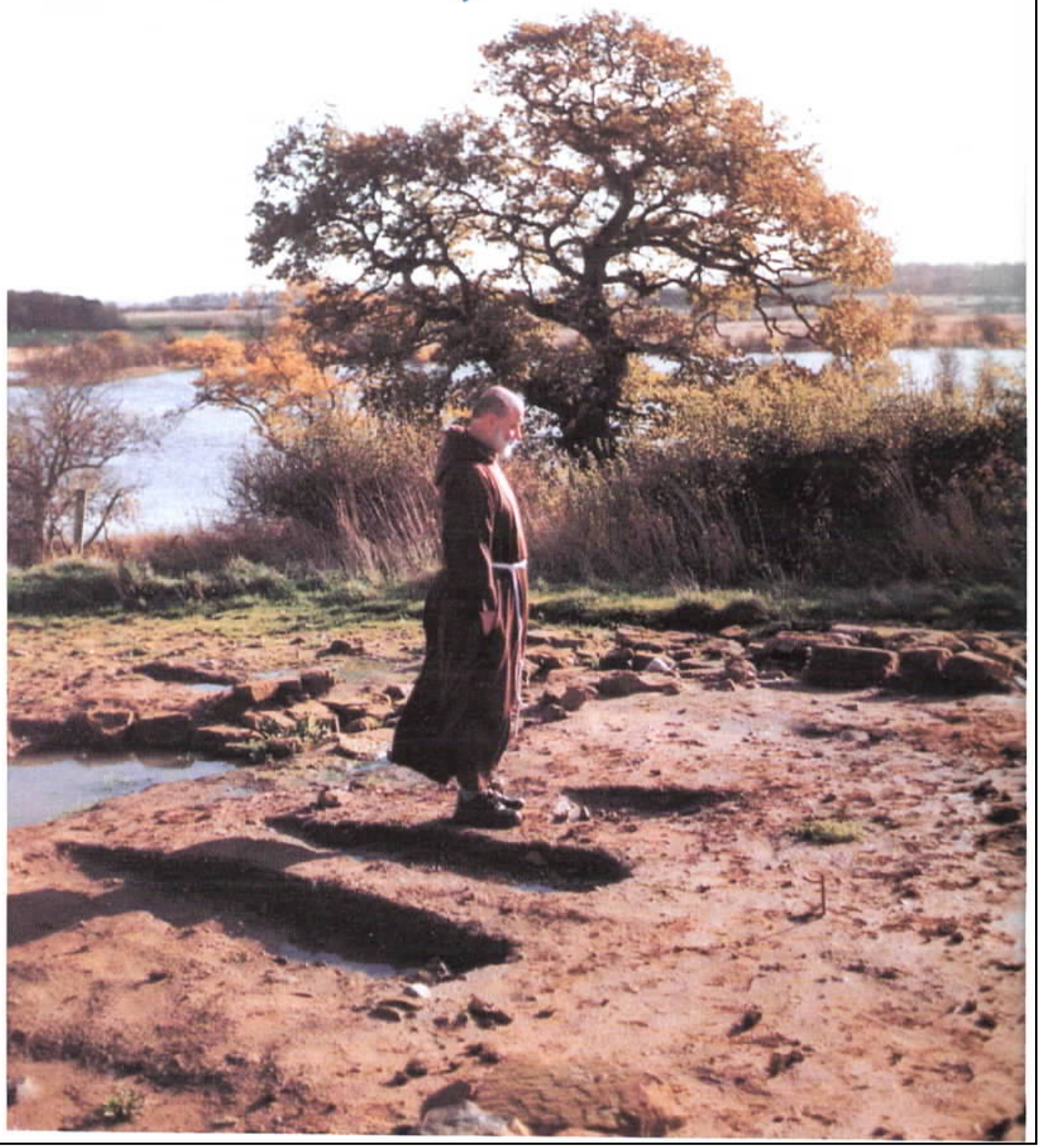
Poulton: the search for a lost Cistercian Abbey



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The late twelfth–century Cistercian monastery at Valle Crucis, about 15 miles south–west of Poulton, just inside north Wales. The origins of famous Cistercian sites are often obscure due to much later rebuilding.

The Cistercians were the great reforming monks of the twelfth century. Some of our finest ruined abbeys were built by the order - like Fountains and Rievaulx in Yorkshire. But there were once many more Cistercian houses than the few we can see today. Most of the original sites are now close to invisible, the monastic walls either incorporated into later buildings or quarried away until nothing survives above ground. In some cases even the locations of former structures have been lost. Also, on the famous sites, because there was massive rebuilding in the high Middle Ages, we know next to nothing about the early years.

The Poulton Research Project in Cheshire is trying to fill in some of the gaps. Poulton Abbey was one of four Cistercian foundations among the 22 religious houses known in the county in medieval times. It lay beside the River Dee just south of Chester in an expanse of low-lying grassland prone to flooding - marginal land, and probably, before the monks arrived and set about reclamation, just the sort of wild and desolate place the Cistercians sought for their monasteries. But it was not occupied by the monks for long. After little more than 50 years, perhaps because of Welsh raiding, they moved elsewhere - which means that Poulton offers archaeologists a chance to look at the origins of Cistercian monasticism and learn what the more famous sites may have been like at the outset. Since 1995, therefore, the site has been the focus of a major research project headed by Mike Emery. Here we report on the discoveries made so far.

Source:
Mike Emery
Director of the Poulton Research Project

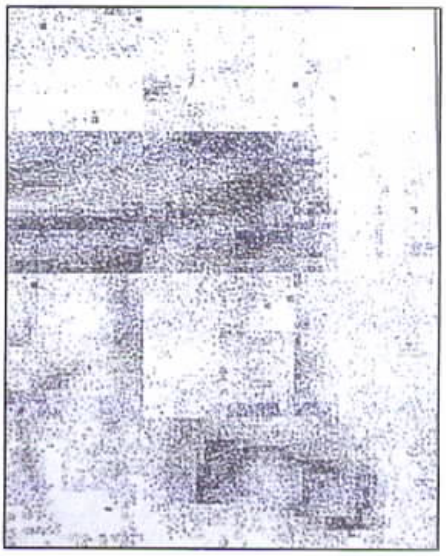
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The Cistercians were founded at Citeaux in Burgundy in 1098 as a reaction against the laxity of the existing 'black-robed' orders. Theirs was a 'back to basics' movement which aimed at restoring the austerity, diligence and intense piety advocated in the original teachings of St Benedict. The Cistercians had appeared at the right time. Western Europe was at the beginning of its long medieval boom, which lasted through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and feudal lords had wealth to spare to endow monasteries, glorify their names, and, they hoped, save their souls. It was also a time of growing Christian fervour - the Crusades were just beginning - and the apparent holiness of the Cistercian 'new monks' made them seem more deserving than the worldly Cluniacs, not least to the Normans, who were now the rulers of England.

Anglo-Saxon monasteries had usually been in towns or on sites which favoured urban growth. But during the twelfth-century monastic revival under the Norman kings, monasteries appeared in the countryside, often, in keeping with the ideal of isolation from the world, at remote and desolate spots. The first Cistercian house in England was founded at Waverley in Surrey in 1128, but many others followed, including, in Cheshire, Combermere (1133), Poulton (1147 or 1153), Stanlow (1178), and Vale Royal (1277).

Poulton was unusual in being very short-lived: medieval documents show that it lasted only until 1214, when the monastery was moved to Dieulacres in Staffordshire. The original location was then converted into a grange - a monastic estate worked by lay brothers (or *conversi*). This does not mean that Poulton/Dieulacres was a minor house.

An electrical resistivity plot of the site before excavation began. The chapel appears clearly at the bottom. Above it, though less clear, there may be evidence for the medieval grange buildings. (Area shown is 80 by 60m in extent.)



The documents show it to have been well endowed and a power within Cheshire for some three hundred years. However, the exact location of the monastic buildings at Poulton was long forgotten. The only clue was that a seventeenth-century estate map recorded the existence of a lost chapel. Was this the last upstanding survival of what had once been a sprawling monastic complex? Here at least was a possible starting-point, and, since the site was under grass and potentially accessible, it was chosen as the initial focus of a new research and training dig in 1995.

Although it started as a joint Chester Archaeology/Liverpool University project, the funding was insufficient, and Mike Emery decided to go independent. Though helped a little by Hollywood patronage - his two brothers are film-stars Ralph and Joseph Fiennes (*Schindler's List, The English Patient, Shakespeare in Love*) - fund-raising remains a problem and money is the main constraint on time in the field. Annual seasons vary from four to 14 weeks and the numbers on site from 15 to 50.

The first part of the project centred on the chapel site and was completed last year. The excavators found three main phases. The chapel started as a tiny single-cell structure, which, after about 50 years, was rebuilt on a somewhat larger scale, when it measured 9 x 4m. The date appears to have been twelfth century - making it Cistercian - and it was very plain: rammed earth for a floor, undecorated walls, a stone slab for an altar. Clearly, this was no abbey church. Perhaps it was

The flood-plain of the River Dee immediately south of the chapel at Poulton. In the early twelfth century, before Cistercian reclamation, the area was probably a waterlogged wilderness.

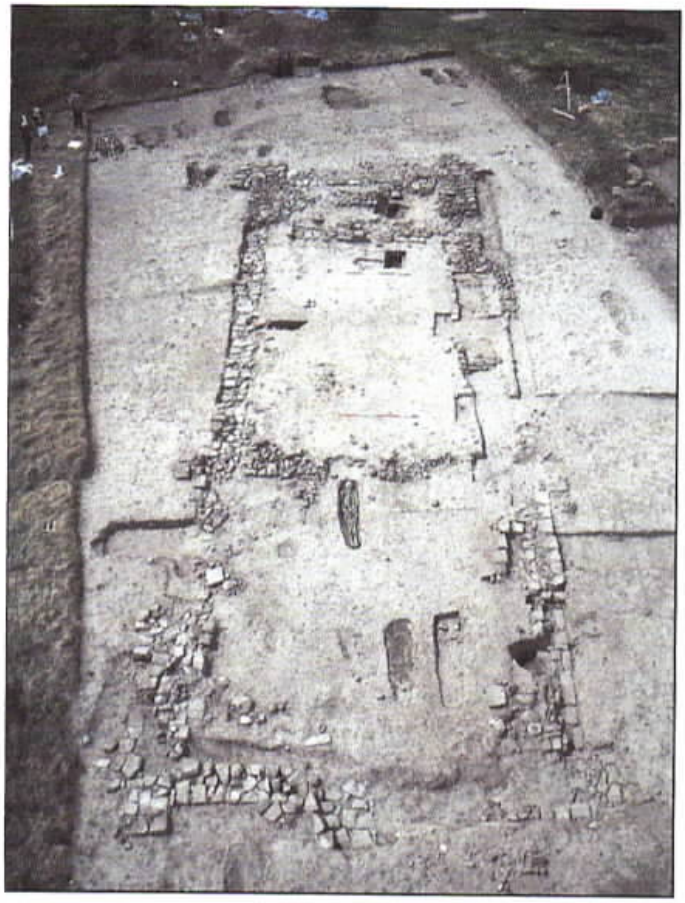


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used while the main buildings were going up; later it may have served as a visitors' chapel outside the main precinct - Cistercian practice was to restrict worship in the abbey church itself to monks and lay brothers.

Why did the Cistercians choose Poulton? As well as being marginal land in the twelfth century, it may have had sacred associations. Two evaluation trenches were dug last year on a site about 50m from the chapel where geophysics had revealed a buried ring-ditch. This turned out to be Bronze Age, and from the small areas of ditch examined came some cremated human bone and two deliberately placed horses' skulls. Perhaps this was evidence for ritual practice on the site two thousand years before the Cistercians. The geophysics also indicated a major Roman structure, and finds of coins, goblet and window glass, decorated Samian, and plenty of building material point towards something high-status. A rural temple complex?

Still more intriguing is a possible link with Arthurian legend. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a famous medieval romance written by an unknown fourteenth-century author. Its dialect places it in Cheshire and Staffordshire, and its many references are to places here and in north Wales. The story goes that on Christmas Day a green knight rode into Arthur's great hall and issued a challenge: if any knight dared to cut off his head, the assailant would be obliged to offer himself to have his own head cut off in a year's time. Sir Gawain accepted the challenge, and, when the Green Knight picked up his severed head and departed, was left honour-bound - in the chivalric way of things - to journey to the Green Chapel to receive the return blow in a year's time.



An aerial view of the chapel excavation looking west.

Poulton director Mike Emery is part of the Fiennes family. Here the real life archaeologist (with brush) is visited by his brother and big screen archaeologist Ralph Fiennes (with trowel). Also visiting are Joseph Fiennes (with spade) and film director sister Sophie Fiennes (with mattock).



During his quest for the Green Chapel - unfortunately the Green Knight had left no directions - Sir Gawain travelled widely. And in the poem's geography are clues to a possible link with Poulton and the Cistercians. Sir Gawain crosses the River Dee at 'the Holy Head' (Poulton?), enters 'the wilderness of Wirral' (western Cheshire?), and later reaches 'the Green Chapel' (Ludchurch near Dieulacres in Staffordshire?). The identifications are far from certain, but the Green Knight is a thoroughly pagan character, and Ludchurch is a striking cave-like natural feature which may

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Left. Mike Emery directing volunteers on the chapel excavation site. The hills of north Wales can be seen in the background.



Right. Beneath the walls of the chancel were Roman ditches. Here Mike Emery is seen sectioning one of them. Roman and prehistoric finds on the site may point to pre–Christian ritual activity.

well have attracted pagan cult in the past. Perhaps there is a clue here also to the identity of the poem's author. Mike Emery has suggested Sir John Stanley, a powerful marcher lord, a benefactor of Dieulacres Abbey, and a man with the education and experience to pen a great courtly romance.

When the monks moved to Dieulacres in 1214, the chapel remained in use. It is first mentioned in 1250, when it seems it was used by nearby villagers, with a monk as the local priest, and excavators have found a large medieval cemetery on the site. The boundary is marked by a ditch, and there are an estimated 1200-1800 burials, of which 113 have been excavated. The deceased - most of them anyway - were not monks. Among the skeletons, males and females are in roughly equal proportion, and around 40% of the total are infants up to seven or eight years of age. Many of the adults have a robust, stocky build, and some have clear evidence of the abnormalities associated with heavy physical labour.

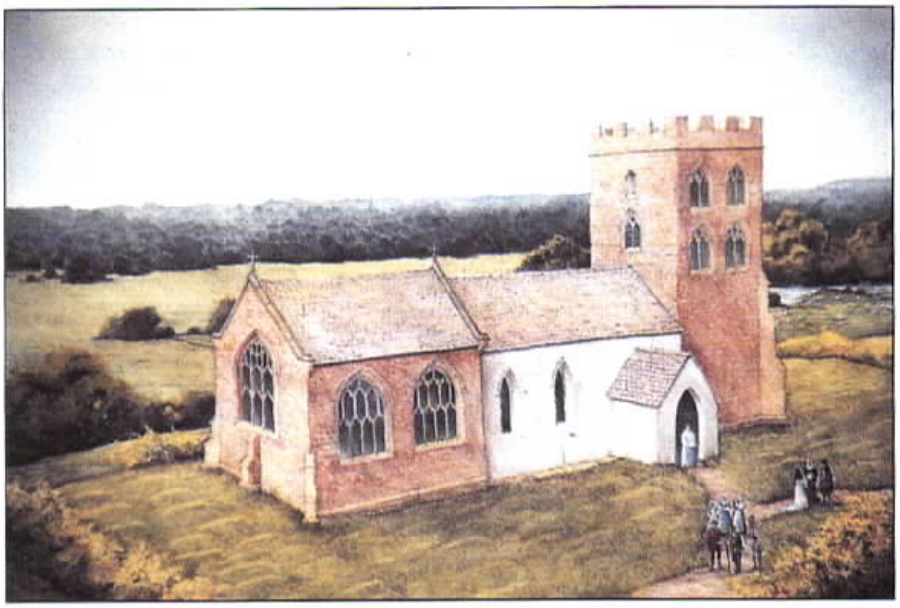
Some of these peasants may have been lay brothers, since the Poulton estate was organised as a 'grange'. The Abbey was endowed with over 3000 acres, 1900 of them arable. Medieval monks were enterprising land-improvers, not least the Cistercians, whose estates included large tracts of wilderness. Skilled hydraulic engineering is a particular feature of monastic sites: rivers were redirected, drainage channels cut, fish-ponds and mill-pools created. At Poulton, especially along the line of the Old Pulford Brook, there is clear earthwork evidence for landscape changes of this kind. Both the engineering itself and the resulting increases in agricultural productivity meant a large labour force was needed. The monks were too few, so the Cistercians enrolled lay brothers called *conversi* ('converts') to work alongside them - Rievaulx at one time had 140 monks and 500-600 *conversi*. Probably, the grange at Poulton was headed by one or two monks, who also served as local priests, and worked by a 'core' group of full-time *conversi* and a 'peripheral' group of ordinary peasants whose labour was casual and depended on the season.

The grange system did not survive into the late Middle Ages; too few men at this date fancied the life of a *conversus*. In 1487 Dieulacres Abbey leased its Poulton estate to the Manley family, and around this time the chapel was completely rebuilt, becoming a three-cell structure with nave, chancel and tower. Cistercian austerity was now banished: the rebuilding involved a new slate-roof, painted window-glass, perhaps a carved rood-screen, and certainly expensive floor-tiles from Seville. It was, after all, to be the private chapel and family mausoleum of one of the great families of Cheshire. There was much speculation - not least by the BBC's *Meet the Ancestors* programme - that the skeleton of a tall, strongly built man of 60-70 years, whose body had been buried centrally facing the altar, and whose radiocarbon date came out as 1510-1680, might be the Sir Nicholas Manley who died in 1519

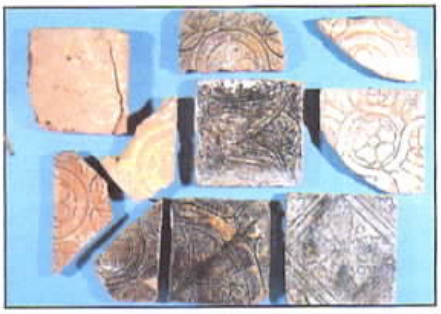
Less than 10% of the burials in and around the chapel have been excavated so far. All appear to post–date the closure of the monastery, and a fairly 'normal' medieval peasant community is indicated. The example shown is a multiple 'family' burial – perhaps plague victims.



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A reconstruction painting of the chapel as rebuilt in the late fifteenth century, when it became a three–celled structure with nave, chancel and tower. The reconstruction was done for the BBC's Meet the Ancestors *programme.*



Fourteenth or fifteenth century floor–tiles. They may date to the grange period (c. 1214–1487) or to that of the Manley family's tenancy (post–c. 1487). Cistercian austerity was a thing of the past.



Is this Sir Nicholas Manley? The makers of Meet the Ancestors *wanted to have it so, but, say the excavators, though he probably was a Manley, there is really no evidence to establish which one.*

leaving a will which required 'my body to be buried in the chapel of Pulton in the Chancel'. But we cannot be sure.

The Poulton project may have to continue for a very long time. The main Cistercian complex has not yet been touched. Mike Emery is confident that this lies about 700m away from the chapel on a neighbouring estate, and he is seeking the owner's permission to extend the project in this direction. If granted, we can hope to learn a very great deal more from Poulton about twelfth-century English monasticism. ■

Acknowledgements
The Poulton Project has been sponsored and supported by Alan Brown (Daresbury Laboratories), Richard Fair, Ralph and Joseph Fiennes, Pat Piercy, and Grosvenor Estates (Duke of Westminster). All photos are by Rob Jones.

Further Details

The Poulton Project will be on site this year from early June to mid–September. There will be an Open Weekend on 3rd–4th August. The dig can be reached by driving directly south from Chester on the old Wrexham road. Anyone interested in volunteering to work on site or organising a group visit should contact Mike Emery, 71 Whipcord Lane, Chester, CH1 4DG, phone 01244 376158 or 07818 254989.

You can also visit their website at:
http://srs.dl.ac.uk/arch/poulton/

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