

An evening visit to The Hospital of St Cross - 21 July 2016

Jane Wheeler



The evening began with a lecture which gave the context of post-conquest family infighting, civil war, and the founding of St Cross by the Cluniac Henry de Blois in the twelfth century. Henry as Bishop of Winchester was a renowned builder, with Winchester being the second richest diocese in the country, extending as far as Southwark in London. As Henry was as wealthy as the King, he was able to bank-roll a permanent building task-force in the south of England. Being a great sponsor of the arts, de Blois instigated the Winchester Bible, and also built the east wall of Wolvesley Castle.

We were told how desk-top survey, geophysical survey and field-walking, and excavations (2007-2010) were undertaken to investigate the chronological development, including destruction phases and rebuilds, of the layout of the St Cross site, including the adjacent parkland. Excavations had begun with a series of test pits being positioned in accordance with the anomalies presented in the geophysical data and crop mark patterns.

A perimeter ditch frames the edge of the modern cricket ground. This feature is not part of the river/meadow system, and is not believed to be defensive as it is situated within the parkland area. Excavation revealed infill and a depth of approximately 2.5m indicating that the ditch was a substantial feature within the immediate landscape. Finds included four sheep skulls that were radiocarbon dated to the Early Medieval period. There was a circular feature constrained within the ditch, along with a cobbled area interpreted as being associated with flint working. The pit (1.5m wide) was clean, and not full of the rubbish deposits usually associated with such features. It is thought that the pit may have been used for washing or

dying wool, as loom weights were found nearby. Pottery provided a relative date of Late Anglo-Saxon/Early Norman.

Crop marks also revealed a series of walls abutting the surviving garden wall. Being the site of the South Range lodgings demolished in 1789. The destruction of this range between the Brother's lodgings to the west and the south-west corners of the cemetery and church remain a mystery. Excavation in this area was undertaken to find evidence of the former structure. The stratigraphy revealed a feature (the Lock Burn) which was a former sluice/conduit of the lavatories which ran under the former lodgings of the South Range. It has been proposed that The Warden may have been reluctant to spend money on maintenance, and wanted a clear view from his dwelling, so simply created the vista by demolishing the obstructing lodgings.

A water feature comprising a rectangular ditch with a central island was revealed to the east of the church building in the parkland. Rebuilding in the mid-fifteenth century may have created this fashionable "paradise island". However, this ditch appears to have been connected/abutted with the end of the Lock Burn culvert/sluice, which may explain why the ditch was infilled with demolition rubble from the former South Range lodgings, including decorated medieval floor tiles. Unfortunately, all the tiles were broken. The damage and dumping being attributed to the Butterfield renovations undertaken in the 1880s to "restore" St Cross, including the replacement of many original floor tiles with Minton replicas. Similar medieval tiles found in the excavated rubble from the water feature ditches correspond with those made by "Witham the Tiler of Otterbourne" in the 1300s. Surviving and in situ tiles can be found in both the Cathedral and Winchester College (the College retains the original receipt – thus providing the relative date range for manufacture). Comparative analysis has revealed that the same tile mould was used at all three locations.

Two test pits (14 and 15) in the middle of the Bowling Green revealed a mother and child burial. It is possible that the child may have been illegitimate, and thus the bodies were buried close to sanctified ground. Additionally, other outbuildings were identified including a butchery site, brew house (original floor surface and stake holes), a number of robber trenches filled with flint, and evidence for the diversion of the Lock Burn/sluice. It has been proposed that the Bowling Green area was the original site of the original St Cross structure (Cross 2011). Excavations in 2013 revealed a series of features to support this hypothesis that the remaining foundations were evidence for the original buildings constructed by Henry de Blois in the twelfth century (see www.WARG.org.uk).

A summary of the chronology of excavations at St Cross was presented in the shadow of the Brothers' lodgings on the site of the long-demolished South Range. These surviving lodgings, built in 1468, are akin to similar two-storey accommodation found in college rooms at Oxford University. The group then moved on to visit the interior of the St Cross Church. The floor tiles and stones in remembrance of former inhabitants of The Hospital of St Cross and Almshouse of Noble Poverty. Being recently repositioned next to the altar, the carved screen, we were informed, is the oldest surviving example in Britain. Whilst carved into the prayer stall was the amusing graffiti of a highwayman holding up a stagecoach. Leaving the church building the group then visited the Master's Garden via the Ambulatory to take in the beautiful yew hedges, and also the pool (now sluiced) – which may have been the site of the medieval fish

pond. The tour was then finalised with a visit to the Brethren's Hall and Refectory. Dendrochronological dating of roof timber has provided a *circa* 1340 date for its construction. The structure being a classic Medieval dining hall with a serving corridor, central fire into a smoke bay, top table, and staircase leading to the Master's room. The Minstrel's Gallery is a more recent addition. As the night was drawing in, members then visited the gift shop to buy souvenirs of this most interesting visit to a most remarkable site.

John Crook's book (2011), *The Hospital of St Cross and Almshouse of Noble Poverty* (Short Run Press Ltd.), presents the story of the St Cross going back to its origins in the 1130s. The WARG website ([www. WARG.org.uk](http://www.WARG.org.uk)) provides summaries of all excavations at St Cross in its Dig Archive for 2008, 2009, 2010, and more recently, 2013.