

The Early Church at Cumnor

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SUMMARY

Small-scale excavations in 1985 defined the first and second phases of Cumnor parish church. The primary stone church (late 11th or early 12th century), identified as one phase by the homogeneity of its footings, consisted of a large square western compartment (probably a tower), a slightly narrower nave and an apsidal chancel; a flat-topped doorway in the S. wall of the nave still survives. In the mid 12th century a new and longer chancel was built, again probably apsidal; perhaps at this time, and certainly no later than c. 1180, an aisle or other structure was added to the S. side of the original western and central components. In the last quarter of the 12th century the existing W. tower was added, and the original western and central components were amalgamated to form an enlarged nave. The big W. tower of Phase 1 places it in a distinct category of important Anglo-Norman churches at episcopal and monastic residences. This interpretation is strengthened by the location of Cumnor church, beside one of the principal granges of Abingdon Abbey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to the Vicar and Parochial Church Council for permission to excavate; to Roger Ainslie and Alison Gledhill, who also dug; to Maureen Mellor for identifying the potsherd; and to Edward Impey for much help and information.

HISTORICAL AND TOPOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

In the middle ages Cumnor and its chapelries covered much of the northern half of a very large estate, roughly equivalent to Hormer hundred, which had belonged since at least the 10th century to the monastery at Abingdon.¹ As the head church of a big and complex estate, controlling several chapelries whose dead were buried in its graveyard,² Cumnor parish church can probably be identified as an Anglo-Saxon minster. A strong indication of this is that the churchyard was once much larger than now: in 1969 two

¹ *V.C.H. Berks.* iv, 391–451; F.M. Stenton, *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon* (1913), 48; H. Edwards, *The Charters of the Early West Saxon Kingdom* (B.A.R. British Ser. 198, 1988), 167–8, 191.

² North Hinksey, South Hinksey, Dean Court, Wootton (*V.C.H.* loc. cit. note 1; *Cal. Papal Letters*, v, 351). Cumnor also had burial and other parochial rights over Seacourt in the late 12th century (*Abingdon Cartularies*, eds. G. Lambrick and C.F. Slade (Oxford Hist. Soc. forthcoming), deed No. C89), and over Wytham until 1408 (*The Register of Robert Hallam, Bishop of Salisbury*, ed. J.M. Horn (Canterbury and York Soc. lxxii, 1982), No. 806). I am grateful to Bronač Holden for this last reference.

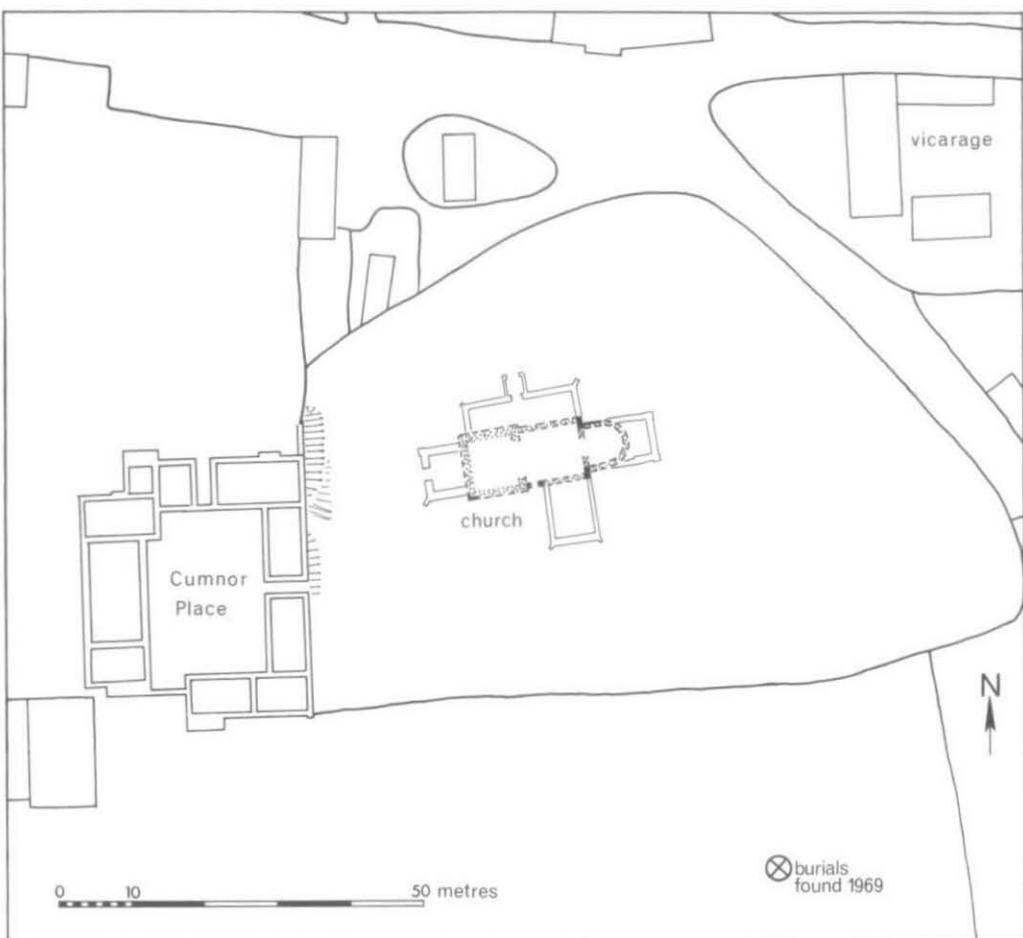


Fig. 1. The environs of Cumnor church, after the Abingdon estate-map of 1808 (Bodl. (R) MS. c17:13(43)) re-drawn to a true scale. The outline plan of Cumnor Place is based on Edward Impey's recent research and excavations.

human burials were found 60 m. S.S.E. of the church, 25 m. beyond the present churchyard boundary (Fig. 1).³ Two grave-slabs lying in the churchyard probably date from the 13th century or earlier (Fig. 2).⁴ There are, however, no early references beyond a 13th-century statement, probably mere fantasy, that the monks of Abingdon held

³ Information from Edward Impey, who observed this find during landscaping in the grounds of the modern Cumnor Place. The inhumations had been deeply buried under terracing, and others may remain in the surrounding area. For the great size of many minster graveyards see J. Blair, 'St. Frideswide's Monastery: Problems and Possibilities', *Oxonienia*, liii (1988), 233.

⁴ The slabs are in the bold, rather coarse style characteristic of excavated examples of the 11th to 13th centuries, and lack the diagnostic features of later medieval graveslabs. In the present state of knowledge it seems impossible to date them more precisely.

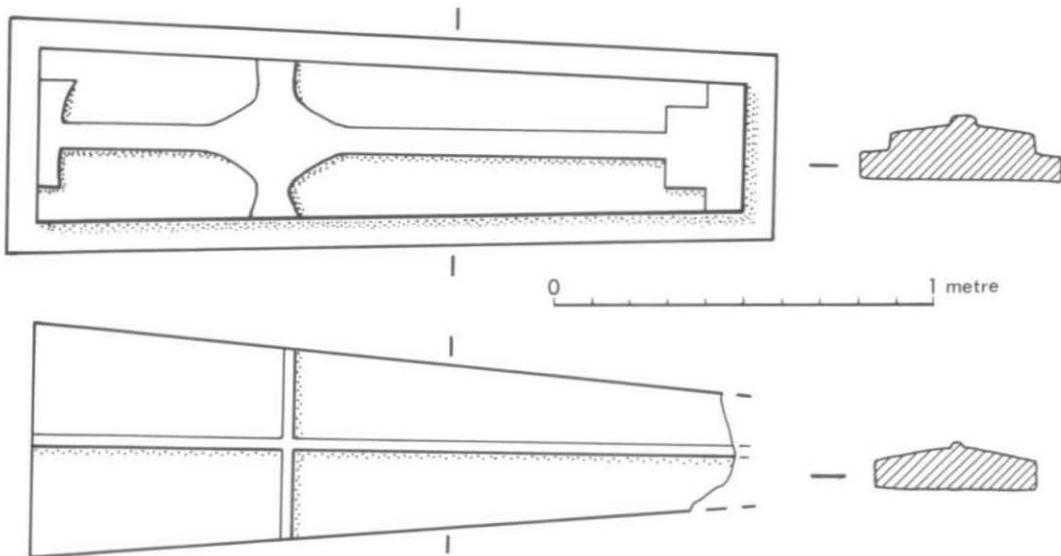


Fig. 2. Medieval grave-slabs in Cumnor churchyard.

Cumnor church in the time of King Alfred;⁵ the first real evidence is in Domesday Book, which lists a church (*ibi ecclesia*) on the Abbey's 50-hide manor of Cumnor.⁶

At all events, Cumnor was one of Abingdon's principal granges.⁷ In the early 14th century the Abbey built the sumptuous courtyard house later known as Cumnor Place to the W. of the church,⁸ probably (to judge from the general lie of the boundaries) on part of the churchyard. The Place is not known to have contained any Romanesque fabric, but some earlier house or grange building must have existed, possibly on the same site and within the churchyard curtilage.

The important fact for present purposes is that Cumnor church was of more-than-average status, and closely associated with a major ecclesiastical residence: it might be expected to share architectural characteristics with other churches in this distinctive category.

⁵ In the tract *De Abbatibus* in B.L. MS Cotton Vitellius A XIII, printed *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, ed. J. Stevenson, ii (Rolls Ser. 2b, 1858), 276. For the unreliability of this text see Stenton op. cit. note 1, 1-2.

⁶ Great Domesday, f.58b.

⁷ By 1242/3 the estate seems to have been divided into ten units administered from granges at Abingdon, Barton, Cumnor, Radley, South Hinksey, North Hinksey, Botley, Swinford, Dean Court and Wootton: *Book of Fees*, ii, 862. Cf. C.J. Bond, 'The Reconstruction of the Medieval Landscape: the Estates of Abingdon Abbey', *Landscape History*, i (1970), 60-4.

⁸ The best published account of this building (demolished 1810) is in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, xci (1821), 34-5 and 201-5. Edward Impey, who has recently elucidated the ground-plan through analysis of plans and drawings, and has carried out a small excavation, writes (pers. comm.) that 'when the Place was being constructed the accumulated ground surface was evidently cut away, making a "step" on which the E. range was constructed directly on natural sand'.

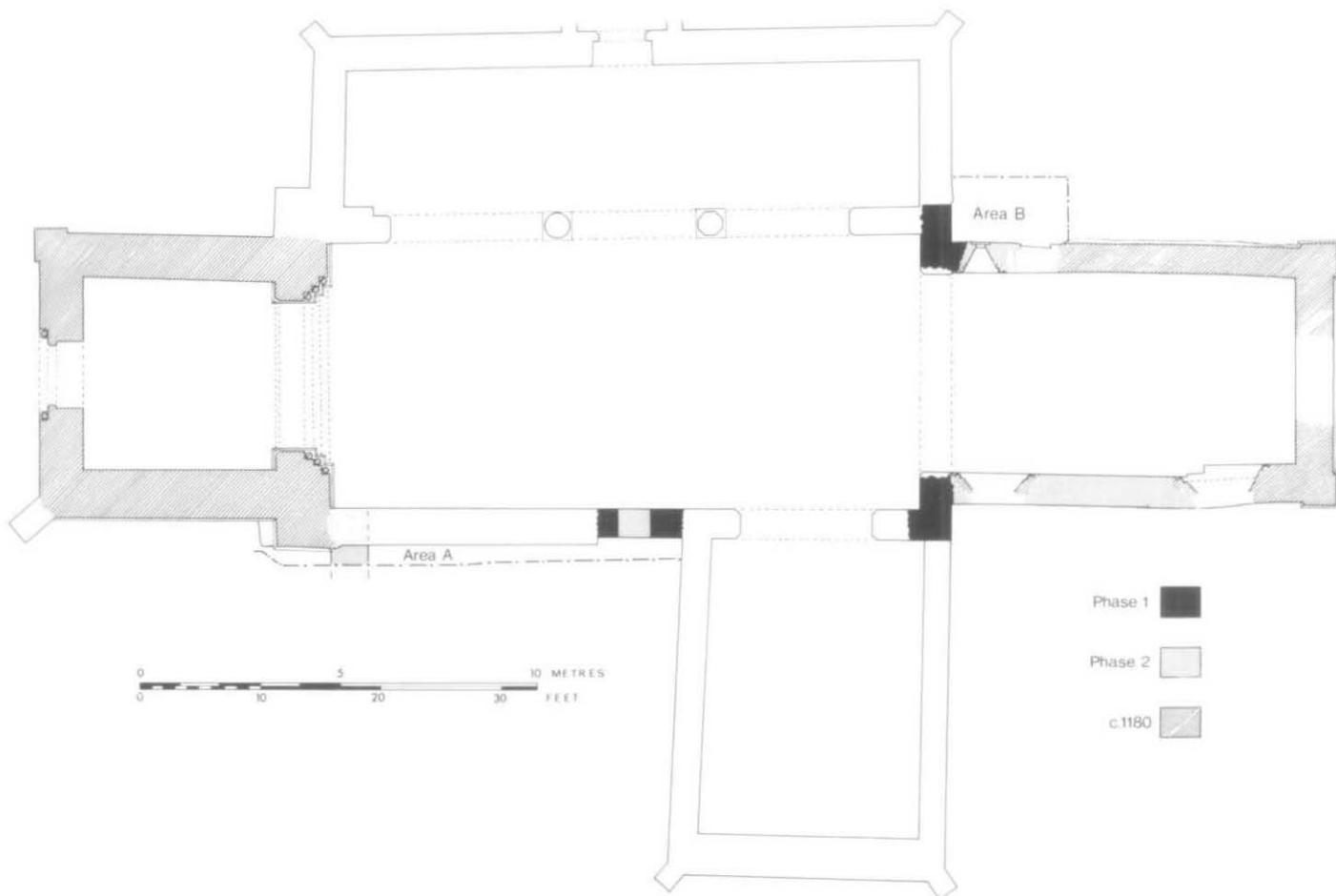


Fig. 3. Plan of the church as existing (post-1200 phases in outline only), showing the locations of the trenches.

THE STANDING FABRIC

The church now consists of a nave, a chancel, a W. tower, a N. aisle, and a big S. transept (Fig. 3).⁹ The aisle and the transept, respectively of the 13th and 14th centuries, will not be discussed further in this report, which is concerned only with the 12th-century and earlier fabric.

The E. and S. walls of the nave, respectively 0.77 and 0.74 m. thick, are the oldest visible part of the standing building. Their eaves-height from present ground-level is 4.64 m., and from original ground-level (as inferred from Area A, F4a) is 5.10 m. There are irregular squared quoins on the two eastern corners, abutted by the E. walls of the aisle and transept (Fig. 4, left); the surviving section of the S. wall includes a simple doorway (now blocked) with an enormous flat lintel (Fig. 4, right). It was the thinness of the walls and the form of this doorway, suggesting work of pre-Romanesque and possibly pre-Conquest character, which prompted the investigations described below.

The N. chancel wall is mostly late 12th-century, but its westernmost part (F13, see p. 66 below) is of a different fabric from the rest and contains a round-headed and externally rebated window (Fig. 4, left), probably mid 12th-century. The S. chancel wall is also probably earlier than the existing straight E. end of c.1180: its outer face curves inwards where it meets the E. wall and a slight corresponding curve is visible internally on the N. side, suggesting an apsidal termination. Further evidence for building activity around the mid 12th century is provided by the 22 corbels from a lavish Romanesque corbel-table which are re-used in the nave, N. aisle and external S. wall (Fig. 5).

The W. tower was built, and the chancel re-modelled, in the last quarter of the 12th century. The tower has a pointed arch towards the nave with roll-mouldings and three orders of shafts, a round-headed W. door with one order of shafts, and pointed belfry windows (perhaps a generation later) with roll-mouldings.¹⁰ The alterations to the chancel seem to have involved squaring-up, very irregularly where the S. side is concerned, the mid 12th-century apse; the strange internal buttress in the S.E. corner may be designed to conceal the curve of the older wall. Both windows in the S. wall (now with later tracery) retain late 12th-century rere-arches with continuous roll-mouldings and pellet-ornament, and the pre-existing window on the N. side has a similar rere-arch. The chancel arch was renewed in the 13th century, apparently when the N. aisle was built.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Two small areas were excavated in the churchyard, one against the S. wall of the nave and the other against its N.E. corner, to establish whether the footings in both places were sufficiently similar to be ascribed to one building phase. *Area A* (August 1985) was confined to the existing drainage-gully along the outer face of the S. nave wall; *Area B* (November 1985) was in the angle between the N.E. corner of the nave and the N. wall of the chancel.

⁹ See also the plan and description in *V.C.H. Berks.* iv, 401–3, which is inaccurate, however, as regards the earlier phases.

¹⁰ It is reported locally that the S. side of the tower collapsed in the early 20th century. Although the plinth-course is clearly original, the standing masonry of the S. face is indeed different in appearance from the rest of the tower, and unlike the other sides it only has one belfry window. This work seems most unlikely to be modern, however, for the recently-replaced bell-cage was apparently of 17th-century date. The 14th-century angle buttress on the S.W. appears integral with the masonry on the S. side of the tower, and suggests the most likely date for the reconstruction (Edward Impey's observation).



Fig. 4. *Left:* The junction of the chancel and N. aisle from the N.E., showing remains of the original nave E. wall, and the window of the Phase 2 chancel. *Right:* Phase 1 doorway in S. wall.

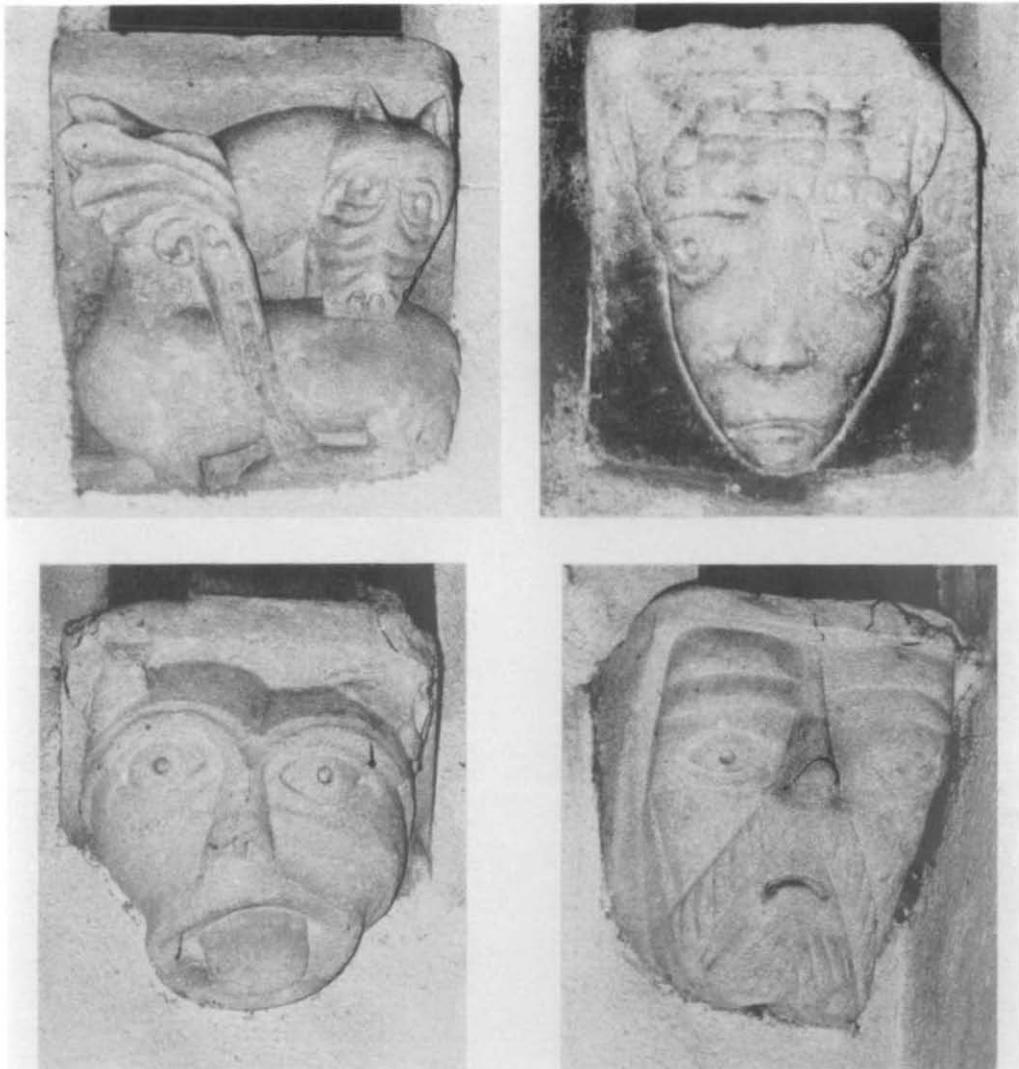


Fig. 5. Four of the 22 re-used Romanesque corbels.

Area A (Fig. 6)

The narrow but deep drainage-gully along the S. side of the western part of the nave was cleaned out, and its sides and bottom trowelled to define the features which became visible. All stratigraphy above footing level had been destroyed by the digging of the gully, but the footings survived intact and enough could be seen of them to establish a building sequence.

The earliest feature was a broad rubble footing (F6) with hard-packed pale-yellow sandy bonding. This underlay the surviving section of original wall (F4), with an offset of c. 0.30 m. At the junction of F4 with the thicker 14th-century wall to its W., the edge of F6 turned 0.32 m. to the S.; it then continued westwards on that alignment for a further 8.60 m., returning N. under the late 12th-century tower.

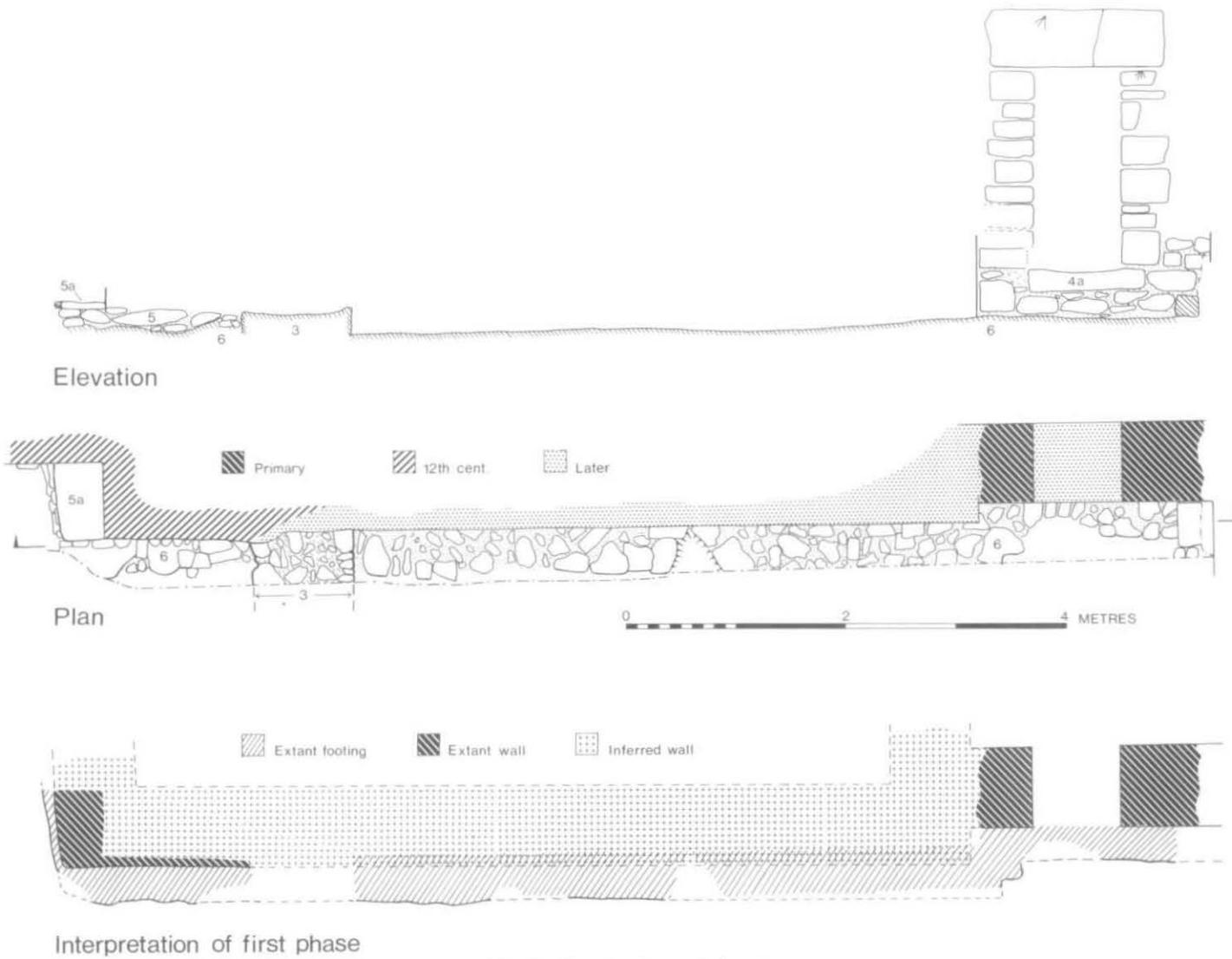


Fig. 6. Area A: plans and elevation.

The bottom courses of the standing early wall (F4) were raked out and shown to be bonded with a hard white sandy mortar; at the base of the blocked doorway was a worn step (F4a). At the W. end of the footing two courses of original wall (F5) survived upon it, including a massive corner-stone (F5a); this again was bonded with the hard white mortar. Like F4, F5 was in-set some 0.30 m. from the edge of F6.

Running southwards from the standing 14th-century wall was a footing (F3), 93 cm. wide and with orange-brown clay loam bonding. This overlay F6 and was clearly secondary to it. The 14th-century wall, with orange sandy bonding, was built straight up from F6 and overlay F3. The chamfered plinth which runs along the S. wall of the late 12th-century tower and around the S.W. corner of the nave abutted F3.

Over all features was an undifferentiated layer of orange-brown clay loam (L2). This had been cut by the digging of the 20th-century drainage gully, the bottom of which was lined with cinders (L1).

Area B (Fig. 7)

An area of about 4.5 square metres in the angle between the N. aisle and the chancel was excavated to the level of the primary footings. A down-pipe, now discharging into a brick drain in the angle of the building, proved formerly to have led into a stone-filled soakaway pit, also fed by a deep W.-E. drainage gully parallel with the chancel wall and c. 0.50 m. away from it. Thus excavation was effectively confined to a strip around the bases of the walls, which was fortunately wide enough to include the expanded footings.

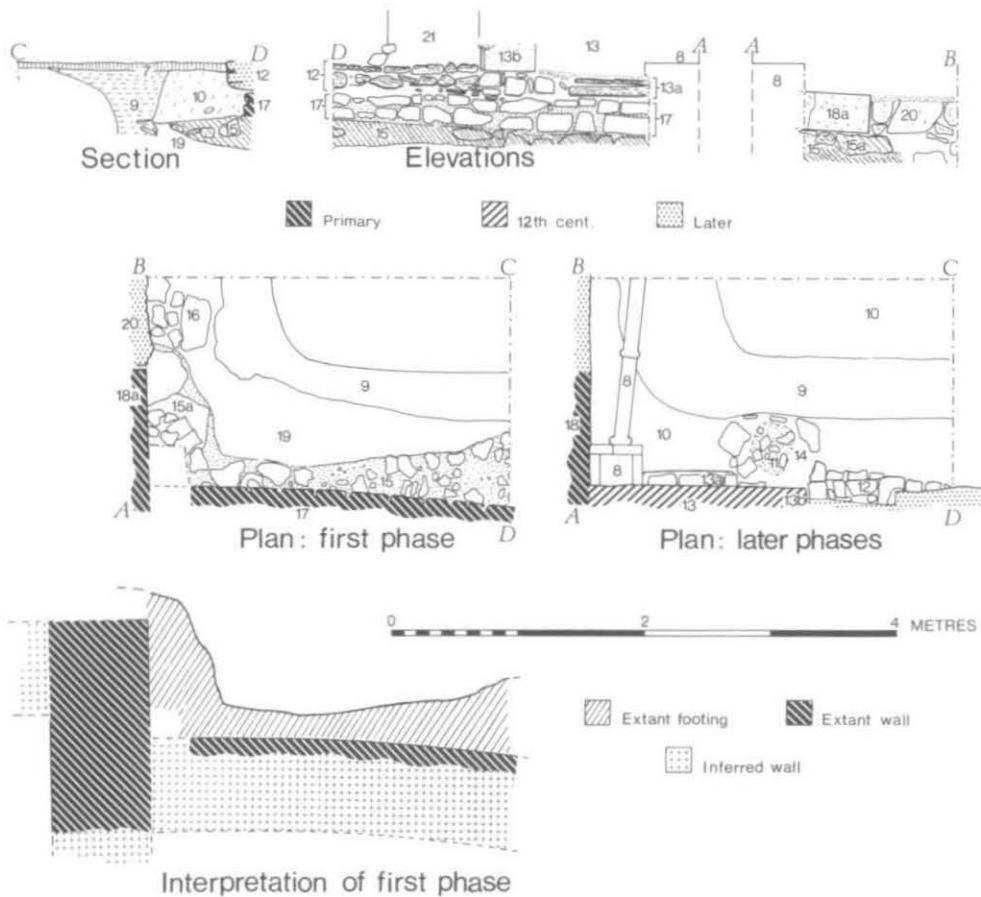


Fig. 7. Area B: plans and elevations.

The underlying layer, probably natural, was a fine sandy orange-brown subsoil (L19). Cutting it was a rubble footing (F15) with hard-packed pale-yellow sandy bonding. This was very shallow but extended well out beyond the wall-faces, with an irregular outer edge; it underlay both the chancel wall and the original N.E. quoin of the nave, and included two large irregular stones (F15a) supporting the latter. A group of stones in the N.W. corner of the area (F16) were either cut by F15 or contemporary with it.

Founded on F15 were the bottom two to three courses of the primary chancel wall (F17); these were of dressed rubble bonded with a hard white sandy mortar, a thin continuous layer of which had been laid under the bottom course on the surface of F15. The eastern part of F17 deflected slightly to the S. The N.E. corner of the primary nave, which stands to full height (F18), was also founded on F15; its bottom quoin-stone (F18a, resting on F15a) was a massive ashlar block with rough diagonal tooling.

Above F17 were at least three later phases of the N. chancel wall. The western part of this wall (F13), rebuilt from the level of an offset consisting of small projecting slabs (F13a), contains the bottom two stones of a chamfered W. door-jamb (F13b) and the complete mid 12th-century window (F13c; above, p.61 and Fig. 4, left). Eastwards, an offset rubble footing (F12) impinged on F13b and seemed integral with the plinth along the N. side of the eastern part of the chancel. Later still is a simple 13th-century pointed doorway (F21) which overlies and apparently cuts F12; since its W. jamb is directly above F13b, this is best seen as a re-instatement of a doorway integral with F13 but blocked or largely destroyed by F12. The E. wall of the N. aisle, butted against F18, stood on a rough, shallow rubble footing (F20) overlying F15a.

Sealing or abutting all below-ground medieval features was an undifferentiated layer of orange-brown clay loam (L10). In L10 was a group of big stones (F14) against the chancel wall, possibly structural but more probably random. A small pit (F11), containing broken-up mortar in dark-brown earth with charcoal flecks, cut L10 and F14. The soakaway pit and drainage gully (F9) cut through L10 into L19 below it. An earthenware pipe (F8) running N. from the down-pipe is reported to have replaced the soakaway in c. 1950–60. The topsoil (F7), which slumped into F9, was of dark-brown earth with patches of orange sand.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FIRST AND SECOND PHASES (Figs. 8 and 9)

Phase 1

The foundations of the primary walls in both areas are so distinctive and so consistent that they must almost certainly belong to one building campaign. The first stage was a broad but shallow footing of compacted rubble with sandy bonding (F6, F15), wider than the walls above it. The surviving portions of the standing walls (F4 and 4a, F5 and 5a, F17, F18 and 18a) are built directly on the footing and are bonded with a hard white sandy mortar.

This evidence goes a long way towards elucidating the original plan. In Area A, the offset between the eastern and western parts of F6 shows that originally the S. wall of the nave was not a continuous length but defined two compartments, the western slightly wider than the eastern. This is confirmed by the fragments of wall (F5 and F5a) remaining at the W. end; the staggered junction between F4 and the 14th-century wall continuing its line westwards perpetuates the division. Thus the flat-topped doorway in F4 was at the W. end of the S. wall of the more easterly compartment. Area B proves that the E. wall of the nave belongs to the same phase, and that a narrower chancel, its N. wall (F17) on the line of the present N. chancel wall, extended E. from the nave and was integral with it. The inwards deflection of F17 implies that the chancel narrowed towards the east, and therefore probably terminated in an apse. The original church can thus be defined as a three-compartment plan: a big W. tower or similar structure (its walls of unknown thickness), a slightly narrower nave, and an apsidal chancel.

A *terminus post quem* for this building is indicated by the one stratified find: a small sherd of coarse pottery found in the bonding of the primary footing (F15) near the junction of the nave and chancel walls. The sherd was firmly embedded in the sandy matrix, though given its small size, and the fact that it was found near the top of the footing above the rubble, the possibility that it was intrusive should perhaps not be

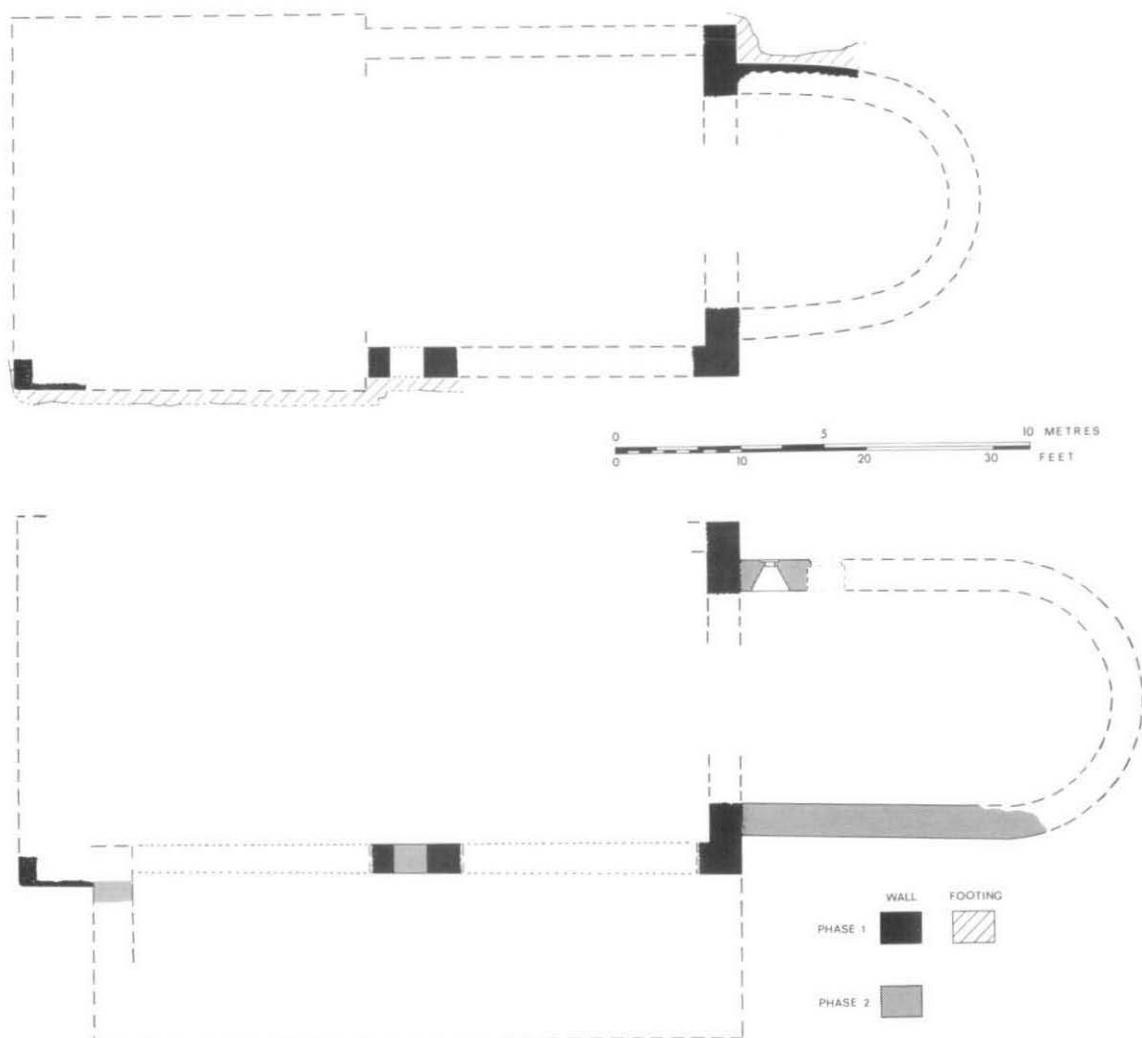


Fig. 8. Interpretative plans of Phase 1 (above) and Phase 2 (below).

discounted completely. Maureen Mellor writes: 'This fabric type has not previously been recorded in the area, and its mixture of chalk, oolite and hard black grains is a mystery. It could be as early as the late 11th century, but I would prefer a date of 1150–1250'. This sherd therefore suggests the (not particularly surprising) conclusion that despite the pre-Romanesque characteristics of the standing masonry, the primary stone church was built in the late 11th or even early 12th century.¹¹

¹¹ For the continuation of Anglo-Saxon technology in the Anglo-Norman period see R. Gem, 'The English Parish Church in the 11th and Early 12th Centuries: a Great Rebuilding?', in J. Blair (ed.), *Mинsters and Parish Churches: the Local Church in Transition 950–1200* (1988), 23–5.

Phase 2

Two enlargements can be identified as later than the primary stone church, but earlier than the late 12th-century tower and E. end: an intermediate phase of the chancel, longer but again apsidal; and an aisle or other structure added to the S. side.

The chancel underwent at least two major reconstructions. On the evidence of Area B, its N. wall was rebuilt from the ground upwards in the mid 12th century, with a new window and doorway (F13 and 13a-c). As described above (p. 61), the inwards curve of the wall-plane at the E. end of the S. wall suggests that the existing late 12th-century E. end replaced an apse. It seems likely that the Phase 2 features on the N. side belonged to this apsidal chancel, considerably longer than its predecessor. (The *ex situ* corbels may derive from a corbel-table around its exterior, though their large scale could be taken as evidence for a higher location, perhaps around the top of the original W. tower.) The high rubble plinth along the extended N. wall of the chancel, apparently integral with the existing E. end, ran westwards (F12) over F17, blocking the mid 12th-century doorway which was probably removed except for the bottom of its W. jamb (F13b).

The footing (F3) running southwards from the S. side of the church definitely overlay the primary footing (F6). The abutment of the tower plinth against it (above, p.65) shows that the structure to which F3 belonged was standing when the late 12th-century W. tower was built; it probably pre-dated the tower, though the possibility that the two were built together cannot be excluded. How far southwards and eastwards this structure extended is uncertain, but its E. wall was not found within the excavated strip of Area A. If this was an aisle along the S. side of the church, the survival of the section of original S. wall containing the flat-topped doorway is not wholly easy to explain. It is possible, however, that such an aisle had a two-bay arcade cut through the existing wall, the surviving section being retained (with the doorway blocked) as a pier between the arches.¹² This would presumably have necessitated the dismantling of the original W. tower (if tower it was) and the incorporation of its remains into the nave. The 14th-century remodelling would then have involved the demolition of the aisle, the blocking of its western arch, and the replacement of the eastern arch by the present opening into the S. transept.

THE ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT OF THE FIRST STONE CHURCH

Three-cell Romanesque parish churches are common in England, but the plan recovered at Cumnor is unusual both for the shortness of the nave and for the remarkable size of the square western component. A context for it can, however, be found in a group of Romanesque churches with prominent W. towers, all built on important episcopal and monastic estates. In 1982 Stephen Heywood pointed out that the ruined churches at North Elmham (Norfolk) and South Elmham (Suffolk), almost certainly chapels of the bishops of East Anglia, and the church at Brook (Kent), probably built by Prior Ernulf of Christ Church Canterbury (1096–1107), are distinguished by exceptionally large western towers evidently built to contain upper chapels or tribunes: the three churches were ‘of similar status, illustrating the personal

¹² At Tackley (Oxon.) a two-bay arcade was inserted in just the way proposed here: see J. Blair and B. McKay, ‘Excavations at Tackley Church’, *Oxoniana*, 1 (1985), 27–30, 42–3.

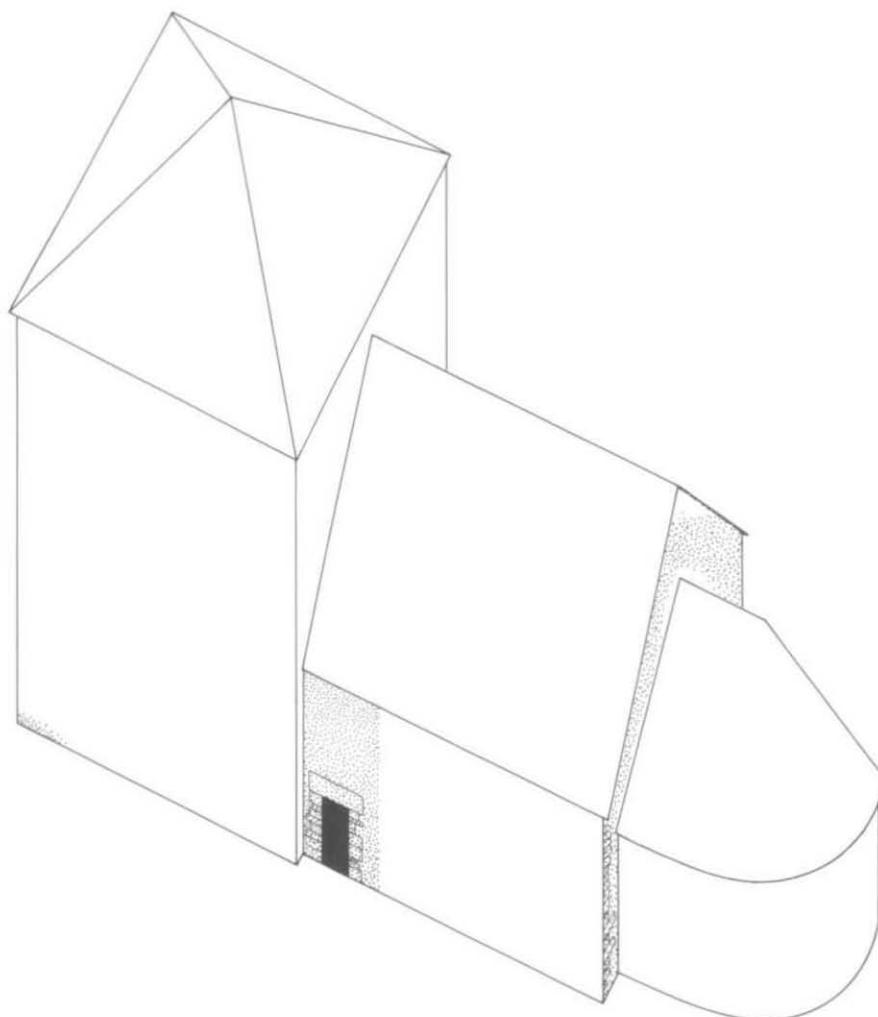


Fig. 9. Isometric reconstruction of Phase 1. Original fabric still visible is stippled.

involvement of prelates requiring chapels for their country residences'.¹³ Eric Fernie has since extended the argument to the episcopal churches at Egilsay (Orkney), which has a round W. tower, and Melbourne (Derbs.), which has a tribune running around the otherwise conventional crossing-tower.¹⁴ Other cases can certainly be found, for

¹³ S. Heywood, 'The Ruined Church at North Elmham', *Jnl. of the British Archaeological Assocn.* cxxxv (1982), 7–9 (with plan); see also S.E. Rigold, 'The Demesne of Christ Church at Brook', *Archaeological Jnl.* cxxvi (1969), 270–1 (with plan), and N. Smedley and E. Owles, 'Excavations at the Old Minster, South Elmham', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. of Archaeology*, xxxii (1970), 1–16 (with plan).

¹⁴ E. Fernie, 'The Church of St. Magnus, Egilsay', in B.E. Crawford (ed.), *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (1988), 148–52 (with plan and elevations).

instance Minster Court (Kent), a four-cell apsidal church with a W. tower of huge proportions at a grange of St. Augustine's; and Fingest (Bucks.), where the square Romanesque W. tower dwarfs the contemporary but narrower nave and where 'the bishops of Lincoln . . . are said to have occasionally resided'.¹⁵

The great W. towers are the one architectural feature which these otherwise varied churches have in common, and there seems to be a good case for numbering Cumnor among them. The inferred internal size of its western component (*c.* 6 to 7.5 m. square, depending on the thickness of the walls) is in the same order of magnitude as the interiors of the towers at South Elmham (*c.* 7.9 m. square), Minster Court (*c.* 7.8 by 6.8 m.), Fingest (5.8 m. square), Brook (5.79 by 5.70 m.) and North Elmham (5.37 by 5.32 m.). Another possible point of contact is the presence in some of these churches of opposed doorways at the W. end of the nave, as though for a cross-passage giving access to the ground floor of the tower but screened off from the nave. At North Elmham, Brook and Fingest both doorways are present, while Minster Court has the N. doorway with evidence lacking on the S. side; the flat-topped doorway at the W. end of the S. nave wall at Cumnor may therefore represent an arrangement normal in churches of this distinctive type.

These parallels, together with the proximity of Cumnor Place, suggest very strongly that the church was built for the convenience of abbots or priors of Abingdon when they visited their main administrative centre outside Abingdon itself. The patron was presumably Abbot Rainald (1084–96), who began the new Abbey church in 1091, or his learned and distinguished successor Abbot Faricius (1100–17) who built the new nave, towers and conventional buildings.¹⁶ Cumnor church may well have been a 'spin-off' from this great Romanesque enterprise, even though its masons had probably inherited some Anglo-Saxon building traits.

The Society is grateful to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards the publication of this paper.

¹⁵ P.K. Kipps, 'Minster Court, Thanet', *Archaeological Jnl.* lxxxvi (1929), 213–23 (with plan); *V.C.H. Bucks.* iii, 42–4 (with plan and photograph). Immediately to the N. of Fingest church are earthworks of a large manorial complex (Keith Ray's observation).

¹⁶ *Chron. Abb.* op. cit. note 5, ii, 23–4, 45, 150, 286; G. Lambrick, 'Buildings of the Monasteries at Abingdon from the Late Seventh Century to 1538', *Med. Arch.* xii (1968), 47, 51.