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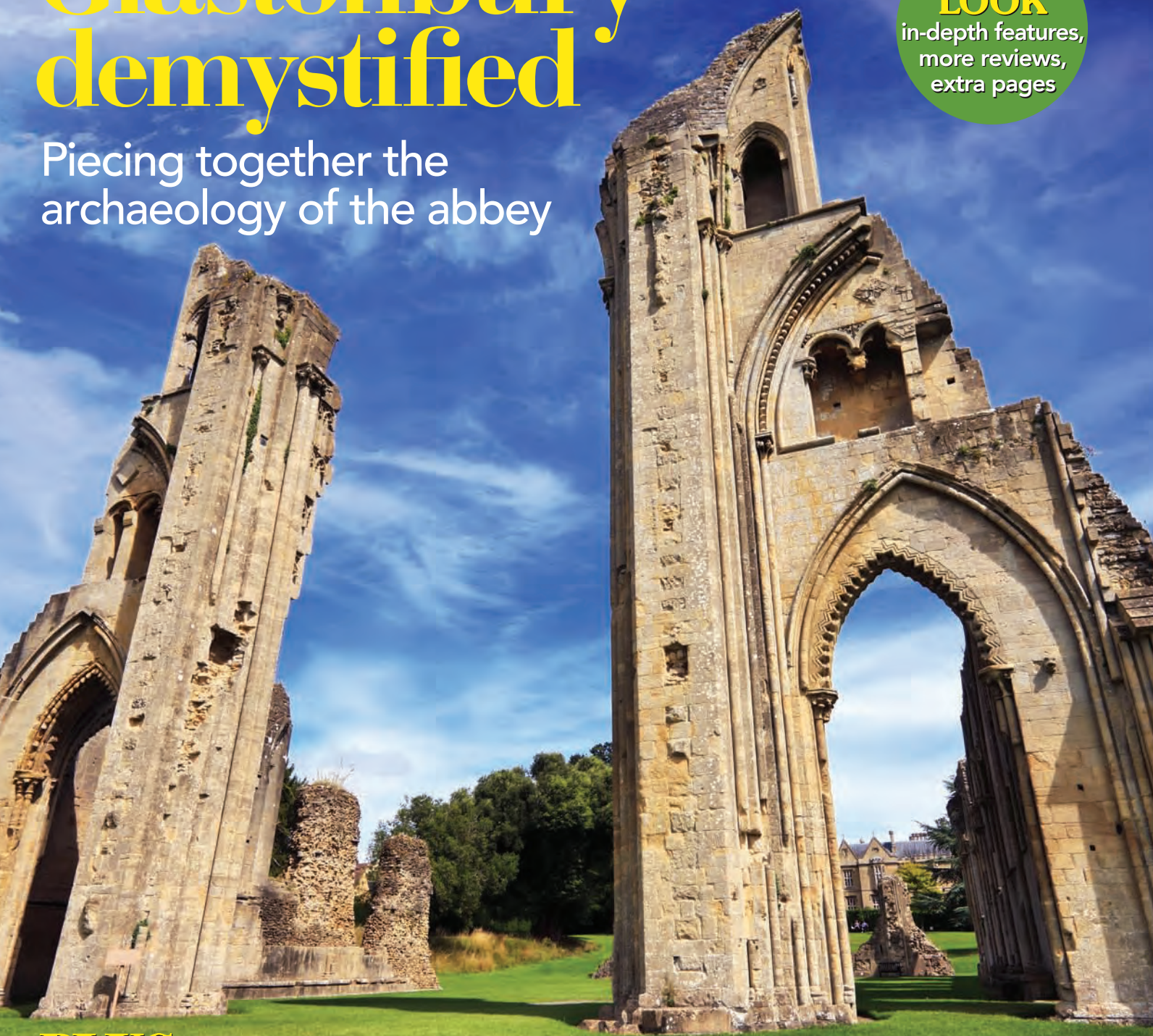
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Glastonbury Abbey

The archaeological story



Excavators were repeatedly drawn to Glastonbury Abbey during the 20th century, but the fruits of their labours rarely made it into print. **Roberta Gilchrist** is spearheading a major project to separate archaeological fact from the rich mythology the abbey attracts.

BELOW View down the nave of the later medieval church at Glastonbury Abbey towards the site of the Anglo-Saxon church and the 'old church'.

BELOW RIGHT Location plan of Glastonbury Abbey and other local sacred sites.

The site of Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset is inscribed with legends that are at the heart of English cultural identity: it is popularly regarded as the burial place of King Arthur and the cradle of English Christianity, where Joseph of Arimathea reputedly founded the earliest Christian church in Britain, in the 1st century AD. These stories influenced the architectural style and layout of the abbey's medieval buildings, particularly the Lady Chapel, which was constructed on the site of the ancient church.

Glastonbury's myths continued to evolve after the dissolution of the abbey in 1539. One West Country legend, for example, claimed that Christ had come to Britain as a boy, accompanying Joseph of Arimathea, his great-uncle, in pursuit of the tin trade. This theme was immortalised in William Blake's poem, 'And did those feet in ancient time' (c.1808) and Hubert Parry's anthem-hymn, 'Jerusalem' (1916). But just as the history and legends of Glastonbury Abbey influenced national narratives, so too they attracted the attention of archaeologists throughout the 20th century. ➡



PHOTO: Steve Slater [CC by 2.0]



IMAGE: Liz Gardner



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Between 1904 and 1979, 36 seasons of excavations were undertaken at Glastonbury Abbey, funded by the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. There were eight different directors, some of whom searched for the grave of

Arthur and even the mythical Holy Grail; others uncovered important evidence for the Anglo-Saxon and medieval monastic buildings and material culture.

Despite their various agendas, all the excavators of Glastonbury Abbey had one thing in common – they failed to analyse and publish the results of

ABOVE The Lady Chapel in its contemporary setting.

their excavations. These digs took place long before archaeologists recognised the ethical requirement to publish promptly and archive data. This failure has been a major stumbling block to scholarship and for interpreting Glastonbury Abbey to the public. If we are to understand this iconic site and the importance of its archaeology, we must return to the archive.

For the last decade, I have led the Glastonbury Abbey Archaeological Archive Project, which is dedicated to analysing and publishing the archive of all 36 excavation seasons. This is a collaboration between Glastonbury Abbey and the University of Reading, funded principally by the Arts & Humanities Research Council. It has drawn on the expertise of a large team of more than 30 archaeologists from across the UK and yielded a wealth of new evidence that is now available in a monograph published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, with the full data and archive reports freely accessible through the Archaeology Data Service (see box on p.27).

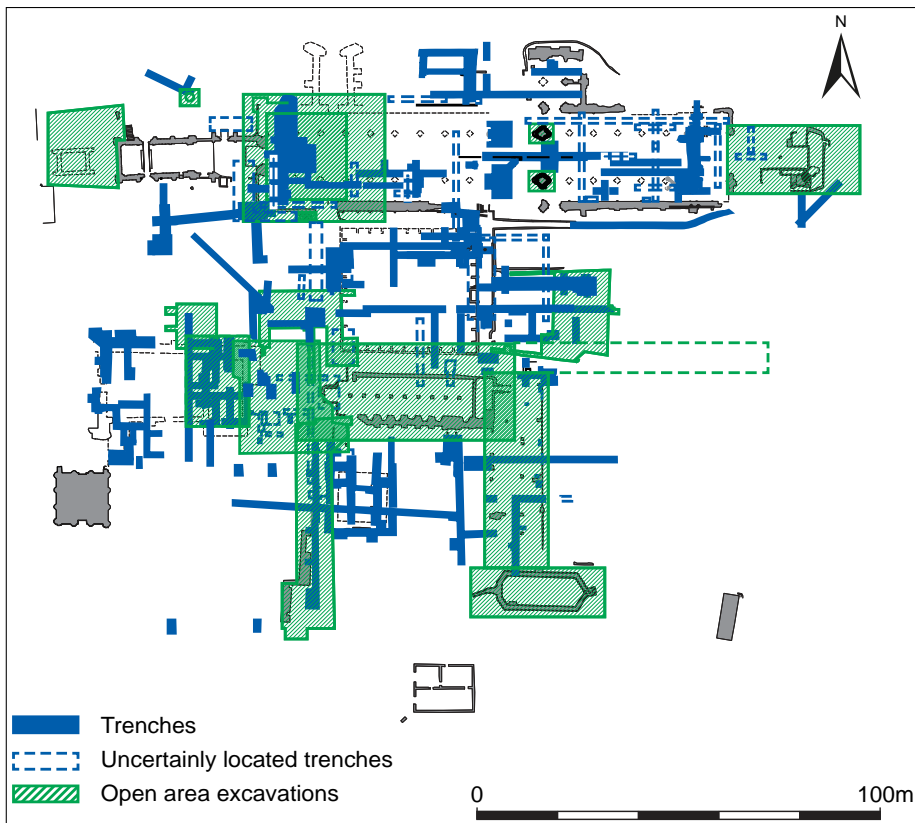


IMAGE: Liz Gardner

LEFT Plan showing the archaeological trenches at Glastonbury Abbey.



A horizontal timeline bar representing the 20th century, with major tick marks at 1900, 1950, and 2000. Above the bar, there are three bracketed intervals: one from approximately 1900 to 1920, one from approximately 1940 to 1960, and one from approximately 1970 to 1980. Below the bar, there are three bracketed intervals: one from approximately 1900 to 1910, one from approximately 1920 to 1940, and one from approximately 1960 to 1980.



LEFT Antiquarian excavators at Glastonbury Abbey, 1904-1979.

Of all the primary archaeological records from the 20th-century excavations, those undertaken by Courtenay Arthur Raleigh Radford in the 1950s and '60s offered the greatest potential to increase understanding. Radford released his interim findings for the Saxon and Anglo-Norman phases in 1981, but virtually nothing had been published on the excavated

evidence dating from the late 12th century onwards. When Radford died in 1999, his archive passed to the Historic England Archive, making it possible to begin fresh analysis. We found that the archive of excavations was predominantly complete, but the records and finds were disconnected: the sections, plans, notes, photographs, sketches, and finds had never been drawn together.

Cheryl Green, now working at Context One Archaeological Services, undertook a programme of cataloguing, scanning, and transcribing to create digital copies of the important elements of the archive and an integrated archaeological database to enable the records to be ➡

BELOW Isometric annotated sketch of Saxon church excavations, 'drawn on the spot' and signed 'Theodore Fyfe' (March 1927).



MAGES: Glastonbury Abbey / Society of Antiquaries of London



LEFT Plan showing the geophysical data.

as a beacon for spiritual, creative, and occult movements in England. The first director of excavations is also regarded as a founding figure of the town's New Age community: Frederick Bligh Bond (1864-1945) was an ecclesiastical architect who undertook excavations at Glastonbury Abbey from 1908 to 1921. His credibility was questioned after he revealed his commitment to spiritualism – a belief that the spirits of the dead can communicate with the living.

In a book published in 1918, Bond revealed that his excavations at the abbey had been an extended experiment in psychical research: *The Gate of Remembrance: The Story of the Psychological Experiment which resulted in the Discovery of the Edgar Chapel at Glastonbury*. Automatic writing suggested to Bond that the Edgar Chapel that was built at the east end of the great church c.1500 had an apsed termination, but this feature was not confirmed by his excavations. Despite the absence of archaeological evidence, Bond showed an apsed chapel on his published plans of the Edgar Chapel and reconstructed it in the layout of the ruins on site. His use of spiritualism as an archaeological method at Glastonbury became a national controversy. The Edgar Chapel was even discussed in Parliament, leading to Bond's dismissal from the abbey.

The archaeologist most closely associated with Glastonbury Abbey is Radford (1900-1999), who excavated at the abbey from 1951 to 1964. He was highly respected for his ecclesiastical scholarship and known for his particular focus on Celtic monasticism. Radford

LEFT Rahtz and Radford holding a fragment of an Anglo-Saxon stone cross found at Glastonbury c.1966.

used with ease. All of the artefacts that were retained from the excavations were reassessed, including chemical and compositional analysis of glass, metal residues, pottery, and tiles. A framework of independent dating was established based on reassessment of the finds and radiocarbon dating of surviving organic material from the 1950s excavations. A comprehensive geophysical survey was undertaken by GSB Propection to establish the location of trenches and to add knowledge of deposit survival. For the first time, the antiquarian excavations can be placed in a firm chronological and spatial framework, mapped by Liz Gardner, freelance archaeological illustrator.

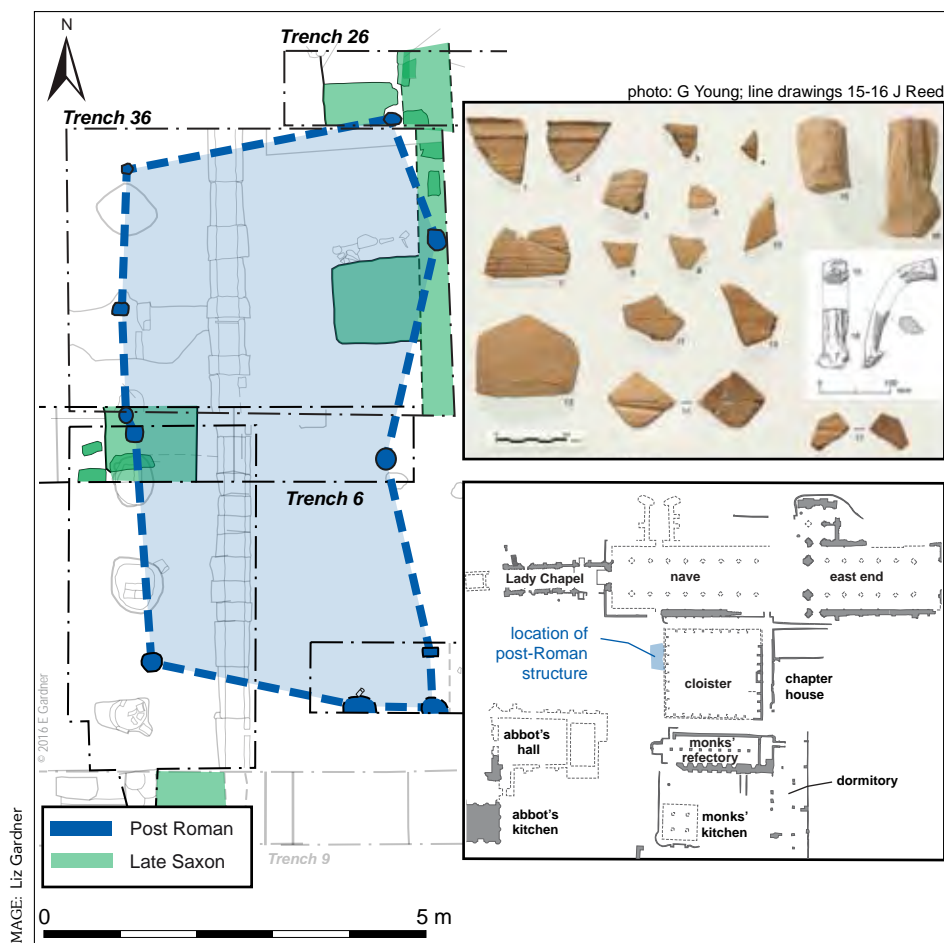
The Glastonbury Abbey Archaeological Archive Project set aside previous assumptions based on the historical and legendary traditions, and achieved a rigorous reassessment of the archive of antiquarian excavations. In this article, I will share some new findings on the Anglo-Saxon monastery and its precursor settlement, but I will begin

with an introduction to the excavators who were drawn to Glastonbury Abbey, some of whom wove archaeological myths into Glastonbury's stories!

ABBEY ARCHAEOLOGISTS

The archaeological excavations began in the early 20th century, around the same time that Glastonbury emerged





LEFT Plan showing evidence for a 'Dark Age' timber structure and the location of LRA1 pottery.

directed the excavations at Cadbury Castle. The Arthurian myth resonated with the post-war generation of archaeologists who used archaeology to search for Britain's lost 'golden age'.

This Romantic sentiment was not shared by Philip Rahtz (1921-2011), the excavator of the early monastic site on Glastonbury Tor, and numerous other sites in and around Glastonbury. Rahtz was highly sceptical of using archaeology to investigate mythical characters such as Arthur, describing the practice as 'historically misleading and trivial'. Rahtz was also critical of Radford's emphasis on 'Early Christian' archaeology, arguing that it leads to 'an undue emphasis on the ideological, specifically Christian, aspects of the period, influencing the choice of sites to be dug and the interpretation of the evidence recorded'. My own interest in Glastonbury was sparked by Philip Rahtz, who was my undergraduate professor at the University of York. Philip sometimes claimed a belief in destiny, and he suggested that it was fate that brought us both to Glastonbury, albeit 50 years apart. ➡

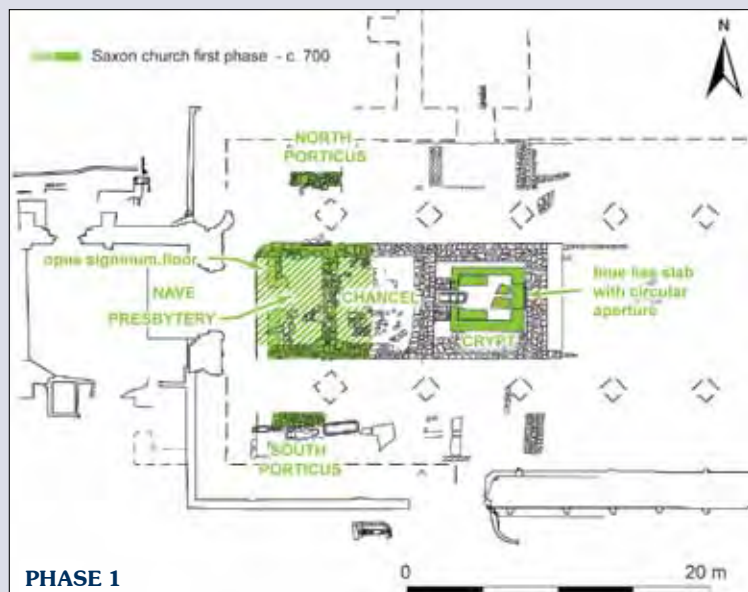
was attracted to sites connected with the Arthurian legends of his native West Country, such as Glastonbury, Tintagel, Castle Dore, and Cadbury Castle. He conducted extensive excavations at the abbey and also carried out a search for the grave of Arthur and Guinevere, guided by

descriptions in medieval sources. In 1963, he announced to the press (optimistically) that he had discovered the site of Arthur's grave, allegedly exhumed by the monks in 1191.

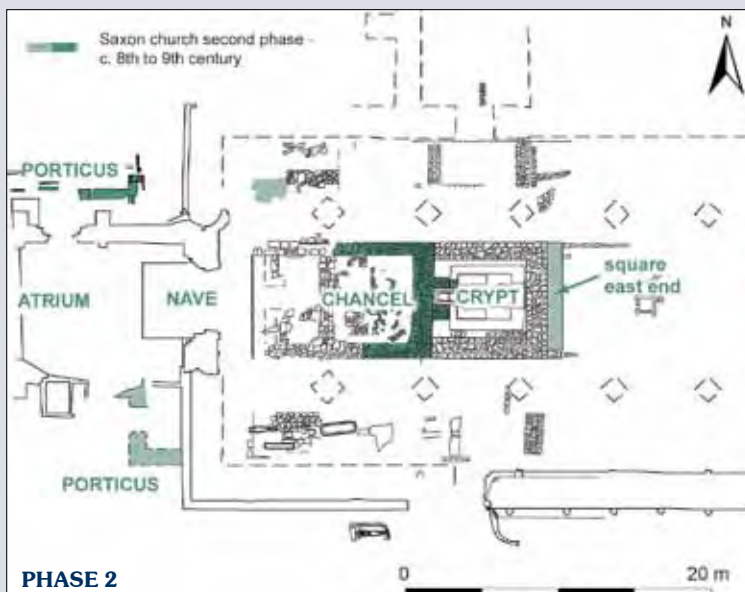
Radford's fascination with Arthur was shared by other archaeologists of his time, such as Leslie Alcock, who

LEFT & BELOW Archive photograph of open-plan excavations in the 1920s revealing remains of the Anglo-Saxon churches, looking west.

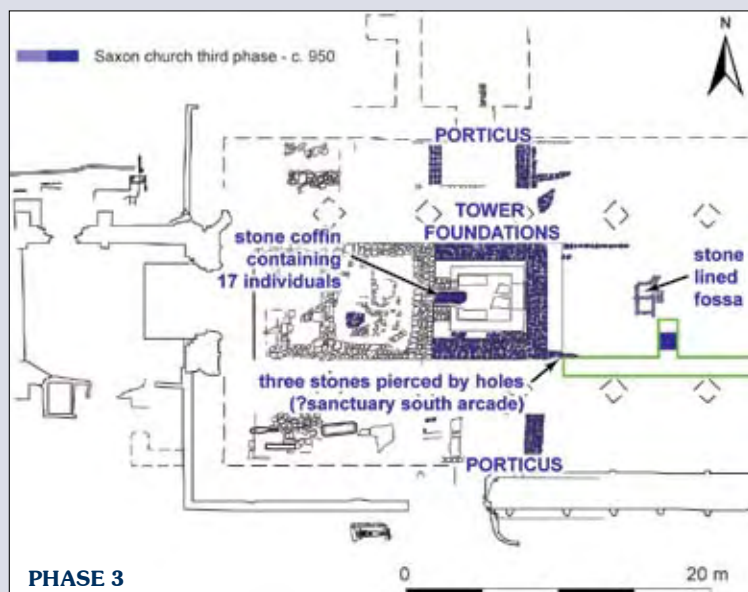




PHASE 1



PHASE 2



PHASE 3

ABOVE & LEFT

Plans showing the excavated evidence for phase 1 (c.AD 700), phase 2 (c.AD 8th to 9th century), and phase 3 (c.AD 950) of the Anglo-Saxon church.

RIGHT Stone coffin containing the remains of 17 individuals, found at the entrance to the Saxon crypt, looking east.



IMAGES: Liz Gardner

'DARK AGE' PRECURSOR

One of the key research questions surrounding Glastonbury Abbey is the date of the earliest settlement on the site. The monks of Glastonbury claimed that their 'old church' was the oldest in the land. In 1130, the renowned historian William of Malmesbury described an ancient 'brushwood' church at Glastonbury. He suggested that it had been founded by missionaries in AD 166, or possibly even earlier, perhaps dating back to the time of Christ's apostles. Recent study of Glastonbury's Anglo-Saxon charters by Susan Kelly, a freelance historian, suggests that the earliest monastic foundation was in the last decades of the 7th century. The medieval monks, though, believed they had descended from an earlier Celtic community.

This view was shared by Radford, even though his own excavations recorded nothing earlier than the 8th century.

Reassessment of the archive and associated finds has revealed new evidence for earlier occupation on the site of Glastonbury Abbey. Among the most exciting discoveries was a small assemblage of Late Roman Amphora (LRA1; previously known as Bii ware). These sherds of pottery indicate the presence of amphorae imported from the eastern Mediterranean that would have contained wine and oil. The date range of LRA1 elsewhere in the south-west of Britain has been confirmed by radiocarbon dates as around AD 450–550. Fourteen sherds of LRA1 from Glastonbury were associated with a roughly trodden floor and post-pits connected with timber structures

located within the bounds of an early cemetery. The condition of the sherds suggests that the floor represents an undisturbed post-Roman context, possibly associated with one or more timber halls. A radiocarbon date from a post-pit suggests a destruction date in the 8th or 9th centuries, indicating that the hall may have been in use for several centuries.

This important new evidence confirms that there was high-status occupation at Glastonbury in the 5th or 6th centuries, long before the first monastic foundation was documented. This refutes the prevailing view that Glastonbury Abbey was a secondary development to the monasteries on Glastonbury Tor and at nearby Beckery, where Philip Rahtz excavated early graves and sherds

of LRA1. The new evidence emerging from Glastonbury fits with the latest research at other early monasteries: for example, recent excavations by the University of Reading at the royal monastery of Lyminge in Kent revealed that a high-status hall complex was the precursor to the Anglo-Saxon monastery (CA 284).

ANGLO-SAXON CHURCHES

Study of the excavation archive has revealed the scale of the Anglo-Saxon monastery, comprising its boundary ditch, a sequence of stone churches, and an associated glass-working complex. The Saxon churches were excavated from 1926-1929, when the entire width of the western area of the medieval nave was stripped. We can confidently assign a pre-Norman date on stratigraphic evidence: fragments of 12th-century masonry sealed the Saxon remains. Three phases of church-building were recognised from stratigraphic relationships and mortars characteristic to successive phases.

The first church had walls built of shallow courses of limestone and there were traces of a pink opus signinum floor, created by mixing crushed recycled Roman tile or brick with mortar to create the distinctive hue. The remains were interpreted by

the excavators as a church of three cells: a nave, presbytery, and the western end of an apsidal chancel. North and south chambers (porticus) flanked the nave and overlapped with the presbytery. A detached crypt was located to the east of the first church. This rectangular stone structure was partially subterranean and reached by steps from the west. In the second phase, the earlier presbytery was extended eastwards to create a chancel, while a square east end was created above the pre-existing crypt. The west end of the nave was flanked by asymmetrical porticus, with evidence for a possible atrium to the west. In the third phase, the crypt was partially destroyed and back-filled. In its place, a tower was built, represented by foundations 1.5m wide. A large stone coffin was placed in the western entrance to the chamber, containing the carefully arranged bones of 17 individuals.

In common with other Anglo-Saxon monasteries, the churches at Glastonbury were laid out on a single axis. In the 8th century, there were at least three churches on the same alignment. The westernmost was the 'old church' (popularly believed to be associated with Joseph of Arimathea), known only from historical sources

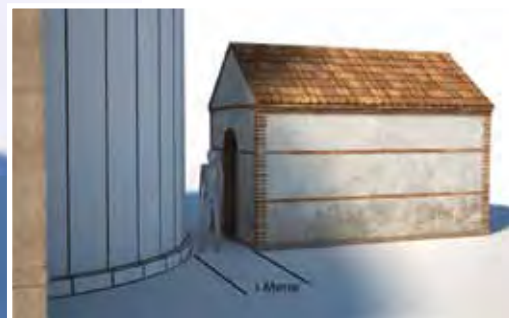
and assumed to have been located on the site of the later Lady Chapel. To the east of the 'old church' lay the excavated church of SS Peter and Paul and the detached crypt-mausoleum. The crypt was incorporated within the main church during the 8th or 9th century, before major rebuilding in the 10th century resulted in the construction of a tower over the former crypt.

Our interpretation of this sequence was limited by the quality of early excavation records, but the process of digital reconstruction has helped to test and refine our understanding. For example, the early excavators were convinced that the first-phase church had an apsed east end, although the evidence was inconclusive. The process of digital reconstruction has demonstrated that an apse in this position is extremely unlikely. The proposed apse would have left only 1m of clearance between the east end of the church and the crypt, which would have impacted on the setting of the church and hindered access into the crypt.

ANGLO-SAXON GLASS-WORKING

In 1955-1957, Radford's excavations in the area of the later medieval cloister garth and the east cloister walk revealed five glass furnaces associated with the church complex. The floors of the furnaces were preserved, providing unique structural evidence for early medieval glass technology in Britain. The stratigraphic and finds evidence has ➡

BELOW Reconstructions of the phase 1 Anglo-Saxon church, with and without apse, and its spatial relationship to the site of the 'old church' and crypt.





LEFT Fragments of Anglo-Saxon glass.

Stuart Black, University of Reading, suggest that Roman metal objects may also have been reused.

The dating evidence from the glass furnaces can also be used to date the construction of the first stone church at Glastonbury. The radiocarbon dates suggest construction around AD 700, corresponding with the known currency of the plan form and the use

of similar opus signinum flooring in churches in Kent. This dating corresponds with the reign of King Ine of Wessex (AD 688-726), who is credited with a major role in founding or refounding the monastery, both by William of Malmesbury and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

been reassessed by Hugh Willmott and Kate Welham, of the Universities of Sheffield and Bournemouth, and new scientific analyses have changed our understanding of what was found. Radford assigned a date of the 9th to 10th century for the glass-working furnaces. The vessels were subsequently reassessed as being of a style more characteristic of the late 7th to 8th century. We were very fortunate to obtain radiocarbon dates for the furnaces from charcoal samples that were retained in the 1950s. The dates provide a broad age range for the furnaces of AD 605-882, but this can be narrowed to AD 605-780 (at 2 sigma).

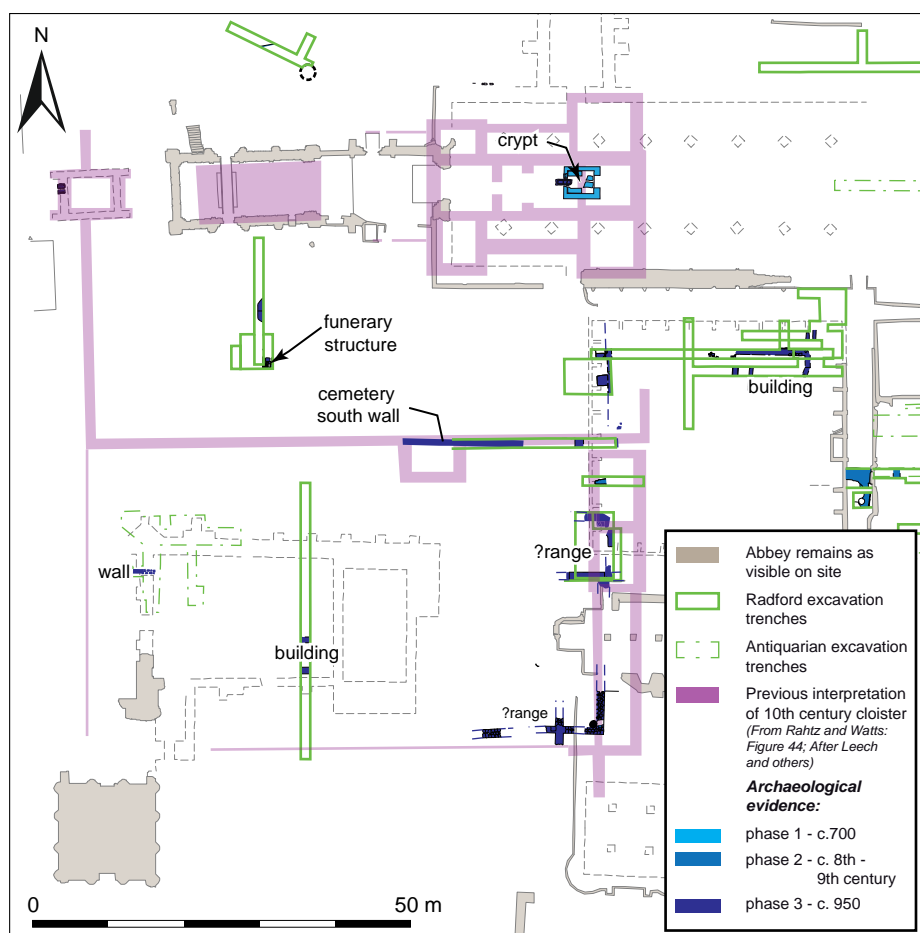
Bayesian analysis of the radiocarbon dates by Peter Marshall of Historic England supports the proposal that the glass-working was a short-lived 'single event', likely to date to the late 7th or early 8th century. The furnaces produced window glass for the first stone churches at Glastonbury, as well as glass vessels used by the monastic community. Chemical analyses of the glass by Kate Welham confirms that production at Glastonbury fits with the broader compositional picture for early medieval glass in Britain from the 6th to 9th centuries. Glass-makers remelted old Roman material, possibly imported as cullet from the Continent. Associated metal residues studied by

CRITIQUING THE CLOISTER

Radford claimed to have discovered evidence for a late Saxon cloister at Glastonbury, which would make it the earliest formal cloister in Britain. This has been taken as proof of the importance of Glastonbury in the 10th-century reform movement that reshaped the character of English monasticism.

Radford reconstructed the cloister as a series of narrow ranges flanking a courtyard measuring 55m by 36m. Traces of the supposed ranges were uncovered during separate digs in the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1970s. Radford connected them on the basis of similarities that he observed in the style of construction; there were no proven stratigraphic relationships and there is no evidence that they

BELOW Plan showing new evidence relating to Radford's 'cloister'.





LEFT The phase 3 Anglo-Saxon church set within its contemporary setting in the ruins of the later medieval abbey.

are all of the same date. Once we had mapped these excavated remains, it became clear that the eastern walls of the supposed Saxon eastern range are misaligned. There is no proof that the structures to the north and south of the later medieval refectory were connected, nor that the junction of two rooms to the south of the refectory represents the meeting of a south and east Saxon range. Such evidence is insufficient to reconstruct a full cloister as envisaged by Radford.

Instead, it appears that several free-standing structures were located across the site of the later medieval west cloister, south of the refectory, and possibly below the later abbot's hall. The buildings in the area of the later west cloister and refectory are sealed by 12th-century deposits and therefore likely to be late Saxon in date. On comparison with excavated sites such as Jarrow, we know that free-standing stone ranges are more typical of accommodation at English monasteries right up to the Norman Conquest. These were sometimes arranged around informal courtyards that were much smaller than the cloister envisaged by Radford.

Reassessment of Glastonbury's later medieval archaeology suggests that the first cloister at the site was, in fact, relatively late – it appears that Saxon monastic buildings were used at Glastonbury well into the 12th century.

GLASTONBURY: THE LEGEND CONTINUES

Reassessment of the archive has revealed important new evidence for the Saxon and later medieval monastery. It has shown that some of the best-known archaeological 'facts' about Glastonbury are themselves myths perpetuated by the abbey's excavators, such as the alleged Saxon cloister. The project has also identified new questions for future work. A striking feature of the finds assemblage, for example, is the lack of evidence for metal objects dating to the Middle and Late Saxon periods. The paucity of Saxon artefacts makes it reasonable to wonder whether the early monastic core has actually been located. Is it possible that the main domestic buildings of the Middle Saxon monastery were situated to the north of the church, in an area yet to be examined?

The presence of LRA1 pottery associated with a timber structure confirms that the site of Glastonbury

Abbey was occupied in the 5th or 6th century. This reopens the possibility of an early religious settlement at Glastonbury before the foundation of the Saxon monastery in the last decades of the 7th century. The key question now is whether this early occupation was religious or secular in character, or both? Does the presence of LRA1 confirm the 'Celtic monastery' that looms large in the abbey's legendary traditions; or, to the contrary, does it indicate a secular settlement that was engaged in trade? Of course, this new evidence for post-Roman settlement at Glastonbury may fuel further speculation about the abbey's early origins – and its legendary connections with King Arthur and the early church associated with Joseph of Arimathea. ■

Source

Roberta Gilchrist is Professor of Archaeology and Research Dean at the University of Reading and *Current Archaeology* Archaeologist of the Year 2016.

Further information

The results of the Glastonbury Abbey Archaeological Archive Project have been published by the Society of Antiquaries of London as: Roberta Gilchrist and Cheryl Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: archaeological investigations 1904-79*, £45.00, ISBN 978-0854313006 (www.oxbowbooks.com/oxbow/glastonbury-abbey-47992.html). The volume will shortly be available Open Access, hosted by the Archaeology Data Service.

The full data and archive reports are freely accessible through the Archaeology Data Service at http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/glastonbury_ahrc_2014/

The Glastonbury Abbey Archaeological Archive Project was funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.