



Cambridge Archaeology Field Group

An archaeological evaluation at

Abbey Farm

Ickleton

South Cambridgeshire

NGR TL 4892 4357

ECB 5896

CAFG code IAF2019

Interim report

June 2019

Summary

Little previous archaeological investigation has been done on the site of the Benedictine priory at Ickleton – this is also true for most of the small rural nunneries in England. Previous excavation, prior to conversion of the barns at Abbey Farm to business activities, had shown the possible robbed out footings of a perimeter wall and a more recent geophysical survey has indicated the possibility of an area with substantial buried footings. A single 10x2m trench was excavated in June 2019 by CAFG members to a depth of c0.3m across these features but although mortar indicating the possible line of the perimeter wall was found most of the area excavated had large amount of flint nodules associated with pottery of the 17/18th centuries. One area, to the west of the supposed wall did have contexts which only contained 12/15th pottery, but this was not fully explored. The expectation was that a return to the excavation would be made in June 2020 but due to the pandemic of Corvid-19 this has been delayed.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Topography and Geology	1
Archaeological and Historical Background	3
Methods and constraints	7
Results	7
Conclusions	9



1. Introduction – Archaeological and Historical background

1.1 Abbey farm Ickleton stands on the site of the Benedictine Priory, a nunnery dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, created in the later 12th century and dissolved in 1538. There is little evidence apparent for the nature of the buildings belonging to the Priory other than a barn, now converted to offices, and Abbey farmhouse which contains some architectural carved stone. The owner Mr L Duke, had commissioned a geophysical survey in the field to the north of the farmhouse and CAFG was asked to examine this area by excavation with a suitable trench.

1.2 This archaeological evaluation was undertaken to establish if the geophysical results represented surviving structures and if so the date and nature of these features.

1.3 There is not much archaeological evidence from small rural nunneries in Cambridgeshire or indeed from elsewhere in the country. The Benedictine nunnery at Swaffham Bulbeck had a small excavation in 1997¹ which exposed the top of a 1m wide wall of clunch, yellow mortar and stone paving slabs thought to date to 12th to 14thc. The current house at Swaffham has an undercroft which belonged to the buildings of the nunnery. In the same year a small excavation took place at Abbey Farm Ickleton² prior to re-development of the 13th century Great Barn. Of the five trenches excavated around the Great Barn none produced clear evidence of medieval activity – truncation and gravel quarrying may have removed shallow features and rammed chalk floors would seem to date to the 17th century at the earliest. Three trenches were excavated across the line of the new roadway to the Great Barn, trench H the most westerly, nearest the public road appears to have evidence of a sunken structure but also a preceding east west aligned wall, mainly robbed out, but consisting of *'a bed of chalk and grey clunch rubble this in part sealed and bonded by a light yellow mortar'* – presumably the outer perimeter wall of the nunnery³.

1.4 There is little in the way of recent publications on rural nunneries and very few plans of sites similar to that at Ickleton. A study of the abbey site at Burnham, Buckinghamshire⁴, presents a plan of an Augustinian Canonesses's church and

¹ Roberts, Judith Medieval building remains adjacent to The Abbey, Swaffham Bulbeck, 1997, Cambs CCC Report No. 137

² Reagan, Roderick M An archaeological evaluation at Abbey Farm, Ickleton, Cambridgeshire, 1997, Cambridge Archaeological Unit, Report No, 217

³ Ibid. p8

⁴ Sister Jane Mary SPD and DD and DM Miller The Manor and Abbey of Burnham, 1985, Records of Buckinghamshire Vol. 27

accommodation which are separated from the secular area. The secular area to the east is enclosed by wall and ditch and it might be expected that at Ickleton there is a similar separation and segregation of the nuns within the religious area.

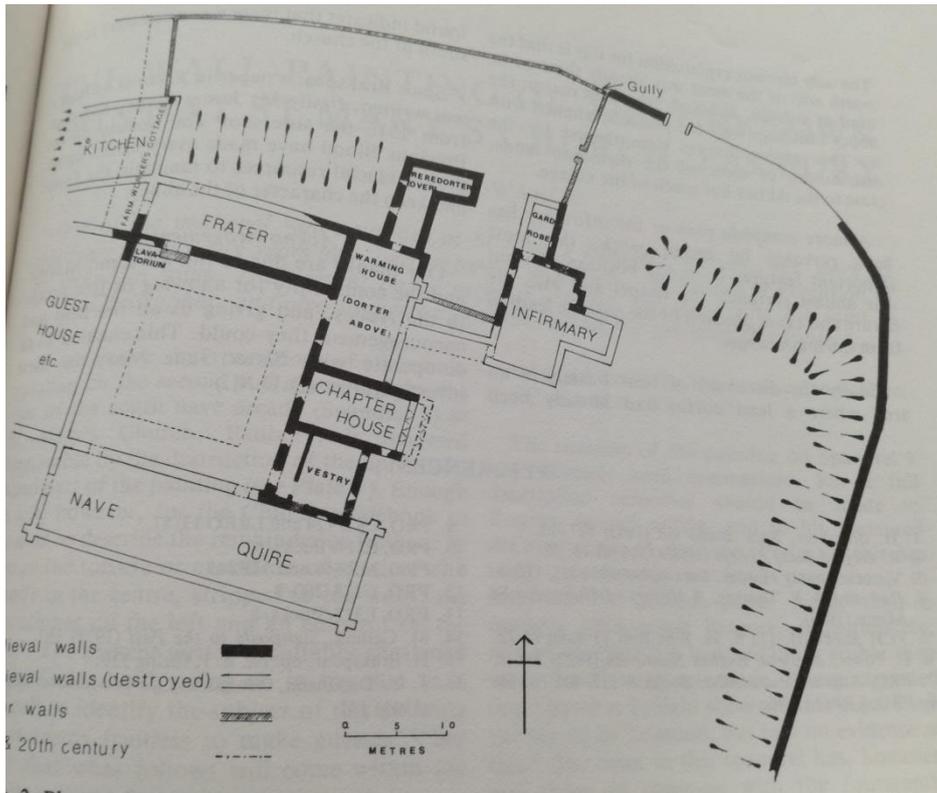


Fig.1 Burnham Abbey, Buckinghamshire

Of the five nunneries in Cambridgeshire only that at Chatteris was established before the Norman conquest of 1066. The priory of St Radegund, Cambridge, established in 1133 for Benedictine nuns was dissolved by the bishop of Ely in 1496 to become the site of Jesus College. Denny Abbey was established as a Benedictine nunnery in 1159, between 1170 and 1305 it was occupied by the Knight's Templars and thereafter by the Franciscan nuns, the Poor Clares, and dissolved in 1539. The dedication of the priory at Swaffham Bulbeck is unknown but it was established by Isobel de Bolebec in 1199.

It is not clear who established the priory at Ickleton or exactly when. The first reference to a priory at Ickleton concerns a pension from the church at Fowlmere that the nuns claim was assigned to them in 1163 by St Thomas of Canterbury.⁵ By 1185 the Honour of Boulogne was in the hands of Henry II when he gave them 30s 5d in alms from the farm of the city of Winchester and by 1279 it is stated that the

⁵ 'Houses of Benedictine nuns: Priory of Ickleton', in *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 2*, ed. L F Salzman (London, 1948), pp. 223-226

manor of Ickleton held by the prioress was held of the that Honour. In the Victoria County History it is suggested that the priory was founded by a member of the Valoignes family towards the end of the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154) but more recent work has identified a number of charters belonging to Stephen which suggest he was perhaps the prime mover in the establishment.⁶

House	Dedication	Order	County	Diocese	Founder and Date
Cambridge	St Radegund	B.Pr	Cam	Ely	C1133-8 temp. Nigel Bishop of Ely
Chatteris	St Mary	B.Ab	Cam	Ely	Eadnoth, abbot of Ramsey, c 1010
Denny	St James and St Leonard	Fr.Ab	Cam	Ely	Mary de Valence, Countess of Pembroke, 1342
Ickleton	St Mary Magd.	B.Pr	Cam	Ely	Uncertain c1190
Swaffham Bulbeck	?	B.pr.	Cam	Ely	Isobel de Bolebec probably 1199
Waterbeach	St Mary of Pity and St Clare	Fr.Pr	Cam	Ely	Denise de Montchesney, 1294 Removed to Denny, 1348

Table 1. Nunneries of Cambridgeshire

1.5 The Cambridge Historic Environment Records (CHER) has a number of records of monuments and finds in the parish of Ickleton. These range from Mesolithic to modern. In view of the current, May 2020, difficulties with the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic this report does not contain a summary.

2. Aims and objectives

The excavation was intended to examine the anomalies seen on the geophysics (see below) to establish if they represented datable building structures relating to the priory. It was hoped that significant finds of structures, building material, pottery and other items would be recovered to provide evidence of the nature of the features.

3. Topography and Geology

3.1 The underlying geology consists of river gravel overlying middle chalk as reported in excavations adjacent to the barns approximately 200m to the east. The site excavated lies approximately 50m north of Abbey Farm house on a flat grass field, there is no local knowledge or evidence that this field has been ploughed. To the west, approximately 50m away, is a ditch running south to north which turns east along the north edge of the field and barns. This ditch is fed from the west by a ditch which has significant right angle turns suggesting it has been altered in the distant past.

⁶ Vincent N 1999 New charters of King Stephen with some reflections upon the Royal Forests during the Anarchy. English Historical Review vol 144 issues 458 p 899-928



Fig. 2 Plan the Site of the nunnery showing water courses from west and south west

3.2 Geophysics

At the request of the site owner in 2016 Archaeology RheeSearch Group carried out a resistivity and magnetometry survey. In their area 6 they identified what they believed to be a building possibly the gate house on the western side of the priory enclosure. Additionally there appeared to be a north south wall in area 6 extending south into their area 5 – this would seem to be an outer perimeter wall of the priory enclosure.

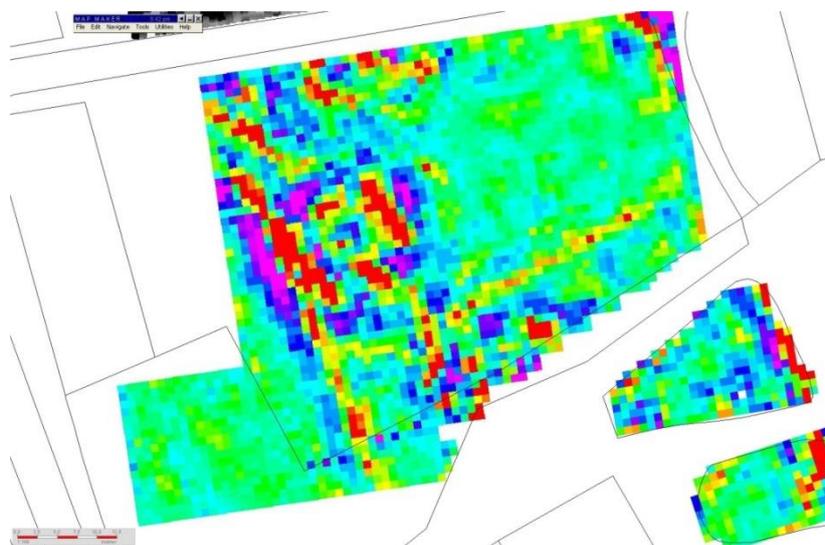


Fig.3 Magnetometry results by Archaeology Rheesearch

4. Methods and constraints

Excavation took place between the 1st and 9th of June 2019. The turf and top soil were removed mechanically [1901] from a trench 10x2m. This surface was then trowelled down to approximately 0.2m depth, at this time it was decided, due to time and manpower restraints, to reduce the trench width to 1.0m and to excavate approximately 1.0m areas across the south side of the trench. Each approximately 1x1m area was given a different context number.

5. Results

5.1 Contexts [1902] [1904] [1906] [1907][1908] [1909] [1910] were immediately below [1901] all consisting of fine silty soil with varying amount of small flint. Context [1905] had a high percentage of large flints. Further contexts of silty soil with small flints [1911 to 1913], [1920] to [1921] and [1924] to [1929] all overlay areas of heavy large flint – the latter not yet removed except [1914] and [1915]. Where the heavy flint has been removed there appeared to be white and yellow mortar features beneath – again yet to be excavated. Most of these contexts contained 17/18th century pottery, with small numbers of medieval pot, along with a large quantity of red ceramic roof tile. Where these roof tiles had peg holes the holes were all round tapering. In addition there were 12 pieces of ceramic floor tile, some glazed, varying in thickness from 24 to 55mm.

5.2 Towards the western end of the trench there was an area of soil, gravel and yellow mortar; this seem to be on the same line as a feature seen in the resistivity survey which may be the outer wall of the priory enclosure. (From the SW corner 1.5m to 2.1m and from the NW corner 2.0m to 3.0m).

5.3 West of the mortar feature contexts [1903] [1906] [1913] [1917] [1924] [1926] [1927] had clear differences to those east of the mortar – they were largely soil with some smaller flint and as far as excavated to date there was no large flint below them. In addition only 12th to 14th pottery was recovered unlike the 17th/18th pottery found east of the mortar feature.



Fig.4 Looking west along trench showing heavy flint and clunch with, at the far end, an area of mortar of a possible wall.

6. Finds

6.1 None of the finds, other than the 9th c iron pin, have been submitted to experts. It is expected that this will be done when the excavation is complete.

6.2 Pottery

6.3 Of 361 sherds of pottery 300 were considered to be 17th or 18th c. these all occurred in the upper contexts associated with the flint nodules. The remaining 61 sherds were considered to be medieval – dated from 12th to the 15th century. Contexts [1913/17/25/26] did not contain any post medieval pottery and are therefore is likely to be contemporary with the activity of the nunnery.

6.4 Brick/tile

6.5 Seventy four kilos of tile were examined; of these 11 were floor tiles and the rest were red or buff coloured roof tiles [17 were indeterminate]. Roof tile was selected for measurement if it had an outer edge, glaze or a hole for a securing peg – those pieces without these characteristics were not further examined. The red roof tile came largely from the contexts to the east of the supposed line of the perimeter wall and were associated with the deposits of large flint nodules.

6.6 Eleven pieces of red tile were considered to be floor tiles based on their thickness of between 30mm and 60mm but with a few somewhat thinner. Four of these have a heavy green/brown glaze and what might be designs but none are impressed with images. Two

were found in [1926] exclusively with medieval pottery but the other nine were in contexts with 17/18th tile and pottery.

6.7 Small finds/metal

6.8 Of the 28 small finds listed the most interesting find is the iron pin with decorated head dated to the 9th c. Although a casual find, in that it was within a context [1907] which contained roof tile and 17/18th c. pottery, it is unusual being iron and clearly pre-dates the supposed foundation of the nunnery by 300 years. The pin has now been conserved.



Iron pin – 9th century –before conservation.

7 Conclusions

7.1 There appeared to be two phases of activity, one in the medieval period and a second in the 17/18th centuries. After this the site was levelled and possibly top soil introduced and it has been under grass ever since.

7.2 The earlier medieval period is represented by the yellow mortar feature approximately 2m from the western end of the trench – this appears to be on the line of the outer precinct wall and is perhaps an indication of underlying structure or a robbed out wall. All contexts west of this feature below the top soil contained exclusively medieval pottery of apparent 12th to 16th date (yet to be seen by a pottery expert).

7.3 To the east of the yellow mortar feature referred to above all contexts excavated to date contained pottery and ceramic roof tiles dating to the 17th/18th centuries. These

contexts of soil and heavy flint probably represent a levelling of the site presumably for some agricultural activity. It was clear that below these contexts there are features which may be mortared walls or floors – all yet to be excavated.

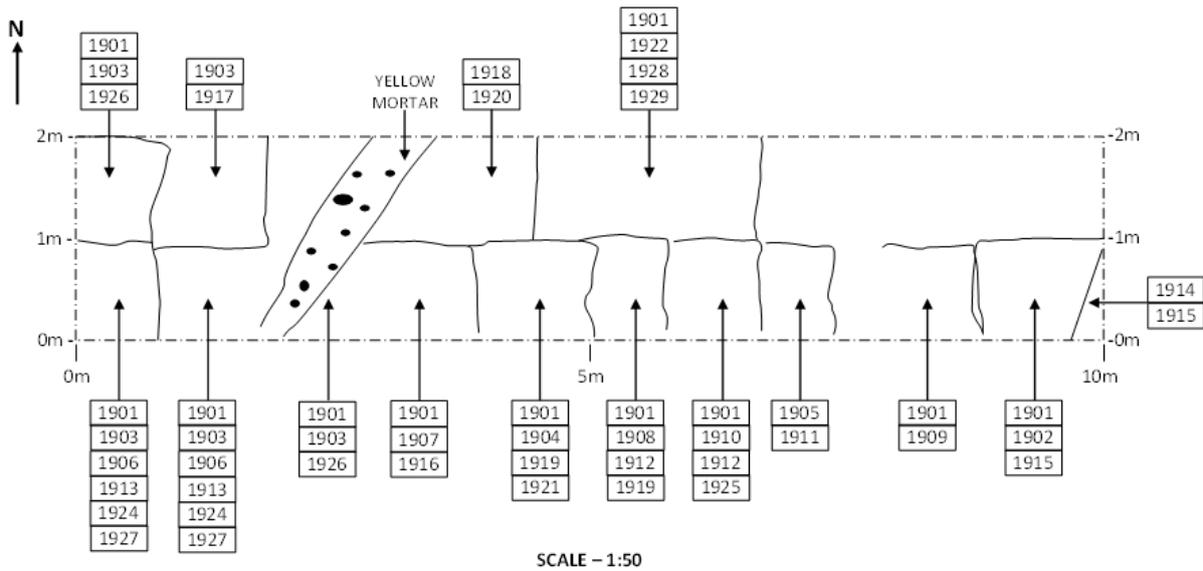


Fig. 4 Schematic drawing of excavated trench with indication of contexts

Small Finds IAF2019					
Number	Context	Date	Found by	Description	Metal
1	1901	01/06/2019	JK	Musket ball	Pb
2	1901	01/06/2019	SM	1866 Farthing	Cu/Al
3	1901	01/06/2019	JK	Gun flint	flint
4	1901	01/06/2019	SM	Buckle	Fe
5	1901	01/06/2019	JK	Lead	Pb
6	1901	01/06/2019	JN	Button	Cu/Al
7	1901	01/06/2019	JN	Musket ball	Pb
8	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Metal buckle ?	Fe
9	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Metal strip	Fe
10	1904	02/06/2019	JN	Metal ring	Fe
11	1902	02/06/2019	JC	metal strip with rivets	Fe
12	1904	02/06/2019	JN	Fragment of fine glass	Fe
13	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Fe metal strip	Fe
14	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Large hand made nail	Fe
15	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Metal strip	Fe
16	1902	02/06/2019	JC	Musket ball	Pb
17	1907	03/06/2019	JW	Pin decorated Head	Fe
18	1902	03/06/2019	JK	Rt angle plate	Fe
19	1909	03/06/2019	JC	?latch	Fe
20	1915	04/06/2019	JC	Fragment	Pb
21	1912	04/06/2019	JN	Plate 2 holes	Fe
22	1913	04/06/2019	SM	Décor pot	Ceramic
23	1912	04/06/2019	Howard	GRE	Ceramic
24	1913	05/06/2019	SM	Grey med pot	Ceramic
25	1914	05/06/2019	JC	Key	Fe
26	1914	05/06/2019	JC	? Half caliper	Fe
27	1919	06/06/2019	BF	Pin	Cu/Al
28	1922	06/06/2019	JN	Plate with nails	FE

Table 2 Small finds

Abbey Farm, Ickleton IAF2019							Others			Bones/shell		Clay pipe	Comments
Site Context	Pottery			Brick/Tile			Metal	Nails	Glass	Bones	Shell		
	Med	PMed	Unc	Rom	Med	PMed							
1901		26				4.135kg	16	26	1	18	5	5	5 coal, 3 stones, 1 button
1902		57				10.337kg	8	31	4	54	1	8	
		17											Staffordshire combed ware
1903	9	5				0.912kg	1	3	1	7	7		
1904		13			1	2.836kg	2	4		21	5		Mother of pearl button, 4 stones
1905		26		1		6.496kg	7	19	1	35		3	
1906	4	3			1	1.233kg	1	4		12	10	1	
1907	1	22	1		3	5.651kg	5	28	2	21	11	6	3 stones
1908		6				1.163kg	1	7		6	1	3	2 stones (whetstone?)
1909		19				2.968kg	5	19	1	21		6	4 coal
1910		1				0.150kg		9		2		1	
1911??		8				4.626kg		28		47	1	2	
1912		14			2	5.499kg		8	1	24		4	3 coal
1913	10					0.096kg			2	7	3		(2 struck flint?)
1914		4				1.619kg	4	10		2			
1915		9				3.399kg	4	8		11			
1916		1				0.226kg		1		3	1		
1917	14*					0.444kg		1		6	5		(* bunghole cistern)
1918	2	7			2*	1.40kg	2			21	4	1	3 stones, (*animal print on tile)
1919		10				3.180kg		9		17	1	2	
1920		19			1	5.379kg		13	1	38	13	1	1 stone
1921		5				1.855kg		3		13			
1922	1	16			1	6.576kg	8	15		16	3		
1923	1	1				0kg				1			15 mortar, 1 stone
1924	10*					0.113kg				9	1		(* slashed decorated handle)
1925						0.045kg		2		1	1		(shell mortared)
1926	9					0.287kg	1			14	8		
1927						0.083kg							
1928		8				5.941kg		9		29	1	1	