

Excavations at Elstow Abbey, Bedfordshire, 1966-68

Second Interim Report

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INTRODUCTION

INVESTIGATION OF this site has continued without pause since the first report was written in May 1966;¹ in particular, seasons of work were organised at Easter in 1967 and 1968, and in July and August 1968. This report summarises the evidence from trenches completed up to August 1968. Attention was concentrated particularly upon the claustral buildings of the medieval Abbey, the east end of the nave, and the east end of the church itself.

SEQUENCE OF OCCUPATION: SUMMARY

A more complex and detailed sequence of Abbey building is appearing as excavation proceeds. It is best described at this stage by assigning building activity to specific centuries primarily; building periods may then be discerned within this framework, yet will be easily modifiable in the face of future discoveries. Of the three Abbey periods proposed after the first year's investigation only the third now remains clearly defined.

<i>? Pre-Roman</i>	Circular ditch
<i>Roman</i>	First—fourth centuries
<i>Saxon</i>	(1) Pagan: Cremation burial (?)s: fifth—sixth centuries (2) Christian: inhumation burials: parish graveyard ending c. 1080
<i>Medieval</i>	c. 1080-c.1539. Benedictine Abbey (Nuns); (fig 1) (1) late eleventh century: apsidal presbytery with rectangular aisles ² nave of abbey church ? temporary domestic timber buildings (2) early to mid twelfth century: earlier stone claustral buildings ? timber cloister walks present north door of church

- (3) mid / late twelfth century:
eastward extension of
south quire aisle to
form chapel
- (4) late twelfth century:
squaring of apsidal pres-
bytery
consequent modification
of south quire aisle
chapel
- (5) early thirteenth century:
westward extension of
church
? westward extension of
outer parlour
- (6) mid-late thirteenth cen-
tury:
reconstruction of cloister
walks
construction of detached
tower
- (7) mid fourteenth century:
claustral expansion
destruction of old ranges
rebuilding of cloister
walks
rebuilding of west range
(? except part of old
outer parlour retained)
rebuilding of south and
east ranges
reflooring of south quire
aisle chapel
- (8) fifteenth century:
extension of north quire
aisle chapel
? construction of vestry
to north of nave
- (9) late fifteenth/early six-
teenth centuries:
modifications to detached
tower

Post-Monastic

c. 1539-c. 1625
demolition of eastern part of
church

	construction of new wall at east end of nave
	? demolition of eastern range
<i>Post-Medieval</i>	c. 1625-c. 1775. Mansion adaptation of western and western half of southern ranges to form Hillersden mansion
	dismantling of mansion
<i>Post-Mansion</i>	c. 1775 to present day restoration and rebuilding of parish church

More periods and more details have been added to the scheme outlined in the first report. The main bulk of burials can now be clearly shown to pre-date the Abbey, apart from the obviously monastic ones at the east end of the church. The growth and rebuilding of the Abbey appears as a more convincingly continuous process, though attention must still be focussed on the major change of the fourteenth century.³ The sequence published here has been expanded to include the evidence provided by the parish church and by the detached tower. Some points however are uncertain, and obviously there is much more evidence to be gathered, which may make significant additions to this scheme.

2 PRE-ROMAN

Two lengths of ditch were seen, both cut 2 ft. to 3 ft. (0.7 m. to 0.9 m.) into the natural gravel. One, in trenches to the east of the present parish church, was sealed by Christian Saxon burials. The other, cut by the Norman presbytery, was sealed by a turf line containing early Saxon pottery (fig 2). The silted contents of the two lengths was similar, as were the profiles, with regular sides and flat bottoms. The only finds were a few fragments of animal bone. Some slight curvature of alignment could be detected on the two lengths.

These ditches are clearly the earliest features yet found on the site. Production of their southern ends could result in their junction to form part of a circular feature. The eastern of them must be pre-fifth to sixth century, and, since Roman material was completely absent from within them, a pre-Roman date is a strong possibility. Further investigation is largely restricted by the modern churchyard. However, if the ditch lengths can be shown to be part of a circular feature, an explanation such as a ring ditch, perhaps of the Bronze Age, might be advanced for lack of an alternative. Unfortunately modern graves would have obliterated any central burials.⁴

ROMAN

Little can be added to the previous report for the Roman period.⁵ A thin scatter of pottery, including the occasional samian ware sherd, has continued to appear, but no further evidence of structures has been discovered. The disturbance of the natural gravel and of the layers immediately above it by the Saxon burials and the medieval footings was perhaps too thorough to allow survival of structures, whilst the ground to the south of the Abbey refectories was probably too marshy at this time to have been suitable for occupation. A coin of Valentinian I was found in a posthole within a gully cut into the turf line under the monastic presbytery⁶ (fig 2). The proportionally small volume of finds may reflect the proximity or border of a settlement rather than its actual location here.

SAXON : PAGAN

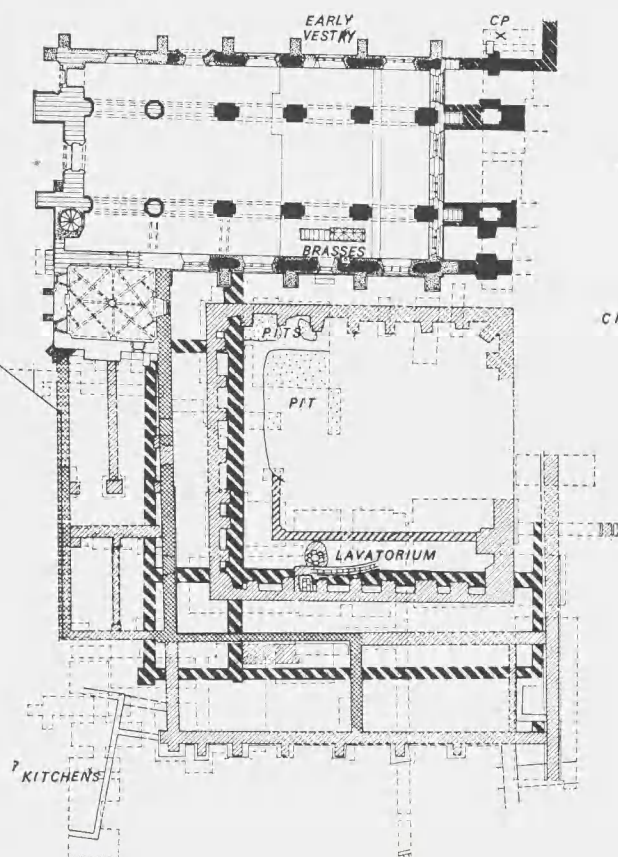
The evidence for this period has come exclusively from the trenches designed to investigate the east end of the church. While an area almost 85 ft. x 25 ft. (25.9 m. x 7.7 m.) was totally excavated, much of the pre-Abbey stratigraphy had been disturbed, either completely by monastic walls, or partially by monastic burials. Fig 2 shows the extent of this disturbance represented by cross-hatching laid over features which had not been destroyed.

A quantity of pagan Saxon pottery was recovered from the upper part of the turf line sealed by the apse and its floor levels. This included a complete undecorated domestic type pot containing a cremation, probably dating to the late sixth century. The remainder of the pottery consisted of a number of sherds belonging perhaps to two or three pots on which bosses and deep heavy grooves had been conspicuous. Dr J. L. N. Myres suggests that the dating here is of the later fifth century, and the context also that of cremation. The absence of any similar sherds in the nearest trenches to the west and the south raises hopes that the centre of the cremation area lies to the north and east, where it would be accessible to excavation.

Other groups of features definitely predating the Abbey were seen in these trenches, and are conveniently mentioned here. Perhaps the earliest was a narrow regular slot with a right angled turn, cut into natural gravel. The dating evidence was small and inconclusive: the northernmost part of the slot appeared to be cut by the ditch discussed above, though this was not absolutely clear, and the few sherds of pottery from the western arm did not provide a coherent picture, and could be the result of contamination. Slots and gullies were seen cut into the undisturbed turf line within the monastic apse. Of two north-south slots, one was associated

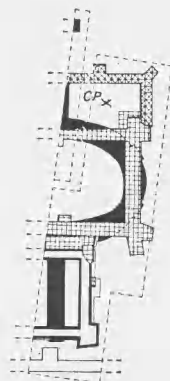
ELSTOW ABBEY 1965-8

MEDIAEVAL



MODERN

CHURCHYARD



CP charnel pit
— date uncertain

	WALL OR FOOTING OR ROBBED	?
late 11th	—	—
early-mid 12th	—	—
mid-late 12th	—	—
late 12th	—	—
early 13th	—	—
mid-late 13th	—	—
mid 14th	—	—
15th	—	—
17th on 14th	—	—
16th	—	—
19th	—	—

FEET
0 5 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

METRES
0 10 20 30



DBB 68

Fig 1. Medieval General Site Plan.

with some fragmentary floor levels which in turn sealed the other. To the north of these, but without any observable relationship, was a complex of gullies. An apparent posthole at the junction between them contained the coin of Valentinian I. The last two of these three sets of features cut into orientated pre-Abbey burials: while these skeletons need not be part of the main Christian late-Saxon cemetery, they seem to place these features in a later, rather than an earlier, pre-Abbey context.

SAXON: CHRISTIAN (fig 3)

The medieval Abbey was built partly over a graveyard which must have previously served the village of Elstow. The alternative pre-monastic and monastic datings for the burials discussed in the previous report⁷ can be resolved as a result of further excavation. At the time of writing over 250 individuals or parts of individuals have been exhumed, not counting the liberal scatter of unassociated human bones found in various layers of the site.

Many burials were sealed or cut by walls or floors belonging to the Benedictine Abbey, whose foundation can be placed at about 1080 on documentary evidence.⁸ Several skeletons were earlier than robber trenches for footings belonging to the pre-fourteenth century Abbey buildings. The location of other burials in the monastic plan would have put them in most unusual positions under the claustral buildings. Stratigraphically the burials could all be associated together, though in some instances identifiable Abbey layers did not exist to provide a positive seal over them. One individual was buried in association with sherds of a pot dating between the mid eighth and ninth centuries. There have been only two instances where post-Saxon burials were cut into the Saxon graveyard, apart from those at the east end of the church: these two were in rough stone coffins and so placed as to suggest north cloister walk burials (pl 1c).

The density of burial varied within the limits of the graveyard. The skeletons were more spread out at the southern and eastern limits, though more tightly packed towards the centre; one trench of 60 sq. ft. produced 25 individuals. Limits to the north and west cannot be clearly defined because skeletons have been seen up to the modern and medieval upstanding structures which border the area available to excavation. There was some evidence for burying in rows, and intensive over-burying, one individual being cut into another previously deposited. In few cases were wood coffins detectable; and the density of burial precluded the discovery of grave cuts except in the cases of those interred deepest, going into the natural gravel.

Some care was taken when the Abbey was first

built to provide for burials disturbed by construction trenches. Two substantial charnel pits were found, one outside the east end of the original north quire chapel and the other to the north of the east end of the nave, the accessible portion of the latter producing at least 20 skulls as well as a large number of long and other bones. This pit had been dug just outside the church, and was partly sealed by a spread which might be associated with its construction. The former sealed other, undisturbed, burials of Abbey date, and could thus be the result of an Abbey rebuilding episode.

The austerity, piety and uniformity of burial conditions has been consistent and must place this group within a Christian period. Strict orientation with the heads at the west and in nearly all instances the absence of grave goods should be characteristic of the later Christian Saxon period, the stage beyond the intermediate phase represented by the Leighton Buzzard (Chamberlain's Barn) Cemetery.⁹ Thus the dating limits of this graveyard can be reasonably defined as falling within a bracket between about the eighth and the late eleventh centuries. It is hoped that this will permit some systematic study of what the distribution of individuals shows to be a parish population.

A graveyard of this size must have been associated with a church built either in stone or timber, or with both materials. Excavation has not yet provided any signs of a church but burials have appeared in nearly all trenches, and are thus likely to have been outside a church. The Abbey church may have been built on the site of the earlier structure, but only Saxon burials were found in trenches at the east end of the original nave; nor was there any indication of such a building under the main east end. There is no hint in the documentation of a pre-Conquest monastic establishment.

Restoration of the present parish church at its eastern external face in 1967 brought to view a complete portion of a Saxon cross shaft, of limestone, height 22 in. (56 cms.) (pl 1b). This had been reused in the wall made to block up the east end of the nave when the conventual section further to the east had been demolished after 1539. The stone had been placed on its side about 12 ft. (3.7 m.) above the ground, and its exposed face had been weathered. Even so, it is surprising that its existence had not apparently been noted prior to cleaning by the restorers bringing it out into clear relief. This wall was the only external face left untouched by the major nineteenth century restoration. The stone was removed from the wall and placed inside the church after cleaning.

Photographs of the stone were submitted to Dr

D. M. Wilson who kindly made the following comments:

"... it is of late eighth century date and ... fits into a series of ornament and sculpture from Mercia. It is extremely rare to find a base as complete as this, but there is a parallel at St Andrew, Auckland. The quality of the decoration is quite high but not uniquely so. An interesting feature is the panelling on the body, which is rare in this period of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, but much more are the almost direct parallels of the animals with those that appear on the Witham pins in the British Museum."

A full account of this stone will appear in the final report.

MEDIEVAL: BENEDICTINE ABBEY (fig 1)

A more detailed picture of Countess Judith of Huntingdon's foundation as it developed during the medieval centuries is emerging, though much has yet to be examined. It is clarified by the separation of the burials into specific pre-Abbey and monastic periods. Also the further exploration of the robber trenches for the earlier claustral buildings has helped to establish the mid-fourteenth century reconstruction as the major building change.¹⁰

(1) late eleventh century Church

Most of the eastern half of the Norman Abbey church at Elstow has been destroyed by modern graves cut into the footings left after the sixteenth century demolition. The surviving part of the nave is mostly Norman and belongs to this first period of construction. Possibly the western front of the church came immediately to the west of the surviving Norman arcade piers, giving a Norman nave of six bays, and an original internal length of about 185 ft. (56.4 m.). Excavation would be needed to establish this thesis. There is no evidence at present that a Saxon parish church was converted into a monastic church.

The original presbytery (fig 2), (pl IIa), making an eastern limit to the Abbey church, was found to project beyond the present graveyard limits, despite the assertion of T. J. Jackson during his restorations in the 1880s, that the church terminated in a short apse with a rectangular shaped, diagonal buttressed Lady Chapel added.¹¹ The wide footings for this main apse were distinctively constructed of alternate courses in gravel and stone laid in rough herringbone style. This particular technique, seen also at the east end of the nave, is more characteristic of the late eleventh century rather than the early twelfth century, and may be taken as the earliest work in the Abbey, which

would anyway be expected at this part. The apse footing had been built up from natural gravel, and where this had been cut by the ditch discussed above, it went down deeper to respect it. The footing in plan was horseshoe shaped rather than semi-circular, but was capable of taking a narrower, properly apsidal, superstructure. There were two shallow clasping buttresses on the outside of this apse. Seen in relationship to other known parts of the church it suggests a fairly well extended presbytery. The north and south sides of the presbytery lined up with the nave of the present church and the excavated part immediately to the east of it.

The north and south quire aisles originally terminated just to the east of the present churchyard. Robber trenches show both butting up to the sides of the presbytery, with the termination for the southern built square both internally and externally: only the straight external side of the termination for the northern aisle was visible. The north aisle lined up with the equivalent aisle against the nave, but the south wall of the south aisle extended further south than its equivalent. The relationship of south quire aisle to south transept and its chapel has probably been lost under modern graves.

A section across the nave of the Abbey church was investigated, between the modern graveyard burials, and the present parish church east end (pl IIb). Four walls were seen, with three surviving as footings, and the sleeper wall for the north side of the nave as a robber trench. Irregular widenings of the footings occurring in places confirmed the evidence from within the parish church that the Norman nave arcade continued for a further bay to the east. They also suggested the aisle walls had shallow clasping buttresses on the outside and widened footings opposite on the inside, to take the lateral thrust of the vaulting. Remains of up to three mortar floor levels were seen, sealing about 45 burials, which must have predated the Abbey.

The west face of the west wall for the north transept was seen only a few feet from the line of twentieth century graves, which had probably been dug through the centre of the wall. The digging of a fresh grave in one of the few vacant plots nearby showed part of what may have been a post-Norman buttress footing on this wall. The main part of the north transept projected into what has been used as a graveyard for many centuries. The digging of graves in the last century may have struck other parts of it.

The Norman buttress arrangements on the north aisle wall were probably changed at some date, as the present day, albeit restored, arrangement would

require. A long narrow buttress footing was seen overlying a shallower broader footing. No dating evidence was obtained directly for these, but the earlier buttress was bonded into the main Norman footing; also, if the later buttress was contemporary with the north aisle fenestration, fairly faithfully restored by Jackson, it could belong to the fourteenth century.

Timber buildings

Occupation layers have been found in the general area later used by cloisters and cloister garth. These layers sometimes sealed burials but were cut in turn by robber trenches for the earlier claustral buildings. What may have been a beam slot was recorded at one place, though generally the soil conditions made it difficult to see much more than the simple limits to occupation spreads. The pottery in this occupation was of St Neots and early medieval wares: pending detailed study an early twelfth century date seems appropriate. It is unlikely that such occupation would be contemporary with the use of the area as a graveyard, though a termination date for this function in any given part of the yard is not known; nor can it yet be clearly associated with any remains of stone monastic buildings. It is therefore tentatively suggested that this stratigraphy represents a temporary timber phase at the commencement of the Abbey's life. Such buildings must have been needed during the delay before the completion of the first stone claustral complex. It is hoped that future work will locate something more structurally definite.

(2) early to mid-twelfth century (fig 1)

Claustral buildings: first stone plan

On present evidence, rebuilding in stone need not have occurred until well into the twelfth century, though the almost complete robbing of the earlier stone plan to the south of the church has denied us evidence as to whether its construction was in one or several phases. The plan of robber trenches conforms with the usual Benedictine plan as far as they have been investigated.

Cloister walks

Very few architectural fragments of the Norman period have come from extensive area excavations in the claustral regions. The majority are in Totternhoe clunch or Melbourne rock and date from the thirteenth century or later. Elstow Abbey's first cloister walks may have been built of timber against the stone buildings surrounding them. The narrow robber trenches for the first cloister wall stone footings, and their lack of buttresses could mean that they had supported a timber superstructure. Alternatively these footings could have been thirteenth century products associated with the stone arcade discussed below. A third possibility

combines these two, with stone footings doing service first for timber and later for stone superstructures. For dating, the only clue was provided by the south west corner of the cloister wall, the only part not totally robbed, which was composed of the alternate gravel and stone layers seen at the east end of the church. It is suggested that this footing could date from the twelfth century, though fig 1 shows it as thirteenth century, reflecting the more positive evidence of reused cloister arcade blocks.

Alleys on the south and west sides of the cloister have been clearly defined by robber trenches. The east side was obscured by the rebuilding or by the retention of the cloister walk and dormitory range on the same lines in the fourteenth century reconstruction. At one point, the robber trench for the earlier wall of the eastern walk was cut by the construction trench for its fourteenth century successor. Under the western wall of the later eastern cloister walk there was no trace of an earlier footing or robber trench surviving. The north west corner of the earlier cloisters had been confused by the digging of pits contemporary with the demolition of the earlier stone plan. The present state of evidence on the north side points to several possibilities. There may have been a walk attached to the church in the usual way, but rebuilt on the same lines, thus destroying the earlier one. There may have been one built freestanding with a slype between it and the church; again it could be argued that most of the evidence for an earlier north cloister walk is an illusion produced by the pits dug probably for gravel. Modern drains and oil heating equipment obscure many of the vital points, though the usual solution may prove to be the correct one.

West range

The main outline plan of the western range against the cloisters has been recovered, except where the building now used as the modern vestry obscures its relationship to the church. The western wall of this range could line up closely with the Norman west front of the church if it is accepted that the two existing bays represent a thirteenth century extension rather than a rebuilding. This would then place the present north door of the church in a more convincingly original position in the westernmost bay of the north aisle.

It has been suggested that the modern vestry was originally the Norman outer parlour at the top of a Norman west range which projected westwards from the west façade of the church¹² as at Thetford Priory. The main evidence comes in an engraving of 1803 showing apparently Norman features in the west wall of this building before

restoration. Two later versions of the same view show thirteenth and sixteenth century features in the same spot. A fourteenth century architectural fragment was found in the original footings of the south wall of this building. The west end of the thirteenth century south aisle and the west wall of this building were constructed on a continuous footing. These points, and others elaborated below, seem to rule out a twelfth century Norman origin for this building.

The length of the first western range was about 78 ft. (23.8 m.) from the outside wall of the church to the northern side of a partition or sleeper wall enclosing a section at its south end, which may have been part of either *cellarium* or *frater*. The full length to the external southern limit was about 107 ft. (22.8 m.) and the width was about 19 ft. (5.8 m.) internally. Another cross partition or sleeper wall was seen robbed about 18 ft. (5.5 m.) from the north end. In nearly all cases the robber trenches had gone down to remove all stones; at best they left only one or two rough courses. No evidence has yet been seen for a central sleeper wall to take piers. To the west of this range, and seen in two trenches, was a hard packed gravel and pebble surface, which may represent the surfacing of a service road to move stores into the ground floor *cellarium* storage space.

South range

The western part of the southern range has been considerably excavated, and the eastern limit has been seen. The walls had been robbed out almost completely in the fourteenth century, except for the south-west corner common to west and south ranges. Here survived a solid, mainly ashlar, footing, for a Norman clasping buttress (pl IIIa). No internal partition walls have been seen as yet, apart from that discussed above. The internal width of this range was about 21 ft. (6.4 m.) and the internal length about 76 ft. (23.1 m.), discounting the unit at the west end. A footing appropriate to a shallow pilaster buttress was seen on the south side externally.

The extreme eastern end of this range was seen where it butted up against the west side of the dormitory range undercroft in this period.

East range

The eastern range in this early construction period was seen where its western wall was shared by the south range. The footing construction technique of alternate gravel and stone layers was again used. Occupation layers were excavated in the ground floor of this range. The west wall of this early dormitory range diverged westwards from the line of its successor towards the bottom of the range: this may explain why it was seen clear of

the later wall at the present southern limit of excavation, but not seen at all in the northernmost trench permitted by modern burying.

(3) *mid to late twelfth century (fig 2)*

Church

The first modification to the east end of the church came perhaps in the middle of the twelfth century, with the extension of the south quire aisle termination out to the east (pl 1). On plan, the interior gained about an extra 8 ft. (2.4 m.). The new chapel was not attached to the main apse in the way its predecessor had been; instead, its northern wall returned, running nearly parallel with the south side of the presbytery until the two joined somewhere about the western limit of possible excavation. The footings of the extended chapel have survived; its internal north-eastern corner was in one build. Characteristic buttresses on the centre of its eastern exterior and at the south eastern corner suggest a Norman date.

Within this chapel there is evidence that the floor was initially at one level. A child burial in a wooden coffin in the south-east corner was deposited fairly early in the life of this new building, but cannot be definitely associated with its construction; the mortar layer it was cut through could be seen as either a building spread, or the residue of several worn-out floors.

(4) *late twelfth century (fig 2) (pls IIa, IIc)*

Church

The second modification to the east end of the church was on a larger scale, involving at least the presbytery and the south quire aisle termination. The original main apse was demolished, and the building reconstructed on the same footings, but with a square superstructure. The superimposed footings were much narrower than the old, and the south side of the new presbytery was placed well over on the northern side of the old Norman footings. The pairs of buttress footings at the two main corners suggested an Early English date. Excavation of this filling between chapel and presbytery showed a substantial concealed buttress on the outside of this new wall, presumably functional rather than visible and decorative. The small amount of surviving ashlar superstructure was more Transitional in character, and goes towards suggesting a late twelfth century date for this remodelling. This conservative rebuilding on the same footings, rather than the more familiar extension of a Norman presbytery, may perhaps be accounted for by the considerable existing length of the church east of the crossing, some 50 ft. (15.2 m.). More conventual church space may not have been needed particularly since there would be limited pressure for new altars in a house of un-

EAST END OF CHURCH



Fig 2.

ordainable women.

Changes to the presbytery affected the south quire chapel termination. The space between the two structures was increased by the placing of new walls on old footings in the presbytery. The north-east corner of the southern chapel was partly demolished to help the main rebuilding, though the inside face does not seem to have been affected. The eastern wall of the southern termination was then extended to be attached to the new south presbytery wall, building from the new to the old. The infill between the two walls was laid down about the same time as the newer wall was built. In this way the problem of external façade was solved without altering the internal arrangements of the south chapel. The creation of the longer eastern exterior made the later Norman buttress on the middle of the outside wall no longer central. A smaller, Transitional-style, buttress, like the one concealed between the two buildings, was placed hard over on the north aisle of the original footing, thus restoring symmetry to the superstructure.

(5) *early thirteenth century (fig 1)*

Church

The nave was extended to include two Early English bays at its west end, making a total of seven bays westwards from the crossing. This was more probably an extension of length rather than a static rebuilding following structural collapse. The end of the church was thus brought out from the general line of the west front for the claustral buildings. Such an enlargement, to a total internal length of about 205 ft. (62.5 m.), may represent an expansion for the easier accommodation of both parochial and conventual worship in the same church. Whatever the motive, surviving relics of the original west front hint at an imposing façade, only a ghost of which has escaped the iconoclasts, contemporary with Bunyan, and the restorers of more recent centuries.

The thirteenth century work in the nave marches in time with the door at the west end of the south aisle wall, and with such vaulting in the modern vestry that is undisturbed: this work includes a Purbeck marble column in the centre of the room. The west wall of the vestry (albeit with a nineteenth century superstructure) and the new thirteenth century west wall of the south aisle run on a continuous footing, suggesting that the two pieces of work were executed together. The vestry could have first been built as an extended outer parlour at the head of the west range. On the other hand, a fourteenth century architectural fragment was found in the footings for the south wall of this building, and must weaken the theory that the

vestry originally belonged to this period. Also there are planning difficulties to reconcile the east of this structure with what is known of the claustral plan in the thirteenth century. A full discussion of all the evidence must await further excavation and the final report.

(6) *mid/late thirteenth century (fig 1)*

Cloister walks

All or part of the cloister garth wall was rebuilt in the thirteenth century to replace a predecessor in either wood or stone. The main evidence for this came from Totternhoe clunch arcade blocks found reused in the footings for the post fourteenth century buttresses on the cloisters¹³. Their general shapes were consistent with a date in the middle of the thirteenth century. A fifth, similar, block has been found; the heraldic charge on the shield mounted on the spandrel was: *Argent a fesse three garbs azure*, or else *Argent a fesse azure between three garbs gules*, depending on the original but now vanished tinctures. These arms belong to the family of Ridell or Rydel, known benefactors of the Abbey.¹⁴ Twenty-three of a possible total of 31 buttresses on this later cloister have now been examined, including all on the south side where these blocks were re-used, so these five stones may be all that will be found.

Detached tower

The first construction date for this is uncertain, since the extensive fifteenth or sixteenth century modifications have obliterated all but the barest evidence. The writer's architectural advisers tentatively advance a later thirteenth century date for the lower part behind its alterations.

(7) *mid fourteenth century (figs 1 and 2)*

Church

Evidence for internal arrangements at the east end of the church has only survived in the termination of the south quire aisle chapel. It seems that this began in the late twelfth century with a floor at one level. A later stage involved raising a dais at the east end on which the altar was centrally placed, with some kind of superstructure over a child burial, at the east end between altar and south side. Make-up for this dais contained architectural fragments of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. At a further stage, in the fourteenth century, the west end of the chapel was built up to the height of the dais, and a tiled pavement laid across, but respecting both altar and superstructure of the burial. Two burials cut deeply through the make-up for this chapel floor were most likely contemporary with, or later than, the tiled floor, which can be dated to c. 1350. The floor was missing over this burial area, but general post-Dissolution disturbance by the mansion driveway could explain

this as easily as could a deliberate cut through the tiled floor. Fig 2 shows the chapel in this latest phase.

Destruction of earlier claustral plan

Demolition and robbing of the earlier stone cloisters was thorough. Motive is still not clear, though the likeliest possibility is difficult to verify: the superstructure may have become unsafe due to settlement into the marshy area to the south of the main buildings. A large pit was found in the north-west corner of the later garth, containing many architectural fragments of up to fourteenth century date, and many scattered human bones. The western limit of this pit corresponded with the expected position of the western face of the cloister garth wall on the western side. Two other pits were seen, one being an extension westwards from another robber trench. The simplest explanation for these irregular features is that they represent excavations for gravel to be used in the rebuilding, cutting through any Saxon burials that happened to be in the way.

The rebuilding must have caused a major dislocation in conventual life. The scale of change, yet the smallness of expansion, would have required a range to be completely demolished before its successor could be built. This suggests that while the work took time, it may have been continuous construction rather than sporadic outbursts.

The western range moved about 22 ft. (6.7 m.) outwards, and the southern range about 16 ft. (pl IIIa). Examination of part of the west side of the east range suggests a complete rebuilding but with the ground position of the new clearly deviating from the old only at some distance south down its length. Presumably it had still to be fixed to an unchanged transept at its north end.

Dating evidence for this major rebuilding relies on material re-used in the footings of the later plan, on the content of robber trenches which must have been filled before the later walls cut them and on finds in the earlier floors or make up for the later ones. It is not possible to advance a more precise date than the middle of the fourteenth century, or the later part of it,¹⁶ without a greater body of material to provide a *terminus post quem*.

Cloister walks (pl IIb)

The four cloister walks have been further explored, but there is still a lack of information on particular kinds of flooring. The northern walk narrowed slightly towards its eastern end which is under modern graves and thus was not seen. The south-eastern corner buttress, the first buttress north from that corner, and the first two west from it, all showed signs of additions to their plan size, which

may denote some superstructural defect at this point. The five buttresses seen on the northern side had markedly shallower footings as opposed to those on the southern side. If the northern walk was probably of one storey and against the church, it is less clear whether the others were leant against their respective ranges, or included within them, and divided on the ground floor by another load-bearing wall. Another join of two styles of footings was seen on the north side, though this need be no more than the join of two working parties. The two walls for the eastern walk were rebuilt in this period on the same position, though the walk was lengthened to the south with the general expansion of the cloisters; the robber trench for part of the earlier east wall was cut by the construction trench for the later.

West range

The new west range was slightly shorter (96 ft. compared with 105 ft. (29.3 m. with 32.0 m.) and slightly broader (24 ft. compared with 19 ft.) (7.4 m. with 5.8 m.) than the full length of its predecessor. Its main walls did not continue to run at right angles to the orientation of the church, but in their new position were angled slightly so that the south ends diverged away to the east. In plan it seems to have been divided into three main sections, of which the northern, perhaps originally an outer parlour, survives much altered as the modern vestry. A sleeper wall ran down the middle for part of its length (pl IVa). Robber trenches or footings for imposts have been found at intervals against the footings or robber trenches for the outside walls.

The northern unit of this range, traditionally but incorrectly called the chapter house, is less easy to understand due to the many rebuildings it has suffered, concluding with its conversion to a vestry. Possibilities of a thirteenth century origin for it have been discussed above. In this case, the rest of the west range would have been rebuilt in the fourteenth century on the line dictated by the part extended in the thirteenth century. Alternatively this northern unit was part of the rebuild, and the conspicuously thirteenth century work may have come from a demolished building. Whatever its construction date, it probably filled the part of the outer parlour, in the scheme of the later cloisters.

The west wall of this range has been obscured by almost total robbing after its re-use in the mansion period. There may have been a large feature of Abbey or mansion date on it just south of the vestry. Evidence for this was confused, however, and came from a limited area. More work generally is needed to clarify detail within this range, but excavation is limited to small trenches because

access is needed by cars.

Refectory

Most of the later refectory has been examined. Its west wall was a continuation southwards of the east wall for the west range, and cut the south wall for the earlier refectory (pl IIIa). The range was sited at right angles to the new west range, and thus the main axis of the refectory was not quite parallel to that of the church. At the south-west corner was a pair of corner buttresses, with some ashlar blocks surviving, the whole built upon a massive footing with three offsets. Parts of four external buttress footings have been seen on the south wall.

It is likely that the upstanding eastern wall of the mansion represents a re-use of a wall dividing the ground floor of the range into two parts. This wall, equidistant between the west and east limits of the refectory undercroft, shows on its inner west face the same use of stone up to first floor level with post-medieval brick above as can be seen on the internal face of the re-used refectory north wall. A trench in the north internal angle of the mansion's east end showed solid footings bonded round the corner and clearly strengthened with a post-medieval mortar above a certain level. A wide construction trench had been dug for this latter purpose. The ground at other significant points was too disturbed by the mansion construction to give any clear picture. This wall was designed to bear a load in the medieval period rather than to be just a partition and could fairly easily have been adapted in a shortened condition to make an outside wall after the Dissolution.

The eastern limit of the refectory undercroft was formed by the west wall of the dormitory undercroft. An area 7½ ft. (2.3 m.) wide was partitioned into a narrow small room, with a hearth apparently built against a substantial west wall (pl IIIc). In any monastic house the dimensions of this room would suggest a passage through the frater range, giving access to the buildings beyond. The presence of the hearth might imply a different use as a warming room, though this feature filled a good third of the area. Again, the room could have seen both uses, with the insertion of heating arrangements here being part of the decline from austere standards as recorded by the visitation documents.¹⁶ The hearth looked more permanent than one created just to expedite stripping the buildings after 1539.

Floor levels for the refectory were seen in places with some tile elements scattered upon them. A footing contemporary with the refectory was seen running parallel with the north wall a few feet south of it. Its purpose was not immediately clear,

but it may relate to some superstructural need of this range at ground or first floor level. The east side of a massive footing was seen running south from the south refectory wall at its east end. It lined up with the narrow room partition wall but both these walls butted against the two sides of the refectory's south wall.

The south and west ranges in the rebuilt period did not directly connect with each other except probably through the cloisters: there was a space, presumably open, at their respective west and south ends. In the construction of the new ranges, demolition and building spreads were laid outside them, on the gravel surface which had been outside the earlier west range.

East range

North of the modern churchyard wall, the area of the dormitory range and the south transept is almost entirely covered by modern graves. There was however room to excavate a trench immediately north of the churchyard wall. It was hoped to see the south wall for the Chapter House; the lack of any indication for it presumably means it was placed further to the north, though perhaps only by a few feet. Part of the west side of the dormitory undercroft was excavated for a length of 45 ft. (13.7 m.), showing make up and floor levels for the later structure. There was no evidence for impost footings relating to roof support on the east side of this wall, though they could have been sited on the wide offset and totally robbed.

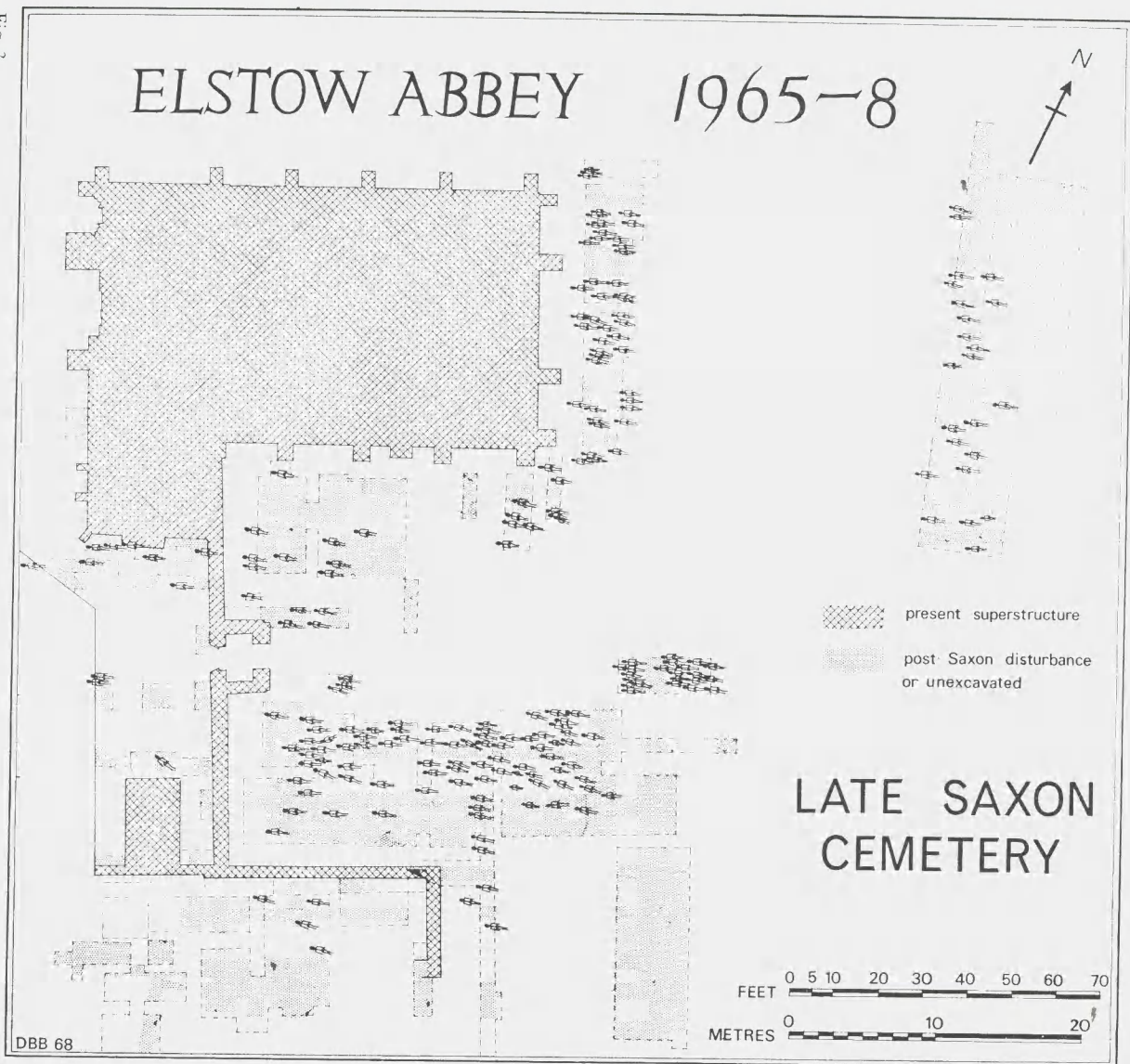
(8) 15th century (figs 1 and 2) (pl IIa)

Church

The third substantial change of plan at the east end of the church involved the eastward extension of the north quire aisle termination. Until the fifteenth century this had preserved its original Norman position; how it was reconciled to the rebuilt presbytery is uncertain because less of this north termination could be excavated than on the south, and because robbing was almost complete. The new chapel extended no further north, but came out beyond the line of the main east end. It butted up to the north-east corner of the presbytery, and had a diagonal buttress at its north-east corner, with another buttress on its north side. The footings were shallow and much of the buttresses ashlar work, and may be taken as characteristically fifteenth century.

To this century may also belong the construction of a small building, perhaps a vestry for the parish priest, attached to the north side of the aisle of the parochial part of the church. It is shown on engravings, and the doorway from the church is behind the modern organ.

Fig 3.



(9) late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries

The detached tower at the north-west of the church was given a major renovation in the last century of the convent's existence. A smaller doorway was inserted into the original and many other changes made. It may have been heightened with the addition of one more floor and the roof above, or alternatively a timber superstructure on the bottom storeys may have been replaced in stone. Little can be seen on the outside, but there is a broad offset running round the inside of the second floor chamber, made by the wall above being slightly thinner and set back outwards.

BURIALS AT THE EAST END OF THE CHURCH (fig 2)

A large number of human burials were encountered in the area excavation at the east end of the church. Some were definitely pre-Abbey, some contemporary with it, and some postdated it, but the absence of clear sealing layers everywhere has caused some confusion. The following categories can be advanced, but not every burial can be placed with assurance into a particular category.

(1) Pre-Abbey: cremation burial.

(2) Pre-Abbey: below Abbey floors, or cut by Abbey Norman walls: some probably part of the main Christian Saxon graveyard; others cut or sealed by pre-Abbey slots or gullies may be of the same date but do not have to be; the lack of dating evidence for the features clouds this issue.

(3) Abbey: outside the presbytery and the original northern quire aisle termination: in rough stone coffins: probably pre-fifteenth century at latest, if the use of rough stone coffins and proximity to the church are any guide.

(4) Abbey: as (3) but not buried in stone coffins: those sealed by the fifteenth century extension will be pre-fifteenth century, and those outside the east end may be early by virtue of their position.

(5) Abbey: burials not in stone coffins: outside and not cut by the fifteenth century extension. These do not have to be post-fifteenth century since there is no clear criterion for distinguishing between (4) and (5).

(6) Abbey: burials associated with south quire aisle termination chapel.

(7) Post Abbey: shallow burials cut through latest Abbey floor levels from about 18 in. below modern ground surface.

BUILDINGS TO SOUTH OF CLAUSTRAL AREA

The area to the south of the later west range was intensively investigated since a church hall is to

be built on that spot. Evidence was found for two successive buildings in different positions. The earlier had been mostly levelled and destroyed to its bottom footing course, after which a compacted layer of gravel had been laid upon it. The later building, with floor levels and foundations surviving, featuring ovens and hearths, may ultimately have been burnt down as floors were covered with a thick layer of burning. There was some evidence for a passage leading from the north end of this later building to the south end of the west side for the later refectory, though robbing of the post-medieval mansion had removed conclusive proof. This, and the position of the building together with its contents may represent the kitchens with the usual serving access to the refectory. It cannot be shown that destruction of the earlier building and construction of the new coincided with the major fourteenth century rebuild, but planning logic might require it. Pottery evidence does not help with this problem.

POST-MONASTIC: c. 1539-c. 1625

Excavation has not produced any more relevant facts for the interval between convent dissolution and mansion creation in c. 1625. In this period some of the claustral buildings, probably on the south and west sides of the cloisters, were used by the Hervey, Radcliffe and Hillersden families, during the rest of the sixteenth century. It is not clear at what stage the church was truncated: the windows in the east end were probably re-used from some demolished portion. The eastern range may have been pulled down at the same time, since it would have been attached to the south transept. Both events could be placed quite close to 1539 given that these were the essential areas whose removal would effectively hinder any refoundation in a period of religious reaction such as occurred under Mary. However, the Radcliffe tomb, of 1566, now over the altar of the present church, may have had an original position in part of the church no longer standing.

MANSION: c. 1625-c. 1775

House

Some more details are known about the main re-modelling of the claustral buildings in the seventeenth century. The revised dating for the extreme eastern wall of the mansion has been discussed above. The robber trench for the south wall of the mansion, built anew with the house, has been seen for a distance of 85 ft. (25.9 m.) west from the south-east corner of the building. There was a layer of disturbed earth in several places along its length between the robber trench for it and the rob-

ber trench for the south wall of the later Abbey refectory. (pl IVb). This may suggest that the Abbey wall had already been robbed when the mansion wall was erected; in any case, the Abbey robber was sealed by a mansion gravel path. The robber trench for this southern wall of the mansion was also seen in the area shortly to be built upon with a parish hall. It gave no indication of turning a corner northwards on a line with the other robber trench for the mansion west wall which had been seen a short distance to the north. Thus the generally accepted idea of an 'L' shaped mansion may need reassessment. An underfloor cavity was found in the mansion south wing, filled with destruction rubble, but too shallow to be a cellar. Bricks from the mansion period had been intentionally placed on the footing for the south-west corner of the early refectory and west range; they may relate to a flue. The mansion porch has been shown to be butted up against the main re-used Abbey wall: footings for the porch had cut into those for the western garth wall. The northern unit (? outer parlour) in the later Abbey cellarium was incorporated into the mansion with its east side altered to conform to the seventeenth century façade, but its west wall either unaltered or merely concealed.

Environment

A gravel spread associated with the mansion has appeared in many trenches, making paths, and gravel surfaces as part of the landscaping around the house and making the sunken drive from the main road westwards to the porch. The last part of this formal drive probably came round in a sweep in front of the house rather than in a direct path up to the porch.

Several more drains have been found, including a series dug into the old cloister garth in front of the mansion. At least three drains took water away southwards from the base of the mansion south wall: two of them were constructed over the robbed footings for the south wall of the later refectory. A full description and discussion will appear in a final report.

Destruction

The mansion was mostly pulled down after 1781 when Thomas Fisher F.S.A. drew it with the roof off and the western half almost certainly gone.¹⁷ Walls, where robbed, were removed right down to the lowest footing course. In the south wing, demolition took place in at least two stages, producing an initial destruction layer separated from a later thinner one by a turf line.

POST-MANSION: c. 1775-PRESENT DAY

A detailed description of the church before its late nineteenth century restoration is difficult to recon-

struct, and does not belong in an interim report. It is fortunate that Elstow's associations with John Bunyan had concentrated nineteenth century artists upon it. The restoration by T. J. Jackson in the 1880s was most extensive, leaving a construction spread seen under the turf in many adjacent trenches. Regrettably there appear to be no records made by him of the church as he found it: he left it with an inextricable mixture of faithful and neo-Gothicised restorations.

The present day vestry was arranged as a result of these works. Watercolours show that externally it was considerably repaired, with new buttresses on the west; excavation showed the south-west angle to have brick in the buttress footings. Previously it had been a Sunday school room, and served this purpose as the only intact part of the mansion to survive the dismantling. The vestry had been sited in the small building attached to the north of the nave until the first part of the nineteenth century when it was pulled down. The western bay of the south aisle was screened off to act as vestry between that time and the main restoration.

Churchyard

The restoration programme was followed up by the church acquiring a new area of churchyard from Samuel Whitbread, who had financed most of the recent work. Before 1892, the southern wall of the churchyard had run eastwards from the northern buttress on the church's east end. The footings for this wall had been inserted into the core of the robbed wall for the north wall of the north aisle. As a result of this new enclosure, graves were dug into the remains of the eastern bay of the nave, the crossing, both transepts, and eastwards into the quire. Only a strip 20 ft. wide to the east of the sixteenth century blocking wall, and the extreme east end of the church, were untouched.

CONCLUSION

In the last 18 months most of the answerable questions concerning the church have been tackled. The cloisters and the south ranges have been explored in detail, with progress being made on the other main claustral buildings. Future work must be concentrated on the dormitory ranges, the buildings to the south of the claustral area, and the possible Saxon cremation area east of the presbytery.

The amount of detail which such a thoroughly robbed site can produce is encouraging. The variations within a standard monastic plan, particularly the major fourteenth century rebuilding which could not have been detected without excavation, may imply that a full investigation of such sites

could produce a more complex general picture. It is premature to generalise about the continuity of occupation at this stage of the project, but the religious or funerary character of settlement at Elstow is impressive, from pagan Saxon cremations through Christian inhumations, Catholic Benedictine nuns, to a truncated Anglican parish church.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the co-operation of many people. The Rev P. Hartley, Vicar of Elstow, and Mr C. Prudden, who farms the land, gave permission to excavate; Mr B. Norman gave permission for a trench on his land. The Lord Bishop of St Albans has continued to allow excavation under terms of a Faculty in the modern churchyard. The Verger, Mr J. Bray, has been helpful at all times. The Ministry of Public Building and Works has permitted excavation of this scheduled site.

The excavation is sponsored by the Bedford Archaeological Society. A full list of donations will appear in the final report. Generous financial support has come in particular from the Harpur Trust and from Humphrey Whitbread, Esq. Organisation has been greatly facilitated by Messrs A. Chrystal, M. J. Long, and Bernard West.

Nearly all the work has been done by pupils of the writer from Bedford School, and by pupils of other schools in Bedford: to the Headmaster

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FOOTNOTES

¹*Beds. Arch. J.* III (1966), 22-30. Below referred to as *BAJ*.

²For the sake of clarity throughout this report it is proposed to refer to the structures flanking the presbytery as quire aisles. They clearly underwent changes of function during the life of the Abbey, but the interim nature of this report and the destruction of evidence between nave and presbytery by the modern churchyard preclude a full discussion at this stage.

³*BAJ*, 24.

⁴Dr J. N. L. Myres kindly discussed these features with the writer, and suggested various interpretations.

⁵*BAJ*, 25.

⁶I am grateful to Mr Richard Reece for identifying this coin.

⁷*BAJ*, 24.

⁸Discussed in: S. R. Wigram: *Chronicles of Elstow* (1885), 1-2, 11-14.

⁹Miranda Hyslop. 'Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Chamberlain's Barn, Leighton Buzzard, Beds.' *Arch. J.* CXX (1963), 161-200.

¹⁰*BAJ*, 24-9.

¹¹Wigram: *op. cit.*, 193.

¹²By Mr P. G. M. Dickenson, to whom I am grateful for discussion of aspects of superstructural remains. His plan of standing buildings and proposed reconstruction (1966) is deposited with the National Building Record.

¹³*BAJ*, 26.

¹⁴I am grateful to Mr F. W. Kuhlicke for supplying this information.

¹⁵*BAJ*, 26.

¹⁶A. Hamilton Thompson: 'Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1517-31', II: 124-9; [*Lincoln Record Society* XXXV (1944)]. Also Wigram: *op. cit.* 130.

¹⁷Thomas Fisher: *Collections Historical, Genealogical and Topographical for Bedfordshire*, (1836) plXXXIV.