

Some Notes on Excavations in and about St. Albans Cathedral during the Summer of 1937

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THE reason for the excavations was the installation of a modern heating system, in the course of which it was necessary to open the ground to form pipe ducts both within and without the Cathedral, and to continue into the north-west corner of the Deanery garden to the site of the new boiler house, etc.

Deanery Garden Excavations.

The removal of about 4 ft. of earth right in the north-west corner of the garden revealed the fragments of tile paving of the Chapter House which had been uncovered by members of this Society in 1920 and fully reported in an article by Sir Edgar Wigram in the *TRANSACTIONS* for 1924.

A plan illustrates that article and shows that, in addition to the patch of tiling in the corner, two other small patches were found further east. Also the west end of the south wall of the Chapter House was then found, including a narrow passage running east and west, dividing the Chapter House from the Undercroft of the Dormitory. An intermediate fragment of the north wall of the Undercroft, with an attached semi-octagonal shaft, is also marked on this plan.

In addition to this plan Sir Edgar Wigram included a page of reproductions of his scale drawings of the tile patterns, but no photographic views were given. The tiles are fully described in the above mentioned article; there is therefore no necessity to do that here.

At the recent exposure, the tiles were carefully cleaned and photographed. One general view and one close-up are here reproduced by the kind permission of the Dean.

It is interesting to compare these with Sir Edgar Wigram's most careful drawings.



13TH CENTURY TILING, FORMING PART OF FLOOR OF CHAPTER HOUSE, ST. ALBANS ABBEY.
VIEW NORTH TO SOUTH, LOOKING SOUTH.



After consultations on the site with experts it was decided to leave the tiles *in situ*, to protect them from possible damage, and to keep all building in connection with the boiler house, etc., well to the south of their site.

It therefore became necessary to drive trenches further south. In doing this, the south walls of Chapter House and Dormitory undercroft were traversed, but on a line some eight feet westward of the point where Sir Edgar marked on his plan the attached wall shaft above mentioned. The new trench, when it came to the position marked out for the new chimney shaft, struck the north-west corner of the Undercroft, with the moulded base and lowest drum of the corner shaft still *in situ*.

Immediately to the south of this point an excavation about 20 ft. square was commenced for the boiler house. Before reaching the level of the Undercroft floor, many fragments of encaustic tile and some moulded stones were unearthed; the most interesting of the latter were a set of stones belonging to a vaulting rib, probably stones of one rib of the vault which once roofed the Undercroft and supported the floor of the Dormitory, and which sprang from the octagonal wall shafts above mentioned, and others in detached positions.

Both shafts and rib stones are clunch, the latter in excellent condition.

Some pieces of a wall shaft of Barnack stone were also found and probably belonged to the Norman work of the Chapter House.

In excavating immediately to the east of the angle shaft, i.e., along the line of the north wall of the Undercroft, the jamb of an opening leading into the passage between Undercroft and Chapter House was found. This proved to be of exceptional interest, and so much as could be moved has been taken into the Abbey to dry out with a view to possible repair. The jamb is of the simple wide splay type, not in masonry, but actually formed in thick plaster upon the flint wall construction.

The boundary of the jamb on the Undercroft wall face is defined by a painted black vertical line, and branching from this are other lines inclined at an angle

of about 45 degrees, which appear to have decorated the wall plaster in the form of a series of criss-cross patterns.

Another small fragment of plaster was found in which lines at right angles were painted in red; thus following a method of decoration to be seen on old plaster within the Cathedral itself.

The floor concrete of the Undercroft was easily identifiable over the whole area of the boiler house site, and, when swept clean, the marks of the surface tiling it originally bore were clearly made out. Unfortunately no tiles remained *in situ* over the area excavated.

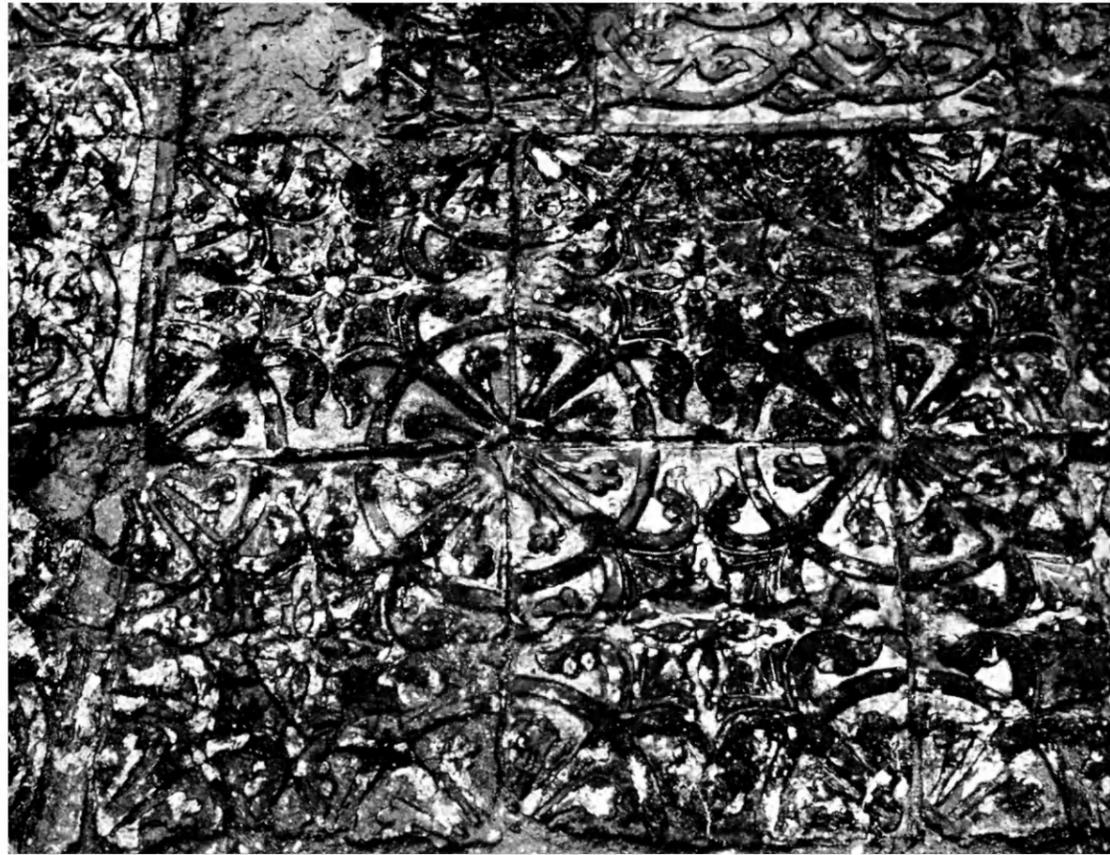
The Undercroft floor will have been some 2 ft. lower than that of the Chapter House, which in turn was 8 ft. below the floor of the south transept, and about 1 ft. 6 ins. lower than the cloister walk. It is interesting, therefore, to note in passing, that at the Abbot's entrance into the Church in the north-east corner of the cloisters there must have been a flight of about twelve steps.

South Choir Aisle.

When excavating for the pipe trench in this aisle, the arched top of a brick vault was encountered. It was found necessary to the work to remove a portion of the arch, thereby providing a view of the interior. The vault was a capacious chamber entirely constructed of red brick and with a sandy floor. There were several coffins within, piled one upon the other. The lower coffins had collapsed under the weight of those above: all appeared to be of wood covered in leather.

The topmost coffin was in excellent condition. Its wooden case was entirely covered in a sort of brown suède leather, secured to the wood and decorated with rows of closely-spaced silver-headed nails. In addition, on the top was a large silver plate, engraved and bearing an embossed coat of arms.

The wording on the plate proved it to be the burial of one William King, of Fineshade in Northants, to whom there is also a wall tablet on the nearby pier. He died on March 10th, 1766, aged fifty years.



13TH CENTURY TILING, FORMING PART OF FLOOR OF CHAPTER HOUSE, ST. ALBANS ABBEY.
TILES FORMING PANEL EACH $8\frac{1}{2}$ IN. SQUARE; THOSE FORMING BORDER 11 IN. BY 6 IN.



The Retro-Choir.

Trench excavations here have brought to light a few more small fragments of the pedestal of the Shrine of St. Alban. These are of clunch and bear considerable traces of colour and gilding. They belong to the vaulted ceiling and spandrils of the offertory recesses that occur in the sides of the pedestal. As is well known, the greater part of the pedestal is of Purbeck marble, but within the recesses all work above the springing of the arches and vaults is of clunch and was originally entirely painted in colours and gilt. I have been able to find the exact position on the pedestal for the largest of the newly-found fragments, but the small pieces will not fit in the absence of others still lacking.

Just as all that was pieced together in 1873 was found within the Church, so doubtless the remaining and still missing parts are also there, and would come to light if excavation were sufficiently extensive.