

NAU Archaeology

Report No.1092

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at the Priory of the Holy
Sepulchre, Thetford, Norfolk**

5749 THD

Michael J Boyle, March 2006

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BAU 1144

Contents

Summary

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Archaeological and Historical Background
- 3.0 Methodology
- 4.0 Results
- 5.0 The Finds
- 6.0 Conclusions

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Appendix 1: Context Summary

Figures

- Fig.1 Site location
- Fig.2 Location of trenches observed

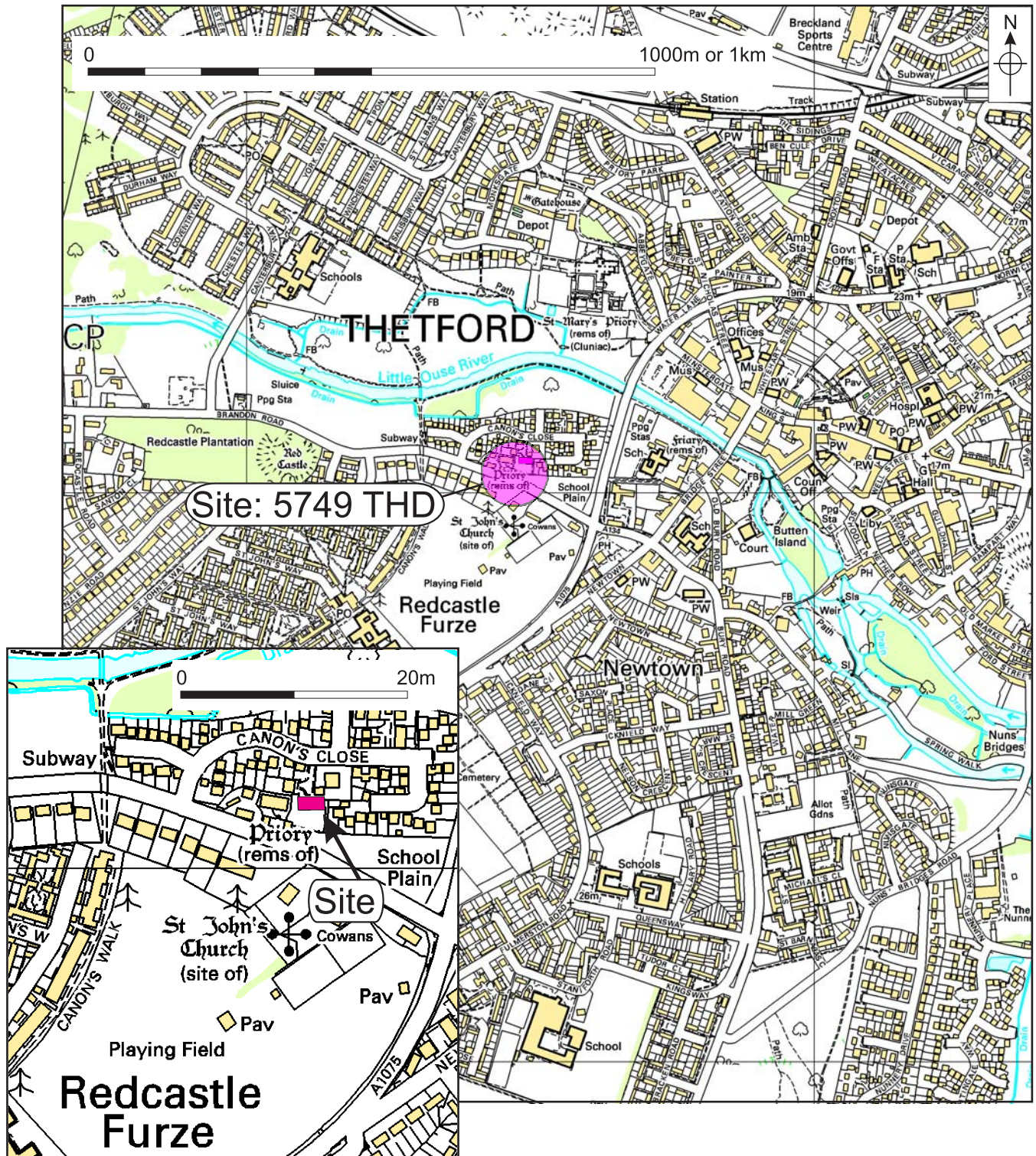


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000 for main map and 1:5,000 for detail.

Local Authority No.100019340

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Location: The Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, Thetford
District: Breckland
Grid Ref: TL 86492 83056
HER No.: 5749 THD
SAM No.: 21409
Date of fieldwork: 19th July 2005

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at The Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, Thetford, during works associated with the relocation and replacement of an information lectern.

A mortar floor surface was observed within the eastern end of the nave and some stratification was found to survive in a previously unexcavated area external to the eastern wall of the building.

1.0 Introduction

(Figs 1 and 2)

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) during works to be carried out at the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, Thetford. This work was carried out to meet the requirements of the Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent issued by English Heritage (Phillip Walker, 4 July 2005). The proposed works involved the removal of two wall mounted information signs and a guardianship/interpretation lectern. A new lectern-type graphics panel was then to be installed externally and to the east of the existing structure (Fig. 2). The lectern post (50mm square) was set 0.40m into the ground and secured in concrete.

The justification for the works was that the existing interpretation scheme at the site was deemed to be in a poor state. The interpretation lectern was behind an iron grill and not accessible to visitors and the wall mounted information panels sited too high on the walls. The new interpretation/guardianship panel was to be more discreet and not clutter the small building and site with panels.

The fieldwork and report were commissioned and funded by English Heritage.

The Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards, currently hold the site archive.

2.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

2.1 Historical Background

William de Warenne, third Earl of Surrey, founded the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, Thetford. He was a powerful magnate in England, and East Anglia was one of his areas of strength. King Stephen had granted him the royal possessions on the Suffolk side of Thetford soon after 1139 and it was these lands and rights that he used to establish and endow the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre. The order stemmed apparently from the crusades; in 1114 regular canons were instituted in the house of

St. Sepulchre at Jerusalem. The Earl of Warwick, at Warwick, founded the first English house. The Thetford house seems to have been associated with the second crusade. The English houses never became large, possibly the revenues suffered after the loss of the Holy Land and by the end of the 13th century they were distinguishable only in name from other English houses of regular canons. Thetford came under the Augustinian general chapter by c. 1260. Income in 1291 was c. £20, probably for nine canons at most. By 1381 there were seven canons and in 1536 commissioners reported only one religious present, two priests, four children and ten servants. The buildings were in decay at this point (Dallas 1993).

The priory was dissolved in 1536. Its site then passed to Sir Richard Fulmerston, one of the lesser men who rose to county prominence with the dissolution of the monasteries. By the 18th century the nave of the church had been converted into a barn, and a large house lay to the north-east of this (pulled down in the early 1950s). A stone building that served as a hen house abutted the south of the nave. To the south-west lay a small barn. There was also a stone lodge.

In about 1870 Leigh Hunt described 'lately carried out' improvements: 'the ruins have been tastefully interspersed with rustic grotto and rockery work and patches of gardening'. By then the nave would also appear to have been a ruin.

2.2 The Archaeology of the Site

The site of the priory lies south of the River Ouse and north of the road from Thetford to Brandon. It lay outside the main part of the town until the rapid expansion of Thetford in the 1960s. All that now survives of the priory buildings is the heavily disturbed remains of the nave (with no aisles) of the priory church. This stands to a height of c. 6m, and is built of flint rubble with ashlar dressings. It has suffered from subsequent changes of use, conversions and re-buildings. In the period after the dissolution the nave was converted into a barn, and for this purpose various openings were cut into the walls and the priory windows were blocked. A new wall also had to be built across the east end of the nave.

The north wall of the nave has a re-built eastern bay and an opening has been cut into its centre bay, an opening that was subsequently blocked. In its western bay there is a doorway. This is probably in an original position, as the string-course decoration on the wall is stepped up over the doorway. Some of it probably belongs to a re-building, as the moulding of the doorway arch is not identical with that of the jambs. The south wall of the nave has been heavily damaged by the subsequent cutting of openings into the wall at ground and first floor levels. In the centre bay was the wide main entrance to the barn. All these openings had later been blocked. The west wall of the nave survives, together with the western doorway and part of the west window, (both of which had subsequently been blocked). The nave was decorated internally with a string-course that survives except where it has been destroyed by later alterations. This string-course is stepped up over both the west and north-west doorways. There are traces of the lower parts of the windows in the north wall. The wall at the east end of the nave is a later addition probably associated with the conversion of the nave to a barn. The doorway here may be even later, since there are no signs of such a feature on 18th-century engravings. It should presumably be associated with the conversion of the nave to a 'tasteful ruin'. It is probably to this stage that we should ascribe the blocking of the barn openings.

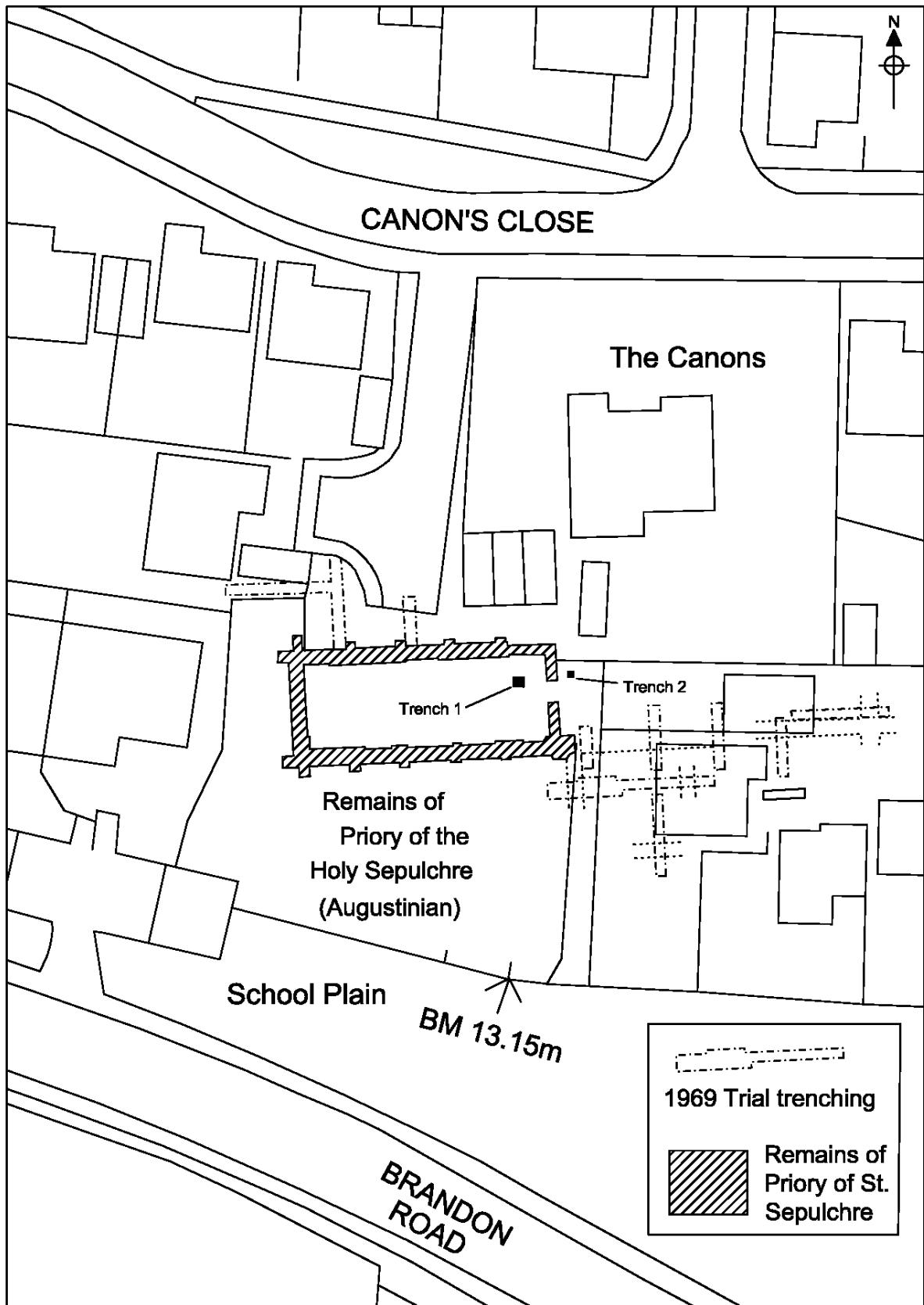


Figure 2. Location of trenches observed. Scale 1:500.

Thus when the main entrance was blocked, the blocking was built flush with the inside face of the wall (which was the side which would be seen), while the outer face that looked towards the farmyard was left deeply recessed.

Externally, the nave is buttressed on all the original walls, with angle buttresses at the west end. On the outside of the north wall the corbels and weather-mould of the cloister walk can still be seen. At the east corner of the south wall of the nave the wall becomes thicker. The reason for this change is not clear. It may have resulted from the strengthening necessary for a crossing tower, or it may have resulted from a subsequent re-building of the nave. Abutting the nave to the south are the remains of a later low stone farm building. The standing remains are thus those of a nave without aisles, later converted into a farmyard barn and then into a ruin.

Unfortunately, little can be established about the dating of these remains. Several carved stones survived, either built into later alterations or incorporated into a rockery within the nave. They presumably had come from the priory itself and would seem to belong to the 12th century. The character of the string-course within the nave might suggest, however, a slightly later date for this part of the church, although otherwise the standing remains provide no clear dating evidence. There was also some later medieval work on the site, as is suggested by the doorway into the cloisters and by a carved block from the excavations in the claustral area (Hare 1979).

3.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2)

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during works associated with the removal of an existing information lectern and the installation of a new one in a different location and the removal of two wall mounted information signs.

The contractors began by removing the existing lectern situated within the upstanding remains of the nave of the church. This was done by hand and involved digging out the concrete base into which the lectern post was set. When this was completed a sub-rectangular trench (Trench 1) measuring 0.90m by 0.80m and 0.40m deep remained. A plan and section of the pit were sketched and visible deposits described. The feature was also photographed.

The next phase of the works was to excavate a small trench to take a concrete footing for the installation of a new lectern. This was to be situated approximately 1.0m to the east of the eastern end of the church and 1.0m to the north of the arched entrance (Fig. 2). The trench (Trench 2) was excavated by hand to a depth of 0.55m and was 0.45m square. Again sketch plans and sections were drawn, deposits described and photographs taken. On completion of this task the wall mounted information signs were removed from the exterior of the structure.

4.0 Results

Trench 1

The upper 0.12m of this trench consisted of a hard sandy mortar surface ([10]). This deposit was undated but was possibly associated with the conversion of the church into a farmyard barn sometime after the dissolution. The mortar surface sealed a layer of flint cobbles in a matrix of mid-to-dark brown loam soil containing small fragments of chalk mortar ([11]). Several of the cobbles were observed to have been dressed and so presumably came from the structure itself. The deposit was interpreted as being demolition rubble that had been utilised as a make-up/levelling later prior to the laying of the mortar surface. The deposit extended to the base of the excavation.

Trench 2

The section of this trench revealed a thin layer of gravel sealing a 0.12m thick layer of hoggin (a modern levelling material). Below these modern surface layers was a 0.15m thick deposit consisting of a dark brownish grey silty clay soil containing small chalk lumps and flecks ([12]). Also within this deposit was a piece of masonry of a similar type to that used in the existing east wall (added when the structure was converted to a barn), and so presumably fell from there when this old ground surface was still exposed. The primary deposit visible within Trench 2 was pale brown silty sand with fragments of a sandy mortar, lenses of degraded mortar and again dressed flint cobbles ([13]). This undated deposit presumably represents a phase of demolition during alterations to the building or tumble associated with a phase of decay.

5.0 The Finds

No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

6.0 Conclusions

In the 1960's Thetford rapidly expanded south of the river. This expansion eventually threatened the priory site, and in 1969 the imminence of a housing development on part of this site led the department of the Environment to carry out some trial trenching. Fig. 2 shows a plan of these excavations. It was stated in the subsequent report that 'East of the nave, the excavations sought to ascertain the eastern plan of the church. This was, however, rendered difficult by the almost complete destruction of the stratification over much of the site. This had presumably occurred when the area was laid to lawn, for there was a singular lack of any large or medium sized flints in the top 0.8m. In removing the flints and other building debris the stratification would have been destroyed' (Hare 1979). The excavations did not encompass the specific areas examined in this watching brief which revealed the existence of a mortar floor surface within at least part of the east end of the nave and that some stratification appears to survive outside and adjacent to the east wall of the nave.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Louisa Sherman of English Heritage, who co-ordinated this project. Also to Mark Hayden also of English Heritage who observed and oversaw the works on site. Thanks also to Riverside Properties who carried out the work. Norfolk Heritage Environment Record information was provided by Jan Allen of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology.

The report was produced and illustrated by Julie Curl and edited by Alice Lyons.

Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
10	Deposit	Mortar surface	Medieval
11	Deposit	Flint cobbles in loam matrix	Medieval
12	Deposit	Silt clay soil	Medieval
13	Deposit	Silty sand with mortar	Medieval

