

The Buildings of Godstow Nunnery

By DAVID GANZ

THE Abbey of St. Mary the Virgin and St. John the Baptist at Godstow was founded in 1133 by Edith, widow of Sir William Lauceline of Winchester.¹ According to the dedication charter Edith² 'with hyr propur labour costys and almys edified the sayd church in the honour of oure lady and seynt Iohn Baptis fro the first ston'. In 1139 building was well advanced,³ and the bishop of Lincoln dedicated the church at a ceremony⁴ in the presence of King Stephen, Matilda his queen, Eustace his son, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bishops of Salisbury, Worcester and Exeter, the Abbots of Westminster and Abingdon, the Papal legate Albericus, Robert of Leicester, Milo of Gloucester, the earl of Hereford, Robert d'Oilly, and other magnates. The nunnery received an estimated income of £72/5/4d in rents and pensions and had a considerable landed income.

Traces of the original buildings were excavated by Mr. R. E. Linington in 1959.⁵ On the site of the present Wolvercote-Wytham road he found 'the walls of two timber buildings' which he dated as 'contemporary with, or soon after the foundation of the nunnery in 1133'. Hurst made drawings⁶ of two pieces of masonry with diaper moulding recovered from under the Wolvercote arch of the Toll bridge in 1880, which may have come from this building. M. E. Freeborn⁷ claimed to have seen 'pieces of Norman work' in a cow-house standing at the N.W. angle of the present enclosure. The dedication charter mentions a gate.⁸

In 1175-6 the Pipe Roll records that 4000 roofing shingles and 4000 lathes at 40/- were brought from Gloucester to Godstow and in 1176-7 wood was to be conveyed to Godstow with 50 marks towards building costs. In 1177-8 a further hundred marks were sent and in 1184-5 £100 with an additional £50 the following year 'ad operationem ecclesie de Godestowe'. By 1187-8 when only 12 marks were sent the building programme was finished.⁹ In the chronicle of *Benedict of Peterborough* it is stated that 'Henry, king of England, so loved Rosamond that out of his love for her house, which before was poor and in want, he gave many and great revenues and adorned it with noble buildings and

¹ I am grateful to Mr. T. G. Hassall for his constant encouragement, to Mr. D. A. Hinton for discussing Ashmolean material from Godstow, to Dr. A. B. Emden for advice on the nunnery lay-out and to Mr. D. Sturdy and Mr. J. T. Munby for references. Mr. C. H. C. Whittick has informed me of surface finds at the site.

² *English Register of Godstow*, ed. A. Clarke, E.E.T.S. (1905), I, 28-30.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 321. Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford presented his charter for an estate at Cutteslowe on the altar of the Church.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28. *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, III, ed. Cronne and Davis (1968), 139, no. 366.

⁵ *O.U.A.S. Exhibition Catalogue*, 1958-9, 13. The University Archaeological Society carried out excavations in the chapel of the nunnery in 1939, *Oxoniensia*, IV (1939), 196.

⁶ MS. Top. Oxon. c. 305, fol. 127, nos. 31, 32.

⁷ M. E. Freeborn, *Twixt Cherwell and Glyme* (1927), 87, quoting *Eng. Reg.*, III, xxiv.

⁸ *Eng. Reg.*, I, 28.

⁹ *Pipe Roll*, 22 Henry II, 131; 23 Henry II, 13, 26; 31 Henry II, 29; 32 Henry II, 117; 34 Henry II, 150.

conferred great revenues on the said church'.¹⁰ He also took the nunnery under his protection.¹¹

I have not been able to find any reference to building activities after this, although the increase in revenue in the second half of the 13th century, the early 14th century references to the importance of the house (especially Thomas of Walsingham's belief that Godstow was founded by King John),¹² and the masonry found under the Toll bridge all suggest that these took place. Linington records 'evidence of an extremely large flood towards the end of the use of this building, presumably of a mid 13th century date; . . . The final building seems to imply a fairly large re-arrangement of the area. A long building, on a slightly different alignment covered the site of the second period stone building; it had a thick gravel floor overlain by rough paving, containing several re-used roofing slabs. At the same time or soon after, a massive enclosure wall over four feet thick was built surrounding this part of the nunnery. On the inside of this wall there appears to have been a row of narrow buildings.'¹³ The English register records one John Masun, whose room was to be made over to the recipient of a corrody in c. 1275, and though neither J. H. Harvey nor H. E. Salter record anyone of this name at this date, it seems reasonable to assume that John Masun was the resident nunnery builder.¹⁴

In 1191 Bishop Hugh of Lincoln ordered that Rosamund's tomb in the choir be destroyed, and she be buried outside the church.¹⁵ Ranulph Higden, however, records that she was reburied in the chapter house with this inscription:

Hic iacet in tumba rosa mundi non rosa munda

Non redolet sed olet quae redolere solet

and that a coffer belonging to her 'made by a wondercraft' was exhibited. 'Therein it seemeth that giants fight, beasts strut, fowls fly and fish leap, without any man moving'.¹⁶ Despite these attractions, in 1316 the king took the nunnery into his protection on account of its poverty and at the first visitation in 1357 the nunnery was taking boarders.¹⁷

In c. 1145 the kitchen is first mentioned,¹⁸ in 1180 the infirmary,¹⁹ in 1276 the refectory,²⁰ and in 1386 the chapter house.²¹ But these are stray references, and the first complete picture comes in Archbishop Peckham's Register.²² In 1284 he ordered that seculars and nuns should not eat in the common refectory or the abbesses' chamber and certainly not in rooms off the cloister. A subsequent injunction orders them to keep out of the dormitory. Bishop William Grey of

¹⁰ *Benedict of Peterborough*, Rolls Series (1867), II, 231. On Benedict see Doris M. Stenton in *English Historical Review* (1953), 574 ff.

¹¹ *Eng. Reg.*, II, 661. A.D. 1180.

¹² Thomas of Walsingham, *Ypodigma Neustriae*, 135. Rolls Series (1867).

¹³ O.U.A.S. Cat. 13.

¹⁴ *Eng. Reg.*, I, 305.

¹⁵ *Benedict*, II, 237.

¹⁶ Higden, *Polychronicon*, Rolls Series (1865-86), VIII, 54. Cf. Knighton, Rolls Series (1889), I, 147.

¹⁷ V.C.H., *City of Oxford*, II, 73.

¹⁸ *Eng. Reg.*, II, 640.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 273-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

²² *Register of Archbishop Peckham*, Rolls Series (1856), 849-52.

Lincoln's visitation (1432)²³ clarifies the nunnery lay-out. Young nuns were not to go out of the cloister precinct into the outer court by themselves. In the outer court lived the steward, the bailiff, the rent collector, the gatekeeper, who was enjoined to admit guests only to the abbess' hall, and other servants.²⁴ There were several doorways between the nuns' houses and the outer court which were used by 'outsiders' when the cloister door was shut. Dame Ffelmersham, probably one of the abbess' relatives, and all her household, together with all other tenants, were to leave the nunnery. The tenants were probably living in the outer court where there were rooms for the accommodation of the nuns' relatives.

In the cloister precinct were the houses of the nuns where each nun had a room with a bed, the dormitory, and the refectory. The nuns were to be divided into three households of 6, 7 or 8 nuns, which may explain the three buildings shown on Wood's plan.²⁵ As the nuns held parties in their rooms with wine smuggled in from outside we may assume that these rooms were larger than the 10 ft. by 8 ft. cells at Littlemore Priory.²⁶ Article 14 of these injunctions makes it clear that 'outsiders' could only enter the nave of the abbey church and the 'separate chapels' probably the chapels of St. Leonard and St. Peter (see below) and the lady chapel mentioned in 1276.²⁷

In 1445 Bishop Alnwick carried out a visitation which reveals that secular folk were entering the chapter house and that there were still separate households.²⁸ The cloister was full of pigs and the conduit, built in 1135 and improved in c. 1200 needed further repairs. In 1533 Godstow presented Mathew Syke, Principal of Brasenose College, to the rectory of the 'parish church alongside the conventual church and adjoining it' which suggests that either the nave or the north aisle had been made over to villagers at this date.²⁹

After the Dissolution, in 1539, the church 'with chappells, cloister, chapter-house, misericord, the two dormitories, the convent kitchen, the garner, the atrium, and all other houses and lodging' were sold to Dr. George Owen, and all passed into the hands of the Walter family, who lived at Godstow. On 23 May 1645 the house was fired, lest it fall to the Parliamentary army. On 4 November 1690, Wood visited the site:³⁰

'One Jeffreyes that keeps the key of this ruinous place shewd me a little old chappell standing in the garden and the vestigia of an old cloister leading from the tower through the said garden to the chapel. He told me yt was called St. leonards chapel as dedicated to him and yt in ye east window thereof did show his picture with this inscription under it

'Ste Leonarde ora pro nobis'³¹

and to each hand ye portraitures of 2 Abesses of

²³ *Eng. Reg.*, III, XXXIV.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 25, 306. III, xcii.

²⁵ MS. Rawl. B 408, reproduced O.H.S., XIX (1891), *Wood Life and Times*, I, facing 346.

²⁶ *Oxoniensis*, XXXV (1970), 20.

²⁷ *Eng. Reg.*, I, 273.

²⁸ Lincoln Record Society, *Diocesan Visitations*, II (1944), 152.

²⁹ *Eng. Reg.*, I, 131.

³⁰ MS. Wood B 15 fol. 102. This was Wood's church note book which he took on his visit.

³¹ Wood also describes this (MS. Wood E I, fol. 72) as written on 'scrolls out of the mouths of the abesses'.

this place with ys inscrip : pray for ye good of margaret Tewkesbury and Eliz : Branton abbasses of this place date 1 . . . I suppose it was to pray for ye good estates of * as we may percieve in such old inscrip. He told me moreover of these in ye said chapel on ye N. side was Rosamund buried but he is much mistaken, for this was no burying place but only a private oratory to be used by the church and on high dayes and holy repaired to ye great church which is now quite downe and not one stone standing. He shewed me alsoe in ye back side of ye house towards ye gatehouse another little old chap which he said was called st Thomas his chap ; but I rather suppose according to his information it was S Peters ; for at ye upp. end thereof were two cocks relating to peters denyng of Xt : there is also at ye upp end an alter of stone ioyning to ye wall, an also on ye side thereof a place to convey holy water and many little places and holes in ye wall to lay books,³² missals and beads : this chapel I suppose was for their confessores to take confessions of them my reason this, because it stands remote from ye house and neare to ye gate house so yt they might come in and out without coming through there monastery, and to ye west of this chap is a lodging which probably was for ye priest there is also a garden. The said Jeffreys alsoe told me yt there were a ring of bells and yt Sr David Walter ye present owner of this seat hath a gospel of this nunnery. as alsoe something in relation to it.'

Wood elsewhere records that 'from within the precincts of the church hath been dug up several stone coffins . . . They were laid deep in the earth only so far, that the plank that covers them shall lie even with the pavement of the floor, and upon some of these planks or plank stones were engraved in them or embossed or convexed a cross from one end to the other'.³³ In 1666 Wood made a plan of the site which is the basis of all attempts at reconstruction. He shows a gatehouse in line with the bridge, having a 'great folding gate' and a little door to the north. Over the gate is a room in the gable with a square-headed window of three lights. West of this, in a range adjoining the gateway, is St. Thomas' chapel. An embattled wall links the gate and the tower of the church. The accuracy of the plan may be gauged by Wood's omission of the windows on the first floor of the tower. The church has five pier bases roughly sketched along the north wall and a step before the single altar at the east end. There are two entrances, through the tower and through the 'great pair of folding gates from the nunnery' shown on Buck's engraving of 1729. South of the church about half-way along is 'a mount in ye garden to look into ye close built I suppose after ye dissolution'. The close is formed by the cloisters on the west side, shown as a group of three buildings, the northernmost being of three the others of two stories all having four mullioned windows. In front are the cloisters, of which twelve arches are shown on the west side.³⁴ Hearne, in his notes to his edition of William of Newburgh³⁵ says that the chapel, cloister and church were painted ; and this is confirmed by a watercolour of 1780³⁶ and by finds of painted plaster. Hearne made a sketch of the ruins,³⁷ which clearly shows bricked-up

³² At Laycock there were also recesses for books : cf. H. Breakspear, *Wilts. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Mag.*, xciv (1900), 223.

³³ MS. Wood EI, fol. 73-4.

³⁴ Wood's plans as above. When this was engraved for the *Gentleman's Magazine* (Nov. 1791, Pl. X, p. 985), the Chapel was mistaken for a tower.

³⁵ *William of Newburgh* (1718), Vol. 3, 778.

³⁶ Gough maps 26 f., 65, drawing by H. Grimm.

³⁷ Gough Maps, 26 f., 65.

15th century mullioned windows in the north wall on the west side of the church, and a building at the south-east of the cloister with a door with square-headed moulding immediately to the north and what he called 'the bathing place' to the west outside the enclosure. He is the only source for the appearance of the granary to the north of the ruins, which had large double doors on the west side surmounted by a carved panel showing a bishop's head amid trefoiled and sub-cusped heads. This granary was pulled down on 30 December 1720.³⁸

In 1780 the new cut was made west of the Trout Inn to accommodate 80-ton barges and the lock was opened in 1790. Several stone coffins were recorded, but no systematic observations were made. This is particularly unfortunate, since the frequent finds of tiles after this date suggest that this cut destroyed the foundations of a chapel or possibly of the chapter house.³⁹ In 1871 Plommer recorded finds of printed tiles 'about 2 feet on the west side of the enclosure, probably part of the cloisters' and 'just outside the north wall at the north-east corner, probably inside the large church'; these tiles were Loyd Haberly's CLXX & XCVIII and C & CCLVIII. CCLVIII is also found at The Queen's College where it was laid in the early 16th century.⁴⁰ In 1873 Messrs. Trousdale, Earnshaw and Parker excavated a space about '8 foot square, partly tiles and partly paved with stone. There were at least 6 tiles'. However, on examination of Wood's plan 'we found that the spot was far too much to the west and seemed rather to be occupied in the drawing as part of the house. As they now lie they are in no order whatever and form no large pattern, as we normally find them doing. It is most probable that they were taken from the church on the dissolution of the nunnery and have been put down as a pavement in Godstow House'.⁴¹ I feel that the report confuses Godstow House with the claustral buildings which may very well have been tiled. In 1874 Mr. Trousdale presented the Ashmolean with 27 tiles found in St. Leonard's chapel about 1 ft. below the surface, together with three ridge tiles, two of which were glazed green, 16½ ins. long.⁴² In 1880 he gave '14 fragments of early english sculpture and mouldings found in the foundations of the bridge, including one small capital of light brown stone with blackberry tendrils, found in dredging near the paper mill'.⁴³ These fragments were deposited in the basement of the town hall when the museum moved, and are now lost. The blackberry leaved capital was drawn by Hurst.⁴⁴

In January 1885, the New Cut was widened to relieve flood water. Hurst and Mr. Sims junior of Broad Street visited the work 'every second or third day' and made a thorough record of the finds. About 25 stone and other coffins were discovered 'all but the lowest range had previously been overhauled'.⁴⁵ Since

³⁸ O.H.S., *Hearne's Collections*, viii, 203.

³⁹ *Taunt's Guide to the Thames* (1905) records that fragments of masonry from Godstow were used by the Earl of Abingdon, who owned the site, in the building of Wytham church in 1811-12. V.C.H., *Berkshire*, iv, 398, is silent about this.

⁴⁰ MS. Top. Oxon. c. 305, 46, 47. Loyd Haberly, *Medieval English Paving Tiles* (1937).

⁴¹ O.H.S. *New Series*, iii, 127.

⁴² Ashmolean registers, 1874, 28, 29, 30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1880, 274-84.

⁴⁴ MS. Top. Oxon. c. 305, fol. 127, no. 33.

⁴⁵ Hurst in MS. Top. Oxon. c. 305, fol. 116 ff.

a half-penny of Charles I was found in one coffin, Hurst suggested that this might have been done by the soldiers 'during the Parliamentary Wars, by the digging of the earlier and narrow channel'. Several coffins had been turned aside by the workmen who dug the channel. A coin of Edward I was found, but this seems to have gone to one of the workmen. (At A on Plan, PL. XVI.) At C on the plan were found 8 elm coffins, at a depth of four foot six inches, one containing a woman's body. Two more elm coffins were found to the north. Some of the stone coffins were reburied (D on plan) and it is these coffins which are now being washed out of the bank. At K on the plan Hurst noted a medieval road to the gateway at a depth of twenty inches. At L on the plan, the Wytham abbey coal wharf 14 ft. by 12 ft., several reject tiles were found. Four of the coffins found had cross-shafts carved on the lids, that at T measuring 10 ins. \times 39 ins. \times 1 in. rising to a height of $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins. at the central ridge. There were crosses at both ends of the lid. The coffin at U had double crotched terminals to the cross.⁴⁶ At B was found a large buff pot 11 ins. high with a rim $7\frac{7}{8}$ ins. in diameter and a convex base $9\frac{1}{4}$ ins. in diameter. Other finds included black glass, a shaft from a window, a cap for a small shaft, an iron key with a quatrefoil shaped head, the handle of a tripod pitcher with plaiting, the base of a baluster jug and a part of a large triple capital.⁴⁷ Small finds of book clasps and belt fittings were also drawn. The tow path was raised some three feet.

Hurst also records the following tiles :⁴⁸

LH I, Hurst 16 & 25.

LH III, Hurst 18.

LH XXIV or XXV, Hurst 17 & 23.

LH XXXVIII, Hurst 19 'two or three varieties of this pattern'.

LH? XLVII, Hurst 14.

LH LIV, Hurst 26.

LH LVI, Hurst 24.

LH CCLII, Hurst 20 (printed).

On fol. 22 Hurst describes these tiles found on the site of the cutting as 'from the east end of the church'. But his observations failed to reveal any masonry remains and Miles Edward's plan of Godstow, from which Hurst worked shows a church about 50 yards long, about 25 yards from the river. Had the tiles and coffins come from within the church it would have been over 200 ft. long, for a congregation of some 20 nuns, 7 corrodiaries, 6 priests, 10 boarders, and 15 servants. This seems rather large; at the Nunnery of Littlemore the church was '60-80 feet long', Dr. Pantin estimates,⁴⁹ while at Laycock the church was about 150 feet long.

On 13 May 1971, a small trench was dug on behalf of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee at Godstow to investigate a line of mortar observed in the bank. Portions of a pavement were uncovered, consisting of two groups

⁴⁶ Ibid., fol. 118 v.

⁴⁷ Ibid., fol. 127, 128, 129.

⁴⁸ Ibid., fol. 121, 122.

⁴⁹ *Oxoniensia*, xxxv (1970), 24.

of tiles (see PL. XVII). The first group consisted of 14 whole tiles and $4\frac{1}{2}$ tiles forming a pavement, composed of the following Habery designs:

Inlaid tiles in position.

LH XIV 2 fragments.

XVII $s\frac{1}{2}t$ used as a border.

LH XXV 1 fragment.

LH XXVI 1 whole tile.

LH XLIII 4 tiles (the second group).

LH XLIX 1 whole tile.

Oxoniensia, xxxv (1970), 111, fig. 14 B. 1 whole tile.

Ibid. „ C.2 whole tiles.

Printed tile in position :

LH CCIX 1 whole tile.

Miss Howard-Drake⁵⁰ records two examples of whole tiles with this design from Godstow. As the plate shows, this tile was part of the pavement though it is normally dated later than the inlaid tiles adjoining it. This part of the pavement is noticeably lacking in any coherent design, and also contains 2 plain tiles, 1 scored $s\frac{1}{2}t$ and one $s\frac{1}{8}t$. But the tiles are not laid at random, the use of LH XXIV as a border and the duplication of C shows that they are perhaps a job lot of tiles bought cheap from some other religious foundation. Alternatively this pavement may have been patched as the result of the siting of a tomb. Several fragments of inlaid and printed tile were also recovered.

Inlaid tiles :

LH ?XXI 1 fragment of a reversed version also found at Greyfriars.

LH XLIII 16 fragments, $1s\frac{1}{2}t$.

LH LI 2 fragments, $1s\frac{1}{2}t$.

LH LVI 2 fragments. In 1937 7 tiles with this design were found at Godstow and given to the Ashmolean.

LH LXIV 1 fragment.

Printed tile :

LH XCVIII 1 fragment.

Mosaic tile :

1 fragment of lozenge-shaped pale yellow glazed tile.

Mosaic tile fragments were found on the earliest floor of Greyfriars north nave chapel 3.

In addition, 47 fragments of worn tile, 2 small nails, 4 pieces of red painted plaster, one with traces of fresco, 1 small piece of glass and a human vertebra were recovered.

Mr. D. A. Hinton informs me that A. Walton, Esq., recovered from the bank LH XXIV 2 whole tiles, 1 fragment with perforated trefoil.

LH XLIV 2 fragments.

Oxoniensia, xxxiii (1968), 45, fig. 13 C. 1 fragment.

Ibid., xxxv (1970), 111, fig. 14A. 1 broken example.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 109-12.

Clearly there is a major nunnery building being eroded, and recent observation of the site suggests that it is being looted. The references listed above suggest that it could be :

(a) The Chapter house, though I suspect that this was on the site of Walter's Mound, at the north-east corner of the present enclosure.

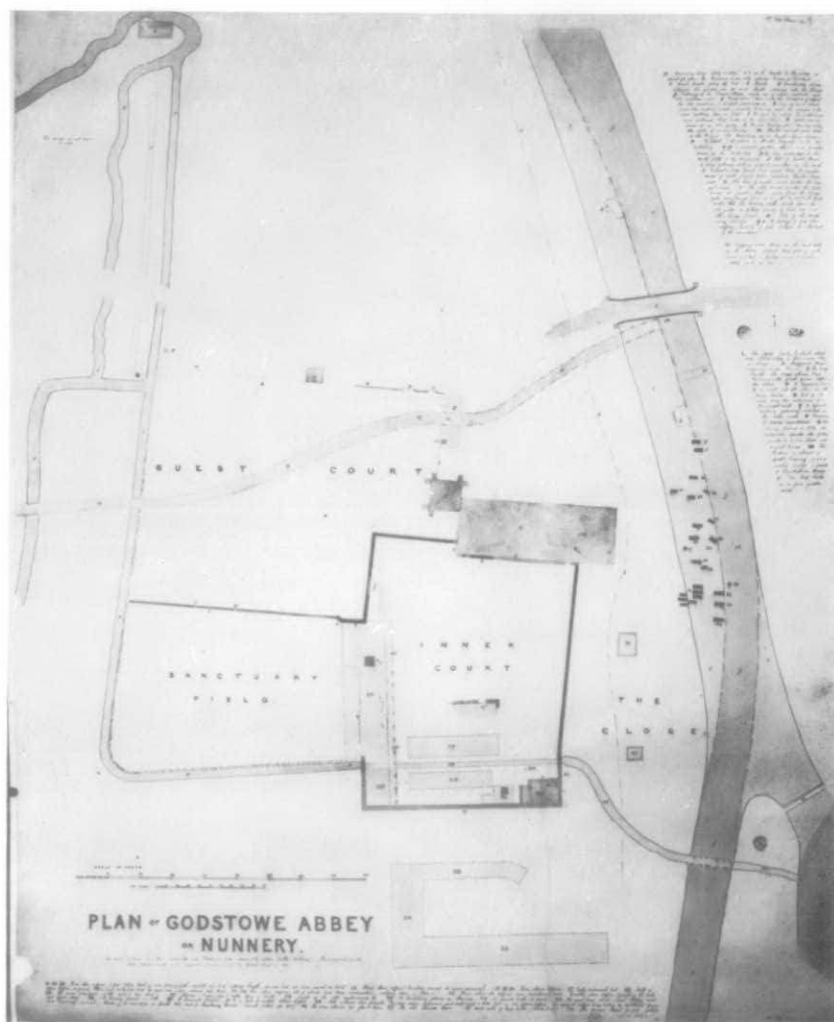
(b) One of the 'separate Chapels' mentioned in Bishop Grey's Visitation of 1432. If St. Leonard's chapel was first built at the end of the 15th century, the plural may imply the existence of another unrecorded chapel.

(c) The parish church (see above).

(d) A building used by boarders or corrody holders.

Clearly the site should be excavated and measures should be taken to end the present unrecorded looting.

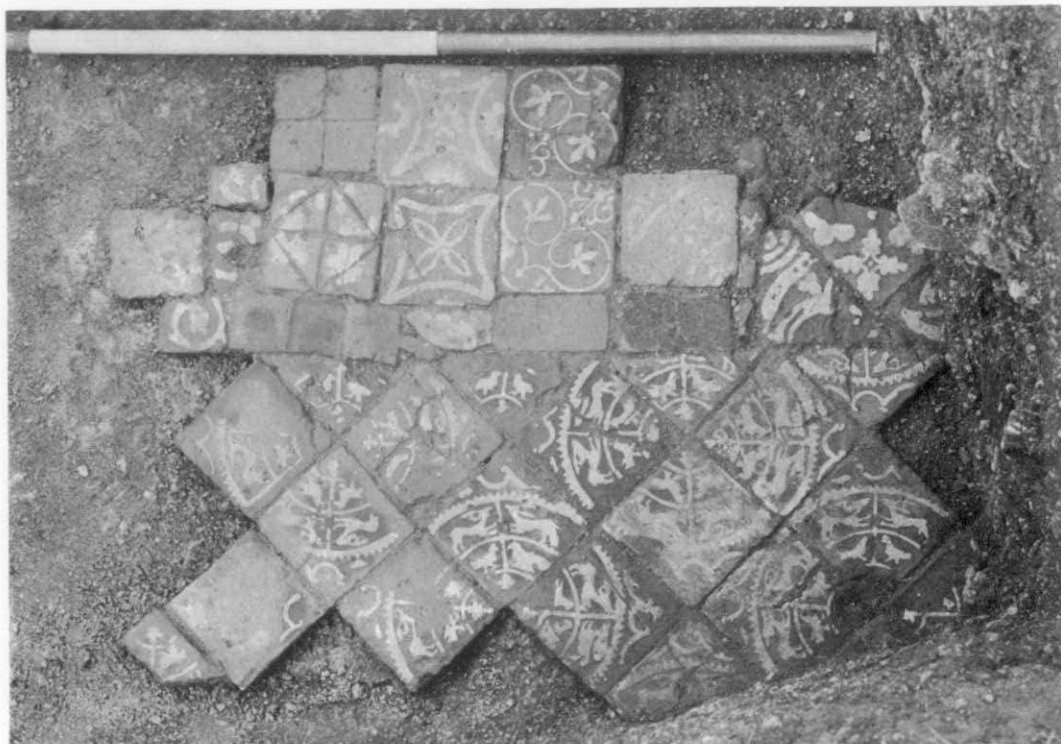
PLATE XVI



Godstow, Oxford. H. Hurst's plan of the Nunnery (MS. Top Oxon, a 18/2).

Photo : Bodleian Library

PLATE XVII



A. Godstow, Oxford. Portion of 14th century tiled pavement with later repairs. Scale = 1 m.



B. Godstow, Oxford. Second group of tiles for the pavement. Each tile is $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches square.

Photos : David Carpenter