

Excavations at Elsyng Palace 2017 (FXO17)

by Martin J. Dearne

(Photos by the author and Neil Pinchbeck)

The annual excavations of the late fifteenth century courtier's palace and later Tudor royal palace of Elsyng in the grounds of Forty Hall, now in their thirteenth year, produced some exciting results in July 2017, not all of which there is the space here to cover fully. For the past few years we have been gradually investigating part of the south side of the palace with the aim of revealing the whole of one of its buildings which lay behind the (double moat fronted) facade wall of the Tudor palace. By 2016 we had identified three rooms within it, one with a glazed tile floor and a stairwell. But its exterior walls, except on the south, were still to be found, how substantially built it was remained unknown and it seemed likely that there were further rooms in it to find. This proved to be the case when an extended excavation opened seven new trenches and cleared the usual large deposits of demolition rubble to reveal numbers of new walls, floors and other features.



For the first time in this area we found evidence of the fifteenth century home of the Earl of Worcester which Sir Thomas Lovell, one of the chief ministers of Henry VII, had rebuilt to form the palace. Though this was mainly in the form of a single wall and one drain. However, we were evidently at the western edge of Worcester's house because, in preparation for its extension by Lovell c. 1486, the west of the area we are focused on had had to be cleared of trees as shown by the digging and backfilling of a tree removal

pit. The building in this enlarged palace we are gradually excavating can now be said to have been trapezoidal, probably around 21.00 m east west and from 15.00 to 20.00 m north south. The 'robber trench' where its fairly modest west wall had been removed on its demolition c. 1657 was located early in the work and a much much larger one on the east seems to suggest that the building may have occupied a corner formed by the (south) facade wall and a major dividing wall between the inner and outer courtyards of the palace. It seems therefore to have been largely timber framed on the west and north, relying on these more major brick walls to support it. Indeed, on the north there was no wall as such as far as we could tell. Rather, a large open brick drain seemed to mark the end of the building here and a timber screen wall may have sat on brick based timber columns along its southern edge.



The large open brick built drain probably marking the north side of the building

Inside the building at least seven rooms can now be identified, separated by dwarf brick bases for timber walls. The plan of the building's rooms was very irregular and many, including the largest, evidently had floors of rammed pebbles and chalk lumps on a bedding of crushed brick. On the east side of the building the rooms were smaller, but at least two had brick floors and these seem to have been service rooms, one of which was perhaps a scullery (or a bakehouse/kitchen). Both brick floored rooms had been modified over the lifetime of the palace with new floors lain over old ones and one furnace or oven probably demolished, floored over and re-sited.



The successive brick floors of the scullery/bakehouse with its west wall on the left

Being a scheduled ancient monument regulations about what we can and cannot remove are strict so some of this relies on hypotheses we cannot e.g. lift floors to prove; and projected work in 2018 may tell us more. But the room shown above certainly had an early patterned brick floor around some sort of feature that was removed and overlain by a new piece of flooring. And both were covered by a new patterned brick floor (when one of the room's walls was also rebuilt) later in the life of the building, quite possibly when a (?new) furnace or oven that still functioned when the palace was demolished c. 1657 was built.



The firing chamber of the furnace or oven with adjacent brick floors and (top left) the end of a plinth which would have supported a superstructure

This furnace or oven was probably the most interesting find of the work – its well preserved sunken fire chamber still had the soot from its last firing on its brick floor, we were able to study how parts of it were built of brick but the back of it of mortared peg tiles (which would have retained and spread the heat better) and to one side of it we excavated its ash pit. Though only the base of one side of its superstructure survived at least in the area excavated (the rest of the furnace/oven and any others will hopefully be revealed in subsequent work), it seems clear that this room was part of the service buildings of the palace and the building we are excavating may well have had accommodation for palace servants above such rooms.

Though the fill of the major drain and the ash pit allowed us to recover evidence such as fish bones, egg shell fragments and of course animal bones that tell us about the diet of those living here at the time, most artefacts and animal bones came from the demolition rubble (which, however, probably included a lot of material redeposited from palace rubbish dumps during that demolition). One particular area of rubble in the bakehouse produced kilograms of bone from sheep/goats and to a lesser degree cattle which suggests, as we might expect, a meat rich diet for those living here. And it was probably washed down with plenty of beer and wine. Thus, there were a notable number of decorated sherds from Frechen Bartmann ('Belarmine') jugs and several glass wine goblet fragments of earlier seventeenth century date.

Whilst a lot of seemingly unimpressive finds (like shaped bricks and small fragments of stone) are in fact building up to give us a picture of how both the courtier's and royal palaces would have looked and where

their materials had been sourced, inevitably it is the small personal items that have the most immediate impact. This year, for instance, they included an iron buckle, copper alloy pins for attaching lace collars and cuffs and some copper alloy studs.

The story of this one palace building is though not yet complete. There are questions remaining about exactly how many rooms there were on the east side of it and about how big the room with two superimposed brick floors was and whether it had only the one furnace/oven or a number of them. There is also the question of whether the barn complex (excavated several years ago) joined the building we are in. Evidence on that point this year was equivocal and the analysis of the barn will have to be re-visited with further excavations in 2018 before we can be sure.

But this was probably the most successful dig ever on the site, notwithstanding that that meant the longest and most complex piece of post-excavation analysis that any Elsyng dig has required had to be undertaken to write the detailed archive report on it. It was also one of the best attended digs with dozens of volunteers from eighteen year old novices to long retired seasoned campaigners every day enthusiastically excavating side by side. Many thanks to all of them and to those who were involved in the organisation of the work or its post excavation phase and we hope to see at least as many again when in 2018 we may well be undertaking not one but two excavations on the site.



The Two Successive Brick Floors Under Excavation