St Helen, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: the Saxo-Norman Cruciform church

St Helen, Wheathampstead: general view from south-west

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St Helen's church, Wheathampstead, is now a largely early fourteenth century building, but retains vestiges of an aisleless cruciform church of the eleventh century. Late nineteenth century investigations indicate it had an apsidal eastern arm. The church may have been founded by Edward the Confessor, but the actual building work was perhaps carried out by Westminster Abbey, to whom he granted the estate in 1060. The church appears to have been of minster status, and excavated later Saxon burials to its north suggest an earlier church on the site

Introduction

The church of St Helen, Wheathampstead, in north-western Hertfordshire, is a modest but well-appointed aisled cruciform building (cover photograph). The details of the church are predominantly Decorated work of c.1290-1340, though the chancel is an Early English structure of the second quarter of the thirteenth century. These phases, though deserving of a study in themselves, are not however the subject of this paper, for there is evidence that some of the structure of the church is far earlier. In the south wall of the south transept is the arch of a blocked doorway executed in rough, non radial voussoirs (Fig 1). The technique is indicative of Anglo-Saxon construction, and previous writers have suggested the church has Anglo-Saxon origins (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 653; Smith 1973, 34-36). This assertion is supported by excavations adjacent to the north aisle in 1979 which revealed burials with funerary treatment of Anglo-Saxon type (Saunders and Havercroft 1982, 102-11).

Fig 1. Remains of early doorway in south wall of south transept

This paper attempts to reconstruct the form of the early church and to suggest a date and patron for the building. After an historical, architectural and archaeological overview of the church is given, the surviving early fabric of the church is discussed in relation to the present building. A reconstructed plan of the church is offered, and its liturgical use suggested. Finally, the church is placed in a broader context, the possible motives behind its building being explored.

Historical, architectural and archaeological background

Wheathampstead is first documented in an authentic charter of 1060 when the estate of ten hides was granted by Edward the Confessor to his (re)foundation of Westminster Abbey (Sawyer 1968, No. 1031). The terms of the grant amounted to frankalmoign or free alms (VCH 1908, 298). Essentially, this meant that Wheathampstead was a liberty immune from the jurisdiction of the bishop and king's reeve, owing suit only to the mother-church of Westminster (Sawyer 1968, No. 1031). In the later medieval period, Wheathampstead was attached to the office of treasurer of that abbey (VCH 1908, 298). It had possibly held this status since the time of Edward's grant. In Domesday, Wheathampstead emerged as the most important of Westminster's Hertfordshire estates, with a population of thirty-seven households including a priest (Williams and Martin 2002, 375). The presence of a single priest need indicate no more than a local church, but Wheathampstead appears to have been something more than this. The present church of St Nicholas at nearby Harpenden was largely rebuilt in 1862, but retains *ex situ* architectural fragments from an earlier twelfth century church (Pevsner 1977, 156-57). It originated as a dependent chapel of Wheathampstead (VCH 1908, 314). The presence of such a chapel at this early date is one indicator of superior or minster status (Blair 1985, 106). While the estate was a possession of Westminster, it lay within the southern part of the huge diocese of Lincoln. This was the cause of some friction, and the church was the subject of a dispute between the two parties in 1220-21, when Westminster claimed the church was among those granted to them by the Pope for hospitality towards the poor and sick; it would appear that patronage of the church by this time lay with Lincoln (VCH 1908, 313).. The transition of control from Westminster to Lincoln may have occurred in the mid-twelfth century. In 1220-1, Westminster claimed that Popes Alexander (1159-81) and Clement (1187-91) had granted them the church (ibid). If this was the case, Westminster's appeal to the Papacy might be seen as an attempt to resist appropriation. The patronage of the church remained with the latter until it was transferred to Peterborough diocese in 1852 (ibid).

The church comprises a chancel, central tower and an aisled nave (Fig 2). It has been described in detail elsewhere (VCH 1908, .309-13). To summarise, the earliest details are the blocked south transept doorway and early walling discussed below. The elongated chancel has three lancets in its east end and two in the eastern part of the north wall, work of the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The central tower appears to have been completed in about 1290, when the Bishop of Lincoln granted indulgences towards those who had contributed towards his building work on the tower (ibid, 309). There then appears to have been a pause in rebuilding for twenty or so years, since all the Decorated windows have reticulated tracery unlikely to be earlier than c.1310. Between then and c.1340, arcades were inserted into the nave walls, aisles added and the transepts were rebuilt. Documentary evidence indicates that there was an altar of St Nicholas in the north transept and one dedicated to St Mary in the south one (ibid, 312). The location of the former is still evident from the elaborate reredos in the recess below the east window of the north transept (Fig 3). The main altar of St Helen would have been at the east end of the chancel. Some refenestration took place in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, while the south porch is an addition of the latter date. The church was restored in 1865-66 by the architect E. Browning; the vestry of 1897 replaced a smaller late fourteenth century structure (Saunders and Havercroft 1982, 102).
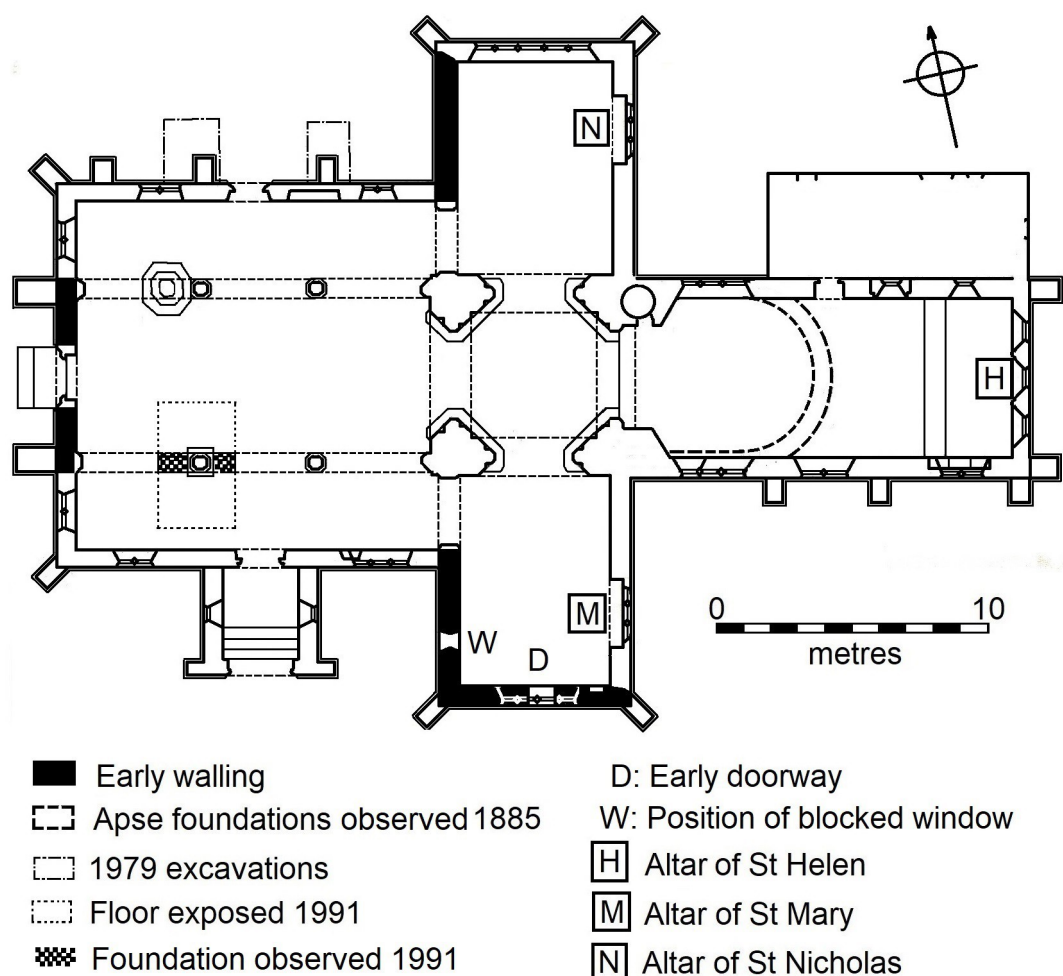
Legend:

- ■ Early walling
- ⊏⊐ Apse foundations observed 1885
- ⊏⊐ 1979 excavations
- ⊏⊐ Floor exposed 1991
- ▨ Foundation observed 1991

- D: Early doorway
- W: Position of blocked window
- H Altar of St Helen
- M Altar of St Mary
- N Altar of St Nicholas

Fig 2.   Plan of church with evidence of early features

Foundations of the apse beneath the chancel were noted when the organ was enlarged in the early 1880s, these were recorded by the then rector of Wheathampstead, Canon Davys (Davys 1888). Archaeological excavations were undertaken in 1979, adjacent to the north wall of the north aisle (Saunders and Havercroft 1982). These revealed a considerable number of stratified burials. It is most unfortunate that none of these were subject to radiocarbon dating. The earliest, however, had stones placed around the head, a later Anglo-Saxon and Norman practice. Examples include burials adjacent to the Anglo-Saxon minster church of St Oswald's Gloucester, where they had a date-range of c.900-1120 (Heighway and Bryant 1999, 196-97, 205). Comparable burials in the cemetery of the small thegnly church at Raunds Furnells, Northamptonshire. dated from c.950-1150 (Boddington 1996, 14-15, 38-42). It has been noted that 'foundations in unexpected places were seen below the nave in 1991 when the pew plinths were renewed' (Thompson 2002, 8). That the foundations were not archaeologically recorded is highly regrettable, but their approximate location is indicated by modern floorboards. It is assumed that the foundations were west-east running. If so, this would confirm the suspicion that the early fourteenth century nave arcades are insertions into earlier walls.

Evidence for the early church

The earliest detail is the arch of a blocked doorway in the south wall of the south transept, visible both internally and externally (Fig 4). Despite an external build-up of earth, it is clear that the

Fig 3. East window of north transept, with reredos behind former altar of St Nicholas below

internal rear-arch is higher than the external one. This is a Romanesque characteristic, but the use of non-radial voussoirs is an Anglo-Saxon one; the doorway can thus be regarded as stylistically Saxo-Norman. The voussoirs are of Reigate Stone. The internal voussoirs are limewashed, but that
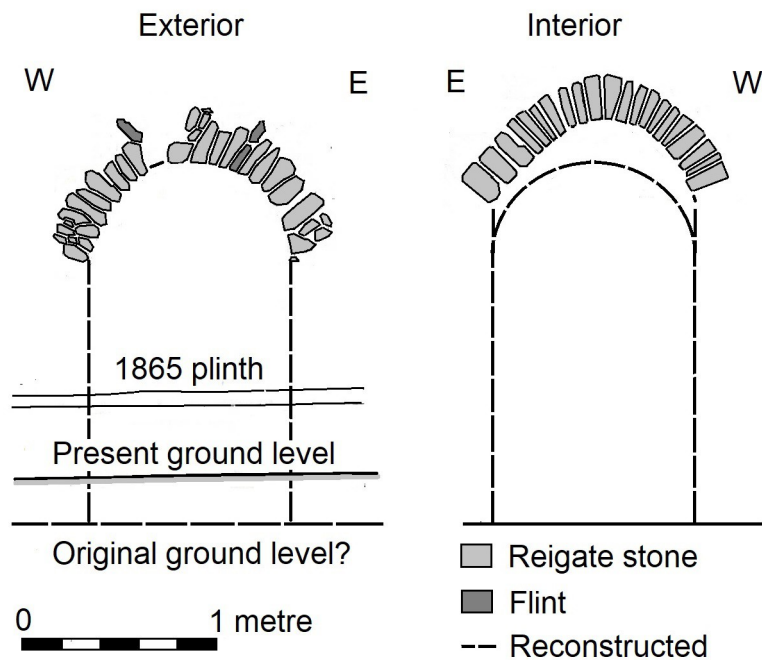

Fig 4. Elevations of early doorway in south wall of south transept

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Fig 5. *West end of nave, showing cortical flint in walling*

they are of Reigate is apparent from their texture. Crucially, the first firmly datable use of Reigate was in Edward the Confessor's church at Westminster Abbey, begun in the 1050s, where it was deployed in plinth and base mouldings (Tatton-Brown 2001, 190). By contrast, the material at Wheathampstead is rough rubble. Was this surplus material from the construction of the abbey church? Westminster is on a direct road route from Wheathampstead. At the latter, there was a blocked 'Anglo-Saxon' window in the west wall of the south transept (Saunders and Havercroft 1982, 102). Its position is now only discernible by a patch of dark flint rubble (Fig 2). Elsewhere, this wall is of the same construction technique as that of the south transept in which the early blocked archway is found. This comprises well-coursed rubble constructed with overwhelmingly cortical flint. The fabric at the west end of the nave is analogous, save that it contains some re-used Roman brick (Fig 5). Similar fabric is also found in the west wall of the north transept, which abutted by the north aisle wall indicating that the former is clearly earlier (Fig 6). Unlike the west wall of the south transept, there is no indication of an early window here.   By contrast, the fabric of other parts of the church makes considerably more use of cut flint. Late thirteenth and early fourteenth century work is also characterised by the presence of putlog holes with dressed stone surrounds. This is apparent in the east wall of the south transept (Fig 7). The fabric of the north and east walls of the north transept is entirely of this material (Fig 2).

   The quoins of the central tower are either part of the 1865-66 restoration or even more modern renewals (Fig 8). The belfry windows are clearly also Victorian restorations, but their authentic Geometric form suggests they are accurate replicas of those of the work completed in c.1290. That the fabric of the tower is also of this date, is indicated by the presence of dressed putlog holes like those described above. There would thus be no reason to suspect the tower has earlier origins but for one feature: the tower has slightly salient angles with regard to the nave and transepts (Fig 9). Towers with salient angles are a well-known late Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman characteristic. Those at Wheathampstead are however very slight, with projections of only 0.16m, Some

Fig 6. West wall of north transept

Fig 7. East wall of south transept, showing cut flint and putlog holes with worked stone surrounds

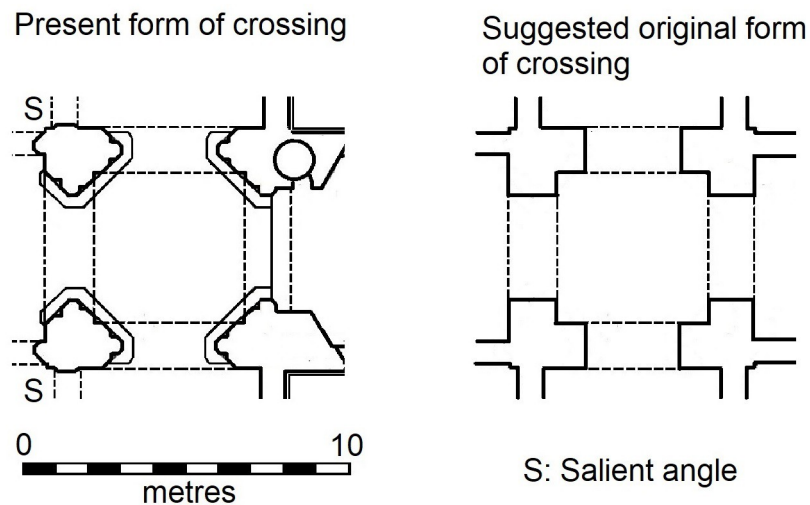***Fig 8. Central tower from the south-east***

Fig 9. Present and suggested original forms of crossing

comparison can be made with those of Stow Minster, Lincolnshire, where the crossing was probably begun in c.1053 x 1055 (Fernie 1983, 124-27; Blair 2005, 357). Even here, however, the projections are 0.75m deep, being formed of large side-alternate quoins of Anglo-Saxon type (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 584-9). The shallow projections of the Wheathampstead salients might be explained if small quoins of Romanesque type were once deployed. It is thus suggested here that the fabric of the lower part of tower is part of the early church, but that the walls were refaced in the late thirteenth century when its upper part was rebuilt. The original tower walls were perhaps as

thick as at present, the archways being as broad as the internal dimensions of their late thirteenth century successors. Thick-walled towers of this date are rare, but occur at Stow, where, as at Wheathampstead, the lateral arms are true transepts in the Romanesque style rather than Anglo-Saxon type porticus (ibid).

It has been seen that the west end of the nave at Wheathampstead retains early fabric, if not details (Fig 5). What appears to have been the wall of the early nave was observed in 1991 (Fig 2). The nave walls are only 0.75m thick, a potential indicator of Anglo-Saxon or Saxo-Norman date; it would thus appear that the early fourteenth century nave arcades were inserted into early walls.

Reconstruction of the early church and its liturgical arrangements

On the above evidence, a reconstruction of the plan of the early church can be offered (Fig 10). It was an aisleless cruciform building with an apsidal eastern arm, a central tower with slightly salient angles and a nave. The unusual depth of the transepts is more appropriate to an aisled church.
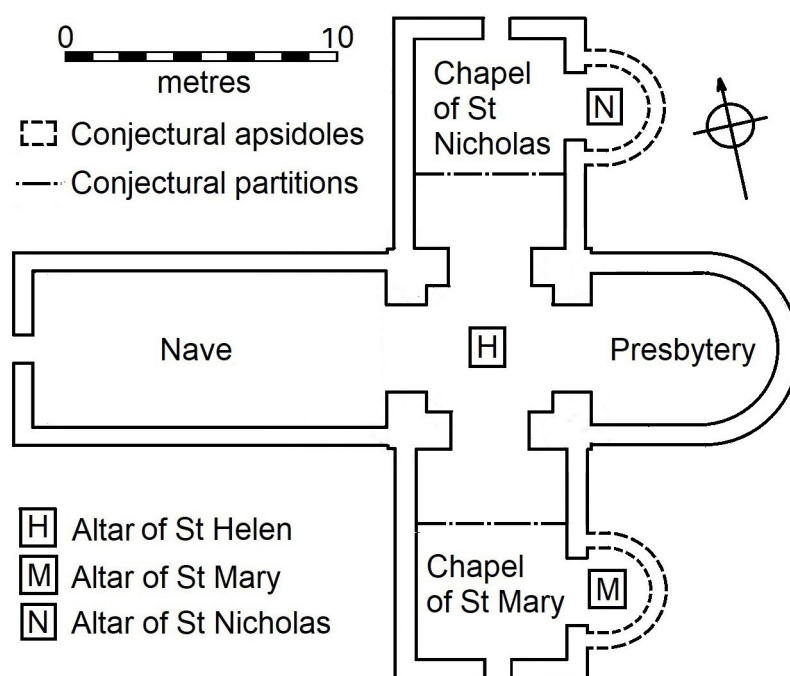

Fig 10. Reconstruction of plan of the Saxo-Norman church

Since Wheathampstead was certainly not aisled before the early fourteenth century, this deserves explanation. It has been seen that by the late medieval period, the north and south transepts contained the altars of St Nicholas and Mary respectively, and that the altars were housed in extant recesses in the eastern walls of the transepts. The latter, however, may have always housed chapels dedicated to these saints. St Mary was of course ever-popular, while there is evidence of an emergent cult of St Nicholas in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The late Saxon churches of Leeds in Kent and Old Shoreham and Worth in Sussex are dedicated to St Nicholas (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 384, 544-55, 688-93). A church dedicated to St Nicholas was built just outside Norwich in Edward the Confessor's reign (Williams and Martin 2002, 1170; Blair 2005, 450n). While the standing east walls of the transepts at Wheathampstead are no earlier than the fourteenth century, they certainly follow earlier foundations. The recesses, by extension, may replicate earlier openings. It is proposed here that the openings originally accessed apsidoles housing the saints' altars, the outer

parts of the transepts housing chapels pertaining to the altars.   The surviving Saxo-Norman south transept doorway can be explained as access for clergy to the chapel of St Mary.   A similar doorway to the chapel of St Nicholas can be postulated.   The depth of the transepts might be explained if the proposed chapels were accessed by vestibules from the crossing but separated from the latter by non-structural partitions.   A comparator for this would be the transepts at the great early Romanesque abbey of Jumièges, built between 1040 and 1067 (Fig. 11).   Here, the vestibules to the transepts are the aisles, but it is argued that here that at Wheathampstead, the arrangement was adapted to an aisleless church.   The comparison is not far-fetched given that Wheathampstead was owned by Westminster Abbey after 1060.   All the evidence points to Edward the Confessor's church at Westminster being modelled on Jumièges (Fernie 1983, 154-55). The transepts at Wheathampstead, in turn, might have been modelled on those at Westminster.
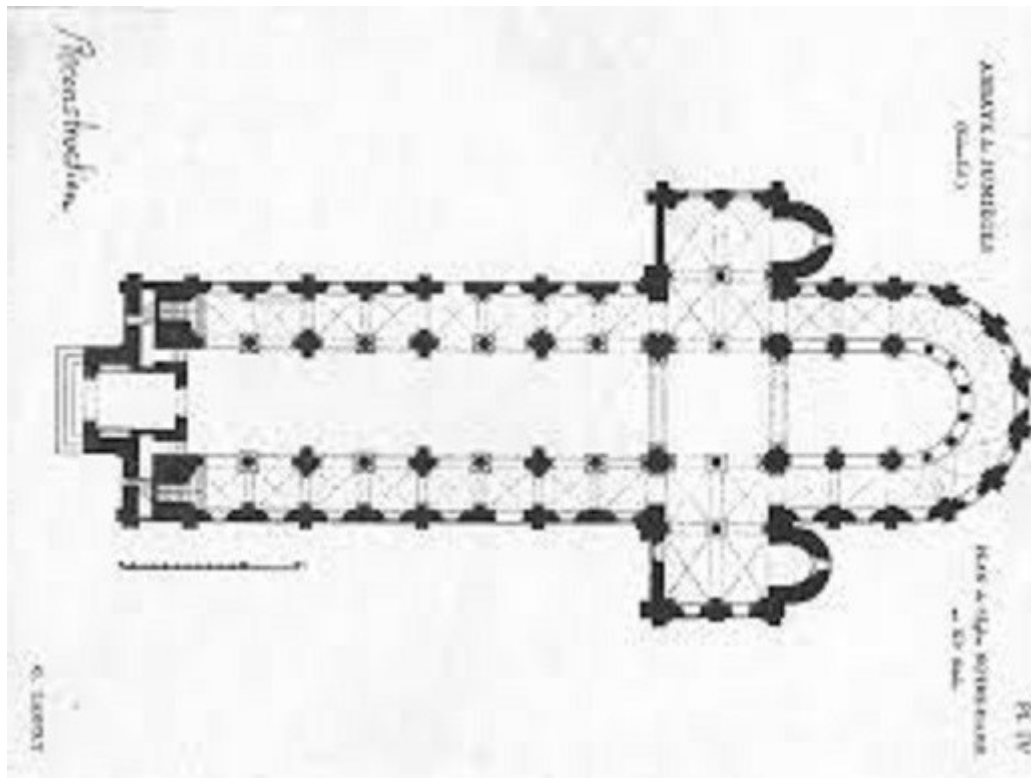

Fig 11.   Jumièges Abbey, an early plan ('Lamolt', undated)

   If the altars in the north and south transepts were dedicated to St Nicholas and St Mary, the main altar was dedicated to St Helen, there being no suggestion that the dedication was not original. After the thirteenth century reconstruction of the chancel, her altar would have stood at its eastern end (Fig 2).   An earlier altar is unlikely to have occupied a similar position in its apsidal predecessor (Fig 10).   It is most likely that the altar stood in the central area, as has been suggested for both the earlier St Oswald's Minster, Gloucester, and later three-cell Romanesque churches without transepts (Barnwell 2004, 44-45, 49-51).   The apse at Wheathampstead would thus have served as a presbytery.   The whole arrangement is far too elaborate for a simple proprietary church and is indicative of a collegiate establishment, yet only a single priest is mentioned in Domesday (Williams and Martin 2002, 375).   Such a priest, however, may have been served by deacons and/or chaplains who were not mentioned in the Survey.

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Discussion

On the above evidence, it is suggested here that the earliest standing walls at St Helen's, Wheathampstead pertain to a church contemporary with Edward the Confessor's abbey church at Westminster. Surplus material from the construction of Westminster may be represented by the Reigate stone deployed in the south transept doorway (Fig 4). The church would thus date from about the time that the king granted of the estate of Wheathampstead to Westminster in 1060 (Sawyer 1968, No. 1031). The charter of that date indicates that nothing was owed to Edward in return for the grant. Was this grant indeed as unconditional as it appears? A scenario worthy of consideration is that the king founded the church under discussion, but that Westminster was expected to actually build it.

   It is worth noting the form of the church at Wheathampstead (Fig 10). If it was contemporary with Edward the Confessor's Westminster, it also probably represented a diminutive, aisleless form of the latter. Here, it might be tempting to seek a Carolingian analogy. In the early ninth century, Bishop Theodulf of Orléans commissioned a diminutive centrally-planned oratory at Germigny-des-Prés in emulation of Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel at Aachen (Shaffer 1992, 128-35 and figs 10-11). As Richard Krautheimer noted many decades ago, the early medieval concept of a 'copy' was not the same as the modern one, and the buildings need not be absolute parallels (Krautheimer 1942). In this case, Wheathampstead might be seen as a 'Germigny-des-Prés' to the 'Aachen' of Westminster, but they occur in entirely different contexts. Wheathampstead appears to have been a minor collegiate minster, whereas Germigny was probably for Theodulf's personal use (Shaffer 1992, 135). Both Westminster and Wheathampstead were constructed by the same people, so emulation cannot have been a motive. It is perhaps more rewarding to look at the context of Wheathampstead itself.

   It has been seen that there is evidence that the church was of minster status, and this is reflected in the elaborate form of the crossing and eastern arm. It is almost certain that the church under discussion was not the first on the site, given that it was built at a time when minsters were being encroached upon by a proliferation of local churches (Blair 2005, 368-425). This is supported by the burial evidence. Though the Anglo-Saxon burials were not scientifically dated, they appear to have comprised at least least two generations, these overlying earlier unexcavated burials (Saunders and Havercroft 1982, 103-5). Moreover, the fill for one of the earliest graves (burial 1) contained particles of charcoal and burnt daub (ibid, 104). This raises the possibility that a wooden structure in the vicinity, conceivably a church, had burnt down. While what was happening here before the present church was built is obviously unclear, it is suggested that a minster church existed on the site from at least the tenth century. The mid-eleventh century saw the rebuilding and refurbishment of many older minster churches. Stow, mentioned above, is one such example. Nearer to Wheathampstead, the middle Saxon minster church at Waltham, Essex, was rebuilt by Harold Godwineson, who commissioned a massive eastern transept (Huggins and Bascombe 1992, 285-98). The innovative and Lotharingian-inspired aisled cruciform church at Great Paxton, Cambridgeshire (formerly Huntingdonshire) was on one of Edward the Confessor's estates and is regarded as his work (Fernie 1983, 129-34). In the same way Edward, or his foundation of Westminster appear to have replaced an earlier church at Wheathampstead with something that was very up-to-date.

   The motives behind the construction of a new church at Wheathampstead may have gone beyond modernisation. By 1066, Westminster owned six other estates in Hertfordshire (Williams and Martin 2002, 375. They acquired another, Ayot St Lawrence, after the Conquest (ibid). Two of these, Aldenham and Ashwell, were outliers on the borders of Middlesex and Cambridgeshire respectively. The other four were fairly close to Wheathampstead (Fig. 12). Also in the area was the minster of Welwyn, first mentioned in c.990 x 1001 (Sawyer 1968, No. 1497). Its existence, however, is not relevant to this discussion. There is no evidence for churches on any of the other

Westminster estates before the twelfth century. In the later eleventh, Wheathampstead may have served as an ecclesiastical centre for these estates as well as an administrative one. There is one other factor to be taken into consideration. Wheathampstead is only seven kilometres distant from the venerable and powerful foundation of St Albans, and is surrounded by the estates of the latter (Williams and Martin 2002, 375077). There was certainly intense rivalry between Westminster and St Albans by the early twelfth century (Crick 2003, 75). The church at Wheathampstead, of up-to-date Westminster-inspired form, might be regarded as an assertion of power by the new monastic institution against the older one.
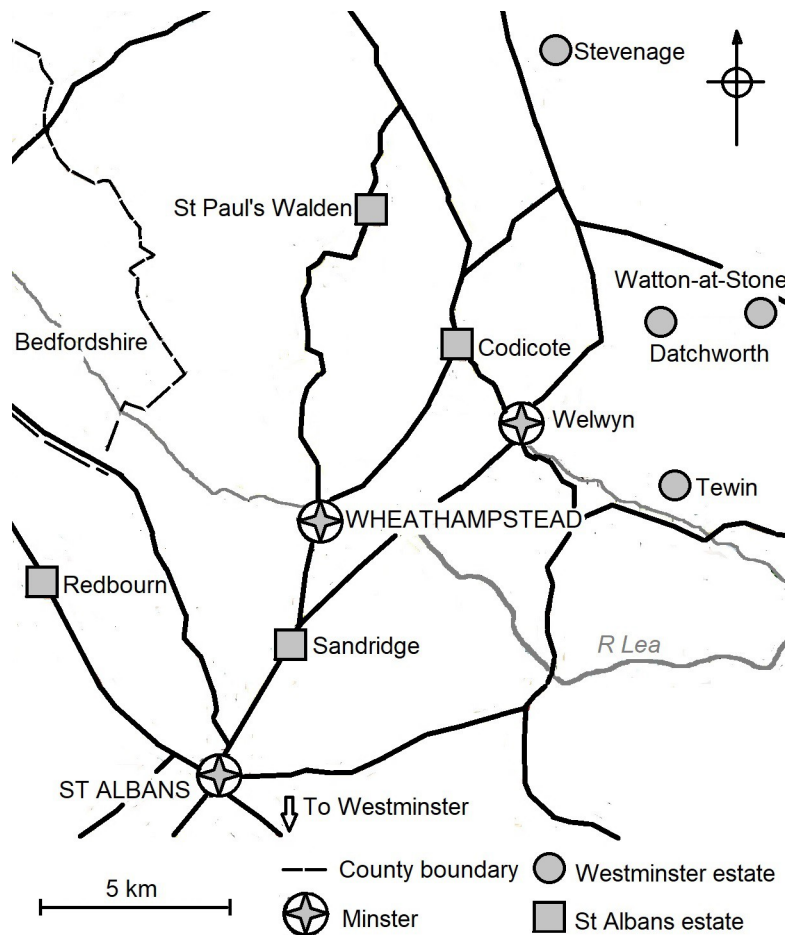

Fig 12. Estates of Westminster and St Albans in the vicinity of Wheathampstead in 1066

Conclusion

The earliest surviving fabric of the church at Wheathampstead pertains to a cruciform building, which, it is suggested here, was founded by Edward the Confessor shortly before 1060. Westminster Abbey, to which he granted the estate in that year, may actually have built the church. There is every chance that work was not completed until after the Conquest. While the eleventh century fabric at Wheathampstead is of considerable interest, the remains of the early doorway are hardly the church's most aesthetically pleasing feature (Fig 4). The Decorated work here is of the finest quality, as exemplified by the reredos for the altar of St Nicholas in the north transept (Fig 3). A study of the later medieval architectural history of the church would certainly be welcomed.

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