Excavations to the South of Lincoln Minster 1984 and 1985 —An Interim Report

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In August 1984, volunteers on the 'Cathedral Camps' scheme uncovered a human inhumation, while preparing a new fire appliance stand on the grass plot immediately to the south of the eastern transept of Lincoln Minster. After inspection by staff of the Trust for Lincolnshire Archaeology it was decided that, prior to further work, the inhumation should be removed and the archaeological significance of the mortared rubble into which the grave was cut should be assessed.

Accordingly a short excavation was mounted with the extensive co-operation and enthusiastic support of the Dean and Chapter and the Clerk of Works, and their contributions to the enterprise are most gratefully acknowledged. In particular the encouragement of the late the Ven. R. W. Dudman, formerly Archdeacon of Lindsey, was greatly appreciated and it is a great pity that his sudden death in September prevented his seeing this small project on his doorstep to a successful conclusion. A full report on this excavation is envisaged as part of a volume in The Archaeology of Lincoln series, but because several aspects of this site have a bearing on the work of other scholars, a provisional account is presented here.

The site (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2f) was excavated in August and September 1984, mostly by hand, the services of a mechanical excavator being used only for the lower levels in the extension dug in January 1985. The aim of the excavation was to recover information about the apparent graveyard, and about the masonry structures which evidently preceded it. It soon became clear that this site would allow a useful analysis of the way in which the late twelfth-century cathedral related to the earlier city wall and, consequently, it would provide material for speculation about the drastic alterations in the topography of the whole area to the east of the cathedral, which have been presumed hitherto but not understood.

![Diagram of Lincoln Cathedral](image)

Fig. 1. Lincoln cathedral. Site location plan. (A. Smith)
Fig. 2. Lincoln cathedral. Sketches to show suggested sequence of development in the area excavated. The toned areas (in the sections) represent purposely dumped material. (A. Smith)
ROMAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL OCCUPATION

The mortared mass into which the first grave had been cut was identified as part of the uppermost core of the east wall of the Roman and Norman upper city, and it provided important new information about the development of the city defences (Fig. 2a,b,c). Since the Roman wall had no foundations as such, being based on the rammed fill of the legionary ditch (Jones 1980, 51-2), little stratigraphy of certain Roman date was encountered at its base when the wall was exposed to its full height.

Contrary to expectations the city wall stood to a height of approximately 3.60m below the lowest course of the east transept masonry, surviving in very good condition where it passed beneath the south-east buttress but deteriorating as it proceeded southwards. It was traced south as far as the edge of the present pavement but no excavation to east or west of it was undertaken beyond a distance of 3.50m south from the cathedral wall. Two principal phases of construction, identified at other sites on the circuit (Jones 1980, 53-54), were easily distinguished. The first stone wall (of mid-second-century date) and originally c.1.50m wide was distinct from the rough masonry mass to the west which had been added to double its thickness in the fourth century (ibid.). The original west face of the wall preceding this fourth-century addition was seen to be formed of small well-squared blocks in accurate regular courses. The east face of the wall, which was exposed briefly to its complete height in a small trench at the northern end of the excavated area (Fig. 3) showed evidence of more than one alteration (Fig. 4). At the base of this face were three large, well-dressed but undecorated blocks arranged with a straight joint along their northern arrises. The wall to the north of these blocks was filled with the foundations of a later masonry projection (below) in a way which suggested that there had been a void here previously. These three blocks are provisionally interpreted as the southern jamb of a later Roman postern gate, since they did not resemble the early wall seen elsewhere, but did appear to be of Roman construction. Above these blocks in the area uncovered, almost all the masonry of the east face was of inferior quality compared with that seen on the west face, and was distinguishable also by the use of a different mortar. This masonry was clearly a refacing of the wall, necessitated by the insertion into the north-south wall of a wall projecting eastwards at the northern end of the area investigated. The projecting wall lay partly underneath the cathedral itself (Fig. 5) and had been cut away by the cathedral foundations, surviving only as a stub extending 0.80m eastwards from the face of the city wall. Enough had survived, however, to demonstrate that it was of considerable thickness and had been inserted into the city wall in the gap created by the presumed former postern gate. This projecting wall is best explained as belonging to a projecting tower inserted into the wall at a relatively late date in its history. No evidence was recovered to suggest whether the surviving fragment was the north or the south wall of the tower or whether the tower was of square, semi-circular or polygonal plan. No direct evidence for dating this tower was recovered either and we have only its position in the sequence to guide us. It is clearly later than the presumed postern gate (which it blocks) and earlier than the east transept, which was probably begun in 1192 (Dimock 1868, 197 ff.). This suggests that it belongs either to the end of the Roman period, or to the period between c.1068 and c.1150 when the defences of the old Roman upper city were reorganised in conjunction with the newly founded royal castle. A date in the intervening period is unlikely. Apart from the towers at the gateways, this is the first confirmed projecting tower at Lincoln of any date (Richmond 1947,31; Jones 1980,19) although the possibility that it belongs to the fortifications of a re-sited postern gate should not be overlooked. There is no reason to doubt that this wall tower was in existence when preparations were made for the construction of the new eastern extension of the cathedral in 1192.
CONSTRUCTION OF THE EARLY GOTHIC CHOIR

It has been recognised for some time that the choir extension (begun in 1192 by St Hugh of Avalon and completed soon after 1200) must have involved the demolition, or radical alteration, of the eastern defences of the city at this point. Although estimates as to the exact position of the wall at this point have varied hitherto, the ground plan of St Hugh's

east end (first revealed in 1791 and on various occasions subsequently [Venables 1887]) must have traversed its line at some point. We can now say where it crossed and can provide one possible explanation of how it might have done so (Fig. 2d). The sequence of development on the site over the previous millennium (shown on Figs. 2a-c) must have raised the surface level inside the wall much more than outside (see e.g. Jones 1980, fig. 9 & fig. 11). This disparity in levels created considerable problems for a builder proposing an extension to the Norman cathedral, with its floor level on the higher ground, across the wall and into the area of much lower ground, a drop of perhaps 2-3 metres. It is suggested, on the new evidence, that the difference in level was resolved by constructing 'foundations' which were partly above the contemporary ground level and then raising the ground level outside the wall to match that inside, a process which buried the newly built foundations (Fig. 2d & e). The first operation undertaken outside the wall was the filling in of the ditch with earth and rubble. The projecting tower was then demolished and a very large pit dug, both through any 'archaeological' levels which had accumulated on the berm, and through the area of the back-filled ditch to receive a 'lower foundation', perhaps a giant masonry 'raft'. Parts of this 'raft' foundation were exposed during excavation and it was seen to be constructed from roughly squared, well mortared, coursed rubble, but it did not reflect the complexities of the ground plan of the building above ground and it was on a slightly different alignment. The foundation pit was probably back-filled soon after the raft had been built within it, leaving just the upper part visible as a masonry platform, but for the sake of clarity it is shown (on Fig. 2d) as still open at a later stage in the work.

The walls which would, when buried, become the 'foundations' of the new eastern end were then built on top of the raft, at a level which was, at that time, still above ground. These walls would, at some stage, have to be co-ordinated with foundations constructed in the usual way (probably in trenches) to the west of the city wall. The city wall itself was thus embedded in the new building, providing a sleeper wall for the eastern arcade and, no doubt, giving the whole structure an added rigidity. There is no evidence as to how many courses were removed from the top of the wall, but, apart from the parapet, the great height still surviving suggests that there cannot have been many.

Once the walls of the eastern end had reached a sufficient height, the ground level outside the former city wall was raised by the dumping of enormous quantities of material around the east end. These dumps buried the lowermost 2.5m of the new walls, converting them into conventional foundations and continued until the top of the city wall had been covered to a depth of approximately 1m. It is likely that there was some dumping of similar material to the west (inside the former city wall), to bring the ground surface up to an equivalent level there, but it was minimal compared with that to the east. The material used for this operation is itself of interest. Although it included occasional dumps of sandy loam and clay, the majority of these deposits consisted wholly or largely of limestone chippings. Much of this was crushed limestone of the sort categorized as 'quarry waste' but in some deposits a proportion of the stone was worked, and included many small broken fragments of late twelfth-century architectural details, especially shaft bases, together with large numbers of Alwalton 'marble' fragments, some of them worked. Alwalton marble (from the Nene Valley, west of Peterborough) was a stone used for many of the ornamental shafts in St Hugh's Choir, and it seems likely that these dumps are composed of waste which had accumulated on the masons' lodge floor during its construction. Further confirmation of this was the discovery of a probable mason's chisel within one of these dump layers.

This proposed sequence of events culminating in the construction of the eastern end of St Hugh's Choir, focuses attention on deficiencies in our knowledge of this sector of the city's defences at this time. The only fragment of useful information we have dates from 1255, when, during preliminaries to the construction of the Angel Choir (which replaced the east end at present under discussion), a royal inquiry was held to establish whether the demolition of the city wall would be allowed (Major 1974,25-6; R.A., 244, 245).

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Fig. 5. Lincoln cathedral. Plan showing position of the city wall relative to the south-east transept. (A. Smith)

Fig. 6. Lincoln cathedral. Plan showing position of graves relative to the south-east transept. The grave-cuts outlined by crosses are at a deeper level. (A. Smith)
The city wall under discussion in this enquiry has never been identified. There are, however, only two possibilities worthy of serious consideration, first that there was a new wall built in an arc around the new east end in the early thirteenth century. Such a wall would spring from the original Roman line in the vicinity of the Cantilupe Chantry House and rejoin it, presumably in the vicinity of the city Eastgate, avoiding the Chapter House of c.1210-20. No trace of such a wall has been found, but there has been no extensive search. Secondly it is possible, given the peculiar ground plan of St Hugh’s Choir and its relationship with the city wall shown in Fig. 2d, that the east end of the Cathedral itself was considered to be a part of the city wall and therefore that the enquiry of 1255 was considering not the demolition of an independent wall, but the demolition of the east end of the church itself. The size and position of the windows in the surviving transept chapels show, however, that if the east end were ever considered to be ‘part’ of the city wall, it would have little defensive capacity. Major churches built into, and as part of, civic circuits are not unknown however, eg. the Greyfriars church at Oxford (Hassall 1975, 60), and the possibility that this was the case at Lincoln is worth consideration (although the apparently similar case at the Greyfriars at Lincoln is more difficult to interpret (Stocker 1984)).

LATER MEDIEVAL OCCUPATION OF THE SITE

Once the former city wall had been buried and the ground levels on either side had been equalised by c.1200, the excavations showed that this area became a burial ground. The western boundary of the graveyard was probably along the line of the former city wall, the position of which was perpetuated by the boundary between the parish of St Margaret Pottergate and that of St Mary Magdelene to the west. The other boundaries are not yet known but there are references to the establishment of the cemetery by the Dean and Chapter in this general area in the mid-thirteenth century (R.A., 2863-2870; pers. comm. Dr K. Major).

The excavations recovered ten graves (Fig. 6) and observed the presence of at least four more, adjacent to the excavations, which were left undisturbed. There were burials at several depths and some of those discovered sealed earlier inhumations; the graves were, therefore, quite closely packed in this corner of the graveyard. This density may be due to the proximity of the Cathedral in general or, more specifically, to the ‘shrine’ of Bishop Grosseteste who was buried in the southernmost chapel of the eastern transept in 1253. It may even have been due to an urgent desire to obtain plots on the right hand of Christ as represented on the Judgement Porch, the side traditionally associated with the Righteous, rather than to the left, that more traditionally associated with the Damned (Boase 1972, chapter 2).

Certainly the evidence suggested that these were the burials of relatively prosperous individuals, as one might expect in such a sought-after spot. Two of the burials were in stone coffins and a third was in an intact cist constructed out of reused stone slabs and sealed with mortar. The entire contents of this cist were retained for specialist analysis and objects of both leather and iron have been recovered. This skeleton is the only one to have been sexed so far and it is thought to represent a mature female (pers. comm. J. D. Henderson). The date of the burials is not certain. They obviously date from the period after the raising of the ground level and completion of St Hugh’s Choir in the early thirteenth century. Furthermore, the burial ground had gone out of use by the early eighteenth century by which time a wall had been built diagonally across the excavation site. In the light of the few documentary references they are probably to be dated between the later thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries.

No evidence was recovered for the post-medieval occupation of the site because, in 1883-84 (Dean and Chapter Acts CC2/1/2 – pers. comm. Mrs J. Varley), a new road was constructed along the line of the present one and the ground level on either side was lowered to accommodate it. During this process Grave II was badly disturbed and other archaeological damage was done by service trenches.

It was this lowering of levels in 1883 that brought the medieval graves much closer to the surface, which resulted in their disturbance by the slight intrusion made necessary by the new fire appliance stand. It is hoped that the position of the city wall will be marked in some way and, perhaps, presented to the passing public as the instructive site that it clearly is.

Acknowledgement

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References

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