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Abbey Close Car Park
Abbey Grounds
Restoration
Abingdon
Oxfordshire



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



Oxford Archaeology

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District Council**

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Oxfordshire*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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SUMMARY

From September to November 2003 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Abbey Grounds, Abingdon, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 5025 9735). The work was commissioned by Vale of White Horse District Council in advance of restoration of the Abbey Close Car Park with better drainage, lighting and resurfacing. This was part of the Abbey Grounds Restoration Project. The watching brief generally revealed post-medieval make up and landscaping layers, sealing deposits probably relating to the abbey complex, including stone walls, garden soils and evidence of possible infilling of the mill stream.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 From September to November 2003 Oxford Archaeology (hereafter OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Abbey Grounds, Abingdon, Oxfordshire (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Vale of White Horse District Council in respect of a restoration of the Abbey Close Car Park. This work is part of the Abingdon Abbey Grounds Restoration Project involving the Heritage Lottery Fund and Vale of White Horse District Council.

1.1.2 OA prepared a Project Design for English Heritage (OA 2002) as the area lay within the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM No.128).

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on alluvium over first terrace river gravel at 52 m OD. The site is situated on the north side of the Abbey Mill Stream at the east end of Abbey Close where it crosses over the Abbey Mill Stream.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA 2002) and is reproduced below. A plan of the Park showing previous below-ground investigations is shown in Figure 2.

The 1922 excavations

1.3.2 The only investigations on any significant scale were the trenches excavated in 1922 under the direction of A W Clapham and C R Peers when Abingdon Borough first acquired the site. These excavations were not written up at the time, and it was not until 1968 that a summary account and a plan was published (Biddle 1968). By this time the finds had become dispersed and only a single section drawing (which was not published) survived. The trench descriptions do however contain information about the depth of archaeological deposits, and a number of photographs of the trenches under excavation also survive.

- 1.3.3 Problems with two systems for numbering the trenches, and the absence of a contemporary comprehensive plan showing all of the excavated trenches, mean that even the published plan represents only a best fit, and omits some of the trenches dug west of the abbey church. The more recent geophysical survey (Bartlett 2001) has however in general confirmed the accuracy of the plan as established by Biddle (see below and Figure 2).
- 1.3.4 Biddle's account describes a surviving Roman occupation soil found at a depth of around 2.5 feet (0.75 m), and surviving between 0.45 and 0.6 m deep across the whole of the Abbey Gardens. This suggests that subsoil lay at a depth of at least 1.2-1.35 m, and gravel at perhaps 1.5-1.6 m down (*ibid.* 62). Medieval graves were found west and north of the nave at around 0.6 m down. Further graves were found north-east, east and south-east of the choir, and in the church and cloister walks. The medieval layers overlying the Roman soil consisted largely of make-up for floors that had been robbed; although the depth of the top of the medieval deposits is not specified, it must have been at around 0.6 m below modern ground level.

Excavations north of the Abbey Gardens

- 1.3.5 Major excavations were carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) north of the Abbey Gardens in advance of the construction of the Vale of White Horse District Council Offices (Allen 1989; Allen 1990). Just north of the formal garden these revealed graves of the lay cemetery at a depth of 0.9 m, part of an octagonal bell-tower at a depth of 1.4 m whose southern half lies within the Abbey Gardens, and beneath these a Roman masonry building that also continues into the Abbey Gardens at the west end of the formal garden. Beneath the Roman building were dense Early Roman and Iron Age features cut into the gravel. Undisturbed gravel lay at a depth of 1.7 m, and the total depth of archaeological deposits was generally over 2 m.
- 1.3.6 A Watching Brief by OAU (Parrington 1976) on construction of a temporary office building and its services also exposed burials and recovered Roman tesserae in trenches up to 1 m deep. These trenches extended east of the major excavations described in 2.2 above, corroborating the continuation of the lay cemetery and the likely continuation of the Roman building eastwards.

Recent minor investigations in the Abbey Grounds

- 1.3.7 A Watching Brief was carried out by OAU on part of an SEB cable trench dug around the east end of the Abbey Gardens (Allen 1990). This, which was dug along the eastern perimeter to a depth of 0.8 m, only revealed archaeological deposits at the very south-east corner of the site, where a layer of mortar 0.05 m thick was found, probably spread from a building to the north-west. The remainder of the eastern perimeter contained soil to at least 0.8 m deep, suggesting that this area lay beyond the abbey buildings on the margins of the former Stert Stream. The cable trench was not observed where it crossed the Abbey Close Car Park.
- 1.3.8 Six test pits 1 m square were excavated by OAU in the south-east corner of the Abbey Gardens in advance of the re-siting of children's play equipment (Roberts 1994). This revealed two walls (Test pits 3 and 5) on the east close to the mortar

spread exposed in 1990 (see 1.3.7 above), one being only 0.5 m below the ground. Further west a stone and gravel surface apparently cut by a grave was found only 0.3-0.4 m below ground (Test pits 1 and 2), and further human bones overlying a firm surface at 0.75 m down in Test pit 7. No archaeological features were found in Test pit 6, which contained possibly reworked graveyard soil to a depth of 0.55 m.

- 1.3.9 A Watching Brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services on a pipe-trench in the Abbey Close Car Park (Moore 1999). This ran eastwards following the south edge of Abbey Close from a point outside 14 Abbey Close to a new electricity pole adjacent to the NW pier of the bridge crossing the Abbey Mill stream. The trench encountered several walls of probably medieval date at a depth of between 0.5 m and 0.7 m, two (22 and 20) outside the Cosener's House, tentatively attributed to the medieval kitchens, and one (8) running north-south towards the end of Abbey Close, tentatively associated with the dormitory. Excavation for the new electricity pole was to a depth of 1.55 m, and revealed thick and fairly homogeneous soil to a depth of 1.4 m, containing occasional medieval, late Saxon and Roman finds towards the bottom. This overlay a grey silt that was undated. Natural gravel was not found at this depth.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The modern car park surface (Fig. 3) was stripped by a 360° machine with a 1.8 m ditching bucket. The trenches for the new drainage were then excavated with a 0.6 m wide toothed bucket to a maximum depth of 2 m. In addition trenches were excavated for new lighting, and the interceptor tank outflow into the Abbey Mill stream. After the new car park was installed, excavations took place for two foundation pads for the new footbridge over the Abbey Mill stream.
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

Car Park drainage (Figs 4, 5)

- 3.1.1 The trench was 0.6 m wide and excavated to a depth of 1 m on the west, sloping to a maximum depth of 1.5 m on the east. Three holes for manholes were excavated along the line of the new drainage, connecting surface drainage from different parts of the car park. These holes were rectangular in shape and measured 2.6 m x 2.3 m x 1.5 m deep.
- 3.1.2 At the west end of the new drainage trench a yellowish brown gravel (9), probably the Pleistocene gravel, was exposed at a depth of 1.05 m (Fig. 5 Sect. 2). This was observed along 7 m of the trench before dipping below the impact level of the trench. A layer of brown silty clay loam (8) a cultivated soil 0.35 m to 0.5 m thick, overlay the natural and was noted in the deeper excavated manholes. This layer was also noted in Sections 7 and 8, at the eastern end of the trench, but at a greater depth below modern ground level. In the latter section, layer 8 overlay a silty clay deposit (13), from which a small assemblage of finds, possibly medieval, was recovered (see 3.2.1 below).
- 3.1.3 In Section 7, layer 8 was cut - in the corner of the interceptor pit - by a stone wall (10), measuring 0.4 m in length and 0.2 m in depth. The wall was only partially revealed, and the orientation was not clearly definable. In the nearby Section 8, layer 8 was sealed by a layer of mixed silty clay and demolition material (7).
- 3.1.4 At the same point in the stratigraphic sequence a north-south oriented stone wall (12) measuring 0.5 m in width was revealed in Section 5. This was overlaid by layer of demolition material (11), similar to layer 7.
- 3.1.5 Present throughout the trench was a layer of dark brown silty clay (6), sealing the demolition spreads and stone footings. (In Section 3 the interface between layers 6 and 7 were obscure, and the combined deposit was recorded as layer 7).
- 3.1.6 Sealing layer 6 in Sections 4, 7 and 8 was a 0.20 m - 0.60 m thick layer of dark brown silty clay loam with patches of crushed brick and stone (5). With the exception of the western end of the trench the final deposits in the sequence were a compact 0.25 m thick hardcore base (4) for the old car park surface, sealed by a layers of gravel (2 and 3) and a tarmac surface (1).

Light Cable Trench (Figs 4, 5 - section 1, and Pl. 1)

- 3.1.7 The trench extended west of the car park area, and measured 27 m x 0.5 m x 0.7 m deep. At its base, the top of a substantial north-south oriented stone wall (17), measuring 2.0 m wide, was revealed, sealed by a rubble and mortar demolition layer (16), which extended below the bottom of the trench. Layer 16 was sealed by a 0.5 m deep layer of dark brown silty clay (15), equivalent to layer 6 in the car park trench to the east, and a layer of modern hardcore (14).

Footbridge Bases (Fig. 4)

- 3.1.8 Two rectangular holes were excavated on the north and south bank of the Abbey Mill Stream for concrete bases to support the new footbridge. The hole on the south side measured 2.3 m x 2.7 m x 1.8 m deep and cut through a 1 m thick accumulation of made ground. This overlay a very dark grey brown buried topsoil.
- 3.1.9 The hole on the north side measured 2.1 m x 3 m x 1.75m deep and revealed the same sequence and character of deposits as were recorded in Section 8.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 A small assemblage of finds were recovered, all from layer 13 at the east end of the site:

1 x fragment of medieval roof tile. The fabric is a hard mid-orange clay, with sparse ironstone and calcareous inclusions, similar to Fabric 6 found in excavations at Eynsham, dating to the early or mid 13th century (Mitchell 2003, 210-11)

2 x fragments of oyster shell

6 x fragments of cattle bone.

- Three cattle limb bones, a right humerus fragment, left tibia and right femur, the latter two with evidence of being chopped through the bone shaft.
- A large left cattle scapula, chopped through the proximal articulation
- Two large mammal rib bones, possibly also cattle, were recovered.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS (Fig. 6)

- 4.1.1 The archaeological evidence, though inevitably limited in extent, allows some significant informed speculation as to the medieval and early post-medieval development of an area of the abbey precinct hitherto not subject to intensive examination.
- 4.1.2 As expected, the natural gravel of the terrace was only revealed in the western part of the site, dipping south towards the Abbey Mill Stream, and suggesting that the mill stream may broadly follow the natural edge of the terrace. However, the radar survey (Bartlett and Boucher 1998) identified what were interpreted as possible mill stream revetment walls (see OAU 2002, 5 and fig.3), suggesting that in the medieval period the north bank of the stream was progressively moved southwards - by infilling behind revetments, presumably to produce more space in the southern part of the

abbey precinct. This hypothesis appears to be supported by the silty clay layer 13 revealed at the eastern end of the watching brief drainage trench, and dated - albeit with caution - to the early or mid 13th century by the finds of domestic rubbish, containing what appears to be a high proportion of kitchen waste. It seems likely that this area was used as a convenient rubbish dump during the infilling process.

- 4.1.3 Layer 8 may represent a medieval garden soil, in places truncated, presumably by building relating to the abbey.
- 4.1.4 Three stone walls were partly exposed in the excavations and are likely to be remains of robbed structures within the abbey precinct. All three survived at a depth of approximately 0.60 m - 70 m below modern ground level, which is consistent with the depth at which late medieval deposits were found in the 1922 excavations of the abbey church and cloister, and thus all three can plausibly be associated with the abbey complex. Arguably wall 17, in the light cable trench, is the most significant (see Pl. 1). Its size, orientation and position suggest that it could represent the west wall of the refectory, typically (in Benedictine monastic houses) a large hall ranged along the south side of the cloister. That the west end extends to the west of the south cloister walk - in contrast to Biddle's conjectural outline (1968, fig.10) - is not at all unusual. The refectory at Eynsham Abbey, for instance, also extended beyond the perimeter of the cloister (Hardy et al, 2003, fig. 5.1).
- 4.1.5 Layer 16 presumably represents the demolition of the refectory superstructure. Biddle (1968, 61) hints that surviving floor layers were identified in the 1922 excavation in the area of the church and cloister, and while it is most likely that any tiled or flagged floor within the refectory would have been salvaged during the demolition process, there is no reason why layer 16 should not overlie floor make up layers within the refectory.
- 4.1.6 In the drainage trench, wall 12 appears to be a continuation of the stone wall, uncovered during the 1999 watching brief (Moore 1999, ext 8). Although on the same orientation as the east range of the cloister, the wall is too far to the east (and too insubstantial) to satisfactorily link to any known or likely structural walls of the claustral range. Perhaps the most plausible suggestion is that it may represent a small feature or boundary wall associated with the monks' cemetery.
- 4.1.7 Finally, the fragment of wall (10), identified in the interceptor trench, might represent part of the infirmary complex, situated south-east of the abbey church, although too little of the wall was exposed to define its orientation or enable a confident interpretation.
- 4.1.8 The demolition of the abbey buildings is cleared signalled by deposits 11 and 16, and possibly 7, and the ubiquitous layer 6 appears to represent a major programme of landfill and levelling of the whole area. With no dating evidence from this layer, it is difficult to be certain whether the layer represents gradually accumulating cultivation soil in the centuries after the Dissolution, or the result of the mid-19th century landscaping carried out by Trendell.
- 4.1.9 The southerly of the two footbridge base excavations revealed a substantial deposit of made ground, which is likely to represent 19th- or 20th-century landscaping.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>
1	Layer	0.10 m			Tarmac	
2	Layer				Gravel Hardcore	
3	Layer				Gravel Hardcore	
4	Layer	0.25 m			Stone Hardcore	
5	Layer	0.20- 0.60 m			Make up layer	
6	Layer				Make up layer	
7	Layer	0.25- 0.50 m			Make up layer	
8	Layer	0.35- 0.50 m			Make up layer	
9	Natural				Natural gravel	
10	Structure	0.20 m		0.40 m	Stone wall	
11	Layer	0.10 m			Stone rubble	
12	Structure	0.02 m	0.50 m	0.60 m	Stone wall	
13	Layer				Stream infilling	Bone, CBM and shell
14	Layer	0.20 m			Hardcore	
15	Layer	0.50 m			Make up layer	= 6
16	Layer				Demolition layer	
17	Structure		2 m	0.60 m	Stone wall	

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APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Abbey grounds Restoration, Abbey Close Car Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

Site code: ABME 03

Grid reference: NGR SU 5025 9735

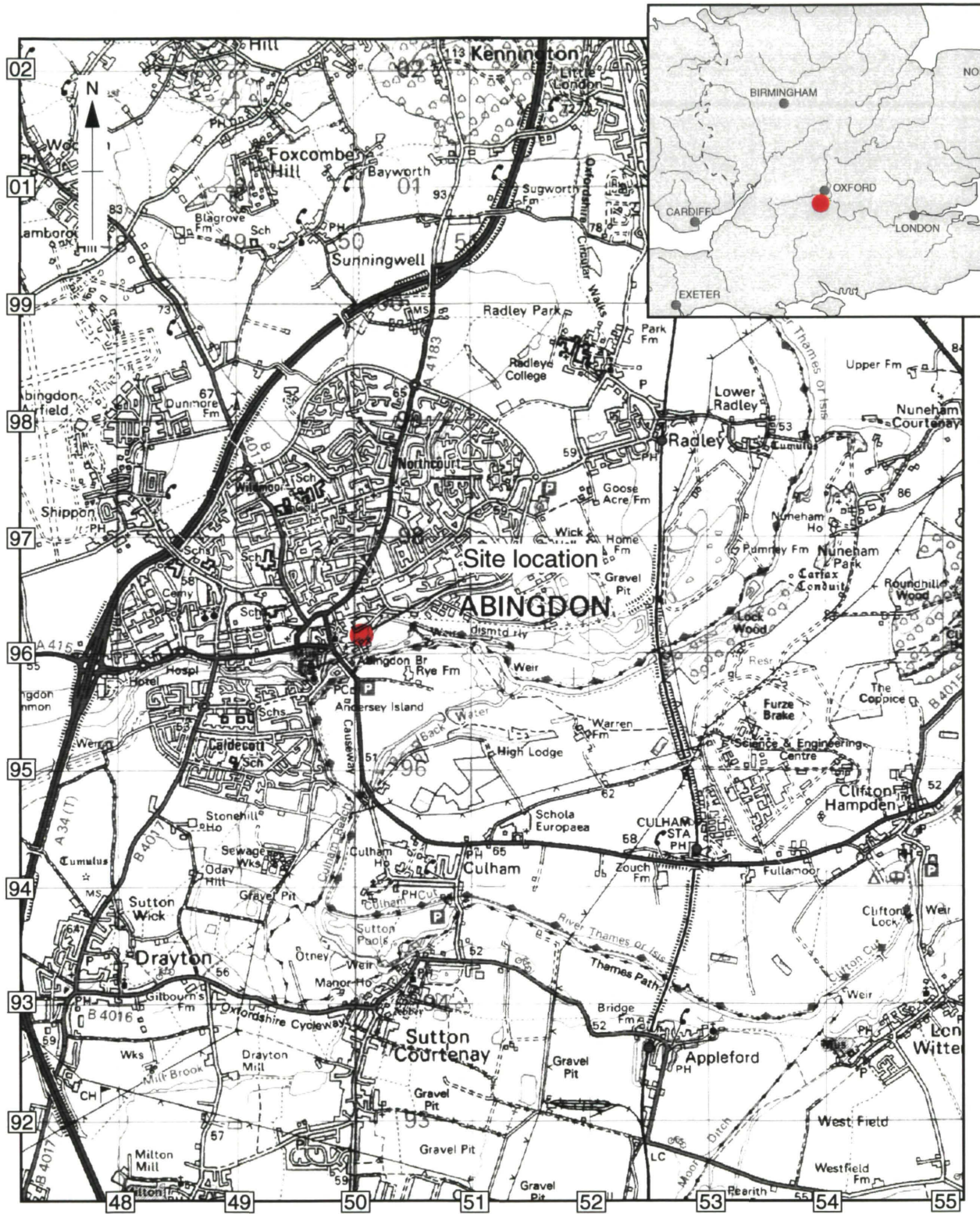
Type of watching brief: Ground works for new car park and footbridge in Abbey Close.

Date and duration of project: Ten visits were carried out from the 12/9/2003 to the 5/11/2003.

Area of site: 45 m x 60 m

Summary of results: Most of the ground works truncated the post-medieval make up and landscaping layers of the site. Three stone walls were partly exposed and could relate to monastic buildings.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS:2003.165



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Figure 1: Site location

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conjectured Abbey foundation plan
 1922 excavation trenches
 OAU excavation 1989
 SEB cable trench
 1999 pipe trench
 Test Pits 1994

0 25m
 scale 1:1000



Figure 2: Abbey Gardens and Abbey Close Car Park showing previous archaeological observations.



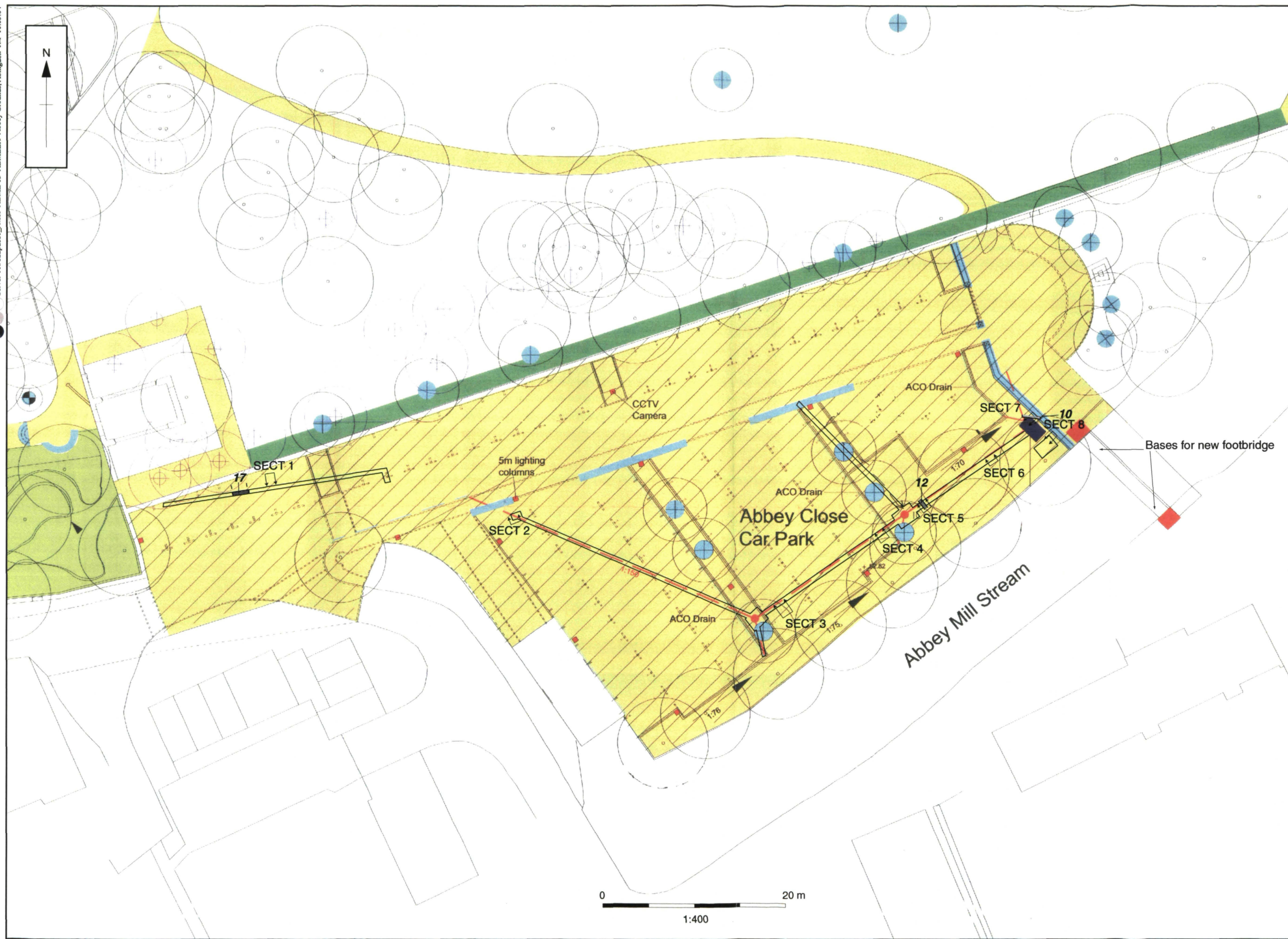
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Area of watching brief



Figure 3: Plan showing area of watching brief

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- NOTES**
- KEY:**
- Trees to be retained
 - Trees to be removed
 - Proposed trees
 - Proposed conifers
 - Tree pits, 0.5x0.5x0.5m
 - Construction/foundation approx. depth: 0.75-1.0m below existing ground level
 - Construction/foundation approx. depth: 0.5m below existing ground level
 - Construction/foundation approx. depth: 0.3-0.4m below existing ground level
 - Areas of building up
 - Area of levelling and construction, max. excavation depth 0.4m below existing ground level
 - Areas of major disturbance, caused by either trees/shrub removal or dredging
 - Drainage, trenches for pipework: 450(width)x750mm (depth), chambers: ø600mm, 750mm depth
 - Construction/foundations approx. depth: 2.0m below existing ground level (Petrol/Oil interceptor)
 - Foundations to lighting columns and CCTV cameras 0.5 x 0.5 x 1.0m deep.

Notes:

1. Depths for drainage, wall footings and foundations are indicative only and must be confirmed with full construction details.

2. Trenches for drainage pipework will vary from approx 450mm to 750mm below ground dependent on fall required.

Change in details relating to car park lighting	AG	14/02/03	B
Change of depth for tree pits to 0.5m, change of depth for foundations of retaining wall (in front of kiosk) and high wall in car park to 0.5m, change of depth for tree pits in islands to 0.4m, add drainage approach and oil interceptor tank, change tree planting layout at chestnut walk and row of trees in Landscape Park	HB	18/01/02	A
By	Chk	Date	Suffix

Revision: ↑

P-4B/SA 54/02

Abbey Grounds
Restoration

Disturbance Plan
Impact depths of
landscape design related
works

Rev B

Figure 4: Plan showing service trenches, location of sections and features

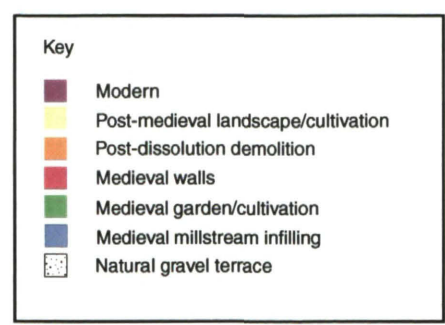
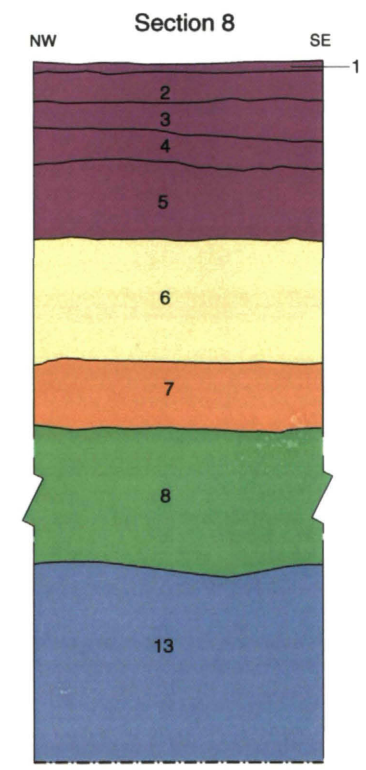
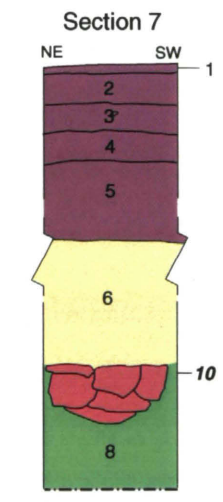
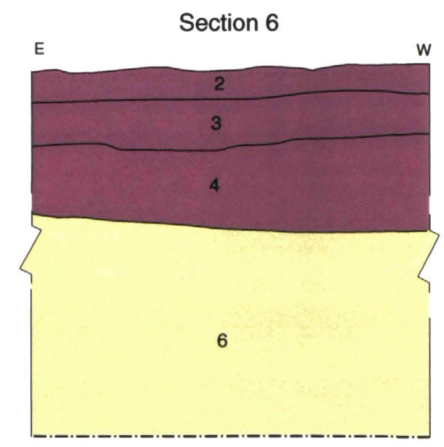
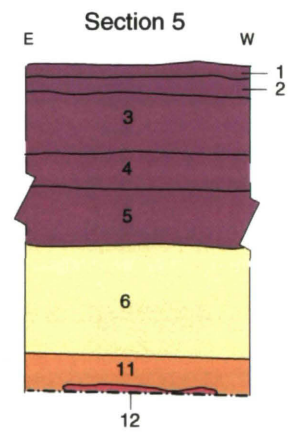
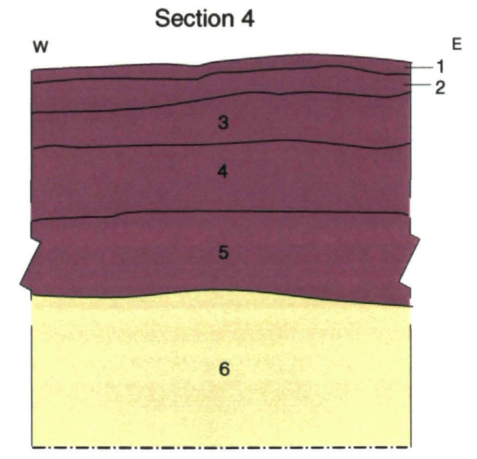
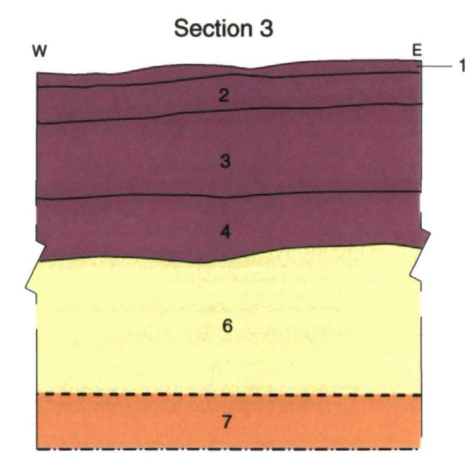
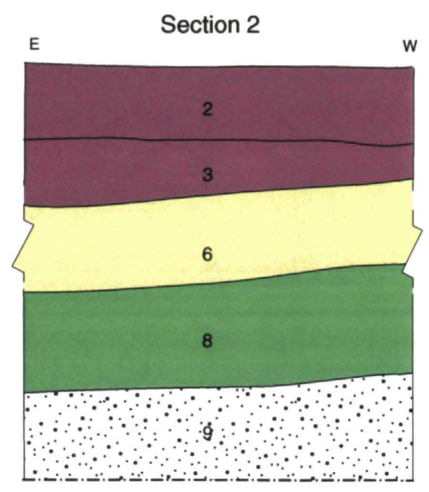
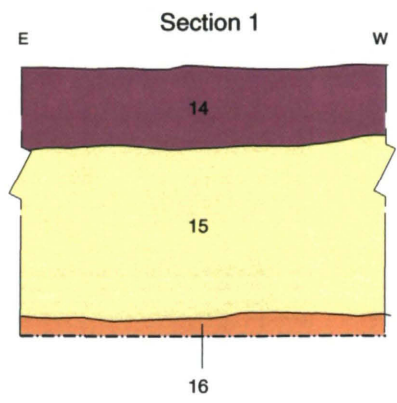


Figure 5: Sections 1-8

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 - Areas of building up
 - Area of levelling and construction, max. excavation depth 0.4m below existing ground level
 - Areas of major disturbance, caused by either tree/shrub removal or dredging
 - Drainage: trenches for pipework: 450(width)x750mm (depth), chambers: a600mm, 750mm depth
 - Construction/foundations approx. depth: 2.0m below existing ground level (Petrol/Oil interceptor)
 - Foundations to lighting columns and CCTV camera 0.5 x 0.5 x 1.0m deep.

Notes:

1. Depths for drainage, wall footings and foundations are indicative only and must be confirmed with full construction details.

2. Trenches for drainage pipework will vary from approx. 450mm to 750mm below ground dependent on fall required.

Change in details relating to car park lighting	AG	14/02/03	B
Change of depth for tree pits to 0.2m, change of depth for foundations of retaining wall (in front of Ref) and high wall in car park to 0.5m, change of depth for tree pits in stands to 0.4m, add drainage pipework and oil interceptor tank, change tree planting layout at created walk and row of trees in Landscape Park	HB	18/01/02	A
By	Chk	Date	Suffix

Revision ↑

F-ABSA 03/02

Abbey Grounds
Restoration

Disturbance Plan
Impact depths of
scheme design related
works **Rev B**

Figure 6: Plan showing revealed walls in relation to 1999 walls and conjectural abbey plan



Plate 1: Wall 17 in base of light cable trench



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