

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT THE OLD BARN DARLEY ABBEY, DERBY

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SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during 2006–2007 at the site of The Old Barn, Darley Abbey, Derby (centred on SK 3523238314) by Archaeological Research Services Ltd on behalf of Derby City Council in advance of restoration work to the 19th century barn.

The site was of historical interest due to the ‘missing’ remains of the Augustinian Abbey believed to have been established c. 1146. The abbey was demolished during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538 leaving only one upstanding building surviving, The Old Abbey Public House (SMR 32468).

During the watching brief three walls and a narrow path were uncovered which are believed to have been associated with the abbey. Two of the walls were substantial structural walls; the third appeared to be a smaller, internal wall. Medieval pottery was discovered beneath the foundation layer of one of the walls, confirming a mid 13th to 14th century date. Whilst excavating service trenches another wall, with an associated flagged floor level, was uncovered. The stone used was comparable to that of the previous walls discovered but the structures were proven to be of a later date. A large arched structure was discovered in close proximity to The Old Abbey Public House which was believed to be a bridge that was located over a previous mill fleam. As a result of these discoveries it was decided that the new barn building would be moved 3m to the east. This enabled all the discoveries to be preserved in situ.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Darley Abbey was originally an Augustinian priory, founded by Robert de Ferrers, second Earl of Derby, around 1146 (Robinson 2001, 8). The Abbey, ideally situated next to the River Derwent, became one of the most important in Derbyshire. It was surrendered as part of the Dissolution of Monasteries in 1538 and almost totally destroyed. After the dissolution, the land was asset stripped and sold to Sir William West (Robinson 2001, 10). A significant amount of monastic buildings survive in England because they were converted into mansions by their new owners. In some cases the Abbot’s private dwellings were reused with little alteration to the original structure as suitable residences for new owners, such as those built by the Abbots of Battle and Ford (Dorset) and the Prior at Watten (East Yorkshire) (Coppack 2006, 176). This has led to the belief that Darley Hall, erected 1727, was originally part of the Darley Abbey complex, possibly the Abbot’s private residence, although no proof of this has yet been forthcoming.

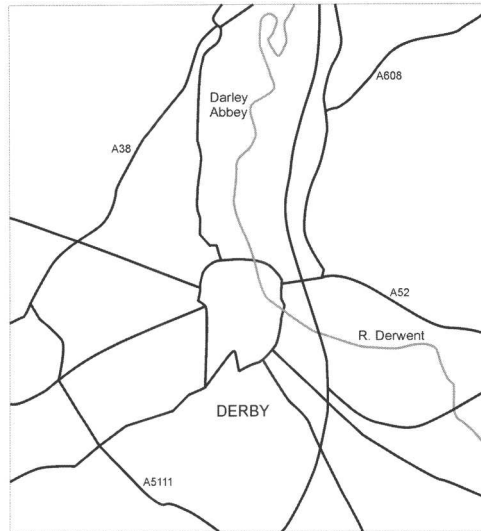


Fig. 1: Location of Darley Abbey.

The only remaining upstanding building is an upper floor hall house, now a public house, built probably *c.* 1450 (SMR 32468) (Fig. 2; Plate 1). The date of this ‘Old Abbey’ building is based on architectural considerations and dendrochronological work undertaken on principle floor joists (Derbyshire SMR). Other archaeological finds from Darley Abbey have been scarce. Apart from 15th century structural remains uncovered at No’s 7, 8 and 9 Abbey Lane, no other medieval remains have come to light (Derbyshire SMR).

Although these houses appeared to have monastic masonry in their fabric it is difficult to ascertain whether the material had been reused or remained *in situ*. In 1965 an area of open ground next to Brick Row and Old Lane was developed for housing. The Derbyshire Archaeological Research Group of The Derbyshire Archaeological Society carried out excavations in eight areas, along with trenches amounting to almost 61m in length and found no traces of any occupation (Robinson, 2002, 13). The absence of medieval pottery from these excavations was thought to rule out this area as a location for the Abbey. The only other archaeological discoveries in the vicinity were of several skeletons at Hill Square, a few metres north of the ‘Old Abbey’ building, during the insertion of gas mains in the 1920s (Robinson 2001, 14). A local workman who worked on service drains in New Road during the 1970s recalled the discovery of large sandstone blocks of a structural nature being uncovered, but they were not recorded.

RESULTS

Walls 1–3

Wall one

During the excavation of the footings for the new barn building a wall was uncovered 1.1m below the modern ground level (Fig. 3 (006); Plate 2). The wall was found to be

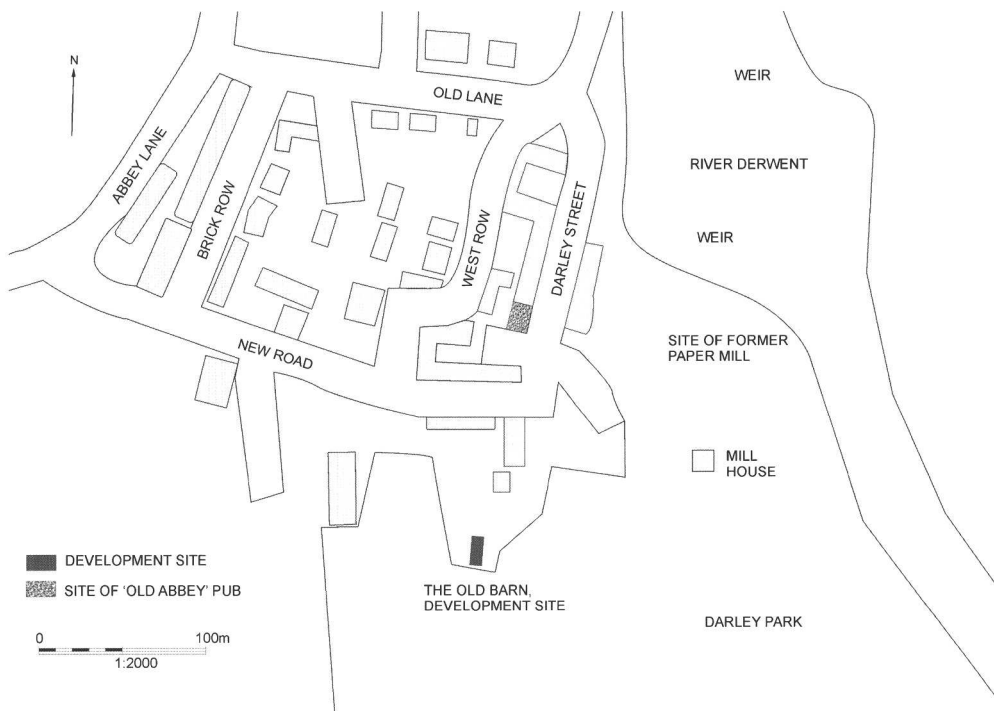


Fig. 2: Map of Darley Abbey showing the development area and The Old Abbey Public House.



Plate 1: The Old Abbey Public House, Darley Abbey.

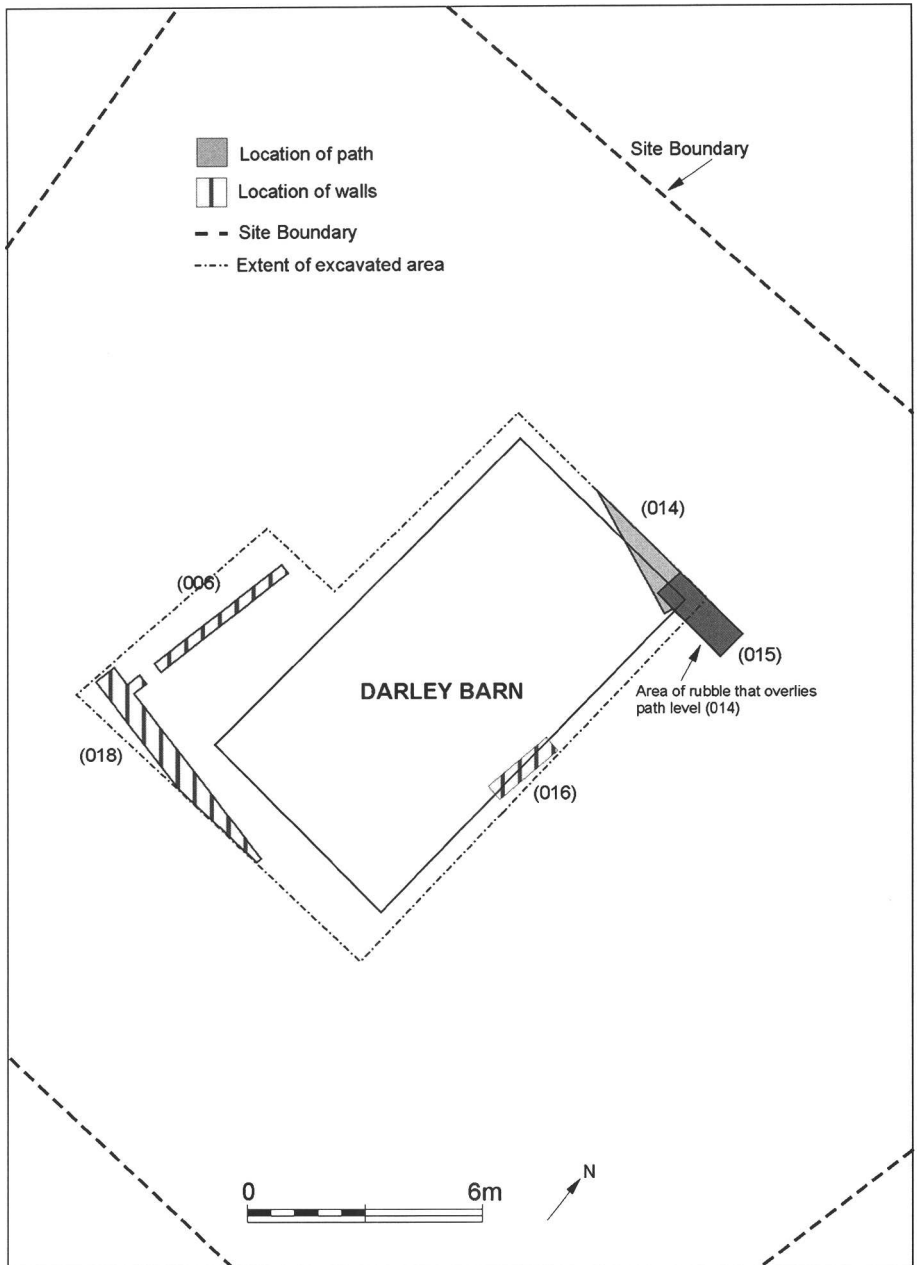


Fig. 3: Darley Abbey: plan of the site showing the areas of archaeology.

on the same alignment as the footings and obstructed any further digging in that area. The exposed area of wall measured $4.54\text{m} \times 0.3\text{m}$ with a maximum surviving height of 0.5m . The wall was a single course in width and survived to two courses in height. It was constructed from sandstone ashlar blocks that were skilfully dressed. Mortar



Plate 2: Darley Abbey: view of wall one (Scale: 1m).

was located between the stones but no finds were discovered in connection with this wall.

The deposits found banked up against the wall suggested a period of industrial use, after the wall's construction. The deposits consisted of layers of black, coal-rich material with a maximum thickness of 0.27m that appeared to have been sealed by thin layers of redeposited clay with a maximum thickness of 0.1m. The large pieces of coal within the layers had not been burnt which suggests they formed part of a waste deposit. The redeposited clay layers may be interpreted as floor levels although a lack of finds suggests this is unlikely. It is also possible they acted as levelling/sealing layers to stabilise the ground after the coal waste had been discarded.

Map evidence indicates that before the construction of the barn in the 19th century the site was an area of enclosed wooded parkland. There is no map evidence indicating medieval structures on the site, suggesting the wall is possibly of medieval date. Due to the walls' potential significance, the position of the barn was moved 3m to the east, enabling preservation of the wall *in situ*.

Wall two

During the excavation of the footings that ran north-south on the east side of the building a substantial sandstone wall was uncovered (Fig. 3 (016); Plate 3). A significant amount of the wall was exposed by hand and although the wall terminated to the south, it continued north into the baulk. The remains consisted of a wall two courses deep with two outer faces of larger, faced blocks with an inner core of smaller stones. The exposed wall was 2.1m long and 0.5m wide with a maximum depth of 0.29m. The stones had been faced but not to the high standard of the first wall uncovered.



Plate 3: Darley Abbey: view of wall two (Scale: 1m).

The stones were larger and more roughly arranged suggesting this was the foundation layer of a substantial, structural wall. The bottom course was not only wider but had redeposited clay packed around it implying the bottom course may have been beneath ground level for added stability. The suggestion that these courses may have lain beneath ground level may explain why they are not as well constructed as wall one.

Whilst excavating the wall two pieces of medieval pottery were found beneath the lowest stones. After analysing the sherds, Cumberpatch noted that both sherds came from a jug, one being a handle piece from a rod handled jug. Both sherds appear to be of the Burley Hill type, manufactured at the site of Burley Hill near Duffield (Cumberpatch 2003). An accurate date for Burley Hill Ware has not yet been resolved but the use of suspension glaze on the fragments found suggests a date range between the mid 13th and the later 14th to 15th centuries (Cumberpatch 2004). The wall was abutted by a deposit of orange redeposited natural clay that appeared to have been packed around the wall to stabilise it within the foundation trench that had been cut for it. The sherds of pottery were located within this context suggesting that they were incorporated with the clay at the time of the wall's construction.

Wall three

During the excavation of a service trench on the south side of the barn a substantial sandstone wall was uncovered (Fig. 3 (018); Plates 4 and 5). It was exposed over a length of 6.72m before continuing under the baulk and averaged 0.64m wide. The wall survived to two courses deep and consisted of two outer faces with an inner core of smaller stones. The wall was well built using well-dressed ashlar sandstone blocks.



Plate 4: Darley Abbey: view of wall three (Scale: 1m).

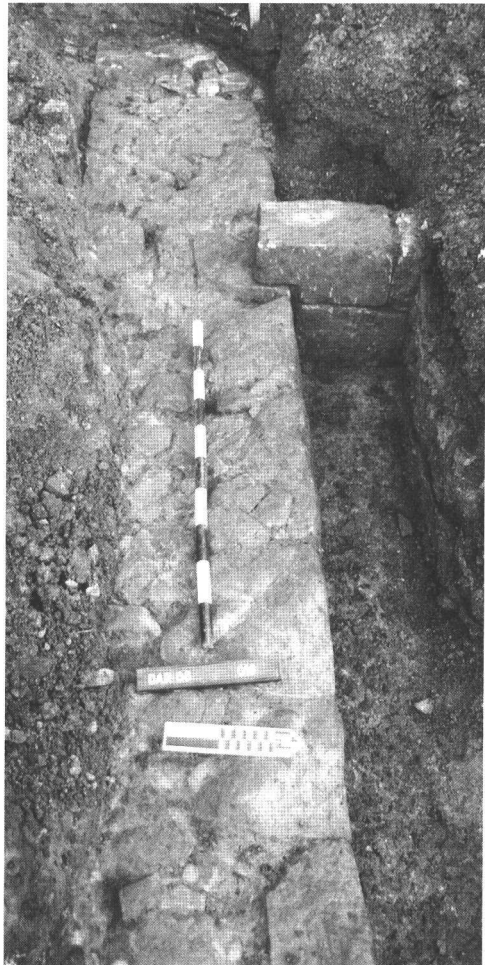


Plate 5: Darley Abbey: view of walls three and one abutting (Scale: 1m).

From the position of the key stone another wall may continue south into the baulk, indicating the remains of a structure extending further than the area already excavated. The west end of the wall continued into the west baulk but the wall stopped to the east where it had been disturbed (indicated by the prevalence of broken sandstone in that area). Further excavation revealed a junction between walls one and three. The smaller wall, which was partially excavated to the north, abutted the larger wall three and is therefore structurally later. The sandstone block that linked the two walls was carefully moulded on one corner so that it neatly rested on the other wall, an attention to detail that suggests a high level of workmanship. The wall had the same orange, redeposited clay packed against the base so as to fill the void of the foundation trench and the wall foundations themselves. The same deposits, consisting of the coal-rich material and the redeposited clay layers found when excavating wall one, were present on the excavated side of this wall. All these remains were preserved *in situ*.

Flag stone path

During the excavation of the footings that ran east-west along the north side of the barn a path was uncovered 2.3m below the modern ground level (Fig. 3 (014)). The unstable nature of the trench meant that shoring had to be inserted in order to investigate the feature. The area exposed revealed a flagged path measuring 0.87m wide that ran for 3.88m before continuing under the baulk. The path was laid over the natural alluvial clay and was constructed from flagstones ranging in size from 0.29m × 0.15m to 0.41m × 0.59m. No finds were discovered relating to this feature. A large quantity of irregular sandstone blocks uncovered towards the eastern area of the path are likely to be the collapsed remains of a wall (Fig. 3 (015)). The stone spread which was exposed for a length of 2.37m and 0.9m, had been heavily disturbed and, as a result, gives little idea about the wall's original structure. According to local workmen, previous work undertaken in the 1970s just outside the perimeter of the site uncovered a similar wall on the same alignment reinforcing the suggestion that the sandstone tumble was the remains of a wall.

The three walls discussed so far were all found to have been constructed from similar sandstone blocks with a comparable fine textured, lime mortar. It is also important to note that all three of the walls and the path were built directly on the natural alluvial clay. Although medieval pottery was found only in association with one of the three walls discussed it is likely, given the similarities mentioned, that all three walls were of medieval construction.

Other associated finds

Wall and flag stone floor

During work on the service trenches a sandstone wall and flagged stone floor level were uncovered. During the excavation of the wall and floor level it became evident that despite some similarities to other walls found on site, these features were of a later date. Below the flags a coarse grained deposit was uncovered which consisted of burnt industrial waste and contained broken bricks, sherds of 19th century pottery and metal objects such as nails. It is highly probable that the sandstone ashlar blocks and flagstones were of an earlier, perhaps medieval, date given their similar appearance to the sandstone blocks found on the walls discussed earlier and had been re-used. Despite



Plate 6: Darley Abbey: view of the arched sandstone structure (Scale: 1m).

the similarity it is highly likely that the features represent farm buildings associated with Home Farm which were built using re-used stone.

Arched structure

The excavation of another service trench located in close proximity to The Old Abbey Public House revealed an arching sandstone structure (Plate 6). The structure was located 0.33m below the surface of the ground and 19.88m east of the south-east corner of The Old Abbey Public House. The structure was only partially revealed as it was located on the north side of the trench which could not be extended. The structure survived to three courses in places and was on an east-west alignment. Although the structure had collapsed slightly, it still retained its original curved shape. The stones were carefully worked and mortared in place with the exterior blocks having been chamfered on the underneath. The sandstone blocks used to construct the feature were fine grained and lighter in colour than the other sandstone blocks found elsewhere on the site.

The arched structure possibly appears on an early map of the area. The 1708 map of Darley Abbey completed by William Woolley illustrates the River Derwent having a man-made mill stream diverted from the main river channel in this area, creating an island. The smaller channel has since disappeared but is marked on the map as a mill fleam. Two bridges are shown to be located over the mill fleam, one of which corresponds to the location of the arched structure. The map also indicates The Old Abbey Public House and the Woolley Mansion which, apart from a few farm buildings, were the only standing buildings at the time. The 1708 map pre-dates the earliest Evan's Mill suggesting the channel marked 'mill fleam' may have been used to power earlier mills associated with the abbey. An inquisition taken on the death of Abbot Henry of Kedleston in 1287 revealed that Darley Abbey had two mills and a smith's forge (Robinson 2001, 10). Although their location has never been determined they would have been close to the river which suggests that the bridges could be medieval in date.

Wall

Running west from the arched structure along the length of the trench was a sandstone wall. It is possible that the wall was related to the arched structure but as the wall is discontinuous, due to truncation, it is not possible to confirm this. The feature was excavated for a total length of 5.4m before it ended and although its total width could not be established it was at least three courses wide. The wall was located 0.57m below the modern ground level and was 8m from the south-east corner of The Old Abbey Public House. The blocks appear to have a face running down the north side, with a possible adjoining wall abutting on the same side. The ashlar blocks were constructed from the same yellow sandstone found on previous walls and were of a similar size and shape. However, given the short length of wall that was uncovered it was not possible to establish the nature of the overall structure or its associated date.

CONCLUSIONS

The discovery of structural medieval remains are the first of their kind to be unearthed at Darley Abbey. The initial three walls uncovered during the watching brief on the west side of the site are substantial and well-made suggesting a medieval building of some size and importance. Given the proximity of the remains to the last upstanding Abbey structure, 'The Abbey Public House', it is probable the walls represent part of the Abbey complex. Although Augustinian monasteries had similar layouts they varied considerably in scale, planning, elevation and architectural detailing (Robinson 2001, 16). It is therefore difficult to say, with certainty, what the walls actually represent, although it is possible they formed part of the inner court, possibly part of the infirmary or the chapel. The building appears to have been rectangular in shape with a narrow path located to the north. The building evidently had internal divisions, as seen where wall one abuts wall three.

A 'composite' plan, compiled by David Robinson in his report 'Darley Abbey — Notes on the Lost Buildings of an Augustinian Monastery in Derbyshire' (2001) gives two possible locations for the Abbey. Based on other Augustinian monastery plans of a similar size, he has taken the most common arrangement to create a projected plan of the Abbey. Careful consideration of map evidence along with other key information, such as the unsubstantiated claim that the Tudor house was built over the Abbot's private residence, allowed the projected plan to be placed in two likely places. One location is over the later Evans Mill complex. Robinson states that due to the area being low-lying and presumably subject to flooding this site seems unlikely (Robinson 2001, 26). The second position shows the plan overlying the 1727 Woolley Mansion. This area is on higher ground and seems a more suitable position for the Abbey. The discovery of the walls in close proximity to this projected location supports the notion of the Abbey having been at this location.

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