

FROM MEDIEVAL WROTHAM PALACE GARDEN TO BOWLING GREEN

By Gerald Cramp

This historic site between Wrotham Church and the medieval Archbishop's Palace at Wrotham is now used as a bowling green by the Wrotham Bowls Club. The ruined palace building is shown in print on Wrotham as published by Edward Hasted in 1782 (1st edition of his *History of Kent*, volume 2, page 235) (Fig 1). Recently, one member of the Wrotham Bowling Club became very interested in the history of its home site after a search on the net using "Wrotham" and "bowling green" as search arguments. He was surprised to be referred to an article from Hasted's History. Further enquiries by members of the club, much of it undertaken in the Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC) in Maidstone have uncovered a fascinating history of the site.



Hugh Hornby, the author of *Bowled Over: the Bowling Greens of England* published by Historic England (2015) believes that the Wrotham Green is the tenth oldest green in England. Moreover, research undertaken by the garden historian, Sally Jeffery, has shown that the walled enclosure surrounding the green and the enclosed area was the middle part of a three-part garden scheme set out during the seventeenth century.

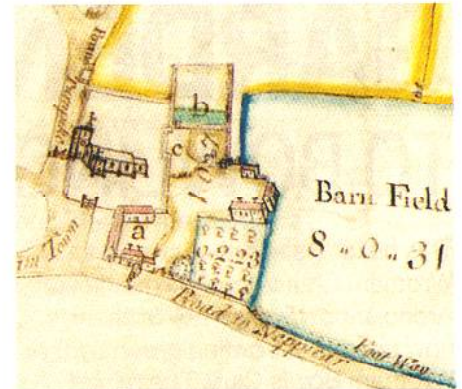
The Manor of Wrotham was owned by the Archbishop of Canterbury from the 10th century until it was surrendered to Henry VIII. Wrotham Palace was one of several linking Lambeth Palace, the London home of the Archbishops of Canterbury, with the palace at Canterbury. To the west was Otford Palace and to the east was Maidstone Palace. The distance between Otford and Maidstone was about a day's ride, making the palace at Wrotham

superfluous. In the middle of the 14th century, Wrotham Palace was pulled down and Harris, in his *History of Kent* published in 1719, records that "about 350 years ago, Archbishop Islip pulled it down and carried the materials to Maidstone to complete the palace there." The ruins and the site to the east of the parish church continued to be owned by the church until they were surrendered to Henry VIII in 1537.

The remaining buildings and gardens were acquired as part of a dowry by James Byng in about 1557 who later sold the property to William James of Ightham shortly after 1649. This estate remained in possession of the James family of Ightham Court until at least 1847. This estate is the subject of a survey of 1568 and plans of 1620 (Fig 2) and 1759 (Figs 3 & 4). The 1568 survey describes the land briefly around the manor house, and more information is



Above
Fig 1: Ruins of the Archbishop's Palace at Wrotham, E. Hasted 1782



a. The Bull-Yard and Buildings	0 1 14
b. The Garden & Bowling-Green	0 1 10
c. Part of the Town-Barn-Yard	0 0 21
Total	0 3 44
Grand Total	403027

Top

Fig 2: Detail from J Hine map 1620

Middle

Fig 3: Wrotham 1759 Edward Hodges. CKS-U681_P8 detail ce

Bottom

Fig 4: 1759 plan CKS-U681_P8 detail of annotation(2)

given on the map of 1620 by John Hine. This survey identifies “the Stone Garden” (now the bowling green), “the Kitchen Garden” and “the Lady Pembroke Walke”. To the south of the Stone Garden in the 1620 map is a representation of the remaining palace buildings. These features can be seen in the extract from “A Plot of parte of the Manor of Wrotham in Kent” preserved in the KHLC (U681 P31). The bowling green is first identified in another survey produced by Edward Hughes in 1759. This survey is also preserved in the KHLC (U681 P8).

Hasted in 1782 tells us that “the palace stood adjacent to the east side of the church-yard, there are hardly any remains left of the house itself, though there is a large substantial stone building once part of the offices belonging to the palace and in which I imagine the Byngs dwelt whilst in possession of this manor and estate. In the field behind the ruins are the marks of a garden, a bowling green and terras round it, still plainly visible.” The remains of the palace can be seen in Hasted’s illustration of 1782. Hasted shows a tower similar to that shown in the map of 1759, and to the left, an arch can be made out which could be that which survives today in the south wall of the bowling green. The statement about the bowling green is repeated in publications of 1790, 1798 and Ireland in his *History of Kent*, 1829.

However, it has been difficult to find later references to a bowling green until 1971 when the following statement appears in the souvenir programme for the Wrotham Festival. “Until recently it (the Bull Hotel) had a bowling green behind it with a magnificent garden encircled by a rag (stone) wall.” Aerial photographs of 1929 and 1964 show the area of the bowling green, but it is not clear whether bowling is being carried out. A photograph of about 1930 shows a group playing a ball game in that area. The original planning application of 1986 to make the site suitable for bowls was headed “Re-use of former bowling green and formation of car parking area within rear garden”. The first task of the Bowling Club was to bring the existing surface within the walled area up to modern standards. Fortunately, no excavation was undertaken, and thus any remaining archaeology was preserved. The surface was levelled with about a foot of suitable foundation sand and soils.

The Bowling Club would like to hear from anyone who has information on the use of this site before 1986. Contact can be made via the Wrotham Bowls Club website.

The present club, the “Wrotham Bowls Club”, has leased the site from the Bull Hotel since 1988 and have had many seasons of successful bowling. Unfortunately, the club has been given notice to leave the site by the owners (the Bull) when the current lease runs out in September of this year.

The bowling green is surrounded on all four sides (some of which are grade II listed) with walls constructed mainly of Kentish ragstone. The upper parts of each wall have been extensively repaired, but the lower courses may contain remnants of medieval or 16th-century craft. In the centre of the wall on the south side of the green are the remains of an early archway which may be that shown to the left of the tower in Hasted’s print. These walls have been the subject of several detailed articles by Sally Jeffery and Andrew Skelton in the last few years. Two articles can be found on the Wrotham Bowls Club website.

She concludes that the walled garden which now houses the bowling green is the middle part of a three-tiered garden which was probably created during the Byng occupation of the site during the 16th century and labelled the “Stone Garden” in the 1620 map. Sally Jeffery suggests that the “Stone Garden” may be identified as the view shown in the background of an anonymous portrait of circa 1615 which is traditionally said to have belonged to the Byng family. The view shows a walled garden with an internal arcade. In the centre are two parterres separated by a fountain on a circular base.

In March, the Kent Archaeological Society undertook separate magnetometry and resistivity surveys of the bowling green in an attempt to discover the central circular base. The results and interpretations can be seen in Figs 5, 6 and 7, both surveys indicating the presence of significant archaeological anomalies that are the likely remains of the “Stone Garden”. A full geophysics report will be published shortly on the KAS website.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to John Townsend for conducting the resistivity survey and the Wrotham Bowls Club for their hospitality during both survey days.



Top
 Fig 5: Interpretation of magnetometry data. Yellow denotes archaeological anomalies and red denotes modern services
Middle
 Fig 6: Magnetometry data
Bottom
 Fig 7: Resistivity data – red is high resistance, green mid resistance and blue resistance