

# Masterwork



**ABOVE** Warwick Rodwell (left) and David Neal were the first to investigate the interior and canopy of the shrine of Edward the Confessor since 1958 © Dean and Chapter of Westminster

**BELOW** Conservation of the sanctuary pavement included archaeology at the edge of the tomb of Abbot Ware on its northern side. Seven discrete aspects of the construction of tomb and pavement around the *in situ* sarcophagus (no 1 below) are discussed in the book © Dean and Chapter of Westminster

**RIGHT** David Neal's painting of the tomb cover reveals the complexity and variety of the mosaic scheme

For the fifth time, *London Archaeologist* is exploring just what makes an archaeological publication the best in its field. LA has been administering the London Archaeological Prize familiar to many as the publication prize – since SCOLA handed it on in 2010. The biennial event gives us a focus for our efforts to promote high standards of writing about archaeology and to encourage a wide range of publications.

Our series of 'Author, author...' follow-up interviews with prize winners enables us to discuss what processes, ideas and approaches contribute to one such successful publication and to review its findings and impact.

## Heart of a nation

In the case of the 2020 prize winners, Warwick Rodwell and David Neal have produced a two-volume, 679-page masterpiece, for the first time detailing and illustrating the history, archaeology, structure and context of the Cosmatesque mosaics at the heart of Westminster Abbey.

Since their installation in Henry III's new church in the 1260s, these have provided the setting for the ceremonial events of a constitutional monarchy, from coronations to royal burials, for 750 years. They had,

*A colossal work of scholarship, 20 years in the making, has won the 2020 London Archaeological Prize. It was praised by the judges as 'a fascinating multi-disciplinary recording and analysis of a complex of internationally important monuments.'*

*Its two authors, Warwick Rodwell and David Neal, discuss the project and its far-reaching results with Becky Wallower.*

however, been little studied in any systematic way.

As only the second Consultant Archaeologist at the Abbey (see LA Spring 2010 for an article on his role), Warwick has been investigating aspects of the standing fabric and, where opportunity permitted, archaeological remains since 2004. And as a principal pioneer of church archaeology since the 1970s, he sees everything from furnishings and artefacts, such as the Coronation Chair and Retable, to architectural details, such as the lantern tower, to be part of his remit, to be explored where feasible.

One favourite target for an archaeological assessment had always been the famous Cosmatesque great pavement in the sanctuary. Although quite prolific in their native Italy, the Cosmati family of mosaicists had little exposure elsewhere, and very few such medieval examples can be found in England. The Abbey's huge 7.9m square expanse had naturally attracted attention, as well as numerous theories about how, when and by whom it had been created, and what its relationship to other mosaic work around the sanctuary area might be.

Years before he joined the Abbey staff, in 1998, Warwick had attended a conference initiated by Tim Tatton-Brown to review research on the history of and works done to the famous mosaics. The pavement was



then in dire condition and needed highly detailed conservation and restoration work. The original aim was to make the pavement safe for the clergy and royal family to use. Once he became the Abbey specialist, Warwick was well placed to embed archaeology in the plans.

Though a few sections had been replaced or removed through the centuries, no complete survey or restoration had been undertaken before. Running from 2008 to 2010, the conservation project was complex and detailed – and offered plenty of new information through archaeological techniques. Warwick was preparing a volume on the project to be published to mark the 750th anniversary of the rededication of the shrine of St Edward, but ran into a major problem: fully and accurately recording the pavement. It was simply too large for a single photo and stitching smaller squares together failed as lighting couldn't be replicated throughout.

A chance meeting in 2010 at the Society of Antiquaries of London over tea changed every thing. He discussed the mosaic project with David Neal, renowned co-author of the definitive four volumes on the Roman mosaics of Britain, who confessed that, although his studio was almost next to the Abbey, he'd never been able to see the Cosmati pavement as it was permanently under carpet. David's first sight of the work soon led to his enrolment in the project as principal provider of the record. He would go on to document and paint every one of the 536,098 *tesserae* in the six elements of the Cosmatesque assemblage.

**The scheme of things**

Their collaboration would open an unexpected window on the works, as David's detailed investigations across all the mosaics helped to change the entire perception of the scheme. Rather than being viewed as a collection of spaces in the centre of the Abbey and a number of separate tombs, the Cosmatesque work was recognised as a coherent, planned assemblage for the ceremonial and religious landscape of Henry III's new building.

The sanctuary great pavement, the chapel to the east, around the shrine of St Edward the Confessor – the king who had completed the earlier church in 1066 – and the area between these two where the high altar was placed, were three sections of one construction. The shrine itself and tombs for Henry III and a number of other royal personages were part of an overarching scheme.

Warwick and David realised that all this needed to be researched, recorded and published together. 'It was all or nothing,' said David, and Warwick adds, '...and a tremendous amount of work, but such an opportune moment wouldn't arise again.'

For David, this territory was both familiar and new. Having been head of archaeological illustration at the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate and later Senior Archaeologist at English Heritage he had decades of experience, but had never recorded medieval mosaics.

'It was a big learning curve as the palette for medieval is vast. Unlike mostly uniform, geometric, ceramic Roman *tesserae*, the medieval pieces are in every shape, colour and size imaginable and the materials include lots of exotic marbles, green porphyry and glass.' Reproducing the glistening effect of the multi-coloured pavement entailed another new technique – his exquisite paintings have three coats of varnish, the better to convey the brilliance of the schemes. 'Working in the public eye was new too,' he says. 'Every sneeze was witnessed, and at one point the Dean just asked me to carry on working as he led students through a service in the shrine chapel.'



**Puzzles solved**

As the project progressed and expanded, Warwick refined consideration of all the existing evidence plus new factors arising from the archaeological work.

Many conflicting ideas had been proposed through the centuries to address thorny issues such as:

- where had King Edward originally been entombed before his sanctification and translation?
- who had commissioned and overseen the scheme for the sanctuary and shrine area?
- who had been entombed in the outlying Cosmatesque tombs?

'In fact, these could largely be answered through the physical, archaeological evidence,' he says. 'One theory was that Abbot Ware must have brought the mosaics and Cosmati mosaicists back when he went to Rome. But no one had looked at the process of designing a scheme, ordering and crafting exotic materials, getting it all to London and constructing it. It's nonsense! That would all have taken many months, and it just doesn't fit.'

He is sanguine about having some of their own propositions in the volumes examined critically though. 'The important thing is to get all the solid information out there so that there is common ground to work from. So much of the "history" has just been unsubstantiated theory passed down without question over centuries.'

For David, one of the surprising features was the work done in the 16th century under Feckenham, the last Abbot of Westminster under Mary I. Since Edward had been translated, pilgrims had been picking off pieces of mosaic from his shrine and

**TOP** The central medallion of the sanctuary great pavement, showing the effect of an initial cleaning of right half with water only  
**ABOVE** The medallion after full conservation  
**Both photos: authors**

**BELOW** Detail of the central area  
**Painting: David S Neal**

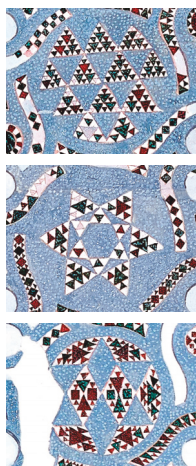




**ABOVE** Through recording the full scheme of mosaics across the whole sanctuary area, the authors realised that it was an integrated assemblage of pavements and monuments including the shrine, with its fluted columns, and similarly decorated tombs of Henry III and others  
Photos: authors



**BELOW** David's paintings of the badly worn and often dismissed shrine chapel pavement revealed it as an attractive, complex carpet of roundels in an array of designs such as these, enabling the decoration to fill the irregular space



others. Feckenham had commissioned fine painted plaster replacements to fill the impressions that remained. David commented: 'It was twice the work, as I had to paint them with and without the plaster, but provided a brilliant idea of what the earlier scheme looked like.'

### History in the making

Warwick describes the position of the Dean and Chapter as 'very accommodating'. They supported what the project was trying to achieve and never said no, 'although,' he says, 'in the case of removing the canopy of the shrine, it took two goes.' It was a significant enough exercise that the royal family was kept informed and involved throughout.

The shrine had last been opened in 1958 by a previous Surveyor of the Fabric (ie architect), Stephen Dykes Bower, who had rebuilt most of the canopy. His records of that intervention, like earlier ones, were minimal: the latest photo was from 1916. In fact, it was easily disassembled as each layer just rests on the one beneath, but it did require equipment to lift the 1.5 ton weight, and scaffolding for access. Unfortunately Dykes Bower had destroyed a great deal, but marks of medieval Baltic timber merchants were discovered, providing provenance. Thorough recording of the shrine and second coffin (inserted after 17th-century damage) was possible.

Dykes Bower's interventions are seen as heavy handed, arrogant and unsympathetic – his disdain for 'scholars' was well known – but George Gilbert Scott, a Victorian predecessor who left his mark on hundreds of buildings, had a saving grace. Warwick cites a letter in the archives which offers the Dean an 'apology for all the archaeology, but I consider it to be important.' And David notes that Scott only replaced parts of the structure beyond repair, and always left a bit of original work as his own archaeological record for those who followed.

After 20 years, something considerably more

significant than Warwick's planned volume on the sanctuary pavement was produced. Since 2010, the process had entailed David recording every aspect of the mosaics and their structures, drawing largely on site at 1:10 scale (1:5 for details), before combining his records with notes and photos to complete paintings in his studio. Both he and Warwick were engaged in constant detailed discussion on the results and especially on any unexpected aspects.

Warwick formulated the order and structure, and wrote the historical and archaeological sections, while David wrote the detailed descriptions. 'I always say that what is represented has to be understandable to a blind person,' he says, while Warwick sees such work as the solid evidence base for the future. Ideas were sent back and forth through emails and meetings both on site and at Warwick's Norfolk home. Did they enjoy it? They smile. 'We had a lot of fun,' says David, and Warwick adds, '...a process of happy collaboration.'

### Conclusions

The final publication is exceptional. They are both clearly, and justifiably, proud of it. When asked what was most gratifying about the project, David says it's the quality of the volumes: 'they're lovely to hold, to read, to smell even.' Warwick concurs: 'It outranks anything I imagined might have been achieved. A landmark.' Oxbow has done an outstanding job of publishing, no doubt recognising that such a prestigious work, with its dedication to the Queen, is a flagship for them as well.

In this feature series, we normally include tips and lessons for other authors. Although this type and scale of undertaking is rare indeed, David thinks that that he would nevertheless wish to stress that standards should never be reduced, even if it means a longer, more costly project, as 'it will never be done again.'

For Warwick, it's been a cause for reflection.

'One of the issues in archaeology becoming a profession is that something like this would be impossible within a 9 to 5 job.' Both have worked very long hours, essentially in their free time, not even claiming expenses. Warwick estimates that payment for their time alone would have cost hundreds of thousands of pounds.

And neither regret a single moment. In fact their collaboration continues: a volume on similar works at Canterbury Cathedral has been underway for several years and will be published after a final visit post-lockdown.

*The Cosmatesque Mosaics of Westminster Abbey: The Pavements and Royal Tombs: History, Archaeology, Architecture and Conservation* (Oxbow Books 2019) The two volumes are available from the Oxbow website: <https://tinyurl.com/y32sgzlc> or as an e-book from various sources – see the above URL for the various links.