

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK AT WHITLAND ABBEY: AN INTERIM STATEMENT

By Peter Crane with Peter Webster

Editorial Note. The Whitland work recorded here is part of an ongoing project undertaken by Cambria Archaeology. Already recent geophysical work suggests that additions to the Abbey plan as may be needed; but this will need confirmation from excavation and it seemed better to the editors to present a summary of the position up to 1999 rather than attempt a more speculative update.

The present site of Whitland Abbey is probably at least the second home of a community founded by Bernard, bishop of St.Davids which came directly from St. Bernard's Clairvaux¹. The history of its foundation is obscure. In 1144 it was given 'what turned out to be a temporary home at Little Trefgarn, which may be the site of that name near Haverfordwest² or more probably the farm of Little Trefgarn about 8 kilometres to the south-west of Whitland Abbey. Another possible temporary site is

¹ One of just four British abbeys colonised directly from Clairvaux, cf. Robinson 1998, 204-5.

² Cowley 1977, 22; Williams 1984, 7 & 20; James 1986.

the settlement of Hendy Gwyn (present day Whitland). The present site was settled in about 1151 on land given by John of Torrington³ and must have expanded rapidly as, between 1164 and 1225, it colonised no fewer than three abbeys in Wales and two in Ireland⁴ and its three daughter houses in Wales had in turn founded four further houses.⁵

Both Knowles and Cowley emphasise what may be termed the 'Welsh credentials' of Whitland.⁶ At the time of foundation the Abbey was in an Anglo-Norman area but it soon attracted both monks and endowments from the Welsh. It was probably this which enabled it to send out colonies to other predominantly Welsh areas. The favour of the Welsh princes brought early advantages but, as time went on, the economics of the abbey are likely to have become increasingly problematic due to the political balance it had to achieve between the English and the Welsh. From the later 1160s Whitland, like Strata Florida, received substantial gifts from Rhys ap Gruffudd.⁷ The burial of members of princely families followed. In 1186 Cadwaladr ap Rhys was buried at Whitland, while, in 1238, Maredydd ap Rhys was buried before the high altar.⁸

However, in 1217, the Abbot of Whitland was among those deposed, apparently for overtly pro-Welsh activity.⁹ In the second half of the 13th century, the situation is less clear. The Abbey was certainly attacked by the English in 1258 because of its support for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd; servants were killed, monks beaten and property stolen.¹⁰ It appears to have sustained further damage in the Welsh wars of Edward I, as a sum for 'war damages' of £260 appears to have been agreed by the Crown. The sum was,

however, never paid, possibly again due to the Abbey's clearly Welsh sympathies.¹¹ It was, nevertheless, not without English support as the founding of a chantry chapel in 1278 by Payn de Chaworth, one of Edward I's officials, shows.¹²

In the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291, the Abbey was assessed at £44 15s 4d, in comparison with Tintern at about £145, Neath at about £236 and Margam at about £255.¹³ The same document records Whitland as having 5040 acres of arable and 1100 sheep.¹⁴ Much of the land and animals were, no doubt, distributed among Whitland's 17 granges,¹⁵ the economy of which was certainly far more varied than the figures indicate.¹⁶ Something of this can be seen from late records of payment in kind from granges when a variety of cereals, fowls, as well as fleeces and sheep reached the Abbey. The existence of mills at grange sites away from the Abbey may also be noted,¹⁷ and Whitland may have had as many as 11 on various sites.¹⁸ There was also a large amount of woodland, some near the abbey itself,¹⁹ and a 'great mead' near the abbey.²⁰ The abbey owned burgages in Kidwelly, Carmarthen and Haverfordwest²¹ and held fishing rights at Haverfordwest and on the Twyi 'at St. Leonard's chapel in the fforenry of St. Ishmaels'.²² Further income no doubt derived from the five fairs under the patronage of Whitland.²³

As on other monastic sites there seems to be a general decline in the early 14th century, probably later exacerbated by the Black Death and this seems to be reflected in the archaeological material recovered. In the Glyndwr rebellion of 1403 the Abbot took the side of the Welsh and Whitland suffered again as a consequence. We do not know the number of monks in the early abbey, although 100 was claimed.²⁴ There are

certainly likely to have been as many as 60, as this appears to have been the optimum size aimed at for the daughter houses of Cwmhir and Strata Marcella during the early colonisation of other sites. However, the difficulties engendered by the Welsh wars of the later 13th century or the deteriorating climate and increasing sickness of the 14th century (or both) appear to have taken their toll. The number of monks in 1381 was only seven,²⁵ and by 1440 this number had barely increased (to eight monks). The Abbey was assessed at £135 in 1535 when it contained only 5 monks. It would have been closed in 1536 at the beginning of the Dissolution had it not been for an appeal (and payment of £400) by Abbot William ap Thomas. The final closure was, of course, not long delayed and came in February 1539.²⁶

Soon after closure the site was pilfered, followed by legalised dismantling by Sir John Vaughan of Narberth and Sir John Perrot. Some of the finer building materials such as Bath stone probably went to Perrot's refurbishment at Laugharne Castle. In the 1600s, the area became an industrial site with an iron forge probably utilising the monastic water system and possibly one or more of the former mill sites. The availability of water-power would have been only one factor. Another would have been the extensive woodlands which the Abbey had held at the Dissolution,²⁷ such that Leland could describe it as 'standing in a vast wood as in a wilderness'.²⁸ Letters Patent of 1636 are probably for two forges and a furnace although it is not clear if all were built.²⁹ The Whitland forge or forges were producing 80 tons of iron in 1717. The forge was rebuilt in 1788 by John Morgan,³⁰ then owner of the estate, and finally ceased production in 1808. By this period, all traces of the original location of the

Abbey and any recognisable clues other than the place name appear to have been forgotten or hidden.

Through marriage to a Morgan heiress, the Whitland estate passed to Rt. Hon. W.H. Yelverton, and around 1837 the exact location of the abbey was rediscovered during the excavation of a farm pond. Shortly after this, stone from the forge and probably also from the abbey was re-used in the building of a new mansion named Whitland Abbey and a walled garden. During this work, a stone bearing the royal arms, probably of Henry VII or Henry VIII, was moved from the walls of the Abbey Home Farm and installed above the doorway of the new mansion, where it still remains.³¹ It is thought that about this time some excavation took place within the Abbey grounds and probably at the east end of the church for the new walled garden. Certainly the Rev. W. Thomas was able to state in 1868 that the length of the church was 226 feet and the breadth 216 feet.³² This length seems slightly longer than that arrived at by excavation in 1926 (which is much closer to his other figure of 216 feet). His figure for breadth does not seem to fit any north-south measurement on the known buildings even if the cloisters are included. Probably only large-scale excavation will provide a picture detailed enough to enable us to work out how Thomas arrived at his figures.

In 1921, Arthur Clapham (with the then Doctor R.E Mortimer Wheeler) surveyed the remains.³³ His plan, which he states is 'by nature of a diagram only and does not pretend to more than general accuracy', located the nave, lay brothers' range and cloister. The west wall of the lay brothers' range was still partly standing incorporated into the later walled garden. There was evidence for recent robbing of the north wall of

the nave (a still open robber trench). It should be noted that the Tithe Map indicates a cottage standing within what would be the nave and, although Clapham makes no mention of its presence, it or its remains may have complicated the picture. Clapham also notes a short length of foundation to the east of the likely position of the chapter house which he suggested as part of an infirmary.

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In 1926, extensive excavations took place in the Abbey church under E.V. Collier.³⁴ These were undertaken with trained workmen. It is not clear if there was further work in 1927, but students from the South Wales Training College, Carmarthen (Trinity College) were certainly involved in sporadic excavation on the site in 1928.³⁵ A site plan was published (Fig. #####) but only a brief interim report, and the site appears to have been left at least partially open, perhaps pending a resumption of excavations.

The Collier excavations confirmed the general outline produced by Clapham and added detail to the church and cloister. The east end of the church would appear to have been cleared or extensively sampled to show the rectangular Presbytery (Collier's 'choir') of the so-called 'Bernardine' plan 29 ft (8.84m) long and 26ft 6in (8.07m) wide, measured internally. The altar is shown on a raised platform attached to the east wall, apparently reached by two steps running around all three available sides. The platform was 14ft 6in (4.42m) wide and 11ft (3.35m) deep, measured to the base of the outer step. Collier postulated a piscina on the south wall of the Presbytery as he found a drain from it running northwards under the altar platform.

The South Transept appears on the Collier plan to be largely conjectural although both transepts were apparently open to the aisles but closed to the crossing with the exception of a small doorway from the North Transept. Recent excavations confirm the South Transept plan and show that, despite its absence from the Collier drawing, an opening similar to that on the north joined the Presbytery and the South Transept. The North Transept contains two small chapels occupying the whole of its eastern sides. These were of exactly equal size, measuring 11ft 6in (3.5m) wide and 9ft 4in (2.84m) deep. The more southerly of the chapels preserved some tile flooring around the altar and it was here that distinctive 'lamb and flag' tiles were found (see below). The South Transept may well have been similar but was not investigated. The Nave was slightly over twice the width of the two aisles, 26ft 6in (8.07m) to 12 ft (3.66m) respectively. The total internal length of the church was 209 ft (63.74m). To this may be added the width of the external walls and external buttresses on the east giving a total length of about 220 ft (c.67m). The bases of the Nave colonnade appeared to be rectangular with small square insets at each corner (to give slight pilaster like projections on each side, an arrangement which is often described as cruciform). The pillar bases were chamfered. However, the plan shows some irregularity and, as recent work has confirmed, re-examination of the evidence here is desirable.

The Collier plan shows stone pitching immediately outside the east wall of the Choir and the monks' cemetery in the angle of the Choir and South Transept. This was some 3ft (0.91m) above the level of the Presbytery floor. The ground level outside the church was certainly higher than the internal floor level here but the stone pitching was not necessarily contemporary with the church.

Examination of the claustral area was clearly hampered by the functioning gardens of the contemporary house but a cloister approximately 101ft (30.8m) north-south by 99ft (30.2m) east-west seems to have been established with a wide (44ft, 13.41m) 'Lane' for the Lay Brothers and a Lay Brothers' Range apparently 34 ft (10.36m) wide with a suggestion of a westward extension on the south-west. The east and south ranges were clearly not explored although the short length of walling east of the supposed site of the chapter house thought by Clapham and Wheeler to be part of the infirmary is shown.

Over fifty years were to pass before the picture of Whitland presented by the Collier excavations was expanded. In 1978, a topographical survey of the area around the Abbey was made by Terry James,³⁶ and his plan is reproduced here (Fig.###). Not all the features noted will have belonged to the Abbey itself and some almost certainly belong to the succeeding forge. Nevertheless, the survey illustrates the potential of the Abbey hinterland.

The features located and interpreted by Terry James can be summarised by reference to Fig.## as follows:

- 1 & 2. Two banks south-west of the Abbey, spanning a small stream feeding the Afon Gronw and which appear to be dams retaining two fishponds.

3. A hollow quarry cut which may represent a further fishpond. The possible feeder for this pond from the north is marked with a dotted line.
4. The retaining bank of a fishpond and/or millpond, apparently fed from watercourse 8.
5. Possible pond site.
- 6 & 7. A large dam (6) originally holding back a pond and feeding a mill leat (7). The mill pool was certainly used by the post-monastic forge and was probably in use into the mid 19th century. Earlier use by the Abbey cannot, however, be excluded.
8. A watercourse traced, mainly from air photographs, as far as the comparatively modern road (see 8 below). A conjectural continuation is marked by dotted lines although some connection into the Abbey drainage system is also possible.
9. A hollow way which is a likely precursor of the present road, the date of which can be shown to be later than 1805 but earlier than 1830.

A & B. Apparent building locations adjacent to the fishponds 1-2

C. A possible mill site at or near the junction of leets 7 and 8.

- D. Evidence of buildings, presumably either of a monastic mill or the post-monastic forge (or both).
- E. The most likely site of the post-monastic forge.
- F. A site connected to E by low banks and perhaps part of the same complex. A pre-existing monastic mill is also possible.
- G. A possible building site. The Ordnance Survey records a wall of some antiquity here and this may represent the Abbey Gatehouse.

The James survey shows a landscape with the potential to reveal both its monastic and post-monastic components and one which almost certainly includes a number of sites where some sort of continuity or re-use may be expected. The survey had the effect of rekindling interest in the site and in 1986 the proposed sale of Abbey Home Farm raised the possibility of an organisation being established to purchase the whole of the Abbey remains. A draft feasibility study for the purchase and development of the site was prepared by Terry James of the Dyfed Archaeological Trust.³⁷

For various reasons, this particular initiative was unsuccessful, but interest was maintained through the Taf and Cleddau Rural Initiative and the Whitland Community Association's concern for the site's preservation and presentation. Support was provided by Carmarthen District Council who in 1993 took the enlightened and critical

step forward in negotiating a 21-year lease of the site of the Abbey Church from the Catholic Diocese of Menevia 'with a view to enhancing its conservation and management, and its development as a cultural and educational amenity for the district and its visitors'. The rest of the site, including the area of the conventual buildings, remains in private ownership.

The Collier excavations had left the church site as a confused jumble of piles of stones and spoil heaps. The site was overgrown and unintelligible both to the lay public and to professional historians and archaeologists. Following the submission of a preliminary report to the District Council, Dyfed Archaeological Trust was commissioned to carry out a field evaluation to determine the likely extent and costs of clearance of Whitland Abbey and to provide more detailed proposals as to its treatment and interpretation for visitors. The initial investigations, funded by the Council, were carried out in 1994, assisted by the Department of Archaeology, Trinity College, Carmarthen. Subsequently, the Trust produced a full assessment report and recommendations.³⁸ A programme of archaeological clearance, levelling and landscaping, funded by the District Council and Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments commenced in 1995 under the Trust's management and direction and was concluded in 1996.

It is interesting to note that students from Trinity College Carmarthen participated in the Collier excavations and that the College again played a major part in the recent work. The initial 1994 excavation concentrated on humps and bumps east of the crossing with a few trial trenches towards the west end (Fig.###). It became apparent

that most of the features being examined were spoil tips of the 1926-8 excavation. One tip close to the south transept consisted almost entirely of architectural stone fragments. Excavation confirmed that the site had been left open after 1928 and that it had deteriorated to some extent, especially where floor tiles had been left exposed. It was also clear that there had been more recent activity on the site as one tip contained material of the 1960s and 1970s. Excavation was designed only to evaluate the site so was mainly limited to deposits above the medieval levels. Very little of the fabric of the building survived above floor height. However a more detailed plan of the site was achieved and later post-monastic building work was recorded. This will form the basis for future work but will undoubtedly be amended if more extensive excavation is possible.

So far, substantive additions to the plan drawn in 1926 are slight. Floor levels indicated that there must have been a number of steps up from nave to the altar (Collier mentions a quire step but does not include it on his plan).³⁹ It can now be demonstrated that the blocking of the crossing probably took place in about the first quarter of the 13th century with small doorways left into both transepts. It would appear that all the flooring has been removed from the nave.

Also in 1994, students from Trinity College, Carmarthen, excavated a building 75 metres (246 feet) to the west of the church. This structure appeared to be square and oriented at 45 degrees to the Abbey. It was medieval in origin, with at least three phases, but its function remains unknown.

In 1995, also partly as a training excavation, the extent of the North Transept was traced and excavated down to the top of the undisturbed archaeology. The floor here appeared to have been re-used or to date to the post-monastic period. Its pitched stone seems likely to have functioned as an anvil base suggesting that parts of the derelict church saw re-occupation as part of the later forge.

At the west end of the church there appeared to be the remains of the night stairs for the Lay Brothers Range although, like so much of the site, this has been robbed of all fine stone. The pillar bases in the nave seem similar to those at Margam. Variations are apparent. The easternmost pillar bases are longer than those at the western end by about 100mm (4 inches) and the gaps between the pillars also varies possibly to compensate. More work needs to be done on this, but there is, at least the possibility that the two ends of the Nave were not laid out at the same time.

The extent of the choir could not be confirmed but it seems likely that it extended west of the crossing and a fragment of narrow mortar wall could be part of a choir enclosure. A large capital was found on the north side of the nave and is similar to one from Abbey Cwmhir Chapter House.⁴⁰ Assessment of fragments also indicated the presence of 'domino motif' resembling that from Strata Florida.⁴¹

The recent work recovered a large assortment of tile fragments which had been dumped in piles from the 1926-8 excavation. These include fragments of relief patterned tiles bearing the 'lamb and flag' motif known from the Collier excavation of the North Transept chapels (see above). The design is also known from earlier finds

from this site⁴² and has subsequently also been found at Haverfordwest Priory, although the latter examples differ in keying and glazing techniques. The Whitland tiles have recently been studied by John Lewis,⁴³ who lists some 15 designs (and elements of a large 16-tile design). These are listed below, along with a concordance of designs also recorded in Eames' British Museum Catalogue:⁴⁴

Lewis No.	Lewis Group	Eames No.	Date
4-7	2	-	late 12th- early 13th
22	5	349	c.1250-1300
23	5	2363-6	c.1250-1300
59	10	-	late 13th
60	10	-	late 13th
107	16	1654 & 3065	c.1340
123	16	2735	c.1340
133	16	-	c.1340
349	21	1326	c.1455-80
356-9	23	-	15th
361-2	23	-	15th
491-2 ⁴⁵	28	-	15th-16th

Plain tiles are also noted.⁴⁶ The variety of motifs recorded is of interest but so also are the variety of likely sources (denoted by the group numbers) and the range of likely

dates. All point to a complex history for the flooring of the Abbey and may well be indicative of other alterations to the fabric.

Subsequent to the evaluation excavations the site was laid out in such a way as to be comprehensible to the visiting public. Those walls of the Abbey Church still upstanding were repointed. Elsewhere the level was raised above the surviving medieval levels so as to protect them. Features were laid out with turf walls and a type of stone termed 'Pembrokeshire hedges'. This achieved a relatively cheap and easy to maintain method of consolidation. The walls and pillar bases of the nave were made up to a minimal height with turf. Throughout, the objective was both to operate within a reasonable budget and to maintain the green and rural appearance of the site.

The Abbey Church, which is being managed by Carmarthenshire County Council, was officially declared open in 1996 only three years after its initial acquisition. Now, three years on, it is settling down with a number of plants and shrubs enhancing its appearance.

Cambria Archaeology are currently seeking funding to record the rest of the rest of standing masonry. This would include walling on the west side of the cloister which presumably includes the Lay Brothers Range. The possibility of surviving medieval remains below the walled garden also seems high. There is considerable potential in further landscape survey, not to mention the environmental possibilities of the concentration of former monastic and post-monastic ponds. To this work may be added the recording of a number of architectural fragments presumed to be from the

Abbey and now in private ownership and the urgent need to disentangle the monastic and post-monastic industrial remains. Clearly this is a site which would repay long term research of the type pursued at Bordesley Abbey and summarised elsewhere in this volume, but even small-scale work could bear important dividends on this site, one of the premier abbeys of medieval Wales.

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- 1 One of just four British abbeys colonised directly from Clairvaux, cf. Robinson 1998, 204-5.
 - 2 Cowley 1977, 22; Williams 1984, 7 & 20; James 1986.
 - 3 Williams D H 1984, 8.
 - 4 Strata Florida (1164); Strata Marcella (1170); Cwmhir (1176 after an abortive attempt in 1143); Comber (re-colonisation as a Cistercian abbey, 1199) and Tracton (1224) in Ireland. Cf. Cowley 1977, 26.
 - 5 From Cwmhir: Cymmer (1199); from Strata Florida: Caerleon/Llantarnam (1179), Aberconway (1186); from Strata Marcella: Valle Crucis (1201).
 - 6 Knowles 1949, 346-7; Cowley 1977, 26.
 - 7 Robinson 1998, 204.
 - 8 Williams D H 1984, 184 & n.210.
 - 9 Cowley 1977, 211.
 - 10 Williams D H 1984, 36.
 - 11 Cowley 1977, 214-5.
 - 12 Williams D H 1984, 185.
 - 13 Cowley 1977, 274; for a range of such assessments between 1291 and 1539, see Williams D H 1984, Appendix 3.
 - 14 Cowley 1977, 88.
 - 15 At the end of the 13th century, see Cowley 1977, 78; cf. also, Williams D H 1984, 223, Williams D H 1990, (map), 66-9 (list).
 - 16 Cf. Williams D H 1990, 109.
 - 17 Williams D H 1990, 21, 33 & 66-7 (sites 197, 202-4 & 208-10).
 - 18 Williams D H 1984, 287.
 - 19 Williams D H 1984, 277.
 - 20 Williams D H 1984, 298.
 - 21 Williams D H 1984, 315.
 - 22 Williams D H 1984, 324.
 - 23 Williams D H 1984, 317.
 - 24 Williams D H 1984, 148.
 - 25 Cowley 1977, 51n.
 - 26 Robinson 1998, 205; Williams D H 1984, 105-7. For a review of Welsh Abbey estates at the dissolution see Jones 1937.
 - 27 Williams D H 1984, 277.
 - 28 Leyland, *Itinerary*, pt.vi, (Smith 1964, III, 115).
 - 29 Evans 1967, 22-6.
 - 30 See note (with references), *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 71 (1916) 363.
 - 31 RCAHM 1917, 154; Milner 1913, 38
 - 32 Quoted in RCAHM 1917 and Clapham 1921, 207.

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- 33 Clapham 1921.
34 Collier 1926
35 Evans 1927, quoting from *The Carmarthen*, the magazine of the South Wales Training
College, 17, no.3 (Summer Term 1928) 69.
36 James 1978
37 James 1986
38 Benson & Crane 1995
39 Collier 1926, 64
40 Pers. comm. Stuart Harrison
41 Pers. comm. Stuart Harrison.
42 cf.RCAHM 1917 (Carmarthenshire), fig.125.; see also Lewis 1999, 262 for references to
earlier finds and the suggestion that the 'lamb and flag' design may have been used in the
Chapter House.
43 Lewis 1999.
44 Eames 1980.
45 Wrongly listed as 488-9 in Lewis.
46 Lewis 1999, Group 31, dated c.1490-1530.

WHITLAND ABBEY.

Plan of recent Excavations 1926.

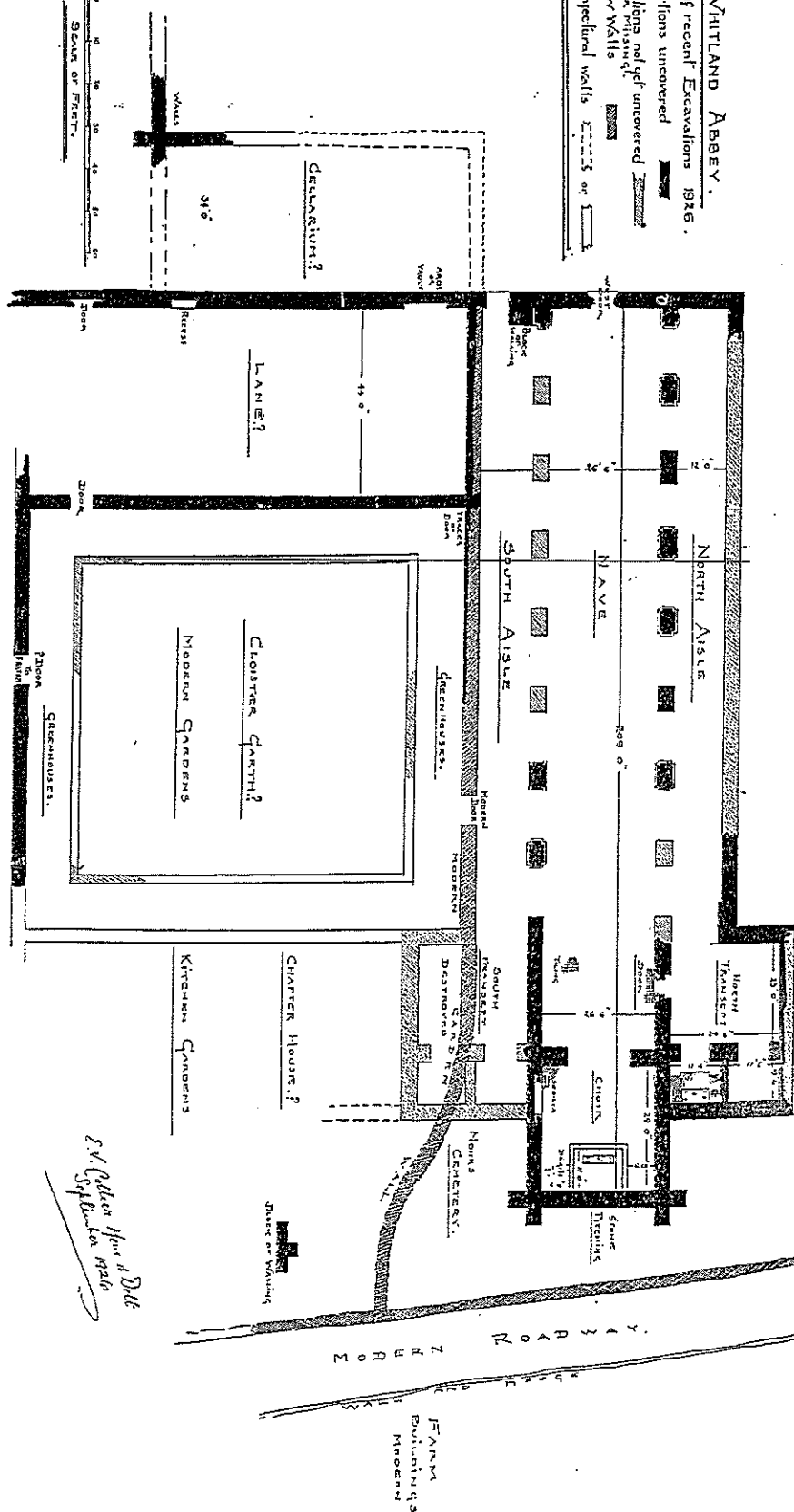
Portions uncovered

Portions not yet uncovered

New Walls

Conjectural walls

Scale of Feet.



WHITLAND ABBEY, 1926.

Original plan by Ernest V. Collier, in the *Transactions of the Society*.

Continuing the Whitland Society.

*E. V. Collier plan & Date
1926*

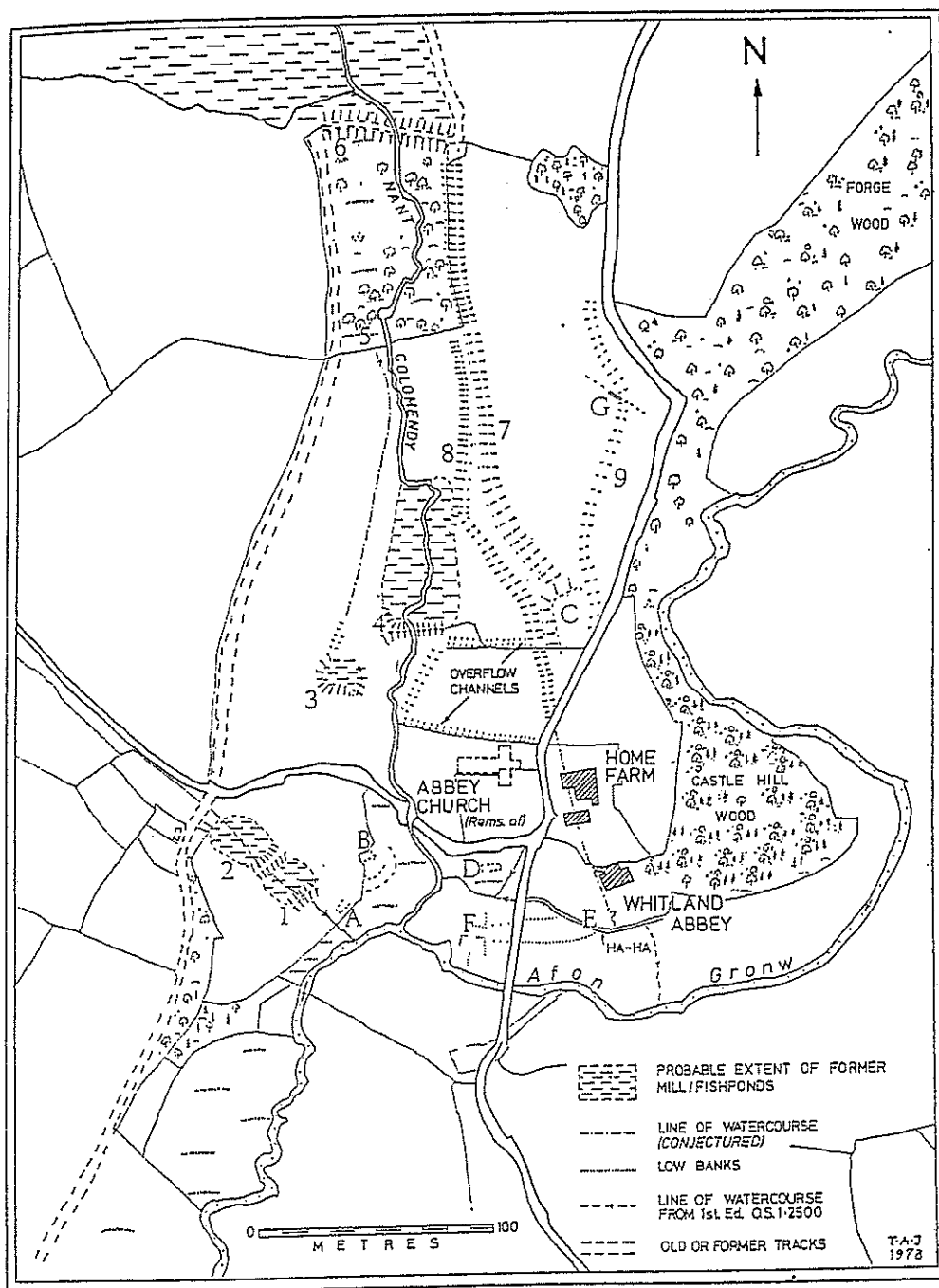
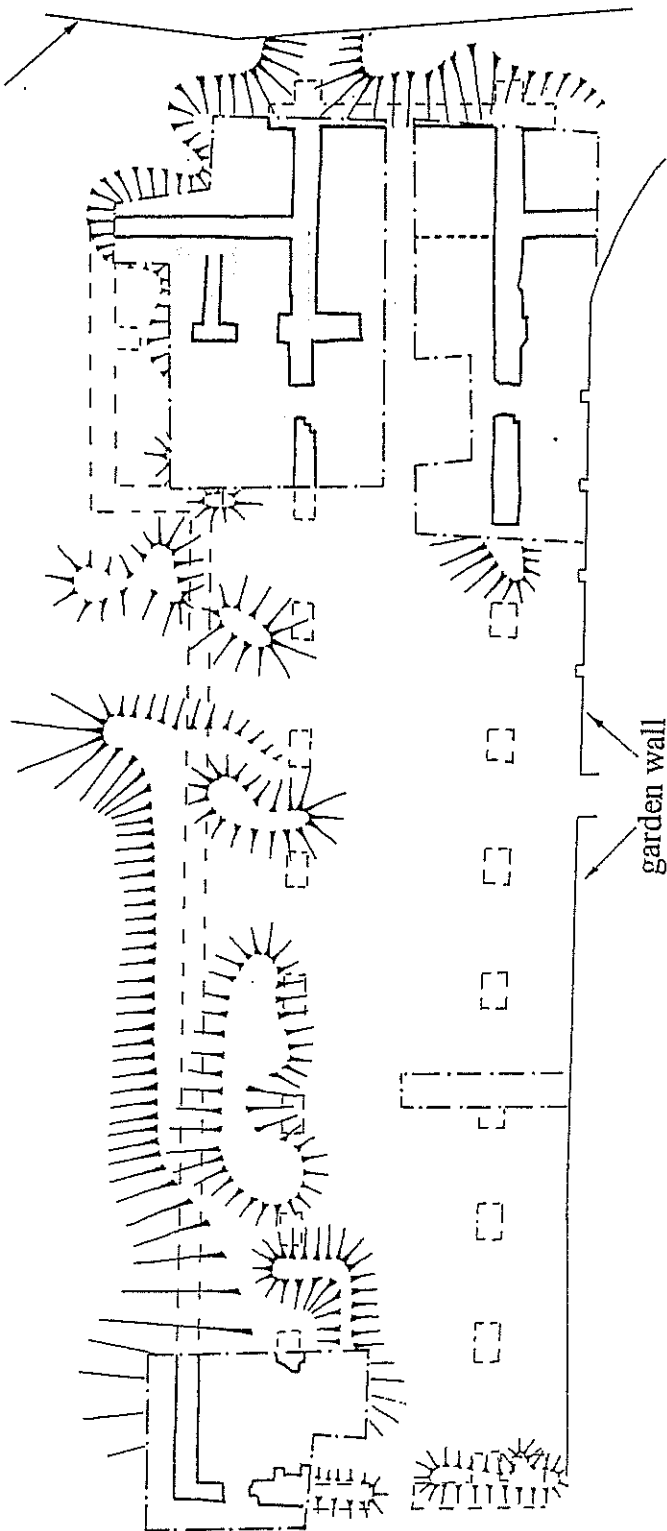


Fig. 1. The earthworks at Whitland Abbey.

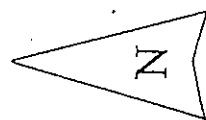
WHITLAND ABBEY: EARTHWORKS AND EXCAVATED AREA 1994



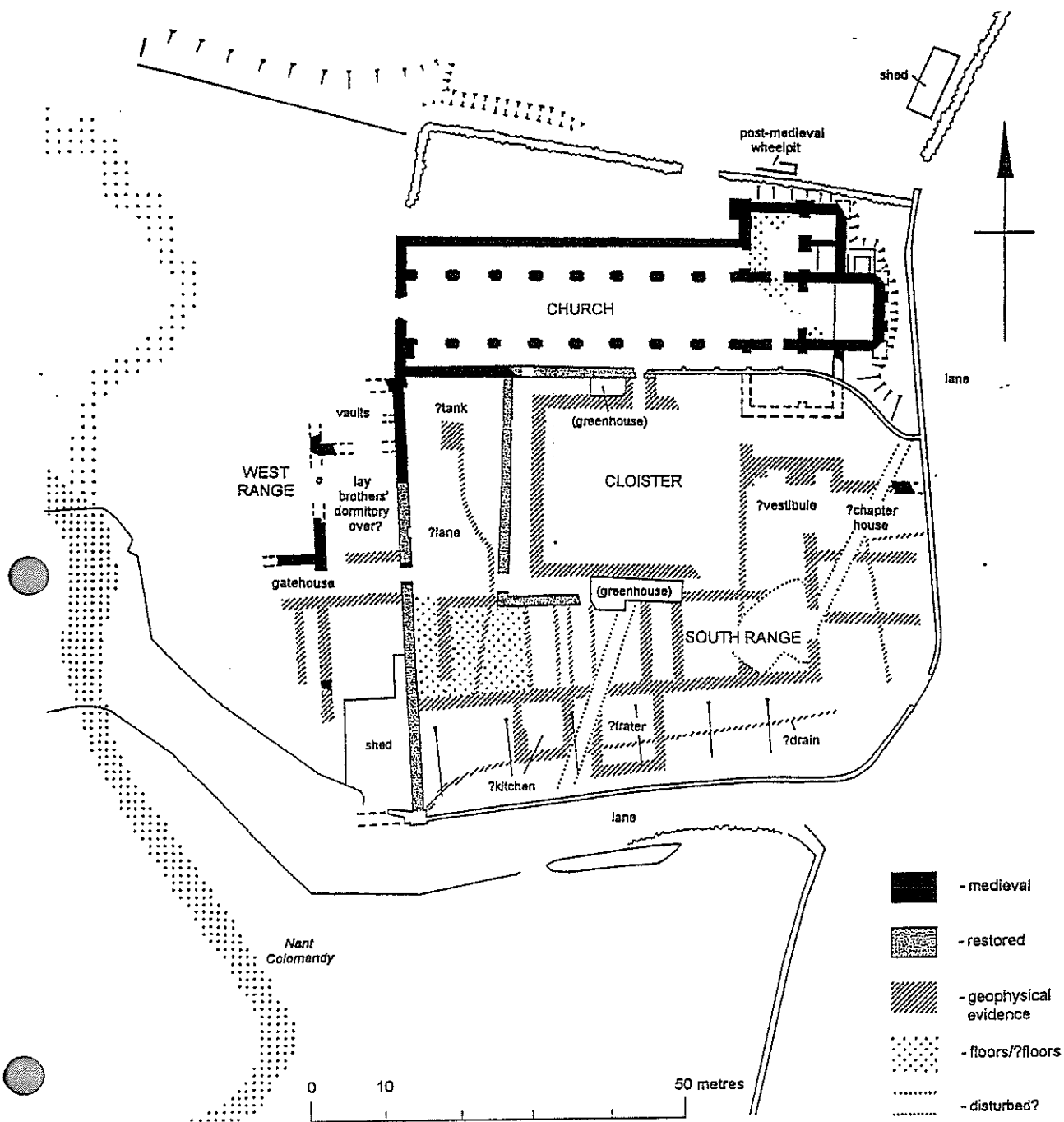
--- edge of 1994 excavation

== wall/robbed wall excavated in 1994

... plan of church as excavated in 1926



0 20m



Whitland Abbey: the excavated church and the results of geophysical survey in the claustral ranges. Drawing by Cambrian Archaeology.