CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABBEY

The account given below of the history of Chertsey Abbey is derived almost exclusively from the following secondary sources: *VCH*, 2, 55-64; Manning & Bray 1804-14,3,208-22; *SRS*, 2,vii-lv. References to these authorities are not given in the text, though references to other works are given either where they contain additional or more complete information, or where my account differs from that in the works cited above. This is not, accordingly, an attempt at a full history of Chertsey Abbey, desirable though such would be (Wheeler's *Chertsey Abbey : an existence of the past* (1905) is, as Meekings condescendingly said (*SRS*, 2,vii) 'not to be judged by modern standards of exact scholarship'), but rather it is designed to provide sufficient background to place the archaeological discoveries in context; for the same reason references to buildings or indications of topography are particularly emphasised.

Bede, in his Ecclesiastical History (Bede iv. 6), correctly glosses Chertsey as *Ceroti Insula* — the island of Cerotus (*cf* Gover *et al* 1934, 105-7). The island in question is a gravel outcrop, raised slightly above the level of the Thames floodplain, which would in early times have been surrounded by marsh. The extent of dry land was dramatically indicated by the severe flooding of 1947 (Stratton 1980, 19), when only the area of the medieval town and the Abbey conventual court (fig 1) remained dry. Who Cerotus may have been is a rather more difficult problem, though his settlement must await discovery somewhere within the island, and since his is a British rather than a Saxon name, a sub-Roman occupation is, perhaps, implied. This gives point to the discoveries of Roman tiles in the Abbey excavations (M48 and M65) and opens the possibility that the foundation of the Abbey on this site is related to the presence of an important settlement from the Roman period onwards. A strong possibility for such a site must be the area to the south of the Abbey which was occupied by a building, described as 'the manor house' on a Chertsey Beamonds estate map of 1810, which was demolished in 1828 (fig 1). The line of the monastic precinct makes a detour around this plot as if it were already defined and of importance when the precinct limits were determined. At what date this happened is unknown, but it must be at least possible that the boundaries go back to the earliest days of the Abbey. If so, it would suggest that the manor house site was even then of high status.

Erkenwald, later Bishop of London, is said by tradition to have founded the Abbey at Chertsey, together with Barking (Clapham & Godfrey n d, ch 13) as a sister establishment, in AD 666. The date is likely to be correct since the charter of 672 X 4 (*EHD*, no 54, 479-80; Gelling 1979 no 309, 148) remarks that it was 'first constructed under King Egbert' who ruled Kent 664-673. However, by the time of the charter the area had come under Mercian control and it was Frithwold, a sub-King of Mercia, who granted extensive additional lands, covering much of Godley hundred, to the Abbey. In about 871 the Abbey was sacked by the Vikings, the abbot and ninety monks killed, the buildings burnt and lands laid waste. It seems, though, that it had recovered sufficiently by the early 10th century to tempt the Danes to further ravages. Later in the 10th century the Abbey was recolonised and reformed by monks in regular orders. Two separate traditions regarding this were preserved, though it seems likely that they refer to a single event; in the one account the Abbey is stated to have been recolonised from Abingdon by Ethelwold (Bishop of Winchester 936-84) and a new church built; in the other account, the secular canons are said to have been driven out and replaced with monks by King Edgar in 964 (*ASC* 116-8).

The possessions of Chertsey Abbey listed in Domesday Book are considerable, though mostly confined to Surrey, with little indication that the damage said to have occurred soon after the Conquest had affected its prosperity. In 1110 a major rebuilding of the Abbey was begun under Abbot Hugh. The works may, as was frequently the case, have been of prolonged duration since as late as ?1176 tithes were being devoted to the repair of the monastic church and buildings. In 1235 the monastic buildings were damaged by fire, a disaster which was vigorously countered under Abbot Alan (1223-1261). How much rebuilding this would have involved is unknown, but it may be significant in assessing the date of the major remodelling of the abbey church and (probably) cloister, that the very full records which survive for Abbot John Rutherwyk's period of office (1307-46) make no mention of major work in these areas. It is clear, however, that the latter was responsible for a determined campaign of improvement and acquisition designed to bolster the Abbey's revenues, which had been falling as a result of inflation reducing the real value of fixed rents and other dues. The cartulary (*SRS*,1, no 473) describes him as 'the convent's second founder ... and the substantial improver of the manors belonging to the Monastery'. Within the precinct he was responsible for the building of three fishponds, a house for the fisherman, a dove house, and a chamber by the great gate for the chaplains who served two chantries which had been established in the conventual church. The first mention of the monastic infirmary and the Abbot's chamber dates from this time also.

The period between Rutherwyk's death and the dissolution was apparently for the most part uneventful. In July 1370 'the central part of the bell tower fell to the ground to the irrecoverable damage of the house' (*SRS*,2, no 1309). This almost certainly refers to the tower over the crossing of the church, the collapse of which was by no means uncommon in Romanesque churches (Clapham 1934, 59). In 1433 houses and buildings were ruined by violent storms, though these were probably in parts of the monastic estate outside

the precinct. An event of much greater importance occurred when Henry VI was buried at Chertsey in 1471, and the Abbey became, for a short while, an object of pilgrimage on that account. In 1484 his body was transferred to Windsor. Finally, it is interesting, in view of the earlier importance of floor tile manufacture at the monastery (Eames 1980), that in 1535 the floor of the chapel at Hampton Court was paved with tiles made at Chertsey (*HKW*, **IV**.2, 135), though this need not mean manufacture on the abbey site.

THE DISSOLUTION AND AFTER

The surrender of the Abbey was signed on 6 July 1537 by the Abbot, Prior and 13 monks. Its value was set at a net figure of £659 15s 8¾d which tends to support the general impression that while Chertsey had considerable wealth it was not in the first rank of Benedictine houses such as Abingdon or St Albans (valued at £1,876 and £2,102 respectively). Its importance had always been at county rather than national level, and while its Abbot was mitred he did not have a seat in Parliament. When Dr Legh, as Cromwell's agent, visited the house in 1535 he made a number of allegations of corrupt and dissolute living against the Abbot and monks, and it may have been this indication of how events were moving that led some of the twenty monks (curiously the same number recorded for shortly after the Norman conquest) then resident to leave before the suppression. It would seem, though, that Henry VIII did not take the allegations too seriously as in a unique arrangement he proposed to re-establish the brethren of Chertsey at the dissolved priory at Bisham (fig 1A), and they actually transferred there on 18 December 1537. However, on 19 June 1538 Bisham was dissolved anew. Meanwhile at Chertsey the dispatch of the monks was to be rapidly followed by the dispatch of their buildings. Henry VIII's plans for the development of Oatlands Palace (HKW, IV.2, 206-9) coincided agreeably with the availability of Chertsey (and also the monasteries at Bisham and Abingdon (fig 1A) as a quarry for building materials, and the demolition is recorded in some detail (Jenkinson & White 1915). Excavations at the site of Oatlands Palace in Weybridge (Cook 1969; Cook & Poulton forthcoming) have revealed the large quantities of monastic mouldings used in the foundations. However, it is by no means certain how much of the Abbey was demolished at this date for the only places specifically named are the steeple and the library. Indeed some details indicate that building work was taking place at Chertsey: lime and chalk were brought into the site (Jenkinson & White 1915, 31), and new door locks were made and others repaired (*ibid*, 32). Wheeler (1905, 163) refers to various secondary sources (not checked) which suggest that the Abbey was used for important meetings on religious purposes, such as the compilation of the Prayer Book and the consecration of Bishops, in the 1540s. It may be that while the church was thoroughly demolished, some part at least of the cloistral buildings was put in good repair and continued in use. It has also been suggested (B Pardoe pers comm) that the Oatlands Palace stables said to be at Chertsey might have been located within the monastic precinct.

It must be presumed that it was these same structures which were referred to when, in 1610, James I granted the 'house, site and circuit' to Dr John Hammond. The dove house and 'messuage next gate'
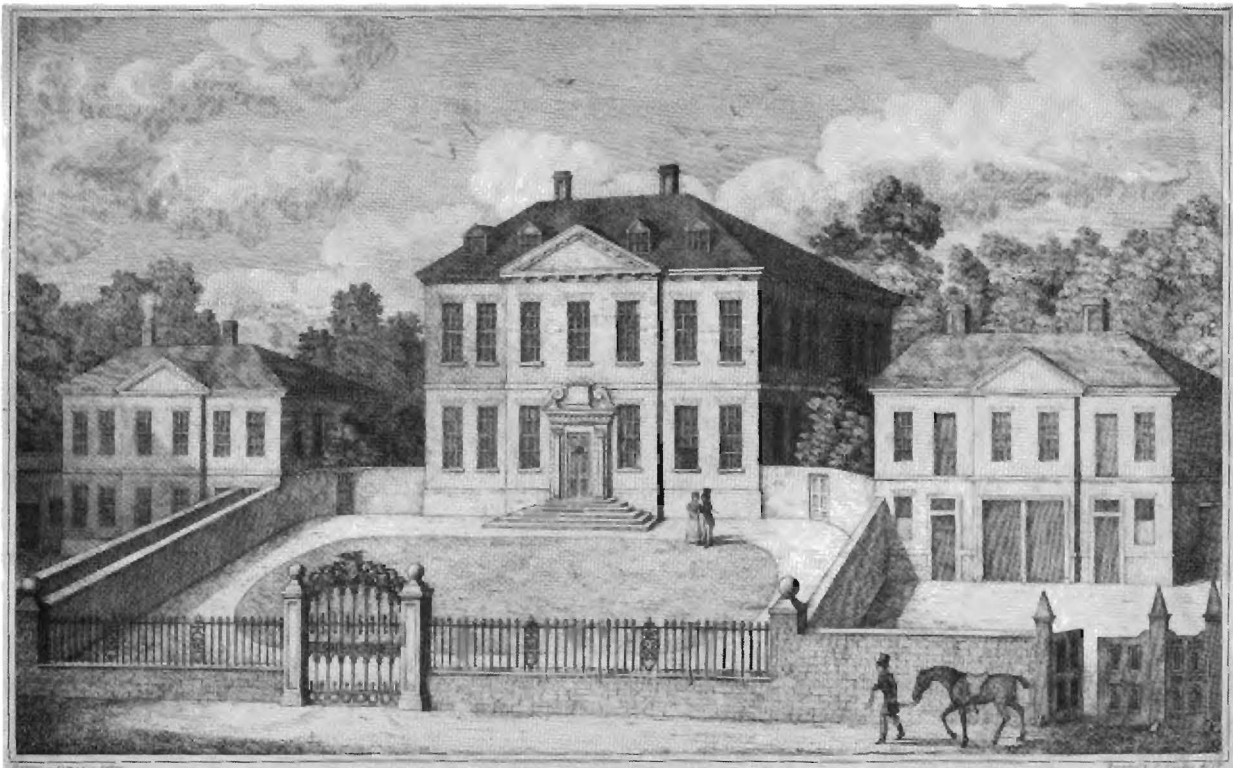

Plate 1   The Abbey House in the 18th century. Print in the Surrey Archaeological Society's research collections (PDL/CHER/3)
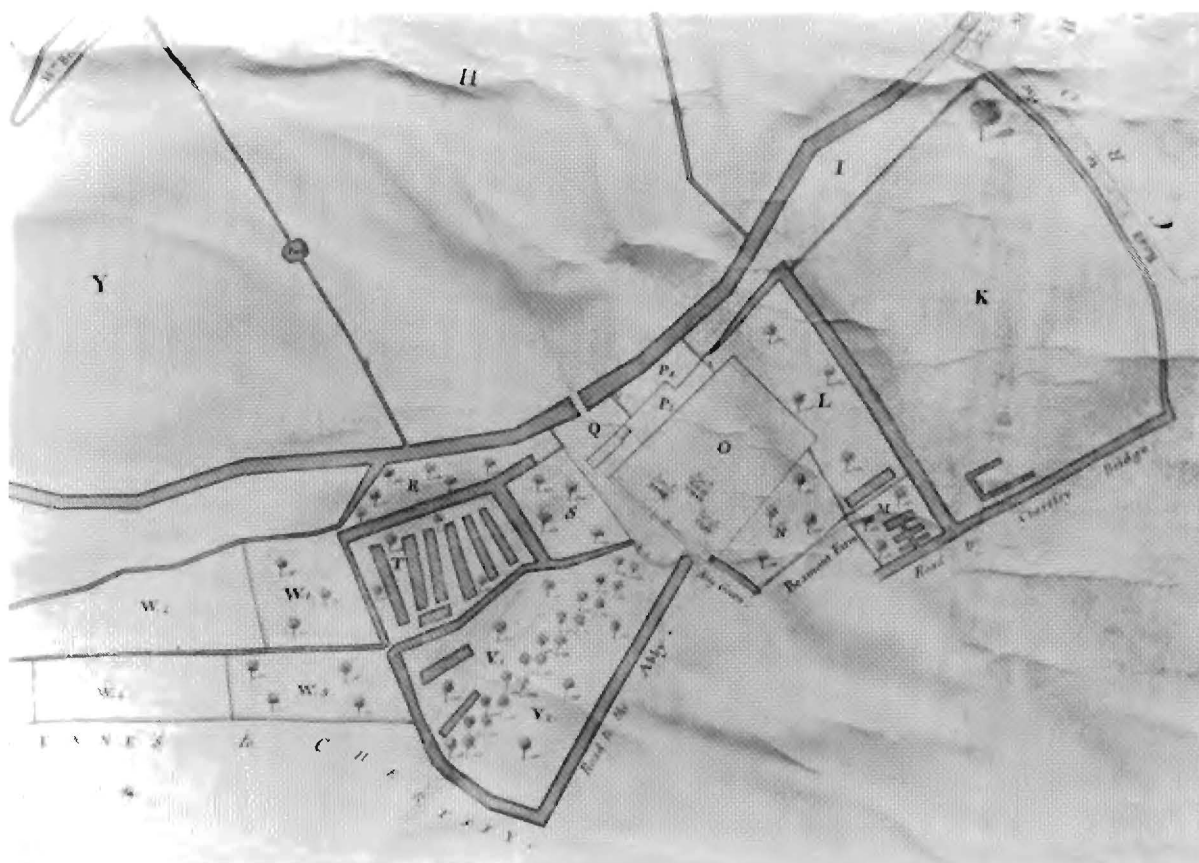
Plate 2   'A Correct Map and Survey of the Abbey-Lands ... belonging to Robert Hinde Esqʳ.   Survey'd in the year 1735 by Henry Brumbridge'. The coloured map is now in Chertsey Museum, and represents an accurate, if slightly stylised, plan of the Estate, which may be readily plotted on to the modern map (*cf* fig 51)

mentioned at the same time seem likely to be those built by Abbot Rutherwyk. In about 1700 the precinct was in the possession of Sir Nicholas Wayte who then built Abbey House (pls 1 & 2), 'a beautiful seat, adorned with pleasant gardens'. It may well have been in creating the latter that the last vestiges of the monastic church and cloister were swept away, as the house itself fronted on the later Colonel's Lane (fig 47), mostly to the west of and beyond the limits of the principal monastic buildings. Certainly the 1735 map (pl 2), showing the precinct as granted in 1610, indicates that none of the monastic buildings survived at the later date. This is further confirmed by the remarks of William Stukeley, the noted antiquary (Piggott 1950), in 1752: 'of that noble and splendid pile, which took up four acres of ground, and looked like a town, nothing remains, scarcely a little of the outward wall of the *precinctus*'. The Abbey House was pulled down in 1810 and replaced, on the same site, by the building which still survives and is called The Abbey. Between 1855 and 1861 Abbey Lodge was built; it was subsequently extended considerably to the north (parts now known as Abbey Walls and The Close). The only other building of note to be erected within the abbey precinct was another Abbey House built in the 19th century to the west of Colonel's Lane, which was destroyed by fire in 1964.

The post-dissolution history of the monastic precinct presents an interesting contrast between the almost complete disappearance of its buildings and the preservation as distinct land parcels of its main sub-divisions. The main alteration is the development of the north-south part of Colonel's Lane as a public right of way through the former precinct and the subsequent realignment of the boundary on its west side to make it parallel with the east side. It had become a public way by *c*1735 when Mr Hinde (who lived at the Abbey House) put up a pair of gates across it, which were torn down by an enraged local populace (source: ms notes, excavation archive, item no 59). Colonel's Lane/Ferry Lane was obviously attractive as a convenient route between Chertsey and Laleham, and it seems possible that a customary use of it by the townsfolk may even have developed in the medieval period.

ANTIQUARIES AND EXCAVATIONS

By the mid-19th century the exact layout of the abbey precinct had been forgotten. Chertsey, however, shared in the widespread revival of antiquarian interest, with the stimulus in this case being the discovery of considerable quantities of Chertsey pictorial tiles on the site (Eames 1980,1,10-11) which were studied and magnificently illustrated by Shaw (1858) and Shurlock (1885). As a result others were moved to attempt to rediscover the site of the abbey buildings. In 1855 Pocock uncovered considerable lengths of walling and, within one room, a number of stone coffins (Pocock 1858; *cf* fig 2 & pl 3). With considerable ingenuity he

Plate 3 Stone coffins under excavation in the chapter house in 1855 (Photo: G W Oakes, SyAS Res Colls 55/1/2. The coffins are nos 1, 2 & 3 of Pocock 1858, opp 114. See also fig 2)

reconstructed the remains he had discovered as portions of the conventual church, the coffins occupying the south transept (Pocock 1858, opp 107; M10). Scarcely had Pocock's interpretation appeared in the very first volume of the *Surrey Archaeological Collections* than renewed excavation on the site led to the discovery of the true site of the church (Angell 1862). Curiously, Angell made no attempt to discuss the significance of Pocock's discoveries and they have been ignored in all subsequent discussion, so that when the 1954 excavations took place their precise location was unknown. They are herein rescued from oblivion and shown to be in the cloistral area (see below 33).

Angell and Pocock had both published with exemplary promptness. However, technical limitations had prevented Pocock from publishing the 'beautiful photographs taken by Captain Oakes', while Angell's account is illustrated by a solitary plan though he several times refers to photographs of the excavation. Fortunately photographs of both excavations are preserved in the Surrey Archaeological Society's research collections, as well as a number of drawings (eg pls 4-7) and plans (for a full catalogue see M2-M15). Many of the photographs are reproduced here (eg pls 13 & 14) and it will be apparent that they are not only remarkably early examples of the use of the technique to record excavations, but also, on occasions (eg pl 14), very fine ones. Detailed comments on the content of these illustrations may be found in the captions and in relation to the 1954 excavations, but it is worth noting here the good standard of much of the excavation work, and the willingness to open up quite sizeable areas (eg pl 19) for investigation. The survival of this material is owed to the executors of Manwaring Shurlock who donated it to the Society (SyAC, 15 (1900), xvii). It is appropriate at this point to pay tribute to the quality of his work, and the concern for detailed recording which he showed, far in excess of that of most of his contemporaries, and, indeed, successors until well into the 20th century. These discoveries were the last in the area of the monastic church and cloister until 1954.

However, discoveries elsewhere within the precinct were made. The most important of these was the location and excavation by Dr E Gardner of a kiln which had been used to produce Chertsey tiles (Gardner & Eames 1954; fig 29). He was also responsible for the discovery of an oven to the west of Colonel's Lane, which was excavated together with the surrounding area in 1934 (Nevill 1935). The excavator described the results as 'disappointing'; it is difficult to know quite what he expected to find as most people then and now would surely have considered the finding of five separate ovens or kilns, together with medieval walls, a hearth, remains of steps and part of a tiled floor, possibly *in situ*, as a more than reasonable return for two weeks' work (fig 47).
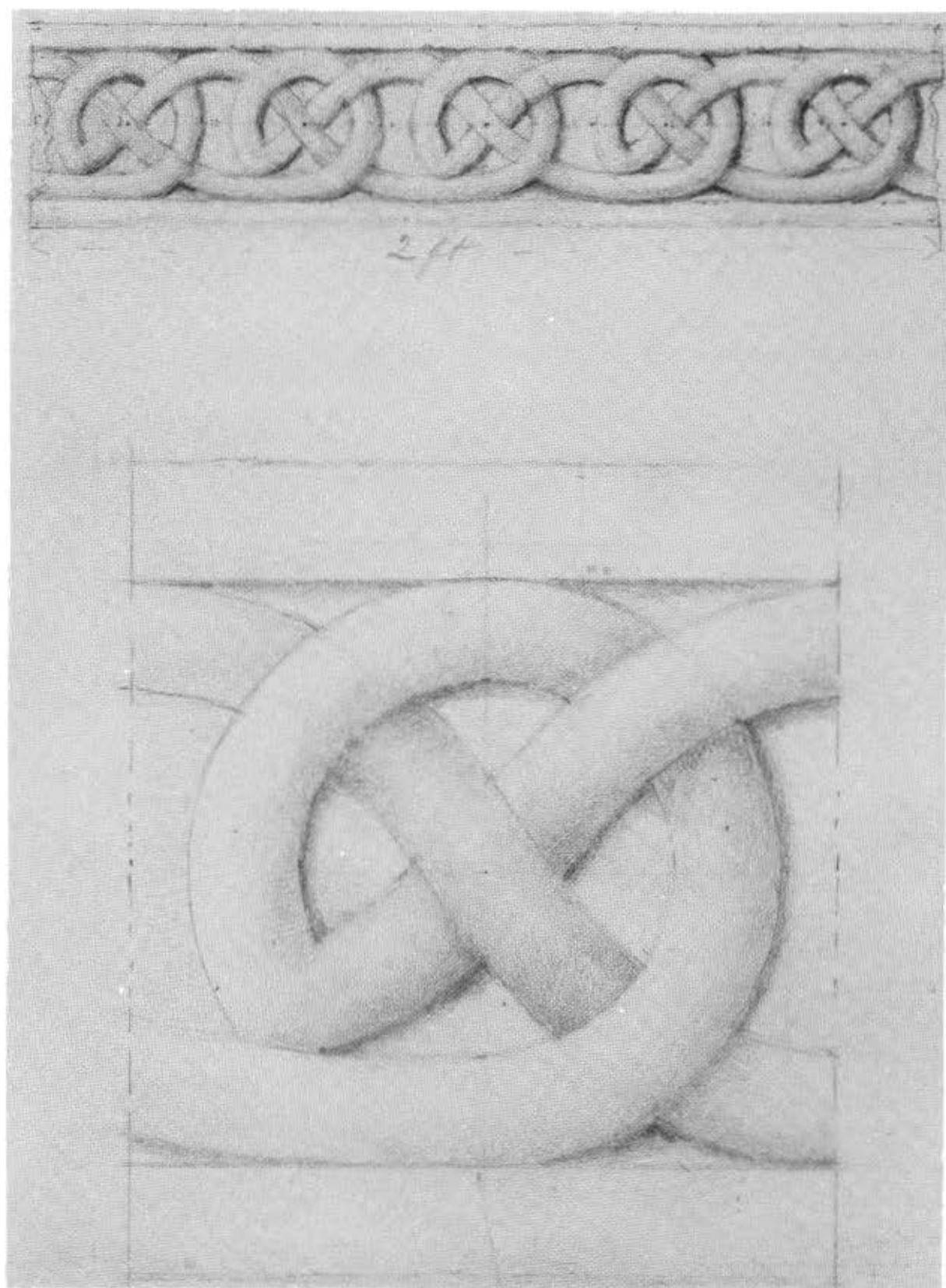
Plate 4   Pencil drawing by Randall Druce of 12th century relief cable work found in 1861, re-used in walling (SyAS Res Colls 55/1/D1; the length shown is *c*60cm)
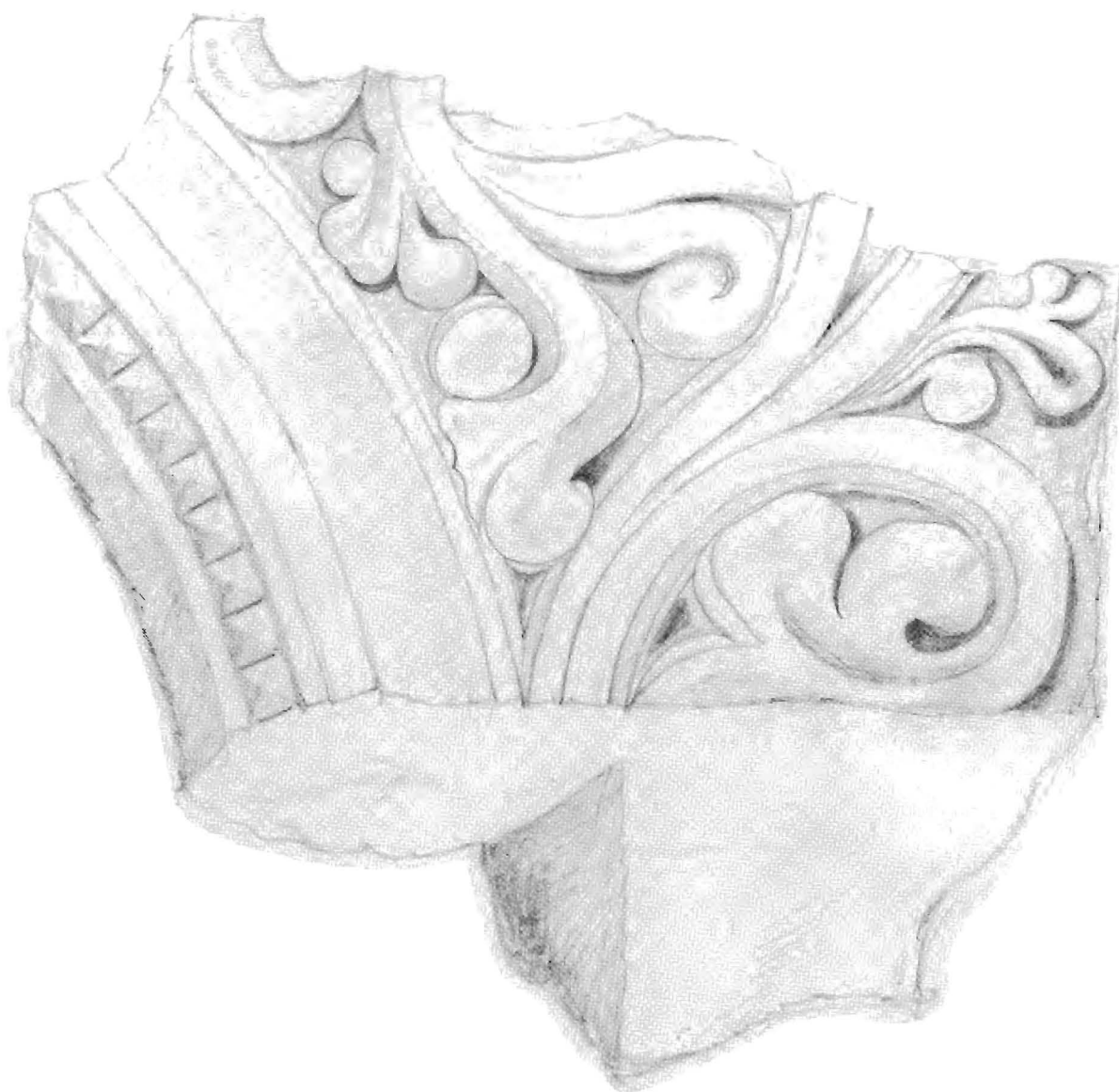
Plate 5 Pencil drawing by Randall Druce of a 13th century spandrel (width at mid-point 24cm) found in the lady chapel in 1861 (see pl 16; SyAS Res Colls 55/2/4.1). It might well derive from the arcading above the capitals in this room (pers comm P Williamson)
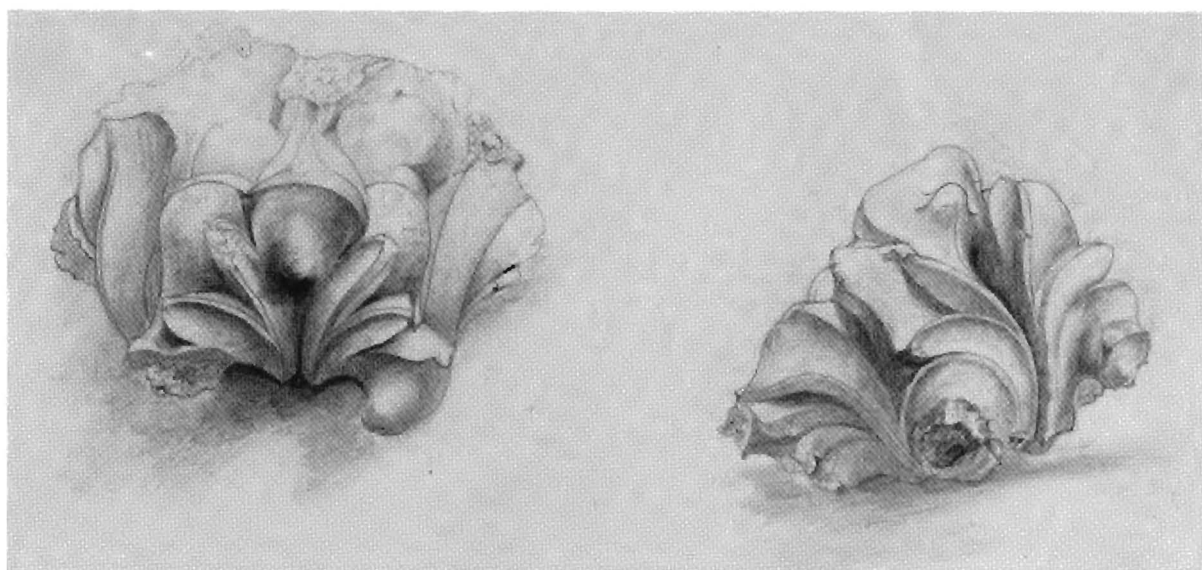

Plate 6 Pencil drawing by Randall Druce of part of a 13th century crocket (maximum width 11cm) found in the lady chapel in 1861 (see pl 16; Sy AS Res Colls 55/2/4.3). Like the capitals from this room, to which it is identical in its treatment of stiff leaf foliage, it should date to the 1250s or 1260s
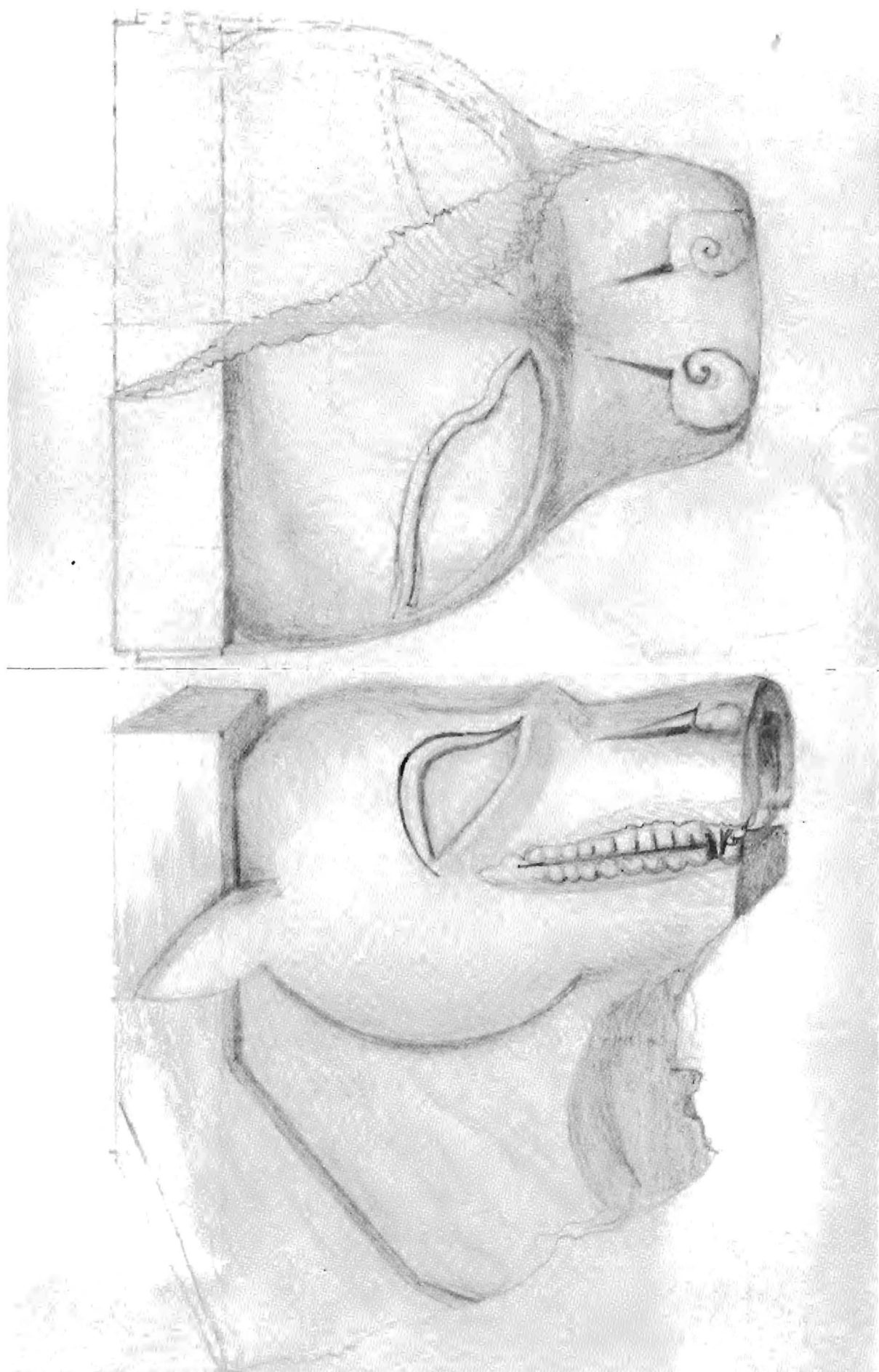
Plate 7   Pencil drawing by Randall Druce of 12th century corbel head found in 1861. It may be seen on pl 13 lying on the south wall of the presbytery (SyAS Res Colls 55/2/4.6; length of head 19cm)