

THE REDISCOVERY OF TWO MAJOR MONASTIC BUILDINGS AT WHERWELL

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ABSTRACT

An important 13th-century monastic building has recently been rediscovered at the site of the Benedictine nunnery at Wherwell, Hampshire. This building contains a roof of raised aisle construction which may be the earliest known example of this form. Six bays of the original roof are almost completely intact and dendrochronology has shown them to belong to two building phases: 1250 and 1280. The earlier phase dates from the time of abbess Euphemia whose recorded building works include a new and large infirmary. There is good reason to believe that this rediscovered building may in fact be her infirmary, although other possibilities are considered. Recently, too, a geophysical survey has established the site and plan of the fine abbey church, comparable in scale to that of Romsey Abbey.

INTRODUCTION

Wherwell Abbey, situated beside the river Test in north-west Hampshire, was one of a group of well-endowed nunneries founded by members of the Saxon royal family in the heartlands of Wessex (Coldicott 1989, 1–19). It came to hold several manors in Hampshire, further manors in Berkshire, Somerset and the Isle of Wight, as well as valuable properties in Southampton and Winchester (*op. cit.*, 179–181). The abbey reached a high point under abbess Euphemia (*ante* 1219–1257) who, according to the 14th-century Wherwell Cartulary, increased the number of sisters from forty to eighty and carried out an ambitious building programme which included the construction of a large new infirmary (VCH Hants ii, 133). At the time of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, the abbey's net annual income was assessed at £339 placing it among the half dozen

wealthiest Benedictine nunneries in the country (Knowles & Hadcock 1971, 253–5). Such an abbey had the resources to build on a large scale.

At the Dissolution in 1539, the Abbey came into the hands of Lord De La Warr (VCH Hants iv, 411–12) but little structural evidence remains of any building works that he may have undertaken, nor can any papers be traced that might shed light on this matter. In 1695, the property was sold by the sixth Lord De La Warr and, after a few years was acquired by the Iremonger family with whom it remained until 1911 (*ibid.*, BLG iii, 491). It then came into the possession of Colonel Atherton Jenkins whose daughter, Majorie Countess of Brecknock inherited the property (Townend 1970, 455). At her death in 1989, it was bought by Mr James Hogg the present owner.

The two largest structures which now occupy the site are a country house called 'Wherwell Priory' and a large building called 'The Stables'. Until recently, both had been assumed to be of 18th-century date or later (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 650). However, in the 1970s and '80s, Mr F Green of The Test Valley Archaeological Trust and Messrs K Stubbs and J Reynolds of Hampshire County Council were alive to the archaeological importance of the site and recognised that the roof of 'The Stables' is partly medieval. Preparation for this paper began in 1995 as part of the work of The Hampshire Buildings Survey Group. The Group commissioned the dendrochronological survey and requested Dr Kate Clark of Southampton University to undertake the resistivity survey.

This paper examines in detail only 'The Stables' and the area of the resistivity survey (marked on Fig. 1). Further survey and excavation of the wider abbey site would, no doubt, reveal more and an examination of 'Wherwell Priory' might

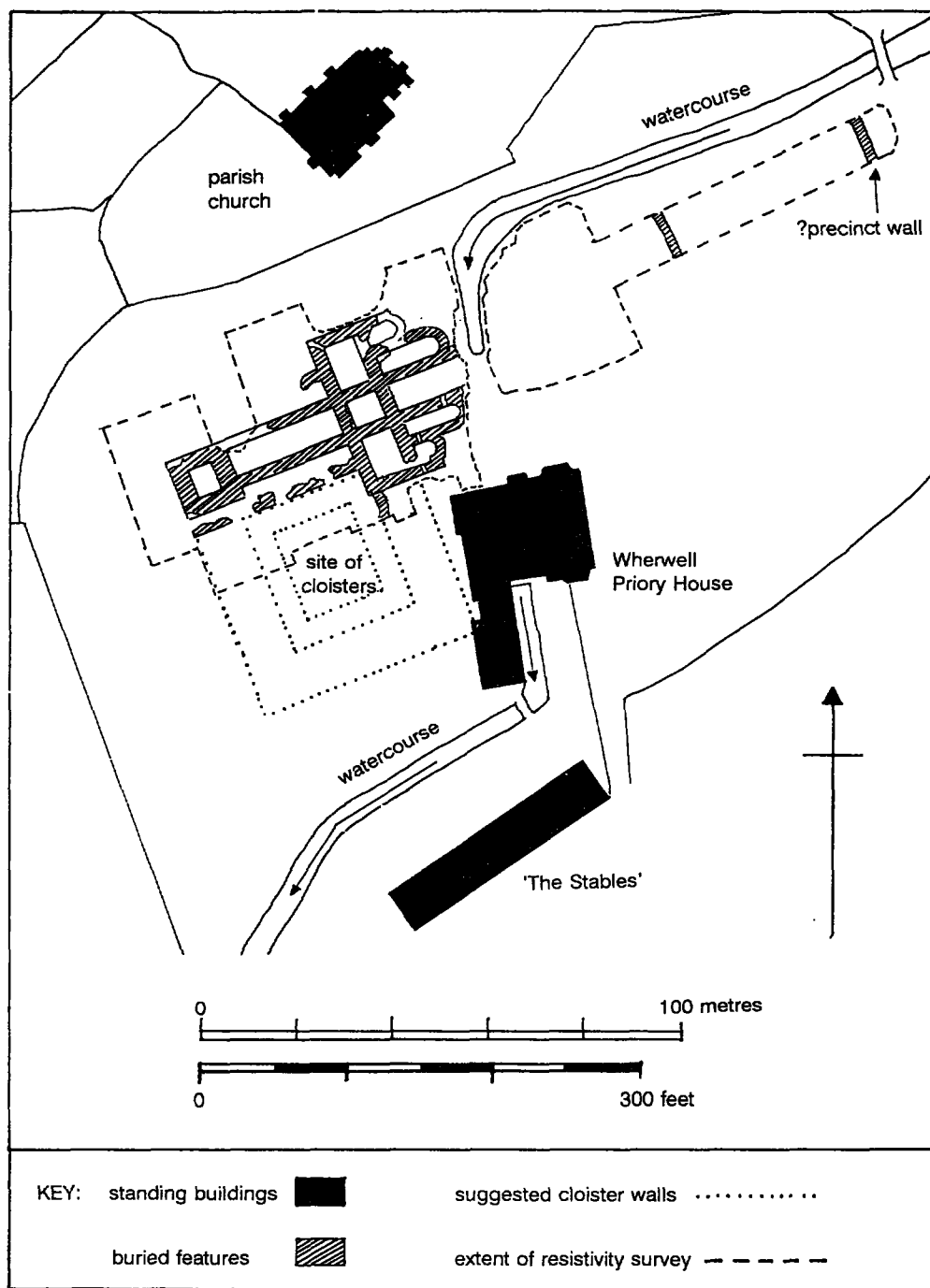


Fig. 1 Wherwell Abbey site plan, showing the plan of the abbey church as revealed by a resistivity survey

show whether it conceals remnants of a monastic structure. Outside the abbey site, important Romanesque fragments (probably from the abbey church) adorn the Iremonger monument in the parish churchyard and fragments of medieval masonry have been built into various village houses.

THE ABBEY SITE

Thomas Powell, an early 19th-century antiquarian, extolled the beauty of the abbey site set in 'the richest possible meadowland watered by streams of the clearest crystal. A finer site for a monastery cannot be imagined'. But he conceded that, 'Of the buildings of the Nunnery there is scarcely a stone left & the very site is scarcely to be ascertained' (HRO 29M51/6/10). However, he recalls 'the tradition of some of the villagers [that the house called 'Wherwell Priory'] is built upon the foundations of some of the abbey offices' and adds, 'There is a mount planted with trees within the garden wall, & very near the parish church, which they say was the site of the abbey church' (*ibid.*).

Powell's 'mount' (a roughly rectangular, raised platform extending to within a few feet of the churchyard wall) is clearly visible today. At its centre an ancient tree fell recently its roots bringing up a large stone slab with carved quatrefoil decoration, which may well be part of a late-medieval tomb chest. This, and some burials recently discovered when a deep trench was dug across the southern edge of the raised platform, left very little doubt that we have here the site of the abbey church with the cloister to its south, for monastic cloisters were frequently places of burial (Gilchrist 1994, 95; Coppack 1990, 72). Moreover, the close juxtaposition of abbey and parish churches was a common arrangement in nunneries (Gilchrist 1994, 99) and was indeed the chief ground of a fourteenth-century petition by the nuns of Wherwell for the appropriation of the revenues of the parish church (BL MS. Egerton 2104a, f.42v.). In the spring of 1997, however, a geophysical survey showing a large church with transepts just south of the parish church convincingly banished any lingering doubts on the matter (Figs. 1 and 5).

The position of the parish church immediately to the north of the abbey church is conclusive evidence that the cloister could only have stood to the south, embracing the area where inhumations have been found. In the south-east corner of this claustral area stands the house called 'Wherwell Priory' beneath which flows an artificial watercourse fed by the river Test (Fig. 1). The house is mainly constructed in post-medieval brick faced with stucco but one south-facing wall, approximately one metre thick and composed of flint rubble, rises through two storeys and crosses the watercourse. Although the wall bears no incontestably medieval features, it is possible, given its position in the south-east corner of the cloister and the watercourse flowing beneath, that it may be a remnant of the monastic *re-rdorter* (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 25–6). Alternatively, in the light of a description of the abbey written by the Dissolution commissioners (see below), the wall may represent part of the abbess's lodgings. To the south stands what is now called 'The Stables', a large building whose original appearance and function must now be discussed.

THE MONASTIC BUILDING NOW CALLED 'THE STABLES'

'The Stables' is roughly aligned east-west and is c. 9.0 m wide by 48.9 m long externally (29' 6" × 160' 4"). The major part of the roof rises to a height of c. 9.84 m (32' 3") but at the west end a shorter section, 12.95 m (42' 6") in length, is somewhat lower (Fig. 3). Although this may suggest two separate structures, in the southern elevation there is no break in the composition of the walling at the point where the roof height changes.

Returning to the longer and higher part of the roof, this is composed of a shorter section of post-medieval work at the east end with unschooted timbers, and a larger central section whose heavily-schooted roof shows that it was once formed part of an open hall (Fig. 3). The roof timbers of this section were sampled by coring for dendrochronological analysis in March 1996 producing two felling dates: 1250 and 1280 (Miles & Haddon-Reece 1996, 99–101). Each of these phases of construction covers approximately three bays of

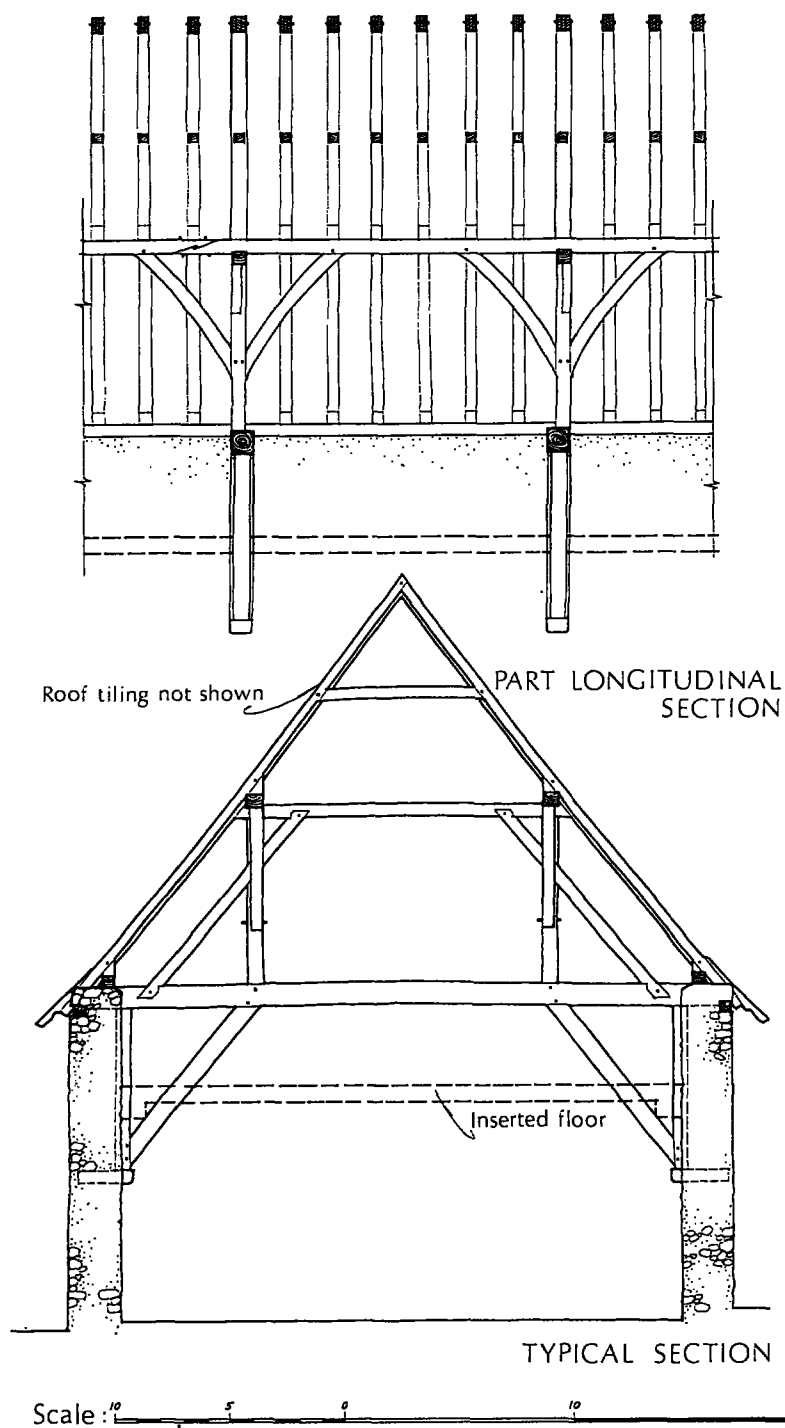


Fig. 2 'The Stables', Wherwell Abbey: part of the phase one roof of 1250, with longitudinal section (above) and cross section (below) showing the short, vertical ashlar pieces from inner wall plates and arcade plates to rafters (Drawing by John Reynolds)

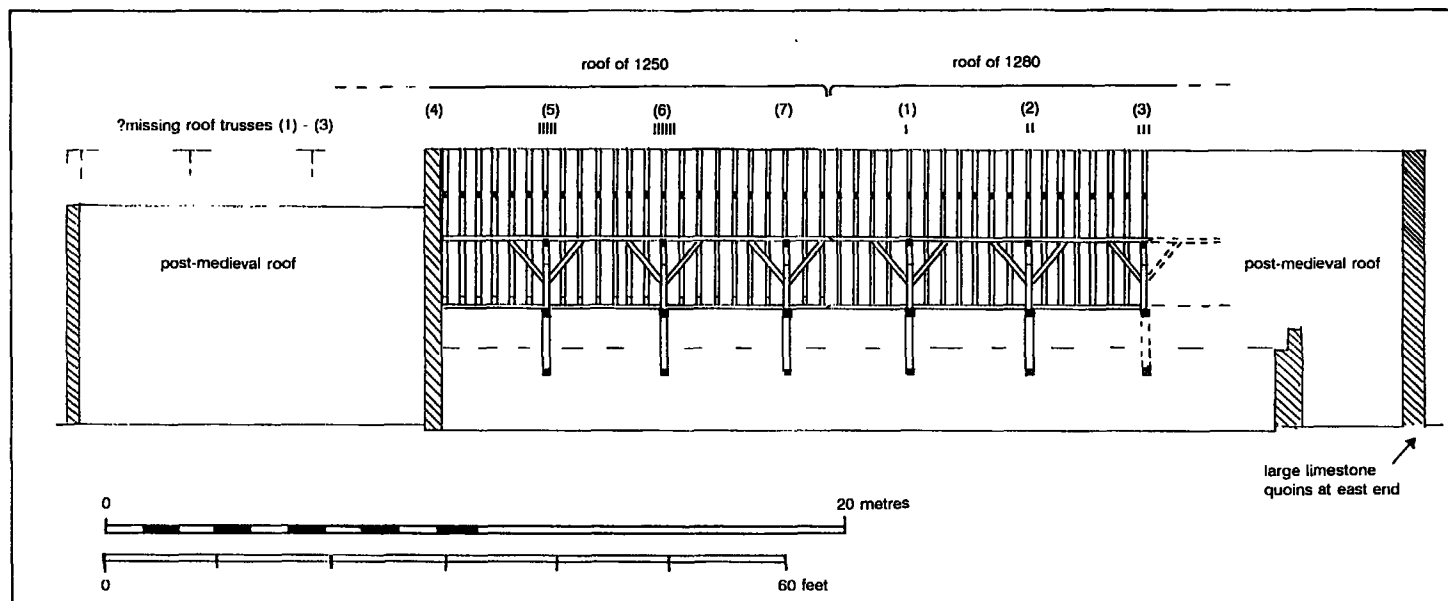


Fig. 3 'The Stables', Wherwell Abbey: longitudinal section showing both phases of the surviving 13th-century roof and indicating the possible extent of the building by 1280



Fig. 4 Wherwell Abbey: 'The Stables' viewed from the north-east. The large limestone quoins to the left of the garage entrance could mark the original end of the 13th-century structure. Note the lower roof to the right which may have been to full height before a post-medieval rebuilding. (Photograph – John Crook)

the surviving six bays of the medieval roof. Conversion to stables apparently occurred after the Dissolution and almost certainly by the seventeenth century. Indicative features are bold ogee chamfer-stops on the posts which were formerly associated with stall dividers (Roberts & Grover 1997, 162). The floor has been covered with modern concrete and the walls stripped of wooden stall linings or other furniture related to stabling. The present loft appears to date from the 19th century, and there are no indications of an earlier first floor. This fact would suggest that the soot on all the roof timbers was deposited in the medieval period and would argue against the view that the

building was originally floored and that the soot-ing is only associated with a secondary unfloored phase.

The Walls

Viewed from the outside (Fig. 4), 'The Stables' fails to betray great antiquity and it is not difficult to see why its medieval origins were unsuspected for so long. Almost all of the walling on the north elevation is faced with flint and brick banding in a style typical of the 18th or 19th century. This refacing has destroyed any evidence of abutting buildings. The same is true of much of the walling



Fig. 5 Wherwell Abbey: the roof of 'The Stables' viewed from the west. In the foreground is truss 7 of the first building phase of 1250 – note the original scarf joint in the lower tie beam which has been reinforced with an iron strap. The three trusses of the second phase can be seen behind it. (Photograph – John Crook)

of the south elevation, although here there may be indications of original work in the form of featureless patches of rough flintwork. It is also possible that the large squared blocks of stone at the east end of the building at both corners may represent original quoining (Figs 3 & 4). However, neither externally nor internally, are there any dressed stones that might indicate medieval door or window openings, and there is no other decorative carved stonework that might be associated with a prestige building.

In view of the importance of its timber roof, this lack of datable shaped or moulded medieval stonework in the walls of 'The Stables' is disappointing

and requires some explanation. Even a stone-built barn, such as the well-known example at Great Coxwell (Berkshire) would have had stone dressings to the wagon entrances and ventilation slits (Platt 1990, 120–121); and if (as will be suggested below) 'The Stables' may have been built as an infirmary hall then, at the least, one might expect (albeit blocked) windows with two-centred arches of the kind still to be found in the nave of a building comparable in date and function; namely, St Mary's Hospital, Chichester (Sussex) (Dollman & Jobbins 1863, vol. 2, pl. 26). However, it is probable that the stone dressings which almost certainly would originally have been found at

'The Stables' have been removed either because of the shortage of good building stone in this part of Hampshire or, perhaps, because the gentlemen, who in post-medieval times owned the adjacent house called 'Wherwell Priory', wanted a smart stable block uncluttered by unnecessary and out-dated medieval features. This removal of dressed stone has left insufficient evidence for any coherent reconstruction of the medieval elevations to be attempted.

The Roof

In contrast to the undistinguished exterior, the interior reveals a magnificent 13th-century roof whose great age was, until recently, entirely unsuspected. Six full bays survive with nearly all original timbers intact and extending to 25.8 m (84' 7") in length and 9.0 m (29' 6") in width. Its early date, size and fine state of preservation make it a roof of national importance. As a consequence of its highly unusual form, there is no generally agreed technical vocabulary with which to describe it. It could be seen either as an archaic form of queen-strut construction with square-set purlins, or as a raised aisle construction with arcade plates and, albeit truncated, arcade posts. The latter interpretation is preferred here because the roof should be understood as a derivative of the aisled hall, with square-set arcade plates rather than diagonally-set purlins.

From the middle of the 13th century, carpenters experimented with ways of clearing arcade (or aisle) posts from the hall floor-space. Base-cruck and hammerbeam roofs were developed to this end, but the raised aisle truss was a rarer solution achieved by removing the arcade posts below eaves level and supporting or raising them on a transverse beam. It would appear that the roof at Wherwell is the earliest known raised aisle construction and further examples at Little Hall, Merton College, Oxford (c. 1300), The Pilgrims' Hall, Winchester (c. 1308) and Church Farm, Lewknor, Oxfordshire (early 14th century) are significantly later (Hewett 1980, 124 and pl. III; Crook 1991, 147; VAG 1987, 7).

At Wherwell, the great transverse timbers which support each of the six surviving trusses (Figs 2, 3 & 5) may be called lower tie beams.

These lower tie beams support inner wall plates in a configuration indicative of early framing known as 'reversed assembly' (Brunskill 1994, 152). The lower tie beams are supported by braces which rise from wallposts resting on wooden corbels, aligned transversely to project through the thickness of the wall. The fact that the wallposts are offset from the outer edge of the lower tie beams by the thickness of the wall leaves little doubt that the building was always constructed of mass walling.

The lower tie beams support raised arcade posts which rise to an upper tie beam. Arcade plates (which rest on these beams in a further example of reversed assembly) are braced by arcade braces which provide the only longitudinal stiffening for the roof. Each truss has a pair of passing braces which are joined to the lower and upper tie beams by notch-lapped dovetails. Above the upper tie beams are unbraced collars (Fig. 2). An unusual feature is the use of full-length principal rafters; against the almost invariable separation of nave and aisle rafters in other aisled and aisle-derivative structures (Dr J Crook, pers. comm.). All the 13th-century roof timbers are smoke-blackened from the former open hearth and are of square section.

The lower tie beams measure c. 30 × 30 cm (12" × 12") in section and are c. 8.75 m (28' 9") long. Even though the construction of this roof was probably assisted by Henry III's grant of oaks from the royal forest of Chute in 1249 and 1250 (Cal. Cl. R. 1247-51, 168 and 392), there seems to have been difficulty in obtaining beams of this length, for the lower tie beam at truss 7 (Figs. 3 & 5) had to be made from two separate timbers joined by an original scarf joint. Difficulties in obtaining long oak beams for medieval buildings have been noted elsewhere (e.g. Munby 1991, 380; Roberts 1993, 464).

Both phases of the early roof (dated 1250 and 1280) have hewing marks, the earliest clearly identifiable marks so far found in English timber framing. In most respects, the two phases are identical but the earlier phase has ashlar pieces (short, vertical struts rising from the wall plates and arcade plates to the rafters), whereas the later phase does not (Miles & Haddon-Reece 1996, 99-101; NMR Report).

THE ORIGINAL EXTENT OF 'THE STABLES'

Although only three bays of phase one (dated 1250) survive, it is clear that these form only part of the original building. The evidence for this claim rests partly on the fact that the roof structure of the 1250 phase extends slightly to the east of truss 7 (Figs 3 & 5). Wall plates and arcade plates from phase one extend to this point as do the ashlar pieces associated with this phase. Thus a full bay between truss 7 and missing truss 8 of phase one is implied and it would appear that, for some reason, this bay was dismantled and replaced by the first bay of the phase two roof in 1280 (D Miles, pers. comm.).

The evidence of the carpenters' assembly marks substantiate this interpretation of the development of the roof but also suggest that phase one originally extended further to the west as well. The two central trusses from the phase of 1250 bear the carpenter's assembly marks IIII (5) and IIIII (6) respectively. Another bay is complete except for a missing truss (Fig. 3) which would presumably have borne the number IIII (4) in the sequence, implying that the building originally extended to the west by a further three bays. This implication is consistent with the fact that the walls of 'The Stables' extend 12.95 m (42' 6") west of the line of presumed truss IIII (4), a distance equivalent to the length of three missing bays, assuming a constant bay length of 4.3 metres (Nigel Fradgley, pers. comm.; NMR Report). Thus at least seven bays of the 1250 building may be implied with a total length of c. 30.1 m (that is 7 × 4.3 metres).

Three more bays have been dated to 1280 (Miles & Haddon-Reece 1996, 99–101) and the associated trusses bear assembly marks I, II and III respectively, but void mortices for braces from the arcade posts at truss III show beyond doubt that in the later phase there was at least one further truss to the east; giving a minimum of four bays constructed in this phase. However, the large stone quoins at the east end of 'The Stables' and what appears to be a wooden corbel in the side wall nearby may even imply a final truss. Charring on the east face of truss III suggests that a fire destroyed the east end of the medieval roof and the present roof at this end represents a post-medieval rebuilding (D Miles and N Fradgley, pers. comm.).

To summarise the evidence for the building's length, although only three bays of the roof of 1250 survive, it is likely that at least seven bays were built in this first phase. The easternmost bay of these seven was largely replaced when a minimum of four bays was added in phase two. Thus by 1280, there was a building of at least ten bays in length, assuming the three western bays of phase one were built and were still intact. Assuming, also, a constant bay-length of 4.3 m (14' 1"), it was a monastic structure of considerable size; at least ten bays, or c. 43 m (140' 10"), in length.

THE ORIGINAL FUNCTION OF 'THE STABLES'

Thus what is now called 'The Stables' was a large and significant 13th-century conventual building exhibiting, in its day, a highly innovative form of roof structure (Fig. 6). The heavy sooting on its 13th-century rafters leaves little doubt that it was, at one stage, an unfloored, open hall. Moreover, the absence of any evidence for a medieval first floor suggests strongly that it was an open hall from the start. There is no evidence for stone or timber-framed partition walls beneath the six original, surviving roof-trusses although the former existence of cross walls in other parts of the building cannot be ruled out. But what was the original function of 'The Stables'; what kind of conventual building was it? In attempting to answer this question, we have not only the evidence of the abbey site itself and of comparable sites but also some valuable documentary sources and a tree-ring survey.

As we have seen, a recent tree-ring survey of 'The Stables' has ascribed felling-dates of 1250 and 1280 to different portions of the roof (Miles & Haddon-Reece 1996, 99). Given that oak was almost always used 'green', or freshly felled, the first building campaign must have occurred during the time of Euphemia (abbess by 1219 and until her death in 1257), and the second campaign while Mabel de Tichburne (1262–81) was abbess. Of key importance to the understanding of the first campaign is a eulogy of Euphemia written in the 14th-century Wherwell Cartulary (BL MS. Eger-ton 2104a. f.43–5). This passage has been freely, and sometimes misleadingly, translated in *The*

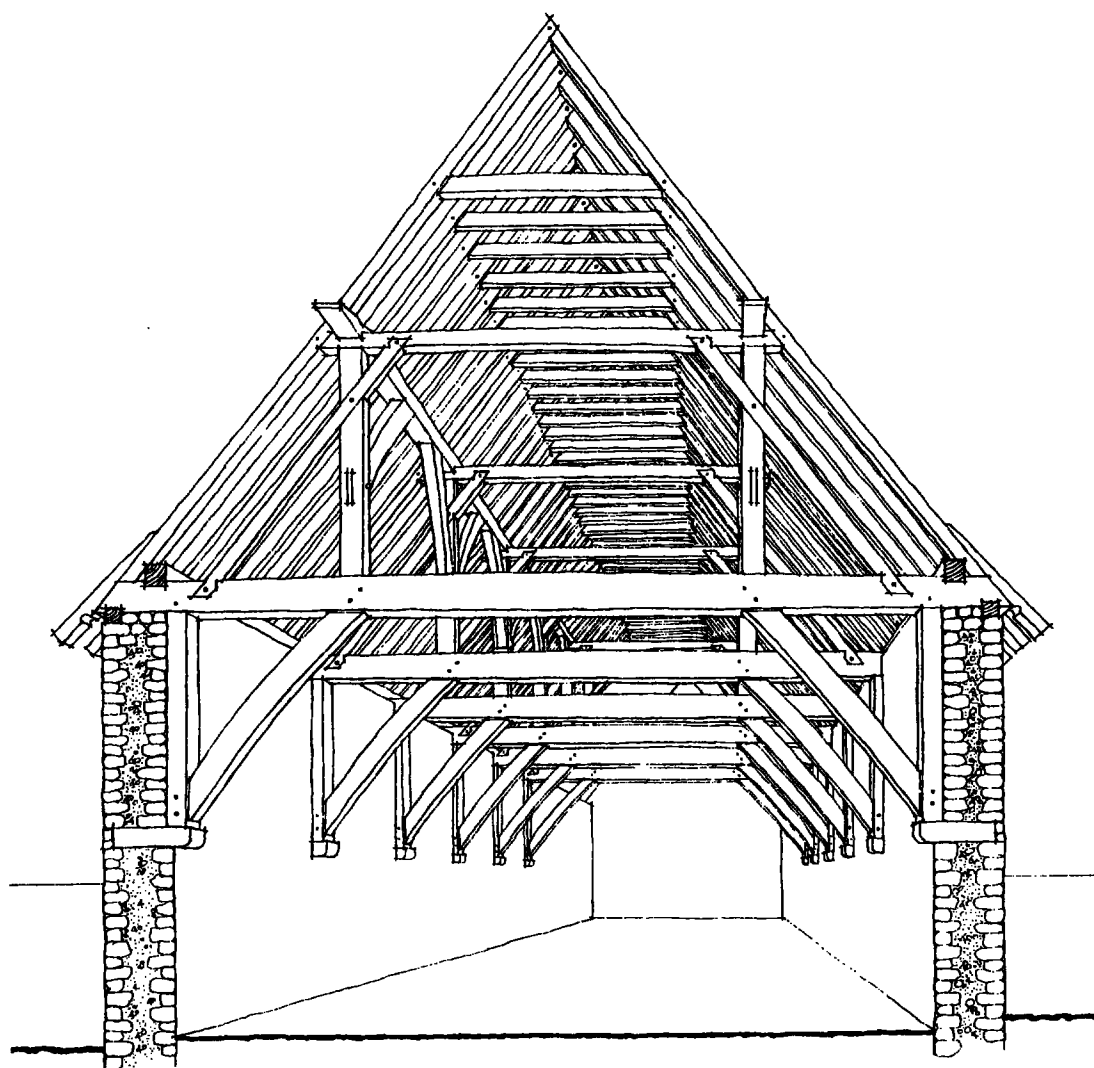


Fig. 6 Restored interior view of 'The Stables', looking westwards from truss 3 of phase two. Only the surviving roof trusses have been drawn but at the far west end the space probably occupied by four demolished trusses has been indicated. (Drawing by Jonathan Snowdon)

Victoria County History (VCH Hants ii, 132–3) and a more literal translation is offered in the following discussion.

The eulogistic description of Euphemia's building works is both lengthy and detailed so that it is most unlikely that any major structure, such as 'The Stables', was overlooked. Her works, in the order given in the Cartulary, were: a new and

large infirmary, a new hall, a new mill, a precinct wall, various buildings on abbey estates, a bell tower and the rebuilding of the presbytery of the abbey church. Clearly, the only buildings in this list which need be considered here are the infirmary and the hall. Both, like 'The Stables', could have been large buildings with heavily sooted rafters.

'The Stables' as abbess Euphemia's hall

The possibility that 'The Stables' is Euphemia's hall will be considered first. Unfortunately, the cartulary does not specify the nature of the hall but, in seeking a function for large, open halls that commonly occupied monastic sites the refectory and the guest hall must be considered prime candidates.

While a refectory could arguably be represented by the new hall of Euphemia's eulogy, it remains an implausible solution. For refectories were essentially buildings of the southern cloister range (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 29) and the resistivity survey has shown that 'The Stables' was too far from the abbey church to be in that position (Fig. 1).

The suggestion that 'The Stables' was a guest hall is more plausible, for guest halls could be on the periphery of the main claustral area – as was probably the case at St Swithun's Priory, Winchester (Crook 1991, 155). However, even the guest hall at this great cathedral priory extended to only three bays, with a separate hall for the guest-master (*ibid*). Indeed, it seems that guest halls were generally modelled on halls in secular manor houses, having perhaps three or four bays with floored rooms at either end (Gilchrist 1994, 115, 126). Such halls could be large but were relatively compact in their proportions and rarely so long relative to their width as, it has been argued, was the case with 'The Stables' (Gilyard-Beer 1958, fig. 22). A further problem with supposing that 'The Stables' was a guest hall is that, in nunneries, such halls were most frequently situated in the west ranges of the cloisters – a good example being Carrow Priory (Norfolk) (Gilchrist 1993, 41; Gilchrist & Oliva 1994, 120), and the same point has been made with respect to monasteries in general (Pevsner 1976, 140–1).

Nevertheless, it might be argued that, as Henry III paid frequent visits to the Abbey (Coldicott 1989, 90), his retinue would need to be accommodated in a large guest hall; a hall, perhaps, of the size of 'The Stables'. While this possibility cannot be entirely ruled out, there is no documentary evidence for it beyond the bare fact of Henry's visits and no obvious parallel amongst other religious houses for an investment in such a large hall which might become redundant should a royal

whim or the king's death take the court to a new and more-favoured spot. Moreover, it is unlikely that lodgings for a large, and entirely male, royal retinue would have been considered appropriate within a relatively short distance of the nunnery's cloister.

'The Stables' as abbess Euphemia's infirmary

On both archaeological and documentary evidence, it seems more likely that 'The Stables' represents abbess Euphemia's infirmary. Firstly, it was common for infirmaries in female houses to be placed beyond the cloister and at the east or south-east of the conventual precinct, such a position facilitating the use of the main watercourse or drain (Gilchrist 1994, 120). Carrow Priory (Norfolk) is a good example of this arrangement (Gilchrist 1993, 41) which is precisely echoed in the position of 'The Stables' at Wherwell. More significant is the great length of 'The Stables' by 1280 (probably c. 43 metres), a length echoed by monastic infirmaries in the wealthier male religious houses and larger medieval hospitals (Godfrey 1955, 20–33; Gilyard-Beer 1958, 34, 35 and Fig. 25). The infirmary at Fountains Abbey was one of the greatest aisled halls built in medieval England, some 54.9 m long (180') and extending to ten bays (Coppack 1990, 78). Other large infirmaries were at Canterbury Cathedral Priory which, with nave and chapel, was 72.3 m (237') long, and St Augustine's, Canterbury whose nave alone was 33.5 m (110') in length (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 34 and Fig. 24). Perhaps the closest surviving parallel to Wherwell is the near-contemporary St. Mary's hospital at Chichester where the infirmary hall and chapel originally extended to some 53.6 m (176' 5") (Orme & Webster 1995, 88).

It could, of course, be argued that comparisons should be sought not from among the male religious houses but from the nunneries. Unfortunately, little survives or has been recovered of either the guest halls or infirmaries of nunneries whose wealth was comparable to Wherwell's. A further problem is that there is no visible evidence at Wherwell of the complex that would have surrounded an infirmary; including a chapel, latrines and an infirmary kitchen (Gilchrist 1994,

120), although survey and excavation may yet reveal such evidence. In particular, the survival of a chapel-like structure at the east end of 'The Stables' would have made a powerful case in favour of the view that it had been a monastic infirmary. However, the medieval roof at the east end of 'The Stables' has been destroyed (Fig. 3) and the evidence from the masonry walls is inconclusive; although the substantial, masonry cross-wall some 4.3 m (14' 1") from the east end of 'The Stables' may possibly indicate a division between hall and chapel.

Turning to documentary evidence, the Cartulary says,

'She [abbess Euphemia] for both the healthy and the sick, ... built a new and ample infirmary and, around the same and the dormitory, built necessary offices. Underneath she fitted a channel in which a stream flowed with such force that, without corrupting the air, foulness might be carried off.'

It should be noted that, despite the fact that the *Victoria County History* has the watercourse running under the infirmary itself (VCH Hants ii, 133), this inference need not be drawn from the Cartulary which only states that the infirmary was in the area of the conventual dormitory and of a channel which flowed beneath a building: a position comparable to that occupied by 'The Stables' today, adjacent as it is to Wherwell Priory house beneath which flows a stream (Fig. 1.). It is also significant that the infirmary was called large or ample and that it was listed first among all Euphemia's building works. If this implies that it was her major work, a building of the size of 'The Stables' could worthily match such a description. Thus, although the evidence of the Cartulary is not conclusive, it would seem that it tends, with some force, towards identifying 'The Stables' with Euphemia's infirmary rather than with her new hall.

In spite of this, it may be argued that 'The Stables' was far too large for the needs of the sick of a community of eighty sisters (VCH Hants ii, 133), only a fraction of whom might need care at any given time. However, a recent study of medieval Westminster Abbey has shown that, 'In common with every other kind of hospital in the

Middle Ages, a monastic infirmary was used for other purposes beside the care of the sick... Indeed, at times the sick had to struggle to retain an adequate foothold there' (Harvey 1993, 87). At Westminster their chief rivals were senior monks who had grown tired of the discipline of the monastic rule although it is probable that corrodi-ans, seculars who had purchased a life annuity from the abbey, were also occasionally housed in the infirmary (op. cit., 87, 182-3). Moreover, it was not uncommon for the upper servants in great households to be sent as pensioners to a monastery when they became infirm (Orme and Webster 1995, 112). Similar arrangements may well have obtained at Wherwell.

All three of Hampshire's major nunneries, St Mary's at Winchester, Romsey Abbey and Wherwell, maintained hospitals for the elderly and infirm (Coldicott 1989, 123). An injunction sent by bishop William of Wykeham in 1387 to all three abbeys ordered that bread intended for the poor women in their hospitals should not be given to others; and that wealthy and powerful women should not be allowed to buy admittance to the hospitals in preference to the poor and debilitated relations of the nuns (Luce 1952, 36 and 41). Although the word 'hospital' (*hospitalium*) and not 'infirmary' (*infirmarium*) is used in these documents, it is possible that the abbey's hospital and infirmary were one and the same building. For a monastic infirmary served much the same purpose as a medieval hospital (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 34). If, indeed, the infirmary at Wherwell sheltered not only sick and elderly nuns but also poor secular women and wealthy women with their servants, then a large building such as 'The Stables' would have been necessary. On the other hand, there must have been separate accommodation for men when, in 1504, William Howell of Wherwell bequeathed a shirt to every man and smock to every sister in the abbey's hospital (HRO WR1, *fol.* 138-9).

In sum then, Wherwell may have needed a large infirmary in order to provide, as the cartulary has it, for both healthy and sick. Nor would it have been at all unusual for the infirmary to have been the largest building outside the cloister area (Crossley 1935, 52). If, as seems likely, Euphemia's infirmary is indeed one and the same

as the building now called 'The Stables', it is clear that it was considered by contemporaries to be a building of major importance, for both phases of its construction were preceded by gifts of oaks from the king, implying some extraordinary building campaign. In 1249 and again in 1250, Henry III granted Euphemia twelve oaks (phase one oaks were felled in 1250); and in 1277, Edward I granted Wherwell fifteen oaks shortly before the felling-date (1280) of the timber in phase two of the roof of 'The Stables' (Cal. Cl. R. 1247-51, 168 and 392; Cal. C. R. 1272-79, 391).

If 'The Stables' is, indeed, the relic of Euphemia's infirmary, the function of the new hall, as it is called in the Cartulary, would remain unresolved. According to the cartulary, the new hall was built in the precinct or courtyard (*curia*) of the Abbey (and not in 'the court of the abbey manor' as stated in the *Victoria County History* (VCH Hants ii, 133)). The relevant passage translates thus;

'For the *curia* of the Abbey which, owing to a useless mass of huts and the nearness of the kitchen, granary and old hall was in danger of fire and because of the confined space and the crowd of foul animals was an offence to those passing through it the aforesaid mass of buildings having been destroyed, and the whole "*curia*" restored to a clean and pleasant plain, she built a new hall of suitable size and height'.

Although this fails to make clear the function of the new hall, it does at least show that it was near a mass of huts and a granary and was thus unlikely to have been the refectory. It may have been the hall that was said to be near a granary and old lodgings at the Dissolution in 1539 (PRO E315/494).

'The Stables' at the Dissolution

At the Dissolution in 1539, the king's commissioners listed the conventual buildings at Wherwell according to whether they were deemed to be superfluous or assigned to remain. Superfluous were,

'The Church Quyer and Steple covered with Leade. The Cloister covered with Tyles and certain Gutteres of Leade. The Chapitre house,

Frayter, dormytory, convent kitchyn. And all th'olde lodgings betwene the Granarie and the halle dore covered with Tyles' (PRO E315/494).

The use of the term 'hall' here is interesting and it could indicate either a guest hall or, possibly, the abbess's own hall (but see discussion of this point below). It may well be a clue to the identity of the new hall referred to in the fourteenth-century Cartulary and which had also been near a granary (see above). In any case, it would seem likely that the hall was swept away, although buildings deemed superfluous were sometimes saved (Coppack 1990, 131).

The buildings assigned to remain were,

'The late Abbes lodging with the houses within the Quadraunte as the water leadith from the East side of the Cloister to the Gate. The Farmery [infirmary]. The Mylle and Mylhous with the Slaughterhouse Adioynynge. The bruing and Baking houses with the Granaries to the same. The Barne and Stabulles in the utter Courte' (PRO E315/494).

The abbess's own lodgings thus seem to have been to the east of the cloister and near a watercourse; a description which intriguingly matches the position of the apparently medieval walling now in the house called 'The Priory'. Turning to the brewhouse, bakehouse, barn and stables, although these were assigned to remain, none of them could reasonably be equated with the building now called 'The Stables'. Neither brewhouse nor bakehouse is mentioned in the detailed list of Euphemia's buildings, and a barn or stable block would not have had a roof encrusted with soot from an open hearth.

Finally, if this list really does represent all the conventual buildings that survived the first onslaught of Dissolution, then it would seem that an infirmary would best match the documentary sources and the physical evidence now presented to us by 'The Stables'. As we have seen, a consideration of the evidence of the Wherwell Cartulary points, at least tentatively, to the same conclusion. Unless and until archaeology brings fresh evidence to light it must be admitted that there can be no certainty about the original function of 'The

Stables' but, at present, it would seem most likely to be part of abbess Euphemia's great new infirmary.

THE ABBEY CHURCH

The remarkable results of a resistivity survey of the abbey church site (see below) not only make a significant contribution to a consideration of the original function of 'The Stables' but also represent a discovery of great intrinsic importance and interest, inviting comparison with documentary sources.

A passage in the Wherwell Cartulary describes the rebuilding of the east end of the church towards the end of abbess Euphemia's life. She caused the presbytery to be taken down to the last stones of the foundations and, because the ground was unsafe, she caused the damp soil to be dug out to a depth of twelve feet until firm and dry ground was found. Then she laid the first foundation stone of the new presbytery (VCH Hants ii, 133). The dampness of the soil at the east end suggests that even then there was a watercourse near this point, although perhaps not in its present form or precise location (Fig. 1). Also, the mid-13th century date for the rebuilding of the east end may assist interpretation of the resistivity survey. The survey appears to show apsidal chapels flanking the presbytery (see below and Fig. 7) but does not clearly reveal the form of the east end of the abbey church. However, by Euphemia's time, early Romanesque apsidal east ends had generally been replaced by square east ends (Batsford and Fry 1943, 52–55) and this change may have occurred at Wherwell. Although a combination of apsidal chapels to the transepts with a square east end might appear somewhat inconsistent, it would be comparable with the contemporary plan at Romsey Abbey (Scott 1996, 2–3 and 8).

The resistivity survey also reveals an aisled nave and a great tower at the west end of the abbey church. This may now be compared with what must be a representation of the abbey church in a corner of an early 16th-century portrait of abbess Avelina Cowdrey (Coldicott 1989, 87; Carpenter Turner 1963, facing page 40). This

picture may show the tower between nave and presbytery, and thus in a position which does not seem to match the evidence of the resistivity survey. Given this interpretation, the demolition of a west-end tower and its replacement by a crossing tower cannot be entirely ruled out, although it would seem more likely that the artist of the portrait was painting from memory and simply placed the tower in the wrong position.

Alternatively, the picture could represent a church with an aisled nave, and a tall tower and spire at the west end with a small western porch. This interpretation would match the resistivity survey more closely and would treat the artist with more generosity!

A Resistivity Survey of the Abbey Church Site at Wherwell by Dr Kate Clark

The survey was undertaken during the unusually dry spring of 1997 when resistance contrasts were high, giving good definition of the features (Fig. 7). What is disclosed by this survey is the presence of the foundations of a cruciform building, approximately 70 m in length and 40 m across the transepts, with a very substantial structure at the west end which is strongly suggestive of a tower. The very clear high resistance responses obtained over the structure indicate that the subterranean stonework is still likely to be in place and in good condition, and the width of the geophysical anomalies suggests that the top of the foundations are near the surface and that the stonework extends to a depth possibly exceeding 2 m.

There is no doubt that this is the abbey church of Wherwell and that it was, in accordance with the description in the 14th-century cartulary of the abbey, a commanding edifice (Coldicott 1989, 119), similar in size to Romsey Abbey church (Hampshire) as it survives today. Apart from the imposing tower, side chapels are visible flanking either side of the presbytery. Although these are slightly truncated by the sub-surface conditions associated with the flower beds at this point and the retaining structures of the canalised stream, the data strongly suggest that they are in fact apsidal. Further substantial construction is apparent to the south of the nave and the tower, and these associated structures are almost certainly the remains of



Fig. 7 Wherwell Abbey: plot of a resistivity survey showing the foundations of the abbey church

the cloister. The cloister will extend southwards out of the survey area.

The only major feature not recovered is the wall at the east end of the abbey church; here the canalised stream and the post-medieval landscaping and garden development have either physically obliterated the feature, or have masked the response. However, a subsequently surveyed 10 m wide transect from the eastern end of the abbey church shows two further linear high resistance features, the closer one being c. 50 m and the further one c. 95 m from the eastern end of the church. Both are in the same alignment as the abbey church and the outer feature would appear to be the foundations of a precinct wall of impressive width.

Two low resistance circular anomalies are visible in the plot; one within the nave of the church and the other on the eastern side of the stream. The eastern anomaly is the current site of a sundial circumscribed by a flower border, and there is a close similarity between this and the circular feature appearing within the church. It seems likely, therefore, that this western anomaly is also a product of a later garden ornament.

The survey as a whole reveals a plan that has every appearance of being a church of the post-Conquest period. However, it is quite possible that the Saxon abbey church underlies it, as at Romsey, and that any geophysical response from these early remains is masked by the later foundations. Indeed, a subtle feature that may very well be an eastern apse is visible, abutting the east wall of the

crossing, and this may indicate the survival of features of an earlier building.

(The resistivity survey was undertaken by Dr Kate Clark of the University of Southampton, assisted by Mr Nick Bradford and final year archaeology students taking the Geophysical Surveying course.)

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