

Elsyng Palace Excavations 2021
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(Illustrations by Neil and John Pinchbeck and the author)

Though delayed until August and September, and minus the usual public outreach activities, the Enfield Archaeological Society did manage to run two weeks of excavation at Elsyng Palace in the grounds of Forty Hall in 2021. Having completed the excavation of the south west range of the outer court of the palace in 2019, the objective was to try and locate the inner gatehouse of the palace (an objective held over from 2020 when we could not of course excavate because of the pandemic).

The inner gatehouse (Fig. 1) would have been one of the largest and most impressive of the residential blocks of the palace and would have marked the transition from the outer (service) court where most of our excavations have taken place to the inner court with its accommodation for the royal family, parts of which were excavated in the 1960s, but which is now too afforested to allow further excavation. Documentary evidence gave us reason to believe that the gatehouse would have run broadly at right angles to the south west range, so at least its eastern side might well be found within the western of the Lime tree avenues that cross the site. In addition it was thought possible that a previously excavated brick built ?water supply channel running along the north side of the range might have fed into the moat known to have fronted the gatehouse.



Fig. 1: The likely form of the inner gatehouse

In the event we had a lot of trouble tracing the ?water supply channel further because repeated tree planting in the avenue had damaged it, but eventually it was found and ruled out as feeding the moat (it now seems likely that it fed a cistern in the outer court). Traces of the gatehouse itself also seemed to be absent at first, what we found comprising two or three external rammed pebble surfaces, one flanked by a little gully filled with demolition rubble. However, a little further west than we had initially thought it might be from the (admittedly very limited) documentary evidence we had, and as always towards the end of the dig (!), another rubble deposit became deeper and deeper and was found to be filling a cut into the ground so large and deep that not even both sides of it were within our trench despite expanding it twice (Fig. 2). Almost certainly a robber trench where a substantial wall had been removed, the cut suggests that we have indeed located some part of the gatehouse. Which part remains to be seen as it would have been a very large structure including things like projecting stair towers and we will need to see its walls, or the trenches from their robbing, at several points before we can judge how what we have found relates to the rest of the building.



Fig. 2: Excavation of the gatehouse robber trench in progress

The rubble fill itself though was of interest because it included quite a lot of pottery such as many many sherds of a decorated Delft so called ‘drug jar’ (Fig. 3), several clay pipe bowls and things like a large iron knife that had been bent double before being thrown away. Indeed, the excavation produced quite a range of finds. For instance, we recovered the rims of two Hertfordshire Greyware jars of the twelfth or thirteenth century, adding to the evidence for activity before the palace was probably first built in the 1430s, a copper alloy book clasp, two separate triangular sectioned legs from heavy pewter or highly leaded copper alloy vessels or pieces of furniture and two jettons or gaming counters. And there were further fragments of the decorated Frechen Bartmann salt glazed stoneware jugs and bottles that have been a feature of our excavation finds over the past few years (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3: Delft ‘drug jar’ decorated in blue and yellow (probably mid C17th)



Fig. 4: Salt and Cobalt Blue glazed Frechen Bartmann ware bottle rim with the top of a face mask