

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**Shrewsbury Abbey Church
Excavations for new drainage
works, 1992**

An Interim Report

by
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1.0: Introduction

As a preliminary stage in restoration works proposed for the fabric of the Abbey Church, Shrewsbury, the provision of storm and foul water drains was required around the building. Since the Abbey site, its immediate surrounds and the former area of the medieval precinct is scheduled as an Ancient Monument, permission to carry out excavations for the drainage systems was subject to conditions specified by the Secretary of State, Department of National Heritage. Accordingly, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned as archaeological contractors by the Church of England, through the vicar and parish council of Holy Cross, Shrewsbury, and subject also to a consent by license from the Diocese.

Archaeological excavation and recording was specified as the principal requirement of the Scheduled Monument Consent, in advance of pipe-laying and other below-ground works connected with the drainage scheme.

2.0: The Site (Fig. 1a and b)

The present church represents a substantial survival of the former medieval Benedictine Abbey Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, its transepts and east end having been demolished following the Reformation, though partially rebuilt towards the end of the 19th century. The former Abbey Precinct lay mainly to the south and east of the church, the only significant upstanding survival being the remains of the 'Old Infirmary' to the west. The Abbey faces the main eastern route exiting from Shrewsbury via the English Bridge across the River Severn. The route, Abbey Foregate, passed alongside the north side of the precinct and its church, and was the focus for an eastern suburb to the medieval town. In 1836 a new and more direct route for this road was created by Thomas Telford, cutting through

the former precinct and its remains and passing south of the Abbey Church. Thus, today the site occupies a triangular piece of land, principally a medieval and post-medieval graveyard to the north and east, bounded north by the old Abbey Foregate and south by its 19th-century successor.

Previous archaeological discoveries on the site have been limited, no formal excavations or detailed structural recording being undertaken prior to works during the mid-1980s by BUFAU. These focused upon the 'Old Infirmary' remains and the site of a probable kitchen block along the south-western precinct boundary (Fig. 1b) (BUFAU 1987). Structural recording was also undertaken at this time upon the surviving fragments of the North and South Transepts of the Abbey Church (Moffett 1986). The earliest recorded excavations took place in 1819 on the site of the West Cloister walk, when Norman and 13th-century architectural remains were recovered (Owen and Blakeway 1825). Owen and Blakeway's plan of 1825 reconstructs something of the former Abbey Church and its precinct layout. No further information was recorded during the construction of Telford's new road shortly afterwards, but some observations were made in 1896 (Cranage 1912) when a sewer was dug along the line of the road. Once again remains of the cloisters were intercepted, together with those of the former Chapter House which was found to have had an apsidal east end; beneath which were earlier burials encased in charcoal.

3.0: Strategy and Method

In discussion with the architects for the scheme (Catterall Morris Jaboor) and other interested parties, including the church authorities and English Heritage, the routes for the drains which combined most effective drainage with minimum

anticipated disturbance of archaeological remains were agreed upon. Some degree of flexibility was required as the work progressed, but it was intended that the greater part of the drainage trench lines and manhole chamber pits should be excavated archaeologically.

The drainage scheme layout finally agreed upon (Drawing no. 787.10.D., Catterall Morris Jaboor) formed the basis for laying out and excavating the trenches by BUFAU during August and early September 1992. Throughout this period close liaison was maintained with the architect, Mr. David Morris, the drainage contractor, Mr. Rodney Slee, and the vicar, Rev. Ian Ross. This was necessitated by circumstances which arose throughout the course of the work, on occasion modifying the detailed excavation specifications and/or the original layout of the scheme. These modifications are referred to more specifically in the account of the results (4.0, below); the final layout of trenches is shown on Fig. 2.

The trenches were either cut by hand or where appropriate, use was made of a mechanical mini-excavator to remove the less archaeologically-sensitive deposits. In several instances short lengths of trench were left for excavation by the drainage contractor due to access difficulties during the period of the archaeological works. In archaeologically-sensitive areas these excavations were monitored by BUFAU.

Throughout, features and deposits of archaeological significance were identified and recorded by a combination of written pro-forma field records, photography and detailed scale drawing. Finds in association with identified features and deposits were collected and recorded, and have been processed and identified at the University of Birmingham. One condition of the Faculty for excavation granted by the Diocese specified the reinterment of any human remains encountered, and this will be accomplished within the consecrated Abbey grounds in due course.

4.0: Results

For the purposes of archaeological recording and for this account it is convenient to group the trenches according to their locations around the church (Fig. 2). The information recorded in

these trench groups (A–H) is reviewed briefly here, and its significance considered in the following section (5.0) of this report.

Area A (Figs. 2 and 3)

The drains in this area formed a separate system at the north east corner of the existing church, their purpose being to carry water away from this corner of the building out to a soakaway within the churchyard. Several modifications to the planned layout were required before and during excavation. Close to the church it was soon established that two sets of late 19th-century earthenware drainpipes carried water away eastwards from existing downpipes here, this end of the church having been rebuilt by J.L. Pearson in 1886. Both had cut through a substantial north–south aligned plinth or foundation of crushed mortar and stone rubble masonry (F103). Floor or make-up deposits associated with this lay to the west, cut at one point by an east–west burial. All these elements are interpreted as having been internal to the former Choir of the medieval Abbey Church, and it was resolved to re-use the 19th-century drain trenches, dispense with a junction manhole in this corner, and thus retain the surviving archaeology intact.

Further east the combined 19th-century pipe trench could be followed for part of the proposed new alignment to the soakaway, before turning away to the south. Excavation of the new drainage trench and soakaway pit was continued thereafter by hand through a succession of archaeological deposits. Once again, the alignment of this element was modified slightly due to the proximity of 19th-century grave vaults and a large mature tree. Within this eastern extension the most coherent features were a spread of mortar and stone demolition rubble near the top; successive gravel and rubble layers overlying a broad, massive drystone platform (F108) crossing the trench diagonally NW–SE; and the edge of a deep parallel cut (F107) into underlying natural gravel to the north east and over 1.5m below the modern graveyard surface. All these features are presumably build-up associated with the Choir of the medieval Abbey Church, although the platform foundation may relate to an earlier phase of building. A more

specific interpretation was limited in such a restricted trench.

Area B (Fig. 2)

This was another separate system of drainage trenches extending from the south east corner of the present church building. The trenches were excavated mechanically along another 19th-century drainage run to a deeper soakaway pit into the natural gravel. None of the trenches revealed any evidence of medieval structures or deposits, although the 19th-century drainage cuts had resulted in over 1.0m depth of disturbance. Elsewhere, up to 0.80m of mixed sandy soil lay between the modern turf and topsoil and the underlying natural gravel. This deposit is interpreted as post-medieval graveyard make-up and excavation soil, and the remains of several disturbed inhumation burials were recovered during its excavation.

Area C (Figs. 2 and 3)

This group of drainage trenches and inspection chamber pits were designed to take water from the south side of the building, and are continued west in Area D (4.4 below). Prior to their excavation the presence of a shrubbery with small trees made access and routing difficult here, problems further compounded by archaeological discoveries. All trenches in Areas C and D were dug by hand.

In the Area C trenches a considerable overburden of modern soil buried deposits of stone and soil debris derived from the demolition of former buildings. The most substantial feature encountered was segments of a well-dressed, mortared wall foundation of red sandstone (F301/F302), c.0.90m wide and aligned E-W, almost parallel and set c.3.0m out from the south wall of the Abbey Church. This lay between c.0.50m and 0.70m beneath the modern surface and was interpreted as the outer wall of the medieval North Cloister walk. In view of this interpretation and the wall's position, some modifications to the drainage trench depths and locations were agreed in this area. By moving the position of the main E-W drain run, and thus the inspection chambers, slightly further south, and reducing their originally specified depth somewhat, it was possible to minimise disturbance to the wall foundations and deposits associated with it.

Between the outer south wall of the church and the line of the cloister wall, linking trenches from the existing roof drainage downpipes cut across the surviving top of the wall (sometimes disturbing its upper course) but did not penetrate right through debris which had been dumped on either side. This material yielded fragments of dressed Grinshill sandstone, 13th/14th-century window tracery and stamped and glazed floor tile fragments, as well as occasional 18th-century pottery and clay pipe stems, and should represent debris from the post-medieval demolition of the cloister range. At only one point, at the base of the western manhole chamber pit just beside the South Door pathway, was an original floor level contemporary with the Cloister wall, reached. This comprised worn red sandstone flags and what may have been a step out into the Cloister Garth. Immediately to the west, in a narrow trench cut through the South Door path by the drainage contractors, was recorded a N-S aligned wall foundation. This is interpreted as the corner of the outer wall to the West Cloister walk.

Area D (Figs. 2 and 3)

The set of trenches which drain the south side of the church continue west beyond the path to the South Door as far as another path which runs along the West Front of the abbey. These are located on the site of a Dormitory building which flanked the west side of the Abbey Cloisters. The lowest levels reached here were cobbled floors, cut through at the east and west extremities of the excavations by N-S aligned parallel trenches (F403 and F404). These occupy approximately the positions of the east and west walls of the former Dormitory, as depicted by Owen and Blakeway (1825), and are interpreted as the robbed-out wall lines. The unmortared foundation courses of a narrow, E-W aligned internal partition wall (F403) were also exposed in the eastern drainage trench. This may represent the south side wall foundation of a narrow passage (slype?) through the West Range, since a door is shown on the west elevation here in a print by John Buckler of the 1820s; although the foundation may have been a later?post-medieval feature. A succession of deposits including a small hearth, ash layers and gravel make-up, with some 17th-18th century pottery, suggests the later use of this medieval building prior to its

destruction and removal, when Telford's new Abbey Foregate road was built across it.

Areas E and F (Fig. 2)

These trenches link the south side drainage system, across the West Front of the abbey, to a connection with the main surface water drains beneath the old Abbey Foregate beyond the north west corner of the building. It was not possible to excavate archaeologically this link from the foul and surface water inspection chamber pits at this corner (Area F), nor the link beneath the path separating Areas D and E, although the latter was observed. A considerable depth of post-medieval overburden was present throughout, within which were recorded two E-W aligned, mortared brick and stone wall foundations (F502 and F503) towards the south end. Alluvium and gravel deposits of natural origin were recorded from c.0.60m below the modern surface in the lowest levels of trench excavation, much of which was accomplished by machine. Further north and beyond the West Door to the Abbey c.1.0m of post-medieval build-up sealed a massive foundation of mortared sandstone blocks and rubble (F501), terminating in the base of the trench within the underlying natural gravel (at over 1.0m below the modern surface) but continuing east towards the church. This is suspected to be of medieval origin and a cobbled surface continues northwards from it. The cobbles were exposed more extensively in the trenches of Area F, where their surface was recorded up to 1.0m below the post-medieval overburden, but sloping up gradually towards the north west corner of the Abbey. Much of the later overburden appears to be of 18th and 19th-century origin, and contains some rubble which may derive from demolition of buildings within the Abbey precinct as well as further temporary horizons of cobbled yards or paths. Although not excavated archaeologically, trenches linking Area F to mains connections beneath Abbey Foregate were dug wholly through these deposits.

Area G (Fig. 2)

Between the North Door of the Abbey church and its north west corner, trenches for both foul and surface drainage had to be accommodated and a new mains water supply pipe provided. Access requirements and space restrictions here

did not allow simultaneous excavation of all the trenches required. Those examined archaeologically comprised the two required for manholes and the link trench towards the North Door and Area H to the east.

Once again, a considerable build-up of post-medieval deposits were encountered, continuing directly from that recorded around the West Front of the building. Although disturbed in places by other earlier excavations for drainage and services, a well-compacted cobbled surface, equivalent to that seen in Areas E and F, was reached towards the bottom of the 1992 excavation trenches. This surface comprised successive layers of cobbling in places, and rose to within 0.40m of the modern ground level closest to the church. Beneath the North Porch path paving and foundations this horizon merged into sequences of interleaved gravels representing earlier paths here. The depth of excavation required for the new drainage here and to the west revealed a thick deposit of alluvial silt beneath the paths and cobbled surfaces, but no other archaeological features or deposits. In view of the observations made in this first set of trenches, it was judged that excavation of the remainder at a more convenient later date could be undertaken by the drainage contractor without further risk to any sensitive archaeological remains in this area.

Area H (Fig. 2)

A set of trenches were dug between the North Transept and the North Porch of the abbey church. This whole area was used for burial during the 19th century and earlier, although few gravestones survive here now. Excavation by hand and machine to the required trench depths revealed a mixed stratum (c.0.50m deep) of sandy soil beneath the topsoil, containing several articulated inhumation burials. No surface grave markers were visible in this area and few of the grave cuts were clearly defined in this disturbed deposit. Beneath it an alluvial clay/silt was encountered at variable depths, disturbed in places by the deeper grave cuts from above.

There was no indication of other archaeological features or levels which might have been contemporary or associated directly with the medieval Abbey Church. At the base of

the existing drainage pipes descending from the roof, excavation of the corresponding trenches revealed the foundation plinth of the building to be set into the alluvium on this side, although no corresponding medieval ground level appeared to have survived the subsequent post-medieval graveyard disturbances and deposits. Beneath some 0.30m of alluvium removed in the western manhole excavation an uneven horizon of natural river gravel was exposed.

5.0: Discussion

The value and coherence of archaeological results obtained during this project must necessarily be limited by the requirements for the excavations in the first place. However, it was possible to interpret most of the features and deposits encountered and relate them to a historical framework for the Abbey and its environs. It was perhaps fortunate that the drainage scheme specifications retained sufficient flexibility to permit some variation in depth and positioning of trenches at points where the most sensitive archaeological features and deposits were encountered. Wherever possible, preservation of those elements belonging to the medieval abbey and its precinct was the priority, although inevitably this has restricted somewhat our understanding of those components which were revealed.

At the commencement of the project two areas of particular sensitivity were identified, at the east end of the present church and along its south side. Only at the north east corner (Area A) were remains of the medieval east end of the church identified, though difficult to interpret. The present late Victorian Choir built by Pearson purports to follow closely the earlier line of the medieval building, a much shorter and narrower Lady Chapel to the east is set well within the medieval Choir. What must surely represent internal floor levels, a burial and cross wall foundation, possibly for a chapel, were certainly present immediately outside the north wall of the Victorian east end. Unfortunately, the presence of large Victorian tomb vaults in the churchyard here prevented any observation of the north wall foundations to the medieval Choir, and may indeed have destroyed much of them. More puzzling was the presence of the NW-SE aligned

?wall foundation or platform (F108) further east, where the requirements for the drainage scheme necessitated the excavation of a deep soakaway pit. Deep layers of rubble and ?floor makeup in this half of the Area A trench do, however, suggest that it still lay within the confines of the medieval Choir and thus that its north wall line lies just beyond and parallel with this trench, to the north. It should be noted that in the narrow confines of the excavated trench the precise orientation of F108 is somewhat uncertain, but that it appears to be the earliest feature in the sequence here. There is no direct evidence of the form or layout of the original Norman east end of the Abbey Church, but the possibility of an apsidal east end, subsequently replaced and its foundations buried beneath the later medieval Choir, are worthy of consideration as a possible explanation for the apparent orientation of this feature. A failure to identify any remains of the medieval church on the south east side was surprising, even despite extensive disturbance caused by the Victorian drainage here.

Along the south side of the Abbey Church lay the Cloisters, of which the outer (south) wall foundation of the North Cloister walk was the most substantial discovery in the trenches of Area C. Assuming this identification to be correct, a narrow cloister walk, no more than 3m wide, must be envisaged. Contemporary floor levels were not encountered here except at the south west exterior corner, where there appears to be the remains of a step out into the Cloister Garth through an opening in the outer (east) wall of the West Cloister walk at its junction with the North walk. Debris overlying these foundations included mortar and dressed masonry, fragments of glazed and decorated floor tile, and portions of Grinshill sandstone mouldings and window tracery; material almost certainly derived from the former Cloister range.

The west side of the Cloisters was flanked by a long N-S aligned building identified by Owen and Blakeway (1825) as the monks' Dormitory. Trenches in Area D appear to have located the robbed-out east and west side walls of this building, and a contemporary cobbled interior floor level. There is no evidence surviving above ground today of the junction of these walls

with the south wall of the church. Evidence for post-Dissolution use of this building survived in the form of rough cobbled floor levels and make-up within the confines of its two outer wall positions. This building was evidently swept away at the time of Telford's building of the new Abbey Foregate.

Nowhere along the south side of the church was it possible to link medieval structures or horizons to the foundations of the building itself. A 19th-century stylobate drainage channel composed of large stone blocks lay alongside the building, and the depth of trenches cut from the existing downpipes to connect into the new drainage system was insufficient to penetrate through the zone of recent disturbance at the foot of the wall caused by this feature and other activities.

Although more difficult to interpret, some of the most unexpected results were obtained in those trenches across the West Front of the church. There was no evidence for the Abbey precinct wall or gate foundations opening onto Abbey Foregate, which should have run out from the middle buttress south of the West Door. Further north, the substantial mortared foundations seen only in the east side of the trench appear to be of medieval origin and might represent an alternative, though unlikely location for the precinct wall/gatehouse. Extending north from this feature, and indeed around the north side of the church, extensive cobbled yard surfaces now lie up to 1m beneath 18th and 19th-century overburden. These were probably contiguous with the old Abbey Foregate street surface, and slope up towards the north and west sides of the building, though their junction at its base was not revealed. To the north west they

imply a street level for the original Abbey Foregate in medieval times at least 1.0m below its present position.

Excepting the continuation of cobbled yard surfaces eastwards around the Abbey church as far as the North Door, there was no evidence of contemporary medieval structures or remains encountered in the northern drainage trenches. Post-medieval burials in the churchyard to the north may have destroyed some evidence, although this area was probably either outside the Abbey precinct as a public open space, or being peripheral to it saw little significant activity.

The underlying natural stratigraphy of the Abbey site was encountered at several locations around its periphery. The river terrace gravels upon which the church was founded were frequently encountered one metre or less beneath present ground level. Thin deposits of alluvium overlying the gravels to the west and north reflect subsequent and periodic river inundations, mainly affecting the lower end of the gravel spur, closest to the River Severn.

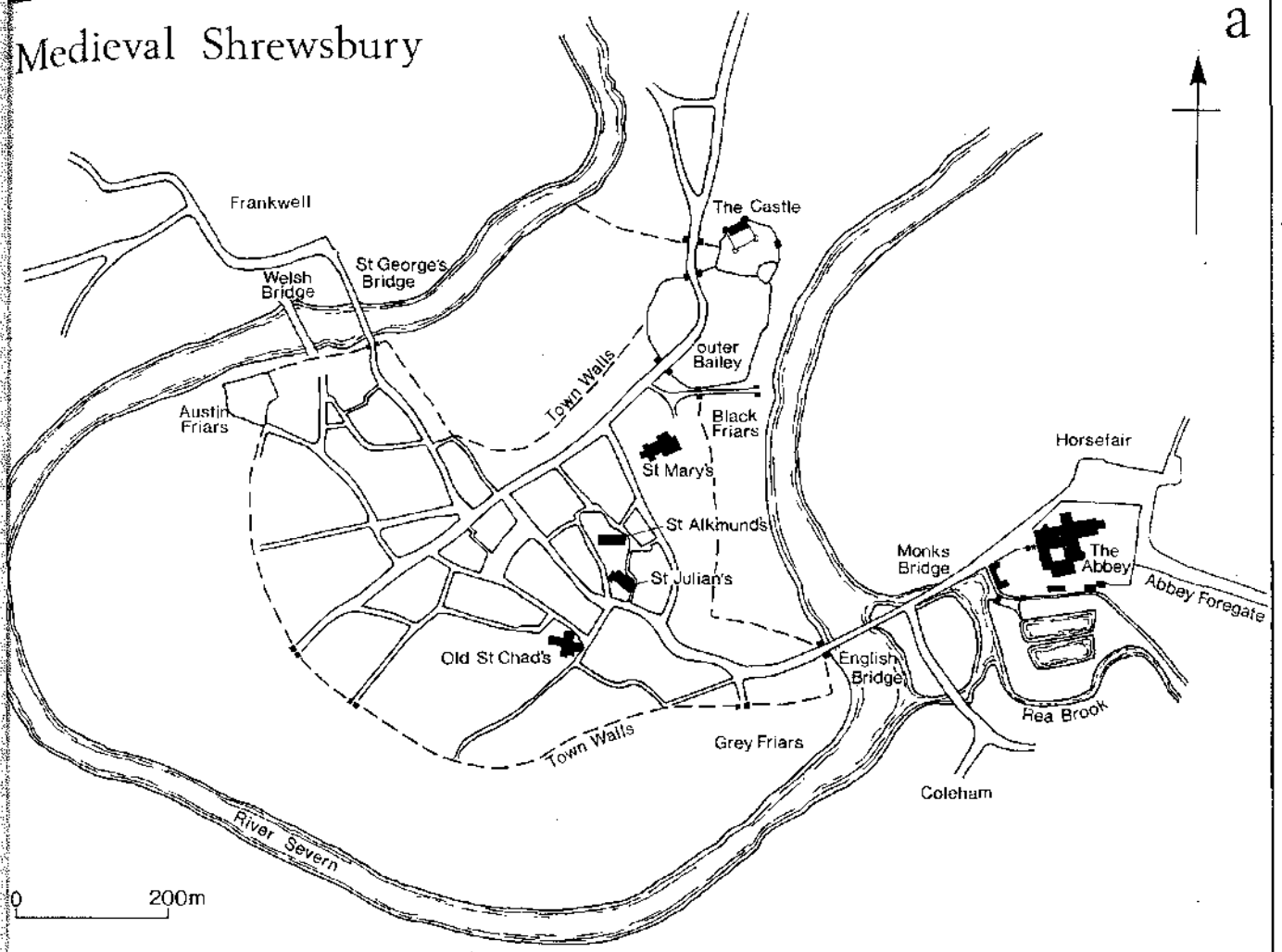
6.0: Acknowledgements

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Medieval Shrewsbury



Shrewsbury Abbey Precinct Historic Features

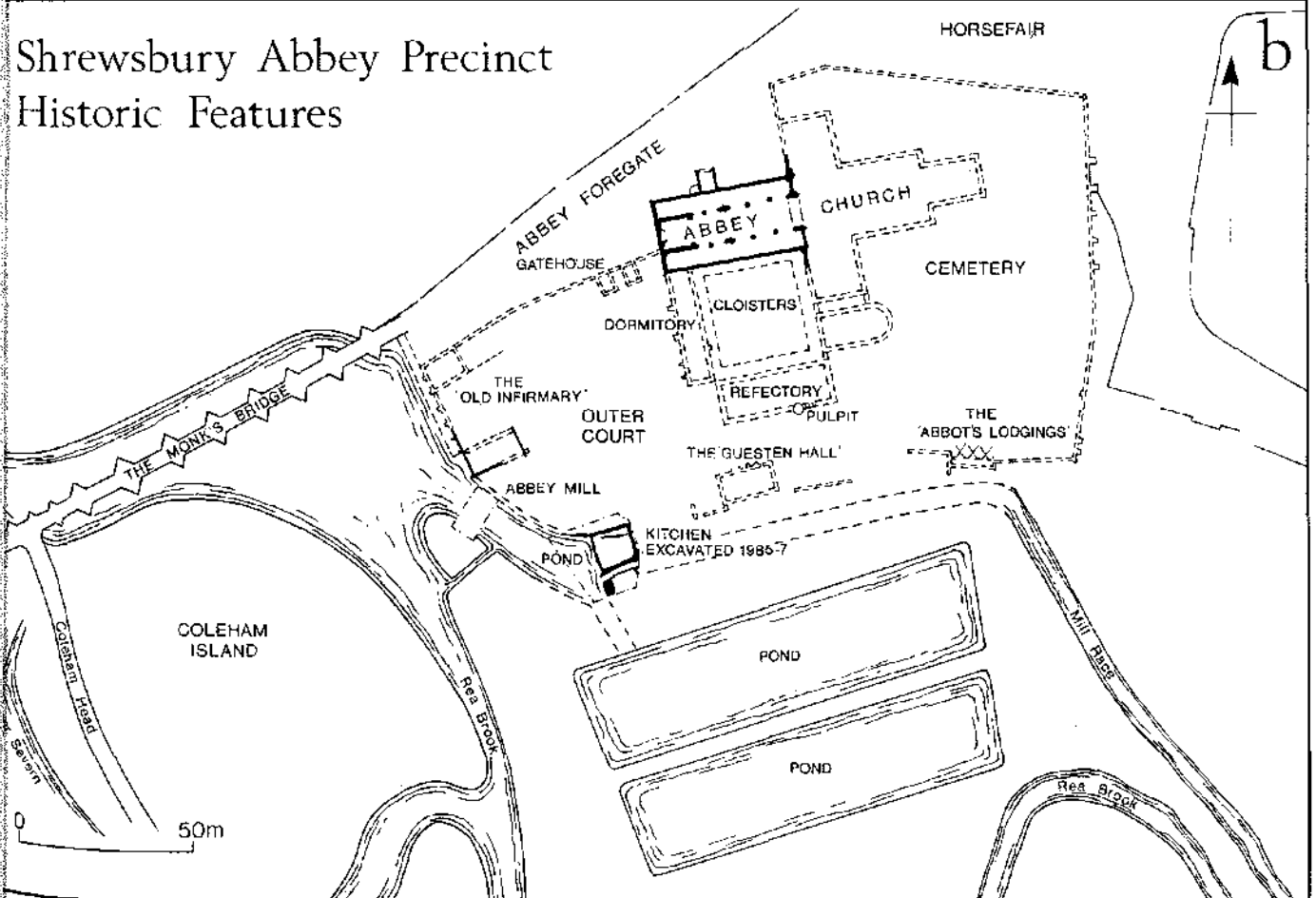


Figure 1

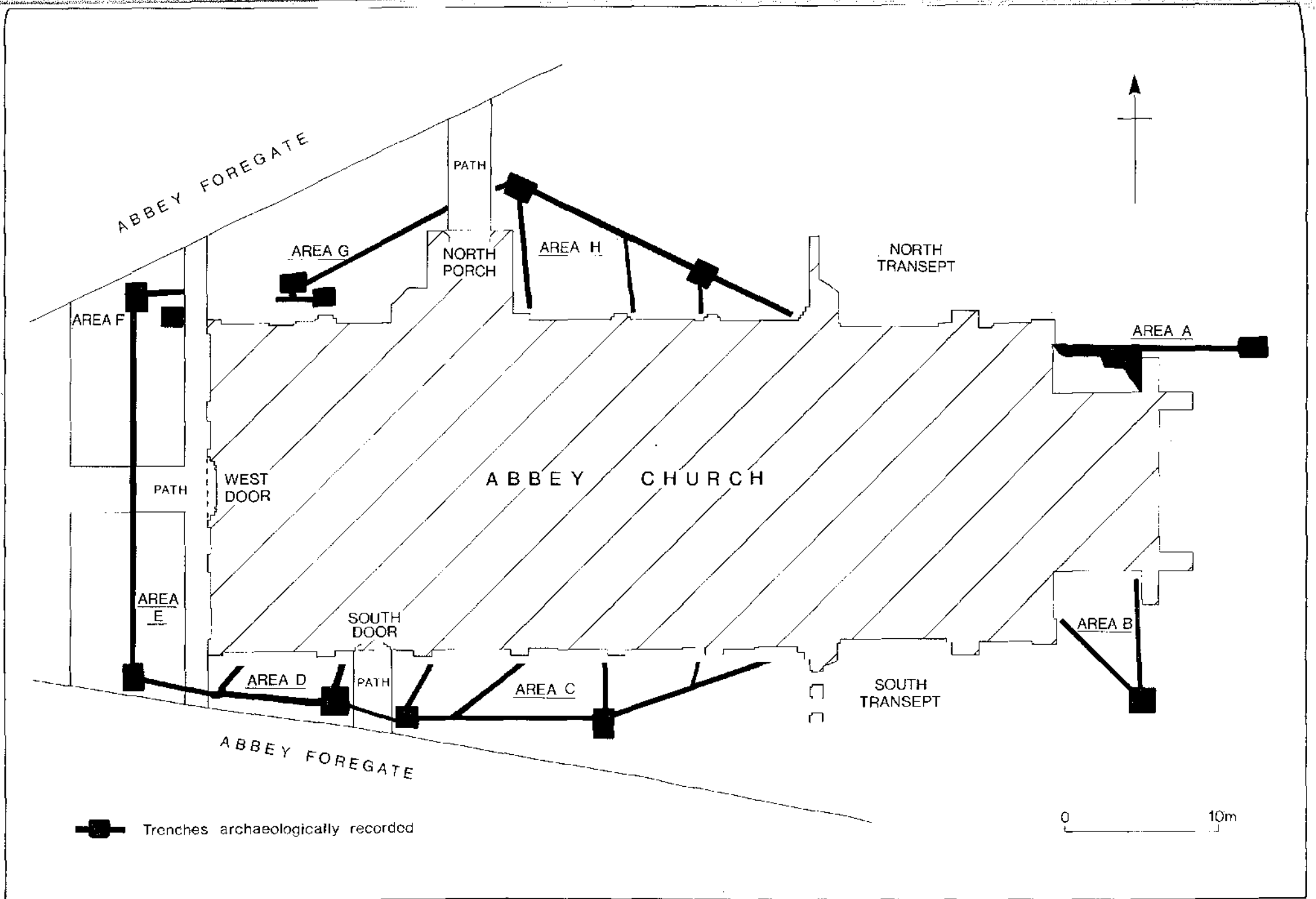


Figure 2

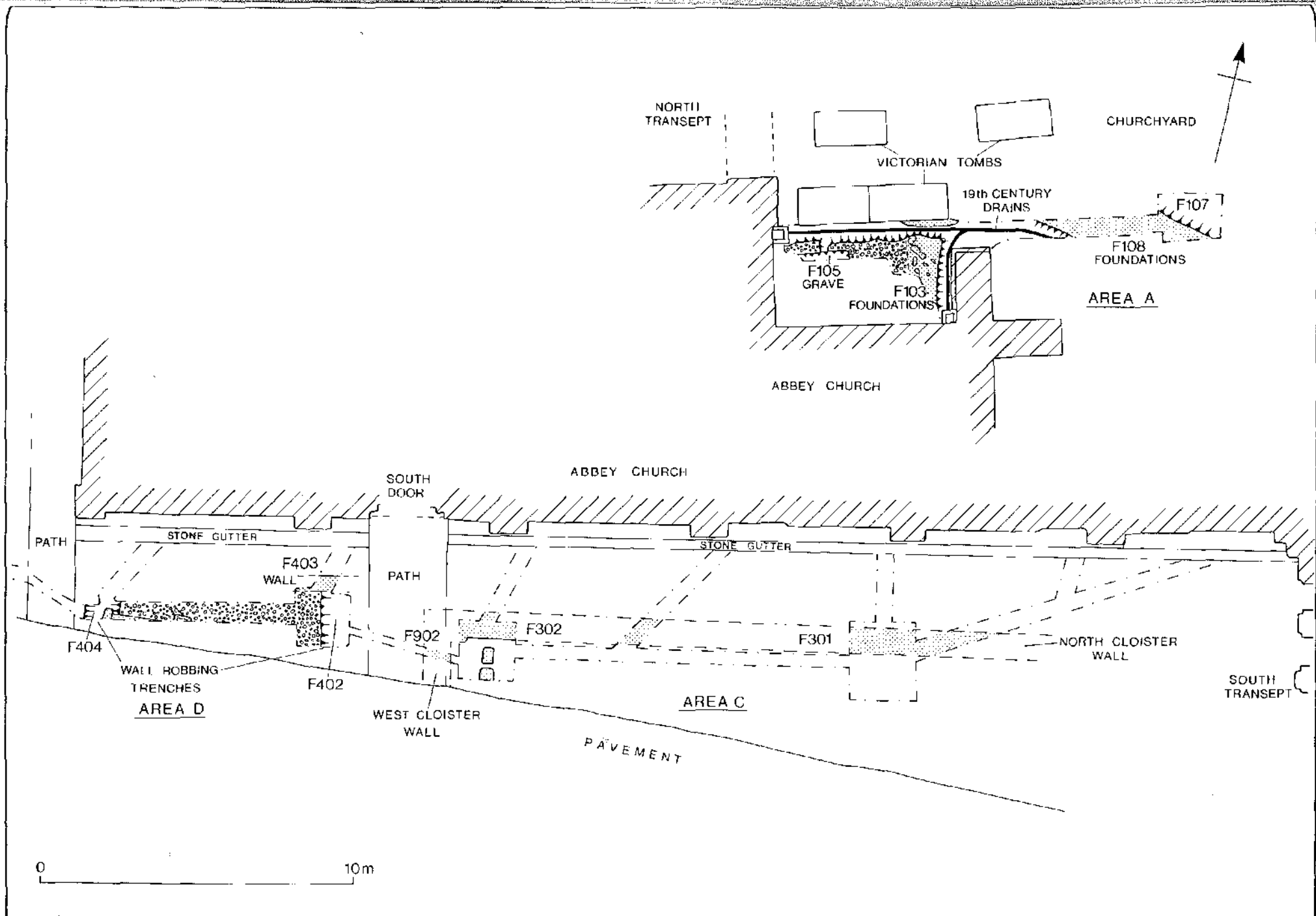


Figure 3