

St. Elizabeth's College Excavation 2011

The WARG AGM has become the traditional spot to update all members on the progress of our various excavations the previous summer. It's an appropriate juncture as it follows on from our Chairman's normally erudite and entertaining appraisal of where we have been and where we are going, allows diggers and processors to see the results of their efforts, and generates an anticipation of what is to come in the near future.

The presentation in 2012 by the dig stalwarts Techer and Chris was ably augmented by James Cassis, one of the young men of Winchester College, whose interest, knowledge, and sheer energy were to help make our dig at St. Elizabeth's College such an enjoyable event.

The History

James would explain the documented history of the Ecclesiastical College, a form of chantry chapel dedicated to the Saints Elizabeth of Hungary, Stephen, Lawrence, Edmund and Thomas. The chapel was founded by Bishop Pontoise in 1301, and had three high altars and a specific and onerous list of prayers, masses, collects and duties for the seven chaplains to perform. As Wykeham founded Winchester College in 1382 the chapel and its activities were there long before.

For nearly 250 years the chapel carried on its sacred duties until the Dissolution, when in 1536 Henry VIII gifted the buildings to Thomas Wriothesly. In 1544 he sold it on to Winchester College under the condition that it was either used as a grammar school or pulled down by 1547. The latter was the obvious result and much of the robbed stone can be seen in buildings around Winchester including the wall of The Meads cricket ground in Winchester College itself.

Importantly for us archaeologists the documents describing the sale spoke of a church with belfry and cemetery with 4½ acres, with the estate also containing houses, barns, granaries, dovecots, kitchen gardens and orchards. Even in the 15th century, documents had described a cloister, bake house, brew house and chambers. Where are they and would we be able to find the evidence?

Digging the Trenches

Our brief was simple: over two weeks to establish the extent of the chapel, record any structures within to corroborate the known history, and record the site using the expertise and experience for which WARG is becoming increasingly renowned.

As usual we started off with a geophysics plot following work done by Southampton University students. This clearly showed the outline of the chapel's foundations. Five trenches were started to locate the internal corners of the chapel, and the wall profile where a modern(ish) sewage pipe had cut it – so giving us a potential wall section. We were helped in this endeavour by the sole surviving plan from Wilmott's excavations in 1964, otherwise poorly

documented which, with its artistic licence, helped us visualise the size of the chapel and, importantly, the scale of the west end which already showed as a major feature.

These initial trenches soon showed the extent of the building, the thickness and construction of the walls and, as we went deeper, began to show how the foundations had been built up on a raft of packed chalk above the alluvium of the Itchen flood plain. Also the demolition of the building appeared to have happened down to a similar level across the site, more to the point the foundations had a definite base level, above which more decorative stone and flint will have been used – although there was evidence of dressed stone being used on corner or buttress junctions, for strength and aesthetic reasons.

The two trenches over the western corners were extended and joined up to show the whole of the west end of the chapel, and there had clearly been two massive towers either side of a double doorway whose porch had flagstones with a stepped entrance. Tantalisingly the porch cut a grave-like feature which could indicate some undocumented multi-phasing in the construction.

A number of other trenches were opened, notably to the east, to establish whether there was a roadway, running close to the chapel, that may have serviced other buildings or fields. Evidence for this was slight, but sufficient to indicate the potential for further work in this eastern part of the site.

We were disappointed not to have found evidence of the three altars in the body of the chapel, although a niche in the eastern foundation may have held a structural beam, but a trench put into the very centre of the chapel floor revealed tile debris (no whole tiles) and another, lined, grave cut. As this trench was dug late into the dig, some potential targets for the next excavation were starting to present themselves.

St Elizabeth's College is a demolition site. It has been systematically cleared of stone and building materials, much of which can be seen in the fabric of Winchester College, including tiles in the cloister of the current College chapel. Our finds were therefore sparse and fragmentary. However our finds processors were kept busy with buckles and book-clasps. Many therefore indicate the Ecclesiastical nature of the site, but many show the more secular, such as fragments of costrels, coins and key. A number of animal motifs were found, pointing towards the presence of the medieval pilgrim.

The Future

Winchester College have been thoroughly supportive of our venture and it has generated much interest amongst the staff and scholars. Taking advantage of this we will return to the site this year, exploring some known areas, such as the centre of chapel with the exposed grave. Are there other graves? Also WARG members have done some new geophysics which shows more clearly some of the features outside the main chapel building. Are these ancillary buildings, perhaps the barn, brew house or chambers from the original site, or are there other features from later periods.

Whatever there is and whenever it is dated, the 2012 dig is set to be as exciting and enjoyable as 2011. With a ban on radios for safety purposes, diggers will be able to get stuck in within an Olympic-free zone.

The 2012 dig runs from Saturday 28th July to Sunday 12th August, see elsewhere in this Newsletter for more details.

A full length report can be seen on the website at www.warg.org.uk. Click on the Big Dig 2011 link.