

7. NEWBATTLE ABBEY, MIDLOTHIAN: REPORT ON MEDIEVAL FLOOR-TILES
RECOVERED IN 1953.¹

The site of the Abbey of Newbattle, near Eskbank, Midlothian, was uncovered in the years between 1878 and 1895 when the plan of the church and the cloistral buildings was determined. Of the church, nothing exists to-day above ground-level, but its plan was outlined on the turf after the excavation. At the time a large quantity of early medieval floor-tiles were recovered, and for many years these were stored on the site. Ultimately they were deposited in the National Museum of Antiquities, but unfortunately no written records are available.

Dr James S. Richardson in his paper on Scottish medieval floor-tiles,² describes the art of the medieval tiler and illustrates examples of his skill and the variety of his patterns. He suggests that the detached mosaic tiles recovered at Newbattle were at one time laid out in patterns similar to those still to be seen in the south transept at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire. New evidence now proves this theory to be correct. The importance of this confirmation will be readily understood when it is realised that to date Melrose Abbey is the only other known site in Scotland where floor-tiles of this type can be seen *in situ* and in their original setting.

In 1953 a large sewage pipe was laid in the Dalkeith area by Midlothian County Council, and way-leave was granted for this pipe to pass through the grounds of Newbattle Abbey. By arrangement with the County Council the deep trenching was kept under daily observation by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments; this co-operation was maintained until the site was cleared.

When the ground in the north transept was cut, a number of detached tiles were recovered and their position noted. At the same time another portion which could be observed in the bank of the trench was cleared by trowel, and the position plotted before lifting (fig. 4). This remnant of the original 13th-century pavement must have been overlooked in the excavations of last century and by good fortune had lain undisturbed (Pl. XXIX, 2). Formation was orderly but many of the tiles were disintegrating badly, due to the moisture which had constantly filtered through the covering soil. The level of this floor lay at a depth of 2 ft. 6 ins. covered by rubble and earth. The tiles were bedded with lime on a layer of fine sand overlying a band of hard clay 4 ins. thick which in turn rested on natural alluvium. This fragment of tile-work (No. 1) was part of a wheel-pattern identical to an existing formation on the floor at Byland³ (Pl. XXIX, 3).

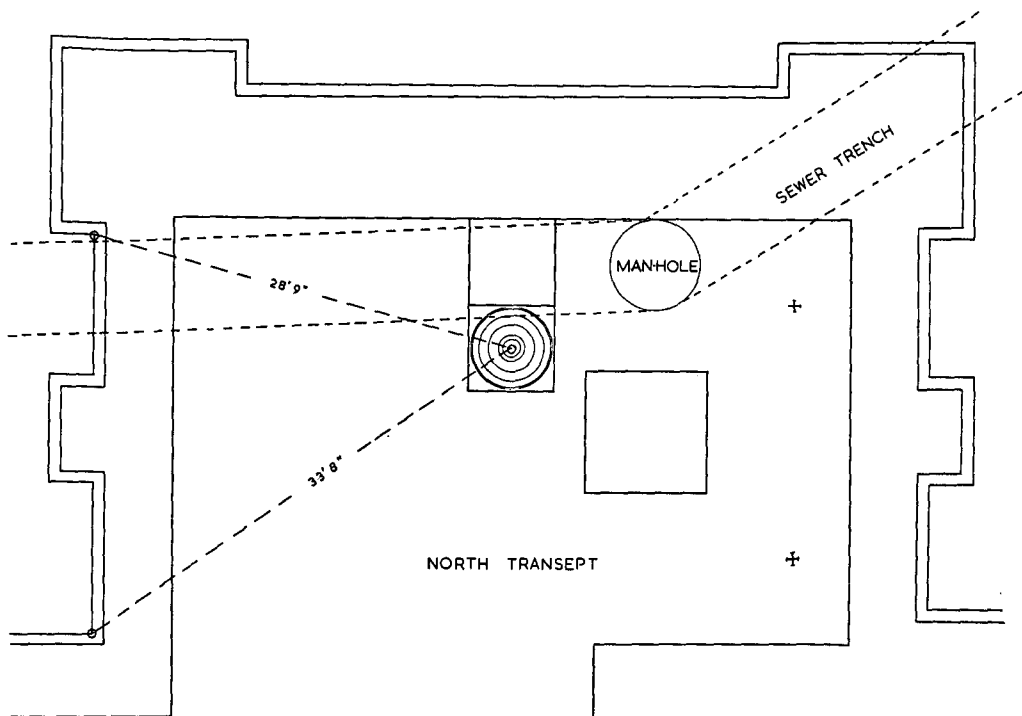
The first-mentioned tiles, which were located in the area 8 ft. from the centre of the manhole on the line of the trench, belonged to a three-tile design.⁴ The

¹ Submitted with approval of the Ministry of Works.

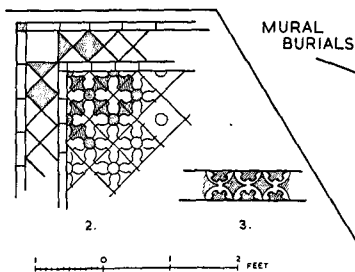
² *P.S.A.S.*, LXIII (1928-9), 284.

³ *Ibid.*, 287, fig. 4.

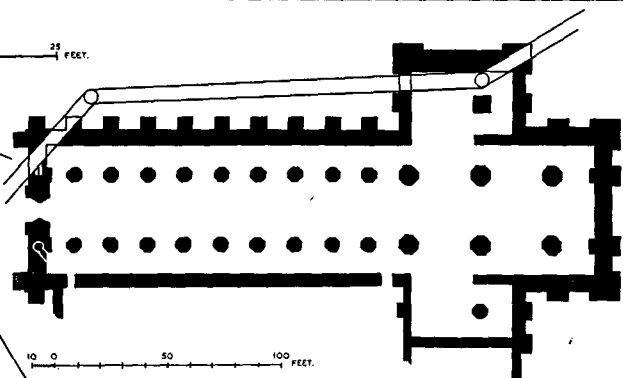
⁴ *Ibid.*, fig. 6, No. 7.



1 0 5 10 15 20 25 FEET.



0 1 2 FEET



POSITION OF TILE-SETTINGS FOUND
IN THE NORTH TRANSEPT.
ALSO SHOWING PIPE ALIGNMENT.

DECEMBER 1953.

NEWBATTLE ABBEY MIDLOTHIAN *W.S.*

Fig. 4.

situation of these tiles when found suggests that they were part of a larger rectilinear composition adjacent to the circular pattern. The church at Newbattle had transept chapels, and the two settings described here lay in front of the altar of the outer chapel in the north transept. About half a dozen fragments complete the 1953 collection, and these are the component parts of a design (No. 3) also used at Byland. The altar was normally on an elevated platform formed by a succession of steps. It is probable, therefore, that these few tiles made a continuous pattern along the edge of the first of these steps, which could not have been far from this line.¹

It was observed that many of the tiles belonging to the circular design had been marked on the ends with deliberate cuts, obviously done when the clay was in its soft state. The suggestion is offered here that these marks, which appear to be numerical symbols, were found helpful for refitting purposes when tiles were of a repetitive shape, and as the fitter need not necessarily be the maker. They would enable the workman to tell at a glance the radius for which they were intended as he laid his pattern. Tally-marks of a more elaborate character can be seen at Glenluce Abbey, where marks for a similar purpose had been applied to flanged water-pipes of medieval date.²

In conclusion, this opportunity might be taken to record the existence of two mural burial recesses, the ends of which were exposed when the trench passed through the NW. corner of the church (fig. 4). They had been constructed within the core of the west front wall at foundation level, and lie to the north of the western doorway which was probably approached through a narthex.

Graves of this type were sometimes constructed to contain the uncoffined remains of benefactors of the Abbey; parallels to such burials are to be found in many medieval churches. Instances are on record where persons who have been closely associated with some building project, express the wish for sepulture within the shelter of their work.

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