

THE RESTORATION OF PRIORY GARDENS  
THE HISTORY OF PRIORY GARDENS



Priory Gardens has the longest history of all Bromley's 104 parks. The boundaries of the park encircle a house and its original gardens both of which date back to the Middle Ages. The park's recorded history starts in 1032. The core of the house, that still stands today as the Bromley Museum, was constructed in 1290-1316 but, like most homes, it has been adapted and displays the marks of changing fashion and personal taste. Today's formal gardens were laid out in the 1930s in the style of Gertrude Jekyll so draw much character from their medieval setting, as did the whole Arts and Crafts movement.

The history that follows of Priory Gardens aims to depict the stages of development that formed the park today and to demonstrate the wealth of heritage encapsulated by the park and on offer for local people to enjoy every day of the year.



1032 The earliest reference that exists for the land upon which The Priory stands today is a charter dated 1032 when Eadsy or Eadsige a Saxon priest, with the consent of Cnut and Aelfgife his Queen, gave his land at Orpedingetune for the good of his soul, to the Priory of Christ Church at Canterbury, to God's servants for garment land. Eadsy was Cnut's chaplain and had bought the land for 80 marks in silver.

1086 In the Domesday Book the land is entered under the title of "the land of the monks of the Archbishop".

1206 King John granted to the Prior and the monks a weekly [Wednesday] market at their manor.

Whilst the manor was owned by the Priory, it was *used* by the rectors of Orpington. Evidence suggests that most of the rectors at Orpington, from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, were wealthy pluralists. It is uncertain how many of them resided at Orpington, but The Priory is one of the few pre-reformation rectories that has lasted to the present day and is of great value in recording the style of manor house of the 14th and 15th centuries.

1270 A document, now in the British Museum, records that Hugh de Mortimer, a native of Poitou who was created rector in 1254, held court in his hall at Orpington to settle a dispute between the monks of Horton Priory near Ashford, Kent, and a local landowner, Galfrid de Neuband, who had challenged their right to the incumbency of Brabourne church.

It was for many years assumed that Hugh de Mortimer's court had been held in the present Great Hall. However, ongoing documentary research has shown that this was not the case, the 1270 building was of wood and not necessarily on the same site.

1290 Records state that a new building was being erected and it is clear from the large amounts of money being spent that it was of stone. This is today's Great Hall, in which the typical late 13th century arches are still visible. There is also mention in the records of a "camera in gordano", a free-standing building in the grounds. Where this latter building may have been is not clear but it was close to the hall as there were ongoing problems with the guttering between the two buildings.

1294 A new watermill was constructed at a cost of £6 11s 7d and 5s 9d was spent on nails and plastering repairs to the hall.

1296 A new stable costing £7 10s 0d was erected.

1316 A new oxhouse was erected at a cost of £13 9s 2d. It has been calculated that this could have been of the order of 70m long x 5m wide which would have been a major timber building. Three years later a disaster occurred when 11 oxen and many of the other cattle died. None of these three ancillary buildings remain today.

1317 Edward II granted and confirmed free warren in those desmesne lands possessed in Orpington at the time of his grandfather [Henry III].

1390-1411 Prior Chillinden built a new watermill at Orpington, although this would not have been within the confines of today's park. However, the ponds which today are a popular and attractive feature of the park did exist in the Middle Ages. Research currently being undertaken at Canterbury by a former curator of the Bromley Museum suggests that the ponds were used to breed freshwater fish for the manor and references are made in accounts to the growing of beans, pears, apples and vines, indicating that the land around The Priory was well utilised as kitchen gardens.

1393 Three rooms were erected to the east of the hall, intended for use by the priest serving the parish church. This may refer to the present east wing which includes the Crypt, Curators Office and the Delft Room above.

1471 William Selling, who was elected Prior in that year, made great improvements to "the apartments of the Prior in the manor at Orpington", constructing the north wing of the present building, today called the Harlow Room with the Avebury Room above. Selling, or his successors, may have also been responsible for the installation of some of the fireplaces, domestic features and the outbuildings with a central gateway, which survive today as Grade II listed buildings.

1543 At the Dissolution of the Monasteries the manor, land and the revenue became the property of the Crown and was immediately leased to the Hart Dyke

family of Lullingstone. Within three years they had built a new house next to All Saints Church, retaining the "Prior's Apartments" (The Priory) as the rectory.

1608 Dr John Bancroft was made rector of Orpington in 1608 and was the last rector to "live" in The Priory. He became Rector of University College Oxford and Bishop of Oxford in 1609. One of the trefoil lights formerly in the study windows at The Priory shows the Bancroft Arms halved with University College, Oxford. He died in 1640 and so it may be fair to say that he would have had sufficient time to make changes to the garden. Furthermore he would have had excellent opportunity to study some of the finest gardens of the time in the courtyards of Oxford's many colleges. For example, the first Botanic Garden, or Physic Garden, was started at Oxford in 1621.

1630 The Honourable Richard Spencer, the third son of Baron Spencer of Wormleighton in Warwickshire, took the lease of the Priory.

1630-1675 It is believed to have been Spencer who was responsible for major alterations which were made to the building. The front door was remodelled with a square head, and the timber-framed southern extension was constructed, with close studding on the west side indicating that, as today, it was the side of the building which visitors were meant to see first as they approached. In carrying out this work the lancet window in the south wall of what is now the boiler room was blocked thus depriving the kitchens of light. It is likely that new kitchens were constructed to the east as part of these works and these were added to in the centuries which followed to produce the south wing of the building as it existed at the beginning of the 20th century. However, only part of the extension survives today as the majority was demolished in 1959 to make way for the new Orpington library.

1634 The Glebe Terrier, produced in 1634, is an important piece of historical evidence, particularly for the gardens of The Priory. The present whereabouts of this document is unknown. The quotation below was transcribed in an anonymous booklet describing The Priory as it was during the 19th century. In *The Story of Orpington* (1897) the author F. Chevenix Trench attributed that work to Lieutenant Colonel B.G. Lake who bought the house in 1882.

*Imprimis.* One fair House with a large Hall, one great Parlour, one little Parlour, one little Buttery, and one Cellar on the north side of the said House; one Mill-house, one Brew-house, one Kitchen with one Larder thereunto adjoining, one long Entry, two Cellars and one Milk-house thereunto belonging on the south, one green Court before the Hall, one Garden with apple trees on it to the north, one Codline Orchard and one Garden Plot thereunto belonging on the south, being altogether by estimation one acre and a-half, be they more or less, with the yards thereunto belonging.

*Item.* One Wood-house with a Hen-house over it; one Stable with a Hayloft over it; one Gate and a Gateloft over it; one Stable on the west side of the said Gate with a Hayloft over that; one Hay Barn adjoining to the said Stable with a Hogstye at the end thereof.

*Item.* One fair Barn with a Cart-house at the end of it, one Pigeon House, and one Barn with a Garner thereunto belonging at the south end thereof adjoining to the said green Court.

*Item.* One Meadow, containing three acres, adjoining to the Garden on the south and on the east against the highway leading to St Mary Cray, and on the West and North against the lands of Sir Percivall Hart, Knight.

*Item.* One Meadow, containing five acres, called 'Mill Mead', abutting against the land of the said Sir Percivall Hart on the south, north and east, and on the lands of Henry Lord Stanhope on the west."

The terrier extract above mentions two gardens, one to the north with apple trees on it and one codline orchard, and one garden plot on the south. A "codling" is a type of apple so a codline orchard may simply be an apple orchard. It is possible that the apple trees on the north may have been grown as a decorative edge, which was a popular fashion of the time.

Another garden which shows this principle is Penshurst Place in Kent. It is feasible that the gardens at The Priory were influenced by Penshurst as the Honourable Richard Spencer, a royalist leader during the Civil War and The Priory's occupier from 1640, was related by marriage to the Sidney's, owners of Penshurst Place. At the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Harry Sidney set out to make a formal garden on a great scale. By an ingenious system of walls and terraces and by the shifting of thousands of tons of soil, he created an artificially leveled area on which he built a formal garden and on the lower level an area for fruit, flowers and vegetables. Today, the structure of the garden at Penshurst has been little changed since the seventeenth century, its main framework relies upon walls, yew hedges and apple trees, much like The Priory. Fig 8.

1642 Articles of Impeachment were drawn up against Richard Spencer in May for his part in the presentation of a petition from Kent to the House of Commons. It is not known whether he fought at the battle of Edgehill, Warwickshire, but his father played host to Prince Rupert at Wormleighton on the night before the battle. He was with the royalist army by the end of 1642 and was commissioned Colonel in July 1643. In September of that year he was captured at Cirencester, Gloucestershire, when commanding his regiment but was exchanged and ended the war in Oxford. Compounded on the articles of surrender he was fined £630, which was cut to £300 for settlement of a rectory; presumably his house, "The Priory". In 1652 he was informed against for having under-valued his estate. In 1651 he had petitioned for a pass overseas which was eventually granted.

1650 A Commission of Enquiry during the Commonwealth into the value of church livings identified the parsonage (The Priory) as a donative belonging to one Mr Robinson who received £40 per annum out of it and held it by grant from the last Archbishop of Canterbury. He let it out with the tithe wood in Knockholt, and parsonage house and 40 acres of Glebeland in Orpington for certain years. It was

worth communis annis £200.

At the Restoration, Richard Spencer returned from exile to Orpington but died in November 1661.

1664 His widow was taxed for 13 fireplaces.

1675 Mary, the widow of Richard Spencer, died and their two daughters Mary and Margaret were the co-heirs. The lease of the house passed to William Gee I, of Bishops Burton, Yorkshire, who was Mary's husband. The house remained in the Gee family for nearly 200 years. During the residency of Richard Gee The Priory enjoyed some interesting horticultural connections.

Robert Uvadale, Doctor of Civil Law and rector of Orpington from 1696 was a respected botanist and earned a reputation for cultivating exotics, "being one of the earliest possessors of a heated green house in England". A species of *Mimulus*, *Mimulus Uvadallae*, was even named after him.

Although he never resided at Orpington, Robert Uvadale would have stayed with his lessee Richard Gee "to give instructions to his parishioners and discharge his duties at four times of the year". On these occasions Gee accommodated him at The Priory and gave him "horsemeat and convenient lodgings for him and his servants" according to the indenture made on 24th June 1717.

It is possible that Dr Uvadale took an interest in the grounds of The Priory and discussed horticultural techniques with his lessee Richard Gee, whose brother-in-law Sir Frances Carew of Beddington was also a renowned horticulturist and, like Dr Uvadale, was famous for his exotic plants and oranges. Sir Frances Carew was related by marriage to Sir Walter Raleigh and the colonising voyages which Raleigh promoted brought back a number of plants which had commercial potential and with which Sir Francis is reputed to have experimented in his kitchen gardens. Oranges were Carew's great success, for more than a century they flourished and became one of the curiosities of England. John Evelyn, Daniel Defoe and many other tourists went to see them. Beddington was the only place in the country where orange trees grew in the open ground and Carew's experiment set a fashion in large and small houses from Kensington Palace downwards.

The estate at Beddington was a large one with a fine formal garden and it is possible that aspects of the garden were copied at The Priory, as the listed walls in The Priory gardens date from the early eighteenth century, the period of Richard Gee's residency.

1780 Links with the Beddington Estate were important for the development of The Priory. In 1780 Richard Gee (grandson of the aforementioned Richard Gee, and occupier of The Priory) received the Beddington Estates, with royal licence to take upon himself the name and arms of the Carew family, according to the wishes of his second cousin Sir Nicholas Hackett Carew who had no male heirs. During Richard Gee Carew's residency at The Priory the most interesting and unusual piece of

garden evidence arises. This is the day book of James Petty of Cockmannings nursery (Fig 9). This volume is a record of a horticultural and general nursery during the period 24th May 1777 to September 1784, consisting of dated payments and receipts connected with its daily business.

1777-1784 In this Cockmannings nursery day book there are several records of purchases made by Richard Gee Esq. and also Richard Gee Carew as he later became. From these records it is evident that he must have had a large vegetable garden and orchard. It may have been at this time that the kitchen garden was built on the site mentioned in the 1840 tithe map (Fig 3).

In addition to the large amounts of vegetable seeds purchased, the Cockmannings nursery records list a vast array of ornamentals, including;

- |                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| * rocket larkspur       | * sweet william      |
| * ten week stocks       | * convolvulous minus |
| * brompton stocks       | * early pinks        |
| * honesty               | * nasturtiums        |
| * chrysanthemums        | * polyanthus         |
| * blue and white lupins | * sunflowers         |
| * candytuft             | * guilder roses      |
| * sweet scabious        | * hollyhocks         |

Also standard trees of apple, quince and cherry.

The design of these annuals and herbaceous perennials may have been in an enclosed formal arrangement, perhaps similar to those described by Celia Fiennes, who wrote about many of the gardens that she saw on a journey through England in circa 1700.

*"Mrs Stevens has a very pretty neat house and gardens...there are six grass walks, three and three, guarded by dwarf fruit trees...leading to another garden or grass cut into shapes, with paths of gravel to form them, on the left side and a codling hedge secured a walk of orange and lemon trees in perfection...in the green garden was large alloes plant and all sorts of perpetuals as well as annuals". (9)*

1815 A painting of the west front of The Priory, dated 1815, shows a central path and what seems to established flower beds around the edge of a high wall and the front of the house (Fig 10). This is an unusual arrangement, but may be explained by the fact that two of the main living rooms in the house face out on this part of the garden. The wall would have provided privacy and planting an embellishment.

It is difficult to establish the layout of the gardens to the north of the house during this period. Although portions of the walls in this part of the garden date from the early eighteenth century, they may have been built on the footings of earlier walls, as gardens from earlier periods were almost always enclosed. However there is evidence to suggest that the wall at the end of the garden was made into a *ha ha* in

the eighteenth century. This may have been the only concession to the new style of gardening that was beginning to take precedence at this time and which became known as the English Landscape style. The ha ha would have allowed a continuous view from The Priory over the meadow and perhaps to the lakes beyond.

1816 In the years following Richard Gee Carew's death it is apparent that the property was "sub-let" to a number of tenants, and the census returns for 1851 and 1861 show that they had six to ten domestic staff, two or three of whom were gardeners.

1864 The leasehold interest was enfranchised and the following year was sold to Dr Herbert Broom, who was very enthusiastic about the history of The Priory. He built a lodge and new entrance bearing his heraldic device at the west end of the outbuildings. It is almost certainly due to this wealthy lawyer that the present entrance layout came about, as can be seen clearly from the 1869 O.S Map on Fig. 11. The Victorians were enthusiastic about restoring the formal gardens of a bygone era and Edward Walford, in the second volume of his book *Village London*, describes The Priory's gardens in 1883 as 'laid out after the antique style and appear to be just the place for peacocks to strut about in'. The photographs in Fig 12 were taken in circa 1925 and show part of the garden which may have been laid out during Dr Broom's ownership.

During the Victorian era the house acquired the name "The Priory" and underwent a major remodelling. Until the nineteenth century it had always been called "The Rectory" or "The Parsonage". English Heritage suspect that the change of name from the Old Rectory to The Priory was part of an aim to increase the grandeur of the property. These Victorian "improvements" also followed the fashion for all things gothic, aiming to conjure up images of hooded monks pacing the stone flagged passages. This involved not only the name change but also the building of a minstrels' gallery in the Great Hall, the current Great Hall stairs and panelling and the installation of the late medieval style windows, which are still visible today in the Museum's Exhibition Room. A photograph exists of a pointed archway, constructed of flint rubble, in the gardens to the northwest of the building, which may have been a folly constructed at this time. The creation of a Gothic ambience at The Priory even extended to stories of a secret passage to the church used by the monks, a ghostly monk and the Monk's Walk in the grounds.

1919 The residency of Mr and Mrs Cecil Hughes commencing in 1919, was a very important period in the gardens' history as it saw the design and creation of today's walled gardens, the feature which gives Priory Gardens its unique character amongst Bromley's parks. (Fig. 13) The documented evidence for their improvements to the property is exceptional, with ground and aerial photographs, and written descriptions of the house and grounds by the architect P.E.W. Street in 1935. In addition, the Hughes daughter, Mrs Dunstall, agreed to visit The Priory to talk about her parents' garden in September 1990.

Mr Cecil Hughes was a successful publisher, keen landscape painter and collector of artifacts. He often visited Italy to paint and it was there that he was influenced by

the Italian garden style, such as terraces, geometric shapes and sharply defined evergreens. In the early 1930's Mr Hughes became Honorary Treasurer to the early Landscape Institute where he met and became friendly with Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe and Sir Peter Shepherd, who are now considered to be among its most distinguished representatives. Mrs Dunstall recalls that they visited The Priory and it is known that Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe designed one of the enclosed gardens, "The Theatre Garden".

Mr Hughes designed the rest of the walled gardens and employed a local builder to carry out the works. The sloping meadow to the north was cut to form four terraces which finally met the existing formal rose garden and nursery (Fig. 14 plan and section).

Mrs Hughes was a keen horticulturist and very influenced by Gertrude Jekyll, the late nineteenth/early twentieth century artist, garden designer, plantswoman and writer, who was her personal friend. Mrs Hughes raised over 4,000 annuals every year with the help of only two gardeners whose responsibilities were confined to mowing and tending the vegetable garden. Her daughter recalls that she often worked from 5am to 11pm in early summer. (Fig. 15).

Garden 1 (Fig. 14) was cut into a series of parterres with large box hedges of yew cut into formal wedges at each corner. Steps to the garden were added through the existing ha ha and a further five courses added to form a low wall. Old bricks were meticulously chosen to blend with the existing wall and used throughout the whole design. The planting of this garden was a mix of annuals and herbaceous perennials, the beds in the centre were planted with low species (Fig.16).

Garden 2 was mainly herbaceous and very similar in appearance to today's garden, although the yew hedge at the south end which formally enclosed the garden is now gone. (Fig.17).

Gardens 3, 4, 5, and 6 were often used for amateur dramatics during the 1930's. Garden 6 had a small stage and auditorium and garden 5 (enclosed by yew hedges) was the "box office" (Fig. 18). For bigger productions, that were intended to raise money for charity, gardens 3 and 4, the tennis courts, were used.

Mr Hughes was very keen on garden ornaments and collected many fine examples on his trips to Italy, including a beautiful stone seat, and wonderful baskets of fruit which decorated the brick pillars on the steps to the terraced gardens, (Fig.19). Many of these artifacts are still in the possession of the Hughes family and they were kind enough to permit the Council to photograph and measure them. (Fig.20).

1935 P.E.W. Street undertook detailed architectural and photographic surveys of the building and gardens which remain one of the major sources of information about the building. Unfortunately the whereabouts of the plan to which he refers is not known.

1940 Cecil Hughes died and the following year his wife and children left. The



building was let to the Orpington District Council for use as offices.

1942 George Rose of Chelsfield produced detailed floor and roof plans of the house as well as cardinal point elevations. As with Street's work these are of great importance as they show the lay out of the building, prior to the major alterations undertaken at the end of the 1950s.

1947 Orpington Urban District Council bought the building and continued to use it as council offices with virtually no alterations.

1959 Most of the south wing of The Priory, including the kitchens and servants quarters, was demolished in order to build a new library for Orpington. Today this is regarded as a loss to the site but at the time, this part of the building was described to be "of no architectural merit". The architect for the new library was Lord Mottistone and it was opened in 1961 by HRH Duchess of Gloucester.

At this time major alterations were undertaken to the fabric of the rest of the building. The lean-to building against the east side of the Great Hall was demolished. The staircase to the roofspace from the first floor was removed, as were the room partitions. All of the fireplaces were removed or remodelled. Panelling was removed from the Avebury Room and from the Harlow Passage. The roof was also remodelled which resulted in the removal of a number of dormer windows and the original roof timbers no longer performing their original function.

1959 When Orpington Urban District Council acquired the grounds of The Priory they consisted of three distinct areas: the formal gardens and lawns around the house, the nursery and remains of an orchard and finally the ponds, woodland and paddock at the north end. In order to transform the grounds into a park the Council embarked upon a plan of improvements and developments in 1959. This included the:

- \* construction of a new main entrance at the corner of the High Street and Court Road;
- \* erection of new gates from the nearby High Elms Estate, believed to date from the early eighteenth century;
- \* clearing of undergrowth and trees;
- \* dredging of the ponds;
- \* building up of the pond banks;
- \* formation of the pond's centre islands;
- \* creation of new paths;
- \* construction of a children's playground;
- \* building of a new public convenience.

After the completion of work totalling £12 500, the new park was opened in 1962. The Museum opened in The Priory in 1965.

Since becoming part of the London Borough of Bromley in 1965, further improvements have been made to the Priory Gardens. However, the most

significant expenditure took place in 1994 as part of the Borough's new Parks and Open Spaces Strategy. The basis of this Strategy is consultation with park users to ascertain their requirements of parks, followed by the adaptation of the existing mix of park types to meet the community's wide range of needs. The Strategy is currently being applied in a phased process across Bromley. At Priory Gardens £27 000 was spent upon the restoration of the parterre garden, new seats, litter bins, poop-a-scoop bins and interpretative and entrance signs.

## **BOOKLIST**

"The Story of Orpington" F. Chevenix Trench (1897)

"History of Orpington" Dorothy Cox

"Village London" Walford Edward

"The Hydrological and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent" Edward Hasted (1797)

"The Priory Orpington" possibly by Colonel Benjamin Lake (July 1887)

"The Priory, Priory Gardens and Central Library" Orpington Urban District Council (May 1962)

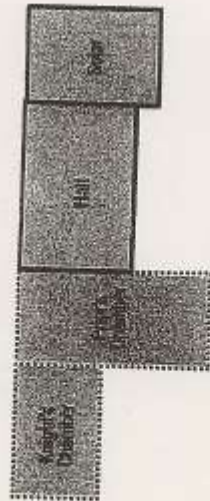
"Survey of The Priory" P.E.W. Street (1935)

"Historical Notes on the Parish of Orpington and the So-called Priory" L.B. Timmis (May 1979)

Personal Communication from Marie Bowen (Former Curator of the Bromley Museum)

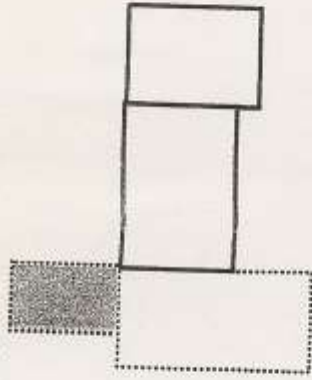
Personal Communication from John B. Weller

### 13th Century



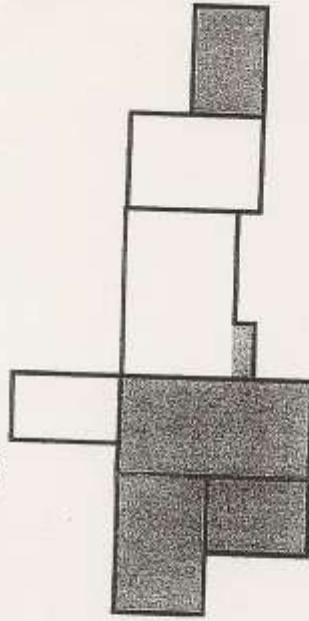
- 1290 Hall built in stone. Also Solar?
- Prior's Chamber, of wood, adjoins hall, but exact position unknown.
- Position of Knight's Chamber unknown.

### 14th Century



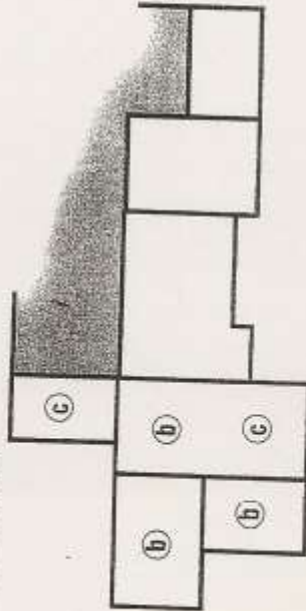
- 1333 Knight's Chamber moved.
- 1393 three rooms for Parish Priest erected.
- New block has integral Spiral Stair and fireplace. Top floor may be a chapel.

### 15th Century



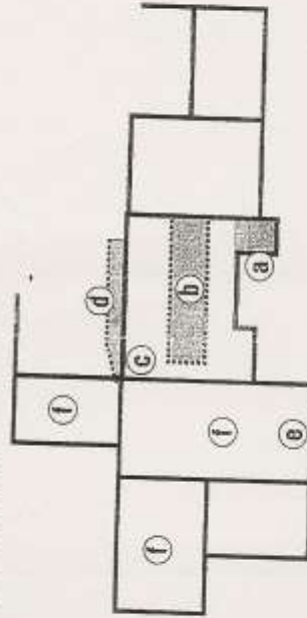
- 1471 Prior Selling makes 'great improvements' including new stone chambers and garderobe.
- Hall roof renewed, ceiling and fireplace inserted and bay built.
- Extension to service wing.

### 17th Century



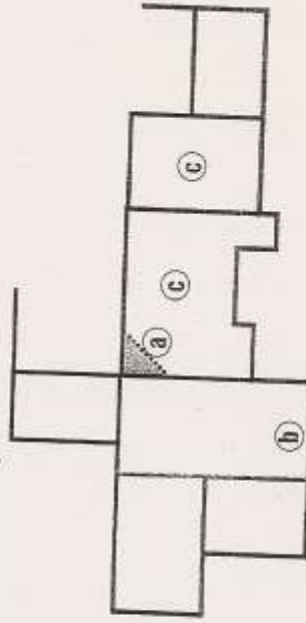
- New kitchen range built to South and East.
- Floors inserted to form attic rooms over chambers. (b)
- Beams in Prior's Chamber enclosed in decorative plaster. Other decorated ceilings now gone. (c)

### 18th Century



- Entrance porch built. (a)
- Cellar inserted under hall, with chequer paving over. (b)
- Hall stairs remodelled in classical style. (c)
- Sunkern passage to connect Kitchens to reception rooms. (d)
- Sash windows replace Gothic in meeting rooms. (e)
- New doors and panelling in reception rooms and principal bedrooms. (f)

### 19th Century



- Invention of the Priory myth.
- Classical main stairs replaced, with Minstrels' Gallery over. (a)
- Square sashes replaced by new Gothic windows. (b)
- Restoration and replacement of almost all other windows.
- Panelling of Great Hall and Billiard room. (c)

## THE PRIORY, ORPINGTON

FIG. 2 INTERPRETATION OF THE BUILDING'S HISTORY

Structural additions/changes