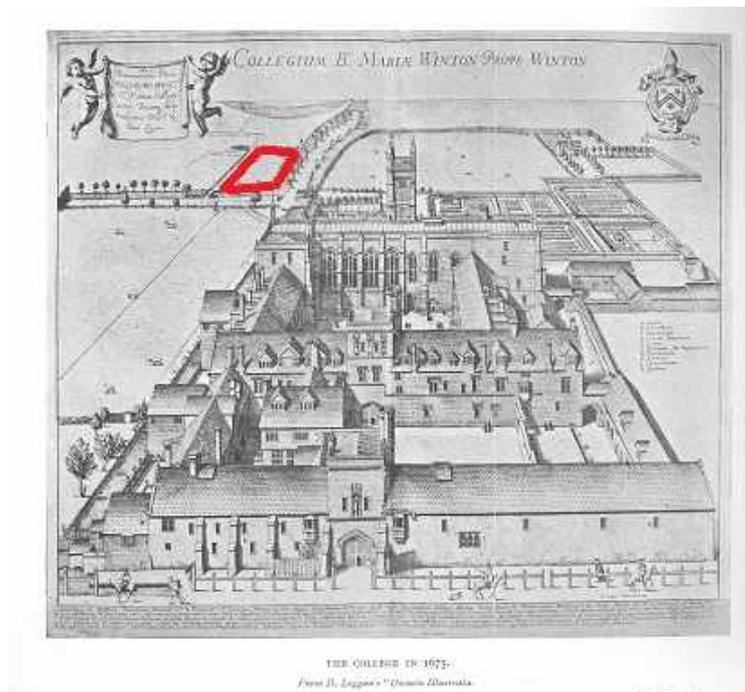


WARG Excavation 2011 - Saint Elizabeth's College

According to the Victoria County History of Hampshire, in 1301 Bishop of Winchester John of Pontoise built the College of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. This was a chantry chapel writ large and the term college refers to the mixed establishment of both secular and ecclesiastical brethren whose role was to perform prayer to a strictly laid down code.

It goes on to describe how three great altars were established in the chapel. The first is dedicated to Saint Elizabeth; the second to Sts. Stephen and Laurence and the third to St. Edmund and St. Thomas of Canterbury.

The chapel was to become an integral part of Bishop Wykeham's new college and remained so until The Dissolution when Thomas Wriothesley acquires the site, like many others in Winchester, and systematically demolishes the buildings, which leads to the selling and much re-use of the materials in the local area. This 1675 "map" shows the chapel site – note the trackway to its east (left).



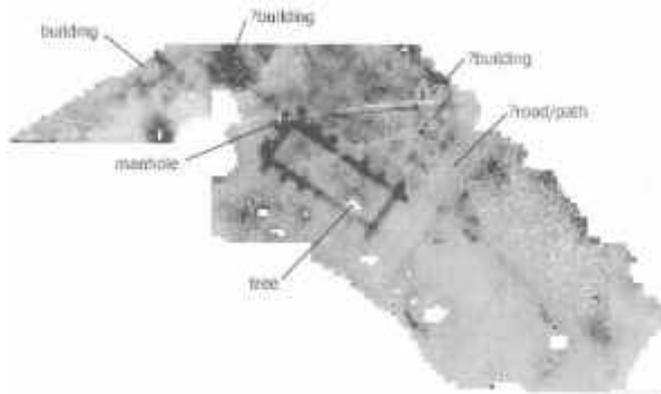
After Leach

The site had been excavated in the 1960's but disappointingly was never recorded, certainly not to the high standards expected today. As a result little is known about the fabric of the chapel, the three putative altars, nor how "grand" the building was.

This is where WARG came in. The brief was simple: over two weeks to establish the extent and layout of the chapel, record any structures within to corroborate the known history, and most importantly record the site using the expertise and experience for which WARG is becoming increasingly renowned.

Also of course, for all our volunteers to have a good time. This year we were joined by some students from Winchester College (Collegemen). This was a chance for them to experience the excitement (and hard work) of a dig and be part of uncovering the history of their own place of

education. Our volunteers were on site the Saturday before, establishing base-camp, getting all the equipment on site and securely stowed on Don and Ted's instant shelving. Geophysics had been done care of Southampton University, and the initial trench positions decided upon and recorded on the Total Station.



The First Three Days

Monday to Wednesday of the first week saw the first trenches being cut over the north-west corner of the chapel (Tr1) and the north wall of the chapel (Tr2) which was positioned over the place where a sewer pipe cut through the wall and would therefore have exposed the wall section, thus its size and construction method.

Trench 1 may have been the first exposure to the reality of archaeology for many of our volunteers, many of whom had paid for the privilege of the back-breaking task of de-turfing a 5 x 5 metre area of chalky Winchester meadowland. Once the initial shock had worn off the painstaking task of alternatively mattocking and troweling began to come down onto the archaeological layers. As parts of this structure had already been excavated we were unsure at what level wall structures would appear, nor what the previous excavators' strategies were for preservation/disposal of spoil and so on, and it wasn't until partway through day 2 that Trench 1 came up with some solid levels which turned out to be the tops of the wall foundations.



Trench 2 did not live up to its initial objective of exposing the wall line and the sewer ditch and thus the wall section, so was briefly abandoned, work carrying on over the opposite (south) wall where the sewer also cut (Tr4). A further trench over the south wall where the geophysics was particularly clear (Tr3) would locate the south-west corner. Trench 4 identified the sewer cut (the sewer is no longer in use we hasten to add) and the structure of this part of the south wall and its foundations. Trench 3 showed us a beautiful internal wall line from which we extrapolated its length and the point where it meets the east wall. Having that wall led us to consider the SW corner of the building, and Trench 7 was opened. It very quickly came down onto mortared flint-work of part of the south wall. Luckily this coincided with the appearance, in Trench 1, of the interior corner of the foundation work of the north-east corner, and the Total Station confirmed that the top of the foundation level was roughly the same height (above sea-level datum) as that in Trench 4. So by the end of Day 3 we had a very clear view as to the extent of the building, its dimensions, and the condition of the remaining brickwork following Wriothesley's Dissolution travails, and those of the twentieth century excavator.



With many able and willing helpers on site it seemed likely (weather permitting) that we would continue to expand our coverage to establish just how much was left and to tell the story of both the chapel's demise, and also, at the east end, to get some evidence for the three altars mentioned in the historical documents.

But there is also the west end of the building, which, from the geophysics, has quite massive foundations. A decision was to be made on Thursday as to our strategy for finding the west door, and assessing, by its size, its grandeur or otherwise.

Finds

Even though we were dealing with a demolished building, probably systematically, re-excavation of a 60's dig, and a general mix of rubble and waste, we had a good selection of finds, which our, as ever, stalwart team of finds processors cleaned and catalogued.

One particularly special early find which caught our imagination was what we conjectured to be a belt ornament, book decoration, horse brass or ... well actually we've had as many conjectures as we have volunteers.

It's reproduced here so that you can either join the debate or come up with the answer. No prizes offered I'm afraid. The piece is two squares of a bronze alloy (like brass), perhaps gilded, separate by a sliver of leather. There is a large rivet through the centre, though the two pieces are actually held together by four smaller rivets at the corners. The two pieces appear to be a piece or pieces of reused metal and the designs on both sides may be coincidental. Any suggestions to webmaster@warg.org.uk.



Large version click
www.warg.org.uk/home_files/Brass1B.JPG

Larger version click
www.warg.org.uk/home_files/Brass2B.JPG

Thursday - The Big Washout

Everybody turned out on this morning (thank you all) despite the fact that the heavens were depositing copious amounts of rain. Unfortunately it was too dangerous to undertake the planned activities but a select few were able to clear the backlog of finds processing, and tidy up the paperwork in some of the trenches.



The End of Week 1

The rains retreated and work started again. By the end of Saturday we had opened 8 trenches:

- 1 Over the NE corner
- 2 The north wall in search of the sewer-pipe section
- 3 Over the SW internal corner
- 4 The sewer-pipe section on the south wall, exposing the pipe
- 5 First trench over the presumed trackway/road to the east of the chapel
- 6 Second trench over the presumed road (with no initial evidence of it in either)
- 7 Over the SE corner
- 8 Over the NW internal corner

The layout of the chapel was now pretty firmly understood, and evidence of the construction methods in use was becoming apparent - though, as is the way with archaeology, that evidence started some heated debate about the sequence, and the reasons for certain deposits, especially the rammed chalk "platform" that was emerging from underneath the wall foundations in some of the trenches, and is described in more detail below.

The two eastern corners came up with clear buttresses of a monumental size which pointed to a building of great height, certainly more than the College's nearby New Hall.

Public Open Day - Sunday 7th August

Well we knew that a dig closer to the centre of Winchester, and adjacent to several well used paths through the River Itchen water meadows, was likely to bring a few interested folk along to see what we were up to. We were only just prepared, however, for the sheer quantity.

People were queuing at the (plastic) gate to come and examine our trenches and to get guided tours from three of our number, ably illustrated by Julia's display of finds and paraphernalia.



The excavation was able to show Sunday's Open Day audiences the full extent of the chapel's layout, and its immensity, together with a range of finds, mainly from the demolition layers, which would give some idea of what the building looked like. Also thanks to the historical researches of our Winchester College students, we had information from the known documentary evidence as to how the building was used, and by whom.

And the digging carried on. Most of our students had (understandably) taken the weekend off, but James carried on digging for Australia in Trench 1 to try and find the natural layers of alluvium below the chalk platform - which he eventually did.

We haven't had time to assess the success of our Open Day yet, there were hundreds of people entertained by us, but everyone left with a smile on their face and a bit of extra knowledge about this wonderful city they either live in, or recognise as being a major centre of England's ecclesiastical heritage.

Week Two

The second half of a WARG dig, defined as the bit after the public have been to see us, is usually characterised by an increasing frequency of panicky decisions and frantic trench deepening. This dig appears to have been spared that, because we are answering many of the questions which are usually posed by the interpretation of our trenches.

One theme running through our examination of the construction of this building is the consistency of the evidence, its agreement with the geophysics and, it has to be said, the shallowness required of the trenches to get to the evidence.

Now that we have four internal corners, we can concentrate on some of the more exciting elements of the archaeology. All the corners have shown foundation walls based on high quality, consistently sized flints in the ubiquitous yellowish Winchester mortar. These walls are "slotted into" a rammed chalk "platform" which may extend over much if not all of the area covered by the chapel. The purpose of this metre thick platform laid directly onto the natural alluvium in the Itchen flood plain is to stabilise the area and seal the foundation from the water table (which was apparent in the peat/alluvium layer below the platform), a method used on many river-valley sites in Hampshire. The slots in the chalk then contain the mortared flint foundations, on top on (in some areas) large chalk blocks or less consolidated flint work.

This whole concept is currently conjectural and further clarification of parallel instances will be sought. Many of us still find it amazing that such a large and high (judging by the width of the walls) structure could be supported in such a way, but these Medieval builders obviously knew what they were doing.

It has always been apparent from the geophysics that the west end of the chapel had structures associated with monumental foundations. By the end of the second Monday with a backfill deadline looming, work began on uncovering the façade area of the west wall. This would include the west door location and the two large features either side which were already being talked about as "towers". Whether these were solid, decorative structures, or hollow features with staircases and upper rooms may end up a conjecture, but it was good to expose something so grand so quickly. The main features were just below the surface in an area which had been subject to the onslaught of agricultural vehicles for decades - indeed it formed a dry causeway when the field was waterlogged.

The remains of the doorway foundation, the east end of the chapel (possibly, but the tree roots are proving problematic) and a potential sondage into the centre of the chapel to firstly confirm the overall nature of the chalk platform, and secondly seek any remaining floor level within the chapel, were the final objectives of what was turning out to be a very satisfying dig, both from the archaeological viewpoint, and the good time that people are having, making friends, finding new sources of knowledge and going home tired but fulfilled.



The west wall showing the gap for the door (Tr9), and the sewer cut through the north wall (Tr2)

Tuesday

The day that saw the west end and door entrance exposed also contained moments of new understanding as external chalk platform levels, and new work in the eastern “road” confirmed some of our early conjectures.

A visit from a researcher at Southampton University looked at some of the alluvial levels below the chalk to try and understand the hydrostatic pressure theories being mooted about how and why the chalk platform worked with or against the water table.

Our day culminated in the invitation by Dr. Peter Cramer to visit some of the glories of Winchester College, including a visit to the top of the Chantry Chapel Tower from where Garrard took this glorious photograph:



At the end of the day, we all packed up early and processed (sic) to the College's Chapels under Peter's guidance to appreciate a building some 80 years younger than St. Elizabeth's College, and of similar proportions. Indeed if the proportions are consistent we envisage our building to be of awe-inspiring height and grandeur.



Collegeman Tom shows Techer and Nicola where most of the chapel ended up, in the wall at Meads.

Wednesday was the final official digging day, to be followed by two back-fill days. A new trench was started (Tr10) in the centre of the chapel, to examine the many potential features within the building and putative chalk platform layer expected across the chapel's extent.

There remained much to be drawn and recorded, and finds to be processed, and the physical story of this building drawn together. We had visits due from other bodies such as the CPRE as well as individual VIPs, eager to understand this "missing" building, and, perhaps, its surroundings. These included Professor Martin Biddle, who presented all our Collegemen diggers with collector's item WARG certificates.

The excitement and enthusiasm of the dig team remained at an all time high and most of us were sorry that this all-too-short excursion into this part of Winchester's history will soon come to an end.



How to wash the spoil sheets – first, find the River Itchen

Thursday and Friday

By the time the back-filling began, and the traditional over-run of that activity stretched into Saturday (our contingency day), we had a fairly comprehensive picture of St. Elizabeth's College of which a trench-by-trench summary is hereby presented:

Trench 1

Over the north-east corner a very clear cruciform was exposed, which was the top of the mortared foundation. Each corner of the cruciform had blocks of dressed stone (Greensand) which are likely to have been placed more for planning in the building phase rather than for any structural purpose. Such blocks were found to a greater or lesser extent in each of the four corners. A section of the inward facing foundation was examined to establish the chalk platform and the blocks above it. This section was taken down to the alluvial level.



Trench 2

The original objective of exploring a wall section was achieved in the second week when Don Bryan joined the dig, as he extended the trench southwards and westwards. Indeed both internal and external wall faces were established, the buttress (the only non-corner buttress) and the wall section where BOTH the sewer pipes cut through. One of the pipes, composed of pipe sections with butt and socket joints, was either a sewer or a drain. The other lacked socketed joints, having instead intentional gaps between pipe segments, was more likely a local land drain. Water was seen inside this pipe after rain.

The early finding of some unstratified and unarticulated human bones in this trench is thought to be earlier burials in the then-sanctified ground which had been disturbed by and part of the fill of the work to install the later sewer pipes.



Trench 3

Originally close to the south-east corner this trench produced the first clear view of the foundations and the way they had been built into the chalk foundations. We can see various layers, the foundation wall, the chalk platform, chalk rubble, then the alluvium layer. The puddle at the bottom is actually water that had either seeped in from the sides, or the water table itself (bearing in mind this is August). A most satisfying trench for Geoff Ellis, who was to see it extended into Trench 9 as the dig progressed.



Trench 4

Dug to seek the section not initially possible in trench 2 due to the delay caused by the bone find, the trench quickly identified part of the wall, the mortar top to the foundations, the foundations themselves and chalk rubble. All this, of course had been cut by the rather large sewage pipe. We were calling it that but in fact a close look at Winchester City Council's GIS

system showed that Southern Water knew nothing of this pipe, let alone pumped anything noxious through it. So its provenance and purpose remains unknown.



Trenches 5 & 6

These were positioned over the course of the putative road to the east of the chapel and proved enigmatic until the last few hours, when structures appeared which suggested there was indeed a trackway here. This is one instance where further work would be desirable, to examine the area around the chapel. Were there, for instance, out-buildings associated with the ecclesiastical use of the area, or possibly commercial as the association with St. Elizabeth took on a more pilgrim-related form. Maybe this was just a utility route to the agricultural area across the flood plain.

Trench 5 revealed an extensive packed chalk platform, possibly a continuation of the chalk platform seen inside the church. This would make sense if the chalk platform was used to create a stable dry building area for the church on otherwise wet, peaty ground. A similar platform, made from re-deposited building material, has been discovered under Pilgrim's School.

Trench 7

The trench identified the south-east corner of the chapel. There was more wall remaining on top of the foundations and the corners again showed the use of dressed stone. Again the question, construction alignment or structural – or even decorative. Tantalisingly the interior east wall, where we would expect to find the altars, had some evidence of a recess in the wall, perhaps where another stone structure had been keyed in. One of the three altars, perhaps.

All this detail has been presented in WARG's highly professional manner – producing an archive for further research – and all done by volunteers, many of whom were new to the techniques used. This plan of the trench by Lucy Sharp illustrates the record, which is allied with photography and the written context sheets to provide a detailed description of the trench.



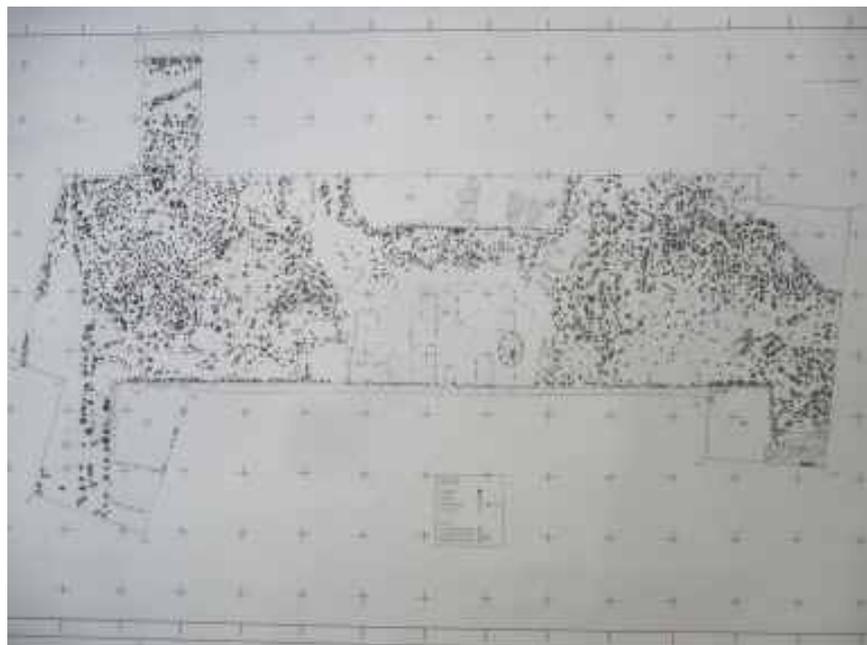
www.warg.org.uk/home_files/Trench-7-plan.jpg

Trench 8

The north-west corner, strangely out of true and not forming a right-angle for about half a metre. There was also a linear cut through the wall whose extent we didn't explore but could have been a recess or even a door. The resultant "hole in the wall" had been filled with modern rubble to prevent tractors coming to grief. Again the chalk platform was exposed.

Trench 9

The trench that just had to be dug. Positioned over where the west door would be, the geophysics had predicted two massive structures either side of the door recess, and they duly obliged. No only that but the door recess showed how the entrance was funnelled towards the door, and had residual mortar shapes indicating where paving slabs had been laid leading up to the doors themselves. This can clearly be seen on the plan.



www.warg.org.uk/home_files/Trench-9-plan.jpg

The final oddity or irony in the trench was the finding of dressed limestone blocks abutting the entrance way in a curious parallel manner. Various conjectures were made but the most likely explanation is that there is a grave, orientated west-east, using the west end of the chapel as the end of the grave markers.



Trench 10

Our final trench was placed slap-bang in the centre of the chapel, in an attempt to prove the extent of the chalk platform, and look for evidence of any of the interior floor remaining. What was found was most exciting, as medieval floor tiles, together with slate were encountered quite near the surface. To cap it all, further dressed stone in the shape of the foot of a coffin were also unearthed, suggesting that the inside of the chapel was a place for the departed clerics and priests to be buried.



As importantly, lots more questions were raised about the use of the building as this dig came to an end, and the potential for further research and excavation became apparent.

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This excavation lived up to the expectations of most of the WARG dig committee and its volunteers, and exceeded those of the rest. Not only had we found a long lost building, we have clearly defined and described the below-ground aspects of it and learned much about medieval construction techniques – and will no doubt learn even more.

Some of our finds, and the other uses to which this building was being put start to create a picture of medieval life and death as well as fit this early chapel into the history of Winchester College and its surrounding environs.

In fulfilling our last objective, that of having some fun, I believe that was surpassed in some measure. Our students from Winchester College (and their long suffering House Master Peter Cramer) were a revelation – considering most (all?) had never lifted a mattock before everyone set about the hard labour with gusto, and never a moan was heard (except when the rains came, of course). Other young people joined the throng, on the road to a first year at university, or having just left with a career or just lifelong interest ahead of them.

Then there were the stalwarts young and old, for whom a dig is, inexplicably, a summer holiday and who just like mucking about with the remains of history. Foremost among them of course is Techer Jones, who spent two weeks of constant action, organising, buying things, filling things up and occasionally digging and back-filling out-of-hours, and most of all, motivating the whole lot of us through the back-aches and early starts.

To him, as also to Saint Elizabeth, thanks are due.

