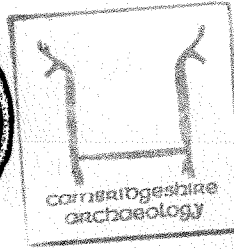
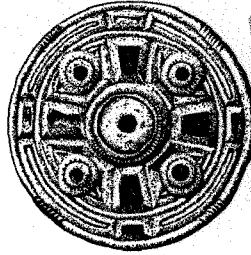


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Archaeological Field Unit

Abbey Farm, Ickleton, Cambridgeshire: An Archaeological Desktop Study

Ben Robinson

May 1994

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A34

Commissioned By Cowper, Griffith, Brimblecombe Associates

**Abbey Farm, Ickleton, Cambridgeshire:
An Archaeological Desktop Study**

Ben Robinson, BSc MA

May 1994

ABSTRACT

Documentary, cartographic, photographic sources and field observation were employed to help define the archaeological implications of a proposed development at Abbey Farm, Ickleton (TL 490/437). The farm occupies the site of the Benedictine nunnery of St Mary Magdalene, which was established in the mid-12th century. Low earthworks in various locations across the property indicate the presence of below-turf archaeological remains; the most promising of these fall outside of the proposed development area. The 'great barn' and farmhouse contain elements of monastic structures. A mid-16th century lease referring to the holdings of the newly-dissolved priory was located and was found to contain a great deal of interesting information regarding the character of the precinct at the end of its monastic life.

Report No A34

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Figure 1: Location

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The following survey aims to define the potential impact of a proposed research facility development on archaeological remains at Abbey Farm, Ickleton (TL 490/437). It uses documentary, photographic and cartographic sources and field observation in order to define areas of potential archaeological sensitivity.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Landscape Context

2.1.1 The development site lies to the west of the River Cam on Middle Chalk. A spit of alluvial deposits, probably representing the former course of a stream now diverted to the north of the site, extends from the shallow river valley into the middle of the development area. A narrow band of third terrace gravels (indicating a former Cam tributary) runs north-easterly from Ickleton Grange to the south of the development area before merging with the gravels of the Cam valley.

2.1.2 A lack of prehistoric stray finds and previously located sites of this date in the immediate environs of Ickleton belies the importance of the Cam gravel terraces to prehistoric activity in the region. Only two 'sites' are recorded on the Cambridgeshire Sites and Monuments Record (hereafter S.M.R.) - a neolithic hand axe 500 metres to the south-east of the village and a 'working site' 1 kilometre to the south. Recent investigations on the gravel terraces to the north of the village have demonstrated their potential more comprehensively. Evidence for neolithic occupation sites and tool production (utilising the river gravels), was recovered, together with Bronze Age funerary structures at Hinxton Quarry (Evans 1993). At Hinxton Hall emparking (and consequent protection from cultivation) had resulted in the preservation of early neolithic and late neolithic/Early Bronze Age tool production sites (T. Reynolds pers. comm.).

2.1.3 Extensive Romano-British exploitation of this area has been revealed by excavation and aerial reconnaissance. A field system with associated droveways and occupation sites was revealed at Hinxton Quarry (Evans 1993), while further small cropmark enclosures, possibly of this date, are known to lie 300m to the north of the development area (S.M.R. 09679). Roman pottery, coins and a medallion have been found in Ickleton (S.M.R. 04117; S.M.R. 04223). These, together with very recent discoveries of dump deposits (possibly intended to consolidate the river bank) and Roman and Iron Age coins (P. Spoerry pers. comm.) suggest settlement on the site of the village and a possible 'Romanised' segment of an Icknield Way track. The best-known Roman structure in the parish, however, is the grand villa partially excavated in the 19th century to the south of the village (S.M.R. 04153).

2.1.4 It is clear that in determining the character of Romano-British settlement in the vicinity of Ickleton, the presence of this great house, a possible ford and the proximity of the fort and town at Great Chesterford are all major influences.

2.1.5 Physical remnants of the early medieval origins of the village (the documentary aspects of which are discussed further below) are apparent in the architecture of the parish church of St Mary Magdalene. The plan of the medieval village was dominated by a long south-west to north-east main street forming the approach to a river crossing. The priory was situated to the west of the village nucleus (Taylor 1973, 225-226).

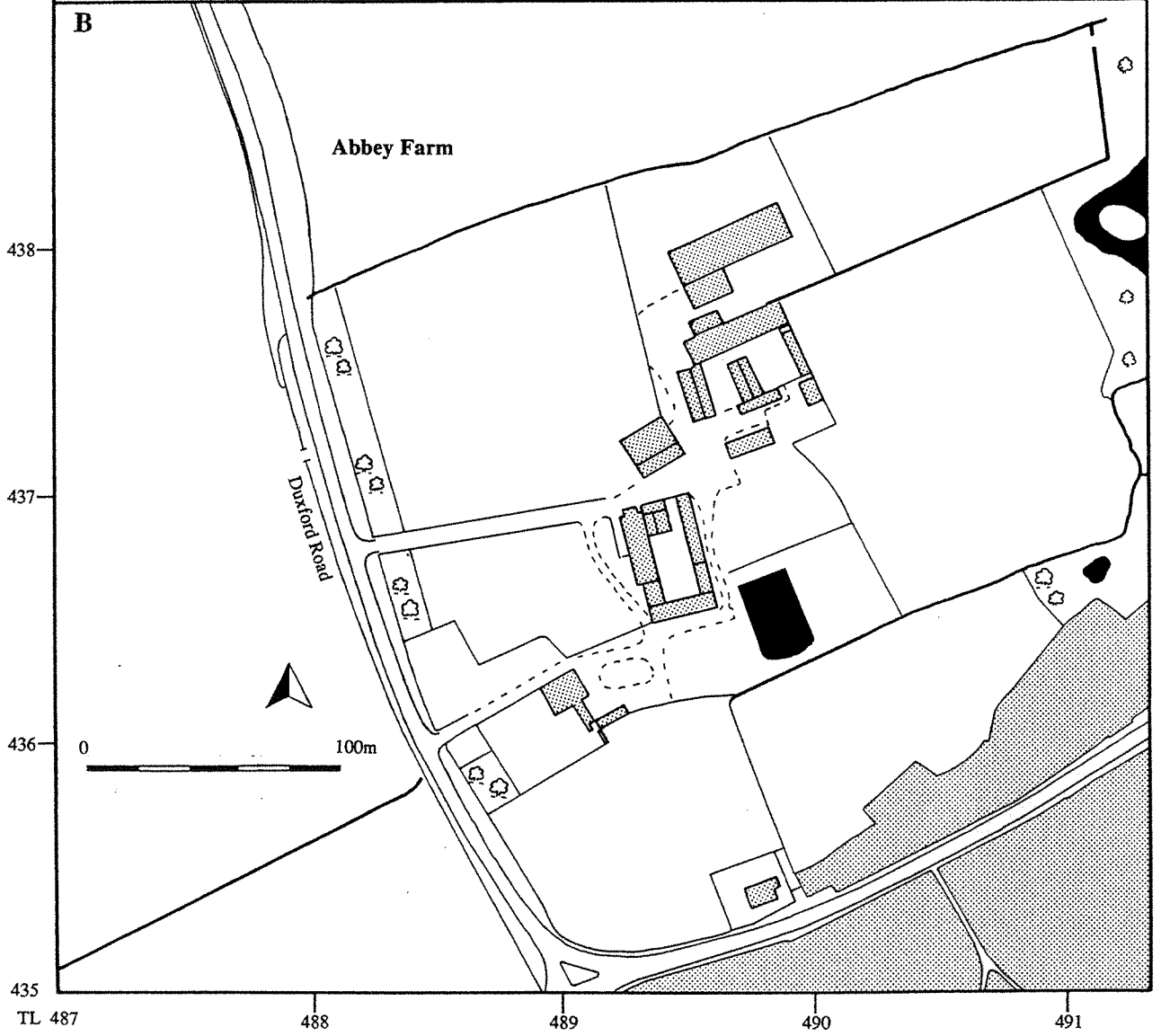
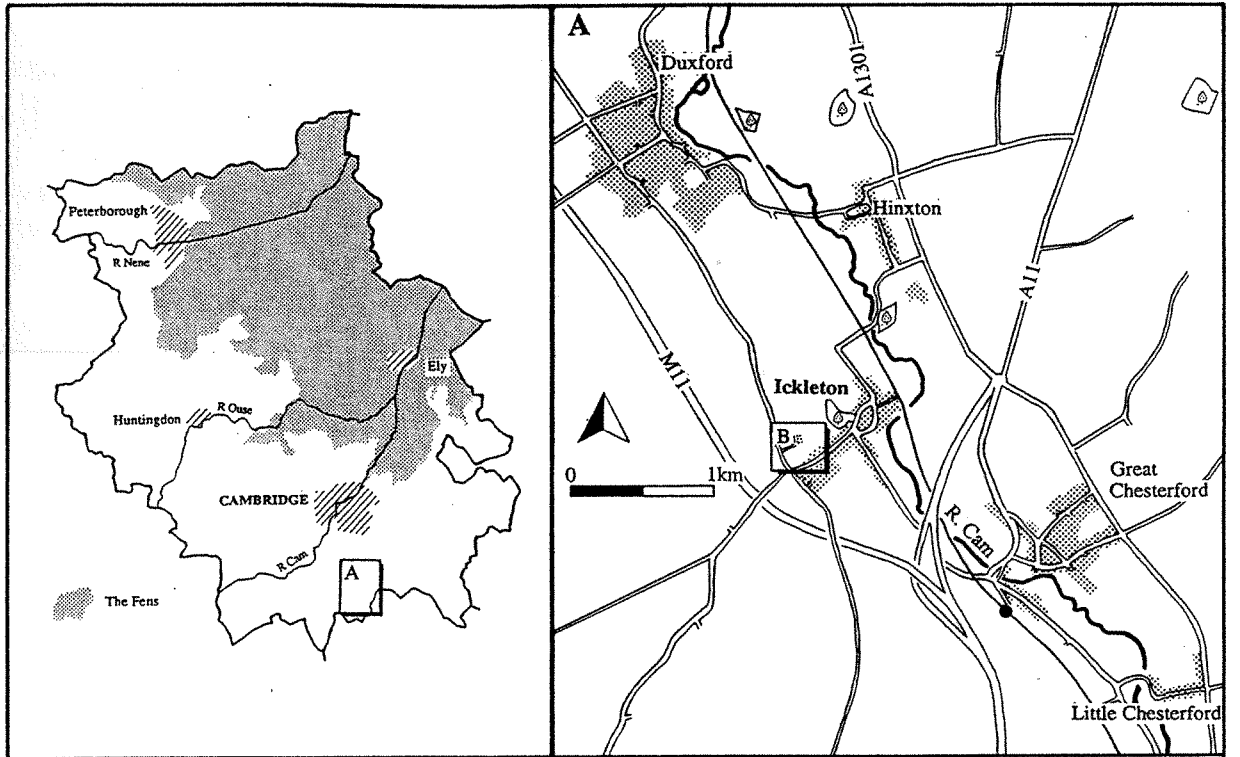


Figure 1: Location

2.2 Finds and Excavations

2.2.1 There are no formal archaeological excavations recorded at Abbey Farm (Proceedings of Cambridge Antiquarian Society 1840-1993; S.M.R.). Similarly, the excavation of a British Gas pipeline (S.M.R., correspondence in Ickleton Parish File) nearby does not seem to have resulted in recorded archaeological investigations.

2.2.2 The S.M.R. 1:10,560 map of this area places the site of the priory and associated finds locations in the field to the west of the Duxford Road, despite contradictory written grid references. The find locations for medieval coins and stone coffins (S.M.R. 04229) have been amended on figure 2 to correspond to the location given by the 1885 O.S. map. A medieval comb (S.M.R. 04229c) decorated with preaching and courting scenes was found 'amongst the ruins of the priory' but the exact location of this discovery is unknown (note in *Archaeologia* Vol 15, 405, pl. XLI).

2.2.3 None of the priory buildings were apparent to the Reverend Cole during his visit of 1742, but he did note an 'enclosing earthen rampart and ditch and fishponds' (Goddard 1907, 193). He was probably referring to the earthwork whose destruction was recorded in 1949.

2.2.4 During 1949 staff of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (E) recorded the levelling of a double-bank and ditch earthwork enclosure and a fishpond in the field to the south of the farmhouse (figure 2, field 1). Observation on the ground as it was bulldozed and examination of an R.A.F. aerial photograph (see enclosed appraisal of air photo coverage) combined to present a fairly good idea of the enclosure's form (McDowall & Harman 1949).

2.2.5 With the exception of medieval masonry from the farmhouse (see 2.4.1), no finds have been made within the farm grounds during the last 40 years (L. Duke pers. comm.; contra. Hurley 1994, 1.2).

2.3 Cartographic Sources Summary

2.3.1 There are many ancient maps of Cambridgeshire, or of large areas within the county, (particularly relating to fenland drainage). Few are detailed enough to assist in elucidating the historic form of the subject area.

2.3.2 The earliest known surviving estate map incorporating the subject area is one showing the holdings of the Fellows of Clare Hall and of Mr John Pytches produced in 1795 (Clare College Library Acc. 1985/5). It has not yet been viewed as it is unlikely to aid in the identification of the priory layout.

2.3.3 Another estate map of 1812 (County Record Office R60/21/1) does not represent Abbey Farm, though Ickleton is shown in some detail. Such maps often omit properties outside the subject estate, leaving large blank areas.

2.3.4 The first large scale Ordnance Survey map of the area dating to 1885 (County Record Office) shows two ponds within the subject area which have since been in-filled (see 2.6.3 below) and several small farm buildings which have since been demolished. The current pond to the north-east of the farmhouse is marked as a garden.

2.3.5 A scale plan of the priory made in 1892 (Cambridge University Library, Maps 53(1). 89.46) has not yet been viewed, but may add a little detail not represented on the smaller scale O.S. map of 1885.

2.4 Buildings

2.4.1 Abbey Farm farmhouse (listed Grade II) incorporates some re-used 13th century masonry (S.M.R. 04229a) some of which (notably pieces of chalk clunch window dressing, one piece with glazing groove) has been re-sited in recent refurbishment work on the first floor. A complete 13th century doorway was observed on the ground floor during renovation in the 1950 s (S.M.R. 04229b). There has been some debate as to the integrity of this feature (see SMR 04229b) but the walls of this building are abnormally thick for a late 17th/ early 18th century farmhouse and it would seem most likely that (as the list description and several other authorities suggest; Wright 1978, 23; Gardner 1851, 263; Haigh 1988, 44) the house is built on a medieval core.

2.4.2 There is a 16th/early 17th century timber-framed barn (listed Grade II) adjacent to the farmhouse.

2.4.3 A barn at the north of the farm yard (listed Grade II*), though encased in brick and asbestos, incorporates a very complete medieval structure. It is an aisled barn of eight bays (a ninth was removed in modern times, L. Duke pers. comm.). Four trusses at the western end date to the late 13th/early 14th century and use queen posts, notched-lapped and tenoned passing braces from tie beam to collar purlin. The five trusses at the east end date to the 15th century and use queen struts and parallel braces from arcade posts to aisle tie and sill beam.

2.4.4 All other buildings on the site date to the 19th or 20th centuries.

2.5 Air Photographic Appraisal Summary (after Palmer 1994)

2.5.1 An appraisal of the archaeological remains visible on air photographs of the Abbey Farm area has been carried out by Roger Palmer. Photographs held by the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photographs (C.U.C.A.P.) and the National Library of Air Photographs (N.L.A.P.) were reviewed.

2.5.2 No trace of the levelled earthwork formerly seen in field 1 (to the south of the farmhouse) could be detected on the (post-1949) C.U.C.A.P. photographs. Features visible in fields 3 and 4 were limited to lengths of earthwork ditch considered to be recent boundaries or drains. No significant features were seen in fields 2, 5 or 6.

2.5.3 The photographs used by McDowall & Harman to interpret the earthwork in field 1 (N.L.A.P.) could be used for a re-interpretation of this evidence, though plotting at 1:2500 might not be worthwhile due to the unavoidable enlargement errors.

2.5.4 A print of the Crawford collection (N.L.A.P.) taken before the war was also examined but, unfortunately was taken at too greater height and with too little clarity to bear close scrutiny (R. Palmer pers. comm.).

2.5.5 There would be little to be gained from re-interpretation and plotting of C.U.C.A.P. photographs. Some N.L.A.P. vertical photographs may contain information not recorded on C.U.C.A.P. photographs (especially of the environs of Abbey Farm) and thus may be useful, for example, in helping to define the field system within in which the priory precinct lay. However, there is little scope for elucidating features within the development area from air photographic evidence.

2.6 Field Observations

2.6.1 An inspection of the development site was carried out on 20/04/94. The observations made below are a result of visual inspection and not detailed survey. Grass cover in all fields was lush at the time of the visit and may have masked slight features. Major features noted during the inspection are shown in approximate locations on figure 2.

2.6.2 The features visible on air photographs in fields 3 and 4 were identified on the ground as shallow (up to 1m in depth) linear depressions containing coarse grass. Though considered to be recent during the air photograph appraisal, they should not be quickly dismissed as such. One ditch (running north-west to south-east from the northern boundary of field 4 across field 3 and continuing a short distance as an extant ditch into a property bordering Abbey Street) may well reflect a medieval boundary laid out from Abbey Street.

2.6.3 Field 2 contained slight undulations but no discernible features. Field 1 contained no traces of the earthwork previously recorded (there was a hint of differential vegetational cover which may correspond to the line of the north to south running double bank and ditch of the levelled enclosure), but did contain a shallow depression conforming to the position of the pond whose in-filling was noted in 1949. Both fields are outside the proposed development area.

2.6.4 Field 5 was quarried in the 1940s or 1950s and was subsequently cultivated (L. Duke pers. comm.). Lower ground and depressions bordering the concrete track are suggestive of this quarrying, but a platform of higher ground in the north-west corner of the field may have been spared. The 1885 O.S. map shows a few small farm buildings in the south-east corner of this field.

2.6.5 Field 6 (outside the development area) contains the most promising earthworks. A low (0.5m-1m), rounded ridge running obliquely to the concrete track can be discerned with a break approximately mid-way along its length. It is possibly shadowed by a slighter ridge which appears to have been flattened at its eastern edge to allow for a tennis court. Two or three slight ovoid depressions are also visible. The ridges are interesting in that they do not respect the line of the concrete farmyard access track (which corresponds to the line of a track present in 1885) but more closely follow the orientation of the farmhouse, which may respect the line of a medieval building.

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Ickleton

3.1.1 The first recorded reference to Ickleton ('Icelingtune') village occurs in a late 10th century will which grants one hide of land to one Aefhelm (Hart 1966, 45-46). However, the name of the village suggests earlier Anglo-Saxon significance, possibly 'Icel's farm' (Reaney 1943, 95).

3.1.2 By the time of the Domesday survey Ickleton was a large village; 30 villagers, 10 smallholders and 2 mills are recorded (Rumble 1981, 25[15],1).

3.1.3 A hamlet named Brookhampton (possibly sited to the north of the present village) is mentioned in 1338 but had disappeared by 1612. The site of another hamlet in the parish, Orledene, mentioned in 1455, has not yet been identified (Oosthuizen 1985).

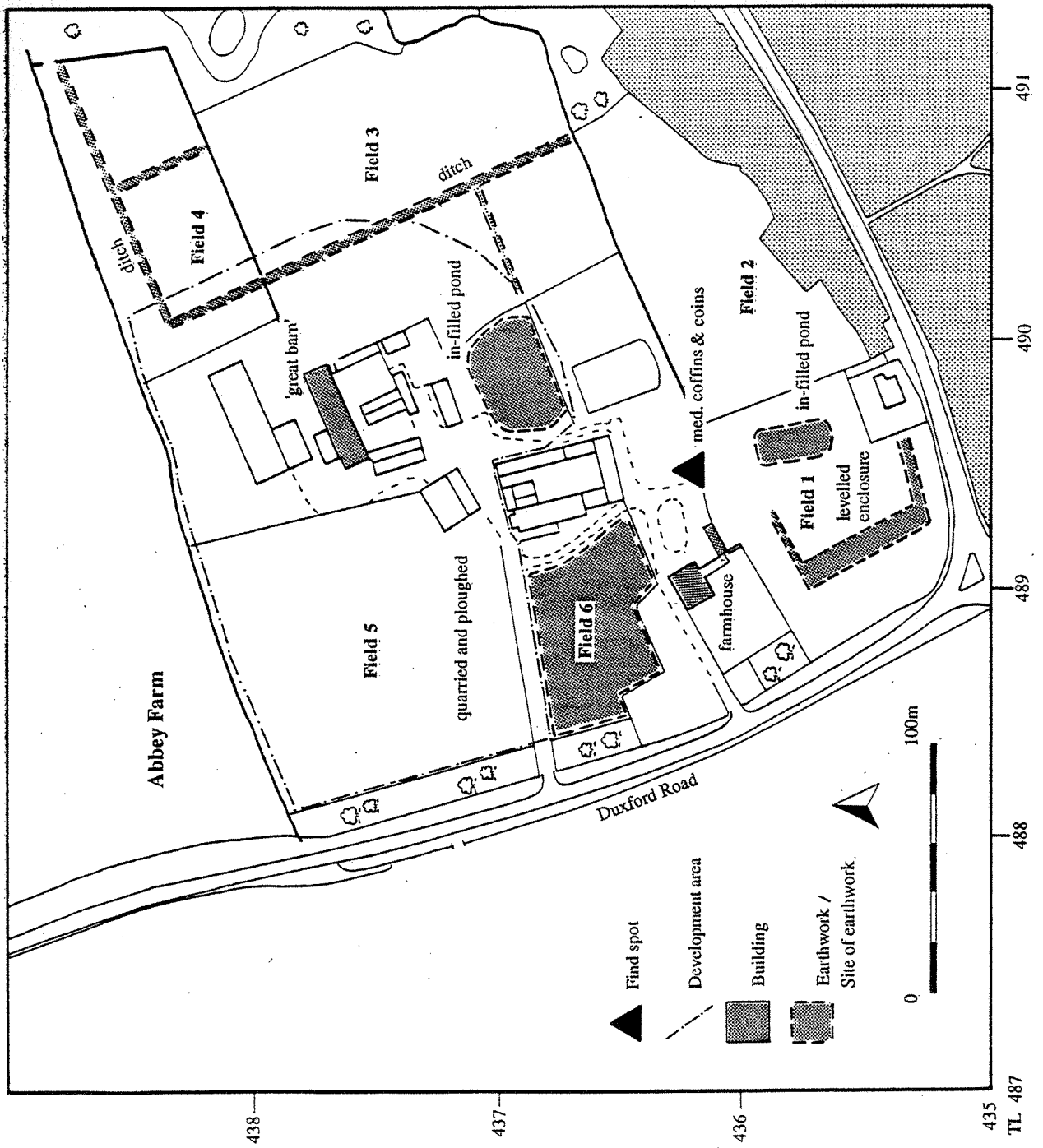


Figure 2: Archaeological features and finds

3.2 A Comment on the Documentary Sources Relating to the Priory

3.2.1 The chartularies and muniments of the priory, in common with most of those connected with the Bishopric of Ely, have not survived (Owen 1971, 56). Similarly, there do not appear to be any surviving manorial records relating to the holdings of the priory or any surviving visitation accounts (Gibbons 1981). However, several visitations are known (for example, those of 1278 and 1345) and a few details of these can be gleaned from other sources (Pugh 1960, 224; and 3.3 below). The documentary sources for Ickleton parish after the dissolution, are by contrast, much more complete. They include visitation books from 1549 onwards (Owen 1971, 7) and a parish register from 1558 (Gibbons 1891, 231).

3.2.2 The paucity of primary documentary material relating to the days of the priory can be partly attributed to the insurrections of 1381 when villagers seized and burned the court rolls and other documents held therein (Pugh 1960, 224).

3.2.3 Various incidental references to the priory survive. For example, reference is made to the election of a new prioress in 1444 (Owen 1971, 50), a composition between the priory and vicar of Ickleton in 1516 (Gibbons 1981, 417), a dispute regarding the rights to a pension from Fowlmere church (Wright 1982, 161), and notes concerning the dedication of the conventual church and cemetery in 1352 (Pugh 1960, 224).

3.2.4 This information, along with summaries of the taxable property and persons of the priory contained in Cambridgeshire's Subsidy Rolls (clerical poll tax accounts), Lay Subsidies etc. (Palmer 1912; Muskett undat) has been mostly summarised in the Victoria County History volumes for Cambridgeshire. A fairly good historical framework can be constructed from this information, which provides a basis for the further examination of the economic, political and social aspects of the priory's existence.

3.2.5 Another miscellaneous article dating to the time of the priory is a prayer book ('Psalter cum Hyminis Secundum Usum et Consuetudinem'), the property of a nun of the priory dating to 1516, now held by St Johns College Library.

3.2.6 The most important document pertaining to the priory deserves greater attention than the passing reference given to it in the Victoria County History Volumes. This is a lease document concerning the former holdings of the priory and was drawn up soon after its dissolution (County Record Office R63/D.D.B. 1119 & 1120). It dates to c. 1545 and defines the terms of an arrangement between John Wood (landlord) and Richard Wyborowe, both of Ickleton. Later, useful only for the parchment it was prepared on, it was re-used as the covers for two 17th century Ickleton parish terrier documents. The document is very detailed and contains a wealth of information about the extensive priory complex and points concerning husbandry.

3.3 A Brief History of The Priory

3.3.1 The Benedictine nunnery of St Mary Magdalene at Ickleton was founded c.1163 by either Aubrey de Vere or Sir William de Cantelupe (Goddard 1907, 182), but little is known about the character and extent of the newly-founded house.

3.3.2 The clerical poll tax return for 1379 records 9 nuns. At this time, after Swaffham Bulbeck, it was the smallest nunnery in the county (Palmer 1912, 145). By 1452 there were 11 nuns, a precentrix and prioress (Haigh 1988, 44). Although we do not know to what extent numbers were affected by pestilence and rural depopulation during the mid-13th century it is probable that the priory had always been relatively small.

3.3.3 The priory held a manor (with full feudal rights over the villeins) in Ickleton and the advowsons of Arrington and Ickleton churches. The latter was probably part of the original endowment, but the former was given c.1220 (Pugh 1960, 223). In 1279 the priory demesne consisted of some 300 acres (Wright 1978, 233). Property was also held in Essex, together with the rights to a market in Stock Harward, a weekly market and annual fair in Ickleton (Pugh 1960, 224) from which retail tolls could be claimed. Income was also generated by taking in lodgers, but the visitation of 1278 resulted in a directive forbidding the nuns to accept married women as lodgers (and incidentally, to keep dogs as pets, or to allow them into the church; Haigh 1988, 44).

3.3.4 In 1379 the revenue from the priory was slightly higher than those of the nunneries of St Radegund & Swaffham Bulbeck (Pugh 1960, 224). However, the priory was exempted from taxation on the grounds of poverty throughout the 13th and 14th centuries (Haigh 1988, 44) and in 1402 the prioress begged the episcopal authorities to consider the small revenue from her churches when determining the priory's taxes (Goddard 1907, 187).

3.3.5 During the insurrections of 1381 James Hog and others of Ickleton entered the priory and burned the court rolls and other documents held there (Pugh 1960, 224). The priory had also been attacked in 1266 by dispossessed landholders and tenants (Bristowe undat). These actions give a wider perspective to the poverty claimed by the priory and its incumbents.

3.3.6 The priory, being valued at less than £200, was dissolved with the lesser houses in 1536. At this time the priory manor was the largest in the parish, consisting of some 714 acres (Wright 1978, 233). All its property passed to Henry VIII but was later exchanged with the Bishop of Ely for Hatfield. It was surrendered to the crown once more in 1600, but later returned to private hands (Gardner 1851, 262).

3.3.7 The priory and its farm buildings declined through fire demolition and neglect and in the late 17th century a new farmhouse was built on the site (Wright 1978, 23).

3.3.8 A cricket match between Cambridgeshire and Kent was advertised, to take place at 'Ickleton Abbey' in 1813; it is not known whether it was ever played (Pugh 1973, 294).

4 INTERPRETATION OF GATHERED EVIDENCE

4.1 The Priory Precinct

4.1.1 Medieval rural monastic precincts consisted of much more than a single building to house the incumbents. The priory precinct was the centre of a farm estate and contained all the buildings necessary for crop processing, storage, implement maintenance and storage and for animal husbandry. Priors would have been as self-sufficient as possible; brewing and baking would have taken place on-site and gardens would have been kept to supply herbs, vegetables and fruit. In defining the archaeological potential of Abbey Farm, Ickleton, it is necessary to consider the presence of these ancillary buildings and activities as well as those of the priory church and of the domestic quarters.

4.1.2 The larger Benedictine monasteries tended to be arranged in accordance to a well-defined 'grammar'. This was led by liturgical requirements, and by the need for the physical environment to reflect social status and the demarcation between spiritual and earthly endeavours. Central to the precinct was the cloister, around which buildings of the inner court were arranged. The cloister usually abutted the south of the monastic church, although it is also found (especially in nunneries - Coppack 1990, 66) to the

north. Such a grammar could, of course, be modified to accommodate considerations in local environment and topography.

4.1.3 The layout of smaller houses, such as Ickleton, was perhaps less standardised and a cloister-based format may have taken time to develop, or may never have developed at all. Nevertheless, there would still have been clearly defined demarcations between the precinct and the outside world and between areas of farming, domestic and religious activity within the precinct.

4.14 The document discussed in 3.2.6 provides a good indication of the character of the precinct at the end of its ecclesiastical life. Although it must be remembered that this represents the culmination of 400 years of monastic development on the site and need not reflect the nature of the precinct during the preceding centuries. Buildings such as a kitchen, a milkhouse, a brewing house, stables, a 'great barn' and a 'great gardner' (granary ?) are mentioned. While a 'great barn yard', a 'little stoneyard', a 'killhouse yard', 'postern yard' and several 'pyghtles' (small enclosures) are also identified within the area to be let. However, the lease only applies to part (an unknown proportion) of the precinct and reserves for the landlord two 'lesser barns', a house 'part tiled and part thatched', a 'parcel of yard' between the lesser barns, a dovehouse and yard, and enigmatically, 'all the houses, rooms, chambers or buildings herein not particularly named and appointed to be letten'. Furthermore, the lease specifies that the rent is to be paid at 'the hall house of the said late priory'. An extensive precinct is thus described.

4.1.5 It is difficult to re-construct the layout of the precinct and its bounds from the lease and above-ground evidence alone. It is likely, however, that the precinct was bounded to the south by Abbey Street and to the north by the still extant ditch (diverting a natural stream to the north of the site). The western boundary was probably formed by the Duxford Road (see Haigh 1975 for an interpretation of Ickleton's open field pattern).

4.1.6 The 'hall house' referred to in the lease may have been the building which formed the core of the later farmhouse. If the location of the finds given by the 1885 O.S. map can be trusted, it is probable that both the priory church and cemetery were located a little to the east of this building.

4.1.7 The extant 13th/15th century timber-frame barn is undoubtedly the 'great barn' identified in the lease. It was bordered by a yard which was itself bordered by the 'great gardner' and stables. This area was to be reserved for five days annually under the terms of the lease as the site of the ancient priory fair.

4.2 Preservation of Archaeological Remains

4.2.1 Whilst this report has inevitably concentrated on the priory as the major historical event on the site, the importance of the area in prehistoric and Romano-British times should not be forgotten and the possibility of encountering remains of these periods must be considered.

4.2.2 Areas of earthworks, indicating below turf archaeological remains, exist in various places across Abbey Farm (figure 2) though the most promising of these falls outside the development area in field 6.

4.2.3 Fields 3 & 4 will be subject to embanking within a small curving strip in order to accommodate a tree belt. Field 5 will be similarly affected by a planting scheme and by shallow excavations for the foundations of an access road alongside the existing northern boundary of the site.

4.2.4 Whilst dissolved monastic sites were frequently used as quarries for later building campaigns, the quarrying is rarely so thorough as to remove all the available stone. The paucity of discarded stone and noted foundations on this site (see 2.2.5) must suggest that many of the priory buildings were timber-framed. The lease's particular reference to 'a stone building' next to the kitchen further supports this argument.

4.2.5 The footprints of such buildings, though likely to be fragile, may survive across those parts of the site that have not been quarried or subject to extensive levelling. The construction of later farm buildings need not have entirely obliterated these, or any other features (i.e. pits and ditches), though such features are likely to be truncated. It is difficult to say with any certainty, for example, whether or not the removal of 1ft of soil from the floor of the 'great barn' to install a reinforced concrete one would have destroyed the medieval surface. Or indeed, whether the medieval surface had survived long enough to encounter this event.

4.2.6 The area between buildings immediately to the south of the 'great barn' seems to have remained free of post-medieval buildings (although we do not know to what extent other agricultural activities have affected it) and so must be considered an area of high potential archaeological survival. This area is to undergo ground level reduction for car parking. Fields 3 & 4 have remained similarly free of post-medieval development.

4.2.7 In conclusion, the preservation of the below-ground archaeological remains across the site is likely to be very varied and cannot be determined through examination of the available documentary sources or by surface examination alone.

4.3 Archaeological Importance of the Priory Site

4.3.1 The 'great barn' is clearly an important structure whose thorough investigation should contribute to our understanding of East Anglian timber-frame building traditions. The form of monastic barns was usually more influenced by the need for crop collection and storage rather than for processing; this substantial building should reflect the character of the priory's agricultural endeavours.

4.3.2 The priory was one of a small number of nunneries in the region, most of whose remains have not survived post-dissolution development well and none of which have been subjected to a thorough archaeological investigation. Archaeological monastic research (with a few notable exceptions) has tended to focus upon the better known male institutions. If sufficiently well preserved, this site presents an opportunity for cross-gender comparison in the organisation of, and use of space within, the monastic precinct.

4.3.3 The recorded economic and social status of the priory should be examined in comparison with the form, extent, and character of the monastic buildings and with reference to the discarded and lost material culture on the site. Not only has the site the potential to tell the story of nearly 400 years of monastic life, but also to chart the progress of agricultural development over this period.

4.3.4 Little work has been carried out on the smaller monastic houses and knowledge of monastery precincts has been skewed in favour of the larger more important houses, invariably excavated during the 19th century. A primary research objective is, therefore, also one of crucial importance to the definition of the impact of the development proposal itself; namely the establishment of the precinct layout.

4.3.5 In conclusion, the proposed development is likely to have some impact on the archaeological remains of the priory. The archaeological importance of the areas to be disturbed, their appropriateness as subjects for conservation or their ability to address the research issues discussed above, will be determined by the extent, character and state of preservation of archaeological deposits therein.

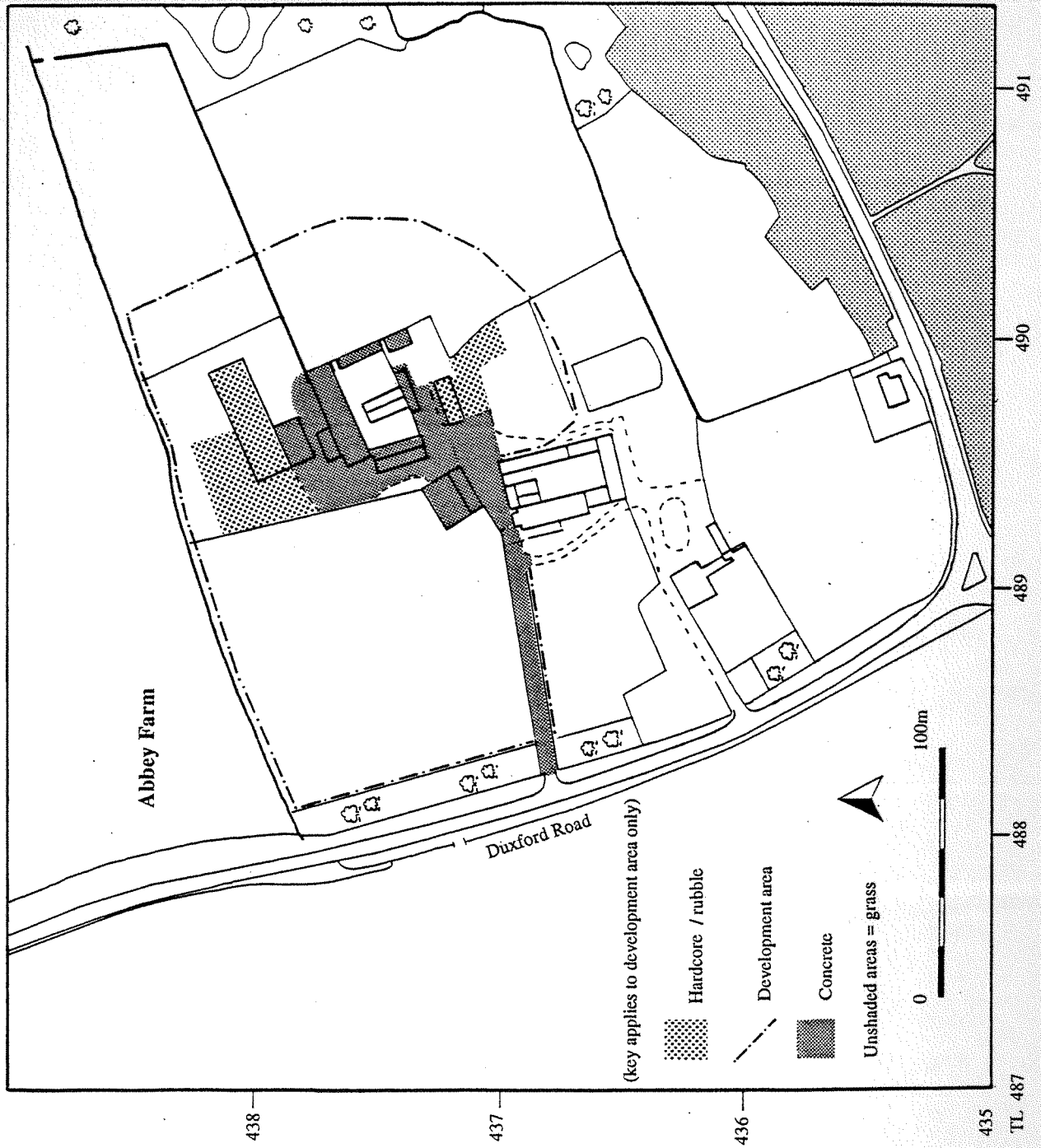


Figure 3: Present ground cover

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