

Introduction

An archaeological excavation on the site of the former Minster House at Bristol Cathedral was completed between April and July 1992. It was proposed by the Dean and Chapter to construct a new cathedral visitor centre with paved forecourt on the site (Bristol planning applications 90/03032/F and 90/03033/L). Initially, a small archaeological evaluation trench was dug immediately north of the access road to the cloister in 1991 (Boore 1991), and the positive results of that investigation prompted the more extensive excavation. Both projects were carried out by the Field Archaeology unit of the Bristol City Museums and Art Gallery, subsequently known as Bristol and Region Archaeological Services (BaRAS), under the direction of Eric Boore. Follow-up observations took place in 1992 and 1993 during construction of the visitor centre foundations and paving of the area west of the Cathedral, although little of additional interest was seen. Eric Boore also carried out the initial post-excavation work, including phasing and the commissioning of specialist reports, and produced a summary report (Boore 1992).

Bristol Cathedral is located in the south-west part of the central area of the city, on the southern edge of the slight knoll that is commonly known as College Green (Fig. 1). It sits on a gently sloping site immediately above a short, but steeper, drop to the south that leads to Canons Marsh, formerly the hay meadows of St. Augustine's Abbey, predecessor to the cathedral. The cathedral site overlooks the Floating Harbour, formerly the tidal River Avon. Geologically, the site consists of Mercia Mudstone, of the Permo-Triassic, above Quartzitic Sandstone (Brandon Hill Grit) of the Upper Carboniferous.

The 1992 excavation occupied an area of approximately 625 square metres, situated between the west side of the cloister and the eastern edge of College Square, along the whole of the north side of the cloister access road (Figs. 2-9). Excavation was carried right up to the south and west walls of the south-west tower of the cathedral, but stopped short of the restored late medieval abbey gatehouse. The site was centred on point NGR ST 58302 72668. Prior to excavation most of the site lay around 17.00m aOD, the eastern part against the cloister being lower at 16.20m aOD. Most of the area was laid out as grass, with a wide, curved pathway connecting College Green with College Square by way of the west porch of the cathedral, and a smaller path connecting with a doorway into the cloister; there were a few small trees, the two smallest of which were removed for the excavation.

West of the cathedral, the overburden was removed by mechanical excavator, but the 7.50-metre-wide strip alongside the cloister, being at a lower level, was de-turfed

by hand. Topsoil and dressed stone were segregated for possible future re-use. Archaeological excavation was then done by hand. Undisturbed ground (natural) lay relatively close to the surface along the northern edge of the excavation, at a depth of about 350mm, the thickness of the stratigraphy increasing across the site to a maximum of 1300mm against the southern boundary. In the lower, eastern area of the site, the average depth of ground removed was approximately 800mm (Figs. 59-61).

During the excavation, archaeological features were given alpha-numeric identifiers (e.g., W.xx for walls, S.F.xx for stone features). Contexts were identified using two-letter codes. Site notebooks were maintained by both the director and the supervisor. The site was surveyed at a scale of 1:20 using sheets of gridded polyester film, with sections and elevations at the larger scale of 1:10. Photographic recording consisted of 35mm black and white prints and colour slides, utilising single-lens reflex cameras. Elevated views of the site were obtained from the Cathedral School, the top of the cloister wall, and the roofs of the cathedral, gatehouse and Central Library. This project has been archived under the Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives Accession Number BRSMG 17/1992.



Fig. 1. Location of the excavation and places mentioned in the text, scale 1:50 © Crown Copyright

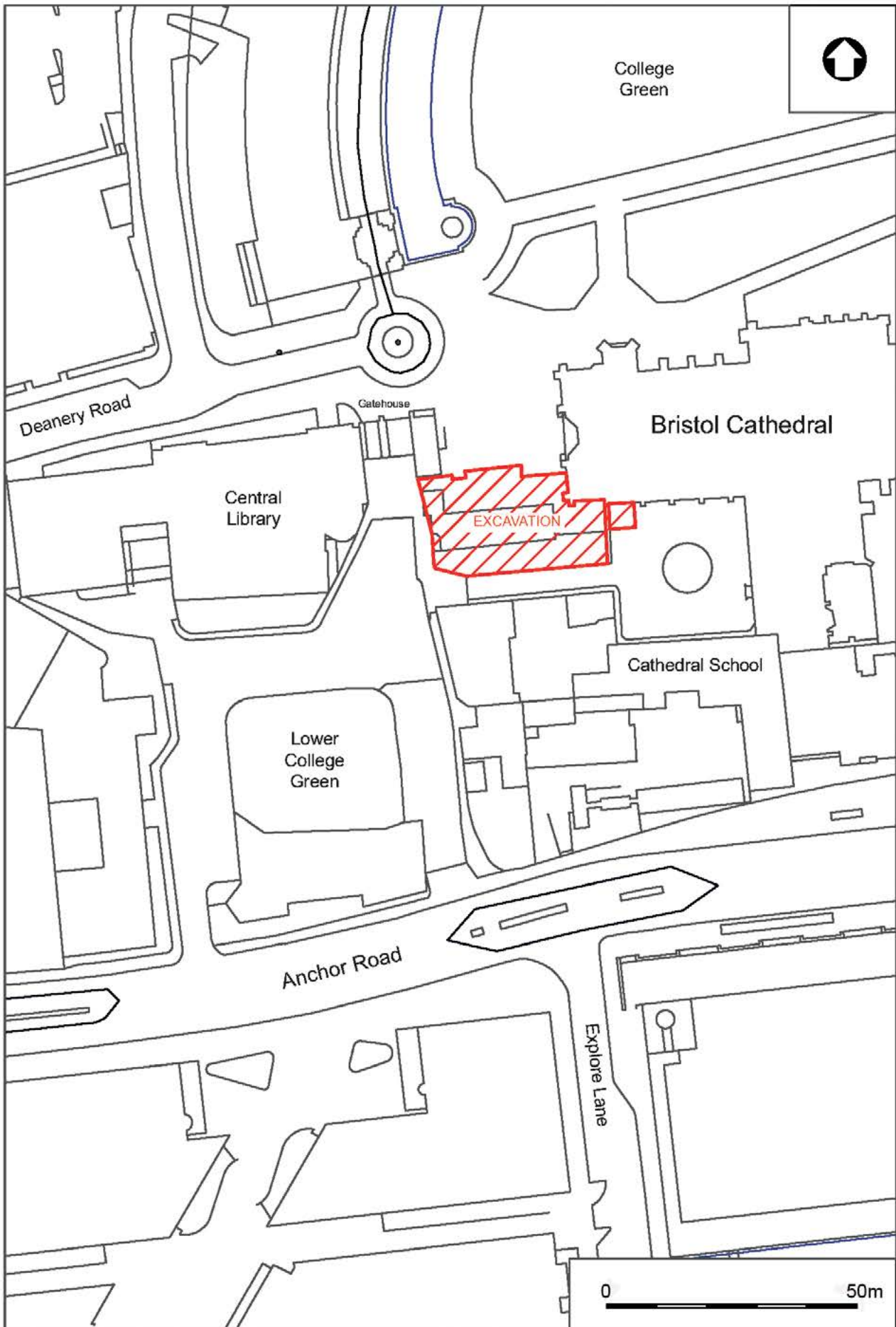


Fig. 2. The excavation site in relation to the modern buildings, scale 1:1000 © Crown Copyright

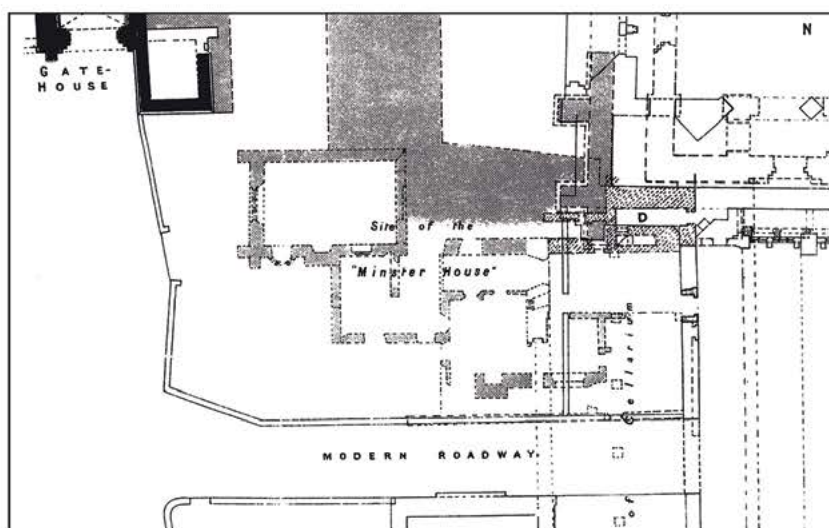
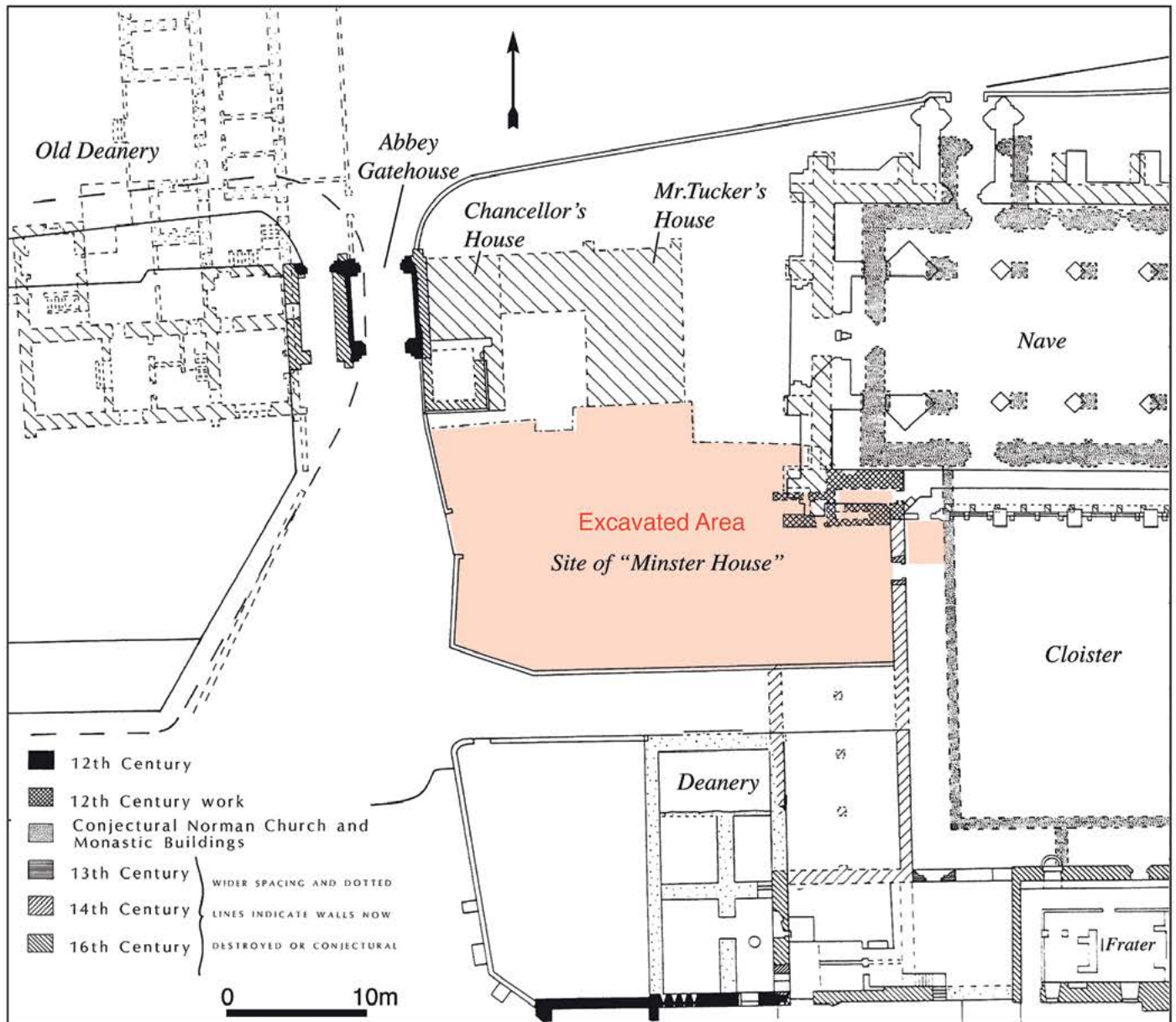


Fig. 3. The west end of the Abbey precinct and other buildings mentioned in the text (after Paul 1912) © Roland W Paul/ Archaeologia (The Society of Antiquaries of London)



Fig. 4. The site in context, seen from the west before excavation commenced © Bristol Culture



Fig. 5. View of the west end early in the excavation, seen from the cathedral south-west tower © Bristol Culture



Fig. 6. Excavation well advanced, looking east from the Central Library © Bristol Culture



Fig. 7. West and central areas of the excavation, seen from cathedral tower © Bristol Culture



Fig. 8. View looking north from the Cathedral School, buildings 2 and 5 in the foreground © Bristol Culture



Fig. 9. Eastern area of excavation, seen from the cathedral tower, looking south © Bristol Culture