

BOXLEY ABBEY

SOME NOTES ON A VISIT ON 10TH JULY 2021

BY PAUL EVERSON

I spent much of time walking around (under guidance) the remoter parts of the site. I have the following contributions to make from my visit:

[1] St Andrew's chapel.

I am thrilled by the idea of a reliquary display chapel, suggested by David. Given that proposal, I might throw in the following points:

- 1) Might one want to make more of the fact (than passed in our conversation) that there are 4 doorways in addition to the N and S viewing slots in the chancel? Are these doorways to do with different levels of superior access to the relic? And all about managing that access? Opposed S and N doorways, for example, might suggest the possibility of a transit through the building, and a near view of the potential relic from the W. The W door might give a more distant view from W, perhaps? And then offer an exit route via the S aisle, and out through S nave/aisle door? Other circulation routes might also be possible: W entrance, then via S aisle to S-N cross transit, for example. Such processes of viewing the relics would be regulated by the clergy in S annex, perhaps? What about internal screens? (I'm Looking for a different purpose for S aisle arrangement from that David suggests.)

- 2) I see that the finger of St Andrew was one of the abbey's relics, and a minor source of accounted income. They had a 'miraculous' statue of St Rumwold, too, which was similarly a source of income. Both apparently predating the famous rood, which - when it came on stream in the later C14 - took income into a new, higher league. Did that free the more portable relics for display more peripherally at the chapel?

[2] The 'Hospitium'

I am similarly wholly convinced by the points raised about the 'Hospitium'. My own thoughts were limited (as I have discussed with David) to the convictions that:

[a] It did not have the facilities one might expect of a hospitium; but rather those of a (huge) agricultural/industrial structure and ...

[b] It is in the wrong place, viz-a-viz access to the monastic complex as a whole, for a hospitium.

[3] Water Supply and Control

I looked at various aspect of the water supply, including at a putative 'header pond' out to the N. I recall having identified many similar such 'header ponds' in earthwork surveys on both monastic and

secular sites. In particular the survey I undertook of Lavendon Abbey (Bucks) with Tony Brown and students on the Knuston field course one year. That survey was published as:

Brown, AE and Everson, P 2005 'Earthworks at Lavendon', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 45, 45-64

That's a reference I promised to pass on to Nick Hill. But I'm sorry that do not have a copy of it, still less a pdf.

[4] Reredorter Drain

I talked at length to the caving group, who were emptying the reredorter drain. They were concerned with the archaeological features as they had encountered them – specifically they had discovered a sluice arrangement at the lower (western) end of the reredorter and a right-angled turn to the channel below that again. Their working explanation was to do with a limited water supply and needing to build up a head of water within the reredorter for an efficient flush.

I wonder whether this represents a false 'modern' conception of how such a drain might work (as if it was a modern flushed toilet)? I wonder whether the sluice was to ensure a build-up, and minimum loss of solid matter ... which was removed as night-soil through the arches on the S side that still survive. Night-soil was routinely valuable for manuring the fields; and monastic stuff was probably inherently good, and possibly considered specially potent because of its source: HOLY SHIT! (Useful ref to Richard Jones book? *Manure matters : historical, archaeological and ethnographic perspectives*, edited by Richard Jones (Ashgate, Farnham; 2012)). The right-angled turn is therefore unproblematic, as was its outflow into the fishponds to the S.

[5] Later Gardens

I looked, of course, at the remains of the gardens now occupying the site, which is one of my specialist interests. Most obviously, the raised walk etc. on the site of the south aisle of the conventual church; but more widely too. This was surely not created in the immediate post-Dissolution period? Its walls in no sense represent the walls of the south aisle of the abbey church, simply filled with hardcore (as appears to be thought?). They surely represent new-built structures, probably on old foundations, and possibly standing ruins. There was plenty of moulded masonry in the walls' core, wherever they are broken out. The Gothicky masonry frags in the 'chapel' might be relevant here. That mid C18th period is more likely to be the chronological and aesthetic context for the garden layout. That may also be true of all the garden walls, that SPAB are consolidating. I thought it interesting that this fine C18 garden layout recognises and perpetuates the monastic 'bones' of the site. Indeed this gardening enterprise reminded me of one of the various schemes undertaken during the past 20 years for memorialising defunct sporting venues (like football stadia) within re-development as housing estates! The Boxley garden does not seem to be logged in the Parks and Gardens website or the HE Gardens Register (?); but I believe it has an intrinsically interesting story to tell, if approached from this point of view – i.e. that it represents and celebrates the monastic background of the site, 200 years after the Dissolution.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I feel that in order to understand the medieval monastery at Boxley, it would make good sense to understand the house and gardens in combination.

[5] Precinct Wall

I looked at the 'precinct wall' in the most cursory fashion, mostly SW of the 'Hospitium'. I'm afraid I wonder whether (in its present form, at least) it too might represent a park wall, that is contemporary with this park-and-gardens phase of the site, rather than the monastic one. It appears to me to ring-fence the core of this elaborate ornamental garden. I wonder whether a parks-and-gardens and local landscape study, of the traditional sort might be able to resolve this – rather fundamental point?

PE

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