

EXCAVATIONS OUTSIDE ST MARY'S CHURCH, TENBY

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INTRODUCTION

St Mary's, Tenby (Thomas 1966) is one of the largest parish churches in Wales. The present churchyard is also of considerable archaeological interest. It was formerly completely surrounded by buildings of medieval and later date of which a number survive (Norris 1812 and MS drawings in Cardiff Central Library; Laws and Owen 1896-1907, 100A No.20; Laws and Edwards 1907, 191-203). Recent salvage excavations beyond the west end of the

church revealed a substantial structure, probably the remains of a porch, which posed considerable problems of interpretation particularly in relationship to documentary evidence.

Surviving medieval buildings (Fig 1) to the south of the church (DAT PRNs 3712 and 11615) include the remains of the town hall and gaol with an archway leading into the church-yard. To the west of the church is the east wall of a medieval building (DAT PRN 3708) known as the college (Figs 1 and 2) and probably the remains of a college of

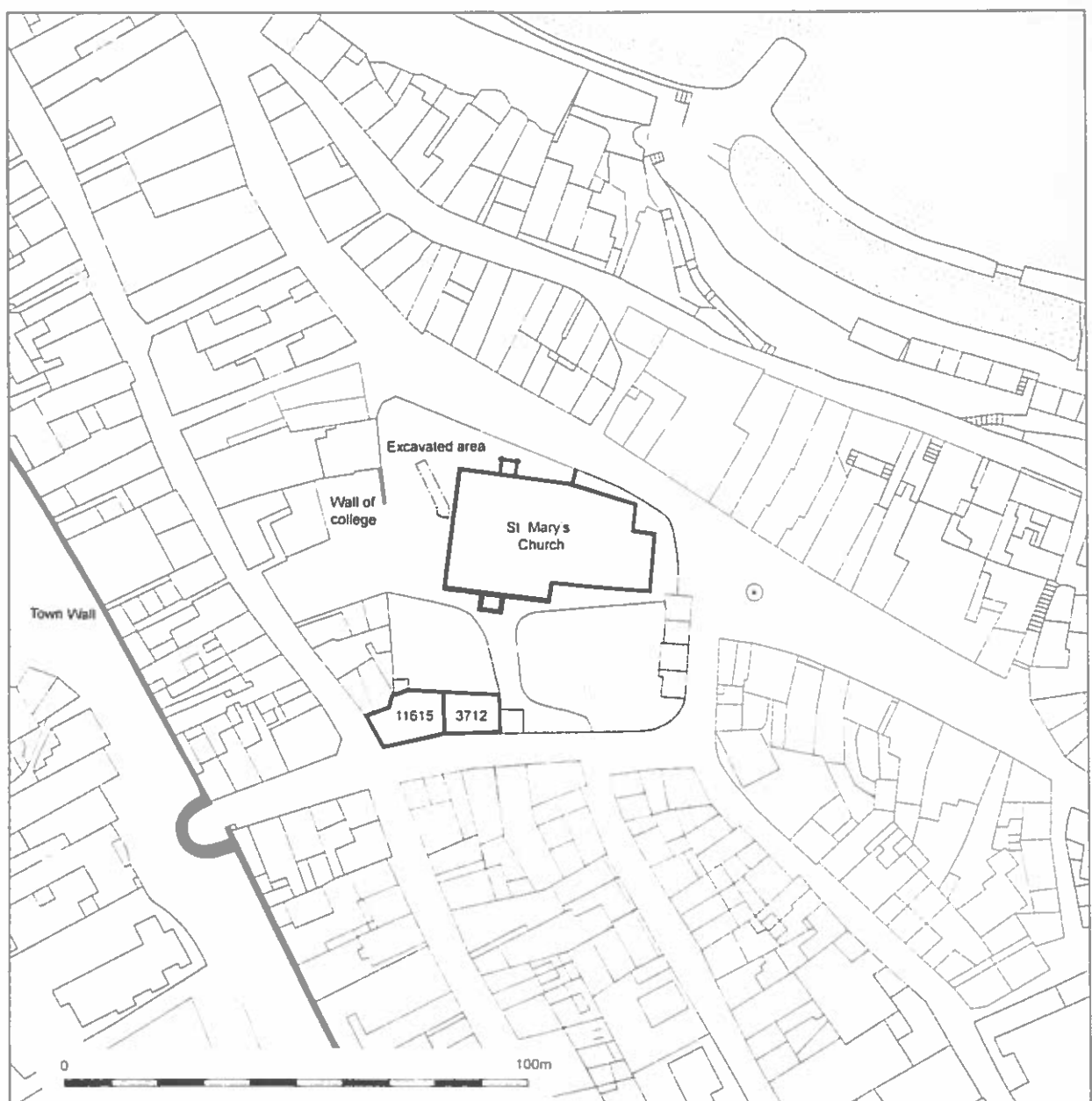
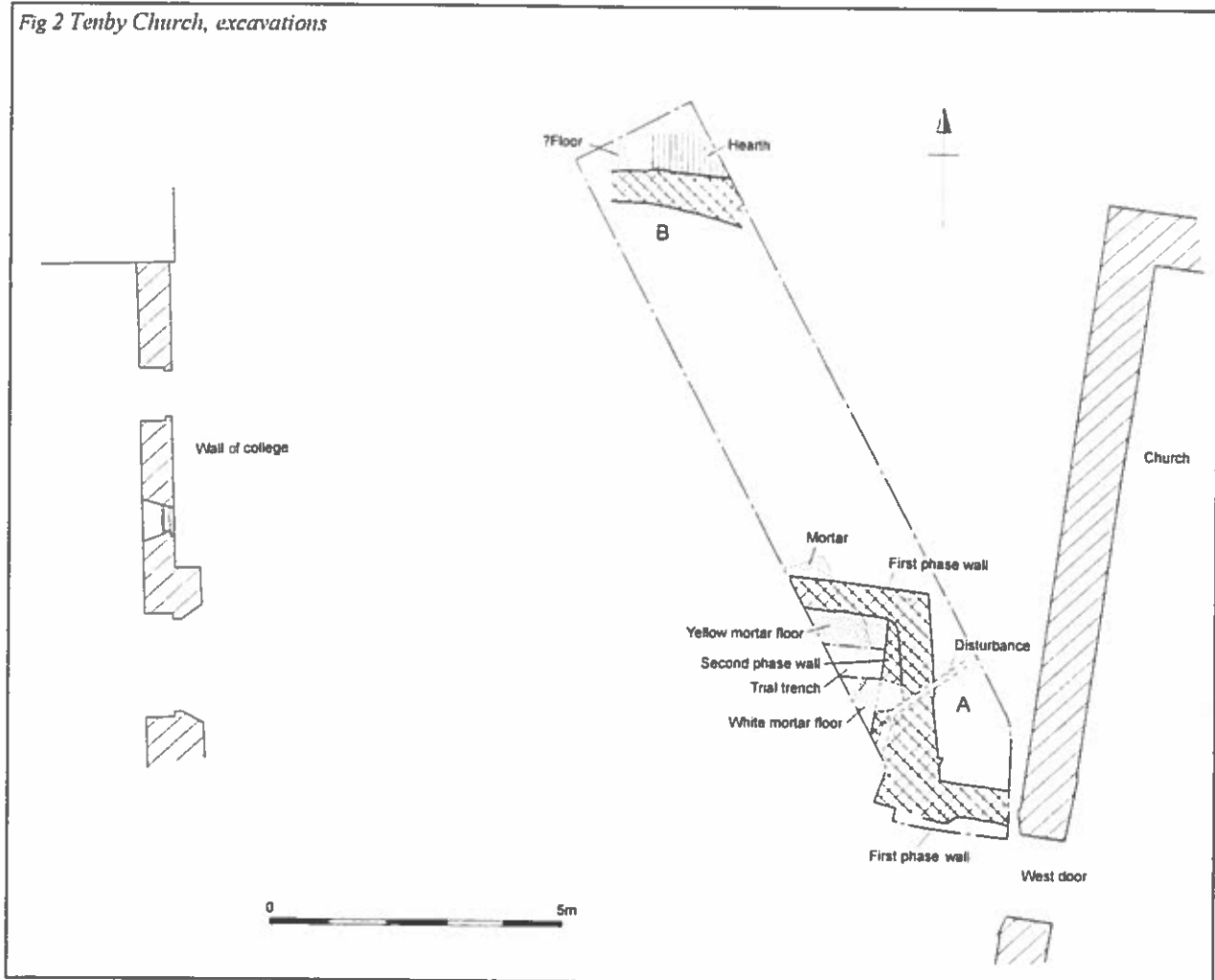


Fig 1 Tenby Church, site location

Fig 2 Tenby Church, excavations



chantry priests (Thomas 1966, 162). There are records of other buildings on the north-west of the churchyard, illustrated by Norris, including the medieval 'Whites' House'. A cellar in this position, connected by a passage with a building across the street, may relate to the Whites' House (DAT PRN 11603: not illustrated). Of particular relevance to the excavations in question are records of the former existence of a large cruciform porch, of late 15th century date, at the west end of the church. This was later converted into a schoolhouse and demolished in the 19th century (Thomas 1966, 160-161; Laws and Edwards 1907, 16 and 173-5). The structure was planned in 1720 by Joseph Lord and described in a covering letter. It was drawn, after conversion to the schoolhouse, by Charles Norris and his brother John and described by the former (C Norris 1812, 17 and 62-63 and Pl 12; Cardiff Public Library, C Norris Drawings, Vol V nos 121, 123, 154; a drawing and a painting by C Norris in Tenby Museum (acc nos 1983.1640 and 1983.1315); J Norris, 1807). There is also a description by one N J Dunn published by Laws (Laws and Edwards 1897, 197). The porch as drawn and described by Lord was a large cruciform structure measuring 43 ft north-south by 32 ft east-west. It is clear from the Norris illustrations and descriptions that the surviving west door of the church was contemporary with the porch, the former having similar details to the door of the porch. The Norris illustrations are otherwise difficult to interpret. They show a two-storey, rectangular, gable-ended structure standing free of the church. It included the door and two late medieval windows on the south. The upper

storey was the schoolroom and was a later addition: it had an 18th century window and was approached by a flight of external steps on the north-west, whilst the west window of the nave was originally too low for a two-storey structure (Norris 1812, 17 and 62; Thomas 1966, 161). Any physical connection with the church had been severed (and both Norris and Fenton (1811, 245) speak of a narrow gap between the schoolhouse and the church).

THE EXCAVATIONS

In June 1992 fortuitous observations by the author of the relaying of paths across the churchyard revealed the foundations of several structures, and a salvage excavation was carried out. The area involved (Fig 2) was a strip some 2.2m wide and 13.7m long running north-west from the northern jamb of the west door of the church toward the churchyard gate (the excavation was not continued right up to the churchyard gate). Hard-core belonging to the construction of the old path had been removed and, outside the remains of buildings, subsoil level had been reached. By the time of the Dyfed Archaeological Trust's attention further paths had been constructed, west from the church doorway through the area of the 'college' and south from the doorway round the outside wall of the church.

The time and area available for excavation was limited and there remain problems of interpretation with regard to the features revealed. The main structure discovered (A) lay outside the west door. It was arguably a porch, 9.6m wide, 5m to 6m deep, with a narrow passage leading to the

west door, the latter 2.8m wide externally, 1.2m wide internally, the same width as the door. On the north, within the excavated area, the structure consisted of a dog-legged section of wall, apparently springing from the door jamb, with internal mortar floors (and of two phases). During the construction of the paths to south and west the contractors discovered a similar wall springing from the southern door jamb and a wall of similar thickness to the surviving northern wall, some 7.3m further west (information from the foreman, Mr R James).

The structure was excavated to subsoil level externally and to the level of mortar floors internally. A small trial trench was excavated across the mortar floors as shown. The wall survived best on the north, above the mortar floor and subsoil, to some 0.22m above the latter. On the east and south the wall was reduced to foundation level.

The first phase was only clearly distinguishable from the second phase on the north. It consisted of a wall, some 0.5m wide, with good rendered facing surviving largely on the inside. On the south this phase was not distinguishable from the second phase. However it was clear that, whilst the north and south (? passage) wall were at right angles to the church walls, the east wall was not at right angles to these, or parallel to the church wall, but was at a slight angle. The trial trench suggested that this phase had a floor of hard mortar (not illustrated).

The second phase was built within, and against the west face of, the first phase, increasing in width to the south, ie effectively rendering this face parallel to that of the church. Again it was only well defined on the north. This phase had a further floor of mortar. A lower layer was of distinctive white, lumpy mortar, this rose up to form the floor surface at the wall itself. Within and above this, forming most of the floor surface, was a loose, yellow mortar with inclusions of charcoal and mussel shell. There were no further features to the north for some 7m; ie there were no apparent walls in the area of the porch as shown by Lord, subsoil being reached over the whole area. An attempt to locate the rest of the structure by probing was unsuccessful as the topsoil in the area was too full of rubble: Laws had also searched for the porch, by probing rather than excavation (as reported by A L Leach to W Gwyn Thomas: pers com).

Some 7m north of the porch, near the churchyard gate, the remains of a substantial building (B) were partly excavated. The excavated area included the footings of an east-west wall, possible flooring and a probable fireplace. There was no dating evidence for this structure. There was much debris over the area, including pottery and tile etc, with medieval examples, but some of this debris was obviously dumped later. These remains presumably relate to the documented buildings in this area.

The work also revealed the top of an arch, just outside the gate (not illustrated), probably associated with the cellar PRN 11603.

Various features had been noted by the contractors including two unusual burials lying close against the outside wall of the south aisle. They were shallow, lying head to head, one had a fox's foot on the breast.

DISCUSSION

There is no satisfactory interpretation of the structural remains outside the west door in terms of the documentation of the west end of the church. Interpretation of the structure as a porch is perhaps the most obvious. One

possibility which was considered is that the structure represented the stem and the base of the north arm of the 15th century cruciform porch, this being a smaller structure than hitherto thought. Alternatively, the 15th century porch could conceivably have been a rectangular structure joined to the church by a narrow passage. The source for the (cruciform) plan of the porch, the 18th century plan by Joseph Lord, is, in respect of other parts of the church, clearly inaccurate and, whilst most authorities have assumed the Norris illustrations show the modified cruciform porch (Thomas 1966, 160-161; Laws and Edwards 1907, 16 and 173-175), the structure they show is clearly rectangular. Both interpretations would explain the absence of the remains of a large porch further north in the area indicated by Lord. The second phase of structure could represent modifications associated with the construction of the schoolhouse.

However, the walls of the excavated structure sprang directly from the jambs of the west door, leaving no room for the mouldings of the door, and therefore must pre-date the door, which was clearly contemporary with the 15th century porch. This suggests that the excavated structure belongs to an older phase of building, ie there was an earlier porch on the site of the 15th century south porch. Even so, on this interpretation, the absence of evidence for a later porch on the north of the excavated structure remains to be explained. Furthermore, on both interpretations, the narrowness of the passage connecting the 'porch' to the church and the odd angle of the north/south wall of the first phase also remain to be explained.

It is unfortunate that faculty was granted on this particularly interesting site without reference to professional archaeological bodies, particularly as larger scale excavation could perhaps have resolved the uncertainty which now exists in our understanding of the west front of the church.

THE POTTERY, RIDGE TILE AND FLOOR TILE (a fuller report is housed with the site archive)

D Brenman

The pottery

A minimum of 25 vessels is represented by 71 sherds of pottery all of them from unstratified deposits. The earliest vessel present in this small assemblage is a green-glazed jug of Bristol origin, evidenced by a single body sherd in a fabric identified as Redcliffe ware. Redcliffe jugs date from the late 13th to the 15th century (Papazian and Campbell 1992, 35).

All other pottery recovered dates from the 17th-20th centuries and in content is typical of post-medieval ceramic collections studied in west Wales. At least nine vessels are in the standard North Devon gravel-tempered fabric (Allan 1984, 148-9) and can be dated to the 17th or 18th century. The usual range of forms are present (Evans 1979, 18-29). They are two jugs, two jars and five bowls. Other North Devon products include sherds from one sgraffito dish or bowl and two slipware jugs. North Devon sgraffito ware dates from the 17th to the early 18th century. Slipwares from the region were produced into the mid 18th century (Allan 1984, 132). Pottery imported from other areas includes two late 17th-mid 18th century vessels from Staffordshire or Bristol. Both are slip-decorated press-moulded dishes of well known type. A single sherd of

black-glazed redware, two sherds of brown-glazed redware and one unglazed sherd are unsourced but are typical of the types of wares produced at many small country potteries, some of which continued in production into the present century.

The ridge tile

Five fragments of ridge tile were recovered. Three fragments in a gravel-tempered fabric were made locally, the type corresponding to O'Mahoney's type A ridge tile at Carmarthen Greyfriars (forthcoming). One fragment with two sides surviving has low triangular crests which do not appear to be slashed or stabbed. The piece has an all-over olive green glaze externally. The acceptable date for ridge tiles in this fabric is medieval although none are closely datable; most fragments coming from demolition deposits (O'Mahoney, forthcoming). Another two unglazed fragments are unsourced but of possible Malvern production and probably 15th or 16th century.

The floor tile

Fragments of four decorated floor tiles were recovered - two plain tiles in the local gravel-tempered fabric, a two-coloured tile of Malvern/Severn valley origin and a tin-glazed polychrome tile in the Spanish cuencan style, probably from Seville.

The locally-made tiles correspond with plain type 2 tiles found at Carmarthen Greyfriars (James and Brennan, forthcoming), the bulk of which came from the Chapter House where they are thought to be 13th century. The type was also found at St David's Bishop's Palace (now in the National Museum of Wales) and at Haverfordwest Priory (Louise Lane, pers comm). Neither of the two Tenby fragments have glaze surviving. At Carmarthen Greyfriars a thin olive green glaze rarely covered the whole upper surface of tiles (James and Brennan, *op cit*).

The Malvern/Severn tile forms part of a 16-tile pattern of 15th-16th century date. This is a two-coloured tile inlaid with white slip which appears yellow beneath a clear glaze. The background body colour is brown beneath the glaze.

Tiles in the cuencan style are quite rare. The surviving portion shows a foliated pattern with areas of white, blue, green and brown glaze between slightly raised borders. Two similar tiles of early 16th century date were found at Exeter (J P Allan and B Williams in Allan 1984, 227 and Fig.132, nos 2933 and 2934), and one came from excavations at Carmarthen Greyfriars (B Williams in James and Brennan, *op cit*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavations were carried out by the author and D Brennan for the Dyfed Archaeological Trust. I am grateful to Mr J Tipton (Tenby Museum), the Rev C J Harvey (Rector of Tenby) and Mr R James (works foreman) for their help during the excavations and particularly to Mr Tipton for further information and for access to the Norris material in Tenby Museum. Mr W Gwyn Thomas kindly read and commented on an earlier draft report and provided additional information. I have also benefited from useful discussions with Mr N Ludlow. The opinions expressed here are my own.

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