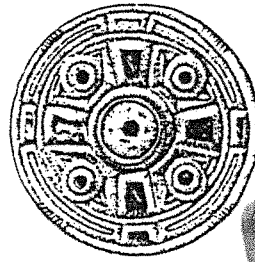


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An Archaeological Evaluation
at
West Acre Priory, Norfolk

N Oakey

1995

Cambridgeshire County Council

Commissioned By West Acre Theatre Trust

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at
West Acre Priory, Norfolk**

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SUMMARY

In November 1995 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council, acting as sub-contractors for Norfolk Archaeological Unit, carried out an archaeological evaluation at West Acre Priory, Norfolk (TF 7830/1504). This was commissioned by West Acre Theatre Trust as the basis of a class consent application for proposed works within the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 21325).

Seven sample trenches produced no evidence for human activity on the site before the foundation of the priory in the early 12th century.

One trench (A) confirmed the survival of the foundations of a medieval building extending northwards for 25m from the standing medieval barn, but in all other trenches any layers associated with the priory had not survived later truncation. A shallow layer of demolition debris was seen south-east of the monastic barn and may be derived from other monastic buildings.

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**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION
AT
WEST ACRE PRIORY, NORFOLK (TF 7830/1504)**

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 1995, the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council, acting as sub-contractors to Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU), carried out an archaeological evaluation within the precinct of West Acre Priory, West Acre, Norfolk (*Figure 1*). The work was carried out on behalf of West Acre Theatre Trust in connection with an application for class consent for various works within the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 21325).

The scheme involved the excavation and recording of a number of trenches within the area of the outer court of the monastery (*Figure 2*). Two trenches were located within an upstanding late medieval barn, with five others positioned around it and adjoining 18th and 19th century farm buildings. These buildings remain in use as part of the West Acre estate, housing a range of functions associated with farming, forestry and theatrical productions.

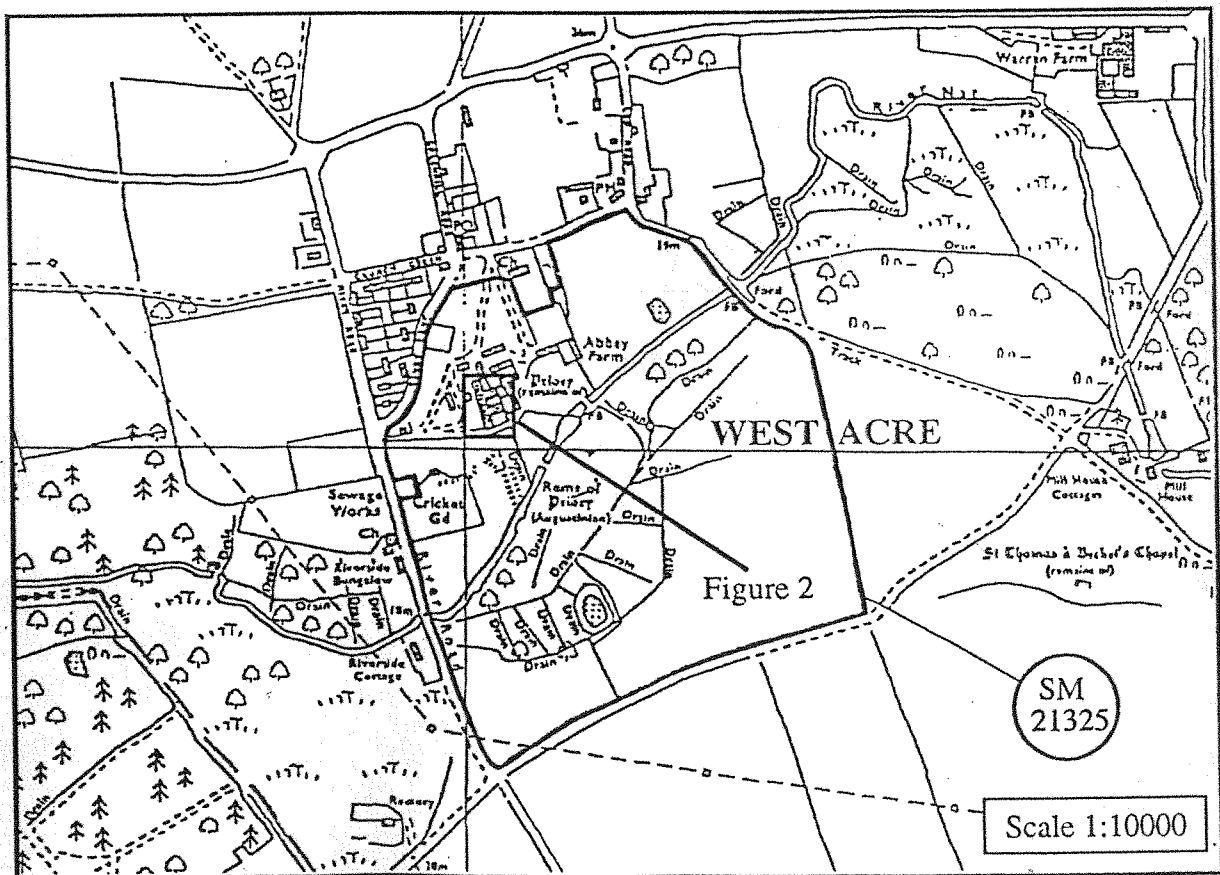


Figure 1 West Acre Priory, Norfolk

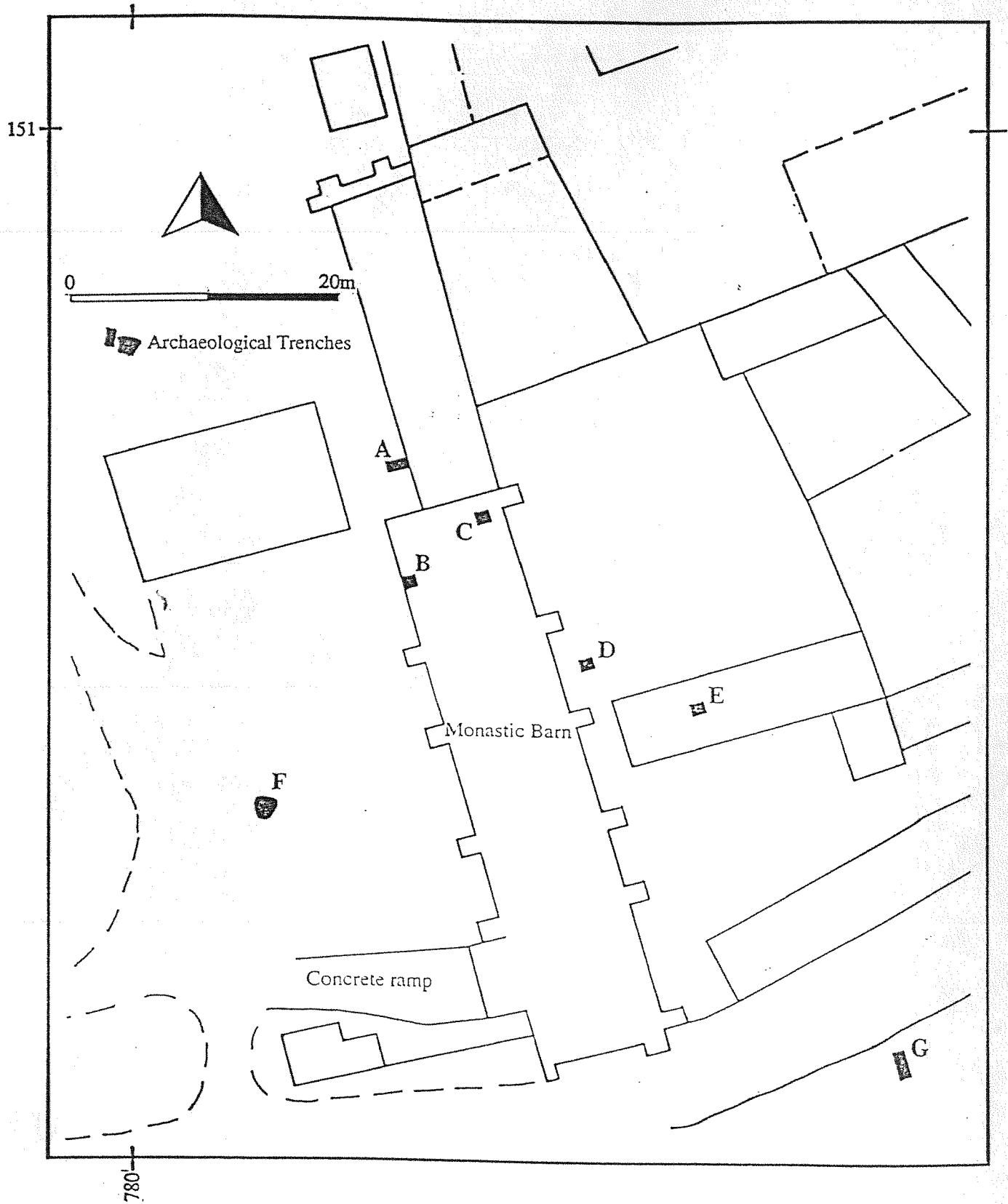


Figure 2 West Acre Priory. Location of trenches

2. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

West Acre Priory was founded as a house of Augustinian Canons on the banks of the River Nar in c1135 by Ralph de Toni and his family. It was comparatively large and wealthy, with up to 26 canons, but from the later 14th century onwards the recorded numbers never exceeded twenty. The original endowment included the manor and church of West Acre and was augmented by further gifts during the 13th century, so that by 1291 the community is listed as having an annual income of £140 5s 7d (Page, 1906, 402). In the first half of the 15th century the income is recorded as £256 11s (*ibid*, 402). The priory, with its dependent cell of Great Massingham, was dissolved in 1538 and the site, together with the manor of West Acre, was granted by Henry VIII to Mary, Duchess of Richmond and Somerset for life (*ibid*, 403).

The precincts of West Acre Priory are protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (National Monument No 21325). This status covers various surviving structures from the monastic complex, but does not include the monastic barn. However, the ground beneath this and later structures is scheduled and consent had to be obtained from the Department of National Heritage before the evaluation took place.

The priory is number 3881 in the Norfolk County Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). Survey of the upstanding remains and a report of excavations in the monastic church and cloister were published in 1929 (Fairweather and Bradfer-Laurence, 1929). The SMR enumerates various watching briefs, surveys and casual finds within the precinct, but the only reference pertinent to the area under investigation was the casual find in August 1992 of medieval pottery at TF 7808/1503, c 20m north-east of Trench G.

3. METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was designed to explore the impact of the development proposals upon the scheduled area by ascertaining the state of preservation, depth, date and quality of any archaeological deposits in the affected locations (*Figure 2*).

To this end, seven trenches were located in areas of potential disturbance. Trench A had been already been excavated as a soakaway in an area subject to flooding, and archaeological work involved the cutting back and cleaning of two vertical elevations within a demolished northward extension of the monastic barn. Trenches B and C, both within the northern end of the standing monastic barn, explored the survival of earlier floor surfaces below the existing modern concrete floor in advance of possible disturbance by proposed stanchions. East of the barn, Trench D was on the line of a proposed covered, elevated walkway. Trench E was within a former farm building converted into a workshop, while F was dug in the forecourt west of the barn at the proposed location of a septic tank. Trench G was in a field south of the farm complex and c17m east of the upstanding remains of a range of buildings continuing the line of the barn southwards.

The concrete floors in Trenches B, C and E had been removed before the arrival of the archaeologists, but otherwise all trenches were dug by hand. Exposed archaeological contexts were then cleaned, photographed, planned and recorded according to the AFUs standard single context recording system using a continuous sequence starting at 1001.

The completed site archive and recovered artefacts will be submitted to Norfolk Landscape Archaeology in the first instance, with copies of the paper archive retained by the AFU.

4. RESULTS

The only artefacts recovered during excavation were animal bones from context 1002 (Trench A). No other artefacts were present in excavated contexts. The status of the recorded deposits meant that environmental sampling was inappropriate.

4.1 Trench A

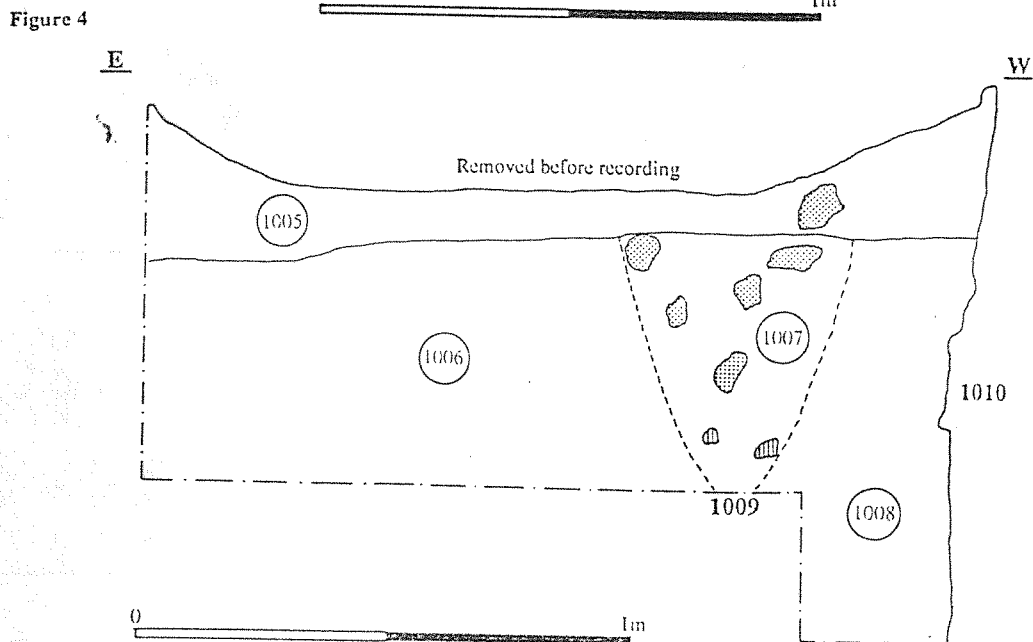
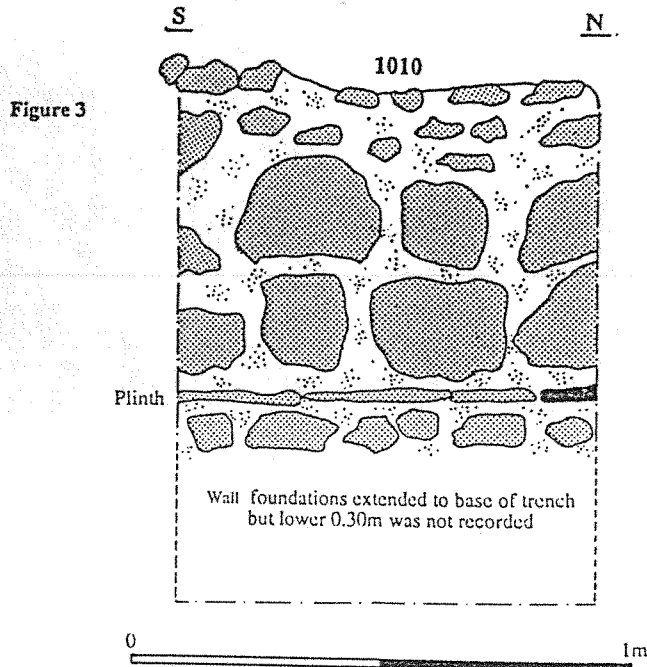
In its initial form, Trench A comprised the north- and east-facing elevations of an already existing excavation. They were cleaned back to a vertical face 0.75m high and each was drawn at a scale of 1:10 (*Figures 3 and 4*). Following advice from Andrew Rogerson, a sondage 0.30m deep and 0.30m wide was excavated adjacent to the east-facing elevation.

The east-facing elevation (*Figure 3*) comprised wall foundation **1010**. At its base (1.08m below modern ground surface) was a horizontally-laid limestone slab, overlain by 0.30m thickness of unbonded limestone rubble and flint nodules (time restrictions did not allow these to be drawn). A course of roughly-dressed limestone supported a plinth formed of horizontally-laid limestone slabs and a reused brick. Above this were two rough courses of faced large pieces of limestone, topped with medium-sized limestone rubble, all bonded with mortar. Wall **1010** ran northwards for c 25m from the northern gable wall of the standing barn to an isolated gable wall. At its southern end, near the standing barn, courses of dressed limestone survived at modern ground level.

No construction cut for **1010** could be seen in the north-facing elevation (*Figure 4*), where fine silty sand (1006 and 1008) ran across the whole width of the trench. Both were dark brown in colour, but 1008 graded to yellowish-brown sand with depth. Cutting 1006/1008 was a post-hole **1009**, backfilled with dark brown silt (1007), containing limestone and flint packing. Contexts 1006-8 were sealed by an accumulation of dark brown, fine silt (1005).

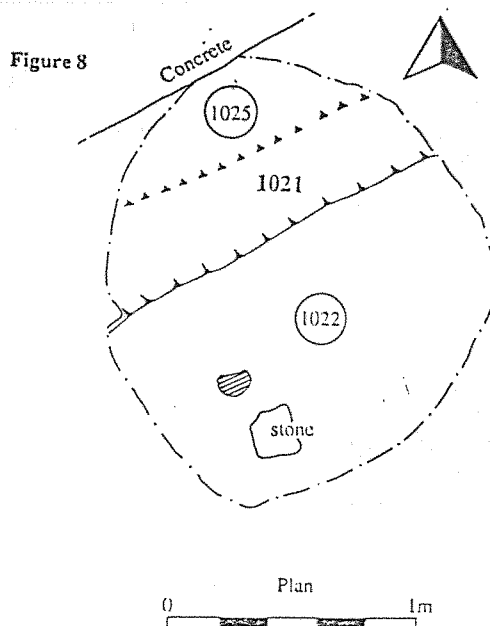
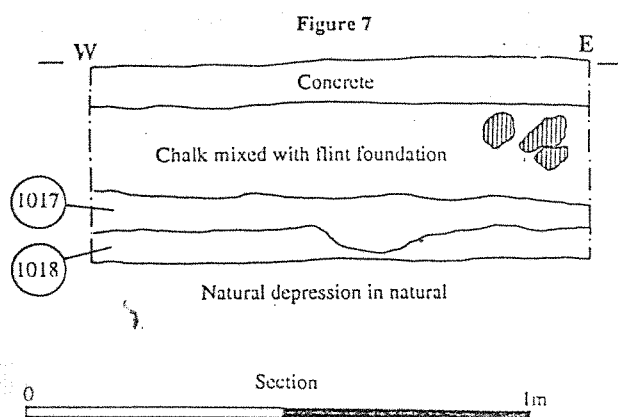
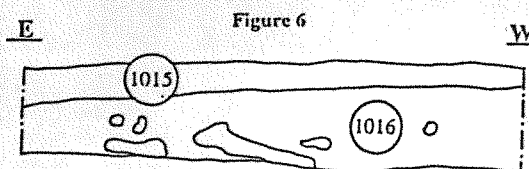
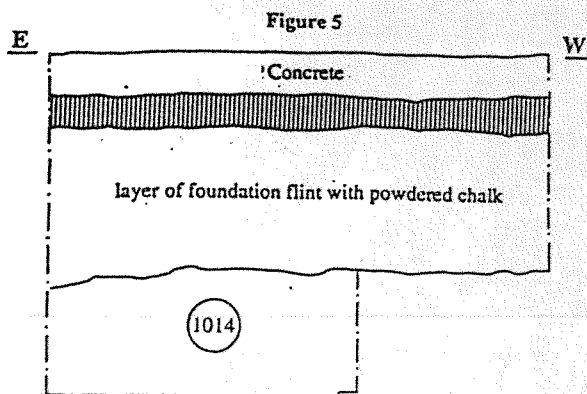
4.2 Trenches B and C

Both trenches measured 1 x 1m and were located within the northern end of the standing medieval barn. In both cases, below 0.45m depth of concrete floor and a foundation of loose flint and chalk was dark yellowish-brown, fine silty sand 1014. A trial sondage in Trench B showed this material to be over 0.25m deep. As both trenches were identical only the north-facing section of Trench B is reproduced here (*Figure 5*).



4.3 Trench D

This trench (1 x 1m) was located to the east of the medieval barn within the farmyard. The modern ground level in this location was 1.31m lower than the floor of the adjacent barn. Below a shallow (0.05m) layer of topsoil or trample (1015), yellowish-brown silty sand 1016 was uncovered. Between 0.10 and 0.15m depth of 1016 was removed across the whole trench (*Figure 6*) and a 0.30m deep trial sondage revealed that this context graded to an olive yellow pure sand with depth. A number of medium pieces of chalk and flint nodules were located in the south-eastern corner of this trench, but no cut was observed and this material seems to be a localised concentration of stones within 1016.



4.4 Trench E

Positioned within a workshop (formerly farm buildings) east of the barn, Trench E measured 1 x 1m. At a depth of 0.28m below the surface of the concrete floor was a 0.08m thick layer (1017) of dark brown, fine silt. It overlay dark yellowish-brown silty sand 1018 (Figure 7).

4.5 Trench F

Trench F was located 14m west of the barn and dug through a gravel standing adjacent to a concrete surface. Positioned to coincide with the proposed location of a septic tank, it was an irregular circle with diameter of 1.55-1.70m. A dark brown, slightly silty sand (1025) was observed 0.30m below the modern ground surface, sealed by brownish-yellow sand full of pebbles and flints (1024). Sealing 1024 was 1023, a dark yellowish-brown, slightly silty sand including a few flints which, in turn, was sealed by a 0.10m thick floor surface of crushed, compacted limestone or chalk and mortar (1022).

Floor 1022 and all the earlier contexts had been truncated by a linear cut 1021 running north-east/south-west (Figure 8). This cut had been backfilled with a yellowish-brown, slightly-silty sand (1020) including large pieces of concrete and polythene. This fill ran under the concrete surface. Both 1020 and floor 1022 were sealed by the gravel standing 1019.

Figure 9

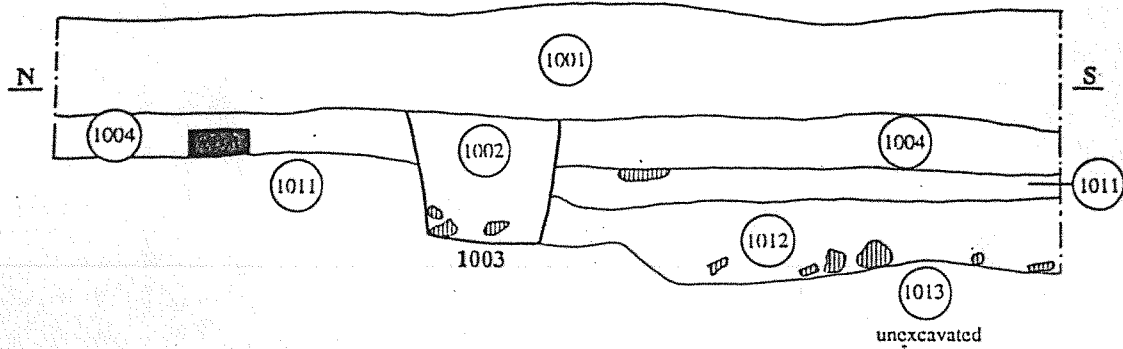
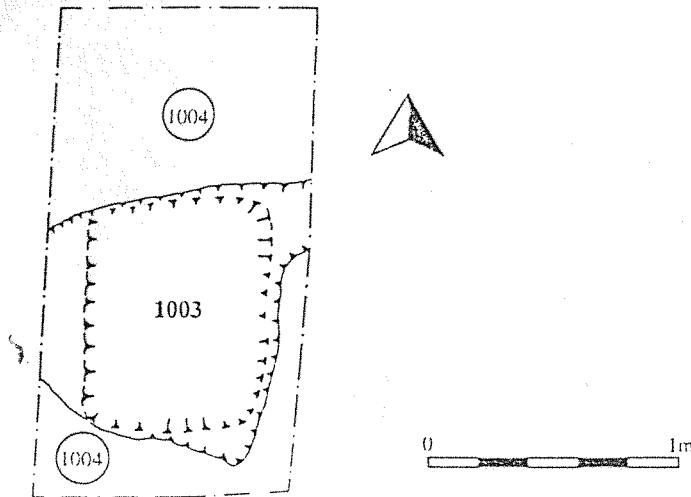


Figure 10



4.6 Trench G

This trench measured 2 x 1m and was in a field to the south-east of the medieval barn, where the excavation of a settling tank is proposed. Pure olive yellow sand 1013 was encountered 0.55m below the modern ground surface and became lighter with depth. Sealing it was 1012 (*Figure 9*), a grey sandy silty clay with frequent iron panning. This layer was identical to higher deposit 1004, but sandwiched between 1004 and 1012 was a shallow (up to 0.09m thick) layer of building debris (1011) comprising cobbles, fragments of chalk and flint, and one large fragment of late medieval or early post-medieval brick (15th - 16th centuries). These components were within a matrix of loose yellow mortar.

Cutting 1004 and earlier contexts was sub-rectangular (1.12 x 1.00m) pit 1003 (*Figure 10*). It was 0.53m deep with vertical sides and flattish base, and penetrated into the natural sand. The lower 0.18m of its backfill (1002) comprised disturbed, redeposited yellowish-brown sand which contained much animal bone. The remainder of the fill was much darker and looser and showed evidence of recent disturbance by rabbits. Sealing backfill 1002 was topsoil 1001 (0.22-0.28m thick).

5. DISCUSSION

Naturally deposited yellow, slightly silty sand containing a few flints was encountered in Trenches D, E and G (1016, 1018 and 1013 respectively). The medieval barn had been built on a terrace which appears to have been formed of a dark brown, slightly silty sand seen in Trench G as context 1025, 1017 in Trench E, 1014 in Trenches B and C and, possibly, 1006/1008 in Trench A. East of the barn this layer either survived only as a shallow skim (1017 in Trench E) or was not seen at all (Trench D). It is probable that a pre-existing change in level was increased by the removal of soil east of the barn to produce a flat area for the construction of the farm complex in the 18th and 19th century.

This dark brown, slightly silty sand contained no artefacts and in Trench D was seen to grade into the underlying yellow natural sand. It may be either a natural deposit with a higher percentage of browner silt deposited by flooding or hillwash, or it may represent a cultivated soil. The total absence of artefacts does not support the latter interpretation, but only a limited amount of the material was excavated or exposed.

The status of context 1006/1008 in Trench A is problematic. It is identical to 1014, 1017 and 1025, but its relationship to wall 1010 was difficult to establish. It ran below the wall, but no construction cut for 1010 was seen. The plinth 0.65m below modern ground level may indicate an original floor level with a faced wall above it. However, no evidence for a floor at this level was located in Trench A and such a low floor would have been under constant threat of flooding by rainwater off the higher ground to the north and west. Examination of the doorways in the standing barn suggested that the existing floor level was unlikely to be much higher than that of the original. It is concluded, therefore, that wall 1010, as exposed in Trench A, was always intended as a foundation for a substantial stone building. Deep foundations would have been required for a stone building sitting on the comparatively soft silts and sands of the terrace. The foundation exposed was built up against the edge of a foundation cut and deposit 1006/1008 therefore pre-dates the construction of the barn and is likely to be the same dark brown, slightly silty sand seen in trenches B, C, E and G. Also truncating 1006/1008 was posthole 1007 which may have housed a vertical post supporting the roof of the demolished range. The reuse of a brick in the plinth of 1010 suggests that this range was constructed in the late medieval or post-medieval period.

All earlier floor levels within the upstanding medieval barn had been destroyed when the concrete floor was laid.

Earlier levels had also been truncated in the forecourt west of the barn in Trench F. The present owner informed the author that surface 1022 was the floor of a modern silo and 1021 was the backfilled cut left after the removal of the wall of the silo. Layers 1024 and 1023 may represent either levelling deposits below the floor or be evidence of earlier activity, but they were only seen in section and no artefacts were recovered.

Trench G was in a field south of the buildings and included a layer of building material, 1011. This material was too loose and too shallow to suggest deliberate deposition as a surface (eg floor, yard or track) and it is difficult to date. The occurrence of a brick within it suggests that it is late medieval or later. Demolition, dereliction or remodelling of the monastic buildings after the Dissolution seem likely agencies for the creation of this deposit. After

soil accumulated on its surface, a deep pit (1003) was dug for the disposal of animal bones. Again, it is difficult to date this activity, but it is likely to be associated with use of the farm buildings to the north.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Within the small areas excavated no artifactual or structural evidence was found for human activity on the site before the foundation of the priory in the earlier 12th century.

The location in Trench A of the foundation for the western wall of a medieval building confirmed upstanding evidence for the existence of a range extending northwards for 25m from the standing medieval barn. This foundation was built in the late medieval or post-medieval period and survived at the modern ground surface.

In all other trenches levels associated with the priory had not survived later activity. Earlier floor surfaces within the monastic barn had been destroyed by the construction of the existing concrete floor; the ground level had been lowered east of the barn to provide a flat terrace for the existing farm complex; and modern farm activity had created disturbance west of the barn.

South-east of the barn, post-medieval activity had truncated a layer of material probably derived from demolition (Trench G). This material could have derived from buildings to the north or west. Another possible source may have been a mound or platform to the east which may once have been the site of buildings.

The only artefacts recovered from the excavation were animal bones from Trench G.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The evaluation was commissioned by West Acre Theatre Trust who provided funding and broke out concrete where necessary. The project was handled on their behalf by TP Nash, Architect, who, together with other personnel associated with the Estate, provided encouragement and practical assistance.

The AFU acted as sub-contractors to Norfolk Archaeological Unit and Brian S Ayers (Principal Field Archaeologist) gave advice on site and assistance with background research.

Andrew Rogerson, Senior Landscape Archaeologist with the Landscape Archaeology Section of Norfolk Museums Service, formulated the original scheme of archaeological works and visited the site to inspect the open trenches and offer advice. He also provided copies of information on West Acre from the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record.

For the AFU, Niall Oakey (Project Officer) supervised the evaluation with the assistance of Bob Hatton (Archaeological Assistant). The project was under the overall management of Tim Malim (Archaeological Field Unit Manager). Illustrations were prepared by Caroline Gait-Utime.

Editorial control was exercised by Brian S Ayers.

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Appendix A - Context List WEST ACRE 95

Trench A

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1005	Recent silting	Dark brown (7.5YR 3/2) fine silt	1007	
1006	?Natural deposit	Very dark greyish-brown (10YR 3/2) silty sand		1009
1007	Fill of 1009	Dark brown (10YR 3/2) fine silt , with frequent flint and chalk nodules	1009	1005
1008	?Natural deposit	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 3/4) fine silty sand		1009, 1010
1009	Post-hole	Sub-circular pit	1006, 1008	1007
1010	Wall foundation	Coursed stonework over rubble	1008	

Trenches B and C

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1014	?Natural deposit	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 3/4) silty sand		

Trench D

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1015	Topsoil or trample	Black (2.5Y 2.5/1) silt	1016	
1016	?Natural deposit	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 3/6) silty sand		1015

Trench E

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1017	?Natural	Dark brown (10YR 3/3) fine silt	1018	
1018	?Natural	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 4/6) silty sand		1017

Trench F

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1019	Modern gravel surface	Yellowish-brown (10YR 7/6) sand with 90% gravel	1020	
1020	Backfill of 1021	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 4/6) slightly silty sand	1021	1019
1021	Linear robber cut	Vertically-sided cut	1022	1020
1022	Floor surface	Light grey (2.5Y 7/2) compacted, crushed chalk/limestone and mortar	1023	1021
1023	?Dump/Levelling	Dark yellowish-brown (10YR 4/6) slightly silty sand	1024	1022
1024	?Dump/Levelling	Brownish-yellow (10YR 6/8) sand including 80% pebbles and gravels	1025	1023

1025	?Natural	Dark brown (10YR 3/3) slightly silty sand	1024
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Trench G

<u>Cntxt</u>	<u>Nature</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>It is Above</u>	<u>It is Below</u>
1001	Topsoil	Very dark greyish-brown (10YR 3/2) sandy silty clay	1002	
1002	Fill of 1003	Dark grey (10YR 4/1) sandy silt over light yellowish-brown (10YR 6/4) sand	1003	1001
1003	Pit	Sub-rectangular pit with vertical sides	1004	1002
1004	Cultivated soil	Grey (10YR 5/1) sandy silty clay	1011	1003
1011	Lens of demolition-derived material	Pale yellow (2.5Y 7/3) loose mortar and other building materials	1012	1004
1012	Cultivated soil	Grey (10YR 5/1) sandy silty clay	1013	1011
1013	Natural	Olive yellow (2.5Y 6/8) to yellow (2.5Y 7/6) sand		1012



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