

Discovery of a late Anglo-Saxon monastic site in Devon: Holy Trinity church, Buckfastleigh

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In 1992 Holy Trinity church at Buckfastleigh in Devon was burned out in an arson attack that left only the masonry surviving. The loss of the ancient parish church deeply affected the local community, but it also made possible new archaeological investigations which have revealed the site of the original Anglo-Saxon monastery at Buckfastleigh.

Holy Trinity church at Buckfastleigh in Devon nestles on the southeastern edge of Dartmoor (Fig. 1) in the Dartmoor National Park (National Grid reference SX 7424 6657). It was burned down in the terrible arson attack of 1992; apart from the tower, which has been restored, it is now an empty and decaying ruin (Fig. 2). There is mounting concern not only about the condition of the standing remains but also about frequent acts of vandalism and the long-term future of the site. In response to this situation, a new project has been launched by archaeologists from several British universities and heritage bodies, with the aim of investigating the history of the church and returning it to its rightful position as a valued place for the local community.¹ Our initial assessment of historical maps and written sources relating to Holy Trinity, in combi-

nation with limited exploratory excavation, indicates beyond reasonable doubt that the site is where the important Anglo-Saxon monastery of Buckfast stood, which is known to have existed by the early eleventh century.

A sixteenth-century document that is preserved in the Devon Public Record Office relates a tradition that one Ealdorman Æthelweard established the abbey at Buckfast in AD 1018 during the reign of King Cnut, probably as a re-foundation of a previous monastery. Before we started our investigations, it had been presumed that the late Anglo-Saxon monastery stood on the site of the present Buckfast Abbey and that the monastic complex had been frequently modified, taking its present form in the late twentieth century. However, we suspected that the site of Holy Trinity church had formed the focus for the early medieval monastic community,

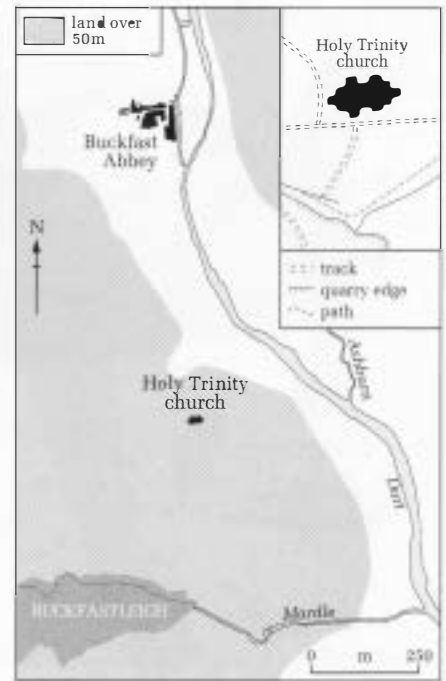


Figure 1 Part of southeastern Dartmoor, showing the location of the town of Buckfastleigh, the present Buckfast Abbey and Holy Trinity church.

before a move to the valley-floor site of the present abbey (Fig. 1) in the twelfth century. Stewart Brown, who carried out extensive excavations at Buckfast Abbey, found no archaeological material securely dated to before the twelfth century,² and

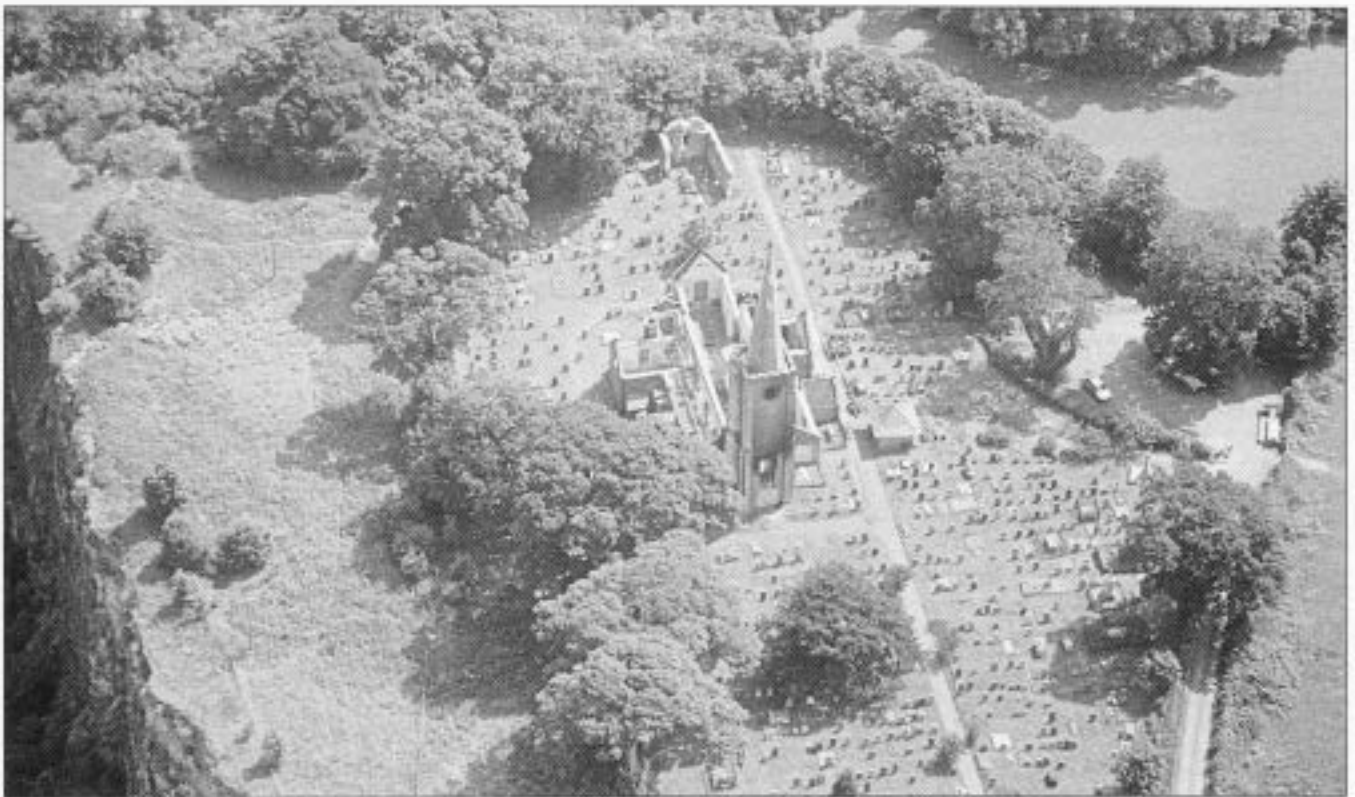


Figure 2 Aerial photograph of the ruins of Holy Trinity church, its graveyard and (at the extreme left) the edge of a nearby quarry; the small ruin aligned with the church at the eastern end of the graveyard may be part, or on the site, of an early medieval monastic building.

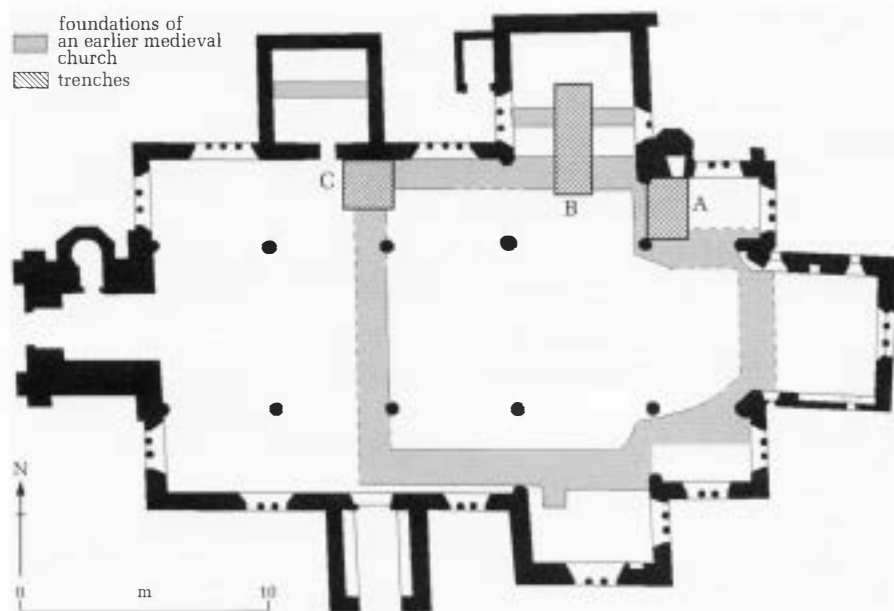


Figure 3 Plan of Holy Trinity church showing the location of trenches A, B and C; note at the east end of the church the outline of a semi-circular apse, which was revealed by the GPR survey.

the surviving documentary material was insufficient to show which site is earlier. It seemed to us that only archaeology could resolve this question.

When we began work we knew that, if what we suspected could be proved, Holy Trinity, Buckfastleigh, would be the first high-status church pre-dating the Norman Conquest to be excavated in south Devon. Such an outcome would also be significant nationally, and potentially internationally. Previously there had been no excavation of any scale in Devon or Cornwall specifically designed to address such important questions as the nature of early monasticism, burial practices, and the changing use of space in early and later medieval churches.

Until our project was launched, previous archaeological work at the site had been conducted in response to specific threats. In 1995 a mid-seventeenth-century burial vault in the ruins of Holy Trinity collapsed during repairs. In response, a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey was carried out by Stratascan Ltd in order to identify any further vaults or other buried archaeological features. This survey identified several anomalies, which were interpreted as possible wall foundations of an earlier church.

Archaeological evaluation in 2002

In April 2002 our team carried out an evaluation exercise at Holy Trinity designed to explore both the quality and degree of preservation of archaeological deposits and to assess the accuracy of GPR as a survey technique inside an ecclesiastical building.³ Our work was successful on both counts. Post-excavation analysis is almost completed and radiocarbon dating of material from four inhumation burials is currently in progress.

Our evaluation comprised three cuttings

made inside the church (Figs 3, 4). The eastern trench (A) was designed to establish the presence or absence of an apse-like feature identified by the GPR survey. We found this to be a finely built structure of coursed limestone bonded with clay. The western trench (C) was placed to investigate the northwest corner of the early structure. It revealed two phases of an earlier masonry church comprising two right-angle returns, one structure laid over the other. They sealed an earlier human burial.



Figure 4 The ruined interior of Holy Trinity church looking east from the restored tower and showing trenches A, B and C under excavation, April 2002.

The central trench (B), which was the largest of the three (Figs 5, 6), revealed a medieval graveyard soil that contained up to three generations of burials. A destruction layer contained the disturbed traces of a high-status monumental tomb of later medieval date in the form of a series of rare inscribed tiles, which resembles in both location and type those from a disturbed tomb at Bordesley Abbey in Worcestershire. Below the medieval soil, a row of five well preserved later Anglo-Saxon graves of varying elaboration was recorded. Burials were found in substantial wooden coffins, held together with iron nails, and one of these lay within a plaster-lined chamber. Charcoal had been scattered in this coffin before the body was placed in it. Osteological analysis revealed additional bone growth on the skeleton indicative of a condition known by the acronym DISH (diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis), which is related to obesity and diabetes. It reflects a very rich diet and is not unusual in monastic contexts. Indeed, the range of individual burial rites of the earliest graves is paralleled only at churches of the highest status elsewhere in England, such as Winchester Old Minster, York Minster, St Oswald's Priory Gloucester and Hereford Cathedral. Several of the most elaborate burials were those of females, raising the interesting possibility that the church may have been a nunnery before the Benedictine reforms of the tenth and early eleventh centuries.⁴ Nunneries are known to have existed in Wessex, but have previously proved hard to identify. Trench B also revealed an east-west wall, provisionally interpreted as the north wall of an Anglo-Saxon porticus (transept) and surviving early floor levels demonstrably earlier than the plaster-lined grave (which is probably of tenth-century age). Another rare survival was a line of stake-holes preserved in the earliest floor, which marked a division between the nave and north porticus of the early church.

The church in its landscape

We are also interested in the wider landscape context of the church. Preliminary documentary research and fieldwork have focused on cartographic materials and sample geophysical survey around the church. In our documentary work we have so far mainly examined early maps, in particular a map preserved in the Devon Public Record Office that depicts the area around the church in the early 1540s when the abbey's lands were sold. It shows several important features, including valuable evidence of the subdivision of the monastic fields after the dissolution of the monasteries during the 1530s, and what may be the earliest known reference to the use of lime as an agricultural chemical in Devon. It also preserves the late medieval field names, some of which had changed by the time the local tithe map was produced in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ In addition,



Figure 5 Excavation of trench (B) in progress; the figure at the right is standing in trench A.



Figure 6 Trench B, showing burials found in the medieval graveyard soil.

the post-medieval maps suggest the outline of a possible monastic enclosure preserved in field boundaries, although much of this has been removed by quarrying since the 1840s. Further evidence to support the contention that the site is that of an early medieval monastery survives in the form of a ruined masonry building aligned on Holy Trinity to the east of the church and within the possible monastic enclosure (see Fig. 2).

Geophysical surveys were carried out in three areas to the north, southeast and west of the graveyard by Mike Hamilton from the University of Wales, Newport. They showed that, although there has been significant disturbance by quarrying around the church, archaeological features do survive below ground in some areas. In particular, probable medieval settlement remains were identified to the west of the church at the far extremity of the modern graveyard, just inside the possible monastic enclosure boundary, in an area not yet disturbed by burials. It seems likely that the area around the church may preserve parts of a Saxon monastic complex. The lack of urban development around the church contrasts with many other comparable sites in England, and important evidence for monastic settlement may have survived here, whereas it has been destroyed elsewhere in England.

Future work

Overall, the results of our initial investigations are highly encouraging. They demonstrate the great potential of the site for further work, which is attributable to the exceptional survival of complex, but coherent and informative, archaeological deposits. Having completed an evaluation, we are now able to formulate an informed research design. We hope to be able to develop a programme of archaeological research that involves further excavation, detailed recording of the standing ruins, and landscape archaeology in the vicinity of the site. Local people will be closely involved in the project, and a member of our team will be dedicated to working with local schools and young people. Devon Archaeological Society members will also be invited to participate in the fieldwork.

We expect our work to show for the first time what characteristics the early monasteries of the southwest peninsula of England share with those in other parts of the country. Preliminary analysis of the GPR survey, coupled with the results of our evaluation, also suggests that some of the closest parallels for the distinctive early structures at Buckfastleigh are found in churches in the Merovingian and Carolingian world,⁶ and investigating the context of such architectural affinities provides a further impetus for the project.

Few Anglo-Saxon monastic sites in England have been excavated to modern standards; many of the most important churches dug earlier in the twentieth century are

poorly recorded and badly damaged. The quality of the evidence revealed at Buckfastleigh, and the opportunity to excavate these deposits to the highest modern standards, will provide a unique opportunity to enhance our understanding of Anglo-Saxon England. Looking to the future, we hope our work will help guide management and development policies at Buckfastleigh and at similar sites across the country. The fire of 1992 has thus had one positive outcome; although it was a tragic event, it has provided an opportunity for archaeological research of great local and national significance.

Notes

1. The project is jointly directed by the authors (Dr Andrew Reynolds, Institute of Archaeology, UCL and Dr Sam Turner, Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne), with assistance from Graham Brown (English Heritage), Dr Mike Hamilton (Department of Archaeology, University of Wales, Newport) and Stephany Leach (School of Humanities and Heritage Studies, University College Winchester).
2. S. Brown, "Excavations and building recording at Buckfast Abbey, Devon", *Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings* 46, 13–90, 1988.
3. The evaluation was funded by grants from the Royal Archaeological Institute, Dartmoor National Park Authority, the Robert Kiln Charitable Trust, the Medieval Settlement Research Group and King Alfred's College, Winchester.
4. The Benedictine reforms led to the re-planning of many English monasteries, including the laying out for the first time of cloisters. The reform itself was a process by which the rules of monastic life were tightened up in an intellectual climate in which leading churchmen, such as Dunstan and Æthelwold, sought to regulate institutions that they regarded as morally deficient.
5. A tenth part of the produce of land and stock was paid to the church up until the parliamentary enclosure of land in the nineteenth century, when common land was divided up by boundaries. The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 introduced an annual rent charge based on the prevailing price of corn, and tithe maps were produced to chart the extent of property, ownership and occupation for this purpose.
6. From the seventh to the ninth centuries, churches of the Merovingian and Carolingian world – broadly speaking, modern France and, during the latter period, including parts of Germany, the Low Countries and northern Italy – were often based on the Roman basilica plan and they currently provide the closest comparisons with what is presently known of the form of the early church building at Buckfastleigh. See C. Sapin, "Architecture and funerary space in the early middle ages", in *Spaces of the living and the dead: an archaeological dialogue*, C. Karkov, K. Wickham-Crowley, B. Young (eds), 39–60 (Oxford: Oxbow, American Early Medieval Studies 3, 1999).