

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

By P. J. TESTER, F.S.A.

ABBEY Farm, situated about 100 yards east of St. Mary's Church at Higham (National Grid Reference TQ 71757421), has long been regarded as the probable site of the Priory of Benedictine nuns founded in the twelfth century and suppressed in 1522. John Thorpe visited the place in 1776 in the hope of finding some remains to record in his *Custumale Roffense*, and in that work he published two sketches of the ruins as they appeared at the time. Some other writers, however, have favoured the view that the Priory stood a mile to the south-east at Lillechurch, but this view has never been supported by any sound archaeological evidence.¹

In 1959 a row of cottages adjoining Abbey Farm was demolished, and observations by our Local Secretary, Mr. A. F. Allen, and Mr. S. D. T. Spittle of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, showed that these cottages contained medieval work and might have formed part of the west range of the Priory. Mr. Allen published the evidence in *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1965) where he also summarized what is known of the Priory's history from documentary sources.

The possibility of discovering the layout of the Priory buildings by selective excavation in the area east of the destroyed cottages presented an attractive proposition, and in the winter of 1965 I visited the farm with Mr. Allen who pointed out a length of flint wall, and building debris on the surface of cultivated land which suggested where digging might usefully be commenced. The Kent Archæological Society, on the advice of its Excavations Committee, adopted the investigation as their official undertaking for 1966 and made a grant towards the cost. A resistivity survey was carried out by Mr. K. W. E. Gravett, and Mr. J. E. L. Caiger made a large-scale plan on which subsequent discoveries could be plotted. At the conclusion of this preliminary work, digging was commenced in April 1966. Nothing like a full-scale area-excavation could be attempted due to the present use of most of the site as a vegetable garden by the occupier of the farmhouse, but he kindly allowed us to dig a number of trenches at points where foundations were expected to occur.

A start was made by following the east-west line of the ruined wall noted by Mr. Allen, and the footings of its eastward continuation were

¹ See F. C. Elliston-Erwood's discerning remarks in *The South-Eastern Naturalist and Antiquary*, lix (1954), 3-4.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

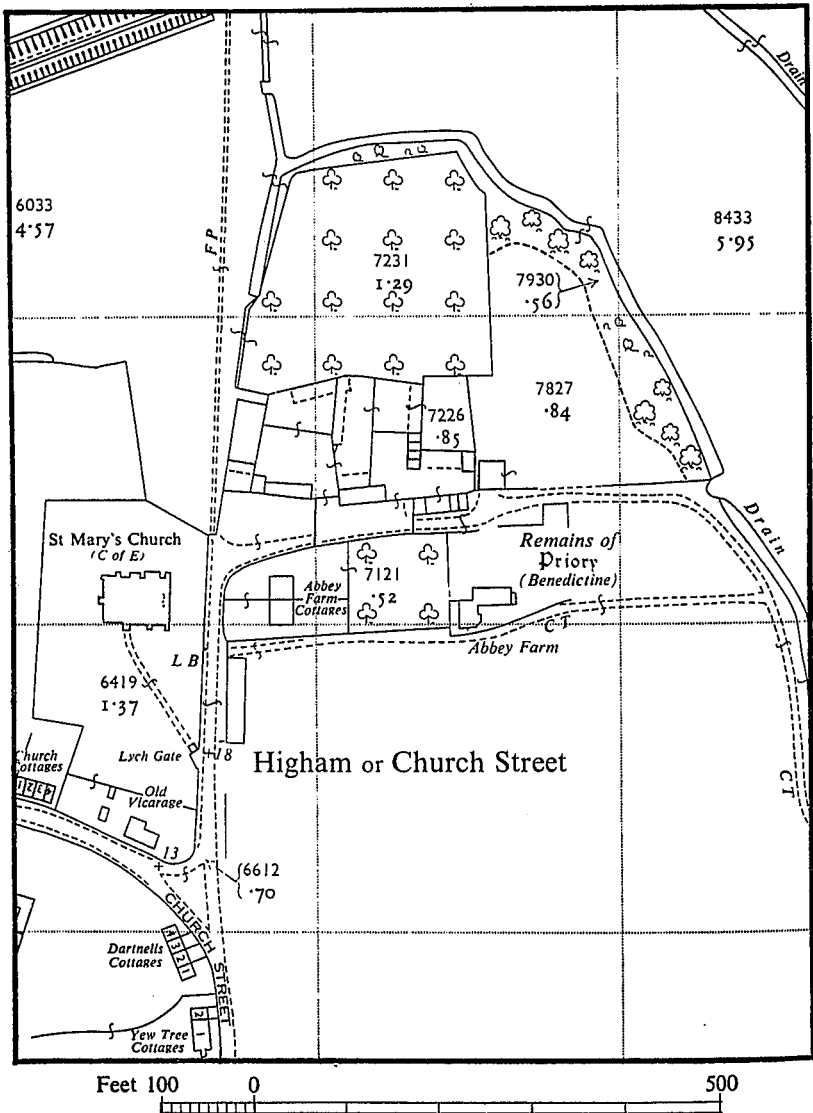


FIG. 1. The location of Abbey Farm, Higham. Ordnance Survey Plan TQ 7174 (revised July 1961). *Crown Copyright.*

traced until a return was observed proceeding southward. This suggested the line of the eastern range, which further digging confirmed, though whether the nuns' church lay to the north or south of the cloister was still uncertain. However, some digging in the field to the

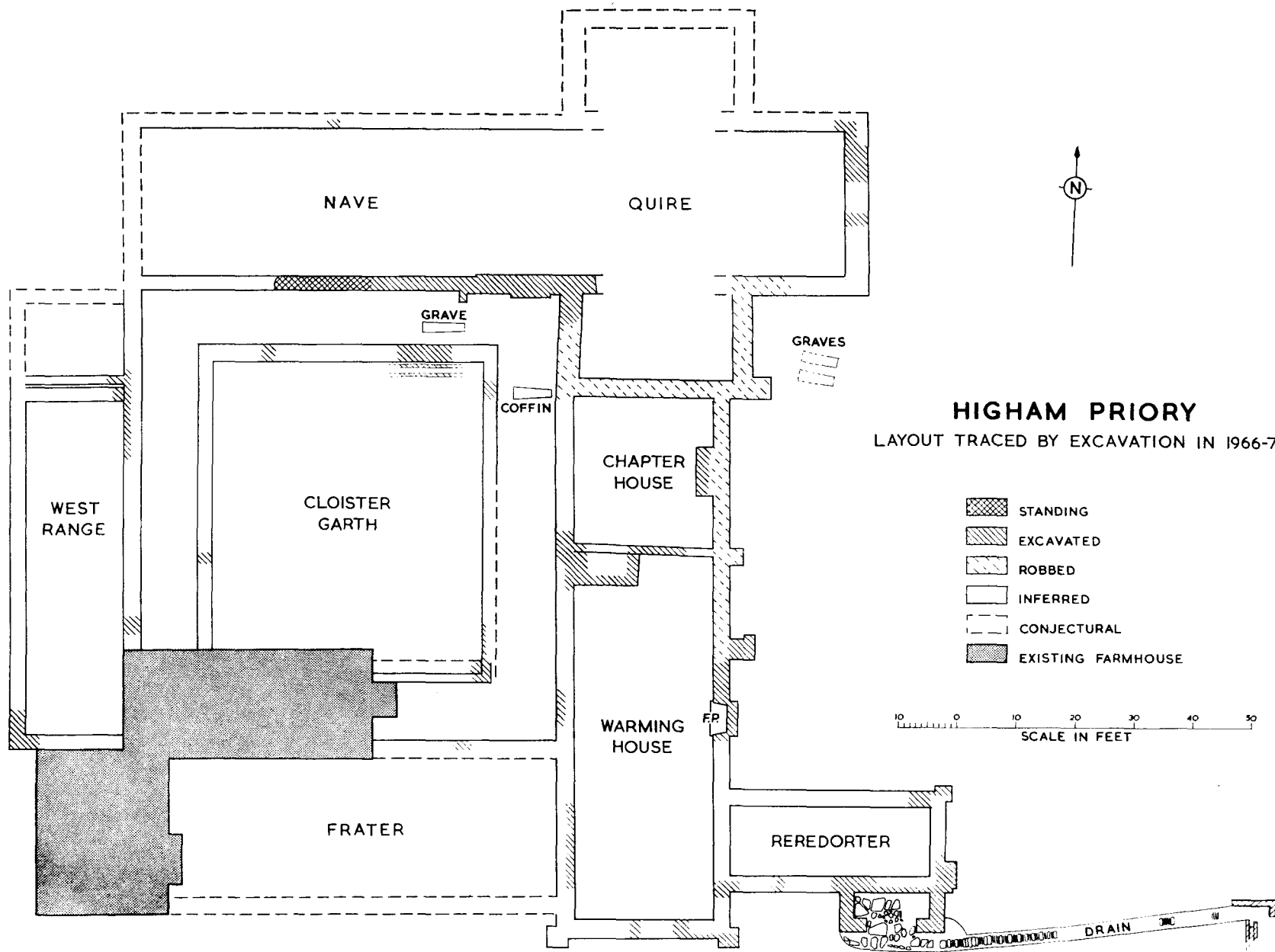


FIG. 2.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

south—prompted by the occurrence of tiles and building debris on the surface—brought to light obvious remains of the reredorter and its drainage system. In monastic houses this feature was almost invariably attached to the end of the east range further from the church which in this case must consequently have been to the north. In fact Mr. Allen's piece of standing wall was subsequently shown to have been part of the south wall of the nave, and it at present constitutes the sole remaining relic above ground of the medieval Priory.

Further periods of digging in the late summer and following winter produced enough evidence to allow the plan of the Priory to be reconstructed. Many details are at present lacking and must remain so until more complete uncovering of the foundations can be undertaken. This is not likely to be possible while the site is intensively cultivated and partly covered by a roadway and farm buildings as at present, so it is thought justifiable to publish the evidence available for the guidance of those who in the future may have less restricted opportunities for investigation. It may at least be claimed that the position of Higham Priory and the general features of its layout are now established beyond doubt on archæological evidence, whereas formerly these matters were no more than subjects of speculation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Permission for the excavation was given by the landowners, St. John's College, Cambridge, and the tenant, Mr. R. G. Batchelor. The occupier of the farmhouse, Mr. J. Palmer, kindly allowed us to dig trenches in his garden and store our tools in his outhouse. Our members, Mr. A. C. Harrison and Mr. T. Ithell, formed the nucleus of a digging team which was ably supported by Messrs. I. J. Bissett, A. P. Detsicas, G. Dockrell, D. B. Kelly, A. Miles, and Mr. and Mrs. D. T. Jones. Some boys of the Gravesend Technical School and Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School, Rochester, also took part. The plan (Fig. 2) has been drawn by the writer from measurements taken by Mr. R. H. Lawrence, related to survey-pegs set and recorded on a preliminary site-plan by Mr. J. E. L. Caiger.

Reference is made in various parts of the following report and appendices to expert help received in identifying material found in the excavation. To the persons named and to all others who have assisted in this investigation the writer expresses his grateful appreciation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE REMAINS

The Church. Unfortunately only the south side of this could be examined as the rest is covered by a farm road in constant use by vehicles. Much of the plan is therefore uncertain, though small cuttings made in the road established the north-east angle and proved the

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

position of the north wall of the nave. A small part of the south wall of the nave still stands to a height of about 6 ft. and is built of flint rubble, approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. thick. A slight external thickening of the footings of the south wall, just west of its junction with the transept, may mark the step of the doorway from the cloister. A small projection further west may indicate a respond or otherwise a support for the cloister bench. Most of the south transept had been completely grubbed but the robber-trenches could be readily traced and indicated the line of the walls.

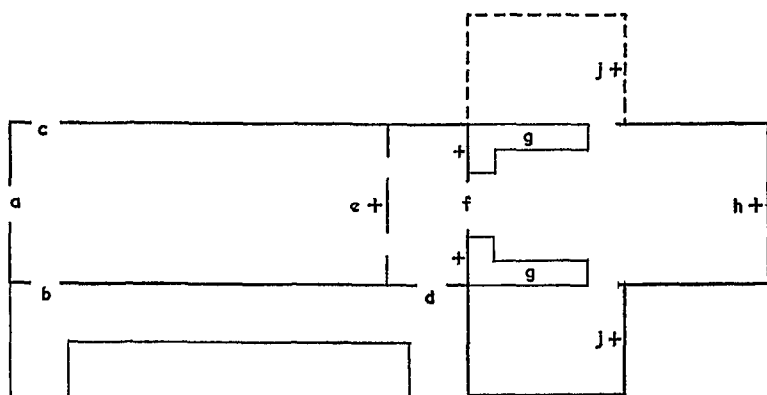


FIG. 3. Diagrammatic plan to illustrate the probable internal arrangement of church and position of doorways. (a) West door. (b) Door from cloister. (c) North door suggested by Thorpe's drawing. (d) Door from cloister. (e) Altar against rood screen, flanked by openings. (f) Entrance through quire screen, flanked by altars. (gg) Nuns' stalls. (h) High altar. (j) Altars of transept chapels.

Chapter House. Part of the east range next to the church was separated from the rest by a wall not more than 1 ft. 4 in. thick, possibly the footing for a timber partition. The roughly square apartment thus formed must, from its position in the layout, be accepted as the chapter house, evidently a simple structure, not projecting beyond the eastern limits of the range and probably low enough to allow the dormitory to be continued above it. At its east end was a well-defined rectangular area of chalk rubble with some broken roof-tiles incorporated, evidently the foundation for a dais or low platform against the east wall. A reasonable interpretation is that this was where the prioress's seat was situated, and the dais would have had a paved or tiled surface a few inches above the general floor-level. No trace was found of benches for the nuns round the sides of the chapter house nor were any burials encountered in the part of the floor area examined. In two places unglazed paving-tiles, $7\frac{1}{2}$ in. square and 1 in. thick, were found apparently *in situ* at the original floor-level.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

Warming House. According to normal Benedictine practice this would underlie the dormitory and be equipped with a fireplace. Here we were fortunate to uncover the fireplace in the east wall and it proved to be one of the most interesting details found in the excavation. Its opening was 5 ft. 6½ in. wide in front and the sides were splayed so that the back was only 4 ft. 9 in. in width. Stone blocks formed the lowest course of the sides with roof-tiles laid in horizontal courses above. At the back the tiles extended down to the hearth in the centre with stone blocks on either side in the first course. These details can be seen in the accompanying photograph of the better-preserved, north side of the fireplace (Pl. IB). Roof-tiles set on edge formed the hearth itself which showed signs of burning. A half-round moulding—radius c. 1½ in.—bounded the front of the hearth and projected 5½ in. from the wall face. At the north end this moulding was preserved intact and returned to the wall, the angle being carved in one piece with the lowest stone of the chamfered fireplace-opening. Several repairs and alterations had been made, indicating that the fireplace was in use over a long period. The opening had been narrowed by filling up the north side for about a foot, using stone which included a re-used Early English moulding (Fig. 4, No. 1). Another tile hearth was then laid in similar manner to the first. A third hearth was subsequently laid on this, and at the same time the back of the fireplace was relined with tiles set in courses as previously. In the three successive hearths, the surface on which the fire itself rested was made of broken roof-tiles set on edge in accordance with a common medieval practice observed elsewhere.² The original depth of the fireplace from the front of the stone kerb to the back was 2 ft. 11 in.

The piece of re-used moulding retains traces of colour-decoration and is part of a string-course of thirteenth-century character.³ Early medieval wall fireplaces usually had a projecting hood supported by shafts or corbels. Often there was a string-course at the junction of the vertical and sloping faces of the hood and it is suggested that when the first reconstruction of the Higham fireplace was undertaken its hood was removed and part of the string-course used with other material for building up the north side of the opening.

No signs of a tiled or flagged floor occurred in the area of the warming house. In front of the fireplace the section showed successive thin layers of black wood ash spread over the unpaved floor and sealed in one case by yellow sand, evidently put down to create a clean surface.

Day Stair. A platform of rubble occurred in a roughly rectangular form in the angle between the south side of the chapter house and the

² *Arch. Cant.*, lxxii (1958), 21 and lxxiii (1959), 211-13.

³ Brandon's *Analysis of Gothick Architecture* (1849), Vol. II, pl. 24, no. 23; also pl. 16, string-course from St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Sandwich.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

west wall of the east range. This was most likely the foundation of the stair by which the nuns ascended by day from the cloister to the dormitory. Benedictine houses commonly had day stairs in this position close to the chapter house, e.g. Christ Church, Canterbury⁴ and St. Andrew's, Rochester.⁵

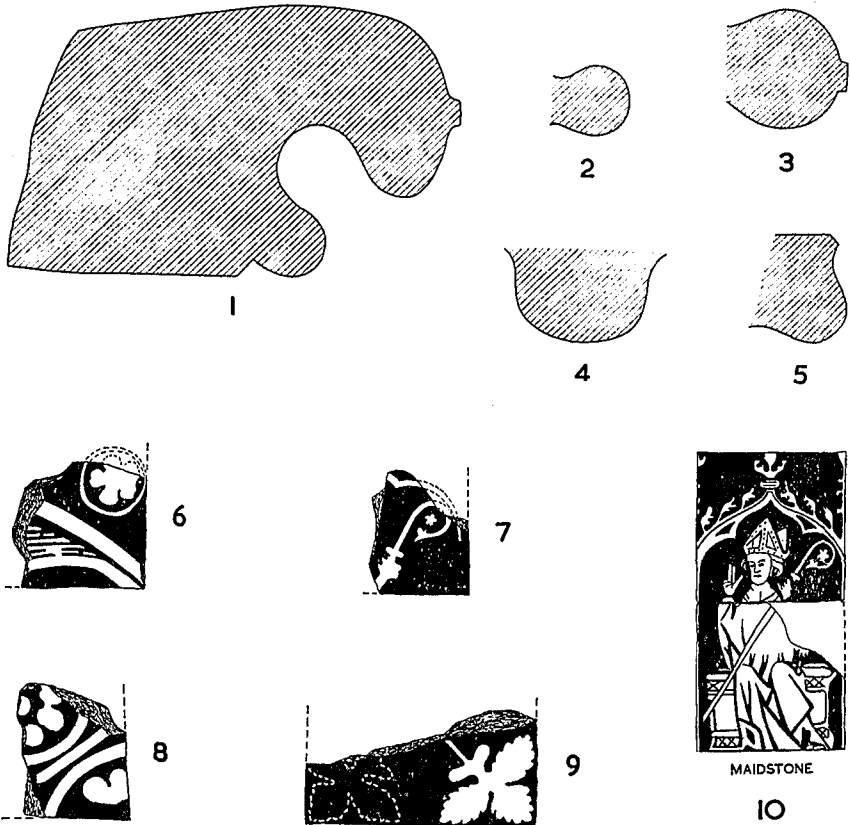


FIG. 4. 1-5, Fragments of mouldings; 6-9, pieces of decorated floor-tiles; 10, tiles from Maidstone Church, for comparison with 7, as illustrated in Cave-Browne's *History of the Parish Church of All Saints, Maidstone*. (Scale: 1-9, $\frac{1}{2}$; 10, size of each tile $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. square.)

Reredorter. The latrine block formerly communicated with the dormitory on the first floor of the east range and projected eastward from it at the south end. Normally efforts were made when siting medieval religious houses to ensure that a flow of water from a stream

⁴ *Arch. Cant.*, vii (1868), 26-7.

⁵ *Arch. Cant.*, xxiv (1900), 41-2.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

could be used for flushing the reredorter drain. At Higham no such stream existed and a less satisfactory arrangement was employed, similar in principle to the garderobes used in secular houses. The garderobe, with its privy at first-floor level, formed a rectangular projection on the south side of the reredorter. At the original ground level its interior was paved with large flagstones which extended through a gap on the south side and joined the drain leading eastwards (Plate IIB). No doubt the gap was covered by an arch, the whole arrangement being similar to that still existing at Old Soar, Plaxtol, in the solar-block of the late-thirteenth-century manor house.⁶

The drain was floored by alternate slabs of stone and areas of roof-tiles set on edge like those in the hearth previously described (Plate IIIA). Most of the vertical sides had gone but they appeared to have been of chalk and tiles. Internally the drain measured about a foot wide and was almost certainly at one time covered. After its course had been traced for some distance into the field it stopped abruptly and turned southward at right-angles into a covered drain of chalk and stone which continued for an undetermined distance (Plate IIIB). In removing some of the loose blocks of this drain-extension a late-thirteenth-century brass jetton was found imbedded in the mortar (Fig. 5), proving that its construction cannot antedate that period. Near by were some fragmentary chalk footings of medieval age but of uncertain significance. As the field was at that time being cropped we were unable to explore further in this area.

The foundations of the garderobe, and especially its heavy paving, have been a nuisance in the past to the farmer whose plough has been repeatedly damaged by striking them. At the conclusion of our digging he accordingly removed these obstructions, some of the large flagstones still being visible where left on the edge of the field.

Frater. There can be no doubt that the nuns' frater, or refectory, occupied the area indicated on the plan, and a small part of the north wall was excavated. Its south side lies under a hedge, a wooden shed and various other obstructions which have accumulated near the entrance of the farmhouse. The width of the frater is shown conjecturally on the plan and is unlikely to be inaccurate to any significant degree.

West Range. Mr. Spittle's plan in *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx shows the building destroyed in 1959 which he suggested might have formed the west range of the Priory. We therefore only needed to excavate a small area in order to plot the alignment of the range in relation to the other remains uncovered. Some digging at the south-west corner also established accurate details of the relationship of the destroyed

⁶ M. Wood, *The English Medieval House* (1965), 385.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

walls with the existing farmhouse. To the north the footing of the end wall was partly uncovered at its junction with the east wall, and it was found to be slightly beyond the line shown on the 1959 plan. Only 6 in. from it was another cross-wall, $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft. thick, the existence of which requires some explanation. A likely theory is that originally the west range extended up to the line of the south side of the church, and it was later shortened. In that case the thin cross-wall must have been a partition separating an apartment at the north end of the west range as originally constructed. Usually a room in this part of a monastic layout served as the outer parlour, and afforded communication between the enclosed community and the outside world. In the later Middle Ages the west range often contained the house of the superior and I am inclined to interpret the building demolished in 1959 as remains of the prioress's lodging adapted as a farmhouse in the post-Suppression period. Its north wall as shown on Spittle's plan must have been external as it was observed to contain a window.

Cloister. Cuttings were made to intersect the line of the cloister walls on all four sides of the enclosure. The results showed that the four alleys were of consistent width although the walls supporting the arcade were of unequal thickness. Next to the church the cloister footing was 3 ft. thick and was flanked by a flint-lined gully intended to catch the drips from the eaves of the pitched cloister roof. At the south-east corner a thin wall, 1 ft. 5 in. thick, was preserved, resting on the south side on a wider footing. Against the inside of this wall, at the south end of the east alley, were a number of glazed floor-tiles *in situ* on the original floor-level 2 ft. from the present surface. These tiles were $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. square and just over an inch thick and are described more fully under separate heading.

Graves. Just east of the south transept a trial cutting uncovered the lower part of two uncoffined skeletons. This was the usual situation for the monastic cemetery and the graves were undoubtedly those of nuns. The remains lay $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. from the present surface and after examination *in situ* they were reburied without further disturbance.

An empty grave, lined with chalk blocks, measuring 7 ft. in length, 1 ft. 9 in. wide at the head and slightly less at the foot, occurred in the north cloister-alley (Plate IIA). Some bones scattered in the immediate vicinity were evidence of grave-robbing at an unknown period.

The position of a stone coffin in the east alley of the cloister is shown on the plan. Its lid was in place but broken and the foot of the coffin damaged, the hole being repaired with small unmortared yellow and pink bricks. Under the lid was a course of the same type of bricks set round the edge of the coffin (Plate IA). While the bricks are not likely to be earlier than the end of the thirteenth century—and more



A. Stone coffin in east alley of cloister, with human remains *in situ*.



B. North side of fireplace in warming house, after removal of two superimposed hearths. Viewed from the south.

PLATE II



A. Chalk-lined grave in north alley of cloister.



B. Stone paving of garderobe, viewed from the south.



A. Reredorter drain, floored with stone slabs alternating with roof-tiles set on edge.



B. Southward extension of reredorter drain.

Fig. 2. North West View of the Remains of Higham Abby; p. 122.

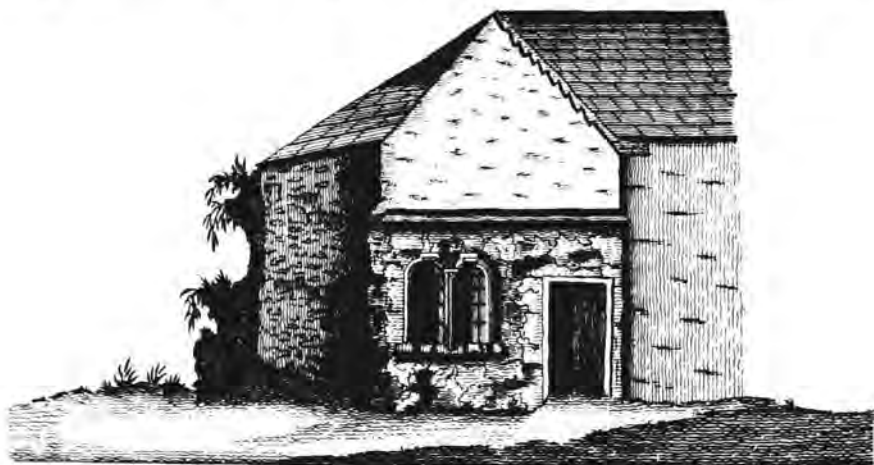
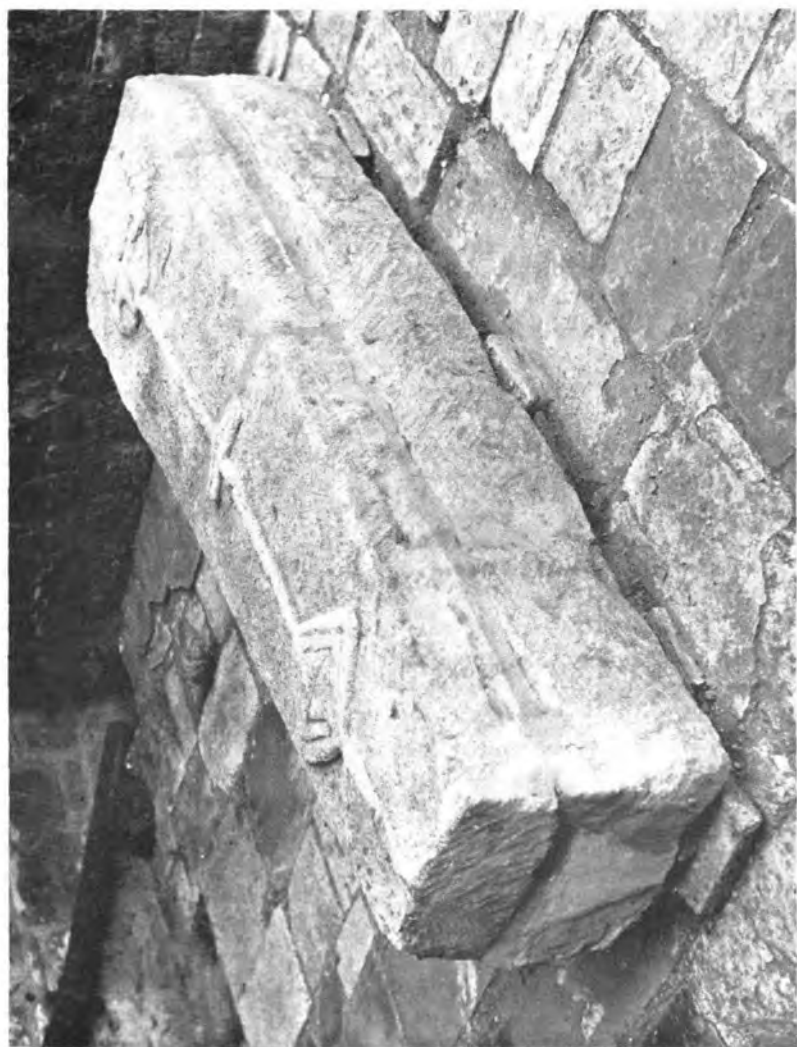


Fig. 3. South View of the Remains of Higham Abby; p. 122.



Drawings from Thorpe's *Custumale Roffense* (1788).



The Higham coffin outside Maidstone Museum. (Reproduced by permission of *The Kent Messenger*.)

probably later—the coffin is twelfth-century, as Mr. L. R. A. Grove has shown (Appendix II). Clearly it was re-interred at this spot having been removed from some other position, probably in either the church or chapter house. In the course of removal it was damaged in the way described and repaired with bricks on reburial.

On lifting the lid the coffin was found to be filled with dark soil enveloping the complete skeleton of an adult male lying with its skull slightly below the cavity intended for its accommodation. Over the feet of the skeleton was another skull, lacking its lower jaw, and some long-bones. These remains represent a second individual, about 15 years of age, and had evidently been placed in the coffin at the time of its reburial (Appendix III).

We may fairly assume that the complete skeleton was the primary burial and that it belonged to someone of importance connected with the early period of the Priory's existence. These remains were apparently taken in the coffin from their first resting-place and reburied in the cloister, the lid being removed in the process to lighten it and facilitate handling. Despite this precaution the lid was accidentally broken and the foot of the coffin damaged. It was then lowered into its new grave, in digging which some uncoffined bones of an earlier burial had presumably been disturbed. They were laid in the foot of the open coffin which was then filled with the spoil of the newly-dug grave, and the lid replaced. Mr. Allen has recorded that when a cess-pit was dug in 1957 some human remains were found, and it is significant that this pit was adjacent to the south side of the coffin indicating that other burials were made in this part of the cloister. The fact that bricks were put under the lid may be explained by supposing that the grave was found to be a few inches too deep and that the bricks were needed to bring the lid flush with the cloister floor.

BUILDING MATERIALS AND CONSTRUCTIONAL DETAILS

The excavated foundations of the church and claustral buildings were composed of flint rubble incorporating some chalk and ragstone. Several pieces of Roman tile or brick had been re-used in the footings and Roman remains are recorded to have occurred 300 yards south-west of the Priory, as noted on the Ordnance Survey maps.

In only two instances could thicknesses of walls, as distinct from foundations, be ascertained. The south wall of the nave was 2 ft. 6 in. thick, and the east wall of the east range was 2 ft. 8 in.

Fragments of Purbeck marble shafts, $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter, were found in the east range, next to the church and also near the fireplace. Broken slabs of the same material, in small pieces, occurred in this area.

Pieces of worked freestone, such as the mouldings shown in Fig. 4,

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

were invariably of Upper Greensand, a stone much used in the Rochester area in the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷ Barnack Stone, the material used for the coffin found in the cloister, was imported into the Lower Medway as early as the first half of the twelfth century when it was being employed in work at Rochester. The quarries were about 8 miles north-west of Peterborough.⁸

Roof-Tiles and Slates. Plain roof-tiles occurred over the site in contexts which indicated that they were derived from the roofs of the Priory buildings, and they were also used in the hearth and reredorter drain. Complete specimens were rare but the main dimensions could be ascertained in several cases. All have a pair of tapering peg-holes at one end:

From reredorter drain construction	$10\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ in.
Warming house hearth (latest phase)	$10\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ in.
South end of east range	$10\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ in.

On the underside of the last example there is extensive glazing.

In medieval levels over the entire site were found pieces of greenish slate of a type known to have been used for roof-covering in southern England during the Middle Ages. A sample submitted to the Geological Survey and Museum⁹ was identified as a green, chlorite-rich phyllitic slate encountered in the Lower Devonian sequence (Dartmouth and Meadford Beds) in parts of Cornwall and Devon. There are numerous old quarries in the South Hams district which were used in the Middle Ages for the supply of building materials, including slates. These were distributed widely by means of coastal trade. No complete slates were found at Higham but one fragment indicated a width of $3\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Bricks. Some excellent examples of small yellow and pink medieval bricks were found in association with the stone coffin. They had been used to set under the lid and also to repair the broken foot. Dimensions vary slightly but $7\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in. was typical. Early use of such small bricks occurs at Salmestone Grange and in the vaults of Allington Castle, c. 1280. They were also commonly imported from Holland from the fifteenth century onwards.¹⁰

Floor-Tiles. Plain glazed floor-tiles were found *in situ* in the east cloister-alley at its south end. They were of red clay and measured $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. square and 1 in. thick. Some had dark-green glaze, others were

⁷ *Arch. Cant.*, xxi (1895), 40.

⁸ The Barnack quarries were owned by the monks of Peterborough and Bishop Ernulf of Rochester (1114-1124) had previously been their abbot. Probably the use of the stone in Rochester was due to his influence. See *Arch. J.*, lxxxvi (1930), 201.

⁹ Dr. P. J. Adams has kindly made the identification and also drawn attention to an article in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, Vol. 103 (1965), by J. W. Murray and E. W. Holden on the medieval use of slates in Sussex.

¹⁰ N. Lloyd, *A History of English Brickwork* (1925), 5.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

brown, and examples occurred with a light slip glazed and giving a yellowish effect. The sides were slightly bevelled.

Small plain tiles came from various parts of the site—none *in situ*—a perfect example being 5 in. square and $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick with light-green glaze, much worn.

Four fragments of decorated floor-tiles were found in unrelated contexts, and are illustrated in Fig. 4. The piece with a crosier-head in one corner can be matched by a tile from All Saints' Church, Maidstone, and now in Maidstone Museum.¹¹ It is $4\frac{3}{4}$ in. square and forms with another tile of the same dimensions a representation of a bishop seated under a trefoiled canopy, wearing a mitre and holding a crosier, the head of which appears above his left shoulder in the bottom right-hand corner of the upper tile, just as in the Higham fragment (Fig. 4, No. 10). When Thorpe came to Higham in 1776 the farmer told him of a 'small red stone or jewel with the figure of an old man like a priest on it, with a cane or staff in his hand, perhaps a crosier', which he had found in the field south of the farm.¹² There can be little doubt that this refers to a glazed tile of the Maidstone type, and together with the fragment found in excavation indicates that tiles bearing this distinctive design were used on the floor of some part of the Priory. The Maidstone tiles have been dated *c.* 1320-30 and are only $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick, while the Higham fragment is up to $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thicker.

DISCUSSION

Architecturally Higham Priory was evidently a place of modest character. Its layout corresponded to the standard arrangements of Benedictine houses and, so far as the evidence goes, it does not appear to have undergone drastic enlargement or alteration during its existence. Although the plan of the church is unfortunately incomplete it seems to have been an austere-designed structure with an eastern limb projecting only slightly beyond the line of the eastern range. Whether there was a north aisle to the nave or a north transept cannot at present be tested, but it is quite likely that the nave was unaisled for this was common with nuns' churches.¹³ The nave was not required to serve the needs of the laity as the parish church stood only about 100 yards westward. Its west end probably did not extend further than indicated as otherwise the builders would have planned the cloister area more generously. As it is the enclosed garth is exceptionally cramped. There was almost certainly no central tower as the junction

¹¹ J. Cave-Browne, *History of the Parish Church of All Saints, Maidstone* (1890), 8.

¹² *Custumale Roffense* (1788).

¹³ R. Gilyard-Beer, *Abbeys* (H.M. Stationery Office Publication, 1958), 19. A Kentish example is in the aisleless nave of Malling Abbey (Benedictine nuns).

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

of the nave wall and south transept showed no sign of thickening necessary for the support of such a structure, in fact there was probably no 'crossing' in the accepted sense, the shallow transepts being in the nature of chapels built against the lateral walls and entered through openings from the body of the church.

Nuns' churches were usually austere planned. Sometimes the community worshipped in one aisle of a building which also served as a parish church, for example, Minster in Sheppey and St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, London.¹⁴ The great nunnery churches of Barking and Romsey were quite exceptional. The size and character of the monastic church at Higham, reconstructed on the evidence at present available, is therefore in accordance with what might be expected.

The unpretentious chapter house, contained entirely within the width of the range, is matched in this peculiarity at Finchdale and Thetford. There should have been a cross-passage through the east range but this was not discernible in the excavated remains. Possibly it was a narrow slype defined by timber partitions and situated immediately south of the day stairs, leaving no trace in the form of footings. A passage may also have existed through the south range at its east end. Whether the infirmary stood in the usual position east of the main claustral complex has not been ascertained, and this might form the subject for future research. Documentary evidence¹⁵ indicates that the place lacked a precinct wall down to the eve of the Suppression, a deficiency partly responsible for the scandalous reputation of the nunnery towards the end of its existence. In spite of the nuns' plea in 1513 that such an enclosing wall should be built it is unlikely that the work was actually carried out in the few remaining years before the life of the nunnery came to an end.

The earliest datable object found on the site is the stone coffin which might well belong to the period just after the founding of the Priory in 1148. Whether any of the buildings traced by excavation are as old as this is uncertain, but some were obviously later. Possibly the nuns were housed for some time in temporary dwellings until permanent buildings had been erected. The plan of the church as here reconstructed is not incompatible with a twelfth-century date, and indeed it bears a resemblance—possibly fortuitous—to some early Cistercian churches built in the first half of that century.¹⁶ On the other hand the thinness of the remaining fragment of the south wall is much more in keeping with thirteenth-century work.

Against the inner face of the east wall of the warming house, close

¹⁴ This seems to be the origin of the widely accepted but erroneous belief that the nuns of Higham worshipped in the parish church. See *Arch. Cant.*, xi (1877), lviii.

¹⁵ Rochester Probate Act Books, f. 115, and *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1905), 195.

¹⁶ R. Gilyard-Beer, *op. cit.*, Figs. 6 (Tintern) and 14 (Waverley).

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

to the fireplace and a little below floor level, there was found a cut-halfpenny of the reign of John (Appendix I), and from its context it may well have been dropped by a workman employed on the construction of the east range. From the actual mortar of the reredorter drain-extension came a jetton not earlier than the last quarter of the thirteenth century (Appendix I). Sherds of pottery found in the excavations cover the period from the thirteenth century to the present day. Several pieces of moulding (Fig. 4) show thirteenth-century characteristics and the use of Purbeck marble shafts was common at that time. Roof-tiles as used in the fireplace and the drain are believed to have been introduced not much before 1200. There is thus good reason for believing that at least some of the monastic buildings were erected in the thirteenth century. Mr. Spittle observed fourteenth-century details in the west range, although these may be due to a reconstruction at that time to convert the cellarium into a residence for the prioress.

Thorpe's two sketches of 'Higham Abby' are reproduced here in Plate IV.¹⁷ Although undated they apparently show the remains as they appeared about the time of his visit in 1776 and before the alterations he mentions in the *Customale* published in 1788. The drawings are crude and difficult to interpret and there can be no certain conclusion as to which parts of the monastic buildings they are intended to depict. It is not unfair to assume, however, that the features he shows are likely to belong to buildings which are still (or were until recently) represented by standing remains. Thus his 'North West View of the Remains of Higham Abby' seems to be the converted west range, demolished in 1959, before the late-Georgian refacing.

Of greater interest is his 'South View' which shows a roofless building lying east-west with a pointed doorway towards the west end. This could well be the nave of the church with a doorway leading into it from the west end of the destroyed north cloister alley, just where one would expect such an opening to occur. The probability is increased by the fact that a substantial piece of this wall still stands, though the doorway has vanished. Thorpe's drawing seems to indicate that the north wall was also standing at that time and through the ragged opening of the south doorway can be seen a similar door directly opposite.

Some light is thrown on the early history of the Priory by reference to the records of the mother house, the Abbey of St. Sulpice near Rennes, in Brittany. Mary, the daughter of King Stephen, was abbess there in 1140 and according to one authority¹⁸ she came to England with a party of nuns and stayed for some time at the nunnery of Stratford at Bow, having the endowment of Lillechurch for their maintenance. Following a dispute they eventually left and are thought

¹⁷ Photographic reproduction by the British Museum. Copyright.

¹⁸ *Victoria County History of Kent*, ii, 145.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

to have established themselves as a community at Lillechurch or Higham about 1148. Certainly Higham Priory was for many years a dependency of St. Sulpice¹⁹ as illustrated by the following evidence.

In an article by the Rev. C. H. Fielding in *The Invicta Magazine*, Vol. I, No. 6 (June, 1910) a transcript is given of a 'Commemoration Prayer' used by the nuns of Higham and now preserved at St. John's College, Cambridge. One part of it runs as follows:

Nous membre del alme labesse Marie, labesse Amor, labbesse Emeline, labbesse Olive, labbesse Mabile, labbesse Amice, labbesse Eustace, labbesse Jude, labbesse Jon, Del alme la p'orisse Alis, la p'orisse Eunice, la p'orisse Jon, la p'orisse Amfise, la p'orisse Maut, la p'orisse Jone, la p'orisse Maut, la p'orisse Elizabeth, la p'orisse Cecile, la p'orisse Olive, la p'orisse Jone, Del alme le roi Estevenne, la reyne Maut, Madame Marie et de lo^f enfants.

The last-named prioress in this extract may be identified as Joan de Haleghesto (Halstow) who was elected on the death of Olive in 1388,²⁰ and this section of the prayer must therefore have been composed not earlier than that date. But significantly the first nine names are those of *abbesses*, the first *prioress* mentioned being Alis, followed by Eunice, and Jon who was elected in 1247.²¹ It can be shown that these abbesses were superiors of St. Sulpice, presumably at a time when Higham was still its dependency. By the kindness of M. Rey du Boissieu, Mayor of St. Sulpice, I have been able to obtain a list of the known abbesses of that place from 1140 to 1250 and this is set out below with their dates against the nine abbesses mentioned in the Higham prayer:

<i>St. Sulpice</i>			<i>Higham</i>
Marie de Blois	1140	=	Marie
Nine (or Nive)	1162		—
Ennougent de Bretagne (undated and doubtful)			—
—			Amor
Ameline d'Ecosse	1198	=	Emeline
Olive	1213	=	Olive
Mabile	1216	=	Mabile
Amice de Dinan	1239	=	Amice
Jeanne de Bonamy	1240		—
—			Eustace
—			Jude
Jeanne de Keraer	1250	= (?)	Jon

¹⁹ In 1227 Henry III granted the Manor of Lillechurch to the Abbey of St. Mary and St. Sulpice and the Prioress and nuns of Lillechurch (*V.O.H.*, ii, 145).

²⁰ *V.O.H.*, ii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

Allowing for some omissions from both lists the coincidence of names is sufficient to establish the identity and dates of the abbesses in the Higham document with reasonable certainty. The last abbess, Jon, can hardly be Jeanne de Bonamy as she apparently succeeded Amice after only one year while the Higham list includes Eustace and Jude after Amice. More probably she is to be identified as Jeanne de Keraer, and if this is correct it implies that connection between St. Sulpice and Higham ceased about the middle of the thirteenth century. The prayer for King Stephen and his family supports other evidence indicating that the Priory was founded in his reign, and elsewhere in the same document reference is made to his 'quenne Mawde, and dame Mary her dowgt^r that was Abbas off thys place'.²²

APPENDIX I

NOTES ON COIN AND JETTON

Coin. This was found, as previously described, close to the hearth. Mr. D. B. Kelly has kindly furnished the following information: A silver halfpenny, cut from a short-cross penny and belonging to Class V (probably Vb). It may be dated 1205-10 (*B.N.J.*, xi, 59-100 and xxxiii, 57-9). The moneyer was WILLELM T and it originated from a London mint. Short-cross pennies were demonetized in 1247 which makes it probable that the Higham coin was lost before that date.

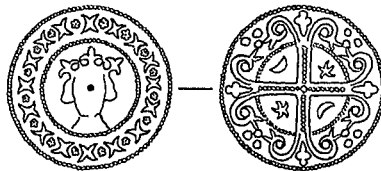


FIG. 5. Late-thirteenth-century brass jetton. (Scale 1/1)

Jetton. A brass jetton (Fig. 5) found in the mortar of the southward extension of the reredorter drain shown in the bottom right-hand corner of the plan (Fig. 2), and Plate IIIB. Miss M. M. Archibald of the British Museum has identified it as late-thirteenth-century, and observes that it shows the trifoliate crown characteristic of the regal pence introduced by Edward I in 1279. The trifoliate crown was replaced by the bifoliate one in 1302. An early date is favoured as the form of the reverse cross is reminiscent of the long-cross issue which immediately preceded the sterling type of 1279. A very similar jetton is figured, with slight variation in the form of the reverse cross, in F. P. Barnard's *The Casting-Counter and the Counting-Board* (1916), 97, No. 12.

²² C. H. Fielding, *op. cit.*, 280.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

APPENDIX II

THE HIGHAM PRIORY COFFIN

By L. R. A. GROVE, B.A., F.S.A.

DESCRIPTION

Both lid and coffin (Fig. 6) are of oolitic limestone. The coffin is of normal type for its period and has a tapered internal cavity to take the corpse, with a separate circular space for the head.²³ The sides are roughly tooled and the tooling runs at an angle of 45° to the upright. The lid is, on average, 76 in. in length. It tapers from head to foot, slightly overlaps the coffin, is coped and has a design in relief. This design shows its Barnack origin in the long shaft or roll ridge which characteristically runs from end to end.²⁴

The cross-head consists of a raised circle, 11½ in. in diameter, into which are cut back four lenticular segments. In the centre of the remaining area of the circle a splay-armed cross has been hacked out to the depth of ¼ in. In the centre of the slab is a cross-arm in relief with a central groove approximately ¼ in. in depth. The basal diamond is also in relief and has an incised cross within its double framing. On the dexter side of the broader end of the coffin is cut a small rectangle with a central dot.

The lid was in two pieces when found and the foot end of the coffin was in a crumbling condition which was not improved by the journey to the forecourt of Maidstone Museum where it now rests after being repaired by Mr. George Curtis of the Borough Engineer's Department, Maidstone Corporation.

A piece of the coffin was sent to the Institute of Geological Sciences for identification and Mr. F. G. Dimes, B.Sc., F.G.S., kindly produced the following report:

'While the nature of the stone was easy of determination, the problem has been to try to determine its provenance; that, I regret, has not been easy of answer and I am not able to give you any definite information.

'Firstly, to deal with the type of rock. The specimen is an oolitic limestone with fairly even, fine to medium-sized ooliths and containing small somewhat rolled gastropods and a coral. From its general appearance and its fossil content it undoubtedly is an oolite from the Jurassic system. Oolitic limestones occur at three main horizons in the Jurassic; in the Inferior Oolite, in the Great Oolite and in the Portland Series.

'Your sample was compared with samples of oolites from these horizons in our Economic, Building and Decorative Stones collections.

²³ Boutell, *Christian Monuments in England and Wales*, 8.

²⁴ *Proc. Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 1 (1957), 94. *Arch. J.*, cxxi (1964), 124. Dr. L. A. S. Butler's 'continuous shaft'.

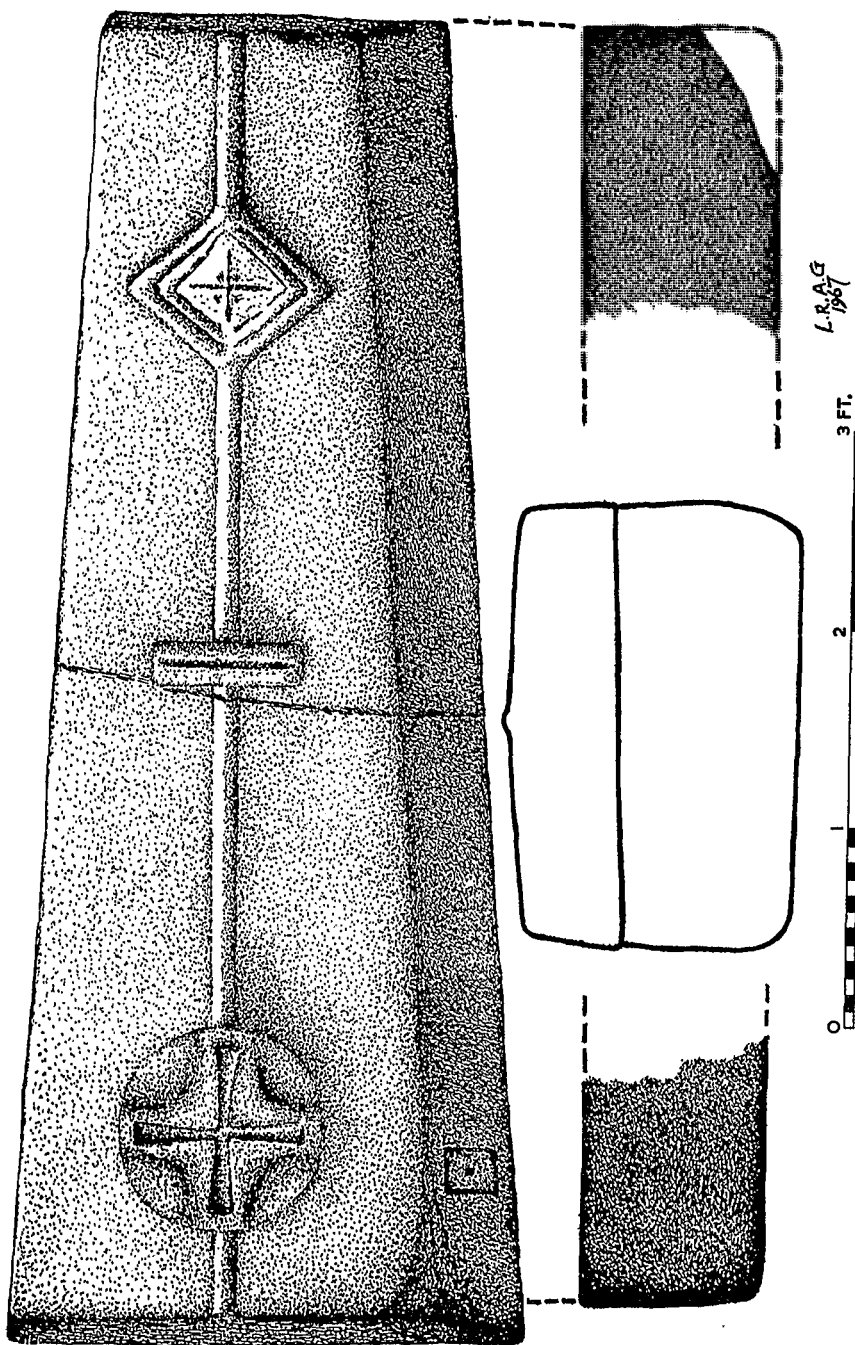


FIG. 6. Stone coffin and lid from Higham Priory.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

It does not match material from the Portland Stone. Fortunately, however, by eye inspection for colour, grain size and even fossil content it may be compared with examples of oolites from the Lincolnshire Limestone (of Inferior Oolite age) and from the Bath Oolites (of Great Oolite age).

'In an attempt to resolve the problem the specimen was submitted to our Palæontology Department. Dr. H. Ivimey-Cook of that department reports, "I do not feel that this is identifiable from its fauna which is of juvenile and badly rolled and abraded gastropods and a coral. These forms might be referred to

? *Procerithium* (*Rhabdocolpus*) sp.

? *Merinella* sp.

? *Thecosmilia* sp. (single *corallite*)

This to me suggests that there is a slightly better than even probability that the specimen is from the Inferior Oolite rather than Great Oolite; these forms are known from the Lincolnshire Limestone but could probably occur in any of the thick oolites of the Inferior Oolite.'

The Higham coffin and lid belong to a type which originated at Barnack, near Peterborough. Dr. L. A. S. Butler has discussed the Barnack School of carvers in an article on the medieval gravestones of Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and the Soke of Peterborough²⁵ and figures two cross-slabs, from Waterbeach (late eleventh century) and Wood Walton (late eleventh century),²⁶ which are the forebears of the Higham cross-slab. He has lately developed his theme in a further paper²⁷ which gives a dating of 1120-60 for cross-heads of four lenticular segments such as on the Higham slab.²⁸ If the Higham example is to be dated to this period and if due consideration is given to the expense needed to bring it down to Kent from Barnack by water²⁹ then its importance is such that it must have originally contained the body of some person of great significance to the Priory.

APPENDIX III

NOTE ON THE HUMAN REMAINS FROM HIGHAM PRIORY

By D. R. BROTHWELL (British Museum, Natural History)

The skeletal material sent for examination would seem to represent just two individuals.

²⁵ *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, 1 (1957), 89-100.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 91, Fig. 1, Nos. 1 and 2.

²⁷ *Arch. J.*, cxxi (1964), 111-153. The author gives distribution maps.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Fig. 1 on p. 115; p. 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118. See *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, 1 (1957), 98, for a note on the dispatch of Barnack's products from the 'quay' on the River Nene at Gunwade.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF HIGHAM PRIORY

The most complete of these (primary coffin burial) is an adult male of about 25-35 years of age, having a stature of about 5 ft. 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Most bones are noticeably robust (with broad articular surfaces to the long bones), and he seems likely to have had a stocky 'lateral' physique.

Bone preservation is good and a close surface examination failed to reveal any evidence of the cause of death, and no special pathology was present. Osteoarthritic deformity did occur in the vertebral column, being restricted to moderate osteophytosis in the cervical area.

A less complete, more damaged, and less well preserved second individual was also examined (principally the femora, humeri and skull). The individual was immature, dental and epiphyseal development suggesting an age of about 15 \pm 1. Certain features of the skull, in particular facial size, suggest masculinity, but this must remain an extremely tentative conclusion.

No evidence of cause of death could be seen, the only abnormality being a slight + degree of cribra orbitalia. The fracturing and compression at the left side of the coronal suture is most likely to be post-mortem in date.