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The Medieval Hospital of Saint Mary Magdalene, Durham

Oliver Jessop

THE hospital of St. Mary Magdalene was the smallest of four such institutions, all of them located on the eastern approach roads into the city of Durham (fig. 1). Very little survives, and the aim of this paper is to compile a comprehensive description and history of the hospital from all the available sources. The first part is a narrative history, primarily compiled from contemporary documents. The second deals with the surviving remains of the hospital and chapel, using a combination of architectural, pictorial and geophysical evidence.

1. THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The contemporary written records relating to the hospital are very scant and indirect. They are preserved in the Durham Treasury (D.T.) and the Dean and Chapter (D.C.) libraries, predominantly within the accounts of the prior almoner. A number of scholars, (Fowler, Offler, Surtees and Barnby) have already translated extracts from these texts and the following account attempts to summarize their work, making reference to the original manuscript source.

The history up to 1541

The details concerning the founder and foundation date of the hospital are far from clear. The relevant three documents contain contradictory information, which has caused a certain amount of confusion amongst those translating them. Also, these texts were written long after the events that they describe and by authors who do not appear to have been directly connected with the institution.

A mid 12thC charter of Bishop William of St. Barbara (D.C. Cartulary, fo. 37v) describes a grant of land in Sherburn "to St. Mary Magdalene and the sick people who dwell there". This has been identified by Offler (1968, 170–2) as sixty acres that formed a large close called "Maudeleynleys", located in front of the gate at Sherburn hospital (D.C. Hunter MSS. No. 27). The hospital of St. Mary Magdalene must have been in existence prior to the issue of this charter. Such an early foundation is also suggested by Meade (1995, 14), who believes that the master of Kepier hospital, founded in 1180, is unlikely to have relinquished any of his land for the creation of another hospital so close to his own; see fig. 1.

The identity of the possible founder must be inferred from two 13th and 14thC texts; D.T. Cart. Elemos., 6tae, 4tae Elmos. No. 12 and No. 16. The first is headed "Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene near Kepier", and describes a gift of 12 acres called "Southcroft". This land in the parish of St. Giles was given to the prior and convent of Durham from the family of John de Hameldun, to ensure his eternal remembrance. This was a common practice, whereby wealthy members of society gave money to the church and worthy causes, obtaining in return the promise of a place in heaven (Platt 1988, 147). Early translations by Surtees (1840, 67) and Barnby (1896, 29–31) have, it seems, misinterpreted this document, suggesting that this gift of land represented the actual foundation of the hospital.

The second text from the 14thC is a complaint in which the writer accuses the prior almoner, John de Bulford, of stealing the deeds of Magdalene hospital; but it contains a footnote from the prior claiming that this is

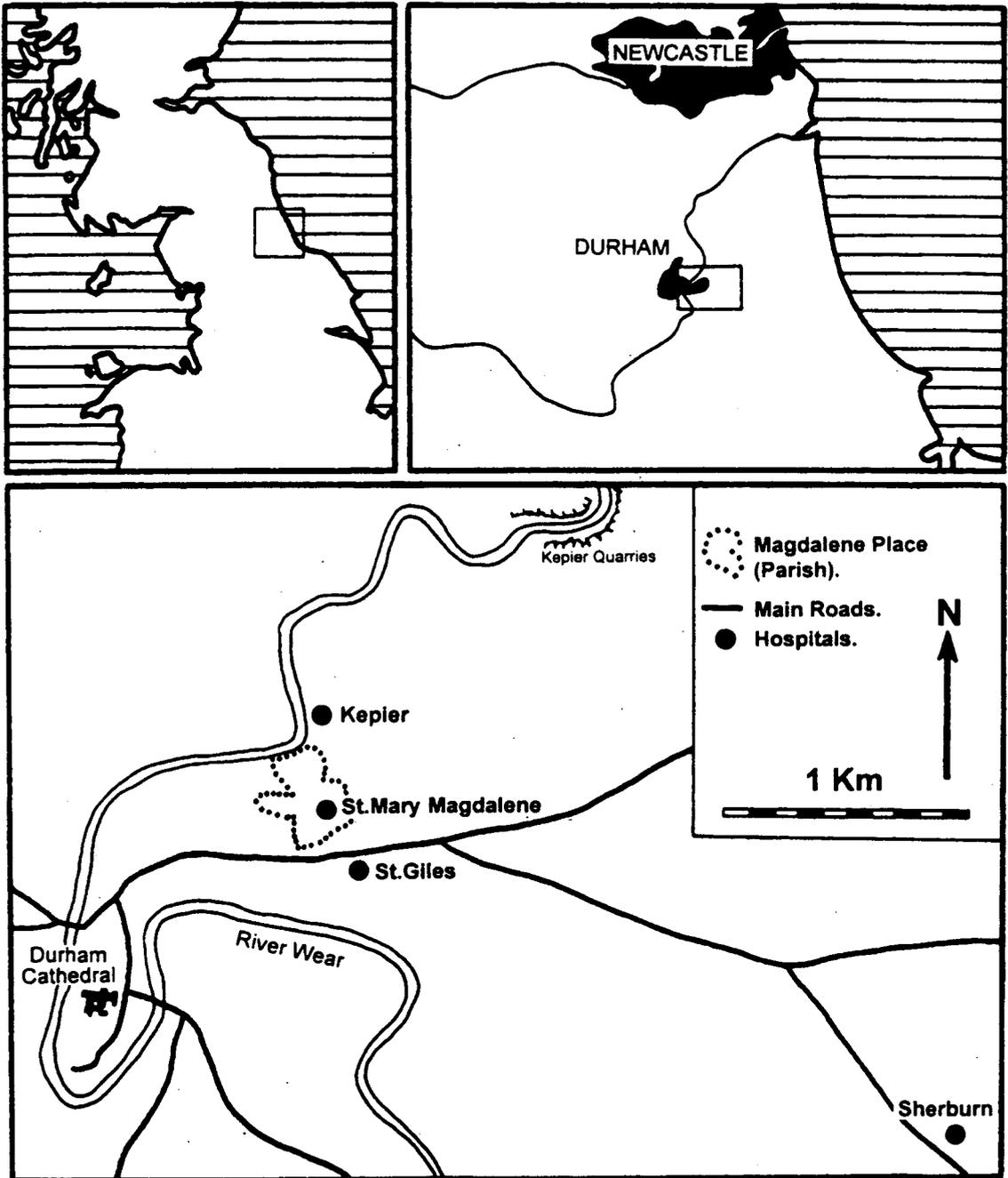


Fig. 1 Location map.

untrue. The document then explains that a knight, Sir John le Fitz Alisaundre, founded the hospital out of his lands, specifically for the souls of Christians. Although they are not contemporary, the two accounts have a number of similarities and it is possible that Sir John le Fitz Alisaundre and John of Hameldun were the same person.

The hospital was located on the eastern approach to Durham (see fig. 1), close to one of the main roads into the city. It consisted of a chapel and several other buildings, one of which was probably an infirmary. When founded it was intended to have a chaplain and thirteen free places for good men and women, a number intended to represent Jesus and his disciples. The almonry of Durham agreed to support the foundation and was given by the founder in return, the village of Rilley and the right to grind corn in Chilton mill (D.T. Cart. Elemos., 6ta, 4tae., No. 16). The chaplain was granted a daily sustenance, and a garment every year to the value of one mark. The inmates were to receive each week 23.5 loaves of white bread; on three days 2.5 gallons of broth; and every year, the sum of 4d. for shoes, 3 ells (c. 45 inches) of russet (coarse grey/red-dish cloth) and the same quantity of canvas. A comparable level of care appears to have been maintained into the 16thC, with an annual stipend of 24s. going to the five inmates between 1532–34 (D.C. Hunter MSS. No. 37).

Regrettably, little is known about the daily routine within the hospital, and the only documented activity is a series of building works. In 1370 a new barn and a chamber for the chaplain, costing £1.19s. 4d., were constructed (D.T. Rott. Elemos., 14). Extensive repairs to the chapel were also undertaken, although these cannot have been very successful, because in 1448 the chapel was in such a dangerous condition that it was dismantled (D.T. Rott. Elemos., 14). The reason for such drastic action was apparently that its foundations had been dug into watery ground. Bishop Nevill granted a license to remove the chapel to another site to the west of the hospital precinct, and also allowed it to maintain its ecclesiastical status. It took two years to com-

plete and finally, on the 6th May 1451, the suffragan bishop Episcopus Holen, with the master of Kepier hospital John Lound, consecrated the new chapel (D.T. No. 2266).

Unlike most other hospitals, St. Mary Magdalene's chapel also functioned as a parish church and the records in the priory accounts indicate that it performed full parochial duties (Fowler 1898, 228, 253): a marriage took place in 1420–21, and in 1515–16, when a stranger who was staying within the parish on the holding of Robert Johnson suddenly died, his burial was in the churchyard. The existence of a font of Frosterley marble (Surtees 1840, 67) suggests that baptisms would also have taken place. When the hospital was founded it included a chaplain and his primary responsibility may have been directed towards the care of the sick, rather than for the care of the soul. This may have been because after 1303, it was the master of the almonry School, and not the resident chaplain, who said the twice weekly mass in the chapel (D.C. Mickleton MSS. No. 32).

Access to the hospital was along a narrow passage to the south, called Magdalene-gate (D.C. Hunter MSS. No. 37). Parishioners lived in tenements along this passage and the first two were thatched cottages, whose joint rents were 13s. 6d. Rents such as these provided the hospital's main income, although further resources were provided by local benefactors, who gave gifts of property, land and money. For example, the vicar of Billingham gave a rent of 3s. a year from a house in Crossgate, Durham (D.T. 2273, 4ta, 2dae, Elemos. 2A). The priory was aware of the importance of such benefactors, and in times of hardship frequently intervened. An example of this can be seen happening in 1391, when Bishop Skirlaw granted a suspension of giving to all those who supported the hospital for a period of forty days (D.T. 2264, 6ta, 4tae, Elemos., No. 15). A regular corn ration was also distributed to the inmates. This was brought in from 32 of the surrounding villages, some of which were located up to 15 miles away, such as Wallsend to the north and Witton to the south (D.C. Hunter MSS. No. 27).

Descent of the site from 1541

After the dissolution of the Cathedral priory, on the 31st December 1540, the hospital was closed. Its revenues were granted to the newly formed Dean and Chapter, who maintained services in the chapel, and it continued to function as a parish church. The chaplain's annual stipend of £4, along with parochial responsibility and administration, was annexed to the office of Cathedral librarian. For the first few years at least, the Dean and Chapter honoured their duty to the parishioners by maintaining the fabric of the Chapel; repairs to the roof are documented from 1554 (D.T. No. 3007).

The site of the chapel was indicated on Schwytzer's early engraving of 1595. It was set back from "Gillygate" (Gilesgate) and surrounded by trees. However, by 1660 services had been discontinued, (Clack 1985, 114) and the isolated and roofless building was illustrated on Fosters' map of 1754. Even in this period of decline, the chapel was still important to the local community, and internments in the cemetery continued. Most notable was the burial of Roger Conyers in 1643 (Surtees 1840, 67), whose funerary details are recorded in the church of St. Nicholas, Durham.

In 1822 the unfenced and overgrown churchyard was converted into a garden. A greenhouse was constructed within the shell of the chapel, and it was at this time that the foundations of the hospital were discovered to the east (Surtees 1840, 67). The true extent of the hospital precinct is unknown, although it does not appear to have extended to the north west. During building work in 1993 a watching brief in this area failed to identify any evidence of graves or buried structures (Hammond 1995). Immediately south of the chapel, a deep cutting was excavated in 1844 for the Durham and Sunderland Railway terminus. I would suggest that this activity destroyed all the surviving remains of the hospital, because in 1970 when the A690 was constructed over the site of the disused railyard, no traces of earlier structures were reported.

The parish

The hospital chapel was unusual, because it also functioned as the focus for a parish, which may help explain the continued existence and patronage of such a minor hospital. The parish was called "Magdalene Place" (fig. 1) and was 25.5 acres in size, which when compared to the 1,855 acres of its neighbour at Kepier, was very small (VCH 1928, 182). It was still an official civil and ecclesiastical land boundary in 1894 (Whellan 1894). The original parish boundary has even been respected by modern developments, such as Orchard Drive and Ferens Park. Population records from the end of the 19thC, list the number of parishioners, which are as follows: 1871 (16), 1881 (27) and 1891 (16). Finally, during the 1930s, the parish was dissolved and amalgamated with that of the church of St. Nicholas.

2. ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY OF THE 15TH CENTURY CHAPEL

In October 1995, the surviving remains of the chapel were surveyed. A phased ground plan (fig. 2) was drawn, along with the external elevations (fig. 3). The growth of dense vegetation prevented the recording of the internal walls. A horizontal datum string was marked out around the building and measurements were taken from it. Regrettably, due to time constraints, this was not tied in to the ordnance datum. There does appear to be a datum point, of unknown altitude, carved within the external face of the southern wall (see fig. 3); its horizontal alignment is unusual and its authenticity is therefore suspect, although there are no signs that it has been reused.

The chapel is of a simple design, consisting of a single cell, measuring only 7 × 17 m. The walls are 1 m thick and faced with squared yellow sandstone blocks, which retain a mortared rubble core. Reused within the walls are a number of carved fragments of earlier masonry, which presumably originated from the earlier chapel dismantled in 1448. Two of

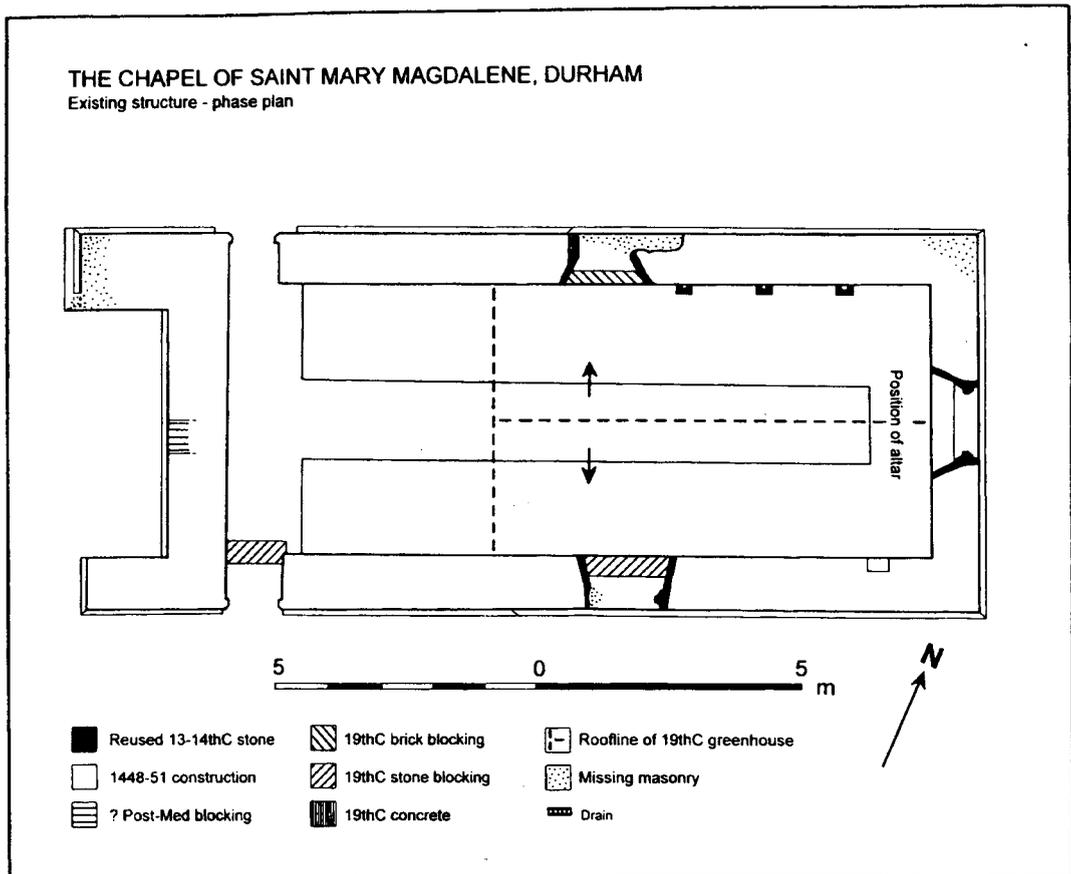


Fig. 2

these are columns, c. 100–150 mm in diameter, and their presence suggests that the earlier structure may have been more decorative than the building which replaced it. An external chamfered string course runs completely around the chapel at an approximate height of 0.5 m above the ground (fig. 3). This is stepped on both the north and south faces, taking account of the gentle slope into which the chapel has been constructed.

Access into the chapel was through one of two doors situated opposite each other at the western end of the building. The southern door has been blocked with a mortared stone wall, which appears to be contemporary with a similar blocking of the southern window

(fig. 2). Bygate (1899, 116) comments on these blockings, which may have occurred after 1822 when the churchyard was converted into a garden and the greenhouse constructed. The surviving northern door consists of a round headed arch, which has chamfered joints and a simple drip mould, only the springer of which survives on the southern door (fig. 3).

The chapel was lit by three windows, and it is only the opening of the east window that survives to its original height and shape. The tracery has gone, although it did survive in 1846 and was illustrated by Billings (fig. 4). His representation portrays a geometric design, which incorporates three quatrefoil lights within the window head. This decorative style

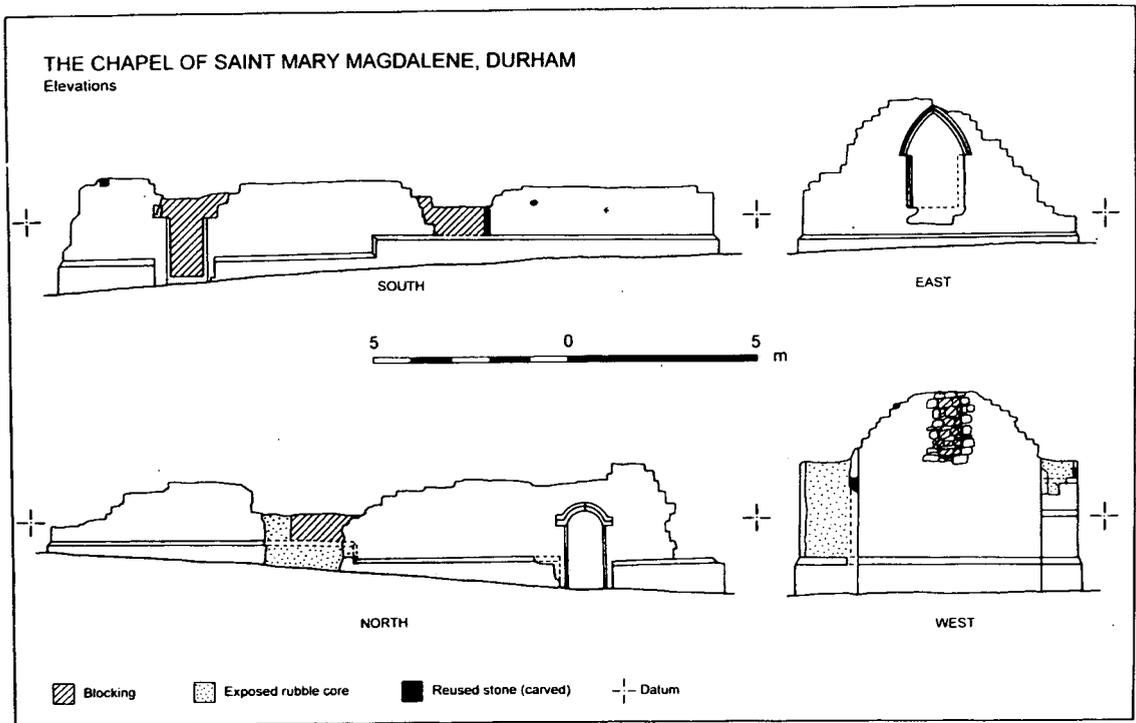


Fig. 3

was most prevalent in the 13thC, and the window may have been reused from the earlier chapel. The design has many similarities to the east window of St. Oswalds church in Durham, and is used throughout the country. A single hood mould surrounds the opening, along with traces of chamfered decoration running up the southern edge of the window. Due to extreme weathering, many of the cut ashlar edges no longer remain.

The other two windows are positioned slightly off centre on the north and south walls. They are both blocked and extensively damaged. It is probable that, like the eastern window, they were rescued from the earlier chapel, although there is not enough detail to give any indication of their original form. Both of the internal splays are blocked, the northern with 19thC fired clay bricks, and the southern with squared stone blocks.

Immediately to the west of the northern window is a small circular drainage hole. This is approximately 0.05 m in diameter and has been drilled through the wall. It is a feature contemporary with the 19thC greenhouse erected inside the ruined chapel. The only surviving traces of this structure are the window blockings, a series of carved grooves in the internal walls and three concrete postholes/sockets, at ground level, along the northern wall.

Beneath the eastern window the ground is raised, and this probably represents a low dais for the altar. Also, there are traces of two narrow side aisles for the stalls; however, the dense vegetation prevented a positive identification of these features. Built into the southern wall and located close to the site of the altar is a simple aumbry (fig. 2). This is only 0.25 m deep and positioned at 1.46 m above the altar dais.

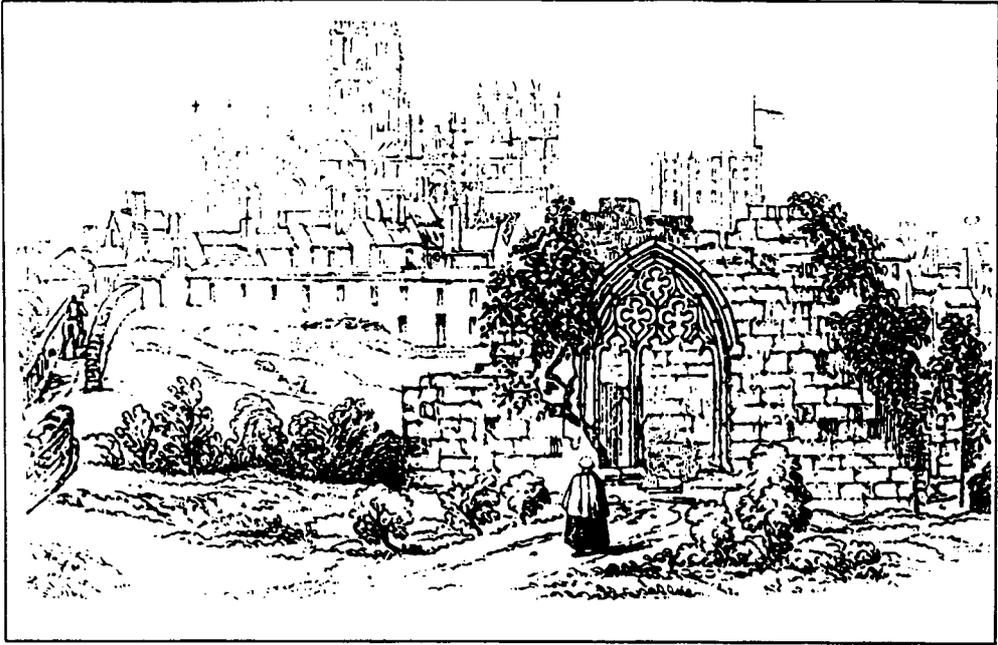


Fig. 4 Illustration of the eastern window by Billings, 1846.

The western gable is the most complete wall of the chapel, remaining to a height of 5.2 m, approximately 2 m short of the original roof apex. The external corners of this gable are supported by two large buttresses. They are of a similar design, with a series of stepped, chamfered string courses. The northern buttress is larger than its counterpart and although extensively damaged, has undergone partial repair. A number of the facing stones have been removed and the holes filled with fired clay bricks. These alterations, along with the repair to the northern buttress, may have occurred when the internal blockings for the greenhouse were constructed in the 19thC.

Immediately below the top of this surviving gable wall is an area of grey squared blocks, c. 2-3 stones wide and 6 courses high (fig. 3). These stones appear to represent a blocking, although the edges are poorly defined. It is unlikely however that this marked the position of a high level window. On the internal face of

this wall, c. 1 m from the top, the wall narrows forming a horizontal ledge which lies approximately 3 courses up the external blocking. It would therefore seem likely that the blocked up opening never went completely through the wall. Instead it may have formed a window-like niche that acted as a belfry which was only large enough to house one bell. The hanging of a bell is recorded in 1450 in the almonry account rolls (D.T. Rott. Elemos, 14).

3. GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

A geophysical survey, using a resistivity instrument, was undertaken on the 12th April 1995. The primary aim was to try and locate any masonry features which might survive from the earlier hospital, along with the distribution of any associated graves in the surrounding graveyard. The full details of the survey have been recorded elsewhere (Jessop 1995) and

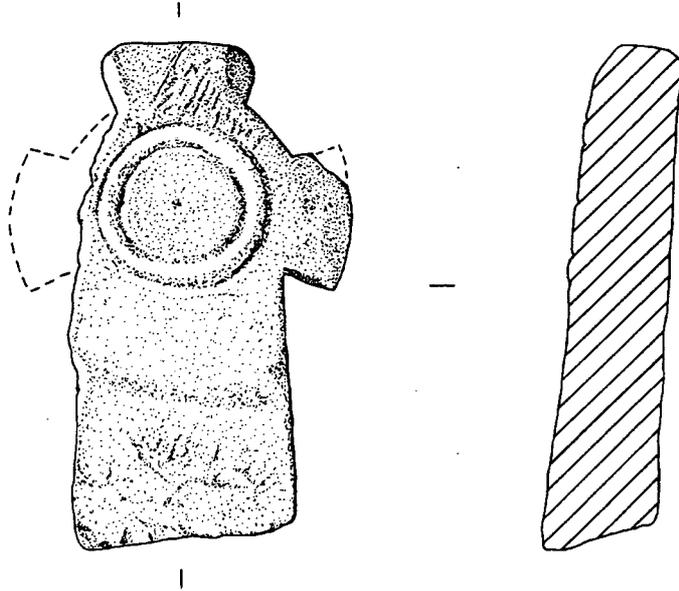


Fig. 5 Gable cross in Dean and Chapter library, Durham.

are therefore not repeated here. However, the overall results were disappointing. The anomalies appear to have been created by a series of 19thC land divisions and the gradual collapse of the chapel. No traces of the associated Medieval hospital were positively identified, or any graves within the graveyard.

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APPENDIX

A. The font

According to both Surtees (1840, 67) and Thompson (1883, 140) there was a stone font made from Frosterley marble located within the churchyard. However, its form and present location are unknown.

B. Gable cross

Thompson's initial work on the chapel (1883, 140) reported that an "Early English Gable Cross" had been discovered on the site, and that it had been placed in the Dean and Chapter library. In 1984 Professor Cramp compiled a corpus of all the worked stone within this library and no mention is made of Thompson's cross. However, she does list a "Cruciform grave-marker/gable finial of unknown provenance" and it is possible that the two crosses are the same.

The cross described by Cramp (1984, 74, No. 13) is carved in a medium grained yellow sandstone, which is typical of the outcrops within the immediate locality of Durham, such as Kepier quarries (fig. 1). It is identical to the sandstone used for the surviving chapel and stylistically is a form that would not be out of place on a 13thC chapel.

The cross (fig. 5), is 0.52 m in height and the shaft is 0.10 m thick and 0.28 m wide. Only one face is carved; the other three are roughly finished. The cross-head consists of three stubby arms that are outwardly flaring, and have been subjected to extensive damage. Carved within the centre of the head is a double circle with a central dimple. The foot of the cross is angled towards the back and has the appearance that it once slotted into another stone. The faces are all weathered, although traces of diagonal tooling still remain.

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