TRACES OF A LATE SAXON CHURCH AT ST. MARYS, AYLESBURY

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Restricted salvage observations suggest that the existing thirteenth century nave of St. Mary's church, Aylesbury developed from a shorter nave employing stone-saving footings, with a western tower added and then removed. The earliest footings are probably late Saxon, perhaps set into a plough headland. There is slender evidence for a cloister and a water distribution system in the twelfth century, which would agree with the assumption that this was once a 'minister' church.

Introduction

Extensive renovation made it possible to observe standing sections as much as 2.3 m deep at the west end of the nave and to a lesser extent in the north transept of the existing church, which is principally of the first half of the thirteenth century.[1] Recording was aimed at identifying any structure of a previous church and forming an impression of the likelihood of early deposits surviving in areas unaffected by the present work.

Michael Farley has recently summarised the early historical evidence for Aylesbury and suggests that it grew to be a defended *burh* by the tenth century A.D.[2] Concerning the church there are legends of two noble Saxon ladies, St. Edburga and St. Osyth, associated with a seventh century religious foundation here.[3] The earliest concrete evidence however comes from Domesday: at the time of Edward the Confessor the church of Aylesbury is said to have drawn substantial tithes from the sokemen of the eight hundreds around Aylesbury. The payments were reduced after the coming of King William, but it is clear that the late Saxon church was well established and probably correctly to be regarded as a 'minister'.[4] Hence the feeling by the County Museum and the Department of the Environment that every advantage should be taken of observing the new work, possibly the last opportunity in the remotely foreseeable future of seeing beneath the floors of the nave and transepts. I am grateful to Mike Farley and Paul Gosling for their support and encouragement, and to Messrs. Roiser, Whitestone and Bartosch (architects), Messrs Andrews, Kent and Stone (engineers), and Messrs. Webster and Cannon and their staff (builders), for their cooperation.

Lack of funds precluded any plan to strip the floor of the church in advance of the new work, and this proved a blessing since the builders' working level required removal of no more than half the thickness of Victorian concrete over most of the floor. Archaeological interest was therefore mainly confined to the west end of the nave where support for the arcades was to be achieved by converting the aisle bays into service rooms, using partitions on mass footings set on 'bedrock'. The only other deep excavations were for a new foul sewer leading towards Nelson Terrace, and four concrete stanchions for a new organ in the north transept. Observation, recording and

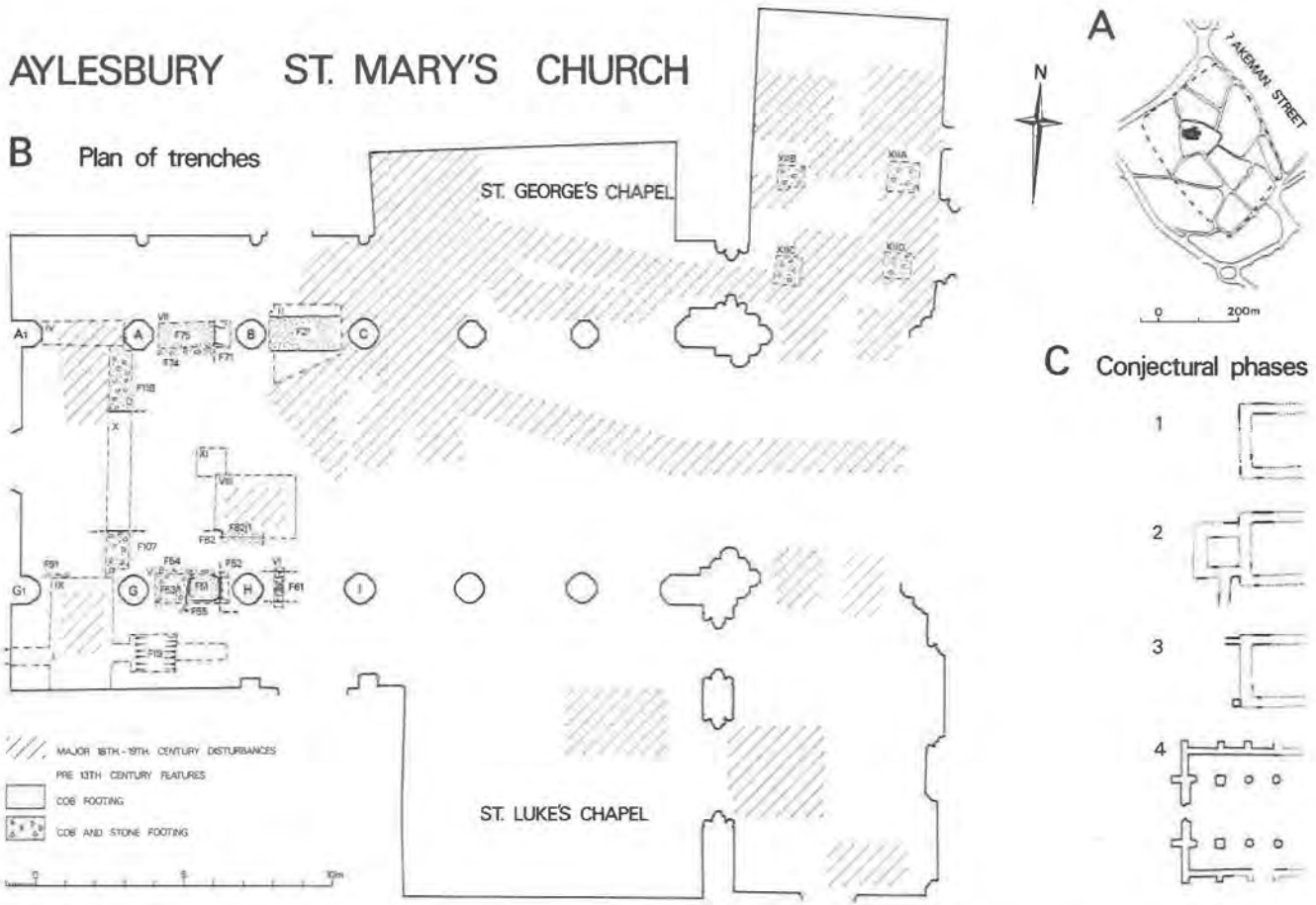

Fig. 1. A. Aylesbury showing the possible line of a late Saxon Burghal defence (after Farley, *op. cit.* note 2, Fig. 1);
B. Principal features of all periods;
C. Conjectural phasing, footing-faces shown with a hard line, irrespective of construction type.

restricted digging could therefore be carried out single-handed by the writer on occasional visits between April and July 1978.

The Excavation (Fig. 1.B)

Despite massive eighteenth and nineteenth century disturbances, most trenches showed traces of medieval clay or mortar floors immediately beneath the Victorian screed. Trenches X and XI were also heavily disturbed by earth graves whose loose fill suggested they were internal burials of the existing church. The first substantial structure encountered was a stone wall F61 with a weathered south face between piers H and I. Unfortunately, due to to this being the only vehicle access, it was not possible to see the footing on which it stood, but it is assumed to have been similar to the footings of clay and weathered rock between other piers of the nave, i.e. F21, F51 and F75. In places the material had penetrated crevices in its construction trench, suggesting that it was put in as a slurry or 'cob'.

Of the three cob footings seen, F51 was unusual in appearing to respect footings F52, F53/1 and possibly F54 (apparently of the same build as F53/1), which are all therefore assumed to have predated it. F52 and its counterpart in the north arcade F71, were built of good stone blocks, and at first sight looked like pier bases of the thirteenth century arcade. Since, however, both (i.e. F52 and F71) were respected by apparently pre-arcade features (F51, F74), it will be suggested that they were corner strengthening of the predominantly cob-founded early nave. F54, from its location and alignment, seemed to be the south face of a footing recorded in other trenches as F82 and F107. Its breadth suggested a heavy structure and it was matched by a generally similar and even broader footing F74, F118, to the north. Both had substantially more stone with the 'cob' than did F21, F51 or F75, and additionally, one or more courses of pitched stone. The south section of Trench VII indicated that F74 was butted onto an existing footing, F71, at its east end, and it will be suggested that the two broad footings represent a tower added to an existing nave. A further wall F53/1, apparently of the same build, will be suggested as being part of a lateral building to the south.

It was not possible to establish the ground level from which the footings had been dug, but it is likely to have been at about 91.80 m.O.D., based on comparison of the levels of clay footings in Trench X and the stone wall in Trench VI. The highest recorded level of the natural subsoil was *c.* 90.40 m.O.D., and a possible explanation for the intervening thickness of dark loam is suggested below. The only area where this stratum could be excavated archaeologically was in Trench X, where a fragment of a burnt horizon, L112 (91.43 m.O.D.), overlay two closely spaced postholes, F113, F113/1, set in a granular, possibly cultivated, loam. This trench was excavated to 90.83 m.O.D. but showed no further stratification and the loam is assumed to have extended down to subsoil at about 90.40 m.O.D. The subsoil itself consisted of 0.15 m of a yellowish-grey clay loam, L92, above 0.35 m of weathered rock L92/1, with the surface of the Portland beds at about 89.95 m.O.D. (Trenches II, IX and XIIA).[5]

As would be expected in the circumstances, finds were few and stratified finds even fewer. From the medieval church levels there were: a sherd of a glazed jug; a lump of copper waste, possibly from bell-making;[6] fragments of window glass and lead; fragments of painted plaster; two mouldings in local limestone; clay roof tiles; two complete floor tiles with inlay and four inlaid fragments. A short section of 90 mm. bore

lead pipe (SF25) was recovered from Trench V, and is conjectured to be part of a water distribution system (F55, see below). Stratified in the pre-church levels of Trench X there were clay tiles/bricks, some possibly Roman, and twelve fragments of animal bone, but no human bone. All of the finds, together with mortar samples from all excavated footings and soil samples from the early topsoil and subsoil, will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum.

Interpretation and Discussion

The overall 1.40 m. of good loam, between the relatively level subsoil/old topsoil and the earliest identifiable church level, is a puzzle. The dark colour suggest much humic material, *i.e.* burials, settlement waste or ploughing. The absence of human bone, the shortage of pottery and the absence of pits or graves penetrating the deeper layers seems to preclude the first two possibilities however, and agricultural activity seems most likely. The fact that the church was built on the loam rather than terraced into it suggests that it was extensive, and would appear to have been the normal surface rather than a ridge or mound. Ploughing on level ground can sometimes create deep accumulations of good soil, particularly at the headlands.[7] These observations would need to be checked at other locations, but if confirmed would be of considerable interest for study of the early development of the town area.

Interpretation of the structural development of the church on the basis of the builders' trenches is difficult, but by making a few assumption some progress is possible. Two broad footings are assumed to belong to a tower on the axis of the existing nave (F54, F74, F82, F107, F118). The earliest evidence of the nave itself is a 'cob' footing east of pier B in the north arcade (F21), matched by a stone wall, possibly on a similar footing, in the south arcade (F61). The cob footings west of this are slighter and appear to have been inserted later (F51, F75), so a north-south cob footing between piers B and H is a good candidate for the west end of this nave (F82/1). Now it may be coincidence that this cob west end is on the same line as the stone block footings against which the tower was to be butted (F52, F71); on the other hand it is not too unreasonable that a cob foundation should employ stone reinforcing at the corner, and making this assumption, the Phase 1 nave is shown two bays shorter than the existing nave in Fig. 1.C. Rodwell has excavated two Essex churches standing on 'stone-saving' footings of the tenth-eleventh centuries.[8] The only characteristic which can be used to compare the Aylesbury nave and that of other surviving buildings is its breadth, which is estimated at about 7.6 m. (25 ft.) internally. H.M. Taylor records at least twelve recognisable Anglo-Saxon naves as wide or wider than this, from a sample of eighty which he describes as still 'well defined'.[9] Considering that Aylesbury church was to see two major structural changes at the west end (Phases 1 and 3, below) before the comprehensive reconstruction of the mid-thirteenth century, it is not then unreasonable to think of Phase 1 as being late Saxon.

The conclusion that the tower of Phase 2 was a later addition, rests on the evidence of its distinctive footings and the butt-joint against F71 in the south section of Trench VII (section not illustrated; site notebook, p. 22). The examples nearest to Aylesbury of Anglo-Saxon western towers are at Caversfield and Oxford (St. Michael at the Northgate), with a group of seven within fifteen miles of Earls Barton, Northamptonshire. For many of these the relationship to the nave is unclear due to later modifications, but certainly towers do exist which are straight-jointed to earlier naves.[10] In its

position at the western end, the Aylesbury tower is just conceivably a substitute for a central tower over the crossing, which at this early date might have been a risky undertaking given the poor foundations and the weakness of the local stone.[11] A footing adjoinng the south side of the tower may have belonged to a cloister (F53, possibly F19), perhaps built at the same time in view of the similarity of construction.

Weathered loam above the footings of the tower (Trench IX), suggest that it was taken down well before the nave was extended (Phase 4), and that the church stood for a while without a western tower. This in turn suggests an explanation for two sections of narrower cob footings (F51, F75) which are west of the Phase 1/2 west end and apparently respect it. They *might* have been a 'Phase 3a' extension to the nave, but the absence of evidence for a cross-wall between them prompts the suggestion that they simply carried buttresses to support the nave when the tower was removed. The most unexpected find from the excavation was the piece of large-bore lead pipe encased in masonry near the south-west corner of the nave (F55, SF25). It was at first considered unlikely to be an internal feature of the medieval church, and from its position in relation to the earlier structures was thought perhaps to be a rainwater pipe from the angle of the Phase 3 tower and west end. However, the writer is grateful to Warwick Rodwell for pointing out that a lead rainwater pipe would be unparalleled in the twelfth century, although examples are recorded in relation to prestigious buildings, such as the newly whitewashed White Tower, in the following century.[12] Dr. Rodwell provided two alternative suggestions – that it might have been a way of draining a roof-valley in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, or secondly, that it could have been part of a medieval water distribution system such as those known at several 'great' churches, for instance Lichfield, Sherborne and Wells, and illustrated in twelfth century diagrams of Christ Church, Canterbury.[13] On balance the writer is inclined to dismiss the idea of an internal drainpipe: firstly the fragment was at least five metres from the roof-valley of St. Lukes chapel, secondly there is no obvious reason why at this date it should be encased in masonry, and thirdly there must always have been a better way of getting rid of water without bringing it down into the body of the church. The pipe may therefore, despite the lack of supporting documentary evidence, be evidence of a small monastic community surviving into the twelfth century or even later. The source of water is likely to have been a well, and it was evidently distributed by the shortest possible route, even if it meant running it under the nave.

If the structural interpretations above are correct, the change in building technique in the thirteenth century was dramatic, good stone footings being used for all Phase 4 developments. Indeed when the nave columns were reset in the 1850's it is fairly clear that thirteenth century stone footings of the two western piers were partially dug out and replaced by very poor concrete, probably only weakening them.

Figure 1.B shows the extent of modern disturbances exposed by the present works. The stated intentions of the restoration of 1850 suggest that huge concrete shoring bases and underpins may exist in the region of the crossing,[14] and since the heating system and internal burials have disturbed large areas of the nave, it is likely that the 1978 builders' trenches could not have been better placed to gain a first insight into the development of the church.

1. *R.C.H.M., Bucks.*, 22–27. The chancel, central tower, transepts, nave and north and south aisles are generally considered to be of one build.
2. M. Farley, 'Aylesbury – A Defended Town', *Recs. of Bucks.*, XIX (1974), 433–6.
3. *V.C.H., Bucks.*, III, 6, 18.
4. *V.C.H., Bucks.*, I, 233.
5. The geology is similar to the limestone area of the Walton site: M. Farley, 'Saxon and Medieval Walton, Aylesbury: Excavations 1973–4', *Recs. of Bucks.* XX (1976), 159.
6. Dr. P. Northover analysed this material and reports that it is pure copper waste, heavily corroded. Pure copper would have been needed for mixing with tin to make bell-metal.
7. The nature of headlands is described in C. Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape* (1975), 85, fig. 11b. I have not found any reference to the excavation of a headland, but I am indebted to my colleagues Bob Wilson, David Miles and George Lambrick for their assurance that many surviving headlands are as deep and as extensive as the Aylesbury feature.
8. K. A. Rodwell and W. J. Rodwell 'Excavations at Rivenhall Church Essex: An Interim Report'. *Antiq. J.* LIII (1973), 225; W. Rodwell 'The Archaeological Investigation of Hadstock Church Essex: An Interim Report'. *Antiq. J.* LVI (1976), 59.
9. These dimensions are conveniently summarised in H. M. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, III (1978), Fig. 745.
10. *Ibid.*, Fig 694; 896–7.
11. Gilbert Scott gives chilling descriptions of both in his assessment of the condition of the medieval church: 'Aylesbury Church in 1848', *Recs. of Bucks.*, I (1854), 30–36.
12. L. F. Saltzman, *Building in England down to 1540* (1967), 266.
13. R. Willis, 'The Architectural History of the Conventual Buildings in the Monastery of Christ Church in Canterbury' *Archaeologia Cantiana* VII (1868), 158–173, fig. 33 and Pl 1, 2 and 3.
14. *Loc. cit.* note 11.

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