

HYDE ABBEY - REDISCOVERING THE LOST MINSTER OF ALFRED THE GREAT

Introduction: neighbourhood archaeology

During building works at 8 Alswitha Terrace, King Alfred Place, Winchester, September 2009, an archaeological watching brief was carried out in the former grounds of Hyde Abbey.

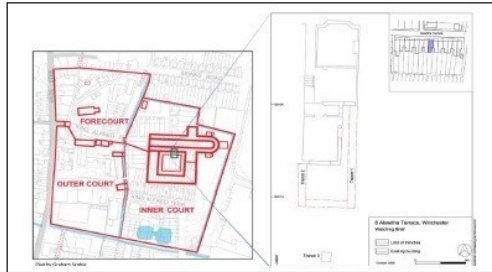
Hyde Abbey was a Benedictine monastery located outside the north walls of the ancient city of Winchester. In 1539, the abbey was dissolved followed by demolition. Only Hyde Abbey's gatehouse and its parochial church, St. Bartholomew's survive.

Since demolition the site has been disturbed by numerous phases of building the latest of which is the King Alfred Place development built in 1897.

A significant archaeological investigation was carried out between 1995 and 1999 by the Winchester Museums Service which helped to reveal the plan of the abbey seen in this illustration.

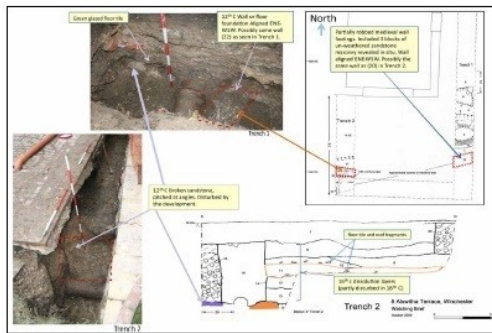


The location of the site



The site of 8 Alswitha Terrace is about 45m east-north-east of the Hyde Abbey church. A cloister is believed to have been attached to the south side of the church. The location of this survey is on the north side of this cloister. Three trenches were dug during the watching brief. Two north-south strip trenches were excavated, hand-dug to a depth of 1 metre. Trench 3, also hand-dug, comprised a 1 metre square trench but there were no significant finds.

Findings of trench diggings



The diggings revealed a sequence of layers, the majority of which pertained to the demolition of Hyde Abbey in the 16th century. Beneath these layers structural remains of wall footings and a floor foundation were found. These appear to be the medieval 12th C wall footings (item numbers 20 and 22 in trench 1 & 2 on the map above) of the north side of the abbey cloister. This wall fits with the plan and layout of Hyde Abbey postulated by Graham Scobie (who was director of the excavation of the abbey church), although the orientation has a slight angle with the line of the inner north cloister wall on this plan. This may be explained by some unknown deviance of orientation of the cloister with regard to the main church.

The overlying rubble layers directly associated with the demolition and systematic stripping of materials from the site of Hyde Abbey at the time of the dissolution in 1538/9 (represented by layers 8 to 13 in Trench 2). The division between layers is very distinctive, suggesting distinct activities during the demolition period.

Artefacts from the trenches of 8 Alswitha Terrace: floor tiles

Corner of floor tile (18-19mm thick) with insid decoration (two-coloured tile). Splashed green glaze on the top of one side, otherwise unglazed. Fleur de lys corner motif above a roundel.



Fragments of floor tiles found in the demolition layers at Alswitha Road are shown above. Most fragments do not show much patterning but do show glazing. One corner of a tile shows a Fleur de lys motif above roundel. This is known as a two-colour tile. More complete tiles of this type have been found elsewhere on the Hyde Abbey site.

Origin of the foundation stones



Limestone masonry from medieval wall foundations (22) in Trench 1



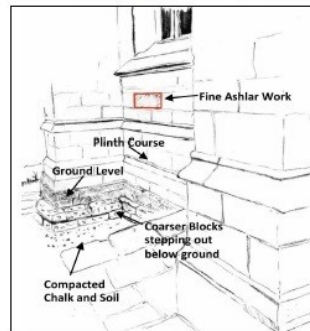
Ashlar block used in used in cloister wall

Foundation Ashlar

The blockwork that makes up the majority of stones in medieval buildings such as Hyde Abbey are roughly hewn or where appropriate carefully dressed and more accurately squared. The more formal and carefully dressed blockwork is often referred to as Ashlar.

The piece on display in the photo immediately to the left fits in to the latter group and displays a finely tooled finish. This particular block is hewn of Caen stone. It was found in trench 1 in the back garden of 8 Alswitha Terrace. The block was found below ground level along with two others of similar size and appearance (blocks seen together in the photo to the left).

The blocks had been lain purposefully and seemed to form part of a wall foundation. It seems unlikely that the mason who produced these stones would have gone to the trouble of finishing them so carefully if they were intended to be hidden away beneath the ground. Most probably the blocks had come from an earlier phase of building and at some point during the history of the abbey, had been reused as foundations.



Two-colour floor tiles and Hyde Abbey



Clarendon Palace



Titchfield Abbey



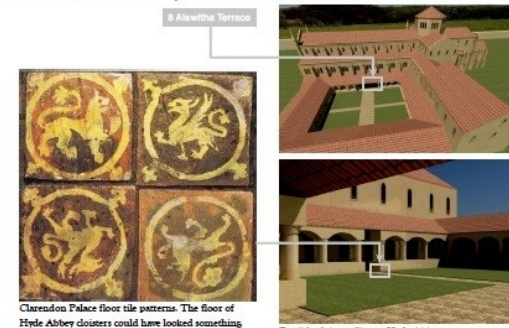
This 14th century tile fragment from Hyde Abbey depicting the back half of a lion. Height 130mm

Two-colour tiles were the most popular and widespread decorated medieval tile. The surface decoration was mostly applied as white clay on a red clay body. Two-colour tiles were usually glazed with the clearest lead glaze available that resulted in a brown and yellow tile.

The origin of two-colour decoration is not known, but it may have been developed in both France and England in the second quarter of the thirteenth century.

These lions and griffins formed two of the most popular motifs in the later 13th C and continued into the 14th C. They, are known in many variant forms from sites as far away as north Wales, Lincolnshire and Devon as well as over the whole of Wessex. Examples can be found in Winchester College, Winchester Cathedral, Romsey Abbey, Titchfield Abbey and Clarendon Palace, near Salisbury.

Reconstruction of how Hyde Abbey cloisters may have looked in 13th C



Clarendon Palace floor tile patterns. The floor of Hyde Abbey cloisters could have looked something like this.

Possible cloister tiling at Hyde Abbey