



**An Archaeological Watching Brief at
Durford Abbey Farm,
West Sussex**

10th December 2003

SUMMARY

The laying of a new water main presented the first opportunity to record the below ground remains of the medieval monastery at Durford Abbey Farm, little or nothing of which was thought to survive above ground. The foundations for the Abbey church were revealed at a surprisingly shallow depth, in places protruding from the ground. To the north the monastery graveyard was crossed, with six graves visible in the sides of the water main trench. To the south a few possible additional medieval features were found. Evidence was also recovered for the post-medieval use of the site, involving several phases of re-building of what was the Abbot's lodgings and the re-development of the rest of the monastery into a farm.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

1. Durford Abbey Farm lies upon the site of the medieval monastery of Durford, the remains of which are protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (National Monument No: 29280).
2. In order to re-lay a water main the current owners of Durford Abbey Farm obtained Scheduled Monument Consent to undertake the work. A condition of this consent was a requirement for archaeological supervision of any ground works, and the submission of a report detailing what was found. This archaeological supervision took place from Tuesday 30th September until Monday 6th October.

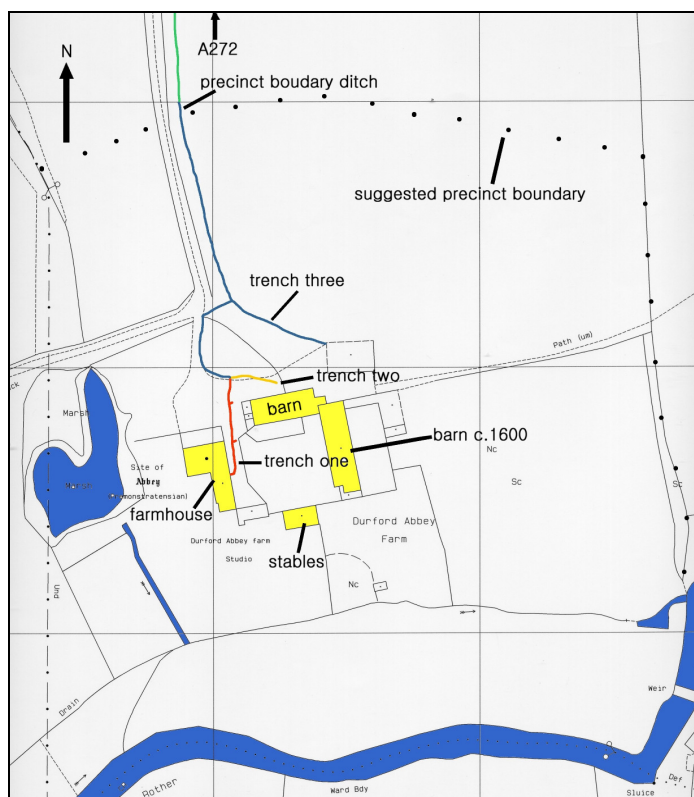


Figure 1 Plan of Durford Abbey Farm, indicating location of the trenches. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. Licence No. AL100036068.

3. The route of the water main trench is shown in **figure 1**. The sections of the water main covered by the Schedule have been subdivided into three for the purposes of this report, numbered trenches one to three. The stretch which lay outside it to the north was given a cursory examination, but nothing of archaeological interest was noted.

WEST SUSSEX ARCHAEOLOGY

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Durford Abbey Farm lies in the parish of Rogate in West Sussex, approximately 1½ miles to the east of Petersfield, and 300m south of the A272 (NGR SU 7779 2336). The Farm sits upon the sands of the Sandgate Beds, just to the north of the River Rother, at c. 50m OD.

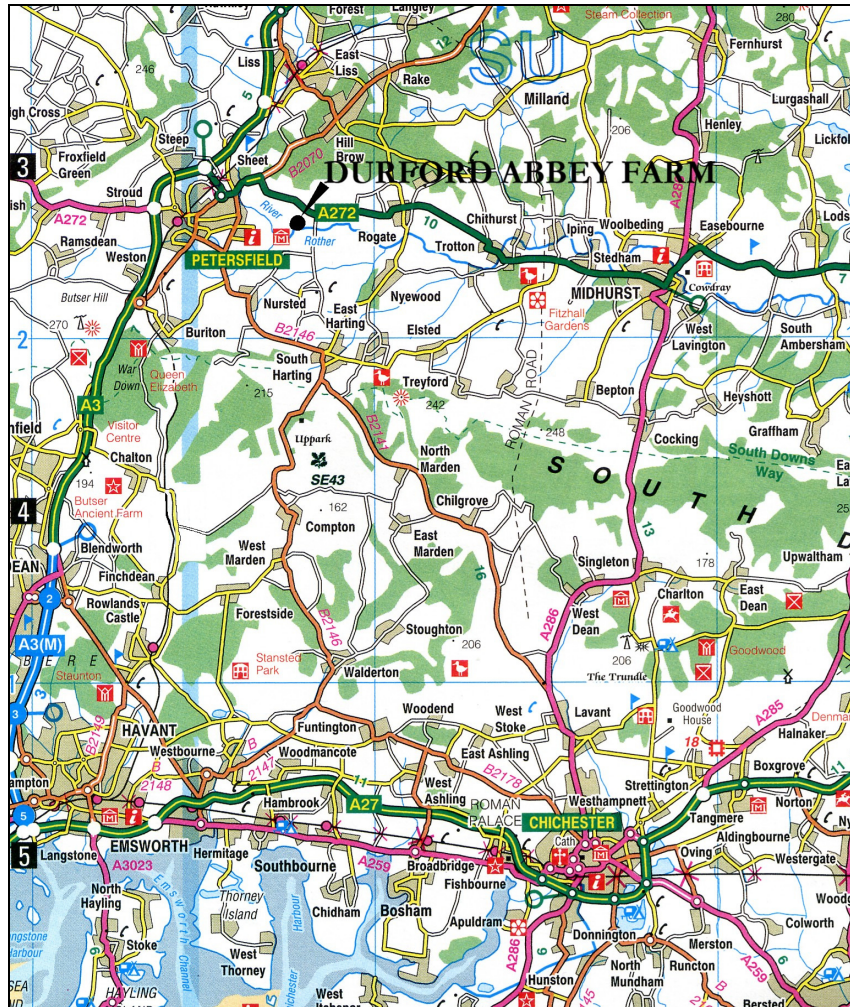


Figure 2 Map showing the location of Durford Abbey Farm. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. Licence No. AL100036068.

2. The medieval Premonstratensian monastery at Durford was founded by Henry Hussey, Lord of the Manor of Harting, some time before AD 1161. The abbey was one of the smaller monasteries, probably with about ten or so canons attached to it. From the 14th century the abbey fell into decline, with significant damage to its buildings left un-repaired. In 1536 it was suppressed as part of the Dissolution carried out under the authority of Henry VIII. It then passed into private ownership up to the present day.
3. No previous archaeological excavations have been undertaken on the site, and all our current knowledge stems from observations of what is visible above ground. Various fragments of medieval masonry are to be seen in a number of walls around the property, but it is thought probable that nothing survives of the Abbey buildings themselves, excepting buried remains.

WEST SUSSEX ARCHAEOLOGY

TRENCH SUMMARY

- Trench one** ran parallel to the east face of the current farm house, following the line of an existing water main. Two extensions were dug leading off from this trench. To the south a short stretch was excavated in order to lay a new garden tap. To the north, at a point in line with the north wall of the northern barn, an attempt was made to turn east with the water main trench, leaving the line of its predecessor. This extension was immediately abandoned when it became clear that the medieval graveyard still existed in this area and at shallow depth.

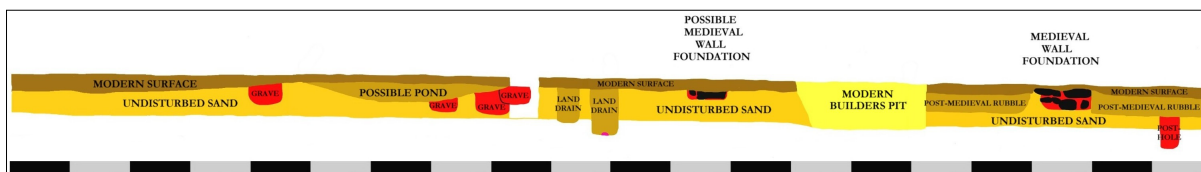


Figure 3 Layers visible in the eastern face of trench one, north part. Scale is 20m.

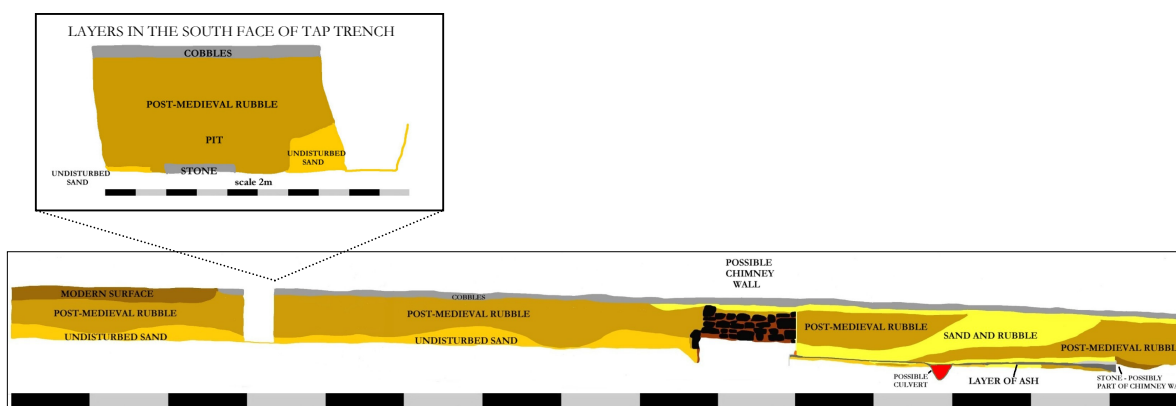


Figure 4 Layers visible in the eastern face of trench one, south part. Scale is 15m.

- Trench two** ran roughly parallel to the north face of the northern barn. It was initially dug for the water main, but was subsequently used instead for an oil pipe, after the water main was diverted into trench three following the discovery of more graves. The trench had been intended to pass to the north of the medieval graveyard, but this proved impossible.

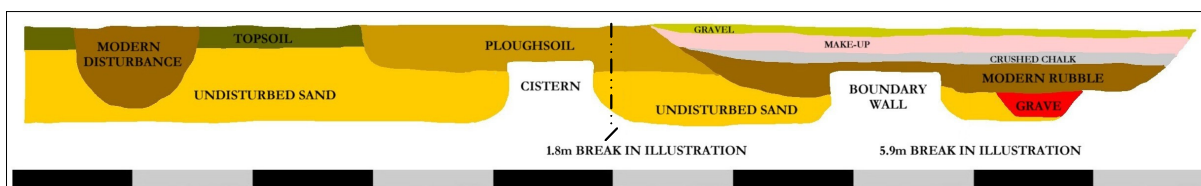


Figure 5 Layers visible in the north face of trench two. Scale is 10m.

- Trench three** ran from the northern end of trench one, through the current drive entrance, and into the arable field to the east of the drive. At this point it divided into two, one arm running north to the A272, and the other running east to a field barn. No archaeological deposits were visible in this trench, save for the upper layer of the precinct ditch where the water main trench left the scheduled area. Three layers were consistently seen in the trench, the undisturbed sands and gravels of the Sandgate beds, a thin layer of sandy subsoil, and a sandy topsoil or ploughsoil.

Timeline

1160 (c.) Henry Hussey grants lands to the Premonstratensian order to build the Abbey at Durford. He allows them to use stone from any quarry on his lands to build the Abbey.

1190 Durford Abbey dedicated as the Abbey of St. Mary and St. John the Baptist.

1276 Edward I visits Durford Abbey.

1317 Thieves break into the Abbey.

1324 Edward II stays at Durford Abbey.

1335 (c.) Thieves again break into the Abbey, this time burning some of the buildings.

1347 Durford Abbey relieved of feudal relief duty due to poverty.

1417 Fire caused by lightning hits and destroys Abbey church tower and bells.

MEDIEVAL REMAINS

A. THE ABBEY CHURCH

1. The assumption that any medieval remains must lie at some depth, meant that in the case of the Abbey church, the obvious had been overlooked at Durford. The foundations of what must have been one of its walls are actually visible amongst the gravel of the current drive (see **figures 3 & 6**). These foundations, composed of greensand blocks set in a yellow mortar, were dug into undisturbed geological sand and extended to only 0.4m deep.



Figure 6 The foundations of the Abbey church, note the large stone exposed on the surface.

2. Did these foundations support the south or north wall of the Abbey church? On neither side were there any remains of floor surfaces to give any clue. Nor was there another east-west running wall immediately apparent in the sides of the trench, with the exception of that at the southern end of the trench which was demonstrably post-medieval in date. The only hint was provided by the position of the graves; it is usual for burials to be placed hard up against the walls of churches, and in this case the nearest one to these foundations was over 8 metres away. This suggested that it must be the south wall of the Abbey church.
3. But where, then, was the north wall? The very shallow depth of the southern wall foundations could have meant that the northern wall had been completely robbed away, and this is quite possible. However, a close examination of the trench sides revealed what may be the very last course of the foundations 5.5m to the north (see **figures 3 & 7**).



Figure 7 A few blocks of greensand visible in the trench side – possibly the northern wall of the Abbey church.

4. If we assume that the church took up the whole of the northern side of the cloister (now the farm yard), then the Abbey church would seem to have been 160 ft long and about 17.5ft wide. These are not unreasonable dimensions when it is considered that the church of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Bayham, East Sussex, which had a similar number of canons, was 275ft long and 25ft wide. It appears that the western range of the monastery abutted the

Timeline

1444 Some Abbey buildings said to be ruinous and Abbey in debt – the Abbot is deposed.

1480 Plague hits Durford leaving only the Abbot and three canons. Repairs to the Abbey buildings said to be needed.

1488 Some Abbey buildings again burned.

1494 Abbey cloister said to be ruinous.

1500 Abbey cloister still not repaired.

1535 Richard Layton, agent for Cromwell under Henry VIII, describes Durford as 'Dirtforde', 'poorest Abbey' he has seen and 'far in debt and in great decay'. However official valuation mentions no debts.

1536 Durford Abbey suppressed. Last Abbot absconds with some of the Abbeys moveable assets including its cattle. All the lead stripped of the roofs and any moveable assets appropriated by Crown.

church in a position roughly on a line with the current north wall of the farmhouse's front garden (see **Figure 8**).

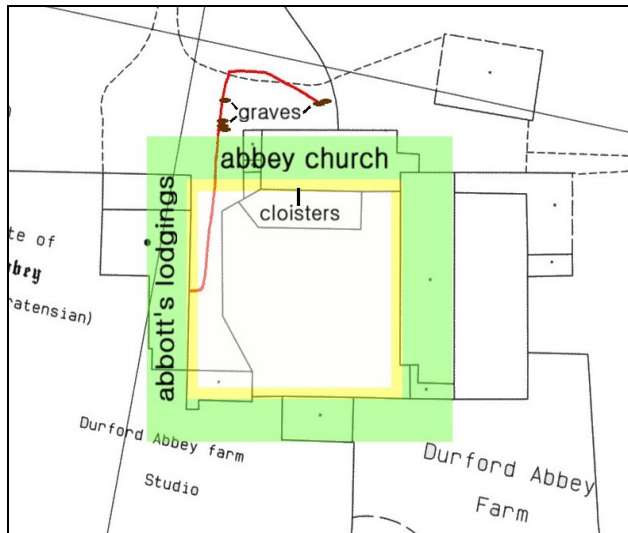


Figure 8 The layout of the medieval monastery. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. Licence No. AL100036068.

B. THE GRAVEYARD

1. Six medieval graves were revealed, four in trench one and two in trench two (see **figures 3, 5, 8 & 9**). The graves were only partially excavated, but appeared to all contain articulated skeletons aligned east-west. The grave fill of one contained a sherd of medieval pottery. None of the graves was discovered at a distance of more than 5 metres from the barn which now forms the northern side of the farm yard. It therefore seems probable that the graveyard does not extend much beyond that limit. The graveyard's dimensions to the west and east are unknown, but it should be assumed that it could run for the length of the now demolished Abbey church.



Figure 9 The southern pair of graves in trench one, view of the pelvis uncovered when an attempt was made to take the water pipe trench east.

2. The existence of a graveyard in the area to the north of Durford Abbey Farm has been known since at least 1873, when it is marked on the 1st edition 1:2500 OS map. The shallow depth of the graves, as little as 0.45m to the base in one case, would have meant that they would be easily disturbed. Indeed it is

Timeline

1537 At the Dissolution Durford Abbey is given to William FitzWilliam, whose large estates were centred around Cowdray.

1542 Durford reverts to the Crown following the death of William FitzWilliam.

1544 Sir Edmund Mervyn buys Durford Abbey from the Crown. In 1541, in his position as Judge of Kings Bench, he had been sent to Durford Abbey to look into irregularities which involved the last Abbot. In addition to Durford his estates included Bramshott, Terwick, Theddon, Heath House and 'Castle House' in Petersfield, which he had himself built (demolished in 1913 and now the site of the post office and a bank).

tempting to suggest that the two land drains in trench one, which must have been laid before the construction of the north barn in the late nineteenth century, may have been the cause of the graveyards re-discovery.

C. OTHER MEDIEVAL FEATURES



Figure 10 Post-hole, possibly associated with abbey cloister.

1. Just over one metre to the south of the Abbey church, a post-hole was excavated covered by a layer of post-medieval rubble and soil (see **figures 3 & 10**). It is possible that this post-hole is of medieval date and was emptied of its post when the Abbey was demolished. If so, its position suggests it may have been a support for the Abbey cloister, which seems to have been in a constant state of disrepair from the 14th century onwards.



Figure 11 Pit with large, square greensand block.

2. To the south, where a short stretch of additional trench was added for a garden tap, part of a pit was discovered cut into the sand (see **figures 4 & 11**). The pit

Timeline

1553 (c.) Sir Edmund's son Henry Mervyn inherits estate on his father's death.

1585 Durford Mill leased to Henry Mervyn from Crown.

1600 (c.) Durford Barn built.

1605 Henry's son Edmund Mervyn pre-deceases him.

1609 Henry Mervyn terminates his lease of Durford mill.

1610 Henry Mervyn sells Durford to John Bellingham. At this time he also sells Heath House and Bramshott.

1613 Henry Mervyn and Sir Edward Bellingham sell Durford to Thomas Bilson.

contained at least one large greensand block, which appeared to be *in situ*, rather than loose rubble. The material surrounding this stone and filling the pit was post-medieval in date. It is unclear what function this pit may have performed.



Figure 12 Possible medieval culvert carrying rain water from west range of abbey.

- Further to the south, near to the end of the trench, a shallow ditch was revealed running east-west, again filled by post-medieval rubble (see **figures 4 & 12**). From its size and shape it is possible to see this ditch as a culvert draining rain water from the west range of the abbey buildings.

D. THE PRECINCT DITCH

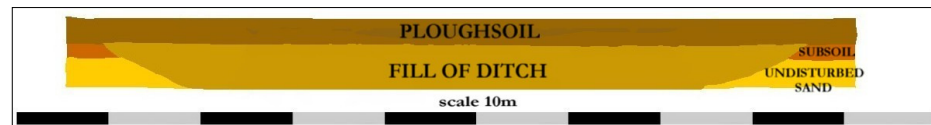


Figure 13 Profile of the precinct boundary ditch, as seen in sides of the water main trench.

- The northern limit of the scheduled area is defined by what is believed to be a ditch surrounding the medieval Abbey precinct. The ditch is still visible as a shallow earthwork in the arable field to the east of the approach road to Durford Abbey Farm, while being more pronounced in the pasture to the west. The shallow depth of the water main trench meant that only the very top of the ditch fill was revealed, containing a few fragments of post-medieval roof tile.

POST-MEDIEVAL REMAINS

A. THE CHIMNEY

- The most obvious feature in trench one belonging to the post-medieval period was the east-west running wall at its southern end (see **figures 4 & 14**). What this wall was, is not clear – the most likely possibility is that it is the northern

Timeline

1613 Durford Abbey is bought by Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester and noted scholar. In addition to Durford his estates included West Mapledurham, Weston, and Facombe. A substantial house at West Mapledurham was the main seat of the Bilson family.

1616 Thomas Bilson dies, and his son, also Thomas, inherits. He increases the estate to include Fyning, Wintershall and land in the Meon valley. He was knighted for services to Parliament during the Civil War and became High Sheriff of Hampshire.

1649 Sir Thomas Bilson dies and estate passes to the Bishop's second son, Leonard Bilson. At around this time the Bilsons acquire Castle House.

wall of the central large projecting chimney seen in the Grimm drawing of 1782 (see **figure 15**). A number of large stones visible in the base of the trench further to the south, at the point where it turns west towards the current house door, may represent the chimney's south wall.



Figure 14 The northern wall of the chimney.

2. This interpretation is supported by the traces of ash apparent at the base of the trench between these two points. No trace was found of the floor of the fireplace, and it must be assumed that this was removed when the chimney was knocked down.
3. Towards the base of the north wall, and incorporated within it, a single brick was found which dates the structure to second half of the 16th century at the earliest. This would indicate that the chimneys were added after the Dissolution and before the Grimm drawing.
4. During the ownership of Henry Mervyn it seems that improvements were made to Durford Abbey, certainly the large barn which runs along the east side of the farm yard dates to this time (see **figure 1**). It is not unreasonable to suppose that the farm house itself, formed from the remains of the Abbot's lodgings, was also improved, with the addition of new windows, doors and chimneys. It is worth pointing out that Durford would have formed only a part of the estates of the Mervyn family, whose principal seat lay elsewhere. As such it was probably either rented out or occupied by a farm manager.
5. There were some indications that the bulk of the wall identified as the north wall of the chimney was actually re-used or partially re-built as a later porch, possibly as part of the Lord Stawell alterations described below, and then subsequently demolished in its turn. Traces of white render or plaster were visible on its southern face which bore no traces of smoke blackening, which would be expected if it were a fire-place. In addition the upper parts of the wall seemed to overlap their foundations and the ash layer. A porch is visible in this location on the Tithe map of 1840 and the 1st edition 1:2500 OS map of 1873 (see **figure 17**).
6. The demolition of this Stawell porch would explain the sand which is visible under the cobbles only in the southern part of the trench (see **figure 4**). These cobbles would appear to have been laid originally as part of the Stawell re-building, probably throughout the farmyard, and around the porch. When the porch was demolished they had to be re-laid over its position, this time with a sand levelling layer.

B. DEMOLITION AND LEVELLING

1. Overlying the undisturbed geological sand throughout much of the trench, from the modern builders pit southwards, is a layer of post-medieval rubble, which

Timeline

1678 Leonard Bilson dies, and the estate passes to his son, Thomas Bilson, who marries Susannah Legge, the sister of George Legge, 1st Baron Dartmouth.

1709 Thomas Bilson's son, Thomas, dies and estate passes to his brother, Leonard, who sells Castle House in 1713.

1715 Leonard Bilson dies and the estates pass to Thomas Bettesworth (Bilson), a relation by marriage.

1754 Thomas Bettesworth Bilson dies and estate passes to Henry (Bilson) Legge another relative of Leonard Bilson by marriage. Henry Bilson Legge was the fourth son of the Earl of Dartmouth and was married to Lady Mary Stawell of Hinton Ampner. He was to become Chancellor of England.

increases in depth as it runs south (see **figures 3 & 4**). The demolition and levelling of the site to which these layers testify is most likely to have been part of Lord Stawell's building programme represented by the date stone of 1782 seen in the east wall of the current house. The only exception to this is between the walls of the possible chimney where the layers are different, probably as a result of the later demolition of the porch described above.

2. The extent of Lord Stawell's re-building of the farm house is open to question, it had been assumed that he had demolished the old house seen in Grimm's drawing (see **figure 15**), and built a new dwelling in its place. However two factors make this unlikely.
3. First, as mentioned above, it must be remembered that Durford was only a small part of a much larger estate, indeed Lord Stawell's holdings were considerably larger than the Mervyns. It is therefore unlikely that he would have carried out more work than was absolutely necessary on a building which was merely a tenanted farmhouse. The complete demolition of a stone structure was not an inexpensive operation and it would be far more common to merely carry out any necessary repairs and re-model the exterior.



Figure 15 The Grimm drawing of 1782, compared with the current farm house. Obvious errors of scale in the drawing have been corrected.

4. Second the building shown on the Grimm drawing bears a striking resemblance to the Stawell house, in that both consist of a north-south block linked to a higher east-west block (see **figures 1 & 15**). The only differences being that the Stawell house has new windows, doors and chimneys, indicating a similar form of alteration as that carried out by the Mervyns two hundred years earlier.
5. The only other alteration which appears to have taken place is the removal of the short stretch of building which continues beyond the east facing gable shown on the Grimm drawing (see **figure 15**). This used to form the link between the Abbot's lodging and the west end of the Abbey church against which it butted. The southern church wall foundation found in trench one lines up with the north end of the house shown on the Grimm drawing, a position which is now occupied by the current garden wall (see **figure 8**). The removal of this end of the Grimm house has resulted in the present north façade of the

Timeline

1764 Henry Bilson Legge dies and his son, also Henry Bilson Legge inherits.

1780 Henry Bilson Legge becomes 2nd Lord Stawell on the death of his mother, Lady Mary Stawell.

1784 A date stone in the current Durford Abbey Farm House testifies to building work carried out by Lord Stawell. However the cellar windows at least are certainly earlier than 1784.

1820 Lord Stawell dies and Durford, amongst the bulk of the rest of the estate, passes to a cousin Rev. William Legge. It then descends within the Legge family until the twentieth century,

farm house, which is composed of much more finely dressed blocks than the other faces of the building (see **figure 16**).



Figure 16 North face of the current farm house.

6. As part of his alterations Lord Stawell seems to have levelled the ground within the old Abbey cloisters. The natural sand slope, assuming it has not been dug out, descends more steeply to the south than the level created by Stawell (see layers in **figures 3 & 4**). This would explain why during a visit to the site in 1976, F.G Aldsworth, saw the heads of two medieval openings, just above present ground level, in the inner face of the west wall of the stable, which forms part of the south side of the farmyard (see **figure 1**). From this he deduced that the ground level throughout the yard had been raised by two metres, a supposition which can now be shown to be true of only the extreme south end, since it took no account of the natural slope of the underlying sand as it descends to the river. As was proven with the medieval church wall foundations, at the northern side of the farmyard the earliest archaeological deposits are very close to the surface (see **figure 6**).

C. AGRICULTURAL CHANGES

1. The remaining features in trenches one and two relate to Durford's role as a working farm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

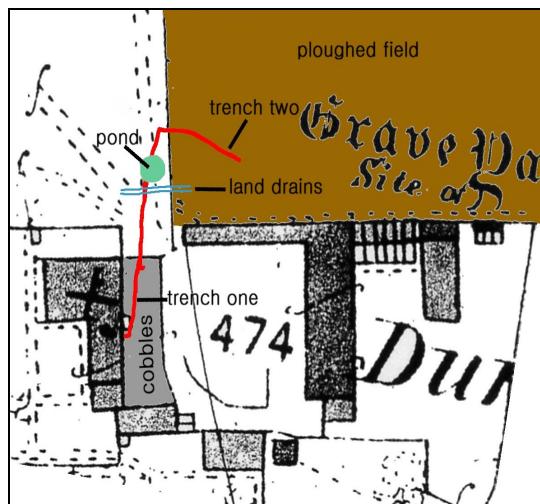


Figure 17 1:2500 OS map of 1873.

2. **Figure 17** shows the farm in 1873 at a time when the field to the north extended right up to a smaller north barn. The two land drains in trench one (see **figure 3**) must have been in operation around this time, since the later extension of the barn lay over them. The edge of the field was clearly visible in trench two, where the ploughsoil comes to an abrupt end, and a much thinner layer of topsoil begins (see **figure 5**). The possible pond, which was a clay lined depression visible in trench one (see **figure 3**), may also have been in use at this date.

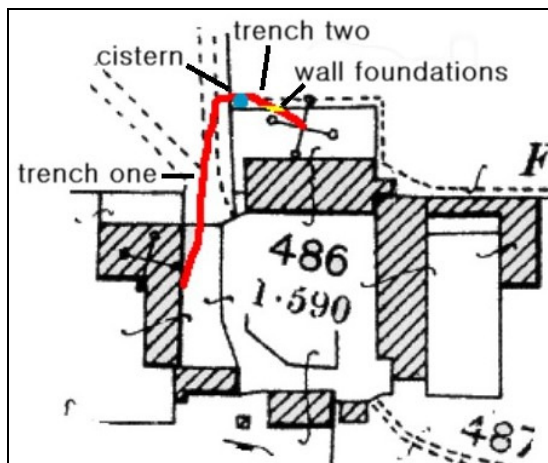


Figure 18 1:2500 OS map of 1898.

3. **Figure 18** shows the farm in 1898, by which time the northern barn has been extended and an enclosed yard created. The wall foundation in trench two (see **figure 5**) would appear to be the remains of the northern wall of this yard. A cistern also found in trench two (see **figure 5**) seems to have been dug in the corner of the field to the north, probably after the creation of the yard.
4. In the course of the 20th century the yard wall is demolished and the whole area re-surfaced on at least one occasion, evidenced by the build-up of make-up layers seen in the eastern part of trench two (see **figure 5**).

THE SURVIVAL OF DEPOSITS

- These excavations have shown that archaeological deposits lying in the area of the northern side of the monastery are very close to the present ground surface. It would appear that in this area the medieval ground level was similar to that existing today. However from a point approximately half way down the water main trench, and in line with the present front wall of the garden, the deposits begin to deepen. This would appear to be a result of landscaping carried out in the late 18th century, which has flattened out the natural slope of the ground to the south. It is therefore likely that the remains of any earlier structures on the site, most notably the medieval monastery buildings, survive to a greater degree, and at a greater depth, towards the southern side of the farmyard. Conversely it seems probable that little remains of the Abbey Church, due to the proximity of its foundations to the current ground surface and the existence of a later barn on its site. As to the survival of the west side of the monastery buildings, it is the assertion of this report that the current farm house incorporates much of the fabric of the Abbot's lodgings, although only a more thorough historic buildings analysis will determine how much.

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