

# OAU NEWS

March 1992

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## EYNSHAM ABBEY

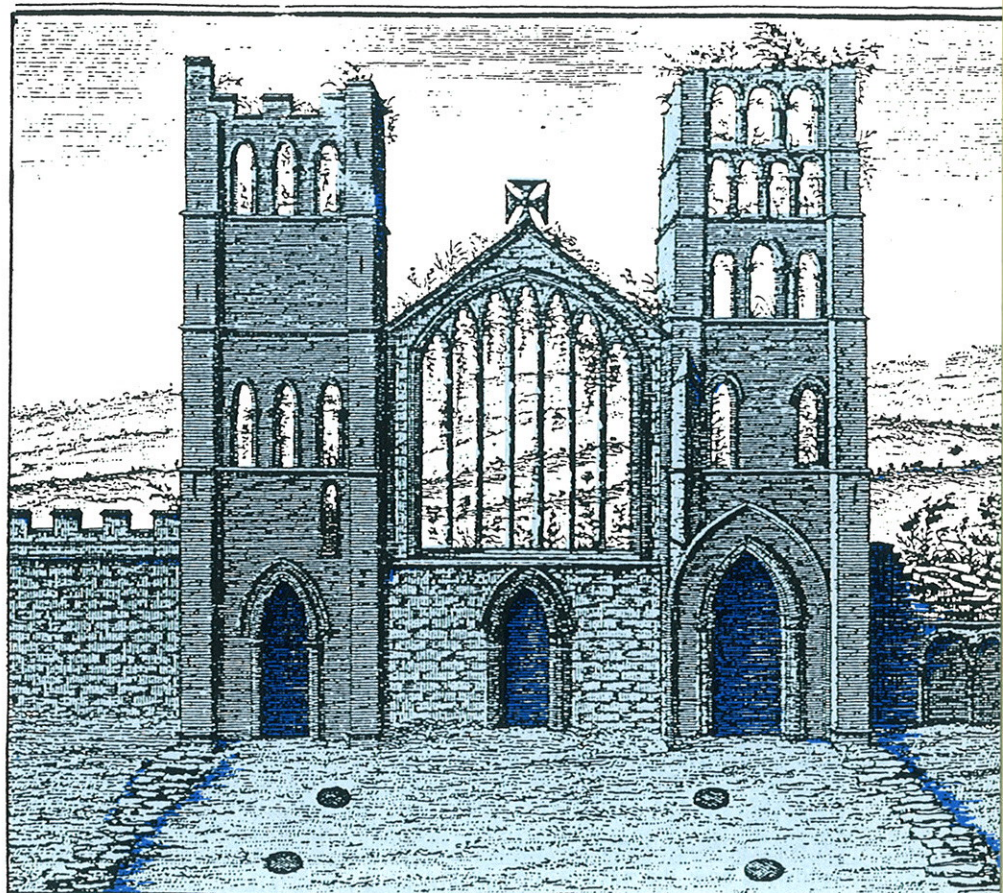
### The history of the site

Few people who visit the small market town of Eynsham, 6 miles W of Oxford, will realise that one of the richest Abbeys in Oxfordshire once stood here. There are no majestic ruins, no silent cloisters, no ivy-covered walls. All that survives are a few stones from windows and doors embedded in the masonry of cottages around the town. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry VIII in 1538 Eynsham Abbey was systematically razed to the ground. All reusable materials were stripped away and used elsewhere. There is even one cottage called Abbey Stones!

Below the ground some of the Abbey's remains do survive, but the exact location of the buildings was unknown. All that could be said was that the Abbey lay somewhere in the grounds of St Leonard's and St Peter's churches. Gravediggers have sometimes had to dig through stonework – hardly an ideal way of revealing the groundplan of a medieval church!

One patch of ground immediately to the E of St Peter's church survived untouched. When the two churches decided to extend their cemeteries onto this land, English Heritage agreed to fund excavation. That two-year

programme of work has now come to an end, and at last we can begin to recreate the layout of the Abbey, and to see something of the everyday lives of the people who lived here through five centuries of religious devotion.



The west front of the Abbey church  
in 1657

### The first Abbey

In the late Saxon period the Church went through a period of renewal and reform, and one of the final flourishes was the establishment of Eynsham Abbey. It was founded in AD 1005 when King Æthelred II granted authority to Æthelmaer, one of his elder statesmen, for the establishment of a Benedictine house. The new Abbey's important position in the late Saxon Church is reflected in the appointment of Ælfric, one of the foremost theologians of the day, to be its first Abbot.

At least three ranges of buildings belonging to this Abbey have been found. The principal structure was a large hall (22 m by 8 m externally) aligned NNE-SSW. Buildings were ranged to the N and W of this, while a courtyard seems to have lain to the E. Abbeys at this time were not built to a standard plan, but it seems that we have revealed the domestic ranges, with the hall perhaps being a dormitory. A cellar to the W of it would probably have been used to store food. Ælfric started a library at the Abbey, and one of our best finds is a fragment of an ivory casket which may have contained one of the manuscripts from the library.



A silver SCEATTA, more than 1200 years old

### The coming of the Normans

The Norman Conquest created great uncertainty in the Anglo-Saxon Church, and Eynsham Abbey suffered severely. For about 50 years the site lay deserted and ruinous, until King Henry I confirmed the Charter of Foundation in AD 1109. This led to a complete rebuilding of the Abbey in the new Romanesque style.

All the buildings, including the church itself, were laid out around a square Great Cloister. This lay at the heart of the Abbey in every sense, and the monks would have spent a large part of their day there. Novices would be taught here, and manuscripts would be written in the scriptorium which was situated on the N side of the cloister. Ranged around the cloister were the church to the N, the refectory (Fratry) to the S, and the dormitory to the E.

The Great Cloister was found at the N end of the excavations. This immediately allowed us to identify the functions of the buildings we excavated even though they had been badly damaged after the Dissolution. It also proved that the Abbey church lay within what is now St Leonard's churchyard.



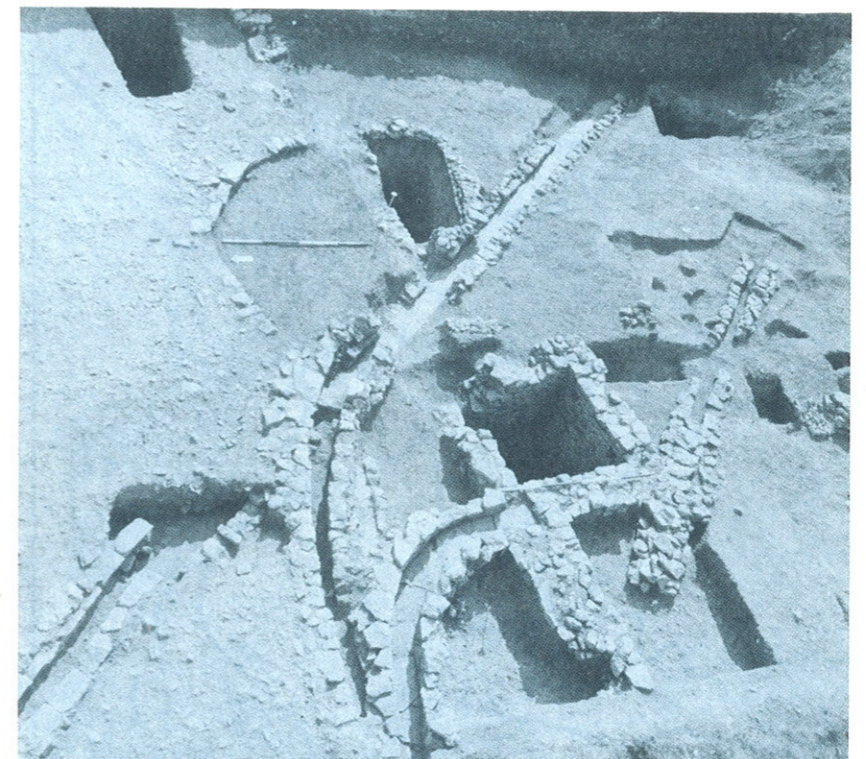
A crucifix figure made at Eynsham Abbey c.1030

The Cloister consisted of a square garden, or garth, surrounded by covered corridors, or walks. The SW corner of the Cloister Garth contained a *lavatorium*, a large basin or fountain within a small pavilion. The basin would have held pure, holy water in which the monks could wash themselves before prayer or before entering the refectory on the south side of the Great Cloister. The used water was taken away in lead pipes.

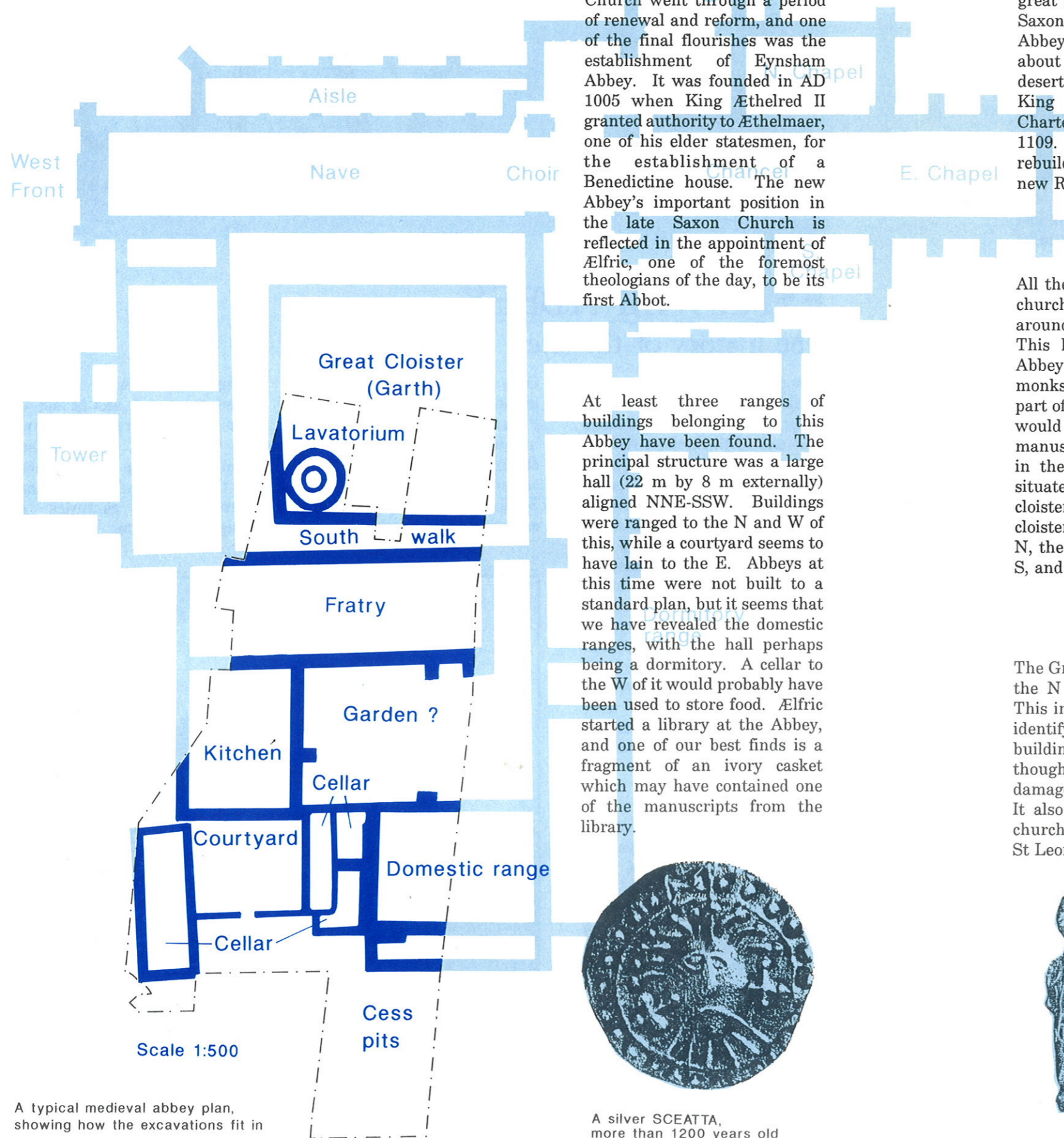
The W cloister walk was paved with finely-cut stone slabs, some of which survived in place. Several graves were dug in the S walk. Most members of the abbey community would have been buried in a cemetery E of the church and cloister, but Abbots and elders of the Abbey were sometimes buried within the cloister. None of the graves contained anything to indicate the status of the deceased, but at least one fragment of an Abbot's tombstone was found.

The Fratry was a plain hall about 30 m long and 12 m wide. The size of the building shows how large the Abbey community would have been at its height. Towards the end of its use stone benches were built around the S and E sides of the hall, and a fine diamond-patterned stone pavement was laid down in the centre. The monks would have dined here at long tables. Strict silence was observed at mealtimes, so that passages from the Bible could be read out from a pulpit.

Occasionally the King would visit the Abbey, attended by his household. This happened in AD 1186, for instance, when King Henry II and his council met at the Abbey for over a week. We know from contemporary records that feeding the King and council was an expensive affair, with poultry, game birds and meat required in plenty, to say nothing of a good cellar of wine!



Gents only - the toilets of the medieval abbey



A typical medieval abbey plan, showing how the excavations fit in

The monks' own diet would have consisted of simpler fare. The Benedictines were not supposed to eat the flesh of any four-footed animals except during illness. In fact they did eat meat such as beef and lamb, as the mounds of animal bones collected during the excavations show, but fish was more important. This was supposed to be the staple diet for about half of the days in the year, and at a wealthy Abbey like Eynsham a steady and constant supply was needed. Some fish would be bought from market, and fishing in the Thames would obviously provide an important supply. This could never have been enough, however, and so in the early 13th century land was bought immediately S of the Abbey so that fishponds could be built. For the next three centuries these were farmed to provide a major part of the Abbey's dietary needs. The ponds can still be seen E of Station Road, but they are dry now, and heavily overgrown.

Food was prepared and cooked in a square kitchen built onto the S side of the Fraternity. The kitchen was divided into two parts; the N end contained a range of ovens stretching right across the width of the building. A sequence of hearths, floors, and ashy layers raked out from the hearths occupied the S half of the structure. Significantly, the ashy layers contained vast quantities of fish bones. Lead pipes fed water from the *lavatorium* into three vats where food could be washed, while drains took the waste water away to the S and SE.

Two massive cellars were found to the S of the kitchen. The cellars would have been very cold, and they held the main food and wine stores. A courtyard lay between them, its S side marked by a boundary wall. The yard was used as a rubbish dump; deep pits were dug, to be filled in with food waste and broken pottery.

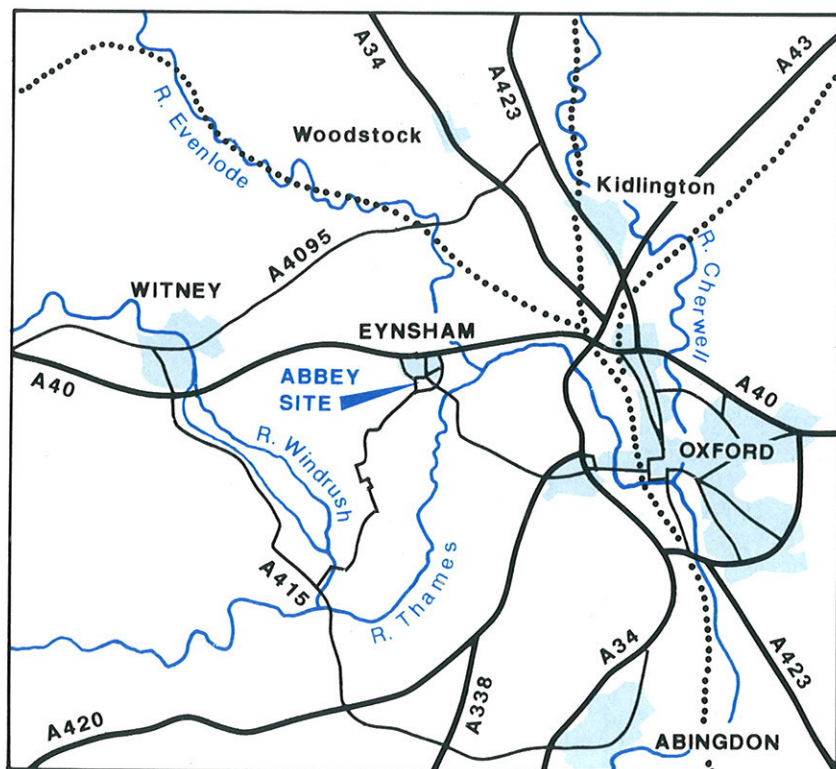
More domestic buildings lay to the E of the courtyard. They were basically plain, with few home comforts, being part of the monks' dormitory. A 'toilet block' consisting of a series of cess-pits lay to the S of the block. The monks were very keen on cleanliness at all times, and the pits were regularly maintained - hardly the most popular job. Waste water fed from the kitchen in drains flushed the cess-pits. On several occasions, pots were lost down the pits. Not surprisingly no-one was very keen to retrieve them - until we excavated the pits, that is!

### The Dissolution and post-medieval activity

After the Dissolution the Abbey was systematically robbed, but one building survived the destruction. The Abbot's Lodging was sold off as a private house, and was lived in for at least a century after the Dissolution. At one stage we believed that we had identified this building, simply because we found standing masonry which had escaped the attentions of the stone-robbers.

Disappointingly, however, the wall turned out only to be the boundary of the courtyard S of the kitchen. The Abbot's house, it seems, waits to be discovered elsewhere!

Graham Keevill



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