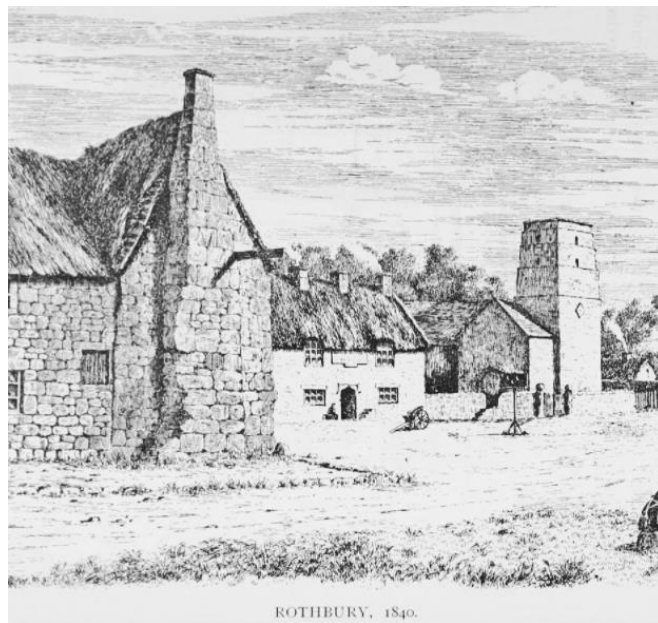


ROTHBURY

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

OCTOBER 2020



North-west view after Dixon, 1840

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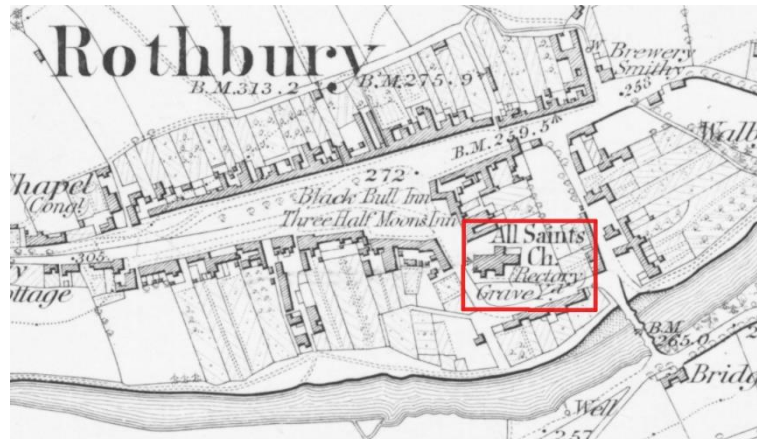
Rothbury, All Saints' Church

The parish church of All Saints stands at the south-east corner of the green at Rothbury, and to the north-west of the medieval bridge over the River Coquet

The church is built of close-jointed stone with a pecked finish, with ashlar dressings (rock-faced and margined to the buttresses of the late-19th century vestry and organ chamber) and graduated Lakeland slate

roofs; the majority of the building is in the style of c1300. It consists of a four-bay nave with aisles (with vestries at their west ends) and transepts which have two-bay western aisles, a west tower, south porch, and a chancel with a vestry and organ chamber to the north.

The **West Tower** has a tall lower stage rising to a chamfered set back at the base of the belfry. The western angles have pairs of stepped buttresses rising to full height, the southern of the southern pair being enlarged to contain a newel stair, with a shoulder-arched doorway at its base, on the south, and a series of chamfered loops. On the west there is doorway of three richly-moulded orders, all on jamb shafts, under a moulded hood with head stops, a king and a bishop, with above it a window of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, and higher up, lighting the ringing chamber, two trefoiled lancets. The side walls of the tower are engaged by the aisles, which end just short of the western buttresses. On each side of the belfry is a larger opening of two cinquefoil-headed lights with a foiled circle in the spandrel, within a triple-chamfered arch which has a hoodmould with shaped stops. The slightly-oversailing parapet has a moulded embattled coping, and at its south-west corner a taller turret at the



Location Map

From 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile (1866)
Ordnance Survey Map Licence 100045703

head of the stair, lit by a trefoiled circular light on the south and with a steep north-south gabled cap.



South view

The **Nave** has a clerestory of three pairs of chamfered lancets on each side and a coped eastern gable with a ring-cross finial. The aisles are each of three and a half bays, the half-bay being at the east end, and their side walls are articulated by stepped buttresses, except on the south where the porch serves this function and there is only one buttress between the third and fourth bays; each bay has a chamfered lancet window.

The **South Porch** has a large outer arch of two chamfered orders, with jambs of the same section that have moulded bases and capitals; the steep gable has a coping that is chamfered on its under side, and carries a bracelet cross finial. The internal walls of the porch are plastered; three carved stones are built into the west wall. The inner doorway has a sharply two-centred arch of two continuous orders, a moulded inner and a chamfered outer. In the east wall of the porch is a window of two lancet lights, with a segmental rear arch.

The **South Transept** has a single lancet in its west wall, and in its south end a pair of tall lancets in the main body and a smaller one set at a lower level to the

aisle; the coped gable has a foliate cross finial. The east wall of the transept (right) is of medieval date, of roughly-shaped and roughly-coursed stone, generally blue-grey in colour; it has three lancets, the southern two, wider and with broader splays are in blue-grey stone, whilst the dressings of the northern lancet in brown sandstone. The northern bay is difficult to see due to trees.



The **North Transept** has a single lancet on the north, and one in the west wall; its east side is covered by the late-19th century organ chamber.



The south wall of the **Chancel** (left) is of three bays, articulated by big stepped buttresses; the western is clearly 19th century but the other two, between the central and eastern bays and around a metre short

of the east end, are older. The easternmost buttress has an old incised sundial c 1.5 m above the ground, a circle with a central socket and 16 regular divisions; there is a second smaller and simpler sundial in the eastern bay, beneath the cut-back string. The walls are of roughly coursed and roughly-squared stone, usually brownish in colour, with some very large blocks in the lower courses, and also more regular (and presumably 19th century) masonry in the uppermost courses. In the central bay is a priest's door with a chamfered shouldered arch, with some of its dressings renewed, and a label which is actually a section of a string course, otherwise cut back flush with the wall face. Higher up each bay has a pair of chamfered lancets, the two in the western bay in 19th century stone, the others ancient.

The east wall of the chancel has some very large blocks low down, including two elongate tapered ones in the lower south-east quoin which are probably medieval grave slabs. Above the cut-back string course are a triplet of lancet windows with double-chamfered surrounds, the glass-line being, unusually, central to the wall. At the north-east corner are a pair of 19th century stepped buttresses. The short length exposed of the north wall, to the east of the late-19th century vestry, is of medieval masonry, with remains of the string course.



East view

The **Vestry and Organ Chamber** have more chamfered lancet windows, and stacks with gabled tops rising from the junction of the east vestry wall with the chancel, and the north-east corner of the organ chamber.

Interior

The internal walls are plastered except for exposed ashlar dressings. A wooden internal porch encloses the south door. The four-bay nave arcades have two-centred arches of two chamfered orders, octagonal piers and semi-octagonal western responds with simple moulded capitals and chamfered bases, all of 1850, although they may replicate what was there before. The eastern responds are older; the southern is semi-octagonal and of the same character as the arcades although its capital is restoration. The eastern respond of the north arcade is quite different and is a 13th century corbel, with nail-head ornament to its capital and a moulded base c 1m above the floor. The two-bay arcades to the western aisles of the transepts spring from the easternmost piers of the nave arcades, and follow their form except that their outer responds are semi-octagonal corbels. The south door has a chamfered segmental-pointed rear arch, and the lancet windows in the aisles and transepts all have segmental-pointed rear arches with hollow chamfers to the heads only; the clerestory windows have segmental chamfered rear arches. The arch to the Tower is tall and two-centred and of two chamfered orders, the outer continued to the floor and the inner carried on semicircular-plan corbels with moulded capitals and bases. Inside the tower there is a late-19th century panelled dado, cutting across a blocked segmental-headed doorway at the east end of the north wall. The window above the west door has a segmental-pointed rear arch.



The west end of the north aisle has a segmental-pointed arch of two chamfered orders, closed by a later wall with a segmental headed doorway into the **North-West Vestry** inside which, re-set over a cupboard in the south wall, is the head of a square-headed doorway with a moulded surround and the inscription 'THOMAS EANSLEY' along with depictions of mason's tools and the date '1611' (right)



On the east side of the **South Transept** the central and southern lancet windows have broad internal splays and segmental rear arches, whilst the much narrower northern one has a segmental-pointed head; all these remain behind plaster.

The broad arch on the east of the **North Transept** is of segmental form and of two-chamfered orders; it is all in 19th century ashlar but sits on very low semi-octagonal respond with simple moulded capitals that sit directly on splayed bases, on top of a screen wall 1.2 m high.

The lofty **Chancel** arch is of two-centred form and of two chamfered orders, the outer coming down to stops c 1.5 m above the floor, and the inner having a chamfered base above a metre-high stone screen, now removed.

On the south of the chancel the six lancet windows all have plain segmental rear arches, plastered over. Underneath the easternmost is a recess that has a trefoiled head with a broad chamfer, and a sill formed by a square-edged slab with below it the semicircular moulded bowl of a piscina, springing from a corbel. The eastern triplet of lancets have double-chamfered surrounds, as to the exterior. On the north of the chancel are a pair of wide arches, of near-semicircular form and of two chamfered orders, resting on an octagonal pier. The western respond is of plain square plan, but the eastern semi-octagonal; the pier and responds have simple moulded capitals, but their bases are not exposed.

The chancel has a hammerbeam roof of five bays with an additional half bay at each end. The trusses have collars set high and carry two levels of purlins and a ridge, and have arch braces, with below the stub ties solid shaped spandrel pieces carried on elaborately carved ashlar corbels.

The nave roof is rather simpler, of four bays with collar-beam trusses that have upper king-posts and carry one level of purlins and a ridge, with long arch braces coming down to wall posts on ashlar corbels. The transept roofs are each of four bays with simple collar beam trusses; the aisle roofs are contemporary as well.



North chancel arcade, formerly opening into Cartington Chapel

Structural Development

The 13th century work of the chancel and south transept appears to relate to a church of more or less the present size and form; however old records provide tantalising evidence for an earlier building, perhaps of quite different form, the last vestiges of which were swept away in 1850. One early 19th century source¹

¹ Mackenzie II (1825) An Historical, Topographical and Descriptive View of the County of Northumberland, 58

mentions ‘fragments of arches still discernible in the steeple’ and also that ‘foundations of buildings have been discovered about 40 yards to the westward, which seem to have been connected to the body of the church’.

There is one valuable source that previous researches seem to have been unaware of. In the Northumberland County Archive at Woodhorn is an 1840s report ‘on the present state of Rothbury Church’ by the well-known architect Anthony Salvin². In this he sees the remains of the original building being the lower stage of the tower, which had four arches ‘now walled up’, and the south wall of the chancel. The upper part of the tower Salvin saw ‘a very humble attempt to obtain a belfry...of no antiquity or interest’. The tower walls were bulging but were capable of repair if two flat Norman buttresses were added on the west. There were two arches on the west side of each transept, and in the nave the pillars and arches were leaning to the north, due to the weight of a former vault over the south aisle, although there had not been a vault over the north aisle. The arcade pillars and arches had been mutilated to make room for galleries. A second note, dated October 28 1845, refers to the ‘foregoing report being submitted some years ago’, and makes proposals for additions to the west end of the south aisle and the west side of the Trewhitt Chapel (south transept) both ‘on foundations that have been discovered by the removal of the earth’.

Accompanying the report is a very interesting plan³. It is not dated, and has a note saying ‘the red portions of the plan denote the new stone work’ – yet it is all in black! It does however tally with the recommendations in Salvin’s text, with the west bay of the south aisle and west aisle of the south transept shown, as well as two shallow buttresses he proposed for the west side of the tower. It is the tower that is the most interesting feature, as the plan clearly depicts the medieval structure. It seems to have had arches in all four side walls, all reduced in size, are shown as having elaborate moulded jambs. The four arches show that this was a crossing, which may or may not originally have been carried up as a tower; what is unclear is its date. If it were Anglo-Saxon, then the elaborate moulded responds would indicate a high-status structure, and have no parallel in the North of England. If it were Norman Romanesque, then the only real parallel is Kelso Abbey, with its surviving western crossing.

² Ref EP103/62

³ EP 103/61/2

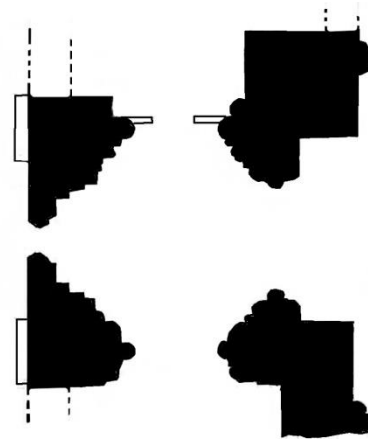
Sculptural evidence points to there being an important Saxon church, perhaps monastic, here; there is no evidence of a major post-Conquest church or monastic foundation.

Several old illustrations show the lost tower, as having several receding stages, and a blocked arch on the south; the openings are mostly small, although none of the illustrations show them in any detail.

Honeyman in the *County History*⁴ argues for a parallel with Jarrow, where two earlier churches on a common axis were linked by a late Saxon/early Norman tower, and there seems some plausibility in this, in that the Rothbury tower seems to have shared with Jarrow the unusual feature of its longer axis being north-south. In 1988 a dowsed plan of the church was published⁵ showing in detail the plan of two Saxon churches with the western remarkably similar in plan and dimensions to Jarrow, just as Honeyman had surmised.

This all seemed quite credible. However in 2005 the opportunity came to test this out, with an archaeological watching brief carried out⁶ on a new drain running the full width of the church outside its west end. This uncovered two probable medieval drains and a limekiln (with a re-used fragment of a Saxon cross) - but no remains of any earlier church building. There was, it was claimed, enough evidence to show that one never existed, and the dowsing explained as being perhaps misled by modern service trenches.....

There remains however the evidence of Salvin's notes and plan (and Mackenzie's earlier comment), showing that there once was a western crossing. Old illustrations show that its northern arch appeared to open into a sizeable transept-like structure, later used as a vestry⁷; Salvin's proposed plan shows this rebuilt to match the south aisle.



ROTHBURY THE MEDIEVAL TOWER

redrawn from plan of proposed restoration by Salvin c1845

⁴ 1940 *Northumberland County History* XV, 321-220

⁵ 1988 Bailey R.N., Cambridge, E and Briggs, Denis H Dowsing and Church Archaeology. *Intercept*, 97-99, 164

⁶ 2005. Ian Farmer Associates MS report (copy with Northumberland County Archaeology Service) *All Saints Parish Church, Rothbury An archaeological watching brief and excavation at All Saints Parish Church Rothbury relating to the construction of a sewer pipe trench*

⁷ Shown on An 1840 drawing of a north-west view of the church (Dixon, D.D (1903). *Upper Coquetdale*. Robert Redpath, f.p.374), as being as tall as the nave, and with a large round-arched (Romanesque?) doorway in its north end. . Honeyman suggests that it was remodelled as a vestry in 1611, the date on a doorhead in the

It is only with the 13th century, a great time of rebuilding and enlargement in the county, that we come to firm evidence. By this date the nave, whatever its original date, had been provided with at least a south aisle – its eastern respond and east wall survive. The eastern respond of the present north aisle, with nail-had ornament, could be from an aisle arcade or just an arch into a transept or chapel. All this probably took place before the last decades of the century, after the long war with Scotland began. Honeyman sees a north chapel being added to the chancel in the 13th century as well, but the evidence for this is less clear as it must have been replaced by the Cartington Porch in the last decade of the 14th century. He saw the chancel arch as 14th century work as well, and similar in detail to work at St Nicholas' in Newcastle.

It is unlikely that the church escaped damage during the Border Wars, although Honeyman suggests two buttresses on the south of the chancel were repair of this period, coeval with the steep-pitched roofs of nave and chancel being replaced by lower ones. Salvin's reference to the south aisle having been vaulted suggests a late medieval reconstruction, maybe like Elsdon where the nave and transept aisles have vaults.

Later alterations are chronicled by Honeyman, some taken from documentary sources, some perhaps surmise. At an unspecified date he sees the north transept of the nave⁸, and north aisle (if there was one) as being removed, and in the early 17th century the south porch or porticus of the tower replaced by a south porch to the south aisle, and its corresponding north porch turned into a vestry⁹ In 1648 the Cartington Porch was abandoned (after Sir Edward Widdrington refused to keep it in repair) and its arcade to the chancel walled up. In the early 18th century a large sash window was inserted in the western bay of the south wall of the chancel, various dormers windows were inserted in the big roof that covered nave and south aisle.

The 19th century story is well known. Salvin's more moderate restoration scheme was ignored, and when the Rev. C.G.Vernon Harcourt insisted on modernisation, and despite the efforts of Archdeacon Singleton he employed George Pickering, restorer of Alwinton and Holystone, to demolish and rebuild everything west of the chancel arch, and alter the chancel as well. In 1887 the

present vestry. The rebuilding of the upper part of its gable is recorded as being one of the works of the 1724-1730 period. It may have been demolished before the 1850 remodelling; an early 19th century town plan (copy in church) does not show any projection here.

⁸ The early 19th century town plan appears to show a north transept.

⁹ See footnote 6

long-derelict shell of the Cartington Porch was removed and the present vestry and organ chamber built. In 1900 a new two-light window was inserted in the west wall of the tower; subsequent changes have been minor.

Archaeological Assessment

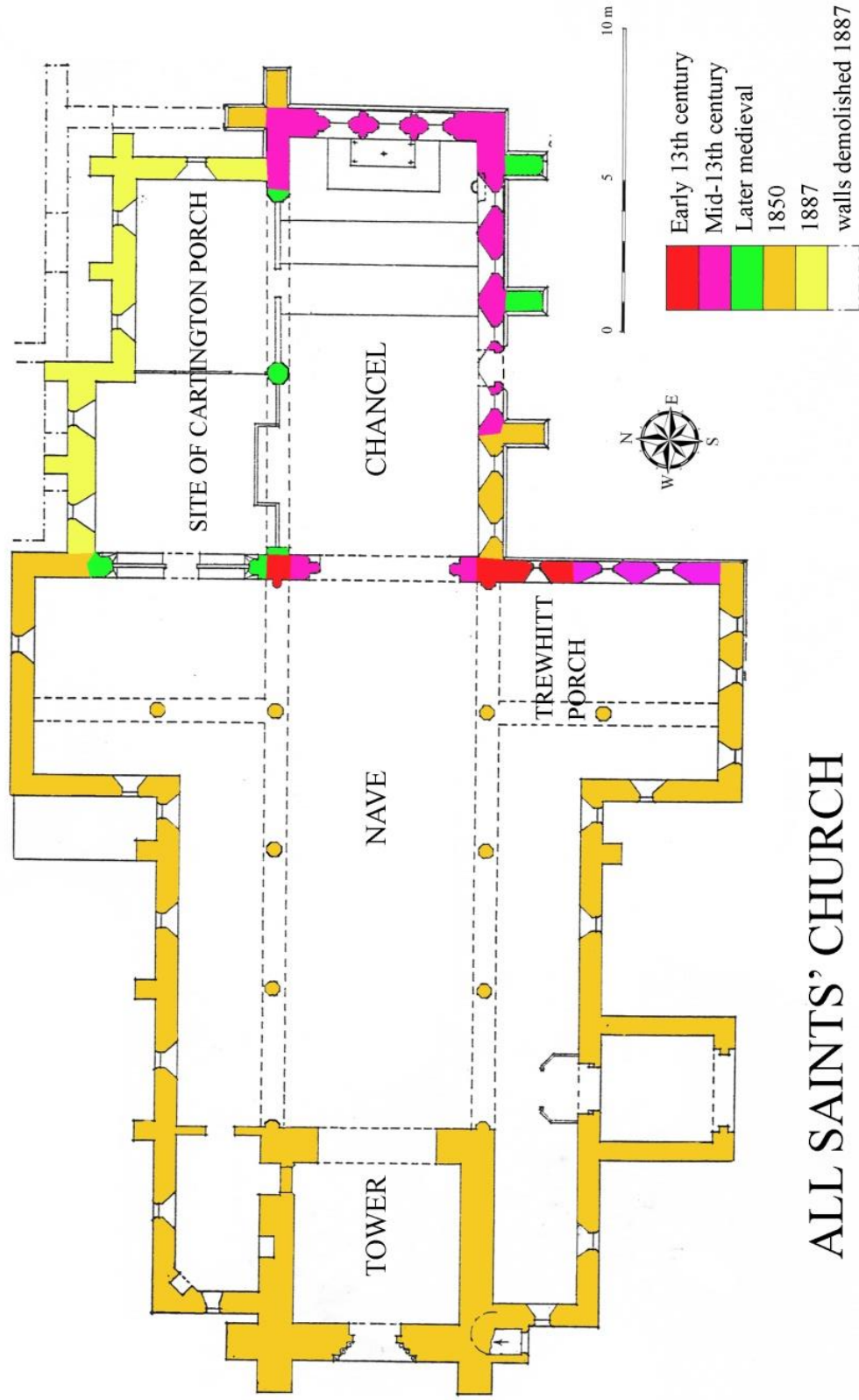
It is difficult to underestimate the archaeological potential of this site, with (from the evidence of the cross) a major Saxon monastic site waiting to be found, despite the fact that we now know no less about it than we thought we did before the 2005 archaeological watching brief that dashed hopes regarding the postulated double church (and did little for the credibility of dowsing as an archaeological technique).

Whilst much of the present church is Victorian, it is highly likely that significant archaeological deposits and structural remains will survive beneath its floors, so any disturbance of these should be accompanied by at least an archaeological watching brief. This also goes for areas of the external churchyard adjacent to the building as, ignoring the dowsed plan, there is evidence that the footprint of the medieval building extended beyond the present one, at least in the areas of the Cartington Porch (outside the walls of the vestry and organ chamber on the north of the chancel) and on the north of the tower, where the former vestry demolished in 1850 seems to have extended beyond the present north aisle.

Archaeological vigilance will also be required if the fabric of any the surviving medieval walls – those of the chancel, and the east walls of the south transepts – are discovered. Earlier plaster, perhaps with mural decoration, might conceivably survive, or the removal of plaster might reveal structural features, which should be recorded.



c1800 Bell plan showing outline of pre-restoration church. There is a discrepancy with the c1840 Dixon in that the projecting NW vestry is not shown



ALL SAINTS' CHURCH ROTHBURY

Plan after H L Honeyman 1937

Appendix. From Northumberland Extensive Urban Survey project 2009, available online at

<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-1019-1/dissemination/pdf/Rothbury.pdf>

(p38)

Event No: 13570 Ian Farmer Associates, 2005. All Saints Parish Church, Rothbury An archaeological watching brief and excavation at All Saints Parish Church Rothbury relating to the construction of a sewer pipe trench. These areas of archaeological importance were identified during the excavations. An unmortared stone-built conduit of possible medieval date was found in Area 1. In Area 2 a construction trench and fills associated with the Victorian church and tower were found along with the truncated remains of a human skeleton. A second inhumation and two large sandstone flags capping another conduit were also recovered. In Area 3 part of a medieval lime kiln was discovered and the watching brief was extended into an excavation to further investigate this feature. To the north of this kiln a third inhumation was revealed. A fragment of pre-conquest cross was also discovered in the kiln, presumably re-used in the kiln walls.