

Replacement of Drainage Channel Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin Reading Berkshire



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

On 20th June 2007 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733) during replacement of a drainage channel. The work was commissioned as part of the consulting process during renovation work on the church. The watching brief revealed evidence of the reuse of redeposited material to level the area below the Victorian brick drainage channel.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 On 20th June 2007 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief during the replacement of a drainage channel on the north side of the nave at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733). The work was commissioned as part of the ongoing site investigations during renovation work on the church.

1.1.2 OA agreed a specification for the watching brief with the architects, engineers and the Church Commissioners.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies within the central area of Reading, south of the River Thames and the railway station (Fig. 1). The site itself is on a very gentle south facing slope running down towards Holy Brook and is located at approximately 44 m above OD. The underlying geology is valley gravels over alluvium (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet no. 268).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 Historic Reading straddles the gap in a gravel ridge through which the River Kennet flows. With the supplanting of the Roman road system based on Silchester, Reading became an important communications centre during the medieval period. The roads from Oxford to Southampton and from London to Bristol passed through or close to the town and, although the town does not lie on the banks of the River Thames, it was sufficiently near to the river to provide easy access to London, Wallingford and Oxford. The ease of access from the capital and the major provincial towns has ensured that Reading has retained an important place in the country's communications.

1.3.2 Reading is first documented by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 870-1 AD when the Danes wintered there and repulsed the attacks of King Ethelred and his brother Alfred. Although the Danes wintered again in 1006, no further mention is made of the settlement here until the later 11th century. A reference to Reading in Domesday

indicates that it had become a town by 1066. A royal borough, separately mentioned, which included 29 *hagae*, a pasture called 'portmansbrook' and land held for official guests, points to an urban community.

- 1.3.3 The post-Conquest history of Reading is dominated by the presence of the abbey and its effect on the town. Henry I's foundation of the abbey in 1121 AD gave the town an increased impetus to urban development. Construction of a new bridge over the Kennet by 1186 and the creation of another wide street, London Street, with burgage plots either side were part of this phase of urban expansion. London Street runs to the south-east of St Mary's.
- 1.3.4 The major industry for this period came to be cloth working, with its attendant trades, weaving and fulling. By the mid 13th century fulling mills along the Kennet are documented as well as the town wharf with its wool beam. By the 14th century Reading had become established as the major town in Berkshire, having long outstripped Wallingford. In the 15th and 16th centuries the population had probably tripled, and there was a corresponding increase in manufactories and commerce.
- 1.3.5 The town's prosperity was, however, severely dislocated during the Civil War, with the alternate occupations by the Parliamentary and Royalist forces between October 1642 and July 1644. These occupations hastened the decline in the old industries of cloth and leather working, and contributed to a reorientation of the town's economy. This reorientation was finally achieved with the completion of the Kennet and Avon canal, linking Reading with Bristol in 1810. The decline in the clothing industry was offset by the manufacture of gauze, silk and sailcloth, whilst the brick and tile making and tanning had expanded considerably. The success of the town's economy is reflected in the virtual rebuilding of the town centre in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- 1.3.6 The site itself is situated on the south-eastern extent of the medieval town of Reading. To the south-east of the site is the 12th century church of Saint Giles, whilst to the south west are the preserved remains of a medieval tile kiln.
- 1.3.7 Pevsner describes the building as having a Norman doorway, possibly reset, within the north wall and a southern arcade c 1200. At the east end of the north aisle an arch c 1300 must once have connected to a north transept with an eastern chapel. The west tower, built of chequer flint and stone with polygonal buttresses dates between 1550-3. The chancel dates to 1864 and the north aisle to 1872.
- 1.3.8 Previous archaeological work on the site (OA, 2006) had exposed evidence of Victorian underpinning and renovation, and post-medieval graveyard soils.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To provide information in order to develop a mitigation strategy for future work in the area.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken as a continuous archaeological presence during the hand excavation of the old drainage channel and reduction of the ground level.
- 2.2.2 A plan showing the location of the trial pits (Fig. 2) was maintained at a scale of 1:100 and any sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 A layer of dark red-brown clay silt (52) was encountered at the base of the excavation. This deposit contained numerous small pebbles and probably represents a layer of redeposited natural used to level the area prior to the construction of the existing drainage channel. This deposit was reduced in level by approximately 0.2 m in order to accommodate the new drains, but the base of the deposit was not established. Overlying this deposit was a 0.12 m deep layer of pale yellow lime mortar (51), this formed the bed for the brick drainage channel (50) which was constructed using machine made bricks measuring 0.235 m x 0.117 m x 0.058 m. This channel sloped gently to the east where it discharged into a cast iron drain.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No dating evidence was recovered, nor was any charnel observed.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The watching brief revealed deposits relating to the Victorian refurbishment of the Minster but no deposits or features relating to any earlier phases of construction of the Minster were observed.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth/ Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
50	Structure	0.06 m	1.6 m	Brick drainage channel	Brick	C19th
51	Layer	0.12 m	1.6m	Mortar bed for bricks	-	C19th
52	Layer	>0.2 m	1.6 m	Levelling layer of redeposited natural	-	C19th

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Astill, G. 1978 *Historic towns in Berkshire; An archaeological appraisal*

IFA 2001 *Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OA 1992 *Field Manual* (1st edition, ed. D Wilkinson)

OA 2006 *Minster of St Mary the Virgin, Reading: Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

Pevsner, N. 1966 *The Buildings of England, Berkshire*. Penguin.

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire

Site code: REVMAR07

Grid reference: SU 714 733

Type of watching brief: Replacement of brick drainage channel

Date and duration of project: 20th June 2007, 4 hrs

Area of site: 13 m²

Summary of results: The watching brief revealed deposits relating to the Victorian refurbishment of the Minster but no deposits or features relating to any earlier phases of construction of the Minster were observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Reading Museum Service in due course, under accession number REDMG:2007.444.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site Location

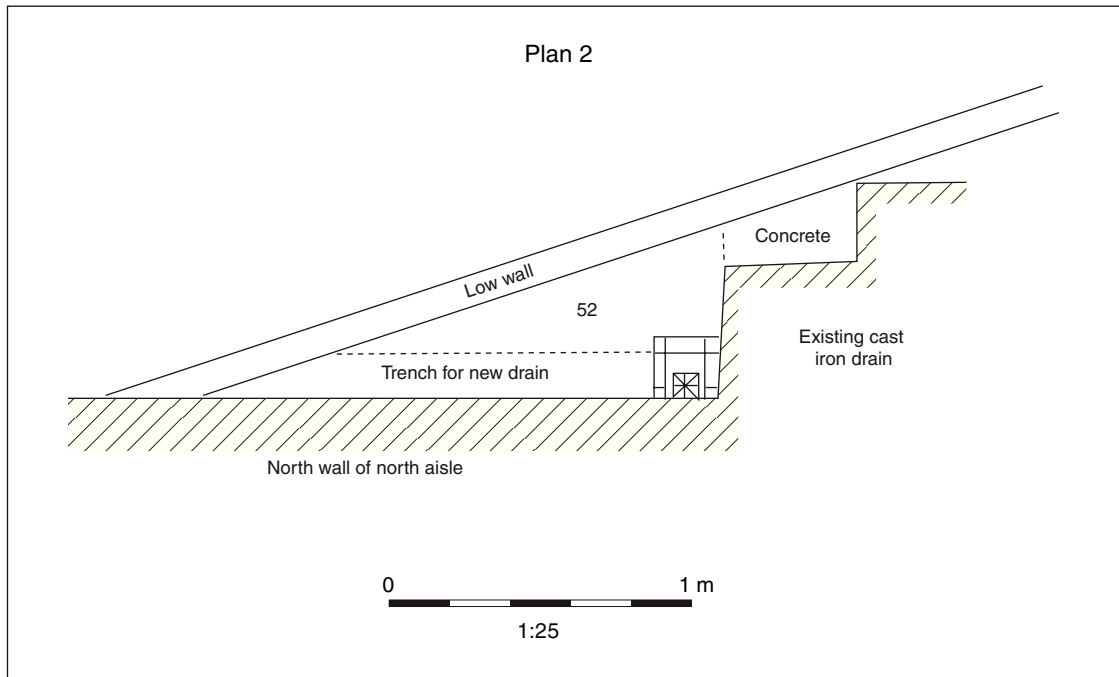
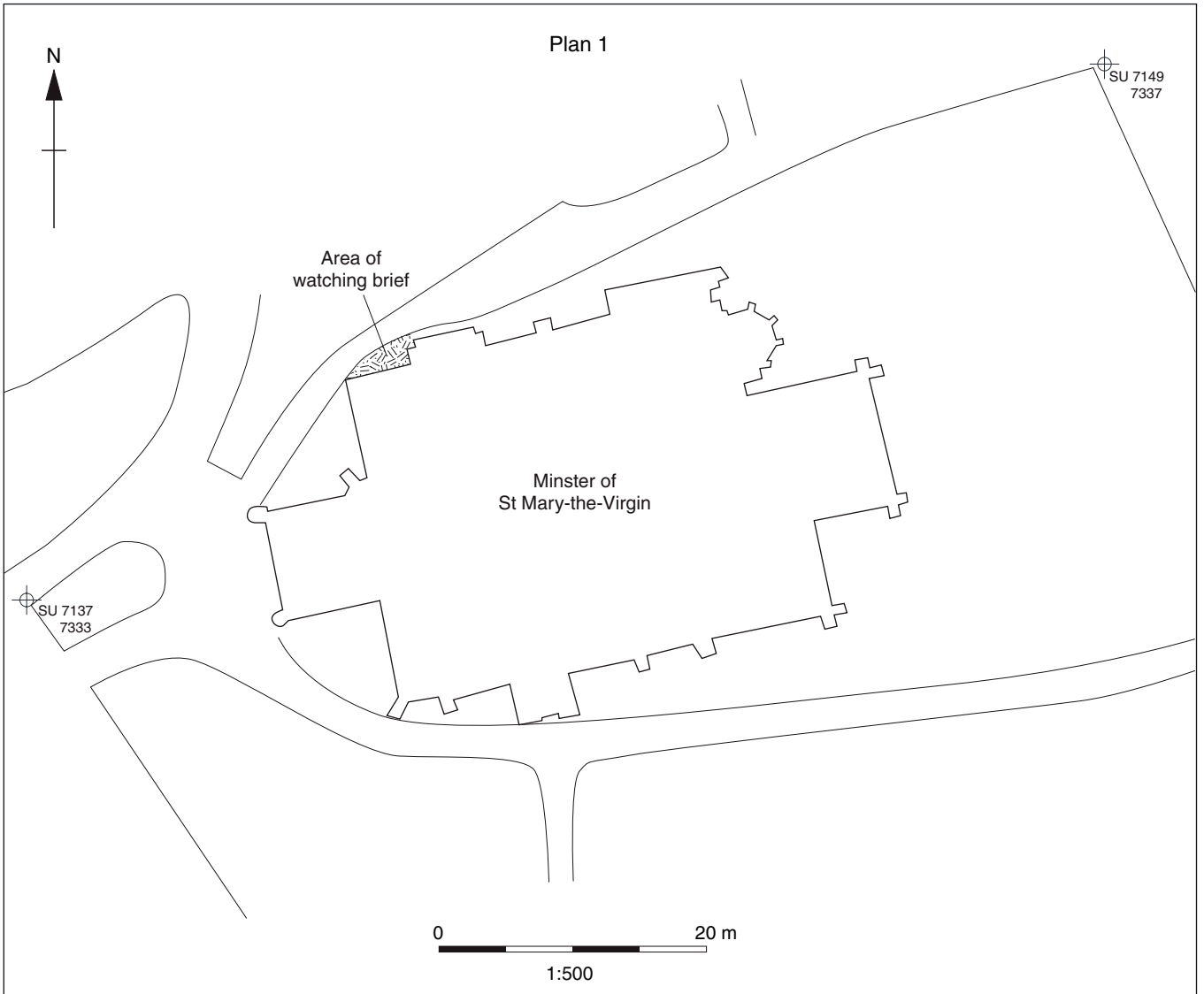


Figure 2 : Site plans



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