

EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH HERITAGE'S RECORD OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

MONUMENT: Bishop's palace

PARISH: WOOKEY

DISTRICT: MENDIP

COUNTY: SOMERSET

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 27961

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): ST51794562

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

The monument includes the earthwork remains of a medieval bishop's palace and grounds, where these have not been affected by modern development. These lie mainly within but partly adjacent to a large moated enclosure on low lying land in a loop of the River Axe. The only upstanding building of the period, in the area of the scheduling, is now a farmhouse, which is Listed Grade II*. The site was the subject of a survey by the Wookey Local History Group in 1992-3.

The palace stood in the northern part of its grounds, where the farmhouse stands today. An area of earthworks to the east of the house indicates the sites of former buildings.

The main grounds of the palace were encircled by a moat, enclosing a large polygonal area of over five acres. The course of this moat is shown on the tithe map of 1839 and it can be traced in places as an earthwork; to the south it has been re-worked to form a later water leat. To the north it has been encroached upon by a realignment of the river for garden landscaping in the 19th century. In the south east corner its accompanying bank can be seen diverging from the later leat, and to the south west as a shallow rise and break of slope running across the field. In the paddock behind the farmhouse the moat is visible as a slight, broad curving depression, and it continues in the main field to the south as a very shallow depression towards the track. The angle at the west end of the northern arm of the moat can be traced clearly in the garden of Abbey Cottage, where it is separated from the river by stone revetting, and further south west by a low bank. It then runs through the 1960s housing development of Abbey Close, surviving as a break of slope in the gardens of nos 6 and 9, and as a hollow between two mounds on the road island. This area is not included in the scheduling.

A record of 1557 indicates that the palace complex included a great hall, parlour, a new parlour, buttery, wine room, a new chamber, little chamber, broad chamber, three chambers over the 'old' cloister, armoury, galleries, chapel, kitchens, brewhouse, larders, cellar, enclosed yard with running water and fish troughs, gatehouse, dairy house and stable. The present farmhouse has been identified as being part of the 'new' buildings of this period.

The grounds were entered from the south east, where a gatehouse was recorded. On the right were an ox house, hay house, stable and pigsty; on the left (south) were a cow house and walled barton of two acres. There also appears to have been an entrance to the south west. Earthworks of buildings are visible on the south, with lynchets and banks suggesting sub-divisions of this part of

the grounds. The mound in the south east corner of the field is a modern soil heap.

Within the grounds were a garden behind the house, an orchard, a piece of land called the Coney Grenne with a barn, a small barton, a barton called Culverhey with a 'fayer large' dovecote, and a four acre orchard. The acreages listed for these indicate that they extended beyond the moated enclosure. In 1839 fishponds are also shown. The 1557 record makes no mention of the moat.

The site of the dovecote is believed to be indicated by the rectangular earthwork beside the track on the west edge of the main grounds, and one of the fishponds can be identified as a shallow hollow, filled in recent years, to the south. In the field to the south of the moat are the linear ridges of an orchard, part of which has trees on today. This can be identified as the large orchard recorded as being within the curtilage of the palace in 1557.

The tithe map of 1839 shows a subsidiary moated enclosure, two ponds and two small paddocks to the west. Traces of this moat and a scarp corresponding to the site of one of the fishponds are visible, and the outline of the small moat is preserved by an 18th century wall.

From more recent times, a modern water leat cuts across the site, following much of the line of the former southern side of the moat, and there is a 19th century farmyard on the west side of the present farmhouse. In the 1960s a housing development, Abbey Close, was built over the north west corner of the site. Finds of medieval pottery, stonework, tiles, a thimble and an iron arrowhead have been recorded from one of the gardens.

The site in medieval times was one of the palaces of the bishops of Bath and Wells. Their residence at Wookey is first documented in 1224 in a licence to Bishop Jocelin to use oak trees from Cheddar forest for its repair. In a 1330s history of Wells it was written that the chapels and chambers of Wookey and Wells were built 'magnificently' by Jocelin. A mention of Bishop Bubwith in 1418 speaks of him being in a walkway between the hall and chapel of the manor of Wookey. Major repair work is again recorded in 1461-2, including the re-roofing of the hall with lead. The survey of 1557 records new buildings and rooms, and mentions an old cloister. The palace was obviously much updated and changed in appearance by this time, as befitted such a residence. In 1839 the tithe map marks the position of the moat and fishponds.

Excluded from the scheduling are all structures above ground, although the ground beneath these features is included.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

Bishops' palaces were high status domestic residences providing luxury accommodation for the bishops and lodgings for their large retinues; although some were little more than country houses, others were the setting for great works of architecture and displays of decoration.

Bishops' palaces were usually set within an enclosure, sometimes moated, containing a range of buildings, often of stone, including a hall or halls, chapels, lodgings and a gatehouse, often arranged around a courtyard or courtyards.

The earliest recorded examples date to the seventh century. Many were occupied throughout the medieval period and some continued in use into the post-medieval period; a few remain occupied today. Only some 150 bishops' palaces have been identified and documentary sources confirm that they were widely dispersed throughout England. All positively identified examples are considered to be nationally important.

The palace at Wookey survives as a good example of its class, within contemporary grounds, and will contain archaeological evidence relating to its use and history. The low lying nature of the site suggests that waterlogged deposits will be present.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

Monument included in the Schedule on 13th August 1982 as:
COUNTY/NUMBER: Somerset 493
NAME: Site of Episcopal Manor House at Wookey

The reference of this monument is now:
NATIONAL MONUMENT NUMBER: 27961
NAME: Bishop's palace

SCHEDULING REVISED ON 26th September 1995