The Saxon and Medieval Palaces of Cheddar

For those of you interested in the history of the Saxon Palace and early architecture from this era, the following may be of interest based on the archaeological dig carried out on the site between 1960 and 1962 led by Professor Philip Rahtz.

These notes are kindly prepared by retired head of History Adrian Targett, who enjoys another special connection to The Kings of Wessex in its true historical sense. Towards the end of the 1990s, as part of a time travel television programme, Adrian had a DNA test and was discovered to be a descendent of “Cheddar Man,” the nearly 10,000-year-old skeleton found in Cheddar Caves. His claim to Cheddar fame was further celebrated following further sophisticated work into the identity of Cheddar Man. See here when revolutionary genome technology showed that the Cheddar Man had dark brown skin and blue eyes.

On the school site, the footprint of some of the Saxon palaces uncovered by the excavations can be seen; as well as the ruined remains of one of the chapels.

Back in the 1950s before the archaeological dig and before The Kings of Wessex was built, not very much would have been on view in what was then a field behind the manor house. In the field would have been a few farm huts and a running building and the chapel; which by the 1950s, had very basic amateur renovation work done occasionally, so that bits did not fall off when there was an annual Rogation Day service within its walls.
In 1800, it was probably used as a barn and by 1829, it had two chimneys and was subdivided and even later, in 1900, it consisted of accommodation for two farm workers’ families. But by 1914, it was derelict and with the roof removed.

As the excavations progressed, Professor Rahtz discovered a series of outbuildings that span over 400 years of occupation. There were successive large buildings, which can be described as Halls or Palaces; as well as a lot of smaller buildings, including the chapels, of which there was also more than one.

To provide a context to the palace, it is understood that the Cheddar complex was begun in the first half of the ninth century, following the political and military successes of Kings Egbert in the early ninth century. So a latest date for the palace complex being started is about 850, thanks to the discovery of a coin of King Aethelwulf from about 845.

This first period of C. 850-930 shows the main building of the Long Hall arranged on a roughly north to south alignment with a number of other buildings and a large storm-water ditch to the north of the buildings. The ditch was necessary because the River Yeo flowed down Cheddar Gorge and then spread over the flat land and was obviously necessary to keep the site reasonably dry. The principal building – the Long Hall – was of post-in-trench construction with three entrances on the two long walls. The Long Hall was 24m long and varied in width between 5.5m at the ends and 6m in the middle. Each post was about 30cm from each other.
No evidence of wattle and daub was found in between the posts and there was no evidence as to the type of roofing material. But it is likely the side gaps were wattle and daub, and that the roof was thatched. Also in the post-trench were inner posts angled inwards which could have been part of the framework to strengthen it; joists for a partially raised floor; but most probably they supported a first floor at some 2m above the ground. This would suggest that the Long Hall was two storied.
Only at the highest levels of society are two storey buildings known and even then, they are rare. As an interesting historical aside, the earliest is the Hall of Louis the Pious 810 – 840 at Frankfurt am Main in Germany and another can be found at Lorsch near Worms, also in Germany, in the first half of the ninth century.

Evidence that there were other two storied buildings in Wessex comes from the Anglo Saxon Chronicles. At a Witan at Calne in 977 in a similar building (now lost), the account reads:

“All the most senior counsellors of the English fell at Calne from an upper floor, except the holy Archbishop Dunstan, who alone stood on a beam; and some were badly injured, and some did not come through it with their lives.”

The other buildings appear to date from the same period as they are constructed in the same way as the Long Hall; i.e. post-in-trench.

Part of the building might have been a replacement as it is stratigraphically later, but of the same construction and was probably a bower, i.e. a private area for the principal guests, or a private retiring area for the women. But certainly, a domestic living area. The entrance to the complex appears to be from the east given the evidence of a flag staff or curved pillar supports this view.

At the time these buildings were in situ, the Danes had attacked Somerset in 870, Alfred was crowned King the following year and by 878 had been forced to retreat to his Levels HQ at Athelney. Then, Alfred marched with all his forces to Edrington in Wiltshire where he defeated the Danish King Guthrum, who was brought back with his retinue to Somerset. Guthrum was baptised at Aller and the later stages of the conversion “the loosing of the chrism” took place at Wedmore, which has therefore given its name to the treaty that provided for the partition of England. It is in fact probable that the Treaty of Wedmore was signed here in the Long Hall at Cheddar. Alfred would have had a large retinue with him at court. “Guthrum” the chronicle says was “one of thirty of the most worthy men” and was “with the Kings for twelve nights and he greatly honoured him and his company with property.”

The chronicle does not mention the Treaty at all; but only mentions “loosing of the chrism.” So even if one allows Wedmore to give its name to the Treaty, the building here was probably where it was decided and is even more likely to have been a sort of ninth century 12 days long B&B!

Wedmore, Cheddar and Axbridge were all parts of a royal estate. Axbridge, because of its more defensive position, became a burgh de novo at the end of this period, i.e. it was fortified. It was part of Alfred’s plan to have a chain of fortified defensive sites.

This leads to the next period from C. 930 to late 10th Century/early 11th Century.

The first, i.e. earliest documentary evidence to Cheddar is in Alfred’s will urging the Hiwum (community) to acknowledge Edward his son. Hiwum can mean “royal household.” The fact that it is singled out in the will suggests or reinforces the area as royal estate. There were pros and cons of being resident on the royal estate. The “pro” was that you were exempt from all usual forms of taxation. The con was that the estate and those in it were liable to and subject to the “firma unius nocits” – which literally means “one night’s farm land.” It meant those on the royal estate had to stump up the money and produce needed to support and provision the Kings and his retinue, normally for a night. But as already stated in this chronicle, often for longer. Apparently, the figure to be provided by the area was up to a theoretical £80 – a phenomenal sum in the 9th/10th Centuries. In the King’s absence, the residence was looked after by a Reeve.

The size of the retinue can be guessed by reference to the witenagemot – or witan – records, which met at least three times at Cheddar during this period. It is very likely it met here more than often. But we have no written evidence.

On 24 July, 941, the under King Edmund here Cheddar is described as “villa caelebris.”
29 November, 956 Eadwig “palatio regis.”
Easter 19 April, 968 under King Edgar “sedes regalis.”
The witan met to deal with issues and our knowledge of it often occurs when land grants were made as there were signatories.

What we know from history tells us about the importance of Cheddar and the palaces at this time in that Cheddar was the axis of the kingdom when the King was here.

He was surrounded by his Lords, Bishops, and sometimes foreign emissaries who were making the decisions of Government: war, peace, taxation, law and order and foreign policy. No wonder the local community was probably glad to see them leave as they would have depleted their supplies of food and drink!

The period 2 complex is thought to date from about C. 930, possibly ordered by King Athelstan; but is certainly likely to have been completed when the King met the witan in 941 under Edmund. During this time there was a complete realignment of the principal buildings. There was a new hall – the West Hall I built over the site of other buildings from the first period. It was rectangular and straight-sided. The building was based on major posts put into pits at wide intervals with entrances possibly in both ends. To the west was a similar building. The first chapel Chapel I was built over the site of the first period Long Hall. The only evidence it was a chapel is that the later chapels enclose it! It was of limestone rubble construction with ashlar windows and doorways and with wavy stucco over the rest. It seems to have been in use by the middle of the 10th Century from a coin found to be dating C. 945. The previous ditch is a replacement from the first, which had become filled with rubbish. There was thought to have been a fowl house at the north a store in the centre for the poultry and at the south, a dwelling with a hearth.

There is no documentary evidence to Cheddar between 968 and the Conquest of 1066; but changes in the buildings occurred at the end of the 10th Century/beginning of the 11th Century.

By the end of the C.10th this new ditch was deeply silted up, but the main timbers of the West Hall I were still sufficiently sound to be revised and the chapel appears to have been burned down.
Moving to the third phase of the Cheddar Palace site to the late 10th Century/early 11th Century. There is no radical change in the layout. Both the chapel and the West Hall have been rebuilt. Part of the structure was disused, and a later ditch was drained westwards from the chapel. Chapel II was built around the footprint of Chapel I and was probably of stone. West Hall II was similar in construction to its predecessor as the same length but narrower. The timbers of the first hall were dug out and reused after possible trimming which reduced the width.
There was a porch at the western end. Ditch B was levelled off, containing limestone rubble, stucco and burned doultning stone; thought to be the destroyed remains of Chapel I. The first two ditches were now quite level and if perhaps a bit later on, over them was built another building of stone and timber foundation. Evidence of iron working was found inside the building; but this may not have been its principal function. At the bottom of a pushed back upcast was a coin dating from around 991-997, which suggests it was filled in after 991 and fabric sherds were found that suggest they were pre-Conquest. The later ditch appears to be the local drain for the chapel area and obviously impeded movement; but there may well have been a bridge.

By this time in 991, Ethelred II was King, and Axbridge was a well-established burgh. Ethelred also founded a number of coinage mints and there is the rapid rise of Bristol and the creation of more burgh to consolidate the kingdom.

To Period 4 – late 11th Century/early 12th Century; which seems to represent the major expansion. There is the erection of a very large building East Hall I and the West Hall was apparently rebuilt to West Hall III. The existing chapel may have received its large channel at this time. But this is speculative. West Hall III was a direct replacement of II with new post holes and the porch of the old hall was not replaced and part of the building was out of use.

East Hall I was a major ailed hall with an arcade of 10 bays, but the spacing of these bore no relationship to the 13 divisions between the main timbers of the outer wall. A feature across the most easterly bay division probably indicates the position of the dais. East Hall I is dated to the 12th century from coins discovered of Henry I and the building can with reasonable confidence be identified as that used by Henry I in his visits of 1121 and 1130.

West Hall III and East Hall I are linked in the plan with similar orientation and are symmetrical – the span of the West Hall III is the width of the arcade in East Hall I; so it is likely they were contemporary. If they were not, they probably co-existed for a short time at the beginning of period 4. Neither two buildings had the timbers robbed below ground level, but were cut off and the buried parts left to rot.

The erection of the massive East Hall I meant the abandonment of the old entrance complex and boundary ditches, which had marked the approach to the palace for some two centuries. This new hall was a major building of its day, exceeded by only a few other examples – and would have been one of the biggest in England.
The chapel was still presumably for private use by the royal family, since its size precluded large numbers worshipping in it.

To Period 5 – early 13th Century; by which time there was a new East Hall II that was a small ailed timber hall of six bays with an outer wall on stone footings. There was a south east building on a U-south alignment and this was probably a domestic annex to the hall. The exact plan was not recovered during the excavations, but it appears to have been a timber framed construction on a stone footing – like the hall – and both their north walls were exactly in line. Chapel II seems to have been untouched.
Pottery finds date the buildings to the first half of the 13th Century and it is reasonable to assume this phase was carried out on the orders of Kings John. John had granted the manor of Cheddar to Hugh, Archdeacon of Wells in 1204. The Royal Estate of Saxon Times had been subdivided into four; but the King until now had sided with Stephen Langton against the King and went into exile in France. John seized his estates and resumed possession, approaching Hugh de Neville as custos (keeper).

In 1209 – 11 Neville spent £40 on “The Kings House in Cheddar” bringing timber from Wales. Miles of St Maur was fined 60 marks for refusing to act as keeper of the works. Overall, what was created in period 5 was “King John’s Hunting Lodge” and it has all the standard components of hall/chapel/domestic buildings, as at Writtle in Essex.

John’s occupancy of his lodge did not last long. In 1213, his submission to the Pope entailed the return of Bishop Hugh and the restoration of his lands. With the King’s permission, Hugh transferred the manor to his brother Jocelin who was Bishop of Wells and the cathedral then held the manor of Cheddar for the rest of the Middle Ages.

Finally, to Period 6 – late 13th Century to 1600
A third East Hall replaced the second. It appears to be a half-timbered cob or stone based two storied building with a tripartite block and added garderobe at the east end. The walls are partly East Hall II on wider footings. Finds date it to between 1213 and 1400, probably ending before C. 1330 as no slate was found. In the same period, the chapel was rebuilt on the same plans as Chapel II; but the channel was widened to the same size as the nave, but there is no evidence that the roof of this chapel, or East Hall III were anything but shingles and thatch. It is presumably this chapel which is referred to in 1321 in the Register of the Bishop of Bath and Wells: “whether the chapel of St Columbanus at Cheddar was the King’s free chapel when he held that manor.”

Given that the dedication St Columbanus is to a very early saint, the dedication is not likely to be post-Conquest. Rather the dedication was simply carried on from the earlier chapels on the site.

Finally, it is thought that after the mention of the chapel in 1321, it was shortly afterwards modified by the demolition of the east end, a new west door was made a new east wall built reducing its length. A window in this new wall is dated to C. 1330. A slate roof was probably added at this time. Buttresses were added still later – probably in the 15th Century.
The roof timbering in Manor Farm is late 14th Century/early 15th Century and seems to show the focus and centre of the manor from the late 13th Century moved northwards. As this occurred, the remains of the palaces and associated buildings (with the exception of the stone chapel) ruins slipped into the soil and under the grass, where they remained undisturbed until the early 1960s when excavations began to build a new school in Cheddar. The discovery of the site of the Saxon Palace delayed the building programme for a year whilst archaeologists set to work.

Finally, in 1964, the new Kings of Wessex Secondary Modern School opened on the present site with Harry Broome as Headteacher.

The rest is history.

The Kings of Wessex thank Adrian Targett for retaining his links with the school as honorary Kings Historian. Adrian is also currently the Parish Archivist at St Andrew’s Church in the village.