

# An Excavation on the Site of the Augustinian Priory, Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire

By STEVEN J. TAYLOR

In 1970 excavations for constructing the foundations of an agricultural building were begun in the crew-yard associated with Canons Ashby House. The yard concerned in part overlay the site of the monastic cloisters to the south of the former Augustinian priory church (FIG. 1). Mechanical clearance of the area revealed quantities of rubble and broken tiles, part of a wall also being exposed. By kindness of the lessee, Mr. Louis Osman, work was suspended and a brief excavation of the threatened area undertaken by the author on behalf of the then Ministry of Public Building and Works.<sup>1</sup>

Canons Ashby takes its distinctive name from the Augustinian priory founded there in the reign of King John. At the dissolution of the monasteries the site and all the property of the former priory was granted to Sir Francis Bryan, from whom it passed to Sir John Cope. Cope is said to have converted the site of the priory into a residence, but the house apparently failed to find favour with his successors after his death in 1558. Before the end of the 17th century, the house had been divided into two farmhouses occupied by tenants, and was eventually demolished in 1710.

The western portion of the priory church still stands beside the present road from Banbury to Northampton, and is the only standing building which still survives from the monastic period. Some 200 yards south-east of the church can be traced the remains of fishponds and the terraced feature known as the Canons Walk, but little trace of the domestic buildings of the priory remains above ground. Cope's house would seem likewise entirely to have vanished, though it is probable that the substantial stone wall which partly encloses the cottage garden immediately to the south-east of the present churchyard is in its present form to be associated with Sir John Cope's building activities, rather than with those of an earlier or a later period. The site of the priory cloisters lies in part under a thin strip of churchyard immediately against the southern wall of the church. A modern farm trackway runs across the middle of the cloister yard, and the southern range of buildings lies beneath the present yard and farm buildings south of the trackway.

In the 19th century Sir Henry Dryden of Canons Ashby House attempted to recover something of the lay-out of the monastic buildings, and also located a lead pipe which supposedly brought water to the conventual buildings from a well which still survives to the north of the church. A copy of this plan is at Canons Ashby House, and shows the buildings south of the church laid out in conventional Augustinian fashion with a chapter house on the eastern side of the cloister

<sup>1</sup> I am particularly grateful to Mr. Louis Osman of Canons Ashby House for ensuring that the excavation took place, to Mrs. Elizabeth Eames of the British Museum for examining and reporting on the floor tiles, and to Miss Stella Michell of Leicester University for drawing the tiles. Also to Messrs. John Burman and David Joyce, who bore the brunt of the hard physical labour. — S.J.T.

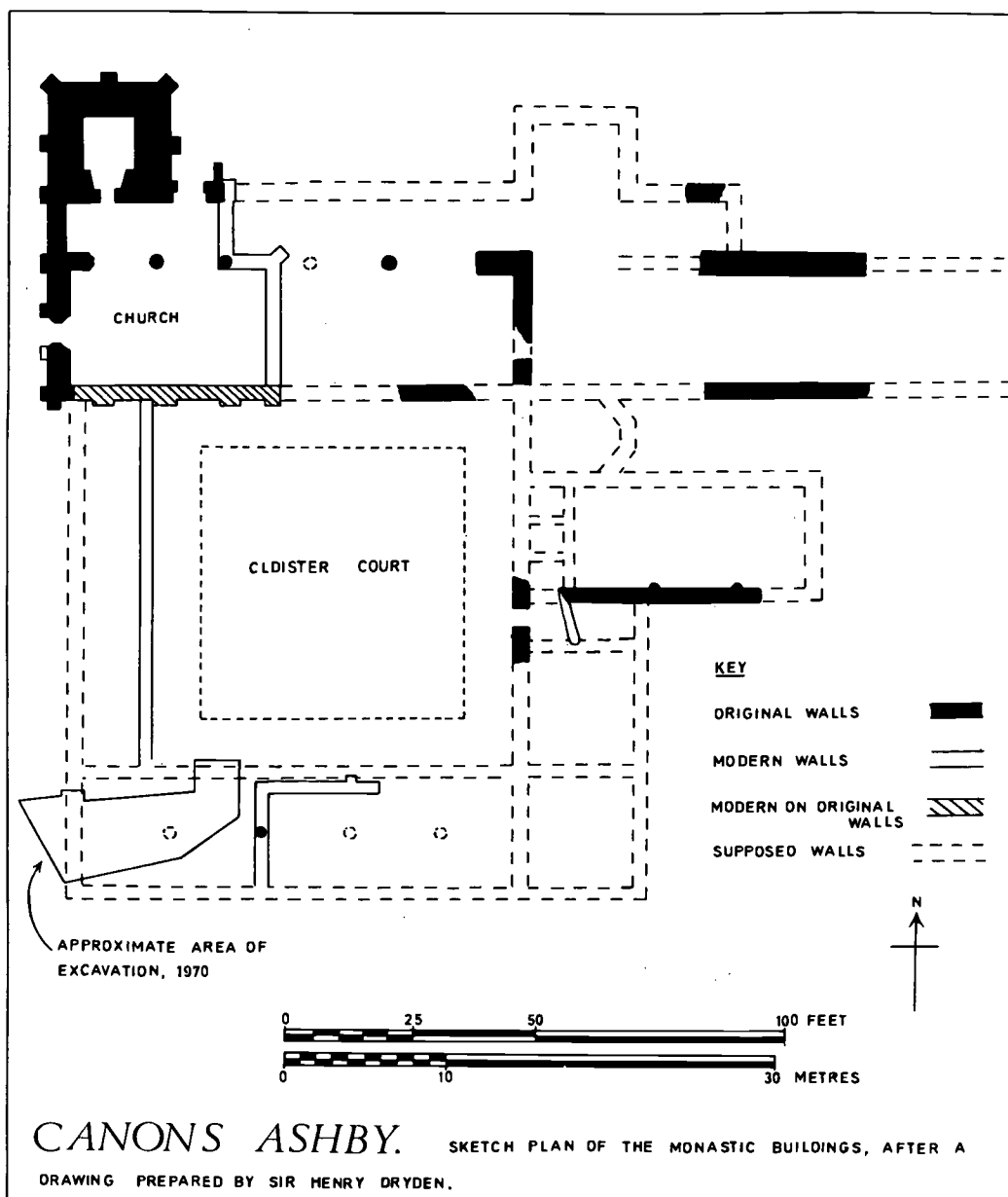


Fig. 1 Plan of monastic buildings after a plan prepared by Sir H. Dryden

yard; the southern range should be occupied by a refectory, which in this case appears to have had a vaulted undercroft (see FIG. 1 which reproduces Dryden's plan virtually unaltered, save for the omission of the well and water-pipe and a fragment of a possible precinct gateway; the approximate position of the 1970 excavation has been added). It is uncertain how far this plan is the result of excavation, and how far it is a reconstruction based upon the known plans of Augustinian

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houses; however in the small area tested by the 1970 excavation, the Dryden plan seems largely to have been correct.

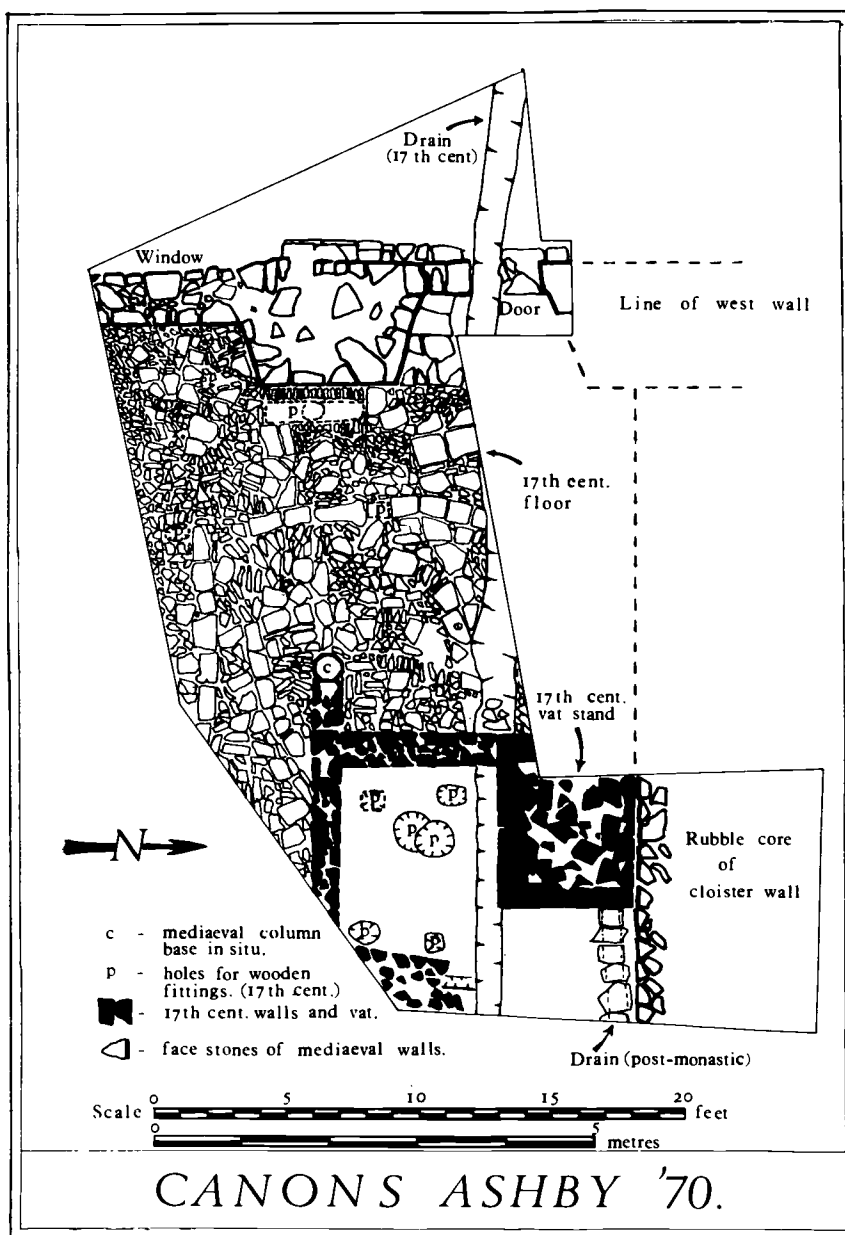


Fig. 2 Plan of area excavated in 1970

The purpose of the 1970 excavation was to ascertain whether construction of an agricultural building would cause damage to any mediaeval foundations. Thus no attempt was made over much of the area to go below the latest surviving

(post-medieval) floor level, though at one point a small section was cut down to obtain information about the earliest floor. Thus the exercise consisted more of clearing late rubble from over walls and floors than of fully excavating the buildings; no structural features of any period were disturbed, with the exception of the small section of post-medieval floor already mentioned. The area investigated was of irregular shape, some 30 feet by up to 20 feet, and lay according to Sir Henry Dryden's plan in the western corner of the south range of cloister buildings; it covered much of two bays of what may well have been the undercroft below the refectory. The overlying topsoil had already been removed when archaeological investigation started, and part of a wall incorporating a worn door sill had been revealed running from north to south. The rest of the area was soon found to be covered with a uniform layer of rubble which sloped up to a depth of at least 3 feet on the northern edge of the excavation. The rubble lay over a well-laid floor of irregular stones, and contained many cut and moulded stones, and numbers of extremely worn floor tiles. (All tiles which were either apparently unglazed, or were so worn as to be of uncertain type, and all fragments of moulded stone found in the rubble, were deposited in the tower of the church.) The rubble seemed to be destruction material from the final demolition early in the 18th century of Cope's house and such claustral buildings as then survived. Evidence of the relatively late date of deposition of this material came in the form of a few pieces of wine bottles and drinking glasses of 17th century type; also two tiny fragments of a Staffordshire slipware cup of a type common in the later years of that century. Pressed into the layer of dirt and coal between the stone floor and the superincumbent rubble, and presumably deposited before the buildings were demolished, were 6 small fragments of a barrel-shaped delftware mug decorated with purple speckling. This kind of mug, with a decoration reminiscent of Rhenish stoneware but a shape influenced by Chinese porcelain of the late Ming-'Transitional' period, was manufactured at Southwark and first makes its appearance in the third decade of the 17th century. Dated examples are known, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum bearing the date 1629, and another 1631. This type gave way to other forms later in the century, though one late specimen, in the British Museum, bears the date 1724.

The floor which was revealed after removal of the rubble was well and evenly laid, consisting of faced ironstone blocks (presumably robbed from the monastic buildings) placed in irregular rows. The spaces between were filled with smaller stones, generally small flat slabs set on edge. Against the western wall a small slot, some 4 feet long by 9 inches deep with a post-hole in its centre (see plan, FIG. 2) presumably represented the remains of some wooden fixture contemporary with the floor. Four other small post-holes also dated from the time when the floor was in use; indeed the stones of the floor seem to have been laid round that post-hole shown in the most south-westerly position on the plan. It is impossible to suggest a use for these posts; the most obvious solution, as the supports for cattle mangers, is rendered unlikely by their distance from the walls and by the absence of any other sign that the buildings had ever been used by cattle. Indeed, the thin layer of broken coal trampled onto the floor suggests some entirely different use for the building.

With the removal of the rubble, part of the westernmost wall of the cloister

buildings was exposed. This was 5 feet in thickness, of well cut and faced ironstone masonry, with a mud and rubble core. The door-sill which had been visible when the excavation started proved to be part of an entrance 4 feet 3 inches wide, with jambs splayed internally to a probable width of some 7 feet. From the position of three white limestone blocks in the southern jamb, the inner mouldings of the entrance would seem to have been in white limestone which would have matched the surviving mid-13th century arcade on the west front of the priory church. In the southernmost corner of the excavated area the wall was narrowed to 2 feet, and the remains of an internal splay and, externally, part of a faced and chamfered stone, indicate the presence of a window some six feet south of the door. Centred exactly 11 feet in from the middle of the run of wall between the internal splay of the door and that of the window was an octagonal limestone pillar, which had been incorporated in the surface of the latest floor. This is the position in which according to the Dryden plan a pillar should originally have existed, this inference being based on the survival at that time in a modern wall of part of the next pillar eastwards. Indeed, the westernmost column, which at first appeared as an octagonal sett in the latest floor, was eventually found to be still standing in position on its base on the original 13th century floor.

At some period before the latest floor was laid, various small stone walls and a large oblong stone base or stand had been constructed towards the eastern end of the area under investigation (features marked in black in plan, FIG. 2). The stone floor did not continue eastwards beyond these walls, where the depth of rubble was correspondingly greater. The stone 'base' or 'stand' was an oblong structure 5 feet by 7 feet, built against the medieval northern wall of the range, (the southern face of this wall was found, and its rubble core over 6 feet in thickness. The northern face of the wall remained beyond the area excavated). The 'stand' was well built of cut and faced ironstone about a mud and rubble core. Although some three courses of the masonry of this feature survived, one cannot be certain of its purpose. It would seem to have been of 17th century construction, and the suggestion was made that it might be the base of a buttress built at this late period to support a medieval wall that was beginning to bulge with age and neglect. A more likely possibility however is to be seen in a similar structure in the manorial brewhouse at Hinton, in the adjacent parish of Woodford Halse. Here a stand some 6 feet by 5 feet by 5 feet in height was built of brick in the early 18th century against the inside of the main wall of the building. This structure served as a combined bread-oven and brewing-vat stand, with the oven inside the brickwork warming the vat which stood on top. Traces of burning on the stones of the Canons Ashby example suggest the possibility of a similar use, though certainty is not possible as only the lower courses of stonework survived, any internal traces of an oven (had such ever existed there) being thus removed. After the construction of the stand a small wall running south from it was built, butting up to the stand at one end and to an east-west wall at the other. Both walls and the stand itself stood upon the remains of a poor quality mortar floor which survived merely as a thin layer of lime and gravel. Between the stand and the small walls the demolition layer of rubble rested immediately upon this floor, which must therefore have remained open and in use until the destruction of the building. When a section of the later stone floor was removed

immediately to the west of these small internal walls the mortar floor was found to continue some ten inches beneath the stone one and its rubble foundation, and presumably covered the whole western end of the building. The 'vat base' was built upon this mortar floor, as also was the internal wall running east from the pillar. The wall running south from the corner of the stand had a butt joint at both ends; this was presumably the latest of the three features, though all were probably of 17th century date. In the easternmost part of the area excavated another poorly built wall lay over the mortar floor, but its relationship to the other features was not established. Cutting the mortar floor immediately south of the 'stand', and by their position perhaps dating from after the construction of the walls, were six small post-holes, the purpose of which remains unknown. However, those four post-holes placed in the corners of the small walled area were all of the same depth (11 inches below the mortar floor) and approximate dimensions, so presumably were related as part of one structure. A roughly dug gulley was associated with the mortar floor, and slightly overlaid by the edge of the 'stand'. It went under the north-south wall where this butted to the stand, a hole being provided for its passage. It also seems to have remained open during the stone floor phase at the western end of the building, though eventually falling out of use as it had filled with dirt and coal dust. To the west it had been cut through the doorway, dislodging part of the sill; thence it passed on beyond the area excavated. To the west of the building, the gulley cut through a layer of hard-packed fragments of unglazed clay roofing tile. These spread out from the door and were laid in post-monastic times, presumably in an attempt to keep the entrance level and dry. Featureless fragments of similar roofing tiles were found in the destruction material which filled the site of the sub-vault. These tiles may well represent roofing material from the monastic buildings; in the case of the fragments packed outside the door, they had been used to fill a puddle after the buildings had fallen into secular hands and into a state of relative disrepair. The gulley cutting the tile layer was a somewhat enigmatic feature in that if it was indeed a drain, as the silty nature of its fill at the eastern end of the area seemed to indicate, it drained *into* the building from the west, was open before the 'vat base' was constructed, and remained open though silted up until the building went out of use. A more intelligible drain ran under the base virtually parallel to the gulley already discussed, and some five feet to the north of it. This was made of flat stones set on edge, with other flat stones laid on top as capping. It appeared to have been constructed when the mortar floor was laid, as the capping stones were at the same level as the floor and seemed to be associated with it rather than cut through. The silty contents of this second drain contained no dateable material.

Available time and finance did not allow a more thorough investigation of the post-medieval features, and it was in any case not considered necessary to disturb these as they would not have been destroyed by the erection of a new building over the top. However, a small area of the later floors was removed, adjacent to the octagonal pillar, in order to test the continuity of the mortar floor and to see whether the pillar was indeed in its original position. The latest floor was found to have been laid upon a well-packed hardcore foundation up to a foot in thickness. The surviving stump of pillar was exactly level with this floor and showed wear upon its upper surface where it had indeed been part of the floor surface.

This would seem to mean that by the time the latest floor was laid, the vaulting and supporting pillars of the building had gone. If the building was indeed a vaulted structure with a refectory over, then the upper storey also must by this stage have been destroyed. The latest floor, as will shortly be demonstrated, was constructed at some time during the 17th century. By then only the external walls of the original monastic building seem to have survived, standing to an uncertain height, and with a somewhat haphazard drainage gulley running through the western door. The building had presumably been provided with some sort of roof after the destruction of the vaulting. The earlier, mortar, floor was found to extend up to the moulding of the pillar base, the pedestal itself being below the level of the floor. The pillar projected for a foot above the level of the mortar floor, implying

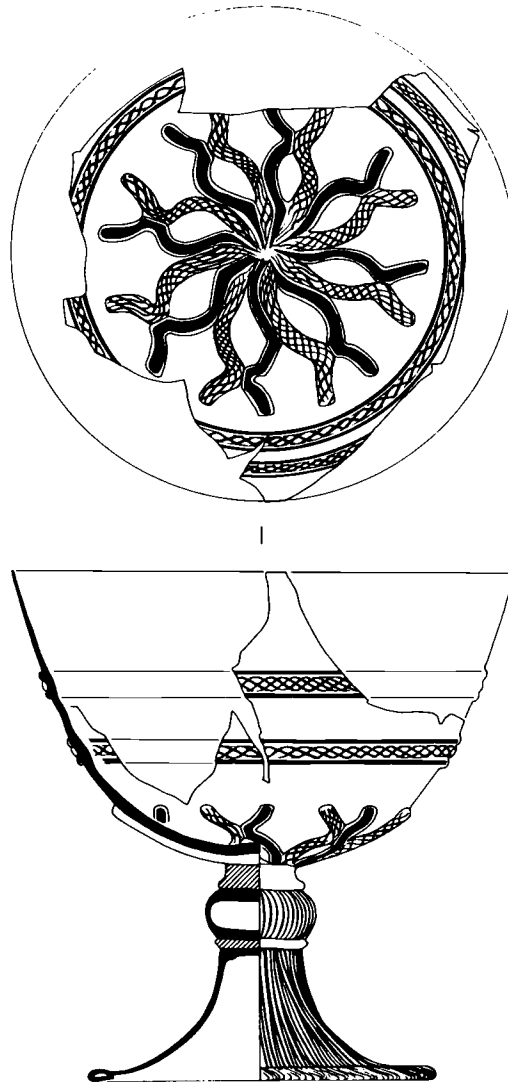


Fig. 3 Late 16th to early 17th century Venetian glass goblet from Canons Ashby (3/4)

that when this floor was laid down, the vaulting above was still intact. Below the mortar floor was a quantity of rubble and silt some 4 inches in depth over an earlier floor of crushed and hard-packed fragments of ironstone. Upon this surface stood the pedestal of the octagonal pillar. In the silting was found the greater part of a Venetian glass goblet with white 'latticinio' decoration (FIG. 3). This type of glass dates from the late 16th to early 17th centuries, and its presence in the make-up below the mortar floor indicates that this surface was not laid before the late 16th century, and may well be seventeenth century in date. Thus all the post-medieval features located fit into a period of slightly more or less than a century.

The packed ironstone floor presumably dating from the middle of the 13th century, and upon which the pillar pedestal rested, was laid upon a rubble foundation. More than this it was impossible to ascertain as the modern water-table lay almost immediately below the medieval floor. (The modern yard in which the excavation took place was in daily use by a herd of dairy cattle. The large amounts of water necessarily used in regular cleansing operations would seem to have caused a raising of the water-table in the immediate vicinity.)

It is scarcely justifiable to suggest any specific conclusions on the evidence of such a limited excavation. However it seems that the sub-vault at least of the monastic refectory was still standing at the end of the 16th century, presumably being in use as outbuildings associated with the house built by Sir John Cope. The sub-vault was given a new mortar floor of inferior quality laid on the silt and rubble above the medieval floor; this took place probably early in the 17th century and shortly afterwards the 'vat stand' and its associated small walls were built. It is likely that at some time during the 17th century the sub-vault collapsed or was taken down, and the western end of the building was refloored. The flooring was level and of better quality than one might have expected for, say, housing cattle. There were a number of wooden fixtures of uncertain purpose associated with this floor, as evidenced by the surviving post-holes. Quantities of coal remained, especially on the northern side of the area excavated, crushed into the floor and partly filling the shallow gully which crossed the site. It is possible that the building was now used for brewing or baking, or for both processes. Early in the 18th century the building was demolished, and the slightly hollow site of the sub-vault filled with rubbish brought from the clearance of adjoining buildings. Probably the moulded masonry fragments, and certainly the worn floor tiles, were brought from elsewhere on the priory site.



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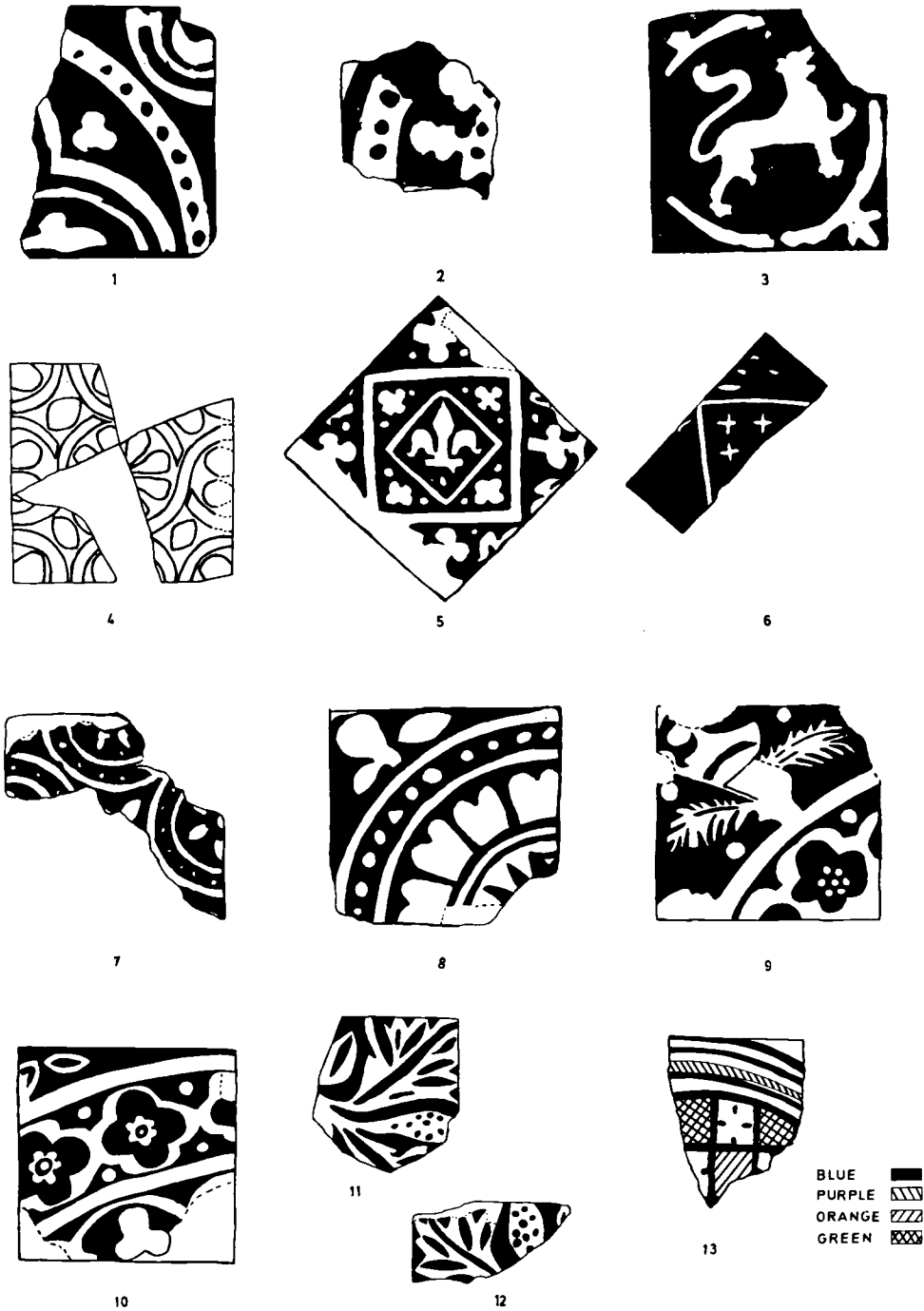


Fig. 4 Medieval floor tiles from Canons Ashby. Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$ , except No. 13 which is  $\frac{1}{2}$

## THE FLOOR TILES FROM CANONS ASHBY

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The submitted tiles are of five types as described below (see FIG. 4).

I. Inlaid tiles with sandy body and hard white inlay; keyed with stabbed holes on the back. This type is known from sites ranging from Berkshire to Northamptonshire and is probably of late 13th and early 14th century date.

1. Fragment 140 x 105 x 18 mm. Base covered in mortar. Inlay revealed in fracture 2 — 6 mm. deep. Hohler's design W38,<sup>1</sup> repeating 4-tile design.
2. Fragment 90 x 85 x 21 mm. Mortar on base. 2 stabbed holes visible. Inlay revealed in fracture 1 mm deep or less. Variant of Hohler's design W37, 4-tile design, probably repeating.
3. 130 x 130 x 17 mm. Mortar on base. 1 stabbed hole visible. Single tile design.

II. A Penn style of design, but the design is impressed on the surface and no white clay is used, so that a tile decorated in counter-relief is produced, glazed with a plain lead glaze to give a brown tile. The greater number of single colour tiles with decoration in relief or counter-relief were glazed yellow, green, or black. This may be one of a series or may be just an odd tile decorated in this way. No example of the usual two-colour Penn tiles is included among the tiles submitted. It should date from the middle of the 14th century.

4. Three pieces of the same tile, 20 mm. thick and originally about 120 mm. square. No keys. Variant of Hohler's designs P62, 63 and 64, including elements of each; repeating single-tile design.

III. 'Printed' tiles, possibly of 14th century date. The white clay does not fill the cavities that have been stamped and consequently the white clay is below the surface of the tile. The damaged cavity along the lower left edge of No. 5 is coated with slip. This suggests that the whole surface was covered in thin slip and the top scraped.

5. Tile 122 x 121 x 20 mm. No keys. This tile was damaged along the lower left edge before it was fired, and the depressed area is covered in slip and is yellow. Repeating single tile design. Chatwin FIG. 41, no. 13.<sup>2</sup>
- 5a. (Not illustrated). Fragment 90 x 40 x 21 mm. A portion of a tile decorated with the same design as 5 above. Very worn.
6. Fragment 114 x 45 x 16 mm. No keys. The upper left edge of a tile decorated with a shield of arms set diagonally. The arms may be quartered, with small crosses in the upper quarter on the right, or the whole shield may have been covered with small crosses. It does not look like accurate heraldry. At the top and outer corners there seem to have been foliate motifs. Probably a single tile design.
- 6a. (Not illustrated). Fragment 85 x 50 x 18 mm. No keys. The surface of the white clay is below the surface of the tile. Very worn. The corner of a tile decorated with part of a spotted circular band. The design is not complete on one tile.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hohler, "Medieval paving tiles in Buckinghamshire", *Rec. Buckinghamshire* 14, (1942).

<sup>2</sup> Philip B. Chatwin, "The medieval patterned tiles of Warwickshire" *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, 60, (1936).

IV. 'Printed' tiles of later 15th century date belonging to a group known in Worcestershire, Warwickshire and south Northamptonshire. They have a well fired fully oxidised red body; the designs are depressed slightly below the surface. The brown part of the surface is a deep purplish brown.

7. Two pieces of the same tile; i) a corner, 78 x 57 x 22 mm., ii) part of a third edge present, 80 x 75 x 23 mm. Originally about 120 mm square. No keys. The surface shows the signs of the grain of a wooden stamp. Repeating single tile design. Whitcomb's design 209.<sup>3</sup>
8. Tile 124 x 120 x 28 mm. No keys. Inner corner missing. 4 tile design. Whitcomb's design 201.
9. Tile 122 x 121 x 28 mm. Base covered in mortar. Marks of the grain of a wooden stamp on the surface. The corner tile of a 16-tile design. Chatwin's FIG. 41 no. 9; Whitcomb's no. 182 is either a poorer version of the same design, or a very worn example of the identical design.
10. Tile 121 x 120 x 28 mm. No keys. Part of the same 16-tile design as 9 above, the next tile to the right. Not illustrated by Chatwin or Whitcomb. The whole of the outside of this 16 tile design can be reconstructed from 9 and 10, but the decoration of the four centre tiles is not known.
11. Fragment 86 x 80 x 24 mm. No keys. The corner of one of the inner tiles of a 16-tile design. Whitcomb's 181 (d), the top right-hand corner.
12. Fragment 90 x 50 x 25 mm. No keys. The corner of a tile, possibly the corner tile of the same pattern as 11 above, or of one of the closely related designs illustrated by Whitcomb 179 and 180.

V. Painted polychrome tile made in the Netherlands or England. If made in the Netherlands late 16th or early 17th century: if made in England, after about 1620.

13. Fragment 50 x 42 x 17 mm. No keys. Yellow-buff body. Design drawn in blue on a white ground, and painted in green, orange and purple.

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<sup>3</sup> Norma R. Whitcomb, *The Medieval Floor Tiles of Leicestershire*, Leicester, 1956.