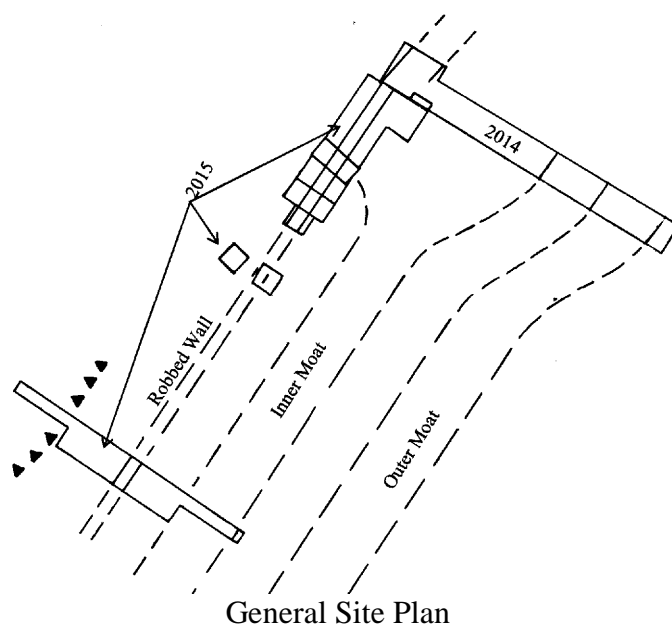


Excavations at Elsyng Palace 2015 (Site Code FXK15)

by Martin J. Dearne

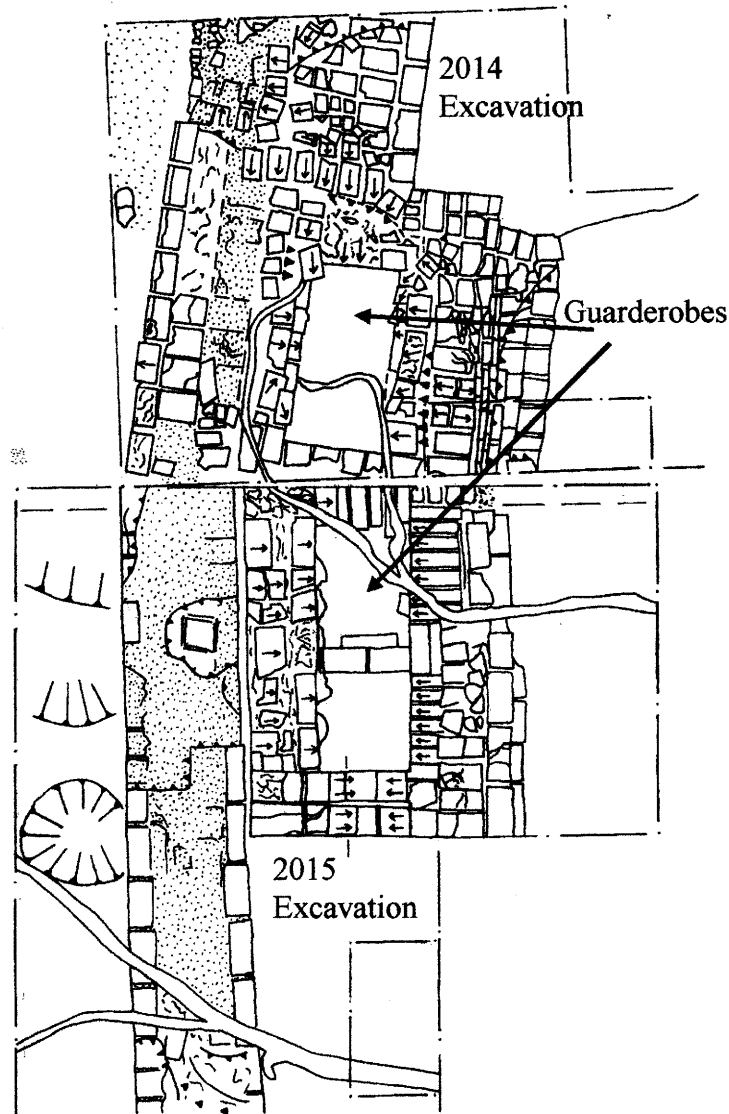
(Illustrations by the author and Neil Pinchbeck)

The annual excavations at Henry VIII's palace of Elsyng in the grounds of Forty Hall (now in their 11th year) often bring to light the unexpected requiring us to modify our growing picture of the plan of the palace and to change our excavation strategy part way through the dig. And 2015 was true to form. In 2014 we identified a garderobe chute projecting from the facade wall and discharging into the inner of two moats on the south side of the palace. So in July 2015 we aimed to trace that wall further west and examine the interior of the range of buildings the chute clearly showed lay behind the wall. Trouble was we couldn't find the wall till half way through the dig, just a shallow slot on its line that seemed too narrow to be anything to do with it. So we had to spend a couple of days backtracking towards and eventually right up to last year's trench to see if the wall had turned at some point. To cut a long story short though it hadn't. That slot had in fact been the robber trench where the wall had been completely removed during palace demolition in c. 1657. Why it seemed too slight to be the palace wall then emerged; last year's garderobe chute had in fact been towards the east end of the range of buildings and we had been within centimetres of the point where the facade wall changed from that substantial one forming the front of a residential block to a much slighter one, probably as it ran on to the west just enclosing royal gardens.



General Site Plan

Whereas the substantial wall had defied complete demolition the slighter one had been entirely robbed away; or nearly so. Because a short length of it survived immediately west of the 2014 work for the good reason that sometime in the palace's history a second garderobe had become necessary at the end of the residential block and had been built onto the outer face of this slighter section of facade wall, making that bit of it too hard to fully remove.



East End of the Site Showing the Second Garderobe Attached to the Narrower Wall Which was Robbed Out from Just off the Bottom of the Plan

In fact this second garderobe chute may have been quite a late addition (?from after the palace ceased to be a royal residence and was sold to Philip Herbert (Earl of Montgomery, later Earl of Pembroke) in 1641). Certainly it had been tacked on to the facade wall and it appeared that the inner moat had been filled with rubble here to provide some of its foundations, the flow of the moat being diverted to actually run through both garderobe chutes which lay side by side. Much about the slight construction of the chute's walls and evidence for a brick arch and perhaps interior wooden shuttering also leads us to believe that its superstructure was of wood not brick.

This dig unlike that in 2014 did not focus on the moats themselves – though we found enough to show how the inner probably curved away from the actual facade wall of the palace as one went west. Rather much of it was concerned in the end with demolition rubble. As in 2014 the area around the end of the residential block was covered in this and the new garderobe chute filled with it and it proved very interesting. Plenty of brick and tile and pulverised mortar inevitably, and that included a few more of the cut or moulded bricks that indicate something of the elaboration of the palace's architecture. But this year a notable haul of pottery, a lot of it evidently in use around the time the palace was demolished and comprising (as in 2014) a large number of drinking vessels and jugs, but also everyday dishes, pipkins (cooking vessels) and big kitchen bowls. It may be that late in the palace's history this area had become fairly domestic in character. But it may not always have been so, for there were, for instance, a few sherds of a high status Venetian glass ?goblet, a probably pewter belt fitting decorated with ivy leaves, a copper alloy 'pendant' (probably sewn to an elaborate Tudor or Elizabethan dress) set with rock crystal and a probable walking stick mount imported from Germany.



Rock Crystal Set Pendant (Length 2.8 cm)

The most surprising finds though were in the fill of the garderobe chute where there was a concerted deposit of window glass and some cames (the leads that held the individual usually diamond shaped or triangular ‘quarries’ or small panes of glass which went to make up a whole window or ‘light’).



One of the Site Team Within the Garderobe Excavating the Glass

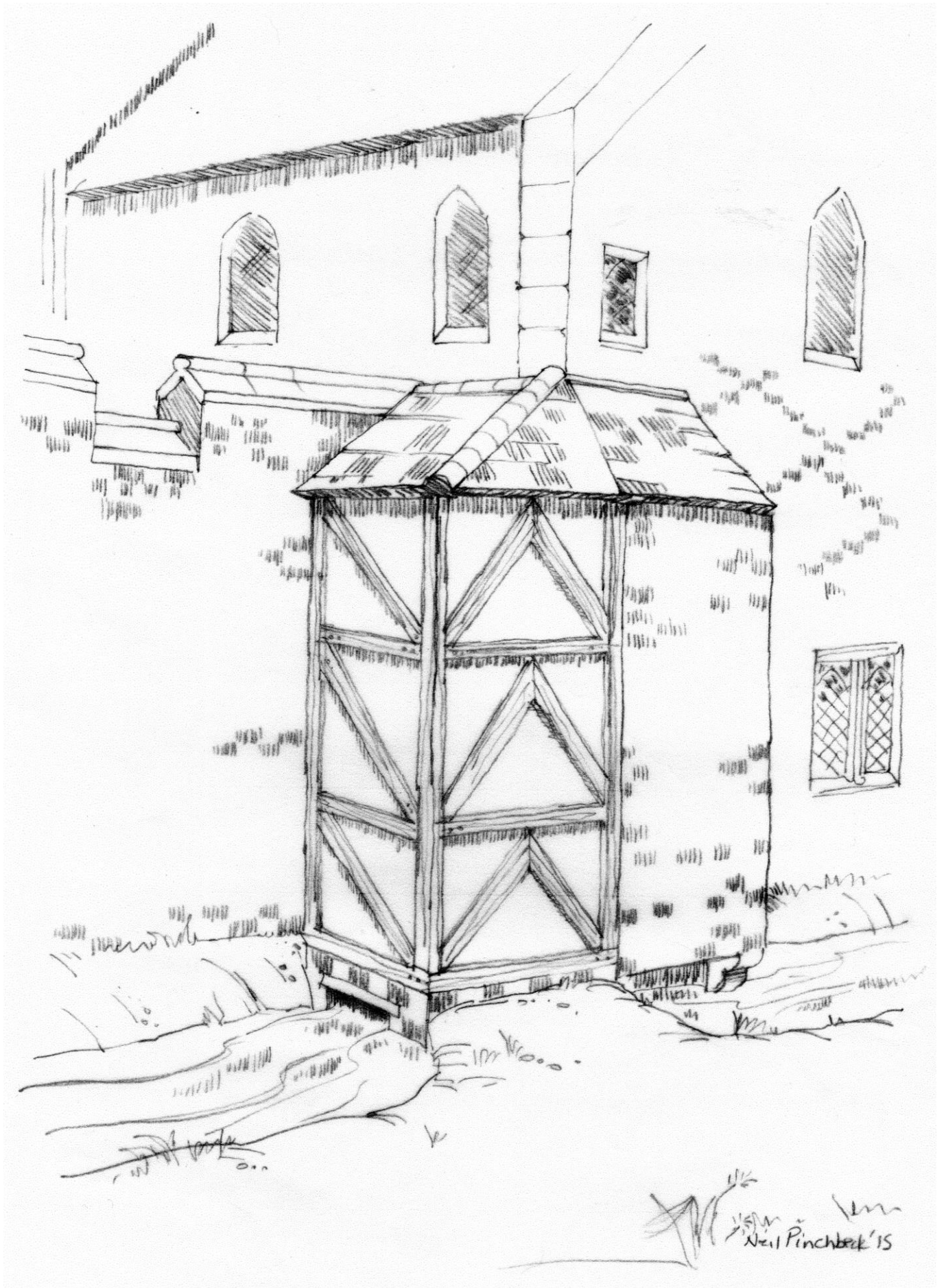
Both glass and lead were often recycled in the seventeenth century – indeed there was so much solidified molten lead about we suspect that they were remelting it into blocks as they demolished this part of the palace. Thus, neither are that common finds, but here were about 180 fragments of window glass and 22 from cames. Almost certainly someone in the demolition crew had stood over the remnants of the garderobe chute separating lead from glass, didn’t think some of the glass was worth salvaging and

hadn't been that careful to recover all the lead either. It was a jigsaw puzzle but eventually 11 complete or partial quarries were isolated – diamond shaped, triangular or truncated triangles. The star of the show though – which was picked up on by local, national and even the American archaeological press – was a complete (now discoloured) glass quarry still set in its lead comes which showed it to be from the top or bottom edge of a light with diamond shaped quarries flanking it. Not quite unique, but very rare indeed.



The Complete Came Set Quarry

Thanks to all who took part in the work, to the borough for its support, the museum service for the coincident public event we always run at the end of the week's digging and to Historic England (formerly English Heritage) for permission to excavate; and we hope to have another opportunity to be confused by the twists and turns of the plan of the palace in 2016 !



Possible Reconstruction of the Outside of the Residential Block Where the Two Garderobes Entered the Moat by Neil Pinchbeck