



Excavations at St Mary Magdalen, Winchester, 2008-2010. Summary Report
(MHARP 2010)

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Little archaeological work has been conducted on medieval *leprosaria*, an institution that accounts for almost a quarter of all medieval hospital foundations.¹ Thus our knowledge of these establishments, particularly their buildings and layout, is limited.² Furthermore, in England, it is often the assumption that leper hospitals were a post-Conquest phenomena, the majority founded in the late eleventh to thirteenth centuries.³ However, recent excavations at the medieval leper hospital of St Mary Magdalen, Winchester, have revealed a range of buildings and, more significantly, convincing evidence for a foundation in the tenth century.

In 2007 the department of archaeology at the University of Winchester initiated the Magdalen Hill Archaeological Research Project (MHARP) with the aim of studying the history and development of the former medieval leper hospital and almshouse of St Mary Magdalen, Winchester, Hampshire. The site is relatively undisturbed by later urban encroachment and is presently used for arable farming. Typical of many leper hospitals the site was located on the outskirts of the medieval town suburbs, presently some 1.6 km (1

¹ Gilchrist 1995, 10-11; Rawcliffe 2006, 107-108.

² In contrast, a little more work has been carried out on the cemeteries, most notably that at St Mary's and St James's, Chichester (Magilton, Lee and Boylston 2007).

³ Gilchrist 1995, 38.

mile) east of the City at NGR: SU 506 295. Despite its importance, and our lack of knowledge relating to early hospital foundations, little work had formerly been carried out on the site. In 2000 it was the focus of a small excavation televised by Channel Four's *Time Team*. However work was not completed due to adverse weather conditions and information concerning the earlier phases of the hospital were thus largely inconclusive at this time.⁴ In late 2007 and early 2008 MHARP carried out an evaluation and desk-based assessment of the site including field and geophysical surveys, together with an assessment of primary and secondary documentation. This was combined with a reanalysis of the Time Team material. The resistivity survey located the existence of several structures as well as evidence for a precinct wall and earlier boundary ditches. With reference to eighteenth-century drawings, these structures were identified as the former chapel, almshouse range, master's lodge and gatehouse as well as other ancillary structures. These results provided the basis for a planned long term excavation project by MHARP directed by Dr Simon Roffey and Dr Phil Marter.

Brief History of the Site

The site is first referred to as a community of lepers in the twelfth-century *Winton Domesday* and it was likely (re)founded by Henry de Blois, Bishop of Winchester (1129-71), as a leper hospital sometime around 1148.⁵ It was still functioning, to some extent, as a *leprosaria* during the fourteenth century, as it is referred to as such in the Bishop's Register of 1325.⁶ By the mid-fourteenth century the hospital was reported as being 'slenderly endowed'.⁷ It is likely that this led to a possible re-foundation and a programme of rebuilding. In the sixteenth

⁴ Gallagher 2002.

⁵ Both Keene (1980, 19) and James (2007, 75) refer to de Blois as the likely founder. Though in the context of the results presented below, there was probably a hospital already in existence (though it may not have been necessarily operational at this time).

⁶ VCH 1973, 197.

⁷ VCH 1973, 197.

century St Mary Magdalen appears to have escaped official dissolution and it was still receiving endowments throughout this period. Both the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and Chantry Certificates further indicate a reasonably healthy income and the institution successfully appealed to the king in 1552 for a continuation of the priest's stipend.⁸ Around this time, the masonry buildings of the hospital were replaced with brick-built almshouses, with only the medieval chapel left intact. By the end of the seventeenth century the institution had been variously used as a Civil War camp and a prison for Dutch prisoners of war, the latter forcing the permanent removal of the hospital residents and the destruction of much of the buildings.⁹ By 1789 the remaining buildings were ruinous and were finally dismantled. Fortunately, the remnants of the almshouse and chapel were drawn by the antiquarian Jacob Schnebbelie and a description of the buildings provided by the last hospital master, William Wavell.¹⁰



Fig 1 Schnebbelie's depiction of the medieval chapel, looking east. c.1789 (HRO)

⁸ VCH 1973, 200; HRO 51M48/2/2.

⁹ HRO 21M65/32/2/2/1.

¹⁰ *Vetusta Monumenta* 3 1796.

Excavations 2008-10



Fig 2 West end of medieval infirmary detailing the south aisle- notice dark floor surfaces and partitions.

The excavations revealed evidence for a series of occupation phases. In 2008/9 the post-medieval brick-built almshouse range was excavated together with an adjoining Master's lodge. Underlying these were the remains of a large masonry aisled hall with evidence at its western end for partitioned cells with hearths. This building was likely the leper hospital infirmary. Archaeological evidence also suggested that the aisles were added at a later date. Attached to the south side of the infirmary hall was a building dating to the fourteenth century with a tiled hearth. This structure may represent an earlier master's lodge, and both this and the infirmary aisles were likely added as part of the fourteenth century refoundation. Parallel to the infirmary, and to the south, was the medieval chapel. Here excavations

revealed flint-faced walls with rubble cores and the flint bases of former buttresses. Significantly, two phases of chapel construction were identified: an earlier wall that had been partially reused by a later medieval wall (the latter built on a slightly different alignment). Depictions of the aisle in Schnebellie's drawings (fig 1) clearly show that it was Norman in character, with no signs of later rebuilding, apart from the insertion of a later window. This evidence thus suggests that the earlier wall (and therefore its building) is of pre-Norman date, an assumption supported by the burials detailed below.



Fig 3 Site looking east. Note burials on right of trench and 'cellared' structure in bottom left corner. The remains of the later medieval phases can also be seen in the north west quadrant of the trench. The north wall of the chapel is visible in the top right corner adjacent, but not aligned, to the burials.

Between 2009-10, a series of graves were uncovered around the site. In the main cemetery, to the south of the chapel, at least one individual presented evidence for leprosy. Inside the south aisle of the chapel itself further graves were excavated including a plaster-

lined tomb with Purbeck marble slab, the contents of which had been later 'robbed'. The earliest of these has been recently Radio-Carbon dated to the fourteenth century and may therefore be indicative of refoundation, noted above, and a consequent increase in patronage and related lay burial.¹¹ Significantly, a large group of burials (at least fifteen), including at least one child, were also found to the north of the chapel between the chapel and infirmary (and underlying the later medieval phases). They were also aligned differently from the chapel. Several of these burials showed indications of leprosy.¹² Moreover, two burials sampled for Radio Carbon analysis provided a date of between c. AD 970-1030. This was later backed up by a further dating sample. A number of artefacts, pits, postholes and what appeared to be a large 'cellared' or sunken-featured structure (underlying the medieval infirmary) may also relate to this phase.

The excavations at St Mary Magdalen have provided a valuable insight into the buildings and layout of a medieval leper hospital and its later transformations. Furthermore, it is clear from the archaeological evidence that an institution for lepers was founded in Winchester sometime before the Norman Conquest. Radio Carbon analysis of some of the stratigraphically earliest human remains on the site, which also present evidence for leprosy, suggest that this institution was founded in the later tenth century. It is possible that a chapel, among other structures, also formed part of this early foundation. Within a wider context, it was this period that witnessed widespread religious reform, with Winchester and its bishop, Aethelwold (d.984), at its heart. This was a reform that included the enclosure of monastic

¹¹ Radio Carbon analysis for this, and the other burials referred to, was undertaken by the Radio-Carbon Dating Laboratory at the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

¹² The remains are currently being analysed at the Department of Archaeology, University of Winchester.

spaces in the city and the tighter regulation of religious life.¹³ It is possible that such changes also led to the foundation and enclosure of a religious community of lepers on the outskirts of the city. It is tempting to think so, and if this is the case it may be interesting to further surmise a possible founder for this institution. A single reference in Byrhtferth's *Life of St Oswald*, a contemporary of Aethelwold, refers to the young monk founding 'a monastery in Winchester'.¹⁴ As both Lapidge and Biddle and Keene note, the location of this monastery is unknown.¹⁵ It may, indeed, still remain to be found, but the dates would certainly tally with that of St Mary Magdalen and offers intriguing possibilities for the continuing work at the site.

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¹³ Rumble 2003, 25

¹⁴ Lapidge 2009, 35. We are grateful to Professor Barbara Yorke for drawing our attention to this.

¹⁵ Biddle and Keene 1976, 330 n.8.; Lapidge 2009, 35.

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