

FOUNTAINS ABBEY: NORTHERN APPROACHES
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY REPORT



FOUNTAINS ABBEY: NORTHERN APPROACHES

SE 26 NE 3

North Yorkshire

Harrogate District

Lindrick with Studley Royal and Fountains Parish

SE 273 683

In advance of a proposed visitor access to Fountains Abbey from a newly located car park to the N, a survey was undertaken of the area bounded by the farm buildings of Swanley Grange in the N, and the Museum gatehouse to the S, and by the landscaped E gardens of Fountains Hall to a point 250m to the E. The area of the plan [some 3.0 hectares] encompasses a terraced field [H], now under rough pasture, and the steep wooded slopes overlooking the abbey.

The N side of field H is effectively marked by a well developed lynchet up to 2.3m high. This is clearly of agricultural origin and until the recent planting of a narrow strip of woodland the lynchet still formed the S edge of a very large field to the N. Its line is continued to the W by the wall on the N side of the gardens of Fountains Hall, which as far E as Swanley Grange, is also the parish boundary with Aldfield. On the SSE edge of the farm buildings of the Grange modern debris has been dumped across the line of the lynchet. Towards its E end the lynchet has been dug into, presumably to increase the area of level ground at the narrow point, probably for a building. This disturbance may be associated with the concrete foundations, still visible in the centre of the field, which may have been part of the Second World War internment camp said to have been sited here, or an extension of the farm piggeries. At the SW corner of this area the crest of the slope has been levelled up with bricks and rubble and the foundations of one small building remain clear.

The W portion of the field contains some fragmentary ridge-and-furrow with ridges measuring 5m to 6m wide. One of them extends to the well defined agger of a grass track [P] which must either entirely post-date the ridge or – perhaps more likely –

have remained in use and continued to be maintained and built up after the cultivation ceased.

The wooded slopes have been quarried for stone – presumably during the development of the abbey. The sheer quarry face, up to 12m high, runs westward from a point 80m WNW of the NW angle of the abbey church, preventing access from the N. There has been further quarrying 15m W of the Museum. Above the rock-head of the principal quarries the sub-soils have slumped steeply away in places, destroying a bank [Q] that extends along the crest. It is 0.5m high on its N, uphill, side and 2.5m to 3.0m in width. A high stone content is evident and some crude courses are visible in the eroding S face at SE 2748 6839, immediately E of the survey area. It is notable that tree-roots have not penetrated the bank but have grown over it, strongly reinforcing the impression that its core is solid throughout and that the bank conceals the remains of a wall.

Beyond the area surveyed the bank, 0.6m high and 3.0m wide, continues through woodland for a distance of 140m though it is obliterated in two places by soil erosion. Further E it cannot be traced with any certainty until the extreme E end of the precinct, to the N of the crossing of the Skell. At SE 2794 6849, just E of the modern wall, a stony bank, 0.6m high and spread to 3.0m wide, climbs the wooded hillside until it is cut by a forestry track; at that point it turns W to run beneath the wall, reappearing on the other side for about 5m before fading completely. This bank is indistinguishable from that further W along the quarry crest; again the tree-roots do not penetrate the core, and similar crude coursing is exposed here and there indicating an original wall width of 1.35m at one point c. 8m E of the modern wall. At this position pinkish-cream mortar can be detected in the fabric; it is of a colour similar to that found in the abbey buildings.

There are evidently particular factors that have contributed to the marked difference in the survival of the precinct wall on the N and S sides of the valley. In the immediate vicinity of Swanley Grange the close proximity of the farm to the abbey would have quickly rendered the physical barrier irrelevant. In addition, the standing wall would have been an unusually convenient source of stone – portable along the contours – for the builders of the Hall or for successive occupants of the Grange.

Nothing whatever can be said at present of the course of the wall to the N and NW of the present Museum or of its relationships to the inner and outer gates of the precinct. The uniform nature of the trackway [P] suggests that there was no relationship between the two – any wall having long gone – in the track's final phase of use.

This track, curving across the slope immediately to the W of the quarries, has evidently been the sole means of access between the higher ground to the N and the valley floor. Its agger is 9m wide and up to 0.9m high at its NW end, becoming a terraceway as it negotiates the slope. A second track [R], unlikely to be earlier than the seventeenth century, cuts through the cambered mound of P, linking the garden of Fountains Hall with the level ground of field A. To the S of these tracks are two minor lynchets, 0.6m in maximum height, which have been disturbed by tree-planting. Some 12m NW of the Museum in the quarry edge is a stretch of mortared masonry, 12m long and 3.2m high, with traces of a S wall face visible; it is surmounted by a mature tree, the roots of which have disturbed it. This was probably an original monastic structure of unknown function. About 70m E of the Museum against a quarried slope, a crude, loosely bonded S wall face can be seen, 10m long and about 0.8m high. No mortar is visible and it may simply be a revetment to the hillside. It too is surmounted by a tree and affected by the root system.

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FOUNTAINS ABBEY

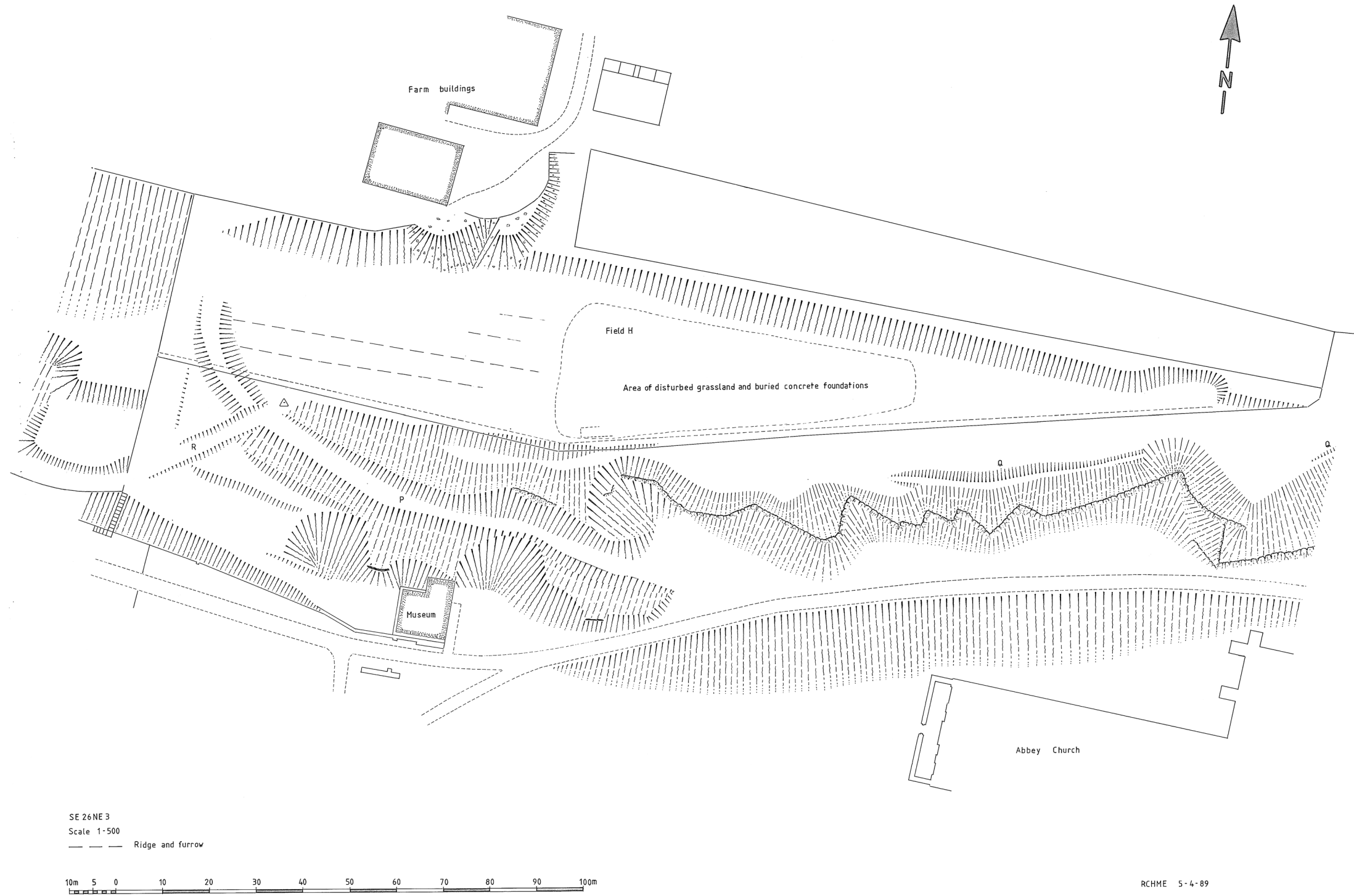


Fig 1: Fountains Abbey northern approaches: reduced from original survey at 1:500 RCHME©Crown copyright