

Excavation at Bicester Priory, 1968

By DAVID A. HINTON

Summary

Part of the north wall of the north transept of Bicester Priory church was located in a trial excavation in 1968. Internal floor levels were not examined; externally, an extensive layer of mortar, containing late 13th-century pottery, post-dates the transept wall. It was shown that enough probably remains of the church walls to justify a complete excavation of the east end.

INTRODUCTION

A TRIAL excavation was undertaken in September 1968 in the garden of the Territorial Army Centre at Bicester, to locate the north transept of the Priory church, and to gauge the advisability of complete excavation of the site before it is re-developed.¹ The Centre covers the east end of the church; it is the only part of the site still available for digging, and for testing the conclusions about the Priory drawn from previous discoveries, described in *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968).

The site selected was the small triangular area bounded on the east by the T.A. Centre's north-west block, and on the west by Priory Lane (FIG. 5, taken from *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), fig. 9). The first trench opened, in September 1968, was B in FIG. 6; when the transept wall was found, B was extended 2 ft. southwards, and Trench A was opened. After A and B had been filled in, Trenches C and D were excavated at week-ends in November and December, to discover the extent northwards of the medieval layers.

EXCAVATION

Trenches A and B encountered an east-west wall c. 5 ft. wide, below some 2 ft. of soil and rubble. Floor levels on the south side of the wall were not examined, because it would not have been possible to get a coherent picture in

¹ I am very grateful to the Bicester Urban District Council for permitting the excavation, and for assisting in many different ways; I would particularly like to thank Mr. R. W. Bainton and Mr. J. Doe. I was very fortunate in my helpers, especially Miss Tania Briscoe, David Watts, and a cohort of Near Eastern archaeologists. Mrs. P. Clarke, Miss F. Nathan and Mrs. M. Cottam very kindly did most of the drawing and lettering. Mr. David Brown made many helpful comments. The excavation was financed by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works.

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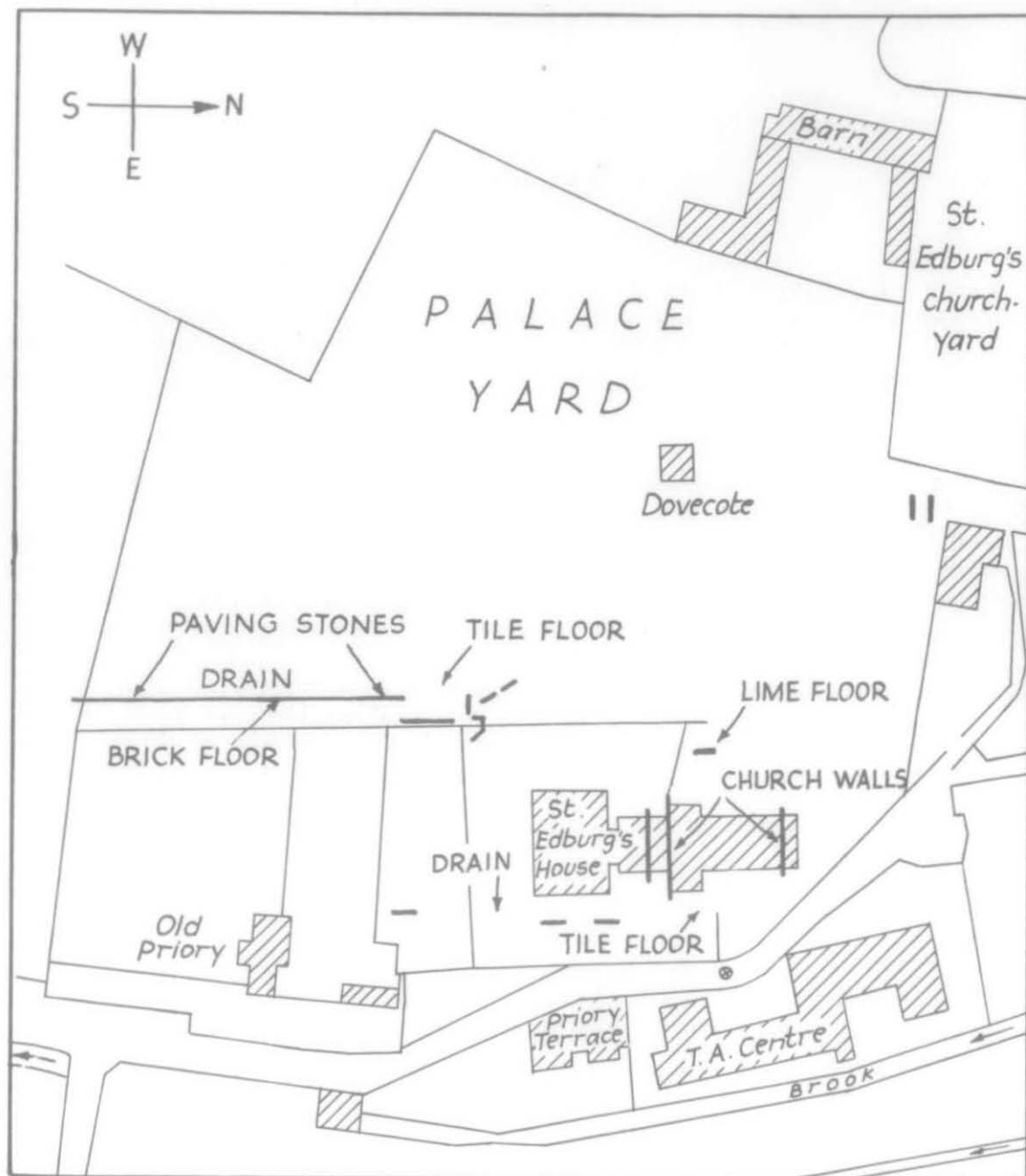


FIG. 5

Bicester : the Priory site ; reprinted from *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii, 1968, fig. 9. Scale 1 : 1250.

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the limited space available. Mortar and foundation layers were found on the north side of the wall, but water level prevented total excavation.

In this position, the wall must be the north wall of the north transept, as it is too far off the axis of the nave of the church to be the wall of the east end.

DESCRIPTION

TRENCH A (EAST SECTION, FIG. 6b) :

LAYERS :

- (1) Top-soil. 20th century finds, but also Med. tile fragments and sherds (see Tiles).
- (2) Gravelly rubble with mortar. Burnt red stones, cf. Trench B2a. 19th century finds, with Med. tile, glass and ?brick (Tiles, Glass).
- (3) Dark grey rubble with mortar and small stones. 19th century finds, with Med. tile, glass and sherds (Tiles, Glass).
- (4) Bright yellow gravelly mortar, in layers ; only excavated to a depth of 6 in. Only find, one Med. inlaid tile fragment (Tiles).
- (5) Wall. Rubble core, with roughly-dressed facings, bonded by hard mortar. Not removed (Stone).
- (6) Thin layer of burnt mortar. Sterile.
- (7) Mortar, yellow and white. Very hard. Sterile.
- (8) Black mud, with small stones and flecks of charcoal. Small bone fragments, otherwise sterile (Stone).

Water level prevented further excavation ; the wall could be felt at least 18 in. lower.

TRENCH B (WEST SECTION, FIG. 6c) :

- (1) Top-soil. 20th century finds.
- (2) Soil, with clay and mortar rubble. 19th century finds, also 13th century and later sherds, Med. inlaid tile fragment and bone tool (Misc.).
- (2a) Similar rubble, not distinguished from (2) during excavation. Large number of burnt red stones, cf. A2 (Stone).
- (3) Compact yellow mortar, the surface disturbed by roots, etc. No features recognized. Finds : charcoal, iron, sherds in sandy fabrics—none necessarily post-13th century (Misc.).
- (4) Stones compacted with mortar. Not of uniform width across the trench. Sterile.
- (5) Clean, hard yellow/white mortar, with stones in it, especially at the North end. Patches of very hard brown mortar. Laminated structure. Finds : late 13th century sherd and two very small undateable sherds. Otherwise sterile (Pottery).
- (6) Hard white mortar, a patch in layer 5. Sterile.
- (7) Grey silty mud, with stones. Small bone and charcoal fragments, otherwise sterile.
- (8) Orange mortar. Small bones, otherwise sterile.

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- (9) Black mud. Water level prevented complete excavation. Finds : small bones, snails, coarse and sandy fabric unglazed sherds, and one green glazed, probably from a 12th century tripod pitcher (Misc., Pottery, Fauna).

A pump² enabled us to go further, but accurate observation was not possible. White mortar (layer 10) was found below 9, with solid clay below ; but its relationship to the wall was uncertain.

TRENCH C (WEST SECTION, FIG. 6c) :

- (1) Top-soil. 20th century finds, but also Med. sherds.
- (2) Clay, soil and rubble. 19th century finds.
- (3) Hard yellow mortar, as B5. Top surface disturbed, no features. Finds : pottery, late 13th-early 14th century. Two baked clay fragments, one with vein of white pipe-clay, which could have fallen into the trench between week-ends. Worked stone (Pottery, Tiles, Stone).

TRENCH D (WEST SECTION, FIG. 6c) :

- (1) Top-soil. 20th century finds, but also Med. sherd.
- (2) Rubble. 19th century finds and 2 Med. sherds.
- (3) Mortar. This layer ended abruptly, layer 2 having been dug down into it. Sterile.

High water level prevented further excavation in Trenches C and D.

THE WALL :

The wall found in Trench B was not of uniform height, but had been robbed deeper on the east side of the trench (see PL. III). This deeper robbing was also found in Trench A on the west side, and although the wall height increased again, it did not regain its previous size. It was built of rubble, with roughly dressed facings, bonded by hard mortar ; the stone was local Lower Cornbrash (Stone). The width in Trench A varied from 4 ft. 9 in. to 5 ft.

FINDS :

The excavation was small, and finds were therefore few. Useful dating evidence was provided by the pottery, and the stones are valuable for interpretation.

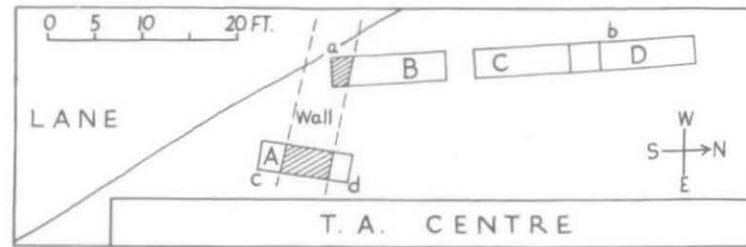
BUILDING MATERIALS

STONE :

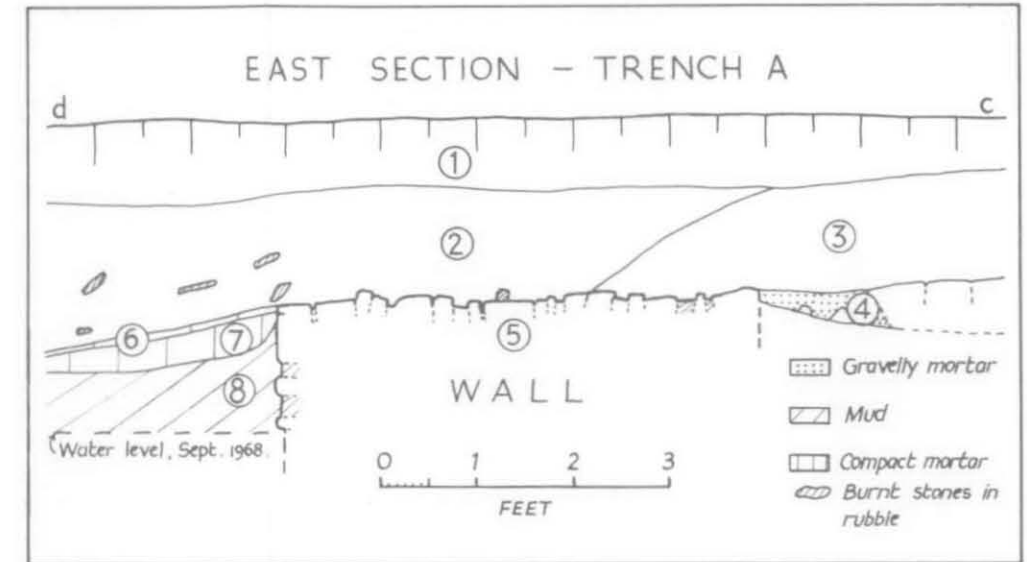
Samples of stone from the excavation were examined by Mr. H. P. Powell at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, and this section is based on his notes. I am very grateful to Mr. Powell for helping me again. Samples included :

- (1) Lower Cornbrash : rubble from wall interior (A5), and from A8, B2. This stone is local to Bicester. Several of those from B2 have pink colouring, evidence of heating in a fire (see section drawings, FIG. 6). This was further shown in an example of
- (2) Fine-grained non-calcareous pink sandstone, which had a glassy coat probably resulting from melting of grains of silica (B2).

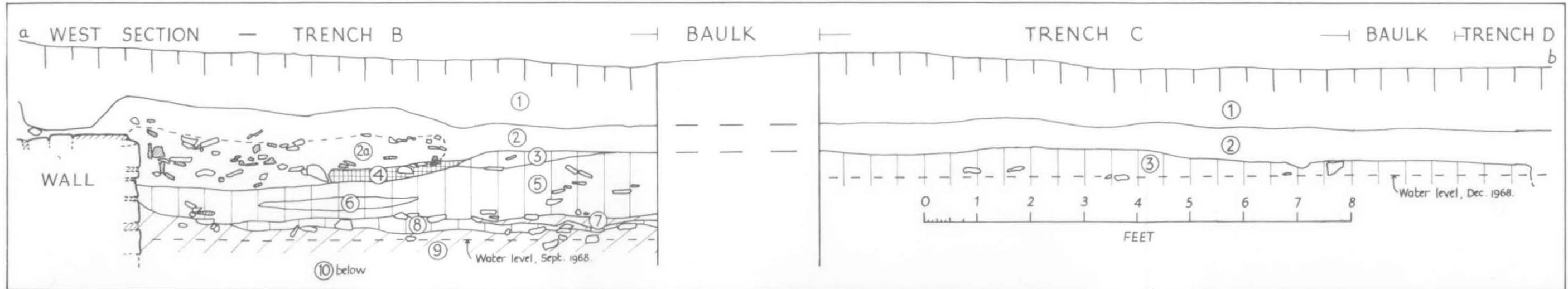
² Kindly lent by Mrs. A. Coker.



(a) Location of trenches.



(b) East Section, Trench A.



(c) West Section, Trenches B-D.

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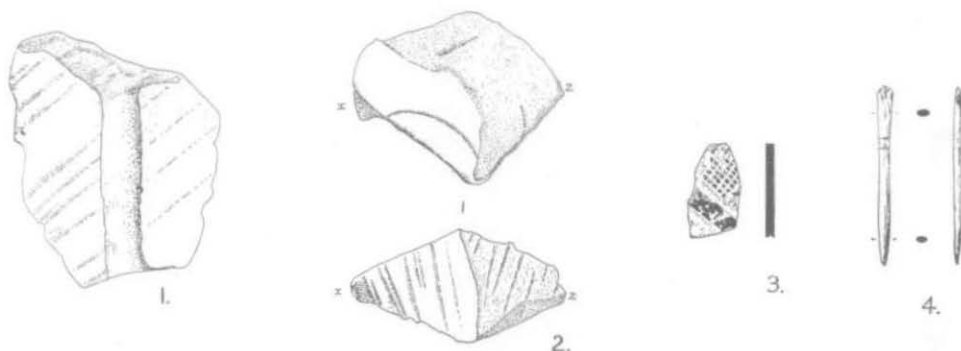


FIG. 7

1, 2 : Stonework from Layer C3 ; 3 : glass from Layer A2 ; 4 : bone from Layer B2. Scale 1 : 4.

- (3) Limestone of oolites and shell-fragments in a marly matrix, from Middle Jurassic. Quarry uncertain, possibly Headington, but less marly, finer grained and darker than most Headington stone. Burnt example from rubble A2, and worked pieces from mortar (C3) (FIG. 7, 1 and 2).

FLOOR-TILES :³

Little new evidence was found ; the two fragments in C3 cannot be regarded as positive evidence of tile-making near-by. An inlaid fragment (st) stratified in A4 was very small, but was probably the design published in *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), FIG. 13F. Other fragments came from Post-Medieval levels ; designs recognized were :

Inland : XXV (A2), LIV (A1, A3), CLXXV (A2).

Printed : P.71 (A2).

GLASS :

Two fragments with a painted chequer design were found unstratified (A2 and A3) (FIG. 7, 3).

SMALL FINDS

POTTERY :

The trenches were too small to yield large quantities of sherds, but enough was recovered to be useful as dating evidence. Stratified sherds included :

- FIG. 8, 1. (B9) Straight-sided cooking-pot or bowl rim. Coarse fabric. Grey core, red-brown 'skin' with grey-black surfaces. Fragments of loose clay stuck to the exterior (cf. similar shapes in St. Neots ware from Late Saxon pits in Logic Lane, Oxford (*Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/62), fig. 10, 1 and 5).
2. (B9) Cooking-pot rim. Sandy fabric. Grey core with pink-brown surfaces (cf. Seacourt, *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/62), fig. 22, 7, early 13th century).

³ See *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), 41-2, for details of codes used here.

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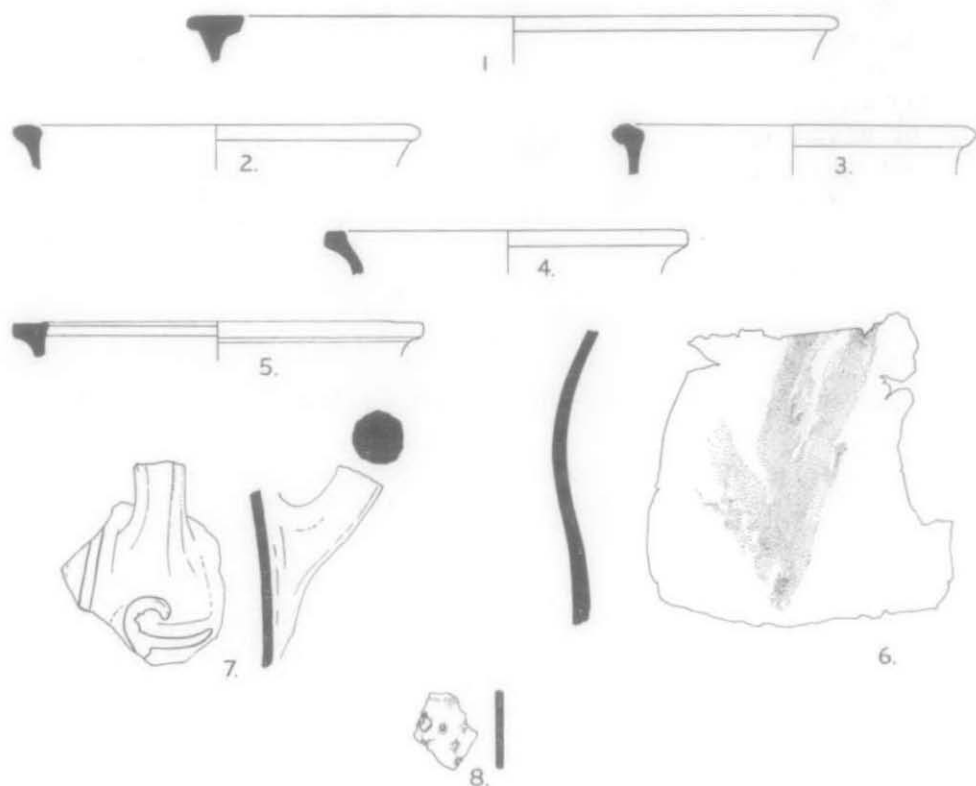


FIG. 8

Pottery, scale 1 : 4. 1-4, from layer Bg : 12th century ; 5, 7 from Layer C3, 6 from Layer B5 : late 13th century ; 8 from Layer B2 : 13th century.

3. (Bg) Another. Coarse fabric. Grey core with pink-brown surfaces. Flange width not even (cf. as last, fig. 23, 18 for shape but not fabric, early 13th century).
4. (Bg) Another. Hard sandy fabric. Red-brown core with grey-black surfaces (cf. as last, fig. 23, 26, late 12th-early 13th century).
5. (C3) Another. Sandy fabric. Grey core with brown/grey surfaces (cf. as last, fig. 26, 7, late 13th century).
6. (B5) Jug sherd. Thick grey sandy fabric, with red-clay pigment decoration, and green glaze with dark green speckling. Perhaps from a baggy jug (e.g. *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), fig. 23, c), but fabric and colour are most closely paralleled by the mid-late 13th century contents of the New Bodleian Well 9 (e.g. *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), fig. 24, J (A.M. 1938.1264)).

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7. (C3) Jug handle. Grey sandy fabric with monochrome applied ribbon decoration and glossy olive-green glaze. Probably from a late 13th-early 14th century 'three-decker' jug (e.g. *Oxoniensia*, III (1938), pl. XIX B (A.M. 1937.960)). These occur in both buff and sandy fabrics (e.g. *Oxoniensia*, VII (1942), fig. 17, I (A.M. 1968.1534)).

Unstratified Med. sherds included :

8. (B2) Jug sherd. Red-speckled buff fabric. Pink-buff interior, glossy olive-green glaze on exterior. Decoration of spots of red clay, each stabbed in centre. Probably late 13th-early 14th century.

MISCELLANEOUS :

FIG. 7, 4 (B2, Unstrat.) Bone ?needle. Expanded end broken. Incised lines. Possibly Med.

Not illustrated : (B3) Iron ?hook, much corroded.

FAUNA :

Miss J. E. Chatfield very kindly examined some snail shells recovered from B9. Two species were present, *Cepaea* sp. (possibly *C. nemoralis* (L.)) represented only by a single immature example, and *Hygromia striolata* (Pfeiffer). The latter is a land snail, now common in hedgerows and disturbed ground of roadsides ; its distribution has probably spread in the post-Roman period, perhaps partly due to living in the proximity of man. Its presence in layer B9 suggests that this mud was not at one time as water-logged as now, and may come from an earlier land surface.

INTERPRETATION :

The excavation achieved its main aim, in showing that considerable traces of the east end of the Priory church remain, and it is to be hoped that a complete excavation will eventually be possible. The interest of the site is considerably increased by the surviving documentary evidence. No attempt was made to examine the floor levels inside the church (Trench A4), as it would not have been possible to make sense of them in the limited space available.

The wall can safely be taken as the north transept north wall, giving a transept length of about 20-25 ft., by measuring from the angle of the crossing postulated in the previous report. Water level prevented us from establishing whether the wall was dug through an earlier occupation layer (A8, B9), or whether this was soil thrown back against it after building ; the white mortar found below water level suggests the latter. The pottery in these layers is consistent with a late 12th or early 13th-century date, i.e. the first building phase leading up to the consecration of the church in about 1200.⁴

The mud was overlain by a thin layer of mortar (B8), and this seems to have been exposed while a silty layer (B7) formed over it. These were later sealed by thick mortar (A7, B3-6, C3 and D3), apparently built up in fairly thin layers. This mortar was probably mixed north of the wall, and was then thrown back

⁴ *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii (1968), 32.

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towards the wall while the mortar was still wet ; layer B6 shows the direction of 'flow'. The pieces of worked stone in this layer, especially the unfinished bit shown in FIG. 7, strongly suggest that it was the platform of a stone-masons' yard, or 'lodge',⁵ and the pottery is sufficient to connect this with the work carried out after 1296 at the east end to house St. Edburg's shrine, and consecrated in 1312. A workshop might well be placed outside the north transept, as far from the cloister as possible.

It was not possible to determine whether the top of the mortar was the original surface, or if this had been disturbed. No traces of supports for a roof were found, and it is possible that the north end was dug away. The rubble layers gave evidence of burning, and it may well be that the interior fittings of the church were burnt at the Dissolution. The rubble was tipped over the edge of the razed wall ; tip-lines can be made out in the sections. The explanation for the way that the mud layers A8 and B9 appear to rise to meet the transept wall may be rain-water running down the wall and seeping into the ground, or the result of these layers being compressed by the layers above them, causing them to rise at the edges.

The discoveries of 1968 do not throw much light on the building sequence of the church, though the probability that the north transept wall was contemporary with B9, and the pottery in it, suggests that the argument that the nave and side aisles were of one build is correct, since an unaisled nave would have given an inordinately long transept. Further excavation of the site holds promise of useful stratified layers, well dated on documentary grounds, as well as a complete plan of the east end of the church.

The Society is grateful to the Ministry of Public Building and Works for a grant towards the cost of publishing this paper.

⁵ D. Knoop and G. P. Jones, *The Medieval Mason* (1967), Chapter III.

PLATE III



BICESTER PRIORY, OXON. EXTERIOR FACE OF NORTH TRANSEPT NORTH WALL
IN TRENCH B

Photo: D.A.H.