

# Rushen Abbey, Isle of Man





# Rushen Abbey, Isle of Man

A hundred years of research and excavation

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Cover: view of Rushen Abbey from the north-west by Sir Henry Dryden, 1853;  
gilded copper-alloy furniture fitting dating from around AD 1500

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## **Excavations 1998 to 2008**

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Throughout the project the success of the excavations depended to a large extent on the involvement of local volunteers who became an increasingly capable work force which provided necessary continuity before during and after the teaching excavations each year. Some of the volunteers gave enormous amounts of their time over the whole eleven years of work on the site. I am very happy to acknowledge and thank the following: Sophie Baldrick, Susan Bolster, Adele Brocklebank, Clarissa Bryan, Eva Castellucci, Alison Clague, Chris

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#### *The students*

The excavations were enriched by the work and enthusiasm of over 500 students, a majority were undergraduates from the Department of Archaeology, University of Liverpool, but a good number came from other universities and there were regular contributions from individual students at Manx secondary schools. They often brought enquiring minds and new approaches to the work which were valued by the excavation team. There are too many to be listed individually but I thank them all most sincerely.

### ***Research***

#### *Research Advisory Group*

This was formed in 1998 in order to assist MNH and CMS in the planning of future excavations on the site. It consisted of the following: Dr Glyn Coppack (English Heritage) for monastic archaeology, Mr Marshall Cubbon (formerly Director of the Manx Museum and National Trust) for Manx early medieval archaeology, Mr Geoff Egan (Museum of London) for post-medieval archaeology, Dr Patrick Greene (Director of Manchester Museum of Science and Technology) for monastic archaeology, Mr Mike McCarthy (Director of Carlisle Archaeological Unit) for medieval archaeology and Professor Chris Morris (University of Glasgow) for Norse archaeology. The group, which also included the academic staff of both institutions, met on a number of occasions and continued to function until 2002 when the new programme of annual excavations was instituted. Their contribution to thinking about Rushen Abbey and its place in monastic studies was considerable and I thank them most warmly.

Many other academics were also helpful during this period: John Ashurst (Ingram Consultancy) on the conservation of the abbey buildings, Ms Roísín Barton (University College, Dublin) on Manx medieval ceramics, Ms Kristin Bornholdt (University of Cambridge) on medieval coins, Dr George Broderick on Irish Cistercian abbeys, Mrs E Brotherton-Radcliffe (National Tile

Census) on medieval ceramic floor tiles, Dr Stephen Burrow (National Museum of Wales) on the Manx neolithic, Lawrence Butler (University of York) on the site and its monastic archaeology, Mr Charles Cain on Cistercian slypes and chapter houses, Mr Nigel Campbell Bannerman on Welsh moss slates, Dr Richard Chiverrell (Department of Geography, University of Liverpool) on Manx geomorphology, Dr Gordon Cook (SUERC) on carbon dates from the site, Mr Frank Cowin on Manx architectural history, Ms Clare Crellin on animal bones from the 1984 excavations, Miriam Critchlow (Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society) for assistance with the publication of medieval documents, Professor Tim Darvill (University of Bournemouth) on Manx prehistory and the abbey demesne farm, Sir Timothy Daunt on excavation methodology, Dr Clem Fisher (Liverpool Museum) on bird bones, Professor Mike Fullen (University of Wolverhampton) on soil sciences and the *Borussus* project, Dr Tony Guerra (University of Rio de Janeiro) on the *Borussus* project, Dr Allan Hall (Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York) on environmental archaeology, Mrs Ruth Hurst-Vose on medieval and post-medieval glass, Dr Jim Innes (Department of Geography, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London) on Manx paleo-ecology, Dr Andrew McDonald (Brock University, Ontario) on medieval historical sources, Dr Arthur MacGregor (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) on bone artefacts, Dr Con Manning (Duchas) on Irish archive evidence for Rushen Abbey, Ms Sinéad McCartan (Ulster Museum) on Manx prehistoric lithics, Mr Basil Megaw, Manx medieval archaeology, Ms Karen Milek (University of Cambridge) on soil micromorphology, Mr David Miller (Beta Analytic inc) on carbon dates, the Manx Coin Recorder, Professor Terry O'Connor (University of York) on environmental archaeology, Dr Sarah Paynter (English Heritage), Mr Paul Quayle, Lezayre Abbeylands, Dr David Quirk (Oxford Brookes University) on geology and building stone, Mr Fred Radcliffe on Manx geology, Dr Charlotte Roberts (University of Bradford) on human remains and cemeteries, Dr Dave Roberts, Manx geomorphology, Mr Jim Roscow on Manx historic documents, Dr Ross Trench-Jellicoe on Manx crosses, Mr Allan Skillan on Manx flint industries, Dr Sue Stallibrass (English Heritage) on environmental archaeology, Dr Keith Stringer (University of Lancaster) on medieval documentary sources for Irish Sea monasteries, Dr Leigh Symonds (Trent University, Ontario) on early medieval archaeology, Dr Alan Vince on medieval ceramics and Lady Eva Wilson on the geology of Manx building stones. I am very grateful to all of them.

In 1997 Andrew Hartley produced a comprehensive assessment of all available documentary evidence for the abbey which has proved an invaluable tool throughout the project. I am very happy to acknowledge his singular contribution.

### **Field Survey 1998 to 2021**

In 1998 and 1999 the author and Jim Roscow carried out separate field surveys of the abbey landholdings in Lezayre. A survey of the abbey demesne was carried out as part of the teaching excavation in 2004 and 2005 and two further surveys were undertaken with the help of local volunteers, one between 2008 and 2009 of the village of Ballasalla, and the other between 2018 and 2021 of the Rushen Abbey lands throughout the island.

#### ***Ballasalla***

For the Ballasalla survey I am very grateful to those who signed up for the extra-mural course and participated so willingly in the fieldwork often not in the best weather conditions. They also worked on the assessment of the related documentary sources: John Bool, Clare Bryan, William Cain, Margaret Dyson, Maurice Dyson, Lynne George, Jonathan Kewley, Violet Ritchie and Gillian Rushton.

#### ***Abbeylands***

For the survey of the wider Malew abbeylands I was joined by David Allwood, Clare Bryan, Tony Cain, Marion Hastings, Fenella Logan, Christine Longworth, Pauline Stewart and Philippa Tomlinson. Their interest, involvement and support was vital to the completion of this aspect of the research for the monograph. Paul Quayle and Philippa Tomlinson assisted with surveys of other areas of monastic ownership on the island. Many thanks to them all.

### **Post-Excavation and Publication 2008 to 2022**

#### ***Research***

During the protracted post-excavation process thanks are due to a number of individuals who shared their specialist knowledge to the immense benefit of the project: Dr Martin Allen (University of Cambridge) and Dr Kristin Bornholdt-Collins on medieval coinage, Tânia Manuel Casimiro (Instituto de História Contemporânea, Universidade de Évora) on Portuguese pottery, Professor Gordon Cooke (University of Glasgow) on carbon dates, Dr Glyn Coppack, on monastic archaeology and the identification of architectural fragments from the site, Elizabeth Davey on fifteenth and sixteenth-century handwriting, Francisca Gale of Tynwald library on the Manx *lex scripta*, Dr Katie Hemer (University of Sheffield) on Manx long cist burials, Professor Keith Manchester (University of Bradford) on palaeopathology, Professor Andrew McDonald (Brock University, Ontario) for most helpful discussions of the abbey and its place in Manx medieval history, Dr Laura Castells Navarro (Universities of Exeter and Bradford) on human osteology and palaeopathology, Dr Rob Philpott on medieval and post-medieval pottery, Paul Quayle for discussion and joint fieldwork in the Lezayre abbey lands, Matthew Richardson (curator of Social History, MNH) on post-medieval pottery, Dr Amber Roy

(University of Newcastle) on prehistoric lithics, Zoe Stansell, librarian at the British Library for help with the Sloane Mss, Dr Geraldine Stout (National Monuments Service, Dublin) on Bective Abbey and St Mary's Abbey, Dublin, Dr Brian Tripney (SUERC) on the recalibration of carbon dates, Georgia Meredith Wedgwood-Smith (University of Reading) on human bones from the site.

### **Publication**

The writing of this monograph depended to a significant degree on individual research projects carried out in specific research areas, some of which resulted in jointly authored chapters and others in contributions to one or more of the online reports. In particular I would like to thank the following: Pauline Stewart for her meticulous and probing work on the small finds resulting in both a contribution to the daily life chapter (5) and a substantial detailed online report and Marie Weale for her dedication to the study of Manx medieval human remains involving many hundreds of skeletons or part-skeletons from the site and also resulting in a joint chapter on cemeteries and burials (4) and an impressive full online report.

Glyn Coppack was supportive throughout the project both during the excavations and more recently. His extensive knowledge of the Cistercians and their archaeology made a huge contribution to our thinking about Rushen Abbey in the context of the wider monastic world. He was also very helpful in the identification of architectural fragments from the site. Fenella Logan nobly accepted the task of reporting on the small but not insignificant collection of clay tobacco pipes. Nick Johnson and Hazel Simons, in the early stages produced extremely useful catalogues of groups of the finds with some initial attempts at interpretation. These formed a valuable source for the later more detailed work on the small finds and architectural fragments. Helen Riekstinš studied in detail the very extensive collection of ceramic floor tiles and ridge tiles from the site, most of them from the Butler excavations, placing them in their wider Irish Sea context. She collaborated fully in the updating of this work to include those fragments found in the later stages of the CMS excavations. The late Jim Roscow introduced the writer to the intricacies of the late medieval and sixteenth century documentation for the site. In particular, his discovery of the annotated version of the 1540 lord's rent book and its relationship to the records held by the court of augmentations in London, transformed understanding of the process of suppression of the Manx monasteries. He was very generous with his knowledge and became deeply engaged with research into the abbey and its land holdings. Philippa Tomlinson managed the sampling for carbon-14 dating and wrote part of the specialist report on the results. The late Ruth Hurst Vose gave freely of her time to study all of the glass from

the site up to and including the 2000 excavations. Her early death was a considerable shock but with a modest amount of updating her contribution is represented in two of the online reports. I have been privileged to worked very closely with all of these individuals and am very happy to acknowledge their very significant contributions.

I am also grateful to Vickie Jamieson, Helen Evans and Alan Lupton of Oxford Archaeology North for giving me access to the whole of the archive for their 2016 excavation on the site and for permission to publish some of their original photographs. This has meant a great deal to the project allowing the results of all the known excavations to be incorporated in the monograph.

The process of getting the text finally ready for presentation to the publisher depended on the assistance and advice especially of three individuals. Fenella Logan produced many of the illustrations, including the site plans and maps of the monastic estates as well as a number of artefacts. Philippa Tomlinson drew most of the distribution maps and prepared almost all of the online reports for publication. Mike Hoy thoroughly edited all of the texts, including the online reports. For all three people these were major pieces of work. I am most grateful to them and their support. I am also very happy to acknowledge the major contribution to the project made by Pauline Stewart who was responsible for a majority of the images of the small finds and to Marie Weale for her photographs of the human remains.

The whole of the post-excavation project was underpinned by Allison Fox on behalf of MNH and Harold Mytum on behalf of the University of Liverpool. Their commitment, involvement and advice has been invaluable.

### **Administration**

Excavation and its aftermath are complex activities involving many overlapping legal and contractual responsibilities for health and safety at work and staff welfare, as well as the management of the excavations themselves, the finds and archives, the undergraduate involvement and the public interface.

### **CMS**

The centre staff were key to the success of the project, especially the secretaries Shirley O'Hea and Jenny Shanley, but the academic staff whose fields of knowledge were some distance from archaeology also gave much encouragement especially Fenella Bazin and Breasha Maddrell. Professors John Davies and Trevor Norton who chaired the CMS management group for most of the period of the excavations provided great support throughout.

#### *DEPARTMENT*

In the archaeology department at Liverpool the involvement and support of successive heads of the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology was crucial: thanks especially go to professors John Davies, Chris Mee and Elizabeth Slater. Pat Sweetingham, the departmental secretary provided an essential means of communication between CMS and the School and Jennifer Mirdamadi, the technical resources manager, gave unstinting and creative assistance in many areas of activity. Both were essential to the success of the fieldwork.

The annual teaching excavations required organising both in Liverpool and on the island. The staff involved at the Liverpool end were essential to their success. In particular, Dr Jen Lewis, Dr Anthony Sinclair, Dr John Gowlett and Dr Phil Freeman. Jenny Woodcock also provided much administrative support and was a key link between the department and the excavation team.

#### *UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL*

The receipt and management of funding for the project, together with the employment of temporary staff and the organisation of the teaching excavations involved members of the university's administration in a number of areas: Caroline Ball (Research and Business Services), Barry Hewitson (Senior Assistant Registrar), Neil Lewis (Senior Assistant Registrar) and George Scully (Personnel).

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#### *MNH*

The management, staff and friends of the Manx Museum and National Trust have been key players from the start, not only in the design and funding of the excavations and post-excavation projects but in the provision of day-to-day support and advice. I am very happy to acknowledge this crucial contribution and the many excellent individual relationships built up over the years: Bernard Caine (chair of the trust), John Caley (photographer), Sarah Christian (archivist), Stephen Cregeen (head of administration and finance), Yvonne Cresswell (curator, social history), Miriam Critchlow (archivist), Peddyr Cubberly (site supervisor) Brandon Ellis (properties manager), Allison Fox (curator, archaeology), Andrew Foxon (head of professional services), Larch Garrad (curator, natural history), Jonathan Hall (chair of the trust), Stephen Harrison (director), Wendy Horn (assistant director), Andrew Johnson (curator, field archaeology and inspector of ancient monuments), Martin Moore (chair of the executive committee of the trust, later chair of the trust), Kirsty Neate (head of professional services), Jane MacGregor Edwards (site supervisor), Sue Palmer (curator, archaeology), Tony Pass (head of properties), Carola Rush (photographer), John Sayle (treasurer and later chair of the Friends of Manx National Heritage), Roger Sims (archivist and librarian), Heather Stephenson, Alison Clague and Alex McFee (Rushen Abbey site staff), Wendy Thirkettle (archivist and librarian), Paul Weatherall (archivist and librarian), Brian Whitehead (head of public services), Julie Whittaker (director's personal assistant).

#### *OTHER*

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'Whilst sauntering near the venerable ruins of the Abbey of Rushen, let us muse awhile on its history' (Cumming 1848, 45)

# Chapter 1

## Preface

### Introduction to the volume and its scope

In May 1998 the Isle of Man Government purchased the site of Rushen Abbey and transferred ownership and responsibility for it to Manx National Heritage (MNH) with an instruction to open the site to the public in millennium year (fig 1.1). MNH asked the Centre for Manx Studies, University of Liverpool (CMS) to carry out exploratory excavations in 1998 and then in 1999 to attempt to open up the entire area of the claustral buildings so that they could be displayed to the public from April 2000. Subsequently, each summer from 2000 to 2008 CMS carried out teaching excavations in different parts of the site.

### Objectives

There are three main aims for this monograph. First, to publish the main results of the 1998 to 2008 excavations, secondly, to provide a synthesis of the results of all previous excavations on the site and thirdly, to assess the national and international significance of the new knowledge.

### Reporting

The results of the 1998 to 2008 excavations are reported on in two different ways. The printed text attempts an overview of the evidence, including a full assessment of the results of previous excavations on the site. It is supported online by more detailed reports on individual evidential types, together with the site narratives, matrix diagrams and excavation and post-excavation archive calendars.

### Structure (see table of contents)

Following this initial introduction, the second chapter introduces the historical evidence for the site and gives a summary account of previous excavations and their results. The background, objectives and methodology of the 1998 to 2008 excavations are then summarised.

Chapter 3 presents the main results of the excavations. It deals with each group of buildings and structures in succession and incorporates, where possible, the findings of all previous excavations for each area where they had taken place. It should be remembered that for parts of the site medieval foundations have been revealed on previous occasions, for others the CMS excavations are the only ones known to have occurred. Towards the end it includes a section which considers the question 'what were the abbey buildings like?' This involves a summary review of the detailed reports on roof tiles, ridge tiles, window glass, lead comes, architectural fragments, wall plaster and floor tiles which have been placed online.

The text is predominantly descriptive with little discussion at this stage. A consideration of the wider issues raised by the excavations and field surveys may be found in chapters 6 and 7.

Human remains were encountered in many areas of the site. Chapter 4 on the cemeteries attempts to present and distil the complex history of the recovery of human burials from the site. It considers the geography, chronology and typology of the burials and includes an overview of recent undergraduate and post-graduate research on aspects of the osteology of the remains.

The material culture enjoyed by the monks at Rushen Abbey, especially in the final years, is considered in chapter 5 which attempts an overview of the evidence both from the 1998 to 2008 and from earlier excavations. This synthesis is based on detailed reports on the flintwork, vessel glass, pottery, coins and copper alloy, stone, lead, iron and bone artefacts and radio-carbon dates which have been placed online. The material culture demonstrated by the finds from Rushen Abbey is discussed thematically, according to the aspect of daily life that they represent.

The abbey's estates are the subject of chapter 6. During the teaching excavations students were involved in a survey of the local monastic landscape, especially the abbey demesne in Malew. Some fieldwork was also carried out in the Myrosough holding in Lezayre. More recently in 2018 a full study of the Malew estates was completed.



Figure 1.1: view of the east range from the south in the Spring of 1998, soon after the site had been purchased by the Isle of Man Government.

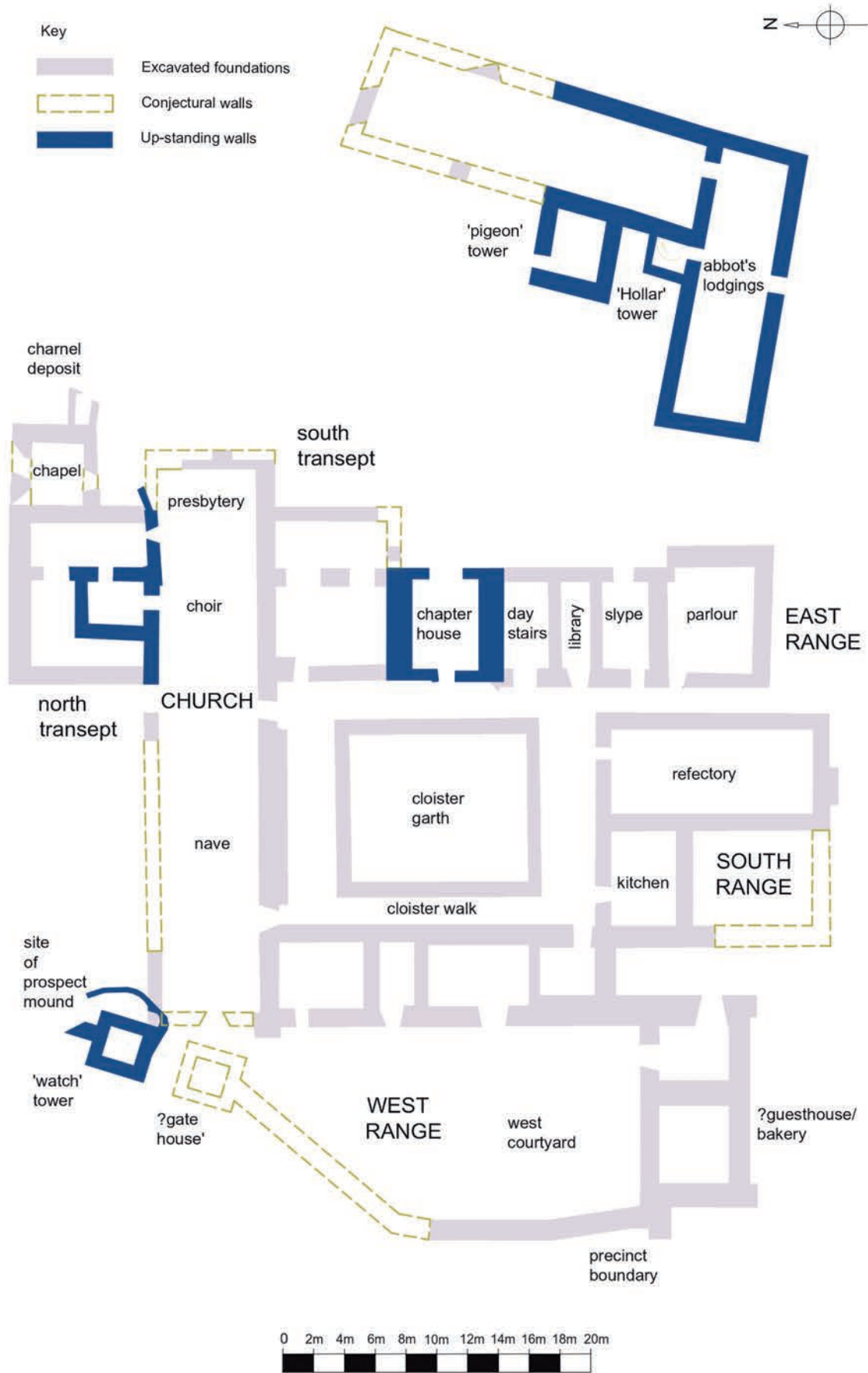


Figure 1.2: plan of Rushen Abbey to show the nomenclature adopted for this monograph.

The evidence presented so far includes some internal discussion within each chapter, such as that on the nature and dating of the cemeteries that have existed on the site, the chronology of the abbey buildings or the management of the farm holdings and their origins. In contrast, chapter 7 reviews the archaeological evidence for Rushen Abbey's structures and finds in their Manx and wider context. It examines four broader issues suggested by the excavations and the research carried out for this monograph as a whole: the chronology of the Manx conversion to Christianity in an Irish Sea context, the status and function of Rushen compared with other Cistercian abbeys in Britain and Ireland, the processes of dissolution and the life of the abbey after 1540.

There follow four appendices which are essentially lists, each with an introduction, of items that are considered sufficiently important and interesting to the reader to be included here, rather than being available solely online. They are lists of abbots, coins, carbon dates and MNH accession numbers.

Finally, there is a bibliography and index. The bibliography consists of primary, published primary and secondary sources and includes all references referred to in the monograph. A complete listing of references used throughout the study together with internal and unpublished external reports is available in the online archive <https://isleofmanher.im/>.

In addition to the longer supporting reports and bibliography, detailed site narratives and matrix diagrams for each separate excavation area are available online, together with calendars of both the physical and digital excavation archive which are retained within the Manx Museum (MS 15157).

Ideas about the function of the abbey buildings have changed over time and a range of terminologies is found in the literature. This subject is discussed further in the volume, but to avoid confusion a single nomenclature has been adopted throughout (fig 1.2). For some of the buildings their function or changes of function remain in doubt.