

# BATH ABBEY: SOME NEW PERSPECTIVES

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Bath Abbey has been the subject of detailed historical study in recent years. In particular, the archaeological and architectural evidence has been discussed by Peter Davenport in an earlier volume of *Bath History*,<sup>1</sup> while Jean Manco has written a detailed account of the documentary sources.<sup>2</sup> However a further article can be justified because, in the short time since their publication, a significant amount of new archaeological evidence relating to the lay-out of the Saxon abbey precinct and of the Norman cathedral priory has been recovered. Of particular value were the excavations carried out by Bath Archaeological Trust during 1993 in advance of the construction of the Abbey Heritage Centre (immediately south of the Abbey), and also beneath York Street in 1994-5.

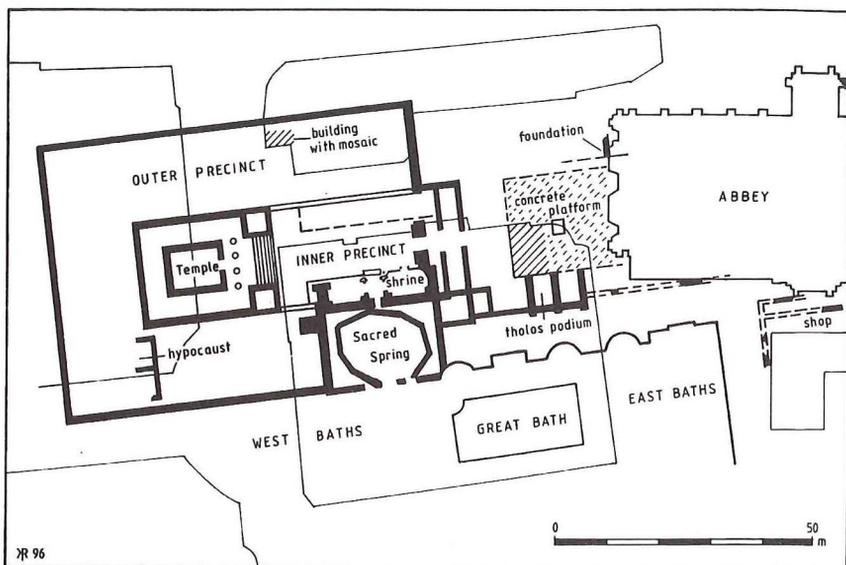
The earliest documentary reference to a monastic house at Bath is in a charter issued in 676 by Osric, King of the Hwicce, granting 100 hides of land to Abbess Berta to found a convent. But Christians were known in Bath back in the third century, judging by the inscription on one of the lead curses retrieved from the King's Bath spring in 1979, and any study of the origins of Christian worship in Bath should begin in the late-Roman rather than the Saxon period.

## The late-Roman and sub-Roman period

*Aquae Sulis* was very far from being a typical Roman small town. The area occupied by the medieval walled city was, in Roman times, one of the most important pagan cult centres in Britain, serving as both a religious sanctuary and a health spa. It was dominated by the Temple of Sulis Minerva and the Baths, which were constructed around the Sacred Spring from the second half of the first century onwards, almost certainly replacing an earlier Celtic shrine. The sanctuary, enclosed in the mid to late second century by a ditch and rampart, was extensive and appears to have contained several subsidiary shrines, including one at the Cross Bath and one at the Hot Bath (where there was also another, smaller baths complex). In addition, a circular shrine or *tholos* is thought to have been located on the vaulted podium to the east of the precinct of the Temple of Minerva.

The nucleus of the actual town was, however, at Walcot, c.1km north of the Sacred Spring. The most likely explanation for its location is that it originated as a civilian market or *vicus*, serving a mid-first century military fort protecting the main river crossing in the vicinity of Cleveland Bridge. The settlement rapidly developed alongside the approach roads, extending southwards towards the sanctuary.

In the early fourth century, the sanctuary was still flourishing. For example, the inner precinct of the Temple of Minerva was repaved and the steps leading up to the temple were re-treaded. Elsewhere an open-ended building, discovered in 1993, was constructed in the late third century on a former open space immediately east of the Baths. It seems to have been a shop selling pewter vessels. These were manufactured in the workshop at the rear, where two stone moulds were found, and may have been aimed specifically at the pilgrim market. The most dramatic evidence for the continuing prosperity of the cult centre is the circuit wall, inserted in front of the second-century rampart and enclosing the whole of the sanctuary. It was probably also built at this time, and although it was subsequently utilized as the Saxon and medieval town wall, in origin it may have been designed to protect only the religious complex. The civilian town outside remained undefended.



1. Plan of the Temple of Sulis Minerva and its precinct in the mid to late fourth century. To the east are the foundations of a vaulted podium, replaced by a concrete platform on which the earliest church may have stood. (Drawing by Kirsty Rodwell)

By the mid-fourth century, however, the sanctuary was being transformed (fig. 1). The colonnade round the outer precinct of the Temple of Minerva was demolished and the inner precinct was in decay. The number of coins thrown into the Sacred Spring shows a marked decline from the mid-350s onwards.<sup>3</sup> However the sanctuary was certainly not abandoned, and a number of new buildings of this period, some of which were clearly of high quality and contained mosaics and hypocausts, have been found. A large building was erected outside the west wall of the outer precinct and two others actually encroached on the precinct itself.<sup>4</sup>

A possible explanation for these changes is that after the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire pagan worship declined. The former sanctuary was secularized as the extra-mural town migrated to a more defensible location. According to this theory *Aquae Sulis* followed the pattern of other small late-Roman towns such as *Cunetio* (Mildenhall, Wilts), which also acquired defensive walls. It should be said that there are no clear signs that the extra-mural settlement actually was abandoned in the fourth century. On the contrary, excavations on the *Hat and Feather* site at Walcot in 1991-2 indicated that the buildings there continued in use till the end of the fourth century, if not beyond. But it is possible that the villa-owning aristocracy were looking to the former religious complex as a safe haven in the troubled times of the second half of the fourth century.

There is no unequivocal evidence that the pagan sanctuary was Christianized in the late-Roman period. Some of the changes at *Aquae Sulis* follow a pattern noted at other temple complexes in the region, where ancillary buildings fell into decay and were demolished while the temple itself was subdivided into smaller compartments.<sup>5</sup> The outer precinct of the Temple of Minerva may have ceased to have a religious function but parts of the inner precinct remained in use. In the late fourth century a small area of the south portico, adjacent to the opening on the north side of the Sacred Spring, was walled off, possibly to form a shrine. This is as likely to have been pagan as Christian.

Evidence for the survival of Christian worship in the West Country in the fifth century derives mainly from cemeteries. At Shepton Mallet, for example, a fifth-century silver amulet cross with a punched Chi-Rho symbol was discovered in 1990 in a burial associated with the settlement alongside the Fosse Way,<sup>6</sup> while mausolea in the cemetery at Poundbury, outside the Roman city of Dorchester, Dorset, are thought to be Christian.<sup>7</sup> Bath's extra-mural cemeteries may also contain Christian artefacts and structures, and it has been suggested that the present church of St Swithin,

Walcot, and the old church of St John, Bathwick, close to known cemeteries, may both owe their origins to sub-Roman mausolea.<sup>8</sup>

But it is clear that religious activity also continued in the centre of the walled area. Excavations beneath the Pump Room between 1981 and 1983 revealed a sequence of six cobbled surfaces separated by layers of soil which had accumulated above the paved floor of the inner precinct. The earliest of these surfaces must have been laid after the mid-fourth century, perhaps after 400. The latest is most unlikely to have gone out of use before the late fifth century and could conceivably be sixth- or even seventh-century in date. The latest surface incorporated a sculptured stone from the pediment of the temple (and may also have utilized the other parts of the pediment, including the Gorgon's head, which were recovered in the 1790s). It was not simply a piece of fallen rubble; it had been carefully laid upside down as paving. All the surfaces were heavily worn, especially in the vicinity of the opening to the Sacred Spring, which was clearly still being visited on a regular basis.<sup>9</sup>

There are striking similarities with the excavated Temple of Mercury at Uley in Gloucestershire, where the pagan temple, after modification in the late fourth century, was demolished in the early fifth century. In the mid-late fifth century, a hall or basilican church with a stone baptistery annexe was constructed on the site, and in turn this was replaced by an early sixth-century stone structure, thought to be a church. The floors of the fifth-century baptistery included re-used pagan altars, also laid upside down, and the head of the cult statue of Mercury was buried adjacent to the church.<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that the pagan temple site was ritually cleansed before becoming Christianized, and the same explanation could apply at Bath, particularly given the existence of the bronze head of the cult statue of Minerva, discovered beneath Stall Street in 1727.

At Bath, no Christian structures have been identified in the precinct, but they may have been located near by, perhaps standing on the podium of the main temple. An alternative, and more plausible, location might be the massive concrete and rubble platform to the east of the precinct, recorded beneath the west end of the present Abbey by James Irvine in 1868. Another part of the same structure was briefly observed and then destroyed during the construction of the Pump Room extension in 1893.<sup>11</sup> The date and function of this structure is unclear but it seems to have replaced the second-century vaulted podium on which the *tholos* may originally have stood. The south wall of the podium, part of which is still visible within the Roman Baths Museum, was evidently partially rebuilt either at the very end of the Roman period or in the post-Roman period.

Following the analogy of Uley, it is also possible that the Sacred Spring was utilized as a baptistery.

Bath had clearly ceased to function as a town during the early fifth century, and the city of Bath, ruled by a king, which was captured by the West Saxons after the Battle of Dyrham in 577, is thought to have been an extensive estate rather than a city in the Roman sense. The centre of administration was probably outside the former town and one possible location which has been proposed is Little Solsbury hillfort.<sup>12</sup> However the religious centre of the estate is likely to have remained in the middle of Bath, focussed on the Sacred Spring. Interestingly, the habit of 'taking the waters' seems to have been popular, judging by the fragments of glass cups found in the layers of soil between the accumulating cobble layers. The survival of Christianity through the so-called 'Dark Ages' need not come as any surprise, although the traditional historical interpretation is that the walled area of Bath was completely abandoned during this period. Common sense suggests that a natural phenomenon as unusual as the hot spring, with its medicinal powers and its centuries-old tradition as a focus of religious worship, was surely not going to be neglected for 250 years, and the archaeological evidence supports this view. In contrast to the eastern and southern parts of the country, which fell under pagan Saxon rule at a fairly early stage, the West Country remained under British control for much longer, and there is no reason why Christianity should not have survived. Numerous places in south-east Wales and the Wye Valley acquired monasteries and ecclesiae in the late sixth and early seventh centuries,<sup>13</sup> and continuity of Christian worship at Bath ought perhaps to be seen as the norm in this region rather than as anything exceptional.

## The Saxon Abbey

With this background the establishment of a Saxon religious house at Bath should therefore not necessarily be seen as a dramatic innovation. To summarize the limited documented evidence, a nunnery was founded by King Osric of the Hwicce in 676. There is no further mention of it after the seventh century and in c.758 a Mercian land charter refers to the brethren of St Peter's monastery. It is unclear whether this monastery was the direct descendant of Osric's convent, as the medieval monks evidently believed, or a completely new foundation. In 781 King Offa of Mercia claimed Bath Abbey from the Bishop of Worcester, by which time it was,

according to the charter, 'celebrated'. The sources are silent throughout the ninth century but in the early tenth century Bath came under the political control of Wessex, and the monastery benefited considerably from royal patronage. In the 930s King Athelstan made substantial land-grants and further grants were made by King Edwy in 956 (when the hot springs were mentioned), and 957, when the Abbey was described as 'marvellously wrought'. After King Edgar came to the throne in 959, the monastery was reformed by Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury and former Abbot of Glastonbury, and brought under Benedictine rule. In 973 Bath Abbey enjoyed its greatest moment when it was the scene of Edgar's coronation as King of England by Dunstan.<sup>14</sup>

The precise location of the Saxon monastery is unknown. It has been the subject of considerable speculation and some writers have suggested that it was nowhere near the present Abbey. In the nineteenth century James Irvine suggested it might be near the Hot Bath spring in the south-west quarter of the City, while more recently Elizabeth Holland and Mike Chapman have proposed a site west of Stall Street, just to the south of Westgate Street.<sup>15</sup> The problem will only be solved by archaeological excavation, though this method is hampered by the virtual absence of coins and other datable artefacts in Bath between the fifth and early tenth centuries. An early eighth-century Danish coin was found at Mill Lane, Bathampton in 1994 during the construction of the Batheaston by-pass, but nothing comparable has been recovered from the centre of Bath. Similarly there is no recognizable pottery earlier than c.930 apart from two sherds of chaff-tempered ware from Swallow Street which can be dated to any time between 400 and 900.<sup>16</sup> Part of a fifth- to seventh-century brooch and a seventh- to eighth-century loom-weight were recovered from the Bath Street site in 1986, but with the exception of these objects, there are no Saxon artefacts earlier than the tenth century. An obvious conclusion to draw from this lack of material would be that the seventh-century nunnery and Offa's monastery were located outside the walled area of Bath. But this may well be incorrect. The absence of middle-Saxon pottery is not unique to Bath. The whole of Gloucestershire and Somerset appears to have been aceramic for 500 years, and excavations at the Saxon Cathedral at Wells produced no Saxon pottery at all.<sup>17</sup> The only other available dating method is radio-carbon analysis and this is very far from precise. As a result it is very difficult to demonstrate the presence of middle-Saxon features unless they are cut through known late-Roman deposits and are sealed by late-Saxon horizons. In the absence

of any artefacts other than residual Roman material, it is perfectly possible that middle-Saxon walls have been mistakenly identified as late-Roman.

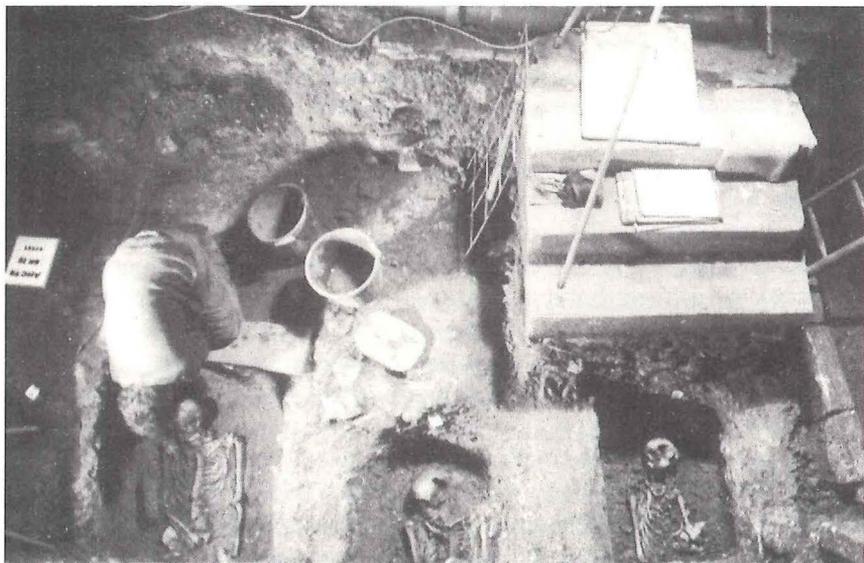
There is marginally more diagnostic late-Saxon material, though pottery from this period is still relatively uncommon and is only found in fairly small quantities. Although Bath was a defensible *burgh* from King Alfred's reign onwards and by the early tenth century was re-emerging as a town with its own mint, late-Saxon coins are still a rarity. The most easily recognisable artefacts of tenth- to eleventh-century date are sculptured stones, usually cross fragments.

The general lack of dating evidence provides one explanation for the failure to find the Saxon abbey. A second explanation is that several potential locations are either inaccessible to archaeologists or were destroyed, with little or no record, in the Georgian and Victorian periods. An obvious place to look is beneath the floor of the Norman cathedral nave, but this is c.2m below the level of the present church floor. It was raised in the early sixteenth century and most of the space between the two floors was subsequently filled with post-medieval burial vaults. It is almost impossible to reach the Norman floor, and even James Irvine, the clerk of works during the restoration of the Abbey in the 1860s, was unable to investigate beneath it. In other parts of the centre of Bath the post-Roman levels have been completely removed. The horizons above the East Baths, the Great and West Baths, and beneath the Concert Hall adjacent to the Pump Room ('excavated' in 1755, 1880-86 and 1893 respectively) might all have provided valuable evidence relating to the Saxon abbey, which has now been lost.

Nevertheless, despite these serious limitations, a certain amount of evidence has survived. Information about the earliest Saxon monastic house is negligible, but the tumble of very large Roman monumental stone blocks overlying the latest cobbled surface in the inner precinct may be of relevance. It is clear that the façade of the Four Seasons, along the south side of the precinct, and the entablature of the north wall of the Sacred Spring reservoir were intentionally demolished, perhaps in the late sixth or early seventh centuries, though possibly slightly later. They did not collapse of their own accord, and the purpose of the operation may have been to gain access to the smaller, more readily-usable coursed stones in the standing walls.<sup>18</sup> The only buildings likely to have been constructed of stone in this period were churches, and it is not inconceivable that the walls were dismantled by the builders of the monastery. Our view of Saxon Bath is heavily influenced by *The Ruin*, an evocative eighth-century poem which describes a landscape dominated by crumbling and

abandoned buildings 'raised by giants'. To the poet they were an awesome sight. To the craftsmen working at the Abbey, they offered a readily-available quarry, and the footings of the only wall to have been found which is definitely Saxon consisted entirely of re-used Roman blocks.

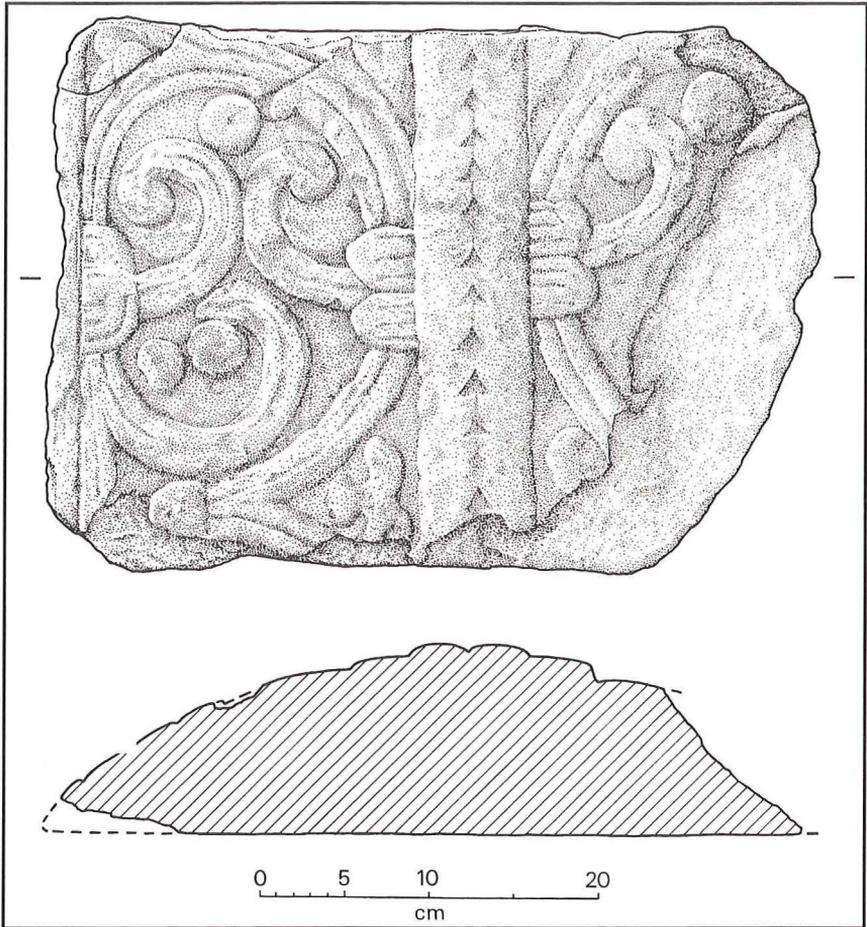
This was discovered running east-west underneath York Street and had such massive foundations, 2.5m wide and at least 1.2m deep, that it has been interpreted as the free-standing south boundary wall of the monastic enclosure rather than part of a building. It cut through the east end wall of the East Baths, but pre-dated a late-Saxon burial. It could have been constructed before the tenth century, but it was certainly no later. Only a fairly short stretch of the wall has been revealed but it appears to be heading eastwards towards the Roman circuit wall, which probably served as the east wall of the precinct. The position of the north and west boundaries of the precinct are unknown. However a possible hypothesis is that the north wall ran parallel to the south side of Cheap Street (and was retained when the much larger Norman precinct was laid out at the end of the eleventh century), while the west wall utilized the surviving Roman wall dividing the Great Bath from the East Baths. The precinct wall would have served the same function as the large ditch and bank



2. Part of a row of graves in the late-Saxon cemetery to the south of the Abbey, above, from the east. (Photograph by Bath Archaeological Trust)

enclosing the Saxon abbey at Glastonbury.<sup>19</sup> One point of interest arising from its discovery is that the plan of the late-Saxon *burgh* needs to be reconsidered. As in other contemporary towns, Bath's road system was laid out in the form of a grid, which still survives in the northern half of the town. An earlier reconstruction of the lay-out suggested that High Street continued across the south half of the town beyond its junction with Cheap Street,<sup>20</sup> but the position of the precinct wall demonstrates that this southern extension cannot have existed. It remains unclear whether the enclosure was laid out in the tenth century, at the same time as the town, or whether, like the abbey church, it was already in existence and was respected by the road grid.

Within the precinct was a late-Saxon cemetery, which must surely be related to the monastery. It was first noted in 1755 when a mid-tenth-century coin-hoard was found in a grave. In 1968 Barry Cunliffe excavated a characteristically late-Saxon charcoal burial close to the north-east corner of the East Baths. But in 1993, a much larger area of the cemetery was recorded. The graves were laid out in regular rows, at right angles to the alignment of the present church (fig. 2). They would have been marked at ground level since each burial was distinct from its neighbour and there was no intercutting. Part of a decorated stone grave-cover and a marker-stone, re-used in a twelfth-century cist burial, must have been associated with these burials (fig. 3). The western and eastern limits of the cemetery are unknown, but it certainly extended from the second bay of the nave of the present Abbey as far as the second bay of the choir. It also extended southwards as far as the precinct wall. Thirty-one Saxon graves were found and the burials in eighteen of these were excavated. All the skeletons were adult and the great majority of those which were identifiable were male. Ten skeletons were buried in wooden coffins and eight were laid on a bed of charcoal. In six of the graves the skull was held upright with stones. A charnel pit, only part of which was excavated, contained the remains of at least thirty-three adults, which were disturbed and re-buried during the construction of the Norman cathedral. The date of the cemetery is provided by the coin-hoard, the grave-cover (thought to be late tenth-century) and three radio-carbon dates from charcoal burials, which all produced ninth- to tenth-century dates. It is worth noting that this was not the only late-Saxon cemetery in the vicinity. Burials of the same period, found beneath the Pump Room and Abbey Churchyard, are thought to have been associated with St Mary de Stalls Church, while another large cemetery, beneath Abbey Street and Abbey Green, is probably linked to St James's Church.



3. A piece of a late tenth-century limestone grave-cover, re-used in a twelfth-century stone burial cist. (*Drawing by Nick Griffiths*)

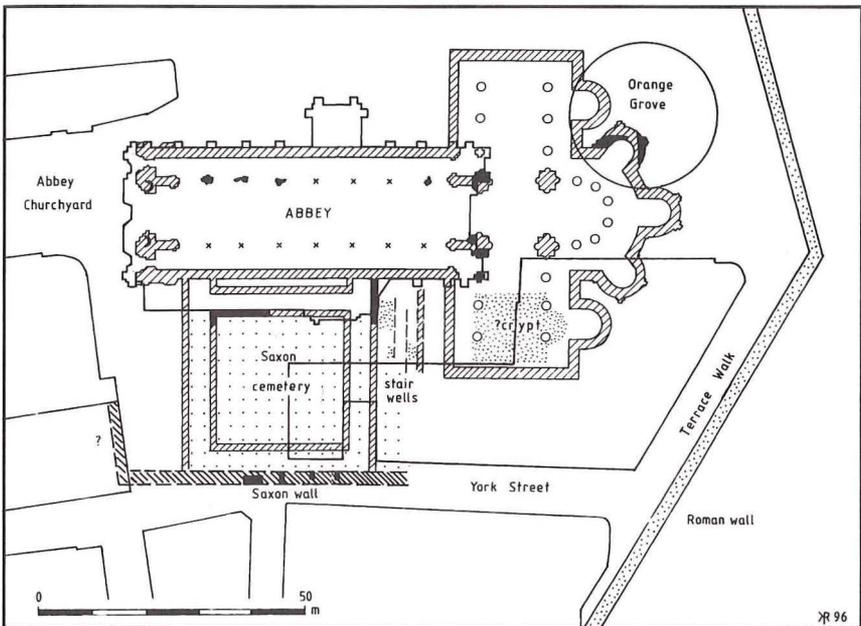
The precise location of the Saxon abbey church is still problematic, but at least it can be stated with confidence that it was definitely not to the south of the present church. Nor would there have sufficient room for it to the north, if the idea that Cheap Street was outside the Saxon precinct is correct. The early religious house is likely to have stood on the concrete platform, partially beneath the west end of the present church and following the alignment of the Roman temple precinct. But the lay-out of the cemetery indicates that in the tenth century, if not before, the Saxon monastery adopted an alignment

10° south of the Roman alignment, which was later retained by the Norman cathedral. It is almost certain that, like the Saxon abbey at Glastonbury,<sup>21</sup> it was directly beneath the nave of its Norman successor.

## The Norman Cathedral Priory

After the death in 1088 of Giso, the last Saxon Bishop of Wells, the see was transferred to Bath. The abbey was transformed into a cathedral priory, and the new Norman Bishop of Bath, John of Tours, embarked on an ambitious building programme involving the construction of a massive cathedral (one of the largest, of its time, in England) and a Bishop's Palace. He also expanded the precinct so that it came to occupy most of the south-east quarter of the town.

The building campaign was evidently long drawn-out. The lower vaults were complete by 1122, when John died. He was buried in front of the High Altar, suggesting that work started at the east end, perhaps with the Saxon



4. Plan of the Norman cathedral priory and the cloisters, overlying the late-Saxon cemetery. (Drawing by Kirsty Rodwell)

abbey being retained until the new presbytery was ready to be used for services. Further progress was made under Bishop Godfrey (1123-35) and after a major fire in 1137 his successor Robert of Lewes built the cloisters, chapter-house, refectory, dormitory and other parts of the priory complex. The cathedral may finally have been completed by 1156 when Papal confirmation of the transfer of the see from Wells to Bath was granted. The Norman church had a long life and survived until the start of the sixteenth century with only relatively minor structural alterations, such as Bishop Bytton's Lady Chapel, added on to the east end in the 1260s. It was then largely demolished and, due to the inspiration of Bishop King and Prior Bird, was replaced by the magnificent, but much shorter, present church. This was still incomplete in 1539 when the priory was dissolved.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from a few features such as the twelfth-century arch at the eastern end of the south aisle of the choir, still standing to its full height, most of what is known about the Norman nave is due to the remarkably detailed architectural and archaeological records made by James Irvine between 1863 and 1872, while employed as clerk of works during the restoration of the Abbey by Sir George Gilbert Scott. He planned all the Norman features revealed during the repairs and also drew an immaculate longitudinal section along the entire length of the present church showing, along with much else, the Norman floor in relation to its much higher Tudor replacement. In addition he recorded the tiled pavement in the central crossing, just beyond the east end of the present church.<sup>23</sup> Irvine was unable to investigate the transepts and the presbytery beyond the central crossing, and it was not until 1979 that part of a lateral apsidal side chapel was found during excavations beneath the circular lawn in Orange Grove. This discovery allowed a reconstruction of the plan of the east end of the cathedral to be made.<sup>24</sup>

However the shape of the transepts, as shown in the reconstructed plan, was based not on any hard evidence but on the reasonable assumption that they were built on the same module as the central crossing. In 1993, excavations on the south side of the church indicated that the south transept (and by implication the north transept as well) was larger than had previously been thought. A trench alongside the outer face of the south wall of the present choir confirmed Irvine's evidence not only that the sixteenth-century wall was built on the same line as its twelfth-century predecessor, but that in certain places the bases of Norman architectural features still survived *in situ*. Instead of the predicted west wall of the transept, on line with the west side of the central crossing, what was found was the base for the engaged shaft of an arch providing access from the west into the main body of the transept. The base of a second arch, with part of its shaft still intact, was also

found immediately to the west, indicating that there had been an opening in the south wall of the Norman south aisle (fig. 5). The most likely explanation for these features is that the transept had a western aisle. A small part of the transept floor, consisting of two limestone slabs and a row of narrow plain glazed tiles, was observed, showing that the south transept floor was at the same level as the Norman nave. This is significant because, as Irvine demonstrated, the nave floor was 1ft 8ins (0.51m) below the level of the central crossing, which in turn was at least 10ins (0.25m) below the floor level of the north transept. So the floor level was stepped down from north to south.



5. An early-Norman engaged shaft in situ on the east side of the former opening between the south aisle of the Norman nave and the west aisle of the south transept, from the south. The paving is also Norman. The twelfth-century work survives within the foundations of the present, early sixteenth-century church. One-metre scale. (*Photograph by Bath Archaeological Trust*)

Further information can be gleaned about the plan of the transept from the important Terrace Walk excavations carried out by Bill Startin in 1973 in the garden between the Seventh Day Adventist chapel and the back of Whiteman's Bookshop.<sup>25</sup> In theory this should have located the east wall of the transept. In practice, graves in stone-capped cists were found on the line of the predicted wall. They were dated by Startin to the

seventeenth century, but stylistically they are clearly medieval. The east wall of the transept must have been further to the east, suggesting that there was an eastern as well as a western aisle.

Of particular interest was a massive deep mortar-filled feature, only the curving north edge of which was recorded by Startin. It was interpreted at the time as the robber trench of the south wall of the Norman transept, but this interpretation is unlikely because the feature would have been almost in the centre of the transept. The explanation emerged in 1993 when excavations in the cellars under the pavement immediately north of Kingston Buildings found what must be the same feature. Its western edge was on a line with the arcade of the west aisle of the transept, and its base was 3m below the transept floor-level. It was filled in during the mid to late sixteenth century, after the Dissolution, and would appear to be a previously unidentified crypt, possibly with an apsidal east end. It occupied much of the area beneath the centre of the south transept and measured at least 14.5m x 11.5m. Its southern edge was not located but this must be beneath the houses at the eastern end of Kingston Buildings.

If the cathedral priory had followed the normal Benedictine plan, the east cloister walk ought to have been laid alongside the west wall of the transept. There is space for a passage in this position, but further west is a Norman building in a thoroughly unorthodox location. The stub end of its west wall, projecting out from beneath the south-east corner of the Rector's Vestry, was, inevitably, first spotted by Irvine. It had a plain chamfer on its outer (west) face, and although Irvine wrongly interpreted it as the west wall of the cloisters, he rightly identified it as Norman (fig. 6).<sup>26</sup> Further research in 1993 showed that the east wall of the Vestry, erected c.1615 in the angle between the early sixteenth-century south transept and the choir, incorporated much of the Norman wall. When the Vestry was constructed, the ground-level was considerably raised so that the new floor could be laid at a level nearer to that of the floor of the church. While the Vestry was temporarily closed for redecoration in 1993, the opportunity was taken to lift the wooden floor and to remove the Jacobean infill. In the process it was discovered that Irvine's Norman wall was still standing to a maximum height of 3.9m above the early-medieval ground-level. It sealed the late-Saxon burial horizon and had all the characteristics of an early twelfth-century wall. It was made of tightly-laid, coursed and diagonally-tooled limestone ashlar blocks, bonded in mortar identical to the matrix of the Norman features further east. Part of the wall face, from its base up to its highest surviving course, was reddened by intense burning, which may well have been caused by the fire of 1137.

6. The west wall of the early twelfth-century building projecting southwards from beneath the corner of the Jacobean Rector's Vestry. The one-metre scale rests on the wall's foundation raft, which is sealed beneath the remnants of the mid-twelfth-century east cloister walk.

*(Photograph by Bath Archaeological Trust)*



A very short portion of the east wall was seen next to the present choir wall, showing that the building was c.10m wide externally. Investigations in the cellars in front of Kingston Buildings suggested it was at least 14m long. A strip of mortar bedding for a tile floor, c.2.5m wide, survived in the centre of the building, but most of the interior was occupied by two deep vertically-sided trenches running parallel and adjacent to the side walls. Each of these trenches was c.2.5m wide, and the bottom of the western one was 2.4m below the internal floor-level. The trenches were

only filled in after the Dissolution, when the ashlar retaining walls were removed. The purpose of these features is unclear. They do not appear to have been part of an undercroft and one possibility is that they were stairwells providing access to and from a subterranean room, perhaps the crypt beneath the south transept. The position of the building is very puzzling and completely unorthodox, and its function is unknown, but it seems to have been erected at an early stage in the construction of the cathedral.

One question which remained outstanding until 1993 was the location of the Norman cloister walks. The early sixteenth-century plan is known because the openings from the church into the cloisters still exist. After the Reformation, when the Prior's lodgings were converted into a secular mansion, the walks served as garden paths, and are shown on seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century maps. But it was uncertain whether the cloisters, like the church, had been reduced in size during the Tudor rebuilding, or whether they had remained in the same place throughout the medieval period. This difficulty has now been resolved. Although some of the adjoining conventual buildings, such as the Prior's lodgings in the west range, were rebuilt, the line of the east, south and west walks remained unaltered from Robert of Lewes' time in the mid-twelfth century until the Dissolution. The only Tudor alteration was to the north walk, which was moved southwards to avoid the new south transept. The limestone paving of the east walk was found intact beneath and just to the south of the Rector's Vestry. On its east side, butting against the burnt part of the west wall of the earlier building, were the ashlar footings of a wall-bench. The junction with the north walk was also discovered. Again, the floor slabs were in place, directly overlain by the east wall of the present transept. Further south, within the cellars now occupied by the Abbey Heritage Centre, the floor of the east wall had been destroyed, but its line was indicated by a concentrated series of medieval graves packed in beneath the walk, clearly a much-favoured place of burial. Most of the north walk was inaccessible beneath the modern Choir Vestry, built adjacent to the south side of the church, but part of the south wall of the walk was recorded, as was the junction with the west walk. Most interesting of all was the south walk which, like the east walk, was indicated by medieval burials. Its southern edge was determined by the Saxon precinct wall. This wall, or a replacement on the same line, was incorporated in the Norman cloisters, and its foundations were only robbed out after the Dissolution. The walks enclosed a square cloister garth measuring c.24m across.

The Norman claustral complex adopted an unorthodox plan because it was constrained by pre-existing structures which were retained and incorporated within the new lay-out. The preservation of earlier structures, however inconvenient, certainly occurred elsewhere. At Wells Cathedral, the Chapel of St Mary, at the east end of the Saxon cathedral, was retained when the rest of the cathedral was demolished. It was converted into the Lady Chapel by the Cloister in the late twelfth century and was integrated with the new cloisters, despite being on a different alignment.<sup>27</sup> At Bath, the Saxon precinct wall is one example of a relict feature. Is it possible that the crypt beneath the south transept is a second example, Saxon in origin but preserved, for whatever reason, within the Norman cathedral?

The recent archaeological excavations have helped to solve a few long-standing problems about the plan of the cathedral priory, but at the same time have raised many new questions. For example, where were the monks housed before the mid-twelfth century? The suggestion that there was a massive temporary timber-framed complex is unconvincing;<sup>28</sup> it is much more likely that the conventual buildings of the late-Saxon abbey were retained until the new complex was built. If so, where were they located? Where was the Chapter House, the focal point of the administration of the priory? Was it next to the east cloister walk or was it sited to the south of the south transept? How was the lay-out of the monastic buildings affected by the relatively small size of the cloisters? Was the monks' dormitory built on a north-south alignment above the early-Norman structure next to the cloister walk, or could it have been aligned west-east between the cloisters and the transept? Was the dormitory, rebuilt by Bishop Bekynton in the mid-fifteenth century, a completely new structure or simply a modernization of the existing dormitory?

These and many other questions are worth posing even though some of them may be unanswerable because all but the deepest medieval layers are likely to have been destroyed by cellaring beneath the houses in Kingston Buildings and York Street. But a considerable amount of evidence survives beneath the pavement between Kingston Buildings and the Abbey, protected by an accumulation of post-medieval soil over 2m thick. Similarly, much of the plan of the east end of the cathedral and the north transept probably survives beneath Orange Grove. This essay is inevitably only an interim statement. As and when further archaeological excavations can be carried out, new information, not only about the Norman cathedral priory but also about the Saxon abbey and the origins of Christianity in Bath, will emerge and current ideas will undoubtedly have to be amended.

## Notes

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