Excavations at Beaulieu Priory, Clophill

KEVAN FADDEN

THE EXACT SITE of Beaulieu Priory was unrecorded and apparently forgotten in the spring of 1963, when the Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society was formed. Inspired by Mrs Mary Phillips' articles in *The Bedfordshire Magazine* (Vol 8, pp 224, 281), the Society decided to search for, and if possible excavate, the site of this small cell.

According to Mrs Phillips, the Rev A. J. Foster, in his *Tourist's Guide to Bedfordshire* (1889) recorded that traces of the foundations could still be seen at Clophill, but by the time that the *Victoria County History* was published in 1908 the remains had been destroyed. Some glazed floor tiles and a thirteenth century base had been discovered, and a fourteenth century coffin lid could be seen at the farm nearby. Today these have all disappeared.

Beaulieu Priory or Bello Loco was founded between 1140 and 1146 by Robert D'Albini and established under the rule of Abbot Geoffrey (1119-1146). It remained a small cell until poverty finally forced the monks to leave in 1428.

The task of locating the site was not difficult, as the farmer, Mr R. Gobey, had just ploughed a field for the first time from pasture, turning up considerable amounts of medieval roof tiles and mortar. The debris was on a slope to the east of the buildings at Top Farm, Beadlow (TL 105385). With the co-operation of Mr Gobey some trial excavations were made to establish the extent and condition of the site. Full excavation was not possible as the ground was to be cropped within six weeks. Subsequent excavations were made on a rescue basis between cropping, until Autumn 1965.

Buildings

The extent of the buildings excavated are shown on fig 2. The walls follow a north-south and east-west pattern. The foundations of the walls were constructed from roughly shaped sandstone blocks

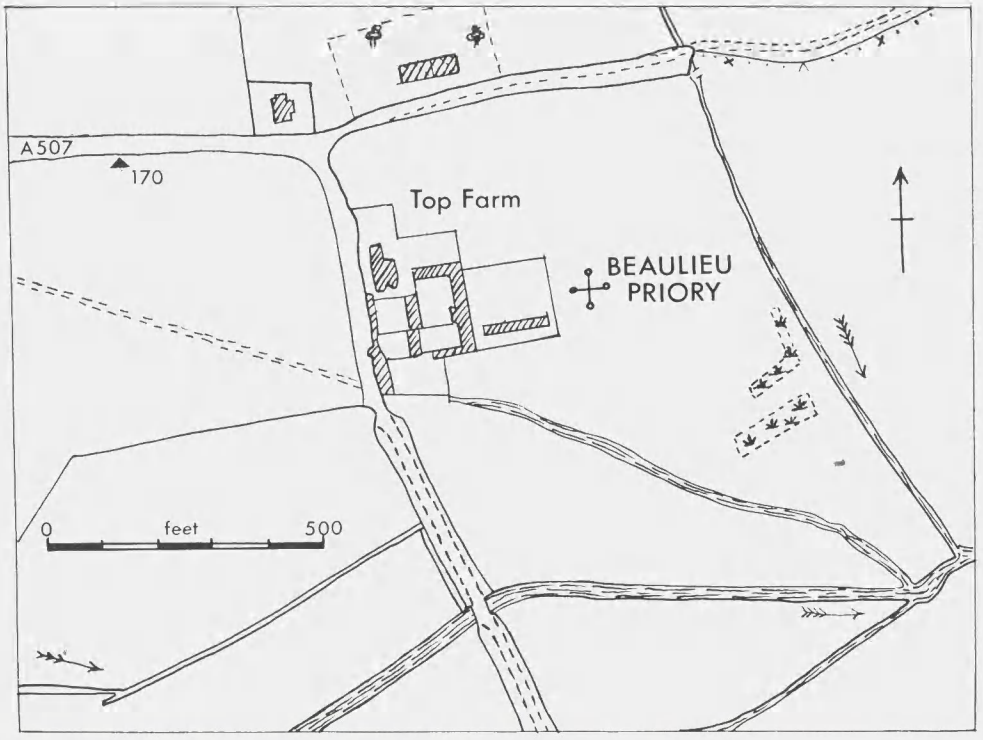


Fig 1. The site of Beaulieu Priory at Top Farm, Beadlow.

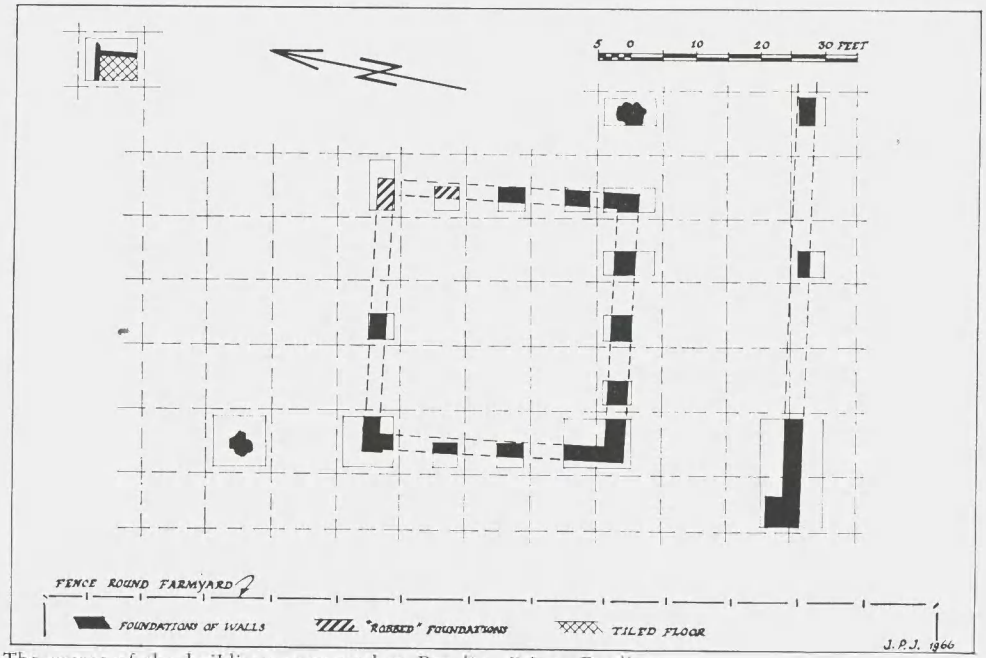


Fig 2. The extent of the buildings uncovered at Beaulieu Priory, Beadlow.

and mortar. Fragments of Totternhoe stone tracery and mullions were found throughout this site.

Bones

A collection of bones were found including bones from horse, ox, dog, sheep, deer, pig and rabbit. Oyster shells were also abundant.

Glass

Fragments of glass including the neck of an apothecary's phial and stained window glass were found.

Metal Objects

The following metal objects were discovered: iron roofing nails between 2 and 6 in. long, several knives, an iron key, a bronze letter *S* of a type for setting in stone and small strips of lead from windows.

Coins

Only one coin was found, a Mary groat 1553-1554. The inscription read *Veritas Temporis Filia Maria D G Ang Fra Z Hib Regina* and is translated: Truth of Time Daughter, by the Grace of God, Queen of England, France and Ireland.

Miscellaneous Objects

These include pumice stone, whet stone and a mill quern made from Hertfordshire conglomerate of the type found locally on Roman sites.

Decorated tiles

The site yielded a small number of decorated floor tiles. They were scattered in a manner which suggests that the floors were extensively robbed before the building was finally destroyed. Three main types of tile were discovered: (a) incised, (b) encaustic, (c) embossed.

(a) The earliest are the incised tiles as shown in fig 3, nos 3, 4, 5, 6, made in varied shapes and stamped with rosettes and fleur-de-lys. The shapes obviously fitted together to form a mosaic. They are coarse textured and unevenly fired with a greenish yellow glaze. The thickness varied from 1 in. to 1½ in. suggesting they were individually cut from a block of partly-dried clay using a template and not made in a mould. Tiles of a similar texture but with a green glaze were found in several geometric shapes, including a regular six-pointed star 9 in. across the points. These were probably from the same mosiac. Incised tiles were common throughout Ireland but in England were confined to the Midlands and Eastern Counties. Cranden's Chapel at Ely Cathedral provides the finest example of these tiles which are dated early fourteenth century. Similar examples have also come from St Michael's Cambridge, and the churches at Higham Ferrers and Icklingham.

(b) Only two patterns of encaustic tiles were found, both reddish brown with yellow decoration fig 3: 1, 2. The clay was finely textured, fired to a light red colour with a blue grey core. They were 4⅛ in. square and ⅞ in. thick. The method of decoration is unknown but was probably effected by pressing a stamp coated with liquid white clay into a partly dried tile. Tiles of similar pattern to fig 4: 1 have been found in a kiln site at Penn in Buckinghamshire. Tiles manufactured at this site

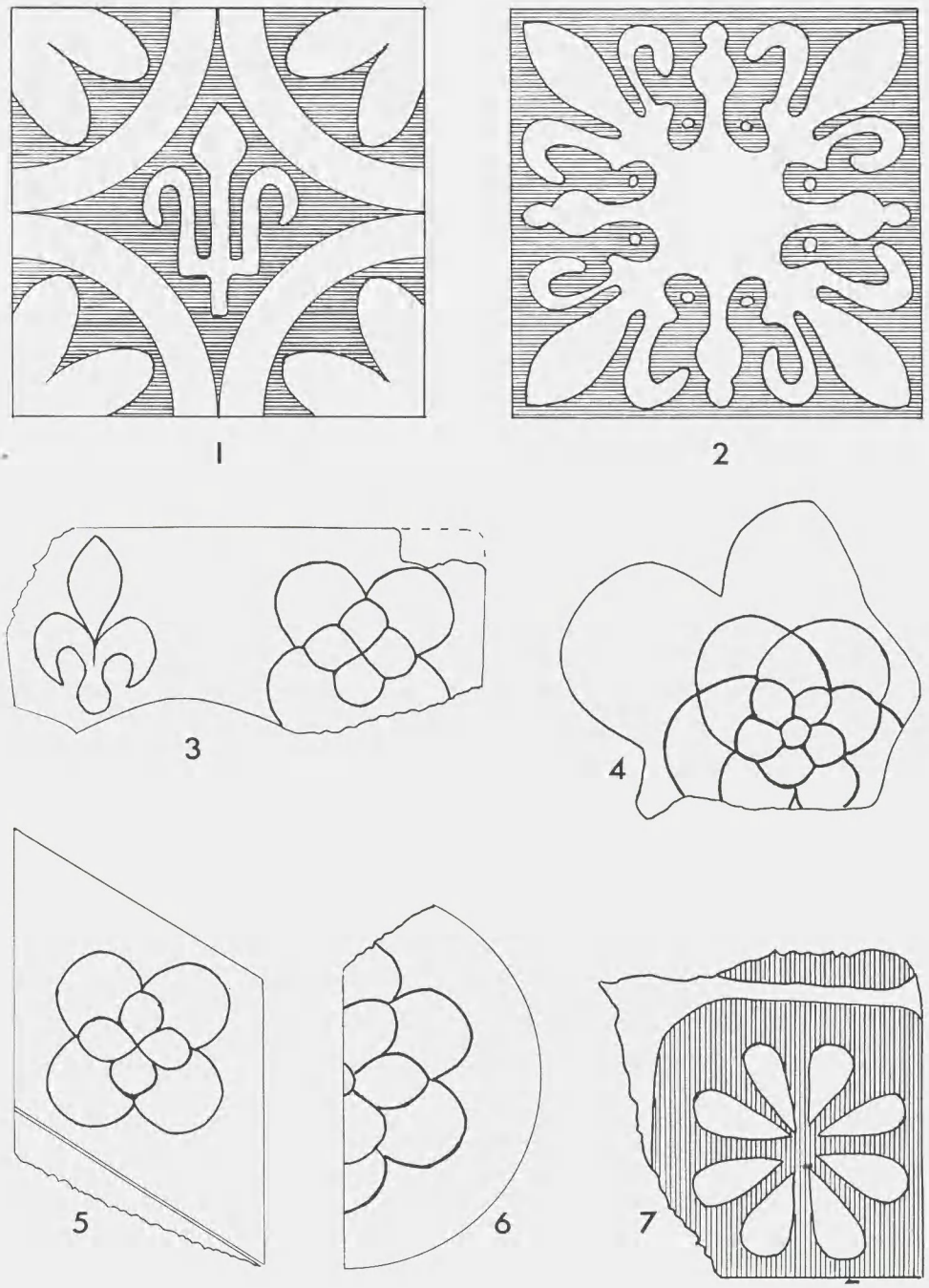


Fig 3. A selection of decorated floor tiles from Beaulieu Priory, Beadlow.

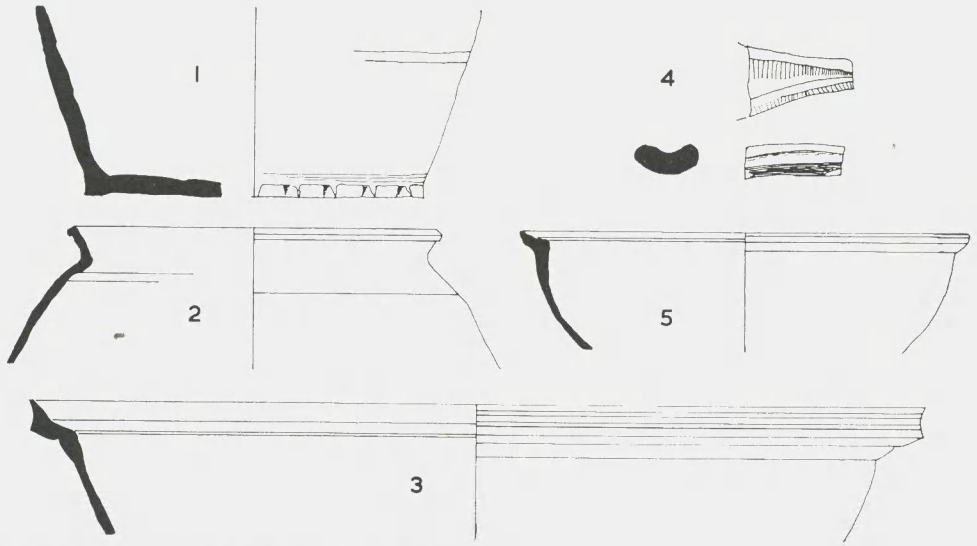


Fig 4. The pottery from Beaulieu Priory, described below.

have been found in churches and monastic sites throughout the Thames basin. The size and material remain fairly standard but show many different patterns. Fig 3 : 1 showing a small fleur-de-lys between four quadrants enclosing two petals also occurred at Crowell, Chinnor, North Moreton and Ewelme churches. These quick-to-manufacture tiles became popular after the Black Death when labour was scarce.

(c) Only one fragment of an embossed tile was found, fig 3 : 7. This was 7/8 in. thick, fine textured, and fired to an even grey core with a light green glaze. The pattern was pressed on to the tile leaving an uneven surface which must have been unpleasant to walk on and difficult to clean. These were the least common of all medieval tiles and belong to the perpendicular period.

Plain tiles

The only tiles found in position were plain with a yellow glaze. They were 1 in. thick, some 7 in. square and others triangular 7 in. on two sides. Firing and appearance suggest a similar date to the incised tiles.

THE POTTERY

by David H. Kennett

THE SHERDS of pottery range over the full length of the occupation of Beaulieu Priory, both as a monastic foundation and a farm. Two principal medieval fabrics are present; a hard, sandy ware with black surfaces and a smooth, black fabric with red or buff surfaces. These are both found at Bedford.[1] All of the vessels appear to have been wheel-made and many still have internal rilling from the potter's hand. A feature of the assemblage is the wide, deep pan, of a form known in thirteenth century contexts at Northolt[2] and Manor of the More[3] and found unstratified at Bedford. To this pottery we can probably assign a tentative date within the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, whilst the post-medieval material includes stonewares and Jacobean combed wares, but is all very fragmentary.

(1) Jug; base; black ware with buff to light red surfaces, sparsely gritted; no decoration; type known from Bedford.

(2) Cooking pot; rim sherd; black sandy ware with grey surfaces.

(3) Wide deep pan; rim and part of wall; hard black sandy ware with black surfaces. (B4/9.8.).

(4) Pipkin; handle; black ware with light red surfaces and slight trace of brown glaze on top. (B/H3A/2).

(5) Bowl; profile; buff ware largely fired light red throughout. (B4/1).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Society gratefully acknowledges the help and co-operation of many people, especially Mr R. Gobey the owner of the site, Mr D. H. Kennett for his report on the pottery, Mr T. H. Gardner for his help and advice, and the staff of the Bedfordshire Record Office and Bedfordshire County Library.

NOTES

[1]Unpublished material in Bedford Museum.
[2]*Med.Arch.* 5, (1961), 270 and fig 67, 49.
[3]*Arch.J.* 116, (1959), 163, and fig 8, 14, fig 9, 1.