

SAXON ARCHAEOLOGY AND MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY AT FORBURY HOUSE, READING

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SUMMARY

During May and November 2001, an archaeological watching brief was carried out by AOC Archaeology Group on land previously occupied by Forbury House (NGR: SU 7180 7350). The archaeological features recorded ranged in date from the Saxon to the post-Medieval period and consisted of pits, ditches, postholes, buried soils and building remains. Of particular note were the presence of Saxon features and also a large assemblage of Medieval industrial waste found within a backfilled gravel pit. In the later periods however, evidence for renewed land management and changes in the land usage was noted in the form of building development. Over half of the site had been truncated by basements associated with the building that had latterly occupied the site.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, Forbury House, a 1960s building overlooking the Forbury Gardens, was demolished. This 1960s office building was built within the precinct of what was Reading Abbey, probably on the site of the monastery garden. Unexpectedly the excavation revealed evidence for the Saxon period as well as the later medieval period. This discovery is important to the growing understanding of Saxon Reading as it indicates that the focus of the Saxon activity was not limited to the area surrounding.

The medieval period is represented by pottery. All of it domestic and mainly Surrey ware. Although no industrial premises were found, quantities of iron slag and ironworking debris were found, suggesting that the premises were close by, but not on the site. There is evidence of tile and brickmaking, probably for use in the Abbey buildings.

After the Reformation, most of the buildings in the precinct were demolished and the area was relatively unused until development began again in the 17th century. Sutton Seeds moved to buildings on the site in the early 20th century and remains of this building have been found.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is evidence of human occupation in Reading and the surrounding area from the prehistoric period, however, it was not until the Saxon period that a structured settlement was formed at Reading. The name 'Reading' is thought to originate from the followers of a man called 'Reada'. Exactly when these people arrived and settled in this area is uncertain. Reading is first referenced in the Anglo Saxon Chronicles of AD 871: '*This year came the army to Reading in Wessex... King Eathered and Alfred his brother led their main army to Reading, where they fought with the enemy; and there was much slaughter on either hand*', (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Part 1-3).

Little of the Saxon settlement of Reading has been uncovered and its exact location remains unclear. No *in situ* Saxon features have been excavated in Reading with the exception of occasional burials. A 9th century burial with associated weaponry and a horse was excavated approximately 500m north-west of the site (MRD 3891, SMR 02092.00.000). Burials were identified *c.* 110m north of the site, in the grounds of Forbury Gardens

(the outer precinct of the Abbey) (SMR 02017.01.000). These were three individual burials, one adult and two juvenile and were dated to AD 630-780. It is probable a settlement would have been located within a short distance to the graves. The majority of the Saxon evidence from Reading tends to consist of small pockets of residual finds recovered from later contexts. Sites excavated on the premises of the later Abbey, to the west of the site, have revealed finds including pottery, a buckle, and weapons including a knife and a spearhead (MRD3902, SMR 02110.04.000 and 02110.03.000). It is thought however that the principal Saxon settlement was located between Broad Street and Minister Street, concentrating around the current church of St Mary, though there is little archaeology evidence to support this, (MoLAS, 1994).

In AD 1121, Henry I founded a Benedictine Abbey at Reading dedicated to the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist and the site at Forbury House lies within the abbey precinct. Reading was already a borough in 1066 and the main trading area of the town was centred on the minster church of St Mary's, some distance to the west of the new abbey. The establishment of the abbey moved the trading focus of the town from St Mary's to the abbey. The presence of the large market place at the gate of the abbey and the layout of the adjacent streets suggests that these were laid out by the abbey for that purpose (Astill, 1978). Gradually establishments such as small tenements, inns and lodging houses began to occupy streets around the Abbey, and the excavation site (Kemp 1986).

During the Medieval period, Reading developed rapidly as a marketing and manufacturing centre. After the dissolution of the Abbey between 1536 and 1539, the land, including the Forbury House site, passed into Royal ownership. During this period, many of the buildings in the centre of the precinct were demolished but many of the outer buildings including the stables continued to be repaired and maintained. The site seems to have been left relatively untouched following the dissolution of the Abbey and the steady growth of the town over the ensuing centuries.

Reading was fortified during the Civil War (1642-51), including the excavation of large ditches, some of which were located close to the site. After the war, the town continued to prosper. By the 18th century, Reading had become known for industries such as silk weaving,

pinmaking and brickmaking. In the 19th century the arrival of the railway, encouraged industrial development and Reading developed a thriving economy. (Phillips 1999). Shoemaker Street was redeveloped with the erection of new cottages, whilst the remaining area was dominated by the construction of the new premises of Suttons Seeds Ltd, (MoLAS 1994). Suttons Seeds Ltd was founded in Reading as Suttons and Son by John Sutton in 1806. The business began as a corn factor and miller with a small trade in farm seeds; this latter business was expanded under John Sutton's second son Martin Hope Sutton. Their first office was based at 16 King Street and the firm then moved to the Market Place in 1839

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The works were carried out in advance of the redevelopment of the site into a residential tower block, an office block, restaurant and underground car parking. The archaeological work was commissioned by Argent Group Plc.

LOCATION

The site is located in the centre of Reading, between Abbey Square and The Forbury

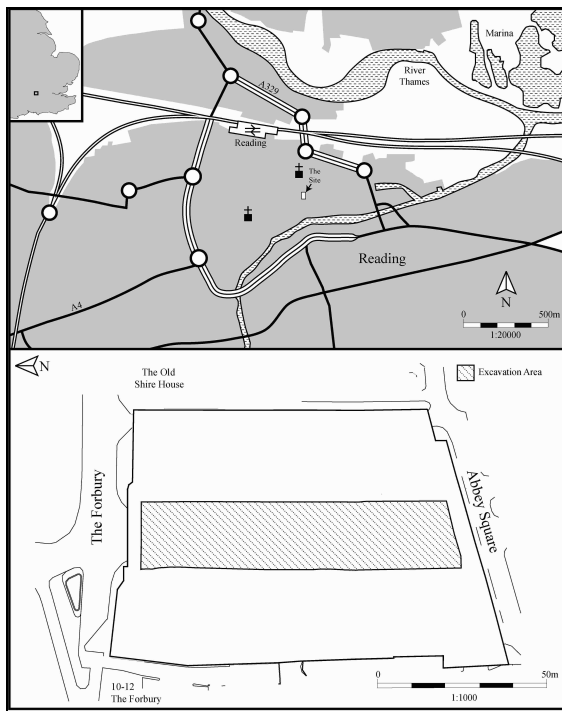


Figure 1: Site Location

It is thought that the site may have been located within the Abbey gardens, which would have been a working garden, probably supplying fruit or herbs. Examples of deliberately created bedding trenches similar to those that may have been used here have been excavated at Mount Grace Carthusian monastery, Yorkshire, (Coppack 1990). The garden soils would also have been fertilised by waste from the kitchens, which would increase the potential for pottery and bones within these deposits..

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by AOC Archaeology Group on land previously occupied by Forbury House, adjacent to The Forbury and Abbey Square, Reading, during May and November 2001 (Fig. 1). This followed an archaeological desk-based assessment in 1994 (MoLAS 1994) and an evaluation in September and October 1997 (AOC 1997).

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The topography of the site follows the profile of the underlying gravel, sloping from north to south. The earliest deposit recorded on site was natural gravels at 43.3m OD in the north, sloping down to c.40.5m OD in the south. This water-lain deposit contained various interleaving horizons of clays, silts, sands and gravels. Manganese staining was common, particularly in the gravels. The deposits were on average between 4m and 5m thick.

RESULTS

Prehistoric & Roman

No prehistoric features were identified on site. A residual prehistoric flint flake of undiagnostic type, dating to the Neolithic or Bronze Age, was found within a medieval ditch. This suggests prehistoric activity in the area. There was no evidence for any significant Roman settlement on site and all Roman finds recovered were residual. A single sherd of Roman Oxfordshire red colour coated ware pottery and 15 fragments of roof tile and brick were found on site and these are uncommon finds in this area of Reading. Other residual Roman pottery and tile have been found in the Abbey vicinity, including the 1997 evaluation by AOC Archaeology at Forbury Square (AOC 1997).

Saxon

Seven Saxon features were identified on site and these were cut into the natural gravels.

Pit (012) was associated with three postholes, and two small stakeholes. The pit was irregular-shaped, measuring 2.2m x 1.7m x 0.12m deep with a flat base. The fill contained finds of animal bone and one sherd of pottery. This dated to AD 400-700 and was from a hand-built bowl with a burnished interior surface and a simple plain rim of 200mm. Similar wares, identified as sandy and micaceous organic-tempered mid Saxon wares (fabrics CS and CM) were found at 112 Crane Wharf on the Reading Waterfront (Underwood 1997). The original function of this pit is uncertain but the stakeholes and postholes surrounding it may indicate the position of a fence.

The remaining Saxon feature is a probable domestic rubbish pit (054). It was similar in size to pit (012), but was filled with mottled dark reddish brown and grey friable sandy silt that contained frequent fragments of burnt daub, charcoal and occasional flint cobbles. This burnt building debris had been dumped into the pit cold as the pit edges showed no sign of being affected by heat. An environmental sample taken from the fill suggests a mixed landscape with grassland/arable weeds with cultivated crops (barley, wheat, peas, lentils, rye) in the vicinity of the site.

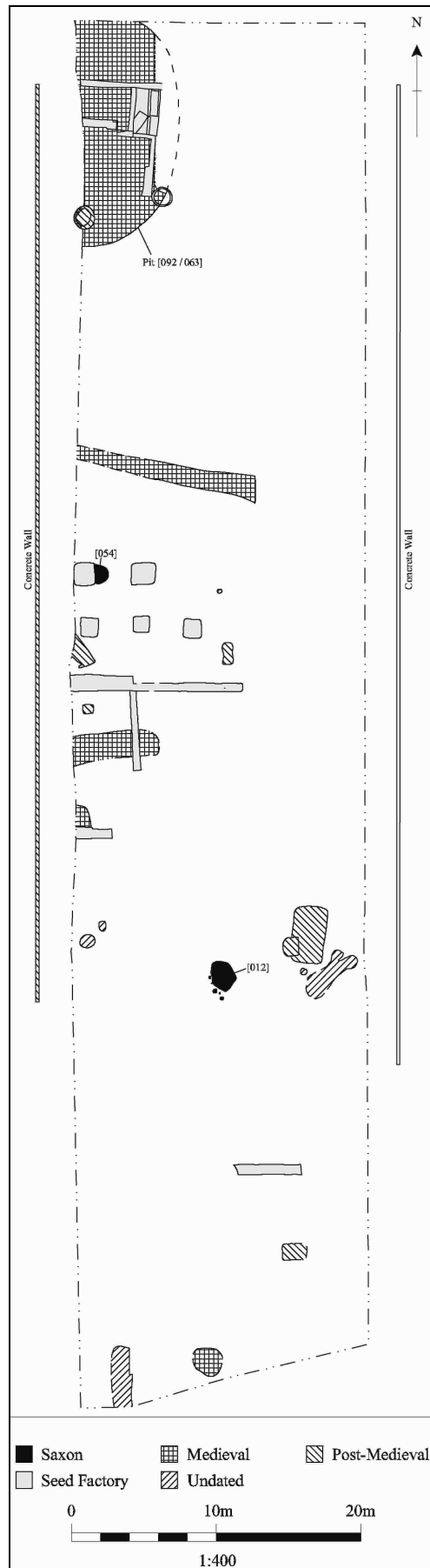


Figure 2: Plan of Archaeological Features

Grassland meadows would have provided a local source of fodder, as well as straw/hay for bedding, flooring and thatch. The proximity of the site to the River Kennet, its tributary the Holy Brook, and the River Thames suggest likely resources for pasture land. A sample of charcoal associated with the daub, was submitted for AMS radiocarbon dating. This produced a date range of AD 630-960 (2 σ) and AD 660-860 (1 σ).

Two residual sherds of Saxon pottery were recovered from a Medieval (late 11th to mid 13th century) buried soil (010). This layer sealed the Saxon postholes, stakeholes and pits and was probably the remnant of a Saxo-Norman/early Medieval occupational or garden soil, possibly associated with Reading Abbey gardens.

Medieval

The most significant feature excavated from this period, was a very large pit [063/092], backfilled by 25 separate fills. The pit was cut into the natural gravel and was over 15m in length (Figs. 2 and 3). The original excavation of such a large feature is likely to have been for gravel extraction purposes, being secondarily used as a convenient place to dispose of local refuse

The majority of the Medieval pottery assemblage from the site was recovered from this pit (65 sherds). Within the sequence, the lowest fills were dated by the presence of Camley Gardens type ware, dated to AD 1150-1240. An overlying fill contained London-type ware, of AD 1240-1350 and therefore provides the 'terminus post quem' by which the lowest features can be dated.

The Saxo-Norman/early Medieval wares, such as the chalk-tempered ware and early Surrey ware in several of the fills throughout the pit must be residual. The upper sequence of pit fills were dated to AD 1300 to 1400, by the occurrence of Surrey whiteware: Kingston-type ware, coarse border ware, Brill/Boarstall ware and East Wiltshire type ware.

The sequence of the pit fills can be surmised from the pottery evidence as dating between *c.* AD 1150/1240 - AD 1400. The pottery suggests local domestic dumping, as the majority of sherds were from jugs, possible cooking pots, jars and tripod pitchers.

A large amount of industrial waste was recovered from several fills. Some 26 fragments of smithing hearth bottoms (the most characteristic bulk slag of smithing) were recovered. There was also evidence that some of the broken fragments of slag (categorised as undiagnostic) may originally have come from smithing hearth bottoms. Both flake and spherical hammerscale (microslags) were recovered in some quantity indicating that both ordinary hot hammering of iron and high temperature welding were taking place, probably quite near the pit in which the slag was dumped. The slag is thought to represent local low intensity metal working or semi-industrial activity. No structures that may have been used for industries were recorded on site, suggesting that the focus for this work was located outside the limit of excavation.

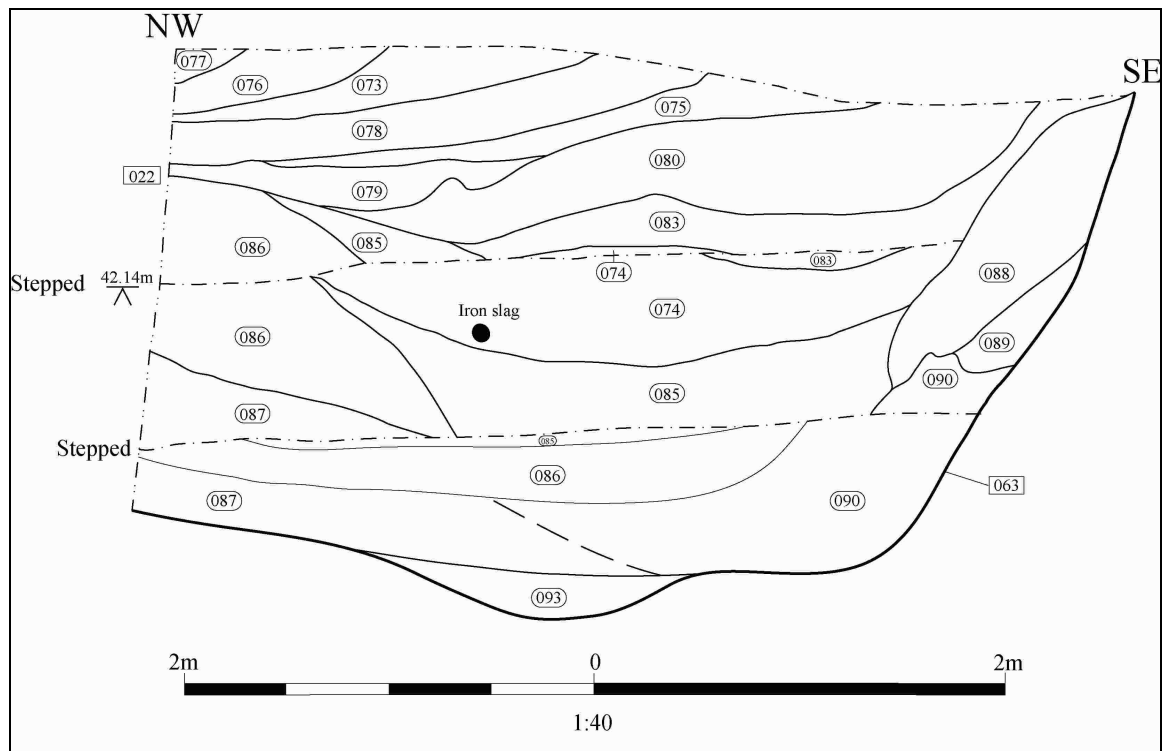


Figure 3: Section through Medieval Pit (63/92)

The building material recovered from the pit fills consists of medieval roof tile and brick. The finds are indicative of a thriving medieval tile industry from the 11th/12th century onwards and by the 14th century brick manufacturing in the area. This was a century before brickmaking became common in many other parts of Britain. It is probable they were produced from kilns owned or leased out by the Abbey. There is evidence from elsewhere in England that some of the earliest use of English brick was from monastic building work, such as the 12th and 13th century moulded bricks made by Coggeshall Abbey and the bricks made by the Carmelite Friars in York for the undercroft of the Merchant Adventures Hall constructed in 1357-1361 (Betts 1985: 342). There is certainly strong evidence that the Abbey was involved with roofing tile and floor tile manufacture as a tile kiln producing both was found at Jubilee Square in Reading (AOC 2005). The floor tiles found at the kiln being very similar to tiles used at the Abbey itself during the period 1270-1320 (Betts 2001).

Environmental samples were taken from two of the fills within the sequence. The botanical remains recovered included a few weed seeds, hulled barley and wheat grains. The weed seeds are representative of wasteland or grassland, plus a single *Galium* sp. indicating wet ground. However this small assemblage is not enough to confirm any particular habitat. Cattle, sheep, goat, pig, cow, fish, chicken, bird, horse and goose bones were recovered from the pit. Evidence of butchery, in the form of surface cut marks, was observed on a single fragment of cow bone. Fragments of red deer antler with evidence of sawing, suggests local antler-working.

Three additional pits and two ditches were also dated to the medieval period (Fig. 4). The pits were all of a similar size and contained small quantities of finds including ceramic peg tile, a single piece of butchered pig scapula and pottery dated to AD 1175-1400 and AD 1270-1500. The function of these pits is uncertain. The ditches contained pottery of a similar date, butchered remains of horse, pig, cow and sheep and ceramic tile, including examples of flanged and curved tile, ridge and peg tile and brick. These deposits suggest that the ditches were backfilled with domestic rubbish. They probably marked a local boundary or structure or were used for localised drainage.

Post-medieval

To the north and west of the site, a series of red brick with chalk/flint foundations were excavated. The wall foundations were constructed of unfrosted red bricks laid in alternate stretcher/header courses, overlying chalk and flint footing with brick quoins at the walls ends. Other contemporary remains included a red brick-built cellar with an associated passageway and stairs and two circular brick wells. The backfill of the wells contained Red Border Ware pottery dating to AD 1580-1800, clay pipe, glass vessel fragments and two pieces of plain glazed wall tile. These structures appear to be related to the 19th century buildings fronting on to the Forbury Gardens. Of more significant local interest were the remains of Suttons Seed Factory. Concrete and brick plinths from the internal supports of the large seed order rooms were identified and east and west aligned red brick walls, forming the internal walls of the factory rooms (Fig. 2).

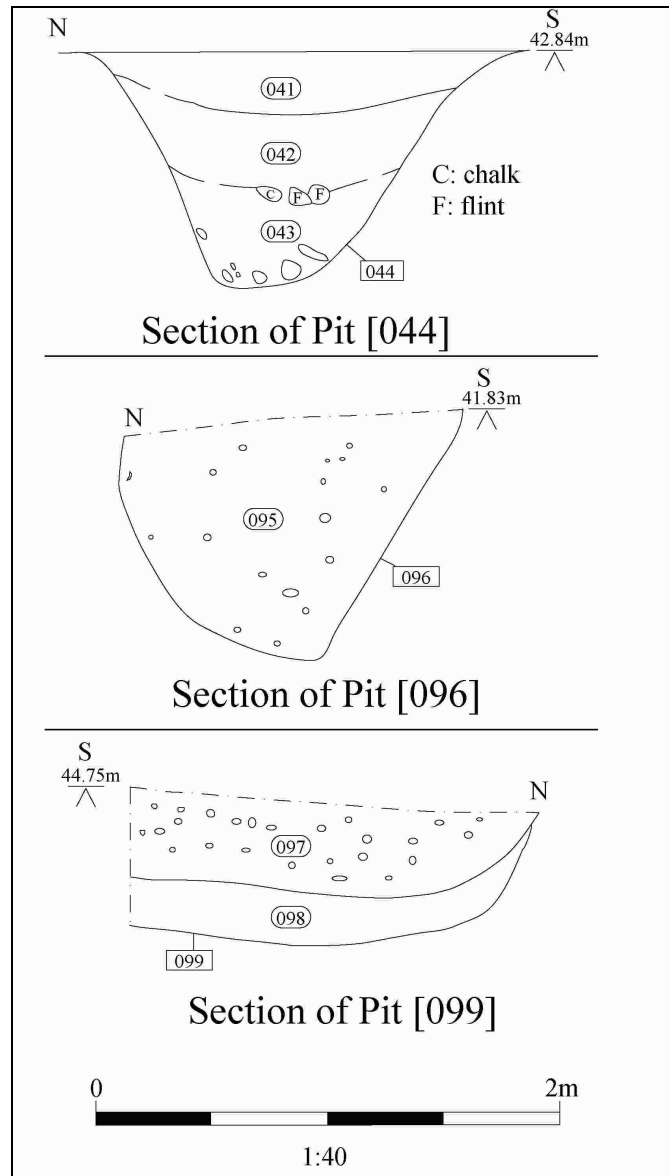


Figure 4: Section through Medieval Pits [044], [096] and [099]

Other post-Medieval features included five pits and a single post hole. The backfill of these features included one piece of pottery, dating to AD 1630-1800, examples of peg tile and ceramic clay pipe. Various buried soil layers were recorded and these are likely to have been garden soils. Finds recovered from these contexts include tile, burnt daub and pottery ranging from AD 1245-1500 to AD 1780-1900. The post-Medieval wares are all of well-known established wares and of no particular significance.

DISCUSSION

The excavation and analysis of this site has demonstrated the presence of *in situ* Saxon archaeological features with overlying medieval deposits and features. The Saxon archaeological deposits were not anticipated and this discovery is important to the growing understanding of Saxon Reading as it indicates that the focus of the Saxon activity was not limited to the area surrounding Broad Street as previously thought.

The site was probably an area used for pitting and the deposition of domestic waste. Animal bone recovered from pit (012) showed evidence of butchery; indicating. The excavation and analysis of this site has demonstrated the presence of *in situ* Saxon archaeological features with overlying medieval deposits and features. The Saxon archaeological deposits were not anticipated and this discovery is important to the growing understanding of Saxon Reading as it indicates that the focus of the Saxon activity was not limited to the area surrounding Broad Street as previously thought. The site was probably an area used for pitting and the deposition of domestic waste. Animal bone recovered from pit [012] showed evidence of butchery; indicating cattle as a food source. The analysis of the botanical remains from pit [054] suggests a mixed landscape with grassland/arable weeds with cultivated crops (barley, wheat, peas, lentils, rye) in the vicinity of the site; a mix of both arable fields and grassland probably prevailed. The grassland meadows may have been utilised for the

grazing of cattle as a food source. The analysis of the botanical remains from pit (054) suggests a mixed landscape with grassland/arable weeds with cultivated crops (barley, wheat, peas, lentils, rye) in the vicinity of the site; a mix of both arable fields and grassland probably prevailed. The grassland meadows may have been utilised for the grazing of cattle as well as a source of straw/hay for bedding, flooring and thatch. The dates for the Saxon features were between AD 430-700 and AD 630-960. Pit (054) contained daub and charcoal from burnt wattle, which suggests the presence of structures in the vicinity.

The largest feature on site was a Medieval gravel quarry pit. The gravel was probably used to establish or repair roads or was used for other local building. The pit was secondarily used to dump both domestic waste such as food remains, cess and broken tiles and pottery, and also industrial waste, such as smithing hearth debris and iron slag. It is unclear when the gravel pit was originally excavated. It may have been dug prior to the construction of the Abbey (AD 1112) or in the early years of its development. The pottery recovered from the pit backfill was dated to AD 1150/1240 to AD 1400. It is unlikely that the dumped backfill originated from the Abbey; it was more likely dumped by residents of the tenements on roads such as Shoemaker Row. The other Medieval features on site probably also relate to these properties. This probably suggests that the gardens of the Abbey did not stretch as far as the western limit of the archaeological site and may have only occupied the eastern limits, with any divisional walls having been truncated in antiquity.

The only evidence of deposits that may indicate the presence of the Abbey gardens was located in the southern half of the site. This deposit (010) was dated to the 11th to 13th century (although little of it remained on site). The building material recovered from the site indicates a thriving Medieval tile industry from the 11th/12th century onwards. In addition an early (14th century) brick manufacturer is located in the area. It is probable these were produced from kilns owned or leased out by the Abbey.

The post-medieval garden soils and pits present on site represent pre-development activity, probably during a period when the site was vacant. It is also clear that following this period, the site suffered significant truncation due to the large-scale development of the area. This was mainly for the modernisation of the area and the erection of new buildings including the Suttons Seeds Factory and buildings associated with the 1960s development of Forbury House.

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