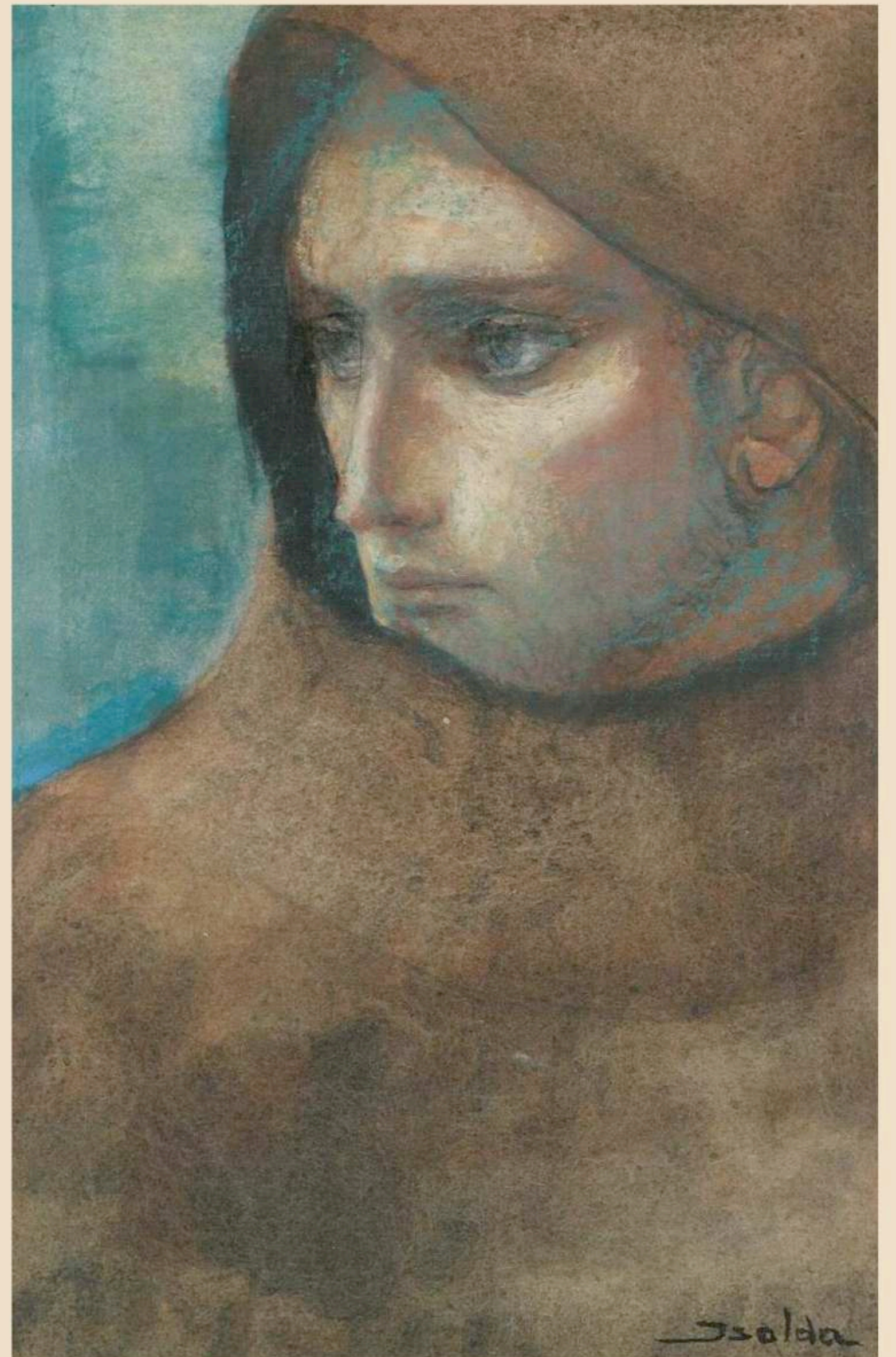


The Friars Minor

Francis of Assisi founded the Order of Friars Minor (Ordo Fratrum Minorum), according to ancient tradition, on 16th April 1209, when he and his followers sought Papal approval for the Order.



The Order, also known as the Franciscans or Greyfriars, expanded and in 1224 a mission was sent to England which founded houses in Canterbury, London and Oxford within two months of arrival.



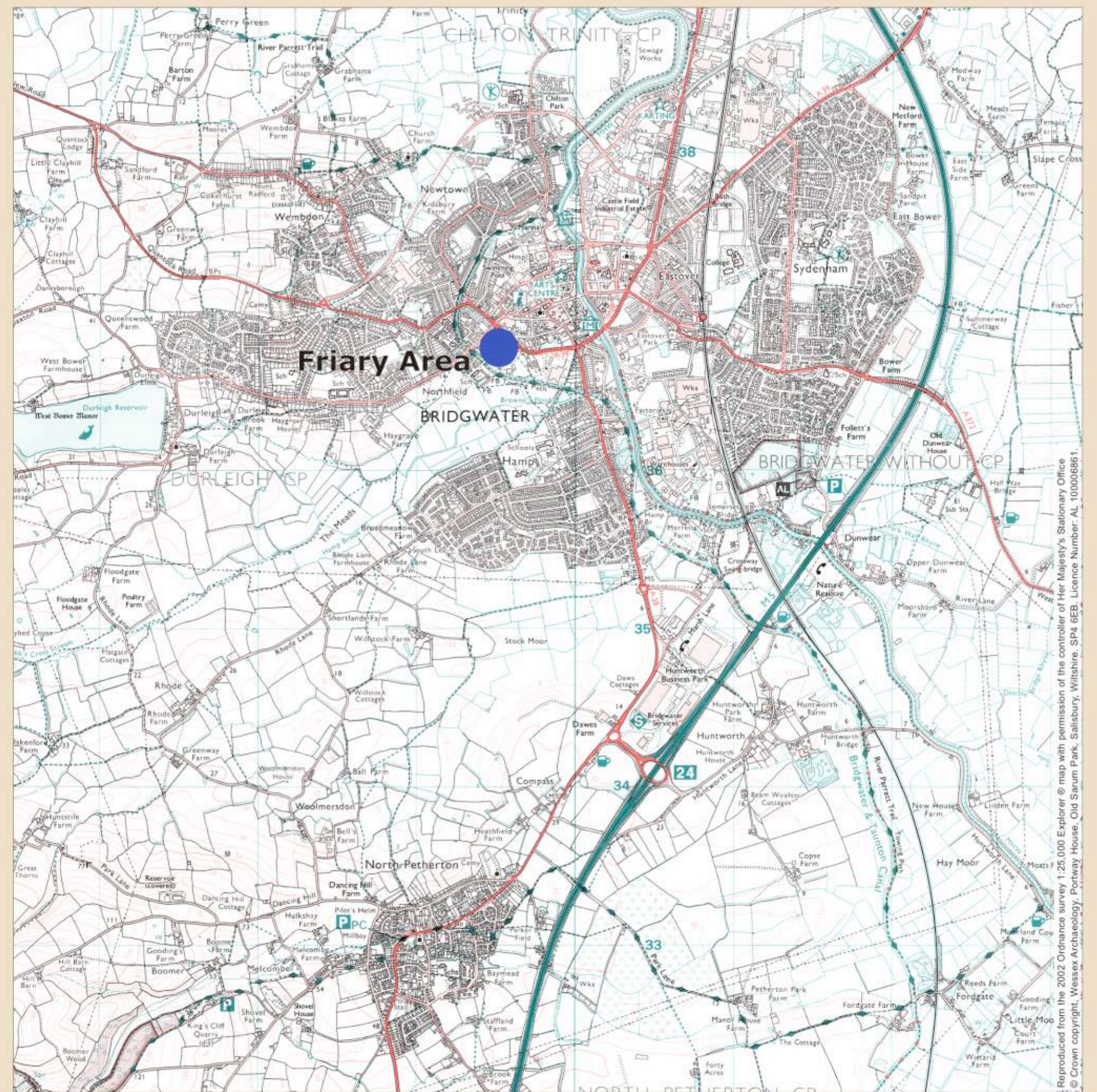
Friary precincts were positioned either inside or just outside towns, to be near the poorest people. In the churches, the emphasis was on the nave, for the congregation, rather than the choir and presbytery for the celebrants.

Bridgwater was an important medieval town. After a brief period within the town, the friars were given a site immediately beyond the town limits at Friarn Meadow.

The Greyfriars, Bridgewater

Although its exact dimensions are unknown, the friary appears to have been bounded by the town ditch to the east and Durleigh Brook to the south. The northern boundary was probably along what is now Albert Road, where a Red Sandstone wall is still visible.

In 1245, on land given to them by the King, the Franciscans constructed a church and associated buildings. Further buildings were added in 1278 and 1284 following gifts of timbers from the King. Greyfriars was the only Franciscan House built in Somerset.



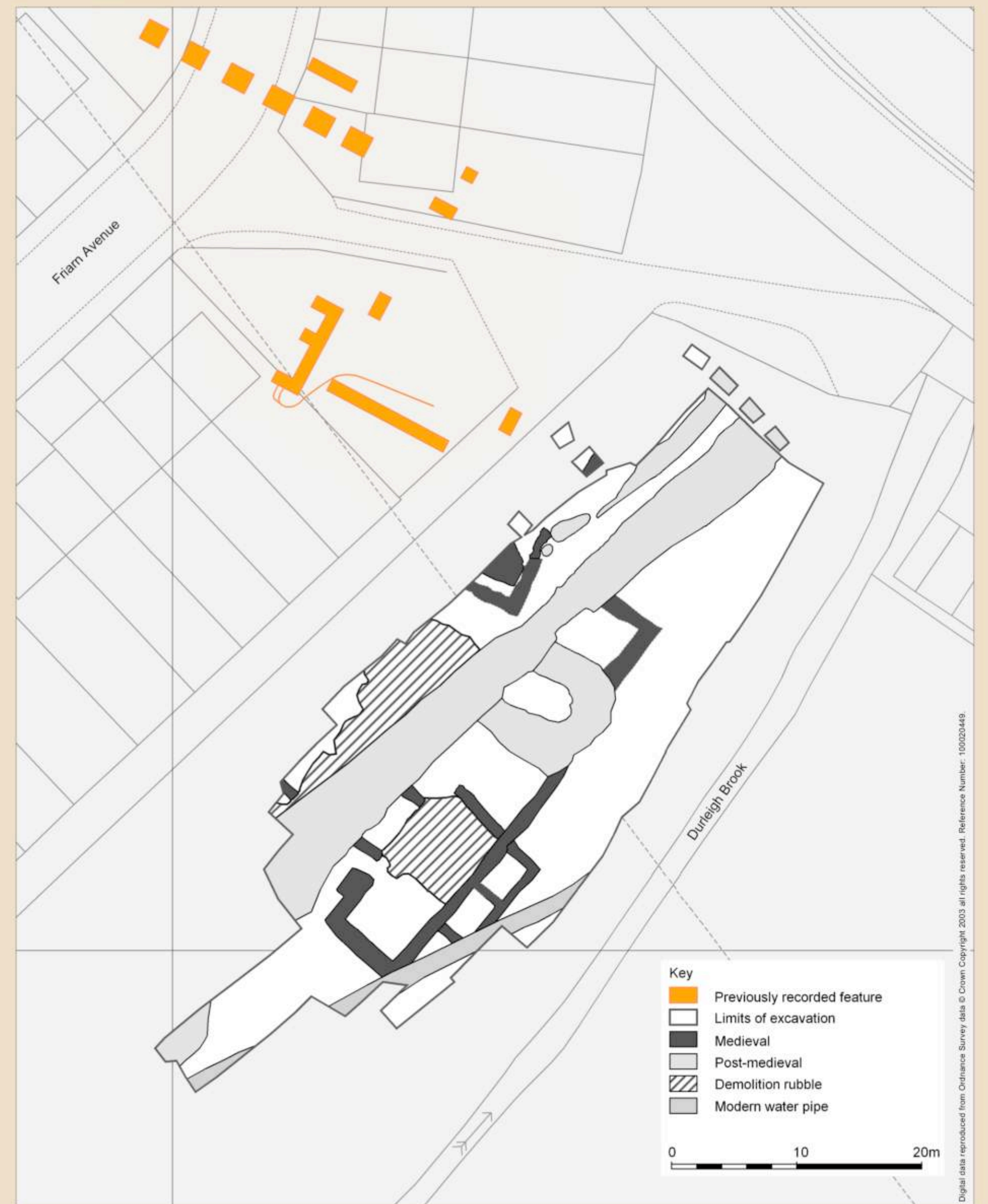
Little is known of the friary's later history, although John Somer, a late 14th century mathematician and astronomer mentioned by Chaucer was a friar there.

In the 16th century Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and the friary at Bridgewater was surrendered on 13th September 1438.

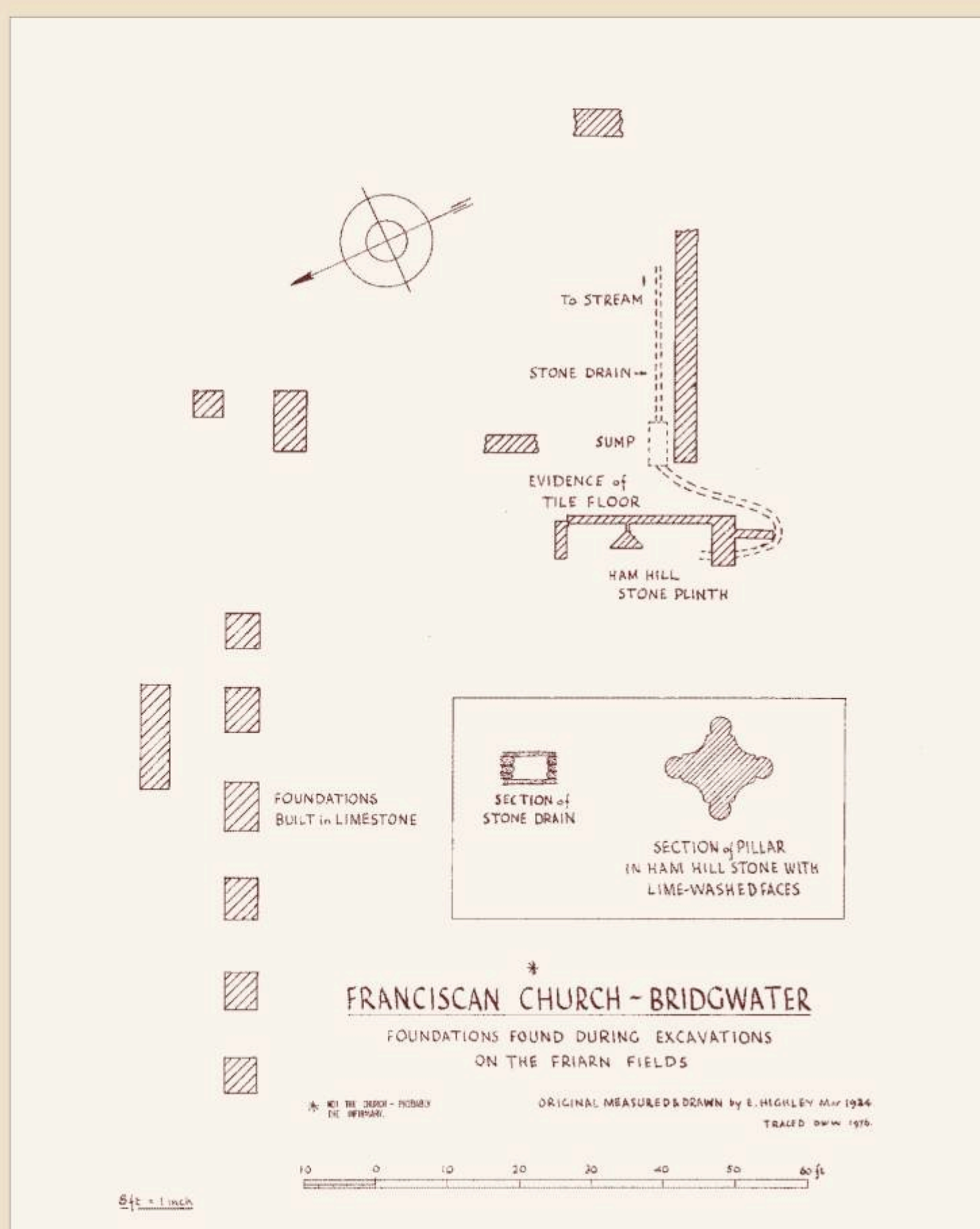


Earlier Excavations

In the 1920s and 1930s, during building works, a row of masonry piers and a wall were found, suggesting an aisled building. To the south-west were the remains of two other walls, a tiled floor and a well-built stone drain.

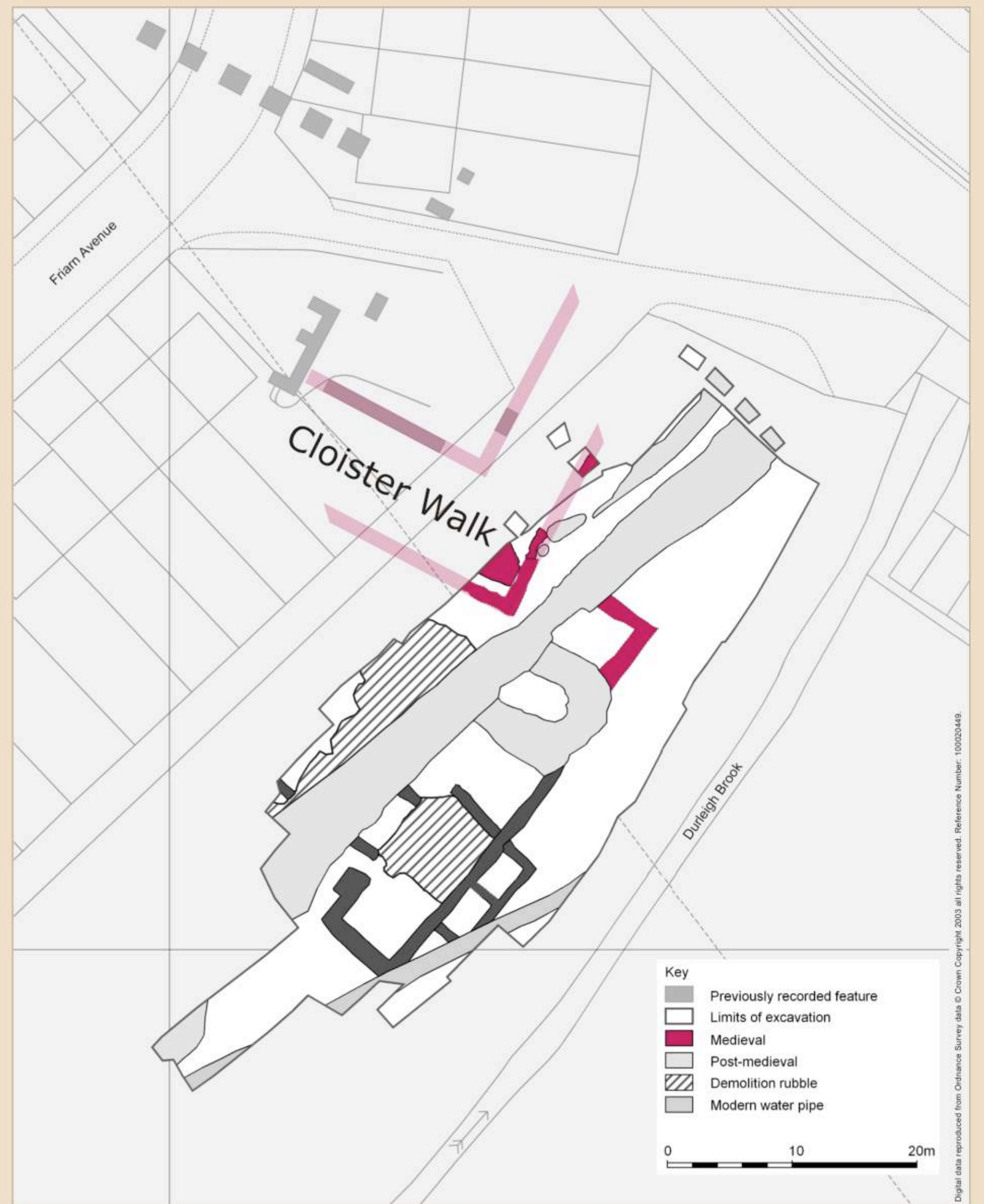


A number of finds had been made on the site prior to Wessex Archaeology's excavations in 2003, many during the period when the site was used as allotment gardens. These include tiles and pottery dated to the monastic period.



2003 Excavations

In 2003 archaeologists found a corner of the cloister. This included a wall and a sanded surface with decorated, occasionally heraldic tiles. This, together with the evidence from earlier work, suggests the cloister walkway to have been around 20m long.



2003 Excavations – The Church

To the south-west of the cloister was a substantial building with a small cellar or vault at its south-eastern end which may have contained burials.

The building's cruciform plan suggests this was probably the church, with side chapels, a vestry and the high altar at the south-eastern end.



Two slots running parallel to the long axis of the building correspond to the choir stalls, and to the south-west was a door or porch giving access to the precinct or possibly to a bell tower.



The Medieval Finds

Monastic period finds of many types were recovered from the excavation, including building materials from the various friary structures.

Floor tiles included both plain and decorated examples. No complete decorated tiles were recovered, but several retained enough detail to allow identification of their design. They include late 13th to early 14th century inlaid tiles of the 'Wessex School', with several heraldic designs paralleled at Wells Cathedral.



At least one tile fragment matches another found previously on the site, part of a tile thought to depict Saladin and Richard on horseback, commemorating the Crusades.



The English Civil War

From 1642 to 1646, England was torn apart by a bloody civil war. On one side stood the supporters of King Charles I, the Royalists or Cavaliers. On the other stood the supporters of Oliver Cromwell and Parliament, the Parliamentarians or Roundheads.

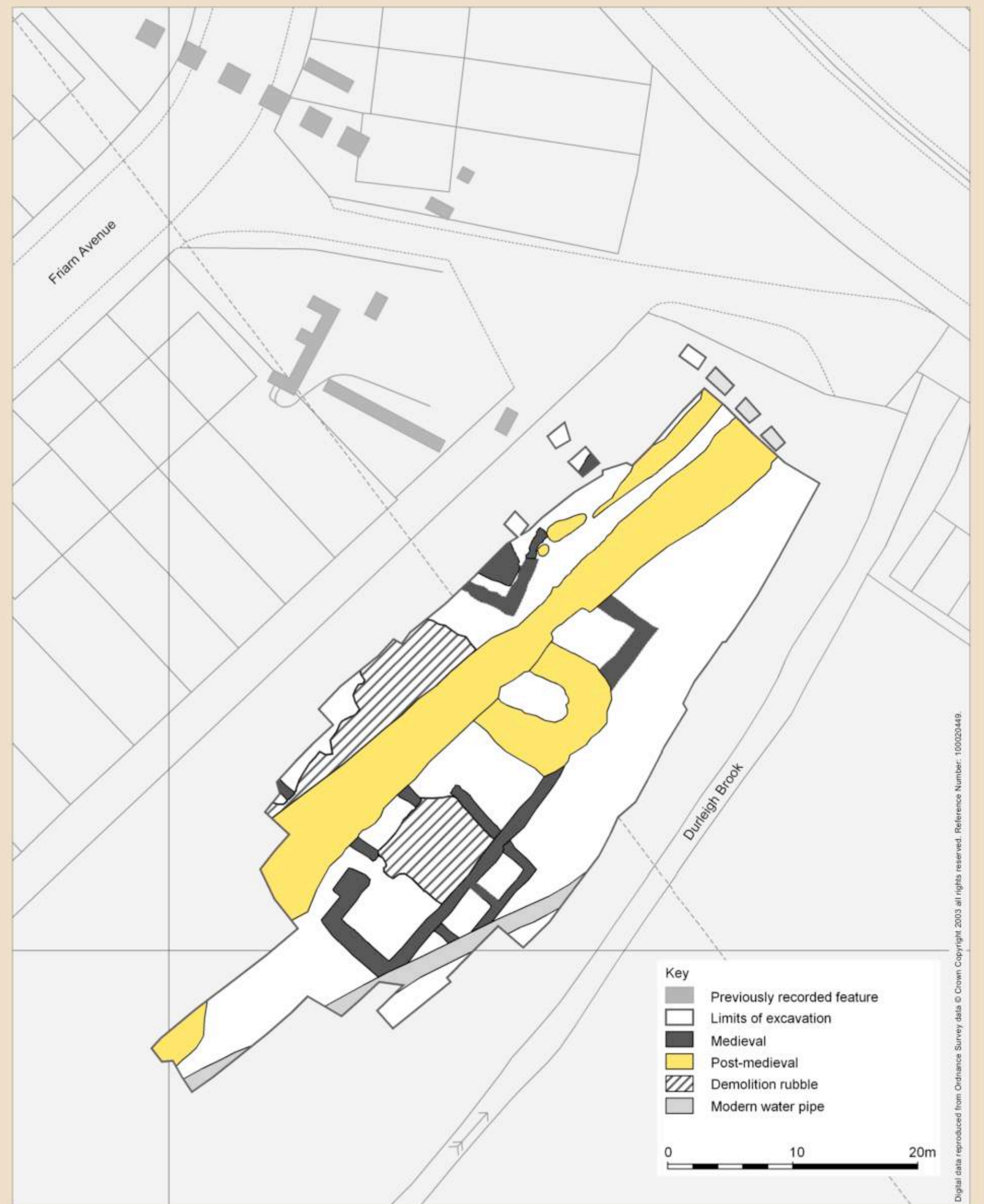


The 1645 siege of Bridgwater was a bitterly contested action, during which 120 of the 400 houses in the town were destroyed. The royal castle surrendered and over a hundred officers and a thousand soldiers were captured, as were many cannons and small arms.



The Civil War Remains

Wessex Archaeology's excavations in 2003 revealed a large east-west aligned feature, dated to the Civil War. It is likely that this huge ditch and outworks was used to defend Bridgwater against the Roundheads assaults. The ditch was flat bottomed, and deep enough to allow the passage of a horse and rider. The semi-circular outworks would have held field guns or cannons.



Sir Thomas Fairfaxes ENTRING BRIDGEWATER By Storming; on Munday last.

In which Town he took from the Enemy ;

4. Colonels.
50. Captains, Lieutenants, and other Officers.
500. prisoners, whereof some Papists.
60. Horse.
1. Great piece of Ordnance, in the Royal Fort.
The Royal Fort also taken.
Mr. Harveys House taken.

And a List of all the particulars, and what losse was
on both sides; And the manner of the Fight:
And in what posture the rest remain in those
Holds where they lye.

ALSO,

The Termes tendred by Sir Hugh Cholmley, for the
surrender of Scarborough Castle.

Commanded to be printed, and published according
to Order.

London, Printed by B. Alsop, and I. Coe. 1645.



The Civil War Finds

Finds included pottery and glass dated to the Civil War period. Pottery included dishes, bowls, jars, jugs, chamber pots, and chafing dishes. Also recovered was the base of a highly decorated cylindrical beaker of late 16th to mid 17th century date as well as bottle and jar fragments dating from 1650 onwards.



A number of musket balls were found in and around the Civil War ditch, whilst animal bone suggested siege conditions with diseased cattle and horses being butchered and eaten.



An Open Day was held on site at the end of the excavations when local people were invited to visit the site and see many of the finds recovered.

The Siege End & Beyond

At the end of the siege, the large defences were backfilled with rubble. Much of this material was stone which would once have formed parts of the friary structure. It is likely that, prior to the digging of the Civil War defences, upstanding masonry was levelled to provide clear lines of sight for the defenders and it is this that was used to backfill the ditch.



This display was funded jointly by Somerset County Council and Wessex Archaeology Limited.

Excavations were funded by The Wessex Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. The land is to be developed for an Army Cadets facility.



Wessex Archaeology is one of the largest archaeological practices in the country, and has completed over 5,000 projects since it was established in 1979. Our clients range from major development companies to small businesses, landed estates to individual householders. We also work throughout the UK for bodies such as English Heritage and the National Trust and for central and local government.

Today developers must take archaeology into account in the planning, design and construction of their work. Planning guidance and legislation helps minimise damage to archaeological deposits by investigating them fully beforehand.

As well as producing academic publications, we communicate the results of our work to as wide an audience as possible; through popular publications, news articles, radio broadcasts and television programmes. We give talks and make visits to schools, mount exhibitions, organise site visits and take students on work placements. Our website has over 10,000 visitors a month. Through it we can inform a large number of people about archaeology and the work we are doing.

Wessex Archaeology currently has a full time professional staff of 180 working on projects throughout the UK.

