

**MALMESBURY ABBEY FLOODLIGHTING
MALMESBURY, WILTSHIRE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

July 2000

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SUMMARY

An application has been made for the replacement of floodlights at Malmesbury Abbey (NGR: ST 9334 8733). The site of the Abbey is archaeologically sensitive and parts of the area, encompassing the surviving building and elements demolished after dissolution in AD 1539, are scheduled (SM 19043). As a result English Heritage have required the preparation of a desk-based assessment as part of the archaeological works required prior to an application for Scheduled Monument Consent. This document constitutes the first stage of archaeological evaluation.

The assessment has revealed the presence of prehistoric, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval features and findspots in the vicinity of the Abbey. The primary importance of the site lies, however, in the Abbey and its associated grounds and cemetery.

1 ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY AND INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A planning application has been made for the installation of new floodlighting at Malmesbury Abbey, Malmesbury, Wiltshire (NGR: ST 9334 8733). The site of Malmesbury Abbey is of known archaeological significance and is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SM 19043).
- 1.2 Archaeological assessment involves desk top study of presently available archaeological and other relevant information. Assessment represents the first stage of pre-planning permission archaeological investigations recommended in PPG16. PPG16 refers to the need to identify the likely presence and significance of archaeological deposits at an early stage in the planning process.
- 1.3 Archaeological assessment therefore forms the basis for any further pre-planning permission archaeological work, such as field evaluation, should this prove to be appropriate. In this instance the assessment is intended to inform an application for scheduled monument consent.
- 1.4 The general requirements of a desktop assessment are set out by the Institute of Field Archaeologist's *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments* (1994) and the Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service *Archaeological Guidance Paper 1: Desk-Based Assessments* (1998).
- 1.5 The opinions expressed in this report and the comments and recommendations given are based on the results of desk-based survey and the site reconnaissance. This document is limited to an assessment of the likely sub-surface impact to be caused by the installation of the new floodlight cabling and associated plinths for the lights themselves. It does not constitute a full historical and structural assessment of the Abbey which would lie outside the scope of the present works.

2 SOURCES

- 2.1 The information available in the Wiltshire Sites and Monuments Record and National Monuments Record has been consulted. This information is referenced in Section 4, Figure 3 and summarised in Appendix 1. Twenty-two Sites and Monuments Records and National Monuments Records have been identified from close to the development area. The Abbey is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and its setting may be affected by the proposals. The study area is shown as included within an archaeologically significant area in the Local Plan.

- 2.2 Information in the Wiltshire Record Office at Trowbridge was consulted for cartographic and other historic data. Regional and national journals have also been examined for relevant information.
- 2.3 Vertical and oblique aerial photographs covering the study area, held by the National Monuments Record (Air Photographs) were examined in order to identify any archaeological deposits or evidence of earlier structures.
- 2.4 The National Monument Record was also consulted for archaeological information relevant to the study area, although this duplicated material held by the Wiltshire Sites and Monuments Record. The National Buildings record was also consulted.

3 SITE LOCATION

- 3.1 The Abbey is located at the northern end of the town of Malmesbury, centred approximately on NGR: ST 9334 8733 (Figure 1). The study area falls within the modern parish of Malmesbury in North Wiltshire District. The proposed cabling runs to the north of the Abbey through the demolished Cloister, and to the south of the Abbey to link with Tolsey Gate. The area to the north of the Abbey and a small area to the south fall within the scheduled area (Figure 2).
- 3.2 Malmesbury is situated on an outcrop of Cornbrash rising above the surrounding clays of the Oxford and Kellaways Beds (British Geological Survey 1978). The town is situated on a promontory between the River Avon and two of its tributaries.
- 3.3 The areas to be impacted upon comprise a grassed garden/picnic area (the Cloister Garden) to the north of the Abbey, a small area adjacent to the Abbey Nave and the cemetery to the south (Figure 4).

4 PROJECT AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Although the disturbance involved with the proposed floodlighting only requires relatively minor sub-surface cabling, an attempt has been made in this report to provide a very general overview of the area, to place the site in its landscape and historical context.
- 4.2 Prehistoric finds and monuments are sparse from the immediate vicinity of the study area, and consist of Iron Age loomweights and a gold stater. The position of the town is very favourable and otherwise unrecorded prehistoric features are likely to exist within the area of the town.

- 4.3 A hypocaust indicating the presence of a Roman building is recorded from the east of the Abbey and stray finds of this period include pottery lamps and a ceramic vessel.
- 4.4 The first documentary evidence for Malmesbury dates from the early 7th century when a Saxon hilltop settlement is known to have existed. Malmesbury is first recorded as Mealdumesburgh from the proper name 'Maeldulph' and 'burgh' a type of fortified settlement.
- 4.5 The early history of the site is uncertain, although there are references to a nunnery founded c. 603 AD, though a more likely date for its establishment is 637 AD when the Irish monk Maeldulph established a hermitage at Malmesbury. The monastery itself was established between 675 and 705 AD under the abbacy of Adhelm. Between 965 and 974 AD the monastery had become established as a house of the Benedictine order. The construction of the surviving buildings began under Bishop Roger, between 1118 and 1139 AD and were completed between 1160 and 1170 AD. The abbey remained with the Benedictine order until its dissolution on 15th December 1539. The Abbey was subsequently sold by Henry VIII's commissioners to the wealthy clothier William Stumpe. He built the Abbey House on the site of some of the monastic buildings and gave the nave of the Abbey church to the people of Malmesbury as their parish church in 1541.
- 4.9 The Abbey has been the subject of numerous articles; foremost among them the work of Harold Breakspear who provided a detailed architectural discussion of the surviving building and compiled a detailed reconstruction plan.
- 4.10 A programme of geophysical survey was undertaken in October 1996 on behalf of Mrs Howard-Pollard of Abbey House by the Bartlett-Clark Consultancy. The survey covered the area of the Cloister Garden that will be affected by the cabling, but did not include the area of the churchyard to the south of the Abbey.
- 4.11 The geophysical survey identified a number of irregular anomalies which may represent fragmentary remains of the cloister. These are detailed on Figure 5 with the proposed cabling route shown as an overlay.
- 4.12 The present project requires the installation of electrical cabling and square concrete plinths for the floodlights themselves. The cabling requires a trench approximately 0.20m wide by 0.45m deep, although at minimum the trench can be as shallow as 0.25m. The plinths measure 0.60m across and will need to be set into the ground to a minimum depth of 0.30m. The proposed route of the cable trench and the location of the plinths are illustrated on Figure 4.

5 SITE RECONNAISSANCE

- 5.1 The site inspection involved an examination of the areas to be affected by the proposed floodlighting scheme. All areas to be affected are substantially short grass with paving slabs. The southern area is situated in the cemetery and will contain human remains, both as intact burials and as disarticulated bone within the topsoil.
- 5.2 Four small 0.30m by 0.30m test-pits were archaeologically excavated to the maximum depth (0.50m) required by the proposed floodlighting (Fig 6). All four were excavated on the southern side of the Abbey, outside the Scheduled Area. The stratigraphic sequence identified consisted of a yellow brown silty clay at between 0.30m and 0.40m from the modern ground surface. This was sealed beneath a mid-brown subsoil containing limestone fragments up to 0.32m thick. Topsoil and turf varied between 0.10m and 0.17m in depth.
- 5.3 The yellow-brown silt clay was not reached in Test-pit 1 where articulated skeletal remains were encountered at a depth of 0.38m from the modern ground surface.

6 IMPACT OF THE PROPOSALS

- 6.1 Based on the results of the desk-based assessment the perceived archaeological potential of the site can be summarised as follows:
- 6.2 Prehistoric and Roman activity is known from the vicinity, but is relatively sparse. Some occupation from these periods is suggested by the available records, but no evidence exists to suggest that the floodlighting will have any effect on remains of these dates.
- 6.3 Anglo-Saxon and medieval occupation in the area is extensive and well documented and, apart from the Abbey itself, includes an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in the marketplace, a (demolished) castle, and medieval elements in many of the town buildings.
- 6.4 The results of the assessment suggest that the archaeological potential of the study area is high, although the proposed sub-surface disturbance is unlikely to impact upon any significant archaeological deposits. Disturbed human bone is likely to be present throughout the area of the churchyard, but this will result in an archaeological constraint only where articulated burials are encountered. The test-pitting suggests that articulated skeletal material may be present within the subsoil, although the only remains encountered were at a depth below the minimum depths required for the cabling and plinths.

- 6.5 It is recommended that the area of land adjacent to the porch (between the Abbey and the path) be excavated by hand, either directly by the archaeological contractor, or under close archaeological supervision. The cabling run through the churchyard is unlikely, if adequately archaeologically supervised, to result in damage to intact deposits. A previous cable trench for the existing floodlights is present within the churchyard. The approximate line of this cable has been located and is illustrated on Fig 6. It is recommended that this line should be accurately located and that the cable linking the replacement floodlights should follow this old line as detailed on Fig 7.
- 6.6 The area of the Cloister Garden (within the Scheduled Area) has previously been used as a market garden and will, as a result, be unlikely to have intact archaeological deposits within the depth to be affected by the proposed cabling and plinths. The geophysical survey suggests that substantial masonry remains are present within the area to be affected, but the high readings in these areas may represent concentrations of rubble rather than intact foundations. Breakspear (1915) notes that 'most of the main walls of the buildings round the cloister had been grubbed up, but a portion of the east wall, a fragment of the north wall towards its west end, and a length of the west wall near its north end remained.' Internally the alleys of the cloister were floored with patterned tiles. The tiled floor of the southern part of the west alley was apparently still partially intact at the end of the 18th century. Moffat (1805) records that workmen digging for stone in a garden adjoining the north-west end of the church came down upon a pavement of square stained tiles. The spot was subsequently re-examined a quantity of 'curious' tiles were discovered. The tiles were glazed, ornamented with roses, flowers-de-luce, and heads.
- 6.7 It is recommended that the cable trench and floodlight plinths in this area be excavated under close archaeological supervision. In the event that intact archaeological deposits relating to the tiled floor of the southern alley are encountered, works should immediately cease and alternative routes should be sought for the cable trench and revised locations for the floodlights. If no route or suitable alternative locations for plinths can be devised alternate design solutions should be sought prior to any proposal to disturb intact flooring.
- 6.8 The locations of the proposed cabling and plinths must be recorded on accurately scaled location plans during groundworks.

7 REFERENCES

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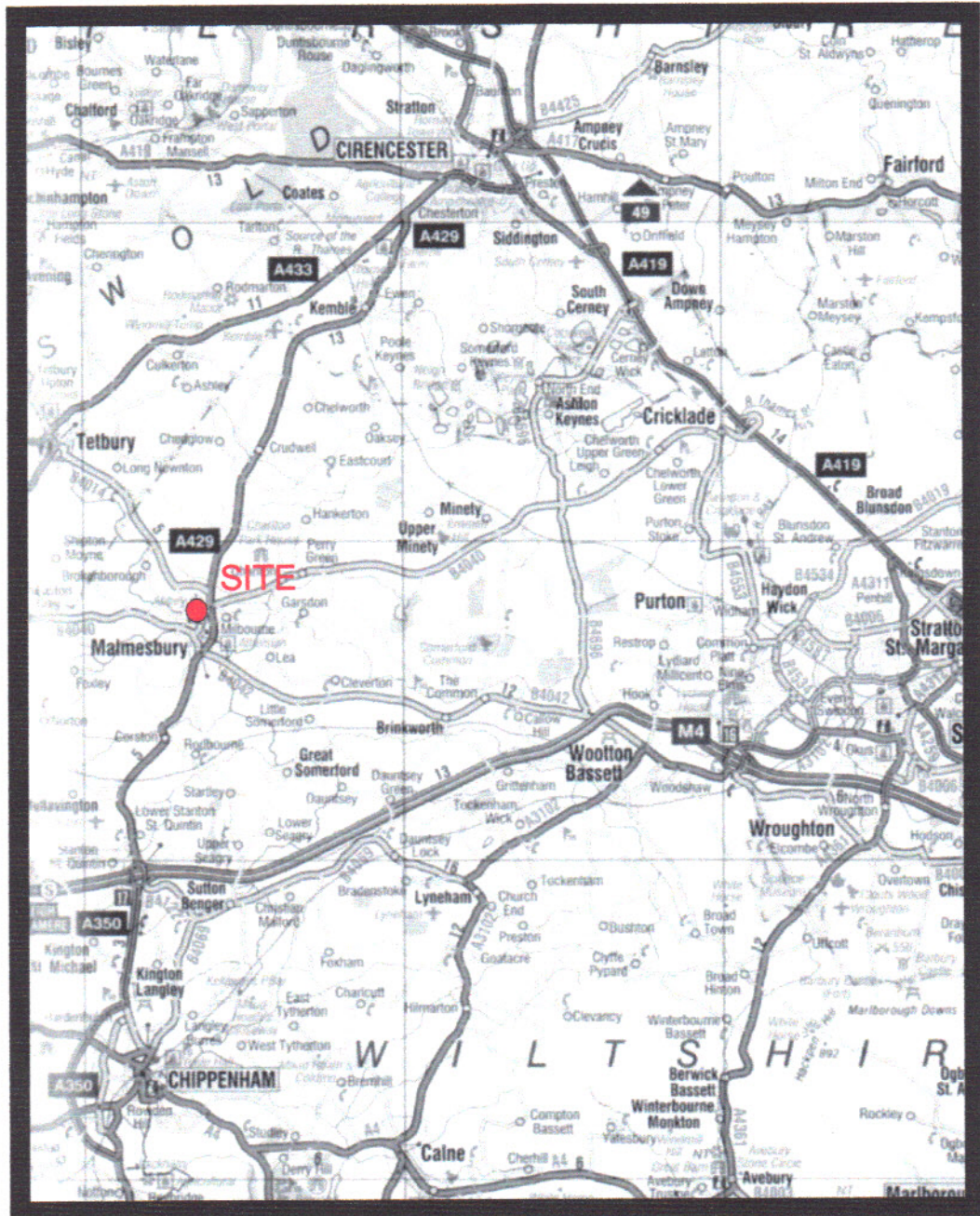
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- In addition the Wiltshire Record Office holds a number of Deeds, Sale Particulars and other documents for the town of Malmesbury which were of no direct relevance to the assessment.

8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Figure 1 : Site location



Figure 2 : Study Area

- 1 Benedictine Abbey
- 2 Roman Building
- 3 Line of Medieval town wall
- 4 11th century coin hoard
- 5 Market Cross
- 6 Almshouses
- 7 Iron Age/Romano British loomweights
- 8 St Pauls Church
- 9 Daniels Well
- 10 Site of Chapel of our Lady
- 11 St Helens Chapel (traditional site of)
- 12 St Johns Bridge
- 13 East Gate
- 14 Holloway Bridge
- 15 Saxon Burials

Figure 3 : NMR & SMR Information

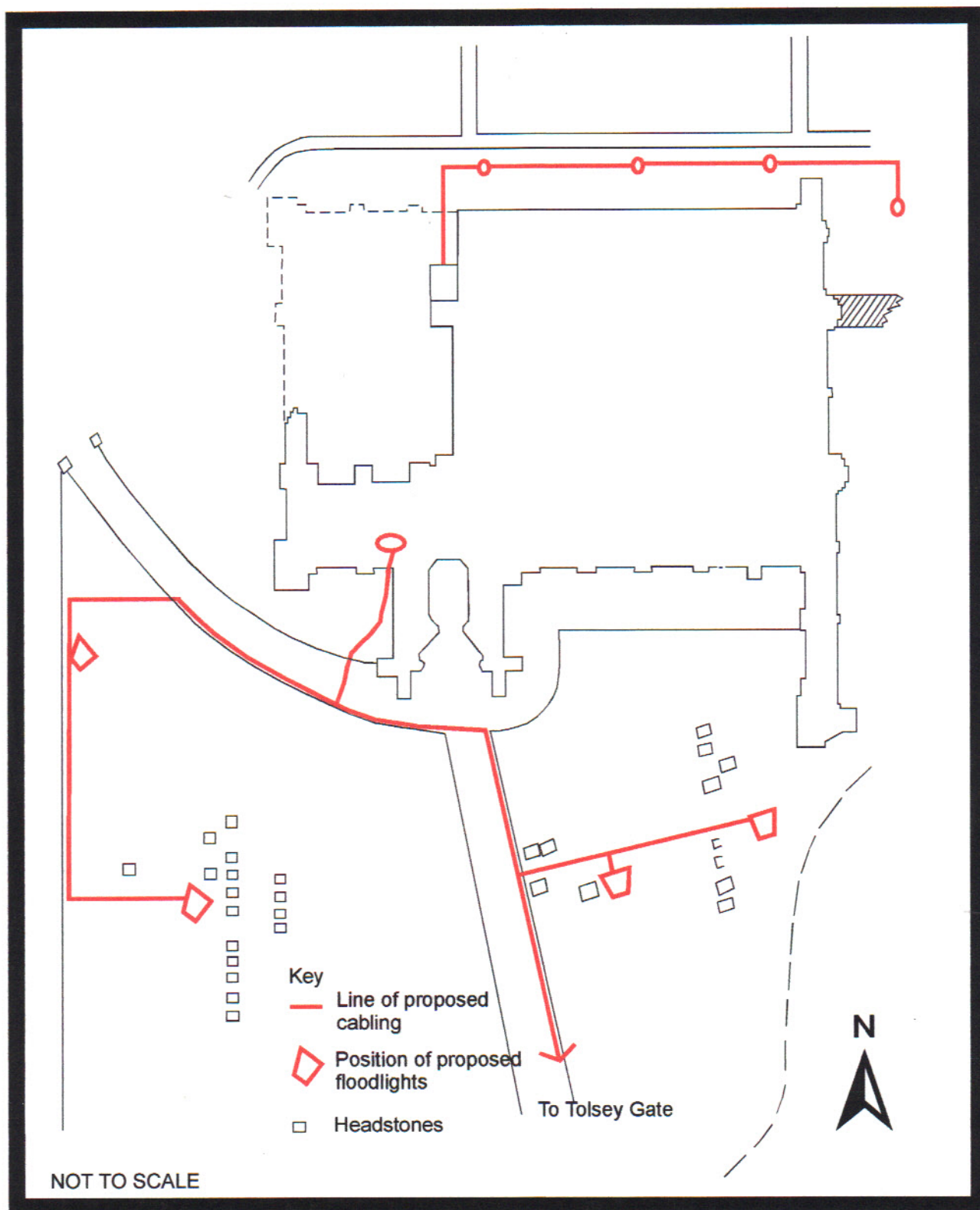


Figure 4 : Proposed floodlighting scheme

