

Rochester Cathedral, Medway, Kent

Trial pit excavations in the Chapter House, and a watching brief in former Dorter, 2019



Figure 1: The interior of the Chapter House with trial pit 2 under excavation, looking south-east.

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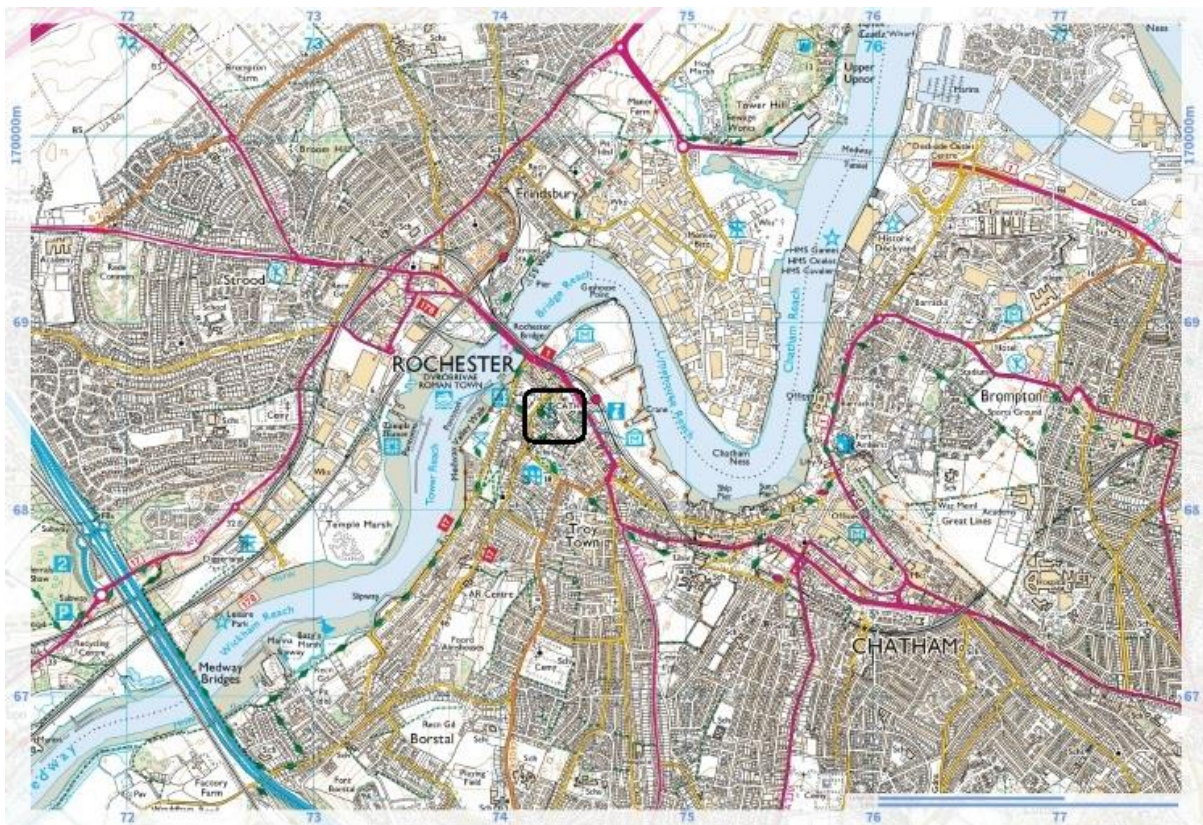


Figure 2: General site location plan, with the Cathedral highlighted. See also Figure 3. Ordnance Survey data Crown Copyright 2019. All rights reserved. Licence number 100051221.

Rochester Cathedral is oriented from north-west to south-east. This is largely followed by the buildings and grounds within its historic and current estate, known collectively as The Precincts, and reflects the pre-existing topography of the Roman town. Using the correct alignment can make description of the site cumbersome. 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 - the ecclesiastical compass - is followed throughout this report.

Executive summary

Two archaeological trial pits were excavated by hand in the Chapter House at Rochester Cathedral in July 2019. One, just inside (east of) the medieval entrance to the building, uncovered an adult skeleton at a depth of 1m-1.1m below ground level. The available evidence suggests that this was a medieval burial, contemporary with the use of the Chapter House itself. The skeleton is probably the one found (and left in situ) during an excavation in 1937. The second pit was located against the south wall of the Chapter House, and exposed the top of its foundations 0.84m below ground. This is the same level as the current entrance threshold from the Cloister into the Chapter House: this was only established in 1937 (during the same excavations that found the skeleton), but it now is clear that a historically correct level had been chosen. The foundations were offset by 0.3m from the wall above, and cut a layer of late Saxon 'dark earth'. While these excavations were in progress, a short trench was dug across the tarmac courtyard/car park between the East Cloister Range and the Old Deanery to re-connect water to a small toilet block within the courtyard (but only accessible from the Cloister) so that it can be used again. The trench was 0.84m deep (maximum) and only contained 18th/19th-century made ground, although post-Dissolution demolition rubble was noted at the base of the trench.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the projects

This report describes the results of two archaeological projects carried out at Rochester Cathedral during July 2019. Both were situated outside the Cathedral but within its Precincts. The first, in the Chapter House, is the main focus of the report, and comprised the excavation of two trial pits to evaluate the archaeological potential of this building as part of feasibility studies for a possible future development project in the building. The second, in the former monastic Dorter range to the south of the Chapter House, was a watching brief during excavation of a shallow trench to re-establish a water connection to a small earlier 20th-century toilet block on the east side of the Cloister. The former Dorter might also be included in the development just mentioned. The excavations and watching brief are separate projects archaeologically, but they were carried out at the same because of the obvious cost saving this represented. It makes sense to report on both projects together as well. The Chapter House is located at the north-east corner of the Cathedral's Cloister, at National Grid Reference (NGR) TQ 7430 6847; the former Dorter (now a tarmac courtyard and car park for the Old Deanery, used by the King's School) is sited at TQ 7429 6845.

Neither of the areas lies within the Cathedral's several Scheduled Monuments, although the west wall of the Chapter House is included in Monument ME 294, the "Remains of Rochester Priory cloister" (National Heritage List number 1003405). Historic England confirmed that SMC (Scheduled Monument Consent) would not be needed for the works. They lie within land under the freehold ownership of the Dean and Chapter, however, and are therefore covered by the Care of Cathedrals Measure 2011. One provision of this is that any excavation which might disturb or damage significant archaeological remains requires the prior permission in writing of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England. The water trench in the Dorter did not present any issues in this regard, as a trial pit excavated in the same area during 2018 showed that no significant archaeological remains would be expected within the depth of excavation needed. The Chapter House trial pits were a different matter, however, as their aim was specifically to assess the archaeological potential (and significance) of the building's interior: achieving this might well necessitate excavating into such remains. Accordingly, an application was made to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England on 30 April 2019 for permission to excavate the test pits. This was considered and approved by the full Commission meeting on 30 May 2019, and

Chapter was informed of the approval in writing on 10 June 2019. The trial pit and trench excavations were carried out on 8-10 July 2019. Figure 3 shows the locations of the two sites within the Precincts.

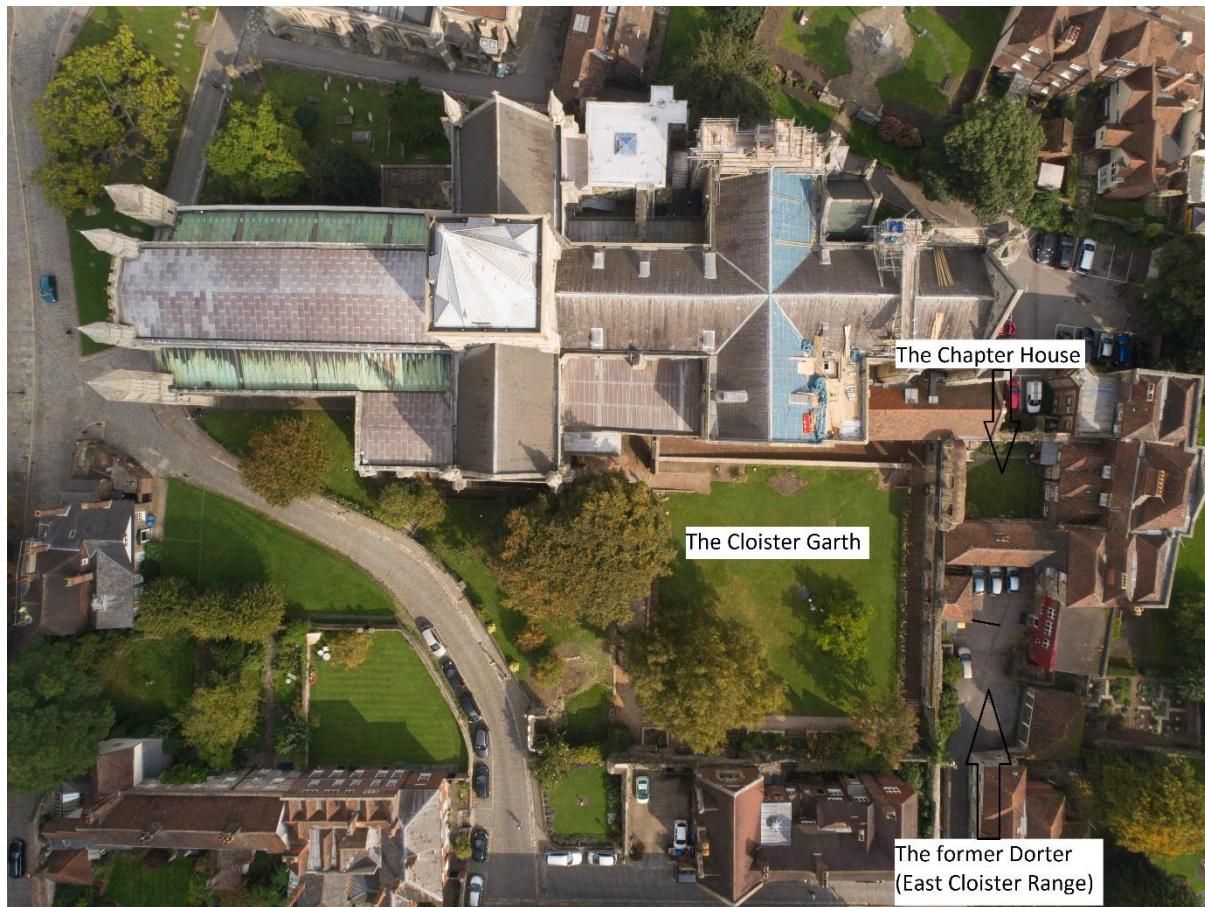


Figure 3: The location of the Chapter House and former Dorter (with the line of the new trench shown) at Rochester Cathedral. Aerial photograph by kind permission of Adam Stanford.

The excavations followed on from a first-stage evaluation in 2018, when one pit each had been excavated in the Chapter House and former Dorter (Keevill 2018). It was therefore decided to carry on the same pit and context numbering sequence that had already been established: the 2018 pits were numbers 1 and 2, so the 2019 ones became 3 (inside the Chapter House entrance) and 4 (against its south wall). The aims and methods of the evaluation were described in the application to the CFCE (Keevill 2019). The two pits were excavated by hand, by Graham Keevill (Cathedral Archaeologist) assisted by Cathy Keevill and Jacob Scott. The weed-rich turf and topsoil were removed first and stored separately. The excavations then proceeded in regular 'spits' of around 200mm-300mm thick, until the desired depths were achieved. Pit 3 was located on the south side of the mid-20th-century path into the Chapter House from its entrance, and was up to 1.35m long (north-east to south-west), 1m wide, and up to 1.17m deep. The pit had been smaller initially, but encountered part of a modern soakaway in the south-east corner. It was therefore extended slightly to the west to ensure that a sufficient depth of excavation could be achieved safely. Pit 4, against the south wall of the Chapter House, was 1.03m long (north-south), 0.96m wide, and up to 1.1m deep. The trench in the former Dorter area was 5.05m long, starting from a water main inserted in 2016 (Ward 2016) and running west to the south-east corner of the earlier 20th-century toilet block. The trench was 0.42m-0.44m wide, and up to 0.84m deep so that the modern pipe could be located and joined on to. The trench was dug partly with a 360^o tracked mini-digger and partly by hand, by Graham Peachey under Graham Keevill's supervision throughout.

2 Description

The site consists of the Chapter House of Rochester Cathedral, with the site of the medieval monastic Dorter (dormitory) to its south. The Chapter House is largely ruinous, having been so since the mid-later 16th century, and contains areas of formal and informal garden. The east end of the building survives within the Old Deanery to the east, however, with the best surviving example of Romanesque blind arcading in the whole of the Cloister. Such arcading once lined the interior walls of the Chapter House. Two 14th-century angel corbels belonging to the Chapter House (certainly one, probably both in situ) also survive in the Old Deanery – highly eroded ones also survive in the ruinous section of the building. The former Dorter to the south is now a courtyard to the Old Deanery and is used as an access to and car park for the King's School classrooms within that building.

The bedrock geology is shown as the Lewes Nodular Chalk bedrock (Chalk). No superficial deposits are recorded by the British Geological Survey.¹ In fact the Cathedral is built on extensive deposits of brickearth. These were observed over large areas of the crypt during the HTFE project in 2014-16. The roofless part of the Chapter House measures c 12.5 east-west x 11m. The Old Deanery courtyard (site of the dormitory range) is approximately 250m² in area (c 35m x 12 m maximum).

As already noted, the context numbers used in 2019 follow on from those assigned in 2018 (**1-13**). Layer numbers **14-18** were used in the Dorter water trench, as this was the first part of the 2019 work to be recorded. Modern services in this trench were not numbered. Contexts **19-29** were recorded in pit 3, and **30-39** in pit 4. These pits were drawn in plan and section at a scale of 1:20 (the plans also showing the precise locations of each pit); a 1:10 plan was also drawn of the skeleton (**28**) in pit 3. A sample section of the water trench was drawn at 1:20, but the trench was not planned except to note its location on an existing 1:100 record drawing.

2.1 Test pit 3

Pit 3 was excavated to 0.85m deep (from 8.35m above Ordnance Datum, aOD) without any significant remains being found. Excavation (and more particularly removal of the soil) became difficult at this depth. A smaller area was therefore chosen on its north side, and excavation continued here. This strategy quickly paid dividends when a skull was revealed at 0.98m below ground. Excavation continued for a further 0.19m below this, ie to 7.18m aOD).



Figure 4: Excavation of pit 3 in July 2019, with the Chapter House door to the right.

¹ Information from the British Geological Survey.

A clean layer of clay (**29**) was found at the very bottom of the pit. The clay could not be excavated, so its thickness and character are unknown. It is most unlikely that it was a natural deposit at this depth. Its presence immediately under an articulated skeleton (**28**) might be coincidental, or the clay might have been laid deliberately as a floor at the base of the grave. Excavation of a 2m-deep pit at the north-east corner of the Cloister in 2012 for the Hidden Treasures-Fresh Expressions project did not encounter a clean clay layer of this type (Keevill 2012, 2-3), nor did the few deeper excavations in the Cloister for the main HTFE project in 2015-16 (Keevill and Ward forthcoming). This might lend some support to the floor interpretation, but only further excavation could prove this either way. Skeleton **28** was obviously that of an adult, and appeared to be male (as one would expect in this location). The pelvis, both femora, the lower vertebrae and finger bones (probably of both hands) were found in the restricted area. The bones were generally in good condition, the body being supine, extended, and laid directly on clay **29**. The abdomen/chest area, however, was obscured by the skull already referred to (with at least part of a mandible, presumably associated), along with several other long bones.



Figure 5: General view of pit 3 looking north-west with skeleton 28 exposed, and a detailed view of the grave. Note the placement of the skull directly over the abdomen area.



The skeleton was found at the bottom of a homogenous, 0.8m-thick layer of mid-brown silty clay (**26**). This contained some rubble (stone, flint and tile). A sherd of early/mid 17th-century pottery was found just above the skeleton, and was given a separate context number (**27**) for identification; the soil itself was not notably different at this point. Later post-medieval pottery was found in the upper part of the layer. Stratigraphically, layer **26** appeared to seal skeleton **28** but should probably be regarded as a 'graveyard soil' within the Chapter House, thus 'containing' the burial. The finds do not help much as dating evidence, given that this area was used as a private garden for the Deanery from the middle of the 17th century onwards; horticultural disturbance of the soil will have occurred throughout this time. For reasons discussed below, the nature of the stratigraphy and finds here may be misleading anyway.

A 0.16m-thick and 0.44m-long wedge of pale buff to brown crushed lime mortar and gravel (**25**) sealed the burial soil in the north-east half of the pit. It in turn was overlain by a dark grey-brown silty clay (**24**) of the same thickness, occupying the south-west part. These appeared to be modern layers dating from the 1936 excavations. They were overlain by a 100mm-thick silty clay (**21**), representing bedding for the existing paving (**19**) to the north of the pit, and a stone kerb (**20**) to its south. Modern soakaway **21** in the east corner of the pit cut layers **24/25** (possibly **21** as well). These do not require any further consideration.

2.2 Test pit 4

Pit 4 was located on the lawned upper part of the Chapter House (often known as Palm Court). This became a private garden for the Old Deanery when the latter was built in c 1640.² The ground surface where the pit was dug lies at c 9.00m aOD, 0.7m above the level at pit 3. This needs to be borne in mind in the description of the soil layers in pit 4, most of which would have been removed from the area of pit 3 during the 1936 excavations there.

A mid-brown to dark grey-brown mottled silty clay (**38, 39**) was found at the bottom of pit 4, starting at c 8.09m aOD. It was noticeably damp at this depth (0.9m below ground). Some small pieces of stone rubble were present, along with eight small sherds (29g in total) of 10th/11th-century pottery and a small amount of vessel glass (probably Roman, and thus residual). The layer was cut by the offset foundation (**36**) for the south wall (**37**) of the Chapter House: the date of the pottery from **38/39** is entirely consistent with this. Only a 0.2m-deep sample of layer **38/39** was excavated, in the north-west corner of the pit: it continued for an unknown depth below this.

Foundation offset **36** was 0.3m wide, and notably even along its length. A compact mortar spread was evident in places, and may have been a remnant floor bedding. A slight thickening in the offset was noted at its west end, directly under one of the eroded angel corbels at high level in the wall above. While this might have been related to the corbel in some way (the base for a wall-shaft?) it could simply have been part of the floor bedding. The wall itself (**37**) rose vertically off the foundation, with 0.84m being exposed within the pit. Not surprisingly the masonry was in good condition, with traces of a possible lime render in places: the stonework was certainly not of a high-quality (ashlar or similar) finish in its own right.

The offset foundation was covered by a 0.1m-0.15m-thick layer of pale to mid-brown mixed mortar and sandy clay (**35**). This contained numerous glazed floor tiles and late medieval/Tudor pottery, along with some stone and tile rubble. It was sealed by a mid-brown slightly gritty silty clay (**33, 34**) with some rubble and chalk/stone/mortar flecks. This was 0.38m-0.4m thick, thus reaching to within 0.35m of the current ground level (ie c 8.65m aOD, around 0.3m above the ground level at pit 3). A linear feature (**31**) running parallel to the south wall of the Chapter House cut through layer **33/34** (and into

² <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1086421>

35 beneath them), and contained a dark grey-brown silty clay (**32**) with much stone rubble (including large but un-dressed pieces), tile and brick rubble. The feature was 0.52m wide, and at least 0.6m deep at its east end. It shelved up to perhaps 0.5m on the west edge of the pit. At first it was thought that this might be another grave, but there was no evidence for a skeleton, and the height from which it was cut alone shows that it must be a quite late post-medieval feature. It seems to have been dug specifically to dispose of large quantities of coarse building rubble – presumably material that was not suitable for re-use elsewhere around the Cathedral and Precincts. The final context in the pit, **30**, was a mid-dark grey-brown silty clay, 0.35m thick to the top of the excavation. This was garden soil.



Figure 6: Pit 4 looking south-west, with the offset foundation plainly visible – note the slight upstand at its west (right) end. This image also shows the sondage dug in context **38/39**, in the lower right corner of the pit.

2.3 The water trench in the Dorter area

The upper few centimetres of a pale brown to buff layer of loose chalk, flint and stone rubble in sandy mortar (**18**) were found at the base of the trench, ie around 0.7m-0.75m below ground. No pottery or other artefacts were found. The same layer had also been revealed in 2018's pit 1, where it was at least 0.75m thick from 0.65m down (layer **9**); given the gradual slope of the ground here from south to north, this is the same depth as in the water trench. The rubble was sealed by a 0.6m-thick layer of coarse mid-brown silty clay (**17**) mixed with brick, stone and tile rubble. Though again no pottery (or clay pipe) was present, the character of the bricks suggested that this was a later post-medieval layer, probably of early/mid 18th-century date. A pair of services (not numbered) had cut the rubble in the east half of the trench: one, in blue plastic, was obviously very modern but the other (an iron gas pipe) was most likely of later 19th-century date. The remaining three layers comprised a 20mm lens of sand

(16) over the rubble, forming a bed for 80mm of Type 1 roadstone (15) acting as the sub-base or the present tarmac courtyard surface (14), which is 50mm thick.



Figure 7: The new water trench in the former Dorter area, looking north-west. The stone range to the right is described as having 16th-century rectangular brick dressed window openings in the listing, which would suggest a potential medieval date for the surrounding masonry (see footnote 1).



Figure 8: Sample section of the water main trench with rubble layer 18 at the base.

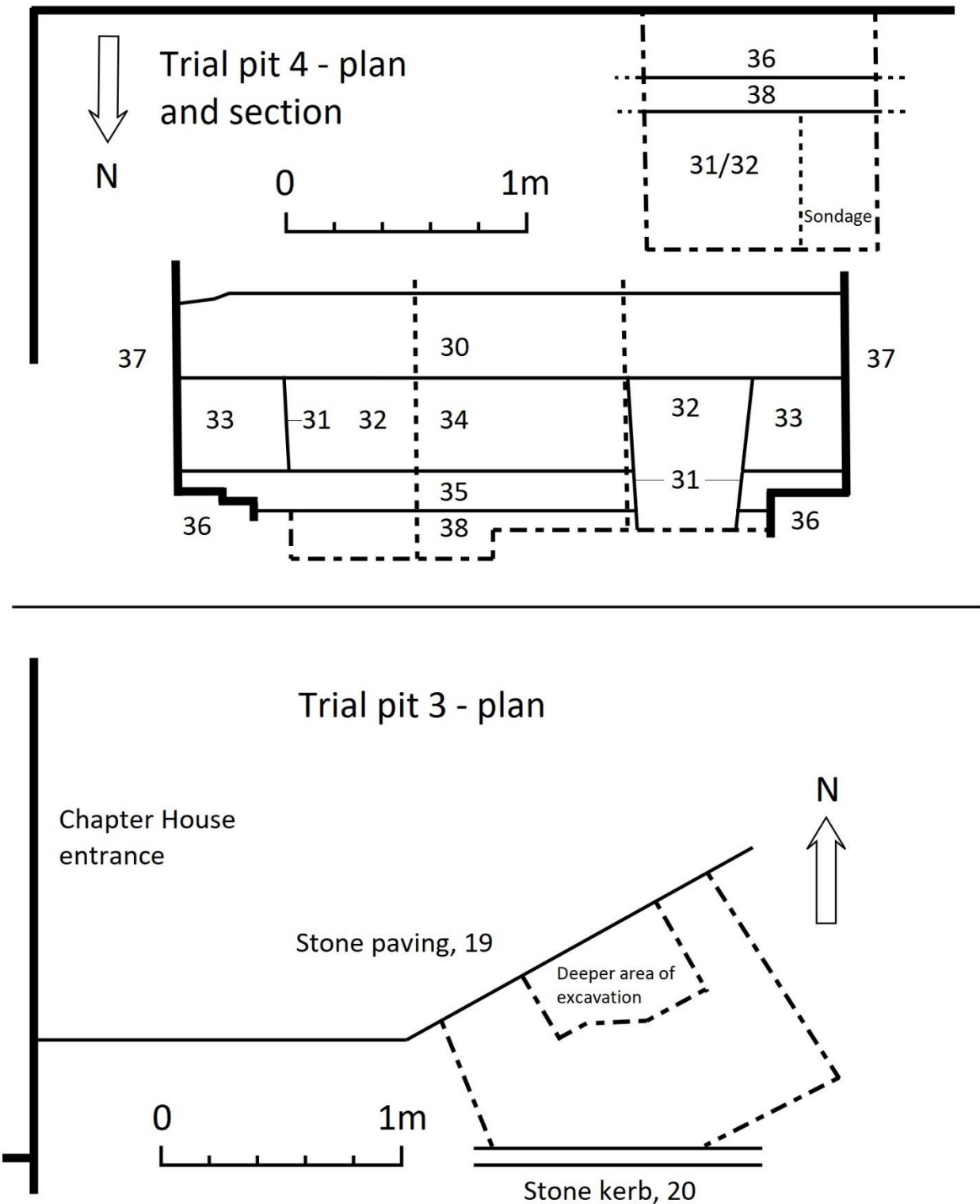


Figure 9: Plan and section of pit 3, and plan of pit 4. Scale 1:25, from originals at 1:20.

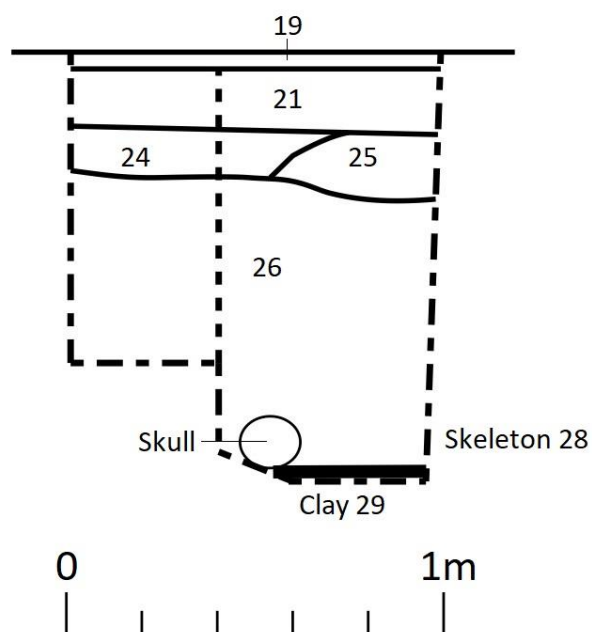


Figure 10: Partial section of pit 3, north side, scale 1:20.

2.4 Finds

A small assemblage of finds was recovered from the Chapter House test pits. The finds were recorded by context, and compared to material and type-series from other sites from Rochester, Kent and more widely (eg the Museum of London's pottery type series). Relevant fabric/material codes were used in the recording, and are included here as relevant. The assemblage is summarised in Table 1.

The finds included one re-worked flint, possibly a blade from pit 4 in 'dark earth' **38**. Other than this, the earliest finds are the 10th to 11th century early medieval sand and shell wares (Vince and Jenner 1991, 59) from the same layer. The small glass vessel also from context **38** may be Roman, because early medieval glass is rare; Roman glass has been found in Saxon and Norman levels in London (Vince et al 1991, 172).

The medieval tiling and window glass are the remains of flooring glazing in the Chapter House. Tiling still exists in the doorway of the Chapter House, though this is most probably re-laid. The designs on the tiles have red-brown painted designs (possibly heraldic) which have been dated on other sites to the late 15th century. The only earlier tile is the example with floral-type design, which is similar to a Tyler Hill design 2831 in Canterbury Cathedral dated to the 14th century (Eames 1980 vol 1, 339, and vol 2). The window glass has an attractive blue to purple tinge; there is also plain glass with painted designs, with some evidence for silver nitrate as colour. Other painted glass remains came from the cloister area as part of the recent HTFE excavations, while incised glass fragments were recovered from the base of a pit in the same area during the south porch excavations in 1983 (Bacchus 1985, 261).

The 16th-century pottery and small piece of Tudor tile are a small indication of the 16th-century use of the site either at the very end of its monastic phase or as part of Henry VIII's brief use of it as a royal residence. The plain tile resembles those of the tile floor found below the west cloister walk in 1983 and 2009 (Bacchus 1985, 257; Keevill and Underwood 2010, 17).

In 1634 the Archbishop of Canterbury and retinue and the Dean and Canons of Rochester met for the visitation of the Archbishop. This was to consider the rights and duties of Rochester Cathedral, and to examine the condition of the cathedral, its surroundings, and other churches. Torr, in considering the visitation, stated that “the return of 1634 makes clear that the chapter house, whatever its state of repair, was then in sufficiently good condition for use on so formal an occasion as a metropolitanical visitation” (Torr 1963, 45). The record does indeed state that the meeting was “holden in y^e Chapter house there, the xxijth day of Aprill in the yeare of our Lord God 1634” (ibid, 51). While it is tempting to take this reference at face value, it might also be very misleading: the present Chapter Library was used (and very often referred to) as the Chapter House from the later 16th and 17th centuries onwards. It is at least as likely that Archbishop Laud’s visitation was held there, rather than the monastic Chapter House. Nevertheless the 17th-century albarello sherd from test pit 3 may reflect some usage of the building either before or just after the Deanery was built over its east end. The 18th-century pottery from the same trench 3 probably derived from the use of this space as the Dean’s garden.

Context	Material	Fabric/type	No	Wt	Date	Comments
Trial pit 3						
26	Fe nails		3	14		Coffin nails?
26	Glass	Window?	1	1		
26	Pot	PEARTR1	1	1	1770-1810	Chinese type design
26	Pot	PEARBW	1	5	1770-1820	Painted and print
26	Pot	DRAB	1	16	1720-1750	Ridged strap handle drab ware jug
26	Animal bone		12	91		Cow long bone, tooth, frags and bird bones-chicken?
26	Oyster shell		1	9		
27	Pot	TGWD	1	4	1630-1680	Albarello painted blue and red brown lines
28	Bone	human				Part of jaw and skull, reburied
Trial pit 4						
32	Pot	PMFRB	1	6	1580-1700	Brown flecked glaze
32	Animal bone	frag	1	5		
32	Roof tile	Peg	3	248		
32	Roof tile		2	165		Mortar on tiles
35	Pot	KOLFREC	1	7	1550-1580	Cologne/Frechen stoneware
35	Pot	NKNT	1	2	1500-1600	Dark green glaze ext and partial int bodysherd North Kent Tudor ware
35	Floor tile		1	295		Triangular fragment heraldic design in red slip and yellow slip and glaze over
35	Floor tile		1	106		Painted red line on yellow slip and glaze
35	Floor tile		1	68		Red and white slip red slip diagonal lines possible heraldic??
35	Floor tile		1	89	4	Traces of white slip florette design
35	Floor tile		1	145		Plain tile heavily mortared
35	Floor tile		1	7	C15-C16	Small frag brown/black glazed tile C16 Tudor?
38	Glass	window	4	4		Blue tinged window glass

Context	Material	Fabric/type	No	Wt	Date	Comments
38	Glass	window	4	6		Clear glass with painted designs and some silver nitrate traces C14 onwards
38	Glass	vessel	1	3		Light green vessel side frag
38	Glass	vessel	1	8		Top of small glass phial rim and shoulder. 1cm diameter flat disc rim and shouldered small jar/phial
38	Pot	EMS/EMSS	8	29	C10-C11	Soft sandy and shelly limestone and some pink quartz and organic Saxon fabric types early medieval sandy and early sand and shell types
38	Flint	blade	1	15		Worked edge flint 4 cm long sf no 1
38	Pot(?)		1	2		Friable possible building material
		Totals:				
		Pot	16	72		
		Glass	11	22		
		Roof tile	5	413		
		Floor tile	6	710		

Table 1: Catalogue of finds from the Chapter House trial pits

3 Discussion and conclusions

Skeleton **28** was an articulated burial, but with parts of what may have been a second body in the grave. The disarticulated skull and other bones over the abdomen were either from an earlier burial which had been disturbed by this one, or were from the same body and had been displaced at an unknown time in history. Either way, the bones had been placed in this grave with a degree of care. It seems highly unlikely that the disturbance was caused by the excavations of 1936. A note in The Times for 2 April of that year stated that “the bones were not removed, and were covered up again within half an hour of their having been discovered”. It seems very unlikely that bones would have been moved around to this extent within half an hour, and the disturbance evident in the burial is therefore assumed to have happened in antiquity. The grave itself is most likely to be of medieval date given its location immediately inside the Chapter House’s entrance, and its orientation on the long axis of the building. An Anglo-Saxon date is felt to be much less likely, while a Roman date can be ruled out because of the location within the area of the town.

It is not certain that skeleton **28** is the same as the one revealed in 1936, but this seems very likely. The homogenous nature and the date of the (relatively few) finds from context **26/27** both suggest a high degree of disturbance above the burial. This might simply be a result of gardening activity in the Chapter House once the Old Deanery had been built, but this seems implausible given that the bottom of layer **26** was more than a metre below the medieval threshold in the Chapter House door. The best explanation for the thickness and character of layer **26**, and the finds from it, may be that it was the backfill of the excavation described in The Times of 2 April 1936, and thus that skeleton **28** is one and the same as that exposed in 1936.

The threshold at the entrance to the Chapter House lies at c 8.3m aOD. The top of offset foundation **36** for the south wall of the building lay at c 8.2m aOD. Allowing for a tiled or paved floor, and a bedding

layer for it, these are virtually the same levels. The threshold into the Chapter House created during the 1936 works is therefore historically correct. Skeleton **28** lay slightly more than 1m below the floor level. If we are correct to date it to the medieval period, such a depth seems appropriate given that the Chapter House was of central importance to the daily workings of the monastic Cathedral. This was an important place of burial, but also a busy one – especially as the skeleton was immediately inside and directly in line with the medieval doorway. Nothing else of historic/archaeological interest was found in pit 3, so at face value there would be some potential for ‘working room’ under the ground level even in the lowest, western part of the Chapter House.

A somewhat different situation pertains at pit 4, where the ground level is higher by around 0.7m. The surface level here is probably of late Georgian or Victorian date: the external staircase to the first-floor Chapter Room door, demolished during the HTFE project, landed at this upper ground level. The upper contexts in the pit (layers **30**, **33** and **34**, as well as feature **31** and its fill **32**) are all of later post-medieval to Georgian or Victorian date as well. They have limited archaeological interest. Layer **35** has rather more potential, given that it appears to belong to the Dissolution period, but its character was typical of demolition layers in a monastic context, and only the finds from it are likely to be of any value in terms of historical and archaeological research. The Chapter House wall and its offset foundation are clearly of great interest and significance, and they (especially the top of the offset) will set the parameters for any future work in this area. Context **38/39**, meanwhile, is clearly a pre-Norman layer. It appears to be of a type generally known as ‘dark earth’, comprising gradual accumulations of soil and domestic debris within former Roman towns such as Rochester. They seem to represent low levels of activity, perhaps a mixture of agriculture/cultivation with some domestic use. Similar layers were observed within the crypt area and Cloister during HTFE. The layer (and the pottery from it) are of some significance for the history and archaeology of the Cathedral and Rochester more widely, but neither represents a major impediment to potential work in this area in the future.

In the Dorter, 2018’s layer **9** had contained early post-medieval finds. Both this and 2019’s layer **18** clearly represent post-Dissolution demolition rubble similar in character to layer **35** in the Chapter House. Here they filled the undercroft below the Dorter itself (which lay at first floor level). The overlying rubble layer (**17**) probably represented a deliberate raising of the ground level during construction and/or subsequent use of/landscaping around the late 17th-century Old Deanery. Again, these are not layers which pose significant archaeological challenges in this part of the Precincts.

The Chapter House pits successfully achieved their archaeological aims, and produced results of wide interest for this building. The water trench in the Dorter provided valuable information to add to 2018’s trial pit in the same area, and again did not suggest that

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