

The Palace of Southwell Norman Summers 1976

The official residence today of the Bishops of Southwell is a modern house, known as Bishop's Manor, built on the ruins of an earlier Palace of the Archbishops' of York. The exact form of that Palace is difficult to determine because documentary evidence about it is very fragmentary, but examination of the remains and of the few documents still existing does tell us a great deal about it.

The most authoritative account of the founding of Southwell Minster was given by Sir Frank Stenton in a lecture delivered in the Minster on 22nd September 1956 during the celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of its foundation, and this account was later recorded fully in the Transactions of the Thoroton Society Vol.LXXI of 1967. He traced the grant of Southwell to Oskytel, Archbishop of York, by Eadwig, King of the English in 956. Archbishop Oskytel almost certainly built the first church here, and established a group of clergy to conduct the services and administer the endowments. The Chapter of Southwell was then a College of clergy (ie a body of ordained priests and not a monastic house), and as such answerable directly to Rome; the Archbishops' function was limited to that of the Visitor, but they seemed throughout the ages to have maintained firm control in spite of a rather tenuous official position. Beverley and Ripon were the two other Collegiate foundations in the See of York, and similar in status to Southwell.

The Archbishops must also have established a residence at Southwell quite early, because it was recorded that Archbishop Aelfric died here in 1051. Archbishop Gerard also spent much of his time here until finally, in 1108, he went for a walk after dinner in the garden adjoining his lodging, and fell asleep but never woke again. This was regarded as a shocking affair because, after his death, a treatise on mathematics and astrology was found under his pillow - heretical studies in those days for a churchman.

By the later middle ages the Archbishops' residence here must have been of considerable importance, apart from the Prebendal and Chapter estates: they maintained three parks in the district, as well as that adjoining the Palace, most of the land being leased out as farms or plantations. Hockerwood Park in the north-east corner of the parish by the hamlet of Normanton contained 120 acres; Norwood to the west 100 acres, and Hexgreave Park four miles to the north-west 700 acres. The Palace was part of Southwell Park, also known as the Little, or New Park, of 132 acres, some of which was open as common pasture. It also contained the Lord's Well from which the town took its name, and two large fish ponds which provided fish for the household on fast days. Many people will remember the sunken football pitch by the dumble on the east side of the present recreation ground which had been made in 1947 by the draining and further excavation of one of these ponds.

The commonest form of manor house of this status in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the first floor hall, reached by an outside stair, with cellars for storage below, and sometimes

with extra chambers above the hall for other sleeping accommodation. By the thirteenth century this gave way in importance to the ground floor hall with its obviously wider scope for the provision of more ancillary rooms. We see then the evolution of the Great Hall, open to the roof, heated by a central hearth in the earliest examples, the smoke amongst the rafters finally drifting out through louvres of tile or stone at the ridge. The Hall commonly had a screened passage across one end giving access to storage rooms - buttery, pantry and larder - and at the other end a dais leading to parlours with chambers over for the principal private apartments. Other rooms necessary for the activities of such a large and important household would later be developed around a central courtyard, often at first floor level, with minor rooms for servants and for storage below.

At Southwell, the walls of the old Palace are of sandy limestone known as Waterstone, or "skerry" locally, found in the clays of the Keuper Marl in the area. This stone, although durable, is too rough in texture to be squared and carved, so that freestones from Mansfield and Bolsover Moor had to be transported for the squared quoin stones and for carving in string courses, window tracery, and other fine work. There are no remains which may be positively identified as part of the first house we might expect to have been built. The earliest details now to be seen are the arches incorporated into the hall of Bishop's Manor, with the central doorway in the south external wall in line with the centre of the three, and these are all late thirteenth century in type. Then there are the mouldings on string courses and on drip stones over some of the window heads in the courtyard walls of later, fourteenth century design. Most of the remaining details of the windows, doorways, and fireplaces are of the fifteenth century.

We may assume, therefore, that by the late thirteenth century, the house was essentially a Great Hall at ground floor level, lying north-south approximately on the site now occupied by the Bishop's residence. This Hall had a cross passage at the south end, and three arches in the south wall, the outer two leading to buttery, pantry, and other storage rooms, and the centre arch framing a passage to the outside on the south, and probably leading to an early external and detached kitchen. There are several examples of such external kitchens still existing, that at Glastonbury Abbey being one of the finest and as late as c.1400 in date. The Great Hall in this position is further substantiated by a fine corbel still to be seen high on the wall in the corner of the minor staircase in the north-west corner of Bishop's Manor, which may have carried one of the principal members of a hall-type roof. Sir William Dugdale, writing 'The Monasticon' in 1655, attributes the rebuilding of Southwell Palace to Archbishop Thoresby in 1360, so that it was probably he who constructed the original range of courtyard rooms, incorporating this thirteenth century Hall into the west side. Later John Kemp, Archbishop of York 1425-52, carried out extensive works here; it was recorded in 1436 that William Ryke was given for life a newly built chamber over the entrance porch and ten marks a year in consideration of his services in connection with the new building of the Archbishop's mansion at Southwell; and a latin rhyme of the time, translated, reads that Kemp "built in Southwell a beautiful manor and decorated it with costly furnishings". These two quotations show that Kemp at least gave the final shape and much of the fine detail to the Palace, even if he did not do more.

The principal rooms of the other three sides of Archbishop Kemp's Palace were all at first floor level, probably with only minor accommodation and storage below. At the north end of the Great Hall, and occupying the north-west corner of the courtyard was a fine room, restored in the nineteenth century, described by eighteenth century writers as the Great Hall - an error repeated many times since but which, in that form and position, must have been the Great

Chamber, or Parlour, reserved for the Archbishop's own use and for members of his personal household. This chamber is so completely fifteenth century in character that Kemp, if he did not build it, certainly thoroughly remodelled it in the fashion of the time. At the east end of the north range is still the great gable, surmounted by the remains of a cross and containing the fragments of a fine fifteenth century window. This would have been the Chapel, and between this and the Great Chamber would be further rooms for the Archbishop's own use. The south and east sides of the courtyard were the lodgings for distinguished guests and principal members of the household. This arrangement is frequently seen in great houses of the period and consists of large first floor chambers (forerunners of the "bed-sitter") open to the roof to expose a highly decorative structure, and with Garde-robres conveniently placed between them. These are in square tower-like projections placed in the outside walls, a single one on the east, and a double one on the south wall. Between these and at the south-east corner of the courtyard is an outstanding example of these mediaeval sanitary arrangements comprising four seats grouped around a central shaft and separated by short walls to provide privacy. Remains of fine examples of fireplace are also in these outside walls for the heating of these lodgings, and the whole shows a standard of comfort provided in the lodgings which was then available only in the great houses of the period. One major feature which has never been satisfactorily explained is the gable, with the remains of another fine fifteenth century window, at the south end of the east range of rooms. In some early accounts of the building this was assumed to have been a Library, but in this position it seems more possibly to have been a principal lodging, and the Library, if one existed in the Palace at all was more probably on the north side with the Chapel and Archbishop's Parlour, where all signs of it have been lost in the subsequent demolition and decay.

The Palace, as the Minster itself, weathered the storms of dissolution during the reign of Henry VIII and remained a habitable, and even sometimes a favourite residence until the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century. No less than fifteen Archbishops had lived here, some for long periods. Cardinal Wolsey stayed during the summer of 1530 on his journey northwards, when his fortunes under Henry VIII were rapidly declining, and is said to have complained of the smoking fireplace in what is now the Bishop's Study. This fireplace was removed from its original place on the south wall in the reconstruction of 1964-65, and is now on the cross wall on the east side of the room, and although this move has undoubtedly improved the view into the garden, its placing on the cross wall is historically incongruous in a fifteenth century building. It is unlikely in any case that the Archbishop maintained a personal apartment amongst the service rooms on the ground floor in this range, so that the story, colourful as it is, must be applied elsewhere in the Palace. Edwin Sandys was the last Archbishop to reside here and died in Southwell on 10th July 1588, his tomb now standing in the north transept of the Church.

Kings have also stayed here; Richard I in 1194, John in 1213, Henry III in 1258, Edward I in 1281, Edward III in 1331, and Richard II in 1395. Finally, during the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, both sides in the conflict made use of the Palace in turn; the Commissioners of Scotland lived here at one time, as did Charles and his Queen for a brief period. The troops of both sides, however, damaged the structure to such effect that when Parliament eventually issued orders for its demolition, little remained to be done. Undoubtedly much of the stone was carted away to be used in later rebuilding of houses and other structures in the town; as Shilton quaintly put it in 1818 "were every feather stuck in its own wing, many a mansion in the Town would totter at its base". The two eighteenth century engravings of the

Palace ruins [shown in the original] are from the records in the Minster Library, and were originally reproduced in William Dickinson Rastall's History of Southwell in 1787. The view from the south-east is particularly interesting in showing the three arches to the service rooms and the external door in the south wall mentioned above.

Part of the Palace survived in habitable condition. The wing projecting westwards, part of the range of rooms on the north side of the courtyard containing the Great Chamber, was converted to use as a Sessions House and part of it, with further building added on the site of the Great Hall, was leased as a house in the eighteenth century. The Borthwick Institute at York has correspondence of Richard Becher, the Archbishop's Steward 1757-75, concerning the leases of this house; the Hon. John Byng, in the diaries of his travels throughout England in 1781-94 wrote "at a small distance from the Church remain those ruins of the Archbishop of York's Palace, which enclose a garden at one end of which is the Sessions House, wherein resides one of the Vicars (who all seem to be, with the rest of the Choir most comfortably, nay superbly lodged). A beautiful old chimney yet endures"; and Shilton, in his History of Southwell of 1818 said "the Great Hall has long been converted into a dwelling house, and is now occupied as a very respectable seminary for young ladies, under the direction of Mrs Williams. In the remaining part, now called the Court Chamber, the Justices of the Soke of Southwell hold their sessions."

When the Diocese of Southwell was created in 1884, the problem of a suitable residence for the Bishop was not immediately solved. The Right Reverend Edward Trollope, Bishop Suffragan in the Diocese of Lincoln, bought the house and ruins from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1881 for £1600, and restored the Great Chamber, renewed the roof and windows, and built the stone staircase at the east end. Dr Ridding, the first Bishop of Southwell, however, lived in the eighteenth century house built by the Cooper family on the ruins of the priory of Thurgarton beside the Church there, and it was not until 1904 that an official residence was provided in Southwell itself. The building of the present Bishop's Manor was then carried out by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to the design of W.D. Caroe, and occupied in 1907, on a site which has seen continuous occupation for over nine hundred years.

In preparing this account I have been indebted to Mr K.S.S. Train for access to his notes on Southwell prepared from documentary sources, and to Mr M.W. Barley for assistance in the interpretation of the Palace ruins.