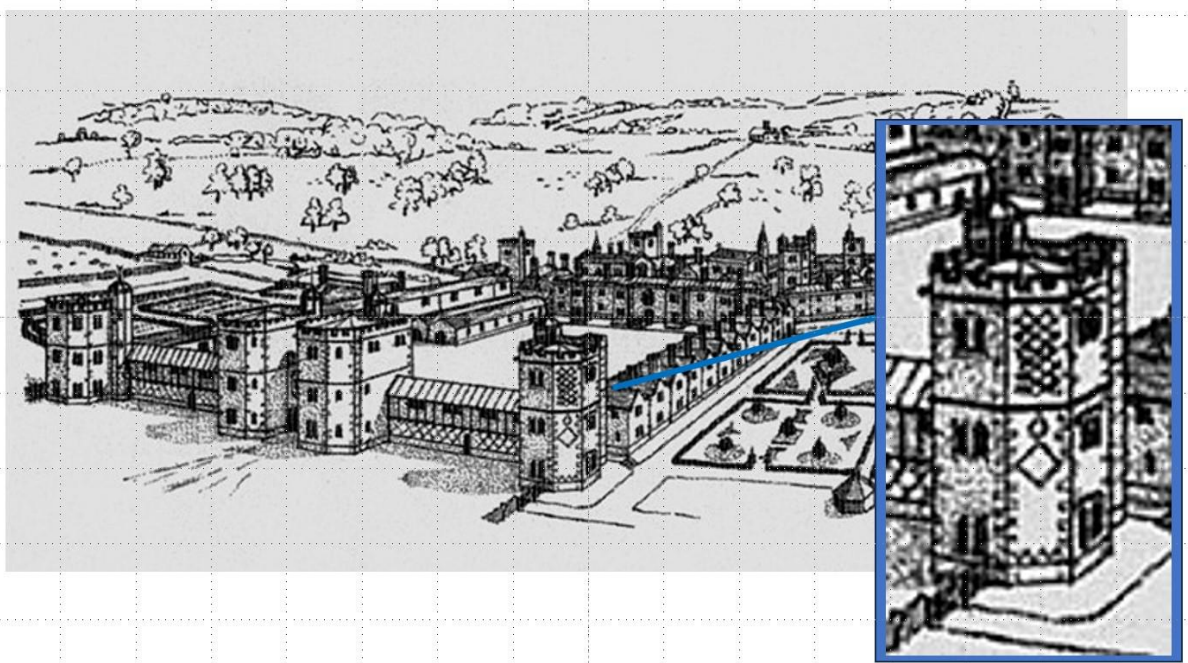


Figure 3: The Palace in 1546

While there was no single formal statute that specifically required the king's approval for crenelations, royal approval was customarily sought and granted through individual licenses from the king. This practice developed from at least the late 12th century and was followed until the 16<sup>th</sup> C. It gradually became a status symbol for landowners and Archbishop Warham, second only to the King, *legatus natus* as Archbishop of Canterbury, a Prince of the Church and Primate of All England would surely have followed this custom.

Immediately above the first-floor windows there is a string course of Kentish ragstone and set into that stone are a number of water chutes to direct rain water clear of the walls. Two of these chutes take the form of gargoyles (figure 4).

This poses the question of why there should be water chutes half way up the building? The current hypothesis is that the Tower was originally built with only two storeys. However, when Warham learned that his rival Cardinal Wolsey had built three storey towers, he ordered his architect to add a further storey giving us the tower we know today. The Trust intends to commission two new gargoyles to replace the originals which have now weathered beyond restoration.





*Figure 4: Gargoyles in the first-floor string course*

## 2. Archaeology

In the early 1970s, the Otford and District Archaeological Group dug a pit at the base of the garderobes and found some evidence of a drain that may have run underneath the three cottages. It is possible that this ran from garderobes in the North-East Tower, collecting waste from the North-West garderobes before running in a culvert to the west where it joins the Scotta Bourne. That culvert still exists, although in parts it has collapsed. Unfortunately, no records of that dig have survived.

There is also some evidence from the 2023 resistivity survey of buried structures close to the Western wall of the Tower. Were these part of the garderobe drains? Unfortunately, the limited excavations in this area (to install a power cable) planned for April 2025, failed to shed any light on this, although they did reveal some ragstone in front of the blocked doorway to the Garderobe Tower. These could have been a set of steps up to the door. More research is needed here when time and opportunity present.

In 1984 a working party from the Otford and District Archaeological Group cleared some of the debris from the floor of the northwest tower and the garderobe. They recalled there were plentiful pigeon droppings! Of interest were 2. fragments of green glazed floor tile and, importantly, one intact Tudor Green tile, 135x135mm. There was a similar sized yellow glazed Tudor tile, 2 bicolour decorated tiles, and some smaller purple decorated fragments (possibly later). A Nuremburg Jetton was found in the garderobe drain. Miscellaneous finds included pottery sherds (dated Tudor to modern), window glass, window lead, iron nails, and oystershell. These finds are stored in boxes in the possession of the APCT.

In October 2025, Archaeology SouthEast was commissioned to carry out an investigation of what might lie beneath the mud and cow dung that had accumulated on the floor of the Tower during the 350 years that it had been used as a farm building. Four test pits were excavated, three within the Tower and one outside the entrance to the Tower. The Trust needed to know what lay beneath the floor to inform the design of the replacement floor.

“The test pits were excavated to a depth at which water ingress occurred. No natural geology was encountered. A sterile silt-clay deposit recorded at the base of the sequence may represent a naturally formed layer. Within the trenches inside the tower, this deposit was sealed by a dark brown, grey silt clay which produced numerous finds such as CBM, metalwork and animal bone dating from the medieval to post-medieval periods. A truncated layer of mortar was recorded above this in all 3 of the internal test pits. A single fragment of

green glazed tile was recovered from a trample layer above this and it may be therefore that the tower did indeed once have a green glazed tile floor, but that this was removed. The dating evidence suggests that this occurred probably in the 19th century. The test pit located outside the entrance to the tower exposed a sterile silt-clay deposit, similar to that within the tower, overlain by a made ground deposit of likely 19th-20th century date.” (May, 2025)

### 3. The ghost of the Tower

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Tower is reputed to be haunted. One of the most graphic reports was from someone who saw a lady dressed in grey, sitting at a spinning wheel in front of a blazing fire the second-floor fireplace. Despite the absence of the second floor itself, the lady appeared to be unperturbed.



*Figure 5: A computer-generated image of the grey lady and her spinning wheel*

### 4. Repairs and the future

In early 1981 a vituperative debate raged between a group of Otford residents, led by Anthony Stoyel and Sevenoaks District Council over the state of the Tower and the Council's responsibility to repair it. This drew in contributions from the Department of the Environment, Sevenoaks District Architectural History, The Kent Building Preservation Trust, the Ancient Monuments Society, Otford Parish Council, and the Otford Society (see: <https://otfordpalace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/A-new-roof-for-Otford-Palace-Tower-1982-v2-compressed.pdf>). The Council fought a rearguard action but was eventually overwhelmed by public opinion and commissioned repairs to make the building safe.

However, 34 years later more emergency repairs were needed, this time part-funded by



Historic England. Then in 2022-23 the Archbishop's Palace Conservation Trust raised nearly £250,000 for more stabilisation work to the brickwork and masonry. The Tower was glazed for the first time in over 300 years (figure 1).



*Figure 6: Repair works in 1982*

The Trust is embarking on an ambitious restoration programme that will see the Tower become an interpretation centre for the Darent Valley. This will involve reinstating the ground, first and second floors, reinstating the spiral stairs and building a temporary vestibule on front of the entrance door to shield visitors from the weather and enable access from the stairs to the first floor. A new roof will replace the temporary structure of 1982.

## **5. Acknowledgements**

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## **6. References**

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