



WARG 1972-2012

Recent Excavations – St Elizabeth’s

In St Elizabeth’s Mead, to the south of College Walk and opposite the New Hall of Winchester College, are the remains of a church, founded in the early fourteenth century and demolished in the sixteenth century. WARG is uncovering information about the building and its structure.

St Elizabeth and other saints

In 1301 Bishop Pontoise of Winchester founded the Chapel/Chantry/College of St Elizabeth of Hungary with three altars, to St Elizabeth, to St Stephen and St Lawrence, and to St Edmund and St Thomas of Canterbury. The foundation charter gives no indication as to why these saints were chosen, although a decayed chapel to St Stephen was nearby. St Elizabeth’s was collegiate - that is a community of clerics but not a monastery. It had seven chaplains, with clerks, choristers and domestic servants, and it was endowed with lands in Hampshire.

In 1536, as part of the dissolution, Henry VIII granted St Elizabeth’s to Thomas Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. He sold the site to the Warden and Fellows of Winchester College, who demolished the building, using it as source of building materials for expanding the college.

Earlier Excavations

This is not the first excavation of the building. An entry in the finds register of the Winchester Museums Service records a book clasp donated after an excavation in the dry summer of 1921. A major excavation was carried out by Rev. Philip Willmot in the summer of 1964. This was an extensive dig, locating the corners of the building, but unfortunately only fragmentary records of the excavation exist, apart from photographs and a plan. The site remained open until 1966, when the field was needed for the College bursar’s horse.

Collaboration

In 2010 Dr Peter Cramer approached WARG to help with giving Winchester College men experience in archaeology. St Elizabeth’s was chosen as a target as it was both accessible, only a few inches below the ground, and badly documented. A resistivity survey by Southampton University showed the site of the church very clearly, and also other traces that could be subsidiary buildings. Extensive desk research by James Cassir uncovered both the founding charter, the dissolution charter and an inventory for the transfer to Winchester College – but all documents in between covering, for example, any building work carried out, have disappeared.

Digging and sewers

The first year’s dig established the corners of the building and confirmed the accuracy of Willmot’s survey, with a building 31.6m (almost exactly 100 feet) long and 12.75m (close to 42 ft) wide. The remains are the foundation walls, with all of the walls themselves having been removed. These foundations are wide, 1.25 m (4 ft), and alongside them are massive buttresses, which indicate a very high building. A sewer pipe had been cut through the building, which gave us a cross-section through the foundations and showed that the church appears to have been built on a platform of chalk, brought onto the site from elsewhere. A trench in the centre of the building revealed a grave-slot and some broken or chipped floor tiles.

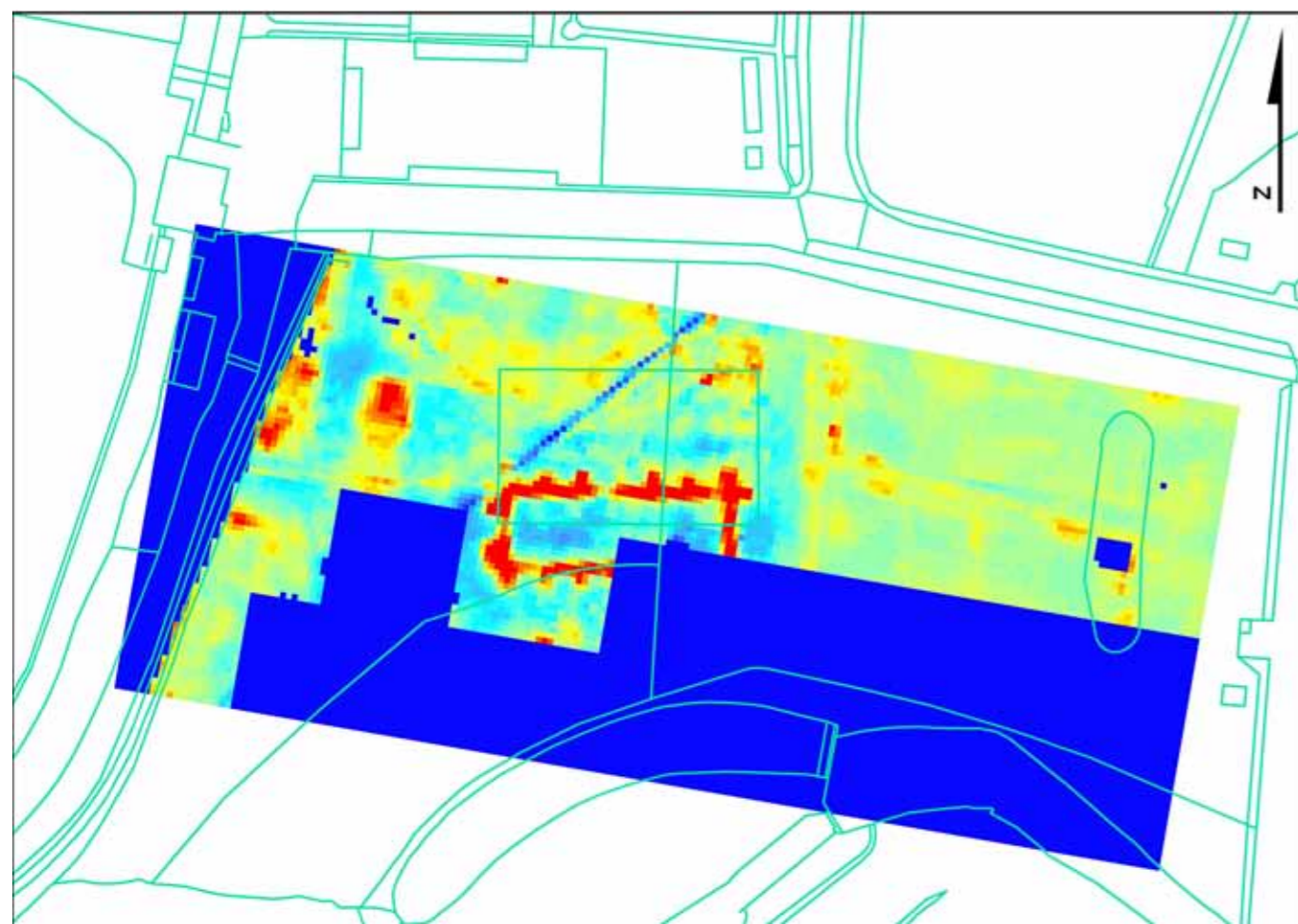
In the second year work concentrated on two large trenches – the west end of Chapel and a cross-section through the Chapel at the mid-point where the grave-slot was found. Both of these have produced more questions than answers. At the west end, there are two large foundations, perhaps of towers either side of the west door. The northern foundation shows several different phases and as yet there is no explanation. Between the two towers is a grave-cut - lined with chalk blocks. Who is this? We hope to carbon date the remains found in the grave to see whether this predates the foundation of St Elizabeth’s. The cross-section revealed large foundations within the walls of the Church, which might be part of a rood screen, or the foundations for a belfry (or both.) Between these foundations, in the centre of the church, were further grave-slots, again lined with chalk blocks.

Conclusions

We still have many unanswered questions about St Elizabeth’s. What was the sequence and dating of the west end? And what is the role of the foundations? Who are the people in the very expensive graves? And that is before we start to explore the other resistivity results to find the domestic buildings that are listed in the inventory.

Acknowledgements

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Resistivity shows the site of the chapel very clearly



Three layers of foundations at the west end



The middle of the chapel showing more foundations and graves



Matching stone from the Chapel with walls in Winchester College



A key found by the west door matches one used today



Detailed drawings are still the best way to record archaeology