

# **Elstow Abbey**

**history**

**archaeology**

**scientific investigations**

**A report to the**

**Bedford Architectural Archaeological  
and Local History Society**

**Wednesday 11 November 2015**

# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

## Project history



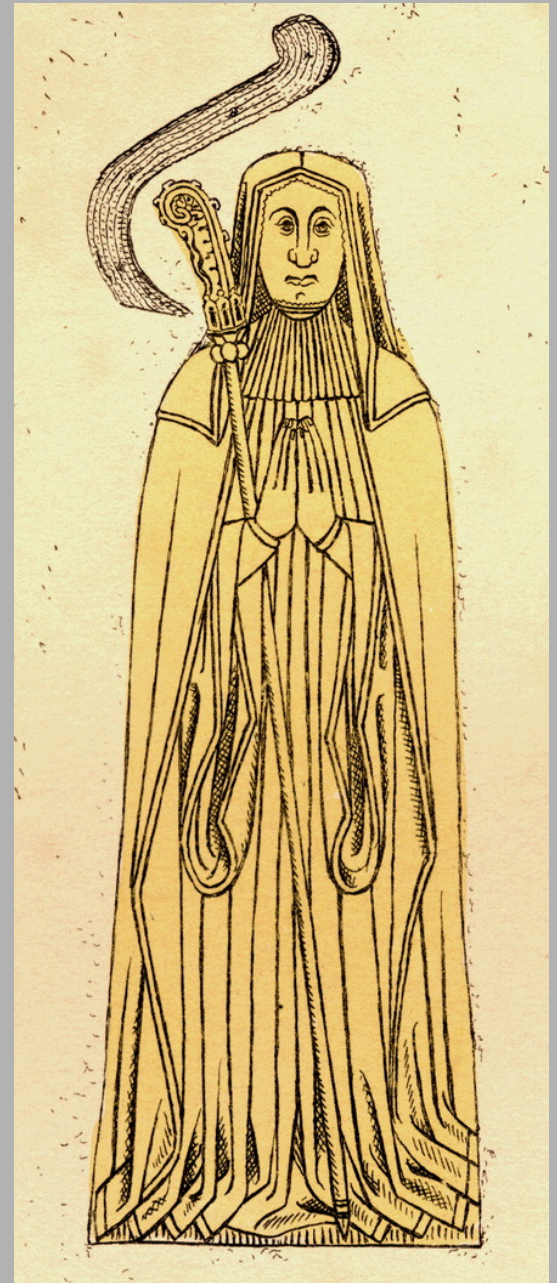
Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527

# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

Project history

What we learnt



Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527



# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

Project history

What we learnt

Reporting results



Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527

# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

*when the world was younger...*

## Background



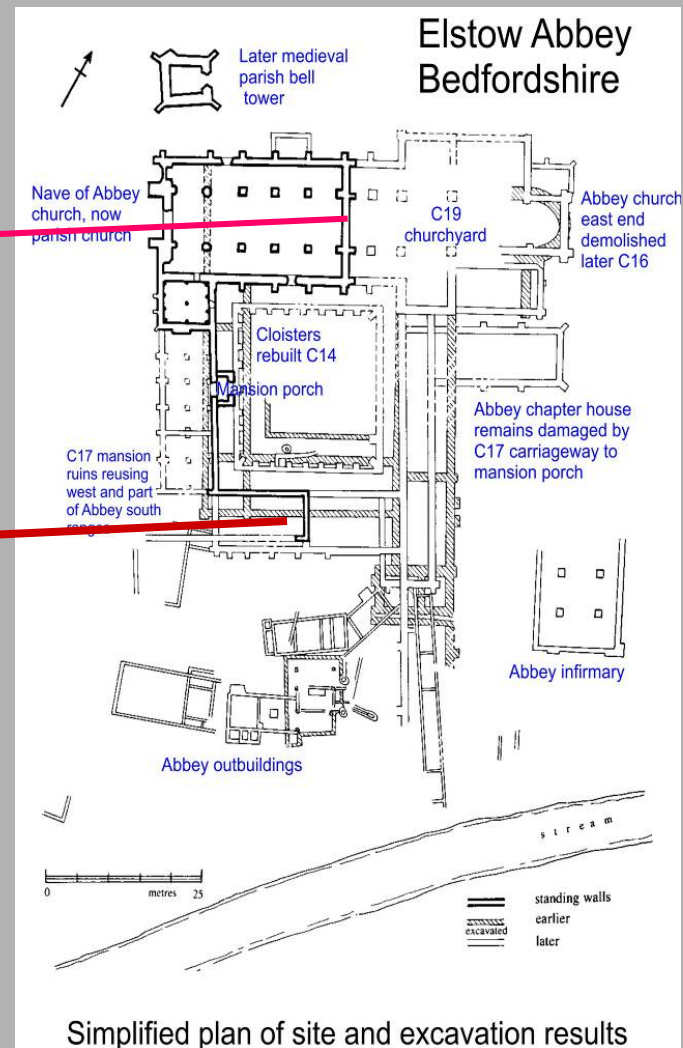
Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527





1975





# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

## Project history

What we learnt

Reporting results



Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527



# Project (pre) history

1955



The Elstow Abbey Youth Fellowship

**10 years later - Bedford School alternatives:  
Rugby, Boxing, Combined Cadet Corps or ...archaeology**





# Schools training dig: written record, measured drawings





# Bedford 6<sup>th</sup> formers; Portsmouth Poly degree students







2015



# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

Project history

What we learnt

Reporting results



Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527

# **What we learnt**

**Before Elstow**

**Saxon Elstow**

**An evolving monastic church**

**Complicated cloisters**

**Outbuildings**

**Monastic life**

**Post-monastic uses**

**The impacts of ‘restoration’**

# What we learnt

## Before Elstow

### Saxon Elstow

An evolving monastic church

Complicated cloisters

Outbuildings

Monastic life

Post-monastic uses

The impacts of 'restoration'

# Occupation continuity

*BC*

Bronze Age burial barrow - - - 1200

*AD*

Roman farming - - - 43 – 400

Pagan Saxon cremation burial - - - 550

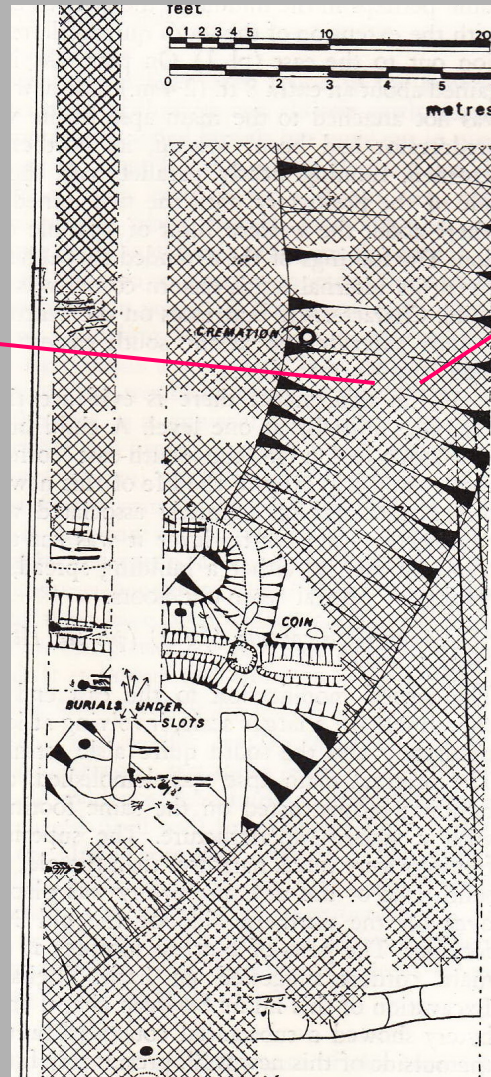
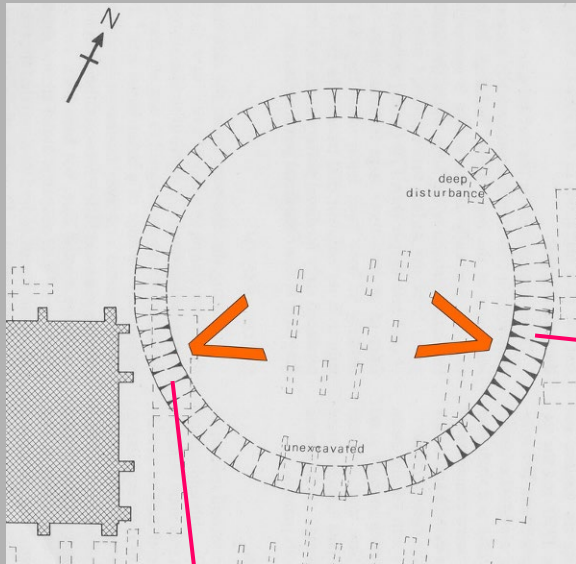
Late Saxon parish cemetery - - - 850 – 1078

Medieval Benedictine nunnery - - - 1078 – 1539

17th / 18th century mansion - - - 1615 – 1790

19th century church restoration - - - 1880





**Bronze Age**  
ring ditch  
barrow ?



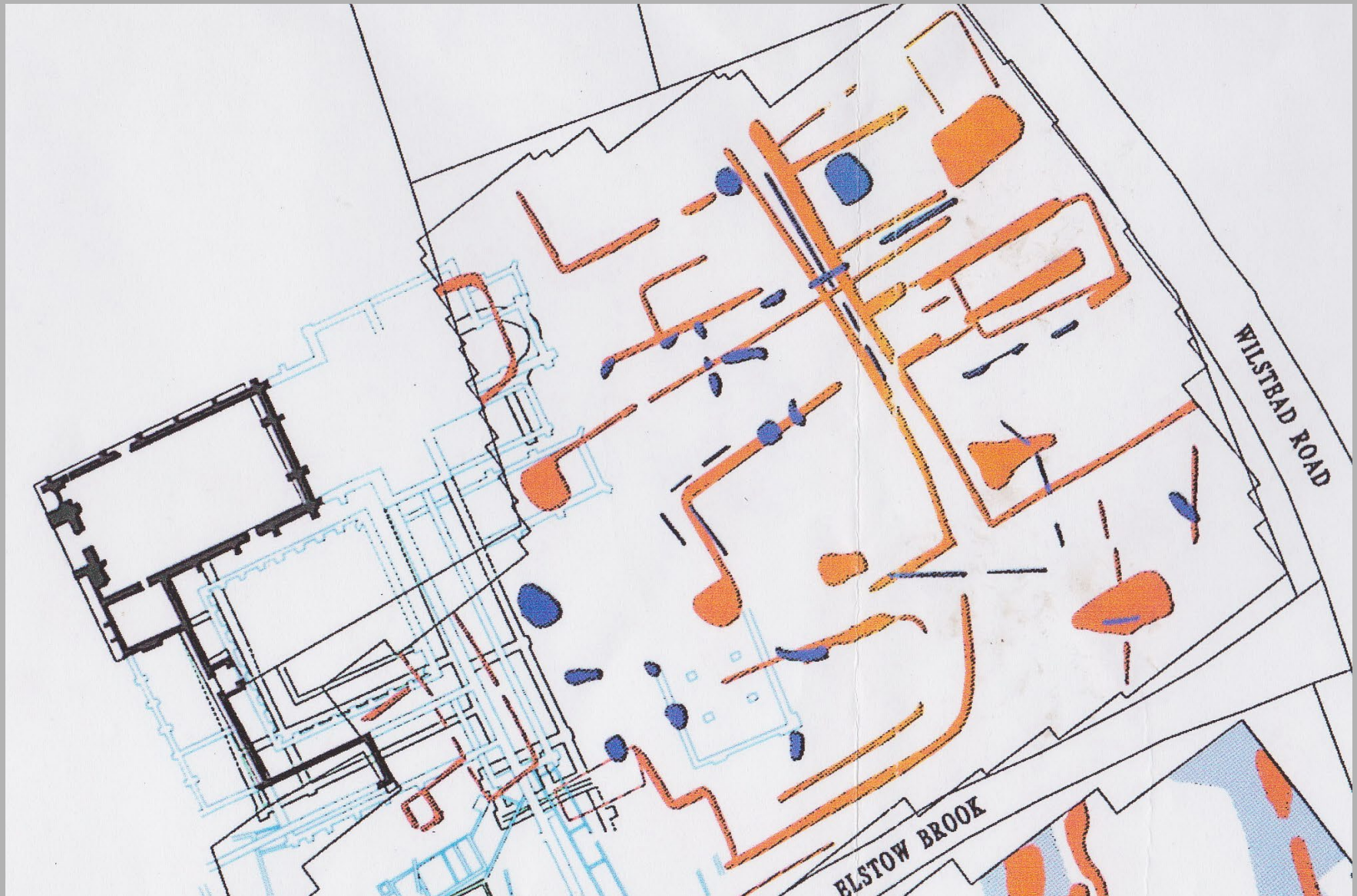
***Under the Abbey church***





# 1995 – geophysics: traces of Roman farming

... and much else ...



# Cropmarks: field boundaries and droveways

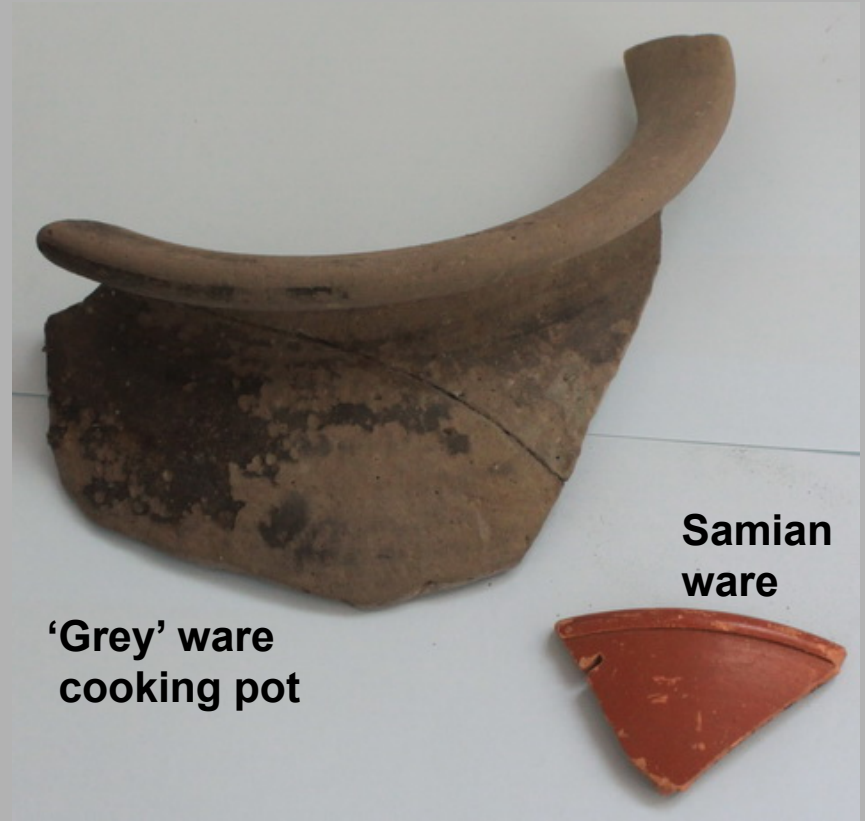




## Roman finds



Diocletian AD 284 - 305



Samian  
ware

'Grey' ware  
cooking pot



# What we learnt

Before Elstow

**Saxon Elstow**

An evolving monastic church

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Outbuildings

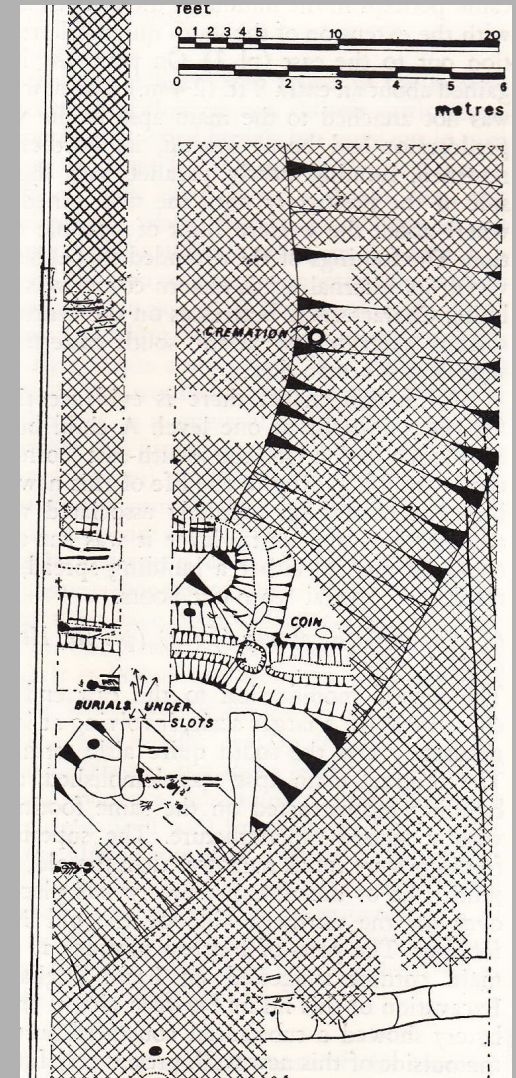
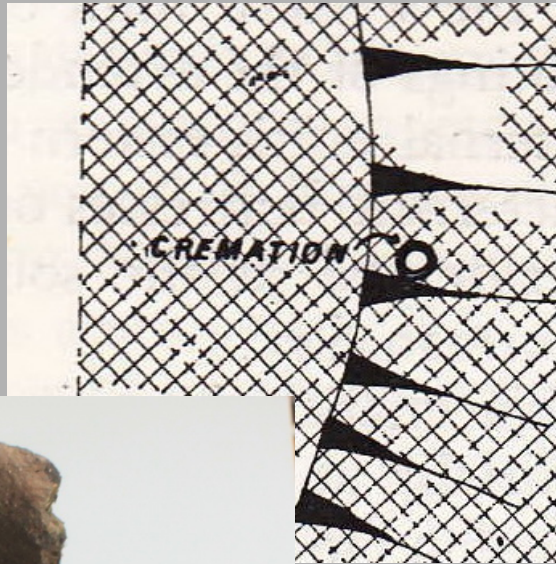
Monastic life

Post-monastic uses

The impacts of 'restoration'



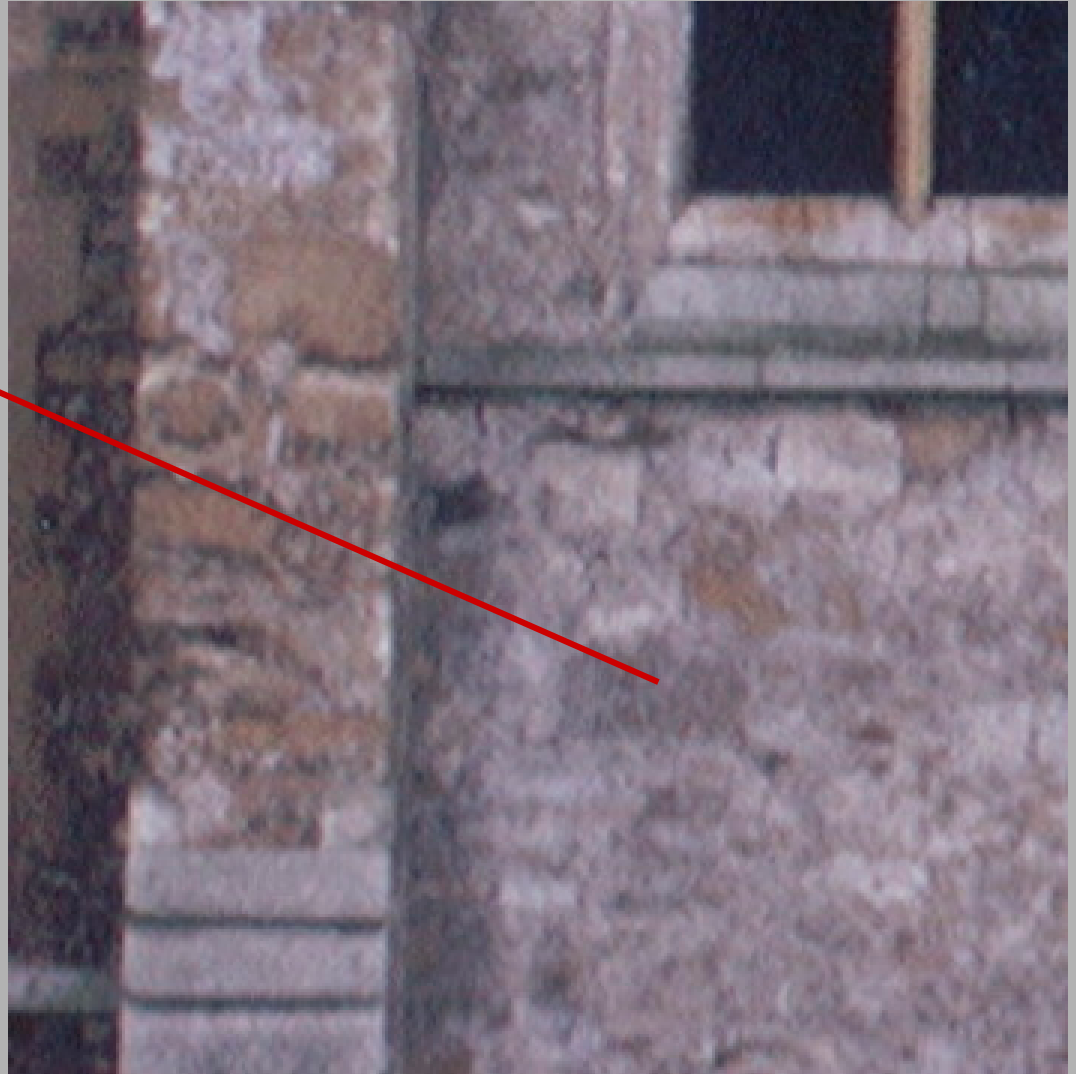
# Pagan Saxon cremation pot burial





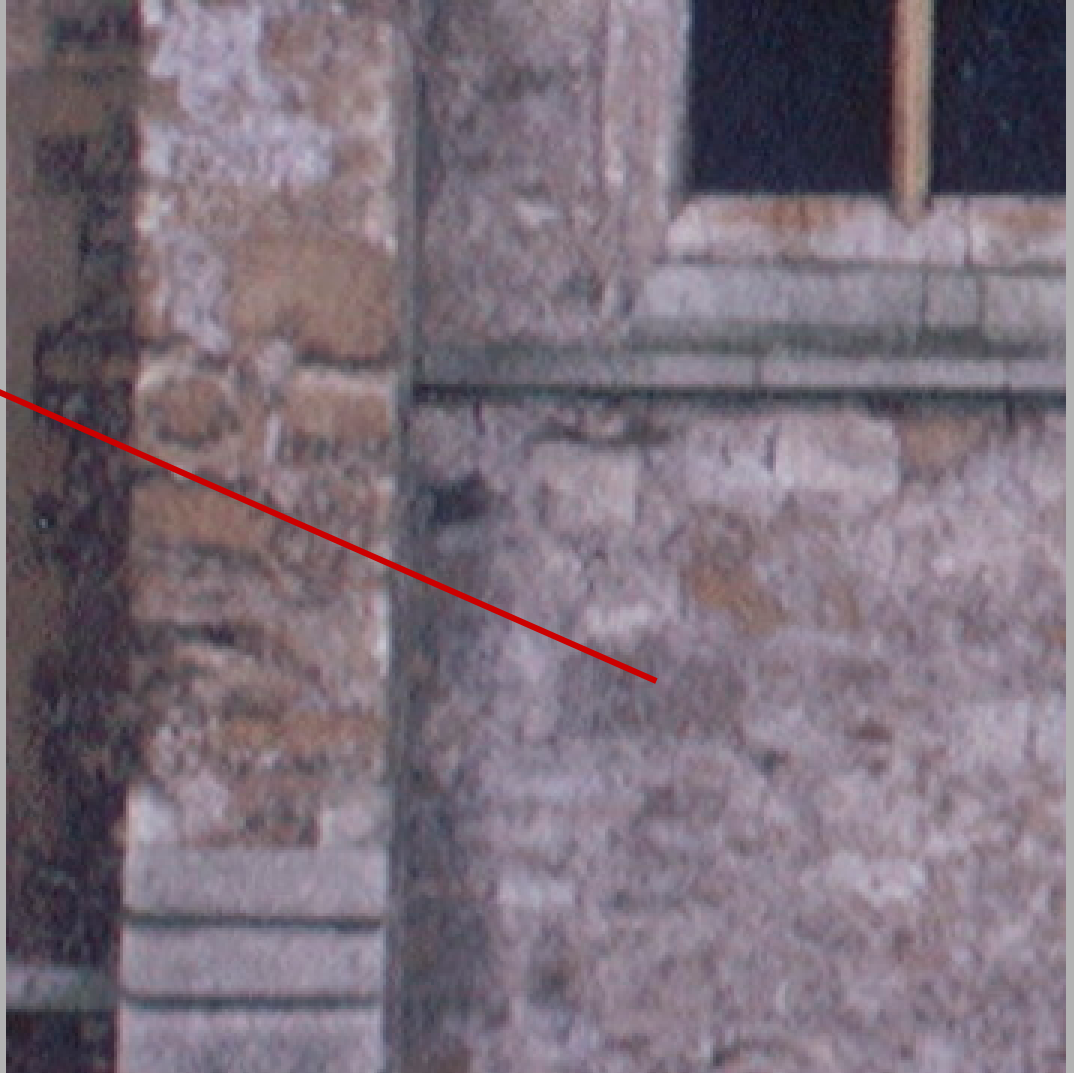
# A later Saxon minster church at Elstow ?

late 8th / early 9th century cross shaft base



# A later Saxon minster church at Elstow ?

late 8th / early 9th century cross shaft base



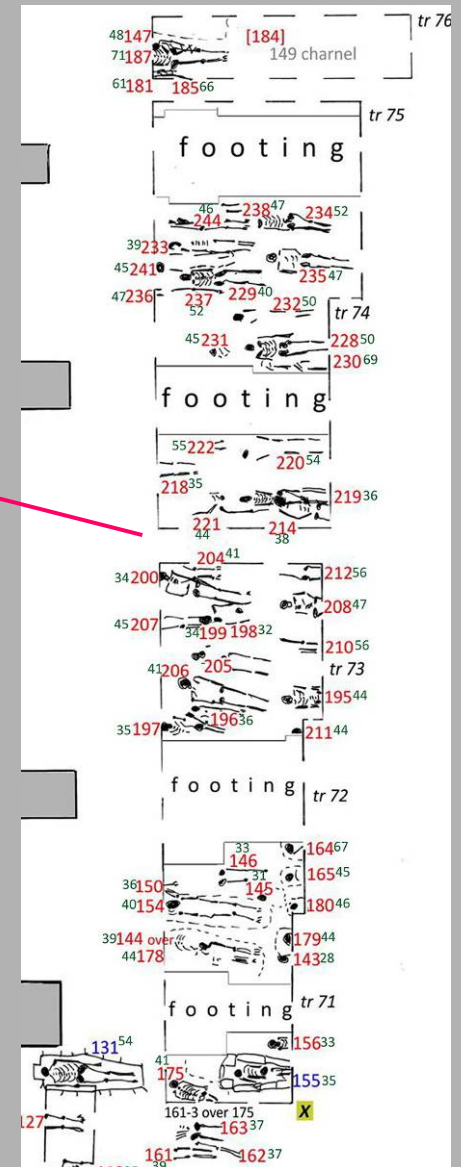
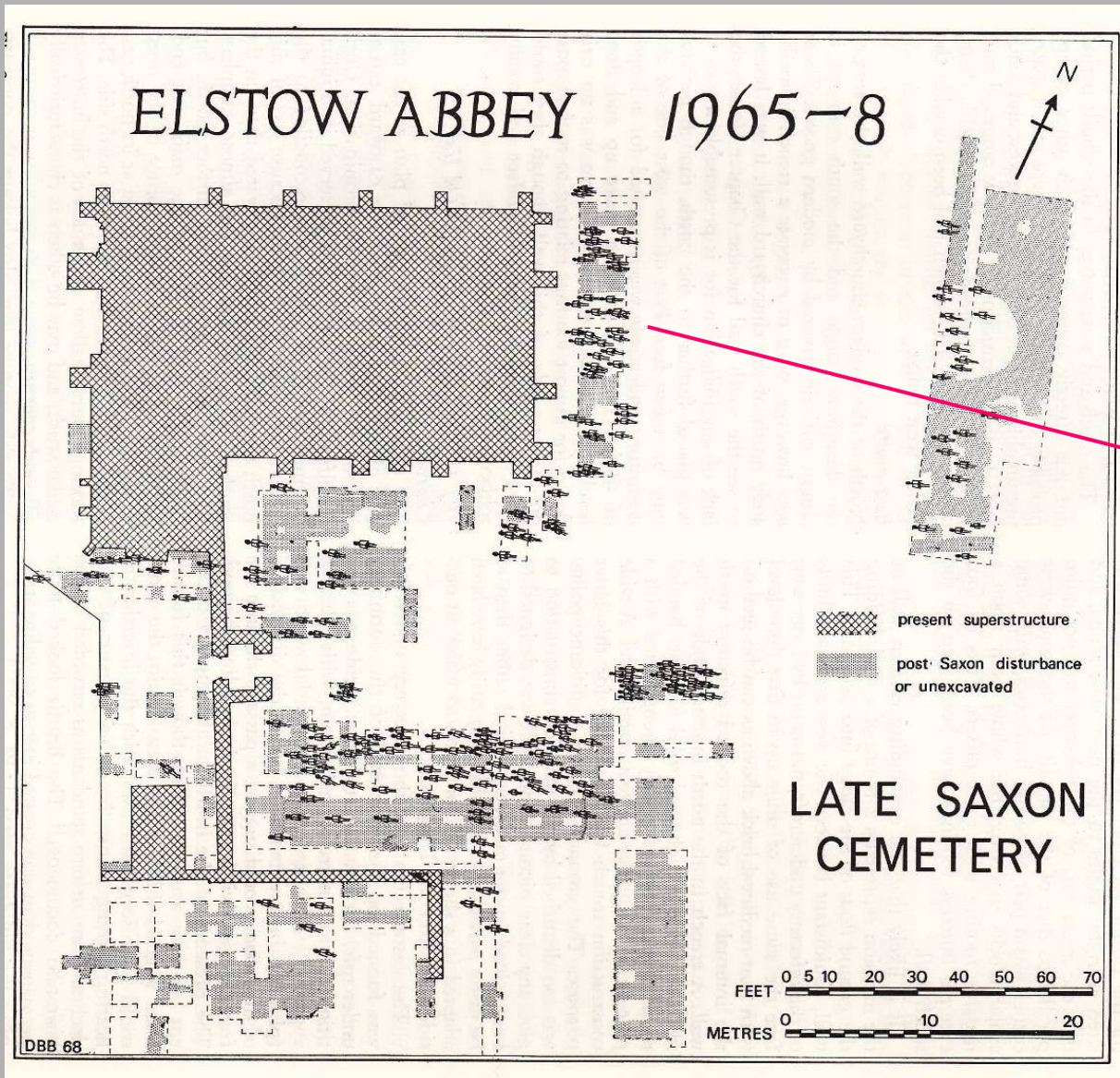


## Base of late C8 / early C9 cross shaft



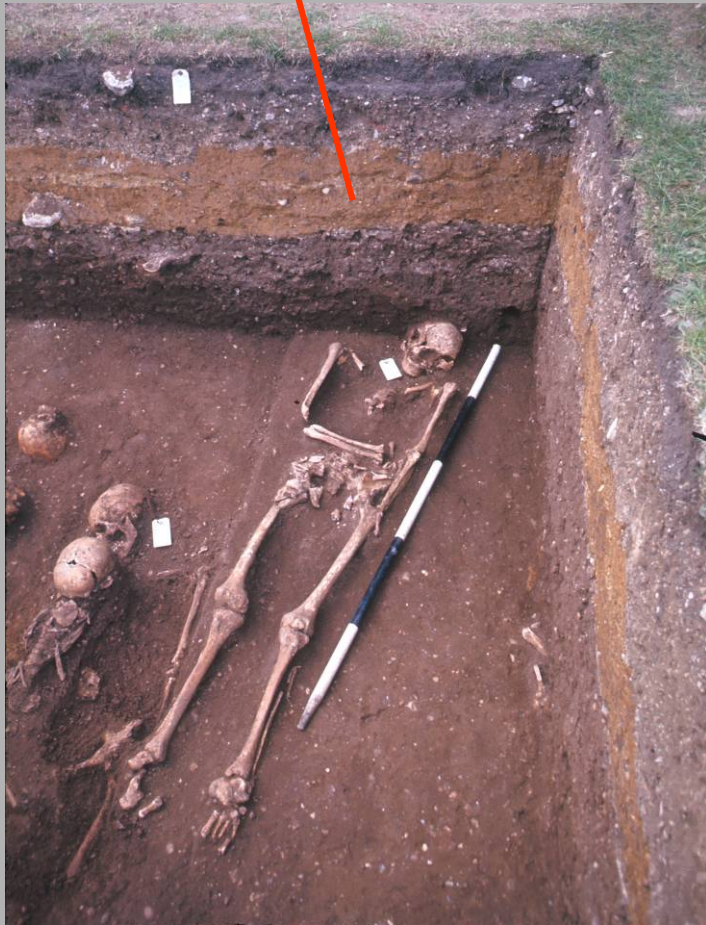


# Late Saxon parish graveyard





# Abbey church mortar floor



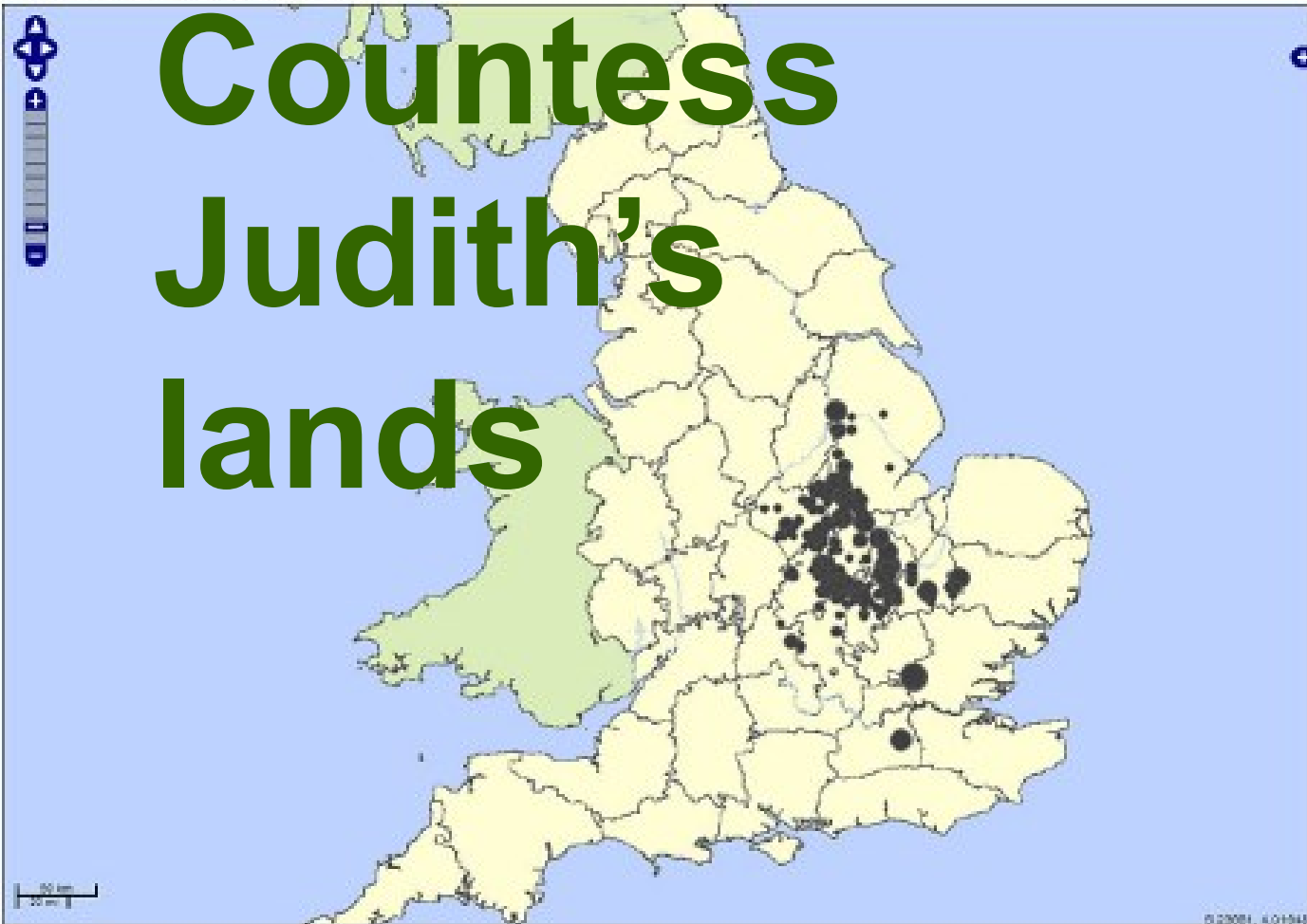


# The foundation of Elstow Abbey

- one of the earliest post-Conquest Benedictine nunneries
- **1075** Countess Judith of Huntingdon, niece of William the Conqueror, betrayed the rebellion of her husband Earl Waltheof of Northumbria to her uncle
- **1076** Waltheof executed
- **c1078** Judith founded Elstow Abbey in expiation (original charter not surviving)
- **1086** Judith died







*Historical note.* Earl Waltheof was executed in 1076 for his part in a rebellion against King William the previous year. Countess Judith was Waltheof's wife and the king's niece. She ended up with most of Waltheof's estates and many more besides. She wasn't fondly remembered by Waltheof's supporters. This story is among those told in the 'Domesday' special.

**1078 – 1539**  
**= 461 years**

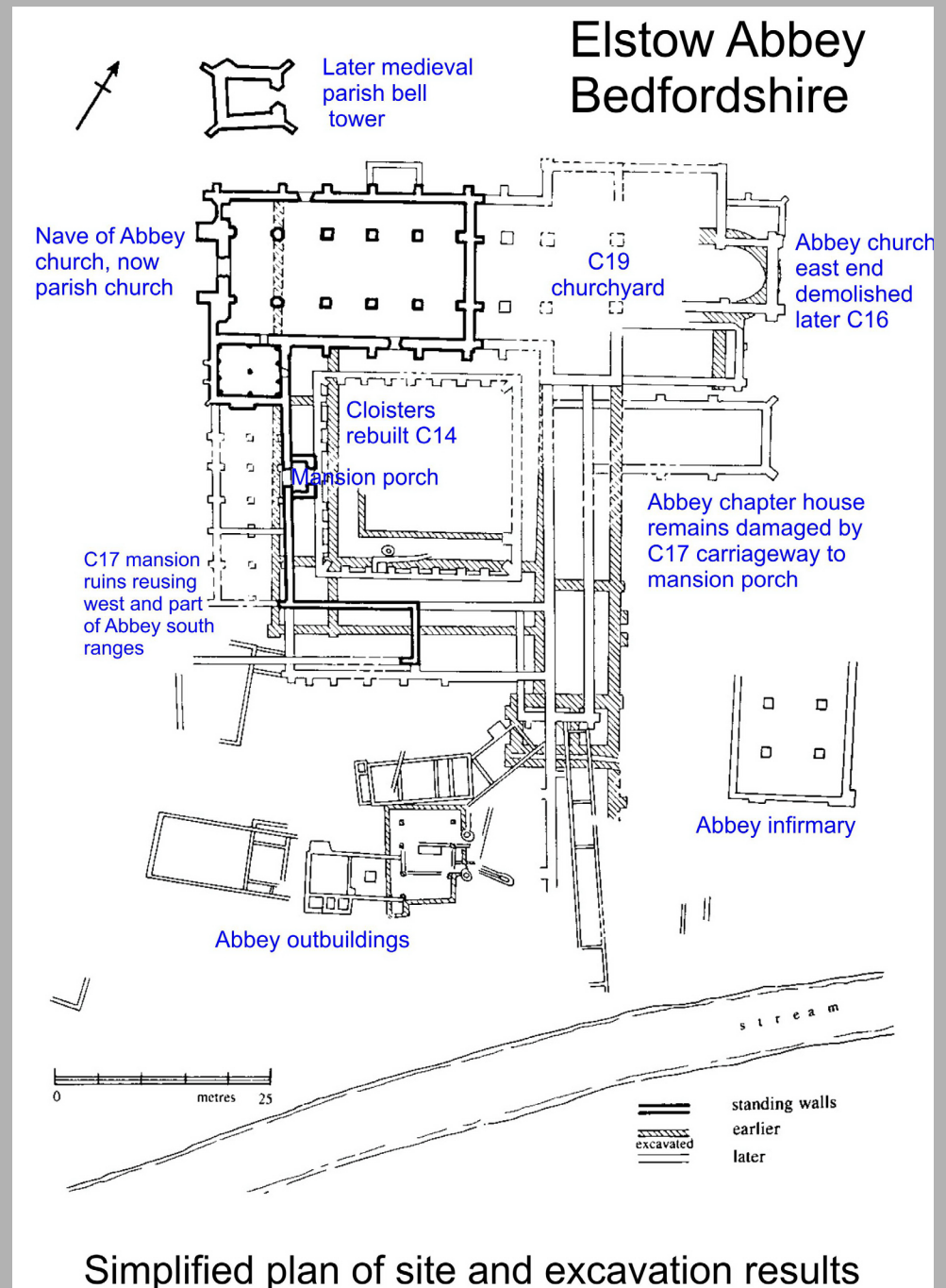
**Archaeology shows change and evolution in depth, not just latest standing remains**

**Construction sequence:**

- church built first E > W
- then claustral ranges
- church shared with parish; bell tower added later

**Accommodation:**

- temporary timber buildings
- claustral ranges and rebuilt
- outbuildings later used for 'households'





# **What we learnt**

**Before Elstow**

**Saxon Elstow**

**An evolving monastic church**

**Complicated cloisters**

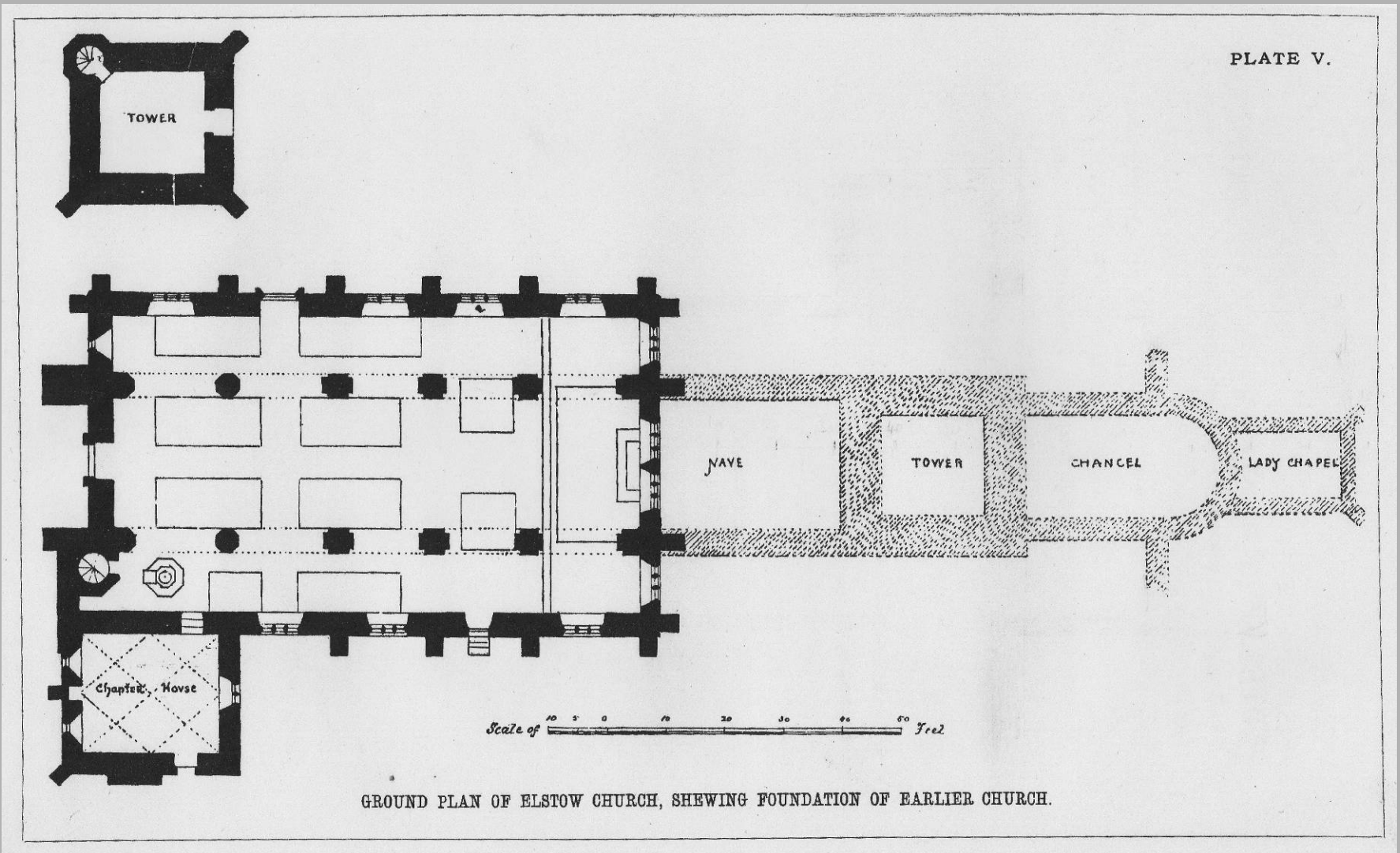
**Outbuildings**

**Monastic life**

**Post-monastic uses**

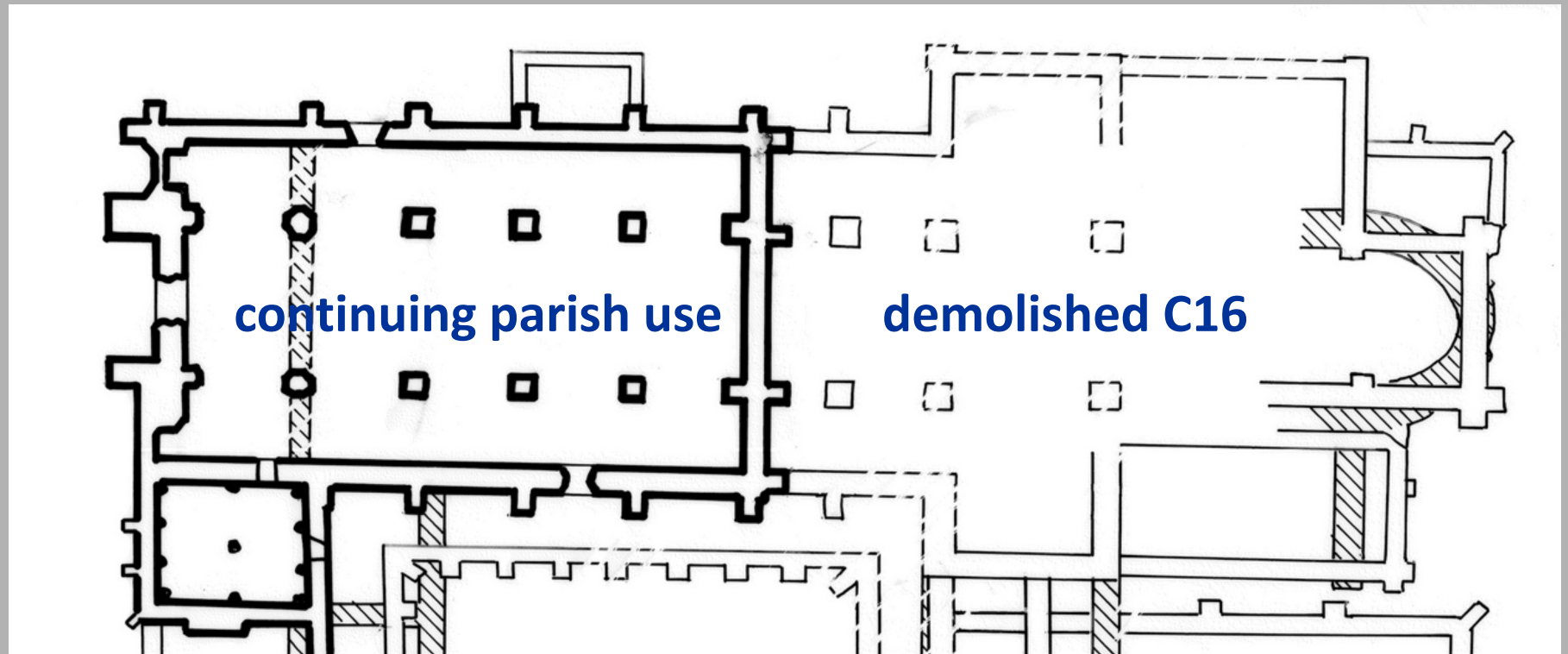
**The impacts of 'restoration'**

# 1885: M J C Buckley





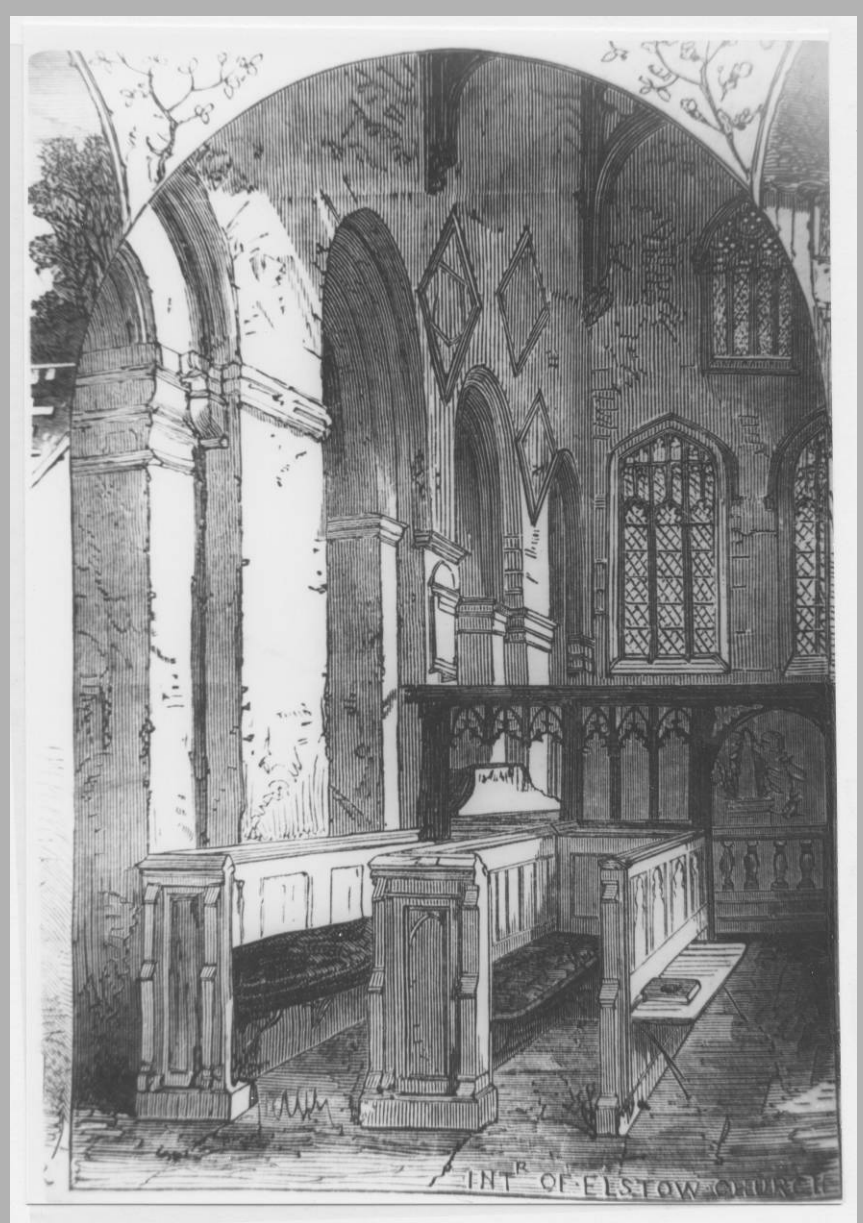
# 1965-1972: excavation results



West end of nave facing east

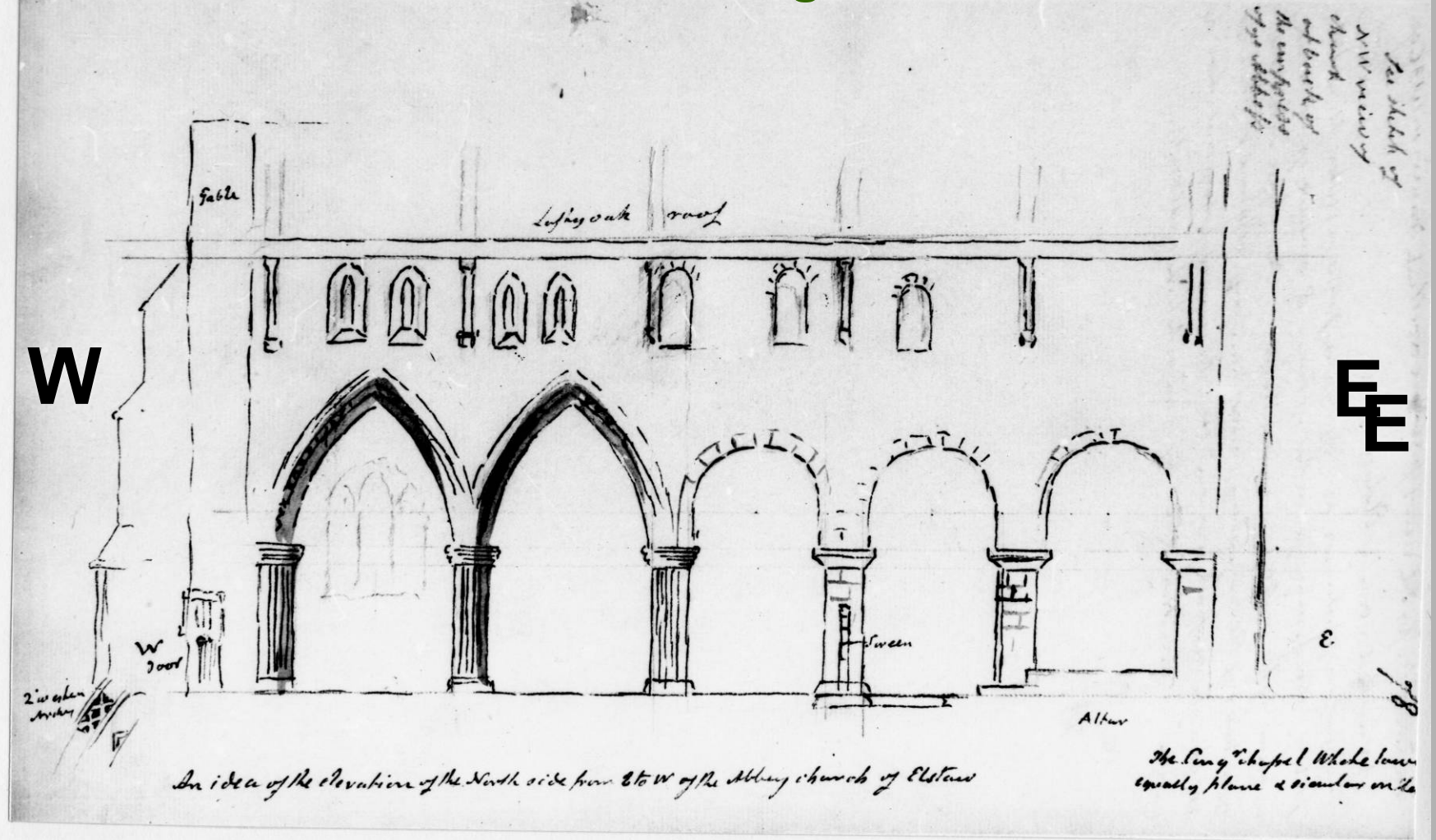


East end of nave

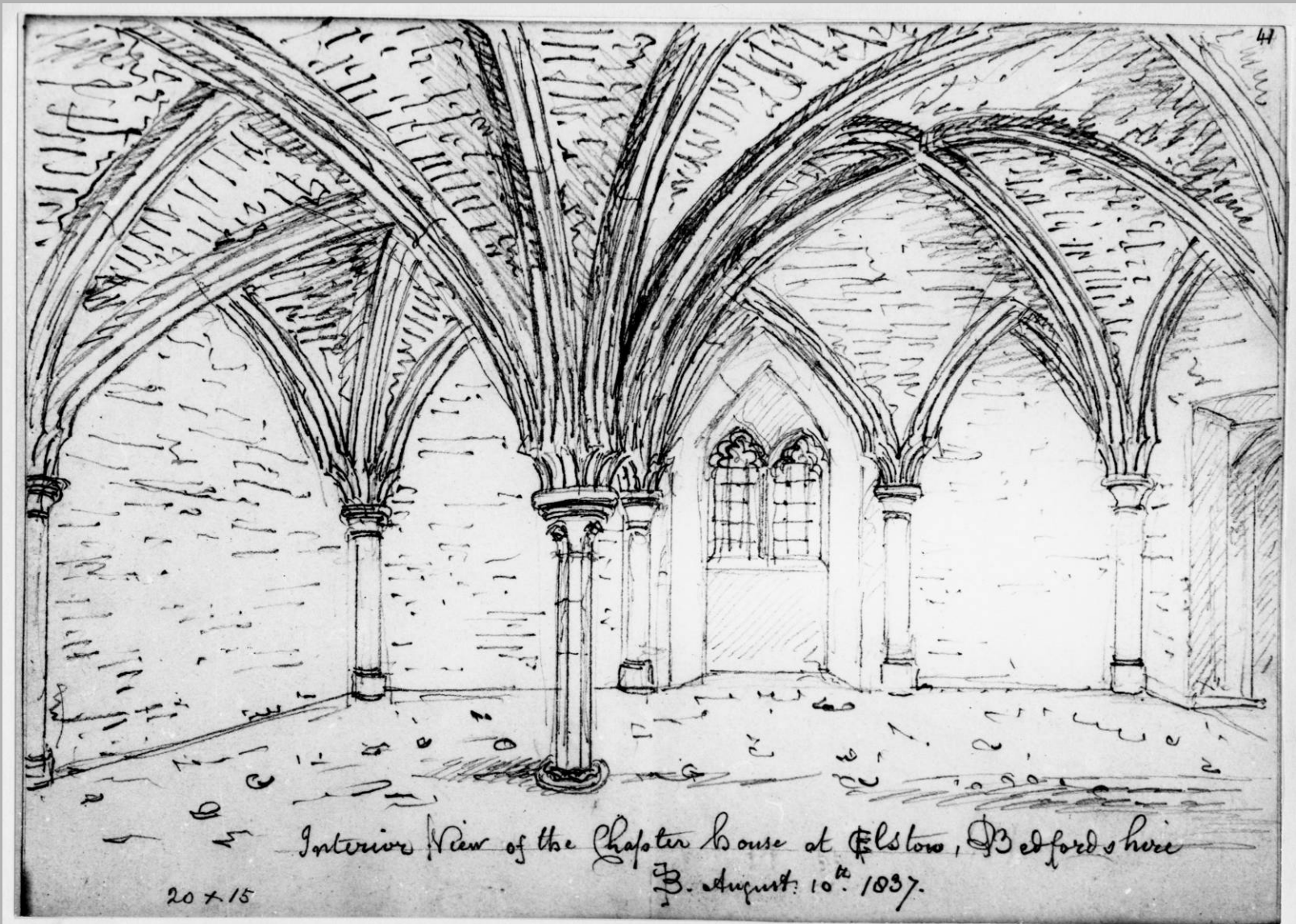




## c1220 west extension Original Norman nave

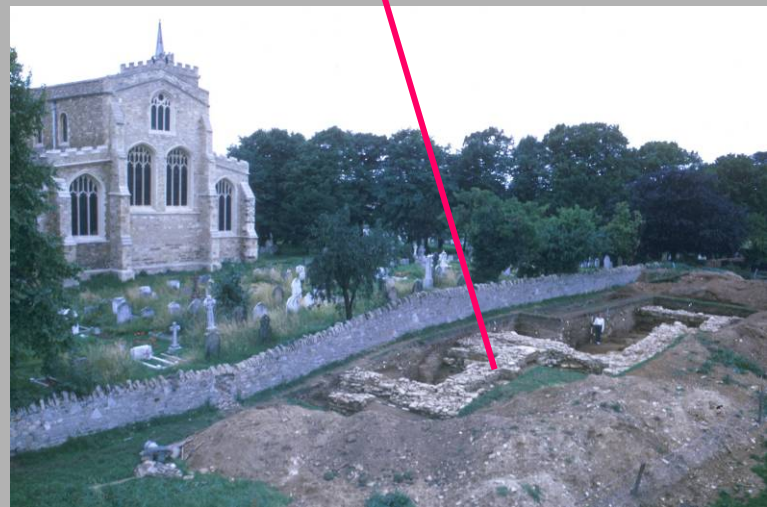
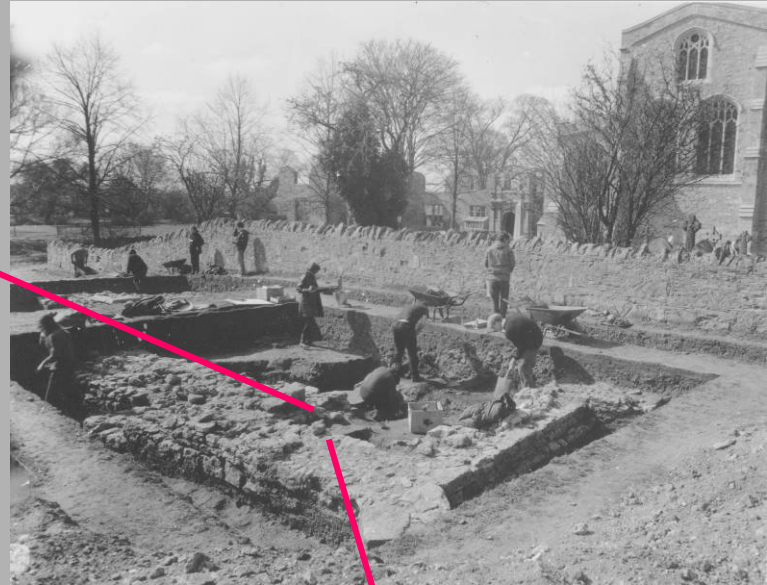


Now the vestry, then the nuns' outer parlour,  
never the chapter house





# Abbey church – the original east end





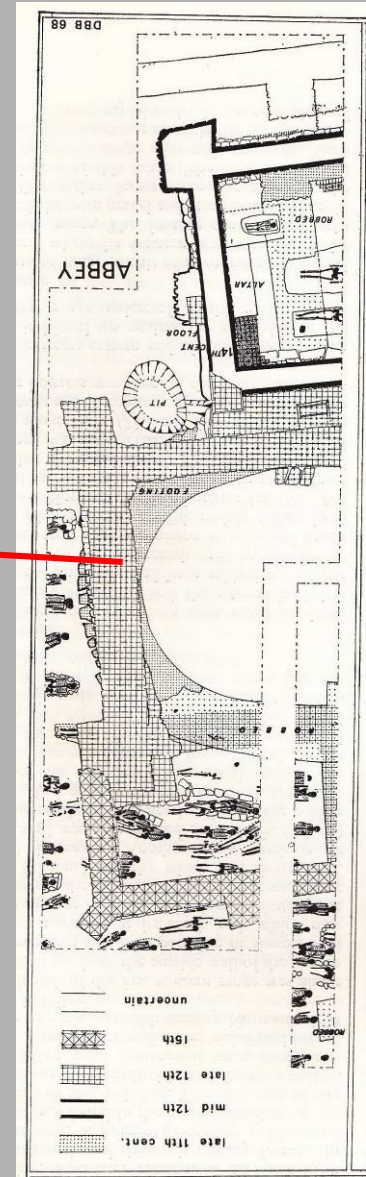
# Abbey church – the original east end



South  
Chapel

High altar

Late  
medieval  
? Lady  
chapel



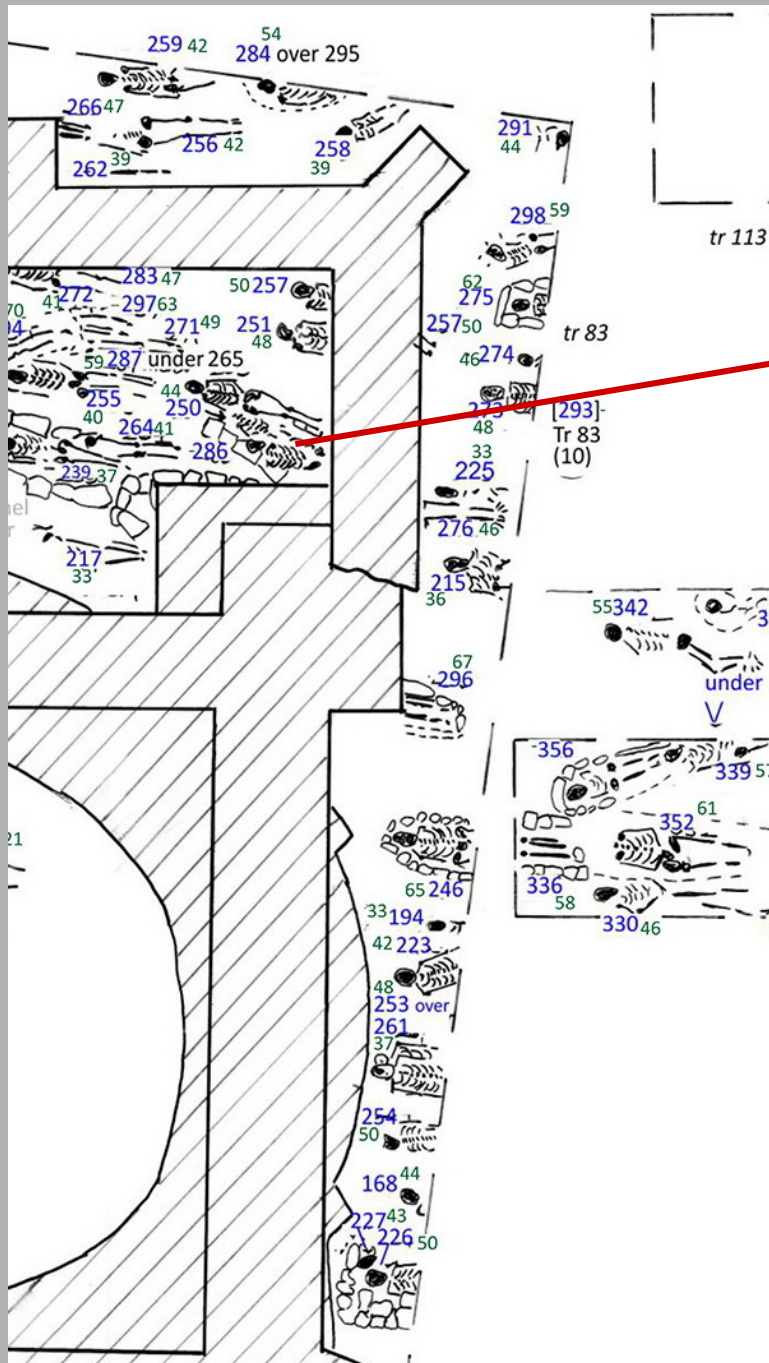


## 14th century floor tiles next to south chapel altar





# Abbey burials





# Abbey burials



# What we learnt

Before Elstow

Saxon Elstow

An evolving monastic church

**Complicated cloisters**

Outbuildings

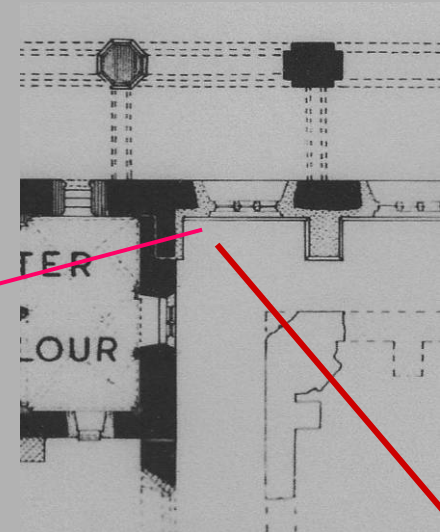
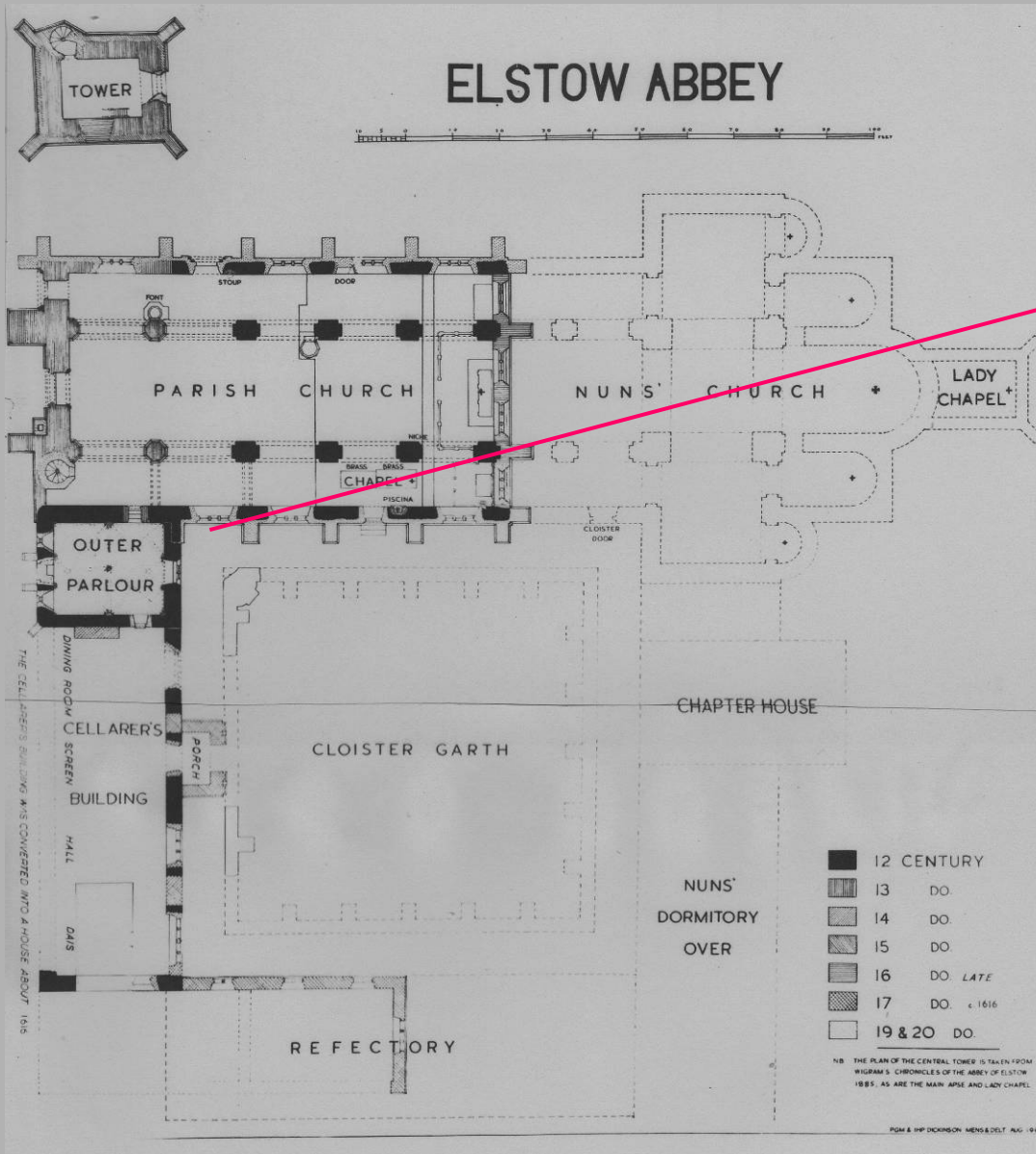
Monastic life

Post-monastic uses

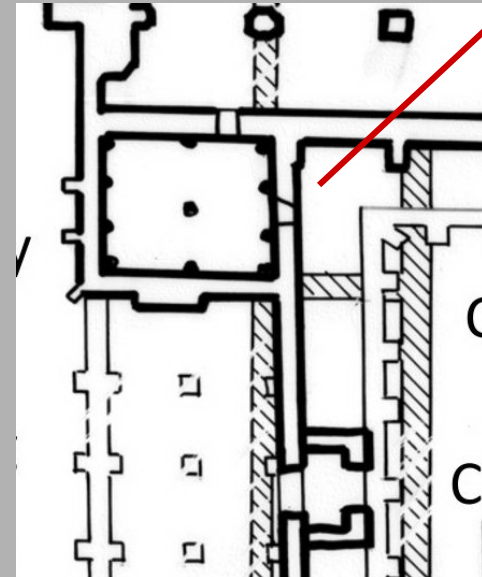
The impacts of 'restoration'



# 1966 – P G M Dickinson

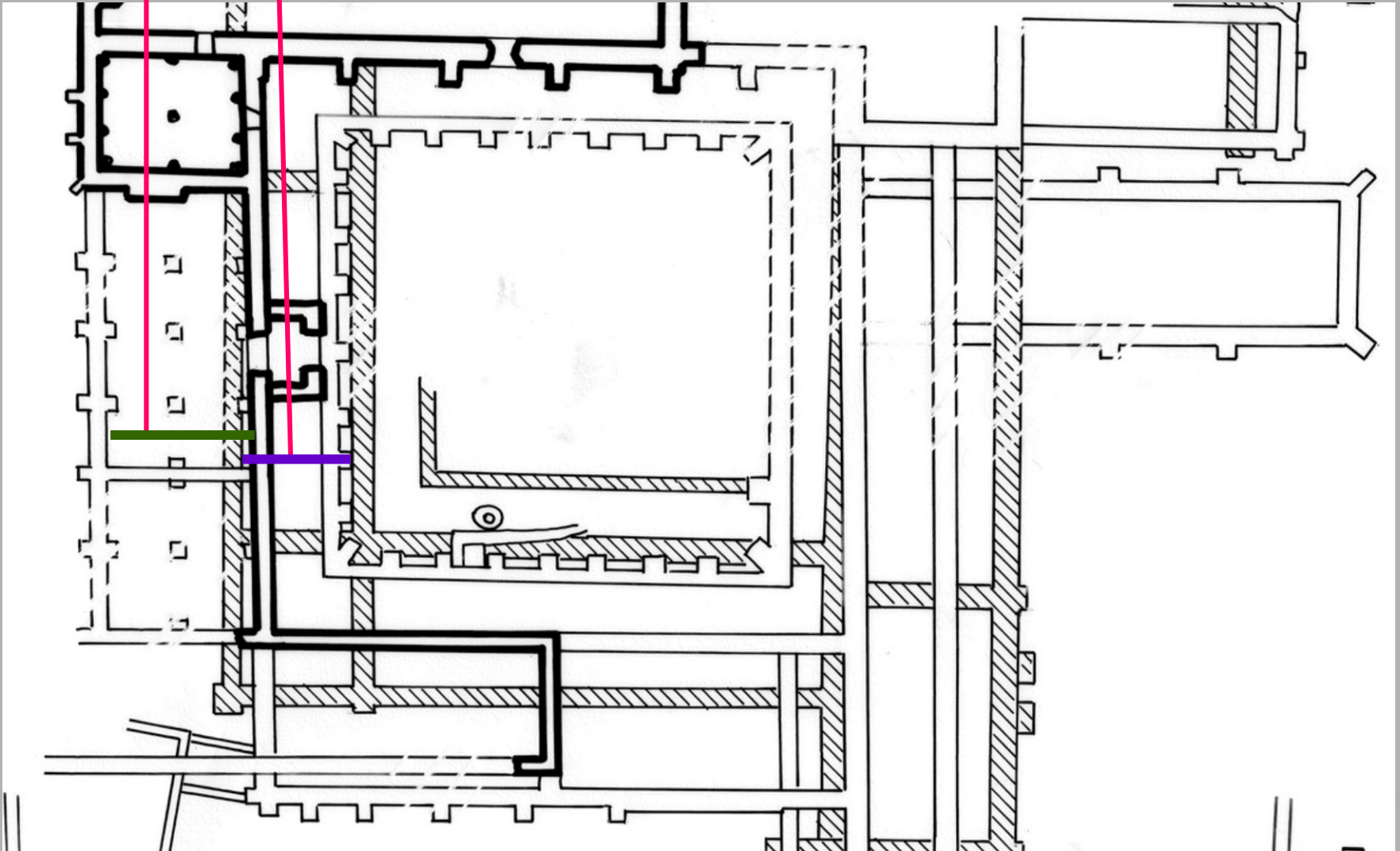


angle



# Rebuilt cloister

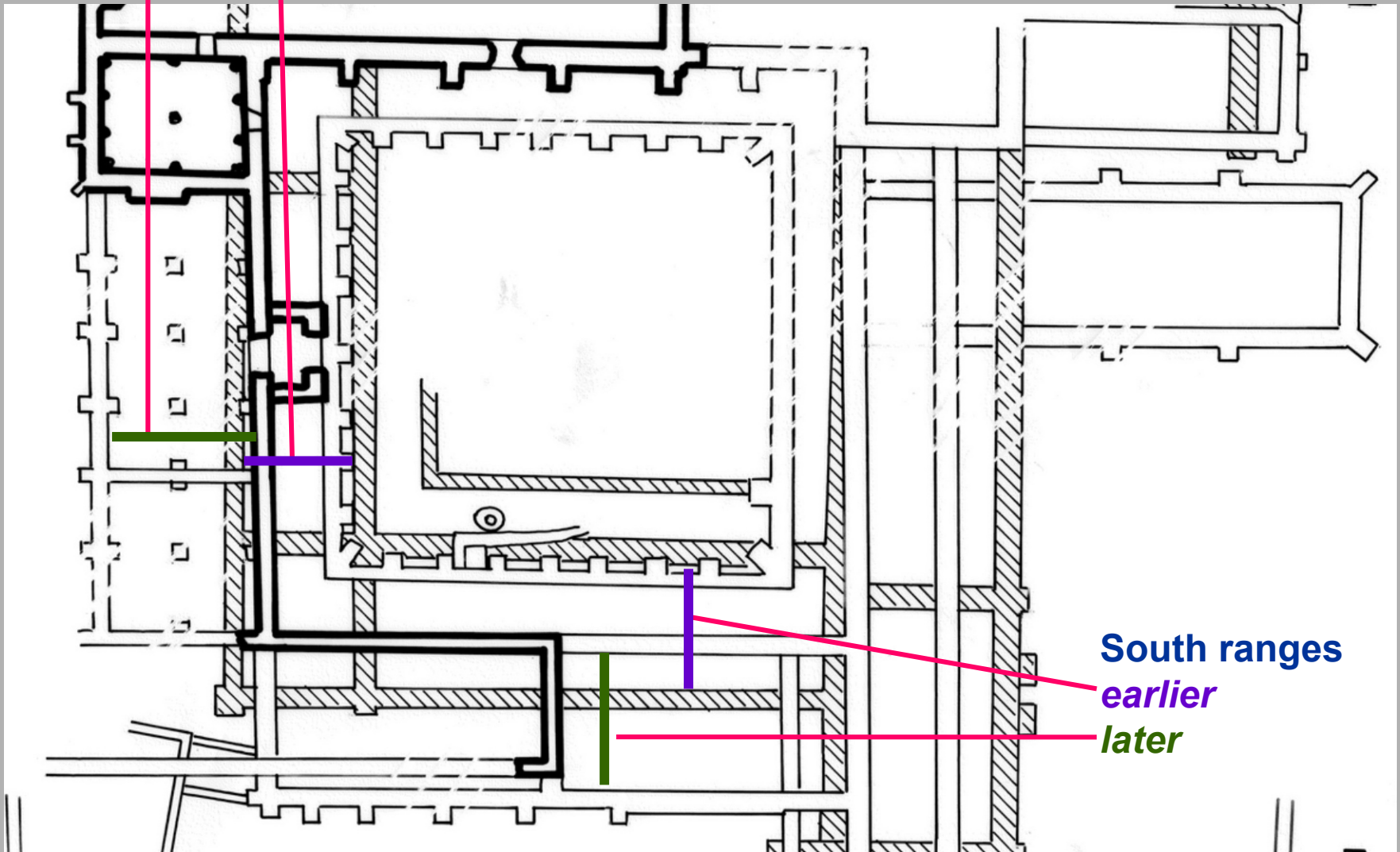
West ranges  
*later* *earlier*





# Rebuilt cloister

West ranges  
*later* *earlier*



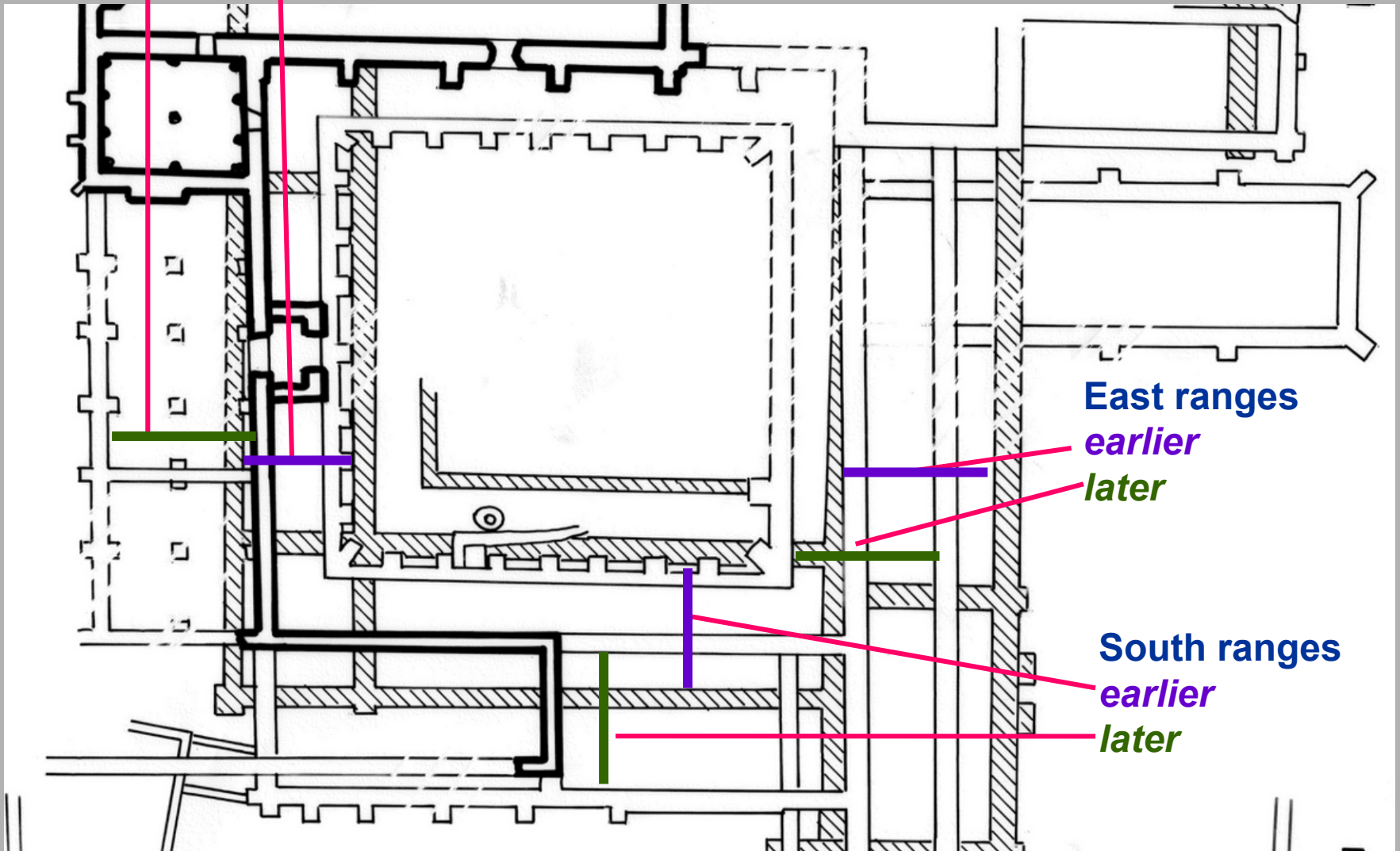
South ranges  
*earlier*  
*later*

# Rebuilt cloister

West ranges  
*later* *earlier*

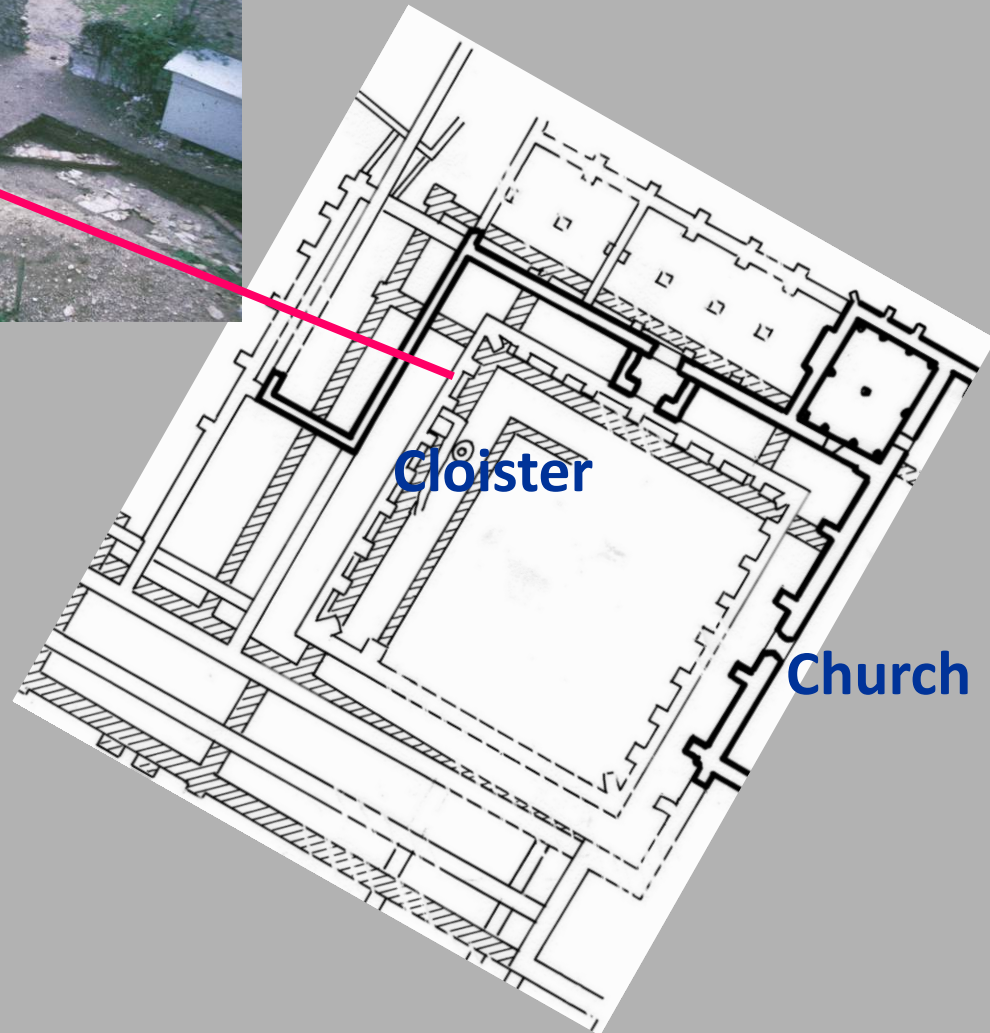
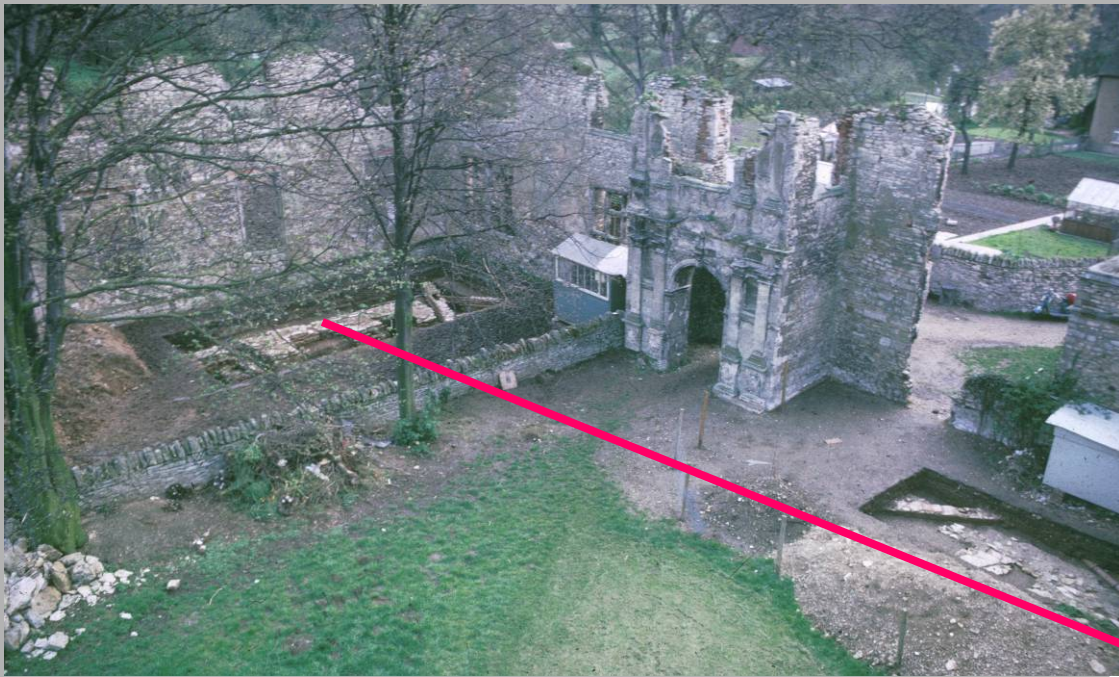
East ranges  
*earlier*  
*later*

South ranges  
*earlier*  
*later*

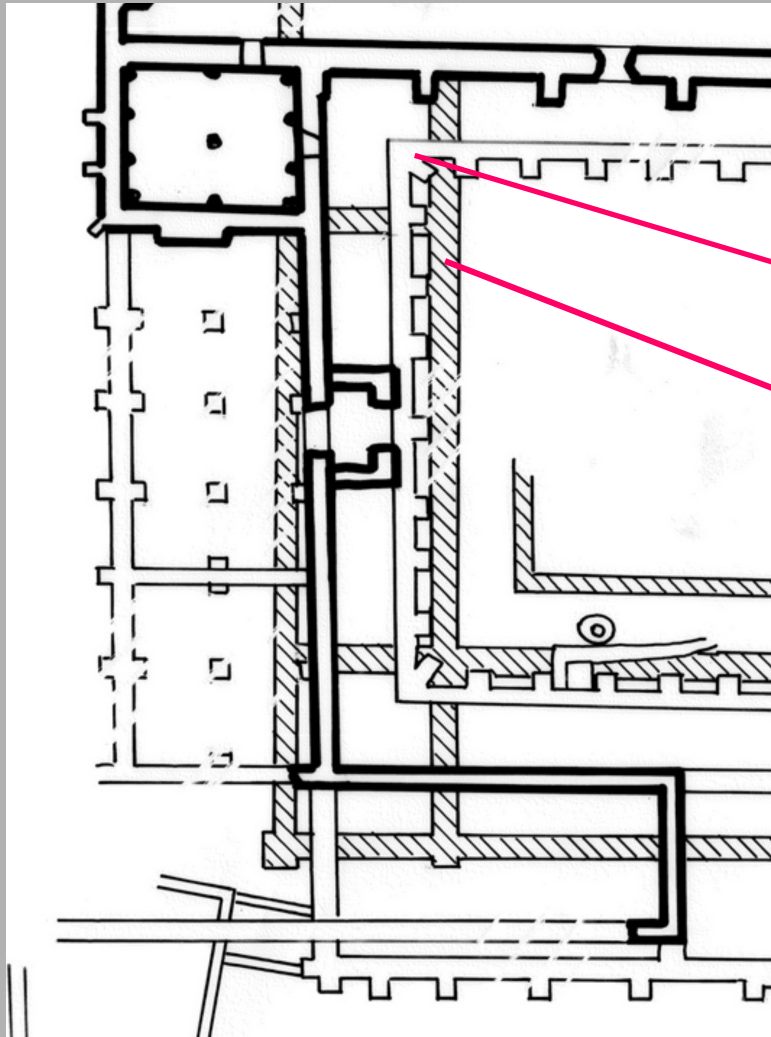




# Cloisters

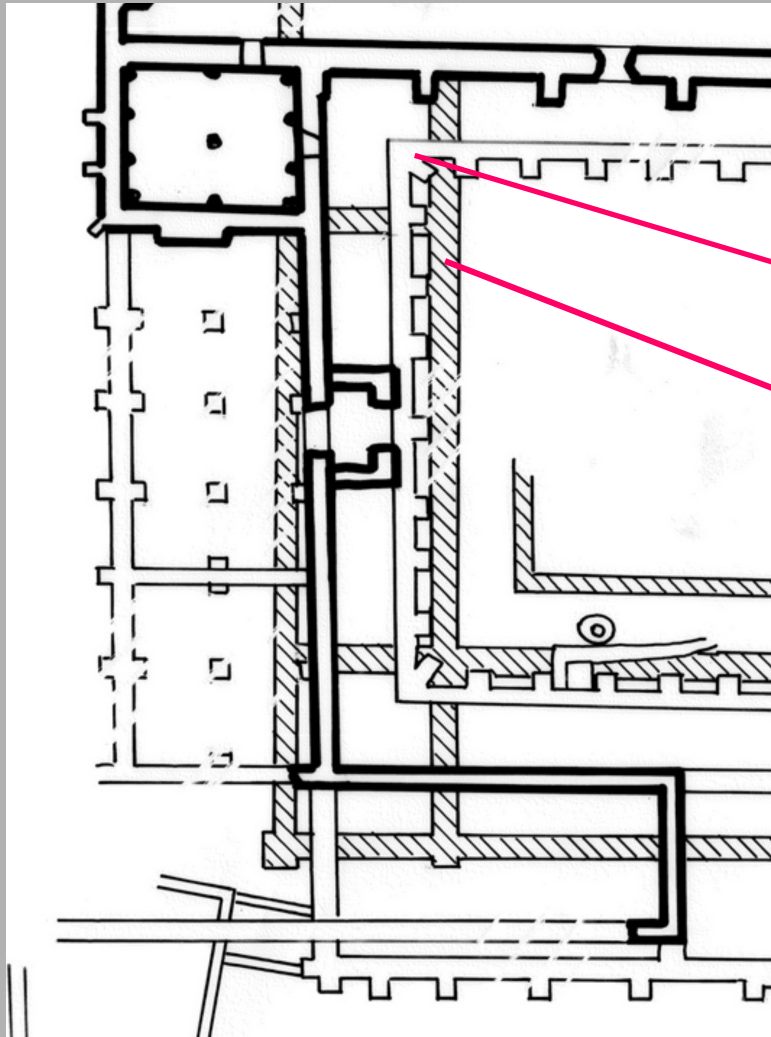






**NW corner of cloister**





north-west  
corner later  
cloister walk

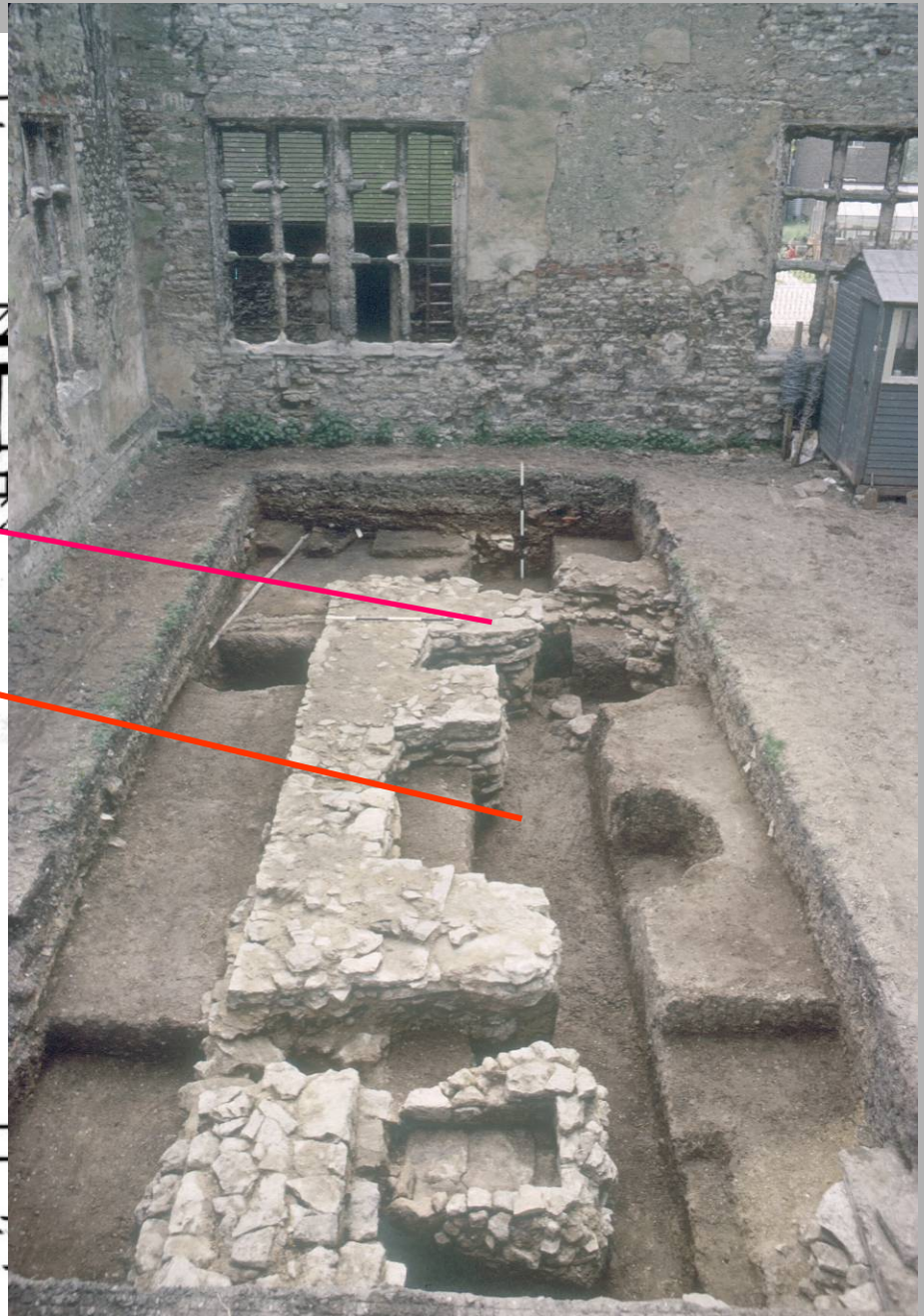
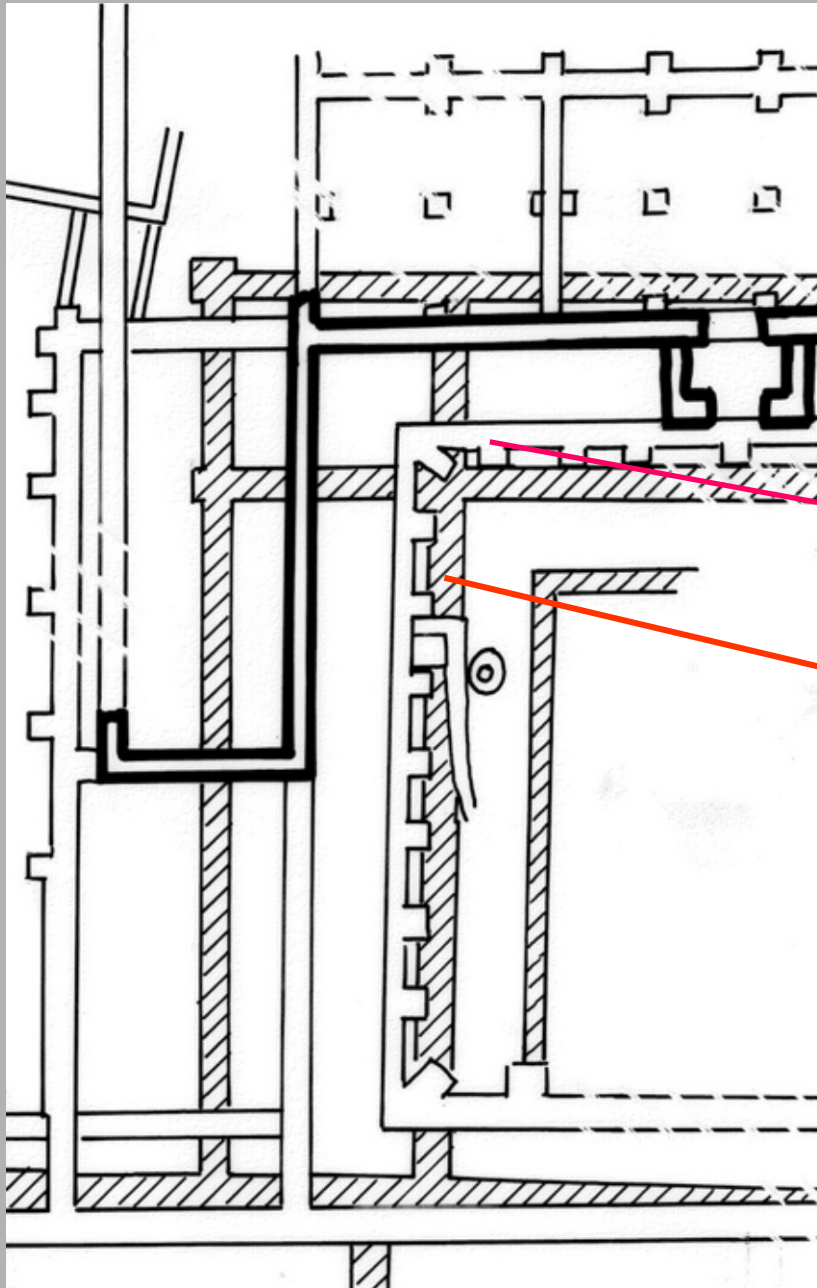
filled  
robber  
trench  
early  
west  
range

late  
Saxon  
burial

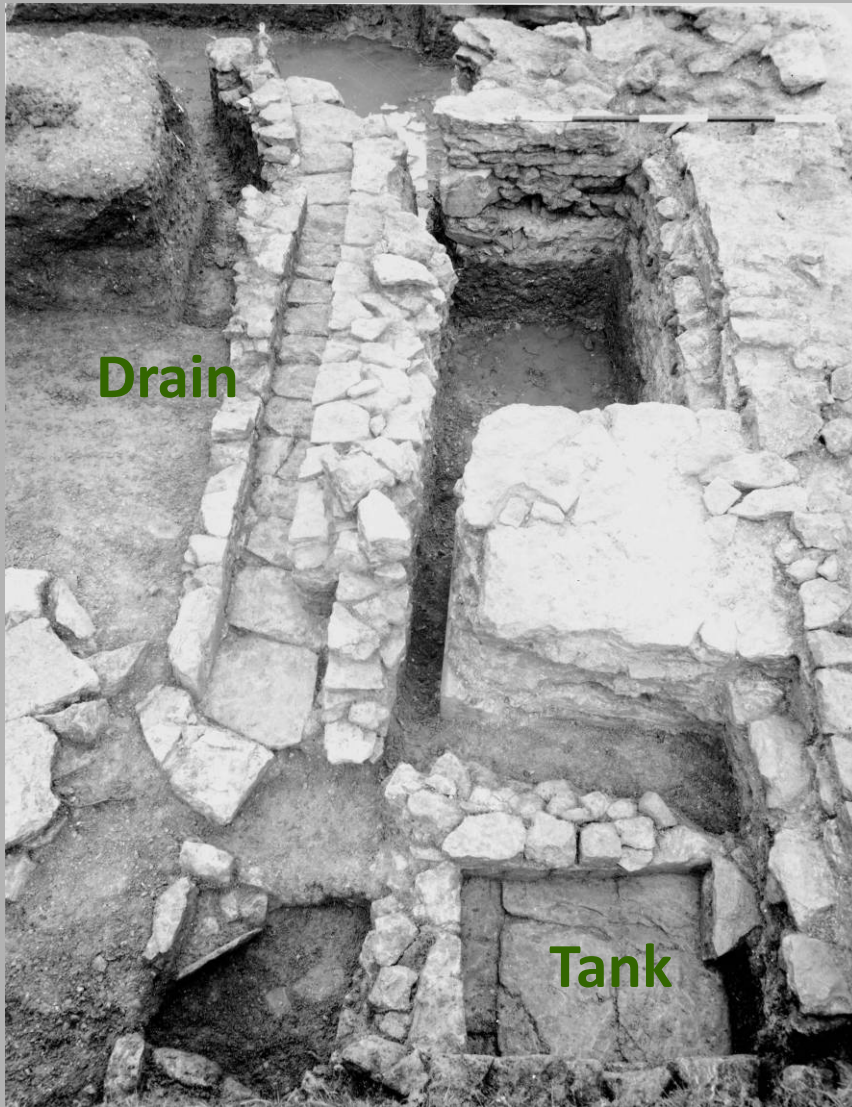
NW corner of cloister



## SW corner of cloister







**Lavatorium in cloister garth outside refectory**



# Early cloister arcade blocks reused in buttress footings for later cloister garth wall

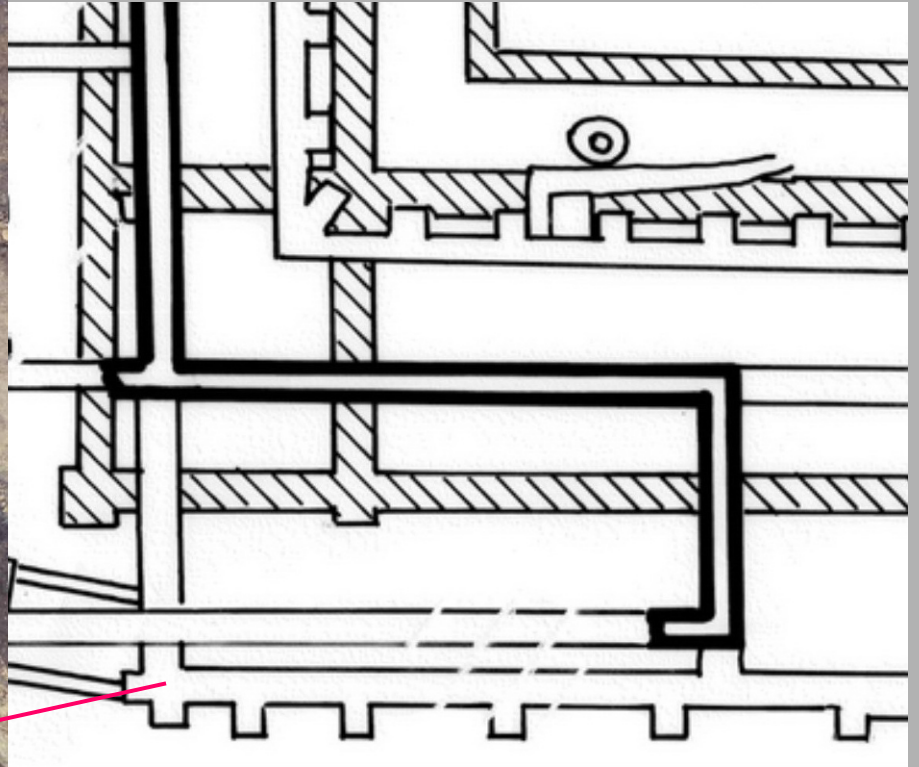






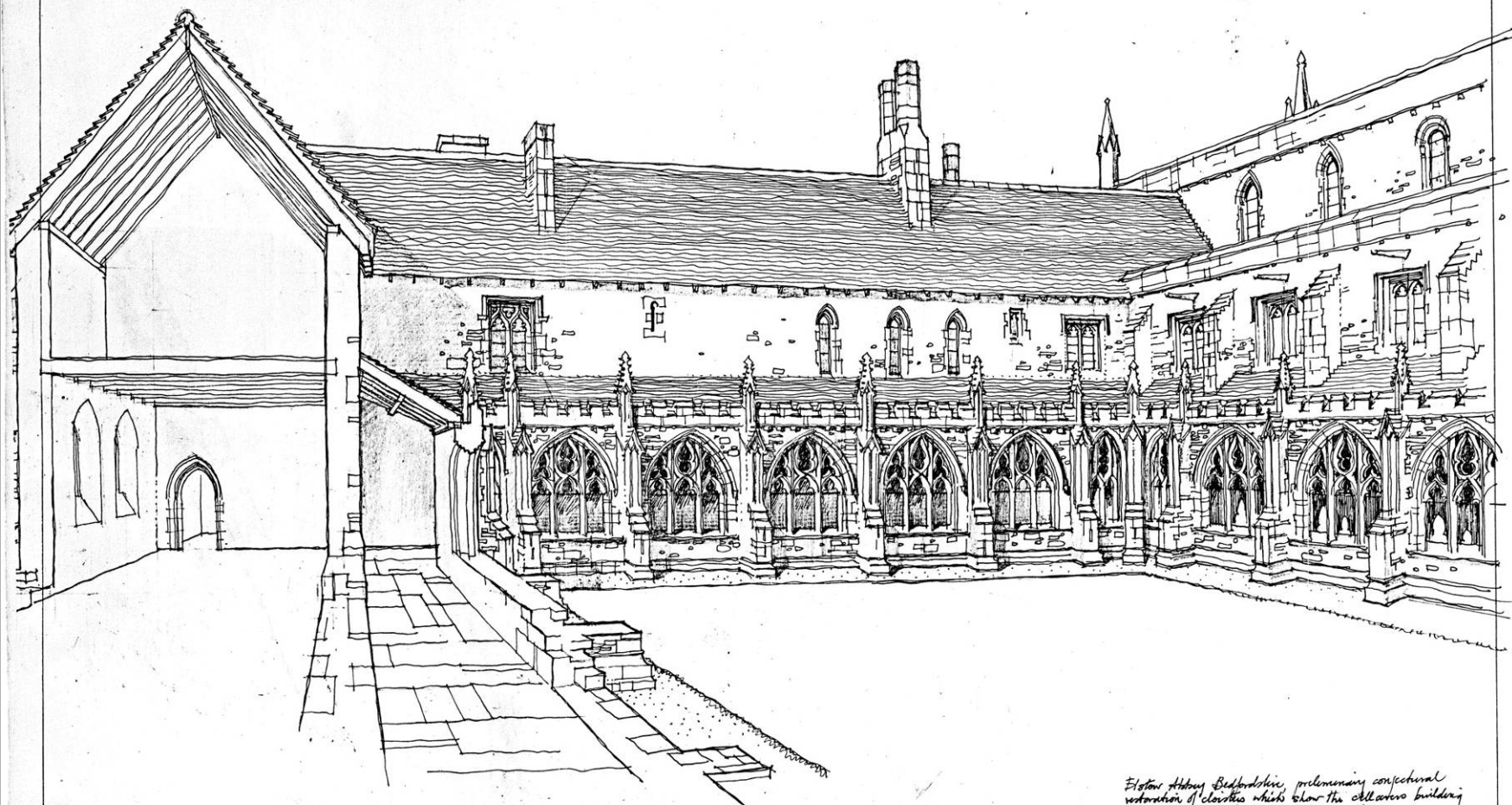
**Damage: heraldic charge  
(*argent*) a *bend lozengy* (*gules*);  
on a *chief* (*azure*) three  
*escallops* (*argent*)**





**SW corner of south  
(refectory) claustral range**





Elston Abbey Bedfordshire, preliminary conceptual  
restoration of cloister which show the abbey building  
which preceded the Hillierston mansion  
Gerrard 1967 A.R.I.B.A. March 1967.

# What we learnt

Before Elstow

Saxon Elstow

An evolving monastic church

Complicated cloisters

**Outbuildings**

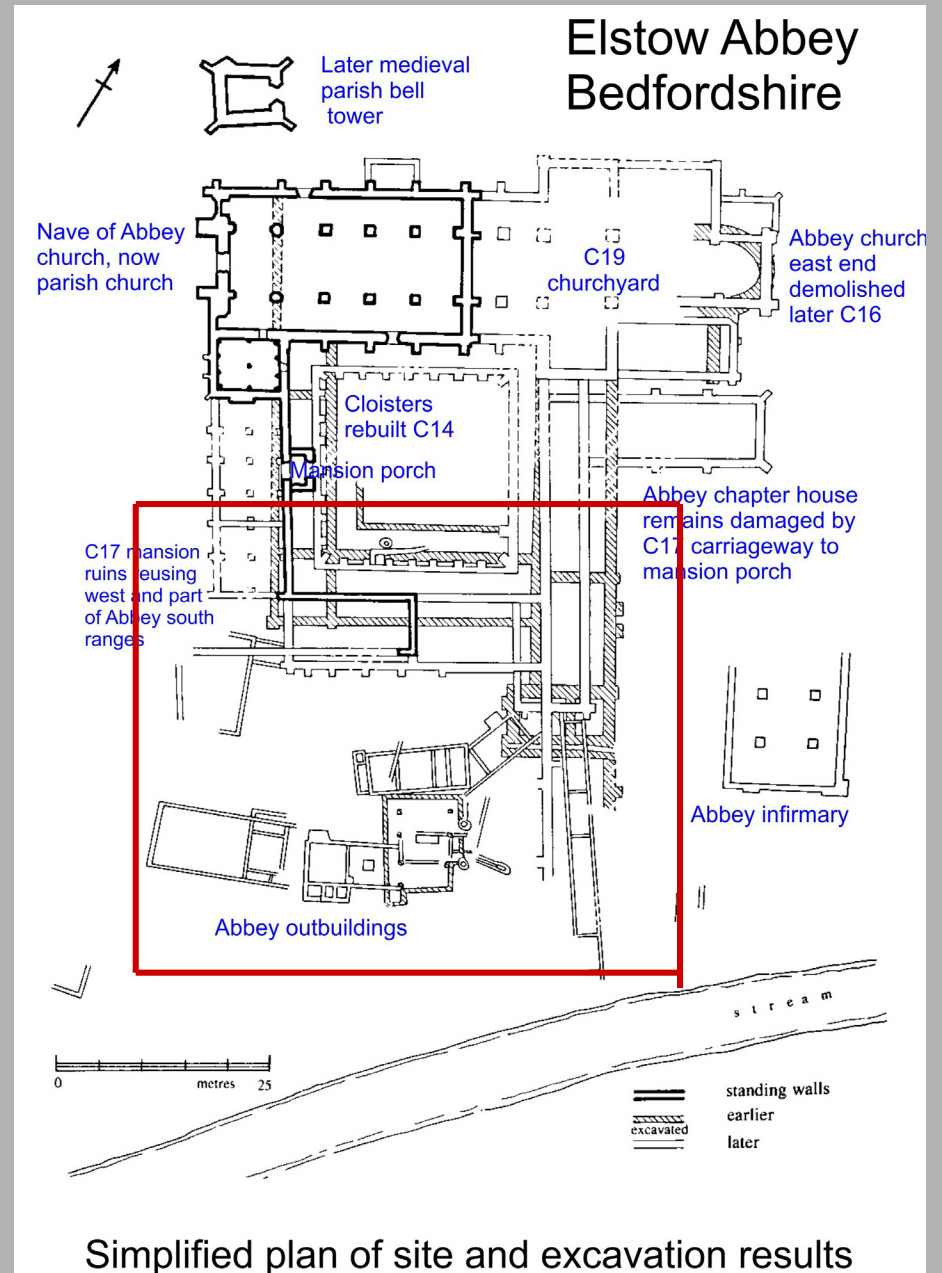
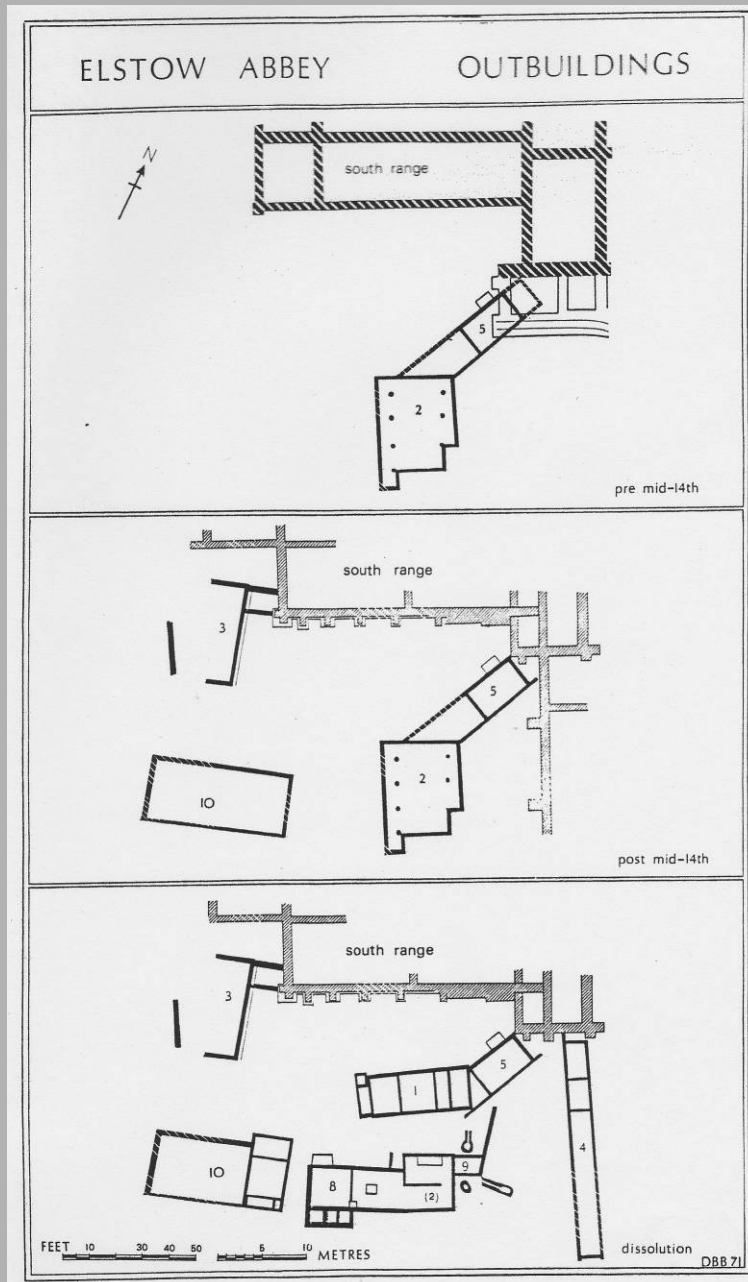
Monastic life

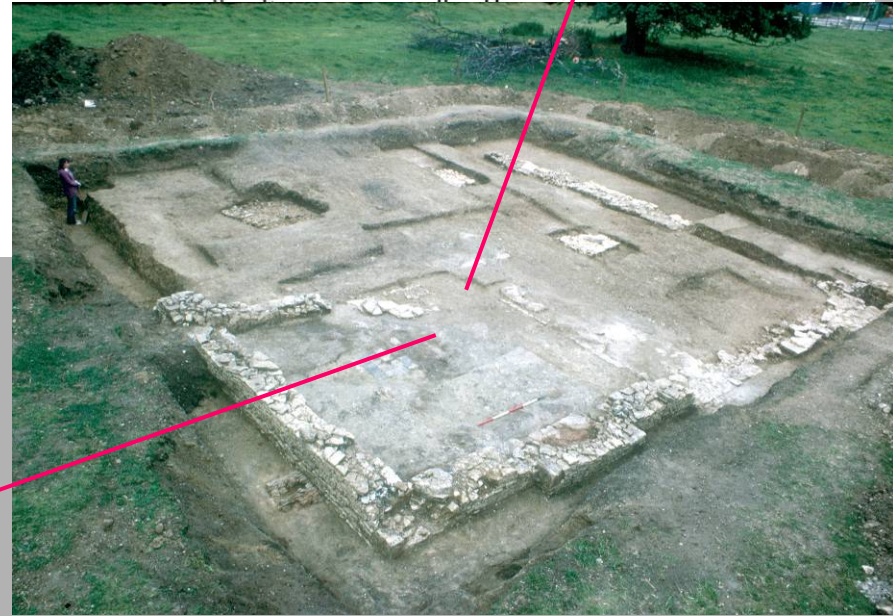
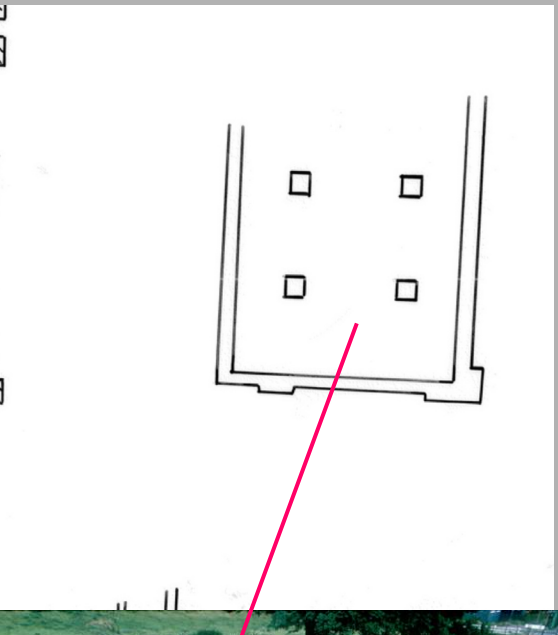
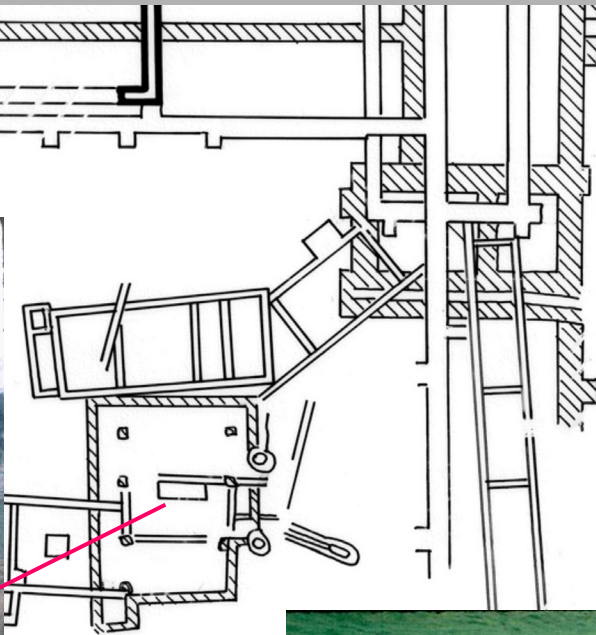
Post-monastic uses

The impacts of 'restoration'



# Domestic outbuildings south of the claustral ranges

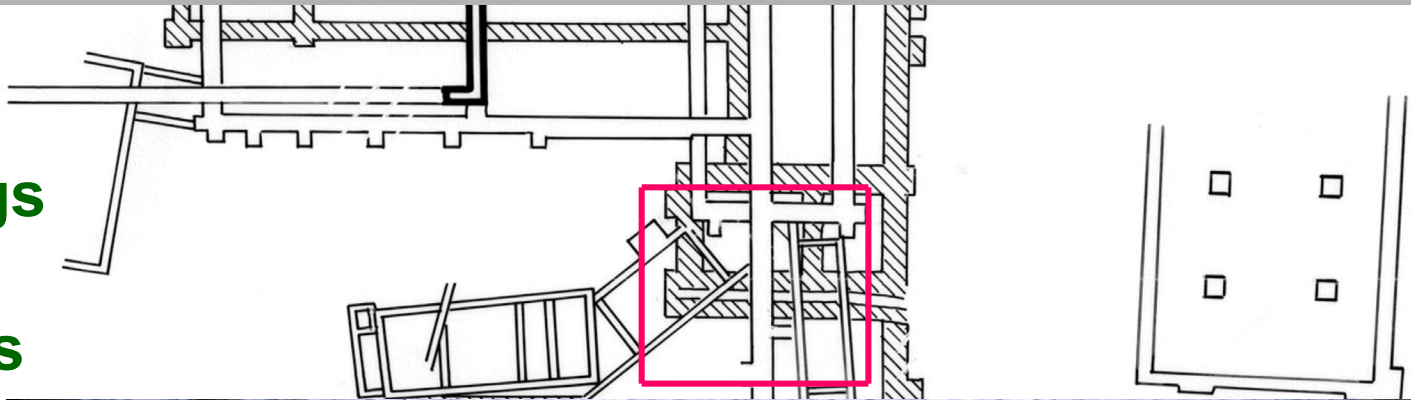


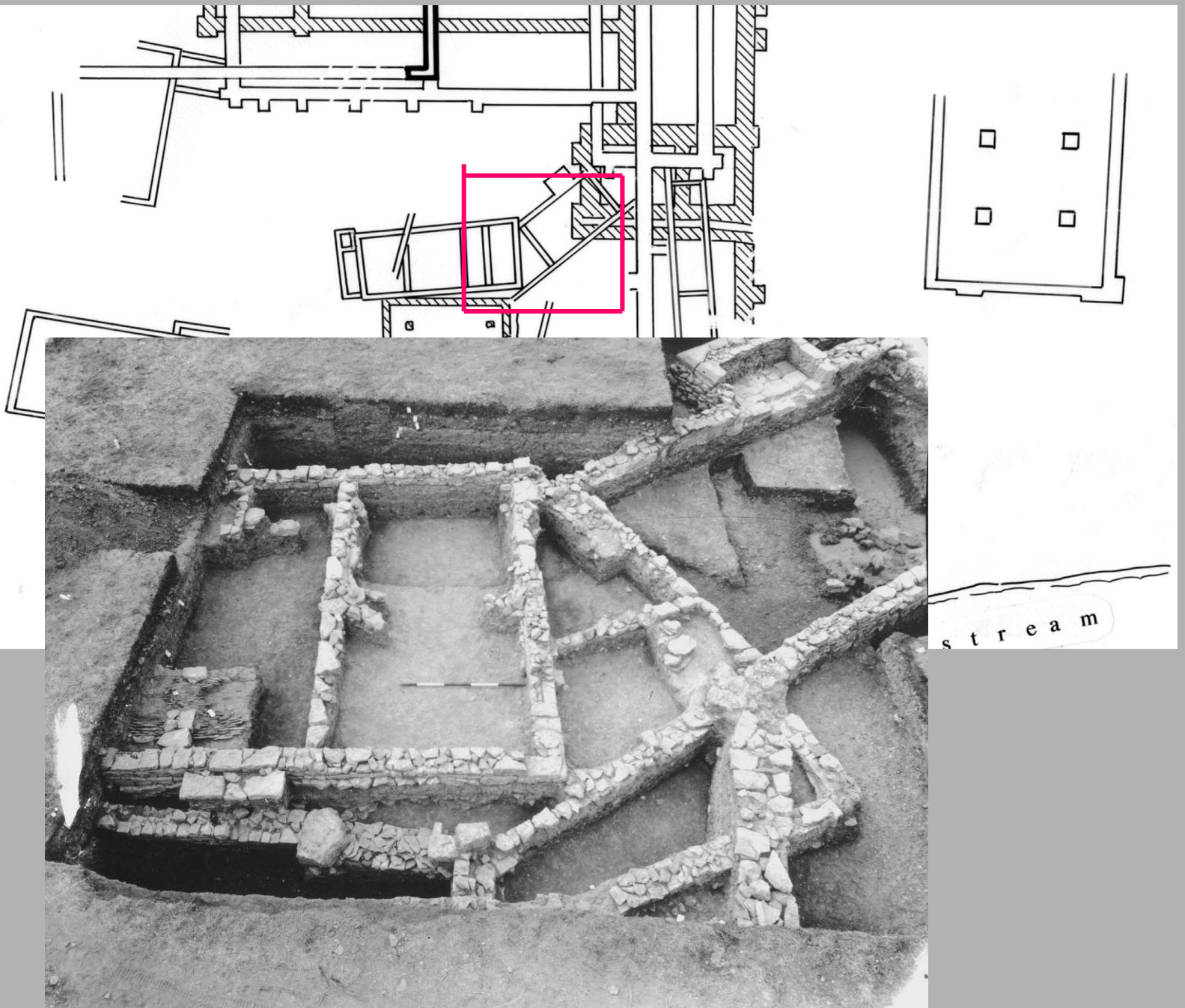


**Earlier and later  
Infirmary ?**



Later  
domestic  
outbuildings  
over south  
end of nuns  
dormitory  
range and  
latrine









# What we learnt

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Saxon Elstow

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Complicated cloisters

Outbuildings

**Monastic life**

Post-monastic uses

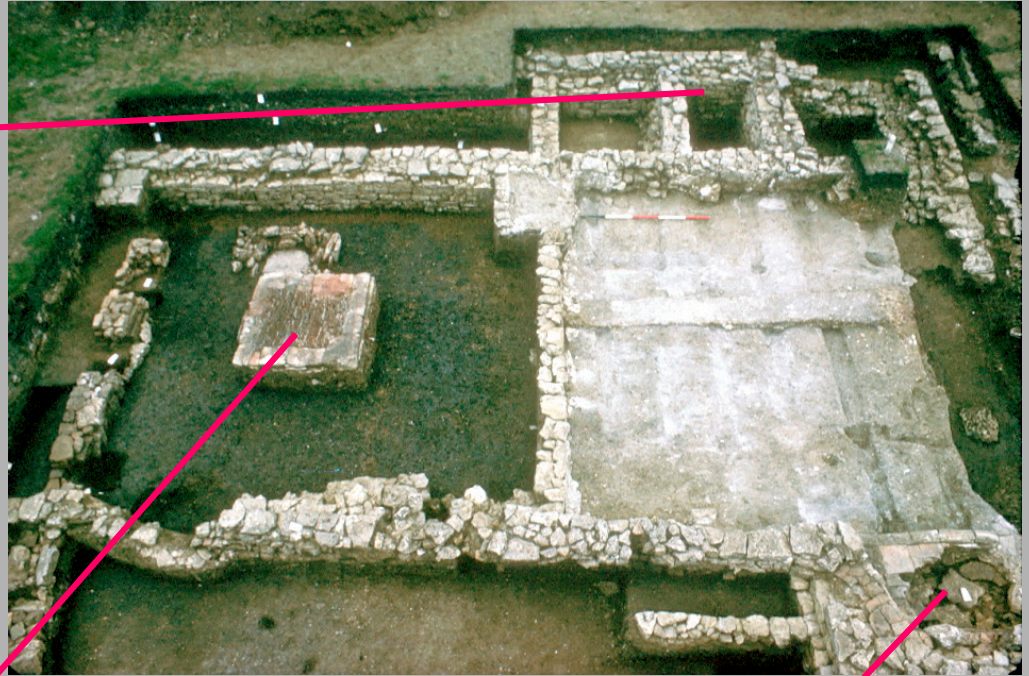
The impacts of 'restoration'



# INJUNCTION BY BISHOP LONGLAND 1530

“... forasmochas the very ordre of saint benedicte his rules are nott ther obserued in keping the ffratrye att meale tymes ... butt customably (the susters) resorte to certayn places within the monasterye called the households, where moche insolncy is use contrarye to the good rules of the said religion by reason of resorte of seculars both men and women and children ... we inioyne and straytely commaunde indre the payne of disobedyence that ye lady abbesse and you successours see that noo suche householdes be then kept from hensforth ... and that the ladye abbesse haue no moo susters fro hensforth in hir householde butt oonly foure with hir chapleyn and likewise wekely to chaunge till they haue goon by course thugh the hole number off susters and soo agen to begynne and contynne ...

# Later medieval common life breakdown - nuns 'households' ?





# What we learnt

Continuity of site occupation

Saxon Elstow

An evolving monastic church

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Outbuildings

Monastic life

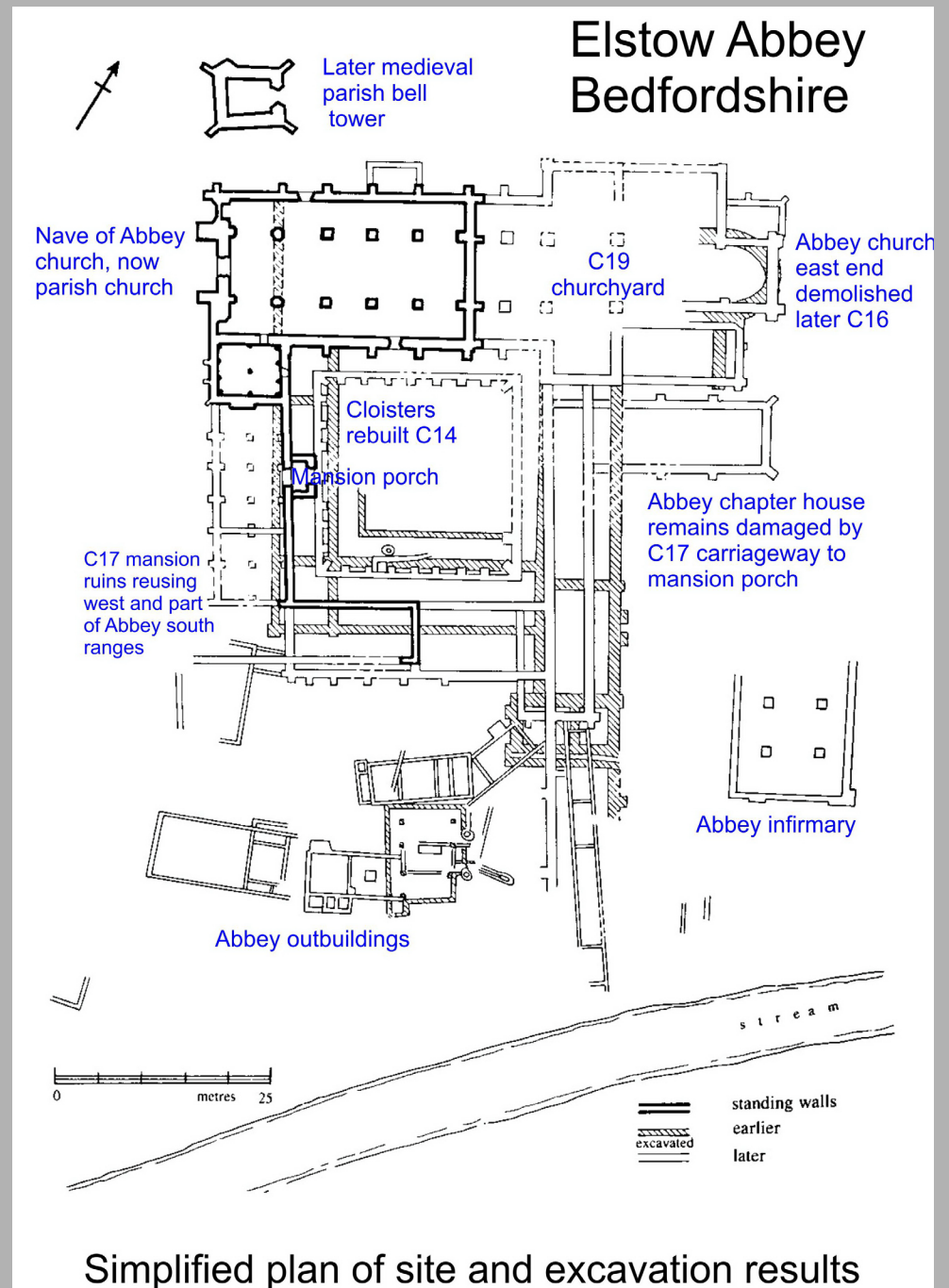
**Post-monastic uses**

The impacts of 'restoration'

# 1539: Dissolution

## Monastic buildings

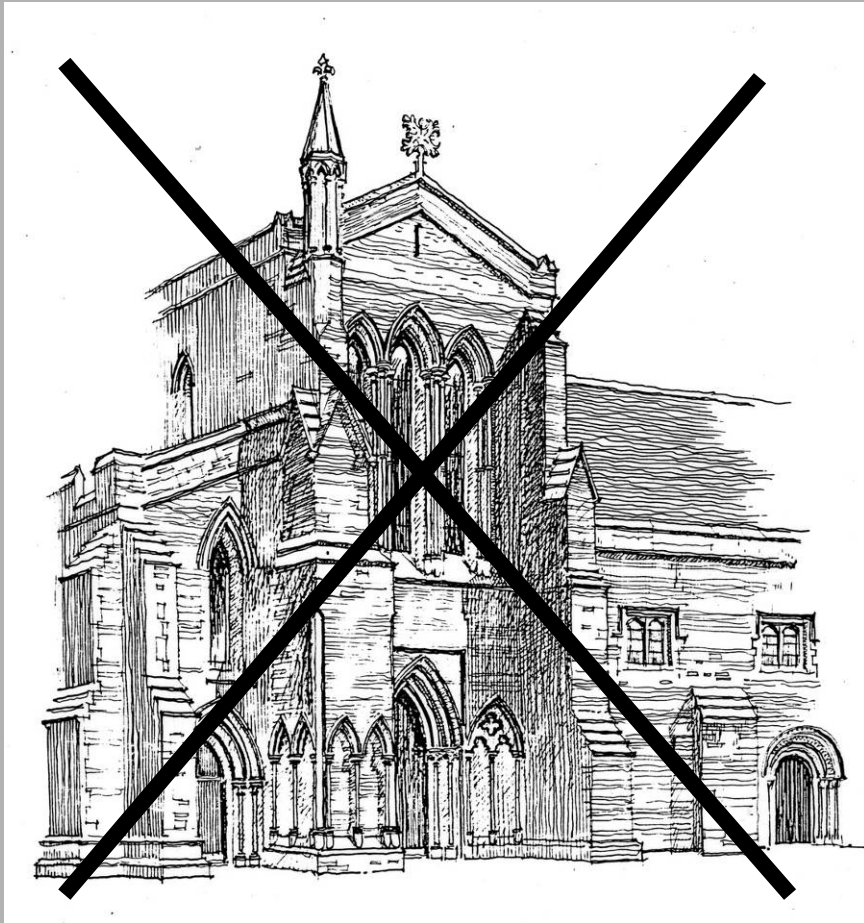
- part survived
- part demolished
- part adapted





# Stephen Gardiner's new cathedral

## Elstow or Peterborough ?



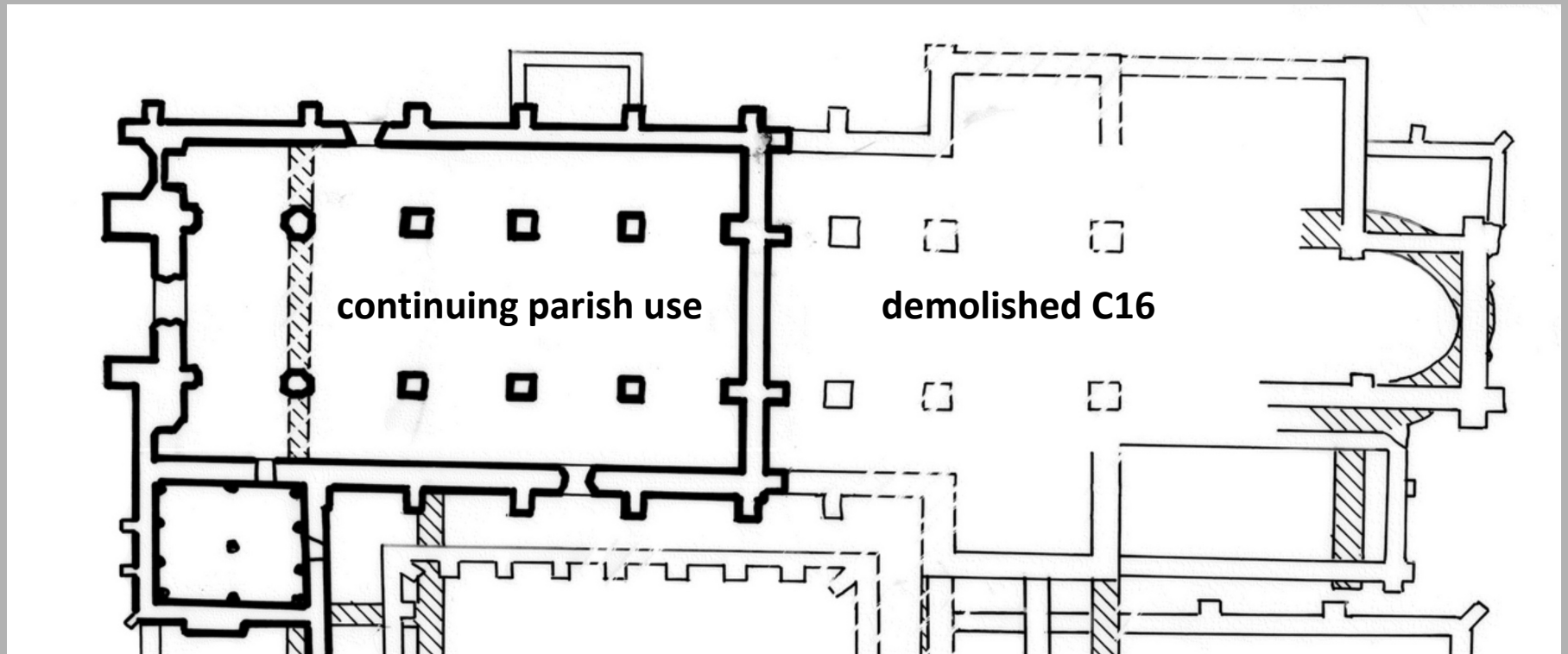
# 1539 – c1550

“The chauntrie of  
Sayncte Elene ... a  
prieste for evr to syng  
masse in the chapell ...”



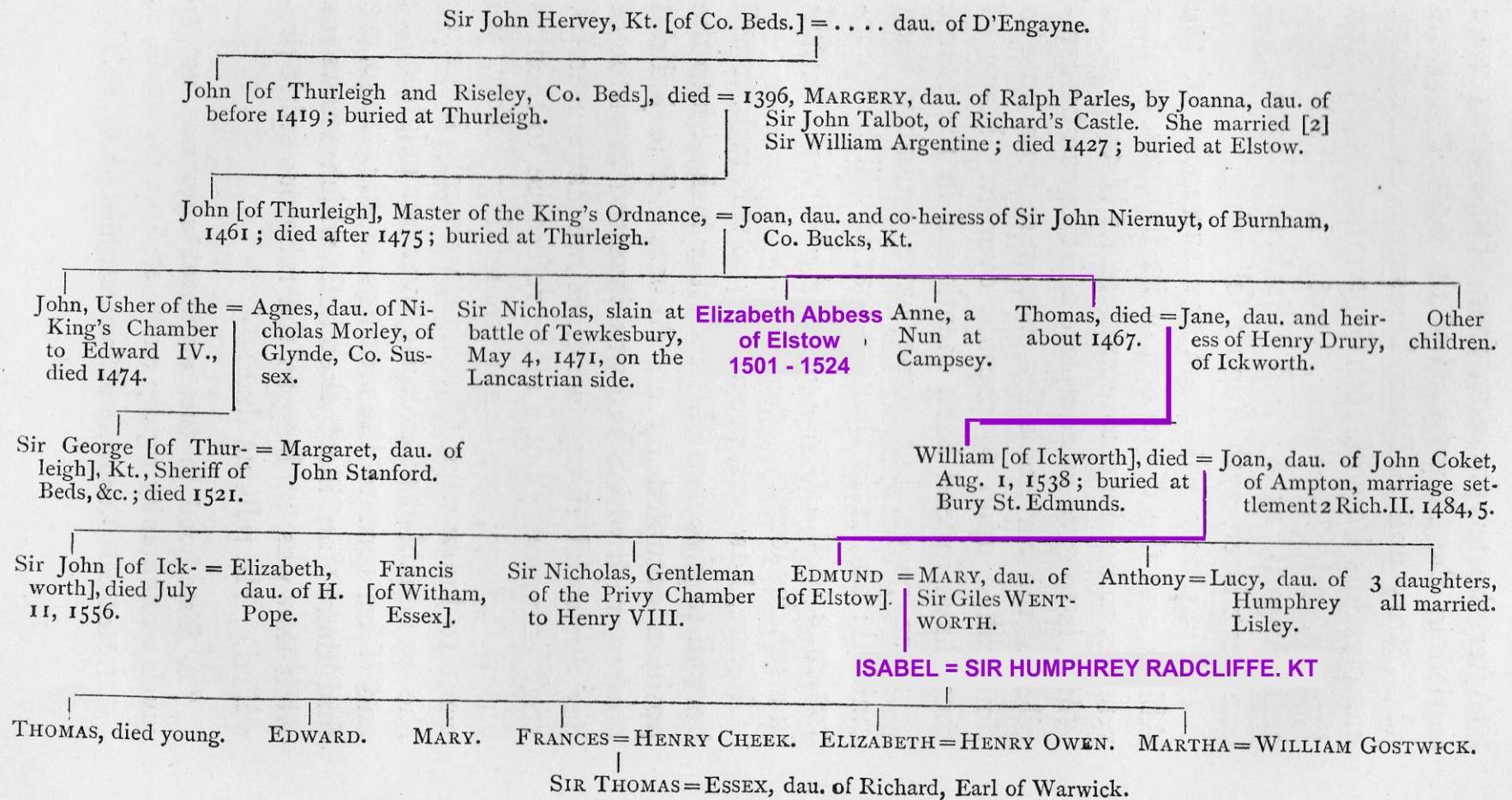


# The surviving parish church



# 1539 – 1616: Lease to Edmund Hervey 1541; Grant to Humphrey Radcliffe 1553, d.1566; Sale to Thomas Hillersden 1616

## PEDIGREE OF THE HERVEY FAMILY.





Orate pro Anima  
domine Elza  
Herwy quondam  
Abbatisse  
Monasterii de  
Elnestow que  
obiit ... die mensis ...  
Anno Domini  
millesimo  
quingentesimo ...

ELIZABETH HARVEY  
Abbess  
1501 – 1524



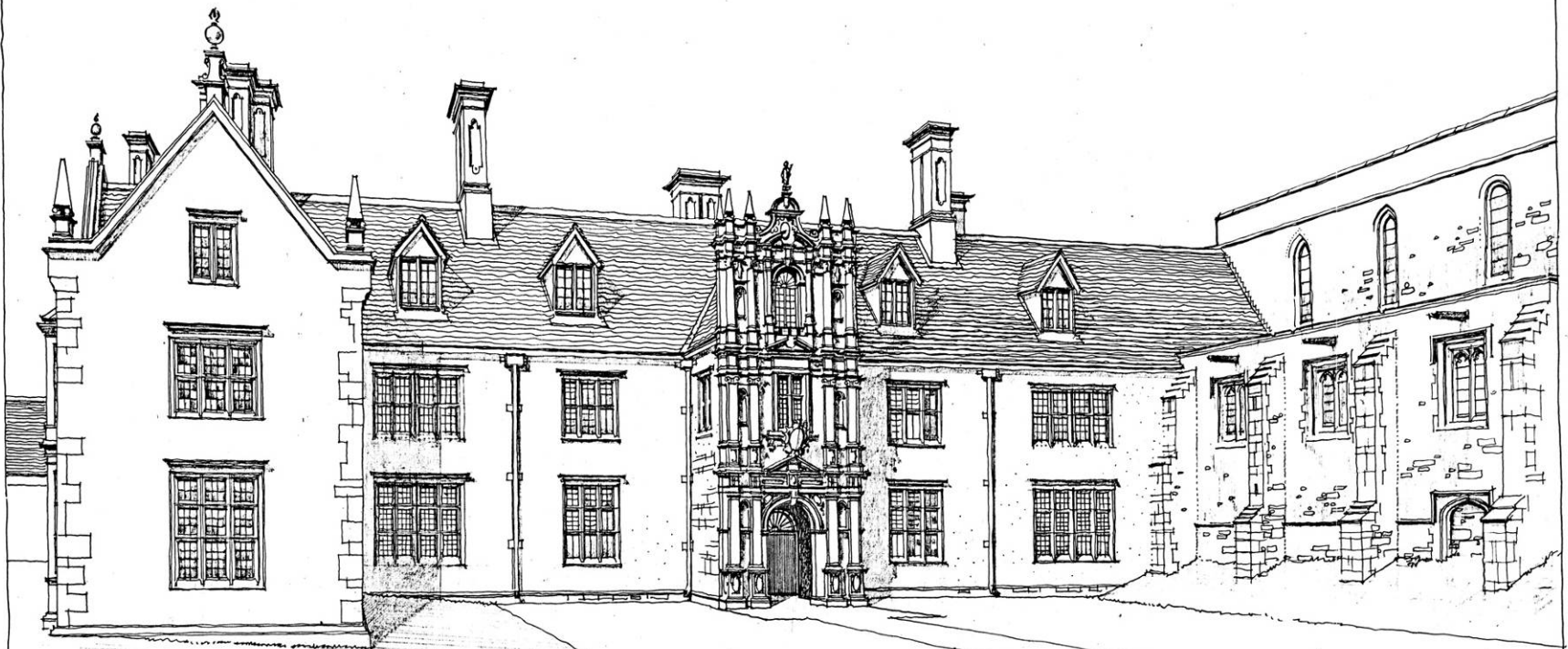
1539 – 1616

Sir Humphrey Radcliffe 1553, d 1566

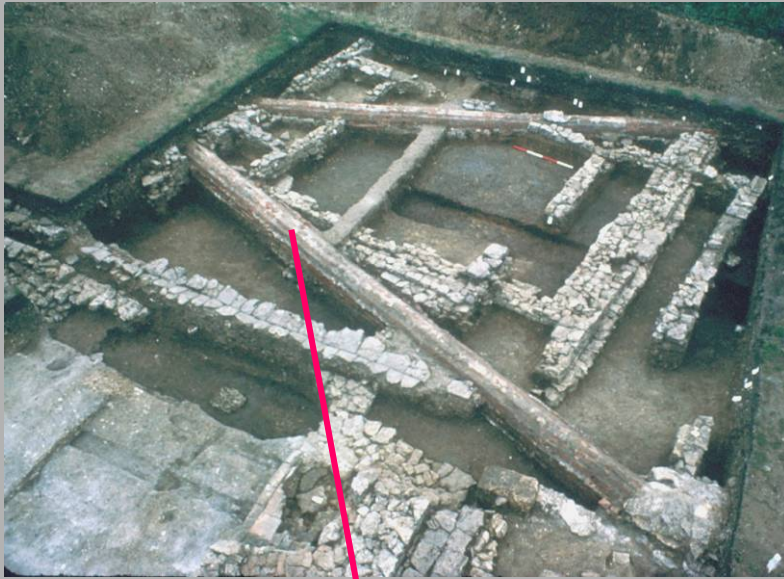




# Hillersden mansion: c1620 – c1790



*Thomas Hillersden's mansion, Elstow, Bedfordshire, the church  
is shown in its pre-19th century restoration condition  
Bernard B. West, A.R.I.B.A., February, 1906.*



**Mansion drainage  
cutting foundations of  
demolished monastic  
outbuildings**



**Mansion south range  
narrower than  
monastic refectory**



**Abbey  
south  
range**

**Abbey west range**

**Abbey church  
nave**





# C21: ruins conserved for Community Hall project





# What we learnt

Before Elstow

Saxon Elstow

An evolving monastic church

Complicated cloisters

Outbuildings

Monastic life

Post-monastic uses

**The impacts of 'restoration'**

# Parish church south side - today





# Before 'restoration' - 1802





# Being 'restored' - 1880







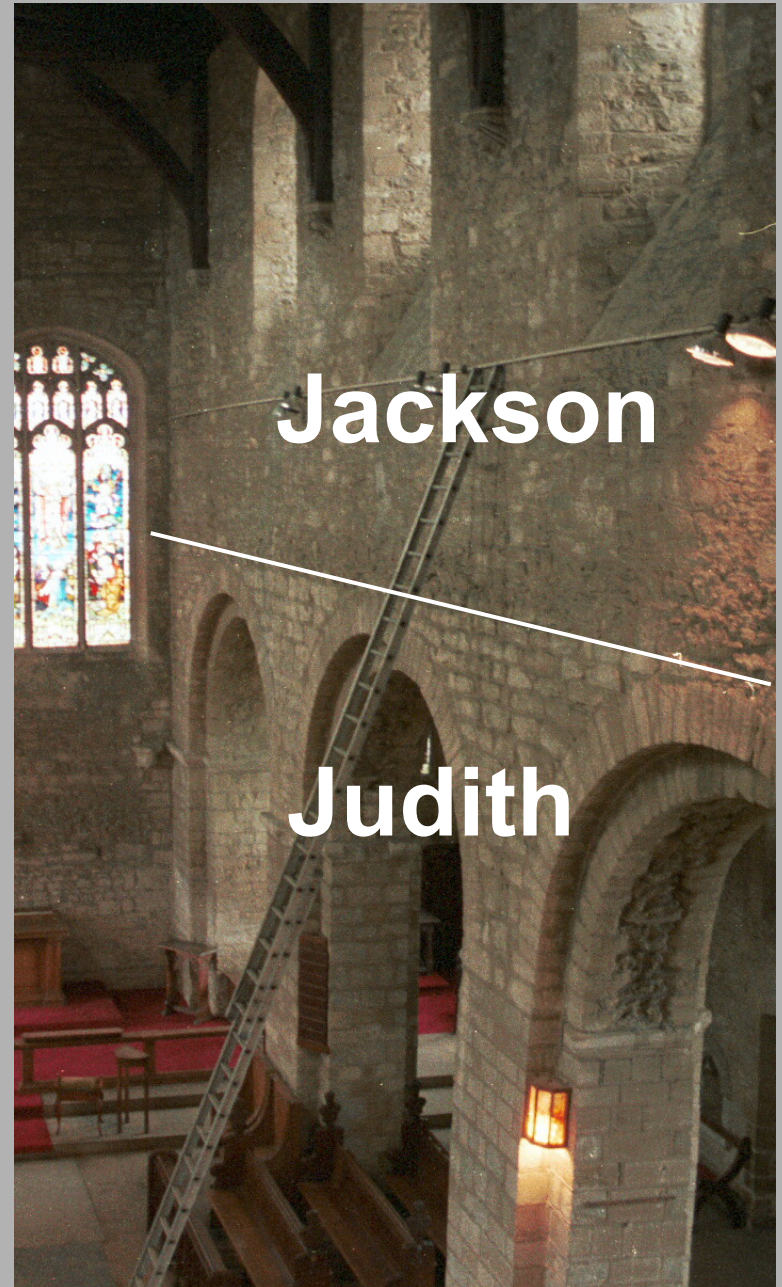
1802



1880



2015



Jackson

Judith



? Jackson







Elstow Priory. Bedfordshire  
B 15.

Soc. of Ant. Rev I. 53



Note. Every tile in Elstow priory church was taken up & destroyed during Restorations undertaken in 1884-5. J.R. All the tiles in Elstow Priory ch: are much worn & seem to be of the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. period 1858.





**Norman  
north door  
and  
tympanum  
before  
1880s  
restoration**





# Elstow Abbey

excavated 1965 – 1972

Project history

What we learnt

Reporting results

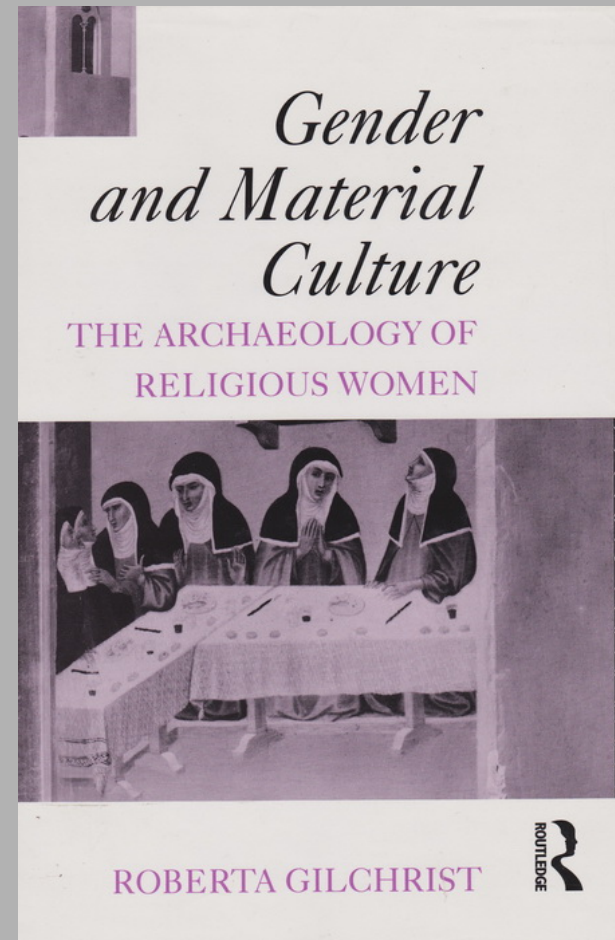
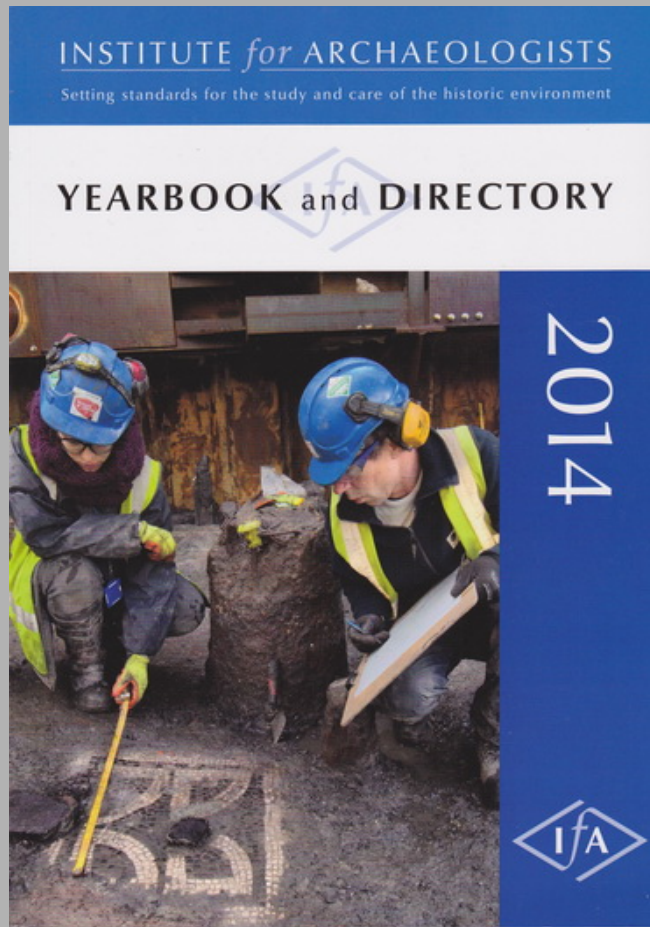


Abbess Elizabeth Hervey d 1527

**... a long-overdue report**



# After 1972, archaeology grew up ... ..



**A profession - Scientific analyses - Research frameworks**

# Post-excavation

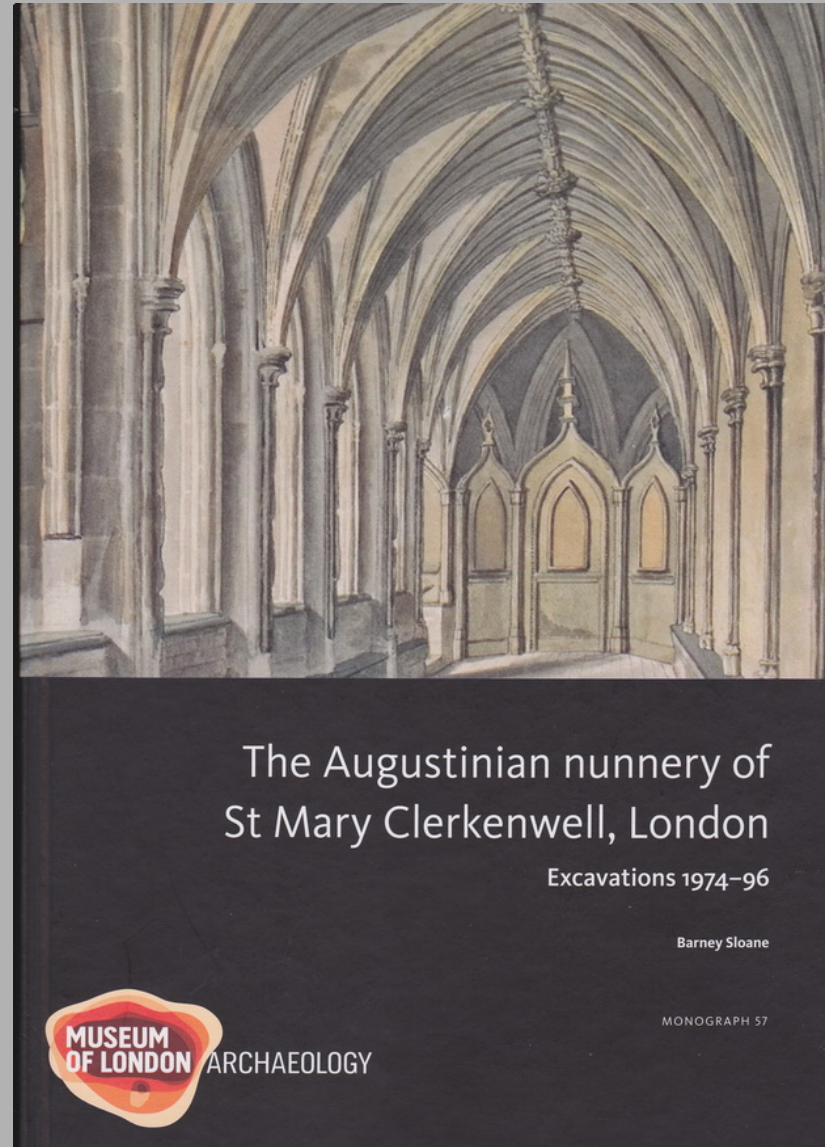
- prepare site archive
- analyse site records
- prepare reports

## *then*

- not always planned
- voluntary / part-time
- often delayed or not done

## *now*

- professional responsibility
- integral part of project
- national standards
- more specialist expertise
- more expensive
- digital data and drawing



Cost of analysis and publication = £160k

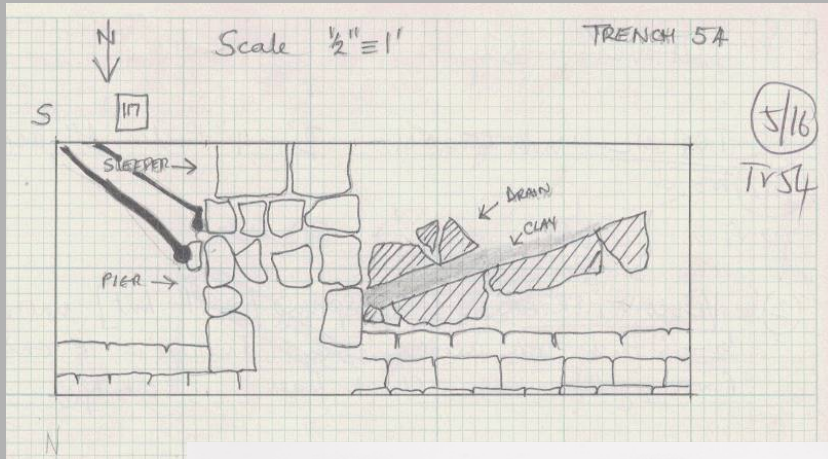


# Process - 1

## Consolidate finds and records

- *1965-72: during fieldwork*
- *1970s: finds in Bedford Museum “2a”*
- *1970s-90s: intermittent ordering records  
(but someone invented computers)*

# Those records ...



- notes on 205 trenches and areas

- 283 large site drawings

- 528 notebook sketches in 22 site notebooks

- 586 monochrome sheet film negatives

- 628 colour slides.





# Those finds ... 657 boxes



**1079 architectural fragments**

**68 boxes of pottery**

**52 boxes of decorated floor tiles**

**378 late Saxon and medieval burials and charnel material**

**12 boxes of wall plaster**

**4 boxes of painted window glass**

**698 registered small finds excluding nails and pins**

# Process - 2

## Create site archive

- *security copy records*
- *digitise images and notes*
- *data-base for finds and structures*
- *finds analysis archive reports*
- *2002: finds accessed to (now) Higgins*



# Specialist analysis of finds in 657 boxes



1079 architectural fragments

68 boxes of pottery

52 boxes of decorated floor tiles

378 late Saxon and medieval burials and charnel material

12 boxes of wall plaster

4 boxes of painted window glass

698 registered small finds excluding nails and pins

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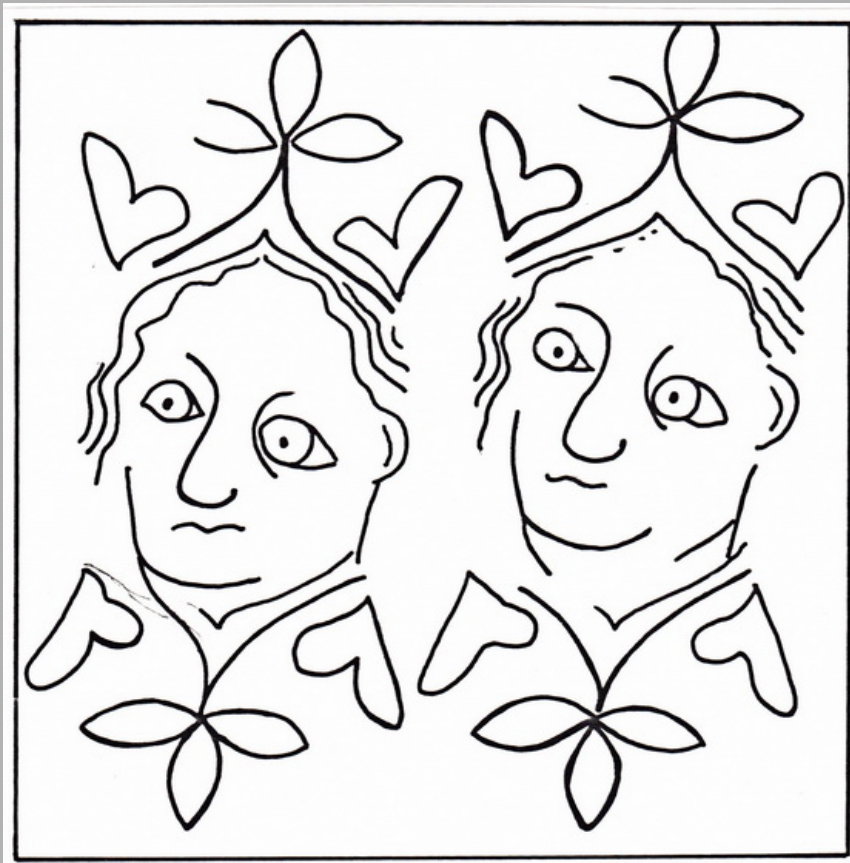
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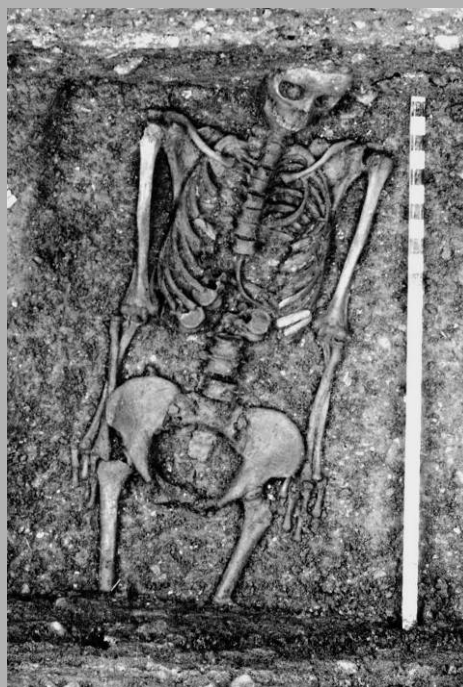




Box 259

# Specialist analysis of finds in 657 boxes

No	Tre Ctx	Box	LS/M	Image and notes	Sex	Age	Analysis
1	3 20	302	LS	image 015	F	25-35	Stirland
BBk: W-E; fully ext, arms by sides; skull 55in below MGS; 2ft S of S wall S cloister walk; good condition; skull - femurs lifted							



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# Specialist analysis of finds in 657 boxes



15<sup>th</sup> century: French – tournay ?



1487 – 1507: Low Countries



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# Process - 3

## Analysis and synthesis

- *review draft Research Design*
- *create structural records*
- *analyse finds types*
- *synthesise finds / structural evidence*
- *synthesise archaeological and historical / documentary evidence*
- *relate Elstow to wider contexts*



CHRONICLES  
OF THE  
ABBEY OF ELSTOW,

BY THE  
REV. S. R. WIGRAM, M.A.  
OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD :

WITH SOME  
*Notes on the Architecture of the Church,*  
By M. J. C. BUCKLEY.



Seal of the Abbey.

Parker and Co.  
OXFORD, AND 6 SOUTHAMPTON-STREET,  
STRAND, LONDON.  
1885.

# Valuable predecessors

Rachel Marchbank

## Elstow Abbey

An Illustrated History

## MEDIEVAL ENGLISH NUNNERIES

C. 1275 to 1535

BY  
EILEEN POWER  
SOMETIME FELLOW AND LECTURER OF GIRTON COLLEGE  
CAMBRIDGE



MADAME EGLENTYNE  
(From the Ellesmere MS.)

# Process - 4

## Reporting outputs

- *academic publication: paper / digital*
- *available archive > ADS York*
- *museum display material > Higgins*
- *leaflet / website*
- *Elstow Moot Hall possibilities*



# Specialist finds analysis

Worst case costs = **£105k** incl VAT

Grants offered: 9 November 2015 = **£67k**

Pilgrim Trust £10k (*ceramics*)

Marc Fitch Foundation £20k (*architectural stonework*)

Bedfordshire Archaeological Council £5k

Bedford Architect Archaeol & Local History Society £5k

Wixamtree Trust £10k (*registered 'small' finds*)

Historic England c.£11k (*edit, peer review and printing*)

Robert Kiln Trust £1k

Gale Family Trust £2k

William Delafield Charitable Trust £3k

**Main outstanding problem: £25k for scientific analysis of human remains – C14 dating and stable isotope analysis**

# Project aims

- **complete** by 2017  
(52 years from beginning)
- **increase** understanding of medieval English nunneries
- **reveal** Bedfordshire's hidden heritage
- **add** archaeology to the story of Elstow Abbey
- **display** Elstow at the Moot Hall
- **improve** the visitor attraction at Elstow



SCE MARIE DE ELENNSTOWE SIGILLVM





# Many thanks

- for listening
- for your continuing support

## More anon !