

BECKET'S CHAPEL, NORWICH

By CHARLES GREEN

INTRODUCTION

IN A.D. 1258, the Friars of Penitence—the “Sack Friars”—settled in Norwich on the south bank of the river Wensum immediately to the east of St. George's Street. When, in 1307, the order was suppressed, their holding was given to the Dominican Friars who, in 1226, had settled on the north side of the river. In 1345, after this gift was confirmed, the Dominicans began to build their great conventual church and other buildings on their new site. Here in 1413 they suffered from a great fire which so damaged their buildings that they returned for a time to their old home on the north bank. By 1449 they had so far progressed with their rebuilding that they were able to move south again.

This great church, rebuilt in the Perpendicular style, still stands and is to-day a civic building. The great nave is now known as St. Andrew's Hall and the old choir as the Blackfriars Hall. Much of the cloisters and other buildings also survives. The whole complex was surveyed and a comprehensive plan of the precinct, together with a summary description, was given by F. C. Elliston Erwood (1951) to the Royal Archaeological Institute in 1949. The plan included details of the buildings still standing and outlined those inferred from earlier test-excavations and also from an eighteenth-century plan by William Ivory.

At the south-east angle of the cloisters, Erwood shows a square vaulted building which also borders the south end of the Chapter House; this building is still in existence and is shown in part on the plans accompanying this report (Fig. 1) as “The Crypt.” To the east of this building and communicating, Erwood places “Becket's Chapel,” shown mostly in broken line. In the mid-nineteenth century this building was still standing, though much mutilated and disguised by later additions and alterations and Harrod (1857) gave a description of it as it then was. It was destroyed in 1874 and the southern part of the site was levelled off to the yard-entrance from Elm Hill, immediately to the north of the east end of Blackfriars Hall. Above this surface a few courses of the north-east angle of the chapel still survive and immediately beyond to the north, the surface slopes steeply downwards towards the river. Here also, abutting on the south wall of the Chapter House, stood in 1958 a row of dilapidated brick-built outhouses of later date, now demolished.

In 1958 the City Architect of Norwich had planned to build a series of lock-up garages over the site and, before it was finally sealed, arrangements were made by the Ministry of Works for the writer to recover by excavation such of the original plan of the chapel as was possible. Excavation with three men

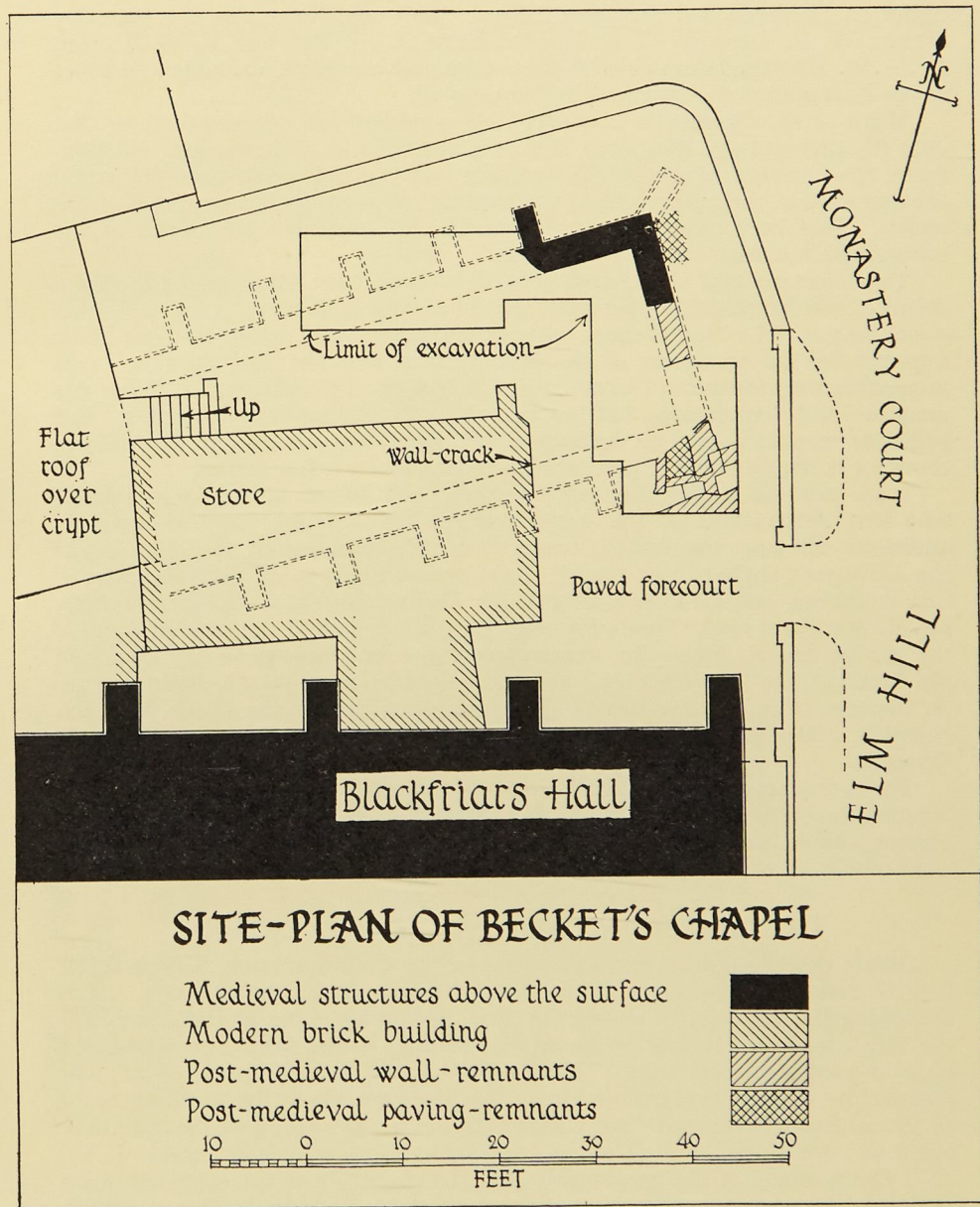


Fig. 1.

began on 17 March and closed on 2 April. Some assistance was also given by Messrs. W. F. Edwards, C. H. Lewton-Brain, C. G. Rye and R. W. Turner. Mr. A. B. Whittingham paid frequent visits and has given valuable assistance in the interpretation of the architectural detail.

Much of the chapel-site is covered by a modern brick-built store, so that only the east end and the north side were available for examination. Furthermore, the presence of the paved forecourt and the restricted space prevented the exposure of the outer sides of the east and south walls for more than a few inches. This limitation made it impossible to determine the depth of the natural chalk surface on the south side.

The lower part of the chapel proved to have been filled with the mixed debris of the demolished upper part, as well as with light earth, ashes and other waste matter. The limited space within the modern yard, added to those limits imposed by the smallness of the labour force and the bad weather made impossible the clearance of large areas of the floor. In addition, the filling was unstable and trench-sides had to be left with a considerable batter. But sufficient was uncovered to determine the essential structure and dimensions, though the length was not precisely determinable by a few inches.

I am grateful to Mr. Leonard Howes (Lord Mayor of Norwich, 1963-4) who lent illustrations of the upper part of the building together with its additions, all now demolished, traces of which complicated the planning of the south-east angle of the chapel. I am grateful also to Mr. David Percival, City Architect, and his then assistant, Mr. Michael Gooch, for advice and help. Mr. R. Markham of the Castle Museum, has also helped in the identification of the animal bones. Since the completion of the excavation, on the advice of Mr. Percival, the Norwich Corporation has abandoned its plan to build garages on the site. The few loose finds have been deposited in the Castle Museum, Norwich, and a selection of the various types of brick in the city's Bridewell Museum.

The newspaper publicity at the time of the excavation brought to light a nineteenth-century oil painting of the interior of the chapel. With the permission of the owner, Mr. Bassett F. Hornor, a reproduction has been included as an illustration. The painting is by D. Hodgson, 1856.

THE CHAPEL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Before describing the remains as revealed by the excavation, it is desirable to give some extracts from Harrod's (1857) account of the building. After describing the cloisters, he writes: "A door, now stopped up, at the east end of the south walk, led to a staircase which, turning to the south, led down to a large and lofty groined vault ["The Crypt"—C. G.] with a central shaft, now replaced by an ugly modern brick pier. On the east side of the southern bay a small and Early Decorated door, with a niche for a water stoup on the right of it, opens into the chapel of St. Thomas à Becket. [This door is now sealed—C. G.]

"The groining of the great vault [i.e., the chapel] is of the same character as that of the cloister vaults, and of the same date. It is 55 ft. long and 20 ft. wide, and has been lighted by small windows some distance from the floor;

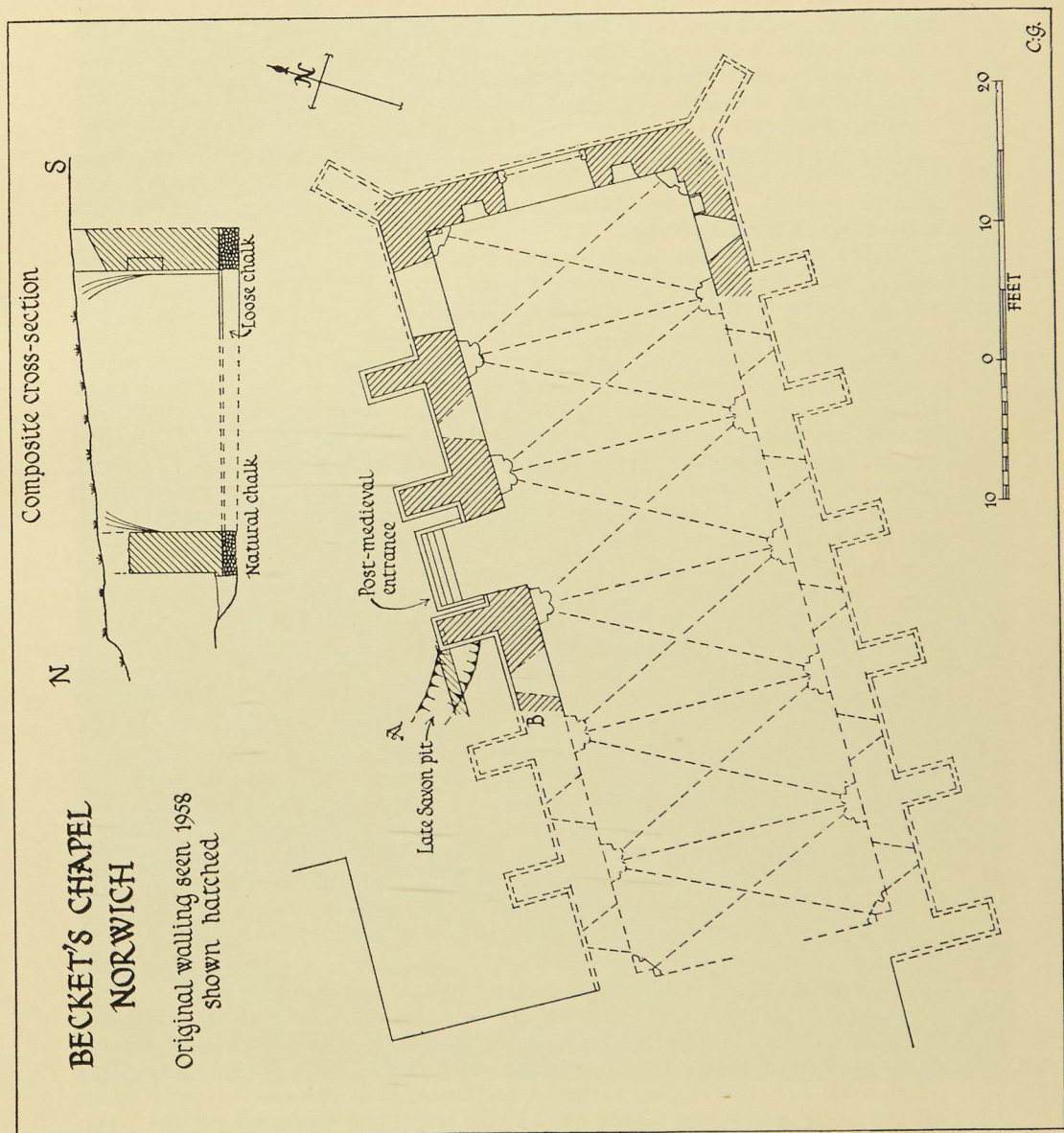


Fig. 2.

but they have been stopped up and Perpendicular windows inserted, and these again have been replaced by apertures at a still greater height and of a more modern date. A Perpendicular east window, evidently itself an insertion, is now entirely closed up and the tracery removed. . . . The ugly brick shafts along the wall are of very modern date and were made when these vaults were used as wine cellars.

" Above the chapel the Library was built about 1450, and two of the windows of it, blocked up, may be seen on the south side next the Dutch Church [i.e., the Blackfriars Hall]. It was originally covered with lead, but was converted into a dwelling at the dissolution. . . .

" The singular position of Becket's Chapel cannot fail to arrest attention and excite speculation, and it is very possible my conjecture respecting it may not be at once received as satisfactory. Still, with the evidence I have adduced on the subject of the original site of the convent and a careful examination of the chapel, ante-chapel, and adjacent buildings, I believe it will be eventually conceded that this 'great vault' was the crypt of the original chapel of the Black Friars erected on the site of the chapel of the Sack Friars. . . . The ground has been greatly raised about these buildings. . . . The whole of the ancient buildings north of the church are of the Decorated period . . . and are formed entirely of brick covered with an admirable cement. The repairs to the buildings, in the Perpendicular period, on the return of the friars after the fire, are discernible at various points. . . .

THE EXCAVATIONS

(a) THE SAXO-NORMAN OCCUPATION

On the north side of the chapel, with its east end passing below the fourth buttress (numbered from the north-east angle) was a deep slit-trench, of curving plan, cut into the natural hard chalk. Some 4 ft. wide, it was about 5 ft. deep, with a slightly expanded bulbous base (Fig. 3). The basal filling was a fawn loam with chalkwash admixture. In this was a single small sherd of what is perhaps Romano-British grey ware, another probably of Ipswich ware and several sherds of Thetford ware (Fig. 5). The remainder of the trench was filled with a fine dark earth, also containing Thetford ware and many animal bones, mainly of young oxen. Near the surface were two sherds of early post-Conquest Thetford ware. So little of the trench could be examined that its use is obscure, but it is just possible that it was some kind of latrine-trench.

(b) THE CHAPEL

Though the slope of the original chalk surface could not be determined, it is reasonable to infer, both from the present-day slope of both Elm Hill and Monastery Court, as well as from the elevation of the Blackfriars Hall that, on the south side of the chapel, the surface was some 5 to 6 ft. higher than on the north side. Into this sloping surface a horizontal platform was cut, penetrating on the lower north side to the hard chalk below the fractured surface layer. On this were laid low foundations of mortared flints which carried the walls. These walls were faced with brick, but the cores contained a proportion of

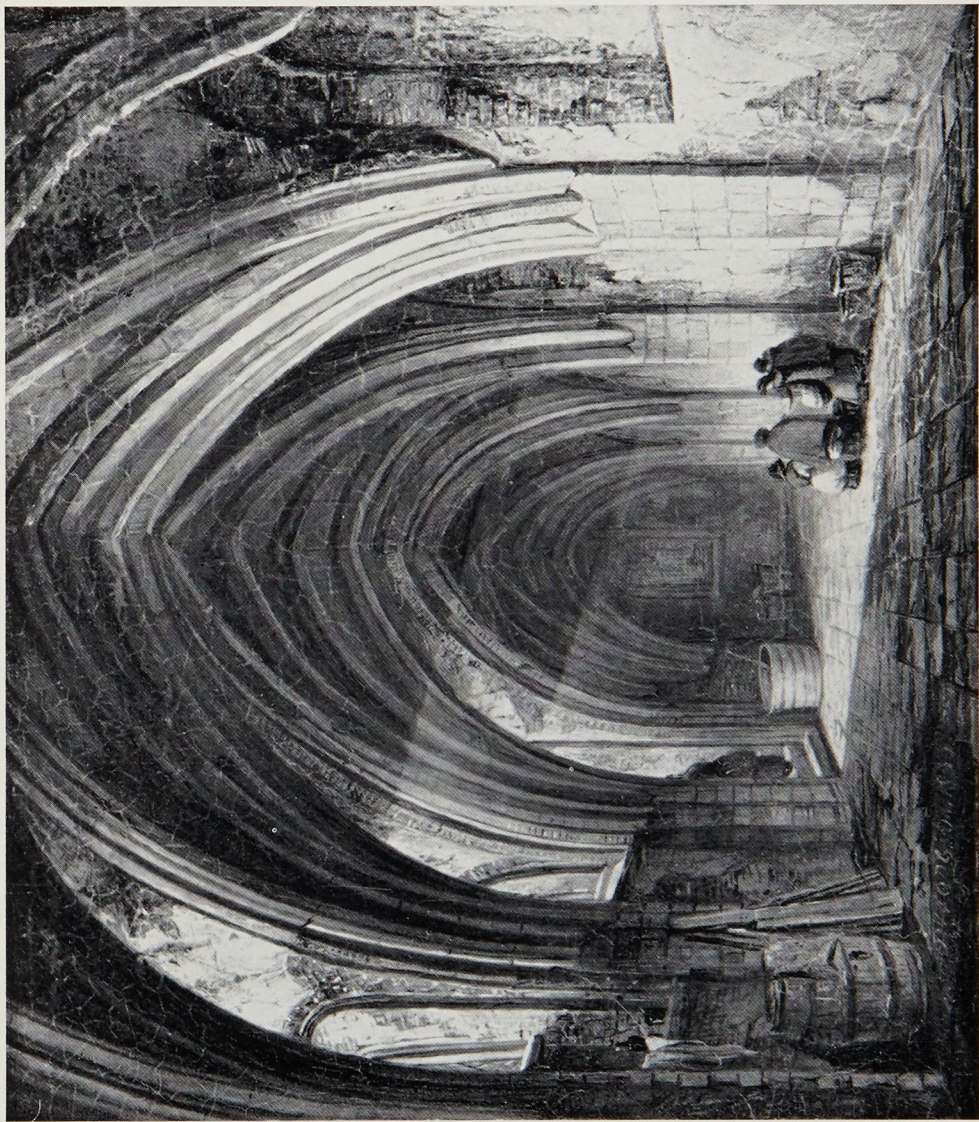


Plate I. Becket's Chapel, 1856

Photo by Hallam Ashley

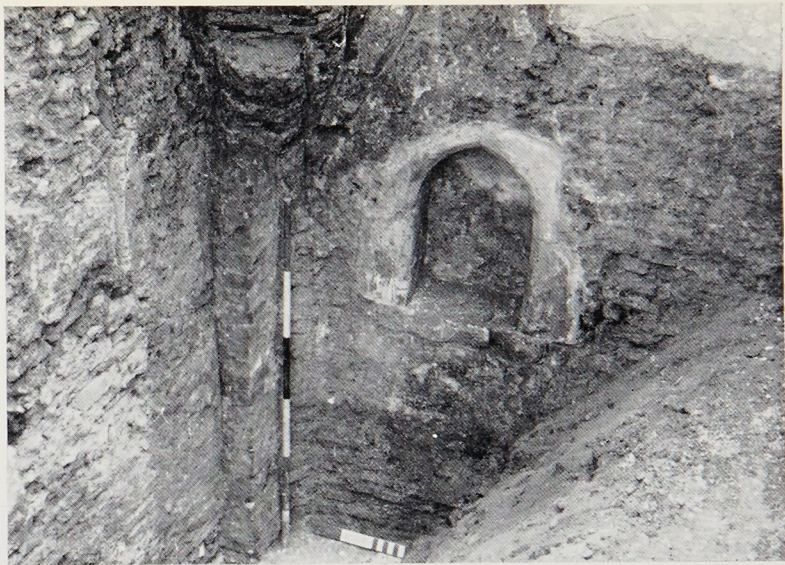


Plate II. (a) The south-east angle



Plate II. (b) The piscina

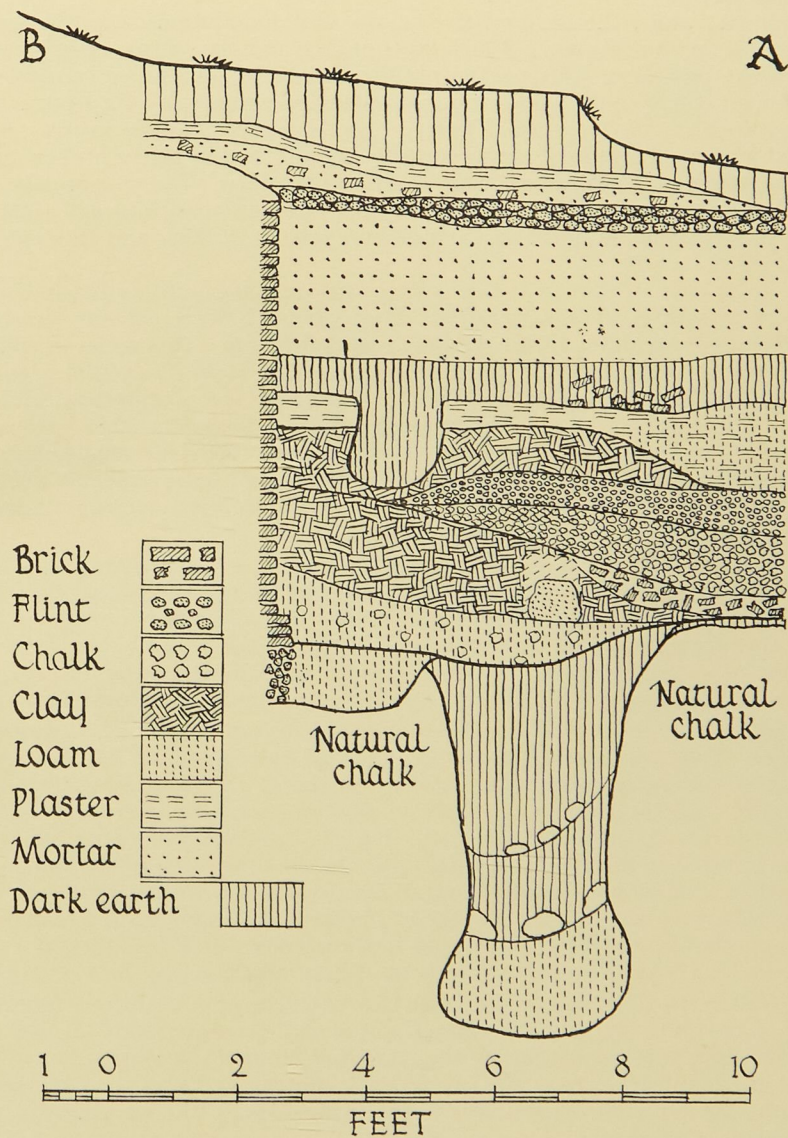


Fig. 3. Section through Late-Saxon trench

knapped flints. The lowest courses of brick, as seen on the north side, projected in a small plinth.

Inside the walls, the cavity between the flint foundations was filled with chalk rubble and on this was a 3-inch layer of lime and clay, apparently levelled to carry the paving; of this paving nothing remained, nor was it possible to infer of what it had consisted, owing to the damage wrought by the destruction and the pressure of the rubble filling. The wall surfaces themselves were rendered with a skimming of coarse cement, but this had in places broken away to reveal brickwork similar to that of the outer face. The cream-coloured mortar contained a proportion of fine gravel. The measured internal width of the chapel between wall-faces at the east end was 19 ft. 3 in. and the inferred length was 55 ft. 6 in.

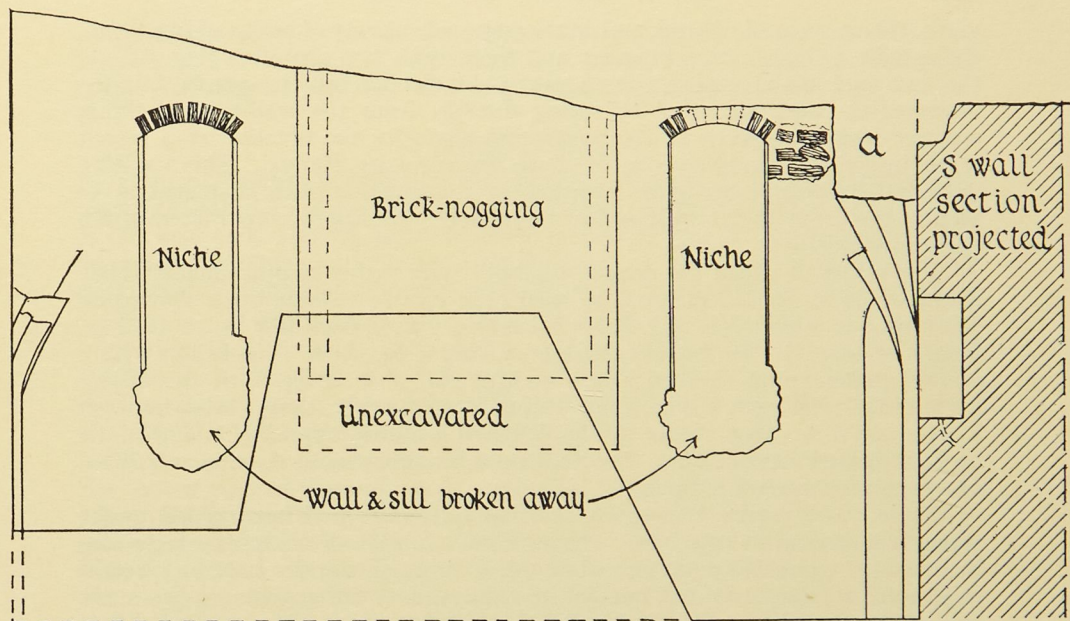
The great east window was filled with brick-nogging and, as Harrod said, the original tracery had been removed. From above, however, it was seen that the original stone framing of the window was still *in situ*. This was a moulding of half-round section, slotted to receive the glass. On either side of the window, high in the wall, was a tall niche (Fig. 4), capped by a low segmental arch of ordinary bricks set as headers and not by shaped voussoirs. The jambs of these niches were slightly chamfered, being framed with the single-chamfer bricks described below. As the sills of these niches had been removed and the wall below broken away, it was not possible to determine their exact height, but they appear to have been some 6 ft. overall.

In the south wall of the east bay was a piscina. The aperture was a pointed arch carved in four pieces of stone, the sill being formed of two others. The opening had a slight chamfer with small double mouldings for the bases. The back of the recess was of the usual rendered brickwork. The outflow was shown, by means of a weighted line, to curve rapidly towards the outer face of the wall, but its lower course could not be followed owing to some obstruction.

Higher in the south wall of this bay was the lower part of a window-embrasure. This was internally splayed and not quite symmetrical, the splay on the west side being rather greater than on the east. All tracery, including the framing, had been removed. This window appeared to have been one of those of the first period and the plan (Fig. 2) has been reconstructed with windows inferred to have been of this type. On the north side of the same bay was another window embrasure. The sill of this was lower than that opposite and the embrasure was wider with very little splay. Again no tracery remained. But it is probable that this was one of those windows of Perpendicular type, mentioned by Harrod, though none of the filling described by him remained.

The wall in the third bay on the north side had been almost entirely removed to form an entrance, and outside was a flight of shallow stone steps. It was not possible to date with any accuracy the construction of this opening, but it can hardly have been earlier than the seventeenth century and was probably later. The jambs were smooth, with a very slight inward splay; the opening was not quite central in the bay.

Sufficient of the wall-stumps remained to show the springing of the ribs of the vaulting. Three types of ribs could be ascertained, wall, diagonal and trans-



ELEVATIONS - (a) EAST WALL & SECTION OF PISCINA
(b) EAST END OF SOUTH WALL

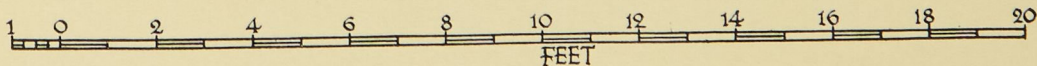
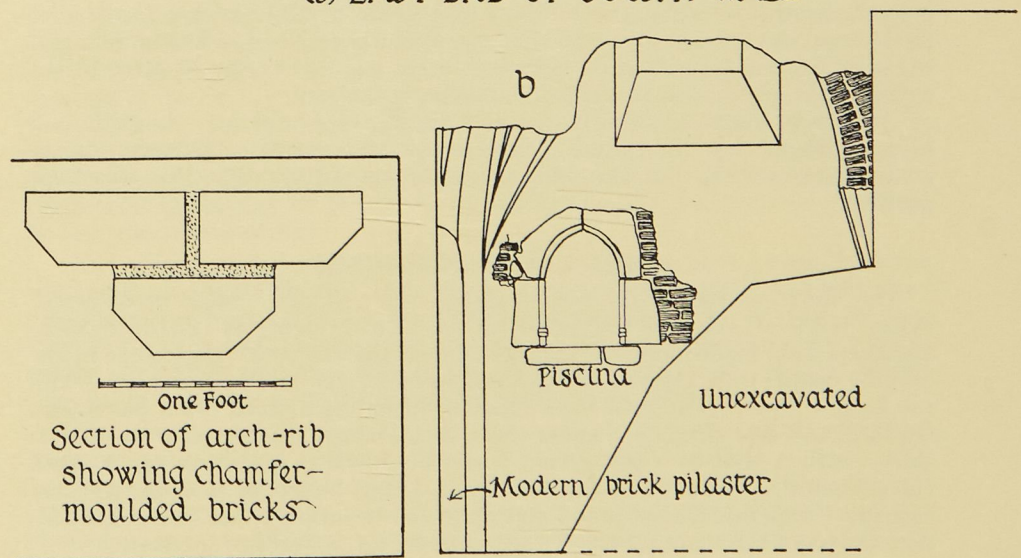


Fig. 4.

verse. These were all of brick and were composed entirely of bricks of two types, those with a single corner-chamfer and those with two chamfers (Fig. 4). At the east end, the springing was supported by slender brick responds, but the intermediate ones appeared to spring directly from the wall-face. Further support had been given in the south-east angle by the erection of a recent brick wall-shaft, doubtless one of those described by Harrod. This vaulting appeared in every way to be identical in construction with that still to be seen in the crypt at the west end of the chapel; this also is constructed of the chamfered bricks.

The bricks of which the chapel was built were rather roughly made. They averaged 10 in. by 4.5 in. by 2 in. thick, but hardly a single brick showed all these precise measurements. Those measured varied from 9.9 in. to 10.2 in. long, 4.4 in. to 4.7 in. broad, and 1.9 in. to 2.1 in. thick. The bricks with a double chamfer had theoretically a central part 5 in. long, with the absent parts of the faces each 2.5 in. long. In practice, however, these varied between 2.3 in. and 3 in. That shown in Fig. 4 (inset) is an asymmetrical example. Of an ill-levigated clay-mixture, they had been roughly moulded, carelessly dried and somewhat unevenly fired.

There was evidence to suggest that the buttresses had been added to the walls at a somewhat later date. Though built largely of brick, the faces also included an appreciable number of knapped flints. From the base to a height of about 3 ft. they were not bonded into the wall. Furthermore, on the north side of the chapel a broken line of light walling was seen. On a mortared flint base was a brick superstructure. At the point of intersection with the trench-side (Fig. 3) the brickwork was absent, but has been reconstructed from that visible a short distance away. The base of these footings rested on the layer of light clayey loam which covered the plinth at the base of the wall, but farther to the east was seen to pass into the base of Buttress No. 4, over the filling of the late Saxon trench. No datable finds were exposed in the loam or in the capping clay which also covered the remains of the wall.

The angle buttresses at the east end are shown as oblique. As these had been destroyed near the surface, it was not possible to dig sufficiently deep to confirm this setting, but the surface indications suggest that this was their position.

THE LATER BUILDINGS

No direct evidence of the second storey, the "library," could be detected. When, however, this was converted for use as a dwelling, as Harrod records, additions were made along the south wall near the east end. Here some of the original chapel wall, close to the modern surface-level, had been cut away and the bases of later structures were exposed, including a small brick pavement. On the south side of this pavement was a small, nearly square, pit with vertical sides, perhaps that of a privy, and from this towards the south ran a small culvert below the brickwork which lies immediately below the modern forecourt surface. These miscellaneous footings appeared to form part of small outbuildings added to the main structure; they offered no features of interest.

After the destruction of the chapel and its superstructure in 1874, the levelled debris outside the north wall was paved with a layer of substantial flints. The date of this was made certain by the contained potsherds.

DISCUSSION

The first point to note is that the chapel is out of scale with the fourteenth-century cloisters to the north and out of relation to the adjoining square crypt at the west end. Harrod had attempted to explain this by the conjecture that the chapel had been built by the Dominicans "on the site of the chapel of the Sack Friars," which had determined the layout of the fourteenth-century chapel.

Not only is this confirmed by the evidence of the excavation, but it seems fairly clear that the foundations and lower part of the walls seen were those of the first Sack Friars' chapel, built soon after 1258. These had been retained by the Dominicans when, soon after 1307, they rebuilt on the site before beginning to erect their larger buildings to west and north.

There are several features which point to this as the correct interpretation. The lowest part of the walling (as seen Fig. 3) was faced entirely with brick, though the buttresses and the fragment of walling still visible above the surface showed some flint in the facing. This original building, it is presumed, would have been of one storey only, and so was built without buttresses. But when it was reconstructed by the Dominicans soon after 1307, they vaulted the upper part, clear evidence of a second storey added at this time. For this, buttresses would be a necessity and so, when they were erected, the lower part, where the original walling survived, show straight joints. Above this, where the Dominicans' walling begins, the buttresses were bonded in, as may still be seen in the fragment above the surface. This interpretation also explains how the buttresses came to be built over the line of wall-base resting on the accumulated loam covering the base of the wall. It would seem that this must have been an erection of the Sack Friars, subsequent to the building of their chapel, perhaps a small lean-to structure demolished and not replaced by the Dominicans. It was not possible to confirm the double build of the exposed wall by a change in the mortar, but the limited size of the trenches, the virtual disintegration of the mortar in the face of the lower courses and its discoloration, may perhaps be the true reason of this.

The piscina with its simple pointed arch may also be a remnant of the original Sack Friars' chapel. Had this been carved after 1307, it would more probably have been cusped in the later Decorated style. It will also be seen (Fig. 4) that the wall-arches of the vaulting at the east end would have overridden the niches on either side of the window. Conceivably there is here a survival of a greater part of the original Sack Friars' chapel.

The presence of the vaulting in the early fourteenth-century building indicates with virtual certainty that the Dominicans erected a two-storey building. Harrod then is wrong in calling this a mid-fifteenth-century addition. Doubtless when, after the great church was completed, this chapel went out of use for services and the upper storey was remodelled to be used as a library,

Perpendicular-style windows were inserted. But the original structure was contemporary with the vaulting of the lower storey.

As the placing of a "secular" building over a church was not customary, it would seem that both the ground floor and upper floor were used by the Dominicans as chapels. This duplication is not easy to explain, but the suggestion may be hazarded that the upper-storey chapel communicated with the dormitory and was used for those services for which the brethren were roused from sleep, the lower chapel being for the daytime offices. The crypt at the west end of the chapel and the Chapter House were also vaulted and doubtless originally had an upper storey, so that communication with the dormitory at this level was possible.

Harrod described the east window as of the Perpendicular period, but the stone framing still *in situ* is of an earlier style. Here then, though the earlier tracery was replaced, this framing was re-used during the fifteenth century.

Outside the north wall, the lower layers of clay and chalk gravel were archæologically sterile and so could not be dated. Above these, the considerable layers of building debris all contained, *inter alia*, pottery of the nineteenth century. These therefore appear to have accumulated during the demolition of the building. There may also have been some tipping of extraneous material to aid the build-up of this area. That this had happened outside the east end is certain, for here the potsherds below the rough grass included a mug-base with the mark "G VI R 1944."

THE FINDS

(a) POTTERY (Fig. 5)

1. Fragment of cooking pot with sharply-everted rim squared on the outer edge.
2. Fragment of a similar vessel with rouletted decoration.
3. Fragment of base of cooking pot with a slightly projecting footing.

These sherds and some fifty side-sherds of comparable vessels are generally of a dark slate grey with the characteristic "sandy" surface of Thetford ware. They came from the lower and middle filling of the late Saxon slit-trench and are all of the pre-Conquest type of this ware, attributable to Hurst's (1963) Period I, A.D. 850-1000.

4. Fragment of cooking pot with thumbbed everted rim.

This and a small side-sherd, fired to a dull light brown on the surface, are also of Thetford ware of a more developed type. They were found in the top-filling of the slit-trench and belong to the early part of Hurst's Period II, 1000-1150.

(b) ANIMAL REMAINS

The mammalian bones were not remarkable. In addition to bone splinters of ribs and upper limb-bones, there were remains of two oxen. Of one, a young animal, there was a horn-core, sundry skull and mandible fragments and a metatarsal with detached epiphysis; of the more mature animal there was a

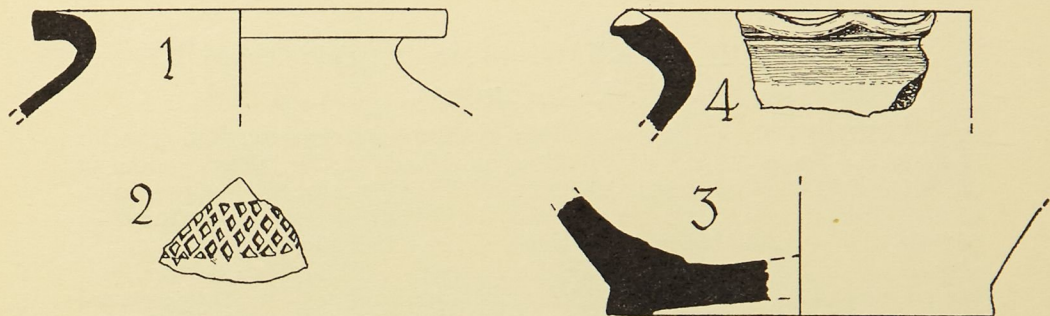


Fig. 5.

horn-core, a metatarsal fragment with epiphysis attached and a few teeth. With them were a metacarpal with epiphysis attached and sundry teeth of a sheep.

A single bird-bone was the right radius of a goose.

There were also some six worn oyster valves.

All these remains came from the middle filling of the slit-trench.

ADDENDUM

by A. B. WHITTINGHAM

The City Chamberlain's Accounts (1541-2, fol. 26) make quite clear that the vaulted chamber at the west end of the chapel ["The Crypt"] was the vestry. Harrod (op. cit., 94) refers to the reconstruction of access from the vestry to the chancel [Blackfriars Hall] of the great church, and this was by means of the doorway on the south side of Becket's Chapel, still to be seen in Plate I. The two ends of this communicating way are the half-blocked door in Blackfriars Hall and another from the vestry into the cloisters.

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