

SOUTH PORCH & SONG SCHOOL
ELY CATHEDRAL
An Archaeological Watching Brief

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June 1996

Report No 176

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Introduction

Between 1st and 3rd of April 1996 the Cambridge Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief of excavated trenches outside the South Porch and Song School of Ely Cathedral. The work was part of an on-going programme of drainage improvements to the south side of the cathedral. The trench ran approximately three metres to the south of the north ambulatory of the cloisters, parallel to the window wall. Three short connecting trenches joined the main trench to the outfall of the rainwater down pipes from the South Porch/Song School roof. The drainage system will run into the system already installed in the north west corner of the cloisters.

Background (from the revised brief for the *Archaeological Assessment of the Song School and South Porch*. W.G. Simpson 27:10:95)

The transept is the oldest surviving part of the cathedral and dates to the late 11th-12th century. The north-east corner of the medieval cloisters, abutting the nave and transept, has been adopted to serve as the South Porch and the Song School and Choir Vestry. The window wall on the north side of the cloister was built in the 16th century, the bay divisions are marked externally by small stepped buttresses surmounted by pinnacles. The spaces between the buttresses are entirely filled by large traceried windows of five lights. Some of these have been bricked up. The third opening from the east is almost entirely filled with ashlar - up to the base of the tracery. This appears to be an original feature and, Atkinson suggested, might be because a large cistern or tank stood here into which rainwater from the gutters was led (Atkinson, 1933).

Methodology

The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.50m by hand with an archaeologist in attendance. Any archaeological features encountered during excavation were to be recorded before digging resumed. The original line of the trench at the east end encountered the north-west corner of a 19th century cistern/sump (Bacon 1877). The trench was re-routed to avoid this obstacle (see Figure 1).

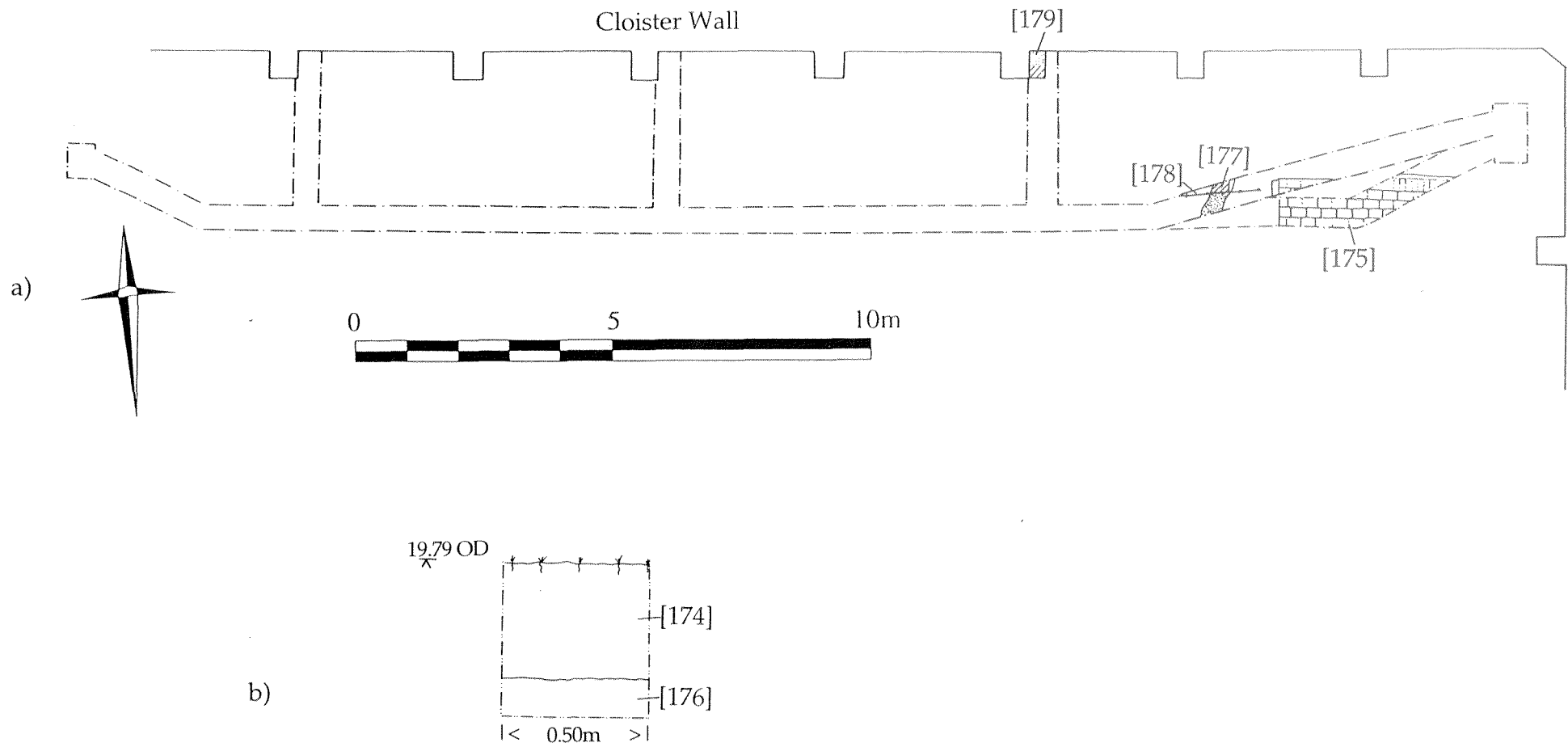


Figure 1 a) Plan of the Drainage Trench
 b) Representative Section

Results

The soil sequence was the same throughout the trench. Below the turf was a mid brown slightly sandy silt top soil with occasional charcoal flecks and brick fragments with a depth of 0.35-7m ([174]). This overlay [176], a yellowish brown, slightly clayey silt with occasional fragments of coal, brick/tile, cream mortar and charcoal. A sherd of post-medieval pottery was recovered. This layer continued below the bottom of the trench.

Two archaeological features were noted and recorded, both towards the east end of the trench. The first of these was [175], a large, brick-built structure topped with tiles. Once the top of this feature was encountered the trench was re-routed to the north and uncovered the south-west corner. On the west edge the bricks extended 0.10m beyond the edge of the tiles. In the second, deeper trench the sides of the feature could be seen to be vertical, and extended below the limit of excavation. The dimensions within the trench were 0.80m north-south and 3.30m east-west; the latter was almost parallel to the cloister wall. This structure is in all probability the 19th century sump or cistern mentioned above.

To the west of [175] was a linear feature ([177]) revealed at the bottom of the trench. The feature was 0.33m wide, orientated in a north-north-east, and south-south-west direction and continued beyond the edges of the trench. [177] consisted of bright yellow mortar with small stones and occasional fragments of chalk. Fragments of tiles lay flat on the mortar surface. This feature appeared to be a foundation to a small wall, possibly a garden feature. The foundation appeared to be cut into the lower soil [176] and was truncated above by the cut for a lightning conductor ([178]).

The three connecting trenches leading up to the cloister wall revealed the east side of buttresses three, five and seven respectively (moving from east to west). The plinths for buttresses five and seven dropped vertically beyond the depth of the trench (0.36m), buttress three was seen to rest on a mortar and tile shelf 0.25m wide and 0.26m below the ground surface.

Conclusion

The drainage trench dug to the south of the South Porch and Song School had a maximum depth of 0.50m and was too shallow to reveal medieval features. A thick build-up of garden soil overlaid an earlier garden soil containing fragments of building debris - both layers were post-medieval. The 19th century brick-built cistern/sump was located towards the east end of the main trench and the trench was moved to the north to avoid it. To

the west of the sump was found a mortar and tile foundation. The foundation was insubstantial and may have supported a low garden wall.

One of the connecting trenches to the cloister wall revealed a shelf of mortar and tile below the third buttress. This buttress lay on the west of the bay division thought to have housed another cistern contemporary to the re-construction of the cloister wall in the 16th century. The trenches did not reveal any evidence of this cistern.

References

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