

Recent Geophysical Survey Work at Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight

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Since 1997, archaeological survey work has been carried out at the site of Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight by the Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton. The work aims to locate buried archaeological remains associated with the Cistercian abbey founded by Baldwin de Redvers in 1131 and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The site now lies within the environs of the present-day Benedictine complex inaugurated in the 19th century.

The first monks to inhabit the abbey came from a monastery at Savigny, Normandy, and throughout the 12th and 13th centuries the abbey grew in importance. At the Dissolution in 1536, Quarr fell into the hands of the Crown. Many of the buildings of the monastic complex were then demolished for sale of building material. By 1781, the account of Sir Richard Worsley stated of Quarr that 'the refectory or Common Hall is the only building remaining entire: it is now a barn...'. This tradition of reuse has continued, and the surviving remains of the earlier abbey can still be seen incorporated within the later farmhouse and farm buildings; together with surviving stretches of the precinct wall these are the only other signs of extant masonry. Although antiquarian interest was shown in the history and remains of the complex, the only archaeological investigation at Quarr was undertaken by Percy Stone in 1891. This work involved partial excavation of the abbey remains, and while a plan of the complex was derived from the results, many of the conclusions were extrapolated from very limited areas of excavation.

The primary aim of the present survey is to determine the exact location of the inner precinct buildings, the abbey church, cloisters and service buildings of the abbey. To be able to visualise the buried remains of the complex, geophysical survey techniques were applied across the area. Resistance survey was chosen as the primary technique for locating the medieval monastic buildings uncovered by

Stone's excavations, as it consistently yields good results when performing surveys of this type. Additionally, magnetometry was chosen as an efficient way of detecting kilns, hearths, ovens and ditches. A geophysical survey of the extramural areas conducted by Dr Kate Clark and Timothy Sly, between 1997 and 1999, successfully mapped a series of enclosures and possible buildings. In the summer of 2002, work was conducted in the area which was the subject of Stone's 19th century excavations, and an adjacent field immediately to the north.

The geophysical survey successfully located a large number of features related to the medieval abbey at Quarr. In the central field the results indicate that substantial areas of the complex survive, maintaining in most parts the plan produced by Percy Stone (see the magnetometer and resistivity results in the accompanying picture). The central cloisters, nave choir, chapter house, even the infirmary hall and court are visible, confirming the features mostly identified by Stone in his excavations. Variations in the strength of anomalies attest to the differences in depth of surviving remains below the modern ground surface. In the magnetometer results, a rectangular room is visible which was not recorded in the resistivity survey. Bearing in mind the depth of response in the resistivity of between 30 and 50cm below the ground surface, it may well be that there are deeper deposits such as cellars. It would thus be worthwhile to record the different depths of structures in this field using resistance tomography, and a further programme of survey is planned for the coming year. The award to the present-day monastery of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to prepare a substantial conservation and access strategy plan will enable more work to be funded, including survey of standing walls, possibly in association with English Heritage, and could lead to an exploratory excavation to inspect the current state of below-ground foundations.

