

Salvage Excavations on the Site of the Lay Cemetery of Abingdon Abbey

By MICHAEL PARRINGTON

INTRODUCTION

DURING mechanical excavations for an office block in the Station Yard car park, Abingdon, SU 499973, a number of human bones were disturbed. The car park is adjacent to the known site of the lay cemetery of Abingdon Abbey¹ (FIG. 1) and would seem to be an extension of that cemetery. Salvage excavations on the site were carried out by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit.

Four trenches were dug by the contractor forming a rectangle 30 m. E.-W. × 10 m. N.-S. The trenches were 60-70 cm. wide and averaged 1 m. in depth. In addition two service trenches were dug: one on a N.-S. alignment, trench A, and the other on an E.-W. alignment, trench B. These trenches were not observed when they were open but the machine driver noted bones at the north end of trench A and workmen recovered the bones of at least four individuals from trench B. No formal excavation was possible and archaeological work on the site was confined to observation of the mechanical excavations and recovering bones.

THE BURIALS

Most of the burials occurred along the most southerly of the foundation trenches, trench C. The burials from this trench were irregularly spaced out along the length of the trench. Many of the bones had been smashed by the machine but where it was possible to work out the orientation of the skeletons, it was on a (christian) E.-W. alignment. Two graves were noted in the trench which ran at right angles from the west end of trench C and one grave in the trench at right angles to the east end of the trench. These three graves were very disturbed by the machine and no bones were recovered from them or from grave 7 in trench C where the outline of the grave could be seen, but the bones had been machined away.

The burials from trench C were numbered 1 to 8 although it was recognized that more than one individual was present in some of the groups of bones. As was noted in the report on the 1922 excavations,² many of the graves were disturbed, presumably as the result of multiple burials on the same site, and the quantity of stone may be the remains of stone cists as noted in the 1922 excavations.³ The fill of all the graves was black loamy soil.

¹ M. Biddle, H. T. Lambrick and J. N. L. Myres, 'The Early History of Abingdon, Berkshire, and its Abbey', *Med. Arch.*, xii (1968), 67 and Fig. 12.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

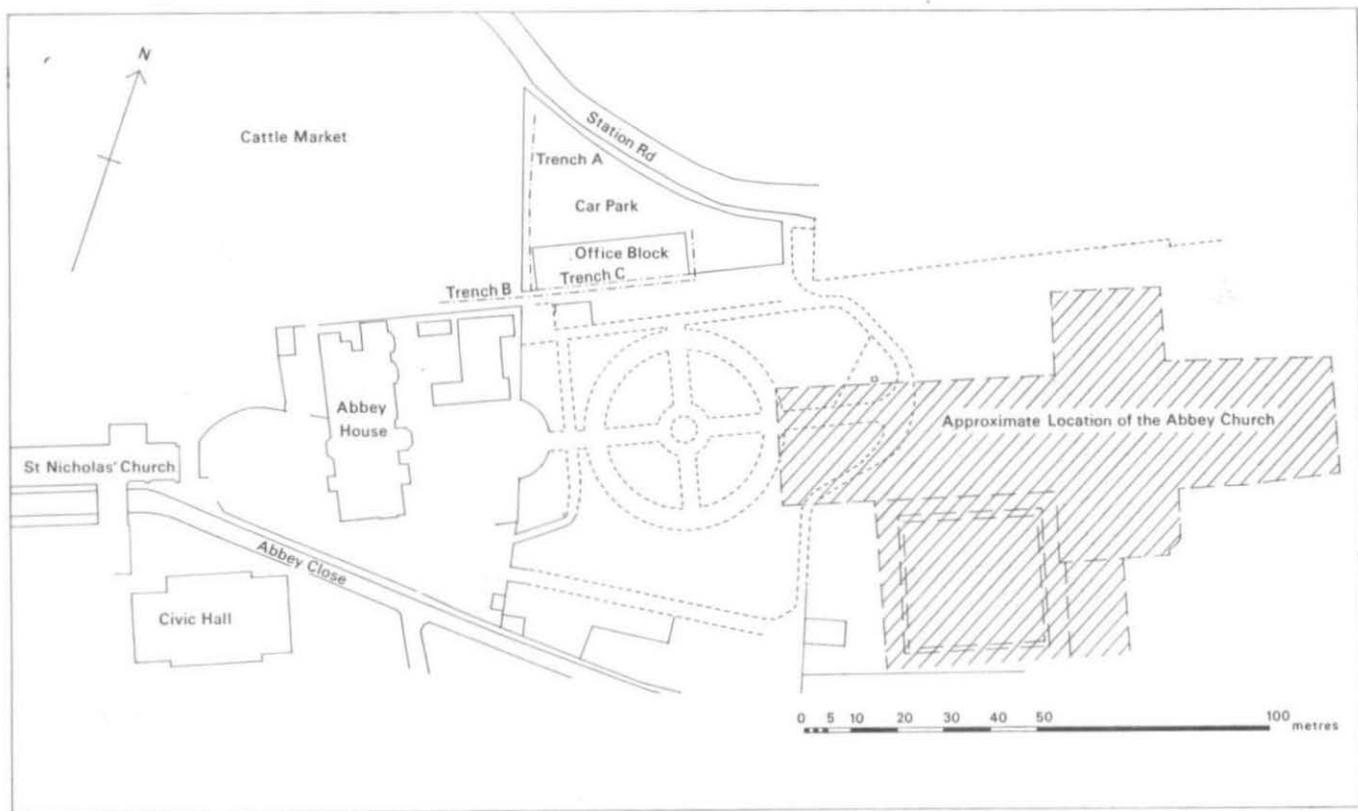


FIG. 1
Site Location Plan

OTHER FEATURES

In addition to the graves two other features were noted in trench C. A stoney area *c.* 13 m. from the west end of trench C may have been a wall or possibly part of a stonelined cist. At *c.* 18.5 m. from the west end of trench C was a circular feature with a greenish soil fill reminiscent of the fill of some of the medieval cess-pits excavated in Abingdon.

THE FINDS

There were no grave goods with the burials and the only finds were scraps of Roman and medieval pottery, two fragments of Roman roof tile and a single tessera made of hard grey stone. The Roman pottery consisted of 14 sherds of grey ware and three red colour-coated sherds of 'Oxfordshire' ware which included one carinated bowl with a hard orange fabric and horizontal zig-zag decoration in white slip. The medieval pottery comprised five body sherds, including one with dark green glaze and one with white painted decoration, one cooking-pot rim and the rim of a 14th-century jug or pitcher in hard orange 'Brill' type fabric⁴ with a spot of yellow glaze below the rim.

THE HUMAN REMAINS. By MARY HARMAN

Most of the numbered burials contained parts of more than one body and none had as much as half of a single skeleton in it.

In the list below, the minimum number of individuals present is given, together with the age and the sex if it is possible to determine this.

- 1 4 people, 2 adults, one person aged 20-25 years, one aged about 7 years.
- 2 One male aged 20-25 years.
- 3 5 people, 2 adults, one aged about 9 years, one 5-7 years, and one about 6 months.
- 4 4 people, 1 adult, 2 aged 17-22 years, and one under 15 years.
- 5 One male, aged 20-25 years.
- 6 One female, aged 20-25 years.
- 8 2 people, one adult, one aged 25-35 years.

Trench B

A mixture of bones from at least four skeletons, one adult female, one female of 30-35 years, one person of 2-3 years, and one juvenile person.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As stated above, the location of the lay cemetery of Abingdon Abbey is well established but the size of the area utilized for burial is uncertain. The most westerly burial recorded was *c.* 75 m. west of the west front and the most northerly burials occurred at a similar distance to the north-west of the Abbey Church. A number of burials were seen during construction work for the new cattle market (FIG. 1) in the early 1960s, *c.* 120 m. from the Abbey Church.⁵

It would seem then that the lay cemetery occupied a large area of the Abbey precinct, as would indeed have been necessary since the Abbey had a virtual monopoly on burial rights.⁶ The Roman pottery confirms the finds of Roman

⁴ For definition of 'Brill' type pottery see M. Parrington and C. Balkwill, 'Excavations at Broad Street, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, xl (1975), 32.

⁵ Information from Mr. S. Coe of Vale of White Horse District Council.

⁶ A. E. Preston, *St. Nicholas Abingdon and Other Papers* (1971), 34-5.

material made in 1922⁷ and the roof tile fragments indicate another area of the town where archaeological evidence of Roman buildings has been discovered.⁸

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⁷ *Op. cit.* note 1, 62.

⁸ For distribution map of Roman finds see 'Abingdon' in K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* (1975), maps 1 and 2.