

Dorchester Abbey Dorchester on Thames Oxfordshire



Historic Buildings Analysis



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DORCHESTER ABBEY, OXON

HISTORIC BUILDING ANALYSIS

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DORCHESTER ABBEY, OXON

HISTORIC BUILDING ANALYSIS

SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out archaeological and historical analysis of Dorchester Abbey Church, Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire. This is the only surviving substantially intact medieval abbey church in England, its survival is due to it being retained as a parish church after the reformation. It lies on the site of Dorchester Cathedral a dissolved diocese which once stretched as far as what is now Lincolnshire. The site remained important after it ceased to be a cathedral and the building was enlarged and enhanced throughout the medieval and post medieval periods.

This project was only a part of a much wider programme of investigation carried out by several organisations and individuals. Below ground archaeological work was previously undertaken by Graham Keevill, wall paintings were analysed and conserved by Ann Ballyntyne and Warwick Rodwell conducted historical research. OA investigation and recording was concentrated on areas of above-ground historic fabric undergoing disturbance during the restoration, these areas included the roof, some areas of walling and the floor of the People's Chapel. A survey of those parts of the abbey interior affected by restoration work was also carried out.

Areas of wall were stripped of plaster in Saint Birinus's Chapel, The People's Chapel and the north wall of the Nave. These revealed different types of construction all of which appeared to confirm the supposed dates of each wall. Some areas of roof structure required extensive restoration and these were examined by OA. Dendochronological analysis showed that the (seemingly 19th century) roof of the nave was partially built from reused 17th century timbers. An analysis of the flooring of the abbey revealed that the church has been re-floored a number of times but this has been piecemeal and that some areas of early flooring may remain.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 LOCATION AND SCOPE OF WORK

- 1.1.1 Dorchester Abbey lies in the small market town of Dorchester on Thames in South Oxfordshire. The abbey sits on the eastern edge of the town, next to the flood plain of the River Thames. To the south the Thames joins the Thames leaving the town surrounded on two sides by rivers. Small lakes created from gravel quarries in recent times lie to the north of the town. Across the Thames to the south the land rises sharply to the hills known as the Sinodun Hills (or more popularly the Wittenham Clumps).
- 1.1.2 The site lies on the Thames Valley terrace gravels. Brickearth has been recorded overlying the gravels to the east around Dorchester Abbey Church, although gault and greensand deposits are located beyond the gravel terraces (British Geological Survey, Sheet 254). The site lies at *c* 49 m OD.
- 1.1.3 Dorchester was a Roman town which became the site of a Saxon monastery and cathedral of the vast Diocese which stretched as far as Lincoln. After the Norman conquest and the removal of the see to Lincoln the church reverted to being a house of Augustinian Canons; and after the dissolution in 1536 survived as a parish church.¹
- 1.1.4 During 2002-4 the church has been undergoing a massive programme of repair. New work included the construction of a new cloister-like building on the exterior of the north wall. The main focus of restoration work concentrated on repairing the roof structure and walls. A new lobby, new lighting, heating and sound facilities were also added.
- 1.1.5 OA monitored the restoration works and observed areas of fabric which had been exposed by the work. Features were recorded on the walls which had previously been obscured by plaster, these included numerous putlog holes and small voids. Investigation of the roof structures and dendrochronological dating provided information on the post medieval roof. An examination of floor surfaces has shown that small areas of possible early flooring survive despite alterations in the 19th and 20th centuries.
- 1.1.6 Related work was carried out on wall paintings by Ann Ballantyne and excavation on the north of the church and trenching for central heating pipes in the nave and monitoring of the unblocking of the nave door was previously carried out by Graham Keevill Associates. The work was carried out on behalf of the Parochial Church Council council, in co-ordination with the County Archaeologist, Paul Smith, and the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, Julian Munby. Warwick Rodwell is writing a definitive architectural history of the church at the time of writing. This report details only the results of the Oxford Archaeology work and should be read in conjunction with the reports mentioned above as well as the Conservation Plan prepared by Martin Ashley Architects.

1.2 AIMS

¹ The standard modern accounts of the abbey and town are to be found in the *Victoria County History Oxon*, vols. *ii* and *vi*.

The general aims of the investigation were:

- Investigate areas of fabric exposed by the renovations
- Relate the discoveries to existing knowledge
- Produce a report and archive.

1.3 OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 The objectives are:

Investigate the fabric and construction of the People's Chapel

- Record the exposed south wall
- Record areas disturbed by the new lobby insertion at the west end
- Record floor surfaces
- Examine wall paintings and decoration
- Access and record the roof

1.3.2 *Investigate the fabric and construction of the Nave*

- Record the exposed north wall
- Investigate the blocked openings on the north wall
- Examine and record the roof
- Record Floor surfaces

1.3.3 *Investigate the fabric and construction of the Choir and Chancel*

- Record floor surfaces
- Examine wall paintings and decoration
- Access and record the roof

1.3.4 *Investigate the fabric and construction of the Shrine Chapel*

- Investigate the blocked openings high on the north wall
- Examine and record the roof and vault
- Record floor surfaces

1.3.5 *Investigate the fabric and construction of Saint Birinus's Chapel*

- Record the exposed north wall
- Record floor surfaces

1.3.6 *Survey the interior of the abbey*

- Produce an internal survey for use on current and future recording of the abbey
- Show locations of wall paintings and exposed stonework.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 FIELDWORK METHODS AND RECORDING

2.1.1 *The Base Survey*

The base survey for the present programme of archaeological recording was previously commissioned by the church. This survey includes a detailed floor plan and external elevations. Internal elevations were not available and a survey was carried out by OA to provide suitable drawings (see below). A previously commissioned rectified photographic survey of the exterior north wall was made available.



2.1.2 *The Drawn Record and Survey*

Prior to the current restoration there has been only limited survey of the interior spaces of the abbey. Although the interior has been planned in some detail many elevations have been only recorded through sketches and photography. Naturally this made the exact placing of details (primarily of areas of wall painting exposed during restoration works) problematic. Areas of survey carried out by OA would also be left as divorced islands of detail with no survey to tie them to. It was felt that the completion of such a survey would allow archaeological recording to be placed within its context.

2.1.3 A limited survey of the church was conducted as part of a recording programme being carried out by Oxford Archaeology during the most recent stage of renovation work. A range of paper and digital techniques had been used already to record parts of the abbey revealed during its renovation, and the purpose of the survey was to tie these together as a cohesive whole, as well as recording new data.

2.1.4 The survey consisted of recording selective internal elevations of the abbey tied into an existing digital plan. A survey company (Sterling Surveys) had already surveyed a plan of the abbey at 1:100, so a good control network of survey stations had already been established.

2.1.5 The survey had two main objectives. To record the position of wall painting uncovered during renovation of the interior of the abbey, and to tie in hand drawn material recorded during stripping and re-plastering of certain areas of the abbey to put them in their general context.

2.1.6 *Equipment Used*

A Leica TCR 705 TST (Total Station Theodolite) with REDM (Reflectorless Electro-magnetic Distance Measurement) was used. Into this was connected a 486 50Mhz Fujitsu laptop with 16MB RAM running Penmap 2.3 software, to enable 'real-time' survey.

2.1.7 *Survey Methodology*

The basic method was to take square-on photos of each area of wall painting, using 35mm black and white and slide film, as well as a digital camera. Each photo taken had a minimum of four targets in the picture. The position of these targets was fixed using the TST, they could then be used to rectify the photos at a later stage onto the elevation.

2.1.8 Once the position of the wall paintings had been established, an outline survey was conducted of each internal elevation where these occurred. Other internal elevations were then surveyed where previous hand-drawn recording had taken place. Once a basic outline of each required elevation had been recorded, salient points of detail were added. Key points were identified and surveyed in, and photographs taken of these areas, using a similar technique as that described above. These photos were later rectified using the key points as a reference. To supplement the photos taken brief measured sketches were also used of certain, more complex, details.

2.1.9 Once the survey was complete the data was exported from Penmap as a DXF file and then opened in AutoCAD. The data was then split into individual two-

dimensional elevations. Additional detail was added from the rectified photos and sketch drawings. Onto these were rectified the photos of the wall painting. The photos were then trimmed so they just showed the areas of wall painting. Hand-drawn, measured detail was added by scanning in the paper copies, georeferencing the scans in the CAD drawing and digitising them.

2.1.10 *The Photographic Record*

A full black and white negative, colour print and colour slide photographic record was made by OA of all features and details. In addition, a general record of work in progress was carried out. Digital photographs were taken to supplement the record.

2.1.11 *The Written Record*

Written descriptions of the structure were made as part of the annotated drawings, additional notes were taken as appropriate.

2.2 **ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

2.2.1 Prehistoric activity in the area is well attested by a number of finds in the locality. Iron Age remains include the massive Oppidum (Iron Age proto-town) to the south of the Dyke Hills and the impressive hillfort on the Wittenham Clumps. Recent research indicated that this is only part of a much wider prehistoric landscape including intensive settlement from the Neolithic onwards (Allen forthcoming).

2.2.2 During the Roman period the focus of settlement moved from the Oppidium and the clumps to the site of the modern town. This important small Roman town was roughly rectangular although the exact line of its defences is unknown. Excavations and chance finds have often revealed details of the town. This includes the discovery of a number of tessellated pavements and even painted plaster. A fragment of mosaic floor was found within the abbey in the 19th century (Rowley and Cook 1985). The late Roman and post Roman history of the town is uncertain

2.2.3 The earliest known church on (or near) the site was founded in the 8th century by Saint Birinus (a native of Italy) who had been sent from Milan to preach in Britain. It is not known for certain whether he chose the site himself or whether it was granted as a gift. It is also unknown if a church was already present on the site and the extent to which the Roman town survived. Dorchester became the centre of a massive diocese with a see stretching from the Humber to Oxfordshire.

2.2.4 By the 11th century a stone cathedral church existed and this may have been built by one of two bishops named Fadnith (1004-16 and 1034-49), (one of which rebuilt Stow Minster in Lincolnshire. Stowe retains much of its Saxon fabric and may give some idea of the appearance of Dorchester at the time). Remigius the first and only Norman bishop is credited with rebuilding the Saxon cathedral.

2.2.5 There has been frequent discussion since the earliest investigations as to the possibility that any 11th century fabric remains within the church. In the 1870s restoration Barns noted that the masonry in the North wall was “*of the peculiar wide jointed (sort) characteristic of 11th-century work*”. He noted similar masonry in the east pier of the east arch. Barns went so far as to offer a tentative reconstruction of this 11th century cathedral church as “*An aisleless nave was the same length as the present with a choir in the crossing under a shingle lantern tower. A transeptual chapel stood either side of the crossing and a shallow apsidal*



sanctuary to the east.” Rowley (et al) discuss the relevance of a ledge which survives low down on the crossing walls and which may be a survival from this 11th-century church and may indicate the entrance to the transeptal chapels (See Figure 6).

- 2.2.6 After the conquest Dorchester’s see shrank dramatically and new Bishoprics (such as Lincoln) were created in its place. After the removal of the see to Lincoln the church declined in importance but still maintained some of its old privileges and rights. It was first settled by secular canons until about 1140 when it passed to regular canons. These Arrousisian canons (The Order of Saint Nicholas of Arrouaise) belonged to a strict order, which were heavily influenced by the Cistercians.
- 2.2.7 Much of the Norman work has been obscured by later masonry but some fine architectural features (arches and doors) may be Norman. The magnificent Norman lead font depicting the 11 apostles (Judas omitted) dates to c1170 and is a survival from this phase of the church's history.
- 2.2.8 Later medieval work dominates the architecture of the church both inside and out. In the early 13th century aisles were added to the choir extending this part of the church dramatically. In 1225 the monks opened the tomb of Birinus and after the publicity generated by this the abbey became an important place of pilgrimage. By 1300 a new shrine had been built for the saint’s veneration and by 1320 the south choir aisle was added and became the shrine chapel. The shrine one can see today was reconstructed from fragments in 1964.
- 2.2.9 By c1340 the eastward extension of the choir had been completed and soon after the People’s Chapel was added. The tower was also rebuilt in the 14th century (although much of the tower now visible is 17th century in date). Fifteenth-century work within the church is less obvious although the south porch dates to this time.
- 2.2.10 After the abbey was suppressed in 1536 the abbey buildings were sold off and many may have been quickly destroyed. A large barn however survived this period and remained intact into the 19th century. The abbey church was saved for the townspeople, who had used part of it as their parish church (the People’s Chapel) and now took over the whole building. The largest piece of post dissolution work was the raising of a new tower in 1602 (this partly incorporates an earlier 14th century tower). The fragmentary remains of wallpaintings and numerous monuments are also survivors of the later abbey (see Figures 11 and 12).
- 2.2.11 By the 19th century the church had become somewhat dilapidated and was the subject of several phases of rebuilding and repair. The restoration of the east window and chancel was carried out by William Butterfield between 1846 and 1852. From 1858-1874 Sir Gilbert Scott restored all the roofs and rebuilt the vault in the Shrine Chapel.

3 THE ABBEY FABRIC AND ANALYSIS

3.1 EXTERIOR AND GENERAL FORM

3.1.1 The large and impressive abbey church of St Peter and St Paul is quite rightly Dorchester's most famous building and dominates this small historic town. It is set on a slight rise above the River Thames which runs to the immediate east of the abbey. It is a massive almost rectangular building made up of a nave and chancel at the centre, with a small aisle to the north (Saint Birinus's Chapel) and two aisles to the south (The Shrine Chapel and the People's Chapel). There is a lofty stone tower at the west end and at the east end the chancel projects slightly. The abbey buildings are almost all lost (the tithe barn was demolished in the late 19th century) the only survivor is the old guest house range to the west of the church, this now acts as a small museum with some office space. The site of the cloister lies up against the north wall of the nave.

3.2 INTERIOR

3.2.1 The long nave dominates the interior space, unlike many other large abbey churches there are no side chapels as such, rather later accretions are in the form of aisles added to the main block. The church is entered through the People's Chapel, a 14th-century aisle, which is almost as large as the nave itself. This is divided from the nave to the north, by an elegant arcade and from the Shrine Chapel to the east by a solid masonry wall pierced by a small door.

3.2.2 The nave reaches as far as the choir, at its eastern end there are arcades on the north and south sides, these give access to Saint Birinus's and the Shrine Chapels respectively. The Shrine Chapel is dominated by the reconstructed shrine under its high vaulted ceiling (with gallery above); two altars lie on low steps on the east wall. To the north of the choir the chapel of Saint Birinus is far smaller and more intimate than the Shrine Chapel and has a single altar on raised step. The chancel and choir are lit by huge windows decorated with elegant medieval tracery and stained glass of various dates.

3.2.3 Almost all of these spaces underwent some form of intervention during the restoration work, much of this was minor and the work only consisted of stripping modern paint and whitewashing as well as minor repairs. In other places major structural work was carried out which necessitated major intervention into the historic fabric.

3.3 THE PEOPLE'S CHAPEL

3.3.1 *Description*

The People's Chapel takes up the south west corner of the abbey. It was added in c 1340 as a parish church attached to the much larger monastic building. The chapel is divided from the nave by an elegant arcade and from the Shrine Chapel by a wall pierced only by a small door (see Fig 9) this door has drip moulding on its surround and was once evidently outside. The chapel houses the main modern access route into the abbey, through the door to the south porch and the doors in the west wall.

3.3.2 The chapel is lit from the south wall by three tall 14th-century arched windows, each has three main lights with cusped tracery above. A smaller (halved) window sits at the west end above the small door to the porch (this window was made smaller by the raising of the porch roof (c1633). On the west wall a 4 light window with cusped quatrefoil heads provides illumination, this is a 19th-century restoration as the window was blocked c1633 and later re-opened.



3.3.3 Perhaps the most unusual survivals in the People's Chapel are the fine medieval and post medieval wall paintings, which may be found on the east wall. These include a crucifixion scene above the altar and a large long-armed (probably post-medieval) cross which sits in the blind arch above. The cross is surrounded by post medieval painted foliage (see wall painting report by Ann Ballantyne for further details).

3.3.4 The 12th-century lead font with its 11 male figures seated in a Romanesque arcade is undoubtedly one of the abbey's greatest treasures and is housed on its stone pedestal at the west end of the chapel. The altar at the east end is sited on a raised platform raised up on four steps. These steps are floored with 19th century (possibly Minton?) tiles and form the roof of an ossuary beneath. This ossuary was created to house the bodies unearthed in the construction of the chapel in the 14th century. The altar at the top of the dais is served by a piscina in the wall and a plain sedilia set into a recess in the south wall.

3.3.5 *Interventions*

Restoration work in this area included:

- The stripping of plaster from the base of the south wall
- the replacement of the 19th century lobby with a modern example
- restoration of the roof structure and covering
- removal of upper layers of paint on wall surface
- Removal of asbestos dust.

3.3.6 *Investigation*

OA work on the chapel consisted of the photographing and drawing of the exposed masonry of the south wall (the former was somewhat hampered by the necessarily intricate scaffolding). Other areas such as the roof and east wall were examined during restoration. The floor was recorded after the removal of scaffolding.

3.3.7 *Walls (Figures 9 and 10)*

The lower part of the south wall (beneath the pronounced stringcourse) was stripped of its plaster during the restorations. The stripped area extended from the small piscina on the east end to within 1m of the door at the west end. This revealed a largely uniform wall made up of small; fairly regular blocks of tightly bonded limestone. At the base of the wall a compacted area of stone and earth makes up the footing of the wall.

3.3.8 Features exposed in the wall included a row of irregularly spaced and sized small blocked rectangular sockets. Most of these sockets were high on the exposed section and away from the floor level. On the west end midway along the wall were some smaller square pockets and a pocket with an arched head. This may have once held a stoop, piscinia or similar feature. These were blocked with fragments of 18th and 19th-century tile, stone and brick. The walls were bonded with a sandy yellow mortar. During restoration the walls were re-plastered and painted with new limewash. The exposure of the wall revealed the character of this fabric associated with the 14th-century build.

3.3.9 *Lobby*

A small 19th century lobby was removed during the restorations and replaced by a modern glazed lobby on the west wall of the People's Chapel. The original lobby

led from the south porch through into a small vestibule before entering the church through a door. The lobby was made with stained dark oak and was decorated in a simple Gothic style with crenelated top. The lobby was dismantled and is now stored on the gallery above the People's Chapel.

- 3.3.10 The insertion of the modern lobby entailed a small degree of disturbance at the west end of the chapel. To allow the construction of a ramp (for wheelchair access) the stone steps were removed and re-set; no archaeological features were noted during their removal.
- 3.3.11 Part of the stone paved floor was removed to allow a concrete raft top to be constructed for the new lobby. This allowed inspection and very limited excavation beneath the floor. The edges of a brick lined 18th or 19th century vault were located but not excavated.
- 3.3.12 *Roof*
The roof has a hipped ceiling with four large trusses. During restoration work it was noted that parts of the wallplates were suffering from rot (caused by leaks in the roof). This necessitated the repair and replacement of an area of wallplate in the northwest corner of the chapel. The roof was rebuilt in the 19th century and there did not appear to be any material from an earlier roof retained in this structure.
- 3.3.13 *Floor*
Most of the floor of the chapel is paved with hard limestone blocks. Most of these are fairly uniform in material (if not in size) and are only lightly worn, they seem to represent a recent period of replacement and renewal (see Figs 11 and 12). Despite this there are a number of earlier grave slabs scattered throughout the floor and nearly all of these appear to belong to the second half of the 18th century. Unlike many examples in the nave all of these slabs appear to be designed to lie flat (rather than being re-set gravestones). Some are too worn to be easily read but the style of lettering indicates an 18th century date.
- 3.3.14 The presence of small groups of grave slabs belonging to particular families (Grangers, Bakers etc) may indicate that these slabs are in the original positions (with the graves beneath) and may not have been moved in later floor restorations. Near the font lie two slabs, which bear the impression of now missing medieval brasses. These both appear to be late medieval priests; it is unknown whether these lie in their original positions. Similarly a shallow coffin lid used as a grave cover may be of early date. A small number of plain tiles and medieval encaustic tiles in the north-east corner appear to have been reset.
- 3.3.15 The east end of the People's Chapel is largely taken up by the raised altar platform. This is made up of three tall steps edged with neatly dressed limestone blocks. These are quite tall and are seemingly designed to give more room to the vaulted ossuary, which lies below. The steps are floored with 19th century encaustic tiles (possibly Minton?). These are either in sequences of four or are single. Geometric shapes, floral motifs and animal designs predominate. The entire dais appears to be 19th or possibly 20th century in origin although it may be a rebuild of an earlier structure.

3.4 THE NAVE



3.4.1 *Description*

The long narrow nave lies on the northern side of the abbey church. It is accessed through the people's chapel to the south from which it is divided by an arcade of graceful pointed arches set on tall columns. A door on the rather featureless west wall allows access to the bell tower and another door in the north wall gives access to the churchyard and the newly added timber cloister (2003).

3.4.2 *Interventions*

Restoration work in this area included

- The stripping of plaster from the base of the north wall
- restoration of the roof structure and covering
- removal of upper layers of paint on wall surfaces
- Unblocking of the North door (pre OA involvement)
- Removal of asbestos dust.

3.4.3 *Investigation*

OA work on the nave consisted of the photographing and drawing of the exposed masonry of the north wall. The roof was examined and a sample truss drawn and the curious blocked feature at the west end of the wall was examined. The floor was recorded after the removal of scaffolding. Graham Keevill Associates excavated the exterior of the north wall in 2001.

3.4.4 *Walls (Figure 3)*

3.4.5 The north wall is lit by a number of large 14th century windows set high on the north wall, the surround top a blocked window is also clearly visible. On the exterior wall a blocked early arch piercing the wall may be seen at the east end of the north wall. The windows were cleaned by the Stained Glass Division of Cathedral Enterprises Ltd, Canterbury.

3.4.6 High on the west end of the north wall lies a small window, which pierces a large niche set into the wall. On the west end of the niche part of a corner turret of the tower projects into the nave. The niche is topped by a wooden lintel supported on limestone corbels. During restoration it became apparent that this wooden lintel was much decayed and in need of full replacement. The lintel was investigated whilst in situ and it was noted that the corbels which retain it were machine cut and that there was pencil drafting on the timber. Although the timber was found to be unsuitable for dendro dating it is clear from the physical evidence that both the timber and its corbels are relatively recent in date being late 19th century at the earliest.

3.4.7 It was unclear how the arrangement at this end of the wall had developed and there was no external evidence to suggest it was related to vanished buildings (such as a stair or connecting wing to the claustral buildings). A perhaps more likely explanation is that when the tower was rebuilt in 1602, the masonry was removed from between the westernmost window (part of the quoining and splay of which survives) and the new tower wall, and a small window was built to replace it. The timber lintel with its corbels may be related to 19th century work on the roof and probably replaced an earlier timber.

3.4.8 The lower part of the wall was stripped of plaster and this revealed a fabric made up of courses of large fairly regular sub-rectangular blocks of limestone. These are bonded in a soft grey mortar with wide spacing between each stone. In character

this is the same as Norman fabric identified on the exterior of the church. This fabric has also been identified as Saxon (Rodwell forthcoming).

- 3.4.9 The small north door (now leading to the new pentice) was unblocked prior to OA involvement (see Keevill forthcoming). This door would have originally given access to the cloister from the church. The blocking was revealed to be 18th century and a number of incised examples of graffiti were located in the door jambs. There is no evidence of a matching door at the west end of the wall, although this would normally be expected with an abbey cloister (these were more usually however on the southern side of the church). The lack of such a door is unusual and its absence may be due to the rather piecemeal addition of a later cloister on an earlier wall. Similarly the siting of a cloister on the north rather than the south is unusual and may imply (now vanished) buildings prevented its construction in the usual place.
- 3.4.10 *Roof (Figure 4)*
The roof is made up of a number of oak trusses each supporting a crown post. The largest element of the restoration was the repair of the roof. After investigation it was ascertained that the wall plates were damp and decayed and that even the great trusses of the roof itself had suffered from serious decay and the insides had almost entirely rotted away. Access to the roof allowed dendrochronological dating to be carried out (see 4.3). This established that despite appearing to be an entirely 19th century roof, large elements of the 17th century roof had been retained and reused. None of the timbers tested were of medieval date however.
- 3.4.11 *Floor*
The nave floor is paved with similar (but perhaps more worn) paving stones to those in the People's Chapel. The floor is also covered with large numbers of ledger stones and a group of reused gravestones. Most of the eastern part of the nave is covered by pews on timber platforms and the floor beneath (where it exists) is obscured. The west end is known to have been repaved in 1747 (VCH, VII, 59).
- 3.4.12 The southern side of the paved half of the nave is covered by a number of reused gravestones. These have rounded heads and a few bear winged cherubim heads and scrollwork. They are nearly all 18th century in date although there are a number of 17th century examples, including one from 1604. Some stones representing family groups were retained when the stones were moved in from outside. The centre and northern sections are paved with mixed plain and ledger stones, the larger ones of which may be in their original positions. These vary from a large medieval tomb to 18th and 19th century ledger stones of varying quality and size. The reused medieval stone coffin lids at the west end have clearly been taken and reused from elsewhere.
- 3.4.13 At the west end of the nave lies a (19th century?) screen dividing off an area now used as a vestry. The floor of this is made up almost entirely of reset coffin lids. The aisle between the pews is covered by large regular limestone slabs; these are almost unworn and are very similar in appearance to those in the People's Chapel. The floor is generally in good sound condition although the wear on some ledger and gravestones is noticeable and they should be recorded as soon as possible. The surfaces of several stones are spalling away and this is again destroying lettering and decoration.



3.5 THE SHRINE CHAPEL

3.5.1 *Description*

The Shrine Chapel sits in the southeast corner of the abbey. It is a large open space accessed from the nave and divided from the people's chapel by a wall. At the east end of the chapel graceful and slender columns support a lofty vault and gallery above. This vault was rebuilt after a collapse in the 19th century and it is decorated with Victorian Gothic painted stonework.

3.5.2 The shrine itself was destroyed during the dissolution in 1536. The reconstructed shrine is made up of fragments found in a bricked up door in the 1870s and reconstructed in the 1960s. A number of late medieval-early modern monuments also may be found here, particularly at the east end. Faded but still vibrant high Victorian wall paintings surround one of the eastern altars amongst fragments of earlier decorative schemes.

3.5.3 *Interventions*

Restoration work in this area included:

- restoration of the roof structure and covering
- removal of upper layers of paint on wall surfaces
- Removal of asbestos dust
- Creation of a new stone floor (reused York stone).

3.5.4 *Investigation*

OA investigated the roof structure above the vault, the floor surfaces were examined and walls with newly discovered wall paintings were surveyed.

3.5.5 *Walls (figures 7 and 8)*

The only disturbance the walls underwent in this area was the removal of modern paint surfaces, during this process Ann Ballantyne located a number of medieval and later wallpaintings, including what has been tentatively identified as an area of true fresco (see Ann Ballantyne's separate report). Excavation by Keevill Consultancy revealed a cross wall in the chapel and it has been tentatively suggested that this is the remains of an earlier transept (Keevill forthcoming).

3.5.6 *Roof*

The large wagon hipped roof has three trusses each has a central beam supporting crucked braces. The central beam spans the chapel, the western sits flush with the wall and the eastern makes up the front of the gallery. Restoration work on the roof was largely on the exterior and had little impact on the historic fabric. The east end of the roof was open to inspection and appears to be 19th-century, although perhaps as elsewhere it makes use of earlier material.

3.5.7 *The Gallery*

The gallery sits high above the east end of the shrine chapel built over the elaborate stone vaulting (a Victorian reconstruction of the medieval original). It is accessed by a narrow spiral stair, which lies in the thickness of the southeast corner of the abbey. This stair is narrow and built entirely of stone it is lit by a number of small lights. The treads appear to be medieval and in places are well worn. The stair gives access to the gallery space. This is an open area in the eaves of the roof. The timber floor is raised on a timber platform built over the stone vaulting (the interior of the vaulting can be accessed through a small door). There is a simple plain timber balustrade on the west edge looking out over the chapel.

3.5.8 Two arched windows light the eastern stone gable end and the exposed stonework on this wall is neat and unweathered. A small 19th century plaque sits on the wall between the two windows. This entire gable was raised in the 19th century and the roof was reconstructed. Several of the rafters above the gallery reuse earlier moulded timbers and these may be the only surviving elements of an earlier roof or even screen, the moulding appear to be late medieval.

3.5.9 *Floor*

The floor of the Shrine Chapel is clearly divided into two halves. The western half is floored with a paved limestone floor. This is a new created floor using reclaimed (and worn) limestone slabs from elsewhere, it replaces a 19th century timber pew base. A small area around the small door to the People's Chapel is paved in similar unworn stone to those seen in that chapel.

3.5.10 The eastern half however is liberally covered with ledger stones and monuments of various dates; these are set in a floor of mixed worn and partially worn paving stones. The greatest concentration of medieval monuments lies in this area. These consist of brasses, brass matrices and effigies which line the altar steps and the sides of the chapel. More medieval monuments lie to the west side of the reconstructed shrine. Other monuments in the Shrine Chapel consist of 17th, 18th and 19th century ledger stones, some of which are fragmentary and may have been bought from elsewhere.

3.6 **THE CHANCEL AND CHOIR**

3.6.1 *Description*

The Choir and Chancel form the main focus of the entire church. The altar is raised on a stepped platform edged in limestone and paved with 19th century tile. The stalls in the choir are mostly 19th century but do incorporate elements of late medieval work, including a number of elaborately carved gothic bench ends.

3.6.2 Behind the altar lies a 19th century marble reredos and to the south an elaborate 14th century sedilia. The most notable features of this part of the church are the magnificent windows with their spectacular tracery and original glass. The east window was restored in the 19th century and its uppermost part rebuilt, the glass is a mixture of medieval and later work. The Jesse window to the north of the chancel depicts the ancestry of Christ and again contains a mixture of medieval and later glass.

3.6.3 *Interventions*

work in this area included:

- restoration of the roof structure and covering
- removal of upper layers of paint on wall surfaces
- removal of asbestos.

3.6.4 *Investigations*

The floor surfaces were examined by OA. Survey work was carried out on all walls containing paintings.

3.6.5 *Walls (Figures 5 and 6)*

Some historic wallpainting fragments were located on the walls above the north and south arcades.



3.6.6 *Roof*

Work was carried out on the wall plates and rafters in Jan/Feb 2004; new pine wall plates were inserted and triangular galvanised iron braces secured the rafters to the wall plates

3.6.7 *Floor*

The floor is largely made up of 19th century encaustic or plain tiles, these cover the entire chancel and the central part of the choir. A number of historic ledger stones of various dates lie in the choir to either side of the aisle.

3.7 **SAINT BIRINUS'S CHAPEL**

3.7.1 *Description*

The small chapel of Saint Birinus is the north choir aisle of the abbey and forms an aisle of the choir. The chapel consists of a narrow space divided from the chancel to the south by a (seemingly 19th century) wooden screen. The chapel is lit by tall (14th century) windows on the north and east sides and is accessed from the chancel to the south or from the outside through a small door in the north wall. The altar is stepped up from the chapel floor and is surrounded by a number of aumbrys or cupboards built into the thickness of the exterior wall.

3.7.2 *Interventions*

Restoration work in this area included;

- The lower part of the north wall was stripped of its plaster along most of its length.

3.7.3 *Investigations*

OA investigation was limited to examining the north wall after it was stripped of plaster. The nature of the floor surfaces was also recorded.

3.7.4 *Walls*

The lower part of the north wall was stripped of plaster and exposed during restoration work. This allowed OA to inspect the wall in some detail. The stripped area ran from the small door (leading to the churchyard) on the west side to the steps rising to the altar. In height the stripped area only reached as far as the stringcourse beneath the windows (c160cm). A small aumbrey with arched head is set into the west end of the wall, this and two round pilasters on turned plinths (extending to the windows above) are the only notable architectural features to be seen on the wall.

3.7.5 The wall was inspected and photographed by OA on 16 October 2002. The wall was made up of squared, flat and irregular blocks of local yellow limestone. The wall is essentially rather crude. The lower part is roughly coursed and made up of fairly regular blocks (this extends up to 90cm in height). There is a clear division between this and the wall above which is far less regular and bonded with a simple 'mud' mortar of grey friable material (seen elsewhere in the abbey). The upper part of the exposed area of wall is also made up of smaller stones. Some areas are packed with small flat stones and rubble, this appears to be galleting to replace areas of stonework which have fallen away.

3.7.6 A number of small features were exposed during the restoration although no large features (such as blocked doors or windows) were noted. Three small square voids

were observed in a horizontal line some 30cm beneath the aumbry. These may be related to a now vanished fitting or panelling around the aumbry. Another larger square void (c8cm by 8cm) lies further along the wall between the two pilasters. This void contained a plug of (damp) timber. Again this void may be related to a vanished fitting or possibly to a phase of scaffolding of the wall during repairs. Despite the alterations, repairs and additions to the north wall of the chapel, the wall seems to be essentially of one build.

3.7.7 *Roof*

The roof was re-leaded externally with new sand cast lead sheeting, no features of archaeological interest were observed.

3.7.8 *Floor*

Around the edges of the chapel against the north wall and south arcade the floor is made up of very worn limestone slabs. The central area is paved with either only partially worn slabs or with 18th and 19th century ledger stones in family groups. A large square of concrete may be found at the west end of the chapel. The altar at the east end is floored with red, black and yellow tiles all of 19th century date. It is known that this area was repaved in 1765 (VCH, VII, 59) and the worn paving in this area may belong to this phase of flooring.

3.8 **WATCHING BRIEFS AND MONITORING**

3.8.1 Throughout the progress of the restoration OA staff carried out a number of watching briefs. These were all small-scale in nature and on the whole the results were limited.

3.8.2 The below ground watching briefs were carried out both inside and outside the abbey buildings. On the whole the below ground interventions were minimal in scale.

3.8.3 *Lighting and Services outside the abbey*

Five small pits were excavated around the exterior of the church by the contractors (see Fig 2). These were designed as earthing points for lightning conductors. These were inspected by OA on 10 April 2003. Each hole was 30cm by 30cm and up to 30cm deep. One was sited on each side of the projecting chancel and the remaining three were along the south wall between the east end and the porch.

Pit 1: dark topsoil with numerous small fragments of mortar, brick etc

Pit 2: dark brown/black topsoil many tiny fragments of mortar tile and brick

Pit 3: dark brown/black soil containing few fragments of mortar or brick

Pit 4: greyish soil c10cm deep over a darker black soil with numerous brick and mortar fragments. Some disarticulated bone fragments were found (later reburied). Part of a late medieval encaustic floor tile and a small sherd of green glazed pottery were also identified.

Pit 5: the upper 15cm contained much brick and human bone (all reburied), with darker black earth (containing many stones) below. Part of a large flat stone formed the base of the pit.



3.8.4 *Clearance of the west end of the People's Chapel*

To allow the insertion of a ramp to the new lobby a small area (c3m x 3m) area of paving was removed. The large stone steps leading up to the west door were also removed and reset. The removed paving was of the type seen elsewhere in the People's Chapel and was largely unworn. Beneath the slabs brick levelling was noted which may be associated with an earlier floor covering. The possible upper part of a brick lined grave (18th or 19th century) was also observed and recorded.

4 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 Despite the large-scale nature of the recent restoration the impact on the historic fabric was often surprisingly small. The areas of fabric revealed were often small and isolated from one another. When analysed however as part of the growing body of data and research on the abbey, it is hoped that the observations will contribute towards a further understanding of the abbey's development. The survey of internal elevations showing the location of wallpaintings and exposed stonework should provide a useful basis for a full survey at a later date.

4.1.2 This report should be used in conjunction with the reports by Graham Keevill: (below ground work in cloisters and in heating ducts and renewal of floor in main church, building recording on door to cloisters), Ann Ballyntyne (wallpaintings), and Warwick Rodwell (historical research).

4.2 PHASING AND DEVELOPMENT

4.2.1 Despite the limited amounts of historic building fabric exposed in the recent work most phases of the building's development were represented in some form. Before the current work the archaeology of the standing fabric was not well understood. No detailed modern analysis had taken place on either the interior or exterior and survey data (external only) was for architectural rather than archaeological purposes. The dating however of various sequences of activity was known or at least strongly suspected and the church had long been a subject of antiquarian study.

4.2.2 Three types of masonry were found (in the People's Chapel, The Nave and St Birinus Chapel). These represent very different styles of building limestone walling and appear to range in date from Norman to late medieval work. They exhibit some similarities to walling found during the Keevill excavation (KEEVILL 2003).

4.2.3 The investigation of the roofs revealed a (surprisingly) large amount of earlier timber reused in the 19th-century roofs, this may have not only been for practical reasons but also as an attempt to preserve some historic fabric?

4.2.4 The floor surfaces were shown to be very mixed in age, condition and materials. Some areas of paving use re-laid gravestones brought in from the churchyard and other monuments may have been moved around the church interior.

4.2.5 For wallpainting results see Ballantyne.

4.2.6 *Saxo-Norman Activity c900-1200*

No features were definitely attributable to either Saxon or Norman work. There is a strong argument that the north wall of the nave is Norman and the stonework revealed under the plaster was consistent with that observed elsewhere. The supposed blocked Saxon arch at the east end of the same wall (Keevill Forthcoming) was not visible in the abbey interior and the plaster was not stripped from behind it. No other early features were noted by OA.

4.2.7 *Later Medieval Activity c1200-1500*

More evidence of later medieval work was exposed or observed during restorations. The exposure of part of the 14th century south wall of the People's Chapel with its many small voids and the north wall of Saint Birinus's Chapel allowed examination of contrasting examples of later medieval fabric.

4.2.8 *16th and 17th century work*

The dendrochronological dates indicate that the nave roof was rebuilt in the 17th century (and again in the 19th). Some of the foliage patterned wallpaintings at the east end of the People's Chapel may also be of 16th or 17th century date.

4.2.9 *18th century work*

The most obvious surviving reminder of 18th century work is the large number of Ledger stones and gravestones built into the floor. Whilst some of these (see figs 11 and 12) have undoubtedly been brought in from outside and re-laid later on, many may be in their original positions.

4.2.10 *19th century*

There is a large amount of 19th-century work throughout the church. Many of the floor surfaces are 19th century as is much of the carpentry on the roofs. The removal of the timber lobby was the most significant impact on this phase of the building's history

4.2.11 *20th-21st centuries*

20th-century work is represented by the limestone paving slabs used in the People's Chapel and elsewhere. Large areas of patching with cementitious mortar on the west wall are evidence of 20th-century repair. The area of flooring in the Shrine Chapel which was previously covered with 19th century pews was replaced with re-used limestone slabs as part of the recent repairs (not shown on Fig 14).

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DORCHESTER ABBEY, Dendrochronological Dating

SAMPLE number & type	TIMBER AND POSITION DATES AD					H/S		SAPWOOD	NO OF	MEAN	STD
	spanning	bdry	complement	rings	width mm	devn mm	sens mm	dates/date ranges (AD)			
Nave roof reused timbers											
* <i>dorc1</i> c W brace 2 nd truss from tower	1502-1601			100	2.03	0.76	0.227	* <i>dorc2</i> c			E brace 2 nd
truss from tower	1508-1612	1612	H/S	105	2.04	0.56	0.209	1621-1653			
* = <i>dorc12</i> Site Master	1502-1612			111	2.02	0.53	0.191				

DORCHESTER, the Abbey, (SU 579 942), nave roof (reused timbers)

Felling date range: 1621-53

Braces 1612(h/s), 1601. *Site Master* 1502-1612 DRCHSTR1 ($t = 5.5$ bct4; 5.0 BDLEIAN3; 4.9 THEVYNE1)

Restoration and other building works have allowed a programme of building investigation and recording, including dendrochronology on two wind braces within the roof above the nave. The roof is essentially a nineteenth-century structure, but the braces were reused from an older building.



Summary of Site Details

Site name: Dorchester Abbey Church

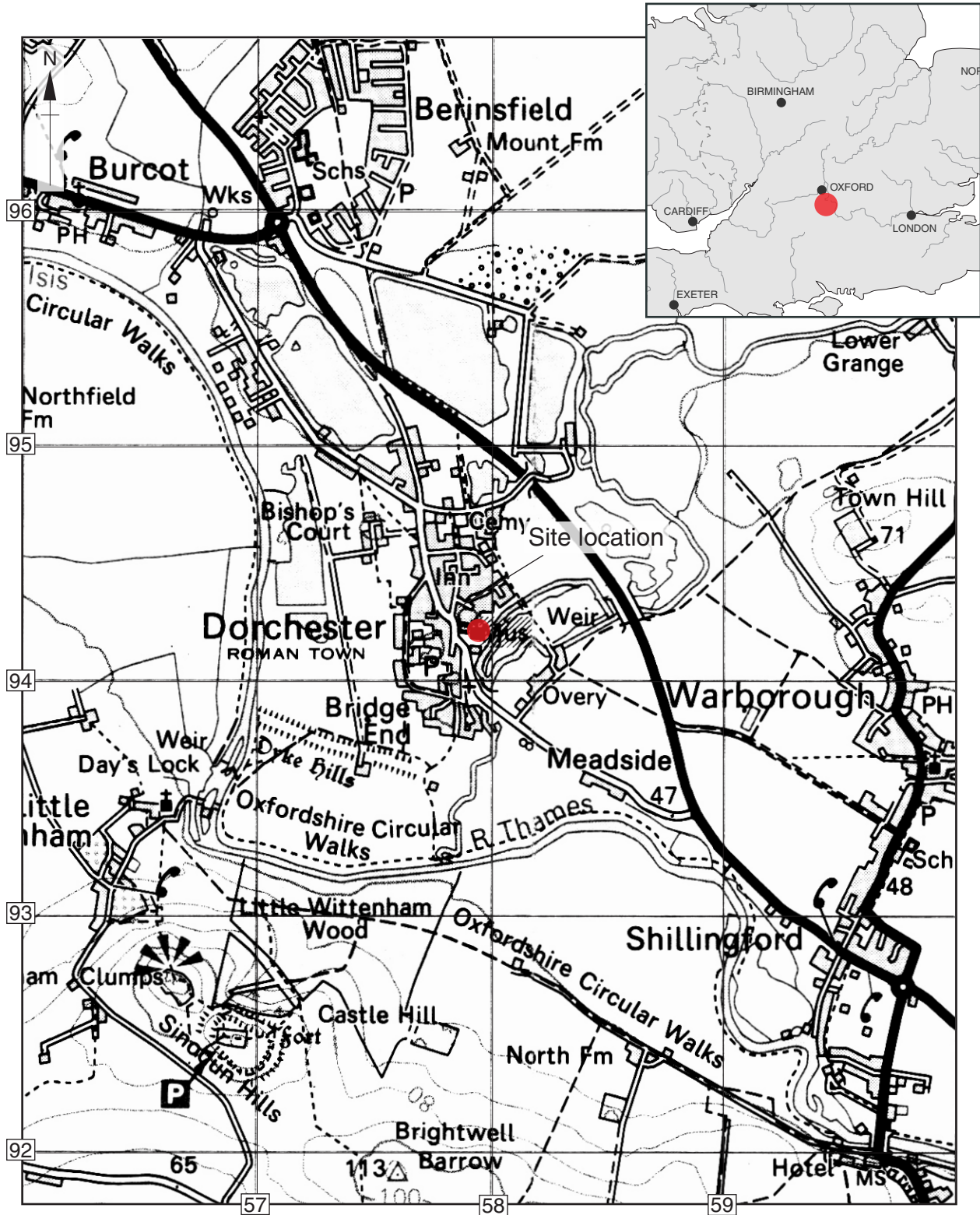
Site code: DORAB 02

Type of evaluation: Building Analysis

Date and duration of project: 2002-4

Summary of results: OA monitored restoration at this large and important abbey church. The main result of the work was an internal survey showing locations of wallpaintings identified during paint removal. Small scale watching briefs and investigation recorded areas of walling stripped of plaster, historic joinery and the make up of the floor surfaces.

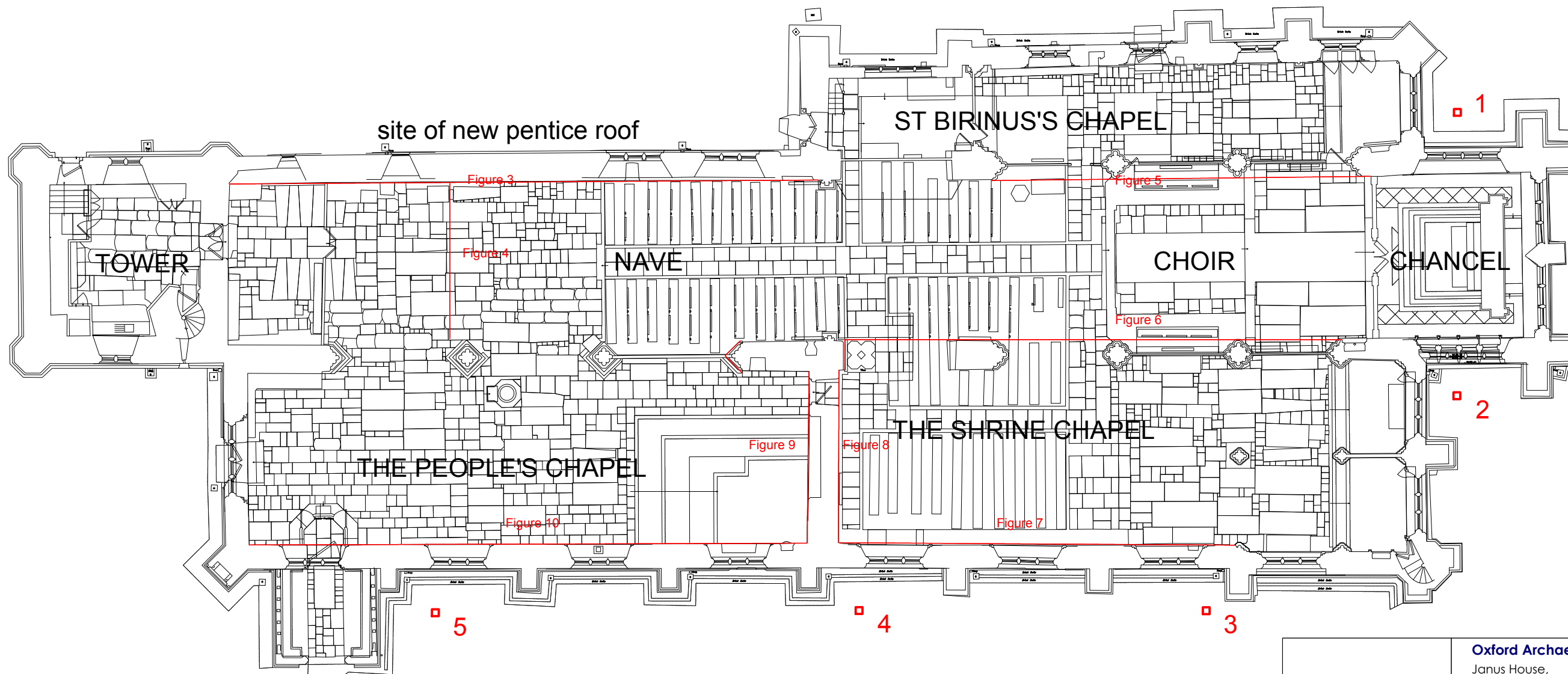
Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.




Scale 1:50,000

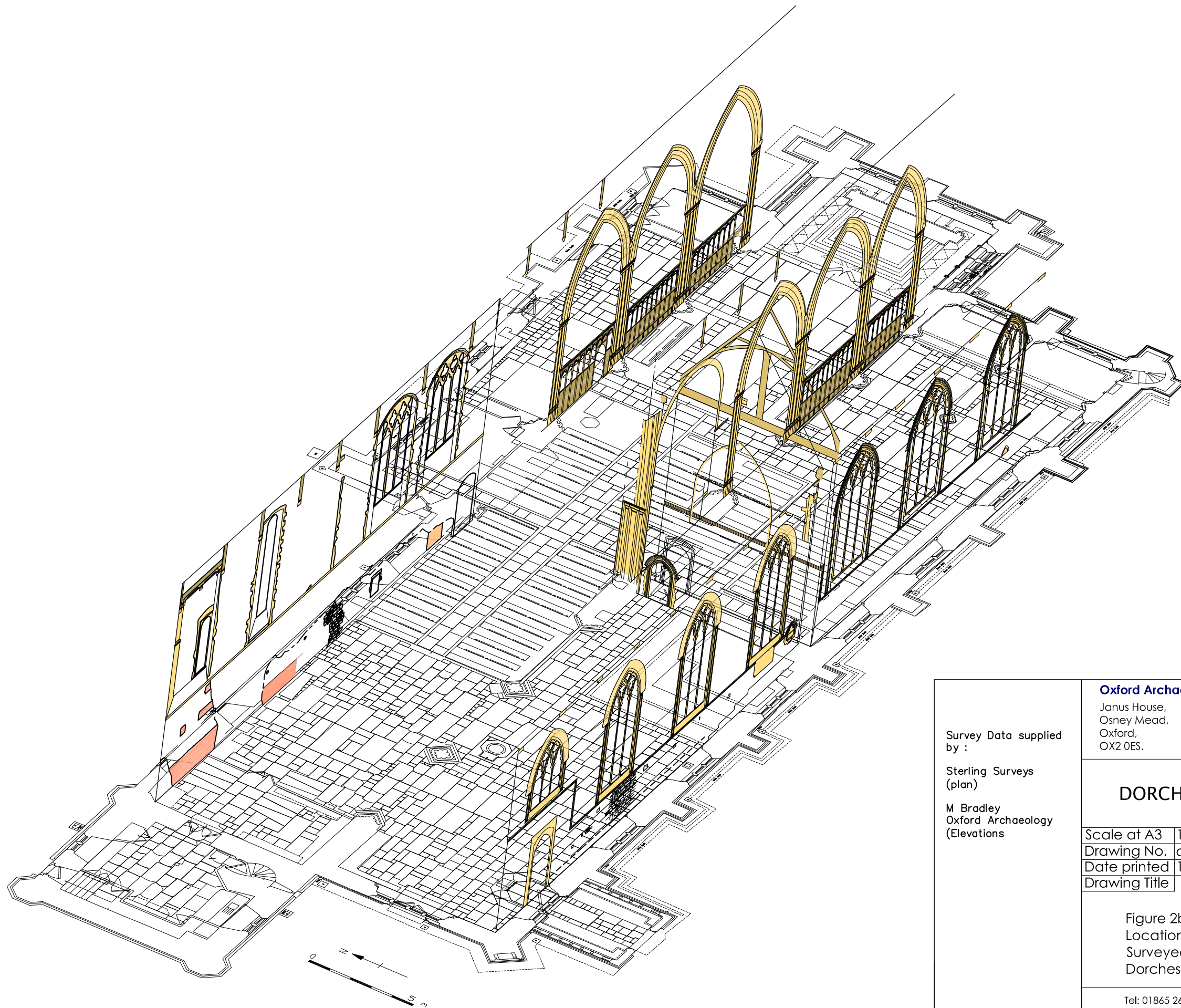
Reproduced from the Landranger 1:50,000 scale by permission of the Ordnance Survey on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office
© Crown Copyright. 1996 All rights reserved. Licence No. AL 100005569

Figure 1: Site Location



<p>--- Location of elevations</p> <p>□₃ Approximate location of new lighting pits</p> <p>Survey Data supplied by : Sterling Surveys</p> <p style="text-align: center;">N ↑ 0 ——— 5 m</p>	<p>Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.</p> 							
	<p style="text-align: center;">DORCHESTER ABBEY</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Scale at A3</td> <td>1:200</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Drawing No.</td> <td>dorabbs/oa/002a</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Date printed</td> <td>12/05/2004</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Drawing Title</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Scale at A3	1:200	Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/002a	Date printed	12/05/2004	Drawing Title
Scale at A3	1:200							
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/002a							
Date printed	12/05/2004							
Drawing Title								
<p style="text-align: center;">Figure 2a Plan of Dorchester Abbey</p>								
<p style="text-align: right;">Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk</p>								

CHECKED BY:



Survey Data supplied by :

Sterling Surveys (plan)

M Bradley
Oxford Archaeology
(Elevations)

Oxford Archaeology

Janus House,
Osney Mead,
Oxford,
OX2 0ES.



DORCHESTER ABBEY

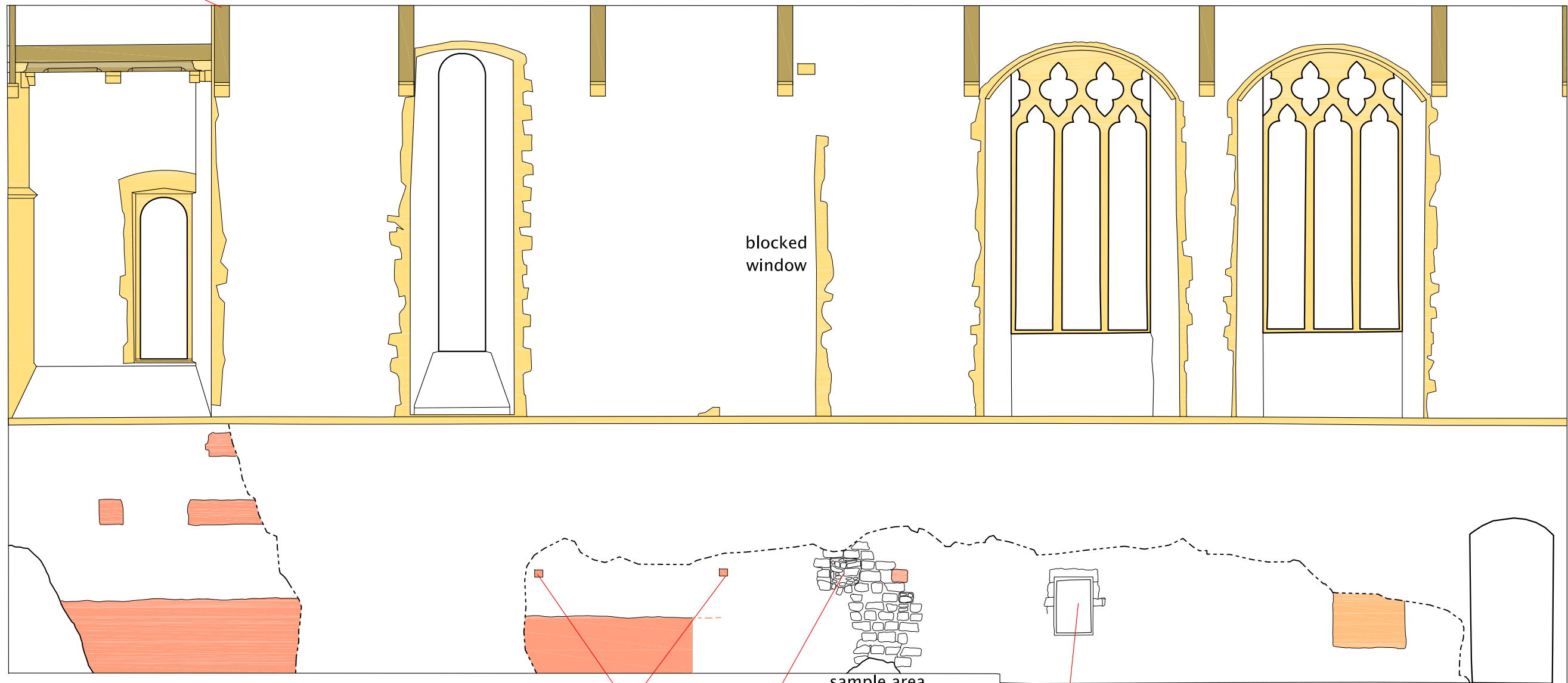
Scale at A3	1:200
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/002b
Date printed	12/05/2004
Drawing Title	

Figure 2b
Location of Elevations
Surveyed at
Dorchester Abbey

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496
email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk
web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk

CHECKED BY:

truss drawn in Figure 4



blocked putlog or joist holes

blocked feature

sample area of exposed stonework

aumbry

- - - - Limit of plaster removal
 Exposed limestone
 Timber
 Light mortar infilling
 White Mortar infilling
 Dark brown waterproof mortar
 Survey Data supplied by :
 M Bradley, B Jeffs
 Oxford Archaeology

Oxford Archaeology
 Janus House,
 Osney Mead,
 Oxford,
 OX2 0ES.

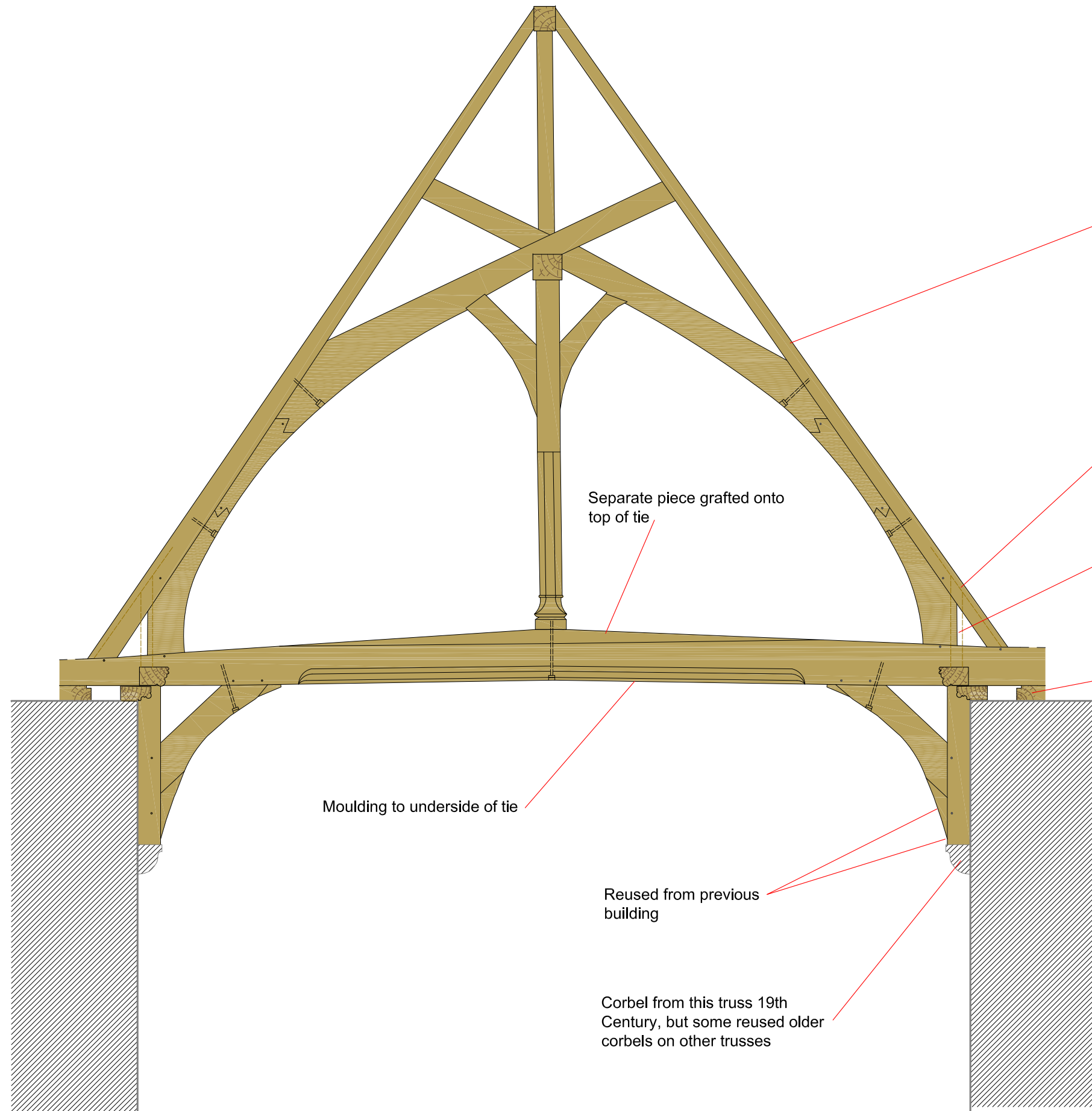
DORCHESTER ABBEY

Scale at A3	1:75
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/003
Date printed	12/05/2004
Drawing Title	

Figure 3
 Internal North Elevation
 Nave

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496
 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk
 web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk

CHECKED BY:



Principal rafter

Line of common rafters

Ashlar pieces supporting common rafters

Wall plate reused oak

Separate piece grafted onto top of tie

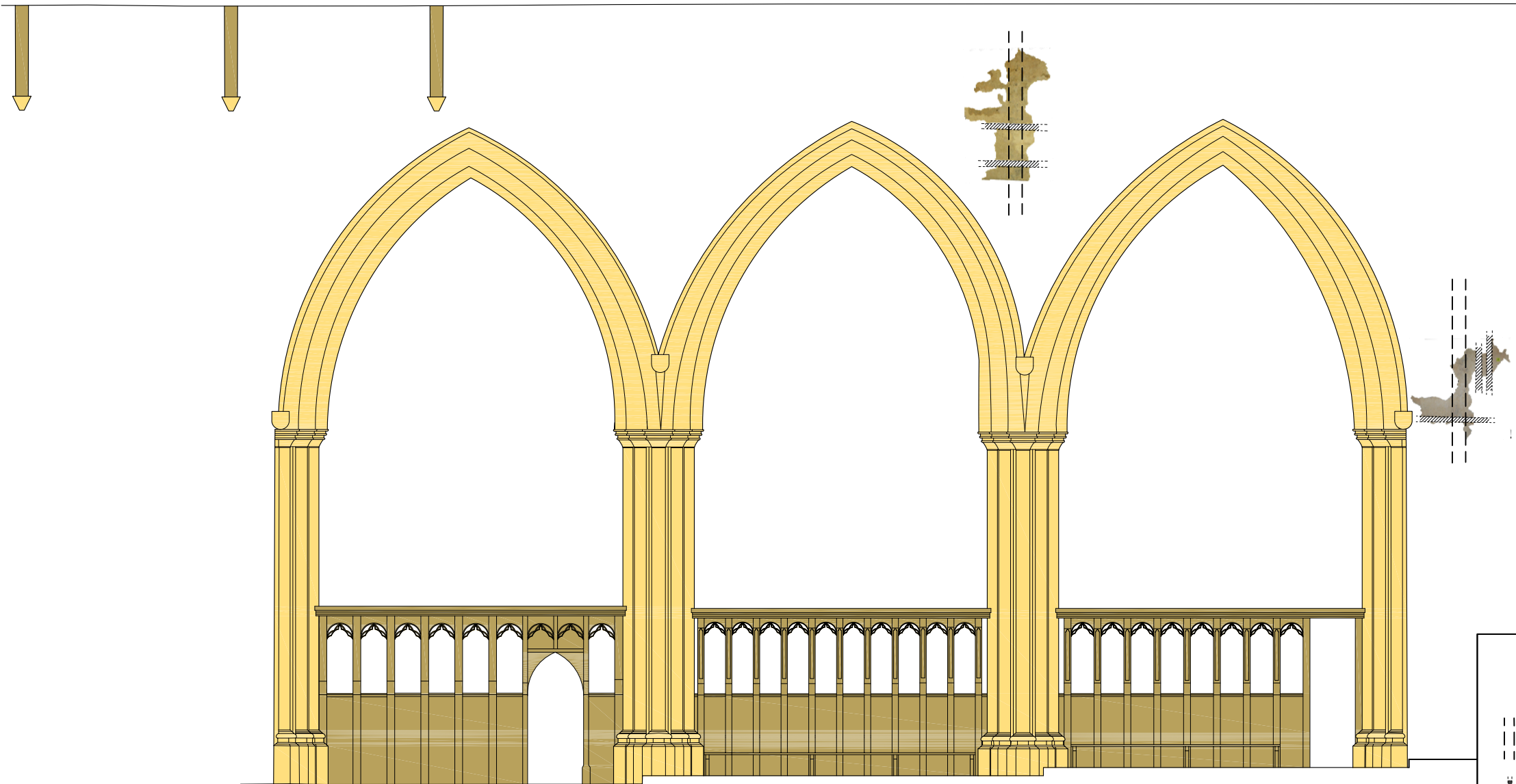
Moulding to underside of tie

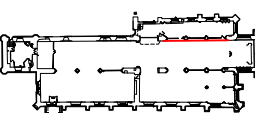

Reused from previous building

Corbel from this truss 19th Century, but some reused older corbels on other trusses

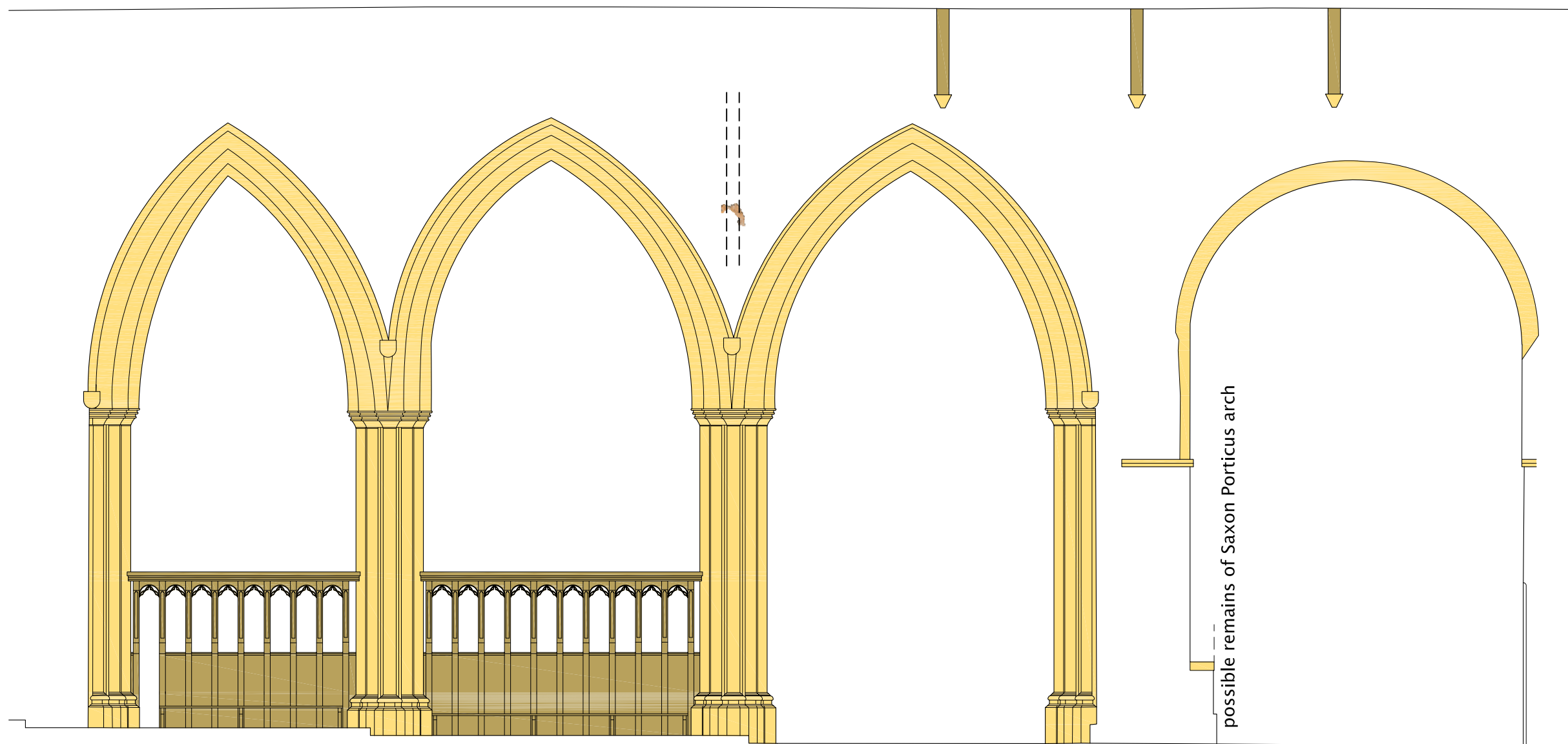
	Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.	
	DORCHESTER ABBEY	
	Scale at A3	1:40
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/004	
Date printed	12/05/2004	
Drawing Title	Figure 4 West Elevation of westernmost truss in Nave	
Survey Data supplied by : J Gill Oxford Archaeology	Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk	

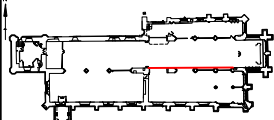

CHECKED BY:



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment of amorphous black streak of paint Area obscured by scaffolding Exposed limestone Timber <p>Survey Data supplied by : M Bradley Oxford Archaeology</p> 	<p>Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.</p> 
	<p align="center">DORCHESTER ABBEY</p> <p>Scale at A3 1:75 Drawing No. dorabbs/oa/005 Date printed 12/05/2004 Drawing Title </p> <p align="center">Figure 5 Internal North Elevation Choir showing exposed wall paintings</p> <p align="right">Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk</p>

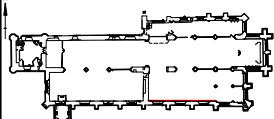

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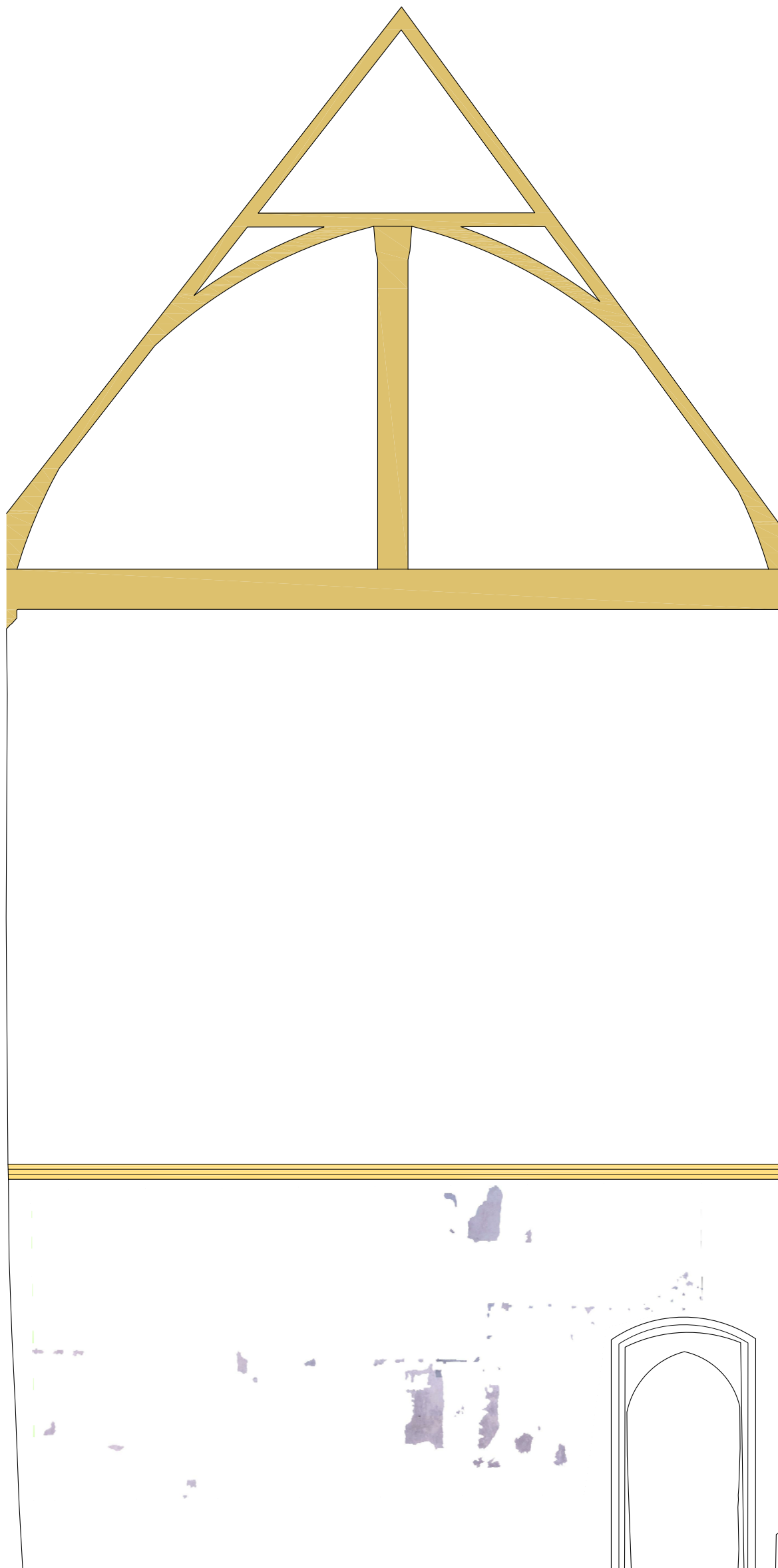
<p> Alignment of amorphous black streak of paint</p> <p>Exposed limestone</p> <p>Timber</p> <p>Survey Data supplied by : M Bradley Oxford Archaeology</p> 	<p>Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.</p> 
	<p align="center">DORCHESTER ABBEY</p> <p>Scale at A3 1:75 Drawing No. dorabbs/oa/006 Date printed 12/05/2004 Drawing Title </p> <p align="center">Figure 6 Internal South Elevation Choir showing exposed wall paintings</p> <p>Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk</p>

CHECKED BY:



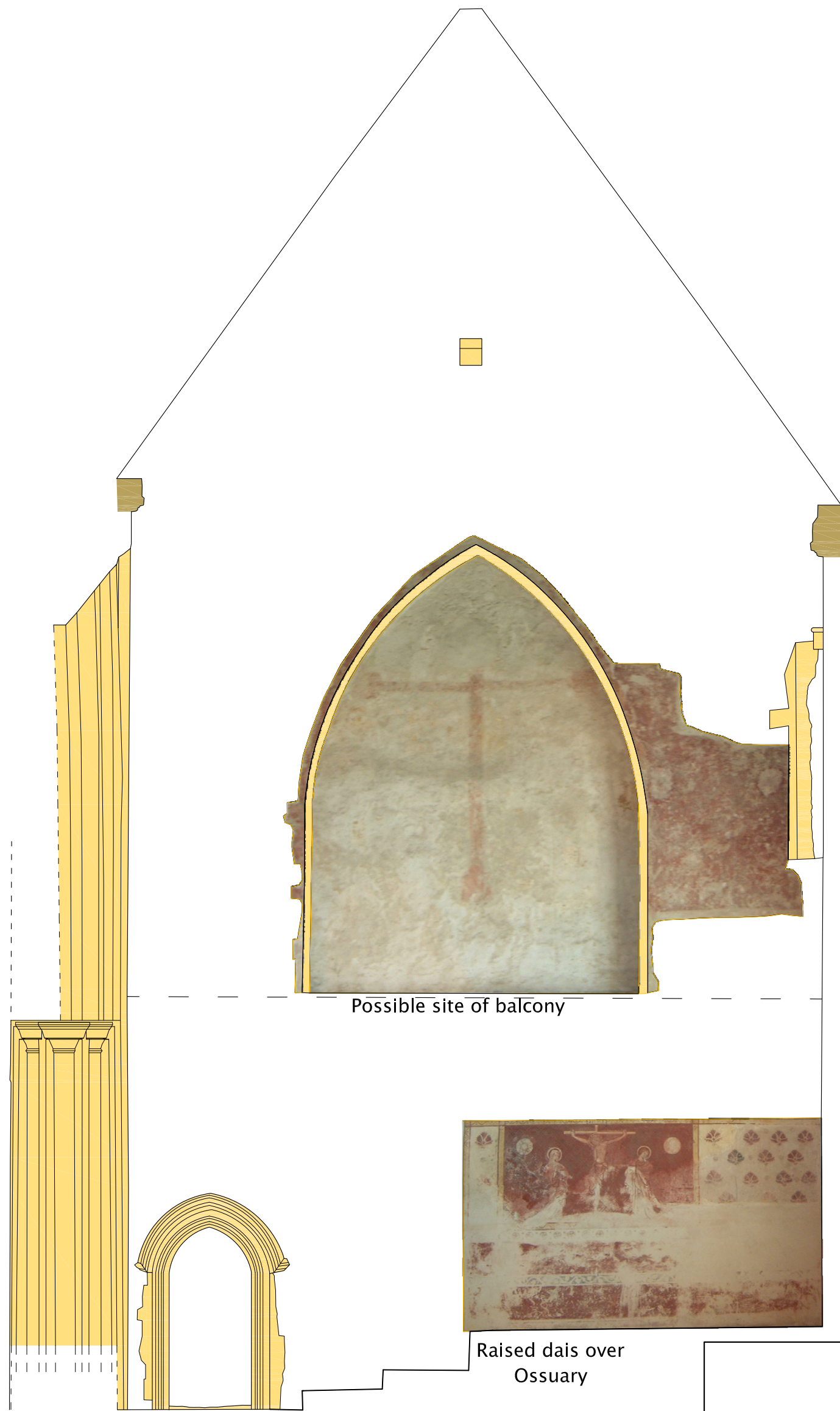
<p>Exposed limestone</p> <p>Timber</p> <p>Survey Data supplied by : M Bradley Oxford Archaeology</p> 	<p>Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.</p> 
	<p>DORCHESTER ABBEY</p> <p>Scale at A3 1:75 Drawing No. dorabbs/oa/007 Date printed 12/05/2004 Drawing Title</p> <p>Figure 7 Internal South Elevation Shrine Chapel showing exposed wall paintings</p> <p>Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk</p>

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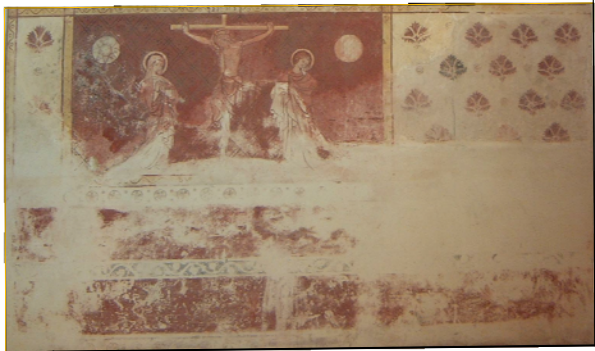


	<p>Oxford Archaeology Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.</p>
	<p align="center">DORCHESTER ABBEY</p>
<p>Survey Data supplied by : M Bradley Oxford Archaeology</p>	<p>Scale at A3 1:75 Drawing No. dorabbs/oa/008 Date printed 12/05/2004 Drawing Title </p>
	<p>Figure 8 Internal West Elevation Shrine Chapel showing exposed wall paintings</p>
	<p>Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496 email : mail@oxfordarch.co.uk web : www.oxfordarch.co.uk</p>

CHECKED BY:



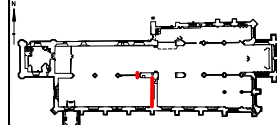
Possible site of balcony



Raised dais over
Ossuary

- Exposed limestone
- Timber

Survey Data supplied
by :
M Bradley
Oxford Archaeology



Oxford Archaeology

Janus House,
Osney Mead,
Oxford,
OX2 0ES.



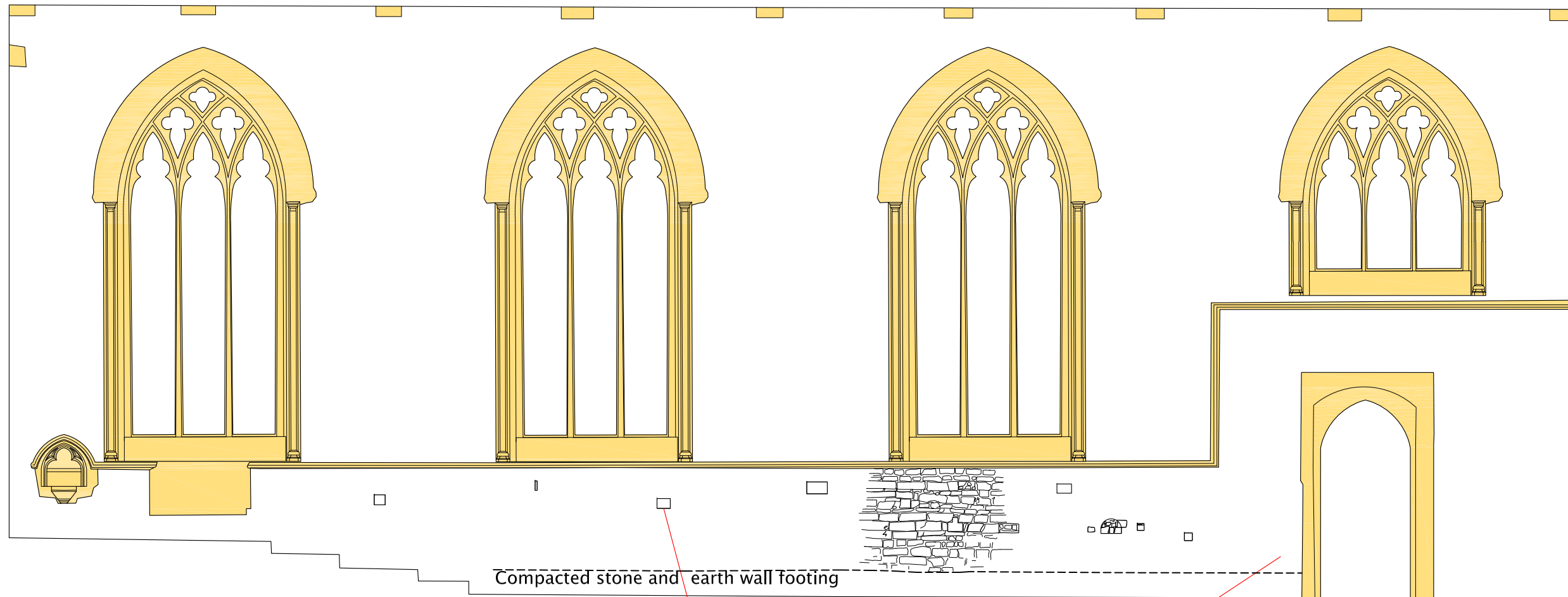
DORCHESTER ABBEY

Scale at A3	1:50
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/008
Date printed	12/05/2004
Drawing Title	

Figure 9
Internal East Elevation of
Peoples's Chapel showing
exposed wall paintings

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CHECKED BY:



Compacted stone and earth wall footing

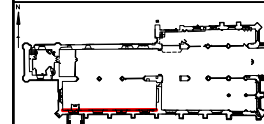
blocked feature
(Putlog hole ?)

sample area
of exposed
stonework

Site of 19th
Century lobby

Exposed limestone

Survey Data supplied
by :
M Bradley, E Simons
Oxford Archaeology



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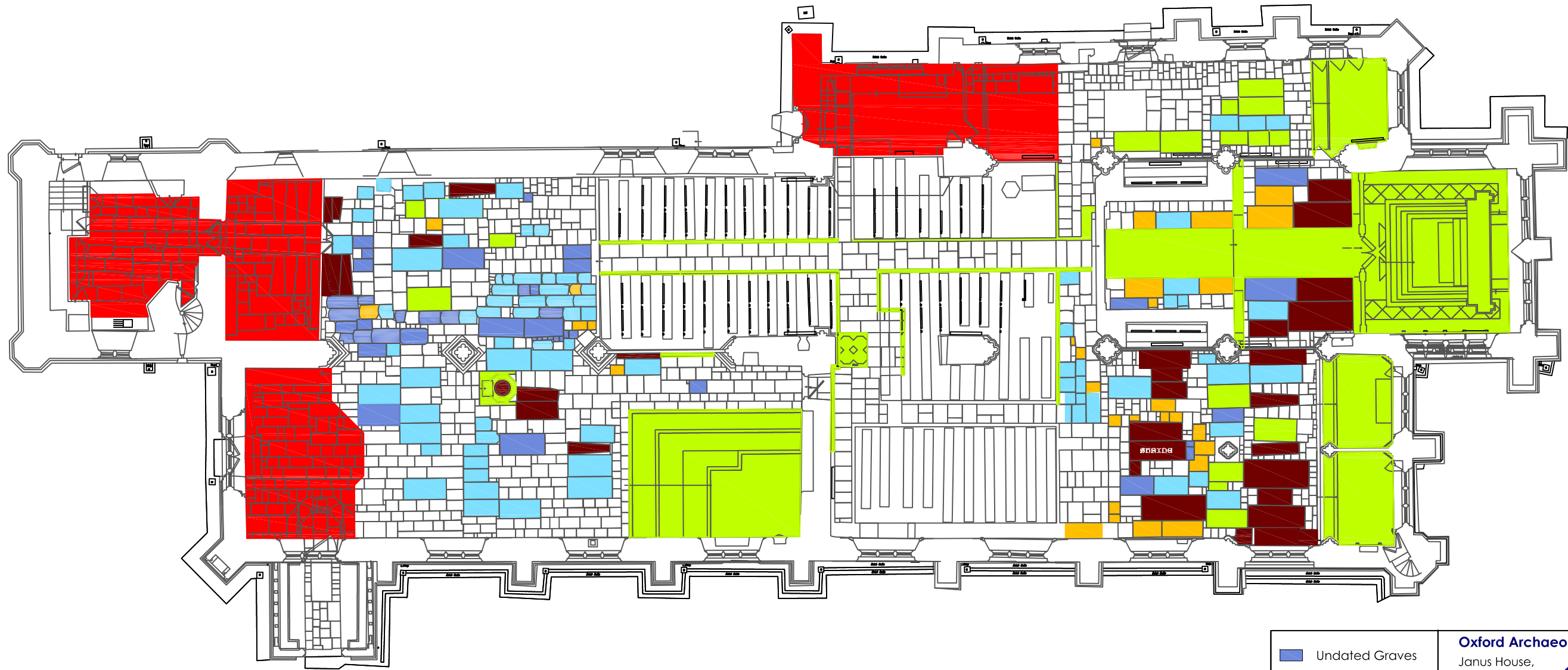
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Scale at A3	1:75
Drawing No.	dorabbs/oa/010
Date printed	12/05/2004
Drawing Title	

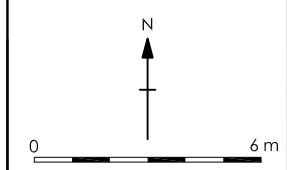
Figure 10
Internal South Elevation
People's Chapel

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CHECKED BY:



- Undated Graves
- Medieval to 16th Century
- 17th Century
- 18th Century
- 19th Century
- Area not accessible during visit



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Scale at A3	1:200
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Drawing Title	

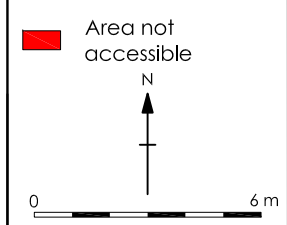
Figure 11
 Plan showing dating
 evidence of Abbey
 floor

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CHECKED BY:



- Worn early slabs
- Unworn Limestone slabs
- Mixed worn slabs & monuments
- Partially worn Limestone slabs
- 19th Century tiles surfaces and pews
- Reset gravestones
- Area not accessible



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Scale at A3	1:500
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Figure 12
 Plan showing
 character areas of
 Abbey floor

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