

St. Albans Abbey: Excavations on the site of the Great Cloister and adjacent buildings, 1924.

BY ERNEST WOOLLEY, F.S.A.

IN the early part of April, 1924, the Parochial Council of St. Albans Abbey parish, the Cathedral being also the Church of that parish since the See was founded by Order in Council dated 30th April, 1877, began to level and enclose the field on the south side of the Church.

The particular part of the field, the subject of these notes, had, before the dissolution in 1539, been occupied by the cloister walk and garth and some of the other buildings of the Abbey.

Those operations, however, developed into excavations which produced some interesting details and added some knowledge to what was already known of that part of the Abbey premises, but perhaps not quite so much as was hoped for.

The proceedings continued until the latter part of October, 1924.

All through the period indicated the work was carried on under the supervision of the Rev. Canon G. H. P. Glossop, to whom so many of the Diocesan, Parish, Antiquarian, and County of Hertford organizations were most deeply indebted for his prompt and effective assistance.

The foreman of the works was Mr. H. Hilliard, of 74, Victoria Street, St. Albans.

I have to express my thanks to the Parochial Church Council and the Church Wardens for allowing me to take the photographs grouped at the end of these notes, except Plate I, which is from a block kindly lent by Messrs. Stimpson Lock and Vince, of St. Albans, who have the copyright of it.

PLATE I.

This aerial view of part of the City shows very well the scene of the excavations south of the footpath which runs along—a short distance from—the south side of the Church.

The site of those excavations is just westwards of the south transept, the west wall of that transept having formed part of the eastern cloister walk.

The chequered fields south-east of the Abbey Gate were turned into allotment gardens during the War of 1914-1918, and kept so until 1925.

PLATE II.

Taken by permission of the Parochial Church Council from a plan kept in the Abbey Institute which was made by Mr. E. R. A. Rahbula, F.S.A., of the office of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.

The Church is referred to in the plan where at the top the line of the "South wall of Cathedral" is shown.

PLATE III.

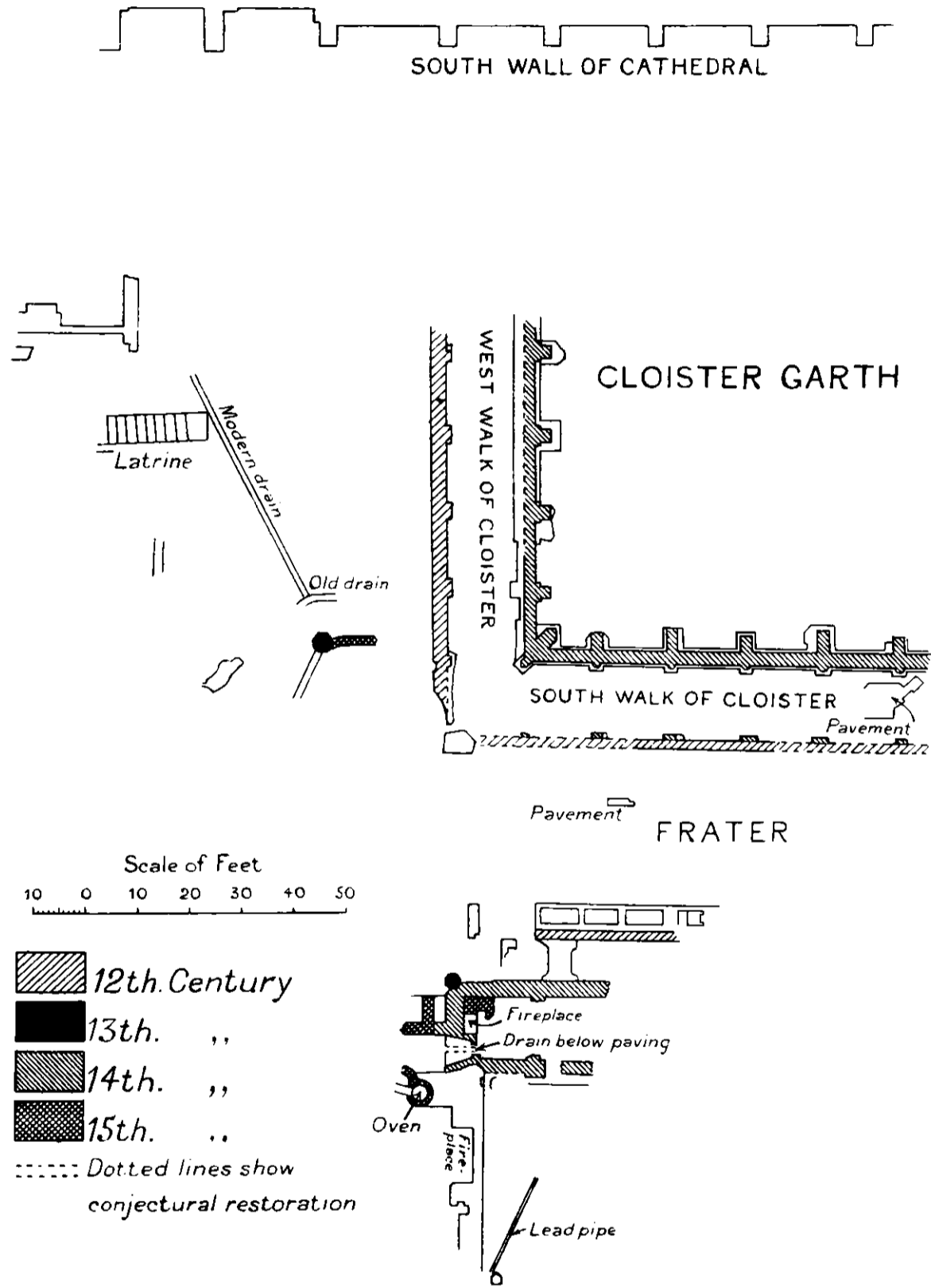
Taken from a scaffold, when the parapet of the Church was being repaired, on 3rd October, 1925, looking down on the site and showing the excavations now filled in, except the line of the lead pipe, Plate IV. They are, however, marked out, the cloister walk by garden-path tiles planted with periwinkle in between, the other items by stones.

By reading these three Plates together the identity of the objects described should be intelligible.

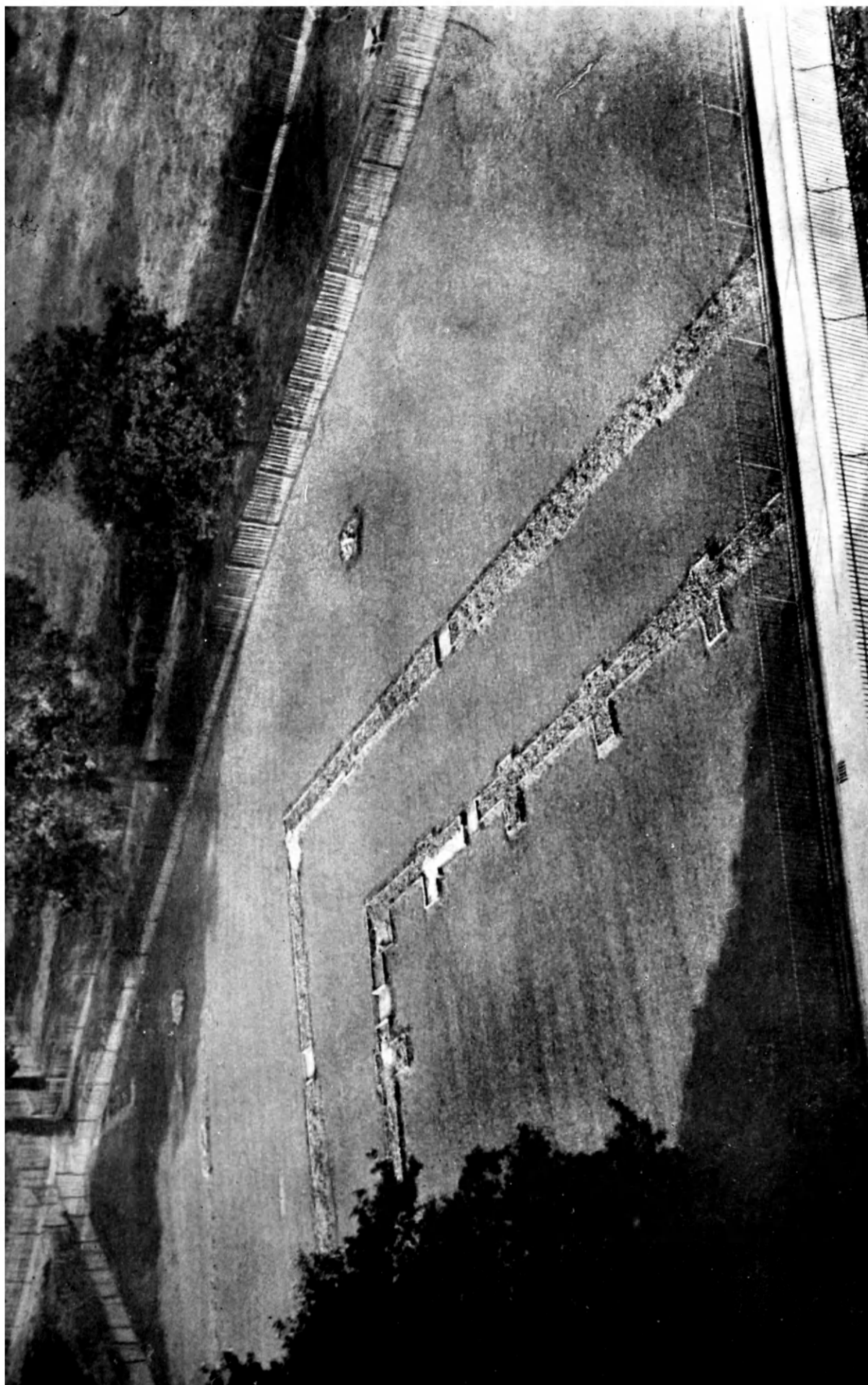


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AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH SHEWING SITE OF ST ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



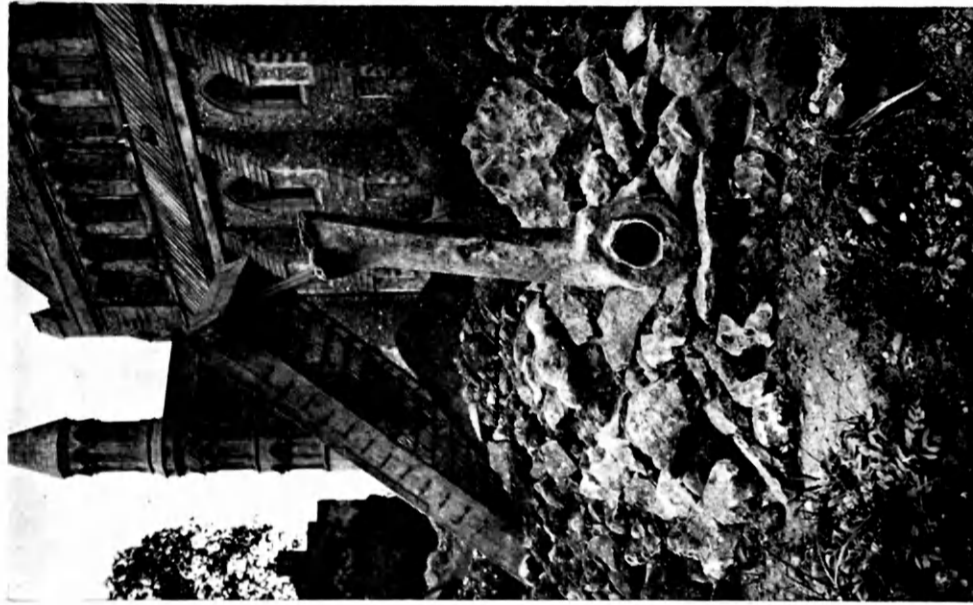
PLAN OF ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



SITE OF ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924
Taken 3rd October 1925



2



3



1

LEAD PIPE

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924

PLATE IV.

Fig. 1. Is a length of lead water-pipe, 19 feet 11 inches long, with two joints, one at 6 feet from the front end in the photograph and the second at 16 feet 1 inch. At the other end a turn to the left of 1 foot 7½ inches. Fig. 2, where it is jointed at the end into a collar of lead, 2 inches thick by 4 square, with orifice 2¼ inches the same diameter as that of the inside of the pipe.

The pipe is made of sheet lead about $\frac{1}{8}$ thick, made up in section approximately to the shape of a pear, and the edges turned straight up, at what would correspond to the stalk end of the pear, and beaten together.

Along each length to be joined together a continuous line of clay was then attached to the pipe and formed into a gutter on either side of the turned up edges about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch below the top.

Molten lead was then poured along to within 1½ inches on either side of the joint, the longitudinal flow of the lead being stopped there by clay dams round the pipes.

Then the two dams had a clay cover formed across them clear of the pipes, and molten lead was poured into the cavity which set round the pipes and made a collar over the joint with a top, beaten flat, 3 inches across the pipe, now made into one, and 2¼ wide, rounded off at the corners, and protruding $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from the pipe, as seen in Fig. 1.

It will be observed that the molten lead along the top of the edges has set in the form of a ridge like an inverted V.

Fig. 2. Is at the turn, see under Fig. 1, this piece of pipe ending over a sump which is at the extreme end of the site excavated, where in Plate III the two fences meet at the top near the left-hand side but on the plan. Plate II, at the bottom, the points of the compass in the prints being reversed.

The length included in Figs. 1 and 2 is now deposited in the north Presbytery aisle of the Church.

Fig. 3. Is an L shaped stand-pipe, probably to supply the kitchen, showing the collar at the joint $\frac{1}{2}$ inch away from the point where it was broken off from the main pipe, Fig. 2.

The bottom length is $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches and the upright 1 foot 6 inches, the inside diameter being 3 inches.

I may say that the sieve behind the pipe, appearing to support it, has no connection with it but was some distance away. This piece of pipe was removed for safe keeping to a shed nearby, and was set up by me on a heap of stones to be photographed. It is at present at the Hertfordshire County Museum, St. Albans. The sieve was for screening the excavated soil, partly lest any small objects should be missed.

PLATE V.

Fig. 1. A fireplace, probably that of the great kitchen, marked on plan, Plate II, a little to the left, and north of the lead pipe.

Fig. 2. One of two fifteenth-century ovens north of and slightly west of the fireplace in Fig. 1.

Fig. 3. Fifteenth-century drain, marked on plan Plate II as below paving, and north of oven in Fig. 2.

PLATE VI.

Fig. 1. A series of walls and blocks of masonry north and eastwards of Fig. 3 in Plate V, looking northwards towards the south side of the Church.

Fig. 2. A similar series of walls and blocks of masonry from the eastern middle of Fig. 1, looking north-east towards the south transept south-west corner.

Both these appear to be of the fourteenth century, as indicated in the plan south of the Frater.

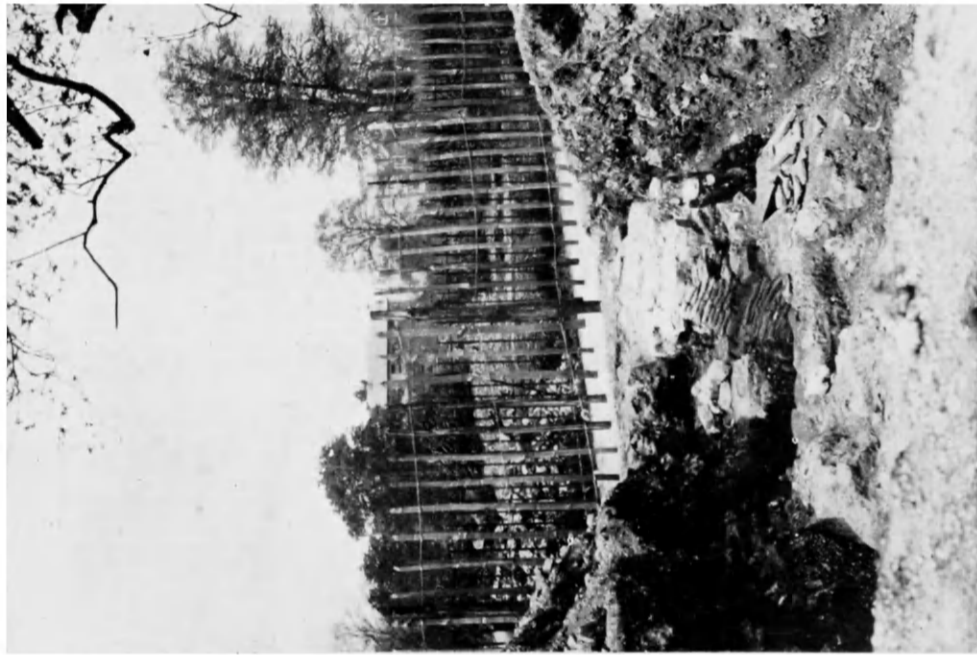
PLATE VII.

Fig. 1. This is clearly the Frater of the twelfth century, with some floor tiles *in situ*.

I am very greatly indebted to Mr. A. W. Clapham,



3
Drain below paving

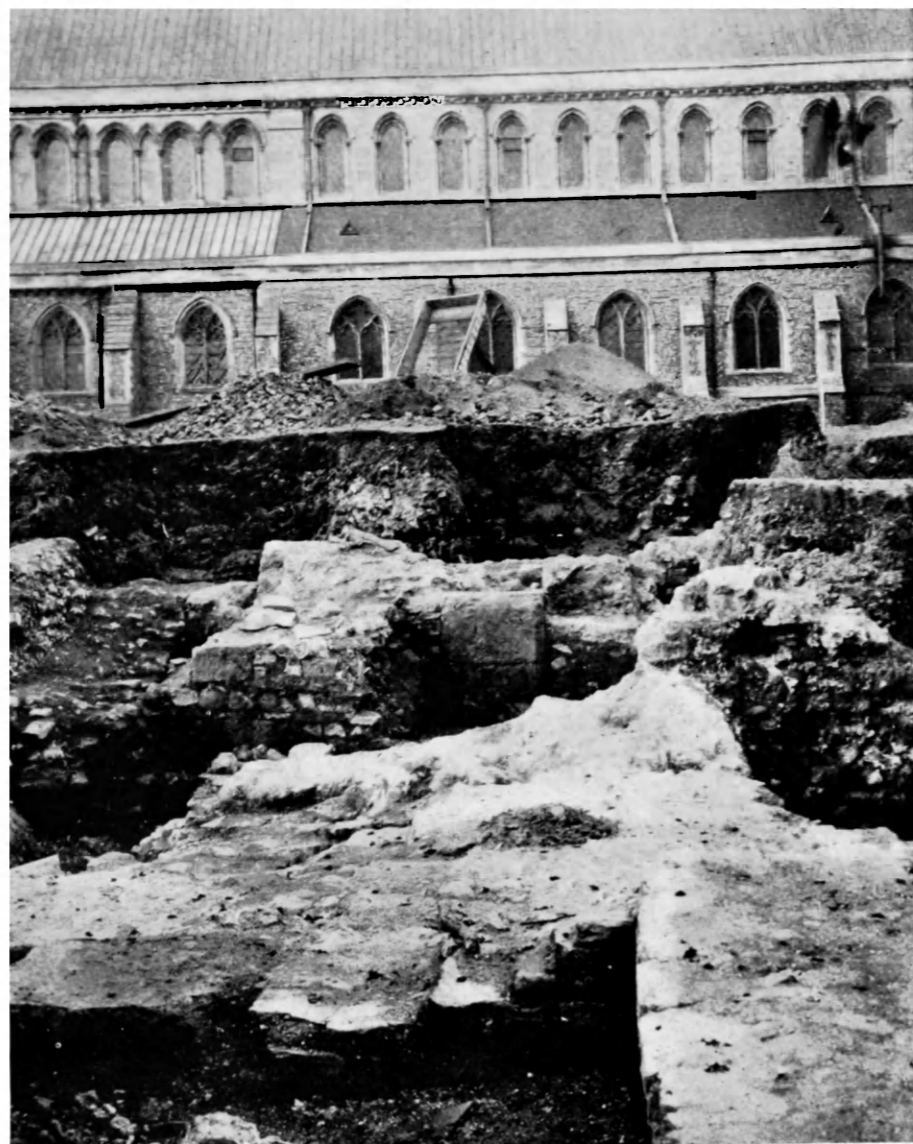


2
Oven



1
Fire-place

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



1
Looking North



2
Looking N.E. towards South Transept

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



1
Frater



2
South wall South Cloister walk



3
North wall North Cloister walk

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924

F.S.A., of the office of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for the following most interesting memorandum:—

“The great Frater stood, as usual, on the south side of the cloister and is the most remarkable building of which remains were found during the excavations.

“Only small portions of the north wall had survived, but a much larger portion of the base of the south wall.

“This south wall was of a most unusual character, and consisted of an outer portion or skin of masonry (1 foot 9 inches thick) which was evidently carried right up the building and an internal offset (5 feet wide) finished with a level top surface $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet below the later floor-level.

“The top surface of this offset or shelf retained the matrices of a horizontal framework of timber consisting of a plate laid along the outer edge, a second plate laid against the skin-wall and a series of connecting timbers spaced about 8 feet apart.

“That a corresponding arrangement formerly existed on the north side of the Frater also, is indicated by the thinness of the surviving pieces of the outer wall, which corresponds to the skin-wall on the south side.

“There can, I consider, be only one explanation of the facts as they stand, and that is that the Frater at St. Albans was essentially a timber building with merely an outer skin of masonry.

“The horizontal timber-framing, of which the imprint remains, must have supported a double row of posts, the outer standing on the plate against the skin-wall and the inner row standing on the second plate.

“The logical outcome of this double row of posts is the carrying of a cantilever-beam, such as a hammer-beam of the main roof-truss, the employment of which in a timber building would demand some such arrangement if the requisite rigidity was to be obtained.”

Fig. 2. All that is left of this part of the south wall of the south cloister walk, twelfth century.

Fig. 3. The north wall of the south cloister walk which is of the fourteenth century, having evidently been rebuilt on the twelfth century foundations, in part, to correspond with the new north cloister walk after the fall of that portion of the nave arcade and south aisle which fell down in October, 1323, and destroyed the old north cloister walk.

The destruction of this part, which abutted on the south wall of the Church, after the dissolution of the Monastery so weakened the wall that buttresses were, some years ago, built to strengthen it.

PLATE VIII.

Fig. 1. The east wall of the west cloister walk, also fourteenth century, having been similarly rebuilt.

Fig. 2. The west wall of the west cloister walk of the twelfth century.

Fig. 3. Detail of wall arcading of north cloister walk still existing but now on the outside of the south wall of the Church.

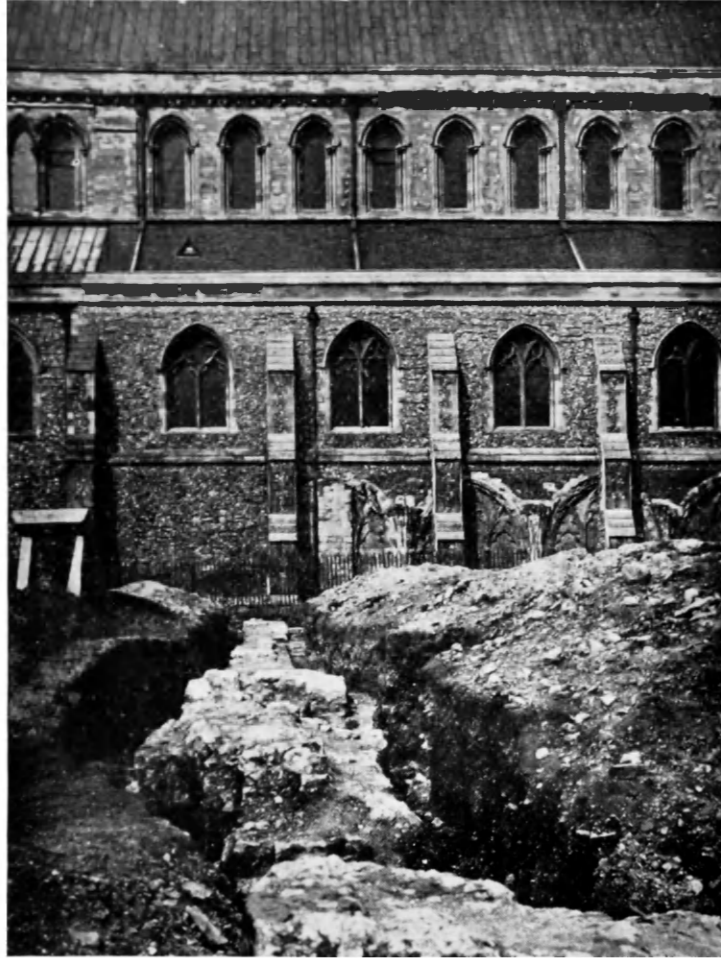
The walk, Figs. 1 and 2, continued up to the Church and then turned along the side of the south wall and the west side of the south transept and southwards to join the south walk, Plate VII Figs. 2 and 3, completing the square enclosing the garth.

PLATE IX.

Fig 1. A latrine marked on the plan, Plate II, and just distinguishable in Plate III half-way up on the extreme right edge.

It is a deep pit 18 feet 8 inches long by 5 feet 3 inches wide, the walls all flint 15 inches thick and the depth below the floor of the cloister 26 feet.

It was surmounted by four arches at intervals. Three



2
West Cloister walk West wall



I
West Cloister walk East wall



3
North Cloister walk North wall arcade

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



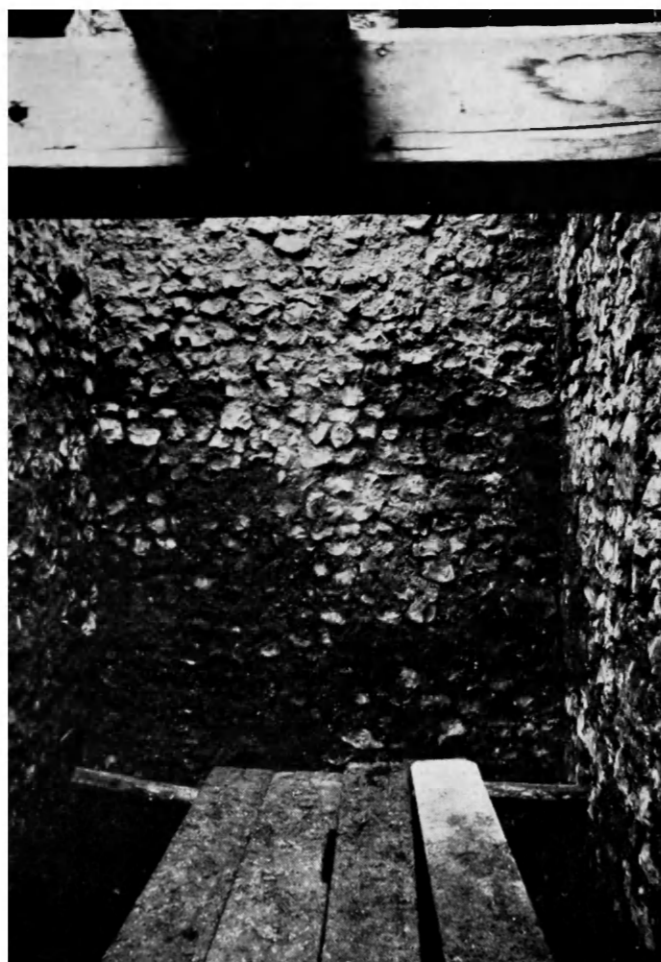
1. The two top Arches



3. The above Arches from the floor



2. The front Arch and West wall
LATRINE



1
West with pudlock holes in sides
Latrine



3
End of modern drain discharging
into medieval drain



2
Eastward Retaining Arch
Latrine

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924



3



2



1
POTTERY

ST. ALBANS ABBEY EXCAVATIONS 1924

of these were found but one fell in, and this photograph shows the two which were left.

Fig. 2. A larger picture of the eastern of the two arches showing its construction, but shored up with planks lest it also should fall in.

Fig. 3. In the centre are the above-mentioned two arches and indications of the spring of the third on the left, taken from the floor looking up skywards.

PLATE X.

Fig. 1. Latrine west wall of flint.

Fig. 2. An eastward retaining arch put in to keep the side walls from falling in. In the top left-hand corner the turn of the arch over the whole is visible.

Fig. 3. In the centre is the end of a modern drain, where it discharged into a mediæval drain running at a lower level, which is marked on plan Plate II as "old drain," west of the cloister walk.

PLATE XI.

Fig. 1. The tall jug being glazed outside but not inside was for water. Height 13 inches, girth $18\frac{1}{8}$, girth of foot 14. The initials, apparently I.F., seem to have been scratched on, though when is doubtful.

The smaller, dark brown, jug is glazed inside and out for wine. Height 8 inches, girth $20\frac{1}{2}$.

Fig. 2. Makes a charming group and each item is very interesting. The cooking pot or pipkin; height to the top of the cover knob $5\frac{1}{8}$ inches, girth 18, handle $3\frac{5}{8}$ long.

The centre jug strikes me as singularly graceful and is of a beautiful grey hue; height $10\frac{3}{4}$ inches, girth 20.

The jug on the right is nicely ornamented; height $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches, girth $16\frac{7}{8}$, brown glazed.

Fig. 3. On the left a water jug, something after the style of a modern red beer jug, with a yellowish pattern

on the front and a band of the same tint round the neck; height $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches, girth 24.

On the right a small jug; height $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches, girth $13\frac{3}{4}$.

In the centre a water sprinkler for use when ironing, or cooking flour; height outside $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches, inside $5\frac{1}{4}$. Diameter at base outside $2\frac{5}{8}$, inside 2. It is open at the bottom and perforated with small holes at the top. It was filled by immersion and withdrawn, the bottom being closed with the palm of the hand for sprinkling, the top held downwards.

The above may be described as late medieval pottery.

PLATE XII.

Fig. 1. The lumps at the top are iron chain mail oxidised, while the links made of latten, a mixed metal like brass composed of copper and zinc, have survived.

The three small buckles, $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide, and one rather larger, 1 inch wide, are medieval, for spur straps.

On the left is a slide, 2 inches wide, probably for a sword belt.

The two larger buckles appear to be post-medieval, $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide.

Below on the left is a groat of Edward III, a Charles II farthing, a George II halfpenny 1747, and two Flemish tokens.

Next to them are two bone chessmen, one a Bishop $1\frac{7}{8}$ inches and the other $1\frac{3}{8}$ long, probably a Queen or possibly a Pawn.

The next is of bone, one of the four corner pieces of a small reliquary such as was sold to pilgrims, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches over all, the tongue at the bottom $\frac{3}{4}$. The slot in the middle received the tongue of the end or side piece of the box.

Next is a bone handle for an etcher's needle and at the end of it is the lump of the oxidised needle.

The two pieces on the right belong to each other. That on the left is the iron handle of a knife and on the right, exactly fitting it, is the horn covering. The cover is easily mistaken for wood but the long grain of it is clearly that of horn.



2
Tiles



I
Chain Armour, Buckles, Slide, Coins, Tokens, Chessmen, Reliquary Corner
piece, Engraver's Etching Needleholder, Knife handle, its horn Cover

Fig. 2. A small group of medieval heraldic and rebus tiles, the latter monkeys' heads.

All the items in Plates XI and XII are now in the Hertfordshire County Museum.

There are no photographs of the walls shown on the plan, Plate II, north of the latrine, which are not identified, or of the base of a pier and piece of wall just south of "old drain" west of the cloister walk, but the positions of the pier and wall are marked by a stone and a concrete circle visible in Plate III.

I am much indebted to Captain J. H. Ball for information on the treatment of the lead pipe and for identification of the bone reliquary, corner figure Plate XII.—E.W.

(The illustrations [except Plate I] are from photographs taken by Mr. Ernest Woolley, and we gratefully acknowledge his kindness in lending us the blocks.—ED.)