

An archaeological evaluation of the Old Priory  
buildings, Leominster: Saxon, medieval and later  
discoveries

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# An archaeological evaluation of the Old Priory buildings, Leominster: Saxon, medieval and later discoveries

By BRUCE WATSON

with contributions by Ian Baxter, Julie Bowen, Shelia Hamilton-Dyer, Derek Hurst, Alan Peacey, Elizabeth Pearson, David Symons and the late Alan Vince.

*In 2005 the Friends of Leominster Priory organised an archaeological evaluation of the car park occupying the site of the cloisters of Leominster Priory (est. 1123), which were located to the north of the church. The primary purpose of this project was to investigate and date a circular structure identified by a ground penetrating radar survey (which proved to be modern). Three radiocarbon dates of cal AD 655-730, cal AD 655-775 and cal AD 772-900 were obtained from bone samples from the initial Saxon features, which makes this activity contemporary with the documented foundation of a church/monastery in c. AD 660 by St Edfrith. The wide variety of faunal material present included the major domesticated species plus birds and fish, confirming that this area was used for rubbish disposal.*

*The three phases of the western arm of the priory cloisters were located. The final phase of the cloister walkway was found to be of either late 14th or 15th century date. Part of a cellared masonry building attached to the western side of the cloister walkway was excavated. After the suppression of the priory in 1539, the cloisters were demolished and then extensively quarried for building stone. During this phase of demolition the former cloister garth was used to sort salvaged material and 536 fragments of broken glazed floor tiles were discarded here.*

## Introduction

During August 2005 the author, on behalf of the Friends of Leominster Priory, organised and directed the excavation of an evaluation trench (16.85m long and 5.0m wide) within the south-west portion of the Old Priory Buildings car park (Figs 1, 2 and 3).<sup>1</sup> This investigation was undertaken as part of 'Operation Leofric', a HLF funded community project.<sup>2</sup> Aspects of this fieldwork have already been incorporated into a new history of the priory produced as part of 'Operation Leofric' and an interim report published.<sup>3</sup> The site archive including digital reports is held by Herefordshire Museum Service and Historic Environment Record.

The primary aims of the investigation were to investigate and date a circular structure with a radius of 3m identified by a ground penetrating radar survey carried out by Stratascan in 2003.<sup>4</sup> This structure was interpreted as starting some 0.4m below ground level and extending down to a depth of 1.5m. No fixed date or interpretation was assigned to this structure by Stratascan, but subsequently it was provisionally interpreted as a Saxon rotunda and therefore part of the pre-Norman minster.<sup>5</sup> It is now clear that the depth of the feature interpreted from the radar response was misleading despite the nature of the returns being consistent with a dense rubble foundation extending to a depth of 1.5m. What caused this disparity is unclear. A marked reduction of velocity of the radar signal through the rubble would explain part, but not all of the discrepancy.<sup>6</sup> This circular foundation was located during the evaluation at a depth of 0.26m to

0.62m below the existing ground surface and it proved to be the limestone rubble foundations of a 20th-century car park (see Period 6).

During the post-excavation analysis related contexts, such as the contemporary fills of a pit were arranged into sets defined as Sub-Groups (e.g. SG1). The related Sub-Groups, such as a number of contemporary features, were arranged into Groups (e.g. G1). These Groups were then arranged into site wide chronological phases of activity defined as periods (e.g. P1). Full details are in the stratigraphic archive.<sup>7</sup> Context numbers are shown as (1) etc. For reasons of space only selective finds and environmental data is incorporated into this article; a full list of the specialist reports available online are listed at Appendix 1.



Figure 1. The excavation in progress 26 August 2005, view looking west. In the centre of the trench the robbed-out remains of the cellared building adjoining the western side of the cloisters is being excavated.

#### **Period 1: The geology and natural topography of the site**

The Priory Church of St Peter and St Paul is situated on the edge of a plateau (ground surface *c.* 76m OD) (Fig 2). The land surface of this plateau slopes away towards the north and east. As the site was situated to the north of the church along the top edge of this slope, it possesses a natural south to north slope, which has been obscured by dumping and terracing intended to raise and level the ground surface.

These slopes around the plateau have been created by the down-cutting action of the River Lugg and its tributary the Kenwater. To the north of the site ran the former course of the Pinsley

Brook (now diverted). The priory and the historic core of the town are located on this plateau which is high enough to be flood free. The low-lying areas of the town around the Kenwater have a long history of flooding.

The underlying solid geology consists of Devonian Old Red Sandstone, overlain by marls. A reddish clayey marl (top 73.03m OD) was interpreted as part of the Devonian deposits, which due to biological activity had been transformed into a soil horizon (G1), predating the Saxon activity (not illustrated).

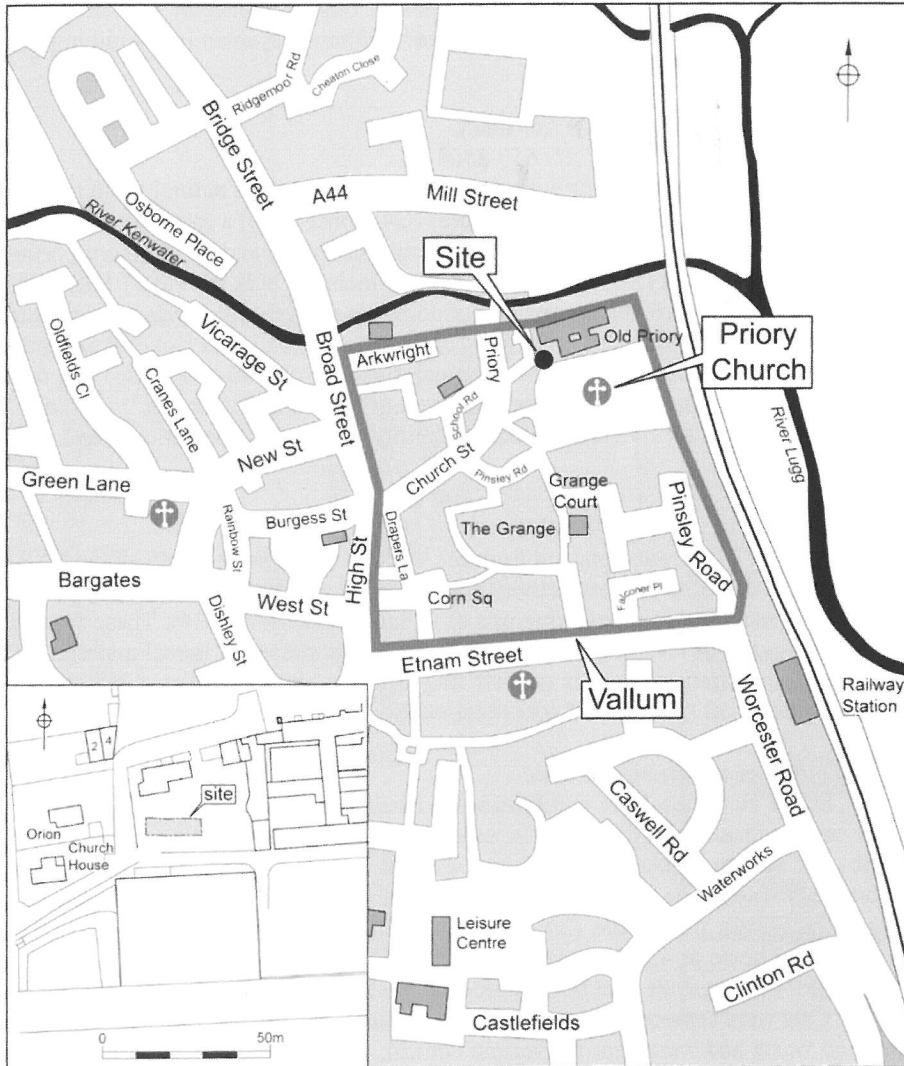


Figure 2. Site location within Leominster showing the possible extent of the Saxon monastic precinct. With an inset Figure 3. Trench location within the Old Priory buildings car park

**Period 2: Pre-Saxon activity**

Prehistoric activity on site was indicated by finds of two residual struck flints. One was probably a broken Mesolithic blade and the other a Neolithic to Early Bronze Age, naturally backed knife with fine invasive retouch and with heavy use or damage along one edge and the proximal end.<sup>8</sup> Part of a small pit of Roman date (no more precise dating possible) was found (G2) (not illustrated). Two Roman ceramic tile fragments were found within Saxon contexts, it is not certain if this building material is simply residual material or whether it was brought to the site during the Saxon period for reuse, perhaps for lining hearths. Two residual sherds of Roman Severn Valley Ware were also recovered from site.<sup>9</sup> There is other evidence of Roman activity in the vicinity and nearby excavations recently uncovered a dump of Roman iron smithing slag probably of 2nd century AD date.<sup>10</sup>

**Period 3: Middle/Late Saxon Activity (c. AD 650-1066)***Middle Saxon activity (Groups 3 and 4 c. AD 650-850)*

Initial Saxon activity consisted of dumping subsoil and marl to level up the natural south to north ground slope (G3) (not illustrated). The earliest features (G4) consisted of a south-west to north-east aligned ditch (SG6) the fill of which (82) included bulk sample 2, and the northern portion of a large oval-shaped rubbish pit (SG7), the fills of which included bulk samples 1 (84) and 3 (86) (Fig 4). The fill of both these features consisted of domestic rubbish which was rich in faunal remains (discussed later). There was also a fragment of a north-south aligned slot or small gully and a robbed out stakehole (SG8). Two radiocarbon dates of cal AD 650-730 (SG6) and 655-775 (SG7) were obtained from animal bones recovered from these features.<sup>11</sup> All AMS radiocarbon dates are quoted to a 95% level of probability (2 standard deviations) and were calibrated using Intcal 04.<sup>12</sup>

*Late Saxon activity (Group 5; c. AD 850-1066)*

A third date of cal AD 772-900 was obtained from the backfill of the north-south aligned ditch (SG 5) (Fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> This date implies that activity continued on site until the 9th century. This ditch was later cut by one or more intercutting pits of unknown function (SG4). These features were later sealed by a series of levelling dumps, which contained masses of faunal material (SG 9). In the absence of any stratigraphy this deposit was dug in a series of 15cm thick spits. A fourth radiocarbon date of cal AD 776-902 was obtained from the next to top spit.<sup>14</sup>

*The Saxon faunal material and its significance*

(with Ian Baxter, Shelia Hamilton-Dyer and Elizabeth Pearson)

These deposits contained a high concentration of animal bones (total 352), including many fragments of ribs and vertebra. Some of these bones had cut or chop marks confirming that this material was butchery waste. The most frequent component in terms of numbers of large bones and teeth were pigs (33%), then cattle (29%), followed by wild and domestic birds (21%), sheep/goat at 13% and horse at 4.5% and roe deer 0.6%. The most important sources of meat were cattle and pigs.<sup>15</sup> Amongst the bird bones domestic fowl or chicken counted for 13% of the total assemblage. Cats were represented by the presence of a single bone. It is assumed that the cats were not food waste and were kept for vermin control. As 'their remains are found with remarkable frequency on nearly all Anglo-Saxon sites' it appears that cats were very widely kept.<sup>16</sup>

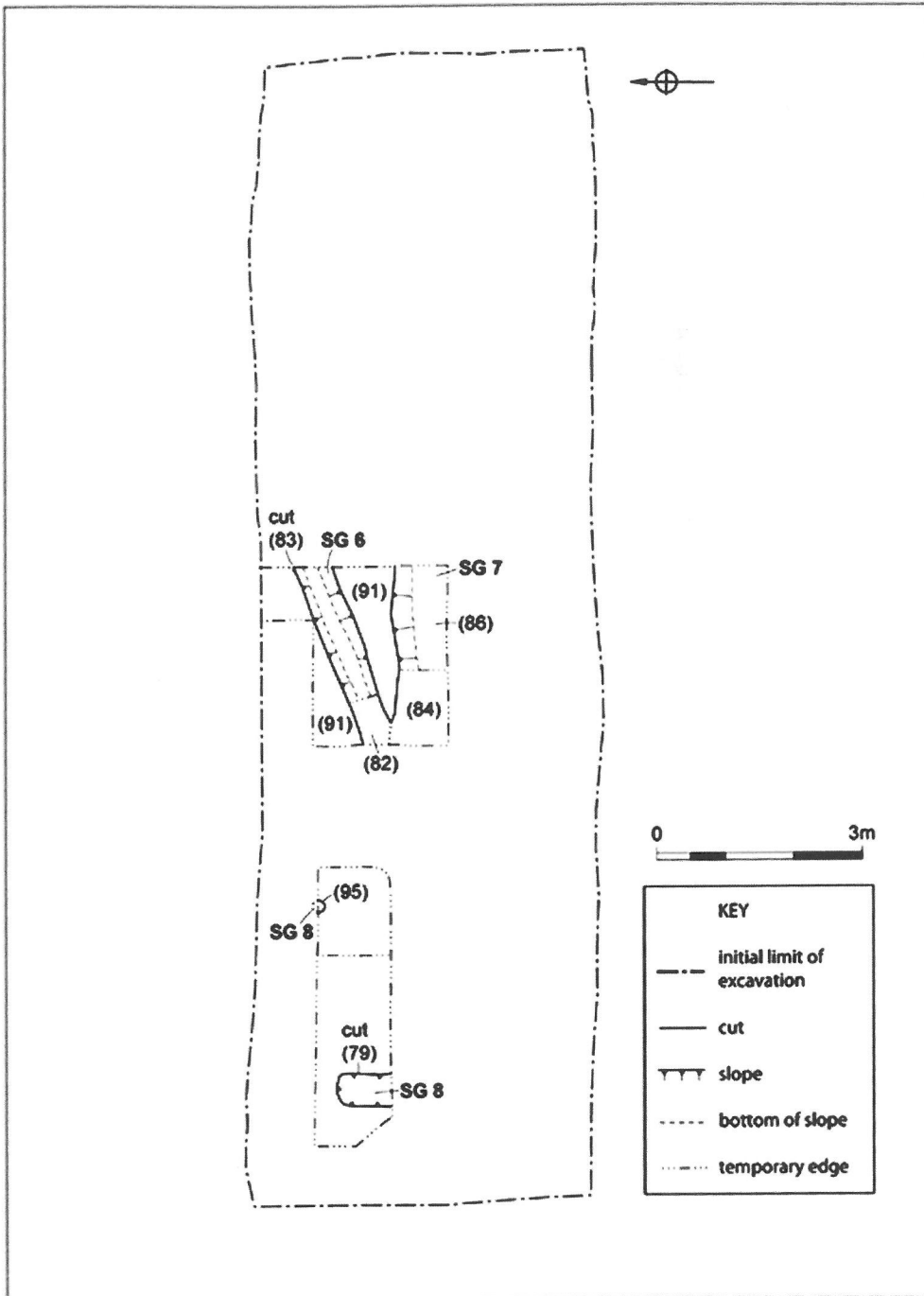


Figure 4. G4 Middle Saxon features

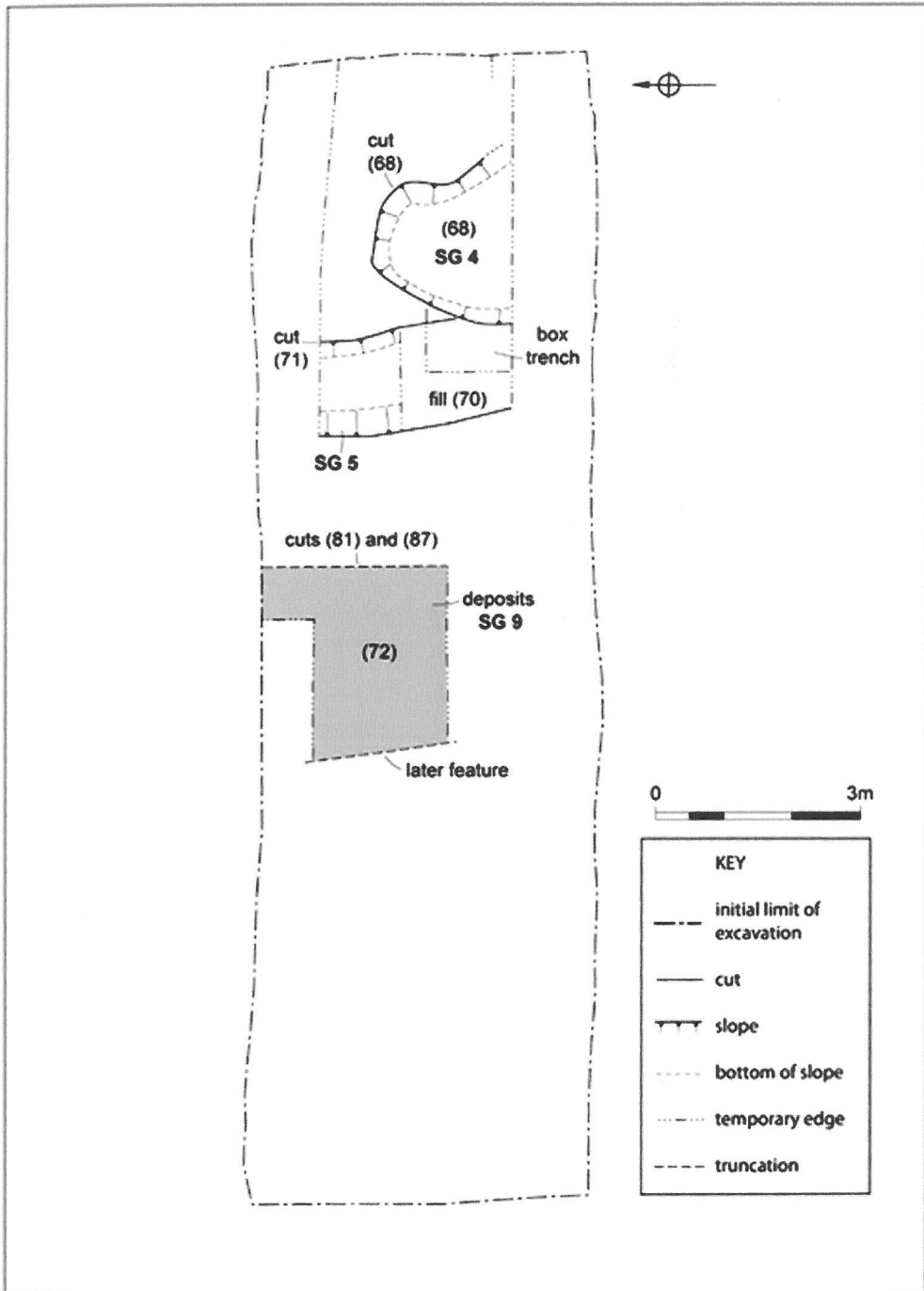


Figure 5. G5 Late Saxon features

Bulk samples 1 (84) and 3 (86) from SG7 revealed a wide variety of faunal material including small mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and fish. The bird bones were dominated by chickens, including juveniles and hens implying that they were being raised locally. Other domestic species present included greylag geese and ducks. While wild species present included geese (examples smaller than greylag), plover, teal, wood pigeon and woodcock. It is possible that blackbirds and sparrows were present too.<sup>17</sup> This wide range of species confirms that some wild fowling was taking place. At Lyminge, Kent, on the site of a royal double monastery founded in the 7th century, excavations of contemporary deposits within the outer precinct revealed that the wild and domestic bird species made up an extrapolated 10% of the quantified faunal assemblage (of which wild species made up just under a third). By the 8th to 9th centuries bird remains comprised about 33% of the faunal assemblage at Lyminge. However, wild species by this date only comprised between 12-20% of the assemblage and chicken was the most important species.<sup>18</sup> Bird remains from Middle Saxon ecclesiastical sites generally show a more restricted range of species than secular ones, with the latter showing more evidence of hunting and the former greater emphasis on domestic fowls.<sup>19</sup> Bird bones of late-12th or 13th-century date have also been recovered from Leominster Priory, including domestic fowl, goose, wood pigeon, song thrush, and jackdaw.<sup>20</sup>

The only wild mammal present in the Saxon deposits were two roe deer bones implying that hunting played no significant part in the monastic economy. However, the probable tip from a long bow from SG5 is evidence of a weapon that could have been used for hunting.<sup>21</sup>

The four species of fish present amongst the identifiable bones were eel (51.6%), salmon (9.6%), herring (8.3%) and grayling (0.3%). While a further 30% of the fish remains were unidentifiable. Most of the eels would have probably been immature specimens some 30-40cm long, but there were a few vertebrae representing full-sized ones over 50cm long.<sup>22</sup> All of these species except herrings, which are marine, can be caught in the River Lugg today.<sup>23</sup>

Both salmon and eels are migratory species, while grayling are restricted to freshwater. The herrings would have been preserved by drying, smoking or salting.<sup>24</sup> There are number of ways that these fish could have caught, for instance eels and salmon might have been speared, trapped or netted. The fish traps in the River Severn at Redwick date from the 5th-6th century AD.<sup>25</sup> Other fish might have caught by line fishing, a practice represented on site by the discovery of a small barbed iron hook (22mm long).<sup>26</sup> Saxon fish hooks are usually made of iron and barbed and are of variable size implying that they were used to catch a variety of species. One Anglo-Scandinavian barbed iron fish hook from York is 55-56mm long.<sup>27</sup>

Other finds from these bulk samples included occasional fragments of iron hammer scale, which show that smithing was being carried out locally. Some of the small fragments of animal bones had the appearance typical of dog digestion. While some of the small fish bones were crushed, probably as a result of human ingestion. This evidence implies that this midden area was also used to dispose of faecal material. The fragments of fired clay or daub present in the samples were probably derived from the cladding of timber-framed buildings.<sup>28</sup>

It is assumed that all this food waste was produced by the monastic community as the site lay within the medieval cloister (Period 4), and it was presumably within the Saxon monastic precinct too. Whereas laymen were only supposed to observe the prescribed feasts and fasts, members of Saxon monastic communities would have probably faced constant restrictions on both the number of meals they consumed and their content. For instance, the rule of Chrodegang stated that between Easter and Pentecost the brothers ate twice a day and could have 'flesh' or meat except on Wednesdays and Fridays. From Pentecost until the birthday of St John the Baptist



(7 January) they still had two meals a day, but ate no 'flesh'.<sup>29</sup> Fish was a popular dish on these frequent fast days. There are documented references to Saxon 'fisheries' and fish also occur as an item in some rental agreements, showing their importance as a food item.<sup>30</sup> The 8th- and 9th-century monastic deposits at Lyminge, contained 'prodigious quantities' of fish bones, the assemblage being dominated by the larger marine species of the Gadidae family (principally cod and whiting), but eels were a significant component of the assemblage. Interestingly, the 6th- and 7th-century deposits at Lyminge revealed very few fish bones, implying that during this period fish was not a significant part of the monastic diet.<sup>31</sup> Fish remains including eel, herring, salmon/trout, haddock, cod, perch and plaice or flounder of late 12th- or 13th-century date have also been recovered from Leominster Priory.<sup>32</sup> This list shows that a much wider range of preserved marine species was being consumed by this period.

Pigs would have been important as both a source of fat (lard) and bacon. The presence of similar proportions of male and female pigs and a perinatal piglet suggests that these animals were being raised locally, perhaps on a small scale. The reasoning being that large scale pig husbandry or the importation of live pigs and/or carcasses would have resulted in a preponderance of males. Pigs could have been maintained locally in woodland or on rough grassland and fattened on natural forage. At Lyminge, pig was the most common domesticated species represented in the 6th and 7th century monastic deposits, making up 45-55% of the faunal assemblage from the assessed contexts. A high proportion (over 30%) of pig remains is often interpreted as a 'high-status dietary signature' during the Saxon period.<sup>33</sup> At Cheddar Saxon palace in Somerset, pigs provided 29% of the meat and were second in importance to oxen before AD 930.<sup>34</sup>

The cattle remains were derived from all parts of the skeleton, implying they were butchered on site. A significant proportion of the cattle being consumed were either sub-adults or young adults and therefore would have been prime beef, as opposed to beasts that had spent years as either dairy or draught animals before being consumed. At Lyminge, in the 6th- and 7th-century monastic deposits, cattle comprised some 16% of the faunal assemblage and about 21% by the 8th and 9th centuries, compared with 29% of the Leominster assemblage.<sup>35</sup>

The sheep or goat remains were also derived from all parts of the skeleton. The limited evidence suggests that most of the sheep being consumed were skeletally adult, which might imply that older animals were being deliberately selected for slaughter.<sup>36</sup> Sheep would have been kept for their wool, milk and meat. At Lyminge during the 6th and 7th centuries sheep made up 19% of the monastic faunal assemblage, while by the 8th to 9th centuries sheep had increased to 36-54% of the assessed contexts, while pig had declined to 12-27% (from 45-55%). It is believed that this change was linked with a major increase in the production of woollen textiles during the Middle Saxon period.<sup>37</sup> The small assemblage of mammal bones of late 12th or 13th-century date recovered from Leominster Priory included cattle, sheep, pig and cat. Some of the medieval sheep and pig bones are immature suggesting the consumption of lambs and suckling pigs.<sup>38</sup>

The average age of the horses and ponies represented on site was seven years old, but specimens present ranged in age from 1 year 3 months to over 12 years old.<sup>39</sup> However, the small number of equid bones present implies that they were only consumed occasionally, while the diverse age range of the individuals represented implies that they were reared locally. These horses would have primarily been intended for riding or possibly farm work as they were technically a 'taboo' food species. In AD 786 Pope Adrian I issued an injunction to the English

banning the consumption of horseflesh; it is not known how widely his instruction was observed.<sup>40</sup>

The plant remains from these deposits consisted of charred grains of oats, free-threshing wheat and a pea. A sample from (82) SG6 contained a charred barley grain and a fragment of hazel nut shell.<sup>41</sup> Baked barley or wheat products in the form of bread would have been the mainstay of the monastic diet; this is documented in several contemporary monastic rules. For instance, under the rule of Chrodegang the individual ration of bread was one pound per day. Oats were probably eaten as porridge or added to soups or stews. In addition broths or stews containing cereals, vegetables, beans or other pulses (including peas) would have been probably consumed on a daily basis. These dishes may have enriched by dairy products and perhaps flavoured with meat or fish. The rule of St Benedict allowed two meals per day one of which was cooked and could have included two dishes of broth or soup.<sup>42</sup> St Wilfred (c. AD 633-709) is credited with introducing the rule of St Benedict to England, so it is quite possible that it was followed at Saxon Leominster. There is no documentary evidence that Leominster followed any particular monastic rule, but the content of the surviving Saxon prayer book from Leominster shows liturgical influences from Iona and the church of St Columba, the great Irish monastic evangelist (died AD 597), as it includes two Hiberno-Latin hymns attributed to St Columba.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the Saxon monastic at Leominster followed the rule of St Columba, which does not describe diet.<sup>44</sup> St Columba did not leave a written rule—it was compiled later by his followers. However, the lifestyle guidance outlined in his rule suggests that it would have included dietary restrictions similar to other contemporary monastic rules.

The rule of St Benedict describes an ideal monastic community that was both a self-contained and self-sufficient unit, with its own fields, livestock and gardens. This concept fits quite well with the faunal evidence for the local rearing of livestock and explains the presence of 'taboo' horses amongst the food waste. Activities like fishing, wild fowling and even smithing would have complied with this concept of self-sufficiency. The medieval priory at Leominster followed the rule of St Benedict and documentary evidence from other medieval Benedictine houses shows a predominance of fish in the monastic diet.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Saxon Period general discussion*

These deposits contained no ceramics or datable finds, so four radiocarbon dates were obtained from animal bones samples to provide a chronology. A chronological model for the radiocarbon dates produced by Alex Bayliss, English Heritage Scientific Dating Co-ordinator, indicates that the initial Saxon activity took place during AD 655-775 (95% probability) and that the third and fourth radiocarbon dates confirm that this activity continued into the 9th century.<sup>46</sup> This means that the initial Saxon activity is contemporary with the documented foundation of a church/monastery in c. AD 660 by St Edfrith, a Northumbrian missionary.<sup>47</sup> It is probable that this church was always part of a minster or *monasteria*, which means that it would have included a small monastic community of priests or missionaries who would have provided pastoral care in the Leominster region. The original mid-7th-century foundation at Leominster was unlikely to have been either a nunnery or a double house (containing monks and nuns), but by 1046 it is documented that it had become a nunnery.<sup>48</sup> Where the Saxon church was situated is unknown, but as the excavation of many other ecclesiastical sites have established that the remains of early churches are frequently found under later ones, it is likely that its remains lie under the medieval church.<sup>49</sup> For instance, in 1996 excavations within the choir of Pershore Abbey Church, Worcestershire, revealed elements of the former Saxon and Norman churches.<sup>50</sup>

It appears that this naturally sloping area was on the periphery of the settled area and was being used systematically for the disposal of food waste and other debris until the late 8th or 9th century (discussed earlier). This might suggest that the site was situated close to the monastic kitchens. Latterly attempts were made to level the naturally sloping site by dumping material perhaps on a systematic basis.

It has been suggested that the extent of the Saxon monastic enclosure or *vallum* at Leominster can be reconstructed, but as this ditch and bank earthwork is unexcavated its date remains uncertain. The western side of this postulated enclosure is defined by Broad Street, its southern side by Etnam Street, while the remaining two sides are defined by the steep breaks of slope adjoining the River Lugg and the Kenwater (Fig. 2). Leominster Priory was situated within the north-eastern corner of this enclosure. Similar enclosures surround the monasteries at Glastonbury and Iona.<sup>51</sup> A Saxon prayer book from Leominster mentions the following early 11th-century monastic buildings: the sacristy and vestry of the church; various cloistral buildings: dormitory, scriptorium, calefactorium (warming room), refectory, cellar, dispensary, kitchen, larder, and an infirmary, while the outer court contained the granary, bakery, hospital and infirmary.<sup>52</sup>

#### Period 4: The Medieval Priory (c.1123-1539)

##### *The first phase of the western arm of the cloisters (G6)*

The earliest medieval activity on site consisted of the construction of the first phase of the western arm of the cloister walkway. This undated masonry is assumed to be part of the 12th-century priory (see discussion). This consisted of a north-south aligned trench-built wall foundation constructed of roughly coursed sandstone rubble, bonded by now decayed mortar (SG11) (Figs 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Composite remains of the cloister garth wall foundations, view looking north. At the southern end is robber trench (65) SG13/G8 and in-situ masonry (88) SG14/G8, in the centre masonry (80) SG11/G6, and at the northern end masonry (89) SG12/G7.

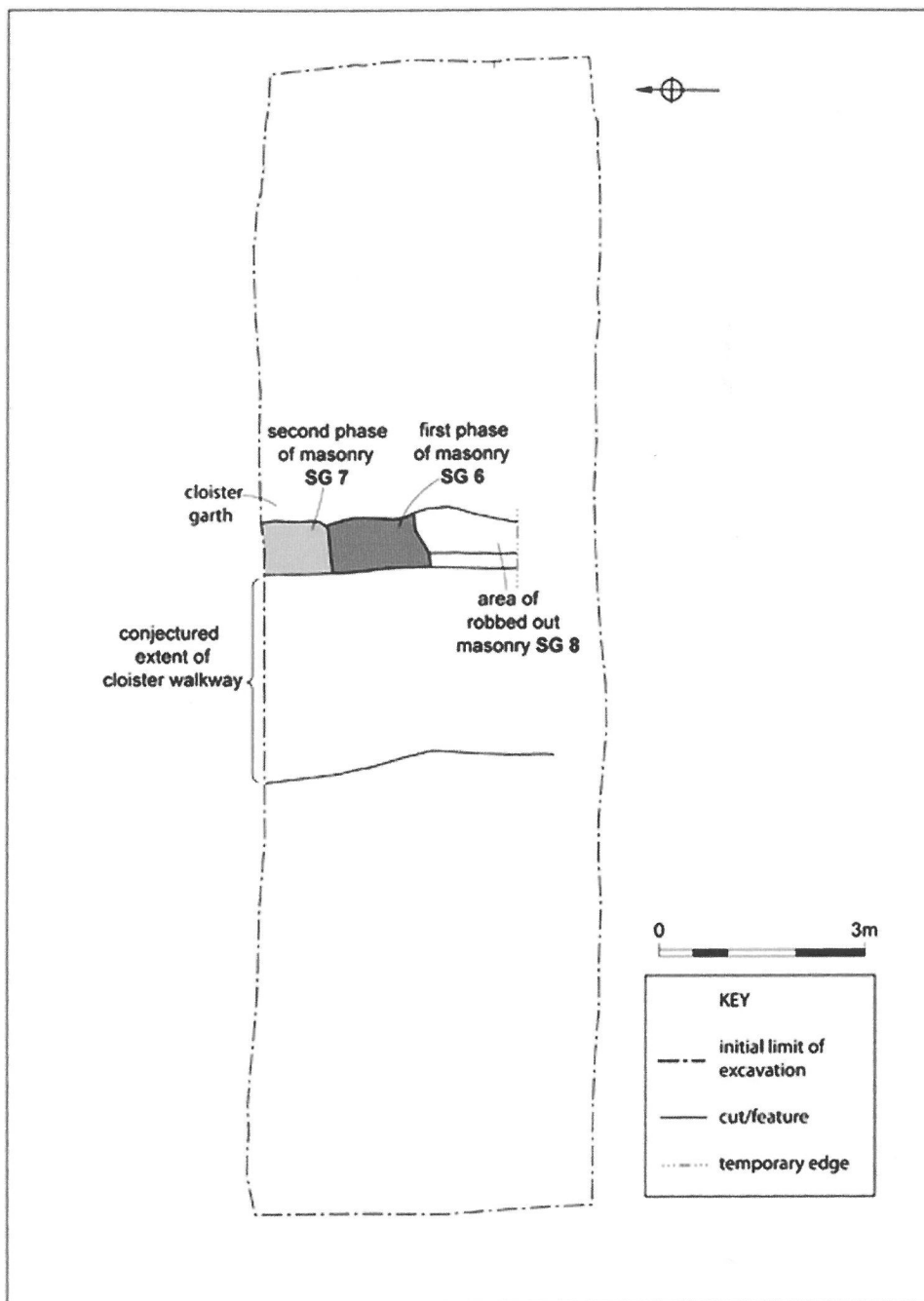


Figure 7. The earlier phases of the medieval cloister garth, G6 and G7 foundations.

*Second phase of cloister walkway (G7)*

At some point the cloister walkway foundation was replaced by another one built directly over its predecessor and this confirms that the layout of the cloisters remained unchanged. The replacement masonry was 0.86m wide and constructed of random sandstone rubble foundation, bonded by a cream coloured sandy lime mortar (Figs 6 and 7). This foundation appears to have been built as a series of linear segments, not as a continuous structure. There is no finds-dating evidence for this activity, but it is of pre-14th century date on stratigraphic grounds.

*Third phase of cloister walkway (G8)*

During the late 14th or 15th century the cloister walkway was rebuilt for a second time. This new phase of the ambulatory walkway was c.2.5m wide (G8) (Fig 8). This rebuilding appears to have removed any earlier floor levels and parts of the earlier masonry, creating a void (SG13), which was then spanned by ramshackle masonry (SG14). The nature of the new cloister garth wall is uncertain as all but one of the stone blocks it was constructed of were later robbed out, but its empty foundation trench that shows that it was 50cm wide (SG16). The relatively shallow nature of this replacement foundation suggests that it was either a dwarf wall or supported a timber-framed structure. The area of the cloister walkway was levelled (SG15 not illustrated), then mortar bedding for the tile or stone paving (of which there was no trace) was laid (SG21). This indicates that the approximate height of its robbed out floor of the walkway stood at 73.8m OD. This activity was dated to the late 14th or 15th century by pottery recovered from SG13 and SG15.<sup>53</sup> These levelling dumps also contained fragments of disarticulated human skeletal material (representing at least three individuals). As there were no *in-situ* burials within the excavated area this skeletal material might have been derived from the dumping of excess soil from the nearby cemetery.<sup>54</sup>

*A half-cellared building on the western side of the cloister walkway (G9)*

The remains of part of a substantial half-cellared masonry building attached to the western side of the cloister walkway were discovered. Its walls and floor levels had been entirely removed by post-Dissolution robbing (Figs 1 and 8). The date of this building is uncertain, but the presence of late-14th- or 15th-century pottery in the robbing debris indicates that it was a later addition to 12th-century cloisters.

Pre-dating the building was a series of external dumps and top soil horizons with clear evidence of biological reworking (SG10). These deposits had been disturbed by post-Dissolution activity and contained ceramics dating from the 13th to 17th centuries.

*Activity within the medieval cloister garth (G10)*

A linear ditch with a concave profile within the cloister garth is assumed to be contemporary with the second rebuilding of the walkway as it contained a silver halfpenny of Henry VI (1422-61) and a fragment of grit or mill stone (SG18) (Fig. 8, left).<sup>55</sup> Possibly this ditch served as a bedding trench. Within this area there was a garden soil horizon (top 73.34m OD) containing 13th-century pottery (SG19) (Fig 8 right).

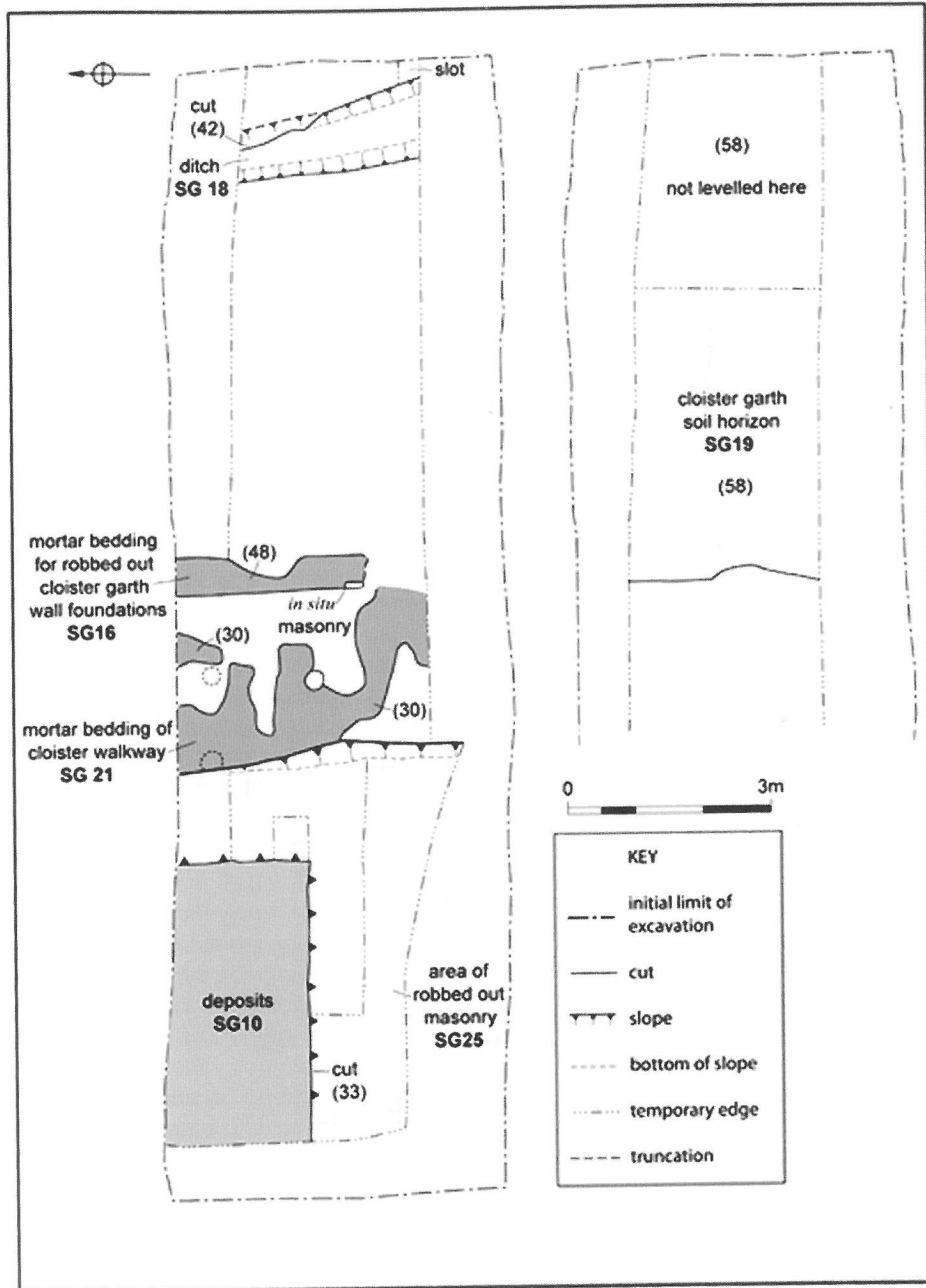


Figure 8. Left: the later phase of the cloister garth wall (G8), plus the mortar bedding for the paving (SG21), plus the robbed out walls of the adjoining half-celled building (G9) and ditch (SG18/G10). Right: later deposits within the cloister garth (SG19/G10).

*Medieval period discussion*

In 1046 Leominster nunnery was involved in a scandal, when the earl of Herefordshire abducted and seduced the Abbess Eadgifu, who he then kept 'as his wife' for almost a year, until he was persuaded to release her by the Bishop of Worcester and the Archbishop of Canterbury. This abduction seems to have been only one of a number of problems that the nunnery and its estates faced during this period as it appears that between 1046 and 1066 the extensive estates of Leominster nunnery were sequestered by the earls of Hereford to finance a series of border wars with the Welsh.<sup>56</sup>

In 1123 Henry I gave Leominster church and its remaining estates to Reading Abbey. By this date it is uncertain what remained of the nunnery, its church and other buildings, as it is assumed that after the events of 1046 the nunnery was probably dissolved. It is believed that building work on the Priory of St Peter and St Paul started immediately after Reading Abbey took over, as in c. 1132 Bishop Robert de Béthune consecrated two chapels in the nave of the new church. The Romanesque priory church consisted of a twin aisled nave, while to the east was the choir or monastic church; it consisted of a semi-circular presbytery, with transeptal chapels.<sup>57</sup> To the north of the church were the cloisters and domestic buildings, some of which are still standing.<sup>58</sup> During the 13th century a new south or parochial nave was added to the church and during the 14th century a new south aisle was added to this nave.<sup>59</sup> The eastern portion of the church was uncovered during the 1850s and its ground plan established from the robbed-out foundations.<sup>60</sup> A hypothetical plan of the priory shows the area of the site as lying across the western arm of the cloisters and part of the cloister garth (Fig 9).<sup>61</sup> Cloisters of English and Welsh medieval monastic houses were generally situated on the south side of the church, but at a significant number of sites such as Leominster the cloisters were located on the northern side of the church. Of the 25 examples of English and Welsh monastic houses with cloisters only 8 (32%) possessed northern cloistral ranges.<sup>62</sup>

The evaluation located the western arm of the priory cloisters in their expected position (G6). The width of the cloister ambulatory or walkway was 2.5m. The remains of mortar bedding for the tile or stone paving (of which there was no trace) indicated that the approximate height of its robbed out floor of the cloister walkway stood at 73.8m OD, which is some 1.2m below the floor level of the north aisle of the 12th-century priory church. Clearly the various elements of the priory had 'stepped' floor levels to take account of the sloping ground surface. The floor level of the western arm of the cloisters explains why the blocked door in the north wall of the north aisle (next to the toilet entrance) of the 12th-century church relates to a much lower floor level and it must have originally possessed steps on its southern side which have since been infilled.

The date of the half-cellared masonry building (G9) attached to the western side of the cloister walk is uncertain, but the presence of late-14th- or 15th-century pottery in the robbing debris indicates its possible date of construction (see G11, SG17). The plan and function of this building are difficult to determine because it had been completely robbed out and its associated deposits disturbed during the post-medieval period. It was interpreted as half-cellared because of the absence of floors (SG17) at similar level to floor-level within the walkway of the adjoining portion of the 15th-century cloisters (G8). The function of any cellared building would have been storage, perhaps for foodstuffs to supply the nearby kitchen. The substantial nature of the robbed-out foundation suggests that this building possessed an upper storey.

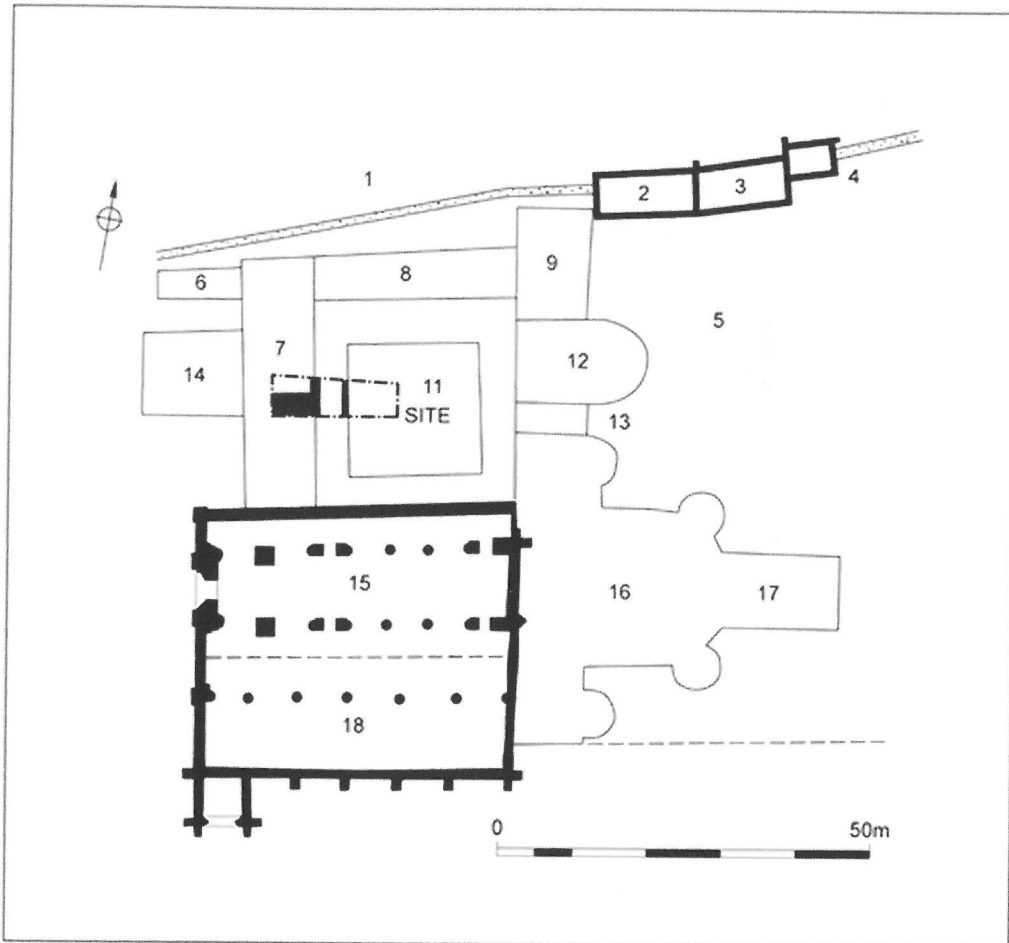


Figure 9. Plan of the medieval priory based on Brown and Wilson (1994, illus 37) showing the excavated area within the cloisters.

#### Key and conventions

The solid lines denote existing buildings, recently excavated foundations or robber trenches including these found during the evaluation. The extent of the buildings shown in outline is conjectural, apart from Nos 16 and 17, which are based on antiquarian discoveries.

**KEY:** 1. Former course of the Pinsley Brook; 2. Redorter; 3. Infirmary; 4. Infirmary Chapel; 5. Monastic cemetery; 6. Kitchen; 7. Cellared building; 8. Frater; 9. Warming room with Dorter above; 10. Cloister walkway; 11. Cloister garth; 12. Chapter House; 13. Sacristy; 14. Prior's Lodgings; 15. 12th-century twin aisled Nave; 16. Chancel with north/south transepts and radiating chapels; 17. Lady Chapel, probably a 14th-century addition; 18. 13th-century parochial nave and 14th-century south aisle.



**Period 5: The Dissolution***The demolition and destruction of the cloisters (G9)*

After the suppression of the priory in 1539, the cloisters, the cloistral buildings and the choir were demolished and then extensively quarried for building stone.<sup>63</sup> In 1611 and 1613 it is documented that stone was being salvaged from the site of the cloisters.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, the sequence of events concerning the demolition and robbing out of the masonry of the western arm of the cloisters can be reconstructed in detail (G11):

First, the tiled or paved floor of the cloister walk was removed (uncontexted). Then scaffolding was erected along the line of the western cloister walkway, presumably to allow the roofs to be stripped of stone slates and the standing walls demolished (SG24). The evidence for this scaffolding consisted of an L-shaped arrangement of four robbed out postholes within the walkway of the cloister garth, which probably held vertical timber scaffolding poles. Presumably all or most of the superstructure of the adjoining half-cellared building was demolished during this activity (Fig 10).

Secondly, after all the superstructure had been removed, the cloister garth wall foundations were robbed out (SG23). It is probable that contemporary with this activity was the robbing out or removal of both any remaining superstructure and the upper portion of foundations of the adjoining half-cellared building (G9) as the unwanted material (mainly mortar rubble, and sandstone rubble debris) were discarded within the interior of the former building (SG17). The 14th- and 15th-century pottery (61) recovered from these deposits is residual and may have been derived from disturbed floor construction deposits. The area of the former cloister garth was used to sort some salvaged material building materials as hundreds of fragments of broken glazed floor tiles and a lot of sandstone roof slate fragments were discarded here (described later) (SG20). Associated pottery was used to date this activity to the 17th century (SG20). Other finds included a few oyster shells and a small amount of disarticulated human skeletal material.<sup>65</sup> Thirdly, the deeper masonry foundations of the half-cellared building were completely dug out (SG25). Finds from these deposits included: sherds of 17th/18th-century pottery and a copper-alloy farthing token of mid-17th date century (a previously unrecorded type issued by Roger Smith, a mercer from Weobley).<sup>66</sup> Associated clay tobacco pipes (23) dated to 1650-75.<sup>67</sup> During the 17th century a north-south aligned ditch was dug across the area of the cloister garth. This was probably a property boundary, perhaps connected with occupation within the retained priory infirmary and reredorter known as the 'Priory House', which in c 1605 was being used as a hall for entertaining. It is possible that the eastern arm of the cloisters, which was apparently not demolished until the 1640s, formed part of this residence.<sup>68</sup>

The site was levelled (SG26) during the later 17th and early 18th century by the dumping of top soil containing many fragments of demolition material, mainly stone roofing slates and including a charcoal spread (Fig 12). Associated finds included clay tobacco pipes dated to 1650-75 and sherds of 17th/18th century pottery. Finally a shallow north-south aligned ditch was dug across the area (27) (SG27). This may have been a property boundary and its backfill contained 17th-century pottery.

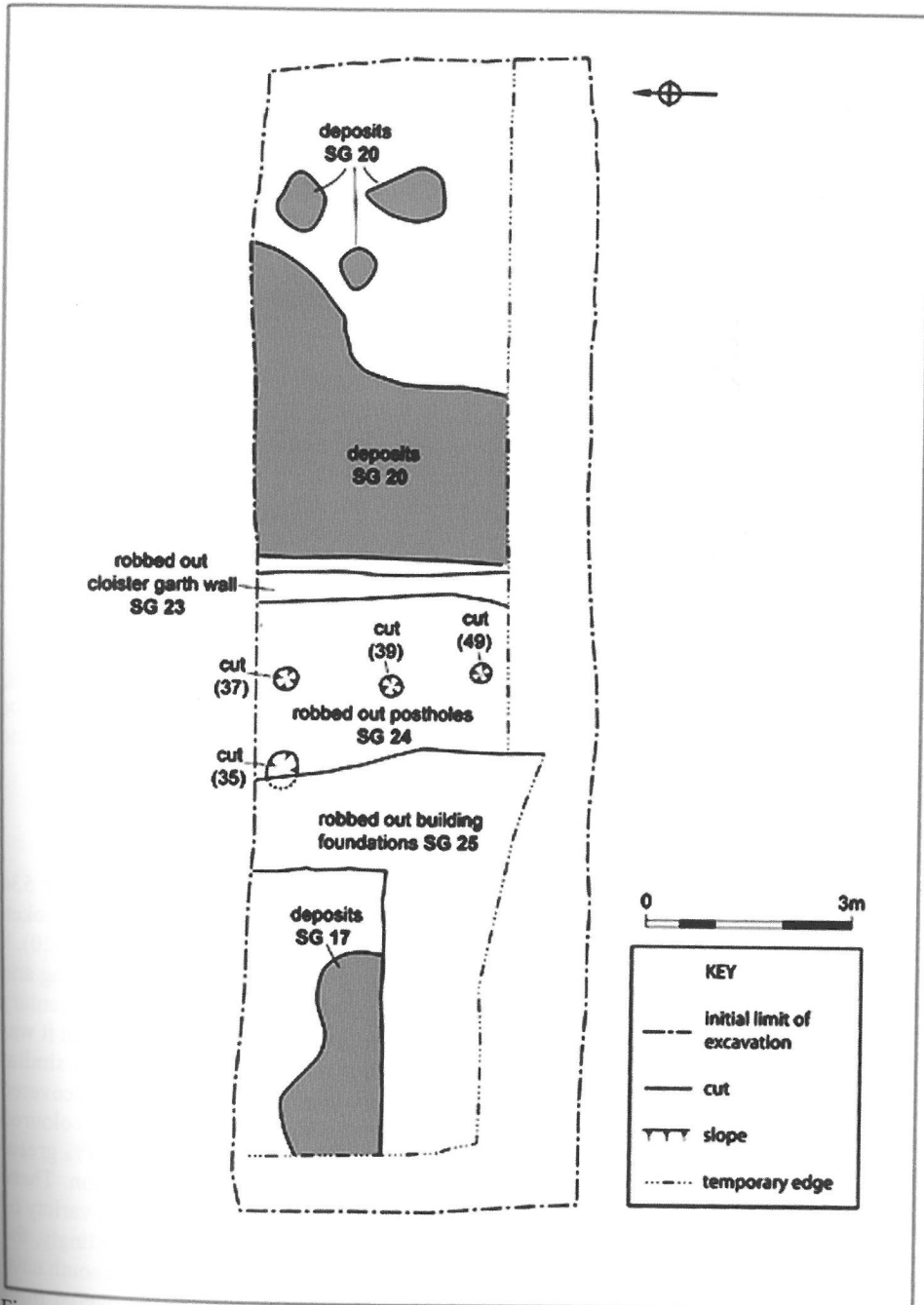


Figure 10. G11 earlier activity within the western cloister: postholes SG24, robber trenches SG23 & SG25, SG17 & SG20 deposits.



Figure 11. Dissolution period activity in the western cloister. In the centre of the trench can be seen the G24 postholes and the line of the robber trenches of the half-cellar building (G9) and the masonry of the various phases of the cloister garth wall (G6-8), view looking north.

*The Medieval floor tiles*  
(with Julie Bowen)

The most important element of the medieval finds assemblage from the site were the 536 fragments of plain and decorated floor tiles, plus other building materials including broken sandstone roof slates and lumps of tufa, all found in post-Dissolution contexts (mostly SG20).<sup>69</sup> The absence of complete tiles implies that this material was being brought here for sorting and the complete or reusable ones were being carted off. The tiles range in date from the 13th century to the 16th. Thin section and chemical analysis of a typical green-glazed tile, suggests that it was a Bredon-type, produced within the Hereford area.<sup>70</sup> All the tiles (except one) were a similar size, measuring some 132-35mm square, with bevelled edges. Of the 536 pieces of tile recovered 12% are decorated and the rest are plain. The plain coloured pieces bear a variety of coloured glazes including: 42% light yellow over white slip; 29% dark green or black, and 17% green. The yellow and dark green or black tiles were presumably laid chequer board fashion. There were also some triangular pieces and decorated infill strips. The decorated tiles bear a variety of designs implying that they were derived from a number of different settings.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, the decorated tiles were dissimilar to those recovered during the 1878-9 restoration of the south nave and aisle of the priory church.<sup>72</sup> This lack of similarity implies that the tiles recovered from cloisters were originally laid in other parts of the priory, possibly the choir and chapter house.

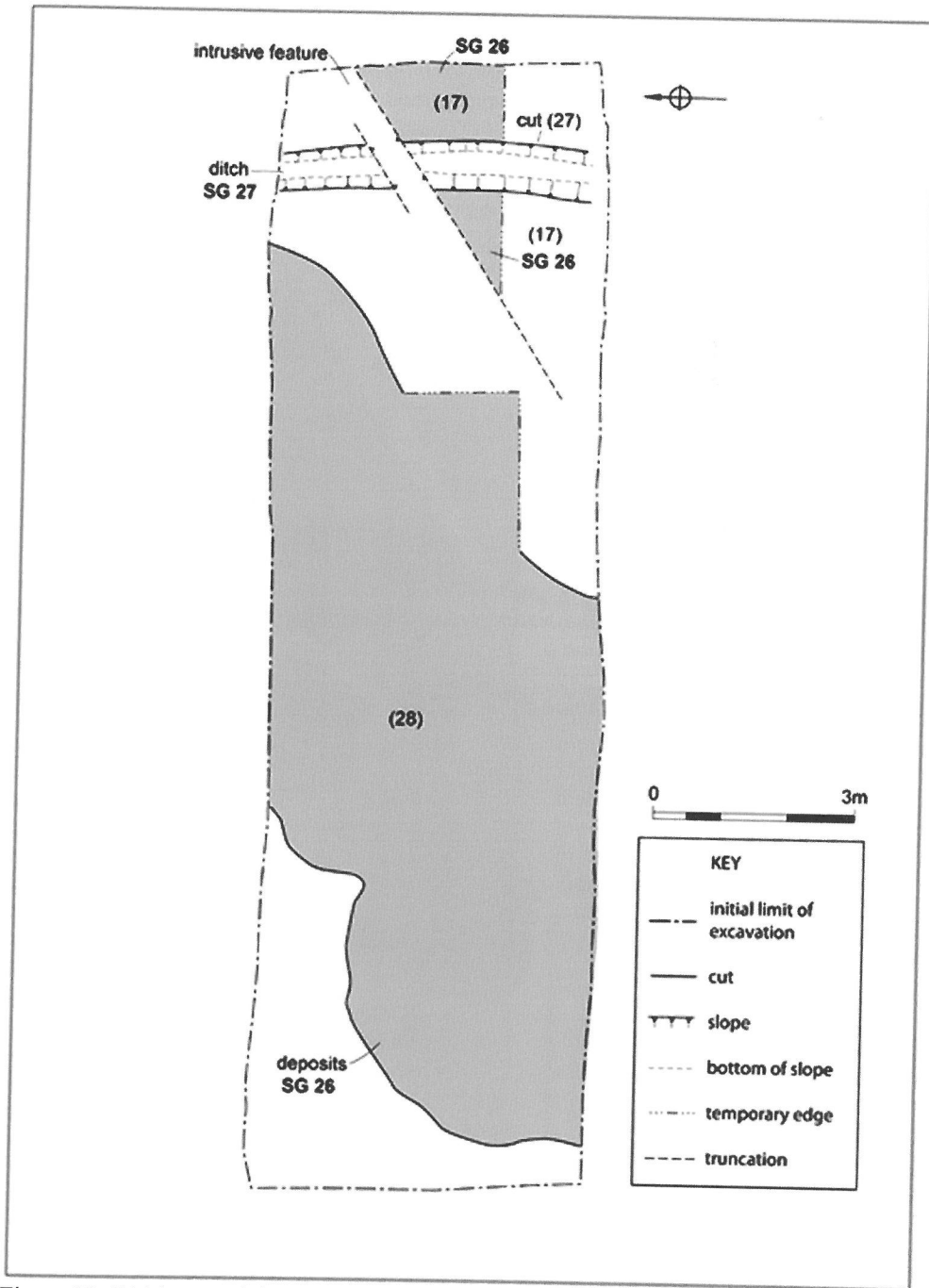


Figure 12. G11 later activity within the western cloister SG26 deposits and ditch SG27.

**Period 6: the 18th to 20th centuries**

*Paved trackway (G12 18th- early 19th century)*



According to Gallier's map of Leominster, by 1825 the site of the cloister was open-space, crossed a south-west to north-east aligned trackway (top 74.15m OD), represented on site by an area of pitched sandstone paving (dated to post 1650) (SG28) (Figs 13 and 14).<sup>73</sup>

Figure 13. G12 pitched stone trackway (22) being cleaned, view looking east

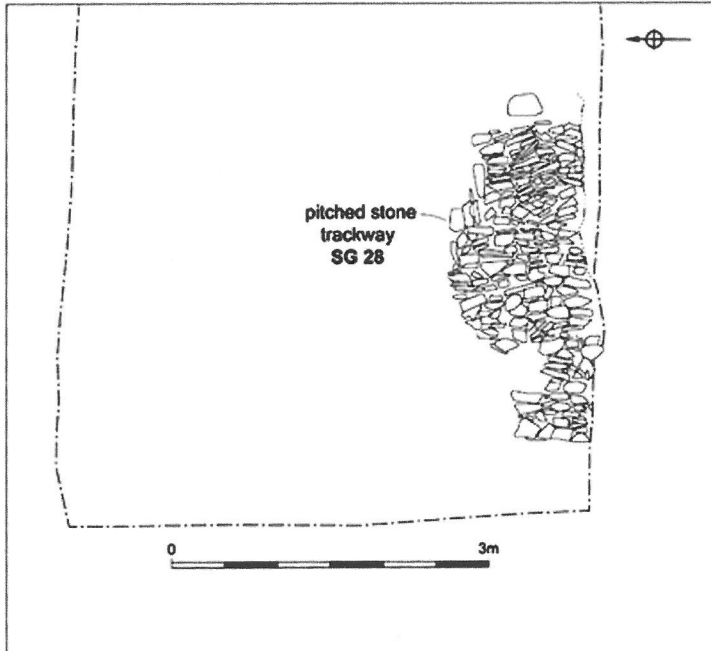


Figure 14. G12 pitched stone trackway (SG28).

*The workhouse garden (G13, late 19th - early 20th century)*

From 1795 the 'Old Priory' buildings were used as Leominster Workhouse.<sup>74</sup> By 1886 the site was part of the workhouse gardens. During this period soil was dumped here to raise the general ground level (SG29) (Fig. 15). Associated finds included fragments of green glass bottles, a clay tobacco pipe stamped RE dated to 1670-1710, and late-18th century pottery.<sup>75</sup>

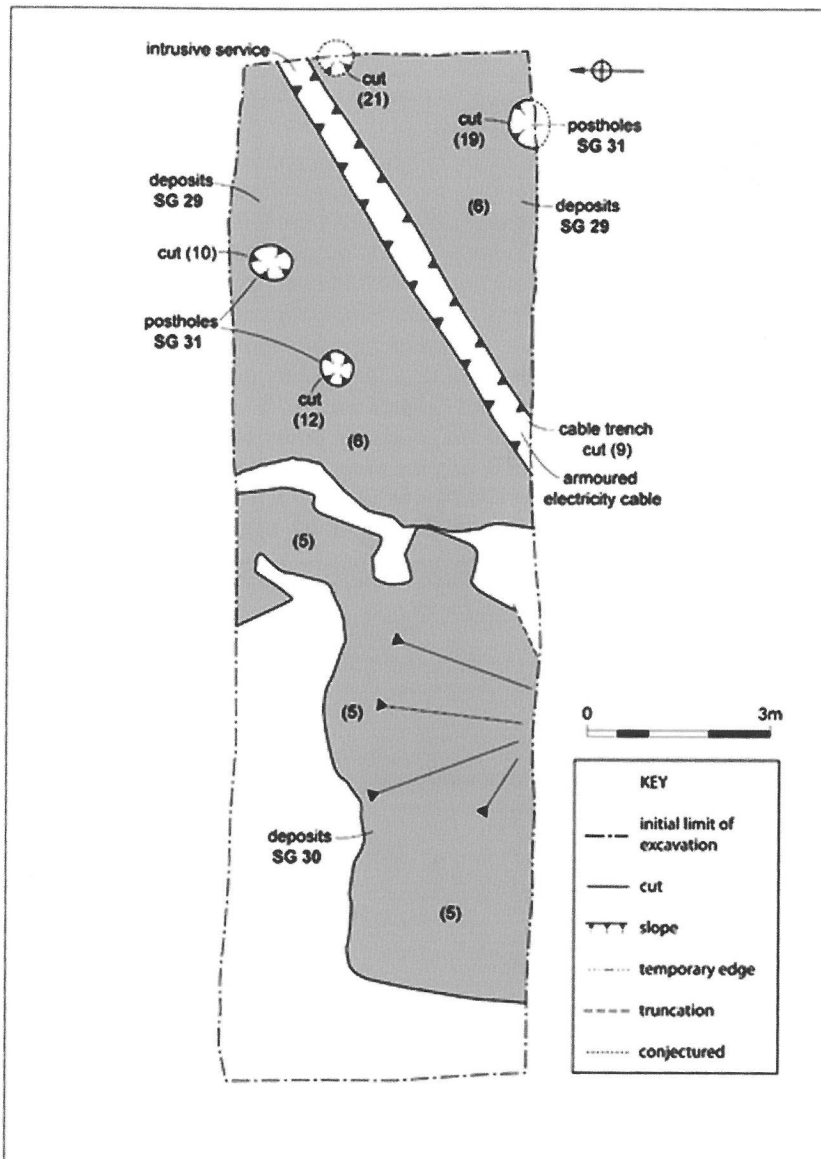


Figure 15. G13 deposits (SGs 29 and 30) and postholes (SG31).

Four scattered postholes (interpreted as 19th-century garden features; SG31) and top soil horizons (SG 30) contained pottery of 18th- to 20th-century date, plus coins of George III and George V. A photograph *c.* 1866-90 of the northern side of the church shows the footpaths and borders of the workhouse garden. These footpaths are also visible on an aerial view of the church taken in 1920.<sup>76</sup>

*The car park (G14, 1948-2005)*

In 1948 the Workhouse became part of the NHS and was converted into a hospital; this involved installing a number of drains and other services across the site (SG 32) (not illustrated). Soon after this area of garden was converted into a tarmac car park with a large circular raised flower bed or border complete with a central flagpole (constructed before 1968) (Figs 16 and 17). The dense mass of limestone rubble used to create the foundations for the tarmac car park (which finished some 50 cm below present ground level) raised the ground level of the area (SG33). This material also created a massive 'shadow' or signal detected during the ground penetrating radar survey, which was misinterpreted as a Saxon rotunda (see introduction). Finds from the garden soil inside the raised border included (SG33): a late 18th-century clay tobacco pipe of William Bryan with a stamped stem, possibly produced in Bromyard; a corroded copper halfpenny of George III dated 1799, a copper disc (diameter 27mm) possibly an extremely worn a late 18th- or early 19th-century halfpenny coin or token; 19th-century pottery; buttons; a bone toggle; a ceramic wig curler; a broken slate pencil and a glass marble.<sup>77</sup>

During 1978-81 as part of the restoration of the adjoining priory buildings the entire car park was repaved in brick. The car park surface within the vicinity of the excavation showed a noticeable south-westerly to north-easterly slope (74.78m to 74.13m OD). Currently the car park is used by Herefordshire Social Services Council staff working in the adjoining buildings.



Figure 16. The car park phase, showing deposits and features, looking north

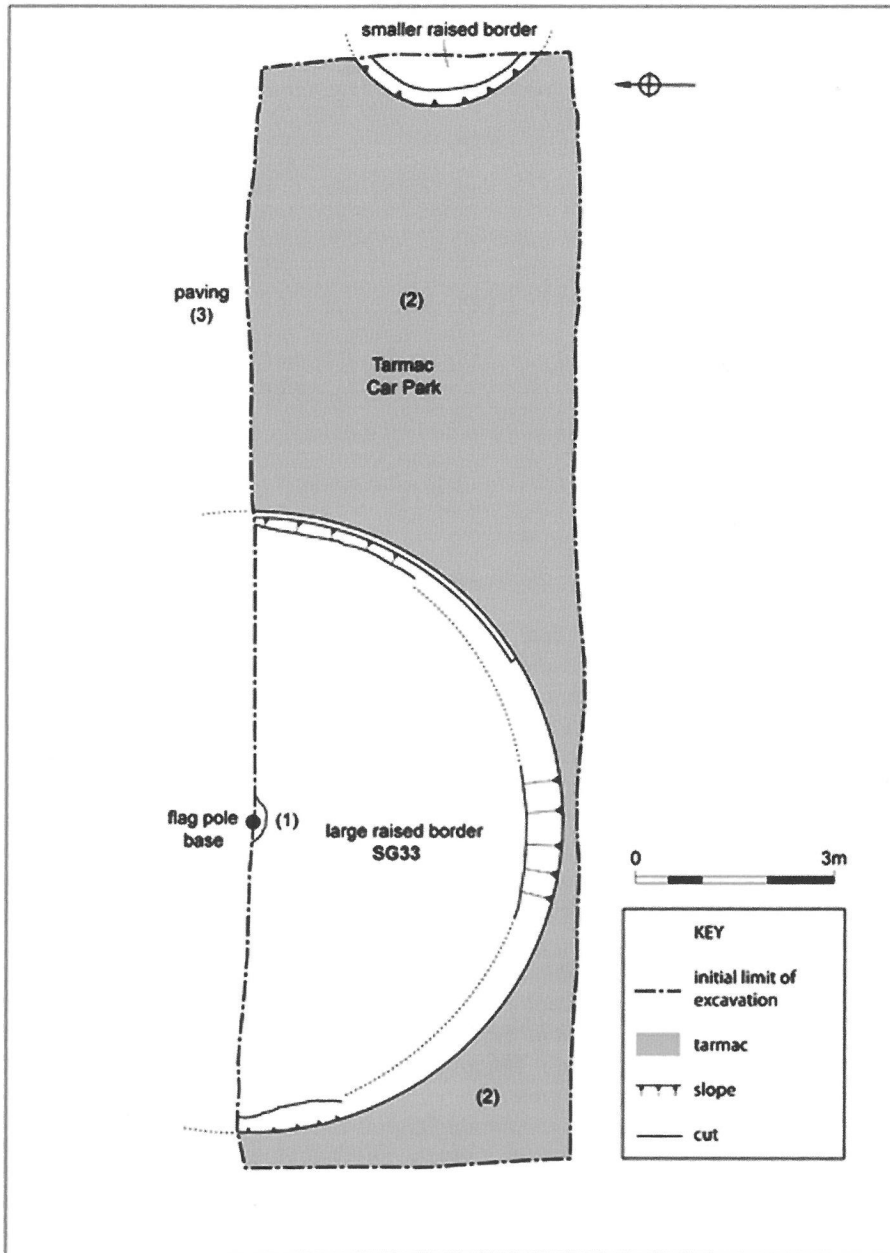


Figure 17. G14 selective features: the large circular raised bed complete with flag pole (SG 33) and the western portion of second smaller raised bed within the tarmac car park



**Appendix One: list of on line archive reports (written 2008)**

(These are available as PDFs from the Woolhope Club website [www.woolhopeclub.org.uk](http://www.woolhopeclub.org.uk)).

**Finds:**

Bowen, Julie, 'Medieval Floor Tiles'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Glass Vessels'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Metalwork Objects'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Miscellaneous Other Finds'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Other Building Material'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Pottery'.

Peacey, Alan and Hurst, Derek, 'Clay Tobacco Pipes'.

Symons, David, 'Coins'.

Vince, Alan (the late), 'Compositional Analysis of the Medieval Floor Tiles'.

**Environmental:**

Baxter, Ian, 'Animal Bones'.

Hamilton-Dyer, Sheila, 'Small Bones'.

Hurst, Derek, 'Shell'.

Pearson, Elizabeth, 'Palaeobotanical Report'.

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