

ELTHAM PALACE

Anniversary Address 1986

by

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This Address was given in the Great Hall of Eltham Palace on Saturday 28 June 1986, the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of the Ancient Monuments Society. The author being then indisposed, the Address was delivered on his behalf by Dr John H. Harvey F.S.A.

Introduction

Eltham is nowadays the least frequented of the royal palaces despite the reputation of its Great Hall. The fate of that Great Hall hung in the balance early last century when the Crown Commissioners sought to pull it down. Artists and antiquaries vied with one another in urging its preservation and in recording the decorative carving which was gradually being stolen. Wyattville's proposal to re-use the roof timbers at Windsor Castle, abandoned as too costly, roused fierce opposition and eventually, though efforts

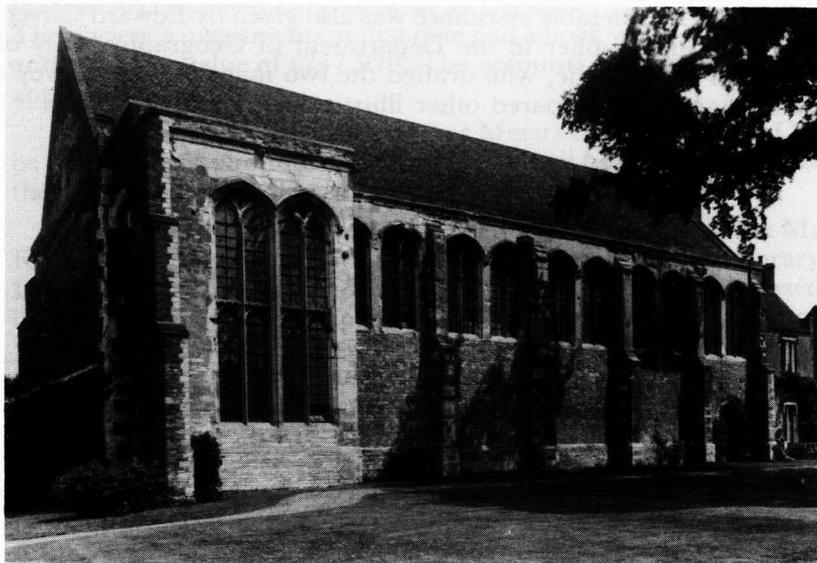


Fig. 1

The Great Hall of Eltham Palace from the south-west before restoration
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

in the House of Lords in favour of preservation were discouraged by the Duke of Wellington, Robert Smirke was ordered to do first-aid repairs. A prime mover in the campaign for preservation was the local historian and artist J.C. Buckler, who complained that 'millions are exhausted to rear monuments to the bad taste of the age and thousands voted for the monstrous inventions of modern architects'.

The permanent preservation of the hall (Fig. 1) was not however assured until 1933 when Mr Samuel Courtauld leased the site for a mansion, designed by my old friends Seeley and Paget, their first substantial commission. They had ample graphic records for the restoration of the hall and moreover were advised by Sir Charles Peers, former chief inspector of ancient monuments. The mansion itself was not—indeed is not—to everyone's taste, but it is becoming a period-piece and the hall's restoration was a very creditable work for its period. The buildings are now occupied by the Army Institute of Education and are maintained by the Property Services Agency, part of the Department of Environment, whose Parks Division tends the gardens.¹

This year we are celebrating the ninth centenary of Domesday book so it is only right to begin with its entry on Eltham: 'Haimo [the sheriff of Kent] holds Aletham of the Bishop . . .' This was Odo of Bayeux, the half-brother and a main supporter of the Conqueror, who had been rewarded with some two hundred Kentish manors and the title of Earl of Kent, partly for his gallantry at the Battle of Hastings, where his ecclesiastical mace had been as effective as any secular sword. There was a ruthless side to him and when ambition led to his exile the people of Kent doubtless gave a sigh of relief. The manor of Eltham passed by marriages to the family of Clare. In 1278 Gilbert de Clare granted it to the de Vesci family who in turn conveyed it to another secular bishop, Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham and Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Excavations by Mr Humphrey Woods in the 1970s revealed traces of twelfth- and thirteenth-century occupation at Eltham, but nothing substantial; its architectural history begins with Bek. He belonged to a wealthy Lincolnshire family, whose Norman forebear had been given wide lands in that county by the Conqueror. Born to great wealth, which he augmented from the revenues of the Church, he displayed the sort of magnificence we associate with Wolsey. As Bishop of Durham, for example, he had in the castle there a great hall comparable to that he built at Eltham. In his home county his fortified manor-house at Somerton had something of the air of the castles Edward I was building in Wales. Protected by a great moat, Somerton had three-storeyed towers at the angles and in the middle of each side—an anticipation of the octagonal towers he was to build at Eltham, where the moat too is his.

It is the moat which differentiates Eltham from the other major royal palaces, the Tower obviously excepted. Their security rested in the authority of the Crown—when this was challenged the king took to a castle. Their physical protection was normally just a precinct wall (like that of a monastery) as at Clarendon or a bank and ditch, the former with a paling on top, as at Gillingham. Ditches are indeed found round some of the lesser royal houses, but mainly in the north or midlands of England or at hunting-lodges. Even there they often served a double purpose as fish-ponds. Otherwise, as at Eltham, the presence of a moat is the mark of a site acquired from a subject. Unfortunately much of the upcast from the Eltham moat was spread within the enclosure, leading to many future problems of settlement, save where foundations were dug down into the subsoil.

Bek was a bishop for whom the Palatinate of Durham was a fit setting. Under the banner of St. Cuthbert he several times led his own army against the Scots and he was a right-hand man to Edward I in the latter's early Border campaigns. But his disputes with the Prior of Durham—disputes in which the Pope became involved—lost him the royal favour. Perhaps for that reason in 1305 he gave the reversion of Eltham to the Prince of Wales, who shortly, as Edward II, bestowed it on his queen, Isabella. With the coming of a new sovereign Bek clearly regained much of what he had lost with the old, for he continued to use Eltham and died there in 1311.

Eltham became a favourite haunt of the king and queen and a number of improvements were made to increase her accommodation. But the best known of these building-works arose from necessity, probably owing to settlement: the construction of a new retaining wall to the moat. This was to lead to one of our earliest recorded examples of the breach of a building contract. This well-known case, first published by the late Dr Salzman, is set out in the Exchequer Plea Roll for 1315. Four London master masons are charged with failing to build a new retaining-wall round the moat at Eltham to the standard enrolled in their contract. It was to be 477 yards long, to have buttresses every eighteen feet to support Bek's wall and was to have a deep foundation, on piles where necessary. It was to be twelve feet high, five feet wide at the base and four at the top. The foundation was to be of hard stone, the moat face of good stone and chalk was to be used only inside and below ground. When finished the wall was found to be not only a foot thinner than contracted for, but was built of soft stone and chalk covered over with cement. A jury found for the king and queen with heavy damages and the masons were imprisoned until they found sureties, one of which was Michael of Canterbury, who had designed the wall. The wall was demolished

and rebuilt and traces of it were found in excavations made on the west side of the moat in the 1950s. Admittedly these traces were much obscured by later alterations, mostly in brick, but there were no convincing signs that the re-building had been particularly thorough. This may account for the numerous references in the records after 1350 to the gradual re-building of the outer moat wall.

Edward's faithless queen had stayed at Eltham in 1308 before her state entry into London and eight years later her son John was born and christened there. A few details of his christening survive: Turkey-work and cloth of gold for the altar and five pieces of white velvet to make a churching robe for the queen. John of Eltham, as the boy was called, died in 1336 on a Scottish campaign and is buried in Westminster Abbey. His monument has one of the earliest effigies in alabaster—like his father's at Gloucester. After the execution of her lover Mortimer her son Edward III allowed the queen to use Eltham when her health required it. Later it became one of his favourite resorts and he built a new set of royal apartments.

It is to Richard II, however, that we owe the outer courtyard beyond the moat, known as the Green Court, by which the palace is approached. It comprised a porter's lodge, various service buildings and lodgings for those who worked in them. He also rebuilt the bridge. His use of Eltham as a place of relaxation is reflected in an Exchequer Roll, which has entries for a *camera tripudiancium*, or dancing chamber, and a new bath-house for the king. (Warm baths were filled by pouring in dozens of pots of hot water.)

It was during the reign of Richard II that Chaucer had an unfortunate experience generally associated with Eltham. In 1389 the poet was appointed Clerk of Works to Westminster, the Tower and a string of royal manors which included Eltham. Most of this work was done by deputy, but he is thought to have been on his way to Eltham to pay some accounts when he was twice robbed on the same day, 9 September 1390. Near Westminster a certain Richard Brerelay took from him ten pounds, his horse and what are described as 'autres moebles'. Later that day, having replenished his purse, he was set upon by the same Brerelay and three accomplices at the appropriately named Foul Oak, near New Cross and robbed of £9 3s 6d. The thieves were taken, whereupon Brerelay chose to become 'approver'—turn king's evidence against the others. Under this procedure anyone challenged with an offence by an approver could put himself on trial either by battle or on his country. If he lost his battle with the approver he was hanged, but if he won the approver was hanged. As it happened Brerelay had turned approver in an earlier felony and before the Chaucer

case came to court had been challenged to a battle he lost and accordingly hanged. Little is known of the fate of his accomplices, save that one of them pleaded benefit of clergy and was consigned to the King's Bench prison till such time as the court should consider his case. For Chaucer there was a more satisfactory outcome: a writ given under the privy seal at Eltham on 6 January, 1391 discharged 'our beloved Geoffrey Chaucer, Clerk of Works, from his debt to the Exchequer' of twenty pounds.

Henry IV in his turn overhauled the palace, rebuilding his own and the queen's apartments in timber. Indeed the use of timber before the general use of brick must have led to frequent re-building, especially on the unstable ground, unless the structure was scrupulously maintained. It is here that Henry married by proxy Joan of Navarre; and here he often spent Christmas.

When Henry VI married Margaret of Anjou in 1445 he spared no expense on her behalf, not least at Eltham, where she was given a new hall, great chamber and kitchen. This lavishness was partly to blame for the gradual reduction of his way of life as compared with that of the great nobles. The Abbot of St. Albans tells a sad story of how when the king spent Easter there in 1459 and made the prior a present of his robe, it had to be taken back as being the only one he had for state occasions. Indeed, it was not till Edward IV came to power (and had got rid of the expense of the French wars) that there was a king whose standard of living and conduct of whose court could command the respect of his mightier subjects. Nowhere can that change have been more apparent than in the great hall he built here at Eltham.

Building of the hall began towards the end of 1475, Bek's hall being one of the structures pulled down to make way for it. It is poorly documented, but some idea of how it was built can be had from a document covering the fortnight ending 30 October 1479 quoted in *The King's Works*. It refers to fifty-one masons and forty-eight carpenters being employed and to the assembling of the timbers for the great roof and their transport to the hall from the Storeyard—doubtless the building shown on the east side of the Green Court in the 1603 plan and there labelled 'Storehouse for the Works'. It also mentions the purchase of ten great iron clamps, with five heavy spikes apiece, for binding the roof-principals together. Presumably the hall was finished by Edward's death in 1483, but on this (and on the rebuilding of the bridge, probably at the same time) the records are silent. They are almost as silent as to what Henry VII may have built at Eltham. This need not have been much, for he had acquired a splendid palace that should have satisfied his immediate needs. However, Lambarde, in his *Perambulation of Kent* (1570), declares 'it is not yet fully out of

memorie, that King Henry the seventh, set up the faire front over the mote', an indefinite statement not supported by documents. He can hardly refer to the entrance front, which had only the gatehouse flanked by minor lodgings—perhaps the west front was meant. In any case after 1500 Henry's main building activity in the area was switched to Eltham's rival, Greenwich, which eventually superseded it in the royal favour.

The way in which the predominance of Greenwich over Eltham has lasted is seen in a painting in the East Corridor leading from the Central Lobby of the Houses of Parliament. Painted by F.C. Cowper in 1910 it depicts the meeting of Erasmus with the nine-year-old future Henry VIII in the setting of Greenwich, with a background of the warships that were one day to be Henry's pride. In fact the meeting was at Eltham, then often used as a nursery for Henry VII's children.

Erasmus recorded what happened. He was taken to Eltham by Sir Thomas More and in the great hall presented to the young royal family (except Prince Arthur, who was away in Wales). At the centre of the dais was Prince Henry, having on his right Princess Margaret (then eleven years old, who was one day to marry James IV of Scotland) and the four-year-old Princess Mary on his left. To Erasmus' surprise More presented Prince Henry with a piece of writing and he was sadly put out (and annoyed with More for not warning him) when the prince challenged him to do the same. This he failed to do, extempore, but three days' later (he tells us) 'in the Muses despite, from whom I had long been divorced, I finished a poem'. This was a set of heroic verses in iambic metre representing Britannia chanting her own praise and that of her princes. In a dedicatory letter to 'the Most Illustrious Prince, Duke Henry' Erasmus declares that he has 'for the present dedicated these verses like a gift of playthings to your childhood and shall be ready with more abundant offerings when your virtues, growing with age, shall supply more abundant material for poetry'.

We move now to Henry VIII's reign and about the year 1520 when the Controller of the King's Works was given a long list of repairs and new works—a programme not completed till 1531. Apart from the building of a new chapel it called for a general refurbishment of the royal apartments, ranging from major items like new galleries to new locks for the king's chambers. An unusual environmental order was to prolong the vaulted 'synk that goet', from our kitchen under our mote into the west side of our Park . . . till it be past the height of the Bank ther . . . and thence in a trench covered with thikk planes of elme unto th'ende, that it be passed out of the daunger of the ayer within our park'. Perhaps the stench of the nearby privy kitchen invaded the royal apartments.

Later, when Greenwich became the favourite royal residence down-river, such works as are recorded at Eltham are generally limited to maintenance, though there are a number of references to glass-work, new and old, by Galyon Hone. During the reigns of Edward VI and Mary little was spent on the palace, but on the accession of Queen Elizabeth it received substantial, much needed repairs, though in fact she seldom visited it. One of the first jobs to be tackled was the great hall, which was then given its brick gables. More serious was the general deterioration of the timber-framed apartments on the west side. Here urgent structural measures were followed by the erection of a brick front with four bay windows, the remains of which survive. These were formerly thought from their style to be Henrician, but Mr Colvin's researches for *The History of the King's Works* have shown them to be Elizabethan. A like amendment is called for in the dating of the rather similar brick bays at the north end of the west front, which belong to the early years of James I's reign, when the business of strutting and shoring up the old buildings continued. But the Stuarts made even less use of Eltham than Elizabeth. Its buildings rapidly deteriorated, some of the lodgings collapsed and in 1632 the wind blew down others. The parks, however, were maintained and in the Great Park the lodge was enlarged. The effect of all this neglect is seen in the Parliamentary Survey of 1649, which describes the palace as out of repair and untenantable; the materials were thought to be worth £2,753, exclusive of the cost of taking down.

For the next ten years the palace was indeed subject to taking down. In particular the chapel was destroyed, though the great hall was reprieved as a barn. The manor had been sold to Col. Nathaniel Rich; and in 1656 John Evelyn said, after a visit, that the buildings were 'miserable ruins and the noble woods and park destroyed by Rich the Rebel'.

In 1663 the Crown leased the manor to Sir John Shaw who had befriended the exiled Charles II. A leading financier and a confidant of Clarendon, the Lord Chancellor, Shaw was an associate of Alderman Backwell, a leading banker. He was farmer of the London customs, surveyor of the royal forests and much else. Sir William Coventry complained to Pepys that he was a 'miracle of a man, for he executes more places than any man in England'. With the palace uninhabitable Shaw decided to rebuild the lodge in the Great Park. This important building, one of the few surviving works of Wren's colleague Hugh May, is now occupied by the Blackheath Golf Club, the oldest in England.

So much for the general history of the palace: now for some account of individual buildings, beginning with the outer or Green Court, laid out by Richard II and containing most of the service

buildings with lodgings for those who worked in them. They were all timber-framed except for the brick gatehouse. Their identities, as known *c.* 1603, are taken from the map made by John Thorpe about that time. They were mostly concerned with food.

Green Court was entered through a substantial three-storeyed gatehouse flanked by two-storeyed lodgings—by 1603 decayed. Just outside stood the Great Bakehouse and the Laundry. The chief yeoman in the latter was charged that he 'safely keep, tenderly wash and preserve diligently the stuff for the king's person'. If there was a queen there were 'women launderers'. At the north-west angle of the court was the slaughter-house and then, successively, southwards along the west side a coal-house and the Pastry and Spicery, the former with a large oven. Here were made the highly spiced meat pies known as coffins. Opposite stood 'the Storehouse for the Work' with an office facing the court and a long narrow shed behind where timbers could be stored. Next to it was the Privy Bakehouse which served the king's table. Behind it and quite separate was the Scalding-house, where meat was boiled and poultry plucked and drawn—roasting was done in the Great and Privy Kitchens just south of the Great Hall.

At the south-west corner of the court and next to the bridge over the moat still stands the Lord Chancellor's Lodging, said to have been used by Wolsey. Now consisting of three houses it had a hall fronting the court with a parlour on one side, a Great Chamber on the other and a kitchen behind. Its main feature today is the bay-window of the former Great Chamber, added in 1586 for a new Lord Chancellor, Sir Christopher Hatton.

The Chapel Royal

Before considering the medieval and Tudor chapels I should like to say something about the Chapel Royal as an institution. We commonly apply the term to buildings, but strictly speaking it refers to the peripatetic royal ecclesiastical establishment—the spiritual bodyguard of the king, which attended him wherever he went. In England it was concerned solely with the spiritual welfare of the king and his household and had no political pretensions.

The Chapel Royal is seen in embryo in Norman times, but evolved only slowly. Henry III indeed had chaplains aplenty, but it was not till the following reign that they were regarded as a separate unit of the household. By the middle of the fourteenth century the king's confessor and chief chaplain was recognized as dean of the Chapel and Dean Way's unofficial guide—the *Liber Regie Capelle* of 1447—implies a well-established code of practice, of which the earliest surviving complete version is the *Black Book*

of Edward IV.² It is from this I propose to quote, partly because the entries are in English and partly because we are assembled in his Great Hall. And I would remind you that it was here at Eltham in 1526 that Wolsey promulgated the set of ordinances with which he hoped to reform the royal household.

At the head of the Chapel Royal was the Dean with the rank of baron—an office 'given without presentation or confirmation of any bishop and determined by King Henry V for ever to be a bachelor of divinity or a doctor'. Today the Dean is always a bishop, as indeed he might become in Edward IV's time: Dean Dudley (1470-76) became Bishop of Durham. He had a staff of about fifty, among whom the sub-dean and chaunters were to supervize the quire of some thirty men and 'oversee their services and songs'. If 'any be defectif or disobedient the Dean or his deputy send to the countinghouse to put him out of wages as often as is needful'. Indeed discontent and drunkenness were not unknown, partly at least because some of the best men had been press-ganged from other quires. Such requisitioning indeed might even apply to the Children of the Chapel: in 1518 Wolsey, whose chapel was not only as large as the king's but in the latter's view had better musicians, was forced to give up his best boy to the Chapel Royal.

Today, though a bishop heads the Chapel Royal as Dean, the organization is in the hands of the Sub-dean, stationed at St. James's Palace, the official residence of the sovereign. As chaplain to the Household in London he maintains the tradition that the Dean was the royal confessor. Incidentally his only normal 'peripatetic' duty is to assist the sovereign in distributing the Royal Maundy money—in his separate capacity as Sub-almoner.

Next came the chaplains and clerks of the Chapel: 'men of worship endowed with virtues moral and speculatif; of their music showing descant [counterpoint?], clean voiced . . . sufficient in organ playing and modest in behaviour'. Their prospects were good: 'the kinges grace auunceth these preestes and clerkes by prebends, churches of his patrimony, free chapels, hospitals and pensions'.

Next are two 'pistlers', chapel Children whose voices are broken, 'chosen for their skill and virtue' and finally the Children, whose successors in their scarlet livery we see on state occasions today. Eight to twelve in number they came under the Master of Song, who taught them music, 'organs' and deportment. Their general education, like that of other children of similar, or indeed superior status about the palace, was looked after by the Master of Grammar. When they were seventeen, say the regulations, with their voices broken and no place vacant in the chapel or the Court, they were sent by the king to 'a college of Oxford or Cambridge of the king's foundation, till the king list otherwise to advance them'.

Something of this royal benevolence survives today: the present Children are sent to the City of London School.

One aspect of the Chapel I hesitate to embark on, but do not like to ignore: its seminal position in the history of English music. Edward I is thought to have brought back from the Crusades, in addition to fresh ideas in military logistics, a new musical fashion which went beyond the modest powers of monastic quires. By the end of the fourteenth century the Chapel Royal had evolved a school of polyphonic music as good as any in Europe. Nor were its activities confined to an elaboration of the standard church services: it could provide special settings for state occasions, spilling over from royal weddings and funerals to secular performances which eventually included plays. And the religious music produced all the year round during the sixteenth century was of course to produce some of our greatest musicians.

The Medieval Chapel

This of course was built by Bek, doubtless on a scale which matched his hall, for the Crown records speak of embellishment, not enlargement. The windows were given decorated glass and the walls tapestries; and there were bells. There is also mention of a first-floor royal pew, from which Richard II descended at Epiphany 1383 to offer gold and frankincense and myrrh at the altar—a ceremony still observed on that day at the Chapel Royal at St. James's Palace, though in the absence of the sovereign. That the chapel was a sizeable building is suggested by the order of ceremonies for the christening in 1480 of one of Edward IV's daughters born at Eltham. Neither king nor queen was present: the latter stayed in her chamber—her turn would come with her churching. The ceremony began with a procession of a hundred knights, squires and 'other honest persons' carrying unlit torches. Then came three earls, the Earl of Northumberland bearing an unlit taper. Next, under a canopy borne by a baron and three knights, came the lady Matravers with the chrisom and the countess of Richmond with the child. The king's mother and his daughter Elizabeth were godmothers and the Bishop of Winchester godfather. After the child was christened the torches (and presumably the taper) were lit and she was borne first to the high altar and then to her *parclose* or closet in the body of the chapel, where she received rich gifts from her godparents. The procession then retraced its steps to the queen's chamber, 'well accompanied as it appertaineth and after the custom of the realm', says the record.

Henry VIII at first contented himself with re-furnishing the chapel. In 1515 the Master of the Great Wardrobe was commanded to provide new altar fittings and a new holy-day vestment of white

damask with a cross of crimson velvet. But the holy water stoup and sprinkler and the candlesticks were to be of tin or latén, so presumably for use in the absence of the Court. The Chapel Royal had its own 'sacred stuff of holy church', which travelled with it in the charge of the yeoman of the vestry.

Henry VIII's new chapel

Some time about 1520 the king ordered a new chapel. It was demolished under the Commonwealth so our knowledge of its arrangements comes mainly from the Thorpe plan and Mr Humphrey Woods' excavations. The specification for the building runs, in part, as follows:

'To be made with a flat roof . . . and with two closets at the floor height of the gallery [from the royal apartments] with the necessary stairs coming down from the closets into the chapel with a parclose [for the king and queen], stalls and other seats . . . the roof to be trimmed and ceiled with plaster and garnished with such work as we may devise; and with comely windows most chapellike' in the side walls as well as behind the high altar.

The layout disclosed by Mr Woods' excavations closely resembled the Thorpe plan, but slightly corrects its orientation. It shows the building had a nave, to the western angles of which were attached towers containing stairs from the royal closets. Between the nave and chancel was a screen on which the organ would be set. The quire stalls beyond the screen had been mounted on a brick trough, a device meant to increase the resonance of the woodwork. On the south side of the chapel was a house for the resident chaplain, who tended the souls of the permanent staff when the Court—and the Chapel Royal—were not in residence and sometimes had general duties in addition to his pastoral ones.

Today there are only two Tudor chapels royal we can compare with Eltham. The small one at St. James's Palace, though much altered, still retains its ceiling of 1540, 'trimmed, ceiled with plaster and garnished'—in this case with the heraldry, cyphers and mottoes of Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves. That at Hampton Court, originally built by Wolsey but remodelled for Henry VIII in 1535-36, has an elaborate timber ceiling with carved pendants. Here, despite alterations made for Queen Anne, we can still go from the Tudor royal apartments to the equivalent of Henry's royal pew, which would have had one closet for him and one for the queen of the day. Queen Anne's grand staircase down to the floor of the chapel corresponds to the angle staircases which served the same purpose at Eltham; when the king and queen were to take Holy Communion they went down those stairs to a travess or closet from which in due course they went forward to the altar. The service involved an elaborate ceremonial of which the best surviving

description is probably the eye-witness account by the then Subdean of Queen Elizabeth I's Easter Communion in 1593, albeit according to the Protestant rite.

'The most sacred Queene Elizabethhe upon Estre day, after the Holy Gospell was redd . . . came downe into her Majestes Travess: beffore her Highnes came the gentlemen pencioners, then the Barons, the Bushopps, London and Llandaffe, thErls, and the Hon: Councell in their colors of State, the Harolds at Arms, the Lord Keeper bearinge the Great Seal himselfe, and the Erle of Herefford bearinge the sword beffore her Majestie. Then her Majesties Royal person came moste chearfully, having as noble supporters . . . thErle of Essex . . . on the right . . . and the Lord Admyral on the lefte hand, the Lord Chambralen . . . attendante al the while. Dr. Bull was at the organ playinge the Offertorye. Her Majestie entred her travess moste devoutly there knyeling: after some prayers she came princely beffore the Table, and there humbly knielinge did offer the golden obeysant, the Bushop the hon. Father of Worcester holdinge the golden bason, the Subdean and the Epistler in riche coaps assistante to the sayd Bushop: which done her Majestie returned to her princely travess . . . until the present action of the Holy Communion, contynually exercysed in earnest prayer, and then the blessed Sacrement first receyved of the sayd Bushop and administred to the Subdean, the gospeller for that day, and to the Epistoller, her sacred person presented her selffe beffore the Lord's Table, Royally attended as beffore, where was sett a stately stoole and qwssis [cushions] for her Majestie, . . . [and] did receive Communion accordinge to the laws established by her Majestie and Godly laws in Parliament . . .'
' (signed) Ant. Anderson, Subdean.

Bek's Hall

A hall and cellar in the Great Court were excavated in the 1970s by Mr Humphrey Woods. Associated finds date these structures to the time of Bek and suggest that the hall was in use right up to the building of the present one, which overlies its south end. Bek built in the grand manner and his hall was nearly as wide as Edward IV's and at least seventy feet long. At the upper, west, end was the high table, set, rather unusually, in a recess fifteen feet wide and six deep—no need therefore for the *spora* or screens ordered for so many royal halls to keep out the draughts. About fifteen feet in front of the dais was an octagonal stone hearth with a stone kerb. This was doubtless the site for a large brazier. There was a wide porch, probably the public entrance, in the middle of the west wall, but there may have been a private doorway just to the right of the dais. However, the south tower of Henry VIII's chapel has destroyed any trace.

The floor was paved with inlaid tiles which Mrs. Elizabeth Eames has dated to Bek's day. Their motifs include the Paschal Lamb, the rose and the fleur-de-lis. They are worn to such a degree as to confirm the notion that the hall was in use till the erection of its successor.

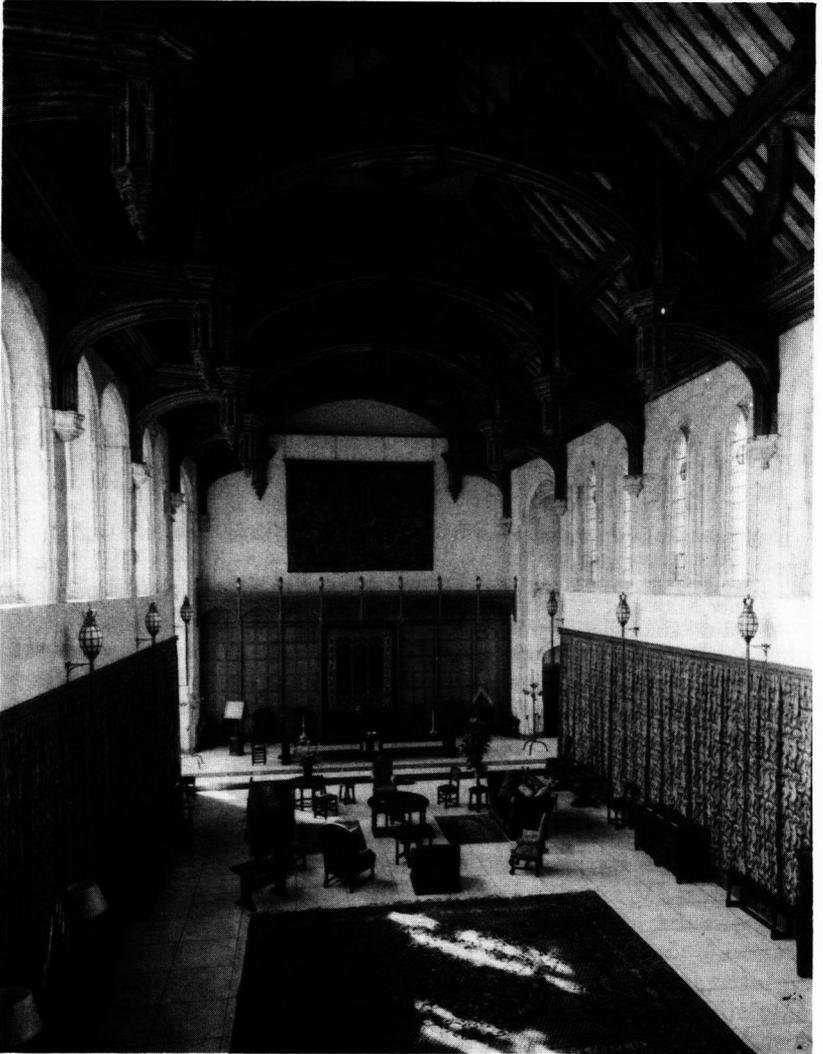


Fig. 2
The Great Hall of Eltham Palace as restored for Mr Samuel Courtauld
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

The present hall

This famous building is too well-known to need any detailed description from me and you can see it for yourselves; but a few basic facts and something about its restoration fifty years ago may not be amiss. Measuring 101 feet by 35 feet and 55 feet high it is one of the largest of its class (Figs 1 and 2). It is built of brick, which was not yet an acceptable building-material for public buildings, so is clad in stone: Reigate ashlar on the front and ragstone up to window-level at the back. The string-course has carved grotesques and the parapet was formerly embattled. The north-east doorway was restored in 1937 from a drawing by Pugin. The screens retain a little original work in the main timbers and flat panels. The accuracy of the restoration of the carvings depended not only on early drawings by artists and antiquaries, but on the fact that the outlines of the stolen decorative work showed up, thanks to bleaching, on the plain panels.

The roof timbers had suffered from various past attempts at restoration, but were basically intact, though needing the replacement of a number of details. Thus the little carved shafts resting on the hammer beams, on either side of the arched ribs, are mostly modern copies as are the pendants and wall-brackets. The louvre was not a feature of the original hall. It was added in the sixteenth century and Sir John Shaw removed it. There was, however, enough evidence to show its form and it was restored as part of the history of the building. Of the bosses in the oriels there was no record. They were restored in wood, with Yorkist badges in the south oriel and motifs reflecting Courtauld interests in the north. I should perhaps add that this is not a pure hammer-beam roof: the hammer posts, instead of standing on the hammer beam are tenoned into it—a weaker form of construction.

I should like to add a few words on what the hall may have looked like on feast days, when the king dined there and not in his private apartments. There would be special hangings on the walls and fine cloths on the tables, varying with the importance of their occupants, all of whom were graded according to the rules of the Court. A feature would be the 'subtleties'—triumphs of the pastrycooks' art, like ships in full sail. Trumpets sounded when the king was seated and there was a band in which strings were very much in the minority.

Table etiquette was governed by the absence of forks, which did not come in until early in the seventeenth century. This meant that food had to be eaten either with a spoon or with the fingers—hence the elaborate arrangements for hand washing before and after meals. Roast meats were eaten in small portions presented by the carver on the end of his knife. Carving was an important craft with

a vocabulary of its own and it was thought a great honour to carve at the High Table for the king—his carvers were knights at least.

Roast meats were recognizable, boiled meat was not. It was the practice either to cut the meat (or fowl or fish) into gobbets the size of a penny or to grind it into a mess with pestle and mortar. It was then drenched in sauces, whose strength was regarded as a merit. Witness even Chaucer's Frankelyn: 'Wo was his cook, but if his sauce were poynaunt and sharp'. It seemed that the better the cook the more he disguised his food. It should, however, be remembered that the raw material (of the actual preparation of which I prefer to say nothing) might be over-ripe and 'poynaunt' sauces necessary. The feast would end with hippocras, spices and comfits and often there was an entertainment followed by dancing.

I should like to end with a brief account of three entertainments which took place at Eltham in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Occasionally the entertainment might be an impromptu affair, devised and acted by the courtiers themselves. One of these came about with the return of King John of France to England in 1362. Froissart says that though he made straight for the 'moult bel manoir' of Eltham, where Edward III awaited him, he did not arrive till the middle of Sunday afternoon. So to fill up the time till supper there were 'grans danses et grans caroles', in which the young Lord de Courci, who was to marry Edward's eldest daughter, sang and danced splendidly when his turn came.

Most entertainments were however set pieces, which usually took place at the great feasts and particularly at Christmastide. Of this, my second example, the text survives: 'a balade made by daun John Lidegate at Eltham at Christmasse, for a momynge tofore the Kyng and Qwene', dated about 1430. It begins:

*'Bacchus that is god of the glade vyne,
Juno and Ceres acorded these alle three . . .
Send nowe their giftes unto your Majestee:
Wine, whete and oyl by marchantes that here be,
Weeche represent unto Youre Hye Noblesse
Pees with youre lieges, plente and gladnesse.*

This suggests actors in costumes, perhaps representing gods or merchants or both, and introduced by someone like a herald reciting the verses.

The term 'mumming' was replaced after the middle of the century by 'disguising', which early in the next century gradually gave way to 'maskeler', 'maskelyn' to mask, as seen in my last example. This was a grand affair, which took place at Eltham on Twelfth Night, 1519 before Henry VIII and Queen Katherine. It was written and produced by William Cornish (or Cornysse) who

was Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal from 1509 till his death in 1523. During that time he was responsible for most of the royal entertainments, including the pageants at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. A favourite of Henry VIII's he combined the parts of musician, poet, dramatist and actor.

For scenery a castle of wood and canvas was built at the screens end of the hall. It was probably decorated with royal badges, perhaps set in lozenges painted in the Tudor colours of green and white (or silver), like those shown above the Queen's gallery in the Great Tournament Roll of 1511. The costumes, mainly in the Tudor colours, were supplied by Richard Gibson, Serjeant of the King's Revels and Tents.

First came a performance by the Children of the Chapel of *Troylaus and Pandor*, a play by Cornish, now lost but believed to be based on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyd*. Cornish played the part of Cressid's father, Chalchas the priest, in a mantle and a 'bishop's surcoat'. Cressid was 'dressed as a widow of honour in black sarcenet . . . and . . . Dyomed and the Greeks like men of war.' Then Cornish appeared as a herald, clad in yellow satin, and 'cried and made an oy', that three strange knights had come to fight three from the castle. There followed a fight at barriers by men-at-arms, the defenders in green and white satin and the attackers in red and yellow sarcenet, the contest ending when the combatants 'with naked swords fought a battle of twelve strokes'.

A queen and six ladies, presumably played by the Children, then issued from the castle 'with speeches after the device of Mr Cornish'; and the professional part of the show ended with seven musicians singing 'a melodious song' from the battlements.

Now came a 'maskeler', one of the first recorded: a masque in which there came from the castle six lords and gentlemen and six ladies all 'disguised' and richly apparelled. The heads of the ladies were adorned with 'gold of damask'; they wore stomachers of crimson damask and their white and green dresses were 'set with H and K in yellow satin'. Dancing followed.

Among the production details recorded are the provision of 265 $\frac{3}{4}$ yards of white and green satin for ladies' costumes; a double cloak for Troylus and a doublet for 'Eulyxes'; and a barber was paid 4d for washing and trimming the Children's hair.

NOTES

1. I have relied for much of this address on the Thorpe plan of c.1603, first published by W.H. Godfrey in 1912, the relevant volumes of *The King's Works* (ed. H.M. Colvin) and on Mr Humphrey Woods account of his excavations in *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* (1980).
2. *The Household of Edward IV: the Black Book and the Ordinance of 1478* (ed. A.R. Myers, 1959).

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