

Saint Leonard's Hospital Alnwick

Outline History & Excavation Report



Entrance Arch from Northern Interior

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Introduction

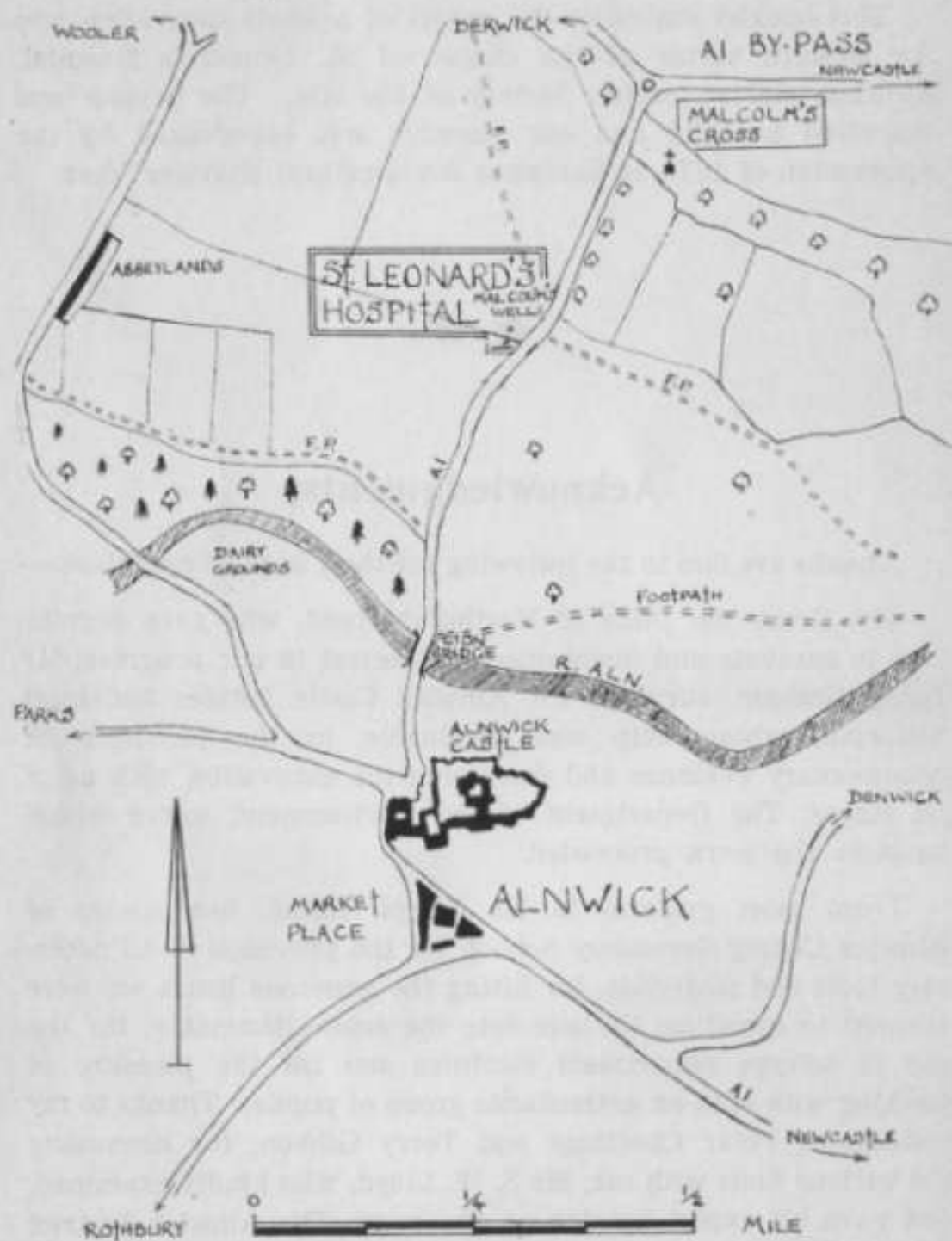
This booklet embodies the report of a small excavation into the western sector of the chapel of St. Leonard's Hospital, Alnwick, and an outline history of the site. The project was conceived in 1974 and our research was encouraged by the designation of 1975 as European Architectural Heritage Year.

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Outline History of St. Leonard's Hospital

St. Leonard's Hospital lies $\frac{1}{2}$ mile north of Alnwick Castle by the side of the A1 London to Edinburgh trunk road. The field in which it is situated is known as "Radcliff's Close."

The present remains on the site of St. Leonard's are not those of the original building, they are the remains of a nineteenth century facade.

Indeed, before 1845, although its existence was known through documentary evidence, the exact position of the site was not.

An early reference to the hospital reveals that it was founded by Eustace de Vescy, owner of Alnwick Castle, between 1193 and 1216, and that the dedication of the establishment was for the good of Malcolm's soul and that of his wife, St. Margaret. This refers to King Malcolm of Scotland, who was mortally wounded in 1093 while leading an attack on Alnwick Castle. He either received the fatal wound or actually died by the spot on which St. Leonard's now stands. Tate and Tomlinson suggest that he died by the side of Malcolm's well after receiving his fatal wounds a quarter mile farther north where the Malcolm's cross monument now stands. However, Selby and Dickson, writing in 1848 felt that Malcolm had received his fatal wounds beside Malcolm's well. They suggest that the interpretation of "near a certain spring" in the Chronicle of Alnwick Abbey should be taken to mean "by the side of that spring."

As the Malcolm's cross monument is only a quarter mile from the well, one feels that this could also be interpreted as being "near" the spring.

Tate's suggestion that it would be natural to help a dying man to the side of a spring, has merit, and one favours his interpretation on this occasion.

According to legend, Malcolm was encamped on high ground above the River Aln when an English knight named Hamund appeared, bearing the keys of the castle on the point of his lance. Malcolm approached presuming this to be a token of surrender and was pierced in the eye by Hamund, who escaped across the river at a point later called "Hamund's ford."

In fact, Malcolm was attacked by an English force under Robert de Mowbray and killed by his own godfather, Morel.

Clearly, he died by the side of a natural spring to which his name was later given. This spring, which is now recognised as Malcolm's well, lies 9 metres to the north of the present remains of St. Leonard's.

About 100 years after Malcolm's death, St. Leonard's was built. Its dedication to him suggests the influence of William the Lion, King of Scotland. He had been taken prisoner in 1174 while leading an attack on Alnwick Castle. On the same visit, a section of his army completed an infamous attack on Warkworth and its church. He was later released on payment of a ransom but at the end of the twelfth century, was pressing his claim for the county of Northumberland. King John visited Alnwick in 1201 in

an effort to settle this long standing border dispute. Eustace de Vescy, owner of the castle, who had married William the Lion's illegitimate daughter, was probably instructed to do as much as possible to appease the Scottish king. The dedication of a specially constructed chapel to the good of Malcolm's soul could be interpreted as such a gesture. However, William appears to have been in favour of the idea for he gave Eustace the barony of Sprouston in return.

St. Leonard's was originally run by an independent order of monks, but later, in 1376, it became annexed to Alnwick Abbey. From this period the support of alms, charities, burdens, etc., became the responsibility of the abbot.

Later, the chapel and small domestic settlement appears to have fallen into a state of disuse and vanished from view. Tate suggests that this probably occurred before the Reformation.

The site was certainly not evident at the beginning of 1845, for in the June of that year it was discovered, as the land came under the plough. Its discovery created a great deal of local interest because it had previously been assumed that the site of St. Leonard's would be much closer to Malcolm's cross. Besides the three-roomed chapel and small domestic settlement, a holy water vase, burial ground, stone coffin and upwards of twenty skeletons were found. Malcolm's well was also uncovered and when excavated it was only five feet deep.

Algernon, fourth Duke of Northumberland, noted for his interest in archaeology, felt that the site should not be lost from view again. Towards this end, in 1848, he asked Lieutenant George Selby, R.N., and William Dickson, the Clerk of the Peace, to form a committee and decide the best way to perpetuate the remembrance of Saint Leonard's. This committee acquired the services of a Mr Thomson through the offices of the Mechanics' Institute, Alnwick. He was recommended as "one who understood the scientific as well as practical part of masonwork." The carved stones were taken from the site to the dairy grounds where they were arranged and drawn. Some stones had been removed in antiquity but those found on the site were sufficient to give a clear indication of the hospital's original style. By comparing the sculptured stones with the existing foundations of the hospital chapel the committee was able to base its report on a sound hypothesis.

For instance, they were able to conclude that there had been no western entrance to the chapel. This conclusion, based on the lack of necessary foundation and arch stones for such a feature was strengthened by the fact that it was not usual to have a western entrance to the chapel in this part of the country. Our 1975 excavation revealed no evidence of a western doorway and reports of similar excavations since 1848 indicate that a western entrance would be unusual.

Of the remains to the south of the chapel, it was felt that they were too confused to be reconstructed in any way and that they had probably existed

to support the alms, burdens and charities associated with hospital life. However, various other suggestions were made regarding the construction of a permanent monument. Mr F. R. Wilson, architect, was responsible for the reconstruction which followed this report.

The 1975 Excavation

By the beginning of 1975 St. Leonard's Hospital was not only covered in weeds and sapling trees, but also a lot of surface rubbish presumably deposited by passing motorists on the busy A1 trunk road at the eastern end of the site. A random surface collection included broken beer and lemonade bottles, discarded cans for the same, aerosols, car tyres, paper and polythene waste. A further threat to the reconstructed remains came from the roots of three well established ash trees which appeared to be undermining the structure, especially at its western end. The most troublesome of these were to be removed during the excavation which followed.

A building of such historic interest deserved some attention, especially in a year which encouraged us to appreciate our architectural heritage. Further, we felt that too little was known about the original structure or the 1848 reconstruction.

The Duke of Northumberland (owner of the land) gave the necessary permission to excavate and the Department of the Environment inspectorate, after visiting the site, agreed that work could commence.

The excavation that followed was confined to the western chamber of the chapel and continued at a careful pace throughout the summer term. When the excavation and survey were completed the site was back-filled and returned to its original state.

Brushes, trowels, shovels and buckets for the excavation were provided by the Alnwick County Secondary School. The work force comprised a small group of fifth form and later, fourth form pupils from this school, who, under constant guidance, developed a tremendous aptitude for the job.

Conclusions

A partial reconstruction of St. Leonard's was undertaken circa 1848, the stones used being those of the original building. A facade was constructed on the foundations of the original south wall in such a fashion that, viewed from the south, the dressed facing stones and entrance arch in the Norman style were clearly visible. On the northern interior of this wall, however, a mixture of stones were used, including some from an inner arch decoration, clearly out of place. This endorses the fact that the appearance of the northern elevation was not too important.

Excavation revealed two distinct sections of masonry in this reconstructed south wall. The original dressed stones formed the foundation course which

lay below soil level. Above soil level, especially on the northern side, irregular stones were used to complete the structure.

The original foundation stones clearly appear to have been remortared then supported at the northern side by a buttress constructed with mason's rubble and large stones. This buttress yielded a copper farthing from the reign of Queen Victoria and pieces of nineteenth century pottery. It was probably constructed with rubble led from another property in Alnwick as it also comprised roofing slate fragments and bricks. The construction of such a buttress on the northern side of the facade would indeed ensure a permanent monument.

After the completion of this facade, the northern end of an inner arch was reconstructed between the nave and chancel. Those of the original stones which remained were used and iron clamps were introduced to fix these in position.

When this partial reconstruction was completed, the western chamber and presumably the remainder of the chapel interior was made into what is best described as a roughly cobbled area. This level lay at an average depth of fifteen centimetres below the surface and was covered by a natural deposit of leaf mould. This surface cannot have been designed as a practical one for visitors, as the stones used were irregular in shape and size. In fact, the site has always been surrounded by a fence with no access point, and the land on which it stands is still private. However, our excavation revealed evidence of human interest or visitation from the time of its reconstruction circa 1848 to the present day.

Pieces of field drain, bricks, nineteenth century glass bottle fragments and pottery were found. Some interesting clay pipe fragments, a medallion and various coins were also discovered above this rough surface.

Directly below this level at an average depth of twenty centimetres, the mediaeval floor level was located. Although the base of sand and clay could have provided a solid foundation for

flag stones, none were evident here. If they did exist, one cannot rule out the possibility of their removal from the site which is easily accessible.

The main feature of this level was the foundation of a centrally placed inner arch.

The Finds

* Denotes illustration

Earlier excavation to the mediaeval floor level and the action of the ash tree roots dictates that all finds (with the exception of the Victorian farthing) be treated as unstratified.

Stones

The majority of the sculptured stones were removed from the site before the reconstruction and some remain in Alnwick Castle. Selby and Dickson in 1848 protested that some had been removed from the site and used in nearby farm structures. The existing remains reflect the later style of Norman architecture.

Several fragments of stone roofing tile with nail holes were found.

Iron

A small smelting pot, badly corroded and broken, was found lying by the side of a roughly constructed hearth. The hearth was situated at the north-western end of the chamber on the 1848 cobbled surface. The ash and clinker removed from it contained fragments of nineteenth century pottery and glass bottles.

The pot itself contained traces of molten lead on the interior and a tapered pouring spout 16 centimetres in length. Its height was 12 centimetres and its widest part 12 centimetres. The handle, which had been broken and discarded in BS antiquity, lay at the same level one metre to the east. CMS It is possible that this was used during the reconstruction activity, molten lead being used to fix the iron clamps to the stones used on the chancel arch. However, one other use is possible. Two small lead objects, one squared and the other cylindrical, were found on the hearth. Both are approximately one cubic centimetre in volume and have the appearance of ammunition for some form of weapon — a catapult, perhaps.

A substantial supply of coal lay by the hearth and the reddened brick and stones suggest regular use over a period of time rather than a single fire.

Slate Pencil

In two pieces, including the point, this is the type used in schools of the past when writing on a slate board.

Coins

(1)* Elizabeth I Silver Shilling.

An example of the late hammered coinage on which the legend is clearly visible.

OBVERSE LEGEND "ELIZAB. D.G. ANG. FR. ET. HIB. REGI."

Roughly translated, "Elizabeth by the Grace of God, over England, France and Ireland reigns." The queen is portrayed with her crown facing left. There is no rose behind her head, fixing this coin as a shilling not a six pence. The woolpack mint mark is also visible.

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1594-96. Assuming 1596 was the date of issue and accepting the fact that the coin is worn through use, I have no doubt that it had been retained for intrinsic value and was lost during the reconstruction of 1848. Victoria farthing struck in copper and dated 1838 This coin is significant in that it is only slightly worn and was found securely stratified in the mason's rubble used to construct the 1848 buttress. (3) Victoria penny minted in 1890. (4) George V halfpenny minted in 1917. (5) George V silver sixpence minted in 1929. (6)* A medallion in brass produced by Macniven and Cameron to advertise their pens. This was produced to commemorate the firm's centenary in 1870. It bears a ring for a chain and had been worn as a medallion. It is devoid of the valuation sign one associates with tokens of that period. OBVERSE. Bust of George III facing right and the date 1770. LEGEND. GEORGIVS. III. DEI. GRATIA. The date was misleading at first as the pen names on the reverse were obviously taken from events after 1770. REVERSE LEGEND.

"MACNIVEN & CAMERON'S PENS ARE THE BEST THEY COME AS A BOON AND BLESSING TO MEN. WAVERLEY. NILE. PICKWICK, OWL. HINDOO. PENS." Correspondence with the firm which still exists in Edinburgh revealed that this medallion was produced on the firm's centenary in 1870 followed by others in 1970 to mark the bi-centenary. It would appear, also, that many news worthy people have used their pens in the past and that their advertising rhymes have been modified by various magazines in times of war and peace.

The Function of St. Leonard's Hospital, Alnwick

Saint Leonard was a French hermit saint attributed with healing powers. It is therefore fitting that his name should be used not only at the Alnwick foundation, but also in over fifty other mediaeval hospitals throughout the country. This reflects the Norman influence at that time and, of course, the esteem they held for their saint.

Over seven hundred and fifty hospitals existed in mediaeval England and these foundations played a major part in the social life of the country. It is therefore easier to appreciate the present remains of St. Leonard's if one understands the role of a mediaeval hospital.

Using the word hospital in its modern sense, one would have an inaccurate picture of St. Leonard's. "Hospital" derives from "hospes," and mediaeval establishments such as this did in fact provide hospitality. A "hospice," pronounced "Hospeece," was a monastery and inn combined and this word gives a clearer outline of the function of St. Leonard's at Alnwick.

Guests here were cared for and comforted. Greater emphasis was placed on spiritual help for the aged or infirm than the curing of ailments. It was also a place where the traveller could expect shelter for the night, hospitality in those days being an obligation to such establishments. St.

Leonard's, situated as it was, must have been a welcome sight to many travellers. The small domestic settlement would contain sufficient accommodation for a limited number of elderly or infirm "permanent" guests, some for the monks themselves and room for the wayfarer. The chapel witnessed a regular observance of God from the devoted brothers and their guests. This was the most important building in the foundation and the centre of attention.

Daily, those who could not reach the chapel themselves would be helped the few metres from their room to fulfill their obligation to God.

The general running of St. Leonard's was initially undertaken by an independent order of monks under the patronage of the owner of the castle, which is clearly visible from the chapel entrance. In 1376 the first Earl of Northumberland arranged for its annexation to Alnwick Abbey at a cost of 100 shillings. From that period the work of St. Leonard's became the responsibility of the abbot and his premonstratensian canons (white canons). One wonders what difference, if any, this made to those involved in the everyday running of the hospital?

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, many hospitals are recorded to have been in a state of decline. So although it is convenient to suppose that the important charitable work of St. Leonard's ended abruptly at the dissolution of religious houses, it is quite possible that this happened many years earlier. Perhaps further research will provide the answer.

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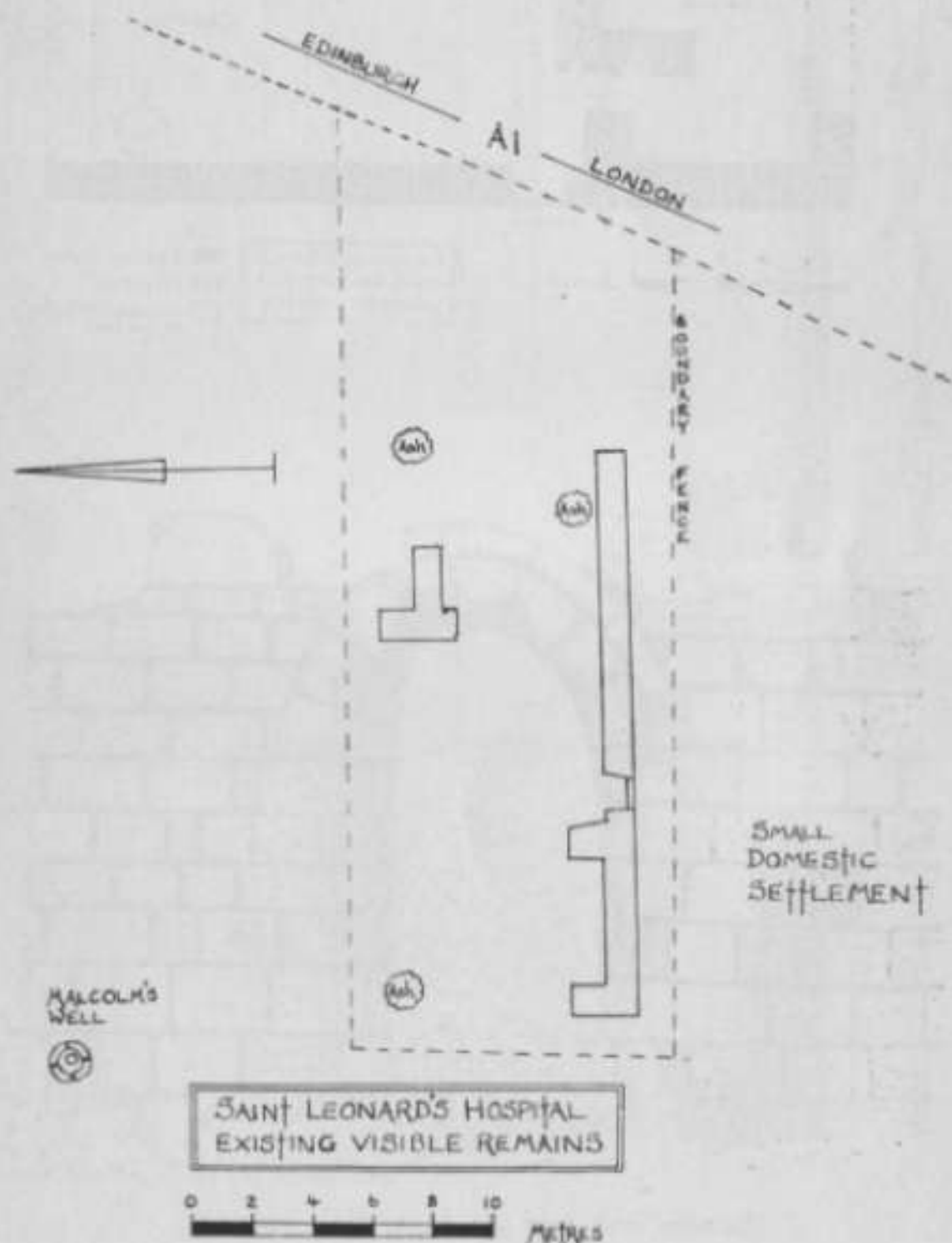
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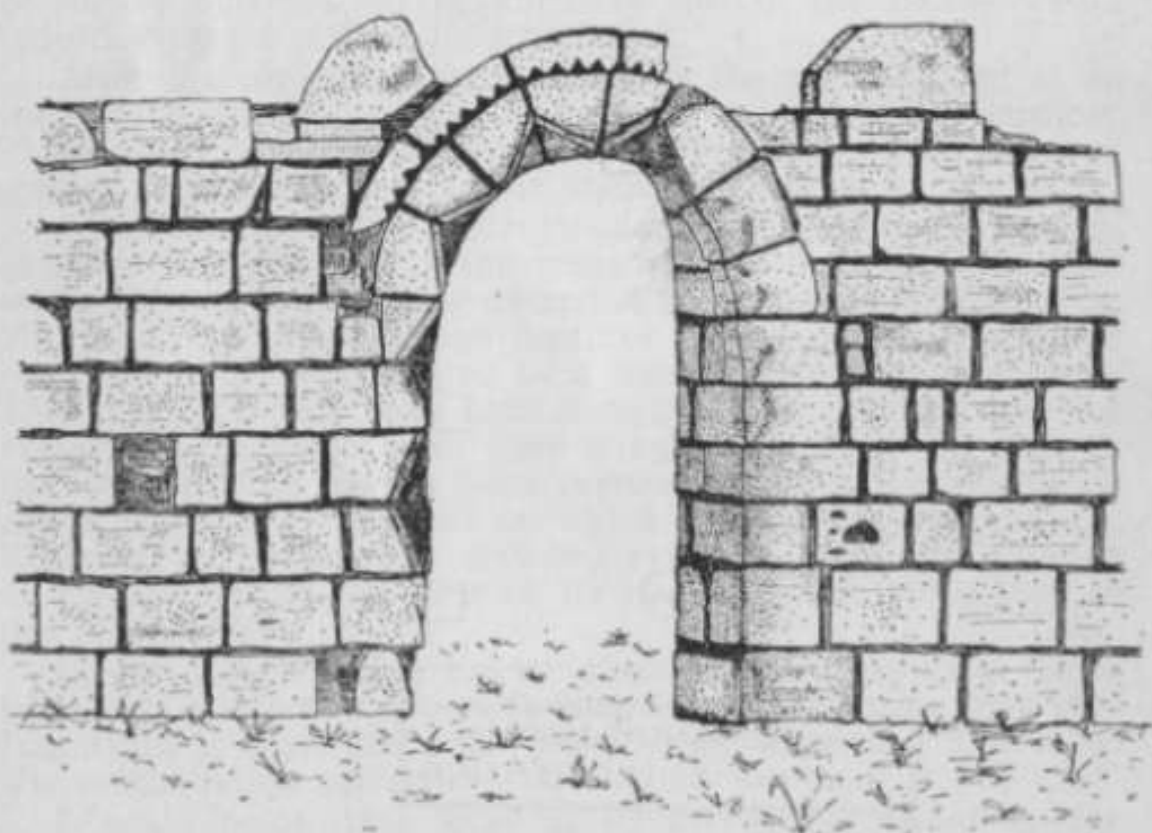
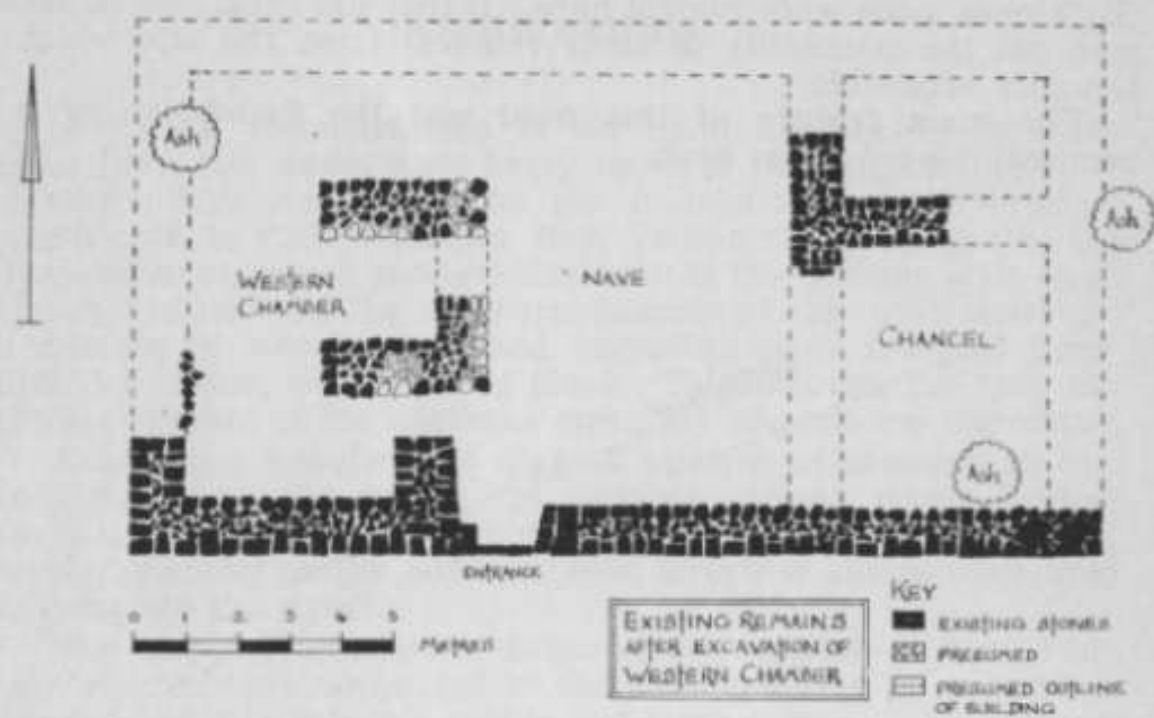
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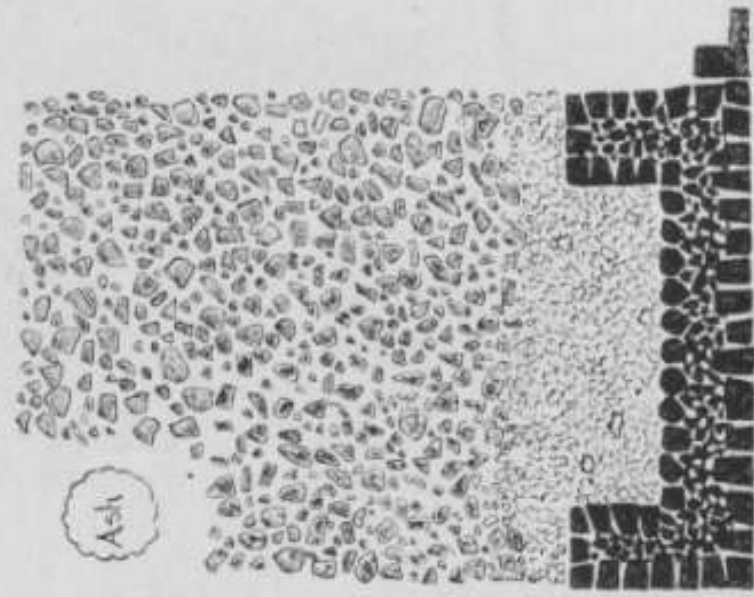
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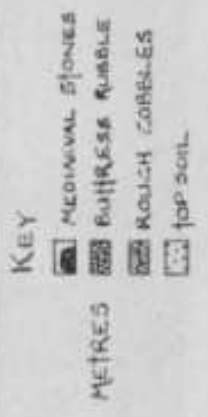


Entrance arch from the south—fence excluded.

WESTERN CHAMBER
1848 LEVEL



WESTERN CHAMBER
CROSS SECTION LOOKING WEST





Northern interior of south wall showing part of foundation course, rough cobbled area and spoil heap.



The foundation course which underlies the irregular stonework of the northern interior.

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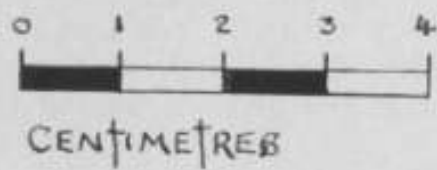
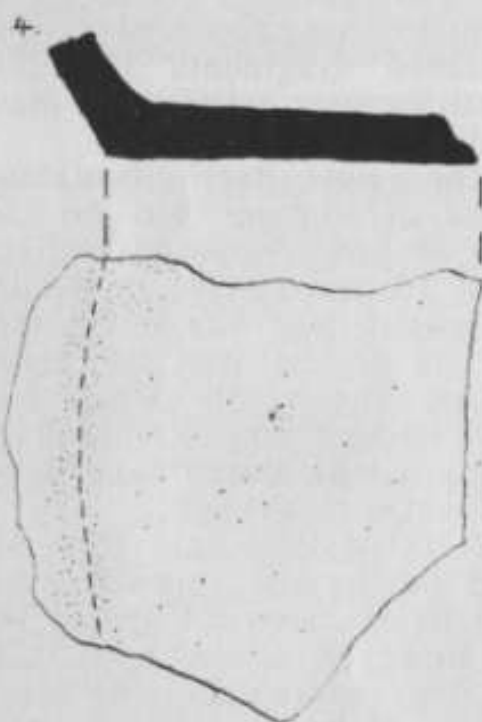
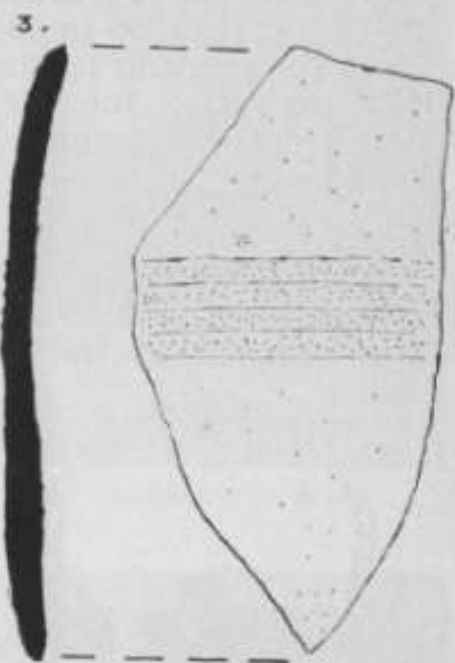
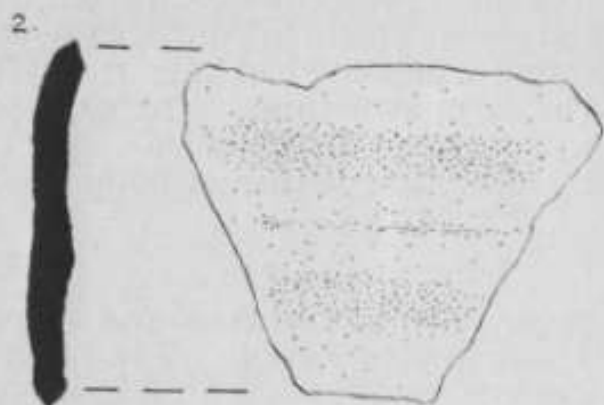
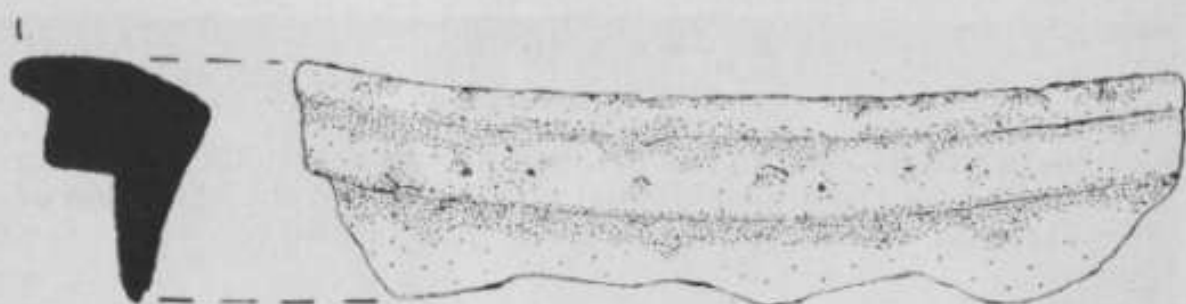
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Mediaeval pot sherds—unstratified.

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Malcolm's Well.



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