

New Clues to the Development of Beverley Minster

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Two small trenches excavated against the nave walls of Beverley Minster by York Archaeological Trust over the winter of 2003 - 4 revealed a sequence of deposits spanning the Anglo-Saxon to modern periods. This is the only modern archaeological excavation carried out within the present bounds of the church. A small number of pre-conquest features cut into natural clays formed the earliest activity encountered. These were overlain by a number of pre-conquest burials, no doubt relating to a contemporary church. Succeeding burials, probably spanning from around the time of the Norman Conquest to the 12th century, again relate to a church for which we have no direct in-situ archaeological evidence. It is suggested that the early churches relating to these burials are likely to lie within the footprint of the existing nave. The earliest stone structural remains were of a late 12th – early 13th-century nave with buttresses. This was a short-lived structure and was soon replaced by the existing 14th-century nave with buttresses. Remaining deposits and features related primarily to later medieval and post-medieval graves.

Only a parish church since the reformation, the cathedral-like scale, grandeur and ancient fabric of Beverley Minster nonetheless mark out this building as one of the great edifices of medieval England. For much of its life it was a collegiate church served by a community of clergy. The origins of ecclesiastical occupation of the site are believed to lie in the 8th century. Bede recounts that St John of Beverley, one time Bishop of Hexham and then Archbishop of York, was buried in the *porticus* of St Peter at his monastery at *Inderauuda* in 721. On the basis of later documentary sources it is traditionally held that the location of the *Inderauuda* monastery can be equated with that of Beverley Minster.

Archaeological evidence for activity of this date in the locality has previously been uncovered. Excavations of 1979 - at 82 Lurk Lane immediately south of the Minster revealed what may be the southern part of a monastic enclosure surrounded by a large ditch, which proved to have an origin in the 8th-century (Armstrong *et al* 1991). Whilst an original monastic church is likely to have been constructed of timber, the presence of window glass in early 9th-century contexts suggests that by this date any such church may have been stone-built. Within the present bounds of the Minster itself investigation of the church has been limited to analysis of the standing structure and to the study of documentary sources (Horrox *et al* 2000).

Fig 1- Plan showing location of trenches (Illustration: Lesley Collett)

Fig 2 - Wooden coffin, with felling date of 992 (Illustration: Steve Allen)

The extant Minster has been subject to long-standing, though relatively minor, structural movement. Many attempts have been made, since at least the 18th-century, to remedy this. The motivation behind the recent programme of archaeological excavation was primarily to aid engineers in understanding the causes of some of this movement. It was hoped to achieve this by investigating the character and proportions of the foundations of the nave and its buttresses and by providing information on ground conditions as a supplement to borehole data. The works consisted of the excavation of two small trenches (Fig 1), each located in the angle between the nave and a buttress, one on the southern side (Trench 1) and one on the northern side (Trench 2). Both trenches were archaeologically excavated and the results provide an entirely new source of information on the Minster's past.

Whilst some post-excavation analysis remains to be carried out, a summary outline of the results of the excavation can be presented. There was a considerable degree of correlation between the deposits recorded in both trenches. Natural clays were reached at minimum depths of around 2.5m below existing ground level. The lower 0.50m or so of deposits proved to be waterlogged and thus permitted the preservation of timbers. The earliest activity uncovered in Trench 2 consisted of a two postholes, one with a post still in place, and a squared timber within a cut; the latter was unfortunately largely obscured by later foundations and a full understanding of its form and function could not be ascertained. Of a definite pre-conquest date, these features may be related to each other, possibly as a part of a structure.

Immediately above this horizon a series of graves, aligned

Fig 3- Trench 1, looking west. On the right hand side the ashlar and foundations of the earlier buttress can be seen. The cist burial pre-dates the early buttress, but post-dates the 10th century coffined burials (Photo: Mike Andrews) [photo 1145-20]

at variance to all succeeding burials, were examined in both trenches. Three of these burials were within rectangular wooden coffins, one of which was recovered in its entirety and examined in detail (Fig 2). A single board had been used to form the base, with two long boards forming the sides. Two short boards were used to make the ends and a single board formed the lid. These individual boards were held in place by a number of round-wood pegs. All the boards proved to be oak, formed by radial conversion from the same tree. Dendrochronological analysis indicated a felling date for the timbers in, or very shortly after, 992. Curiously, despite the intactness of this coffin, the remains of the occupant were in a jumbled state. There are at least two possible explanations for this disturbance; perhaps a rat or other small animal may have gained access to the coffin whilst in the ground (though there were no signs of gnawing

on the bone), or perhaps the body and coffin had been translated from elsewhere. Another burial of this pre-conquest group was buried under a broad wooden board and accompanied by a willow rod laid parallel to the left leg and also by a glass bead. It seems certain that these burials relate to an early church. Given that the burials in both trenches share the same alignment with remarkable precision, despite being separated by a distance in excess of 20m, it is may well be that their alignment was determined by a church that lay between them, that is, within the footprint of the present nave. It is also noteworthy that two of the boreholes sunk within the churchyard cut through wooden coffins at depths that are likely to correspond with this group of burials. The implication is that large areas of waterlogged early burials exist within the present churchyard.

An extensive sequence of burials post-dating the earliest

graves but pre-dating the earliest stone structural remains was also examined. The lowest of these were also waterlogged; and one skeleton lay directly over a thick oak board, but there were no indications of coffin sides, end or lid having ever been present. Several of the graves within this group had been lined with dressed chalk slabs (Fig 3). The burials of this group, which appear likely to span from some time around the Norman conquest to the later 12th – 13th centuries, again relate to a church for which no *in-situ* archaeological evidence is yet known. It is assumed that this church is also likely to lie within the footprint of the present nave.

In both trenches evidence for an earlier buttressed nave was found immediately below the existing 14th-century nave (Fig 3). This had been constructed in relation to a ground level that was approximately 1.0m lower than that of the standing 14th-century work and was built to a marginally narrower width. The elements of this work that had formerly stood above ground were of finely dressed Jurassic oolitic limestone, whilst the foundation material was principally of chalk and oolitic limestone. Some re-used architectural fragments of a probable 12th-century date had been incorporated within the foundations. What limited dating evidence there is for this episode of building points towards the later 12th – 13th centuries. There were very few burials that could be proven to belong to the period of time that elapsed between this, the first stone structural episode for which there is incontrovertible evidence, and that of the 14th-century rebuilding of the nave. The time span between these two phases of construction was apparently a short one.

One effect of the 14th-century rebuilding of the nave was to largely obscure the earlier structural episode. In both trenches the new buttresses sat squarely over the sides of the earlier buttresses, though the new ones were of considerably greater projection. The lower parts and foundations of the earlier buttresses were extended to form foundation material

for the later ones. The new foundation material that lengthened the earlier buttresses was mostly of un-coursed stone rubble that was ineffectively mortared, loose and very often full of voids. As the buttresses form the principal load-bearing components of the nave, they should have been more substantial. The 14th-century foundations of the nave walling were composed largely of roughly hewn chalk blocks with some re-used oolitic limestone, whilst the ashlar fabric of this episode employed Lower Magnesian Limestone in quantity for the first time.

An extensive series of later medieval and post-medieval burials, many originally in wooden coffins, post-dated the 14th-century building works. The latest activity on the site related almost entirely to surface and drainage works.

The *raison d'être* of the archaeological exercise was to permit engineers to identify the causes of structural movement in the Minster nave. This seems to have been achieved, as considered technical opinion has it that the comparative instability of the 14th-century extended buttress foundations is likely to be the key factor affecting movement of the nave walls.

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