The Cathedral Archaeologist’s Report

I find that I am about to celebrate a quarter of a century as Winchester Cathedral’s archaeological consultant. Way back in 1990 the Cathedrals’ Measure enacted that every Anglican Cathedral should appoint a consultant to advise them on matters of archaeology and architectural history when developments were planned, and I am one of a dwindling number of colleagues who have been in post since those early days.

The cathedral is undergoing the most comprehensive building programme since the preservation works of 1905-12, but whereas a century ago no statutory permissions were needed before construction works took place, and Deans and Chapters had an almost completely free hand if they wanted to make even quite major alterations to their cathedrals, now any such works have to be sanctioned by the Cathedrals Fabric Commission. This means that the cathedral archaeologist is required to undertake desk-based assessments and archaeological evaluations in order to gauge the impact of each proposal on the historic fabric or archaeology of the Cathedral and Close.

The Heritage Lottery funded works began with the construction of the New Learning Centre in the garden of No. 9 and the refurbishment of the existing Learning Centre in No. 10a The Close (I shall refer to the latter building as No. 10a to avoid confusion). Both projects involved below-ground works, but in the case of the new building, the foundations were carefully designed so as to sit within about a metre of post-medieval build-up which had been identified during preliminary excavations undertaken by Oxford Archaeology. These covered a medieval flint paved surface which might have been a stable-yard or perhaps an intramural farmyard associated with animal husbandry within the monastic precincts—documentary evidence suggests that the western third of the Close was used for such purposes.

The early thirteenth-century undercroft below No. 10 has long been recognised as a significant survival of part of the monastic cellarer’s range, which probably extended along the full length of the great cloister; and the west elevation of No. 10a, overlooking a small courtyard, is of the same date. The works within 10a brought to light many more features of similar date, and it became clear that thirteenth-century walls survived internally to a greater extent than hitherto suspected. Indeed, before it was rebuilt in 1804, No. 10a seems to have been substantially a thirteenth-century building which had been adapted as a canonry house at the Reformation.

An unexpected discovery was a blocked arch within the party wall separating Nos. 10a and 9 (Cathedral Office); removal of the infill showed that in its origins this wall was late eleventh-century, a survival of Bishop Walkelin’s buildings for the new Norman monastery. Excavation of service trenches and for the footings of the sensory garden at the rear of No. 10a proved that this wall formerly extended further west, until it abutted another Romanesque wall on the line of the rear wall of the undercroft. Thus the outline of a substantial part of the early Norman monastery may be added to the phased plan of the monastic Close which I have been developing since the 1980s.
The excavation of service trenches within No. 10a also provided further evidence for the development of the monastic drainage system known as the Lockburn. This originally flowed southwards just outside the west wall of No. 10, then turned eastwards before running south again beneath Nos. 10a and 9 The Close. This configuration probably reflected the layout of the buildings which they served. The Lockburn west of Nos. 9 and 10a was diverted in the 1880s when mains drainage reached the Close, and thereafter mostly received surface water. A trench for the new WCs provided a fine cross-section of the medieval culvert, walled and vaulted in Quarr stone, the favoured building stone of the late eleventh century.
The reorganisation of the south transept includes the provision of adequate WCs for the choir, and these could not be plumbed into the foul water drain serving the old WCs which was at the wrong level and not fit for purpose. Thus a new drainage channel was excavated beneath the carriageway on the east side of the cloister garth, working from south to north and starting at the existing manholes on the west side of the Deanery. This excavation produced much of historic interest, especially the remains of a plain tile pavement with green tile border which may have been the floor of the passageway at the east end of the Infirmary, linking the Infirmary Cloister and the Great Cloister. The Infirmary Cloister and its associated buildings may have been rebuilt in the later thirteenth century, for four superb Caen stone rib voussoirs, still with their polychrome decoration, were discovered amongst the demolition rubble in this area.

As the trench proceeded northwards, it coincided with the line of the inner wall of the Great Cloister, strongly built of large Quarr stone blocks. The Great Cloister appears to have retained its Romanesque form throughout its life, unlike so many other monastic cathedrals where the cloisters were remodelled in Gothic form.

Within the cathedral, the exploratory trench for the proposed passenger lift at the end of the south transept showed that, as predicted, below-ground archaeology had been severely compromised by various earlier service trenches: for a nineteenth-century gas supply, and the 1930s central heating system. Archaeology did however survive either side of this modern disturbance. It was therefore possible to understand how Bishop Walkelin’s workmen had levelled the site of the proposed new cathedral, shifting soil from the Anglo-Saxon graveyard, an operation which necessarily involved the disturbance of graves. The Norman builders appear to have collected together the skulls

Figure 2. The medieval Lockburn running beneath No. 10a.
and longbones of the disturbed graves, interring them in a mass grave towards the west end of the cathedral (excavated by Professor Biddle’s team in the 1960s); lesser bones were evidently not deemed worthy of such treatment, and their broken fragments formed part of the fill beneath the new cathedral floor.

In March and April Head Stonemason Tim Covington and his team have been demolishing the upper half of the thick wall between the calefactory at the end of the south transept and the former staff WCs, the area designated for the new Winchester Bible exhibition. The wall in question was inserted in place of a wooden partition in 1820 at the suggestion of the cathedral architect William Garbett, who was concerned about the evident rotation of the transept’s south gable wall. Several interesting stone fragments emerged from the core of the wall, and it seems that at around the time it was put up other Romanesque structures within the cathedral or Close were being demolished.

![Figure 3. Left: a Quarr stone voussoir with pellet moulding and chevron c.1140. Right.: a double waterholding base, early 13th century.](image)

There was great excitement amongst the contractors responsible for clearing the south transept when a stone-lined pit in the virgers’ vestry was opened up. I last briefly saw this in 1990 and wrote a piece for the Friends’ Record at the time,¹ but for many years it was concealed below the stair to the vestry mezzanine level. The pit (really three pits divided by narrow stone partitions) is undoubtedly twelfth-century on the evidence of its characteristic masonry. I previously conjectured that it was created at the time the west aisle of the transept was walled off to create the Treasury of Bishop Henry of Blois, and that the pit was used for the storage of bullion or coin. This still seems to me the most likely purpose: the Treasury with its massive walls would have been a secure repository for the personal fortune of one of the richest men in the kingdom after the king.

External stonework repairs to the south transept are under way, particularly to the aisle parapet wall on the west side, an addition of the early sixteenth century (Bishop Fox), where the replacement of a gargoyle will provide a good opportunity for our mason Will Davis, an accomplished carver, to show off his skills. Another challenge will be the replacement of the finial figure at the apex of the transept gable wall. I doubt that many readers have paid much attention to the dangerously eroded Caen stone figure that has just been taken down, and whose main function in recent times has been to support a lightning conductor. When I first inspected this statue I thought it was probably a nineteenth-century replacement of an earlier statue. An examination of the way it was fixed to the apex stone showed however that it was medieval; the masons had drilled and chiselled out carefully shaped and aligned holes both in the base of the statue and the coping stone, then poured molten lead through pouring holes drilled in the side of the statue, so it was securely held by four lead plugs plus a central iron spike, also encased in lead. The expanding profile of the lead ensured that withdrawal was impossible.
Figure 5. Diagram showing how the statue was fixed to the apex stone of the gable.

The archaeological context suggests that the statue may date from around 1317 when the profile of the south transept roof was altered slightly, an operation which would have required rebuilding the top of the gable. Although worn, it is a good piece of medieval sculpture, particularly in the treatment of drapery and its swaying (contrapposto) stance, as found in the figure of Ecclesia outside the Langton chapel, dating from a century earlier. As to whom it might represent: we appear to have a monk in a habit with a robe girdle, and a hood which is fastened with a brooch (still just discernible). A hole in the figure’s left side suggests he may have been carrying a metal object such as a pastoral staff. Virger Benedict Yates has come up with the good suggestion that it might represent St Benedict.
Figure 6. Base of the statue, showing one of the four lead plugs, sawn through at the base of the statue, and removed from its socket. Another lead plug is visible, still in place (below the pouring hole).

The removal of the lead covering of the presbytery roof has at last solved the mystery of the date of that structure. It was already evident from the different techniques used on either side that the roof slopes were not of the same date, but there was little to guide us apart from some workmen’s graffiti on the sides of the dormer windows. On taking off the lead, it was found that several of the lead sheets on the south side bore an inscription in relief on the underside, which had been formed when the lead was sand-cast. These inscriptions showed that the lead of the south slope had been renewed in 1897 by the local firm Moreton and Sons at the same time as the nave and north transept roofs were releaded. Even more exciting was the discovery on the north roof slope of the beautifully incised name of ‘George Northover, Plumber, 14 July 1819.’ This means that the lead of the north slope of the presbytery was nearly two hundred years old. It is pleasant to think that it will undergo reincarnation, for the old lead from the two roof slopes of the presbytery will be separately melted down and recast.
Work will shortly be starting on the conservation of the presbytery vault and windows, and the mortuary chests. No doubt many further discoveries will emerge, adding still further to our knowledge of the development of our great Cathedral.