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REWLEY ABBEY



An Archaeological Assessment



BY



Oxford Archaeological Unit

Funded By British Rail And Oxford City Council

REWLEY ABBEY

OXFORD

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An Archaeological Assessment of the Scheduled Ancient Monument

by the Oxford Archaeological Unit

commissioned by

BRITISH RAIL

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

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1. INTRODUCTION

The last surviving buildings of Rewley Abbey were taken down in 1850 when the site was acquired by the Buckinghamshire Railway. Like so much monastic property in England it was already only a fragment of its medieval form, simply the parts which were most easily adaptable to domestic requirements. There was indeed no firm evidence of a church, which should be the spiritual focus of the monastic complex.

Pressure to redevelop the area has been increasing over the last ten years, and the Oxford Archaeological Unit has in turn pressed for a full investigation of the below ground remains. The first fruit of this policy was a small trial excavation in 1981 which confirmed that the north range survived in good condition. This was followed by an independent review of the heritage of the entire station area redevelopment by J Munby, with a useful discussion of the history of the abbey. He underlined its dual function as an abbey and a house of studies. The distinction had previously been made by H E Salter, but without any direct relevance to the layout of the site. Munby's contribution was to suggest that the abbey proper might be to the east, and that the buildings demolished in the 19th century might be a house of studies which was architecturally distinct. This question alone would have justified further excavation. Secondary questions were how the normally 'remote' Cistercians might adapt their architecture to a suburban setting, whether their reputedly opulent lifestyle would be reflected in the quality of artifacts, and whether they would be shown to have carried out major engineering to make this flood-plain site dry and habitable.

By 1985 an archaeological excavation of part of the coalyard had been agreed with British Rail. It was overtaken however by a decision of the Department of the Environment to enlarge the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument from a narrow strip along the waterfront of the City Council's land to include the remainder of the City's land and approximately one third of the development land on the British Rail site. Apart from curtailing ideas of an archaeological excavation, the scheduling persuaded British Rail to withdraw their site from the market, and the City to press ahead with plans for a separate housing development on its own site. Each recognised the need for scheduled monument consent for any building work, and each made parallel applications for an archaeological assessment of the quality of the abbey

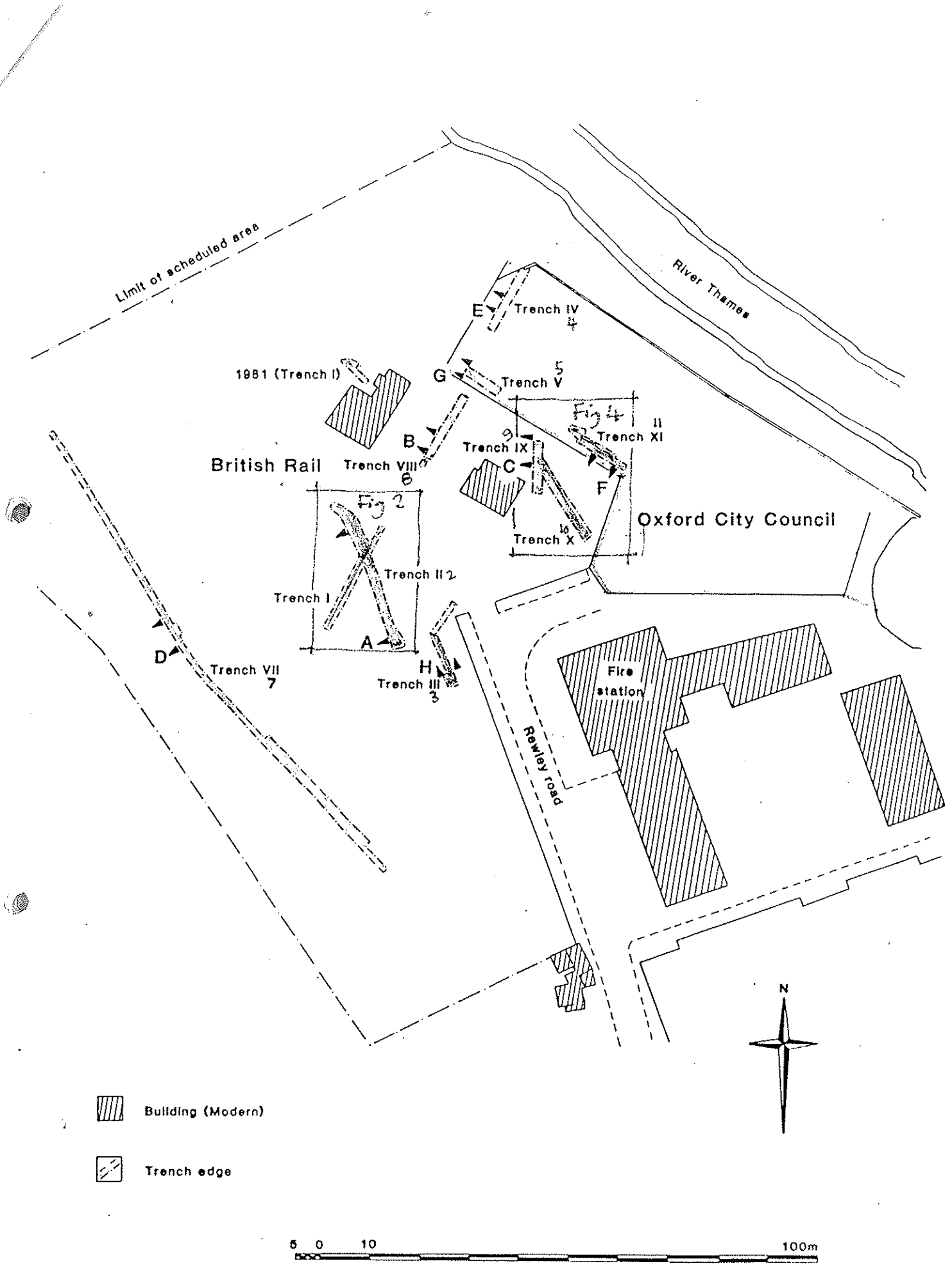


Fig.1 Location of excavated trenches.

remains, as a first stage in their applications for full consent. The assessment was to be carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit, and led to the following report.

2. THE ASSESSMENT

2a. Objectives:

The purpose of the work was to establish the quality of the remains, to provide a basis on which the Secretary of State for the Environment and his advisers can decide any application for development. It was not designed to produce a complete plan of the medieval abbey, but to sample the quality of a range of deposits without disturbing any structural remains. The work has been done by archaeologists, and the report is not qualified to make recommendations on the engineering considerations which would make one form of development more acceptable than another. These decisions must be made by the Secretary of State.

2b. Methods:

A series of trenches were proposed with the following objectives:

1. to locate the south-west angle of this known courtyard (Trenches I and II).
2. to look for an abbey church to the south (Trench II).
3. to look for a cloister to the south (Trench III).
4. to assess any east range to the known courtyard (Trench VIII).
5. to look for buildings extending east of the known courtyard (Trenches IV and V).
6. to locate and assess any buildings beyond the known western moat (Trench VII).
7. to look for evidence of monastic usage of the area north of the abbey (not excavated).
8. to look for buildings south-east of the known courtyard (Trenches IX and XI).

It was immediately apparent that many trenches would need to be more than 1.2m. deep and potentially dangerous to work in. The overburden was

therefore stripped to a width of 1.8m., down to the 1850 surface in the courtyard area, and to the base of the 19th century cultivation level elsewhere. All recognisable post-medieval features such as robber trenches were dug out to give sections through the monastic levels. Of the monastic levels, narrow trenches were excavated stratigraphically through the yard surfaces external to the courtyard, and smaller defined areas within the buildings were similarly excavated to provide evidence of the succession of deposits. Control baulks were retained to preserve continuity.

2c. Results of Trench Excavations.

The results are described below in order of the objectives listed under 2b. This report concentrates on the quality of the structural remains, seen in the context of the abbey plan as it was progressively revealed.

2c.1 South-west angle of known courtyard, and possible church (Figs. 2, 3).

In places medieval stonework survived to within .3m. of modern ground level. This included the very substantial west wall of the brewhouse building, with an offset plinth on its outer face, a battered inner face, and a footing at least 1.0m. deep. The south wall of this building was of similar strength, but was one of the few walls (F901) on the site to show stone-robbing (F200) of the railways period. The north wall was well preserved, and by contrast was narrower and bonded with a more friable gravelly mortar. It included an original doorway, now blocked (F236), with a rebate for a door opening to the north.

These three medieval walls formed the building known as the brewhouse, together with a post-medieval east wall (F219). The identification of the building was confirmed by a large hollow in the floor assumed to be a steeping vat for brewers grains, which had an effluent culvert (F10) opening to the west, cut through wall F3.

The brewhouse was the most easily recognisable building on the site. To the north would have been the angle of two courtyard ranges, although only the west range was detectable. Here the 16th or 17th century wall (F234) seemed to be a replacement of a medieval north-south wall (F220) just west of it. The medieval wall was very instructive of the courtyard arrangements. It had a doorway between the two ranges with a fragmentary tiled floor (L238) running through. The tiles were plain, possibly 16th century, but an

adjacent hollow for a doorpost exposed the corner of a previous stone threshold 15cm. deeper. This suggests that medieval domestic levels will survive at this depth, possibly also tiled, since impressions of a tiled pavement were found to the east (L265). This may indeed have been late medieval tiling of the cloister walk of an undershot range, a type of construction suggested for the east range (2c4 below).

Where the steeping vat had cut into the floors of the 'brewhouse' building, a series of medieval floor layers was exposed. These were excavated in a small triangular area against the north-west section of the trench. The deepest occupation level was a burnt floor L29/2 at OD 56.75m. Beneath was a succession of gravelly loam deposits with no compacted surface (L29/2-4), and then 1m. depth of water laid silts above natural gravel. The silts suggest an ancient stream bed on this alignment. The material above it fits into a pattern of land reclamation repeated on all parts of the site where it was examined, and suggests a man-made platform for the abbey.

2c2. Investigation of a possible church to south of courtyard (Figs. 2, 3).

No post-medieval structures were found to the south and west of the brewhouse, only a series of metalled surfaces assumed to be the access drive sweeping round to the west of the courtyard. Consequently it was possible to excavate down to medieval horizons, and the features shown on plan Fig. 2 to the south and west of the brewhouse are medieval. Beyond about 6m. from the building the levels began to drop away sharply into a ditch or moat. The south ditch seemed to have been in-filled rather earlier than the west, and was therefore investigated more thoroughly down to water level. A stone footing (F217) at its south end was set so deep into the silts that is assumed to be a pier for a bridge, rather than a building. To the west of the brewhouse wall F3 was a fragment of an earlier wall (F28, F31). It suggests that the 'brewhouse' building was not the earliest on the site, but it is not sufficient evidence to suggest an abbey church here, particularly since no major foundations or robber trenches were found in Trench II, and none of the alignments coincides with those of the church in trenches IX-XI. It was concluded therefore that the archaeological evidence supported the topographical sources, and the church never formed the south side of the known courtyard.

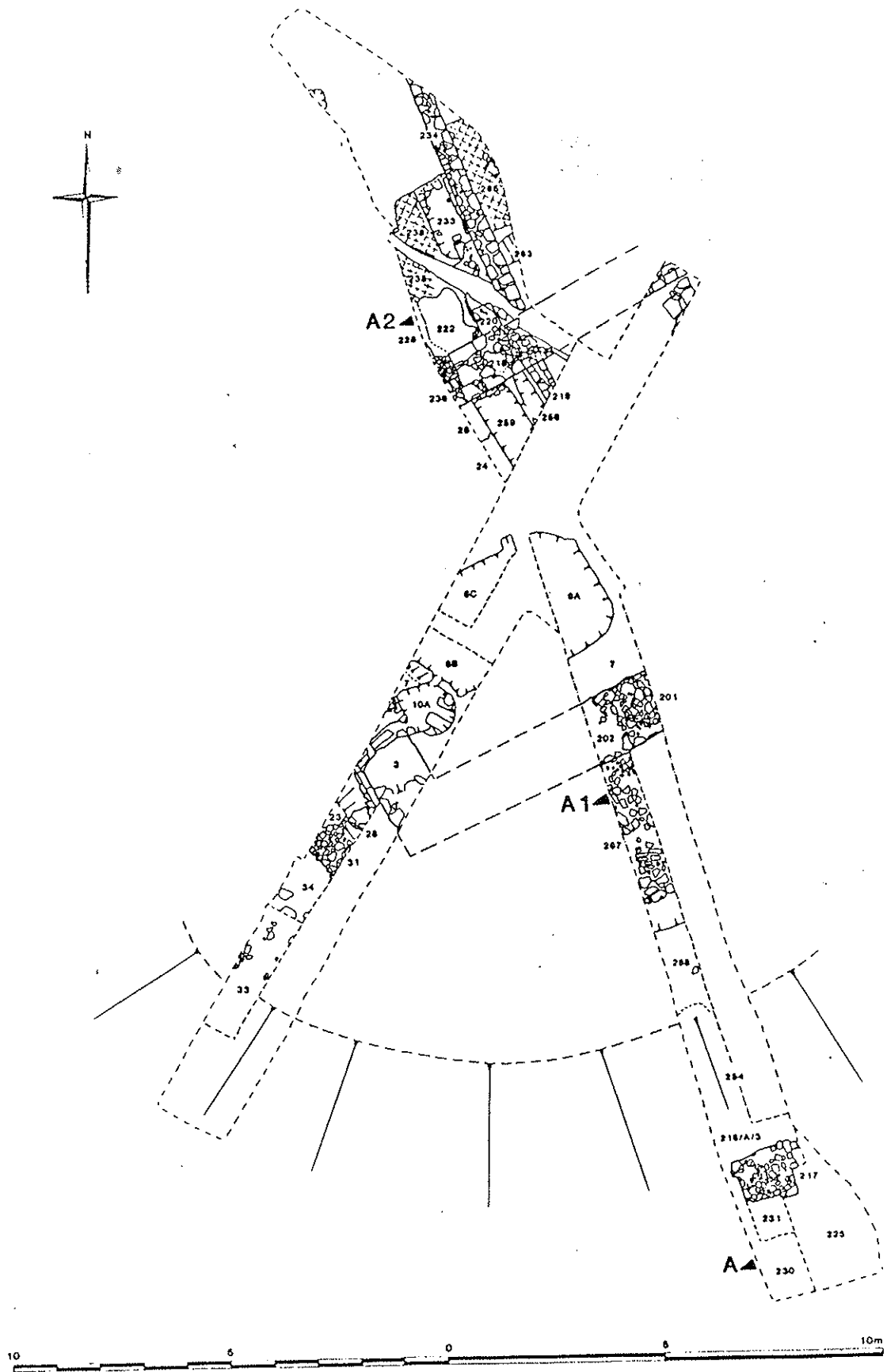
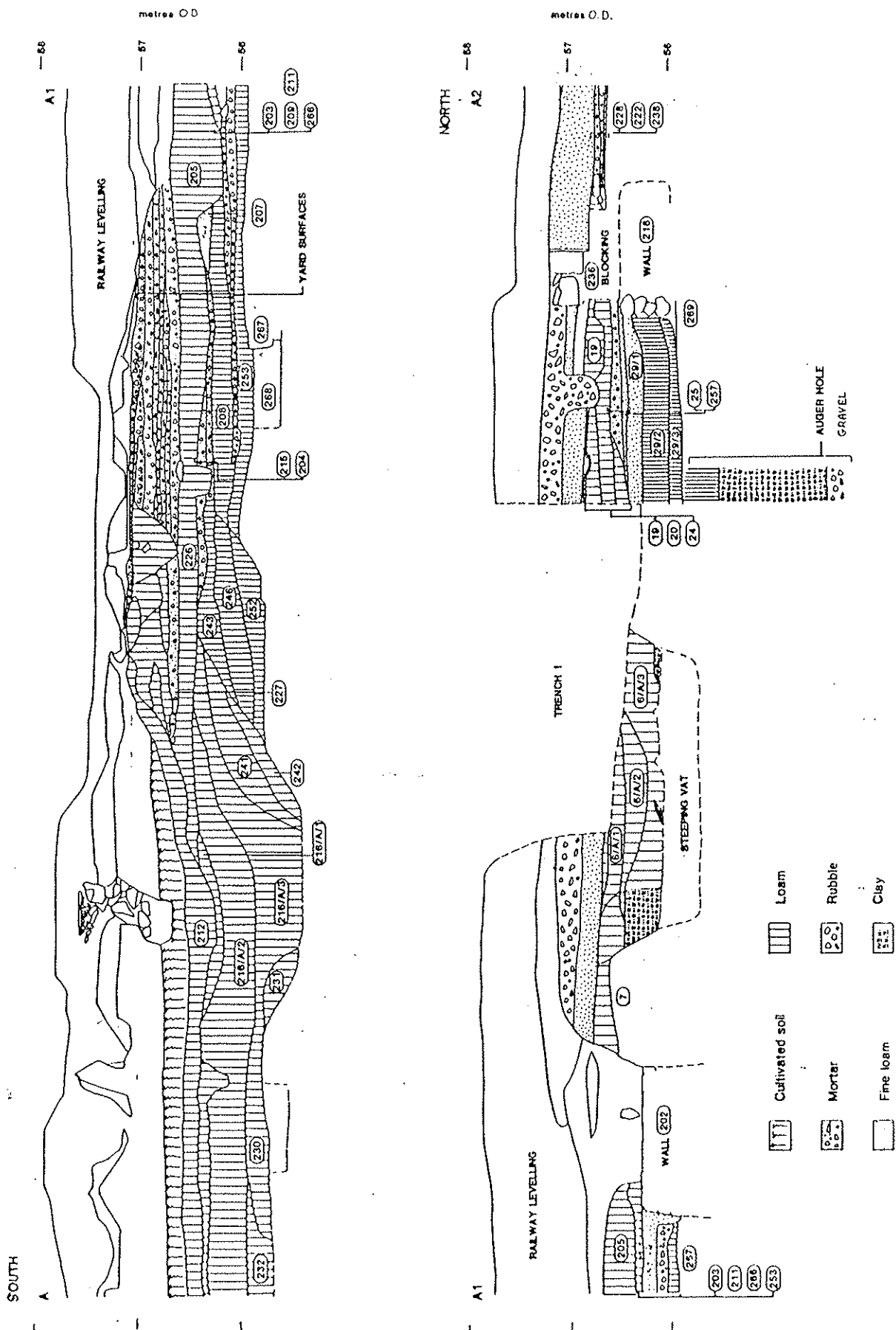


Fig.2 Trenches 1 and 11, showing post-Medieval features in the courtyard areas and Medieval features to the south and west.



Fig,3 Trench II , West section.

2c3. Investigation of possible cloister to south of courtyard (Trench III).

Having failed to find a church south of the known courtyard it seemed improbable that there would be further buildings in this direction. Trench III exposed a surface of large rubble (L302) at OD 56.6m. with no fine stratification, above a deep layer of organic silt (L304) with a shallow north-south gravel filled ditch (F303) (Fig. 5H). This is what would be expected of an access road, the precursor to the tree-lined avenue of the 18th century illustrations. It seems likely therefore that there were no major abbey buildings in this direction.

2c4. Assessment of east range of courtyard (Trench VIII, Fig. 5B).

No east range appears on any surviving illustration of Rewley Abbey, but it was clear where it should have been. Trench VIII exposed the robber trenches (F801, F810) of two walls which could have formed a narrow range. A third robber trench (F814) could have formed a cloister walk, but it was more substantial than expected, as broad if not broader than those of the range itself. The logical conclusion is that this was an undershot cloister where the walk was oversailed by the upper room, and therefore required a load-bearing arcade wall.

The quality of structural preservation of this range was poor, with stone surviving only at the deepest level of robber trench F801. The buildings surviving in 1850 are immediately to the south however, and their dimensions suggest that they represent a continuation of the undershot range. The south-east corner of the medieval cloister may therefore be as well preserved as its south-east corner in Trench II. Within the range a series of medieval floor layers (L821-826) was intact.

2c5. Buildings east of known courtyard (Trenches IV, V, Fig. 5E/G).

Two trenches to the north and west of the City Council property had a 1m. depth of very unstable overburden, and therefore had to be excavated in a more restricted way. A cultivated soil horizon overlay a pale gravelly demolition level (L400). Beneath this were a wall (F416) and another largely robbed wall (F405) which could represent a building or range against the north precinct wall (F417). Gravelly levels at OD 56.7m. to the west of F405 may be a path, or possibly internal floors of an adjoining room of which the west wall was outside the trench.

A rich assemblage of c. 14th century finds was recovered from a deposit in Trench V (L501) which was on a similar level to the above. In the restricted area of the deep trench this could not be properly evaluated, but may be domestic activity adjacent to the east cloister range and the Trench IV building. There was no evidence of the fish pond depicted in the 16th - 17th century maps of Agas and Loggan.

The floors, 'path' and other deposits overlay a series of deposits similar in form to the dumped levels of Trench I (2c1 above), and it is assumed that this area was part of the general reclamation of the site.

2c6. Assessment of buildings beyond western moat (Trench VII, Fig. 5D).

A long trench against the perimeter of the coalyard site was intended to trace buildings west and south-west of the known courtyard, which are depicted respectively on Agas' map (1578) and Hoggar's map (1850). The latter was located immediately, a narrow range (F717, F719) forming the north edge of a very compacted yard surface. There was little depth of stratification however, and the archaeological evidence suggests a lightweight building of the mid 18th century.

The northern extension of this trench passed through the general area of a barn-like building shown by Agas (1578). A thick humic turf layer (L702/5) extended over the entire trench, but in places it overlay a stonier horizon which may be related to the 'barn'. No walls were seen.

This entire trench again showed the process of dumping material (L702/1-3) to raise the ground level, all the more surprising in that this would have been a separate island and was apparently not intended for building. In one place the trench was excavated down to a natural level, which proved to be a pale reddish brown loam (L702/4) broadly similar to the capping of the second gravel terrace beneath Oxford. An irregular hollow cut from a level within the dumping may result from tree planting, either the grubbing-out of an inadequate tree or a new planting at the same time as the dumping.

2c7. Buildings beyond the north moat - (not assessed).

The turf layer at the north extremity of Trench VIII (2c6 above) became increasingly deep, suggesting it was crossing the infill of an old river channel. It was decided that this north moat, with its flanking fishponds, would have left the area very wet. Consequently the proposed north trench

was not in fact excavated, resources being concentrated on the courtyard area and the church.

2c8. South-east of the courtyard: the church (Trenches IX-XI, Figs. 4, 5C/F).

Trenches I and II had failed to show a church south of the known courtyard, and the next obvious area was to the south-east, as described by Wood and Hearne. Trench IX exposed a robbed pier base (F905) with a robber trench (F906) to the north, and this was confirmed in Trench X with a second pier (F1016) and a robber trench (F1006) to the south. The inference was a major aisled building on an east-west alignment, which must be the church. The outer walls had been robbed to water level, the pier bases to a lesser and more variable depth. Floors within the church survived well in most areas (OD 56.7m), but were not excavated. In the south-west end of Trench IX a small pit yielded a rich group of copper alloy and lead objects, perhaps the result of post-Dissolution looting.

At the south end of Trench X the structures became more obscure. It was clear that there was a south return (F1007) from F1006, as there was a north return from F906. They are both probably buttresses, since F1007 could not be recognised at 3.75m. from F1006. The ground in this southern area was very disturbed. If there was a cloister adjoining the church it would require a broad trench to detect it. This would certainly explain why no structures were found in the narrow trial trench dug by T G Hassall here in 1967.

The clear identification of the church led to renewed interest in the adjoining car-park site. Trench XI was as deep and unstable as the other car-park trenches, with the additional complication of a surface water drain. It was nevertheless possible to show robbed parts of two pier bases (F1106, F1150), and of both the north and south walls (F1158, F1105), together with two shallow burials. The alignments matched those of Trenches IX and X, and the only recognisable difference was that in the only verifiable dimension, one of the pier bases was broader than those to the east. This might indicate strengthening for a central tower, but it is insufficient to predict the plan of the church.

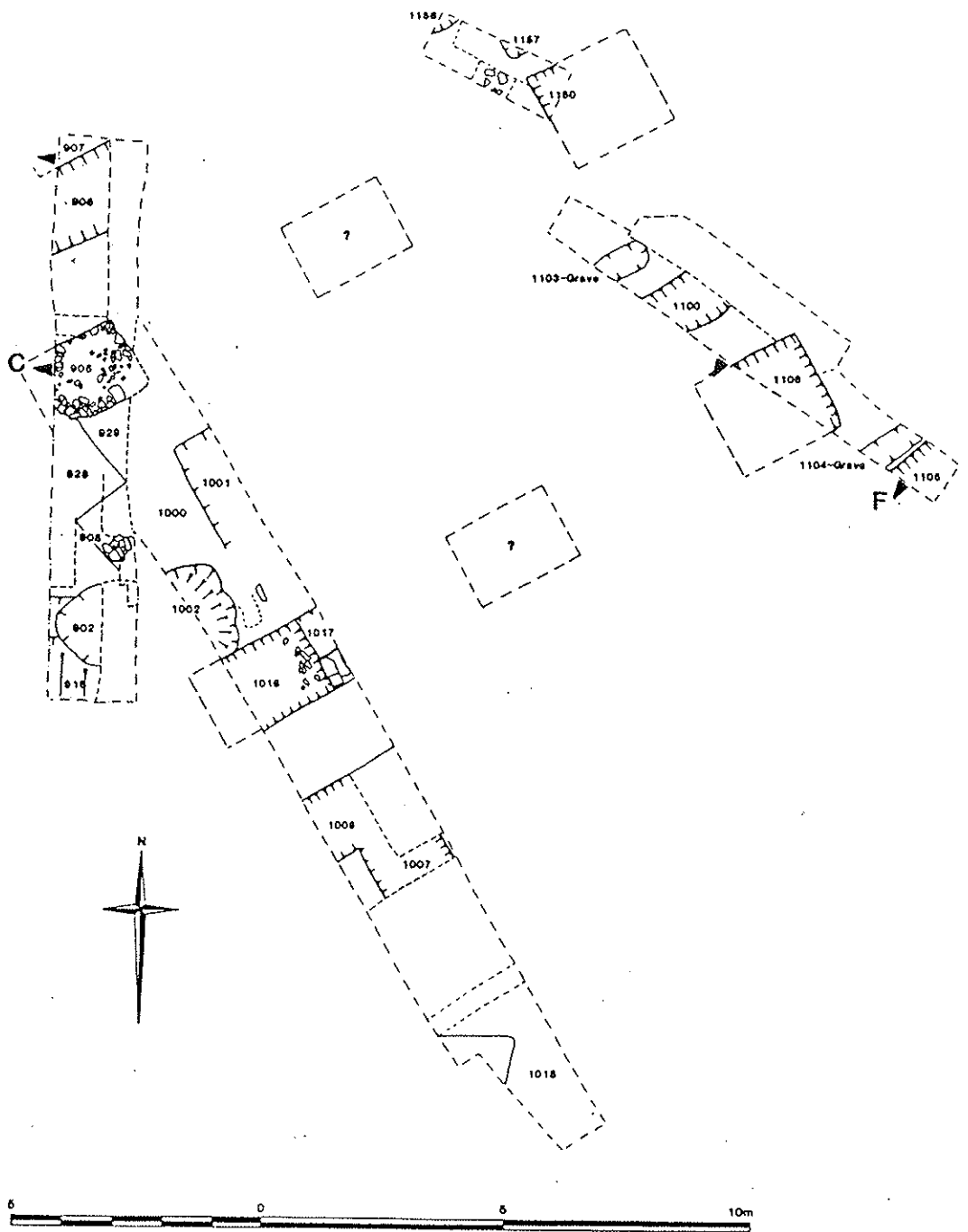


Fig.4 Trenches IX-XI showing conjectural reconstruction of the arcade.

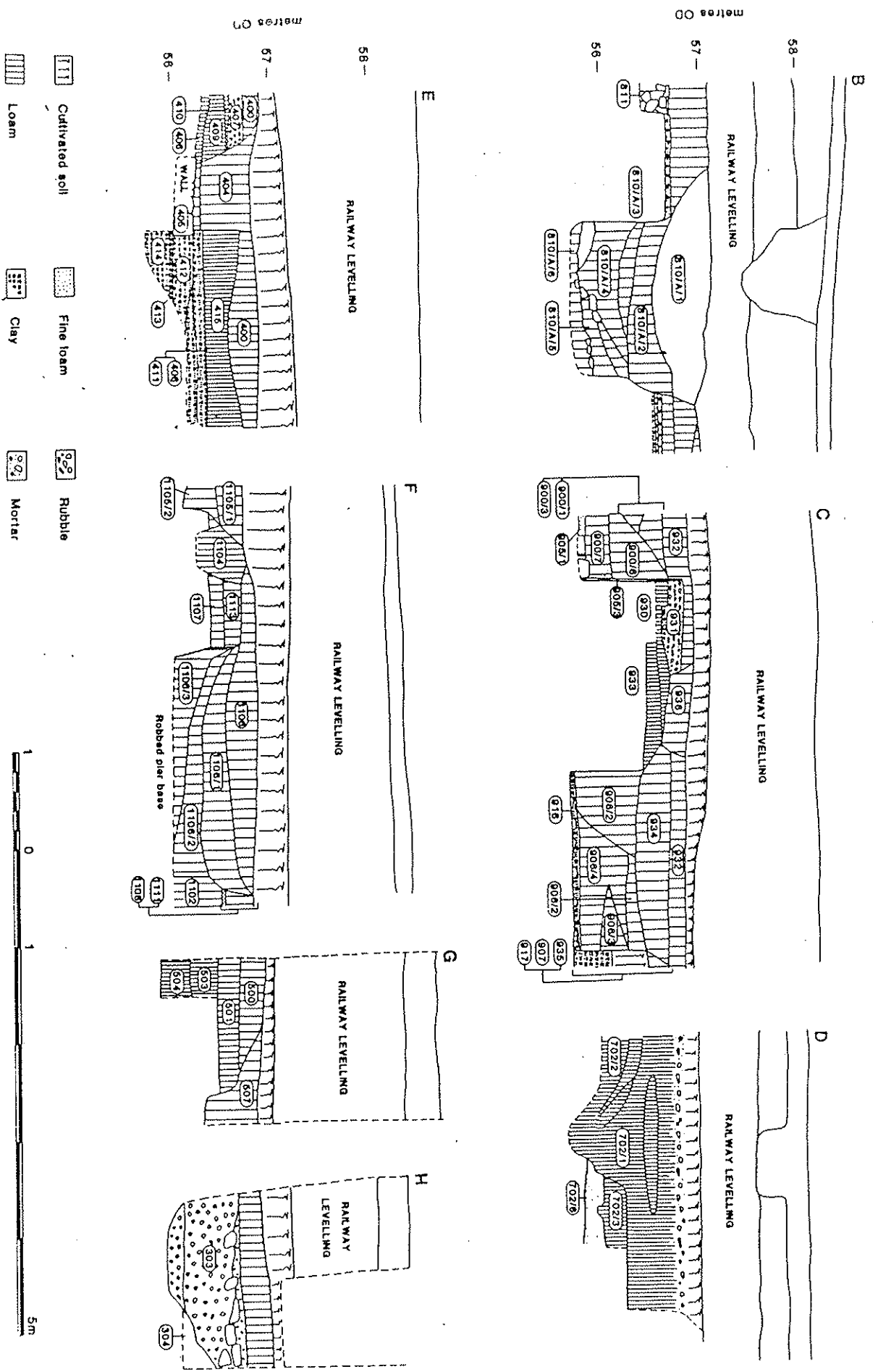


Fig. 5 Sample sections of trenches VIII, IX, VII, IV, XI, V, III

3. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Oxford has a wealth of documentary and topographical evidence about most of its dissolved monastic houses, and Rewley Abbey is no exception. Julian Munby has compiled an inventory of the published sources, and Nicholas Doggett has made notes on the Calender of Estate Papers and many original deeds of the 16th to 19th centuries in Christ Church. Together with more recent published works such as Squires and the Victoria County History it has recently been possible to build up a good picture of the abbey. The task has however always been confused by the vexed question of whether the church was south or north of the known courtyard. Only the new excavation has provided the full answer; there was certainly a church to the south, but possibly more precisely to the south-east, but there is equally no reason why there should not have been another, or at least a chapel, to the north.

Rewley Abbey was founded as a chantry to pray for the soul of Richard Earl of Cornwall. It had evidently been Richard's prodigious wealth which led him to be elected king of Germany in 1257, and which had previously enabled him to found such an impressive Cistercian house as Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire (1246). In founding Rewley Abbey in 1281, his son Edmund was carrying out the spirit of his father's will, and would presumably have followed the conventional plan at Hailes, except in as much as the new site had special functions or special topographical constraints.

Two obviously special functions of Rewley were firstly the provision of a chantry and secondly of a monastic college (house of studies or studium). The chantry might mean no more than a shrine within the church. A monastic college might equally be housed in one part of an otherwise standard monastic plan, and no other studium of this date has been recognised as a separate entity in any English monastery. Separate monastic colleges begin to appear at about this time in Oxford, ie. the Benedictine Gloucester (now Worcester) College in 1284 and Durham (now Trinity) College in 1291. Virtually nothing survives of these colleges before the 15th century however, and they give no indication of what might constitute a late 13th century monastic college. Spreading the net a little wider therefore, it is necessary to look at secular colleges, such as University College (1249), Balliol College (c.1263) and Merton (1274). The earliest surviving buildings are at Merton with an incomplete church of c.1290 which is a blueprint for Oxford's principal

medieval college chapels, and Mob Quad (1304-7) to the south. This basic quadrangular college arrangement with a chapel to the north could easily have been inspired by a standard monastic plan, but by the same token, a studium within Rewley Abbey could in turn have been based on a 13th century conception of a secular college. Two tenuous arguments suggest that the cloister which has been shown in 2c4 (above) to form the basis of the post-medieval courtyard was indeed such a purpose-built college. Firstly, the way the cloister is apparently offset to the west of the church nave suggests something other than a simple reversed conventual plan, particularly as there is now good reason to believe there could also be a standard south cloister. Secondly, a plan of 1775 found by Nicholas Doggett at Christ Church shows the buildings then standing, with part of the surviving north range identified as the former chapel. There is no reason why an abbey with its own church should also need a chapel in what might otherwise be the Frater, but it is common for medieval Oxford colleges, New College and All Souls for example, to have chapels within their north ranges. The incorporation of a chapel into a range is achieved in both cases, and also at Magdalen College, by dispensing with an east window and having instead a solid wall, decorated with an elaborate reredos. By this means the chapel at Rewley could have been isolated both physically and visually from the building across its east end, the reredorter or latrine which arches over the north moat on the maps of Agas and Loggan. It is this juxtaposition of the sacred and mundane which has confused so many attempts to understand this abbey plan, and which now has a logical explanation.

Rewley Abbey may therefore incorporate the earliest purpose-built Oxford college plan. This would be confirmed if it can be shown conclusively that the church does not extend along the south side of the college cloister, and if it is possible to demonstrate a south cloister. The plan of the church has its own interest. There is nothing in the excavated evidence to show where the crossing might be - pier base F1106 in Trench XI may have been exaggerated to carry Anthony Wood's 'squat enbattled tower', but this is only speculation. The breadth of the nave and the proportions of the aisles suggest however that Rewley could be a half scale replica of Edmund's father's foundation, Hailes Abbey. A half scale drawing of Hailes is therefore superimposed on Fig. 6, to indicate the likely proportions. It would mean that the east end of the church could be close to the surviving

precinct wall on the Castle Mill Stream.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4a. The story of Rewley Abbey.

The assessment trenches have provided possible answers to some major questions at Rewley Abbey, and posed some new ones. A full historical interpretation of the results is outside the scope of the present report, and must await specialist study of the excavated artifacts, should it transpire that there is to be no further excavation. A brief history is however possible at this stage.

The area appears to have been partly a gravel island and partly shallow channels with alluvial silting. One of the alluvial areas was chosen to be reclaimed in the 13th century by the dumping of silty gravel to the east, and loam in the area of the college cloister. In August 1281 Oseney Abbey just downstream agreed a money settlement in case this raising of the area should cause flooding. Within six months Rewley Abbey was ready to accommodate its first monks, implying that building was rapid on the newly reclaimed platform. The variety of wall construction seen in the south-west corner of the college cloister, and particularly the early wall F31, suggest that the initial buildings may have been augmented later, but the assessment trenches were too limited to define these building phases. It is most likely that both the abbey and studium were built together, as implied by the decrees of the Cistercian chapter. The large moat which surrounded the site into modern times possibly started as simply the areas of flood plain which had not been reclaimed. With a gradual rise in water level however, the abbey would have appeared to be surrounded by a wet moat very typical of defended houses of the period. The extensive reclamation beyond the west moat is particularly interesting since it may not have been intended for building or agricultural purposes. Mark Robinson's suggestion that it was designed to raise the level of an orchard above the rising ground water is very plausible.

A superficial view of the finds from the assessment suggests that the site is comparatively rich in copper alloy and other decorative artefacts. Pottery bottles are far more common than on neighbouring domestic sites, perhaps for oil, condiments or other precious liquids. The bone artefacts

included a tuning peg from a small harp of a type being manufactured in the south suburb of Oxford in the 15th century. This peg was unused, perhaps kept in reserve in case of breakage.

4b. The quality of the remains.

The quality of structural preservation is very patchy, excellent in places, but with total robbing of stonework elsewhere. The most helpful rule is that those abbey buildings which survive on the plan of 1850 are well preserved in the ground, those which had been demolished previously having been robbed to a greater or lesser extent. It may therefore be predicted that much of the north-west, south-west and south-east areas of the cloister will survive in good condition, with good preservation of floor surfaces in at least the east and west ranges. Yard surfaces external to the college cloister, including the access road, are also shown to be well preserved. They are interstratified with the infilling of the ditches, which themselves are likely to tell a complex story of recutting and infilling through the life of the property.

Away from the college cloister the preservation was best in the northern and eastern sides of the City Council site, where the precinct wall survives and part of a small stone building stands to medieval floor level (2c5).

Preservation of the masonry of the church is poor, with little stone surviving above water level. In the British Rail area a 0.2m. depth of church floors was intact, although with an assortment of pits suggesting post-Dissolution activity within the building. The church on the City Council site had its walls robbed, and most of the floor accumulation had been stripped off exposing the tops of the burials.

The worst preservation of all was to the south of the church on the British Rail site. There was extensive disturbance which made it quite difficult to define the shape of a robbed external buttress, and recognition of a robbed south cloister would require careful excavation in these circumstances.

4c. General comments.

Parts of Rewley Abbey are seen to be preserved better than any of Oxford's other dissolved houses, and these are the parts which, as a putative college plan, have most impact for the history of Oxford, its university and

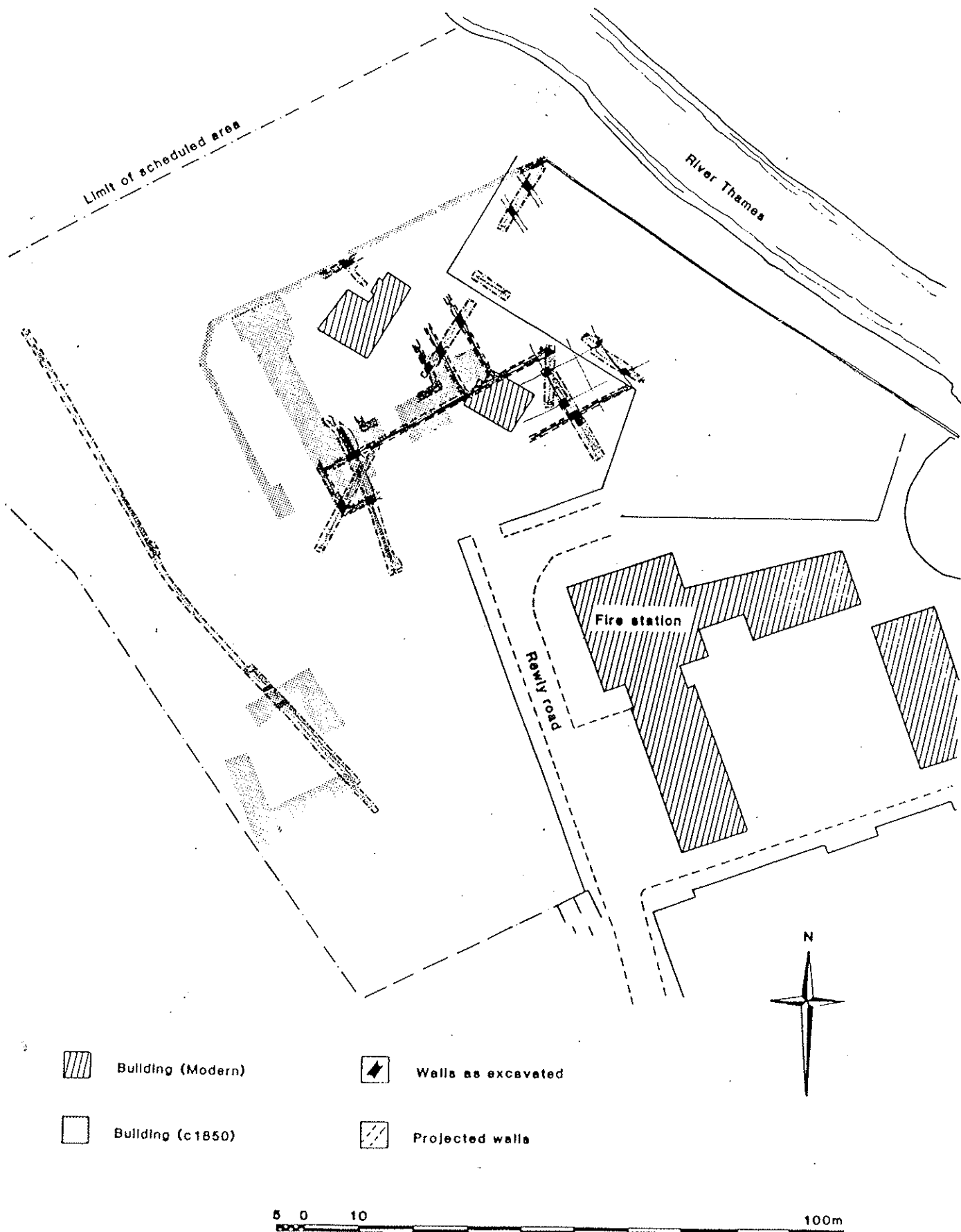
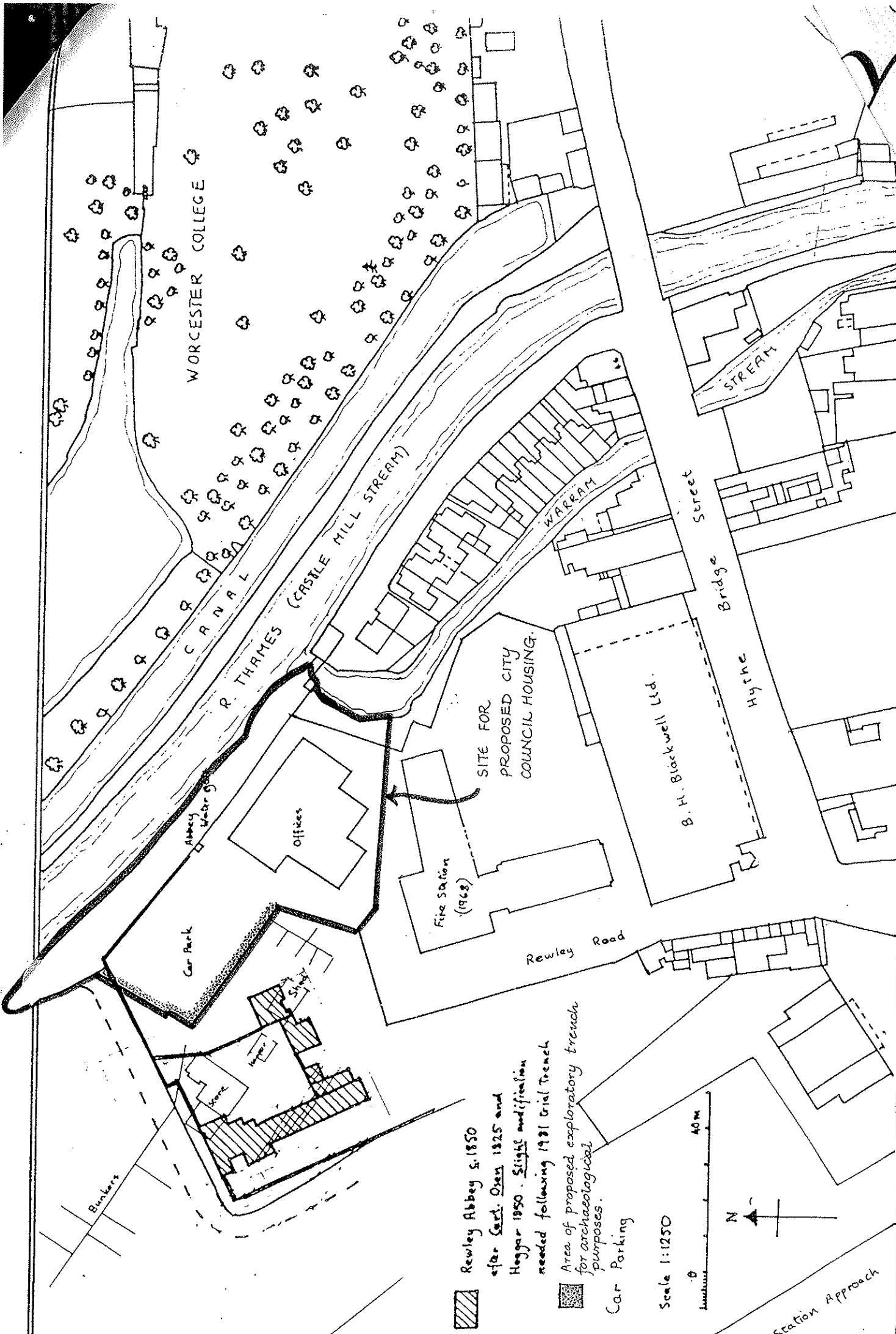



Fig. 7 Plan showing the conjectural reconstruction of the abbey and studium with buildings of 1850 superimposed


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
half reduction

the Cistercian order in England. The suggested 'miniaturisation' of the abbey plan also has significance for monastic studies generally. The purpose of scheduling the site as an Ancient Monument under the terms of the 1979 Act was to ensure its preservation. The Oxford Archaeological Unit upholds the terms of the Act. It hopes that the objectives of this investigation has been achieved in assessing the quality of the remains, and that this report will be the basis for realistic and imaginative decisions on the future of the monument and its landscape.



 Rewley Abbey s.1850
 after Sart. Owen 1825 and
 Hoggar 1850. Slight modification
 needed following 1981 trial trench

 Area of proposed exploratory trench
 for archaeological
 purposes.

 Car Parking

Scale 1:1250



Station Approach

Director of Planning, Estates & Architecture, Oxford. Draw No. Scale 1:1250. August, 1988

REWLEY ROAD HOUSING SITE: Applm. for Scheduled Monument

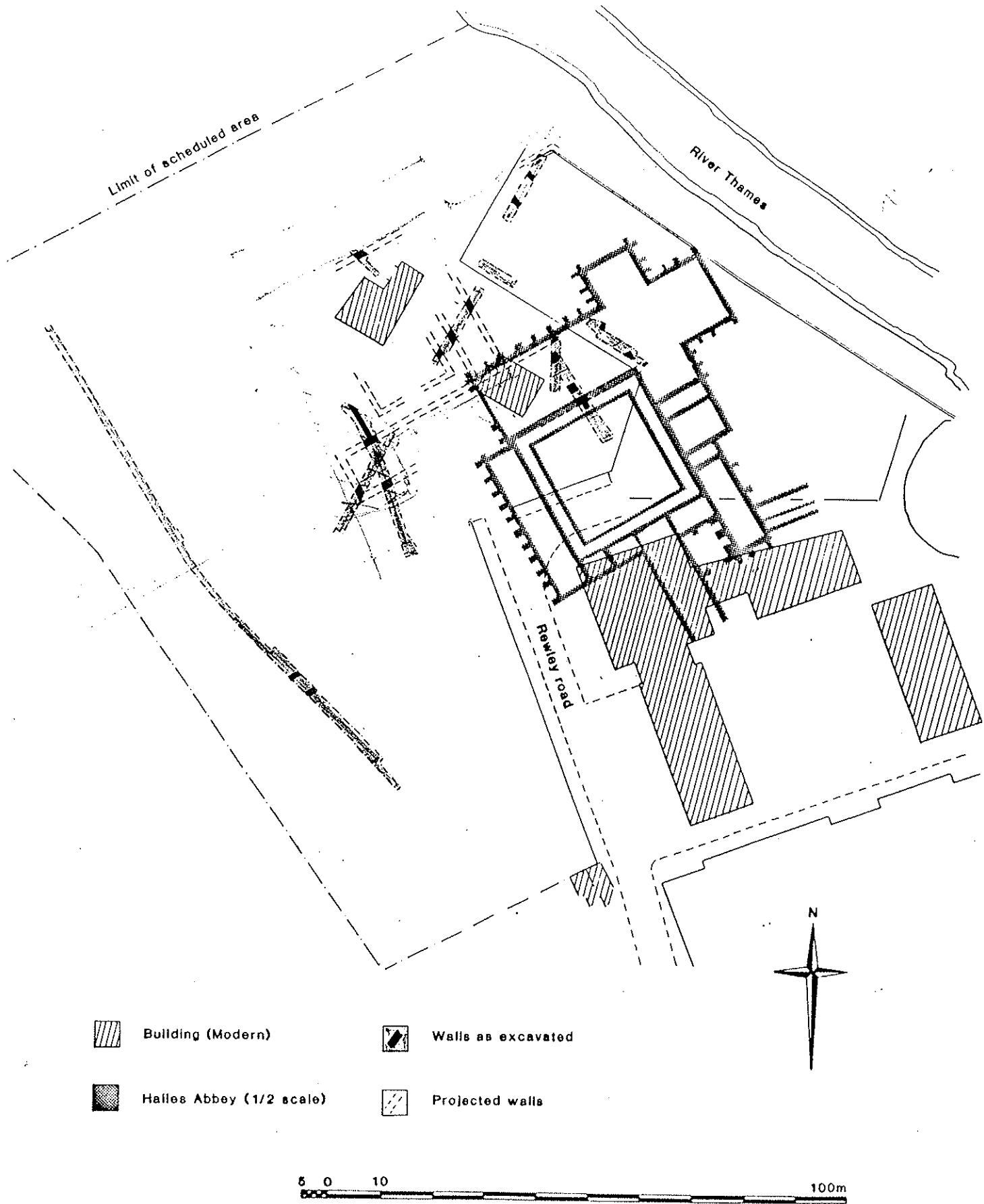


Fig. 6 Plan showing conjectural reconstruction of parts of the abbey and studium, with a half scale plan of Hailes Abbey superimposed.