

# Reading Assize Courts Berkshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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**READING ASSIZE COURTS, BERKSHIRE:  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

Prepared on behalf:

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### *Summary*

*A watching brief was undertaken during groundworks and underpinning associated with the redevelopment of the Assizes Court in Reading, Berkshire. The site lies within the precinct of the medieval Abbey at Reading. The junction of two walls of chalk and flint was found in the south east corner of the site, adjacent to the boundary of the modern Abbey Square. Pottery of 13-15th century date was found near the walls, and it is likely that the walls formed part of a building in the precinct of the medieval Abbey.*

## **Acknowledgments**

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# **READING ASSIZE COURTS, BERKSHIRE :ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

## **1 The project**

As part of the planning permission for the redevelopment of the Assizes Court in Reading, Berkshire (SU 7183 7350)(Fig. 1) an archaeological watching brief was required during the groundworks which required the demolition of an existing building and the clearance of the site. All groundworks were to be monitored and any archaeological deposits recorded fully .The work was undertaken between September and October 1993.

## **2 Geology and topography**

The redevelopment area lies on coarse pebble gravels overlying weathered chalk. The ground slopes noticeably, dropping from 44.513m OD at the north of the existing courts buildings to only 40.152m OD to the south at the boundary of Abbey Square, and covers an area of c. 1750m<sup>2</sup>.

## **3 Archaeological background**

The site lies within the precinct of the medieval Reading Abbey (Fig. 1), occupying an area to the west of the refectory and cellarer's office, and to the north of what were probably the stables, where a series of small excavations have been undertaken (Hawkes 1986-90). A considerable amount of other archaeological excavation and observation has been undertaken in the immediate vicinity of the site which had demonstrated considerable disturbance to medieval deposits. Observation of geopits excavated on the Assize Courts in 1987 suggested that much of the present site had been quarried and subsequently backfilled, with cellarge then being excavated into the backfilled site (Wessex Archaeology 1987).

## **4 Methods**

Initially a full-time watching brief and the examination of underpinning was undertaken but when it became apparent that most of the site was made ground, this was reduced to an intermittent presence until the introduced material had been removed. Thereafter a full-time presence was maintained and the site clearance was undertaken by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision.

## **5 Results**

Archaeological remains survived in only one area of the site (Fig. 1). Quarrying, cellarge, and subsequent service trenches had totally destroyed any deposits which had existed elsewhere on the site.

The junction of two walls (008) was discovered at a depth of 1.3m below the present ground surface. One wall ran north-south, the other east-west. The northern end of the north-south wall had been truncated by a later service trench.

The walls formed a corner which stood to *c.* 1.2m at its highest point but elsewhere it generally only survived to a height of *c.* 0.4m at its northern and eastern ends. It was *c.* 0.6m wide. The foundations of the north-south wall appeared to have been dug to a slightly greater depth, while the east-west wall appeared to rest on a course of clay tiles laid on the natural gravel. The walls were made of alternate courses of dressed chalk blocks (up to 300mm<sup>2</sup>), roughly knapped large flint nodules (up to 150mm<sup>2</sup>), and unglazed ceramic tiles in courses which were three-four tiles thick. The wall was bonded by a coarse yellow mortar, perhaps of lime, which included chalk pieces and sand.

During the removal of the material from around the walls, a small quantity of medieval finds were recovered from the angle within the walls. The finds were in a loose, dark, material (9) but could not, however, be regarded as securely stratified.

## **6 The finds**

Two pieces of ceramic building material and nine sherds of pottery were recovered from context (9).

The pottery is all of medieval date. Seven sherds may belong to the same vessel: a tall wheelthrown jug of baluster type in a fine sandy oxidised fabric. There are traces of white-slipped linear decoration and splashes of apple-green glaze on the body. The rod handle has been stabbed. Baluster vessels have been found on several sites in Reading, in contexts dating from the 14th and 15th centuries. They are likely to be of at least relatively local manufacture (Underwood forthcoming). The remaining two sherds are of slightly earlier date. Both are in coarser sandy fabrics, and one is green-glazed; a date range of 13th/14th century may be suggested.

The two fragments of ceramic building material are from a handmade roof tile of indeterminate late medieval/post-medieval date.

## **7 Conclusion**

Although the wall is strictly undated, medieval pottery was found within the area defined by them, and the character of the walls themselves is comparable with examples found within the Abbey precinct and which have been considered to be of medieval date (e.g. Fasham and Stewart 1986-90, 93). The orientation of the walls on the Assize Courts site is also comparable to those found on adjacent sites (Hawkes 1986-90, fig. 1; Fasham and Stewart 1986-90, fig. 5). It would seem likely, therefore, that the wall is medieval and formed part of the buildings of the Abbey, although its relatively elaborate construction may be noted.

## 8 References

Fasham, P.J. and Stewart, I.J., 1986-90, 'Excavations at Reading Abbey, 1985-86', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* **73**, 1986-90 (1991), 88-103.

Hawkes, J.W., 1986-90, 'Excavations on the site of Reading Abbey Stables, 1983', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* **73**, 1986-90 (1991), 67-87.

Underwood, C., forthcoming, 'The pottery', in Hawkes, J.W. and Fasham, P.J., *Excavations on Reading Waterfront Sites 1979-1988*, Wessex Archaeology Report 5.

Wessex Archaeology, 1987, *Assize Courts, Reading: archaeological evaluations*, Unpublished report, Salisbury.

## 9 Project archive

The project archive consists of one box of finds and one ring binder file which contains;

- 1 Context index sheet
- 6 Context sheets
- 4 A4 drawing sheets
- 1 Graphics register sheet
- 16 colour slide photographs
- 16 monochrome photographs
- 2 photographic sheets
- a copy of this report

The archive is presently held in the Offices of Wessex Archaeology under the project code W632 but will be deposited in Reading Museum and Art Gallery in due course.

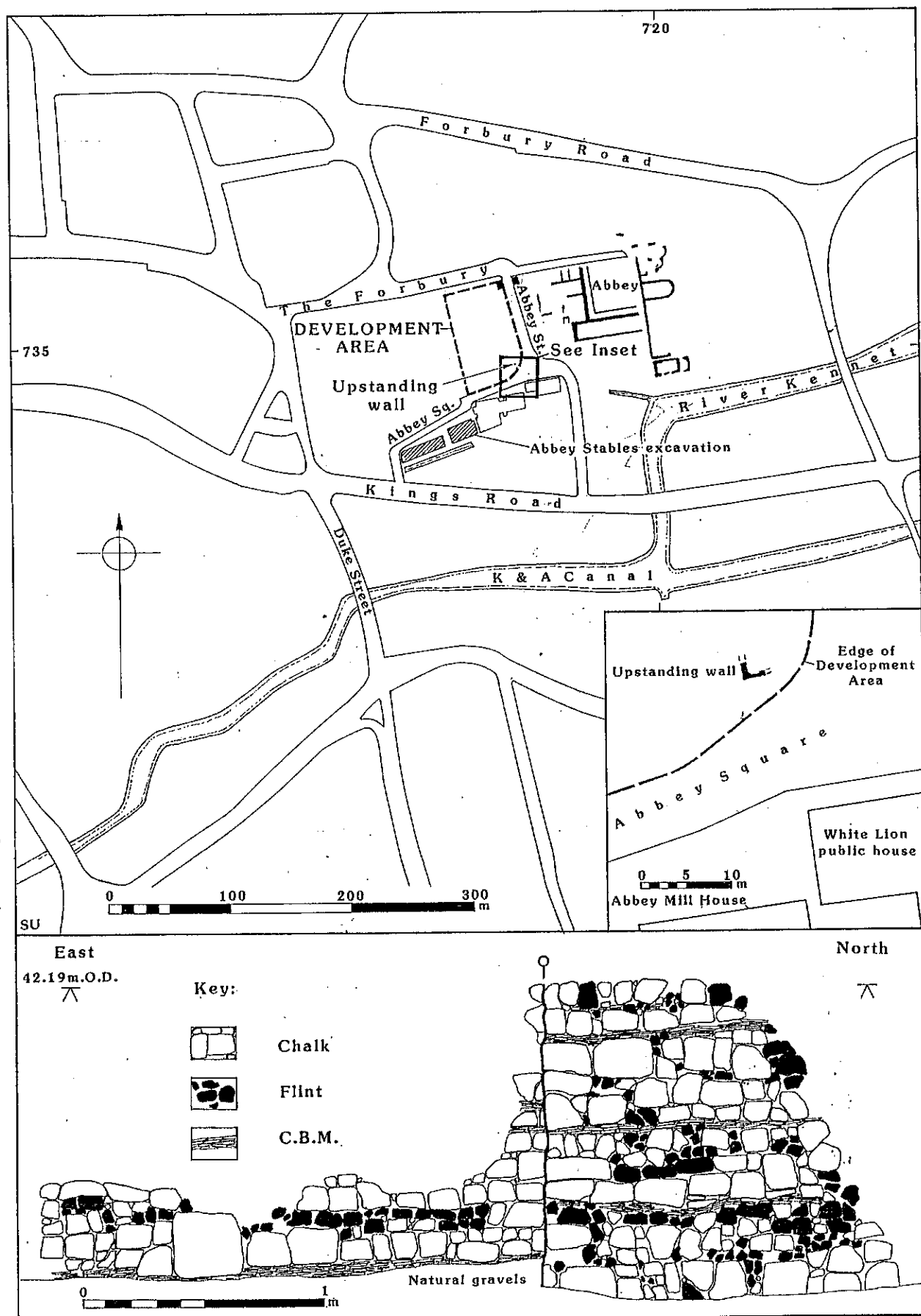


Fig. 1





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