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EXCAVATIONS AT THE OLD MINSTER, SOUTH ELMHAM

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The date of the Minster at South Elmham (Plate I and Fig. 1), and its possible claim to be the Cathedral Church of the See of Elmham, created in the third quarter of the 7th century, have been a subject of controversy for over 100 years. The writers had for some time been urged by local historians, notably Mr. Derek Charman, then the County Archivist, and Mr. Norman Scarfe, to endeavour to throw some light on the problem by carrying out excavations. The Minster is scheduled as an Ancient Monument, and the Ministry of Public Building and Works readily gave permission subject to the agreement of the owner of the land, Mr. George Sanderson. This was obtained, and work began in July, 1963, under the auspices of the Ipswich Museum, of the staff of which both writers were then members, and with some financial help, mainly from the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology.

In had been intended to produce the results of this investigation as part of a symposium to include work on other aspects of the controversy, by those working on these problems, but this has so far not been found possible, and it is felt that publication of the results of the excavation should not be further delayed. Another reason for holding up publication was the desirability of carrying out further excavation in the enclosure in which the Minster stands, but this, too, has so far proved impracticable, although no final conclusions as to the nature of the site can be reached until this has been done.

It is not intended here to recapitulate all the arguments which have been adduced to prove or disprove the theory that South Elmham, and not North Elmham, was the episcopal see of the second of the two bishops chosen first as coadjutors to Bisi when sickness hindered him 'from administering his episcopal functions',[1] and then as his successors, nor are we concerned with the question as to whether the original see was at Dunwich or, as suggested by Mr. S. E. Rigold,[2] at Felixstowe. From either of these places, it would be more logical to establish a second see at North rather

[1] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, trans. J. Stevens, Everyman ed., Chap. v., p. 174.
[2] S. E. Rigold, 'The Supposed See of Dunwich', *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, XXIV (1961), p. 55, n. 6.

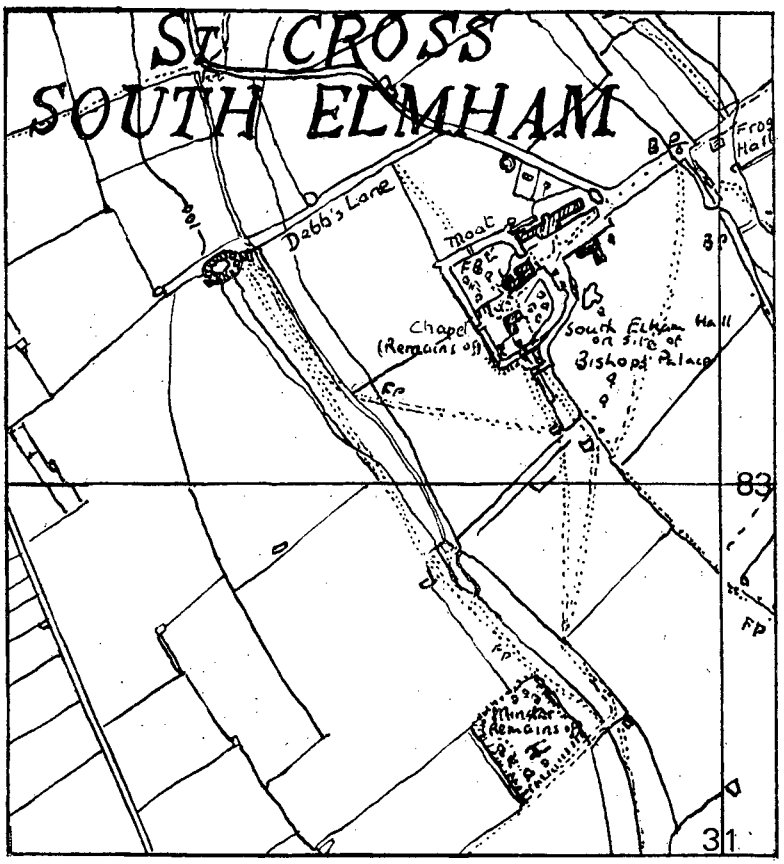


FIG. 1.—Map of the area, scale six ins. to one ml.

than at South Elmham, but logic did not then, as now, always play a conspicuous part in such decisions. The questions to be answered so far as possible are, Was this an ecclesiastical building, and if so of what kind? What is the probable date when it was built? Are there any indications, such as other buildings, graves, etc., that here was a settlement of the kind which would be expected in the precincts of a cathedral?

As has been indicated, the answer to the last question cannot be given until the surrounding enclosure can be excavated. The excavations already carried out do throw some light on the nature and date of the building.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Owing to other commitments, the work had to be carried out in stages, spread over the months of July, September and October, 1963, and continuing in August, 1964. Mr. Sanderson was most co-operative, and greatly lightened the initial stages by cutting the luxuriant growth of nettles which occupied the whole of the interior of the building. The first step was to establish the general accuracy of the plan given by Peers,[3] and to confirm the existence of the apse, which was completely covered by earth, a fact which had led to a belief in some quarters that it was not in fact present at all, but had been included in Peers' plan as a feature to be expected in 'Saxon Churches of the St. Pancras type'. It has been suggested that the building was merely a rectangular barn. Peers' plan was in fact found to be substantially correct, except in minor though not unimportant details such as the relation of the two windows immediately to the east of the wall separating the narthex and the nave (Fig. 2).

In 1846, Suckling wrote, 'Mr. George Dumont, the present occupant of South Elmham Hall, informs me, that he caused the whole interior to be dug over, five feet deep, about four years since, but discovered nothing besides a few bones, and a small piece of old iron, with one or two ancient keys. It then appeared that the foundations of the walls are full five feet thick at the base, rising with two sets-off to the surface of the soil . . . the adjoining site is entirely free from any foundations but those of the "Minster" itself, while the frequent discovery by the plough, of urns filled with burnt bones and ashes, seems to confirm the voice of a tradition very current in the village, that the "Minster" occupies the site of a pagan temple'.[4]

The excavations did not confirm Mr. Dumont's statement that the whole of the interior had been dug over to five feet, and when Micklethwaite [5] visited the site with Raven in 1897, he too was of the opinion that 'what we found did not confirm the story, mentioned by Mr. B. B. Woodward in the fourth volume of "Suffolk Archaeology", of the whole surface being dug over'.

It was unfortunately impossible to extend the 1963–4 excavations to examine the enclosure in which the Minster stands, and there is now no record of what became of the 'urns filled with burnt bones and ashes' referred to by Suckling, but there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the observation. Mr. James Campbell, of Worcester College, Oxford, one of our helpers, heard a story that more urns had been found some 40 or 50 years

[3] C. R. Peers, *Arch. J.*, LVIII (1901), pp. 433–4.
[4] A. I. Suckling, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Suffolk*, I (1846), p. 209.
[5] J. T. Micklethwaite, *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, XVI (1916–18), pp. 29–35.

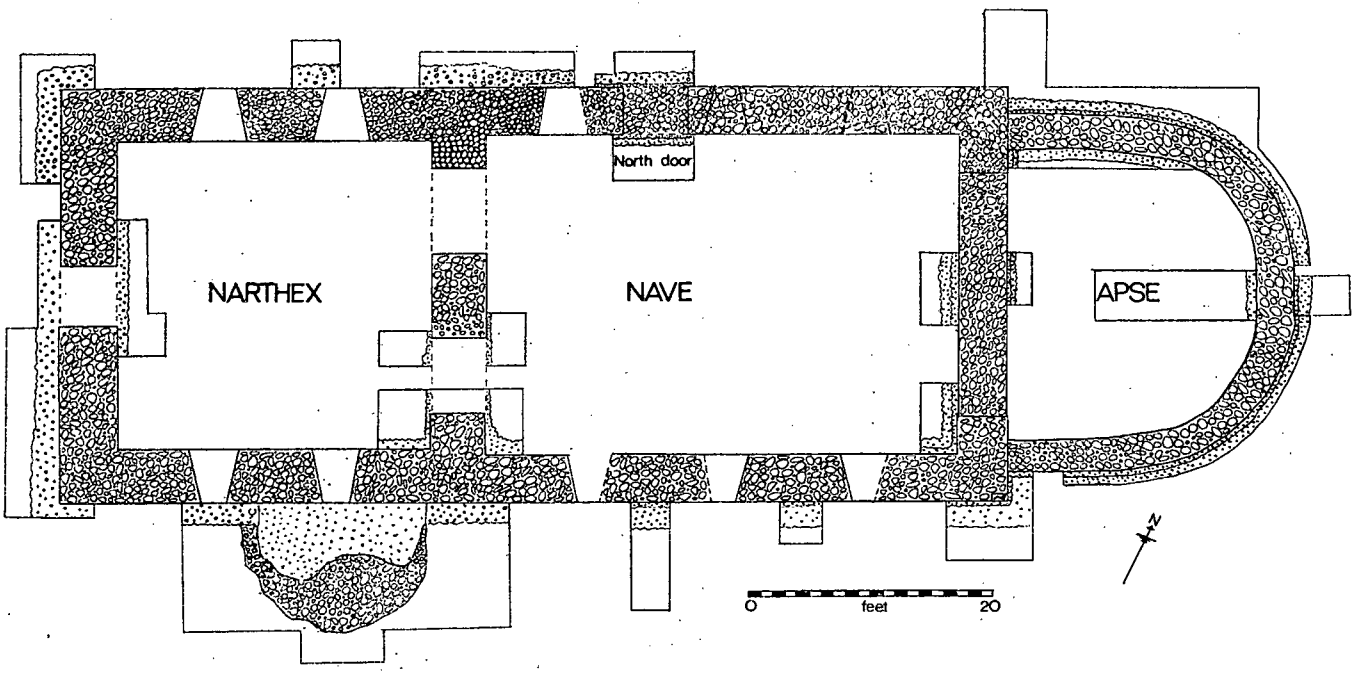


FIG. 2.—Plan of the Minster, showing extent of excavation.

ago, and were incorporated in the foundation of chicken huts. A future excavation of the area is of great importance, as the regular use of the Minster would surely imply the existence of other buildings to house the Bishop's retinue.

The extent of the enclosure, and its relation to the Minster building, may be seen in the plan of the site by Cleer S. Alger, published with Woodward's account [6] of the Minster in 1874. He did not believe that the church had ever been finished, and suggests that the absence of foundations in the enclosure is accounted for by the fact that 'the conventual buildings would have been of wood, and have therefore disappeared'.

So far as the Minster itself is concerned, there is still nothing to controvert or confirm the view of Harrod [7] that the present building, which he considers to be early Norman, replaced an earlier wooden structure which he attributed to Felix (one of the South Elmham group of villages is named Flixton).[8] From this he proceeds to argue that when the see was divided, one of the new bishops would naturally establish himself at South Elmham.

Others who have entered into the controversy, either as to the relationship of the Elmhams, North and South, to the bishopric, or as to the dating of the building, have largely stated their views categorically without adducing any concrete evidence to support them. Redstone [9] saw an indication of the importance of the 'Old Minster' in the fact that in 1326 Edward II, on his way from Hoxne to Norwich, broke his journey at South Elmham. St. John Hope,[10] writing to a correspondent in Suffolk simply gave it as his opinion that 'the remains of "The Minster" are those of an undoubted 7th century church'. Rigold (*loc. cit.*) refers to it as 'the so-called "Minster"', and seemingly doubts whether 'it ever functioned as a church'.

As regards the enclosure, it has been generally accepted that this is of Roman date, although at one stage during the excavation the suggestion was put forward that the bank and ditch had been constructed as a defence against the Danes. It would not seem, in the opinion of the writers, that this need be taken seriously, par-

[6] B. B. Woodward, *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, IV (1874), pp. 1–7.
[7] Henry Harrod, *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, IV (1874), pp. 7–13.
[8] Norman Scarfe, in a paper read before the Society of Antiquaries of London in October 1963, before the date of the building had been established with any certainty, has suggested that the transfer of rights from King to Church may have taken place in the time of Sigebert and Felix, and the Minster erected by Bertgils Boniface, second in succession to Felix.
[9] V. B. Redstone, 'South Elmham Deanery', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, XIV (1912), pp. 323–331.
[10] Sir William St. John Hope *in litt.*, quoted by Francis Seymour Stevenson in 'The Present State of the Elmham Controversy', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, XIX (1926), p. 111.

ticularly as there is no evidence that there was anything to defend at that time. Raven [11] regarded it as a small camp 'to be occupied on occasion'. Trial trenches put down across the north and west ditches produced only a few small sherds of Roman pottery and this, bearing in mind the close proximity of the kiln of the late Roman period excavated by the writers at Homersfield in 1959,[12] should leave little doubt as to the nature of the enclosure. Nevertheless, further excavation both of the ditch and of the interior of the enclosure would be profitable.

Before proceeding to a detailed description of the various features of the building, some general observations may be of interest. The foundation of the whole structure might be described as a hollow 'raft' (Fig. 3), considerably wider than the walls which it supported. Suckling (*loc. cit.*) writes 'the walls are full five feet thick, rising with two sets-off to the surface of the soil', and this is a fairly accurate general description. Micklethwaite noted that 'the salient angles both inside and out, have been of wrought stone, all of which has been taken away', and our conclusion on this point tallied (Plate II). Raven, on the other hand, found 'no worked stone'. He observed that 'the land falls slightly eastward, following the set of the ground, so that the apse is somewhat lower than the west end'. This was confirmed when levels were taken, the fall from the narthex-nave crossing to the apex of the apse being about three feet.[13]

Micklethwaite commented on the unusual put-log holes, triangular in form, but seems to have missed the fact that all were not apex upwards, some being the reverse (Plate II). Another uncommon feature was that the holes on the inside of the walls were still visible. This has been taken in some quarters as evidence of the fact that the building was never completed, but it is probable that they were merely filled with loose rubble before the walls were plastered, and this filling has naturally fallen out as the plaster deteriorated. For the most part the walls, standing in places to a height of fourteen feet, have been robbed of the facing to the height of a man's reach, even of the flints.

THE APSE

Until the excavations took place, the apse was completely concealed below ground level, a fact which may have given rise to the suggestion mentioned earlier that, in spite of Peers' remarks and Alger's plan, it did not exist.

[11] Rev. John James Raven, *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, IX (1900), pp. 1–6.
[12] 'A Romano-British Pottery Kiln at Homersfield', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, XXVIII (1959), pp. 168–184.
[13] If the hand-sketch which accompanies Alger's plan in Peers' account of the Minster is accurately to scale, this seems quite possible.

A trench was cut round the outer face of the wall, and inside the north face. In view of the suggestion that the Minster was a cathedral church, an extension was cut, 4 feet wide and extending for over 12 feet down the centre of the apse, to establish whether or not there had been a foundation which would indicate an episcopal throne and a stone altar. No evidence was found.

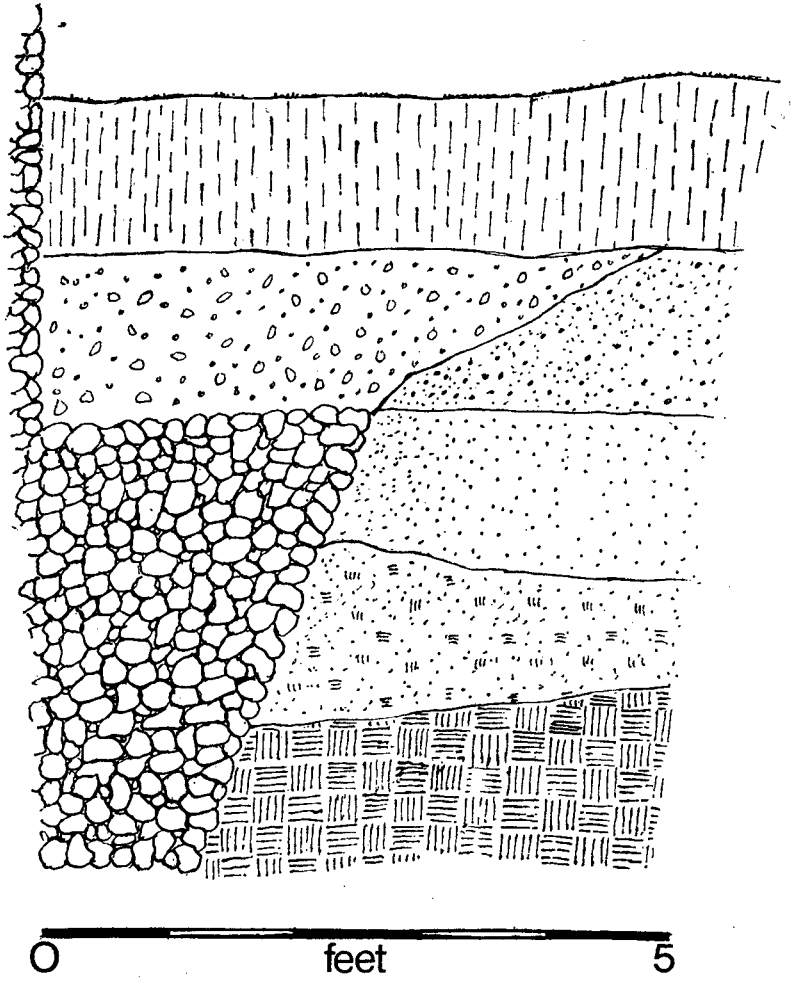


FIG. 3.—Section at south-west corner looking south, showing raft-construction of foundation (see key on p. 13).

The apse extended for 20 feet beyond the cross-wall with the nave (internal measurement). The wall is 3 feet in thickness, with an offset externally of 4 to 6 inches at about 8 inches below present ground level, and another of 1 foot, at 1 foot 6 inches below the upper. Inside the wall the upper offset is not present, the lower being 9 inches to 1 foot wide.

THE CROSS-WALL BETWEEN APSE AND NAVE

The cross-wall between the apse and the nave has a thickness of 4 feet. On the east side, facing the apse, it has an upper offset at 1 foot 6 inches of 4 inches in width, and at 1 foot 4 inches below this, a lower offset of 8 inches.

On the west side, opening on to the nave, the upper offset is 6 inches wide, with a lower offset of 8 inches at 1 foot 4 inches below the upper—2 feet 6 inches below the present ground level.

Raven and Micklethwaite, visiting the Minster together in 1897, had looked for evidence of a tripartite arch, and Peers also regarded this as probable, and indicated it on his plan. There is in fact no evidence to support this except the considerable width of the opening, and the fact that on the south side the springing of the arch occurs at 7 feet from ground level. Mr. A. B. Whittingham, whose co-operation throughout has been so valuable, has made the suggestion that this may indicate a triple arcade, with the two outer arches somewhat lower than that in the centre. There is a butt joint between the return of the nave wall and the cross-wall proper, so that the latter could be a later addition or a re-building, probably when some alteration was made, as for instance the replacement of the triple arcade by a single wide arch.

There is a slight indication at the north end of the wall of a plinth to the supporting pillar, but this is less obvious on the south.

THE NAVE

The nave provided the most valuable evidence for the dating of the building, and a great deal of credit is due to the experienced observation of Mr. Whittingham. He it was who first noted the error in Peers' plan, in which the most westerly pair of nave windows are placed directly opposite one another, and equidistant from the nave-narthex crossing, and it was in looking for a reason for placing the north window at a less distance from the wall than its fellow that he was led to seek, and find, the north door, which will be described later.

The nave is 38 feet in length and 27 feet wide, with walls of a thickness of 4 feet, where they have not been reduced by robbing to about 3 feet 8 inches. It would appear that Micklethwaite was right in his surmise that the angles, both inside and out, had been

of worked stone, but this has been robbed except where it was underground.

The windows, some 7 feet 6 inches above ground level, are 4 feet wide at the inner splay surface, and about 2 feet at the outer face, or possibly less if the missing stonework is taken into account. The springing of the arch begins at 5 feet above the sill level.

The north wall of the nave (Plate I) still stands to a level of some 14 feet up to the splay of the first nave window, 4 feet 4 inches from the junction of the nave-narthex crossing. It is then reduced practically to ground level until the third window, and here a large block of masonry from the north-east corner has been dislodged and lies reversed in the corner.

The south wall stands to a height of 14 feet up to the position of the first window, here 6 feet 6 inches from the cross-wall (interior

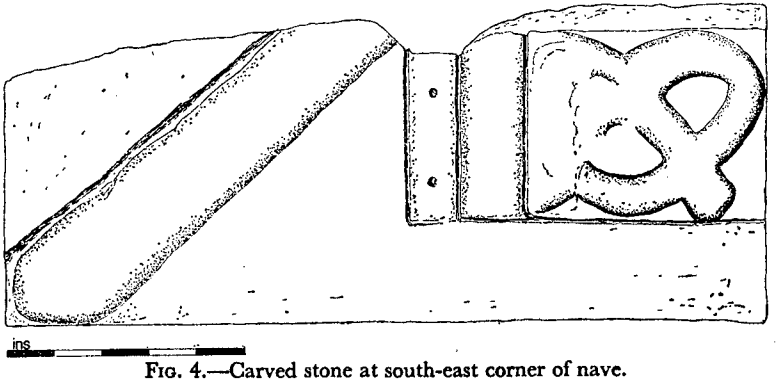


FIG. 4.—Carved stone at south-east corner of nave.

measurement) where it drops to 10 feet 6 inches. It is then reduced to 5 feet 9 inches until at the third window it resumes its full height, and at the upper level continues at a height of 14 feet for 4 feet over the apse. Here it has been robbed in its lower portion in such a way as to give almost the impression of a doorway and in view of this the question arose as to the possibility of a *porticus* such as those at Bradwell.[14] This led to the excavation of the south-east corner of the nave which was to produce such incontrovertible evidence of the relatively late date of the Minster, at least in its present form.

Just below ground level it was revealed that the corner was supported by a stone block 1 foot 5 inches in length, 7 inches wide on its eastern face and 6 inches at its other end, and 4 inches deep (Plate III*a*, Fig. 4). The inner (north) face was somewhat irregularly

[14] S. E. Rigold, *North Elmham Saxon Cathedral* (H.M.S.O., 1960), p. 9, and plan on pp. 6–7.

broken. On the upper surface of this stone was a carved design consisting of a heavy diagonal bar running upwards from the west corner, a more lightly carved vertical centrally, and a pattern of interlace in the east corner. It was in fact quite obviously a fragment from a tomb slab similar to that at Milton ~~Abbas~~.[15] It could hardly be of earlier date than the 9th century, and showed signs of considerable weathering before being broken and put to its present use, suggesting a date for that use as perhaps the 10th but more probably the 11th century. The possibility was not overlooked that it might have been a repair, but it was bonded into the wall in

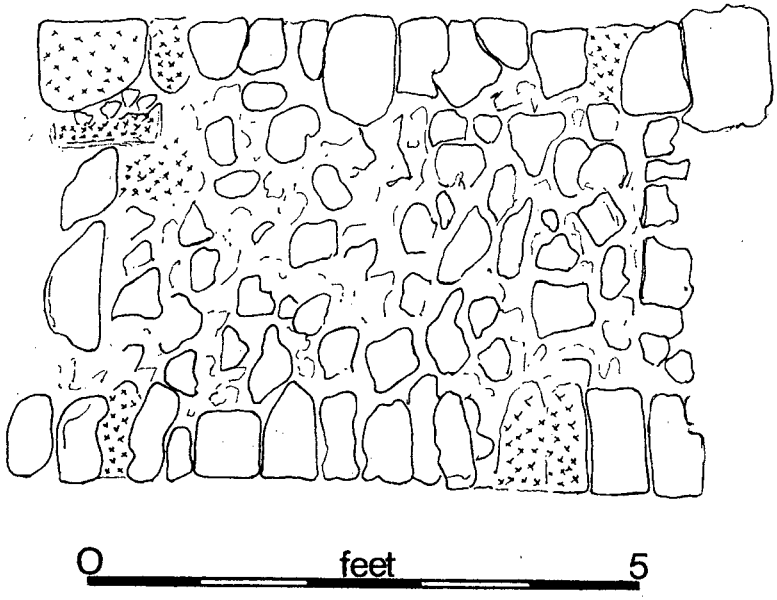


FIG. 5.—Plan of north door (see key on p. 13).

such a way as to preclude this interpretation. Underneath the carved stone was another slab of similar dimensions, but unmarked.

The date of the Minster, then, can with some certainty be established as most probably post-Conquest, but conceivably only a little earlier.

As has been said, Mr. Whittingham had suggested that the obvious reason for the more westerly placing of the north-west window as compared with its pair in the south wall was the insertion of a north door, and this he proceeded to explore (Figs. 2 and 5).

[15] T. D. Kendrick, *Late Anglo-Saxon and Viking Art* (1949), p. 82 and Pl. LIV.

Although the state of the masonry rendered interpretation at this point by no means easy, there seems little doubt that this door did exist, and was of the type associated with Norman rather than Saxon buildings. It began some 6 feet 9 inches from the splay of the window, and was 5 feet in width. On the outer face the wear of the corners seemed sufficiently uniform to suggest the presence of an inset or 'nib', which would support the later date, although this was not obvious, it must be confessed, without the guidance of the expert.

THE CROSS-WALL BETWEEN NAVE AND NARTHEX

The cross-wall, opening by two doorways into the nave, still stands to a height of 9 feet. The abacus of the arches can be clearly seen at 7 feet 6 inches above present ground level, and the springing of the south arch, measured from the exposed foundation of the doorway, was at 10 feet 8½ inches.

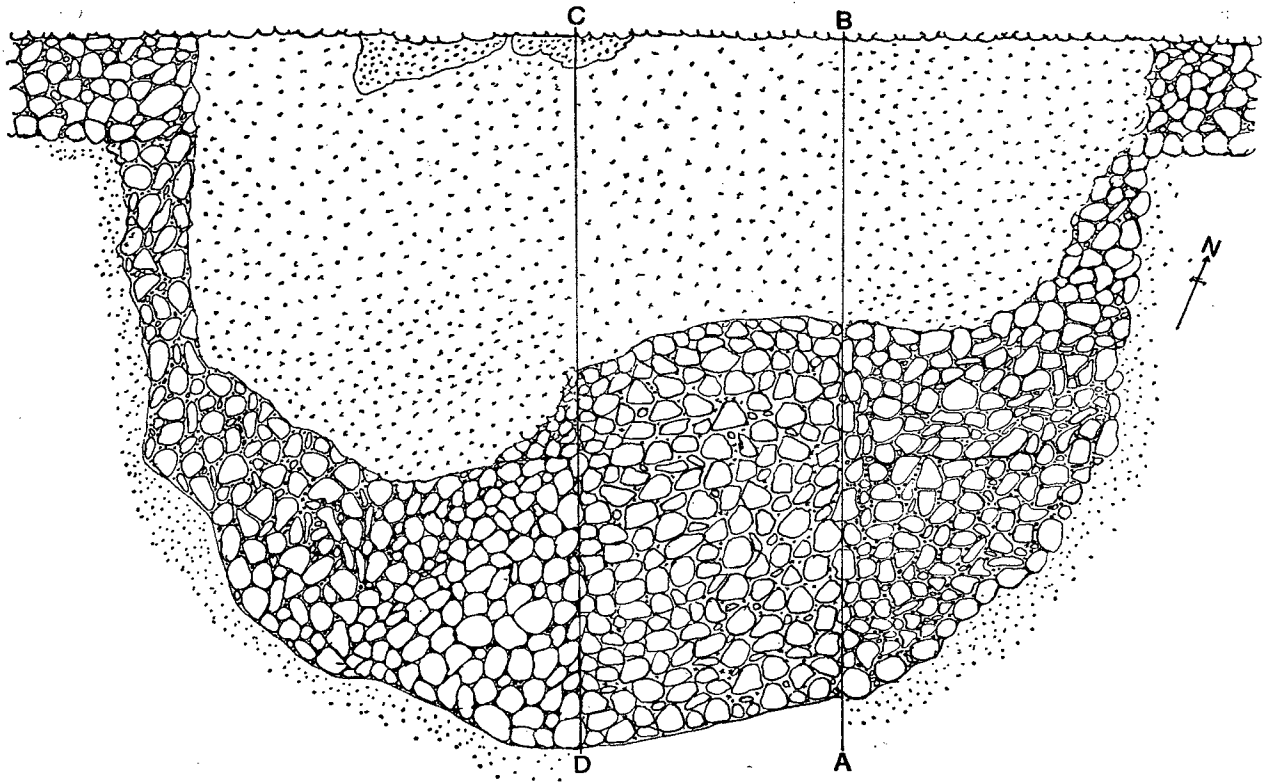
The wall has a thickness of 4 feet 7 inches, agreeing with that of the narthex itself. This fact is significant as it would indicate that the additional strength as compared with the nave was intended to support a tower higher than the nave, and probably with a four-sided gable.

The centre block of the wall is 7 feet long, and the width of each of the two doorways 7 feet, subject to allowance for stone-robbing. The northern doorway is entirely blocked by a large ash tree. The offsets on either side have a width of 6 inches at the level of the lower offset of the nave walls.

THE NARTHEX

The narthex is 26 feet square (interior measurement) with two windows on either side similar in dimensions to those of the nave. In assessing the proportions of the windows it must be remembered that much robbing of material has taken place. Not only has all the worked stone been removed, but the flint walls themselves have been denuded of their facing up to the height of convenient reach of an average man. Certainly no worked stone would be allowed to escape; good building material is scarce in East Anglia. The original size of the window apertures would therefore almost certainly have been appreciably smaller than is now the case.

The west door is 5 feet wide, and the springing of the arch 10 feet 3 inches above the main step, which is 1 foot 3 inches above the general floor level, with indications of two steps down, though the stone-work is so worn that the width of these cannot easily be defined, and they are therefore not indicated in the plan.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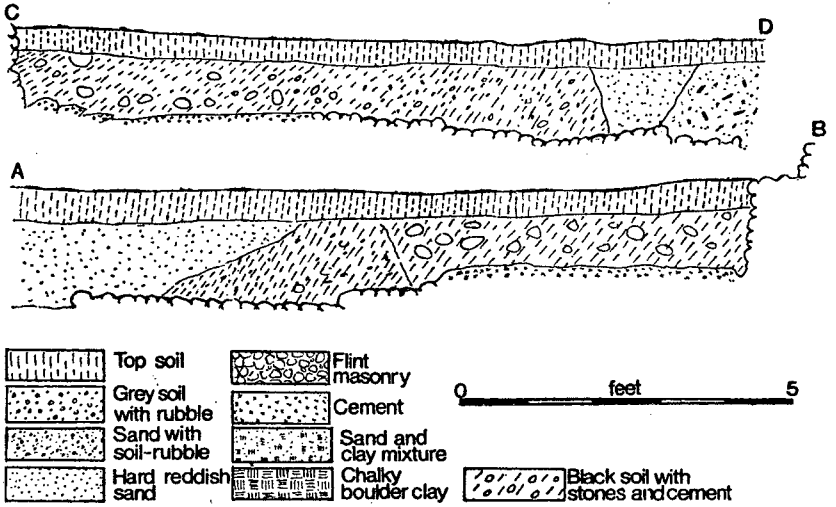


Fig. 6.—Plan and sections of platform outside south wall of narthex.

The cavity left by the removal of a substantial dressed stone was clearly visible outside the northwest corner; that of the southwest corner was still in position.

Outside the south wall of the narthex there was revealed one of the most puzzling features of the building (Plate III, *b* and Fig. 6). It had been decided to put down a trial trench outside the south wall, in case this might reveal any further clues to the date in the form of pottery or other small finds. The only pottery found was extremely fragmentary, and in fact of very little help in arriving at any conclusions as to date. A note is appended below (p. 15).

What did emerge, however, was the presence of an apsidal platform, centred on the second, or easterly window in the south wall of the narthex. It had a base of 15 feet, and projected for 11 feet from the wall. The floor was solidly constructed of flint pebbles, and for 6 feet or so from the wall, was cemented over; the level was 1 foot above the main offset of the narthex. The immediate comparison which springs to mind is the stair-turret which led to the upper chamber of the west tower at North Elmham, which it resembles in form and size; the central cemented area was probably the floor of the turret, and this would naturally not be represented in the surround, which would be the base of the wall. Its presence could well be accounted for if Whittingham's tentative explanation is accepted, that the Bishop of the time (?Aylmer) who had built the stair at North Elmham was having it copied at South Elmham, for this stair is evidently an afterthought; there is no provision for the turret to be entered from the interior of the narthex as at North Elmham, and if it had an external door the entrance to the upper room seems never to have been completed. Rigold points out that 'such a chamber was a normal late Saxon feature', and adds, 'it may have acted as the Bishop's pew'. The lower chamber might have served as court and audience chamber on the occasion of the Bishop's visits to South Elmham.

This feature does therefore seem to point to a relationship with the North Elmham building, and points again to a later date.

THE ENCLOSURE

Little need be said about the general character of the enclosure, except to confirm its Roman origin. Not only were sherds of Roman pottery found during the excavation of both the north and the west ditches, but Mr. Peter Wade-Martins, whilst examining the Minster site for a comparison with that at North Elmham, on which he had been working, found a number of sherds in the field opposite the south entrance.

Any suggestion that the enclosure is a moated site is discounted by the relative levels of the ditches as shown in the traverses pre-

pared by Alger. It is clearly demonstrated, particularly in the case of the west-east traverse, that the west ditch would remain dry, or at the most might retain stagnant pools of rain-water in places, unless the eastern ditch was not only flooded but the bank submerged. This is confirmed by a survey carried out by Mr. G. Mathieson in 1965, using theodolite, plane-table, and C.T. & S. tilting level.

THE POTTERY

Two small fragments of a wheel-made cooking pot were found by the footings of the apsidal platform on the south side of the narthex (Fig. 7). The ware is dark brown and gritty. The rim is

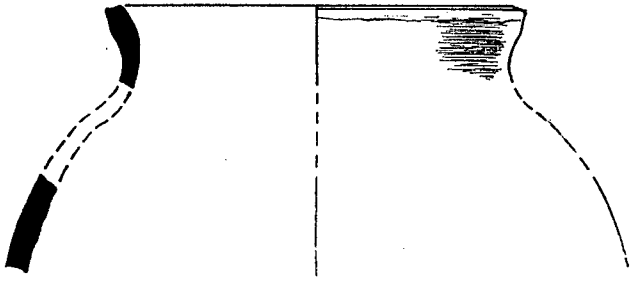


FIG. 7.—Cooking pot, scale ½.

almost upright, slightly out-turned, with a hollow on the top which is considered by Mr. J. G. Hurst as being typical of Middle Saxon pottery. In his opinion, if not Middle Saxon, it might be early medieval.

SUMMARY

Excavations carried out in 1963–4 at the Old Minster, South Elmham, were aimed principally at establishing the true nature of the building, its date and probable use.

All indications point to its having been a church, possibly functioning as a Minster serving the area of the group of South Elmham parishes, but unlikely to have been the site of the See of Elmham.

The date of the existing building cannot have been much earlier than the 11th century, and although this does not preclude the possibility of an earlier timber building, no evidence of this was found.

Further light might be thrown on the exact nature of the site by the excavation of the interior of the enclosure, which is undoubtedly of Roman date.

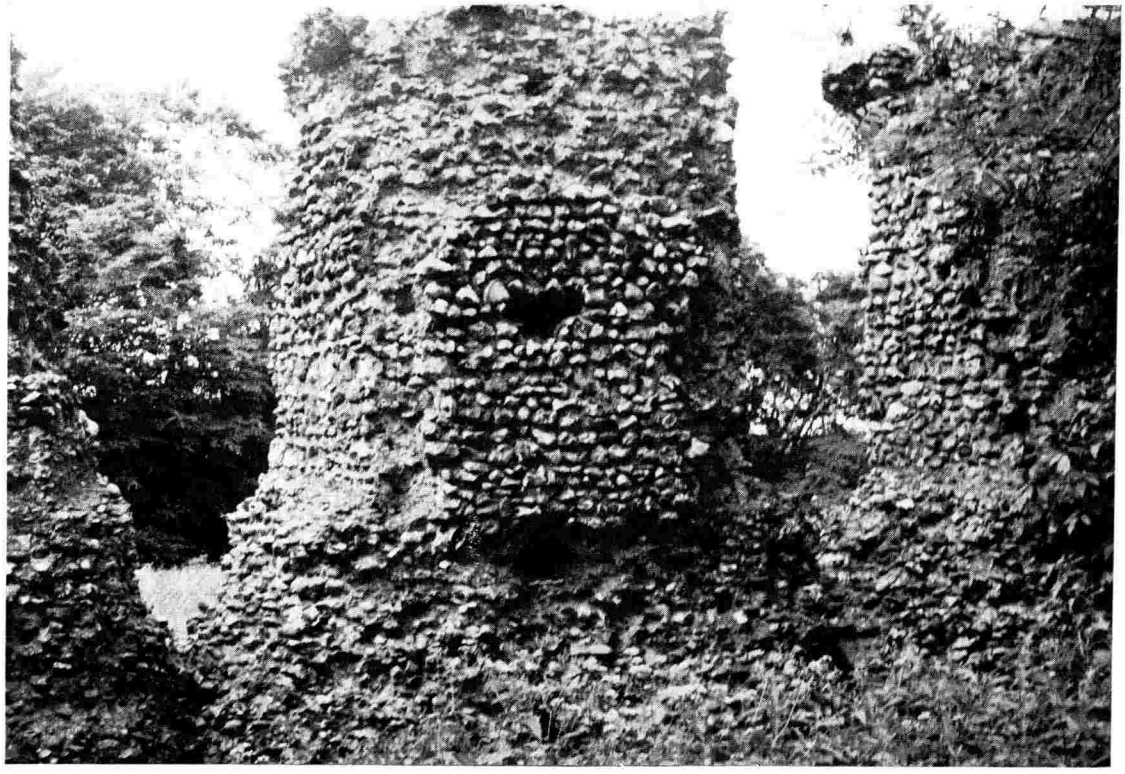
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Ministry of Public Building and Works for readily granting permission for the excavation of this scheduled ancient monument to take place, to Mr. George Sanderson of South Elmham Hall, the owner of the land, for agreeing to allow the work to proceed, and for material help in the early stages. The writers are also indebted to Mr. Derek Charman who provided much of the historical background necessary in deciding on the excavation, to Mr. Norman Scarfe, who made the results of his own studies relating to the Minster available, and on occasion gave physical help in the work, and also to a large number of voluntary helpers who carried out the digging of the site under the guidance of the writers.

PLATE I

The Minster from the North.

PLATE II



Interior of north wall, showing putlog holes, window and stone robbing.

PLATE III

a. South-east corner of nave, showing built-in grave slab and dressed stone quoin.

b. Apsidal platform on south side of narthex.