

BROMLEY MANOR AND PALACE

Through the centuries

by

PATRICIA E. KNOWLDEN

Bromley Borough Local History Society

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The Palace in c.1900, much as the building is today.

Bromley Manor and Palace

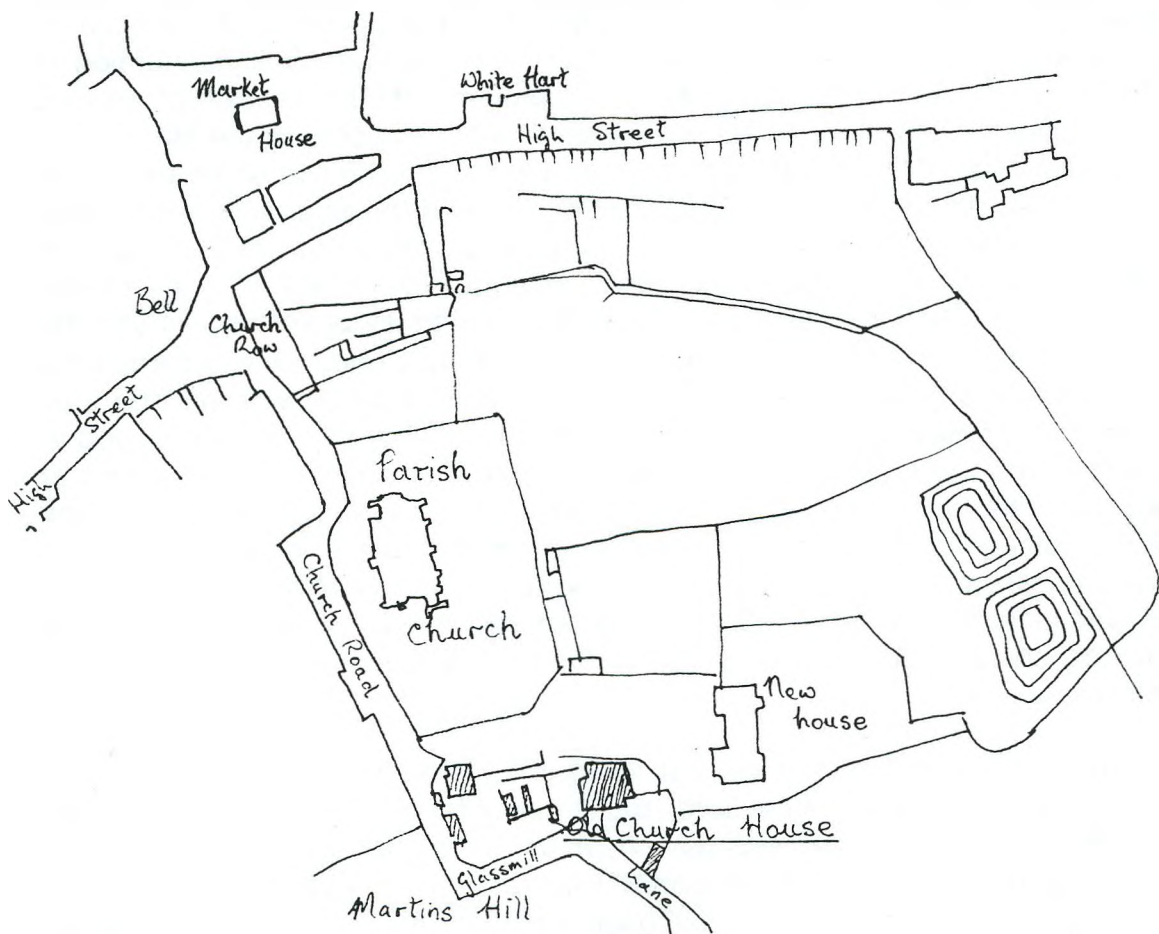
The story of Bromley manor and its palace stretches back for over 1,000 years. Whether it was based on a Roman estate we cannot tell but, by late Anglo-Saxon times it had an area of 10 ploughlands - or as much arable as 10 teams of oxen could deal with, perhaps 1,800 acres; plus meadow-land, woods and so on. So it was quite a size, much bigger than the parish of Bromley was later on. In the year 862 King Ethelbert granted this estate to one of his courtiers for services rendered - and services expected in the future - and his charter describes the boundary.¹ Briefly, commencing near Lower Sydenham station on the boundary of Lewisham it ran along its border and then that of Mottingham to CREG SETNA (now the Crays) and then turned south to FEARN BIORG and on to CYSSE STAN, by WICHAMMESMEARK (mark means boundary) and BIOHHA HAM, back to the beginning.

This is not the only charter for Bromley. There are others, including one with the date of AD955 in which Bromley is granted by King Edgar to St. Andrew's Priory at Rochester, the fore-runner of Rochester Cathedral; but the charter is a "forgery" because neither King Edgar nor the principle witness, Archbishop Dunstan, were in office in 955. Or rather, it is a back-dating of a legitimate claim when the original papers were missing, as was eventually confirmed in AD998 by King Ethelred. Thus, Bromley came into the possession of the See of Rochester, and the Bishops of Rochester were its Lords of the Manor until 150 years ago. Manors rather than estates were an invention of the Normans, and carried an obligation to provide fighting men for the king, and also to keep the peace within the manorial lands. This necessitated holding those Courts which became the criterion of a manor - the local government of the middle ages. In 1086 at the time of Domesday Book, Bromley is entered among the "lands of the Bishop of Rochester",² then the great Gundulf who enlarged the cathedral and built Rochester Castle. Of course Bromley was not the only manor of the Bishops, there were others at Halling, Stone, Trottescliffe, and at Lambeth on the route to London and the Court after it had become settled at Westminster instead of Winchester. Domesday Book entry records land now for 13 ploughteams, a mere two acres of meadow but woodland enough to fulfil a tax of 100 pigs a year. A water mill, assuredly down on the Ravensbourne. There were 30 farming families and 26 small-holders on the manor, some of whom were surely craftsmen as well. The beginnings of a small town, perhaps.

There must have been a timber hall-dwelling from the first for the steward who would have run things for the Lord, and to house the Bishop and his entourage when needed. This would also have been the clergy-house of the monks who serviced the church of St. Peter and St. Paul (a dedication which is believed to indicate an early foundation), although by 1226 this duty seems to have passed to a Rector. The first hall-house was probably, as in so many places, close to the church. The present "palace" must be almost half a mile away -

properly, the term palace belongs only to a bishop's residence within his cathedral precincts. A comparison can be made with Orpington where the so-called Priory is near the church. This was the hall-house where the steward farmed the manorial lands, which there were expected to create sufficient profit to "pay for the clothing of the monks" at Christ Church Priory in Canterbury. Hence the name.

The Bromley equivalent would have been Bromley or Church House, just south of the parish church in the angle between Church Road and Glassmill Lane. Until the last century there was a large farm there with a great tithe barn along by the road. Now the site is the entrance to Church House gardens, which is across what was once the farmyard. In the 17th century the tenant of Church House with its 51 acres of glebe lands was second only to the Bishop in wealth, as is shown by his tax assessment³ for lands and house with "gatehouse, stable, hay howse and a roome over it, together with courtyard and garden". A "little house in the parsonage yard" with the barn of 11 bays and two smaller ones, a stable and two granaries, was already sublet. The main house is described as having "below stairs, one wainscott (panelled) hall, two wainscott parlours, one kitchen and scullery, one buttery" and above stairs were six lodging chambers and two garrets.⁴ A sizeable holding. Also, the property was said to be a manor i.e., the Rector, too, had been entitled to hold manorial courts for his lands. And in fact Bromley's oldest surviving court rolls, from the 1450s, are from this Rectorial Manor, not from that of the



From the mid-19th century tithe map and sales plans

Bishop; indeed, the Rector had been claiming various manorial dues and fines more than a century before then. So it seems fairly clear that by the mid-15th century at very least the original Bromley estate had become divided, with the Bishop's demesne on the outskirts of what must by then have been a town, and the Rector holding substantial glebe lands on what was probably an older site near to the church, which were also regarded as manorial.

Back in 1185 Bishop de Glanville rebuilt his by then delapidated palace at Bromley with one "more congruous" and I suggest he did so on a new site, surrounding it with a moat. The older manor house continued in use by the Rector. When the farmhouse was still standing last century it was noted that the foundations were of chalk blocks and flint like the church, and "as old as any round about" ⁶ although the upper parts must have been rebuilt, perhaps more than once.

By the 13th century about 30 men including *Welgert de Bromlega* held property of the Bishop by Knight's Fee, so fulfilling the Bishop's obligation to provide a fighting force for the King. Among estates carved out of the medieval manor were Blackbrook at Southborough, Sundridge, and Simpson's Place down by the Ravensbourne. In 1205 Bishop de Glanville acquired the rights to hold a market on Tuesdays; however, times were not peaceful and

the Close Rolls record how "that market was afterwards interrupted by the destruction of the said manor which took place on occasion of the war raged between King John and his barons of England". How comprehensive was this "destruction" can only be speculated, allowing for a certain legal exaggeration. Certainly the market was ordered to be reinstated.

Bishops came and went. In 1292 Bishop Thomas de Wouldham had a dispute with his Rector, Abel de Martin, over those manorial fines which they were both claiming. Judgement went in favour of Thomas and Abel was himself fined, half a mark, and thus the Bishop asserted his rights as the superior lord. But - one wonders whether these privileges should not have remained attached to the old site?

About 1320 Hamo de Hethe had financial problems following his election as bishop, and sold (or perhaps mortgaged) Elmstead Woods for 200 marks. According to contemporary records, whenever a new bishop was appointed at that time "there ought to remain . . . on the Manor:

1 cart horse, 16 oxen, 4 stallions, 8 cows, 1 bull, 100 sheep, 5 rams, 2 boars, 25 hogs" and various domestic items " but now, by the long vacancies of the See . . . they will all be made away with or lost, and the buildings themselves will probably run to ruin, the temporals [revenues] be diminished, and the woods destroyed." Hamo's response to these pessimistic comments was that he had already borrowed 100 marks to re-stock farms neglected during the three years between his election, and his consecration and taking over the bishopric - which was not his fault - and the money raised on the woods was partly to repay this. A gap such as this seems not to have been unusual.



Reconstructed "medieval" arch, from stones found in the moat.

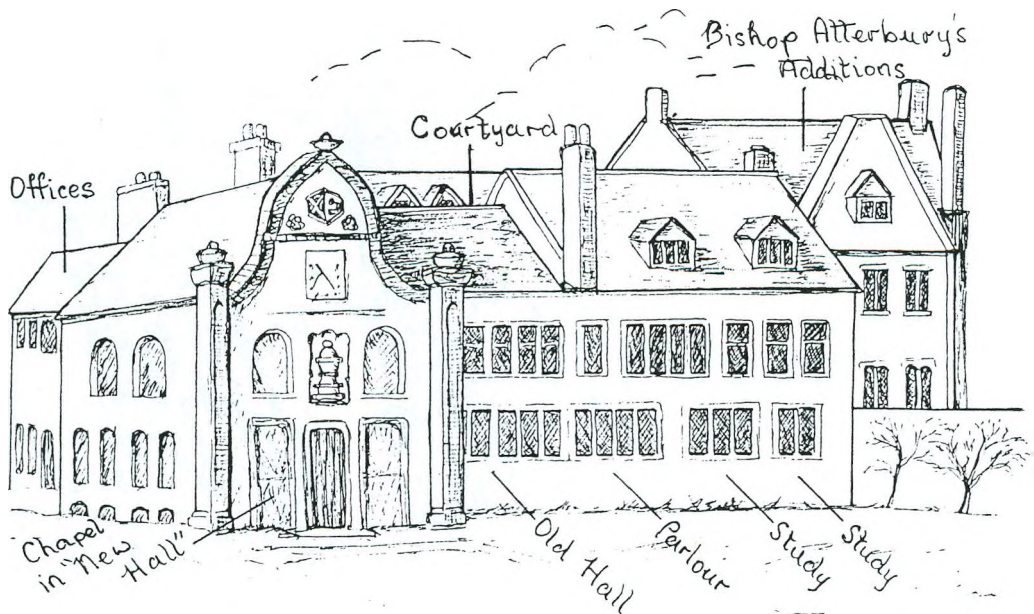
The market, which by now had been changed to a Thursday, had become established and brought the Bishop a worth-while sum in dues and tolls; so did the fairs on the feast-days of St.James and St.Blaise (after whom the Healing Well in the grounds of the Palace was named). By the end of the Middle Ages Bromley could certainly be described as a town, providing good and services, spread along the Street north of the church, and profiting from passing trade between the channel ports of Rye and Hastings, and London. Out in the fields people lived on their farms or in the hamlets of Widmore, Southbarrow, Plaistow, Elmstead and Masons Hill, many still as tenants of the manor although, like everywhere else, land was gradually being sold off freehold; although even freeholders owed some formal allegiance to the manor.

In 1533, according to a Bailiff's Account to the Cathedral Chapter,⁷ the Manor of Bromley was leased out in several parts; Robert Fisher had the manor with perquisites of Court there for £29 a year, while John Rutter was farming the park and "conyng" for £8.12.0 and 165 pairs of rabbits - some rent was still in kind as it had been from earliest times. In medieval times rent had also to be paid in services such as ploughing, picking apples, muck-spreading etc. It seems that while the Bishops kept the mansion to their own use, the running of the manor and its lands might be either in the hands of their steward or out under lease, much as Francis du Boulay found for the Lordship of Canterbury in the Middle Ages.

In 1537 a new Bishop, John Tilsey, obtained an order from King Henry VIII - for a consideration of £40 - which transferred the Rectorship, with its glebe and the tithes (the dues everyone was supposed to pay to the Church) to

himself. In effect he became Bromley's Rector, and extinguished those bothersome Rectorial Courts. There was a condition that he should appoint a Vicar or Perpetual Curate who was to be paid £20 a year out of the rent obtained from leasing the land. So this obligation was passed on to his lessee⁴ together with the incumbent's obligation to "sufficiently repair, maintain, uphold, ceile, glaze, and whitewash the chancel of the church at Bromley, and all the tenements, houses, barns and stables." The nave of any church was always the responsibility of the parishioners. In 1706 William Emmett, who had just acquired the lease, found he had to spend £2 the first year on repairs to the chancel (and in the same year was obliged to lay out £2.5s. for the maintenance of the parish bull and boar).⁸ In a very dry year like 1705, he said, the whole rents of the land he sublet with income from tithes would not defray these charges, the poor rate of £10 and his standing rent, a total outlay of some £200 per annum.

By 1550 the manor house again needed extensive repairs which Bishop Tilsey had carried out, and in an engraving of some two centuries later the buildings then appear to be mainly Tudor, but older walls are surely hidden inside. After the upheavals of the Reformation, Bromley Palace became the sole residence of the Bishops outside Rochester, and was often preferred because of the damp and mists which rose from the River Medway. Only in 1630 was the Bishop "beat from his house at Bromley by plague". Unfortunately for them, most of the townspeople had to stay put; and that year the burial rate was twice the usual.



The Palace from a drawing of 1756, with conjectural layout



JOHN WARNER

born 1581

consecrated 1637

died 1666



THOMAS SPART

born 1635

consecrated 1684

died 1713

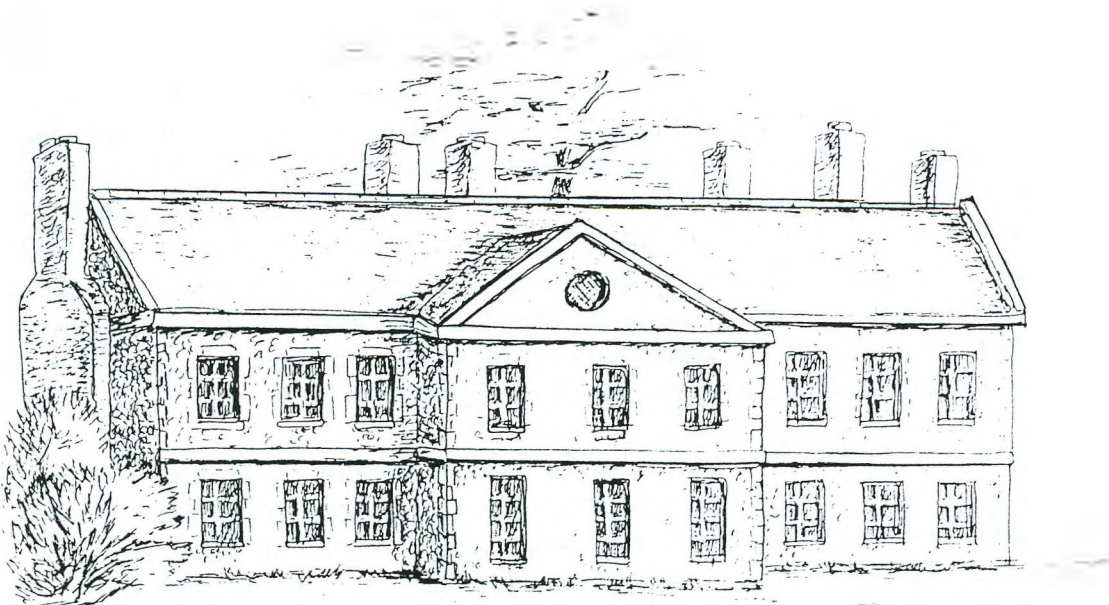
After Parliament gained the upper hand in 1645 during the Civil War, all bishops were expelled and their episcopal property seized. For three years the then Bishop of Rochester, John Warner, refused to budge, until the High Sheriff of Kent was ordered to "remove Dr. Warner, late Bishop of Rochester, . . . out of [his] house and to deliver the possession of the same. . . unto Augustine Skinner . . . who hath purchased the said Manor" and so eventually the Bishop was ousted and left to spend the next ten or twelve years living with friends. Skinner was one of the Parliamentary Commissioners for the county of Kent; and he became Lord of the Manor for Bromley - until the Restoration.⁹ To expedite the sale Parliament had ordered a survey. The report describes the "Manor or Manson House" as having "belowe stayres one greate new Hall being builte parte of Bricks parte of timbre, one Little Hall, one Wainscott parlour, two Studydes, One Buttery, Two Kitchings, One Larder, and three other Roomes adjoyning, being builte parte of flinte parte of Timber and Morter, Above the staires seaven lodging roomes and one faire Dyning Roome with six garretts above;" a wash-house, barns, and "One Outhouse contayninge one wainscott Chappell" - which was in fact the gate-house to the courtyard, approached by a bridge over the moat that was still complete at that time. Another account records that there was "one great messuage where the Court is held", the ward, and a prison. To establish the estate boundaries four Kent J.P.s were enjoined to Beat the Bounds with a jury of local men - all of whose names can be recognised, like Daniel Gyles who kept the Bell. There are several more 17th century surveys, and rentals of the manorial lands with much information about Stuart Bromley. Home Farm continued to be managed by a steward, the first man after the Restoration being Richard Allen.

In 1660 Bishop Warner, an old man of 79, returned from his wanderings. When he died six years later he left money to build Bromley College, to house homeless widows of "loyal and orthodox" clergymen, which still graces the Upper High Street. Warner's successor, John Dolben, had - according to John Evelyn's Diary - to make repairs to the Palace after the delapidations of the Rebellion. We can know so little about what all these people were actually like, but among the State Papers is a letter from the Archbishop's treasurer of this time¹⁰ to a friend suggesting they put off a projected visit to Bromley because "Madame Dolben is at Westminster and if she returns she will carry with her such grave company that it will be criminal to laugh". The next bishop, Thomas Sprat, had a rather shattering experience at Bromley in 1692 when, he says, he was walking in the orchard meditating⁶ and saw a coach and four stop at the outer gate; two men alighted and one said to him "My lord, I am sorry but I have come to arrest you on suspicion of High Treason!" And he was taken into custody, and the house was searched.

The unfortunate Bishop had been "set up" by a prisoner in Newgate prison who decided it would help his situation if he could accuse somebody of a traitorous plot - but not actually knowing anything incriminating about anybody, had to simply invent a crime and some evidence; so an accomplice hid a forged letter in a flower pot at Bromley Palace. However, after it had been found the formidable Bishop Sprat confronted the conspiritors and forced them

to confess. This has always been known as "The Flower Pot Plot". In the 1690s Sprat had permission from the Archbishop to demolish the old gatehouse with its chapel, describing how he intended to remove the wainscott to a new chapel in his house, "two stairs high".

Sprat's successor, Francis Atterbury, also had to spend money on the place, saying that in the space of eight years he "did lay out £2,000 upon the house and other appurtenances" but, because Sprat left his family not well off, claimed "not one shilling from his executors." In his time the Home Farm was not run by a steward but (by 1706 anyway) was leased to Lord Romney⁸ who held "arable, pasture and meadow with the manour [sic] of Bromley of Francis Lord Bishop" which he let out again to some half-dozen under tenants who themselves all seem to have sublet! From about this time, from 1702 onwards, there is a nice run of Manor Court Rolls in the Centre for Kentish Studies¹¹ which tell us, for instance, that Francis Valentine succeeded the Gyles family at the Bell, and William Passenger had the White Hart - where the Court was held, not then at the Palace. In the 18th century it was also often held at the Bell. The inhabitants of Bromley seem to have gone on much the same as those elsewhere: in 1711 John Jones was presented for not scouring his ditch and Edmund Gyles for "throwing dung in the public road". Incidentally, at that Court, nine of the twelve men who formed the Homage or jury were able to sign their names.⁸ The Gyles family continued in Bromley. Although others now ran the Bell, in 1749 the latest Daniel was chosen Borsholder, or assistant to the Parish Constable, for the town; there was another Borsholder for Southborough, and also the parish Ale-taster and a Leather Searcher, who was responsible for the quality of leather which was produced and traded locally.

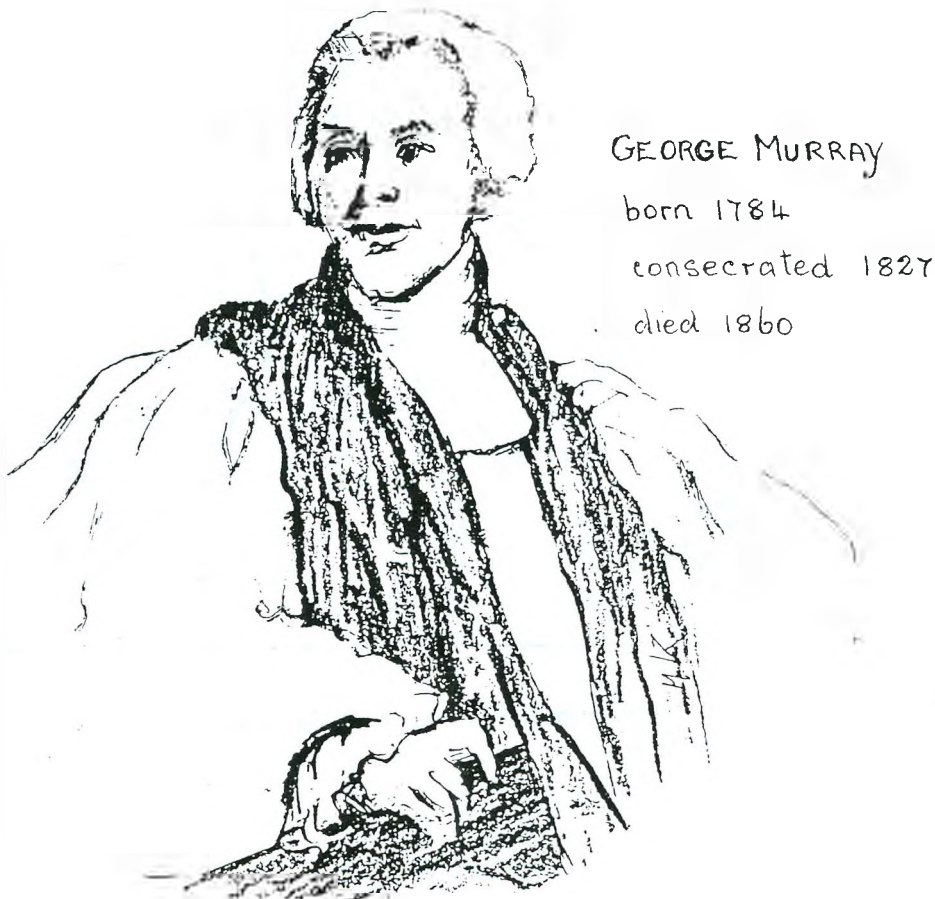


Bishop Thomas' building of 1774

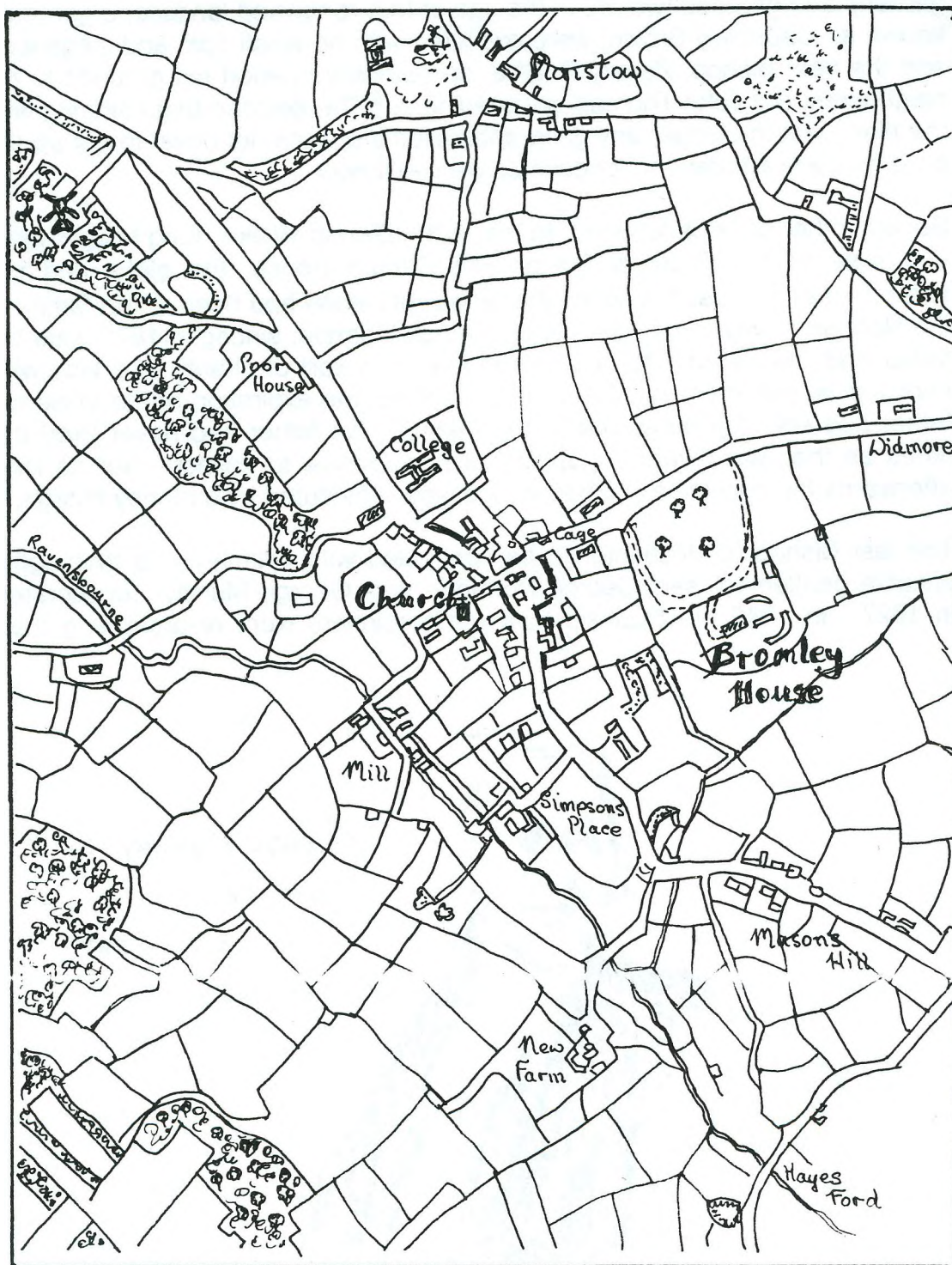
In the 1730s Bishop Wilcock's "repairs of the buildings in improving of gardens and grounds [we are in the age of that renowned landscape gardener known as Capability Brown] were executed with no small cost and elegance," and the next Bishop, Zacary Pearce, occasionally opened his grounds to his neighbours. But John Thomas, succeeding in 1774, decided that tinkering with the place was no longer any good and pulled the whole lot down to put up the building we see today - if not quite as we see it now.

Several other bishops followed. In the 1820s Bishop Walker King bought back the lease of the Rectorial Manor with Church House, the glebe and the tithes.¹² For the last 100 years the renewable lease had been in the family of the Normans - who of course sublet. George Norman, writing in 1872, said his father had always let it for a very low rent as a sort of charity to a lady who kept a girls' school there; a year or two before one expiration of the lease his father had sold the remainder to the Bishop - his father had never liked the tithes as they were very unpopular, and expensive to collect. Not so long afterwards the collection of tithes in kind was substituted by a money charge.

The last Bishop of Rochester to be connected with Bromley - "a thoroughly amiable gentleman" said George Norman - was George Murray, consecrated in 1827. In 1845 the Ecclesiastical commissioners were re-organising their



Bishop George Murray - a "thoroughly amiable gentleman."



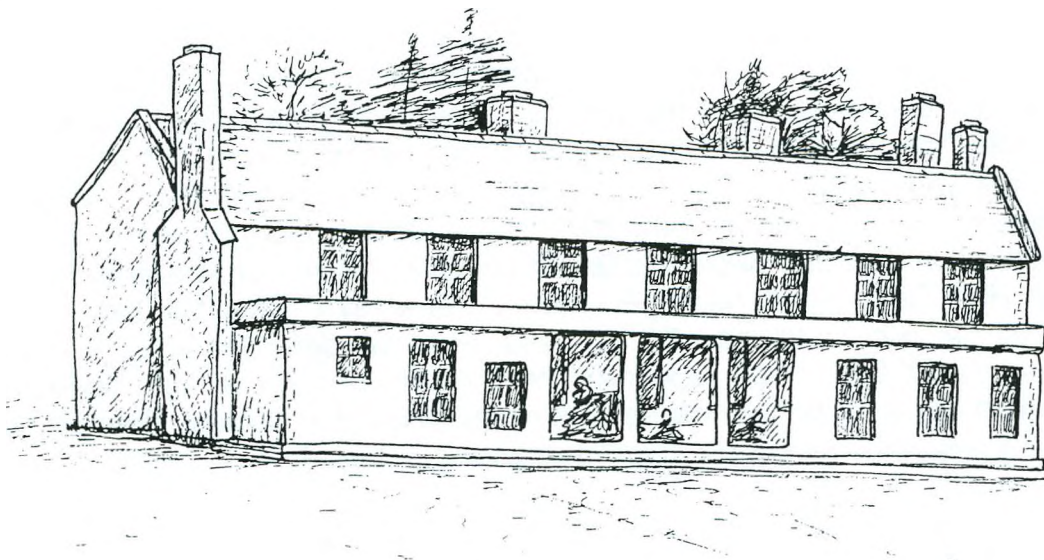
Bromley in c.1800, from the Ordnance Survey drawings for the 1st. Edition 1".

properties and decided to sell Bromley Palace because it cost too much to maintain. At the time Bromley was economically in the doldrums, and the loss of the Bishop and his entourage and the income they brought to the town was a further blow:

"Toll we our bell ! our Bishop we deplore !
Bromley can boast her Bishop now no more.

And Murray now, the last upon the list,
But not the least - at Bromley will be missed
And much lamented ! Bishop here the last
Of near a hundred Bishops that have passed

Thomas Scott, Chaplain at the College.



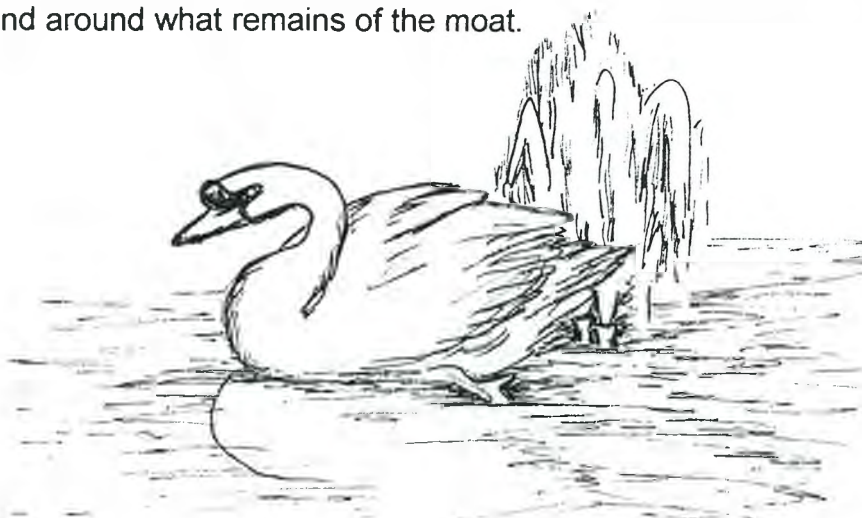
The Palace in the 1860s. with the new walkway added to the garden front.

But all was not lost. The manor and the estate were bought by a wealthy coal merchant, William John Coles Child¹³ who set about becoming a real Lord of the Manor. On the one hand he was keen to maintain customs such as Beating the Bounds - and also to collect any remaining dues such as heriots - the right of the lord to choose the best beast when a property changed hands, although long before commuted to a sum of money (in 1855 the Trustees of Bromley Workhouse were probably not alone in seeking release from such payments) and on the other hand he revitalised the market and encouraged the trade of the town. He only encouraged the railway, which cut across his lands in 1858, after he had been promised 600 £10 shares; it was said he had a particular knack of putting his foot down flat and keeping it down until he got what he wanted. He built a grand new Town Hall to replace the wooden market house that was being described as "our old shed" - leasing the ground

floor to a bank and an estate agent and letting out the upstairs meeting hall. But the building also housed the police station and the Bromley Literary Institute. To finance improvements he sold off a large part of the estate. New Bromley near Bromley North Station began to be built up in his time, and Holmesdale Road down towards the gas works area, which was close to Child's own flourishing brickworks. The park and farmlands remained until the 1920s. Among improvements to the farm had been a large brick barn and three roundel oasts to dry the hops that were often first in the year to reach the London market, and which survived until 1927. By now the outlying farms at Widmore, Southborough and so on had long been in private hands. In his spare time he put together "a collection towards a history of Bromley", a collection drawn on extensively when Horsbrugh edited the History of Bromley which was published in 1929.

Sadly, he died at the age of 59 in 1873. But he left a young son, Coles Child, who had been brought up to follow in his father's footsteps. Even before his second birthday he had laid the foundation stone of the new Town Hall. Like his father he made his own alterations and additions to the Palace building. When a number of old stones, assumed to have been part of the earlier palace, were dredged from the moat¹⁴ they were built into an apparently medieval "folly" in the grounds (now by the Rafford Way entrance). An important local architect, Richard Norman Shaw, was employed to design a cottage for the farm bailiff¹⁵ who had taken over the ancient role of steward. In celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Coles Child presented the White Hart Field, which had been used as Bromley Cricket Ground, to the town as the public park now known as Queen's Gardens. He acted as J.P., sat on the K.C.C., was Governor or Director of several organisations, Chairman of the Town Committee of Bromley Charitable Society, President of Bromley Rifle Club and of the Chrysanthemum Society.¹⁶

He died in 1929, but in 1920 Bromley Palace had been sold to become a school; most of the park went for speculative building - and the new streets were named after the Bishops. In the 1930s Stockwell College moved in. After the war there was a great programme of expansion when several of the brick blocks were put up. Then after the College closed, Bromley Borough took over and added significantly to the buildings. One great consolation is that once again Bromley Palace houses Bromley's local government, in the person of the Mayor - and now we too can all stroll in the grounds to the south of the old mansion and around what remains of the moat.



Notes

1. Michael Watts, Anglo-Saxon Charters of Bromley, Kent, in *Bromley Local History No.4*.
2. The main source for this paper is E.L.S. Horsburgh, *History of Bromley*, 1929.
3. Public Record Office, State Papers 28/160
4. Deeds of Church House, Bromley Archives ref. 766/2/6 44/1/10
5. Draft History of Bromley by Coles Child, Centre for Kentish Studies, U833/21 p.147.
6. W.T.Beeby, MD, Bromley Manor in *Archaeologia Cantiana* Vol.XIII.
7. Coles Child, p.182a.
8. Manorial Court Book, C.K.S. CCRb.177
9. Parliamentary Survey of Bromley Manor, 1647. Bromley Archives ref.43.
10. State Papers Domestic, printed, 26.9.1663.
11. Manorial Court Rolls, C.K.S. Mf. U.1262.
12. George Norman, *Anecdotes of the Bishops of Rochester*, 1872. C.K.S. U833/28.
13. John Filmer, Bromley Palace and Coles Child, in *Bromley Local History No.5*.
14. Ken Wilson, *The Palace in Bromley*, n.d.
15. Andrew Saint, *Richard Norman Shaw*. 1977.
16. T.Jones and W.T.Pike, *Kent at the Opening of the 20th Century*, 1904.

Acknowledgments

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other drawings by the author :
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Bromley Manor and Palace Chronology

- 862 A.D. King Ethelbert grants 10 ploughlands at *Bromleage* to his minister.
- 998 A.D. King Ethelred confirms 10 *sulungs* to the Bishop of Rochester.
- 1086 *Bronlei* is among the holdings of the Bishop.
- 1115 9d. owed for chrism oil for a church at Bromley.
- 1185 Bishop Glanville builds a palace "more congruous".
- 1189 Welfgert de Bromlega among the Bishop's knights.
- 1205 Charter for a market on Tuesdays and a fair on the Feast of the Assumption.
- 1226 Bromley has a Rector.
- 1292 Dispute between the Bishop and Bromley' s Rector.
- 1320 Bishop Hamo raises 200 marks on Elmstead Woods.
- 1477 Market transferred to Thursday, fairs now on feastdays of St.Blaise and St.James the Apostle.
- 1537 Bishop becomes the Rector, has to appoint a Vicar.
Church House and glebe lands leased out.
- 1550 Palace needs extensive repairs.
- 1647 Bishop Warner ejected by Parliament, palace and manor are sold.
- 1660 Restoration of the Episcopacy.
- 1692 "Flower pot plot".
- 1699 Gatehouse with chapel demolished. New chapel made in the house.
- 1702 Commencement of surviving Manor Court Rolls.
- 1730 Repairs, and improvements to the park.
- 1774 Complete rebuild of Bishop's palace.
- 1820 c. Bishop buys back Church House lease.
- 1845 Church Commissioners sell Bromley Palace to William John Coles Child.
- 1858 The railway reaches Bromley. Land sold for housing.
- 1863 Coles Child builds Bromley a new Town Hall.
- 1865 Bromley's ancient fairs suppressed.
- 1873 William John Coles Child dies, succeeded by his young son, Coles.
- 1897 Coles Child gives the White Hart Cricket Field to the town for a park, as a Jubilee gift.
- 1920 Bromley Palace sold to become a school.
- 1929 Coles Child, last lord of Bromley Manor, dies.