WELLS CATHEDRAL: WEST FRONT EXCAVATIONS, 1987-1989

CHARLES AND NANCY HOLLINRAKE

The enhancement scheme for Wells Cathedral Green, when the old tarmacadam surface was replaced by stone paving, enabled a series of small-scale archaeological excavation and recording works to be implemented. Eight separate trenches or areas were investigated between 1987 and 1989, mostly recording the surfaces which were graded down to receive the new paving slabs but occasionally excavating or recording to a greater depth where new mains services were installed (Fig. 1). Most of the recording was of relatively recent construction layers associated with the 19th-century renovations of the West Front but a number of large postholes were excavated which allowed recording of medieval features and stratigraphy including the disposition of the 12th-century foundation pad for the cathedral. This short note will only detail the medieval features or layers recorded in these works (Fig. 2).

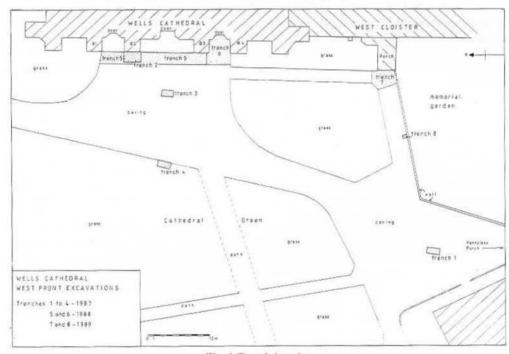


Fig. 1 Trench locations

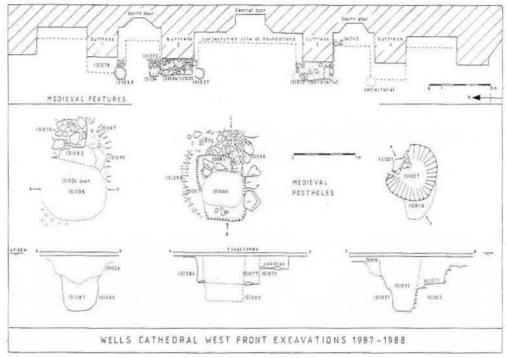


Fig. 2 Trench 5 and medieval postholes

The earliest finds were a few small sherds of Romano/British pottery which were residual in 19th-century features. The earliest feature was context 072 in trench 5, a spread of worn cobbles associated with 12th-century pottery. The cobbles had been cut by the cathedral foundations which were laid down in 1179-80, and had been partly covered by mortar splashes from the construction of the foundations. Too little of the cobble spread was seen for its function to be interpreted.

The cathedral foundation pad, recorded in trenches 2, 5 and 6, was made of rubble stone in mortar and was 1.4m deep. The foundations recorded were associated with the west front buttresses but in trench 6 excavations were undertaken to examine the junction of buttress 3 with the main wall and it was seen that the foundations of the west wall and the buttresses were of one build. The materials used in the foundations were not uniform, with different stone types and mortars being employed. It was noted that the buttresses did not stand squarely on the foundations which may mean that either there was a slight change of building design between the construction of the foundation and the raising of the west front, a period of about 50 years, or that the foundation pad was planned to accommodate some leeway.

The construction of the west front facade did not commence until about 1230 and was completed in about 1240 although the statuary was not finished until 1425. Medieval construction features and deposits were recorded in trenches 2, 5, 7 and 8 although none were closely dateable.

In trenches 7 and 8 a thick layer of yellow stone dust and freestone chippings 0.15-0.2m deep was recorded. This deposit was later that the north wall of the Mary Mitchell Memorial Garden which is possibly of early 13th-century date and shares the same alignment of the earlier Anglo-Saxon cathedral buildings. The wall may, in fact, have been built to provide a boundary between these older buildings and the construction works for the new cathedral which were commencing to the north. A small sondage on the south side of the wall failed to record

any stone dust and it is possible that the area north of the wall and south west of the west front was used as a masons' yard during the west front constructions. The stone dust is probably connected with the 13th-century works although it may be associated with the building of the south west tower which started in 1365; it is certainly pre-15th century.

Three large posthole complexes were excavated and recorded in trench 5 – cuts 027, 065 and 088 (Fig. 2). Each of these features had been reused in the 19th century for large wooden scaffolding poles but all contained medieval pottery in their fills. None of the pottery was closely dateable but all appeared to be of the 14th or 15th century. No postholes or pits were seen to belong to the 13th century, but it seems probable that whenever new construction or renovation projects were undertaken on the west front the builder reopened earlier scaffold holes.

The various phases of the west front archaeological works were directed by R.A. Croft, R. Adkins, J. Sampson, E. Dennison, R. Lunnis, and C. and N. Hollinrake. The full archive has been deposited with the Somerset Record Office. The finds have been accessed by the Somerset County Museum, Taunton.

Authors	
C. and N. Hollinrake.	