

# **New Power Cable Trench, The Forbury and Abbey Street, Reading, Berkshire**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief**

**For SSE Power Distribution**

by James McNicoll-Norbury

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code FCT 09/05

**March 2009**

## Summary

**Site name:** New Power Cable Trench, Abbey Street, Reading, Berkshire

**Grid reference:** SU 7178 7354 to SU 7189 7351

**Site activity:** Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 15th January – 16th February 2009

**Project manager:** Steve Ford

**Site supervisor:** Danielle Milbank and James McNicoll-Norbury

**Site code:** FCT 09/05

**Summary of results:** The cable trench was of relatively shallow depth and was wholly located within modern made ground and foundation levels for the road surfaces. On occasion the trench coincided with trenches containing other services previously laid. No archaeological deposits were identified nor artefacts recovered.

**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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Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford✓ 10.03.09 Steve Preston✓ 26.02.09
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# **New Power Cable Trench, The Forbury and Abbey Street, Reading, Berkshire An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by James McNicoll-Norbury

**Report 09/05**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at Abbey Street, Reading, Berkshire (from SU 7178 7354 to SU 7189 7351) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr David Tull, SSE Power Distribution, Arrowhead Road, Theale, Reading, Berkshire, RG7 4AH.

A new power cable trench has been required to link a new office building on Abbey Street with an existing supply on The Forbury, Reading, Berkshire. The route of the cable trench lies within the current roads which are located within the former curtilage of Reading Abbey. The Abbey ruins are a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 19019).

Due to the archaeologically sensitive location of the proposed cable trench, with the possibility of damage or destruction of archaeological deposits, a watching brief was carried out during groundworks. This was in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), the Borough policies on archaeology and Section 9 of the *Electricity Act* 1989. In addition Scheduled Monument Consent was gained from the Department of Culture Media and Sport on the advice of English Heritage regarding the parts of the trench that certainly or possibly encroach on the boundaries of the Scheduled Monument. The fieldwork was undertaken by James McNicoll-Norbury, Danielle Milbank, James Earley and Tim Dawson between January 15th and February 16th 2009 and the site code is FCT09/05.

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 site is located on Abbey Street and The Forbury in the centre of Reading adjacent to Forbury Gardens (to the north) and running through the Abbey Gateway that links the two roads (Fig. 2). The route of the cable trench lies within the Scheduled Monument zone where it passes through the Abbey Gateway. In the Forbury, parts of the cable route lie adjacent to the scheduled boundary and partly encroach upon it. The underlying geology is described as Valley Gravels (BGS 1946) but this was not observed within the excavated trench. The site lies at a height of *c.* 44m above Ordnance Datum.

## **Archaeological background**

The site lies within the historic core of Reading in an area which contains elements of the medieval abbey and a castle mound ('Forbury Hill') (Astill 1978). The abbey commissioned by Henry I was founded in 1121 and consecrated in 1164, housed over 100 monks and was a substantial and wealthy foundation before its dissolution in 1539. Parts of the complex were subsequently used as a royal palace but after 1549, the remains were systematically robbed until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Much of the complex now survives only as below ground remains, a considerable proportion of which lies within the Forbury. However, there is evidence to suggest that these remains have been subject to many disturbances, including the erection of civil war defences. The site of the proposed cable route lies along the access road from the western (Compter) gate which was sited adjacent to St Laurence's church and passes through the inner gateway (now restored as the Abbey Gateway) (Slade 2001). Various archaeological investigations have taken place at the abbey showing good survival of archaeological remains of Medieval and later date (e.g. Fasham and Stewart 1990; Hawkes 1991; Preston 2006). Some finds of prehistoric and Saxon date are also recorded, however previous work in Forbury Gardens itself no archaeological evidence was found (Hammond 2003).

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and/or record any archaeological deposits affected by the groundworks. This involved examination of all areas of intrusive groundworks, in particular the digging of the new cable trench.

The cable trench was dug using a mini-digger with a toothless bucket down to a maximum depth of *c.* 0.70m along Abbey Street and along The Forbury. Three test pits were dig at intervals along The Forbury prior to the digging of the trench there (Fig. 3, A–C). The trench location was recorded 'as built'.

## **Results**

The excavated trench was *c.* 140m long and varied from 0.45–0.79m wide and *c.* 0.70m in depth. The line of the trench sometimes wobbled to avoid other local services. The stratigraphy observed during the excavation comprised 0.06m Tarmac above 0.12m of pale yellow sand and gravel backfill that overlay a layer of made ground that included in places modern service plastic pipes close to the base and modern rubble (Fig. 4). The

three test pits (A, B and C) were each 1.8m long by 0.50m wide and contained the same stratigraphy as the cable trench.

Where the trench passed through the narrow arch of the Abbey Gateway, it was noted that the route followed was that already followed by several previous cable trenches. A shallow buried mortared brick wall or foundation was partially exposed close to the war memorial at the western end of the trench in the Forbury. The wall was present 0.44m deep and the cable was laid over the top of the wall.

## **Finds**

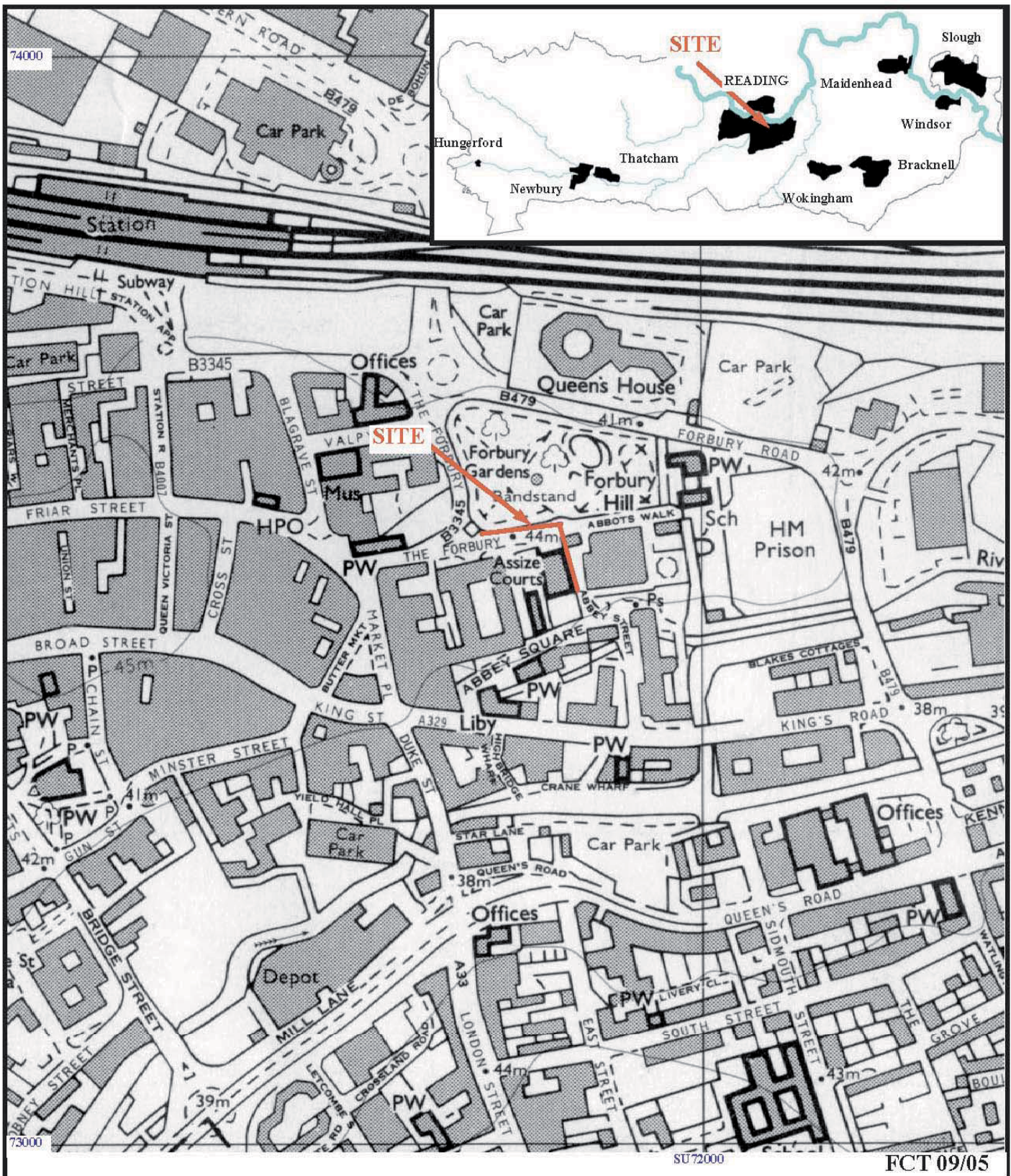
No finds were recovered from the excavated trench.

## **Conclusion**

The new cable trench was frequently dug along the same line as previous service trenches and to a similar depth, therefore not disturbing any archaeological deposits. Despite the trench lying within the curtilage of Reading abbey, no deposits nor artefacts of archaeological interest were observed either relating to the medieval abbey or to any other period.

## **References**

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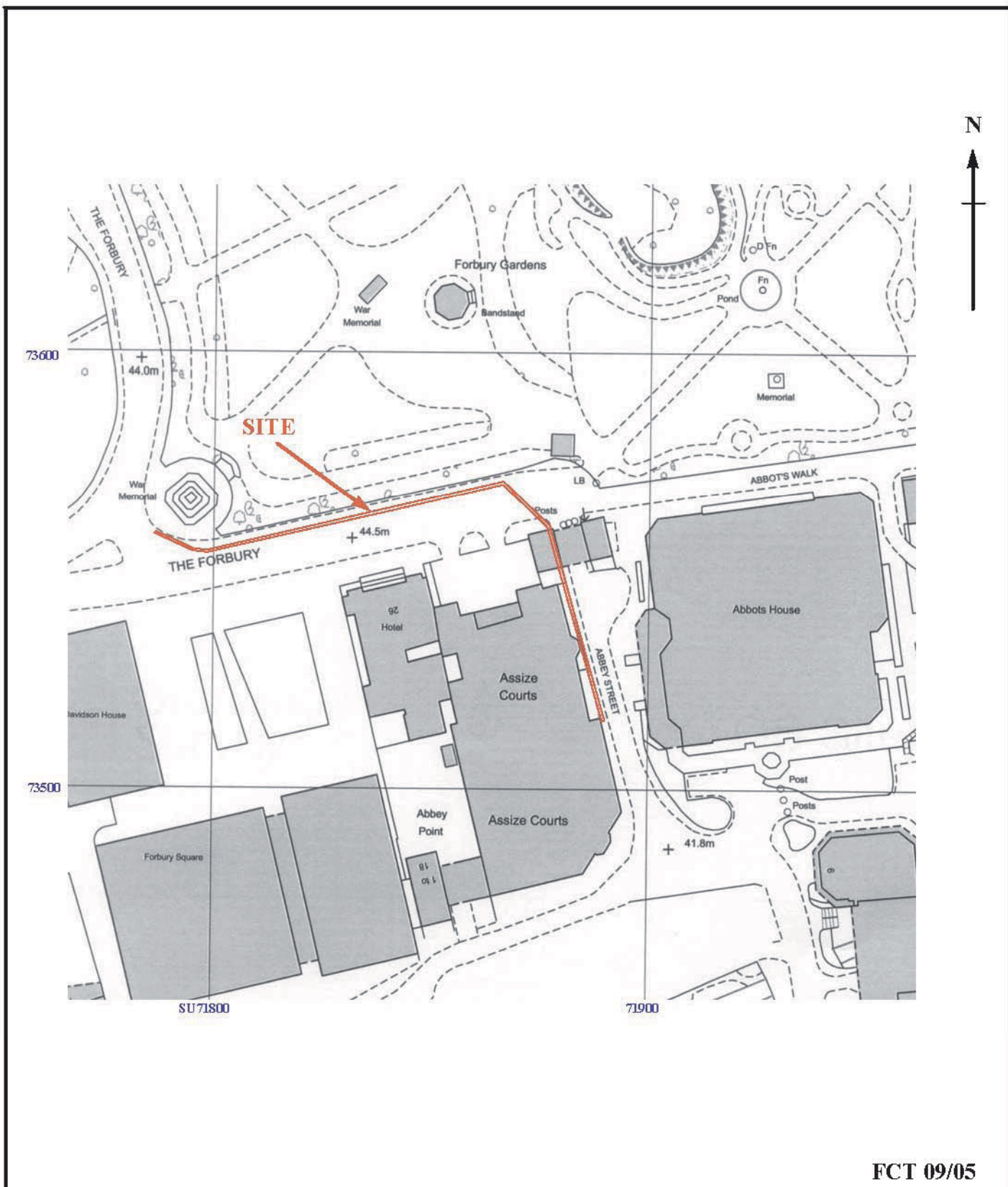
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Figure 1. Location of site within Reading and Berkshire.

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Figure 2. Location of site off Abbey Street.

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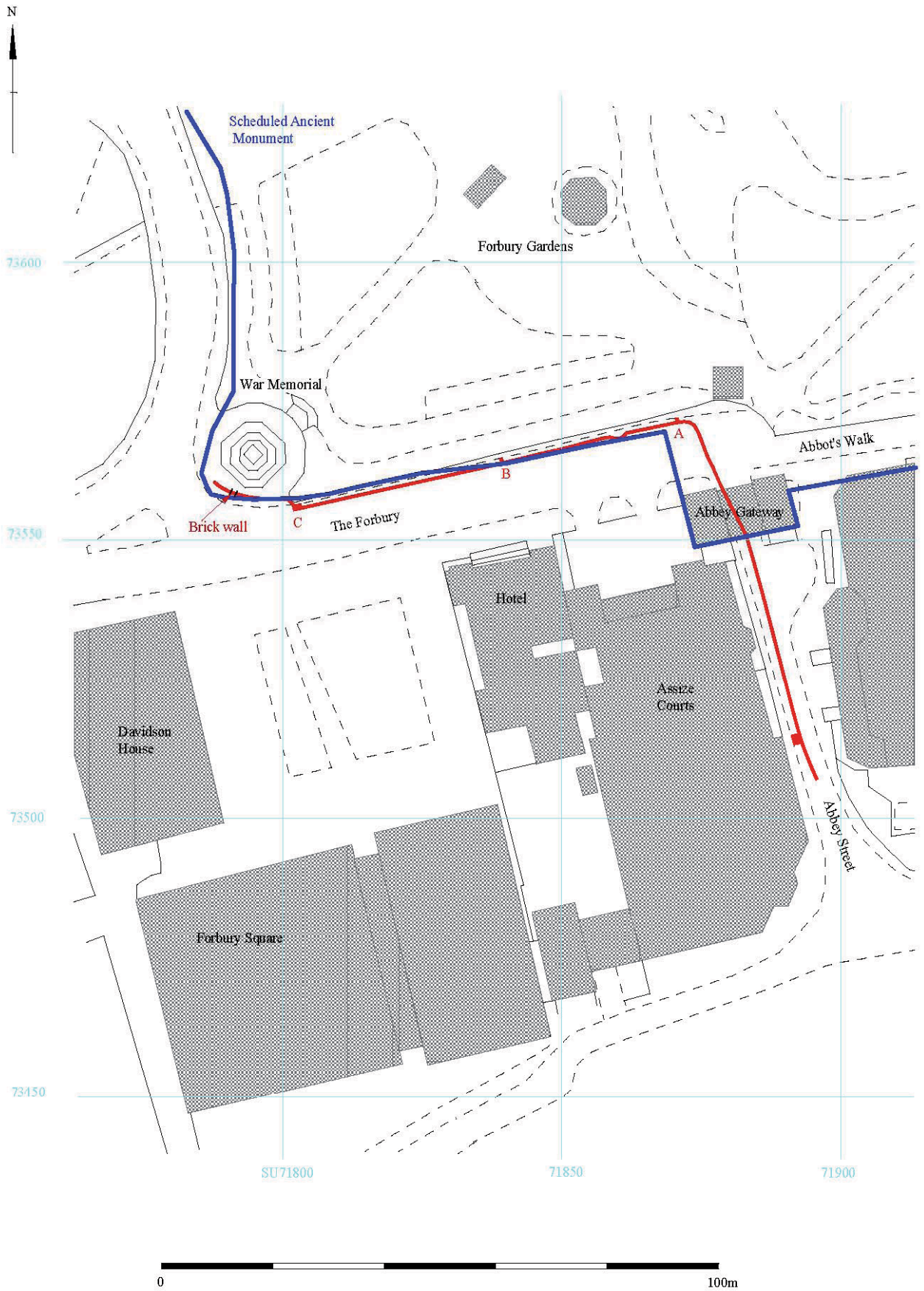


Figure 3. Location of cable trench observed.



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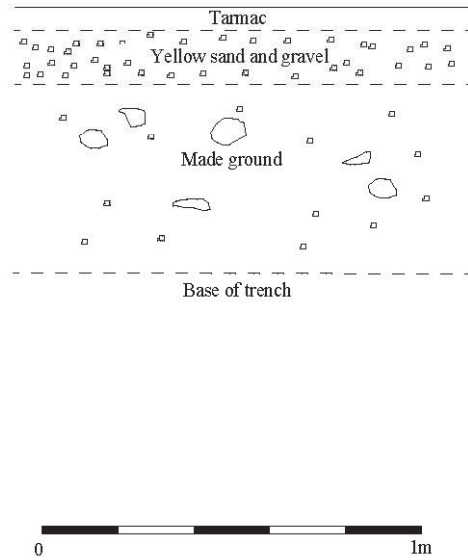


Figure 4. Representative Section