

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING REPORT

MEMORIAL TREE, ABBEY GARDENS, BURY ST EDMUNDS: SACIC Report no. 2016/093

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1. Introduction

Historic England has granted Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) for the installation of commemorative metal sculpture, known as the 'memorial tree' within the Rose Garden of the Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmunds. The gardens are within the precinct of the medieval Abbey of St Edmunds, which is a designated Scheduled Monument and protected by statute. The sculpture was to be fixed into the ground with a shallow foundation that required a hole to be excavated in the historic site. The consent was given on condition that the excavations were to be attended by an approved archaeologist for recording and were completed by hand.

The work was completed on 19th October 2016 by David Gill on behalf of Suffolk Archaeology CIC

2. Background

The Benedictine Abbey of St Edmund was once one of the largest and pre-eminent monasteries in the country and became a centre for international pilgrimage. The Abbey as we see it today was conceived by Abbot Baldwin (AD1065-97) but a religious community had been first founded on the site in the 7th century; its importance was assured when the body of the martyred king and saint Edmund was enshrined here in AD906. Following the reformation of the church in England, the Abbey was dissolved and was surrendered to the Crown in 1539; eventually to be left in ruins as the site was robbed of all its material assets.

The Rose Garden lies just to the north of the site of the great Abbey Church in an area of the former cloister buildings. Previous archaeological work in this area (Gill 2009) has demonstrated that the medieval archaeological levels are buried beneath deep deposits composed of post-Dissolution rubble, later occupation and building demolition deposits.

3. Project aims

The aims of the project were:

- To record any archaeological deposits that may be lost or exposed during the work.
- To produce a permanent archive of which will be deposited with Suffolk HER.
- To make provision for the dissemination of results.

4. Results

The excavation was located in a flower-bed in the south-east corner of the Rose Garden (Fig. 1 and Pl. 1). It was in an area which had until recently been occupied by a tree or large woody shrub (garden staff pers. com) and the excavation area was in the grip of deep roots. The size of the excavation was determined by the specification of the memorial tree's foundation and measured 0.8m x 0.8m by 0.5m deep.

The ground levels have been built-up and the excavated section (Fig. 2) showed a soil profile made up of a muddy post-medieval rubble (0002) beneath a layer of clean, orange gravel (0001) and topsoil. The rubble (0002) at the base of the excavation was composed of a dense mix of

powdered, lime mortar with frequently occurring building-flint and small fragments of limestone; some of which was burnt.

Whilst the limestone and flint could have derived from the destruction of the Abbey's buildings the deposit was dated by post-medieval roof-tiles and bricks which included examples of 'white-bricks', similar to those that make up the frontage of the Georgian buildings on Angel Hill. The layer also included roofing-slate and clay pipe stems; the presence of orange-glazed earthenware pottery demonstrated that the rubble had been deposited no earlier than the 19th century.

5. Conclusion

The Rose Garden and Bowls Green are located over the remains of the range of claustral buildings that once stood alongside the Abbey Church. This area was not included in the archaeological excavations carried out by the Ministry of Works between 1957-64, when parts of the ruins were exposed, and thus the ground levels here are visibly higher than those of the surrounding gardens. The full archaeological sequence: the abbey ruins, the post-Dissolution demolition rubble and layer associated with the subsequent occupation¹ are therefore likely to be still preserved intact over this part of the site. The current intervention demonstrated the existence of these preserved layers but sampled only the top of this potential sequence. Although post-medieval in its deposition, this 'overburden' it is a highly important resource in reconstructing the Abbey's story.

David Gill, October 2016



Fig. 1. Site location

Bibliography

Gill, D., 2009, *BSE 332 Abbey gardens, Low Impact Evaluation*. SCCAS report no 2009/136

Gill, D., 2014, *Historic Asset Assessment report: Refectory Garden Wall, Bury St Edmunds*.

SCCAS report no. 2014/072

¹ The West Front had already been re-occupied by the 17th century and the Warren map (1747) shows a house, which was demolished in c.1770, located at the east end of St James' church (Gill 2014).



Plate 1. Showing the location of the excavated hole. The boundary wall and cart lodge (a and b) date to the C19th; they are not shown on the Tithe Map of Bury surveyed in 1845, but are included in the first edition of the Ordnance Survey (1884)



Plate 2. Section looking east. The rubble at the lowest limit of the excavation was composed of lime-mortar, building flint and limestone and was deposited or re-worked in the 19th century. The short scale is 30cms long.