

The Medieval Floor Tiles of Plympton Priory.

Report by Peter Houghton

Peter Houghton lives in Plymouth and studied for a BA in Archaeological Studies at Bristol University. This project was carried out as part of ongoing research into the medieval floor tiles recovered during archaeological excavations within the monastic sites along the Devon and Cornwall border.

History of Plympton Priory

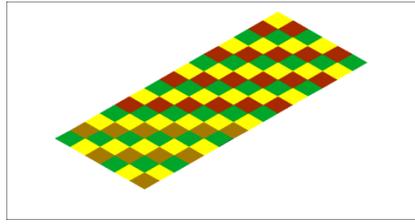
In AD 904 a charter of King Edward the Elder granted to Asser, the Bishop of Sherborne, twelve manors in Somerset in exchange for a monastery at Plympton. The Domesday Book reveals that the canons of St. Peter's of Plympton have two hides of land which can be ploughed by six ploughs. In the early twelfth century Bishop Warelwest introduced a band of Austin Canons to the priory and a charter of Henry I confirmed its foundation. The priory rapidly became one of the largest Augustinian houses in England and by its dissolution in 1839 it was one of the five richest. Not much of the priory today remains above ground.

Archaeological Excavation.

Archaeological excavation of the Plympton Priory site was carried out during 1958/1959 by the City Museum Archaeological Group, under the direction of V.Ledger. At this time, excavation was only possible in the western part of the church, as far as the transepts and to the western part of the cloister. Much of the area even today is covered by buildings. Previous work by a local historian, Mr Brooking-Rowe, within the church revealed a tiled floor from which some tiles were removed. Very little useful information about this excavation seems to have been recorded.

Excavation was to show that the tiled floor had been laid during some part of the 14th century although a precise date could not be determined. The only place where the tiles were found to be intact as laid was in the nave opposite the south transept where the floor had been raised covering the tiles. Other than this the tiles appear to have been continually reused up until the Dissolution.

The plain tiles were mainly found in the west end of the church and tended to be larger in size than the patterned type. These varied from 160mm (6 $\frac{3}{8}$ ") x 135mm (5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ") to 195mm (7 $\frac{5}{8}$ ") x 115mm (4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "). The tiles to the south west corner were laid square to the church walls as opposed to the normal method that was used to the east by laying them diagonally. Why this was favoured is not known. Pattern tiles only existed towards the east of the west processional entrance. Other than this the plain tiles were simply glazed brown, green or yellow and un-patterned.



Thirteen different styles of pattern tiles were recovered from the site and these were mainly 120mm (4¾") square and 18mm (⅝") thick. The evidence suggests that they were part of repeating patterns or designs and may have been part of a type of geometric mosaic. Not all of the tiles have common patterns although there are parallels found in other churches throughout Devon and Cornwall. The 'fish in vesica' is a common Christian symbol that has been found elsewhere.



A tile containing the coat of arms of Richard Plantagenet, Earl of Cornwall and Poitou, brother of Henry III and younger son of King John was uncovered. This shield pictures the rampant lion of Poitou within the shield of Cornwall.

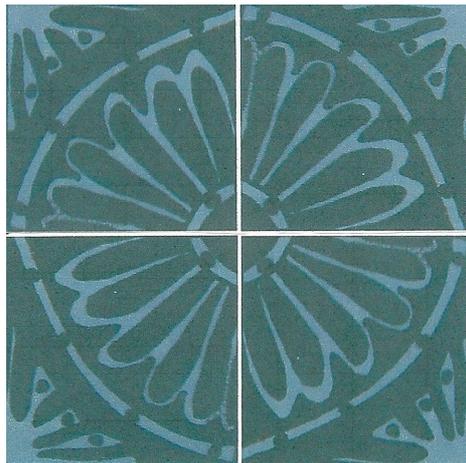


Its date is questionable as his son Edmund continued to use the same coat of arms. As Richard died in 1272 and Edmund in 1300, this could place the design of the tile to the late 13th century. However, at other monastery sites such as Tavistock and Cleeve Abbey, Edmund's coat of arms has often been accompanied by his wife's Margaret de Clare, which pictures a set of chevrons within a shield. The only pattern tile which closely resembles this coat of arms at Plympton is a tile with a herringbone

pattern and it is debateable if this is meant to represent the de Clare coat of arms. If it is, then it is a rather poorer copy of one. This evidence places a late 13th century date for the tiles, as both Earls had died by 1300; as Edmund had no heir the title reverted back to the crown and Edward II awarded Piers Gaveston with the title. Both Richard and Edmund were known as patrons of several monasteries in the south-west of England.



Other patterns were represented by a fleur-de-lis , various flower/petal patterns and other symmetrical designs. One tile was designed to be arranged in quadrants to form a larger pattern.



It is generally accepted that the work of laying the tiles was carried out by a group of itinerant workers who travelled from monastery to monastery. Whether these tilers brought tiles with them that had been made elsewhere, possibly at a central location, or whether they made them on site using their own stamps and local clay, is questionable. If brought to the site, then the cost and difficulty of transport at the time needs to be considered, as a significant number of tiles would be required for such a site as Plympton Priory. It is known that some of the plain green tiles were imports from Normandy but these are thought to date to the 15th/16th century. If the tilers were using their own stamps and local clay then the source of the clay as well as the need for a kiln needs to be considered and to-date no kiln has been located. Perhaps further analysis of the clay and the inclusions used for the tiles could provide a location for their manufacture.