St James, West Teignmouth: The Medieval Church and its Settlement Context

Daniel Secker

St James, West Teignmouth, Devon: the medieval church and its settlement context

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With the exception of the west tower, the medieval church of St James was thought to have been entirely demolished when a new church was built between 1817 and 1821. It has however been noticed that the plinth of the medieval north transept survives. The west tower itself is also studied. The architectural details suggest it was commissioned by Henry Marshal, Bishop of Exeter from 1194 to 1206. Despite extensive destruction of the medieval town, an attempt has been made to reconstruct its topography from cartographic sources

Introduction

The church of St James, now St James the Less, West Teignmouth (SX 9392 7309) is situated just west of the town centre and about twenty kilometres south of Exeter (Fig 1). The church (Fig 2) was rebuilt in 1817-21, but retains a medieval west tower. It was thought all other traces of the medieval church had been destroyed, but observation by this writer on 11th May 2014 indicated that the plinth of the medieval north transept was still visible from the staircase leading down to a modern boiler shed. Since the cramped conditions of the staircase made photography of the feature impossible, a stone-by-stone elevation was undertaken, together with an outline plan of the present church to establish the context of the medieval feature. While there was neither the time nor resources for the systematic recording of the west tower, the latter was photographed and simplified drawings of the elevations and details made.
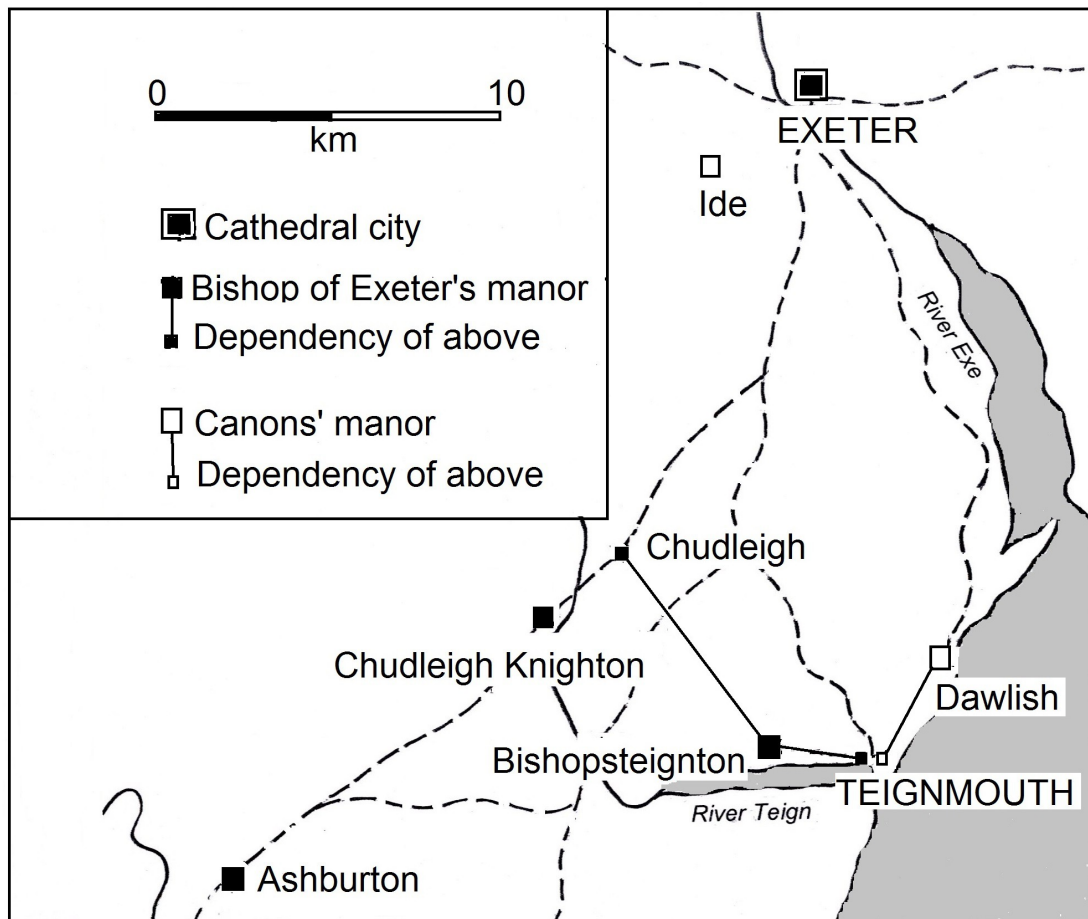
Fig 1. Teignmouth: location showing manors of bishop and canons

Previous accounts

The church is mentioned by Daniel Lysons in his *Magna Britannia* (Lysons 1822, 477), with a more detailed account being made by Oliver and Pike-Jones (1828, 44-5). It was again briefly mentioned by Samuel Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary* (1833). In the latter two works, the church is merely referred to as 'St James'. It is only specifically referred to as 'St James the Less' by Jordan and Jordan (1904). More recently, an account of the church was given by Phyllis Bradley (Bradley 1968) and a brief architectural description in *The Buildings of England* (Cherry and Pevsner 1991, 796).

Fig 2. St James, West Teignmouth: west tower from west

Historical summary

In a charter of 1044, Edward the Confessor granted his then chaplain, after 1050 bishop of Exeter, Leofric, the manor of Dawlish (Fig 1). The charter bounds make it clear that the estate included the church of St Michael in *Tenge muthan* (Sawyer 1968, No. 1003). Before his death in 1072, Leofric granted the manor to the canons of Exeter, and Dawlish is stated as being one of four manors set aside for the sustenance of the canons in Domesday (Williams and Martin 2002, 283). West Teignmouth is not mentioned in Domesday, but was part of the huge manor of Bishopsteignton (ibid). After Leofric's death, Bishopsteignton passed to bishop Osbern fitz Osbern (1072-1103). The brother of William I's regent, William fitz Osbern (d. 1071), Osbern had been a royal chaplain under Edward the Confessor (1042-66) and held the chapelry of Bosham in Sussex together with extensive lands attached to it (VCH 1953, 185).

Teignmouth is mentioned in 1220, when a market in East Teignmouth was granted to the canons of Exeter (GMF Teignmouth, East). In 1256, the bishop of Exeter was granted a market and fair at Bishopsteignton on the feast-day of St James the Great, 25th July (ibid, Bishopsteignton). It has been argued that this was a West Teignmouth due to the dedication of fair and church (Kowaleski 1995, 366). This assertion is supported by topographical evidence of a marketplace adjacent to the church discussed below. St James's chapel is first specifically mentioned in Folio 64 of the register of Bishop Walter Bronescombe of 1257-80 (Hingeston-Randolph 1889, 270). West Teignmouth had certainly achieved urban status by 1291, when the *Taxatio* of Pope Nicholas IV recorded that the bishop's estate of *Teygnemuwe Burgus* was worth £15, 5s (ibid, 473). That the borough was a thriving place by 1337 is suggested by its provision of 7 ships for Edward III's war effort (Martin and Martin 2002, 14).

Teignmouth was raided by the French in 1340 after which the town never recovered; the market and fair at West Teignmouth were apparently defunct by c.1350 (Kowalseki 1995, 32, 44, 47).

The chapel of St James had a cemetery by 1448, since Nicholas Upton stated in his will that he wished to be buried there. He also left bequests to the altars of the Holy Ghost and the Blessed Virgin within the chapel (Oliver and Pike-Jones 1828, 44). The manors of Bishopsteignton and West Teignmouth were alienated by the Bishops of Exeter to Sir Andrew Veysey in 1549 (Lysons 1822, 478).

The dedication

In all accounts of the church before Jordan and Jordan (1904), the church is merely referred to as 'St James'. By the later nineteenth century it was presumably forgotten which St James the church had originally been dedicated to. It is far more likely to have been St James the Great.   It was this saint's feast day that the fair at Bishopsteignton, which it has been suggested above was at West Teignmouth was held. Moreover, the cult of St James the Less was very rare in medieval Western Europe (Rose 2009, 129).   By contrast, the cult of the mythical St James the Great of Compostela flourished in the West the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Van Harwaarden 2003, 314). Teignmouth is well placed to be an embarkation point for maritime pilgrimage to Compostela, though there is no direct evidence it was used as such.

The medieval morphology of Teignmouth

Due to a combination of destruction by French fleets in 1340 and 1690, development as a seaside resort in the nineteenth century and Second World War bombing, Teignmouth is one of the least well understood medieval ports in England. Some

clues as to its topography can however be gleaned from a panorama of 1741, a map of 1842 (CA 2008a, 10-11) and 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps (Fig 3).
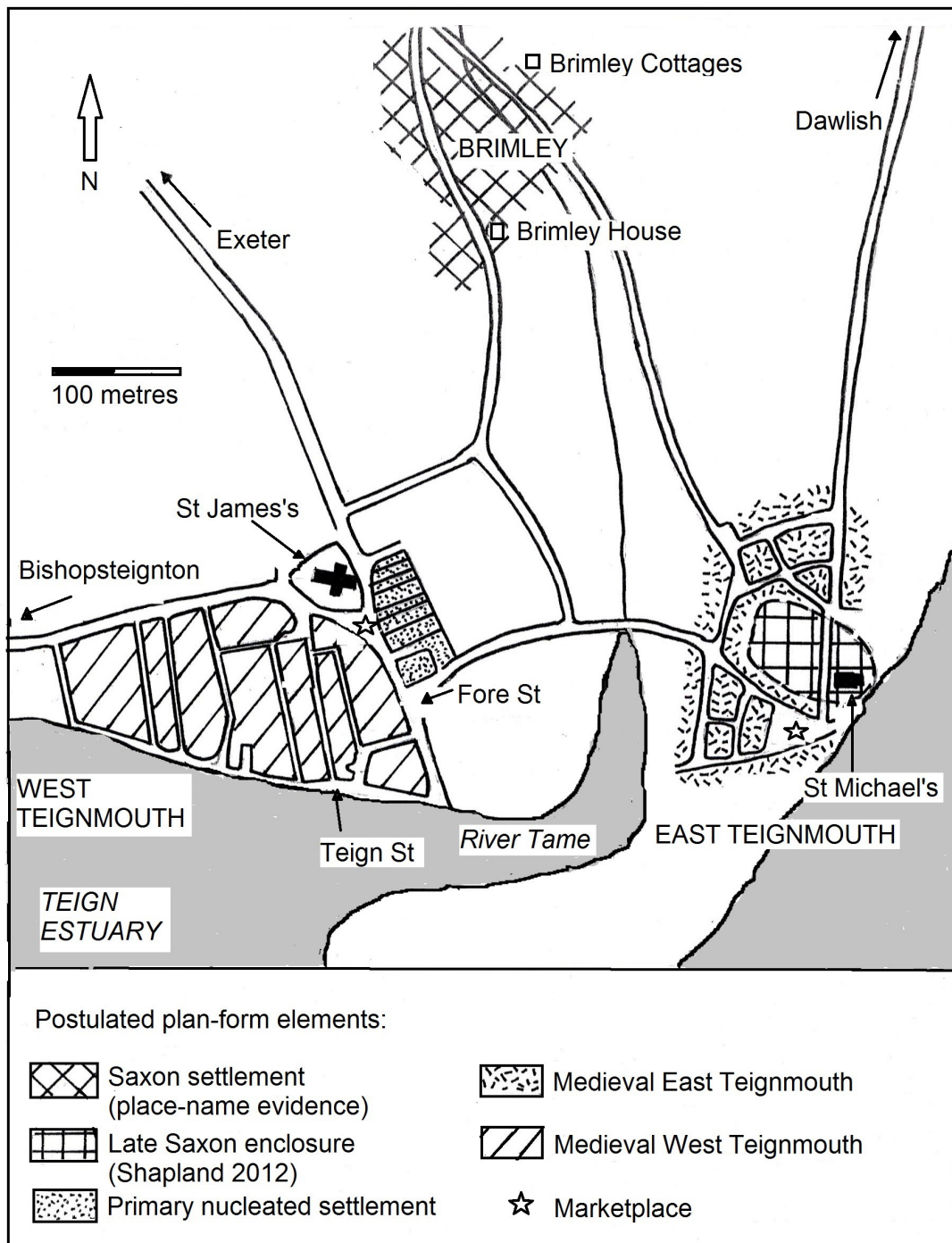

Fig 3. Teignmouth: conjectural medieval topography based on panorama of 1741, map of 1842 and other sources

Though West Teignmouth is not mentioned in Domesday, it is likely that at least some of the 24 salt-pans listed under Bishopsteignton (Williams and Martin 2002,

283) were here. Furthermore, there is the place-name Brimley, preserved in the Brimley House and Brimley Cottages. This is from the Old English *brom-leah*, 'brushwood clearing' and suggestive of minor settlement here by the late Saxon period.

   The settlements of West and East Teignmouth were separated from each other by the river Tame, a small stream which led into a creek adjoining the Teign estuary. The creek was extant in 1741, but was infilled in the early nineteenth century (CA 2008a, 10-11). East Teignmouth was centred on St Michael's church, where later property boundaries appear to define an ovoid feature around the church. Dr Michael Shapland has suggested this represents a relict late Saxon enclosure, perhaps related to the 'great ditch' mentioned in 1044 (Shapland 2013, 448). What may have been the medieval streets of East Teignmouth formed a radial pattern around the postulated enclosure in 1842. It has also been suggested that the triangular street pattern to the south of St Michael's may represent an infilled marketplace (CA 2008b, 12). West Teignmouth must have grown up around Fore Street. On the east side of the street, the 1842 map shows a number of tenement plots about 30m long. It is possible these represent an early planned settlement. The church and churchyard occupy the junction of the roads to Newton Abbot (now Bitton Park Street) and Exeter (Exeter Street). To the south of the church, the street broadened to form a triangular area. This would appear to be the most likely site of the medieval marketplace of West Teignmouth. The area to the south-west of St James's was destroyed by Second World War bombing, but the 1841 map shows a series of parallel lanes perpendicular to the Newton Abbot road and what was the waterfront before the early nineteenth century (modern Teign Street). Though the buildings of Teignmouth were almost entirely destroyed in the French raid of 1690, the medieval street pattern may have

been retained. The pattern of a road running parallel to the original waterfront with several lateral lanes running down to the quayside is comparable to the medieval topography of Dartmouth (CAA 2013, 4) and the fourteenth-century development of Sandwich in Kent (Clarke *et al* 2010, 56).

It is therefore suggested that the church stood at the north-eastern corner of the later medieval town, but at the north-western corner of a small planned settlement that preceded it.

The churchyard

The churchyard is roughly triangular, measuring about 65m NNW-SSE by 38m WSW-ENE (Fig 4). To the NNW, it is level with the external street level but to the south and west, there is a drop of up to three metres to the street. This, however, is less apparent on an engraving now in the church nave (Fig 5). From the appearance of the houses on the right hand side of the engraving, it was made shortly before the medieval church was demolished. Judging from the engraving, which is probably of c.1800 it would appear the road to the south of the churchyard was deepened in the nineteenth century. It is however apparent that the present south wall of the churchyard is on an original boundary. The churchyard wall to the east pre-dates the early nineteenth-century rebuilding of the church, since the base of the ENE turret of the 1817-21 building rests on the wall.   The irregular boundary to the north is indicated on the 1842 map, but is probably post-medieval. The medieval boundary was perhaps aligned on Bitton Park Street (Fig 4).
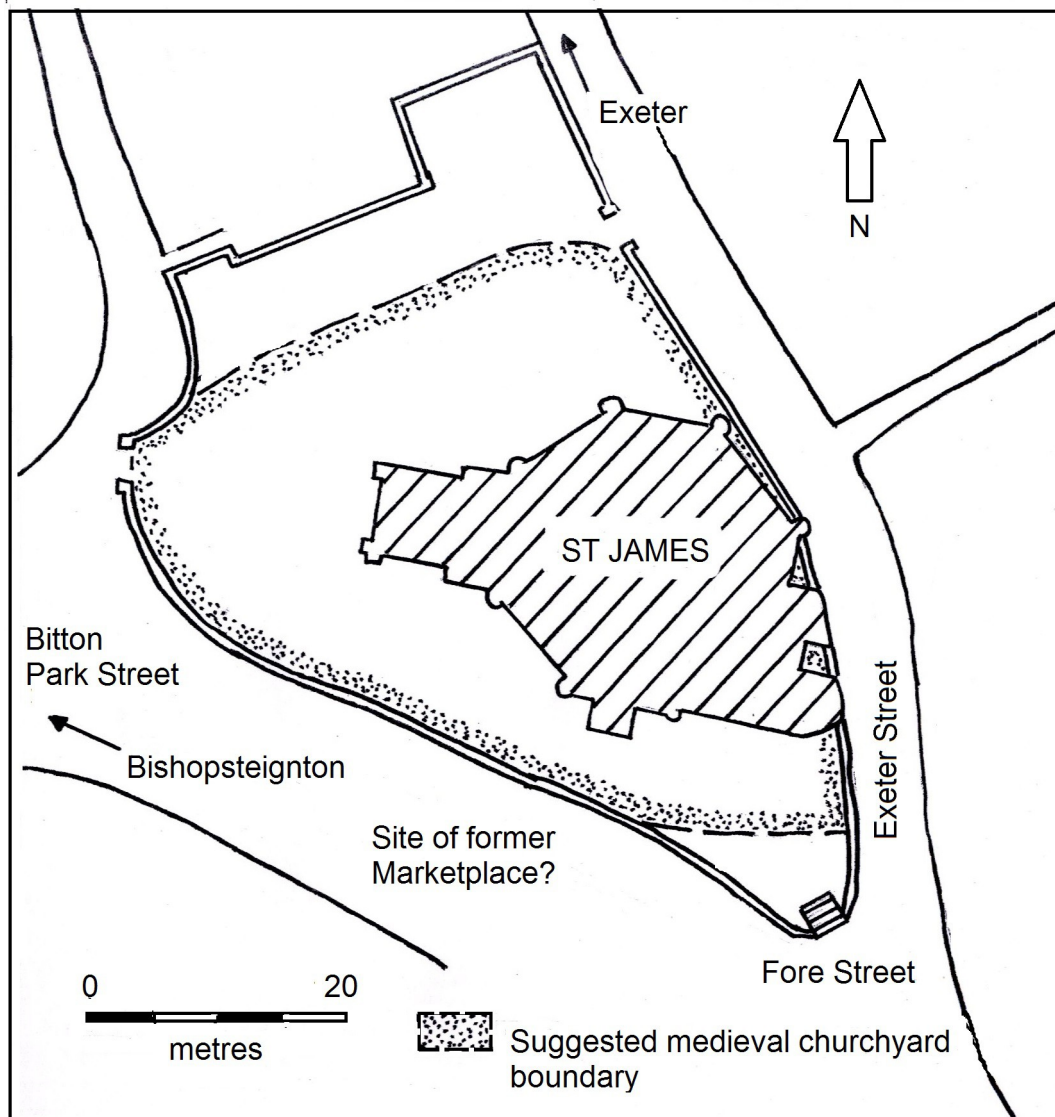
Fig 4. St James, West Teignmouth: churchyard

The church

The medieval church was almost wholly rebuilt in 1817-21 (Cherry and Pevsner 1991, 796) apart from the west tower and as is now apparent, the plinth of the north transept (Fig 6). The tower is described and discussed in detail below. The early 19th century building is of unusual form, being octagonal with eight angle turrets and with an internal lantern supported by iron piers.

Though the medieval church is lost there is important evidence for its appearance on the c.1800 engraving (Fig 5). The latter shows that the church was aisled and

Fig 5. St James, West Teignmouth: engraving of c. 1800 now in church

cruciform. The chancel has two-light Decorated windows between which was what appears to have been a priest's doorway. The south transept has a three-light Decorated window in the east wall and a Perpendicular window in the south wall. Judging from the surviving topography, the proportions of the church in the engraving are accurate.

The benchmark of the church, in the north-western turret of the 1819-22 building and at 0.8m above ground level is set at 15.00m OD (Fig 6). There is however a distinct descent to the east of this point on the southern side of the church.
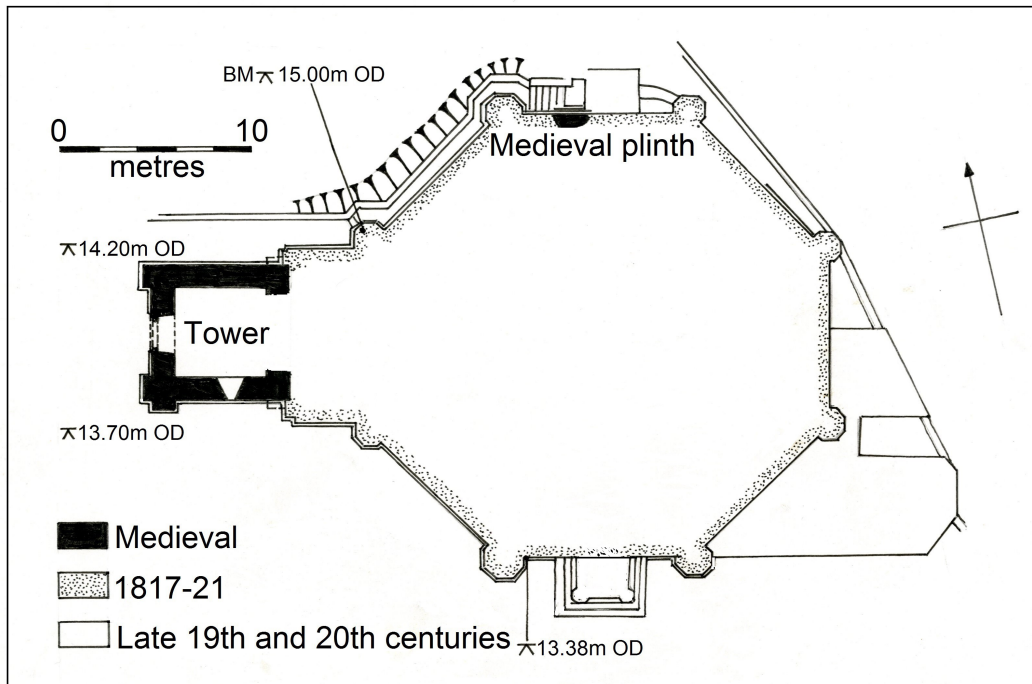
Fig 6. St James, West Teignmouth: plan with 19th and 20th century features shown in outline

The tower

Description

The tower is rubble built throughout, even including the quoins and most of the dressings (Figs 2, 6-7). It is constructed of red sandstone, breccia (a conglomerate in a red sandstone matrix), limestone and some volcanic tuff. All the materials are from the immediate locality (CA 2008a, 5). The tower is 7.2 metres square externally at the base with walls 1.2m thick. There is however a slight taper. The tower is about 15.5 metres high to the top of the parapet (Fig 7). The base of the tower is surrounded by a moulded and plastered plinth which appears to be an addition of 1819-22. To the north-east is a low buttress projecting west while at the south-west corner are right-angled buttresses of identical projection and height which are original features apart from the cappings which are part of a restoration of 1929.
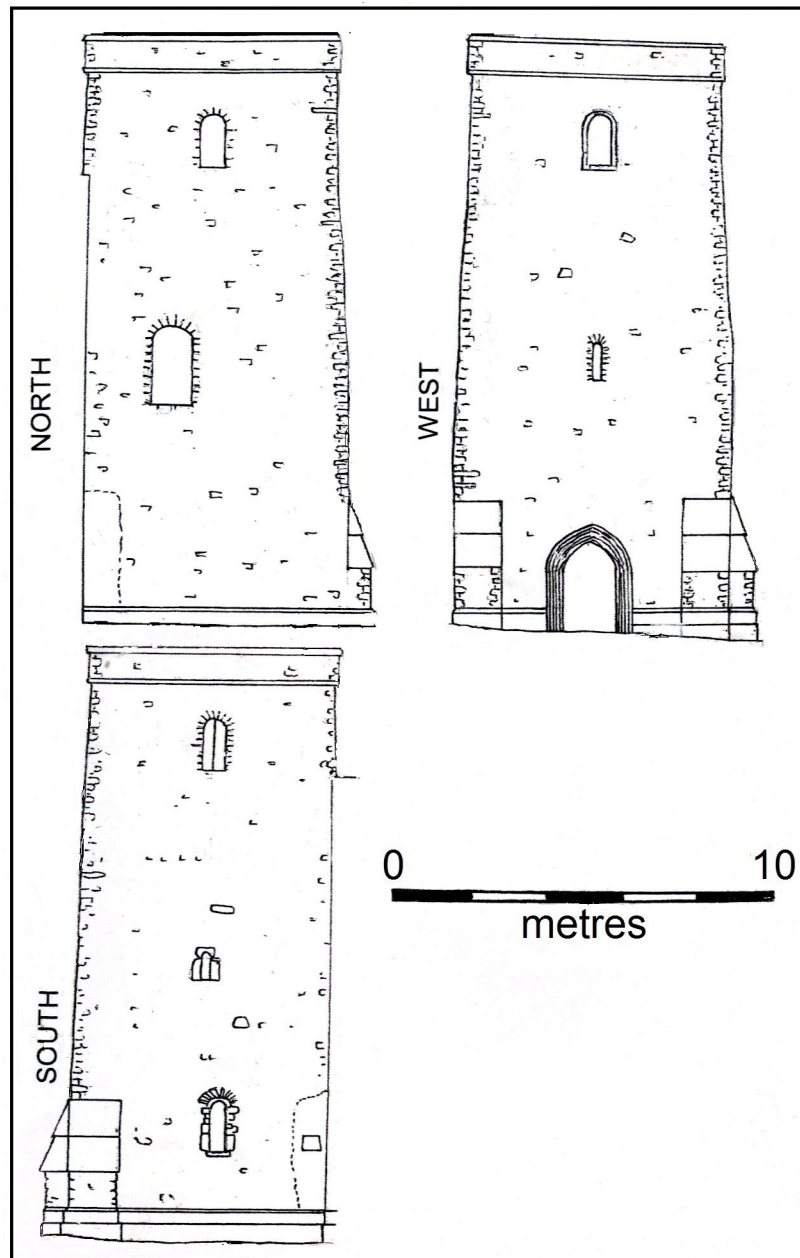
Fig 7. St James, West Teignmouth: elevations of tower (modern fittings omitted for clarity)

Patched-up scars at the eastern ends of the north and south walls indicate there were further buttresses at these points. The heavily limewashed west doorway is two-centred and of multiple continuous orders. The only window at ground floor level is a tall narrow window in the south wall with a round-headed relieving arch (Fig 8a). Though a modern grille over the window gives the impression of a pointed
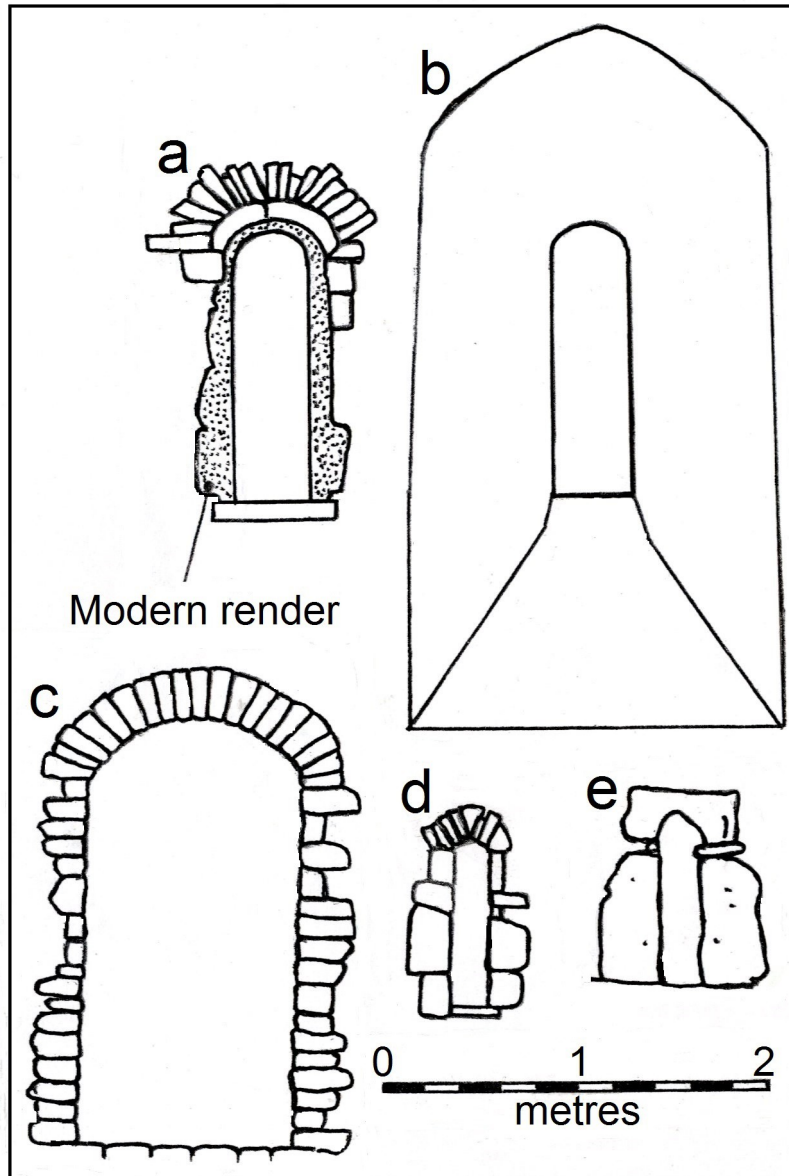
Fig 8. St James, West Teignmouth: details of tower

lancet, the window is round-headed. The splay, however, has a depressed two-centred rear-arch (Fig 8b). At first floor level, there is a blocked hanging doorway east of centre of the north wall with a segmental head (Fig 8c). In the west wall is a narrow slit-like window also with a segmental head (Fig 8d). In the south wall is a small round-headed window of limestone with monolithic jambs (Fig 8e). At second floor level, the tower windows are obscured by clock faces (Fig 2), but it can be seen that the north and west windows had plain round heads (Fig 7). The south window was of

14

similar form, but its eastern half has been blocked at some point. At wall-head level is a slightly projecting low, plain parapet.

Date and patron of the tower

The west doorway is Decorated work of the early fourteenth century. The multiple mouldings are paralleled in the arcades of Exeter Cathedral, of 1275-1329 (Cherry and Pevsner 1991, 368-9, and plate 20). It is however clear the doorway is a later insertion. Elsewhere in the tower, the combination of round-headed and segmental openings together with the depressed two-centred head of the rear-arch of the ground floor window (Fig 8a-d) are indicative of Transitional work of the closing years of the twelfth century or the opening ones of the thirteenth . The details if not the form of the tower have strong analogies in the transformation of Chepstow Castle, Monmouthshire, made under William Marshal between 1189 and 1219. Segmental arches like that of the hanging doorway at West Teignmouth are employed in most of the doorways in Marshal's work at Chepstow, for instance in the main gatehouse, now dated to c. 1190 (Avent and Miles 2006, esp. fig 42). The ground floor window at West Teignmouth, round-headed but with a depressed two-centred rear-arch is paralleled in the first floor of the very early 13th century Marshal's Tower at Chepstow Castle (Turner 2006, esp. fig 59). The slightly projecting parapet of the tower at West Teignmouth is normally paralleled in buildings of a later date, for instance the Mill Tower at Pickering Castle, North Yorkshire of 1323-7 (Matarasso 1995, 148). Parapets of the late twelfth century typically rise straight from the walls. There are however exceptions. A slightly projecting parapet occurs at Henry II's *donjon* at Orford, Suffolk, of 1165-73 (ibid, 80). More significantly, Chepstow again provides an analogy to Teignmouth. There are the slight remnants of a projecting parapet to

the rear of the D-shaped tower which flanks the middle bailey gateway (Avent and Turner, 2006, Fig 52).

Given the analogies between the tower at West Teignmouth and William Marshal's work at Chepstow Castle, it is surely no coincidence that the bishop of Exeter between 1194 and 1206 was none other that William's younger brother, Henry Marshal (Crouch 1990, 174). It is almost certain that the tower was commissioned by Henry, and quite possible that William Marshal's masons were employed in its execution.

. One anomaly in the tower at West Teignmouth is the round-headed limestone window in the south wall of the first floor (Fig 8e). While it is just possibly contemporary with the tower, the monolithic jambs and head are more characteristic of Saxo-Norman work of the later eleventh century. A surveyed example of a church with this type of window is Hardham, Sussex (Aldsworth 1982). As noted above, bishop Osbern of Exeter (1072-1103) held the manor of Bosham in Sussex. It is thus suggested that the window was recycled from an earlier chapel at West Teignmouth that had been commissioned by Osbern. It is possible the window was from the west wall of a nave which was demolished or altered when bishop Marshal's west tower was built.

Function of the tower

It has been suggested that the tower formed part of the defensive circuit of the town (CA 2008a, 12). As argued above, however, the tower is most unlikely to be later than the early thirteenth century. Conversely, the documentary evidence suggests West Teignmouth acquired urban characteristics in the mid 13th century at the earliest, if it is accepted the 1256 grant of a market was indeed at West Teignmouth; it was

only by 1291 that the settlement was certainly a borough (GMF West Teignmouth). The tower thus related to a village rather than a town.

Nevertheless, there are signs that the tower was built with low-level defence in mind, notwithstanding the somewhat vulnerable ground floor window. The tower has a parapet which would have commanded the point where Fore Street met the former creek of the River Tame (Fig 3). This is a plausible site for an early ships' landing-place.   The tower also intercepts the road junction between a northern route which led to Exeter, while what is now Bitton Park Street led to Bishopsteignton (Fig 1). The hanging doorway in the first floor of the tower suggests security was a consideration. Hanging doorways are usually an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, the majority being in the south wall (Hare 2009, 84-5). That at Deerhurst, Gloucestershire, at least may have been associated with the display of relics (ibid, 52-70, 86). There are however later examples. At Leeds in Kent, there are opposed doorways in the first floor of the massive early twelfth-century west tower there. This writer has suggested that the otherwise windowless first floor of the tower, which was only ever two storeys high, served as a guardroom flanking the approach to a vanished manor house which was the precursor of Leeds Castle (Secker forthcoming). The chapel at West Teignmouth had no attached manorial complex, but was situated on routes from the Teign estuary to the bishop of Exeter's estates. The tower dates from a time when English possessions in Normandy were being increasingly eroded before finally being lost in 1204 and 'for the first time since 1066 control of the sea became a military requirement' (Barlow 1999, 336).   Bishop Henry Marshal may therefore have seen the writing on the wall and commissioned a defensive tower at west Teignmouth to protect the nascent port. Furthermore, before1190 a stannary (tin-mining) town was established on the Bishop of Exeter's manor of Ashburton (Burls 2002, 241). From

the latter, Teignmouth would be a more convenient place for export of tin than Exeter. The former was certainly engaged in costal trade with Winchelsea, Sussex in the 1260s (Martin and Martin 2002, 9), though it is uncertain what was being traded. The tower of St James's church might thus have had a function as a strongroom for valuable imports.

A possibility that needs considering is that the tower served as a lighthouse. The parapet would be where the beacon was lit while the hanging doorway provided independent access for the lighthouse keeper. A purpose-built lighthouse is known to have been built shortly after the date suggested for the tower at West Teignmouth. This was the Tower of Hook of the Irish coast commissioned by bishop Henry's brother William Marshal (Avent 2006). The problem with this interpretation is that the tower at West Teignmouth is a little too far inland for such a function. Moreover, a much more suitable structure for a lighthouse would be the former tower at St Michael, East Teignmouth (Fig 3). Here, before its demolition in 1822, there was a Romanesque church of probable tower-nave form (Shapland 2013, 442-7).

The north transept foundation plinth

Description

The foundations of the former medieval north transept are exposed at the base of the stairs leading to the twentieth century boiler-shed (Fig 9). The base of the visible foundations is 1.64m below that of the tower. They are largely composed of red sandstone but with some breccia and limestone. The wall is of irregularly coursed rubble blocks generally 0.2-0.5 metres long. The walling now comprises of an apparent two-step plinth. The lower wall is 0.69metres high, the upper one

0.34metres high. The upper step is now entirely capped with modern cement, but some of the masonry of the lower step is visible.
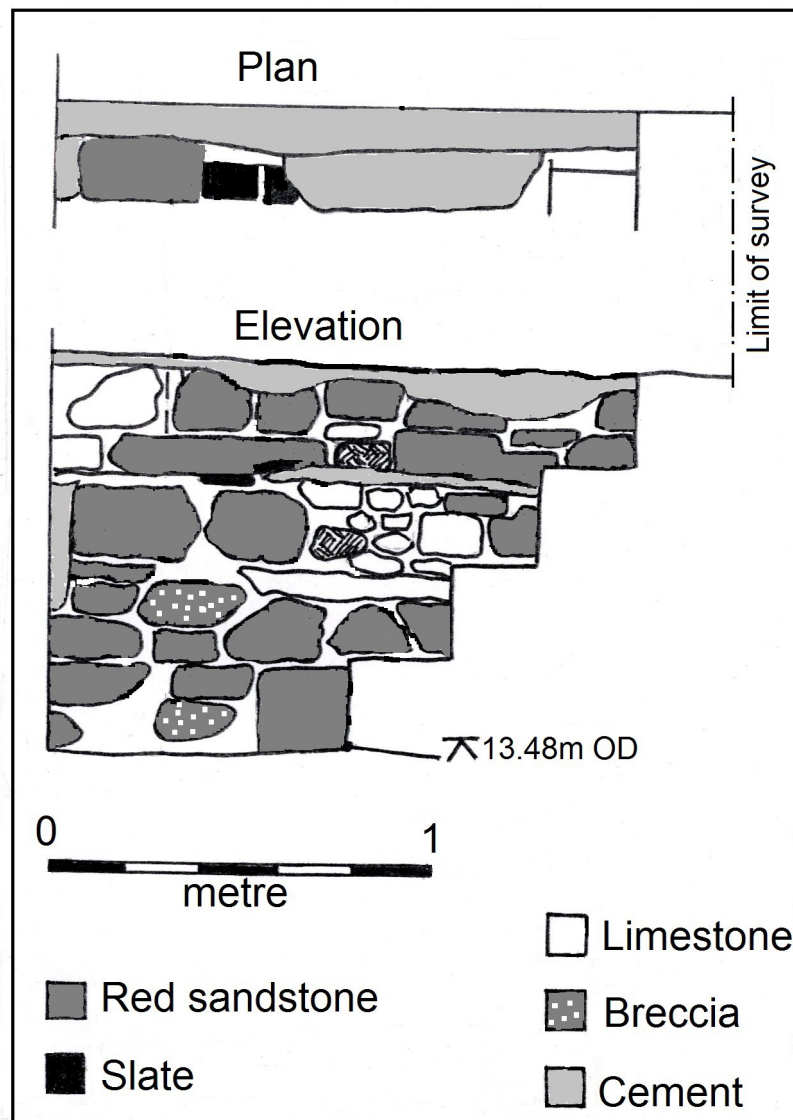

Fig 9. St James, West Teignmouth: foundation plinth of medieval north transept

Discussion

The purpose of the plinth appears to have been to compensate for the fall in ground level here before the present build-up of grave-earth. If it is accepted that the medieval floor level of the transept was at the same height as the top of the upper step of the plinth, the floor would be 0.07m above the external south-west corner of the

tower. While the plinth fixes the northern extent of the medieval north transept, it does not fix its western and eastern extents. These must be extrapolated from the c.1800 engraving (Fig 5), assuming the north transept was of identical dimensions to the south one. The medieval chancel, which was just over 9m long, had an east end on the same line 1819-22 one (Fig 10). The transepts were about the same external width as the tower (7.2m). It is therefore suggested the corners of the medieval transepts were situated between the four central turrets of the 1817-21 building.

The plinth has no datable details, but it is reasonable to assume that the north transept was contemporary with the south one. On the basis of the Decorated window depicted on the c.1800 engraving in the east wall of that transept (Fig 5), both transepts were late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in date.

Reconstructing the development of the church

0 _____ 10
metres

North Transept

North Aisle

Tower

Nave

Chancel

South Aisle

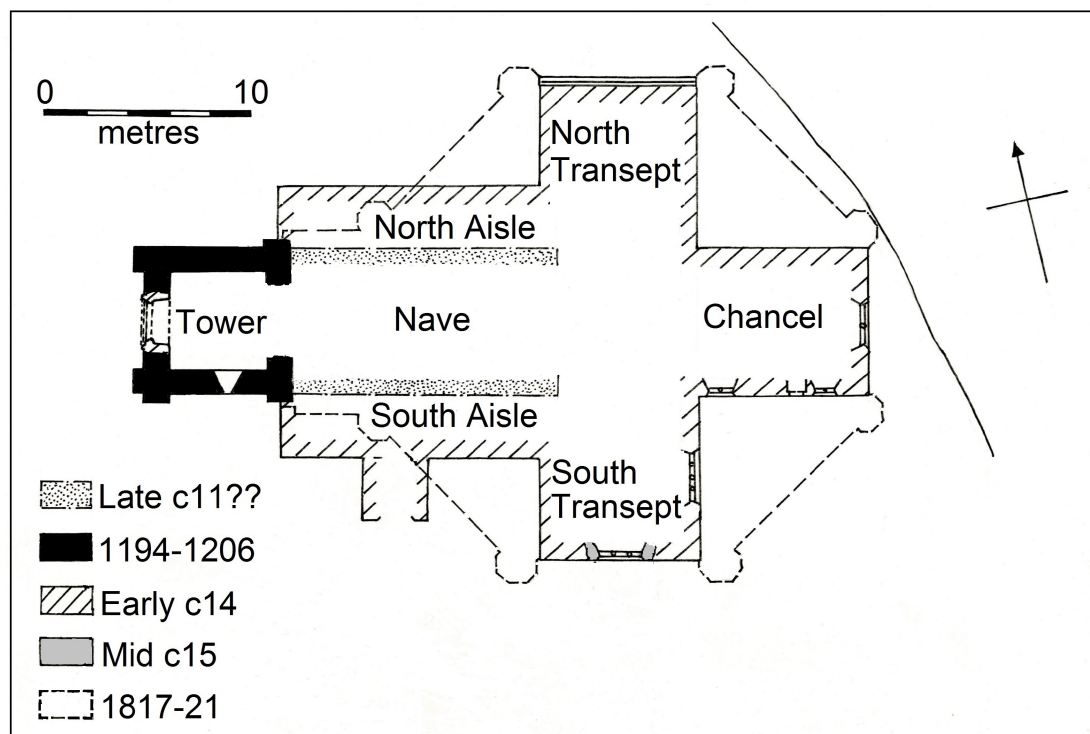South Transept

Late c11??
1194-1206
Early c14
Mid c15
1817-21

Fig 10. St James, west Teignmouth: reconstruction of plan of medieval church

Despite the almost entire rebuilding of the church in 1819-22, a combination of structural, pictorial and *ex situ* evidence allows for a tentative picture of the development of the medieval church to be suggested (Fig 10).

Though the tower is the earliest surviving structure, the window in the south wall of the first floor of the tower (Fig 8e) appears to have come from a Saxo-Norman building, perhaps the west wall of a nave which was demolished or altered when the tower was added. The form of any early nave is obviously speculative, but may have been as wide as the tower and extended as far to the east as the western walls of the later medieval transepts (Fig 10). This would give a 2:1 plan form for the nave typical of later eleventh-century minor churches (e.g. Blair 2005, 413). The window is consistent with a building commissioned by Bishop Osbern (1072-1103). The postulated late eleventh-century nave may have been retained when Bishop Marshal's tower was built in 1194-1206. The c. 1800 engraving (Fig 5) hints that the aisles were additions to the tower. While there may have been an earlier thirteenth-century phase, neither structural nor pictorial evidence survives for this. It is safest to assume the church acquired its aisled cruciform plan when the chancel was built in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The fully developed medieval church perhaps dates from the episcopate of Walter Stapledon (1307-26). Stapledon was a controversial and probably corrupt figure, but a prolific patron of churches (Burls 2002, 198, 229). His youngest brother, Thomas, ordained vicar of Bishopsteignton in 1310 (ibid, 205), is a strong candidate for the transformation of St James's.

In the fifteenth century a window was apparently inserted into the south transept. In this context, it is worth re-capping the bequest by Nicholas Upton to the church in 1448 which included bequests to the altars of the Holy Ghost and Blessed Virgin

(Oliver and Pike-Jones 1828, 44). Possibly these altars were in the transepts, and the refenestration of the south transept was connected with Upton's bequest.

The church in the context of the medieval settlement

There is slight *ex situ* architectural evidence that a chapel was founded here by Bishop Osbern (1072-1103). Leofric's bequest of Dawlish including East Teignmouth to the canons of Exeter would have deprived Osbern of a personal port, though he would have had the use of Exeter itself. It is tentatively suggested that Osbern founded a proto-port near the postulated Saxon settlement of Brimley (Fig 3), the future West Teignmouth, to compensate for the loss of East Teignmouth.

The development of the settlement at the time the tower was built, 1194-1206, is uncertain. It is however possible that the plots on the eastern side of Fore Street are this early and mark the beginning of urban pretensions realised by the establishment of a market probably in 1256 and borough status before 1291. Impetus to the growth of Teignmouth was probably also provided by the construction of a weir at Topsham, downstream from Exeter before 1290 which made the latter city inaccessible to shipping (Edwards 1987, 315). Between 1307 and 1327, the head of sheep at Bishopsteignton increased from 337 to 581 (Burls 2002, 98). This may be related to provision for a burgeoning population at West Teignmouth. The transformation of the church into a fairly substantial aisled cruciform building, perhaps begun c.1310 may be part of the same dynamic. That dynamic was short lived, the town never recovering from the depredations of the 1340s (Kowaleski 1995, 32).

Conclusion

That the plinth of the medieval north transept survives was an unexpected discovery and confirms the church of 1817-21 was partially laid out on the foundations of the medieval building. That the Bishop of Exeter in 1194-1206 was the brother of William Marshal allows, given the architectural analogies between the details of the tower at West Teignmouth and those of Marshal's work at Chepstow Castle, a highly probable date for the building of the tower at the former. There is also some evidence that the church was a late eleventh century foundation of Bishop Osbern.

It is unlikely that any more archaeological information on the medieval church will come to light, but the church of 1817-21 is one of the most interesting and innovative buildings of its time and deserving of more detailed survey. Finally, there is the settlement context. Teignmouth is one of the most thoroughly destroyed and least well understood medieval ports in England. Further documentary and cartographic research might clarify the topographical model presented here (Fig 3). It is probable even most of the below ground archaeology is lost, but should the opportunity arise, rescue excavation at Fore Street, the possible early planned settlement or Teign Street, the probable medieval waterfront, may yield results.

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