

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT

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## **West Front of the Abbey Church, Bury St. Edmunds**

A REPORT ON THE EXISTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDS, 2005  
(Pre-planning application.)



*The West Front in 2001*

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## Summary

The results of the archaeological events undertaken in and around the West Front of the Abbey Church, Bury St Edmunds were examined in order to assess the impact of the proposal to conserve and convert the empty 17th–19th century dwellings formed within the Medieval fabric.

There have been five small archaeological excavations BSE 110, 111, 112, 113, and 123 in and immediately around the west front, in addition to the more extensive excavations in the cathedral cloister BSE 052 and alongside St James' tower, BSE 182. These demonstrated that the archaeological deposits around the Abbey precinct are deeply buried and as a consequence well preserved. The medieval occupation surface is largely intact and unseen remains of the Abbey Church lie just below the surface.

## SMR information

Planning application no.	Pre-planning application
Date of fieldwork:	NA
Grid Reference:	TL 8562 6408
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OASIS ref	Suffolkc1-7775



## Introduction

An outline proposal has been made to conserve and convert the structures, which comprise the West Front of the Abbey Church, Bury St Edmunds. The empty 17th–19th century dwellings formed within the medieval fabric are to be returned to domestic use.

The site is part of St Edmund's Abbey, one of the largest and most important Benedictine Abbeys in medieval England and the site and its history are unquestionably of national importance. The site is a Schedule Ancient Monument (SAM No.32406) and the West Front a Grade II listed building. There are known to be deep and extensive archaeological deposits, laid down during the late medieval period, at the western end of the Abbey Church and surrounding areas of the precinct. Previous excavation has shown that these seal significant and well preserved earlier medieval layers relevant to the understanding of the development of the Abbey and town.

Suffolk Council's Archaeological Officer R.D Carr has specified the need for an Archaeological Impact Assessment prior to the commencement of the project in order to define the depth, preservation and potential of the archaeological deposit so that a strategy for its preservation can be planned. The requirements for the assessment are detailed in the *Brief for Assessment and Recording Phase 1* (Appendix 1, section 6). The work was commissioned and funded by St. Edmundsbury Borough Council.

This report details the findings of a desktop assessment based on the existing archaeological record and is seen as the first part of two stages of work required to fulfil the brief. It is anticipated that a follow up field evaluation will be necessary to address the question unanswered in the existing record.

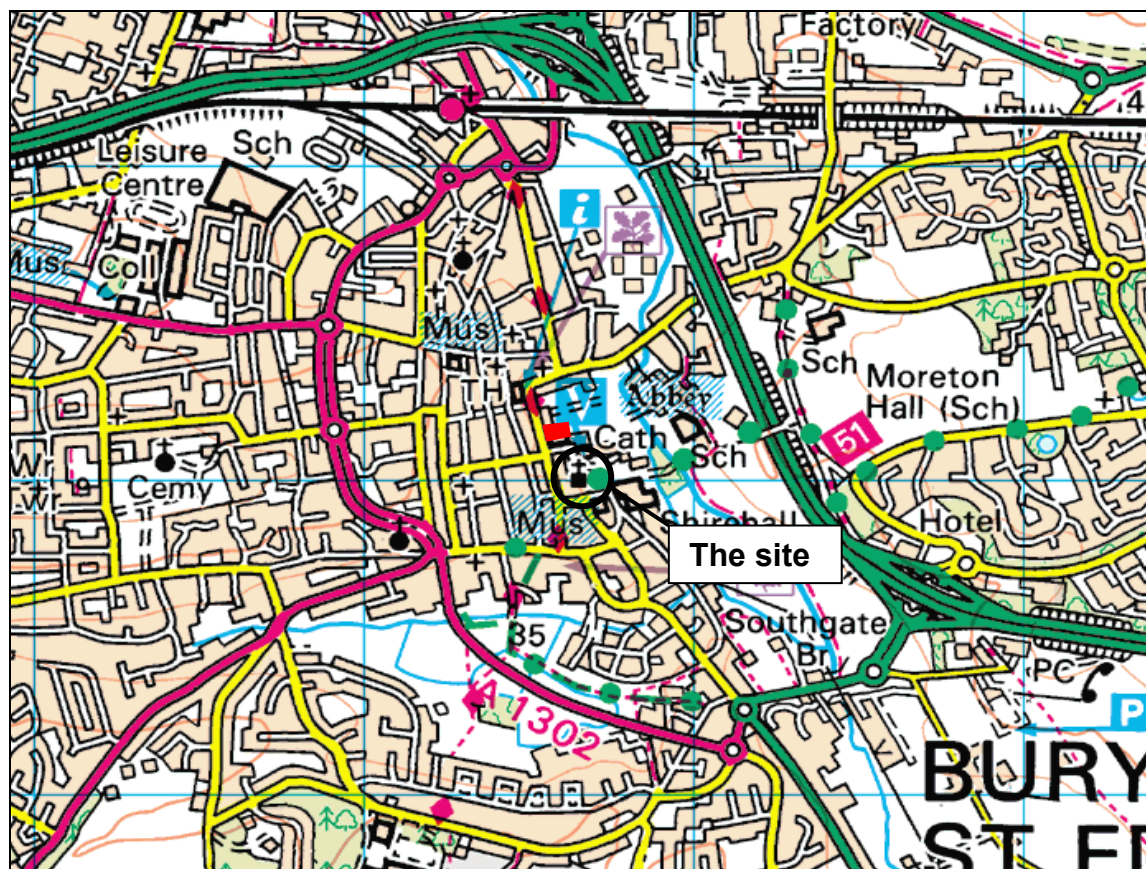
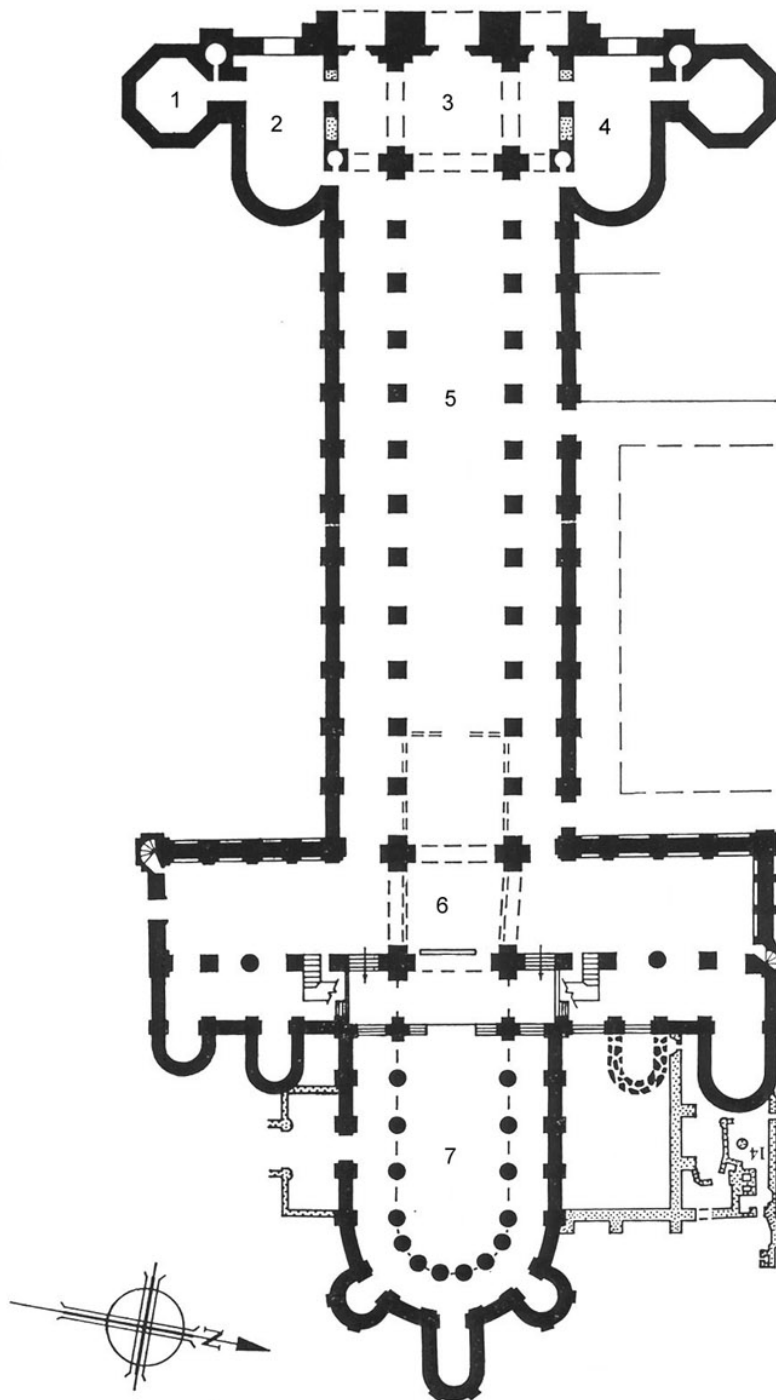


Figure 1. Site Location Plan

The West Front



Key:

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1. Samsons tower                           | 5. Nave                         |
| 2. St John's Chapel                        | 6. Crossing below central tower |
| 3. West tower over centre of west transept | 7. High altar over crypt        |
| 4. St.Denis' Chapel                        |                                 |

Figure 2. Plan of the Abbey Church  
(taken from the English Heritage guide)

## Aims of the Assessment

There have been five small archaeological excavations in and immediately around the west front BSE 110, 111, 112, 113, and 123 (two phases). In addition to this more extensive excavations have taken place in the Cathedral Precinct Yard (BSE 052 -undertaken in two stages) and beneath and alongside the Norman Tower (St James' Tower) BSE 182 and 174 (Figure 2). From these records it is aimed to:

- Make an assessment of the depth, O.D., to the medieval ground level and of the quality, complexity and degree of preservation of the archaeological deposit beneath the West Front structure and the associated gardens.
- Identify potential areas of concealed up-standing ruin within the area of the development and define physical areas of particular potential in the context of the history of the Abbey, its precinct and its primary church.
- Inform the planning and targeting of the stage 2 evaluation.

## Methodology

The existing archaeological records held within the County's Site and Monuments Record database (SMR) were examined. Areas of archaeological intervention and all available level information was plotted using MapInfo and a summary report of each of the sites reproduced within the report.

## Results

### Introduction

The records of nine archaeological events were examined (Fig 2). The excavations are described in summary below and plotted along with relevant level information in Figure 3. I.W.Stuart and P.L.Drewit along with DoE staff carried out the excavations below the Norman Tower BSE 174. Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service (SCCAS) or its forerunner Suffolk Archaeological Unit (SAU) undertook the other excavations. The levels are in metres OD and were calculated from the bench mark (37.78m) on the side of the Norman Tower. The levels in red are the heights of actual medieval surfaces and features, the ones in blue are the current ground level.

### *Excavation Summaries*

#### **BSE 052**

Two archaeological excavations have taken place within the Cathedral Precinct Yard, one in advance of the construction of the Cathedral Centre during 1988, and the other prior to the building of the North Transept in 1999 (Figure 2).

These revealed evidence of occupation activity prior to the enclosure of the precinct and its subsequent development as part of the Abbey complex. Evidence of an early surfaced road forming part of the planned town grid pattern, and which is thought to have passed alongside the West Front was found along with a succession of timber buildings from the Late Saxon period to stone-built conventual buildings of medieval date. The archaeological level was buried beneath a deep deposit of soil, imported during the c. 16th century to raise ground level prior to the

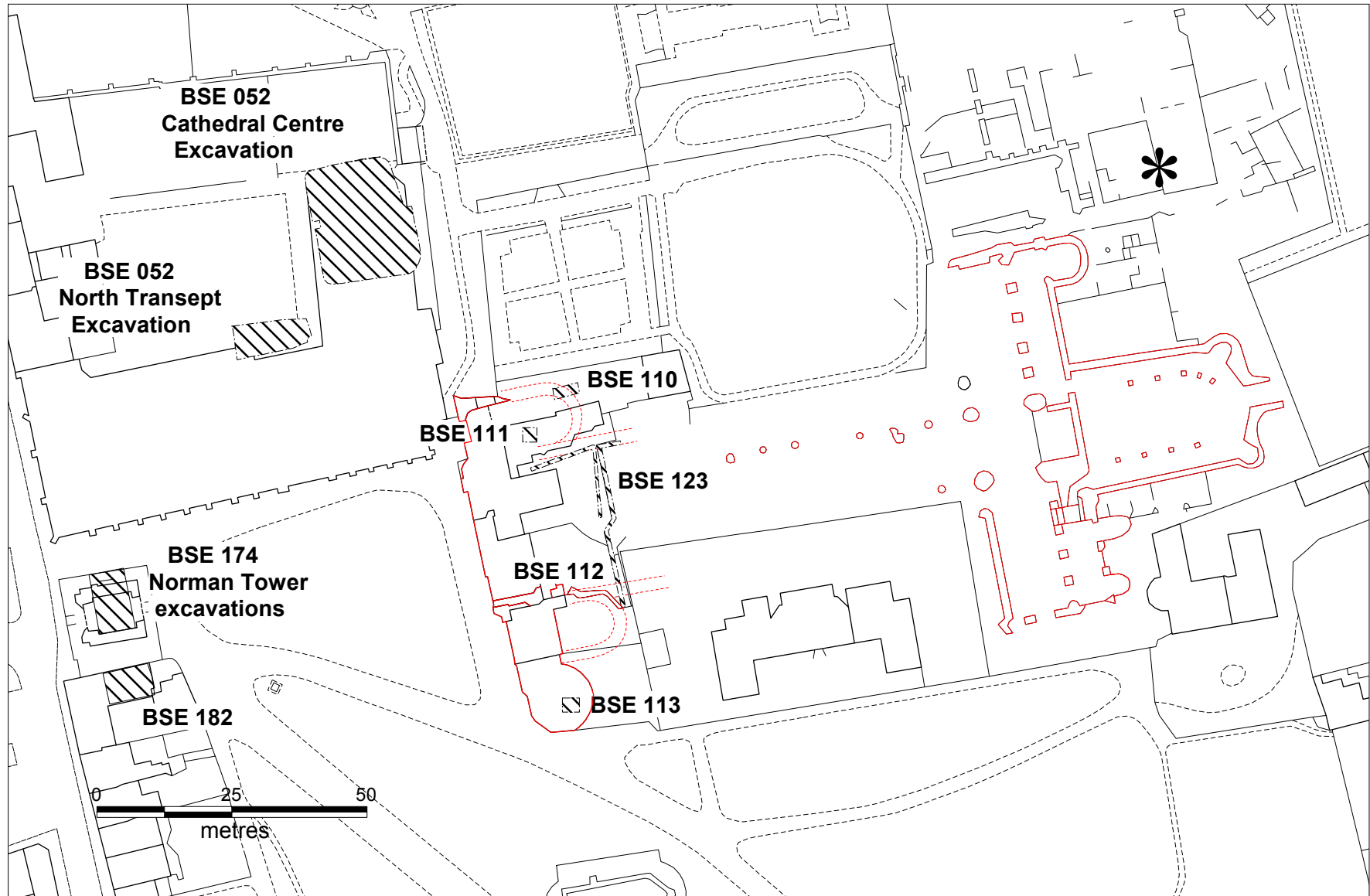


Figure 3. Excavation Areas



construction of St James' and the landscaping of the Cathedral Precinct Yard after the Dissolution. The road surface was recorded at 35.20m and the uppermost archaeological deposit at 35.54m (Gill 2005).

### BSE 110

A small scale excavation undertaken within the north courtyard (Fig.3) to locate the apse wall of the north chapel during January 1988 (Scheduled Monument consent HSD9/2/278).

A hand excavated trench, 3.4m x 1.1m revealed a bonded flint and mortar structure interpreted as a stub of the east wall of St Faith's Chapel. It was discovered at 55cm below the present surface beneath a modern hard standing of flint and gravel and a deposit of dark loam in which 18th-19th century tile fragments were found. Only the top of the remaining wall was exposed, its maximum recorded width was 1.4m but the profile of the ruin suggested that this was not full width (Carr 1988).

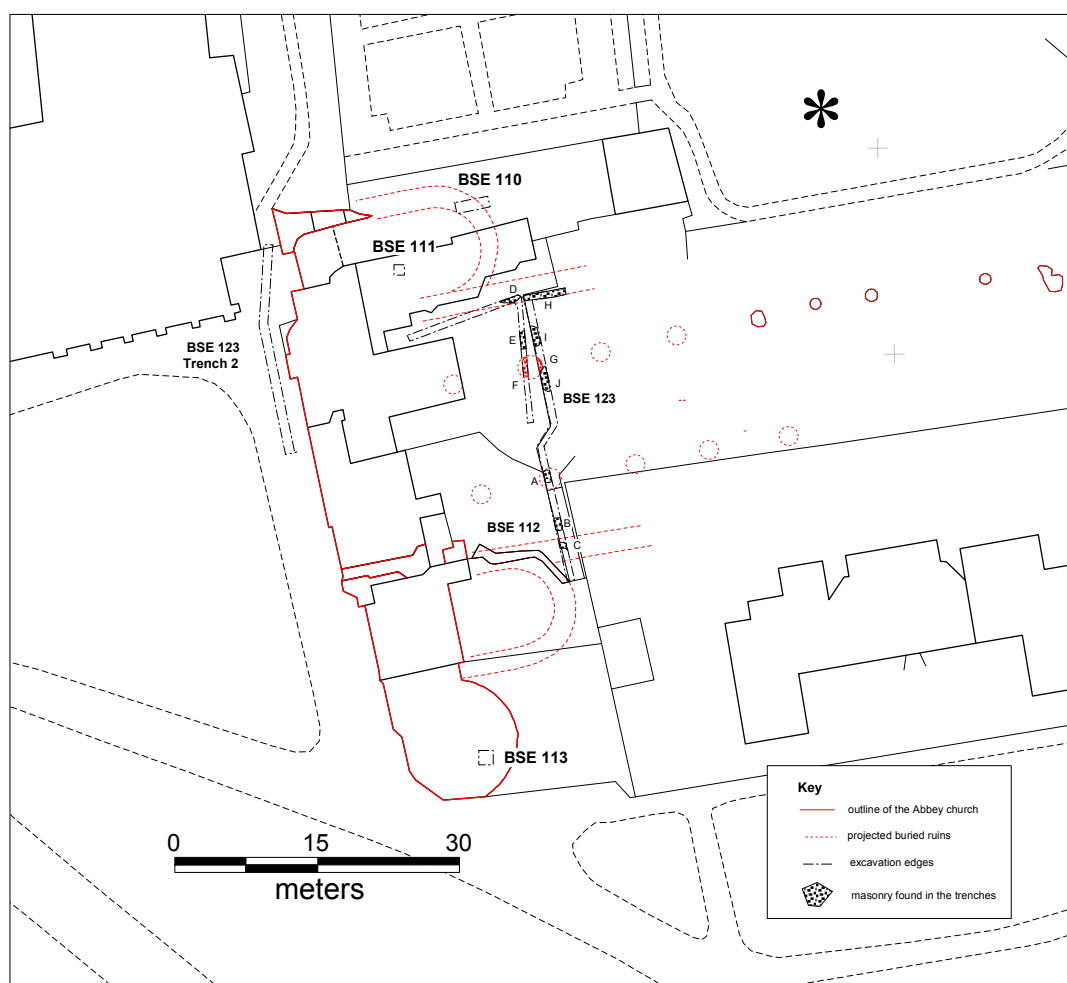


Figure 4. Excavations in and around the West Front

### BSE 111

A testhole excavated by engineers to establish the load bearing capacity of the soil within '1A The Courtyard' cleaned and recorded by SCCAS (Fig. 4).

The section shows that the interior of the west front has a build-up of more than 2.8m of post-medieval deposits (Fig 5). These lie in bands of soil and flint rubble from the demolition of the Abbey church. At the base of the test hole, at 35.54m, a rough cobbled surface was encountered and this was interpreted as possibly the Abbey floor (Carr 1993).

House Nos.3 and 4, those in the centre of the West Front that occupy the area of the former nave, are cellared (in contrast to the houses in the side chapels, which are not). Floor levels in the basements taken from the photogrammic survey are 36.0m (No 4) and 36.40m. These are above the recorded floor level BSE 111 and therefore the potential for the nave floor to exist in this area remains.

### BSE 112

Monitoring of the excavation of a garden wall footing trench at the rear of the west front as part of the project to create the Samson's Tower visitor centre (Fig. 4).

The trench was 60cm wide and no deeper than 50cm. The excavation revealed three instances of extant bonded flint masonry, labelled A, B and C. The excavation was restricted to the specification of the footing and limited, so it was impossible to determine whether these were *in situ* Abbey Church remains or detached blocks of rubble. A and C however were on the line of the south nave arcade and south aisle wall where masonry would be expected to be from projections of the visible ruin. The top of the buried masonry here was only 35cms below the present ground surface (38.50m) and within the horizon of the garden topsoil (Caruth 1993).

### BSE 113

Monitoring of pit excavated by contractors for the underpinning of the strong room wall, which divides the octagon inside Samson's Tower (Fig. 4).

The pit was 1.3m sq and 1.4m deep. The section through the soil profile recorded bands of fill material made up of flint, mortar rubble and soil. The contractors had collected pottery and clay pipes which show a date range of late 17th to early 18th century. The pit did not penetrate beyond the backfill layers and no structures were observed (Carr 1993).

### BSE 123

Two phases of groundwork monitoring around the West Front were recorded under site code BSE 123 (Fig. 4).

The first a sewerage pipe trench in the rear gardens, uncovered three pieces of bonded flint masonry, labelled D, E and F. Two of these were *in situ* remains; D which lay on the line of the nave north wall and F which was in the position of one of the north aisle arcade posts. The third, E, was a large *floating* fragment.

The top of the masonry of the nave north wall (D) was only 3cm below the present ground surface (38.20m), and was exposed to a depth of 1.46m below ground level where it was still continuing. Although only the core fabric remained the impressions of the ashlar blocks with which it was once faced could be seen. The surviving top of the arcade post (F) which was encountered at 36cm (c.37.84m) below the surface continued below the base of the trench 1.58m below the surface. The remains were buried within a clean fine mortar rubble generated during

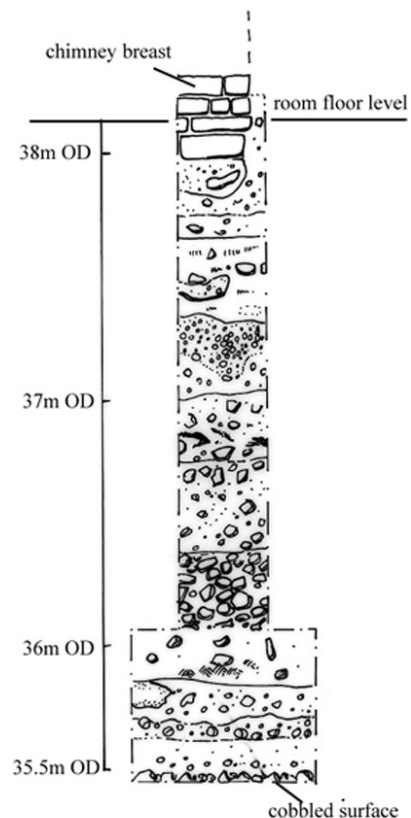


Figure 5. Section of testhole, BSE 111

the demolition of the Abbey church and had been laid in a single deposit. This was covered by 35cms of topsoil (Caruth 1995).

### **BSE 123 (II)**

The second phase of monitoring under BSE 123 was the observation of two trenches; Trench 1 a garden wall footing and a continuation of the wall monitored as BSE 112, and Trench 2 for a drain in front of the monument (Fig. 4).

In Trench 1 four areas of bonded flint masonry were uncovered, two were *in situ* Abbey Church remains, labelled G and H, while I and J, were large bonded but displaced fragments. The *in situ* ruins could be identified by both their positions within the known geography of the building and the orientation of the horizontal flint coursing. Bonded fragment D was a continuation of the nave north wall, G the western side of the arcade pillar identified in the previous monitoring (labelled F). The top of this was just below the turf at 37.95m. The fragments were again buried within clean loose mortar rubble, a uniform layer that appeared to have lain undisturbed since the Abbey's demolition and the top of this deposit lay beneath 20cm of topsoil. The general level of the garden was at *c.*38.33m

Trench 2 was up to 70cms deep and cut through the tarmac of the present surface and into a redeposited dark soil layer below. This layer had an organic texture and was mixed with occupation debris which included fragments of animal bone, oyster shell, charcoal and building debris. (Gill 1995)

### **BSE 182**

Twenty-seven medieval skeletons were found below Norman Cottage during the excavation of a new cellar. Norman Cottage is situated alongside the Norman Tower and straddles the line of the precinct wall (Fig. 3).

The skeletons were of towns-people and included adults of both sexes and children. Their presence illustrates that the limit of medieval 'Great Churchyard' of St James' and St Mary's extended further north than was previously thought. There were two distinct layers of burials with the upper ones occurring from as high as 37.14m. The burials occurred prior to *c.*1540 when permission was sought to demolish part of the precinct wall in order to extend the property, which preceded Norman cottage. Postholes and surfaces associated with this earlier phase of the property's expansion were recorded and these indicate a ground surface of 37.27m in the late medieval period and the top of the archaeological deposit was found at 37.79m (Gill 2000).

The excavation also exposed a fragment of the precinct wall and its footing which consisted of a trench filled with rammed gravel. Medieval masonry structures rarely have much bonded material below ground so the interface between the bottom of the flint wall and the gravel at 36.86m is a good approximation of the surface level when the wall was built at the beginning of the 12th century.

### **BSE 174 Excavation beneath the Norman Tower**

In 1973 two excavations were carried out beneath the Norman Tower (Fig. 3). The first examined the evidence of the Norman road beneath the arch and the second the precinct wall where it connects to the north side of the tower. The excavation beneath the arch recorded a section through two structured and surfaced roads. The earliest one was laid down during or after the 10-11th century, and sealed a ground surface which produced Thetford-type ware pottery and through which the tower footings were cut. A second road was built at the completion of the tower in the 12th century (Drewett and Stuart 1975).

The roads were the main approaches to the West front from the town and a continuation of the line of Churchgate Street, which was laid out in about 1080.

One of the aims of the excavation was to *establish the level of the Norman roadway ... in order that the new paving could be laid at the correct level*. This implies that the current paving at the base of the tower at 36.81m, reflects the original road level.

## Discussion

Excavation has shown that the present ground levels around this part of the precinct are all artificial and the importation of soil in front of the Abbey Church and the accumulation of demolition rubble within it have raised the ground by up to 2.5-3m.

The Abbey was constructed on the valley floor alongside the river Lark, with the Norman town, and later the Abbey precinct, laid out on what had been a greenfield site on the rising ground to the west. Excavation suggests that the medieval ground surface in front of the Abbey Church was *c.* 35.5m<sup>1</sup> rising to 36.80m on the western edge of the precinct<sup>2</sup>. The continuation of the natural fall to the river is illustrated by the ground level in the tennis courts to the east of the abbey church where the surface is at 34.52m. This drop has allowed for the floor level at the west end to be projected over a crypt at the east end, saving a degree of excavation and allowing it to be lit by daylight. The floor level at the crossing of the Abbey church can be estimated closely by the moulded column base at the foot of the crossing pier and here it is at 36.23m. This is 69cm above the suggested floor level in the west front and implies that the floor sloped or perhaps rose through a series of steps, in its progression to the *high end* of the church.

The individuals buried within the Norman cottage were at 37.14m, so the surface of the graveyard was probably at least 50cm higher at this time. A consequence of burial is that ground levels in the graveyard rises, the evidence of the Norman Cottage excavation is that when the last of the individuals was interred, levels in the Great Graveyard had become around 85cm higher than the surface of the road approaching the West Front. When the building fronting Crown Street was expanded into the graveyard in 1540, the ground within the precinct wall was reduced in order to create a building platform to within 15cm of exposing the skeletons. The effect of the rising graveyard was to form a basin to collect storm water from Churchgate Street and probably contributed to the reported flooding of the churches in the 15th century. The effect of this hollow was later remedied by the raising of the ground level; firstly in advance of the building of St James' Church (illustrated by the door threshold level at 37.85m) and later sometime in the 17-18th century (as evidenced by the artefactual material in the dumped soil layers in the top of Trench 2 BSE123), with the resultant part burial of the West Front and Norman Tower.

The ground level within the Abbey Church is the result of the accumulation of tons of mortar rubble deposited during the demolition when the building was quarried for building material after the Dissolution. The trenches excavated as part of BSE 112 and 123 sampled this rubble material and the clean nature of the deposit suggests that it lies where it fell, burying possibly the western end of the monument to a depth of 2.5m on the inside. The examples of bonded

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<sup>1</sup> BSE 111 Suggested floor of the Abbey Church 35.5m OD. BSE 052, C11th road surface 35.20m OD

<sup>2</sup> BSE 182 base of the precinct wall 36.86m OD, pavement below Norman Tower 36.81m OD

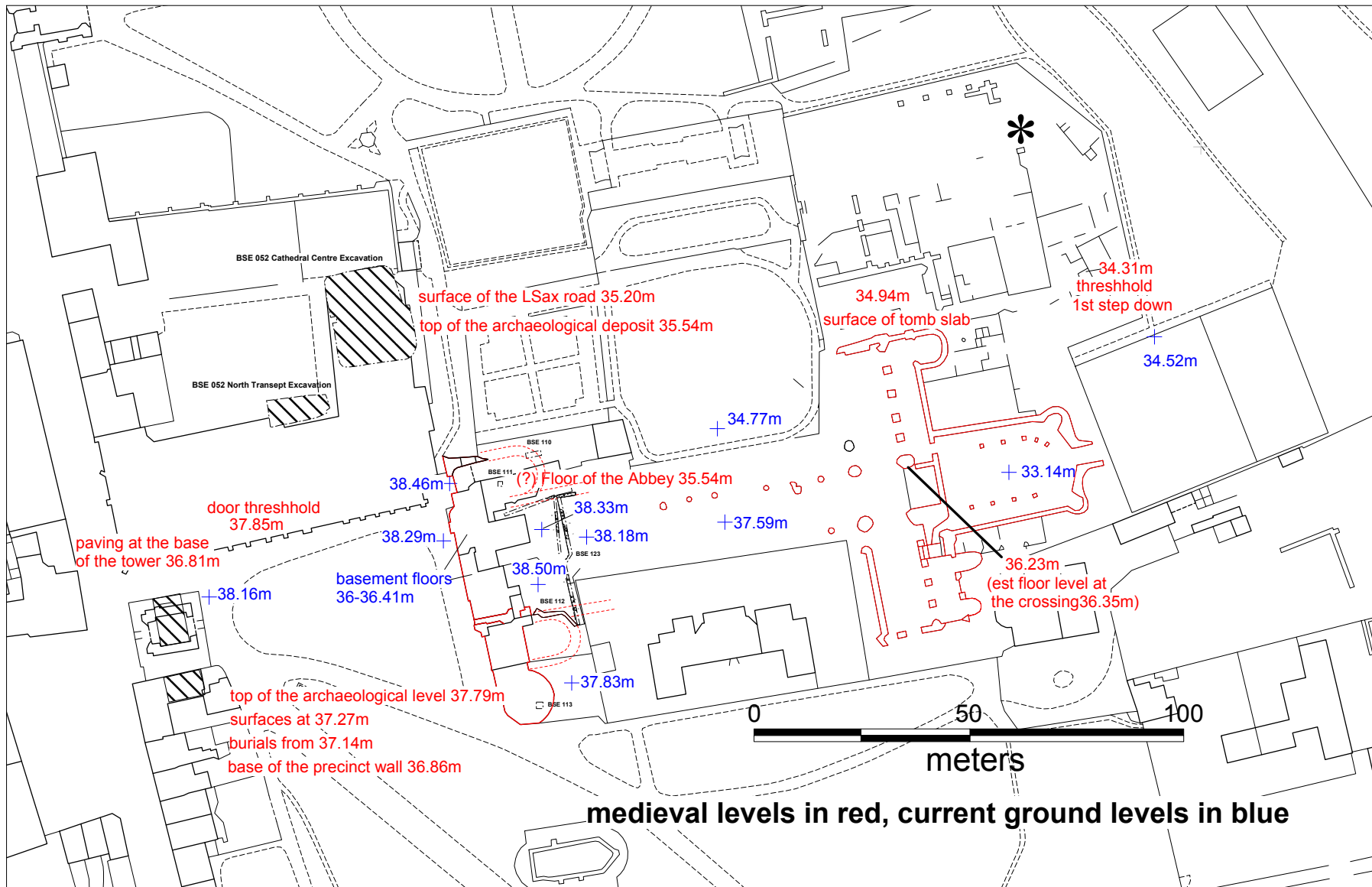


Figure 6 Levels in metres over datum in and around the Abbey Church

remains show that large parts of the building survive unseen and the tops of the remains are within the topsoil of the garden, buried as in case of the nave north wall (BSE 123 'D') by as little as a few centimetres of soil.

## Conclusions

The recent works show that the archaeological deposits around the Abbey precinct are very well preserved. It has been demonstrated in the previous excavation that the medieval occupation surface contemporary with the use of the Abbey church has been buried and as a consequence is largely complete and intact.

The small-scale work that has taken place has demonstrated that unseen fabric of the Abbey Church lies just below the surface, the Late Saxon and medieval Abbey site and its history are unquestionably of national importance and therefore the preservation of these is essential.

Proposed works in the back garden areas (services and boundary partitions) are in an area where the medieval fabric of the piers and aisle walls has been shown to lie just below the surface. Preservation *in situ* will be the preferred option so routing should try to respect areas liable to have masonry, or utilise pre-existing cuts through, e.g. the aisle wall.

All of the large-scale work however has occurred with the environs of the Abbey precinct and the Norman ground level within the Abbey Church or outside of the West Front has not been investigated, save for the small testhole BSE 111. Although the enormous potential for archaeological remains has been demonstrated, the assessment has highlighted a gap in the archaeological record concerning the nature and depth of the deposit which occur in front of the West Front. The current knowledge of medieval ground levels at the Norman tower and within the West Front suggests a drop of about 1m to floor level may exist immediately inside the West Front. The existence of such a level change and the way it was managed (It is possible, for example that it is a stepped entrance as at Norwich Cathedral) are significant to our understanding of the Abbey Church. The opportunity to investigate this issue should be taken by ascertaining the medieval pavement level inside and outside the West Front. It is recommended then that a series of trial holes are excavated in front of the Abbey church to establish the medieval pavement level and the top of the archaeological deposit before development.

D.Gill  
March 2005

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