

RAVENSTONE PRIORY: THE CHURCH LOCATED

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A watching brief in 1984 recorded firm evidence for the location of the Augustinian Priory of St Mary at Ravenstone, when what is thought to be part of the church was exposed in a modern foundation trench. Worked stone and painted window glass were recovered from the site. These are reported on by Jill Kerr and Richard Halsey respectively. A note is included on the location of the manor house.

Introduction

The conversion to domestic use of farm buildings lying to the east of Abbey Farm, Ravenstone led to considerable alteration of the structures, including underpinning and rebuilding walls, laying service pipes, and constructing a cess pit. The farm buildings concerned, now known as 'Priory Lade', lie some 400 metres NNW of All Saints Church and just south of a pasture field, thought to contain a substantial part of Ravenstone Priory and Scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1973. The watching brief showed that a large part of the Priory complex lies to the south of the scheduled area.

The site records are filed at Buckinghamshire County Museum, Ref. CAS 0460 and the glass and a few samples accessioned as 1992.120.

Structural Evidence

Evidence for the Priory and its outbuildings was observed at three locations during 1984. Initially, on 21st May 1984, a soakaway pit exposed a stone wall in the field north of the modern buildings; concurrently the interior floor of the former byre was in process of being lowered. This action had brought to light pieces of dressed medieval masonry which the owner had put to one side. In mid-July a foundation trench was dug to form a new south wall to the byre. This action cut stratified deposits and exposed a column base

and other features. A short time only was available on 16th July to record these features. A few details were added following a further visit on 30th July and meanwhile the widening of an access way adjacent to almshouses to the east provided another recording opportunity. The evidence brought to light on these three occasions is noted here. It was also reported that other structural features had been encountered whilst digging service trenches in the NW corner of the enclosed courtyard which adjoins the byre on the south, and the discovery of painted medieval glass (b on Fig. 5) was similarly reported.

The principal discovery relating to the Priory was made within the byre (Fig. 2). The byre floor had been reduced, and consisted largely of earth and, beneath, a further 0.30m of soil with sandstone rubble, according to the owner. The observed section of one footing trench (Fig. 3) broadly confirmed this. The trench had been dug E-W along the south edge of the byre and a further trench, for an internal wall, dug N-S at its eastern end. At the junction of the two trenches a column base was exposed (Fig. 3-4 and Plate 1). The base, which was set on a rectangular footing of roughly squared limestone, was made of shelly sandy limestone with occasional small round black pebble inclusions.

To the west of the column, the partially robbed footing of a N-S wall could be seen

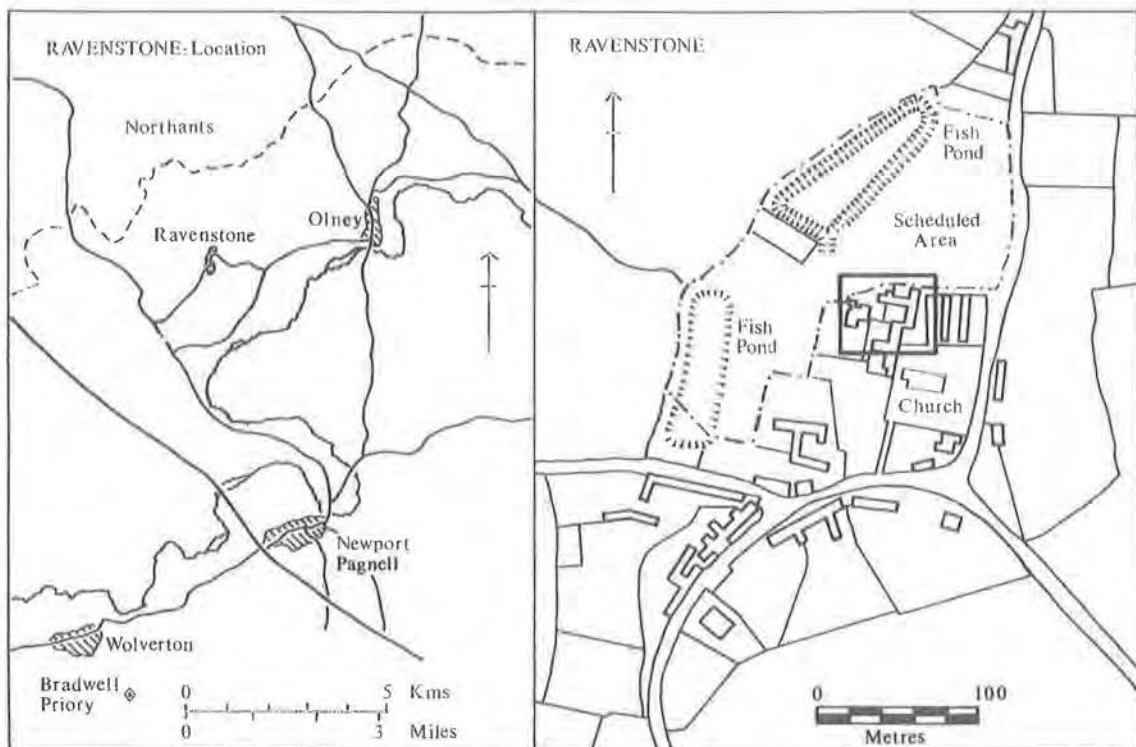


Fig. 1. a) Ravenstone Priory: location of development.

and, between this point and the column itself, it was possible to establish the approximate position of an original floor level. One in-situ limestone floor slab laid on a mortary sand remained. All other slabs had been removed but the projected level of the surviving slab would have encountered the column base just at its foot.

Beneath the floor level were a dark red clay and a dark humic clay, both containing flecks of charcoal. The whole rested on what was presumably the undisturbed geology, a brown clay with sparse flint fragments. In the short N-S section the basal clay could be seen sealed by a humic clay (Fig 4, 2) possibly indicating an old ground surface. This in turn was capped by a layer of mortary sand (Fig 4, 9) similar to that beneath the paving in the long section, and then by fragments of thin limestone paving partially on and in mortar. The presumed finished surface of this initial flooring would have been at a similar level to the flooring observed in the long section,

namely about 0.40m below the modern courtyard level. Subsequently the primary flooring had been cut away adjacent to the column and two or more substantial butted slabs laid on top of the ensuing backfill. These slabs, which were 0.14m thick, also butted the column base. One was at least 0.60m square; two had the appearance of being worn. The three abutting slabs presented a continuous N-S edge. It is tempting to consider that these may have formed a step up beside the column, from a lower level floor on the west. It is however possible that flooring of similar quality was formerly also present to the west, overlying the thinner primary flooring slabs observed in that section, but that this has been robbed. If this were so there would be no difference in level either side of the pillar and hence no step. Slightly in favour of the step theory is the presence of a continuous edge, rather than the offset pattern which might have been expected had further slabs abutted those which survived, but this can scarcely be regarded as conclusive.

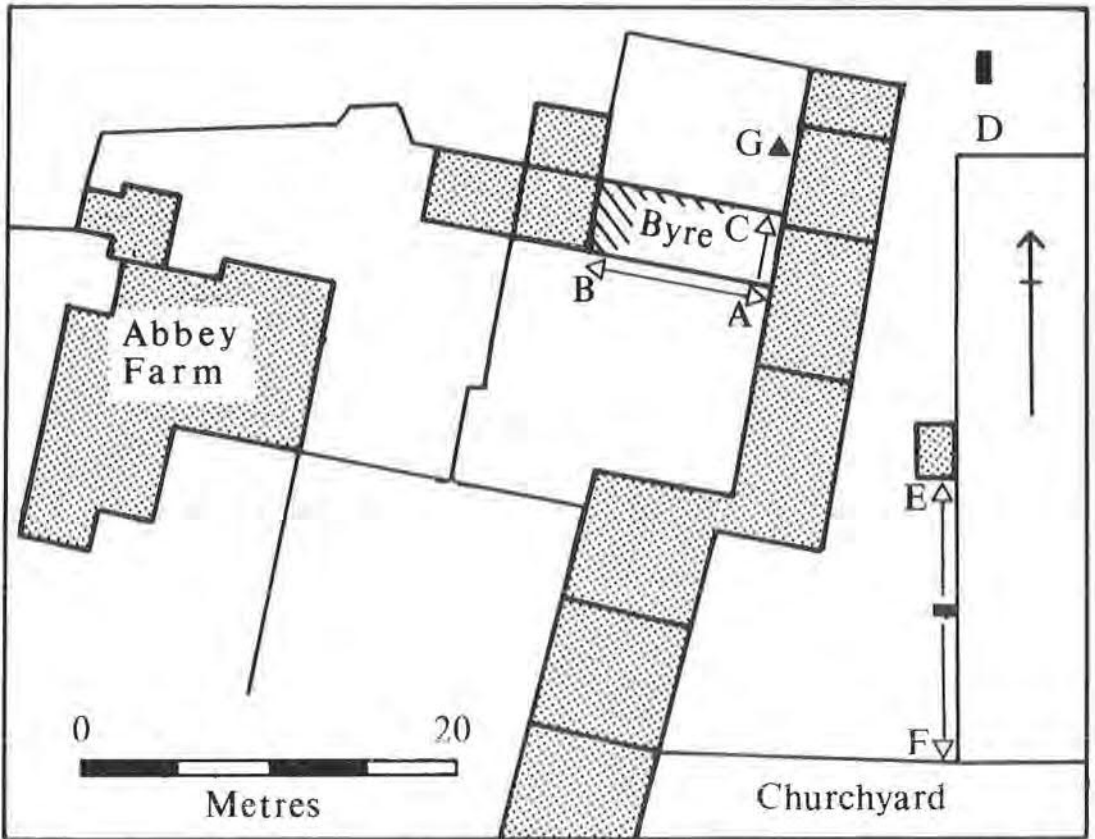


Fig. 2. Priory Lade, Ravenstone: location of drawn sections and other finds.

The discovery of further structural evidence a few metres south west of the byre building in a service trench dug by the owner through the courtyard has previously been mentioned. Rectangular blocks of dressed limestone masonry had been encountered which the owner thought to be a wall. Two blocks of dressed stone remaining on the spoil heap measured $0.2 \times 0.3 \times 0.5\text{m}$.

In a small yard 7 metres north of the byre wall, in a narrow service trench, a clean yellow sandy clay deposit with fragments of limestone was noted but it is uncertain whether this was structural or natural. East of this, adjacent to a modern wall (Fig. 2,b), the owner encountered fragments of painted window glass which are discussed further on.

Further to the north, in what was previously pasture, the footings of a further wall had

come to light during construction of a soakaway in May. The footings of this wall, which ran roughly N-S, were seen in the west face of the pit. Its minimum recorded width was 0.5m, but when it was subsequently cut through its full width was reported to be nearer 0.7m. The tabular sandy limestone of which it was composed was undressed and set in a red clay of local origin; pockets of similar clay were seen elsewhere on site. The wall seems a little substantial to have been merely a boundary wall; however there was no associated occupation debris or floor levels on the side which was visible.

Finally, improvement of the access way to Priory Lade led to the eastern boundary of the site, adjacent to the almshouses, being cut back (Fig. 2, section E-F). The resultant sloping section was drawn although conditions

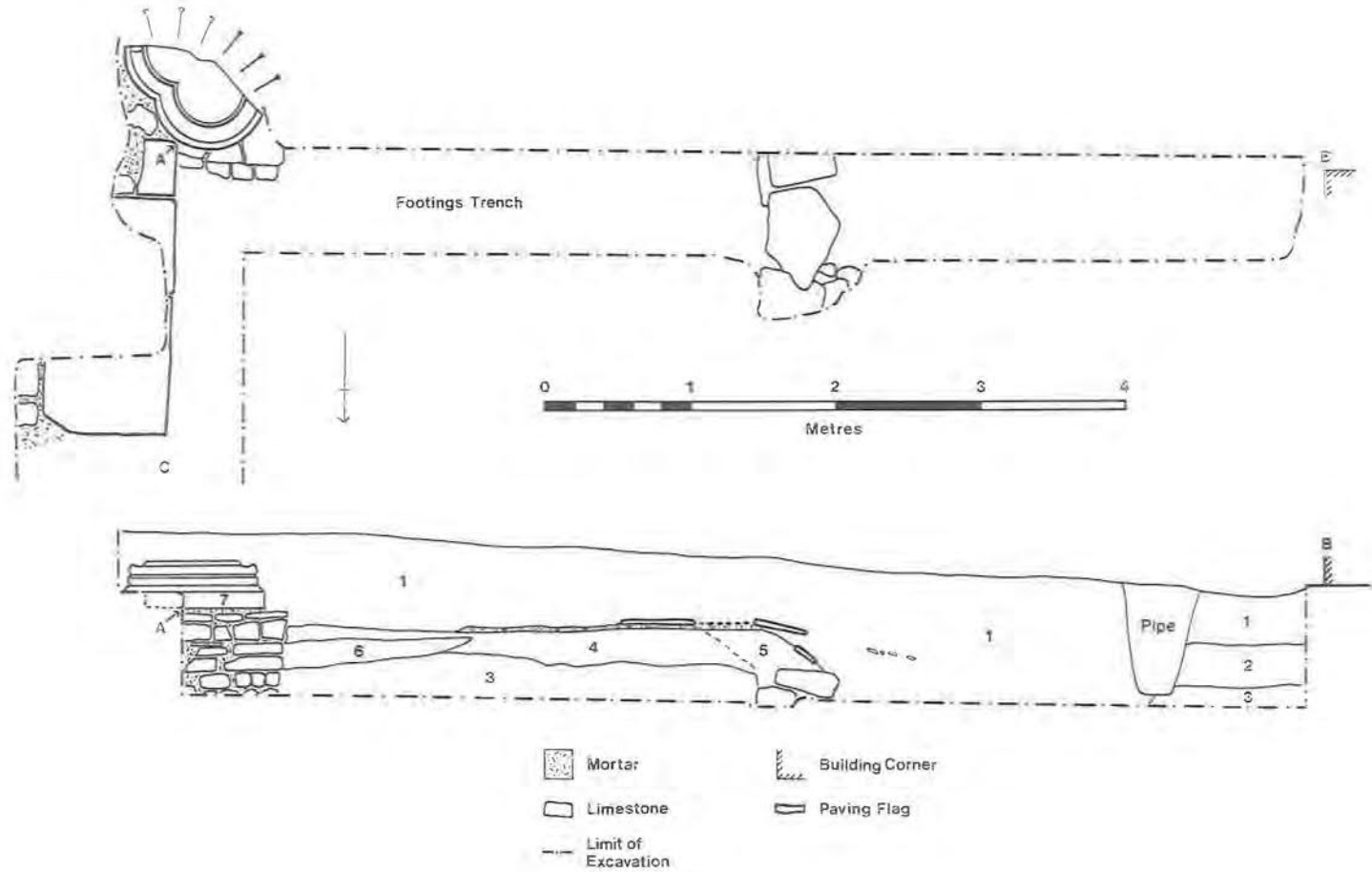


Fig. 3. a) plan of modern footing trenches in byre showing medieval column base and paving slabs. b) section A-B along footings trench.

were not ideal and the section is not reproduced here. A little over a metre of made ground was exposed with at the base a brown clay containing sparse limestone. The latter was presumed to be undisturbed natural. In the section a wall of mortared, roughly squared limestone blocks was exposed (shown black on Fig. 2), width 0.5m and surviving height at least 1.10m. Its base was not seen. A rough limestone paving which abutted the wall on its south side, near its crest, sealed a sherd of seventeenth to eighteenth-century date. The paving post-dated 0.6m of made ground, implying late use of a substantially infilled structure, which provisionally may also be regarded as part of the Priory complex. The whole section has now been revetted by a wall.

To the south of the wall, a little above the 'natural' and adjacent to a layer of small limestone with mortar, a single hand-made body sherd in fine sandy reduced fabric was recovered. This sherd could be either mid to late Iron Age, or Saxon.

THE ARCHITECTURAL STONEMWORK by Richard Halsey

Most of the stonework, apart from that described above, was recovered by the owner from the floor of the byre or from other locations during the work. The comments below are based on photographs of the stone taken at the time. The owner subsequently built many of the pieces into walls.

The principal architectural feature discovered was the mid to late thirteenth-century moulded base of a triple-shafted respond, of which two shafts are visible. The upper hollow moulding apparently has an uncarved piece and was presumably bedded in the wall. The plinth echoes the triple shaft arrangement. The size and N-S positioning of the piece suggests it supported a major arch. With the possibility of a step to the east, this might therefore be the south respond of the chancel arch. Following the development part of the base remains visible projecting from walls at the NE corner of the courtyard.

The following identifiable pieces of worked stone were recorded by photography on site:

1. Circa 1300 moulding, probably from an arch.
2. Piece of mullion?
3. Length of semi circular half shaft.
4. Piece of curvilinear window tracery, with cusps and glazing groove to each side. From an early fourteenth-century Decorated window. (Plate II).
5. Smaller piece of tracery from similar or same window.
6. Fragment of inscribed foliate cross from memorial floor slab, probably one of the arms of the cross. Probably fourteenth century.
- 7-8. Two pieces of a respond, hollow chamfer between two attached shafts. Traces of ochreous paint, on which lime wash was later laid, were noted on site. Perhaps thirteenth century.
9. Section of shaft or arch moulding with two of the three fillets showing. Fourteenth century.
10. Section of arch voussoir?
11. Curved piece, possibly a lining to a well-head or similar structure.
12. Spandrel of flat-headed cusped opening, no glazing groove visible, so possibly from tracery screen or similar.

Five other small dressed pieces were not identifiable.

Finally, an engraving of a piece discovered previously near the site and reproduced here as Fig. 9, may be noted.

As this large stone is described as having been placed over the Holy Well in an 'inverted' position, it is most likely that it has been brought here from elsewhere. This elaborately decorated triple arch form is unlike other medieval English well-heads which tend to be single plain arches. As it is of some size, it is unlikely to have been brought very far, but was presumably thought useful enough to hold water from the well in the inverted central niche head.

If of three equal arches, then the scale suggests that this stone's original use might have been as the head of a sedilia or a triple statue niche, possibly above the doorway or an elaborate entrance arch to a porch. However, the

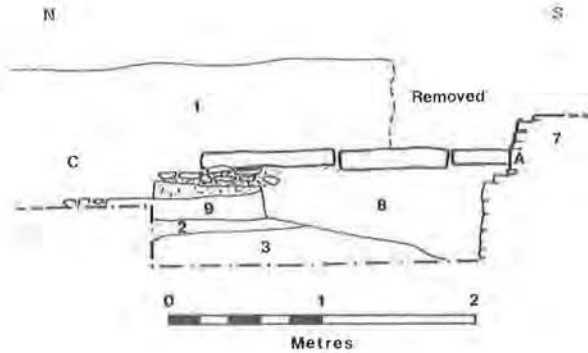


Fig. 4. Section A-C along footings trench N-S across byre, showing paving slabs and column base to right.

use of a figure on a bracket at the springing point of the arch is unusual for such features and could suggest that this stone is part of an elaborate monument or, given the apparent depth of the niche, is part of an Easter Sepulchre. Parallels for these latter two uses are no easier to find, though, as the 'figure' is unidentifiable; it could have been an elaborate hood stop above a capital.

A date of *c.* 1300 can be suggested from the use of an ogee arch, apparently rising in front of regular, geometrical shapes contained within an almost semi-circular arch. None of these features is well-drawn (although the text mentions the 'sharp and fresh' quality of some ornament) and it is more likely that the hood mould of the basic arch shape was pointed rather than semi-circular. The mouldings around the geometrical shapes on the left of the ogee arch give them a later thirteenth-century quality, as distinct from the plate tracery character of the right-hand shapes without mouldings.

There is much *c.* 1300 curvilinear tracery to be seen in this area of north Buckinghamshire/south-east Northamptonshire and the sedilia at nearby Emberton uses ogee arches. The two-seat sedilia at Preston Bissett (south-west of Buckingham) also uses (nodding) ogee arches and the chancel arch there springs from caryatid figures reminiscent of the spandrel feature depicted in this plate (though not standing on brackets).

On the basis that this engraving shows a single large stone, that spanned a complete niche about two feet in width flanked by similar-sized niches, it can be tentatively suggested that this stone came from a sedilia of the early 14th century. From its elaboration, it is perhaps more likely to be the principal church sedilia, rather than from a side chapel.

Although the stone used in the Priory has not been checked petrologically it is thought to be similar to that used for mouldings in the adjoining parish church. Limestone is widely

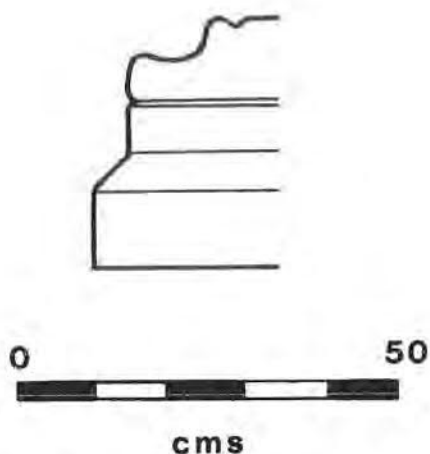


Fig. 5. Profile of column base.

used for building in Ravenstone and adjacent parishes and Sheahan (1862, 590) noted the presence of quarries here.

THE WINDOW GLASS by Jill Kerr

The window glass was recovered from a compact area to the north of the byre (Fig. 2, g). The quantity of material is very small – grouped together, the surface area covers barely half a page of A4-sized paper.

Colour Range

Approximately three-quarters of the survival is of painted glass. The discernible colour range is restricted to white, flashed ruby with striations and surface bubbles, pot-metal green and pot-metal yellow.

Condition

The overall condition is very poor, with much loss of surfaces, shaling of paint and few grozed (deliberately cut) edges intact. Some of the exteriors are very heavily pitted and where grozed edges survive there are marked lead shadows which are evidence of the glass having been glazed in situ for a sufficient period of time for the surface to decay. Some of the glass is still vitreous and there are a few

translucent pieces. There is no evidence of fire damage. All the pieces appear to be destruction debris and there are no examples of construction glazing.

Date

There are a few pieces that may be late-thirteenth-century formalised foliage designs from geometric grisaille patterns – but without the characteristic cross-hatched backgrounds – otherwise all the other surviving designs would be consistent with a fourteenth-century dating.

Designs

The repertoire of designs is limited. Apart from fragments of naturalistic, veined foliate leaf designs, the most striking survivors are two distinct border designs. Both are geometric designs picked out of a matt wash and cursively painted. The evidence for figurework is meagre: apart from some scant survivals which may bear drapery painting, there is only one fragment of crudely painted hair. A piece of plain red, shaped glass is intricately grozed and may have been from the background (gules) to a shield of arms. There are no heads, hands, faces, feet, inscriptions or heraldic motifs and nothing that indicates the *scale* of the glazing. None of the surviving painted pieces bear recognisable architectural designs and there is one piece only that could be interpreted as a fragment of black-letter inscription.

The painting is not of the highest quality and there are no examples of any virtuoso glazing techniques surviving. The cursive and relaxed style of painting does not demonstrate an expensive class of designer operating here and the repertoire of motifs is neither distinguished or distinctive. Despite the dearth of formally identifiable designs, this type of glass would be appropriate to an ecclesiastical context. All the most complete fragments are illustrated (Figs. 7–8) with the broken edges indicated by broken lines. The catalogue is grouped by colour where this is discernible.

Green

1. Strip of border painted with plain side line design.
2. Painted overall with heavy wash, possibly drapery, not substantial enough to illustrate.
3. Background or border design of cursive geometric grid of crosses picked out of matt wash; 5–6mm lead shadow on exterior.
4. Unpainted, very pronounced exterior pitting.

Red

5. A more precisely painted grid of geometric crosses (as number 3 above) with extensive exterior pitting.
6. No paint visible, exterior pitting.
7. Unpainted shaped piece, incomplete, very precisely grozed edges, possibly a red (gules) background to an heraldic charge.
8. As number 5 above.
9. Surface very discoloured, but may conceal cursive wash lines, possibly drapery.

Yellow

10. Either a seaweed background design or a fragment of an architectural design, central finial and crockets?

Colour not discernible

11. Fragment of background foliate design picked out of a matt wash. 4mm lead shadow.
12. Now decayed to a bright, emerald sugar green base glass with discoloured surfaces. Original colour not known, some line painting survives, possibly drapery.
13. Fragment of incomplete design of formalised stem and foliage, too fragmentary to define, but probably from thirteenth-century stiff-leaf geometric grisaille design.

White

- 14–16. Fragments of thirteenth-century geometric grisaille designs of stiff-leaf foliage and stems. Extensive corrosion on exterior surface. Paint applied in bold thick strokes.
17. 19mm width plain strip.

18. Pronounced exterior corrosion. Interior surface has thickly applied strong paint lines. Possibly a quarry design, too incomplete to determine.

19–23 Fragments of foliage designs, some associated with geometric frames. None complete enough for typological comparison. All are cursively painted with relaxed brush strokes. Number 21 may have been part of a foliate border to a black-letter inscription, but unfortunately only a small part of this survives.

24. Very scuffed surface design, difficult to read.

25–27 A group of geometric border designs, of intersecting lozenges incorporating quatrefoils formed by cusps within triangles surrounded by a line of dots. All design features are picked out in matt washes. All have exterior corrosion.

28. Very crude line painting, possibly representing hair, perhaps from an heraldic animal or a figure.

A tangled lead came, cast, 4mm flange. retains some cement. Condition consistent with lead stripping.

OTHER FINDS

Jetton by G.C. Lamb

The jetton bears the arms of France (three fleur-de-lis on a shield) with a religious motto 'AVE MARIA GRACIA' (plena ora pro nobis) and on the reverse is a cross with fleur-de-lis on each arm and 'V' (for Virgo) in between. I cannot find an exact parallel for this jetton but I am sure that it is French, probably Tournai, and its date is likely to be the first half of the fifteenth century, as it resembles very closely the silver 'gros blanc' of the royal coinage which was minted 1400–1470.

INTERPRETATION AND HISTORY OF THE SITE

Little documentary evidence is available for the history of the Priory or its size (VCH I, 381–2). It is known to have been founded as the result of a bequest by Peter Chacepore c. A.D. 1255. Some details of the life of Peter

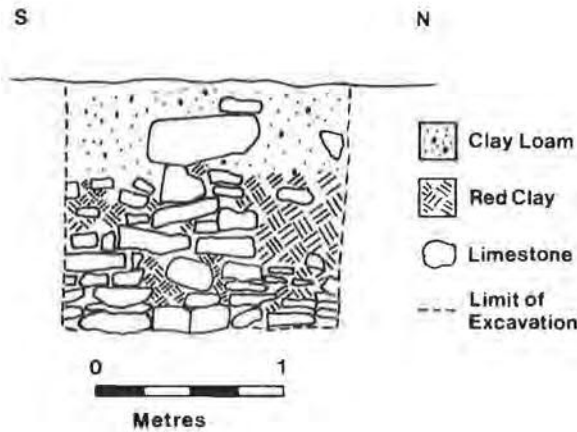


Fig. 6. Section of soakaway pit, north of 'Priory Lade'.

have recently been published (Hagerty 1990). The suppression of the Priory was authorised in 1524, but Hagerty argues that the fabric of the church may have remained substantially intact until c.1535.

Discussion about the precise location of the Priory and its buildings and of the manor house of Ravenstone has previously hinged around comments by the following authorities,

a) *Lipscomb* (1847, IV, 313-6, citing also Browne Willis) notes the tradition that the present parish church of All Saints was built of the materials of the Priory. However both he and Willis agreed that this was unlikely since the church was clearly of pre-reformation date. Browne Willis had noted 'not the least remains of the Priory, but a small portion of wall out of which a very indifferent farmhouse had been built', but otherwise both parties pass no comment on its location. Lipscomb recorded also 'a large orchard moated around in which was formerly a fishpond and a well of clear water covered with an ancient wrought stone,

through the cavity of which the stream proceeding from it runs into a small brook'. He illustrates this stone which has been described above by Richard Halsey. A copy of a second plate illustrating the piece (reproduced here as Fig 9), which was known also to Sheahan, is at the County Museum. The text accompanying the second plate, perhaps from the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, gives its dimensions and notes that the well was known as the Holy Well. The 'well' may be the Chalybeate spring shown adjacent to the S.W. corner of a 'moat' on the 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey map of 1881 and noted also in VCH.

Lipscomb notes that when Elizabeth granted Ravenstone to Henry Berkeley in 1585 its properties included the 'Manor place of Ravenstone and, . . . the "Court Curtilage", . . .'

b) *Sheahan* (1862, 591), who had an eye for topography, states firmly that 'the site of the monastery, a short distance west of the church is occupied by a farmhouse and near to it are indications of buildings in the very uneven ground'. He makes no comment on the location of the manor house.

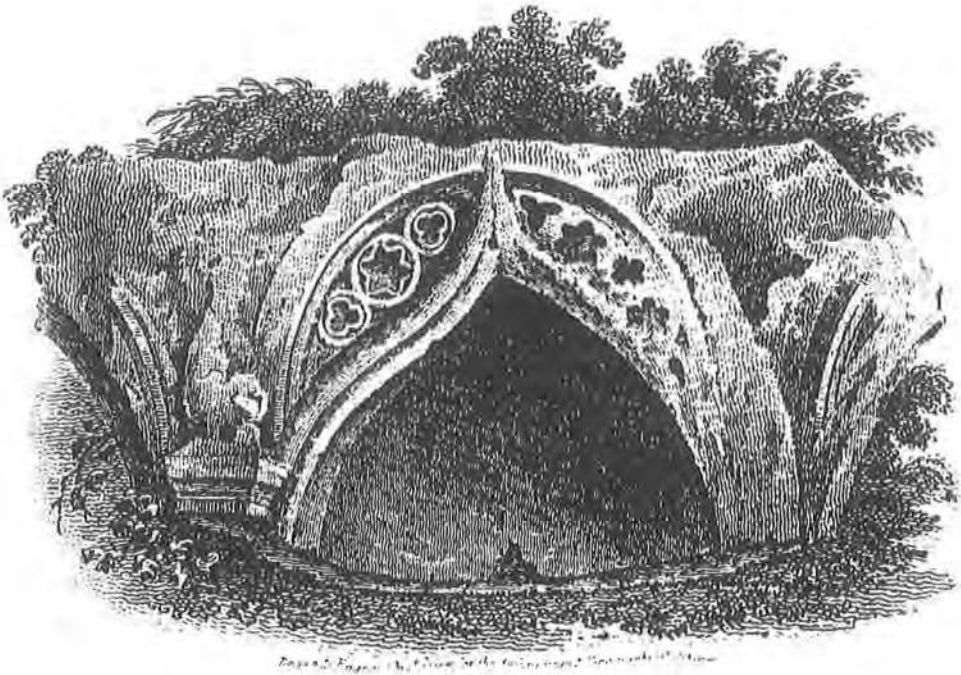


Fig. 9. Engraving of an 'ancient wrought stone' from Ravenstone

- c) *The Royal Commission* (RCHM 1912, 252), has nothing to say about the Priory at all, but notes that part of All Saints Church may be late eleventh century. The Commission records a homestead moat at Abbey Farm 'about 120 yards north of the church'.
- d) *VCH* (IV, 440), comes down firmly on Abbey Farm as the site of the Priory. It notes also the 'large orchard just below the farm ... surrounded by a moat' and states that this was 'probably the site of the old manor house of Ravenstone'. That a manor house existed is demonstrated by the fact that it formed part of the endowment of the Priory. That the house lay close to fishponds is shown by a reference to the manor place having a court in which there were fishponds.
- c) A re-survey of the area in 1973 by an Ordnance Survey archaeological investigator (OS Antiquity no. SP 85 SE 22) disputes the existence of a 'moat' on the floor of the valley NW of Abbey Farm, and states that the moat 'is a series of fishponds now dry, forming a narrow triangle'. A second large fishpond immediately west of Abbey Farm was also identified.

The observations made during 1984 indicate that:

- a) the Priory did indeed lie beneath the modern complex of buildings to the east of, and perhaps also beneath, Abbey Farm.
- b) that although never a large establishment the buildings were substantial and of good quality.
- c) that the parish church was not the Priory church. The Parish church was already in existence at the time the Priory was founded (Hagerty 1990, 113).

Although the observations have been useful in defining more precisely the location of the Priory, it clearly would be helpful if the position of the key feature, the column base, could be related to the overall pattern of the Priory. The evidence is unfortunately not conclusive; however the base clearly supported a major N-S arch, and it would not be unreasonable to

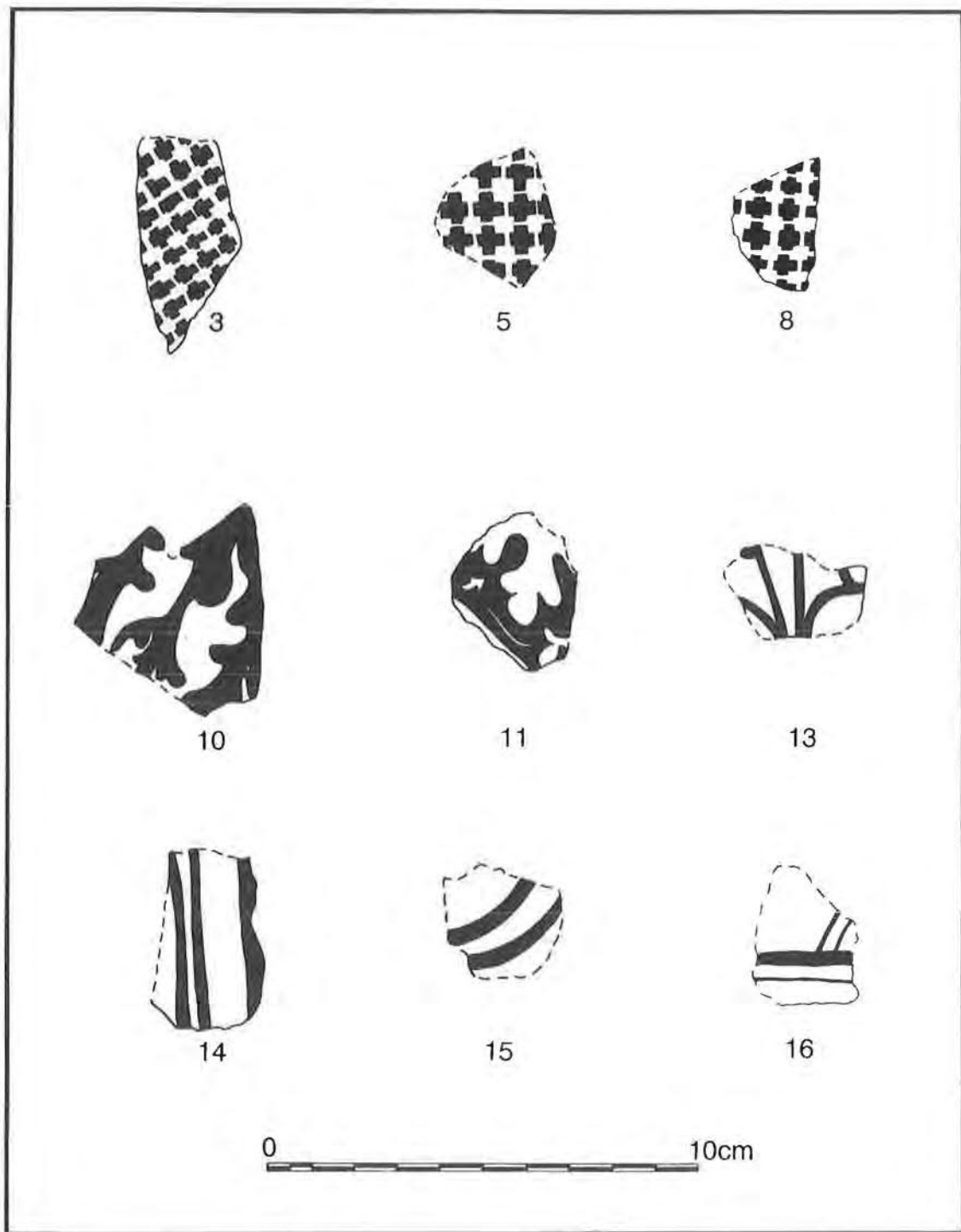


Fig. 7. Ravenstone window glass 2:3 scale

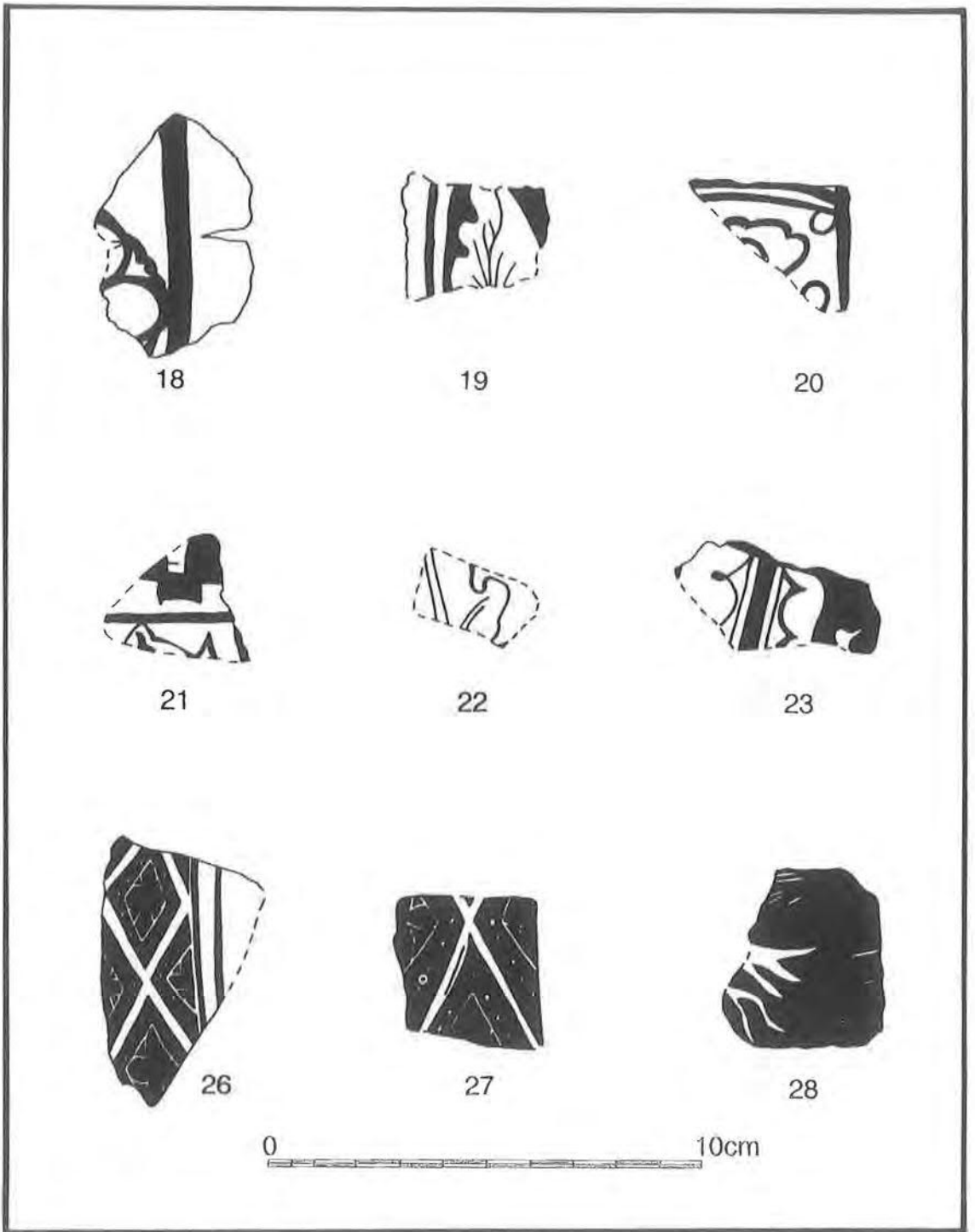


Fig. 8. Ravenstone window glass 2:3 scale



Plate I. Column base Ravenstone Priory, with upper limestone slab floor (scale 0.5m).

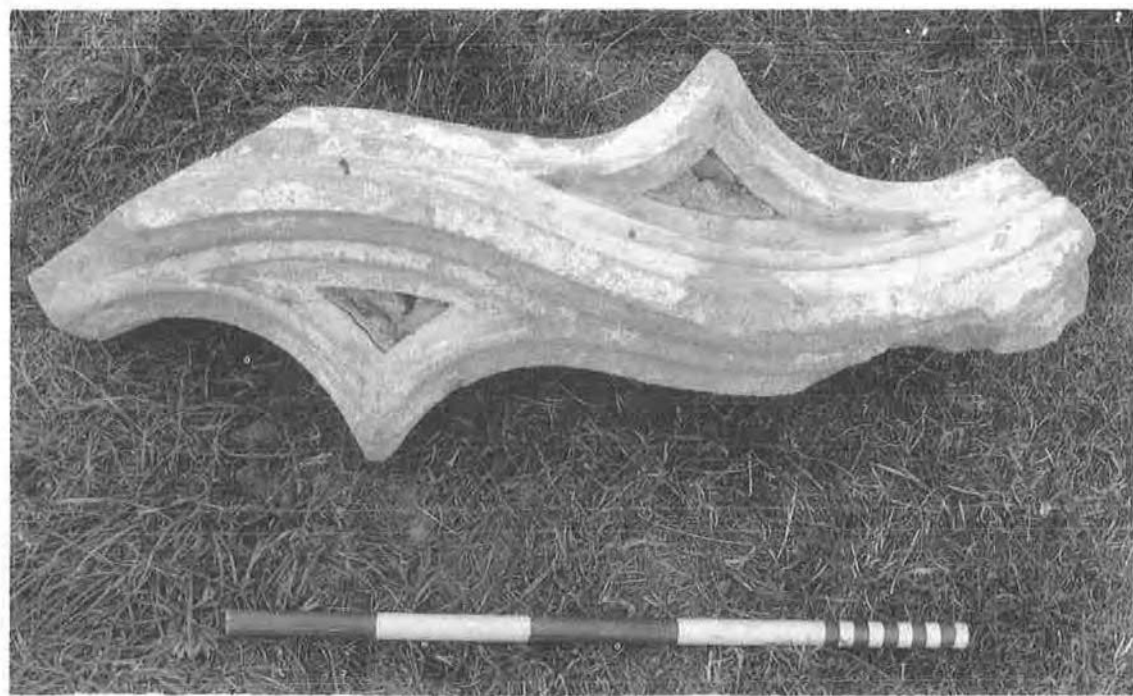


Plate II. Curvilinear window tracery, Ravenstone Priory (scale 0.5m)

presume this to be the chancel arch of the church. It is perhaps surprising that there have been no past reports of discoveries of human remains in the vicinity which one would expect from such a location; however, it is possible that the disturbance beneath the secondary paving adjacent to the column marked the site of one grave. The quality of the stonework and the glass shows that the Priory although not large, was nevertheless able to present a good appearance. Unless evidence to the contrary comes to light, it can be presumed that the layout of the Priory would have been conventional with cloister to the south and refectory, chapter house etc leading off.

A separate issue is the question of the location of the manor house which may have had its origins in that built by Peter Chacepore in 1245. Presuming that the Ordnance Survey re-interpretation is correct, and there remains in the writer's view some room for doubt, then the location of the house site is unknown. There is scarcely room on the floor of the valley for a third 'moat', and a manor house in

the county of this period is likely to have been moated, yet in the sixteenth century the Prior had a manor place with a court in which there were fishponds' (VCH IV, 440). This is obviously a problem that remains to be resolved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work was initially observed by Angela Bond who subsequently kindly gave every assistance to the writer. Mr & Mrs C. Noel Johnson kindly gave access for the discoveries to be recorded. Thanks are also due to Amanda Chadburn and Nigel Jones for preparing the drawings, to Paul Struth for late modifications to the same, and to Jill Kerr and Richard Halsey who reported on the glass and stonework respectively. Finally to Pam Russell for her usual patience in converting scribble to type.

The Society is grateful for a grant towards the cost of publishing this article from the Francis Coales Charitable Foundation

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