

Excavations at Elstow Abbey, 1965-66

First Interim Report

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INTRODUCTION

THE MODERN VILLAGE of Elstow lies immediately outside the southern boundary of Bedford, on the A.6 road to Luton. The site lies to the south of the parish church which was the nave of the Abbey. Some excavation was carried out by the Elstow Youth Fellowship in 1956, but this work has not been published. In April 1965 excavation commenced under the direction of the writer and Mr P. G. Tilson, with the purpose of exploring the sequence and development of occupation on the Abbey site. This report is a preliminary statement on the work to the end of May 1966.

Permission to excavate was kindly given by the Vicar of Elstow, Rev P. Hartley, by the farmer of the land (Mr C. Prudden), by the Ministry of Public Building and Works, and by the Lord Bishop of St Albans. The work is sponsored by the Bedford Archaeological Society and by Bedford School; it has been helped by a grant from the Carnegie (United Kingdom) Trust Fund. Thanks are due to many advisers and helpers, in particular to Messrs L. A. Speed, A. Chrystal, A.R.I.B.A., M. J. Long, and J. Knights, A.R.I.C.S. Mr G. C. Dunning, F.S.A., has advised on the pottery, Mrs Elizabeth Eames, F.S.A. on the medieval tiles, and Mr Bernard West, A.R.I.B.A. on architectural details; Miss P. Bell, of the Bedfordshire County Record Office, has been helpful at all times. Mrs Evelyn Baker has looked after the finds. Mr R. Carpenter undertook a preliminary survey of the human bones. The writer's gratitude and thanks are owed to his pupils at Bedford School, whose interest and enthusiasm are accounting for nearly all the excavation carried out; the encouragement of the Headmaster (Mr W. M. Brown, M.A.) and of many colleagues, has been equally invaluable.¹

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND²

The Benedictine Abbey of St Helen and St Mary was founded at Elstow in the reign of William I by his niece, Countess Judith. Its dissolution in 1539 was one of the later surrenders to Henry VIII's commissioners. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 showed Elstow to be the eighth richest Benedictine nunnery and the eleventh richest of all nunneries in England and Wales.³ The Abbey

church was mentioned in an abortive scheme by Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, as a possible cathedral for Bedfordshire following the departure of the nuns. At some time in the latter part of this century, no doubt partly resulting from the failure of this scheme, most of the church was demolished. The nave was left standing, presumably by the assertion over it of parochial rights deriving from the period before the Dissolution. Dunstable Priory is a similar local instance of this practice.

The church and the conventual buildings which survived the Dissolution passed successively to the Hervey, Radcliffe and Hillersden families. The last-named built an 'L' shaped mansion in the early seventeenth century over some of the foundations for the latest claustral buildings.⁴ All other conventual buildings were probably demolished by this time. The mansion was occupied until the late eighteenth century when most of it was dismantled.⁵ The church was extensively restored in the 1880s. The present-day churchyard was extended to the south and east in 1892 by the incorporation of the northern part of the latest medieval cloister garth.

SITE DESCRIPTION (fig 1)

The site lies to the south of the village green. It is bounded on the south by a stream that supplied the nunnery fishponds which can be seen to the south-west of the site, although some have been partially levelled. The ground to the south-east and east of the parish church is raised a few feet above the level of the remainder of the field. A drive-way to the seventeenth century mansion was cut through this platform, to run from east to west, connecting it with the modern road from Bedford to Luton. The area within the churchyard immediately to the east of the present parish church⁶ is the site of the demolished part of the medieval conventual church. This was used as a burial ground for about the first fifty years of this century. The natural subsoil consists of gravels in the top of which are occasional patches of sand and chalk rubble from the boulder clay.

Excavation began with trial trenching (fig 2) (pl 4a, 4b). The position of the ruined mansion

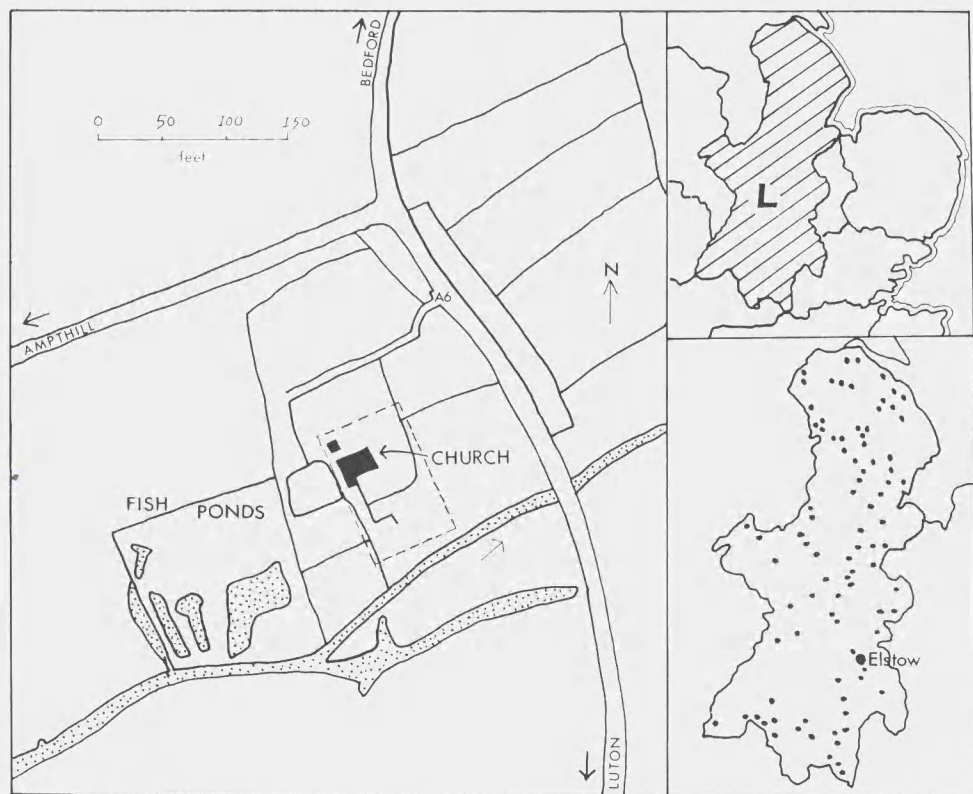


Fig. 1. Site plan of Elstow. Insets show Eastern England with the early 16th century Diocese of Lincoln, and sites of religious houses in the Diocese.

suggested the hypothesis, which was subsequently demonstrated, that the general lay-out of the latest Abbey conformed to the usual Benedictine plan. One series of trenches was intended to cut across this latest southern claustral range and any buildings between it and the stream. A second series, at right angles to the first at its northern end, was intended to cut across the latest eastern claustral range as far as the area then available for excavation permitted. These trials have been followed up by a series of area excavations, concentrating initially on those parts of the site occupied by the latest cloister garth and adjacent structures.

SEQUENCE OF OCCUPATION: SUMMARY

The sequence of occupation suggested by these trenches is detailed below, though it must be emphasised that work on other parts of the site may necessitate its modification.

Roman: 2nd - 4th centuries.

Abbey: (1) *c.* 1080 - mid/late 13th century.

(2) mid/late 13th century - ? mid 14th century.

(3) ? mid 14th century - 1539/*c.* 1625.

Mansion: *c.* 1625 - *c.* 1775.

Three points about this sequence should be noted.

(a) The Domesday Book entry for Elstow implies the existence of a pre-Conquest settlement. The Norman Abbey church may have had a Saxon parish church predecessor on or near the site of the same building, though no archaeological evidence can yet be produced for this structure.

(b) The recognition of at least three periods in the life of the Abbey for the area excavated is fairly secure, but for reasons elaborated below their dating limits must be regarded as tentative.

(c) The Abbey 3 period presents some difficulty. Dissolution of the institution and possibly some demolition of the buildings occurred in 1539, though no mansion was built until *c.* 1625. It seems likely that the purchasers of the site lived in some of the conventual buildings, modified for their own use.⁵ There is no other suitable site known nearby, and this practice has been recognised at other ex-religious houses, such as Herringfleet, Walsingham⁷

and Hailes. No archaeological distinction has yet appeared between the Abbey in use as such, and a post-Dissolution re-use prior to final demolition and modifications for the seventeenth century mansion. Future work may make a subdivision of this period necessary.

ROMAN (*pl 3a*)

Features cut into the natural sand and gravels were found in the area covered by the southern part of the Abbey 3 cloister garth. They consisted of slots, a pit, and several postholes. In the black earth fill of these features and on the surrounding gravel surface were found several sherds of coarse, soft, grey ware.⁸ A sherd of Samian ware of Antonine date was also found.⁹ In the trial trenches to the south of this area two further Samian sherds were found, but not in stratified contexts. A trench in a private garden¹⁰ to the west of the modern vestry has produced further postholes and slots, one of which contained a coin of Constans, with a date of c. A.D. 350.

The Roman layers are immediately above the natural gravel and have only been seen in small areas so far; they have also been disturbed in places by burials interred at later dates. Just to the south of the main Roman occupation the natural gravel slopes down under a layer of silt and pebble which increases in thickness the further down the field it has been sectioned. It is likely that this represented a marshy area forming at this point a southern limit for the Roman occupation. The features seen so far do not provide much evidence for interpretation. One arrangement of postholes might suggest a corner and two adjacent sides of a timber building. Little more can be said at this stage about their character and purpose. Not all the series of features are in direct association with Roman finds.

ABBEY 1. c. 1080 - mid/late 13th century

The Norman arcade of the parish church nave may belong to the last decade of the eleventh century, and thus be the oldest extant part of the Abbey. There are a few other examples of Norman work in the church. The early land endowments of the Abbey were generous but the evidence for conventual buildings is not yet clear.

The ground occupied by some of the buildings of both Abbey 2 and Abbey 3, prior to their construction, was used as a burial ground (figs 2, 3). The relationship between the burials and these two building periods was clearly demonstrated at a number of points along the Abbey 3 garth on its southern side. Here burials were cut either by this wall itself or by the earlier robber trenches of Abbey 2. In one instance a pre-Abbey 2 burial had

been obliterated above the mid-tibia by both features. (*pl 3b*).

The southern, eastern, and possibly the western limits of this burial ground have been observed.¹¹ Close interment in the medieval period has caused disturbances, making the identification of individuals in places difficult. Later building has had a similar effect. Males, females and children have been identified: the total of individuals has reached 70. (October 1966). In nearly all cases the burial position, where not obscured by *post-mortem* disturbances, was uniform: the skeletons were laid on their backs with heads to the west, fully extended, with their arms by their sides. In three cases earth staining suggested the existence of wooden coffins; in another there was some evidence for a shroud, a third had a bronze disc near its skull, and a fourth a shale bead. No coffin nails were found.

These remains suggest themselves to be associated with a secular community rather than with an enclosed nunnery. It was initially thought that these burials were contemporary with the Abbey, and that they were part of an early graveyard pre-dating the mid/late 13th century. If the burials appear to be secular, they would presumably be parish burials: the parish probably had use of the nave of the Abbey church. However, burials have been found in positions which make difficult the contemporary existence of claustral structures to the south of the church. A number of possibilities present themselves, and these can only be checked by future excavation. One is that the burials are pre-monastic, and associated with a Saxon parish church preceding the Abbey church: this theory would require a Norman superstructure in this Abbey 1 period on the wall foundations which in Period 2 supported the thirteenth century cloister arcade discussed below. Against this theory is the noticeable lack of architectural fragments from the Norman period, and the lack of positive evidence for the siting of an earlier parish church. Alternative explanations would involve Norman cloister and domestic ranges sited elsewhere, or the subdivision of this Period 1 into an earlier, burial, phase and a later, claustral building phase.

ABBEY 2. mid/late 13th century - ? mid 14th century (figs 2, 3)

The area between the mansion ruins and the modern churchyard wall was covered by conventual buildings from at least the thirteenth century until the Dissolution. The foundations of two successive structures were dug down above, and occasionally into, the earlier burials.

The walls of the first building, here called Abbey 2, had been thoroughly robbed with the exception of one corner; elsewhere only a few

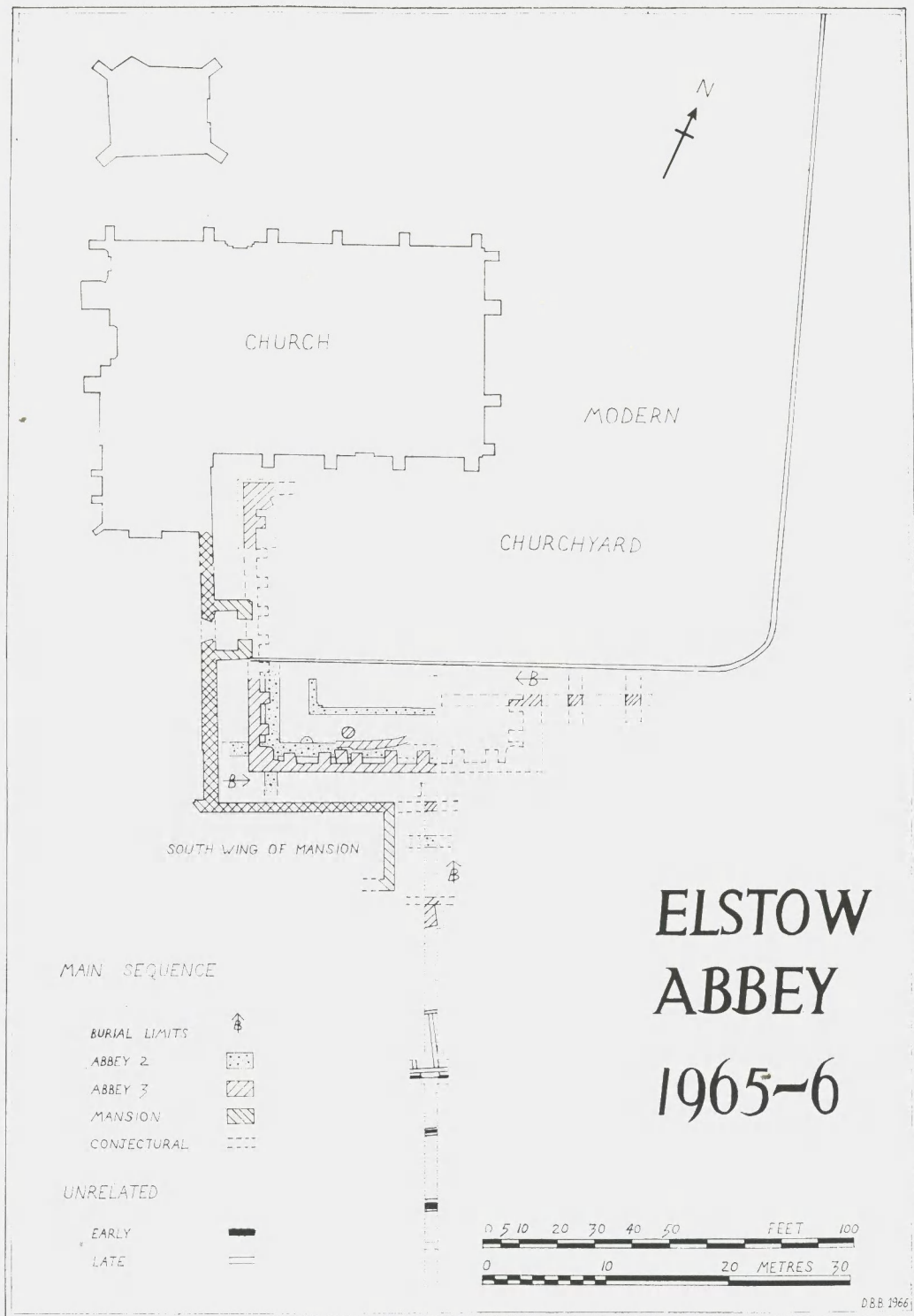


Fig 2.

rough limestone blocks remained as the lowest foundation course bedded on the natural gravel. The filling of the robber trenches was mixed: in places it contained sandy mortar and building rubble; in other places it appeared as an orange gravel. The robbing of these walls, and the construction afterwards of those belonging to Abbey 3 combined to destroy any Abbey 2 occupation layers.

Three substantial robber trenches for walls of this building have so far been discovered. A fourth almost certainly ran east-west in a trial trench to the south of those already noted. At first sight the ground plan suggests a southern and a western cloister walk with a south range built against the former, the internal width of the alleys both being 7 ft. 8 in. The width of the robber trench and the absence of substantial buttresses might suggest that the garth walls bore a simple arcade built against the main ranges rather than a walk with an upper floor extended over it. The ground plan has been obscured in two places by later work. The drain and tank of the Abbey 3 *lavatorium* were built over one east-west robber trench (fig 3). The excavations by the Elstow Youth Fellowship destroyed the same robber trench further to the east for about 14 ft. The southern cloister garth wall of Abbey 3 had cut into the surviving clay packing for two wooden pipes to the south of it. A hearth with a large burnt area surrounding it was found in the south-west corner of the south-west trench (fig 3). Both it and the robber trench of this period to the north of it were sealed by a thin line of debris from the demolition of the building.

Masonry fragments indicate that much of the Abbey 2 superstructure was built of Totternhoe clunch, a chalk which carves easily but weathers poorly. The main source of these fragments, apart from the robber trenches, has been the cloister wall of the next period. In particular, this wall contains four moulded arcade blocks, each built into the foundations of a buttress. More blocks may await discovery. Their shapes were similar and consistent with a date in the mid thirteenth century. Two had shields on their spandrels; the heraldic charges were: (i) (*argent*) a bend lozengy (*gules*); on a chief (*azure*) three escallops (*argent*). (ii) quarterly *per fess indented*; (*or and azure*).¹² The two other blocks had later carvings on the earlier basic shapes, the spandrel of one had foliate decoration in an irregular trefoil with a central rosette (pl 5a), and a reveal of the second bore three ballflowers. The undersides of two blocks taken to Bedford Museum. were seen to be plain. They may be said to range in date from about 1250 to about 1330. The blocks probably formed part of the Abbey 2 cloister arcade which was constructed in stages during the Abbey 2 period, thus explaining the development of

styles.

The dating limits of this second Abbey period thus rest for the moment on the dates derived from these moulded blocks. This assumes that they come from the same site: the robber trenches and other contemporary architectural fragments would seem to support the assumption. A construction date in the mid thirteenth century cannot be directly substantiated by pottery evidence since the burial layer and Abbey 1 were not clearly sealed, yet the end of the range is not inconsistent with such a date. The destruction should postdate the latest re-used masonry of c. 1330. Pottery in the robber trenches which were sealed by the construction of the Abbey 3 wall extended in date to about 1300, but the sample was small.

It is possible that this cloister arcade, on which the dating at present rests, had a Norman predecessor, but little direct evidence can be produced for this at the present stage.

ABBEY 3. ? mid 14th century - 1539/c. 1625.
The structures of the second Abbey period were superseded by another stone-built ground plan of ranges built against a cloister, but apparently on a slightly larger scale than the previous building (pl 6b).

The cloister walks. The cloister wall bounding the garth has been seen in parts on all four sides, although work has been mostly concentrated on the southern side. The buttresses were external and regularly spaced. Two corner buttresses have been seen: the north-western was at a diagonal to the main wall and the south-western could have been either square or diagonal. The wall was partially constructed with re-used stone and mortar, including the Totternhoe clunch discussed above, and partly with limestone in hard sandy mortar. The latter was in the upper parts of the wall and clearly built on top of the re-used material. This wall varied in depth below surface from 4 ft. 3 in. on the south side to 3 ft. 0 in. on the east. A join of working parties was seen on the southern wall. It is not clear whether this represents two contemporary parties working towards each other, or a lapse of time in building over a long period.

The trial trenches sectioned the southern and eastern cloister walks: later trenches took in parts of the southern and western walks, but in neither case were they completely excavated owing to the proximity of the mansion ruins. In all cases the latest floors had been destroyed, either in the course of robbing the adjacent walls, or by later disturbances. The absence of appropriate debris in the walks suggests that they were not tiled. The widths of the walks where examined were: about 8 ft. 0 in. wide on the southern and western sides, 7 ft. 6 in.

wide on the eastern, and 8 ft. 10 in. on the northern. The size of the garth wall foundations would permit two stories on the southern, western and eastern sides. Insufficient evidence has been seen for this point on the northern side. There is an indication that the eastern walk was contained within the eastern range, rather than built separate from it.

The lavatorium. In the southern part of the third Abbey garth were found a drain, a well, and a tank (pl 6a and fig 3). The well was stone-lined and had at least 6 ft in depth surviving. No evidence for any superstructure was found. It had been built in a roughly circular construction pit and was packed round with gravel. The stones were curved internally to form the round well mouth, and the aperture was splayed to give a width increasing with depth. The upper 3 ft. 7 in. of the well was deliberately filled with fragments of masonry ranging in date from the middle of the thirteenth century to the early fifteenth century.

A stone tank had been built butting up to the north face of the southern garth wall. Only a few courses of it survived and it had no drain hole either in its floor of cornbrash slabs or in its sides; there was no surviving evidence of lead lining. The offset of the main wall was used as part of its south side.

In between the tank and the well was a stone drain cutting into the edge of the construction pit for the well and laid over the filled robber trench for the previous Abbey period, as was the tank in its northern part. The drain emptied to the west, but this end had been disturbed by the Youth Fellowship trench. The eastern surviving floor stones of the drain were at the bottom of a steepening incline, and the surrounding area of disturbed ground contained many large unshaped stones. The drain may have ended here in a soakaway. To the west of the tank was an irregular channel cut through the cloister wall adjacent to the westernmost point of the drain. Extensive robbing of the wall and the drain at this western end has obscured their exact relationship to each other. This western part of the drain contained in its fabric two re-used architectural fragments of the late thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

These features can perhaps be seen as details of the *lavatorium* arrangements, the basins or trough of which were usually sited in the southern cloister walk near the entrance from it to the frater. Any evidence for basins in the cloister walk itself has been destroyed by robbing down to below the contemporary ground level. Similarly, the dressed blocks which probably lined the outflow through the wall have disappeared. The simplest explanation for the operation of the complex would entail the temporary storage of well water in the tank,

followed by transference from it over a dwarf wall or through an opening in the cloister wall to the basins perhaps by taps or pipes. After use, it returned through the wall to the drain. No top covering for this drain was found, but its increasing depth below the contemporary ground level implies enclosure. There was no evidence for any structure containing these features to form a *lavatorium* built in the garth against the southern cloister walk.

The south range. A range of buildings was constructed against the southern cloister walk with a shared northern wall. The southern wall of this range was particularly deep: 6 ft. 0 in. of foundations were observed. Its exterior had been strengthened by the addition of a massive but shallower buttress (pl 4b). The disturbed latest floor level for this building produced several floor tiles of both the incised and printed types. These mostly dated to the first quarter and the middle of the fourteenth century. The floor make-up contained further tiles and some painted wall-plaster, presumably from the earlier Abbey 2, whose possible robber trench was sealed by this make-up and by a thin mortar spread.

The presence of washing arrangements in the southern cloister walk would support the thesis that this building was the frater or refectory range in its customary position. There is no clear evidence of whether the refectory proper was on the ground floor of a one-storey building, or on the first floor. The thickness of the walls, the evidence of the buttress, and the two storeys of the seventeenth century mansion built upon them might suggest that the foundations were designed to take an upper chamber.

The east range (pl 4a). The trial trench across the eastern side of the garth cut across a wall 11 ft. 0 in. east of the eastern walk wall. Level with its western offset was a discontinuous occupation layer. This width seems rather narrow for a range of buildings. Two possible explanations present themselves. The wall under discussion was found at the limit of the area available for trial trenching; a further wall could exist, making this a central, and possibly a sleeper wall for columns in the ground floor of the presumed dorter range. Alternatively, this wall, with its size and strength, could still be the eastern wall of the eastern range, whose dorter, customarily on the first floor, extended over the cloister walk also, as at Wilberfoss.¹³ This latter explanation could account for the size of the buttress on the garth eastern wall, but not for the shallowness of its construction, with its lowest course only 3 ft. 0 in. from the modern ground surface.

The construction of Abbey 3 is presumed to have commenced soon after the demolition of Abbey 2. The needs of conventual life might be expected to

require this. The latest evidence for Abbey 2 extends to about 1330. A number of floor tiles and other architectural fragments belonging to the mid fourteenth century were found, but not in well-stratified positions. At this stage in the work, a date in the middle of the fourteenth century can be tentatively advanced. Further architectural fragments, particularly from the filling of the well, indicate sporadic rebuilding during this period. Its end can be ascribed to the Dissolution or to the construction of the mansion, or to a series of dates between them.

MANSION. c. 1625 - c. 1775

The ground plan of the Hillersden mansion was 'L' shaped. The top of the 'L' abutted on to the western end of the south aisle. The house was strongly influenced by its monastic predecessor: materials were re-used and the conventual foundations re-employed. This is not the place of a detailed description of the surviving parts of the mansion—its gateway, and the eastern and northern faces—but rather for an indication of how it relates to the current excavations.

The western part of the third period southern range adjacent to the cloister was used as the basis for the foot of the 'L'. The monastic width of range was evidently too great for the Hillersdens, for their return wall, now demolished, made a narrower structure, externally 24 ft. 3 in. instead of 29 ft. 6 in. (excluding the buttress). The shared wall of the third period south range and cloister walk as seen in the trial trench was a direct continuation of the north front of the mansion. Similarly the west wall of the Abbey 3 western cloister walk has the eastern front of the mansion upon its foundations. (pl. 5b).

Excavation in the mansion forecourt has uncovered some drainage features. A lead pipe with its top sealed over was laid down before one of a series of brick and tile drains, the direction of whose outflow was to the south, and in this instance, apparently underneath the foot of the 'L'. One of these drains carried water from the roof of the southern portion of the mansion. Many of the constituent tiles were re-used from the nunnery. The drains were in places sealed by a gravel path around the front of the mansion.

BUILDINGS SOUTH OF THE ABBEY CLAUSTRAL AREA (fig 2)

The trial trenches to the south of the third Abbey claustral buildings cut almost at right angles across two buildings. These are discussed separately from the main part of the site since there is at present insufficient dating evidence to relate them to the main chronological sequence.

The northern building had at least two phases

of construction. The later plan consisted of a passageway with at least one room on either side, entered from the south over a small step. The clay floor of this phase was laid over debris from an earlier structure whose southern wall had been covered by gravel make-up for the step.

The southern building also had two phases. For the second, the northern and southern walls had been broadened by shallower additions to the width of the deeper constructed walls of the first phase.

The evidence obtained from a trench 3 ft. wide was insufficient to date these structures with any security. The narrowness of the walls and the shallowness of some of their foundations suggest that their superstructures were of timber rather than of stone. The normal domestic arrangements of buildings, such as kitchens, to the south of the main claustral complex, may indicate an Abbey date for these buildings; similarly, planning considerations relating to the view from the mansion might preclude the existence of cottages close to the main house.

The walls of the southern building were built above and over a shallow depression which contained a large quantity of pottery, mostly of St Neots and other wares, with sherds of Stamford and derived Stamford wares also. The latest dates for the whole group were in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Just to the north of this was a pile of dry stones. The relationship of these features cannot be determined without further excavation. The black silt containing the pottery, which belongs to the first part of the Abbey's life, may represent a ditch or an earlier course of the stream marking the southern boundary of the site.

CONCLUSION

The first year's work has given an indication of the complexity of this site. Roman Elstow has been established, but awaits closer dating and description. The Abbey has shown three distinct periods: within them the range of architectural fragments indicate that re-building was a frequent rather than a rare event. The apparent enlargement of a thirteenth century cloister in the fourteenth century is an interesting feature. The replacement of nunnery by mansion, of nuns by squire, follows a familiar pattern. At Elstow the post-Dissolution adaptation of monastic remains has been noticeably thorough.

Several years' work will be needed to excavate enough of the site for a coherent picture to emerge. It is hoped that during this time it will be possible to build up a range of medieval pottery groups which will expand and clarify the knowledge of local wares. Already Elstow can add to the distri-

bution maps of Stamford ware, twelfth century stamped pottery, and bar-lip pottery.¹¹ Grimston ware, Cistercian ware, and various continental imports also occur on the site. This is perhaps to be

expected in a house with such a lengthy history, one whose latest cloister dimensions rivalled those of Lacock and Barking, and which supported at least 24 nuns at the Dissolution.

REFERENCES

- ¹I am indebted to Professor Barry Cunliffe, F.S.A., and Professor S. S. Frere, F.S.A., for reading this report in typescript and making a number of valuable comments. The section on Abbey I has been revised to incorporate important modifications arising from work carried out since going to press. (Oct. 1966).
- ²For more detailed accounts, see: *V.C.H. Beds.* i, 353-8; iii, 279-84. S. R. Wigram: *Chronicles of the Abbey of Elstow*. (1885).
- ³D. Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock; *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales*. (1953), 209-33.
- ⁴*Beds. Hist. Rev. Soc.* V, (1919-20), 80.
- ⁵Beds. Co. Rec. Office: X 1/6/1,2; W 2864. Dugdale says Sir Humphrey Radcliffe lived at 'Abbey House': *Monasticon Anglicanum*, iii, 412.
- ⁶Detailed descriptions of the church can be found in: Wigram: *op.cit.*, 193-206 (M. J. C. Buckley): *V.C.H. Beds.* iii, 279-84.
- ⁷J. C. Dickinson: *Monastic Life in Medieval England*. (1961), 139.
- ⁸The surface scatter around an unexcavated kiln site to the east at N.G.R. TL 058476 may suggest an origin for the grey ware.
- ⁹Thanks are due to Mr H. Pengelly who saw the Samian sherds.
- ¹⁰By kind permission of Mr R. George.
- ¹¹Fig 3 shows the possible western limit. At the time of writing excavation of the north-western trench had not yet reached the burial level. The Abbey 3 southern cloister walk was not excavated to the earlier burial level owing to the proximity of the mansion ruins.
- ¹²The colours are placed in brackets on the assumption that these shields, found in a largely uncoloured condition, were originally painted, as indicated by traces still surviving on the blocks. They represent the arms of respectively Gamage and Piro, both of which families no doubt had some connection with the Abbey. I am indebted to Mr F. W. Kublicke, F.S.A., for kindly seeing the shields, and supplying heraldic information.
- ¹³R. Gilyard-Beer, F.S.A.; *Abbeys*. H.M.S.O. (1958): 25, fig 38.
- ¹⁴G. C. Dunning, F.S.A. et al.: *Anglo-Saxon pottery, a Symposium*. *Med. Arch.* III (1959) figs 11, 17, 22.