

Excavations at Dorchester Abbey, Oxon.

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FROM October 1960, in response to a request by the vicar of Dorchester, excavations were carried out by members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society with a view to establishing the limits of the cloister of the abbey and certain other pre-dissolution buildings. Three cuttings were laid down and excavation was completed by March 1962 (FIG. 1).

All three cuttings yielded some evidence of the abbey buildings, though not as much as was hoped. The line of the cloister walls was firmly established, as was the position of the north wall of the North Transept, but the position of the slype remains conjectural. A very thorough robbing had occurred in all the places excavated, and no material was found comparable to the architectural fragments at present stored in the Abbey church and reportedly excavated from the south walk of the cloister. There was no material from the Saxon cathedral, though it is very possible that the burials discovered in cutting II and which underlie the cloister belong to the pre-conquest period. They are described with cutting II.

In each of the cuttings extensive Roman layers were found which yielded a large quantity of pot and some other finds. The Roman layers of cutting I were particularly substantial, and accounted for some 5 ft. of the 9 ft. depth of soil to the natural sand. The line of the defences of Roman Dorchester lie a little way to the west of the church, and so the whole site is outside the Roman town. No firm evidence of structures of the Roman period was found. However, a shallow well was discovered in cutting II, of square section and rather over 9 ft. deep from its lip to water level. This yielded a corpus of pottery which appears to be mostly of the late 1st century A.D. Other Roman finds included a fine bow brooch with red cloisonné enamel and with boar's head foot. This appears to be a continental type, probably from the Rhineland, and may be dated about 150 A.D. In view of possible relationship with other excavations of the Roman period in Dorchester, all the finds from the Roman layers have been handed over to Professor S. S. Frere for further examination, and he has kindly agreed to incorporate a note on the significant finds in his next publication on Dorchester.

The Augustinian abbey of Dorchester was founded at the time of the Norman Conquest when the see was removed from Dorchester to Lincoln leaving vacant the Saxon cathedral. Of that building nothing remains apart from some of the stone in the north wall which may be of Saxon date. The church was extensively altered throughout its history to provide for the needs of the monastery and for a church for the townspeople in what is now the south aisle. There is ample architectural evidence that the cloister lay to the north of the church. There are no windows at ground floor level, and the doorway from the north transept still

survives and has recently been reopened. There is, unfortunately, no evidence remaining as to the original height or roof structure of the cloister. The remains of a blocked doorway at first floor level by the tower may indicate access at that level to an upper range of buildings over the west walk.

Cutting I, 12 ft. \times 4 ft., was laid out 5 ft. to the north of the present wall of the North Aisle and at right angles to it, so as to cut through the line of the wall of the North Transept and to follow the line of the cloister wall at the assumed entrance of the slype. The results were something of a disappointment. A very thorough robbing had occurred, and the only sign of foundations, those of the

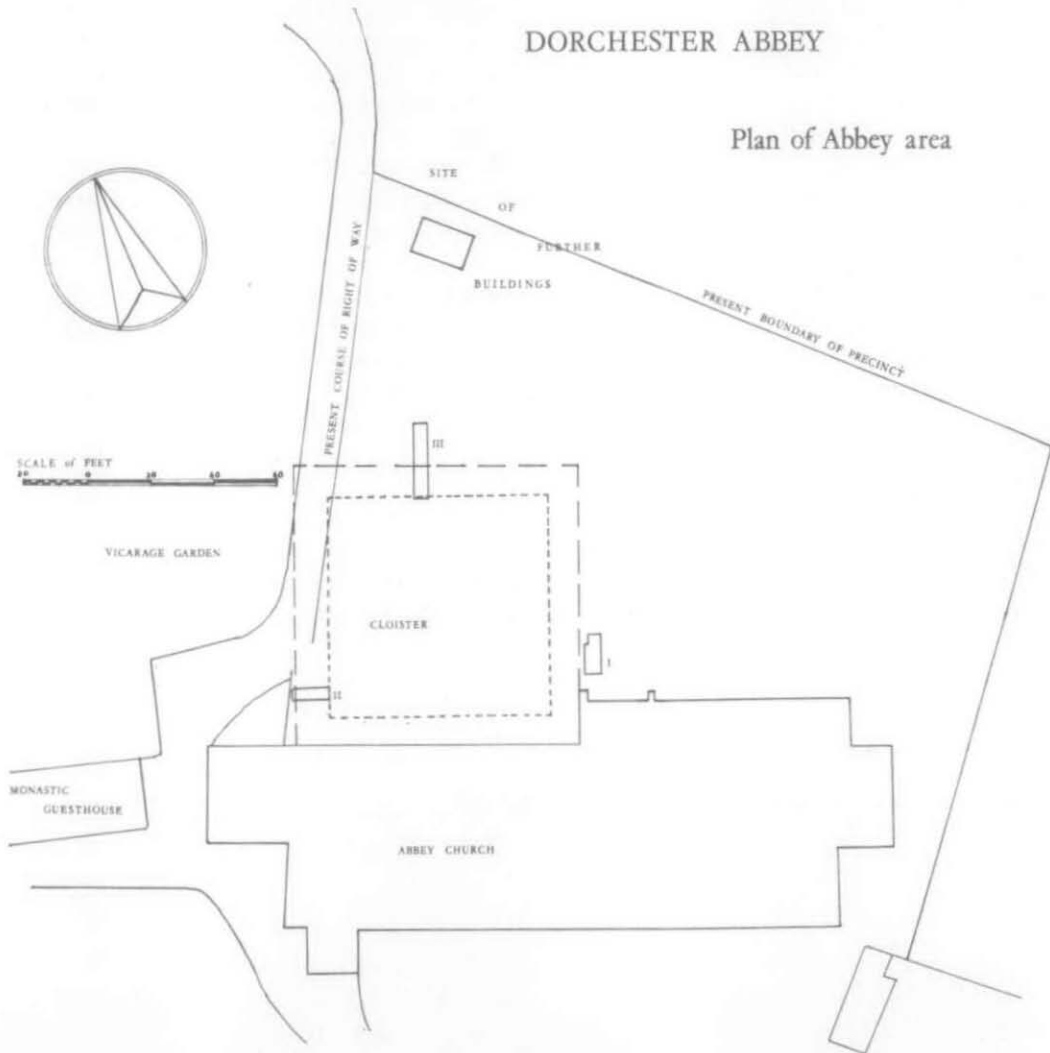


FIG. 1
Location Plan.

transept wall, was a layer of large flints and hard packed gravel at the south end of the cutting. Further north were two robber trenches, one cut through by a second on a different alignment. There is no evidence to show that any considerable time gap separates them. Both robber fills consisted of a very coarse mixture of sand, gravel, brick and broken tile. The evidence from the north end of the cutting was confused by the intrusion of modern rubbish pits; and along the west side of the cutting a deep rubbish pit of the 18th or early 19th century had been cut through both robber fills to a depth of 9 ft. No evidence of a northward continuation of the cloister wall was found and so the existence of a slype at this point remains a possibility.

Cutting II, 12 ft. \times 4 ft., lay across the west walk of the cloister at a distance of 15 ft. from the north wall of the abbey. The upper layers had been disturbed by bulldozing, and the western half of the cutting contained two rubbish pits of the 19th century. However, two robber trenches were found which establish the lines of the walls. The outer wall had been very thoroughly robbed and the fill of the trench was a mixture of earth and coarse gravel with fragments of brick and tile and a piece of stone roofing shingle. This robber trench contained some pottery of the late 17th century which would place the clearing of the trench later than the rebuilding of the tower in 1605. The bottom of this trench was square-cut and lined with a mixture of sand and fragments of mortar. The inner robber trench was less fully explored since time did not allow any extension of the cutting which only opened up the first foot of its width. It was filled with a variable mixture of rubble and earth. In the bottom of this fill was found a clay pipe bowl which has been dated by Dr. L. A. S. Butler to the first half of the 18th century. This again is surprisingly late, but ties in well with the material from the outer robber trench.

Between the robber trenches was a layer of rubble varying in depth from 20 ins. to just under 12 ins. This contained a few large stones probably from a wall core and a number of fragments of whitewashed wall plaster some of which retained traces of red paint. Beneath this rubble were the remains of a base for

DORCHESTER ABBEY: Plan of Cutting II showing robber layer with tile-markings.

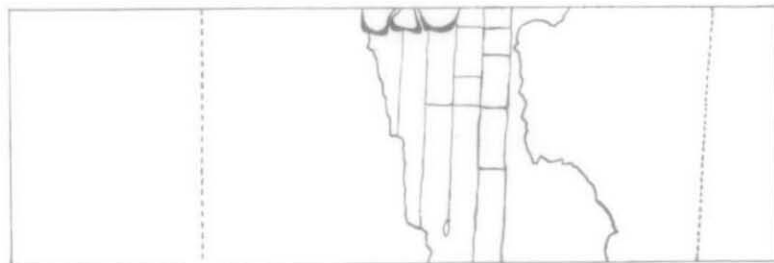


FIG. 2
Cutting II, Plan.

a tile floor. About 1 in. of sand overlay the earth of the layer below ; above that was a thin cement layer of between $\frac{1}{2}$ in. and 1 in. in depth. This layer of cement clearly preserved the marks of tiles set in the cement (see FIG. 2), though no tiles were found *in situ*. From the markings it can be seen that the cloister was floored with large tiles about 6 ins. square. In view of this it is disappointing to note that so few fragments of tile were discovered and of those only five bore traces of decoration. It would seem possible from the line of these tile marks that the west walk of the cloister did not run exactly at right angles to the church. Such an irregularity might occur because an ancient right of way did pass through the monastery at this point. The present course of this right of way would certainly preclude the laying out of a square cloister ; but an examination of its course beyond the precinct would seem to indicate that it was probably moved to allow for the building of the Victorian vicarage. In the absence therefore of any evidence from the robber trenches to corroborate the line of the tile marks, the possibility of an irregular cloister has been dismissed.

Immediately beneath the medieval layers was a layer of dark humic earth containing a quantity of animal bone and also several parts of human skeletons and two complete burials. Evidently earlier burials had been disturbed in the digging of the two graves. These two graves are shallow, the skeletons lying only 2 ft. 6 ins. below the cloister walk, and thus only an inch or two below the inner robber trench. No dateable material was found associated with the skeletons, and only a few coffin nails survived to indicate the type of burial. A third much deeper grave, of fully 5 ft., had been dug through this layer alongside these, and contained besides its own burial the skulls of two other skeletons. All three complete skeletons lay orientated to the east. Their remains were examined by Dr. Owen of the Dept. of Human Anatomy in the Pitt Rivers Museum who reported that all were male, as was a fourth skull, and were aged between 25 and 40 years. The fifth skull was that of a child between six and eight years old. Since there was no medieval pottery found in this layer it seems most likely that these burials are from the graveyard of the Saxon cathedral which would have fallen into disuse when the church was handed over to the Augustinian canons. The present graveyard is on the south side of the church.

Cutting III, 24 ft. \times 4 ft., was laid out to cut the north walk of the cloister. Again both walls had been thoroughly robbed, but this cutting provided the clearest evidence for the line of the cloister walls. It can be seen from the section that the walk is narrow, possibly as narrow as 6 ft. (FIG. 3). This is in contrast to the section of cutting II where a width of 8 ft. or 9 ft. is more likely. However, even from cutting III the exact line of the inner wall is not quite certain, and it would not be possible from this small excavation to say with certainty that the width of the cloister walk did vary. The walk had been flanked by a substantial outer wall and a slightly less substantial inner wall. Both had been thoroughly robbed and the robber trenches were again filled with a mixture of rubble, sand, gravel and broken tile, in this case including some pieces of glazed ridge tiles. A few fragments of whitewashed plaster were found and a very few fragments of stone moulding. The best of these has a finely carved trefoil section (see FIG. 4).

DORCHESTER ABBEY Cutting III west section

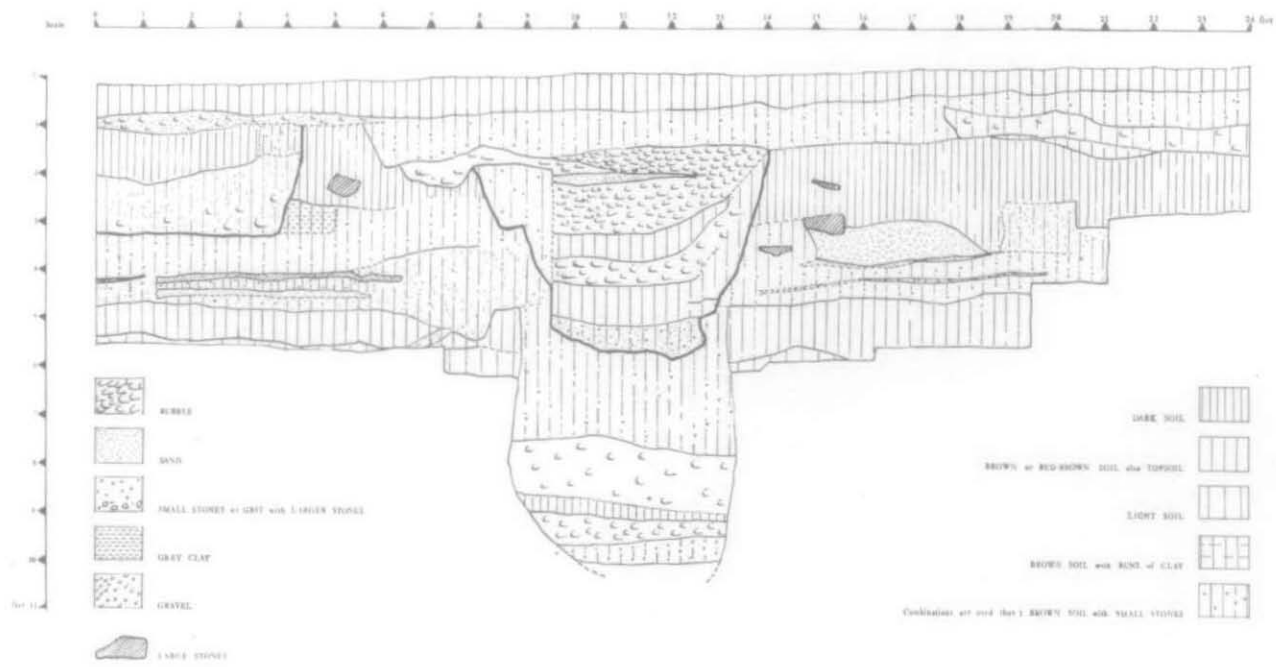


FIG. 3
Cutting III, Section.

Dr. Butler has confirmed that it is of 14th century date. But its delicacy and traces of colouring on the inner edge only indicate a cupboard surround rather than window tracery, and so it cannot be used as any firm indication of the date of the cloister building. The section of the outer robber trench offers further information on the line of the outer wall. A vertical division in the fill marked by texture rather than by colour appears to be the original surface of the rubble core when the dressed stone had been removed. This has enabled us to plot the line of the outer wall with some accuracy, though its exact width would depend on the size of the dressed stones used. The information from the robber trenches would suggest a width of 4 ft. 6 ins. for the outer wall, but this must not be taken as the exact width of the wall from surface to surface. The complete lack of any major fragments of dressed stone precludes any exact dating or description of the buildings at this stage.

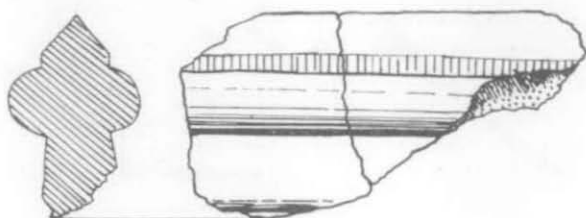


FIG. 4
Moulding ($\frac{1}{4}$).

FINDS

The finds from this excavation are less informative than one would have hoped (except of course for the Roman finds). The tile decoration has been examined by D. A. Hinton of the Ashmolean Museum, and the significant medieval pottery by Dr. L. A. S. Butler of the School of History, Leeds University.

Apart from the usual selection of roof tiles there are a very few pieces of undecorated floor tile of poor quality. The five decorated fragments are designs no. I, XX, XXVI (two fragments) and LIV (from Loyd Haberly, *English Medieval Paving Tiles* (1937)). All these designs are previously recorded from Dorchester.

The best fragments of medieval pottery came exclusively from cutting II and on information supplied by Dr. Butler can be described as follows:

From the outer robber trench of cutting II (FIG. 5).

1. Red earthenware bowl with single loop handle, and thick brown glaze. Late 17th century to 18th century.
2. Fragment of another bowl similar to the above (not illustrated).
3. Fragment of small two handled mug, glazed dark brown, late 16th century.
4. Fragment of buff coated earthenware dish decorated with copper and iron oxide, local manufacture. Early 17th century.
5. Large red earthenware dish decorated with cream coloured slip marbling and copper oxide. Late 16th century.
6. Large red earthenware dish with trailed decoration in cream slip. 17th century.

From the inner robber trench of cutting II.

1. Clay pipe bowl, 1700-50 (not illustrated).

Metal finds, apart from a bronze pin of 19th century date, are confined to a few scattered nails and some fragments of lead window lattice. The lead was found with fragments of window glass in cuttings I and II only.

There were no significant glass finds. A number of small fragments were found.

Apart from the human remains, the bone finds from most layers represented the normal range of kitchen rubbish. Butchers' chopping marks were fairly frequent. Two items of worked bone were found, both from the rubbish pits in cutting II. The first was a bone needle case of the 19th century, the other, a flat piece of bone bored at either end, appears to be a tally of some sort.

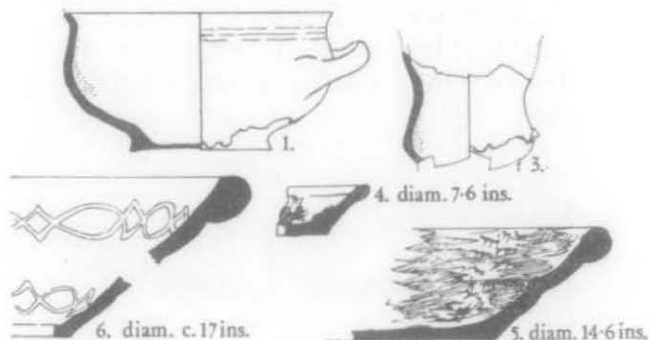


FIG. 5

Pottery from outer robber trench, Cutting II ($\frac{1}{2}$).

The excavation has proved conclusively the existence of a north cloister at Dorchester, and the line of the cloister walk is now established with some accuracy. The thoroughness of the robbing throughout and the comparative paucity of household rubbish in the medieval layers suggests that the buildings were demolished wholesale over a fairly short period rather than that they fell into decay gradually. The pottery would indicate a date some time at the very end of the 17th or at the beginning of the 18th century for this demolition. In that case the demolition was by no means contemporary with the rebuilding of the tower in 1605, but represents a completely different operation. On the basis of so small an excavation certainty is, of course, impossible and there remain the problems of the other buildings of the abbey which lie further to the north and which can still be seen as humps in the ground. Since trees make aerial photography impossible only further excavation can determine the exact layout and fate of this complex of buildings.

For help and advice during the excavation and in the preparation of this report our thanks are due to the Rev. H. F. Best and the Garden Committee of Dorchester, members of the staff of the Ashmolean Museum, the late Professor I. A. Richmond, Professor S. S. Frere, Miss Marion Wilson, Dr. Owen of the Pitt Rivers Museum and Dr. L. A. S. Butler of Leeds University.

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