

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING
BRIEF
AT
PERSHORE ABBEY,
WORCESTERSHIRE

Simon Sworn

With a contribution by Alan Jacobs

Illustrated by Carolyn Hunt

29th June 2005

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Worcestershire County Council

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Project 2759
Report 1348
WSM 34416

Archaeological watching brief at Pershore Abbey, Worcestershire

Simon Sworn

Background information

<i>Client</i>	Pershore Abbey
<i>Agent</i>	Mr R Shoesmith
<i>Site address</i>	Pershore Abbey, Worcestershire
<i>National Grid reference</i>	SO 94775 45805
<i>Sites and Monuments Record reference</i>	WSM 34416
<i>Brief</i>	Verbal outline by Mr R Shoesmith
<i>Project design</i>	HEAS 2005
<i>Project parameters</i>	IFA 1999

Previous archaeological work on the site

Work to the south of the abbey in 1929-30 established the ground plan of the abbatial buildings and the nave (Andrews 1928). Trial excavations were carried out in 1984 to enable an assessment to be made to the structural stability of the central tower. Even with the limited excavations that were possible it was shown that medieval, or possibly earlier, archaeological evidence remained. In particular, a rubble foundation appeared to predate the Norman south-western crossing tower (Roberts 1985). An evaluation carried out in 1997 revealed significant archaeological deposits, though truncation may have removed shallow features. Deposits pre-dating the Norman nave were recovered and the outline of the west end of the nave was securely defined (Napthan 1997).

There have been a number of instances of archaeological work focussed on the fabric of the existing abbey church. Blockley (2000) undertook extensive excavation inside the abbey with 10th, 13th and 19th century phases identified. Further excavation was undertaken on the site of the nave, with 11th century remains. (Dalwood *et al* 2000).

Previous archaeological work on associated sites

Pershore has been the subject of a recent survey undertaken as part of the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey (Dalwood 1996) and contains a summary of previous archaeological work in the town and the abbey grounds.

Aims

The aim of the archaeological watching brief was to observe areas of ground disturbance associated with a hand excavated trench carried out in order to establish the source of subsidence to the north-east corner of the 1936 vestry wall. Observations were carried out in order to record archaeological deposits and to determine their extent, state of preservation, date and type.

Methods

General specification for fieldwork	CAS 1995
Sources consulted	SMR Sources cited by the SMR 1 st Ed OS Map 1885 4 th Ed OS Map 1936
Date of fieldwork	20 th June 2005
Area of site	c 4.70m ² (as indicated on Fig 2)

Dimensions of excavated areas observed length 2.00m
 width 2.35m
 depth 1.10m (max)

Statement of confidence

Observation of the excavated areas was undertaken during and after hand excavation. The exposed surfaces were sufficiently clean to observe well differentiated archaeological deposits. The entire area was cleaned by hand. Access to, and visibility of, deposits allowed a high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved.

Deposit description

Context	Type Colour Texture	Description	Date	Interpretation	Depth (below ground level)
100	Light grey concrete	Frequent sub-rounded gravel matrix	1936	Double poured concrete footing of vestry	0.07- 1.10m
101	Compact yellow lime mortar	Occasional small sub- angular limestone fragments	12 th C	Internal floor surface?	0.59- 0.67m
102	Dressed limestone blocks	Small limestone fragments and yellow mortar	12 th C	North – south wall, eastern wall of northern transept	0.60- 1.10m
103	Human burial. Lying within grave cut 109 and within grave fill 108	Arranged in a roughly east-west line with the head originally at west end. Partially exposed and heavily truncated Body in supine position with right arm lying next to body	7 th – 12 th C	Truncated burial	0.48- 0.55m
104	Curved cut	Only partially exposed in far northeast corner of excavation. Not excavated	7 th C +	Unclear cut, possible grave or post hole	0.50m +
105	North – south linear cut	Vertical sided, flat based cut	12 th C	Construction cut for wall 102	0.60m +
106	Orange brown sandy gravels	Very loose		Natural	0.55m +
107	Compacted yellowish brown silty sand	Frequent sub-angular limestones and rubble	L12 th - 14 th C +	Made ground	0.07m- 0.55m
108	Friable dark brown silty sand	Frequent small sub- rounded pebbles	7 th – 12 th C	Grave fill	0.48m +
109	Partially exposed east – west cut	Not excavated	7 th – 12 th C	Grave cut	0.48m +
110	Grey/black tarmac	Tarmac	20 th C	Present footpath surface	0-0.07m
111	Compacted mid grey silty sand	Frequent limestone fragments and small sub- rounded pebbles	12 th C?	Make-up layer for floor surface 101	0.64- 0.77m
112	Compact yellow lime mortar	Occasional small angular limestone fragments	12 th C?	Internal floor surface?	0.77m+

Discussion

A number of features were exposed within the area of the watching brief. Below the present tarmac surface was a layer of made ground mainly consisting of limestone rubble and tile (context 107), the tile was dated from the late 12th – 14th century, this deposit also contained a small quantity of disarticulated human bone. Though the deposit contained medieval material there were no indications as to the period in which they were laid down. These deposit had been truncated by the concrete foundations for the 1936 vestry building (100). The foundations were exposed to the north-east corner, the area in which the building has started to subside. It appeared that there was at least two separate phases of concrete foundation, suggesting that the walls of the vestry had started to subside soon after construction and that a second level of concrete was laid as a quick remedial solution, though this clearly did not work. This concrete footing has been truncated by a number of later service cables leading into the vestry.

To the east of the concrete foundation a wall aligned north to south was observed (102). The wall, 0.58m below the present surface, consisted of large dressed limestone blocks, interspersed with small limestone fragments and a yellow lime mortar. Although the wall provided no dateable artefacts, it is very likely to be the foundation for the 12th century northern transept. The wall consisted of the same type of limestone to that of other areas of the Romanesque abbey, built c 1100. This wall also lined up with a scar line visible high up on the main body of the 12th century church. The wall had been robbed to a level of 0.58m below the present surface, though there were no indications as to when this took place. Towards the southern end of the excavation the wall appeared to have been robbed out completely, this may have been during the construction of the vestry foundations, though the cut was back-filled with the same medieval (?) make-up layer (107) and may indicate removal of stone immediately after the collapse of the northern transept in 1686. A number of original stones within the wall were seen to slope quite considerably to the west (section 1), the cause for this is unknown, this may possibly have resulted during the collapse of the northern transept in the 17th century. Yet it is more likely that the movement of the stones has been caused by the sheer weight of the later concrete vestry foundations causing the wall to shift downwards and westwards, probably down into the original loosely filled construction cut for this wall or the cut large buttress to the west of the vestry building. This is apparently the most likely cause for the present subsidence in the north-east corner of the vestry wall.

The southern end of the excavation appeared to have been heavily disturbed, as noted by the robbing of the northern transept wall, it is quite feasible that this may have taken place during the construction of the large buttress to the eastern side of the vestry. It is not known when this buttress was constructed, but a carved stone on the top of the buttress gives a date of 1686 (the date of the collapse of the northern transept), though this stone is most likely to have been re-used, suggesting the buttress construction is even later, though it clearly appears on the 1st edition OS map of 1885 (Fig 4). The construction of the buttress is likely to have disturbed a considerable amount of the surrounding area, accounting for the loss of the northern transept wall in this area and the resultant subsidence of the later vestry wall.

The 12th northern transept wall (102), truncated the remains of an east to west orientated juvenile human burial in the north-eastern corner of the excavation. The burial (103) was only partially exposed, the left side of the body remaining hidden underneath the northern limit of the excavation. The only visible remains consisted of the right humerus, ulna, pelvis, four of the lower lumbar vertebra and the sacrum. Found within the grave fill was one small fragment of residual Roman pottery. The upper part of the body has been truncated by the cut for the 12th century wall and the lower part of the body below the pelvis had been truncated by a partially exposed cut. The limited visibility of this later cut made it unclear as to its nature, though it is feasible that it may be either another grave cut or a posthole. This cut was cleaned and recorded in plan, though not excavated. The burial was recorded and photographed, then carefully protected and left *in situ*.

To the west of the northern transept wall was a layer of yellow mortar, though this was only partially exposed in plan within the main excavation trench, the small excavation to the north side of the vestry wall revealed that this was a thin layer of mortar, roughly 0.06m thick, resting on top of a mixed make-up layer (111), which in turn was resting on another mortar surface (112). It

appears from this evidence (section 2) that these layers are either the remains of at least two internal floor surfaces within the walls of the northern transept, the higher layer (101) being a later addition when the floor surface had been raised, or that these are associated with construction. There were no signs of this surface having been tiled at any point.

Artefact analysis (by Alan J Jacobs)

Artefact recovery policy

All artefacts from the area of salvage recording were retrieved by hand and retained in accordance with the service manual (CAS 1995 as amended).

Method of analysis

All hand-retrieved finds were examined and a primary record was made on a Microsoft Access 2000 database. Artefacts were identified, quantified and dated and a *terminus post quem* date produced for each stratified context. Pottery and ceramic building material was examined under x20 magnification and recorded by fabric type and form according to the fabric reference series maintained by the service (Hurst and Rees 1992: Hurst 1992)

Artefactual analysis

The pottery assemblage retrieved from the excavated area consisted of 1 sherd of pottery weighing 8g, in addition fragments of tile and human bone were recovered. The group came from 1 stratified context and could be dated from the Roman to the medieval period (see Table 1&2). Level of preservation was generally fair with the single sherd displaying a high level of abrasion.

Material	Total	Weight (g)
Roman pottery (fabric 12 Severn Valley ware	1	8
Medieval tile	6	206
Human bone	9	54
Total	16	268

Table 1: Quantification of the assemblage

Discussion of the pottery

All sherds have been grouped and quantified according to fabric type (see Table 1). No diagnostic form sherds were present and the single sherd was dated by fabric type to the general period or production span.

The discussion below is a summary of the finds and associated location or contexts by period. Where possible, *terminus post quem* dates have been allocated and the importance of individual finds commented upon as necessary.

Finds

Only a single sherd of residual Roman pottery was present, several fragments of tile of late 12th-18th century dating were present (Hurst 1992) the majority of these has an organic content and were more vesicular than is normal for this long lasting local fabric. This would indicate an early date for these sherds.

Context	Material	Date	Total	Weight
103	Human bone		3	5
103	Roman Pottery	1 st -4 th century	1	8
107	Human bone	L12 th -14 th century	6	49
107	Medieval Tile	L12 th -14 th century	6	206

Table2: Quantification of the assemblage by context

Significance

The lack of clear unequivocal dating evidence due to the small number of finds makes evaluation difficult. However, the presence of adolescent human bone within a late 12th-14th dating context is clearly significant within the context of the abbey.

Conclusions

The results of the watching brief have concluded that substantial archaeological remains are well preserved not far below the present surface outside the north-eastern corner of the vestry. There are substantial below ground remains of the eastern wall of the 12th century northern transept and either floor or construction surfaces. The partial remains of an earlier Christian burial lie in a well-preserved state not far below the surface, though they were truncated by the 12th century wall foundations and an unexcavated cut. Although considerable disturbance has taken place during the insertion of the large buttress, built between 1686 and 1885, and the 1936 concrete foundations of the vestry, there are still considerable remains that will help to establish to original ground plan of the early medieval northern transept and burial practise prior to the 12th century.

Publication summary

The Service has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, the Service intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Pershore Abbey, Worcestershire (NGR ref SO 94775 45805; SMR ref WSM 34416). The results of the watching brief have concluded that substantial archaeological remains are well preserved not far below the present surface outside the north-eastern corner of the vestry. There are substantial below ground remains of the eastern wall of the 12th century northern transept and at least two phases of internal mortared floor surfaces. The partial remains of an earlier Christian burial lie in a well-preserved state not far below the surface, though truncated by the 12th century wall foundations. Although considerable disturbance has taken place during the insertion of the large buttress and the modern concrete foundations for the present vestry, there are still considerable remains that will help to establish the original ground plan of the early medieval northern transept and, burial practise prior to the 12th century.

Archive

Trench records AS41	1
Fieldwork progress records AS2	1
Photographic records AS3	1
Digital photographs	53
Drawings	4
Boxes of finds	1

The project archive is intended to be placed at: Worcestershire County Museum
Hartlebury Castle, Hartlebury
Near Kidderminster
Worcestershire DY11 7XZ
01299 250416

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Acknowledgements

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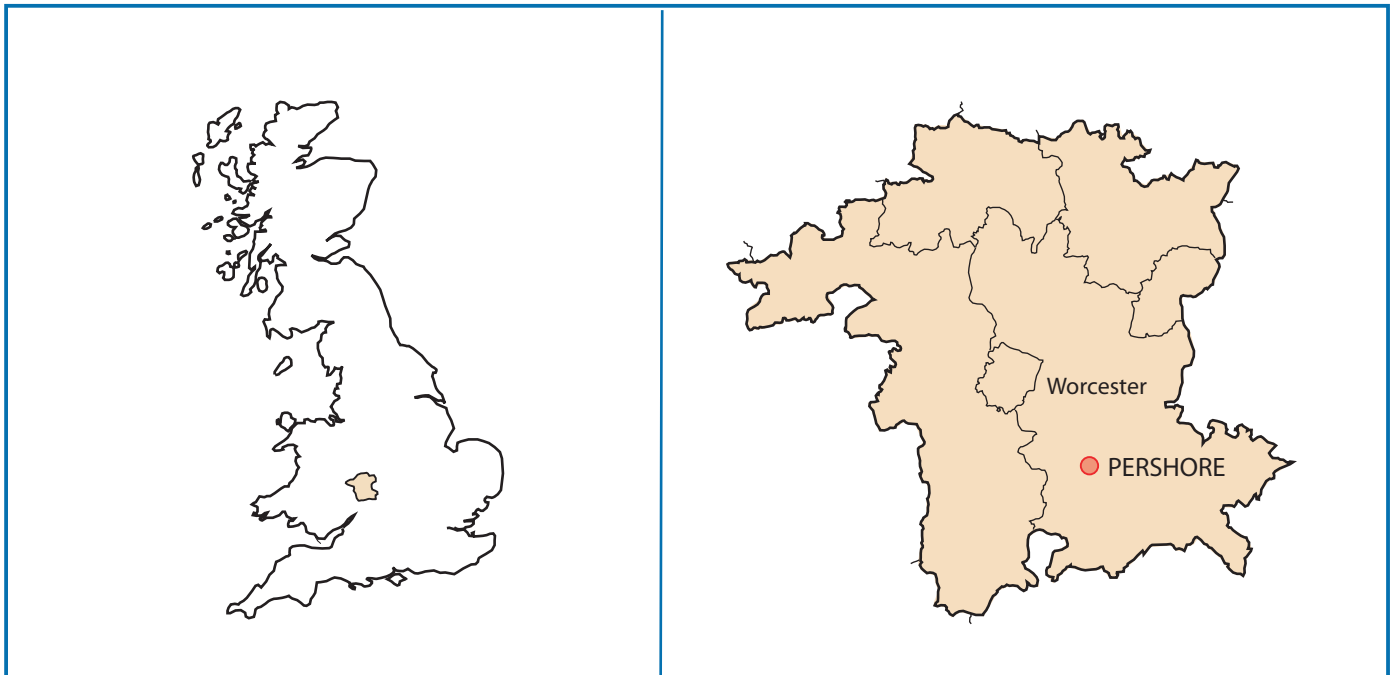
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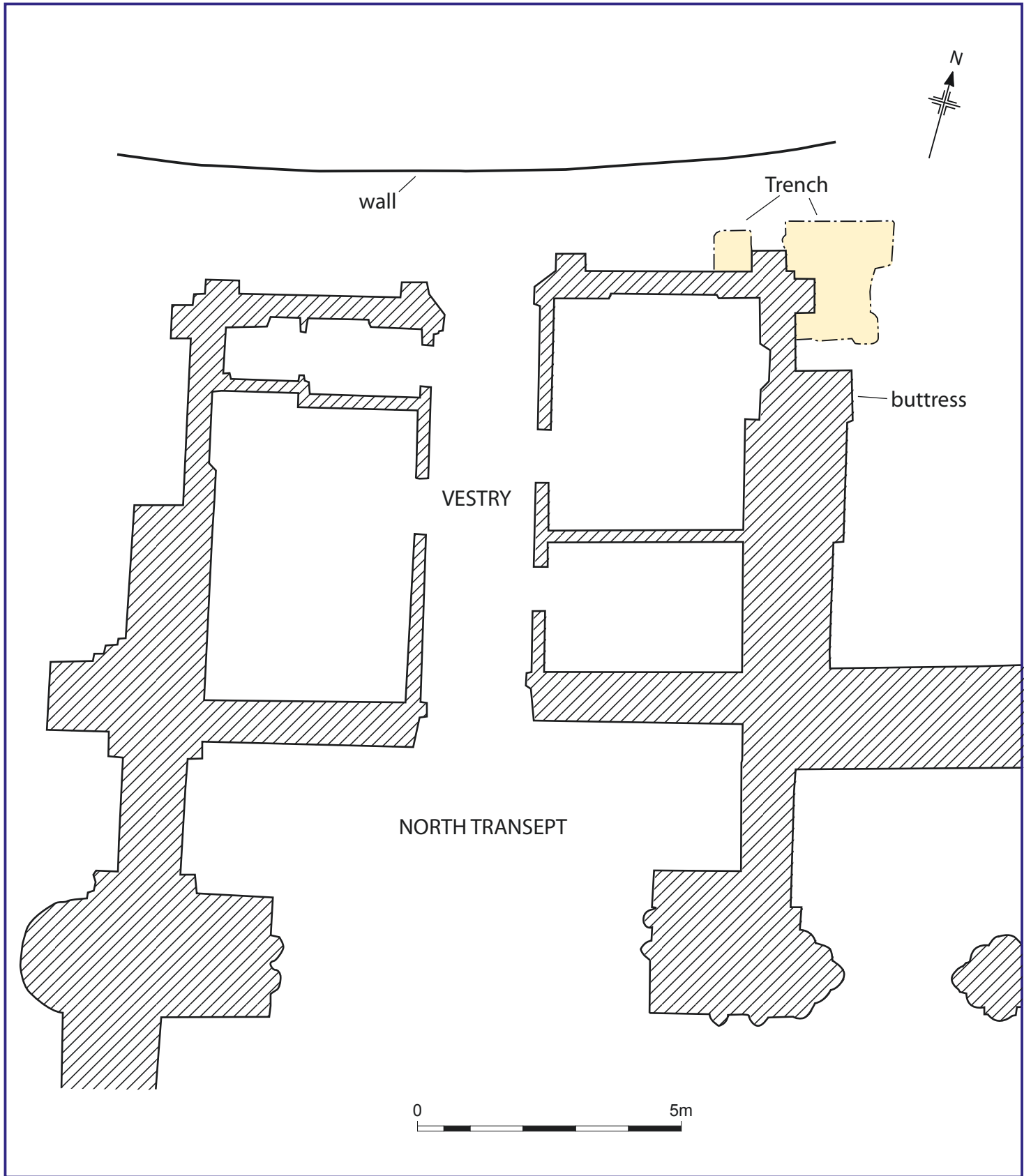
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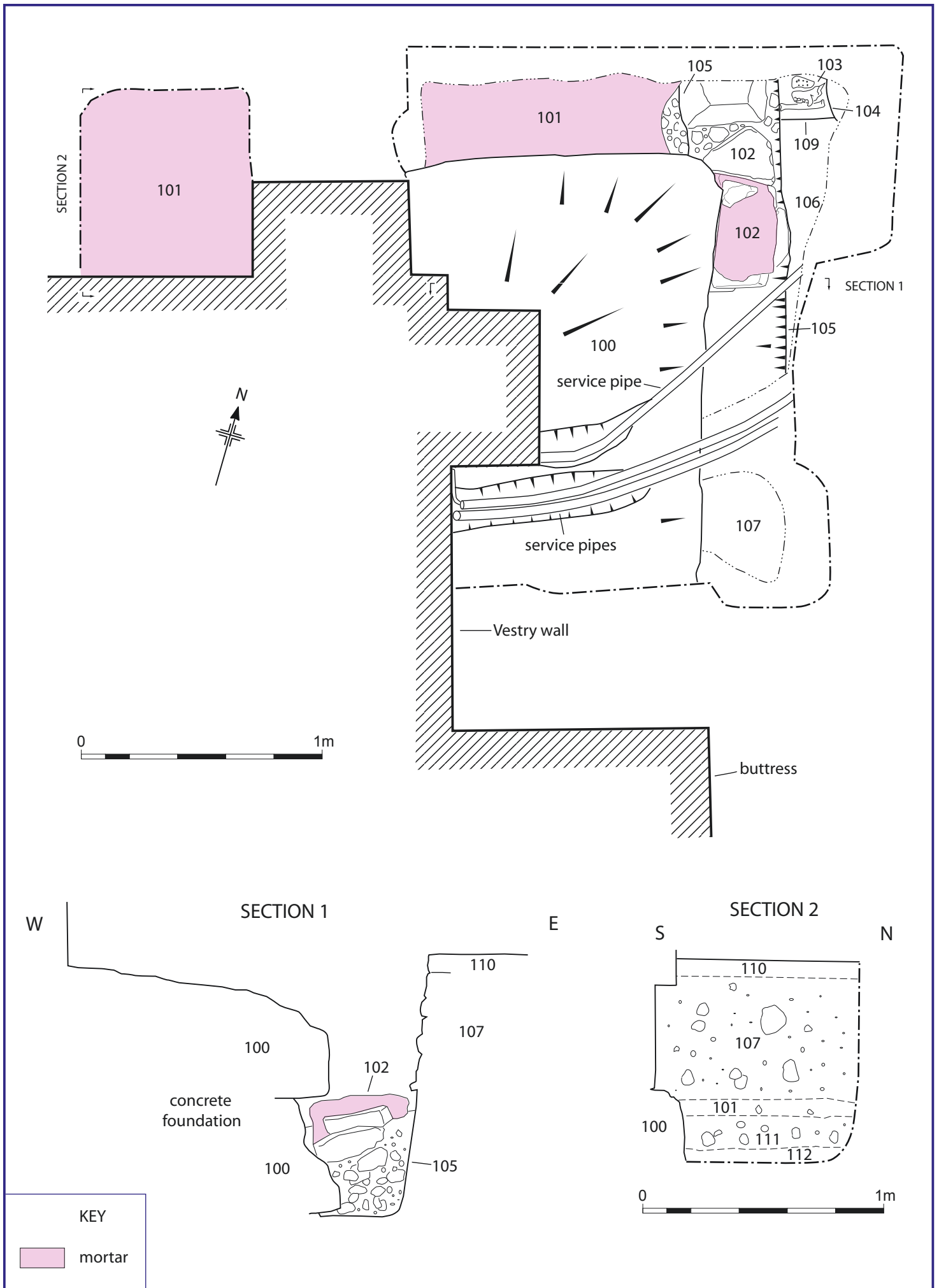
Location of the site.

Figure 1



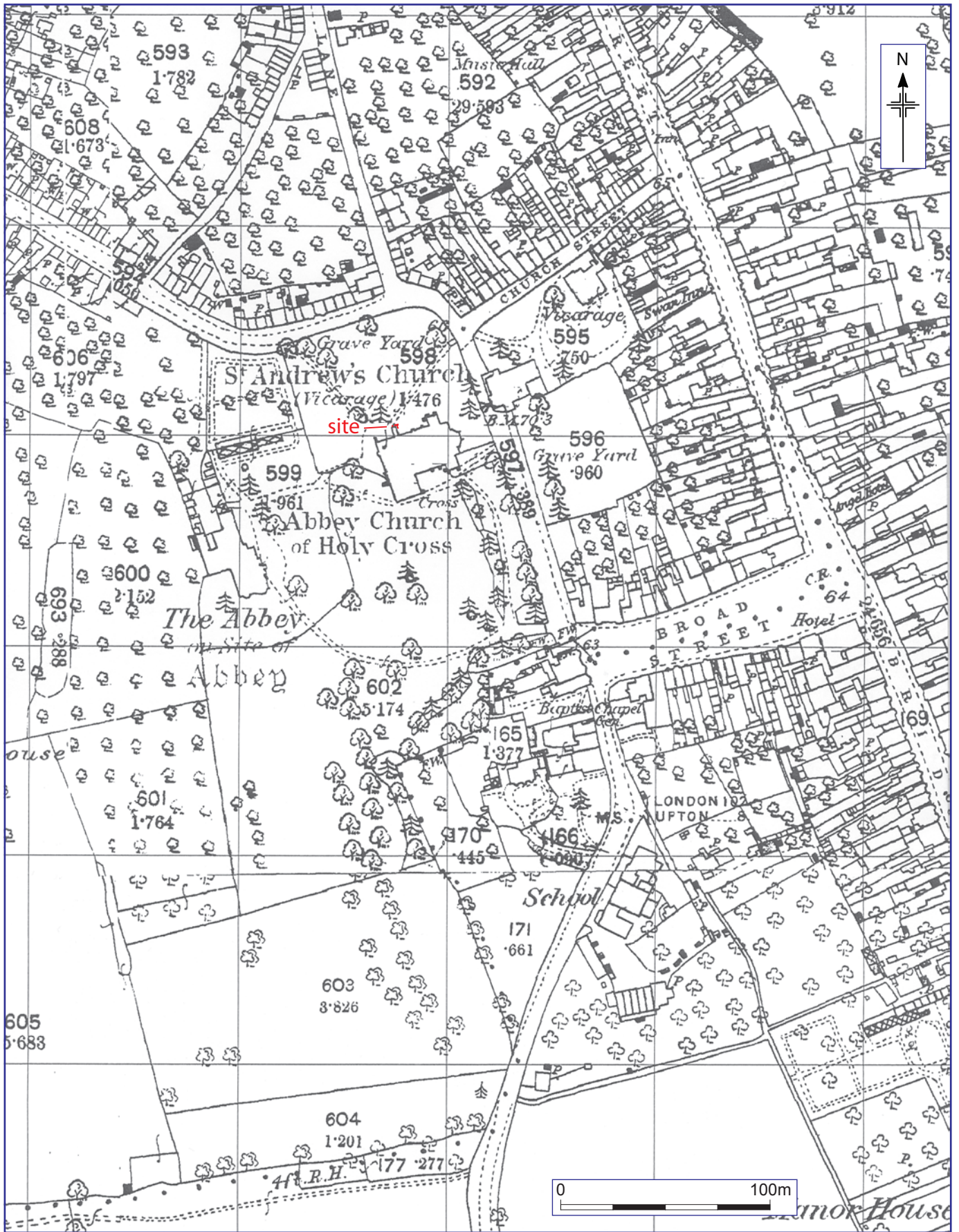
Trench location plan

Figure 2



Plan and sections

Figure 3



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Extract from First Edition Ordnance Survey map, 1885

Figure 4

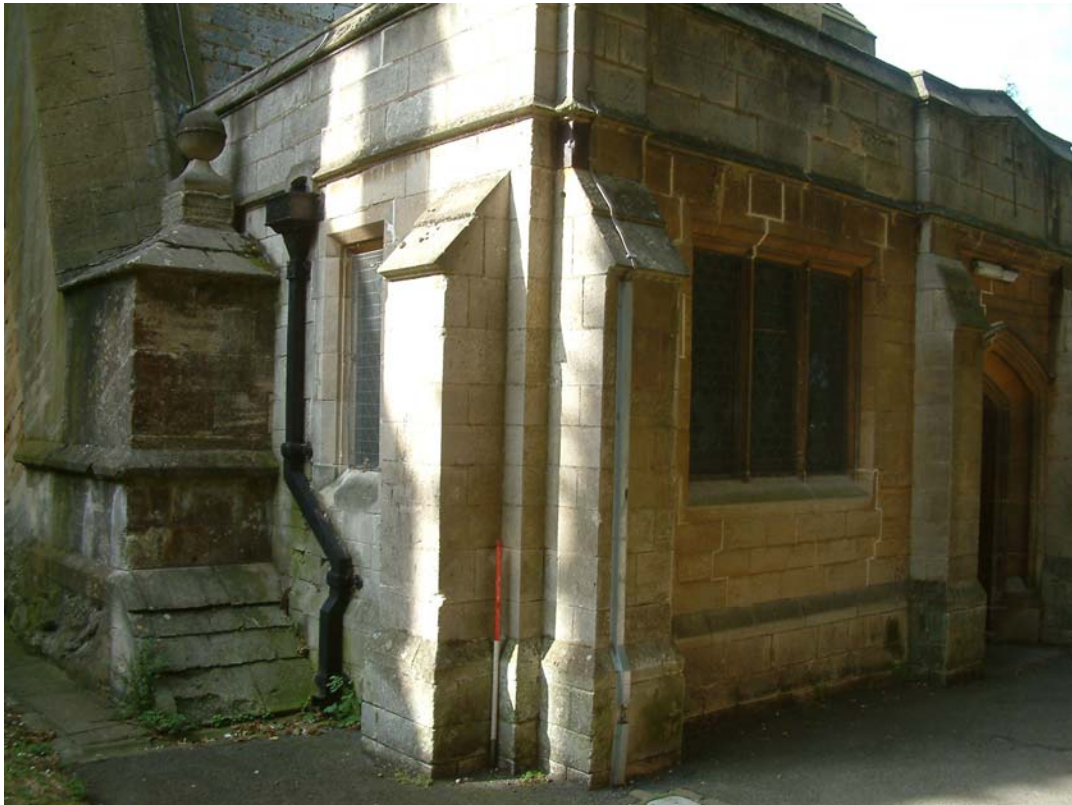


Plate 1: North-east corner of vestry prior to excavation, facing south-west



Plate 2: Detail of wall 102, concrete footing 100, skeleton and mortared floor surface to the lower right of photograph, facing south



Plate 3: Northern transept wall, showing the stone sloping to the west and the robbed out construction cut, facing north



Plate 4: Detail of skeleton 103, heavily truncated by wall 102 in foreground, facing east



Plate 5: Mortared floor surface 101 in the base of trench 2.