Excavations in the South Transept of St Mary’s Abbey, York

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Landscaping developments on the site of St Mary’s Abbey, situated within the Museum Gardens, encountered in situ archaeological remains in the south transept. A substantial area of a wall foundation was uncovered and a chapel apse discovered. The published record of the architectural features within this area is piecemeal and does not account for the unusual position of this feature within the transept.

See References for a glossary of abbreviations.

Background
A major landscaping and gardening project by York Museums Trust, begun in December 2014, intended to reclaim unused land behind the York Art Gallery and develop the north-west corner of the precinct of St Mary’s Abbey (centred at NGR SE 59941 52176) as part of a wider scheme of landscaping developments within the environs of the Museum Gardens, York. The scheme of works intended to open up additional visitor space within the Museum Gardens, due for opening in August 2015. The installation of a fibre optic cable from the Yorkshire Museum to the York Art Gallery, via the Gardens, necessitated this scheme of works. A condition of the SMC (Scheduled Monument Consent, English Heritage ref: S000097484) required the preliminary excavation of three trenches within the Abbey church central range in March 2015 (Parker 2015a). These excavations, undertaken to a maximum depth of 0.5m, recorded small quantities of in situ architectural remains. The later discovery of significant quantities of in situ archaeological deposits during the final phase of the cable trench excavations necessitated a second archaeological investigation on this site. St Mary’s Abbey is a Grade I Listed Building and is located within an Area of Archaeological Interest (AAI) and the York Central Historic Core Conservation Area. The York Museum Gardens, within which the Abbey is situated, are a Grade II Listed Park and Garden.

Site and excavation history
St Mary’s Abbey was founded in 1088 following grants from William II. The abbey church is aligned northeast-southwest, the Norman church of which had an apsidal liturgical end flanked by smaller apses in the transepts (Wilson and Mee 2009, 7). A major rebuilding and expansion of the Abbey church occurred in the mid to late 13th century under Abbot Simon de Warwick (Wilson and Burton 1988, 7). The Abbey surrendered to the crown in November 1539 during the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. From the 16th century onwards this land was used as gardens in private ownership of the King’s Manor complex and later acquired by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society in 1828.

Archaeological investigations in the Abbey church have occurred over much of the past two centuries. The most extensive series of excavations on the site were undertaken in 1827–29 by the Rev. Charles Wellbeloved, the first large scale monastic excavations to be extensively published in Britain (Wellbeloved 1829). A series of excavations by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society in 1900–02 focussed on the eastern end of the church (Briery 1901; 1902; Bilson 1906) and were followed in 1912–14 by Walter Harvey Brook and Edwin Ridsdale Tate (Brook 1914) culminating in an updated plan of the Abbey being produced by Tate in 1914. George Willmot, Keeper of the Yorkshire Museum, undertook a series of excavations from 1952–56 in the western range. The archive remains in the Yorkshire Museum, but has never been fully published; only fragmentary reports are available (Willmot 1953). A series of small excavations by York Archaeological Trust between 1986 and 2000 were located across the Abbey church and its associated buildings (Wilson and Mee 2009, 60). A 1986 excavation investigated the...
relationship between the south transept and the Yorkshire Museum’s Tempest Anderson Hall building directly atop of it (Wilson and Mee 2009,7; YAT site ref 1986.19 – a copy of this report was unavailable from YAT at the time of writing). Excavations on the Abbey church during the current phase of developments located wall foundations associated with the northwest pillar of the central range at a depth of 0.35m, but only adjacent to the modern reconstruction of these. Elsewhere in the abbey church no stratified remains were visible beyond a depth of 0.5m (Parker 2015a).

South Transept excavation

A single trench measuring 8.7m x 1.05m was excavated and recorded by the author in the south Transept of St Mary’s Abbey, York in April 2015 (Parker 2015b, Fig. 1). The excavation exceeded the original SMC-specified dimensions, a decision made in consultation with Historic England, and it was intended to excavate only to a depth at which archaeological deposits were encountered: this was shown to be a variable depth of between 0.07m and 0.35m. The ground surface reduced in height by 0.86m from the highest point at the north-eastern edge of the trench, to the lowest at the south-western edge.
Three primary observations were made of the uncovered deposits. Firstly, that a substantial quantity of foundation associated with the north-east wall of the south transept remains in situ (Fig. 2, context [103]). These foundations retain a strong compaction at the level exposed, although a number of stones have been robbed out. A clear association between the foundations and the consolidated line of the nave wall as visible on the modern ground surface is established at the north-western edge of the trench. The second observation is that of the identification of a chapel apse within the transept (Fig. 2). The southern extremities of this apse could not be investigated as part of this scheme of works. The third observation is that a significant area of disturbance has occurred at the eastern edge of the trench, interpreted as non-archaeological ground penetrating works associated with the construction of the Tempest Anderson Hall, a 1914 extension of the Yorkshire Museum (YPS 1913), the north-western wall of which is located 1m south-east from the trench edge plotted in Fig. 2.

The Chapel Apse

Post-excavation research has focussed on the previous excavation work associated with the transepts of the Abbey church and the various interpretations over time. Excavations by Wellbeloved (1827–29) and Brierly (1900–02) produced the standard plan of the Abbey site. This plan, of which copies are retained in the Yorkshire Museum archive, shows the two smaller chapel apses in the north transept and conjecturally assume that the layout was mirrored in the south transept. A 1914 plan of the same,
with the additions of the 1912–14 excavations (also in the archive) draws the south transept apses as excavated rather than conjectural.

Excavation has shown that this cannot be the case. The central point of the chapel apse is located 5m east from the wall junction of the transept and the nave, as shown to scale by Tate (Fig.3). Published reports of the apses in the north transept (Wellbeloved 1829; Brierly 1901; 1902) record a larger chapel apse centred 3.3m west from the corresponding wall junction and a second, smaller apse a further 4.5m west and inset by at least 2m. The location of the south transept apse at an approximate middle point along the wall does not correlate to the published plan (Fig.4). It should be noted that Tate’s 1914 plan has formed the basis for later published plans of the Abbey church (Wilson and Burton 1988; RCHME pl. 40) recording the in situ remains of the 11th-century Romanesque church. The dating of the south transept apse is a difficult issue to approach as no full stratigraphic record for the site was permitted, given the heritage protection on the site. If the apse is part of the 11th-century construction of the church, the conjectural location of the apses provided by Tate, and replicated by others, requires review as the apse is located further east than it has thus far been associated, and no archaeological (or published) record accounts for a second apse in the south transept. The immediate ground cover of the transept included a number of residual 19th-century small finds, identifying its excavation and reburial at some point (Parker 2015b). The 13th-century apses of the north transept were built two feet (0.6m) above the floor level of the Norman apses (Tate 1913, 16). Notes relating to the reconstruction of fragments of the Abbey walls (Brook 1914) based on excavated heights suggests that the 2015 excavations penetrated to a depth comparable with the 13th-century levels of the north transepts. Wilson and Mee (2009, 7) assert that the only remaining fragment of the Norman church visible in situ is a gritstone block, possibly of re-used Roman material. The apse encountered by this scheme of excavations was constructed of faced limestone blocks. If the apse can be associated with the 13th-century reconstruction (and repositioned as part of this rebuilding) of the Abbey church and simply not planned by previous investigators, this may account for the variation in its now established location. No foundation associated with a second apse, either east or west of this feature, was encountered during excavation. However, the possibility that a second apse has been removed from the area of disturbance at the east of the trench cannot be discounted at this stage.
Archives
The paper and digital archive for this site is held in the Yorkshire Museum (York Museums Trust) under the accession code YORYM : 2015.127.

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Abbreviations
RCHME Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England)
SMC Scheduled Monument Consent
YAT York Archaeological Trust
YMT York Museums Trust
YPS Yorkshire Philosophical Society

References
Wellbeloved, C. 1829. Some account of the ancient and present state of the Abbey of St Mary, York, and of the discoveries recently made excavating the ground on which the principal buildings of the Abbey formerly stood. Vesta Monumenta 5.