

A Saxo-Norman Oyster Colour-Dish from St Mary's Church, New Shoreham, Sussex

Inspection of the inside face of the north nave aisle wall of St Mary's Church (Shoreham-by-Sea, West Sussex) in July 2006 revealed an oyster shell mortared *in situ* 8.8 m from the (north) transept west wall [see plan, below]. The nave walls today lie at a low level in the churchyard, being ruined from around the 17th century. The section of wall in which the shell was discovered (c. 1100–30) shows no sign of consolidation at that time or afterwards (a separate portion adjoining the transept has been re-pointed), the mortar open to weathering and now accordingly flaky. The mortar around the shell was thus loosely bonded, allowing the shell to be lifted. When turned, an area of yellow paint was observed on the inside shell surface, extending under the mortar layer. Further oyster shells, though without visible paint, are mortared *in situ* within the rubble-core walls of the Norman nave. Such shells were widely available at Shoreham in medieval times, as today, the harbour town lying next to the sea.

The shell itself is not complete, having been broken prior to its mortaring in the wall, perhaps prompting its discard and re-use. The mortar clearly extends over the break, which is thus not fresh. The paint is still relatively crumbly, preserved from erosion or alteration within the wall. In order to establish whether the yellow was paint, and the pigment type used, two samples of the material were analysed by Catherine Hassall, an independent historic paint specialist. The samples were shown to be yellow ochre (iron oxide), overlaid by lime mortar. The shell was radiocarbon dated in 2007 by Dr Paula Reimer, Director of the Centre for Climate, the Environment, and Chronology (¹⁴CHRONO) at Queen's University Belfast to cal AD 717–910, the late Saxon period. It was most likely used as a colour-dish, though, c. 1100–30 by a Norman artist to decorate part of the church interior or an object such as a statue or tomb. This dish represents the oldest known colour-dish discovered *in situ* – in direct association with the building in which it was most likely used – from medieval Britain.

The medieval colour-dish is displayed in Marlipins Museum (Sussex Archaeological Society), Shoreham-by-Sea, on loan from St Mary's Church. A more detailed account of the dish has been published: Standing, G. 2010. 'A Saxo-Norman Oyster Colour-Dish from St Mary's Church, New Shoreham, Sussex', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 163, 16–23.

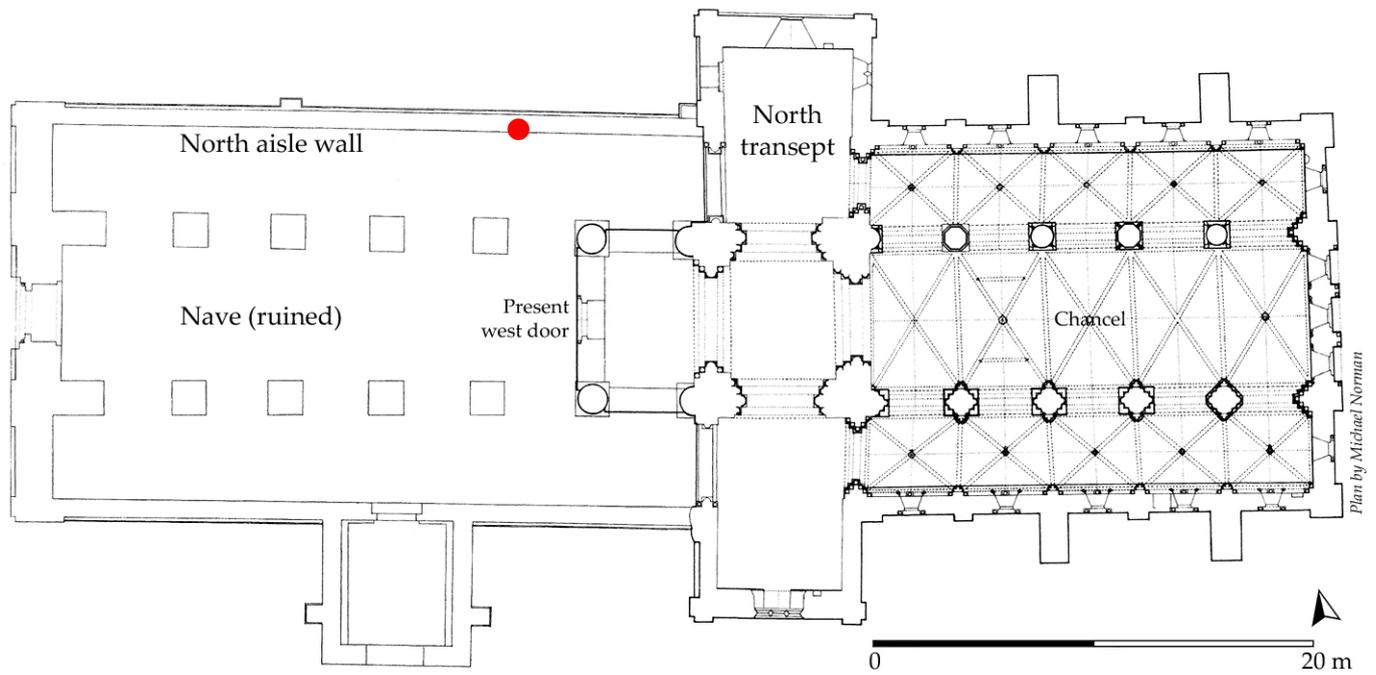
Giles Standing BA MPhil (*Cantab*)
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Scale of shell: w 80 mm; h 60 mm

Oyster Colour-Dish Findspot Location

St Mary de Haura, New Shoreham



● = Oyster colour-dish found within inside face of ruined nave north aisle wall
8.8 m from west wall of north transept



Ruined nave north aisle wall (looking east), towards north transept west wall