

WHERWELL ABBEY: NEW EVIDENCE

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ABSTRACT

Following the location of Wherwell Abbey church by geophysical survey in 1996, the lawns to the east of the church and cloisters were investigated in the autumn of 1998. Two possible lines for the precinct wall were revealed, together with a suite of buildings. The original function of these buildings is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence for the medieval plan and buildings at Wherwell Abbey was discussed in a recent *Proceedings* paper (Roberts 1988). The position and ground plan of Wherwell Abbey church had been defined by resistivity survey in the spring of 1996. This discovery confirmed the position of the cloisters on whose eastern side stands the house called 'The Priory' (Fig. 1 – shown in solid black between the cloisters and the geophysics plot). This house incorporates a south-facing wall of likely medieval date beneath which flows an artificial watercourse, and it was suggested that it might be a remnant of the monastic rere-dorter or, less plausibly, the abbess's lodgings. A large building standing to the south-east of the cloisters, and now known as 'The Stables', had been shown by dendrochronology to have a 13th-century roof, and it was suggested that it might well have been an infirmary hall built by abbess Euphemia or, less plausibly perhaps, a guest hall. Finally, a 10 m wide transect surveyed at a distance of some 90 m from the east end of the church suggested the position of substantial wall footings (Roberts 1998). In the autumn of 1998 a further resistivity survey was carried out over the east lawns, but to the south of the earlier transect, in order to identify, if

possible, the line of this wall (Figs 1 & 2). The discoveries made during this further survey are the subject of this note.

1998 SURVEY RESULTS

The condition of the lawns was very wet during the course of the 1998 survey, and the resistance contrasts are therefore much lower than in the dry spring of 1996. Nevertheless, buried features are visible in the greyscale plot (Fig1). The possible precinct wall observed in 1996 (shown as a dark line on the far right of the plot) clearly extends south-eastwards but then, some 65 m from the watercourse it turns westwards. However, there are two possible lines – one is on the same alignment as the standing Wherwell Priory House, and the other runs in a more south-westerly direction and is aligned with 'The Stables'.

In addition to the line of the possible precinct wall, further building foundations were discovered between Wherwell Priory House and the drive running through the east lawns which can be seen on the plot as a pale 'S' shaped band. It is interesting to see the remnants of an earlier exit of this drive towards a bridge over the watercourse (Fig. 1, in the north-east corner). The drive currently leaves the grounds at right angles to the precinct wall foundations.

The buildings that partly underlie the drive and extend almost to the east front of Wherwell Priory House appear to be a complex, possibly arranged around three sides of a small courtyard (Fig. 2). The northern perimeter of the group is defined by the more northerly line of the putative precinct wall. These newly-discovered buildings are aligned both with this wall line, and with

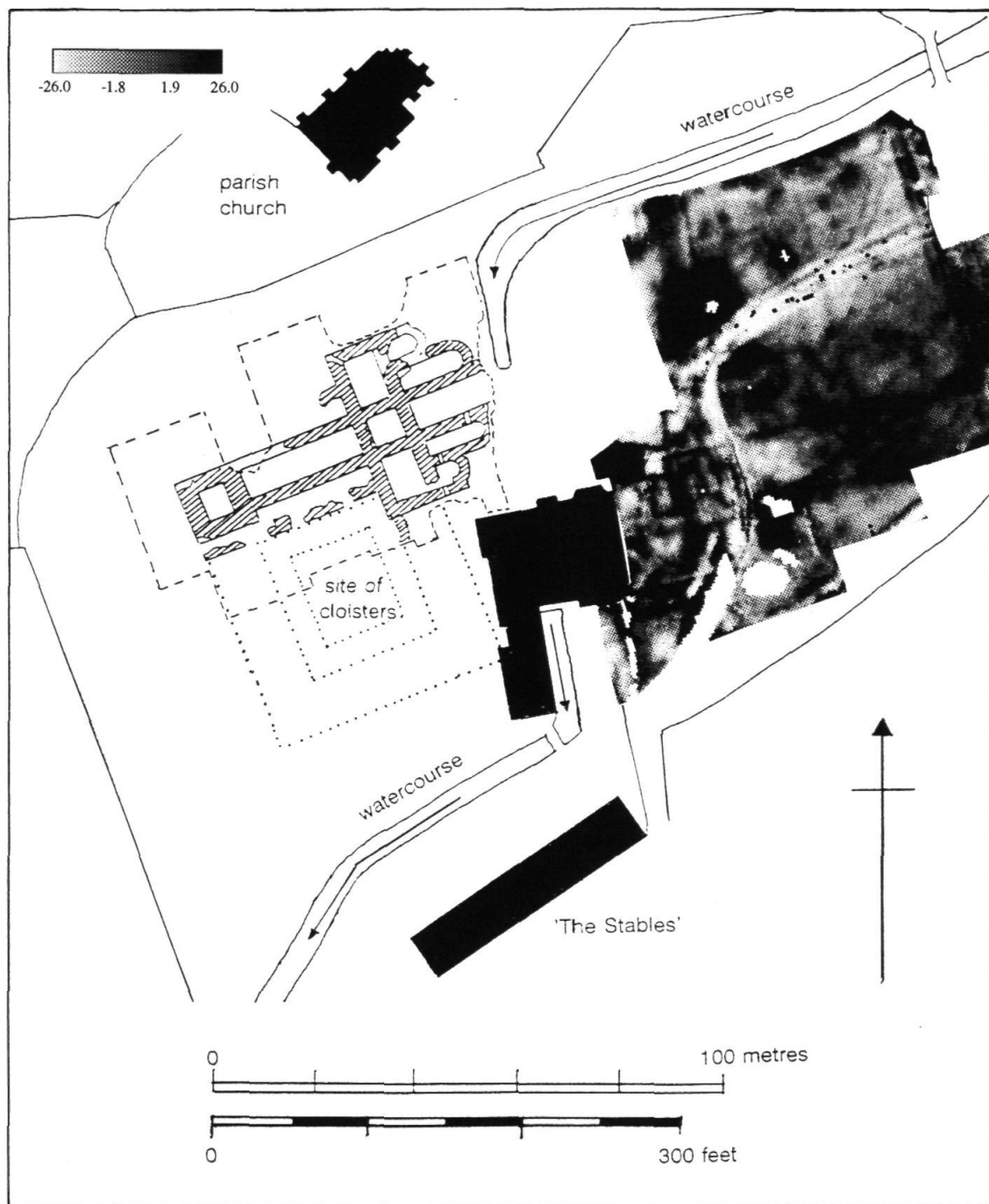


Fig. 1 Wherwell Abbey, showing the ground plan of the abbey church, the position of 'The Stables', and other published features (Roberts 1988) alongside the buried features recovered by resistivity in 1998.

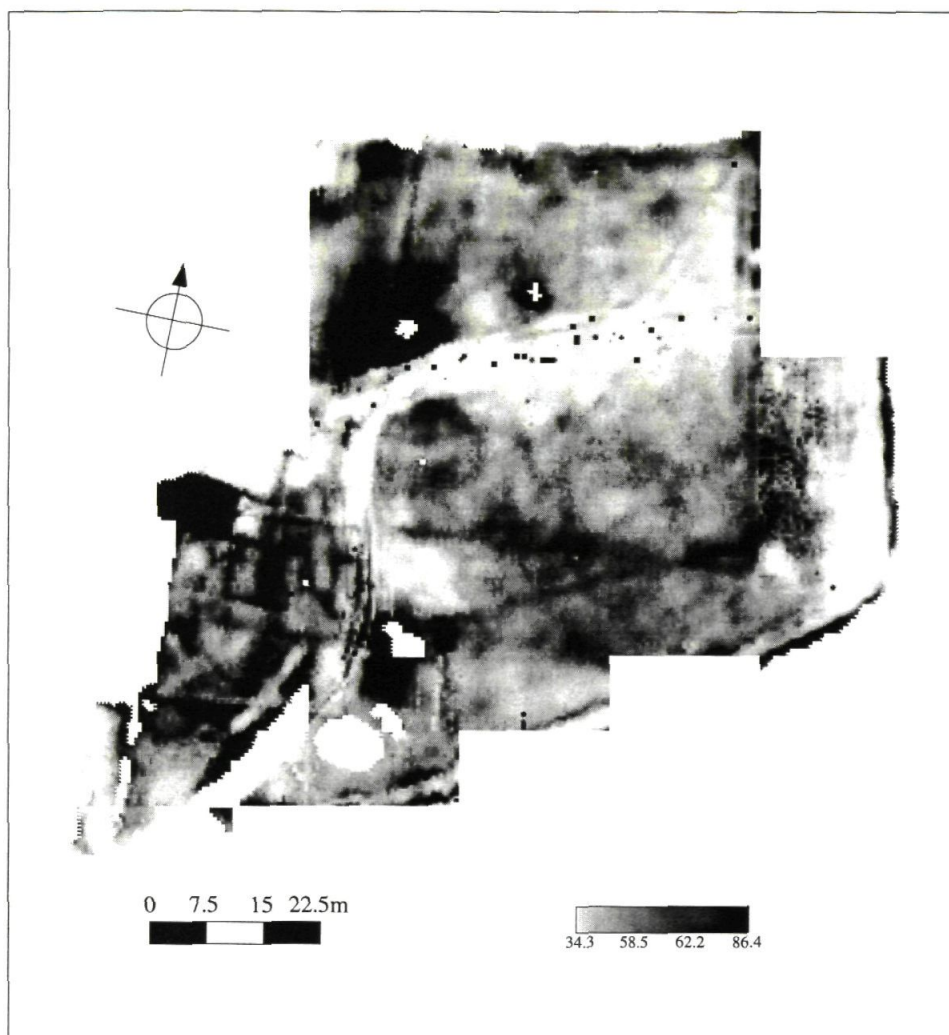


Fig. 2 Resistivity survey of the east lawn of Wherwell Priory House, 1988.

Wherwell Priory House which incorporates the south-facing medieval structure described above.

INTERPRETATION

On the reasonable assumption that this building complex dates from the monastic period, what may it represent? Its position, size and arrange-

ment make it a candidate for at least two monastic elements.

Firstly, the complex at Wherwell might have been associated with the monastic infirmary, for it is set on the east side of the cloister, as was normally the case (Coppack 1990, 76; Greene 1992, 5, 158; Knowles & St. Joseph 1952, 57, 62). However, the largest room within the complex appears to be no more than about 7 m by 5 m.

This is improbably small for an infirmary hall but it is recorded that the infirmary built at Wherwell by abbess Euphemia in the mid 13th century had necessary offices built around it, as was the usual practice (VCH Hants ii, 132-3; Roberts 1998, 145-148; Coppack 1990, 77). It is possible that the survey has picked up the subsidiary buildings whereas the infirmary hall has not been fully or clearly revealed. This interpretation would call into question the identification of 'The Stables' with the infirmary hall, for 'The Stables' seems to be too distant from the newly-discovered complex to be associated with it. However, it may be argued that we are looking at a late-medieval infirmary in the geophysics plot, one that replaced 'The Stables' of Abbess Euphemia: for the privacy afforded by separate rooms was progressively valued during the Middle Ages.

Secondly, the complex may be the abbess's lodgings. Its position to the east of the cloisters is not especially significant, as there was no fixed position for an abbess's apartments (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 32). However, the plan of the complex could be seen to resemble a typical abbess's house. By the end of the 14th century, it had become customary for the head of the larger monasteries to have a house that was a separate establishment. If

free-standing from the cloister, it closely resembled a secular manor house in plan, having a number of rooms suitable in size for domestic life, such as a hall, parlour, bedchamber, and chapel, and these were often arranged around a courtyard (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 33, Fig. 23; Coldicott 1989, 81).

In the present state of our knowledge, the case for identifying 'The Stables' as the infirmary which Euphemia built 'for both the healthy and the sick' is persuasive (Roberts 1998; Barbara Harvey, pers. comm.). The arguments for the newly-discovered structures being the remains of an infirmary are attractive but more tenuous, and rely on position and comparison only. They could, perhaps, more reasonably be identified with the abbess's house. At the Dissolution, reference was made to,

The late Abbes lodging with the houses within the Quadrante as the water leadith from the East side of the Cloister to the Gate (Roberts 1988, 149).

The position beside water and to the east of the cloister certainly seems to match the surveyed structures.

REFERENCES

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