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Contents

A Late Bronze Age enclosure at Lynton Way, Sawston, Cambridgeshire Phil Weston, Andrew A. S. Newton and Kate Nicholson	7
The Chronicle Hills, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire Christopher Taylor and Ashley Arbon	21
Iron Age settlement and Romanisation on the Isle of Ely: the Hurst Lane Reservoir site Christopher Evans, Mark Knight and Leo Webley	41
Prehistoric, Roman and Saxon activity on the Fen hinterland at Parnwell, Peterborough Leo Webley	79
Anglo-Saxon and medieval boundaries and burials at the former Oblic Engineering site, Church Street, Litlington Thomas Woolhouse	115
Mid-Saxon burials at Barnwell Road, Cambridge Andrew A. S. Newton	127
Early Saxon and medieval remains adjacent to the round moat, Fowlmere Paul Spoerry and Mark Hinman	135
The East Fields of Cambridge Mary Hesse	143
Ely Cathedral and environs: recent investigations Craig Cessford with Alison Dickens	161
Re-assessing the navigation impact of draining the Fens in the seventeenth century Michael Chisholm	175
West Cambridge 1870–1914: building the bicycle suburb Philomena Guillebaud	193
Fieldwork in Cambridgeshire 2006 Elizabeth Shepherd Popescu and Sarah Poppy	211
Obituary: David Wilson	227
Reviews Malcolm Underwood, Paul Spoerry, Debby Banham	231
<i>Index</i>	235
<i>Abbreviations</i>	241
Recent Accessions to the Cambridgeshire Collection Chris Jakes	243
<i>Publication Policy and Format of articles and submissions</i>	256

Ely Cathedral and environs: recent investigations

Craig Cessford with Alison Dickens

Small-scale investigations in and around Ely Cathedral have provided valuable insights into the development of the area. There is evidence for Late Iron Age and Roman settlement at Walsingham House and the Lady Chapel. The earliest evidence that might relate to the medieval religious community is a Middle Saxon pit at the Lady Chapel. Late Saxon activity is represented by buildings and other features, including a charnel pit at the Lady Chapel and evidence of substantial structures at the Bishop's Garden. Following the foundation of the cathedral, there is evidence for a twelfth-century cemetery at the Lady Chapel. This was followed by a thirteenth-century passage linking the Presbytery to a building or gate lying to the north. In the fourteenth century, this passage was rebuilt and linked the North Choir and the Lady Chapel. At the Old Bishop's Palace there is evidence of an earlier substantial thirteenth- and fourteenth-century stone building that might be the 'Abbots House' and a fourteenth-century cemetery.

The archaeology of medieval Ely has recently received a considerable amount of attention; in particular, large-scale excavations have taken place in the eastern part of the city towards the river (Alexander 2003; Cessford, Alexander & Dickens 2006) and on the western edge of the city (Mortimer, Regan & Lucy 2005). This work has focussed on the relatively low-lying peripheries of the settlement, where large-scale development has recently occurred. The dominant element of medieval Ely was, however, the religious community on the hilltop. While large-scale archaeological investigations have not taken place in or around the cathedral, a number of small-scale investigations have been undertaken over several years by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) (Figs 1 & 2). The cathedral is built on Cretaceous Greensand and occupies the geographically advantageous high ground to the west of the River Great Ouse. The natural topography and the original contours of the hill are no doubt distorted and masked by later landscaping and structural activity.

The main thrust of investigations on the hilltop has been architectural rather than archaeological, with significant recent overviews (Ferne 2003;

Maddison 2003) and work on the infirmary complex (Holton-Krayenbuhl 1998), Prior's Lodgings (Holton-Krayenbuhl 2000), Lady Chapel (Dixon 2002) and Octagon (Potts & Potts 2003). The archaeological excavations that have been published are largely concerned with secular rather than religious occupation of the area, as at the Paddock (Holton-Krayenbuhl 1988) and the White Hart (Jones 1993). The only published excavations of the religious buildings was the work within the north range around the Sacrist's Gate of the cathedral, which revealed medieval structural remains and a possible boundary to the early monastic precinct (Holton-Krayenbuhl, Cocke & Malim 1989). Elsewhere, a major and previously unsuspected fourteenth- to seventeenth-century stone building discovered at Ely King's School is probably part of the Old Bishop's Palace complex (Dickens & Whittaker in preparation).

The most significant archaeological work related to the cathedral was carried out between the Lady Chapel and the North Choir Aisle, which revealed activity predating the cathedral and shed light on the use of the area contemporary with the cathedral (Regan 2001). More limited work has taken place to the south of the cathedral around the south-western transept (Alexander 1994) and to the east and west of the south-eastern transept (Alexander 1996; Gibson 1995; Regan 1995; Whittaker 1996). Further afield, work at the Old Bishop's Palace (Alexander 1997; Regan & Alexander 1995), Canonry House Garden (Kemp & Hunter 1992) and Walsingham House (Hunter 1992) has also yielded results that are of considerable interest. Some of this work has been alluded to in recent discussions of the cathedral (e.g. Dixon 2002, 2003; Holton-Krayenbuhl 1998); however, this has usually been based on interim assessments that do not necessarily reflect considered analysis.

The Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral commissioned the majority of these excavations and funded the fieldwork and the immediate post-excavation work. Further post-excavation work and this publication were funded solely by the CAU. It was not possible to analyse the human remains that were

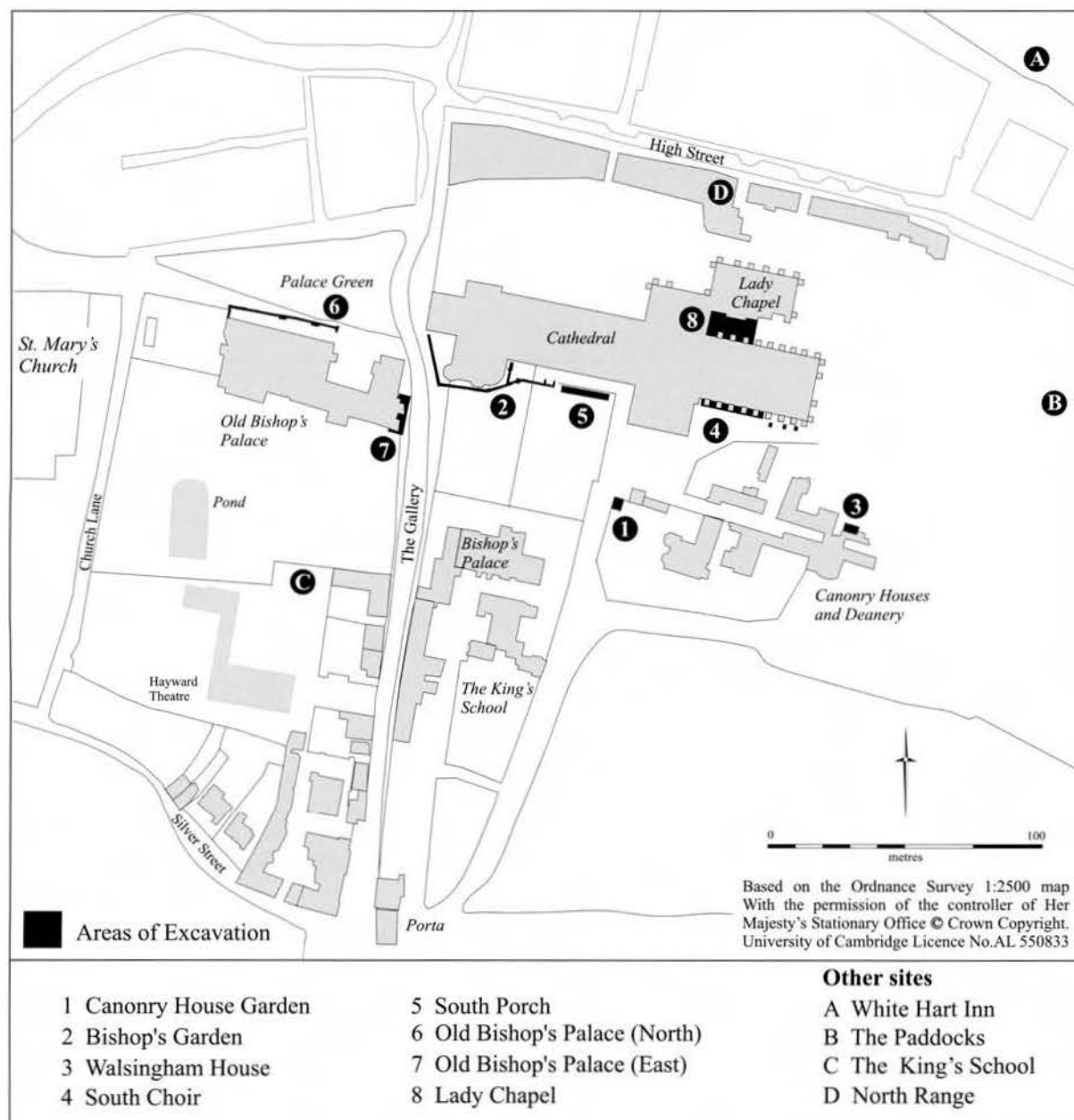


Figure 1. Location of recent archaeological investigations in and around Ely Cathedral.

discovered at the Lady Chapel in any detail, as the Cathedral authorities decided to reinter them immediately after discovery close to the site. All statements concerning these human remains are based upon on *in situ* examination of the material.

The Iron Age to Early Saxon periods

Extensive medieval and later activity means that there is little direct evidence for the early use of the hilltop. Discoveries of residual material hint at some prehistoric activity from the Neolithic onwards, but the earliest definite evidence for a settlement comes from the Late Iron Age. At Walsingham House (Fig.

3), a relatively small trench revealed a pit and a ditch flanked by an upcast bank containing Late Iron Age and Roman pottery (105 sherds). The relatively large quantity of Late Iron Age pottery suggests that the features might be part of a substantial Late Iron Age settlement; Roman activity was apparently much less intense. At the Lady Chapel, no Roman features were found, but a substantial quantity of pottery was recovered (128 sherds), much of it from a dark brown subsoil that produced no later material. Recent discoveries of extensive settlement at various sites in the vicinity suggest that the brow of the high ground was intensively occupied in the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period (Evans, Knight & Webley 2007).

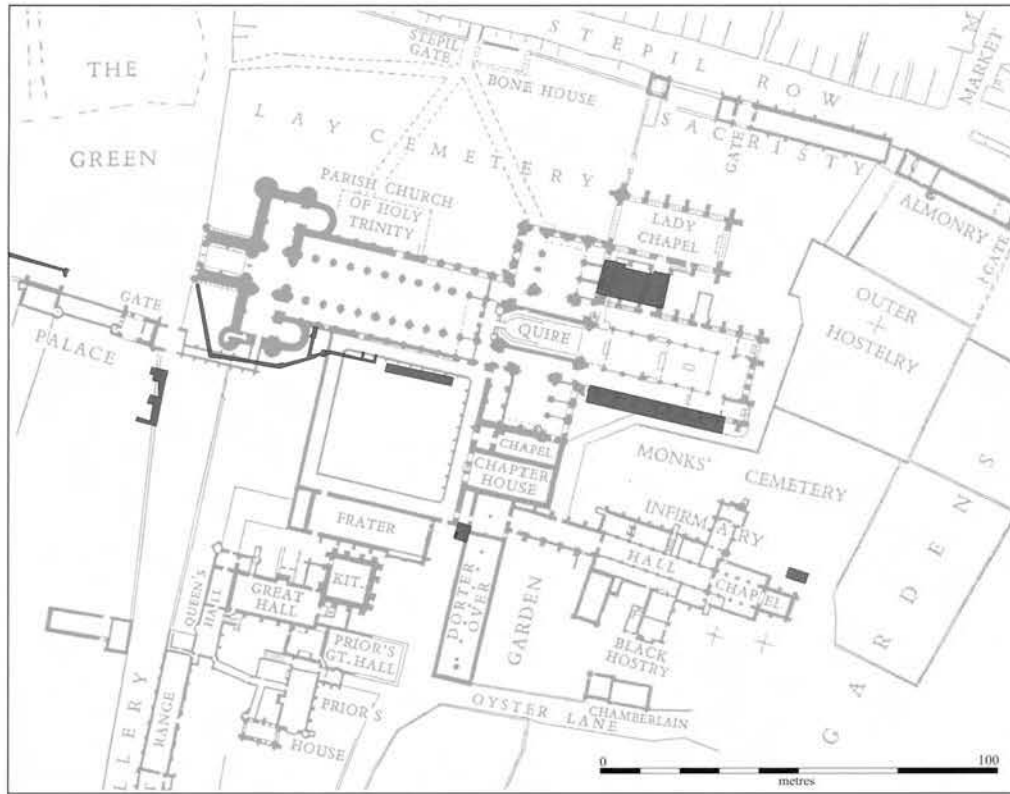


Figure 2. Location of recent investigations overlaid on Atkinson's plan of Ely Cathedral and Priory (from Atkinson 1953, p. 78), plus aerial view of the Cathedral (courtesy of the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs).

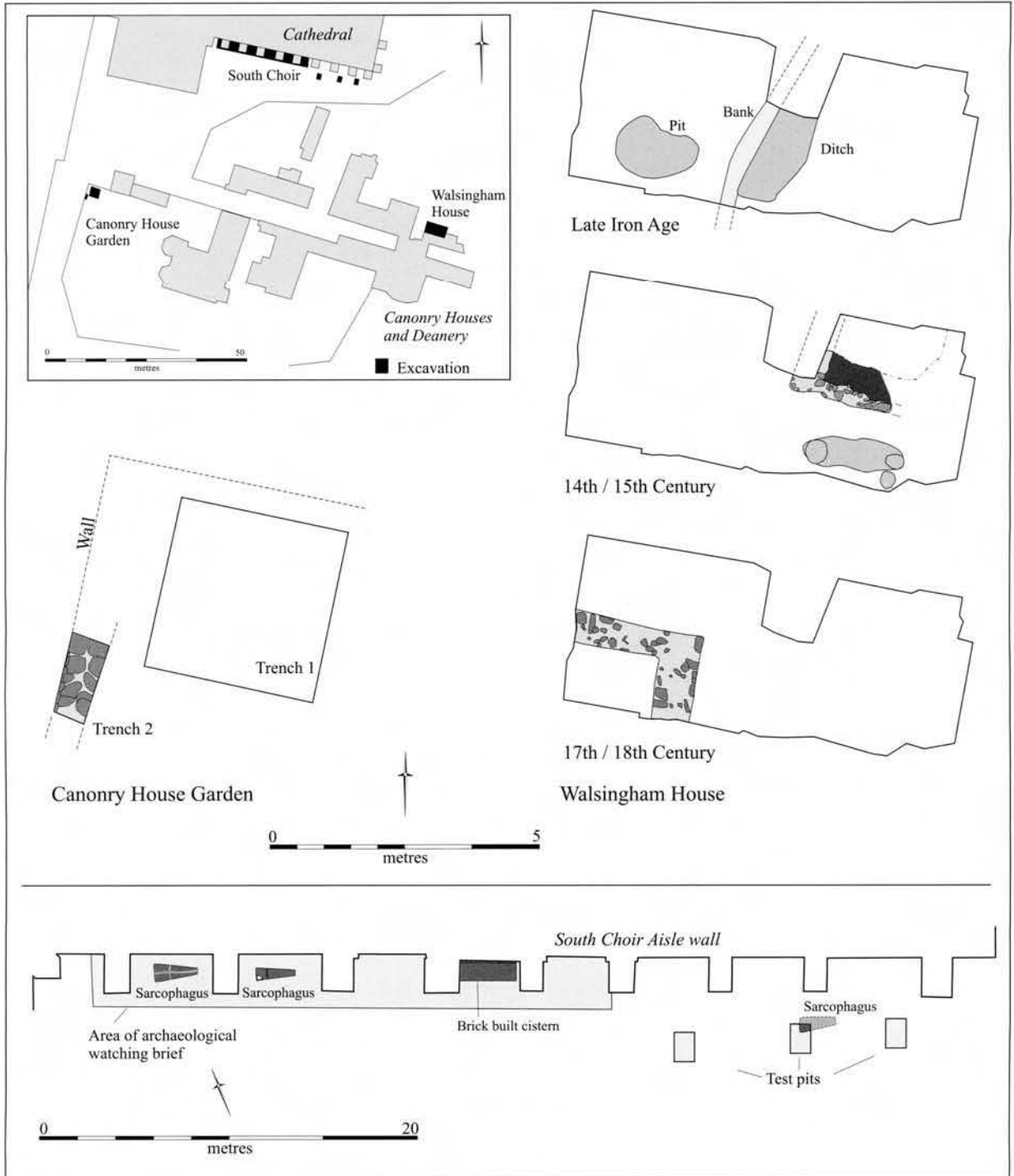


Figure 3. Features at Walsingham House, Canonry House Garden and South Choir Aisle.

No definite Early Saxon features or material have been recovered from the area of the cathedral. A small quantity of handmade pottery that is either Early or Middle Saxon was found at the Lady Chapel (ten sherds). In the absence of any definite evidence for Early Saxon activity, and given the presence of Middle Saxon features and material, it is probable that the handmade pottery is Middle Saxon.

There are three Early Saxon cemeteries located near Ely. At Witchford Aerodrome, three kilometres to the south-west, about 30 fifth- to seventh-century inhumations were discovered (Fowler 1947) and an eighth-century pendant from nearby might relate to a high status burial (Lethbridge 1952). Around 1.5 kilometres to the north is what appears to be a substantial sixth-century cemetery (Cra'ster & Bushnell 1959). More recently, a seventh-century cemetery has

been excavated to the west of Ely at Westfield Farm (Newman 2007). These cemeteries suggest that during the Early Saxon period the area around Ely was already a focal point and that the Christian ecclesiastical sites were located with regard to an already occupied landscape. All of these cemeteries are probably associated with nearby settlements (Hall 1996, p. 36). It appears that the Middle Saxon religious settlement was established between at least three existing settlement/cemetery complexes.

The Middle Saxon period

Evidence of Middle Saxon activity at the Lady Chapel (Fig. 4) came mainly from a series of dark soil layers, plus a single large pit. The pit was probably initially dug for sand extraction and its primary fill consisted of dumped burnt fuel, including rush and sedge, plus

eggshell, fish and eel remains, suggesting that food preparation and cooking had been carried out. There was also some pottery and a copper alloy pin. Above this was a clean light-coloured puddled clay. This clay was not from the immediate vicinity and the pit was probably deliberately lined to hold water. When the pit went out of use it was deliberately backfilled with domestic debris, including considerable amounts of pottery and animal bone.

The pottery was dominated by Ipswich ware (48 sherds out of 89 from the entire site; Fig. 5.1) and the Ipswich ware assemblage from Ely is one of the largest from an inland site. The majority of the vessels were small jars although there were also some larger jars and pitchers. Ipswich ware probably began to be used in Cambridgeshire between 725 and 740 and continued until the middle or late ninth century (Blinkhorn forthcoming). There was also a single sherd of Maxey Type ware dated c. 650–850 (Hurst 1976, pp. 307–8).

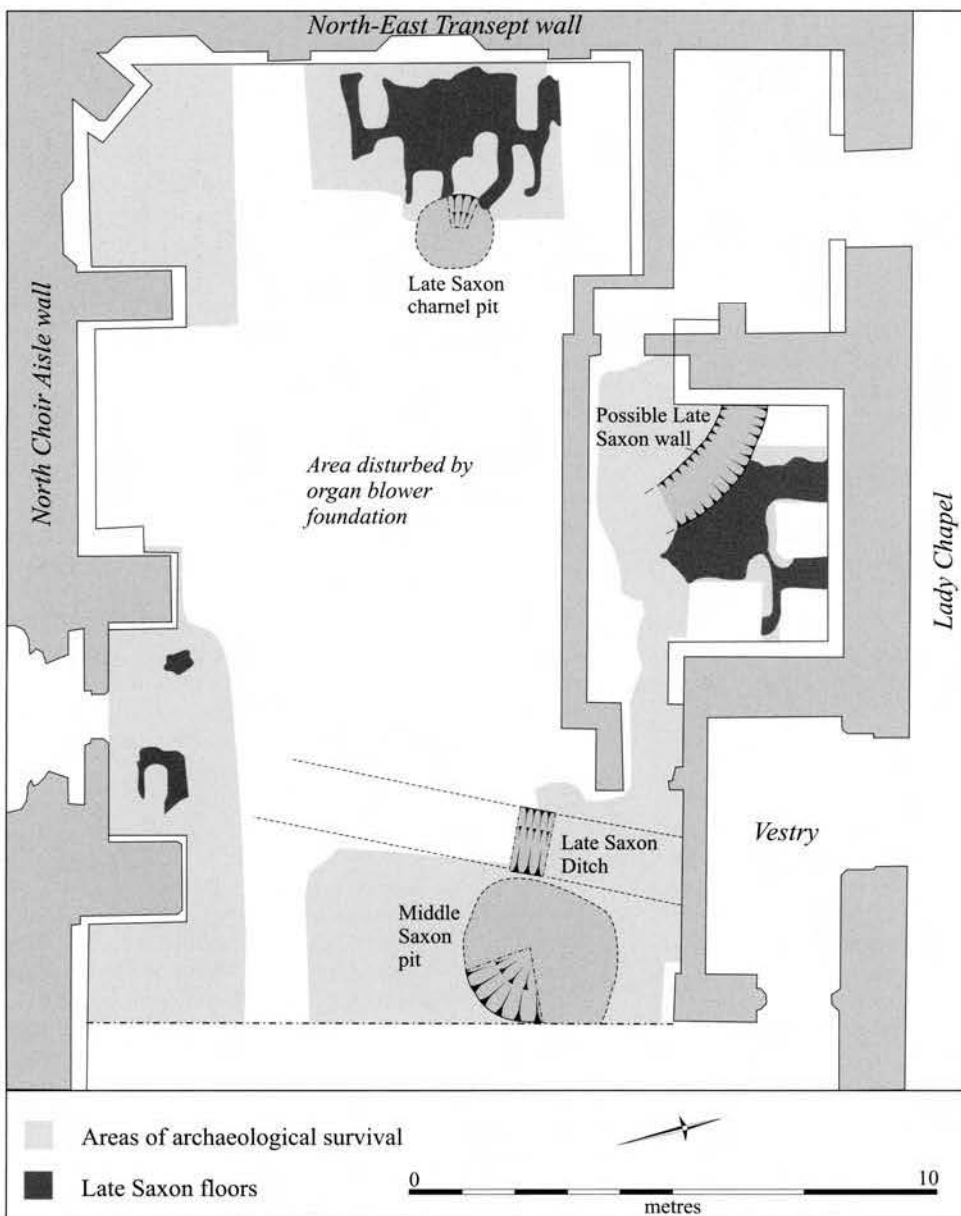


Figure 4. Middle and Late Saxon features at the Lady Chapel.

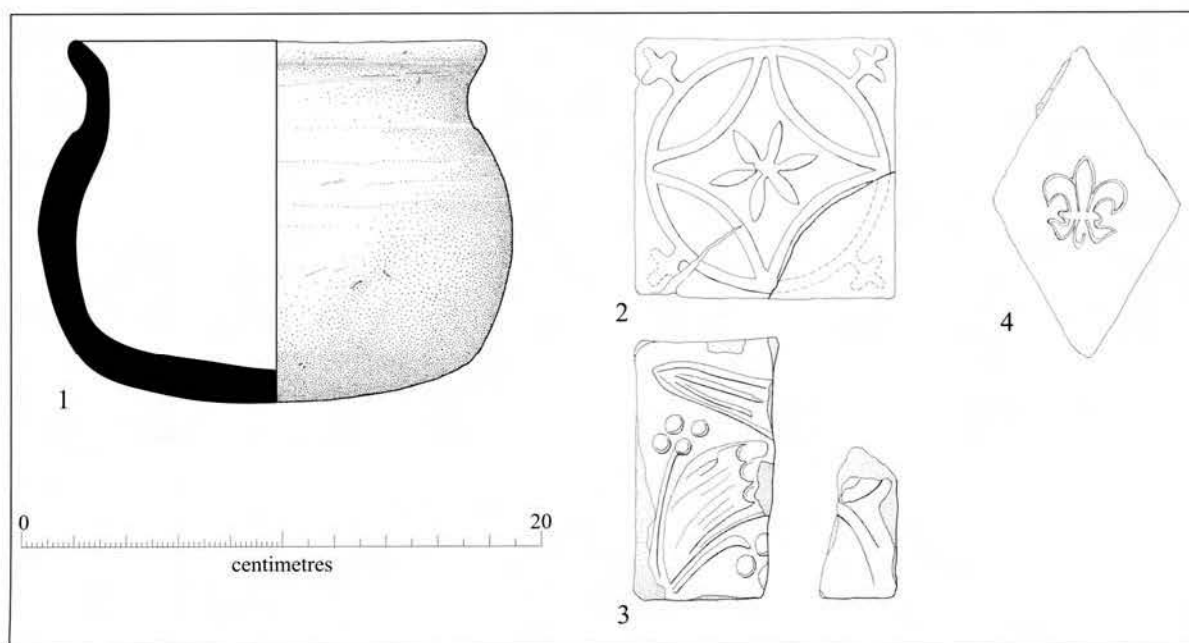


Figure 5. 1) Ipswich ware jar 2-4) Decorated fourteenth-century floor tiles.

More significantly, there were three sherds of imported North French Blackware, a hard, wheel-thrown sandy ware with black burnished surfaces dated to the eighth and ninth centuries and made at many sources in France and the Low Countries. While imported pottery is relatively common at Middle Saxon coastal trading centres, it is considerably rarer at inland sites: these inland sites usually have a significant ecclesiastical component or are royal estates (Mayes, Hardy & Blair 2001). The presence of smaller quantities of Thetford and St Neots type wares suggests that the backfilling of the pit dates to the late ninth century (Cessford with Dickens 2005, table 5).

The animal bone was dominated by sheep/goat, cattle and pig, which represented the waste products of secondary butchery, and were supplemented to a lesser extent by deer and possibly game birds. The cereals from this and later phases were hulled barley and bread/club wheat plus some rye and oats, which are typical of the period; however, the weeds associated with them do not match those found at nearby sites such as West Fen Road, where crops were grown on heavy clay soils, as indicated by the presence of large quantities of stinking chamomile. The cereals from the Lady Chapel seem to have been grown further away on drier sandy loams as the associated arable weeds are small and medium-seeded vetches and wild peas, which may indicate the importation of cereals from distant manors owned and farmed by the religious community. There was also some iron slag.

The quantity of domestic debris in the pit suggests there was a substantial settlement in the vicinity, although the fact that only a single feature was found indicates that the Lady Chapel was on or just beyond the edge of the area of occupation. The most detailed

evidence for Middle Saxon settlement at Ely comes from West Fen Road, where finds and structures relate to a settlement founded in the second quarter of the eighth century (Mortimer, Regan & Lucy 2005). There is less substantial evidence from a number of other sites, including evidence for ninth-century occupation at Broad Street (Cessford, Alexander & Dickens 2006, pp. 5–6). The *Liber Eliensis* records that St Etheldreda founded a religious community at Ely in about 673, which was subsequently burnt by the Danes in about 870. After this there was a community of secular priests, although it is unclear whether they were present immediately after the events of around 870. Later, Bishop Ethelwold founded a Benedictine institution with royal patronage in 970 (Fairweather 2005; see also Keynes 2003). The pit from the Lady Chapel with its evidence of high status imported pottery, not found at any of the other sites, may well relate to either the last years of St Etheldreda's religious community or to the early years of the community of secular priests that followed afterwards.

The Late Saxon period

Several floor deposits at the Lady Chapel (Fig. 4) appeared to pre-date the cathedral: these included thin bands of ash-like material, thin layers of mortar plaster, layers of rough pebbled metalling and burnt material from ovens or hearths. Between the floors was evidence of various episodes of deliberate dumping/levelling, with clean imported sand and mixed debris from occupation. No walls were directly associated with the floors, although a section of curving robber cut possibly indicated the line of a robbed out wall. There was also a ditch and a gully. Remains of wheat,

barley and rye, burnt fishbone, eggshell and shellfish suggest domestic activity, while the presence of slag and hammerscale (small 'fish-scale' like fragments dislodged from the oxide/silicate skin by mechanical or thermal shock during the forging of iron), together with fragments of masonry and glass, indicate construction activity. A large vertically sided charnel pit crammed with disarticulated human remains was presumably the result of grave clearance from a nearby cemetery. The pottery consisted of the typical types for the period, Thetford type (43 sherds), St Neots type (17 sherds) and Stamford (1 sherd) wares. There was evidence for the butchering of cats, probably to obtain either guts or skins.

In the Bishop's Garden (Fig. 6), there were layers of dumped domestic debris, which suggests there had been occupation nearby. Overlying these were remains of substantial buildings that appeared to predate the

cathedral and were on different alignments. The relatively large quantities of Late Saxon domestic debris at both the Lady Chapel and the Bishop's Garden is in striking contrast to the medieval deposits associated with the cathedral, which generally contained much less material, indicating that the Late Saxon occupation was much messier as quantities of refuse were simply allowed to accumulate in the area.

The early medieval period: late eleventh to thirteenth centuries

At the Lady Chapel, the Late Saxon buildings appear to have fallen into disuse and were cleared away during or just after the initial construction phase of the cathedral. The area was then used as a cemetery during the twelfth century (Figs 7a & 7b). Thirty-two *in situ*

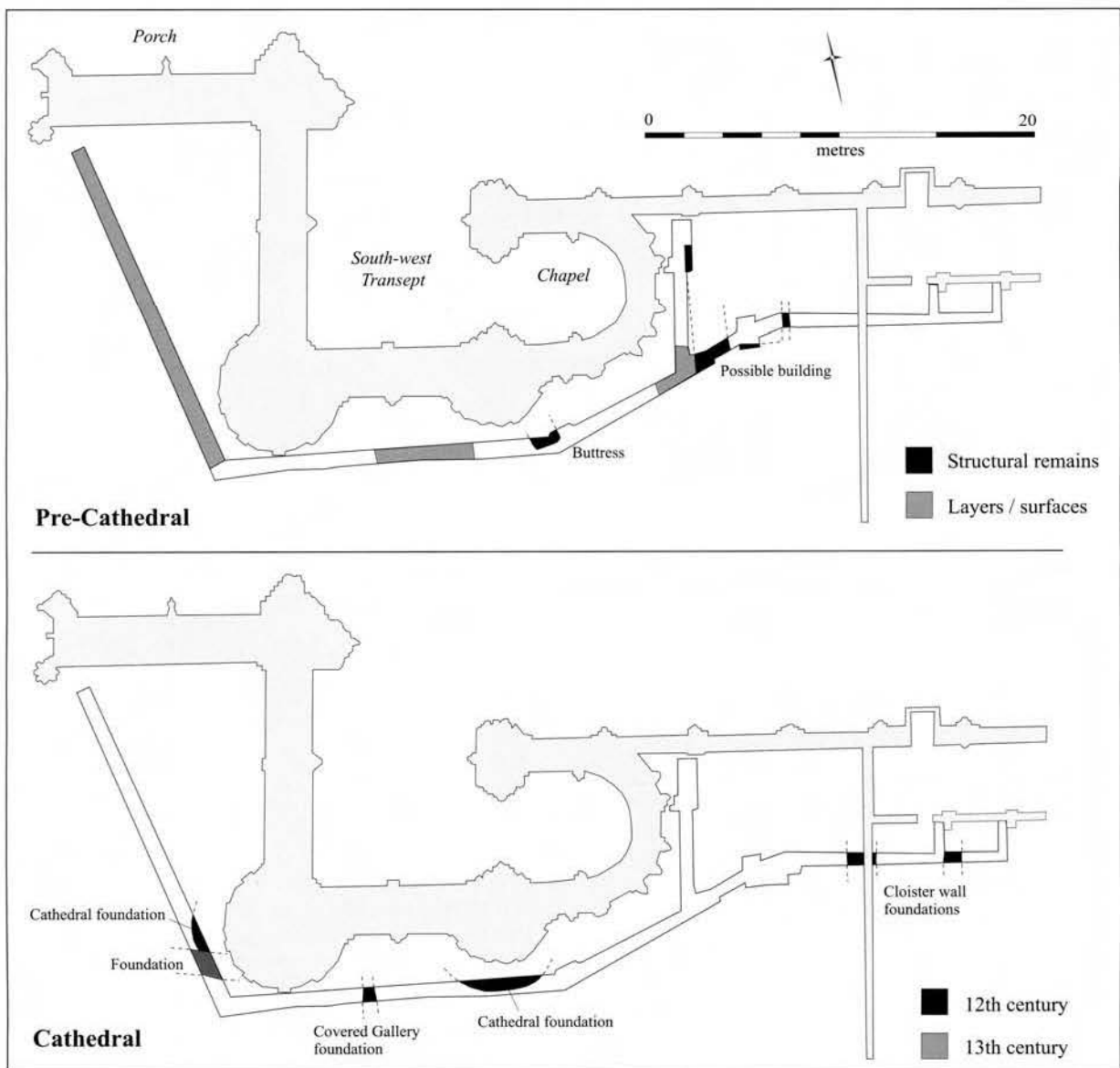


Figure 6. Features at the Bishop's Garden.

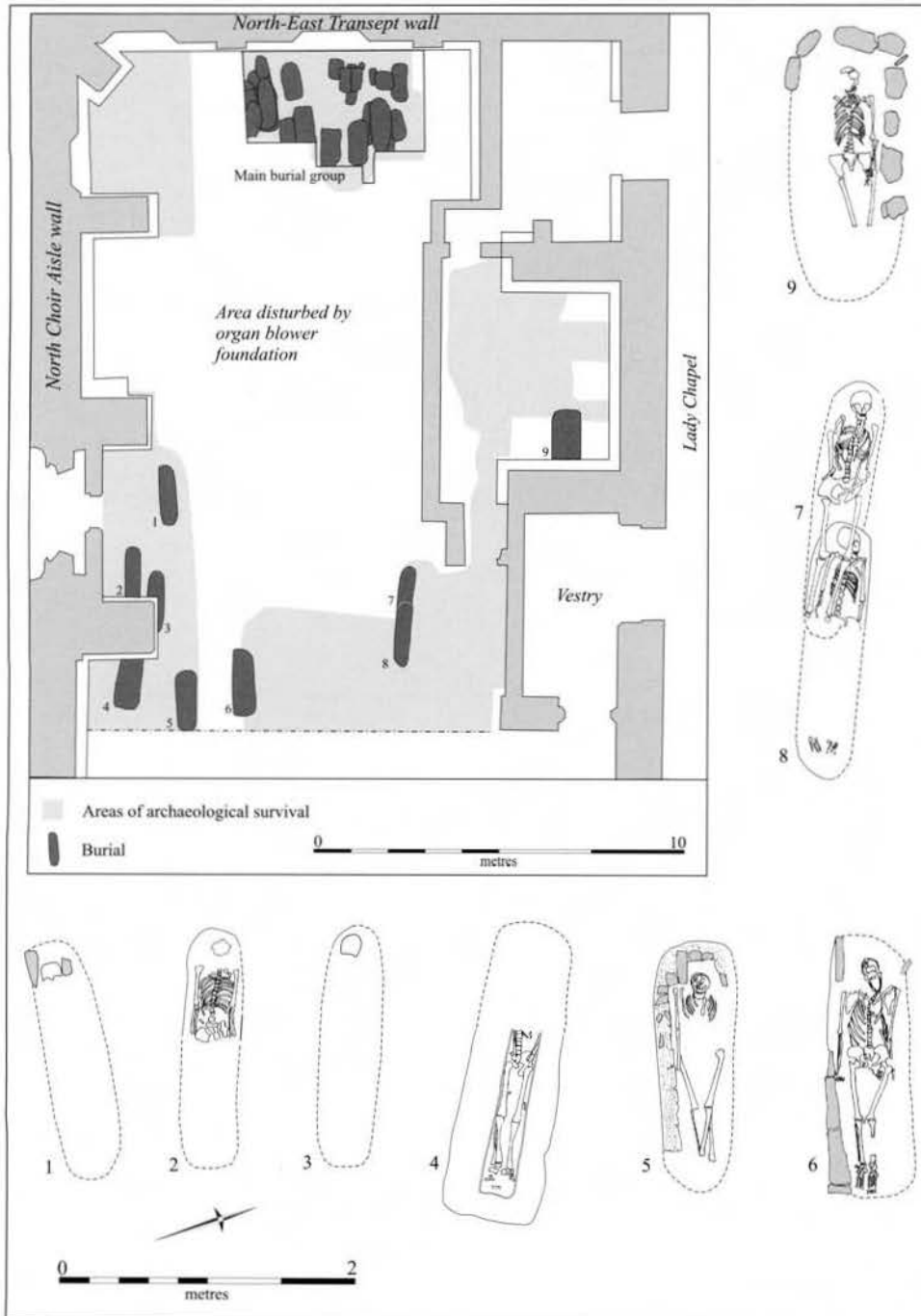


Figure 7a. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century cemetery at the Lady Chapel.

burials were uncovered and numerous disarticulated human remains were found. Both male and female adults were present, as were a significant number of children, ranging from neonates (possibly still-born) through to eight- or nine-year-olds. The child burials were all clustered towards the north transept wall: in the Anglo-Saxon period there appears to have been a belief that rain water run-off from the roof would effectively 'baptise' the children (Daniell 1997, p. 128). Although this belief might have died out in the Post-Conquest period, it is possible either that it continued or that this is simply some form of zoning of burial within the cemetery (*ibid.*). Nine bodies were interred

in coffins and three had stone-lined tombs or cists. The others were either interred in coffins, now rotted, or were shrouded, although no shroud pins were found. Atkinson located the monks' cemetery on the south side of the cathedral to the east of the south-eastern transept and the lay cemetery to the north of the cathedral between the north-western and north-eastern transepts (1953, p. 58). The most likely explanation for these burials is that prior to the construction of the Lady Chapel the lay cemetery covered the entire area to the north of the cathedral (Atkinson 1953, p. 60).

The cemetery remained in use until the thirteenth century, when a passage aligned south-southwest

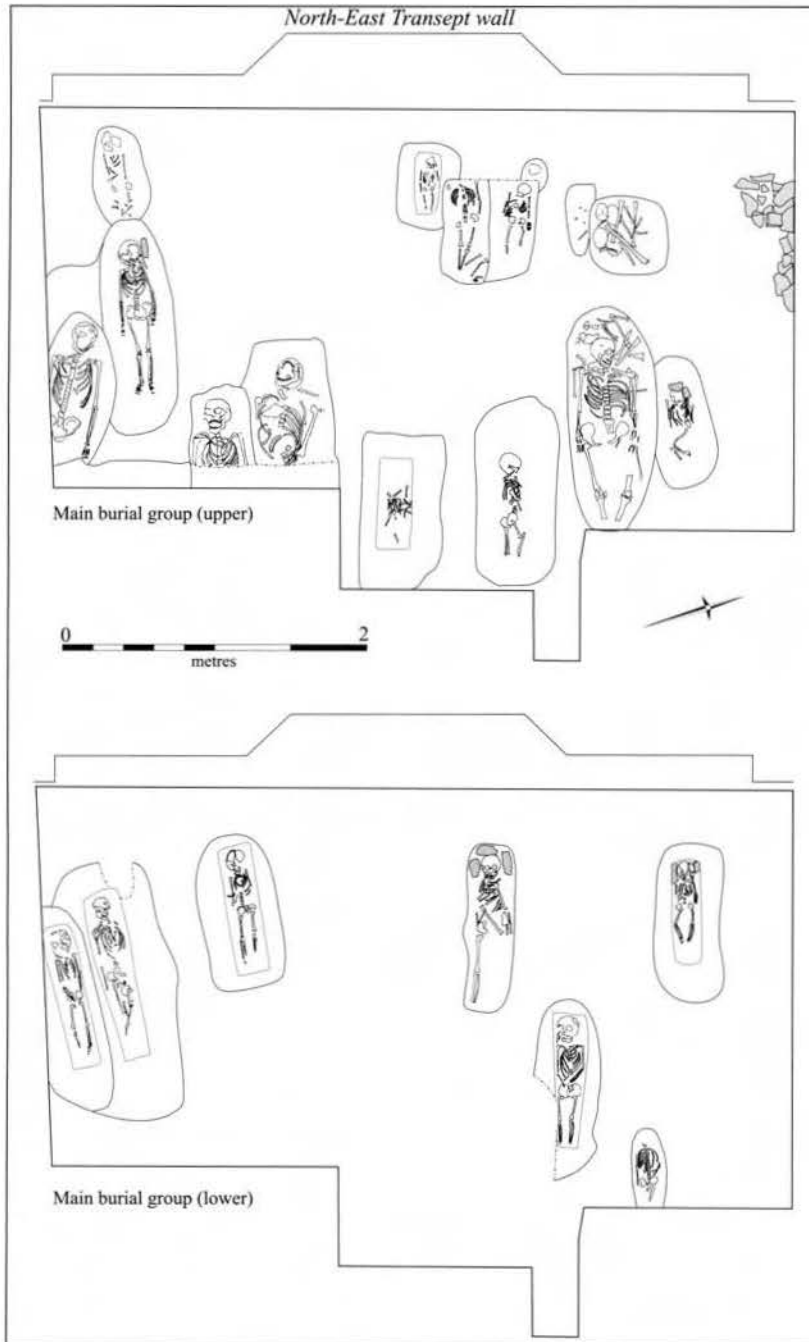


Figure 7b. Main burial group from twelfth- and thirteenth-century cemetery at the Lady Chapel.

to north-northeast was constructed (Fig. 8). In a recent discussion based on architectural surveys, it was argued that this passage was built in the early fourteenth century when the Lady Chapel was beginning to be constructed, to provide a covered way between the North Choir door and the Lady Chapel (Dixon 2002). This was based on evidence that it was built in with the primary walls of the Lady Chapel and against the end buttress of Northwold's North Choir Aisle (c. 1234–52), but underlying the buttress of Hotham's North Choir Aisle (c. 1330). Whilst this might be true of the upper elements of the passage, its foundations are earlier: the foundations of the both the North Choir Aisle buttresses and the Lady Chapel

overlie the passage, indicating that it dates from the early thirteenth century. The two buttresses situated along the east wall of the processional way also sit rather uncomfortably between the two fourteenth-century structures, and appear to belong to a different phase of building. Further dating evidence for the foundations of the walls comes from the inclusion in them of fragments of pre-twelfth- and twelfth-century masonry. The re-used stones included fragments of moulded mullions, billets and parts of small columns, with some faced blocks showing finishes made using a pecking hammer and a masonry cleaver. The re-used stone dates the walls to after the twelfth century and the stratigraphic evidence places them be-

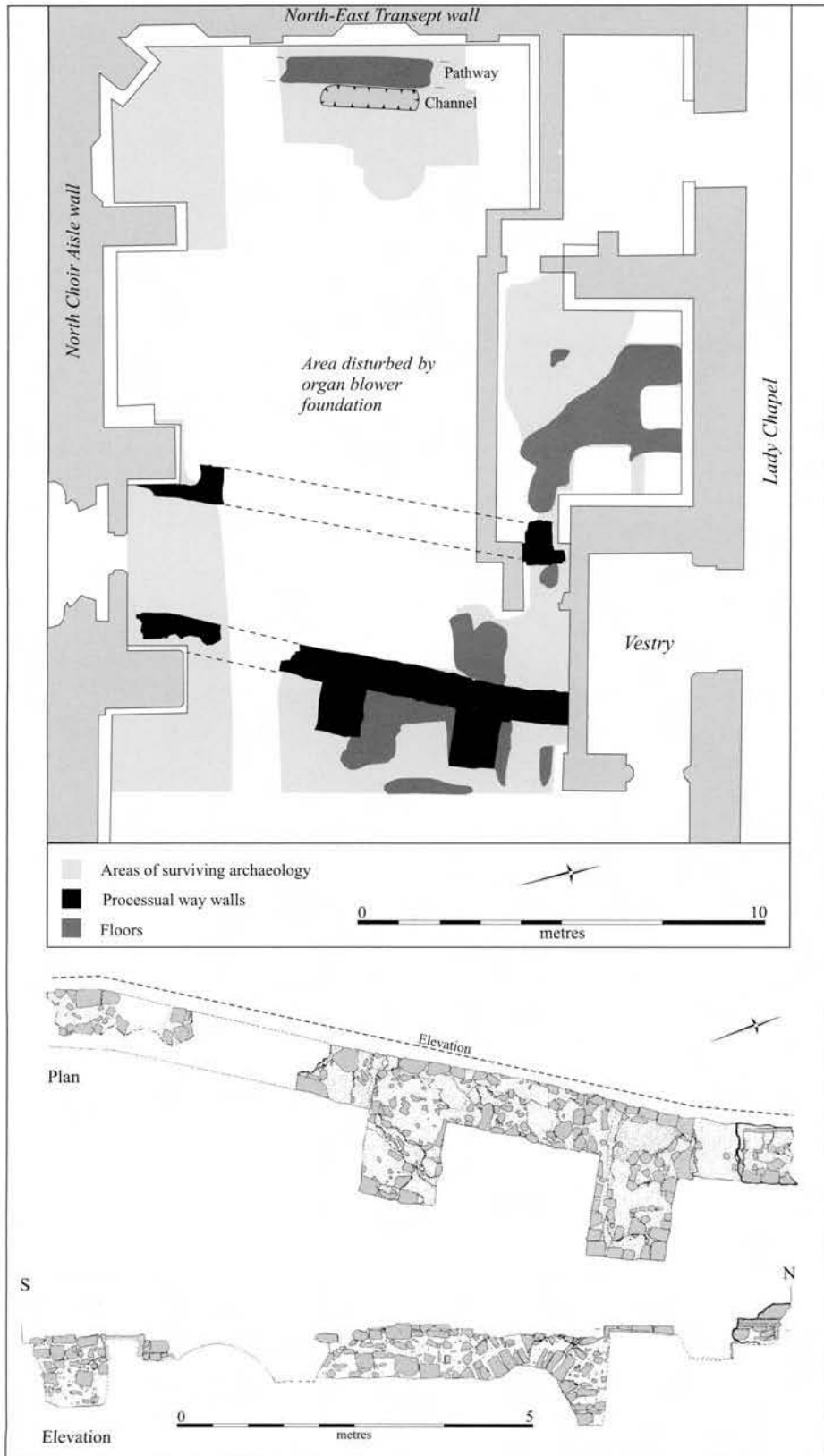


Figure 8. Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century features at the Lady Chapel.

fore the early fourteenth-century construction of the North Choir Aisle and Lady Chapel. If thirteenth century in date, then the passage might have been constructed to link the Presbytery, built by Bishop Hugh de Northwold, to a building or gate lying to the north, which has now been destroyed. This might also explain the presence of fragments of an earlier Norman building within the build of the wall, as the original apsidal end of the cathedral was demolished and replaced at this time. There is also the factor of the positioning of the passage *vis à vis* the buttresses of the Lady Chapel and the North Choir Aisle, especially the asymmetry of the buttresses along the eastern side of the passage, which supports this argument.

The foundations as exposed measured up to 0.85 metres wide and reached a depth of 1.7 metres from their greatest standing height. The wall was constructed mainly from Barnack limestone plus ragstone rubble, with some clunch, flint and re-used worked fragments. The binding agent was a relatively compact yellow coarse sandy mortar. The eastern wall had two foundation arches: the northernmost spanned a space of 1.5 metres, the southernmost collapsed, probably when the culvert was re-roofed in the sixteenth-century or later. The superstructure of the wall was supported by two rectangular buttresses on the eastern side. The buttresses do not lie symmetrically along this eastern side and had different mortar from the main wall, which suggests that they were later additions. Little was revealed of the line of the corresponding west wall of the passage, as it was heavily truncated by later activity, although the surviving fragments suggest that it was of similar build. Three ashlar blocks located to the north of the west wall indicated the presence of a doorway from or to the processional way: these provided a step up and out of the passage and the central uppermost surface was worn from prolonged use. Into these blocks on the north was cut a square recess for the base of a wooden door frame. The doorway leads through the west wall and onto a worn cobbled surface.

Other surfaces that appeared to be contemporary were a series of fragmentary mortar floors, largely truncated by later intrusions. Cutting through the mortar floor was a vertically sided rectangular cut, probably the remains of a tomb inserted within the floor between the two walls of the passage. A series of other minor cut features also belong to this phase.

The pottery recovered from this and the next phase consisted of local Medieval Ely ware (ten sherds), sandy coarsewares (19 sherds), Grimston ware (ten sherds) and Scarborough ware (one sherd). In general, the limited assemblages that were recovered have little to distinguish them from the material found in secular parts of Ely. The only elements that appear to be distinctive and restricted to the cathedral area are decorated floor tiles (Fig. 5.2–4), which might come from the short-lived fourteenth-century kiln at Bawsey (Eames 1955).

Twelfth- and thirteenth-century features were also found in most of the other sites that were investigated. In the South Choir Aisle there was found to be a

difference in construction between bay six and bays seven to nine, with bay six having different foundations and more regular coursing above the floor and thinner mortar. At the Bishop's Garden (Fig. 6) were some of the foundations of the south-western transept. Cutting through these were some substantial stone foundations 1.5 metres wide on an unusual alignment and perpendicular to some of the walls of earlier buildings at the Old Bishop's Palace. There was also a wall that was part of a covered gallery linking the Old Bishop's Palace to the cathedral. The walls of the cloister were also found. At Walsingham House there was evidence of several phases of sand quarry pits. While these could have predated the cathedral, it is more likely that they were contemporary with it and might relate to its construction. At Canonry House Garden, a pit and posthole provided evidence of some other contemporary activity. At Old Bishop's Palace (East), some substantial foundations of stone walls aligned north-northwest to south-southeast consisted of mortared large flat slabs (Fig. 9). Beside these are what might have been a gravel surface. The foundations are on a different alignment to the Old Bishop's Palace and some distance from it and might represent the western boundary of the Gallery. At Old Bishop's Palace (North) there is evidence for the foundations of another substantial wall aligned north-northwest to south-southeast 1.1 metres wide and made up of mortared rough pieces of sandstone (Fig. 9). These walls might relate to the 'Abbots House', which is believed to have existed in this general area and was associated with bishops Northwold (1229–45) and Arundel (1374–88) (Atkinson 1933).

The later medieval period: fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

At the Lady Chapel site, the fourteenth century is dominated by the construction of the North Choir Aisle and the Lady Chapel. The thirteenth-century passage was largely demolished but the foundations were re-used for building or re-building the linking passage. This is suggested by the addition to the original foundations of new ones, including a chamfered plinth. Associated with this phase of building is a floor with preserved impressions of tiles. This construction work sealed off the area lying to the west of the processional way, making this a very dark and enclosed space and possibly precluding the use of the area as a burial ground. The burial ground was sealed by a gravel path, which was originally probably cobbled and would have run beneath the raised passage running along the eastern side of the north-eastern transept (Atkinson 1953, fig. facing p. 66). No foundations of the raised walkway were observed, although a shallow depression running to the east and parallel with the path suggests a channel caused by run-off from a roof. That the area was closed off by the late fourteenth to fifteenth centuries is suggested by the lack of evidence of any features dating to this period.

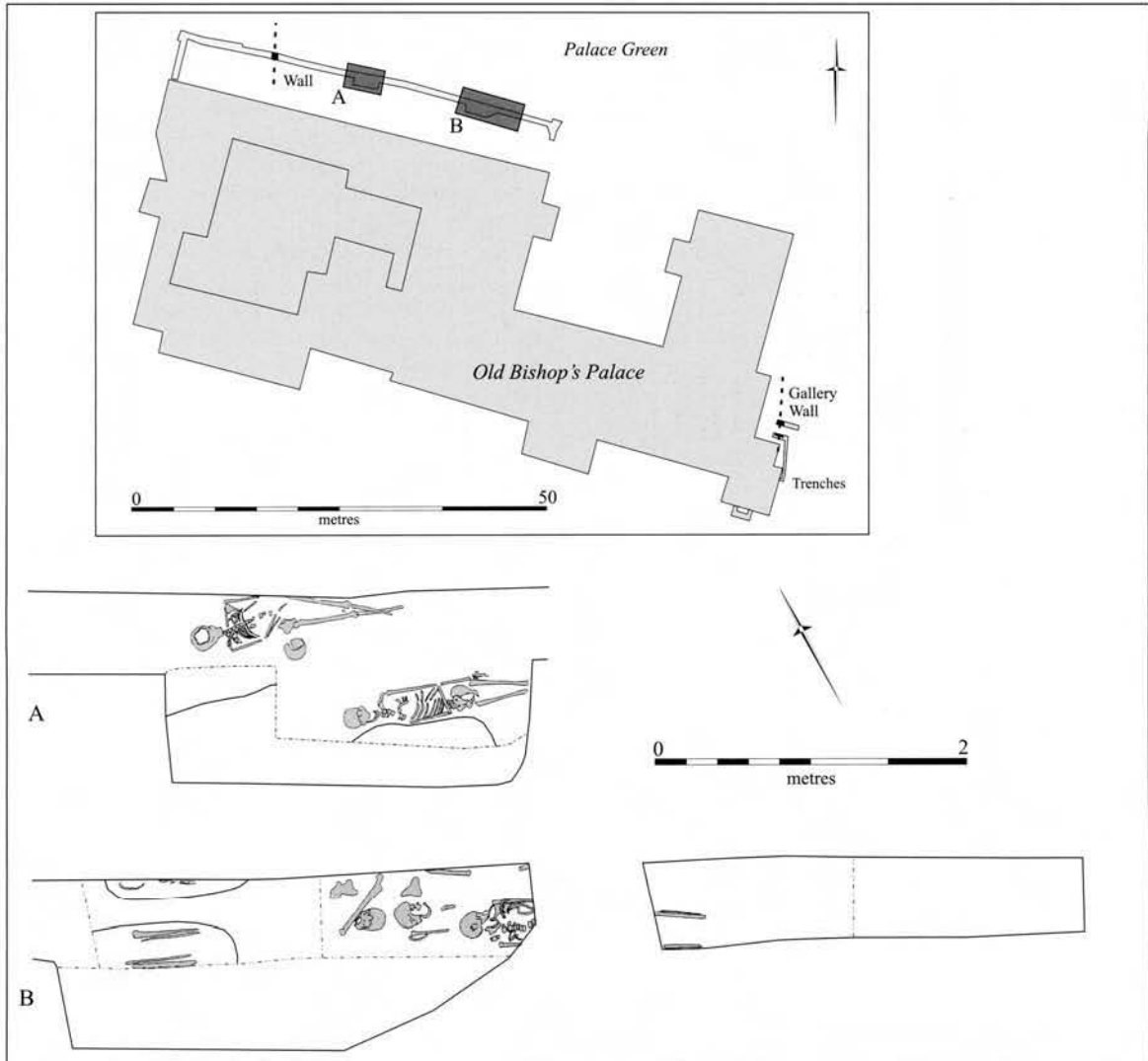


Figure 9. Walls and fourteenth-century cemetery at the Old Bishop's Palace.

Outside the South Choir Aisle, various disturbed human remains were found, and stone sarcophagi were found in bays seven and eight (Fig. 3). The lid of the sarcophagus found in bay seven is made of roughly tooled sandstone and is 2.09 metres long and 0.3–0.7 metres wide. The lid of the one found in bay eight is made of well tooled sandstone with a raised decorative central spine and is 2.14 metres long by 0.26–0.8 metres wide. Part of what was probably another grey limestone sarcophagus was found opposite the buttress between bays one and two. These sarcophagi were in the area of the monks' cemetery and confirm the use of the area for relatively high status burials. In bay five, a brick structure was found which was probably a cistern, one of 'two large soft water cisterns which received rainwater off the cathedral' (Bacon 1872, p. 146).

At Walsingham House, quarrying appears to have ended and the area was used as a garden for a considerable period. At some stage the area was levelled and two insubstantial structures, possibly workshops or

stores, were built (Fig. 3). At Canonry House Garden, a fourteenth-century timber structure with postholes, a beamslot and a mortar surface was replaced by a more substantial set of mortared stone foundations that were probably part of the Dorter (Fig. 3). Some fifteenth-century pottery wasters (the remains of vessels that became damaged or deformed during firing) from Canonry House Garden may have derived from production closer to the river Great Ouse, but suggests that some kilns might have been located on the hilltop (Cessford, Alexander & Dickens 2006, fig. 66).

At Old Bishop's Palace (North), there was evidence for a previously unknown fourteenth-century cemetery (Fig. 9). Five burials and the remains of two more disturbed skeletons were identified, with evidence for intense use of the area and intercutting burials. The individuals were all adults: some were female and they were probably all buried in shrouds rather than coffins. The presence of a fourteenth-century cemetery almost opposite the western entrance to the cathedral and only 40 metres from it is particularly

noteworthy and indicates that this area to the south of the Palace Green was not part of the main access route to the cathedral and that there might have been some form of division between the two areas. The area was levelled in the early to mid-fifteenth century and a series of three mortared floors was constructed. Further levelling took place in the late fifteenth century and an extensive pebbled surface was laid, which was probably a paved precinct.

The post-medieval period

The Lady Chapel became the parish church of Holy Trinity after the Dissolution in 1539. The processional way was demolished and lean-to buildings were constructed within the southern bays of the church. During this period, the walls and foundations were robbed, the robbing cut was backfilled and the whole area was levelled with sand and gravel mixed with domestic refuse and material from the demolitions. Other developments appear to be confined to the construction of drains and levelling the immediate area. A certain degree of respect for the dead is indicated by the re-interment of human remains after the construction of the drainage system. Several post-holes might be evidence either of further wooden lean-to buildings or of scaffolding for repair work. The post-medieval pottery from the Lady Chapel was dominated by material produced locally in Ely, particularly Glazed Red Earthenware (188 sherds) and Babylon Ware (31 sherds) (Cessford, Alexander & Dickens 2006, pp. 46–71). There was also some tin glazed earthenware (five sherds) and imported German stoneware (17 sherds).

At Walsingham House, the earlier insubstantial building was demolished and a larger structure was built in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century (Fig. 3). This had limestone and clunch foundations, including a number of re-used moulded fragments, and might have been an extension abutting the former Infirmary Chapel. This was eventually demolished and replaced by another set of stone foundations. At Canonry House Garden, there was evidence for a number of structures and garden features.

Conclusion

Although the scale and nature of the archaeological investigations in and around Ely cathedral means that they shed only limited light on the site, they have nonetheless led to a series of important discoveries. Whilst the evidence of Late Iron Age and Roman activity on the hilltop is of some interest, it is the evidence from the late ninth century of high status activity south of the Lady Chapel that gives us the earliest glimpse so far of the origins of the medieval religious community at Ely. Through the Late Saxon period, the evidence for activity around the site of the cathedral continues to provide tantalising hints of the Benedictine monastery, with evidence of substantial

structures and a charnel pit.

After the foundation of the cathedral in the late eleventh century, the context of the sites around it becomes much clearer, although the limited scale of the investigations is frustrating. The early phases of the cathedral's development are elucidated by the evidence that the passage connecting the North Choir Aisle and the Lady Chapel is of thirteenth-century origin, and the identification of the 'Abbots House' complex under the site of the Old Bishop's Palace and the possible gallery connecting it to the cathedral. The identification of part of the Dorter at Canonry House Garden and a possible extension abutting the Infirmary Chapel at Walsingham House represent minor advances in our understanding of the layout of the cathedral area.

Elements of both the lay and monks' cemeteries have been revealed. Although this confirms what is known from documentary sources, the discovery of a fourteenth-century cemetery north of the Old Bishop's Palace was unexpected and indicates that burial was not as spatially restricted as had previously been believed.

Acknowledgements

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