

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXV

for 1986

THE CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

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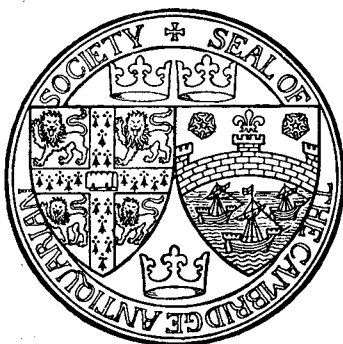
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VOLUME LXXV

for 1986

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EXCAVATIONS AT BARNWELL PRIORY, CAMBRIDGE

DAVID HAIGH

Summary:

Rescue excavation revealed a substantial medieval foundation trench. It is suggested that this was for one of the priory buildings, possibly the church.

The only recorded plan of the buildings of Barnwell abbey is that published by J. W. Clark in volume VII of the Society's Proceedings in 1891. This plan was based upon the records made by John Bowtell between 1810–1812 during the final destruction of the site. The plan shows a number of different parts of the friary buildings which are now lost, including the central column bases for the dorter undercroft. The rest of the plan is conjectural, based upon the list of buildings included in the inventory taken at the dissolution of the house in 1538, and the details included in the *Liber Memorandum de Bernewelle*.¹

A planning application in March 1985 showed that the sole remaining open area of the priory adjacent to the garden of Abbey House was going to be built over. A brief examination of the site was carried out at the instigation of the author, by M. Alexander and J. Miller for the County Archaeologist. This suggested that at least part of the area due to be built over had not been completely destroyed by gravel digging and stone robbing subsequent to the dissolution of the priory. A small rescue excavation was carried out with the consent of the developers, Froment Builders, during the weekend of the 21st–22nd April.

The excavation concentrated on that part of the site which was going to be built over and did not include an investigation of the garden of the new house which was to remain undisturbed. Topsoil was removed by hand from an area 5.5 m × 5.5 m adjacent to the boundary wall of Abbey House at the edge of the concrete footing for the former workshop which had existed on the site. This operation revealed that the whole area was honeycombed by gravel and rubbish pits of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century date, and that most of these seemed to be cut into the

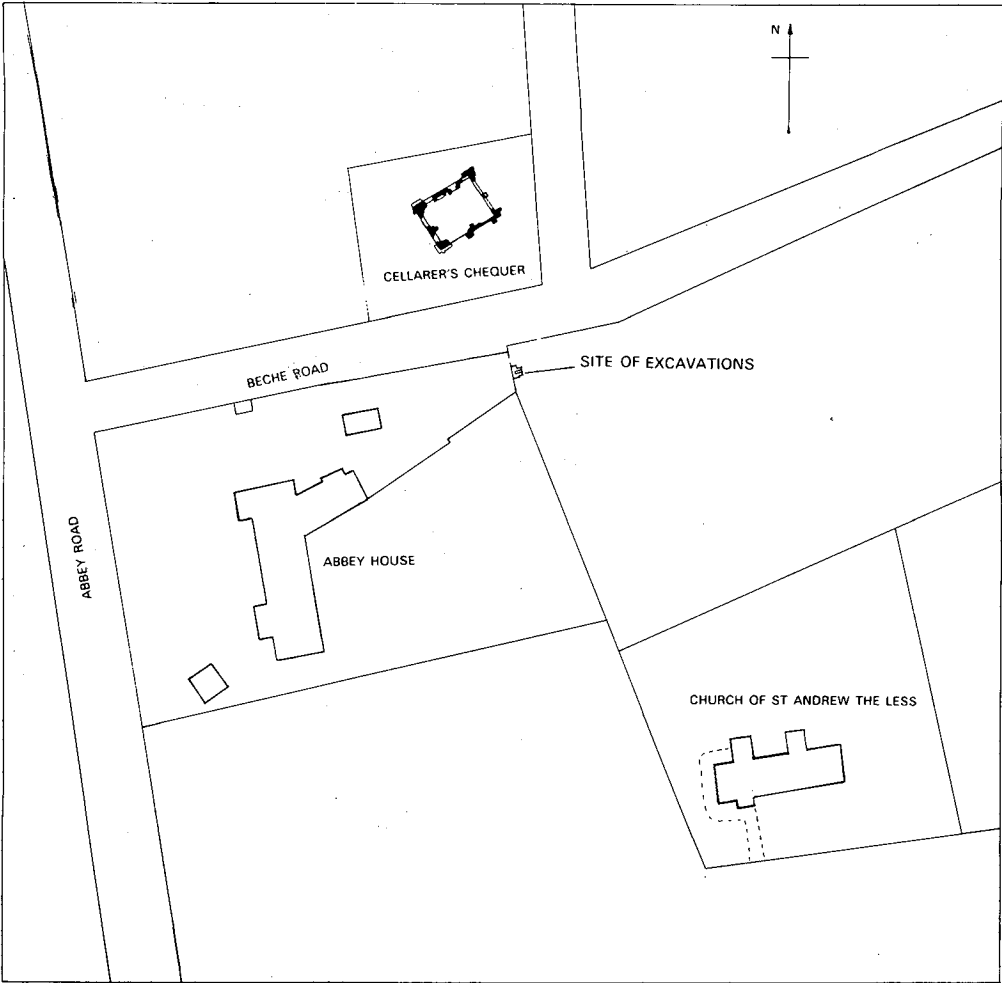
underlying marl, to a depth of c. 1.00m.

However the excavation also revealed the butt end of a substantial trench running approximately east-west across the area, (Fig. 1) 2.5 m of which were excavated. East of this section, the trench ran under an area of nineteenth century disturbance, and it was not possible within the time available, to excavate this disturbed area to see if the foundation survived below it.

The vertically sided trench had been cut at least 1.2 m into the subsoil, (calculated from the highest surviving area of natural gravel adjacent to it). It was 1.1 m wide and sloped gently to the east, showing a fall of 0.1 m over 2 m, and clearly must have been deeper still beyond the east side of the excavated area. The trench was filled with fragments of chalk marl, clay and sand, and it is suggested that the fill within the trench is the result of deliberate levelling of the robbed wall foundations of part of the priory, which we know was in this area. There were insufficient finds from the excavation to be sure of the date at which this robbing took place, but a sixteenth century context is most likely, as the upper levels of the trench had been cut into by later rubbish pits. The sloping floor of this trench must have been deliberate given the obvious care with which the trench had been cut, and this may indicate that the trench contained the foundation of a buttress rather than a wall; if so, the wall itself would have run north-south immediately to the east of the excavated area.

The position and alignment of this foundation trench suggest that it was associated with the west end of the priory church which was situated somewhere in this area. Indeed the substantial nature of this trench implies that it held the foundation of a major building and it is not inconceivable that we have here the footings of a buttress at the west end of the abbey church. If this is the case it is immediately apparent that the alignment is almost east-west, unlike that recorded by Clark on his plan of 1891, which was based upon the alignment of the existing 'Cellarer's Chequer'.

It is recorded in the *Liber Memorandum* that



EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF BARNWELL PRIORY, APRIL 1985.

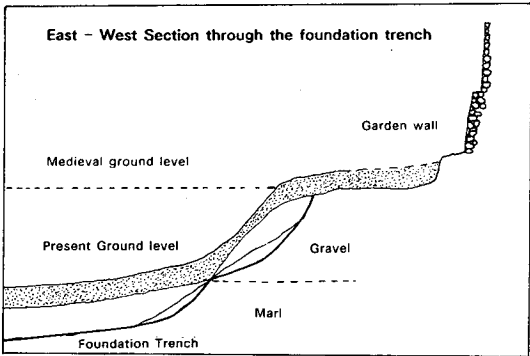
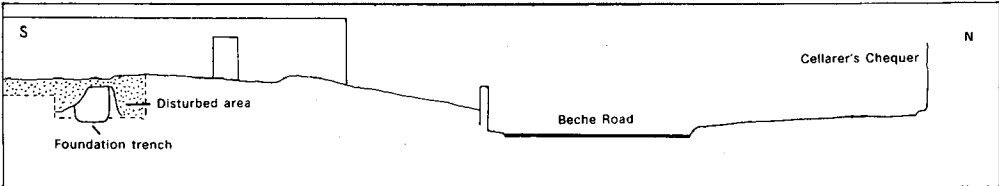


Fig. 1. A plan and section of the foundation trench.



Fig. 2. The foundation trench from the north side.

the church was finished in 1112 but was then partly rebuilt in 1827 after the central tower had been destroyed by lightning and part of the rest of the church was burnt down. The cloister buildings had been completely rebuilt between 1213 and 1265, and the Cellarer's Chequer dates from this time. A tentative explanation for the change in alignment is that the twelfth century church, respected the alignment of the earlier hermits cell, whilst the claustral buildings were laid out on a different alignment initially or were rebuilt on a new alignment during the early thirteenth century. Given that the surviving fragment of claustral building, the Cellarer's Chequer, is rhomboidal rather than rectangular, it would appear that the latter suggestion is more likely.²

Whilst the difference in date between the construction of these two sets of buildings provides an explanation for the change in alignment, it is unclear what part of the priory buildings were revealed in this excavation. The location of the church has been shown by Clark to lie near to the present line of the Newmarket Road and would have required massive foundations on the scale of those shown here. Although it is no longer wise to

accept the details of this plan, the basic arrangement of the site would be correct.³ Without a larger scale excavation little further can be deduced from the site however, sufficient was revealed to suggest that further investigation of the area would prove fruitful as it is now clear that the deeper foundations of the priory buildings still survive where they have been cut deeply into the marl underlying the gravel deposits.

Thanks are due to Froment Builders for enabling the investigation to take place, and to the Staff of the County Council Archaeology department for their assistance and for loaning equipment as required during the excavation. Mrs J. Pullinger provided valuable help during the initial investigation and Ms J. Miller and Mr C. Godfrey assisted in the excavation.

1 *Liber Memorandorum de Bernewelle*, ed J. W. Clark, Cambridge, 1907.

2 *ibid.* pp. 42–46, 64–74, and p. 220.

3 'A History of Barnwell Priory' J. W. Clark, *PCAS* 7, 1891. The plans by W. H. St. John Hope incorrectly show the Cellarer's Chequer to be rectangular. Correcting its shape throws further doubt on the details of his plan. The correct shape is published by the RCHM. RCHM, City of Cambridge, 1959, pp. 299–300.

THE PROCEEDINGS

- (1) The Editor welcomes the submission of articles on the history and archaeology of the County for publication in the *Proceedings*, but in order to avoid disappointment potential contributors are advised to write to the Editor, to enquire whether the subject is likely to be of interest to the Society, before submitting a final text. The Editor, if necessary with the advice of the editorial committee, reserves the right to refuse to publish any papers even when an earlier approval of the subject has been given.
- (2) Authors are reminded that the cost of printing is high and that, all other things being equal, a short and succinct paper is more likely to be published than a long one. It would also assist the Editor if contributors who know of possible sources for subventions towards the cost of printing their paper would inform the Editor of this when submitting their manuscript.
- (3) Illustrations must be high quality. They should not be more than twice the size intended for publication and they should be accompanied by a list of captions.
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