



*Highland Archaeology Services Ltd*  
Bringing the Past and Future Together

# Pluscarden Abbey



## Archaeological Watching Brief

7 Duke Street Cromarty Ross-shire IV11 8YH

Tel / Fax: 01381 600491 Mobile: 07834 693378 Email: [info@hi-arch.co.uk](mailto:info@hi-arch.co.uk) Web: [www.hi-arch.co.uk](http://www.hi-arch.co.uk)

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# Pluscarden Abbey

## Archaeological Watching Brief

<b>Report No.</b>	HAS120601
<b>Site Code</b>	HAS/PCN12
<b>Client</b>	Pluscarden Abbey
<b>OS Grid Ref</b>	NJ 1418 5761
<b>Planning Ref</b>	11/01508/APP
<b>OASIS</b>	highland4-128767
<b>Date/ revision</b>	15/06/2012
<b>Author</b>	J Wood

### Summary

*An archaeological watching brief was undertaken from February to May 2012 during groundworks for a new wood pellet heating system at Pluscarden Abbey, Morayshire. The level of most of the land involved had been raised considerably in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and all the observed works took place within this. No archaeological features were encountered. A trench approximately 750mm deep, opened to bring heat to the abbey buildings from the new boiler house, was wholly contained within this redeposited material, which was found to contain a remarkable number of modern cables, gas pipes and drains.*

*No further archaeological work is recommended in this area of the site unless future works require much deeper excavation.*

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## Acknowledgements

Desk-based assessment, fieldwork and overall project management was by John Wood. We wish to thank the monastic community, in particular Brother Michael de Klerk for commissioning the work and the building contractors and the Aberdeenshire Archaeology Service for their assistance and co-operation. Background mapping has been reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey under Licence 100043217. Extensive use has also been made of site drawings supplied by the client.

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## Location

Pluscarden Abbey is centred at OS Grid Reference NJ 1418 5761 on a terrace within a south-facing valley side slope at a height of about 64m above sea level (see Figures 1 and 2). The present development adjoins the south side of the precinct where the land drops away into the valley floor.

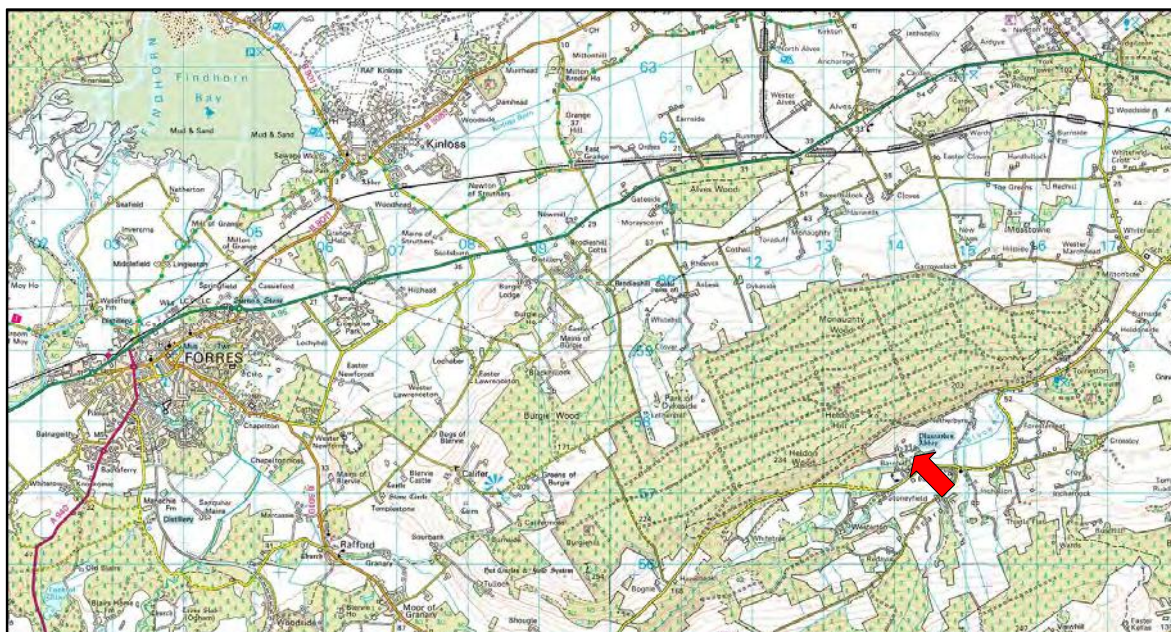


Figure 1 General Location



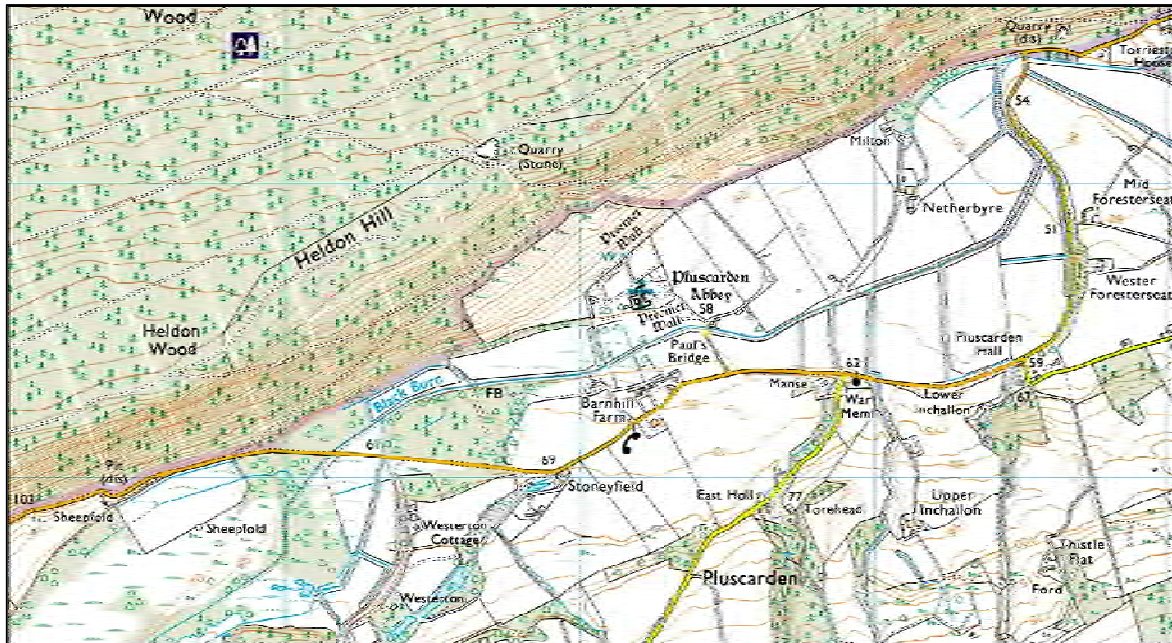


Figure 2 Location (detail)

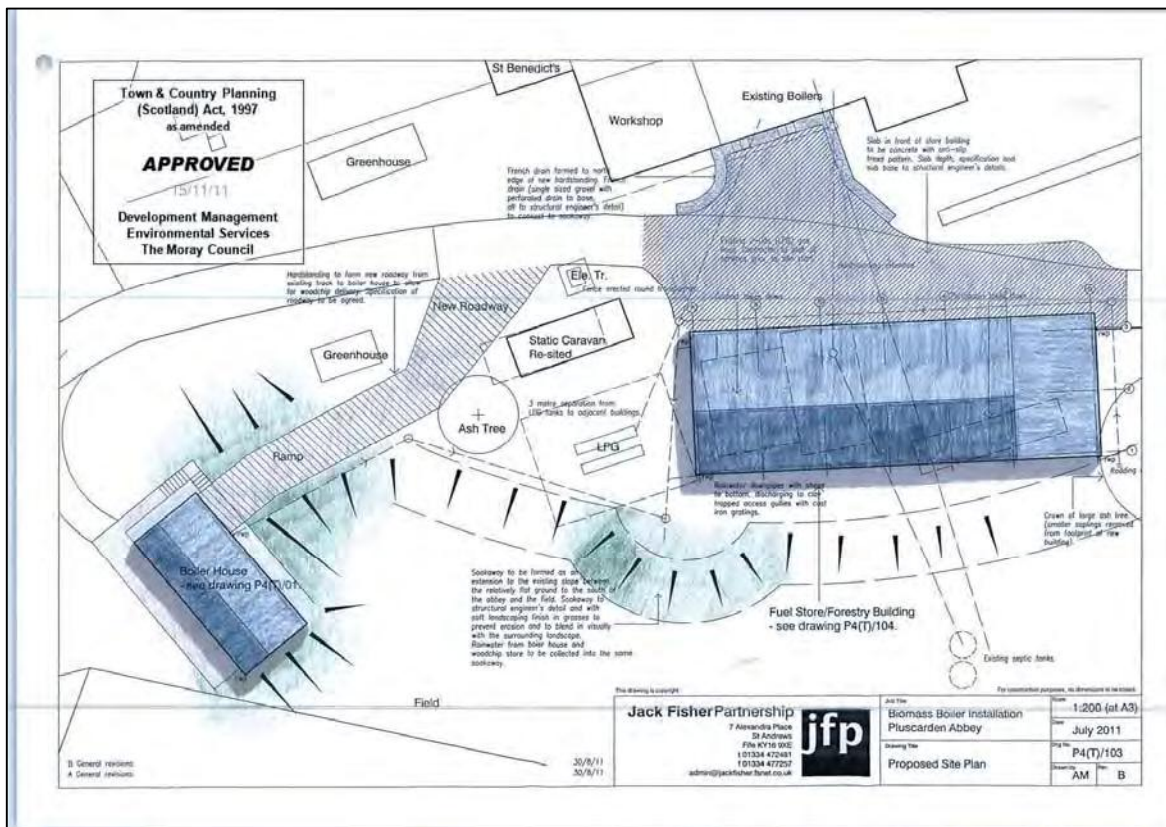


Figure 3 Development as proposed 2011

## Aims and objectives

- To minimise any possible delay or cost to the development by anticipating archaeological requirements as far as possible, timetabling and integrating archaeological recording work with the project, and dealing with any issues arising quickly and efficiently.
- To determine as far as possible the character, extent, condition, date and significance of any archaeologically significant remains affected; and to record where necessary in line with national and local policies and standards.
- To ensure that any artefacts or human remains identified are dealt with in accordance with legal requirements and current Historic Scotland policy guidance.

## Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken between March and May 2012 by John Wood of Highland Archaeology Services Ltd during excavations for a new biomass boiler installation including boiler house, wood chip store and connections at Pluscarden Abbey, Morayshire. This report sets out the circumstances, methods, results and conclusions of the work.

Fieldwork included observation of contractor's work only. No archaeological excavation was undertaken.

## Legislation and policy background

The programme consisted of archaeological investigation and recording in line with current legislation and relevant planning policies and advice including those adopted by Moray Council, as advised by Aberdeenshire Archaeology Service.

The policy framework includes the Moray Council's *Development Plan / Structure Plan (2007)*<sup>1</sup>, and Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy (SPP)*, (2010) which consolidates and supersedes the previous SPP and NPPG series. The fundamental principles underpinning all the above legislation and policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment (2002)*<sup>2</sup> and the *Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1999)*.<sup>3</sup>

The work adhered to the *Codes of Conduct and Approved Practice and Standards of the Institute for Archaeologists*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.moray.gov.uk/downloads/file51191.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.archaeologists.net/>





Figure 4 Extract from OS 1st edition 1:2500 map, 1870-4  
 Elgin sheet XII.9. Not reproduced to scale.



Figure 5 Extract from OS 1:2500 map, revised 1904  
 Elgin sheet XII.SW. Not reproduced to scale.

## Desk-based Assessment

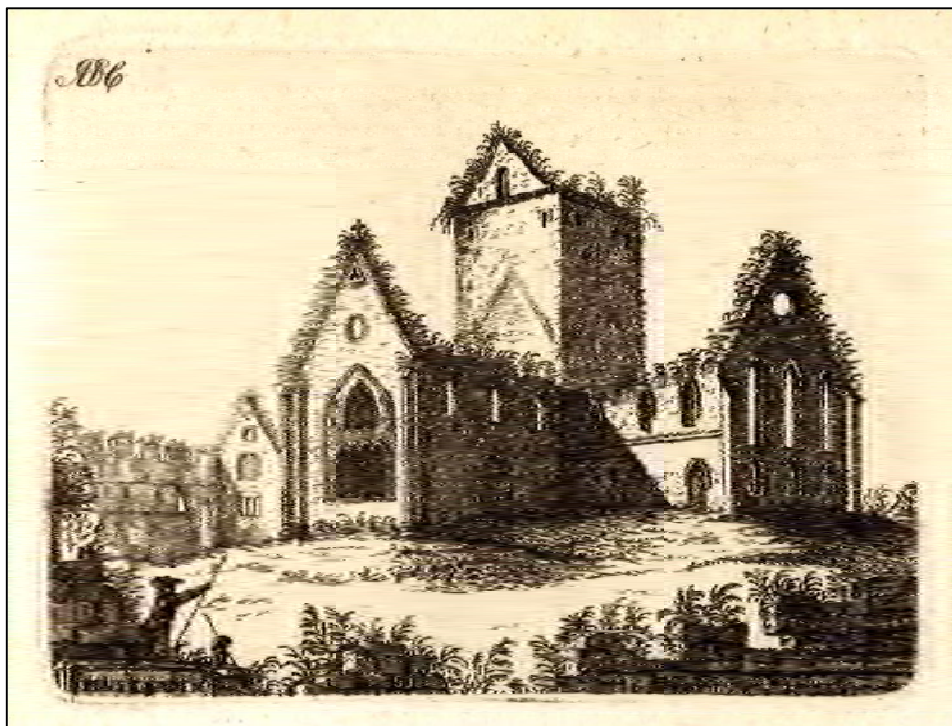
Sources checked included the National Monuments Record for Scotland (NMRS), the Moray Sites and Monuments record (MSMR), historical maps held by the National Library of Scotland, and the Statistical Accounts of Scotland. Other online sources were also consulted. Valuable information was also offered verbally by Brother Michael of Pluscarden Abbey and other individuals connected with the present monastic community.

Several histories of Pluscarden Abbey are listed in the Bibliography. It is not intended to duplicate these but a very brief summary is offered here as background information.

The Priory of the Blessed Mary, St John the Baptist and St Andrew was founded by Alexander II in 1230 for the French Valliscaulian order. At the same time, he founded two other houses of the same order, at Beaulieu and Ardchattan. These three remain the only houses of this order in the island of Britain. At Pluscarden it is possible that a holy well and hermitage may have previously stood at or near the site chosen.

The house passed under the control of the Bishop of Elgin and according to the present monastic community, traces of burning have been found that could date to 1390, when Alexander Stewart, the 'Wolf of Badenoch' burned down the towns of Forres and Elgin, including Elgin Cathedral. In 1453 Pluscarden was united with the Benedictine Urquhart Priory, five miles east of Elgin, and became Benedictine. At that time the two houses together apparently contained only 8 monks between them. The merger meant that Pluscarden also became a daughter house of Dunfermline Abbey, which then revived the community and invested in repairs and improvements to the buildings. King James IV stayed at the Priory in 1506.

However the later 16<sup>th</sup> c. saw gradual decline and after the Reformation the site and lands passed into the hands of the Lay Commendator, Alexander Seton, Lord Urquhart, and became the private property of his and other lay families over the next 450 years. However parts of the church seem to have continued to be used as a burial ground. During the 17th century, the buildings were apparently used as a quarry for the rebuilding of St Giles Kirk, in Elgin<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 6 Engraving of Pluscarden Priory (1788)**

*Adam de Cardonnel, "Picturesque Antiquities of Scotland," 1788, courtesy of RCAHMS*

<sup>5</sup> Anson P F 1959, 158.



Despite the 17<sup>th</sup> c. demolitions, the First Statistical Account for Elgin (1791-9) describes the ruins of Pluscarden Priory as ‘truly magnificent’, while going on to say that the church was never completed. It refers to the excellent abbey gardens and a fig tree which had produced fruit annually ‘a few years ago’<sup>6</sup>. An engraving of 1788 illustrates this (Figure 6).



**Figure 7 Postcard of c. 1900**  
RCAHMS

By the time of the Second Statistical Account (1834-45), the Earl of Fife, then owner of the site, had taken ‘every attention’ to ‘preserve these relics from further decay’, created new gardens, and had re-roofed one range to provide a place of worship for the local people.<sup>7</sup> The first edition OS 1:2500 map shows this in use as a Free Church (Figure 4). According to the revised OS map of 1904, the reference to a Free Church has gone but a larger area had been roofed over (Figure 5). However this does not seem to tally with photographs held by the RCAHMS (Figure 7). The Marquis of Bute bought the site in 1897 and started a restoration programme, but this was halted on his death in 1900.

In 1943 Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart gave the site to the Benedictine community of Prinknash near Gloucester, England, and monks from Prinknash took up residence in 1948. Since then, the buildings have undergone extensive refurbishment and redevelopment. The precinct wall was Scheduled in 1961 under the Ancient Monuments Acts as of national importance. Abbey status was granted to the community in 1974.

The church incorporates some of the original 13th century building, as well as 14th - 16th century work. Although it has been generally accepted that the nave was ever completed, excavations undertaken in

<sup>6</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Elgin/Elgin/5/18/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Elgin/Elgin/13/8/>

1990 on the W side of the present monastic building before the construction of new dormitory accommodation uncovered its SW corner, and ‘the pressure-cracked condition of much of the foundations suggested that the building had probably been built to its full height and not abandoned at foundation level’<sup>8</sup>. An isolated group of three skeletons and a deep pit containing animal bones, glass and cloth was found about 3m west of the present cloistral buildings.

The renovations and developments of the last 60 years have clearly raised the ground levels along the south side of the site. An undated photograph, probably from the 1930s shows the area subject to the present watching brief (Figure 8).



**Figure 8 Southern side of site ('Fraternity from SW'), undated but probably c.1930**  
*RCAHMS: SC1201678*

## Fieldwork

Photographic recording took place throughout the fieldwork, and an index to the photographs taken is included as an appendix to this report.

Some initial excavation had already taken place at the site for the boiler house some time before to the writer's first visit. However on inspection it was clear that this lay within an area of disturbed ground and no archaeology was likely to have been affected (Plates 1,2). Excavations for the erection of poles for the log store (Plates 1,4) and a trench to connect the boiler house with the abbey itself were observed (Plate 3). The trench was excavated using a back-acting digger fitted with a 1m wide straight edged bucket.

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<sup>8</sup> NMRS NH15NW 6





**Plate 1 View east, 2012: erection of fuel store poles**  
*Compare with Figure 8 above*



**Plate 2 Boiler house site as found, showing modern deposition of rubble and debris.**

A roadway now skirts the southern edge of the buildings and provides service access as well as continuing past into the land beyond. This has been built up using rubble imported (it is understood) from Elgin, forming a terrace 2-3m high above the valley fields below. The whole area has also been very disturbed by building works over the last 150 years as well as the insertion of electricity cables, gas pipes



and drains. The excavations cut through very mixed material including builders' rubble, as well as orange periglacial sands, gravels and occasional boulders up to c.20cm dia. (Plate 3). No archaeological features or artefacts were recorded.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Apart from part of the boiler house site, which was in any case clear of archaeology, the entire footprint of the present development lay within made-up ground containing modern stone and other rubble to build up the levels.

There was no evidence of archaeological features or artefacts, and there are no recommendations for further archaeological work in connection with the present development. However, if in future there are further developments immediately to the south of the Abbey buildings requiring deeper excavations that would extend beneath the 20<sup>th</sup> / 21<sup>st</sup> c. deposited material, an archaeological watching brief would be advisable as earlier evidence could be preserved beneath.



Plate 3 Connection trench, view ENE, showing services and disturbed ground



Plate 4 Construction of fuel store

## References

*Moray SMR* accessed at <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/moray/default.aspx>

*The Statistical Account for Elgin 1791-9* accessed at <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Elgin/Elgin/5/18/>

*The Statistical Account for Elgin 1834-45* accessed at <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Elgin/Elgin/13/8/>

*National Monuments Record for Scotland* (<http://rcahms.gov.uk>)

*The Scottish Government 2010. Scottish Planning Policy*. Accessed at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/300760/0093908.pdf>

*Scotland's Places* accessed at <http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk>

*National Library of Scotland online historic map collection* (<http://nls.uk/maps>)

*Modern OS Mapping and aerial photography* has been checked courtesy of Landmark Information Group.

*Pluscarden Abbey website*, accessed at <http://www.pluscardenabbey.org/>

## Bibliography

The following provide resources for the history of Pluscarden Abbey. They have not all been consulted for this report.

- Anson P F 1948 *The Story of Pluscarden Priory - A Monastery in Moray*  
 Anson P F 1959 *A Monastery in Moray - The Story of Pluscarden Priory 1230 - 1948*  
 Skene FJH (ed) 1877 *Liber pluscardensis (The Book of Pluscarden). (Chronicle)*  
 Skinner B C 1964, 1965, 1970 *Pluscarden Priory, near Elgin Moray, Scotland. The Story of a XIIIth Century Monastery and of the Benedictines of the XXth Century returned to restore it.*  
 Skinner B C  
 and Wood C H 1970 *Pluscarden Priory (Great Houses)*

## Photographs

Photo no.	Direction (Facing)	Description	Location	Taken by	Date
PCN12_001	E	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP1	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_002	ESE	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP1	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_003	SE	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP1	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_004	S	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP1	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_005	SSW	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP1	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_006	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_007	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_008	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_009	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_010	[down]	Sample Posthole - post in place	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_011	W	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_012	WSW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_013	SW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_014	S	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_015	SSE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012



Photo no.	Direction (Facing)	Description	Location	Taken by	Date
PCN12_016	ESE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_017	ENE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP2	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_018	N	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_019	NW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_020	WNW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_021	W	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_022	WSW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_023	SW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_024	S	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_025	SE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP3	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_026	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_027	W	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP4	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_028	E	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP4	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_029	NE	Erection of poles for fuel store	CP4	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_030	ENE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_031	ESE	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_032	S	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_033	SSW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_034	WSW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_035	WNW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_036	NW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_037	NNW	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_038	N	Erection of poles for fuel store - Panorama	CP5	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_039	ENE	General view to boiler house site	CP6	JW	26/03/2012

Photo no.	Direction (Facing)	Description	Location	Taken by	Date
PCN12_040	NE	General view	CP7	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_041	ENE	Boiler house site	CP7	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_042	NNW	Boiler house site	CP8	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_043	NNE	General view to fuel store site, inc. slope	CP8	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_044	NNW	General view to fuel store site, inc. slope	CP9	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_045	N	General view to fuel store site, inc. slope	CP9	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_046	W	General view to fuel store site, inc. slope	CP9	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_047	W	General view to fuel store site, inc. slope	CP10	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_048	WNW	General view	CP10	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_049	N	General view	CP10	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_050	NNE	General view	CP10	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_051	NE	General view	CP10	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_052	W	General view	CP11	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_053	WNW	General view	CP11	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_054	W	General view	CP11	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_055	[down]	Sample Posthole	-	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_056	E	General view	CP11	JW	26/03/2012
PCN12_057	NE	Preparations for boiler house; fuel store completed	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_058	N	Preparations for boiler house; fuel store completed	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_059	NNW	Preparations for boiler house	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_060	NW	Preparations for boiler house	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_061	W	Preparations for boiler house	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_062	N	Connection trench under excavation showing material cut through	CP8	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_063	NNE	Connection trench under excavation	CP13	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_064	SSE	Connection trench under excavation	CP13	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_065	NW	Electricity cable and cover	CP14	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_066	E	View along open trench	CP14	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_067	S	View along open trench	CP15	JW	30/05/2012

Photo no.	Direction (Facing)	Description	Location	Taken by	Date
PCN12_068	N	View along open trench	CP16	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_069	W	View along open trench	CP17	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_070	W	View along open trench	CP18	JW	30/05/2012
PCN12_071	W	Open trench	CP19	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_072	W	Open trench	CP19	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_073	NE	Open trench	CP19	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_074	NW	Open trench	CP19	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_075	WNW	Open trench	CP19	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_076	ENE	Open trench	CP16	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_077	N	Open trench	CP16	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_078	NE	Open trench	CP16	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_079	N	Open trench	CP8 (APPROX)	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_080	NNW	Open trench / boiler house site	CP8 (APPROX)	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_081	NW	Boiler house site	CP8 (APPROX)	JW	01/06/2012
PCN12_082	WNW	Boiler house site	CP8 (APPROX)	JW	01/06/2012