



University of Leicester

Archaeological Services

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
during restoration works at
Abbey Grounds,
Abbey Park,
Leicester.**

NGR: SK 585 060 (area)

Andrew Hyam



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An Archaeological Watching Brief

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Abbey Grounds,

Abbey Park, Leicester

NGR: SK 585 060 (area)

Scheduled Monument No. 17131

A R Hyam

For: Leicester City Council

Approved by

Signed:



..Date: 2/4/2014.

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CONTENTS

Summary	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Objectives	6
Methodology.....	7
Results.....	8
Discussion.....	11
Archive.....	12
Publication	12
Acknowledgements.....	12
Bibliography	12
Appendix 1 Digital photographs.....	13
Appendix 2 OASIS information	13

FIGURES

Figure 1 Leicester Abbey location.....	4
Figure 2 Initial proposed location of boreholes	5
Figure 3 Eastern face of precinct wall	5
Figure 4 Earth bank against western face of precinct wall	6
Figure 5 Location of trench.....	9
Figure 6 Location of trench.....	9
Figure 7 Upper levels of trench stratigraphy	10
Figure 8 Section	11

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) at the Abbey Grounds, Abbey Park, Leicester. The work took place on the 17th of March 2014 during the preliminary investigative works in advance of proposed restoration works to the eastern precinct wall. The work involved the excavation of a small trench and four boreholes in order to be able to formulate a suitable mitigation strategy to safeguard archaeological remains when the restoration work commences.

No surviving structural archaeological features were observed but substantial layers containing demolition rubble were encountered, and may be as late as 1930s excavation spoil.

The fieldwork was carried out by A.R.Hyam. The archive will be deposited with Leicester City Museums Service under Accession Number A7.2014

Introduction

In accordance with the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, this document is a report on the results of archaeological investigations carried out in advance of proposed restoration works at Leicester Abbey, NGR: SK 585 060, a Scheduled Monument (No 170131). The work comprised archaeological monitoring of the excavation of a series of boreholes and archaeological control and supervision of the excavation of a trench adjacent to the inner face of the eastern precinct wall. The ground investigation works were necessary to establish the nature of the deposits which have apparently caused a dangerous lean on the adjacent precinct wall. Works were to be carried out in accordance with conditions placed on the Scheduled Monument Consent following advice from the Inspector of Ancient Monuments, English Heritage.

Background

Abbey Park lies to the north-west of the Roman and medieval walled town of Leicester in Abbey Ward and is bisected by the River Soar. The Abbey Grounds are on the western side of the river and contain the precinct walls and laid-out foundations of Leicester Abbey together with the ruins of Cavendish House, a mansion of the 16th–early 17th century (Fig. 1). This part of the park is at a height of 52m–55m above O.D with a gravel terrace forming an area of slightly higher ground which was

chosen for the site of Leicester Abbey. The geology of the area is mainly alluvium and Mercia mudstone.

The site shows evidence for occupation from the prehistoric and Roman periods, but is known principally as the site of the medieval abbey. The abbey was founded in 1143 (or possibly 1139) by the Second Earl of Leicester and by the time of the Dissolution, comprised a substantial church with cloister surrounded by the usual ranges of monastic buildings and ancillary structures. With the exception of the precinct walls and probably the gatehouse, the Abbey was thoroughly demolished after the Dissolution. A series of extensive excavations took place in the 1920s and early 1930s and were undertaken as part of an overall scheme to transform the Abbey Grounds, then neglected and overgrown, into a public park, containing sports facilities and gardens. The excavations, directed by T H Fosbrooke and W K Bedingfield, later after Fosbrooke's death by Bedingfield, was the largest ever undertaken on the site, beginning as a series of exploratory trenches and finally expanding into a huge operation to uncover all the claustral buildings of the Abbey. The work was not completed until 1931, or possibly even a little later. Much of the archaeological background and the early 20th century excavations have since been discussed in the series of archaeological evaluations carried out by the University of Leicester School of Archaeology and ULAS between 2000 and 2009. Most of the more recent archaeological work has concentrated around the gatehouse itself and the abbey complex.

The precinct walls were subject to walkover survey in 1997 (Seary and Sturgess 1997). The northern section of the eastern precinct wall contains some of the most complete medieval features on the site and whilst it has been subject to much refacing and rebuilding, many of its features suggest that it still follows its original course. Sections of moulded stringcourse and plinth, and fragments of interval and corner towers appear to be in situ. Evidence of this type covers the whole length of this section of wall and suggests that it has deviated little. The east wall originally closely followed the bank of the River Soar but the course this river has since been extensively modified, diverting it away from the base of the wall. There are a number of symbolic elements of fortification built into the east wall, but these are of widely differing character and date. The north-east corner tower of the site at the north end of the east wall, has been very substantially rebuilt in granite and sandstone rubble. Internally it is of sub-circular plan which is open onto the north enclosure at its south-west. Externally it forms an irregular polygon which loosely resembles an octagon and may well represent an original octagonal tower. The ground level on the inside of this tower is more than a metre higher than that on the outside. Within the lower 1.2m of the outside face of the tower, in its north-western and northern facets, are a few rough courses of sandstone masonry which may be of medieval date.

Proposal and Requirement for archaeological work (taken from the SMC application)

The eastern precinct wall of Leicester Abbey has a pronounced lean to it due to the configuration of surrounding mature trees and the difference in ground levels on both sides of wall – that to the west being much higher than to the east. This wall has no weep holes for ground water to discharge and it is also retaining soil beyond its strength and design capacity (the soil being too heavy for the structure, the water

pressure increasing during the wet period) not to mention that some trees have virtually grown inside the wall.

In order to determine the best course of remedial action, it was proposed to carry out a soil geotechnical investigation (4 bore holes for taking soil sample) and excavate an archaeological trench for observation (Fig. 2). The existing ancient wall and buttresses along the river are leaning due to tree roots and ground movement. This is now presenting health and safety risks, and if left unchecked; there will be on-going deterioration and possible collapse (Fig. 3). This investigation work is required to determine the remedial action to be taken. Remedial plans are not yet finalised but are likely to involve the excavation of a long trench running from north east to south west, parallel to the west side wall into which a tie-beam will be laid. Tie-rods will then be attached connecting the beam to the wall to act as an anchor. The height of the bank may or may not be reduced to lower the pressure of soil against the wall. Tree felling and or reduction might also form part of the plan.

The boreholes were subject to archaeological monitoring, whilst the investigative trench was excavated under constant archaeological control and supervision until the required depth or uppermost significant archaeological horizon was reached.

At present there is a bank of earth rising from the pathway up to the top of the surviving wall (Fig. 4). At the top of this bank are a number of semi-mature trees which are very close to the precinct wall. At least one tree has broken through the stonework and its roots appear to be growing within the wall structure. The trees are thought to be approximately 100 years old (pers comm M Sharif) giving an indication of the minimum age of the earth bank.

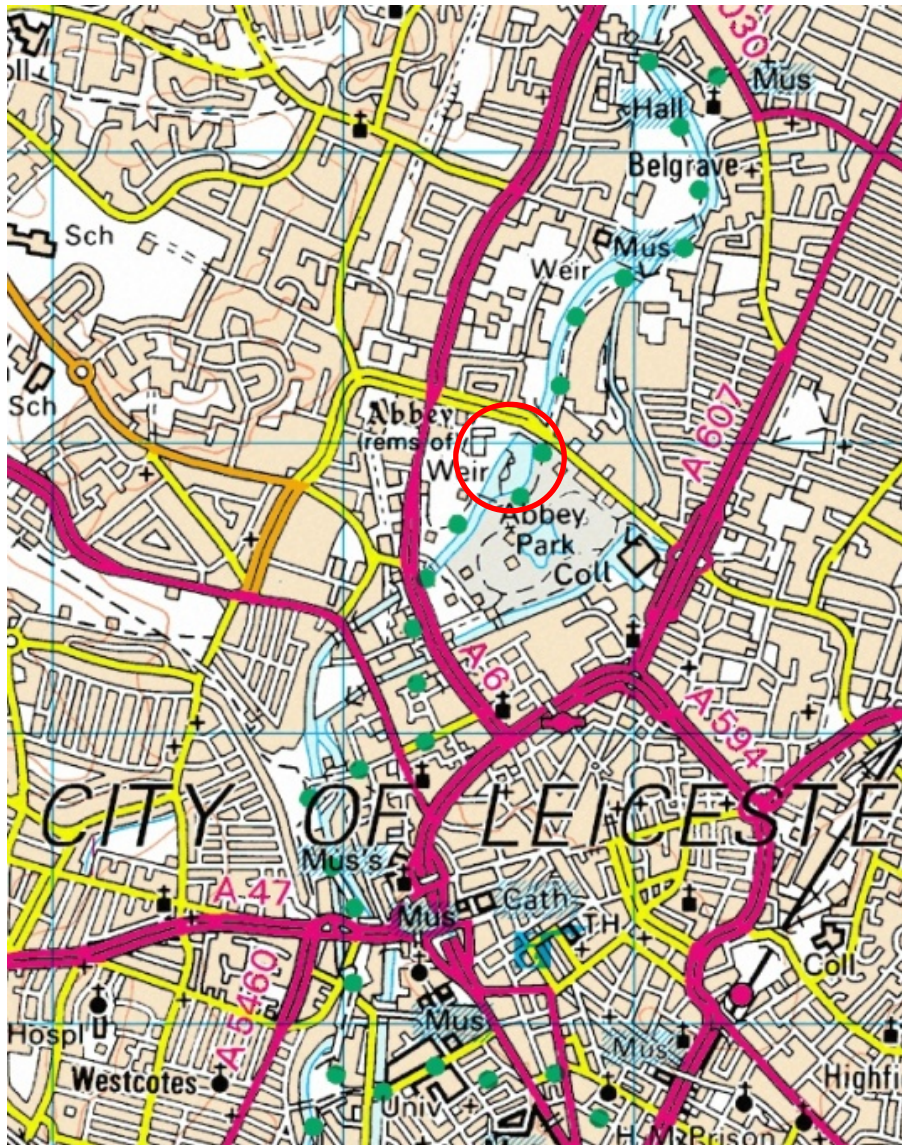


Figure 1 Leicester Abbey location

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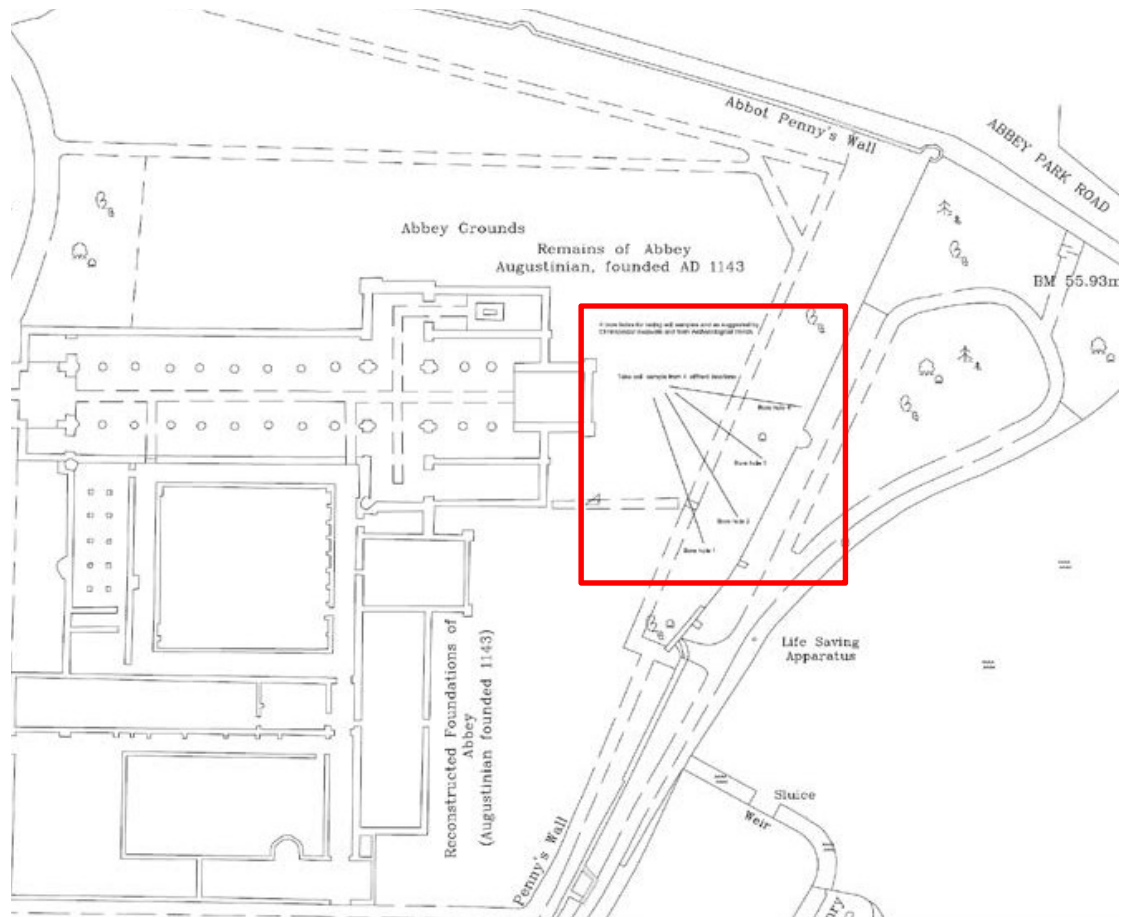


Figure 2 Initial proposed location of boreholes
Plan supplied by client



Figure 3 Eastern face of precinct wall
Looking north west. Trench and boreholes on opposite side of wall



Figure 4 Earth bank against western face of precinct wall
Looking south east

Objectives

Academic Research Agenda

The project has the potential to address the East Midlands Research Agenda topics (Knight et al 2012) for the High Medieval Period:

Agenda 7.5.2: ‘Can we discern significant differences in the planning, economy and landscape impact of the different monastic orders.

Agenda 7.5.5 ‘How can we refine our understanding of local and regional architectural styles, including sculptured stonework, decorations and monuments’

Specific objectives:

Through archaeological control and supervision of groundworks by the client's contractors:

1. To identify the presence/absence of any archaeological deposits.
2. To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed ground works.
3. To record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works.
4. To recover any artefacts, worked stone and other building materials from the fabric of the walls.
5. To produce an archive and report of any results.

Methodology

General methods

All work followed the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) *Code of Conduct* (2010) and adhered to their *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (2008).

Archaeological attendance for inspection and recording

The project involved archaeological attendance by an experienced professional archaeologist during all ground works which had the potential to disturb buried archaeological remains. The trial trench was excavated using a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. The boreholes were made using a standard borehole drilling rig. During these ground works, if any archaeological deposits were seen to be present, the archaeologist would have the power to halt the works to investigate and record areas of archaeological interest. In practice, the investigative trench was excavated under constant archaeological supervision until the first significant archaeological horizon or the desired depth was reached.

If the initial monitoring identified areas having no archaeological interest (e.g. modern made ground or disturbed areas), then the archaeologist would stand down monitoring of that area following consultation with the Planning Authority.

If significant archaeological deposits were discovered work would be halted in order for contingency excavation and recording to be carried out. The archaeologist would however co-operate at all times with the contractors on site to ensure the minimum interruption to the work.

Any archaeological deposits located would be hand cleaned and planned as appropriate. Samples of any archaeological deposits located would be hand excavated. Measured drawings of all archaeological features were prepared at a scale of 1:20 and tied into an overall site plan of 1:100. All plans were tied into the National Grid.

Archaeological deposits were excavated and recorded using standard ULAS procedures. Sufficient of any archaeological features or deposits were hand excavated in order to provide the stratigraphic and chronological sequence of deposits, recognising and excavating structural evidence and recovering economic, artefactual and environmental evidence.

All excavated sections were recorded and drawn at 1:10 or 1:20 scale, levelled and tied into the Ordnance Survey datum. Spot heights would be taken as appropriate.

Spoil was monitored for artefacts. A representative sample of unstratified finds may be retained if deemed necessary.

Should any human remains be encountered they would be initially left in situ, covered and protected, and only removed in accordance with a Ministry of Justice licence and in compliance with relevant environmental health regulations. The landowner, the

Planning Authority and the coroner would be informed immediately of their discovery.

Results

After discussions with the Senior Building Surveyor for Leicester City Council and the borehole contractor it was decided to place the trial trench and boreholes at the southern end of the area identified for stabilisation work (Fig. 5). This area contained most of the larger trees including those which were growing through the walls. To avoid a wooden fence and causing root damage to the existing trees the eastern edge of the trench was excavated 3 metres to the west of the wall (Fig. 6). The trench was laid out on an east to west orientation to cut across the proposed location of the tie-beam.

An average thickness of 0.3m of mid grey-brown sandy silt topsoil (1) was removed in level spits. This layer was full of reasonably sized tree roots indicating a significant level of disturbance. Below the topsoil was a mid orange-brown sandy silt layer full of Dane Hills sandstone fragments, mortar and slate roof tile fragments (2). The whole of this deposit was quite compact but appeared to be relatively free-draining and may not be causing as much of a drainage problem as first thought. Four fragments of 14th-century floor tile and one fragment of post-medieval pancheon ware were recovered from this layer. The tiles were all broken and quite worn with some still having mortar attached to the underside. No very modern material was observed. Layer (2) had an average depth of between 0.9 and 1.0m. Removal of (2) exposed a dark red brown sandy silt layer (3) which had a frequent occurrence of charcoal but only a small amount of Dane Hills sandstone. No artefacts were recovered from this 0.2m thick layer. A similar layer, but with significantly more Dane Hills sandstone (4), was exposed below layer (3) (Fig. 7). This layer, from which no finds were recovered, had an average thickness of 0.15m and appeared to be an interface layer between (3) and a layer of compacted Dane Hills sandstone rubble (5). The top of layer (5) was below the expected excavation depth of the tie-beam so, after a small exploratory box had been dug, no further excavation took place during this phase of work (Fig. 8). The final excavated base of the trench was at the same height of the pathway running parallel to the wall and to the church ruins.

The four bore holes confirmed the relatively simple stratigraphy seen in the trench. Layer (5) continued down to a dirty clay silt layer which was on top of the clay/marl natural substratum at between 3.5 and 4.1m below current ground level, dependent upon the borehole position on the bank.

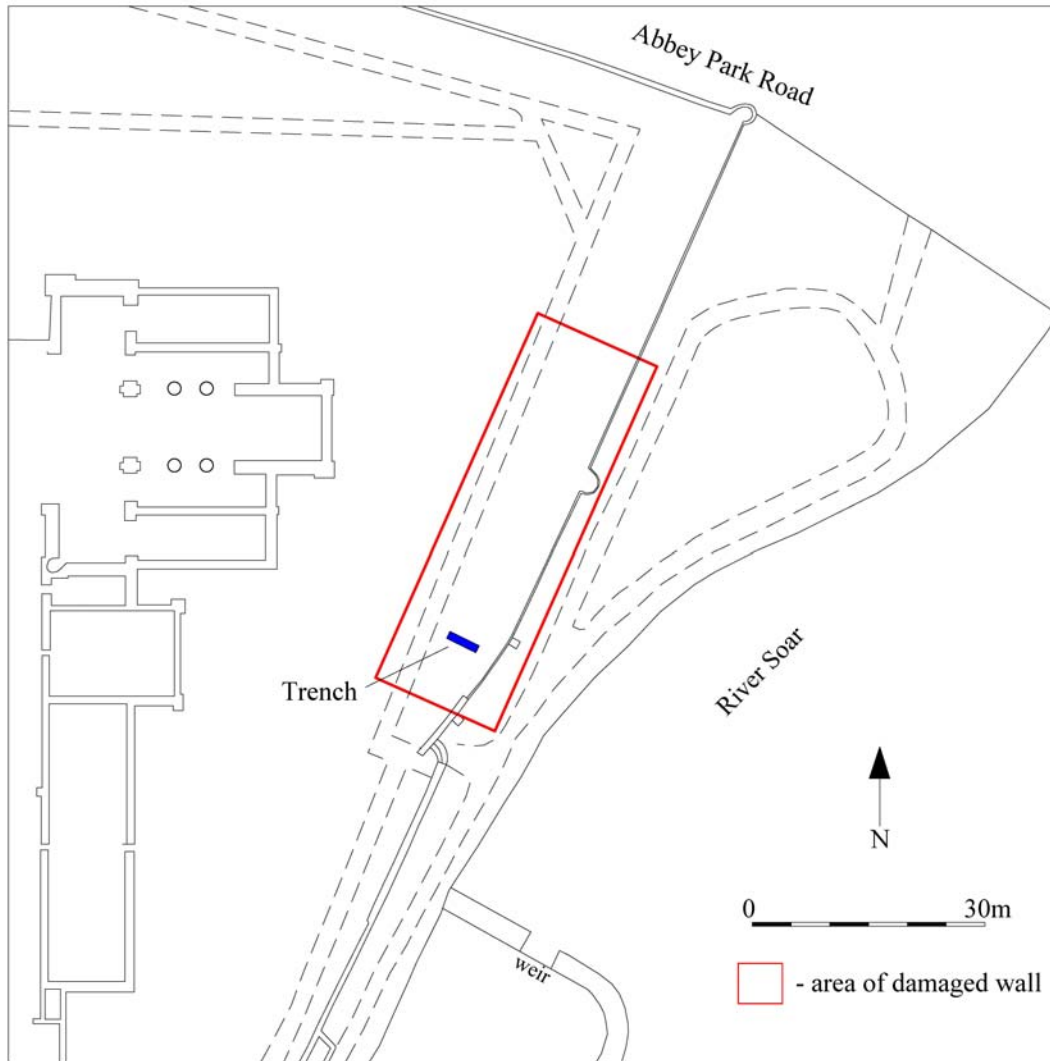


Figure 5 Location of trench



Figure 6 Location of trench
Trench partially excavated. Looking east

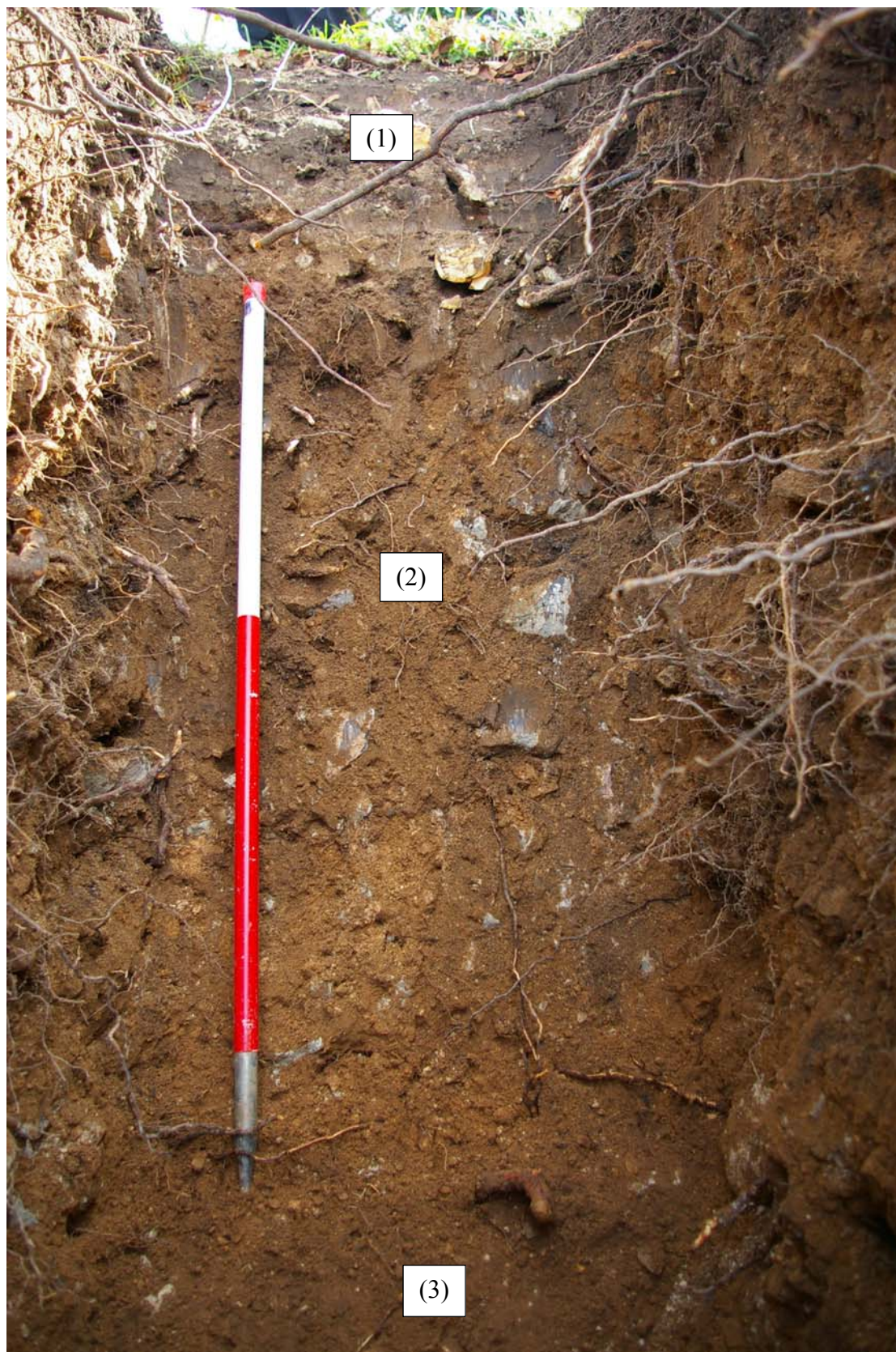


Figure 7 Upper levels of trench stratigraphy
Looking east

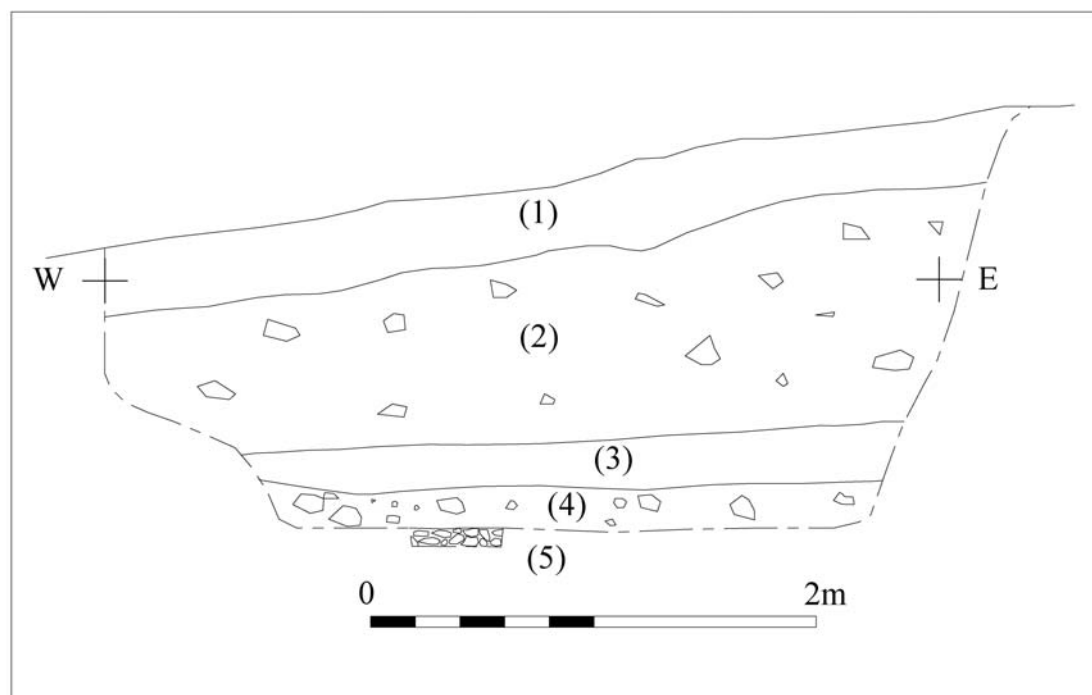


Figure 8 Section

Discussion

The limited excavation and borehole work indicates that there are unlikely to be any surviving structural deposits within the location of the proposed remedial tie-beam. To the south of this area the abbey infirmary buildings are seen as a complex of walls and metalled floor surfaces, there is no indication that this sort of building activity continues as far north as this point. The layers encountered appear to be dumped layers placed against the wall either as a landscaping episode or in an attempt to get rid of waste spoil, perhaps resulting from the excavations of the 1920s and 30s.

The different layers containing demolition debris suggest phases of clearance or dumping over a number of years. Layer (2) was the only layer from which any dateable finds were recovered, the floor tiles being from the abbey demolition phase but the pottery clearly post-dating the mansion phase. The quantity of Dane Hills sandstone rubble, one of the more commonly used stones found in the abbey, and slates might be from a period of salvage whereby good quality stone was being recovered and cleaned ready for re-use. The resulting spoil and debris might then have been disposed of against the precinct wall. Similar rubble layers have been found elsewhere on the site. However, the late date of the post-medieval pottery from this context seems likely to post-date any salvage work which presumably took place very soon after the Dissolution in 1538. The bank could be part of Bedingfield's excavation spoil from the 1920s and 1930s although, when found elsewhere on site, his spoil is often characterised by a large quantity of modern rubbish which was not seen during this watching brief. More accurate dating of the trees sitting on top of this layer might help to provide the latest possible date. From the limited work the best date that can be estimated would be between the late 17th to early 20th centuries.

The layers (3) and (4) below the rubble layer could be the remnants of a trample layer laid down when the precinct wall was still working as an effective high wall. These layers, which contain very little building rubble, may sit on an abbey phase stone dressing layer or post Dissolution rubble layer which layer (5) might well prove to be.

Archive

The archive consists of:

This report,

5 pro forma context recording sheets,

1 drawing sheet,

1 contact sheet of 3 35mm black and white photographs and negatives,

1 contact sheet of 19 digital photographs,

1 cd of this report and the digital photographs.

Publication

A summary of the work will be submitted for publication in the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* in due course. A record of the project will also be submitted to the OASIS project. OASIS is an online index to archaeological grey literature.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was undertaken by A Hyam. Thanks are due to Mr M Sharif, Senior Building Surveyor at Leicester City Council, for assistance during the works.

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Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Watching Brief during restoration works at: *Abbey Grounds, Abbey Park, Leicester*. 2014. ULAS

Appendix 1 Digital photographs



Appendix 2 OASIS information

Project Name	Restoration work, Abbey Grounds, Abbey Park, Leicester
Project Type	Watching Brief
Project Manager	R Buckley
Project Supervisor	A Hyam
Previous/Future work	None – mitigation work to follow
Current Land Use	Public park
Development Type	Stabilisation of walls
Reason for Investigation	Scheduled Monument
Position in Planning Process	n/a
Site Co ordinates	SK 585 060 (area)
Start/end dates of field work	17.3.2014
Archive Recipient	Leicester City Council
Study Area	100m

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