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PROCEEDINGS OF THE CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



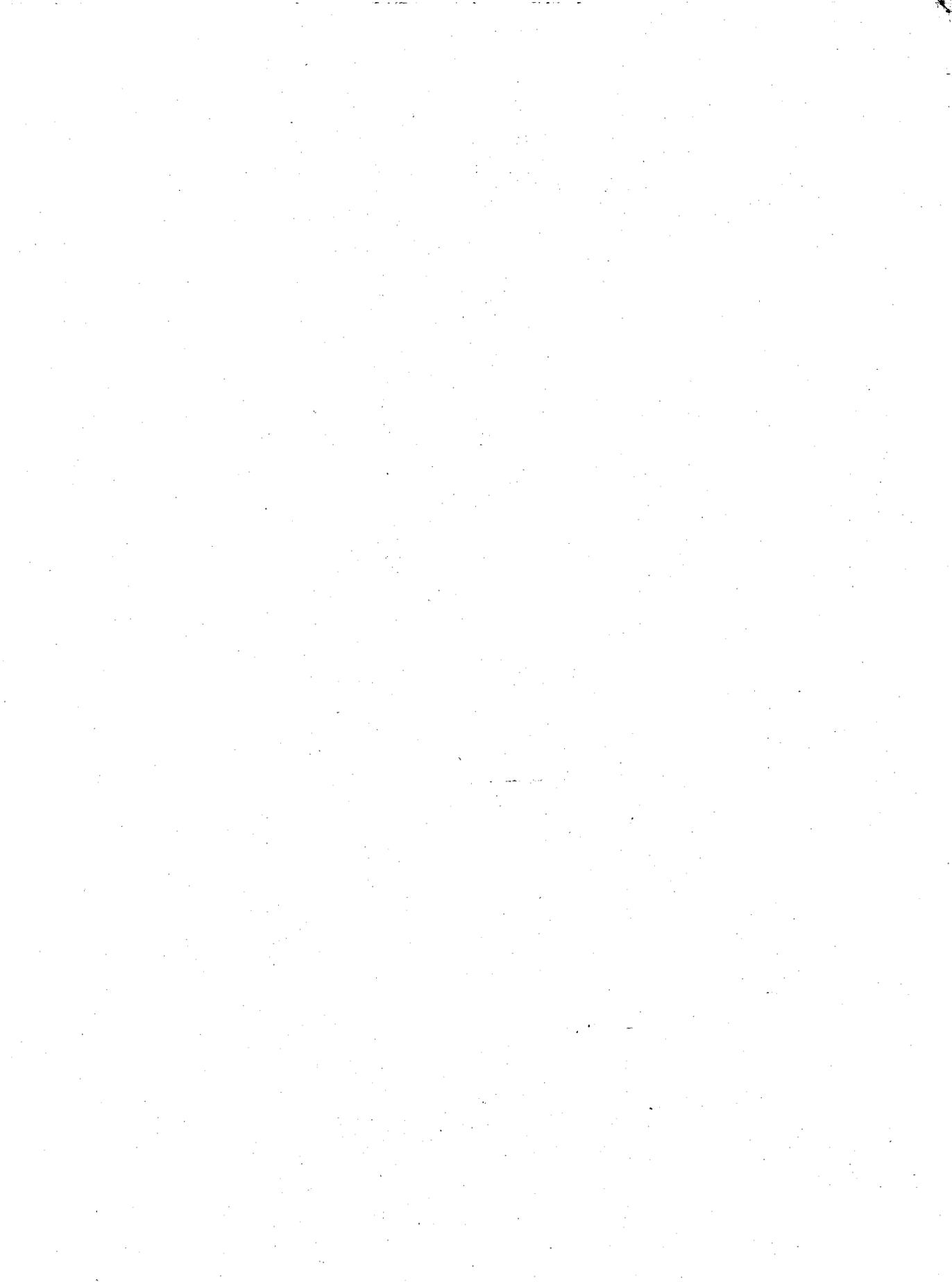
VOLUME LI

JANUARY 1957 TO DECEMBER 1957

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DEIGHTON BELL

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CONTENTS

<i>Officers and Council of the Society 1957-8</i>	<i>page vi</i>
<i>Report of the Council for the Year 1956</i>	vii
<i>Summary of Accounts for the Year 1956</i>	viii
The Riddle of the Dykes <i>By T. C. LETHBRIDGE</i>	I
Roman Discoveries from Hauxton <i>By JOAN LIVERSIDGE, M.LITT., F.S.A.</i>	7
Combined Early Iron Age and Romano-British Site at Wangford, West Suffolk <i>By GRACE BRISCOE, F.S.A.</i>	19
Saxo-Norman Pottery from Godmanchester <i>By H. J. M. GREEN</i>	31
St Ives Priory <i>By H. J. M. GREEN</i>	35
Saxo-Norman Pottery in East Anglia <i>By J. G. HURST, M.A., F.S.A.</i>	37
The Masons' Marks in the Church of St Mary, Over, Cambridgeshire <i>By LAURENCE TURNER</i>	67
A Note on Manors in Madingley <i>By P. G. BALES</i>	79
Archaeological Notes <i>By G. C. DUNNING, A. R. EDWARDSON and J. R. GARROD, M.D., F.S.A.</i>	81
<i>Index</i>	85

ST IVES PRIORY

H. J. M. GREEN

THE site of the medieval priory lies on the east side of St Ives, near the river Ouse, and about 730 yards south-east of the parish church (O.S. 52/315711).

Following the discovery of the bones of the legendary St Ivo in a stone coffin during the late tenth century, a priory church and its secular buildings were established by Abbot Adnoth of Ramsey in A.D. 1008. The cell was closely linked with the famous St Ives Easter Fair, and soon became a place of pilgrimage and the administrative centre for the abbot's clerks during fair time. The priory continued in use until the Dissolution in 1539, after which the building site was granted to Thomas Audley and has been in private hands until recently.

The only existing medieval remains are the walls of a barn, whose original dimensions were internally 88 ft. 6 in. by 34 ft. The walls are of Barnack rubble with a series of buttresses, probably of fourteenth-century date.

In 1948 and 1949 the foundations of the barn were examined in four places by trenches dug down to the undisturbed gravel. The stratification was disturbed by service pipes to the present house. However, evidence was found that suggested that the south and west walls were built on earlier foundations. The northern end of the garden was also trenched, but was found to be disturbed to a considerable depth. The only structural remains discovered was that of an eighteenth-century garden wall (shown on Pettis's survey of St Ives dated 1728). Fragmentary pottery was discovered at all levels of the excavations. Much of it was Roman and ranged in date from the first to the fourth century A.D. A sherd of St Neots ware opens the medieval series which runs through to the present day. The results of the excavations suggest that most of the medieval priory buildings probably lie beneath the site of the present house. There is in fact a local tradition to this effect. The discovery of Roman remains on the site may also indicate that St Ivo was in fact a Romano-British burial in a stone coffin.

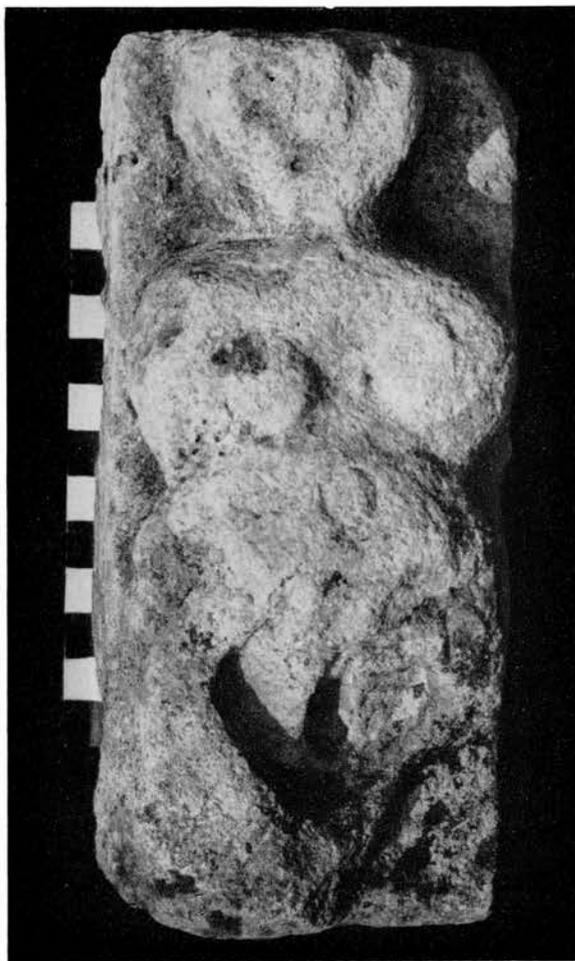
In 1956 an important discovery was made about 100 yards south of the Priory in the garden of Mr R. C. Jude. He found, when clearing an area close to the modern railway line, that an old track had led from the direction of the Priory towards the river meadows. This track had been lined on either side with worked stones from the Priory. These varied in date from the late twelfth to the fourteenth century. Amongst them was found a rectangular block of Barnack stone carved with the body and part of the head of a female figure in high relief.¹ The figure is very weathered and in some places there are signs of burning. Its appearance suggests that the block was built into an outside wall, which may have been that of the Priory itself. (It is of interest

¹ Pl. iv.

to note that in 1207 the Priory church and offices were destroyed by fire.) The body of the figure is crudely shaped with the arms, legs and top part of the head deliberately omitted. The breasts and navel consist of little more than compass rings. The eyes are two small holes, the nose is slightly V-shaped and the mouth is straight and strongly worked in the corners. Of the lower part of the body only the genital organs appear to have been carefully worked. All these features suggest that the figure was connected with some fertility cult. This type of pagan figure is occasionally found on Christian sites, where they were probably invested with a new Christian meaning suggested by legendary analogies which we no longer grasp. An important series of these semi-pagan figures has been found in the church of White Island, Lough Erne.¹

I am indebted to Mr L. Edwards (on behalf of the St Ives Rural District Council) for permission to excavate, to the late Mr S. Inskip Ladds, F.S.A., for inspecting the structural remains, and to Mr R. C. Jude for permission to examine the carved figure.

¹ F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period* (1947), p. 100.



Fertility figure from St Ives Priory.

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