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**The Bishop's Palace, Gloucester**

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# The Bishop's Palace, Gloucester.

By P.E. CHANDLER

THE OLD Bishop's Palace at Gloucester, now occupied by the King's School, is a large Victorian building replacing a mediaeval one on the same site. Perhaps surprisingly, its history has received little attention.<sup>1</sup>

Before the fourteenth century the Abbots of St Peter's dwelt in a range of rooms to the west of the cloisters, part of the present Church House. But around 1320 a *camera* was erected 'next to the Infirmary Garden' by John Wygmore, who as prior was responsible for many improvements to the abbey. Later in the fourteenth century a chapel was added, but no further changes appear to have been made until the time of the last abbot, William Malverne or Parker. He seems to have acquired a taste for building whilst Master of Works, and he extended or repaired both the Palace and the abbatial manor at Prinknash.

To Malverne's works we may attribute the oriel window in the gallery wall which still faces Pitt Street, and also some stained glass. One piece bears the initials W M, another the arms ascribed to the reputed founder of the abbey, similar to glass formerly at Prinknash and now in the cathedral cloisters. The stained glass was removed from the old Palace in 1860, as was some of the wood panelling. Much of the latter has since disappeared, but some fine oak now made into a sideboard includes Malverne's paternal arms of a buck trippant.

In 1541 the Abbot's Lodging became the Bishop's Palace. The detailed description in the Letters Patent founding the see, together with the plan and report made in 1856<sup>2</sup> enable a fairly detailed reconstruction of the Abbot's Lodging. It was mostly timber-framed over a stone basement level, similar to most of the domestic buildings of the abbey. Only the great hall, the chapel and the north wall of the gallery were completely of stone. Hospitality was extended to visitors as befitted their rank, and those of highest order were entertained by the abbot. To the west of the great hall was the court chamber, where these guests were received; to its south was the servants' hall. East of the great hall were more bedchambers,<sup>3</sup> the chapel and the abbot's own quarters. These had especially fine panelling, as had the long gallery which connected with another range in the east, whose use is uncertain.

In addition to the Palace, the bishop also had use of 'The Vineyard House' at Over. This was built as a country house for the abbots about 1350, and a hall was added a little later. It seems to have been a popular residence of the bishops, as it was conveniently close to Gloucester, but escaped the worst dangers of disease: one plague-ridden summer, a timorous bishop brought chaos

1. There is a brief description in St. John Hope's article (*Records of Glos. Cathedral*, III Part 1 (1885-97), p. 90-134), which includes reproductions of the plans of the old Palace made in 1856, relevant extracts from the *Historia* of the abbey, and the description given in the Letters Patent of 1541.

2. Church Commissioners File No. 10279. This file may be taken to be the source of all information for the period from 1856.

3. Some of these were demolished in 1691 (Lambeth Palace Library VXIB/2f/8; Wake's Register, 1, pt. 2, f.338).

to diocesan affairs by completely isolating himself in 'The Vineyard'.<sup>4</sup>

However, the see of Gloucester was poorly endowed, and it was impoverished during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I by a number of vacancies and several weak bishops. The expense of maintaining both houses was too great, and by the end of the sixteenth century the Palace was 'a very vaste, mellancollick, decaied and ruinous howse'.<sup>5</sup> It was left to the vigorous Bishop Ravis (1604-7) to pay for their repair, and to restore the water conduits at the Palace (the Full Brook ran outside, and in 1541 fed a stew).

During the Civil War the Palace was plundered and much damaged; in 1648 a Parliamentary Survey reported 'we . . . doe finde a greate parte of the saide House do be very ruinouse and not habitable';<sup>6</sup> it was later sold to Thomas Hodges of Shipton Moyne.

'The Vineyard' was also looted in December 1642, and later completely destroyed. The strategic importance of this hill overlooking the river crossing meant that Col. Massey had the site fortified and garrisoned, and the earthworks still stand ten feet high. It played an important part in the skirmishes leading to the battle of Barber's Bridge in 1643, but it had later to be abandoned to the besiegers of the city. The hill was subsequently let to Augustine Loggins, a Gloucester stonemason, and the stone was removed from the site of the house; the Parliamentary Survey revealed that of the house 'nothing remains but a few ruinous stone walls'. The land later passed to Alderman Thomas Pury, who used the rent for the relief for the poor and prisoners of Gloucester.<sup>7</sup> In spite of a reference to the contrary in the life of Bishop Frampton,<sup>8</sup> this seems to have been the end of 'The Vineyard'. The isolation hospital was built at the foot of the hill in 1897-1902.

To return to the Palace, the only considerable work done between 1660 and 1860 was that by Bishop Benson (1734-52). His changes, although only superficial, left the Palace looking much like an eighteenth century mansion. He added a rather incongruous classical front to the great hall (a hut of the same design still stands in the garden), and he filled the north window 'with coats of arms of painted Glass, chiefly Bishop Bensons Arms, which appear twenty times about the House'. This extract is from one of the letters descriptive of the Palace at that period written by Mary Yorke, wife of James Yorke, bishop 1779-81.<sup>9</sup> The great hall made 'an admirable Parlour this hot weather' or 'a good Dining Parlour, but I think I should be tempted to beg the favour of the *House Door* to remove itself out of it, at least at Dinner time, or in cold Weather'. However, lack of passageways led her to ponder 'in what manner we can connect the two ends of the House together without passing through the Hall'; a lean-to corridor was added by Dr Beadon (1789-1802). 'The Chapele with the painted window which I am told cost £300 is really elegant'; the window was by William Price the Younger, and was much admired by Horace Walpole:

'UpStairs I learn is another very good Room, but that there was no way to it except through the Bps Study & that some Years ago when Mrs Warburton graciously made a great Drum for the Ladies her Neighbours, his Lordship not chusing to make one of the party, nor caring to quit his Study, submitted to have a large *Screen* placed before him to conceal him from the Company passing & repassing. had the *Screen* fallen the *Eclaircissement* would have been almost surprising (tho more decorous) as that in the School for Scandal!'

But much of the Palace was dark, ill-aired and in poor repair, and when the sees of Gloucester and Bristol were united in 1836 it was decided to provide a new house near Bristol. The old Bristol

4. P.R.O. Court of Requests 2/163/90.

5. See *Trans. BGAS*, 91(1972), p. 193.

6. Glos. Record Office, G.D.R., G3/19.

7. *Calendar of Records of Gloucester Corporation*, compiled by W.H. Stevenson (1893), No. 1297.

8. *Life of Robert Frampton*, edited by T.S. Evans (1876).

9. Typescripts at Glos. R.O., D1137/2.

palace had been burnt down in the Reform Riots of 1831, and the £7,500 derived therefrom was devoted to the purchase of Stapleton House, four miles north-east of Bristol. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners were rather reluctant because of its poor communications with much of the diocese,<sup>10</sup> but in 1840 the estate was purchased for £11,000. Bishop Monk thought the house substantially fit for use, and wanted the addition only of a chapel and hall, but the Commissioners considered that the dignity of the bishop's successors would be impaired unless considerable improvements were put in hand. The chosen architect was Decimus Burton, and the works were completed by 1844 at a cost of another £11,000, the expense provoking the bishop's voluble protests. However, no sooner had Bishop Monk died than the Ecclesiastical Commissioners reconsidered the matter; this was probably due to the new bishop, Charles Baring, wishing to live at Gloucester. In July 1856 Ewan Christian, architect to the Commissioners 1850-95, surveyed the old Palace and recommended the measures he thought necessary to make it fit for habitation again. He considered the chief defects to be the lack of air and southern sunlight (the site was shut in on all sides) and the very decayed state of the eastern wing. His suggestions were to retain the hall, chapel and gallery, and rebuild the rest; the site was to be opened up on the east and west by the purchase of gardens and demolition of adjacent buildings. These plans were substantially agreed to, but there the matter rested while efforts were made to sell Stapleton House. This expensive white elephant was eventually sold in 1859 at a mere £12,000 to the Society of Merchant Adventurers of Bristol for use of the Colston Schools. Several public meetings were held in Bristol to complain of the departure of the bishop, but these protests were ignored.

Final plans for the new Palace were prepared, but these differed greatly from the original ones. The squat old Palace was to be entirely demolished except for the hall, and a much taller and more compact building 'in a combination of the decorated and the perpendicular' was to take its place. The gallery wall was retained to shield the Palace from Pitt Street (whence was the principal access), and the garden was extended much as previously intended. Some of the land taken over belonged to the Dean and Chapter, and Beaufort House in College Green (previously the bishop's stables) was given in exchange.

Demolition commenced in May 1860, and revealed that the unsoundness of the ground entailed extra, very deep, foundations; also 'In the Abbot's Hall it was found on attempting to repair the old roof that it was so far decayed that a satisfactory job could not be made without its entire removal more especially as portions of the wall beneath it having proved to be unsound must necessarily be rebuilt'. The hall therefore presents an appearance uniform with the rest of the building, but in the basement the old layout can still be seen. The cost of the work was some £13,000 and the new Palace was completed by late 1862. It was occupied by the bishops of the diocese until 1939, when the outbreak of war compelled the acknowledgment that its maintenance was too great a burden. Until 1960 it was used as government offices, and since then by the King's School.

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10. Correspondence concerning Stapleton House, Glos. R.O., G.D.R., A 13/1.