

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing chapters have explored the evidence for the origins, development and appearance of Chertsey Abbey using a variety of different types of evidence — historical, archaeological, geophysical and cartographic. It remains now to draw together these various lines of evidence in order to provide a more general assessment. A brief mention must be made of the limited amount of evidence for Roman occupation (40, 75, and 78) which is nevertheless just sufficient to indicate that a tiled Roman structure had once existed, and was being looted during the early period of the Abbey. The site of the later Beomonds manor house has been suggested as the most likely location for this, because of its position relative to the Abbey precinct (4 & fig 1). The place-name Chertsey is usually held to include the Celtic personal name *Cerotus*, and to imply sub-Roman occupation. The possibility emerges that there was continuous occupation of this site from the Roman period until 1828, when the manor house was demolished.

The Abbey itself was probably founded in AD 666, but knowledge of it in the pre-conquest period is very limited indeed. There are no finds which need belong to that era, but some fragments of walling in the area of the south-east corner of the cloister and north transept are earlier than the Norman walls (12). They might conceivably mark the site of the earlier Abbey, which in any event is unlikely to be far away since it must surely be within the 'island' of the place name (*see above* 4), the extent of which was graphically illustrated by the 1947 floods (Stratton 1980). In the circumstances any notion of its appearance is hard to obtain, particularly as our knowledge of this aspect of English monasteries, especially in the south-east, at this period is very poor (Cramp 1976). Recent excavations at Barking (the sister foundation to Chertsey) may, however, indicate the form of at least one such building (Blackmore 1986, 215).

More certain ground is reached with the archaeological evidence for the Norman monastery. There can be little doubt that the structures uncovered represent the rebuilding begun under Abbot Hugh in AD 1110. The church was fundamentally similar to many others in this period of English architecture, with its ambulatory giving access to a triple apse and apsidal chapels to the transepts (fig 22). The cloistral buildings were to the north of the church, a position favoured in the area around London (Clapham & Godfrey *nd*, 211) over the more usual location to the south, and were arranged around a roughly square garth; the arcade fragment (35 & pl 41) makes it possible to visualise something of the appearance of the cloister walks. Few details are known about the cloistral buildings, apart from the chapter house which was partially excavated in 1855 (33 and pl 3) and shown to be a rectangular room with numerous elaborate stone coffins containing the bones of abbots of the house beneath the floor. It was from just above this floor that many of the finest pictorial Chertsey tiles were recovered (49-60).

The arrangement of the rest of the precinct is uncertain though it clearly differed from that which obtained later. The discovery of the Chertsey tile kiln of the late 13th century and of pottery and an occupation layer of late 12th century date (fig 29) suggests that some of the activities of the outer court were located in the area to the south of the abbey church. Equally, though, the 13/14th century outer court wall west of Colonel's Lane (fig 47) was not the first activity in that area (75) and it may be that such functions were more dispersed than in the later medieval establishment.

During the 13th and 14th centuries considerable reorganisation and rebuilding took place, and it is possible to depict (fig 51) and describe the monastic establishment in the later middle ages in some detail. The rebuilding of the church may have begun in the 1250s or 1260s and been largely completed in the 13th century (31). The new parts consisted of a squared (and higher?) east end replacing the triple apse of the Norman church, and an ornate (Angell 1862, 25-7) lady chapel (pls 13-17) replacing the small apsidal chapel to the south transept. In the same way, though the details are obscure, the north transept apse was also replaced, and, presumably at this time, the cloister was wholly or partially rebuilt, though preserving its original location (35). The walls uncovered by Pocock (1858) cannot be dated, but many could well belong to this phase of the site, and represent part of the infirmary cloister and perhaps also the abbot's lodgings. Limited excavation in 1954 in the frater range indicated that a complex series of building works may have taken place.

Abbot Rutherwyk (1307-46) is known to have carried out a number of works in the abbey precinct (4), and it may have been in his day that the monastery assumed the form shown on fig 51. Certainly the precinct wall to the outer court (chapter 3), later called Brewhouse Field, was built at about this time, and, at a similar period, the area to the south of the church was used as a cemetery. In the 18th century (pl 2, portion labelled 'N') much of this area was called 'Bellfree Orchard', which suggests that a detached campanile, such as is known from many monastic houses and still survives at Chichester cathedral, stood here. It was presumably built after the collapse of the central tower in 1370, and may have been in a comparable position to that at Chichester (Pevsner & Metcalf 1985, 89-90, figs 34 & 35), near the west end of the church.

Part of this area may also have been some kind of pleasure garden; this seems a likely explanation of the name Fountain Orchard for the land containing the curious system of branched moats on the 1735 Estate Map (pl 2, area labelled 'M'). Overall, the elaborate and extensive system of moats and fishponds forms a most impressive aspect of the monastic precinct. It is also distinctly unusual for such work to be found in an old established Benedictine monastery like Chertsey (Bond 1988, 103). The main entrance to the Abbey,

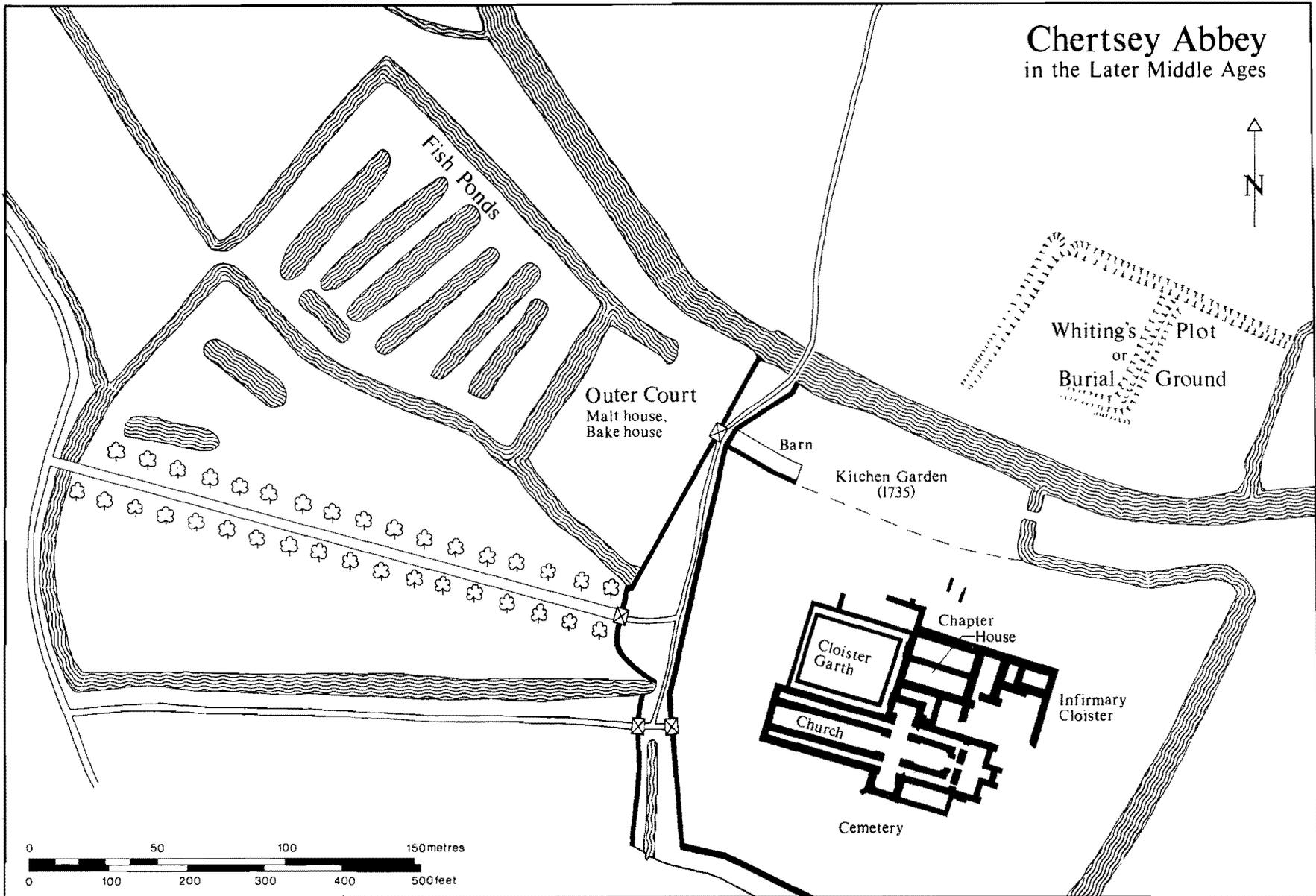


Fig 51 A reconstruction plan of the Abbey as it was in the later Middle Ages

marked by an avenue of trees on the 1735 plan, and detected by geophysical survey (fig 47), was from the west on the road to Staines (ie Windsor Street), with the main gatehouse probably where the forerunner of the north-south part of Colonel's Lane formed a path linking the various courts of the Abbey. The east-west part of Colonel's Lane had certainly emerged by 1735 as the main 'road to the Abby' but it is uncertain when it replaced the carriageway to the north. It may be that it had already developed as a path before the suppression of 1537 (*see 6 above*). Such a tendency would have been encouraged if the principal access to the church and cloister were in the position marked on fig 51, which would have been the sensible location for access to the whole court while minimising disturbance to the cloister proper. The 14th century re-organisation produced a clear division between the religious and non-religious parts of the precinct, more closely resembling Cistercian practice (Coppack 1986, 130) than Benedictine. Might this not reflect the temperament of Abbot Rutherwyk, and could it be that it was his comparatively austere attitude which strained the loyalty of monks used to a more relaxed rule, and led to rebellion against his governance (SRS, 2, no 1289)? Certainly the explanation offered for this event (that he had acquired so many possessions for the Abbey that 'none could tell their value or estimate their extent') does not convince as a cause of great dissatisfaction.



Plate 49 Medieval entrance (now blocked) in the precinct wall. Note the chequerboard pattern of the walling produced by alternating conglomerate and sarsen blocks. On the left is the brick north wall of Abbey Farm Barn (*see pl 50*)

In the outer court itself the excavations of 1934 (Nevill 1935: fig 47) gave an indication of some of the ovens, kilns and buildings to be expected there. An entrance to this court (pl 49) and parts of the wall still stand above ground. Very little of the rest of the precinct walls still survives, though their position and the main divisions of the Abbey are clearly shown by the 1735 map (pl 2). Parts of the wall to the south of the church remain visible, especially where they are incorporated to form the back wall of the later 17th century Abbey Barn (correctly Manor Farm Barn). Similarly, it looks as if the Abbey Farm Barn (pl 50), which might be pre- or post-dissolution in date, also incorporated parts of the north wall of the conventual court, as well as part of the west wall of the area between the conventual court and the Abbey River. That area may have been, as later, a small farm yard (Angell (1862, 28) found several foundations and drains here) and kitchen garden. The principal abbey barn (granary) was on the north side of the Abbey River, where Angell (1862, 28) claims to have observed its foundations as a crop-mark. On this side of the river there survives also the earth work called 'Whiting's plot or Burial Ground' on an 1806 Estate Map (SRO 849 A9/L9). The name suggests that it was used as an additional cemetery area, presumably after the main cemetery became full.



Plate 50 Abbey Farm Barn showing the south and west walls. Note, as in pl 49, the chequerboard effect. These walls (see fig 51) may be earlier than the barn, the roof of which suggests construction in the first half of the 16th century. The north and east walls are clearly of a different build to those shown, being composed of brick with some stone, including re-used mouldings, which might indicate a post-dissolution date

When Stukeley visited the site of the Abbey in 1752 he said that 'so total a dissolution I scarcely ever saw, so inveterate a rage even against the least appearance of it as if they meant to defeat even the inherent sanctity of the ground'. Over 200 years later it is not to be wondered that the casual visitor could easily fail to see any evidence for the former site of the Abbey. The walls have gone forever: but if the foregoing pages have any value then it is that they bring us closer to a full and proper appreciation of the physical appearance of Chertsey Abbey in the Middle Ages than at any time since Henry VIII first set his men to 'pluck down' the conventual church.

FUTURE WORK

That said, the task of reconstruction has by no means been completed, and there are a number of aspects of the Abbey's history where further archaeological investigation would be rewarding. The biggest and perhaps the most intractable problem relates to the pre-Conquest Abbey. The known evidence is so weak that it would seem pointless to formulate ambitious research programmes for its elucidation. The situation with regard to the post-Conquest Abbey is now much more satisfactory, and it is possible to define a series of precise research objectives.

- 1 With regard to the church, the two major problems relate to the nature of later remodelling of the Norman work, in the central part of the east end and the area of the north transept apse. In both cases the problems could probably be resolved by area excavation.
- 2 The cloistral area is much less well defined than the church and a clear idea of the layout and development of the various ranges could only be obtained by excavation on a very large scale, if at all. Some more modest objectives, could, however, be achieved rather more economically. Small scale work could hope to clarify the nature of the rather odd walls defining the western cloister alley and attempt to establish a date for the building of the lesser cloister.
- 3 A vastly more important objective would be excavation of the east end of the chapter house. One of the most significant results of the present report has been the demonstration that the source of almost all the pictorial tiles discovered in the 19th century was the chapter house. None were actually *in situ* but the mortar bed had survived. The east end of the chapter house does not seem to have been examined; there is therefore the exciting possibility that yet more of the finest examples of the medieval tilemakers' art might be recovered, and perhaps even some in their original positions.
- 4 The remainder of the abbey precinct is known only in the broadest outline, so that the only realistic objective would be to confirm the nature of the entrance carriageway and test for the presence of a gatehouse in the area shown in fig 47.
- 5 In the course of excavations on the site a considerable number of stone coffins have been recovered. A number of different types might be defined, but as yet no satisfactory typological framework has been developed into which they could be fitted. A national or regional survey badly needs to be undertaken to achieve this, in particular because it may well allow a chronological sequence to be defined.
- 6 Finally, mention must be made of the relationship of the Abbey to its immediate neighbours. Immediately south of the later monastic cemetery the site of the medieval manor house, whose potential importance has been emphasised above (4; fig 1), remains open land but has recently (October 1987) been the subject of proposals for redevelopment. If preservation proves impossible, then excavation is imperative. The town of Chertsey has been undergoing piecemeal redevelopment. The only substantial archaeological investigation occurred in 1977 (Poulton, in prep) and indicated that the town may have been first established in the 12th century which accords well with the earliest market charter of 1135 (*VCH*, 3, 404). In other words the town may be a direct consequence, or a corollary, of the Norman re-establishment of the Abbey. Such a hypothesis badly needs confirmation by further excavation in the town.

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