

Dunstable Friary Excavations 1988

Royston Clark and Anthony Maull*

Grid Reference TL 0195 2169

Introduction

In 1988 a four month excavation programme opened up an area of 704 m² within the church precinct of the Dominican Friary in Dunstable. The excavation was probably the last opportunity to investigate a substantial area of this extensive site. The project was conducted by the Archaeological Service in the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council. Funds were generously provided by the site developers - Furlong Brothers (Chingford) Ltd, Bedfordshire County Council and English Heritage. Assistance on site with excavation and finds processing was provided by the Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable.

Historical sources indicate that Dunstable was one of 56 Black Friar houses in England. The Friars were invited to Dunstable in 1259 by Henry III and construction of the church and other buildings occurred soon after.

"A certain mansion was given to the Friars Preachers in 1259. They began to build very sumptuous houses, and built a church with all speed" (Nicholls 1794:228).

Completion of the first church is likely to have been in 1264, a particularly early date for a friary church. The final church would have been taken out of use or destroyed sometime after the Dissolution in 1538/9.

This note will concentrate on summarising the immediate results of the 1988 excavations, with some reference to excavation work conducted in the early 1970s by the Department of the Environment.

Pre-church features

Pre-church features consisted of two Roman wells, (these were not fully excavated) one of which contained a partially articulated horse skeleton and sherds of Samian ware. In general, very little residual Roman material was found across the site. This may be due to landscaping in the medieval period.

Two Christian graves also date to before the earliest constructional phase found on the site.

The Dominican Church

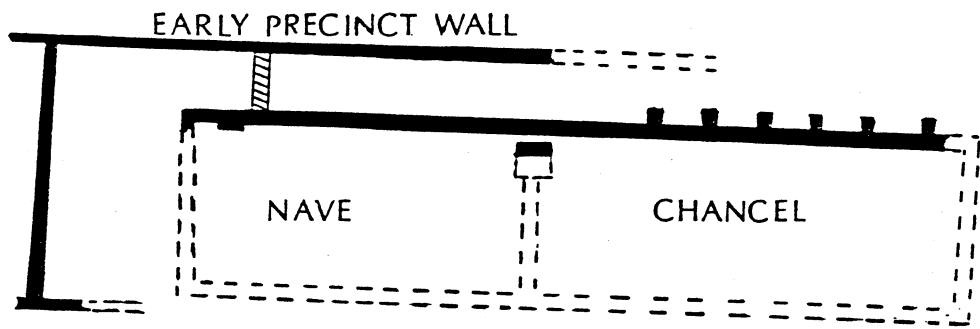
Three main constructional phases were recorded, although phases I and III had evidence of limited secondary building. The quality of surviving masonry was often extremely good, especially considering that walling was often preserved only a few centimetres below the modern ground surface. In many areas there was evidence for post dissolution robbing of stone and other materials. Finds were limited mainly to roof and floor tile and architectural fragments, including window tracery and mouldings. Also found were large quantities of window glass, including both stained and painted fragments. Very little pottery was found from the excavations. A total of 22 human burials were excavated, but at this stage, it is too early to ascribe them to particular constructional phases of the church.

Phase I. Thirteenth century stone built church.

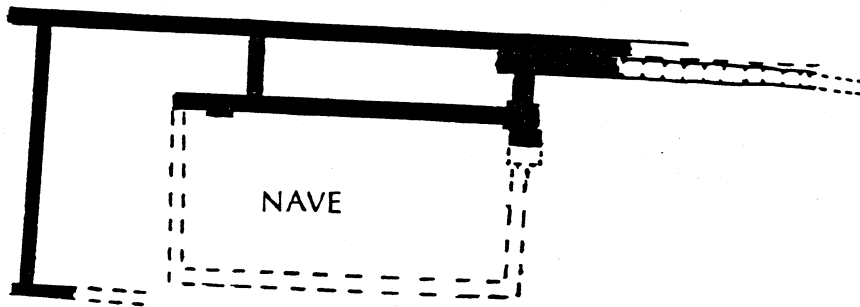
Excavations revealed part of the north wall of the nave and chancel. The nave wall was constructed from chalk blocks and contained a stepped doorway, while the chancel was built from carstone (sandstone with a high iron content) and was buttressed at 2.5 metre intervals. It was impossible to calculate the full dimensions of the church because of the limits of the excavation, but the nave measured c. 25 metres in length and the chancel was at least 30 metres. Between the nave and the chancel, a large block of masonry was found which could indicate the presence of a substantial structure such as a central tower, above the crossing between the nave and the chancel. Unfortunately, later quarrying has destroyed any further evidence for this structure.

Associated with the church, was a precinct wall made of Totternhoe stone, flint and tile fragments. This wall enclosed a space roughly 4.5 to 5 metres in width around the north side of the church.

PHASE PLAN 1
1A



PHASE PLAN 2



LATER PRECINCT WALL

PHASE PLAN 3
3A

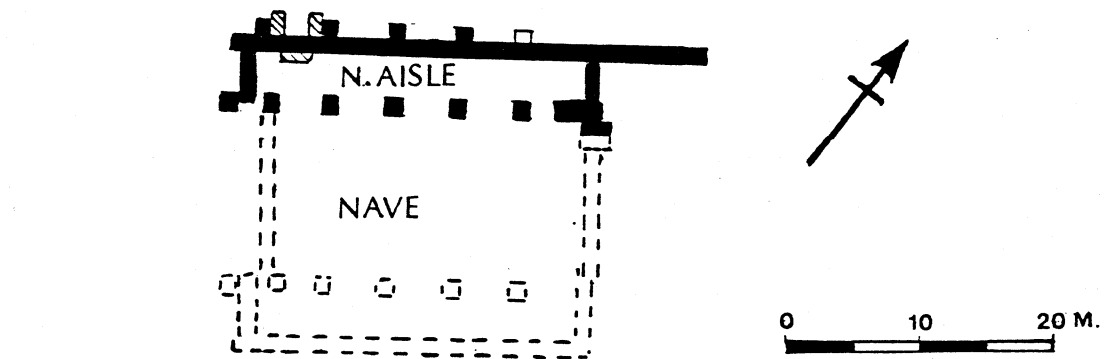


Fig 17. Dunstable Friary 1988. Preliminary phase plans.

A.S.M.

Phase Ia.

During this phase, a blocking wall was inserted between the north wall of the nave and the precinct wall. This had the effect of restricting access around the building, the eastern area possibly becoming a graveyard.

Phase II. Early fourteenth century church.

A major planned but only partially implemented rebuild of the church coincided with the chancel going out of use and the area becoming a graveyard. A large masonry block was inserted between the wall of the nave and the wall of the disused chancel. This block also butted against the possible tower foundation footings. A construction trench was dug immediately north of the disused chancel wall and a wall partially built at the western end of this trench. This wall was never completed. Perpendicular to this wall, a blocking wall was constructed, this butted against the precinct wall and the masonry block. The reason why this rebuild was only partially completed remains unclear. Perhaps the most plausible explanations would be that the Friary ran out of money or there was a change in plan for the church.

Phase III. Mid fourteenth century church

The north wall of the 13th century nave appears to have been dismantled to floor level and a series of pier bases were inserted along its length at 3.5 metre intervals. An associated north wall was constructed to make a northern aisle with a series of buttresses opposite each pier base. The building material was high quality Totternhoe ashlar blocks. This structure presumably supported a vaulted ceiling above the aisle. The excavations in the 1970s suggested a west wall to the aisle, this gives the north aisle an internal measurement of c. 24 metres in length and 3.5 metres in width.

A new precinct wall was also built north of the aisle, 6.4 metres from the church, thus pushing outwards and extending the limit of the precinct. This wall was built largely of flint. No evidence for a later chancel was

found, though it may rest underneath a modern factory building to the south; if so it would be unusually narrow.

Phase IIIa.

The final construction episode was the insertion of a porch into the north wall of the aisle. The entrance way had a series of steps which were located during the excavations in the 1970s. Associated with this phase is a ditch and a road surface with a series of cart ruts running approximately parallel to the side of the church. The ruts had been deliberately backfilled with building material.

Summary

Provisional results from the excavation suggest that three main construction phases were recorded on the northern side of the church. During each phase the church and precinct grew progressively larger, suggesting increased wealth for the Dominican Order in Dunstable. The church suffered destruction and robbing sometime after Henry VIII's Dissolution in 1538/9. Unfortunately, the excavation failed to produce a full ground plan of the church, but it can be concluded that most of the nave and the southern side of the church were completely destroyed by the construction of industrial units adjacent to the site. The eastern end of the church could still survive under properties facing onto the High Street, and these may be an opportunity of completing the plan.

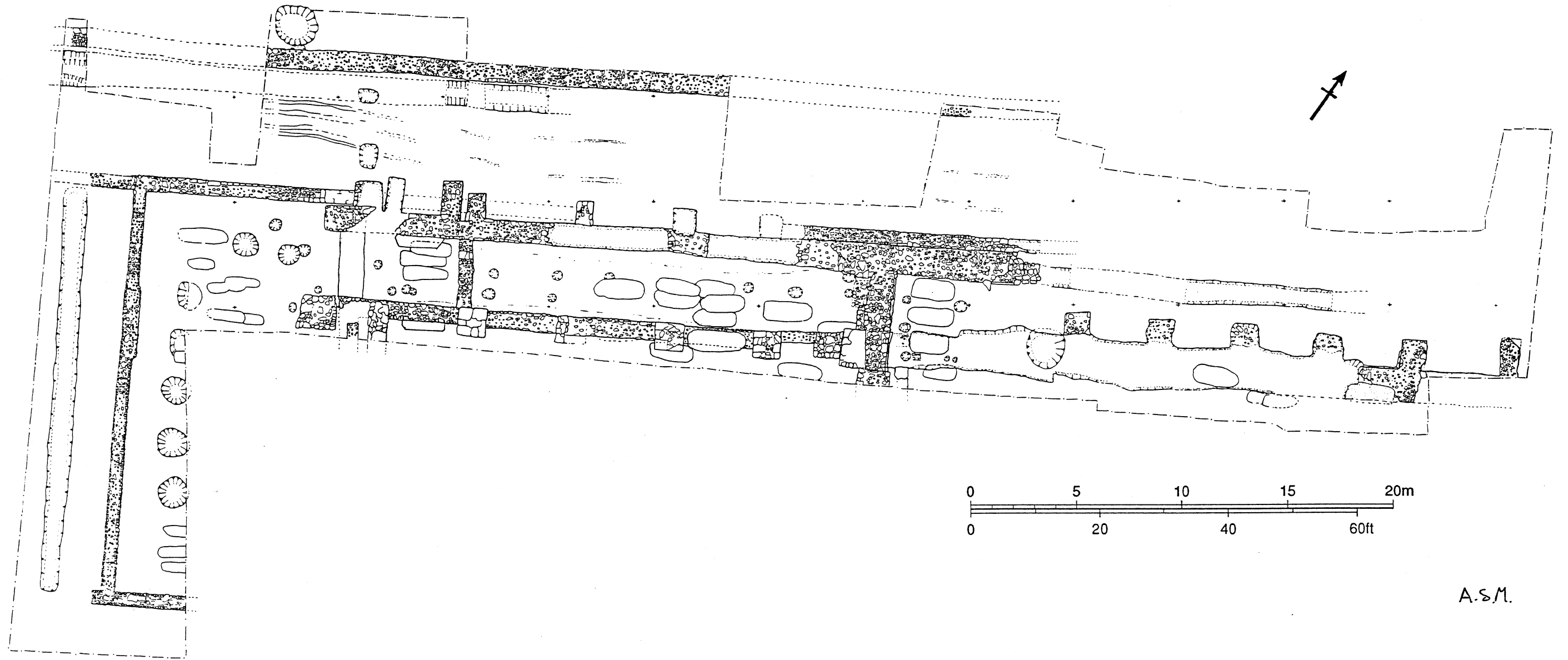
Bibliography

J Nicholls (1794) *Bib Top Brit*

*

Archaeological Service,
Conservation and Archaeology Section,
The Planning Department,
Bedfordshire County Council,
Bedford
MK42 9AP

DUNSTABLE FRIARY: COMPOSITE PLAN



A.S.M.