



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

**AT**

**ST. EDBURG'S HOUSE, OLD PLACE YARD**

**BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE**

**NGR SP5835 2220**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

*On behalf of*

*Cherwell District Council*

**JUNE 2014**

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**REPORT FOR** Cherwell District Council  
Bodicote House  
Bodicote  
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## INTRODUCTION

John Moore Heritage Services carried out an archaeological watching brief during demolition works at former St. Edburg's House Care Home located to the southeast of St Edburg's church at Old Place Yard, Bicester (NGR SP 5835 2220). The monitored area covered approximately 0.25ha and lies at approximately 69m above OD. Demolition works were first stage of proposed redevelopment of the wider area of Old Place Yard by Cherwell District Council.

Due to the high archaeological potential of the area Oxfordshire Historic and Natural Environment Team prepared a Design Brief for Archaeological Watching Brief (OHaNET 2014) and John Moore Heritage Services prepared Written Scheme of Investigation (JMHS 2014), which proposed the methodology by which the archaeological watching brief was to be carried out.

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were; to make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy archaeological remains and in particular to record any evidence of remains related to the Augustinian Priory, established by Gilbert de Bassett in 1182-85 and any earlier activity.

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An archaeological investigation in 2011 revealed surviving foundations of the east end of the Church and considerable number of burials at the former Bryan House located immediately to the south of Priory Lane (Riccoboni 2012).

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in Old Place Yard in 2013 (Tabor 2013). Fourteen evaluation trenches were opened across the site; five of them, which in particular demonstrated that archaeological remains related to the Priory, survive on the site, were within the grounds of St. Edburg's House, which was a subject of this archaeological watching brief.

## RESULTS

Demolition works at the former St. Edburg's House were executed by 20 tonne excavator fitted with 1.8m wide trenching bucket (Pl. 1). The removal of the concrete slab and foundations was gradually carried out from south to the north with the last as the area of the east extension.

The concrete slab (101) that covered the entire footprint of the former building was 0.3m to 0.4m thick and reinforced with a steel framework. Concrete foundations were 0.5m deep and 0.4m wide in the south, central and north parts of the monitored area. The concrete foundations of the east extension of St. Edburg's House were 0.6m deep and 0.7m wide.

The biggest impact of the demolition works was in the area of the lift shaft, which covered approximately 52m<sup>2</sup>, in the west central part of monitored area. Here concrete foundations were up to 1.7m deep (Fig. 1).

Surrounding the concrete slab (101) was 0.45m thick dark grey sandy loam (100), topsoil.

Under the concrete slab (101) and topsoil (100) was a layer of mid brown sandy loam (102) observed in the south part of monitored area. In the central and north area was a deposit of mid brown clayey silt (103), which seems to be very similar to deposit (102). Either the deposits represent levelling layers related to construction works in 1960s or they might be related to use of the area in the post-medieval period.

The lowest deposit exposed in the south part of the monitored area was mid brownish grey clayey silt (104) containing charcoal flakes, small sub-angular stones and three animal bones (Fig. 1, Pl. 2). This was interpreted as an alluvial deposit.

In the area of the lift shaft after removal of the demolition rubble were exposed two alluvial deposits, the remains of a wall and five successive layers, which represent occupations and/or floor surfaces. The high water table, which flooded the entire exposed area, affected recording of these remains.

The lowest deposits recorded within this area were alluvial deposits (105) and (107). Deposit (105) was organic 0.2m – 0.3m thick (as excavated) dark grey silty clay, containing c. 2% of charcoal flacks, waterlogged plant material and ten animal bones. Deposit (107) was c. 0.3m thick (as excavated) light greenish grey silty clay, with c. 1% of charcoal. The direct stratigraphic relationship between those two deposits was unclear, due the fact that both deposits were cut by construction cut 121 of linear wall **106** (Fig. 1, Pl. 3).

Wall **106** was c. 5m long, 1.6m wide and c. 0.4m high (approximately 67.50m above OD), aligned east to west. It was built of roughly squared limestone of maximum dimensions 350x200x150mm, bonded with light yellowish sandy lime mortar. Wall **106** was overlaid by deposit (103) (Pl. 3). Rubble related to the wall **106** was observed further to the east in central part of monitored area mixed with deposit (103).

On the north edge of the area of the lift shaft were exposed five occupation and/or floor layers overlaying deposit (105) (Pl. 4). The lowest layer (112) was compact light yellowish white sandy lime mortar floor or bedding surface, 0.06m thick and 0.70m long in section. The following layer (111) was 0.1m thick and 1.3m long (in section) firm mid greyish green clayey silt with 5% of small sub-angular stone. This layer might represent bedding for floor surface (110). Floor surface (110) was 0.08m thick and 1.3m long (in section). It was made up of well-sorted small sub-angular stones bedded in mid grey silty sand. Deposit (110) was overlaid by 0.1m thick firm mid greenish grey sandy silt (109) with c. 5% of small poorly sorted sub-angular stones and c. 2% of charcoal flecks. This deposit represents an occupation or floor layer as well. The uppermost deposit within the sequence of occupation and floor surfaces was 0.08m thick soft blackish grey sandy silt (108), containing approximately 5% charcoal content. This deposit might represent a tramped floor surface related to last stage of the existence of the priory. Deposit (108) was overlaid by 0.3m thick concrete slab; top at 68.52m above OD.

The lowest deposit exposed in the north part of monitored area was alluvial very dark grey sandy clay (116) very similar to the deposit (105) (Fig. 1). This deposit was truncated by deposit (103) within the footprint of former building.

In the section of the east edge of north part of monitored area were exposed remains of two walls **114** and **118** (Fig. 1). Both walls were heavily disturbed by construction of building in 1960s.

Wall **114** was set within construction cut 113 with sharp break of slope and vertical sides, orientated in east – west direction (Fig. 1). It cut into deposit (105), this stratigraphic relationship was clearly visible in section. Wall **114**, as seen was 0.6m long, 1.6m wide and 0.3m high (top of the wall 68.45m above OD), mainly built of sub-angular limestone of maximum dimension 320x200x190mm and bonded with light yellowish brown sandy lime mortar (Pl. 5). Rubble from this wall, which contains sub-angular and roughly worked stones, was mixed with deposit (103) (Pl. 6). Overlaying wall 114 was 0.24m thick mid greyish brown sandy loam containing occasional sub-angular stones and ceramic building material. This layer possibly represents a demolition layer and it might be post-medieval in date. Layer (115) was covered with 0.2m thick layer of topsoil (Pl. 5).

Wall **118** was on the same alignment as wall **114** located 3m to the south, set within construction cut 117 (Fig. 1). It was 1.2m long (as seen) 1.8m wide and 0.28m high (top of the wall 68.48m above OD). Wall **118** was built of sub-angular limestone of maximum dimensions 300x250x180mm, bonded with yellowish sandy lime mortar. It was overlaid by an asphalt footpath, concrete curb and topsoil (101) (Pl. 7).

In the area of the east extension, after removal of concrete foundations, alluvial greenish grey silty clay (107) was exposed. Cut into this deposit (107) were surviving remains of limestone wall **120**, which was set within a not clearly visible construction cut 119. Wall **120** was 1m wide, 1.4m long (as excavated), 0.25m high (top of the wall 67.87m above OD) and aligned north to south (Fig. 1, Pl. 8). The rest of the area of the east extension was covered by deposit (103).

In the area to the west of footprint of the former building (Fig. 1), part of the driveway was removed, which was originally covered by paving blocks. Only sand bedding for the paving blocks and topsoil were exposed within an area of 13.5x6.5m (Pl. 9). To the north of footprint of former building paving blocks, which originally were part of the floor of a garage which was demolished before the start of archaeological watching brief, were removed (Fig. 1). Only the rubble bedding of the floor was exposed in this area.

## **FINDS**

A relatively small amount of finds was recovered during the archaeological watching brief

Animal bones represented the main group of finds. From alluvial deposit (104) was recovered an assemblage of three animal bones and from deposit (105) were obtained ten animal bones. One of the bones from the deposit (105) has traces of cut marks.

Both assemblages of bones perhaps represent domestic rubbish, which was disposed in period before second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century (dating based on stratigraphic relationships).

Apart from the animal bones, one unstratified fragment of gravestone was recovered from demolition rubble. It was 300mm high, 380mm wide and 85mm thick with four lines of carved text (Pl. 10). First line of inscription has been poorly preserved and illegible, the following three lines were identified as follow:

[.]o D[.....]  
Wife of THOMAS  
Son of JOHN PARS[ON]  
Who Died 20 N[ov]

Although exact date is not preserved within the inscription on gravestone, it seems to be late post-medieval in date and may have originated from the non-conformist chapel on Chapel Street. A similar part gravestone was recovered from the Bryan House excavations.

No other finds were recovered from monitored area.

## DISCUSSION

The archaeological watching brief at the former St. Edburg's House was successful in proving that some remains of the Priory church were still preserved within the monitored area under the former building. The most significant features were remains of the church walls, and floor surfaces recorded in area of the lift shaft.

Wall **114** represents foundation of north exterior wall of church. This wall foundation was recorded during the construction work in 1960s. A photograph published in *Oxoniensia* shows the wall foundation quite well preserved (Hinton 1968, Pl. 1). The continuation of this wall was recorded as a wall **395** during the archaeological investigations at the former Bryan House in 2011 (Fig. 2) (Riccoboni 2012, 37, 32: Fig. 12).

Masonry identify during the watching brief as wall **118**, seems to represents one of the pillar base recorded in 1960s (Hinton 1968, 30: Fig. 10, 38, Fig. 11). However remains of wall **118** were on same alignment as walls **165** and **166** recorded in the recent evaluation Trench 9 (Tabor 2013, 8, Fig. 4, Fig. 8), which suggest it could be continuation of linear foundation **265** investigated in 2011 (Fig. 2) (Riccoboni 2012, 30: Fig 12) and more likely represent foundation of the colonnade between the nave and north aisle.

Wall **106** recorded in area of lift shaft represents south exterior wall of the priory church. This wall was recorded in 1960's (Hinton 1968, Pl. 2) and was on the same alignment as wall **267** investigated in 2011 (Fig. 2) (Riccoboni 2012, 30: Fig. 12). Photography taken in 1960's shows the wall quite well preserved which was not case during the watching brief.

Remains of masonry recorded as wall **120** located in the area of the east extension of the former St. Edburg's House represents the foundation of the west wall of the south transept and also might be related with cloister. This wall was located exactly as shown on the reconstruction plan of the Priory church and cloister published by D. Hinton (1968, 38: Fig. 11) (Fig. 2).

Floor/occupation surfaces (108), (109), (110), (111) and (112) recorded in the area of lift shaft, represent the internal floor of the nave. Numerous floor surfaces were recorded in the trenches 6, 7, 8 and 9 excavated during the archaeological evaluation in 2013 (Tabor 2013, 6-8). Perhaps some of the floor surfaces recorded during the watching brief might be relate to floor surface recorded in trench 6/2013, although the direct stratigraphic relationship was not established.

Based on data collected during the archaeological watching brief, it can be concluded that archaeological feature/remains of the Priory church, cloister and additional building are better preserved outside of the actual footprint of the former St. Edburg's House.

Construction works in 1960s had greater impact on archaeological remains than was in case of the former Bryan House located immediately to the east of Priory Lane.

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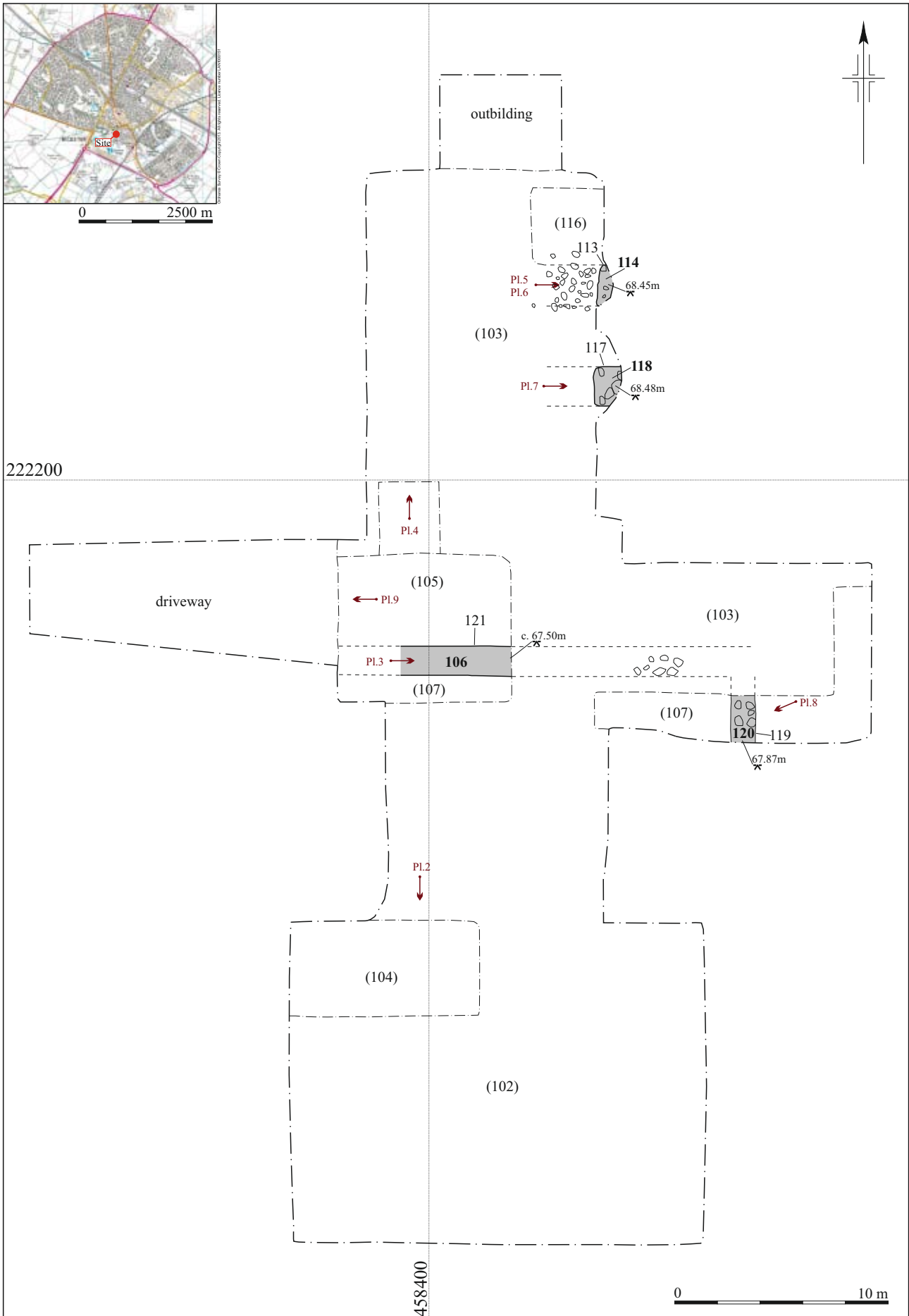


Figure 1: Site location and plan of monitored area



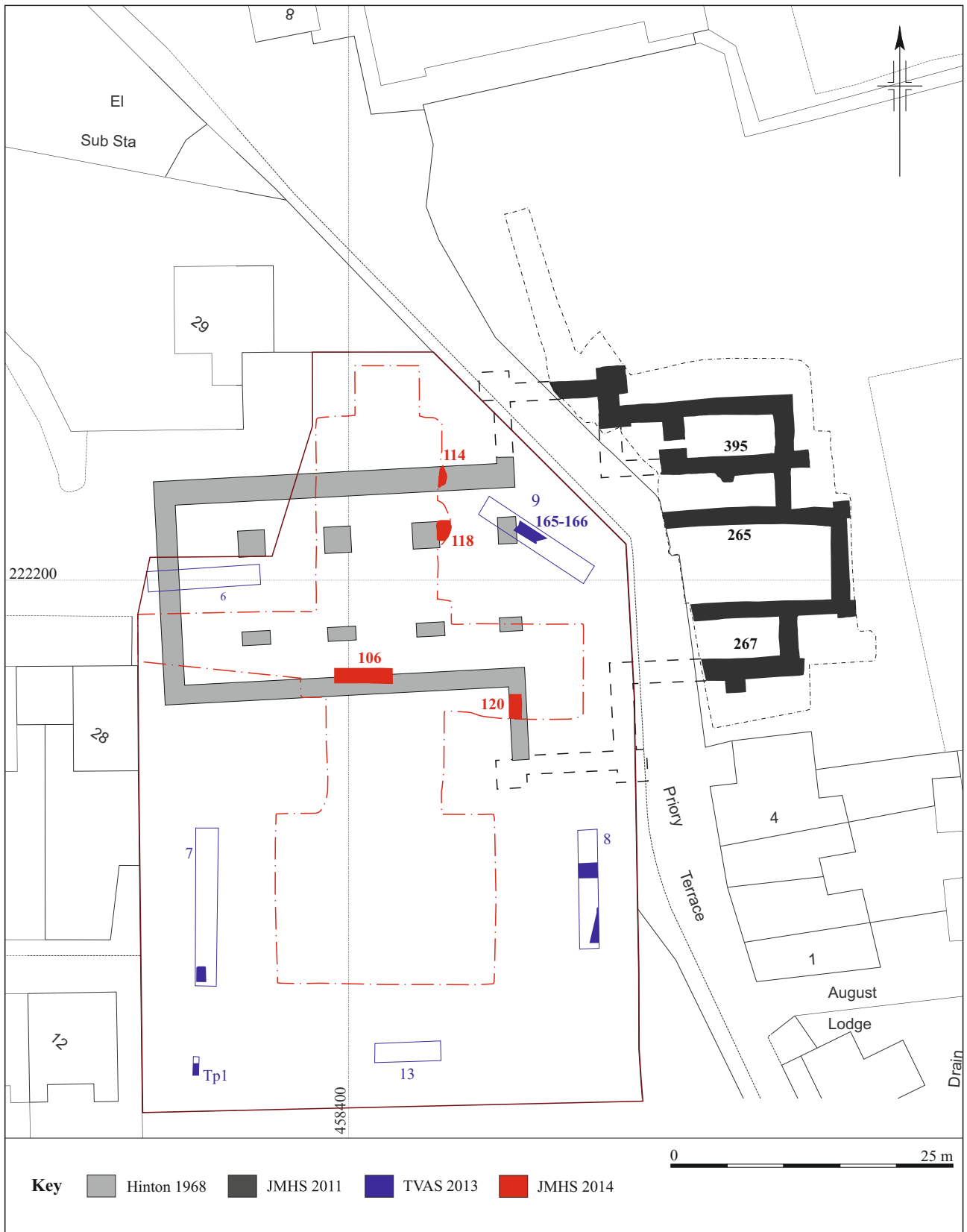


Figure 2: Result of archaeological watching brief superimposed on possible reconstruction of the Priory church



Plate 1: Demolition works in south part of monitored area, looking west.



Plate 2: Alluvial deposit (104), looking south.



Plate 3: General overview of wall 106 and alluvial deposits (105) and (107), looking east.



Plate 4: View of floor and occupation deposits (108), (109), (110), (111) and (112), looking north.



Plate 5: Remains of wall **114**, looking east.



Plate 6: Stone rubble from the wall **114**, looking east.



Plate 7: Remains of wall **118**, looking east.



Plate 8: Remains of wall **120**, looking southwest.



Plate 9: General overview of driveway after removal of paving blocks, looking west.



Plate 10: Fragment of gravestone.