

Mercian Archaeological Services CIC

Occasional Papers

No. 2

**The King's Houses - A palace or a mere hunting lodge?
The story of a 20th century misidentification of a Mediaeval
royal residence in Sherwood Forest**

by

James Wright

2013.

James Wright is Senior Archaeologist (built heritage) at the Museum of London Archaeology, and former Archaeological and Historic buildings officer at Nottinghamshire County Council. He has spent over a decade working in Nottinghamshire as a conservation stonemason and Archaeologist. He has worked at King John's Palace, the Royal Heart of Medieval Sherwood Forest for around a decade and has been involved in a large corpus of work on the site. He helped with a geophysical survey, self-funded an excavation of the boundary ditch of the site with Andy Gaunt, and he and Andy Gaunt invited Time Team to the site in 2010 acting as researcher and site consultant for Channel Four. He has directed a stone survey in properties in the village, and in 2011 acting as an independent consultant for Mercian he undertook a building survey of two cottages: Arundel Cottage and Brammer Farm House, where his investigations have discovered the standing remains of a Medieval Gatehouse to the palace. James has also written the Wikipedia entry for King John's Palace. Alongside this; his passion and commitment to the site was in no small part responsible for the ruin being saved from collapsing in recent years.

In his spare time James now runs the popular Facebook page Archaeology and History of Kings Clipstone, Nottinghamshire, which promotes the heritage and archaeology of the palace and the wider settlement of Clipstone through time.

James also spent the years 2004-2008 researching and conducting fieldwork for a book and accompanying articles on the Castles of Nottinghamshire.

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The ruins of King John's Palace stand in splendid isolation within an 11.5 acre field called Castlefield to the south of King's Clipstone, Nottinghamshire, but during the Mediaeval period the site was known as the King's Houses. This was a royal residence with an attached deer park in the heart of Sherwood Forest upon the south-eastern slopes of a low hill overlooking the confluence of the River Maun and Vicar Water, amidst gently rolling countryside characterised by the geology of the Sherwood Sandstones.

Philip Rahtz spent four weeks excavating in Castlefield, during the autumn of 1956. He was drawn there as part of a programme of fieldwork inspired by a project administered by Howard Colvin which eventually became the groundbreaking six volume *History of the King's Works*. The subsequent article which was published in 1960 (Rahtz & Colvin 1960, 21-43) has become the benchmark for the study of the King's Houses. The site was specifically identified as a 'hunting lodge' by Rahtz (Rahtz & Colvin 1960, 21) and again by Colvin (Colvin, Brown, & Taylor 1963, 918). A hunting lodge is defined as a 'retreat for Royal parties and others, when hunting in the Royal forests, or as a viewing station for the chase' and is certainly considered to be a lesser ranking monument than that of a palace which is defined as 'a large, luxuriously appointed building used as an official residence by a member of royalty' (English Heritage - imagesofengland.org.uk). Herein lies a sharp dichotomy of status.

The site certainly had links with the royal pastime of hunting as a deer park was enclosed with a pale fence in 1178-80 (Crook 1976, 35). Although the boundaries changed over time (Gaunt 2012, Crook 1976, 42-3), by 1630 Clipstone Park was roughly circular in shape and covered an area 4 miles in diameter (Gaunt 2011). The amenities of the King's Houses were initially developed alongside the park to include the Great Pond and a stone-built chamber and a chapel constructed during the years 1176-80 (Colvin, Brown & Taylor 1963, 918), in advance of a visit by Henry II in 1181. The total cost of works during this period exceeded £500 and was therefore a very significant investment on the part of the monarchy.

Early historians were in agreement that the King's Houses was unequivocally a palace (Grose 1772; Throsby 1790, 173; White 1844, 625). However the local historian Alfred

Stapleton (Stapleton 1890) and more influentially Nikolaus Pevsner later downgraded the site to a lodge (Pevsner 1951, 52). This interpretation by such luminaries as Pevsner, Rahtz and Colvin has subsequently become endemic and is reflected by archaeological practitioners (Masters 2004, 2) and statutory bodies including the Nottinghamshire Historic Environment Record (M4100) and English Heritage (Listed Building Entry 1370215; Scheduled Ancient Monument Number 320381). David Crook had the courage to describe the site as 'a substantial residence' in his article on Clipstone Park (Crook 1976, 35), but it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that a robust challenge was made to the notion (Bealby et al 2001, 29). The downgrading of the status of the monument has led to serious issues regarding the promotion of conservation, designation, management and research potential of the site. It has been an uphill struggle during a decade of research and dissemination to project the importance of the King's Houses to statutory bodies, the academic community, professional and amateur archaeologists, historians and conservators, the local community, tourists and the media.

Despite the fact that to many eyes the surviving structure within Castlefield is little more than three rubble-core walls, which until the conservation programme of 2009 were in a perilous state of preservation (Wright 2004; Wright & Mordan 2005), the basic evidence that the King's Houses was a palace was actually represented by Rahtz and Colvin themselves. They cited a tremendous list of buildings known from documentary evidence to have existed during the mid 14th century including the Great Gateway, King's Long Stable, Great Chapel, Great Hall, Great Chamber, King's Kitchen, Chapel next to the King's Chamber, Queen's Hall, Queen's Kitchen, the pantry and buttery, the Knight's Chamber as well as chambers for individuals as diverse as Robert de Mauley (2nd Baron Rodyn and a notable soldier who eventually became Constable of the Tower), Roger Mortimer the Earl of March, Prince Lionel the Duke of Clarence, Bishop William Edington and an unidentified woman known only as Rosamund (Rahtz & Colvin 1960, 24). Additional evidence for a high status palace may be drawn from the 12th and 13th centuries as Richard I entertained William (the Lion) King of Scotland at Clipstone in 1194 (*Chronica Rogeri de Houdene* (Rolls Series) iii) and Edward I convened Parliament in 1290 (Calendar of Patent Rolls 1281-92) demonstrating that this was a complex of buildings capable of accommodating and impressing on a national and international scale. Edward had previously ordered the construction of a stable in 1282 at the enormous cost of £104 8s 5d (Rahtz & Colvin 1960, 23). This stable was capable of accommodating 200 horses, and John Steane is of the opinion that it was intended to provide for the entourage of the Household, or possibly even act as a royal stud (Steane 1999).

It is apparent that by the mid 14th century the King's Houses at Clipstone was a sprawling palace complex of many buildings serving a variety of functions. The dating sequence of these structures is not straightforward as this was clearly an extensive programme of repairs to existing fabric, and it is apparent that many of these buildings mentioned were already ancient. Recent archaeological work (Wright, Gaunt, Budge & Crossley 2013) has demonstrated that the boundaries of the site enclosed an area of approximately 7.5 acres, much bigger than any had anticipated previously. Consequently the scale and importance of the King's Houses should be seen in comparison to other great palaces linked to forest resources such as the 5 acre site at Clarendon in Wiltshire or the 8 acre site at Eltham near London.

How then could such an error of identification have occurred during the mid 20th century? A partial answer is the manner in which Nikolaus Pevsner conducted his survey for the *Buildings of England*. Beginning in 1947, and during his Easter and Summer vacations from the University of London, Pevsner would engage in a whistle-stop tour of England in a 1933 Wolseley Hornet borrowed from Penguin and driven by his wife. They were unable to spend more than a month visiting each county and consequently a number of errors and omissions crept into the work (pevsner.co.uk). Despite a continual process of editing even the later editions for Nottinghamshire still refer to King John's Palace as a 'hunting lodge' (Pevsner & Williamson 1979), an error which probably goes all the way back to 1890 and Stapleton. Stapleton himself admits that he was aware that previous writers had thought the site to be that of a palace yet dismisses them out of hand with no explanation for his decision (Stapleton 1890).

Equally revealing is the career trajectory of Philip Rahtz who in 1956 was aged 32, and had only been a professional archaeologist for a total of three years (Rahtz 2001, 62). Prior to 1953 Rahtz had worked as an accountant, enlisted with the RAF during World War II and then became school teacher (Rahtz 2001, 36-62). Rahtz's relative inexperience may have led to misidentification, and as we shall see below several of his specific archaeological conclusions about the King's Houses are open to question. Due to Rahtz's later towering reputation as one of the finest archaeologists that has ever practised it has often been missed that his career was still in its very early stages when he excavated at Kings Clipstone and his interpretative skills were only beginning to develop.

More puzzling was the decision by Howard Colvin to use the term hunting lodge. By the publication of *The History of the King's Works* in 1963, Colvin was, at the age of 44, an experienced academic at St John's College, Oxford and at the height of his powers. The first two volumes have been described as 'the definitive history of the castles, palaces and religious foundations of the medieval kings' and Colvin himself as 'the greatest architectural historian of his own time, and perhaps ever' (Hewlings 2008). Perhaps the error again goes back to Stapleton, but it is unusual that such a fine architectural historian in possession of so much documentary evidence to the contrary should not have identified the King's Houses as a palace.

The use of biography has recently been employed by Professor James Shapiro (Shapiro 2010) to interrogate the process of decision-making that led authors as diverse as Sigmund Freud and Mark Twain to the conclusion that William Shakespeare did not write his own plays (for the record – a completely preposterous notion!). This model has been shown as applicable to study of how and why the King's Houses was misidentified so frequently during the 20th century by so many scholars. This article is not by any means an attempt to undermine the reputation of the proven intellectual achievements of Pevsner, Rahtz and Colvin – overall their work is to be held in the very highest regard. However, this reassessment of the historiography of the King's Houses does serve as a cautionary tale when gauging conclusions drawn during largescale projects or during the very early years of a career. Often the details become obscured and misidentifications can creep in, especially if the word of a reactive historian such as Stapleton - who could give no explanation for his reinterpretation of the King's Houses - is trusted without further enquiry. Sadly at the time of writing no biographical details for Alfred Stapleton have emerged which may explain his arbitrary decision-making process...

This article is a précis of a much larger piece of writing to be published in the 2014 Journal of the Castle Studies Group by Wright and Gaunt which will discuss the archaeological and documentary evidence in detail for the identification of the King's Houses to have been a Mediaeval royal palace in the heart of Sherwood Forest.

For more information please visit: <http://www.castlestudiesgroup.org.uk>

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