

Jesus College, Cloister Court

Archaeological Recording (Phase I)



Richard Newman

Jesus College, Cloister Court, Cambridge

Architectural Observations (Phase I)

Richard Newman

With photography by Dave Webb
and graphics by Andrew Hall

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Summary

Archaeological monitoring was conducted in Cloister Court, Jesus College, Cambridge, during remedial works being undertaken to the Court's walls. Cement-based render was removed from the north and east walls during this phase of the project, and elements of the College's historic fabric revealed. This included remnants of the medieval nunnery and material pertaining to the initial establishment of Jesus College at the end of the 15th century, as well as its subsequent development up to the present day.

Introduction

This report presents the results of archaeological monitoring that was undertaken during an episode of maintenance conducted in Cloister Court, Jesus College, Cambridge (TL 4521 5889) on the 22nd and 23rd of August 2017. Architectural observations were made by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) following the removal of cement render from portions of the north and east walls of the court (see Figure 1 for locations), thereby exposing elements of the college's historic fabric. Several decades ago an unsuitable, non-permeable render had been applied to all the walls of Cloister Court; this material is now having an increasingly deleterious effect upon the structure, trapping moisture and encouraging the growth of mould. After portions of the render broke away, revealing the extent of the problem beneath, a programme of remedial repair and replacement was instituted. It is the first stage of this programme that is reported upon here. Subsequent stages will encompass the remaining walls of the court, leading to the removal of the entire cement-based product and its replacement with a more suitable, lime-based render. Consequently, while this report presents the results obtained from the current exposure (Phase I), detailed discussion of these findings will not be undertaken until the project is complete and all of the evidence can be assessed together.

Methodologically, the recording followed Historic England's guidelines for a Level 2 building survey. A Level 2 survey consists of an illustrated record in which the structure will be viewed, described and illustrated; conclusions will be presented, but detailed descriptions will not be provided (Lane 2016, 14; Andrews *et al.* 2010, 31). As part of this process, a detailed photographic record was compiled by the CAU, from which rectified elevations have been prepared (Figures 2 and 3). In addition, phased elevations were also hand-drawn at a scale of 1:20 with each significant build-element highlighted (Figures 2 and 3), in accordance with Historic England's recommendations for drawing historic buildings (Adams 2016). Throughout the following account, architectural terminology follows the standard dictionary of Lever and Harris (1993). The sitecode for the investigation was JCC17 and the event number was ECB5245. Topographically, Jesus College is situated on the southern periphery of the historic core of Cambridge, outside the medieval town boundary formed by the King's Ditch. The area is characterised by a core of built settlement (nunnery/College) surrounded to the north, east and west by greenfield (including College gardens, Jesus Green and Midsummer Common), and by urban settlement and primary roads (Jesus Lane and Park Street) to the south. The current ground level in Cloister Court lies at 7.60m AOD.

Historical and archaeological background

The historical, architectural and archaeological background of Jesus College has been discussed at length in a number of published sources (Willis & Clark 1886 II, 115-186; Gray 1898; RCHM(E) 1959, 81-98; Gray & Brittain 1960; Haigh 1988; Van Houts 1992; Evans *et al.* 1998; Newman *et al.* 2013). Consequently, only a brief summary is presented here.

The architectural history of the site began circa 1138 when a Benedictine Nunnery dedicated to St. Mary and St. Radegund, whose foundation has been attributed to Nigellus, the second

Bishop of Ely (Van Houts 1992), was founded on an area of former agricultural land on the outskirts of medieval Cambridge. Construction of the chapel began circa 1150 but was not completed until 1245 (Willis & Clark 1886 II, 125). At 58m in length it was one of the largest churches in Cambridge and was cruciform in plan with transepts, north and south aisles, chancel and nave, a high pitched roof and a belfry or steeple. The latter collapsed in 1277 and fires destroyed much of the convent in 1313 and 1376. This was followed in 1389 by storm damage to the nunnery and the subsequent repair of buildings in 1459. Finally, John Alcock, Bishop of Ely, dissolved the nunnery in 1496 to make way for the formation of Jesus College. The church was rededicated, becoming Jesus Chapel, and extensive modifications to the existing buildings were carried out. Although the College plan accords very closely with the outline of much of the preceding monastic complex, there is little of it that remains visible in the current building fabric. Nevertheless, a reconstruction of the plan of the nunnery from circa 1250 has been proposed in light of archaeological investigations conducted in the 19th and late 20th/early 21st centuries (see Evans *et al.* 1998; Newman *et al.* 2013). Significantly, Cloister Court lies at the heart of both the former monastic complex and the subsequent college, rendering it a location of particular architectural interest.

Results

The following results are presented on a phase-by-phase basis. Whilst stratigraphically successive, however, it is important to note that each phase does not necessarily correlate to a distinct, temporally-discrete event; instead, a number of alterations have been grouped together in order to provide a structural framework upon which to base the discussion. The later phases, in particular, represent the amalgamation of multiple episodes of development.

Phase 1

In the eastern claustral range, the earliest fabric to be exposed comprised part of the north end of the medieval north transept (Figure 2). Here, vertical limestone quoining marked the outer face of a probable external buttress. Composed of well-dressed limestone ashlar blocks, measuring on average 300mm by 200mm by 120mm, the buttress appears to have originally stood detached from any neighbouring structure(s). 1.78m to the south, separated by a contemporary core of randomly coursed unworked clunch fragments bonded with semi-friable pale brown lime mortar, was a second set of vertical quoining. In contrast to its neighbour, however, these latter ashlar blocks were composed of clunch (measuring on average 220mm by 200mm by 180mm); a much less hardy material that is predominately restricted to internal use. The position of these particular blocks indicates that they mark the return of the interior face of the of the transept's north wall. This is intriguing, because it suggests that the wall did not originally return to the south at this point but was instead open in some form – either as a doorway, arch or colonnade – thereby permitting access to the transept from the cloister walk. Unfortunately, as the upper half of the render was not removed in this location, no further determination as to the nature of the original arrangement could be determined.

In the northern claustral range, the earliest fabric to be exposed was again most probably monastic in origin. Here, along most of the base of the wall, several courses of well-laid clunch ashlar blocks, measuring on average 300mm by 200mm by 170mm, were present (Figure 3). A break measuring 1.72m wide was noted 7.0m from the range's east end; given its size and location, this may potentially represent a robbed and infilled doorway. Overall, this build survived to a maximum height of 0.98m above the present floor level (8.45m AOD), which is approximately 1.84m above the original monastic ground height (see Figure 3). It is notable that as well as their stratigraphic position at the base of the sequence, all of the Phase 1 elements were distinguished by their relatively high build quality.

Phase 2

In the eastern claustral range, Phase 2 was represented by two walls that infilled what appear to have been previously open spaces to the north and south of the Phase 1 buttress (Figure 2). The date at which they were constructed is unclear, however; both may represent monastic developments, or alternatively one or both may relate to the subsequent conversion of the cloister for collegiate use. The northern wall, which infilled the exterior space between the end of the transept and the remainder of the east range, was the best constructed. It consisted of well-coursed but irregularly-sized clunch fragments – several of which clearly comprised reused moulded blocks, including two sections of small freestanding columns that were probably derived from a colonnade – that were bonded with concreted mid brown lime mortar. Further to the south, the second section of infill abutted the interior face of the transept's clunch quoined north wall. Two distinct builds were noted, although it is possible that they represent the use of different materials in the same construction. To the north, abutting the transept, the build was near-identical to that described above. Adjoining this to the south, however, the second build predominately consisted of larger, unsquared clunch fragments that were more irregularly coursed. It is possible that this change represents an infilled feature such as a door, although no trace of any jambs was identified and the door would have been unusually narrow for such a prominent location.

In the northern claustral range, Phase 2 was principally represented by an extensive wall that utilised the preceding Phase 1 remnant as its foundation. This build, which was composed of moderately well-coursed small clunch fragments (measuring on average 180mm by 120mm by 100mm) with occasional patches of handmade red bricks (arranged as headers) and flat-laid peg tile, all bonded with tenacious off-white lime mortar. This fabric is very likely to represent Alcock's extensive alterations of the late 15th century (see further Evans *et al.* 1998, 96-102). In addition, one intriguing contemporary feature located towards the west end of the range comprised a brick-built opening composed of plain chamfered bricks forming a simple arch mould (Figure 3). The bricks themselves were handmade in a dark red fabric and measured an average of 45mm thick, while the opening measured 0.72m high and approximately 1.08m wide (although it was later truncated by the addition of a Phase 4 doorway). Whilst open to interpretation, the opening appears most likely to have functioned as a service hatch associated with the hall that occupied the north range after its conversion into a college. It was originally plastered both internally and externally, thus obscuring its constituent bricks from view.

Phase 3

In the eastern claustral range, Phase 3 was represented by the addition of two stone-built doorways (Figure 2). That to the south, which was also associated with a partial rebuild of the transept wall

with good-quality clunch ashlar, has previously been associated with the conversion of the chapel for collegiate use (RCHM(E) 1959, 89-90). Its location indicates that it was inserted after the preceding north aisle was demolished, although it was not necessarily a primary element in the chapel's conversion. It is of simple perpendicular style, with a four-centred arch. The archway to the north, which provides access to Chapel Court, is extremely similar in design. It is however heavily weathered, somewhat unusual given its sheltered location inside the cloister walk, suggesting that it may have been moved here from elsewhere during Phase 4.

In the northern claustral range, Phase 3 was principally represented by an outer skin that was applied to the preceding Phase 2 college wall. Composed of flat-laid handmade red brick fragments (measuring 45mm thick) and unworked clunch fragments, with the addition of occasional flat-laid Collyweston stone and green-glazed ceramic floor tile fragments, this skin appears to have been applied in order to protect the earlier structure and provide a solid key for additional coats of render. Given its constituent materials, it is likely that this additional skin was applied during the 16th or 17th centuries (although it could conceivably date as late as the 18th century). Portions of this material were removed when the external render was chipped away as part of the ongoing remedial works. Also occurring during this phase, the Phase 2 brick-built service hatch was blocked up using a single skin of dark red to pale pink bricks that measure 220mm by 110mm by 45mm in size. This blocking was then coated with off-white lime mortar that has been keyed in a diamond pattern to facilitate the addition of render to the wall face.

Phase 4

In the eastern claustral range, Phase 4 was represented by the addition of a small stone-built two-light window with square heads and simple mullions. This is most probably 19th century in date.

In the northern claustral range, more extensive fenestration, along with two further doorways, was introduced during Phase 4. These changes are again most probably 19th century in date (probably extending into the early 20th century). Of the four windows, the westernmost was associated with the most extensive alterations. Here, the surrounding wall fabric had been replaced with pink and yellow machine-made bricks (measuring 220mm by 110mm by 65mm in size) that were bonded with mid-brown sandy mortar. A brick-built relieving arch had also been introduced above the window, which was itself stone-built with two lights, each having a four-centred arch, and a perpendicular hood moulding. Three further windows of near-identical design were also present, although these had been introduced with less impact upon the preceding fabric. In each instance, they were infilled around with modern machine-made bricks. Of the two doorways, the easternmost was the oldest. Its insertion was associated with a partial rebuild of the north range wall using irregularly-coursed unsquared clunch, with some reused ashlar blocks and occasional handmade red brick fragments. The easternmost doorway was both larger and more recent. Although copying the prevalent perpendicular design, it is more highly decorated and is clearly associated with a significant alteration of the north range's layout.

Discussion

The principal discoveries made during this initial phase of investigation, although limited in scope due to the partial nature of the exposures, pertain to the monastic church and refectory building and their subsequent collegiate conversion.

The complex developmental history of Jesus Chapel was first identified by Robert Willis, the eminent 19th century engineer and architectural historian. Willis noted that “during the course of preparations for repairs in 1846, the removal of some of the plaster made known the fact that the present two south windows of the chancel were inserted in walls which were themselves merely filling up a pair of pier-arches, and that these arches, together with the piers upon which they rested, and the responds whence they sprang, still existed in the walls. When this key to the secret of the original plan of the church had been supplied, it was resolved to push the enquiry to the utmost; all the plaster was stripped off the inner face of the walls, piers and arches were brought to light again in all directions; old foundations were sort for on the outside of the building; and a complete and systematic examination of the plan and structure of the original church was set on foot which led to very satisfactory results” (Willis & Clark 1886 II, 124). As part of his research, Willis made a number of detailed drawings, one of which – showing a transverse section through the transepts from north to south – has been included below (Figure 4).

Willis determined that the north transept, with its fine Norman arcading and windows (Figure 4), represents the oldest extant portion of the chapel, upon which work probably commenced in the 1150s. The relationship of the transept to the adjacent east range of the cloister remained something of an enigma, however. The presence of three round-headed windows in its north wall, at first floor height, indicates that it was initially at least free-standing (an interpretation that is supported by the recent identification of a probable buttress in this location). The date at which the range was fully amalgamated remains unclear. It may have been a later monastic modification, or alternatively an introduction of the late 15th century collegiate conversion. Although a detailed architectural examination of the east range was undertaken in the 1990s, it was noted that “no new information has been found in the area between the chapter house and the north transept of the conventual church and its form in the monastic period remains unknown” (Evans *et al.* 1998, 95). The identification of reused column fragments within the blocking wall between the two does not in itself preclude a monastic date for the work.

Equally enigmatic is the nature of the relationship between the north transept, the north aisle and the cloister walk. Conjectural reconstructions of the church’s layout – beginning with Willis and continuing to the present day – have assumed that the south wall of the transept was closed, thereby preventing access from the cloister, with entry to the church being gained instead via a doorway into the north aisle. Yet the identification of dressed clunch quoining marking an apparent internal return of the transept’s north wall suggests the possibility that a door or arch was originally present here, permitting direct access from

cloister to transept. Due to the limited scope of the exposure this interpretation remains highly conjectural, but the issue may be clarified somewhat when the upper portion of render is replaced. Also notable is the absence of an identifiable scar marking the return of the aisle adjoining the transept. It is possible that this was removed when the new doorway was introduced upon the church's conversion into a collegiate chapel (at B in Figure 2), although other interpretations could again be presented.

Finally, additional information pertaining to the north claustral range was also uncovered. During monastic times this range housed the refectory on the first floor, with probable store rooms below. Subsequently, the structure was converted into the college hall. Within the exposed elevation a portion of the original monastic fabric was identified, surviving at most 1.95m above the initial ground surface (see Figure 3). Evidence of the later collegiate conversion was also revealed, including a brick-built opening that probably functioned as a hatch permitting food and drink to be introduced ready for serving in the hall. Later modifications included the addition of an outer rubble skin and several phases of fenestration. Overall, it is clear that the results of this work make an important contribution to the architectural history of the site. As subsequent phases of remedial work expose additional portions of the college's historic fabric, a valuable opportunity will be presented to increase this understanding still further.

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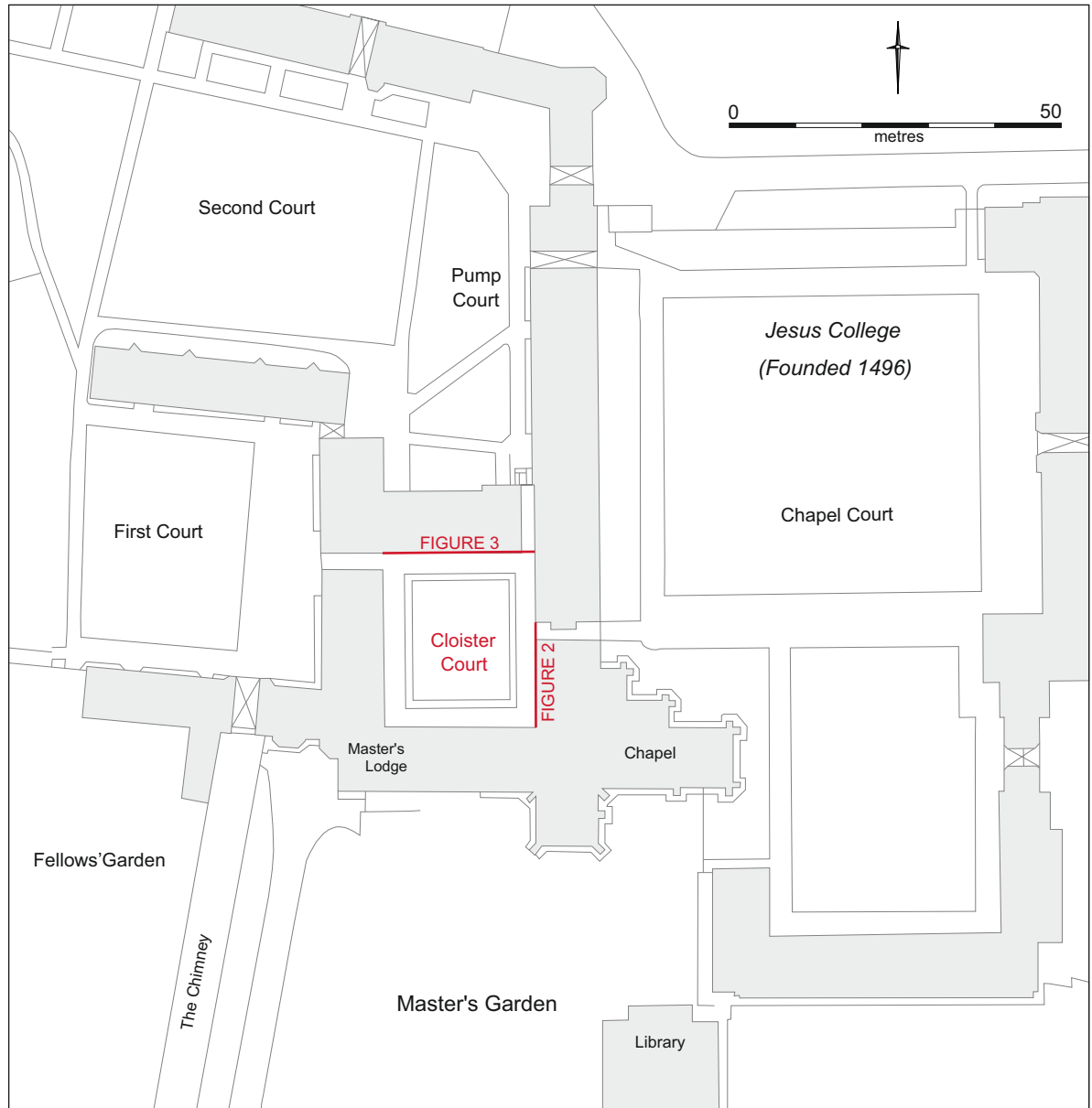
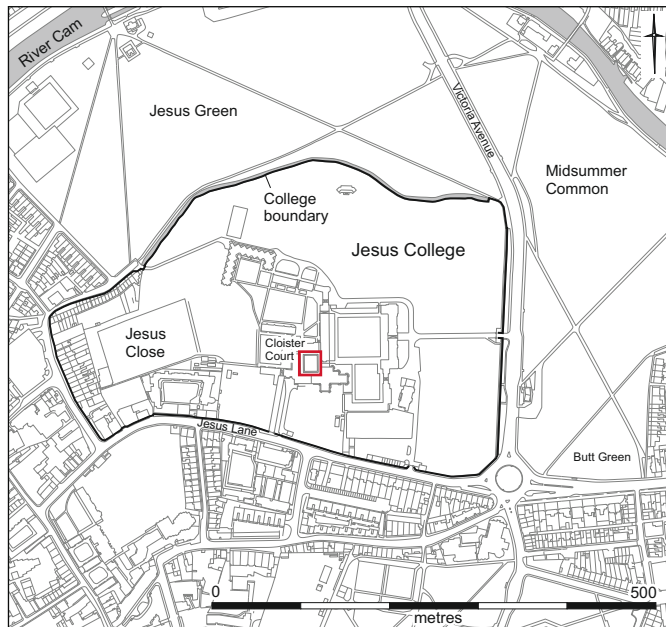
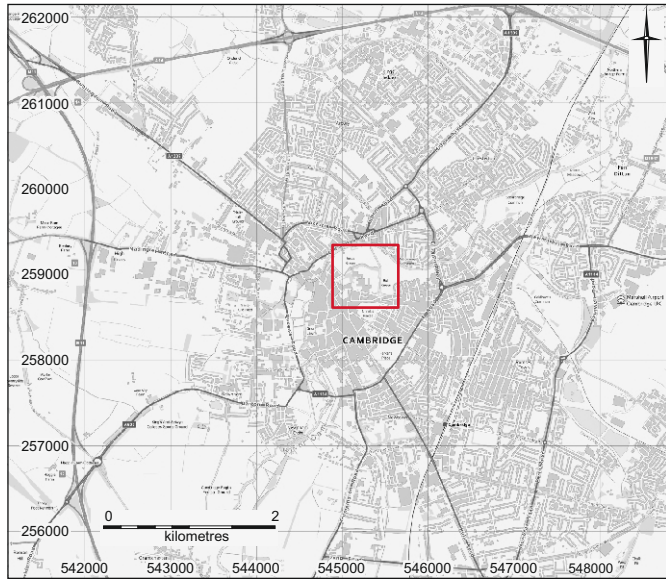


Figure 1. Site location, showing location of elevations within Cloister Court

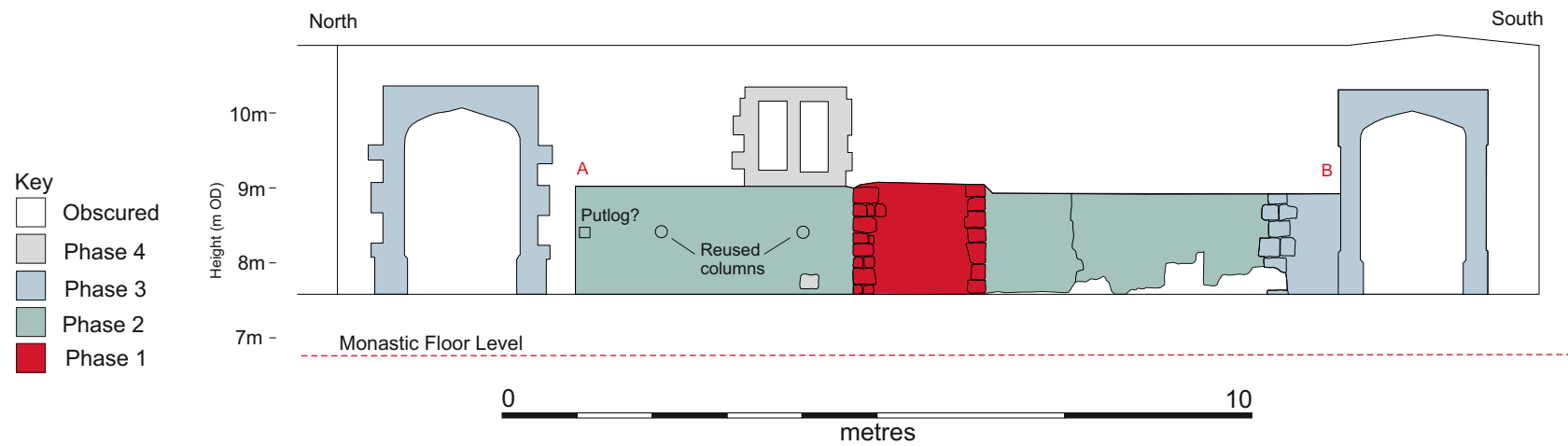


Figure 2. Elevation of east wall, showing phasing

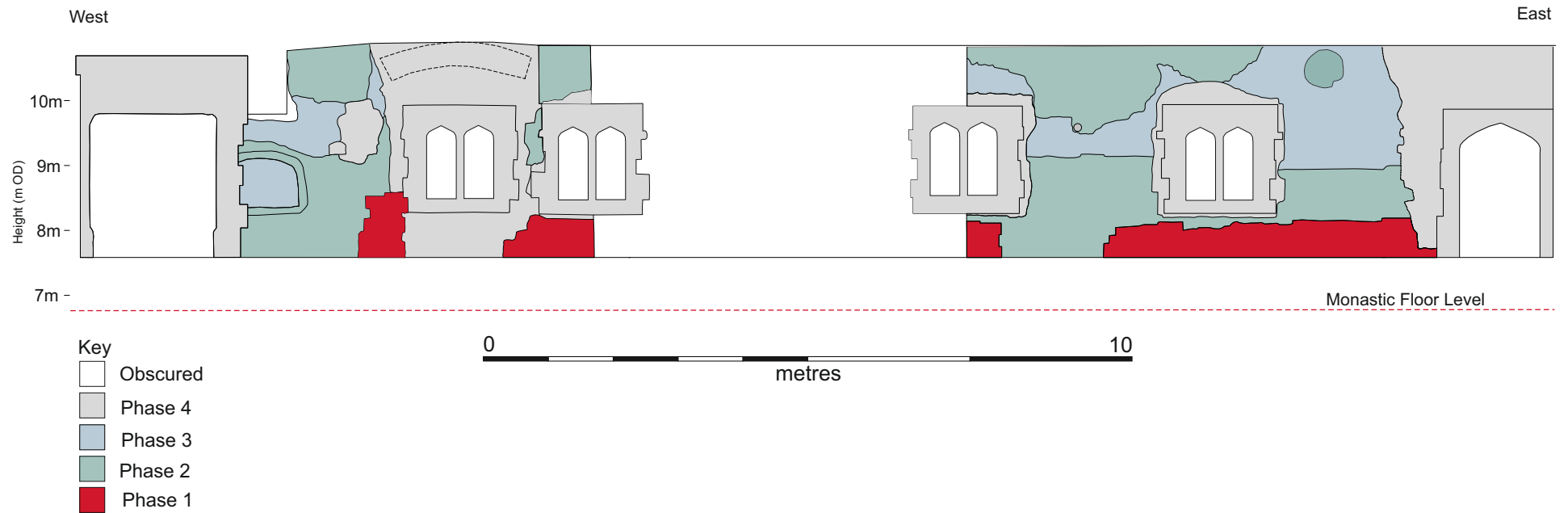
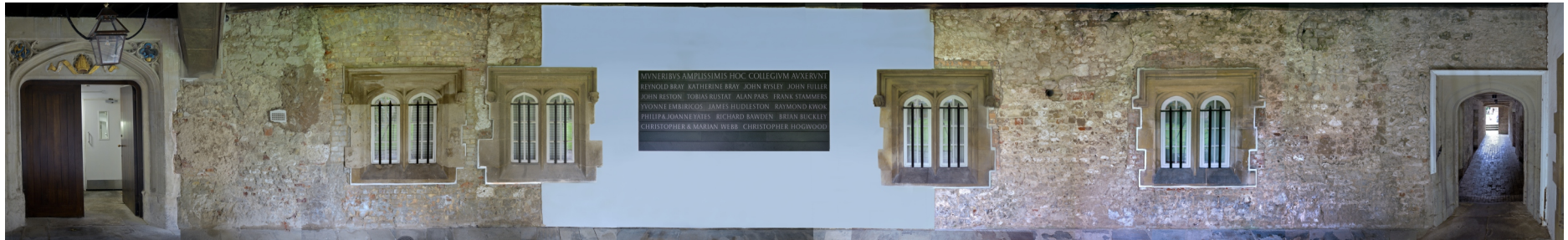


Figure 3. Elevation of north wall, showing phasing

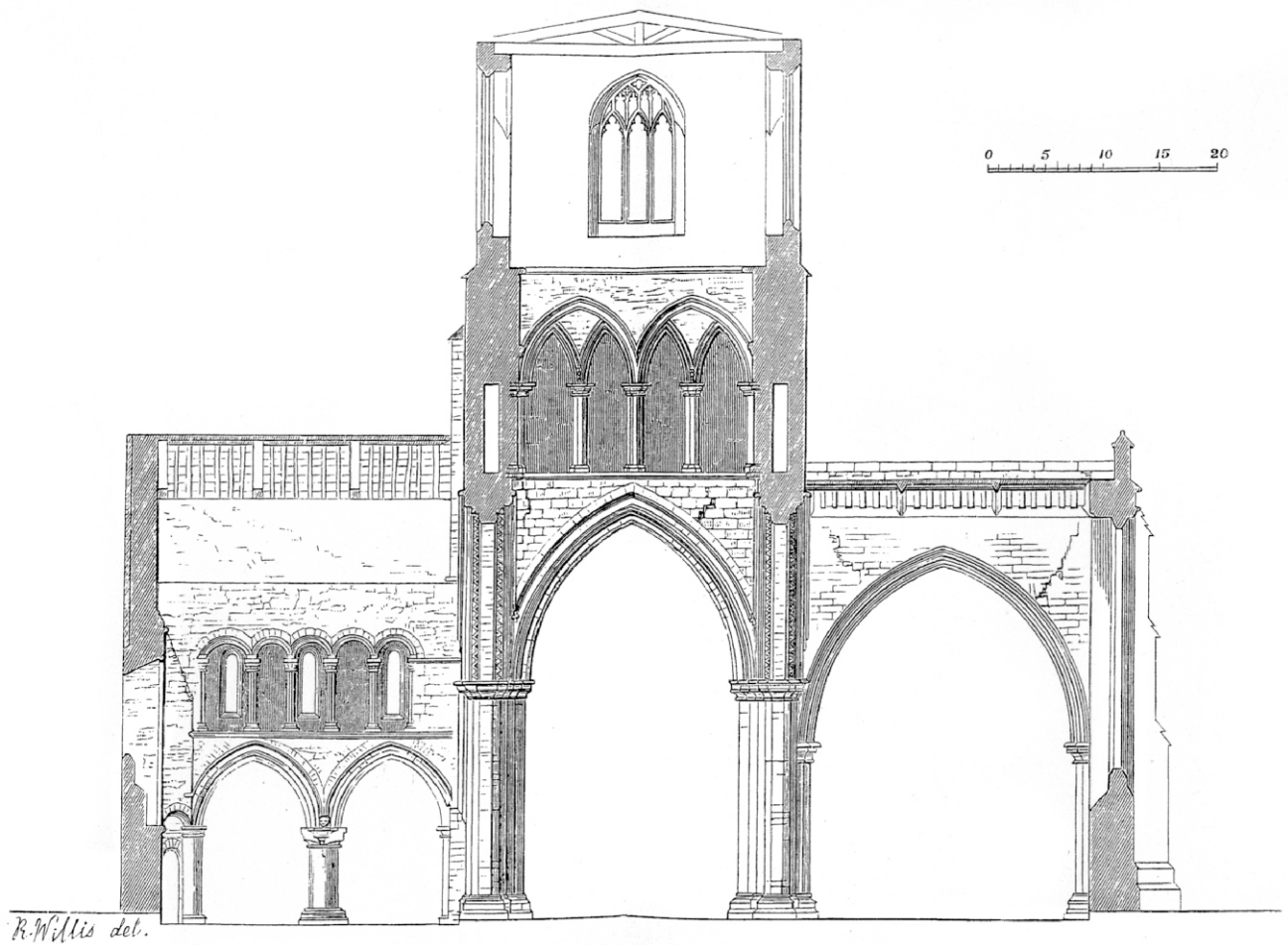


Fig. 6. Transverse section of Jesus College Chapel, on a line drawn through the transepts from north to south.
Measured and drawn by Professor Willis.

To face pp. 124, 125.

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Figure 4. Robert Willis' transverse section of the College chapel on a line drawn through the transepts from north to south

Oasis Form

OASIS ID: cambridg3-300005	
Project details	
Project name	Jesus College Cloister Court
Short description of the project	Archaeological monitoring was conducted in Cloister Court, Jesus College, Cambridge, during remedial works being undertaken to the Court's walls. Cement-based render was removed from the north and east walls during this phase of the project, and elements of the College's historic fabric revealed. This included remnants of the medieval nunnery and material pertaining to the initial establishment of Jesus College at the end of the 15th century, as well as its subsequent development up to the present day.
Project dates	Start: 22-08-2017 End: 23-08-2017
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ECB5245 - HER event no.
Any associated project reference codes	JCC17 - Sitecode
Type of project	Building Recording
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Other 2 - In use as a building
Monument type	WALL Medieval
Monument type	WALL Post Medieval
Significant Finds	NONE None
Methods & techniques	"Annotated Sketch","Measured Survey","Photographic Survey"
Prompt	Voluntary/self-interest
Project location	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE CAMBRIDGE CAMBRIDGE Jesus College, Cloister Court
Postcode	CB5 8BL
Study area	500 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 4521 5889 52.208646907577 0.125426693061 52 12 31 N 000 07 31 E Point
Project creators	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Self (i.e. landowner, developer, etc.)
Project design originator	Christopher Evans

Project director/manager	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project supervisor	Richard Newman
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	Jesus College, Cambridge
Project archives	
Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Digital Archive ID	JCC17
Digital Contents	"none"
Digital Media available	"Images raster / digital photography"
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Paper Archive ID	JCC17
Paper Contents	"none"
Paper Media available	"Notebook - Excavation',' Research',' General Notes","Photograph","Section"
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