

## Rochester Cathedral, Medway, Kent

### Report on archaeological test pits on the east side of the Tudor Gate (Project Code RCTG 11)

**NGR TQ 7425 6850**



Figure 1: The Tudor Gate seen from the north-west.

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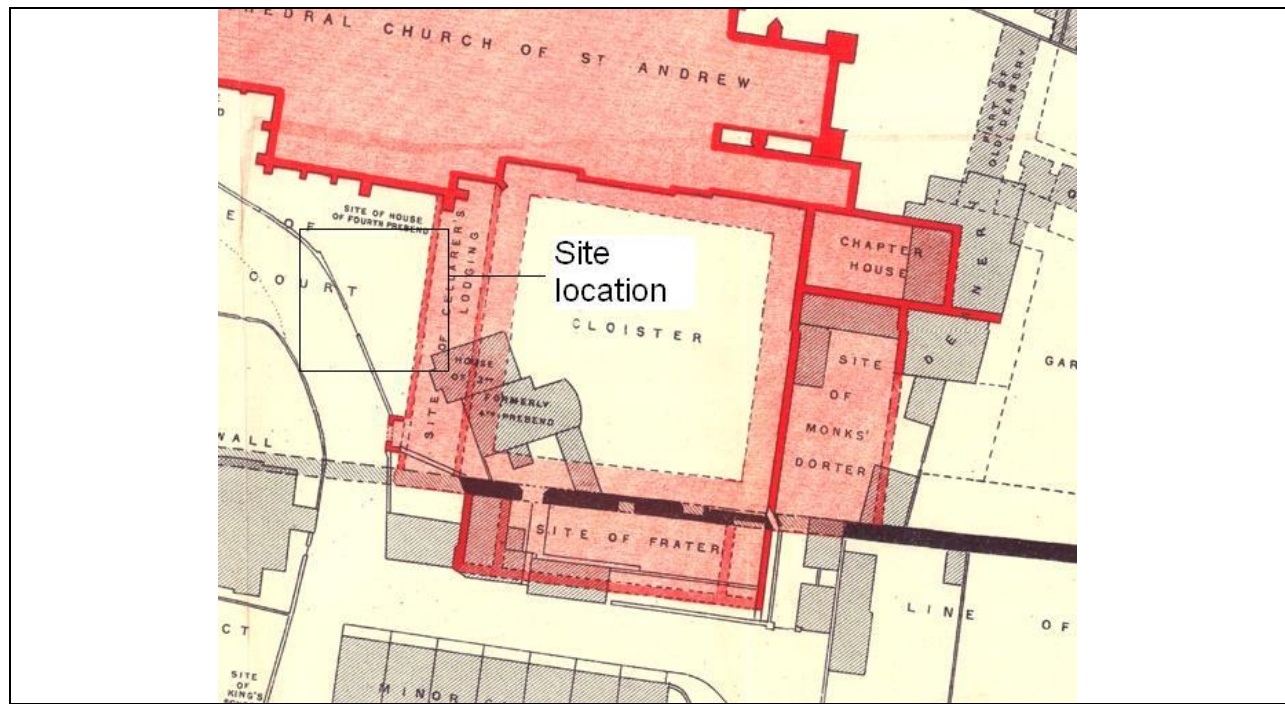


Figure 2: General location of the excavation area, after St John Hope. Not to scale.

Rochester Cathedral is oriented from north-west to south-east. The orientation largely reflects the pre-existing topography of the Roman town. It is a broadly accepted convention, however, to describe church buildings with reference to a ‘standard’ east-west orientation even when the reality is significantly different from this, as at Rochester. This convention is followed throughout this report.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Four small test pits were hand excavated on ground just to the west of the cloister at Rochester Cathedral. No significant archaeological deposits were encountered, and indeed the western two pits lay within wholly modern disturbed ground. The eastern two pits, however, revealed an ashy mortar and chalk layer at 450-500mm below the current ground surface. This layer is provisionally interpreted as the top of demolition deposits from the medieval west range of the cloister, which was demolished at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Excavation did not continue into this layer.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Four small test pits were hand excavated on 22 February 2011 on ground just to the west of the cloister at Rochester Cathedral. Test pits 1 and 2 were excavated immediately behind (east of) the so-called Tudor Gate, to accommodate the concrete foundations for a new iron gate within the existing timber frame. Each pit was 450mm long (at 90 degrees to the gate), 300mm wide and 350-400mm deep. The location, size and depth were in accordance with Carden & Godfrey Architects' design drawing.

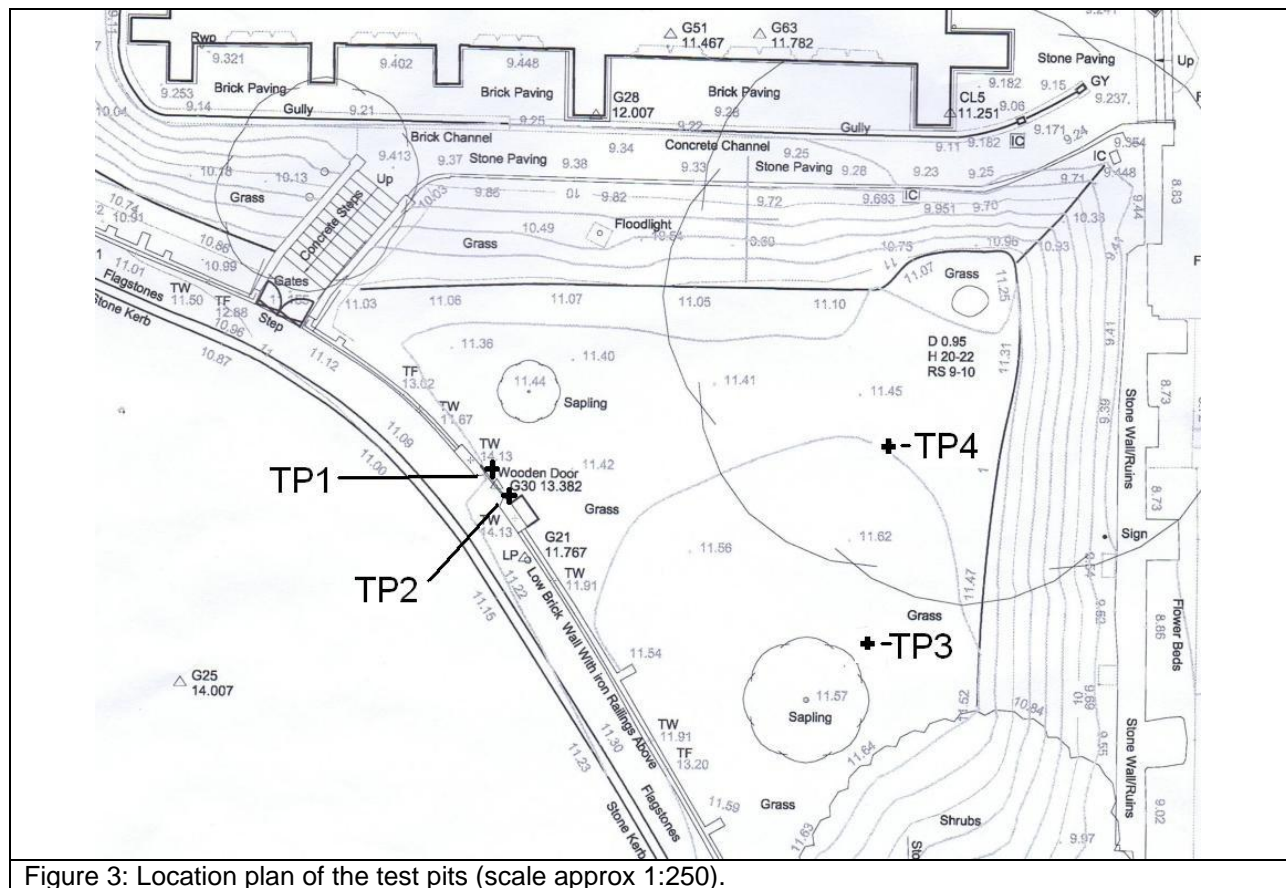


Figure 3: Location plan of the test pits (scale approx 1:250).



The remaining two pits were located further to the east on the higher ground behind the Gate, between 2.75m and 3.25m west of the sharp break of slope down to the cloister. This raised area might be chosen to replace the existing memorial garden at the south end of the west cloister range, which now has very little space left for the burial of ashes. Given that the two foundation pits had to be excavated, the opportunity was taken to dig the two additional pits so that the potential archaeological impact of burying ashes in this new location could be evaluated. These two pits were 500mm square and 450-500mm deep, the southern one being the deeper because of a very slight slope from south to north (see spot levels and contours on Figure 3).

The excavation area lies just to the west of Scheduled Monument ME 294 (Remains of Rochester Priory). Scheduled Monument Consent was not required for the excavations, but they were discussed with and approved by English Heritage irrespective of this. The Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England was also informed of the intended work and agreed that it did not require their formal consent, provided that excavation would cease if archaeologically significant/sensitive remains were encountered. The work took place on this basis, and was carried out by the author on 22 February 2011.

## 2 DESCRIPTION

The topsoil was essentially uniform across all four pits, being a very dark grey-brown silty clay loam (context 101, 201, 301, 401). This was 100mm thick in pits 1 and 2, but slightly thicker (150mm) in pits 3 and 4. The two pits immediately behind the gate otherwise encountered mixed rubble in a grey-brown silty clay incorporating much yellow sand (context 102, 202) for their full depth. The sand was part of the protection for an electric cable running through pit 2 (203), with a ceramic cable cover (204) to the east side of (but not covering) it. The cable is believed to be the feed for the floodlighting on this side of the cathedral, with the feeder pillar for this being located just to the south of pit 2.



Figure 4a: Test Pit 1 viewed from the south, 0.5m scale.



Figure 4b: Test pit 2 from the north with the feeder pillar behind it, 0.5m scale.

The location and direction of the cable found in pit 2 may mean that the foundation has to be re-positioned slightly to avoid this. Any further work here would still be in modern disturbance layers, and is thus unlikely to require any further archaeological input.

Test pits 3 and 4 were similar in sequence, but not identical. In both pits the topsoil sealed an extremely compact and hard orange sandy gravel 'ballast' (302, 150mm thick, and 402, 130mm thick). This was excavated over the full extent of each pit, after which a smaller sondage was dug into the north-west quadrants. Layer 302 in pit 3 sealed a similarly hard and compact 180mm-thick 'ballast' layer, but here the gravel was in a mid-brown sandy clay (303). In pit 4, layer 402 sealed a 170mm-thick layer of mixed brick, chalk and stone rubble (403). This was somewhat less heavily compacted than the 'ballast' layers, but was still hard. Layers 303 and 403 sealed a pale grey mixed layer of ash, lime mortar (possibly burnt limestone) and chalk (304, 404). This lay at the base of the pit, and was not excavated as it appeared to be a potentially significant deposit. Its upper surface lay at about the same level once the slight slope from south to north was taken into account.



Figure 5a (left) and b: Test Pits 3 (a) and 4 (b) from the north, showing the 'ballast' layers and the ashy mortar at the bottom of the sondages, 0.5m scales.

No artefacts were collected during the excavation. No pottery, clay pipe or roof/floor tile was present. The pieces of brick and stone rubble were of no interest. A few pieces of oyster shell were likewise of no significance.

### 3 INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The two pits next to the Tudor Gate do not require any further comment here. As far as pits 3 and 4 are concerned, the ashy mortar layer (304, 404) appeared to be demolition and/or stone robbing rubble. There are only two known buildings from which this might have derived: the west range of the medieval cloister, adapted after the Dissolution and in use until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and the Prebendal House which succeeded it, demolished in turn in 1937-8. The house was a red brick structure, and parts of its foundations were exposed in the cloister watching brief during 2009-10 (project code RCCL0 09-10). The bonding mortar was hard and apparently cement-

based. The materials present in layer 304/404 do not seem to be consistent with this. Notwithstanding the lack of excavation, therefore, the mortar layer is interpreted as being derived from the demolition of the west cloister range. The test pits lie just to the west of the anticipated line of the west wall of this range (for which evidence was found in 2007 – project code RCSTLC 07), and so should be just beyond it. D Alexander's plan of 1801, however, shows a second (added?) structure running west from the range (see Figure 6). The demolition material could have come from either building.



Figure 6: Extract from D Alexander's plan of the cathedral and precinct c 1801, showing the west range and the extension from it (to the right of the number 7).

The rubble and ballast layers (302, 303, 402, 403) are interpreted as landscaping for the gardens and grounds of the Prebendal House. The very hard and compact nature of layer 302/402 in particular was suggestive of a path. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 1:500 map does indeed show a carriage drive running in this general area. These layers are not considered to be archaeologically significant.



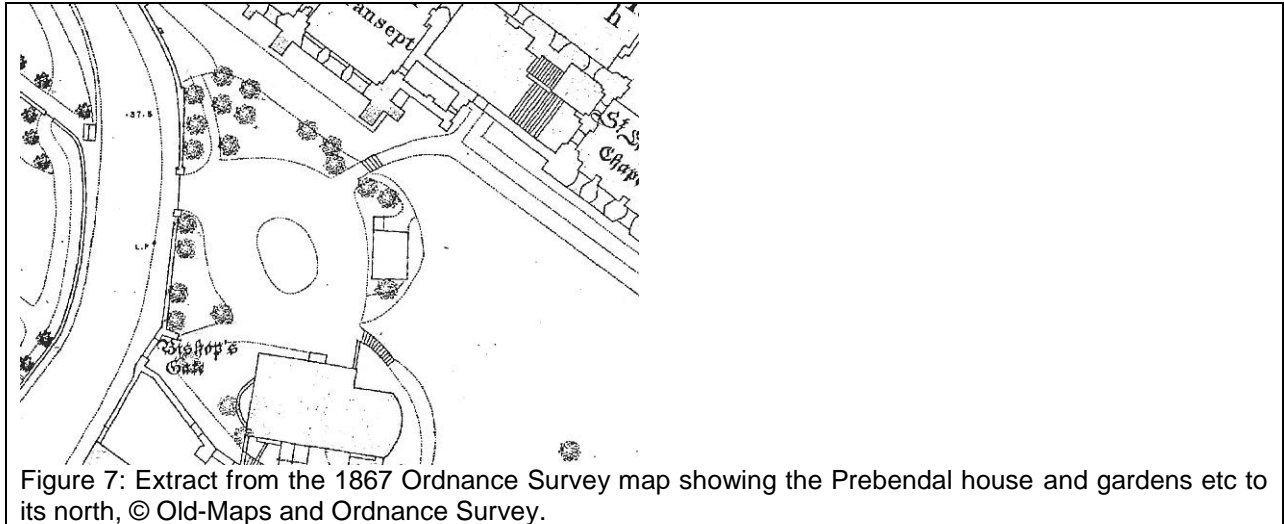


Figure 7: Extract from the 1867 Ordnance Survey map showing the Prebendal house and gardens etc to its north, © Old-Maps and Ordnance Survey.

As far as the burial of ashes is concerned, the test pits (though limited in extent) do not suggest that there would be a significant archaeological impediment if a formal proposal was to be forthcoming. The hardness of the 'ballast' and rubble layers, however, would not be readily conducive to the regular digging of small pits. It might be better to pre-excavate an area of (say) 10m square by hand and/or machine under archaeological supervision. This could then be filled with softer soil to facilitate the subsequent burial of ashes. Excavation down to the top of the mortar layer (304/404) should be achievable with minimal complications, and subject to the necessary consents it may be possible to dig slightly deeper than this either generally or locally, as this would offer the opportunity for further investigation of the mortar layer.

### 3 SOURCES/PROJECT REPORTS

RCSTLC 07: Keevill G D 2009, *Report of archaeological survey and watching brief in association with conservation work on the South Transept and Lady Chapel, 2007-8*

RCCL0 09-10: Keevill G D 2010, *Report of an Archaeological Evaluation and Watching Brief in the Cloister and South Quire Aisle shop store*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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