

Dunkeswell Abbey, Devon

A River Walking Survey

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

- 1.1.1 This document sets out the results of river walking undertaken at Dunkeswell Abbey, Devon. The work was carried out on the 20th & 23rd July 2019 by Heritage Arts and People (HAP) as part of a Heritage Lottery Funded Project 'Discovering Dunkeswell Abbey'. It was carried out in consultation with Devon County Council (DCC) and Historic England (HE)
- 1.1.2 The initiation of this fieldwork element to the Discovering Dunkeswell Abbey project was in response to its overarching aims:
- To engage the local community with the history of Dunkeswell Abbey; and
 - Extend the existing body of knowledge of the Abbey and its history by investigating features identified by the Blackdown Hills AONB and East Devon River Catchments Aerial Investigation and Mapping Survey.

1.2 Site Location & Description

- 1.2.1 The site (Figure 1) is a stretch of a tributary of the River Madford where it passes through land associated with Dunkeswell Abbey, Devon, centred on National Grid Reference NGR: ST 14191073. The site is a 290m length of the river, extending to the immediate north and west of the Scheduled Area of Dunkeswell Abbey (National Heritage List for England (NHLE) ref: 1009303) and to the immediate east of the Scheduled Area of the Dunkeswell Abbey Fish Ponds (also recorded under NHLE ref: 1009303).
- 1.2.2 The site is divided into two sections labelled as Site 1 and Site 2. Site 1 extends from the fish-ponds at its western extent to the edge of 'Abbey View'. To its south lies of the farm complex of Little Musgrove Farm its north bank is a pasture field. Site 2 extends through pasture fields to the east of 'Abbey View'. The section of the tributary which passes Abbey view was not accessible to the survey.

1.3 Geology & Topography

- 1.3.1 The British Geological Survey records the underlying geology of the site as the Mercia Mudstone Group comprising sedimentary mudstone bedrock formed approximately 201 to 252 million years ago.
- 1.3.2 The site occupies ground sloping gently down to the east towards the Madford River at between 158-152m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).

1.4 Historical and Archaeological Background

- 1.4.1 The site lies immediately north of well-preserved fish-ponds associated with Dunkeswell Abbey. Remains of the Abbey lie some 250m further to the east of the site. The Cistercian Abbey at Dunkeswell was founded by William Brewer and was in occupation between 1201 until its dissolution in 1539. Full details of the Abbey are given in its listing description on the National Heritage List for England under its reference number 1009303.

- 1.4.2 The known extent of upstanding and buried remains of the former Abbey are defined by the Scheduled Area of Dunkerswell Abbey which falls into two areas and includes the associated fish-ponds. The wider historic landscape beyond the Scheduled Areas features earthworks potentially related to the Abbey and its broader activities, but of which the origins are not currently well understood.
- 1.4.3 Current knowledge of these features has been informed by the 'Blackdown Hills AONB and East Devon River Catchments Aerial Investigation and Mapping Survey' using data from LiDAR and aerial photography (Figure 2). Features identified to the north of Site 1 have been characterised as a Possible Medieval Field System and while features to the north-west and south-east of Site 2 have been categorised respectively as 'Extractive Pits' and 'Possible Building Platforms'

A recent geophysical survey of the pasture field to the north of Site 1, undertaken as part of the 'Discovering Dunkeswell Abbey' project (Geoflow 2019), yielded limited results beyond confirmation of the known earthworks.

2. AIMS & METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The principal aims of the project were:

- To extend knowledge of the Dunkerswell Abbey monastic complex and its activities;
- To better understand features identified through the Blackdown Hills AONB and East Devon River Catchments Aerial Investigation and Mapping Survey; and
- To engage the local community in archaeological fieldwork at Dunkerswell Abbey.

2.2 Objectives

2.2.1 In order to achieve the aims of the project, the main objectives were:

- To recover and record any archaeological artefacts exposed in the riverbank or bed through erosion by the water course;
- To give a group of local residents an understanding of archaeological artefacts and how to identify them; and
- To engage a group of local residents to undertake the river-walking survey.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Before the river-walking took place, the activity was advertised to the local community to develop awareness and encourage volunteer participation in the survey.

2.3.2 On the day of the survey a group of local volunteers were given training in identification of archaeological artefacts and split into groups.



Photo 1: Archaeologist John Allan training local volunteers

- 2.3.3 Sites 1 & 2 were split into 10m long Sub-Areas (see Figure 1) for the purposes of locating any finds recovered to within a 10m stretch of the tributary. The survey work was supervised at all times by HAP staff members and professional archaeologist and pottery specialist John Allan.
- 2.3.4 Volunteer groups walked the individual Areas of each Site, collecting artefacts exposed in the riverbank or bed. No intrusive investigation was undertaken. All artefacts recovered were those exposed by river erosion. All finds were bagged and labelled with the site code and according to their location.



Photo 2: Volunteers river-walking in Site 2

- 2.3.5 The artefacts were washed and packaged by the volunteers at Wildside, Dunkerswell.



Photo 3: Finds washing event

3. RESULTS OF RIVER-WALKING *By John Allan*

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 All finds recovered on site during the survey were retained and cleaned. A number of additional finds were donated from the garden of Abbey View and from grave digging activity in the churchyard the Holy Trinity Church locate c.50m to the south of Site 2. These have been incorporated into the results.
- 3.1.2 The most significant finds were an assemblage of medieval floor tiles and peg tiles. Other finds comprised building materials of medieval date including brick and a variety of stone. A single piece of metal working slag was also recovered. The finds have been catalogued below type and by Site and Area according to where they were found (see Figure 1).

3.2 Finds Catalogue

MEDIEVAL INLAID FLOOR-TILES

Abbey View: garden (finds in private ownership)

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Thick (c. 25mm) 13C local redware tiles with deep keying scoops:		Inlay up to 2mm thick. No gross inclusions in fabric.
Mitchell Design 5	2/2	
Design 8	1/1	
Design 8 possible	2/2	
Thinner 14C tiles:		Thinner (18mm)
Mitchell Design 1	1/1	With copper-green tinge

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 1

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Thick (c. 18mm) 13C local redware tiles with deep keying scoops:		
Mitchell Design 8	1/1	
New design	1/1	Small fragment
Not identified	1/1	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 3

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
14C inlaid Mitchell design 13	1/1	Top half of the shield with chequer

POTTERY AND OTHER TILES

SITE 1

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 2

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ridge tile & pantile, 19/20C	3/3	With 1 piercing near corner
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	1/1	
Tile <i>cf</i> production waste	1/1	

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 3

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ridge tile & pantile, 19/20C	4/4	Tile stamped 'COLTHURST AND S[ONS] BRIDGWATE[R]
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	1/1	Not a cauldron as first thought
Tile <i>cf</i> production waste	1/1	
[Also cast iron item, 19C]		

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 4

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ridge tile & pantile, 19/20C	3/3	

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 5

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ridge tile & pantile, 19/20C	1/1	With circular stabbing.
Ridge tile, 14-17C	2/1	
Peg tile	1	

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 6

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ridge tile & pantile, 19/20C	1/1	

SITE 2

Pre-fieldwalk finds, Site 2 (river), approx from Area 1 (finds by CF)

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Verwood-type pottery, late 17/18C	1/1	Pale sand-tempered fabric, yellowish glaze
Peg tile	1/1	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 0

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	1/1	One with knob One bucket-handled pot
Brick & tile, 19/20C	4/4	
S. Somerset redware, prob. 18C	2/2	
Peg tile	2/2	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 1

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>

White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	1/1	
Brick, 19/20C	3/2	
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	6/5	
Peg tile including much production waste	60/25++	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 3

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	3/3	
Brick, 19/20C	5/2	
S. Somerset redware, 15/16C	1/1	
Peg-tiles (waste?)	5/4	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 4

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	2/2	
Brick, 19/20C	4/2	
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	2/2	
Peg-tiles (waste?)	6/5	
Frechen-Cologne stoneware, E16C	1/1	Base of a drinking jug, typical cheesewire base, non-sand-tempered type

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 6

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	2/2	
Brick, 19/20C	6/5	
Peg-tile (possibly waste)	3/3	One pierced from below

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 7

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Brick & pantile 19/20C	17/10	
Pegtile (one def waste)	5/4	One glazed; 1 heavily burnt

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 8

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Redwares, 17/18C	3/3	
Pegtile (?waste)	3/3	One pierced corner

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 9

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
19/20C tile & brick	2/2	
Redwares, 17/18C	1/1	
Pegtile (?waste)	3/3	One pierced corner

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 10

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	1/1	
Brick & pantile 19/20C	6/6	
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	1	Plain cup sherd, prob. 16C

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 16

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Brick & pantile 19/20C	2/2	
18/19C redware	1/1	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 20

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Plain redware, ?16/17C	1/1	Unglazed vessel, ?local

Abbey View: garden (finds in private ownership)

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	1/1	Blue-glazed large vessel
S. Somerset redware, 18C	2/1	
Donyatt, 17C	1/1	Typical red-&-yellow line sgraffito
Peg tile	1/1	

See also floor-tiles

Graveyard: spoil from grave fills

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White earthenware, 19/20C (Staffs, etc)	1/1	
S. Somerset redware, 16/17C	12/10	

BUILDING STONES

Fieldwalk, Site 1, Area 3

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
South Devon roofing slate (probably medieval)	1/1	

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 0

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
White sandstone	1/1	Small lump

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 1

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Blue Lias (Jurassic) slab.	1/1	Fragment with max length of 0.22m no sign of working. Sample retained

Graveyard: spoil from grave fills

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
Ham Hill stone	1/1	Almost certainly pre-the 19C use (see context)
Beer limestone	1/1	

IRON SLAG

Fieldwalk, Site 2 (river), Area 2

<i>Type & date</i>	<i>No. of sherds/vessels</i>	<i>Date, form if known, & comments</i>
1 fragment (perhaps early medieval?)		

3.3 Discussion

FLOOR-TILES (Figure. 3)

- 3.3.1 The most-eye-catching finds in the collection, and the earliest pieces, are the medieval floor-tile fragments with inlaid designs. They belong to at least three different medieval tile pavements. The earliest, datable to the early or mid-13th century, are the fragments of large, thick and very well-made tiles. Some belong to two designs published by Mitchell in his study of the collection from Wolford Chapel, which in all likelihood were removed from Dunkeswell Abbey in the early 19th century (Mitchell 1995, 10–13, designs 5 and 8). At least one other piece represents a previously unknown design.

- 3.3.2 A fragment of a smaller tile with an attractive pattern of adorsed birds (Mitchell 1995, design 1) also belongs to the early or mid-13th century, but the quarry is much smaller and the tile consequently thinner; it could not therefore have been part of the same pavement as the large tiles. The third pavement is represented by the shield fragment with a chequer pattern. This design (Lowe 2003, design 477) is also known from Glastonbury Abbey, Wells Cathedral and the church at Muchelney in Somerset; the missing lower part of the design shows a church with a central tower flanking the shield.

EVIDENCE FOR THE PRODUCTION OF PEG-TILES

- 3.3.3 The most significant discovery from the fieldwalk is the completely new evidence for the production of plain peg-tiles on the site. Tiles of this type were used in roofing. They are unusual in Devon, where thatch and slate were almost the universal means of roofing, and it is in fact difficult to quote precise parallels for them.
- 3.3.4 A marked concentration of plain tile-fragments was recovered from Area 1 of the stream (Site 2), where no fewer than 60 pieces were recovered. There is quite a wide spread of further pieces downstream in Areas 3–9, but there the numbers are much lower (3–6 pieces), and there are no examples further downstream in Areas 10–20.
- 3.3.5 The evidence that these are tile wasters is as follows. First, there are two finds of lumps of ceramic which, when viewed in section, can be seen to consist of tiles fused together – two in one case, three in the other (Fig. 4, items 2.1 and 2.2). These can only result from over-firing in a kiln in which adjacent unglazed tiles, stacked without separators, melted into a lump. They could not possibly have been used and are clearly production waste. Second, there are grossly distorted pieces, also heavily reduced and over-fired (Fig. 4). They likewise could not have been used. Third, the pronounced concentration of fragments of this unusual form of tile
- 3.3.6 Although the finds are very fragmentary, a little can be said about the form of the products made here. They consisted of plain flat unglazed tiles, all 13–17mm thick, fairly roughly made, without a sanded back. All the sides are straight, and all the corners seem to be at right-angles, showing that the complete objects were rectangular in plan, rather than wedge-shaped. Several have peg-holes (Fig. 4 the best examples). The single complete tile width is 170mm. There are no crests, so no ridge-tiles (much more common finds elsewhere in Devon) are present. Fig. 5 shows a partial reconstruction of a tile; given their fairly consistent thicknesses, it is likely that they were standardised products.
- 3.3.7 At this stage the date of the tile production has not been established firmly, and this is made difficult by the lack of parallels and the simple character of the material. Its general hand-made appearance indicates that it is probably of late medieval or early modern date. At this stage a pre-Reformation date perhaps seems the most likely interpretation, but this is far from certain.
- 3.3.8 The find is however of great interest, in view of the emerging evidence that the parishes around Dunkeswell supported a major ceramics industry in the medieval period and in the 16th century. This first emerged from Dr Harold Fox's documentary study showing that there were several potters at Clayhydon. Archaeological evidence for substantial scale emerged from Hemyock, and this has now been fully published (Smart 2018), and the industry extended over the county border to Wrangway and Langford Budville in Somerset (material

currently being prepared for publication by David Dawson and collaborators). Some years ago, Allan and Keen published a single 13th-century floor-tile waster from the abbey site (Allan and Keen 1983). Subsequently doubt was cast on whether this really is a waster (Mitchell 1995, 12) but it is badly distorted and I see no reason to doubt that it demonstrates that the abbey's fine 13th-century tiles were actually made here. The new finds of 2019 add a second strand of evidence for the production of ceramics at the abbey site.

BUILDING MATERIALS

- 3.3.9 The other significant finds were the building materials, which probably all come from the medieval structures of the monastery, since they reflect the provision of good-freestone, quarried some distance away, for high-quality stone structures. They would have been used solely for dressings and architectural features, the plain walling being in Greensand chert, which is abundant on-site but cannot be carved.
- 3.3.10 Two examples of white sandstone were present, one probably from a doorway. They are likely to belong to the 13th- or 14th-century buildings, since this material tended to fall out of favour later with the rise of the Ham Hill and Beer quarries. They may come from White Staunton, where quarries are documented.
- 3.3.11 Single finds of Beer stone and Ham Hill stone are likely to come from later medieval buildings; both stones were employed in the standing late medieval abbey gatehouse (Ham for the main gateway, Beer for the Perp-style windows). Finally, a fragment of South Devon roofing slate is an interesting addition to the known distribution of this material.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1.1 A river walking survey of a tributary of the River Madford was undertaken as part of the Discovering Dunkerswell Abbey Project. The project was co-ordinated by Heritage Arts and People (HAP) with the assistance of Archaeologist John Allan and local volunteers.
- 4.1.2 The aims of the project were fulfilled by engaging the local community with the site Dunkerswell Abbey through involvement in the fieldwork and by providing education to a group of volunteers in finds identification.
- 4.1.3 The results of the survey exceeded the expectations of the project by recovering a substantial assemblage of artefacts derived from the former abbey buildings including floor tiles and peg tiles. Most significantly, within the assemblage is evidence for peg tile production on the site of the abbey, in the form of wasters (tiles which failed during the firing process). These finds were concentrated in Site 2 Area 1 to the immediate east of Abbey View.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 5.1.1 Many thanks are due to the landowners for allowing access to the site and for their kind co-operation, interest and support in the course of the field work. Thanks is also due to all the volunteer river walkers who gave up their time to assist with the project. The advice and support of Bill Horner (Devon County Council) and Charlotte Russell (Historic England) is also gratefully acknowledged. The work was project managed for HAP by Catherine Farnell and Marie Leverett and was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The site work was conducted by John Allan with the assistance of Catherine Farnell and Marie Leverett. The find analysis and reporting was undertaken by John Allan.

6. REFERENCES

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