

STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST NO 5

ST FRIDESWIDE'S PRIORY

Asset/Monument Type: Priory (Post Conquest)

Summary: St Frideswide's priory was founded in the Middle Saxon period as a nunnery and minster. It was re-founded as an Augustinian priory in 1122. Immediately prior to the Dissolution it was converted by Thomas Wolsey into Christ Church (College) in 1525. The priory church was later designated as the City Cathedral in 1546. Although the 12th century priory church survives, the full extent and layout of the monastic precinct is not fully understood.

Location (NGR): 5154 0597

Description: A priory is a monastery of men or women under religious vows that is headed by a prior or prioress.

Key characteristics

The following criteria (which are not in any order of ranking) are based on the Secretary of State's criteria for assessing Scheduled Monuments. They should not be regarded as definitive, but as an indicative provisional assessment.

1. **Period:** Does the asset characterise a category or historic period?

Assessment: A religious institution has survived on this site more or less continuously since the Middle Saxon period, the present 12th century church is all that survives of the priory.

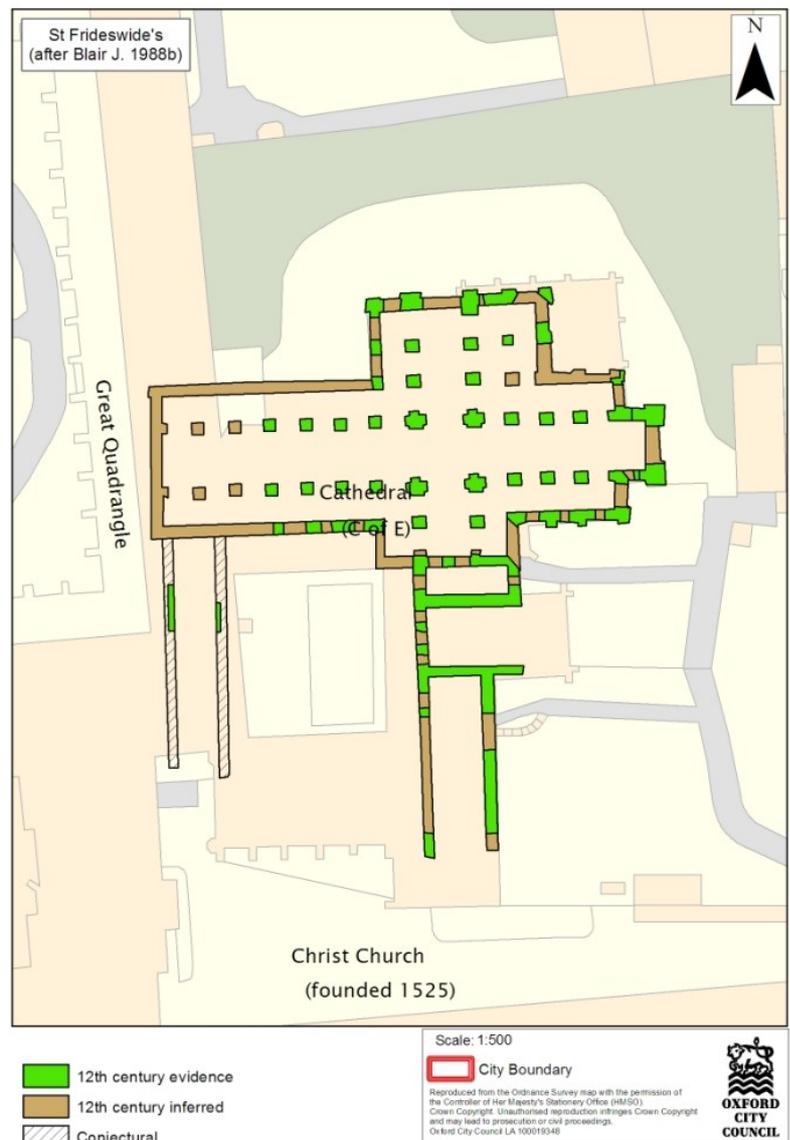
Score: Medium

2. **Rarity:** What is the rarity of the asset in terms of regional and national context?

Assessment: At a national level Augustinian monasteries were the most common order founded in England although few survive in any recognisable form. The Victoria County History notes 27 monastic houses in the modern county while the Oxfordshire HER contains 35 records.

Score: Medium

3. **Documentation:** To what extent is the significance of the asset enhanced by existing documentation or lack thereof?



Assessment: The documentation for St Frideswide's Norman priory is reasonable and is held by Christ Church, there is little information on the early foundation of the minster. There is good archaeological documentation.

Score: Medium

4. **Group Value:** *Is the value of the asset enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments or with monuments of different periods?*

Assessment: The priory sits within the present Christ Church College on the site of a former Saxon minster and cemetery, reflecting a long period of use. It is also closely associated with the wider Saxon and medieval intramural settlement.

Score: High

5. **Survival/Condition:** *What is the estimated level of above and below ground survival?*

Assessment: The 12th century cathedral (Grade I listed building) is the only surviving above ground element of the medieval priory. Previous archaeological investigation has noted a good survival of below ground features however.

Score: High

6. **Fragility/Vulnerability:** *susceptibility to change.*

Assessment: The cathedral has seen many phases of alteration for aesthetic and restoration purposes, factors which may be an ongoing consideration for the future. Vulnerability to change is subject to its listed building status. Its dual status as a college and cathedral has led to a question of the extent of ecclesiastical exemption and permitted development rights within the grounds.

Score: Low

7. **Diversity:** *Does the asset possess a combination of high quality features?*

Assessment: High survival of features in the church and for outbuildings, also evidence for burials.

Score: Medium

8. **Potential:** *Is there a likelihood that currently unrecorded evidence can be anticipated?*

Assessment: Previous archaeological investigations have indicated a good potential for evidence of a middle to late Saxon cemetery, domestic occupation and the city defences.

Score: High

Overall score (18/24)

Overall Assessment of Archaeological Interest: High

HERITAGE ASSET DESCRIPTION

The priory was located to the south of the intramural settlement but set back from the St Aldates Road, the only surviving above ground structure is the former church, now the city cathedral.

Pre-minster foundation

There is very limited evidence of prehistoric activity on the site of the minster comprising a single Neolithic flint knife and several flakes recovered from excavations at the garden of the Canon of the Sixth Stall in 1954 and a substantial north-south aligned ditch from excavations in the Cathedral garden in 1961. Although no dating evidence from the ditch was recovered it was suggested that the ditch formed part of a Neolithic causewayed camp (Sturdy, 1988).

St Frideswide's Minster

Little is known for certain about the early foundation of the minster although it has been suggested that it could be as early as the mid 8th century and it certainly predated the foundation of the burh. The first documentary reference comes from 1002 when it was burnt down by the king and his supporters following the massacre of the Danes who had taken shelter in the church. The king was compelled to rebuild the minster and some construction clearly took place as a charter of 1004 by Aethelred II confirmed the king's duty to rebuild the minster and three canons of St Frideswide's are mentioned in Domesday (Stenton 1936).

Understanding the Saxon minster is complicated by substantial construction phases on the site since the 12th century however it is conjectured that the original minster was located to the north of the present cathedral with the shrine in the east end. Settlement evidence dating to the 11th century located along the northern edge of the cathedral garden indicate the extent of monastic occupation to the north while the 1122 charter indicates that the minster was enclosed by intra-mural roads to the south and/or east (Blair 1988).

Evidence for a Mid to Late Saxon cemetery at the St Frideswide's Precinct has long been recorded; the earliest record of human remains in the area was noted in the 19th century during the construction of the Meadow Buildings, however these were undated (Conradi 1864). Later discoveries in 1962, 1972, 1985, 1998 and 2007 have indicated a substantial cemetery surrounding the church that may have extending east beyond the boundary of the medieval wall with Corpus Christi College (Bashford, 2007). In total, over 70 inhumations have been recorded, several of which were placed on a bed of charcoal. Radio-carbon dating has produced a wide range of dates from the 7th-11th century.

At the Conquest the precinct was probably entirely contained within the town wall. The south east corner bounded by an intramural road to the south and possibly to the east as well. There is evidence that Aethelred extended the perimeter of the basilica when he rebuilt the church in the 11th century (Blair 1988).

St Frideswide's Priory

The Norman priory of St Frideswide's was founded in 1122 by Henry I on the site of the minster, at which time the priory took possession of, or had confirmed the ownership of, at least ten churches in and around Oxford including All Saints Church, St Edward's Church, St Michael at the South Gate, St Mildred's Church, St Peter le Bailey Church, the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, St Clements Church, St Margaret's at Binsey, St Nicholas's at Marston and St Andrew's at Headington (Page 1907). The priory was also granted a yearly fair to be held both within and without the wall, presumably referring to St Aldates.

That the priory remained modest seems likely as many of the local families initially supported the new Augustinian abbey of Osney, and despite holding a number of churches they appeared to have little other land. Documentary sources indicate that a fire or some catastrophic event occurred in around 1190 that resulted in the destruction of some or all of the church; reports differ as to the extent of the damage with the Osney Cartulary indicating that the damage was extensive destroying the church and even part of the city adjacent (Page 1907). Halsey, however, suggests this is unlikely as there is little architectural evidence to suggest extensive fire damage, the chapter house and the shrine both survived intact and the fire may have been contained to the roof or cloister (Halsey 1988).

Several architectural surveys of the Church have been carried out since the RCHME survey in 1939, the most detailed being perhaps Halsey's article in 1988 indicating the church was predominately Norman in style and nothing appears to survive of the pre Conquest church which may lie partially beneath the cloister. Construction of the new priory precincts appears

to have been slow with architectural elements that can be dated to 1120s to 1180s (Halsey 1988). At some point in the 12th or 13th century the line of the town wall was also altered to the north to allow more room for the growing monastic precinct.

Archaeological evidence for the priory has been recorded in several excavations with foundations noted in the north east part of the Cathedral, in the current Latin Chapel and within the cloister where a long sequence of construction from the early 12th century onwards was noted despite significant Victorian disturbance (Sturdy, 1988). The early cemetery was in its final phase by the early 12th century and was largely abandoned to accommodate new structures for the converted monastery. The chapter house and dorter range were rebuilt in the 13th century while the frater and cloister were rebuilt in the late 15th century. Further investigations carried out in the Cathedral Garden produced evidence of several medieval burials and charnel pits. In the 19th century an observation at Christ Church recorded a substantial stone wall on a north-south alignment from Tom Tower to 8 St Aldates and was thought to be a boundary wall for the priory.

A reconstruction of the expansion of the church from the 12th century is provided by Sturdy based on this and other nearby investigations. The earliest structure is the 12th century Chapter House and Dorter Range south of the Cathedral (LB Ref 8/453G) with the slightly later 13th century church which later served as the city cathedral and college chapel (LB Ref 8/453H).

Christ Church and Cathedral

The priory was dissolved towards the end of the medieval period before the Dissolution of the Monasteries and was converted into Christ Church by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525 (see Christ Church SAI 36). The college proved an ambitious design gradually expanding over a far more substantial area than the earlier priory; the extensive Tom Quad is perhaps the largest quadrangle in the city. Archaeological investigation has recorded several abortive attempts of additional structures within the college complex suggesting its original plans may have been more ambitious than was ever built.

Academic statements

MPP Class Description

In selecting examples of national importance an attempt should be made to identify a variety of site types and situations, examples with differing proportions of standing remains and sites prioritised by reference to their historical descriptors. All sites which originated as pre-Conquest houses are noteworthy, as are those which belonged to orders with few nunneries (Cluniac, Premonstratensian, Dominican, Franciscan, St John of Jerusalem). In addition, any examples of nunneries converted from monuments of another function (in particular, male monasteries) should be examined in order to assist in the recognition of morphological traits specific to nunneries. The sample should also include sites of short-lived or unsuccessful occupation, so that stages of development may be classified (English Heritage 1989).

Research agenda

- Further investigation into the Saxon minster and its cemetery, what structural remains of the minster church survive in the present structure?
- What was the extent of the Saxon minster and can we identify its growth during the medieval period?

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- Can the original line of the Saxon burh be identified in the archaeological record? Possible evidence has been previously recorded; can the evidence from the investigations be revisited?
 - Can we identify separate phases of the town defences as at St Michael's Street? Is there evidence for a southern extension around the priory in the Saxo-Norman period?
 - When was the medieval town wall altered to follow its present line south of the Meadow Buildings?

Existing Designations

10 Grade I, 3 Grade II* and 18 Grade II listed buildings (including Christ Church)

SAM No 2 (City Wall)

Central Oxford Conservation Area.

Christ Church Registered Park and Garden Grade 1 (No 1409)

Associated Monuments

UAD Monument 2: Saxon defences (site of). Probable line of former burh defences

UAD Monument 4: City Wall (site of). Former line of City Wall through Christ Church

UAD Monument 36: Blackfriars Priory, first site (site of).

UAD Monument 99: Record of Real Tennis Court in 1546 (site of). Building demolished 1966

UAD Monument 105: Christ Church College

UAD Monument 363: Chantry College (site of). Demolished 1773

UAD Monument 389: Church of St Michael at the Southgate (site of)

UAD Monument 392: Cathedral. Former church of St Frideswide's, later city cathedral.

UAD Monument 393: St Frideswide's Priory

UAD Monument 527: The Pike Inn (site of). Former synagogue and later inn

UAD Monument 673: Gardens and quadrangles of Christ Church

UAD Monument 746: St Frideswide's Lane (site of). Former road removed in medieval period

UAD Monument 749: Jury Lane (site of). Former road removed in medieval period

UAD Monument 753: Shitbarn Lane (site of). Former road removed in medieval period

UAD Monument 807: Ape Hall (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 827: Burnells Inn (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 830: Chimer's Hall (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 838: Eagle Hall (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 844: Glasen Hall (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 846: Greek Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church.

UAD Monument 863: Leberd Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church.

UAD Monument 876: Peckwater Inn (site of). Former Academic Hall.

UAD Monument 885: St Edward Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church

UAD Monument 886: St Edward Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church

UAD Monument 904: Soler Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church

UAD Monument 912: Vine Hall. Medieval Academic Hall, now part of Christ Church

UAD Monument 943: Late Saxon buildings at Christ Church

Associated Events

- *Excavations at the Garden of the Canon of the Sixth Stall, Tom Quad, 1954 (UAD 164):* Single Neolithic flint knife and some flakes. Earliest occupation evidence included Late Saxon and 12th century pottery in the fill of a watercourse thought to be the Trill Mill Stream and occupation layers from the late 12th century onwards. Evidence also of the medieval City

Wall and several medieval tenements fronting onto St Aldates as well as post medieval walls and terraces associated with the garden.

- *Excavations at Peckwater Quad, 1956 (UAD 169)*: Evidence of 1.5m thick layer of 11th-12th century accumulation into which a 13th century pit was cut. 14th-15th gravel floors probably associated with Eagle Hall then overlay this.
- *Excavations at Cathedral Cloister, 1958 (UAD 172)*: Eleven badly disturbed burials of possible Saxon to Norman date recorded in later pit or quarry. Medieval foundations of a possible abortive phase of development for Cardinal College was also recorded, dated to the 15th-16th century.
- *Excavations at Cathedral Garden, 1961 (UAD 185)*: Late Saxon occupation layers including postholes, kilns or ovens and pits were recorded. Also several medieval graves and a charnel pit to the south. A 12th century road was recorded to the north, later replaced in the 14th century by domestic development. Possible evidence of stables associated with the college.
- *Excavations at Corpus Christi College, 1958 (UAD 186)*: Evidence of the 14th century boundary wall of Canterbury College was exposed, later the boundary with Christ Church. Below were the remains of an earlier 12th-13th century road surface and domestic occupation fronting onto it.
- *Excavations at Cathedral Garden, 1961 (UAD 200)*: Substantial ditch recorded of a possible prehistoric date. Second larger ditch also recorded and thought to be part of the burh defences. Also recorded was evidence of the City Wall, Eagle Hall, 12th century structural activity and inhumations of a medieval and post medieval date.
- *Excavations at Tom Quad, 1972 (UAD 254)*: Two Saxon skeletons recorded on a bed of charcoal.
- *Excavations at Cathedral Cloister, 1985 (UAD 296)*: Fourteen Saxon inhumations recorded, two of which lay on a bed of charcoal and a possible third in a stone cist. Also structural foundations of a building within the cloister garth.
- *Building work at Priory House, 1986-7 (UAD 297)*: Survey recorded evidence of Norman architectural elements including a cloister door and some steps. Evidence of the 1190 fire also noted along with later 15th century alterations and a post medieval wall painting over the door.
- *Evidence from Christ Church, 1920s (UAD 300)*: 14th century wall paintings recorded in the south choir aisle of the Cathedral.
- *Watching brief in Tom Quad, 1996 (UAD 286)*: Some 13th-14th century pottery overlain by a mortar layer.
- *Building survey of St Frideswide's Shrine, 1999 (UAD 458)*: A measured survey of the shrine was carried out to provide a basis for detailed drawings of the carvings and mouldings.
- *Documentary evidence for excavation, 12th century (UAD 489)*: Record of excavation of the shrine by the canons to verify that the saint's remains had not been removed by Abingdon Abbey.
- *Excavations at Cathedral Gardens, 1998 (UAD 515)*: Numerous burials recorded, some of which may be Saxon however no further information is available.
- *Excavations at Christ Church, 1975 (UAD 531)*: Garden soils recorded along with small area of stone hardcore below the existing floor. Original fireplace also recorded.
- *Excavations at Old Frater, 1975 (UAD 535)*: Rubble, probably from the construction of several 18th-19th century cellars was recorded along with two medieval floor tiles.

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- *Christ Church in 1983 (UAD 567)*: Possible post medieval well in cathedral precinct.
 - *Excavations at Old Library in 1954 (UAD 900)*: The original 17th century painted roof consisting of heraldry panels was uncovered above a false ceiling.
 - *Observations at Old Library in 1959-60 (UAD 901)*: The fan-vault of the pulpit was found to have been painted blue with gold stars.
 - *Surface find at the Cathedral in 1869 (UAD 904)*: A late Saxon gravestone and other 11th century stonework were removed from the Sanctuary wall.
 - *Salvage record at the Cathedral in 1871 (UAD 907)*: South nave aisle wall almost completely rebuilt and 'muniment room' added in North cloister walk.
 - *Surface find at Christ Church, 1887 (UAD 1203)*: A copper figure inlaid with coloured enamels was dug up, it appears to be part of an 11th century crucifix.
 - *Surface find at Canon's Garden, 1912 (UAD 1245)*: 13th-14th century jug rim and copper jetton.
 - *Surface find at Christ Church in 1947 (UAD 1321)*: Medieval tiles and a pitcher base.
 - *The Cathedral in 1890s (UAD 1378)*: 12th century wall painting exterior of Chapter House.
 - *Observations at Old Library, 1888 (UAD 1379)*: Late medieval stone corbel probably from the monastic refectory.
 - *Excavations at Cathedral, 1887-9 (UAD 532)*: Several semi-circular foundation walls recorded, possibly apses. A number of skeletons and bones were also recorded.
 - *Excavations at Cathedral, 1856 (UAD 1540)*: Undated stone chamber, possibly used for relics.
 - *Excavations at Chapter House, 2003 (UAD 1640)*: Dendro-chronology dating of roof indicates a felling date ranging from spring AD1259 to winter AD1260 to 1261.
 - *Excavations at Corpus Christi, 2007 (UAD 1714)*: Stone structure thought to represent the late Saxon burh as well as evidence for later development of the town defences was recorded. Some evidence of repair during the Civil War. Evidence for the partial reconstruction of the boundary wall between Christ Church and Corpus Christi colleges was also revealed.

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