

The July 2023 EAS Excavations at Elsyng Palace (Site Code FXV23)

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The 2023 Elsyng excavations, approaching our twentieth almost consecutive year exploring the palace and marking 60 years since the EAS rediscovered it, were probably the most productive since the 1960s. Though rained off a couple of days, two weeks of thankfully not too hot weather saw sufficient progress on the moat between the inner and outer courts of the palace to regard it as understood well enough to move on to the west and look for the inner gatehouse we know controlled access between those two courts of the Tudor, and presumably earlier, complex of buildings (Fig. 1). We think too that we have found it on an artificial raised platform that the moat would have flanked. But we still have to confirm which walls belong to it and which to other buildings.

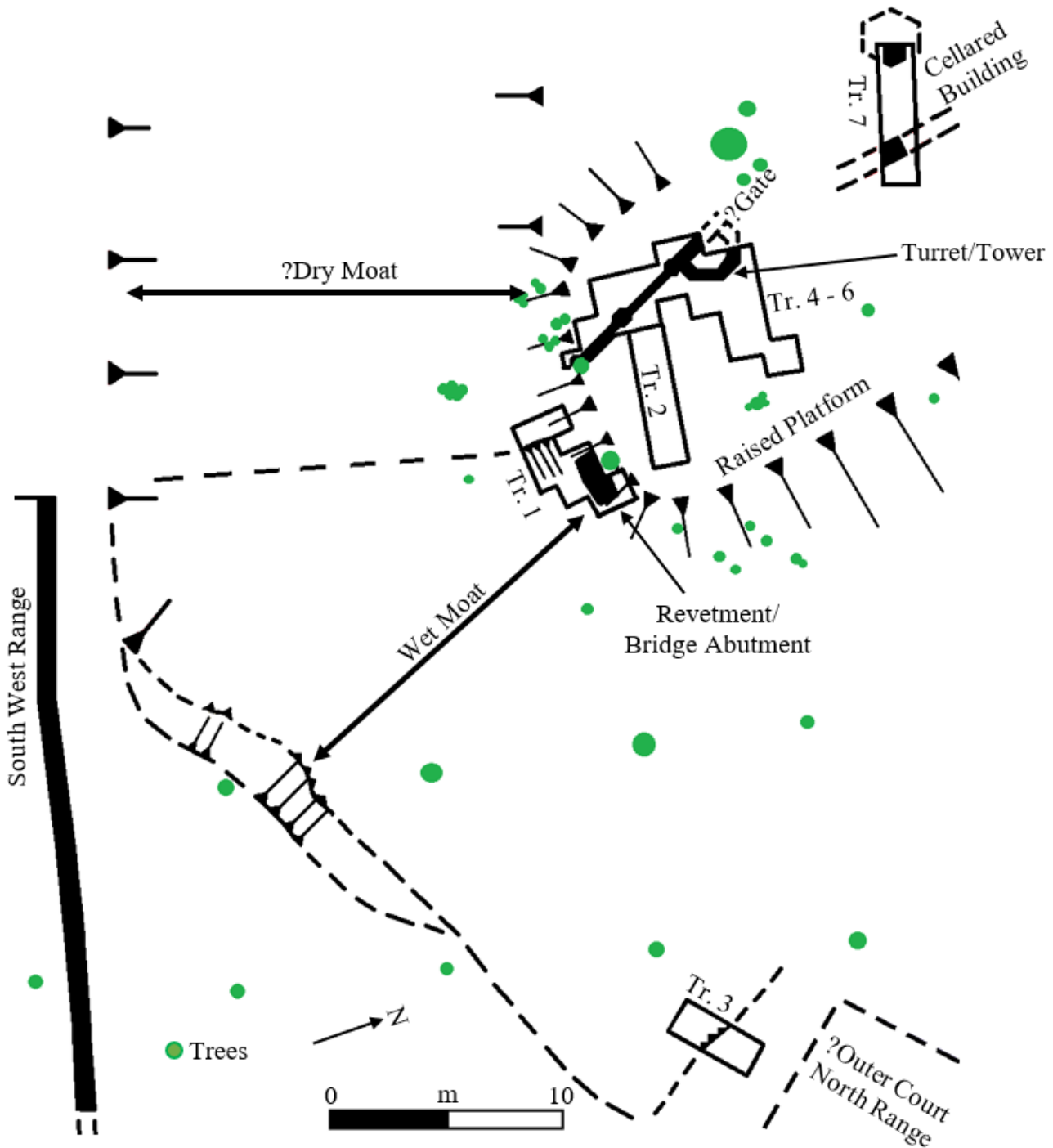


Fig. 1: Simplified general site plan showing the 2023 trenches

Excavation of two of our seven trenches this year (Trenches 1 and 3) allowed the moat to be confirmed as up to 15 m wide and about 33 m long. It is hypothesised that a western arm of it may have headed off north beyond the area in which we were excavating (which is something to investigate another year), but basically it fronted this raised platform with a connecting, probably dry, shallower moat also defining one (south) side of that platform. So the platform may have appeared to have jutted out into the moat at an angle. Where this dry moat met the corner of the platform in Trench 1 we excavated a brick built feature that probably revetted the platform, but may also have been the abutment for a footbridge from the south west range of the palace that we spent many years up to 2019 fully excavating. Where the main bridging point of the moat is is yet to be determined, but we were able to confirm in Trench 3 that it shallowed as it approached the probable end of the outer court's north range.

The platform, though now all too encumbered by self set trees, clearly held important buildings and other structures meant to look impressive and it will take more than a single season of excavation to understand them fully. But one that we encountered an exterior wall from in Trench 7, as well as a very large, brick built, multi-angular roof support column within it, seems to have had a large cellar, though it was too deep to fully excavate (Fig. 2). Evidence of the construction date is restricted to the type of mortar in use, but would be consistent with what we believe was the first phase of the brick built palace, likely belonging to somewhere around 1430. There was evidence though for modifications sometime after 1486, probably to do with replacing the cellar roof and perhaps, as a length of the wall had been cut away, inserting a new entrance with steps down into the cellar (though if so they were later removed, perhaps to salvage the stone they would have been built of). That cellar too might well have gone out of use at some point in the lifetime of the building (?when Elsyng became a less frequently used royal palace) as it seemed to have been partly infilled before the building was demolished.



Fig. 2: The interior of the wall of the cellared building, cut away on the left, perhaps to insert (later removed) steps into the cellar

It initially seemed logical to suspect that what we had found was part of the inner gatehouse, but during post excavation analysis it became clear that it didn't lay directly between the outer and inner courts, rather it was off to one side of their meeting where the inner court runs further north than the outer. Documentary evidence – though it is ambiguous – seems, however, to place another inner court range including the royal chapel to one side of the gatehouse and the current tentative hypothesis is that this is the cellared building we have found part of. Whatever it is though when the palace was demolished (c. 1660, though there are just hints beginning to emerge in the finds that bits of it could have been left standing longer) the cellar was used as a demolition material dump. Here thick deposits of rubble and especially mortar (probably cleaned off of bricks taken away for resale) produced the largest collections of worked stone and shaped brick to date from the site. Amongst them was evidence for large, finely carved Limestone window settings (Fig. 3), further (? post 1486) windows set into decoratively shaped brickwork, internal brick pilasters and particularly a series of pieces of the jambs

or side uprights, lining blocks and possibly elaborately carved overmantels of stone fireplaces, quite possibly ones original to the c. 1430 build.



Fig. 3: Part of a Limestone window setting

Elsewhere on the platform, to the south of the cellared building, but with a large tree and two big holly bushes in between, preventing us seeing how they related to each other, were further brick walls in Trenches 4 - 6. These seem to be rather later in inception, probably belonging to after c. 1550 (so maybe built under Elizabeth I or even James I and VI), and so far all seem to be free standing and very well constructed. They so far comprise a long wall, which incorporated the bases for three octagonal brick columns, running across the platform and leading to a wider wall fronted by a pentagonal turret or tower (Fig. 4). That might well be one side of a gateway and, if it is, the gatehouse proper might well be just beyond it to the west. It may be in fact that the platform had been extended to the south at this time and the new wall and a gate constructed to re-emphasise the separation between the service and residential parts of the palace and provide a grander façade to those approaching the latter.



Fig. 4: The wall with octagonal columns and the turret or tower looking north

These discoveries came at a rather opportune moment as the production company that make the BBC2 programme ‘Digging for Britain’, fronted by Prof. Alice Roberts, had arranged to join us and film the excavations for two days in our second week as part of a series (transmitted on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2024). A range of artifacts also emerged this year, especially from the work on the moat, the rubble fill of which at one point in Trench 3 had a concentration of pottery and glass items in it. The more photogenic included two or three FREC (Frechen Bartmann) salt glazed stoneware jugs carrying so called beardman faces (Fig. 5), but there was also much of a Border Ware pipkin (three legged pottery saucepan), the top of a seventeenth century glass flask and the base of a large glass ‘case bottle’. Perhaps the most significant item was though the smallest, part of a very fine writhen glass bangle that may have been made in Venice.



Fig. 5: Frechen Bartmann beardman jug

Elsewhere finds were more sporadic. There were further Penn floor tiles of c. 1350 – 90, a mangled coin of Henry III, dated to 1248 – 50, and several sherds of Hertfordshire Greyware, all testifying again to pre-palace activity on the site, even though we can only speculate as yet on what form that took. In the mass of demolition material in the probable cellar in Trench 7 much excitement was caused by what seemed to be a coin sticking out of a piece of mortar, though once extracted in post excavation work it turned out to be a circular mount with a rose design, perhaps a decoration applied to a piece of body armour. From the same mortar deposit though was a complete late Medieval to early Modern copper alloy purse bar (Fig. 6), comprising an upper belt attachment element and a lower one the leather purse hung from, connected by a swivel which, remarkably, still worked perfectly.

Whilst the post excavation side of the excavation this year took longer than usual since we found so much that had to be analysed in detail, it does mark the beginning of a new phase in the Elsyng project as we begin to explore the higher status parts of the palace and thanks are due to all those who worked on site, to Forty Hall Farm for providing equipment storage facilities and to Historic England and the borough Parks Department for their continuing support of the excavations. Work in 2024 will hopefully see us understand the structures on the raised platform more fully and add yet another piece to the evolving jigsaw that is the Elsyng Palace site.

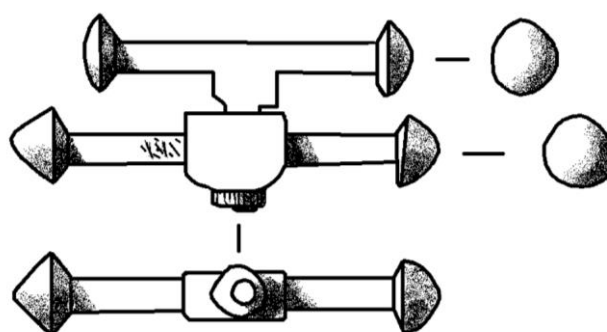


Fig. 6: Copper alloy purse bar