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# Silver Street, Glastonbury

an archaeological evaluation 1988



NORTH GATE OF GLASTONBURY ABBEY IN 1800.

B.U.F.A.U.



SILVER STREET, GLASTONBURY, SOMERSET

An Archaeological Evaluation

by Peter Leach

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### An Archaeological Evaluation

#### Introduction

At the request of Somerset County Council an archaeological evaluation of property scheduled for development in Glastonbury was undertaken on behalf of Lindcross Ltd. by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. Under the terms of a Section 52 agreement planning permission was granted by Mendip District Council on condition that the developer should contribute towards a prospection and appraisal of the site's archaeological potential. The field work was undertaken at short notice between 20th - 23rd September 1988 and forms the basis of this report.

Excavation and preparation of the report were the responsibility of Peter Leach, with the assistance of Peter Ellis (on site) and Trevor Pearson (illustrations) of B.U.F.A.U. The work was undertaken in consultation with Mr. James Barattini, architect for the scheme and Mr. Bob Croft, Archaeological Officer, Somerset County Council. The assistance of Mr. and Mrs. C. Holinrake during the course of excavation work is gratefully acknowledged.

#### The Site (Figure 1a and b)

The property for development occupies the rear portion of tenements fronting onto the High Street, Glastonbury, namely nos. 46 and 48 (ST 50083895). These are bounded to the S by Silver Street, onto which the new development will front. Silver Street is a back lane, now serving the rear of High Street properties, and for part of its length is contiguous with the present precinct boundary to Glastonbury Abbey. In 1978 excavations were undertaken in advance of a widening of Silver Street and following the demolition of a section of the post-Dissolution precinct wall (Ellis 1982). These included areas now beneath the modified street and the adjacent car park, immediately S of the present site. Prior to the

archaeological evaluation of 1988 the site was occupied by premises (subsequently levelled) which appeared to cover two, if not three former burgage plots.

The former natural topography of the site is now barely perceived beneath the manmade palimpsest of medieval abbey precinct and modern townscape. Glastonbury and its abbey are located on the gentle lower western slopes of Edmund Hill and Chalice Hill, separated by the short, steep valley of Bushy Combe. The whole area is founded upon geological outcrops of the Jurassic lower lias shales and mudstones, a formation exposed during the course of the evaluation. The site lies currently at c. 24.0 m AOD, above what may formerly have been a shallow westward continuation of the valley carrying the stream from Bushy Combe.

#### Archaeological Evaluation

An archaeological assessment was made by means of a series of mechanically-excavated trench transects across selected areas of the site. These were located adjacent to but excluding the sites proposed for the erection of buildings, and cut to a maximum depth of 1.5 m (Fig. 2a). A T-shaped arrangement was defined as Trenches 1-3; Trench 2 remaining separated from 3 by the requirement to retain an active waste-water drain serving the High Street property to the north. Recording and interpretation of the stratigraphy exposed was achieved through the execution of measured scale plans and section drawings, and a photographic record. Mechanically-excavated sections were cleaned manually for improved definition, and man-made deposits were sampled with a view to obtaining material relevant to their date and function/origin.

The earliest feature and evidently the most substantial was located towards the base of Trenches 2 and 3, initially as a series of waterlogged clay/silts incorporating much charcoal and some organic plant and animal remains. The full width and depth of these deposits were not established here but their context was confirmed in Trench 1 where the southern lip of what is evidently a major E-W ditch alignment (F5, Fig. 2a and b) was

recorded. This ditch was cut into a natural weathered horizon of lower lias clay and mudstone banded with veins of calcite. Most of its fills lay beneath the natural water table, and no dateable finds were recovered.

What may be interpreted as a contemporary silt or soil horizon above the sloping southern lip of the ditch, merged into the waterlogged silts and was subsequently buried by later deposits. At least one other infilled feature was sealed beneath this buried soil/silt but no dateable material was obtained from these deposits. This horizon continues southwards in Trench 1, much contaminated from above by later material, but representing a subsoil above the weathered natural lias.

At a late stage in the silt infilling of the primary E-W ditch an episode of more deliberate backfilling was marked by dumps of re-deposited and mixed clays and shale towards its E end. This was less apparent further W, or at least was of a different character - infill and levelling being represented by deposits of mottled buff-brown clay. Set or cut into these levelling-up deposits was a vertical-sided and flat-bottomed trench, c 1.5 m wide and surviving up to 0.60 m above its base. This feature (F6) was traced along Trenches 2 and 3, its E-W axis apparently conforming to that of the southern edge of the infilled ditch beneath (Fig. 2a and b).

A dense layer of buff-yellow puddled clay at its base provided the foundation for a single laid course of large, squared lias limestone blocks. These were recorded only at the E end of Trench 2. Elsewhere they are represented by a thin layer of decayed sandy lime mortar, small stones and gravel, and angular chips of limestone with mortar adhering. Above this a much thicker deposit of buff/grey-green clay silt with a sparse scatter of small stone and charcoal filled the greater part of the cut (F6). Together, this cut and its fills undoubtedly represent the robbed foundations of a substantial mortared stone wall.

Trenches 2 and 3 also revealed several later features, many of which were superimposed upon the robbed-out remains of the wall. These included rubbish pits containing 18th-century material, two E-W boundary wall foundations, and more recent disturbances arising from the insertion of

drains, services and building foundations. Similar post-medieval and modern disturbances were recorded to the S along Trench 1, where for the most part the underlying natural stratigraphy of weathered lower lias clays survives quite close to the present day surface.

At the S extremity of Trench 1 excavation was halted by a roughly built but substantial drystone structure encountered just below the modern surface (F1). This was partly exposed as a segment of the N face of a sub-surface feature which evidently continued to the E and W of the excavation trench. Its identification as part of the structure of a functioning water channel seems most likely in view of the known existence of such a conduit beneath Silver Street, a little further to the W. The full extent and character of this structure was not investigated further to avoid its disturbance. More apparent was its secondary relationship to an earlier cut into the adjacent natural clays and mudstones (F2); evidently the N side of a ditch, whose NW-SE alignment was at variance with the apparent E-W alignment of the conduit (Fig. 2a and b). The full width or depth of the largely waterlogged dark grey-black silts and clay within this feature could not be determined. A range of medieval pottery suggested that it was in use until at least the early 16th century and that the stonework of the conduit had probably not been inserted into the ditch before that time.

### Interpretation

The results of this evaluation are of considerable importance to any appreciation and reconstruction of the development and layout of Glastonbury and its great medieval abbey. A more considered interpretation of the results ideally would require further research, but at this stage it is possible to reconstruct a likely sequence of events and suggest their significance.

Central to this interpretation are the discoveries in Trenches 2 and 3. Briefly, the sequence here was of a long-established and substantial ditch or watercourse, of unknown dimensions but aligned approximately E-W and becoming infilled with waterlogged silts. Late in its life a more

deliberate final infill and levelling-up of the depression takes place, linked with the need to provide a firmer foundation for a similarly aligned wall erected above the southern edge of the earlier ditch. Subsequently, this wall and its foundations are almost completely robbed out leaving only the ghost of a construction trench and successive backfilled robber trench. Dating evidence for these events is sparse. A single 13th-century sherd of pottery from the levelling-up material in the ditch provides a terminus post quem for wall construction, while features containing 18th-century material which disturb the robbed wall remains suggests its removal before that time. Also significant is the inferior stratigraphic relationship of what might otherwise have been interpreted as medieval burgage plot boundaries to the robbed wall (Fig. 2a), and the complete absence of any medieval rubbish pits or other contemporary deposits which would normally be expected so close to what is ostensibly a series of medieval urban burgages fronting onto the High Street of Glastonbury.

From this evidence it is apparent that a major linear ditched boundary, in all probability a watercourse, lay parallel to and no more than 10 m S of the High Street. Subsequently, its perpetuation as a stone boundary wall was achieved through a levelling-up and final obliteration of what was by then a heavily silted up ditch, to provide a more secure foundation for that wall. There was no evidence of any inner boundary to this primary ditch, as for example an accompanying wall, fence or embankment to the S. The relatively thin layers of overburden above natural in Trench 1, and the dumps of clean backfilled clays and redeposited natural sealing the upper ditch silts, suggest at least the possibility of an inner bank (originally derived from excavation of the ditch), completely obliterated in the backfilling process to leave only a truncated surface to the south.

A projection westwards of the wall alignment (and by implication that of the ditch also) suggests the site of the Abbey's North Gate at the turn of Silver Street, to be the objective (Figs. 1b and 2a). This observation, together with the evidence recorded in the excavation, strongly favours an interpretation of the features discovered as successive definitions of Glastonbury Abbey's medieval precinct boundary to the N. If such a hypothesis be accepted the wall foundation may well be that provided by

Abbot Frome around 1420, and successor to an earlier definition of the precinct - a vallum monasterii - laid out almost certainly at some time before the 13th century.

Upon historical grounds it would be reasonable to assign the demolition of the second-phase boundary wall to a time following the Dissolution of 1539. This will have permitted a southward extension of the burgages belonging to the High Street frontage properties, which are presumed to have already existed and been bounded by the wall and its predecessor up until that time. This has implications both for the origin of Silver Street and for the identity of the surviving precinct wall which flanks it to the S at its eastern end. The evidence of the conduit and its predecessor, recorded at the southern extremity of Trench 1, must now be considered.

Despite a very limited exposure, the conduit appears to have been provided as the replacement for a medieval ditch, probably functioning as an open watercourse which had become largely silted up by the 16th century. By implication, this must have lain within the medieval Abbey precinct, while its successor - the conduit - could be interpreted as a post-Dissolution arrangement provided when Silver Street was laid out to serve the rear of the newly-extended High Street properties. The alignment of the earlier ditch, apparently parallel with Silver Street, must also be considered. An alternative hypothesis would suggest that Silver Street originated as an internal alignment within the medieval precinct, possibly a track or route from the North Gate which skirted the Abbey church. Its alignment in this area will have been emphasised by the watercourse bounding it to the north, while peripheral buildings and arrangements partly revealed in the excavations of 1978 (Ellis) may have flanked such a route to the south.

#### Summary and Recommendations

In the course of what was a minimal and strictly limited archaeological evaluation, results of considerable significance have emerged. The identification (for the first time) of what must surely be the northern boundary to the Glastonbury Abbey precinct east of the North Gate, first as a vallum monasterii and then as a mortared wall, has major implications.



Whatever its relationship may be to a pre-Conquest/Anglo-Saxon or ?earlier precinct (Radford 1958), this new boundary fits well with a hypothesis which would see the medieval abbey as enclosed within a larger rectangular precinct from before the 13th century (Fig. 1b). This layout may well be linked with the foundation and layout of the medieval borough, principally to the north of the precinct - the High Street alignment thus conforming closely with the north boundary for its full length (Aston and Leech 1977). The development of urban properties along the S frontage of the High Street would have been restricted to the rear but by no means impossible.

Within the precinct a more complex sequence of events and arrangements is apparent in this area. The result of the 1978 excavations (op.cit.) were both complementary and yet contradictory in part to the new discoveries. Many problems of interpretation still remain from that work but it is apparent that most, if not all of the precinct wall investigated then was a post-Dissolution creation. The identity of the surviving wall to the E on Silver Street will now require some reassessment since this has always been regarded as part of the ?15th-century precinct wall. Questions as to the origin and identity of Silver Street itself are also raised by this latest evaluation. The ditch/watercourse, subsequently replaced by a stone-lined conduit in the ?16th century, is an important feature here. In origin this watercourse is a natural one; a stream issuing from Bushy Combe below Chalice Hill to the E is still carried by the conduit. Prior to this an open ditch, flanking a forerunner of Silver Street or determining its post-Dissolution alignment, carried this flow. Even earlier, the ditch of the vallum monasterii to the N may have taken this stream, possibly adapted from an originally natural watercourse.

The particular archaeological interest of this site, combined with the proposals for its development, suggest the need for a follow up which requires the integration of further field recording with groundworks in the course of development. Of major interest will be observation of any further excavation required across the precinct boundary, and those which may reveal further details of the conduit and its forerunner ditch.

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. An archaeological watching brief be maintained during the course of below-ground excavations for foundations and services, and time be made available for recording of any stratigraphic information so revealed.
2. If possible an archaeological investigation be permitted of an area to the N of the E termination of Trench 3. This by means of a machine and hand-excavated trench in an attempt to establish the full width of the vallum monasterii and to obtain more evidence to date the sequence of events here.
3. Preparation and submission of a more fully documented report on the discoveries here and their implications, to the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for publication.

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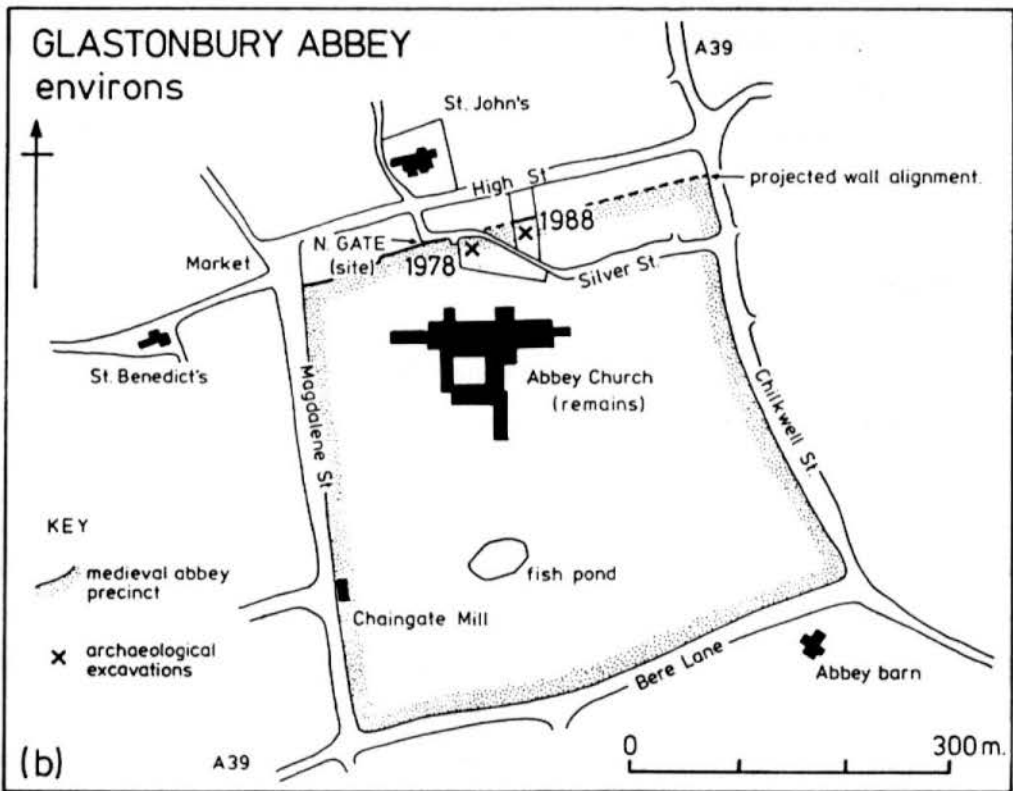
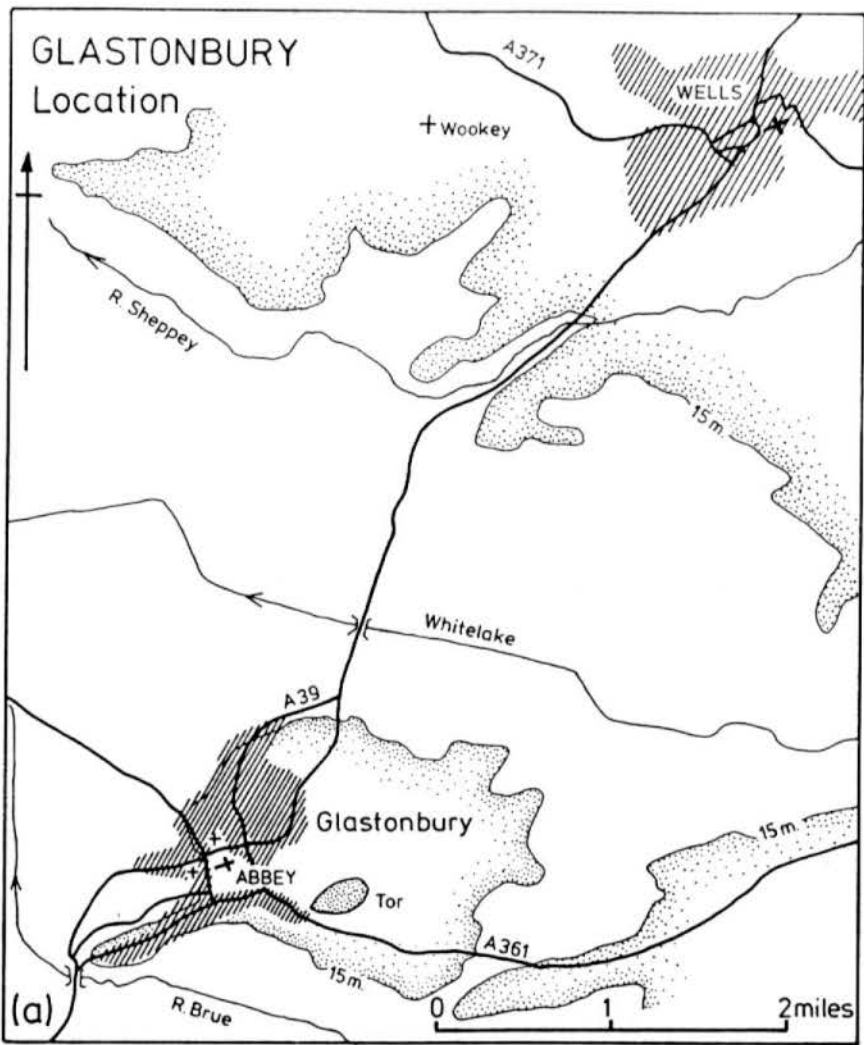
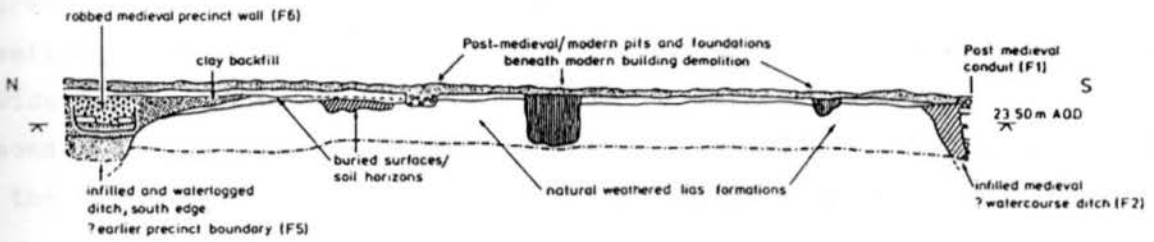
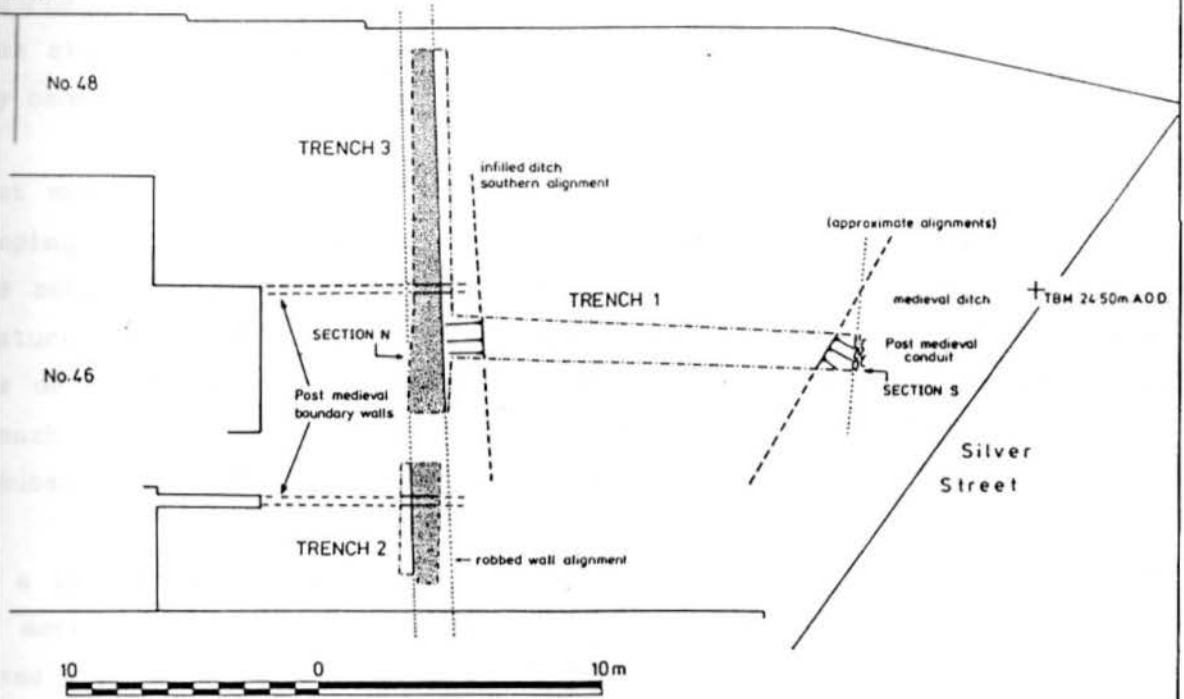


Figure 1

GLASTONBURY Silver St. 1988  
Archaeological Evaluation

(a) PLAN



(b) SIMPLIFIED ARCHAEOLOGICAL SECTION  
Trenches 1 and 3, north-south

Figure 2