

Archaeological investigations at Cannington Court, Cannington 2013-14

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Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by EDF Energy to undertake a programme of archaeological works, comprising evaluation, excavation and watching brief, at Cannington Court, Cannington, Somerset, centred on National Grid Reference (NGR) 325745 139570 (Fig. 1). This was carried out prior to and during the renovation of the Grade I listed former Priory and the restoration of the grounds by EDF Energy for a new training facility. The work followed an earlier programme of archaeological evaluation and historical building recording (the latter undertaken by McLaughlin and Ross llp).

Domesday records that in 1066 Cannington was a royal manor with an estate belonging to Cannington church, this church, possibly of Anglo-Saxon origin, being replaced by the current St Mary's Church in the 14th century. In 1138 Robert de Courcy founded Cannington Priory for Benedictine nuns. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 the Priory was granted by Henry VIII to Edward Rogers and his family who greatly altered the Priory to create a grand Elizabethan Manor House, before it passed to the Clifford family towards the end of the 17th century.

The excavations in 2013–14 were concentrated to the west of Cannington Court, the former lay wing of the Priory, comprising four ranges with medieval origins arranged around a rectangular courtyard (Fig. 1). The lay wing was situated to the north of the probable site of the Priory church, which may have had a small cloister to the north,

and been subsequently linked to the north side of the chancel of the later St Mary's Church. The main excavation areas also lay immediately in front of the new, Elizabethan entrance to Cannington Court. These excavations were augmented by a number of watching brief areas both inside and outside the former Priory lay wing which later formed the core of the Elizabethan house.

The excavations were successful in identifying several phases of activity related to the foundation and development of the Priory, as well as its subsequent post-Dissolution use. The earliest archaeological remains appear to predate the Priory foundation and comprised a series of small, 11th to 12th-century pits and a ditch which may have formed part of an enclosure surrounding the postulated site of a Late Saxon church, the probable precursor to St Mary's.

The early ditch was cut into by a lime kiln, part of the ditch fill being removed to create the two opposing flues of the kiln. This was probably one of several such kilns located in the immediately vicinity of the Priory lay wing, built to supply lime for use in the construction of the religious complex.

A small part of a floor of encaustic tiles was exposed during renovation work at the south-east corner of the existing Cannington Court building. This floor, of probable 14th-century date, is likely to have lain towards the east end of the Priory church or within an adjacent chapter house, corroborating the suggested location for the church.

Within the northern wing of Cannington Court

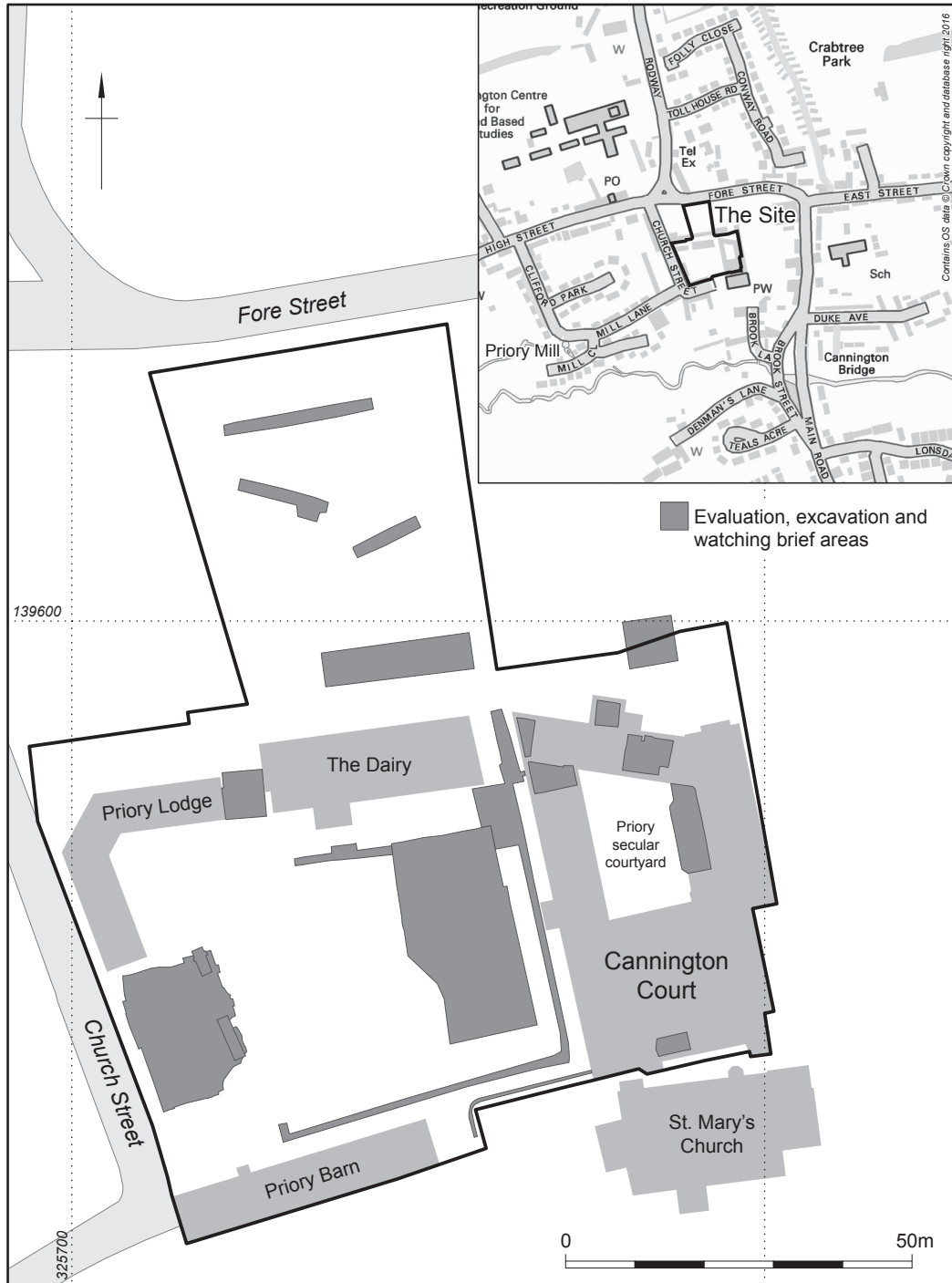


Fig. 1 Site location plan showing archaeological investigation areas

part of the original approach and entrance to the Priory lay wing was revealed, represented by a cobbled surface flanked by a wall and a possible pillar base.

Associated with the early development of the Priory during the 12th–13th centuries were the remains of a probable ancillary building and adjoining wall. These were revealed in front of Cannington Court and continued the projected line of the north range of the Priory lay wing. The function of these structures is difficult to ascertain due to a lack of finds and extensive later disturbance, though their relatively insubstantial nature suggests they may have been agricultural or service buildings; a boundary wall and associated dovecote is a possible interpretation. The existing tithe barn, which lies to the south, has medieval origins and may have been contemporary, perhaps forming part of a complex of agricultural and related buildings constructed around a service yard immediately to the west of the Priory lay wing. There were no later features of significance found

in the vicinity of the lime kiln, suggesting that this area, within the postulated service yard, remained open.

The early phase of building works was followed by subsequent phases of construction, particularly in the 15th century when there was major rebuilding, reflecting a period of relative prosperity. This is likely to have provided further accommodation for guests and visitors, and part of a substantial building uncovered to the west of the Priory lay wing, on the same projected alignment as the north range, may have served such a purpose (Fig. 2). An infirmary is another possibility, though this would have been rather close to the lay wing, or perhaps another building that served an agricultural or storage purpose, on the north side of what is likely to have continued in use as an outer service court. Further to the west were other structural elements but insufficient was exposed to clarify their extent and function, whilst several drains/culverts possibly of this period were also revealed.

The Dissolution saw the demolition of all structures except for the Tithe barn immediately west of the Priory lay wing, probably between 1536 and c. 1580 when the Elizabethan porch was added to the western elevation of the newly transformed and re-ordered house, now in possession of the Rogers family. This was contemporary with the establishment of a new approach from the west (replacing that to the north), a substantial portion of which was revealed in the excavations, perhaps associated with a gatehouse. Within the central courtyard of the new Elizabethan house (and formerly at the centre of the lay wing), a stone-paved surface was laid, of likely 18th century or later date, and this was recorded by rectified photography.

The finds assemblage is of medium size, and relates mainly to the 17th century and later occupation at Cannington Court, with a small proportion of earlier material. The pottery provides a hint of high status occupation, though the animal bone and charred plant assemblages are limited, and other finds comprise mainly structural material.

The full report on the archaeological investigations is available on the Wessex Archaeology website <http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/projects/cannington-court>, and the project archive will be deposited with Somerset County Museum, Taunton, under the accession code TNCM 29/2012.



Fig. 2 West-facing elevation of Cannington Court with medieval secular accommodation range in foreground. View from north-west

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