

THE TRANSEPT EXCAVATIONS OF GLASTONBURY ABBEY

BACKGROUND

The Saxon enclosure ditch, or vallum monasterii, extended from north-south through the eastern side of the north transept (Radford 1981, 114) (see The Claustral Range report for further details on this feature). At the base of the ditch were structural remains interpreted as a Roman well. In his 1981 interim report Radford published reconstruction drawings of the two major phases of the Romanesque church pre-dating the fire of 1184. This shows the proposed plan of the church built by the late 11th-century abbot, Turstin, and the proposed plan of the church begun by Abbot Herlewin (1100-1118), with the nave completed by Abbot Henry de Blois by 1150. William of Malmesbury records that Turstin's successor, Herlewin, completely razed Turstin's church 'because it did not correspond to the greatness of the possessions of the abbey'. The shaded areas on these plans represent the evidence for the walls comprising occasional masonry and robber trenches. The major criticism of these published plans is that so much was deduced from so little evidence (Abrams). However, there are two section drawings in the same publication, one from the north transept and one from the south choir aisle, which include additional crucial evidence such as sleeper walls and floor horizons. These are not represented on the plan, which only shows the outline of the churches.

The eastern parts of the late 12th to mid 13th century structure remain partially upstanding, including the two eastern chapels, together with the lower courses of the north wall. Abbot Bere (1493-1524) was recorded by Leland as building a Loretto Chapel on the north side of the body of the church; despite Bond's attempts to locate this chapel on the western side of the north transept (see below), the location of this structure remains elusive.

This report covers the scope of the historic excavations within the north transept, including research objectives where specified, preceding detailed analysis of Radford's excavation records in relation to the earlier excavations. Evidence of the Saxon monastic enclosure ditch will be presented together with a consideration of the possible Roman well at the base of the ditch. The archaeological evidence for the two Norman churches and associated burials is re-evaluated. Following the fire of 1184, the siting of the 13th-century north transept will be considered in relation to the earlier structures, together with any archaeological evidence for episodes of re-building, enhancement and ultimately post-Dissolution destruction.

Historic Excavations

Bond

North transept

Early investigations in the north transept noted that finely carved blue lias fragments had been re-used in the late 12th-century foundations of one of the piers (Bond 1913, 62). In 1915 Bond discovered evidence for the foundation of the north transept west wall, a section of the north wall of the nave, and a second line of foundations running northwards from the nave foundations (see A on transept report plan) which he interpreted as a western aisle to the transept (Bond 1915, 129). The latter theory was subsequently abandoned (see below). The survival of in situ floor tiling in the

transept showed that the floor level was 1.22m higher than in the nave and supposed western aisle (ibid,130).

In 1921 the first trench was opened across the width of the west wall of the north transept, establishing the dimensions of the robbed medieval wall which was found to be identical to the south transept (Bond 1926, 13). The shallow excavation trench was extended eastwards from which many fragments of glazed floor tile were recovered including a small rectangular area of in situ tiles in the centre of the transept (ibid,13-14) (see B on transept report plan). Bond surmised that these may have been positioned on a threshold for a space such as a chantry chapel. These tiles remained on view beneath a wooden hatch still in place today, although the tiles have been re-set (see *The Medieval Floor Tiles*). The remains of a rough foundation aligned with the tiling appeared to support this theory, perhaps suggesting an interior screen wall (ibid,14). The rough foundation continued as far as the robbed pier opposite the dividing wall between the two east chapels. Several pieces of a richly moulded and decorated screen dating to the 15th century were recovered from the rubble fill of the pier (ibid) and beneath the topsoil was a small stone head of an ecclesiastic (ibid, pl 3) [l:1627].

In the same year, the north transept wall was exposed and was found to be predominantly intact including sections of the plinth, pilaster buttresses and the lower parts of a blocked doorway in between (ibid, pl 4). Against the inner face of the north wall a remnant of a moulded lining was found comprising four narrow panels resting on glazed tiles; vandals removed all but two of the panels (ibid.,15). Behind the panels and within the wall was a sepulchral cavity 'as a stone coffin, the head to the west but pointed as for a mitre' (ibid, 14).

Loretto Chapel

The initial search for the Loretto Chapel built by Abbot Bere was begun in 1911 and yielded a few broken mouldings including a section of a window-mullion (Bond 1915, 131). The latter was dated to the 15th- or 16th-century and was therefore attributed to Bere (Bond 1919, 79), implying that it came from the Loretto Chapel. Bond also discovered a massive 3.81m wide wall running northwards from the eastern bay of the north nave aisle for a distance of c 5.5m (ibid, 79). The space between the wall and the north transept was filled with natural (redeposited?) clay and the debris overlying the wall contained a few pieces of worked freestone. The discoveries were not mentioned in earlier reports as Bond thought it was unlikely that a chapel would exist so close to the west wall of the north transept. Instead, the 1912 report shows the remains as a western aisle to the transept (ibid).

In 1919 excavations were carried to a greater depth (1.52m), encountering the south-west angle of solidly-constructed foundations with a short buttress on the southern face (ibid, pl 7). The east return was traced for a few feet (ibid, 82) and the entire west wall foundation establishing an external width of 6.1m for the building. The robber trench for the north wall had masonry at the base and was traced for 9.75m (ibid, pl 8). The finds included several lumps of plaster with false-jointing in reddish ochre ; a small broken terracotta ornament and a possible pendant of 16th- or 17th-century character (ibid, 84).

Bond's conclusions on the Loretto Chapel were that the wide wall was actually a passage or short cloister leading from the nave to Bere's chapel, as opposed to a western aisle to the north transept. He concluded that an 1817 picture by Coney of a wall with four windows might represent the south

wall of a building outside the nave and that this building would lie within the area of the bank. He proposed that the building which Cannon describes as the 'chapter house' was in reality the Loretto chapel (ibid, 82).

South transept

The exact position of the west and south walls of the south transept were established (1910, 63-64). The foundations were noted as being 4.57m wide supporting a wall 3.96m wide, which was substantially thicker than the other walls recorded at the abbey. Bond suggested that the foundations may have been widened to include the breadth of the monks' night stairs from the dormitory, although at this date the location of the dormitory had not been established and Bond suggested it may have been against the east walk of the cloister (ibid, 65). A 3.35m wide slype or passage was also identified between the south transept and the chapter house to the south (ibid, 70).

Peers, Clapham and Horne

In 1931 a trench was excavated through the south transept in an attempt to discover evidence of the Norman churches, however nothing was found (1931, 85). Also, Captain Bowen's notebook records that a second small area of a tiled floor was exposed in the north transept in 1938 (A39).

Radford

In 1956 Radford excavated two trenches in the north transept, both extending westwards from the eastern walls of the transept chapels. The south trench ran along the central axis of the southern chapel (St Thomas's chapel) and continued westwards beyond the west wall of the north transept. The northern trench was considerably shorter and ran along the central axis of the northern chapel extending as far as the eastern line of the west wall, with a small north extension near the eastern end. A further trench was extended northwards from the south trench outside the western wall of the transept; located in the area of Bond's supposed Loretto Chapel and separated by a baulk measuring 3.9m, this was divided into the Loretto Cross South trench and the Loretto Cross North trench.

The purpose of the north transept excavations was to locate the apsidal chapel of the 12th-century church (A508) following the discovery of the east end of Herlewin's church within the later choir in 1955, while the Loretto Cross Trench was excavated to explore the evidence for the Loretto Chapel.

METHODOLOGY

The Results section of this report provides a technical stratigraphic account based on the sections, plans, photographs, sketches and notes for each trench.. All contexts have been included on a stratigraphic matrix [M:469] however it was not possible to deduce relationships for all contexts. The individual sections, plans and the overall site plan (see pdf) should be referred to particularly during the Discussion section where the evidence from the trenches is synthesized. Stratified finds are included per context and unstratified finds are summarised per trench, although finds numbers are only provided where there is no context (finds with contexts can be accessed through the context record).

The official photographic record for this area includes three images of the graves, while two unofficial photographs have been linked to the south trench; these are incorporated within the Discussion. Both north transept trenches were drawn as single multi-phase plans and sections while the Loretto Cross trenches and the north extension to the transept north trench were only recorded as single multi-phase plans. Details of the trenches appear in both Radford's and the volunteers' site notebooks with sketches and detailed trench write-ups; these notes, sketches and write-ups have been used critically to construct this report. The results of these excavations were summarised in Radford's 1958 published report while the 1981 interim report added further interpretation; these are referred to in the Discussion together with evidence from the recent geophysical survey.

As far as possible, the interpretative element of these records have been removed, although original labels have been left on the drawings primarily to retain terms of reference between the drawings and the notes. The phased Discussion section provides a critical appraisal of the archaeology from a modern perspective incorporating new dating and spatial evidence from specialist finds reports, the recent geophysical survey (GSB Propection) and the parchmark survey (Hollinrake & Hollinrake 1989). Together with a re-evaluation of both the original recorded and published interpretations, features have been attributed to the earliest possible phase. The Conclusion provides an overview of the archaeology, an assessment of the success of the historic excavations and suggestions for future areas of research.

RESULTS

1956 North transept south trench

[L:1649] [E:53] [E:55]. To the west of the 13th-century north transept the modern topsoil [C:3700] sloped downwards from east to west and covered a modern rubble bank [C:3703] which overlay a buried topsoil [C:3704]. To the east, within the area of the north transept, the buried topsoil [C:3704] rose to the surface above the robbed west transept wall [C:3713] and continued eastwards. On the western side of the buried topsoil, beneath the modern rubble bank [C:3703], was a further soil layer [C:3705] directly overlying the natural clay [C:3741].

Beneath the topsoil [C:3700] was a Bond excavation trench [C:3701] [C:3702]; finds recovered from this fill comprised a corner fragment of blue lias possibly of Romanesque date and likely from a monument, altar or screen; four marbles, a bone handle and a 16th- to 17th-century iron spur. The Bond trench exposed the remnant of a wall or foundation [C:3731] and truncated the stone packing [C:3728] on the western side of this masonry together with the robber fills [C:3730] [C:3786] of a double foundation.

To the east, a robber trench [C:3759] cut an earlier robber trench [C:3787], both aligned north-south, although only the bottom 0.23m of the fill [C:3786] remained due to later truncation. This was described in Radford's trench write-up as similar to another fill [C:3736], comprising tightly packed rubble, mostly small stones, mortar debris and mixed clay and soil. Removal of the upper layers above the robber trenches prevented the firm establishment of relationships.

On the western side of the Bond trench [C:3702], the modern rubble layer [C:3703] overlay a thin rubble layer [C:3769] labelled as 13th-century bedding. Two sherds of pottery recovered from this layer have been dated 950 to 1100, the contextual information stating that they were found within

flooring rubble. This sealed a grave soil [C:3723], the eastern end of which overlay the stone packing [C:3728] of a construction cut [C:3729], and was cut by the Bond trench [C:3702]. The grave [C:3724] cut through a soil and clay layer [C:3760] to the west; this overlay paving [C:3725] which also partially extended beneath the grave; to the east of the paving was a thin mortar layer [C:3726] which continued at the base of the grave. A gilded boss was found in the centre of the pavement dated 1220-1230; the contextual information states it was in situ. The paving and the mortar bedding overlay a soil layer [C:3727]; the mortar and possibly the soil layer appear to have respected the edge of the construction cut [C:3729]. At the western end of the trench the soil and clay layer [C:3760] overlay a thin layer of redeposited clay [C:3721] which in turn overlay a slightly thicker soil and rubbish layer [C:3722].

Another example of a double foundation was recorded along the line of the west transept wall. This comprised a large robber trench [C:3714] filled with clayey soil, rubble and mortar [C:3713], which cut through an earlier robber trench [C:3712] to the west filled with dark soil and stones [C:3711]. The latter had a post-pit at the base [C:3719] [C:3720] containing an iron nail and was covered with a disturbed mortar filling.

To the east, the robber trench [C:3714] cut through a clay and spalls layer [C:3715] which lay directly beneath the supposed 13th-century mortar bedding [C:3710]. On the eastern side of the baulk this layer continued [C:3734], overlying a sandy clay layer [C:3738] before the plaster line [C:3716] was reached. The plaster line [C:3716] directly overlay redeposited natural clay [C:3717] which on the western side of the baulk overlay a soil layer [C:3718] and on the eastern side of the baulk overlay the old surface [C:3739] above the natural clay [C:3741].

Further east, the supposed make-up [C:3734] for the 13th-century mortar bedding [C:3710] overlay a spalls and mortar layer [C:3735]. This covered part of the backfill [C:3736] of a robber trench [C:3737] which ran east-west and cut through the redeposited clay [C:3717], the old surface [C:3739] and the natural clay [C:3741]. In plan, the robber trench is drawn with the spring of an apse at the east end and a north-south cross wall at the west end, with the apse cut by a wall [C:3761] aligned north-south. This relationship is also described for the south section, although it is not represented on the north section because the apse curved away from the later wall [C:3761] at this point. Although some in situ masonry [C:3740] remained in the base of the foundation trench it had been predominantly robbed [C:3733], the rubble and mortar fill [C:3732] of which was sealed beneath the supposed 13th-century mortar bedding [C:3710]. Both this mortar bedding [C:3710] and the robber trench [C:3732] were cut on the eastern side by a robber trench [C:3707]. The loose fill [C:3706] of this robber trench was more typical of 19th-century robbery and produced one fragment of floor tile dated c 1272-1280.

To the east of the robber trench [C:3707] the supposed 13th-century mortar bedding [C:3710] continued. This sealed a robbed feature [C:3742] [C:3777] with some loose stones which cut through a clay layer [C:3758] to the west and the edge of the back-fill [C:3750] of the vallum monasterii to the east. The plan shows this robbed feature was located on the western side of the apse chord [C:3778] and was interpreted as a shrine. The shrine also appears to have cut through a stone and mortar layer [C:3743], although Radford's notes state that the shrine stood above it. The stone and mortar layer was below the clay [C:3758] and overlay the natural clay [C:3741]. Radford's trench write-up states this layer was at the same level as the plaster line [C:3716] to the west.

Within the upper fill [C:3750] of the vallum monasterii was a robber trench [C:3709] with a loose fill [C:3708] suggestive of 19th-century robbery. On the eastern side of the robber trench and beneath the topsoil [C:3704] was a mortar or soil layer [C:3748] and a further mortar layer [C:3757] at the eastern end of the trench. This was thought to represent the foundation of the altar, although there was much modern disturbance, and overlay the east foundation [C:3746] of St Thomas's Chapel comprising stones with yellow mortar. This was cut through by a modern concrete projection [C:3744] at the east end of the trench and a small mortar deposit [C:3747] survived at the base of the foundation.

The upper fill of the vallum monasterii [C:3756] predominantly comprised redeposited clay [C:3750] although on the eastern side of the apse foundation [C:3751] was redeposited clay with stones [C:3749]; these fills may have been the same and were no doubt deposited simultaneously to fill the ditch to ground level. The redeposited clay was packed around the apse foundation [C:3751], although relationships have largely been lost due to the later robber trench [C:3709]. The apse foundation comprised small stones [C:3783] cut into the eastern side of the vallum monasterii; in plan the outer face of the apse wall is shown as a curved line [C:3789] crossing the trench from south-west-west to north-east-east.

The apse foundation overlay the contemporary 'stone wall chamber' [C:3752] shown in plan on the northern side of the excavation trench and constructed of small lias stones. Opposite, a further small stone platform [C:3779] was recorded on the south side of the trench measuring 0.68m wide. The stone 'raft' [C:3752] directly overlay the clay silt [C:3753] of the vallum monasterii which yielded a fragment of painted plaster supposedly of Saxon date, plus one sherd of samian pottery (not reassessed) and a further sherd of Roman pottery. The silt overlay stones [C:3754] which may have formed a circular setting measuring c 1.07m - 1.37m in diameter. Excavation could not proceed much beyond this depth in case the upstanding remains were de-stabilised although a 'grey sludge' [C:3755] was recorded beneath the stones. The ditch or vallum monasterii [C:3756] was aligned north-south with slightly convex sides sloping at a 45 degree angle and measuring 5.52m wide and >2.11m deep. The ditch was largely cleared but the base was still not reached at a depth of 2.74m below the original ground surface.

In addition to the grave recorded in section, two further single graves and one double grave were exposed in plan. On the south side of the trench was a male skeleton [F:SK17] within a grave [C:3775] [C:3776] containing a pair of annular buckles [F:SF3707] [F:SF3708] positioned on the thighs. The buckles have recently been re-dated with an earliest possible date of 1270. In plan, the east end of the grave, including the feet, had been cut by the 13th-century sleeper wall [C:3762]. Beside the feet, in front of the altar, was 38g of copper alloy slag [F:SF3706]. The plan indicates that the grave lay above the eastern chord [C:3778] of the apsidal feature, was on the southern side of the robbed shrine [C:3742] and must also have cut through the western side of the Saxon ditch [C:3756].

Within the western aisle of the north transept, a grave [C:3767] [C:3768] was found [I:18551] beneath an area of in situ tiles [C:3782]. The feet and lower part of the leg had been removed; this was identical to another skeleton in the same trench [I:18552] although this could not be identified with a specific grave. The gilded point of a boss was embedded in the centre of the tiles (see above) and the grave fill contained bits of mortar which had a layer of whitewash (lime) on them.

A disturbed double grave [C:3772] [C:3774] on the south side of the trench contained the remnant of a lead coffin [C:3773]. Two adults were represented by the collection of human bones, some of which were missing. The excavation notes indicate that the grave was cut into the natural clay and was below the level of the plaster line [C:3716], and the plan appears to show the graves nestled within the possible apsidal chapel. In addition to the finds identified with contexts, a curved decorated tile [F:BF3705] dated c 1275 was also recovered from this trench.

1956 Loretto Cross Trench

The southern part of this trench exposed a robber trench [C:3781] aligned east-west and containing a soil fill [C:3780]. This was of the same width as the north-south robber trench [C:3787] in the north transept south trench and may have been the eastern return of the same wall. A note records that the depth was part-way between the north-south robber trench [C:3787] and the later robber trench [C:3757] on its western side. A modern drain is also shown crossing the trench from north-east to south-west. A medieval carved bone mount [F:SF3701] was recovered from the joint of the Loretto Cross trench with the north transept south trench at a depth of 0.61m.

The northern part of the Loretto Cross trench revealed a robber trench [C:3785] aligned east-west and aligned with the north wall of the north transept. This trench was very deep with a predominantly soil fill [C:3784] and the base was not reached.

Two fragments of a pinnacle moulding [F:AF3702] approximately dated 15th to early 16th century were recovered from a screen or monument and were found adjoining the 'Loretto' foundation.

1956 North transept north trench

[L:1648] [E:54]. The topsoil [C:3500] extended across the trench and contained numerous large fragments of medieval tile. This sealed the north-south robber trench [C:3505] of the 13th-century sleeper wall for the eastern arcade and fragments of tile were also recovered from beneath the 13th-century sleeper wall. This robbed sleeper wall contained a series of fills ([C:3501], [C:3502], [C:3503] and [C:3504]) sloping down from east to west. The plan shows an in situ step [C:3523] on the south side of the trench and presumably below the robbery. To the west another north-south robber trench of similar dimensions [C:3507] marked the 13th-century sleeper wall for the arcade of the western aisle. However, this only contained one fill [C:3506] with rubble, mortar and spalls. A small fragment of 14th-century moulding was recovered from the fill; this had bright red paint and gilding and was thought to have come from a tomb.

Both of the robber trenches cut through a layer of spalls and mortar [C:3508]; this was the make-up for the 13th-century pavement which lay directly beneath the modern turf and extended throughout the trench. The mortar bedding sealed all the features, except for the two robber trenches discussed above, including the altar foundation [C:3512] at the eastern end of the trench which had been excavated into the natural clay [C:3525]. Both the mortar bedding and the altar foundation butted against the plinth [C:3511] on the western side of the east transept wall revealing that they were added after the wall had been constructed. The altar [C:3512] was immediately east of the Saxon ditch [C:3522] which was backfilled [C:3521] with large, long undressed blocks of stone set in very poor mortar.

At the western end of the trench the bedding [C:3508] sealed a grave [C:3509] [C:3510] in the north-west corner comprising a stone-lining and a disturbed skeleton. This grave cut through a north-south robber trench [C:3513] [C:3514], which on the south side retained two large lias blocks [C:3526] from the west face. Radford records that this robber trench was dug in to the natural clay [C:3525], the eastern side of which was cut by the 13th-century robber trench [C:3507] with the earlier trench penetrating 0.08m deeper than the later robber trench.

On the eastern side of the 13th-century robber trench [C:3507] was a layer of disturbed soil [C:3515] cut on its eastern side by the robber trench [C:3520] for an apse. The fill [C:3519] of this apse robber trench contained mortar and spalls together with a fragment of Douling moulding with red paint traces (possibly of Romanesque date) plus a fragment of wall plaster with limewash. To the east of this was a layer labelled as a 'hard fill of spalls and mortar' [C:3517] beneath the mortar bedding of the 13th-century church [C:3508]; this may have been the fill of a feature [C:3518] or simply a layer.

Within the north extension, the plan shows two parallel walls [C:3527] aligned north-south and labelled as a 'slotted wall'. These are certainly later than the robbed apse [C:3520], which they appear to overlie. To the north of the parallel stones was an area of mortar bedding [C:3528] labelled as pavement bedding; this must relate to the 13th-century church as it overlies the footprint of the robbed apse.