

# **Tree planting, Churchyards of St Mary's and St Laurence's, Reading, Berkshire**

**An Archaeological recording action  
for Reading Borough Council**

by Danielle Milbank

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code RTR 07/168

**January 2008**

## Summary

**Site name:** Churchyards of St Mary's, Gun Street and St Laurence's, Forbury, Reading.

**Grid reference:** St Mary's: SU 7140 7330; St Laurence's SU 7170 7370

**Site activity:** Archaeological recording action

**Date and duration of project:** 11<sup>th</sup> December 2007

**Project manager:** Steve Ford

**Site supervisor:** Danielle Milbank

**Site code:** RTR 07/168

**Summary of results:** No archaeological deposits were found nor finds recovered. Disarticulated human remains was recorded

**Location and reference of archive:** The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Reading Museum in due course.

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# **Tree Planting, Churchyards of St Mary's and St Laurence's, Reading An Archaeological Recording Action**

by Danielle Milbank

**Report 07/168**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological recording action carried out in the churchyard of St Mary's (SU 7140 7330) and St Laurence's (SU 7170 7370) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Ms Kate Rodway on behalf of Reading Borough Council, Civic Centre, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 7TD.

A scheme of work involving the removal of diseased trees and the planting of replacement trees has been arranged for the churchyards of St Mary's and St Laurence's in the centre of Reading. Prior to tree planting taking place in the churchyards, the Borough Council were advised by Berkshire Archaeology to have all digging within the churchyards monitored or carried out by an archaeologist. The fieldwork was undertaken by Danielle Milbank and Daniel Bray and the site code is RTR07/168. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Reading Museum in due course.

## **Location, topography and geology**

The sites are both located in the centre of Reading (Fig. 1). St Mary's church and churchyard occupy a roughly rectangular parcel of land with Gun Street to the south, St Mary's Butts to the west, Chain Street to the east and Broad Street to the north (Fig. 2). The churchyard slopes from the north towards the River Kennet to the south, with the northern side of the site at approximately 43m above Ordnance Datum. St Laurence's Church and churchyard occupies a roughly semi-circular plot bounded by The Forbury and Valpy Street. The churchyard is relatively flat and lies at a height of c. 45m AOD.

The geology underlying the two site areas consists of Valley gravel (BGS 1946), which was not observed in any of the excavated areas as they were of insufficient depth.

## **Archaeological background**

The archaeological potential of the two sites stems from their locations within the core of Reading, within the churchyards of St Mary's and St Laurence's. The town of Reading, to the west of the confluence of the Thames

and the Kennet, is situated in the archaeologically rich Thames Valley, with evidence of occupation from the prehistoric periods onwards. Reading itself is thought to have Saxon origins, and the late Saxon town is believed to have been centred on the parish church at St Mary's Butts. However, the town was later centred on Friar Street and Broad Street following the foundation of the Abbey in 1121 (Astill 1978), and the town's market place was relocated from the Butts to a location outside the Abbey gates.

The church of St Mary's was recorded in Domesday, and though the present church comprises elements built in the 1550's (using materials taken from the Abbey) and substantial 19<sup>th</sup> century rebuilding, a doorway and south arcade are thought to date to the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The bend in Minster Street at its western end has been attributed to the churchyard being expanded to the south, though the date of this development is uncertain. The churchyard was closed to new burials in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as its overuse led to the gases from decomposition becoming overwhelming to residents.

A coffin containing a hoard of 9<sup>th</sup> century coins was found in the churchyard, though the location of this within the churchyard is not recorded.

A watching brief was carried out at St Mary's Church which examined certain areas where paths and services were to be routed, and two test pits were excavated. In summary, articulated human remains and a brick vault were partially exposed in a trench dug at the main church entrance. One of the two test pits contained a partially articulated skeleton which had been truncated by a service trench. The majority of the examined areas consisted of topsoil and loamy or silty grave earth, with frequent human and occasional animal bone fragments and medieval and post-medieval pottery sherds. Overall, the results suggested that the churchyard had been considerably landscaped, and the human bone was generally fragmentary and redeposited (Smith 1995).

The church of St Laurence was founded in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, and is described as a chapel, and was added to in the 1190's. The limit of its churchyard at that time is not known. The nave was enlarged in 1438, and in 1556 a small part of the Forbury was given over to the church to provide a graveyard for the parishioners of St Laurence's. In 1791, the churchyard was extended slightly, again using land formerly part of the Forbury (Slade 2001). In 1927, human bones were found under the floor of part of the Abbey's Hospitium (probably the dormitory building), several metres to the north of the graveyard area, and were reburied in St Laurence's churchyard without further investigation.

An excavation immediately to the north of St Laurence's at 1 Friar Street produced evidence of medieval occupation of the site, including pottery and building materials dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This site

was within the Abbey precinct, and may have been a courtyard area. No burials were encountered during excavation at 1 Friar Street (Pine 1995).

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the archaeological recording action was to preserve by record any archaeological deposits or features which may be affected by the proposed tree planting. Also, particular attention was to be paid to the possibility of encountering deposits or finds relating to the Saxon period. This was to involve the excavation of three pits in the churchyard of St Mary's and one pit in the churchyard of St Laurence's. The pits were to be hand-dug and topsoil was to be monitored for finds. Any human remains encountered were to be screened from public view. With the agreement of the Rector, any human remains recovered were to be reburied within the churchyard in an appropriate manner.

## **Results**

### Pit 1 (Fig. 2)

This was located in the southern corner of St Mary's churchyard, measured 0.75m long, 0.75m wide and was 0.58m deep overall. Topsoil 0.28m thick overlay grave earth/subsoil which was a dark grey brown silt. This contained occasional tree roots, fragments of china and glass, and one unidentifiable small bone fragment which was appropriately reburied as it is likely to have been human.

### Pit 2 (Fig. 2)

This was located in the southwestern corner of St Mary's churchyard and was 1.5m wide, 1.5m long and was excavated to a depth of 1.20m overall. A square slot c. 0.40m by 0.40m and c.0.20m deep was then excavated in the base to provide sufficient depth for the root ball of the tree and reburied remains. Topsoil 0.35m thick overlay a subsoil/grave earth layer comprising dark grey brown silt with very frequent tree roots and rounded and subrounded flint pebbles. The topsoil contained several fragments of modern (and some very recent) detritus such as glass and drinks cans. The grave earth/subsoil layer contained occasional glass and pottery fragments and an iron nail (not retained), and approximately 15 bone fragments, fairly evenly distributed within the soil. Of these, the majority were very small and three were identifiable as human; a femur head and two mandible fragments. These were reburied within a slot at the base.

### Pit 3 (Fig. 2)

This was excavated to the south east of the church of St Mary's, and was 1m wide, 1m long and 0.56m deep overall. Topsoil here was 0.20m thick, and overlay subsoil/grave earth which comprised dark brown (slightly clay, slightly sandy) silt, and contained occasional glass and china sherds, and approximately 10 fragments of bone. Of these, two were identified as possible human cranium fragments, and all 10 fragments were appropriately reburied.

### Pit 4 (Fig. 3)

This pit was excavated in the churchyard of St Laurence's, several metres to the north of the church. It measured 0.75m long and 0.75m wide, and was 0.50m deep. Topsoil 0.24m thick overlay dark grey brown subsoil/grave earth with occasional roots, subrounded and rounded flints, and *c.* 10 bone fragments, of which one was identified as human (a femur head). These were reburied appropriately in this location.

## **Conclusion**

The pits excavated for tree planting give some indication of the thickness of the topsoil across the churchyards, which is fairly consistent, between 0.20m and 0.28m thick. The topsoil produced a range of finds which confirm that some disturbance (and considerable littering) has taken place since the last burials were interred.

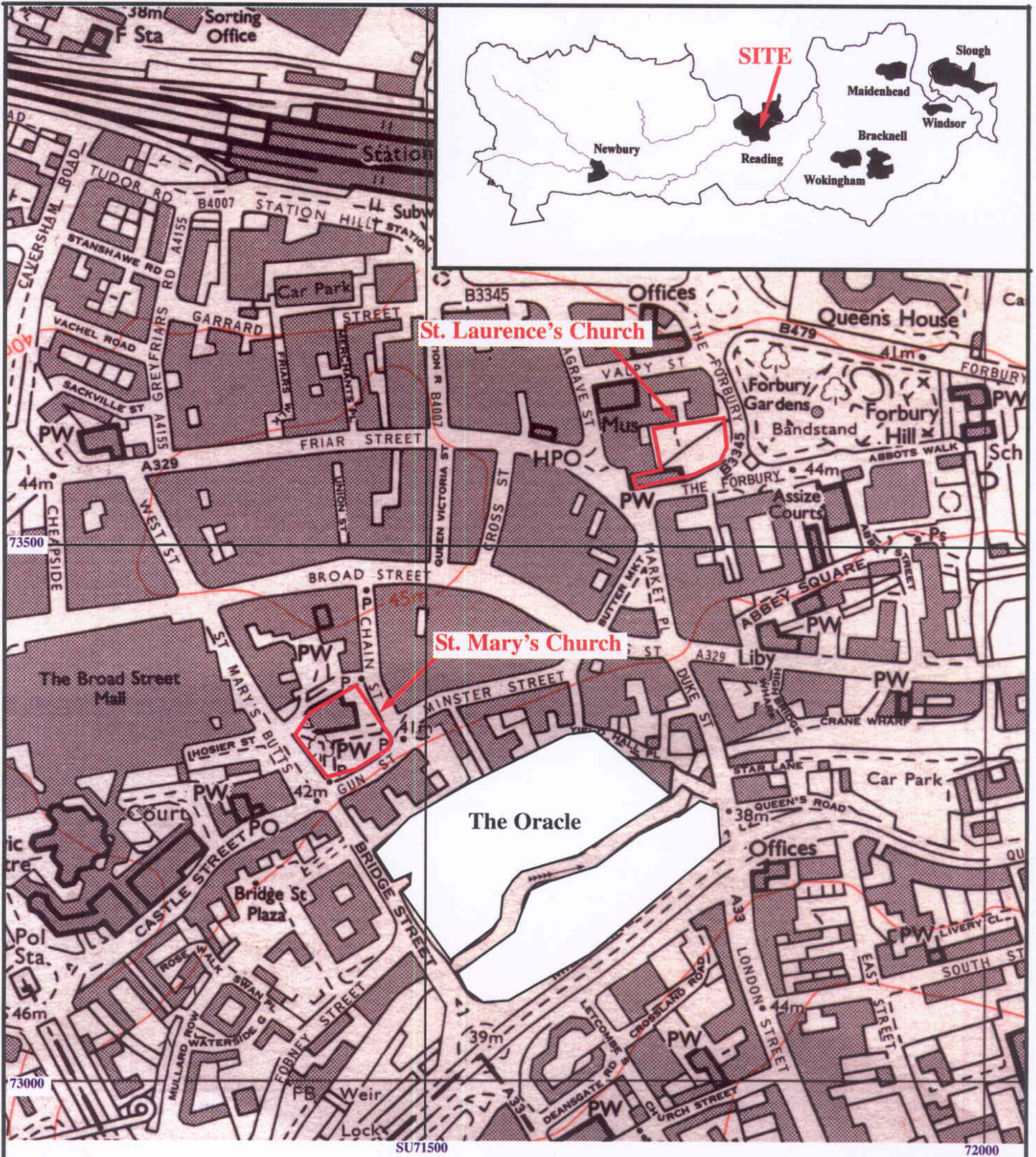
The subsoil/grave earth was a homogenous layer in St Mary's churchyard, and it contained frequent glass and ceramic fragments, though all appeared to be post-medieval in date and were scattered throughout the soil, suggesting disturbance. No grave cuts, coffins or coffin furniture were identified, and the bone fragments encountered were disarticulated, and in most cases of insufficient size to confirm human origin.

The single pit in St Laurence's churchyard provided a limited insight into the underlying deposits, but the topsoil and subsoil are consistent with that of St Mary's. Both represent a fairly typical stratigraphy for churchyards active from the medieval period onwards, with subsequent burials and significant landscaping in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulting in a homogenised grave earth.

No pottery or evidence relating to Saxon or Medieval activity or occupation was encountered, and natural geology was not observed.

## References

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**Reading Trees, St. Mary's Church, St. Mary's Butts, & St. Laurence's Church, The Forbury, Reading, Berkshire, 2007**  
**Archaeological recording action**

Figure 1. Location of sites within Reading and Berkshire.

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# Reading Trees, St. Mary's and St. Laurence's Churchyards, Reading, Berkshire, 2007

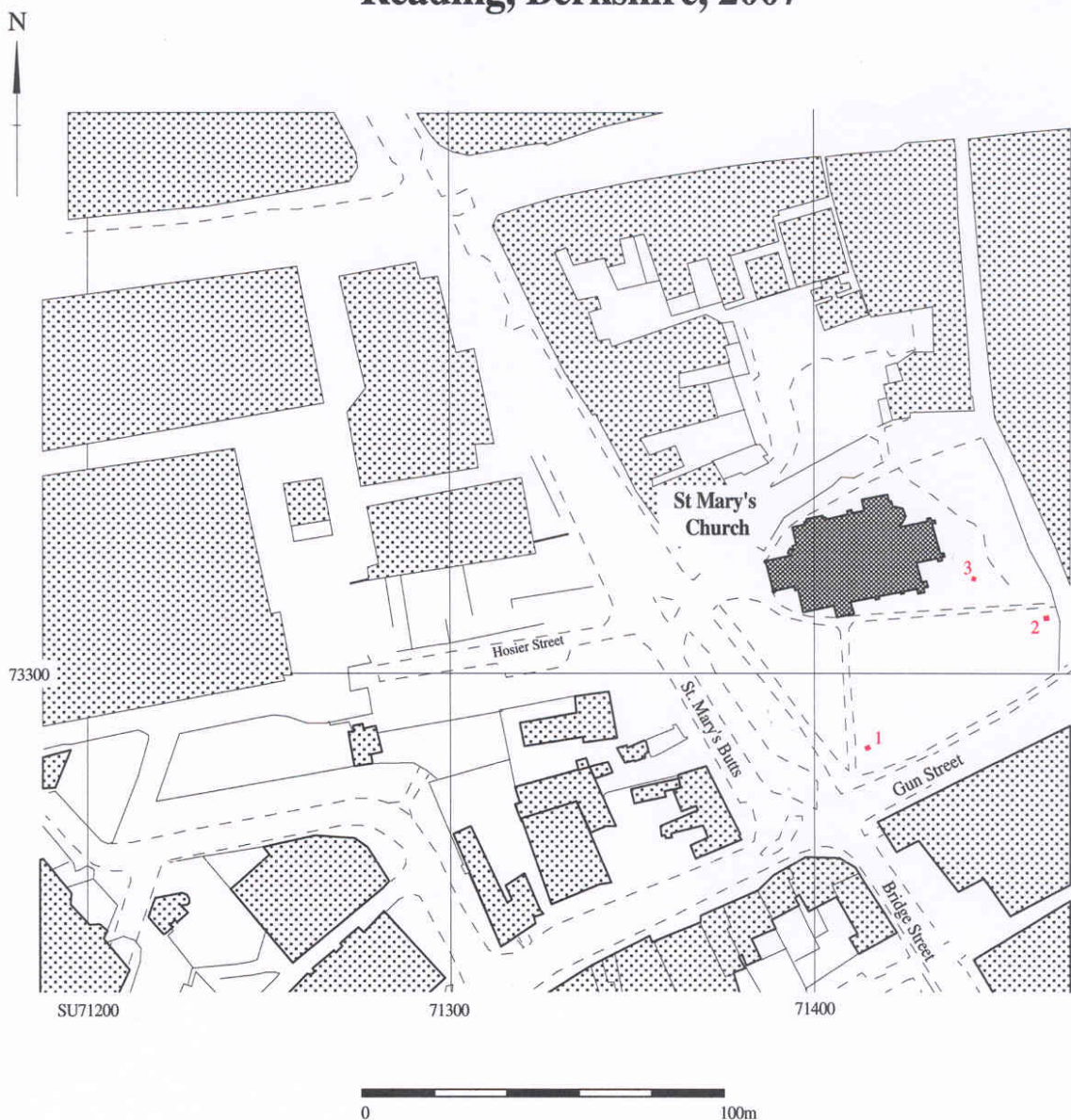


Figure 2. Location of hand dug pits at St Mary's.

# Reading Trees, St. Mary's and St. Laurence's Churchyards, Reading, Berkshire, 2007

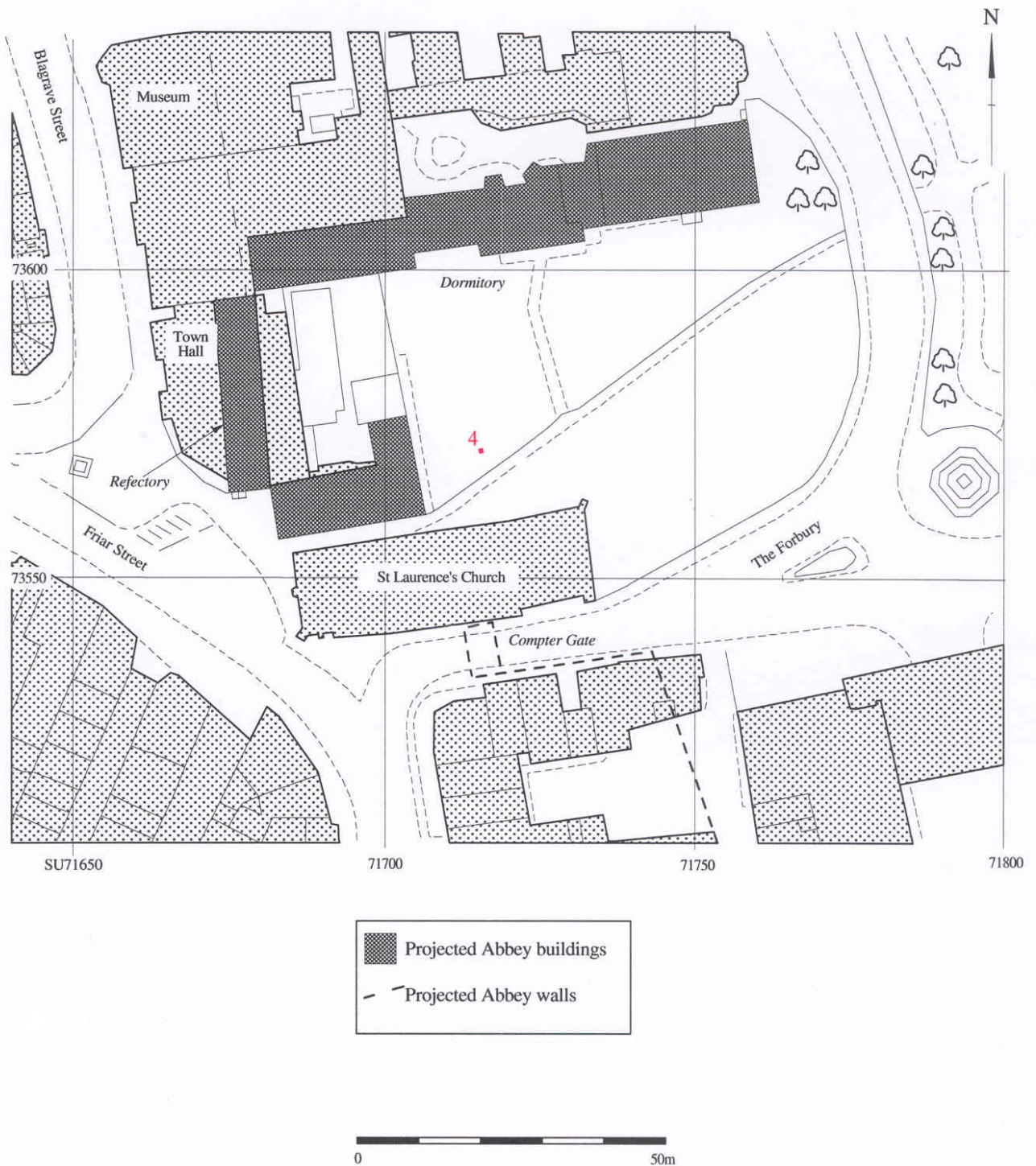


Figure 3. Location of hand dug Pit 4 at St Laurences.

# Reading Trees, Churchyards of St. Mary's and St. Laurence's, Reading, Berkshire, 2007



Figure 4. Representative sections of the four pits