

Godstow Abbey  
Godstow  
Oxfordshire



Archaeological  
Watching Brief Report



August 2009


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## **Godstow Abbey, Godstow, Oxfordshire**

### *Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

*Written by James Mumford*

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## **Summary**

*In July 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Godstow Abbey, Godstow, Oxfordshire (NGR SP 485 091). The work was commissioned by the University of Oxford in advance of the replacement of three sections of the river bank revetment wall. The watching brief revealed material relating to the construction of the present river bank revetment wall, but no archaeological deposits or features relating to the medieval abbey were seen.*



## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In July 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Godstow Abbey, Godstow, Oxfordshire (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by University of Oxford in respect of the replacement of the existing River Thames bank revetment wall.
- 1.1.2 The Abbey is a Scheduled Monument (SM 35542), and as such, Scheduled Monument Consent was obtained from English Heritage (EH), with the condition that the works were subject to an archaeological watching brief.
- 1.1.3 Prior to the commencement of the works OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief, which was approved by EH.

### 1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies at 59.75 m above OD. The site is located on the west bank of the River Thames to the east of the ruins of Godstow Abbey. The underlying geology is first (floodplain) terrace gravels overlying Oxford Clay.

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background is based on the background produced in an earlier watching brief report (OAU 2000) and is summarised below. The background information was largely derived from Ganz 1972, RCHM 1939 and VCH 1990.
- 1.3.2 Godstow Abbey was founded in 1133 by Edith, widow of Sir William Launceline, for nuns of the Benedictine Order. The Abbey was suppressed in 1539 and after dissolution the buildings were sold to Dr George Owen, and were used by him and his descendants until the English Civil War; at this point they were burnt down in order to prevent them falling into the hands of the advancing parliamentary army. Thereafter, the remaining buildings fell into disrepair, with the exception of an outbuilding that became the present Trout Inn Public House. In 1780 the new Navigation Channel was cut through the site of the Abbey, to the west of the Trout Inn, in order to accommodate the passage of 80 ton barges; the lock was opened in 1790. Between 1885 and 1886 the channel was widened to provide flood relief.
- 1.3.3 The existing ruins of the Abbey consist of a greatly rebuilt small rectangular enclosure, possibly representing the inner court of the Abbey, with a small probably 16th-century chapel in the corner; these represent only a small part of the Abbey buildings. A description of the Abbey as purchased by Robert Owen in 1539 mentions "...the church, chapels, cloister, chapterhouse, misericord, two dormitories, convent kitchen, garner, the atrium and other houses and lodgings". The precise locations of all of these buildings, many of which were destroyed during the 17th century, is unclear although a combination of the study of early maps and prints, and a limited amount of excavation, has enabled a partial reconstruction of the site.
- 1.3.4 By the time of the earliest plan of the ruins, produced by Wood in 1666, the buildings had been out of monastic use for nearly 130 years, and had largely been destroyed by the Civil War fire. This plan depicts the buildings as a single walled enclosure, with the site of the church lying to its north and stretching down towards the river. To the north lay the gatehouse with the main residential buildings and cloisters lying to the west.





Generally, this layout is also shown on a number of plans and prints from the 18th and 19th centuries.

- 1.3.5 The construction of the navigation channel, also known as New Cut, in 1780 appears to have affected the remains of the Abbey as they stood at that time. There was no systematic monitoring of the work, however a number of stone coffins were reported as having been found (Gents Mag 1791, 986). Subsequent reports of the finding of tiles and masonry in the river bank would also seem to indicate that the new channel may have been cut through the remains of a building, possibly the Chapter House or a subsidiary chapel.
- 1.3.6 Further coffins were found during the 1885 widening works, which were visited 'every 2 or 3 days' by Henry Hurst. Approximately 25 stone and elm coffins were recovered, some of which appeared to be in their original positions, and some of which either had been reburied or pushed to one side by the 18th-century workmen. Some of the coffins were then reburied further inland between the standing buildings and the edge of New Cut. Hurst produced a plan showing the findspots of all the coffins, and some of the archaeological remains.
- 1.3.7 Godstow Weir, and the weir cut, appear to have been constructed during the 1885 works; they do not appear on the 1876 OS map. Hurst's plan shows the weir and its cut within the area of new works, and does not indicate that any archaeological remains were encountered during their construction.
- 1.3.8 The erosion of the river bank has continued to produce chance finds associated with the Abbey. A stone coffin containing 'the bones of a female adult' was discovered by children playing on the river bank in 1943 and, by local tradition, bones have continued to be collected from the river bank ever since.
- 1.3.9 On 13th May 1971 a small trench was dug by the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee to observe a line of mortar first seen in the river bank. Portions of a pavement were uncovered, consisting of two groups of tiles; however it remains unclear exactly what form of building these remains represented.
- 1.3.10 A watching brief undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU - now Oxford Archaeology) in 1994 (OAU 1994) on the northern side of the Wytham-Wolvercote Road, indicated the presence of a number of substantial stone buildings. These structures were interpreted as lying at the northern end of the Guest Court of the Abbey and their presence here seemed to indicate that the Abbey buildings continued into the field to the north of the road, and that they still were relatively well preserved.
- 1.3.11 A further watching brief was undertaken by OAU in 1998 and 1999 during improvements to Godstow Weir (OAU 2000). Deposits and features associated with the construction of the existing weir; the creation of the navigation cut and periodic dredging works were identified and recorded. The topography of deposits excavated at the north end of the island adjacent to the weir, appeared to indicate that a greater volume of dredged material from the river had been redeposited on the west side of the island than on the east side, an event that may have occurred at the time of the construction of the 'New Cut' in 1780 (see above) or during subsequent works. Clay and gravel river bed deposits were observed during the breaking out of the pre-existing weir structure. No archaeological evidence relating to the abbey buildings or grounds was recovered, and no human remains were encountered.
- 1.3.12 Features and deposits relating to the construction of the weir and navigation cut were also observed (OAU 2000).



## 2 EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To record the extent, date, character, quality, significance and state of preservation of the archaeological remains within the areas of the site affected by the proposed works.
- 2.1.2 In particular, to preserve by record any structures, features or deposits associated with the Abbey.
- 2.1.3 To signal, before the destruction of the material in question, the discovery of a significant archaeological find, for which the resources allocated are not sufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard.
- 2.1.4 To make available the results of the watching brief.

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 Sections of damaged revetment and adjacent material were removed by a mini-excavator fitted with a ditching bucket. All work was carried out under close archaeological supervision.
- 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 digital photography and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (OAU 1992).



### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 Three sections of the bank were excavated on the south-west side of the river, just to the north-east of the abbey remains (Fig. 2). The two northern sections measured 5.5 m long and up to 1.8 m wide, whilst the most southerly section measured 8.5 m in length.
- 3.1.2 The deposits in front of the river bank comprised a concrete sand bag revetment wall (8), which was abutted by a loose sandy gravel (9) infill deposit (Fig. 3; Section 2). A second concrete sand bag wall (5) was constructed c 1 m to the east of 9 below and was abutted by a second infilling deposit (2 and 7). However, the wall appeared to have been repaired at a previous time (Figure 3; Section 1, cut 4). The deposits were overlain by a 0.15 m to 0.20 m thick topsoil (1). Full details of all contexts can be found in Appendix A.
- 3.1.3 Excavation took place to a depth of 0.6 m. A few of the loose sandbags were replaced with new ones and a Teram membrane laid prior to backfilling.

#### 3.2 Finds and environmental summaries

- 3.2.1 No finds were recovered and no deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified during the watching brief.



## 4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1.1 No archaeological remains or deposits from the medieval abbey site were located within the areas of the new works. The works were confined to the backfilled area between the old river bank and the current revetment wall, which was installed in the late 20th century (c 1965). Observation during the watching brief would suggest that any surviving archaeological deposits would be encountered a least 1 m to the west of the current river bank.

**APPENDIX A. CONTEXT INVENTORY**

<b>Contexts</b>					
<b>Context no</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Width (m)</b>	<b>Depth (m)</b>	<b>Height (m)</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1	Layer	0.25 m			Topsoil of site
2	Deposit	1 m	1.4 m		Backfill material building up bank
3	Deposit	0.25 m			Silty clay river bed
4	Cut	1 m	0.5 m	29 m	Cut for repair to revetment wall
5	Structure				Concrete filled sand bag wall
6	Fill				Back fill behind revetment
7	Deposit				Back fill behind revetment
8	Deposit				Back fill behind revetment
9	Structure				Concrete filled sand bag wall



## APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Ganz, D, 1972 The Buildings of Godstow Nunnery, *Oxoniensia* **37**, 150-159

Gentleman's Magazine, 1791

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OAU, 2000 Godstow Weir Reconstruction, Godstow, Oxford, Archaeological Watching Brief Report, unpublished client report

Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England), 1939 *An inventory of the historical monuments in the City of Oxford*

Victoria County History of the County of Oxfordshire, 1990, *Volume XII, Wootton Hundred South*



## APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

<b>Site name:</b>	Godstow Abbey, Godstow, Oxfordshire
<b>Site code:</b>	OXGOAB09
<b>Grid reference:</b>	NGR SP 485 091
<b>Type:</b>	Watching brief during ground works for repairs to the revetment of the river bank.
<b>Date and duration:</b>	Two days from the 06/07/09 to 07/07/09.
<b>Area of site:</b>	Three sections totalling 35 m x 1.8 m.
<b>Summary of results:</b>	The watching brief revealed no archaeological deposits or features relating to the medieval abbey, only material relating to the construction of the present river bank revetment wall was observed.
<b>Location of archive:</b>	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 2009.37.







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Figure 1: Site location



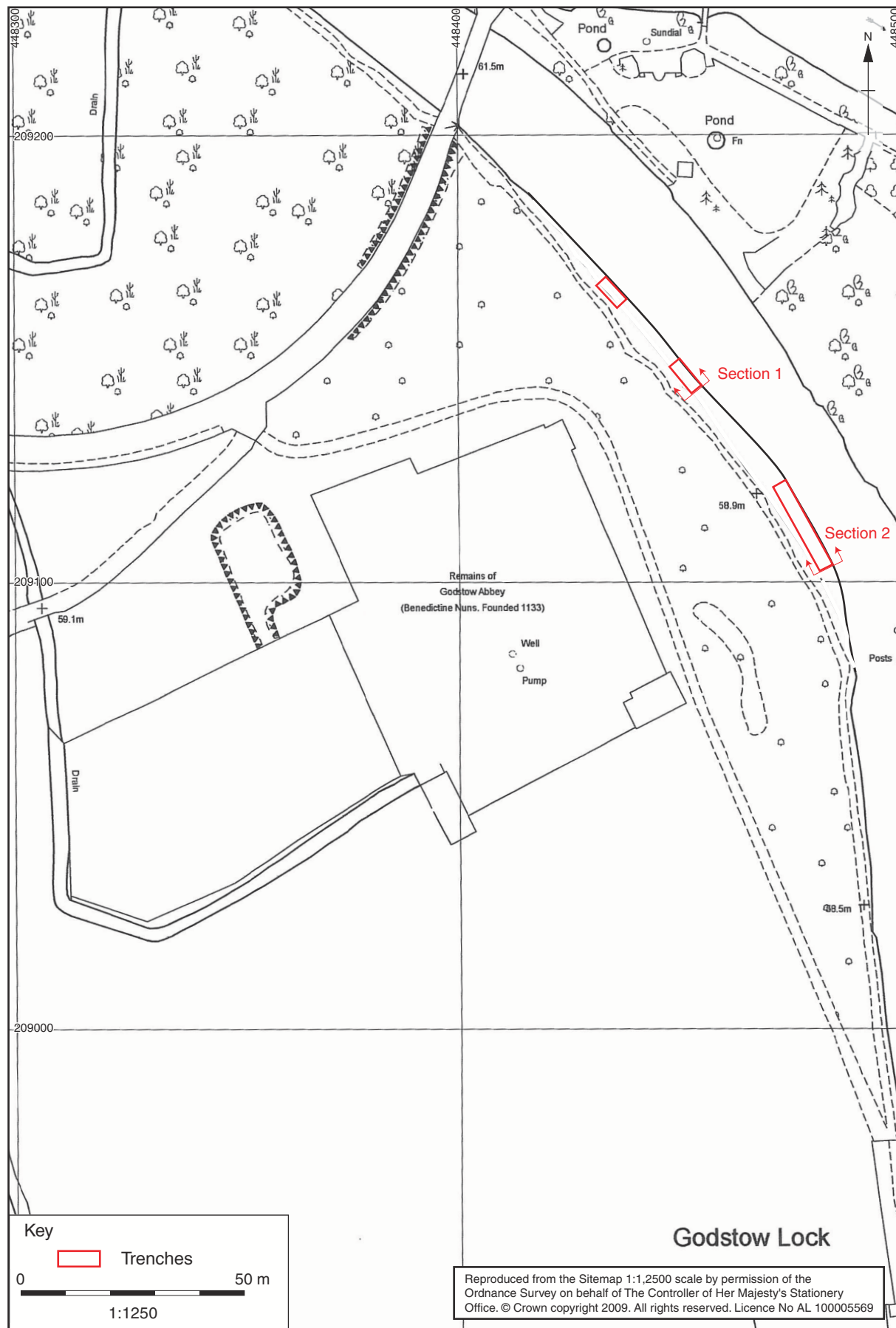


Figure 2: Site plan, location of works and sections



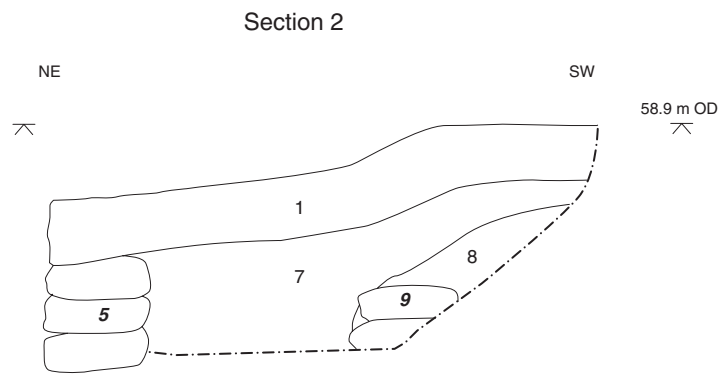
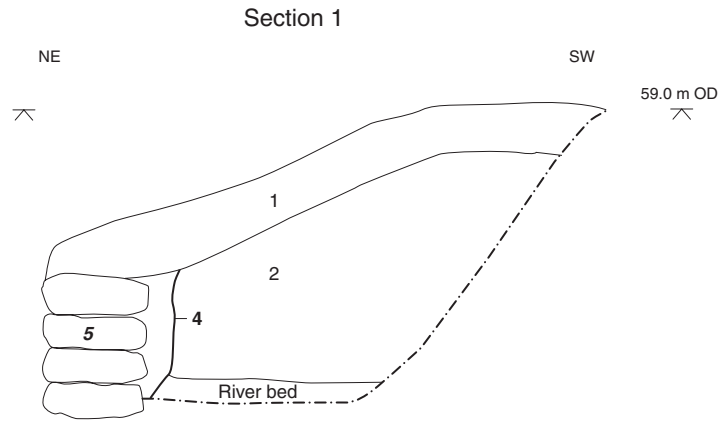


Figure 3: Sections







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