Malmesbury, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

Malmesbury is in the small part of Wiltshire that is in the Cotswolds and therefore is on oolitic limestone that provides excellent building stone (see also Bradford-on-Avon on-line entry). The town is sited on a natural peninsula, above where streams meet to form the second of the two rivers called Avon that flow through the county (plan from Haslam 1976, 82). Despite its height, it does not lack springs, so can easily be used for settlement. A medieval tradition that it had long been an ancient fortress was justified recently when excavations on the east side defences showed definitively that, like Chisbury (see on-line entry), it had been an early Iron Age hill-fort, using the natural topography and strengthened with ramparts (Longman 2006; Collard and Havard 2011). Sites in the vicinity suggest that the hill-top could have remained a focus into the Roman period, although the Bath-Cirencester Fosse Way runs to the west and attracted settlements; an important Roman site lies to the north at Brokenborough, and to the west is a seventh-/eighth-century Anglo-Saxon complex that has only been partly excavated.

Malmesbury became the site of an important monastery in the later seventh century, and in the late ninth was one of Wiltshire's four 'burhs'. It was probably then that the Iron Age wall was overlain by a Saxon limestone rubble wall on an earth bank, with an intra-mural lane inside and a ditch outside. These defences can only be visualized by the slopes and by the layout of the streets.

As at Old Sarum and Devizes (see on-line entries), Bishop Roger of Salisbury built a castle in the early twelfth century, but nothing remains; its site was given to the abbey by King John, and it may have been used for the guest-house, which has been succeeded by the Bell Hotel. Roger was probably also responsible for a mortared stone wall found on the

eastern defences. In the mid twelfth-century civil war Malmesbury was surrounded by three siege-works, one recently recognized as a ring-work to the south (Wright et al. 2015).

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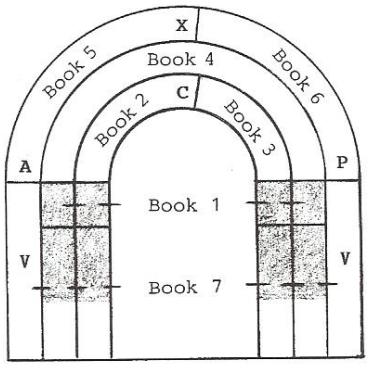
Malmesbury Abbey is one of the great Romanesque churches of twelfth-century England, renowned for its sculpture. It has a much longer history, however, for it was founded in the seventh century by an Irish (or possibly British) saint, Maeldub, and was where one of the great Anglo-Saxon writers St Aldhelm was educated and became abbot before becoming the first Bishop of Sherborne, dying in 705. Subsequently the area swung between the control of Mercia and Wessex, with their rival kings making grants of land to the church to show their power over the territory, and this frontier position may account for its choice as the burial-place of King Athelstan, who died in 939. William of Malmesbury, a prolific twelfth-century historian based in the abbey, implied that there had been up to six different churches, but none has been definitely located; a chapel south of the south transept excavated in 2002 was thought likely to be the site of at least one of them, but the fragmentary structure may have been Norman, and was associated with a graveyard. Another has been claimed outside the walls, in Westport, on the basis that it is a building with long-and-short corner quoins. The twelfth-century abbey church probably overlies at least some of the Anglo-Saxon churches.

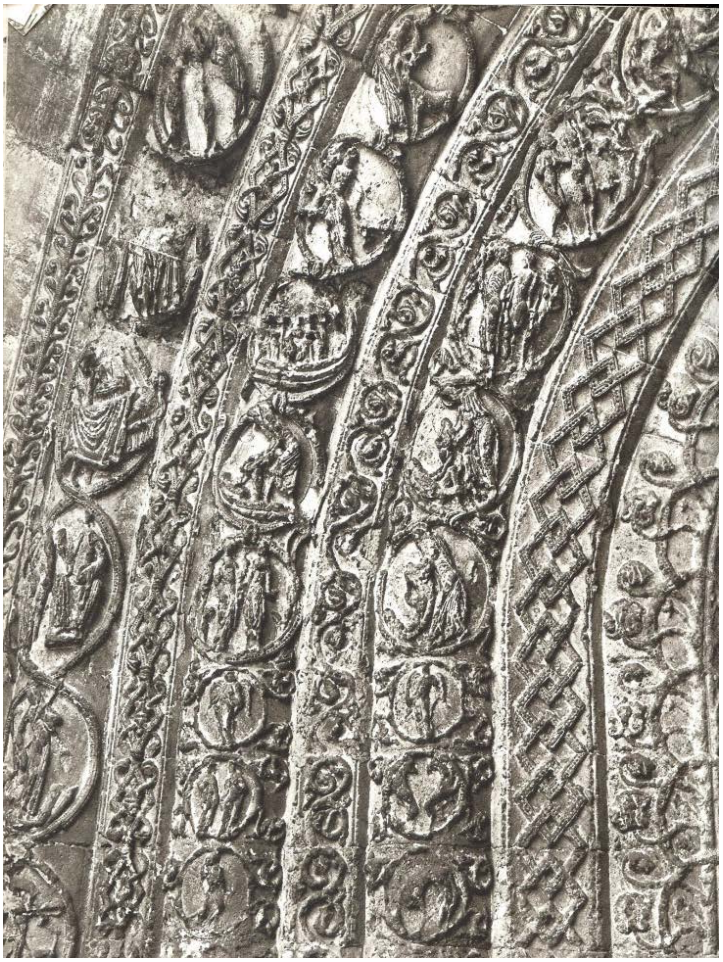
Whatever had been achieved in rebuilding the abbey church by 1139 seems to have been interrupted by the civil war, and the above-ground work that survives is the east end, supposedly complete by 1164, and the nave, by 1170-80. Enough of its west end remains to show that its blank arcading was elaborate and among some of the best work of its period. (photograph by Andrew Dunn reproduced under common licence, accessed from Wikimedia).

Also very impressive is the sculpture in the south porch, behind a fourteenth-century outer wall and arch, with a hood-mould reusing two beast-head label stops similar to ones inside the church (photograph by Andrew Dunn as above).

The twelfth-century door is framed by eight arches, embellished with some of the finest Romanesque carving in the country (photograph by Richard Arnopp). This has recently been shown to have strong Burgundian influence disseminated from Cluny Abbey, from which came Abbot Peter of Malmesbury (1141-1158/9). The outer arch is carved with eight bands, three of which contain a series of medallions with figures, which recent research has shown to have been inspired by a tenth-century poem written in

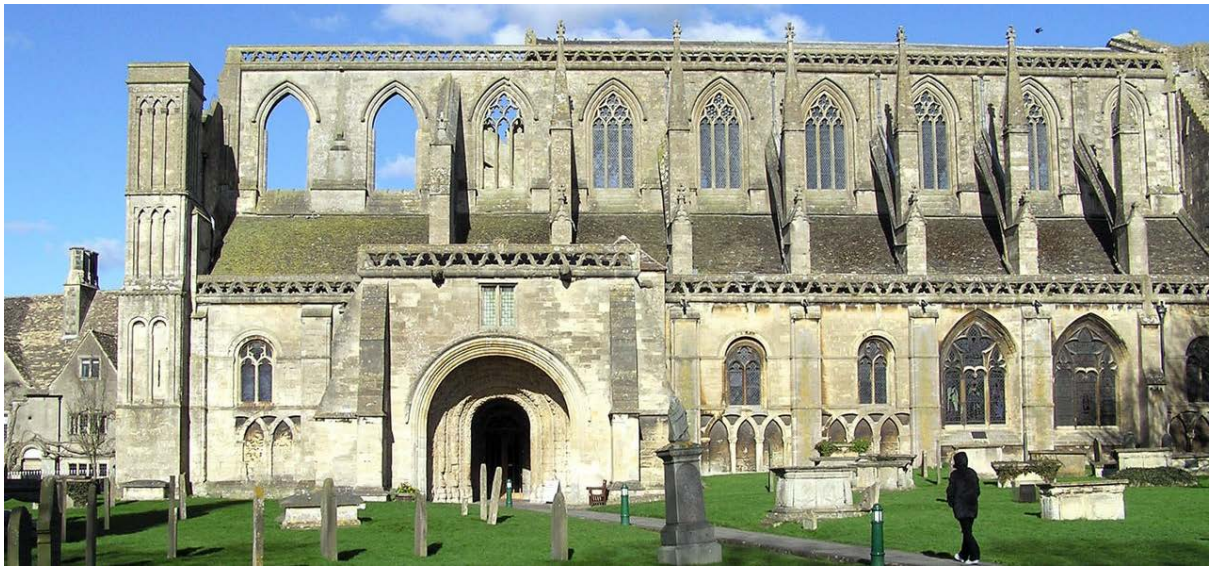


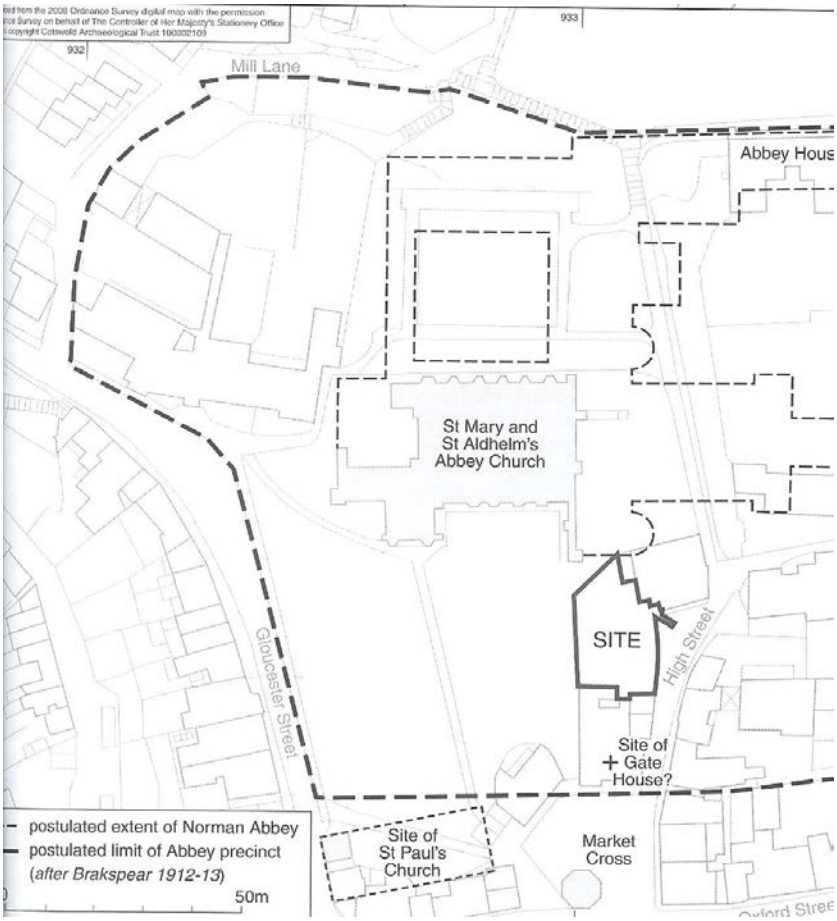
seven books by Odo of Cluny as a commentary on different parts of the Bible and other texts (Wood 1998; 2009. Drawing from Wood 1998, 46, with the author's permission. The photograph shows some of the worn medallions in and above the shaded area on the left; the most recognisable is the half-length Viking-style ship representing Noah's Ark).



The interior of the porch has shafts and seats – the porch was where marriages were conducted in the Middle Ages – and the inner doorway has a tympanum with Christ in a mandorla supported by flying angels. The side walls have monumental sculpted figures of the Apostles, and an angel above them flying towards Christ. On the south wall, St Peter can be recognized on the right because he holds the key to the gates of heaven (photograph by Christopher von Patzelt). This sculpture is thought to have been inspired by south-western French work, as at Moissac, and by Anglo-Saxon drawings kept in the abbey's library.

Inside the church, the drum columns of the nave make the most impression; above them is an elaborate arcade, but the rib-vaulting is early fourteenth-century (Thurlby 1998). Between the nave and the aisles are early examples of pointed arches – but above them are semi-circular roll mouldings, with animal-head stops that could as well have been carved in the late Saxon period as in the Norman, though the central masks are Romanesque. On the south side is a 'watching chamber', its true purpose unknown – for the abbot to watch services? for a vigil to be kept over the relics? an organ-loft? Also inside are show-cases with manuscripts, and the fourteenth-century 'tomb' of King Athelstan.





The abbey cloister was on the north side of the church, despite the site's restrictions (plan from Hart and Holbrook 2011, 167, by permission of Cotswold Archaeology). On its west side was St Paul's parish church, of uncertain foundation, and demolished except for its tower after 1539 when the nave and south aisle of the abbey church were sold to the parishioners by William Stumpe, a wealthy clothier who bought the site and probably demolished most of the buildings. Even the west end's upper nave window glass was removed (photograph by Adrian Pingstone, reproduced under common licence, accessed through Wikimedia). Stumpe used some of the buildings as a manufactory, bringing together weavers and their looms, probably the first time that this had been done. It was not successful – it is not known whether Stumpe continued to pay them for each 'piece' or by wage, but the former is much more likely, and the weavers may have resented the extra degree of control that Stumpe exercised. His house is built over abbey buildings, partly surviving in the basement. It is a very large Tudor house (private, but the garden may be visited).

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Recent excavations have produced a little evidence of use of at least parts of the are within the present town in the eighth/ninth centuries; a coin minted in Southampton probably between 720 and 750 was found in the middle part of the High Street. After its ninth-century use as a 'burh', Malmesbury developed into a borough with a mint; local belief that it is Britain's oldest borough is based solely on a claim made in 1381 that it had been given a charter by King Athelstan (Pugh 1979/80; VCH 1991). Domesday Book recorded it as having about 70 dwellings, almost half of them derelict, a tale of destruction greater than in most towns. Presumably most of these lined the High Street south of the abbey, but the market itself was within the south part of the abbey precinct, and was not moved out until 1228 when

a ‘new market’ was instituted, presumably the area round the market cross, which is itself of *c.* 1500 (photograph by Adrian Pingstone, as above). Although the High Street now extends further north, no trace of medieval domestic occupation was found in the 2002 excavation, and the encroachment seems eighteenth-century (Hart and Holbrook 2011). The location of St Thomas’s Hospital implies that tenements stretched down the hill to the river by the end of the twelfth century; its gateway survives but reset as an entrance to almshouses (photograph: Historic England). To the west, ‘Horse Fair’ may imply a stock market in suburban Westport, but Cross Hayes inside the walls is a large open space likely to have had a similar function, and was certainly a post-medieval cattle market (the Athelstan Museum is on its north side). Like Old Sarum and Downton (see on-line entries), Malmesbury was a ‘rotten borough’, not deserted like the former, but with an electorate consisting of the alderman and twelve burgesses, who received up to £100 each per election until 1832.

The man who bought the abbey complex in the sixteenth century, William Stumpe, was dealing in woollen textiles; the Avon gave plenty of flowing water for fulling mills. Water-wheels for powering the spinning and weaving processes were not introduced until the eighteenth century; the Avon Mill in Malmesbury is the earliest factory in Wiltshire, built in 1791, converted to steam power in the 1830s. Changes to the market led to its conversion into a silk mill before the end of the nineteenth century, part of a widespread trend, as is its more recent conversion into flats (Williams 2013; photograph by courtesy of Rightmove).

References and further reading

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Malmesbury were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.