

HISTORIC SCOTLAND PROPERTIES IN CARE
MINOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS 2011

Deer Abbey: Tree Stump Removal, August 2011.

HS PIC Index Number: 90093

SITE: Deer Abbey, Buchan.

N.G.R.: NJ 9685 4816

DESCRIPTION: Excavation accompanying the removal of a tree stump.

PROJECT CODE: HSCO-90093-2011-01

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INTRODUCTION

Under the terms of its Properties In Care (PIC) call-off contract with Historic Scotland, Kirkdale Archaeology was requested to carry out some small scale excavation work at Deer Abbey. The site is a Cistercian Abbey, founded in the early thirteenth century and now a property in care. The site has a somewhat enigmatic history, and is a ruinous state, with the Abbey Church in particular reduced to little more than a foundation course.

In the early nineteenth century James Ferguson of Pitfour enclosed the site in a wall, and in the middle of that century his son constructed a mausoleum over the E end of the church. This mausoleum was in turn demolished when the site was taken into state care in the early twentieth century.

A series of large trees remain around the site, some of which are exotic species, presumably planted in the nineteenth century. A particularly large example grew at the main entrance to the site on its N side. Here a gatehouse has been constructed, fronting on to the road, with steps on its S side at W and E ends leading down to the monument. The tree in question, a Nordman Fir, lay between these steps.

This tree had become diseased, and before arrival on site it had been reduced to a stump, standing some 2m above the ground level. This stump was still of formidable size, measuring more than 1 m in diameter, and significantly larger as it entered the ground and its root system spread out.

The intention was to remove this stump, and plant a replacement. Its prodigious size meant that it was hoped to extract it using a crane parked outside the gatehouse. This would then lift it clear of the surrounding wall, and remove it from site. To this end a trench was to be excavated around the stump, of sufficient size to allow access for a chainsaw to cut the larger roots. Kirkdale Archaeology was to dig this trench, and then monitor the removal of the stump. The work took place between 6th June 2011 and 8th June 2011.

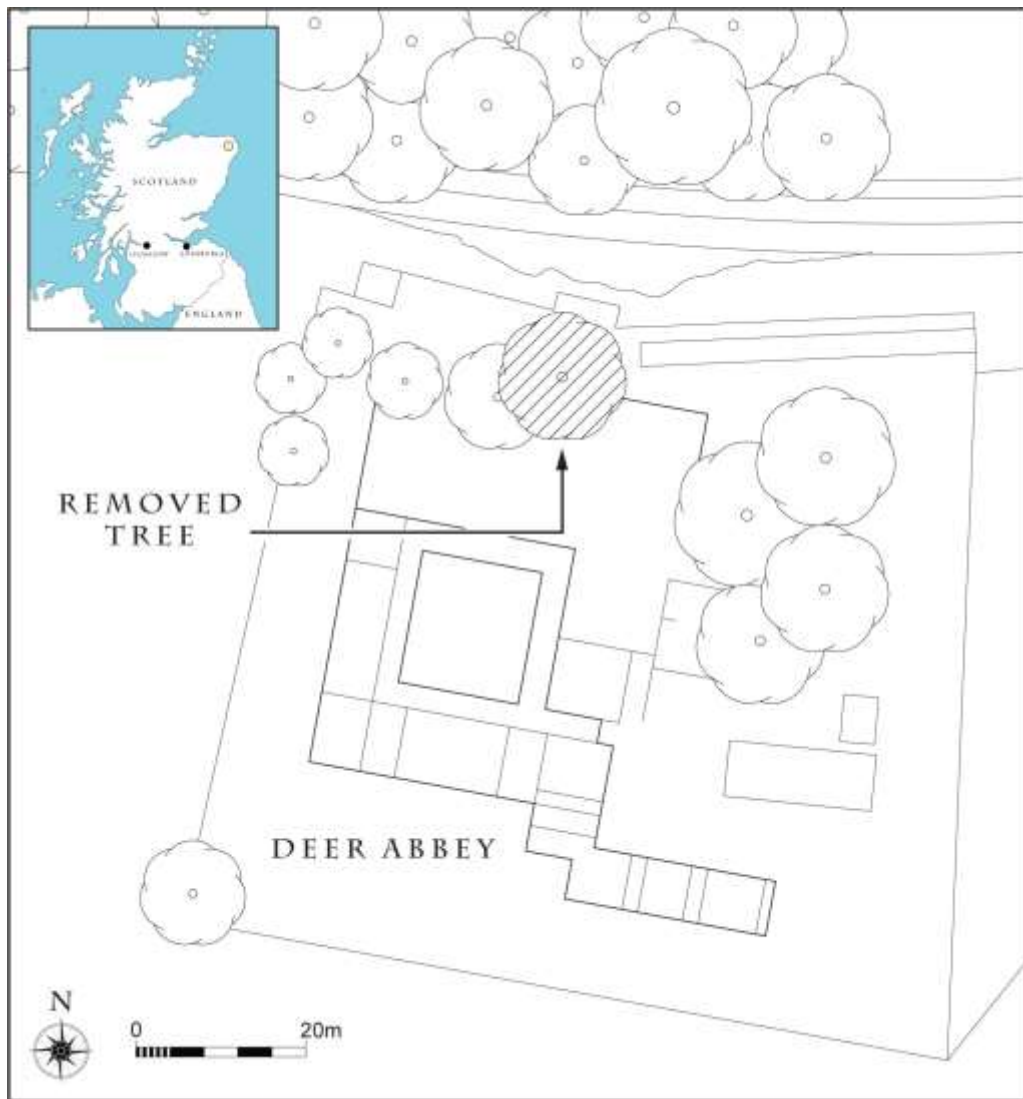


Figure 1: Plan showing the location of Deer Abbey, along with the site of the present works.

DESCRIPTION

The stump of the tree was found to be perilously close to the surrounding wall, coming within 0.75m at its closest. The trench was somewhat irregular, especially on its E and S sides, following the disposition of the roots. In plan it averaged 3.3m E/W by 3.1m N/S, although the tree itself occupied most of this space, and a small, shallow extension was added on the SE side to examine deposits on this side in more detail.

In the event little was dug that was not already disturbed by the roots; the matrix

containing these was given a general context number of **010**. This was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.9m on its E side, where the section produced a sequence of deposits, although the presence of the roots meant that deposits to the N could not be related to those to the S. Context **010** itself was a mixed deposit, principally composed of mid brown silty clay, rich in charcoal and mortar flecks. A single decorated, probably medieval, pottery shard was recovered from this, as well as two later (nineteenth century) sherds. A fragment of red sandstone roll moulding, a piece of a thick slate, two pieces of slag, a flint chip (possibly from a gravel path) and a small assemblage of bone were also recovered from **010**.

In the section, below the modern gravel path and its Terram underlay **001**, at the S end, evidence for an earlier gravel path with a sand underlay **002** was noted. This sealed **003**, which was exposed in the SE extension, but not excavated, and comprised an area of compacted sandstone and whin stone fragments. This lay over **004**, only recorded in section, but comprising of a dump of large angular whin stone fragments at least 0.3m thick, which formed the base of the trench at the S end.

At the N end of the E section, separated from the S by a large root, a deposit of dark grey silty clay 0.15m thick, **006**, lay under **001**. This was found to overlie **005**, the footings to the wall around the N side of the site. These were formed mainly of cement, with brick and stone fragments throughout, and projected 0.1m to 0.15m S of the wall above. At its E end, context **005** sat directly over an earlier stretch of masonry, **007**. This ran in a curve across the NE corner of the trench, continuing under **005** to the N, and running out the trench to the E. Context **007** was built using small to medium sized undressed/split blocks of whin stone, with some granite also present. This was bonded by a fine crumbling yellow mortar and formed a good curving SE face traced for 1.05m E/W by 0.7m N/S. Behind this SE face was a level upper surface, in a strip 0.2m wide, before rising again some 0.1m to 0.15m, in a curve that matched the outer face.

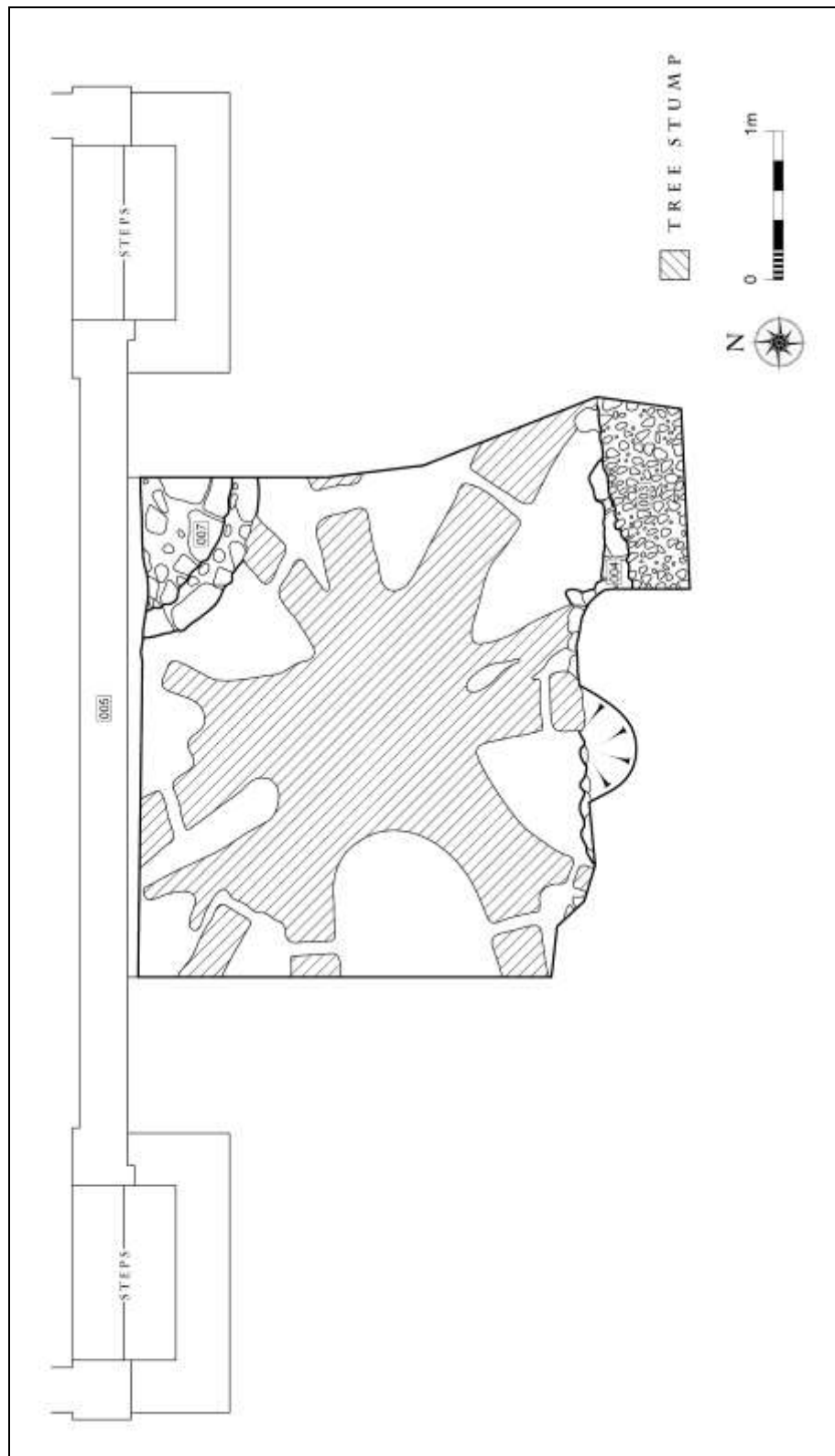


Figure 2: Post-excavation plan of the trench.

A substantial (0.65m thick) deposit of compact pale grey silty clay, numbered **008** was built up against the SE face of **007**. At the base of the trench **009** was seen below **008**, running N under the base of **007**. Context **009** proved to be compact mid brown silty clay, very rich in small sub angular stones, with some charcoal flecks, slate fragments and roots throughout, and was at least 0.2m thick.

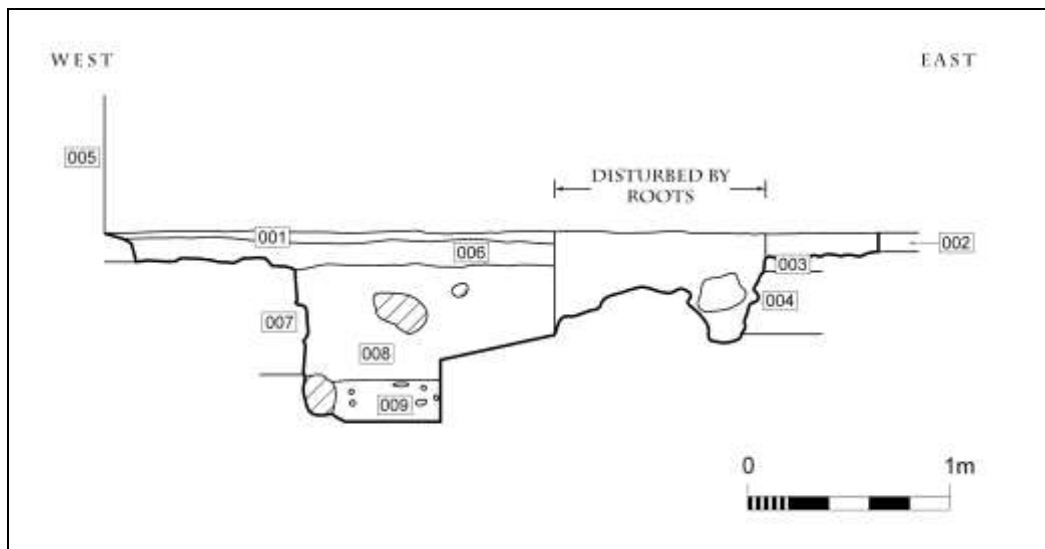


Figure 3: S-facing section of the excavated trench.

At this stage in the excavation it was felt that sufficient clearance had been provided to cut the roots, so no further digging was undertaken. In the event, in spite of cutting through all the visible roots, the crane brought to site proved unable to dislodge the stump. This is possibly due to the presence of a central tap root running down below the stump. As of 8th June 2011, the stump remained in the ground.

CONCLUSIONS

This small scale exaction at Deer Abbey at least demonstrated the archaeological potential for the site. At the S end of the E section of the trench a sequence of paths was recorded. Gravel surface **002** below the current path **001** is probably twentieth century in date, while metalled surface **003** (below) may relate to the nineteenth century lay out, perhaps more of a garden feature than anything to do with the Abbey. The rubble layer **004** below **003** could be a deliberate underlay to this surface, or perhaps just represent rubble from the Abbey or the Mausoleum.

At the N end of this section a very different sequence was observed. Here the N part of the enclosing wall **005** was found to overlie an earlier, mortar bonded, wall **007**. This followed a definite curve, and seemed to have a matching curved inner face, where the masonry stepped up to the NE. Although little was visible, it resembled a curved step, and might suggest a precursor to the current entrance arrangements. Although outside the scope of this project to record in detail, it is clear that the masonry of the gatehouse has been altered, and it may be that the current steps are a replacement of an earlier version represented by **007**. Of course, no actual dating evidence was recorded, beyond the observation that **007** ran under **005**, so it is possible that **007** is a fragment of a medieval structure on the N side of the Abbey church.

Deposit **008** seemed to be built up against the SE face of **007**, but root disturbance meant that its full extent could not be established. It is possible for example that **008** represents the fill of a cut for the insertion of **007**. At the base of the sequence, **009** ran under **007**, and seems likely to represent a medieval deposit, albeit possibly a late demolition layer - perhaps post-dating the Reformation.

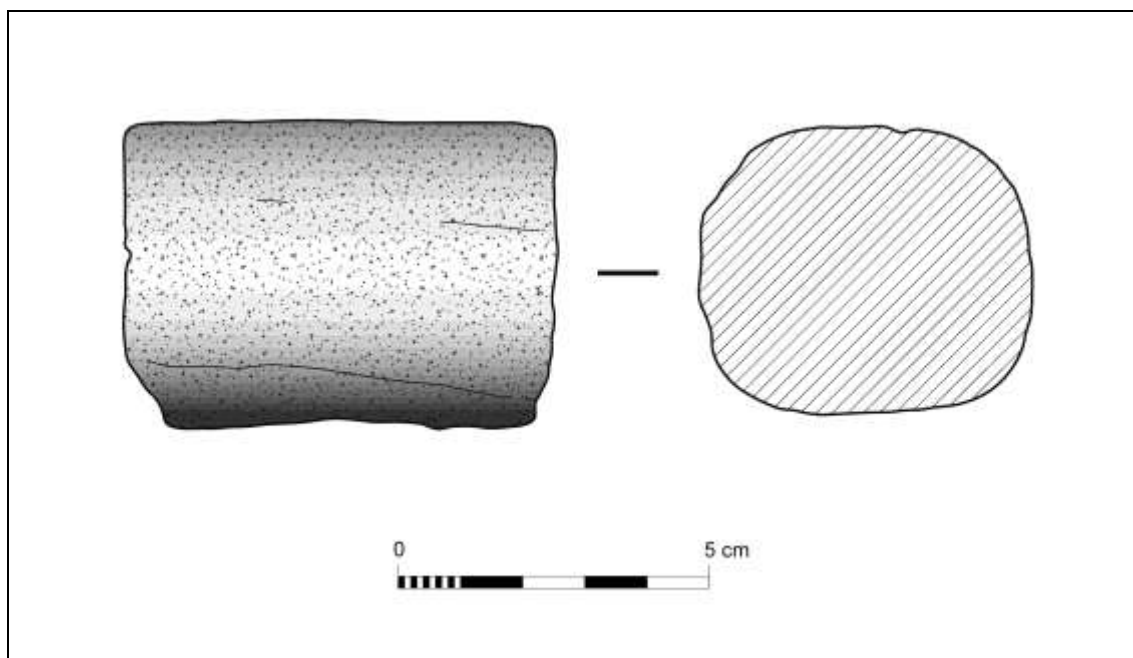


Figure 4: SF003, fragment of a roll-moulded stone from context 010.

LIST OF CONTEXTS

No.	Description
001	Modern gravel path and Terram underlay.
002	Earlier gravel path and sand underlay, below 001.
003	Metalling below 002.
004	Rubble below 003.
005	Wall on S side of steps and footings.
006	Dark grey silty clay under 005.
007	Curved masonry under 006.
008	Mid grey silty clay below 006, against SW face of 007.
009	Stone rich mid brown silty clay below 008.
010	Mixed deposit, principally mid brown silty clay with tree disturbance.

LIST OF DRAWINGS

No.	Type	Description	Scale
001	Plan	Plan of trench as finished.	1: 20
002	Section	W facing section of trench.	1: 20

LIST OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS

No.	Description	From	Date
01	Tree stump pre-excavation.	N	06/06/2011
02	Tree stump pre-excavation.	N	06/06/2011
03	Tree stump and gate pre-excavation.	S	06/06/2011
04	Tree stump and gate pre-excavation.	S	06/06/2011
05	Tree stump and gate pre-excavation.	SE	06/06/2011
06	Tree stump and gate pre-excavation.	SE	06/06/2011
07	Surface 003 exposed.	E	07/06/2011
08	Surface 003 exposed.	NE	07/06/2011
09	General working shot.	SE	07/06/2011
10	Crane at site.	S	08/06/2011
11	Crane at site.	S	08/06/2011
12	Chainsaw in operation.	SE	08/06/2011
13	Chainsaw in operation.	SE	08/06/2011
14	Chainsaw in operation.	S	08/06/2011
15	Crain at site.	SE	08/06/2011
16	Crane at site.	S	08/06/2011
17	Crane at site.	S	08/06/2011
18	Crane at site.	S	08/06/2011
19	Crane at site.	SW	08/06/2011
20	Crane at site.	SW	08/06/2011
21	Crane at site.	SW	08/06/2011
22	Crane at site.	SW	08/06/2011
23	Crane at site.	SE	08/06/2011

No.	Description	From	Date
24	Crane at site.	SE	08/06/2011
25	Crane at site.	E	08/06/2011
26	General working shot.	E	08/06/2011
27	General working shot.	W	08/06/2011
28	Crane.	E	08/06/2011
29	Crane.	E	08/06/2011
30	Crane.	S	08/06/2011
31	Crane.	S	08/06/2011
32	General working shot.	W	08/06/2011
33	Masonry 007.	S	08/06/2011
34	Masonry 007.	S	08/06/2011
35	Masonry 007.	S	08/06/2011
36	Masonry 007, S face.	S	08/06/2011
37	W facing section against 007.	W	08/06/2011
38	S facing section against 007.	S	08/06/2011
39	Detail of 005 over 007.	SW	08/06/2011

LIST OF FINDS

No.	Type	Quantity	Description
001	Pottery	1	Possible medieval pottery body sherd. Buff coloured ware with external pale green glaze. Incised decoration.
002	Pottery	1	Possible medieval pottery body sherd. Buff coloured ware with external green glaze. Very similar to SF001 - possibly from same vessel, a 15 th - 16 th century jug.
003	Stone	1	Fragment of roll moulded worked stone (rounded section, 30mm - 40mm in diameter). Possibly part of a window mullion or frieze. Stone is a coarse-grained, pink sandstone.
004	Pottery	1	Post-medieval pottery body sherd, with a shiny brown glaze on both sides. Probably from a jug.
005	Pottery	1	Post-medieval pottery sherd from a white glazed plate or saucer.
006	Stone	13	Miscellaneous animal bone fragments. Unidentified, but showing evidence of butchery/food preparation.