# EXCAVATIONS

# AT ELSTOW ABBEY

1965 - 1970

a progress report by

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ELSTOW MOOT HALL

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

P.1 TOP: View of the present parish church and the mansion ruins at Elstow. facing west.

BOTTOM: View of the excavations at the east end of the Abbey church. The south quire aisle chapel is in the foreground.

PP. 2 - 3 Plan of Elstow Abbey

P.4 TOP: Saxon cross shaft unit, late 8th century. 22" high. Limestone.

BOTTOM: A few of the late Saxon skeletons belonging to the cemetery over which the Benedictine Abbey was later built. The wall in the background, the eastern wall of the 14th century cloister walk, is later than the burials.

## SUMMARY

This short pamphlet describes the main discoveries of the recent archaelogical excavations at Elstow Abbey. These are placed within the context of the known history of the convent, and surviving buildings are included in the sequence, although this is not intended as an exhaustive survey of either aspect.




## 1. INTRODUCTION

".....we, the aforesaid Abbess and Convent..... have freely and willingly given and granted... to our most illustrious and victorious Prince and Lord HENRY VIII ... ALL our said Monastery, or Abbey, of Elnestowe aforesaid and all the Site, Estate, Circuit and Precinct..."
With these words the dissolution of the monasteries came to Elstow, as the Abbey was surrendered to Henry VIII by a document "Given in our Chapter House of the Monastery aforesaid the twenty-sixth day of the month of August..." in the year 1539. The Abbey had originally been founded about 1080, or perhaps as some scholars suggest, as early as 1075. Not until the year 2000 will the same amount of time have elapsed after the dissolution as had passed during its lifetime.

There is little to see today above ground of the "said Monastery or Abbey", and within a century the place where the surrender document was signed was gouged out by a carriageway for the mansion which was adapted from parts of the cloisters. The ruins of this mansion and its porch are the targets of slow decay and vandalism; the present parish church, the nave of the Abbey church, was preserved from decay but altered in some aspects by Victorian restoration. Thus by stages the architectural landscape has evolved with changing ways of life. Much has gone completely, like the superstructural details of the Abbey, and can only be guessed at from incomplete evidence. Where documents and pre-photographic engravings fail, traces of the past can only be recovered through archaeology. The application of this technique to the area around the parish church since 1965 has detected much of Elstow's forgotten past, nor has it stopped at the beginnings of the Abbey, but reached back into the Roman and perhaps the pre-historic period.

Archaeologists can only attempt to reconstruct the past from what survives in or on the ground. Stone walls are fairly obvious, but the disturbances left where the foundations

have been taken away by those in need of building material - "stone robbers" - are less conspicuous, and shallow impressions made by the rotted beams of timber buildings may never be seen.

Animal and human bone, pottery, glass, and stone, and some metals will be found, but little else, so at best the archaeologist is only seeing a partial view of an age, through the ground plans of its buildings and non-perishable objects thrown away or lost. 150 trenches and five years' digging has discovered much; but there has been no buried treasure, few moments of blinding inspiration and much piecing together of small items of evidence to increase the total of knowledge. Several hundred people mostly local VIth form pupils, have given up weekend and holiday time to work hard and painstakingly in often unpleasant conditions. This is a brief survey of what they have found.

## 2. PREHISTORIC ELSTOW

It is unlikely that Elstow was recognisable as its modern place-name before the Saxon period. Some people were however in the area. Evidence for them is fragmentary, as often is the case with earlier cultures: dating is similarly uncertain. Two sections of silted up ditch have been discovered cut deep into the natural gravel subsoil. It is likely that they were dug out before Roman times, but more precise dating is impossible. One was probably circular and might have been part of a Bronze Age ring ditch surrounding a burial: it was sited to the east of the present church. The other ran in a north-south direction across the field about halfway between the east end of the original Abbey church and the modern A6.



## 3. ROMAN ELSTOW

It is a mistake to think of Britain as populated by real Romans from the 1st to the 5th centuries; rather Romanisation was a process imposed with varying degree of success on the native population. Scholarly concentration on villas and military remains has emphasised these aspects at the expense of more elusive everyday peasant life. Some kind of Romano-British settlement did exist near Elstow; although nothing structural has turned up in any of the trenches, there has been a steady accumulation of Romano-British finds, such as coins and several types of pottery. The latter has included Samian ware, hard redglazed material imported from Gaul in the 1st and 2nd centuries of the Roman occupation; much has been in a grey ware probably being made in 1st century kilns recently excavated at the Mile Road allotments, only a short distance from Elstow. Fourth century coins have also been recovered, of Constans (337 - 350) and Valentinian I (364 - 375).

## 4. PAGAN SAXON ELSTOW

Roman influence on Britain did not cease abruptly in 410 with the Saxons stepping instantly into the resulting power vacuum. The more that is discovered archaeologically about the so-called Dark Ages, the clearer it is that the transition from Roman Britain to Saxon England was lengthy and complex, and that the darkness lies more in our ignorance than in their quality of life. The influence of continental peoples settled in Britain has left at least two traces on Elstow. Its name is probably a derivation of "Aellen's Stow", meaning the place or homestead of one Aellen settling here at some stage of the migration. The other trace is meagre but significant: the progress of various peoples from the continent to different parts of England has been worked out considerably through comparison of burial customs at places of origin and destination. Cremation burial was practised by

peoples who came from parts of Germany. A complete example was found at Elstow with fragments of some others, dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries. It is just possible that the Bronze Age ring ditch, if such it was, may have been still visible, to give the site a certain sanctity which attracted later pagan burials near its faint outlines.

## 5. CHRISTIAN SAXON ELSTOW

The description of Elstow's past so far has been almost entirely in terms of burial customs. This aspect of human occupation shows a remarkable continuity as a major use of the site through the Saxon, mediaeval and into the modern period.

The village existed in the later Saxon period, complete with its parish church, though this can only be inferred from an extensive parish cemetery. The excavation of only a part of this in the course of general investigations has so far produced over 250 individuals. The mediaeval Abbey church was placed over the northern part of this cemetery, and may also have obliterated the Saxon parish church. The mediaeval builders were certainly aware of what their foundation trenches were disturbing, for a large charnel pit containing hundreds of bones, including skulls, was found just outside the north of the monastic church.

The recovery of bones left by a long dead population, if carried out systematically, can yield general information about the physical appearance of people who are depicted only very sketchily in the art of their period. Permission to work on this cemetery was kindly given by both church and civil authorities. As with all finds, the archaeologist wants to gain the maximum from the bones, so excavation has to be a careful process. Most burials are photographed in position, all are drawn on to a plan, and notes are made



about the position and attitude of burial. Elstow's Christian Saxons were all laid out properly oriented east-west; only a few had any objects with them, such as a simple ring, brooch or pottery food vessel, indicating the almost complete Christianisation of the population by the start of the graveyard's use. Measurements of the long bones can give an estimation of height, study of part of the skeleton can give an indication of age at death, and some clues about the diseases which leave a mark on bones, such as osteo-arthritis. One skeleton can only tell of one person; the main value of the group from Elstow is in its size, which allows statistical summaries about the population as a whole. Its dating also is quite closely limited as the use of graveyards goes: it must fall between the effective conversion of the local population, possibly in the late 7th or early 8th century, and the foundation of the Abbey a few years after the Norman conquest. The study of the skeletons is still in progress at the time of writing so no conclusions can be ventured yet.

The other item from this pre-monastic period, the base of a late 8th century cross shaft, is perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing object from the excavations so far. It stands 22" high, and has low relief decoration on all four sides. Three panels show dragon-like beasts with wings, horns, lolling tongues and entwined tails. The fourth is made up of an interlacing pattern into which three simple crosses have been incorporated.

The top of the section is socketed to receive the next stage. It is tempting to think of this cross in use within the Saxon parish church at Elstow: however this cannot be proved since it was discovered by church restorers built into a 16th century wall as reused stone.

## 6. THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY

Tradition has Countess Judith of Huntingdon founding the Abbey in expiation for betraying her husband Waltheof to her uncle, William the Conqueror. If this is correct, the foundation must have occurred between 1075, when Waltheof was executed, and 1086, when the Domesday Survey was compiled, mentioning the Nuns of St. Mary's several times. No actual foundation charter survives however, and the chief authority for Countess Judith as founder is Dugdale's massive compilation *Monasticon Anglicanum* which in turn quotes from the 16th century antiquary John Leland who saw a document now no longer surviving. There is also some other evidence that the Conqueror confirmed an early charter, possibly in connection with the foundation. There is no positive evidence however, in documents or archaeology, for a pre-Norman origin, and a comparison of the Domesday landholding pattern with that of Edward the Confessor's last year shows the nuns conspicously absent from the earlier period. Neither has excavation produced evidence for any religious house here in the late Saxon period.

Complete monasteries did not spring up overnight. Building techniques and mobilisation of resources were both slow. Priorities were dictated by the nature of monastic life. The first permanent building was usually the church, beginning with the high altar at the east end, so that the religious routine could early be established. The cloisters followed, beginning with the eastern dormitory range, and often continuing round the south with the refectory and to the west with the *cellarium* or storage range.

This pattern can be demonstrated at Elstow. The early church, to judge from what survives of its nave as the modern parish church, is early Norman in date and was perhaps constructed in the late 11th century. Its west end probably came about twenty feet east of the facade we see today. The plan of its main part was unusual, as far as can be gathered from the



small amount of evidence left by modern grave digging. The standard monastic church plan of the period was cruciform, a shorter quire and presbytery with aisles being separated from a longer aisled nave by transepts with eastern chapels off them. At Elstow, however, the transepts and quire aisles are joined to each other, thus making into one unit what is usually two distinct planning features. This arrangement has few known parallels in England.

The earliest stone claustral buildings were completely replaced and all stone removed from their foundations in the 14th century, so it is difficult to date their construction. There is some evidence that the nuns may have lived in temporary timber buildings to the south of their new church, until funds permitted the building of a more permanent home towards the middle of the 12th century. The main ranges were built on the familiar plan, round three sides of a square closed at the north by the nave of the church. The eastern was built first, with the *rer-dorter* or lavatories at its south end, and the other two ranges were probably built together later. The cloister walk walls of this period were presumably in timber, since no trace of them has been detected in excavation.

An early addition to the church may suggest that these conservative, rather austere buildings were regarded as out of date as soon as they were completed. The southern quire aisle was rebuilt for part of its length and extended about ten feet eastwards. A child burial was made fairly soon afterwards in this new chapel near the altar position. The Abbey Chapter House was also built at some time in the 12th century, either contemporary with or postdating the east range. It was exceptionally long, and came out as far as the main presbytery itself, making a distance of about 80 feet including that part of the eastern range which probably acted as a vestibule. Little is known of this building other than

its simple ground plan: the floor levels were removed by the 17th century carriageway, and the walls had already been robbed out.

At the end of the 12th century the east end of the church was further brought up to date. The main presbytery, the site of the high altar, had its massive Norman apse demolished and replaced by a squared-off east end, probably in Transitional-Early English style. The superstructure of the extended south quire aisle was partially or totally modified at the same time.

There is a plan published in Wigram's *Chronicles of Elstow* showing foundations of the eastern part of the church allegedly detected by T.J. Jackson during the 1880's restoration. Although a modern churchyard had not limited the exploration of this area at the time, what we know from recent work completely contradicts this plan, which seems mainly to represent wishful thinking. Certainly there was no Lady Chapel attached to the east of the presbytery; the dedication of the Abbey to St. Mary and St. Helen probably meant that the main altar was devoted to the cult of the Virgin Mary, and consequently no separate structure was needed.

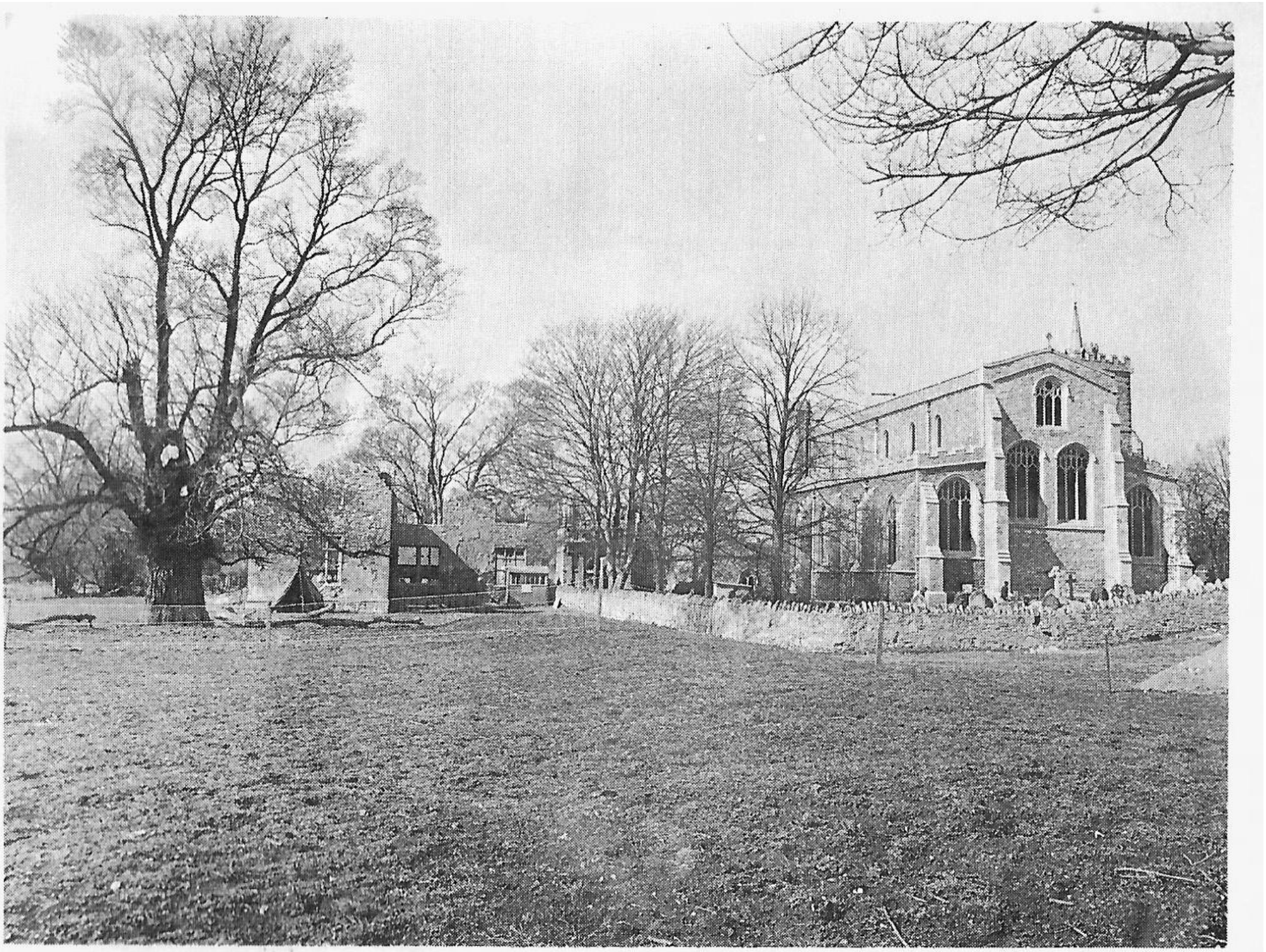
In the 13th century further changes took place in the fabric of the Abbey. The old Norman west front was pulled down and replaced by an Early English extension to the west. This brought the length of the church out from about 185 feet (56.4 m.) to about 205 feet (62.5 m.). At the same time it seems that the north end of the west range was extended westwards for the same distance. The new facade probably incorporated niches and a large central window, hints of which can be seen behind the many restorations imposed upon the surviving fabric. The extension to the claustral building, (evidence for which is not conclusive due to the drastic



remodelling it suffered to become the present vestry), made an outer parlour, where customarily the nuns could talk with persons from the outside world.

In the middle of the 13th century the cloister walk walls were rebuilt in stone. The wall facing on to the *garth* or open space was furnished with an arcade, the blocks of which were found reused in the footings of the next set of cloisters. They carried on them shields carved with the coats of arms of families such as the Ridells and the Mortains, who had presumably benefacted the Abbey through gifts of lands or daughters. One of these blocks had been given a facelift in the first half of the 14th century, removing the crest and replacing it with a deep cut foliage pattern: this and the use of ballflowers on another block help to indicate the life span of the arcade.

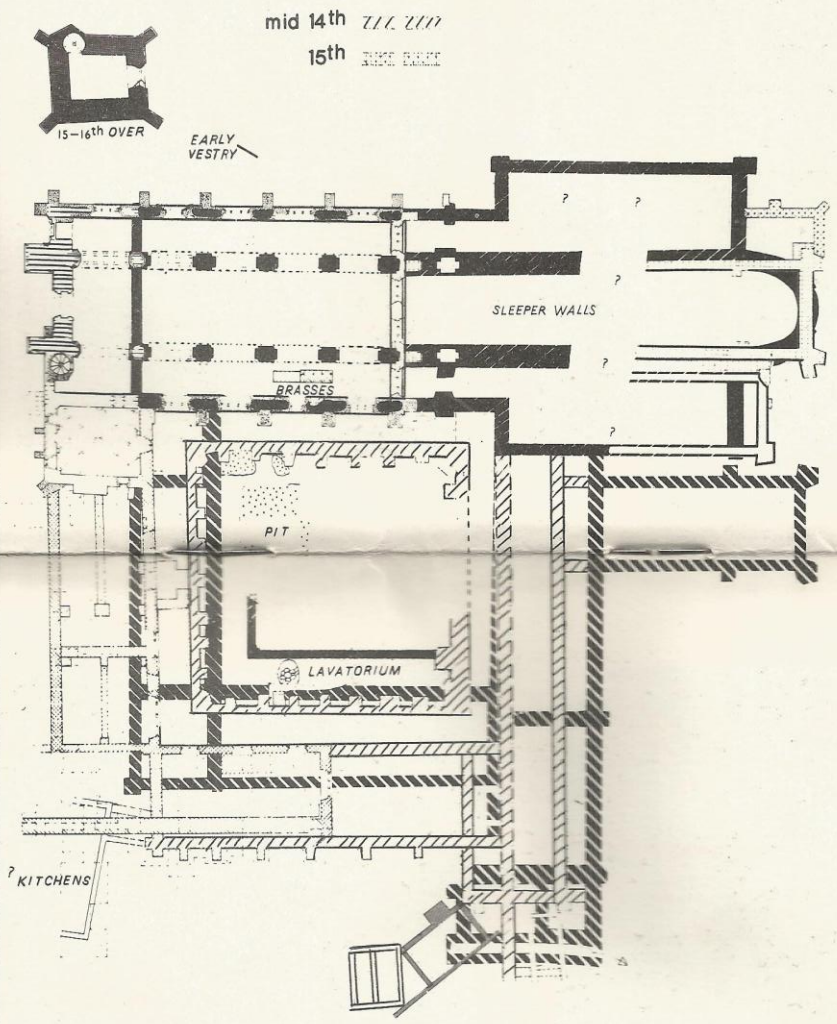
The lower storey of the detached tower appears to be the next work in the rebuilding sequence. The upper storey, if it existed, may have been in wood. This raises two problems. Did the Abbey church have a tower already? The evidence on this point lies beneath the modern graveyard, but the Norman church may have had a low square tower set over the junction between the east end of the nave and the quire. The other problem is of church usage. By the Dissolution the parish was using the nave and the nuns the eastern part. It is not known when this arrangement began, but it is a sharing of space between lay and religious with many parallels in other monastic houses. Nor is it clear how documentary references to a parish church in the churchyard fit this picture. A Westward extension of the Abbey church in the early 13th century might have been for the better accommodation of the parish, in which case a separate tower for bells could have been an urgent need. It is not clear whether this hypothetical building in the churchyard continued in use, or whether



# ELSTOW ABBEY 1965–70

## MEDIAEVAL & POST MEDIAEVAL

late 11th
early–mid 12th
mid–late 12th
late 12th
early 13th
mid–late 13th
mid 14th
15th
17th on 14th
16th
17th
date uncertain
19th




FEET 0 5 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

METRES 0 10 20 30

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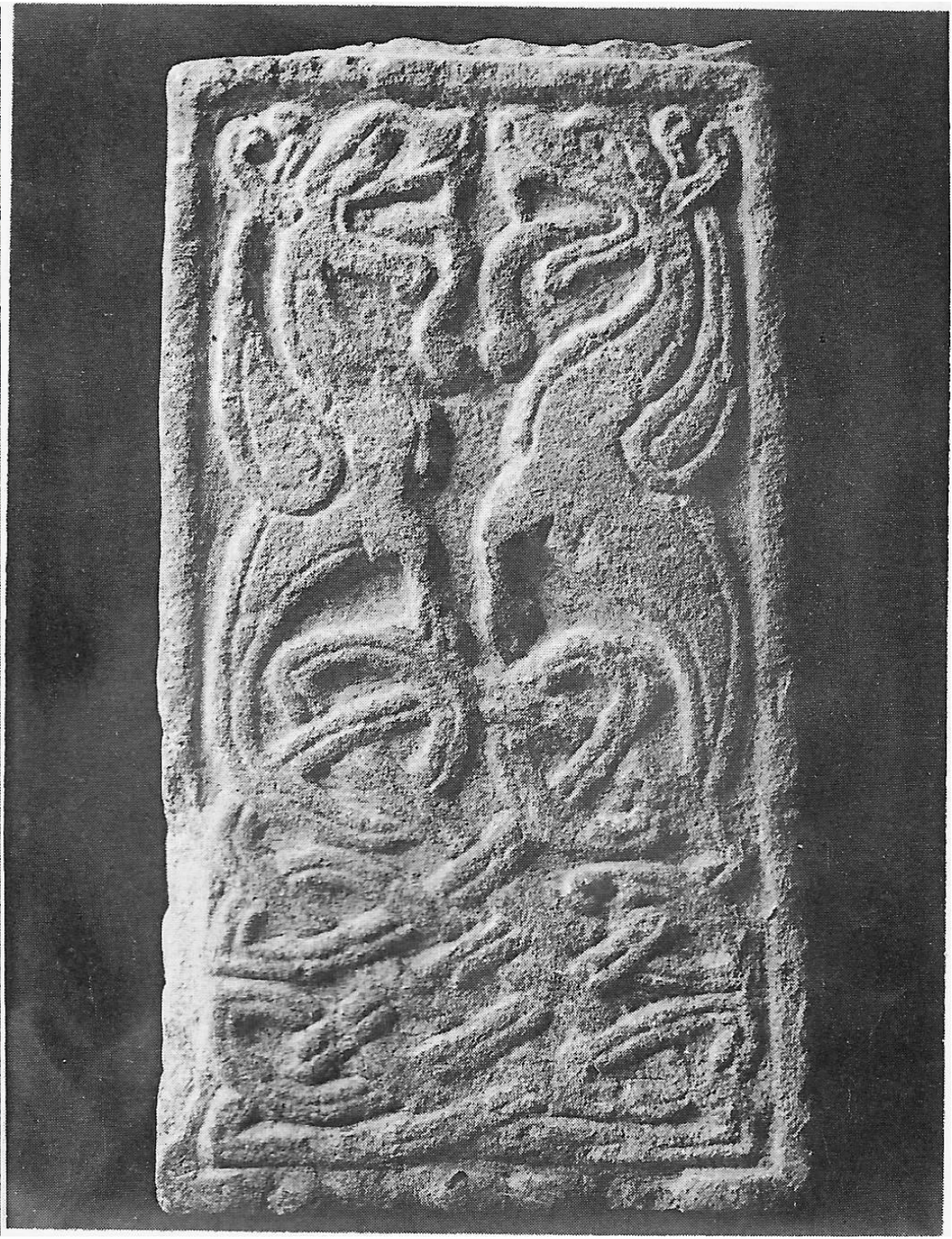

tinuous wall limiting the transept and quire aisle on the south: the range simply moved westwards against this wall. On the west side modern graves obscure the new relationship. The first floor of the new dormitory extended west over the eastern cloister walk, which was thus contained within the ground floor of the range. In the other changes the *refectory* was moved out south about 15 feet, and the west range out about 22 feet, to bring its western limit on a line with the outer parlour extension made in the previous century. Details of the 14th century *lavatorium*, where the nuns washed their hands before dining in the *refectory*, have been recovered just outside the south cloister walk. These include a well, a storage tank, a drain and a soakaway. There was a passageway through the ground floor of the *refectory* range, from the cloisters to the area outside the claustral complex: later it had a hearth inserted into it to provide a warming room.

This 14th century claustral plan remained basically unaltered until the Dissolution in 1539. Its foundations have largely survived, and it is interesting to note that a purely surface clearance of the site, like much investigation of monasteries until recently, would not have detected the earlier version of the same buildings whose remains were so much more tenuous.

About the same time as the major repositioning of the cloisters, the south quire aisle chapel was refloored. Part of this was the only surviving piece of intact tiled floor found during the excavation. The mid 14th century printed tiles made near Penn in Buckinghamshire were roughly arranged to make a circular pattern with every block of four elements laid together, though in places this scheme had not been followed exactly.

Further alterations did occur to the new plan, and have been detected through the observation of standing remains or by



excavation. In the 15th century a part of the north quire aisle was extended eastwards, further even than the main prebystery. The north wall of the new work was on a line with the north wall of the nave. The small area thus enclosed may have been used as a chantry chapel. Elsewhere on the site, in about 1500 the upper part of the detached tower was built in stone, and the whole structure modified to include a smaller doorway on the ground floor.

Other parts of the site have been excavated, and have produced evidence which cannot be so easily fitted into this chronological account of the Abbey's development. There used to be a small vestry on the north side of the church: it was removed in the early 19th century, and the external indications on the church disappeared in the late Victorian restoration. However the blocked entrance from the church, with a 15th century doorway, can still be seen behind the organ.

The monastic graveyard has been excavated, situated in its normal position around the east end of the church. It is interesting to note that the skulls from these burials are much rounder than the longer headed examples from the pre-monastic graveyard: this difference between chronologically adjacent populations has been noticed elsewhere but has not been satisfactorily explained. One of the monastic burials was that of a priest, buried customarily with a chalice, in this instance made of lead.

At the time of writing the excavation programme is particularly concerned with outbuildings south of the main claustral area. At least six separate structures have been found, including the post-14th century kitchens placed in the angle between the south and west ranges. The architectural development was particularly complicated at the south of the eastern ranges, perhaps because this was so close to a marshy area, and buildings consequently had a short life owing to subsidence.

Elstow has other features of interest connected with the everyday economy. The stream running to the south of the main cloisters is probably a mediaeval canalisation, and may even date from attempts to drain the marshy area around it. It served the fishponds, which can be seen to the south-west of the church.

## 7. THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES

Elstow went the way of all the monasteries, and surrendered in 1539 as one of the greater houses. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, a royal survey made five years previously, had recorded Countess Judith's foundation as then the 11th richest of all 136 nunneries and the 8th richest female Benedictine house. Life at the end was probably fairly comfortable in the Abbey, and some distance removed from the austere ideals of St. Benedict. There is documentary evidence in the Bishop of Lincoln's Visitation records that while the monastic plan designed to serve a communal life still survived in outline, it had in practice been adapted for a more congenial way of life. The common use of dormitory and refectory by all nuns had been abandoned in favour of households or messes where friends shared their lives in small groups. The fabric of the buildings was also deteriorating, though we are not told of the specific defects.

There is a gap in our knowledge of the site between 1539 and the building of the Hillersden mansion in the first quarter of the 17th century. There was a possibility that Elstow might have achieved prominence as a cathedral for Bedfordshire, if the scheme of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, had been carried through. At some stage, parts of the Abbey were destroyed, and the remainder converted into a dwelling place, while the parochial nave presumably continued in use. This involved blocking the east end of the nave with the wall that exists today behind the altar. It



may respect the site of the *pulpitum*, or dividing wall within the church between the parochial and conventual sections, and could have been erected about 1580.

The royal policy over demolition of the religious houses was partly aimed at preventing any re-establishment should England revert to the allegiance of Rome, as she did for a while in Mary's reign. This policy would naturally be modified by the needs of whoever bought the sites from the crown. Elstow was leased in the first instance to Edmund Hervey of Elstow, grandnephew of Elizabeth Hervey who had been Abbess from 1501 - 1524. Edward VI regranted the land in 1553 to Sir Humphrey Radcliffe who had married Isabel, Edmund Hervey's daughter, after her father's death. The new owner survived until 1566, was buried in the church, and has a monument to him on the wall above the present altar. The property remained substantially in Radcliffe hands until it was sold to Sir Thomas Hillersden whose father had married into the Radcliffes. It is possible that the new secular owners of these monastic lands lived in the west and south ranges, with the eastern part of the church and the eastern range, the essential parts of the convent, safely removed.

The twenty-four nuns who inhabited the monastery in its last days were dispersed, some willingly, others reluctantly, into the world, all with pensions of varying amounts according to rank. A few may have attempted to continue the only way of life they wanted in a house in Bedford: seven are recorded as buried in the churchyard of St. Mary's in Bedford, to which parish retired Dame Elizabeth Boyvill, the last Abbess.

## 8. HILLERSDEN MANSION

The thorough construction of a mansion from buildings which had only previously been given a makeshift conversion began about 1625, for Thomas Hillersden's will of 1632 specifically set aside a sum of money to complete the work. Basically the

western half of the refectory and the whole of the west range were retained, the open space between the two, formerly occupied by kitchens, being also included. A solid load-bearing partition wall in the old refectory became the foundation for the end wall of the mansion. The full width of the original structure was not however utilised, since the south mansion wall was built a few feet to the north of its old monastic equivalent. The west range became the main wing of the new mansion, to which a porch ascribed to Inigo Jones or his school was attached. The conversion is more obvious here in the ruins, with two blocked openings visible in the east wall. The modern vestry, previously the outer parlour, seems to have been incorporated into the mansion with its east facing entrance camouflaged to reconcile it with the symmetry of the new mansion front. The plan of the mansion was thus basically 'L' shaped, though excavation has not yet been able to establish exactly what happened at the south-west corner.

The environment of the mansion was suitably modified: a sunken carriageway was driven from the half-courtyard to the main road; gravel paths were laid around the house and some rudimentary landscape gardening took place. This mansion was occupied until the late 18th century: it was probably standing in the 1760's but demolition was in progress in 1781 when Thomas Fisher drew it with the roof off and western half almost certainly gone. The mansion period contains the years of John Bunyan's lifetime. His was an old Elstow name: one Thomas Bonyon is mentioned as inheriting his father William's lands in 1541. John himself has however left no trace on the architectural or archaeological record, although scholars attempt to ascribe parts of the church and village to references in his written works.



## 9. ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LAST HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS

With the disuse of the mansion, this part of Elstow begins to look generally as it does today. However small changes have continued in the last century and a half, and will no doubt still occur.

In the earlier 19th century the small vestry on the north side of the church was taken down, and the western part of the south aisle made to do service as vestry until the end of the century. Small sums were spent intermittently on the church fabric, as the Archidiaconal Visitation records show. Perhaps this was not enough to cope with the decay of a much modified but basically Norman church, for a major restoration was financed by the Whitbread family in the 1880s. This may have been the salvation of the church as a place of worship, but it also entailed the suppression of much detail essential to an understanding of its past. Fortunately, Elstow's associations with John Bunyan had concentrated nineteenth century artists upon the church: much can be deduced from engravings and watercolours. The T.J. Jackson restoration involved the substantial rebuilding of north and south aisles, complete replacement of the clerestories, and a major remodelling of the old outer parlour. It is sad that an architect with an otherwise good reputation should have approached Elstow with such a lack of antiquarian discretion. His policy seems to have been to simplify and Gothicise when he should have faithfully reproduced detail as he found it: this, coupled with an apparent lack of preliminary drawings showing the building he found, makes accurate re-construction difficult. This restoration left a mortar and stone scatter which has appeared under the turf in trenches near the church.

Jackson's work on the church was immediately followed in 1892 by a further generous gift, when the Whitbread family gave land to the east and south of the parish church for use

as a graveyard. Thus was built the present churchyard wall. Unfortunately the need for more burial space resulted in graves being dug methodically through the central part of the monastic church and the north end of its east ranges: a reconstruction of the plan has only been possible from tenuous scraps of evidence.

The story of changing land use on the Abbey site may be brought up to the present day with the building of a new parish hall, over the 14th century west range and their adjacent kitchens. This area was excavated completely before work began.

The process of exploration through excavation is adding to our knowledge of Elstow in the past by revealing more of the setting within which people of different centuries lived. This is a continuing process, so it may be possible to amend or add to the above account with future discoveries.



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## OTHER MOOT HALL PUBLICATIONS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Leaflet 1 | A Bunyan Guide. By H. G. Tibbutt. 3rd (revised) edition. 1965. | 1s. |
| Leaflet 2 | Bedfordshire Letters of Bunyan's Day. By A. T. Gaydon and P.L. Hull. 1955. | 1s. |
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| Leaflet 4 | Crime in Bedfordshire 1660-88. By Evelyn Curtis. 1957. | 1s. |
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| Leaflet 7 | Wrest Park and the Duke of Kent (Henry Grey, 1671-1740). By Joyce Godber. 1963. | 1s. |
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