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There was I digging this 'ole...

This month I had my first taste of real archaeology, digging a couple of test pits, and along with my colleagues I worked and installed the new sections of hoodmould I've been working on.

One of my current assignments for my Foundation Degree is about project planning; the intricacies of what is involved from start to finish of a project. I have chosen to focus on the planning and installation of a new font that will be installed at the west end of the Cathedral at some point in the near future. For my assignment I need to interview the key people involved in the project which includes project manager, cathedral architect and cathedral archaeologist (Chiz) to get their perspective on how the project will run from the initial start-up meeting to the installing of the font. Through this assignment I will gain valuable insight into the stages of the project and all the details that are involved in such a project like time schedules and health and safety. I am particularly interested in the installation font as it requires working in the cathedral which will remain open while the work goes on. How will this impact daily worship, work and visitors experience?



One of the key early stages of the project has been to establish what lies beneath the current floor of the cathedral around the area where the font will go. To establish what is there Chiz needed to dig a couple of tests pits. A few weeks earlier in the project a radar scan was made of area where the font will be installed. The digging of the pits helped to confirm some of what the radar results the pits helps to establish what there is below the surface so that the designer, architect, engineers know it will take the weight of the new design. The pits also afford to chance to see what items of significant interest might lie beneath the surface - the pits act as a window into the past. But as I learnt, not all what you find and see might be telling the whole story either. There is the possibility that things we found might have come from other digs in the abbey and cathedral over the centuries which have been used as infill. Fortunately, I had Chiz with me to inform and guide me.



The two pits that I helped to dig, work and record were one meter square. We worked them down to depth of around 600mm. Chiz kindly and helpfully guided me through the steps of working away the soil and debris of each 'context'. The context is the level and place where there is change in the substrate i.e. soft soil giving way to a more compact mud or a mortar matrix and surface. At each new context we stopped and noted and recorded things of varying interest, from the type and make-up of the soil to the size and shape of fragment of bricks that we found. By the time we had worked down to the required depth around six layers strata of previous floors could be seen.

Things we found included fragments of tiles and brick probably used as infill on the previous occasions when the floor and tiles have been relaid or a 'new' floor laid. I found a pound coin on the second day of digging. I think Chiz might have popped it in the ground the night before help encourage me to keep digging in the hope my hope finding some holy grail!

The Foundation Degree aims to give us students a taste of different aspects of conservation and restoration of historic buildings - project planning being something which some of us may find ourselves doing in future. It was really good for me and my project to see this part of the process first-hand and to be fortunate enough to be able to take part in the process. It is easy when being a mason to simply work the stone component required and install it and not to think about all the planning and all the meetings that have gone into get it into the place when they it will live. A real eye opener and a privilege to work with Chiz.

It was very nice to be in the cathedral for these two days, with visitors interested in what we were doing and what we had or might find. The thrill of the possibility of discovering something is great and part of the addiction, I imagine, for those who do this work full time - it certainly worked for me, but I think I'll stick to masonry.

Ancient and modern

For most of this past month I have continued working on the restoration of sections of the hoodmould which sit above the window on the west face at the base of the tower.

After finishing the cutting out of the old stones, it was time to work the new ones. The three blocks of stone required for the new ones were cut on the saw table to within a few millimetres of the required size. I applied the face and section templates to the stone and scribed the outlines so that I knew where to work to. The moulding of the stones is fairly simple: a couple of chamfers, a shallow cavetto, a crooked joint



on the bed, with all of these running the length of the gentle arc. After about a week of working my stone, with some tips to improve my efficiency and techniques from Pascal, the stones were ready to fix. The moment of truth, would they fit?

I had previously done all my checks with templates in the now voids where the old stones had been. I was fairly confident of the fit, but I admit that a tiny part of me feared getting the stones up into place finding something was wrong, with either the size, but more so the curve. However, I had no need to be concerned as they each fitted very well, only a modest bit of trimming on the cavetto of each stone so that they matched-up with the stones either side of them.

An interesting and challenging part of the process and operation was getting the stones to the west face of the tower. It was done in the time-honoured fashion that masons from the ancient and medieval worlds would easily recognise - a series of ropes, chains and pulleys. First up to the top of scaffold in the compound by the north ambulatory using the hoist. Then each stone was transferred to a trolley and wheeled round to the next section, the gantry by the towers on the north transept. From here each stone was strapped up and winched up via a chain to the gantry. Next, they were each wheeled round on another trolley to the next section of scaffold, along the west face of the north transept. Strapped up again and then winched up to the scaffold alongside the north nave. Then up and over the parapet and onto the roof of the nave via an improvised seesaw which helped us get the stones past this tricky section. Then using a series of straps and combined muscle, we lifted them from the roof onto the scaffold. And then finally up and into the rightful places. After a bit of manipulating, they were ready to be grouted; a few days later pointed; the pointing tended; then the pointing was scratched back. Job done!

