
Fire, Fast and Feast: The Kitchen of Leicester Abbey

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Above: Excavation in progress.

In the summer of 2002 and 2003, ULAS undertook a third and fourth season of training excavation for students of the School of Archaeology and Ancient History at the site of Leicester Abbey, just to the north east of Leicester city centre. The abbey, an Augustinian foundation of the 12th century, was largely destroyed shortly after its dissolution in 1538, leaving only the precinct walls and gatehouse intact. The latter was subsequently incorporated into a mansion house built by the Hastings and Cavendish families in the later 16th and early 17th century before being destroyed by fire in 1645.

The site of Leicester Abbey was subject to a major programme of archaeological excavation in the 1920s and 30s, in connection with the conversion of the precinct to a public park, as an extension to the neighbouring 19th-century Abbey Park. The entire area of the principal monastic buildings – including the church, cloister, dormitory, refectory and west range – was stripped during the course of this work, whilst other outlying buildings, including the infirmary and probable guest hall, were also revealed. The original excavation plan survives, and shows the position of surviving masonry foundations, fragments of floors, drains and lead water pipes. Where walls had been robbed of their stone, the resulting robber trenches were not always recognised by the excavators, so certain elements of the plan, especially in the vicinity of the Chapter House, dormitory and kitchen, remain rather vague. As part of the current project, small targeted trial trenches were excavated by ULAS in 2000 and 2001 within the cloistral ranges to clarify elements of the plans of specific buildings. This strategy only met with limited success, and starting in 2002, it was decided to concentrate on the examination of a single building over several seasons, the probable site of the abbey kitchen.

The 1930s excavation plan indicates that the south-eastern corner of a substantial structure was uncovered just to the south of the refectory. Three drains were also encountered leading from within the building and from a possible adjacent structure to the east, running southwards to converge with a single, larger drain. Another drain is shown running east-west in the narrow space between the north wall of this building and the south wall of the refectory. To the west, a short stretch of north-south wall was located, associated with a small square masonry feature. Based on the nature of the remains discovered, their location next to the refectory and the description of this part of the site in a survey undertaken by the Crown Commissioners in 1538, this area was interpreted by the excavators as the probable site of the abbey kitchen and ‘Kynoges lodging’.

In 2002, an initial long and narrow exploratory trench was examined to assess the survival of archaeological deposits in this area. This located the south wall of the refectory, the north and south walls of the kitchen, together with a drain, a brick oven, perhaps of late 15th-16th-century date and evidence for a substantial sequence of floor levels. In 2003, a larger area was opened up revealing the south-western corner of the kitchen block, represented by a substantial sandstone wall with two courses of superstructure surviving. Built into the internal angle of the walls a circular oven was exposed, whilst the external corner, although heavily robbed, appeared to be buttressed. On the floor of the oven, a thin charcoal spread was sampled for environmental evidence, and found to contain wheat and barley grains with a little bread wheat chaff and arable weed seeds. These remains may have been from waste from cleaning cereal grains to prepare potage. The oven fill also contained other domestic rubbish including fish bones and hazel nut-

shell, probably accumulated from the surroundings of the kitchen. A stone-lined and stone-capped drain running from the kitchen to the south was also identified and appeared to correspond with one on the 1930s excavation plan. It contained fragments of shell and a single sherd of 15th or 16th century pottery. Numerous fish scales and small bones were also found within the fill and had probably been washed down the drain following food preparation within the kitchen. Other remains included bones of rodents, possibly rats living in the drain.



Above: Excavating the kitchen drain.

From the evidence encountered so far, the kitchen would appear to be a substantial building measuring approximately 39 feet (11.88m) square internally with walls 4ft 4in (1.32m) thick, except for the west wall which has been re-faced, increasing the thickness to about 5.7 feet (1.74m).

The earliest high-status medieval kitchens were generally detached buildings, presumably to reduce the risk to adjacent structures in the event of fire, and were commonly square or octagonal in plan. The hearth might be located centrally initially, the smoke being carried out through a great timber or stone-vaulted louvred roof. Later, the fireplaces are more commonly moved to the sides. Some kitchens were square externally, but octagonal internally, such as that which survives at Glastonbury, measuring some 33 ft 6 in (10.2m) across, as a result of fireplaces being constructed across the internal angles. Other square kitchens might have fireplaces in the side walls, or in both the walls and corners whilst pairs of fireplaces adjoining at right angles are not uncommon.

The presence of an oven in the south-western corner of the kitchen at Leicester Abbey could suggest a form similar to that at Glastonbury, with fireplaces constructed across the internal angles, creating an internal octagonal plan. This interpretation may be supported by the fact that the internal dimensions of the building at 39 feet across are neatly divisible by three to create an octagon. The numbers themselves may also have religious symbolism: three representing the Holy Trinity and thirteen representing Jesus and the twelve apostles. The apparent thickening of part of the east wall as shown on the 1930s excavation plan may indicate the base of one of the fireplace arch abutments. The thickening of the south wall encountered in the 2002 trench is more difficult to explain, but could indicate an additional fireplace in the centre of the wall.

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Right: 15th-16th century illustration showing bakers at work.

<http://www.godecooking.com/afeast/kitchens/kit002.html>

