

ST ALBANS ABBEY  
THE EXCAVATION OF THE CHAPTER HOUSE 1978

*edited by*

Martin Biddle, †Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle,  
Megan Kirkpatrick, and Francis M. Morris





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Cover: Reconstruction of the third (rectangular) chapter house. RDFT Types A, B, C, D2, D3 and E (composite reconstruction from multiple images).



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In memory of Peter Clement Moore

dean of St Albans 1973–93

instigator, supporter, and friend

## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The excavation of the site of the medieval chapter house of St Albans Abbey took place in 1978 in response to the impending construction of a new chapter house, on the site of its medieval predecessor demolished following the suppression of the abbey in the sixteenth century.

The then dean of St Albans, Dr Peter Moore, and the Abbey Chapter had asked Andrew Anderson, the celebrated ecclesiastical architect, to design a new chapter house on the site of the previous building, but the site of the earlier chapter house and its burials and any earlier features had first to be fully investigated. Arrangements were made for an excavation which lasted from May into the autumn of 1978. As the then director of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, I oversaw the work along with my late wife, Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle, who wrote much of the present book.

The creation of memorial churches over the graves of saints outside the walls of Roman cities is commonplace in the world of late antiquity. One has only to think of St Peter's in Rome, or St Paul's without the Walls, but in Britain, no single case is yet known, other than at St Albans. There is no reason to doubt that the late Roman cemetery immediately to the south of and extending under the nave of the present abbey church is the place where Alban was buried and that the nave of the present abbey stands on the site of his grave and of the burials of his contemporaries.

Enigmatic finds had long revealed that this early Christian site on the hill, now dominated by the great mass of the Norman abbey church, is one of the most important to be studied for the history of early England. In just four short months our volunteers uncovered fragments of some of the decorated floor tiles of the Anglo-Saxon abbey and associated graves, along with the magnificent floor of relief-decorated tiles of the medieval chapter house, and the graves of sixteen known figures of the late eleventh-to fifteenth-century abbey, including eleven abbots.

I am particularly grateful to St Albans Cathedral for their unwavering support and to my co-editors, Megan Kirkpatrick and Francis Morris, for their unstinting help in seeing this volume through to publication.

Martin Biddle  
Summertown  
15 February 2024

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 1978 excavation of the chapter house at St Albans shone a light on the Cathedral's rich past and the significance of the findings was immediately recognized. Given the richness of the material, this volume has been in preparation for quite some time and many people have contributed to its completion. The editors are indebted for their support, both great and small, especially to the diggers and site supervisors who were instrumental at the very beginning of this project.

Thanks are especially owed to the contributors who have produced such carefully researched work and who offered helpful editorial suggestions over the years. Much of the initial work on the volume was undertaken by Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle and more recently her work has been revised and added to by Megan Kirkpatrick and Francis Morris. The illustrations have been carefully prepared by Hamish Roberton and Vicki Herring.

We owe much to the Dean and Chapter of St Albans Cathedral who have provided support and inspiration along the way. Special thanks are owed to the Friends of St Albans Cathedral who have supported the publication of this book from its early days. Julia Low's and Ailsa Herbert's patience and willingness to grapple with the most essential and often complicated questions, ranging from the academic, to the routinely practical, is gratefully acknowledged. We are grateful too to the Cathedral Archive Team who have supported this work, to David Kelsall especially. Members of The Fabric Advisory Committee have been devoted in their support.

We are very grateful to our three external readers for undertaking the task with every attention to detail and much enthusiasm. Our copyeditor, Sarah Thomas, has worked hard to ensure consistency across the text, illustrations, and tables. No small task. Our thanks are also gratefully given to Clare Chapman who has offered invaluable support and advice over the years, patiently and generously. The team at Archaeopress have, as is their standard, been brilliant to work with, adeptly dealing with all the complexities of a multi-faceted volume and always with enthusiasm and patience. Particular thanks are owed to Mike Schurer of Archeopress for his careful and kind guidance.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Compton (Lord Alwyne F. Compton) collection of tile tracings in the Society of Antiquaries, London.
BAR	British Archaeological Report
BL	British Library
BM	British Museum
BM Cat	Eames 1980
BW	Williamson 1889 and Williamson 1891
CK	Carson, Hill and Kent 1960b
CM	<i>Matthaei Parisiensis monachi Sancti Albani Chronica majora</i> , ed. H. R. Luard, 7 vols, Rolls Series, 57 (1872–83)
CSP Dom.	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series</i> , Public Record Office
d.	died
ESC	Seaby and Rayner 1974
ex.	number of examples
F.	Feature number
fl.	floruit.
F.ph.	Final phase
G.	Grave number
Gesta Abbat.	<i>Gesta abbatum monasterii Sancti Albani, a Thoma Walsingham, regnante Ricardo Secundo, compilata</i> , ed. H. T. Riley, 3 vols, Rolls Series, 28/4 (1866–9)
GLL	Greatest Lateral Length
GR	William of Malmesbury, <i>Gesta regum Anglorum</i>
grs	grains
HA	<i>Matthaei Parisiensis, monachi Sancti Albani, historia Anglorum: sive, ut vulgo dicitur, Historia minor; item ejusdem abbreviation chronicorum Angliae</i> , ed. F. Madden, 3 vols, Rolls Series, 44 (1866–9)
HE	<i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> , eds Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford, 1969)
HK	Carson, Hill, and Kent 1960a
MCE	Spink & Son Ltd. 1950
MLGB	N. R. Ker, <i>Medieval libraries of Great Britain: A list of surviving books</i> , Royal Historical Society, Guides and Handbooks, 3 (2nd edn, London, 1964)
mm	millimetres
MOL	Museum of London
MWS	Mandible Wear Stages
ND1	BL, MS Cotton Nero D I, St Albans Abbey, <i>Gesta abbatum</i>
ND7	BL, MS Cotton Nero D VII, St Albans Abbey, book of benefactors
NISP	Number of Identified Species Per Taxon

Norweb	Thompson and Dickinson 1992
LDM	Large Domestic Animals
P	Peck 1964
pm	privy mark
P.ph.	Provisional phase
PUE	<i>Papsturkunden in England</i> , ed. W. Holtzmann, 3 vols. (Abhandlungen der Akademie de Wissenschaften in Gottingen, Phil.-hist, Klasse, Neue Folge, Bd. Xxv.1, and Dritte Folge, No. 14, 15, 33 Berlin, 1930–5, and Gottingen, 1952)
RA	<i>Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede abbatis monasterii sancti Albani iterum susceptae; Roberto Blackeney capellano quondam ascriptum</i> , ed. H. T. Riley, Rolls Series, 28 (London, 1871–2)
RCHM St Albans	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, <i>A Guide to Saint Albans Cathedral</i> (London, 1982)
RDFT	Relief-decorated floor tiles
RIC	Mattingly, Sydenham, <i>et al.</i> 1923–94
RF	Recorded Find number
RS	Rolls Series: see under RS and year of publication in the bibliography
RW(1)	<i>Rogeri de Wendover Chronica sive flores historiarum</i> , ed. H. O. Coxe, English Historical Society, 5 vols (London, 1841–4)
RW(2)	<i>Rogeri de Wendover Liber qui dicitur Flores historiarum ab Anno Domini MCLIV annoque Henrici Anglorum regis secondi primo</i> , ed. H. G. Hewlett, 3 vols, Rolls Series, 83 (1886–9)
SAA	St Albans Abbey
SABMS	St Albans Borough Museums Service
SAHAAS	St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society
SAM	St Albans Museum
sw	slightly worn
T.	Tile number
Tr.	Trench number
W.	Wall number
VAM	Victoria and Albert Museum

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*Lincoln Cathedral Library*

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