

WYMONDLEY PRIORY  
HERTFORDSHIRE  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

by

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Commissioned by *Ove Arup Partnership*.

## Contents

i	Contents
	List of figures
ii	Note on contributors
	Note on the cover
1	1 Introduction
3	2 The Mediæval Priory
4	2.8 A Note on the Tithe Barn
	2.9 A Note on the Monastic Cemetery
5	3 Documentary Evidence
9	4 The Archaeological Investigation
	4.4 Trial Trenching
11	5 The Phasing of the Archaeological Contexts
12	6 The Recorded Archaeology from the Trial Trenches
	6.1 Trench A
13	6.2 Trench B
14	6.3 Trench C
15	6.4 Trench D
16	7 Conclusions from the Trenches
17	8 Conclusions and Recommendations
19	8.19 Summary of Recommendations
20	9 Acknowledgements
21	10 Bibliography

## List of Figures

	2	Fig.1 Location Map
	6	Fig.2 The 1731 Estate Map
facing page 9		Fig.3 Site Plan
facing page 12		Fig.4 Trench A plan and section
facing page 13		Fig.5 Trench B plan and section
facing page 14		Fig.6 Trench C plan and section
facing page 15		Fig.7 Trench D plan and section
facing page 16		Fig.8 Site Matrix



G R Burleigh had overall responsibility for the fieldwork and for the preparation of this report. He wrote sections 1, 2, 3, 4.1-4.3, 4.8 and 8. K Matthews improved much of the text, especially in sections 5-7, drew most of the published illustrations, and produced the final text on a word-processor. D Went supervised the fieldwork, prepared the initial archive report and wrote sections 2.5, 4.4-4.7, 5, 6 and 7. Faith Pewtress drew additional plans and sections. Stephen Player drew the cover illustration.

NB The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and they take responsibility for them. They are not necessarily the views of the North Hertfordshire District Council.

The cover illustration by Stephen Player draws its inspiration from *Les Très Riches Heures de Jean, Duc de Berry*, the most famous and splendid mediæval Book of Hours ever produced. It was commissioned in 1409 by Jean de Berry and painted by the brothers Paul, Hennequin and Herman de Limbourg, the greatest miniaturists of their time. Our cover adapts its border from a miniature depicting Purgatory and includes, at the top, a seal of the Priory and, below, the Tithe Barn at Wymondley as it might have been drawn by a fifteenth-century miniaturist.

The seal, derived from a reproduction in Clutterbuck 1821, shows the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus and an orb, standing in a traceried recess with seven unidentified flowers; the inscription S CAPITVLI DE HI? SCĒ MARIE DE WILMVNDELE is probably to be translated "The Seal of the Chapter House of the H[osp]ital of Saint Marly of Wymondley".

## An Archaeological Evaluation at Wymondley Priory, Herts.

### 1 Introduction

1.1 During 1989 preliminary enquiries were made of the local Planning Authority (North Hertfordshire District Council) by the site owner, Ove Arup, as to the possibility of converting Wymondley Priory and associated agricultural buildings into a company training centre (see fig.1). The *Priory House* is a Grade I Listed building largely constructed from the nave of the mediæval Priory church soon after the Dissolution in the mid-sixteenth century. It retains a number of important mediæval features, besides the nave walls themselves, including thirteenth-century roof timbers, and some windows and doorways (Rigold 1974, Farris 1989). There are later additions and alterations, including drastic rebuilding at the eastern end, and demolition of large areas of mediæval wall for the insertion of rather insensitive windows and doors performed in the 1970s. The exterior walls were also covered in rendering, thus obliterating mediæval stonework and much fine post-mediæval brickwork. This was all done with Listed building consent.

1.2 To the south of the house, across a courtyard, is a magnificent fifteenth-century monastic timber-framed tithe barn, Listed Grade II\*, and virtually still in its mediæval form. Between the barn and the house is a small former agricultural building converted (in the 1970s?) into a dwelling. To the west of the tithe barn are three small agricultural buildings of rather curious brick and flint construction.

1.3 A wall crosses the courtyard at right angles to the barn, and joins one of the old walls surrounding the garden of the house. These walls contain much reused dressed stone. To the east of the courtyard wall is a grassed orchard and pasture. To the west of this wall the yard is gravelled, linking with the gravel drive entering the property from the north-west.

1.4 The whole complex is surrounded by a moated enclosure of probably mediæval origin. The western half of the northern arm of this moat, and the northern half of the western arm were apparently filled in many years ago. Indeed, over the western moat eighteenth to nineteenth-century barns have been constructed (and are now in separate ownership). The moated system is much silted-up but parts, at least, are seasonally wet. A possible original entrance causeway is situated in the centre of the southern arm. Leading eastwards from the centre of the eastern arm is a very wide ditch which fed the moat from a spring to the east. To the north of this arm are ridge and furrow earthworks, the fossilised remains of ancient ploughing.

1.5 Also feeding the moated system from the north-east was an aqueduct, substantial traces of which are still visible in the pasture to the north (in separate ownership). This aqueduct leads from a natural spring and was possibly a pre-existing natural water course, merely improved by monastic endeavour. At its eastern end the aqueduct is largely now piped, buried and ploughed over. However, surmounting the spring source is a curious brick and stone structure, partially excavated and rebuilt by the East Herts Archaeological Society at the turn of this century, but reputed to have been a mediæval conduit chapel. This is Scheduled as an Ancient Monument.

1.6 The pasture to the north of the Priory, known as "*The Park*", is full of archaeological earthworks which are concentrated in the western half of this field. This concentration, which has never been surveyed in detail, seems to indicate a deserted mediæval settlement, either associated with the agricultural work of the Priory, or depopulated when the monastic settlement was founded.

1.7 The moat surrounding the Priory has been Scheduled as an Ancient Monument for many years, but remarkably the moated island itself is not yet Scheduled. The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (English Heritage) is currently proposing to increase the Scheduled area to include not only the moated island which contains the Priory, but also most of the earthworks to the north, plus a small area of earthworks to the south of the moat. This is being considered under the Monuments Protection Programme.

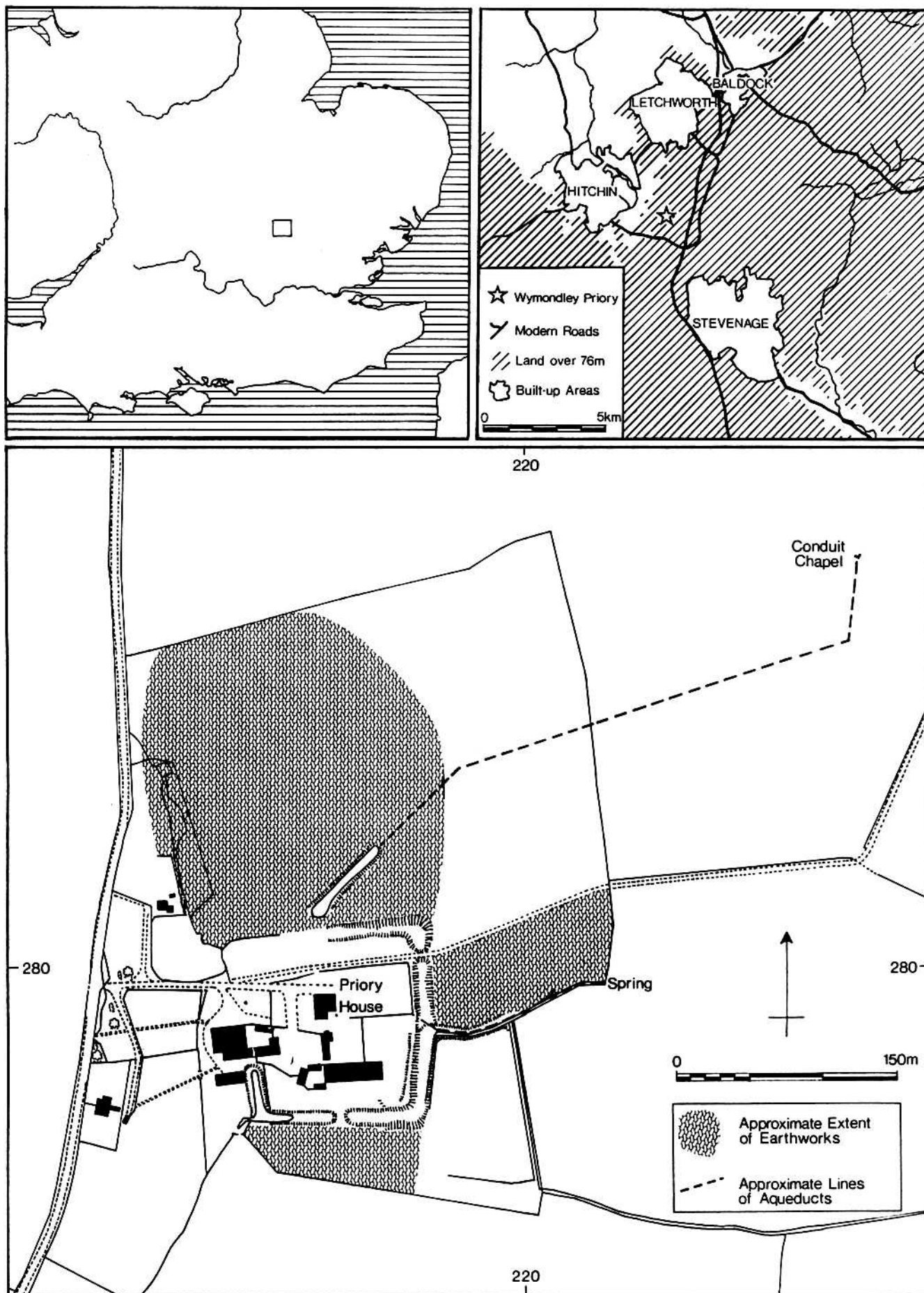


Figure 1. Wymondley Priory Location Map

## 2 The Mediæval Priory

2.1 A Hospital dedicated to St Mary was originally founded between 1203 and 1207, and the Priory seems to have been founded before 1231. There is some confusion in the county historians as to the date and dedication of the Priory (Salmon 1728, Chauncy 1828, Clutterbuck 1821, Cussans 1870), but it is clear that it was originally to the Virgin Mary, presumably taking over the dedication of the Hospital. At the time of the Dissolution there were three altars; the High Altar, one to Our Lady, another to St Lawrence. As a Priory it was small, having an average of only five canons. Besides its religious, medical and charitable functions, the Priory made wealth for the Order from its agricultural activities, hence the provision of a tithe barn. There were probably also additional agricultural buildings.

2.2 The Priory church (now Priory House) was certainly constructed of stone (in this case local chalk clunch, perhaps Totternhoe Stone), and possibly most, if not all, the other monastic buildings were also. These conventual buildings would have comprised the cloister ranges, chapter house, Prior's chamber, refectory, dormitory, kitchen and maybe warming room and wash room. An infirmary is known to have existed before the Priory on this site, and a seal of the Priory in MS BM Cotton Tiberius iii quoted by Cussans (1870) mentions the Hospital of Saint Mary of Wymondley; this has further implications for the layout of the conventual buildings (see below). At a little distance there may have been a guest-house. However, some of these buildings may have been timber-framed.

2.3 Besides the nave, the church may have comprised a central tower and quire/chancel, and possibly transepts to the north and south of the crossing. Only the nave of the church has survived because of its conversion into a farmhouse in the immediate post-Dissolution period (mid sixteenth century). The remainder of the church was demolished, but its plan should survive as buried archaeology.

2.4 It is assumed that, likewise, all the other monastic buildings were demolished in the aftermath of the Dissolution, when the Priory was converted to a working, if wealthy, lay farm. However, there remains the possibility that some of the conventual buildings could have been retained and converted to other agricultural uses, perhaps to be demolished in later centuries as the farm changed and developed. There are hints of more than one phase of demolition from the current investigation. Again, archaeological remains of most, if not all, former structures should survive buried on the site.

2.5 At the western end of the north wall of the nave (retained in the present house) an elaborate thirteenth century doorway (now blocked) has caused some debate. Situated as it is, the doorway may suggest that the normal Cistercian monastery ground plan, usually adopted by the Augustinian Canons, was in this instance reversed, with access directly from the nave to the cloister pentise, and that the cloister together with the monastic range ran northwards from the church. The disadvantage inherent in this layout is that due to its height, the church constantly casts shadows on the cloisters and associated buildings, restricting light and heat, and promoting damp. Lanercost Priory, Cumbria, an Augustinian house completed in 1260, has two entrances in the north wall of the nave, yet the groundplan remains standard. However, the practice of building the range to the north of the church has several precedents, including Tintern Abbey near Chepstow, and is normally prompted by factors beyond the control of the monastery builders, such as available space or poor terrain. This does not seem to apply at Wymondley unless there were pre-existing buildings on the site which the Canons wished to retain. It should be noted that the Priory church lay just north of the centre of the enclosure and that the moat was probably constructed to enclose the major buildings on the site rather than being a pre-existing feature, constraining monastic development.

2.6 The position of the monastic tithe barn, which is conventionally dated to the fifteenth century but could be earlier in origin, has been taken to demonstrate that the area to the south of the church was reserved for agricultural activities, thus confirming that the conventual buildings were to the north of the church. However, it is interesting to note that the barn is approximately 40m to the south of the church



nave while there is about 42m between the north wall of the nave and the northern arm of the moat. By analogy with other monastic foundations, there is room for the conventual buildings in the standard position south of the church, while still leaving, say, 10m to the north of the barn for manoeuvring carts, etc. It should be noted that there is about 20m between the south side of the barn and the south arm of the moat, which retains a possible original entrance causeway. This might suggest that the main original approach to the barn was from the south and that most of the activities associated with it occurred on that side too. Interestingly, immediately to the south of the southern moat arm are earthworks possibly indicating sites of other agricultural buildings, and certainly including a hollow way approaching the moat causeway.

2.7 It might be suggested then that the positions of the former church and the tithe barn indicate a carefully planned layout of buildings within the moated enclosure, as would indeed be expected in a monastic establishment. It may be seen that the case for the position of the cloisters and conventual buildings is at present not proven. There is a doorway at the west end of the north wall of the nave, and there is reputed to have been arcading in the outer face of the north wall of the nave (Rigold 1974), which has led to speculation that the cloisters and other conventual buildings were to the north of the church, a rather anomalous situation. However, there is also reputed to be similar arcading at the west end of the south wall of the nave, exposed during the 1970s refurbishment, but now covered (N Farris, pers.comm.). There are parallels for doors in the north wall of the nave when the cloister was to the south. There are, however, good reasons for suspecting that monastic buildings existed both to the north and to the south of the church: only further archaeological investigation will settle the problem. Obviously the position of the conventual buildings is crucial to the scope of development, the siting and form of any new buildings; whether, indeed, any new development should occur or whether further archaeological excavation is necessary.

2.8 A note on the Tithe Barn Architectural historians generally agree that this structure is probably late fifteenth-century in date (Farris 1989). This fits well with the documentary evidence which suggests that that period was a relatively prosperous one for the Priory. It is quite possible that the barn is on the site of an earlier one; it certainly incorporates reused timbers. Samples of timbers from the barn have been dated using the radiocarbon method by Rainer Berger of the University of Los Angeles. One sample gave a date centred on 1260, from what is presumably a reused timber; another gave a date centred on 1475, which fits the presumed date of the barn; and a third sample yielded a date centred on 1625, which could be a later repair (Berger 1971). In 1948 the roof tiles were stripped off and re-hung; there are reputed to be about 72,000 of them. This action probably saved the barn for our present appreciation.

2.9 A note on the Monastic Cemetery Some of the Priors and Canons, and also a few wealthy benefactors of the Priory were buried in the nave and quire of the Priory church (Farris 1989). Other Priors may possibly have been buried in the Chapter House.

2.10 Some of these burials were apparently translated to Little Wymondley parish church after the Dissolution for at least three Priory memorials are recorded there in later years. Unfortunately they are no longer visible and were probably destroyed during the Victorian restoration of 1875.

2.11 To the east of the church, where the walled garden now is, would have been the cemetery for other Canons and, probably separately, an area for the burial of lay persons: the servants, the elderly and infirm who had been tended by the Canons, and perhaps some of the labourers from the Priory estate. Most of these burials probably still lie under the ground.



### 3 Documentary Evidence

3.1 Wymondley Priory is particularly fortunate in having a wealth of documentary evidence relating to its mediæval and subsequent history. We are doubly fortunate in that a local historian, Mr Noël Farris, who lives in Little Wymondley, has made a lifetime's study of the documents relating to the history of the Wymondleys, including those with a bearing on the Priory. What follows is partly derived from the research of Mr Farris.

3.2 The most important mediæval document for the Priory is a thirteenth-century Cartulary which is preserved in the British Museum (Add MS 43972). This is a book containing two hundred and fifty diverse documents, most of which relate to land and property. From it may be gleaned a vast amount of information about the history of the Priory, its land holdings and agricultural activities. The information from the Cartulary may be supplemented with equally important information from other documentary sources such as Rentals.

3.3 The foundation date for the Priory may be fixed fairly precisely. In a Papal Bull dated May 1207 Pope Innocent III takes the "Hospital of Wymondley" under his protection. Richard de Argentein, the founder of the Priory, had inherited the Manor of Great Wymondley on the death of his father, Reginald, c1200, and he was also holding the manor of Little Wymondley in sub-tenancy. The family was of considerable wealth and importance and held other manors besides Wymondley. Soon after, Richard for some unknown reason seems to have forfeited his estate, for in 1203 he received a pardon from King John and had his patrimony restored.

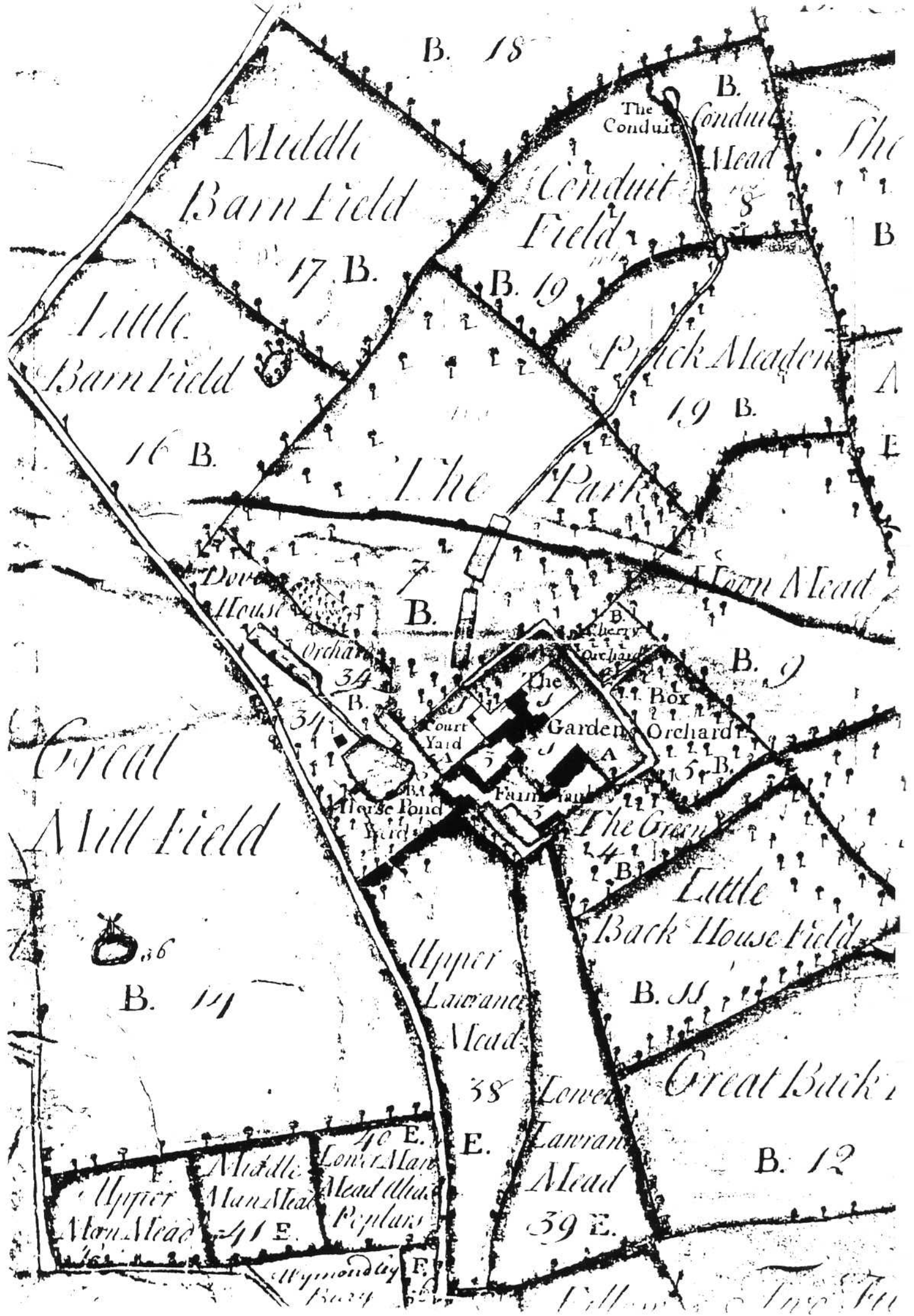
3.4 Now, the 1207 Papal Bull clearly indicates that the Hospital of Wymondley, for that is how the Priory is first described, was already in existence by that date. Since Richard de Argentein founded the Priory, as other documents tell us, on land he inherited, it follows that the foundation date must be between 1203 and 1207. This is earlier than has previously been realised.

3.5 In its early years it is always referred to as a Hospital dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the master was a *medicus* ("physician"). A seal survives in the British Museum attached to one of the Wymondley charters and is inscribed *S:HOSPITAL:SCE:MARIE:DE:WIMONDESE* ("The Seal of the Hospital of St Mary of Wymondley"). A mediæval Hospital was not simply a place to tend the sick but it also catered for the elderly, the infirm and even the impoverished. Throughout the mediæval period a number of elderly people were always looked after at the Priory. Indeed, this seems to have been one of its main functions, even after it ceased to call itself a Hospital, and it is probable that there was always an infirmary building.

3.6 Before the death of the founder in 1246 it had become known as a Priory and the master was called a Prior. However, the evidence indicates that the Augustinian Canons were associated with the establishment from its beginning. Some charters say the number of Canons appointed was not to exceed five, but others say seven.

3.7 Other buildings for which we have evidence apart from the church and a probable infirmary, include a Chapter House (mentioned in 1442 and on the seal reproduced on the cover of this report); a drawbridge and gatehouse (mentioned in the fifteenth century); and in the 1537 Dissolution Inventory, a hall (perhaps the Refectory with Dormitory over), a kitchen, servants' chamber, bakehouse, brewhouse, buttery, pantry and barn. In 1530 the Refectory is mentioned as having been recently rebuilt, and there is also mention of a bell tower which had also been rebuilt, following a recent collapse. This might suggest that it was free-standing since there is no mention of damage to the church; on the contrary, the church is said to be in good repair. The Prior's chamber is mentioned in earlier documents.

3.8 There were clearly a considerable number of buildings on the site, which must also have included a latrine building near the moat, and it is hard to see how, other than the tithe barn, they all fitted north of the church. Curiously, the Cloisters are



not mentioned in documents until c1700 by which time they must have been largely demolished.

3.9 At the Dissolution it is recorded that there were five Canons with eleven servants. The Priory had never been wealthy and the mediæval documents frequently report crop failures and pestilences destroying the livestock. In 1537 the annual worth of the property was placed by the King's Commissioners at about £30. It was then leased by the Crown to James Needham, a master carpenter and Surveyor of His Majesty's Works.

3.10 The Needham family occupied the property for nearly two hundred years. It is likely that by the time James Needham leased the site many of the conventual buildings may already have been partially or totally demolished. No doubt he continued this process, keeping only those buildings, or parts of buildings, such as the church, which he could convert to his domestic purposes, and reusing the stone, timber and tiles from those of no use to him.

3.11 The tithe barn and part of the church nave we know he kept, but what else might we surmise? The fact that Henry Chauncy, the county historian, mentions the cloisters c1700 (Chauncy 1828) suggests that at least a part of these were kept, and I shall return to this possibility below. Farris suggests that the east end of the church, including the rest of the nave, quire, chancel and side chapels, was kept since they seem to appear on an Estate Map of 1731 (Herts County Records Office 44215; the relevant portion is reproduced here as fig.2). However, we think this is probably a misinterpretation of the evidence of the map. On this map the layout of the east end of the house looks like a sixteenth or seventeenth century domestic range rather than a mediæval ecclesiastical arrangement. We think it more likely that the east end of the church was demolished in the mid-sixteenth century, and that the Needhams added a domestic wing instead, which could possibly have incorporated some of the walls and foundations of the east end of the church and perhaps the chapter house. Unfortunately this wing was destroyed by fire and subsequently demolished some time between 1731 and 1811 when the Enclosure Map was drawn. Its foundations and those of the east end of the church etc., no doubt remain under the west end of the walled garden of Priory House.

3.12 James Needham certainly seems to have added the building attached to the south-west end of the church nave. We also suggest that he may have converted the south wing of the cloisters, attached to the north wall of the nave, to a domestic wing of his new house. The evidence for this comes from the Estate Map drawn by Thomas Browne in 1731. It appears to show this wing of the cloisters and a wall outlining the west and part of the north wings too. This arrangement on the map seems to us highly suspicious and evidence that the cloisters (and thus at least some of the conventual buildings) may indeed have been to the north of the church. It might also suggest that part of the west end of the nave has been demolished.

3.13 From this 1731 map we can also see that, interestingly, the wall around the present garden east of the house was apparently already in existence. The moat had reached more-or-less its present form, with the north-western parts infilled. Various agricultural buildings existed on the western side of the enclosure and the tithe barn is clearly visible. To its immediate west is a small building roughly in the position of one still there (and proposed for demolition).

3.14 In addition, in the field to the north of the moat, the monastic fishponds (which are still visible today) were in use and the aqueduct leading to the conduit building is clearly marked. No doubt this water was piped (elm water pipes having been ploughed up about 1920) to give a sufficient head of pressure to turn the spit in the mediæval and later kitchens. This arrangement was still in operation about 1865 (N Farris, pers.comm.).

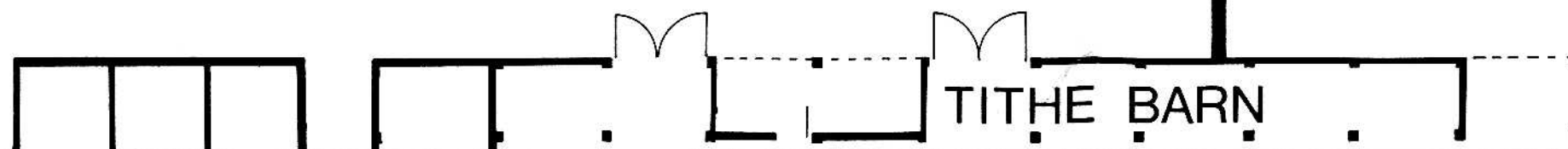
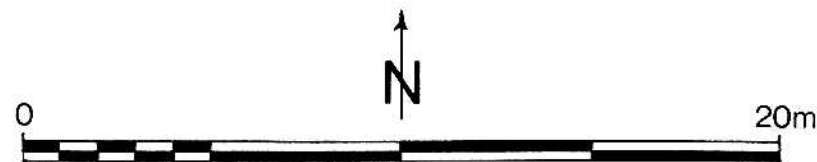
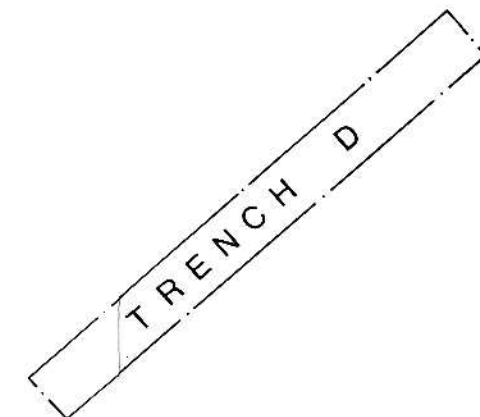
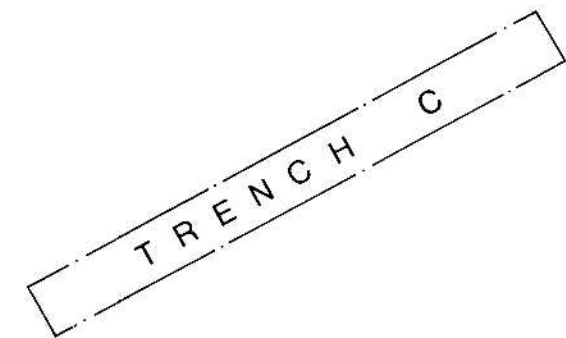
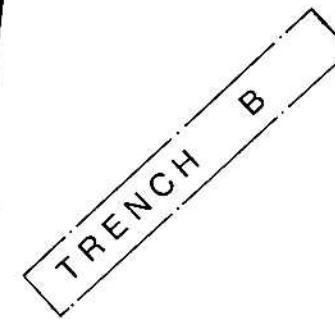
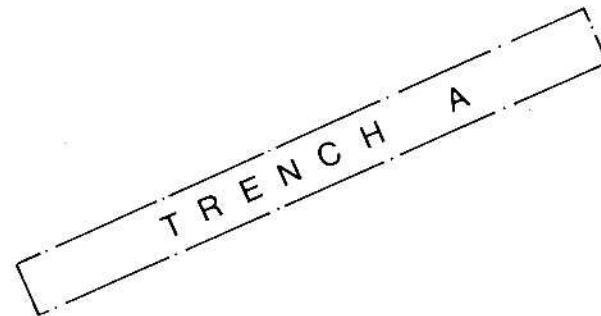
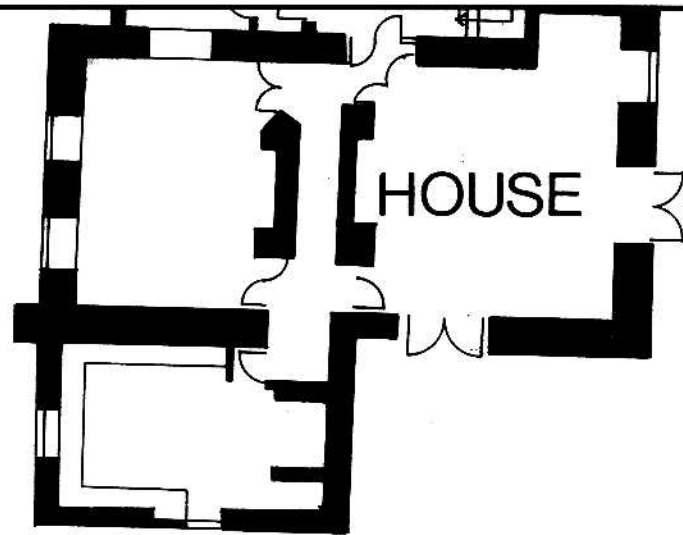
3.15 It should be noted that the field immediately to the north of the moat was termed in 1731 "*The Park*". The Needhams created this in the mid to late sixteenth century (N Farris, pers.comm.). It is possible that they in fact depopulated and



demolished the small agricultural settlement which, on the evidence of the earthworks, existed here presumably for labourers in the employ of the Canons.

3.16 Finally, it is interesting to see that the "*Box Orchard*" is marked in 1731 and to realise that the box trees still growing around this paddock are more than 250 years old.

WYMONDLEY PRIORY  
Trial Trench Location  
November 1989



#### 4 The Archaeological Investigation

4.1 The proposed development of the property by *Ove Arup* into a training centre, whilst preserving the Listed house and barn, will involve considerable archaeological disturbance in the area between the two major Listed structures, and in the area of pasture between the gravelled car park and the eastern arm of the moat. If planning permission is obtained, disturbance will be created by any new buildings (although this could be limited depending on the foundation type adopted); by new services, removal of old building foundations and services, and possibly by the construction of a new car park, although again this could be minimised.

4.2 Given the historic importance of the site and the archaeological sensitivity of the possible new building areas, an archaeological evaluation was clearly required. English Heritage, which is involved in discussions over the site with the owner because of its responsibility for the Scheduled part, suggested trial trenching as a quick method of evaluation and that NHDC Museums Field Archaeology Section should perform the work. This was agreed between the three parties, hence this report, which has been commissioned by *Ove Arup* through their architect, Julian Bicknell.

4.3 By the time NHDC Museums Field Archaeology Section was brought into the situation, English Heritage had already agreed with the owner that trial trenching was the method of investigation to be adopted. Given the choice, our preferred method of operation would have been to first complete a brief documentary search and then to undertake either a geophysical or ground radar survey. Trial trenching would have been the third stage when much more would already have been known. Adopting trial trenching as an initial option has meant a fairly blind and destructive approach to the problem, when non-destructive techniques could have been used first. It will be seen that the trial trenching still leaves many questions unanswered, and that further non-destructive investigation should be undertaken pending larger-scale archaeological excavation prior to any new building works.

#### Trial Trenching

4.4 At the beginning of November 1989 a small team from the North Herts District Council Museums Service's Field Archaeology Section marked out four trial trenches, spaced along the lines of proposed new buildings, and supervised their excavation by JCB. Trench A was located between the main house and a small farm building (recently converted into a bungalow) in the gravel courtyard to the south. The remaining trenches were dug further to the east beyond the courtyard wall, with Trenches B and C in amongst saplings in a newly-planted orchard running along the outside of the garden wall, enclosed by a large wooden fence. Trench D, also located in the pasture, outside the orchard, crossed an area closer to the east end of the tithe barn.

4.5 Trenches B, C and D were dug in two stages, bearing in mind the sensitivity of the site and the unknown nature of the deposits. The possibility of faint traces indicating wooden structures was recognised, and the possibility that theories concerning the orientation of the Priory may be incorrect and that features such as the monastic graveyard might be encountered. Firstly the turf and a shallow spit of the upper layers was stripped in each trench by the back actor of the JCB using a 1.5m ditching bucket, followed by cleaning and recording to assess the upper deposits. Secondly, having established the nature of upper layers, and their approximate date, the trenches were extended downwards. Owing to the paucity of datable finds, the trenches were excavated until the features could no longer be assumed to be post-Dissolution. In the confined space between the saplings, the fence and the garden wall, the JCB encountered severe problems, making systematic stripping difficult and affecting the straightness of the trenches (especially Trench C).

4.6 Trench A required only a single machining to reach a satisfactory depth as defined by the archaeological remains and the numerous immovable service pipes and cables.

4.7 The longest northern side of each trench was used as a baseline, and small finds were allocated co-ordinates by offset. All the trenches were located by



triangulation, cleaned by hand and the sections and plans drawn. Tile samples were taken from sections 3, 5 and 6, and the trenches backfilled by machine. The on-site work took two weeks.

4.8 The finds and records were then checked and analysed, a context matrix prepared, and a draft archive report written. Field drawings were checked and from them final drawings prepared for this evaluation report. Other drawings have been added as necessary and this expanded report written. Preparation of this report has taken four weeks.

## 5 The Phasing of the Archaeological Contexts

5.1 In general the phases allocated to the features within all four trenches are highly speculative. The **Final Phase** (Phase IV, 1973+) is the most susceptible to proof, representing changes to the property since 1973 when the area was surveyed for the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale map and when the property was sold; these changes are manifested in Trench A. **Phase III** (19<sup>th</sup> century+1973) is designated by small finds of a relatively modern date and by features which have not changed since the 1973 map.

5.2 **Phase II** (18<sup>th</sup>+19<sup>th</sup> century) cannot be defined narrowly due to the vague nature of the evidence. All the archaeological features in this phase are devoid of closely datable finds, although some of the structures, walls and culverts suggest approximate dates. In order to reflect this ambiguity, which is largely inherent in the whole operation, this phase is made to merge with Phase III.

5.3 **Phase I** (13<sup>th</sup>+17<sup>th</sup> century) has a very wide time span again due to the obvious difficulty of assessing the age of layers without the benefit of tangible dating evidence. The problem of distinguishing between late monastic material and early post-Dissolution material was borne in mind from the outset; unfortunately the problem remained throughout the excavation. Structures, particularly in Trench A, can be shown to be early, but without further work theories regarding their actual date must remain tentative.

## 6 The Recorded Archaeology from the Trial Trenches

### 6.1 Trench A

16.0x2.0x0.7m (maximum).

Located between the main house and the bungalow (see fig.3).

See fig.4.

This trench showed considerable evidence of disturbance of the upper deposits, being largely composed of layers of redeposited clay/silt matrices and building debris, with service trenches containing pipes and cables. Since the 1973 OS map shows a driveway running along the south side of the house, the final layers seen in section - topsoil and gravel - must be a more recent arrangement. Features cut through these layers also belong to Phase IV, including a trench carrying a heating oil pipeline to the house from a remote tank. From the map it is also possible to deduce that the farm building in the courtyard had not, at that date, been converted into a bungalow; therefore the services leading from it (24 and 25) also belong to Phase IV. Other features associated with this phase are the electric cables to the tithe barn and the stable block from the house, and the remains of a brick wall seen in section running roughly from the south-west corner of the main house to the north-west corner of the bungalow.

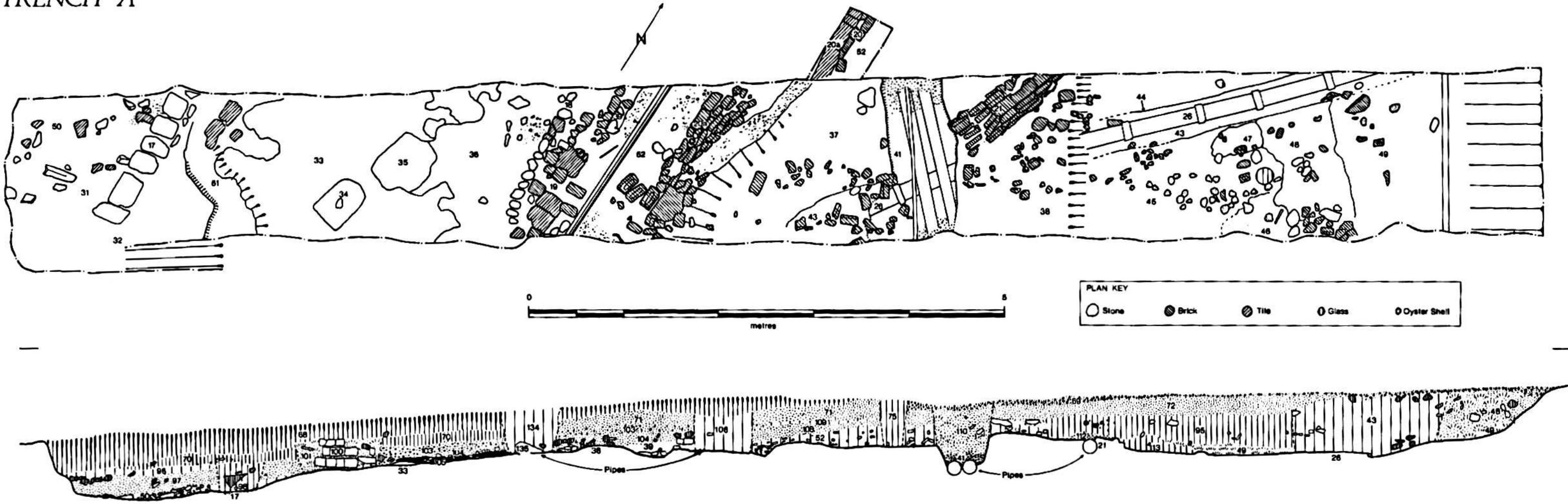
Phase III consists of a series of tile and brick-flecked make-up layers, and a large brown glazed sewage pipe (26) running from the north-west corner of the trench to a point approximately in the middle of the opposite section. This was probably disused, but we were not inclined to investigate. One of the redeposited layers from this phase (48) produced a fragment of fourteenth century pottery; this merely serves to illustrate the disturbed nature of all the later deposits within this trench. Likewise a series of dump deposits from Phase II (45, 46, 47 and 49) produced a mixture of artifacts including oyster shells and bottleglass, as well as sherds of pottery dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. However, this phase also contains a culvert (21), composed of bricks apparently of eighteenth-century manufacture, and a fragment of gravel yard surface.

The earliest features, ascribed to Phase I, are again difficult to date closely. Beneath another series of build-up layers (50, 96 and 97), the foundations of a wall consisting of squared 0.3m clunch blocks (17) run diagonally, north to south, across the western end of the trench. Approximately 4m farther east along the trench another wall foundation made of large pebbles, tiles and thin bricks (19) runs parallel. In the space between the two walls the trial trench revealed a broad, white, waxy hammered chalk surface, with other similar surfaces below it (seen in a small area of over-machining). This surface (33) appears to be a floor, and may be associated with the two walls although this relationship was not proven. Two indentations in this surface (34 and 35) may well indicate the positions of roof support timbers. There is a third foundation (20) which can also be ascribed to this phase, the bricks from which it is composed being of late sixteenth or seventeenth-century type. The reused roof tile (20a) associated with this foundation may be either the truncated remains of a floor or a means of levelling the brick courses. Clunch blocks similar to those forming the wall foundations (17) can be seen incorporated into the foundations of the tithe barn and in numerous places along the boundary walls of the courtyard and garden; these are assumed to be stone robbed from the monastic buildings.

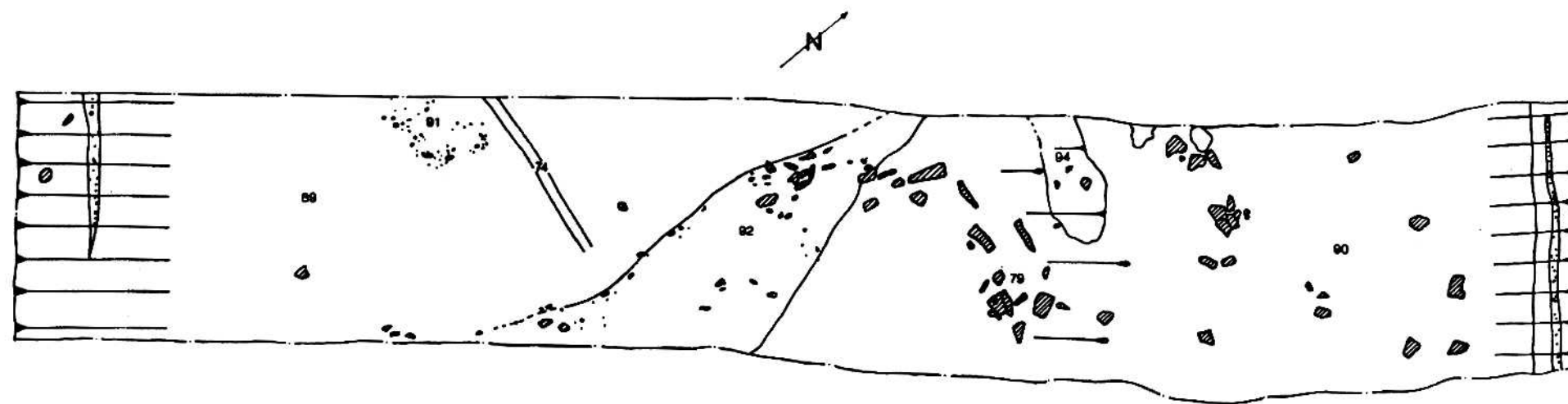
NB None of the contexts from Trench A can be related directly to contexts in the other trenches.



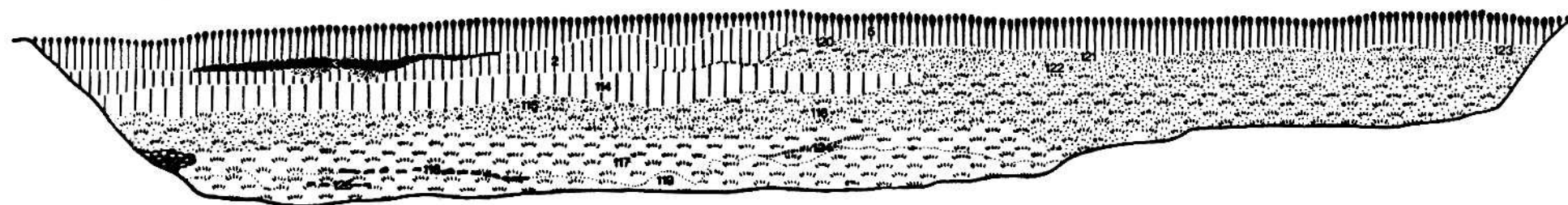
TRENCH A



# TRENCH B



PLAN KEY	
○ Stone	⊗ Tile



## 6.2 Trench B

9.0×1.7×1.2m.

Located in the orchard near the junction of the courtyard and garden walls (see fig.3).

See fig.5.

There are few direct comparisons between Trench B and Trench A, although the basic soil matrices are similar, characteristically a mixture of mid-yellowish brown clay and grey/brown silt. The top layers of turf and topsoil can be assumed to have been deposited before the pasture was planned in 1973; there are no later features. Phase III also incorporates a number of fragmented sand and gravel yard surfaces dated to the nineteenth century by a quantity of bottle glass and occasional sherds of blue and white Willow Pattern china. The surfaces appear to be sequential, possibly deposited within a relatively short period.

The layers ascribed to Phase II are similar to all the remaining earlier layers in Trench B, essentially clay based redeposited material containing variable amounts of demolition débris, tile and brick fragments. The dating of layers 114 and 115 to Phase II is extremely tentative, and results from these layers being bracketed between the earliest yard surfaces in Phase III and the latest datable layer in Phase I.

Phase I consists of sequential layers of redeposited clay/silt to a depth of approximately 1.2m below the modern ground surface. A pipe stem and bowl dated to 1650-1700 found in layer 128 defines the upper limit of this phase at about 0.4m from the present ground surface. The trench was discontinued when a fragment of fifteenth or sixteenth century sandy-ware rim appeared in 89, and no evidence of later activity could be seen.

The massive amount of redeposited material seen in this trench, together with the lack of any containing cut, suggests a very large negative feature, the limits of which lay outside the trench (see conclusions). The nature of the backfill, with such a large component of demolition material, may indicate that this is a post-Dissolution process of landfill incorporating débris from the monastery buildings. Two areas of redeposited roof tiles in Phase I (79 and 125) could be the result of Dissolution demolition; the remaining layers appear more likely to be secondary redepositions, the building débris being considerably mixed with large amounts of silt and clay. Unfortunately, it is not possible to date the processes seen in this trench accurately, and although the sizable depth of build-up material is likely to be contemporary with, or later than, the Dissolution, the possibility remains that the earlier layers in Phase I may be the result of monastic landscape remodelling.



### 6.3 Trench C

16.6×1.7×1.2m.

Located in the orchard, towards the eastern end of the garden wall (see fig.3).  
See fig.6.

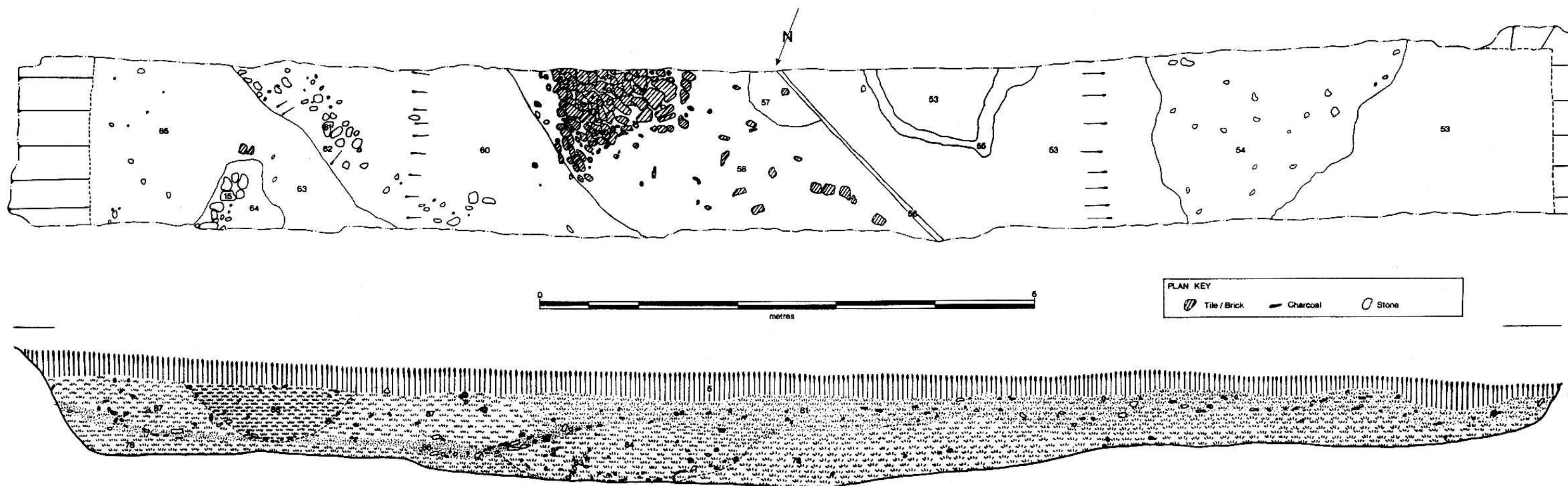
Generally the layers in Trench C are very similar to those of Trench B, and in a few instances directly comparable. This trench also shows extensive disturbance, with no natural soil *in situ*, and evidence of systematic build-up layers containing demolition material.

Phase III, as with Trench B, culminates with the topsoil and turf assumed to predate 1973. A late, shallow cut ran diagonally across the eastern end of the trench (14) north-west to south-east beneath the turf, filled with topsoil. Phase III also includes a fragment of red/yellow gravel yard surface (140), probably the same material as 126 seen in Trench B, indicating the extent of the former farmyard.

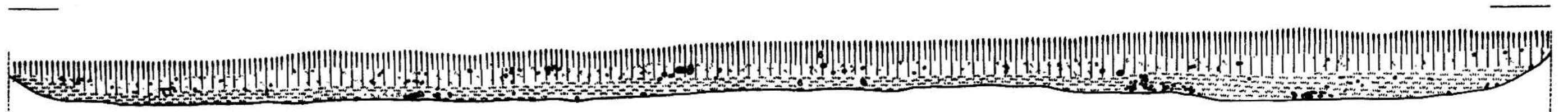
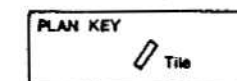
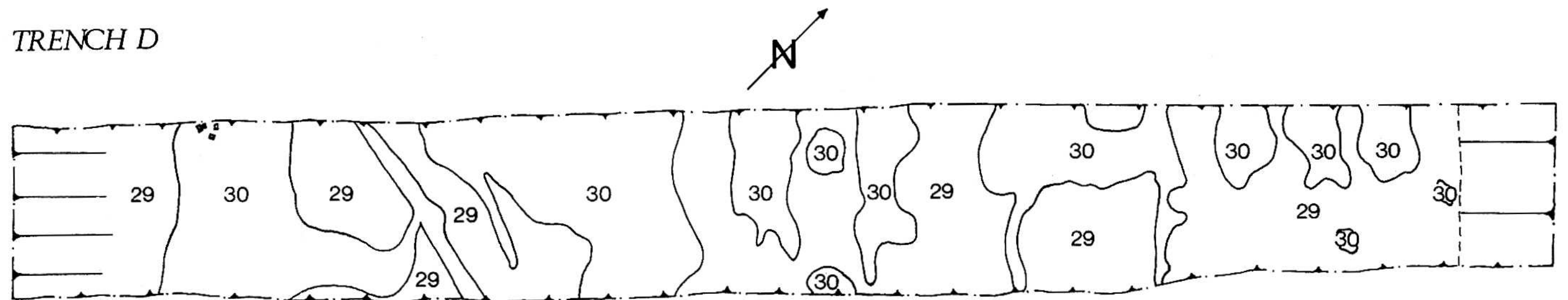
The final stage of Phase II is defined by the remains of a wall foundation (15) seen in section 4. The foundations, composed of a mixture of poor quality stone fragments, broken tiles and bricks, form the butt end of a structure with walls very similar to the garden wall to the north. The fill surrounding 15, together with the fill of 141, a stratigraphically contemporary cut, and the underlying redeposited material, contained fragments of glass, hard brown glazed pottery and pipe stem loosely datable to the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, as well as the ubiquitous fragments of red roof tile.

The build-up layers assigned to Phase I did not contain the later dating evidence. On the floor of the trench, towards the middle and against section 3, a large spread of well-preserved roof tiles dictated the limit of excavation. These tiles (59) appear very similar to 79 seen in Trench B, and may be contemporary. The cut which contains the tiles (82) was approximately 2.5m wide and seen in both sections truncating earlier redeposited layers which in turn overlay a pack of rubble (61) towards the eastern end of the trench. The lower redeposited layers (8 and 9) also overlay some less disturbed layers (53 and 54) containing no building material, but fragments of fourteenth and seventeenth century pottery. As with the other trenches, definitive dating evidence was non-existent and the decision to halt excavation was made when the evidence for a later date dwindled leaving features which could be shown to be early, but within the context of such a limited investigation, not how early. The spread of tiles (59) could indicate a Dissolution demolition period. The general spread of tile debris throughout the sections, as in Trench B, suggests a large monastic negative feature infilled with demolition residue (see conclusions). An interesting feature is the rubble spread (61) which appears to predate the main phase of demolition, and overlay layers containing none of the widespread tile fragments (63 and 65); further excavation will be required to place this in its proper context.

# TRENCH C



TRENCH D



#### 6.4 Trench D

15.0×1.75×0.66m.

Located in the open pasture within the moat to the north-east of the tithe barn (see fig.3).

See fig.7.

The shallowest of the four trenches, Trench D produced very little archaeological evidence, and was therefore difficult to phase. The topsoil lay immediately over a broad layer of redeposited clay/silt matrix containing fragments of red tile, possibly representing a former surface contemporary with the yard surfaces seen further to the north. A small irregular cut (138) containing the carbonised remains of a post and some mortar (28) in the western end of the trench proved almost completely undatable, except that it cut a shallow redeposited layer (6) possibly contemporary with similar layers in Phase I of Trench C. There may also have been flimsy timber-framed buildings in this area which could easily have escaped detection given the destructive nature of the investigation. At a maximum depth of 0.66m the machine struck a heavy, consolidated yellow clay with occasional medium-sized flints, which was almost incapable of excavation (29 and 30). This is assumed to be the underlying natural, an archaeologically sterile, and possibly glacial, clay.



## 7 Conclusions on the Trenches

7.1 Taken together, the wall foundations and series of floor surfaces in Trench A may represent the final phase of a long-lived building dating from the occupation of the Priory. Relative dating (such as it is from this trench) places these features before the eighteenth century, and the nature of wall 17, which runs at approximately 90° to the south wall of the nave, suggests a mediæval date. The two walls east of 17 perhaps indicate a structure with two discernible phases, the earlier some 3.5m wide and perhaps of pre-Dissolution date, and the later about 5m wide and post-Dissolution. Without specific dating evidence it is impossible to determine whether the remaining features date from before or after the Dissolution. Although they cannot be proven to be monastic, significantly they cannot be proven to be otherwise; therefore, given the limited and destructive nature of this investigation, this was considered to be the limit of excavation. In any event, the presence of "live" services made it impossible to proceed further at this time.

7.2 The pre-Dissolution structure in Trench A raises several intriguing possibilities. One is that it is a part of the conventual buildings, probably the cloisters, in which case the problem of the location of the remainder of the conventual buildings is perhaps resolved in favour of a southern range; another solution is that this structure is part of the original monastic Hospital, although the foundations revealed in trial trenching need not be as early as the early thirteenth century. The continuation of use of this structure after the Dissolution is probably to be explained in terms of the adaptation of monastic buildings to lay agricultural use.

7.3 Despite the vague nature of the dating evidence from Trenches B, C and D, a major feature emerges which appears worthy of further investigation. Trenches B and C truncated redeposited material to a depth of over a metre on average without reaching undisturbed natural. Trench D indicates what may be the normal level of natural across the site. Even though Trenches B and C did not uncover the cut containing this mass of build-up material, they do indicate the general direction of a large linear feature running east-west from the middle of the eastern moat ditch towards the centre of the island. At the point where the projected feature would meet the moat, the inner bank which skirts the eastern arm disappears, and from the opposite side of the eastern moat arm a broad and shallow ditch runs further eastwards towards a spring which formed a second water supply for the moat. One possible interpretation of the large negative feature in Trenches B and C is that it formed part of the moated system, perhaps subdividing the island into two roughly equal-sized parts. This would perhaps separate the conventual buildings and church from the tithe barn, although it apparently stopped east of Trench A. The negative feature could also be the cellar or undercroft of a building, although this is considered less likely. A *terminus ante quem* for the filling of this negative feature is provided by the Estate Map of 1731, which shows no such feature in this position.

WYMONDLEY PRIORY  
Trial Trenches 1989  
Phased Site Matrix

Trench A

Trench B

Trench C

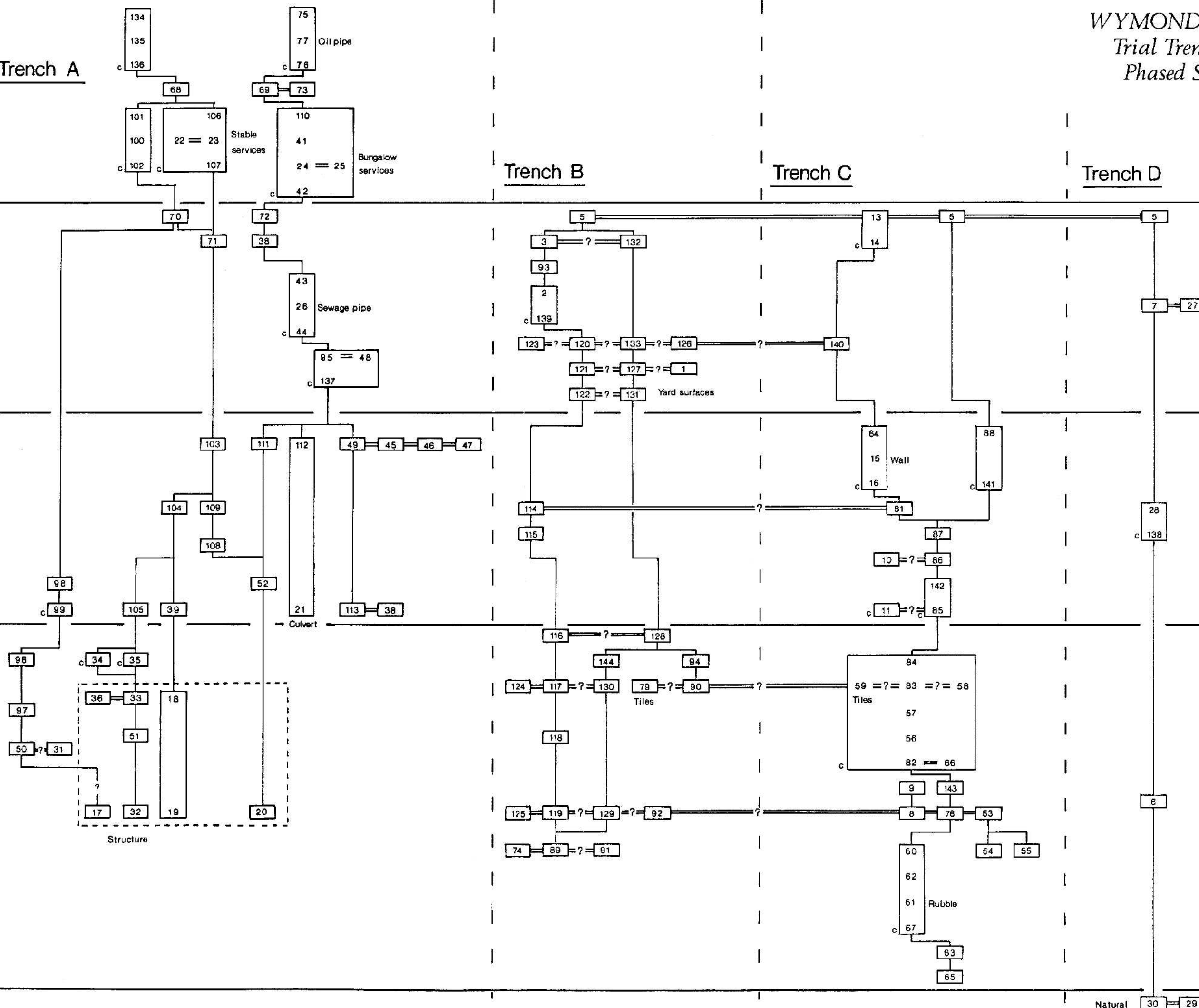
Trench D

IV 1973 —

III 19th — 1973

II 18th — 19th C.

I 13th — 17th C.



Natural 30 29

## 8 Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 The very limited nature of our investigation so far and the lack of an opportunity to carry out a non-destructive survey of the undoubted buried remains leaves several vital questions unanswered. For instance, and perhaps the most important, it is still by no means certain whether the monastic conventual buildings, including the cloister, lay north or south of the former church. If these important features did lie to the north, as is probable, then a case could be made to allow new buildings to the south of Priory House, subject to larger-scale archaeological investigation, or to altered foundation type. However, if the monastic range was to the south of the Priory church, as is normal and for which a reasonably convincing case may still be made, it might be argued that new building should not take place in that area. If any monastic buildings are indeed on the south side then, in my opinion, it would not be archaeologically desirable simply to seal them under concrete rafts supporting new buildings.

8.2 The Cartulary suggests that the foundation was on a new site in the fields between the two Wymondleys. The fact that it was at first a Hospital under a Physician, and only later became a Priory might explain the irregularity in the layout of buildings, apparently north of the church. If the original early thirteenth-century Infirmary occupied the centre of the moated enclosure, this pre-existing building could account for the cloisters and conventual buildings being sited eccentrically north of the church in a less favourable position, especially if they were constructed at a slightly later date.

8.3 If the main monastic buildings were south of the church, a case could be made for scheduling the area and siting any new buildings elsewhere. Unfortunately, there are likely to be important archaeological remains on any part of the moated enclosure which should be investigated and recorded prior to new building.

8.4 Even if the main monastic range is not south of the Priory church, our investigation has shown that there are archaeological remains *in situ* including mediæval structures and a considerable depth of stratigraphy in places. In addition, our investigation has shown that in Trench A there was a probable mediæval monastic building which could either be an arm of the cloister or perhaps an infirmary. However, the remains were not well-preserved due to stone-robbing and later disturbance, particularly by services.

8.5 In Trenches B and C there is a considerable depth of stratigraphy, possibly related to an infilled arm of the mediæval moat. From the evidence of Browne's Estate Map, this had been filled in by 1731. This accords well with the archaeological evidence. If this area is to be built over then an archaeological requirement should be that at least one hand-dug section is dug across this large negative feature to discover exactly what it is, its form and date. In any event, building foundations may need to be altered for structural stability.

8.6 Although Trench D produced little archaeological evidence or depth of stratigraphy, even in this area there is a case for further investigation prior to development. Only area excavation, for example, would reveal traces of possible insubstantial mediæval timber-framed structures.

8.7 There should be further non-destructive archaeological investigation of the proposed building areas by geophysical or ground probing radar techniques to establish more clearly the extent and nature of surviving archaeological structures and deposits. Unfortunately, the trial trenching by its very limited scope has failed to do this entirely satisfactorily.

8.8 This non-destructive survey should be followed, perhaps in phases, by much large-scale area excavation where proposed new buildings are to be sited. Even if the monastic buildings are to the south of the former church, the trial trenches do seem to have shown that preservation is not so good as to preclude any new building. On the other hand, it would not be acceptable simply to seal the archaeological remains under

a raft and thus lose the opportunity of making a proper record, especially when we still have no real idea as to exactly what it was we would be sealing off.

8.9 All the land within the moated enclosure which is not to have new buildings on it should be Scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Act, bearing in mind that the areas to be excavated archaeologically would have to include any part likely to be disturbed by development and not just literally the areas of the new buildings themselves.

8.10 Provision should be made for full archaeological recording along the lines of any proposed new services before the services are laid.

8.11 The area of the proposed new car park should be constructed in such a way as not to damage the underlying archaeology, perhaps by building up the present ground surface, and certainly not by any kind of lowering of the surface.

8.12 The buildings due for demolition if development goes ahead should be recorded fully first, bearing in mind that these buildings include reused masonry from the mediæval Priory. This also applies to the courtyard wall.

8.13 A photographic survey should be undertaken of the Priory House and tithe barn before any changes or refurbishment occur.

8.14 It would greatly assist to put the Priory site in its immediate setting if it were possible for a measured survey to be completed of the mediæval earthworks around the moated enclosure to enable an accurate plan of the whole complex to be produced.

8.15 Following on from the work of Farris, an attempt should be made to relate the documents to the mediæval topography.

8.16 There exists at Wymondley Priory an opportunity to ensure the long-term future of the Listed house and barn. In order to achieve this it may be necessary to 'sacrifice' some of the archaeology of the site, but this need not be a negative event if the above recommendations are implemented. Indeed, the opposite is true: here is an exciting opportunity to secure the future of two major standing historic buildings; to provide *Ove Arup* with their desired use of the site; and to provide the local and wider community, not to mention *Arup*, with otherwise unavailable information about the archaeology and history of the site. In addition, large parts of the moated enclosure may be preserved as an Ancient Monument, not to mention the associated and extensive surrounding mediæval earthworks.

8.17 Although the developer would be required to fund the cost of the archaeological work, this should be seen to be to his advantage in enabling him to achieve his aims for the site. In addition there would be the prestige of sponsoring an important archaeological project. It would also provide detailed historical information about the site which should be of considerable interest to the developer, his staff and clients.

8.18 I therefore recommend that all parties (*Ove Arup*, the Local Planning Authority, English Heritage, and the archaeologists) grasp this unique opportunity for the benefit of all.



#### 8.19 Summary of Recommendations

- 1 A non-destructive survey should be completed of the areas to be affected by new buildings.
- 2 Further documentary research should be carried out to provide background historical and topographic information.
- 3 Record surveys should be made of the Priory House, Tithe Barn and the minor agricultural buildings due for demolition.
- 4 Area archaeological excavations should occur where new buildings are to be constructed.
- 5 The lines of new service positions should be archaeologically investigated.
- 6 The new car park should be constructed without reducing any ground levels.
- 7 A measured survey should be made of the associated earthworks.

NB The above recommendations assume the granting of planning permission.

## 9 Acknowledgements

Our thanks must go first to *Ove Arup* for their thoroughly responsible foresight in commissioning this archaeological evaluation; to Chris Hay of Julian Bicknell Architects for helping to set up the archaeological work and for patiently awaiting this report; to Dr Mike Parker Pearson of English Heritage (Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission) for valuable discussions and for recommending us to carry out the evaluation; to John Eté, also of English Heritage, for discussing the proposed increased Scheduled area; to Don Edwards for his patient assistance while the archaeologists dug holes into the property in his care; to Noël Farris, especially, for kindly sharing his immense knowledge of the history of the Priory before his own book on the Wymondleys was published; to Mike Salisbury and Garth Denning for additional historical information; to John Wallace, who farms the adjacent land to the north, for discussing the site which was at one time owned by his family; to John Carr of NHDC Planning Dept. for discussing the Listed buildings; to David Brown, for his skilful handling of the JCB excavator; and to our archaeological team, Christine Colley, Dene Conway, Adam Garwood, Tony Offord, and Faith Pewtress for their skilful assistance; finally, to Kit Westaway for processing the finds.

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