

SOURCES

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APPENDIX

EYNSHAM ABBEY:

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

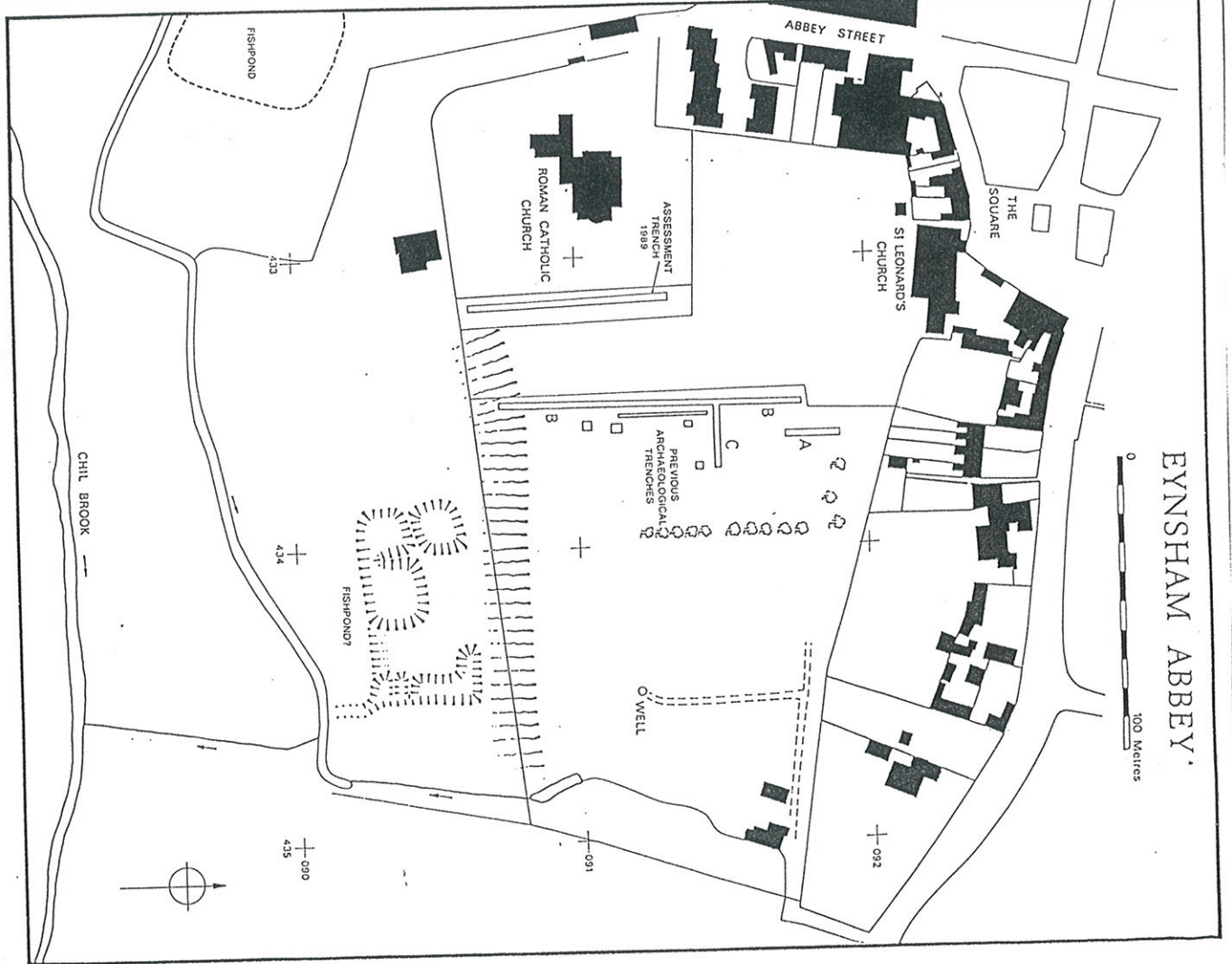
TRENCH IN ST LEONARDS CHURCHYARD

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Fig. 1



EYNSHAM ST. LEONARD'S CHURCH YARD EXTENSION 1989

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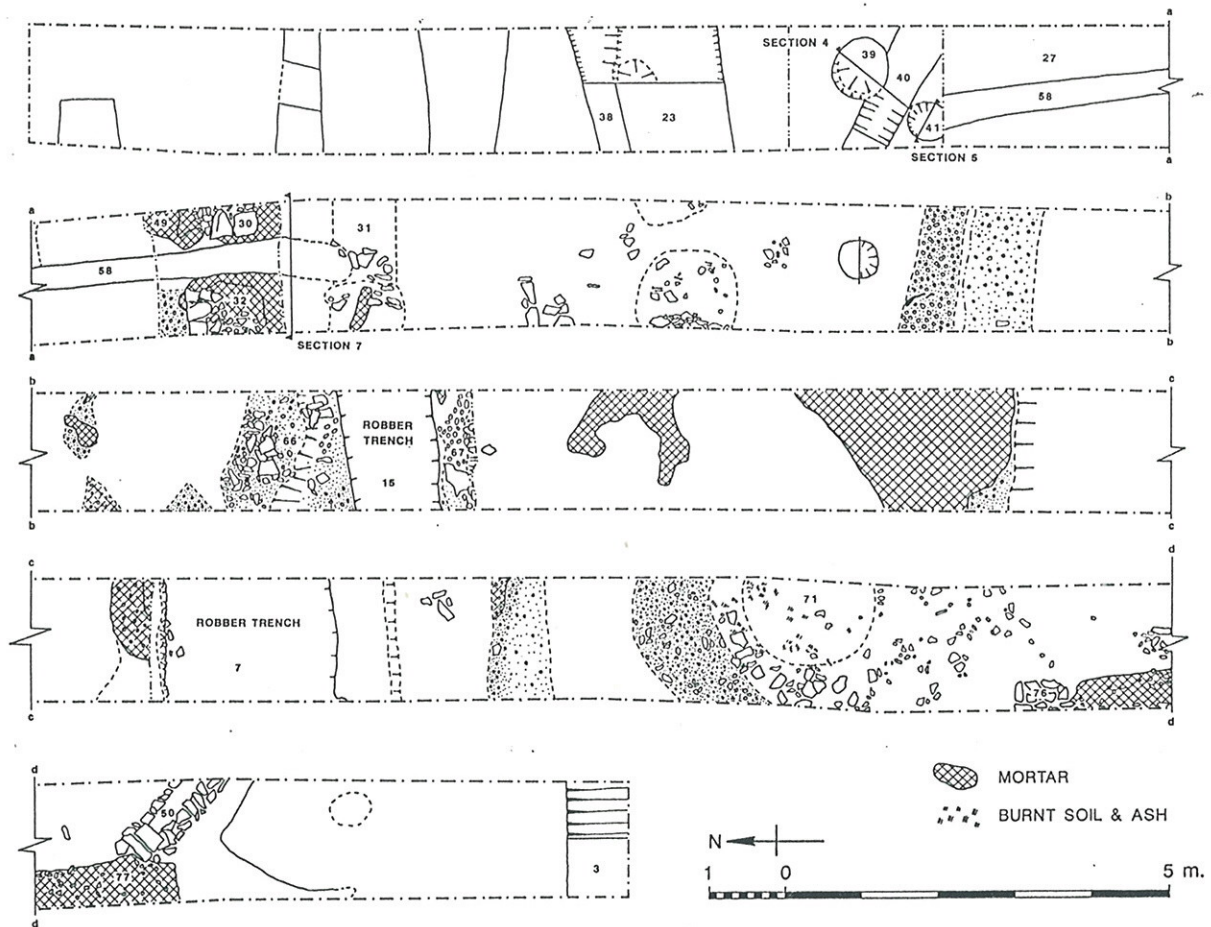


Fig. 2

## SUMMARY

A trench dug along the length of the graveyard extension revealed evidence of the Norman and medieval abbey and of earlier, Anglo-Saxon occupation. The medieval abbey remains were considerable, consisting of large robber trenches, mortar floors and remains of domestic structures. Anglo-Saxon deposits were revealed beneath the abbey buildings, with 6-9th century pottery. There was little ceramic evidence for the late Saxon and Norman period but very little of the earlier abbey levels was excavated.

## LOCATION (Fig 1)

Eynsham Abbey lay to the south of the present village. Sited on the edge of the second gravel terrace the abbey overlooked the River Thames flood plain to the east. Between the Thames and the Abbey lies the Child Brook and a canalised stream or leat along which lay a range of fishponds. The Ordnance Survey marks the site of the Abbey at SP433091, where the Roman Catholic Church now stands, and the main Abbey buildings are believed to be in the adjacent churchyards of the Catholic Church and the Parish Church of St Leonards.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The only record and illustration of standing remains of the Abbey was drawn by Anthony Wood in 1657. In 1963-64 David Sturdy and the OVAS dug small trenches in Nursery Field, on the east side of St Leonards churchyard, and further trenches were dug in the same area by Margaret Gray in 1971, revealing Roman and Saxon features, pre-Conquest burials, and medieval pits and walls. The excavation report includes a detailed archaeological and historical background to the site (M Gray & N Clayton 'Excavation on the Site of Eynsham Abbey 1971', *Oxonlensia* XIII, 100-122).

## THE ASSESSMENT TRENCH (Figs 2 & 3)

A trench 68 metres long and 18 metres wide was dug in the new extension to St Leonards Churchyard, previously the eastern edge of the Roman Catholic churchyard. The trench was dug by a JCB using a toothless five foot bucket. It was then hand cleaned and selected features were partly excavated. The west facing section was drawn at 1:50 and two areas re-drawn in more detail at 1:20. An overall plan of the trench was drawn at 1:20.

## TOPSOIL

The site is covered by a layer of turf and organic soil c. 30cm deep (Layer 1). In the southern end of the trench a further layer of dark brown loam and gravel overlay the abbey demolition rubble.

## POST MEDIEVAL

The topsoil sealed an unmortared E-W wall foundation (3) cut by a narrow N-S linear trench (58). The wall foundation appeared to be built from stone taken from the abbey ruins. Although a layer of soil separated the wall foundation from presumably

medieval mortar floors there was no other direct dating evidence for the wall.

## ABBAY DEMOLITION LAYERS

Spreads of mixed loam, mortar and demolition rubble (4, 6, 13, 37) overlay the archaeology in the rest of the trench. These were layers of silty-loam mixed with gravel and powdered mortar containing chips and fragments of dressed limestone and some limestone rubble, ceramic roof tile and some medieval pottery. Two pieces of painted window glass were found in layer 4. Fragments of wall plaster were all white washed except for one piece with dull red veils of ochre white wash. Several small pieces of moulded stonework were also white washed. There were few fragments of floor tile. The overall impression was that the site had been methodically worked over by demolition gangs removing all useable stonework including the rubble fillings of the larger walls leaving only the mortar behind.

## THE ABBEY REMAINS

Substantial evidence of the abbey buildings was revealed, although the pre-Conquest and later medieval phases cannot be distinguished without further excavation. Robber trenches of considerable size (7, 15, 23, 56, indicated the former existence of substantial stone walls, all orientated E-W. Two robber trenches (7 and 15) were partially excavated, to a depth of 1.20m and 1.30m respectively but were not bottomed. A section of 23 was fully excavated showing the bottom of the original wall to have been 1.10 metres below the modern topsoil level with a free built wall foundation trench (38) on the north side. The probable trench 56 was not excavated. Just south of the post-medieval wall (30) a narrow wall (31), 1.75m wide had been robbed. Mortar floor layers associated with the walls, were exposed. Preserved beneath the post-medieval wall (30) were two mortar floors (32 and 49) which probably originally butted against the wall represented by the robber trench. Revealed in the excavation of one robber trench (7) were layers of mortar floor presumably associated with the original wall. The side of another robber trench (15) revealed a cobbled surface of large rounded chert pebbles (67) below a layer of limestone rubble with pebbles (66). These layers either butted or were cut through by a wall represented by the robber trench (15).

In the southern end of the assessment trench was evidence of domestic activity: a sub circular area of burnt soil and ash surrounded by a line of rubble and a closely packed gravel surface (71) indicated a hearth, kiln or oven which was not excavated. Two wall foundations (76 and 77) probably formed the north-east corner of a building which appeared to cut a covered stone drain (50) leading from it. At the southernmost end of the trench the edge of a substantial E-W ditch was revealed. This ditch is probably part of the southern boundary ditch to the Abbey curtilage and was also found in the 1971 excavation some 46m to the east.

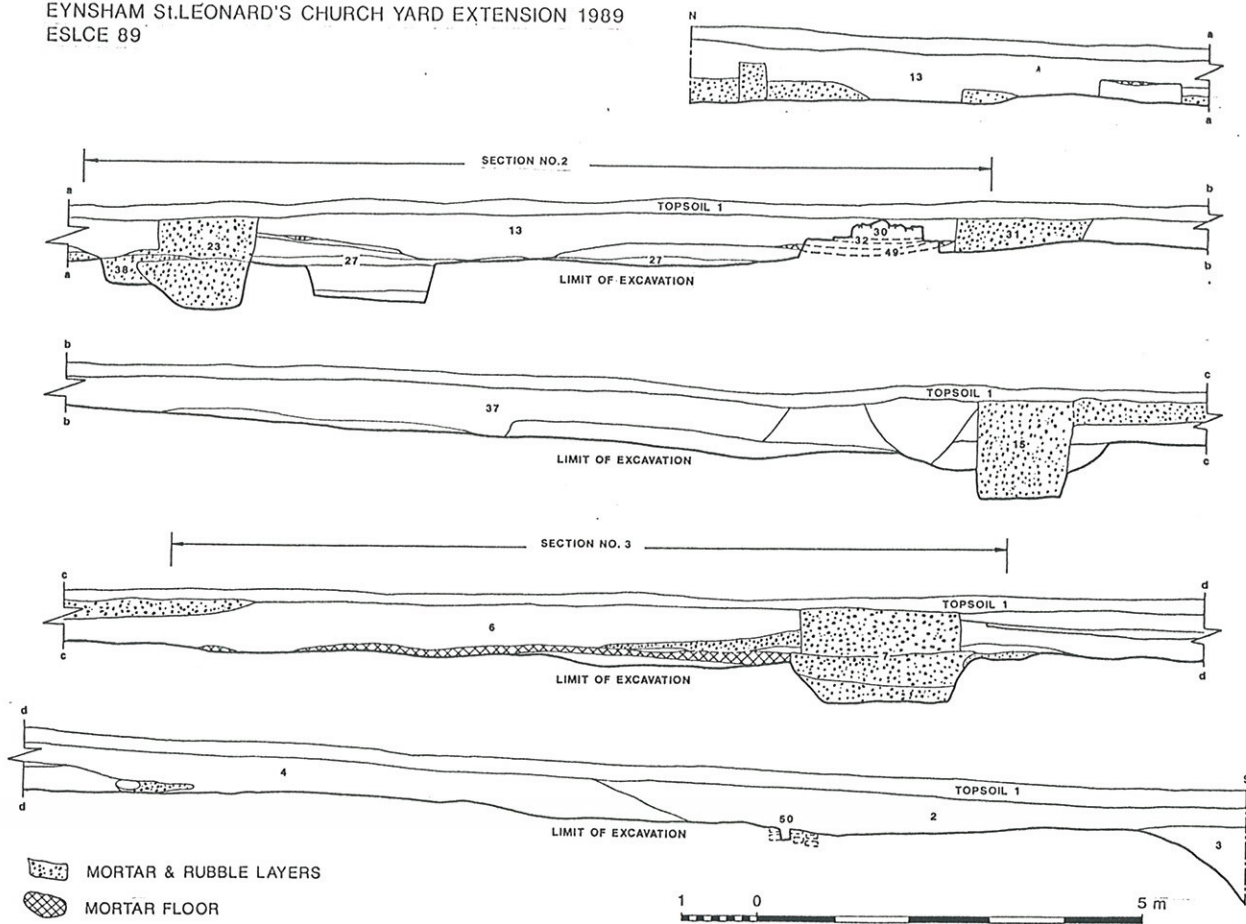


Fig.3

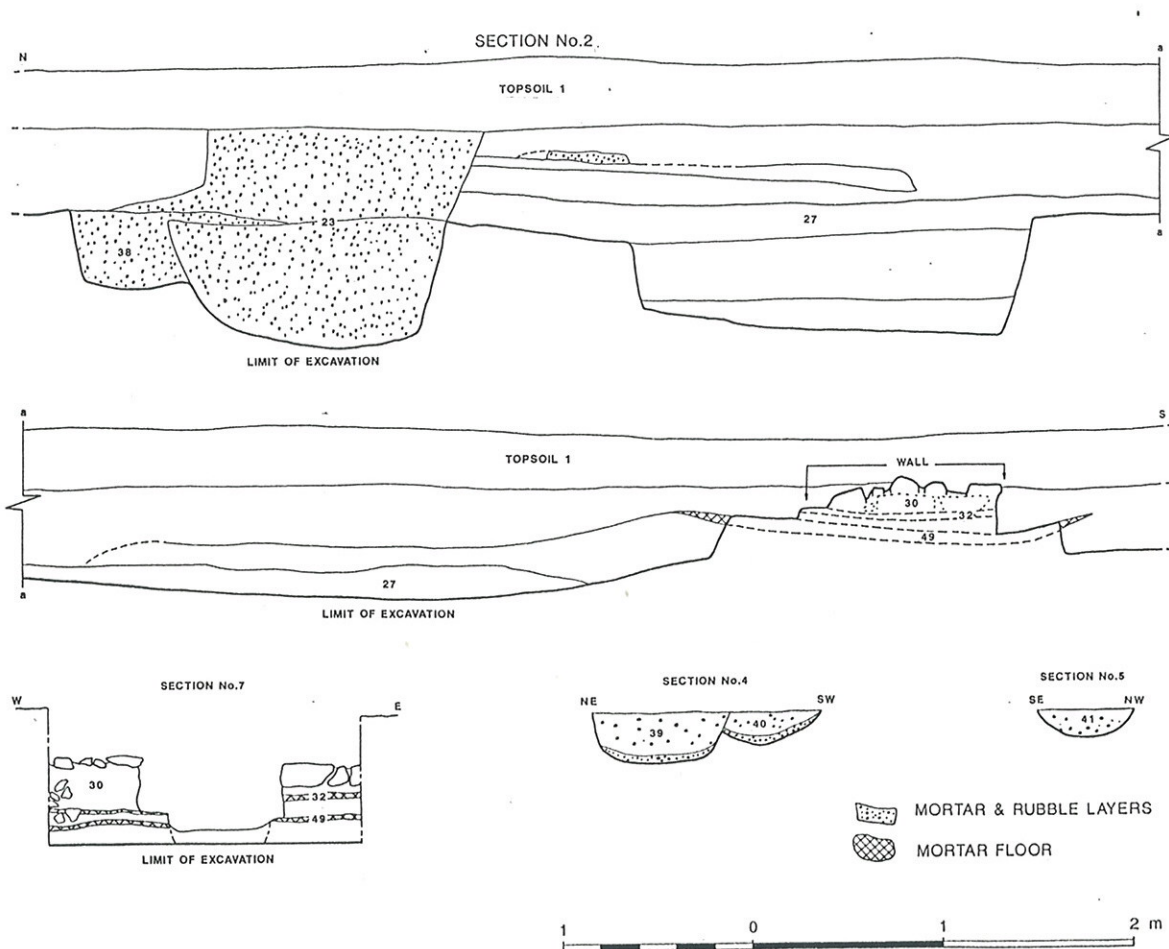


Fig.4

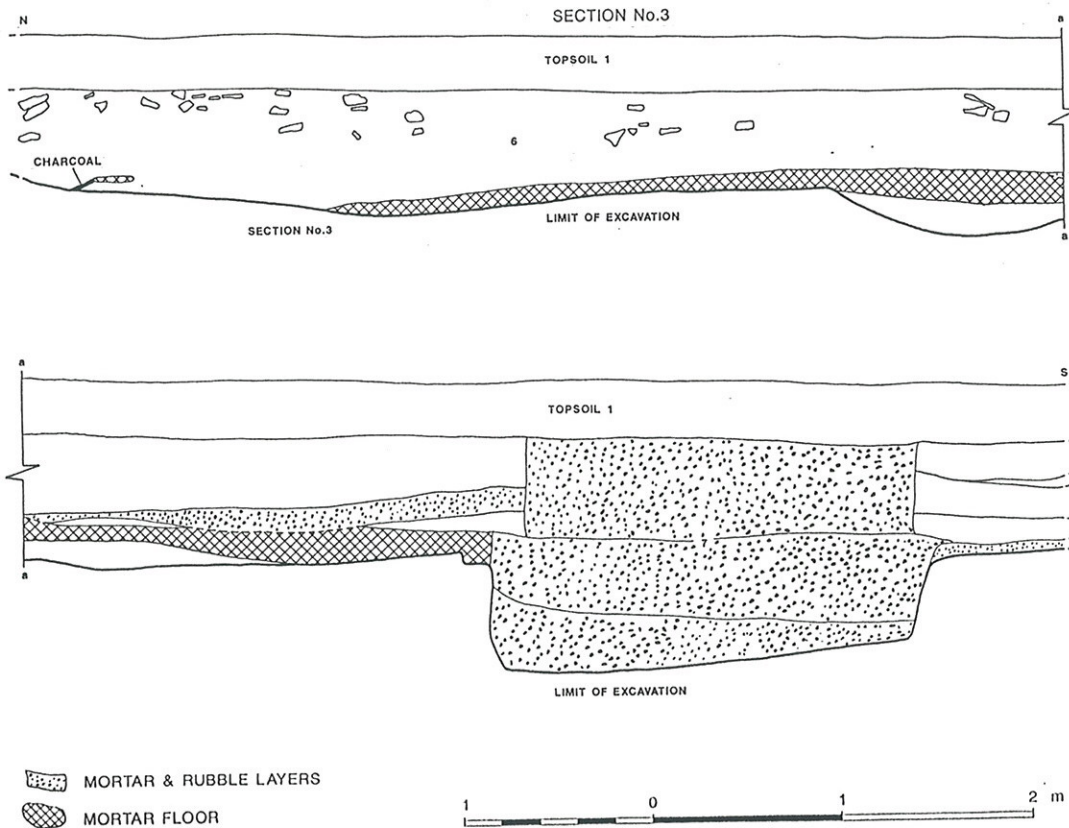


Fig. 5

#### THE ANGLO-SAXON REMAINS

In the northern part of the trench three features were excavated (figs. 2 & 4) which mirror Margaret Gray's description of the late-Anglo-Saxon pits found 70m to the NE in the 1971 excavation. A small section of the trench, dug by machine down to the top of the natural gravel, revealed the bottom of these circular pits (39 and 41) and one linear feature (40). Pit 41 contained two sherds of pottery currently dated 6 - 9th century AD. These three features originated in the gravely dark loam above (27) which appeared to represent pre-abbey land surface. This land surface was not excavated.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This assessment trench revealed the methodically robbed remains of the medieval abbey. The building plans survive as robber trenches and as a sequence of floor surfaces although tiles and flagstones have been removed. Sizeable E-W wall footings suggest a substantial building in the centre of the trial trench with fragments of white washed moulded stonework and clay floor tile in the overlying rubble. A sequence of domestic buildings, possibly including a kitchen lay at the southern end of the trench close to the southern boundary ditch. Mechanical excavation through part of the pre-abbey land surface revealed two small pits and a gully which may represent early-mid Saxon occupation at the time when Eynsham was still a regional centre, perhaps the centre for the whole Upper Thames region.

Without complete excavation down to natural it was not possible to distinguish between the remains (if present) of the 1005 AD foundations and those of the later abbey buildings following the return of the house from Stow in 1098. The levelling and gravelling over of the pre-Conquest graveyard seen in the 1971 excavation suggests great replanning and rebuilding at this time. The pre-Conquest graves found in 1971 (Fig.1.) may belong to the pre-1005 ecclesiastical foundation, rather than the first Benedictine house.

Several sherds of Anglo-Saxon pottery were present both in-situ and as residual sherds in medieval and later levels. This pottery is impossible to date precisely on present knowledge. Grass tempered wares appear to continue throughout the 8th century and much of the earlier Saxon pottery types probably continue into and throughout the mid Anglo-Saxon period and into the 9th century (M Mellor pers. comm). The lower occupation levels on this site provide an unparalleled opportunity to establish a chronology for mid Anglo-Saxon pottery as well as establishing archaeologically something of the nature of this early royal centre.