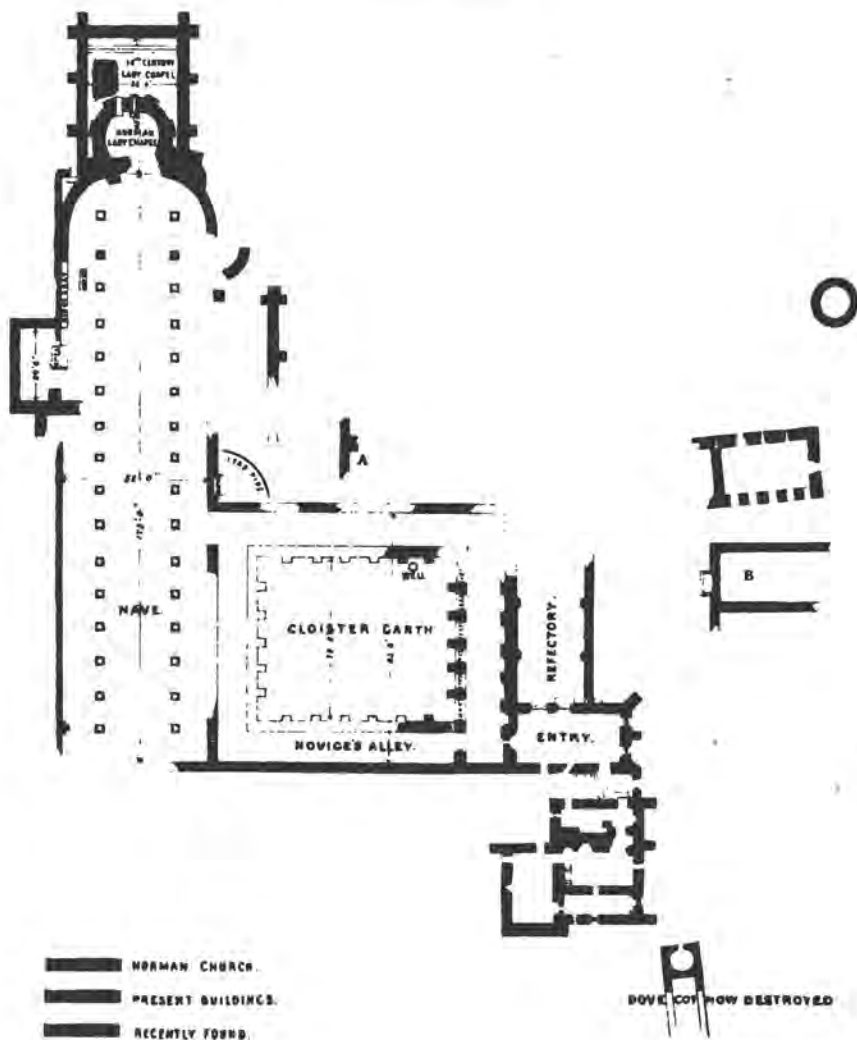


Plan of Foundations at Muckelney Abbey.

■ HARSTONE HEARTH



Notes on the Excavations at Muchelney.

BY T. SHELMERDINE.

THERE are but few, if any, that do not know the name of Muchelney, and a great many of you I have no doubt have visited the spot on which once stood this magnificent Benedictine Abbey. On this quiet spot, surrounded by its stately elms, nothing of the old Abbey Church is now to be seen. I have sat there hours and only heard the bleating of the sheep, or the caw of the rook, and occasionally been disturbed by the venerable owl dropping out of one of the elms and quaintly surveying my handiwork.

It is not my intention to give you the history of this place; that has already been done by the Rev. Thomas Hugo, in the Society's *Proceedings* for 1858; but, as some of you may not have seen that exhaustive paper, I will just say that the Abbey is mentioned as being founded by King Athelstan in the year 939, being the 14th year of his reign. But the Church must have been in hand some time before this, for, according to an ancient calendar, it was dedicated 7th January, 939. It was about this time that Athelstan ordered the Bible to be translated into Saxon, his mother tongue.

In the winter of 1872, Mr. Westlake, the tenant farmer, ordered a heap of rubbish to be removed out of the orchard on to some portion of the farm. I may here state that up to this date nothing at all was known about the exact formation of the Abbey Church; certainly Dugdale, and others, give the size of it, but do not mention the spot on which it stood. About 5 feet below the surface the men came upon a large flat stone, which proved to be the cover of a coffin. This stone was 6 feet 3 inches long, 3 feet 3 inches across the top, and 2 feet 8 inches across the bottom; and on turning the stone over (for it was lying on its face), it was found to have on it a rudely cut crozier,

with a Tudor rose in the centre. It was under this stone that we had the first glimpse of the beautiful pavement, which has since been found to be the floor of the 14th century Lady Chapel. In 1873, Mr. Long, the owner, visited the site, and he at once put on a lot of men, and explored the spot for a fortnight. The north wall of the Lady Chapel was followed until they came to three steps; these steps were formed of blue lias, a very small portion of the top edge of the step being visible, the risers and treads being formed by tiles, inlaid into the stone, which must have had a beautiful effect when the Church was in its glory. The tiles were laid diagonally. No rule seems to have been carried out, for tiles of different dates are laid altogether. The beautiful early centre piece, which is made up with nearly 100 pieces, was not found entire; the pieces were put together when found, till at last they formed the centre. All the tiles in this centre are of a red colour, inlaid with yellow ornaments. There are about 50 different patterns of tiles in this one floor. The tiles, as I said before, are of different dates, Norman, Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular. Some of the early tiles are very quaint—terrible ugly looking dragons, and nondescript sort of animals, that would create dismay in the heart of any S. George. The Early English tiles are beautiful examples of the potter's art of that period. Take, for instance, the beautiful curved lines of the two birds on the fleur-de-lis, and the two birds on the towers. This is most likely the representation of the west end of the Church, a central tower with two flanking turrets. A great many specimens of Decorated tiles have been found, some of them representing knights on horseback. One of these knights carries a shield, which is, *gules*, three escutcheons, *or*. These might not be the proper tints, for at that period it was difficult to give the tiles more than two colours, red and yellow. I have been unable to trace whose shield this would be, so many wearing that shield with different tinctures. Other tiles have the arms of the De Warrens and the Montague family. On one of them there are the sword, key, and

saltier, the emblems of Saints Peter, Paul, and Andrew. These are the saints to whom the Church was dedicated, although it is generally called the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. But I find in one of the Royal Rolls, still preserved in the British Museum, that William, the then Abbot of Muchelney, was fined, and he is there described as of Saints Peter, Paul, and Andrew; this MS. is dated 1498. The same emblems appear on the seal of the Abbey. But, to proceed with the tiles, on one of them there is a splendid specimen of the elephant and castle; this is believed to be one of the oldest elephants in England. There is one about the same date in Exeter Cathedral, placed there by William de Briwere, or, as it is now written, "Brewer." He was consecrated to that see 1224. The lion rampant and two-headed eagle, are also to be found here in great abundance. One very pretty set of tiles I must not forget to mention representing a hunting scene. I dare say some of the monks were as fond of hunting as Englishmen are at the present time; at any rate, we have here the stag courant, or in full course, the huntsman on foot, leaning on his spear, which is in his left hand, and in his right a horn, which he is in the act of blowing, at the same time he is partially turned round, as if in the act of calling on his dogs, which appear to be fully up to their work, for they are, or seem to be, advancing at a terrible pace. The attitude of the huntsman is very good.

There are also a great number of Perpendicular tiles, far too numerous to mention here. One good tile was found, about 9 inches \times 3 inches, with green letters on it. I am not quite certain what they are, but I think the letters will be found to be BRAEMAR. A number of the tiles are 8 inches \times 8 inches, of a dull olive colour, with curious sunk patterns on them.

I must not forget to mention that I think that the tiles must have been laid with green bands and black angles, instead of black and yellow angles; for specimens of green tiles have been found the same size as the black ones; this would have a lovely

effect. The floor, at some period, not long before the Dissolution, must have been taken up and relaid, which would account for the many dates in the one floor. The floor, when found, was taken up and relaid in the chancel of the present Church. When the tiles had been taken up a stone coffin was found, empty. The stone I mentioned before was the cover of this coffin, for it appeared to be simply turned over to rifle the grave of the dead. The coffin is the same shape as several others found on the site, cut out of a solid stone, with a hollow place for the head. On the north side of the coffin a stone grave was found—at least, stone at the sides; nothing but earth was found at each end. In this grave the skeleton of a man, about 5 feet 10 inches long, was found. There did not appear to have been any coffin; a few nails were found, and two copper buckles. Both the grave and coffin were built in a very strong foundation, which, on searching further, proved to be the foundation of the Saxon or Norman Church, which was in the shape of a horse shoe. Round the outside of this apse were four buttresses, in exactly the same position, and the same number, as the Norman Lady Chapel at Canterbury. On the north and south sides of this Chapel some very strong foundations were found, which were evidently of the same date. These, I would suggest, were the foundations of two flanking turrets, as at Canterbury and Norwich. Since this was found, other portions of the Norman Church have been uncovered, which I have coloured black on the plan, for the sake of distinction. The Lady Chapel is 16 feet long and 17 feet wide, and the Norman Church would be about 50 feet wide.

In 1874, part of the foundations of the south transept was found, also the north-east corner of the cloisters. In this wall a grave was found, filled with mortar; in it, at the depth of 5 feet, the skeleton of a man was uncovered—his head on one side, and his jaw broken. Near this grave a lead pipe, about $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch bore, was found; this was in short lengths, making altogether about 13 feet 6 inches long. This evidently was a drain from a lavatory


in the cloisters. Since then, at different times, the whole of the north wall of the Church has been found. This wall, which is probably the north aisle wall, built in the 14th century, terminated square at the east end, with a small doorway, either leading to the roof or outside. There is a stone seat built in this wall, which is perfect for 40 feet.

About 50 feet 6 inches from the east end of this aisle a small Chapel was found, 20 feet 6 inches long, and 10 feet wide. In this Chapel the remains of a monument were dug up, and a full-size figure of what was probably one of the monks. The head was battered off; at the foot, for the feet to rest on, was a lion. The tiles in this Chapel, at the east end, appeared to have been raised, as if there had been an altar there. At the entrance to this Chapel two skeletons were found under an archway. No doubt the monument stood on this arch. Could this be the Chapel mentioned by Collinson as dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary?

Near this Chapel a splendid canopy was unearthed, beautifully gilded and coloured. The carving on this is magnificent. Near this a curious figure was found, which, I believe, represents the Holy Trinity. It is the figure of a boy, holding in his hand a dove, and a portion of a larger figure is standing behind the boy—in fact, holding him in his hands. The large figure, I believe, represents the Father; the lesser figure, the Son; and the bird, the Holy Ghost. A similar design, in stained glass, is in one of the churches at York.

Only two of the foundations of piers in the nave have yet been found; to find the whole of them the orchard would have to be destroyed, and thousands of loads of earth taken away. According to the two that are found, the aisles would be 9 feet wide to centre of piers; which would make the nave 34 feet wide from the centre to centre of piers. The two found are at the east end of the nave. Near these the high altar would stand. The bases of two columns are still standing in the north wall. These give you the distance from centre to centre of columns in

the nave arcades, which would be divided into seventeen arches, being 10 feet 2 inches from centre to centre of each column.

This year Mr. Long has had another staff of workmen there for a fortnight, and he has succeeded in uncovering the whole of the foundations of the 14th century Lady Chapel ; which is found to be 43 feet long, 26 feet 6 inches wide. There are the usual two buttresses at each angle, and two buttresses on the north and south sides. This Chapel I have marked  on the plan.

About 40 feet south-east of this Lady Chapel, a fire-place, 3 feet 10 inches \times 3 feet 4 inches, was found. This fire-place had a stone fender all round, and had been very much used. This seems to have been in the centre of some room, but what room this was I cannot say. The fender was completely burned away in some places.

The east wall of the cloisters is now decided upon, which gives the clear width of the cloisters 96 feet. In digging for this wall, just inside the cloister garth, a well was found ; this well was cased with stone, and about 14 feet deep. This in all probability supplied the lavatory in the cloisters. Near here was found what appeared to be a hearth-stone, but on closer inspection it was found to be the base of a buttress. From its position I should think it one of the buttresses of the Chapter House, which would stand in this position. This I have marked *A* on the plan. We have now got the full length and width of the Church, but the figures do not correspond with those given by Collinson. The Church is 173 feet long, 52 feet wide ; this, and the length of the Lady Chapel, making a total of 216 feet.

Last summer Mr. Westlake pointed out to me a fire-place, and foundations of some of the offices ; these I have marked *B* on the plan. Near this spot there is a building, the use of which I have been unable to find out. It is a decorated building, with a south and east door. On the north side there are five open arches. These arches are very low, being only 3 feet 6 inches above the floor level to the crown of the arch. The windows are mere squints, about 2½ inches wide, with very deep splays

inside, and pointed heads outside. On the south-east corner of this building some circular foundations appear above the soil; these seem to have been the foundations of a dovecot.

I will now endeavour to explain some of the stone work dug up during the excavations. Several pieces of Norman arches have been found, probably belonging to the arch that would be between the Norman Lady Chapel and Church; two or three pieces of Norman diaper work, belonging to string courses and columns, and the well known boar's head.

I will now pass into the Early English period. A great quantity of caps, bases, &c., has been found of blue stones, which appear to have formed a screen. The work on them is very fine, and the columns of two sizes—3 and 3½ inches in diameter. I only saw one Early English boss. Some portions of early tombs were found in blue stone, the carving on them being beautiful. What patience the workmen must have had! I question whether you would find workmen to do it now; it must have taken months to do a very small portion of some of it at that period. Some very fine Decorated caps and bases have been found, with the well known ball flower round the caps.

The Perpendicular carving and mouldings are very rich—I should say some of the finest in England. The central bosses belonging to the groined ceiling are really magnificent, some of them two feet square, into which seven very fine bold mouldings intersect, which formed the moulding in the ceiling. Others, not so large, into which four mouldings intersected, are beautiful specimens of the carver's art, and in splendid condition—in fact, almost as sharp as if only just out of the carver's hands. To describe the mouldings and tracery, of which there are loads, would take up too much of your time. The plate tracery, which no doubt belonged to the Lady Chapel, could, with a little care be put together, and would give us the complete windows of the Chapel.

I will now pass to some Early Perpendicular monuments, or portions of monuments, that have been found during the different

times the explorations have been going on, which consist of canopies, finials, and bosses. The carving of these, and of the crockets, is simply superb; some of the crockets being only three-quarters of an inch long, beautifully carved. One bit, which appears to have been a small cap, with part of the column attached, is very curious, the column being oval, and the cap only three-quarters of an inch long, with two rows of billets round it. On the columns there are a lot of rude figures cut, which seem to be men on horseback, and trees, as if intended for a hunting scene. The cap itself seems like a Norman cap for some niche. Only one piece of pottery, that I am aware of, has been found; that consists of the neck of a bottle, with portions of the lower part, and a portion of the twisted handle. The neck is about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and it is of a dull green colour.

In concluding these brief notes, I trust, ere long, the Society will give us another call at Langport, it being now seventeen years since the Meeting was held there; and I am sure there are a great many things now to be seen that the Society did not get a glimpse of when they visited the neighbourhood. Muchelney alone would be well worth a visit, and I hope before this time next year we shall be able to report that the foundations of the Chapter House and of the whole of the Church are uncovered.
