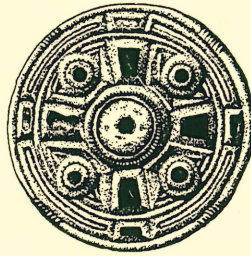


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Archaeological Field Unit

Medieval building remains adjacent to
The Abbey, Swaffham Bulbeck

Judith Roberts

1997

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 137

Commissioned By Freeland Rees Roberts, Architects

Medieval building remains from The Abbey, Swaffham Bulbeck

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Report No 137

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SUMMARY

Archaeological excavations adjacent to The Abbey, Swaffham Bulbeck revealed a paved surface, a substantial wall foundation and a possible buttress. The wall is not in an exact alignment with the existing building (being 2m to the north) but parallel to it. The floor levels are broadly similar suggesting they may be roughly contemporary. Stone roof tiles and painted window glass were recovered from immediately above the floor.

Residual Roman pottery and a coin were found in the deposit abutting the southern face of the wall and underlying the floor.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Archaeological work was commissioned by Freeland Rees Roberts on behalf of Dr. and Mrs. Ridsdill Smith to assess the impact of the proposed building work on the archaeological remains in the development area adjacent to The Abbey, Swaffham Bulbeck (TL 558 635). The development involves the construction of a double garage and store, an area of 108 sq.m. The impact of the access and services was not investigated at this stage. Between 13th - 17th January 1997 an archaeological investigation was carried out by a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council in accordance with the design brief produced by the Archaeology section of Cambridgeshire County Council (Planning application no. E/95/1001/F).

The site is adjacent to the standing remains of a medieval Benedictine nunnery dating to the 12th century. There is a range of earthworks in the immediate vicinity indicative of further buildings and quarrying. The site had been disturbed in recent years by the building (and demolition) of a small garage, and also by the roots of blackthorn, elder and apple trees. Initial machine clearance of the overburden revealed a substantial wall and a paved area.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Location

The site lies to the northeast of the village of Swaffham Bulbeck, beyond the present settlement of Commercial End (formerly Newnham) (Taylor 1973), within the fen-edge zone and at the end of Swaffham Bulbeck Lode (see Fig. 1). The lode formed a water route, navigable for sea-going craft, from at least the medieval period until the 17th century. The present house, known as The Abbey, incorporates masonry remains of the Benedictine nunnery. Surrounding earthworks suggest the location of further buildings, possibly relating to the nunnery.

2.2 Geology and Topography

According to the BGS 1:50,000 Geology Map, sheet 188, the site lies on a slope of Lower Chalk at the edge of the marley skirt fen. The channel of the lode a few hundred metres to the west forms a sinuous peat deposit over the chalk in that area. The site lies at about 8mOD, just above the fen which stretches north and west along the valley of the Cam. To the southeast of the site the ground slopes gradually to a chalk ridge, at around 35-40mOD, some 2km away.

2.3 Archaeological and historical background

The Cambridgeshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) indicates the presence of scattered Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts in the locality, along the fen edge and adjacent chalk upland. No late Bronze Age or Iron Age sites were identified in the survey of the Swaffham Bulbeck area carried out by the Fenland Survey Project (Hall 1996).

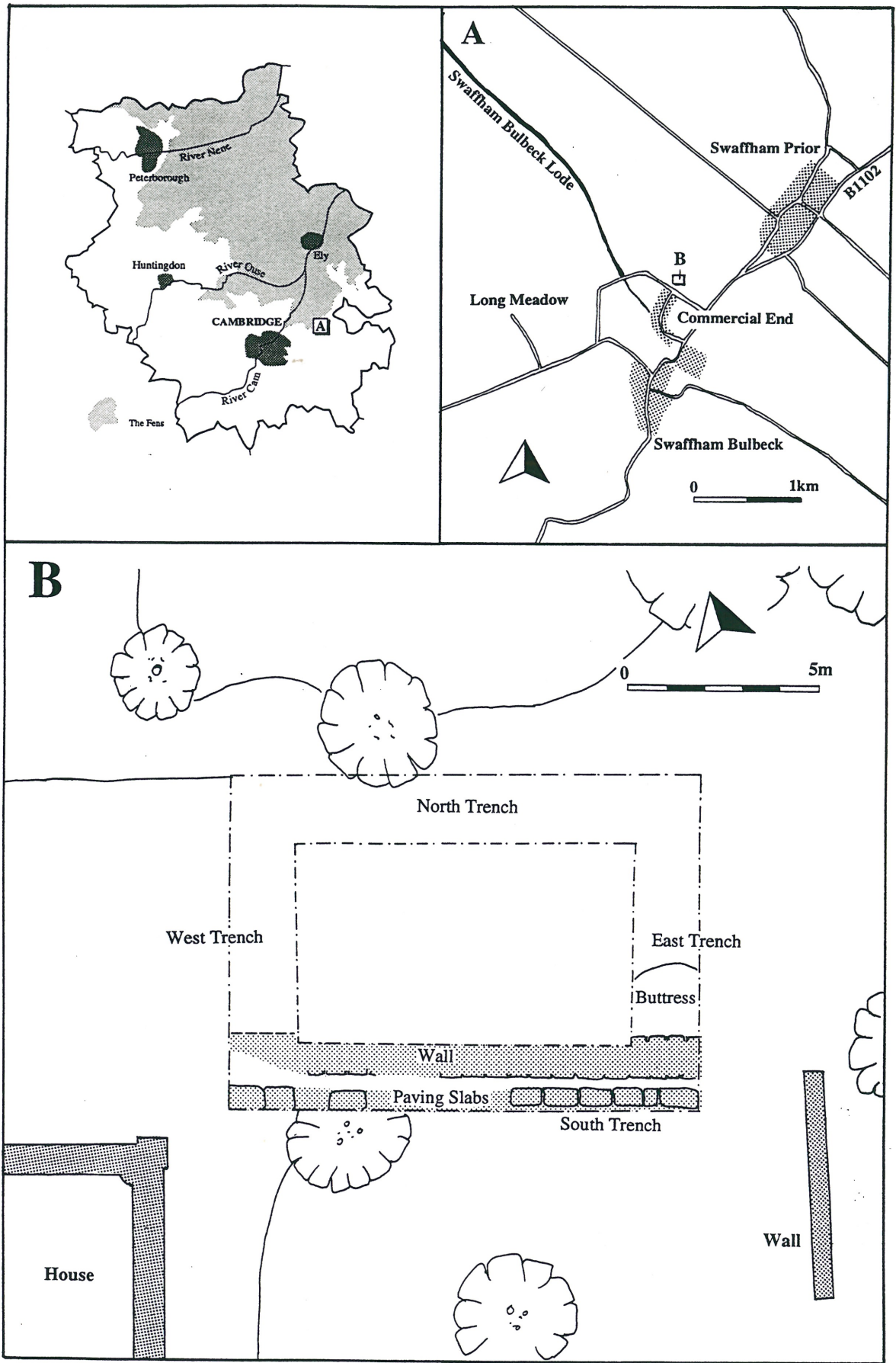


Figure 1 Site location map

Roman material has been found in the fields immediately northeast of the Abbey, including flint clunch, roofing tile and Nene Valley colour-coated and Horningsea wares (RCHME 1972). A range of crop marks have been plotted from air photographic surveys in the field to the east, although no date can be assigned to these.

Swaffham Bulbeck lode (to the northwest of The Abbey) is first recorded in 1279 and the RCHME suggests it is probably of Roman origin, extending 3.5 miles northwest across the fen from Commercial End to the Cam. There is little evidence of large-scale use of the Lode by water traffic at any date (Taylor 1973) and none before 1700 although at the northwest end of the lode on the edge of the prehistoric course of the Cam a 1st century AD pot and blocks of Barnack stone were found in association, possibly part of a cargo of a barge which sank nearby. The Fenland Survey (Hall 1996) considers there is insufficient evidence to date the lode to the Roman period and believes rather that they were canals used for transport, connecting with the fenland waterway system and the sea port of King's Lynn during the medieval period and that their origins are late Saxon or early medieval.

The priory was founded during the second half of the 12th century with an initial grant of approximately 120 acres (4 virgates) and the church at Swaffham. Despite further grants it never became wealthy and was exempt from taxation on the grounds of poverty in 1338. The nunnery of Swaffham Bulbeck is first referred to in the Assize Roll of 1199 and its foundation is linked to Isabel de Bolbec, possibly a few years before her marriage into the family of the Earl of Oxford (Palmer 1931).

By 1279 The Abbey was occupied by a prioress and 6 nuns and by the 14th century the nunnery staff included a brewer, a yardman, a turf digger, a cellarer and cook, ploughmen, carters, a shepherd and a bailiff. Records from the 14th century indicate there were a range of buildings associated with the priory, including a 2 storey gate house opposite the road from Commercial End and a cow house some distance from the gate house. In 1352 the conventual church was dedicated by the bishop, perhaps supporting the suggestion that up until that date the nuns had used the existing parish church (Gilchrist 1994). Certainly by 1379 it is clear that the religious community were using the nunnery church and there were two chaplains living at the priory. Records mention that in 1395-6 it was necessary to carry out major repairs to the church, cloister and other buildings (Palmer 1931).

The priory continued to flourish, albeit on a small scale, and the records show the nuns took in paying guests. In 1482 there were 10 paying guests during the year, including 1 man, 1 woman, 5 boys and 3 girls staying for short periods mainly during the summer (maximum visit 40 weeks). At this time the nunnery had 100 sheep, 50 porkers, 10 calves, a dovecote which produced 43 dozen pigeons and a brewhouse brewing using their own barley.

During 1536, or soon after, the property was transferred to the Bishop of Ely and in 1601 there was no mention of church or cloisters but there was a convent/mansion dwelling, a dovehouse, two barns, stables and other buildings within the walls/precincts. A large tithe barn had fallen down by this date.

The extant building is surrounded by a series of low earthworks which have been disturbed on the west and south by large clunch pits. The RCHME (1972) suggests that only those on the north and north east are connected with the present house as they are on a similar alignment. The other earthworks to the north west, south and east are more probably associated with post-

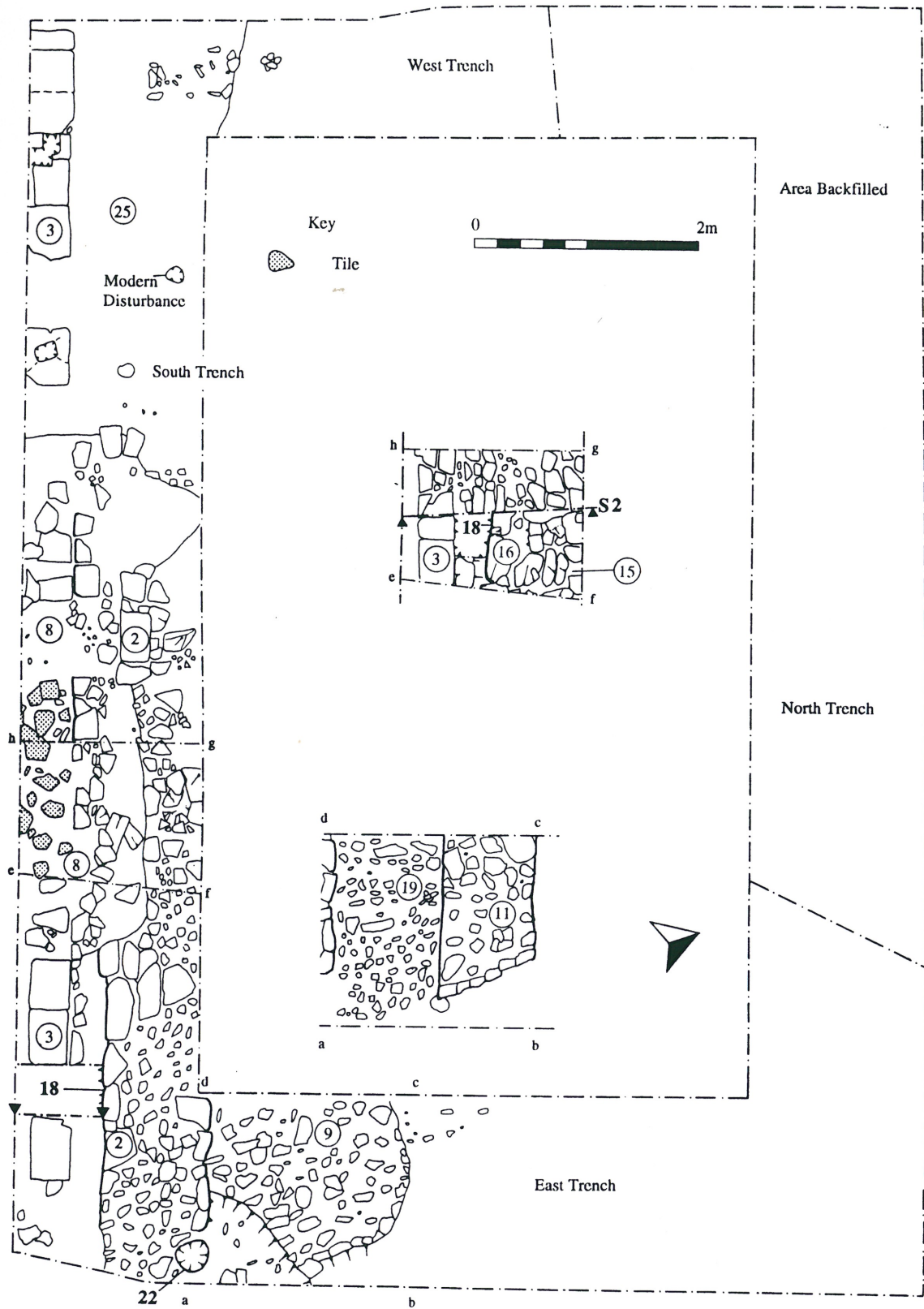


Figure 2 Trench plan

medieval farm buildings which were in turn replaced by another farm further southeast in an area of the clunch pits where a farm is recorded in c 1768, this had been demolished by 1834.

The parish church of St. Mary to the south dates to the early 13th century, with clunch ashlar and field stones and some freestone dressing. It was re-built mid-14th century and high altar was consecrated in 1346 by Bishop of Ely. Earthworks and settlement remains indicate the village formerly extended south of its present nucleus (RCHME 1972).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Area excavated

Trenches were opened by machine (a JCB with a toothless ditching bucket and a mini-digger) to a width of approximately 1.8m, around the sides of the proposed site for the development. The total area exposed was about 60 sq.m. The ground slopes gently from northwest to southeast, with a rise across the site of 0.3m. The depth of the soil and sub-soil excavated was largely dictated by the building plans. In the southern and eastern trenches topsoil was removed until remains were uncovered (a depth of about 0.5m). In the northern and western trenches subsoil was revealed. The overburden comprised demolition debris and household refuse mixed with, and sealing, garden soil. All spoil was removed from the site.

After initial cleaning the trenches were photographed. Archaeological features were partially excavated and were recorded, drawn and photographed using the pro-forma recording sheets of the Archaeological Field Unit. Context numbers are here given in brackets, fill numbers in plain text and cut numbers in bold. Vertical sections and plans were drawn of the main features. All site levels are above Ordnance Datum taken from the 8.34m benchmark on the north wall of 104 Commercial End, on Abbey Lane.

Conditions for recording were mainly good although light conditions were occasionally poor due to fog, the low angle of the sun and shadows cast by nearby trees.

3.2 Limiting factors

The depth of the garage foundations are not expected to exceed 0.6m below the present ground surface and only 0.3m on the northern side, whilst the internal structure will be supported on cross-beams. The trenches, thus, only had to be deep enough to uncover remains and assess the impact of the weight of the building on any buried features.

The other limiting factor on the area excavated was the presence of trees around the site. To prevent damage to the roots of trees that were to be retained areas of the northern and western trenches were not excavated below the level of the subsoil.

4 RESULTS

The southern trench revealed a 1m wide clunch and mortar wall (feature number 2) and dressed stone 'paving' slabs (3). Excavation showed the depth of the southern face of the wall to be approximately 0.5m. This was abutted by a grey clay deposit (9) which continued southwards beneath the slabs. The foundation blocks of the wall rested on chalk natural. The lower part of the wall foundation was formed of large irregular clunch blocks (16) up to 0.3m long and 0.2m wide, bonded by a pale yellow chalky/sandy mortar (15). There was no evidence for courses within the foundation and whilst the face of the wall was well formed the blocks did not appear to have been dressed. The cut for the wall foundation (18) was not clear. Context (9) contained Roman and medieval pottery (see Appendix II) and a small, indecipherable, Roman coin. A compact orange sandy mortar skim (14) sealed the foundation blocks and produced a level surface on which further smaller clunch blocks (13) were placed along the line of the wall, these were bonded by an orange sandy mortar (17).

Adjacent to the wall, at a level above the mortar skim (14) was a mixed layer (10) (approximately 0.3m wide and up to 0.1m deep), consisting of soil, sandy mortar and small chalk /stone fragments. This layer sealed (9) and abutted the 'paving' slabs (3). At the interface between (9) and (10) was a relatively large amount of coarse medieval pottery (possibly Sible Hedingham ware) dating between 1175 and 1350.

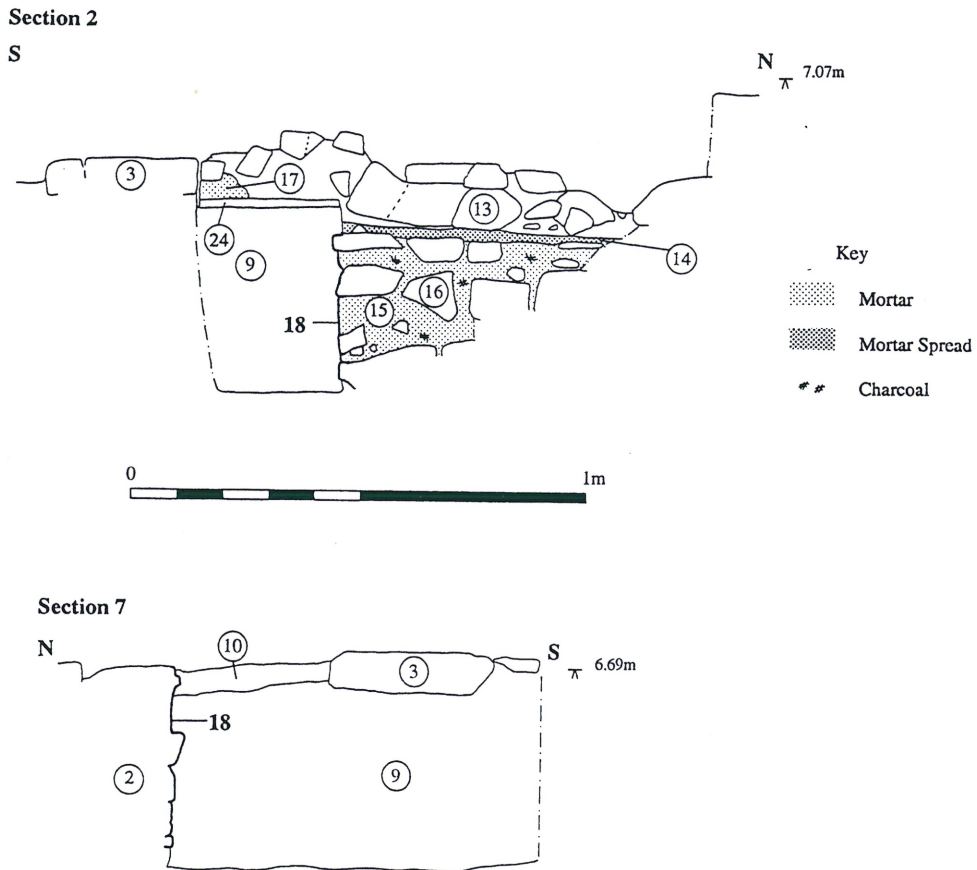


Figure 3 Sections through the wall and adjoining deposit

A layer of collapsed building material (8) consisting of stone roof tiles, stone blocks and decorated window glass was found in the central part of the trench. This layer spread over the slabs (3) and appeared to have an origin, through dumping or collapse, to the south. It was several centimetres thick in the south-facing section.

The 'paving' slabs (3) form a regular, level, surface of well dressed stones. Each slab was approximately 0.3m wide, 0.4-0.5m long and 0.8m deep. They were laid end to end, and were closely fitting with no space between. There did not appear to be a further set of similar slabs to the south but the narrowness of the trench did not allow further examination of this area.

The wall and paving slabs sloped gently down towards the west. The level of the slabs (6.6mOD) is approximately the same as the floor level in the priory undercroft. Two or three of the stones have been worked, possibly for structural wooden fittings or they may be reused from earlier structures.



Figure 4 Photograph showing wall and paving

To the north of the wall, at the eastern end of the trench, was an area (4) of irregular large clunch blocks with mixed patches of sandy silt and sandy mortar which may represent a demolition layer. A section was excavated through this layer, which was 0.1m deep, and revealed an outer clunch wall (11) approximately 0.7m wide and 0.6m deep (0.9m below the present ground surface), parallel to wall (2) with a rubble core (19) between the two walls. The outer, retaining wall was made up of large (0.2-0.3m) irregular clunch blocks (no courses visible) in a substantial foundation cut (20). The compact

rubble core (0.8m wide and 0.6m deep) was made up of very irregular clunch blocks (0.15-0.2m) and orange sandy mortar. There were no finds from any of these contexts and only a limited amount of information regarding the structure was available because of the narrowness of the trench and the compact nature of the wall and core. The northern two-thirds of the eastern trench contained a grey brown chalky clay with medieval and post-medieval pottery and animal bone, which probably represent domestic refuse. No further features were evident in the eastern trench.

The northern trench was stripped by machine and cleaned by hand. Beneath the topsoil was a deposit of grey brown chalky clay with post-medieval rubbish present in its upper level. The trench was heavily disturbed by roots and the presence of roots from a nearby apple tree prevented cleaning of the western third of this trench. No features were visible in the sub-soil at this level.

The western trench was disturbed in its northern portion by roots and animal activity and at the southern end by a recent building. A chalky clay subsoil was encountered in the northern portion which contained post-medieval pottery and animal bone. At its southern end a spread of small chalk/clunch stones was noted.

5 DISCUSSION

The wall revealed during excavations appears to be parallel to the extant undercroft although it is some 2m to the north. It is also of a similar width (approximately 1m wide) to parts of the undercroft wall. The wall and paving slabs may therefore be of a similar date to the undercroft. This date is supported by the pottery found in conjunction with the remains, i.e. dating to the late 12th to 14th century. It was not possible to discover the function of the wall but it would appear from the buttress on the northern face and the lack of features to the north that it represents an outer wall with a paved inner area or walk-way to the south. The 3m high clunch wall to the south does not appear to be connected to the excavated wall or medieval remains and may indeed be part of a later structure which stood on this site (RCHME 1972, 101).

The stone roofing slates have been identified as coming from quarries close to (but not from) Collyweston and are of a similar material to that used to roof Michael House, Cambridge (founded 1324) (Kelsey pers. comm.). Stones from the north-west of the county are known to have been transported along the fenland waterways for use in Cambridge (Sharp 1984) and at Denny Abbey, Waterbeach (Christie and Coad 1980).

Cleaning and some conservation work on the window glass recovered from the collapsed material overlying the flooring has been carried out. It reveals that it is painted with a red iron oxide on plain glass. Because of the fragmentary nature of the glass it is not possible at the moment to make out the decoration but they appear to include architectural elements and a 'floral' motif.

Evidence of collapse and buttressing supports the historical evidence which suggests parts of the foundations of the conventual buildings were unstable and were in need of substantial repair towards the end of the 14th century (Palmer 1931).

6 CONCLUSION

The substantial nature and good quality of surviving remains 0.7m below the present ground level suggest that medieval deposits are likely to survive at a similar level in the vicinity. In particular it is clear that the surrounding earthworks hold considerable potential and that any groundworks carried out in the vicinity of The Abbey will produce abundant information on the priory and its associated buildings.

Pottery sherds suggest the building remains date to the late 12th to early 14th century. Roman pottery from the site is residual and may have been deposited during manuring or rubbish disposal from the Romano-British settlement to the northeast. Other pottery evidence suggests occupation in the vicinity, possibly from the 10th to the 16th century and then abandonment until the 19th century. Although it is clear from records that parts of the surrounding fields were farmed during the intervening period, that the undercroft was occupied after the dissolution of the nunnery and that other farm buildings are shown on 18th century maps, there is little or no dating evidence of the 16th to 18th century occupation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX I

LIST OF CONTEXTS

Context Number	Description	Contents/dating evidence
1	Cleaning layer	19th/20thc pot and building material
2	Wall	
3	Dressed slabs	
4	Buttress	
5	Fill of posthole 7	Post-medieval pot
6	Posthole	Post-medieval
7	Posthole	Post-medieval
8	Spread of tile/glass/etc	Medieval and animal bone fragments
9	Fill below 3	Roman coin, Roman and med pot (1175-1350), oyster shell
10	Mixed stone/mortar to south of wall	Animal bone
11	Buttress foundation wall	
12	Upper surface of wall 2	
13	Large stones of upper part of wall 2	
14	Compact mortar layer	
15	Mortar within wall foundation	
16	Blocks of wall foundation	
17	Mixed soil and mortar between stones 13	Animal bone
18	Possible cut for wall foundation	
19	Rubble core of buttress	
20	Cut for buttress wall 11	
21	Natural clay	
22	Cut of posthole (same as 6)	Post-medieval
23	Fill of posthole 22	Post-medieval
24	Layer between 9 and 17	1175-1350 Sible Hedingham ware, animal bone

APPENDIX II

SUMMARY OF POTTERY

Unstratified:

	Sherd count	Date
19th century Willow pattern sieve or colander	3	19th C
19th century cream ware plate rim	1	19th C
Tudor Green lobed cup rim	1	1380-1550
Orange sandy ware cupped rim from cauldron/ cook pot	1	1350-1550
Micaceous grey wares	7	1175-1350
?Sible Hedingham coarseware including flanged rim from inturned jar		
Coarse Stamford ware variety	4	900-1150

Context 9:

Micaceous greyware: probably Sible Hedingham coarse ware	4	1175-1350
Ely ware	1	1200-1400
Mill Green coarseware	1	1250-1400
Colour coated ware	2	Roman
Samian	2	Roman
Harrold shelly ware	2	Roman
Other assorted wares	4	Roman
Grey with possible colour coat	2	Roman

Context 24:

Grey brown slightly coarse micaceous ware Probably Sible Hedingham coarseware	9	1175-1350
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(from notes made by Paul Spoerry, February 1997)

APPENDIX III

SWAFFHAM BULBECK, THE ABBEY, 1997 (SWBTA97) - Finds types by context (in grammes)												
Context	Pottery weight	Pottery count	Tile and brick	Flint weight	Flint count	Animal bone	Shell	Clay pipe	Roofing slate	Building stone	Window glass	Glass count
U/s	409	21	83	10	2	65	55	9				
5			98									
8						2			1924	411	with conservator	
9	79	18				34	11					
10						3						
24	59	9				3						
Total weight by finds type	547		181	10		107	66	9	1924	411		



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