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Excavations at Back Lane, Winchcombe, 1985

by C. J. Guy
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ERIC J. BOORE

EXCAVATIONS AT BACK LANE, WINCHCOMBE, 1985

Introduction

Excavations were carried out from 1 July – 26 July 1985 on the proposed site of a new Infants' School in Back Lane, Winchcombe (FIG. 2). The excavations were funded jointly by Gloucestershire County Council and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England. The available site (SP 023 284) was bounded on the north by a children's play area (included in the area for the new school), on the west by the Junior School playing field, on the east by a car park, and on the south by Abbey Old House. Two trenches were laid out. The first (trench I) was 34 m long, *c.* 2 m wide and aligned north-west to south-east, at right angles to Back Lane. The second (trench II) ran north-east from near the north-west end of trench I and was parallel to Back Lane. This trench was 40 m long and *c.* 2.5 m wide.

Excavations undertaken in 1963 and 1972 (Ellis 1986) to the west of the present site found evidence for a trackway, apparently dating to the Saxon period, and a Saxon-period clay bank with stone facing lies immediately south-east of Back Lane, although much degraded in the children's play area. It was hoped that trench I would produce evidence for the continuation of this trackway and of buildings fronting onto it. In the north-east corner of the available site there was a very large depression which it was thought might be one of the abbey fishponds or a quarry (Aldred and Hannan 1981). Trench II was laid out to cut across the depression.

The topsoil was stripped from the trenches by machine and the underlying stratigraphy was excavated by hand. All layers and features were recorded in a unique sequence beginning at 1 and the numbers used in this report are those used on site. Three test pits were dug by machine before the trenches were back-filled, their positions being determined in agreement with the consultant structural engineers.

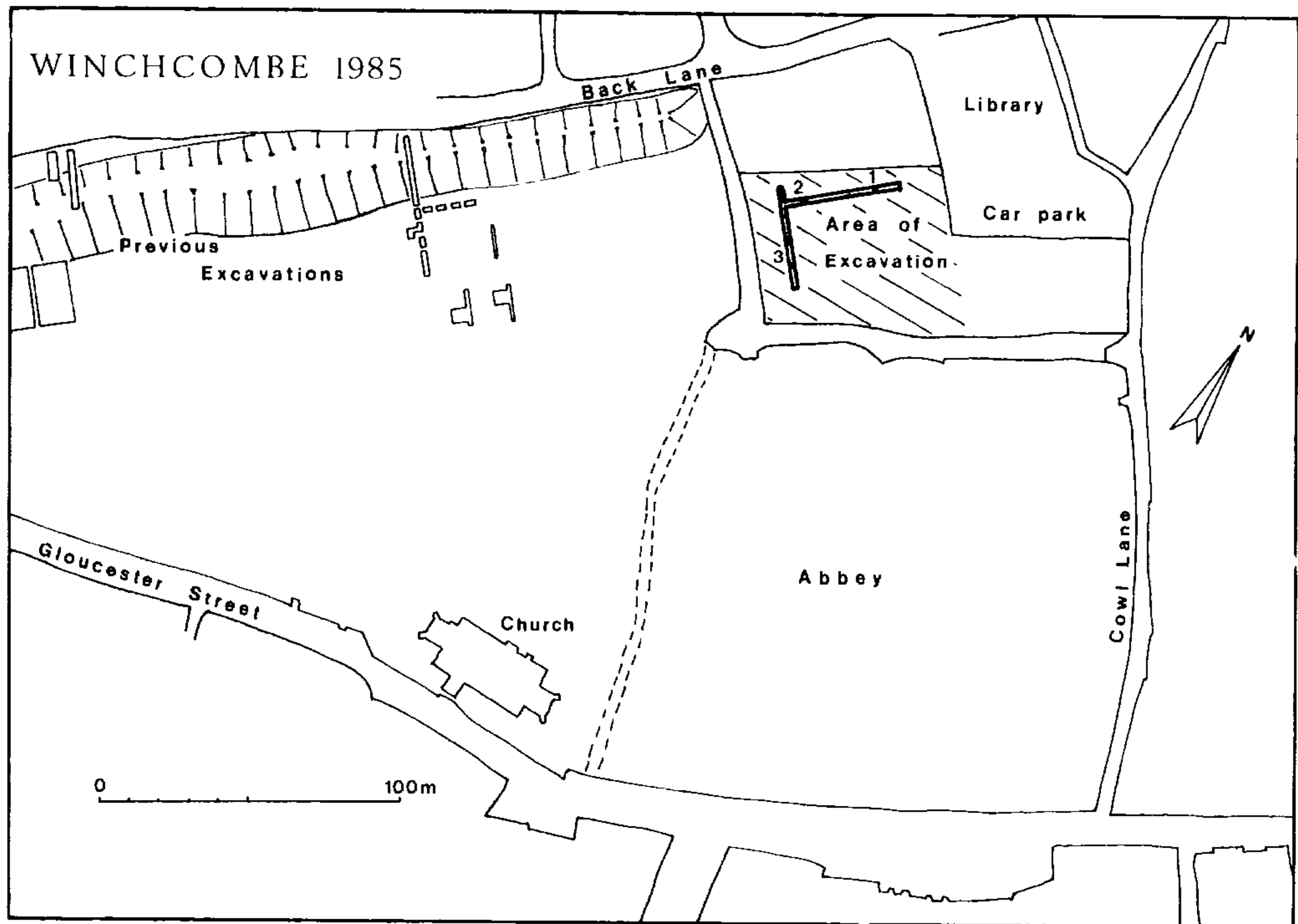


FIG. 2 Site location, showing the excavated trenches and the position of test pits 1–3. Trench II is parallel to Back Lane, trench I is at right angles to it.

Trench I (FIG. 3)

The majority of the excavation period was spent on digging this trench and the work was concentrated on each end. To simplify the following description the trench is assumed to lie on a north-south alignment.

At the south end of the trench the topsoil, 1, overlaid a layer of brown loam with much limestone, 2, to an average depth of 0.25–0.3 m below ground surface. Below 2, at a distance of 2.8 m from the end of the trench, there was a straight-sided linear feature, 4, aligned approximately west to east. This was 0.5 m wide and up to 0.45 m deep with steep sides and a slightly concave base. At the bottom there was a layer of yellow sand *c.* 50 mm thick on the west which faded out before it reached the east section. The remainder of the fill was brown loam with occasional lenses of blue clay (mainly in the east), ash, and fragments of limestone. The function of this feature is unknown.

Below 2 to the south of 4 there was a layer of compact orange gravel and limestone, 3, of variable thickness. This was probably debris from the demolition of a wall, 6, which ran along the west side of the trench. This wall was composed of uncoursed fragments of limestone in a matrix of orange clay/gravel. At its south end it was at least 0.6 m wide and it disappeared into the west section 4.7 m from the south end of the trench. It was cut by feature 4.

The demolition debris 3 overlaid a second wall, 5, aligned approximately east to west and *c.* 0.47 m wide, close to the south end of the trench. It was constructed of coursed limestone fragments, except at its west end where it was disturbed by wall 6, and its edges were irregular. To the south of wall 5, adjacent to wall 6, there was an area of limestone rubble with a fragment of possible sandstone paving. This was *c.* 0.8 m wide and to its east there was clay. None of the layers below 3 to the south of 4 was excavated.

To the north of feature 4, layer 2 overlaid a layer of compact orange gravel and loam with much limestone, 7, very similar to layer 3 and probably also debris from the demolition of wall 6. This extended 1.2 m north of 4 and was up to 0.1 m thick. Below it there was a layer of limestone fragments, including roof tile, in a matrix of brown loam, 8, with peagrit above the limestone. This may represent a cobble surface but the fragments of limestone were fairly loose. Adjacent to wall 6 this layer was thin but it was *c.* 0.2 m thick at the east section. It was similar in extent to layer 7.

Underlying layer 8 there was a more extensive layer of compact brown/black loam, 12, with fragments of limestone and

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Trench I

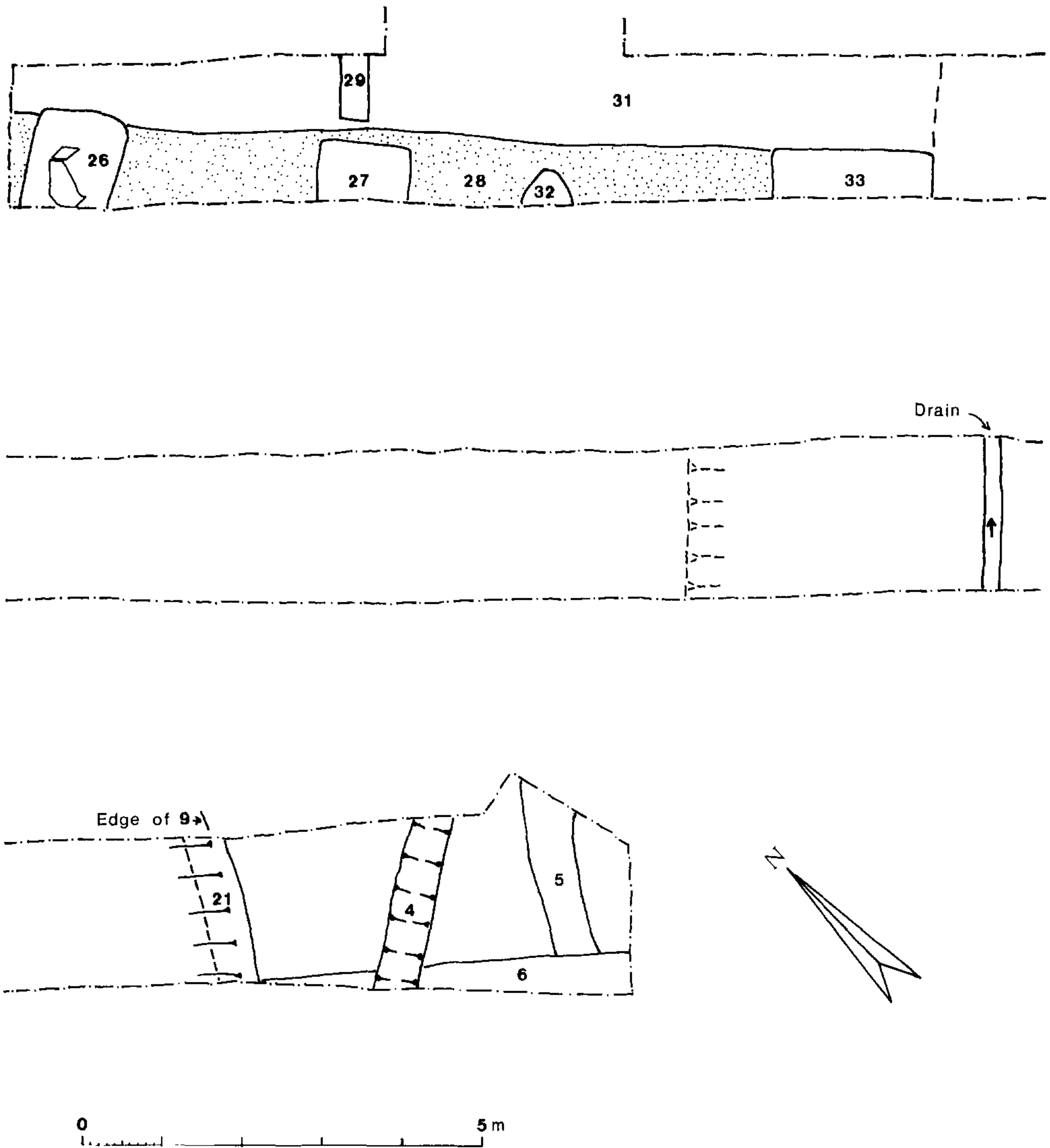


FIG. 3 Plan of trench I, showing excavated features mentioned in the text. The plan has been split into three parts, with the north end of the trench shown at the top and the south end at the bottom.

much metal-working debris. This was up to 0.1 m thick and was cut on the north by a large intrusion, 9. The south side of this intrusion was straight and fairly steep but its full profile was not ascertained. The fill of 9 adjacent to its south side was sticky green-brown clay/silt, 11, which contained flecks and fragments of charcoal and occasional fragments of limestone. Overlying 11 there were fills of fairly compact brown-black loamy clay/silt, 10 and 23, with limestone blocks and roof tiles which followed the profile of the intrusion. These fills were only excavated in a small area of the south side of the intrusion and to a depth of 1 m below ground surface.

Below layer 12 there was a layer of mortar and limestone fragments, 13, which varied in depth from a thin skim to 0.12 m thick. This may be debris from the demolition of an earlier wall and appears to have been used to level the area. The top of this layer was smooth and sloped down slightly towards the north. It sealed a very uneven layer of brown loam, 14, which contained lenses of brown clay, occasional fragments of limestone, and much metal-working debris. Layer 14 overlapped the south side of a robber trench, 20, which was parallel to wall 5 and c. 4 m north of it. The trench was at least 0.2 m deep and 0.2 m wide but had been truncated by intrusion 9. The south side was fairly straight and vertical and the bottom was flat. It was filled with fairly compact, brown, clayey soil with flecks of mortar. Cut by 20 was a layer of black loam, 19, with much charcoal and metal-working debris and containing fragments of limestone, particularly towards the bottom of the layer. This may have been composed of more than one layer as possible tip lines were visible in section. It was up to 0.2 m thick.

On the east side of the trench to the south of robber trench 20 there was an area of compact brown clay, 22, at least 0.14 m thick, butted and overlaid by layer 19. This would appear to be the fill of a possible trench aligned north-south. Its relationship to 20 was uncertain but it seemed to cut 21, a fragment of the wall not robbed by 20. This wall was at least 0.36 m wide and was composed of limestone blocks, although there was no evidence of mortar. Layer 13 may represent debris from the demolition of this wall. There was possibly a return to the south below 22 but this was unclear.

To the west of 22, and cut by it, there was a layer of limestone fragments, 24, perhaps forming a surface and possibly associated with wall 21. This surface sloped down from south to north. To its west layer 19 sealed a layer of compact grey-brown clay, 25, containing fragments of limestone and bone with flecks of mortar and charcoal, which seemed to overlie a southern extension of layer 24. These layers were not excavated.

At the north end of the trench the topsoil, 1, and brown loam, 2, overlaid a layer of rubble, 15, c. 0.4 m thick and extending 12 m along the trench. The top surface of this layer was fairly flat with many small stones. This may be the result of cultivation or it may have been a yard surface. Within the rubble there were numerous roof tiles of Cotswold limestone and occasional fragments of worked stone.

Below 15 on the west side of the trench at its north end there was a wall, 17, of regularly laid limestone fragments. This was 2.8 m long, 0.8 m wide, and aligned north to south. Only one course survived, although there were traces of a second course in places. To the east and south of 17 there was a very extensive area of limestone rubble, 18, similar to 15, but with the stones in a matrix of compact orange/brown clay. There were numerous iron nails c. 0.15 m long, perhaps from a wooden superstructure.

Between 17 and 18 there was what appeared to be a gully, 16, 0.2 m wide, 0.15 m deep and about 2.6 m long. However, this was probably just a chance arrangement of the rubble as there were no proper sides or base to the feature.

Removal of wall 17 revealed a pillar base, 26, with two fragments of an octagonal pillar *in situ*. The base was formed of fragments of limestone and sandstone laid flat and bonded with a gravelly mortar. The base measured c. 1.15 m by at least 1.15 m and the pillar was 0.75 m by 0.48 m. The upper edges of the pillar fragments were chamfered. 3.5 m to the south of 26 there was a second pillar base, 27. This was similar in construction to 26, 1.2 m by at least 0.7 m in extent, but no fragments of the pillar survived. Between 26 and 27, and also to the south of 27, there was a layer of compact yellow gravel with fragments of mortar, 28. This may have been a surface or the bedding for a floor which has been totally robbed.

Cut into 28 c. 2.4 m south of 27 was a posthole, 32, c. 0.6 m in diameter and c. 0.5 m deep. It was filled with grey clay and limestone fragments, perhaps postpacking. Visible in the south side of the hole were four courses of stone. These were perhaps part of a rubble raft or of an earlier wall but no alignment could be discerned. A further stretch of wall, 33, was found c. 2.8 m south of 32. This was formed of irregularly coursed blocks of limestone with a yellow sandy matrix and was 2 m long by at least 0.65 m wide. It appeared to cut surface 28 and had no clear corners.

Underlying rubble 18 to the east of these features was another layer of rubble, 30, but in a matrix of orange sand/clay. This sealed a layer of brown gravelly loam, 31, which seemed to form a surface. It was at a slightly lower level than 28 and in places there were patches of cobbles. Set above layer 30 and running east from pillar base 27 was a narrow wall, 29, 0.2 m wide and at least 0.8 m long. There were at least two courses of stone with a squared block at the west end of the wall.

At the south end of wall 33 there was an area of rubble, 34, perhaps part of the general rubble layers. To the south of 34 numerous layers were observed in a section of the trench excavated rapidly by hand but it was not possible to make a detailed, accurate record of them. However, there were at least two surfaces, one of crushed limestone, the other of limestone and yellow mortar. Cut into the latter, which was the lower of the two, was a feature (?linear) containing charcoal and fire debris. Above the former there was layer of orangy-brown clay/gravel with slag and burnt limestone.

These layers extended *c.* 10 m south of wall 33 and were cut by the north side of intrusion 9. It is unknown whether these surfaces are associated with the Saxon trackway or the burnt material with the building at the south end of the trench. The surfaces could be associated with an earlier building underlying that to the north, as represented by the courses of stone visible in the side of posthole 32, and perhaps with a north-south trackway of ?medieval date just west of this site.

Trench II

Only the west end of this trench, where it joined trench I, was excavated by hand. The context numbers used in trench I were used here also. Below the topsoil and layer 2 the rubble spread 15 was found to extend *c.* 3 m into this trench and to overlie rubble 18. To the east these layers were replaced by brown/orange loam. Under rubble 18 layer 30 was very thick and contained much limestone but no features could be discerned. This sealed a continuation of surface 31 and there were fragments of cobbling on the north side of the trench. Further east the topsoil overlaid brown clay with fragments of limestone.

Test Pit 1

This was dug in trench II, 10 m west of its east end, where it was thought that there was a fishpond or quarry. Below the topsoil there were horizontal layers of clay, loam, and rubble to a depth of *c.* 1.2 m below ground surface. Cut into the surface of the natural clay there was a depression filled with black earth but the shape and function of the feature are unknown. There were no layers of silt to indicate that the depression had been waterfilled, nor were there signs of quarrying activity.

Test Pit 2

This was dug in trench II, 7 m east of the west side of trench I. Below layers of brown soil, equal to 2 in trench I, to a depth of *c.* 0.6 m below ground surface there was a layer of orange clay and rubble over natural. This rubble may be a continuation of the cobbles found in surface 31 to the west.

Test Pit 3

This was dug within intrusion 9, 8 m north of the south end of trench I. At 0.9 m below ground surface a drain with stone sides and a stone capping was found, aligned east-west. This measures 0.2 m by 0.2 m internally and had a clay base. The flow of water within the drain was from west to east and it was probably a main collecting drain for field drains to the west. Below the drain there was *c.* 0.7 m of limestone rubble above natural. It is unknown whether this is related to the drain or to earlier features, but the former is more probable.

THE FINDS

The Slag by **Justine Bayley**

A proportion of the slag found during the excavations was examined in order to identify the process or processes producing it. Most of the material was smithing slag that forms in a blacksmith's hearth and some of the pieces were plano-convex buns, i.e. slag which collected in the bottom of the hearth. Also present were a few pieces of clay hearth-lining, which was vitrified on one side from contact with the ash in the fire at high temperatures.

The total weight of material examined was about 18.6 kg. The amount of slag examined per context was follows: (4) 3.775 kg; (7) 1.200 kg; (8) 4.425 kg; (10) 0.500 kg; (12) 3.575 kg; (13) 0.175 kg; (14) 4.450 kg; (19) 0.525 kg.

The Pottery

The pottery from the site was examined by Dr Alan Vince. The majority of the material came from contexts at the south end of trench I and was associated with the slag. The sherds from contexts 13, 14 and 19 were of late 13th- or 14th-century date; from 12 of 14th- or 15th-century date, and from 7 and 8 of 15th-century date. This suggests that the building or area was used for the dumping of smithing slag throughout the medieval period. Some sherds of pottery found in the matrix of wall 6 imply that it was built no earlier than the 15th or 16th century. The pottery from context 10 (within intrusion 9) was of 16th-century date and thus layer 23, which contains pottery of a later date, may be the fill of a recut. Intrusion 4 contained late 18th-century pottery as well as pottery from the 15th/16th century.

At the north end of trench I little pottery was found. However, sherds from context 34, on the south side of the aisled barn, and probably all from one vessel, were dated to the late 13th or 14th century, and those from context 18 to after the late 13th century. The fragments from the rubble 15 were of 14th- or 15th-century date.

The range of dates provided by the pottery suggests that these buildings were associated with the abbey and that they went out of use at or before the Dissolution.

The Flint

Two fragments of flint, both of which had been damaged, were found in context 18 and were examined by Dr T. Darvill. One was an unused blade or waste flake, the second was part of a blade. It was not possible to date their period of manufacture.

The Clay Pipes

Fragments of clay pipe were found in contexts 4 and 23. That found in context 4 was a plain pipe stem fragment. From context 23 there were three bowl fragments and 26 stem fragments (including three mouthpieces). Three of the stem fragments were inscribed: the first with 'JOHN DAYS' (Peacey 1979, 52); the second with 'T.C.'; the third with a ?lion rampant. There was also an unstratified pipe bowl stamped 'THO.L-GG' on the heel (Peacey 1979, fig. 12, 152).

Discussion

The buildings found in the course of excavation would appear to be of late 13th- or 14th-century date and were probably associated with the abbey, which lay to the south-east of the site. The building at the south end of trench I seems to have been used for smithing or the dumping of smithing slag, although the use may have changed when wall 6 was built.

At the north end of trench I the building appears to have been an aisled barn or open-fronted structure, with its open end running down the centre of the trench. The internal surfaces, represented by 28, were to the west and the external surfaces to the east. It would appear to have been adjacent to a medieval trackway aligned north-south which cuts through the clay bank. There seem to have been two phases in the life of this building as the northern pillar base was incorporated in a wall and the whole building may have replaced an earlier structure. The presence of numerous long iron nails in the rubble overlying the surface suggests that the superstructure may have been of wood. The roof was almost certainly clad with Cotswold limestone tiles. The fragments of worked stone found within the rubble could have come from the abbey but, given the nature of pillar 26, could alternatively have come from the barn itself. A halfpenny of Charles II (issued 1672–75) came from layer 2 above the building.

The field drain within intrusion 9 is probably 18th century in date and a halfpenny of William and Mary dated 1694 was found within layer 23.

Documents in the Gloucestershire Record Office seem to refer to this field as Water Abbey or Moat Mead but one of 1775 makes no mention of buildings within it. The OS map of 1883 shows a pond in the south-east corner of the field, adjacent to Court Lane, but nothing in the area investigated during this excavation.

No evidence was found during the excavation of Saxon activity on this site but this is probably due to the limited nature of the excavations rather than to the absence of Saxon material. There does seem to have been extensive occupation of the site during the medieval period, but by the 17th or 18th century it was an open area.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr M. Parker Pearson (HBMC), Bill Wathan and Roy Winston (Gloucestershire County Council), and Tony Carter and Roy Clough (Consultant Structural Engineers) for their help in organizing the excavation and advising on the layout of the trenches; the staff of Winchcombe Library for providing space for the storage of equipment and finds; Justine Bayley, Alan Vince, and Tim Darvill for specialist reports; and Diane John, Fred Fray, Jack and Sheila Waterhouse, Christopher Aeschlimann, and Nicholas Adye for their assistance in excavating the site. The material from the site is now in the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum.

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