

# Lichfield Cathedral

## Archaeology of the Sanctuary

Warwick Rodwell

*Excavation in the second bay of the nave of Lichfield Cathedral yielded remarkable and wholly unexpected results. These included elements of the Anglo-Saxon church and a sunken chamber over which a canopy of honour had been erected. This may be the primary site of the shrine of St Chad, which remained a focus through the Norman and Gothic reconstructions of the building. The position was finally abandoned in the 14th century, when Bishop Langton erected a costly new shrine in the eastern arm.*

*The discovery of a pre-Viking sculptured and painted limestone panel, potentially an Annunciation scene from the shrine, is an art object of European importance.*

*Several medieval priests' graves were found: one contained a partially preserved oak coffin and other accoutrements of exceptional interest. No English medieval burial has hitherto yielded evidence of a painted cross on the fabric covering of the coffin lid, or of the consecrated Host being buried with the funerary chalice and paten. The remnants of the eucharistic wafer and linen napkin (corporal) must surely be the oldest found in Britain. It has hitherto been held that pewter chalices and patens were made especially for mortuary use and were only symbolic. That they could be buried holding the Host sheds new light on English sepulchral history.*

The nave of Lichfield Cathedral is a splendid Early English structure of c 1260-70, standing on the site of its Norman predecessor (Rodwell 2000). The floor was repaved by Scott in 1860, but nothing was recorded of its archaeology. Excavations in the choir aisles in 1992-94 revealed Anglo-Saxon walls and burials, suggesting that the pre-Norman cathedral lies axially beneath the present building (Rodwell 1993a; 1995). In 2003-2004 a new nave sanctuary was constructed in the second bay of the nave west of the crossing, the floor of which comprises a retractable stone-paved platform. An octagonal pit, seven metres across by 1.2 m deep, was excavated to house the jacking mechanism for the platform (see Figs 1 and 2).

### *The Anglo-Saxon Cathedral*

There must already have been a church here in 669 when Chad was consecrated fifth bishop of Mercia, and established Lichfield as the seat of his see. Bede tells us that when Chad died in 672 he was buried 'close by' the church of St Mary, but that his body was later transferred to the new church of St Peter. Bede also notes that Chad's tomb took the form of 'a little wooden house – covered – with an aperture in the side, through which those who visit it out of devotion to him may insert their hand and take out some of the dust' (Bede, IV, ch 3)

The significance of Lichfield continued to grow and during the reign of Offa it was briefly elevated to archiepiscopal status: thus from 787 to 802 the cathedral was the seat of the third archbishopric of England. It is against

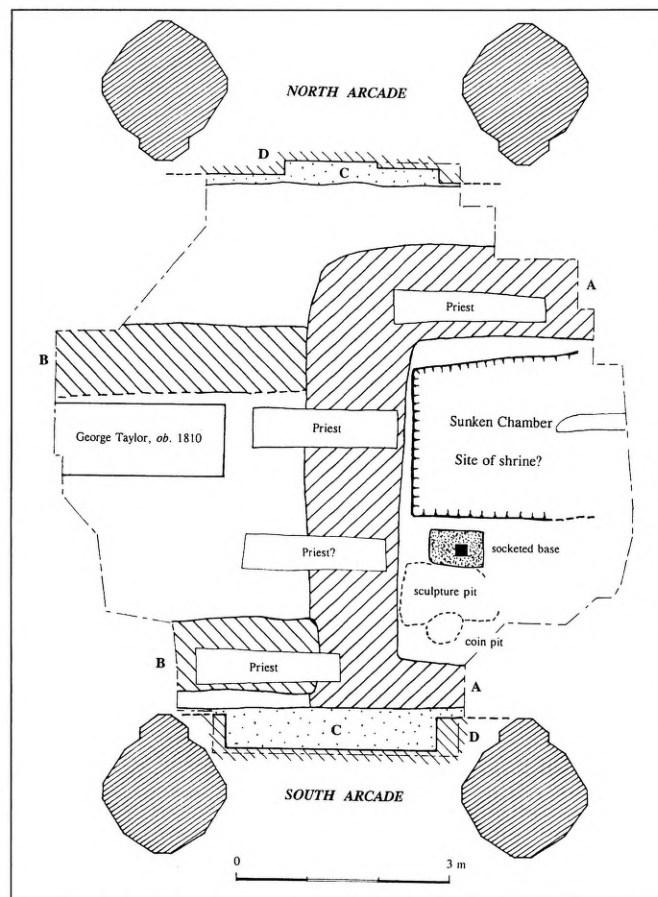


Fig 1 - Plan of excavations in bay 2 of the nave, showing principal features discussed in the text: A, primary Saxon foundations (cobbles); B, secondary Saxon foundations; C, late Saxon or Norman nave wall foundations; D, mid-13th century arcade foundation

this background that the Anglo-Saxon archaeology of the site must be viewed.

### *The Primary Structure*

The earliest structural evidence comprised the foundations of the west wall, together with parts of the north and south walls, of a rectangular building. The foundation trench, dug into the natural marl, contained large water-worn pebbles laid in a matrix of sticky red clay. The tenacious bond between pebbles and matrix, with an absence of voids and soft material, indicated that it had been laid as a wet-mix, acquiring a monolithic character when set. No contemporary walling survived on this foundation, which averaged 1.35 m in width. The scale and nature of the foundation indicates a very solid building probably with walls 1.2 m thick; the overall width (north–south) would have been c seven metres.

Although the Anglo-Saxon building is on the same alignment as the Norman and later churches, it does not share their central axis but is offset to the south by c 0.8 m. Whether this was a compact structure with a squarish plan, or the west end of a building of substantially elongated form (e.g. a nave) cannot be determined on the evidence available. However, circumstantial evidence hints at a small building. At least three interments took place inside the structure, one grave containing a good deal of dispersed charcoal. The presence of these graves suggests that we are not dealing here with the main body of the Anglo-Saxon church, where burial would not have been permitted. No graves were found outside the building.

### *The Western Adjunct*

In the next structural phase a narrow, rectangular cell was

added to the west: two lengths of foundation masonry were laid to abut the primary building, at the same time leaving its north-west and south-west angles projecting as salients. The foundation width was one metre, and the overall north-south dimension of the structure was 5.2 m. Since the west wall was not found, the full length of the addition cannot be estimated, but it was in excess of 3.6 m.

There then followed a complex sequence of events which led to the deposition within the two structural components of a series of thin layers of soil, mortar, sandstone chips and burnt material. The last seems to have been derived from a wattle-and-daub structure. Unfortunately, the survival of these deposits was very fragmentary, being confined to narrow ‘ribbons’ of stratigraphy upstanding between medieval graves. Interpretation of the evidence, while clear enough in section, is extremely difficult in plan.

### *The Sunken Chamber (Shrine?)*

Embraced within the earlier part of the Anglo-Saxon stratigraphic sequence was the creation of a semi-subterranean chamber approximately 2m square (the east side is however uncertain). The chamber was formed within the curtilage of the cobble foundation, but whether that still supported a building at the time is a moot point. The north, south and west sides of the construction pit for the chamber were cleanly cut and vertical, and the base was flat. Owing to later disturbances, the surface level from which the pit was originally dug cannot be established precisely, but its depth was at least 80cm.

The pit was designed to receive a lining. Partially adhering to the sides of the cut, especially at the western corners, was a vertical sliver of clay and small stones which constituted infill in the gap between the wall of the pit and the lining. No trace of the lining itself remained, that having either decayed or been robbed by the time the pit was backfilled several centuries later. Determining the nature of the lining is crucial to the interpretation of the sunken feature. It was not masonry, and the remaining options are lead and timber. The former would imply a water-holding tank, and its interpretation as a baptistery for the total immersion of adults would be the inevitable corollary. If the lining material was timber, the feature could have been a small burial crypt, or *hypogeum*, potentially with access from the east. On balance, a timber lining appears most likely. Whatever the nature of the chamber, it seems to have been prominently marked within the body of

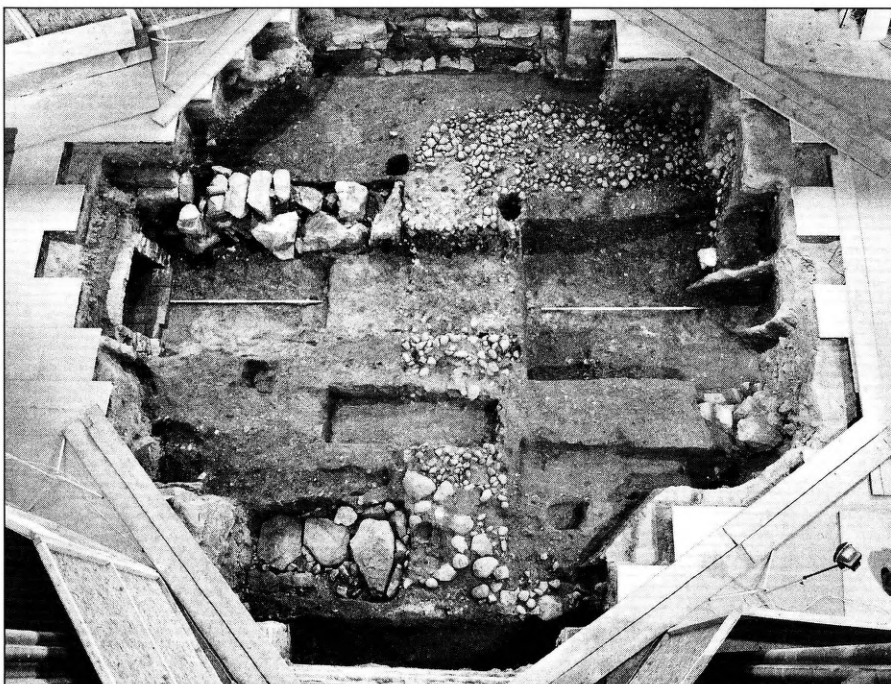


Fig 2 - The completed excavation, viewed from the south triforium

the church by a structure which stood above floor level.

Set into one of the earlier Saxon floors, close to the south-west corner of the chamber, was a large rectangular block of sandstone with a square socket in the centre of its upper face; this must have been the foundation pad for a timber column supporting a canopy. The wear-pattern on the stone suggested that the base of the column was 40 - 45cm in diameter. There were presumably four such columns, marking the corners of the chamber but, unfortunately, the positions of the other three had all been cut away by later features. The presumed canopy of honour (*baldachino*) was possibly not primary, but a subsequent embellishment added over the sunken chamber. Nevertheless, it was still stratigraphically early in the Anglo-Saxon sequence. The pit dug to receive the surviving base-block cut through earlier layers, which included the deposit of burnt material from a destroyed timber building.

The recognition of a *baldachino*, square in plan and sited over a sunken chamber, greatly enhances the likelihood that we are dealing here with a grave and shrine of middle Saxon date. Although not comparable in scale or grandeur, this calls to mind the reconstruction of St Peter's *Confessio* in Rome by Pope Gregory the Great (590 - 604).

In recent decades, archaeology has demonstrated how major Anglo-Saxon minsters gradually developed out of series of axially aligned churches, chapels, tombs, standing crosses, wells and other liturgical features (Blair 1992). Lichfield appears to be falling into the same general pattern, and the latest investigation may have succeeded in locating the original shrine of St Chad, constructed within the cathedral church of St Peter. Bede's description of the tomb as 'covered' must surely be a reference to the canopy. Potentially, the structural remains found further east in 1992 - 94 belong to the church of St Mary.

### *Anglo-Saxon Sculpture*

(*'The Lichfield Angel'; cover photograph*)

Sealed beneath the burnt layer, and thus antedating the erection of the *baldachino*, was a small pit containing two fragments of an Anglo-Saxon sculptured limestone panel. A third piece was recovered from a grave which had cut away part of the pit. The fragments conjoin to form one corner of a hollowed rectangular block, 61.5cm high. The principal face is decorated in bas-relief, while the return face (to the left) is plain. The surviving decoration (up to 37cm in width) comprises the left-hand end of a rectangular sculptured panel, the full original width of which is unknown. However, since the top edge of the block is slightly canted, it could be interpreted as half of the left-hand end-panel of a chest with a coped lid.

The decoration is of the highest quality and is excellently preserved. It depicts a standing male figure, winged and heavily draped. His right hand is raised in blessing, while his left hand grips a tall slender staff with a foliate head, which

crosses the torso and rests on the right shoulder. The head is nimbed and turned slightly to the left, indicating that it is part of a pair of figures. Identification as the Archangel Gabriel is indicated, and this is almost certainly half of an Annunciation scene. The panel was painted, and extensive traces of colour remain, although cleaning and conservation have yet to be undertaken. The figure itself seems to have been largely red, set against a field of pure white. The nimbus was white, edged with a narrow border possibly of yellow ochre; that could have been a ground for gilding. The feathers on the wings were individually coloured, red at the base with white tips and black shadow-lines. A panel on this scale could have come from a hollowed-out altarpiece, shrine or sarcophagus. It is potentially identifiable as a shrine chest, plausibly that of St Chad. The sculpture is a product of a Mercian school, dating from the late 8th century. It is a singularly fine piece, and exhibits some affinities with the angel panel at Breedon-on-the Hill (Cramp 1977, fig 58c).

Finally, the deposition of the broken sculpture in a small pit, on its own, adjacent to the putative shrine, raises interesting questions. We may see here the ritual burying of a once-important religious sculpture, after it had been desecrated. Could this be a pointer to hostile activity in the Viking period? Stratigraphically, the deposition comes after the spreading of burnt material across the site, and before the digging of a pit which yielded a coin of King Edgar (957 - 75).

### *The Late Saxon Period*

Little evidence relating to this period was found in the excavation, except that the positions of the north and south walls of the present nave seem to have been established in the pre-Norman period. These foundations were retained as sleeper walls for the early Norman arcades. Whatever stood over the sunken chamber remained as a focus, but the *baldachino* was removed and a series of layers representing floors and working horizons covered the socketed stone that had formerly supported the south-west column.

### *The Gothic Nave*

The arcades of the present aisled nave rest on massively constructed strip-foundations built of ashlar. The trenches for these walls sliced through, and almost entirely removed, the earlier nave foundations. Masonry salvaged from the demolition of the Romanesque building was used, including blocks carrying mouldings, decorative sculpture, masons' marks and paint.

Interest in the Anglo-Saxon sunken chamber was still not abandoned. On the contrary, whatever now marked the spot provided a focus for high status burials, again reinforcing the argument that this site was of pre-eminent religious significance. Surely, only the burial place or shrine of St Chad could have commanded such respect during the later Saxon, Norman and medieval rebuilds of the cathedral? The

iconography of the Gothic vault bosses of the nave might have shed further light on the setting of the shrine, but the original vaulting was largely dismantled and replaced by Wyatt. Fragments of one of the fallen bosses in the second bay were found during the excavation: these represented stiff-leaf foliage which was sumptuously decorated with polychromy and gilding.

The coffined burial of a priest, in a stone-lined cist, was placed on the central axis of the nave, hard against the west side of the posited shrine. When a large pit was dug for the construction of this cist it was found necessary to build a stone revetment at the east end of the grave, up to floor level. The implication must be that digging the grave partially undermined, and consequently threatened the physical stability of, the shrine; hence the need to underpin it with mortared masonry. This provides a strong indication that, despite the loss of all the floor-level evidence, there was a heavy structure standing over the sunken chamber.

The axial grave was flanked on the south by another, also in a massively constructed stone cist, and on the north by a third grave (which was almost entirely destroyed by a much later interment). Another priest's burial, again in a stone-lined cist, was placed immediately to the north of the shrine, while the area directly adjoining on the south was not intruded upon by medieval interments. The high status of the burials in this area is reflected by broken fragments of incised floor slabs, and indents of Purbeck marble and bluestone (recovered from sinkage fillings over the graves).

The posited shrine remained a prominent feature of the nave until the 14th century, when the sunken chamber was finally backfilled with layers of soil and rubble, and a tiled floor laid over it. Subsequently, several interments were made in this area, but the soft filling of the chamber compressed and sank markedly. Consequently, the burials inserted here became distorted, and the tile paving sank by up to 45cm, as a large sub-circular depression appeared in the floor.

Historically, the abandonment of the shrine in the nave may be linked to Bishop Walter de Langton's (1296-1321) recorded provision of a sumptuous new shrine in the retro-choir (here, the bay east of the high altar; Kettle and Johnson 1970, 157). It is unlikely that this was completed much before 1320.

Hitherto, it has been supposed that Chad's shrine was located in the presbytery apse of the Norman cathedral, and was moved progressively eastwards as the building grew in that direction. This interpretation has not been without its problems, especially in relation to space and pilgrim circulation: it is both logistically simpler, and more persuasive from the point of view of maintaining the cult focus, to regard the shrine as having been relocated only once.

### *Medieval and Later Burials*

Most of the excavated area contained medieval interments,

laid out with no inter-cutting. Post-medieval burial was remarkably sparse, probably because a substantial part of the floor was already taken up with large slabs, and these were respected. From the backfill of one of the later graves came an engraved brass angel of 15th-century date. It is likely to have been one of a pair of 'supporters' from a major sepulchral brass. This is the only fragment of a medieval memorial brass known from the cathedral: all such metalwork was torn up and sold for scrap in the 17th century.

A few tiny fragments of painted and gilded tabernacle work point to the likelihood that there were medieval canopied tombs in the vicinity, perhaps sited under the nave arcades. In total, only 22 medieval and later burials were encountered in the nave. Half of these are likely to date between the later 13th and 15th centuries, and of the remainder all but one are assignable to the 16th and 17th centuries. The final grave dates from 1810.

### *Burials of Medieval Priests*

The three medieval graves already mentioned yielded chalices and patens made of pewter and are indicative of priests' burials, with the possibility of a fourth having lost its vessels through later disturbance. These graves all comprised stone-lined cists with timber coffins placed inside them. The position of the chalice and paten was different in each case, and other details are worthy of mention.

The coffin in the cist abutting the shrine on the west was completely filled with fine loam, which had been packed around the corpse. The loam appears to be a mixture of fuller's earth and charcoal, both of which are effective desiccating agents. Little is known about this kind of deliberate filling of coffin voids in the Middle Ages, very few examples having been recorded by excavators. The chalice and paten were placed inside the coffin, next to the skull.

In the case of the priest's burial flanking the shrine on the north, the chalice and paten were placed in the cist, but outside the timber coffin, at the north-west corner. The cist itself was also interesting on account of having one end made from a flat slab of sandstone which had formerly been floor paving. On the worn upper surface were scored lines (both straight and curved) and numerous marks where the points of compasses had burrowed into the stone. This provides evidence that somewhere in the cathedral there was a stone pavement which medieval masons had used as a tracing floor, for setting out the geometry of architectural detailing. This is an exceptionally rare discovery, and the only extant stone pavements retaining evidence of use as tracing floors are at Lincoln and Wells.

The third priest's burial lay adjacent to the south nave arcade, and the amount of evidence preserved within the cist was remarkable (Fig 3); it probably dates from the late 13th century. The coffin was of oak, tapering in plan and constructed using nails. Although very fragile, some of the

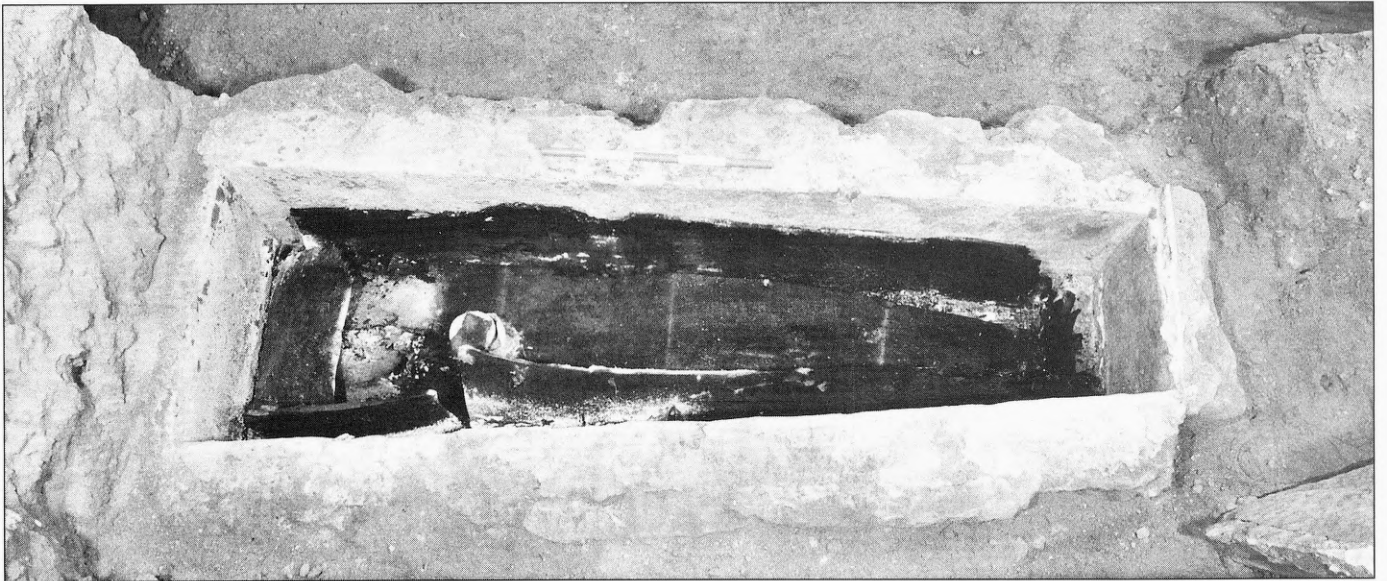
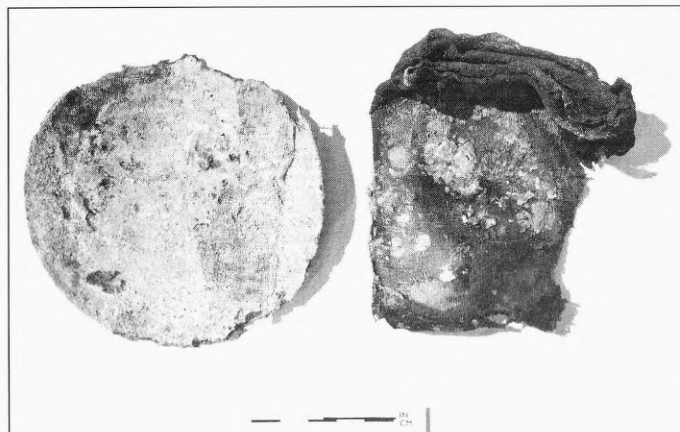
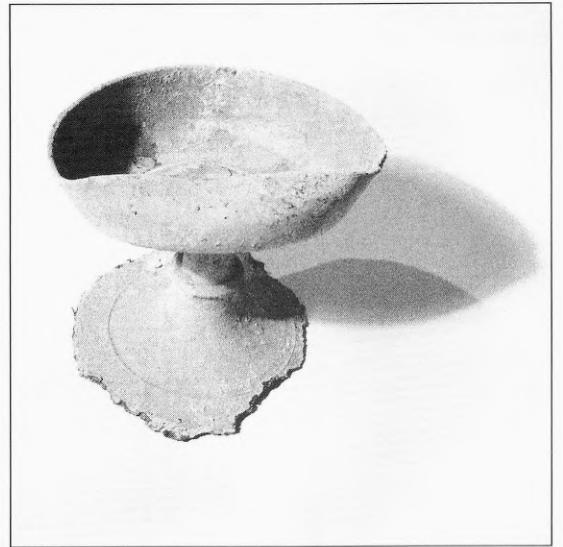


Fig 3 - 13th-century priest's burial, with pewter chalice, paten and linen cloth (corporal) with remnants of wafer adhering



timber still survived. The sides had collapsed outwards, against the walls of the cist, allowing the lid to sink down on top of the corpse. The lid had been covered with dark cloth on which was painted in bright red, a long cross with splayed arms. Lying over the intersection of the arms of the painted cross was another little cross made out of two twigs placed one over the other; this simple but poignant device with equal arms measured only 5cms across (cf Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 167).

Standing on the coffin lid immediately west of the twig-cross was a pewter chalice, and resting on that a paten. Lying on the paten, and partly hanging over the edge on one side, was a folded linen cloth. Its dimensions are c11.5cm by 30cm. It may have been either a purificator or a corporal, probably the latter (a rectangular napkin which is spread out on the altar and the communion vessels placed upon it). Sandwiched between the paten and the cloth were the remains of a cream coloured eucharistic wafer, 5cms in diameter. Slight pitting in the interior of the chalice could be the result of acidic attack from wine. Clearly, this burial was accompanied by a consecrated Host.

Lying in the gap between the coffin and the walls of the cist, on both north and south, was a long thin stick or wand. The inclusion of wands of hazel or willow in Anglo-Saxon and medieval graves may be a hangover from pagan custom, and no satisfactory explanation for its occurrence in an overtly Christian context has yet been found. Another example of a wand in a grave – not a priest's burial – was discovered in the south choir aisle in 1992. Well-preserved wands have been found in waterlogged graves at Barton-upon-Humber. Sometimes they occur within the coffin, while others are found underneath or alongside it (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 171-5).

Inside the coffin were the remains of a cloth lining, and the trails of animal glue that had been applied to secure this to the boards were still in evidence. The corpse was wrapped in cloth and had been tied up, parcel-fashion, with string which was then knotted on the chest (i.e. the string ran both around the body, and longitudinally). The use of cloth and string recalls the treatment accorded to Dean Mancetter's exhumed and re-deposited bones in St Peter's Chapel (now the sacristy) in the cathedral (Rodwell 1983; 1993b). The head, which seems not to have been included in the wrapping, rested upon what appears to have been a specially shaped leather (?) pillow (reminiscent of the trefoil-shaped recesses often found at the head-end of stone coffins). Despite the extent to which evidence for the accoutrements of burial was preserved, hardly anything of the corpse itself survived, except the hair. The bone had all turned to white powder. Elsewhere, the very poor preservation of bone in higher-status burials has raised the question of possible embalming (cf Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 108-9).

### *A Pilgrim's Burial(?)*

One other medieval grave is especially worthy of note. It was probably 15th century, was inserted in the backfill of the sunken chamber, and tile paving was laid over it. The interment was un-coffined, but was placed on a board (an old coffin lid?). On top of the legs and pelvis lay a piece of branch wood up to 3cms in diameter (only the bark survived); this was possibly a staff. Alongside the right thigh were traces of a leather object, seemingly a bag with a rounded base. The significant location – on the former site of the shrine – and the presence of a bag and staff suggests the possibility that this was the burial of a pilgrim, even though the traditional scallop or cockle shell worn by pilgrims was not found. Several possible pilgrims' graves have been excavated in Britain, most notably one at Worcester Cathedral (Lubin 1990).

### *King George III's Chaplain*

On the central axis of the nave, immediately west of the medieval priest's burial adjacent to the shrine, was a well-built brick-vaulted tomb containing a single coffin. The outer timber casing had largely decayed, exposing the sealed lead lining. Affixed to the top of the coffin were three items of decorative metalwork, including an oval cartouche of silvered brass, with an engraved inscription. It recorded the burial of the Reverend George Taylor, 1810. A marble wall plaque in the north transept provides further details of Taylor's career. He was, *inter alia*, private chaplain to King George III.

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