

THE ARCHBISHOP OF YORK'S PALACE AT SOUTHWELL

By John Meredith 19/7/04

Although there is no evidence to suggest that there was an Archbishop's palace in the early days, records do show that Archbishop Gerard [1108] died in the garden of his palace at Southwell. If this were correct, then it would not have been as large as the present one, possibly a small hall type building on two levels.

It is thought that the present palace ruins date back to the time of Archbishop John Thoresby in 1360, or Archbishop Alexander de Neville in 1383, as he had built a new college for the Vicars Choral in 1379. But as the present ruined architecture shows, very little is dated before the 15thC, so is attributed to Cardinal John Kemp [1426-1452] and his successor Archbishop William Booth [1452-1462].

In 1530 Cardinal Thomas Wolsey came to stay for a short time, bringing with him a retinue of 160 servants, but he was unable to live in the palace until it had been made habitable. Archbishop Edwyn Sandys used the palace on a regular basis, living here for long periods, until his death in August 1588. He is buried in the Minster churchyard.

The last Archbishop to be resident was John Williams, at the time of the civil war. It is said that he fled to Wales as the troops approached. Cromwell's troops laid the palace to ruin, stripping it of the lead roof and anything else valuable they could lay their hands on. The locals did the rest, by removing the stones for building purposes, leaving it very much as we see it today. The only building remaining was the State Chamber [now known as the Great Hall], to be used as a court and dwelling, the entrance being through the West Window via a set of steps.

In the 18thC a small house was built on the south side of the chamber, used as a young ladies school, under the direction of a Mrs Williams.

In 1881 the ruins were bought, through subscription, by Bishop Trollope, the then Suffragan Bishop of Nottingham. He proposed to rebuild the palace as a residence for the new Bishop of Southwell [1884], but only managed to restore the present Great Hall and construct a new stair case to the east.

Finally a new Bishops Manor and chapel were constructed and completed in 1907, to the design of the then Church Commissioner's Architect, William Douglas Caroe. The Manor incorporated parts of the old palace, especially the south wall, entrance porch and the 18thC house. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns the second Bishop of Southwell was the first occupant. Major alterations took place in 1985, when the Bishops chapel was re-located to the manor, in a room of the 18thC house. The old chapel became the Minster song room.

The old palace was constructed round the four sides of a quadrangle, on two levels, the important rooms being on the upper level. On the north side, starting at the east end, were the Archbishops chapel, the library and the State Chamber [the present Great Hall]. On the west side stood the original Great Hall, and beneath this the main entrance porch. The south side contained a private hall, lodgings and offices. And on the east side, the Archbishop's private quarters. Although there is no written evidence, it is thought that the service area was outside the palace on the south side. The lower level contained more lodgings and the Servants quarters.

The finest preserved parts of the present ruins are the gable ends of the chapel and the private hall, several fireplaces, especially the one in the east wall, and the Gardrobe towers, the one in the south-east corner containing a four seat medieval toilet, said to be one of the best examples in the country.