

EXCAVATIONS AT ALCISTON, 1984

by *Peter E. Leach*

Alciston (N.G.R. TQ 505055) is well known as a grange of Battle Abbey, whose church, manor house, barn and dovecot all survive in different degrees. The site is well documented (Wooldridge 1965; Brent 1968), and the manor house has been the subject of several studies (Mason 1977–8), but the other secular buildings have received little attention. The church, which has recently been studied with others of the Cuckmere valley (Clarke & Leach 1985), and the dovecot, partly ruined, were the subject of excavations in 1984 in order to resolve problems of interpretation and to give information on medieval aspects for the Cuckmere Valley Project.

DOVECOT (Figs. 1 and 2)

In the years 1368–70 a 'new' dovecot was built at Alciston (Wooldridge 1965; Brent 1968), the phrase implying that an earlier dovecot existed, of which nothing is now known. The manorial records sadly give no information of the details or method of construction, being concerned only with the purchase of materials such as nails, and payments to men for carpentry and tiling. No size is given, nor the number of nesting boxes, but the doves produced are later referred to from time to time as being sold or sent to Battle Abbey. It is not known when the dovecot fell into disuse for doves or any other purpose, when it partly collapsed, or indeed which event came first. In 1672 an unexecuted lease (East Sussex Record Office, SAS/G 16/37) was for buildings, barns and 'one half of the Pigeon house being the north side or half part' (it is this

north side that has collapsed). That the building remained whole for a few more years is shown in a lease of 1687 (E.S.R.O., SAS/G 16/38), repeated on 2 July 1698 (E.S.R.O., SAS/G 16/40), which includes 'all that Pigeon house'; a similar reference in 1716 (E.S.R.O., SAS/G 16/44) seems to be the last. A probate inventory of 1710 (E.S.R.O., W/INV 63) of Edward Boys, based on the 1698 lease, has no pigeons in the listing of his stock, suggesting that the dovecot was then not in use for its original purpose. The building, partially collapsed with the north chamber open to the sky and the other roofed with corrugated iron, is now used only by farm stock, although it has been used in living memory by passing gypsies, at least one being born there (Mrs. J. Walton pers. comm.). Early photographs, undated but possibly c. 1882, show it with a two-pitched tile roof with a central louvred cupola; this roof must be late, for the visible south-east wall had already been heavily repaired and modified as seen today. Later photographs, undated but late 19th- or early 20th-century, show the building collapsed and virtually as it is now. It has been repaired on several occasions, sometimes at the expense of the Sussex Archaeological Society. It is however deteriorating, due largely to its poor construction, and it seems wise to record in some detail its present condition.

The dovecot, 11 metres long, 6.5 metres wide, and 4.5 metres at its highest point today, is in a relatively low-lying paddock between the church and the road. The paddock, until recent drainage work, tended to flood, and early Ordnance Survey maps show a pond here, as do some of the photographs. The dovecot when

ALCISTON 1984
Dovecote

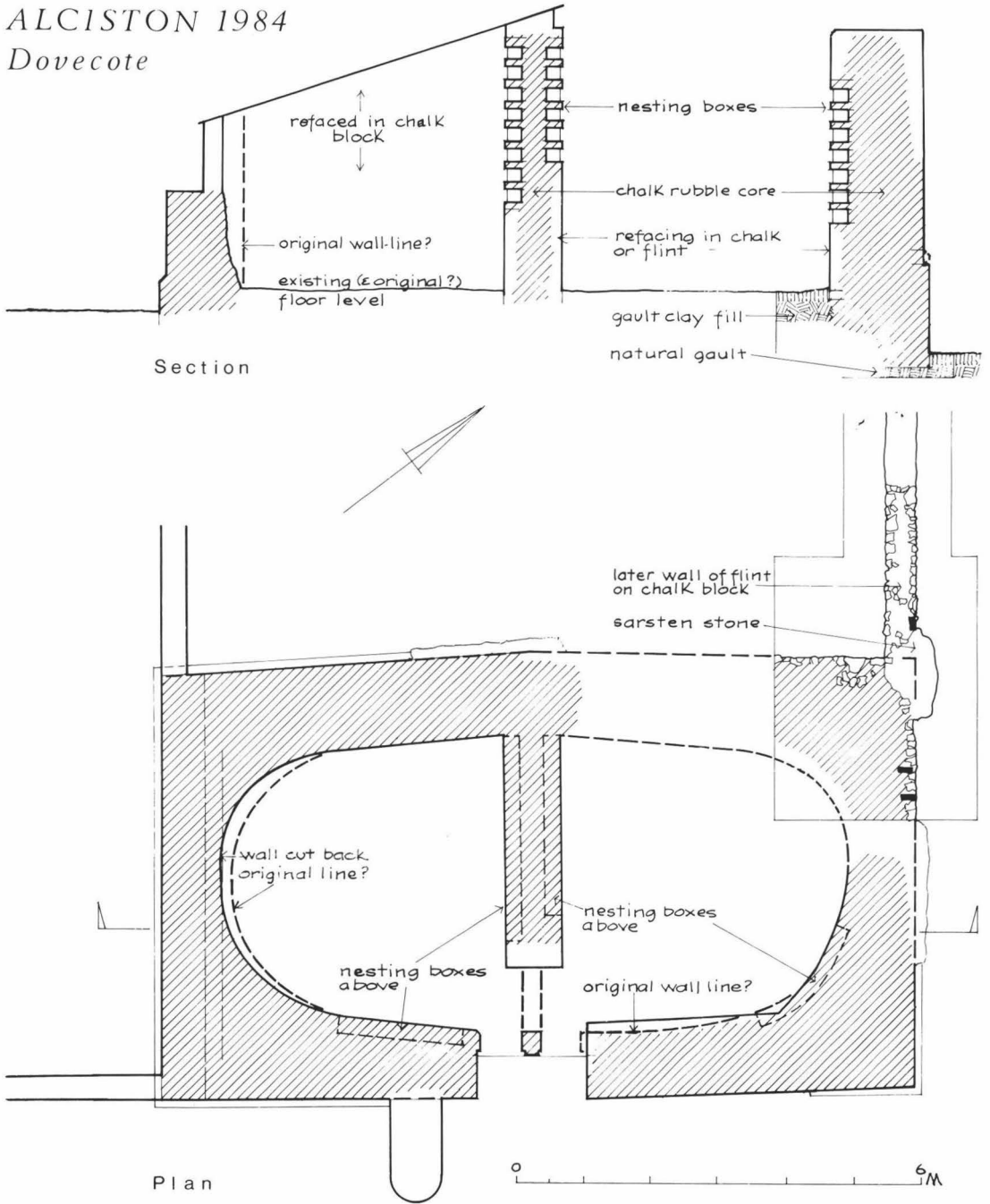


Fig. 1. Dovecot: plan and section. The hatched work shows the original surviving structure.

ALCISTON 1984
Dovecote

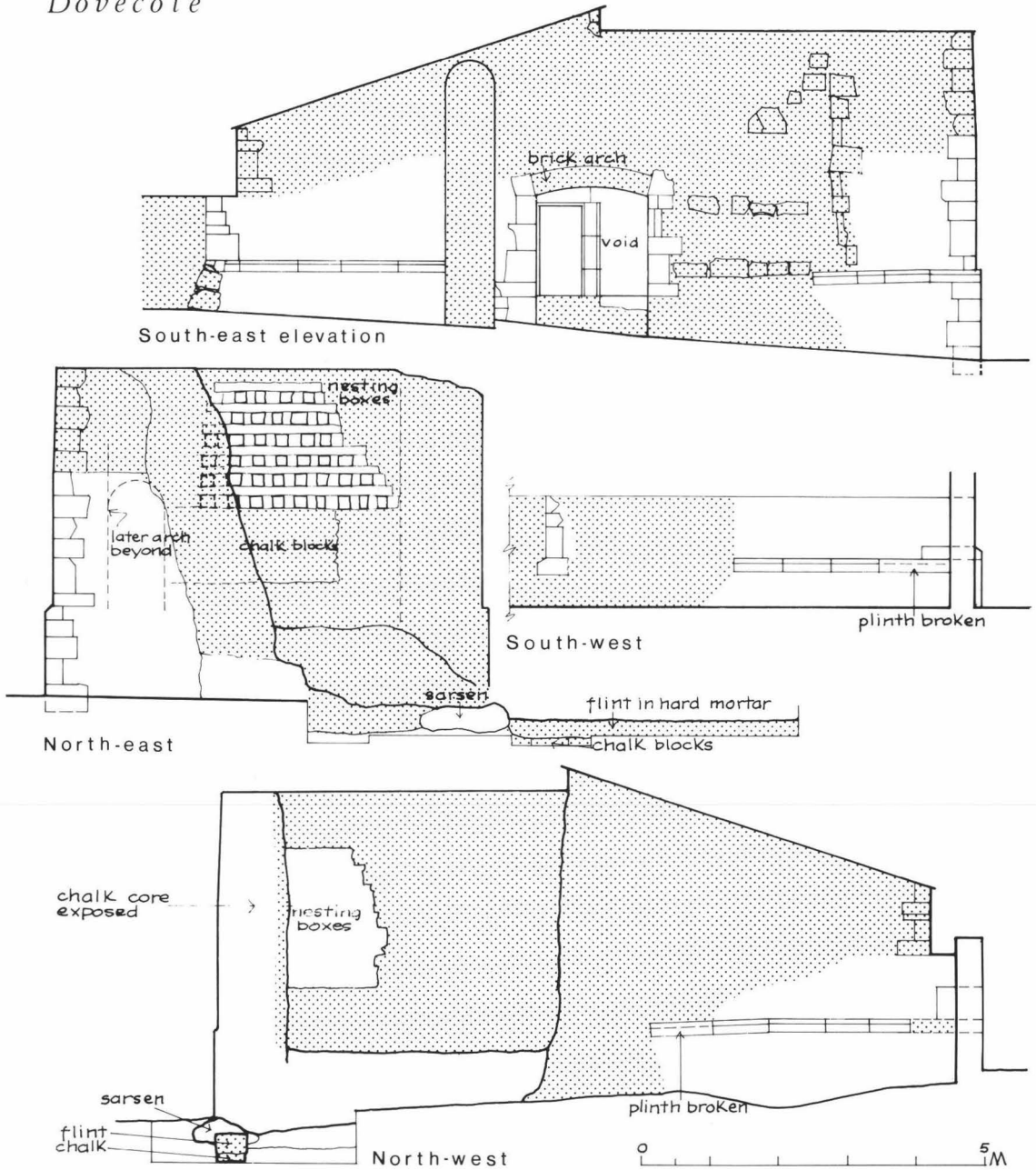


Fig. 2. Dovecot: elevations. The shaded areas show later work or repairs.

built was free-standing, but a later building or yard once extended from it to the north-west, and a cowshed still stands against the south-west wall, both being later structures possibly using material such as quoins or chalk blocks robbed from collapsed parts of the dovecot. It consists, unusually, of two D-shaped compartments built back to back with the exterior forming a six-sided, slightly lozenge-shaped figure. Two adjoining doorways on the south-east side gave access to the chambers at ground level; the stone jambs and lintel of one door still exist and are rebated on the outer face for a door, but there is no evidence for the fixing of hinges or locks. The stonework of the other doorway has gone, but the shared jamb has one stone extending some way into the interior, suggesting that the dividing wall at this point was thinner than the main wall. A stone at the foot of the latter doorway may be a threshold.

The walls, where excavated, were built directly onto the Gault clay which is only *c.* 15 cm. below the ground surface, but the north corner was built on a large sarsen imported presumably to support the corner nearest the pond. It is this corner that has collapsed despite rebuilding of the walls at the lowest levels. The walls, of a minimum thickness of 1 metre, have a plinth of varying height around the perimeter, and are of a chalk rubble core faced externally with flint nodules and internally with chalk blocks and nesting boxes. No floor, organic layer, or potence, was found. The inside, below the assumed floor, was made up with fill to a depth of *c.* 0.75 metre of Gault clay which merges with the chalk wall core, and the interior chalk block facing seems to bear directly onto the Gault fill. The external dressings are of Greensand.

About 120 nesting boxes remain of 700 or more that may once have existed. They vary in size but on average are 18 cm. high, 17 cm. wide and 23 cm. deep; they are roughly rectangular and not L-shaped, as is often found; the horizontal chalk band between the boxes projects 7 cm. to form a ledge for settling.

There is no evidence for the original height of the building, the form or material of the roof, or of access for the pigeons, and it is sad that the map of Alciston of 1647 (E.S.R.O., SAS/G 45/24) whilst depicting accurately other buildings such as church, manor house and long barn, ignores the dovecot. The simplest and most likely form of roof would be two-pitched with a gable at each end, in which case the present height may represent the original eaves. The alighting platforms for the pigeons could have been in the gables or possibly roof cupolas. The roof was certainly tiled in the later stages, for many fragments of clay peg-tiles were found externally during excavation, and these may be a product of the tilery established in 1429–30 (Wooldridge 1965; Brent 1968). Prior to that, shingles would probably have been used.

CHURCH (Fig. 3)

The visible evidence for earlier periods of the church is seen in the north wall of the chancel, 1.1 metres thick, with a chalk and flint rubble core faced externally with roughly coursed flint nodules. Although much repaired, the wall is probably of single build and can be given a 12th-century date by the small round-headed single-splay window at its western end. Three lancet windows were inserted in this wall, two surviving intact, but that at the eastern end is seen inside and out as the western half of a blocked opening, the other half being destroyed by the east wall and a diagonal buttress of, on the evidence of the east window, the 15th century. The chancel was shortened at the time and the excavation was intended to establish the position of the earlier east wall.

The excavation trench as set out extended 3 metres beyond the present wall and extended the full width of the chancel, but excavation was restricted by the need to avoid disturbance to the foundations of standing walls and by a request that some plants be retained as far as possible. Digging was further restricted by discovery of a brick-built tomb and two modern

ALCISTON 1984
Church

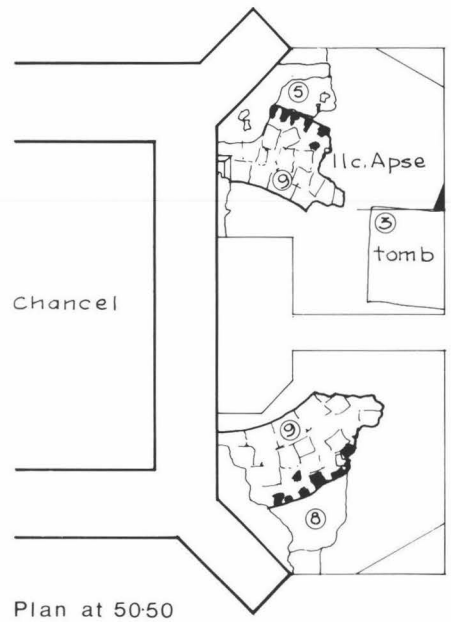
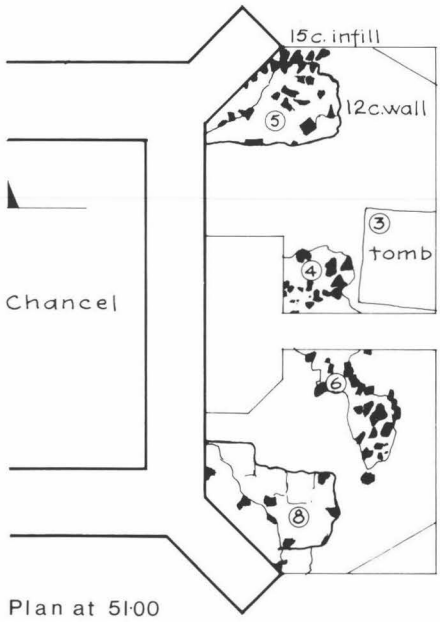
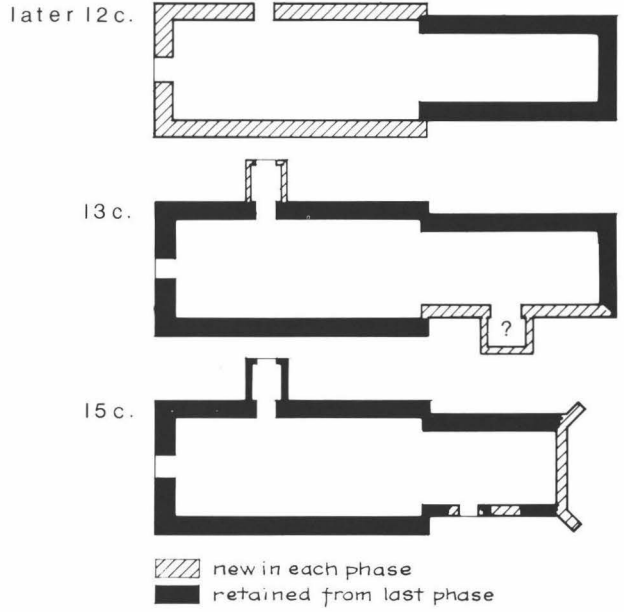
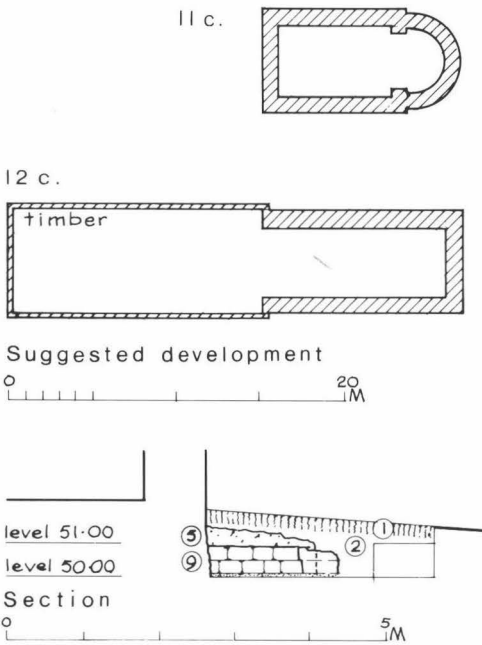


Fig. 3. Church: plans and section of excavation, and suggested development of the church.

drains which were left undisturbed. Otherwise excavation was to a depth of about 1 metre, the soil found being typical grave-soil (Contexts 1 and 2) with no useful stratification; but it was clear that grave-slots had destroyed much of the evidence sought.

The continuation of the north and south walls of the chancel were found (Contexts 5 and 8) extending 2.3 metres and 1.8 metres respectively from the present east wall, diminishing from just below ground down to about 1 metre below present floor level. They were of chalk and flint rubble with flint facings, set in Mortar Type C. This was very badly decomposed, suggesting that this end of the church may have been in a state of collapse, especially as the ground falls away at this point. This view may be supported by the remains of the half lancet window, which leans to the east and has some rough fill-in repairs around it. No remains of the contemporary east wall were found, probably having been destroyed by grave-slots. At a higher level, just below ground an irregular area of flint rubble set in Mortar Type A of a maximum thickness of 10 cm. was found (Contexts 4 and 6). It could possibly have been one of the earlier floors, but as it extended slightly over the brick tomb is more likely to be the bedding for a later memorial slab or cross.

The 12th-century walls extended over the remains of an apse (Context 9), the centre section of which had been destroyed by grave-slots. The surviving portions were on a thick mortar bed set directly onto the soil and were faced internally with two courses of finely cut chalk blocks 18 cm. high and varying in size but about 18 cm. deep and 30 cm. long. They had diagonal tooling on the face and were set in a firm Mortar Type A. The core of the walls was mostly chalk with some flint and the external facing, from what could be seen, was also of flint. A layer of chalk and mortar fragments at the bottom of the wall was probably construction debris, but no evidence for a floor was found other than the slab noted above. The apse continued under the present east wall and in

plan must be stilted, but to what extent could not be established. It may well be that the present east wall is built upon the return of the apse.

The apse shows the existence of an earlier church, and it may be of interest to speculate what form this took and to consider subsequent development. It is possible that the chancel was built upon the earlier nave, which would result in a two-celled church of apse and nave similar to but slightly smaller than Exceat (also with a stilted apse), assigned a pre-Conquest date (Budgen 1916; Clarke & Leach 1985). There is no visible evidence for the construction of this nave; it may be that its walls are incorporated in the 12th-century work, but it could have been of timber on perhaps a stub wall or strip foundation.

Construction of the long 12th-century chancel may be the result of the ownership by Battle Abbey of Alciston, equalling in size the major contemporary churches at Hellingly and Wilmington. It would require a nave of commensurate size, but it must be asked whether they are contemporary. This seems unlikely although the walls are of similar thickness and construction. If built together the junction of chancel and nave would be expected to show an overlap equal to the full wall thickness, but a very small overlap is found here. Externally the west end of the chancel north wall is finished with dark brown sandstone quoins (similar to the stone of the round-headed window), most of which run into the junction with the nave wall. This is also built at this point in similar stones with little bonding into the chancel wall; these stones, with some mortar on the exposed faces, are probably re-used. The evidence suggests that the nave was not contemporary but may have been built not much later.

The small overlap between these walls, unusual in solid construction, is suggestive of timber, and it may be that a wooden nave was built initially, being replaced by the present structure; the closeness of the round-headed

window to the west end of the chancel wall may support this view.

In the 13th century the south wall of the chancel was rebuilt, thinner than the original, and incorporating a large arched opening of unknown purpose. It seems too high for a tomb recess, and may have been the entrance of a side chapel, but no evidence for this can be seen and the ground here, other than a drainage channel, is much higher than floor level.

In an effort to solve some of the problems noted above, mortar samples were taken from different locations, and I am indebted to Caroline Cartwright for analysing the 14 samples taken (Appendix 1). The results were not conclusive owing to the similarity of the mixes, but it is of interest that the apse and possible floor use Mortar Type A or a variant, and that the north walls of chancel and nave, and the facing on re-used stone, are Type B or variants, suggesting they may be contemporary or nearly so. Type C, which is markedly different, is used in the later east and south walls of the chancel; that some is found in the buried remains of the 12th-century walls may be due to consolidation at the time of rebuilding.

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APPENDIX 1: MORTAR (by C. Cartwright)

Fourteen mortar samples from the church were analysed: they have been grouped into three types, but Types A and B are very similar, the differentiating factor being the quantity of calcareous inclusions present. Types A and B differ markedly from Type C.

Mortar Type A. Is very similar to B but is even more chalky and 'blocky' in texture with actual lumps of chalk as inclusions. It occurs in the apse, and a variant in the slab (Contexts 4 and 6), which was darker in colour and more 'brittle' in texture.

Mortar Type B. Has a very white chalky (calcareous) matrix, and contains medium to small sub-angular flint inclusions, a scatter of fine-grained quartz, some small charcoal flecks and fragments of calcite. It occurs at both ends of the north walls of the chancel and nave, and a variant, more sandy and less chalky, on the face of the re-used stone in the nave wall.

Mortar Type C. Has a creamy-beige 'earthy' matrix and

FINDS

The finds, other than building debris, were, as would be expected in a churchyard, largely of disarticulated bone (Appendix 2). What is unexpected are the animal bones found representing a sheep or goat, dog, a bovine, and a number of smaller species. Glass and the lead came from windows were found of medieval and later periods (Appendix 3). These finds have been returned to the church.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Vicar and P.C.C. of Alciston for agreeing to the church excavation, and to Mr. and Mrs. Walton senior and junior for their agreement to the dovecot survey and excavation and for their help in so many ways. Mrs. J. A. Brent kindly advised on the manorial accounts and John Bleach drew the author's attention to the photographs mentioned and provided copies. The work of those who prepared the specialist reports is appreciated as is also, of course, that of the diggers, without whose labours the excavations could not have been undertaken.

frequent large rounded flint pebble inclusions. Some angular flint fragments may also be present and there is a frequent overall scatter of small, rounded and angular flint inclusions of many colours. Many sub-rounded small to medium-sized quartz inclusions are also found. Both the flint and quartz inclusions in this type seem typical of beach or riverine sands. It occurs in the present east wall and buttresses and as possible strengthening in the demolished part of the chancel north wall and the rebuilt south wall (in the latter cases as variants).

APPENDIX 2: OSTEOLOGICAL REMAINS (by Allison Vazehgoo)

The osteological sample is mixed material from a burial site in use, probably, from the 11th century to the present day, although the site excavated probably was used for burial between the 15th and 18th centuries only. It shows a large assortment of human and non-human material which is summarized below.

Human remains. Although much of the material consists of small chunky fragments, numerous long bones of diminutive size indicate burial of several young individuals of four to ten years of age. There are also substantial numbers of fragments indicating the presence of at least two adults. Evidence for this includes: a nearly complete frontal bone in good condition, and a fragment exhibiting the superciliary arch; one left and one right fragment of innominate bone, each showing the sciatic notch, suggesting the presence of one male and one female; and four unmatching fragments of adult scapulae. Other adult remains include: thoracic and lumbar vertebrae; molars, premolars, and incisors; rib and parietal fragments; and many phalanges, metacarpals and metatarsals.

Non-human remains. These comprise an eclectic assortment of small, medium and large mammals and a fine specimen of complete skull and beak of a crow-size bird. Incisors and cheek teeth, some still in the maxillae, are those of sheep or goats. A single canine tooth 2 cm. by 1 cm. comes from a carnivore, probably a dog. Smaller bones, including humeri, tibia and vertebrae, appear to be rodent or insectivore. The largest fragments include: three fragments of long bone; a single body of thoracic vertebra; a tarsus; and an incomplete ossified epiphysis of tibia, indicating the remains of a cow or ox. The bird skull exhibits a single rectangular hole 6 mm. by 2 mm. which may have caused death.

Indeterminate. A large quantity of fragments from diaphyses of long bones was not classified owing to the difficulty of diagnosing them from inspection only.

Other material. With the bones were found eight iron coffin nails and three iron spikes, one retouched flint flake, and fragments of marine bivalve shells.

fragments of lead came were found. Of the glass fragments, four are vessel glass and the remainder window glass of three distinctive and well attested types.

(a) Thick (2.5 mm.) glass with deep surface decomposition layers at times penetrating through the entire thickness. This glass is medieval.

(b) Thinner glass (1.5–2 mm.) with slight surface decomposition of 16th to 19th centuries.

(c) Greenish, colourless with little decomposition, also of 16th to 19th centuries.

Vessel glass. Of the four pieces three are of thick olive-green bottle glass of late 17th to 19th centuries, and one of thin colourless glass of indeterminate form and date.

Window glass. This is summarized as follows:

(a) Seven fragments probably cylinder-blown. Greenish colourless with deep surface decomposition. 13th to 16th centuries.

(b) Five fragments probably cylinder-blown. Greenish colourless with deep surface decomposition which has preserved dark red painted and fired decoration. Medieval.

(c) A complete diamond quarry, probably cylinder-blown. Indeterminate colour with deep surface decomposition. Medieval.

(d) Part of a triangular quarry, probably cylinder-blown. Greenish colourless with deep surface decomposition. Medieval.

(e) 171 fragments of greenish colourless cylinder-blown glass with slight surface decomposition. Post-medieval.

(f) 96 fragments of greenish cylinder-blown glass. Post-medieval.

Lead came. 21 small twisted fragments were retrieved. It is not possible to be sure of their original section but they seem to have been small flattened squares.

APPENDIX 3: GLASS (by John Shepherd)

Two hundred and eighty-five fragments of glass and 21

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