

John Bryant, *Excavations at Minster House, Bristol, 1992*, (BAR British Series, 669, 2021). 156 pp., 88 figs., 11 tabs., Cardcovers, £39 [ISBN: 9781407316383].

It is good to have this long-awaited report on the excavation of the site of a late-medieval building which occupied an area south-west of the church of the Augustinian abbey which later became Bristol cathedral. The excavation was carried out in 1992 under the direction of Eric Boore. John Bryant has produced a thorough and clearly-written account of the work with copious illustrations, plans and detailed analysis of the finds. He has been a leading figure in archaeological work in Bristol and the region for many years and was involved in the 1992 excavation as site-surveyor. His book provides much more than a record of the archaeology, since he has made good use of the cathedral's documentary sources to give a full account of the history of the building and its successive residents. He has also used the remarkable collection of plans, drawings, paintings and photographs to show how the building and the adjacent areas of the cathedral developed. This adds a great deal to our knowledge of the abbey and cathedral and will be essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the complex history of the site in the future.

The Augustinian abbey was founded in 1140 by Robert Fitzharding and was endowed with numerous properties in Bristol and estates in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire. This made it a wealthy institution, well able to engage in lavish building work on its church, cloisters and domestic buildings. The house which was the focus of the 1992 excavation was built as the lodging for the Prior of the abbey and was later to be known as Minster House. It was erected during the time of Abbot Newland (Abbot 1481-1515). Newland was also known as Nailheart from his rebus or badge of a heart pierced by three nails. He was responsible for a great deal of work on the abbey and his rebus appears on many parts of the building. The house consisted of a two-storey structure with a hall or principal room on the first floor giving a view of the abbey gatehouse. It included a kitchen, buttery, parlour, two chambers, a study and a garden. From his lodging the Prior could supervise the reception of goods delivered to the abbey and stored in the nearby cellarium. Details of the history of the area south and west of the abbey were revealed by the excavation. To the north of the site was a parlour or room in which the Augustinian canons could meet with people from outside such as relatives. There was a thirteenth-century bell tower which was later demolished. There

were numerous drains and cess-pits, pits where bells had been cast and a kiln in which tiles had been produced. To the south was the back of the western cloister range which had been rebuilt in stone during the early fourteenth century.

The purpose-built house for the Prior served its intended function for only a few decades. In 1539 the abbey, like all others throughout the country, was suppressed by Henry VIII. Three years later in 1542 it was chosen as the cathedral of the newly-created diocese of Bristol, one of six new dioceses created by the King, with a bishop, dean, six secular canons or prebendaries and six minor canons. This was the last of Henry VIII's dioceses and was poorly endowed. Few bishops, deans or canons stayed long before they sought more lucrative offices in the Church elsewhere. The cathedral of the new diocese lacked a nave, since the twelfth-century nave of the abbey had been demolished in preparation for rebuilding. The Prior's lodging became a house for one of the secular canons and became known as Minster House. Cathedral clergy and staff quickly occupied houses elsewhere in the precinct and houses were built on the site of the demolished nave.

This situation continued until the campaign to rebuild the nave in the later nineteenth century. George Edmund Street, the architect of the new nave found it necessary to demolish the eastern part of Minster House in order to accommodate the south-western tower. This work was carried out in 1869-70. After Street's death in 1881 his successor, John Loughborough Pearson, advocated the complete removal of Minster House in order to present a clear view of the whole of the west front of the cathedral. There was some opposition to the destruction of an ancient and attractive building, but in spite of these protests Minster House was demolished in 1883. The excavation of the site and surrounding area in 1992 was undertaken because of a proposal to create a visitor centre on the south-west side of the cathedral. Later, this ambitious project was abandoned when a main sponsor withdrew the promised finance.

Several specialists have contributed accounts of the finds made during the excavation. They reflect the materials discarded over such a long period of occupation by prosperous residents. There was a great deal of pottery, much of it from the Ham Green and Redcliffe kilns. Other material showed the extent of goods brought down the Severn and the widespread trade of Bristol with Europe and further field. There were roof tiles from Minster House and

medieval floor tiles. Animal and bird bones provided evidence of diet and butchery methods. Other material included shells, glass vessels and bottles, a quantity of coins and tokens and objects of copper-alloy, iron and lead. Numerous clay pipes and pipe fragments were found, witnessing to the fact that Bristol was a major pipe-producing and exporting centre, some pipes were foreign and a few were beautifully-decorated in spite of their fragility. Expert examination of the bell-pits provided information on the development of bell-casting methods. The book contains a full bibliography of published work on the subjects covered.

This is an important and well-researched book which will be of interest to anyone concerned with the history of Bristol and with the former abbey and splendid cathedral which dominate part of the central area of the city.

JOSEPH BETTEY

Chairman of Bristol Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee (1989-2014)