

ELTHAM PALACE

By ANTHONY EMERY

FEW people who admire Westminster Hall and the glories of Hampton Court realize that the impressive remains of another medieval royal residence still survive only a few miles from the heart of London. Despite its encirclement by unimaginative housing estates during the last eighty years, Eltham Palace still retains a quiet, almost rural aspect which undoubtedly contributed to the appeal of this site to successive monarchs during the later Middle Ages.¹

The manor of Eltham is first mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086 but we have no idea of the form or the date of the buildings which stood on the present site during the early Middle Ages. Henry III kept Christmas here in 1270 and Edward I issued several charters from Eltham, but it is unlikely that any surviving work dates from before 1295 when Antony Bek obtained the manor from Sir William de Vesci. Bek, the visibly wealthy and worldly bishop of Durham (1284-1311), only held the manor for ten years but during that time he built a new residence for himself in place of the earlier house. As a result of a sixteenth century plan (see below), partly confirmed by recent excavations, there is good reason to believe that Bek's work covered almost the same area as the present Inner Court and that it had octagonal towers in each corner connected by a curtain wall. The entrance gateway may have been in the middle of the south front.

In 1305,² Bek gave the manor to Edward Prince of Wales who succeeded his father, Edward I, two years later. Eltham was a favourite residence of Edward II and his queen and it was at her

¹ The earliest descriptions and drawings of Eltham Palace are among the best that have been made. J. C. Buckler *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Royal Palace of Eltham*, 1828, is a useful and for its date, particularly competent description of the remains as they existed at that time. In the same year, H. Dunnage and C. Laver published their beautifully drawn *Plans, Elevations, Sections . . . of the Great Hall of the Royal Palace of Eltham*. In 1831, Pugin published seven detailed drawings of the hall in his *Examples of Gothic Architecture*.

The Story of Royal Eltham by R. C. C. Gregory, 1909, was the work of an enthusiastic local romantic writer. There is an important description of the palace in *Some Famous Buildings and Their Story* by A. W. Clapham and W. H. Godfrey, c. 1913, but that in *East London* by the Royal Commission of Historic Monuments, 1930, is sketchy. The work carried out by Courtauld is briefly summarized by W. H. Godfrey in *The Architectural Review*, October 1936, and in more detail by Christopher Hussey in *Country Life*, May 1937.

Since writing this paper, the Ministry of Works has published a guide to the palace by D. E. Strong (1958). I would like to thank Dr. Strong for kindly reading my paper and offering many useful suggestions.

² Brit. Mus., Har. 43, D.12.

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request that the existing stone retaining wall was built against the inner side of the moat. John, the second son of Edward II, was born at Eltham in 1316 and the palace became one of the favourite residences of Edward III and Richard II. Both kings made considerable alterations to the palace and until Henry VIII's reign it became the practice for the royal family to spend many of their Christmases there.

The scheme to rebuild, or at any rate drastically alter the palace, dates from Edward IV's reign. Alterations had been made to the chapel in 1427-28¹ and Henry VI had ordered that the accommodation should be improved for the benefit of his queen in 1445.² There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Henry intended to build a new residence at Eltham. Such a scheme was far more in accordance with Edward IV's approach to life than that of his predecessor.

Eltham Palace was the first important royal domestic structure to be built since the close of the preceding century when Richard II had begun reconstructing his hall at Westminster. Henry IV had too many worries in coping with his newly gained throne and too little money to undertake any large building operations other than finishing the work begun by Richard. Henry V spent most of his time and money fighting the French while Henry VI, amidst the growing turbulence which surrounded his throne, was mainly concerned with his religious and educational foundations at Eton and Cambridge. Edward IV spent the early years of his reign from 1461 trying to consolidate his royal position after the ineptitude of his predecessor. The more stable conditions which followed the death of Warwick the Kingmaker in 1471, combined with a steady improvement in royal finances, enabled Edward to begin improving the accommodation in some of the royal residences.

In July 1475, Edward invaded Northern France. Eager to avoid any fighting, Louis XI offered to pay Edward 75,000 gold crowns at once and 50,000 crowns each year if the English army was withdrawn across the Channel. Edward gladly accepted such an attractive offer which may well have provided the financial backing necessary for his building schemes. Work had started in June on clearing the site for the new chapel of St. George at Windsor Castle and within a short time the reconstruction had begun of the royal manor at Eltham.

No records have survived concerning Edward's work except for an account for the last two weeks of September 1479, showing the "costs and expenses don upon the bildyng of the newe halle wtyn the manor of Eltham in the charge of James Hatefeld"³. Then follows the amounts paid to the freemasons, hardhewers (stone-masons), plumbers,

¹ P.R.O., E 101.496 No. 7.

² Brit. Mus., MS. Add. 4609, f. 205.

³ P.R.O. E 101.496 No. 21.

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carpenters, smiths, labourers and clerks and the cost of nails, iron, stone, lime and transport employed in the building. From this return we learn that money was being spent on "xxx grete spyknyggs (spike nails) for the hall roof weyng xxviii lb" and "x grete clamps of yron for the bynddyng of the principles". If the roof was being constructed in 1479, the foundations of the hall must have been laid in about 1475 and the apartment finished in about 1480.¹ According to the same return, stone was brought from Reigate and Kentish ragstone was used as well. The necessary stone and timber was brought by water to Greenwich and then transported by carts to Eltham. The total expenditure for the fortnight was £40 13s. 6d. It is likely, as Harvey suggests,² that the hall was designed by Thomas Jurdan, the king's master mason, and that the roof was designed by Edmund Graveley, the king's master carpenter.

We do not know how much work had been carried out by Edward IV before his death in 1483. In addition to the hall, it is probable that the buildings immediately east of it and the kitchens were constructed during his reign. The west front was almost certainly rebuilt by Henry VII for his successor was making alterations to it before 1530. This view is supported by Lambarde who wrote in 1570 that ". . . it is not yet fully out of memory that King Henry the seventh set up the fair front over the mote".³ Although the west front was mainly built of brick, only the outward facing walls of the north, east and south fronts of the Inner Court were built of that material for the inward facing walls were constructed of timber. This difference between the western and the other fronts may represent separate building phases of early Tudor work. Building was certainly taking place within the Inner Court during 1501 for the account book of Thomas Warley, Clerk of the King's Work, mentions expenses incurred in moving the chapel of the king and queen.⁴ As the account book also refers to repairs to the lodgings on the east side of the lower court, it is probable that the Green Court had also been reconstructed by the opening years of the sixteenth century.

We learn about Henry VIII's numerous alterations to Eltham Palace in a detailed report made for the benefit of the Comptroller of the Royal Works.⁵ As the report includes an order for a partition wall to be removed "that standeth next my Lord Cardynelles Bed Chambre", it must have been drawn up between 1515 and 1530 when

¹ It took five years to build the great hall at Hampton Court begun in 1531.

² John Harvey, *English Medieval Architects*, 1954.

³ Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*. Written in 1570 and printed in 1576.

⁴ Brit. Mus., Eg. 2358, f. 50. The chapel may have been a private oratory for the king and queen as the great chapel in the Inner Court was rebuilt a few years later by Henry VIII.

⁵ P.R.O. E 101.497 No. I.

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Wolsey was cardinal. The report orders various alterations to be made to the chambers of the king and queen, including the removal of several partition walls and the building of new ones, the addition of a new bay window and chimney in the queen's withdrawing room, the construction of a study for the king, the addition of shutters at the windows of the king's bedchamber, and iron rods with rings round the bay windows of the "newe lodgings". Henry ordered the old chapel to be taken down and a new one built in its place, twelve feet nearer the hall. It was to be constructed of timber set upon a stone foundation and covered with a flat lead roof. Other improvements to the palace included a new gallery from the king's chamber to the chapel, a new finial and vane on the hall and the repair of the drawbridge. Alterations to the gardens included the removal of old buildings, the construction of various new brick walks and fences and the planting of new trees (including plum and cherry trees).

Despite these alterations, Henry VIII preferred the palace of Greenwich where he had built a large range of buildings facing his new tilt yard. When Elizabeth I showed the same preference for Greenwich as her father, the great days of Eltham were over. A plan of 1590 records that some of the lodgings in the Green Court were already decayed while a survey made late in 1649 by order of the Commonwealth¹ states that the palace was empty and in need of so much repair as to be considered untenable. Only the chapel and the hall retained their wainscot although the buildings of the Great Court were still roofed. The manor was sold to Colonel Nathaniel Rich who soon began to demolish part of it. In 1663, the manor was leased to Sir John Shaw who did not live there but seems to have repaired the moat walls. The drawing made by Buck in 1735 shows that the majority of the Great Court had disappeared by that date. Nothing remained except the moat with its enclosing walls, the hall and some buildings which look as though they may have been erected in the late sixteenth and altered in the seventeenth century.

The site has not radically changed since the early eighteenth century although the hall was used as a barn until the present century. Between 1911 and 1914 and again in 1920, the Ministry of Works made necessary repairs to the roof and masonry but the site was still encumbered with a house, a hotel and various farm buildings until Stephen Courtauld acquired the property in 1931. In addition to building a large residence for himself and clearing the Inner Court, he restored the hall to its former splendour. His work included re-opening a number of blocked windows, restoring broken or missing window tracery, adding new bosses in the bay windows, and building a new parapet. He ceiled the roof between the rafters and replaced the

¹ P.R.O. E 317/8 Kent.

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little shafts resting on the hammer-beams and tracery round the pendants. Other work included adding a new floor, the woodwork behind the dais and the coats-of-arms in the windows. A sixteenth century fireplace discovered below the ground level was placed in the billiard room of the new house while some timbered gables which had survived from the early Tudor period were incorporated in its frontage.

The house built by Courtauld is now leased to the Institute of Army Education who also maintain the exceedingly attractive gardens created within the moat. Since 1951, the Ministry of Works who are responsible for the upkeep of the hall, have repaired beetle infested parts of the roof and excavated the foundations of the royal apartments on the west side of the Inner Court.

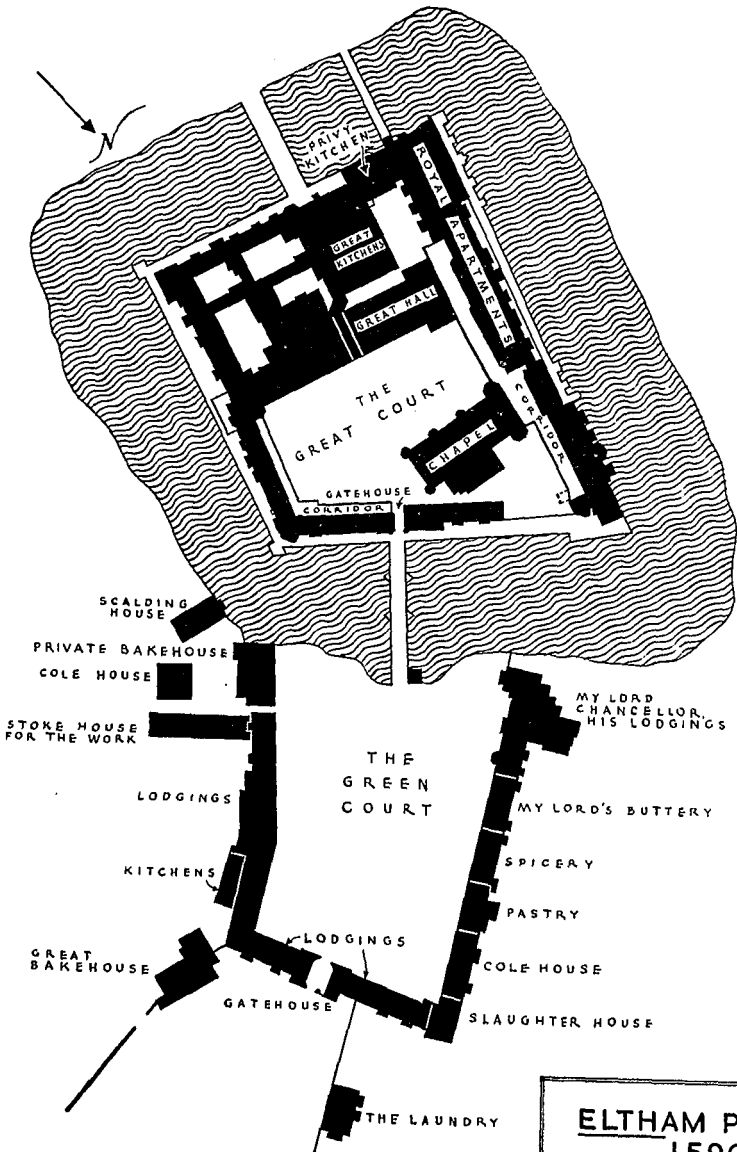
A ground plan of the palace made in the late sixteenth century was recovered by Walter Godfrey¹ from two papers kept in the Public Record Office and Hatfield House respectively. Contemporary with each other and drawn to the same scale, the one showing the Green Court² was signed by the Elizabethan surveyor John Thorpe and marked on the back "Eltham 1590" and the other found among the Cecil papers at Hatfield was endorsed "Eltham House". These plans indicate the names and purposes of many of the apartments in the palace towards the close of Elizabeth I's reign and their general accuracy has been supported by excavation. No royal palace prior to the seventeenth century has wholly survived to the present day. These plans are valuable because they add to our scanty knowledge of royal domestic architecture during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and relate to a structure which was rebuilt within a comparatively short space of time.

The edifice consisted of two courtyards and a forecourt (Fig. 1). Some indication of the size of the palace may be gained from the fact that the two courtyards and the moat covered an area of just over eight acres. At the close of Henry VIII's reign, Hampton Court covered little more than six acres.

The approach to the gatehouse of the Green Court was through a forecourt flanked by a large bakehouse on one side and a laundry and retaining wall on the other. The Green Court was an irregular-shaped oblong between 264 feet and 319 feet long and 187 feet and 213 feet wide. It consisted of a number of buildings reserved for the kitchen staff and a series of lodgings for people who were attached to the royal household. These two-storied buildings were ranged round three

¹ See Chapter IV of *Some Famous Buildings and Their Story*.

² P.R.O. M. PF 228.



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1590
 BASED ON THE ORIGINAL
 PLANS BY JOHN THORPE

20 60 100 140
 Scale of feet

A.H.E.

Fig. 1.



(Crown copyright : Ministry of Works.)

Foundations of the west front of the Inner Court.



(Crown copyright : Ministry of Works.)

Remains of Tudor bay windows at the south end of the west front.

PLATE III



(Crown copyright : Ministry of Works.)

Great hall from the south.



(Crown copyright : Ministry of Works.)

Northern bay window of the great hall.



(Crown Copyright : Ministry of Works)

Roof of the great hall.

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sides of a courtyard and the side opposite the entrance gatehouse was left open to the moat. The Elizabethan plan indicates by the thinness of the walls that all the buildings round the courtyard were timber framed except for the gatehouse which was built of stone or brick. This gatehouse possessed a wide entrance arch with a smaller entrance at the side for those on foot. The north-west range included a lodging with its own screens passage, hall, kitchen, chamber and parlour. In the same wing to the north were rooms used by the royal staff for the spicery, pastry, coal-house and slaughter house. On the opposite side of the courtyard were the private bakehouse and other lodgings which continued along the gatehouse range.

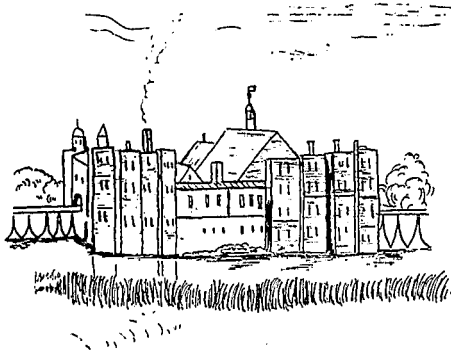


FIG. 2. Eltham Palace, c. 1650.

The Great Court covered an area of two and a half acres. It was entered through an impressive gatehouse approached by a stone bridge and drawbridge spanning the moat. The great hall lay directly opposite with a range of imposing apartments to the right. The latter were built along the whole length of the west front and consisted of two groups of bay windows at either end with a lower range and corridor between them. The extensive views from this range towards the towers and spires of London have not yet been completely disfigured by modern housing estates. A sketch of this frontage published by Peter Stent in the mid-seventeenth century (Fig. 2) clearly shows the bay windows rising directly from the moat for a considerable height with the hall and chapel roofs projecting above them and the gatehouse dominating the entrance to the court.¹ This drawing is particularly valuable because it is the only illustration we possess of a little-known but impressive royal building of the early Tudor period. The chapel, only a

¹ An extensive search has not indicated the source of this drawing. The only known copy of it is the one left in the hall by Stephen Courtauld to whom it had been given just before the Second World War by the owner of Chancellor's Lodgings.

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little smaller in size than the hall, projected far into the court from the western range and terminated close to the gatehouse. In order that its orientation should be correct, it did not lie quite parallel with the hall.¹ Other apartments connected by a timber cloister similar to that on the west side lay to the left of the gatehouse. Behind the hall range, various blocks of buildings were grouped round five courtyards. The largest block contained the kitchens which were placed to the south of the hall in preference to the more usual position beyond the buttery and pantry.² A covered way from the screens passage led to the gatehouse commanding the southern bridge. According to the Parliamentary Survey of 1649, there were thirty-six rooms and two cellars at ground level in the Great Court and thirty-eight rooms, together with various closets, at first floor level. The royal apartments were divided into the King's side, the Queen's side and the Prince's side and they contained seventeen, twelve and nine rooms respectively.

Symmetry in elevation and plan is to be found in medieval military architecture long before it was applied to domestic buildings. Houses like South Wingfield Manor (c. 1440-c. 1455) show that such ideas were being gradually established in the fifteenth century but that they were still only partially understood. Unfortunately, we do not possess much evidence about the elevations of the palace at Eltham and so we cannot be sure about the intentions of the builders. As for the ground plan, the irregular shape of the Great Court and the projecting chapel were a heritage from an earlier period³ though the conglomeration of courtyards and buildings behind the great hall and the adjoining rooms were probably not. The plan seems deliberate though it has few surviving parallels. The Inner Court of Eltham owes little to either the single or the double courtyard plan so popular during the later Middle Ages. However, a similar plan had been adopted not long beforehand by Sir Roger Fiennes who built his apartments and offices at Herstmonceux Castle round a number of courts within the confines of a moated area (begun 1441). Fiennes also built his hall in the same relation to the principal court and its entrance as Edward IV did at Eltham, and his entrance court was similarly surrounded by a cloister. The apartments which Fiennes reserved for his own use were built in the same proximity to the hall as those at the royal palace and the remainder of the site was similarly filled with rooms for officials,

¹ In a private letter (1957) Mr. Stephen Courtauld mentions that one or two trial trenches were cut across the Great Court during his restoration of the hall and that the foundations of the chapel proved to be several feet nearer the hall than shown on Thorpe's plan.

² A similar arrangement had been adopted by Lord Lovell at Minster Lovell in the second quarter of the fifteenth century.

³ The fact that the Green Court also lacks regularity is almost certainly due to the existence of earlier buildings on the same site.

retainers and servants grouped round small internal courts. Both residences also possessed a postern tower on the opposite side of the court to the main gateway so that the only important variation in the plan of the two buildings lay in the position of the kitchen and chapel.

The origins of this plan may be found in such buildings as the late fourteenth-century castle at Farleigh Hungerford in Somerset, but the fifteenth century examples were so complicated that their inhabitants probably felt that they were living in a human rabbit warren and the plan was not repeated again.

Hardly anything remains of the Green Court (Fig. 3) which is now attractively divided by a tree-lined road and the walls and gardens of several twentieth century houses. As the visitor approaches the moat, he passes on the right a picturesque row of half-timbered houses built during the early Tudor period. They are the only portion of the Green Court which has survived and were the northern part of the east wing of the lodgings which used to surround the courtyard. They are marked on Thorpe's plan as "My Lord Chancellor His Lodgings" and may have been occupied by Cardinal Wolsey. There is evidence that they have been remodelled from an earlier long, narrow, two-storied building which survives in part at the back of the present houses and possibly dates from the fifteenth century. These houses were so drastically restored between 1951 and 1956 that they only give a partial indication of what existed there in the sixteenth century. To the north-east of the Green Court is a brick gateway with stepped coping which is believed to have led to the tilt yard.

The bridge across the moat consists of four ribbed arches which become progressively narrower as the Inner Court is reached. Its dating is uncertain although a document of 1396¹ mentions that fifteen feet of ashlar stone was used for making a certain bridge and this could refer to the existing structure.² The moulding of the arches supports this statement but the use of bricks in between the ribs favours a late fifteenth century rather than a fourteenth century date. The original stone parapet was replaced by the present brick and stone coping in the nineteenth century.

Built in 1315-16, the greater part of the inner wall of the moat has survived all later vicissitudes. Constructed of Kentish ragstone, it stands about 14 feet high although it is now topped on three sides by Tudor brickwork. A contract of 1315³ gives details of this retaining

¹ P.R.O. E 101.473.3(i).

² This is the date favoured by Hussey, *Country Life*, May 1937.

³ P.R.O. Exch. Pleas 10 Ed.II m. 16. Printed in *Building in England*, by I. F. Salzman, 1952, pp. 422-24.

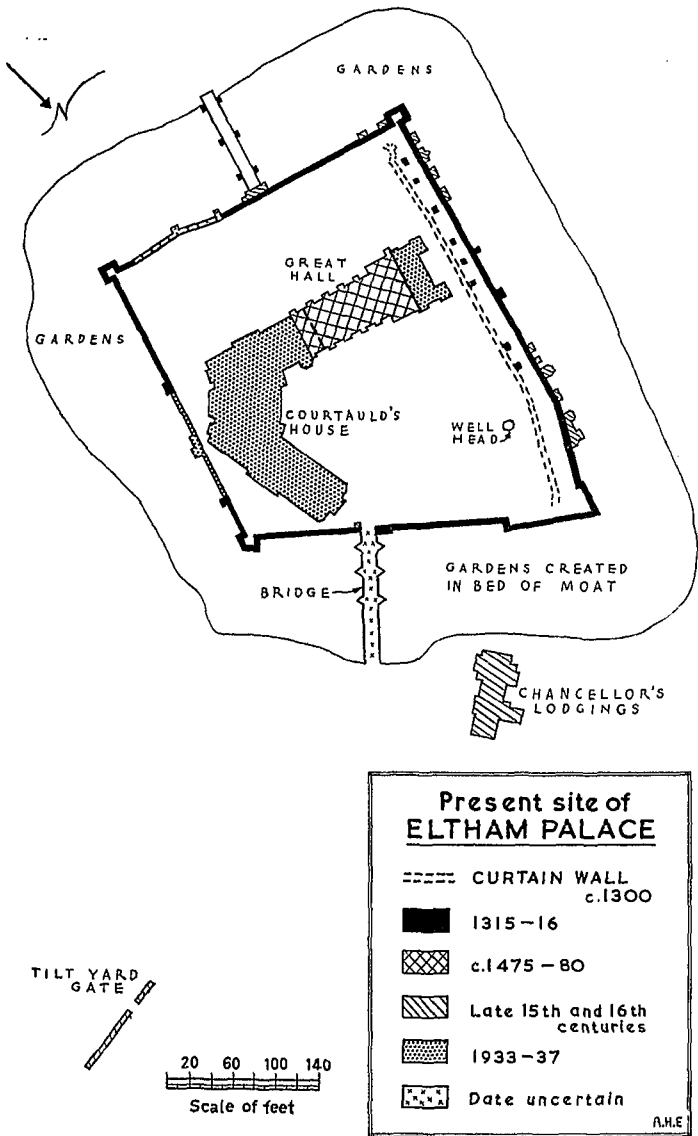


FIG. 3.

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wall which was to be built against the wall of the previous dwelling on a foundation of hard stone. Arch buttresses were to be built against the old wall at intervals of 18 feet. A record of the following year¹ indicates that the work was carried out in a very slipshod manner. The masons tried to build the wall thinner than was stated in their agreement and they built the buttresses with chalk and soft stone instead of hard stone. After being sued and imprisoned, the masons were released and ordered to rebuild the whole wall again in a proper manner. A mass of chalk filling found during excavations carried out by the Ministry of Works in the south-west corner of the court was possibly a relic of this episode.

The north side of the retaining wall, like part of that to the north-east, has been heavily restored by Courtauld who may have also inserted the three small gunports in the north-west bastion. The two-light window adjacent to the bridge was inserted in 1934 to light the room containing the heating plant of the house. The window was taken from under one of the gables to the east of the hall and the stone figures came from the Houses of Parliament. The retaining wall on the east side of the court has either been extensively covered with later Tudor work or else rebuilt by Courtauld, and the south wall has been so heavily repaired on different occasions as to be of little interest.

The foundations on the west side of the Inner Court are rather a jumble but two types of walling may be discerned, the one built of flint with the addition of a little ragstone and the other of Tudor brick (Plate I). The flint walling begins in the south-west corner with part of the base of a corner tower. From it run the footings of a curtain wall with the tops of the buttresses added in 1315 visible above the grass. Both they and the wall survive for nearly 100 feet before they are all but covered up by later brickwork. The wall emerges further north and terminates in the footings of another corner tower. This work is almost certainly part of the dwelling built by Bek. Scanty remains of clunch walling used in later medieval alterations were found during the excavations.

All earlier work was taken down to foundation level when the Tudor rebuilding began. The plan of this work, now partly revealed by excavation, generally agrees with that given by Thorpe although not always in question of detail. The remains of the bay windows projecting from the early fourteenth century retaining wall are best seen from the moat (Plate 2). Those to the south were built of red brick diapered with black ones, and their bases were formerly protected by stone facings. The unusual shaped central bay recalls those built at Windsor and Thornbury Castles during the early Tudor period. The four bays further north were also built in front of the earlier retaining wall but

¹ P.R.O. Exch. Pleas 10 Ed. II m. 15.

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the Tudor work was faced in imitation of medieval stone work. Some of the floor tiles laid in the bays have survived and a number of them may be seen in the connecting corridor. The prominent foundations of a large five-sided window behind this corridor have been exposed (Plate I).

There are a number of intriguing passages under the western frontage and the south lawn. Those to the south are very probably connected with the drainage system built at the orders of Henry VIII who stipulated that refuse from the kitchen was to be carried through a brick roofed passage built under the moat and carried into the park so that the air and moat near the royal apartments should no longer be polluted.

Apart from the entrance to the porter's lodge and the three timbered gables which have been incorporated into Courtauld's house, the only other surviving part of the Inner Court is Edward IV's dignified hall. Fortunately the walls have always remained in sound condition and the structure has not required a great deal of restoration. This magnificent apartment faces the entrance to the Great Court at an oblique angle (Plate III). It is built of brick faced with Reigate stone on the north side and roughly squared Kentish ragstone below the window sills on the south side. It is 101 feet long, 36 feet wide and 55 feet to the pitch of the roof.

As at Penshurst Place and Westminster Hall, there is no basement and entrance is effected at ground level. This entrance is surprisingly modest. It merely consists of a two-centred arch surmounted by a square head. Buckler, writing in 1828,¹ mentions that the spandrels were decorated with Edward IV's badge of a "rose-en-soleil" and these have been restored by Courtauld. Above the external arch of the doorway at the opposite end of the screens passage may be seen the remains of a corbel and the position of another one slightly to the right which would have supported a small canopy of wood or stone.

Five buttresses support the north and south walls at regular intervals and Buck's drawing shows that the parapet on the north side was originally embattled. The lower half of the hall walling is blank stonework relieved only by a slight batter nearly four feet from the ground. The upper half is filled with a row of windows grouped in pairs between each buttress. Each window has simple cinquefoil tracery and is divided into two lights under a two-centred head. Most of the window tracery and the stonework above the windows has been restored. The string course below the parapet on the north side and round the bay window on the south side is broken at regular intervals by a number of badly worn grotesques, some of which are animals. The roof has been re-tiled on several occasions for the lead which probably covered it in the fifteenth century would have been removed

¹ *The Royal Palace of Eltham*, p. 90.

during the Commonwealth. Henry VIII placed a finial surmounted by a vane on the west gable but this, like the louvre, has disappeared.

The hall at Eltham not only possessed the largest bay windows yet constructed in England but two of them were built to light the dais.¹ Formerly covered with separate pitched roofs, two-thirds of the outer face of each bay is filled with two conjoined windows of four lights, 25 feet high,² and the other third was left plain except for a small two-light window in the north bay lighting an internal lobby. It is a pity that the windows in the return walls have been squashed so close to the body of the hall for this unfortunate defect also draws attention to the change in the apex line of the windows. Nevertheless, the boldly projecting bay windows prevent the rhythmic patterning of windows and buttresses in the body of the hall from creating a monotonous exterior elevation.

The entrance door leads directly into the screens passage with two simple blocked arches on the left which formerly led to the buttery and pantry. The present screen replaced the original one which partly survived the eighteenth but not the nineteenth century. It was separated into five divisions, two of which were archways as at present. The other three divisions were panelled and each one horizontally divided in two places by a carved frieze above a four-centred arch.³ There was no gallery above the screen until the existing entrance was inserted by Courtauld.⁴

Part of the original brick walling shows beneath the windows inside the hall but most of it, following the original scheme, has been plastered and covered with curtaining. The imitation stone floor added by Courtauld replaced bare earth although a tile floor found in 1935 eighteen inches below the present level was believed to date from Edward III's reign. The hearth was not placed directly in front of the dais as shown on Thorp's plan but was situated in the centre of the available hall space.

The bay windows are larger externally than internally owing to the inclusion in their plan of a lobby which led from them to the royal apartments. These windows open from the hall by moulded two-centred arches, the internal width and height of the bay (Plate IV), which gives no indication of the ungainly joins noticed externally.

¹ John of Gaunt had built two bay windows flanking the dais of his hall at Kenilworth Castle (c. 1390-93). Flanking bay windows were also built at Great Chalfield (c. 1480), Oxburgh Hall, Suffolk (c. 1482), the Old Hall, Lincoln's Inn, London (1490-92), Middle Temple Hall, London (c. 1560-72), Emmanuel College (1584) and Trinity College, Cambridge (1597-1605). Several buildings have had a second bay added to a medieval hall at a later date.

² As the lower part of the south bay had been cut down in the nineteenth-century to admit farm carts, this has been renewed.

³ *Archæologia* 1782. The present screen incorporates the scanty remains of the original one.

⁴ Buckler, p. 90.

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The stonework above the doors leading to the royal apartments¹ is filled with blank tracery which reflects the patterning employed in the windows. The stellar vaulted ceilings are divided into two bays with modern wooden bosses replacing those which had decayed or disappeared.

The simplicity of the walls heightens the beauty and richness of the hammer-beam roof (Plate V). Built of oak and supported on small embattled corbels, it is divided into six bays. The main timbers are boldly moulded and the effect of heaviness is partially mitigated by the carving around the pendants and on the lights above the main timbers.² Additional rhythm is provided by the curved wind braces which fill each bay. This structure is not a true hammer-beam roof for the hammer-posts do not rest on the hammer-beams but are tenoned into them and project below as pendants. However, the weight borne by the hammer-beams is not very great owing to the low pitch of the principal arches. The pendants were at one time gilded, for traces were found by Courtauld of the yellow pigment on their under surfaces which formed the base for their gilding. The hexagonal louvre in the third bay from the upper end was added after the roof had been finished for the timbers were specially cut to receive it. It was removed by Sir John Shaw in the seventeenth century but the framing has been reconstructed by the Ministry of Works. Although undeniably impressive, the roof lacks the lightness and majesty of its royal predecessor at Westminster Hall.³ This is partly due to the use of the lower four-centred arch and partly to the replacement of winged angels by heavy pendants which seem to pull the structure downwards.⁴

The restrained style of Edward IV's hall at Eltham stands out in a reign noted for its pageantry and display. Compared with the richness of Lord Cromwell's hall at South Wingfield and Sir John Crosby's hall at Bishopgate⁵ (1466), Edward's domestic building programme strikes a subdued note between the rather more ornate structures which immediately preceded it and the flamboyant style favoured not long afterwards by the early Tudors.

¹ The idea of reaching the private apartments from doors in flanking bay windows was adopted by the Wiltshire squire, Thomas Tropnell, at Great Chalfield towards the close of Edward's reign.

² Compare the pendants with those built in stone one or two years later at the Divinity School, Oxford. The tracery round the Eltham pendants was added in 1935 but follows the original work which had disappeared. Buckler made a drawing of the last surviving example just before it fell down in 1817.

³ It is very similar to that at Beddington in Surrey built in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.

⁴ The hall at Oxburgh, built by Sir Edmund Bedingfield in about 1482 may have been modelled on that at Eltham. It was just over half the length of the royal hall, but the width and height of the two apartments was approximately the same. The Oxburgh Hall possessed a hammer-beam roof and had two flanking bay windows. Unfortunately, it was pulled down in 1775.

⁵ Taken down and re-erected in Chelsea in 1909.