

Torre Abbey, Devon

The Archaeology of the Premonstratensian Abbey

by Deirdre Forde, Julian Munby and Ian R Scott

with Andrew Pye, David Saxby and Andrew Westman

with contributions by

Ian Betts, Sue Browne, John Cotter, Geoff Egan, Heather Gilderdale Scott,
Laurence Keen, Philip J Lankester, Alexandra Livarda, Penny MacConnoran,
Rebecca Nicholson, Jacqui Pearce, Alan Pipe, Cynthia Poole, Mark Samuel,
Andrew Simmonds, Kirsty Smith, Terence Paul Smith and Lena Strid

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	xvii
Preface	xix
Summary	xxi
Acknowledgements	xxiii
Picture Credits	xxiv

Chapter 1: Introduction *by Ian R Scott and Kirsty Smith*

THE SITE	1
THE SCOPE OF THIS MONOGRAPH	1
GAZETTEER OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELDWORK AND BUILDING RECORDING	4
1825–7: Excavation by Father John McEnery	8
1874: Building investigations and observations by Edward Appleton	8
1906–11: Excavations by Hugh R Watkin	8
1915: Excavations by Colonel Lucius Cary	8
1920–59: Historic research and sketch plans by Commander H Cary	9
1930–4: Observations by Mr Wilson	9
c 1962: Measured drawings by J Kesteven	9
1969: Recording by an unknown archaeologist ‘from London’	9
1977: Building restoration by P W Wilkins and Son Ltd	9
1981: Watching brief by Simon Timms and E Moxon Brown	9
1982–91: Various archaeological observations by Leslie Retallick	9
1984: Watching brief on sewer trenches by EMAFU (Site A)	10
1986–9: Excavation of the abbey church by EMAFU (Site B)	10
1987–90: Recording of chapter house doorway by EMAFU (Site C)	10
1992–present: Historical research by Michael Rhodes	10
1993–4: Architectural and historical survey by Keystone	10
1994–5: Observations by John Thorp and Michael Rhodes during repairs	10
1995: Archaeological recording by EMAFU (Site D)	11
1996: Standing building recording of Abbot’s Tower by Paul Gibbons Associates (Site E) and conservation work by Carrek	11
1997: Evaluation in the cloisters by Paul Gibbons Associates (Site F)	11
1997: Recording of the west wall of the south transept by Paul Gibbons Associates (Site G)	11
1997–8: Watching brief by Hal Bishop	11
1997–8: Archaeological assessment by Hal Bishop	11
1997–8: Archaeological assessment by Paul Gibbons	11
2002: Evaluation trenches in the cloisters by MOLA (Site H)	11
2003: Geophysical survey by English Heritage	11
2004–8: Archaeological evaluation, excavations and watching briefs by MOLA (Site I)	12
2005: Geophysical survey by Stratascan	12
2011: Archaeological test pit evaluation by OA (Site J)	13

2013: Archaeological watching brief in the south-east wing by OA (Site K)	13
2013: Archaeological test pit excavation at the Mohun Gatehouse by OA (Site L)	14
2013: Archaeological excavation and watching brief of the eastern side of the cloister by OA (Site M)	16
2013: Archaeological excavation and watching brief of the brewhouse by OA (Site N)	16
2013–14: Building investigation and recording of the south range by OA (Site O)	16
2015: Geophysical survey of west front by Substrata	16
HISTORICAL AND DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH	16
CIRCUMSTANCES AND LIMITATIONS OF BUILDING INVESTIGATION AND SURVEY	17
ORGANISATION OF THE REPORT	17
Notes on the phasing	17
Textual and graphical conventions	17
CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF TORRE ABBEY	19
The Premonstratensian order	19
The foundation of Torre Abbey (1196–1300)	19
Later medieval and early post-medieval development (1300–1539)	20
The Dissolution (c 1539)	23
Country mansion (late 16th century to 1900)	23
19th century remodelling	24
Early 20th century repairs	25
A public site, 1930 to present day	26

Chapter 2: The Abbey Church *by Ian R Scott and Julian Munby*

INTRODUCTION	31
CONSTRUCTION LEVELS (PERIOD 1)	31
CHURCH FABRIC (PERIOD 2)	33
Introduction	33
External walls and arcade piers	33
Internal layout of the church	37
DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH, c 1280–1400 (PERIOD 3)	48
The church in the 14th century	48
Nave and aisle	49
Choir	53
North transept	55
South transept	59
Crossing tower	59
DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH IN THE 15TH AND EARLY 16TH CENTURIES (PERIOD 4)	62
Nave, aisle and choir	62
North transept	63
EVIDENCE FOR DISSOLUTION AND DECAY, 1539–98 (PERIOD 5)	65
BURIALS AND FUNERARY MONUMENTS	68
Introduction	68
The lay cemetery	68
Burials within the church	69

Chapter 3: The East Range *by Julian Munby*

INTRODUCTION	85
EXTANT REMAINS ABOVE GROUND	85
Surviving west wall of the east cloister range	85
Description of visible events in cloister wall	85
EXCAVATED REMAINS AND RELATED STRUCTURES	89
Sacristy	89
Muniment room (treasury?)	90
Chapter house	90
Infirmery passage (slype)	94
Reredorter undercroft or day stairs	94
Brewhouse courtyard	94
EXCAVATIONS AT THE SOUTH END OF THE EAST RANGE	94
Watkin's investigations	95
OA investigations 2013	97
DISCUSSION OF THE EAST RANGE.....	97

Chapter 4: The South Range *by Deirdre Forde*

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION	99
Parlour/warming house	99
Vaulted undercroft and west lobby.....	102
Ground floor and above	106
ANALYSIS OF ELEVATIONS AND HISTORIC FABRIC EXPOSED DURING CONSERVATION WORKS.....	107
Introduction	107
South elevation	107
North elevation	117
West elevation	119
East elevation.....	120
Later additions to the rear of the south range.....	122

Chapter 5: The West Range *by Deirdre Forde*

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION	123
WEST ELEVATION	126
EAST ELEVATION	129
NORTH AND SOUTH ENDS	132
INTERIOR ARRANGEMENT	133
Undercroft.....	133
Ground floor	135
First floor.....	138
KITCHEN BLOCK	141
Introduction	141
Exterior	141
Interior.....	141
ADJACENT BUILDINGS	145
The Mohun Gatehouse	145
Stables	147
The Spanish Barn	147
Lost precinct buildings	147

Chapter 6: The Cloister Garth and Cloister Walk by *Andrew Simmonds*

INTRODUCTION.....	149
ORIGINAL CLOISTER WALK.....	149
Evidence for the roof of the cloister walk.....	150
Cloister drain.....	150
Lead water pipe.....	151
FOURTEENTH CENTURY RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CLOISTER WALK.....	151
Evidence for the roof of the cloister walk.....	151
Cloister drain.....	151
BURIALS WITHIN THE CLOISTER WALKS.....	153

Chapter 7: Stonework by *Philip J Lankester and Mark Samuel*

INTRODUCTION.....	157
ARCHITECTURAL FRAGMENTS by <i>Mark Samuel</i>	157
Architectural fragments from the primary build of the church 1196–c 1250.....	157
Architectural fragments from the cloister.....	160
Modifications and additions prior to c 1280: architectural fragments.....	161
The superstructure of the church: the architectural evidence for 14th century renovation.....	162
The superstructure of the church: the architectural evidence for the 15th and 16th centuries.....	171
SCULPTURAL FRAGMENTS FROM MONUMENTAL EFFIGIES by <i>Philip J Lankester</i>	171
Introduction and background.....	171
Other monuments from Torre Abbey.....	172
Dating, comparisons and identification of monuments.....	176
Grouping the effigy fragments and consideration of the number of effigies represented.....	177
Monumental Effigy Group 1: A military figure of about 1320–40.....	177
Monumental Effigy Group 2: A military figure, probably early 16th century.....	180
Monumental Effigy Group 3: A military figure of between c 1340–1420 (most probably c 1360–70?).....	182
Monumental Effigy Group 4: A military figure, about 1420–40.....	187
Monumental Effigy Group 5: Parts of one or more effigies of ecclesiastics.....	188
Monumental Effigy Group 6: A civilian figure (almost certainly female), second half of the 14th or 15th century.....	191
Monumental Effigy Group 7: A (male?) civilian figure, 14th or 15th century?.....	191
Monumental Effigy Group 8: A non-military effigy, about 1250–70?.....	193
Monumental Effigy Group 9: Lower part of face from a figure, possibly from an effigy; probably 15th century.....	194
Monumental Effigy Group 10: Large piece of drapery, from a non-military figure, possibly from an effigy, after 1260.....	195
Monumental Effigy Group 11: Hands.....	195
Monumental Effigy Group 12: Lions.....	196
Uncertain identification.....	200
MINIATURE ARCHITECTURE AND MISCELLANEOUS by <i>Mark Samuel</i>	200
Monument Group 13: Tomb base structures, canopies and surrounds.....	200
Architectural Group 14A: Structural and miniature decorative features.....	207
Architectural Group 14B: Features possibly from a chantry in the north transept built after c 1440.....	209

Contents

Architectural Group 14C: Coats of arms (dated after 1400)	211
Architectural Group 14D: Human or celestial figure	212
Architectural Group 14E: Angels possibly from a chantry in the north transept	213
Other fragments	213

Chapter 8: Ceramic Paving-tiles *by Laurence Keen*

INTRODUCTION	215
EARLY FINDS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS	216
EXCAVATED TILES	220
Pavements	220
Group 1 (designs 1–13): Exeter Series 1	221
Group 2 (designs 14–29): Exeter Series 1	224
Group 3 (designs 30 and 32)	227
Group 4 (designs 31 and 33)	227
Group 5 (designs 35–36)	228
Group 6 (design 37)	228
Group 7: Plain Low Countries tiles	228
Group 8: Probably from Normandy	228
CONCLUSION	229

Chapter 9: Finds

INTRODUCTION	231
CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL AND PLASTER	231
Ceramic building material	231
Plaster	232
ROOFING SLATES	234
Roofing slates from the MOLA excavations (Sites H and I) <i>by Terence Paul Smith</i>	234
WINDOW GLASS	234
Medieval window glass from the EMAFU excavation of the abbey church (Site B) <i>by Ian R Scott and Heather Gilderdale Scott</i>	234
Window glass from the MOLA excavations (Sites H and I) <i>by Jacqui Pearce</i>	242
Window glass from the OA excavations (Sites L and M) <i>by Ian R Scott</i>	242
POTTERY	242
Pottery from the MOLA excavations (Sites H and I) <i>by Jacqui Pearce</i>	242
Pottery from the OA excavations (sites J–N) <i>by John Cotter</i>	246
CLAY TOBACCO PIPES <i>by John Cotter</i>	247
SMALL FINDS	247
Metal finds from the EMAFU excavation of the abbey church (Site B) <i>by Ian R Scott</i>	248
Metal, worked bone and stone finds from the MOLA excavations (Sites H and I) <i>by Geoff Egan</i>	249
Metal finds from the OA excavations (Sites J–M) <i>by Ian R Scott</i>	251
VESSEL GLASS	251
Vessel glass from the EMAFU excavation of the abbey church (Site B)	251
Vessel glass from the MOLA excavations (Sites H and I) <i>by Jacqui Pearce</i>	251
Vessel glass from the OA excavations (Sites J–N) <i>by Ian R Scott</i>	254
LEATHER <i>by Penny MacConnoran</i>	255
The assemblage	255
Conclusion	255

HUMAN BONE <i>by Sue Browne</i>	255
The assemblage	256
Methods	257
Results	257
Discussion	262
Catalogue of burials	262
ANIMAL BONE	263
SHELL	263
PLANT REMAINS	264
Bibliography and Sources	265
Index	271

List of Figures

1.1	Site location	2
1.2	The site today	3
1.3	Torre Abbey within the medieval parish of Tor-Moham (Tormohun), shown on the OS First Series one-inch map, 1809	4
1.4	Watkin’s plan of Torre Abbey and his excavations of 1906–11, redrawn from his manuscript plan.	5
1.5	Excavations at Torre Abbey 1984–2014.	6
1.6	Locations of geophysical surveys at Torre Abbey 2003, 2005 and 2015	12
1.7	Results of the English Heritage geophysical survey in 2003 showing a possible courtyard and buildings at A–C, smaller buildings at D and E, a linear feature at G with a structure to the south at F, and linear features at H, J, L and M	13
1.8	Interpretative results of the Stratascan survey of 2005	14
1.9	Interpretative results of the Substrata survey of 2015	15
1.10	Overall phase plan of Torre Abbey	18
1.11	The medieval precinct of Torre Abbey (within a modern street plan)	21
1.12	Plan of the abbey buildings c 1400	22
1.13	Hollar’s view of the abbey looking west, from Dugdale’s Monasticon, 1661. Key of original engraving: A: The hill where this was drawn; B: The Tower which remains of ye old Church; C: The Ruines of the Old Church; D: The Old Buildings belonging to ye Abby; E: The New buildings; F: The Gatehouse on ye west side of ye Abby; G: The Orchard; H: The old Gatehouse; I: The old Barne; K: Old Ruines; L: Painton key; M: Painton Towne; N: Livermead key; O: The hill above Blagdon; P: Chelston; Q: Torr Church; R: St Maries Chapell	24
1.14	Plan of Torre Abbey showing the post-medieval house overlaid on the medieval monastic footprint	25
1.15	View of Torre Abbey in 2017 showing the nave of the church, the cloister and rear of the south and west ranges.	27
1.16	View in 2002, looking north from the museum roof, of the nave as presented after the excavations within the church, with reconstructed walls	27
1.17	View in 2002 of the east end of the church, showing the fallen tower masonry and remains of the chapels in the south transept to the right.	28
1.18	View in 2017 looking north from the first floor showing the work done to the cloister	28
2.1	Plan of the abbey church as built (Period 2)	32
2.2	Base for pier 109, looking east	35
2.3	External elevation of west wall of north transept.	36
2.4	Newel stair 684.	37
2.5	Choir and screens as built (Period 2)	38
2.6	Internal elevation of north wall of north aisle showing wall bench 320=272 and wall tomb 119	39
2.7	Elevation of walls 88 and 86 and detail of stonework 170	40
2.8	Detail of newel stair 684 with details of surviving elements of door surround (940 and 941).	42
2.9	View of the choir, looking east.	43
2.10	Tiled floor 163, facing north-west	43
2.11	North transept as built	44
2.12	North transept, looking south	45
2.13	North transept, looking east. The newel staircase in the central crossing is visible in the bottom right	45
2.14	Internal elevation of west wall of north transept	46
2.15	Piscina in the south wall of the south transept (the blocking of the possible aumbry is also visible)	47
2.16	Southern reveal of the presbytery east window viewed from within the church.	47

2.17	Eastern embrasure of the easternmost window in the south wall of the presbytery viewed from within the church	48
2.18	North transept, looking south-east. The south wall of the presbytery, with the window embrasures illustrated in Figs 2.16–2.17.	48
2.19	Plan of the abbey church as modified (Periods 3 and 4).	50
2.20	Stone-lined culvert on north side of abbey church. Section 354: section across culvert showing bridge 436=504 and wall 503; Section 398: wall 148 bridging culvert.	51
2.21	View along stone-lined culvert, looking west.	52
2.22	Bridge 436=504 and wall 503 crossing culvert in front of north aisle door 440.	52
2.23	Elevation of stone-lined culvert on north side of abbey	53
2.24	Choir and screens as modified (Periods 3 and 4).	54
2.25	North transept with enlarged chapels	56
2.26	North transept floor 680 and bedding 679 through to aisle. Scale 1m, looking west.	57
2.27	Stone bench 645 in north transept.	57
2.28	South transept exterior from west.	58
2.29	South transept interior from south-east.	59
2.30	Central tower: plan locating collapsed fragments	60
2.31	A: Pieces M, N, and O from the west; B: From the north-west	61
2.32	A: Piece R from below; B: Detail of vault shaft.	62
2.33	A: Direct view of piece S; B: Oblique view	63
2.34	A: Pieces S and T from east; B: Piece T from north-east	64
2.35	Threshold 93 and slate paving 110, looking south. Scale 0.1m.	65
2.36	Base for column 109 and slate paving 110, looking east	65
2.37	North transept with latest graves and mortar bedding 706 for latest tiled floor	66
2.38	Late floors bedding 706 and 709 in the north transept, looking south. Scale 1m	67
2.39	Graves from Period 2 (1196–c 1280) in the abbey church and cloister	70
2.40	Graves from Period 3 (c 1280–1400) in the abbey church and cloister	71
2.41	Graves from Period 4 (c 1400–1539) in the abbey church and cloister, and undated grave 409	73
2.42	View of the choir with graves 128 (left) and 130 (right), looking east.	74
2.43	Grave 130, skeleton 236, looking west. Scale 0.1m.	74
2.44	Grave 128, skeleton 956, looking west. Scale 0.3m.	75
2.45	Grave 126 showing the black cross painted on the north side of the grave. Scale 0.3m	75
2.46	Grave 126, skeleton 125. Black cross painted on the south side, looking south. Scale 0.3m	76
2.47	Grave 115, disturbed skeleton 513, looking west. Scale 0.1m.	76
2.48	Grave 120, skeleton 141, looking west. Scale 0.3m.	77
2.49	Grave 306, skeleton 514, looking west. Scale 0.3m.	77
2.50	Grave 136 (foreground) and grave 140 with floor 308, looking west. Scale 1m	78
2.51	Stone in grave 136	78
2.52	Grave 137, skeleton 133, looking west. Scale 0.3m.	78
2.53	Grave 140, skeleton 139, looking west. Scales 0.3m and 1m.	79
2.54	Wall tomb 119, looking north. Scale 0.3m	79
2.55	Wall tomb 119 with grave 270 in the foreground, looking north. Scale 1m	80
2.56	Grave 179, disturbed primary skeleton 511 and secondary skeleton 510, looking west. Scale 0.1m	80
2.57	Grave 98, skeleton 97.	81
2.58	Wall recess 547 in the north transept, looking north. Scale 0.3m.	82
2.59	Sculptural fragment scatter 549 in front of wall recess 547 in the north transept, looking north-east. Scale 0.1m	83
3.1	Plan of the east range	86
3.2	External, west-facing elevation of the south transept and east claustral range.	87
3.3	Internal, east-facing elevation of the south transept and east claustral range.	87
3.4	A: west front of the east range in 2011 before restoration; B: west front of the east range in 2017 after restoration.	88
3.5	Splayed door embrasure on the south side of the sacristy entrance, with tiling.	90
3.6	Plan and elevation of the phases of the sacristy door	91

List of Figures

3.7	Chapter house entrance, facing south-west.	92
3.8	West elevation of the chapter house entrance in 1987	93
3.9	Plan of the excavation of the south-east wing by OA in 2013	95
3.10	Watkin's 1912 plan of the east range showing his later discoveries. Not to scale.	96
4.1	The south range, looking north, showing what is believed to be the medieval refectory, now largely Georgian in appearance	99
4.2	South-facing elevation of the south range before removal of concrete render and restoration in 2012–13	100
4.3	Plan of the undercroft level, ground floor and first floor levels of the south range.	101
4.4	Pillar base in the 'parlour' of the undercroft of the south range, excavated in 2012 and now supporting a modern pillar	100
4.5	East wall of the 'parlour' in the undercroft of the south range during excavation, showing the proposed location of a hearth, no evidence of which was detected	102
4.6	Central column in the undercroft of the south range, chamber C.	103
4.7	Doorway, probably 14th century, in the undercroft of the south range, looking east	103
4.8	Stone steps that ascend from the undercroft of the south range to the south side of the cloister, looking north-west, thought to have been inserted into an original medieval window at the time of the addition of the 17th century chimney stack	103
4.9	Ground floor of bay 1 in the south elevation of the south range, showing the arch of the blocked doorway into the west lobby and a Georgian sash window cutting a later blocked opening above.	104
4.10	Above: exposed archaeology in the south elevation of the south range; below: possible window arrangement of the medieval refectory dating to the 13th century	105
4.11	Timber lintel over the now blocked fireplace in the west wall of the principal ground floor room of the south range, looking west.	106
4.12	Plain rafter and purlin roof of the south range (replaced in 2012), believed to date to the 1760s, looking north-east	106
4.13	A: remains of 17th century frieze exposed behind the window shutter in the first floor of bay 3, showing that a window opening existed here before the 18th century sashes were inserted, looking north-west; B and C: fragments of the same frieze decorated with 'acorn men', rescued under Colonel Cary and surviving in the Torre Abbey collections; D: cast of the frieze that is now lost	108
4.14	Remains of a splayed window behind the 18th century inserted window in the first floor of the south elevation	109
4.15	Pier observed in the internal wall between bays 6 and 7 in the ground floor of the south range, looking south	109
4.16	18th century sash window insertion in bay 6 of the south façade of the south range at first floor level, showing where it cuts an earlier blocked window opening.	110
4.17	Possible medieval plaster observed on the jambs of an early blocked window in bay 6 of the south elevation of the south range, at first floor level, looking north-east	111
4.18	Early lintel truncated by the 18th century window insertion in bay 6 of the south elevation of the south range at first floor level, looking north-west	111
4.19	East wall of the south range over the parlour, viewed from an opening in the west side of the ceiling in the east Georgian wing.	111
4.20	Former doorway in the west gable wall of the south range between current ground and first floor levels, looking north-east.	111
4.21	West-facing elevation of the south range, showing a blocked medieval doorway at current ground floor level, and a blocked window at current first floor level	112
4.22	Lintel of an 18th century window insertion at first floor level of the south elevation of the south range, looking north-east	113
4.23	Red brick jamb of an 18th century inserted window cut to fit the medieval masonry behind it in the south elevation of the south range, looking north.	113
4.24	Exposed 18th century plaster behind a blocking that is thought to be 19th century in the central doorway of the east Georgian wing of the south range, looking west	114
4.25	North-facing elevations of the south range (after restoration in 2012–13), looking south, the primary elevation of which represents the south side of the medieval cloister	114

4.26	North-facing elevations of the south range and west range	115
4.27	Blocked casement window in the ground floor of the north elevation of the south range, looking south	115
4.28	Doorway from the cloister through the north elevation of the south range into the parlour, looking south	115
4.29	Surviving masonry of the main door into the refectory in the north elevation of the south range, looking south	116
4.30	Above: exposed archaeology in the north elevation of the south range; below: possible window arrangement in the medieval period.	117
4.31	Evidence of the raised roof line of the cloister on the north elevation of the south range, looking south	118
4.32	Details of the historic ground floor windows in the north elevation of the south range.	119
4.33	Georgian sash window inserted into a blocked medieval opening in the north elevation of the south range, looking south	119
4.34	Detail surrounding the inserted Georgian sash window in the first floor of the north elevation of the south range.	120
4.35	Red brick quatrefoil arrangement, set into a blocked opening in the east elevation of the south range, looking west.	121
4.36	Early 19th century view of Torre Abbey from east showing the quatrefoil pattern	121
5.1	The west range, looking east, showing both the early medieval range with its large porch tower and the later kitchen block to the south	123
5.2	Plan of the undercroft level, the ground floor and first floor levels of the west range	124
5.3	West elevation of the primary medieval west range, showing possible phasing	125
5.4	Decorative string-course on the west elevation of the west range, looking north-east	126
5.5	South elevation of the Abbot's Tower, and the south elevation of the south covered stairs, showing possible phasing.	128
5.6	North elevation of the Abbot's Tower, and the north elevation of the north covered stairs, showing possible phasing.	129
5.7	The west range, looking west, showing the inner east-facing side of the cloister	130
5.8	East elevation of the primary medieval west range, showing possible phasing.	131
5.9	Lavabo in undercroft level of the east elevation of the west range (the west side of the cloister), looking south-west	130
5.10	North gable of the west range, looking south-west.	132
5.11	Ogee-headed 14th century window in the north gable of the west range, viewed from loft, looking north-west. It is now hidden between the false apsidal end of the chapel and the 17th century transom window on the exterior.	133
5.12	Cross passage of the undercroft level of the west range, looking south-west, showing medieval painting in the form of red lines highlighting the vaulting and arcading along the sides.	134
5.13	Northern undercroft of the west range, looking south	134
5.14	Southern undercroft of the west range, looking north-west.	135
5.15	North elevation of the Abbot's Tower under the roof of the northern covered stairs, showing the scar from an earlier, lower roof and the corbel that would have supported it.	136
5.16	Ground floor lobby of the Abbot's Tower, looking north-east, showing the c 14th century lavabo and doorway into the ground floor of the west range, as well as the main entrance from the northern covered stairs.	136
5.17	The former abbot's hall, which was converted into a chapel in 1776, looking north.	137
5.18	First-floor dining room in the west range, designed by Edward Cary in the late 18th century, looking north-west.	139
5.19	North and west elevations of the kitchen block of the west range, showing possible phasing	140
5.20	Blocked doorway at ground floor level in the west wall of the courtyard in the kitchen block, looking west	143
5.21	West and south elevations of the Mohun Gatehouse.	144
5.22	Section through Mohun Gatehouse from survey by J C Kesteven	145
5.23	The Spanish Barn, looking south.	146

List of Figures

6.1	The original drain on the east side of the cloister, looking north. The masonry footings running parallel to the drain are those of the rebuilt cloister walk: the original cloister wall was completely removed when the rebuilding occurred but would have run on the line of the shallow trench visible between the footings and the drain	149
6.2	Rendering beneath the lavabo	150
6.3	Cloister floor tiles preserved in the doorway to the sacristy, looking east.	150
6.4	The north-west corner of the later phase of the cloister drain, looking south-east. The original feeder channel is in the foreground	152
6.5	Graves within the cloister, all periods	153
6.6	Cross slab of grave 375, looking west.	154
6.7	Mortar layer beneath cross slab of grave 375, looking north-west	154
7.1	Reconstruction of pier moulding 109 from the nave arcade.	157
7.2	Ribstone mouldings as recorded from the church vaults. 1: Restored ribstone moulding M1.6.1 and M1.6.2; 2: M1.6.1 rib with plain lateral rolls; 3: M1.6.2 rib with beak lateral rolls.	158
7.3	Capitals which may be from the cloister. 1: Two capitals S18 and S134 showing weathering; 2: Reconstruction of the probable form of the waterleaf pattern of capital S18; 3: Purbeck marble crocket capital dated post-1185; 4: Reconstruction of the architectural form of the crocket capital.	159
7.4	Mouldings post-1200 probably from the church. 1: Window scoinson with bowtell and quirks S35; 2: Possible portal jamb with keel moulding S50.	160
7.5	Vault respond capital S23 dated <i>c</i> 1225 from unknown location (from either church or claustral building). 1: Elevation of surviving capital; 2: Restored elevation; 3: Lateral view of surviving capital; 4: Restored lateral elevation; 5: Underside of surviving capital; 6: Restored moulding of possible vault respond (edge of abacus shown as broken lines)	161
7.6	Window moulding variants probably from the north wall of the aisle of the church	163
7.7	Partial reconstructions of the internal elevations of window tracery. Left: With S56; right: With S12, S70 and S71. The cross-sections of S83 and S90 are shown below	164
7.8	Conjectural reconstructions of possible north aisle tracery schemes (internal elevations). 1: Common plan of the possible north aisle window; 2: Internal elevation of window tracery based on S70; 3: Internal elevation of window tracery based on S56	165
7.9	Tracery fragments that cannot be assigned to building schemes M2.7.1 or M2.7.2 and are from unknown locations. 1: Possible junction between cinquefoil archlet and inverted dagger S13; 2: Tracery fragment (composite of S40 and S65); 3: Junction of arcuated supermullion with window arch S69; 4: Junction of arcuated supermullion with window arch S89; 5: Junction of arcuated supermullion with window arch S115	165
7.10	External cinquefoil window details (M2.7.2). Above: Elevation detail S124; Below: External elevation detail S7, S41	166
7.11	A: Vault boss, of uncertain provenance; B: Corbel and springing of south transept vault in collapsed tower masonry	167
7.12	Window mouldings and tracery M2.15.1. 1: Cross-section of window mullions with the interior below; 2: Reconstruction of internal elevation of tracery; 3: Mullion moulding S16 (enlarged)	168
7.13	Window mouldings and tracery M2.15.2. 1: Cross-section of window mullions with the interior above; 2: Reconstruction of internal elevation of tracery; 3: strong mullion moulding S67 (enlarged)	169
7.14	The strong mullion window (M2.7.2(a)). 1: Conjectured detail of external elevation; 2: Conjectured detail of plan	170
7.15	Internal elevation of strong mullion tracery M2.7.2(b) forming paired cinquefoils at different levels	170
7.16	East Ogwell parish church: memorial slab to William Norton (abbot 1382–1412)	173
7.17	East Ogwell parish church: memorial slab to Richard Cade (abbot 1456–83)	173
7.18	East Ogwell parish church: memorial slab to Thomas Dyer (abbot 1483–1523)	174
7.19	Cross slab from east cloister walk	175
7.20	Head in mail coif (X1), Monumental Effigy Group 1.	177
7.21	Hand grasping a sword hilt (X2), Monumental Effigy Group 1	178

7.22	Military figure, Monumental Effigy Group 2	178
7.23	Head (X17), Monumental Effigy Group 2	179
7.24	Shoulder, arms and hands, Monumental Effigy Group 2. a: Right shoulder (X19); b: Left elbow and forearm (X21); c: Praying hands (X23–5)	179
7.25	Pieces of the knight's torso and decorative hip belt, Monumental Effigy Group 2. a: Part of upper torso; b: Part of torso with decorative hip belt at the lower end; c: Three pieces of decorative hip belt	180
7.26	Pieces of left leg including fragments of the upper leg, the poleyn (plated knee guard) and the lower leg, Monumental Effigy Group 2.	181
7.27	Part of right knee and lower leg (X51–2), Monumental Effigy Group 2.	181
7.28	Right foot (X44, X45 and X47), Monumental Effigy Group 2. a: View from above; b: View from the side	182
7.29	Lower part of bascinet with attached mail aventail (X4), Monumental Effigy Group 3	182
7.30	Mail (X5–7), Monumental Effigy Group 3	183
7.31	Part of a gauntleted hand (X8), Monumental Effigy Group 3	183
7.32	Left forearm and elbow (X9), Monumental Effigy Group 3	184
7.33	Right upper arm and elbow (X10), Monumental Effigy Group 3	184
7.34	Part of lower left leg with garter (X11–12), Monumental Effigy Group 3	184
7.35	Possible part of a lower leg (X83), may be from Monumental Effigy Group 3	185
7.36	Possible lower part of an upper leg (X90), may be from Monumental Effigy Group 3	185
7.37	Pair of armoured elbows (X13–14), Monumental Effigy Group 4	187
7.38	Armoured knee with top of lower leg (X16), Monumental Effigy Group 4.	188
7.39	Possible part of a leg or thigh (X15), Monumental Effigy Group 4.	188
7.40	Upper (X95) and lower (X102) part of tonsured head, Monumental Effigy Group 5.	189
7.41	Drapery (X103–4), Monumental Effigy Group 5.	189
7.42	Drapery (X106), Monumental Effigy Group 5.	189
7.43	Drapery with stole (X105), Monumental Effigy Group 5	190
7.44	Part of top and upper part of face of a coroneted head (X91), Monumental Effigy Group 6	191
7.45	Front half of a lion with front half of one foot (X81), Monumental Effigy Group 7	193
7.46	Front half of a lion with front half of one foot (X81), Monumental Effigy Group 7	193
7.47	Toe emerging from hem of gown and supported on foliage (X85), Monumental Effigy Group 8	193
7.48	Lower half of face (X86), Monumental Effigy Group 9	194
7.49	Drapery (X76), Monumental Effigy Group 10.	194
7.50	Pair of praying hands including lower section (X87), fingers (X88) and thumbs, Monumental Effigy Group 11	195
7.51	a: Upper parts of the fingers of praying hands (X89); b: Upper third of two fingers from praying hands. Both Monumental Effigy Group 11	195
7.52	Part of headless body of a lion (X75), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12A	196
7.53	Foreleg of a lion (X73–4), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12A.	196
7.54	Part of the upper or lower leg of a lion (X71–2), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12A.	197
7.55	End of a lion's tail (X62), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12A.	197
7.56	Headless body of a lion (X107), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12B. a: showing the tail on the body; b: showing curls from part of the mane	197
7.57	Head of a lion (X61), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12B. a: View from the front; b: Profile of the lion showing the curls of the mane	198
7.58	Four fragments of a lion's mane (X63–6), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12B	198
7.59	a: Part of the head of a lion (X99); b: Part of a leg of a lion (X67). Both Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12C	199
7.60	Parts of feet of one or more lions (X68–70), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12C	199
7.61	Part of a lion, possibly from a head (X101), Monumental Effigy Group 12, Sub-Group 12C	199
7.62	Possible elbow (X82)	200
7.63	Capital base AF163 and capital AF168	200
7.64	A: Base of fluted shaft AF163, lateral elevation; B: Capital of fluted shaft AF168, lateral elevation	201

List of Figures

7.65	Crockets and archlets. a: AF141; b: AF142; c: AF143; d: AF144; e: AF145; f: AF146; g: AF147; h: AF148; i: AF149; j: AF150	202
7.66	Pendentives. a: AF151, oblique view; b: AF151, view from below; c: AF157, oblique view; d: AF157, view from below	203
7.67	Tomb canopy AF153. a: reverse elevation; b: vaulting-ornament of soffit; c: view from above showing sheared-off statue base	203
7.68	Tomb canopy AF156. a: elevation; b: vaulting-ornament of soffit; c: view from above	204
7.69	Tomb canopy elements. a: soffit AF158; b: paired-archlet canopy AF159, front elevation; c: soffit AF160	204
7.70	The Kirkham chantry screen in Paignton	205
7.71	Tomb canopy elements. a: AF154, elevation; b: AF154, from below; c: AF155, elevation; d: AF155, from below	206
7.72	Part of tomb base with quatrefoil (AF171).	206
7.73	Rose (AF202).	206
7.74	Fighting cocks tomb canopy on polygonal shaft (AF177). a: Elevation; b: Soffit	206
7.75	Fighting cocks tomb canopy on polygonal shaft (AF177).	207
7.76	Finial possibly from retable (AF176).	207
7.77	Blind tracery panels, lateral elevations. a: AF169; b: AF172; c: AF173; d: AF174.	208
7.78	Engaged shaft with abacus (AF170)	208
7.79	Features possibly from a chantry in the north transept (Architectural Group 14B), details of the elements and their possible relationship. A: Capital element from below showing finial (to right) and scribe lines (AF103); B: Pinnacle element, profile of fielded bases from below (AF84); C: Possible relationship of arch mouldings AF102 and AF166; D: Elevation of paired finial elements AF84 and capital/arch AF166 with flanking sedilia AF178; E: Convergence of setting-out lines on lower capital element bed (AF103); F: Probable relationship of AF84 to timber sedilia (broken lines)	209
7.80	Engaged shaft (AF84), elevation	210
7.81	Voussoirs (AF167), elevation	210
7.82	Sedilia shaft (AF178), elevations and soffit	210
7.83	Vertical moulding (AF188)	211
7.84	Coat of arms of 'Torre Abbey' (AF182).	211
7.85	Coat of arms (AF183).	211
7.86	Draped legs of seated figure (AF200).	212
7.87	Angel (AF196). a: Frontal view; b: Reverse, showing plain wings	212
7.88	Angel (AF203). a: Frontal view; b: Reverse	212
7.89	Angel (AF204), frontal view	213
7.90	Pleated mantle (AF201).	213
7.91	Sculpted hand (AF207)	213
8.1	Tiled floor 186.	218
8.2	Tiled floor 163.	219
8.3	Tiled floor 708.	220
8.4	Tiled floor at the entrance to the sacristy.	221
8.5	Group 1: Exeter Series 1 tiles (designs 1–13).	222
8.6	Group 2: Exeter Series 1 tiles (designs 14–29).	223
8.7	Heraldic tiles from Hailes Abbey, Gloucestershire. Drawn by Meredith Sassoon for English Heritage.	226
8.8	Tiles within Groups 3–6 (designs 30–37)	227
9.1	Painted wall plaster: white ground traversed by red stripe (OA 5065)	233
9.2	Painted wall plaster: bands of yellow ochre, white and red (OA 5065)	233
9.3	Ceiling plaster vaulting rib junction: two moulding ribs diverging (OA 5065).	233
9.4	Plaster, possibly window or door moulding or arcading (OA 5065).	233
9.5	Ceiling plaster rosette: decorative boss of vaulted ceiling in form of rose (OA 5065)	233
9.6	Window glass from EMAFU excavations within the abbey church	235
9.7	Window glass from EMAFU excavations within the abbey church	236

9.8	St Thomas, Ante Chapel, New College, Oxford 1380–6	238
9.9	William of Wykeham (modern head) before the Virgin and Child, Winchester College Chapel, c 1393	238
9.10	Sir Reginald Bray, from the 'Magnificat' window, Great Malvern Priory, c 1501–2	239
9.11	The Resurrection, from the east window of the church of St John the Baptist, Wistow (Huntingdonshire), early 15th century	239
9.12	Holy Kindred, including, at left, St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, All Souls College Chapel, Oxford, c 1441	239
9.13	Apostles' Creed window, showing figures holding open books, Drayton Beauchamp (Buckinghamshire), c 1420–30	240
9.14	St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, with donor, Ross-on-Wye (Herefordshire), early 15th century	241
9.15	Selected iron finds from the EMAFU excavations within the abbey church	249
9.16	Slate gaming board from cloister	250
9.17	Abscess (draining through the lingual aspect of the alveolar bone) at the site of the right third molar in the mandible of burial 1008	258
9.18	Severe arthropathy in the right elbow of a male aged 35–45 years (burial 1008)	260
9.19	Ossification of soft tissue, probably the result of previous trauma, on the left corocoid process of a male aged 25–35 years (burial 1001)	260
9.20	Healed oblique fracture in the left tibia of an elderly male (burial 1004)	261
9.21	Ossified soft tissue on the olecranon processes of a male aged 25–35 years (burial 1009)	261

List of Tables

1.1	Summary of archaeological interventions 1984–2014	7
1.2	MOLA trenches, Sites H and I	7
1.3	MOLA concordance table	17
1.4	OA concordance table	19
2.1	Graves within the abbey church and cloister, Period 2 (1196–c 1280)	69
2.2	Graves within the abbey church and cloister, Period 3 (c 1280–1400)	72
2.3	Graves within the abbey church and cloister, Period 4 (c 1400–1539)	72
3.1	Dimensions of the smaller chapter houses of the English abbeys of the Premonstratensian order. Data supplied by John Jenkins (pers. comm.)	93
7.1	Summary of the Period 2 tpestones from the abbey church	158
7.2	Summary of the Period 2 tpestones from the claustral buildings	160
7.3	Summary of the Period 2 tpestones from the claustral buildings	162
7.4	Summary of the Period 3 tpestones from the renovation and refenestration of the abbey church	162
7.5	Summary of the Period 4 tpestones from the north transept of the abbey church	171
8.1	Tile designs, with parallels. Contexts and quantifications of identifiable tiles or fragments are given for the EMAFU excavations in the abbey church. Designs found in pavements within the abbey church indicated by *. Unstratified pieces indicated by u/s. Note that design 37 is represented only in the sacristy doorway pavement. All locations are in Devon unless otherwise indicated.	216
9.1	Index of finds figures and tables	231
9.2	Glass from EMAFU excavations in abbey church	237
9.3	Pottery from MOLA excavations. Breakdown of the major fabric groups by percentage sherd count (SC) and minimum number of vessels (MNV)	243
9.4	Pottery from MOLA excavations. Breakdown by function in percentage sherd count (SC) and minimum number of vessels (MNV)	245
9.5	Iron finds from the fills of graves in the abbey church. * indicates skeleton recovered; u indicates finds from upper fills only	248
9.6	Bottle glass from MOLA excavations. Summary of all bottle glass by shape, quantified by fragment count (FC), minimum number of vessels (MNV) and weight	252
9.7	Bottle glass from MOLA excavations. Summary of English wine bottle glass by shape, quantified by fragment count (FC), minimum number of vessels (MNV) and weight	253
9.8	Summary of burials in the abbey church	256
9.9	Burials: Age distribution in adult (excluding burial 1010)	256
9.10	Distribution of non-metrical traits in the burials	256
9.11	Distribution of mandibular third molar agenesis (radiographic evidence) in the adult burials. Maxillary data are shown for comparison (excluding burial 1010)	258
9.12	Distribution of joint changes in the adult burials (excluding burial 1010)	259

Preface

Torre Abbey is one of the more impressive monastic sites in Devon, both as a ruin and as a conversion to a comfortable post-medieval mansion. For the 15th century compiler of the itinerary for travelling between the Premonstratensian houses of the 'White Canons', it must have seemed as remote as Shap Abbey at the other end of the country, but its quiet and sunny location on the south coast could hardly have been more different from the Cumbrian fells, even if its remoteness is difficult now to appreciate surrounded by a busy seaside town. The acquisition of the site by the municipality in the 20th century was an enlightened move, and the redisplay of the museum has resulted in the latest archaeological episode on the site reported here. The earliest explorations by Watkin (conducted with the encouragement of the owner Col. Cary) were carried out with more antiquarian enthusiasm than scientific objectivity, and it was only gradually that the careful methods pioneered by William St John Hope became the norm (though had Hope turned his attention to Torre there might be little left for others who came later). The opportunity came in the 1980s, with a series of excavations under Messrs Calway, Patch and Pye by the Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit, funded by Torbay Borough Council and the Manpower Services Commission. This was a carefully conducted research excavation of the monastic church with a view to the consolidation and display of the ruins, but as with many enterprises of that heroic period of archaeology, the work was more easily carried out than brought to conclusion in a publication. It was left to a later phase of museum reordering and redisplay to seize the opportunity for further exploratory work and final publication, first with Museum of London Archaeology, and then with the watching brief on the final phase of completion under Oxford Archaeology.

The standing remains of the cloister and abbot's house that were incorporated in the post-medieval mansion were investigated first by Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, and later by a number of individuals working independently, and by MOLA and OA staff. These investigations were of

the greatest importance in capturing evidence that was revealed (even if not destroyed) in the course of a long campaign of repair, repointing, and render replacement. Together with the results of below-ground work, the story of the development of the abbey and its transformation into a mansion house is now much better understood than when Watkin published his first account over a century ago. Historical research culminating in the thesis by John Jenkins (Oxford 2010) has provided an important baseline of what can and cannot be said from the documentary evidence for the abbey, while Michael Rhodes' investigation of the later history of the site has now supplied a published account of the later periods that are not covered by the present volume.

The continuity of witness and understanding provided by Hal Bishop and Michael Rhodes, both formerly of Torbay Council, has been a vital element in the completion of this work, which relies so much on drawing together earlier work by others. It is to be hoped that the present publication provides a balanced account of the archaeology of the medieval abbey, and fairly represents the huge amount of work by EMAFU and MOLA before OA came onto the scene. And while the contribution of those who have worked on the sculpture, architectural remains and floor tiles from the excavations is a very significant aspect of this publication, it cannot be claimed that all the finds from the site have been fully identified or investigated. The changing conditions of museum storage and access in a comprehensive building campaign have been exacerbated by staff changes, and made it impossible to carry out a thorough exploration of the collections, and it must be left to others to make further discoveries in the museum stores.

It remains to signal some regret in the delays to the final completion of this study, but 30 years after the commencement of the project is still within the lifetime and memory of many of the participants, and it is to be hoped that they can take some pleasure in seeing their hard labours brought to fruition in this publication.

Julian Munby

Summary

Torre Abbey, standing at the head of Tor Bay in south Devon, was founded in 1196 by William Brewer as a house of the Premonstratensian order, the 'White Canons' (who were not monks restricted to the cloister, but might serve as priests in the secular community). The church and the monastic buildings round the cloister were built soon after and not greatly modified in later medieval changes. After the dissolution of the abbey in 1539 the abbot's house and part of the cloister were transformed into a mansion. The house belonged to the Cary family from 1662 until 1930, when it was taken over by Torquay Borough Council as a ceremonial centre and then a museum.

Serious investigation of the site began with explorations by Hugh Watkin in the early 20th century, which established the extent of the monastic buildings. It was not until the 1980s that a major programme of excavation was undertaken on the church by the Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit, the results of which form the major part of this monograph. In the course of building repairs in the 1990s important observations were made on the historic fabric, and in the present century, a major reordering of the site and museum facilities led to a series of excavations and observations by Museum of London Archaeology, and for the later phase by Oxford Archaeology. These are reported here, together with other discoveries, including a series of geophysical investigations and the results of continuing historical and documentary research.

The abbey church and claustral buildings were constructed from 1196. The church had a nave with a single aisle, a crossing and transepts with pairs of chapels, with stone vaults. The monastic choir extended from the nave screen through the crossing and into the chancel. Surviving stonework suggests there were a series of plain lancet windows, not dissimilar to Cistercian churches of that era. Later medieval changes included alterations to the choir and nave screen, and a refenestration of the church with more elaborate window tracery and stained glass. The tower over the crossings was rebuilt in the 14th century (and survived until destroyed in the 18th century). The church was a popular place for burial, and graves and monuments occur throughout the building, and particularly in the north-east chapel that was extended out from the north transept. The most significant finds from the church were the numerous sculptural fragments from monumental effigies, and the remains of miniature architecture from church fittings and monuments. These were only partial remnants of some fine monuments, though the nature of their destruction

and partial removal did not allow an immediate association with individual tomb recesses or monuments in the church and chapels.

Excavations in the cloister uncovered a series of changes to the arrangements for the central access to the monastic buildings, and evidence of reroofing, but relatively little survived in the way of architectural fragments, apart from large quantities of tiles. The cloister was used for a small number of burials, including a special one (possibly of an abbot) with a decorative grave slab, just outside the chapter house and sacristy. Other monuments of Torre abbots exist in a nearby parish church, and are published here.

The east range of the cloister, being as usual the location of the chapter house and dormitory, has one surviving wall (rebuilt to form a post-medieval dovecote). This has a fine Romanesque portal to the chapter house, and remains of another high-status entrance to the sacristy were discovered in the recent works. The plan outline of the dormitory and latrine (reredorter) remains uncertain, though the east wall has now been found in two places. It remains likely that the ruined structure to the east was the monastic infirmary.

The south range, built over a primary vaulted undercroft, has the appearance of a Georgian mansion, and both it and the pair of side wings to a large extent were built or reconstructed in the 18th century. However, removal of render on the front and back of the building revealed a series of medieval window openings, some of which must be the original windows lighting the monastic refectory, and others belonging to the storeyed ends of the range, either of medieval date or modified when the building became part of the mansion house after the Dissolution. The remains of the door to the refectory from the south side of the cloister had already been uncovered (and its nearby lavabo), and at the east end of the cloister walk the supposed warming room was found to have a central pillar, but no remains of any fireplace.

The west range of the cloister (which has a vaulted undercroft) may originally have contained accommodation for the monastic lay brothers, but was appropriated to the abbot's lodging. This consisted of an open hall at the north end (now the domestic chapel), and a series of chambers at the south end, reached by a stair tower, and much modified by the post-medieval conversion to comfortable domestic interiors, with staircases and fireplaces. Once again, the replacement of render on the outside of the building led to a much better understanding of the development of the structure

(and in particular the entrance tower), though much of the story on the inside remains to be discovered. There is a particularly complex arrangement at the south end of the range, where the monastic kitchen must have been located, and the remains of the later kitchens and 18th century range retain parts of the medieval structure and the links through to the Mohun Gatehouse.

The 14th century gatehouse and the reconstructed monastic barn are important survivals alongside the claustral buildings, but were not further investigated, although the geophysical surveys have indicated the existence of other buildings in what must have been the outer court of the monastery.

Apart from the stonework, the major finds of interest were the ceramic paving-tiles, making a

significant addition to the corpus of Devon tiles and recent discoveries from other sites in the region. While only limited areas of tile flooring were recovered, the decorated patterns included a number related to the earls of Cornwall and their relatives.

Remains of stained glass included tantalising fragments, in sufficient quantity to determine something of the quality of the early 15th century reglazing of the church windows. Other finds and environmental material were of limited extent, and often more relevant to the post-medieval occupation than monastic life and economy. Only 13 burials were removed and studied (all from the church), and these probably mostly comprised secular individuals of some status rather than canons.

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