

**ABBAY BARN  
Syon Park  
Brentford TW8**

A report on the watching brief  
Site code: ABV09

*Author Robert Cowie*

## **Summary (non-technical)**

*This report was written in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out next to a building known as the Abbey Barn, at Syon Park, Brentford.*

*The watching brief was prompted by the chance observation of a trench excavated by contractors against the west side of the Abbey Barn. The barn is traditionally associated with Syon Abbey (Bridgettine 1431–1539), although its superstructure has been almost entirely rebuilt with the possible exception of a four-centred doorway in weathered Reigate stone near the south-east corner of the building. The watching brief was rapidly undertaken on the 26th June 2009 by archaeologists who happened to be working on a nearby archaeological training excavation.*

*The earliest deposit revealed by the trench consisted of firm brown silty clay, which survived to a maximum height of 4.68m OD and was excavated to depth of 0.4m. The deposit was interpreted as alluvium that had accumulated near the south-eastern edge of a former branch of the Thames. Previous archaeological work suggests that the palaeochannel was over 140m wide and had largely silted up by the Roman period.*

*The trench also revealed the foundation of the west wall of the Abbey Barn, which was stepped and made of rough hewn stone bonded with yellowish buff sandy mortar, the top of which lay c 0.9m below ground level (4.7m OD). The materials used in the foundation were of a type that would accord with the view that the barn was built at the time of the abbey, although this does not necessarily rule out a later date for the building's construction.*

*A wall of soft orange-red brick bonded with buff sandy mortar extended up c 0.8m (12 courses) from the stone foundation to modern ground level. The bricks were mainly laid as headers.*

*Later strata comprised dump layers of sandy gravel and brick rubble, which were cut by a brick wall provisionally dated to the early 19th century. The wall lay about 1.9m to the west of the Abbey Barn, but on a parallel alignment, and was almost certainly a perimeter wall shown on an estate plan of 1830.*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Site background

The watching brief took place next to the so-called Abbey Barn, Syon Park, Brentford, hereafter called 'the site'. The site is located on the west side of the building, in an area next to the car park for Syon House and the Garden Centre (see Fig 1). The Abbey Barn, which runs roughly north–south, lies close to the Ninth Earl's Gateway. The centre of the site is at Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference 517195 176845. Modern ground level immediately adjacent to the site was between 5.11 and 5.4m OD. The site code is ABV04.

Post-excavation assessments of nearby sites were previously prepared by MOLA, which cover the whole area of Syon Park (Cowie 2009; 2010). In addition, a number of standing buildings, including the Abbey Barn were assessed in a standing building report by MOLAS (Smith 2002). These documents should be referred to for information on the natural geology, archaeological and historical background of the site, and the initial assessment of its archaeological potential.

## 1.2 Origin and scope of the report

This report was produced by the author as an independent initiative. The report has been prepared within the terms of the relevant Standard specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (IFA 2001).

The purpose of the watching brief was to determine whether archaeological remains or features were present on the site and, if so, to record the nature and extent of such remains.

The purpose of the present report is to analyse the results of the watching brief against the original research aims, and to suggest what further work, including analysis or publication (if any), should now take place.

## 1.3 Aims and objectives

The watching brief was undertaken with following research aims in mind:

- What are the levels of natural deposits and how do these compare to adjacent sites?
- What is the nature and significance of the surviving archaeological remains?
- Is there archaeological evidence to indicate when the Abbey Barn was first built?

All research is undertaken within the priorities established in the Museum of London's *A research framework for London Archaeology, 2002*.

## 2 Topographical and historical background

The topographical and archaeological background is summarised in reports on earlier archaeological investigations in Syon Park (Cowie 2009; 2010), while the history of the site is covered in varying detail in numerous publications (e.g. Aungier 1840). Nevertheless, a review of aspects of the history of the site specific to the evaluation is provided here to place the results of the archaeological evaluation in context.

The site lies on the south-east edge of a former channel of the River Thames, which is thought to have been over 140m wide and to have largely silted up by the Roman period. The opposite (north-west) bank of the palaeochannel lies beneath the new hotel, but was recorded during an archaeological evaluation in 2004 at about 4.9m OD (SYV04; Cowie 2004). The deepest part of the channel probably lay at about Ordnance Datum.

The site also lies within an area occupied by a Bridgettine abbey from 1431 until 1539. The abbey was originally founded by Henry V in 1415 at a site in Twickenham, but the location proved unsuitable and the community soon moved to the site now occupied by Syon House (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, 202; VCH 1962, 96). Building work continued sporadically at the abbey almost up to the time of its suppression in 1539 (see Dunning 1981).

By the end of the 16th century almost no visible trace was left of the abbey. The few possible remnants of the abbey that may still be seen include a doorway of badly weathered Reigate stone with a four-centred arch near the south end of the east wall of the so-called 'Abbey Barn' (in the garden centre) (Smith 2002, 28).

The 'Abbey Barn', as the name implies, has traditionally been associated with the abbey, although the original date of construction is not known. Its superstructure has been much altered over the centuries. Smith (*ibid*) observed that 'the brickwork, in red bricks, on the west side appears to be entirely rebuilt. Other walls, in stone, certainly are. The only possibly primary feature appears to be a four-centred doorway ...' (above). The building was almost certainly in existence by the early 17th century for a building is shown on its site on Moses Glover's map of 1635. It is first clearly shown on Christopher Fairchild's plan of 1747, which shows the Syon House and its gardens as they were before the 'Hard Frost' of 1739. Fairchild depicts the Abbey Barn, probably somewhat schematically, as a rectangle divided into four rooms or compartments by internal walls or partitions aligned east-west. A similar arrangement is indicated on a much more detailed estate plan of 1830 (revised 1864) that shows estate buildings and underlying drains and water pipes. On this plan the Abbey Barn is shown in much greater detail. Again it is generally rectangular in plan, although the north and west walls are connected by an entranceway aligned at c 45° to the two walls. This was probably designed to give easy access for wagons, especially as a perimeter wall (also on the plan) to the west of the barn would have left little room for manoeuvre. At this time the barn was divided into five rooms by walls that extended across the full width of the building. The largest rooms were at the south and north ends, and were used as a 'meat shed' and a 'waggon house' respectively. The middle three rooms were narrower and were used as a 'potato house', a 'wood house' and a 'charcoal house' respectively.

### 3 The watching brief

#### 3.1 Methodology

The watching brief was prompted by the chance observation by archaeologists (Laurie Elvin and Sigrid Padel) passing the site, who noticed that a trench dug by contractors had exposed structural remains. The trench had been excavated for the footings of a new wall at right angles to the Abbey Barn.

The watching brief was hurriedly undertaken during a one-hour lunch break by Laurie Elvin, Sigrid Padel and the author, who were working on an archaeological training excavation behind Syon House. Although by necessity the recording was rapidly carried out, it was done in accordance with the *Archaeological Site Manual* (MOL 1994).

A scale plan of the trench and a simplified scale section of the strata exposed in its north side were drawn. All features of archaeological interest were described on the section drawing. The descriptions were later transcribed onto pro forma sheets.

Heights on the field drawings were related to Ordnance Datum (OD). A temporary benchmark (value 5.68m OD) was established on top of a rusty hinge at the north end of the Abbey Barn by a traverse from an Ordnance Survey benchmark (value 6.54m OD) on the corner of the Slaughterhouse.

The location of the trench was recorded by triangulation measurements from the west wall of the Abbey Barn. This information was later used to plot the location of the trench and the principal archaeological features onto the Ordnance Survey grid.

The site records can be found under the site code ABV04 in the MOL archive and are summarised in (Table 1).

*Table 1 Contents of the site archive for the watching brief in March 2010*

Type	Quantity	Comments
Context register	1	1 A4 sheets
Section register	1	1 A4 sheet
Context sheets	7	Numbered 1–7
Site / trench plan	1	1 plan sheet
Section	1	1 plan sheet
Survey data	2	2 A4 sheets
Site summary	1	P:\ HOUN\1076\field\ABV09\sum01.doc
Interim report	1	P:\ HOUN\1076\field\ABV09\wb.doc

#### 3.2 Results of the watching brief

A single trench was seen and recorded. There follows a brief description of the archaeological deposits as recorded. For the trench location see Fig 2.

Trench location	On the west side of the Abbey Barn, 5.15m south of the large angled gateway at the north end of the building
Trench dimensions	4m long, 0.6–1.15m wide, up to 1.12m deep (base of trench at 4.2–4.3m OD)
Modern ground level	5.19–5.4m OD
Base of modern fill/slab	5.11–5.15m OD
Depth of archaeological strata seen	0.84m thick
Level of base of archaeological strata	4.3–4.68m OD
Natural? observed	4.64–4.68m OD

The earliest deposit comprised firm brown silty clay [1], which was provisionally interpreted as natural alluvium. The clay was slightly darker at the east end of the trench, where it also contained occasional small fragments of red CBM. This darker clay partly overlay a stone wall foundation of the Abbey Barn [2] and was possibly the fill of a construction trench back-filled with natural. However, the darker clay extended c 0.80m out from the footing, which would have made the feature exceptionally wide for a construction trench. The interface between the 'natural' clay and the darker clay was poorly defined.

The earliest archaeological feature revealed by the trench was the foundation of the west wall of the Abbey Barn [2]. It was made of fragments of rough hewn stone up to 0.20m across bonded with yellowish buff sandy mortar that was soft and friable. The stone was mainly Kentish ragstone, but Reigate stone had also been used. The foundation was exposed to a depth of 0.41m, but its base was not reached. The outer face of the upper part of the foundation was roughly flush with that of the overlying brick wall, but near the bottom of the trench the footing stepped out about 0.30m.

A wall [3] made of soft orange-red brick (breadth = 110mm, thickness 55mm) bonded with buff sandy mortar extended up c 0.80m (12 courses) from the stone foundation to modern ground level. The bricks were mainly laid as headers. The brick wall may have been built at the same time as the stone foundation; certainly some brick walls of abbey buildings recorded during excavations to the east of Syon House had stone foundations (Cowie 2010).

Layers of sandy gravel and brick rubble [4–6] up to 0.44m thick had been dumped against the brick wall to level up the ground. These were cut by a wall which lay about 1.9m to the west of the Abbey Barn, but on a parallel alignment. The wall was probably of early 19th-century date, and was made of dark red and yellow bricks (breadth = 100–102mm, thickness = 65mm, L = 210–215mm) with shallow frogs, bonded with white mortar. It was 0.59m wide and survived to a height of 0.90m (11 courses). This feature was almost certainly the perimeter wall shown on the estate plan of 1830 (see Section 2).



## 4 Potential of archaeology

### 4.1 Original research aims

***What are the levels of natural deposits and how do these compare to adjacent sites?***

The earliest deposit on the Abbey Barn site comprised firm brown silty clay [1] at 4.68m OD. This was low enough to be alluvium within the palaeochannel (see Section 2). The clay had been excavated to a depth of about c 4.2m OD, but no trace of the underlying terrace sand gravel was seen. However, the sand and gravel clearly rises to the south-east of the site, as terrace deposits have been recorded at heights of between 4.36m and 4.67m OD to the east of Syon House, on a putative eyot created by the channel (Cowie 2010).

***What is the nature and significance of the surviving archaeological remains?***

In addition to the data on the natural topography discussed above the most significant archaeological remains were the stone and brick walls [2 and 3] of the Abbey Barn and the later perimeter wall [7] (early 19th-century?). The discovery of apparently very early elements of the Abbey Barn is particularly significant when considering the origins of the building (see below).

***Is there archaeological evidence to indicate when the Abbey Barn was first built?***

The results of the watching brief showed that the west wall of the Abbey Barn had a stepped foundation of rough hewn stone bonded with yellow/buff sandy mortar, the top of which lay c 0.9m below ground level. It is not possible to date the stone footing accurately, but the materials used are similar to those used for abbey buildings recorded nearby. This supports the view that the barn was built at the time of the abbey.

### 4.2 Significance of the data

The archaeological findings of the watching brief make a modest contribution to current knowledge of the local topography and of the late medieval/early post-medieval development of the site. They provide further data about a former channel of the Thames, a feature of regional significance, and provide evidence supporting (but not proving) the tradition that the Abbey Barn originally formed part of the Bridgettine abbey at Syon. The abbey in its entirety is of national importance as the only example of a medieval Bridgettine house in the United Kingdom.

## 5 Publication and archiving

Information on the results of the excavation will be made publicly available, to permit inclusion of the site data in any future academic researches into the development of London.

The site archive containing original records will be stored with the Museum of London within 12 months of the end of the excavation.

In view of the limited potential of the material (Sections 4) and the relatively limited significance of the data (Section 4.2) it is suggested that a short note on the results of the watching brief should appear in the annual round up of *London Archaeologist*. In addition, it is recommended that the results are included in any publication relating to the late medieval/early post-medieval archaeology of the Bridgettine abbey and Syon House.

## 6 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mark White, the site manager (Bowen), for allowing access to the site and for his assistance and to Gideon Simons (MOLA) who prepared a digital version of the site plan.

The fieldwork was carried out by Laurie Elvin, Sigrid Padel and the author.

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## 8 NMR OASIS archaeological report form

### 8.1 OASIS ID: molas1-76466

#### Project details

Project name	Abbey Barn, Syon Park, Brentford, TW8
Short description of the project	A trench excavated by contractors ran up to the west side of a building known as the 'Abbey Barn', which is traditionally associated with Syon Abbey (Bridgettine 1431-1539) although its superstructure has been almost entirely rebuilt in red brick, with the possible exception of a four-centred doorway in weathered Reigate stone near the south-east corner of the building. The trench showed that the west wall of the building had a stepped foundation of rough hewn Kentish ragstone and Reigate stone bonded with yellow/buff sandy mortar, the top of which lay c 0.9m below ground level, which accords with the view that it was originally an abbey building.
Project dates	Start: 26-06-2009 End: 26-06-2009
Previous/future work	No / No
Any associated project reference codes	ABV09 - Sitecode
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Area of Archaeological Importance (AAI)
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 3 - Retailing
Monument type	BARN Medieval
Monument type	BARN Post Medieval
Significant Finds	NONE None
Investigation type	'Watching Brief'

Prompt Voluntary/self-interest

Prompt Research

**Project location**

Country England

Site location GREATER LONDON HOUNSLOW BRENTFORD Abbey Barn, Syon Park, Brentford

Postcode TW8

Study area 4.00 Square metres

Site coordinates TQ 17195 76845 51.4779123140 -0.312219545717 51 28 40 N  
000 18 43 W Point

Height OD / Depth Min: 4.64m Max: 4.68m

**Project creators**

Name of Organisation R. Cowie, L.Elvin, S. Padel

Project brief originator R. Cowie, L. Elvin, S. Padel

Project design originator None

Project director/manager None

Project supervisor Robert Cowie

Type of sponsor/funding body None

Name of sponsor/funding body None

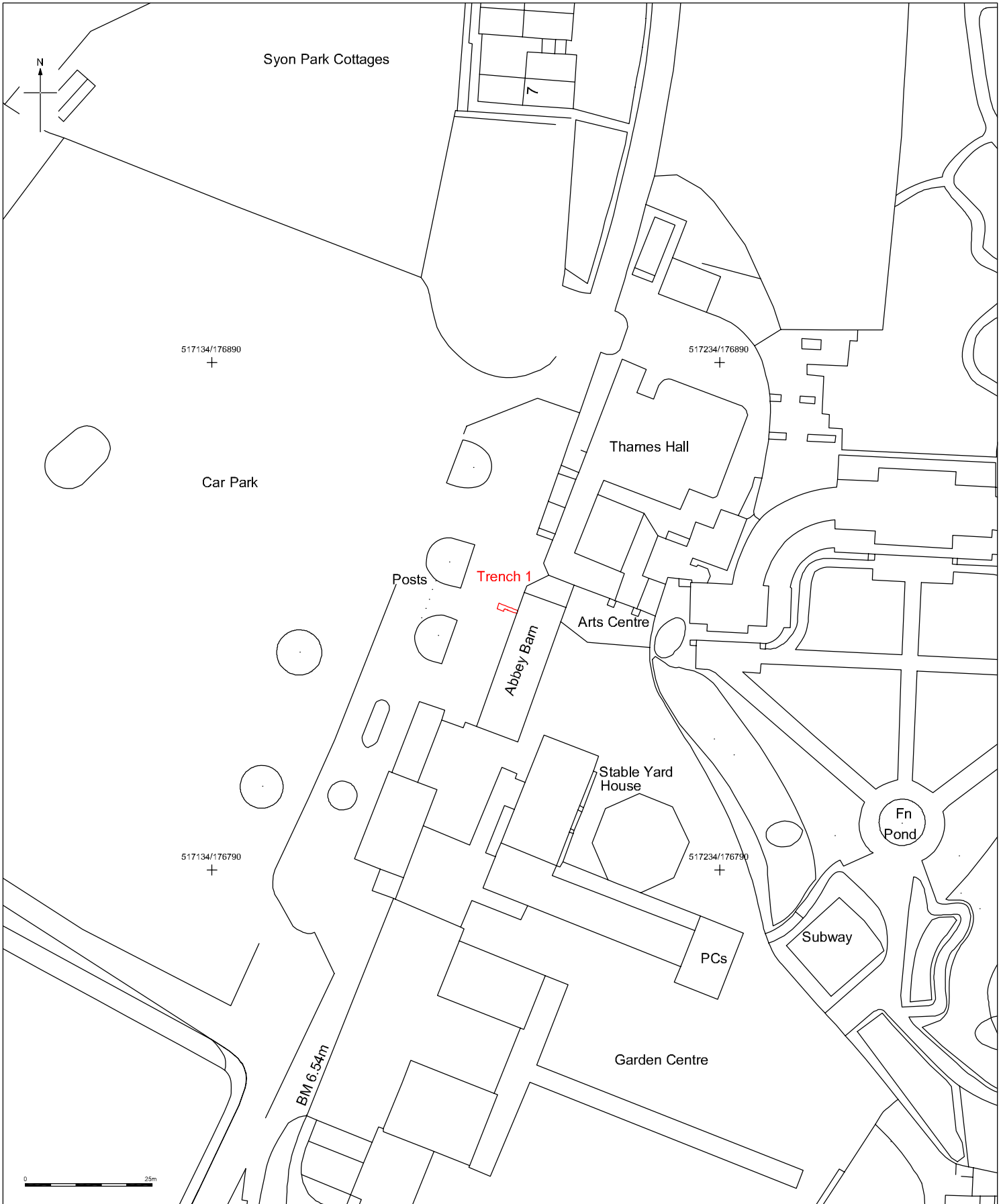
**Project archives**

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive recipient	LAARC
Digital Archive ID	ABV09
Paper Archive recipient	LAARC
Paper Archive ID	ABV09

**Project bibliography 1**

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Abbey barn, Syon Park, Brentford, TW8, London Borough of Hounslow: an archaeological watching brief
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Cowie, R.
Date	2010
Issuer or publisher	Cowie, R.
Place of issue or publication	London
Description	Unpublished AA4 report

Entered by	Robert Cowie (bcowie@museumoflondon.org.uk)
Entered on	29 April 2010



SITE NAME:  
**ABBEY BARN**  
 ADDRESS:  
**SYON PARK  
 BRENTFORD, HOUNSLOW  
 MIDDLESEX TW8**  
 GRID REFERENCE:  
**517195 176545**  
 SITE CODE:  
**ABV09**  
 CLIENT:  
**ROBERT COWIE**

DRAWING TITLE:  
**Trench location plan**  
 DRAWING REFERENCE:  
 DRAWING SHEET/OF:  
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**Fig2.dwg**  
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 AUTOCAD VERSION:  
**2009**

SURVEYED BY:  
**n/a**  
 SURVEY DATE:  
**\*\*\*/\*\*/\*\***  
 DRAWN-UP BY:  
**GJS**  
 DRAWING LAST MODIFIED:  
**29/04/10**  
 DRAWING STATUS:  
**FINAL**  
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**n/a**  
 BASE SURVEY DATE:  
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Trench location plan for ABV09

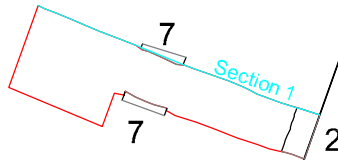


Posts

517192/176844



Trench 1



517192/176839



Abbey Barn

0 2.5M

SITE NAME:  
ABBEY BARN  
ADDRESS:  
SYON PARK  
BRENTFORD, HOUNSLOW  
MIDDLESEX TW8  
GRID REFERENCE:  
517195 176845  
SITE CODE:  
ABV09

CLIENT:  
ROBERT COWIE

DRAWING TITLE:  
Plan of Trench 1 in relation to the Abbey  
Barn  
DRAWING REFERENCE:

DRAWING SHEET OF:  
1/1  
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AUTOCAD VERSION:  
2009

SURVEYED BY:  
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SURVEY DATE:  
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GJS  
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29/04/10  
DRAWING STATUS:  
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