

The Archaeology of Anchor Church

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Modern View of Anchor Church and Landscape (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-good-walk-ingleby-anchor-church-and-foremarke-hall-derbyshire-ktmxmlbcs>)

“Is there anything known with Certainty concerning its history and foundation?” — John Pickford, 1891

Anchor Church is classed as an early Medieval cave hermitage. While it is not known how many people lived in this dwelling after its creation in the Anglo-Saxon period, Anchor Church was later used as a hermitage, or an isolated residence a single individual living, during the early Medieval period. Anchor Church was cut out of an existing cave system, modified over the years and still stands today, revealing the long and laborious tasks of the past. The close proximity of the hermitage to the river could indicate that it was a source of water for drinking and cleaning. Much like Guy’s Cliffe in Warwick and Robert’s Cave in Knaresborough, Anchor Church is associated with a singular hermit: St. Hardolf.

Surviving Features

Block A – 3 original rooms with a dividing wall which has been removed leaving an empty space and two intact doorways.

- **A1** – This room still has the channel (groove) for the door and a bolt hole (can you spot it?).
 - Horizontal scars and sockets are found on the sides of the pillar and are thought to be used for partition walls or possibly shelving.
- **A2** – This room section features the main entrance in the form of a large rectangular hole with cuts for a wooden frame. 18th–19th century brick can also be seen at the base of this entrance (a later addition).
- **A3** – This room is the most complex and can be accessed through a narrow arched door or a hole which

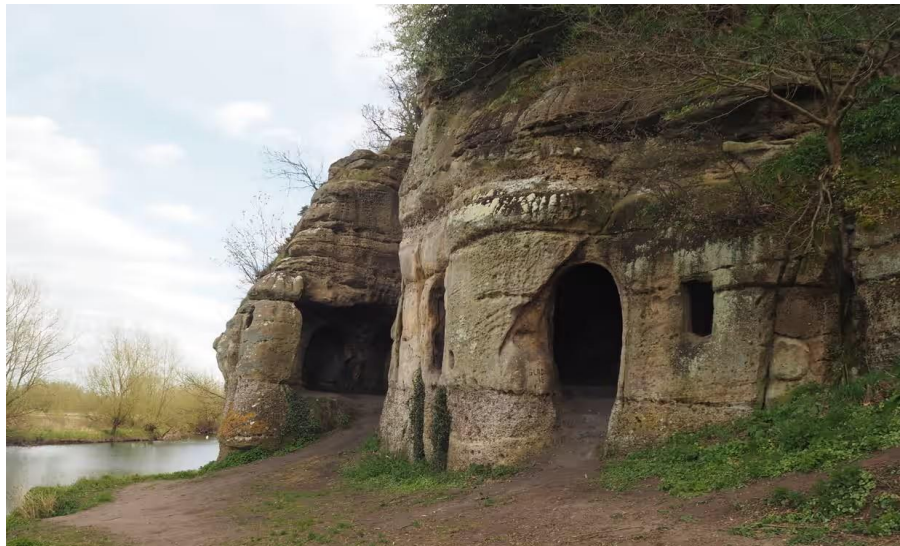
would have had a dividing wall in its early construction and use. The central pillar has a small part of the dividing wall still there with tools marks (crowbars or picks) from when it was later removed.

- To the centre of this space, there is a pilaster (ornamental pillar).
- A crude fireplace made up of 18th–19th century brick, indicating its late construction phase.

Block B – A single narrow room oriented North-South, with a separate access and no way through from Block A. This block contains 3 large niches and the North one was most likely a window.

The Rock House

The archaeology of the cave shows that it was purposefully cut and modified over time, including features such as pillars, windows, walls, with later changes. An archaeological hypothesis for its early Medieval origin is supported by the outer door and two very narrow, small round headed doors, which are similar to other pre-12th century rock cut hermitages. The narrow windows are perhaps the most interesting evidence which points to Anglo-Saxon style construction. Among Anglo-Saxon architecture, cave dwellings are some of the best preserved examples of their homes due to the longevity of the rock and sheltered locations. The discovery of this Anglo-Saxon structure will help identify many other potential dwellings in the West Midlands.



Modern View of the Entrance to Anchor Church, View from the West (Simons, 2021)

The Hermitage

In mid-to-late Medieval England, there seems to have been a trend to turn earlier Anglo-Saxon rock dwellings into hermitages. Many modifications and additions were undertaken, such as the three doors at Anchor Church. These are simple but appear to be Romanesque, therefore are likely 12th century in origin. The pilaster capital also shows this style. Another great example of this is the Warkworth Hermitage which was built around the same time in Northumberland alongside a castle — now a heritage site. Also cut into rock, Warkworth Hermitage was is known for the legend of Guy of Warwick retiring there as a hermit, eventually leading to the founding of a chantry and 1423 chapel of St. Mary Magdalene.



Engraving of Interior of Warkworth Hermitage in 1814 by Walter Scott (L. Connell, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

The arches within Warkworth Hermitage (see engraving above) imitate that of the Romanesque architecture similar to Anchor Church but Warkworth (circa 1400) is an example of the other end of the spectrum. It is far too ornate to be a hermitage in the traditional sense and financed by the Earls of Northumberland , who even hired a priest to live there and pray for their salvation. We can compare Anchor Church Hermitage to other hermitages such as West Yorkshire's Pontefract, which is a rock cut hermitage surprisingly discovered underneath a hospital in 1854. As you can see Pontefract Hermitage (see image below) has a similar style of architecture despite being in Yorkshire. This suggests the Anglo-Saxon rock-cut houses perhaps inspired religious members across the country to create more hermitages such as Pontefract.



Doorway within Pontefract Hermitage

Another thing to remember is that hermitages are often a symbol of religion. Upon excavation of Pontefract Hermitage, an oratory was found as well as a cross and fireplace. Anchor Church also has a fireplace. Since Anchor Church Hermitage was a lot more well-known than Pontefract Hermitage, it's possible that similar findings could have been at Anchor Church but removed by recreational explorers in previous years. Pontefract is an extreme example of the degree of isolation of hermitages, while other sites such as Anchor Church or Warkworth are not quite as secluded. The fact that Anchor Church relates to religious hermitages, even with extremely different hermitages, does lead archaeologists to believe that the Anchor Church was in fact used as a religious hermitage.

The Folly



Anchor Church, Derby c. 1861–80, photo by Ernest Edwards (http://www.geh.org/fm/english-amateur/htmlsrc/m198002640001_ful.html)

The Folly was created between the 1700s and 1800s, during which they extended the hermitage. No easily identifiable features can be definitively attributed to the later Medieval or post-Medieval period, although it's thought that the windows were slightly enlarged during this period. Otherwise, no other modifications were found from the 17th century.

In the 18th–19th centuries, Anchor Church was modified to create a bigger space for guests: the floors were flattened out, stepped access was created, windows were opened, and the aforementioned internal walls were removed. The above photo was taken by Ernest Edwards in 1861–1880, which would have been after the construction of the folly and as it was in use. Comparing to the first photo in this article, you can see that there were once steps leading up to the hermitage but after years of use and weathering, they have eroded. This shows that even after 100 or more years, people had active interest in Anchor Church as it was still being updated and changed, demonstrating the ongoing importance of the site.

What is the Hermitage Today?

However, what does the site mean to us today? In recent years, Anchor Church has been rediscovered and the site became a place for people to explore and hang out, with graffiti being found all over the walls. Since 2020, the site has been restored and researched becoming a part of the Trent Valley Landscape Scheme and Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. Lastly, What does Anchor Church mean to you?

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