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Houses of Power: The Places that Shaped the Tudor World

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Audrey Thorstad

You may think you know the story of the Tudor dynasty and the steps they took in securing their power and legacy, but what most grand narratives of the Tudor monarchs do not describe is their intimate relationship with the built environment around them. The royal buildings facilitated power structures and hierarchies, they included hunting lodges equipped to house royal entourages, castles and palaces so grand they were fit for a queen, renovation projects that cost millions of pounds, and monarchs unwilling to pay the upkeep of the expansive range of estate. All of these are covered in Dr Simon Thurley's most recent book *Houses of Power*, which explores the intricacies of royal buildings and those who lived, worked, and visited them providing the reader with a fresh look of England's most written about family.

Dr Thurley tells us in his introduction that he has been working on the archaeology of at least a dozen Tudor royal houses for the last 30 years. This experience has enabled the production of a much-needed synthesis of the most (in)famous dynasty in English history told through their building projects and the spaces in which they conducted their lives, their business, and their politics. In a crowded field full of books on the Tudors, *Houses of Power* offers a refreshing new insight into the lives not only of the monarchs, but also of the occupants of these buildings, who could number from 500 to 1500, as well as the communities living and working in the shadows of the structures. Thurley does a beautiful job of weaving many different disciplines together to create a coherent history of a family and their building programme across 118 years.

Although *Houses of Power* is very much readable and accessible to a wide-ranging audience, the rigour and attention to detail put into the monograph is clear. The book is not devoid of footnotes, but some readers

may feel they are lacking in places; however, in no way does the book report to be purely academic. It is actually stated in the introduction that most of Thurley's own work and the work of others, 'has been published in obscure academic journals or in expensive monographs too heavy to hold in one hand' (p. xi). Therefore, the aim of *Houses of Power* is clear from the onset and the absence in some places of academic finesse is understandable in a book very much dedicated to bringing the narrative to readers outside of academic circles. Indeed, this book is very much about bringing Dr Thurley's expertise, experience, and knowledge to a broader audience, and the approachability of the book for all levels of familiarity is a masterpiece. Surprisingly, no one, up until the publication of this book, had collated data from across the entire dynasty related to building works and historical context and asked the question: what does all this information tell us about the Tudors? And to be frank, it is about time.

The importance of many of these structures to our understanding of the Tudor monarchs, society more generally, and our interpretation and presentation of them in today's society is unmatched. However, scholarship on the built environment under the Tudors has remained focused on the major innovative projects like Hampton Court Palace and Nonsuch Palace. The fascination with the large structures and with Henry VIII's ambitious building programmes more generally, has left the scholarship on Tudor buildings fragmented. This fragmentation is exacerbated by the lack of discussion across disciplines and sectors. Dialogue between archaeologists, architectural historians, and historians is still rare and has left the dissemination of knowledge hidden away in academic discipline-specific publications and conferences. Over the last forty or so years, research on architecture have focused on the display of power, the social and political ques of heraldry, the idea of privacy and public spaces, and the changing architectural fashions. Indeed, Dr Thurley has published a multitude of books and articles that explore many of these aspects. His 1993 monograph on *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England: Architecture and Court Life, 1460–1547* broke away from that mould and integrated the people and the built environment together. *Houses of Power* takes a similar approach with the combination of people and place and pushes the chronological boundaries to the end of the Tudor dynasty engaging with people from all stratifications of society.

The beauty of this publication is that it not only focuses on the architectural history and archaeology of these sites, but it brings in ideas of space and movement, discussions on the role of political and economic factors on construction as well as the use of these buildings by people other than the monarchs. Weaving these aspects throughout the narrative provides a more holistic picture of Tudor society and such an interdisciplinary approach has yet to be taken up by other scholars. Undoubtedly, one hindrance that scholars face is the lack of building remains of many of the properties. This is where the interdisciplinary prowess of Thurley comes to the forefront. Combining the excavation reports with documentary evidence, as well as his own personal experience working with these buildings, allows him to put together building plans and drawings that have not been possible until now. The book very neatly discusses functionality and purpose of chambers and architecture, rather than getting bogged down in definitions or in the intricacies of architectural detail, which is, of course, important, but not needed for what Thurley was trying to accomplish with *Houses of Power*. Instead, the reader begins to get an understanding of how buildings shaped, and manipulated in some cases, the lives and institutions of the late 15th and 16th centuries. It is a powerful reminder of how important buildings are in our everyday lives.

Some of the most well-known Tudor buildings, including Windsor Castle, Hampton Court Palace, and the Tower of London feature heavily throughout the book. But according to my count, there are some eighty other properties across England that are covered. Some with far more detail, due in part to the surviving evidence, while others feature on the fringes of the book, brought in to support and further enlighten the other case studies. The buildings themselves range from secular to religious, from small residences used to escape court to the enormous Tower of London with its multifaceted uses throughout the 16th century. There are 16 chronological chapters, sub-divided into more thematic sections. Each chapter has familiar episodes and material within; Cardinal Thomas Wolsey's fall from grace and Henry VIII's eagerness to possess Hampton Court Palace, for example. Less familiar to many will be the sections on 'Room Service', which traces the change happening in the royal household organisation and how these developments influence the architecture and spatial layout of the residential buildings. But, whether familiar or not, the

sheer amount of detail and care given to each building enormously extends our knowledge and understanding of the role these buildings played in Tudor society and how they were adapted and shaped by each monarch in turn. These are subject-areas on which Thurley has already written authoritatively in his *Royal Palaces of Tudor England*, but here we learn not just more about the interaction between the built environment and the people but a lot more about how and why these structures were erected.

Each monarch is not discussed in the same detail, which is unsurprising as the length of reign was one factor in determining the scale of building work possible. The chapters on Henry VII provide new details on a king who is traditionally seen either as a man who focused his projects on religious buildings or as someone not interested in architecture. But, as Thurley is quick to point out, Henry VII was very aware of appearance and displays of power, and this can be seen strikingly through his building of the new privy chamber block at Windsor, his completely new build at Richmond, and his building work at Greenwich. Thurley demonstrates that much of Henry VII's building work was about magnificence and displays of royal power, which was, for the most part, similar to what was happening in previous reigns. One particular building project that Thurley discusses under the sub-section 'Treasure House' describes the renovations started in 1501 at the Tower of London as 'a sort of national counting house for the royal treasure' (p. 85). The description of the series of chambers, their spatial arrangements, and furnishings commissioned by the first Tudor king are the kind of detail that are invaluable fountains of knowledge for early Tudor scholars.

Unsurprisingly, Henry VIII has the most chapters dedicated to extensive and expansive building projects. The second Tudor king inherited 20 palaces and houses as well as six castles for residential use. It was clear from early on in his reign that he was going to continue to add to his inheritance. Henry acquired and built a further 25 properties, almost doubling his inheritance. Cardinal Wolsey is also focused on throughout the chapters related to Henry VIII, due in part, to his grand palace of Hampton Court. In the reviewer's opinion, one of the most interesting chapters in the whole of the book is called 'Room Service' and discusses in depth how chamber arrangements facilitated movement by servants, visitors of varying statuses, the king, and the queen. The chapter focuses on great halls, particularly the one rebuilt by Henry VIII at Hampton Court, as well as Henry's changing preferences when it came to the sequence of chambers in his royal apartments. The changes that took place to the royal apartments, Thurley argues, stayed standard into the reign of James I. Details such as those in this particular chapter offer an intimate glimpse into life in these buildings, something that is not usually discussed in chapters on grand displays of power and politics.

There is only one chapter dedicated to Edward VI, as king. Prince Edward, along with most of the royal children, are mentioned throughout the monograph. The chapter's main focus is on the changes happening to religion; however, there is a brief discussion on the largest architectural project undertaken during Edward's reign: Royal Mews at Charing Cross. Thurley argues that we can see changes to the inner workings of the privy chambers that reflect the political atmosphere of a minority kingship.

Queen Mary I does not have a full chapter dedicated to her. There is a brief discussion of the Anglo-Spanish court, but the chapter 'Queen Regnant' focuses its attention on the whereabouts of Princess Elizabeth and the built environment in which she called home for much of her younger years. Not including the chapter on Elizabeth as princess, there are four chapters on her building and use of the royal palaces already in her possession. Elizabeth I has been seen for a long time as a monarch not interested in building or renovating. However, the four chapters about Elizabeth's use, renovation, and building of royal palaces testifies to her interest in architecture. As many people will know, Elizabeth I did not stay in one place for very long, and indeed, Thurley has a chapter called 'Home and away'. This chapter examines not only at royal palaces that Elizabeth travelled to, but also those of her courtiers that she went to on royal progress, such as Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire and Hengrave Hall in Suffolk. Like with the chapters on Henry VIII, there is a chapter on 'The Elizabethan Royal Lodgings' which takes the reader on a journey through the private living quarters of the Queen and the select number of servants who would assist her in her daily activities.

We are not just left with Elizabeth I's death in 1603. The Epilogue takes us into James I/VI's accession. The problem with presenting the biography of a building is that many of their stories continue even today. With that being said, Thurley does an excellent job walking us through the lives of the royal buildings under

the Tudors. This is a narrative that Dr Thurley is well-equipped to write. We see just how much continuity there was in the buildings in the late Tudor period and the changes that begin to happen under James. We follow the fortunes, good and bad, of these buildings, getting hints and glimpses into their later biographies through maps, plans, images, and archaeological excavations.

This work highlights the fact that the built environment in Tudor England was evolutionary in many ways. Dr Thurley carefully and coherently points out the developments in architecture and space and the links these changes had to social, religious, and political context. The integration of the household organisation, the Privy Council, and other visitors, such as diplomats, to these buildings brings a stimulating peak into the interactions, movements, and daily lives of the Tudor monarchs and those in close proximity to them. The ease with which Thurley describes the interior chamber arrangements allows the reader to be guided through each structure, imagining arriving at Whitehall by barge and being swept through the gardens, and led up the stairs to the king's royal apartments.

One of the many advantages of this book is the vast number of coloured plates, images, and building plans throughout. The plans in particular add so much to the understanding of chambers and space that these in themselves are an invaluable resource for the reader. Moreover, the book has a well-formed index that allows readers to dip in and out of the book if they are interested in following the biography of a particular building. There is an enormous number of images, maps, reconstructions, coloured plates, and maps that bring these buildings to life. One drawback is that none of these images are numbers, but according to my own count there are 47 plans, maps, or reconstructions, 82 images, and 32 coloured plates.

This book has successfully demonstrated that building projects by the Crown can tell us a lot about their power structure, politics, and everyday life. These buildings would have dictated the lives of the Tudors in many ways, and it behooves us to understand them in that way: as an integral part of any society. Chamber arrangements restricted and facilitated movement, furnishings and heraldic badges announced ownership and power, while the architecture itself promoted authority, wealth, and status. The only way this book could have been so well-written is due to Dr Thurley's expertise and experience working with many of these structures. This book is a refreshing new view into the Tudor dynasty for both scholars who think they are familiar with the family and those just starting on their Tudor adventure.

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