

# The Site of the Palace of the Archbishops of York at Bishop Wilton

## A Summary of Research So Far

*This summary brings together the outcome of research conducted over a period of 4 years by members of the Bishop Wilton Local History Group as published in the Group's Bulletins. The articles referred to and identified in the footnotes are listed at the end of this summary.*

Legend has it that King Athelstan of Northumbria gifted lands to the church of John of Beverley as a result of battle victories after 934. This is said to have included Wilton, hence the depiction of John and Athelstan in the stained glass of the west window of St Edith's Church.

Another source states that King Athelstan's gift was

to Archbishop Wulstanus of York (also referred to as "Wulfstan")<sup>1</sup>. No documentary evidence for this has been uncovered (e.g. in the form of a charter) and it would appear that succeeding Archbishops of York quoted this "legend" in defence of their rights when questioned by the King at the time.

Research suggests that the Palace at Wilton was built in the time of Archbishop Walter De Gray (also referred to as "Walter De Grey"; Archbishop of York from 1216 – 1255) who is known to have been active with building

It is said that Athelstan's gift was a way of giving thanks for his success in fighting the Scots after he prayed for assistance at the tomb of John of Beverley on his way north.

projects in other areas of his diocese<sup>2</sup>.

The Palace site as it exists today is a scheduled monument managed by English Heritage. In their official record they say that the "site is thought to have been built for Archbishop Neville during the reign of Edward IV" which would give a date between 1465 and 1476. This is thought to be too late for the type of moated site it is and out of line with evidence (admittedly scant) that we have uncovered<sup>3</sup>.

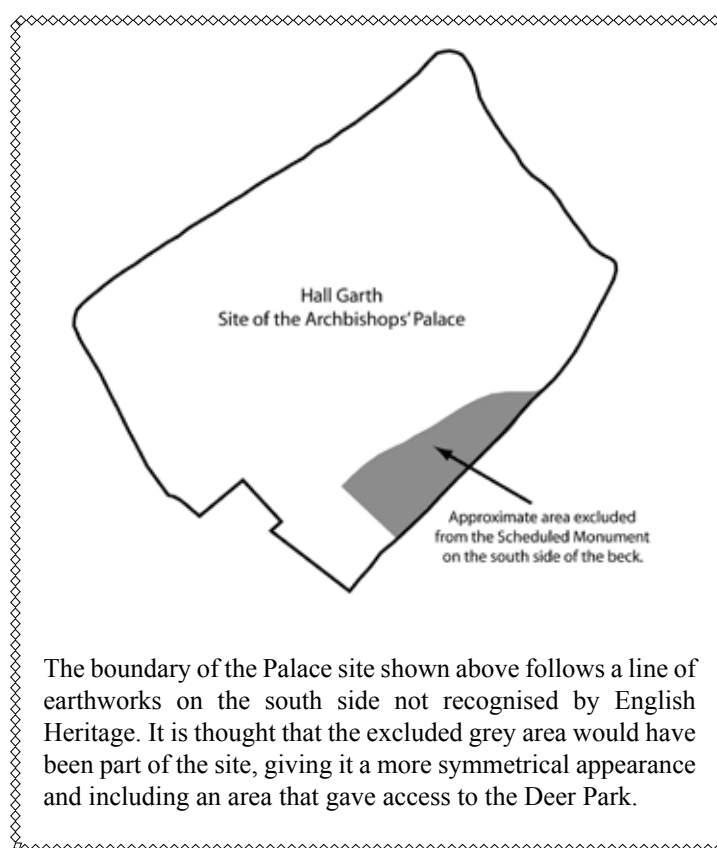
The view that the palace was built by Archbishop Neville, although we consider it to be erroneous, can be explained. Firstly, an OS map of 1854 refers to "Hall Garth. Site of Archbishop Neville's Palace". It

was prevalent in the 1800s for the site to be attributed to Archbishop Neville. But herein lies a problem: there were two Archbishop Nevilles, one in office from 1374 until 1388 and one from 1465 to 1476. At least one directory from the 1800s makes the attribution to the earlier Neville<sup>4</sup>.

The one fragment of documentary evidence for our dating of the site as opposed to English Heritage's is this<sup>5</sup>:

"The sheriff of York was to allow the archbishop of York 30 bream in the fishpond of 'Fossa' to install in his fishpond of Wilton."

It is a translation from the Latin of an entry in the Calendar of Close Rolls at the National Archives (PRO), Kew. The entry is dated 1228. We assume that the "fishpond of Wilton" (the outline of which is still visible) must have been an integral part of



The boundary of the Palace site shown above follows a line of earthworks on the south side not recognised by English Heritage. It is thought that the excluded grey area would have been part of the site, giving it a more symmetrical appearance and including an area that gave access to the Deer Park.

1 Andrew Sefton, LHB 5.

2 As above.

3 Mike Pratt & Andrew Sefton, LHB 9.

4 As above.

5 Mike Pratt, LHB 10.

the Palace site of the time, i.e. it would not have existed without the other structures on the site. All of which supports Andrew Sefton's conclusion which attributes the establishment of the Palace site to Archbishop De Gray.

The use of Wilton as a place of residence for the Archbishops of York is not open to question as there is abundant documentary evidence in the form of letters written (in Latin), and signed by them with an identification of where they were at the time.

We believe that the Palace was in ruins by 1388 when a document declares the "manor", which we take to mean the Archbishops' residence, to be "in a very ruinous state and almost fallen down". How it declined we do not know for sure. It could have been ransacked as a result of the "seizing of the assets of Alexander Neville, Archbishop of York, upon his judgement as a traitor in 1388"<sup>6</sup>. It is also possible that there was a gradual decline due to reduced usage over what was a very difficult century which encompassed famine, Scottish raids, the Black Death and general lawlessness. Expert opinion suggests that both royal and ecclesiastical itineraries were pared down and the number of residences of those who travelled around were reduced after the privations of the 14th century.

The Palace site covers an area of approximately 9 acres taking the moat, fish ponds and a plot on the south side of the beck into account (see diagram). It has a moat still visible today on three sides. The fourth side is delimited by an earthwork mound of varying heights that gives the site a symmetrical shape that it lacks if it is assumed that it ends at the edges of the fish ponds. It encompasses 2 fish ponds, a mill pond, a dovecote and a range of other buildings.

Land surrounding the Palace site to the east and the south is thought to have constituted a park that would have provided the Archbishops with deer and rabbits. The case for a park rests on two main pieces

6 Andrew Sefton, LHB 11.

The first record of a letter written by an Archbishop of York when at Wilton that survives appears to be one dated 6th May 1225, by De Gray.

Source: *Registers of Archbishop Gray, Surtees Society, Volume 56.*

Old documents which we have managed to transcribe and translate from the 1300s do refer to the presence of a Warrener at Wilton. While this would support the idea of rabbits being raised in the "park", we have not found any references that would suggest the presence of deer. A part of the Palace site across the beck on the south side is referred to as "Lodge Garth" and "Foster Lodge" which suggests the presence of a "Forester" or someone who looked after the park. However, these references do post-date the time of the Palace and have to be treated with caution.

of evidence:

1. Old documents use the term "park" to name surrounding plots of land. The oldest, an inventory (in Latin) from 1298 refers to "All the timber from a building which was at the park gate, which timber is in the big shed."<sup>7</sup>

2. Aerial photographs provide evidence for a boundary ditch on parts of the southern and eastern extremities of the "parkland" which could have served to hamper the escape of deer<sup>8</sup>.

As a group we started looking at the possible layout of the Palace site in March 2005, using aerial photographs, architectural features of comparable sites, general documentary evidence and assessment of the site on the ground. This resulted in the publication of an annotated aerial photograph in February 2006 that speculatively identified the main residential and kitchen buildings, stables, barns, a gatehouse, a dovecote (or watch tower) with the surrounding courtyard and gardens<sup>9</sup>.

By October 2006, we were able to publish a more specific plan produced by our resident architect and group member, Andrew Boyce. This superimposes a "conjectural layout of buildings, walls and other features" on features seen on aerial photos<sup>10</sup>.

After discussion of the site for the 4 years of the Local History Group's existence and assessment of it from the perimeter, members of the Committee managed to get permission to conduct a site walk in May 2006. As Andrew Boyce has put it, this made it possible "to appreciate the extent and scale of the monument and to further interpret the "lumps and bumps" seen on the photographs".

An emerging view of the Palace site is that it acted as "a larder that yielded fish, rabbits, deer and pi-

7 Kate Pratt, LHB 11.

8 Mike Pratt, LHB 7.

9 Joint Effort, LHB 13.

10 Andrew Boyce, LHB 14.

geons” and that the conception, design and landscaping of the site and its environs envisaged this functionality. Consideration of the fish ponds in their own right suggests a degree of engineering (to manage water levels and water flow) that indicates the level of planning (and financial outlay) that went into the site’s construction<sup>11</sup>.

Official archaeological attention so far although minimal has produced results that are consistent with our thinking that the Palace site had a period of main use from the early 1200s to the early 1300s, declining

thereafter until it was in ruins by 1388.

The remains that appear as humps and bumps today have, at least, been well looked after. As a scheduled monument that is under the watchful eyes of tenants of the land, users who graze livestock and village residents who oversee it, the site preserves its secrets well.

---

11 Mike Pratt, LHB 15.

The articles on which this summary is based were published in the Local History Bulletin (LHB) as follows:

1. *The Site of the Archbishop of York’s Palace* by Andrew Sefton, LHB 5.
2. *Wilton’s Deer Park* by Mike Pratt, LHB 7.
3. *The Dating of the Palace Site* by Mike Pratt and Andrew Sefton, LHB 9.
4. *The Dating of the Palace Site - Update* by Mike Pratt, LHB 10.
5. *The Extent of Wylton for 1388* by Andrew Sefton, LHB 11.
6. *1298 Inventory for the Manor of Wilton* by Kate Pratt, LHB 11.
7. *The Layout of the Archbishops’ Palace Site*, a collaborative effort, LHB 13.
8. *The Layout of the Archbishops’ Palace Site - Part 2* by Andrew Boyce, LHB 14.
9. *The Archbishops’ Fish Ponds* by Mike Pratt, LHB 15 (this one!).