

ABINGDON (OX)

ABINGDON: VINEYARD REDEVELOPMENT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

1987

# ABINGDON, VINEYARD REDEVELOPMENT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION 1987

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1971 the redevelopment and expansion of Abingdon has been accompanied by one of the most intensive programmes of archaeological exploration in Britain. This work has taken place both within the historic core of the town and around the periphery. This work has demonstrated the great historical and archaeological importance of the Abingdon area from early times. In 1986 the results were summarised by Burrow and Miles in a report on the Archaeological Potential and Response to the Policies for Redevelopment Adopted by the Vale of White Horse District Council.

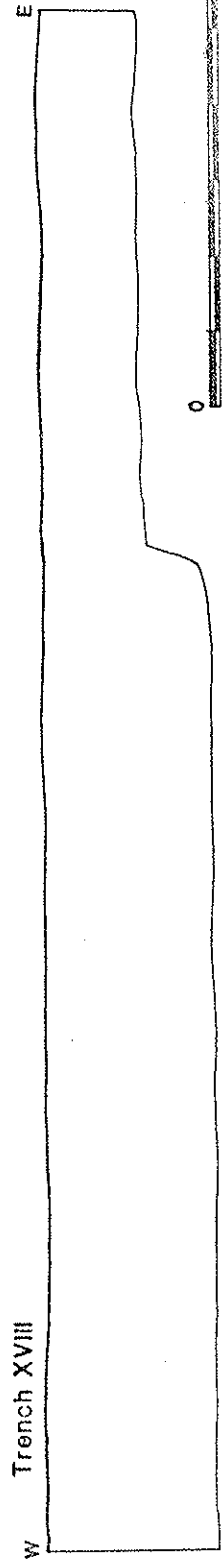
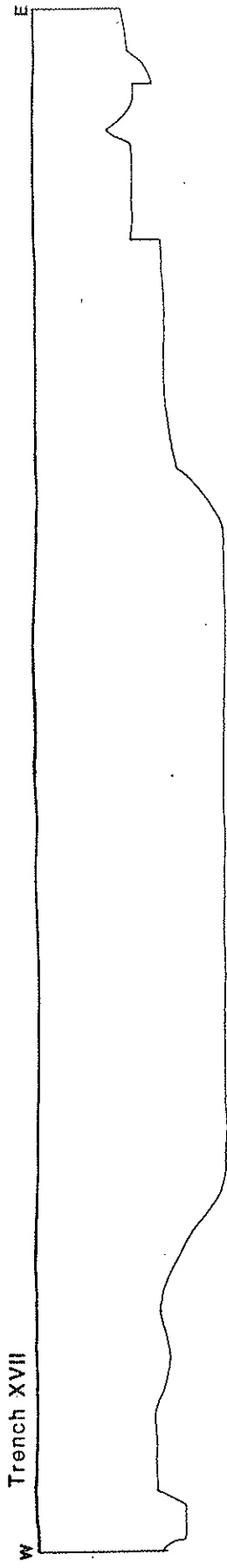
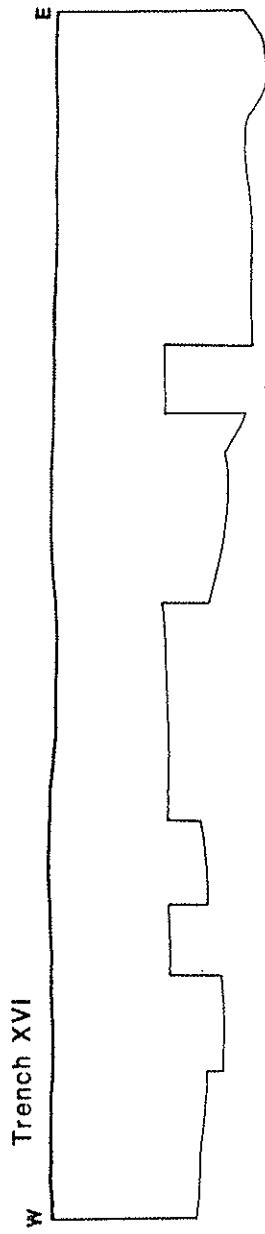
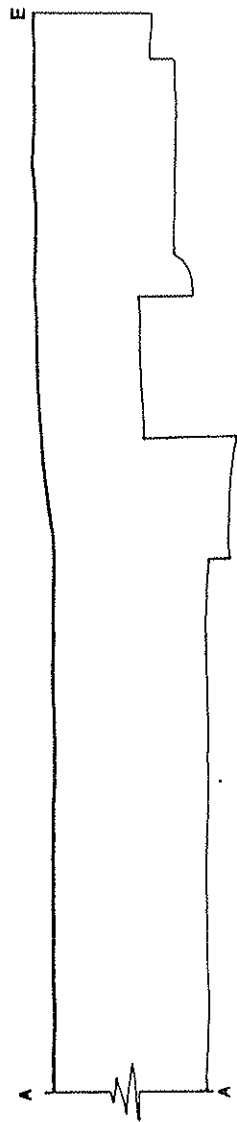
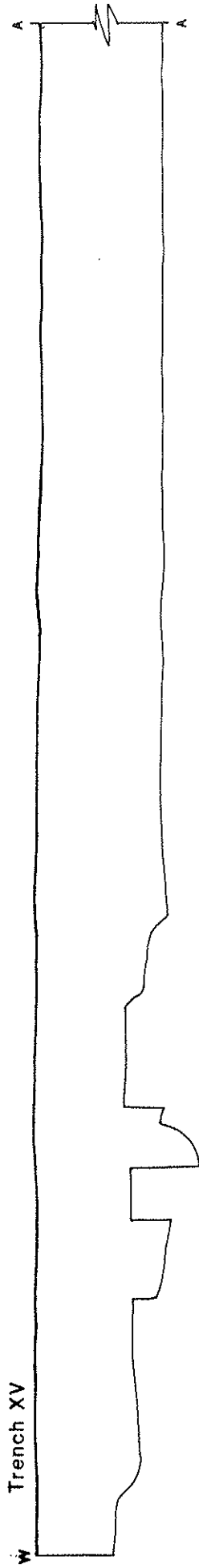
The Vineyard Action Area overlies the north-eastern edge of an extensive Roman settlement. This settlement is one of several unwalled 'small towns' whose role in the development and economy of Roman Britain has yet to be fully explored. During the early Anglo-Saxon period the foundation of the abbey in the 7th century ranks Abingdon as one of the key places in the conversion of the English to Christianity. The later medieval abbey was one of the largest in England. Much of the Vineyard Action Area lies within the former abbey grounds and includes part of the extensive lay cemetery.

With a market in front of the abbey gates, Abingdon appears well established by the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, well before the majority of Oxfordshire's towns had been laid out. It is this that makes Abingdon so important in the study of the development of towns in England. The main route to Oxford may have crossed this area in the later Anglo-Saxon period possibly bridging the river Stert beneath the present cattle market. Urban development may have extended along the Oxford road from a relatively early date.

Although by 1200 the medieval town appears to have extended northwards west of the Stert, the development of the east bank and its temporal relationship with the abbey precinct remains unexplored. It is crucial to our understanding of the sequence of Abingdon's urban development to date the expansion of the town east of the river and recover something of the general character and appearance of this part of the medieval town.

In February 1987 an evaluation of the site was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit financed by the Vale of White Horse District Council. A sample of nineteen machine and hand dug trenches and pits were excavated in an attempt to quantify the archaeology that will be damaged or destroyed by the Vineyard redevelopment. On the basis of this evaluation the following scheme is proposed. Each of the five development blocks (Areas 1-5; see enclosed map) have been dealt with separately.

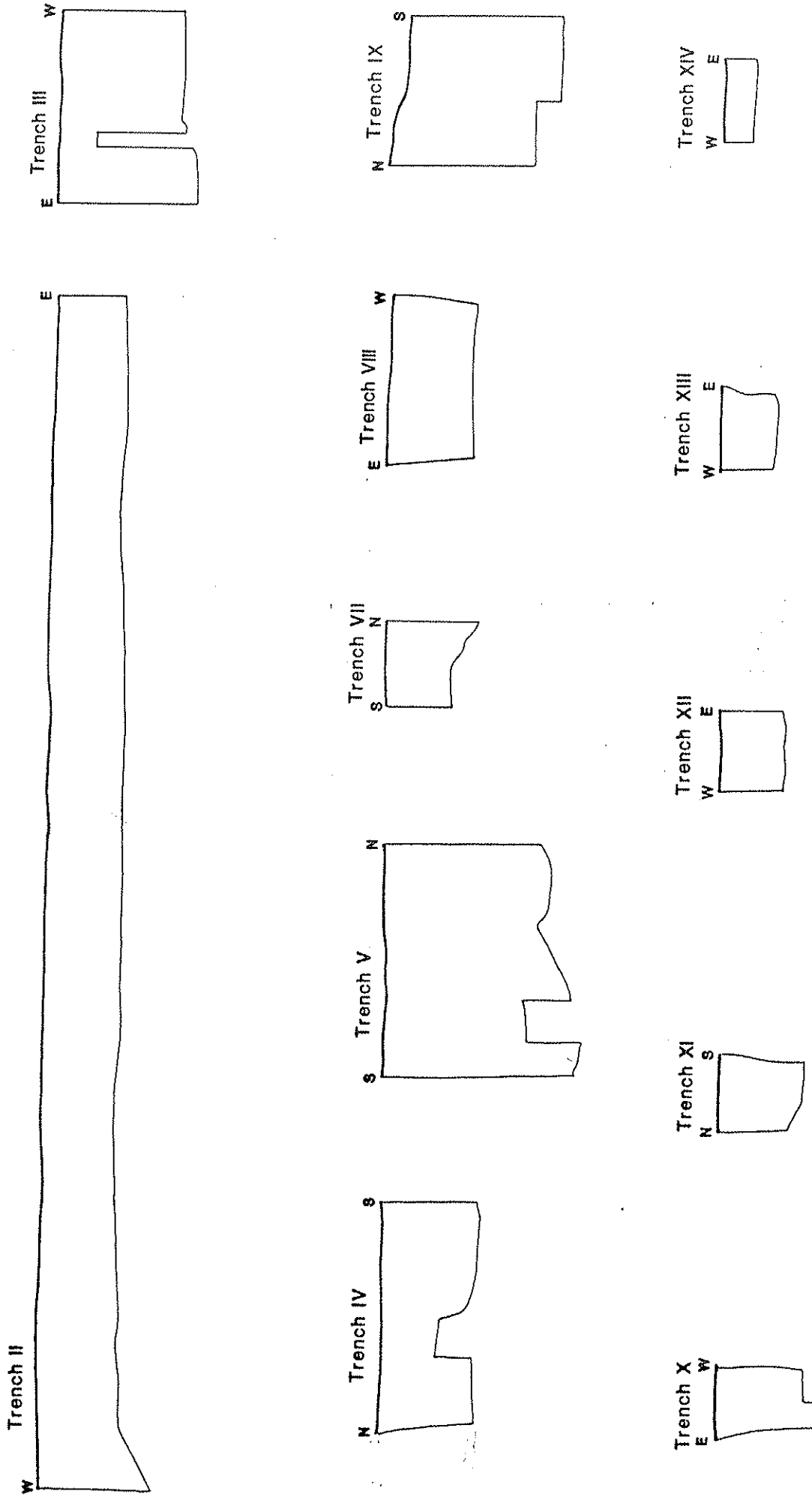
ABINGDON: VINEYARD      ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL TRENCH PROFILES

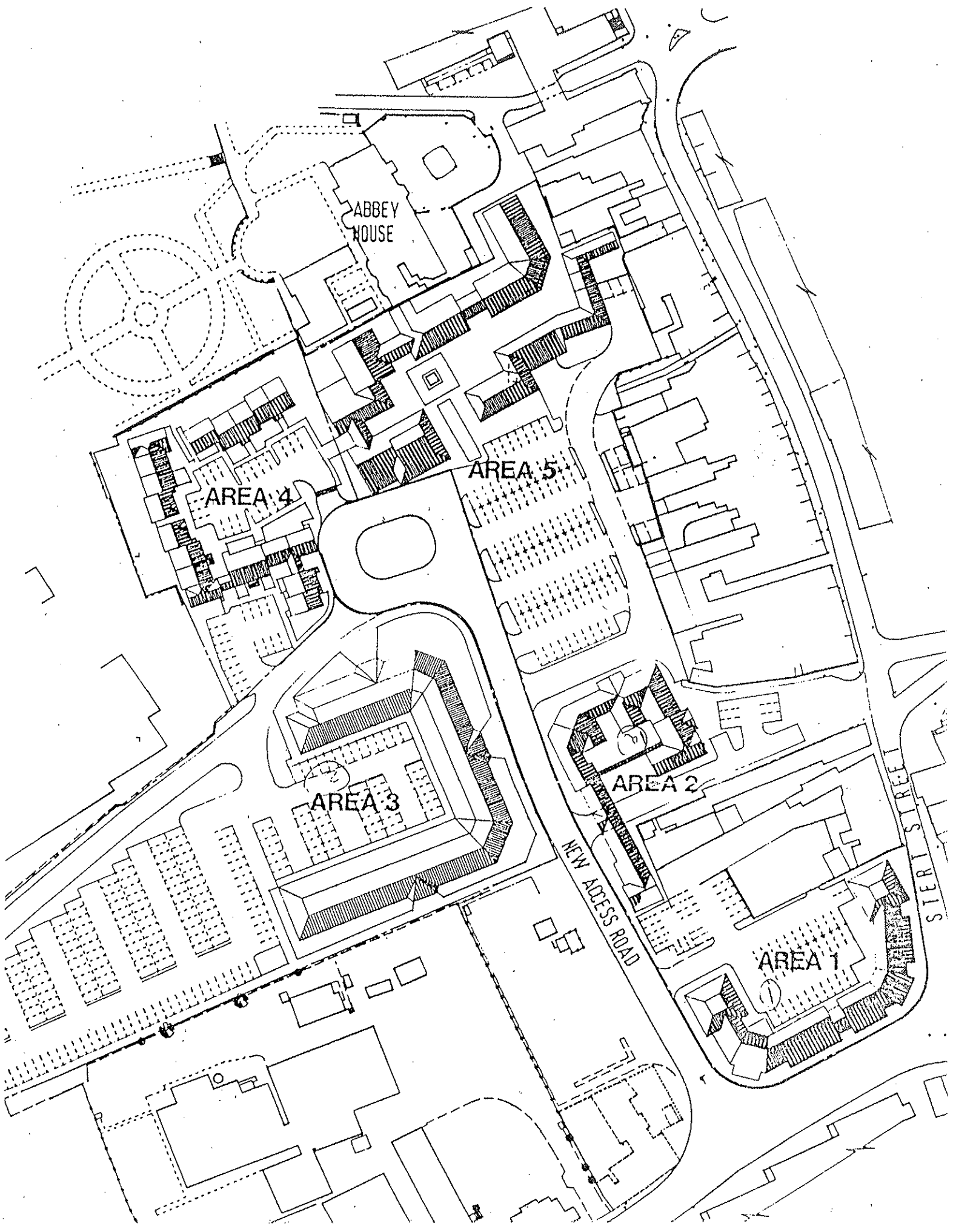


0 10 metres

ABINGDON: VINEYARD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL TRENCH PROFILES





## AREA 1: THE VINEYARD-STERT STREET CAR PARK

### The Trial Trenches

A single trench (no. IV, 1m x 4m x 1.6m deep, see enclosed plan) within the Vineyard car park revealed medieval rubbish pits beneath 0.4m of car park metalling and some post-medieval garden soil. A post-medieval well was discovered at the southern end of this trench.

### Archaeological Potential

Sufficient medieval stratigraphy survives to suggest that further, more extensive excavation of this crucial dual frontage site in advance of development would answer a range of problems, principally:

- a. to date the construction of the abbey precinct and vineyard and its relationship with the growth of the present road system.
- b. to establish the temporal relationships between the buildings fronting on to 'The Vineyard', on to Stert Street and the abbey precinct boundary.
- c. the growth and development of Stert Street as an important thoroughfare and the probable associated channelling of the river and the river crossing at the Stert Street/Vineyard junction.
- d. to date the extension of the town along the west bank of the Stert.
- f. medieval tenements fronting on to Stert Street should be examined for trade and industrial activity, particularly the latter in their relationship with the river, the original position of the street frontages and the general character and appearance of this part of the town.

### Recommended Action

Single right-angled trench 5m wide within the car park. Spoil placed to enable enlargement of the trenches to examine frontages and waterlogged material if desirable.

A second trench across the abbey boundary and western end of the vineyard.

## AREA 2: FORMER RAILWAY STATION SITE

### The Trial Trench

A single trench (no. V, 1m x 4m x 3.5m deep) through the platform to the rear of the former ticket office revealed some 2.5m of dumped rubble and earth above a much disturbed former ground surface. This ground surface contained several sherds of Romano-British pottery and sealed a shallow early-mid Iron Age pit. The lack of medieval urban remains was consistent with this trench lying within the medieval abbey precinct.

### Archaeological Potential

The truncated prehistoric and Roman features discovered at the bottom of Trench V are too deeply buried beneath modern land fill to allow easy excavation and the quality of information obtainable through large scale excavation in advance of development would not repay the time and expense involved. However the early-mid Iron Age pottery suggests that sufficient remains may survive to demonstrate the development of the landscape in the centuries preceeding the growth of the Roman settlement. The few pottery sherds from Trench V concurs with the overall impression that Roman settlement activity was less intensive beneath, north and east of the River Stert than to the south and south-east. The archaeology of Area 2 would be served by a thorough watching brief maintained over the ground work during development to record the extent, nature and date of the prehistoric and Roman period settlement features.

Although no buildings are expected on this part of the abbey grounds any development here will almost certainly cross the former abbey precinct boundary and confirm the precise western limit of the medieval abbey grounds and possibly the date at which this part of the abbey curtilage was enclosed.

### Recommended Action

Section across the abbey boundary down to natural followed by a detailed watching brief by an experienced archaeologist.

Duration: 2 week section excavation prior to development. Watching brief during all site clearance, wall foundation and service trench excavation.

Recommended Action

A detailed watching brief by an experienced archaeologist during all site clearance, foundation and service trench excavation.

Duration: Trench excavation 3 weeks.



## AREA 3: FORMER COAL YARD

### The Trial Trenches

Thirteen trenches and trial pits (nos. I, II, VI & X-XIX) revealed Romano-British settlement features, some late Anglo-Saxon pottery and the edge of the former course of the river Stert.

Before the site was levelled for the construction of the railway sidings the south-western edge of the area fell away sharply to form the edge of the former river channel. Trenches XV-XVII revealed a series of silted, marshy meanders. The upper silts contained some Romano-British domestic refuse and the intervening peninsulars of dry land yielded some Roman period settlement features. To the north and east the gravel terrace lay within a foot of the present ground surface and little Romano-British material was recovered. Unlike the old ground surface to the south-west preserved beneath Victorian land fill, the north and eastern parts of Area 3 had previously been cleared down to the surface of the gravel terrace during the construction of the railway and an unknown quantity of settlement evidence removed. Trenches XV-XVIII revealed that the channel had been infilled with soil containing 10th-11th century pottery before the more mixed make-up of the railway sidings was laid. This clean soil may represent a partial 13th century infilling of the original river channel in order to institute a degree of water control during the construction of the water supply for St. John's Hospital.

The general impression was that Romano-British settlement activity was much less intensive on the north bank of the Stert than to the south and that the Stert may have acted as a boundary to the more intensive urban occupation of this unwallled small town for a time at least.

Late Anglo-Saxon pottery from horizons either affected by or comprising deliberately dumped soil suggested nearby late Anglo-Saxon domestic activity.

### Archaeological Potential

The forthcoming redevelopment will provide an opportunity to examine the character of the settlement and land use around the edge of the Roman settlement and to fill in a gap in the archaeological picture already extensively examined through major excavations a little to the east at Barton Court and Barrow Hills. In view of the projected redevelopment of much of this area as car park the archaeology beneath the east and southern part of Area 3 will remain intact. The anticipated building development to the west and north will provide ample opportunity to record the extent of the Iron Age settlement noted in Area 2.

## AREA 4: LAND WEST OF BURGESS PRINTING WORKS

### Trial Trenches

This development area contains two principle features. North of Station road the infilled former course of the river Stert was confirmed by Trenches VII, IX, X-XV & XVIII. In Trench VII the infilling which was examined to water level at a depth of 1m appeared to have been deposited in the later 19th or early 20th century and marks the infilled channel. South of Station Road rising ground indicates the southern river bank over which spread the northern part of the monastic lay cemetery above extensive archaeological deposits from the Romano-British settlement. Roof tile and a tessera (floor tile) recovered during the erection of a single storey office in 1976 indicates the presence of a substantial Roman building in the immediate neighbourhood.

### The Medieval Lay Cemetery

Trench VIII revealed a sequence of intercutting graves to a depth of 1.5m interrupted by a thick deposit of medieval building rubble and painted wall plaster presumably dumped during a phase of rebuilding within the abbey. Shallow foundation and service trenches excavated in 1976 for the present single storey office block indicate that the cemetery extends over the whole of that part of Area 4 south of Station Road and extending to the eastern part of Area 5.

### Archaeological Potential

The traces of a substantial Roman period building in the southern half of Area 4 will provide an opportunity to examine the character of the buildings on this side of the extensive settlement which lies beneath Abingdon but of which very little is yet known. This may help considerably in establishing the relationship of the settlement to surrounding land use and former land use during the Iron Age.

The extensive medieval Christian cemetery represents a statistically viable and extremely valuable sample of the population of medieval Abingdon. The south bank of the Stert probably lay within the curtilage of the Anglo-Saxon abbey and the lay cemetery may have begun at that time.

### Recommended Action

Removal of concrete and car park metalling over the south bank followed by area excavation of medieval and Roman levels. Section to examine edge of former river channel and degree of water control exercised since Roman times.

## AREA 5: THE CHURCH HALL, CATTLE MARKET AND BUILDINGS TO THE NORTH

### Trial Trenches

The cattle market was the only area not directly subjected to trial trenching as it remains in use. Immediately to the south of the cattle market Trench III revealed 2.5m of accumulated occupation material above natural gravel. Post-medieval deposits including hard core and concrete had accumulated to a maximum depth of 1.2m above some 0.6m of medieval soils and urban refuse. At a depth of 1.8m the medieval deposits gave way to well preserved Roman period ditches and pits. The depth of the post-medieval deposits revealed in this trial trench demonstrates that although the cattle market is at a lower level than the present ground surface to the south, the building of the cattle market has not unduly affected a substantial area of archaeological material from both the medieval abbey and the Roman settlement.

No human remains were found.

### Archaeological Potential

Lying astride the former course of the River Stert, Area 5 occupies a crucial position in relation to the Roman, Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlements and is a key area to the understanding of the development of settlement at Abingdon and its relationship with the peripheral settlements to the east, already subjected to major excavations at Barton Court and Barrow Hills.

Sufficient Roman period stratification appears to have survived for the sequence of land use to be established, the character of the settlement on the periphery of a small Roman 'town' and the effect of the river Stert as a boundary to the development of the Roman settlement.

With intensive occupation abutting the southern edge of the River Stert, there is an opportunity for the recovery of waterlogged material. Waterlogged deposits from a Roman small town is currently of some importance as there have been few opportunities to recover similar deposits elsewhere in Britain.

The possibility of a roadway crossing the Stert somewhere in this area linking the Roman settlement beneath Abingdon with the villa and surrounding settlement around Barton Court seems likely in view of the late Anglo-Saxon occupation on the north bank of the Stert.

10th-11th pottery from beneath the south-west corner of the former coal yard suggests late Anglo-Saxon urban or monastic development in the vicinity. This is possibly an extension of the town along a pre-existing route, possibly becoming the principle route to Oxford until closure through the establishment of the medieval abbey curtilage. Sufficient medieval and earlier stratification survives for the sequence of land use to be

established, the character of the occupation and the possible role of the Stert as a boundary to the Anglo-Saxon abbey.

It is important to establish whether the soil in Trenches X-XIX represents a narrowing of the river channel in the 13th century in order to achieve a degree of water control and establish a water supply to St. John's Hospital.

### Recommended Action

Following the removal of concrete a sequence of trenches to examine three principle areas:

1. excavation across the former course of the Stert for:

- i. 13th cent. water control and channelling
- ii. Anglo-Saxon crossing point  
    .. .. waterlogged deposits
- iii. Romano-British crossing  
    .. .. waterlogged deposits  
    .. .. channel

2. excavation of area of south bank for:

- i. Medieval lay cemetery
- ii. Anglo-Saxon occupation and land use
- iii. Medieval abbey curtilage, date of establishment
- iv. Roman period occupation, character and date
- v. Prehistoric occupation, intensity and date
- vi. roadway?

3. excavation of area of north bank:

- i. late Anglo-Saxon occupation, character and date
- ii. road?
- iii. Roman occupation, character and date
- iv. Iron Age occupation, extent, character and date