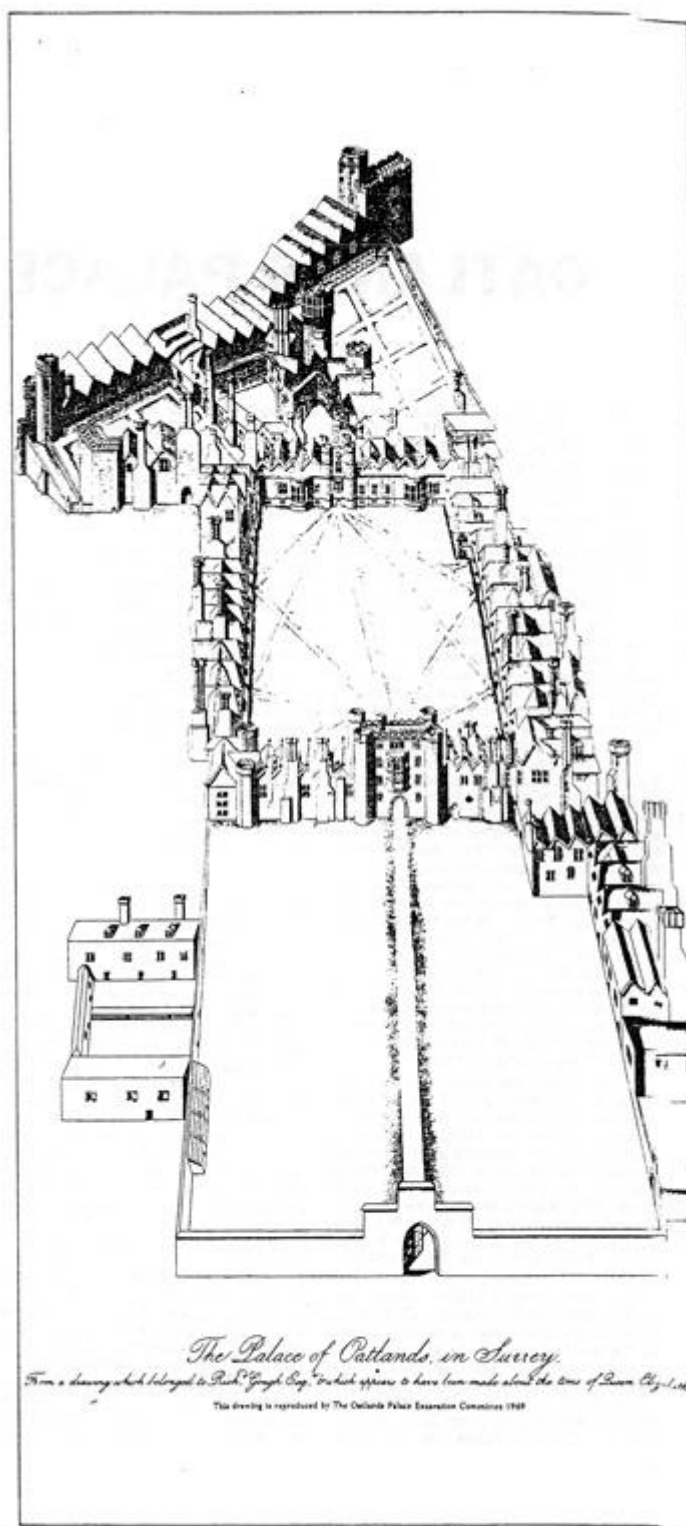


Oatlands Palace, Weybridge

by H. Llewellyn Williams



In past issues, I have written about two of Surrey's lost Tudor Palaces—Nonsuch and Richmond. There is a third palace lying beneath a housing estate at Weybridge; I refer to Oatlands, built with "*expedicion*", — meaning that it was hurriedly rushed up for the reception of Anne of Cleves. Henry wanted a third elaborate 'hunting lodge' to link up with Hampton Court and Nonsuch, and with typical Henrician ruthless-ness, a considerable amount of stone from Chertsey Abbey was transported to "Ottelandes" and used for the foundations.

Oatlands Palace was erected on the site of a much older mid-fifteenth century building owned by a wealthy family of merchants named Rede. This family were, in fact, goldsmiths, very respectable and quite happy in

their red brick country-house until the King decided that he wanted it. The site—close to the river—suited Henry very well. So, negotiations began in 1537 with William Rede which offered him, in exchange for his house, lands and property once belonging to the dissolved Priory of Tandridge. There seems to have been some reluctance—natural enough in the circumstances—on William's part, to agree to this exchange, but to make the King's task easier, William Rede conveniently died. The unhappy widow, Isobel was conveniently evicted, and John—the heir to the property and a minor—was more or less forced by his conveniently appointed guardian, Thomas Cromwell, to sign away Oatlands House to the King. It was all very unethical, but typical of the King and the age.

Henry carried out some repairs to this house in 1537 starting work on the major additions and alterations that was to be Oatlands Palace in 1538. A glance at Richard Gough's drawing gives some idea of the size of the palace. It covered a large part of the present housing estate—9½ acres. The Rede's house was the "A" shaped range of buildings to the N.E. seen at the top of the drawing now beneath Grotto Road, and to the North and East of the area.

The excavations of 1968-69 (carried out by the Oatlands Excavations Committee) established that a timber-constructed house of the late 14th century once occupied the site, and further excavations revealed that Henry did not entirely demolish the Rede's house. A 15th range in the Inner Court was pulled down when the Inner Gatehouse was built in 1538. The Palace was created by adding to the older building and enlarging it into courts of which there were three—*"large and fayre courts: the Greate Court, the Midle Court and Innermost Court, the first two where of are grene courts and the other is paved with rough freestone . . ."*. These courts were entered by gate-houses of massive proportions, particularly the one giving access to the middle court. The gate-house leading to the inner court—which was the centre-piece of the State Apartments—was much more elegant. The entrance to the outer court was just a plain gate-way with a moulded four-centred arch and crow-stepped parapet.

One of the best architectural features of Oatlands were the large, half-circular bay windows which gave light to the State Apartments on the first floor. These windows looked quite splendid and were an unusual feature in pre-Elizabethan houses. Behind the inner court stood a tower; very similar in design to the flanking towers at Nonsuch. It was, probably, erected, both as a water holder, and as "a kind of elaborate 'crows nest' where ladies and gentlemen could look out over the 500 acre park when the King and his friends were hunting.

Unhappy wives

Poor Anne of Cleves! Oatlands was not for her. The story of the King's 'abashment' at the first meeting is well-known. Anne wisely agreed to a divorce, receiving an even grander palace in Richmond plus a handsome pension: thus Anne kept her head, but the scheming Thomas Cromwell, who had arranged the match—lost his!

Henry married his fifth wife, Catherine Howard, at Oatlands, but Catherine's enemies, delving into her past, found her to be a blemished rose, so Henry, full of moral indignation, had the unfortunate lady expeditiously removed via the block. He then took a sudden dislike to his new palace, and placed it in charge of his Master of Horse.

Oatlands had few happy memories for Mary. Part of her lonely childhood was spent there, and it was at Oatlands that she brooded on the terrible disappointment of her false pregnancy. Few people have seen so many hopes blighted as the unhappy Mary Tudor. Elizabeth sometimes came to Oatlands on her 'Progresses' but much preferred Nonsuch. But, if the Tudors did not care for Oatlands, the Stuarts became quite fond of the palace—especially James 1st, despite the failure of his 'Mulberie Trees' to encourage silkworms. Inigo Jones built a 'Silke-worme House', but the scheme produced not a thread of silk, because the wrong trees were planted. In any case James had backed a loser; the white mulberry—which the silk worms like, —will not flourish in the English climate, and the black mulberry—which the 'wormes' don't like—grows reasonably well.

In 1611 James made over the Palace of Oatlands to his wife, Anne of Denmark, who, undismayed by the failure of the silkworm industry, tried her hand at viticulture. In August 1616, Thomas Edmondes, bricklayer, made a wall 11½ feet high ... *'to compas and enclose her majesty's vineyarde . . . and the long privy walke addioyninge to the same'*.

In 1642 war came, and the Royal army H.Q. was stationed at Oatlands after the advance to London had been stopped at Turnham Green. In November of the same year, Prince Rupert was there, determined to make an attack on Kingston, which was evacuated by Parliamentary forces on the night of November 12-13. On the 14th, Royalist forces occupied undefended Kingston, where the townspeople were Royalist. The King stayed at Oatlands four nights. After the war, Charles arrived at Oatlands under escort. On the 24th August, he was removed to Hampton Court, but escaped and came again, for the last time to Oatlands. For the palace too, it was the end.

Soldier creditors

Parliament decided to get rid of the palace. The Commissioners valued the property at the remarkably modest sum of £4,023 18s. In July 1650, a certain Robert Turbridge, Cent, of Middlesex, purchased Oatlands on behalf of certain creditors—in this case soldiers who had fought in the Civil War and whose pay was very much in arrears. The palace was demolished and the materials sold to developers and contractors. Sir Richard Weston of Sutton Place, bought a quantity of bricks which he needed to construct locks for the artificial watercourse, or channel which he intended to cut from Stoke Mills on the river Wey to his estate at Sutton Park. Twelve locks were built with the red bricks from the walls of Oatlands Palace.

I visited the site again in August this year after all the excavations had been covered in. This area has a curious fascination for me. Here is this nicely-planned housing estate, linked together with fragments of old walling that once surrounded the Outer Court, and underneath the back gardens, the kitchens, the living rooms and the tool sheds, lie's one of the most splendid houses of the 16th and 17th centuries.

I am grateful to Miss Madine Page of Palace Gardens, who showed me photographs of the excavations in her garden (I met Mrs. Page later at the museum where we discussed the excavations further) where some very interesting masonry mouldings and pottery fragments were found. Part of the original Tudor wall ran along the bottom of these little gardens, and formed the northern boundary of the palace. In this wall, are two blocked gateways with 4 centred moulded arches. These two gateways can best be seen from Gate Road— (which is a turning off Grotto Road).

On this site were the Palace stables, and part of the gate hinges still remain. Turning left into West Palace Gardens, one catches glimpses of more old walling in between the houses, that joins up with the wall in Old Palace Road. Here, I came across a fragment of the Outer Gate which originally had a crow-stepped parapet, and into which one of the estate houses has been built. I spoke to the occupier, who told me that the archway was demolished when the housing estate was under construction.

The site was acquired by the local council in 1922. During the work of draining the land, some interesting finds were made. The Surrey Archaeological Collections (Vol 33) mentions part of the wall that surrounded the entrance court of the palace, and "massive foundations" that were only removed by blasting. Over 70 carved blocks were found, including a very fine grotesque head (probably from Chertsey Abbey). Other finds included numbers of Chertsey tiles, tobacco pipes, wig-curlers, and pottery: and, most, interesting of all, two arrow heads from the very spot where, tradition asserts, "Queen, Elizabeth practised with her long bow" . . .

And so passed another great Tudor house. To build it, an abbey had to be destroyed. Now life still goes on at Oatlands—a way of life different in many ways to that of the 16th century. But a better life perhaps for Mrs. Page and her family than for 'Jhamys Mychell' and his fellow labourers who were paid fourpence a day for building— *"The Royal Mansion House commonly called and knowne by the name of Oatlands . . ."*