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Pond Restoration
The Abbey Grounds
Abingdon
Oxfordshire



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



Oxford Archaeology

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Pond Restoration in the Abbey Grounds, Abingdon, Oxfordshire***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

Summary.....	1
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Location and scope of work	1
1.2 Geology and topography	1
1.3 Archaeological and historical background.....	1
1.4 Acknowledgements	3
2 Project Aims and Methodology.....	3
2.1 Aims	3
2.2 Methodology.....	3
3 Results	3
3.1 Description of deposits.....	3
3.2 Finds	4
3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains	4
4 Discussion and Conclusions.....	5
Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory	6
Appendix 2 Bibliography and References	6
Appendix 3 Summary of Site Details.....	6

LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1 Site location
 Fig. 2 Abbey Gardens and Abbey Close Car Park showing previous archaeological observations.
 Fig. 3 Plan showing area of works and pond
 Fig. 4 Plan showing stripped features in pond

Cover Plate: Working shot showing the removal of silt from the pond, from the south-west.

SUMMARY

During February and March 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 park pond in the Abbey Grounds. The watching brief revealed a former stream course and a former channel of the river Stert with a rough stone revetting, along the east boundary of the abbey.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 During February and March 2003 Oxford Archaeology (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 restoration of the park pond as part of the Abbey Grounds Restoration.

1.1.2 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (hereafter WSI) detailing how it would carry out the work, which was approved by the Deputy County Archaeologist Hugh Coddington.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on alluvium over first terrace river gravel at 52 m above OD. The site is situated at the east end of the abbey ground park, on the north side of the abbey mill stream.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared as part of the WSI for the Abbey Grounds 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 Abbey Grounds overlies the site of the church and cloister of Abingdon Abbey. The only investigations within the Abbey Grounds 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 (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 has however in general confirmed the accuracy of the plan as established by Biddle (see below and Figure 2). The survey showed clearly the outline of the abbey church with its cloister on the south side, and added detail not recovered by the earlier excavations. The east end of the abbey church lies only 50 m from the pond.

- 1.3.4 Biddle's account also 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 (2') 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 ground.

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 the 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.
- 1.3.7 North of these remains the excavations revealed a former channel of the river Stert, which was traced running diagonally from just behind the Plough on Stert Street south-west across the car park, and into what is now the housing development adjoining the Abbey Gardens. Historic maps, notably Rocque's map of 1761, show the Stert following this course and then turning south into the Abbey Mill Stream. By 1841, when the Tithe map for the parish of St. Nicholas was drawn up, the channel was cut off from the Stert, but survived as a ditch draining into the Abbey Mill Stream. This map also shows a second channel running into the Mill Stream just to the east, part of a system of watercourses on the north side of the Mill Stream creating a pair of moated islands. The second channel ended opposite the corner in the Stert channel, but irregular curving field boundaries north of this suggest that there had previously been a stream draining from the north, which had dried up or been diverted.

- 1.3.8 The Abbey Gardens pond was created by W. Trendell as part of his landscaping when he united the various former abbey land parcels in 1861. The parallel channels of the two former streams just north of the Abbey Mill Stream were joined by digging between them at the north and south ends, and the stretch of the bank between them that was not dug through became the island in the middle of the pond. The landscaping removed the ditch of the Stert channel north of the Abbey, burying it beneath an orchard, and creating a boundary to the new formal gardens further south (Ordnance Survey 1st edition, AD 1874).

Recent minor investigations in the Abbey Grounds

- 1.3.9 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). The trench was dug along the eastern perimeter to a depth of 0.8 m and 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 the 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.
- 1.3.10 Six test pits each 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). The work revealed two walls (in Test pits 3 and 5) to the east, close to the mortar spread exposed in 1990 (see 1.3.7 above). 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 were found in Test pit 7. No archaeological features were found in Test pit 6.
- 1.3.11 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.

1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 The OA would like to thank Phil Matchwick and the work force from White Horse Contractors Ltd for their assistance during the course of the dredging operation.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To look for evidence of the former channels of the River Stert and the parallel stream channel to the east.
- 2.1.2 To look for structural evidence, such as revetments, and for waterlogged deposits that might contain evidence of past environments, within the Stret channel and to recover dating evidence from the channel to corroborate its antiquity.
- 2.1.3 To look for dating evidence and environmental evidence from the stream channel east of the Stert, and for any evidence of modification to the channel in the past.
- 2.1.4 To look for evidence of earlier occupation, of Roman or prehistoric date, to the west of the Stert channel, and in the island in the middle of the pond.
- 2.1.5 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 There were two phases of work. The first consisted of the removal of the old play ground equipment in the park and the general clearance of the site prior to the main ground works. As this lay within the Scheduled Area, this work was carried out under archaeological supervision (Fig. 3).
- 2.2.2 The second and main restoration task consisted of the removal of overgrown trees and shrubs from around the pond edges and the two islands, and the dredging of the pond to a depth of 1.3 m. The dredging was carried out as follows. Sheet piling was laid across the two inlets to the pond from the abbey mill stream and the water was pumped out. The build up of silt and debris was then removed, using two 360° mechanical excavators, and was stored on site in three pens to dry out. The pond islands were landscaped down to the pond base at approximate depth 1.3 m. The east and west sides of the pond were not cleared back to their edges, but were battered to an even slope before a new revetment was inserted. The original stone wall along the north side of the pond was retained and the two inlets were cleaned up.
- 2.2.3 All archaeological features were cleaned by hand, planned at a scale of 1:250 and excavated. All excavated deposits and 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

Playground equipment removal

- 3.1.1 After the equipment was dismantled and taken away the concrete bases were pulled out and the paved slab removed. The depth of disturbance was no more than 0.60 m

below the ground surface. The concrete bases were all set into the modern topsoil of the park, a very dark grey brown silty sand 0.15 m - 0.20 m deep, and into an earlier dark brown silty sand cultivated soil beneath. No archaeological features or deposits were observed.

Pond clearance (Fig. 4)

- 3.1.2 The pond was cleared to a maximum depth of 1.3 m. At this depth the base of the pond was a compact reddish brown clay with bands of silt (53). Along the east side this was cut by the bed of the former stream channel, 2.5 m - 3.5 m wide, which curved south-west and then south through the base of the pond. It was filled with a very dark reddish brown to dark brown silty clay (52) with abundant snail shells. A sample was taken from this for environmental sampling, but no finds were recovered.
- 3.1.3 Along the west side of the pond a larger north-south channel (56) was uncovered in the base, the remains of the former channel of the river Stert. It had a stepped vertical side, but the base of the channel was not exposed. It was traced for some 50 m, was at least 12 m wide, and probing indicated that it was at least 2 m deep. On the east side the channel was revetted by two courses of a dry-stone limestone wall (54). This wall was 0.9 m wide and stood 0.3 m high; it ran the length of the pond, except that at the north end the last 6.5 m had been removed during the excavation of the pond. The west side of the channel was not exposed by the dredging. The channel was filled with a very dark grey black sand silty (55), from which no finds were recovered. This deposit did not appear to contain molluscan remains, and was extremely liquid, so could not be sampled.
- 3.1.4 Overlying these features was a layer of dark reddish brown silty clay (51), 0.4 m - 0.5 m thick which represented the slow build up of material in the pond. Sealing this was a very dark grey brown to black silty sand (50) 0.5 m thick. This was the main fill of the pond and a large quantity of dumped rubbish (see below).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No recovered finds from the pond material pre dated the late 19th century. The material that was recovered consisted of traffic cones, bottles, wood, car parts and ordnance from the nearby wartime TA centre, and a general accumulation of rubbish thrown into the pond after it became overgrown and neglected.
- 3.2.2 The pond fills have been left to dry out adjacent to the pond. Sorting of these deposits has not yet been possible due to their extreme wetness, but this will be carried out when the deposits have dried out later in the year.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.3.1 A single 1kg sample was examined from the stream channel (52). The sample derived from an organic deposit filling a former watercourse. Molluscan remains were present in the sample albeit in low numbers. Approximately 20 individuals were identified, consisting almost entirely of freshwater species.

3.3.2 Several species were identified including *Planorbis planorbis*, *Lymnaea* sp., including *L. palustris*, *L. cf. peregra*, *Anisus vortex*, *Planorbis albus*, *Planorbarius corneus*, *Bithynia tentaculata* and *B. leachii*, *Bathymphalus contortus*. Terrestrial species were represented by the marshland/wet ground *Succinea/Oxyloma* species and a single example of *Cochlicopa* sp. The character of the assemblage, largely freshwater and ditch species (Sparks 1961), together with the relative absence of terrestrial species, suggests the deposit accumulated in slow moving, well-oxygenated water with abundant vegetation.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 The watching brief did record the remains of the old river/stream channel in the east side of the pond. The fluvial origin of its fill was supported by the results from the environmental sample. The former channel of the Stert was also confirmed on the west side of the pond, with a stone wall revetment along its east side. No dating evidence was recovered to confirm its possible medieval or Saxon origins, but its size confirms that this was a significant channel, previously bounding the abbey buildings on the east and north sides.

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>
50	Layer	0.5 m			Pond Fill	
51	Layer	0.4 - 5 m			Pond Fill	
52	Layer		2.5 - 3.5 m		Stream Fill	
53	Natural				Natural	
54	Wall	0.3 m	0.9 m	43.5 m	Revetment wall	
55	Fill				Fill of channel	
56	Cut	2 m	12 m	50 m	Channel cut	

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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Roberts, M. unpublished client report *Children's Playground, The Abbey Grounds, Abingdon, Oxfordshire. An archaeological evaluation*, December 1994, OAU.

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Wilkinson, D (ed.) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Pond Restoration in Abbey Grounds, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

Site code: ABME 03

Grid reference: NGR SU 5025 9735

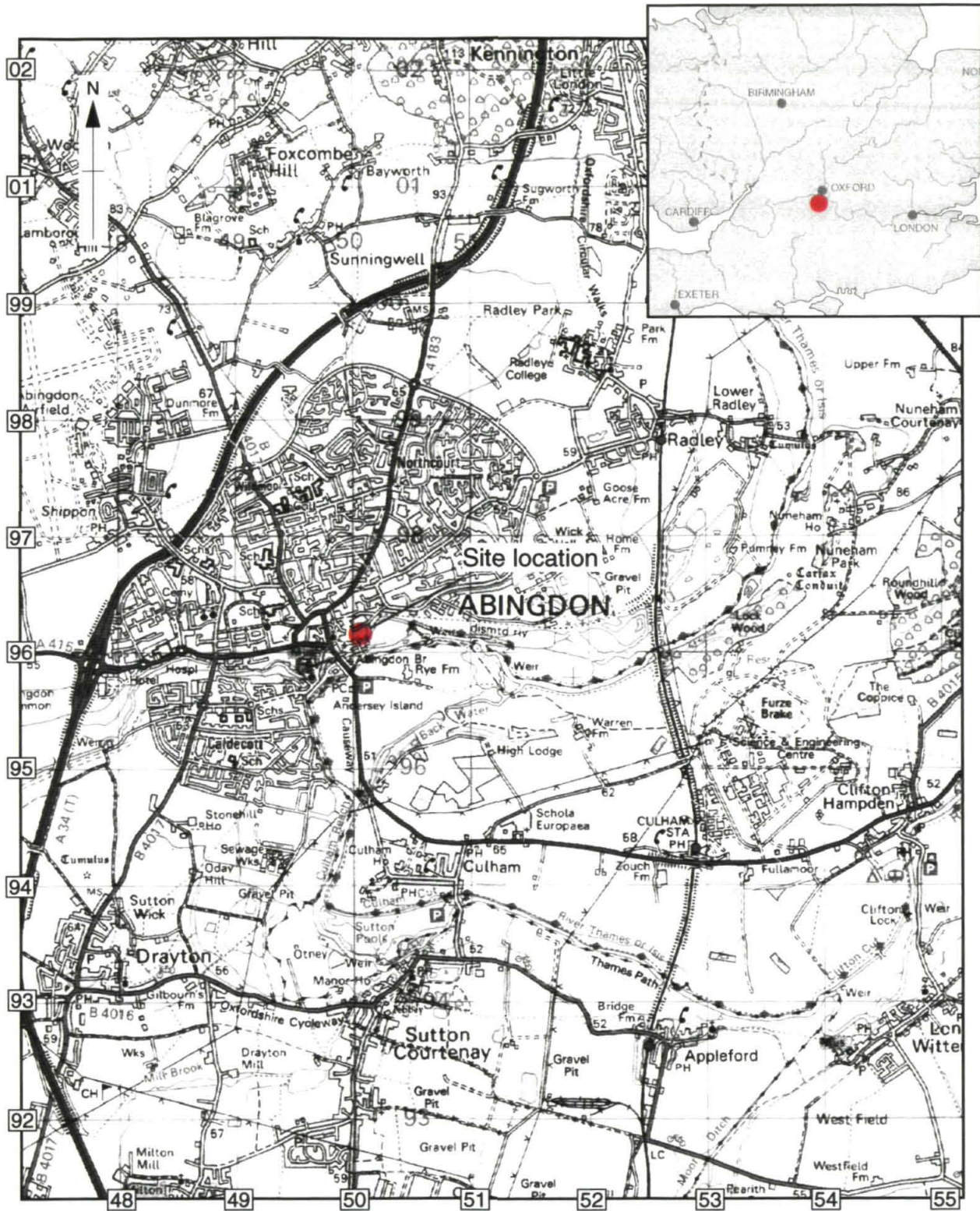
Type of watching brief: Observation of dredging of park pond as part of the Abbey Ground Restoration Project.

Date and duration of project: A total of nine site visits from the 18th February to the 9th March 2004.

Area of site: 50 m x 34 m

Summary of results: The watching brief revealed a former stream course and a former channel of the river Stert along the east boundary of the abbey.

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



Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location



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

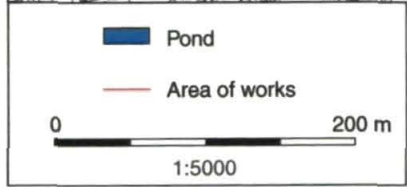


Figure 3: Plan showing area of works and pond

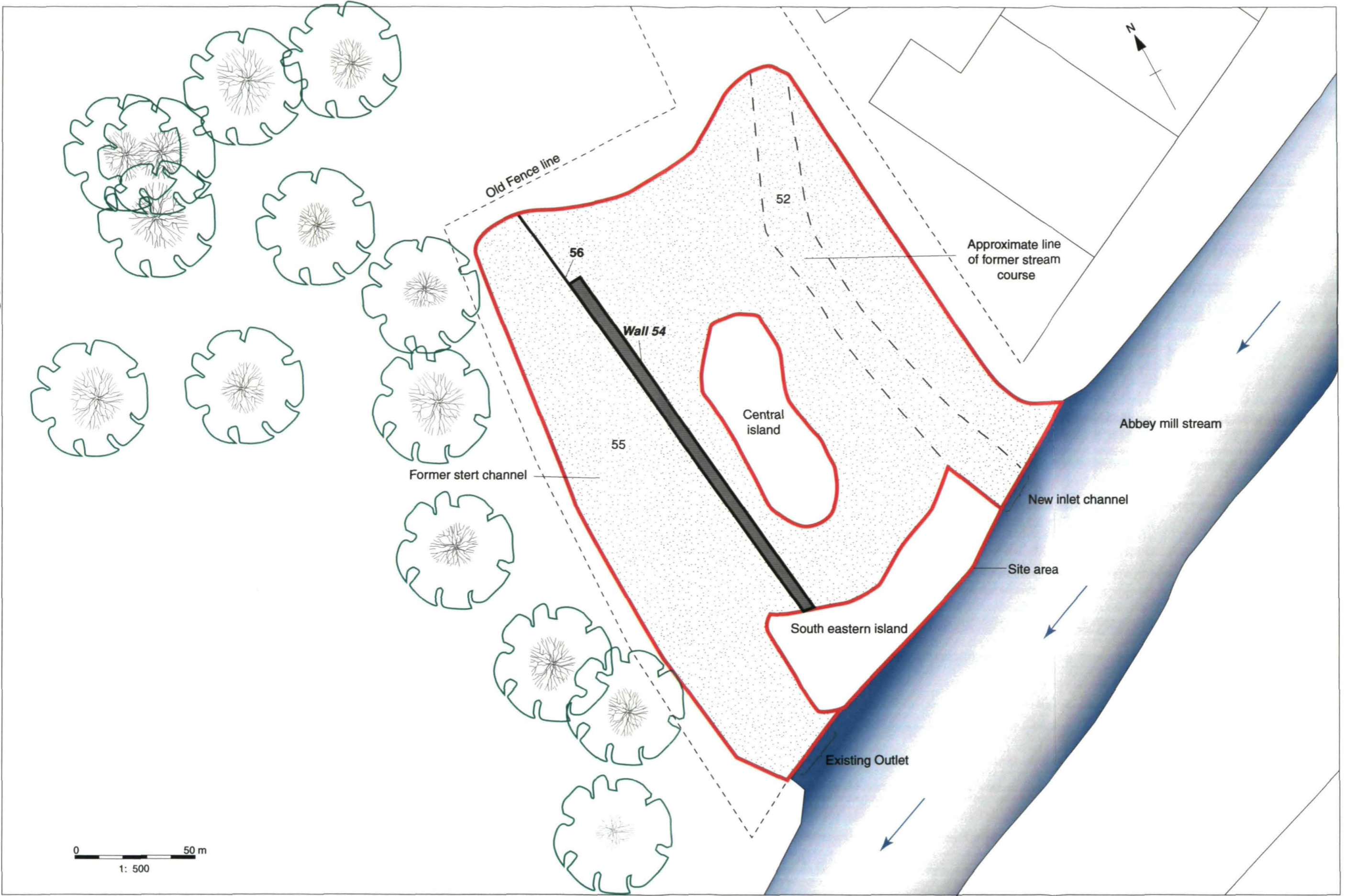


Figure 4: Plan showing stripped features in pond



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