

CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND,
THE ABBEY GROUNDS, ABINGDON
OXFORDSHIRE

(ABAGD 94)

NGR SU 50109715

Oxford Archaeological Unit

ABSTRACT

Six hand dug test pits were excavated. Topsoils from the current use of the site overlay a possible articulated burial, two walls, a stone surface and possible graveyard soils. Both medieval and Roman pottery was recovered, mainly the latter.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been commissioned by the Directorate of Development and Leisure of the Vale of the White Horse District Council in advance of installing new playground equipment within the confines of the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Abingdon Abbey (Oxon SAM 218). The evaluation was carried out following a brief provided by Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services based on the proposed impact of the new equipment on the site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The reasons for commissioning the work were to determine the likely impact of the foundations for new playground equipment on the remains of Abingdon Abbey which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Excavations on the Abbey were carried out in 1922 and a pre Norman structure, interpreted as a late Saxon Abbey church, was found under the medieval Abbey church. The plan of the medieval Church and cloister was recovered. Burials found S and E of the church, some in stone cists were thought to be a part of the monk's cemetery (Biddle et al, 1968, 67).

During the 1922 excavations Roman material was recovered from all across the excavations. A cobbled surface which was thought to be Roman was also located (Biddle et al 1968, 62). This is certainly part of a larger settlement; excavations carried out by T G Allen of the OAU in 1987-93 to the N of the site revealed Iron Age and Roman settlement with an element of early Saxon occupation. The Late Iron Age occupation in this area is bounded by three very large (possibly defensive) ditches which may indicate that Abingdon is the site of a late Iron Age Oppidum.

The River Stert may have been diverted in to one of the large late Iron Age ditches which may have run in a semi-circle to the Thames. It now runs underneath Stert Street and was culverted in the 12th century. At a later date the Stert also joined the Abbey Mill stream immediately to the E of the site as it is shown on Rocque's 1761 map of Berkshire to the N of the abbey.

After the 1922 excavations the site became a Scheduled Ancient Monument and there has been little further investigation. In 1990 a mortar floor at a depth of c0.8 m from the surface was recorded during observations of a pipe trench by T G Allen of the OAU (next to the course of the Abbey stream at a point due E of Trench 5).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Chronicles of Abingdon Abbey indicate a foundation in 675 by Hean, a relative of Cissa who was the 'king' of Berkshire under Centwine, King of Wessex.¹ The abbey was refounded in 954 by St Aethelwold under the orders of King Eadred. A new Abbey church was begun in 1084-96. This church was rebuilt and added to on several occasions and the church seen by Leland, in the sixteenth century, was largely the work of four 15th-century abbots. Similarly, accommodations for the monks was also built and rebuilt. The Abbot had a suite of buildings for his use SW of the Abbey church.

G Lambrick has reconstructed a layout of the abbey from documentary evidence (Lambrick in Biddle et al 1968, 49 to 55). An infirmary, joined to the monks quarters and Chapter House by a passageway, lay to the SE of the Abbey church in the general area of the evaluation. A misericord, a private prison, and obedientiaries' quarters were probably connected to the infirmary. The chapel of the Trinity (built c1250) also lay to the E of the abbey church. A *pitancery* (?from 1322/3) lay to the E of the Trinity chapel and covered 3 acres of marshy ground with bridges. Other buildings were attached to the infirmary; an ex-abbots lodging, the chamberlain's hospice and perhaps the monk's guesthouse. A gatehouse SE of the Church lead into the monk's cemetery. A 12th-century map of Canterbury Abbey is reproduced on the cover; the infirmary cloister, of almost the same size as the great cloister, lies to the SE of the church with ancillary buildings and may be taken as an indication the layout of a substantial abbey.

The Abbey was one of the first to be surrendered to the Crown at the Dissolution in 1538. An orchard at the E of the Church was recorded by Amyce after the dissolution. By 1575, of the central buildings only the Abbey church was left standing. Up until the mid 17th century the Abbey had belonged to one family; in the late 17th century the abbey was sold in several smaller portions. Little is known of the use of the site after this but it is likely that it became the garden of Abbey House. The Abbey stream was turned into an ornamental lake with a boat house, of which photographs survive, in the 19th century.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY (Fig. 1)

The total surface area of the site which was investigated was six square metres, this is just under 1% of the proposed impact area. There was no reason to believe that the part of the Abbey grounds covered by the site has been extensively disturbed by 19th century and modern activity. The site is at present grassed with trees.

The six trenches were positioned under the proposed new playground equipment sites to prospect for archaeological deposits. These were hand dug down to the top of the first significant archaeological horizon or the level of the

¹Academic opinions on the likelihood of Abingdon being such an early foundation are divided. Certainly Abingdon Abbey made much of such claims in the Middle Ages, but it is possible that the early references in the Abingdon Chronicles are forged.

likely impact of the new equipment.

No environmental samples were taken as the features in the trenches were not revealed over a large enough area for samples to be taken with certainty as to their provenance.

Depth of Trenches

Trench	Depth Actual (proposed)
1	0.34 (0.85)
2	0.5 (0.85)
3	0.54 (0.85)
5	0.9 (1.05)
6	0.55 (0.55)
7	0.75 (0.45)

DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS (Fig. 2)

(also see Table of contexts and pottery report in appendices)

A turf layer and a layer of gardensoil (commonly either layers *00 and *01 or *01 and *02) were ubiquitous in all the trenches.

Trenches 1 and 2

A stone and gravel surface was seen in both trenches at a depth of 0.3 and 0.4 (51.29 and 50.93 m OD respectively). In Trench 1 was a feature which contained two parallel human bones in association with a finger bone (51.33 m OD). It was not possible to identify the two bones precisely but they may have both been from the lower arm and the feature is tentatively interpreted as a grave. Trench 2 contained an E-W aligned feature (unexcavated) which cut the stoney surface. The pottery recovered from the excavated (gardensoil) layers above the stoney surface was predominantly post-medieval dating to the 17th and 18th centuries although several Roman sherds were recovered. These deposits may represent a yard surface which has been cut by graves extending from the monk's cemetery.

Trenches 6 and 7

Deposits of mid brown loam with small amounts of mortar were seen in these trenches which were excavated to a depth of 0.55 and 0.75 m (51.13 and 50.97 m OD). An ankle bone and toe and finger bones were found in Trench 7. The excavation of Trench 7 was stopped when a firm layer, perhaps forming a surface, was encountered. The function of this possible surface was not determined. No identifiable human bone came from Trench 6. The presence of Roman pottery from these trenches and the uniform consistency of the soil suggests that the deposits encountered have been reworked over some time to the depth of Roman

deposits. It is possible that these reworked soils represent graveyard soils as they contain human bones and lie adjacent to one possibly articulated skeleton (in Trench 1) and to burials located in 1922.

Trenches 3 and 5

Both these trenches contained walls. Trench 3 was excavated to the top of solid limestone rubble masonry (50.71 m OD) which was greater in extent than the trench. A layer which overlay it contained one sherd of 12th- to 15th-century pottery and one sherd of Roman pottery. Trench 5 was excavated (in a reduced area due to roots and stones) to the top of a limestone wall bonded by hard yellow mortar (50.17 m OD). A small amount of material (0.06 m) was removed to the W of the wall in Trench 5 to determine whether the wall was coursed or faced. The wall was coursed but not faced with dressed stone (although the facing may have been removed at a later date). Both the walls in these two trenches were overlain by a mid brown silt with mortar/stone debris and post-medieval pottery. These deposits overlying the walls could be interpreted as demolition debris. Planting pits from garden activity were present in Trench 3.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

The deposits revealed in the evaluation trenches indicate medieval activity and burials on the site. Although Roman pottery was recovered no Roman deposits were encountered.

The remains of a rich Benedictine monastery are not unique but generally the areas of monasteries covered by infirmaries and other ancillary buildings have not commonly been subject to excavation. As infirmaries were an integral part of the life of an abbey the well preserved remains of buildings in the area likely to contain infirmaries or hospices and ancillary buildings are highly significant (G D Keevill pers. com). A synthesis of the documentary evidence was produced by Lambrick (in Biddle 1968, 49-55). Documents exist detailing the medieval and post-medieval activity on the site

DEPOSIT SURVEY

The site slopes from the W to the E dropping around 1 m to the Abbey stream. It is unknown whether the landscaping for the lake and boathouse truncated the archaeological deposits, if so, then the extent of this truncation is unknown. The observation of the pipe trench by T G Allen did not indicate truncation.

Archaeological deposits were found at depths of 0.3 m, and over, from the present surface. The proposed depths of the foundations for the play equipment average 0.85 m and correspond to the proposed trench depths (see table above for comparisons). This would seriously effect the archaeological deposits. In addition the proposed development may be set into a terrace (of unknown depth Fig. 1). RSJ type supports are to be placed at 2 m intervals around the edge and at the corners of the new play surface to a depth of 0.45 m. This will also affect the archaeological deposits.

Mark Roberts MIFA November 1994

APPENDICES

Bibliography

Biddle M, Lambrick Mrs H T, and Myres J N L, 1968 The Early History of Abingdon, Berkshire and its Abbey Medieval Archaeology 12 26-69

Coppack G, 1990 Abbeys and Priors Batsford/English Heritage Bath

Table of Contexts

(Contexts 100- from Trench 1, contexts 200- from Trench 2, etc.)

CTX	Description	Interpretation	length	width	depth	date of pottery (number of sherds)
101	dark grey silt loam	topsoil	-	-	0.17	1720+ (1), Roman (1)
102	grey brown silt loam	?gardensoil	-	-	0.13	19th (10), 17th (2), Roman (2)
103	mid-brown gravelly stoney silt loam	?surface			ne	
104	mid-brown silt loam	?grave fill	-	-	ne	
105	cut	grave cut (only seen in plan)	-	-	-	
106	two parallel bones + 1 fingerbone	Human bone- skeleton	-	-	-	
201	dark grey silt loam	topsoil	-	-	0.13	17th-18th (11), tile (2)
202	grey sandy silt	gardensoil	-	-	0.13	early 18th (1)
203	grey brown sandy silt	layer function not determined	-	-	0.04	Post-medieval (2)
204	gravel + stones	surface	-	-	ne	
205	light brown sandy silt	?grave fill	-	-	ne	
300	grey brown sandy silt	topsoil	-	-	0.18	
301	dark grey brown silt loam with mortar	?demolition debris	-	-	0.34	
302	cut	vertical cut filled by 301	-	-	0.34	
303	yellowish brown gravelly silt	layer-function unclear	-	-	0.32	16th (2), 17th (3)
304	mortar + limestone	wall	1+	1+	ne	
305	mid yellowish brown sandy silt	layer over wall	-	-	0.6	12th-15th (10), Roman (1st-4th 1)
306	dark grey brown	fill of 307	-	-	-	

CTX	Description	Interpretation	length	width	depth	date of pottery (number of sherds)
307	cut	vertical cut			0.4	
501	grey brown sandy silt	topsoil	-	-	0.4	Delft tile, 1720+ (1)
502	dark brown sandy silt	gardensoil	-	-	0.2	
503	mid/dark buff gravelly silt	demolition dump	-	-	0.32	16th (1)
504	dark brown silt occ. mortar	demolition	-	-	nfe	
505	unfinished limestone and mortar	wall	-	-	-	
601	dark grey silt	topsoil	-	-	0.1	18th (1), 19th (1)
602	dark grey silt loam	?gardensoil	-		0.15	
603	light grey silt occ mortar	?dump-or graveyard soil?- unclear	-	-	0.3	16th (1), 13th (1), Roman (3)
700	dark grey brown silt loam	topsoil	-	-	0.18	18th (2)
701	yellow brown gravelly silt	graveyard soil	-	-	0.48	12th-15th (1), late 12th (1), 17th (4), Roman (15)
702	mid yellow brown gravelly silt	surface	-	-	ne	Roman (3)

Pottery from Abingdon Abbey, Children's Playground, Oxon

By C Underwood-Keevill

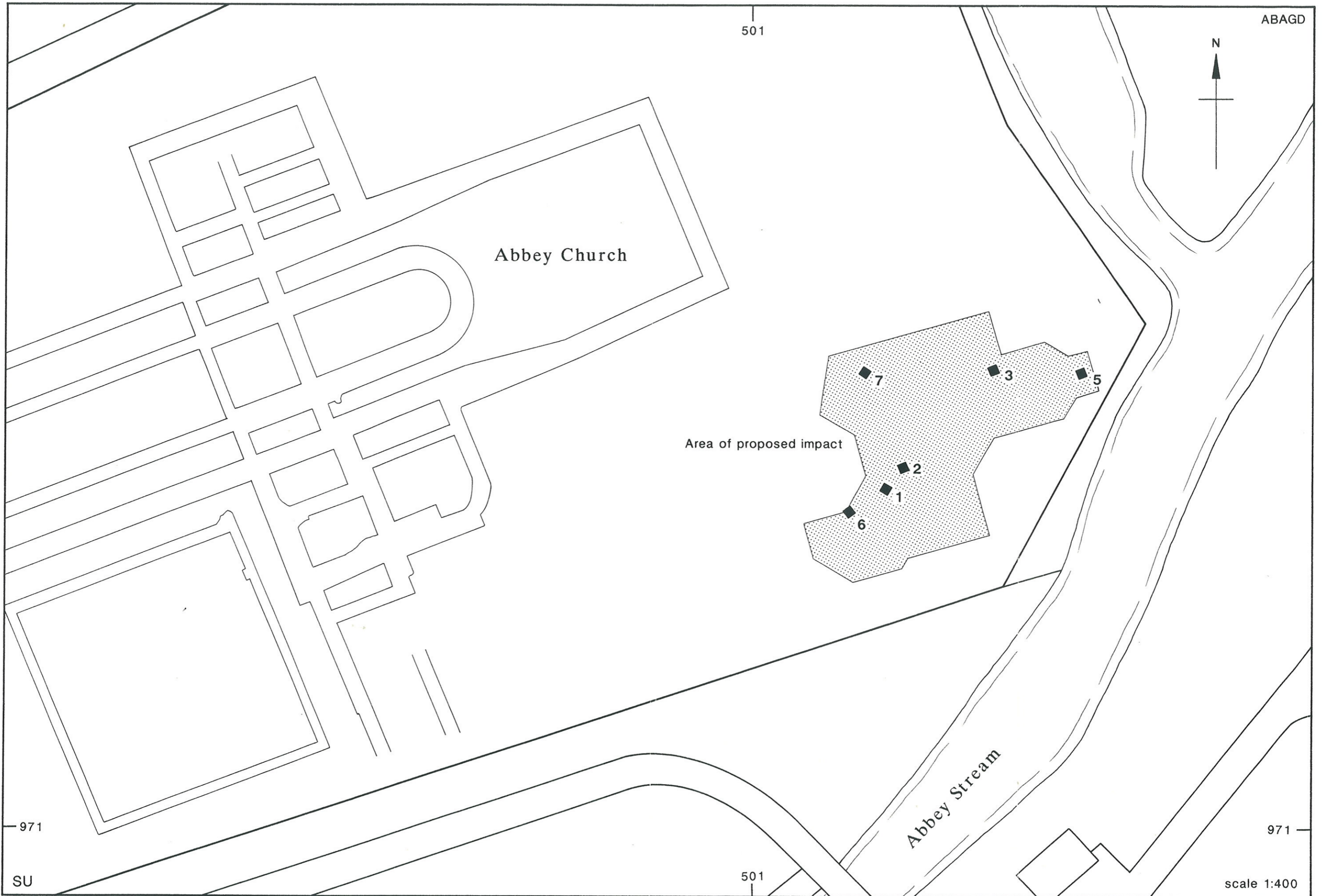
Total	77	0.44 kg
Roman	24	
Medieval	5	
Early Post-med	6	
Post-med	37	
Building mat	5	

The assemblage consists of post medieval red wares, including dishes and pans dating from the late 17th century onwards. There is a small amount of early post-medieval material dating from the 16th century to early-mid 17th century which includes Tudor green cup sherds, tin glazed wares including Dutch tiles, and one sherd of Cistercian type ware.

A high proportion of Roman pottery also occurs, mainly in context 701. These consist of sandy reduced wares, probably local Oxfordshire wares which range from the reduced short everted rim jars and shallow dishes copying BB1

forms (fabrics R10 and R30). The shallow dishes are late Roman types dating from the 3rd to 4th centuries. One sherd of Oxfordshire colour-coated ware and one of Oxfordshire white ware were noted. Only five medieval sherds dating from the 10th century to the 15th century were recovered. This includes fabric types: Abingdon type A (Oxford type AG) a cooking pot and pitcher fabric dating from the 12th to 15th century; Abingdon type D (Oxford AM) and Oxford type AU. The two 13th to 15th century Brill/Boarstall jug fabrics, and one sherd of Abingdon type H (Oxford R) St Neots-type ware dated to the late 10th century to 11th century.

The building material includes one medieval floor tile with splashed green glaze (context 701).



ABAGD



Abbey Church

Area of proposed impact

Abbey Stream

971

SU

501

501

971

scale 1:400

figure 1

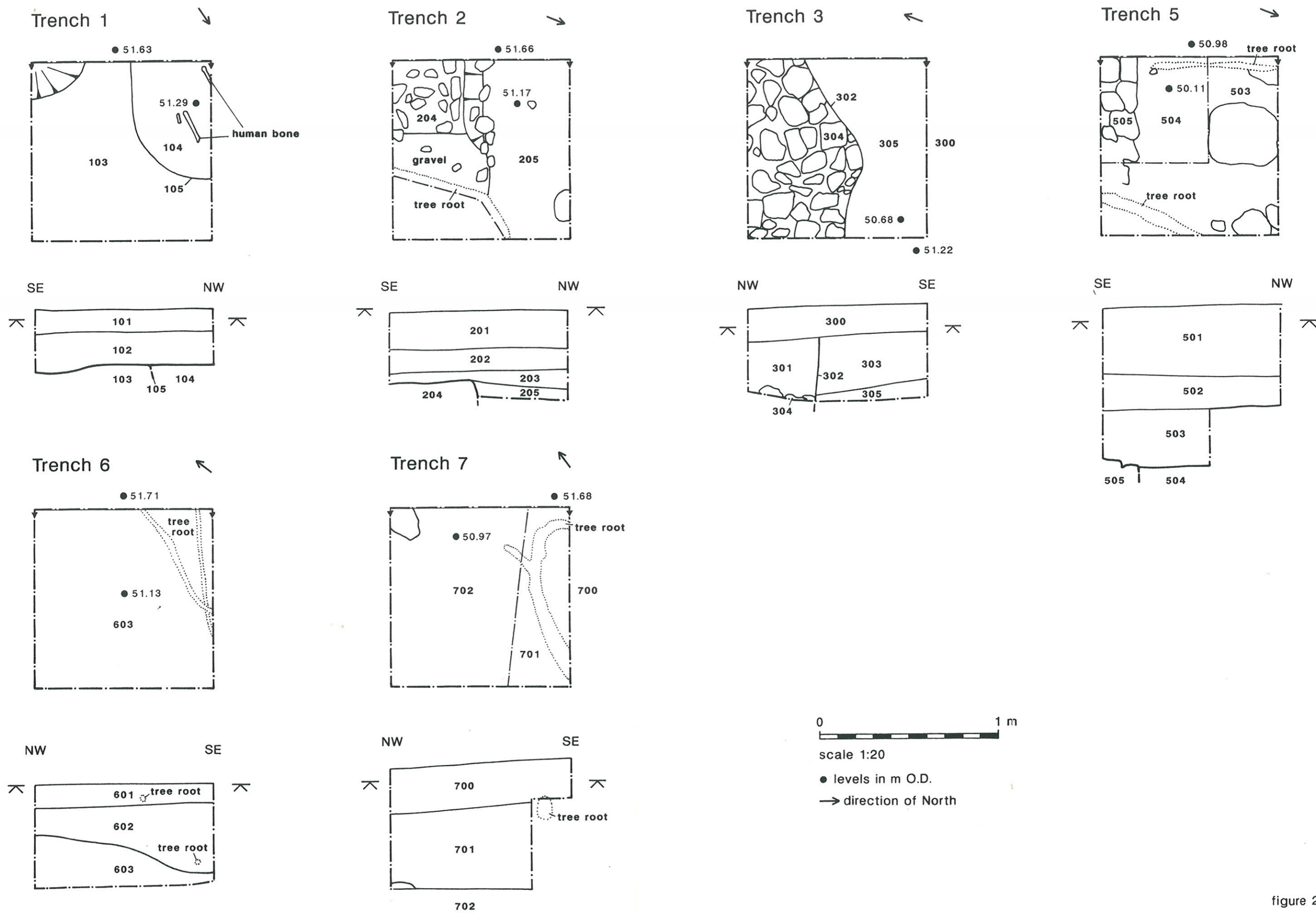


figure 2

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