

The Priory Church of Saint Mary, Canons Ashby

by

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with contributions by Hugh Richmond and Terry Pearson

SUMMARY

A programme of archaeological and architectural survey was carried out at St Mary's Priory Church Canons Ashby, in 1988–9, in advance of restoration by the National Trust. The survey contributed to the reconstruction of the configuration of the 13th century Augustinian priory which originally occupied the site. Historical sources document the foundation of the priory in the mid-12th century, and a major period of church and conventual building in the 13th century. Archaeological work showed that the familiar pattern of a priory church flanked by a square cloister with east, west and south ranges, was probably followed at Canons Ashby. Ironstone footings of part of the church, claustral and other buildings were exposed, suggesting that an alley bordered the west and south ranges of the cloister, and revealing the morphology and dimensions of the south range of the priory. Excavations also confirmed that the church was reduced to its present state at the Dissolution, with the demolition and subsequent levelling and robbing of the claustral ranges. Adjacent to the north side of the tower, a plain tiled floor of late 16th/early 17th century date was revealed, corroborating Baker's account that a building was formerly attached to this part of the church.

INTRODUCTION

In 1982–3 a programme of investigation, combining rescue-excavation with the techniques of archaeological and architectural survey, was undertaken by St Mary's Priory Church, Canons Ashby. The work was carried out by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments (England) and the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit in accordance with

Scheduled Monument Consent granted for the purpose.

Archaeological excavation was restricted to trenches along the line of the proposed drains and services which, with a few exceptions, were confined to specifications determined by architect and contractor. Trenches were dug around the nave of the church, across the area of the cloister, and to the west of the former woodyard barn. The trenching was enlarged only at the south west corner of the cloister in an attempt to determine the relationship between the walls of the east and south ranges. The results have thereby clarified details of the claustral buildings south of the surviving church.

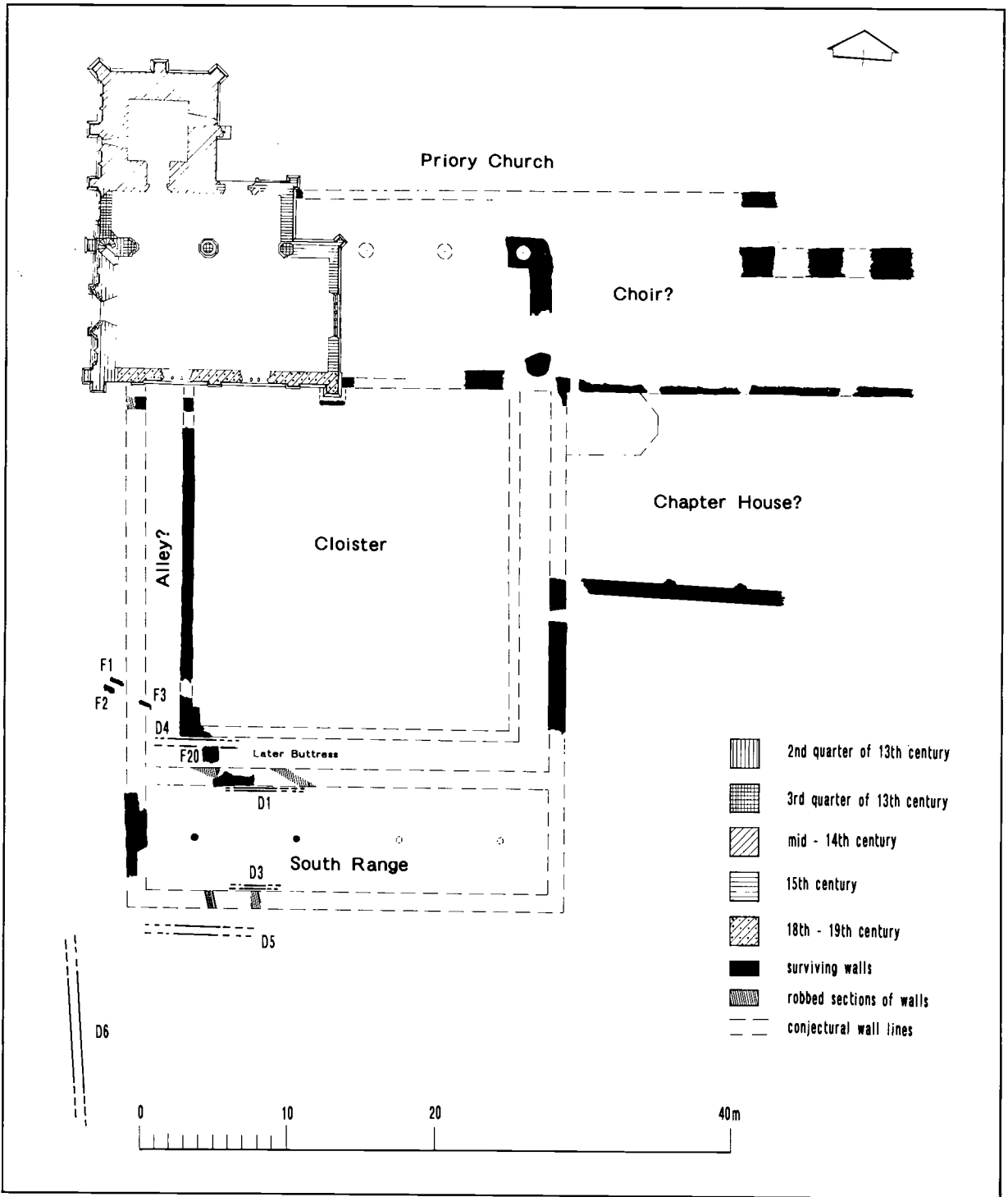
The archaeological work was carried out with the aid of grants from the Department of the Environment and by kind permission of the National Trust, owner of the church grounds, and Mr and Mrs Charles, owners of the 'Woodyard.' The authors wish to thank Alan Hannan, County Archaeologist and Brian Dix, Principal Archaeologist (Contracts), for reading and editing the text in its draft form and for providing constructive advice throughout the preparation of the present report. The illustrations which accompany this report were prepared by Lesley Hoyland.

The records of the excavations together with other materials are retained in the Northamptonshire Archaeological Archive. The information includes detailed level 3 reports of the stratification and the finds.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE AUGUSTINIAN PRIORY

A religious house was established at Canons Ashby at around the middle of the 12th century











-  2nd quarter of 13th century
-  3rd quarter of 13th century
-  mid - 14th century
-  15th century
-  18th - 19th century
-  surviving walls
-  robbed sections of walls
-  conjectural wall lines

Fig 1 Canons Ashby, church and Priory

when land, tenements and a church were granted for the foundation of an Augustinian Priory with a Prior and twelve canons (Foard 1982, p.1). The church and claustral buildings, however, were not built until the 13th century.

At the Dissolution the large priory church continued to be used, albeit in a much reduced form with only the west end of the nave and aisle left standing together with the square tower. The eastern part of the church was demolished and the adjoining site was purchased by Sir John Cope who converted part of the monastic buildings into a mansion. By 1600, the property was sub-divided and let to several tenants. The mansion itself was finally demolished around 1710 (Foard 1982, p.4).

THE CHURCH OF SAINT MARY by Hugh Richmond, RCHM(E)

The present building consists of the west end of the nave of the priory church, two bays of the north arcade, and a tower at the north east corner, the west face of which is in line with the west front (cf FIG 1). In the angle between the tower and the north aisle are the scant remains of a north porch. The east end of the nave and aisle date from the Dissolution, and the south wall and roof are of 18th and 19th century dates. The earliest surviving fabric, of the second quarter of the 13th century, is in the west front of the nave, that is to say the west door and the blind arcading on each side, the south-west corner buttress and the turret above. It may be that the west front was originally intended to be symmetrical as there is a corresponding turret stair on the north, the top of which has been contained by later works.

It appears that the north arcade and the aisle are just a little later in date, perhaps the third quarter of the 13th century, and this must have been the moment when the symmetrical design was abandoned. It is interesting to note that the roll moulded string course which runs round the south-west corner buttress, some 6 m above the level of the blind arcading and across the west front (its line is broken by a later window), terminates against the south side of the buttress which marks the division between nave and aisle, thus marking the division between the early and later 13th century phases.

In the mid-14th century, the north-west tower and the porch were added. This involved the rebuilding of most of the north walls of the aisle, and the upper part of the west wall above the single light window, to accommodate a gallery linking the vice at the north-west corner of the nave to the tower vice. This work is marked by a hollow moulded string decorated with ball flower. The north-west tower vice runs from this high level to the top of the tower, thus the arrangement must be original. Little now remains of the north porch: only the west jambs of an entrance arch, now mostly hidden by a later central buttress on that face of the tower, and a few blocks of the east wall where it joined the aisle wall. The west window of the nave was replaced in the 15th century. This work involved the replacement of the wall and the gable above and the window sill over the west door and flanking arcading. Straight joints on each side of the window indicate the internal extent of the disturbance.

After the Dissolution the church was contained to its present size and Sir John Cope built his house to the south in the area formerly occupied by the cloister. The east and north walls of the present sanctuary, together with the east and part of the north wall of the aisle, must be of that date. The south wall of the nave shows evidence for later rebuilding on its earlier line. The present wall is set back slightly in bays which are defined by Tuscan wall pilasters. This work probably dates from the 18th century. The upper part of the wall was probably rebuilt in the late 19th century, certainly after the engraving by E Blore of *circa* 1820 which shows windows at this level. There is also a blocked window at a similar level in the north wall of the sanctuary. The blank arcading on the north wall of the tower looks as if it has been incompetently restored in modern times.

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH (FIG 1)

The earliest recorded excavation on the priory site was in 1828 when George Baker exposed sections of the nave, aisle, choir, and chapter house walls (NRO, Canons Ashby [Dryden collection]). Later in the century, Sir Henry Dryden carried out further below-ground explorations in addition to extensive restoration

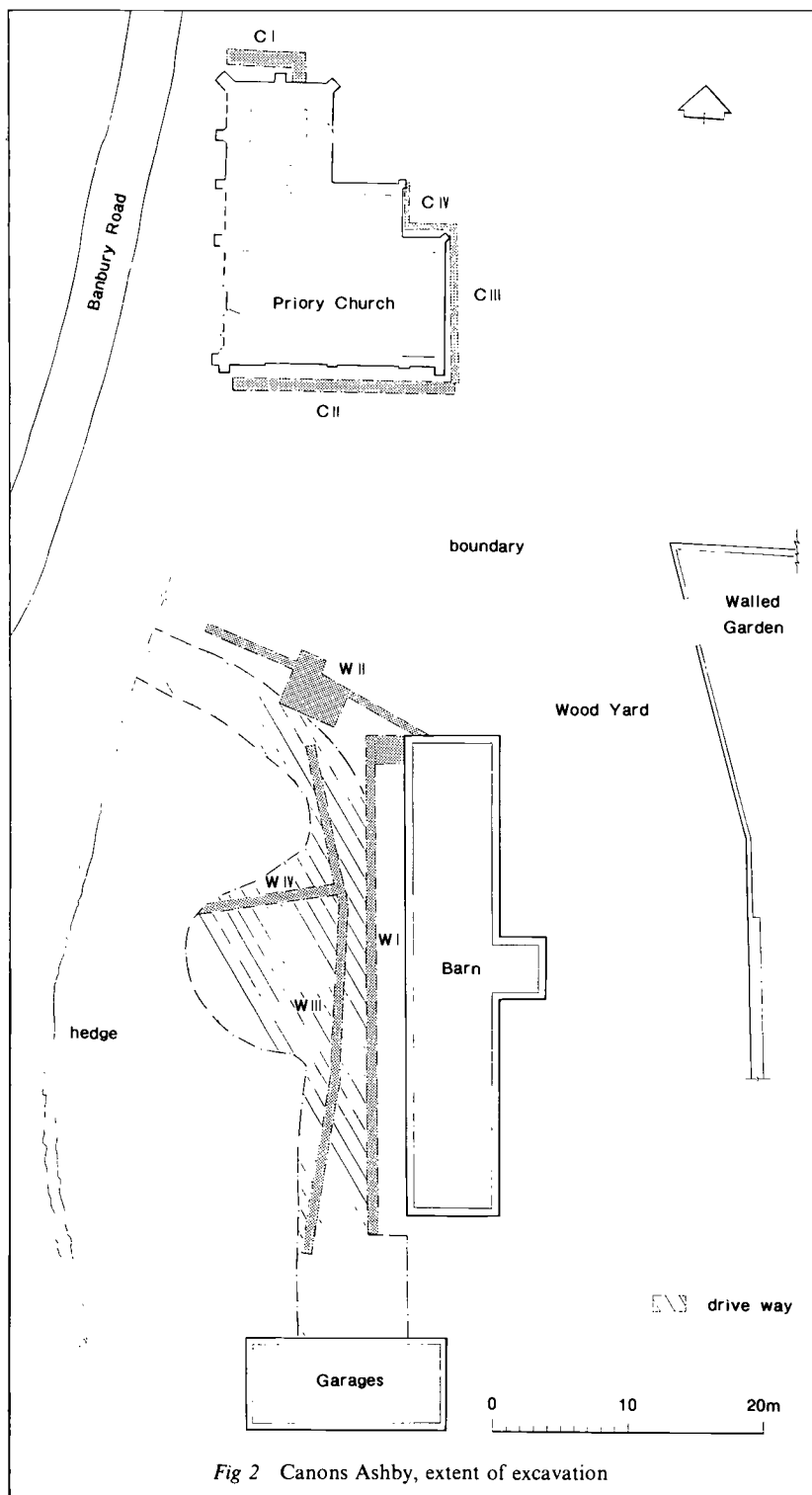


Fig 2 Canons Ashby, extent of excavation

of the standing fabric. In 1909 he gathered the results of this fieldwork into a plan which reconstructed the conventual layout. The drawing is now retained in the Northampton Public Reference Library. It is largely conjectural, however, and was inspired by the plans of other Augustinian houses comprising a cloister garth enclosed by an eastern range with a chapter house and a southern range housing the refectory.

Dryden's plan remained unpublished until 1974, when it was reproduced by Steven Taylor in the report of his 1970 excavation at the site (Taylor 1974). Such work constituted the only recorded archaeological investigation in the present century prior to 1982.

EXCAVATIONS IN 1982/83

In 1982, as part of a major conservation scheme at the nearby Tudor house and its gardens, the National Trust commenced restoration of the priory church. The installation of drains in deep trenches around the church required prior archaeological investigation. At the same time, an adjacent property at the south, known as the "Woodyard", was being converted into a private residence; it was located within the area of the former monastic precinct and partly over the claustral ranges. Archaeological observation and recording were conducted intermittently alongside restoration during 1982-3. Investigation and recording were limited however to the disturbances caused by trenches and other ground works for water and sewer pipes, electricity cables and driveways.

EXTENT OF EXCAVATION (FIG 2)

THE CHURCH: TRENCHES CI, CII, CIII, CIV

A series of hand-dug trenches was opened along the north, south and east sides of the church at distances of 0.5 to 1 m from the walls. Along the north and south sides the trench was dug to a depth which exposed the natural strata but at the east (CIII, CIV) the drainage requirements largely limited the excavation to post-monastic levels, although earlier graves were exposed at the base of trench CIII.

THE WOODYARD: TRENCHES WI, WII, WIII, WIV.

Machine-dug trenches were opened on the west

side of the barn in the southern part of the former west range of the cloister and at the west end of the range opposite the church. Trench WI ran beside the wall of the barn at a distance of 2 m. Archaeological levels survived best in the northern part of the trench and provided a cross section of the stratification within the southern claustral range. A small extension was made eastward to expose more of the occupation surfaces. Trench WII extended across the northern area of the woodyard from the north-west corner of the barn to the gate beside the Banbury road. The trench was enlarged at about its mid-point to expose a greater area of the structural remains revealed there. The construction of the adjacent driveway was preceded by the cutting of two narrow trial trenches in which recording was limited to the definition of features at their bases.

The method of recording followed the procedures outlined in Boddington 1978, whereby units of stratification were recorded individually and then combined to form structural groups (SG) which can be interpreted into a series of structural and general phases.

DESCRIPTION OF MAIN PHASES

I. LOCATION AND EARLY OCCUPATION

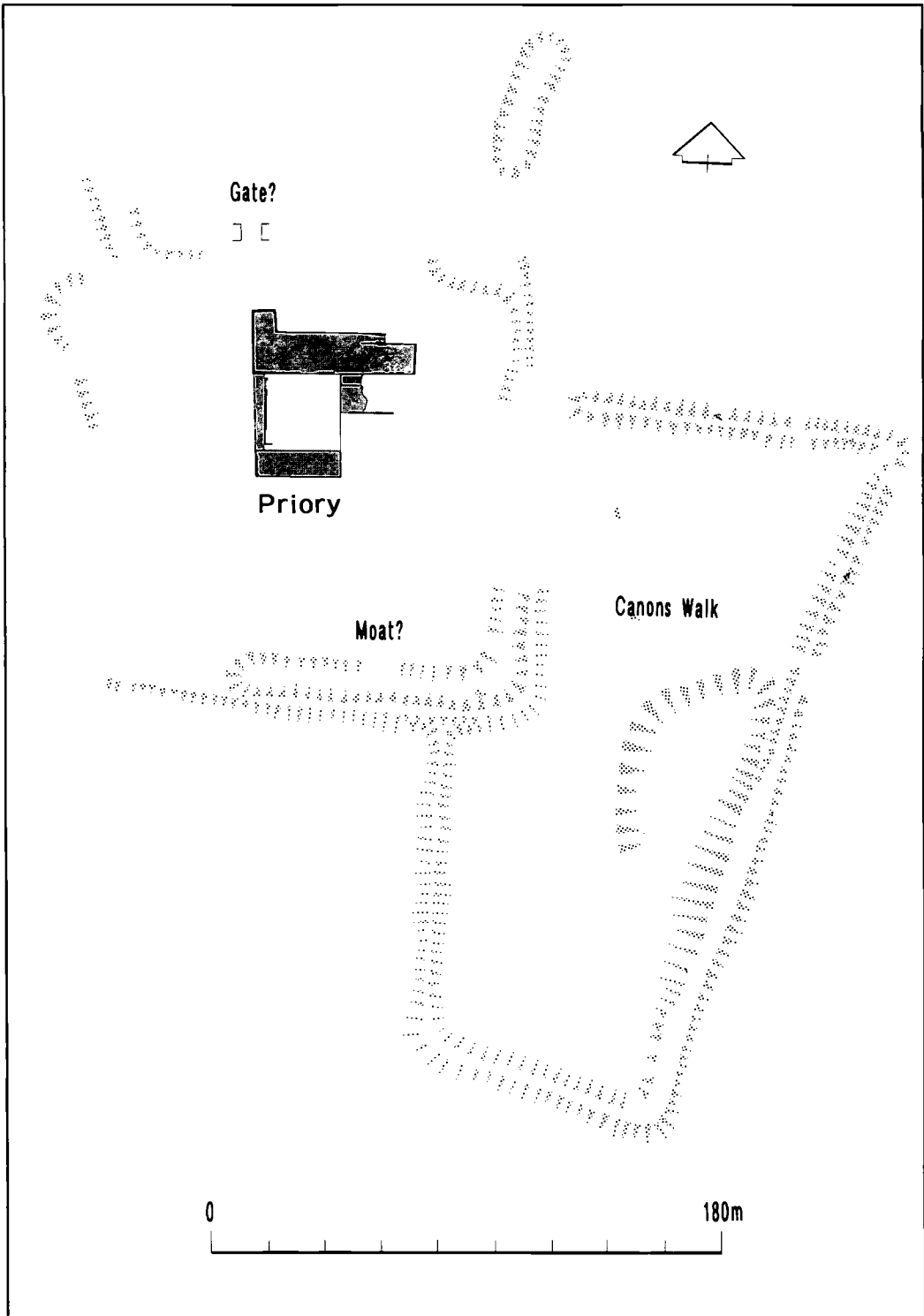
The Priory was established at the lower or southern end of an outcrop of ironstone subsoil. Evidence for early occupation was denoted by fragments of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery recovered from later levels. A few features cutting the natural may relate to this period however. Although none could be adequately investigated or interpreted, all yielded Romano-British pottery and in the woodyard a large pit may have served for rubbish disposal. This phase is not illustrated in the present report.

II. MONASTIC EVIDENCE (FIG 1)

THE CHURCH: SP101, SP102, SP103

The foundations of the demolished south wall of the nave and north wall of the aisle were exposed in trenches CIII and CIV, where both were 0.6 m to 0.7 m wide and of coursed ironstone masonry surviving to a height of 0.5 m.

The northern footings of the tower were also partially exposed (CI) comprising two superimposed fabrics. The upper courses included ironstone ashlar and were laid upon a 0.2 m layer of small ironstone rubble. This in turn overlay



a single course of limestone blocks offset *circa* 0.2 m from the upper work. The depth of this lower structure could not be ascertained, and though phased as part of the foundation of the tower, could equally represent the footings of an earlier building.

Any floors had presumably been destroyed during the mid 16th century demolition since they did not survive to the east of the truncated nave and aisle. The demolition had resulted in a build-up of debris which is still visible as a mound to the east of the church. Close to the nave, the depth of this deposit was reduced to 0.4 m by the construction of a Victorian surface drain (GP4). The layer sealed an earlier series of inhumations. Nine graves were visible at the base of the trench, and one contained fragments of a stone coffin with a monolithic head recess. All predate the 16th century rebuilding of the nave wall and presumably relate to interments inside the original church. The excavation of the graves may have disturbed an earlier level of occupation as Romano-British sherds were found in the surrounding upcasts.

THE CLAUSTRAL BUILDINGS

The cloister and its complex of buildings was attached to the south side of the church. The plan suggested by Dryden includes a cloister court surrounded on three sides by buildings forming respectively east, west and south ranges. These provided accommodation for the various domestic activities which were part of the daily life of the monastery.

The west range and cloister alley

A wall of ironstone footings 17 m long and 0.6 m wide was first located on the west side of the cloister garth by Dryden in the last century (NRO, D(CA) 486/11; 464/2, 40,41; 465/5, 6, 9, 10). The ends of this wall were re-exposed in 1982. At the north, a single course of ironstone blocks bonded in clay survived in trench CII, but its stratigraphic relationship with the nave footings could not be established. At the south, the wall survived in three courses to a height of 0.5 m and formed a right-angled corner together with another wall at the east. Only the south face of this latter survived and part of it had been incorporated in the construction of a later stone drain (GP3, drain D4). The corner was well faced and strengthened with large ironstone blocks. A thin bed of lime mortar still adhered to the upper surface of the top course. The possible core of another wall was exposed at 2.5 m to the west of these footings. It comprised a band of rammed ironstone, 0.6 m wide, following a line projected from the west wall of the south range as defined by Taylor in 1970 and therefore should be regarded as the remnants of the east wall of the west range. Further south, however, Trench WII failed to expose any clear section of this putative wall. Three features were visible in the section of this trench. F1 and F2, both 1 m wide, could be identified as drystone footings, and F3, a trench filled with ironstone rubble, may represent the remnants of a robbed wall. The general north-south orientation of all features is compatible with that of the wall and although none falls exactly on the projected wall line, they cannot be ruled out as being of monastic origin. The configuration created by these two walls tends to suggest that an alley, 2.5 m wide, bordered the west and south ranges, thereby

enclosing two sides of the cloister garth.

The individual wall-footings lay upon what appeared to be the surface of the levelled off natural ironstone. This survived extensively along the south side of the church and also close to the south-west corner of the cloister garth where it lay 0.5 m lower, suggesting that the floor of the alley sloped southward on a gradient of about 1:44.

Fragments of a thick layer of limestone chippings (30–70 mm deep) were recorded about 0.7 m below ground level along the south wall of the nave. They may represent a make up of construction debris compacted upon the construction surface. The largest fragment survived between the walls of the cloister alley and yielded a pottery sherd dated to the 13th century.

Floor finishes did not otherwise survive within the area of excavation.

The south range

The west wall of the southern claustral range is known from Taylor's work (Taylor, 1974). In 1982–83 the excavation trenches demonstrated that the north and south walls of the range had been entirely robbed. However the resulting plan of robber trenches fixes the internal width of the room at 7 m.

An even layer of rammed ironstone rubble similar to that in the cloister alley represents the earliest level within the range. This context occupied the entire width of the room. It was cut by three later drains (SP3: D1, D2, D3) and the foundation of the 19th century barn. The ironstone surface lay some 0.9 m below the construction level recorded in the cloister alley, thus suggesting that the room may have been an undercroft. We know from Taylor's previous excavation that this surface extended to the west end of the room where the base of a central pillar was located (Taylor, 1974). A similar feature was found by Dryden to the east, during construction of the northern extension of the woodyard barn in the last century (NRO, D (CA) 464/2). Stratification which could have related to the monastic use of the building did not survive within the range. It was presumably destroyed when new floors were laid following the Dissolution (GP3, GP4).

Earlier levels did not survive outside the building apart from the layer of ironstone rubble associated with the south-west corner of the cloister alley.

Two large stone-built drains (GP3: D5, D6), running parallel with and outside the north and south sides of the range, may have been part of the monastic drainage system, although this cannot be demonstrated stratigraphically. All three have therefore been arbitrarily placed and discussed in a later phase (GP 3).

III. EARLY POST-MONASTIC EVIDENCE (GP2)

THE CHURCH

At the Dissolution the church was reduced to its present state. To the east a turfed mound of debris is still visible today. Within the excavation trench, the demolition layer was up to 0.4 m thick and sealed medieval graves.

Adjacent to the north side of the tower, the remains of a plain tiled floor were exposed about 1 m below ground level. The tiles, plain glazed on one side, date to the later

16th or early 17th centuries and belong to the floor of a cellar. Its existence together with the presence of the scars of beams and rafters in the masonry of the standing wall above, corroborates Baker's account that a building was formerly attached to this part of the church (Foard, 1982, p.4).

CLAUSTRAL BUILDINGS

The west range and cloister alley

Extensive stone robbing and subsequent levelling had so thoroughly removed deposits from the 16th and 17th centuries that the stratification close to the church consisted only of 18th century upcasts which were very similar to those found in the south range. A few fragments of 14th–16th century decorated tiles found in these deposits probably relate to the Cope's period of occupation.

The south range

Robber trenches constitute the only indication of the position of the walls.

A single feature, F20, may be attributed to post-monastic repairs and comprised a massive, square stone structure, 1 m × 1 m × 0.4 m, which was made of rough hewn blocks of ironstone bonded in clayey silt. It was faced on three sides and apparently had been cut away at the south, presumably during the robbing of the north wall of the range. The position of these square footings on the edge of the robber trench suggests that they probably relate to a buttress. The insertion of this feature occasioned marginal damage to the south face of drain D4 and partially blocked the cloister alley which must therefore have been already redundant.

Two superimposed thin mortar layers were found above the earlier levels within the range. The lowest appeared intermittently in section and overlay an organically rich make-up layer 0.2 m to 0.3 m thick. The upper mortar layer was also established on a similar thickness of make-up spread over the lower mortar.

Both mortar layers were sandy and very thin. While the lowest contained ceramics of the 13th century, it also seems to be level with the lower mortar floor which Taylor recorded and found to date to the 17th century (Taylor 1974). The assemblage from the upper floor ranged from the 14th to the 16th centuries and can be equated with Taylor's upper floor. The flagstones recorded in 1970, however, did not survive within the area which was excavated in 1983. A southern portion of the same stone floor was nevertheless exposed during later excavation of the driveway trench.

Another group of flagstones was recorded on the north side of the range where they sealed a level of upcasts dated to the 16th and 17th centuries. The stones were noticeably worn and the floor surface was covered by a thin layer of coal dust reminiscent of Taylor's findings inside the building (Taylor, 1974). It is therefore reasonable to regard the group as being contemporary with the internal stone floor and providing an indication of the external ground level. A difference of about 1 m exists between these floors, thereby reflecting the medieval undercroft design.

At some stage during this period of occupation, three small stone drains appear to have operated within the west

end of the south range (D1, D2, D3). They were all of narrow section (100 mm × 100 mm). D1 and D3 ran along the north and south walls respectively. D1 was recorded by Taylor (Taylor, 1974) and Dryden (NRO, D(CA)464/2). The third drain, D2, ran a comparatively irregular course across the building and on these grounds could be separated chronologically from the others.

Three larger drains (D4, D5, D6), averaging 0.5 m × 0.4 m, were found outside the building. D4 and D5 appear to run parallel with the north and south sides of the range at about 4 m from the respective walls. Both were stone built and the cover stones, if any were ever intended, were missing. Their organic fills contained a small assemblage of 17th century ceramics. The northern drain, D4, utilised part of the south west corner of the cloister alley. Although not established by excavation, it is possible that both D4 and D5 flowed into a third drain, D6, which ran from north to south about 3 m west of the range.

Since the conversion of the buildings to secular use probably utilised existing drainage systems, these large drains might therefore be of monastic origin (GP2).

THE POTTERY AND LATER MEDIEVAL TILES

Terry Pearson

Besides a small assemblage of pottery comprising Roman, Saxon and Medieval wares, the fieldwork also yielded a total of 38 floor tile fragments representing a minimum of 32 tiles. A complete inventory and series of fabric descriptions is retained in archive. The upper surface of all tile fragments was worn and stripped of its glaze and, in some cases perhaps, decoration. The majority however was clearly plain and of triangular or square shape. The range of fabrics and other features concurs with the descriptions of the earlier group of material retrieved by S Taylor (Eames 1974, 66–7).

CONCLUSION

Some form of Romano British occupation on the site in the 1st, 2nd and possibly 4th centuries AD, is strongly suggested by the presence of sherds of that period, either stratified in pits or residual in later levels. Likewise, residual Anglo-Saxon ceramic in later levels, although in smaller quantity, may be an indication of some kind of contemporary activity. While it is impossible to draw any conclusion from the assemblage of pottery from the site, the scarcity of material of that date, combined with a total absence of associated

features, may be taken as an indication of the marginal location of the Priory relative to the village of Ashby first recorded in 1086.

Similarly we are poorly documented on the hundred years or so which elapsed between the granting of the lands and buildings and the actual construction of the Priory. Archaeological research has not yet provided any indication of the nature and location of either the earlier church nor the temporary living quarters of the canons during the construction of the new House.

Our knowledge of the destroyed part of the church derives entirely from Baker's limited investigations and the detail of the spatial organisation of the building remains obscure. Our understanding of the conventual configuration itself is still imprecise but can be broadly reconstructed. The familiar pattern of a Priory church flanked to the south by a square cloister garth with east, west and south ranges was probably followed at Canons Ashby. There is now strong evidence that a 2.5 m wide alley existed around the cloister court.

The west range has not yet been satisfactorily investigated. The western wall of the alley could also belong to the range but Dryden's attempts, albeit limited, to locate monastic evidence west of this line remained unsuccessful. The existence of an east range including, probably, a vaulted chapter house is also attested by the results of Baker's and Dryden's investigations of its northern end in the last century (NRO, D (CA) 464, 465).

We are more accurately informed about the morphology of the south range. Its north, south and west walls have been fixed, together with two pillars of a central colonnade. The building was positioned some 26 m south of the church. The undercroft room was 7 m wide internally and 27 m long, measured from the west wall to the projected line of the west wall of the east range as fixed by Dryden. A colonnade of three full bays, 6.5 m each as measured from the known pillars, and two half bays at each end would fit exactly within the 27 m to support vaulting.

There is a lack of evidence concerning the ancillary buildings usually associated with a monastery since research has so far focused on the main buildings, the church and cloister. The

definition of the monastic precinct is also difficult but its boundaries may be represented by some of the earthworks surviving in the vicinity (FIG 3). The L-shaped 'moat' south east of the Priory, together with traces of a similar ditch-like feature north east of the church and the remnants of a gateway recorded by Dryden on either side of the Banbury road, some 30 m north of the tower, may be elements of a rectangular enclosure centred on the claustral complex. The traces of earthworks at the west however do not support such a regular pattern, though the southern branch of the L-shaped moat may have continued further west originally. The large trapezoidal enclosure, the Canons Walk, to the south east is more likely to relate to the post-Dissolution development and in particular to Sir John Cope's conversion, although this still requires confirmation (Foard, 1982).

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