

Pentney Abbey, Pentney, Norfolk

Scheduled Monument Ref: 30590

HES Ref: CNF43116

Archaeological Monitoring Report

(Continuous observation of ground works)

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Site details for HER

Name: Pentney Abbey, Pentney, Norfolk, PE32 1JT

Client: Mr H Barber

Local planning authority: Kings Lynn & West Norfolk

Planning authority: English Heritage

Development: Trench for electricity & water supply to area with planning consent for touring caravan/mobile home use

Date of fieldwork: 15 February, 2011

HER Ref: ENF 125984

Scheduled Monument Ref: 30590

Listed Building Refs: 222003 (Abbey Farmhouse) & 222004 (Gatehouse)

OASIS Ref: johnnewm1-95276

Grid ref: TF 7013 1206

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(Sue Holden)

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Summary: Pentney Abbey, Pentney, Norfolk (HER- ENF-125984, TF 7013 1206) monitoring of trenching works for a combined cable and water pipe trench revealed a substantial wall to the south of the Post medieval farm buildings which is clearly of medieval date and relates to one of the main priory buildings. A possible medieval drain was also revealed parallel to the wall, these features were left in situ (John Newman Archaeological Services for Mr H Barber).

1. Introduction & background

1.1 Mr H Barber commissioned John Newman Archaeological Services (JNAS) to undertake the archaeological monitoring of trenching works for an electric cable and water supply pipe run at Abbey Farmhouse, Pentney (see Fig. 1) required under the relevant Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) issued by English Heritage. The monitoring requirements were set out in a Brief set by Mr K Hamilton of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology; Norfolk CC acting as county representatives for English Heritage. The electricity and water supply is required for the paddock area some 50m south of house which has planning consent to be used for touring caravans and mobile homes (see Fig. 2).

1.2 Pentney is a long narrow parish on the northern of the River Nar in west Norfolk with the main village being located in the north western part of the parish. Abbey Farm, which is located on the site Pentney Priory, is some 3km south west of the village on an isolated site spur of higher ground with the River Nar c200m to the south. The soils are generally sandy and coarse loams over chalk and carstone.

1.3 Pentney Priory was founded in c1130 as a house for Augustinian Canons and to quote further from *Pastscape*-, '*consolidated with Wormegay priory in 1468, and dissolved 1537. Remains now consist of little more than foundations apart from a fine late 14th century gatehouse. Material from the priory has been reused in Abbey Farm and outbuildings which now occupies the site. Crop marks to the south seen on air photographs may be associated with the site. Excavation has revealed pits apparently for burning stonework for lime production at the time of the dissolution. Geophysical survey has located the nave and transepts of the church.*' This geophysical survey covered the area to the east of the gatehouse and it appears that the priory church was located in this area (Ken Hamilton pers. comm.). While detail relating to this geophysical survey is lacking its conclusions are supported by information gained casually on site from a former farm worker who recalled stone foundations in the same area noted during grass cutting works.

1.4 The gatehouse has a grade I listing and Abbey Farmhouse, an early 18th century structure with re-used materials, is grade II. The site of the priory is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) though the original layout is only poorly understood with the proposed works being carried out some 100m south east of the gatehouse. Whether Abbey Farmhouse is located over one of the ranges of the medieval priory is unknown. Pentney may also have been a minster church in the mid/late Saxon period which lapsed and one possibility is that this minster was located at the parish church and when re-founded in the post conquest era the more isolated, current site of the priory was seen as being more appropriate (Tim Pestell pers. comm.).

2. Monitoring methodology

2.1 The SMC was conditional upon a programme of archaeological works being carried out to ensure that any deposits, features or finds would be fully recorded and, if possible, preserved in situ. The trench ran from the north-eastern corner of the barn in a southerly and then south-westerly direction to the paddock with consent for touring caravans and mobile homes (see Fig. 2 map extract). Within the paddock the trench was taken along the eastern edge with two, east-west, spurs and small, 300mm x 300mm and 300mm deep, post pits at both ends of each spur (numbered

1-4 on Fig. 2). In total 185m of trench was mechanically excavated with the northern section of 55m from the north-eastern corner of the barn to a point close to the north-eastern corner of the paddock being excavated by a mini-digger with a 400mm wide bucket while the remaining 130m of trench was opened using a specialist trenching machine leading to a trench width of only 100mm (see Fig. 2 map extract). Given the amount of masonry and other building debris of various dates around the eastern end of the barn it is very unlikely that a trenching machine would have been able to open the required trench. The wider, northern, part of the trenching works was taken to a depth of 500mm with the exception of that part of the trench, as described in section 3 below, where structural features of archaeological importance were revealed, under constant archaeological supervision and with a close examination of the upcast spoil. The trench was plotted with regard to mapped features nearby.

2.2 The much narrower, southern, part of the trenching works was monitored at regular intervals through the day as the machine being used gave very little visibility with regard to the ground being disturbed due to the very narrow width of the trench and loose spoil that stayed within the trench as its action was more similar to that of a plough rather than a machine with a bucket. The depth of this southern part of the trench went down to c300/400mm though the lower 200mm remained as loose soil in the trench base. Therefore monitoring of the trenching in the paddock concentrated on inspecting the spoil that was thrown up as the machine could only cut through soft ground and was unlikely to have the power to damage structural features if these were encountered. The four post pits were hand excavated. Throughout the monitoring a record was maintained with a series of digital images (see Appendix I).

3. Results

3.1 As outlined above the trench ran from the north-eastern corner of the barn (see Fig. 2) which appears to be a structure of perhaps later 17th or 18th century date which incorporates a large amount of re-used priory material. Around the north-eastern corner and then parallel to the eastern gable wall of the barn the trench revealed a shallow, 100/150mm, depth of sandy topsoil lying over a 300/400mm deep layer comprising a mixture of later Post medieval building and farm debris with occasional loose blocks of ashlar and moulded stone fragments from the now demolished priory buildings (see images 1-4). The priory stone appeared to be a fine limestone and similar to re-used material in the walls of the farm house and barn. The loose priory stone was recorded via digital images and the landowner plans to store all such material from the overall site so it will be available should a comprehensive review of the site be undertaken in the future. At a depth of 450/500mm, representing the base of the trench, the naturally occurring local geology of dark brown sand with numerous small carstone fragments was exposed. The area east of the barn had also seen some relatively recent, small scale, disturbance as at least two service trenches ran in an easterly direction.

3.2 To the south-east of the barn the trench was taken from the initial north-south alignment to a north-east/south-west line towards the paddock (see Fig. 2). As the trenching moved away from the barn the amount of building and farm debris below the still shallow topsoil cover decreased and the lower c300mm of trench fill comprised undisturbed sand and carstone. However at a point 17.5m south of the western part of the barn an anticipated modern drainage pipe, running to a septic tank just to the south of the trench, was located at a depth of 450mm. Immediately to

the west of this pipe (see Fig. 2 plan detail) two large blocks of carstone were then exposed under the 150mm topsoil cover. As these stones appeared to be mortar bonded, and therefore of potential structural significance, mechanical removal of topsoil was then undertaken slowly and carefully to cause minimum disturbance. This area of masonry within the 400mm wide trench continued under 150/200mm of topsoil for some 3.5m and hand cleaning revealed a north-west/south-east aligned, 1m wide, wall foundation (0002) made up of mortared carstone blocks (see images 5 & 6) which was left in situ. To the west of this wall (0002) the topsoil layer was somewhat deeper at 300mm and lay over a partially fragmentary mortared surface incorporating small carstone fragments (0003). This mortared surface had what appeared to be a shallow step down close to its western side before it sloped down to a depth of c400mm below two large, though not bonded, blocks of carstone (0004-see image 7) which were not totally exposed in the trench and which, again, were only covered by 150mm of topsoil. Finally more carstone blocks formed the western edge to the mortared surface. These carstone blocks (0004) were also left in situ as any investigation or disturbance in such a narrow trench would most probably have caused damage to what are clearly structural features of medieval, priory period, date without gaining any useful information in such a narrow trench. The cable and pipe will be lagged and laid over these features. The remainder of the 400mm wide trench to the corner of the paddock did not reveal any archaeological features of finds.

3.3 As outlined in section 2.2 above the trench within the paddock was opened using a small machine somewhat similar to a large plough giving a trench width of only 100mm (see images 8 & 9). Combined with 100/200mm of loose spoil left in the base of the trench the visibility for archaeological features was therefore very limited. However it was clear that no structural features, such as wall foundations, were disturbed by the trenching machine and no archaeological finds were visible in the upcast spoil. Occasional small fragments of what appeared to be degraded mortar were noted in the trench spoil around pit 2 (see Fig. 2 detail) and adjoining trenches however examination of what could be seen within the narrow trench did not reveal any clear reason for the presence of the degraded mortar fragments.

4. Conclusion

4.1 While the most of the trenching works either did not reveal any archaeology of interest save loose masonry fragments or was too narrow to give much visibility the short length with what are clearly structural parts of the medieval priory are of importance. Archaeological work at Pentney Abbey has been very limited and little is known about the priory plan and it is clear that the 1m wide wall (0002) is a major foundation with what could be evidence for a drain (0004) running parallel along the western side of the wall if, as seems possible, the carstone blocks lying over the point where the mortar surface (0003) drops down are cap-stones. With an alignment just to the north-west/south-east of a true north/south line the wall (0002) appears to fit better with the alignment of the only surviving medieval above ground structure at the priory, namely the gatehouse, as opposed to the Post medieval barn and farm structures which are closer to a north/south alignment.

4.2 Any attempt at further interpretation of the recorded features is fraught with difficulty as such a small area has been recorded within the 400mm wide trench; even gauging wall alignments from such a narrow exposure is tentative. However if,

as the geophysical survey noted above suggests, the priory church was to the east of the gatehouse the area of the trenching should be towards the southern side of the cloister assuming that Pentney followed a typical monastic layout. Based on these assumptions the wall exposed is more likely to be part of one of the ancillary structures at the priory such as the kitchen, refectory or infirmary. The width of the wall foundation would allow for an upper storey and the presence of a possible drain would support a kitchen though could also suggest the lavabo nearby (and recent drainage works at the site feed towards a ditch just to the south of the cable/pipe trench).

4.3 As the archaeological structures have been left in situ further work at Pentney Abbey can build on these results to try and understand the priory layout. The location of the gatehouse gives few clues though it could be suggested that the main approach to the priory could have been from the river on the southern side leading to where the church appears to have been just to the east.

Acknowledgements: JNAS would like to thank everyone at Pentney Abbey for their close cooperation, and in particular to Mr & Mrs Barber for their hospitality, all of which helped in the smooth running of the archaeological monitoring.



Fig.1: Site location (Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright 2008
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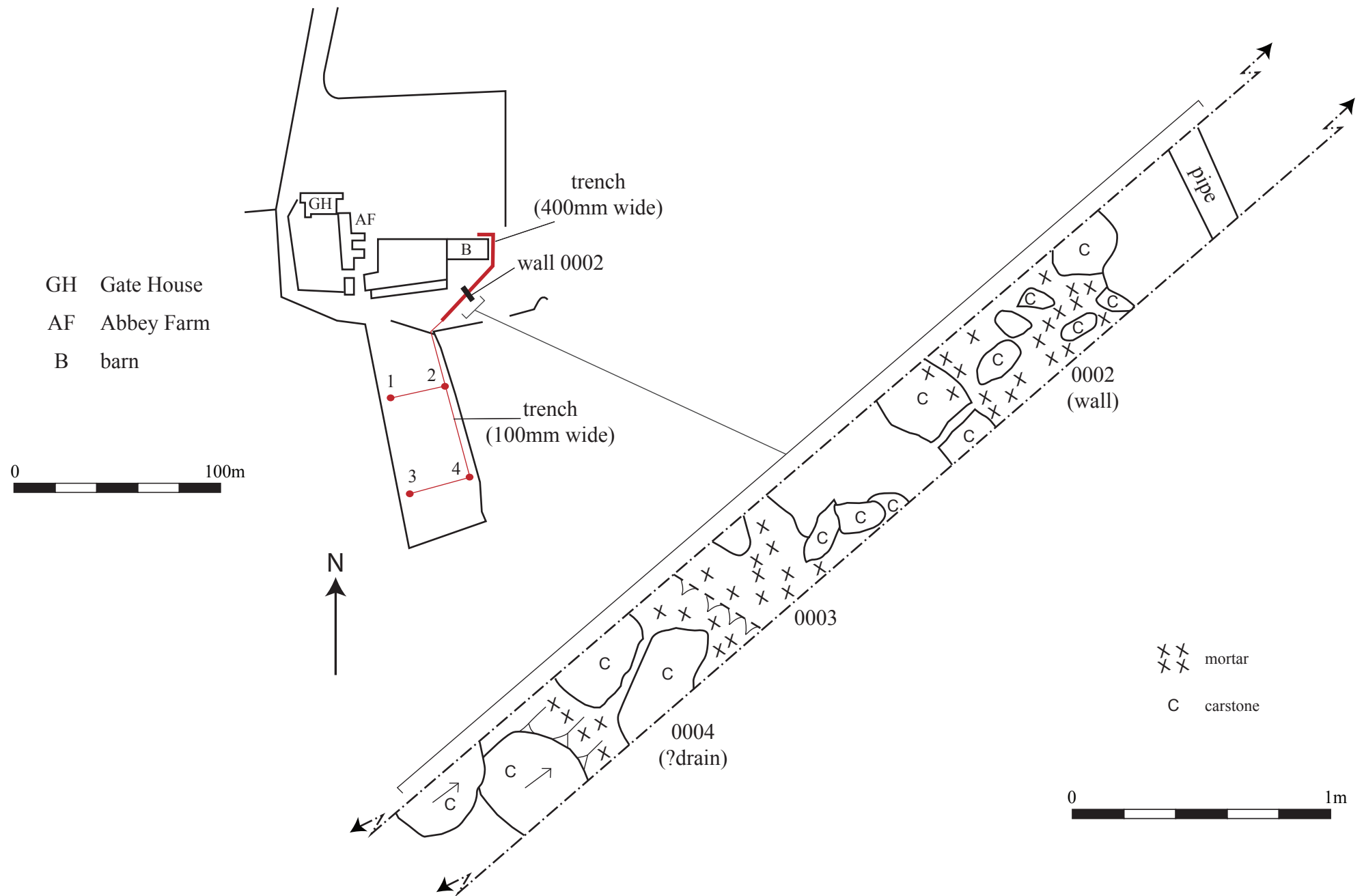


Fig. 2: Location of monitored trench and plan of features 0002-0004
 (map extract after Ordnance Survey©Crown copyright 2010 All rights reserved LN 100049722)

Appendix I- Images (amended for pdf)



5. Wall 0002 from south



7. Possible drain 0004 from south



8. Narrow cable trench in paddock



9. Narrow cable trench & post pit in paddock