

A Monastic Fragment at Wadham College, Oxford

By W. J. BLAIR

DURING major building works by Wadham College in 1972 and 1974, a watching programme for possible traces of the Austin Friary was maintained by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit. Nothing except two burials was observed in the foundation trenches, but as a part of this work the Oxford University Archaeological Society was asked to survey a small rubble-walled outbuilding destined for demolition, and a small excavation was carried out to clarify its history. It is unlikely that further excavation on or around the site would produce significant new information, and it has therefore been decided to publish the recent work as it stands.

THE SITE (FIG. 1)

The erection of the Austin Friary began shortly after its establishment on the site in 1268. Little is known of the main buildings except that they apparently included a quadrangle closed by the church on the south side and the refectory on the north, but the precinct was substantially the same as the present Wadham grounds, though extending southwards as far as Holywell and excluding the large garden to the north acquired by the College in 1798. In 1480 William Worcestre visited the Friary, and wrote that 'the length of the choir of the church of the Austin Friars is 60 paces, and of the nave 66 paces; its width is 40 paces'; with an assumed value of 21 inches as the average of Worcestre's paces, this gives the total length of the church as some 230 feet.¹

The site was leased after the Dissolution, and in 1587 it was sold to the City of Oxford. By this date the main buildings had gone and the precinct was partly divided into plots; in 1610 thirteen tenements at the south-west corner, including the King's Arms inn, were held at lease by Alderman Bartholomew.²

Agas's map depicts the site in 1578 (FIG. 1, inset),³ empty except for boundary walls and the tenements fronting on Holywell and South Parks Road. This group included at least one pre-dissolution fragment: a gate in the west boundary, opposite the New Bodleian site and identifiable on Agas (FIG. 1, A).⁴ This is now entirely renewed, but a drawing made shortly before 1801 shows the original outer face as a simple pointed arch with a hoodmould.⁵ In 1889 a patch of poor-quality black and red tiles was found in the main quadrangle covered by a demolition layer

¹ William Worcestre, *Itineraries*, ed. J. H. Harvey (Oxford 1969), 274-5, 400.

² For the sources for these paragraphs, see T. G. Jackson, *Wadham College, Oxford* (Oxford, 1893), 18-23 and map between pp. 22-3; H. Hurst, *Oxford Topography* (O.H.S., xxxix (1899)), 131-3.

³ Traced from the facsimile in O.H.S., xxxviii (1884), Pl. VI.

⁴ See Hurst, *op. cit.* note 2, 131, and Bodl. MS. Top Eccl. b 27, f. 27^a.

⁵ Drawing in Bodl. MS. Top Oxon c. 19, f. 74; a careful copy in Bodl. MS. Don c. 97, f. 43 is reproduced in *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), Pl. XXIII. A seventeenth-century block adjoining the arch southwards 'was taken down in 1801 for the erection of a brewhouse' according to a note on the drawing.

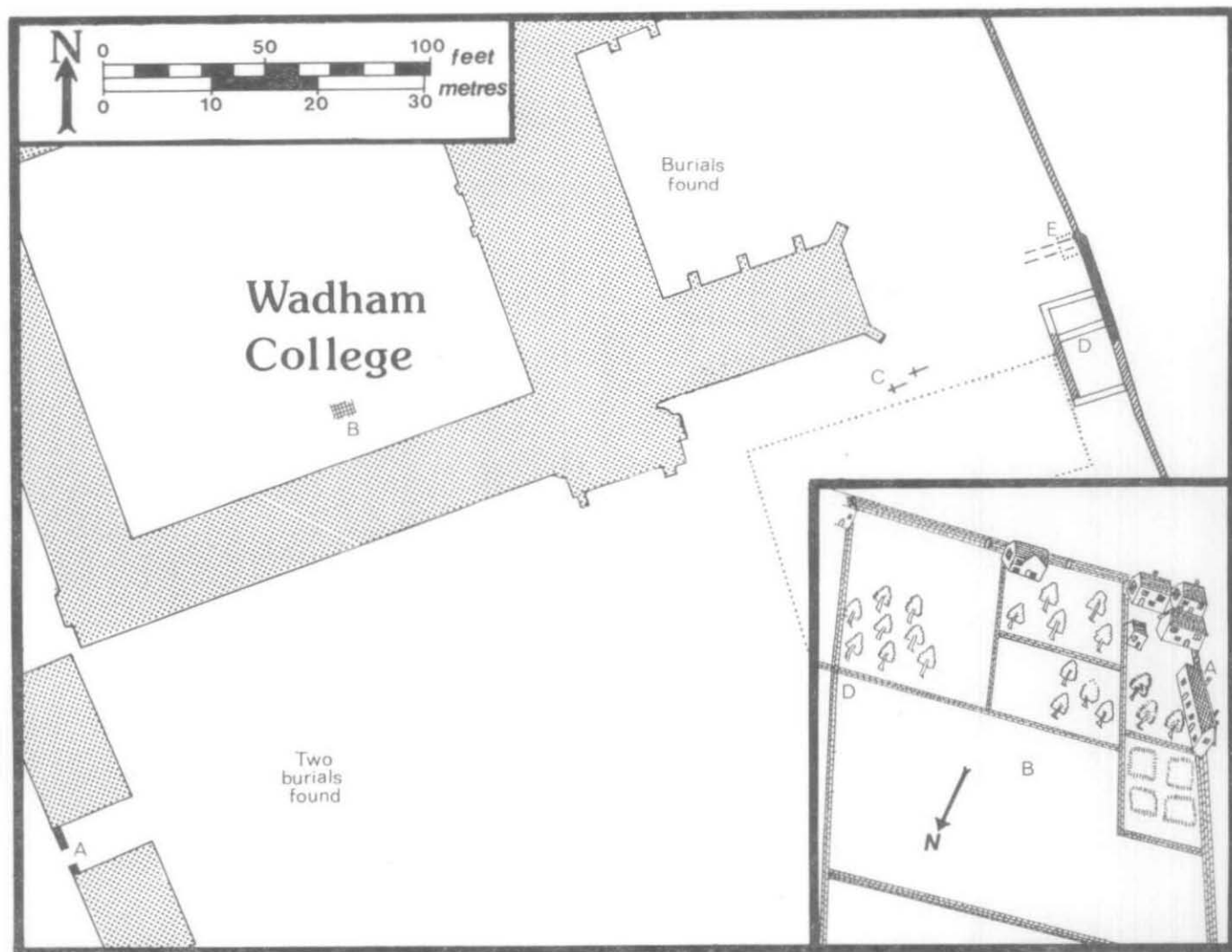


FIG. I

(FIG. 1, B); the tiles were 14 cm. ($5\frac{1}{2}$ ins.) square, just under 1.2 cm. ($\frac{1}{2}$ in.) thick, and laid on poor gravel.⁶ Burials were found in the last century to the south and east of the main College block, as indicated on FIG. 1, 7 and in 1972 two more were cut by a service-trench (FIG. 1, C). Some of the Holywell tenements might contain pre-dissolution structures, but it seems impossible that any other standing monastic remains could survive except as fragments incorporated in boundary walls.

THE BUILDING (FIGS. 2, 3)

In its present state, the building is a rectangular block 10.5 by 6.5 m. on the College's east boundary (FIG. 1, D). Both ends are modern rebuilds, but the west wall, presumably 17th-century, is of roughly dressed blocks with a chamfered four-centred doorway set between the remains of two flat-headed windows. The roof is modern, except for one old truss, probably 17th-century, consisting of principals, collar and tie, with rebates for low-set purlins apparently supported by small raking struts of which only the mortices remain.

The east face (PL. V, B), incorporated in the boundary wall, is more complex. A door and two windows with depressed four-centred heads are visible externally, all three formerly blocked with ashlar but with the blocking recently removed from the southernmost window. The door seems to be merely chamfered, but the windows have wide hollow mouldings on the outside and are splayed internally; the jambs have sockets for seven horizontal and two vertical bars. The window-splays are covered with a skin of fine plaster disguising mortar-filled gaps between the inner quoins and the worked blocks of the outer opening. Parts of two similar windows remain in a free-standing northern continuation of the wall, the first converted into a modern doorway and the second rubble-blocked with a wooden lintel replacing the lost head. A little further north the wall is staggered and becomes thinner, this point being marked by quoins built in on both sides. To a height of about 2.2 m., the length of wall from the southernmost window to the quoins is of smallish, roughly dressed coursed blocks, but above this it has been heightened with rubble, of which its continuations northwards and southwards are also built.

The stagger and quoins seemed likely to mark the north-east corner of an earlier building associated with the standing east elevation, and a trial trench (FIG. 1, E) dug against the inner face in 1974 by Mr. B. G. Durham for the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee⁸ located the robber-trench of the north wall, a fragment

⁶ Bodl. MS. Top Oxon., c. 313, f. 131v.

⁷ See Hurst, *op. cit.* note 2, 131; Jackson, *op. cit.* note 2, map between pp. 22-3.

⁸ See B. G. Durham, 'Excavations at Oxford: Austin Friars', in *C.B.A. Group 9 Newsletter* (1976), 74. It should be mentioned that Mr. Durham's interpretation of the building conflicts with my own.

FIG. 1—caption

Remains of the Austin Friary, Oxford: Site plan.

Based on the 1880 1:500 plan of Oxford. The post-medieval College buildings are stippled; other known seventeenth-century walls are shaded, known medieval walls shown in solid black. The dotted line marks the approximate edge of the 1951 contractors' excavation. The letters indicate: A, site of medieval gate; B, fragment of tile pavement; C, burials found in 1972; D, seventeenth-century outbuilding; E, 1974 trial-hole. The inset, showing the same area (inverted) in 1578, is traced from Agas's map with the omission of lettering and the addition of a north-point.

A FRAGMENT OF THE AUSTIN FRIARY, OXFORD.

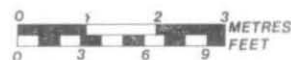
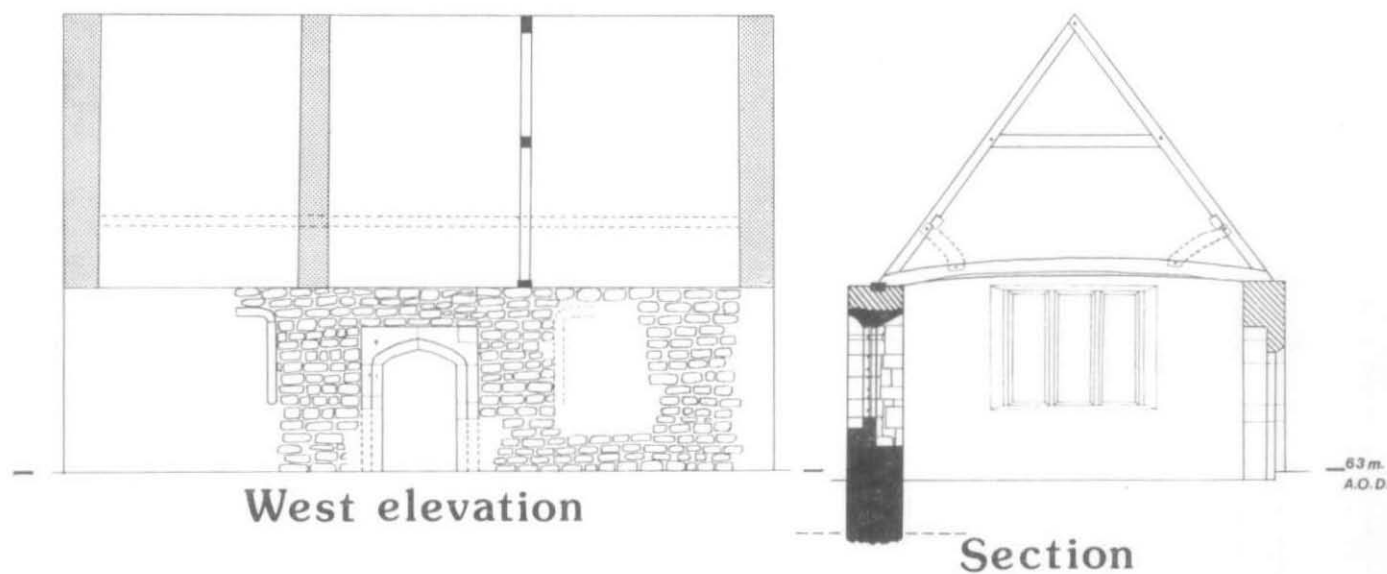


FIG. 2

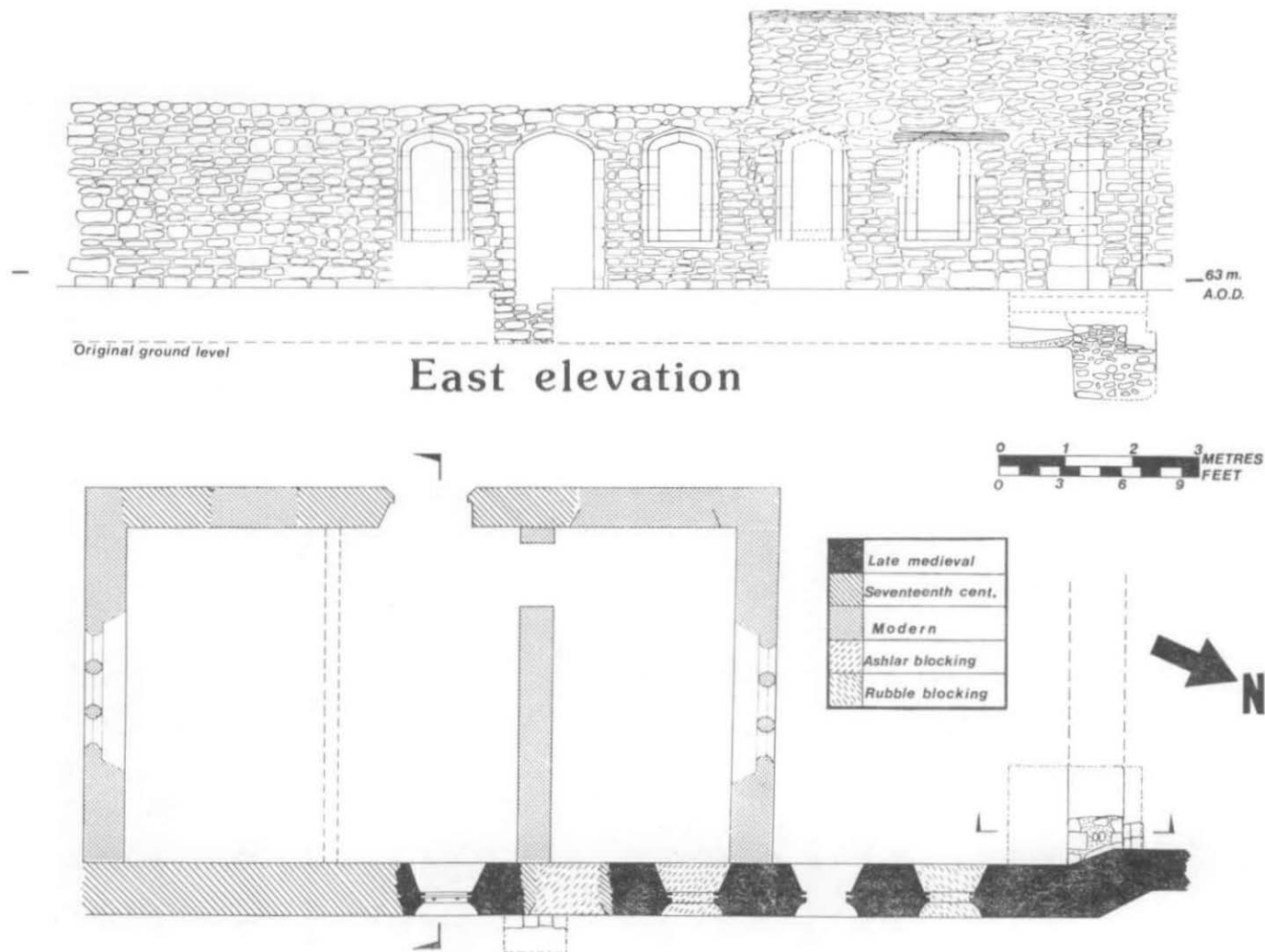


FIG. 3
Wadham College, Oxford : Seventeenth-century service-building incorporating monastic features.

of whose footing, expanded on the outer side, still remains at the point of junction. On the south (inner) side a layer of loose red-brown gritty clay with small stones overlies the natural clay loam (on a level with the top of the expanded footing, as indicated in FIG. 3) and probably represented a robbed-out floor. This was overlain by loose rubble and mortar containing part of a poor-quality glazed floor-tile and a tiny fragment of late medieval painted window-glass, but no other dating evidence was found. Another small trench, dug against one of the door-jambs in the outer face of the east wall, located the top of the expanded footing on a level with that of the former north wall; the door was proved to be a later insertion, since its jamb ends 0.5 m. above the original floor-level, with continuous walling below.

The removal of plaster from the inner face of the east wall, around the southernmost window, revealed that the masonry on the south side is unweathered above the bottom two courses, whereas on the north the stones are abraded and the original pointing has weathered out. This suggests that the length containing the windows was once free-standing for several years, the featureless and more roughly constructed southern section being a later rebuild.

Building works in 1951 involved the digging out to natural gravel of a large area south-west of the building (approximate limits indicated by the dotted line on FIG. 1), and although apparently not drawn, the north face of this excavation appears in a series of photographs taken by the late P. S. Spokes.⁹ These show very disturbed deposits with no sign of medieval structures; one photograph shows what could be a robber-trench but is more probably a pit. However, the existing west wall appears in the same view with the earth dug away from its base, showing a surprisingly deep footing ending just above the gravel. This seems to be expanded at about the level of the footings of the east and earlier north walls, and it is therefore possible that the west elevation was built up in the 17th century from an existing foundation.

The boundary wall continuing southwards from the building was removed in 1951. That to the north, however, still stood, and partial demolition in 1974 enabled its construction to be examined. North of the quoins of the original building it proved to be entirely post-medieval, on very shallow footings and containing much reused stone, but the clay-packed rubble footings of an earlier wall, on the same alignment though slightly offset, were visible in section. The masonry fragments from the wall mainly belonged to standard cusped Perpendicular window-heads with triangular spandrels, apparently from a large window of more than one tier and possibly incorporating a row of glazed quatrefoils. The only earlier item was a small mid 13th-century attached shaft-base in dark freestone, presumably part of the original Friary buildings.

DISCUSSION

From its form and position, the standing building is unquestionably that shown on the Wadham College engraving in Loggan's *Oxonia Illustrata* (1676) as the southern of a matching pair (of which the other had gone by 1850) symmetrically placed

⁹ Prints of Mr. Spokes's photograph are deposited with the National Monuments Record. A photograph of another face of the same hole, illustrated in *Oxoniensis*, xvi (1951), Pl. X, shows no pre-dissolution features.

in relation to the College buildings. However, it is clear that it occupies the site of a larger and earlier structure, to which the existing east wall and the footing exposed by excavation presumably belonged.

The door is an insertion, but the windows, which do not resemble it, have characteristically late medieval mouldings, and are more problematical. Coursed rubble walling is so easy to alter without leaving any trace that nothing can be deduced from the regularity of the stonework, and it is therefore impossible to prove that windows and door were not all inserted together into a blank wall. A window identical to the others and more or less equally spaced could have been replaced by the door, however, and the simultaneous insertion of both windows and door seems inherently improbable. It is unlikely that the windows are post-medieval additions to a partly surviving monastic structure: this would presuppose that in 1613 or afterwards the College built new walls on the foundations or robber-trenches of walls destroyed before 1578, only to demolish the new building in time to replace it with that shown on Loggan's map and engraving. It is similarly improbable that phase I was entirely post-1613, pointlessly replaced by a smaller building after a very short life. The suggested explanation is that phase I represents a late monastic structure, part of whose east wall with its windows survived as a length of boundary later incorporated into a College outbuilding. A parallel worth mentioning is the Blackfriars gatehouse, another fragment of Mendicant architecture which has survived through incorporation in a later structure.¹⁰

The following stages of development may be suggested:

- 1 (*c. 1500*) Ancillary monastic building, apparently fairly narrow but of unknown length or height, built on the east boundary of the Friary and with five or more small barred windows facing outwards. Purpose unknown, though the glazing and plastered splays may suggest some kind of fairly comfortable lodging.
- 2 (*Between the Dissolution and 1578*) The building is demolished, the east face being left because continuous with the boundary wall. Over the years the wall becomes ruinous; it is extensively rebuilt with masonry lying about the site, and the windows are blocked with rubble.
- 3 (*After 1613*) Wadham College erect a service-building, siting it for convenience against the stretch of wall containing old windows and perhaps using existing foundations. The three windows coinciding with new building are unblocked, and the central one is replaced by a doorway.¹¹
- 4 (*Late 17th century*) For reasons unknown (perhaps the construction of the outhouse shown abutting the building eastwards on Loggan's map), the two windows and door are blocked with ashlar.¹²

A Department of the Environment publication grant was received for this report.

¹⁰ See the present volume, p. 200.

¹¹ The purpose of the wooden lintel is uncertain. It is very crude, and was presumably connected either with late repairs to the present structure, or with a hole made in the wall to light an otherwise unrecorded outhouse.

¹² I wish to thank the Warden and Fellows of Wadham College for allowing the investigation; the Estates Bursar for his co-operation; Mr. Brian Durham for his help and advice; and Miss Juliet Allan and Mr. Philip Riden for helping to survey the building. Thanks are due for other help to Messrs. John Ashdown, H. M. Colvin, Tom Hassall, George Lambrick, Philip Lankester and Jeffrey West.

PLATE V



A. St. Helen's Passage, Trench III. Stairwell to postern through the outer city wall.

Ph.: Brian Durham

OXFORD WALL



B. The remains of the pre-dissolution east face in 1974, with two original windows flanking inserted door.

Ph.: Philip Riden

OXONIENSIA, XLI (1976)

MONASTIC FRAGMENT AT WADHAM