

ACHP11/003



## PERSHORE ABBEY, PERSHORE

*Archaeological ground monitoring*

*commissioned by The Vicar and  
Churchwardens of Pershore Abbey*

*June 2013*



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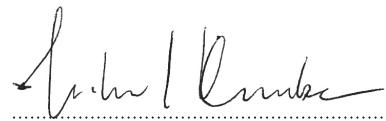
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## Illus 1

Site location



# PERSHORE ABBEY, PERSHORE

## Archaeological ground monitoring

*Headland Archaeology conducted ground-monitoring works at the west end of Pershore Abbey in order to record any archaeological remains exposed during the construction of a new access ramp to replace the existing steps and refurbishment of the paved area adjacent to the modern church entrance. The area of the current works lies within the former nave of the abbey.*

*During the works, a small charnel pit and two truncated grave cuts were identified beneath the paved area and associated levelling deposits at the west end of the abbey.*

*The identified grave cuts had been truncated by the drainage system for the original paved area. The charnel pit had been excavated directly beneath the original paved surface and was probably modern.*

*Cartographic, photographic, and archaeological evidence indicate that the area of the steps was extensively remodelled during the 20th century. Re-deposited material was identified including brick rubble and both disarticulated human and animal bones.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd was commissioned by the client to undertake a programme of archaeological work within the grounds of Pershore Abbey (SAM 260).

An application was submitted to the Diocesan Advisory Committee and English Heritage to alter the existing path and steps at the west end of the abbey church. The proposal involved the replacement of the existing steps with a permanent ramp to enable disabled access to the building, the refurbishment of the paved area and associated drainage system (*Illus 1*).

In accordance with the advice of Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service and in connection with the application for scheduled monument consent a written scheme of investigation (Kimber 2013) was submitted by the applicant and approved by English Heritage.

### 1.1 LOCATION

The site comprises of the access path, steps and a paved area within the western entrance of the Abbey Church (NGR SO 94767 45784). The upper part of the site is situated at 21.60mOD and the lower paved area (at the base of the steps) at 20.90mOD.

The underlying geology is Lower Lias formation of the Jurassic period overlain by alluvium. (BGS, <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/>)

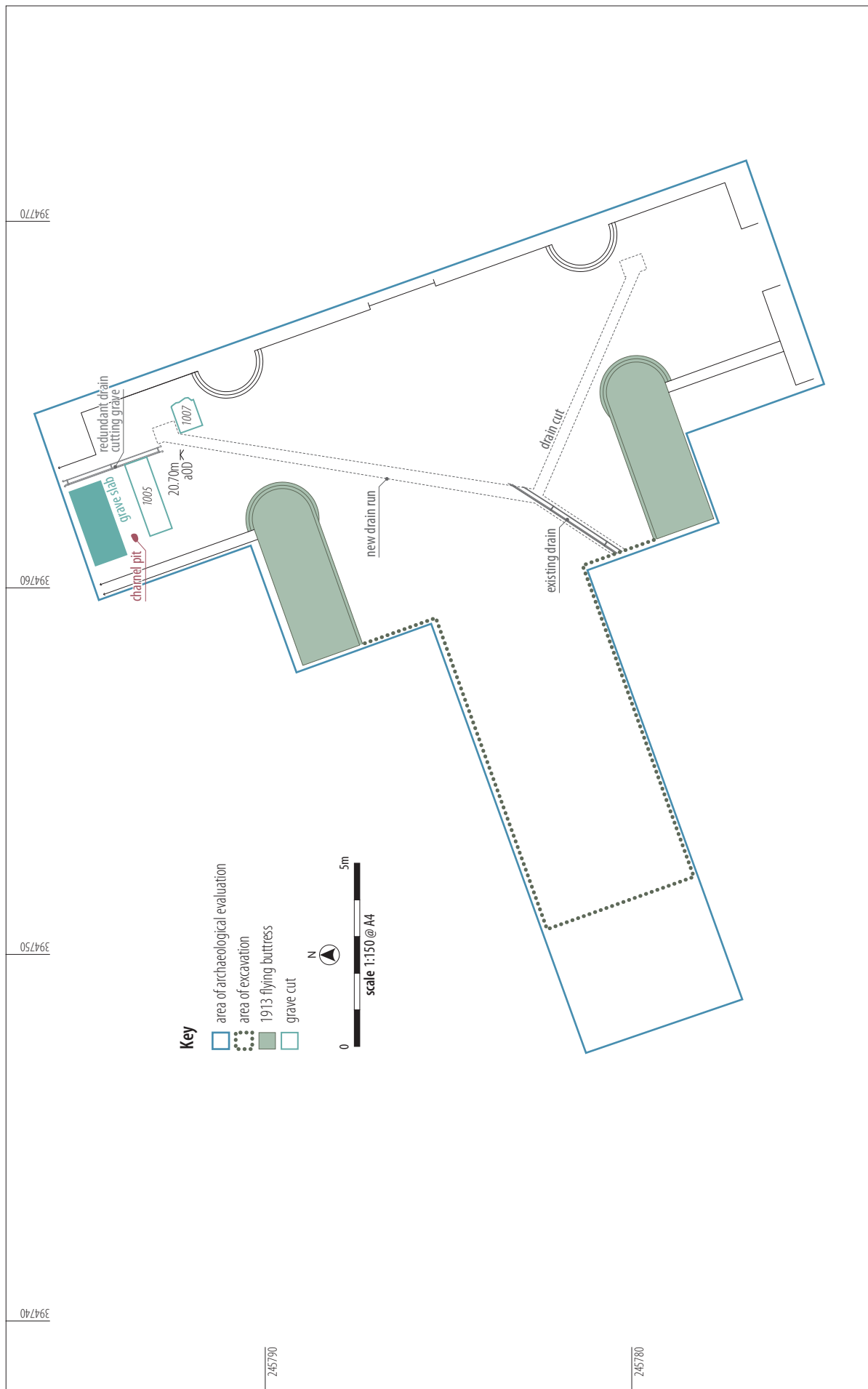
### 1.2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Pershore has Roman and Anglo-Saxon antecedents, with a minster church founded in c AD 698, but the present town is likely to have grown in the main following the foundation of the Benedictine Abbey in c AD 970 as a small rural settlement adjacent to its north gate (Dalwood 1996). Following its establishment as a burgh after 1065 Pershore became moderately prosperous via the wool trade, but declined towards the end of the medieval period.

The abbey has had a long history, from Saxon religious house, via a Norman and later medieval structure to the rather truncated remnants now forming the present abbey church. A Saxon foundation is preserved within the present-day nave (Blockley 1996), while Norman architecture is visible within the south transept.

The area of the current works lies within the former nave of the abbey. Andrews (in Dalwood and Ratkai 1996) states that after the dissolution of the monasteries the Lady Chapel and nave were demolished and sold for building materials. The standing part of the abbey (the crossing, transepts and chancel) was purchased from the crown by the parishioners of Holy Cross after the surrender of the monastery in 1540.

The major source of information on the layout of the demolished part of the church is the extensive excavation carried out by F. B. Andrews in 1929–30 (HWCMS 5407). Andrews' efforts to trace the plan of the nave met with frustration: 'the lines of the nave walls and the



**Illus 2**  
Site plan showing areas excavated and features identified

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### Illus 3

General view of site facing S, before grading of ground levels

### Illus 4

General view of site facing S, after grading of ground levels

arcades north and south have been followed for some 175ft from the crossing westwards, but with little result other than the exposure of fragments of foundation stone-work of the walls and further debris-filled trenches' (in Dalwood and Ratkai 1996). The excavations extended well beyond the limit of the recorded wall-lines, but a large area 'proved entirely barren'. It is clear from Andrews' account that only very short lengths of in situ foundations of the demolished abbey buildings survive under Abbey Park (Dalwood and Ratkai 1996).

## 2 METHOD

Existing paving & drainage gullies were removed by hand by the main contractor, allowing the archaeologist to make a preliminary inspection of the ramp area. In particular, any voids left by the removal of the gullies were inspected to provide an initial understanding of the levels nearest to the original abbey floor.

Areas where ground reduction was required were spade-tested to formation depth in shallow spits by the archaeologist in order to:

- Identify any in situ floor surfaces
- Ensure that post-medieval bulk deposits were correctly identified as such
- Identify any horizons where machine excavation should cease in order to allow sufficient investigation and characterisation by hand prior to further excavation.

Once the archaeologist had identified deposits that could be removed in bulk without compromising the integrity of the monument, excavation of these proceeded using a mini-excavator equipped with a flat-bladed ditching bucket, under direct supervision of the archaeologist. Machine excavation ceased at the formation level of the ramp; in the event no archaeological deposits requiring excavation by hand were encountered above this level.

All recording followed IfA Standards and Guidance. Recording was undertaken on Headland Archaeology pro forma trench record sheets. 35mm colour transparencies and black-and-white print photographs were taken, and a drawn section of each trench was recorded at a scale of 1:10. Site levels were recorded with reference to Ordnance Datum.



As prearranged, all identified disarticulated human bone was returned to the Churchwardens to allow re-interment at a later date.

## 3 RESULTS

The existing paved area was removed [1001], the paved area was set upon a layer of black engine clinker [1002] of varying depths between a maximum of 0.10m, beneath which was a deposit of sand [1003] approximately 0.05m in depth, but not consistent over the area. The construction layers were set upon a mid brown sandy loam [1004]. Inclusions within the deposits varied across the site, in relation to their location; within the vicinity of the former nave and aisle wall the deposits contained an increased quantity of small stone inclusions. A small amount of disarticulated human and animal bone was also identified within the makeup layers for the paved area.

Three archaeological features were located during the ground works (Illus 2).





**Illus 5**

*Detail showing truncated grave cut*

Within the area of the former north aisle of the nave, directly beneath the concrete slab of the existing paved surface a small charnel pit [1006] was identified. The pit contained a heavily damaged skull, small pieces of leg bone and a kneecap.

The location of charnel pit [1006] and its fill (mixed engine clinker and soil) indicated that a pavement slab had been lifted and the charnel pit dug from that level, the association with the existing paved area indicates that the pit is of a post-medieval date.

It is also interesting to note that during the re-grading of ground levels it became clear to observe a post-medieval grave slab that formed part of the modern paving was set on bricks, similar to the bricks surrounding the flying buttress, indicating that the grave slab had been raised to lie flush with the paved surface (*Illus 4*). The grave slab was left in situ and not disturbed during the observed ground works.

Located within close proximity to the existing and retained grave slab, a grave cut was identified [1005]. The grave cut was aligned east-west and positioned within the line of the former north aisle of the nave. The cut was also truncated at the eastern end by the run of the redundant drainage system (*Illus 5*).

Grave [1005] was not excavated, however during further ground reductions required for drainage alterations, a number of disarticulated bones were identified within the upper fill, at the eastern end of the grave cut.



**Illus 6**

*General view showing drain cut*

The identification of disarticulated bones within the grave fill of [1005] suggest, that when the grave was truncated by the existing drainage system, the disturbed bones were replaced in the fill of the grave cut, before the construction of the paved area was completed.

Further work conducted during the reduction of the area around the northern drain sump (*Illus 6*) identified another grave cut [1007] also in line with the former nave aisle. The grave cut was heavily truncated by the drainage system, resulting in only a small portion of the original grave remaining at the western end.

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 THE CHARNEL PIT

The small charnel pit that was identified is possibly a direct result of previous ground works within the abbey precinct that have disturbed burials.

The fill of the pit contained inclusions relating to the levelling deposits that were used in the formation of the bedding layers for the existing paved surface, suggesting that the pit relates to relatively modern activity after the existing paved area was constructed.

## 4.2 EXISTING POST-MEDIEVAL GRAVE SLAB

During the ground reductions work it was observed that the existing grave slab was set upon a brick plinth. The use of brick beneath the grave marker could indicate that there is a chamber beneath the slab or it could equally reflect the need to level up the slab to lie flush with the previous raised paved surface.

## 4.3 THE TWO GRAVE CUTS

The two graves cuts identified within the ground-works for the ramp raise an interesting question – that of their date and relationship to the former abbey nave.

The grave [1007] that lies parallel to the existing post-medieval grave slab is cut into the line of the former north aisle of the nave, possibly indicating that the grave pre-dates the demolition of the nave as it respects the former aisle alignment.

The identification of a second grave [1005], albeit heavily truncated, also within the line of the former aisle may lend credence to the implication that both these graves are contemporary with the former nave of the Abbey. Burial of patrons within the aisles of monastic buildings is not an unexpected practice.

Projecting the line of [1005] cut indicates that the later in-filled wall, blocking the western arch of the nave, cuts the grave. The blocking of the nave arch was carried out in 1862–64, confirming that this grave predates this phase of restoration.

It is clear that the graves through location and association predate the construction of the blocking wall; the only question that cannot be conclusively answered is “do these grave cuts represent pre dissolution activities”.

The implication that the graves may pre-date the dissolution of the Abbey in 1540 implies that the deposit [1004] to which the ground level was reduced (20.7m OD average) actually lay beneath the original medieval floor and therefore probably represents a medieval deposit relating to the construction of the Abbey

## 5 CONCLUSION

The monitoring of the ground works for the refurbishment of the entrance to the west doorway of Pershore Abbey identified two previously unidentified grave cuts and a small charnel pit. The charnel pit represented a small burial of disarticulated bone that post dated the construction of the existing paved area

The small amount of disarticulated bone within the makeup of the previous paved area was not unexpected, when compared to the identification of the grave cuts, in an area that was previously considered to have been heavily truncated thought the action of recent modernisation and previous excavations.

The implication that the graves could belong to the pre-dissolution period of the abbey is only implied through location, within the line of the north aisle, but a physical relationship with the alterations in 1864–66 to the western arch of the nave indicates that they do at least pre date the alterations .

It seems likely that within the area of the access ramp, there are no surviving structural remains of the Abbey.

## 6 ARCHIVE

Site notes and photographic record

The archive will be deposited at Worcestershire County Museum within one year of the completion of fieldwork.

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## 8 APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 SITE REGISTERS

#### APPENDIX 1.1 PHOTOGRAPHIC REGISTERS

Photo	C/S	B/W	Digital	Facing	Description
1	36	36	DSCF0001.jpg	—	Film Id Shot
2	35	35	DSCF0002.jpg	E	General view of drainage system near west door
3	34	34	DSCF0003.jpg	W	General view of ramp and wing walls before removal
4	33	33	DSCF00041.jpg	S	General view of site after ground reduction
5	32	32	DSCF0005.jpg	W	General view of grave mark within ground reduction area
6	31	31	DSCF0006.jpg	N	General view of site after ground reduction
7	30	30	DSCF0007.jpg	NW	General view of site with ramp grading
8	29	29	DSCF0008.jpg	W	View of skull fragments from charnel pit
9	28	28	DSCF0009.jpg	E	Detail of grave cut, cut by drain run
10	27	27	DSCF0010.jpg	S	General view of site after ground reduction
11	26	26	DSCF0011.jpg	W	General view of site after ground reduction
12	25	25	DSCF0012.jpg	S	General view of silt trap in situ
13	24	24	DSCF0013.jpg	S	Wing wall section
14	23	23	DSCF0014.jpg	E	Ramp after grading and wall footings cut
15	22	22	DSCF0015.jpg	W	Ramp after grading and wall footings cut
16	21	21	DSCF0016.jpg	E	Drain run cut
17	20	20	DSCF0017.jpg	E	Drain run cut
18	19	19	DSCF0018.jpg	E	Drain run cut
19	18	18	DSCF0019.jpg	E	Drain run cut
20	17	17	DSCF0020.jpg	S	Drain run cut
21	16	16	DSCF0021.jpg	W	Drain run cut

#### APPENDIX 1.2 CONTEXT REGISTER

Context	Description	Depth (below surface m)	OS Benchmark—St Andrews Parish Church
1001	Concrete paving slabs	0.00–0.08	20.90m
1002	Black engine clinker-ash-levelling deposit	0.08–0.12	20.82m
1003	Sand-levelling deposit	0.12–0.15	20.78m

Context	Description	Depth (below surface m)	OS Benchmark—St Andrews Parish Church
1004	Mid brown silty clay – sub-angular sandstone inclusions	0.15–0.40+	20.73m
1005	Grave cut – unexcavated	—	20.73m
1006	Charnel pit	0.08–0.20	20.82m
1007	Grave cut- unexcavated	—	20.72m
1008	Fill of 1006 – mixed 1004 with 1002	0.08–0.20	—







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