Excavations on the site of Eynsham Abbey, 1971

By MARGARET GRAY and NICHOLAS CLAYTON

SUMMARY

This report describes trenches cut to ascertain the eastern extent of the Benedictine Abbey, and excavation of a pre-Conquest burial site lying to the east of St. Leonard's church, where the burials cut into late Anglo-Saxon pits and were themselves followed by early medieval pits and walls.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

IN 1971 the owners of Nursery Field, Eynsham, which had for some years been used for a market garden but had fallen out of intensive use, made application to build houses on the land. That the buildings of Eynsham Abbey lay on the south of the village was known : the Ordnance Survey marks the site of the abbey W. of Nursery Field at SP 433091, where the Roman Catholic church now stands (Fig. 2). Whether or not the Abbey church or its offices extended into the area required for building was not certainly known, although early reports of finds suggested that they did. The Abbey was a site of sufficient importance strongly to be recommended for preservation. A limited excavation was mounted for a period of six weeks in May and June 1971 to test for monastic buildings in the threatened area. The results of the investigation were given in evidence to a public inquiry in 1973[1] which decided that building should not be permitted.

We are grateful to the executors of the late Mrs. W. S. Hoskins for allowing access to the land and for their cooperation whilst the excavation was in progress. The work was sponsored by the Oxford City and County Museum (now the Oxfordshire Department of Museum Services) with the help of a grant from the Department of the Environment. The finds and a more detailed report are deposited in the Museum at Woodstock. We are grateful to the Museum for the loan of equipment and for the help and advice of D. F. Benson who was then Field Officer. We would like to thank Jean Mitchell for her work as Finds Assistant and Mr. and Mrs. L. Bishop, R. de Freitas and G. Williams for their work on the site.

We are indebted to the following for examining finds : H. J. Case, the prehistoric pottery ; Freda Berisford who drew and prepared the report on the Saxon pottery ; T. G. Hassall, the late Saxon and early medieval pottery ; and David Ganz, the decorated floor tiles. We are grateful to M. Card for drawing the small find and the Roman, late Saxon and medieval pottery, and to C. B. Denston of the Duckworth Laboratory of Physical Anthropology, Cambridge University for his

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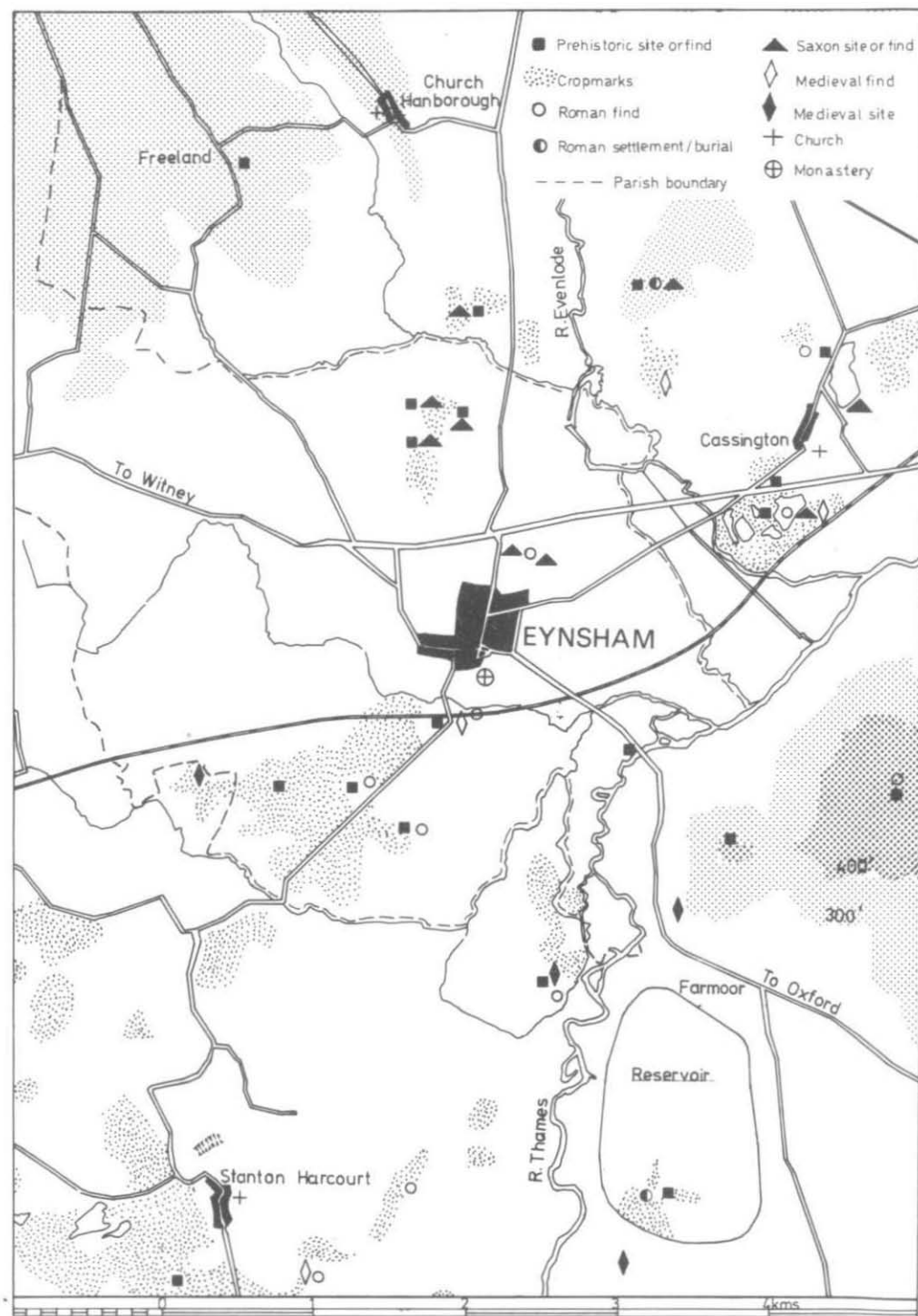[1] *Current Archaeology*, IV, no. 5 (September, 1973), 132.

Fig. 1

The location of Eynsham. Reproduced by courtesy of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Committee.

report on the human bones.   Finally, tribute is due to Bishop Eric Gordon for his
contribution to the history of the Abbey, and his translations from its first charter
and from other early references to Eynsham.

THE SITE (Area plan, Fig. 2)

The Abbey lies to the south of Eynsham on a gravel terrace of the Thames.
The site slopes southwards to the canalized Chil Brook, a tributary of the Thames,
which it joins about 1500 m. away.   Another watercourse, which may be a leat or
drain, more closely borders the abbey site, passing the earthworks of a group of
fish ponds which are terraced into the foot of the slope.   These ponds are the only
visible remains on the site, and were surveyed during the excavation, because they
may have been part of the monastic foundation, although they could be of almost
any date before 1700.

The main buildings of the Abbey are believed to lie under the two church-
yards.   The sexton attested that most graves dug have to be cut through masonry
if they are to reach full depth.   This was confirmed in one grave where massive
foundation-stones were exposed at a depth of one metre below turf.   Construction
of the Roman Catholic church disturbed some material, but the hearsay accounts
provided no details of structure.   Architectural fragments unearthed at the time are
set up in the church precinct.

The only illustration and record of the buildings is to be found in the papers of
Anthony Wood.   The description and a drawing in ink (Pl. IV) occur in Wood's
' biography ' under the date 16 September 1657.[2]

> A. W. went to Einsham to see an old kinsman called Thomas Barncote.   He
> was there wonderfully strucken with a veneration of the stately, yet much lamented,
> ruins of the abbey there, built before the Norman Conquest.   He saw then there
> two high towers at the west end of the church, and some of the walls on the north
> side standing.   He spent some time with a very great delight in taking a prospect
> of the ruins of the place.   All that which together with the entrance or the lodge,
> were soon after pul'd down, and the stones sold to build houses in that towne, and
> neare it.   The place hath yet some ruins to shew, and to instruct the beholder with
> an exemplary frailty.

There is another note of interest in 1658 :[3] ' About 20 yeares agoe was a pardon
of the pope found in digging in some of the ruins of Ens/h/am Abby Oxon, and was
sent to the earl of Derby, lord of that mannor.'

Wood's record of the west end shows two differing towers with a door or arch
of unequal size in the base of each (Pl. IV).   The towers flank a large west window
(labelled ' ye larg west window ' on the sketch) which rises above a central doorway.
An arcaded wall on the north aisle is labelled ' Cloysters ', and indicates that the
cloister was on the unconventional north side.   The suggestion that this wall is the
arcaded internal face of the north side seems precluded by the wavy diagonal line

² A. Wood, ' The Life and Times of Anthony Wood ', Vol. 1, ed. A. Clark, O.H.S., XIX (1891), 228–9
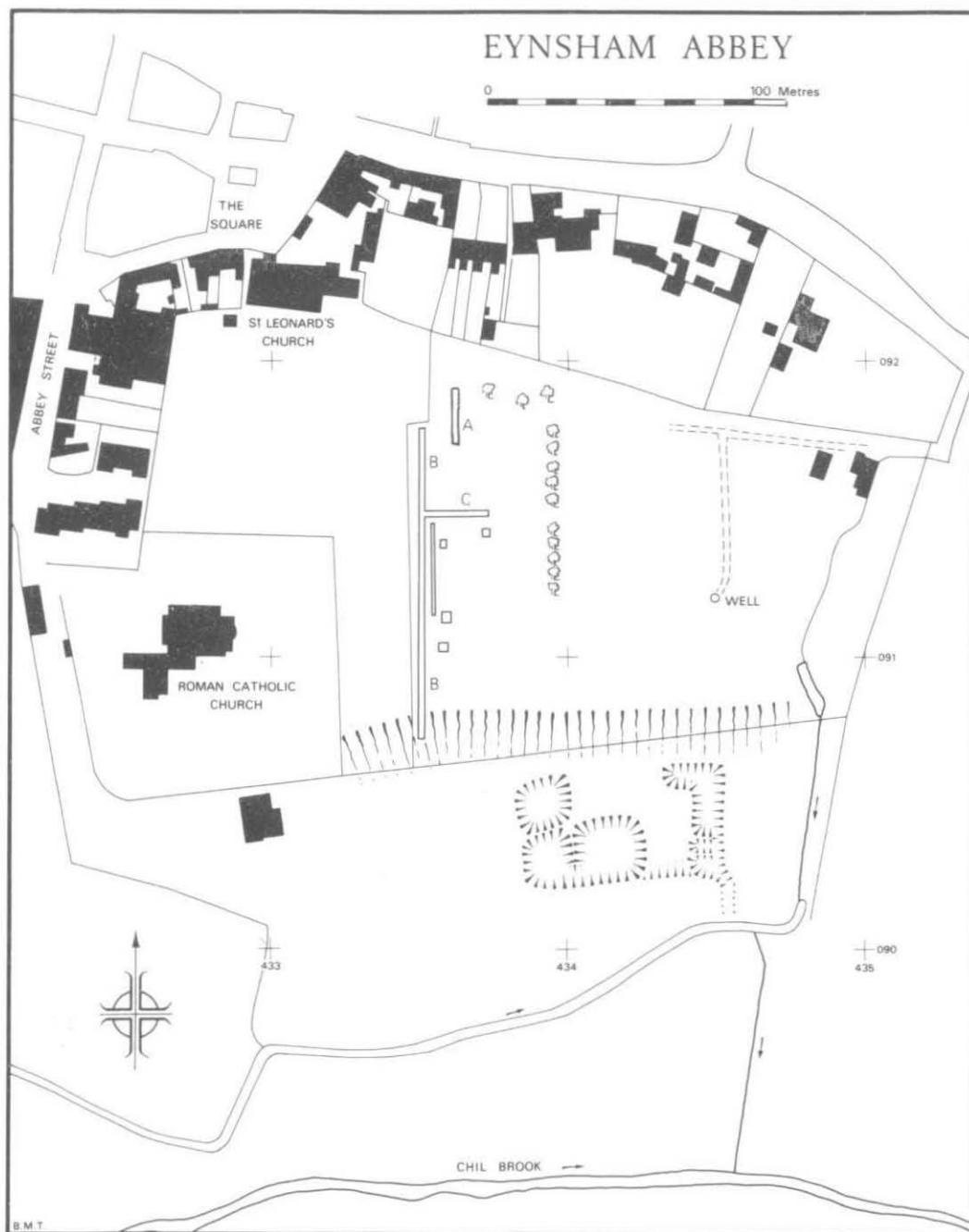and Pl. III.
    ³ Ibid., 255.

Fig. 2
The site of the abbey and its surroundings.

also leading off from the north-west corner. The discovery in Trench B (see below) of building foundations on what would seem to be the south side of the church perhaps places the main cloister in the orthodox position. Wood may have been drawing the wall of an enclosed burial ground, for which the north side of the church would be quite appropriate. He drew a battlemented wall extending southwards from the west end of the church, but did not label it. Pier-bases are shown in the nave. The drawing was engraved by John Coles in about 1690 and again in 1729 by Samuel Buck who fills out the background with a view of Wytham Hill which in fact lies *east* of Eynsham. Dugdale refers to Wood's drawing and mentions (possibly on the basis of Wood's notes) that 'some old foundations and a gate-house' were all that remained above ground.[4] The ruins were seen by Leland[5] and Hearn (Leland's editor) found only the outer gate on the west side of the pre-cinct and traces of the fishponds.[6] Dugdale's editors note that in 1819 'scarcely any vestige of the edifice of Eynsham abbey are now visible, except a small doorway and a shield, with the date 1504, placed in the vicarage garden'. There are still many architectural fragments to be seen in this garden. The Abbey site must always have been a convenient quarry and many of the buildings in Eynsham in-corporate Abbey stones into their fabric.[7]

In 1851 a Mr. Day uncovered some decorated floor-tiles whilst planting some trees, probably the belt of trees shown on the plan (Plan, Fig. 2).[8] He states that the floor was 'in two strips running parallel (four feet apart) about three yards long and a yard wide'. He also records that the well shown on the area plan was then visible and that water from it was running into a drain. From there it was led into a stone cistern (7 ft. long by 3 ft. wide, with walls 18 ins. thick) which was approached by five steps, and was 1 ft. below ground level. The magnetometer survey suggested a concentration of buildings in this area. To the west of this he saw a 'flooring of encaustic tiles'; he also found human bones and 'a figure, the head and arms of which were of gold and weighed seventeen guineas'.

An excavation was conducted by David Sturdy and the O.U.A.S. in 1963–4. The 30 m. trench and four small cuttings are shown on the site plan (Fig. 3) and are lettered a–e. The results are not published, but we are grateful to Mr. Sturdy for visiting the site during the course of the excavation. He assisted us to locate his trenches, and also provided photographs, which showed walls and burials.

In 1975 mechanical excavation for a swimming pool in the grounds of the 'Shrubbery', within the scheduled area of the Abbey, was watched by Jean Mitchell and recorded by R. A. Chambers.[9] The records and a section drawing have been deposited at the Department of Museum Services. The pottery from this excavation was similar to that found in Trench A, that is Roman and Anglo-Saxon,

[4] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, Vol. III, 11.
[5] Thomas Hearne (ed.), *Leland's Itinerary*, Vol. V, 92.
[6] T. Hearne, *Collections*, Vol. I, O.H.S. (1884), 244.
[7] The sale and demolition of the fabric is described in E. K. Chambers, *Eynsham under the Monks*, Oxford-shire Record Society, xviii (1936), 40. *Cf.* H. C. D. Cooper, 'Eynsham Armorial', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 248 and Pl. XXV, B.
[8] G. L. Gomme (ed.), *Topographical History of Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Rutlandshire. A classified Collectiana of the Chief Contents of 'The Gentleman's Magazine' from 1731–1868* (1897), 113.
[9] R. A. Chambers, 'Notes', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 355–6.

both early and late, including St. Neots type ware.   In 1977, during reconstruction work at the Recreation Ground, outside the scheduled area, and about 200 metres from the 1971 excavation, Jean Mitchell found 12th-/13th-century pottery, which is also deposited at the Museum.

THE SITE OF EYNSHAM ABBEY : A HISTORICAL NOTE.   By ERIC GORDON

The year 1000 brought great expectations of the end of the world.   England was facing a fresh wave of Danish invasions.   Eynsham abbey was born at that time.   Its foundation-charter came from King Aethelred the Redeless in 1005 : our earliest surviving copy was made in *c.* 1196.   A chain of prayer and praise at a new abbey might help to turn God's anger away :

> The wrath of God is turned fiercely against us, and in no ordinary way : I am re-solved to placate him by a continual display of good works and never to cease from his praise.   In these very times we are enduring flames of battle : our goods are plundered : savage enemies devastate the land and pillage it cruelly : pagan tribes inflict all kinds of tribulation : they torment us to the very point of extinction.   And thus we realize that the ' perilous times ' are upon us : we are those ' upon whom the ends of the world are come ' : . . . a new age is about to dawn . . . ' here have we no continuing ' dwelling-place ' but we seek one to come ' . . . (*Eynsham Cartulary*, ed. H. E. Salter, O.H.S., XLIX, LI (1907–8), I, 19.   Biblical references to 2 Tim. iii. 1, 1 Cor. x. 11, Hebr. xiii. 14.)

The Christian church in this country had suffered very severely from the earlier Scandinavian invasions : and monastic life had become virtually impossible. Monasteries had in most cases, if not all, ceased to observe the full Rule of Saint Benedict : some had been destroyed, some lay empty, in others there were ' colleges of secular priests ' : these last were clergy, grouped with varying degrees of for-mality to serve a more important church, but moving freely in and out of ' the world '.   Our 10th-century church-leaders concluded that a revival of strict monasticism might revitalize the whole church : so new houses were founded, and others which had slipped away from the full Rule were brought back to it.   It was a prominent Anglo-Saxon layman, who took the initiative at Eynsham in 1005 : he was Aethelmaer, Ealdorman of the Western shires, and his Eynsham foundation came almost at the end of the monastic revival.   King Aethelred's charter of confirmation makes clear that the abbey is already functioning : monks have been gathered, buildings erected, servants found, tenants organized, boundaries clari-fied, supplies of food and drink guaranteed, complex endowments settled etc. : he has doubtless known about and approved of the plans at every point : now he sets his seal to them.

Aethelmaer has acquired Eynsham village itself by an elaborate exchange of lands with his son-in-law, Aethelweard.   Taken in isolation this transaction sug-gests that Eynsham abbey is an entirely new institution.   The charter does however say of the founder :

> There he is setting monks who will order their lives by the Rule (*vite regularis monachos inibi constituens*).   (*Ibid.*, 20.)

This may simply mean that the new community is monastic in the full sense of the word : ' minster ' (though in origin meaning ' monastery ') had come to be used so carelessly in connection with larger churches, even those that had never housed a community of any kind, that such definition may have been essential.   Indeed the whole expression may have been a mere formality in a charter of this type.   On the other hand it may imply that Aethelmaer was here ' regularizing ' a house which had lapsed into a less strict type of community.

The charter continues :

(Aethelmaer) is himself acting as father to the community, and he is sharing his life with theirs : he has arranged that during his own lifetime he will himself nominate the first abbot of the sacred community of monks : but it is understood that future abbots will be subject to election, in accordance with the Rule.   (*Ibid.*, 20.)

Aethelmaer chose Aelfric, the outstanding spiritual leader of the day, a man second only to Bede in those centuries : he had worked with him at Cerne abbey, in Dorset, and there he had seen his skill in teaching, his spiritual depth, and his theological insight.   It seems that at Cerne Aethelmaer had ' cleansed ' or ' regularized ' a lapsed house, and that Aelfric had helped him.   Perhaps they were doing the same at Eynsham.   They plan to live their last years together here.   In his famous *Letter to the monks of Eynsham* (ed. M. Bateson, Hants. Rec. Soc. (1892), 174f.) Aelfric indicates the problems which face his raw recruits :

It is but recently that at Aethelmaer's request you have been set aside for the monastic life : sojourning amongst you, I have come to see that you need spoken or written instruction in that way.

He goes on to say that he is making just a few points clear, and that he simply dare not tell them everything that he had himself learned through many years spent in the rigorous school of Aethelwold!

The village of Eynsham is described in the charter as :

An important place (*in loco celebri*) hard by the river Thames, and called Egnesham by those who live in that part of the country.   (*Ibid.*, 20.)

As ' Egonesham ' it is mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 571.   On its gravel platform, commanding the Swinford crossing of the Thames, some 5 miles from Oxford, but protected by the Wychwood forest to north and west, and by rivers and marshes to south and east, it must have had a strategic and economic significance ever since men lived in this part of the Thames valley.   It could have been the site of a pagan shrine, even in Roman days, then of very early Christian buildings, then of a larger ' minster ', even of an earlier monastery.   We have no certain knowledge : but we know that ' holiness ' often tends to inhere in sites, and to pass from one faith to another.   There is a strong chance that here in Eynsham we have an opportunity to trace the whole history of a holy site, right down to the undisturbed gravel, and long before surviving written records, and in a very significant area of ancient Britain.

If we attempt to trace the history of Eynsham abbey in the years after 1005 and before its dissolution in 1539, we find another complex story : and again we need the help which only archaeology can give.   At the time of the Conquest the

abbey was deserted and laid waste.   For some while its bishops had been living at Dorchester : their vast diocese stretched from the Thames to the Humber.   In 1072 the first Norman bishop, Remigius, moved his see from Dorchester to Lincoln. In 1086 the Domesday Survey notes that ' Eglesham ' is held by ' Columbanus the monk ' : but it is held under the bishop, who is tenant-in-chief : it is not clear whether the abbey has been reconstituted or not.

In 1091, however, Remigius fulfilled a long-planned project.   Stow minster, near Lincoln, had been served (at least until 1066) by a college of secular canons. Now he turned it into a new Benedictine monastery, surrendering to it all his own financial interests in Stow itself, and also giving it all the property of Eynsham abbey.   In effect, Stow abbey replaced Stow minster and Eynsham abbey : but in 1092 Remigius died.

His successor, Robert Bloet, was a secular priest : by 1100, or perhaps not long after 1109, he had virtually reversed the situation.   All the local northern endow- ment of Stow minster came back to the see : Eynsham abbey was reopened, and it recovered its former property : to this was added a compensatory endowment for what the bishop had taken at Stow : in addition, Henry I encouraged a number of great families to contribute their gifts.   Although Eynsham abbey seems in fact to have prospered by the whole affair, Bishop Bloet's reputation suffered greatly : his death came suddenly, whilst he was out riding with Henry I at Woodstock : William of Malmesbury's account, even in his more discreet version of *c.* 1140, speaks for itself :

> When the bishop died, his body was disembowelled, lest it fouled the air with its evil smells.   The parts which were removed were buried at Eynsham, the remainder at Lincoln.   For during his life he had moved the monks who were at Stow to Eynsham.   (*Gesta Pontificum*, Book IV, Rolls Series, 314.)

From *c.* 1109 Eynsham abbey followed a relatively uneventful course, doubtless continuing its main work of prayer and praise, but increasingly diverted by estate-management and litigation.   Even in 1109 the Benedictine order had begun to lose some of the spiritual leadership which it had enjoyed for so long.   That was to pass to other orders, to the universities, to bishops' households, and soon to friars. When dissolution came in 1539, there may well have been a long tradition of worldliness : certainly there had been several notorious lapses from virtue : not unexpectedly Cromwell's commissioner, Tregonwell, gave a very poor account of monastic life there.   But credit must be given to Eynsham for two fine works, both in Latin : they are the *Life of Saint Hugh* and the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham*, both by Adam, monk at Eynsham, later chaplain to Bishop Hugh, later still a none too successful abbot of Eynsham.

Our knowledge of the abbey-buildings is limited to a single rough sketch of the ruins of the church : it was drawn by Anthony Wood in 1657, and shows in par- ticular a west front with two towers (Pl. IV) : much of that is in Romanesque style and somewhat reminiscent of Southwell minster today.   The fact that the church and all its surrounding buildings were at first Anglo-Saxon, then rebuilt in Norman times, and doubtless substantially enlarged later on, is reason enough (even with- out the earlier history) for the careful preservation of the site, and for its ultimate scientific excavation.

(The best account of Eynsham abbey is in Salter, *op. cit.*, esp. 1, vii–xii.   The above account takes note of subsequent research and other viewpoints.   The writer is responsible for the translations from the Latin.   For ' minsters ' and the ' regularization ' of houses, *cf.* D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd ed. (1963), esp. 34f., 49f. ; and D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses : England and Wales* (1971), esp. 465.)

THE EXCAVATION

Method of Excavation

As the site was large and resources limited, attention was concentrated on two areas.   Trench A (18·50 m. × 2 m.) was sited as near the existing parish church as was possible, in an area not previously investigated.   Trench B (102 m. × 2 m.) and Trench C (22 m. × 2 m.) covered most of the north/south extent of the conjectured area of the Abbey.   Whereas Trench A was fully excavated down to the natural gravel, and useful levels were obtained, it was decided that a deep trench through the Abbey buildings might be prejudicial to any future work on the site. Trenches B and C were not therefore excavated below the surface of features which were encountered, only enough of these being uncovered to estimate the extent of the building.

A magnetometer survey was conducted by the Oxford University Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art over most of Nursery Field, and the results of this survey are shown in the area plan (Fig. 3).   Both the magnetometer survey and the trenches were laid out on the lines of the National Grid, and levels were related to the O.S. Datum Bench Mark on the porch of the church (68·33 m.), and the Site Datum was 80 cm. above this.   (S.D. = Site Datum ; O.D. = Ordnance Datum).

In all trenches the topsoil and post-medieval levels were removed mechanically with a J.C.B.   As the field had been a market garden for many years, and deep cultivation had taken place, the upper layers would be too disturbed to merit excavation by hand.

Trench A (Plan and Sections, Fig. 4)

There were four phases in this area.   The plan shows only those features which cut into the natural gravel.

I. Roman and early Anglo-Saxon

Although there were only three features which could stratigraphically belong to these two periods, the quantity of Roman and Anglo-Saxon sherds indicated that there was a site in the close vicinity.   These three features were cut by later pits, which may have destroyed all other evidence from this phase.

12d. An area of red, stained gravel, unlike the yellow-brown gravels encountered elsewhere on the site. It extended beyond the south extremity of the trench, as the lowest layer, and was cut by Phase II pits 48 and 49.

18. Narrow gulley, which shows only in plan, as it did not reach the east section and was cut away by pit 55 at the west section.   The filling was buff-brown silty soil with gravel, and many river-worn smooth pebbles.   Depth below surface of natural gravel was 14 cm.   A sherd of R/B pottery was at the bottom of the feature and a sherd of A/S pottery was at the top.

41. Layer of sticky, clean, red clay, probably associated with gulley 18, which shows in the east section.

EYNSHAM ABBEY

Key to Magnetic Survey

Normal anomaly (pit, ditch)
○ slight ⊙ weak ● medium

Reverse anomaly (wall, floor)
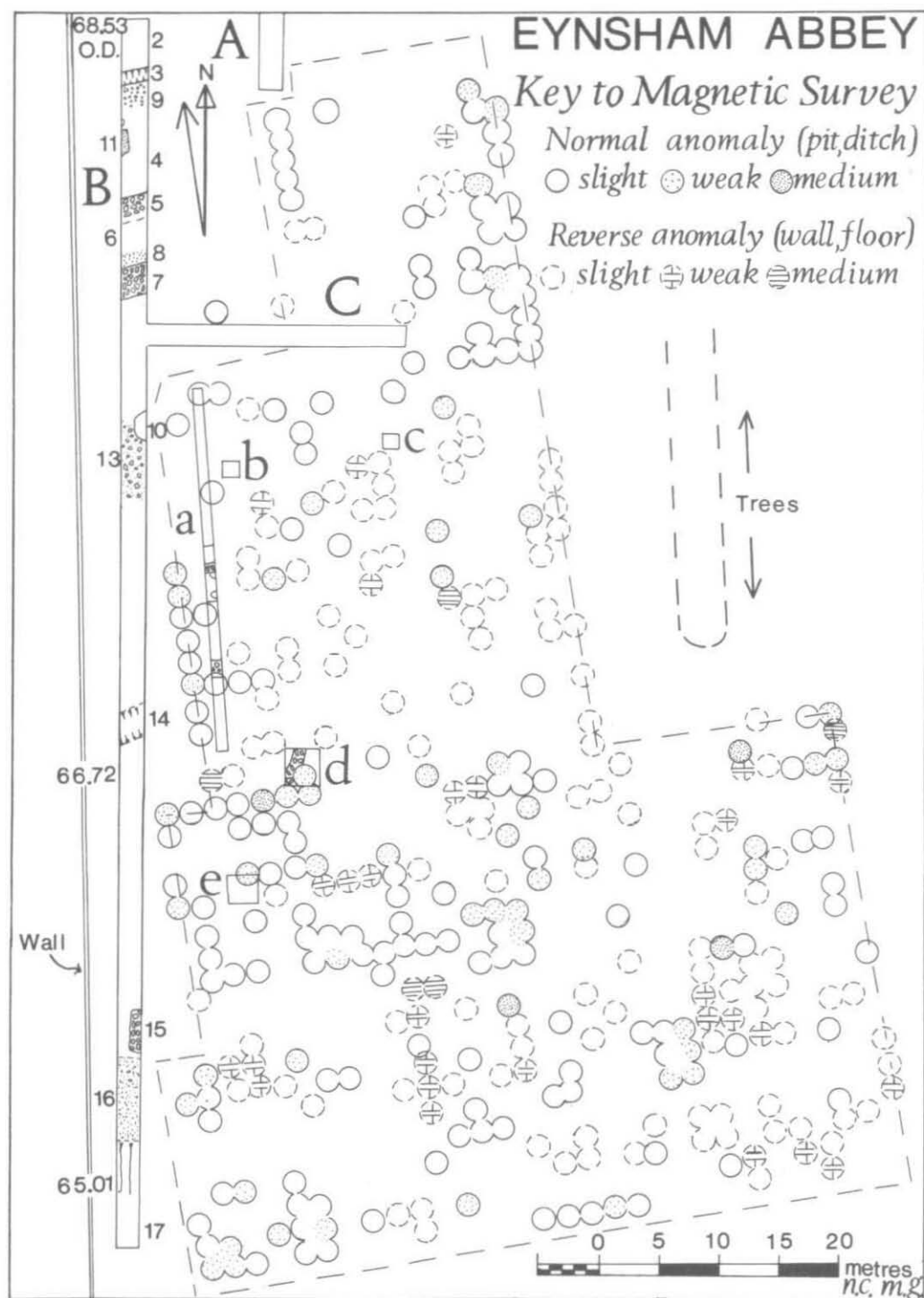◌ slight ⊕ weak ⊜ medium

Trees

0 5 10 15 20
metres
n.c. m.g.

Fig. 3
Site plan and magnetometer survey.

II. Late Saxon Pits

48 and 49. These two adjacent pits intersected at their higher levels, where pit 49 was seen to be the earlier. Whereas the filling of pit 48 was homogeneous, soft, dark brown soil with fragments of limestone and some yellow-brown gravel, only the lower layers of 49 were like this, the upper ones consisting of bands of gravel alternating with dark brown, greasy, humus. Possibly the pit had been back-filled when half empty.

55. This very large pit contained alternate layers of clean, loose, gravel and soft brown soil : perhaps this was an old, back-filled gravel pit. The instability of the natural gravel here and the continuing depth of the pit, precluded excavation of the lower layers.

51 and 52. These two pits cut the loose gravel of 55. Although pit 51 cut pit 52 the fillings of the two pits was similar soft brown soil with some gravel. Both of them had a top layer of gravel.

53 and 56. Pit 53 cut pit 56 ; both were filled with alternate layers of brown soil and dirty gravel. Most of these two pits lay beyond the east section. They were later than pits 51 and 42, which they cut at a higher level. They were later covered by 17 and 33.

III. Pre-Conquest Burials

To record the exact number of burials encountered in this trench was not possible. Excavation of a complete skeleton was very difficult, firstly because the narrowness of the two metre wide cutting meant that many of the limbs extended beyond the sections, and secondly because the graves had not been dug in neat, orderly rows but intersecting each other, at varying depths. Furthermore the features of Phase IV had disturbed the burials considerably. Where a complete, or almost complete, skeleton was encountered, it was photographed and drawn. The plan shows only those graves which cut into the natural gravel The only place where the natural gravel was undisturbed was at the north end of the trench, where it was 60 cm. below the present ground surface.

The burials are numbered 1–4, 4a, 5–9, 14–16, 19–24, 24a, 25–29, 29a, 30–35, 37, 37a, 38–40, 40a, 42, 43, 43a, 44, 45 (12c), 46, 47, 54. Those containing pottery are listed in the pottery table. Some of the sherds from 37 which came from later levels are recorded under that number. As this (37) was an area in which so many graves had been dug that one burial could not be distinguished from another, it was excavated by fork rather than by trowel. Similarly, it was not possible to identify individual burials in 32 as they had been disturbed in Phase IV.

There was no trace of coffins, although some of the undisturbed skeletons had stones carefully placed around the skull. These stones were either flat limestone slabs, *e.g.* 26, or lumps of concreted gravel and some pieces of chalk, *e.g.* 16. There were burials of children, as well as men and women of various ages. No grave goods were found with them, and all were supine with their feet to the east.
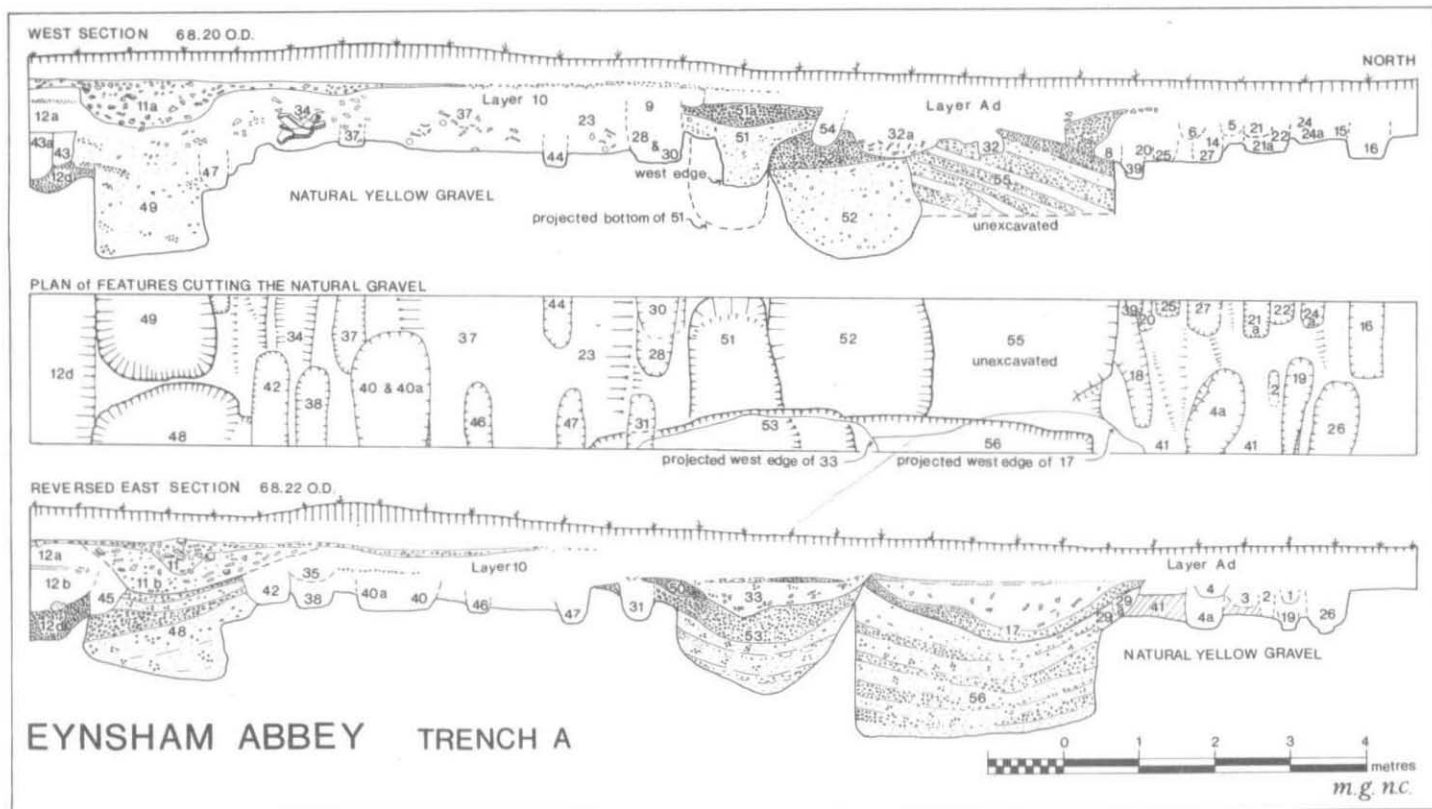
It is important to notice on the east section drawing that burial 31 cut through a layer of gravel (50) associated with the Phase II pit 53, and yet was covered by the gravel from Phase IV, pit 33.

34. ?Wall. A line of flat limestone slabs extended half way across the trench. There was no mortar with these stones, which lay in a mixed brown soil, very like the general disturbed burial soil, with no sign of a wall trench. As the pottery from this end of the trench was significantly later and the burials extended southwards beyond the stones, it could possibly have been a boundary wall of the cemetery which was destroyed in order to extend the burial area.

IV. Medieval Pits and Wall

33 and 17. Both these pits were relatively shallow, wide depressions, and were unlike the large Phase II pits in both shape and filling. Possibly they result from the dumping of rubbish into the soft ground of the earlier pits, in order to level up the surface. Whereas the earlier pits had few finds, apart from a few sherds and a little animal bone, these pits contained building material of all kinds (see Finds Lists, below) and mortar, which was entirely absent in the earlier features. There was also a quantity of human bone from the disturbed burials, animal bone, oyster shells, snail shells and much charcoal. Pit 33, composed of very dark, charcoal-flecked soil was later than, and cut through the south edge of, 17. Both pits had a final layer of gravel over them. Pit 33 had a larger slip of dirty gravel, 50, on its south side, which covered burial 31. Similarly, the north edge of 17 covered burials 29 and 29a. The Type I roofing material and the pottery could date these pits to the late 13th/early 14th century.

Fig. 4
Trench A.

WEST SECTION   68.20 O.D.

NORTH

12a   11a   34   37   Layer 10   23   9   51a   54   Layer A d   5 21 24 15
43a   37   28 30   51   32a   32   20 25 6 14 21a 22 24a   16
43   44   west edge   8 39   27
12d   47
49   NATURAL YELLOW GRAVEL   55
projected bottom of 51   52   unexcavated

PLAN of FEATURES CUTTING THE NATURAL GRAVEL

49   34   37   44   30   39 25 27   21 22 24
12d   37   51   52   55   20   8   16
42   40 & 40a   23   28   unexcavated   18
38   46   47   31   53   2 19
48   56   projected west edge of 33   projected west edge of 17   41   4a   26
41

REVERSED EAST SECTION   68.22 O.D.

12a   1f   Layer 10   Layer A d
12b   11b   35   42   40a   40   46   47   31   33   4   3 2 1
45   38   50   17   29 9 41   19   26
12d   48   53   4a
NATURAL YELLOW GRAVEL
56

EYNSHAM ABBEY   TRENCH A

0   1   2   3   4   metres

m.g. n.c.

11. Wall. The base of the wall survived in the centre of the trench, and fragmentarily in the east section, but it was destroyed by a robbing trench in the west section. The wall was composed of large blocks of re-used dressed building stones, between 26 cm. and 54 cm. long. Between the stones of the wall was found a buckle (C.A. 1, Fig. 8) and 10th-/11th-century pottery.

11a. Robbing trench for Wall 11, shown on east section, filled with mortary brown soil with many fragments of broken limestone. This destruction debris extends for some distance each side of the robbing trench.

11b. Robbing trench for Wall 11, shown on west section. Both these robbing trenches contained 13th-/14th-century pottery.

12. The area to the south of Wall 11 as far as the end of the trench was represented by :—

12a : a layer of brown soil mixed with mortar and some gravel covered burials, 43 and 43a, on the west side of the trench, and burial 45 on the east.

12b : separated from 12a by a layer of mortar, and cut away burial 45. It was a dark brown mixed soil with less gravel than 12a. Both layers contained animal bone, and are later than the Phase III burials but are earlier than the 13th-/14th-century features 11 and 11a+b. They probably represent the 10th-/11th-century levels general to the area except where disturbed by the later robbing trench and pits.

Layers Ad and 10 were numbers given to areas of the trench and are marked on the section drawing. These were layers of mixed, disturbed, brown soil which, like 12a lay over the burials.

Trench B (Plan, Fig. 3)

The feature numbers and descriptions apply only to those features which showed after the plough-soil had been removed by machine, and the surface cleaned. No features were excavated. Widths given were measured at the west section. Finds from the top-soil, called Ba and Bb, were and are considered unstratified.

2. Soft, brown soil with mortar and destruction debris, at north end of the trench.

2a. Lower levels of 2 : larger pieces of stone, more mortar.

3. Robbing trench for wall. Grey-brown soil with mortar and many pieces of limestone. Width 1·15 m. corresponds with the robbing trench encountered in Trench A (11). The mortar extends for a further 5·60 m. to the south.

4. Area of mortar and shattered limestone. Width 2·80 m.

5. Area of flat pieces of limestone irregularly distributed over brown soil. Width 1·10 m. There was a 5 cm. thick layer of mortar extending a metre from the N side of these stones.

6. Soft brown soil and destruction debris over 5 and 8.

7. Area of very compact stones, lying in stoney brown soil. Width 2·80 m. To the south of this lay 1 m. of tumbled stones.

8. Area of mortar to north of 7. Width 1·20 m.

9a. Yellow mortary soil. Width 2·20 m.

9b. Small pit, filled with loose gravel and stones.

10. Large pit. Dark brown soil with many fragments of roof and floor tile, oyster shell, animal bone, dressed stones. Width at east section 2·10 m.

11. Area of burnt clay, 7 cm. thick, lying over a layer of light grey mortar 10 cm thick. Width 2·40 m.

12. Brown soil beneath 11. No mortar.

13. Area of much rubble, dressed stone, roofing material. Width 6 m.

14. Ditch, filled with brown soil and gravel. Width 2·40 m.

15. Area of flat stone slabs. Width 3·75 m. at east section.

16. Area of very compacted gravel. Possibly metalling of road. Width 7 m.

17. Large boundary ditch. South edge beyond end of trench. Width to end of trench from north lip of ditch, 9 m.

Trench C (Plan, Fig. 3)

This trench did not produce any major features. The soil was full of mortar and destruction debris, animal and human bone, but no walls or pits were encountered.

CONCLUSION

Trench A

The history of this piece of land is very complex and demonstrates more than anything else a lack of available space. Both Dugdale[10] and Tanner[11] state that

[10] *Loc. cit.* note 4.
[11] Thomas Tanner, *Notitia Monastica* (1787), Oxfordshire XII.

the Abbey was founded ' before 1005 '[12] and possibly it was sited, as was often the case, near an earlier Minster church.   Dom David Knowles[13] suggests that only rarely would a Minster church have been transferred to another place and only infrequently did the builders ' enjoy the freedom of a virgin site '.   He mentions also the problem of public grave-yards adjoining the early churches and adds that they ' usually found the site of their monastery fixed in advance, and their flexibility was reduced to a manoeuvre within the limits of a few yards '.

The purpose of the late Saxon pits seems to be obscure ; the fillings of some of them were alternate layers of clean gravel and dirty soil, whereas others had homogeneous fillings, as though the former had been back-filled from the latter.   They did not appear to be rubbish pits and contained few finds, apart from a few sherds of Roman and Anglo-Saxon pottery, the latter conventionally dated 9th–11th century.   They were very soon cut into by burials.   These burials were densely super-imposed, without any definite grave-yard plan, so that they must reflect either an emergency or more probably lack of space for an orderly cemetery.   The pottery with the burials was much the same as that in the preceding pits, the latest being 9th–11th century.

The early medieval activity took the form of levelling in the graveyard by back-filling the hollows with rubbish and by distributing layers of gravel over the site.   A wall was also constructed at the southern end of the old grave-yard.   In the 13th–14th century (the time that St. Leonards church was built), this wall was removed.   There was no sign that there had been any other activity in this area during the period that the Abbey flourished.   This area did not exhibit the variety of medieval finds and features encountered in Trench B ; possibly it remained as an orchard until the present day.[14]

Trench B

The limited extent of the excavation did not allow of any conclusions as to the purpose or date of the buildings encountered.   The north end of the trench was crossed by the same robbed-out wall as that encountered in the south end of Trench A.   Beyond this there extended southward a range of buildings which produced many decorated floor tiles and medieval and post-medieval pottery.   The magnetometer survey and the excavation both showed a gap of about 30 metres between these buildings and a further range of buildings to the south.   This is despite Anthony Wood's evidence for a cloister on the north side, discussed above (pp. 103–4).   The further range appeared to use a different type of limestone and roofing tile.   It lay directly east of the present Catholic church, which may lie over or near to the site of the Abbey gate-house.   Digging in the modern, Anglican, grave-yard, which intervenes, has revealed, beyond the church-yard wall, substantial foundations at a depth of one metre below the present surface.   At the south extremity of the

[12] See also D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (1971), 65, and E. Gordon, above.
[13] D. Knowles, *The Historian and Character and other Essays* (1963), 184–5.   From an essay entitled ' The Monastic Buildings of England '.
[14] The estate map of 1782 shows orchards in this area : Chambers, *op. cit.* note 7.

trench there was evidence, both in the magnetometer survey and the excavation, of a very large ditch, which is probably the perimeter of the Abbey. Beyond this lie the fishponds, and extending for some distance both east and west of the site of the Abbey, between it and the canalized Chil Brook, are remains of distributory leats for water-meadows.

THE FINDS

Abbreviations used in this section :—

Bolingbroke Castle	P. Drewitt, 'Excavation of the Great Hall, Bolingbroke Castle, Lincolnshire, 1973 ', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 10 (1976), 1–33.
Churchill Hospital	C. J. Young, ' Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1971 ', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 10–31.
City Farm	H. Case, N. Bayne, S. Steele, G. Avery, H. Sutermeister, ' Excavations at City Farm, Hanborough, Oxon.' *Oxoniensia*, xxix/xxx (1964/65), 1–98.
Clarendon Hotel	E. M. Jope and W. A. Pantin, ' The Clarendon Hotel, Oxford, Part I ', *Oxoniensia*, xxiii (1958), 1–129.
Jewry Wall	K. M. Kenyon, *Excavations at the Jewry Wall, Leicester* (Soc. Antiqs. Research Report, XV, 1948).
London Museum	*London Museum Catalogue No. 7* (1954).
Oxford Castle	T. G. Hassall, ' Excavations at Oxford Castle, 1962–73 ', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 232–308.
Ridge Tiles	E. M. Jope, ' The development of Pottery Ridge Tiles in the Oxford Region ', *Oxoniensia*, xvi (1951), 86–8.
Shakenoak	A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands and D. R. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak*, Vol. III (1972).
Stonesfield	M. A. Aston, *Stonesfield Slate*, O.C.C. Museum Publication No. 5 (1974).
Sutton Courtenay	E. T. Leeds, ' A Saxon Village at Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire : Second Report ', *Archaeologia*, lxxvi (1927), 59–79.

POTTERY (Table 1)

A detailed record of the provenance of each sherd is deposited with the pottery at the Department of Museum Services.

Trench A

It is surprising how much pottery was recovered from so small a cutting. But the disturbance of the ground by pits and burials and the impossibility of fully excavating those features which extended beyond the limit of the excavation, make the pottery evidence less reliable for dating than the stratigraphical evidence, although it fully supports it.

It is important to notice the high incidence of Roman pottery fragments (47), and Anglo-Saxon grass-tempered (31), and coarse, sandy (60) (though this includes many small fragments) sherds, indicating that there were Roman and Anglo-Saxon sites in the close vicinity. The late Saxon pits and burials were cut into ground which abounded in this pottery. The latest pottery in these features is Limestone-Gritted (type L.G.) which also produced the greatest number of sherds from the whole cutting (73) ; from this period also came 35 sherds of late Saxon coarse, sandy wares (Type S.M.).

Relatively few Saxo-Norman sherds were found (25) and these were always from features consistent with the early 11th-century foundation of the Abbey. There were only 11 glazed and 4 unglazed medieval sherds, indicating that this area was not of importance in the years that the Abbey flourished.

Trench B

This area contained a much higher proportion of medieval and post-medieval sherds, and a lower proportion of the earlier fabrics than were encountered in Trench A. But excavation in this area was very limited, and only the latest phases of the Abbey were examined.

TABLE 1 : Pottery

TRENCH A

Fabric		PROVENANCE																																	Total
	Ad	1	2	3	4	5	10	11	11a	12a	12b	12c	12d	14	17	18	19	25	26	33	34	35	37	38	40	42	43	48	48a	49	51	52	56	
P				1														1																2
F.G.	3	2					2		3	1	1				1	2	2				2	2	12					1	1	1	1	4		41
S.G.																				2						1			1	2				6
G.T.	1		1	1					3				1	2	3								7	2				2	1	4		1	1	31
C.S.		1			3				3	1	2	1	2		4	1	2		2		3	16	5	1	1			2	3	3	1	1	2	60
L.G.	7	2	1			7	3		3	2					8		2		1	2	1	2	9			2	5	3	4	2	2		5	73
S.M.									5	1			1	1	2					1	1	1	6	2		1			3	6	1	2	1	35
B.B.	1					1	2		7	1	2				2						2		6							1				25
Gl.	3						1		2						5																			11
P.S.	1								1						1						1													4
Total	16	5	2	1	1	7	10	2	27	6	6	2	4	2	26	3	6	1	5	4	9	21	45	5	2	3	9	12	7	17	5	8	9	288

	TRENCH B							Total
	BB	2	2a	3	8	10	11	
M.			1					1
G.T.	1						1	2
C.S.							4	4
L.G.	2		2		1		6	11
B.B.	1	1						2
Gl.	5					11		16
P.S.	1							1
P.M.	2			1		10		13
Total	12	1	3	1	1	21	11	50

Pottery Types and Abbreviations

Roman : Fine, grey, sandy = F.G. Coarse, grey, sandy with small grits = S.G. Mortaria = M.

Saxon : Grass-tempered, dark grey or black, sandy, fine quartz grits = G.T. Coarse, pink-grey, sandy, fine quartz grits = C.S.

Late Saxon : Shelly limestone gritted, black or dark grey, sandy, resembling Fabric B, *Oxford Castle* and dated there early 9th/early 11th century. Some of the sherds also resembled the St. Neots type ware from this excavation and from *Clarendon Hotel* = L.G. Coarse, sandy grey or black with micaceous grits = S.M.

Saxo-Norman : fine, sandy, buff or grey, sometimes with a ' smoked ' grey surface, ' biscuity ' in texture, similar to Fabric B1B1 at *Clarendon Hotel* = S.B. and B.B.

Medieval : pink, sandy fabrics, with green glaze = Gl. pink, sandy, unglazed = P.S.

Post-Medieval = P.M.

The Prehistoric Pottery. By H. J. CASE

Two sherds of Late Beaker pottery (Nos. 5 and 21) were found. 5 was in Burial 4a and is illustrated (Fig. 5), 21 was in Burial 25. They can be paralleled by sherds from *City Farm*, Fig. 22, No. 7.
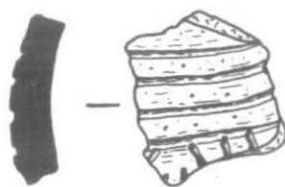
Fig. 5
Prehistoric pottery.   Scale ½.

Romano-British Wares (Fig. 6)

1. Pie-dish. Grey sandy fabric. Acute-angled trellis pattern externally. Similar to *Jewry Wall*, Fig. 48, No. 6. 2nd century (A, 37).
2. Pie-dish. Grey sandy fabric. Acute-angled trellis pattern externally. Similar to *Jewry Wall*, Fig. 50. No. 2. Early 3rd-century (A, 37).
3. Pie-dish with heavy, flanged rim. Grey sandy fabric. Similar to *Jewry Wall*, Fig. 50, No. 8. Early 3rd century (A, 36).
4. Mortarium. Sandy, off-white fabric with pink surface, possibly coated with pink slip. The hooked flange is depressed into the rim. Both rim and flange are grooved. Similar to *Churchill Hospital*, Fig. 5, No. 9, where it is described as being a standard late Roman product of the Oxford region (B, 2a).
5. Body sherd with stabbed dot surrounded by finely incised lines. Hard, sandy, dark grey fabric, with fine grits. Possibly Saxon (B, 12).

The Saxon Pottery. By FREDA BERISFORD (Fig. 7)

1. Eleven sherds from thick-walled, crudely made pot. Fabric : fine quartz gritting ; micaceous ; pinkish, with darker, worn surfaces. (A, burial 35). Not illustrated.
2. Sherds from two or more pots. Fabric as above, though some sherds more coarsely gritted. (A, Area 37 ; below wall 34 ; pit 11a ; burial 43 ; pit 51). Not illustrated.
3. Sherd from a thick-walled, baggy pot with upright, tapered rim. Fabric : sandy with fine quartz gritting ; black throughout ; smoothed surfaces. Also one small body sherd, the same probably from another pot. (A, pit 52).
4. Part of an upstanding pierced lug. Fabric : coarse white gritting and light grass-tempering ; dark grey with black, lumpy surfaces. *Cf. Sutton Courtenay*, House 26 ; *Shakenoak*. This type of vessel is fairly common throughout the early and mid Saxon periods. (A, burial 14).
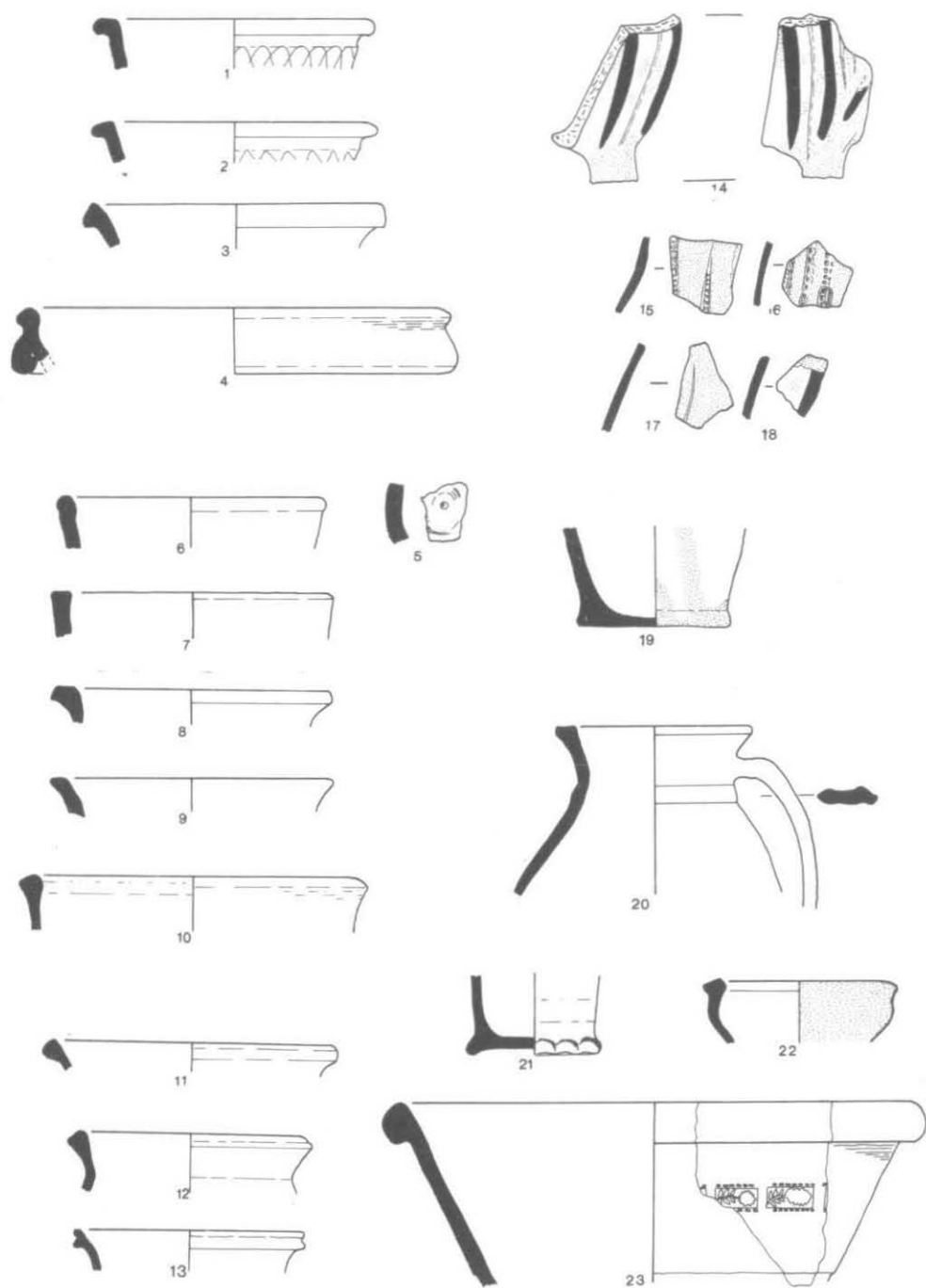
Fig. 6

Roman (Nos. 1–5), Late Saxon (6–10), Saxo-Norman (11–13) and medieval pottery (14–23).   Scale ¼.
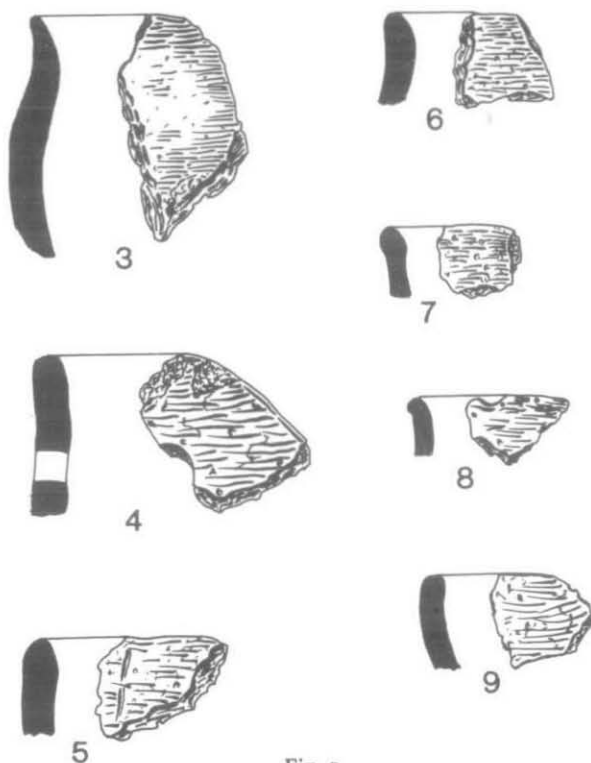
Fig. 7

Early and mid Saxon pottery.   Scale ½.

5–9. Rims, with sherds and fragments possibly from the five rims.   Fabric : fairly sandy ; grass-tempering ; some sherds with white quartz gritting ; black, usually with dark surfaces.
5. Sherd from straight-sided ?bowl ; crudely made.   (A, burial 43).
6. Sherd from upright rim and concave neck of jar.   (A, burial 1).
7. Sherd from upright, slightly bulbous rim.   (A, pit 17).
8. Sherd from upright, beaded rim ; crudely made (A, below wall 34).
9. Sherd from ?incurved rim of plain bowl.   It is possible, however, that this represents part of another upstanding lug.   (B, unstratified).

Late Saxon Wares, Limestone gritted (Fig. 6)

6 and 7. Black fabric with upright rims.   (A, pit 56 ; A, pit 52).
8. Pink-grey core with black exterior, and finer grits, less 'shelly' than 6 and 7.   Angular and everted rim.   (A, 36).
9. Black core with buff exterior and fine grits.   Everted rim.   (A, burial 5).
10. Light grey core, with orange-pink interior and dark grey exterior.   Rolled and everted rim.   (B, 8a).

These rims are similar to those found at *Clarendon Hotel*, Figs. 10–12, where they are described as St. Neots type ware and of late Saxon date.   Also from *Oxford Castle*, Fig. 12.

## Saxo-Norman Wares, fine sandy (Fig. 6)

11. Light grey fabric with small grit inclusions, fired hard so that the grits stand out to give a pimply surface.   Flat, everted rim.   (A, 11a).
12. Rim of jug.   Hard buff ' biscuity ' fabric, with dark grey 'smoked' surface on part of rim.   Slight rouletting on rim.   Similar to *Clarendon Hotel*, Fig. 17, No. B1B 42.   (A, 34).
13. Very fine light grey fabric, with pink core and darker grey surfaces.   Rim thickened by folding over outwards.   Similar to *Clarendon Hotel*, Fig. 18, No. Z16, in form, but a finer fabric.   May be an import.

Medieval Glazed Ware (Fig. 6)

14. Body sherd from an aquamanile.   Smooth, pink, sandy fabric ; patchy, bright green glaze, over-painted with dark brown lines. (A, 11a).

15. Body sherd from glazed jug.   Pink sandy fabric.   Olive green glaze with rouletted lattice design in brown. (A, layer d).

16. Body sherd from glazed jug.   Light grey sandy fabric, dark green glaze.   (A, top of pit 17).

17. Body sherd from glazed jug.   Buff sandy fabric.   Speckled dark green glaze over lighter green glaze. (A, 11a).

18. Possibly part of aquamanile No. 14.   Smooth, pink, sandy fabric.   Patchy, bright green glaze, over-painted with brown glaze. (A, 11a).

These glazed sherds could all be from Oxford type jugs, 13th–14th century.

19. Base of jug.   Dark pink sandy fabric.   Restricted use of dark green glaze on flat base of jug.   15th century. (B, 10).

20. Rim and handle of jug in fine, orange-red, sandy fabric, with thin orange-red slip, but no glaze.   15th century. (B, 10).

21. Base of stone-ware mug.   Light grey fabric with grey-brown external glaze.   Finger moulding at the basal angle.   Similar to *Bolingbroke Castle*, Fig. 4, No. 17, where it is attributed to 16th century. (B, 3).

22. Glazed rim.   Hard, smooth, sandy orange fabric.   Glazed externally with light orange-green, which continues over the rim. (B, U/S).

23. Large bowl.   Hard, sandy fabric.   Dark grey core with orange-pink exterior.   Decorated below rim with stamped design of flower and leaves.   In form similar to *Bolingbroke Castle*, Fig. 11, No. 105, but not glazed.

BRONZE

C.A. 1 (Fig. 8) Bronze strap-end buckle, pin missing.   Single rivet holding remains of a leather strap.   Similar to, but smaller than one from Smithfield in *London Museum*, Pl. LXXV, No. 1, 13th/14th century (A, pit 11).
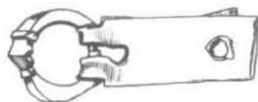
C . A . 1

Fig. 8
Bronze buckle.   Scale 1 : 1.

IRON

Nails, ranging in size from 3 cm. to 7 cm. (A, b, A, d, A, 4, 9, 12, 17, 36 ; B. 2, 10).   Iron strips with rivets (A, b and 1).
Unidentified object (A, 48).
?Coffin fitting (A, d).
Iron spikes, 9 cm. long (B, b), 6 cm. long (B, 1).
Hook (B, b).
Hinge (B, 10).

GLASS

Part of glass vessel from 49.
Fragments of window glass (Fig. 9) (A, 11, 12, 17 ; B, 2, 10).
The glass from A, 11 seems to resemble the designs on the decorated floor tiles.   The glass illustrated from A is painted, that from B, 10 is painted and abraded.

LEAD

' Cames ' for holding window glass (A, b, A, c, A, 10, 11, 17 ; B, 10).
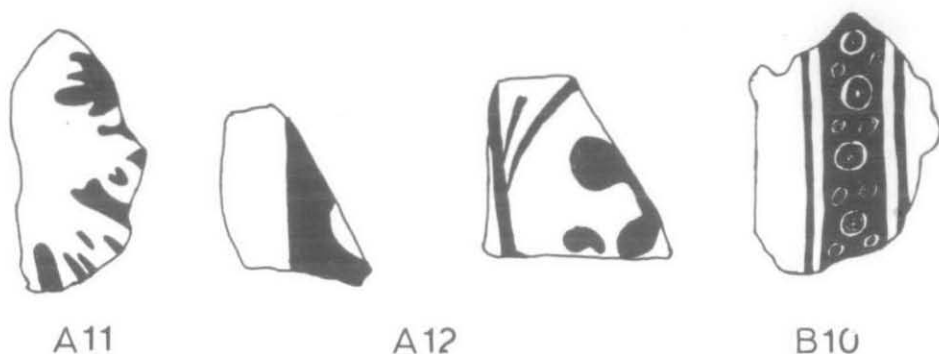Sheets of lead (A, 17 ; B, 10).

A11   A12   B10

Fig. 9
Window glass. Scale ½.

FLOOR TILES. By DAVID GANZ

There were three types of tile, all from Trench B.

1. 16th-century green glazed tiles (unkeyed), with an incised design of two concentric circles, diameters 20 cm. and 12 cm.   No other decoration.   These are not previously known from the region.   Size 13 cm. × 3·5 cm.   (B, 2 (2 frags.) ; B, 2a (5) ; B, 2G(6) ; B, 10(3)).   Not illustrated.
2. Inlaid Tiles (all are keyed).   The numbers refer to Loyd Haberly, *English Medieval Pavingtiles* (1937).
From B, 2 : LII (Fig. 10, No. 4 (fragments) ; Unidentified (3).
From B, 2a : XLIV (Fig. 10, No. 17) (2 fragments) ; XLIX (Fig. 10, No. 1) (1 fragment) ; LXI (Fig. 10, Nos. 2, 3, 5, 6) (10 fragments) ; Unidentified (4).
From B, 2b : XLIV (1) ; XLIX (2) ; LIII (1) : LXI (3) ; Unidentified (1).

The Eynsham examples of LXI are of the variant with quatrefoils, and there is only one step at the neck.   The frequency of the double headed eagle design is interesting as Haberly does not record it from Eynsham ; the two tiles in N. R. Whitcomb, *The Medieval Floor-Tiles of Leicestershire* (1956) (Nos. 9 and 10) previously recorded from Eynsham Abbey also do not resemble the examples from this excavation.

STRUCTURAL STONEWORK

Inevitably, there were many fragments of the Abbey stonework throughout the excavation, as there are indeed throughout Eynsham itself.   Fragments included local limestone, including part of a quern, and Purbeck marble columns.

Stone Roof Slates

These were recorded from many of the features, and only those with drilled peg holes were retained (A pits, 17, 33).   The buildings at the north end of Trench B appeared to have had stone roof slates of two very similar types, probably from *Stonesfield* :—

1. Yellowish oolitic limestone.
2. Blue-grey sandy limestone (' potlids ').

Those from the south of Trench B were of a darker grey-blue and contained more fossils. Probably also from *Stonesfield*, but a different slate bed.

CLAY ROOF TILES

The only roof tile which was retained was large fragments from pits, which appeared to be of two types :—

1. Coarse, limestone, shell- and grog-tempered fabric with dark grey core, and buff surfaces, often covered with yellow-green glaze.   Late 13th-early 14th century (*Ridge Tiles*, 86).
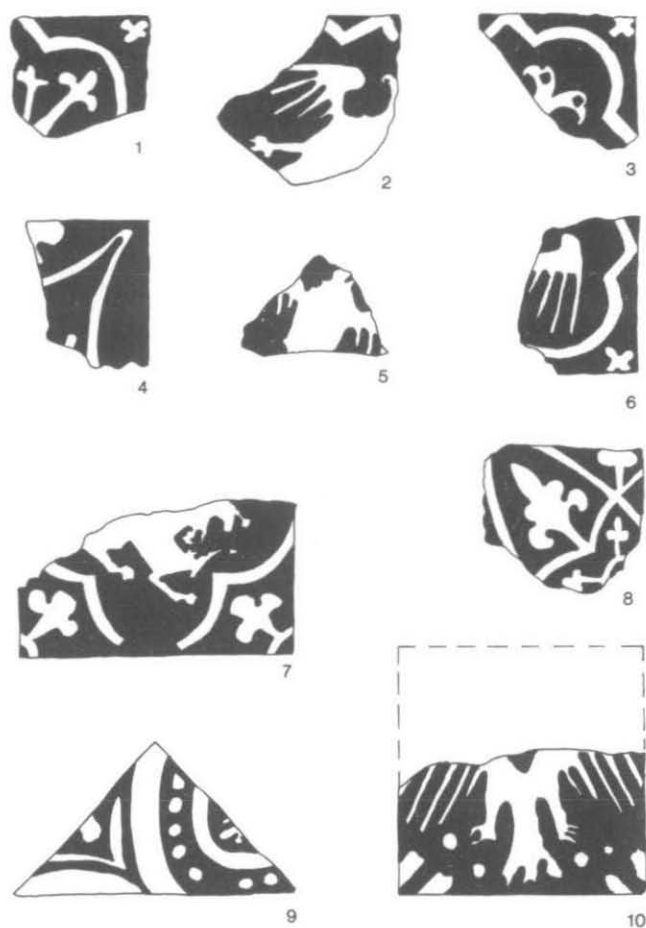
Fig. 10
Floor tiles.   Scale ¼.

2. Hard red sandy fabric, more brittle than 1, with patchy dark green or orange-brown glaze.

Pits A, 17 and 33 contained only type I, which consisted of 3 flat, 3 curved and 3 ridge crests.   The ridge crests were finger moulded near the crest.   Pit B10 contained both type 1 (4 flat, 1 curved, 1 ridge crest) and type 2 (21 flat, 2 curved, 2 ridge crests—with smaller, knife-cut lugs).

SLAG

Slag was found in A, b (2 pieces), pit A, 48 (1) and pit A, 12 (1).

DAUB

Daub was found in A, burial 43.

ANIMAL BONE

This was not kept, but occurred mainly in the pits of both phases.

HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS. By C. B. DENSTON

Most of the burials were disturbed, and only a few relatively complete skeletons were available for analysis.   The complete report is deposited with the rest of the site report notes.   The more interesting are synthesized below :

4a. Remains of two skeletons : (1) Adult male, height 5 ft. 8 in.   (2) Adult female, ?25/35 years old ; height 5 ft 2¾ in.   Abscess and caries in teeth.

9. Remains of at least three mature adults, and one juvenile, 6/7 years.   One male was heavily built, 5 ft. 9½ in. tall, and grooves on his tibia and cranium could have resulted from blows.

14. Adult female, height 4 ft. 11 in.

19. Adult female, 20/30.

22. Adult male, height 5 ft. 8¾ in.

45. Adult female, height 4 ft. 11¾ in.

47. Adult male, 35/40.   Medium degree of periodontal disease, and caries.

In addition to the skeleton in *9*, there were at least four other children, with ages ranging between 2 and 9.

PLATE IV
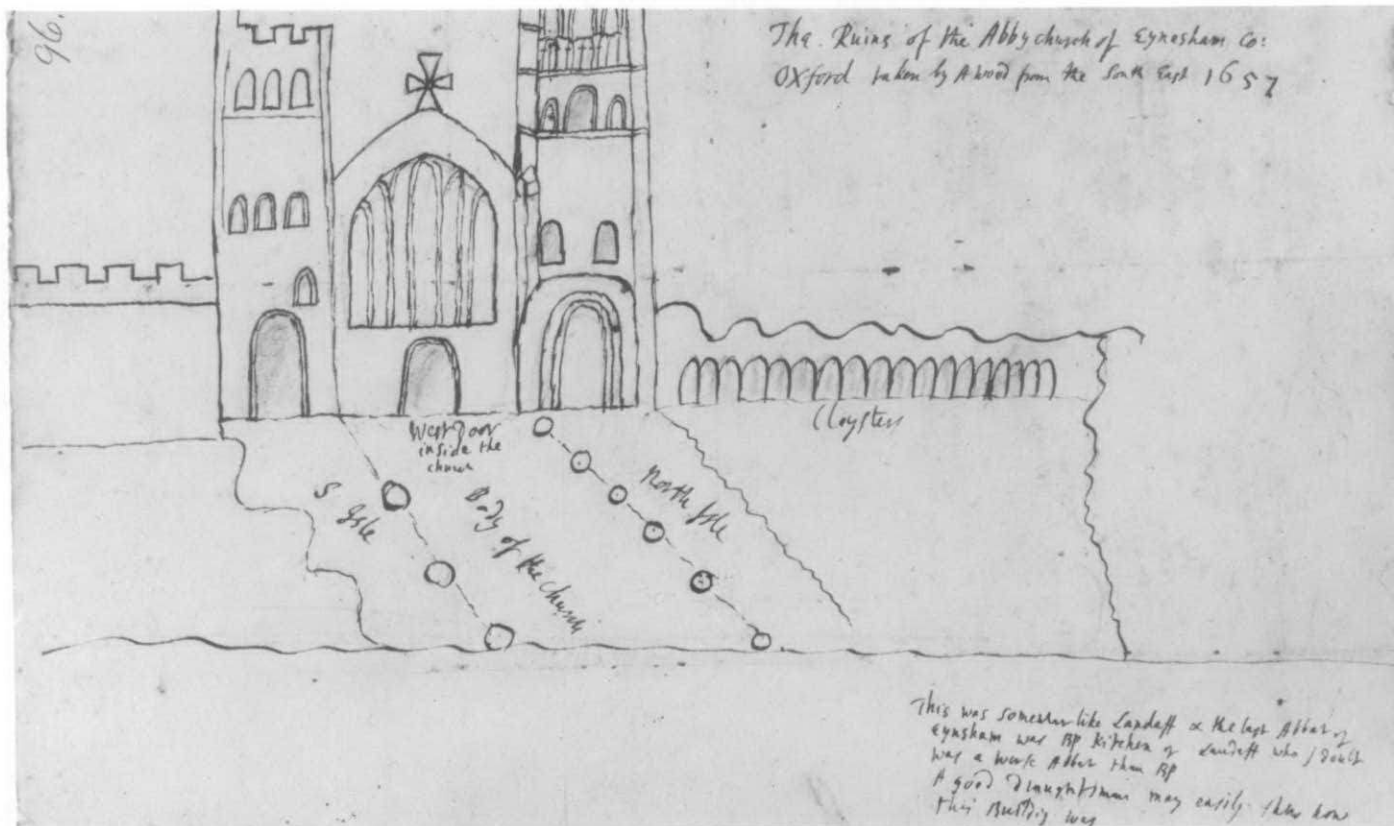
Eynsham Abbey, drawn by Anthony Wood in 1657. Bodleian Library, MS. Willis 46, fol. 96r. The note at the top reads ' The Ruins of the Abby church of Eynesham Co : Oxford taken by A. Wood from the South East 1657 ' ; that at the bottom, ' This was somewhat like Landaff & the last Abbat of Eynsham was Bp Kitchen of Landaff who I doubt was a worse Abbat than Bp. A good draughtsman may easily show how this building was '. The titles on the drawing are ' S Isle ' ; ' West Door inside the Church ' ; ' Body of the Church ' ; 'North Isle ' ; ' Cloysters '.