Reflections on the excavation at Bartlemas
Graham Jones

Looking back to the first day of excavation at the east end of the Bartlemas Chapel, cleaning the machine-exposed surface southwards from the angle of the north-east buttress in Sector C of Trench 1, its barely yielding hardness beneath the trowel is still a clear memory. Some weeks later, my palms are still calloused! I was familiar with the chapel's origins and early history, but not with the details of its post-medieval fortunes, so I had no thought of this stony, gritty surface, described as a path, having anything to do with the medieval structure. However, at the end of the excavation six weeks later, the last day's digging forced a realisation that this was not necessarily the case.

Indeed, the last couple of days were among the most challenging, physically and in terms of interpretation. I had to abandon my thoughts of an apsidal chapel from the 1120s, for example – or at least for the time being. Actually, what was revealed in my sector raises much more intriguing possibilities. How lucky I was – privileged, even – to find myself allocated to this place in the excavation.

Again looking back, Jane Harrison's comments on the first morning's tour of the site were to have marked relevance for how arrangements and conditions at the east of the chapel might be interpreted. She pointed out the dampness of the ground against the east end of the north wall (a dampness giving rise to green discoloration of paving slabs inside the building). This was due to the fall of the ground surface on the north side of the chapel, but there was also the possibility, as she pointed out, that given the continued southward fall of the land surface, the water was channelled through the building and that its exit was one possible reason for a fan-shaped arrangement of large vertical stones on the opposite side of the chapel in what appeared to be the fourteenth-century foundations. Six weeks later after a night of heavy rain, a squelchiness in what felt and looked like natural clay, apparent against the east end footings at the north-west edge of a truncated structural feature, prompted the thought that the water might have emerged here, too.

Indeed, the six weeks left this digger with the feeling that water may prove to be a key element (*the* key element perhaps) in determining the location of this site and its functions as a hospital for the treatment of leprosy. The importance of bathing for lepers is documented, and its ritual aspect is found in Leviticus.[1] In the immediate topography, 'marsh' as in Cowley Marsh, has the meaning in Old English *mersc* of 'well watered land'. As Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole noted, 'The common use of *mōr* and *mersc* as qualifiers in *tūn* names reflects the high value of wetland resources to early farmers.'[2] In the absence of early forms, my guess is that the Strowell at Bartlemas (ceremonially garlanded every year, according to the seventeenth-century antiquarian Anthony Wood[3]) signified a spring in *strōd*, an Old English term generally taken to signify 'marshy land overgrown with brushwood' (cf. Stroud, Gloucestershire).[4] These names need not be taken as indicating poor, peripheral land. St Bartholomew's Field, along the ridge between here and what is now Jeune Street, was a shared open field which gave rise to interdigitated portions of Headington, Iffley, Cowley, and St Clements parishes (Fig. 1) which survived into the late nineteenth century. This may have fossilised an area of intercommoning, which suggests that the land was desirable for particular uses. The underlying clay is certainly gluey, and readily stuck to the trowel when dried out. The topsoil, on the other had, is dark and broke up easily. Isolated sherds of pottery on the site suggest manuring to some minor degree, so that some of the land at least was cultivated. Indeed, as Fig. 1 shows, aratral curves (the S-shaped open

[1] See for example, in comparison with East African practice, Johnson M. Kimuhu, *Leviticus: the priestly laws and prohibitions from the perspective of ancient Near East and Africa*, Studies in Biblical Literature 115 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 383.
[2] Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000), hereafter 'Gelling and Cole', p. 37. A. H. Smith translated *mersc* as 'watery land, a marsh': *The Place-Name Elements, 2, The Elements Jafn-Ytri*, English Place-Name Society 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), hereafter 'Smith (1970)', p. 39. Gelling and Cole, p. 57, gave simply 'marsh', but noted that *mersc-tūn* settlements may have had a specialised function in relation to the marsh, or that their economy depended heavily on its products. A useful example is Moreton-in-Marsh, formerly Moreton Henmarsh (Gloucestershire).
[3] Anthony à Wood, *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford*, ed. Andrew Clark, Oxfordshire Historical Society 15, 17, 37 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889-99), 17, pp. 504-17.
[4] Gelling and Cole, p. 63. Smith (1970), p. 164.

field strip edges resulting from repeated turning of the plough) come up to and define the western boundary of St Bartholomew's.

The chief find in my sector, generally devoid of anything except bones, a few tiles and nails, and numerous pieces of gryphea, was an articulated skeleton of a young man who had lived well and done little manual work. The manner of burial is striking, for besides a stone lining on the south (rubbly limestone held together in places with a roughly applied powdery, plaster-like mortar), the north side was defined by what was left of a substantial piece of masonry. Core-like rubble to the north rested on three courses of mortared, dressed limestone blocks. My instinct was to look on this as evidence of an apse. Both burial and structure certainly looked to have a south-west to north-east trend. Furthermore, two fragments of skull above the burial and a further burial, evidenced by a skull, cut into the complete burial's lower half, hinted at deposition at an early phase in the chapel's history. It would fit a clerk, buried in a privileged position within feet of the high altar, even though outside the chapel.

I went as far as testing to my satisfaction with a computerised drawing that an apse could return within the space between the burial (just south of the centre of the east window) and the north-east buttress, on the south side of which the land surface of the first day continued and deepened (Fig. 2). The buttress is poorly underpinned by rubble on this side, and I entertained the idea that some larger stones in the hard surface might represent some indication of the apse's return.

The burial recorded and sampled, I was able to return to this area on the last day of the dig before back-filling in the hope that hacking down through the stony surface would vindicate the thesis. I was disappointed. The surface gave way to a sandy spread beneath it, and below that, pea-grit. Intriguingly, the sandy spread ran away under the buttress's under-pinning. There was no sign of anything structural, however. Instead, under the pea-grit there was clay – thick, glutinous stuff that felt and looked like natural. However, a fellow volunteer, Karen, came to join me, specifically to continue digging out the clay fill of a construction trench around the chapel – a feature which had come to light much earlier and whose removal showed it dying away in the southern angle of the buttress. At the bottom of the trench she came upon a large, flat limestone block and a large lump of mortar (perhaps tumbled so that the stone to which it had been applied was upended and was now face down in the clay). In the fading light that evening, and together with Jane for an hour the next morning as the back-filling mechanical digger advanced towards us around the chapel, a mass of masonry and mortar became visible a short distance north of the first. No apse, this, but a small but well formed structure, either attached to, or against the east end of the chapel and cut through by the construction trench for the fourteenth century chapel(Fig. 3).

Two possible interpretations may seem on the face of it as ambitious as the idea of an apse: that it represents a treasury for the relics which the chapel possessed, or that it was a well-house. Certainly it looked very probable that it related to a mortar floor revealed just at this spot by the initial mechanical removal of topsoil. It was as a result of cleaning back from the southern edge of this mortar floor that the burial came to light. A small building of indeterminate function (the occupant of Bartlemas House suggests it was used as a pigsty) is shown against the east wall of the chapel on an estate plan of *circa* 1840 and the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1878 (Figs 2 and 3). However, it looks rather larger than the structure revealed by trowelling and was probably at least partially re-using and existing surface.

I now wonder whether the surface at the north-east corner of the chapel, which I took to be early modern (a piece of worked stone, reminiscent of a fragment of a medieval corbel table, had been embedded in it), was leading towards the mortar floor and the small structure. Given that the sandy layer apparently supporting the surface was found to be running under the buttress, it seems more probable that the surface predates the (?late medieval) buttress.

If this surface represents a path, where was its other end? One possibility is that it linked the chapel with the water feature shown on nineteenth-century maps (Fig. 4). This long, oddly curving feature might have been a fishpond, perhaps, but more likely in the context of the hospital is either a washing (i.e. laundry) pool or a place for the bathing of patients. Were inmates making their way from a bathing place to an east-end well house – or to venerate the relics? A well-house was incorporated at St Kenelm's, Romsley (Worcestershire), under the east end of the church (Figs 5 and 6). Here it seems that earlier a stream may have flowed from north-west of the church, through the nave and into the chancel. A damp area down the centre of the nave still caused problems in the 1990s. At Whitwell (Rutland) the eponymous 'white' or 'holy' spring rose west of the hilltop church (Fig. 8) and through

it, excess water being channelled away through drainage stones at the base of the chancel arch pillars (Fig. 7). St Bartholomew on the Tiber Island, the inspiration for St Bart's, Smithfield, and so at one remove for Bartlemas, has a spring head in the sanctuary steps (Fig. 9). St Gabriel's church, Nazareth, has a spring in a western annexe which is associated with the Annunciation. At Bartlemas, a fellow volunteer, Steve, noticed what could be the ghost of an arch in the east wall – though the wall may have been rebuilt at least once, as evidenced by the truncated string course between the corner buttresses. This prompts comparison with the door behind the high altar at Hallaton (Leicestershire) (Fig. 10), which gave access to spiral steps in a former external turret probably leading to an ostension (or monstration) platform for displaying relics to the public. At Bartlemas the opening might possibly have been intended to allow the transfer of relics between their storage place and the main body of the chapel, or to give access from the chapel to a well-house, or for something else entirely.

Graham Jones, November 15, 2011

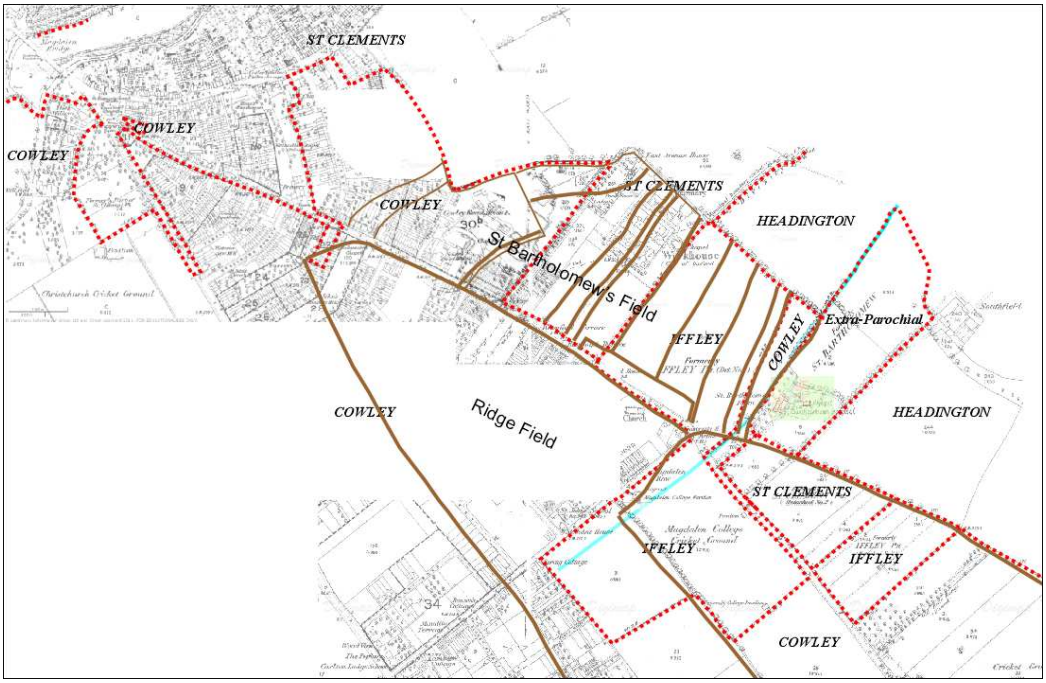

Fig. 1 *Open fields and parish boundaries, from OS 1:2500 maps, 1878, and select open field furlongs and strips shown on 'A Survey of an Estate belonging to the Dean and Canon of Christchurch lying in the Parish of Cowley in the County of Oxford, 1777'*

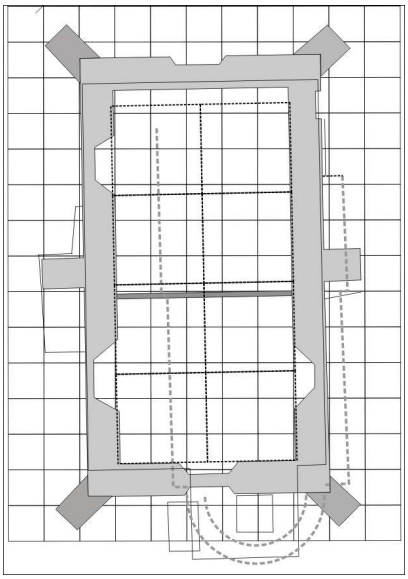

Fig. 2 *Conjectured apsidal end centred on mortar floor and defining the northern edge of the grave of Skeleton 1 (drawn by the author)*

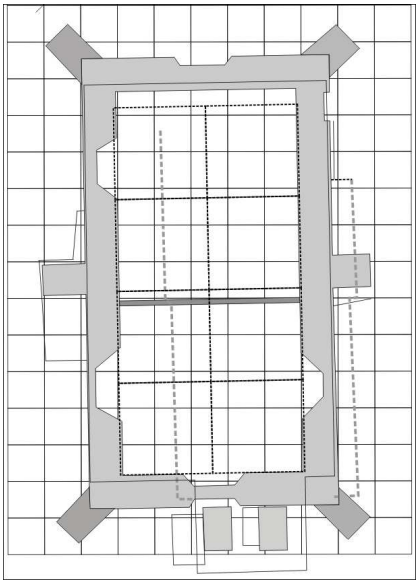

Fig. 3 *Structural masonry and mortar at the east end of the chapel (shaded) (drawn by the author)*

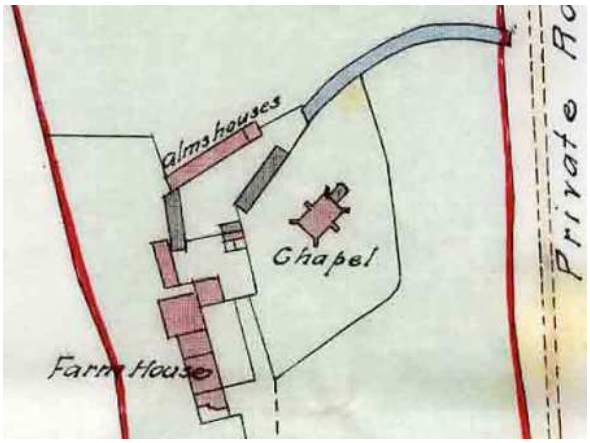

Fig. 4 *Water feature (coloured blue) shown on plan of Bartlemas Farm by Castle, Field & Castle, Oxford, June 8, 1837*

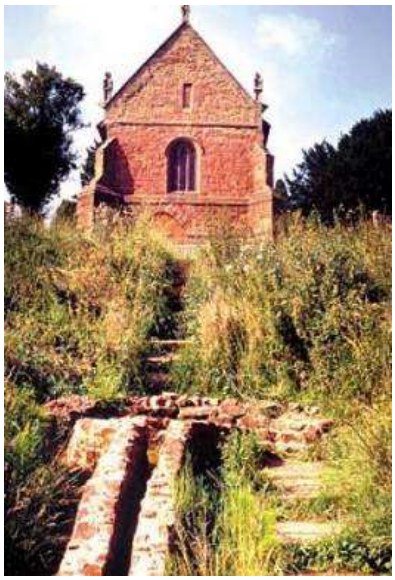

Fig. 5 *East end of St Kenelm's Church, Romsley, Worcestershire. Blocked-up archway giving access to wall-house beneath the east end of the church can just be seen. Brickwork in foreground is part of the landscaping of the present spring done in 1985.*

Fig. 6*: St Kenelm's from the south, with view northeastwards from the Clent Hills towards Halesowen*

Fig. 7 *St Michael's, Whitwell, Rutland. Drainage base at foot of thirteenth-century chancel arch column*

Fig. 8 *St Michael's, Whitwell, showing hilltop site and land falling away from the east end*

Fig. 9 *Romanesque sculptured spring-head in the sanctuary steps of St Bartholomew's on the Tiber Island, Rome*

Fig. 10 St Michael's, Hallaton *The scar of the internal doorway giving access to spiral steps to an external turret and probable platform for displaying relics can be seen below the northern light of the east end window. Crowds gather in the open space in front of the church entrance for the scattering of hare pie before the start of the procession to the site of St Morrell's Chapel for the Easter Monday Bottle-Kicking*