

**NAU ARCHAEOLOGY**

**Report No.1091**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at Abbey House,  
Thetford, Norfolk**

41836 THD

Michael J Boyle, April 2006

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BAU 1141



## **Contents**

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### ***Summary***

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

### ***Acknowledgements***

### ***Bibliography***

- Appendix 1: Context Summary
- Appendix 2: Finds by Context
- Appendix 3: Catalogue of Metal Objects
- Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material

### **Figures**

- Fig.1 Site location
- Fig.2 Trench location
- Fig.3 Map by John Miller c.1720 (copy) (detail)
- Fig.4 Map of 1807 (detail)
- Fig.5 View of The Abbey Gate by T Martin 1779
- Fig.6 Ordnance Survey Map of 1883, with Priory outline added and other details



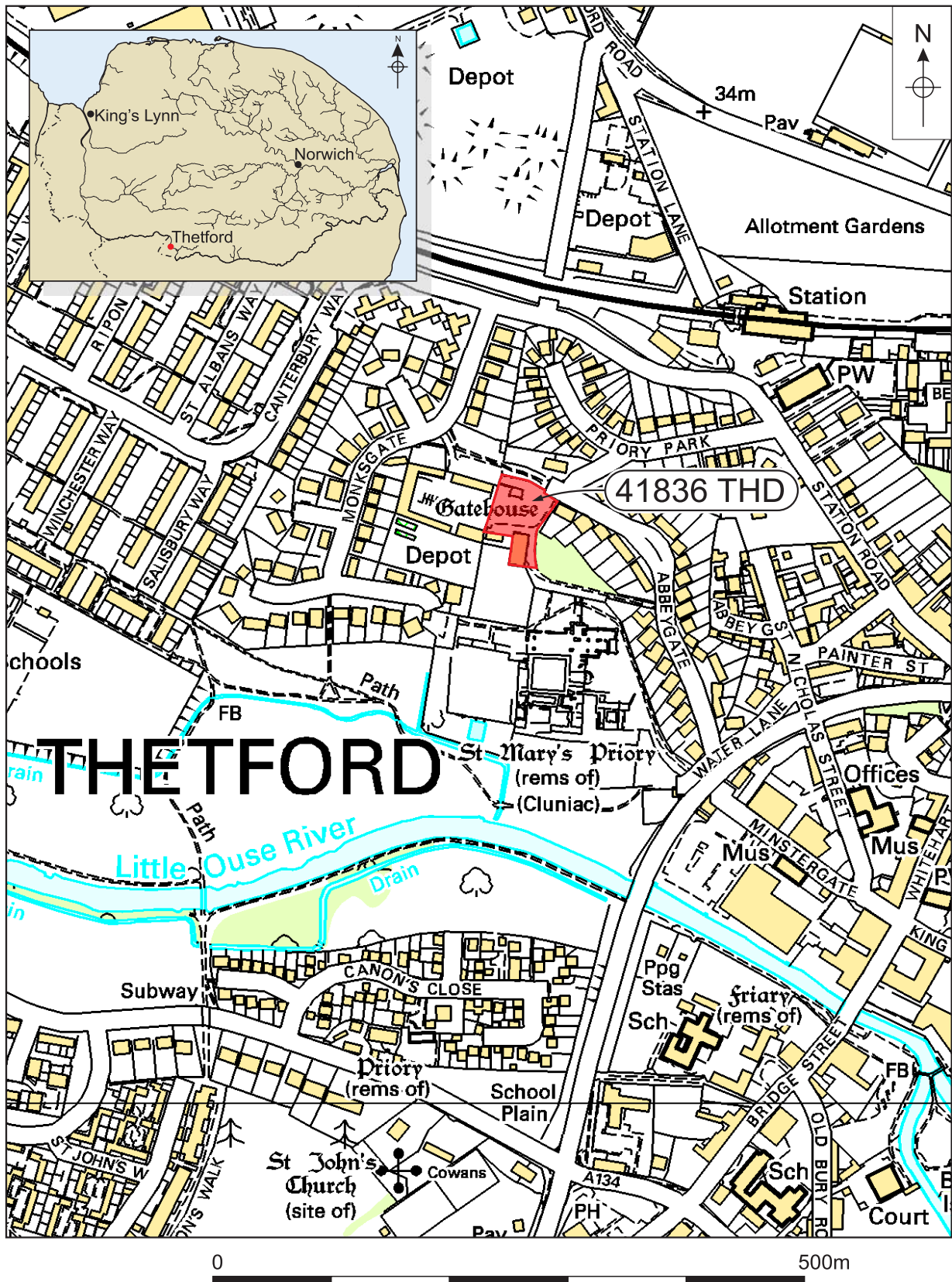


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:5000

Local Authority No.100019340

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Location: Abbey House, Thetford, Norfolk  
District: Breckland  
Grid Ref: TL 865 835  
HER No.: 41836 THD  
Date of fieldwork: 18th – 19th July 2005

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## **Summary**

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Abbey House, Thetford, Norfolk. The purpose of the watching brief was to observe and record any archaeological features or deposits uncovered during the excavation of two service trenches.*

*A probable 19th-century driveway to Abbey House was found beneath the present asphalt driveway and demolition rubble associated with a possible medieval barn was also observed.*

### **• 1.0 Introduction**

(Fig. 1)

Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) undertook an archaeological watching brief during works at Abbey House, Thetford. The works comprised the excavation of two service trenches, excavated to install both gas and electricity supplies to Abbey House. The site was situated adjacent to the northern gatehouse of Thetford Cluniac Priory (SAM 21420) and therefore in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: AH/18/07/05) an archaeologist was required to be in constant attendance to monitor the works.

This work was commissioned and funded by Stuart Wilson, the owner of the property.

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

### **• 2.0 Geology and Topography**

The underlying solid geology at the site consists of a white chalk of the Upper Cretaceous period (Funnell 2005). A chalk-sand drift with pockets of sand and flints overlies this. Topsoil at the site was dark greyish brown sandy silt that overlay pale-to-mid brown silty sand subsoil. The site lies at c. 17m OD and is situated on a gentle slope running down towards the River Little Ouse to the south. The site appeared to be free draining.

### **• 3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Thetford was an important Late Saxon town, with defences on both sides of the river. A castle was established on the east side of the town by the sheriff Roger Bigod in the 1070s and the bishopric centred here for some twenty years between 1071 and 1094. Early medieval Thetford also lay on a pilgrimage route and was therefore central to Norfolk and its administration in the 11th century.

In 1104 Roger Bigod established a Cluniac Priory in Thetford, on the south side of the river, moving it to the present site on the north bank in 1107, just outside the Late

Saxon town defences on the west side. The main church and claustral buildings lay to the south, closer to the river, to the north lay the outer court, the centre of estate administration for the priory. Since the Dissolution, the Outer Court became Abbey Farm and in modern times was used as a depot by Breckland District Council.

### **3.2 General background: Cluniac Priors**

The Cluniac Order came to England in the wake of the Norman Conquest but never became very rich or influential, only thirty-two houses being founded here with just a handful being 'fully organised monasteries'. It remained essentially an aristocratic and intellectual order with monks drawn from the higher classes of society, whose daily life revolved around a long ritualistic timetable and much ceremonial. Even with a few monks, there were many people in a Cluniac monastery, with lay brothers undertaking the manual work of the fields and farmyard, and with secular staff and servants to look after the domestic needs of the monastery and the visitors and tenantry who came there.

The major buildings and functions of the monastery were in several distinct courts, the whole being enclosed in a single precinct wall with a main gatehouse, sometimes with a market outside the gate.

Cluniac houses in their monastic layout conformed to the Benedictine plan generally, but very little is known of the non-claustral buildings. Medieval monasteries however, were often centres of large agricultural estates, in effect, manorial centres. All the elements appropriate to this function were usually found in an Outer Court and except for the gatehouse (constructed in stone) these buildings almost never survive.

Many monasteries had an Outer Court around which were ranged buildings connected with the administration of the monastic estate, probably including stabling and accommodation for travellers and guests. Visitors could include kings and barons (who might arrive with retinues), tenant farmers, travellers and pilgrims.

### **3.3 The Outer Court at Thetford**

(Figs 1 and 2)

The ecclesiastical buildings of the Priory are laid out with the cloister south of the church and the gatehouse to the north. This may be compared to the other Cluniac priory in Norfolk at Castle Acre, where the Outer Court also lay to the north and west. The gatehouse at Thetford was the entrance to the whole precinct and had an almonry (hospital) attached. To the north field boundaries may have preserved the main approach road to the gatehouse (Fig. 1) with the Outer Court just to the west (whether it had its own access is not known).

At the Dissolution in 1539 the priory (or its domestic buildings, at least) remained in use as a farm, with the priors lodging forming the farmhouse and the buildings of the Outer Court remaining in use as farm buildings. A survey map of 1720 by John Miller (Fig. 3) depicts elements of the Outer Court. This map shows the northern yard as the Cow Yards (a) and the southern yard as the Pond Yard (d); the yard with the gatehouse was known as Steepleyard (b) and also shown is the Courtyard (e) and the Garden (f), the old priors garden. In the 19th century the farmhouse in the priors lodging was given up and replaced by the present Abbey House, close to the gatehouse.

A map of 1807 (Fig. 4) shows Abbey Farm to be a range of buildings on the site of, or incorporating the old priors lodging.

An 18th-century drawing (Fig. 5) shows the gatehouse attached to a large barn, which is also on the map of 1720, which may be based on an earlier survey (Penn 2003).

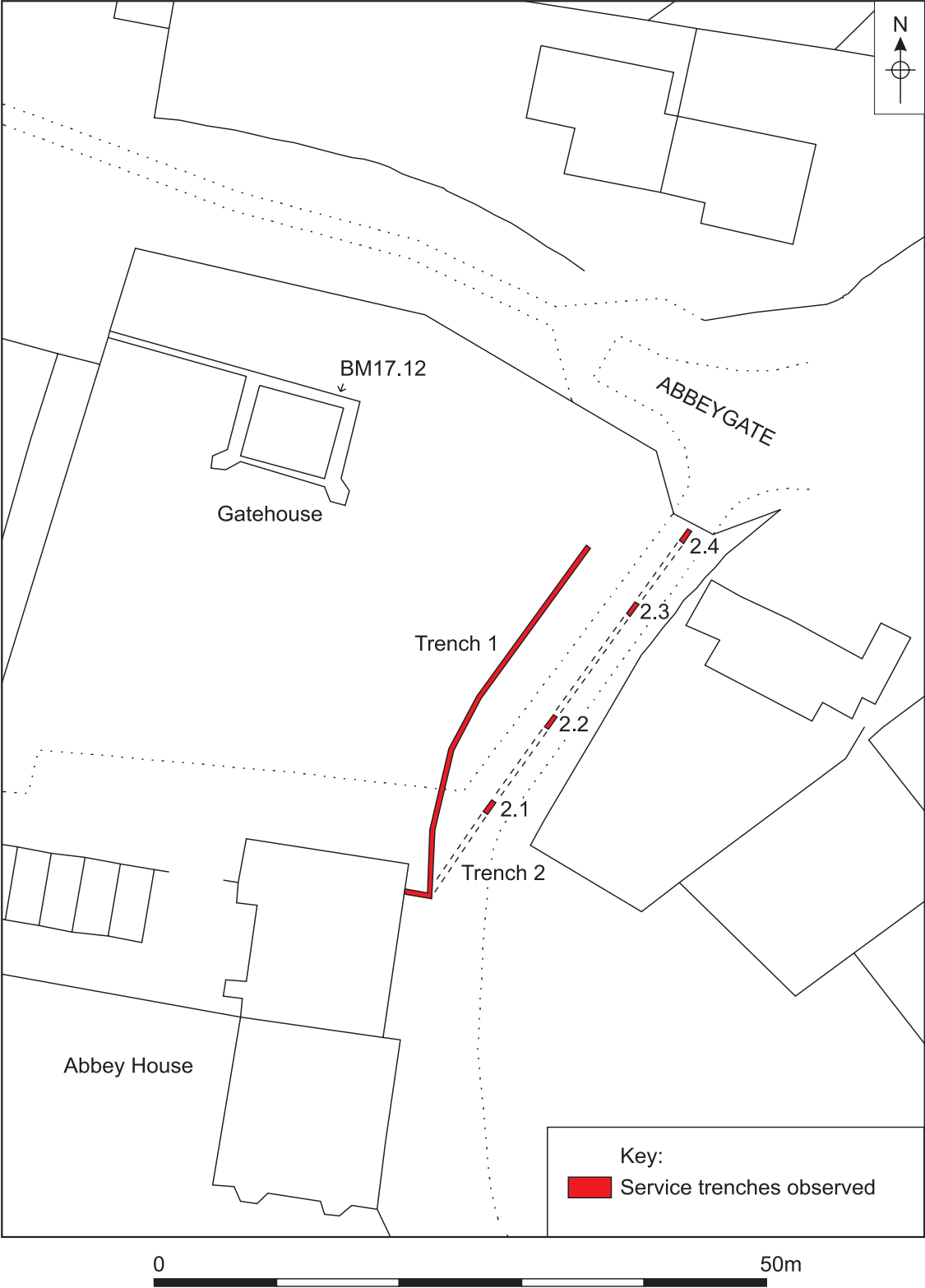


Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:500



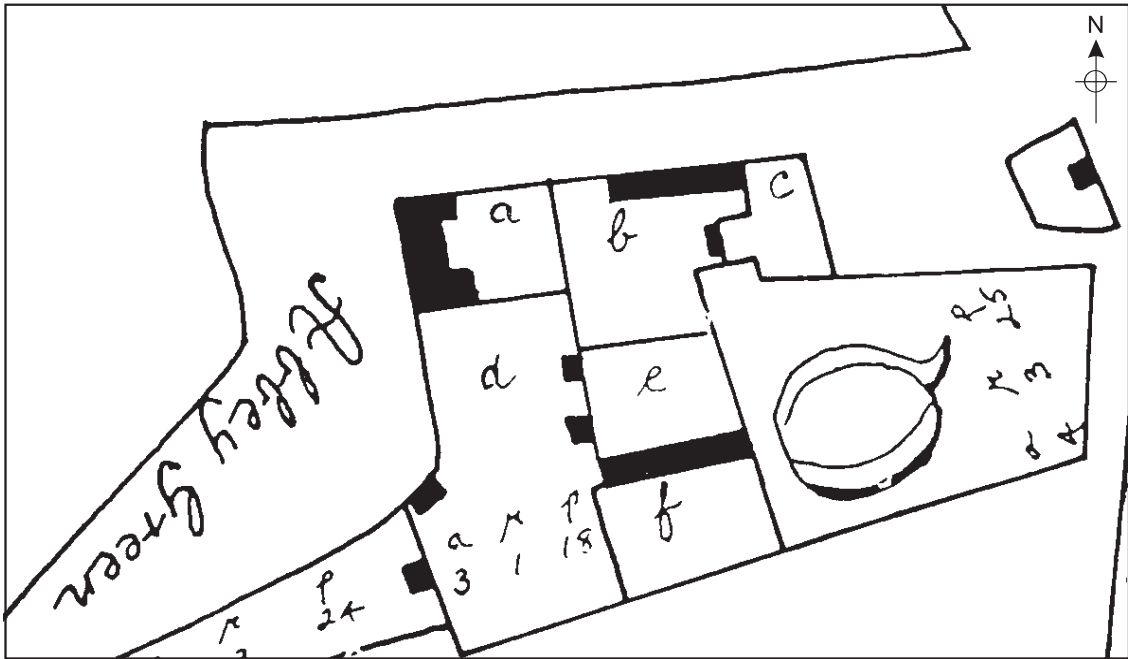


Figure 3. Map by John Miller c.1720 (copy) (detail). Not to scale

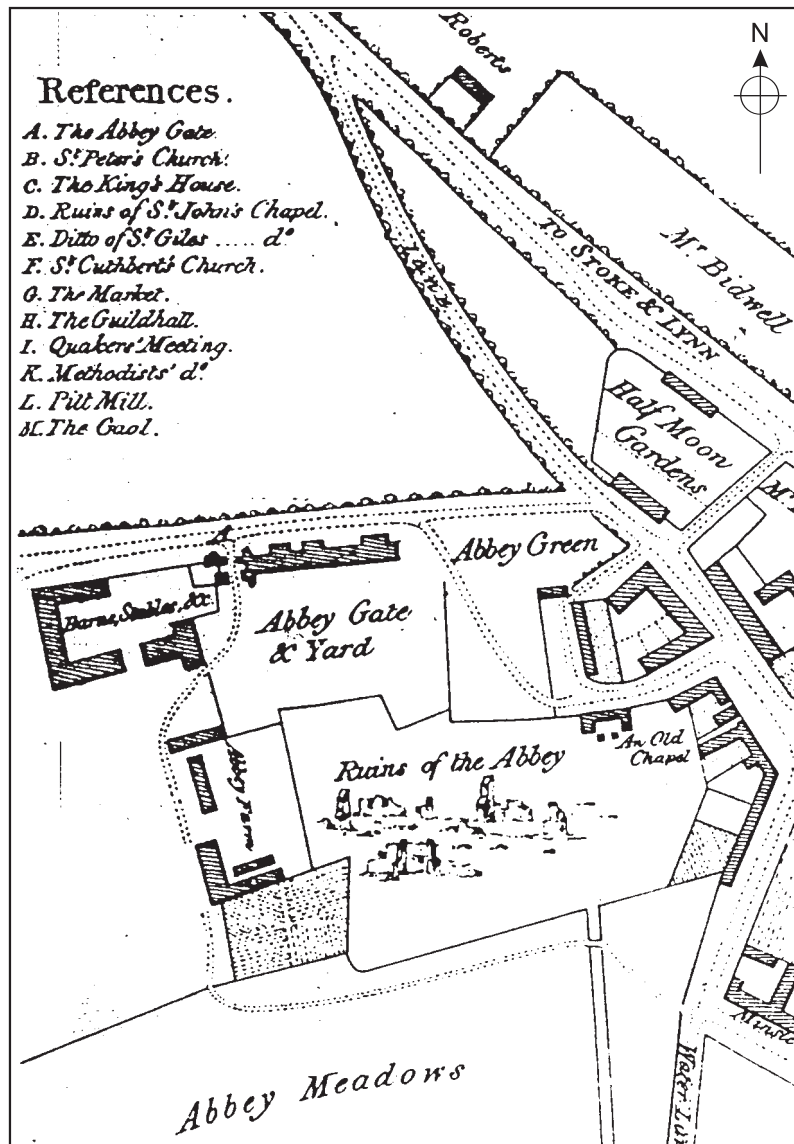


Figure 4. Map of 1807 (detail). Not to scale

### 3.4 Archaeological Evidence

Excavations (Penn 1991) in an area of the Outer Court immediately to the south-west of the gatehouse showed a general lack of evidence for activity in the medieval period. It is thought that the likely explanation for this is that the use of the site as a farmyard and grazing for animals left few structural remains (Fig. 3: the Cow Yards, the Pond Yard). Moreover the use of the area as a depot by the District Council probably destroyed any evidence that did exist as the northern half of the site had been truncated down to the natural chalk-sand removing all topsoil etc before being concreted over in the 1940s. The southern half of the site has also been levelled over the years, intensive rotavation possibly removing any shallow features. Several pits associated with bell-founding were deep enough to escape destruction (Penn 1991).



Figure 5. View of The Abbey Gate by T Martin, 1779

### • 4.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2)

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during the excavation of two north-east to south-west aligned service trenches located in the grounds of the present Abbey House, Thetford, Norfolk.

The Brief required that an archaeologist be in constant attendance during the works.

The contractors began by excavating the more westerly of the two trenches (Trench 1) using a mini JCB with a toothed bucket. The trench ran from the north-east corner of Abbey house in an approximate north-easterly direction for a distance of 21m. This trench was excavated to a depth of between 0.50m and 0.65m and was 0.40 wide. It was excavated to carry the new electricity supply to Abbey House.

Trench 2 was intended to carry a new gas supply to the house and extended from the junction of the drive to the house with Abbeygate, to the house itself, some 50m to the south-west. The installation of the gas supply was to be achieved not by

excavating an open trench but by the use of a thrust borer that operates below the ground surface and connects a series of small open trenches situated at intervals along the length of the service run. In this case there were to be four open trenches each 1.20m in length and 0.50m wide. The depths of the four trenches varied between 0.35m and 0.95m.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those that were obviously modern.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU Archaeology *pro forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

A level was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 17.12m on the north-east corner of the northern gatehouse of the Priory.

Due to the lack of suitable deposits, no environmental samples were taken.

Site conditions were good, the clients Mr and Mrs Wilson were helpful and informative and the contractors Fulcrum Connections were very co-operative. Parking and access to the site were convenient and the weather was warm and dry.

## • 5.0 Results

### 5.1 Trench 1

This trench was 21m long and 0.5m wide and was excavated to a depth between 0.50m and 0.65m.

At the northern end of the trench the sequence consisted of dark greyish brown loam topsoil (0.3m thick) that overlay pale-to-mid brown silty sand subsoil (between 0.2m and 0.35m deep). Natural was not observed.

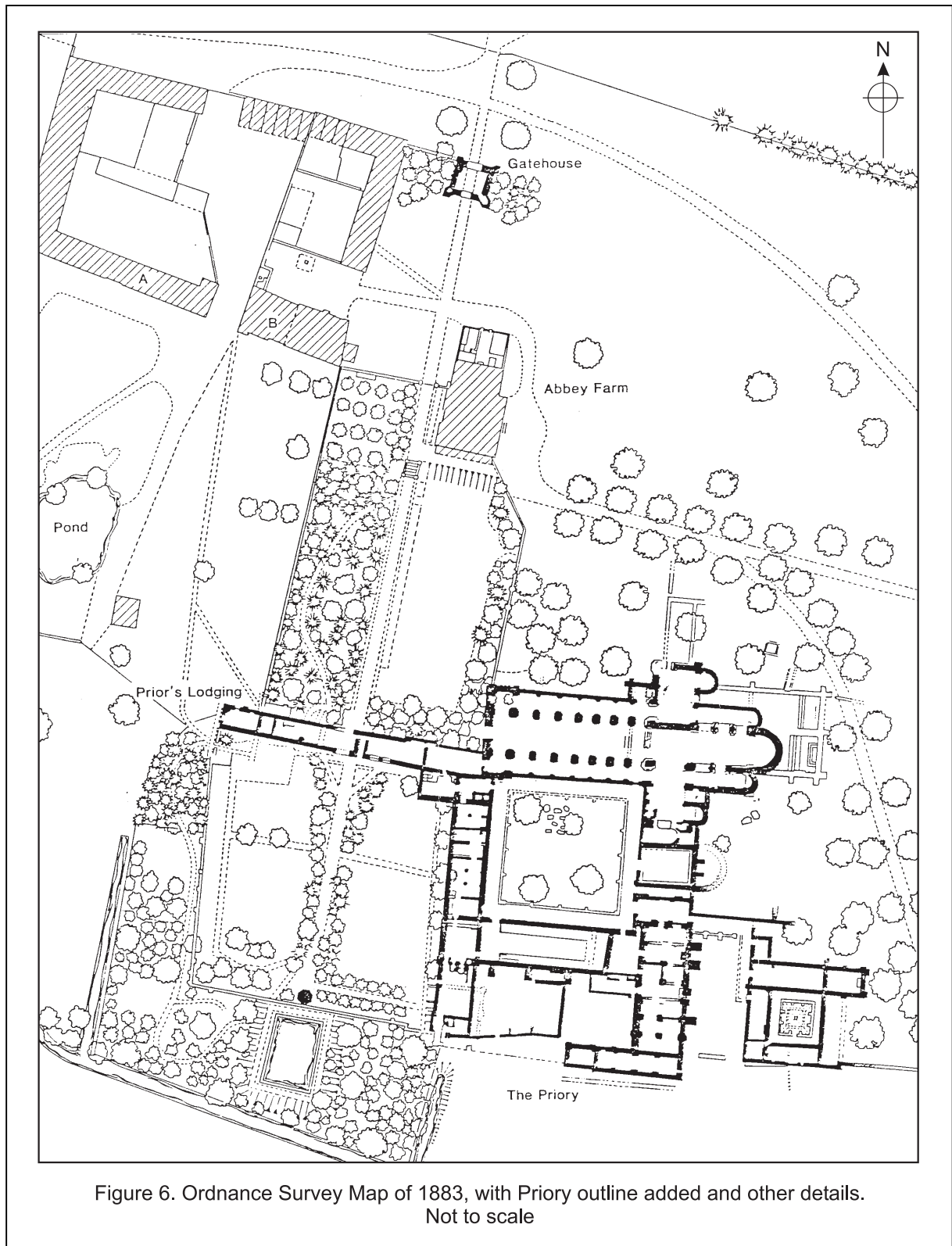
At the southern end of the trench (close to the north-east corner of Abbey House) a similar topsoil/subsoil sequence was recorded but here the topsoil was overlain by three layers of gravel each c. 0.07m thick. At the base of the trench a natural deposit of chalk sand drift with pockets of flints was in evidence.

### 5.2 Trench 2

The four sections of trench opened are referred to as Trenches 2.1 to 2.4 (Fig. 2).

**Trench 2.1** was 1.20m long, by 0.5m wide and was excavated to a depth of 0.90m. A surface layer of black asphalt had been laid on a layer of 'hoggin' to form the present driveway. This overlay a compacted 0.15m thick layer of flint cobbles in a matrix of coarse orange sand with chalk and mortar lumps that in turn overlay a 0.10m thick deposit of compacted crushed chalk. The lower 0.60m of the trench consisted of a deposit of mid grey sandy silt containing red brick fragments and chalk lumps. This deposit extended to the base of the trench.

**Trench 2.2** was 1.2m long, by 0.5m wide and was excavated to a depth of 0.95m. This trench displayed an identical sequence of deposits to those observed in Trench 2.1.



**Trench 2.3** was 1m long, by 0.5m wide and was excavated to a depth of 0.35m. This trench displayed an identical sequence of deposits to that observed in Trench 2.1.

**Trench 2.4** was 1.2m long, by 0.5m wide and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.47m. This trench showed a different sequence of deposits to those observed in the three trenches to the south-west of it. In this case the asphalt and ‘Hoggin’ surface overlay a rubble deposit of flint cobbles in a matrix of loose sandy mortar with chalk lumps. Beneath this deposit was a compact yet soft mid brownish grey sandy clay silt with chalk flecks that extended to the base of the trench.

## • 6.0 The Finds

(Appendix 2)

The finds and environmental material from the site is presented in tabular form with basic quantitative information in Appendix 2: Finds by Context.

### **Metal work**

(Appendix 3)

Three iron nails and one piece of cut lead sheet were recovered from the topsoil ([02]). None of these objects were closely datable, but were probably medieval or post-medieval in date.

### **Ceramic Building Material**

(Appendix 4)

by Lucy Talbot

The site produced three examples of medieval and post-medieval ceramic building material weighing 0.297kg.

### **Methodology**

The assemblage was quantified (counted and weighed) by form and then fabric. The fabrics were identified by eye and the main inclusions noted. Fabric descriptions and dates are based on the type series established by Sue Anderson (formerly of the Suffolk Archaeological Unit).

### **Medieval**

A single fragment of medieval brick (0.013kg; [02]) and a piece of plain roof tile (0.041kg; [02]), dating from the c. 14th to 15th century were collected from the topsoil. Both examples are typical of the period, made using fine estuarine clay with coarse inclusions of grog and vegetable matter.

### **Post-medieval**

The site produced a single fragment of dark orange, medium sandy brick, dating from between the 17th and 19th century, with coarse inclusions of flint and ferrous pellets, (0.243kg; [01]). Traces of mortar are present on two surfaces. This fragment was recovered from a post-medieval make-up layer ([02]).

## **7.0 Conclusions**

No archaeological features or deposits were observed in Trench 1. The deposits appeared to be an undisturbed and naturally formed topsoil and subsoil overlying glacial chalk sand/ drift. A possible explanation for the lack of any archaeological evidence in this particular area is that it may have been used for grazing animals. A

single fragment of medieval brick and a piece of roof tile dating from around the 14th to 15th century were recovered from the topsoil in this trench which may support this theory.

Trenches 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 all had a similar profile. The flint cobble in sand deposit [05] appeared to be bedded onto the crushed chalk deposit [04] to form some type of surface. The presence of brick fragments dating to the 17th to 19th centuries in the deposit immediately below and sealed by this surface ([01]) suggests that the surface is an earlier instatement of the present asphalt driveway. The sandy silt deposit ([01]) is probably a make-up layer laid down ahead of the construction of the original driveway to Abbey House in the 19th century.

A drawing of 1779 (Fig. 5) shows a large flint barn attached to and extending from the eastern wall of the northern gatehouse that also appears on the map of 1720 (Fig. 3) that may be based on an earlier survey. The building appears on a map of 1807 (Fig. 4) but is absent on an Ordnance Survey of 1883 (Fig. 6). The barn was therefore built sometime prior to 1720 and was demolished between 1807 and 1883. Although it is thought to be unlikely that the building was contemporary with the construction of the gatehouse no evidence can be found to disprove this.

Trench 2.4 was sited within the footprint of this substantial building. It seems likely therefore that the rubble deposits observed within this trench are associated with the demolition of the barn sometime in the 19th century.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Stuart Wilson, the owner of the property, who commissioned and funded this work.

Jan Allen of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology provided the NHER information.

The following NAU Archaeology staff contributed to this report. Lucy Talbot processed and reported on the finds. The author carried out the fieldwork. The report was produced and illustrated by Julie Curl. Alice Lyons edited the report.

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### **Appendix 1: Context Summary**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Period</b>
01	Deposit	Sandy silt make-up	Post-medieval
02	Deposit	Topsoil	
03	Deposit	Subsoil	
04	Deposit	Crushed chalk	Post-medieval
05	Deposit	Fint cobbles in sand matrix	Post-medieval
06	Deposit	Modern surface disturbance	Modern
07	Deposit	Flint/mortar rubble	Medieval?
08	Deposit	Sandy clay silt layer	Medieval?

### **Appendix 2: Finds by Context**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Weight (kg)</b>	<b>Period</b>
01	Ceramic Building Material	1	0.243	Post-medieval
02	Ceramic Building Material	2	0.054	Medieval
02	Lead	1	-	-
02	Iron	3	-	-

### **Appendix 3: Catalogue of Metal Objects (not Small Found as either late post-medieval or undiagnostic)**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Object Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Object date</b>
02	3	Iron	Nails	-	Undiagnostic
02	1	Lead	Waste	Cut lead sheet	Undiagnostic

### **Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Weight (kg)</b>	<b>Period</b>
01	Brick	1	0.243	Post-medieval
02	Brick	1	0.013	Medieval
02	Plain roof tile	1	0.041	Medieval

