

Abingdon Abbey Gateway Pipeline

Abingdon, Oxon

Archaeological Watching Brief

NGR 5085 9707



ENTRANCE TO ABINGDON ABBEY.

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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ABBEY GATEWAY GAS PIPELINE, ABINGDON. OXON.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief, on behalf of The Vale of White Horse District Council, during the excavation of a gas pipeline trench in the gateway of Abingdon Abbey in December 1994.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Gateway and adjacent Parish Church are surviving elements of the Abbey (Oxon SAM 218), which was founded possibly as early as 675. It became one of the most prosperous religious houses in the region, and was surrendered to the Crown in the Dissolution of 1538.

Excavations NE of the Gateway in 1987-93 by T G Allen and the OAU revealed extensive Iron age and Roman occupation of the area. The Guildhall (formerly Abbey Hall) alongside the entrance of which the pipeline was sited, was built in the early 1960's. No archaeological recording was done at the time.

RESULTS (Figs 1, 2.)

The pipeline was 19.5 m long, 0.35 m wide, and averaged 0.70 m deep. It was aligned approximately 1.00 m E of the E wall of the Magistrates Court, continuing across the roadway to link up with an existing gas service pipe 1.0 m S of the S wall of the Parish Church.

The deposits in the Southern 8.0 m of the trench were disturbed by a modern service trench. In the E section however, was revealed an ashlar faced stone wall, (5), overlaid at the S end of the trench by The Guildhall steps. The wall was traced for its full length to terminate in alignment with the N wall of the Magistrates Court. At the S end of the wall the corner was seen to be slightly buttressed.

Between the wall foundation (5) and the existing Magistrates Court to the W, where not disturbed by modern services, the trench revealed a layer of dark brown loamy silt (4) from which three sherds of Roman 2nd century pottery were recovered. From a small sondage the depth of this layer was seen to be at least 0.45 m deep.

Sealing layer 4 was a thin deposit of coarse sandy gravel (3) and a dumped layer of mixed mid-brown clay with inclusions of brick and stone rubble (2), which also overlaid the top of the wall footing (5). The present modern flagstone surface (1) was laid onto this layer.

The foundation of the Guildhall steps was seen to be brick (6), which directly overlaid the S end of the wall foundation (5).

Where the trench crossed the pavement to the N of the building frontage, the ground was heavily disturbed by modern services, and their presence made close inspection of the deposits in this section impossible.

Under the present roadway, at a depth of approximately 0.68 m below ground level, a compact rough limestone cobbled layer was revealed (7) with a revealed width of at least 2.7 m, and a slight camber on either side.

The cobbling was overlaid by an accumulation of compact clay/sand (11) up to 0.08 deep.

This was overlaid by a 0.15 m deep layer of coarse sandy gravel (10) and a dumped gravel and clay layer (9) up to 0.45 m deep, which was sealed by the present tarmac road surface (8).

Under the N pavement, in the W section, a continuation of layer 10 was overlaid by a layer of stone rubble (12) with a worked stone block defining its S extent. This was overlaid by 13, a layer similar to layer 9 to the S. No dating evidence was recovered from any of the deposits under the road or pavements.

DISCUSSION

Although it is reasonable to suggest that the cobbled layer 7 represents an earlier road surface of the Gateway, the lack of dating evidence, or stratigraphic relationships with features to the N or S, means that no conclusions can be drawn as to its possible date.

The stone layer 12 may represent a pavement, or possibly part of the footings for the Archway, which lies approximately 1.5 m to the W.

The wall (5), revealed in the S part of the trench, appears to represent the remains of one of the buildings demolished in 1962 to make way for the present Guildhall.

Documentary sources show that a proposal to build three 'cottages' on the site was made in May 1865. The proposal was approved in July of that year, and construction took place soon after. Two of these cottages were occupied by the Police Superintendent and the Sergeant at Mace. The cover illustration (from a 19th century print) shows the gateway looking from the east with two of the cottages to the left.

The presence of sherds of Roman pottery within layer 4 is unlikely to indicate that the layer is an undisturbed Roman context, given that the deposit is only 0.60 m below the present ground level. The excavations to the NE by T G Allen typically revealed stratigraphy of well over 1.0 m overlying Romano-British levels.

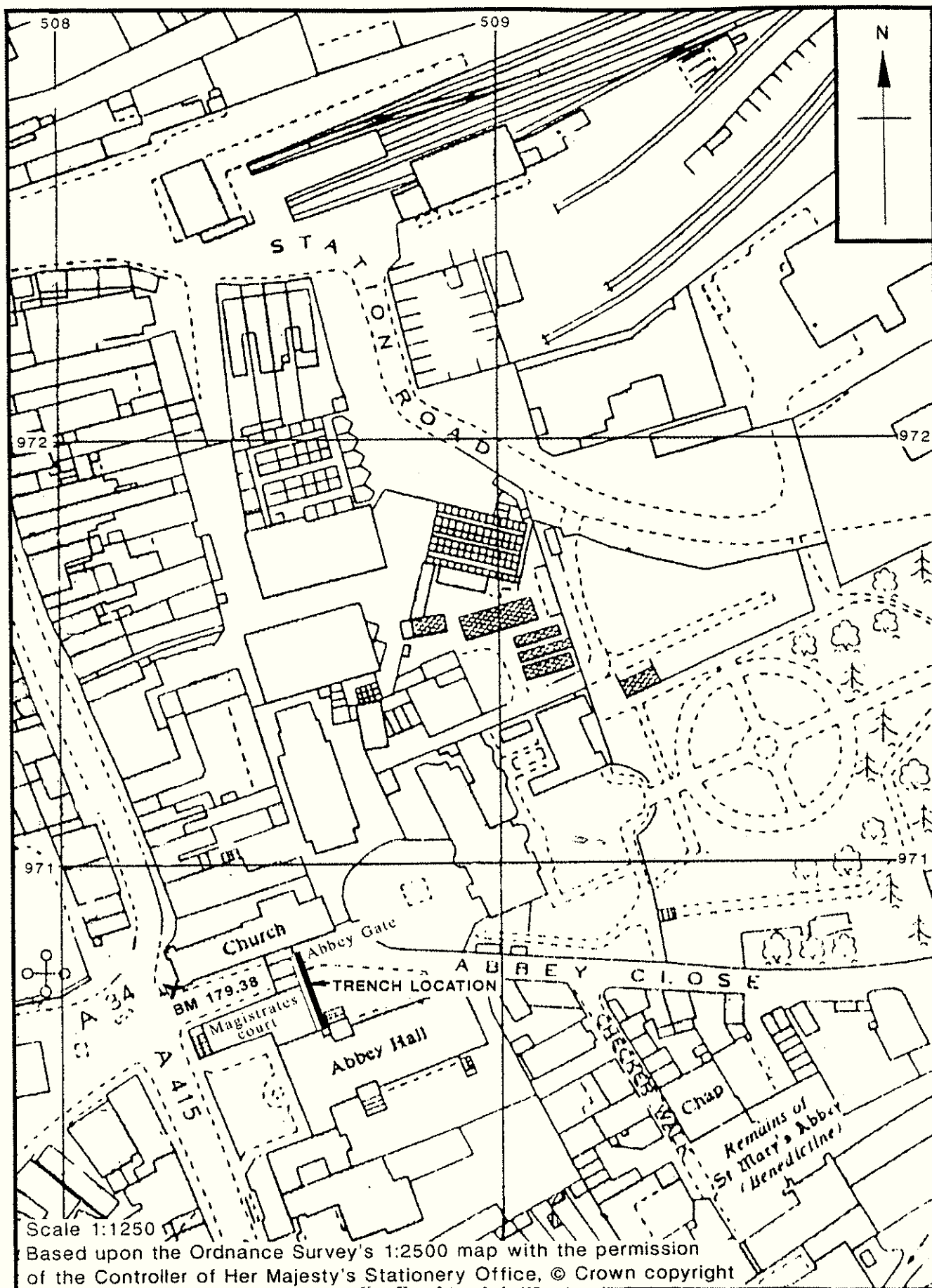
A more likely explanation is that it is a post-medieval cultivation soil, and the pottery is residual. However, no construction cut through layer 4 was seen for the building, which could argue that at least the upper part of layer 4 is an accumulation of soil in the narrow strip of waste ground between the cottages and the Magistrates Court. The thin layer of gravel (3), which overlay layer 4, may represent a pathway laid over the soil (4), after the cottages were built.

Following the demolition of the cottages, the site was levelled with layer 2, prior to the construction of the present Guildhall, completed in 1966.

Bibliography

Borough of Abingdon Minute Book 8 (1865-1874).

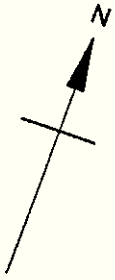
Alan Hardy
OAU
January 1995



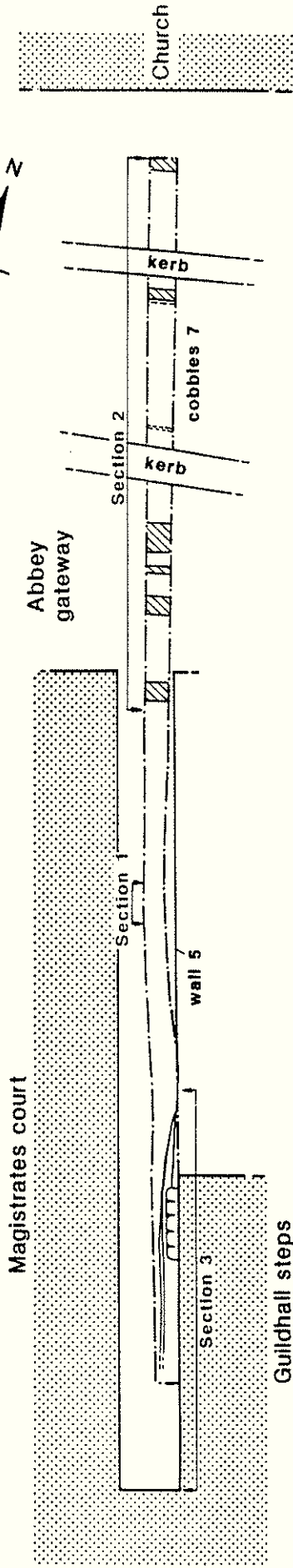
Scale 1:1250
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figure 1

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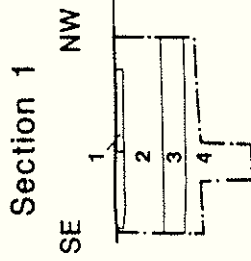


Trench plan

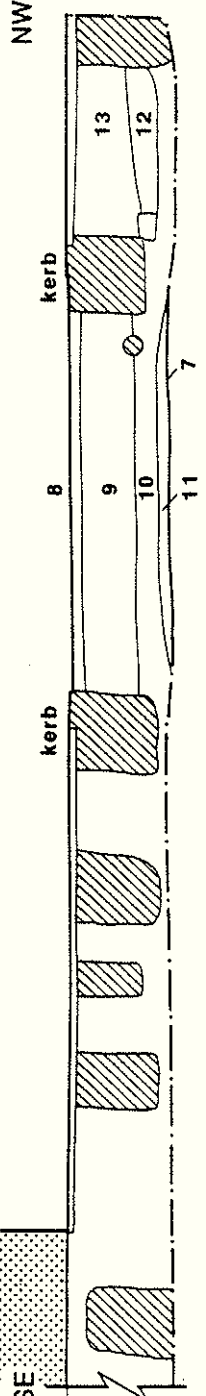


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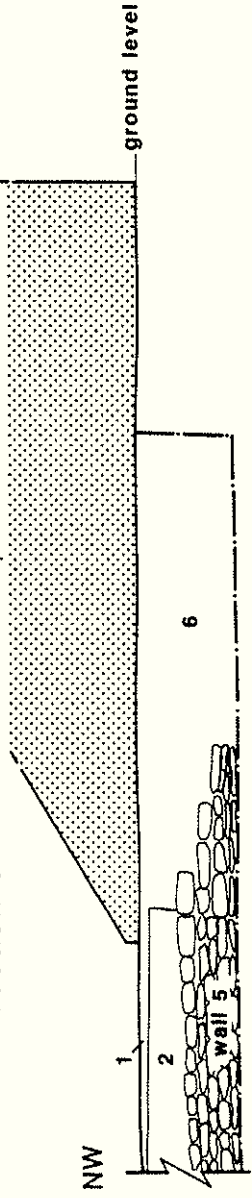
Section 1



Section 2



Section 3



Standing buildings



Modern service trenches



scale 1:50

figure 2

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