

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING REPORT

The Priory, Blythburgh (HER ref. BLB 070)

**A report on the archaeological monitoring of groundwork associated with
the construction of an extension to The Priory, Blythburgh
Planning application number: C/07/1571**

Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service Report Number: 2007/214
Oasis ID. No. - suffolkc1-34835

Summary

A single storey extension to the rear of The Priory, Blythburgh (TM 4519 7534, BLB 070), required a programme of archaeological monitoring to be undertaken. The property is located within the village of Blythburgh, a settlement of probable Saxon origin, and was constructed in a number of phases. A medieval chapel, sits at the west side, with a 17th century farmhouse, a rebuilt 15th century timber framed property, and early 20th century additions making up the remainder of the house. A small ruined medieval priory is located in the gardens. The extension required footings that were hand dug and inspected during and after excavation. Part of a human burial, thought to be at least late medieval or post medieval in date, was encountered at the base of the footing, beneath a layer of 19th century pottery and waste. This was re-covered and left in situ, as the whole body could not be exposed without further excavation, and would not be directly affected by the subsequent raft foundations. No medieval evidence was revealed, despite the location of the site in relation to the priory and the church.

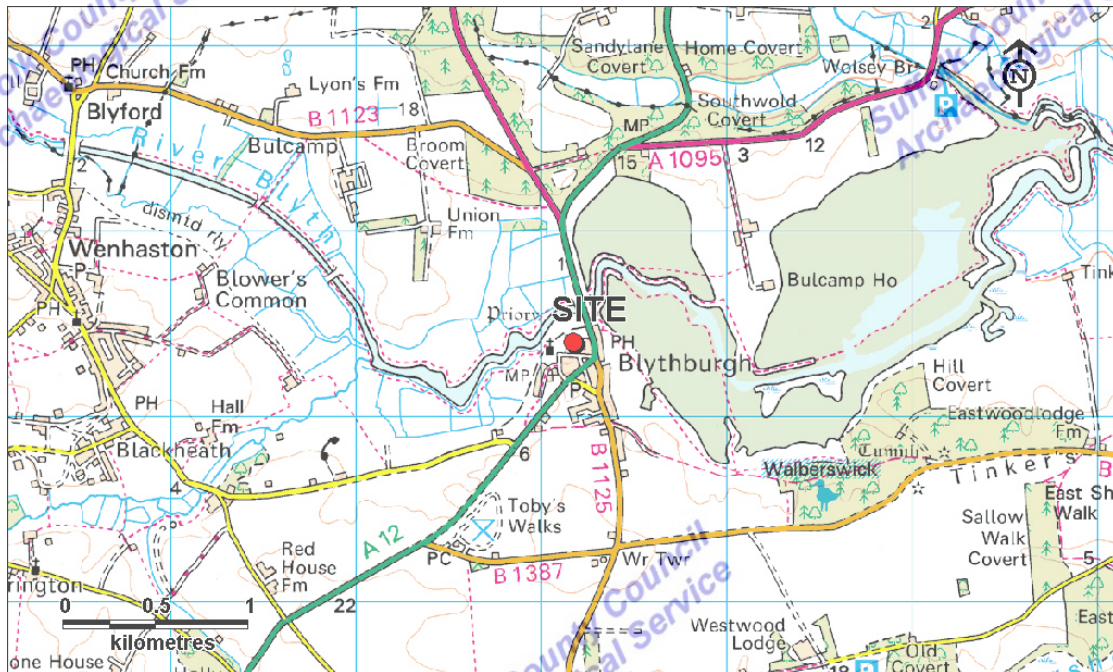


Plate 1: The Priory, Blythburgh, with former the medieval chapel (now part of the house) in the foreground

Introduction

Planning consent for the construction of a single storey extension to the rear of The Priory, Blythburgh, required a programme of archaeological monitoring to be undertaken. The property is listed (LBS 285534) and was constructed in a number of phases. A former medieval chapel, once a cottage, sits at the west side, with a 17th century farmhouse, a rebuilt 15th century timber framed property bought in from Saffron Walden, and early 20th century additions comprising the remainder of the

house. It lies within the village of Blythburgh, a settlement of probable Saxon origin, some 100m east of the church, and only 50m south of a former Augustinian Priory, a scheduled ancient monument (SF215) and listed building (LBS 285535), located within the grounds of the property. The development required footings that were hand dug. The project was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Nick Haward.



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Figure 1: Site location

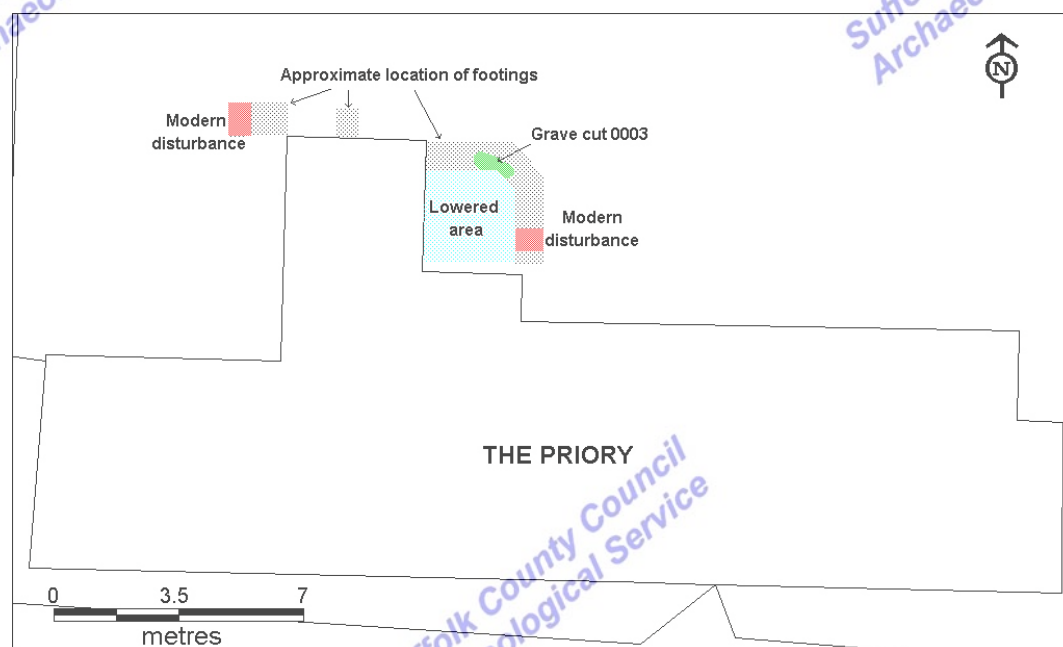


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Figure 2: Approximate area of development to the rear of The Priory, with the former medieval Augustinian Canon priory to the north (BLB 001) and Holy Trinity Church (BLB 021) to the west

A Brief and Specification for the archaeological work (Appendix 1) was produced by Bob Carr of the Conservation Team, Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service (SCCAS), who requested continuous monitoring during excavation of the footings. This was to observe the trenches and the upcast soil to determine the presence, if any, of archaeological evidence in this area.

Results



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Figure 3: Approximate location of footings and Grave Cut 0003

The footings to the north and north west of the property were hand dug prior to the visit of the observing archaeologist to a depth of 0.55m, through topsoil (0001) comprising brick rubble and tree roots in a dark brown slightly clay silty sand. The base was also this topsoil, with the natural subsoil not reached in these footings. The north western footing had an area of modern disturbance to the west, comprising of a number of bricks and chalk lumps. This had the appearance of a former footing of no great antiquity, due to the size and shape of the bricks. No archaeological finds or features were encountered in these footings.

The footing to the north east was also hand dug, under almost constant supervision from the observing archaeologist. This was dug to a depth of between 0.7m and 0.76m, down to a natural subsoil of a mid orange brown gravelly sand. This natural subsoil was only visible in places, but occurred at roughly 0.75m. The footing was dug through a uniform topsoil (0001) which comprised a dark brown slightly clay silty sand, with frequent brick rubble, late 19th century and onwards pottery, oyster shell and animal bone throughout. An early bottle and rubbish pit was encountered at roughly 0.3m, in the northern side. A modern pipe and associated disturbance were encountered to the south of the north – south aligned footing. The transition between this topsoil and the natural subsoil was very clean, suggesting it had been truncated in the past. This topsoil sealed everything below.

This current soil surface is just below the floor levels of the house, suggesting that the two are roughly contemporary. The garden has obviously been extensively altered in the recent past, with elements of the arts and crafts movement of the 1900's visible in the form of formal hedgerows, garden statues and such like. These alterations roughly coincide with the dating of this topsoil layer, and so this may be an imported soil, bought in to build up the gardens during these changes. This is reflected in the very clean horizon between this and the natural subsoil, suggesting truncation. The natural subsoil is considerably lower (c.0.8m) than the floor surface of the property, so if this topsoil layer was imported during the 1900's as suspected, it is likely some removal of existing topsoil occurred.

The area immediately adjacent to the house was lowered to a level of roughly 0.5m, into topsoil 0001. No archaeological finds or features were seen in this lowered area.

At the base of the footing, in the north eastern corner, grave cut 0003 was discovered. This was aligned roughly north west – south east, and contained an articulated skeleton (0004) (Figure 4), thought to be of a young adult. The skull was disturbed during the excavation for the footings and so was no longer in situ. but the torso and left upper leg remained in place. The skull and vertebrae moved out of position were all recovered, suggesting the skeleton was initially intact before discovery. The skeleton was within a deliberate grave cut (0003), filled by 0005, a mixed mid orange sand with moderate stone inclusion.

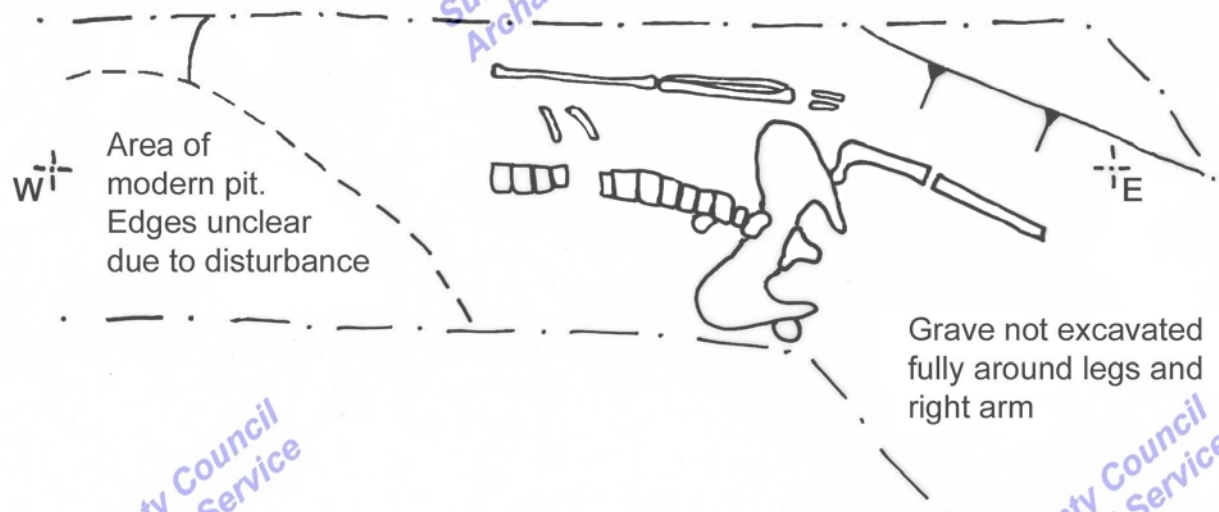


Figure 4: Plan of partially excavated grave 0003, and pit 0006, within footing trench (Scale 1:10)

The left femur was completely and cleanly broken, either just before death or sometime after it as no sign of recovery was evident at the break. No further trauma was evident around this wound. The base of the femur was also broken, with the lower leg and knee apparently missing. This was not confirmed as no further excavation was undertaken.

No dating evidence was available with this body, with an intrusive pit [0006] to the west of the skeleton the probable source for the finds recovered. These finds (from fill 0007) consisted of a fragment of probable early 18th century bottle glass, a fragment of post medieval mortar, two post medieval roof tile fragments and an abraded sherd of post medieval pottery, used from the mid 16th century through to the 18th (Goffin, pers. comm.). Although this pottery could date from the mid 16th century, its presence alongside the later finds implies a later date, suggesting this pit dates from around late 17th/early 18th century. No finds were recovered from directly around the body.

This pit, cut after the deposition of the body, showed evidence of burning, with some of the bones adjacent to it slightly charred. The exact edges of it were unclear, due to disturbance during the excavation of the footings. It is likely the fill (0007) was hot on deposit, rather than burning in situ., as although they were charred, all the bones remained in tact and only slightly discoloured. The scorching of the bones suggests that the burial had completely decomposed prior to burning, and so could be significantly earlier than the pit fill. The pit was filled by 0007, a dark brown silty sand with charcoal flecks.

Despite the intrusive pit at the head of the skeleton affecting the dating evidence, the scorching of the bones implies it was significantly earlier than this pit, due to the likely complete decomposition of the body before the pit was excavated. It was sealed by a topsoil layer with late 19th/early 20th century pottery within and so pre-dates this. However the skeleton was in reasonably good condition and the exceptionally sandy (and so acidic) soil in this area means bone would not survive long, suggesting it was not of great antiquity. It can be assumed from this evidence that the burial is at least late medieval/early post medieval in date, if not older. It is not thought to be related to the adjacent Priory, or indeed the church some 100m away, where a burial orientated east to west might be expected, but this cannot be ruled out. The lack of medieval evidence in the footings may be due to the garden being heavily truncated during the early 1900's, to create the formal garden that exists today. Medieval evidence would be expected in a site of this location due to it's proximity to both the church and the priory, and the distinct lack, together with clear horizons between the subsoil and topsoil, does suggest that recent truncation has occurred. This burial, immediately below this recent topsoil layer, may be an example of further archaeological evidence, as yet undiscovered.

The origin of this skeleton remains unknown. A deliberate grave cut implies it was buried with care, but its proximity to the building, which is may have existed in some form at the time of burial, is curious. As stated, there appears to have been some sort of trauma to the left leg, but it is unclear as to whether this occurred in life or after death. A burial orientated north west – south east is not of a known standard practice, which also adds to its mystery. It appears to be a single burial although this footing only offered a very small snapshot, allowing few conclusions to be drawn.

To recover the whole body, if it was there, would have meant extensive further excavation. It would not be further disturbed by the construction works and so it was decided to re-cover the skeleton and leave it in situ.

No further archaeological finds or features were discovered during the monitoring. The footings were excavated fairly cleanly and visibility was reasonable throughout.

Thanks are due to Mr and Mrs Haward, the builders of Nick Haward, and Architect Alan Greening, for their excellent communication and liaison throughout this project.

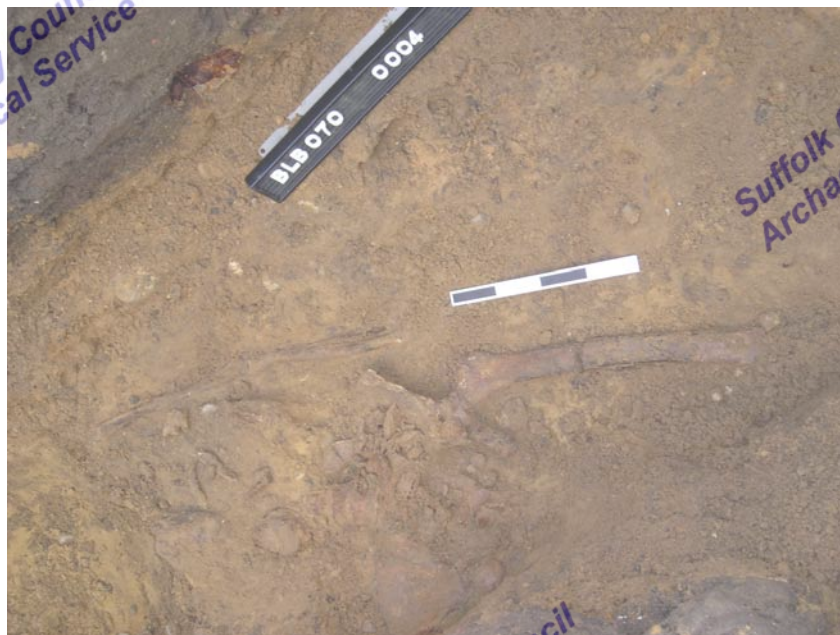


Plate 2: Skeleton 0005, within grave 0004

Clare Good

Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service, 21st December 2007