



Cerne
Historical
Society

MAGAZINE



THE DIG

So far...



'Ground truthing' the Abbey Hugh Willmott



A Student's Perspective of the Dig Luci Paczkowski



The Mysterious Case of the Cruck Harriet Still



Mary Anning Elizabeth Bishop



A Tale of Two Village Halls George Mortimer



The Coppice, the Countryside & the Hurdle Maker Robin Mills



Cerne Abbey: Porches, Fireplaces, Oriels & Towers Bob Foulser



Features of the Local Landscape Mike Clark

Winter
2023-4



Summer 2023 saw the first season of excavation undertaken by the University of Sheffield in Beauvoir field. Many local volunteers joined students from the UK and abroad in excavating two trenches close to the north wall of the graveyard. The season's work aimed to '*ground truth*' the ground penetrating radar survey undertaken in 2022. This showed that elements of the monastic ground plan were well preserved beneath the ground despite few indications on the surface.



The larger of the two trenches, measuring 10x10m, was located over what was assumed to be the southeast corner of the cloister, incorporating part of the east range and the north aisle wall of the church's nave.

A very thick layer of rubble was encountered below the turf in places up to 1m deep, confirming the geophysical survey's suggestion that the surviving remains were deeply buried. It quickly became clear that the buildings in this area had been thoroughly robbed of almost all usable stone in two clear phases. The first occurred at, or shortly, after the Dissolution in 1539 where this section of the abbey was seemingly razed close to ground level. The second phase of robbing occurred in the 19th century when the rough stone foundations for the original walls were systematically removed, presumably to provide further building materials for the village. All that remained were the foundation trenches for the abbey walls and some surfaces that served as bedding for now missing paved floors. *Figure 1.*

Despite this, the trench provided good evidence for the layout of the abbey cloister. The covered walkway had a buttressed arcade that would have held windows or openings looking out into the cloister garth. Fragments of roofing material suggested this was topped with slates, capped by decorative glazed ridge tiles. Although no *in situ* flooring was found in the walkway, numerous small pieces of black and cream tiles suggest it originally had a standard 'chequerboard' pattern laid down. A single grave cut was found in the eastern section of the cloister walkway. Its original stone cover had been robbed, but an impression of it in the floor bedding could still be seen, and it was of typical 15th or even early 16th-century style. Scientific research is currently being carried out on the skeleton found there that will provide more details about his life and maybe even his cause of death.

The cloister walkway was bounded to the south by a massive, completely robbed wall over 1m wide, presumably belonging to the monastic church.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to investigate within the church due to its location on the edge of the excavation trench. On the east side of the trench, the completely robbed-out foundation of the east range wall was also revealed, along with an entrance leading out into the cloister walk. At this point numerous broken up, but highly decorated, floor tiles that had originally paved the east range before being disturbed were found. Amongst these were typical motifs, including three leopards and the crest of the de Lacy family.

Although no architectural pieces were found in their original location, the excavation revealed many small fragments of worked stone that had escaped the robbers' attention or were not thought worth taking. These included pieces of Purbeck columns and other mouldings, almost all of which were 13th century or slightly later in date. No stonework could be said to belong to an earlier cloister, leaving the possibility that either one did not exist (in stone at any rate) or, more likely, a programme of comprehensive rebuilding in the 13th century had removed all evidence for it.



There was one tantalising hint of the earlier history of Cerne found in the northeast corner of this trench, perhaps coincidentally in almost the exact spot blessed by the Bishop of Sherborne at the start of the excavation! Lying beneath, and partly disturbed by, the later medieval east range walls was a sequence of three pits. These must be earlier than the 13th-century rebuilding of the cloister and quite probably considerably so. They were filled with dark organic-rich soil and animal bone, suggesting they

were used for waste disposal.

However, they did not contain a single fragment of pottery, tile, or architectural stone as would normally be expected if they dated to the period of the later abbey. The suspicion is they were, in fact, Anglo-Saxon, something we hope to confirm in the next few months.

A second smaller trench measuring 3x5m was also opened to locate the church's north wall towards its east end. This trench encountered an even greater depth of demolition rubble but succeeded in finding the church's outer wall. This, too, had been robbed of all its fine-facing stones, but a small amount of its rubble core remained. To the south of the wall, and thus just inside the church, portions of flooring were encountered. This mainly took the form of a mortar bed to support a tiled floor, which had mainly been robbed. However, one roughly rectangular patch had been left behind, possibly because it was very heavily worn or obscured by something, allowing for a reconstruction of what had originally covered the whole of the church's interior in this area.

Figure 2.



Fig 2 © Sheffield University 2024



This trench also produced numerous small fragments of architectural stone left over from the church's demolition. These included further pieces of Purbeck marble and decorative 'stiff leaf' elements from column capitals that were largely 13th-century in date and bear a striking similarity to parts of the upstanding architecture that can still be seen at the east end of Sherborne Abbey.

© Gordon Bishop 2024: Sherborne Abbey

More unique were finds of several pieces of carved chalk mouldings still retaining elements of gilding along with red, orange and white paint. Given the fineness of their carving and the fact they were made from soft chalk, it seems unlikely these were structural. Instead, they must have formed part of an elaborate internal feature such as a tomb, altar or shrine. **Figure 3.**

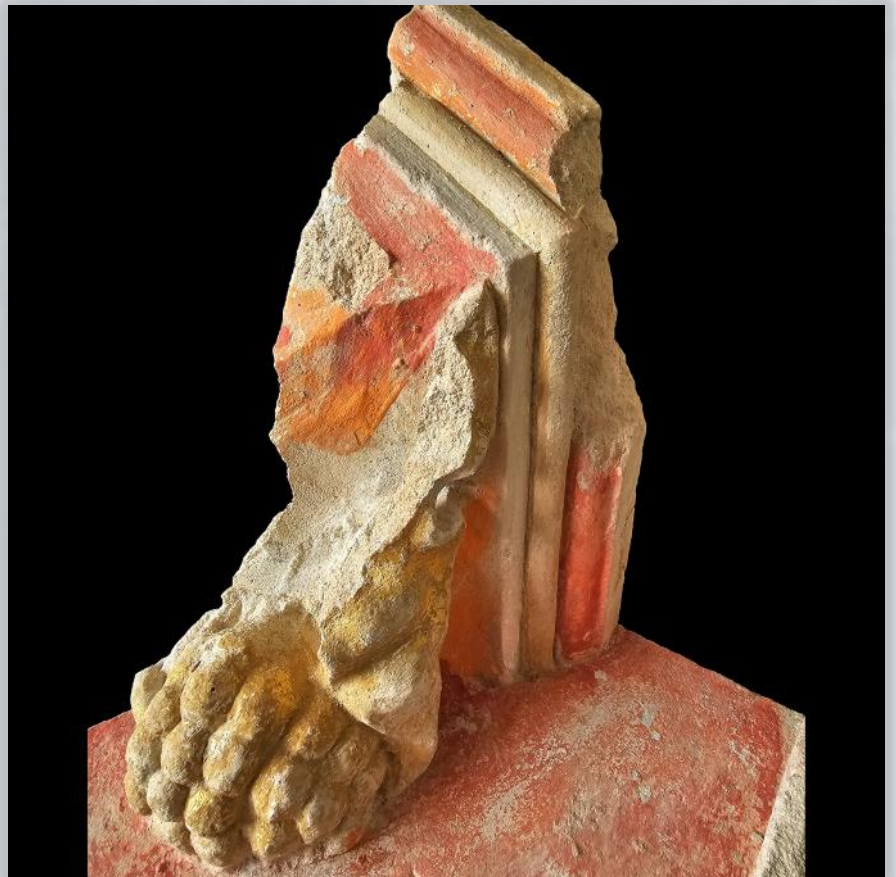


Fig 3 © Sheffield University 2024

The results from just three weeks of excavation have been informative and encouraging but still leave many unanswered questions. We have now positively identified the location of the cloister and the

church's north wall, confirming the accuracy of the geophysical survey. However, it is less sure where the other key buildings of the late medieval monastery are and what many other features identified on the ground penetrating radar might be. Although hints of earlier, possibly Anglo-Saxon, activity have been found in the form of the three pits below the later cloister, many questions remain concerning what occurred on the site before the Norman Conquest. The original ground penetrating radar survey has been extended further north to take in almost all of Beauvoir field, and this now shows that there are buildings and buried features across the whole area. **Figure 4**

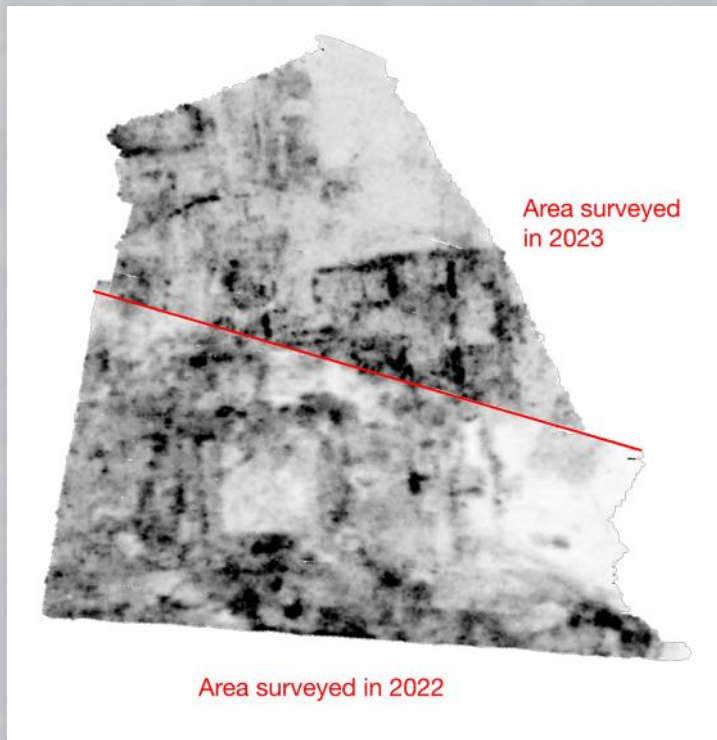


Figure 4 © Sheffield University 2023

The University of Sheffield is planning to return for further excavations this summer between 14th July and 10th of August, and it is hoped that some of these questions will be answered then.





"I think I found something!" An aureate figure, shrouded beneath hundreds of years of soil and clay, faintly glimmered under the harsh sun on a late afternoon in August. My gloved hands trembled as I carefully peeled away the caked layers of soil, revealing glints of red, and orange, and, all of a sudden, intricately molded golden leaves. Hugh sprints from the far corner of the trench and beams down at me. "You've finally found something of worth, kid!" he teases. I was overcome with a sense of solemnity and awe as the decorative piece from Cerne Abbey's altar laid before me. A forgotten piece of spiritual decor, one that might have been knelt beneath every day, was rediscovered within a century that its makers could have only imagined in their dreams. This ornament embodies two worlds, the old and the new.

Now I knelt before it, within a different context, not religious, yet spiritual, and felt thankful for this moment, this opportunity bestowed upon me by Cerne Abbas.

I always wanted to join an archeological dig, but never imagined I could. As a then twenty-one-year-old cultural anthropology student from America, excavating anything, especially medieval artifacts, seemed daunting. The responsibility to our histories, skill, and physical labor seemed too inaccessible, too scary. But after a sleepless night in March 2023, I blindly actualized this subconscious dream of mine through an email to Dr. Hugh Willmott pleading to let me join his excavation of Cerne Abbey. And before I could process the consequences of my email, my application for the excavation of Cerne Abbas was approved.



I spent the next few months gathering workwear, tools, and my courage. I spent hours online scanning articles discussing the best trowel to not make you look like a buffoon on site, trying my best to combat the countless faux pas I would enact during my time in the field. When my friends asked my motivations for the dig, or if I was nervous, I pushed them off, unwilling to show how anxious I really was. The dig was supposed to be fun, not the crux of my sleepless nights for the months before.



The day before I flew from my home in San Francisco to London, someone close to me wrote in a letter carefully stowed in my carryon that, although I “play the dig off as hopelessly spontaneous and silly,” he could tell this was something deeply important to me as a student, history buff, and human. At the time I was touched, but did not believe him. Turns out he was right.



My experience excavating Cerne Abbey, and getting to know the villagers was an indescribable joy and pleasure. The warmth and generosity of the residents was certainly appreciated by not only me, but the whole archeological team. From playing the fiddle with Harriet, saying hello to Doris the black-lab puppy, or enjoying the sun in Diana’s backyard, all of my interactions with the villagers were nothing short of wonderful. Thank you again to the community of Cerne for all your efforts that made us feel integrated, and welcomed into your world.

Cerne Abbas is a special place, though I am sure you all know this. The village is loaded with history. A history that is visible, yet invisible and in need of excavation. This history is enacted by and lived through people and the land; exposing a crossroads of contradictory spiritualities and historical sentiments.

And there are many figures that uphold these histories that are etched into the mythical memory and current reality of the town: The Giant, St. Augustine’s Well, Cerne Abbey, to name a few. These figures were and are inspiring enough that Cerne had historically, become a haven for romantic poets and artists who found inspiration in the land, who recognized this specialness.



When I returned home to San Francisco after the excavation, before beginning my senior year of university at Wesleyan University, I was unsure what to make of my experience in Cerne. I was overwhelmed with a love and appreciation for the place and the people in it, and wanted to study Cerne's history from an anthropological perspective. I craved Cerne, and wanted to honor the village's history, and those who made my time there so beautiful.

With the help of Gordon Bishop and the members of the Cerne Historical Society, I decided that I wanted to write my senior thesis on my time in Cerne, from an outsider's perspective. As my project took shape, Gordon patiently allowed me to sift through Cerne's digital archive and bounce premature ideas and theories off of him. My advisor and peers back at Wesleyan encouraged me to take my theoretical findings and transform them to resemble the fantastical sense of play, wit, and myth I experienced in Cerne.



By combining these two approaches, my thesis has become a collection of creative nonfiction short stories about my interactions with the land, history, spirit, and people of Cerne. I employ anthropological theories of temporality, hauntology, and spirituality to express these almost intangible aspects of Cerne's soul, and incorporate them into my short stories.

When my pieces are completed, they will tell my version of the story of Cerne, and pay homage to the histories of the village that have yet to be told. This bizarre, unique place that is loaded with history that is both hyper-visible and yet invisible, in need of excavation. A crossroads of different traditions, religions, and industries. The inspiration for artists, poets and authors who found a special relationship with the land, The Giant. The home of those with deep rooted bloodlines and those who ended up there by chance. The collection of all these factors, all these stories creates Cerne - an experience, and identity.

My thesis is just a sliver of the real thing, and one day I hope those who have never met Cerne in person will be able to do so and see for themselves how magical your village truly is. I hope I will be able to return to Cerne myself, as I am unsure of where life will take me after I graduate university in the spring.

But regardless if I receive the chance to return and continue the abbey's excavation, Cerne Abbas has changed my perspective on history, religion, and what it means to be a community forever. I am enormously grateful for my blip in Cerne and will remember this experience for the rest of my life.

