

Documents prepared for Christchurch Priory

Nave Roof Preliminary Assessment Ross Cook

Preliminary Inspection of the Painted Nave Roof Dr Andrea Kirkham ACR FSA



Nave Roof, Christchurch Priory, Dorset

Preliminary Assessment

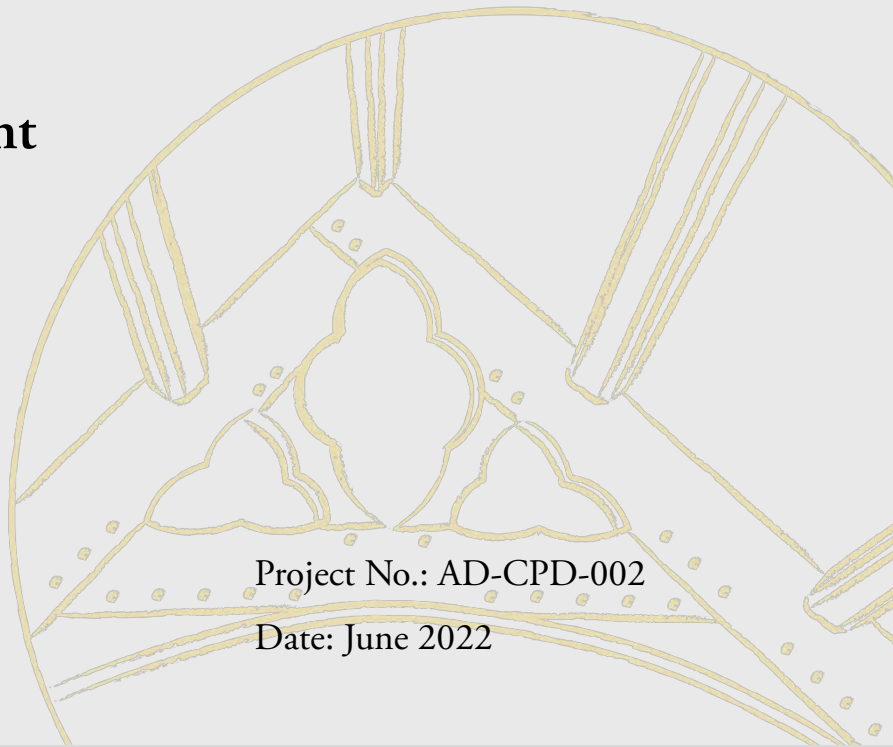
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Abbreviations

HER	- Historic Environment Record.
LPA	- Local Planning Authority.
NGR	- National Grid Reference.
NMR	- National Monuments Record.
OS	- Ordnance Survey.

All other abbreviations will be referred to in text.

Project Team

Ross Cook – A buildings archaeologist and dendrochronologist with a background in archaeology and buildings conservation. Ross is the Cathedral Archaeologist to St Davids Cathedral, and Consultant Archaeologist to Christchurch Priory, Dorset. He has undertaken archaeological fieldwork throughout Wales and has also worked to produce detailed surveys of a wide range of Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listed Buildings throughout Wales and England; this has included Neath Abbey, Llansteffan Castle, Tretower Castle, Cilgerran Castle, Newport Castle Pembrokeshire, Picton Castle, and Brymbo Ironworks. He previously worked for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales as a Historic Buildings Investigator (Archaeology), where he recorded buildings and Monuments, and provided advice on historic buildings at a national level. Currently he is involved with project work with Cadw, The Brymbo Heritage Group, and The Buildings of Medieval and Ottoman Palestine Research Project.

Ross also works as an Associate Dendrochronologist with the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory, through which he has undertaken work on sites such as Hampton Court Palace, Winchester Cathedral, Queens House Greenwich, The Tower of London, Christ Church and Magdalen College Oxford, Llwyn Celyn (Mons), and many other smaller listed buildings and scheduled sites throughout Wales and England.

ArchaeoDomus Archaeological & Heritage Services is the trading name of Ross Cook, an affiliate member of the Cifa, and adheres to the Cifa codes of conduct.

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Nave Roof, Christchurch Priory, Dorset

Preliminary Assessment

Summary

ArchaeoDomus was commissioned to undertake a preliminary assessment of the nave roof at Christchurch Priory, Dorset. The purpose of this assessment was to establish the potential sequence of development of the roof, and begin to understand its significance, prior to the development of a proposed programme of works, including retiling and repair.

This assessment has made a basic record of the roof and has described the roof and its development. It has found the late-medieval roof to have survived almost complete to its original scheme, along with its paint scheme of the same period. The structure of the roof is of superior quality and demonstrates the access to resources and tradesmen at the disposal of the Priory during the period. The striking similarity to the Abbots Hall at Sherborne suggests that these two roofs may have been the work of the same team of carpenters, or master carpenter. However, the inability to find other examples within churches in the region, yet some others found within medieval halls of the period, lead to the possibility that this is a roof copied from a domestic setting.

The identification of the common rafters as being of reused oak, and possibly being that of the earlier nave roof, provides the opportunity to understand how this older scheme may have once looked.

Overall, the survival of the roof with its painted scheme is an extraordinary and exceptional survival in England, both in the quality and detail of the carpentry, and the extent and quality of the painted scheme.

For the next step in this programme of investigation, it is recommended that a full and detailed record should be made of the roof, and of its decorative paintwork, which should be subject to full paint analysis to help reveal its original nature and vibrancy. It is also recommended that a programme of dendrochronological dating should be implemented to determine the date, or dates, for the roof's construction and phasing.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 General

- 1.1.1 ArchaeoDomus and were commissioned by Thomas Ford & Partners, on behalf of the Christchurch Priory Parochial Church Council, to undertake a preliminary assessment of the nave roof at Christchurch Priory. This work runs alongside preliminary assessment of the painted decoration by Andrea Kirkham.



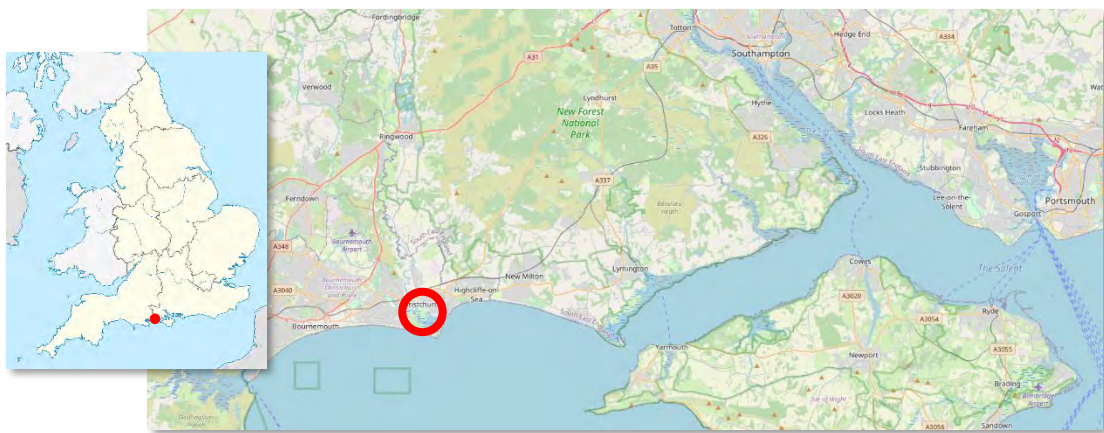
Fig. 1 – Painted Arch-Brace.

- 1.1.2 The aim of this work is to provide information to the Priory and its architects regarding the significance of the roof structure and its painted decoration.
- 1.1.3 This document is not a final report on the nave roof and should form a part of a larger scheme of investigation and analysis.
- 1.1.4 Drawn plans of the roof are available in **Appendix I**, and as a separate document (AD-CPD-002-01 and AD-CPD-002-02) and a photographic archive in **Appendix II**.
- 1.1.5 The fieldwork for this assessment was undertaken by Ross Cook on 30th and 31st May 2022.
- 1.1.6 This report documents the results of the Preliminary Assessment.

2 SITE AND LOCATION

2.1 General

2.1.1 Christchurch Priory is located within the town of Christchurch, in the county of Dorset. The Priory is located within a precinct, which together form the greater part of the south-east of the town. It is sited at the confluence of two rivers, the Avon and Stour, the former of the two bounding the precinct to the east and a mill-leet to the south. Access to the Priory is made from the north-west by Church Street or from the south-west by Quay Road, or via a footpath from Castle Street to the north. The Priory Church sits at circa 6m above sea level and is centred around NGR SZ 16032 92529 / Lat-Long 50°43'55"N 1°46'27"W / What3Words lance.result.gentle.



*Fig. 3 – Location – Christchurch.
OpenStreetMap 2021. All rights reserved.*



*Fig. 2 – Location – Christchurch Priory (blue) and Scheduled Area (red).
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2.2 Geology

2.2.1 The underlying geology is formed of a sedimentary bedrock known as the Branksome Sand Formation (BGS) with River Terrace Deposits, 4 (sand and gravel) superficial deposits recorded (BGS). The local soil type is an unclassified soil (UKSO) and is unsurveyed on the Soil Map World Reference Base (UKSO).

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Christchurch Priory sits within a Scheduled Monument (ID 1018277; MDO8680), which included the former priory precinct and castle. This area contains 14 Listed Buildings, of which 3 are Grade I and three are Grade II*. These are:

ID	Name	Grade
1110141	Christchurch Priory and Parish Church	I
1153159	The Castle, Christchurch	I
1325069	The Constable's House	I
1303953	Priory Cottage	II*
1110074	Place Mill	II*
1304357	Gateway to Churchyard	II*
1153350	The Priory Ruins	II

3.1.2 The Monuments and Buildings of the Priory and the Scheduled Monument in which it is located are registered with the Regional Historic Environment Record (HER), held by Dorset County Council. Structures within the Scheduled Monument are individually recorded with the Regional HER.

3.2 Historical Background

3.2.1 This historical background has been drawn together using numerous different published and unpublished sources. It seeks to provide a chronological sequence of events that have led to the development of the Priory Church and Scheduled Monument area as it can be seen today.

3.3 Roman

3.3.1 The earliest history of settlement at Christchurch may belong to the Roman period, with some material relating to the Romano-British period having been recovered within the town (Heaton, 2010). The later settlement then possibly being founded on this Roman legacy.

3.4 Early Medieval – Saxon Foundation

3.4.1 The history of Christchurch is traditionally thought to have begun around 800 CE, in the Anglo-Saxon period, as a religious settlement. It almost certainly functioned as a trading post and port, with its location at the confluence of two important waterways, the Avon and Stour, it had good access to routes inland and to sea. Its location, only a mile from the sea, would have made it an attractive position for access to the continent, whilst also offering a degree of protection because

of its favourable natural geography.

- 3.4.2 The settlement, which had become known as Twynham, proved to be prosperous, and enough so that King Alfred (b.849 – d.899 CE) created it a burgh (fortified town) in *circa* 879 CE. This formed just one of a large network of burghs across the south and midlands of England to protect the English from marauding Danes. This burgh would later be replaced and improved by Edward the Elder (b.874 – d.924), Alfred's son, in *circa* 924 CE by a wooden fort at first, with a motte added shortly after.
- 3.4.3 Tradition suggests that by the early 11th century, a Saxon Minster community was established at Twynham, with a church and nine freestanding chapels. These would have been accompanied by a range of service and domestic buildings to support the religious community but are unlikely to have been ordered in the same fashion as later precincts.
- 3.4.4 In 1043, the Saxon Minster was re-founded ('regularised') as an order of secular canons by Edward the Confessor (b.1003 – d.1066), possibly around the same time he re-founded Wimborne Minster after it was destroyed by the Danes. This re-founding brought the community under a recognised monastic 'rule' and would have brought with it new sources of income and patrons.

3.5 11th to 12th Century – The Norman Church

- 3.5.1 After the Conquest of 1066, the Priory was documented in the *Doomsday Book* of 1086.

The Canons of Holy Trinity Thuinam hold in the vill 5 hides and a virgate and a hide in the Isle of Wight; these hides have always belonged to that church. There are 5 ploughs in the demesne; there are 11 villeins and 13 bordars with 1 plough, there are 2 serfs; there is a mill worth 30/- and 108 acres of meadow land; there is a woodland for 2 swine; there are 6 messuages worth 13/4d. To this church belongs the whole of Thuinam and one third of the tithe of Holdenhurst; in King Edward's time it was worth £6; now £8. This church formerly had 8 acres in Andret in Bovre but they are now in the forest.

- 3.5.2 In total, the Canons of Twynham held some 630 cultivated acres of land; a virgate being about 30 acres, and a hide some 120 acres. The Canons clearly benefitted from their position, with three, Alsi, Alnod and Sulfric, having owned estates personally.
- 3.5.3 During the 1180s, we are told that the leader of the secular canons was Godric.
- 3.5.4 Shortly after Doomsday, in 1093, the church, and its lands in Twynham were granted by William II (William Rufus) (b.1056 – d.1100) to Ranulf Flambard (b.1060 – d.1128), who became the first dean. Flambard had risen to prominence through William I's Chancery where he acquired a reputation as an able financier and administrator and held numerous ecclesiastical offices. His accumulation of prominent positions, and therefore political power, see Flambard being considered the first Chief Justiciar of England.
- 3.5.5 Although Flambard probably did not spend much time at Twynham, in 1094 he breaks ground

for a new Priory Church, replacing the earlier Saxon church and its nine chapels. The new church was built in the Norman cruciform fashion.

- 3.5.6 In 1099, Flambard was made Bishop of Durham, which came with the largest Bishopric in the country, and shifted his focus north and away from Twynham.
- 3.5.7 With the accession of Henry I (b.1068 – d.1135) in 1100, Flambard found himself imprisoned in the Tower of London on charges of embezzlement on 15th August the same year. His incarceration did not last long and Flambard was able to escape on 3rd February the following year, with the help of his custodian, William de Mandeville (b.???? – d.1130) and fled to France. During this time, Henry granted the control of Christchurch, and its priory, to Baldwin de Redvers (b.???? – d.1155), his family would remain its patrons for the next 150 years.
- 3.5.8 Under Baldwin, Christchurch Castle was expanded, improving the Anglo-Saxon motte with a timber castle, and the creation of the bailey.
- 3.5.9 When Flambard fled to France, a new dean, Gilbert de Dousgunels, who had previously served as a clerk, was appointed in 1100. Gilbert continued the construction of the church to Flambard's plans, which are followed to completion with a succession of deans to 1150.
- 3.5.10 Under the de Redvers, construction of Flambard's priory continued and, despite several periods of inactivity, by *circa* 1150 the church was completed. The large church was in the Norman Romanesque style, cruciform in plan, probably with large tower, and up to triforium level. Its construction is believed to be on the site of the earlier Saxon church, the footprint of which may be under the east end of the nave and crossing.
- 3.5.11 During the construction of the church, in the early-12th century, the story of the miraculous beam appeared. The story tells of a beam that had been cut too short when it was lifted into place by the team of carpenters, causing embarrassment to them. However, there was a carpenter, who worked alone, which none of the others appeared to know. The following day, the carpenters returned to find the beam was now fitted into place and the unknown carpenter never returned. The belief was that the unknown carpenter was Jesus Christ, and the town was renamed in his honour; originally Twynham-Christchurch, and eventually to just Christchurch.
- 3.5.12 Around the time of the completion of the new church in *circa* 1150, the de Redvers re-founded the priory for the Augustinians, and the first prior, Reginald, was appointed. The Augustinians would have reordered the precinct to a standardised Augustinian plan. From the south of the nave, the cloister range once projected, and contained the monk's dormitory, the refectory, library, and chapter house. The buildings of the outer precinct were less well defined in their location, but near to the refectory would have been the kitchen, brewhouse, bakehouse, infirmary, priors house, and other service and ancillary buildings. Alongside these would have been gardens, service yards and the monks' cemetery. The church was parochial and would have sat astride the boundary wall to the precinct, with the lay cemetery to the north.
- 3.5.13 Around the time the church was nearing completion, the wooden defences of the castle were replaced in stone, considerably improving its defensive capabilities. The construction of the Constable's House was also started as part of this works, and built within the bailey.

- 3.5.14 Several priors were appointed in the late-12th century, though dates of appointment are vague, differing in the accounts by years at times; Reginald, 1150-54; Julian, 1160-62; Reginald, 1169-1173; Ralph, 1186-89; Peter, 1189-1199.
- 3.5.15 From the late-12th century, the priory and its precinct underwent several phases alterations and additions resulting from the income and activity generated from both its agricultural lands and patrons.

3.6 13th Century

- 3.6.1 During the 13th century, the height of the nave was raised with a new clerestory and its aisles were vaulted, and stair turrets to the north and south transepts were added. The Montacute Chapels replaced the Norman apse on the east side of the North Transept, and the impressive North Porch was started. These were built in contrast to the Norman Romanesque church of Flambard, adopting an Early English style which brought the two centred (Gothic) arch to prominence at the church, and was used through all the later work.
- 3.6.2 In 1293, the patronage of the de Redvers family came to an end when Isabella de Fortibus (b.1237 – d.1293), Countess of Devon, sold her eastern estates to Edward I (b.1239 – d.1307) for the sum of £4,000. Through this, Christchurch became a Royal Manor.
- 3.6.3 The work that had been started in the 13th century naturally spilled over into the 14th and saw the completion of the roof a little before 1350. A spire may have been added to the tower during this period, which may be represented by a small carved depiction on the Draper Chantry, though this is 16th century.
- 3.6.4 Priors of the 13th century; Roger, 1216-29; Richard, 1229-35; Nicholas de Warham and Nicolas de Sturminster, 1235-62; John of Abingdon, 1262-78; William of Netheravon, 1278-87; Richard Maury, 1287-1302.

3.7 14th Century

- 3.7.1 The construction of the Great Quire reredos, with alterations to the Quire, were undertaken during the mid-14th century.
- 3.7.2 The end of the 14th century saw the commencement of another substantial campaign of works at the priory and was begun with the construction of the Lady Chapel in the Perpendicular Gothic style, its pendent vaulting are thought to be one of the earliest examples in England. To help accommodate this addition at the east end of the church, the precinct was probably rearranged, with the loss of some of the monastic cemetery.
- 3.7.3 Priors of the 14th century; Richard Maury, 1287-1302; William Quyntyn, 1302-17; Walter Tydolveshide, 1317-21; Edmund of Ramsbury, 1321-37; Richard de Buttethorne, 1337-8;

Robert de Leghe, 1340-49; William Tyrevache, 1349-57; Henry Eyre, 1357-77; John Wodenham, 1377-97; John Borard, 1397-1415?.

3.8 15th Century

- 3.8.1 During the early-15th century, the Great Quire and Quire Aisles were built, and their footprint extended to join with the new Lady Chapel, and alterations were made to the North Transept. As with the Lady Chapel, these were built in the Perpendicular style, the Great Quire being finished with pendent and lantern vaulting. The beautiful nave roof, with its double-cusped wind bracing is likely to have been part of this programme of works. It is speculated that this campaign of works was set in motion after the collapse of the tower, which provides a sound reasoning for the large amount of works seen at the east end of the church in this period.
- 3.8.2 It is assumed that the 15th century also saw ongoing alteration and additions to the buildings of the precinct.
- 3.8.3 In about 1470, a new tower was constructed at the west end to replace that lost earlier in the century, fitted with belfry and seven bells. With the completion of this 15th century campaign of works, the priory created the longest parish church in England, and one of the largest.
- 3.8.4 Priors of the 15th century; John Borard, 1397-1415?; John Wimborne, 1422-31; William Norton, 1431-46; John Dorchester, 1446-77; John Draper I, 1477-1502.

3.9 16th Century – The Reformation

- 3.9.1 The last major additions for several hundred years came with the construction of the Salisbury Chantry and Draper Chantry. Completed in *circa* 1529, they represent one of the last moments of pre-Reformation architectural church decoration in England.
- 3.9.2 In 1536, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* valued the priory at £312 7s 1d, and had 1lb of pepper and 1lb of cumin in stores, and when commissioners of Henry VIII's (b.1491 – d.1547) visited in May the following year, they found it very favourable.
- 3.9.3 On 28th November 1539, the last prior of Christchurch, John Draper (b.???? – d.1549), surrendered the priory and all its holdings to Henry's men and it was dissolved. Draper was provided with a pension of £133 6s 8d, and the use of Somerford Grange for the remainder of his life. As with many ecclesiastical settlements across the country, the conventual buildings of the priory were pulled down and the members of the monastic order were dispersed. The original intention was to pull down the church as part of the dissolution, but the pleas of the townspeople, supported by Draper, led to the church being granted with its churchyard to the people and churchwardens of Christchurch for use in perpetuity. This held sway with Henry, as Draper had been appointed as one of the king's personal chaplains in the 1530s, and the prior knew how to put forward a convincing argument, which he had done in a letter in 1538. Though this plea failed

to save the convent, the church was to remain with the townspeople. The official grant was duly given by Charter on 23rd October 1540 and was reconfirmed on 12th February 1612 by James I (b.1566 – d.1625). With the grant, a corporation called ‘The Sixteen’ was formed to oversee and be responsible for the secular and spiritual affairs of the parish, with the vicar and churchwardens as principal officers.

- 3.9.4 At the time of the Dissolution, seven bells were recorded, with two being removed when the priory became parochial in 1540.
- 3.9.5 Edward IV (b.1537 – d.1553) continued and expanded the reformation started by his father. This is when the aisle and transept altars were probably removed and the damage to the chantry chapels and reredos inflicted.
- 3.9.6 Priors of the 16th century; John Draper I, 1477-1502; William Eyre, 1503-20; John Draper II, 1521-39.

3.10 17th to 18th Century

- 3.10.1 Accounts demonstrate piecemeal expenditure on maintenance from the 17th to 19th centuries. Externally, the churchyard to the north of the church continued to operate as a cemetery for the town.
- 3.10.2 The 17th and 18th centuries added box pews to the transepts and the east end of the nave, which faced a pulpit centred at the east end of the nave, behind which a large nave screen partitions this from the crossing.
- 3.10.3 During the English Civil War (1642-1651), the castle was held by the Parliamentarians, who successfully resisted Royalist attack. The strength of the castle, then feared by Cromwell (b.1599 – d.1658), was slighted in 1652.
- 3.10.4 The five bells that had survived the dissolution, were converted to six in 1633 and in 1725, the belfry had to be rebuilt owing to decay, with two new bells being added to the frame by Abel Rudhall (b.1714 – d.1760) of Gloucester in 1755.
- 3.10.5 In the 1760s, Gustavus Brander had acquired the former precincts of the priory and donated a new organ to the church in the 1780s, where it was installed to the nave screen.
- 3.10.6 In 1763 or 1775, Priory House was built across the eastern cloisters and monks cemetery, within the priory precinct. The house was probably built for Gustavus Brander FRS (b.1720 – d.1787), a wealthy merchant, former Governor of the Bank of England, and amateur palaeontologist and naturalist, though this is not certain. Brander kept records of the foundations, walls and floors exposed during construction, which he then reported to the Society of Antiquaries in 1778.

3.11 19th Century

- 3.11.1 The 19th century saw sustained programmes of work at the church, though nothing on the scale as seen in the pre-Reformation era.
- 3.11.2 Unused areas of the church were blocked off and windows, which had survived the Reformation, were replaced in plain diamond-shaped quarries, or blocked with masonry.
- 3.11.3 In 1810, the Reverend William Bingley (b.1774 – d.1823) arrived at Christchurch and understanding the importance of the church, instigated a programme of restoration and repair, which would last the rest of the century, and, arguably, it is still ongoing today. Bingley's successors continued this work, with repairs to the masonry elevations, roofs, windows, and internal decorative detail, with substantial programmes in 1817-18, 1820, 1827-30, 1834, 1838, 1859, 1883-5 and 1890. Many of the early and mid-century programmes of work were awarded to female contractors, including Susanna Belbin, Elizabeth Long & Sons, and Mary Holloway.
- 3.11.4 As the congregation continued to expand, the Incorporated Church Building Society sought funding in 1820 for the construction of new pews to fill the nave.
- 3.11.5 The earliest addition to Priory House appears to have been complete by 1843, which seems to have doubled its original size, and reached its present size by 1871.
- 3.11.6 By 1844, burials within the church were ceased owing to an increasing number having been squeezed into the space over the past 100 years.
- 3.11.7 Between 1859 and 1888, gas lights and coke burning stoves were installed, which are believed to have caused the deterioration of some decorative details within the church.
- 3.11.8 The eight bells in the tower were rehung into a ten-bell frame in 1885 by John Taylor & Co but were not augmented.

3.12 20th Century

- 3.12.1 The early-20th century saw the most substantial and sustained campaigns of conservation works to the priory. These begun in 1906 with deep trenches to carry pipework for a new heating system, which was not realised at the time.
- 3.12.2 Internally, floor levels were reduced in all areas in 1908, except in the Quire. Trial excavations revealed medieval floors beneath the Lady Chapel and possible Saxon foundations.
- 3.12.3 In 1909, the south and north nave aisle were underpinned to a depth of almost 2 metres. Trenches were also cut around the priory to improve the drainage of the site and stop movement of the ancient walls. Further structural repairs followed in 1910, 1924-6 and 1930.
- 3.12.4 Decorative repairs were made to both reredos screens, the Quire roof bosses, the Lady Chapel ceiling lanterns, and the sepulchral monuments, with the replacement of window, buttress,

parapets, and pinnacle fabric. These took place over several programmes of work in 1929, 1930, 1934, 1936, 1957 and 1959-61.

- 3.12.5 In 1934, Priory House was purchased by public subscription, and has since been held by the *Priory House Trust* for public benefit. It was first rented as a single tenanted house to help raise funds for the Priory, before being converted during World War 2 to provide 13 flats. Since the 1980s, it has been used as a café, offices, meeting rooms and visitor centre.
- 3.12.6 In 1985, Priory House was linked to the Priory Church by the current glazed link passage.

4 DESCRIPTION

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 This aim of this section is to provide a general descriptive account the late-medieval roof structure and its decorative details.

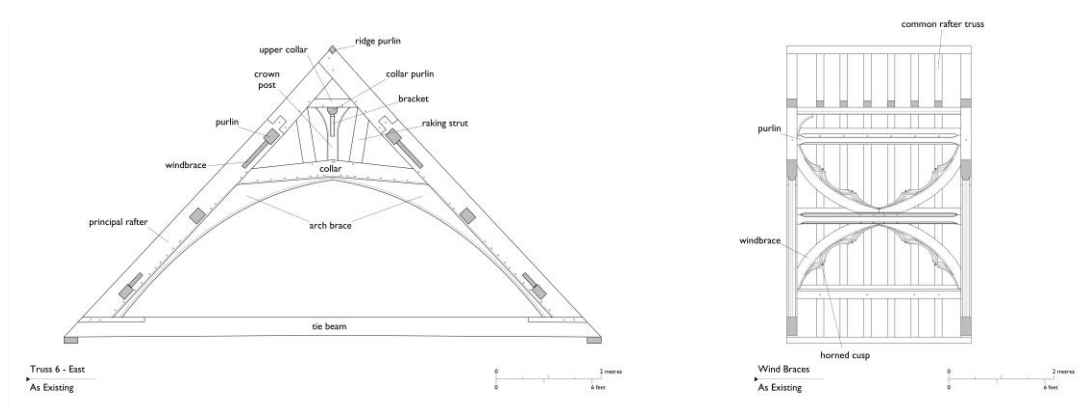


Fig. 4 – Typical truss and bay detail.

4.2 Roof Structure

4.2.1 The roof is formed of ten bays divided by eleven trusses, extends to the full length of the nave and is of exceptional quality.

4.2.2 The trusses are arch-brace in form, with a bracketed crown-post. The arch-braces are decorated with an ovolo moulding, except for T1 and T2, which have roll mouldings separated by a small keel or soffit. The principal rafters carry a plain chamfer from their base to the cranked (bent) collar, onto which the chamfer is then carried. From the collar, a crown-post rises to support a collar purlin on the post and two brackets. The collar purlin passes under an upper collar of each truss and the collars of the common rafter trusses. Raking struts flank the crown-post, rising from the collar to the soffits of the principal rafters. At their apex, the trusses carry a ridge purlin.

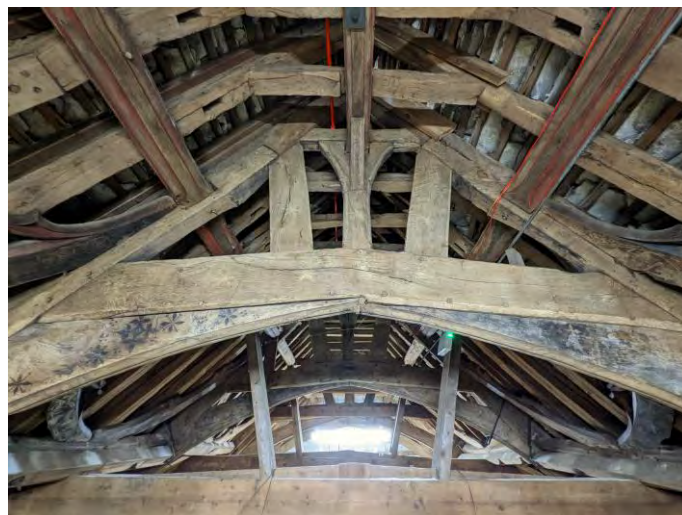


Fig. 5 – Typical truss detail, above collar.

- 4.2.3 The tie-beams were added, possibly within a century of its construction, to stop the roof from spreading. These replaced the cut a, stub-tie, sole or inner wall plate, with evidence for these surviving at several trusses.



Fig. 6 – Chamfer and stop details

- 4.2.4 The trusses support three rungs of threaded purlins (passing through the principal rafters) to the north and south pitches. The purlins are decorated with three different mouldings and stops; plain chamfer with lamb's tongue stop (bottom); a double roll-moulding and keel with run-out stop (middle); and ovolo moulding with run-out stop (top).



Fig. 7 – Typical wind brace detail.

- 4.2.5 Windbraces occur in pairs in all bays and at two heights: from the middle purlin up to the top and morticed into the principal rafter, and from the middle down to the bottom and again morticed into the principal. Each brace is curved, pierced, and have two hollow horned-cusps, and are set against each other in the bays to form cinquefoils.
- 4.2.6 The purlins support six common rafter trusses over each bay, the collars of which are supported by the collar purlin. A significant number of the rafters are reused, which is made apparent by the empty mortices that do not correspond to the current roof structure. The common rafter trusses

carry baton and the stone tiles external finish.

- 4.2.7 Later repairs and strengthening have been added to the roof structure in both oak, pine, and iron, but has left the medieval roof *in situ*.

5 UNDERSTANDING THE ROOF

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 This aim of this section is to provide a preliminary interpretation of the roof structure and its development. This is not a final interpretation and will be subject to change at subsequent stages.

5.1.2 The roof can be understood in three distinct phases:

- ❖ **Phase I** – Construction – 15th Century
- ❖ **Phase II** – Strengthening – Late-15th to Early 16th Century
- ❖ **Phase III** – Strengthening and Repair – 18th, 19th, and 20th Century

5.2 Phase I – Construction – 15th Century

5.2.1 Unfortunately, there are no readily available written records that provide a date for the construction date of the nave roof, through published or unpublished research or referenced in the Christchurch Cartulary.

5.2.2 The first phase of the nave roof, indicated by its decorative and carpentry detail, appears to be 15th century in date and remains largely complete. During this period, the roof was conceived with an elegant arched-braced truss design, with crown post, decoratively chamfered purlins, and highly decorative cusped windbraces. Initially, the arch-bracing was unimpeded by the later addition of the tie-beams and would have created a greater sense of height to the nave. The tie-beams replaced an earlier sole or inner wall plate, onto which the principal rafters were once jointed.

5.2.3 It has been difficult to find direct comparisons for the roof with other churches in the region. However, the Abbots Hall at Sherborne Priory has a near identical roof, which are shown in drawings from the American Architect and Building News, 31st August 1883. The only discernible different in the drawn plans is the apex block over the collar purlin, rather than a collar. The wind braces appear to be identical to those seen at Christchurch. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England also records this detail, though only in text. This requires further investigation, but if these are of the same construction, it suggest the same team of carpenters may be responsible for both.

5.2.4 The Priory appears to have reused an earlier roof to fabricate the common rafter trusses. This is made apparent by the large numbers of rafter with empty mortices and peg holes that have been cleaved in two when some larger timbers were split for reuse.

5.3 Phase II – Strengthening – Late-15th – Early-16th Century

- 5.3.1 Phase II is a relatively minor phase of works, but significant to the continued survival of the roof, and appears to have come less than a century after the roof was completed. This replaced the cut tie-beams with full tie-beams spanning the full width of the nave. The work is made evident by the survival in several trusses of the original cut tie-beams, which were neatly scarfed into the new ties.
- 5.3.2 The new tie-beams were ornamented with plain chamfers and stepped hollow-stops, and typical for the period.
- 5.3.3 The work was probably undertaken to strengthen the roof after the partial failure and deflection of a number of the principal rafters caused by the weight of the stone tile roof.

5.4 Phase III – Strengthening and Repair – 18th, 19th, and 20th Century

- 5.4.1 After the works to strengthen the roof of Phase II, there are no clear signs of work until 1749, when repairs were undertaken the tie-beam of Truss 6. This was followed by subsequent work in 1784, 1819 and 1823, all of which are marked in pencil.
- 5.4.2 Shipping marking on one of the 1819 repairs demonstrate that the pine used to reinforce the purlins was imported from the Baltic region.
- 5.4.3 The most recent addition to the roof was the addition of the intermediate trusses, to support the centre of the purlins.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

6.1 General

- 6.1.1 Overall, this assessment has shown that most of the medieval roof structure survives *in situ* over the nave of the priory church, with later strengthening and repairs made to this without removal of fabric. The structure of the roof is of exceptionally high quality, with superior craftsmanship and ability demonstrated in its fabrication and decorative detail. The scale and detail of the roof helps to reveal the wealth of the priory during the late-medieval period.
- 6.1.2 The difficulty in finding comparative church roofs helps to identify a potential uniqueness amongst the churches of Dorset, and further afield. However, its striking similarity to the Abbots Hall at Sherborne Abbey, and the use of decoration seen in regional domestic architecture from the early-14th to the late-15th century, suggests that this is a roof copied from a domestic setting. When considering the closeness in design and detail to that of the Abbots Hall, it could be suggested that the same team of carpenters, or at least a master carpenter, were potentially responsible for both sites. Further study has the potential to improve our understanding the movement of crafts people during the medieval period, or the transfer of ideas and patterns between different groups of owners and tradesmen.
- 6.1.3 The main roof structure (trusses, purlins, and braces) was fabricated of newly felled oak, and likely came from a local managed or semi-managed forest. The common rafter trusses were, in the most part, made of reused timber, and are likely to have been reused from the roof that the surviving scheme replaced. This is not uncommon practice during the medieval period, but to see such extensive reuse of what appears to be an earlier scheme, could provide important insights into the development of the medieval ecclesiastical roof.
- 6.1.4 The survival of the roof with its painted scheme is both an extraordinary and exceptional survival in England, in terms of quality and detail of the carpentry, and the extent and quality of the painted scheme. The survival deserves to be better known and appreciated in the public, professional and academic spheres.
- 6.1.5 For the next step in this programme of investigation, it is recommended that a full and detailed record should be made of the roof, and of its decorative paintwork, which should be subject to full paint analysis to help reveal its original nature and vibrancy. It is also recommended that a programme of dendrochronological dating should be implemented to determine the date, or dates, for the roof's construction and phasing.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Archaeological Recording

7.1.1 Prior to and during any major programme of works a full programme of recording should be implemented to fully survey, interpret, and understand the roof structure more fully. This should include the detailed recording of each individual truss for its surviving paint, and details such as carpenters and construction marks.

7.2 Paint Analysis

7.2.1 Prior to any major programme of works a full programme of paint analysis and recording should be implemented to assess, interpret, and understand the painted scheme.

7.3 Dendrochronology

7.3.1 A programme of dendrochronological dating should be built into a larger programme of research and investigation to establish a date, or range of dates, for the roof construction.

7.3.2 As part of this project, a provisional assessment of the timbers was made, which showed the material to be suitable for sampling and dating.

7.4 Publication

7.4.1 The results of a larger project should be published in *Church Archaeology*, the journal of the Society for Church Archaeology, and in *The Antiquaries Journal*, the journal of the Society of Antiquaries.

7.4.2 More general readership should also be considered, with submissions made to *British Archaeology*, and *Current Archaeology* magazines.

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APPENDIX I

Plans

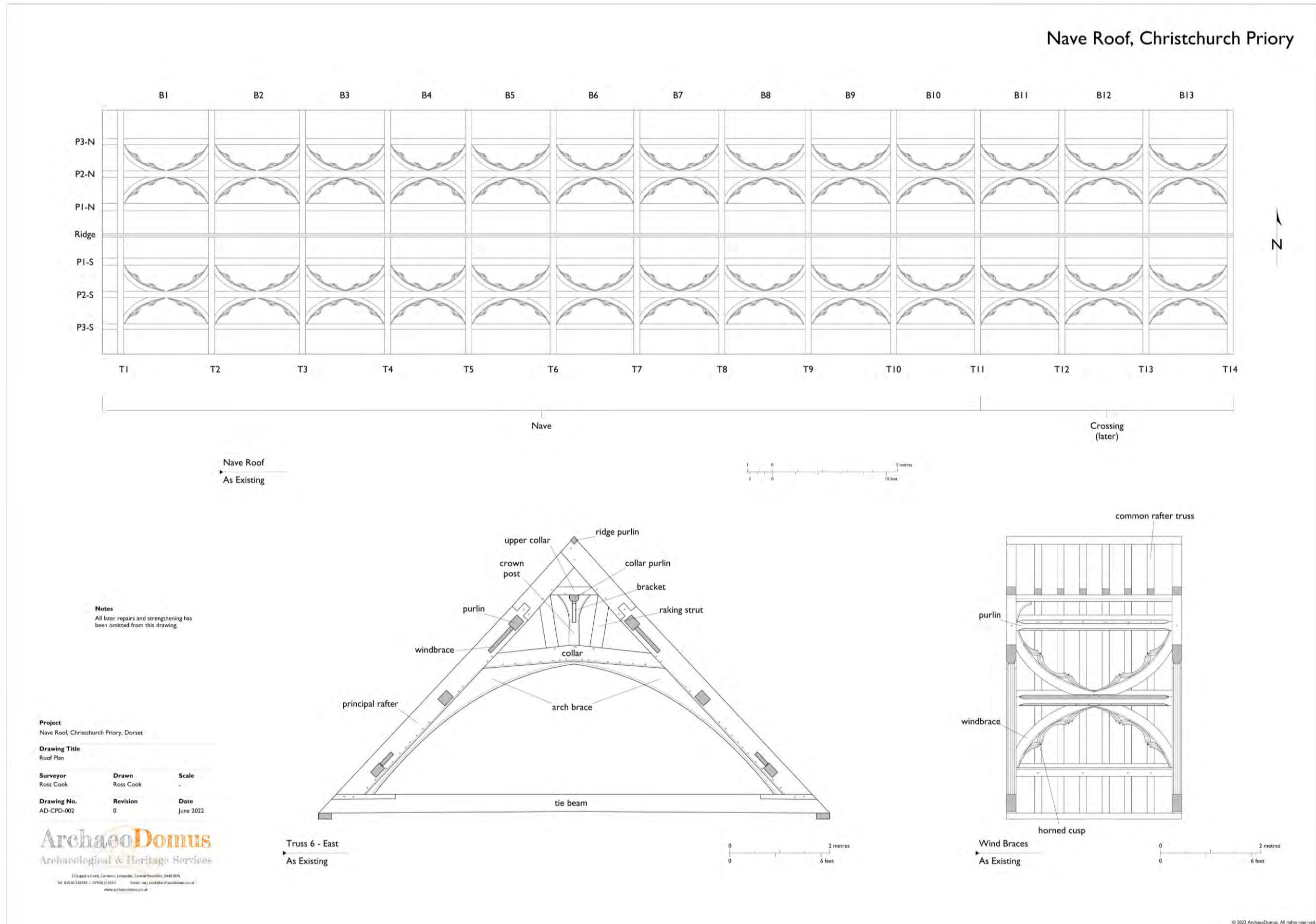


Fig 8 – Nave Roof Plan and Sections

APPENDIX II

Photographic Archive



Plate 1 – Bay 1 – South – Rotated 90° anticlockwise



Plate 2 – Truss 1 – South



Plate 3 – Truss 1 – Mid



Plate 4 – Truss 1 – North



Plate 5 – Truss 1 – Arch-brace moulding – Rotated 90° anticlockwise



Plate 6 – Truss 2 – North – Tie-beam chamfer and stop



AD-CPD-002_PA_007

Plate 7 – Bay 7 – South



AD-CPD-002_PA_008

Plate 8 – Truss 8 – North



Plate 9 – Truss 8 – Mid



Plate 10 – Truss 8 – South



Plate 11 – Truss 8 – Painted Arch-brace – North



Plate 12 – Truss 8 – Painted Arch-brace – South



Plate 13 – Truss 8 – Arch-brace ovolo moulding – Rotated 90° anticlockwise



Plate 14 – Truss 2 – South – Alterations to original sole plate



Plate 15 – Truss 8 – North – Remains of original sole plate



Plate 16 – General detail – Lower purlin



Plate 17 – General detail – upper purlin



Plate 18 – General detail – Middle purlin



Plate 19 – Bay 4 – North – Baltic shipping marks



Plate 20 – Truss 9 – 1749 repair to tie-beam



Plate 21 – Bay 4 – 1819 strengthening to purlin



Plate 22 – Bay 13 – 1784 strengthening to purlin

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**Christchurch Priory Dorset
Preliminary Inspection of the Painted Nave Roof**

Andrea Kirkham

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Christchurch Priory Dorset



Preliminary Inspection of the Painted Nave Roof

August 2022

Christchurch Priory, Dorset

Preliminary Inspection of the Painted Nave Roof

CONTENTS

- 1: Introduction and Scope
- 2: General Context and Significance
- 3: Preliminary Description of the Scheme
- 4: Preliminary Comments on the Condition
- 5: Recommendations

Plates

1: INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

The late medieval painted roof at Christchurch Priory is one of the most spectacular survivals in England. Despite extensive areas of surviving medieval paint, this is one of the least well known painted roof schemes. When first painted, it must have been spectacular, yet many of the details would hardly have been visible from ground level. When paint analysis can be carried out (in the detailed second phase) of investigation, there will be a fuller picture of the way the scheme was articulated through its use of colour and materials.

This preliminary inspection was carried out over two days and aims to provide outline information on the design and condition of the painted scheme from the walkway. It is not intended as a detailed condition survey which would require scaffold access to all the surfaces.

The preliminary paint assessment was carried out 18th-19th May 2022. Please note that images used in plates 1-24 are indicative and will be located and orientated in the full report.

The roof structure has been described by Ross Cook. Further images can be found in his report.

2: GENERAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

- 2.1: When E T Long discussed East Anglian painted roofs in 1929, he wrote: 'It seems to have been an almost invariable rule that the roofs of medieval churches, in part at any rate, should be decorated in colour.'¹
- 2.2: The surviving number of painted roofs is likely to be a small percentage of the original numbers.² Other roofs (or parts of) have been repainted.
- 2.3: Some roofs were probably never painted while others were partially painted, such as the ceiling at the eastern end of the nave. Recent investigation on the south aisle roof at St Gregory's Church, Norwich, for example, showed that only the eastern bays were painted.
- 2.4: Many roofs have been stripped and without close access it is not possible to know whether tell-tale traces of paint survive in splits and grain of the timber. James Davidson, 'Church Notes on Devon' (1826-49), for example, described and recorded painted roofs at Ilsington, Haberton and Buckland Monachorum (all Devon) which are now seen stripped.³
- 2.4: One of the problems is that surviving painted roofs in parish churches are not well catalogued.⁴ Painted roof schemes are rarely examined in any detail (because of access issues) with the exception of a few recent examples that have been investigated as part of structural repair programmes. Cawston St Agnes, Norfolk (Figures 1-3) illustrates the point. The roof is one of the finest of its type in East Anglia and unusual for its standing figures. Few people realised the extent and quality of the original late medieval polychromy on the figures until recent repair work. Interestingly, antiquarian and Faculty material for Cawston does not reference the paint either, only the structure is valued.
- 2.5: The painted roof at Christchurch Priory seems to have fallen into a similar vacuum as Cawston St Agnes. Part of the problem is visibility which must always have been an issue because of the height of the nave. Now, of course, the Victorian vault obscures the painted areas. On the positive side, the walkway provides closer access than would have been possible before the C19th. Whatever the reasons, the painted roof at Christchurch Priory is hardly known, yet it is one of the most magnificent survivals in England. It most certainly deserves to be more widely known.

¹ E T Long, Painted Roofs in East Anglian Churches, *Burlington Magazine*, 1929, p. 75

² See <https://www.angelroofs.net/map> for a photo-gallery of angel roofs in East Anglia.

³ Cited by Andrews, 'Devon', pp. 83-84.

⁴ Paint is rarely the focus, research tends to dwell on the structure and 3D imagery: S Cassell, *Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs* (UEA Doctoral Thesis, 2018); S Andrews, *Late Medieval Roof Bosses in the Churches of Devon* (University of Plymouth, Doctoral Thesis, 2011), see especially, pp. 83-90.

- 2.6: At present, the evidence seems to indicate that the Christchurch roof was painted from construction. The dating can be confirmed as part of the detailed survey.



Figures 1-3

Cawston St Agnes, Norfolk. Top, view of the nave roof towards the east end. Below, details of one of the red/green angels. The detailed inspection and paint analysis of the nave roof at Cawston St Agnes showed a distinct procession of colour and iconography towards the rood group (now surviving as negative images) and the screen below. (All photos © A Kirkham 2019)



Figure 4: St John the Baptist, Bere Regis, Dorset. Perhaps one of the most wellknown Dorset roofs but restored (Image <https://www.britainexpress.com/attractions.htm?attraction=4556>)



Figure 5: St Peter and St Paul, Bardwell, Suffolk. The angel is repainted but the trailing vine on the rafters is original, c.1421. (Image <https://www.johnstebbingarchitects.co.uk/single-post/2020/01/14/bardwell-church-hammer-beam-roof-dating-from-1421-isa-getting-a-closer-look-during-work>)



Figures 6 & 7
Details from Astwood Court, Redditch, Worcestershire. (images, FWB Charles Archive, respectively: CA_BA12857-64-1_d14; CA_BA12857-64-1_d3)

3: PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHEME

- 3.1: The iconography and colour use at Christchurch could not be more different compared to Cawston St Agnes, Norfolk. Preliminary comments on the way colour is used are made here and will be discussed in detail when paint analysis is available. Originally, the colour would have been richer and more vibrant than it now appears. The scheme now appears to be predominantly black and red but the colour range is deceptive through pigment alteration and paint loss.
- 3.2: At present, it is not clear how much of the Christchurch nave roof was painted and how much was intentionally unpainted. An often forgotten point is that new oak would be light golden in appearance. If selected colouring were used then it would stand out against the light oak. The effects would be very striking.
- 3.3: The current appearance of side purlins, for example, suggests that the mouldings are picked out in bright red with some evidence for black surviving on the mid purlin (plate 14), perhaps contrasting with unpainted areas. This may prove to be a false impression based on the limited access available for this preliminary inspection. A close detailed investigation might, for instance, show traces of colour trapped in the grain of the timber. Elsewhere, paint has almost certainly been removed while other areas have been lost through decay and deterioration mechanisms (for example, plate 23). The inner faces of the principal rafters and undersides of the collars, for example, initially appear to be unpainted but this is clearly not the case with black visible in a badly abraded state (plates 13, 23). Similarly, the moulding on the underside of the truss arch braces were painted but very little survives. Many of the common rafters are reused and appear not to be polychromed but again, close access is required.
- 3.4: Each bay has two pairs of wind braces, at different heights. The background colour on each face of each brace is alternating red and black. The windbrace cusping is counter-colour to the brace. So, a black brace has red cusping and vice-versa (plates 1-5). All the wind braces have a trailing vine scroll in contrasting colours. Where the colour survives, the effects are dramatic (plate 2). Losses have occurred and plates 2-6 selected details of vine scroll decoration indicate differential patterns of loss. Much of the green vine seen against the red background, for instance, has been lost or is discoloured (plates 5-6).
- 3.5: Each archbrace is painted on both sides with a range of figurative and decorative motifs. Alternating colour continues on the archbraces. The figurative subjects include a George and the Dragon (one figure designed to fit each brace, plates 11-12) and Merfolk (plates 9-10). The sun and moon appear on other braces, along with a rich and inventive set of decorative patterns that fill the braces. (Two examples are shown in plates 7-8). These will all be described and catalogued in detail in phase two. The collars, crownpost and raking struts were decorated with an equally inventive range of motifs (some perhaps stencilled) that do not survive well (plates 15, 21).

- 3.6: The iconography will be discussed in more detail in stage two. Vines, for instance, are design motifs that are infinitely adaptable across media (paint, carved timber, decorative plasterwork) and are used to great effect at Christchurch on the wind braces. Vines occur across a wide range of contexts with various meanings appropriate for the context (for instance, the meaning is different in an inn to a church). Vines are symbolic of Christ and the Christian Faith, especially Christ's parable of the vine (John 15: 1-17).⁵ An example of vine scrolls in an ecclesiastical context include the nave roof of St Peter and St Paul, Bardwell, Suffolk where the vine scroll is against a yellow background (Figure 5).⁶ A close design parallel is seen in a c.1500 timber frame domestic house, Astwood Court, Redditch, Worcestershire (Figures 6-7).

4: PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ON THE CONDITION

- 4.1: The roof structure has been repaired/strengthened and the main phases are described by Ross Cook.
- 4.2: At present, there is no information available to indicate that the painted scheme has had any conservation treatments.
- 4.3: Any evidence of surface coatings (original or applied) will be assessed when close access and analysis is possible. The slight yellowness seen on some details (especially on whites) may suggest a surface coating which can be confirmed once analysis is carried out.
- 4.4: There is no obvious evidence from the walkway that the paint layer is flaking or has lost its adhesion. The condition of the paint layer will be confirmed once access available.
- 4.5: There is no evidence at present, for residues of later overpaint which might have been applied during one of the repair phases. Areas of thinned and abraded paint suggest that cleaning has been carried out at some point.
- 4.6: There is evidence of timber decay and insect damage (plates 23-24).
- 4.7: Splits and damages in the timber have been repaired in the past, and these have now discoloured to such an extent that they are visually intrusive (There are numerous areas, selected examples can be seen in plates 19-20, 22).
- 4.8: Dust and debris rests on horizontal surfaces. (Examples are shown in plates 6, 19)

⁵ Hall's Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art (Bungay, 1974), p. 142 & 322.

⁶ The vine scroll is original although some areas, such as the angel have been repainted.

5: RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Detailed Report:* This is a spectacular medieval painted roof that deserves to be better known. A detailed survey/report is required that will catalogue and photograph all painted surfaces, particularly important given the proposed nave roof repairs.
- *Paint analysis:* Paint analysis is essential, to provide information on the materials used and the stratigraphy. Organic analysis may be carried out if necessary. A detailed close inspection of all surfaces should resolve the way colour was used.
- *Mitigation:* Mitigation during buildings work and repairs will be essential. Recommendations will be made in the final report.

Dr Andrea Kirkham ACR, FSA
14th August 2022

**Plate 1**

Top: example, windbraces with alternating background colour

Plate 2

Bottom: example, detail of a windbrace and counter-colour cusping. Note the colour of the foliage and compare with plates 3&4

(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)



Plate 3

Top: example, windbrace with most of the black background lost and the vine trail surviving as a negative image (ie the colour on top has been lost leaving only the black background)

Plate 4

Bottom: example, windbrace with the background colour loss, some leaves and the outline of the vine stem survive as negative images
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 5**

Top: example, windbrace with a reddish background and remnants of foliage colour. Note black cusping.

Plate 6

Bottom: example, windbrace with green foliage surviving, the rest mostly lost. Note also dust and debris on the purlin.

(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 7**

Top: example, archbrace, there is a wide and inventive range of decorative motifs used on the braces. Two examples are shown here

Plate 8

Bottom: example, archbrace, with stylised floral motifs
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)



Plate 9

Top: example, archbrace with merperson, paired with the opposite archbrace below

Plate 10

Bottom: example, archbrace with merperson
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)



Plate 11

Top: archbrace detail, with a dragon, that is, George and the Dragon (truss 8, south)

Plate 12

Bottom: archbrace detail, showing a figure probably George (truss 8, north)

(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 13**

Top: general detail, inner face of a principal rafter with black paint. The red electrical wiring runs along the top of the purlin

Plate 14

Bottom: general detail, middle purlin with red mouldings and black to create shadow
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 15**

Top: example, showing differential patterns of loss. The paint survives in a variable state from one motif (?stenciled) to another

Plate 16

Bottom: example detail, brace with abraded paint
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 17**

Top: example, archbrace, with a moon motif, disfigured by a discoloured repair

Plate 18

Bottom: example, collar showing the remains of a petalled floral motif, disfigured by discoloured repairs. Note also, insect damage
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 19**

Top: example, windbrace with discoloured split repair. Note also dust and debris on the purlins. Dust and debris is visible on the purlin

Plate 20

Bottom: example, windbrace with discoloured split repair
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 21**

Top: example, with star motifs on the collar, raking struts and crownpost

Plate 22

Bottom: example merfolk truss with discoloured repairs that are now visually disturbing. Compare with plate 21 above which has not been repaired

(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)

**Plate 23**

Top: example showing timber decay with the collar badly affected. Note also the richness of the red where it survives on the upper side purlins

Plate 24

Bottom: detail of plate 23 showing insect damage and frass
(All photos © A Kirkham 2022)