

**Archaeological Recording at
Ramsey Abbey**

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SUMMARY

On 31st July 1995 Cambridgeshire County Council's Archaeological Field Unit carried out monitoring at Ramsey Abbey whilst the foundation trench for a new staircase was being excavated. Within the trench a mortared stone wall was observed and recorded which possibly related to an undercroft or cellar extant before the construction of the nineteenth century extension to the house.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING AT RAMSEY ABBEY

INTRODUCTION

On 31st July 1995 Cambridgeshire County Council's Archaeological Field Unit carried out monitoring at Ramsey Abbey whilst the foundation trench for a new staircase was being excavated. The monitoring was conducted for the County Councils Property Department, and involved the inspection of a trench measuring c. 3.3m x 0.65m x 0.80m deep, which was located at the bottom of a stair well within Ramsey Abbey School. The main school building had formally been a country house of c. 1600 (Haigh 1988). The building lies on the site of parts of Ramsey Abbey, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (*Figure 1*), so Scheduled Monument Consent was required before the groundwork's could proceed.

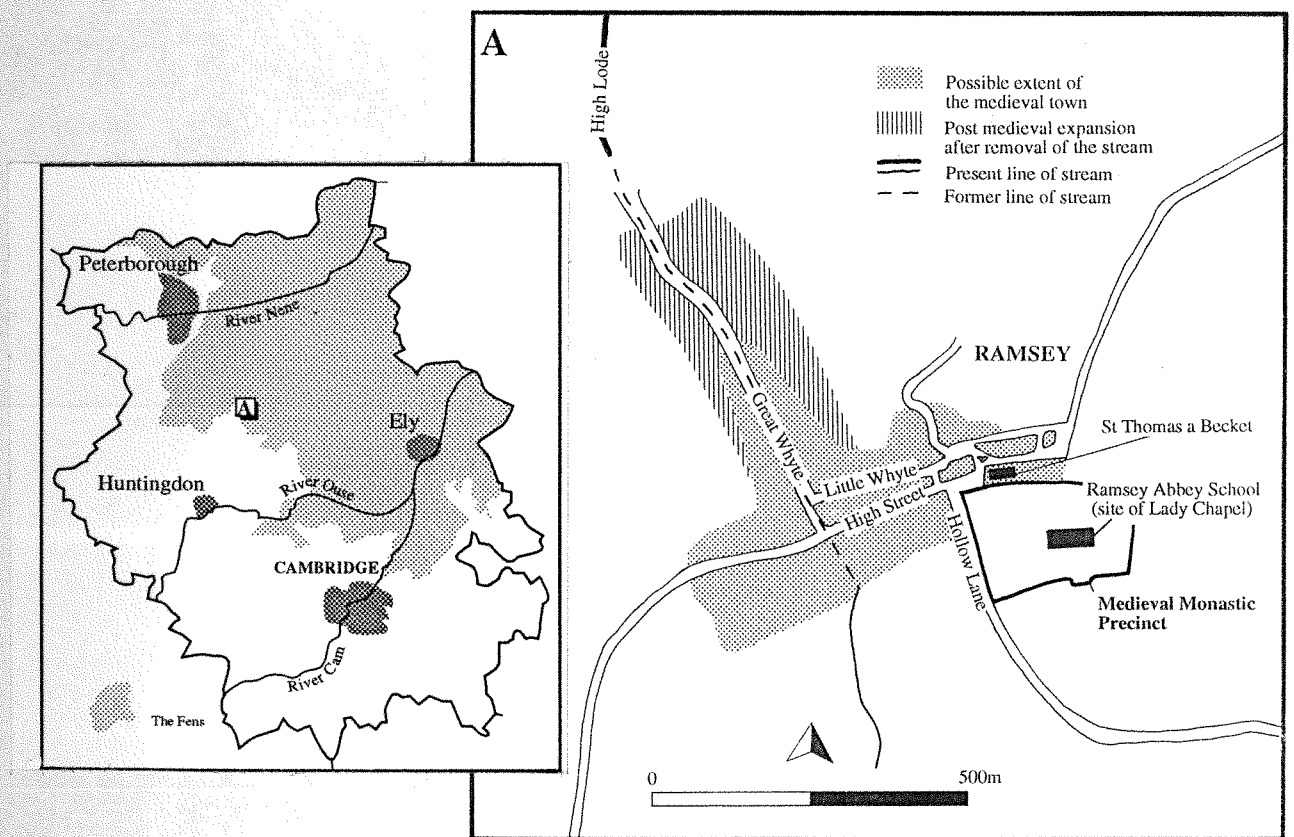


Figure 1 Site Location Plan

BACKGROUND

Ramsey Abbey was founded as a regular Benedictine monastery in AD 969, and by 974 a wooden church had been completed and dedicated (Haigh 1988). Substantial land grants quickly made the house one of the richest in the fens, and it continued to flourish in the eleventh century, surviving both the Danish invasion and the change to Norman rule. During the twelfth century, the monastic buildings and the church were rebuilt in stone. In 1538 the monastery was dissolved, and most of its buildings were demolished for reuse of the stone although some substantial fragments survive. The present parish church of St Thomas a Becket was originally built c. 1180-90 as an infirmary, hospital, or guest house, and parts of the thirteenth century Lady Chapel, was incorporated into the basement of the original house of c. 1600 (*ibid.*), and six bays survive, at least 12m east of the stair well being investigated. It is thought possible that the site of the north transept of the abbey church also lies beneath the house, immediately east of the stair well (RCHM Huntingdon 1924).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Work on the site began with the removal of the present floor by building contractors working under archaeological supervision. The floor consisted of concrete and stone slabs laid on modern brick supports. Below, a deposit of red brick and stone rubble in a yellowish brown silt and sand matrix was visible. No archaeological features were observed and no further recording was necessary at this stage, so the contractors proceeded with the removal of the subfloor deposits to a depth of 0.80m.

At the northern end of the trench, the rubble extended to a depth of 0.60m, and sealed a yellowish brown sandy clay deposit at least 0.20m deep. Although this may represent a natural deposit, its rather mixed appearance suggested that it might have been redeposited. To the south, the rubble deposit extended to a greater depth, and was present down to the base of the trench. A rough mortared stone wall or foundation c. 0.50m thick was observed c. 0.50-1.00m from the south end of the trench (*Figure 2*). It was at least 0.55m deep, and after partial excavation, could be seen in plan in the trench base, aligned east west, and extending for c. 0.52m into the trench from the east before reaching a butt end. The stones appeared to be undressed angular blocks with a maximum dimension of c. 0.30m x 0.08m deep, and appeared to be of limestone, and a dark grey conglomerate with quartzite inclusions. No dating evidence was recovered. The wall was sealed by the stone and brick rubble described above, which appeared to have been dumped in around it. No construction cut was observed as this rubble was still present at the base of the trench. The base of the trench was planned, and a sample part of the west facing section drawn, so that the position of the wall was recorded in plan and section. No other features were observed and the contractors' trench was infilled with concrete to support the new stair foundation.

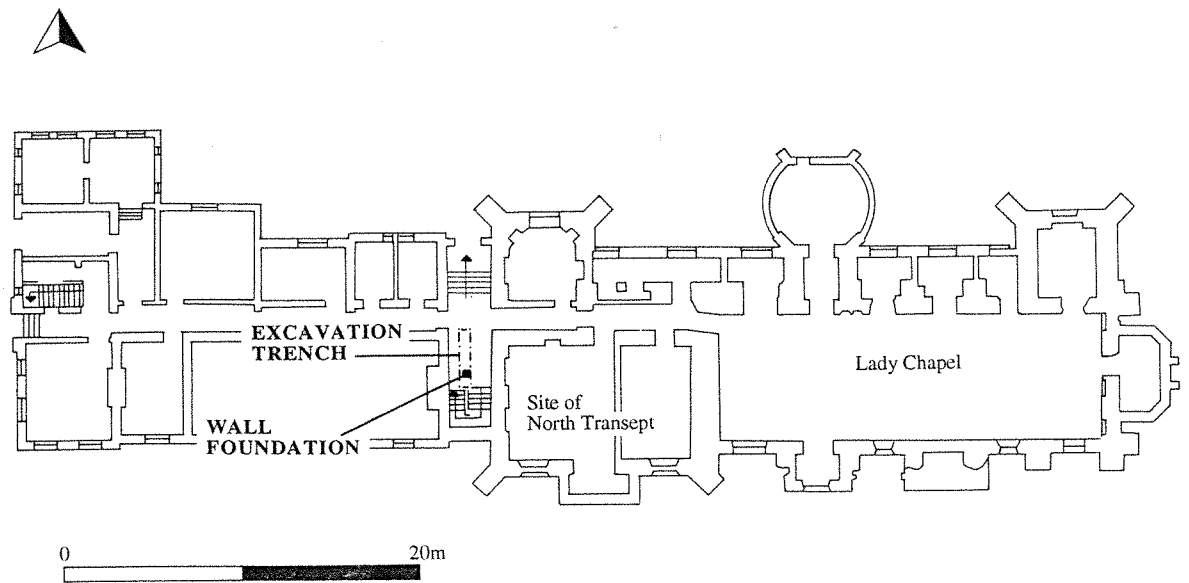


Figure 2 Trench Location Plan

CONCLUSIONS

The short length of rough walling observed was aligned east-west, parallel to the alignment of the sixteenth century house to the east, and also to that of the earlier Lady Chapel and abbey church. The interpretation of a very short length of undated wall can only be tentative but it may relate to the backfilled undercroft or cellar of a structure extant before the construction of the nineteenth century extension to the house. This may be suggested partly by the depth of the wall. It extended to at least 0.80m below the floor of the stair well, and this itself lay four steps, or *c.* 0.60m, below the ground surface outside. With a width of *c.* 0.50m, the wall may not have been substantial enough to represent the foundations of a major building, but another possibility is that it might be the base of a buttress relating to a structure to the west, either the original house or an earlier building.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

- Haigh, D, 1988 *The Religious Houses of Cambridgeshire*, Cambridge
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