

Excavations at the Misericorde of Westminster Abbey

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IN Westminster Abbey and its precincts one is dealing not only with a great church, but also with the associated buildings of the religious community which served it. These buildings conform to a regular plan which is common, with only slight variations, to the vast majority of West European monasteries. The central element of this plan is the Cloister, around which the structures most important in the daily life of the monks were grouped. Where the site rendered it possible, the buildings were arranged so that the Church was to the north with the Chapter House adjoining it to the south-east. The Dormer (Dormitory) occupied the first floor of the east range of the Cloister and, at Westminster, faced the Abbot's Lodging to the west. The Frater (Refectory) faced the Church on the south side of the Cloister and the Kitchen generally adjoined it (to the south at Westminster). From the Cloister there was also access by a passage, usually eastwards as here, to the Infirmary which was commonly provided with a smaller cloister of its own.

In addition to these necessary buildings, many subsidiary structures were also required. The position of such buildings was not strictly laid down either by rule or custom, but was dictated by the site at disposal. Such a building was the Misericorde, generally situated near the Frater or Infirmary, where monks who had been bled, or required indulgence in respect of diet on account of age or health, had their meals.

The position of the Misericorde at Westminster had been established by earlier research as lying between the Frater and the Kitchen¹. From February to May 1975 the Inner London Archaeological Unit had the opportunity of excavating part of the building in advance of a redevelopment scheme being carried out by the Abbey authorities. This was the first formal archaeological excavation to be carried out within the boundaries of what was one of the most important Benedictine monasteries in the country.

The Misericorde itself was a chamber on the first floor, of which only a fragment of the east wall survives. Considerable remains of the sub-vault beneath the chamber do however exist, and it was within this

at the eastern end, that the excavation took place (fig. 1).

The Frater and Kitchen of the monastery were erected in the late 11th or early 12th centuries. One of the principal discoveries of the excavation was that the Misericorde was of later construction than these buildings and had been created by utilising the space between the south wall of the Frater and the north wall of the Kitchen. The excavation was able to demonstrate that the building thus created was formed of four bays in length, and three bays in width². The dimensions of the building were 14m x 8m.

Beneath the building was a layer of chocolate brown river silt about 0.40m thick, overlying the natural sand. A few small pieces of Roman pottery and tile were found trampled into the surface of this silt, but there were no Roman features as such.

Cut into the silt were features pre-dating the earliest stone walls. Most notable of these was a section just over one metre long of a mortar footing for a timber structure, which was probably of Saxon date, reflecting the Abbey's status as a small and struggling community prior to the reign of Edward the Confessor. Also cut through the silt on a different alignment to the stone buildings of the Confessor's Abbey was a shallow ditch containing massive deposits of oyster and whelk shells in its backfill. This ditch may have been associated with a temporary timber Kitchen and Refectory, in use while the Abbey church was being built, and prior to the construction of the other monastic buildings in stone in the 1070's and 1080's.

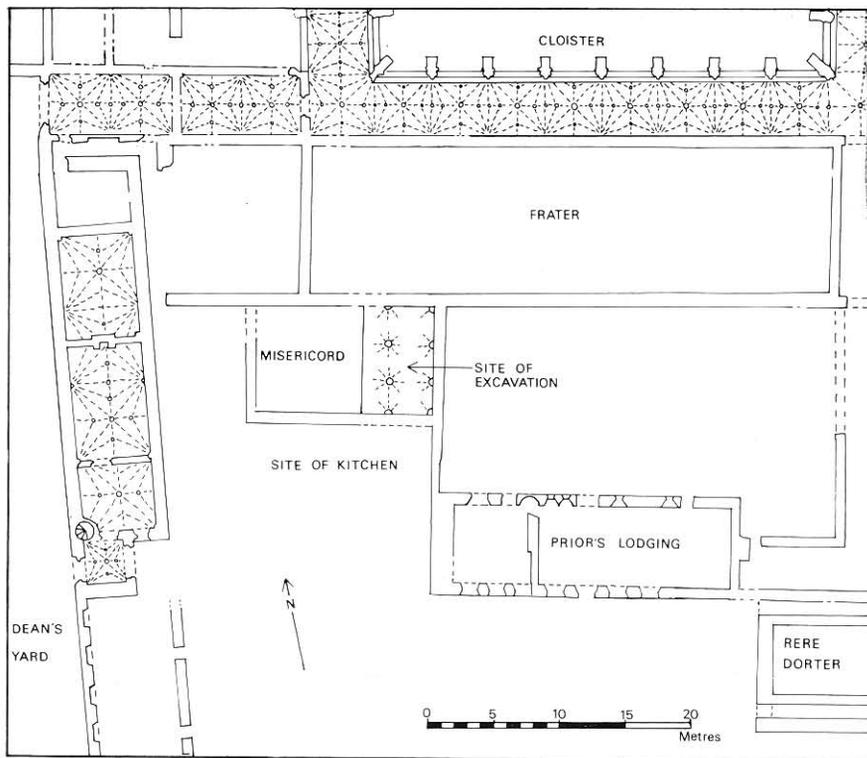
Sealing the ditch, and extending over the entire excavated area, was a floor surface constructed from a mixture of crushed chalk and mortar. It was cut though in the late 11th century by the foundation trenches of the Frater and monastic Kitchen. The site must therefore have become part of a surfaced outdoor area prior to the construction of the major monastic buildings. In the western part of the site this floor surface had been patched on at least one occasion reflecting reasonably heavy or long term use. The foundations of the Frater and Kitchen were

1. Dr. Armitage Robinson *The Abbot's House* (1911)—Fixed the position of the Misericorde from documentary sources; subsequently this was confirmed by excavation—Rev. H. F. Westlake, 'Notes on some

recent excavations at Westminster Abbey' *Ant. J.* 1 No. 3 (1921).

2. The Royal Commission on Historic Monuments erroneously shows the building as being two bays wide. *London (Westminster Abbey)* (1924).

Fig. 1. Location plan.



built tightly against the sides of the construction trenches and contained much re-used building material, possibly from the earlier monastery. This suggests that the pulling down of the original monastery, but not necessarily of the Church, had already begun. A volute was discovered in the foundations of the Frater. It may be an unfinished Norman work, or alternatively from the earlier Saxon monastery.

Shortly after the building of the Frater and Kitchen, a sleeper wall was constructed, running north-south between them, and butting up against their foundations. The Abbey church and its monastic buildings were erected on sand and to stabilize pier foundations it was necessary to construct such sleeper walls beneath. One such sleeper wall runs underneath the nave arcade in the Abbey itself. However the purpose of building a sleeper wall at this stage in the area later to be occupied by the Misericorde, is uncertain. It is possible that an earlier building was envisaged. Two clues to its purpose were found at the southern end, where there was one course of a partition wall of chalk surviving on top of the sleeper wall, and, butting against the wall of the Kitchen, was the base of what could have been either a pier or a buttress. This base was later re-used when the vaulting of the Misericorde was inserted. Whatever the original purpose of the sleeper wall, its position was known when the vault of the Misericorde

was constructed, the internal pier bases being built on top of it.

Prior to the construction of the vault, the site remained an open area. A large pit was dug which was first lined with clay and later given a mortar lining. Associated with this pit were a series of gravel working surfaces. The purpose of the pit, however, is uncertain. When the pit was backfilled in the mid 13th century, the fill contained a jug of London-type fabric with thin slip stripe decoration which was 0.40m high.

The construction of the Misericorde followed immediately after the backfilling of the pit. A wall was constructed between the Kitchen and Frater forming the eastern wall of the new structure, and the vaulting was inserted into the existing framework. The sub-vault was lit by a window in this eastern wall. This window was subsequently rebuilt, and at a later stage blocked. The piers have been dated³ to the mid-13th century and it seems likely that the construction of the Misericorde is part of the great rebuilding of the monastery which took place under the auspices of Henry III.

The floor associated with the initial construction of the building was built up with loose mortar fragments, and then surfaced with crushed Reigate chippings. Within the building's first period of use, it

3. With thanks to Mr. S. E. Rigold.

Fig. 2. A view of the vault of the Misercorde looking south with the blocked eastern window on the left of the picture.



was necessary to replace the floor level twice, as well as patch the existing floor on innumerable occasions. The surface of both new floors was constructed from a mixture of crushed chalk and mortar. These re-surfacings reflect the heavy use made of the building. This was particularly the case on the western side of the excavation, towards the centre of the chamber, where doorways into the Kitchen and Frater faced each other.

In the late 15th century, there was a major change in the use of the sub-vault. A two-bay baker's oven was inserted through the Kitchen wall, with almost half of the oven being situated within the area of excavation. A new floor surface was constructed associated with the oven, but this became covered by a thick layer of burnt refuse, and a new floor had to be laid on top in the first half of the 16th century. Both floors were again surfaced by a mixture of crushed chalk and mortar. The oven then seems to have continued in use until the Misercorde itself was demolished late in the 16th century. The site then became an open area, and was heavily disturbed by

17th century pitting, before being built over once more in the early 18th century.

The medieval layers contained a considerable quantity of kitchen refuse, from which it has been possible to recover a good deal of information on the diet of the monastic community. As well as the expected remains of cow, pig, sheep, fish (including a porpoise tooth) and chicken, thin layers of crushed eggshell were discovered, and the bones of many game birds and of rabbit and hare.

The excavation demonstrated the intensity of use made of a relatively minor part of the monastery. The somewhat ephemeral evidence of pre-Conquest activity was, however, a little disappointing though the area investigated was fairly restricted. We know little of the inner life of the post-Conquest Abbey though many books could be filled with details of its house-keeping and estate management. It is hoped that the Unit's excavation has added more information.

The Inner London Unit wishes to thank the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey for the opportunity of conducting this fruitful excavation.