



University of Leicester

Archaeological Services

An Archaeological Watching Brief at
Abbey Park,
Leicester
NGR: SK 5837 0608 centre

Andrew Hyam



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An Archaeological Watching Brief

At Abbey Park

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NGR: SK 5837 0608

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An Archaeological Watching Brief at Abbey Park, Leicester

NGR SK 5837 0608

Andrew Hyam

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) between the 8th and the 16th of November 2010 during the course of the excavation of a television camera mast base and cable trenches for a cctv system in the north-west corner of the park. The cable channel runs from a walled works depot, on the site of former abbey farm buildings, northwards to the north east corner of the original entrance to the abbey.

An east to west wall, probably relating to a former dovecote garden was located as was part of the western boundary wall of the abbey entrance half-way. The north foundation wall of a stone-fronted outbuilding within the depot was located indicating that the range of buildings extended further west than at present. Elsewhere evidence for remodelling and landscaping, probably dating to the twentieth century, was also recorded.

Records will be deposited with Leicester City Council under Accession Number A14.2010

Introduction

In accordance with PPS5 (Planning and the Historic Environment, 2010), this document forms the report for an archaeological watching brief at Abbey Park, Leicester. Leicester City Council are erecting a closed circuit television mast and associated cabling to the north-west of the abbey complex, to the west of Cavendish House and around the present Pet's Corner area (centred on SK 5837 0608) (fig. 1).

Abbey Park lies to the north of Leicester city centre in Abbey ward at a height of between 52 and 55m above O.D. It is bisected by the River Soar and lies entirely within its floodplain. The geology is mainly alluvium and Mercia mudstone. Abbey Park lies on a terrace of the River Soar, just to the north-west of the Roman and medieval walled town of Leicester. The Abbey Grounds lie to the west of the river and contain the boundary precinct walls and laid-out foundations of Leicester Abbey together with the ruins of Cavendish House, a mansion of the 16th - early 17th century (SMR Ref. 50NE.BG). In the north-west corner – the site of Leicester Abbey – the otherwise flat terrain is relieved by a gravel terrace forming an area of slightly higher ground.

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. Much of the archaeological background and the 20th century excavations have 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.

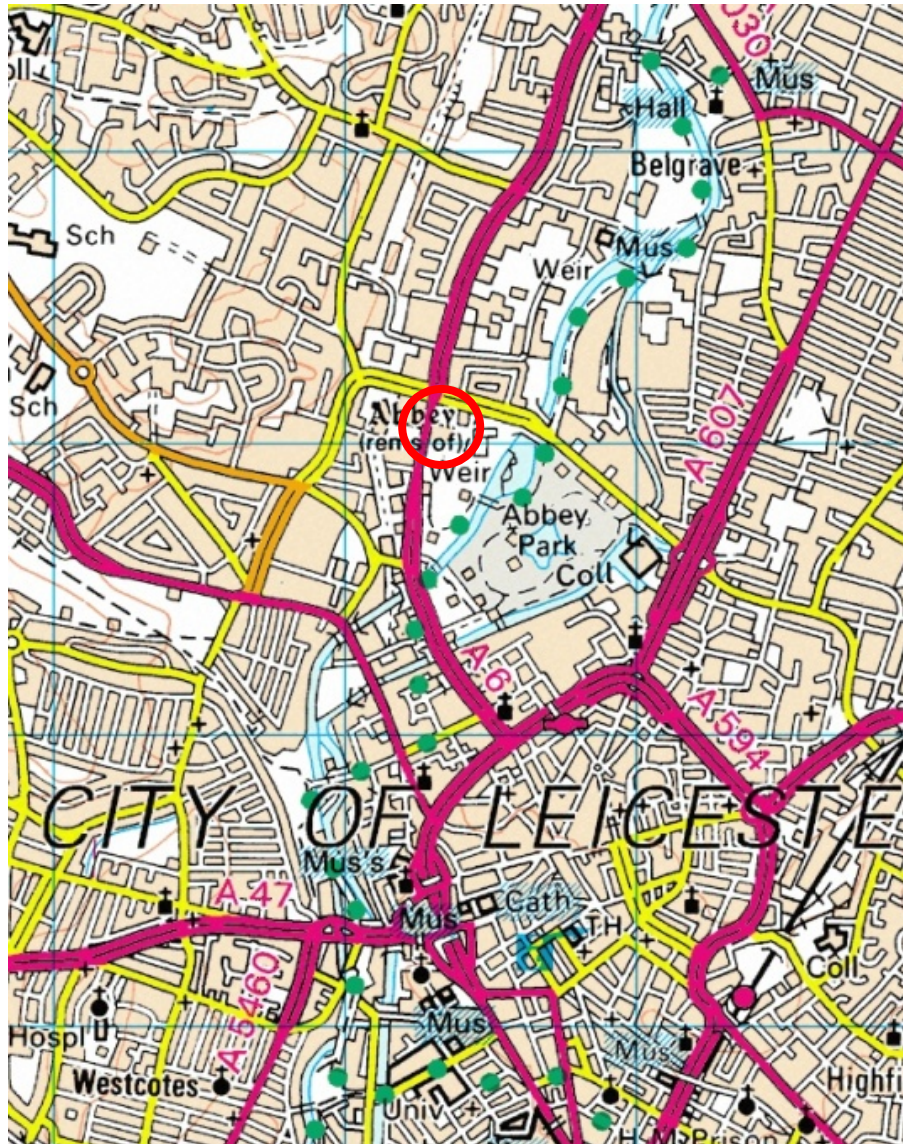


Figure 1 Site location

Ordnance Survey Licence Number: AL100029495

The area subject to the present watching brief runs northwards from a walled works depot continuing to the west of a modern roadway between Cavendish House and Pet's Corner and finally across the park entranceway (fig. 2). The William Senior map of the abbey site published in 1613 for the Cavendish family shows the works depot as stables and farm buildings which are thought to be part of the original abbey complex. Part of the area presently used for Pet's Corner is shown as a dovecote garden (fig. 3).

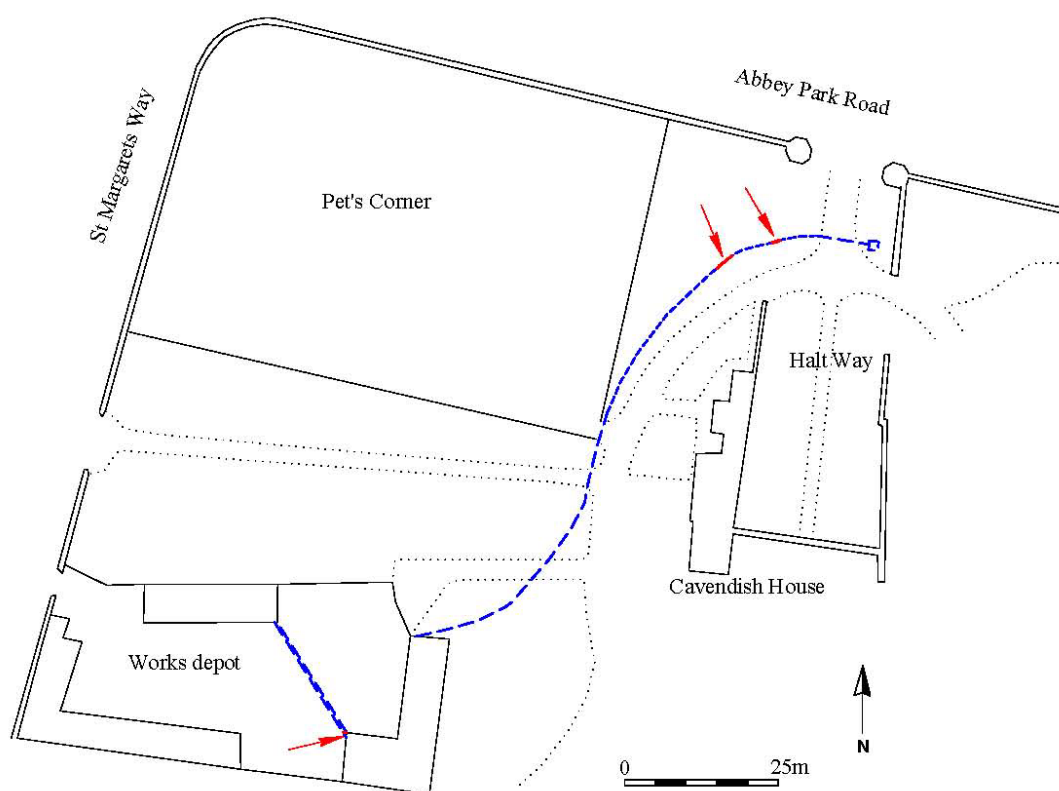


Figure 2 Site plan
Cable trench route shown in blue.
Location of archaeological features shown in red and with arrows

Background

Due to a number of security requirements it has become necessary to install a closed circuit television system and associated cabling trenches within the park as discussed in the previous section. The location of the cctv cable runs across the line of the original main abbey gateway known when the abbey was in use as the halt-way which led to the large gatehouse located within the precinct walls. The second camera and length of cable being installed within the nearby works compound runs across the yard from south-east to north-west. Most of the cable work requires only a narrow trench approximately 0.3 to 0.4m wide and between 0.3 and 0.5m in depth but a larger excavation is necessary were the base for the cctv mast is to be erected near to the park entrance.



Figure 3 Detail from William Senior map (1613)
Dovecote garden highlighted, the halt-way is immediately to the east of this.

Objectives

The objectives of the archaeological watching brief were:

- To identify the presence/absence of any archaeological deposits or features.
- To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed cabling and mast works.
- To record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the works.
- To produce an archive and report of any results.

Methodology

A small tracked mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket was used to excavate the narrow cable trenches and the larger foundation for the television mast. A pneumatic drill was used to cut parallel channels into the asphalt roads and yard surfaces before the trench was excavated. The spoil was removed in spits under archaeological supervision and scanned for finds and dateable material. The work was recorded on standard pro-forma watching brief recording sheets.

All deposits were recorded by notes, sketches and photographs. All work followed the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) Code of Conduct and adhered to their *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* and the *Guidelines for Archaeological Work in Leicestershire and Rutland* (LMARS).

Results

The gateway trench

The route of the cctv cable runs from the north facing end of the L-shaped depot building, through a small garden area, across a road and then just inside a border running along the edge of the road leading northwards out of the park (fig. 2). Near to the entrance gateway the trench turned eastwards, across the entrance road to a grassed area where the cctv mast is to be located.

The first part of the trench immediately north of the L-shaped building was within a garden area and revealed it to be heavily disturbed by roots from the surrounding trees and shrubs. Approximately 0.2m of dark brown topsoil was removed to reveal a slightly paler grey silty clay subsoil extending to the base of the trench. No archaeological features or deposits were observed within this section of the trench. Beyond the garden the trench cut across a road leading westwards across the north boundary of the works depot. Excavating the trench through this road indicated that it had been laid on top of an earlier track made from red orange sandy gravel containing a large quantity of sandstone fragments. This deposit was similar in nature to the excavated and backfilled deposits created during the 1930s archaeological excavations noted within the abbey complex during the University of Leicester excavations. The deposit extended approximately half way across the present road and may indicate that the original, narrower, track was made in the 1930s when the park was being landscaped and laid out. To the north of the east to west road the cable trench ran in the garden border alongside the north to south road through more disturbed material and grey silty clay subsoil with no archaeological deposits.

To the north of the garden border was another road running westwards past Pet's Corner and out onto St. Margaret's Way. Unlike the previous roadway there was no evidence of any earlier tracks or roads beneath the present road only more disturbed material extending to the base of the trench. The trench continued to curve north-eastwards within the garden border with Pet's Corner to the west. The area has been badly disturbed by root action and a live gas pipe which follows the same path as the cctv trench for a few metres. Approximately 12.5m east of Pet's Corner and 19.5m from the northern precinct wall were the remains of a brick and Dane Hills sandstone wall foundation. The bricks measured 9" long by 3" thick (230mm by 75mm) and were bedded within a loose matrix of sand and degraded mortar (figs. 4 and 6). None

of the bricks was whole so no measurement of their width could be made. The top of the wall, which appeared to run from east to west, was 0.3m below current ground level and had a width of approximately 0.7m. On the northern side of this feature was a 1.5m wide layer of river washed cobbles set within an orange brown silty clay with some ashy material especially towards the northern limits. This layer was approximately 0.45m below ground level but only one or two cobbles deep. The northern edge of the cobbles was not particularly well defined and gradually changed back to grey brown silty clay subsoil.

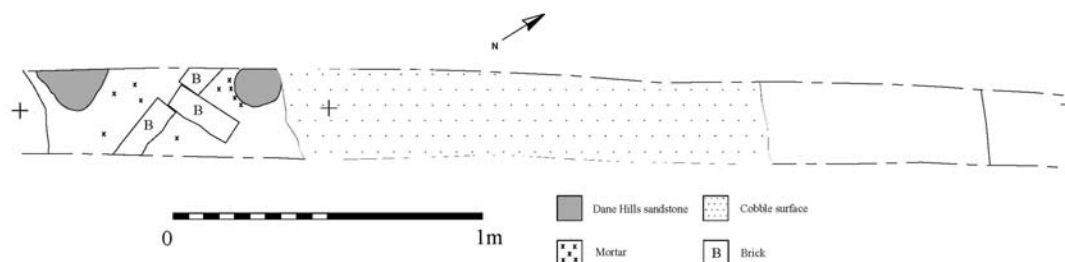


Figure 4 Wall and surface remains east of Pet's Corner

Approximately 6.5m further north along the trench was another length of wall, this time running along a north to south orientation. The wall was quite solidly built of Dane Hills sandstone and limestone within a bed of yellowish orange mortar and was approximately 0.9m in width (figs. 5 and 6). There was a single fragment of heavily abraded brick on the surface of the mortar although it was not clear if this formed part of the structure or had been pressed into the surface after demolition. Because the wall ran through the trench at an oblique angle an accurate measurement of its width was rather difficult. It was however on the same alignment as both the surviving half-way wall extending northwards from Cavendish House, and with the western gate tower on Abbey Park Road. On the west side of the wall was a disturbed mix of garden soil and grey brown silty clay subsoil. To the east side, beneath the topsoil, was a 0.1 to 0.2m thick layer of mixed mid brown clay silt with patches of orange sand and gravel. Beneath this layer was a deposit of what looked like made ground consisting of a dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional rounded stones, charcoal and brick fragments. No dateable finds were recovered from this material. This deposit continued below the base of the cable trench.

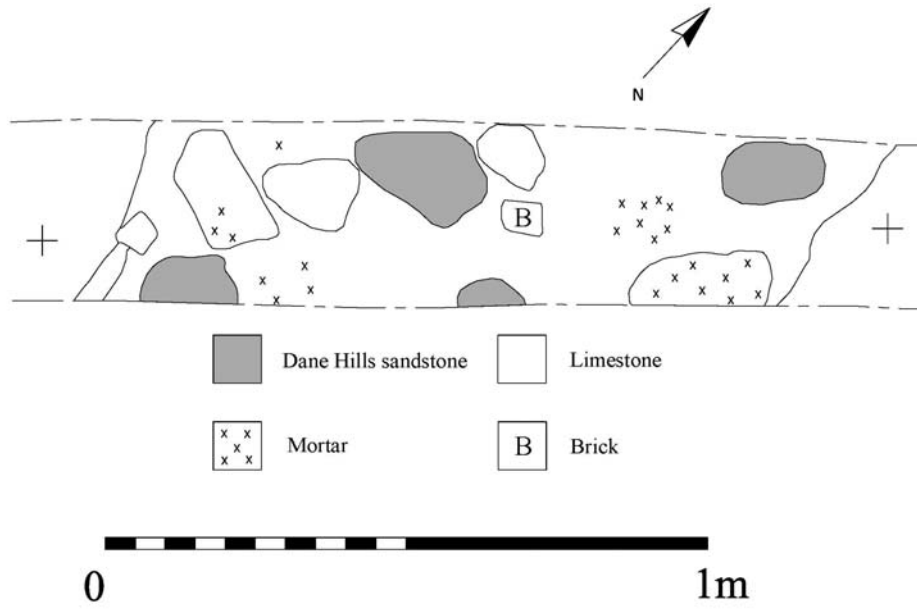


Figure 5 Possible halt-way wall foundation



Figure 6 Trench and surviving halt-way wall
Excavated foundation in foreground below north arrow

Beyond the possible half-way wall the cable trench turned eastwards under the entrance road to a grassed area where the cctv mast is to be located. The road was laid on a bed of sandy gravel to a depth of 0.3m below road level. A 0.2m thick layer of Dane Hills sandstone, limestone and degraded mortar fragments beneath the gravel may represent an earlier, but undated, version of the entrance roadway. Beneath this layer was a deposit of pale brown clay silt extending to the base of the trench. On the east side of the entrance road the 1.5m square by 1m deep mast base was excavated through what was apparently redeposited made ground of the same dark grey brown sandy silt seen on the west side of the road. A sample excavation in the bottom of the mast base indicated that this deposit extends well below the limit of excavation. No dateable material except for one small abraded brick fragment was recovered from this material.

The depot trench

The trench for the cctv cable runs from the north-west corner of a two-storey L-shaped building in the south-east corner of the depot across, in a north-westerly direction, to the south-east corner of an open fronted range running along the northern boundary (fig. 7). The depot yard is covered in a layer of heavily patched asphalt giving the impression that there have been a number of excavations into this surface.

The trench was begun at the north corner of the west-facing elevation of the L-shaped building. This building has a stone rubble-built north-facing façade with rear and side walls of brick. Beneath the layer of asphalt and approximately 25mm of sandy bedding material was a 0.9m wide unworked block of Dane Hills sandstone within a matrix of degraded mortar and sandstone fragments (fig. 8). The stone corresponded with the front stone façade of the adjacent building and extended from east to west across the base of the trench and appears to be a continuation of the stone facade. Unfortunately the cable trench was so narrow and at such an angle that it was not possible to identify any internal floor surfaces which may still survive. Beyond this point, for the next 4.5 metres, the trench contained a heavily disturbed layer of silty clay with river washed cobbles and brick fragments scattered throughout. None of the brick fragments was large or complete enough to estimate its original size. This disturbed layer was approximately 0.4m deep beneath which was a clean deposit of pale orange brown silty clay which appeared to be the natural. The total trench depth within this area was between 0.45 and 0.55m below present ground level.

Approximately 4.5m beyond the remnants of the stone foundation was a dense deposit of stone rubble and brick which looked like a dumped layer within the disturbed layer already noted. This rubble extended for a distance of approximately 2m beyond which the trench was filled with the disturbed deposit as far as the northern building. The cctv is to be mounted on the corner of the northern building so it was not necessary to place a mast at this point. Apart from the stone façade no other archaeological deposits or features were noted within the cable trench.



Figure 7 Depot cable trench
Asphalt cut ready for excavation. Looking south-east



Figure 8 Foundation of stable building
Looking south-east

Discussion

Although very little in the way of dating evidence was found during the watching brief the two walls indicate that some of the original walls from the Abbey and mansion phase are still likely to survive in places. The roadways appear to be constructed over earlier paths and tracks laid out in the 1930s when this part of the park was landscaped and opened to the public.

The east to west wall seems likely to be the remains of the dovecote garden with a possible cobbled path running alongside its internal face. The bricks within this structure are of the same 9” length as in the early 16th century Abbot Penny’s wall but were somewhat thicker at 3” rather than the 2 ¼” seen in Penny’s wall suggesting that they may be of a later date. William Senior’s map of 1613 shows a wall in this approximate location but it is possible that it has been rebuilt a number of times before finally being demolished.

The much more substantial wall foundations found on the alignment of the surviving half-way wall are almost certainly the remnants of this feature. A projected line from the existing wall to the, albeit rebuilt, gate turret, runs almost directly over the exposed foundation. The area between the east and west half-way walls appears to have been heavily robbed. It is possible that the original abbey half-way surface was robbed during the Dissolution possibly for a metalled or flagged surface and was then backfilled with spoil from elsewhere.

In the works depot it seems clear that the stone-fronted building continued further westwards than it does now. Senior's map also indicates that the building, identified as stables, were significantly longer in 1613. No evidence was found to give an indication of the date of construction of this building. Elsewhere in this area the yard appears to have been re-laid more than once which has destroyed any archaeological evidence.

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 R Hyam. The project was managed by R J Buckley.

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Appendix. OASIS Information

OASIS INFORMATION	
Project Name	Abbey Park cctv scheme
Project Type	Watching Brief
Project Manager	R Buckley
Project Supervisor	A Hyam
Previous/Future work	None
Current Land Use	Public park
Development Type	CCTV installation
Reason for Investigation	Adjacent to scheduled ancient monument
Position in the Planning Process	As a condition
Site Co ordinates	SK 5837 0608
Start/end dates of field work	08-11-2010 to 16-11-2010
Archive Recipient	LCC
Study Area	100m length

ULAS Contact Details

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