



# Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**Archaeologically monitored test pits  
dug at Delapre Abbey, Northampton**

**March-April 2014**



# Delapre Abbey Test Pits

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## **Archaeologically-monitored Test Pits dug at Delapré Abbey, Northampton, March-April 2014**

Iain Soden BA MIFA

### **Summary**

A series of test pits throughout Ground and Basement levels at Delapré Abbey shows that archaeology is likely to survive in the area of the probable former monastic church to the south of the former monastic cloister. This is likely to comprise cut features, perhaps including human burials. The same area also contains a widespread, but neatly-contained, deposit on top of the natural geology which contains post-medieval finds from the construction and life of the current south range, in particular the Drawing Room. Elsewhere, a discrete island of archaeology may survive south of Abbey Cottage.

### **Introduction**

Delapre Abbey is the site of a former Cluniac Nunnery (later elevated to Abbey status), which lies on the south-east side of Northampton town centre. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1539) it became a gentrified residence and underwent considerable re-building. The Abbey core lies at NGR: SP 7595 5908 and is surrounded by parkland, which includes the Registered Battlefield of The Battle of Northampton (1461). The Listed Buildings of the Abbey are undergoing major conservation and internal re-ordering for public presentation.

In order to inform plans for re-ordering, a series of Test Pits were dug, some with the aid of a 5-ton 360-degree mechanical excavator fitted with a 600mm-wide toothless bucket, but mostly by hand. About half lay in the basement and cellared areas of Delapré Abbey, while half lay at current ground level, although there is considerable variation to be observed in that ground level. The locations were chosen almost exclusively for structural reasons by the project's structural engineer, Peter Cunningham, and no archaeological remains were targeted or suspected before the work.

The test pits were archaeologically monitored and recorded in accordance with the archaeological sensitivity of the site.

Some of the test pits were dug deeply into the natural geology, in order to verify the depth of foundations. Others stopped at the surface of the natural ground. A few verified the current build-up of soils and made no attempt to test the full sequence down to natural geology.

The work was commissioned by Northampton Borough Council and archaeological monitoring and recording carried out by Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd (ISHeritage) over four days from 25 March. A preliminary digest of the data was presented to the Delapré Abbey Project Management Team on 3 April, those results intended to be qualified and expanded at a subsequent date by the present report.

# Delapre Abbey Test Pits

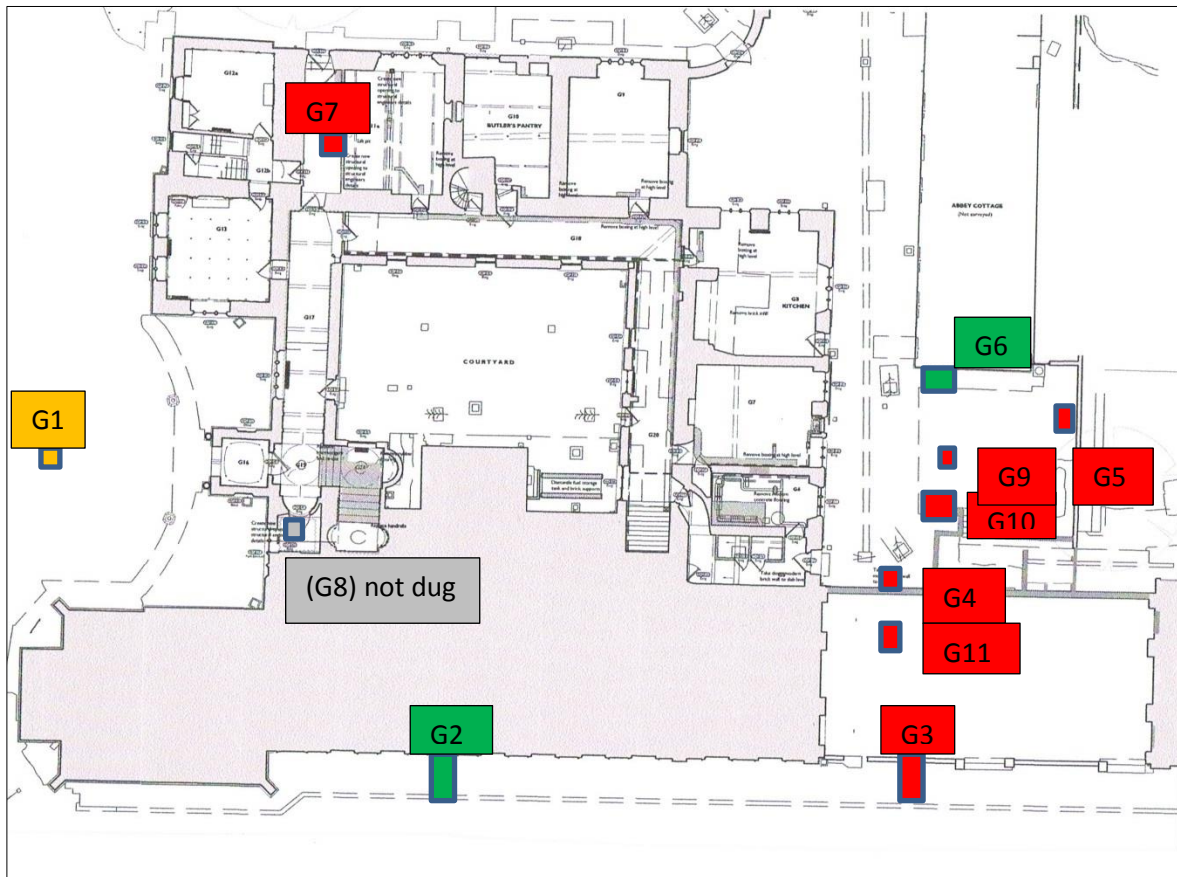


Fig 1: Locations of the Ground Floor Test Pits – Not reproduced here to scale (Image c/o Purcell & original survey information produced by Foster Surveys) **Green** = Archaeology present; **Amber** = possible archaeology present; **Red** = no archaeology encountered

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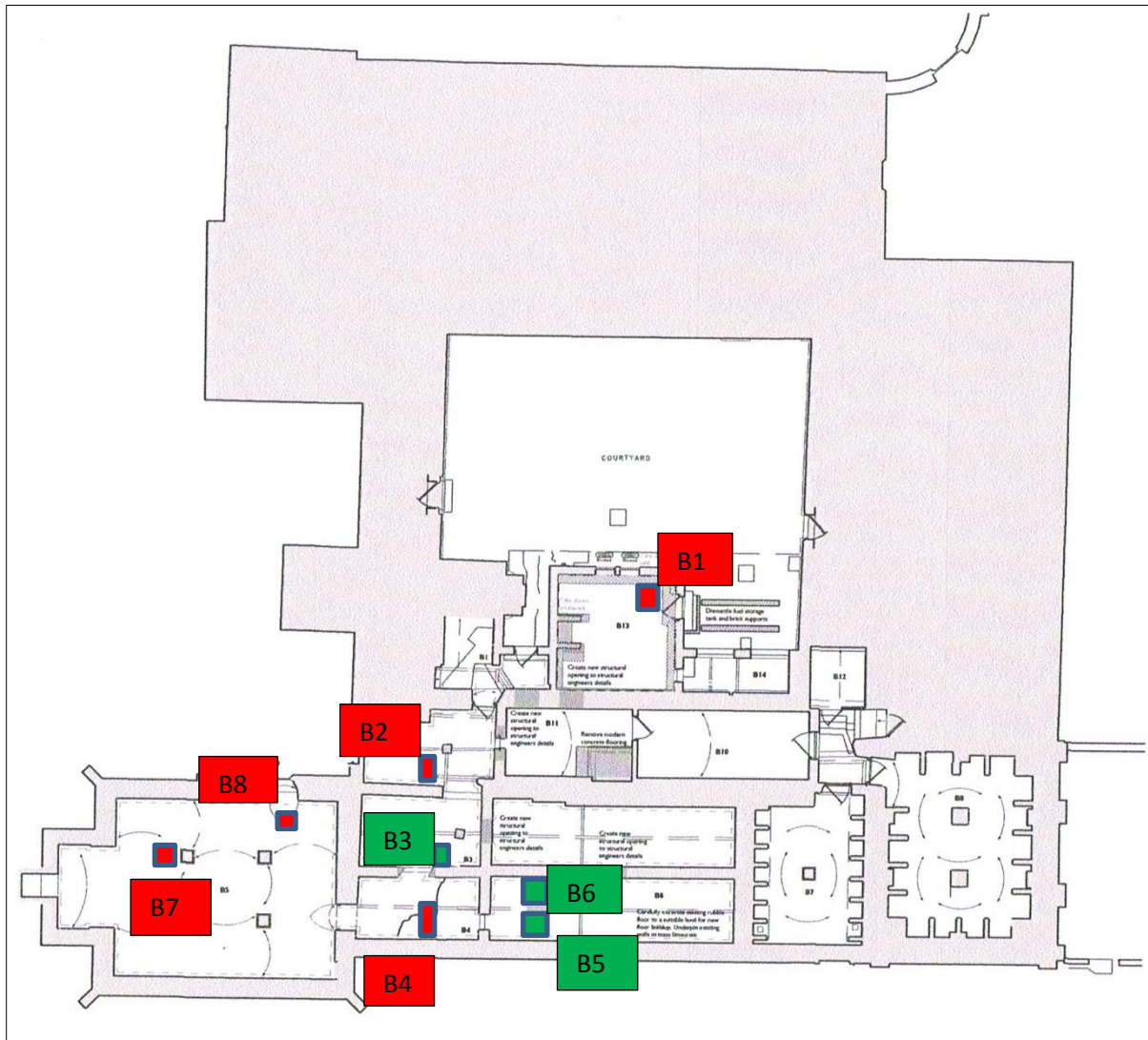


Fig 2: Locations of the Basement Test Pits - Not reproduced here to scale (Image c/o Purcell & original survey information produced by Foster Surveys) **Green** = Archaeology present; **Amber** = possible archaeology present; **Red** = no archaeology encountered

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### Concordance of Test Pit data

The same colour-key has been used below as is seen in the location plans above, to denote the location and nature of any archaeology encountered (see Figs 1 and 2 for locations). Thus:

**Green** = Archaeology present

**Amber** = Possible archaeology present

**Red** = Archaeology not encountered

Approximate sizes and depths are given in mm where less than a metre and metres where greater.

Test Pit	Length m/mm	Width m/mm	Depth m/mm	Natural geology at	Pit characterised by:	Archaeological survival?	Dated?
G1	c3m	600mm	1.2m	1.2m	Deep soils	Yes but likely disturbed	TPQ C13
G2	2m	600mm	3m	1.8m	Ground built up	Yes, but deeply buried	TPQ late C16
G3	1m	600mm	1.2m	-	Ground built up	No	-
G4	1m	500mm	800mm	200mm	Ground reduced	No	-
G5	500mm	500mm	600mm	-	Ground reduced	No	-
G6	1.2m	800mm	150-400mm	-	Structural remains	Yes, shallowly buried	?Monastic
G7	1m	400mm	500mm	-	Disturbance	No	C17-19 brick
G8	n	o	t		d	u	g
G9	300mm	300mm	300mm	-	Disturbance	No	No
G10	500mm	500mm	700mm	-	Services	No	No
G11	1m	700mm	1.1m	-	Ground built up	No	No
B1	500mm	500mm	500mm	200mm	Ground reduced	no	no
B2	500mm	300mm	700mm	0	blank	no	no
B3	600mm	600mm	700mm	0	Cut archaeological feature	Yes	Pre-abbey stone-phase
B4	600mm	400mm	500mm	0	blank	no	no
B5	900mm	900mm	400mm	200mm	Archaeological deposit	Yes	C16-19
B6	900mm	900mm	1.7m	200mm	Archaeological deposit	Yes	C16-19
B7	700mm	500mm	600mm	0	Ground reduced	no	no
B8	600mm	500mm	300mm	0	Ground reduced	no	no



## Delapre Abbey Test Pits

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*Ground Level (G1-G11: see fig 1 for locations)*

### Positive results

Above Ground, Test Pits G2 and G6 contained notable archaeology. This is characterised as follows:

**Test Pit G2** cut through the existing stone paving, and down through deep top-soils to a sandy rubble layer at 1.2-1.5m depth. This contained a fragment of late 16<sup>th</sup> - or early 17<sup>th</sup>-century window reveal identical in profile to those extant along the east range. It does not date the layer or provide a positive identification, except to note that it can have been laid down no earlier in date than that.



Fig 3: Test Pit G2 in plan, exposing the outer face of the Drawing Room foundations. The test pit dug deep into natural clay; scale 1m

**Test Pit G6** was very shallow since it exposed what seemed to be a 1.1m-wide stone wall, aligned north-south just below the surface of modern brick pavements. This lies where there was formerly a cottage joined to Abbey Cottage. Such a great width to a wall suggests a medieval date (12<sup>th</sup>-century domestic house walls this wide were excavated off St James' End some 15+ years ago). Later medieval and subsequent walls are usually much narrower.

## Delapre Abbey Test Pits

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Fig 4: Test Pit G6 in plan, showing the width of the possible medieval wall, lined with brick on the right. North (and Abbey Cottage) to top of picture; scale 1m

The line of this putative wall was tested by probing for some metres (the results were equivocal-some resistance but not total) and two further test pits were dug in lawn and garden soils a few metres along (G9 and G10). However, these locations were found to have been disturbed to levels deeper than the structures encountered in G6 and were discontinued. Plans show numerous existing services in this area.

Elsewhere in this area, the top 600mm comprises modern material or topsoil (as tested in G4 and G5), so any archaeology in this area is thought to be discontinuous, perhaps as potential survivals in 'islands'.



## Delapre Abbey Test Pits

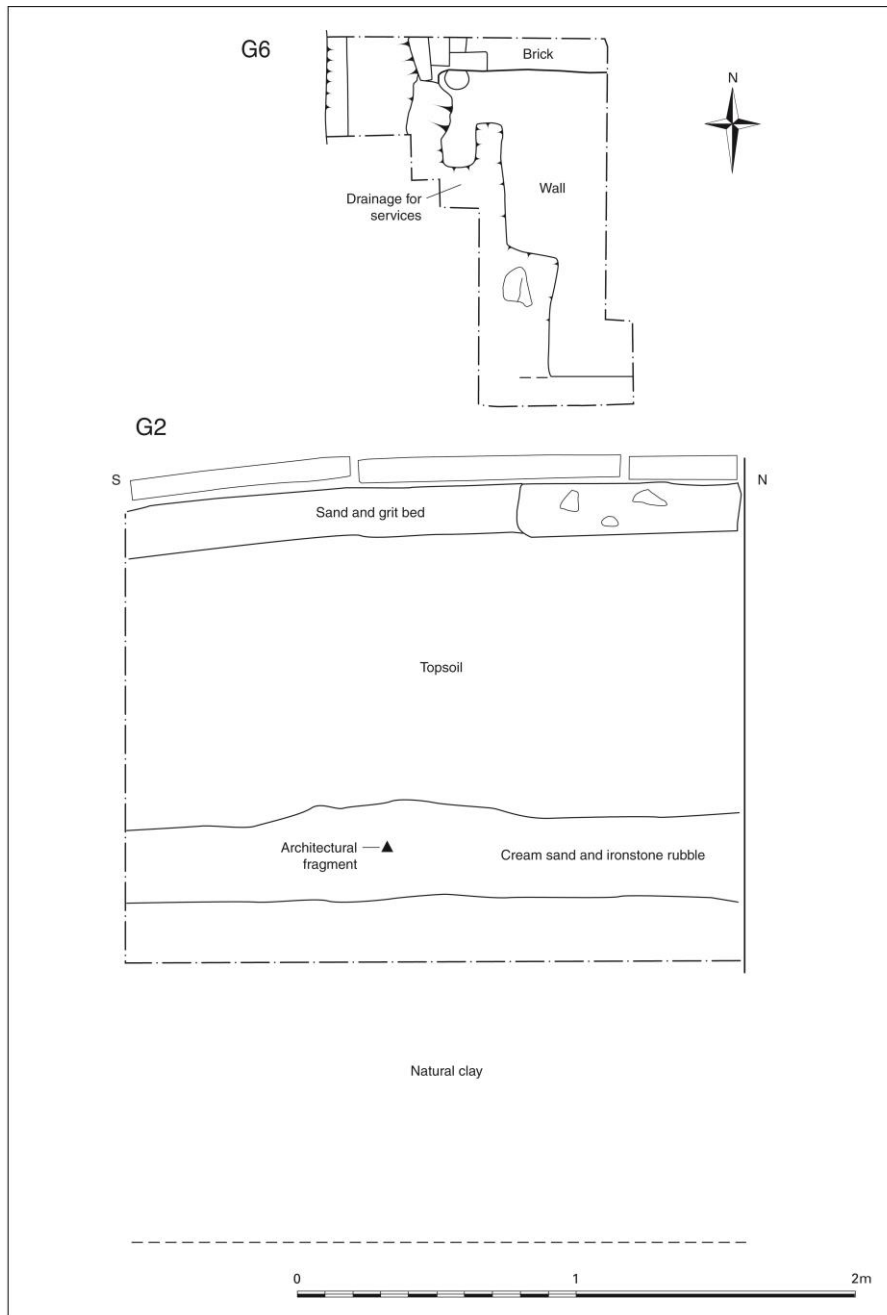


Fig 5: Plan of the structural remains in G6 and the section showing the sequence in G2, with deeply-buried rubble layer producing an architectural fragment (Andy Isham)

### Finds from the Ground Floor Test Pits

From **Test Pit G1** came a single unglazed sherd of Oolitic coarseware jar rim with thumbled collar decoration, probably of the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century and probably from the Lyveden/Stanion industry (CTS 319). It is potentially residual in a series of interleaved and confused soil deposits which characterised this test pit, which was dug to find the existing water mains.

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From a depth of about 1.4m in a cream sand and rubble layer in **Test Pit G2** came a single architectural fragment, from an Elizabethan or Jacobean window reveal, complete with glazing groove (Fig 6, below). It is identical to those reveals which are still *in situ* around the windows of the east range. As such it indicates that the layer from which it came can date no earlier than the late 16<sup>th</sup> century (but may be much later).



Fig 6: Late 16<sup>th</sup>- or early 17<sup>th</sup> century fragment of window reveal; scale 300mm.

### *Basement Level (B1-B8; Fig 2 for locations)*

In the Basement, Test Pits B3, B5 and B6 contained archaeology, which has been to some extent characterised, as follows:

**Test Pit B3** exposed an archaeological feature cut into the natural ground which lies directly beneath a supposed medieval wall. As such, not only does this suggest remains survive of the pre-stone phase of the Abbey, but that in this basement area, the old exposed natural ground may contain other cut archaeological features, as the surviving islands between medieval walls and post-medieval piers are far greater than the few small test pits dug there.



Fig 7: Test pit B3, showing the cut feature beneath the stone wall, natural geology to left

**Test Pits B5 and B6** were dug close to B3 but within an adjacent sub-floor space, not strictly a basement (under the Drawing Room). These cut through a very dry stony and sandy layer which contained a variety of finds from the life of the range, potentially including its construction. Within the test pits this layer, which seems to extend throughout the entire sub-floor space, was 200mm thick. It lies directly upon natural ground which is separated from the area of B3 by only c4m, and the level is almost continuous, so the potential for cut features to survive remains throughout this area too.

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Fig 8: Test Pit B6. The uppermost 200mm contained finds, a layer in common with the adjacent B5



Fig 9: The sub-floor environment during digging of Test Pits B5 and B6

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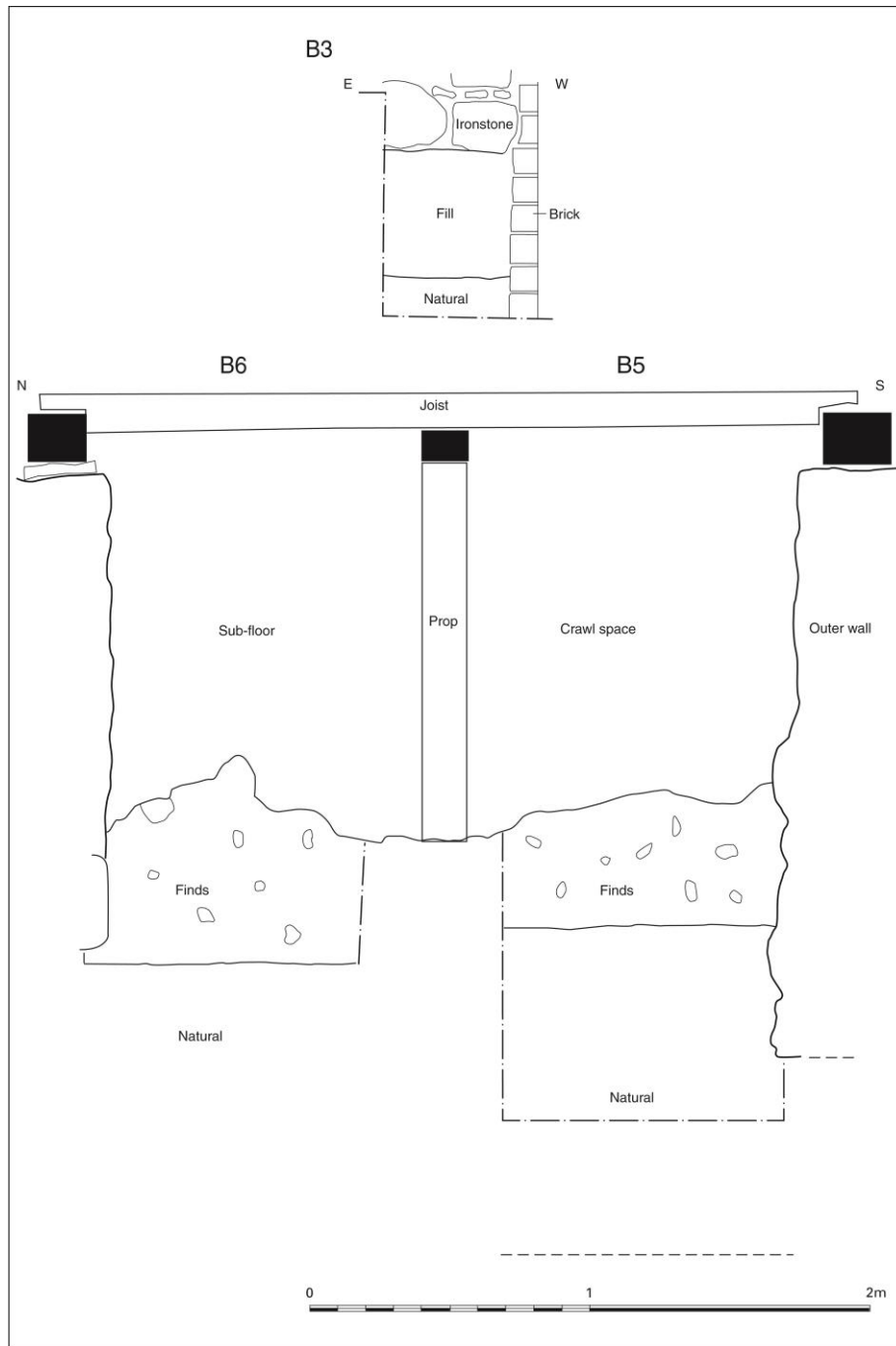


Fig 10: Test Pits B3, B5 and B6 sections, containing archaeology (Andy Isham)



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### Finds from the basement test pits

From the dry and rubbly deposit which was observed in B5 and B6 (and common to both-see Fig 10), came a selection of finds and an ecofact (Fig 11, below):

- A sherd of 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Glazed Red Earthenware platter (CTS 407)
- A moulded clay tobacco pipe bowl and stem. The bowl shape and heel suggest a date in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Two complete glass phials, possibly for pharmaceutical uses, or precious powders, such as paints. Their completeness and lack of attrition is notable in a deposit which has thus (probably) never been compacted or walked upon.
- A single desiccated, vermin-gnawed plum-stone.



Fig 11: The finds from Test Pits B5 and B6

### Archaeological significance

There is strong evidence from **Test Pits B5 and B6** to indicate that a 200mm-thick (where tested) deposit survives from the life of the post-medieval house, which lies between the two sets of (three) stone walls beneath the Drawing Room. That the finds in Fig 11 all came from these two small test pits, the locations of which were chosen for non-archaeological reasons, is good reason to suppose that many more similar finds lie within that deposit, which appears (on surface inspection) to cover the area of the entire drawing room sub-floor space. It is an exceedingly dry, loose deposit which might preserve organic matter as well as artefacts.

In this same area, and further afield in the surviving islands of natural geology to either side of the walkway through the basement, **Test Pit B3** indicates that cut features may survive, which date from the period of the Abbey, whether during the stone-built phase (perhaps c1250-1539), or from an initial (c1150-1250) predecessor timber phase. Of five test pits dug (B2, 3, 4, 5 and 6), only one



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## Delapre Abbey Test Pits

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encountered a cut feature (beneath a monastic wall), but the areas tried were a small proportion of the total space, which extends beneath the drawing room at the same level.

If, as suspected, the area beneath the drawing room was part of the abbey church (the south range of the nunnery), then there is potential for the survival of human burials as cut features within this space. At least one burial with a testamentary bequest is known from the church, that of Thomas Arderdon (1469) a tenant of Delapr , whose will has been translated and published in full (Edwards, D, Forrest, M, Minchington, J, Shaw, M, Tyndall, B, and Wallis, P, 2005 *Early Northampton Wills preserved in Northamptonshire Record Office*, Northants Record Society, Vol **42**, 44-6).

A small island of archaeology appears to survive just south of the standing Abbey Cottage, which retains probable structural remains (**Test Pit G6**). On the basis of other test pits in that area, it might not be extensive. This is not however conclusive as the other test pits were limited in extent and depth (G5, G9), or were demonstrably into disturbance by existing services (G10).

Outside the south range the ground has been built up. A layer containing rubble of the 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century in G2 is the highest datable layer encountered, at a depth of more than 1.2m. the architectural fragment which it produced, however, only provides a broad *date after which* it was deposited.

### Appendix

#### Negative results

Most Test pits contained no archaeology at all, or at least no archaeologically significant deposits or features. These 'negative' test pits comprise:

- Ground Floor pits G1, G3, G4, G5, G7, (G8 was not dug), plus the additional G9, G10 and G11
- Basement pits B1, B2, B4, B7 and B8

All test pits received written records and/or both a drawn and photographic record (Digital and B/W film). A photographic record of some of these test pits which contained no archaeology follows. In each case a 1m-scale is depicted, unless otherwise stated. Further, drawn records are in archive.

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Test Pit G1, looking west



Test Pit G3, looking north



Test pit G11, within the former conservatory, confirmed the built up ground seen in G2 and G3



Test Pit G7; broken (C17-19) bricks in a loose soil matrix below the flagstones



Test Pit B1: Concrete directly onto natural clay

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Test Pit B4: cut into exposed natural geology



Test Pit B7: cut into exposed natural geology, below beaten earth floor adjacent to cellar pier; scale 300mm



Test Pit B2: cut into exposed natural geology



IS Heritage, 15 April 2014

## Delapre Abbey Test Pits

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### Appendix 1: OASIS data

Project Name	Delapre Abbey test pits
OASIS ID	Iainsode1-232696
Project Type	Evaluation- test pitting
Originator	Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd
Project Manager	Iain Soden
Previous/future work	Future work expected
Current land use	House and gardens
Development type	Redevelopment by Borough Council
Reason for investigation	NPPF
National grid reference	SP 7595 5908
Start/end dates of fieldwork	March-April 2014
Archive recipient	-
Study area	-