

REPORT NO. 1193

SEAFORD - 'THE CRYPT'

NGR TV 48239892

LOCATION

The undercroft now known as 'The Crypt' is situated approximately 100 metres SSW of Seaford church, on the western side of Church Street. It is set back approximately 13 metres from the 18th-century street frontage. The long axis of the undercroft is aligned E-W, at right angles to the street.

PERIOD A (mid 13th C) (Drawing Nos. 1193/1-2)

LAYOUT

Features within the eastern wall of the upstanding structure make it clear that the undercroft was situated within the rear range of a structure, the street range of which has been entirely demolished. Only slight remains of the destroyed street range were recovered during archaeological excavations carried out by the Field Archaeology Unit in January 1993. The jamb of a doorway and the foundations of a return wall to the north of the undercroft, together with the splayed jamb of a window to the south indicates that the former street range extended beyond the undercroft to both north and south. The cramped location of the window suggests that a cross wall or other feature was situated but a little distance to the south of the undercroft, thereby preventing the window from being more conveniently positioned further southwards. The same is true of the northern doorway, where the northern face of the undercroft range is purposely canted inwards to allow room for the door. In this instance the foundations of a cross wall were discovered during the excavations.

Set with its floor at approximately 3.70 metres above Ordnance Datum and approximately 1.60 m (5'3") below the floor of the street range, the two-bay undercroft measures 8.35 m x 4.05 m (27'4" x 13'3") internally. The principal means of access was via a wide doorway [D1] and flight of stone steps [S1] located at the extreme western end of the northern wall. A narrow secondary flight [S2] at the eastern end of the undercroft, built into the wall thickness, allowed access to the undercroft from the street range to the east. Incorporated into the wall at the bottom of the secondary flight is a deep wall cupboard [C1] formerly

fitted with a door and a shelf at mid-height. The flight could be shut off from the street range by a door at the head [D3], but there was never a corresponding door to the opening [D2] located at the foot of the stairs. For purposes of security, the main external doorway [D1] leading to the cellar from the north was fitted with a heavy, sliding locking bar (now indicated by a wall slot). Although there is today a two-light window incorporated into the west wall, this represents a 19th-century antiquarian insertion - it is not shown in a drawing of the undercroft reproduced on page 118 of *Sussex Archaeological Collections* Vol. 7 (1854). Therefore, the undercroft was originally lit by a single two-light window [W1] set high in the north wall.

Photographs taken prior to destruction of the later building which stood over the undercroft show that the southern wall of that structure incorporated the tall flint-built wall of the Period A superstructure. The photographs show no early visible architectural features.

DISCUSSION

With the exception of the two vaulting bosses [B1 & B2] the work is not elaborately finished, though the quality of finish is generally high. There can be little doubt that the room was intended to impress and must have been accessible to guests, either in the form of the owner's friends or clients. The undercroft can therefore be discounted as a room used purely for the **storage** of goods which needed to be kept cool. The existence of vaulted cellars of this form, (of which there are large numbers within the ports of Winchelsea and Southampton) is usually attributed to the storage and sale of wine by wholesale importers, and it is probably no coincidence that the vaulting boss [B1] closest to the main entrance is decorated with grapes and vine-leaves. The standard form is for the cellar to be entered via a wide doorway and associated flight of steps leading down directly from the main street. In this important respect the Seaford example is not typical, for there was no direct street access, the 1993 excavations having disproved the possibility of there having been a street immediately to the north of the undercroft. Whether the area outside the main entrance fulfilled the function of public space, or was easily accessible from the street is not known, and without such information to speculate further on the original purpose of the cellar would be dangerous.

DETAILED ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

WALL CONSTRUCTION

All visible walls are of flint cobble construction with occasional inclusion of chalk blocks

to the internal face of the undercroft. The external work is of roughly coursed flint cobbles with Caen dressings to the northern quoins - there are no indications of a dressed quoin at the south-western external corner. Within the undercroft the quoins at the internal angles are likewise of Caen stone, but not the vaulting ribs, which are of sandstone. Much of the rendering still survives within the undercroft, and there are further patches of original plaster towards the southern end of the east wall (within the former street range) and towards the base of the northern external elevation. Above the latter is a more course covering of gritty rendering, the date of which is uncertain. In all three areas the rendering/plaster finishes at the base in a distinct line which indicates the levels of the original floors and external ground surface.

WINDOWS

The window within the west elevation of the undercroft is of modern brick masked by rendering and must be an insertion of the late 19th or early 20th century - it is not shown in an illustration of the undercroft included within an article by Mark Antony Lower, MA FSA [*Sussex Archaeological Collections* Vol. 7 (1854) p. 118].

It is therefore clear that the undercroft was originally lit by a single two-light window [W1] located high in the northern wall of the eastern bay. The window has a flat internal cill, widely splayed internal jambs with internal sandstone dressings, and a depressed two-centred rear-arch. The rear-arch is formed in two parts - a southern rib-like arch of dressed sandstone voussoirs chamfered along both lower leading edges, behind which is a higher arch of roughly squared sandstone blocks. Although repaired, much of the external face of the window still survives. It is of two-lights with a slender dividing mullion and flat shouldered arches above each light, the shoulders having a convex curvature rather than the more normal concave curvature. [The same feature is to be found at the nearby Rectory at West Dean]. In modern times small arches have been formed in rendering over the flat heads. The lights are rebated internally for shutters and plainly-chamfered externally. Originally the cill was set slightly below ground level, suggesting the former existence of a walled open area - no evidence of this was found during the excavations.

Recent removal of a flight of 18th- or 19th-century external steps to the east of the undercroft revealed the northern splayed jamb of a destroyed window [W2] formerly located immediately to the south of the undercroft and serving the destroyed street range. The jamb, which is located very close to a contemporary wall cupboard [C2], incorporates a vertical return forming a recessed area in the jamb towards the main face of the window. It seems likely that this recess was incorporated to house a hinged shutter when open. Although an unusual feature, it can be compared with similar recesses sometimes found to accommodate an open door - as with the door at the head of the spiral staircase at Old Soar, Plaxtol, Kent. The need for a shutter recess at Seaford is probably explained by the close proximity of the wall cupboard [C2] and the need for a wide window-splay to

maximize light. The cill of the window has been hacked away at some date so as to lower the opening by 160 mm, though the original height is indicated both by rough tooling on the dressed jambs of the cill and a distinct bottom edge to the plastering beyond. Although the upper part of the opening has been lost, much of the original rendering still survives on that part of the jamb which remains. Where it has fallen away small 'flemish' style bricks - some crimson, some buff - are visible. They are fully integrated into the fabric and are contemporary with the undercroft building. [Similar bricks are to be found in the locking-bar shaft adjacent the main entrance doorway and in the undercroft cupboard - see below].

DOORWAYS AND OPENINGS

Three door openings survive, whilst the fragmentary remains of a fourth are also recognizable.

The main doorway [D1] giving access to the undercroft is a wide opening at the western end of the north wall. It is fitted with a two-centred arch of neatly dressed Caen stone with a continuous external chamfer finished at the base by neatly formed barred-and-rounded stops. There is a neat internal rebate to accommodate the door, which was hung on the western jamb by means of two iron pintles, both of which survive. A large horizontal shaft extending 1.55 m into the eastern jamb of the doorway formerly housed a sliding timber locking bar. The roof of the socket is formed by small 'flemish' style crimson bricks, whilst the walls incorporate clay tiles and West-Country slate. When in its closed position the end of the locking bar was housed into a neatly cut socket in the western jamb. Internally the rear arch is of depressed two-centred type, formed in sandstone with a chamfered lower leading edge. The chamfer is continued down the internal leading edges of the jambs and is finished at the base by means of barred-and-rounded stops. Being set high in the wall, the vault is 'pushed up' in the north-western corner in order to accommodate the doorway. For a description of the steps associated with this doorway see 'Stairs' below.

At the foot of the secondary staircase in the eastern wall of the undercroft is a narrow two-centred opening [D2] which was never intended to incorporate a door. The opening incorporates continuous chamfering along both its eastern and western leading edges, the western chamfers (visible within the undercroft) being finished with barred-and-rounded stops.

At the head of the secondary staircase is another narrow doorway [D3], in this instance rebated in its western face for a door. The surviving shafts of iron pintles indicate that the door was hung on the northern jamb and opened against the northern wall of the staircase. In the southern jamb can be seen the socket for a small locking bar of the type operated by a knob projecting through the door. On the east, facing into the destroyed street range, the opening is continuously chamfered and shows signs of broken stops at the base. The tall,

chamfered cill, which stood well proud of the floor within the street range, still survives.

At its eastern end the northern external wall face of the undercroft cants inwards at a dressed Caen stone quoin. The reason for this is to allow room for a doorway [D4] giving access from the street range to the area immediate north of the undercroft. Part of the southern jamb of this doorway still survives and indicates that the opening was squeezed hard against the undercroft wall, so much so that the chamfer on the external (western) jamb was narrowed to less than half normal size at this point. At the base of the jamb can be seen the line of the up-standing cill which was widely chamfered on its western face. The closing rebate for the former door is now the best preserved part of the jamb. At some date the jamb has been mutilated by the cutting-in of a rough chase.

THE VAULT

The plainly chamfered vaulting ribs spring from the walls without the use of corbels and are of sandstone throughout. Each bay incorporates a high-quality carved sandstone boss. That within the western bay, nearest the main entrance is enriched with a grape and vine-leaf design [B1], whereas that in the eastern bay is carved with two swirling leaves [B2]. Neatly cut ashlar blocks of chalk fill the webbing of the vault.

STAIRS

Being the principal means of access, the steps [S1] leading down through the main entrance are set to a relatively shallow pitch and are wide. The 1993 excavations indicated that there were always two steps beyond the doorway. Furthermore, a retaining wall (now largely robbed out) held back the ground to the west, which was set at a markedly higher level. The top of the retaining wall is indicated by the start of the dressed Caen stone quoins, the lowest of which projects slightly from the wall and incorporates a horizontal chamfered offset with chamfered eastern return.

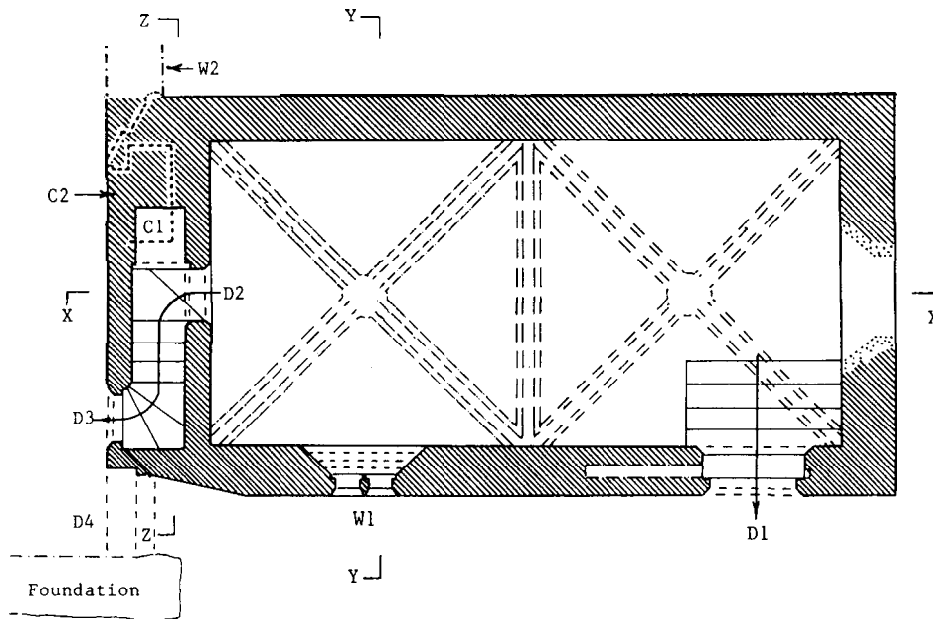
Much narrower and set to a considerably steeper pitch, the secondary flight [S2] descends within a wall passage at the eastern end of the undercroft and incorporates winders at its head and foot. The passage has a stepped roof of heavy, horizontal sandstone slabs supported by rounded corbels built into the side walls. When viewed from the staircase the shape of the roof echoes that of the shouldered arches which cap the surviving window.

WALL CUPBOARDS

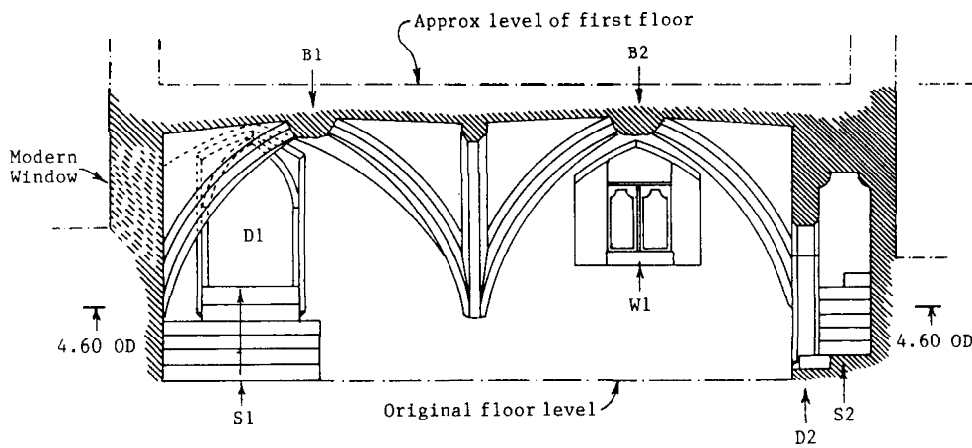
Set into the southern wall of the secondary staircase, near its foot, is a 620 mm wide wall

cupboard [C1] approximately 800 mm deep. Its two-centred arched opening is carried back to form the roof of the recess and is rebated on its external face for a door. The two iron pintles upon which the door was hung still survive in the eastern jamb, whilst three sockets cut into the western jamb suggest alteration to the locking point position. A tiled offset part way up the rear wall indicates the level of a former shelf, though there are no indications as to how the front of the shelf was supported. All internal faces of the cupboard were rendered and shows signs of shuttering to the arched roof. Where patches of rendering have fallen away from the back wall this has revealed crimson 'flemish' style bricks.

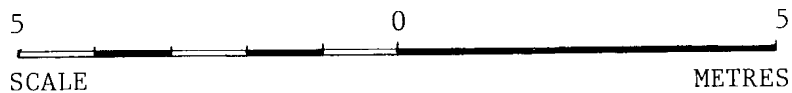
Removal of the modern external steps rising to the east of the undercroft in 1993 revealed the broken remains of a large (1.26 m wide) cupboard recess [C2] located above the mural staircase and set immediately to the north of a former window [W2], with which feature the recess shared a jamb. Substantial parts of the cill, southern jamb and back wall survive, together with the fragmentary visible remains of the recess's northern jamb. At its northern end the front face of the recess had been entirely destroyed and blocked-in, as had the upper part of the cupboard. An offset incorporated into the south, west and fragmentary remains of the north wall marked the level of a former shelf. As with the other recess, the front face of the surviving jamb is rebated for a former door.



PLAN



SECTION X-X



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Site

'The Crypt', Church Street, Seaford, East Sussex

Title

Plan and Long Section through the undercroft

Drawn By

D. Martin

Date

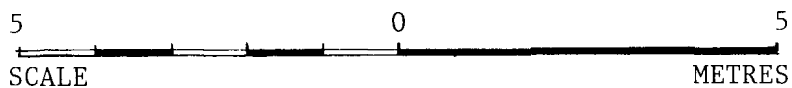
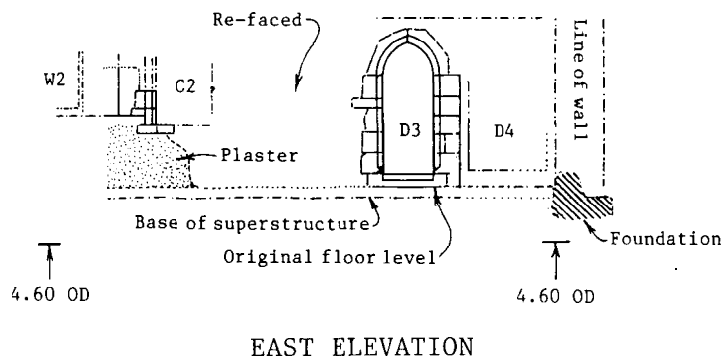
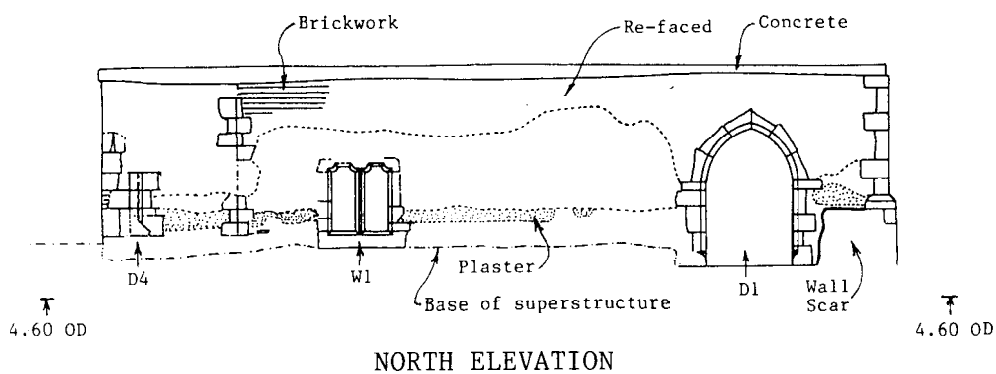
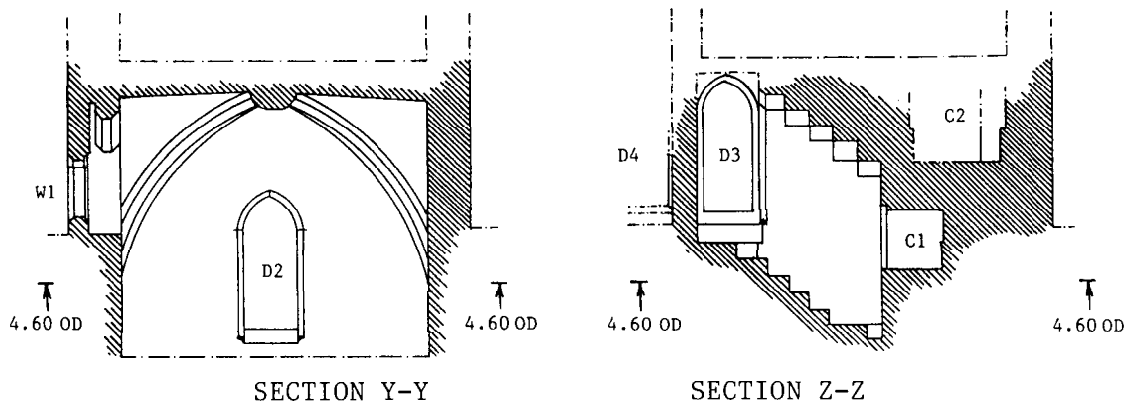
12/4/93

Project Ref

1992/45

Drawing No

1193/1



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Site
'The Crypt', Church Street, Seaford, East Sussex

Title
Cross-Sections and Elevations

Drawn By
D. Martin

Date
12/4/93

Project Ref
1992/45

Drawing No
1193/2



Looking E [R557/10 - DM 1993]



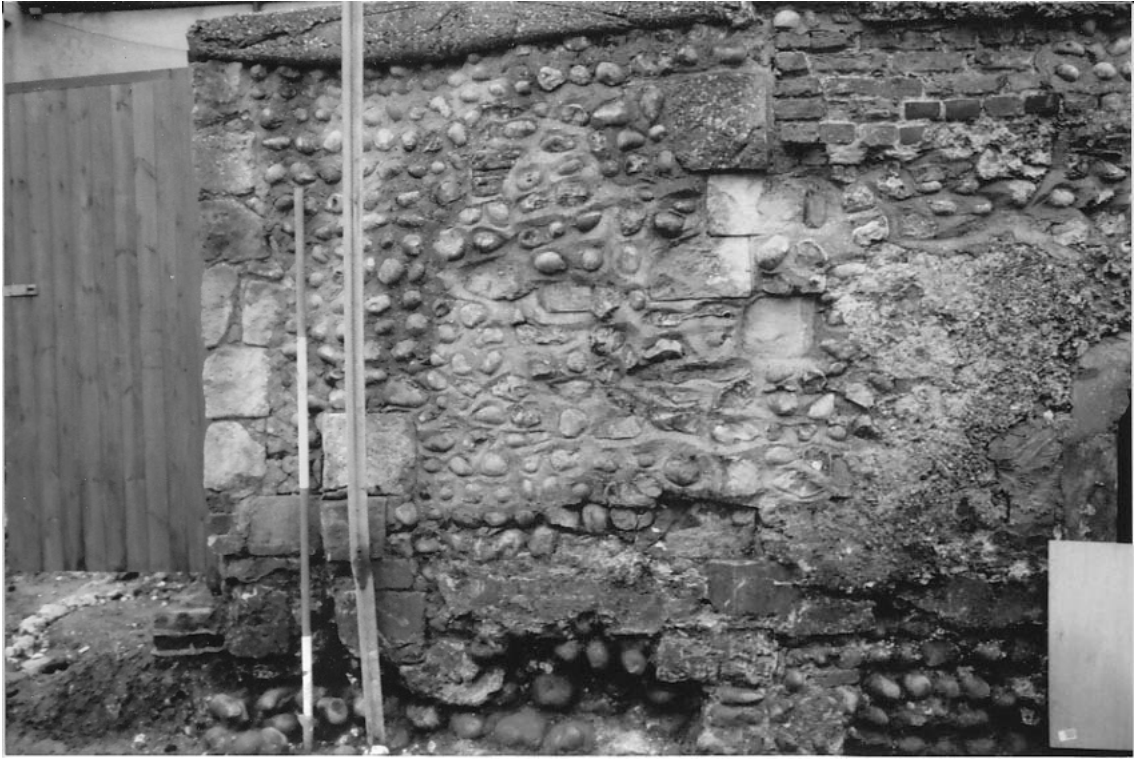
Window in north wall [R557/00 - DM 1993]



Looking W [R557/18 - DM 1993]



Locking point to main door [R557/20 - DM 1993]



N wall, E end [R557/26 - DM 1993]



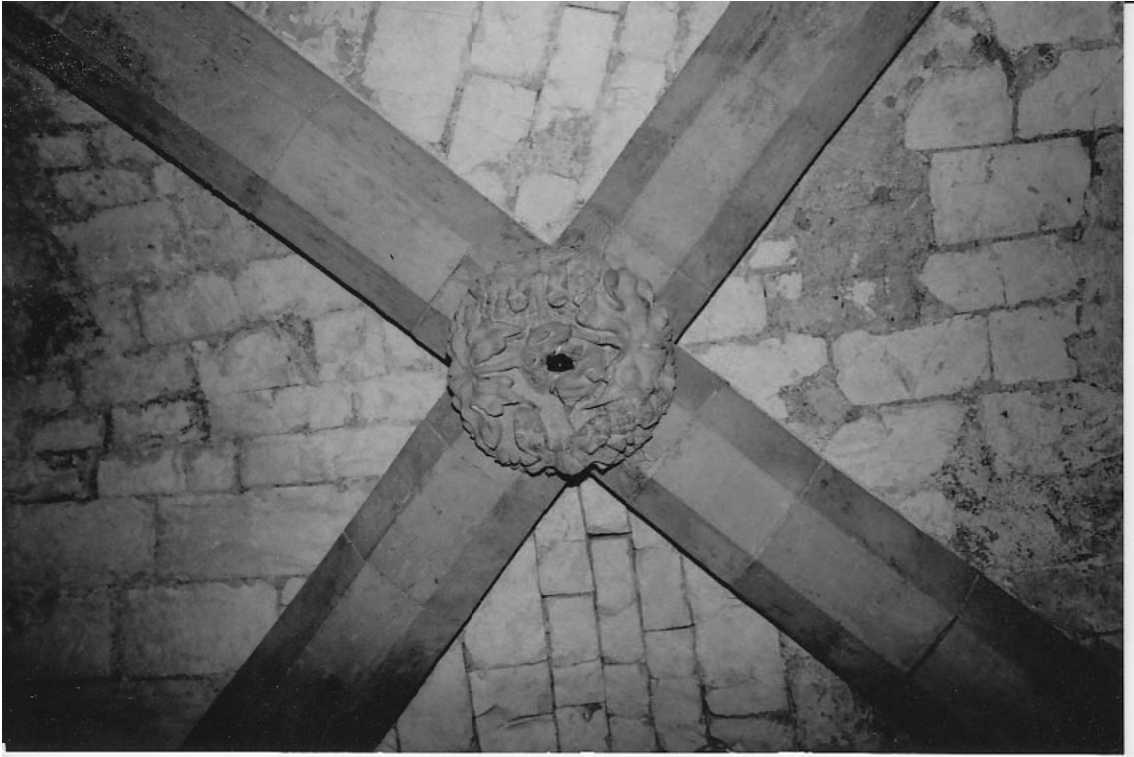
Window in N wall [R557/27 - DM 1993]



Main entrance, N wall [R557/30 - DM 1993]



Vault [R557/14 - DM 1993]



Detail of boss [R557/7 - DM 1993]



Jamb between W2 and C2 [R563/32 - DM 1993]



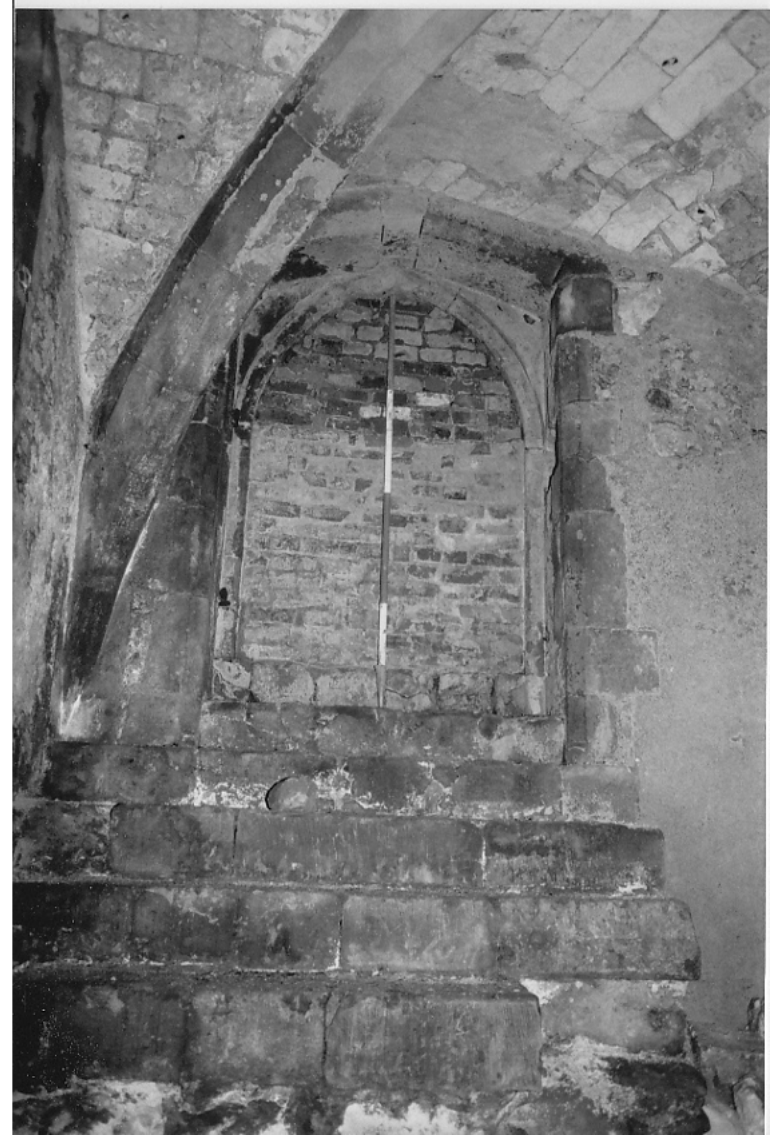
Detail W2 (left) and C2 (right) [R563/31 - DM 1993]



Window N wall [R557/2 - DM 1993]



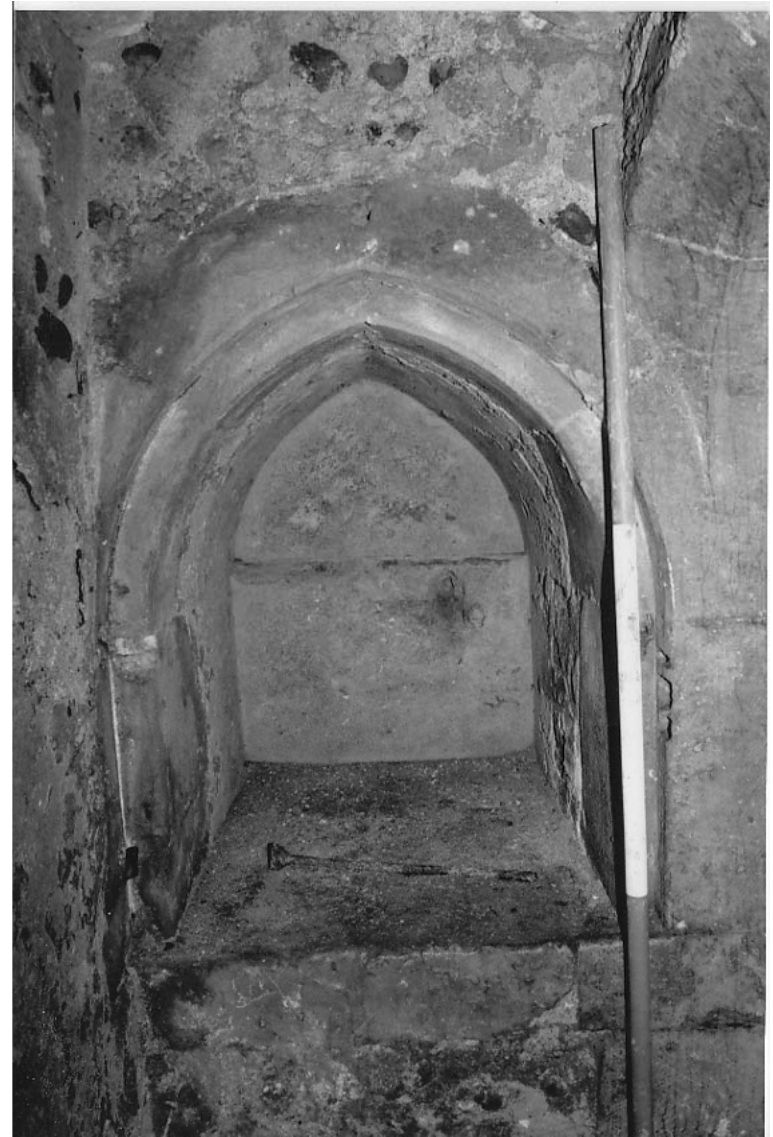
Door to secondary stair [R557/3 - DM 1993]



Main entrance, N wall [R557/11 - DM 1993]



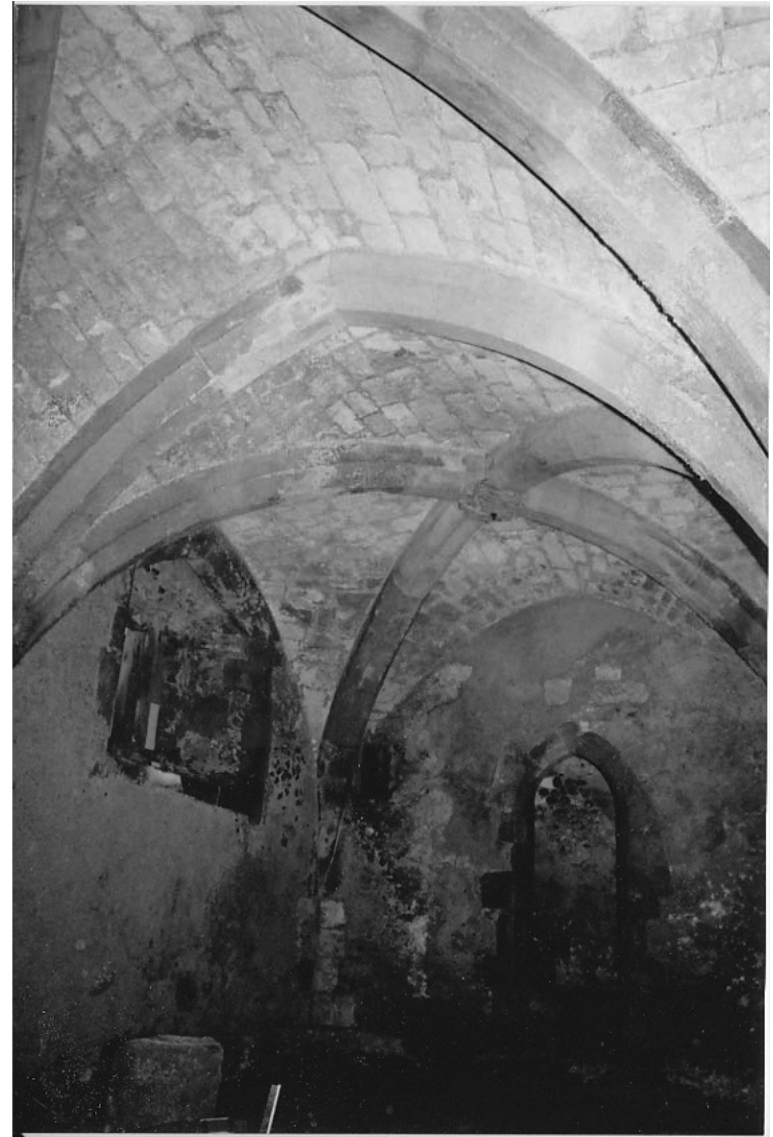
Looking down secondary stair [R557/15 - DM 1993]



Cupboard, secondary stair [R557/16 - DM 1993]



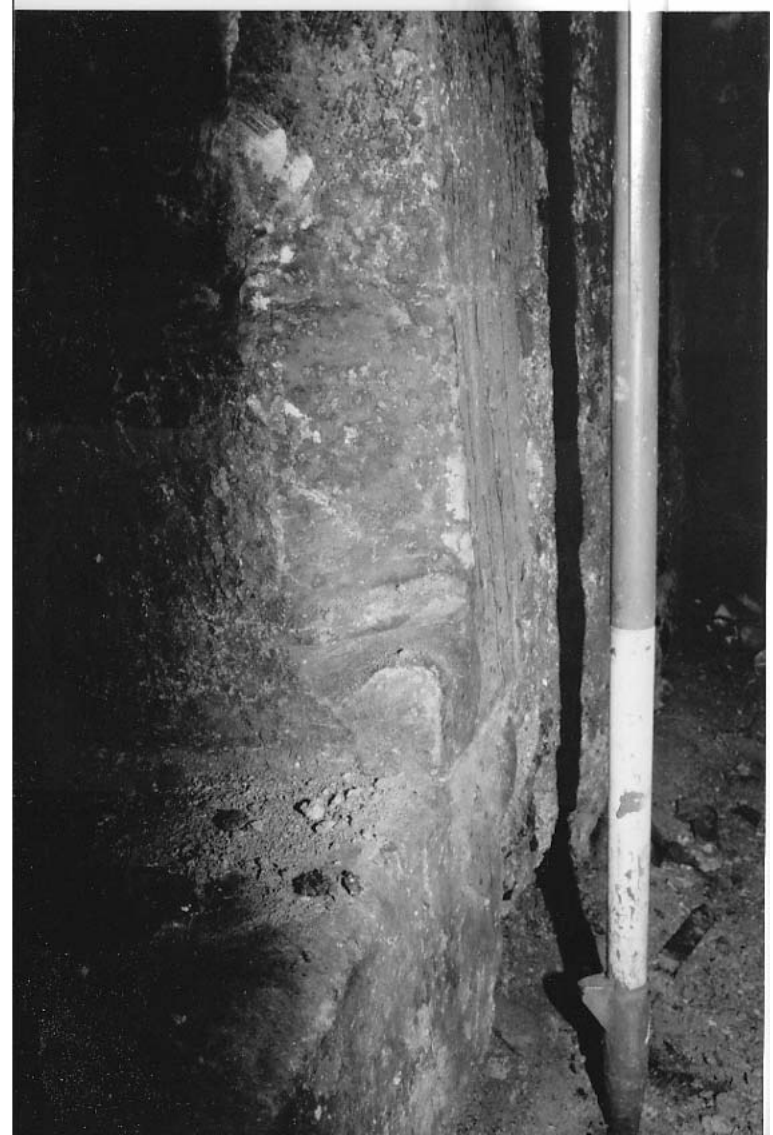
Roof of secondary stair [R557/17 - DM 1993]



Looking E [R557/13 - DM 1993]



Pintles and locking point, main entrance
[R557/21 - DM 1993]



Stop, door to secondary stair [R557/22 - DM 1993]



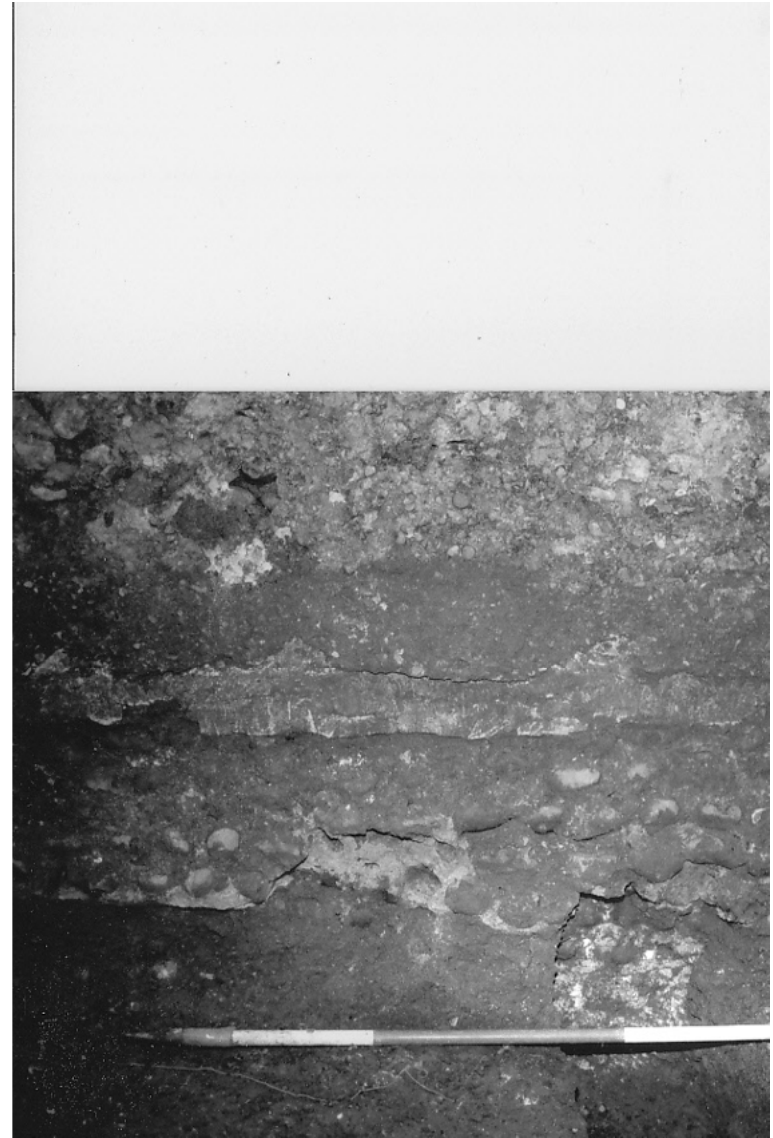
Entrance to secondary stair [R557/23 - DM 1993]



Door jamb at NE corner [R557/24 - DM 1993]



Door jamb at NE corner [R557/25 - DM 1993]



Rendering coats, base of N wall [R557/28 - DM 1993]