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**The Church of St Augustine the Less, Bristol: an interim
statement**

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Notes

THE CHURCH OF ST AUGUSTINE THE LESS, BRISTOL: AN INTERIM STATEMENT

Excavations in advance of redevelopment were carried out on the site of the church of St Augustine the Less, College Green, Bristol (ST 58497272), over the winter of 1983–1984. The excavations demonstrated continuous religious occupation on the site from the Saxo-Norman period to the middle of the 20th century.

The earliest occupation was represented by six adult burials found in the south-east corner of the site. Two of the burials were contained in cist graves and another within a body-shaped grave with a head and shoulders profile. Similar graves of Saxo-Norman date were found at Rivenhall Church, Essex (Rodwell and Rodwell 1973, 225–227).

A small church or chapel partly overlay this cemetery. The two bay chancel?, which measured 9.20 m x 3.80 m internally, survived with a stone-built corner at the north-west and a doorway to the south. Both were continued by robber trenches extending to the east. The door jambs were constructed of oolitic limestone. The foundations of a north/south partition wall were found 0.82 m east of the doorway. The corner and doorway were constructed on foundations with internally projecting footings built of Brandon Hill Millstone Grit. Two coarse ware jars were found, set in the ground west of the north wall foundations, in a contemporary context. They are provisionally interpreted as acoustic jars in a possible choir area and are dated to the later 12th century. This Norman church, possibly of stone and timber, may have been a chapel or a temporary church built for the canons while St Augustine's Abbey was under construction further to the west (Dickinson 1976, 119).

This church probably served as the parochial church of St Augustine the Less referred to in documents *c.* 1291 (Dawson 1981, 22). A floor of decorated tiles of late 13th/early 14th-century date overlay the acoustic jars. At the east end of the later chancel a stone coffin was found. This contained the disturbed remains of at least three individuals. The coffin was similar to two in St Nicholas' Church, Bristol (Nicholls 1879, 174 and 178) and one in the south aisle chapel of St Mark's, now the Lord Mayor's Chapel, Bristol.

William Worcestre writes that St Augustine the Less was, 'the ancient and original church of the said (St Augustine's) Abbey' and the church was, 'newly built in this year 1480' (Dickinson 1976, 117). The surviving foundations of the western part of the church are dated to this late Perpendicular period. The church included north and south aisles defined by arcades of five bays. A tower was built at the west end with a stair turret in its north-east corner. A small tower or bellcote may have been built on the south-east corner of the church. The main porch stood on the north side with a second doorway on the south. The body of the church measured *c.* 21.5 m x 16 m externally.



FIG. 1 Aerial view of St Augustine the Less looking east showing the main church walls, internal burial vaults, and brick-lined shaft burials of the 17th- 19th centuries (photograph: City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery).

A new chancel was constructed in the 16th–17th centuries. The chancel measured 9.12 m x 7.12 m externally. At the same time the pier bases for the arcades were rebuilt, presumably to conform to the new chancel arch. On the south side of the chancel a contemporary building of two rooms served as the vicarage and vestry (Nicholls and Taylor 1881, 238). A pentagonal rood stair was constructed on the south-east corner of the south aisle. By the end of the 17th century brick-built burial vaults were constructed inside the church. One such vault, which was located at the east end of the chancel, may be that of Sir Hugh Owen of Orierton, Pembroke, who died in 1698. A broken, black marble ledger stone, bearing his name, was found in the chancel area.

The granting of a faculty in 1708 allowed the chancel to be extended east by 4.0 m (Sabin 1956, 238). Subsequently the aisles were also extended for 9.50 m, slightly longer than the 16th/17th-century chancel. The south aisle extension involved the demolition of the earlier vicarage and vestry. Internally, burial vaults (FIG. 1) began to multiply along with 'brick-lined shaft burials' (Litten 1986, 1). Both continued to proliferate inside the church well into the 19th century until internal burial within newly constructed vaults was prevented by the Burial Boards Act 1852 (Litten 1986, 4).

Later in the Victorian period a single-storey vestry was built on to the south-east corner of the church. Central heating was installed mainly around the east end, with a boiler house constructed below floor level at the east end of the south aisle extension. The heating duct cut through many of the earlier burial vaults.

Various encroachments occurred in the churchyard at this time as a result of road improvements. The considerable reduction of much of the northern churchyard may have led, in part, to the need to underpin the western half of the north aisle wall. In 1938, the parish of St Augustine the Less was united with that of St George on Brandon Hill. Unfortunately the church was damaged by fire in 1940. This led to its closure in 1956 and eventual demolition in 1962. The internal burials were removed prior to demolition. The external churchyard was cleared in 1971.

In total, 136 burials were recorded in addition to a vast amount of disarticulated human remains. A continuous sequence of burials from the churchyard was recorded below the 19th-century vestry. Many burials were found within the later church walls. These included medieval cist graves through to triple-coffin burials found in the burial vaults. The medieval stone coffin and two later post-medieval burials lay with their heads to the east. Over 100 burial vaults and brick-lined shaft burials were recorded (FIG. 1). It was during this post-medieval period that the church achieved its greatest status which is, in part, indicated by the density of internal vaults and brick-lined shaft burials. Similar burial vaults and coffin furniture were found at the church of St Mary le Port, Bristol (Watts and Rahtz 1986, 168–175).

The later burials and other sepulchral remains including coffin furniture invite a study in their own right, together with the large quantity of architectural material. Medieval floor tiles and decorated window glass of post-medieval date were also found. The coins included a French jetton of *c.* 15th–16th century, several Bristol farthings dated 1662 and a lead token of *c.* 17th–18th century. The token depicted a man smoking a clay pipe and may be an advertising piece or gross penny (Tupan 1984, 14; Boore 1986, 32).

The construction of the Royal Hotel to the west in 1868, warehouses to the south, and encroachments on the churchyard from road schemes, combined with a decline in the parish population, eventually culminated in the church closure in 1956.

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EXCAVATIONS AT BACK LANE, WINCHCOMBE, 1985

Introduction

Excavations were carried out from 1 July – 26 July 1985 on the proposed site of a new Infants' School in Back Lane, Winchcombe (FIG. 2). The excavations were funded jointly by Gloucestershire County Council and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England. The available site (SP 023 284) was bounded on the north by a children's play area (included in the area for the new school), on the west by the Junior School playing field, on the east by a car park, and on the south by Abbey Old House. Two trenches were laid out. The first (trench I) was 34 m long, *c.* 2 m wide and aligned north-west to south-east, at right angles to Back Lane. The second (trench II) ran north-east from near the north-west end of trench I and was parallel to Back Lane. This trench was 40 m long and *c.* 2.5 m wide.

Excavations undertaken in 1963 and 1972 (Ellis 1986) to the west of the present site found evidence for a trackway, apparently dating to the Saxon period, and a Saxon-period clay bank with stone facing lies immediately south-east of Back Lane, although much degraded in the children's play area. It was hoped that trench I would produce evidence for the continuation of this trackway and of buildings fronting onto it. In the north-east corner of the available site there was a very large depression which it was thought might be one of the abbey fishponds or a quarry (Aldred and Hannan 1981). Trench II was laid out to cut across the depression.

The topsoil was stripped from the trenches by machine and the underlying stratigraphy was excavated by hand. All layers and features were recorded in a unique sequence beginning at 1 and the numbers used in this report are those used on site. Three test pits were dug by machine before the trenches were back-filled, their positions being determined in agreement with the consultant structural engineers.