

A corner of Cambridgeshire

by Duncan JD Smith

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At first glance Ely Place seems little more than a cul-de-sac of smart Georgian terraced houses — but look again. The clue to its unexpectedly colourful history is the little gatehouse standing at one end of the street. It carries a sign lacking the usual EC1 district number and it houses a beadle who locks the gates at ten each evening. By passing through them one leaves London and enters a fragment of land which is full of the spirit of Cambridgeshire.

Ely Place is one of the last privately owned streets in London. It dates back to 1290, when an exclave of Cambridgeshire was established here for the powerful Bishops of Ely. In common with the Bishops of Canterbury and Winchester they held high state offices requiring the maintenance of a London residence. Long subject to its own ancient rights and privileges the area is still managed by its own body of commissioners.

In mediaeval times the self-supporting community, which included a palace and extensive gardens and orchards, was separated from the City and its laws by a high wall. All that remains of the place today, however, is the Church of St Etheldreda at number 14. Once the bishops' private chapel, it is unusual in being a pre-Reformation church that is still used as a Catholic place of worship. It is also one of London's few surviving buildings

LEFT: The entrance to Ely Place in London's Holborn district (photo by Duncan JD Smith).

*My Lord of Ely, when I was last in Holborn
I saw good strawberries in your garden there.*

William Shakespeare, Richard III (Act 3 Scene 4)

from the reign of Edward I. The desiccated hand of St Etheldreda is preserved in a jewelled casket alongside the altar and her unfortunate death from a tumour of the neck gives added poignancy to the 'Blessing of the Throats' ceremony held in the church on 3 February each year, that day being the Feast of St Blaise.

Despite being badly damaged during the Second World War, the church has been restored. Its undercroft is perfectly preserved and now used for the candlelit celebration of marriages.

The chapel gardens were once renowned for their strawberries, so much so that Shakespeare has the Duke of Gloucester compliment the Bishop of Ely accordingly in his *Richard III* and they are still recalled today in an annual strawberry fair in June. Shakespeare also uses the palace (known as Ely House) as the setting for John of Gaunt's famous "This royal throne of kings, this sceptre'd isle" speech. The nobleman lived here after the Savoy Palace was destroyed during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Many famous people visited the bishops in their palace, including Henry VIII and his first wife Catherine of Aragon, who attended a five-day feast here in 1531. The sixteenth-century historian John Stow records that the menu included 13 dozen swans, 37 dozen pigeons, 91 pigs, and 340 larks!

Another noteworthy visitor was Elizabeth I, who in 1578 granted the freehold of the estate to her favourite, Sir Christopher Hatton. He had already secured a lease on the property and spent money renovating it, which the incumbent Bishop of Ely was unable to reimburse.

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ONLY IN LONDON

This text by Duncan JD Smith is adapted from the author's forthcoming book *Only in London: A Guide to Unique Locations, Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects*. The book is the tenth title in the well-established 'Only In' guidebook series — all written by Duncan JD Smith.

This is the first time that Duncan has focused on a city outside mainland Europe. *Only in London* has 244 pages, 122 colour photos and two fold-out maps. It will be published in late May 2015. For ordering information and further details see www.onlyinguides.com. The new London title will appear under the Urban Explorer imprint.

Hatton renamed the property after himself and in 1587 became Lord Chancellor. He is remembered around the corner in Hatton Garden, where a passage alongside number 8 gives access to Ely Place via Ely Court. Here can be found Ye Olde Mitre, a quirky tavern built for the bishops' servants in 1546 and rebuilt in 1772, when the estate was sold to the Crown (in the same year the Georgian cul-de-sac was built and a new home for the bishops found at 37 Dover Street in Mayfair). Just inside the tavern door is the trunk of a cherry tree around which a love-struck young Elizabeth is said to have danced. Although the pub license is no longer sought in Cambridgeshire the opening hours remain strictly in line with those of the gates. Bear that in mind, if you are inclined to visit. The nearest stations are Chancery Lane (on the Central Line) and Farringdon (served by Metropolitan, Circle and Thameslink services). ■