

Dorchester Abbey Tower Dorchester on Thames Oxfordshire



**Building Recording and
Watching Brief**

oxfordarchaeology



southsouthsouth

September 2015

Client: Martin Ashley Architects

Issue No: 1

OA Job No: 3185

NGR: SU 579 943

**Dorchester Abbey Tower,
Dorchester on Thames
Oxfordshire**

Historic Building Investigation and Recording

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY

July 2008

Client Name: Martin Ashley Architects

Document Title: Dorchester Abbey Tower, Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire, Historic Building Investigation and Recording

Document Type: Client Report

Issue Number: Draft

National Grid Reference: SU579 943
Planning Reference:
OA Job Number:
Site Code: DORAB 06
Invoice Code: DORABBS

Prepared by: Marsali MacGregor
Position: Buildings Archaeologist
Date: July 2008

Checked by: Jonathan Gill
Position: Project Manager (Historic Buildings)
Date:

Approved by:
Position:
Date:

Document File Location //Server1/buildings/projectsongoing/Dorchester Abbey Tower/
Graphics File Location ~
Illustrated by
Building Name Dorchester Abbey Tower
Building Location Dorchester, Oxfordshire

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Oxford Archaeology
Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES
t: (0044) 01865 263800
f: (0044) 01865 793496

e: info@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk

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Dorchester Abbey Tower, Dorchester- on- Thames Oxfordshire

HISTORIC BUILDING INVESTIGATION AND RECORDING

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Dorchester Abbey Tower, Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire

HISTORIC BUILDING INVESTIGATION AND RECORDING

SUMMARY

A watching brief has been carried out by Oxford Archaeology (OA) during works to the inside of the north-western tower of Dorchester Abbey (NGR SU 579 943). This work has formed an addendum to a wider report on the Abbey prepared by OA on 30 June 2004. The work was commissioned by Martin Ashley Architects. No significant archaeology was observed during the course of the watching brief.

During the watching brief, the groundworks inside the north-western tower of Dorchester Abbey were observed and monitored, with a substantial number of photographs taken. The destruction of the previous interior of the tower on the ground floor and the subsequent raising of wooden walls and insertion of two new floors within the tower were, also, observed.

Dorchester Abbey is a nationally significant building, because it is the only substantially intact medieval abbey remaining in England. It is believed that the good preservation is due to the abbey being used as a parish church, after the reformation in 1536.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and Scope of Work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) has been commissioned by Martin Ashley Architects on behalf of Dorchester Abbey, Dorchester on Thames to undertake an archaeological watching brief and recording of exposed historic fabric within the tower of Dorchester Abbey during the digging of foundation pads.
- 1.1.2 The investigations were undertaken to enable understanding of the nature and condition of the fabric and to ensure any features exposed or revealed were sufficiently recorded or, indeed, preserved.
- 1.1.3 Dorchester Abbey is located to the east of the small market town of Dorchester on Thames, which is in South Oxfordshire. It lies next to the River Thame, which places it in the flood plain. The town has two rivers running around it, the Thame and the River Thames, which adjoin to the south of the town. There are gravel quarry lakes to the north and Wittenham Clumps to the south. The site lies on the Thames Valley terrace gravels. The tower which has formed the focus of the current project is on the north-western side of the Abbey.
- 1.1.4 This report follows a wider study of the fabric of Dorchester Abbey undertaken by OA in 2004.

1.2 **Aims and objectives**

1.2.1 The general aim of this project was to outline the work carried out and observed during a watching brief, due to the removal of flagstones from the ground floor and the digging of foundation pads for the steel footings. The aim of the watching brief was to understand the structures exposed, the fabric and materials of the tower, the sequence of development, if any were revealed, and to subsequently record this information in a written report. It, also, was to create a photographic record of the destruction of the previous layout of the tower, as well as the insertion of two new floors and to record the further renovation undertaken in order to increase the function use of the tower.

1.2.2 In order to achieve these aims the following objectives were set out:

- To examine the areas revealed by the digging of the foundation pads.
- To create a photographic record of the exposed areas and revealed features
- To record before and after the destruction of the previous interior of the tower on the ground floor, as well as the erection of the wooden walls and insertion of the two extra floors

1.3 **Methodology**

1.3.1 The fieldwork consisted of a watching brief on the uplifting of flagstones from the ground floor, as well as the digging of foundation pads for the steel work footings. The foundation pads required limited excavation and an evaluation as to whether the continued work was viable, within the tower. In total, there were six foundation pads, each measuring approximately 0.8m by 0.8m. All excavation was undertaken by hand.

1.3.2 A series of notes were compiled on the observations made during the watching brief and were subsequently used to write this report. Black and white film, colour slide and digital photographs were taken of the tower and detail shots were, also, taken of certain features of interest, particularly the removal of the interior of the ground floor of the tower and the insertion of the extra two floors.

1.3.3 The site work was undertaken during March 2006.

2 **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

2.1.1 The area appears to have seen much prehistoric activity. There is evidence of a a Cursus and Big Ring Henge, as well as Bronze Age round barrows in the area, an Iron Age hillfort at Wittenham Clumps and a major Iron Age settlement or *Oppidum* at Dyke Hills.

- 2.1.2 The main settlement site, during the Roman period, then appears to have moved to Dorchester. A Roman fort was identified between Dyke Hills and the area of the small town known today. The Roman town is believed to be rectangular, although the location of the line of defence is not specifically known.
- 2.1.3 After the Roman rule, the town of Dorchester continued to be occupied. The town became the site of a Saxon monastery, cathedral and vast diocese, which reached as far north as Lincoln. The first known church on the site was that of Saint Birinus in the 8th century and it wasn't until the 11th century that a stone cathedral was mentioned to have existed on the site.
- 2.1.4 After the Norman conquest, the bishop Remigius is said to have rebuilt the cathedral, but the diocese of the area had soon decreased dramatically in size, with the see moving to Lincoln. Dorchester was, then, refounded as an abbey for the Arrouaisian canons, who are part of the Augustinian order.
- 2.1.5 In 1225, Monks opened the said tomb of Saint Birinus and began to revive the importance of the site, but for a different purpose, for pilgrimage. For this reason, in 1300, a shrine was built and the south choir aisle was added, in order to form a Shrine Chapel. During the 1300s, the eastward extension of the choir was completed, as well as the People's Chapel being added. It was during this time, the tower was also rebuilt. The tower is believed to, originally, date from 14th century, with the spiral staircase from this period being incorporated into the rebuild of the tower in 1602. By 1445, the Bell Tower was said to be ruinous.
- 2.1.6 The reformation caused the abbey to be dissolved in 1536. The building was preserved, however, in order to supply the town people with a parish church.
- 2.1.7 It was in 1602 that the new western tower was then built, although it incorporated some of the 14th century remains. The restoration was said to be extensive, even though the appearance of the tower is said to be traditional in character. New bells were added to the original ones in 1591, 1603, 1606 and 1651. A chiming clock was, also, added sometime during the 1620s.
- 2.1.8 In the 19th century, the abbey went through further work and repairs, some by William Butterfield between 1846 and 1852 and, then, between 1858 and 1878, some restoration work was undertaken by Sir Gilbert Scott, an architect, both on the roof and in the vault. During 1868 to 1869, he, specifically, undertook restoration work on the tower.
- 2.1.9 Between 2002 and 2006, the building has undergone further restoration, with work undertaken on the roof, walls, lighting, heating, sound, disabled access and further disabled facilities. A new cloister building, in medieval style, has been added to the northern side of the abbey to try to accommodate some of the necessary renovation work.

3 **DESCRIPTION OF INVESTIGATIONS**

3.1 **The Abbey**

3.1.1 The abbey is broadly rectangular in shape and is a prominent building within the landscape of the historic town of Dorchester-on-Thames. It consists of a nave, a choir and a chancel, which run through it's centre, as well as The Shrine Chapel, Saint Birinus's Chapel and The People's Chapel, which are aisles placed around the nave. Saint Birinus' Chapel is to the north and the other two to the south. It, also, has the Bell Tower, which is to the west of the nave.

3.2 **The Bell Tower**

3.2.1 The tower was originally constructed in the 14th century and possibly could have formed two separate towers either side of the doors, which can still be seen in the centre of the eastern elevation of the tower. The tower then under went major restoration again in 1602. The traditional style of the tower was kept, for example, it still has a flint and stone chequer-work turret appearance. Further restoration work was undertaken in the 19th century. The tower is square in plan and sits on the western side of the building, with the east elevation adjoining with the nave.

3.2.2 The east elevation has a double door just off centre to the north. It has a turret in the north-east corner, shared with the north elevation and abuts a spiral staircase in the south- east corner, which, also, abuts the south elevation. There is a door leading from the east elevation into the spiral staircase. The walls are constructed of stone.

3.2.3 The north elevation has a turret in both the north-east and the north-west corner. It has a window in the centre of the elevation and a door to the west, inbetween the north-west turret and the windows. Before the watching brief began, there were also entrance steps, in front of the door, which abut the west elevation. The walls are constructed of stone.

3.2.4 The west elevation has turrets in both the north-west corner, shared with the north elevation and the south-west corner. The north-west corner, also, abuts the entrance steps from the door in the north elevation. The walls are constructed of stone.

3.2.5 The south elevation has a turret in the south- west corner, shared with the west elevation and it abuts the spiral staircase in the south-east corner, which also abuts the east elevation. It has a window and the walls are constructed of stone.

4 **WATCHING BRIEF**

4.1 **Foundation Pad 1**

4.1.1 This is in the south-west corner of the tower. It was aligned north-south and measured approximately 0.7m by 0.8m. The stone flags (100) were uplifted, which measured 0.05m and then a further 0.85m of probable backfill or building debris (101) was excavated. It consisted of a mid to dark grey, brown, stone, mortar and flint rubble. A small amount of tile was, also, found. No significant archaeology was present.

4.2 **Foundation Pad 2**

4.2.1 This is in the north-west corner of the tower, east of the steps for the entrance to the tower. The trench was orientated east- west and measured approximately 0.8m by 0.8m. The stone flag (200) was removed and measured 0.05m in depth. There was a stone, mortar and flint rubble backfill or building debris. This was 0.85m in depth (201). A decorated floor tile was uncovered, which is believed to have come from (201). Beneath the rubble layer, a dark grey to black organic silt was visible (202). This feature is possibly part of the edge of a pit of 0.05m visible width and 0.4m maximum visible depth. Animal bone and shell were recovered from within the fill. The possible edge of pit may be part of the same feature, as was located in Foundation Pad 4, which was to the west of the entrance steps to the tower. Not enough was uncovered to be certain.

4.3 **Foundation Pad 3**

4.3.1 This is in the south-east corner of the tower and is to the west of the stairs. It was aligned north-south and measured 1.25m by 0.55m. A concrete flag of 0.5m depth was removed (300) to uncover an area of flint shingle (301) 0.7 x 0.55 x 0.4m maximum. This was only located in the southern three quarters of the trench. It appeared to be modern backfill, possibly due to previous drainage work. This theory is reinforced by the flagstone material being modern concrete. Beneath this, stone, mortar and flint rubble, to a depth of 0.04m, was uncovered (302). This, again, was probably building debris and, also, contained some bone and tile. At the base of the pad, original brick (303) and stone (304) foundations were uncovered. This stopped any further excavation from taking place.

4.4 **Foundation Pad 4**

4.4.1 This is in the north- west corner of the tower, to the west of the entrance steps. It is orientated north-south and measures approximately 0.8m by 0.8m. Stone flags to the depth of 0.05m were removed (400). A stone, mortar and flint rubble layer was beneath this to 0.85m, this was probable building debris (401). Beneath this, a dark grey to black organic silt was uncovered to the eastern edge of the pad (402). Animal bone was recovered from (402). It is possible (402) represents the further edge of a pit, as was seen in Foundation Pad 2, but not enough was uncovered, to be certain.

4.5 **Foundation Pad 5**

4.5.1 This is in the north-east corner of the tower. It measured 0.7 by 0.7m and was excavated to a depth of 0.6m through probable building debris (**501**). Flagstones were removed to a depth of 0.05m (**500**). Stone foundations (**502**) and brick foundations (**503**) for the chimney were uncovered from the original tower, which stopped further excavation.

4.6 **Foundation Pad 6**

4.6.1 This is in the north-west corner, to the north of the entrance steps of the tower. The trench is aligned east- west and measured 0.6m by 0.4m. A stone flag (**600**) of 0.05m was removed and beneath this a stone, mortar, flint rubble, which was probably building debris, was located (**601**). This was to a depth of 0.35m. Once this was removed, the original stone foundations (**602**) of the tower were recovered, which prevented any further excavation. A grave stone, on an east-west alignment was also recovered. This restricted the extension of the Foundation Pad and extension to the north was disallowed.

4.7 **Removal of interior and insertion of two extra floors**

4.7.1 The interior of the tower, including all cupboards and shelving, on the ground floor was removed, leaving the space clear to adapt for new use.

4.7.2 Two extra floors were inserted into the tower, providing an office and a store room. These were designed to have as limited an impact on the building as was possible. The groundworks of the tower were the only areas affected, due to extra support pillars being needed, in order for the new floors to be stable.

4.7.3 The erection of a new staircase to lead to the doorway on the north elevation and to provide access to the two new floors was, also, constructed and, subsequently, recorded using photography. The new staircase appears to go over the top of the already existing entrance steps. It is possible these are still intact beneath the new renovation work.

5 **CONCLUSION**

5.1.1 During this watching brief, six foundation pads were dug and all of these cut through a deposit of probable building debris. The original stone foundations were found in three of the pads (**3**, **5** and **6**) and the original brick foundations in two of the pads (**3** and **5**). A possible pit was uncovered, with the edges of it being located in pads **2** and **4**, but there is insufficient evidence uncovered to be certain of it's function.

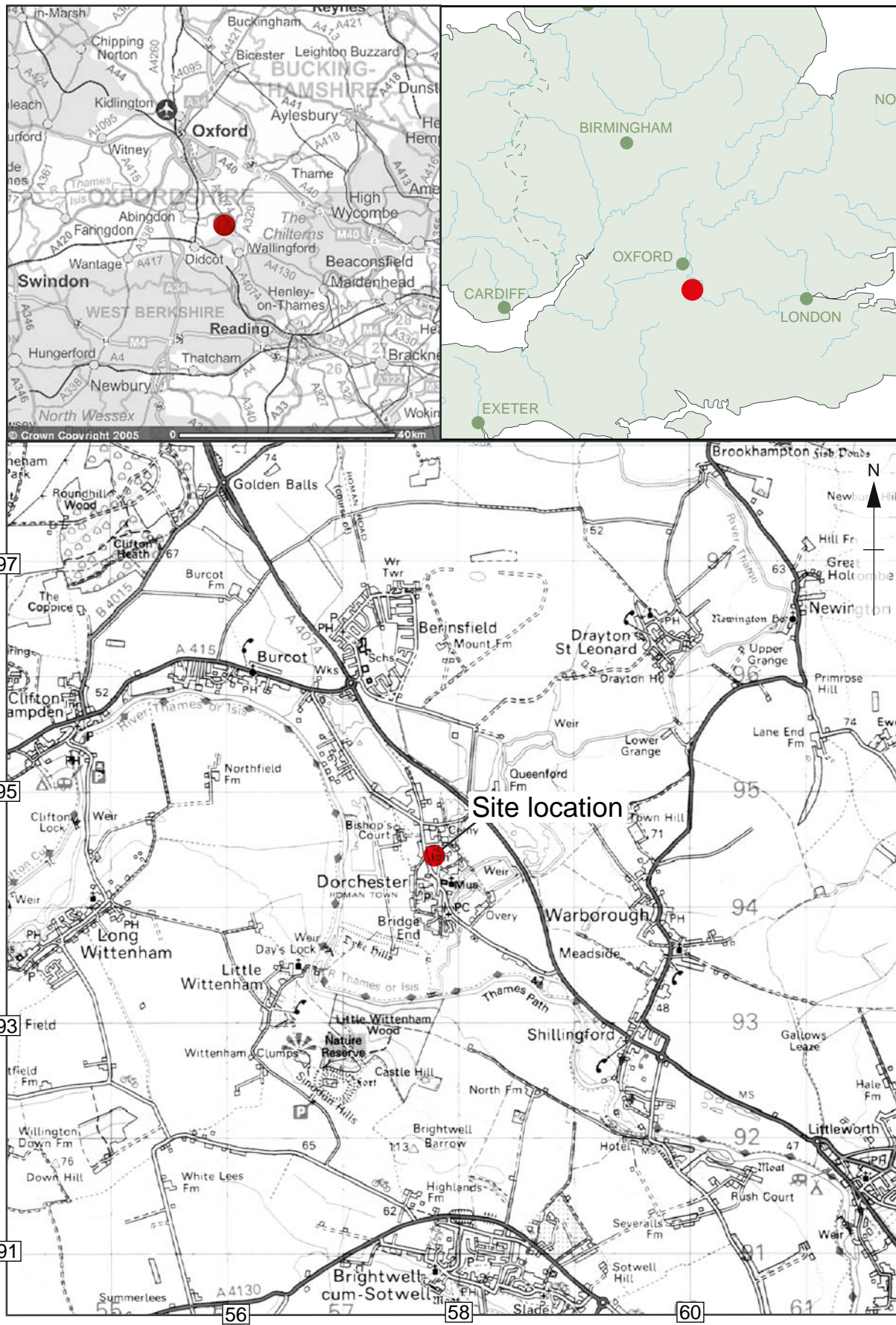
5.1.2 The previous interior of the tower, including wooden cupboards, was all removed. Two new floors were inserted, providing more useable space, which were adapted into an office and a store room. On the ground floor, a new staircase was added and the area was updated to create both a kitchen and a toilet. The second floor was designed to have as little impact on the tower, as was possible, and is a wooden box

structure within the tower. Above this, another full floor was created, in the same style as the two floors that were already present.

6 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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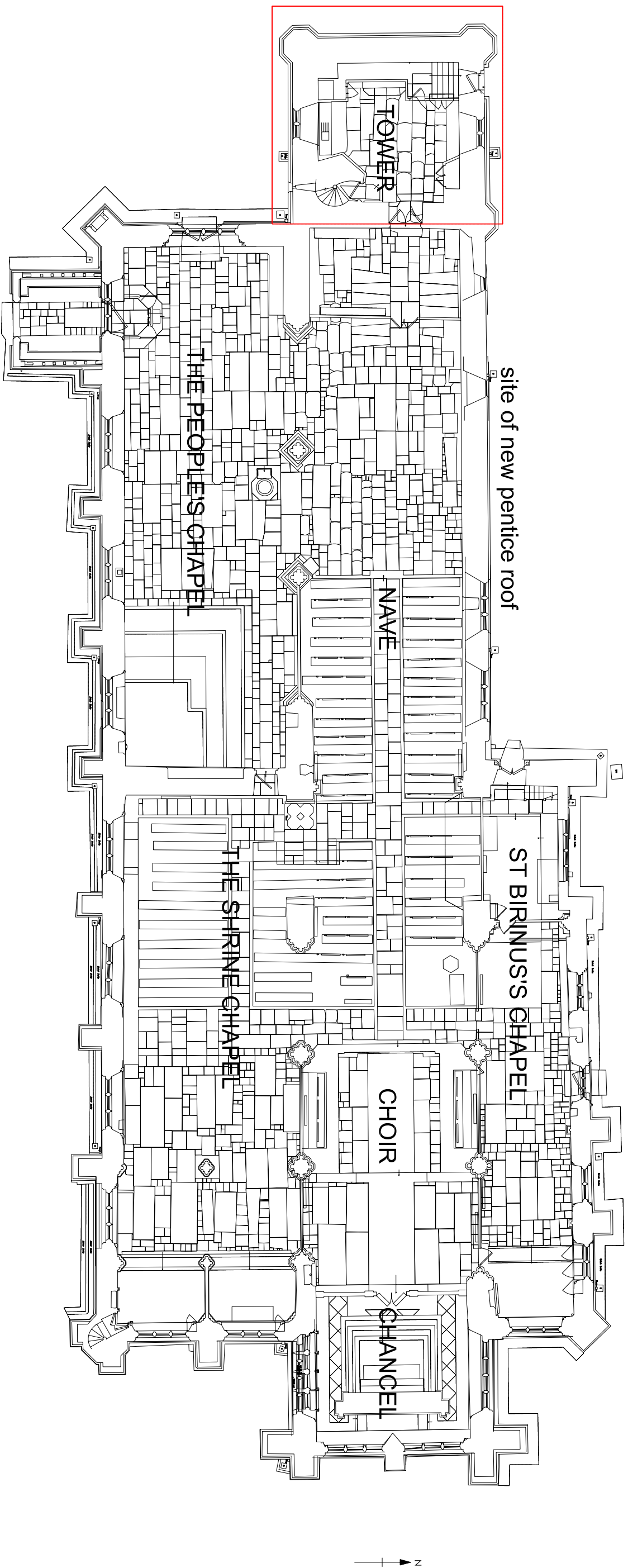
Oxford Archaeology, 2004, *Dorchester Abbey Historic Buildings Analysis*



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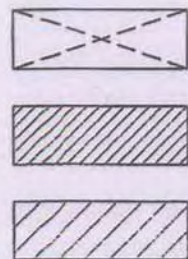
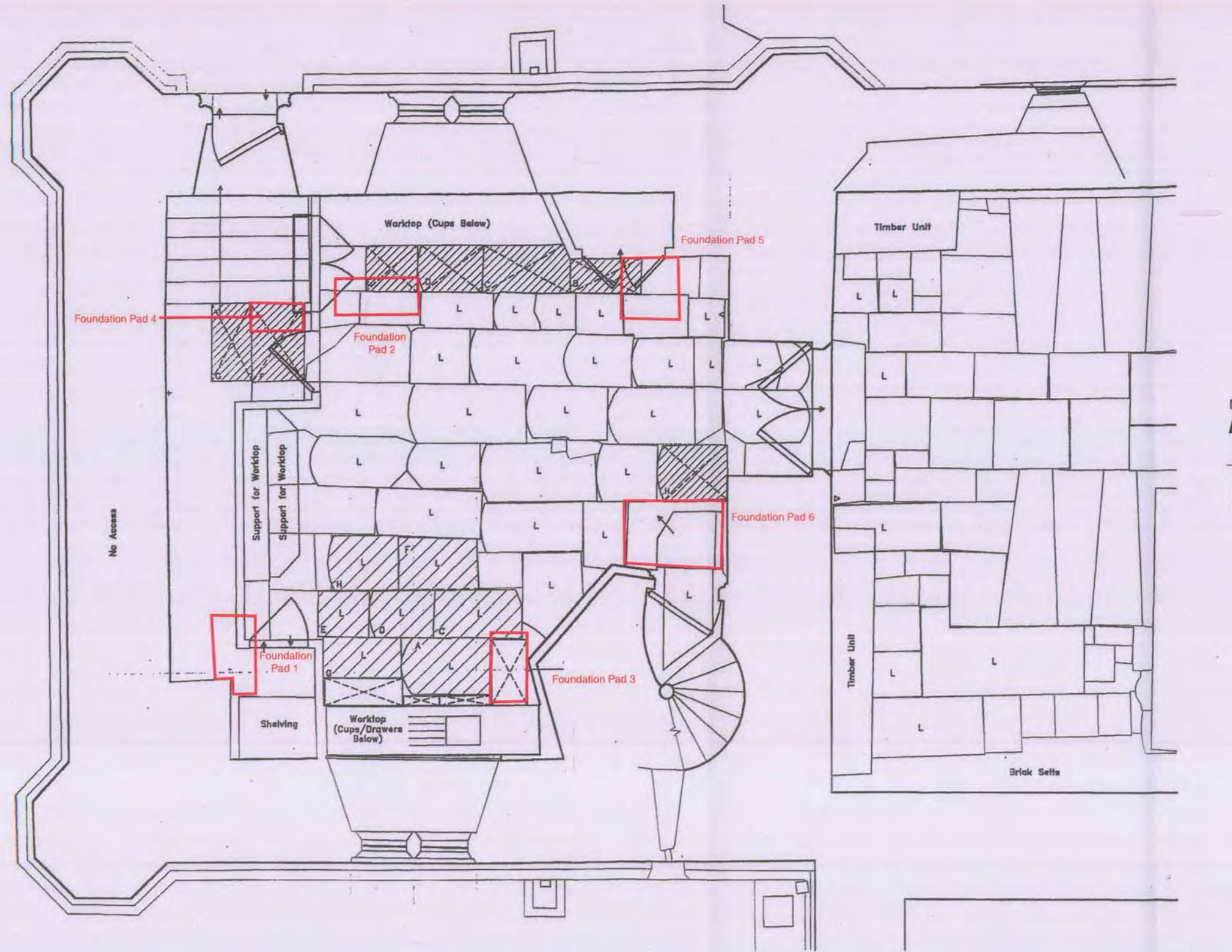
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Figure 1: Site location



0 5 m
Scale at A3 1:200

Figure 2: Plan of Dorchester Abbey



New (reclaimed) stone flags

Existing ledger stones to be relocated

New location for ledger stones

Plain flags removed to allow relocation of ledgers are to be re-used where possible, cut to suit as necessary.

REV	
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ALL DIMENSIONS TO BE CHECKED ON SITE. ANY DISCREPANCIES TO BE REPORTED TO THIS OFFICE

CLIENT	The PCC of Dorchester Abbey Church
JOB	Dorchester Abbey: Proposed Tower Improvements
TITLE	Relocation of Ledger stones to tower floor
DATE: 6/2005	DRAWN: DM SCALE: 1:50
204605/08	



Figure 3: Plan of Tower, showing location of foundation pads



Plate 1. East Elevation of Tower



Plate 2. South Elevation of Tower



Plate 3. West Elevation of Tower



Plate 4. North Elevation of Tower



Plate 5. Elevation of East/ South corner of Tower



Plate 6. North entrance steps



Plate 7. Timber ceiling before erection of new floors



Plate 8. Grave slab flagstones by East/ South corner of Tower



Plate 9. Foundation Pad 1



Plate 10. Grave slab removed from Foundation Pad 1



Plate 11. Foundation Pad 2 during excavation



Plate 12. Area of Foundation Pad 3



Plate 13. View of grave slab flagstones in Foundation Pad 3



Plate 14. Area of Foundation Pad 4



Plate 15. Grave slab flagstones in Foundation Pad 4



Plate 16. Foundation Pad 4 during excavation



Plate 17. Area of Foundation Pad 5



Plate 18. Grave slab flagstones in Foundation Pad 5



Plate 19. Area of Foundation Pad 6



Plate 20. Foundation Pad 6 during excavation



Plate 21. Grave slab flagstone in Foundation Pad 6



Plate 22. Erection of new floor



Plate 23. Erection of new interior



Plate 24. Erection of staircase



Plate 25. Staircase to new floors



Plate 26. Office room, showing no damage caused to structure, especially to the window



Plate 27. South elevation of outside of Tower, lower view



Plate 28. South elevation of outside of tower, upper view



Plate 29. West elevation of outside of Tower, lower view



Plate 30. West elevation of outside of Tower, upper view



Plate 31. North elevation of outside of Tower, lower view



Plate 32. North elevation of outside of Tower, upper view



Head Office/Registered Office/ OA South

Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES

t: +44 (0) 1865 263 800
f: +44 (0) 1865 793 496
e: info@oxfordarchaeology.com
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>

OA North

Mill 3
Moor Lane
Lancaster LA1 1QD

t: +44 (0) 1524 541 000
f: +44 (0) 1524 848 606
e: [oanorth@oxfordarchaeology.com](mailto: oanorth@oxfordarchaeology.com)
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>

OA East

15 Trafalgar Way
Bar Hill
Cambridgeshire
CB23 8SQ

t: +44 (0) 1223 850500
e: [oaeast@oxfordarchaeology.com](mailto: oaeast@oxfordarchaeology.com)
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>



Director: Gill Hey, BA PhD FSA MCifA
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