

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
OF ST MARY'S SCHOOL AND ST MARY'S CONVENT,
BUCKFAST, DEVON**

Prepared for
the Diocese of Plymouth
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1. INTRODUCTION

This archaeological assessment was undertaken in November 2011 to determine the potential implications of proposed building extensions, landscaping and the provision of a new playground for St Mary's Catholic School, Buckfast (SX 7404 6721; Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Grainge Architects on behalf of the Diocese of Plymouth. The site lies within Dartmoor National Park.

1.1 Site description

The assessment site comprises a walled property bounded to the north by the 1982 link road and to the east by Buckfast Road (Fig. 2; Photo. 1). The area is subdivided by a NNW-SSE aligned wall, with the building and grounds of St Mary's Convent to the west and St Mary's School to the east. The area lies on ground that slopes to the east towards the River Dart, although the school grounds have been almost completely levelled, resulting in a difference in height of approximately 1m between the two plots at the dividing wall. The southern half of the convent grounds slope to the south towards the mouth of a narrow valley. This part of the convent garden holds a small canalised stream that presumably issues from this valley and which is culverted within the school grounds.

1.2 Aims and methods

The aim of the assessment is to establish the history and land-use development of the site and its environs, with a view to informing decisions regarding any subsequent archaeological mitigation.

The following sources were consulted:

- Dartmoor National Park Authority Historic Environment Service
- Devon Record Office
- Westcountry Studies Library
- English Heritage website (listed buildings and scheduled monuments)
- Buckfast Abbey archives

A site inspection was also undertaken.

1.3 The development proposals

It is proposed to create a new playground within the northern part of the convent grounds (Photo. 3 & 4). This will entail some reduction of ground levels, although the area will not be fully levelled. A small gateway will be created within the convent boundary wall to the north of the new playground, and the existing gateway in the dividing wall to the east will be widened.

A new reception area and offices will be constructed in the north-west corner of the school grounds, with a short section of the boundary wall removed to provide a new entrance to the property (Photo. 5). The new build will abut the northern boundary wall and north-south dividing wall. The existing reception wing of the school will be removed. Construction of foundation classroom against the northern boundary wall to the east of the reception area will result in two small breaches in this wall.

A new hall and ancillary rooms will be constructed within the south-west corner of the school grounds (Photo. 2), again abutting the north-south dividing wall and also the southern boundary wall. Landscaping, including the creation of an amphitheatre area, will take place between the new hall and the existing school.

2. STATUARY PROTECTION AND DESIGNATIONS

No archaeological designations have been identified within or immediately adjoining the school site.

To the north of the school, the North Gate and part of the Precinct Area of Buckfast Abbey is designated as a Scheduled Monument (UID 29672; Fig. 2), and the South Gate and adjoining range to the west, is a Listed Grade II building (UID 392223). There are a number of other listed buildings to the north of the south gate (including some within the scheduled area), but none lie significantly close to the school.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Buckfast is documented in 1046 as *on Bucfaesten*, the elements 'buck', and 'fasten' (meaning stronghold), possibly referring to a thicket where buck took shelter.¹ An abbey at Buckfast was founded, or confirmed, by Ealdorman Aethelweard in 1018, although this early community may have been located around Holy Trinity Church (see below).

St Mary's School lies close to the south gate of the present Buckfast Abbey in an area that has been identified as the outer court, or outer precinct of the medieval abbey (see Fig. 2). The outer court would have contained agricultural and industrial buildings, such as barns, mills and tanneries, together with open areas of pasture and meadow;² excavations within the outer court to the north of the school suggest that this area was undeveloped agricultural land.³ The principal buildings of the abbey were sited in the inner court, where the present abbey buildings now stand. Excavations within the abbey between 1982-1984 exposed features including the western boundary of the 12th-century precinct and found evidence that the enclosure was enlarged in the early 13th century.⁴

The medieval abbey was dissolved in 1539, and the site and adjoining properties were purchased from the King by Sir Thomas Denny. In 1800 certain 'orchards and old walls' at the site were granted to Samuel Berry, owner of the adjacent mill, who in 1806 levelled the remains of the church and adjacent buildings and built a mansion on the west side of the cloister.⁵

In 1882 the mansion and immediate grounds were acquired by a fraternity of Benedictine monks who founded the present monastery, gradually erecting new buildings on the site of

¹ Gover *et al* 1931, 293.

² Brown 2011, 2.

³ Stewart Brown pers. com. to Tim Gent November 2011.

⁴ Brown 1988, 13.

⁵ Brown 1988, 15.

the ruined medieval church and claustral ranges,⁶ and from the mid 20th-century, acquiring the properties which made up the original precinct.⁷

It has always been assumed the late Saxon abbey at Buckfast, founded or confirmed by Ealdorman Aethelweard in 1018 (and possibly an even earlier foundation), lay on the site of the medieval and present abbey. Excavations at Holy Trinity Church, Buckfastleigh, in 2002 and 2005, however, suggest rather that this was the focus of the early monastic community, which moved to the present valley floor site in the 12th century.⁸

3.1 Development of the site

The OS surveyors' drawing of 1802-3 (Fig. 3) shows Buckfast, although the small scale and schematic representation make it difficult to identify the site area with any certainty. A small plot that may represent the site has a linear feature, possibly indicating an access lane, close to its northern boundary.

The site area is shown in detail on the Buckfastleigh Tithe Map (c. 1843; Fig. 5) and comprises a single field (No. 1227) and part of a field to the west (No. 1198). Field 1227 is recorded in the Tithe Apportionment as 'Orchard', under the property name of 'Abbeylands', which was owned by William and Thornton Bental and occupied by Thomas and Edward White. 'Abbeylands' included the mansion built by Berry within the abbey site and a Captain Thomas White is recorded there in 1829 and 1846.⁹

Field 1198 on the Tithe Map is recorded as 'Shame Park' (Shippon Park).¹⁰ To the north of field 1227 are two cottages (Southgate Cottages), the southern garden of which encroaches into the northern part of the plot. The orchard is also shown on a map of Buckfast Abbey Estate (property of William and Thornton Bental), drawn in 1815, which records it as 'Chaffe's Orchard' (Fig. 4).

The OS map of 1887 (Fig. 7) shows that by this time the western boundary of the plot had been altered, the new boundary being straight and positioned further to the west. An interior division is also shown, the whole apparently representing the present enclosing walls of the site, and dividing wall between the school and convent. The plot appears to represent a walled garden, and is depicted and referred to as separate gardens on a sketch map of c. 1870 (Fig. 6).

The plot has potentially been identified as a parcel of land formerly called The Strowle, referred to in a lease of 1803 as having been many yeas past converted to an orchard.¹¹ A note by Francis Bental in 1870 says that the orchard had been converted to a fruit garden for the abbey,¹² by which he presumably meant the abbey estate, as no actual abbey existed in 1870.

⁶ Brown 1988,15.

⁷ Travers 2005,1.

⁸ Summary results of excavation provided for Dartmoor National Park Authority by Sam Turner.

⁹ Travers 2005,18.

¹⁰ Travers 2005,18.

¹¹ Travers 2005, 35.

¹² Travers 2005,35.

The OS 1887 map also depicts a building against the outer south-western boundary; it is uncertain if this still exists. The position of the 'Letter Box' marked is unclear. To the east of the main road terraced houses and a gas works are shown.

The Roman Catholic school was built within the eastern part of the site in 1893¹³ and is depicted on the OS map of 1905 (Fig. 8). It is shown as an 'L' shaped building with small structures adjoining to the north and west; two small structures are also shown to the south. The main building appears unchanged on the OS map of 1955 (Fig. 9), although one of the small buildings to the south has gone and there are new structures against the north wall. To the west St Mary's Convent is shown, together with small structures against the east (dividing wall) and north walls. The OS map of 1961 shows an extension on the south side of the main school block, and additional small buildings against the western wall.

Hilary Beard refers to the school as St Mary's Convent School and writes that the first nuns were the Sisters of Charity, who arrived in 1901, the children being taught by lay teachers beforehand.¹⁴ As the convent appears not to have been built until after 1905 (it is also not shown on the OS Revision of 1904 with additions in 1938) the nuns were presumably originally housed either within the school or elsewhere. The school became a Maintained School under the Local Education Authority after 1902 and was given Aided status in 1953. In 1962 the senior pupils were transferred to a Secondary Roman Catholic School in Torquay, from which time it became a primary school.¹⁵ The convent, with its teaching nuns closed in 1987.¹⁶

3.1.1 *The walls*

The north, south and west boundary walls to the convent grounds are the result of a single phase of construction. On the basis of map evidence, this presumably took place between 1843 and 1887, possibly c. 1870. The north wall may have continued to the east beyond the dividing line between the school and convent properties, although the physical relationship is obscured by later rendering and the insertion of a door to the schoolyard. This section of wall appears to be of the same date as the dog-legged section at the north-east corner of the site, the alignment of the wall at this point presumably reflecting the extent of the former Southgate Cottages property to the north.

The physical relationship between the wall dividing the two plots and boundary wall is also obscured at the north end. At the southern end, as a result of the gateway to the convent, it meets only the south wall to the school, where it appears to predate a substantial repair to this feature. Some form of physical division between the two plots is suggested on the c. 1870 'rude sketch' (Fig. 6) and 1887 OS map (Fig. 7), although it is not known if it was marked by a wall. The existing dividing wall is buttressed, and almost certainly built following reductions in ground levels on its east side, which it is assumed only took place immediately in advance of the construction of the school in the 1893. A doorway has been blocked in the

¹³ Bovett 1989, 52.

¹⁴ Beard 1991, 60.

¹⁵ Bovett 1989, 52.

¹⁶ Beard 1991, 60.

north boundary wall, directly to the west of the current entrance to the school (Photo. 5). This would appear to be situated at the point at which the dividing wall meets the boundary wall on the opposite side, suggesting that the dividing wall is a later addition. The exact alignment is, however, uncertain.

The eastern wall to the school grounds is almost certainly of recent construction. A photograph of c. 1930 shows a gateway in the north-east corner of this section of wall, and no evidence of its blocked remains are evident.¹⁷

A small area of rubble stone build appears to underlie the north boundary wall to the school (Photo. 5). This may represent no more than a wide section of footings, although it has the potential to represent the remains of an earlier structure.

4. SITES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL INTEREST (Fig. 2)

1. **Abbey outer court boundary (bank/ditch) SX 74045 67209**

A north-south aligned bank and ditch representing the western boundary of the 13th-century monastic outer court. This was exposed during the construction of the new road immediately to the north of the assessment site in 1982⁸, and the line of the boundary appears to pass through the site of the convent. The outer court boundary is believed to have extended to the south of the present abbey site, the line possibly preserved as field boundaries, and a trackway, depicted on the Tithe Map.¹⁹

2. **Walled garden SX 740 672**

The walled enclosure containing St Mary's School and the adjacent convent appears to represent a walled garden, the outline and dividing wall of which are depicted on the OS map of 1887 (Fig.7). The divided enclosure is also represented on a sketch map believed to date to c. 1870 (Fig. 6). If the date of the sketch map is correct, it predates the arrival of the Benedictine monks in 1882, and the subsequent rebuilding of the abbey, and must therefore be associated with earlier owners. The walled enclosure presumably post-dates the Tithe Map (c. 1843) on which the western boundary of the plot is distinctly curved.

The sketch map marks the eastern part of the enclosure as 'Lewis' garden. Goes with farm', and the western part as 'abbey kitchen garden', with a gated (and/or steps) 'way to abbey kitchen garden' along the northern boundary (from the road). The plot has potentially been identified as a parcel of land formerly called The Strowle, referred to in a lease of 1803 as having been many years past converted to an orchard, and a note by Francis Bentall in 1870 says that the orchard had been converted to a fruit garden for the abbey.²⁰ The undivided plot is recorded as an orchard in the Tithe Apportionment (1839; plot 1227).

3. **Possible structural remains SX 74050 67228**

A small area of stone rubble build (Photo. 5) appears to underlie the northern section of the

¹⁷ in Beard 1991, 83.

¹⁸ Brown 1988.

¹⁹ Stuart Brown pers com.

²⁰ Travers 2005,35.

school boundary wall, extending slightly beyond the outer face. This may represent only a wide section of wall footings, but has the potential to represent the remains of an earlier structure.

4. **Ancillary school buildings** SX 74054 67193 & 74063 67179

Two small structures are depicted to the south of the school on the OS map of 1905. Only the southern building is shown on the OS map of 1955, although there are structures in the position of both on the OS map of 1961 (Fig. 9 & 10).

5. **Building** SX 7401 6717

OS maps of 1887 and 1905 (Fig. 7 & 8) depict a building outside the south-west corner of the site. A larger building is shown on the same position on the OS map of 1961 (Fig. 10). It is uncertain if the building still exists.

6. **Southgate Cottages** SX 74052 67239

Cottages are shown within an enclosure to the north of the school boundary on the Buckfast Abbey Estate Map of 1815, and the Tithe Map (Fig. 4 & 5). Southgate Cottages stood here in c. 1930,²¹ and appear to still be represented on the OS map of 1961 (Fig. 10). The site lies beneath the road to the north of the school.

7. **Buckfast Abbey** SX 740 673

An abbey was founded or confirmed at Buckfast in 1018, although it is possible that the focus of this early foundation was at Holy Trinity Church, rather than the present abbey site.²² Excavations at the abbey between 1982-84 found evidence dating back to the 12th century.²³ A single fragment of a probable Anglo-Saxon window was recovered;²⁴ no definite late Saxon pottery was found.²⁵

The site lies within an area identified as the outer court of the medieval abbey.²⁶

8. **The north gate and part of the precinct area of Buckfast Abbey** SX 74055 67367 Scheduled Monument (UID 29672)

The Monument includes part of the north-west area of the precinct of the outer court, including the standing arch of the North Gate, the below ground remains of buildings and courtyards of the outer court, the standing remains of a kitchen and service block, and the below ground remains of the medieval guesthouse and Abbot's guest hall.²⁷

9. **South Gate, Buckfast Abbey** SX 74057 67281 Listed Grade II (UID 392223)

The south gateway to Buckfast Abbey and adjoining range to the west is of 12th-century origin and has a long, complex structural and functional history.²⁸

²¹ Beard 1991, photograph on p. 83.

²² Summary results of excavation provided for Dartmoor National Park Authority by Sam Turner.

²³ Brown 1988.

²⁴ Blair in Brown 1988.

²⁵ Allan in Brown 1988.

²⁶ Pers. Com S. Brown.

²⁷ list.english-heritage.org.uk (list entry No. 1019607.)

²⁸ list.english-heritage.org.uk (list entry No. 1209042).

10. **Prehistoric flint finds** SX 740 673

A series of 24 flints was recovered from the excavations at Buckfast Abbey between 1982-84, including Mesolithic and Neolithic pieces.²⁹

11. **Lower Mill** SX 7413 6725

The Tithe Map depicts a mill pond and mill, marked 'Buckfast Mill', to the east of the site. OS maps of 1887 and later illustrate the development of the site; it is now Buckfast Spinning Mill. An archaeological recording project of the mill has recently been undertaken (Stewart Brown Associates October 2011). It is possible that there was a medieval mill on the site.³⁰

5. CONCLUSIONS

The bulk of the assessment site was an orchard from at least in 1815 to 1839, and part of the abbey estate. No buildings are known to have existed within the area before the construction of the school in 1889, although the limitations of cartographic and documentary study to identify early structures should be noted.

The western boundary of the site had been realigned (to its present position) between 1843 and 1887, possibly c. 1870 (sketch map), during which time the convent boundary walls were probably built, and the site consisted of two areas of garden, rather than an orchard. The reason for the division of the gardens is not known, and it is also uncertain if this partition was originally marked by a wall. It is probable that the current dividing wall was not built until the area was levelled for the construction of St Mary's School in the 1890s. The eastern boundary wall to the school was almost certainly built after c. 1930. The western part of the site appears to have been unoccupied until the convent was built, possibly after 1938.

To the south of the main school buildings are the sites of two small structures depicted on the OS map of 1905. At least one of these was situated within the area of the proposed hall complex.

Although limited breaches of the boundary wall are proposed, this feature is not thought to date to before c. 1843, possibly being built some decades later. The present reception wing, scheduled for removal in the proposed plans, was constructed between 1955 and 1961.

The majority of the site lies within an area identified as the outer court of the medieval Buckfast Abbey. The boundary of this enclosure, surviving as a bank and ditch, has been seen during excavations to the north of the site, and its projected line would pass through the garden of the convent.

The proposed developments and associated groundworks will result in sub-surface disturbance at a number of points within the assessment area, and the outer court boundary feature may well be exposed/truncated during excavations to create the new playground. Although previous archaeological work at other points within the abbey outer court or precinct suggests that the areas was used largely for agricultural purposes, some industrial activity

²⁹ Berridge in Brown 1988.

³⁰ Brown 2011, 2.

has been identified, and such activity may have taken place within the site.

It is therefore suggested that an archaeological watching brief is maintained during any groundworks within the assessment area. This will allow for any exposure of the medieval outer court boundary, or other archaeological features, to be adequately investigated and recorded.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Devon Record Office

Z2/9 'A Map of Buckfast Abbey Estate in the Parish of Buckfastleigh The Property of William Searle Bentall & Thornton Bentall Esqrs', by Thomas Richards, 1815

Buckfastleigh Tithe Map/Appportionment c. 1843/1839

OS maps

Surveyors' Two Inch Drawing No. 25, date of survey 1802-3

1:2500 map Sheet 114.7: 1887 & 1905

1:2500 Plan SX7467, 1955

1:2500 Plan SX7467 & 7567, 1961

1:10 560 Sheet 114NE, Revision of 1904 with additions in 1938

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Listed buildings and Scheduled Monuments (english-heritage.org.uk)

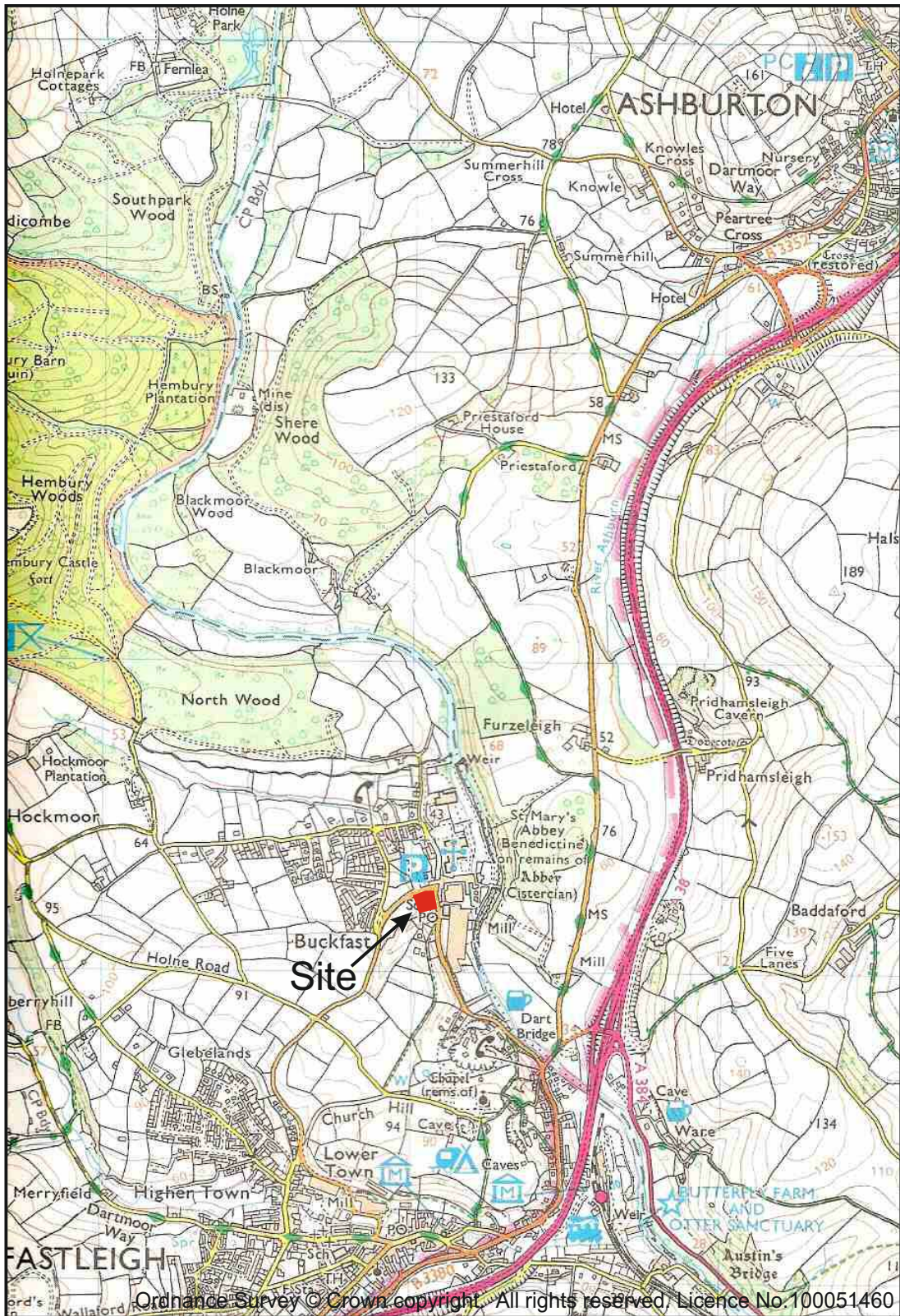


Fig. 1 Location of assessment site.

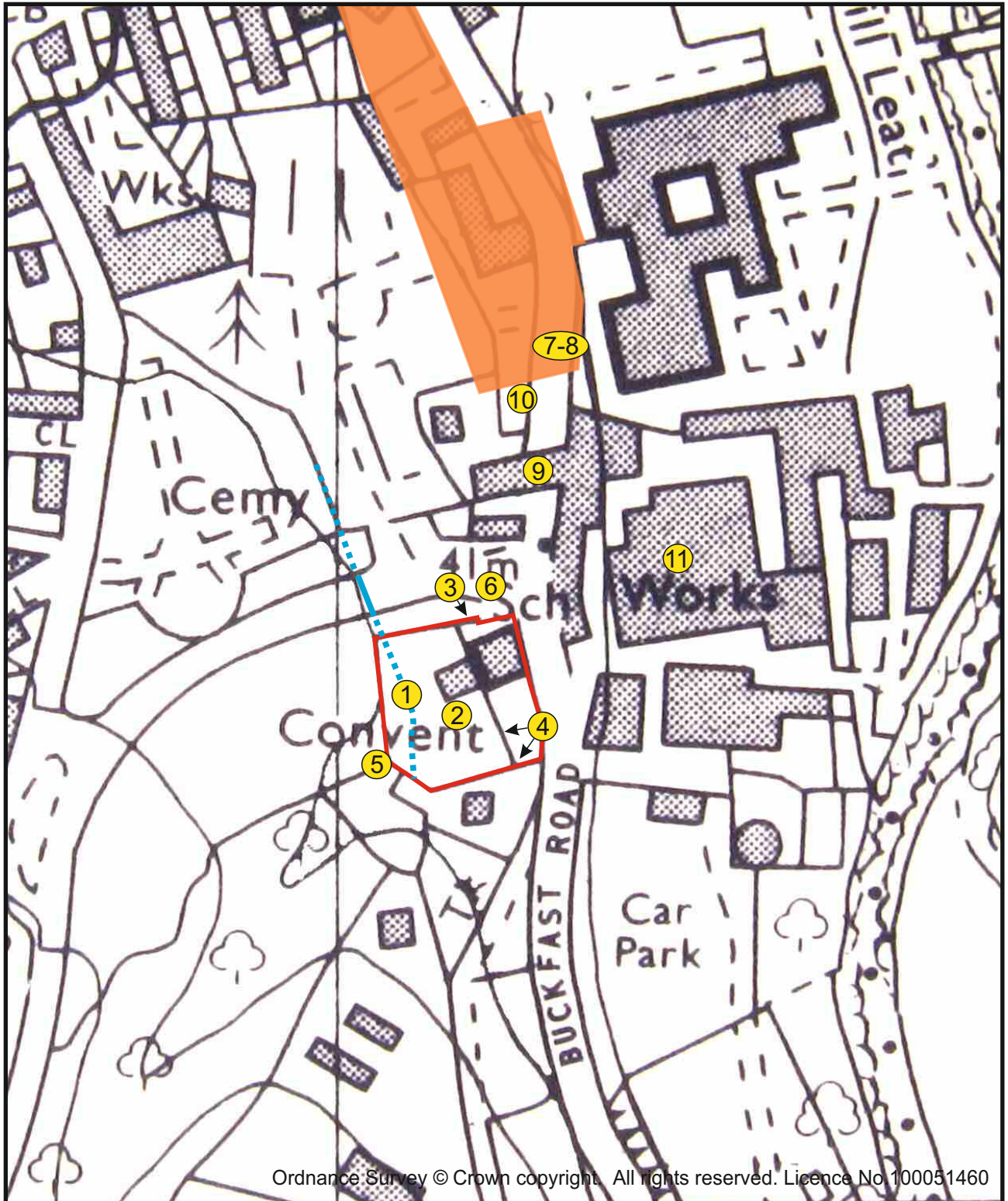


Fig. 2 The site (red line), showing location of heritage assets. Ditch (site 1) in blue. Scheduled Monument area shown in orange.



Fig. 3 The OS surveyors' drawing of 1802-3, showing the approximate position of the assessment site.

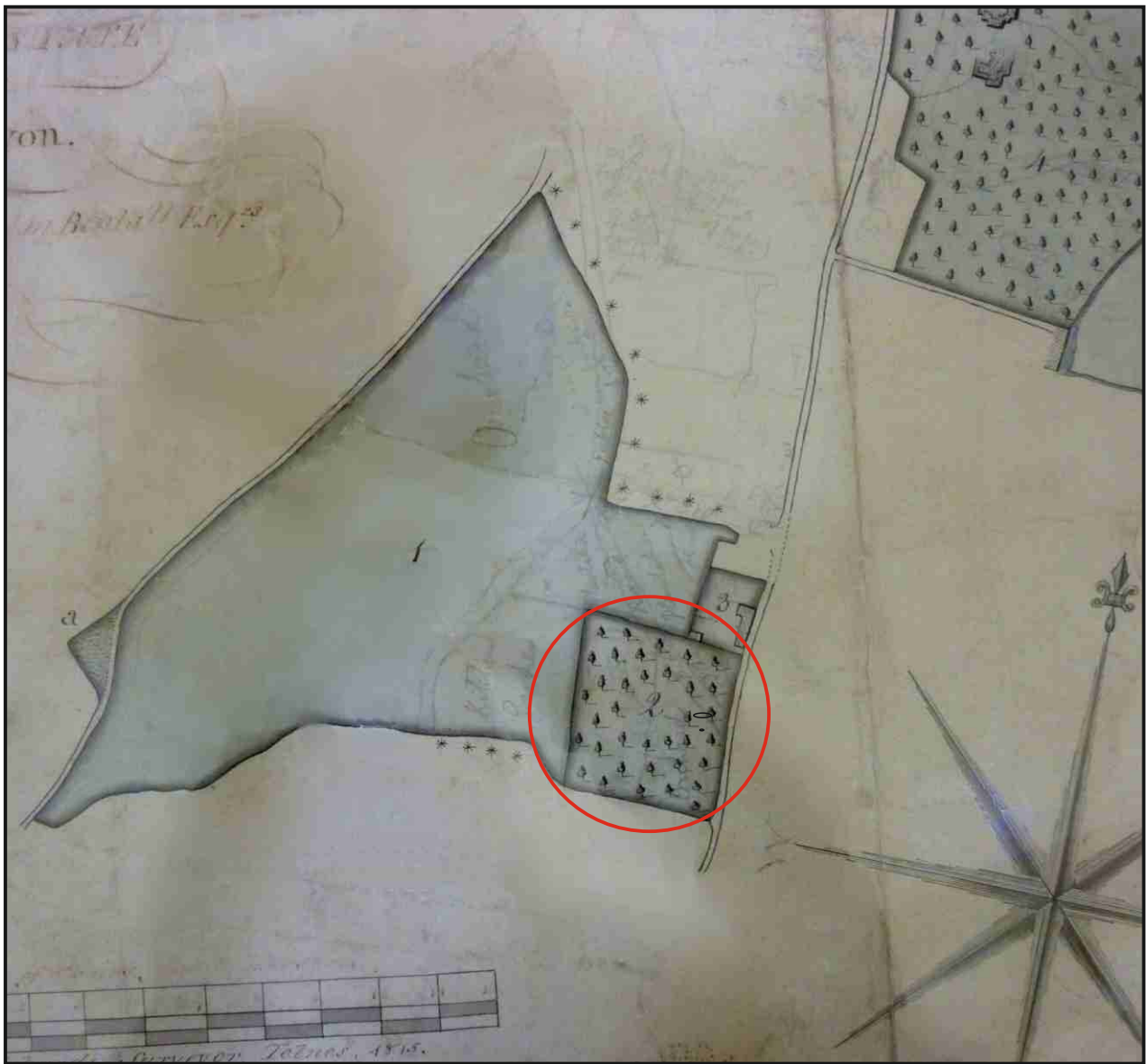


Fig. 4 Extract from 'A Map of Buckfast Abbey Estate in the Parish of Buckfastleigh ...' by Thomas Richards, 1815. Reproduced with permission of the Devon Record Office (Ref. Z2/9).

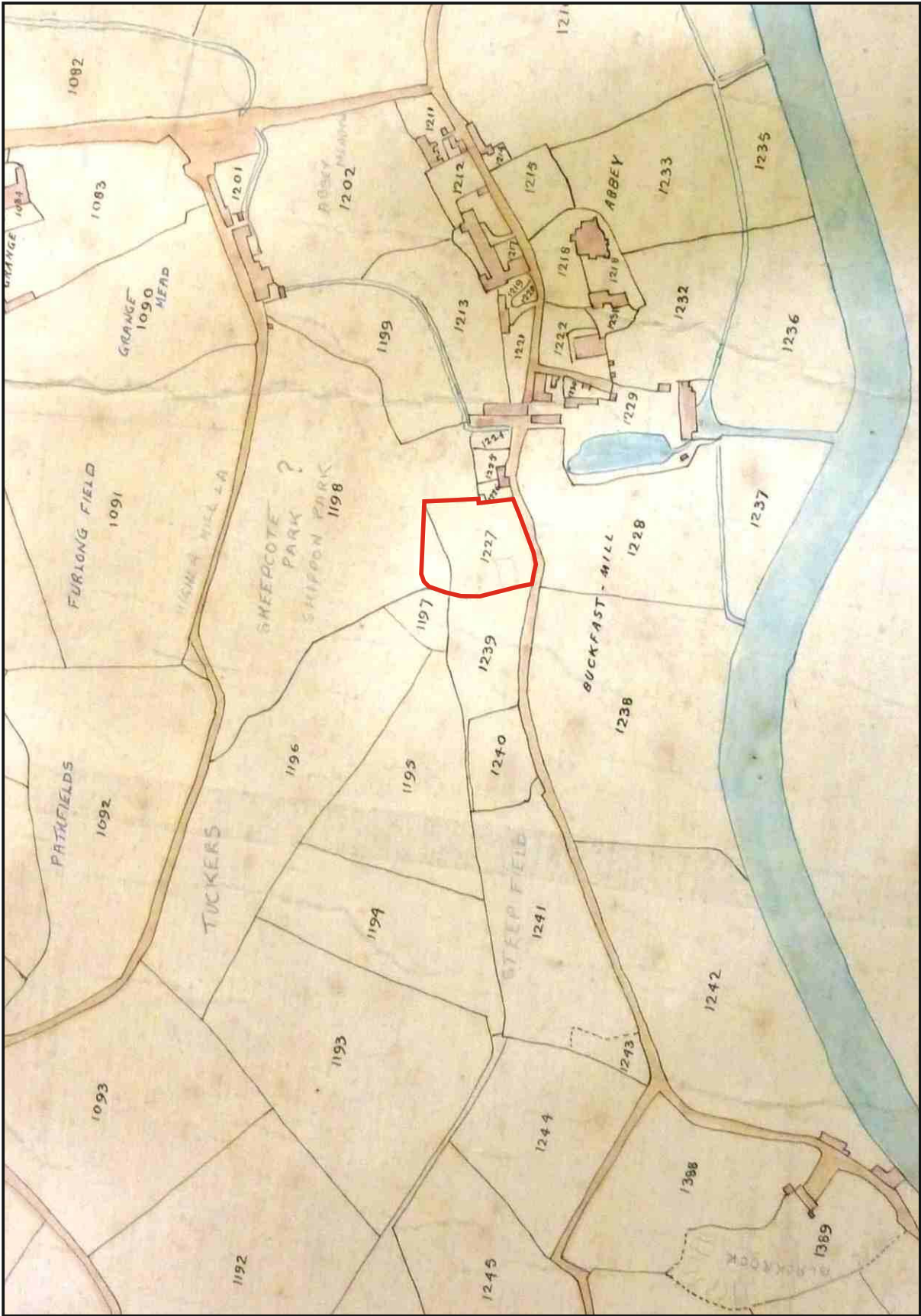


Fig. 5 The Buckfastleigh Tithe Map, c. 1843.

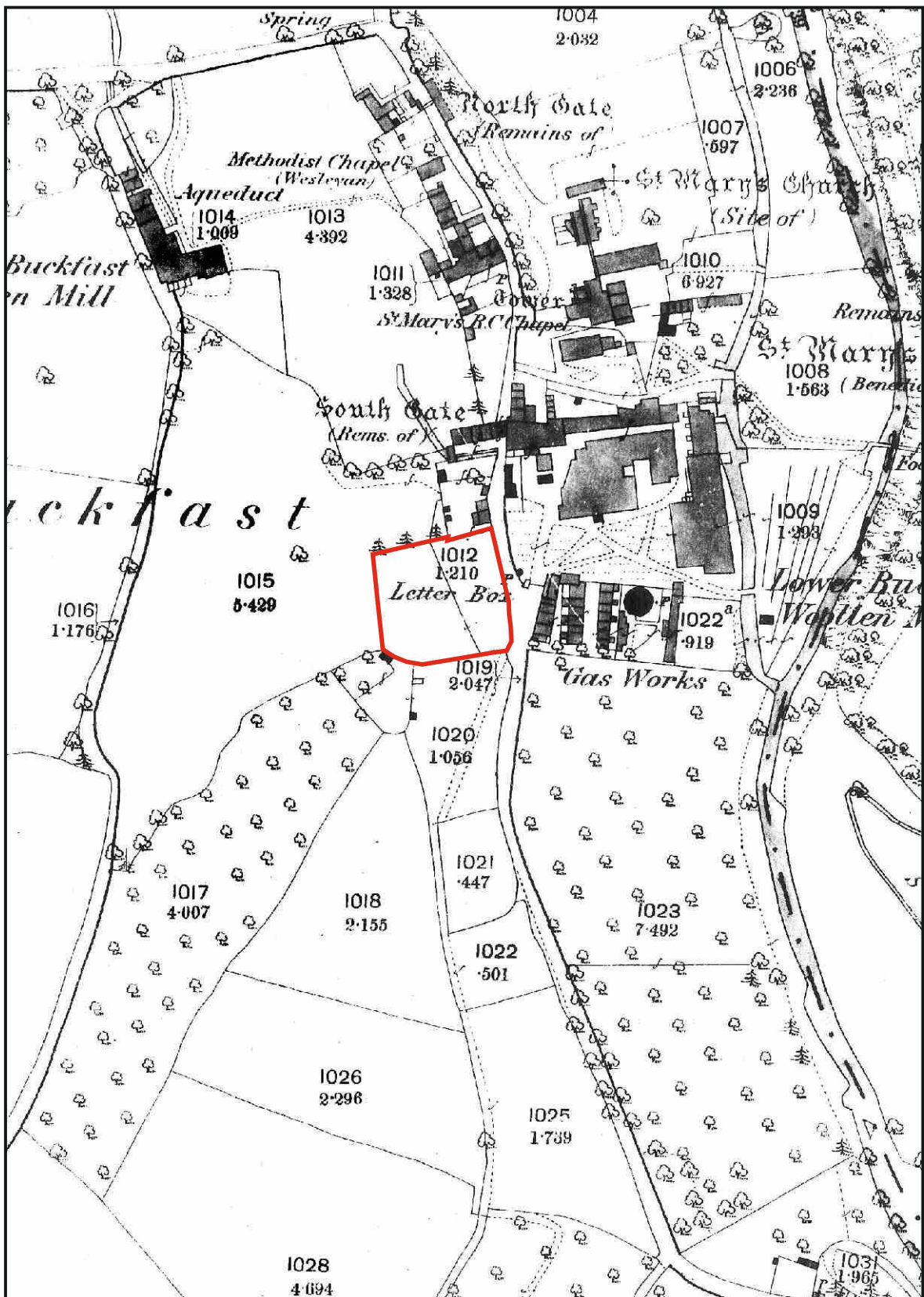


Fig. 7 The OS 1:2,500 map, 1887.

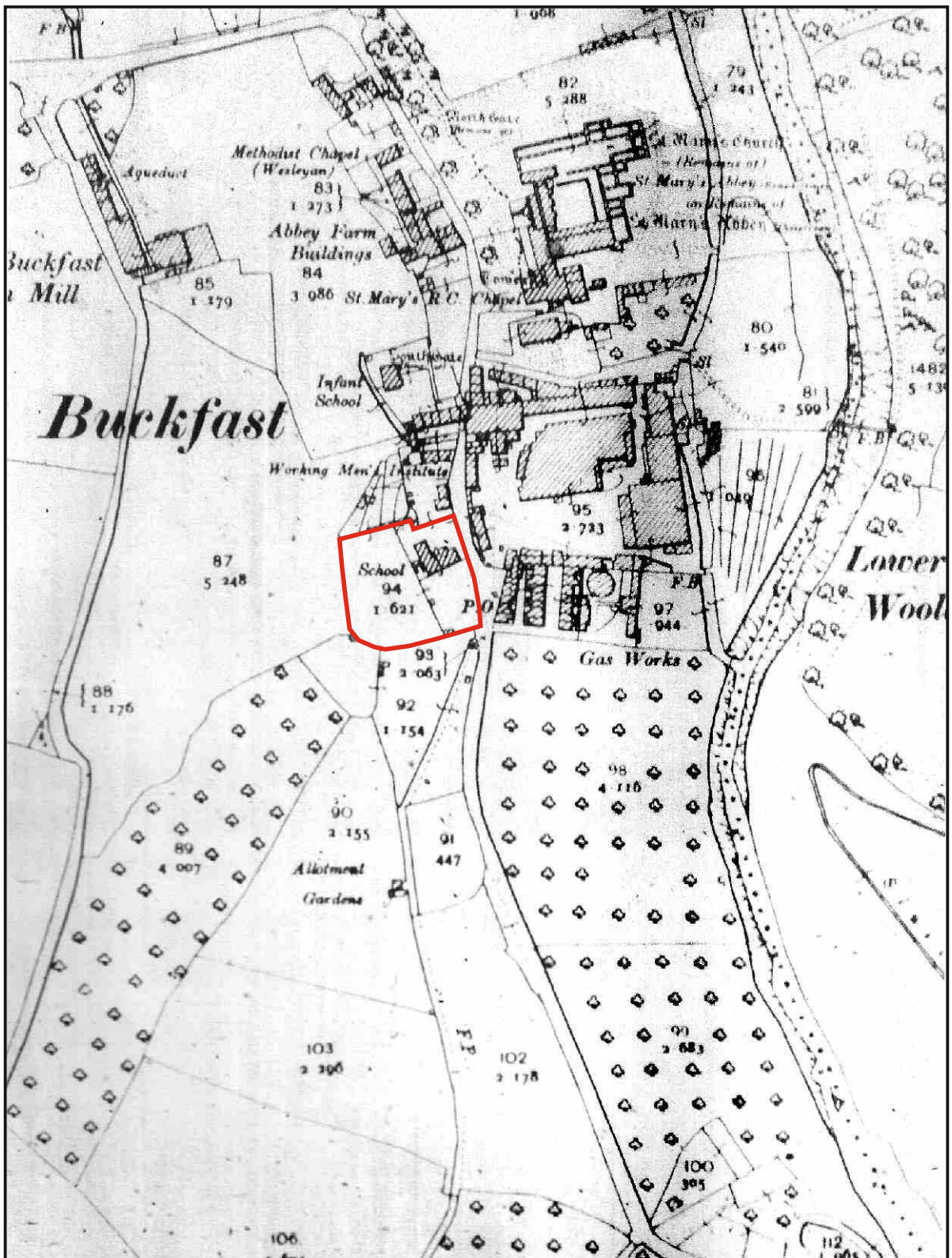


Fig. 8 The OS 1:2,500 map, 1905.

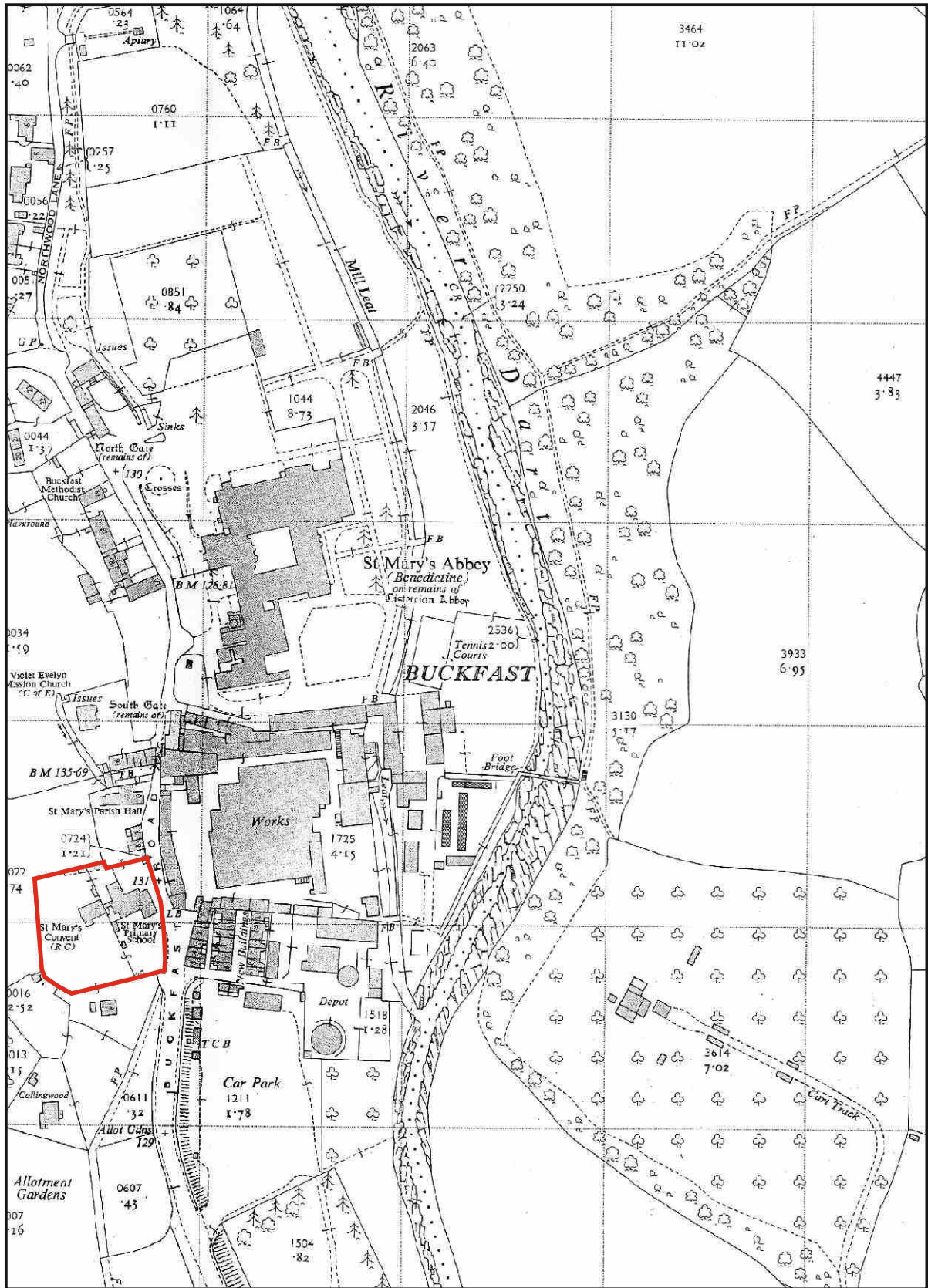


Fig. 10 The OS 1:2,500 map, 1961.



Photo. 1 The assessment site, looking south-west, with the convent on higher ground to the rear of the school.

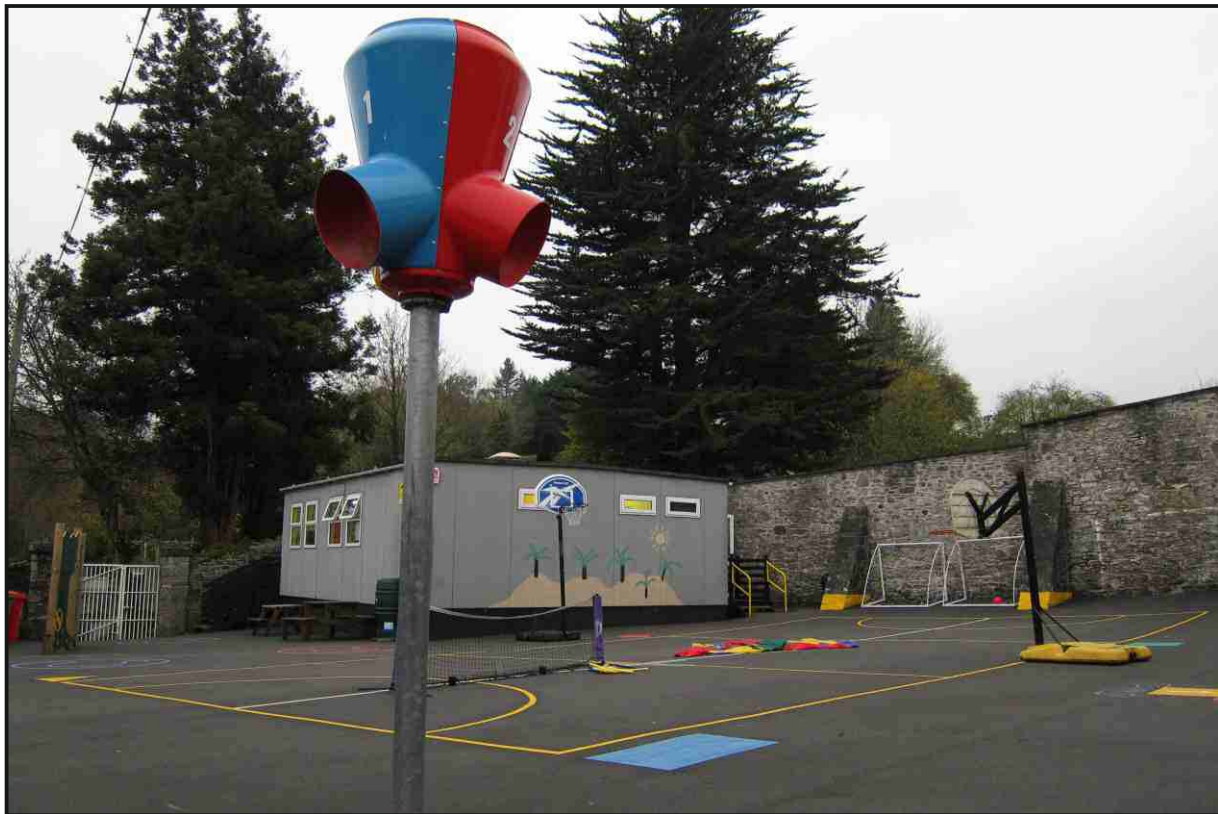


Photo. 2 The area of the proposed hall in the school grounds, looking south-west.



Photo. 3 The area of the proposed playground in the convent grounds, looking north-east.



Photo. 4 The area of the proposed playground in the convent grounds, looking north-west.



Photo. 5 The north boundary wall of the school and convent grounds, showing the blocked doorway and area of protecting stone build (site 3). Looking east.