

Excavation at Elsyng Palace, July 2016 (Site Code FXL16)  
by Martin J. Dearne

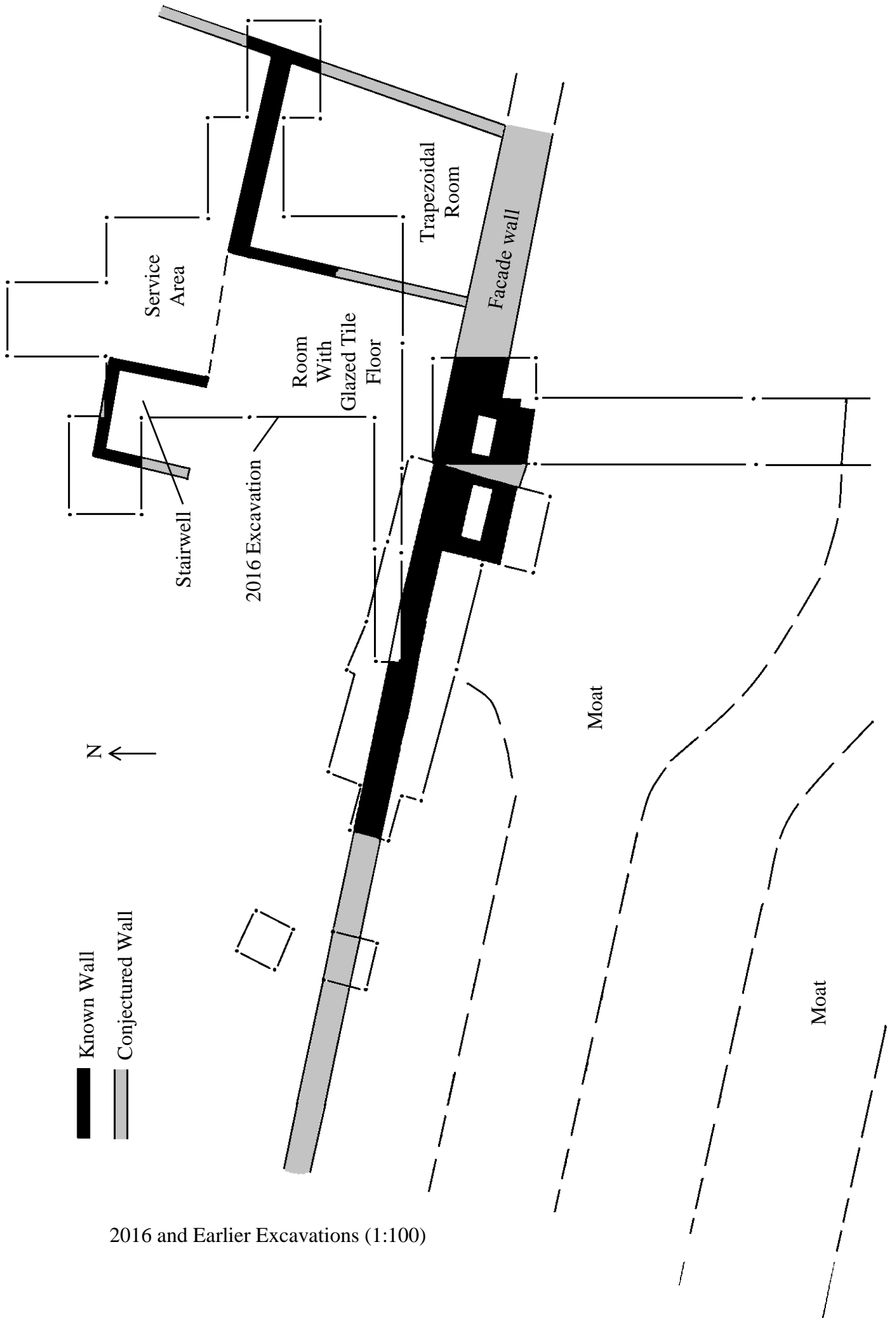
EAS excavations at the fifteenth century courtier's palace and sixteenth century royal palace of Elsyng (in the grounds of Forty Hall) are now in their twelfth year and in 2016 the plan was to build on the two previous years in which we had revealed the fronting moats and facade wall of the south side of the palace at what we think is the eastern side of the inner court. Clearly from the presence of garderobe (toilet) chutes discharging into the moat at least part of the facade wall here fronted a building, but what sort of building, how large was it and how grand (or just functional). With permission from Historic England and the support of the borough parks department and Forty Hall we therefore undertook six days excavation (along, with the Museum Service, the usual public outreach day, plus schools visits programmes), opening a large area immediately north of the 2014/15 trenches. Almost immediately we were confronted by a veritable sea of demolition material, but with walls poking through it. Since it is that demolition rubble – all the bricks, mortar, roofing tile, bits of worked stone, smashed pots, pieces of ironwork, coins, and animal bones – that on this site at least provides so much of the information about what a given part of the palace looked like and was used for, it took time to record and clear it.

But when we had done so we had layed out before us not just the plan, but also some of the floors and a complete stairwell from what was clearly in fact quite a large (how large we are not yet sure) at least two storey building, probably of moderately high status, but quite probably timber built on dwarf brick walls (half timbered is the slightly misleading technical term).

Just behind the facade was a long room which had a mortar base for its floor of glazed tiles (hundreds of fragments of which came from the demolition material). Separated off from it by a timber partition which had been founded on a low wall built of mortar and roof tiles was a smaller trapezoidal room which had had any floor removed by large demolition cuts. To their north a change to a rammed pebble and chalk fragment floor, which was still largely in place, showed where what was probably more of a service area began. And projecting into it was a complete stairwell that had led off of the first room. Its edges were defined again by dwarf walls built as much of mortared roof tiles as bricks and which would have carried timber constructions to support and box in the stairs, which were also supported by a central possible newel post foundation. On the east the trapezoidal room had slightly sturdier east and north foundations of brick, though still probably only for half timbered walls. Whether the eastern of these was an external wall was unclear – and determining that must await further excavation – though either way there was a badly damaged cobbled surface beyond.



Looking North over the Room that had a Glazed Tile Floor, with the Trapezoidal Room to the Right and the ?Service Area and Stairwell (top left) Beyond



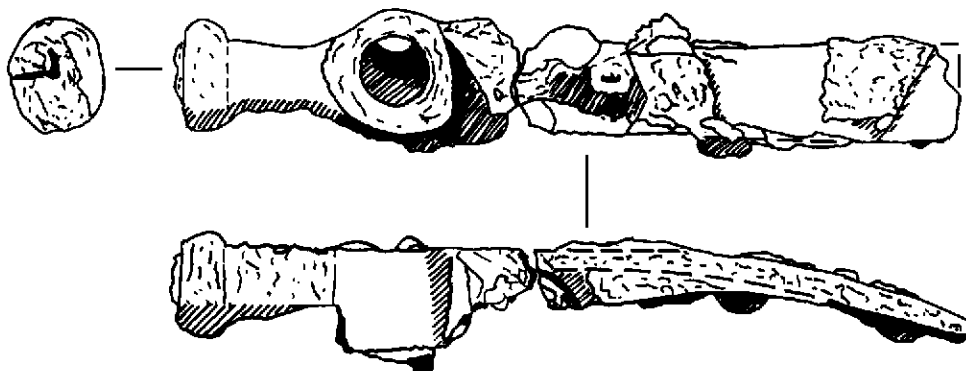
2016 and Earlier Excavations (1:100)

The demolition rubble provided hints of some of its fittings with parts of moulded brick window surrounds, a fragment of coloured window glass, window leads, parts of a brick column base, small fragments of carved stone and some structural fittings in the form of iron bars as well probably as chest bindings. However, demolition rubble of course reflects the state of – and the portable items within it the use of – a building not when it was built, but mainly when it was knocked down. And we know the palace had been out of royal hands for decades by then and parts of it were probably rented by its main owner to a number of well to do but hardly royal tenants. Quite likely it was they and their servants that had left behind a lot of the pottery and other small items found including jettons (counting or gambling tokens), the head of a carved bone hairpin, copper alloy dress pins and lace tags, several large but just functional flagons, a range of salt glazed drinking jugs, the base of a glass pedestal beaker, kitchen bowls, a horse harness buckle, a sythe, iron knives and a range of food bones that suggested a relatively high status diet, including rabbit, chicken and goose, though beef and lamb/mutton may have been the most important meat elements of the diet. Indeed, an exceptional find was an iron roasting spit.



Iron Roasting Spit (Length 29 cm)

Equally though some finds probably derived from the demolition crew not the former residents as one was an pick/hammer head broken into two pieces; and rather later probably, as it came from topsoil, someone had lost the mount from a walking stick (the second to come from this small area) while promenading around the estate that succeeded the palace from c. 1700 on.



Iron pick/hammer head