A DECORATED MEDIEVAL FLOOR TILE FROM BIDDLESDEN ABBEY

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A unique decorated medieval floor tile found at the site of Biddlesden Abbey is described. Probably dating to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, it is suggested that it may have been made locally. The layout of the abbey buildings is briefly discussed and the removal of settlement, probably of medieval date, close to the abbey in the course of post-dissolution emparkment is noted.

Introduction

A slip-decorated tile was found by Mr George Bardrick some years ago at Biddlesden House whilst making a new landscaped area known as 'the secret garden' adjacent to the stable yard of the house at SP 6328 3988 (Fig. 1, A). Mr Bardrick recently showed the find to Ros Tyrrell, Finds Liaison Officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme at the County Museum (Ref: BUC-OC2C37), and it was subsequently donated to the museum.

The Tile and its Design (Fig. 2)

The tile is incomplete and as only two partial edges survive, its original size is not known. Presuming that it was square, each side would have been greater than 5 ⅛" (130mm): its thickness varies between 26.7mm and 28.3mm. Both surviving edges have bevels, probably cut with a knife. One edge has a trace of slip or possibly mortar on it. There are no stab marks on the underside, but there are several small impressions and a large thumb print with clear ridges visible on it. Its outer surfaces are brick red but the interior is mid-grey; laminations in the clay are visible. There are sparse white, granular, inclusions (calcareous?) in the fabric and clear angular quartz less than 1mm; also there are numerous regularly-distributed fine cavities less than 0.5mm. The underside, which may have been sanded, has a few flakes of white flint up to 2mm and occasional clear angular quartz grains.

The design has been formed using a stamp or stamps. The central impression is up to 2mm deep and a bright, white clay fills the recesses. In two areas the slip extends beyond the impressed figure onto the surface of the tile, causing the images to lack clarity here. In part of the depressed areas the white infill has a segmented appearance which might have been caused by shrinkage of the inlay, or alternatively from pressure on a white clay fillet when being pushed into the recess. The method of making such 'two-colour' tiles has been much discussed, and there are several suggestions for the process, the most laborious of which would have been by inlaying individual fillets of clay into the recesses, and the simplest through slipping the entire surface and then scraping the unwanted surplus off the top (see e.g. Eames 1980, 45–48, Stopford 2005, 77, 86). Whichever process was used, the occasional white-clay overlap onto the image on this tile does beg the question as to whether the tile could have been rejected during manufacture, although there are no other indications that it was a waster as such. There is no obvious trace of glaze on its surface, although it would certainly have formerly been glazed, or intended to be glazed. The shape of an incomplete inscription set in a band shows that it would have been one of a set of four.

There are four principal elements to its design:

a) Around the perimeter of the tile is a simple, slightly-recessed band.
b) In the top right-hand corner is a four-petalled flower with a stem. Below is a left-facing running deer with open mouth and cloven hooves. The deer has a sharp, clear, wavy-edge body-outline, the result of using a v-gouge when cutting the wooden stamp that was used to make the impression. The deer probably has two antlers, but if so the adjoining flower stem

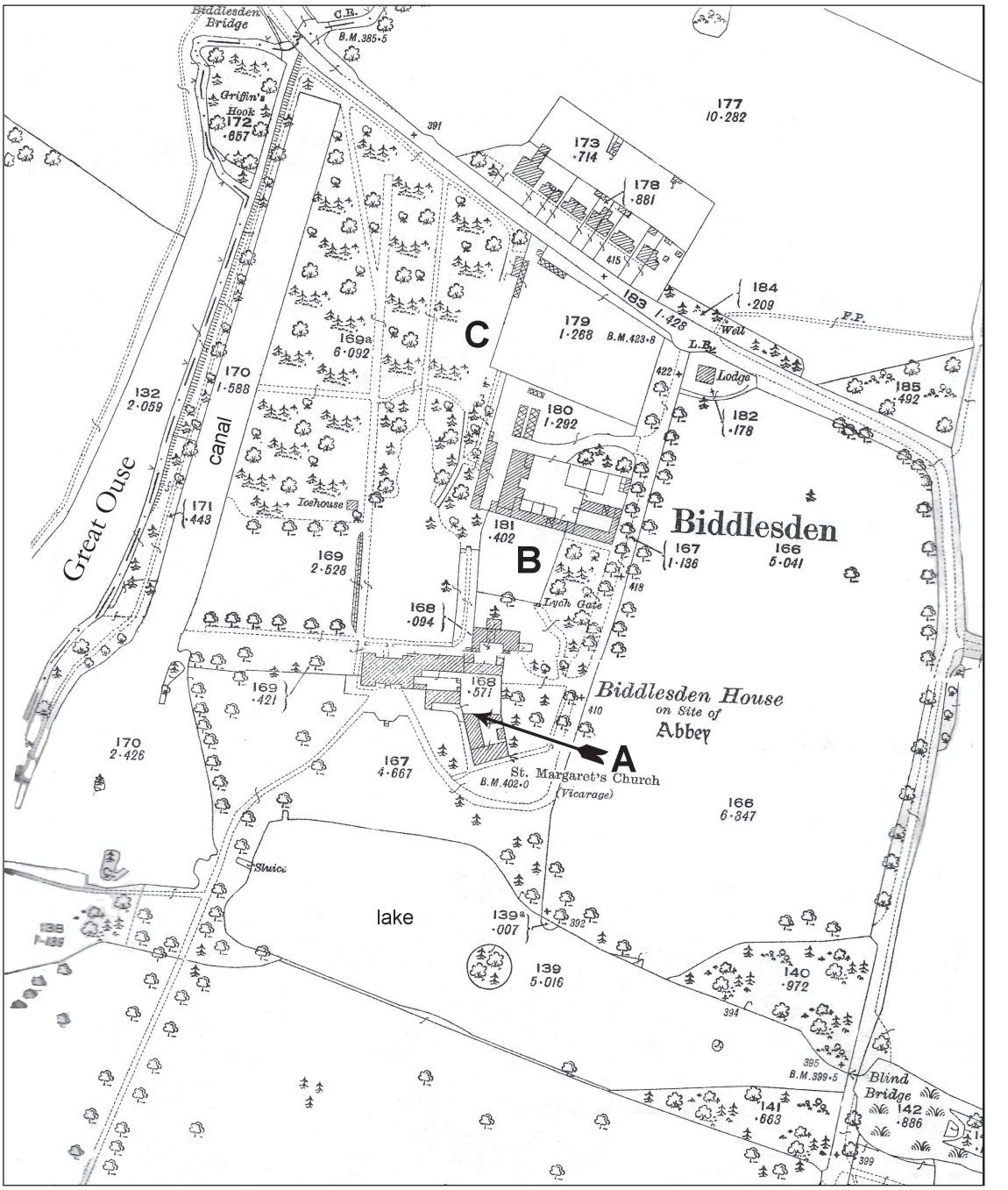

FIGURE 1 Biddlesden Abbey. A: Findspot of the tile. B: Old Chapel Yard (and existing cemetery). C: Approximate location of extinguished north-south road, 'The street of the old town'. Based on OS 25" sheet, 1925 edit.

FIGURE 2 Upper: tile from site of Biddlesden Abbey. Lower: detail of stag and its outline, showing v-gouge marks present on the wooden tile stamp.

would join onto the end of the lower antler: a less likely option is that there is no lower antler but the flower has a long stem.

c) Beneath the deer is an inscription set within a double-arc band which, making the reasonable assumption that the tile was one of a set of four, would have formed one segment of a quatrefoil. The individual letters of the inscription are not at all clear. The writer is most grateful to David Noy who has looked at a photograph of the tile and comments as follows:

'There are seven fully preserved letters, with parts of another at each end of the inscription. They are in a form of Lombardic capitals, but few are definitely identifiable. Inscriptions on medieval floor tiles are often difficult to decipher (Wright 1975, 13). They can consist of names, including maker's inscriptions; prayers, most commonly *ave, Maria*; or form part of a dedicatory inscription running across several tiles, such as one from Halesowen Abbey which also includes a prayer (Eames 1980, 159) *istud opus Nicholas matri Christi dedit abbas + vigeat absque chao mater dona Nicholao.* The language is usually Latin, but English and French are also found.

The first complete letter on the Biddlesden tile is in a form for which I have found no parallels, and is most plausibly explained as a reversed and inverted Q. Reversed letters are common in tile inscriptions, presumably because the tile-makers could not read them. If it is a Q it must be an abbreviation, perhaps for *quod* (or *quem*, *quam*, etc.). The letter before it, which is partly lost where the tile is broken, may be V. If so, it probably represents a word ending *–um*, as final *–m* is often omitted in manuscripts. Or could the reversion of Q (if that is the correct interpretation) have led the tile-maker to put before the Q the V which should have come after it?

The next three letters appear to read EGO. E and O are clear, and G seems to be the only possible reading of the letter between them, forming the pronoun *ego*. A name or first person verb can be expected afterwards. The next letter seems to be T (C is also possible on the analogy of the form found in manuscripts). The following letter has a form which suggests N, but in the context H is more likely, with the upright disappearing into the upper band. A badly formed R is also possible. The final complete letter is A.

A very tentative interpretation of the whole inscription would be:

---]u(m) q(uod) ego Tha[--- suggesting a name (it would be a very unusual one, such as Thaddeus or Chad), or:
---]u(m) q(uod) ego tra[--- suggesting a verb, perhaps *tradidi*, or another *trans-* compound. … *quod ego tradidi* … ("which I have handed over") is a clause sometimes found in charters. … *quod ego transeam* … ("that I may cross over") might be a prayer.'

d) Below the inscription are parts of a complicated design, the only clear elements of which are (on the left) a spread, left human hand with four fingers and a thumb and unclear elements to the left above this. Below and to the right there appears to be either a piece of upright vegetation or perhaps a figure. Below and to the right of this is a second four-fingered hand (on the tile's broken edge).

The writer is grateful to Richard Gem who suggested checking illustrations of the abbey's seals to see if there might be comparable images. The abbey's twelve known seals are listed and four are illustrated in VCH I (1905, 367–8 & pl. II). Many show the abbot holding a crozier: others feature Minerva, a bust, or the virgin and child (the abbey's dedication was to St Mary and St Nicholas). Examples of Cistercian seals nationally (including Biddlesden) are shown in Heslop (1986, pls. 135–177). Images of abbots with croziers are again common and sometimes a crozier and hand alone; either were approved images in the early history of the Cistercian order. Interestingly, one abbot on a seal from Stratford Langthorn is accompanied by a 'budding rod' (Heslop 1986, pl. 136). It is possible that this might be what is shown to the right of the (presumed) standing figure noted above on the Biddlesden tile, although it has to be admitted that this is stretching the evidence.

Where was the Tile Made?

Unfortunately there are no comprehensive publications on the floor tiles from the adjacent counties

of Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, which are the natural search areas for material comparable to Biddlesden as the parish is adjacent to the former, not far from the latter, and the abbey held properties in both counties. Oxfordshire has one known production area near Bagley Wood which produced tiles unlike those from Biddlesden (Haberly 1937, 173), and two production sites are known in Northamptonshire, one at Lyveden where undecorated glazed-floor tiles were made (Steane & Bryant 1975) and the other at Pipewell Abbey which produced line-impressed tiles (Eames 1980, 743). Neither of their products are comparable to the Biddlesden tile, nor has a match been identified in a fairly rapid search of individual publications of tiles from the two counties.

The study of decorated floor tiles in Buckinghamshire has been well served by a comprehensive survey carried out in the 1930s by Hohler (1941 & 1942) which included all of the tiles in Buckinghamshire's churches. Hohler also considered known production sites in the county. Knowledge of these has advanced a little since Hohler's day, and a brief summary follows.

a) Penn is Buckinghamshire's best known tilery. Its fourteenth-century products were purchased for a number of ecclesiastical and royal structures in Windsor and London, no doubt utilising the Thames for transport, and supplied to many other areas beyond the county's borders (Keen 2000, Green 2005).
b) Little Brickhill tiles have been studied by Mynard (1975) who records their distribution in a number of churches. A late fifteenth-century date has been confirmed for some at Great Linford, although production may have continued a little later than this (Mynard & Zeepvat 1991, 114–5).
c) Cadmore End. There is information at present about one particularly distinctive design only from this tilery, where pottery was also produced (Hurman 2004).
d) Boarstall. Evidence for a tilery here was identified some years ago (Farley 1982), but since that date further information about its products has come to light that will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Records*.
e) Chetwode (?). Hohler (1941, 4, 17, 100, 102–3) refers to wasters found at Chetwode Priory about nine miles south of Biddlesden, but unfortunately although he notes the tile types, he does not provide any detailed evidence that they were wasters. Presuming the site is acceptable, it may have been making tiles for a specific abbey project.
f) Finally, a case has been made for the existence of a pottery production area in the forest of Whittlewood, within which Biddlesden is sited (Farley & Hurman 2015, 220–1) and since the two products were sometimes made at the same location the local position may change in the future.

It has to be said at the outset that the Biddlesden tile does not match any of the tiles known to have been produced at these sites, nor any other tile published by Hohler from Buckinghamshire churches. This is not entirely surprising, since it is the first tile known to have been recorded from the abbey, and as such is but a random survivor from a single floor which would originally have contained very many. For example, a floor at Warden Abbey, Bedfordshire (Baker 1993) contained 800 tiles, albeit of a very different character to the tile from Biddlesden. Decorated floor-tiles in Buckinghamshire were no doubt once a common feature of both churches and high-status buildings, but today they only survive *in situ* in a few churches, and although others may yet remain undetected beneath raised floors, many will have been completely replaced during subsequent re-flooring. Of those which do survive, some are now so foot-worn that no decoration remains upon them.

It is worth considering the individual design elements on the tile further. Eames (1980) catalogued the substantial collection held by the British Museum, an important reference source which includes over 300 designs, some of which will be referred to below. Hohler notes an important division between 'Wessex' tiles and their derivatives (such as those made for New College, Oxford), and later tiles made at such locations as Penn and Little Brickhill. Wessex tiles commonly had deeply-stamped designs, multiple stabs on the underside and a fairly consistent size of between 5½" and 6½". The Biddlesden tile does have some affinity with Hohler's Wessex group in depth of stamp and (probably) size, but lacks stab marks on its underside, usual amongst Wessex tiles. Its combination of design elements is also unusual. Comparisons between the tile's

principal elements and tiles from elsewhere are noted below.

a) The plain border. It is certain that this would only have been along only two edges of the tile, or it would have interfered with the four-tile quatrefoil design. The border is the principal element that the tile shares with Hohler's 'Wessex' tiles. Eames (1980) records a simple slip line border on about thirty tiles in the British Museum collection, ranging from borders which encompass a multiple tile design to those outlining a tile containing a simple image.
b) The stag. Stags feature on three of Hohler's fourteenth-century Penn series, which are so-called 'printed tiles', made in quite a different tradition to the impressed Biddlesden tile. They are not common among the very large number of designs that Eames illustrates, being clearly depicted on only sixteen tiles, of which only four stags look left as does the Biddlesden stag. None of them are otherwise similar to the Biddlesden stag, nor are they associated with lettering (see below).
c) Lettering. The only inscribed Buckinghamshire tiles illustrated by Hohler are a few from the later Penn and Little Brickhill series. None of these inscriptions are set within a double-arc band, as at Biddlesden, or form part of a four-tile design. Almost all of the lettering that Eames illustrates occurs within a circular setting. Of the four double-arc bands she illustrates, none contains lettering.
d) Figures. A few simple human figures occur on the later Penn tile series, but otherwise are not recorded in Hohler's designs. Human figures are not very common amongst Eames' designs, but occur most frequently on the more sophisticated tile series, such as those from Chertsey Abbey of later thirteenth-century date (Gardner & Eames 1954), which bear no relation to the relatively crude Biddlesden images.

In summary, it can be seen that although there are a few general design elements which occur on other tiles, none are a close match for the Biddlesden tile, nor is the overall association of elements the same.

Dating a single incomplete tile is not straightforward, and no information is available about building works at the abbey (see below). Eames (1992) suggests that two-colour tiles (as against e.g. incised or geometric tiles) were introduced in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, the earliest fairly closely-dated examples being those of c.1240–1244 from Clarendon Palace. Another reasonably dated series occurs at Hailes Abbey, Gloucester, where a floor has been dated c.1277 (*ibid*, 285), but these tiles are better quality than the Biddlesden tile. As noted above, the probable figural image on the tile might be loosely compared with images on Cistercian seals. The images of figures on seals increase in complexity from the early fourteenth century, when they often begin to feature multiple figures, such as appear to be present on the Biddlesden tile. Presuming that that the tile was commissioned by the abbey, the design may have reflected this trend towards elaboration. At the other end of the time-scale it certainly pre-dates the Penn series, which commenced somewhere in the early to mid-fourteenth century. On balance a provisional later thirteenth to early fourteenth century date seems likely.

At a number of locations there is good evidence that in the thirteenth century decorated tiles were often produced by craftsmen, probably itinerant, who worked at the site where the tiles were going to be laid, for example at Clarendon Palace (Eames 1988) and possibly locally at Chetwode (see above). This could also have been the case at Biddlesden. Cherry (1991, 197) suggests that following their establishment such tileries might have gone on to supply other religious houses, etc. in the vicinity. Apart from the unusual character of the Biddlesden tile itself, there is slight evidence supporting the idea of local production. Romano-British pottery kilns have been found only 700m from the abbey site (HER 4426 and Swan 1984, 112), indicating the presence of suitable clay nearby. There is also a hint of undated but presumably post-Roman tile-making activity at Biddlesden parish in a document of 1742 which records a lease to one Charles Adkins of Biddlesden, yeoman, of land which included 'Little Tylers Field containing 13a 3r 18p' (Verney Archive 2/1046), although the name could of course refer to a clay source rather than a kiln, or indeed to much later tile-making activity in the area.

The Abbey

Biddlesden Abbey lay close to the banks of the Great Ouse which, as previously noted, marks the county

boundary between Buckingham and Northamptonshire. It was a Cistercian house founded in 1147 within Whittlewood Forest, and was dissolved in 1539. There was one other Cistercian house in the county at Medmenham on the banks of the Thames, both being part of the eighty-six strong permanent foundations in Britain (Robinson 1998). The abbey had lands or houses in twenty-one parishes. Its holdings are described by Roundell (1858, 1863, and 1864; VCH I, 363–9 and IV, 153–7). The names of thirty-one abbots are known (VCH I, 367–8). Its possessions were surrendered to the king's commissioners in September 1540, at which time it had an abbot, a sub-prior, eight monks and a number of staff (Roundell 1858, 75–79). 'Some 16th and 17th century accounts of the manor-house, which must have incorporated at least part of the old abbey, state that it contained sixteen bays, a brew-house, stable, 'colehouse', dovecots, orchard, hop-yard, and three fisheries.'(VCH IV, 154). The abbey church was destroyed by Sir Robert Peckham about the middle of the sixteenth century. Browne Willis, who visited Biddlesden in 1712, found various elements of the abbey remaining including parts of the cloister, the tower, a small chapel and the chapter house 'with a handsome arched room about 40ft square', but most of these structures including the separate chapel (which was in existence in the thirteenth century, see on) had been demolished by Henry Sayer, lord of the manor or his predecessor, as Browne Willis subsequently noted in 1737 (VCH IV, 154; two of Browne Willis' drawings are included in Green 1966). Sayer was to provide a replacement chapel which still stands within the precinct of the house he had built c.1731. Willis recorded several tombs but makes no mention of tiles. Subsequently the Royal Commission noted that; '… some of the foundations of the abbey are said to exist N. of the house, on a site partly covered by outbuildings.' (RCHM 1913, 63).

The layout of Cistercian houses generally followed that of the Benedictine order, with the church on the north side of the cloister, the chapter house east of the cloister, etc. A regular variation from the Benedictine plan was that the axis of the refectory was aligned north-south to the cloister, with the warming house on one side and the kitchen on the other. A local historian (Green 1966), has provided a hypothetical plan of the abbey. He places the abbey church to the south of the present house, adjacent to the current lake, and the cloister on the north of the church, which would place its furthest walk close to and beneath the present house. This arrangement is the reverse of the conventional Cistercian layout, and in terms of the present topography of the land provides some problems, since the level area occupied by the current house is several metres higher than the lakeside, and there is also at present a considerable slope from house to lake. Although of course it is possible that a very substantial area could have been landscaped after demolition of the abbey buildings, thus removing all trace of the abbey church and most of the cloister buildings, Green provides no evidence that this was the case. He does thank '…the late Lt-Col T.R. Badger of Biddlesden House … for his kind assistance in the search for the plan of the abbey within its grounds.' but again provides no information about the nature of the search he carried out – whether for instance he dug any exploratory trenches. A simpler solution might be that the abbey church was not in the position he suggested, but lay roughly where the house now stands, with the cloister etc. on the (traditional) north side, roughly in the area where there is now a terraced lawn. As construction of the lawn would have certainly required considerable levelling, unfortunately neither Green's proposed layout nor this alternative leave much potential for the survival of footings etc. although geophysical survey might be of value in the future. The Cistercians originally eschewed decorative features in their buildings, but over time embellishments became more common and chapter houses were often 'more flamboyantly decorated than the church' (Coldstream in Robinson 1998), so it is possible that the Biddlesden tile originated from such a location. However, its findspot (Fig. 1, A) would not relate to a chapter house on either proposed plan, although of course this may bear no relation to its original position.

Apart from the abbey's own church there was also a parish church of St Margaret, which in 1209 was assigned to the abbey. At the dissolution no distinction was made between the holdings of this church and those of the abbey, when the whole was assigned to Sir Thomas Wryothesley, the first of a number of subsequent owners (Roundell 1863, 78–9). In the Verney archive at Claydon House is an interesting sequence of maps, all dateable around 1755. They depict the current house and

its outbuildings in some detail, and include a plan showing a landholding that existed prior to the construction of the house in c.1731. Among the features of interest is an 'Old Chapel Yard' (Fig. 1, B). This lies in approximately the same site as the existing cemetery just north-east of the house that has served the present church, and which is now on higher ground than the terraced lawn. According to Browne Willis, part of the cemetery was levelled around the time the house was constructed (VCH IV, 154–5). The 'Old Chapel Yard' is shown at the south end of an extinguished north-south route, named as 'the street of the old town' (Fig. 1, C), which terminated not far short of the present house. Its north end begins at the modern road through Biddlesden, which is also the park boundary. Closes are shown fronting the street together with a few houses – suspiciously rectangular in shape so possibly schematic. It seems likely that the former parish church will have been close to the 'Old Chapel Yard', presumably its cemetery, and this is also the position in which Green has positioned it on his figure. VCH IV (154, 156) notes 'a gravestone of 14th-century date, from Biddlesden Abbey' in the existing cemetery, and cites a Harleian manuscript recording that the old chapel of St Margaret 'stood at the gate of the Abbey'. The combination of all these elements suggests that the 'street of the old town' was once the approach road to an abbey gate. Finally, it may be noted that in 1325 a Monday market and annual fair was granted to the abbey (Roundell 1863), so presumably the abbey was keen to encourage commercial activity in the local community.

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