

# Chewton Mendip

## The case for a Saxon Minster and Precinct

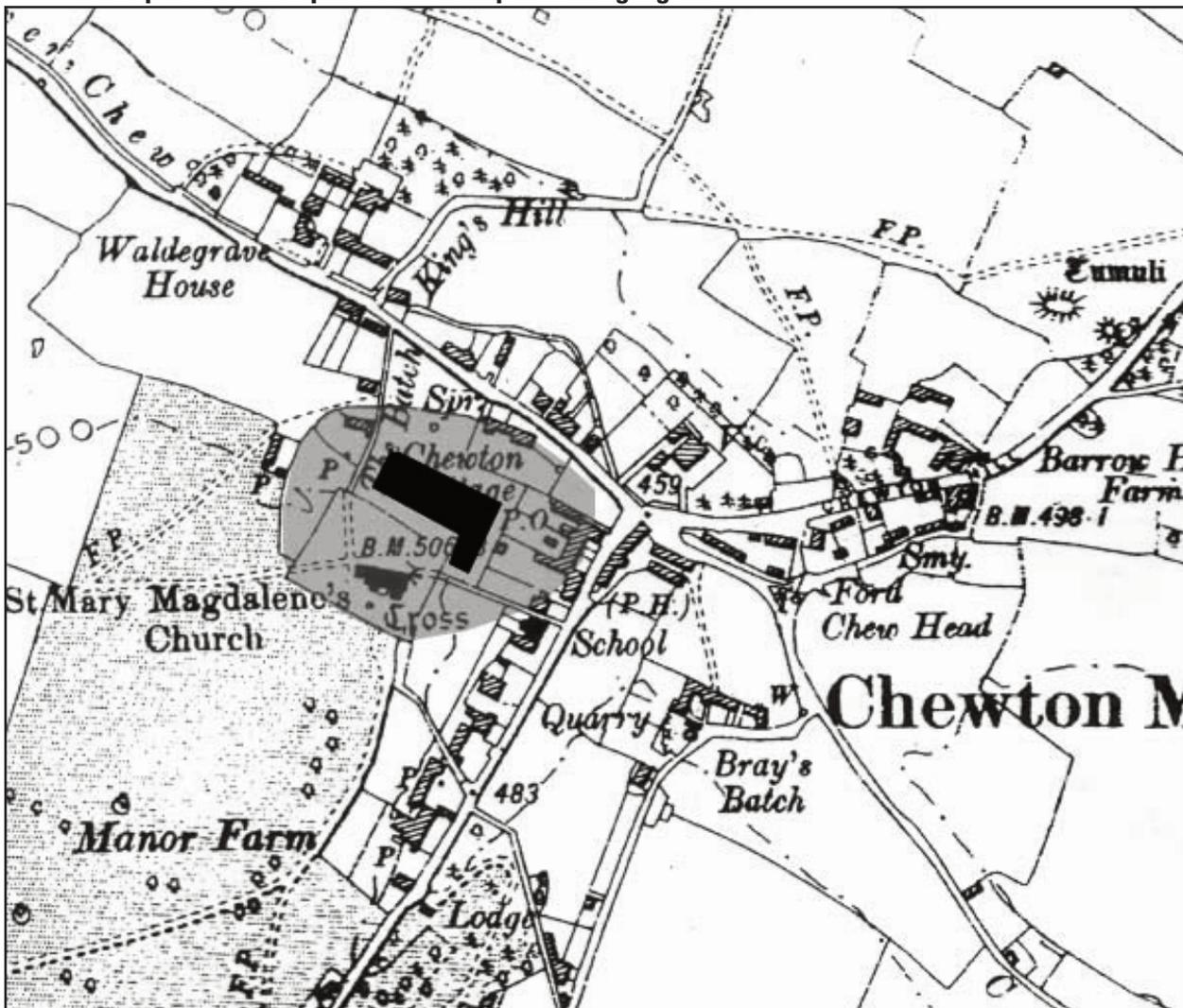
Like many others I have had the privilege of being introduced to practical geophysics surveying by John Oswin during a BACAS training dig for part of my degree course in archaeology at the University of Bristol.

**Pip Osborne** Post-degree I find myself revisiting an area of study begun with my dissertation, namely the Medieval origins of Chewton Mendip, Somerset. Who better, then, to call upon than John to investigate the possible precinct of the Saxon 'minster' church?

It was whilst scanning the centre of Chewton on Google Earth that I was surprised and excited to see a strong, circular pattern of field boundaries extending to the north and west of the churchyard. I had not noticed it on old maps, but then it had not jumped out at me as this striking image did.

I then recalled learning of John Blair's work on early minster churches in which he states that, 'In England, curvilinear monastic enclosures rarely survive as earthworks, but their outlines are often reflected in boundaries or road systems. Typically they measure between 150 and 300m across' (Blair 2005, 198). On the Ordnance Survey map of 1904 I have highlighted my projected course of the boundary (Figure 1). I estimate it to measure approximately 160m in diameter and to survive in both field boundaries and routeway. In part I believe it to have been obliterated by later building to the east and the superimposing of a later Medieval churchyard to the south.

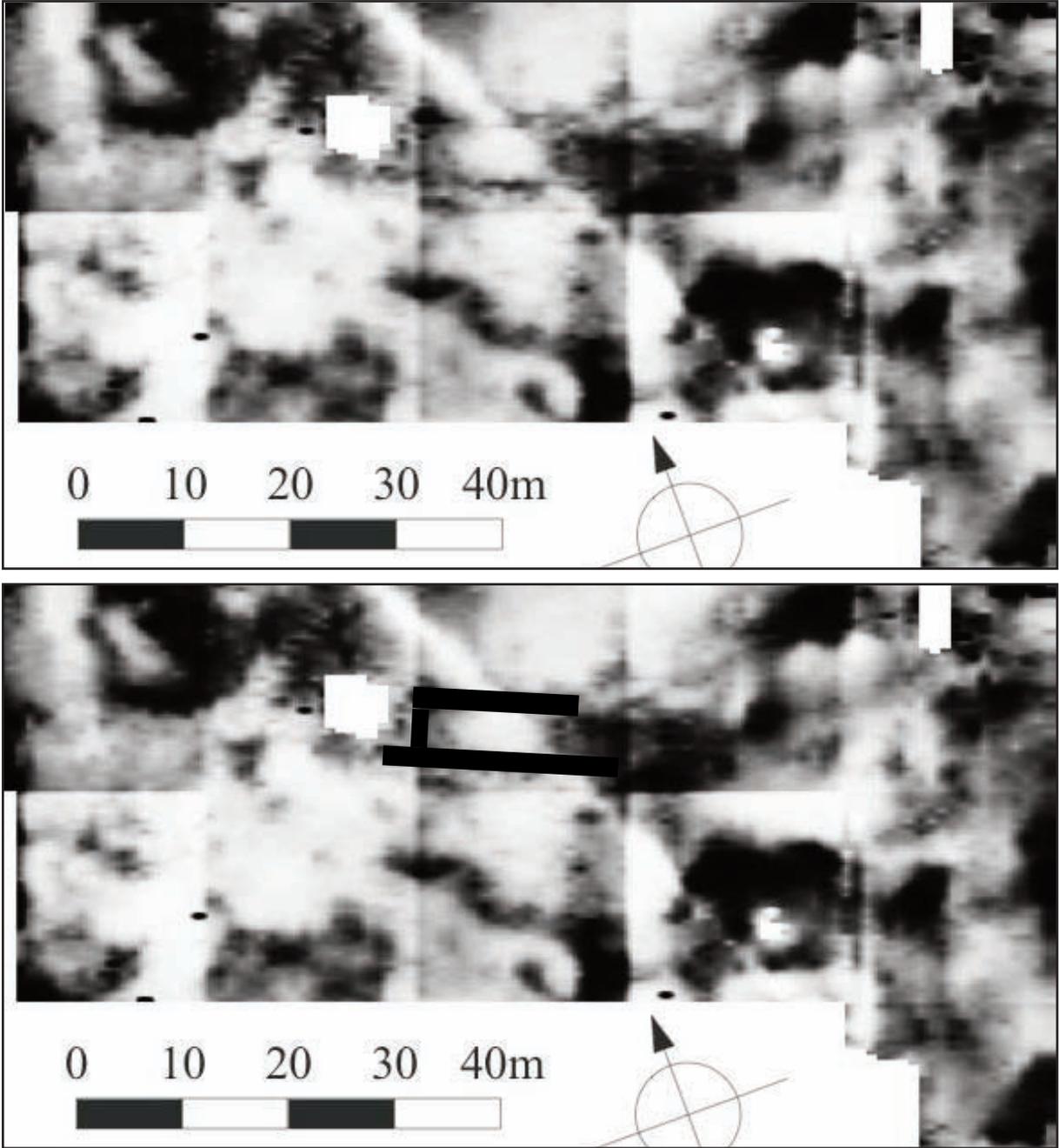
**Figure 1**  
OS map of 1904 with possible area of precinct highlighted.



But what of the documentary evidence for a minster church at Chewton? Chewton's importance as a Saxon Royal Estate and head of Chew Hundred lends weight to the possibility that it could have played a significant role ecclesiastically in Saxon times. There are several references to the church and its dependent chapelries dating to the post-Conquest era, including mention in the *Taxatio Papal Nicholai* of AD1291, where it is assessed as the third most wealthy in Somerset. All the facts point to an important church of early foundation.

It just so happened that a field within this proposed precinct boundary and lying to the north of the churchyard had not, to my knowledge, been built on in recent history. This might potentially contain archaeological evidence of the church's early origins. With the permission of the co-owners, John Oswin got underway with both resistivity and magnetometry surveys, covering an L-shaped area of approximately 220m<sup>2</sup>, over a two-day period in November 2010 (shown as solid black in Figure 2). Members of my new group Community Archaeology on the Mendip Plateau (CAMP) assisted. This was purely speculative surveying and yet the resistivity showed up the outline of a large, rectilinear building and other anomalies.

**Figure 2a/b**  
**Resistivity survey showing a rectilinear feature of a building in the top centre.**



It was decided to put in a trial trench in April 2011 to assess the nature of this building. It proved to be the very substantial foundation of a building of, as yet, unknown date. Further excavation in the summer of 2011 has established that the building was 7.8m wide by at least 26m long. We have not yet located the eastern end. The south-west corner has a beautifully constructed drain running beneath a flagstone floor, with a fine cobble surface to the exterior (*Figure 3*). Although no sealed dating deposits have been found so far, we do have an early Norman horseshoe, a Medieval copper alloy dress pin and pottery dating from between the 11th and 13th Centuries in association with the building.

From the documentary evidence we know that the Norman Benedictine Abbey of Jumieges held the church after the Conquest (Thorn C&T eds 1980). We also know that from 1414 until the Reformation it belonged to the Carthusian House of Jesus of Bethlehem at Sheen (Malden 1967, 89-94). Therefore the evidence so far points to a monastic connection for this building, but quite what it was used for remains a complete mystery. We will be continuing excavations this year in the hopes of throwing more light on the subject.

**Figure 3**  
**Aerial photo of the southwest corner of the building showing the drain feature and the cobble surface to the exterior.**



#### **References for general historical background**

- Blair, J. 2005, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford: OUP.  
Eyre, G & Strahen, A. 1802. *Taxatio ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate P. Nicholai IV, circa A.D.1291*: London  
Malden, H. ed., *Victoria History for Surrey Vol 2*, Victoria County Histories (at British Histories online).  
Thorn, C. & T eds., 1980, *Domesday Book: Somerset*, Chichester: Phillimore.

#### **Acknowledgements**

My grateful thanks to John Oswin for geophysics, Steve Tofts, John Croxford and Kay Boreland for photography and the landowners for permission to excavate.