

The Monastic Church before 1116

by Donald Mackreth

When the foundations for the new central tower of Peterborough Cathedral were dug last century, remains of the east end of the church burnt down in 1116 were found (Irvine (1894)). Part of the restoration scheme of the Cathedral included passageways to allow visitors to view the old walling. Since then a large amount of dirt had accumulated which made appreciation of what was on display difficult. When, in February 1979, snow and prolonged frost stopped all work outside permission was kindly granted by the Dean and Chapter to allow the dirt to be cleaned away.

For the first time in decades the ruins could be seen properly and it has been possible to carry out a new appraisal of them. What can be seen of the walls shows them to have been built of small rag above a base course of fairly large dressed blocks. In places the original hard plaster facing survives in good condition. The only wall to differ significantly from the norm is that marked A-B on fig. 6. Here the exposed south face is clumsily built and contains re-used material. The only other place where this clearly occurs is at C where a dressed block with a plaster face from an earlier building was recorded by Irvine in his papers, now in the Cathedral Library.

Three internal features can be seen. At the extreme east end is a rise in the mortar surface which suggests a platform set against the east wall. Against the face of wall B-D are the remains of a plaster-coated bench, while at E is the stub of a built feature which has usually been interpreted as an altar base; but cleaning showed that there was probably another bench-like feature here.

Other details which emerged were the quoins A and B. At the latter, the base of the quoin is formed by a large dressed block of stone with a projecting chamfer to the east. At A, although the base is not visible, the upper part is built from small pieces of rag, but below what appears to be a rebuild level, itself above the original plaster floor and over an accumulation of burial earth outside the church. What can be seen are three large blocks which look like a basal plinth with traces of rebating on the inside for the face of the wall itself. Perhaps the most interesting detail was that the east-west wall at D had a foundation which ran westwards to the face of the modern passage. The wall itself projects beyond the face of the wall to the north. There is no neat corner and there is likewise no trace of a respond for an arch spanning the entry into the eastern element. It would seem that there was no normal crossing

arrangement, and this removes a difficulty in restoring the known plan; for the east-west axis is half as long again as the north-south one. The only dating known for this building is that it is earlier than 1116 and later than a stone carved with interlace (found under the plaster floor) which may be post-Conquest.

It has long been known that J. T. Micklethwaite carried out excavations in the north-east corner of the cloisters, but, until Irvine's papers and those of Dryden in the Northamptonshire Records Office were examined, it looked as though all that was known of these was the corner of a building (*VCH Northants* II, opp. p.40). What has come to light is a plan prepared by Irvine and correspondence between him, Sir Henry Dryden and Micklethwaite, who undertook the excavation to prove his hypothesis that the original church of Medeshamstede had a plan like his restoration of that at Brixworth (Micklethwaite (1896), 299-303). Irvine held that what he himself had found under the Cathedral was at best an extension of the church of Aethelwold by Aelfsige to house his collection of relics. Irvine thought that there would be no aisles to the nave while it was essential to Micklethwaite's views that there were. Neither expected what was actually found (F on fig. 6). The details of the discoveries are unevenly recorded. Irvine was unable to stay for the full term, but what he did record was well done. Micklethwaite's recording suffered from the weather: 'Unfortunately, heavy rain came on yesterday afternoon and I did not measure up all independently as I meant to do . . .', and Irvine found it impossible to do more than guess where the wall revealed after he left (stippled on fig. 6) should be plotted. Micklethwaite could not fix the alignment or width of the wall properly as each face lay under rain-water or gas pipes. Micklethwaite said that the wall butted the work to the north, but his sketch leaves the matter in doubt. However, Irvine's drawing has the new wall marked in pencil and shows a butt joint. As both men had met after the close of the excavation, it may be that the drawing reflects a considered view. Only re-examination can hope to cast light on this point.

In a letter to Dryden Irvine mentions that 'the only item of a floor . . . places its level at least 3 Steps (*sic*) above plaster floor' of the early building to the east. The comment is tantalising. It should refer to the area within what might be taken as a very thick east wall in the cloister. If it was a floor, and Irvine was fully conversant with Saxon flooring both here and at Barnack, it would suggest a raised platform, perhaps an altar in the midst of the church burnt out in 1116.

What the building in the cloister may have been is open to question. Perhaps it was the east end of the original church that Micklethwaite vainly looked for. Or it might belong to the church attached to Aethelwold's refoundation. However, it might equally have been a temporary altar set up after the fire. It should be noted that its position lies well clear of the known earliest stages of

the rebuilding; there is no mention in Hugh Candidus of a temporary church, which may be significant as he was a witness of the fire and what happened later. Apparently a large part of the church described as destroyed was capable of being brought into use until 1140 when Martin de Bec led the monks into the new east end.

Micklethwaite's poorly recorded wall, if it is not part of the pre-1116 church (as it could be) may represent a temporary wall built to cut off the area where the masons were working from the monks in their damaged cloister. It is tempting to think, however, that the 'only item of a floor' was made up of plaster and that it belonged to the pre-Danish church of Medeshamstede, now largely under the grass and gravel of the cloisters beside the church which was finally dedicated in 1238 and survives substantially unaltered today as Peterborough Cathedral.

Bibliography

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| Irvine (1894) | J. T. Irvine, 'Account of the discovery of part of the Saxon Abbey Church of Peterborough', <i>Journal of the British Archaeological Association</i> L, 1894, 45-54. |
| Micklethwaite (1896) | J. T. Micklethwaite, 'Something about Saxon church building', <i>Archaeological Journal</i> 53, 1896, 293-351. |
| VCH Northants II | <i>Victoria History of the Counties of England, Northamptonshire II</i> , 1906. |

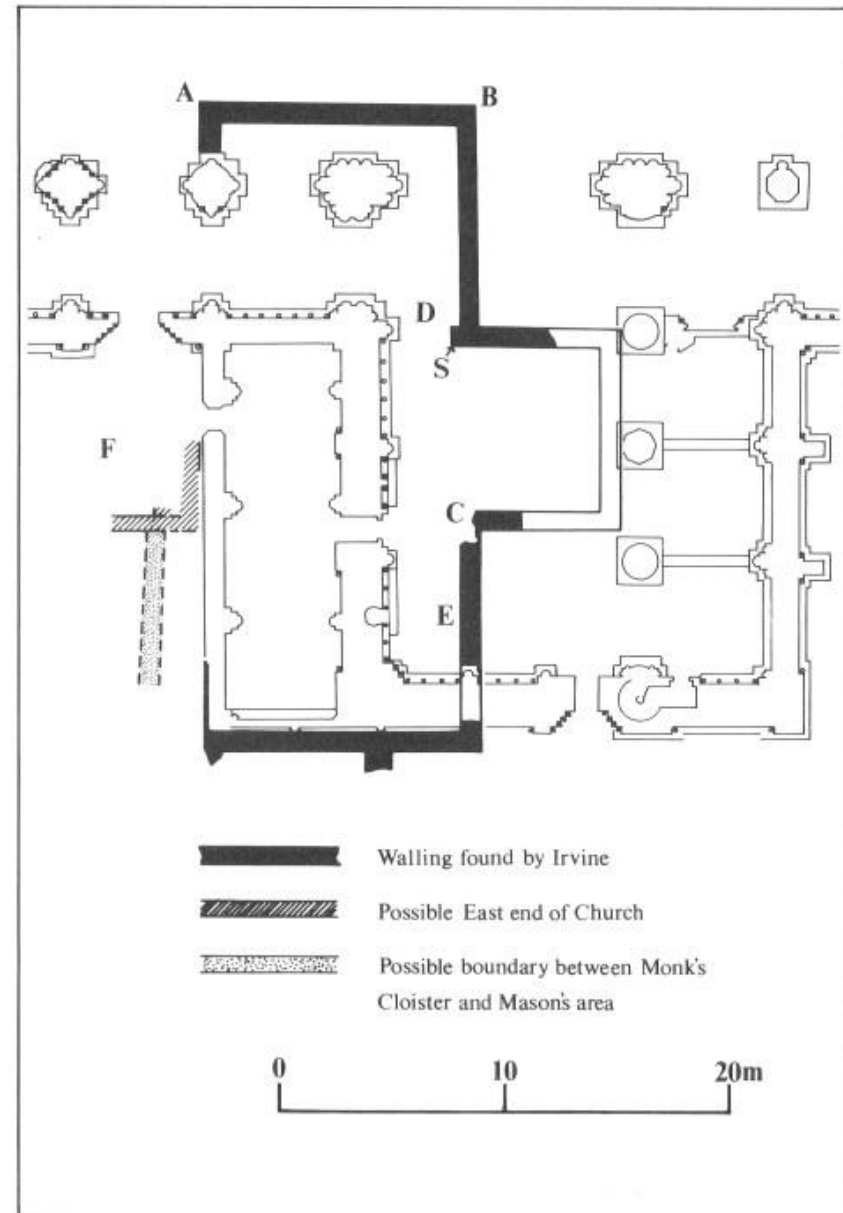


Fig 6 The monastic church of Peterborough before 1116

Recent Work on Monastic Peterborough

by Donald Mackreth

Because the Department of the Environment could not fund rescue work arising from development in Peterborough, the Committee could only deal with the threats by setting up a Manpower Services Commission scheme under the Community Enterprise Programme. One of the projects was to date the monastic precinct boundary by excavating in what is now a car park. Another, because the MSC finance was not tied to rescue threats, lay in the cloister of the Cathedral, and the Committee gives its grateful thanks to the Dean and Chapter, especially Canon T. Christie, for its help in carrying out the work. Both pieces of work, undertaken by Calum Rollo, were rewarding in that the long-sought-for *burh* defences have almost certainly been identified, and the enigmatic remains found in 1894 in the cloisters can now be set into context.

The Precincts Boundary

Fig. 9 uses as a base Eyre's survey of Peterborough made in 1721. It is the first good survey to survive and represents to a large measure the basic layout of the town as it was at the end of the Middle Ages. On purely general grounds, it is thought that the squared-off western part of the Precincts dates from the reign of Abbot Martin de Bec who laid out the new town before his new abbey gate. Our trenches were laid out at A against the only available part of the north boundary wall. The intention was to see if the earliest boundary was indeed of twelfth-century date.

It was soon clear that the excavation was going down through pond-fillings sealed beneath the garden soil belonging to Peterscourt, built as a teachers' training centre between 1856 and 1864. Most of the pond-filling was Mediaeval in date, but contained a surprising quantity of Roman pottery which increased as the trenches went further down. It was clear that no boundary ditch was going to be present unless a trace was left under the southern edge of the pond. When deposits dating after c. 1200 were removed, a broad band of rubble and mortar was found, and, when that was taken away, part of a massive pitched stone foundation set in a hard mortar was revealed. The wall had been set on a shelf in the underlying cornbrash and had itself been cut into the front of an earlier bank. The foundations cannot have been less than 2.35m thick and it is a matter of conjecture as to how much had been eroded by the pond. Indeed, the pond itself may have begun as a ditch quarried to provide stone for the wall. A

trench to the east located the wall again, but, because of the Dean's garden wall, its width could not be checked. In the Dean's garden is a long bank running parallel with the wall and on the line of the earlier bank. A set of resistivity survey traverses carried out by Adrian Challands in the garden showed that there was a bank there, and an anomaly in the resistivity readings may be caused by a possible robbed-out wall along its northern edge. How far these anomalies run to the east is not clear, owing to the presence of the Mediaeval castle, Tout Hill, and the ditches around it; but they show that the motte lay outside the newly-found boundary.

The archaeological dating of the wall and bank is slight, but reasonably clear. The wall had been demolished by c. 1200 and the observable monastic boundary wall was set more or less on the crest of the bank to the south. In the bank were some scraps of shell-tempered pottery which is not Roman, early Saxon or full Mediaeval in character. Under the wall was found a small group of pottery including similar shell-tempered sherds and a piece of Northampton ware.

The pottery can be shown to be late Saxon. Thus we have a probable date-range for the life of the wall from about the ninth or tenth centuries to c. 1200, after which the wall was forgotten and sealed by a pond probably belonging to the Prior's lodging, the thirteenth-century hall which still forms the core of the present Deanery.

Historically, there appear to be only three abbots who may have been responsible for such a wall. The first is Kenulph (992-1005), the second Torold (1070-98) and the third Martin de Bec (1133-55). Kenulph is said to have been the first to surround the monastery with a wall and this is supposed to be the cause of the change of name from Medeshamstede to Burh. Torold is credited with having built a castle and he certainly enfeoffed 60 knights on the instructions of William I. Martin de Bec is not known to have built either a wall or a castle and he is said to have destroyed the latter. The only castle known is Tout Hill at the bottom of the Dean's garden and clearly part of an earth and timber motte-and-bailey.

It seems strange that Torold should have spent so much effort on a great stone wall and yet have been content with earth and timber for the castle. It might also seem odd for the castle to lie outside the Precincts, but the rude soldiery would have sorted ill with the religious community of a monastery. If de Bec had built the wall, why did he leave the castle in timber? It is possible that he did away with the latter and replaced it with a stone circuit; but as he reigned through the Anarchy, he is more likely to have kept the castle and only demolished it at the end of the Anarchy when there was a general destruction of mainly unlicensed earth-and-timber castles. On general grounds, it could be argued that he or his successors

William (1155-75) or Benedict (1175-94) were responsible for the destruction of the wall. But the homogeneity of the pottery recovered and the problem of the castle favours Kenulph, even if a monastic *burh* in the sense of the Peterborough *burh* seems to have been unusual.

The traditions which mention that Kenulph built such a wall are Peterborough-based and are a problem as they cannot necessarily be taken at face value. There is, however, independent dating for the change of name, and presumably for the building of the wall. Aelfric's *Life of St Aethelwold* can be dated to 1006. In it, he says that the monastery by the Nene that Aethelwold refounded was once called Medeshamstede, but was now called Burh. He is unlikely to have made a mistake as he addressed his work to the Old Minster monks in Winchester and Bishop Kenulph, the same man who is said to have built the wall and who died in 1006.

Fig. 9 shows the conjectural circuit of the wall. On the west it most likely followed line B on the east side of a shallow valley containing a small stream. The stream was diverted by de Bec to run outside the boundary between the monastery and his new town. The stream was diverted back in post-Reformation times and is shown on the 1721 map. The southern course, C, cannot be drawn further south without lying on the Nene's floodplain, and it is still followed by the Precincts boundary. On the east, there is more uncertainty. Much depends upon whether de Bec's new vineyard, D, lay within or without the *burh*. Between 1214 and 1222 part of the vineyard was given over to the monastic cemetery. Irvine found the original vineyard wall during under-pinning works under the east end of the Cathedral and recorded the details in plans and annotated and coloured sections. There is no trace of an earlier wall or a substantial robber trench and we can be sure that Irvine would not have missed either. Thus it looks as though the burghal defences ran on the east side of the vineyard and this fits in with the layout of what looks like the *vill* of the pre-new town days (fig. 9, E.). If all this conjecture is correct, then the site of the Bolhithe gate at which Hereward and his Danish allies fought would be at F.

Fig. 9 also shows, blocked in, the approximate size and shape of the early monastic church and also shows the probable site of the great tower dedicated in 1059. The figure also shows how close to the present wall end the wall would have run – far too close, hence the removal of the wall here would belong to de Bec at the earliest, or to Benedict at the latest, as he is said to have carried the building of the new church to its front.

The Monastic Church

Apart from the ultimate east end of the church damaged by fire in 1116 and recorded by Irvine in the 1880s, there has only been one other known

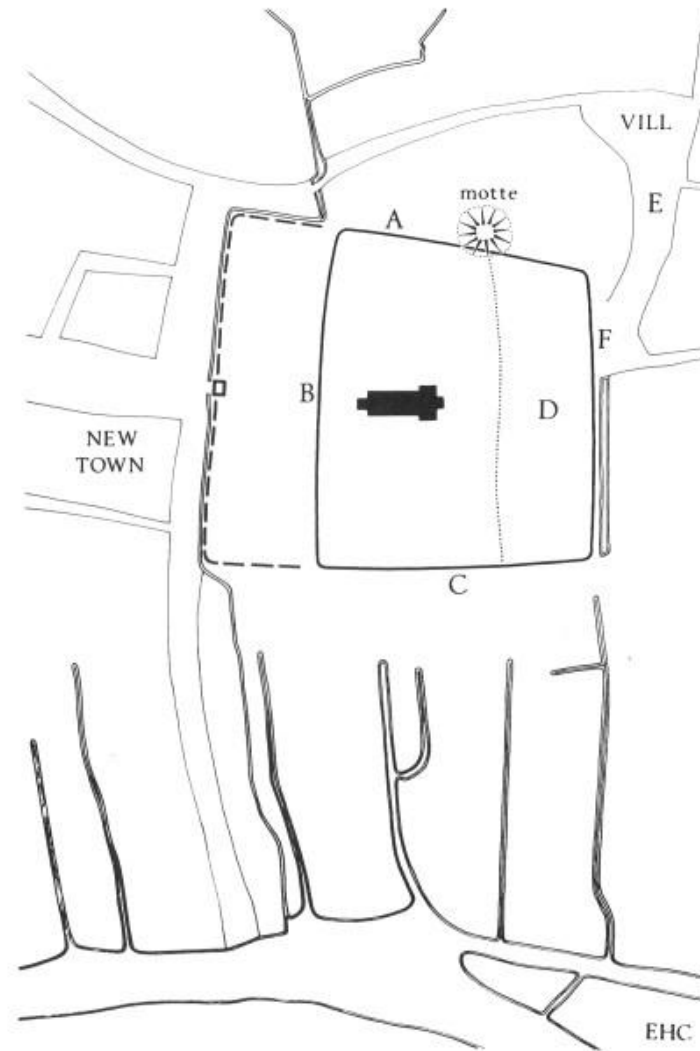


Fig 9 The Cathedral precincts after Eyre's survey of Peterborough in 1721 showing the conjectural circuit of the boundary wall

exposure of the early church (see *Durobrivae* 8, 1980, 11ff.). In 1894, J.T. Micklethwaite, with Sir Henry Dryden and J.T. Irvine attending for part of the time, sought to prove his theory that Irvine's church was seventh-century in date and modelled upon the plan of Old St Peter's in Rome. He chose the north-east corner of the cloisters as that was closest to the known remains and should have revealed part of the great cross-transept he expected. There were other views as to what would be found, but none of the antiquaries expected what was uncovered and the excavation remained unpublished, the only records being those compiled by Irvine. From these, it looked to us as if part of the east end of an early church had been located, and the Dean and Chapter kindly gave permission for the original trenches to be re-opened so that the earlier results could be checked.

The plan of the structures found is shown in fig. 10, A in which a-a are the walls found by Micklethwaite. However, the south wall was seen to run on under the Sacristy and to have a major offset thickening the wall on the south side at b. A robber trench belonging to an addition (c) was also found, although its south end could not be defined as it has been cut away by works belonging to the later cloisters. The addition had cut through a cemetery which had developed against what *should* be the first church on the site; for there were no burials within it, and had it been an extension to

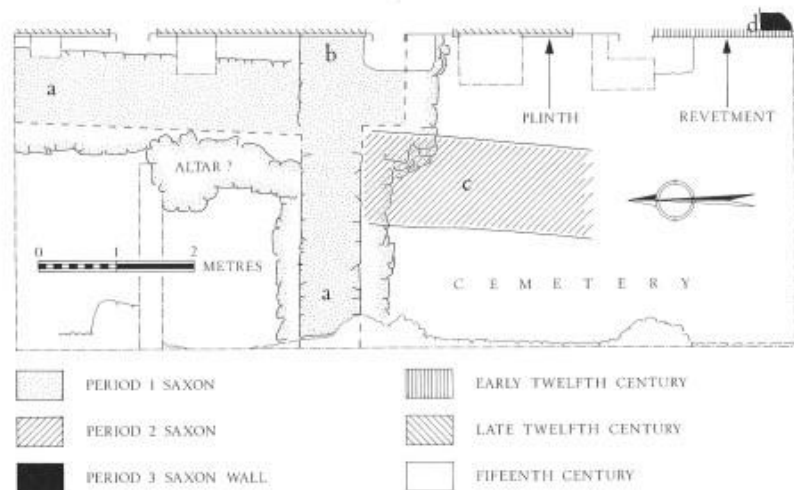


Fig 10A The east end of the earliest monastic church in Peterborough: the excavation plan

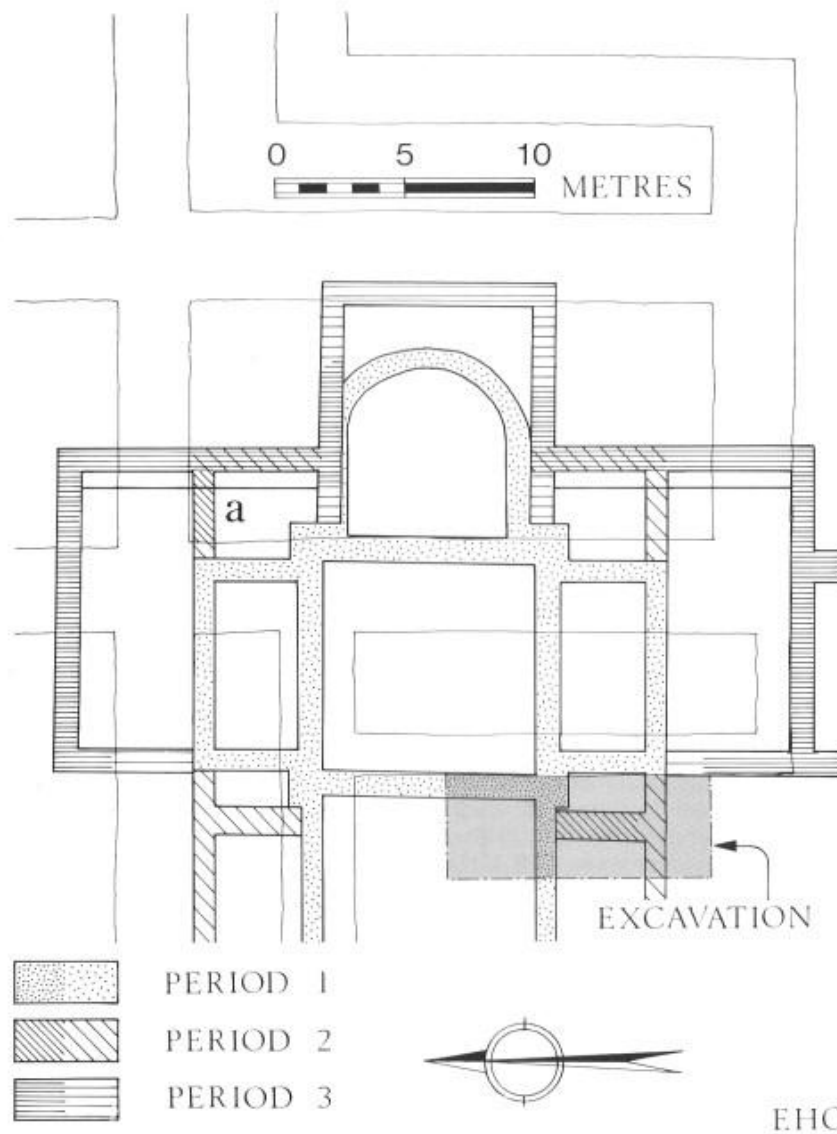


Fig 10B The east end of the earliest monastic church in Peterborough: the conjectural plan (excavation area shown by grey tone)

a yet earlier building, then it should have sealed burials associated with that. The surviving end of the building found by Irvine under the Sacristy in 1889 was located (d) under the primary twelfth-century work.

Once the remains of the cloisters had been removed, no dating evidence for any Saxon work was found. In the back-filling of the construction trench of the earliest church were some Roman tiles and these should show, not surprisingly, that such tiles had been used in the superstructure. The only carved stone of interest is a beast's head which once projected from the face of a wall and came from Micklethwaite's back-filling.

Two other details of interest were found: at the bottom of the south end of the Sacristy wall is the original revetment wall for the platform which raised the floor level of the new church above the pre-existing monastic cemetery. Secondly, it was found that the late Mediaeval cloister floor had been lowered by about 10cm below that of the twelfth-century cloister.

Putting all the records together, it can be seen that there are, in essence, two discrete blocks of building and only conjecture can relate them; this is shown in fig. 10, B. A careful scrutiny will show just how much has had to be guessed at and the drawing shows just how much damage has been caused by the great foundations and sleeper walls needed for the new church.

It seems clear that there had been a chamber, probably square, to the east of the walling a-a, and using Repton as a kind of analogy it very probably had a *porticus* to the north and south, and a square- or apsidal-ended element to the east. The first known addition may have been associated with a line of *porticus* along both sides of the nave, possibly connecting with the hypothetical ones belonging to the first church. The next set of additions is basically that found by Irvine, probably belonging to building works to be associated with Aethelwold's reformation of the house, or, as Irvine thought, to Aelfsige (1005-1042), to house the relics garnered by this acquisitive abbot. However, all is not plain sailing; for Irvine found a wall sealed beneath the floor of these later works (fig. 10 B.a.) and levels taken in 1982 show that the floor of this is lower than any possible lowest floor in the building in the cloisters.

The full significance of all these details is not yet fully appreciated, but additional information comes from stones in the Cathedral's *Lapidarium*. Here are to be found the feet of a great sculptured rood, in the same manner as the battered remains at Headbourne Worthy, Hants, and the fragments at Bitton, Glos. More remarkably, some of the architectural detail shows that a major decorative scheme required imposts and other work in the Winchester Style of art, and this seems to be the first recorded instance in which it was applied directly to architecture, although the

miniatures in which it is found show it in architectural settings. It seems likely that the style was used more often, but probably in paint rather than carving.

The excavation was rewarding and blessed with good weather. The burials were left in peace for future archaeologists and the work was impressively rounded off by a burial service conducted by Canon Christie, in memory of the first monastic community in Mercia.