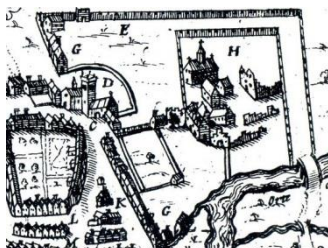


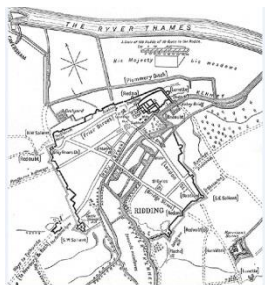
Reading Abbey and the Forbury Maps, Surveys and Excavations

John Mullaney

1. 1610. The earliest extant map of Reading showing the Forbury is Speed's drawing of c 1610. Although this includes the Forbury and the Abbey buildings it needs to be viewed with some degree of caution. For instance it shows the Abbey church with a spire. We are fairly certain, from other sources, that this had been removed several years beforehand. Nevertheless it is a map which tells a story and shows a complex of buildings, many of which are no longer visible.



2. 1640s. The next map belongs to the time of the Civil War in the 1640s. It is now in the Bodleian Library. This is a military map showing the defences around Reading, including the Abbey and Forbury area. Once again it would be over simplistic to read this as an exact piece of cartography. The Abbey buildings are shown as no more than outlines. What is more the defence wall does not match the line of the Great Ditch that we believe from other evidence, both written and archaeological, to have been driven through the Forbury. It may of course be that this map was drawn before the Great Ditch was created.



3. 1650. Following the conclusion of the Civil War Parliament ordered a Survey of all the former Royal properties. This Survey records in great detail the land and buildings in the Abbey area that had belonged to the Crown. Although there is no map the information it contains is useful when we try to interpret the site today and match the buildings with existing remains.
4. 1779. The first and only mapped survey of the whole of the Abbey was undertaken by Sir Henry Englefield and published in 1779. Shortly after this, in 1786, the first County Gaol was built on the eastern section of the Abbey. Its gardens extended westwards over the eastern part of the Abbey church, including the 1314 Lady Chapel, and any other buildings which may have existed to its south. Consequently after this date no survey or excavation of this area was possible.

Englefield's work is a remarkable piece of work. When I matched it with an aerial photograph I found that the existing ruins fitted his outline exactly. In fact, following his plan, I located

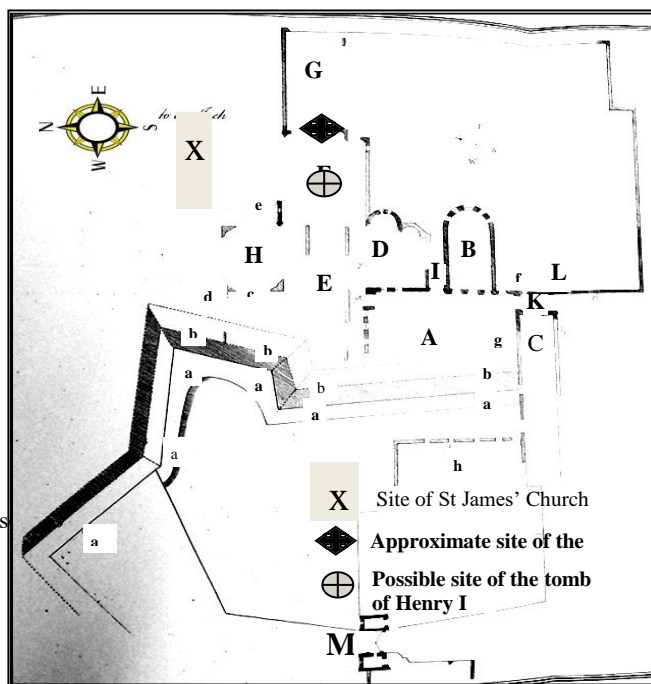
the lower section of a pillar and its base, in the grounds of St James', which had hitherto gone unnoticed.



It should be noted that Englefield's plan does not take us any further west along the nave of the Abbey church than its second bay. It shows where he estimated that the Great Ditch, mentioned above, had sliced through the rest of the nave and the cloisters.

Key as produced by Sir Henry Englefield

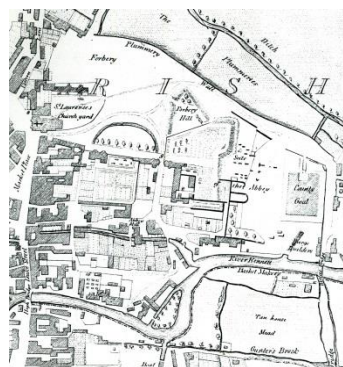
- A The Cloister court 148ft sqr
- B The Chapter House 78 by 42
- C The Refectory 72 by 38
- D The South Transept of the church
- E The Nave of the church
- F The Choir of the church
- G The eastern chapel of the church (the Lady Chapel)
- H The North transept of the church
- I A passage vaulted two stories (sic)
- K A passage vaulted
- L A wall once enclosing two rooms
- M The great gate (the Abbey Gateway)

- a The top of the rampart thrown up in the civil wars, which crosses
- b The ditch of the rampart.
- c The spot where the mine was sprung.
- d The leaning masses of wall.
- e A small house built by the late Lord Fane.
- f The remains of a stair-case.
- g The lavatory.
- h Probable situation of the dormitory.

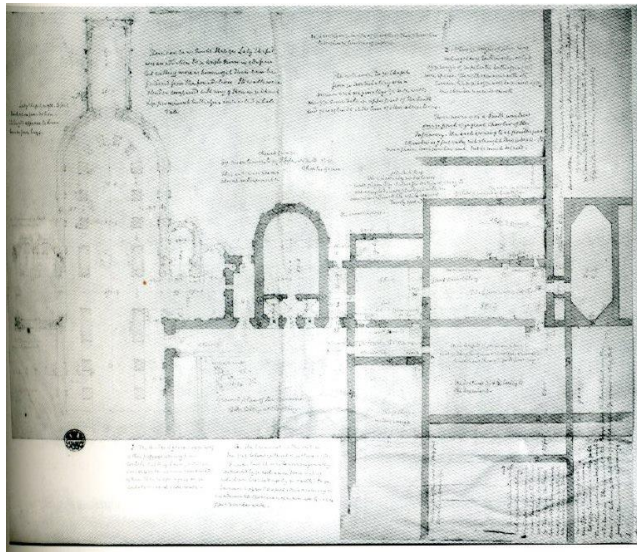


These two symbols ( ) and site of St James' church added by J Mullaney, 2014

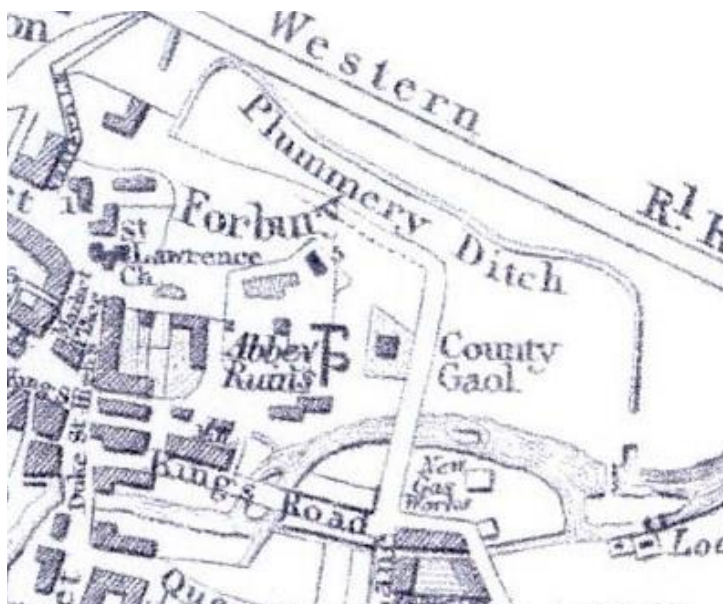
5. 1802. Coates' plan of the area includes the whole of the Forbury and St Lawrence's Church. The outline of the Great Ditch is shown, as is the semi-circle of the Green which also appears in the Civil War map, in the 1842 Post office map and in the 1853 Board of Health survey. In any GPR of the Forbury it would be interesting to see if there is any trace of this feature. It existed until the mid-19th century when it was lost with the creation of the Forbury Gardens.. There are many written references to it and illustrations show that it was still present through the first half of the 19th century. The primary purpose of the GPR is to ascertain the extent of the 1121 Abbey. However it has been suggested that the Green may have been the site of the Danish Viking camp reported in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of 870-1 and that the ditch around the Green was in fact the remnants of this fortification.



8. 1823. C A Buckler. Survey and Plan. This is very similar to Englefield's plan and its likely date is 1823-1824. Once again nothing is shown further west than the second cell of the nave.



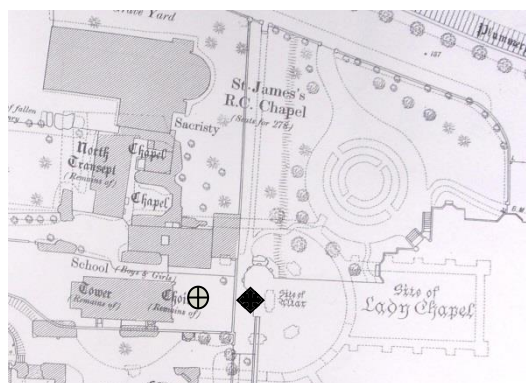
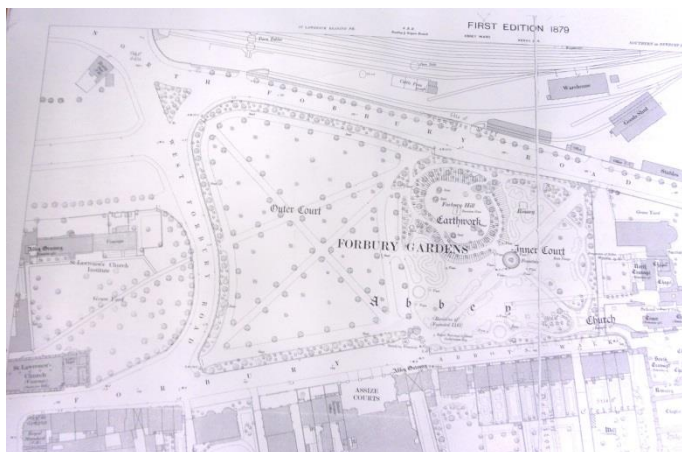
9. 1842. Post Office Map of Reading. This shows little detail of the area.



10. 1853. Board of Health Survey. This is one of the most detailed of the maps showing roads, houses and house numbers and the outline of the standing ruins. It also shows the new Gaol as well as the semi-circle of the Green. (see above no. 5).



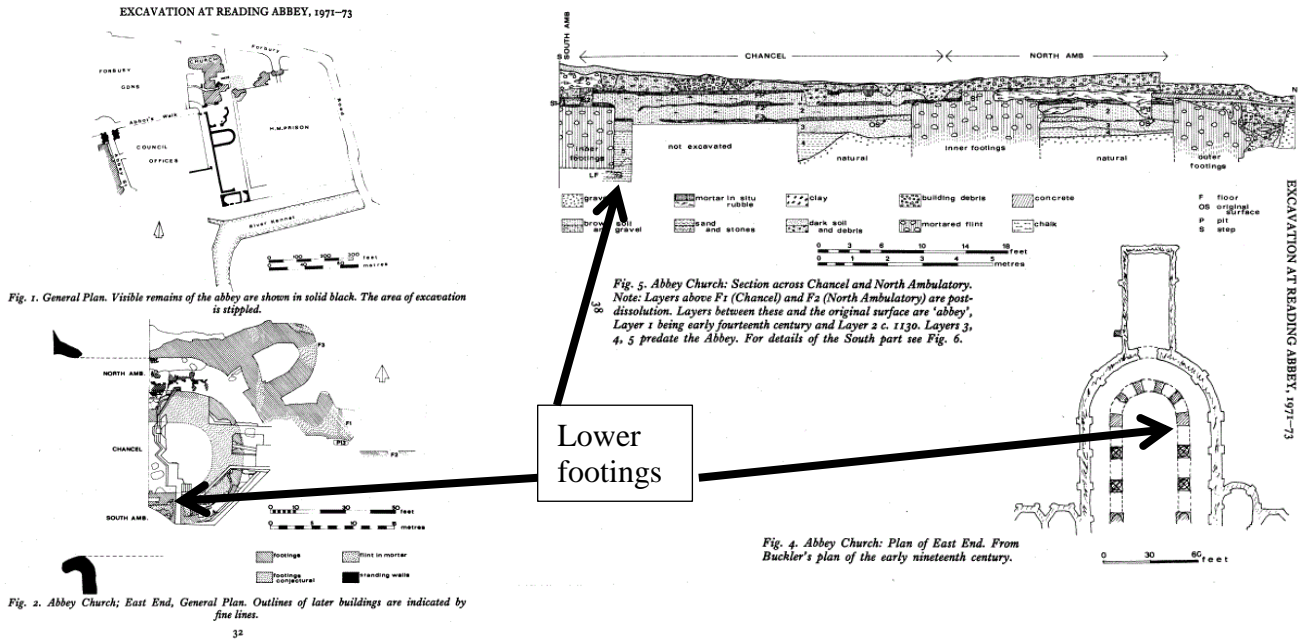
11. 1857. J Okey Taylor, writing in the quarterly journal of the Berkshire Archaeological and Architectural Society 1889 reported that in 1857 he and others had been involved in excavating the Forbury area to a depth of between two to five feet and that the topsoil had been removed to create the embankment along the River Kennet to Blake's Bridge where Chestnut Walk now exists.
12. 1867. John Mellor. The Mayor of Reading gave Mellor permission to excavate in the Forbury Gardens but, according to Slade, *nothing particular was found. He dug twice in the area of the church as mention is made of mortar and flint and portions of the Abbey pavement*
13. 1879. Ordnance Survey and F W Albury. The OS map of 1879 gives us a detailed picture of the area. F W Albury comments that the outline plan of the Abbey was inserted following the results of his survey. Much of the evidence relies on the work of Englefield, Buckler and Albury. Some of this may be speculative or the cartographers may have had information, based on Albury's plan, which has been lost to us. It is possible that Albury had in fact found the foundations of the missing nave pillars. His own report is that he had made a detailed plan, marking in red the positioning of these Abbey remains. This was then incorporated into the OS map. It was at this time that the eastern section of the Forbury: the part east of the Hill and the Inner Gateway, was being converted into a botanical garden and much work was therefore taking place here. This is the plan on which all subsequent maps showing the westward extent of the Abbey have been based. It is likely that the plan by Dr Hurry (see 14 below) was based on Albury's work.



⊕ Possible site of the tomb of Henry I

◆ Approximate site of the Abbey's high altar. Note that the altar on the OS map is marked further to the east. In fact it could well have been much further to the west

16. 1970s. In the 1970s Cecil Slade excavated the east of the Abbey Chancel. This is the only deep archaeological dig to have taken place in the Abbey church area. It is reported in the Berkshire Archaeological Journal. Vol. 68. In analysing the Abbey footings in the prison area adjacent to the land of St James' school, Slade shows sections, depths, soil composition, materials found and comments about the construction of the 1121 Abbey.



In the south west corner Slade described how he came across what he described as *pre-Abbey footings* and are marked as LF (lower footings) on the diagrams. Note the different angle and greater depth of the *lower footings*. Slade also said that the cement and gravel composition differed from those of the above which he associated with the 1121 Abbey.



PLATE 13. Reading Abbey: Chancel, pre-Abbey footings under Abbey footings.

17. 1975. C Slade *Atlas of Historic Towns* Slade not only gave a brief, but intriguing, account of the development of the town but produced an overlay map showing the various stages of the development of the town, including the Abbey Quarter. He based this on all the evidence we have seen above.



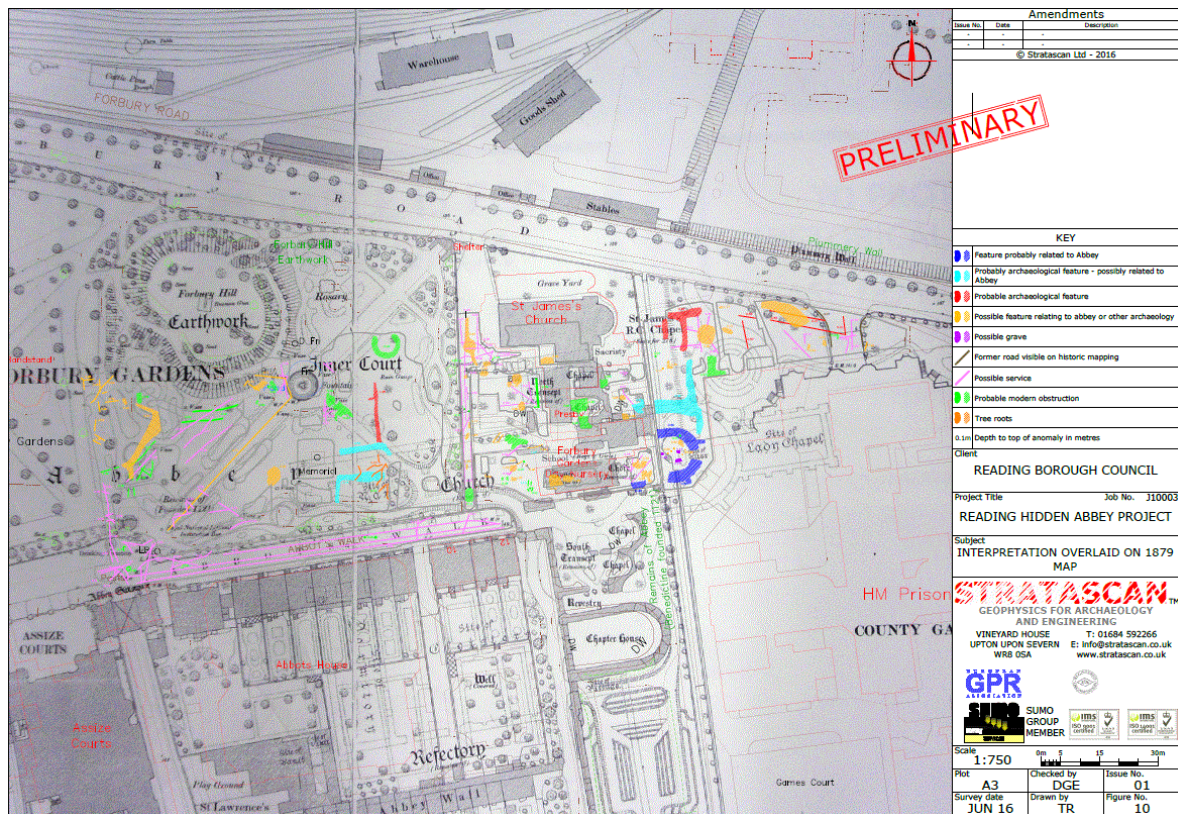
18. 2008. Wessex Archaeology. In 2008 WA published an account of their excavations in the Abbey Quarter. They dug several small trenches in the area, including the Forbury. There were very few finds and no evidence of the missing pier bases of the Abbey nave. On the other hand none of their trenches was in the expected line of the nave.



19. 2015. Stuart Harrison. In 2015 Reading Borough Council (RBC) published the results of the work supervised by Harrison. This was a comprehensive analysis of the standing ruins. It was commissioned by RBC with a view towards the work which would be required following a successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid for money to conserve the standing ruins.

20. Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) Survey May 2016

In June and August 2016 a geophysics survey by Stratscan Sumo was commissioned by the Hidden Abbey Project group. This consisted of a GPR scan of the area believed to be the main body of the Abbey church.



KEY	
	Probable wall
	Possible grave
	Possible feature relating to abbey or other archaeology
	Former road
	Possible service
	Probable modern obstruction
Client	

At the west end the survey did not provide much positive information. The more northerly of the blue marked lines corresponded, approximately, with the northern wall of the nave. However the feature positioned at right angles to this, bearing south, did not correspond with any previous known part of the Abbey. The survey describes these as *probable archaeological feature – probably related to the Abbey*.

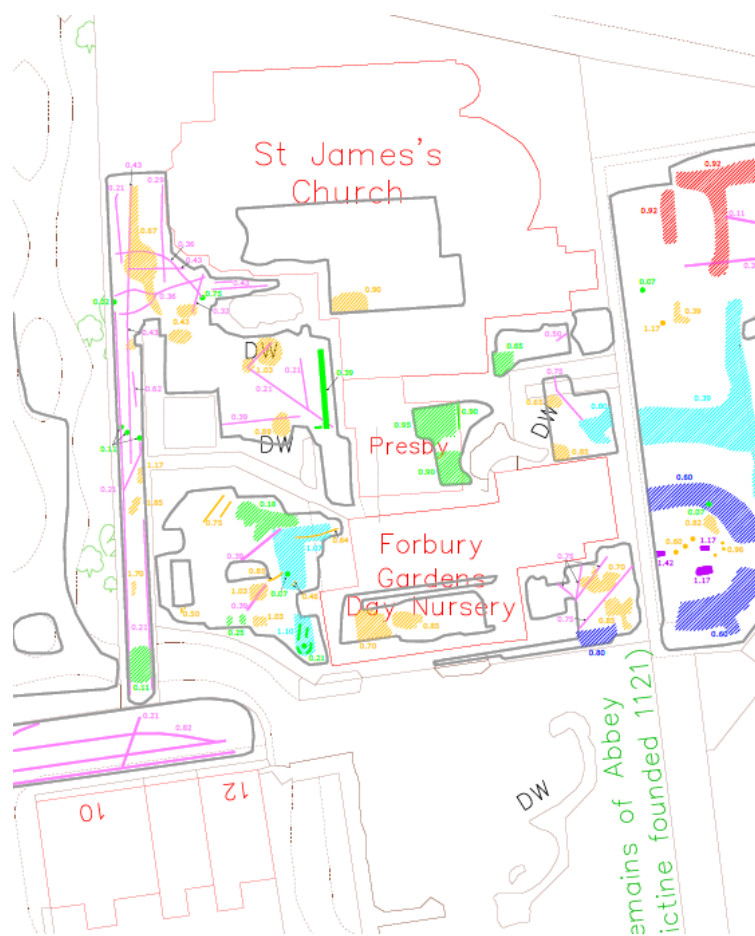
In the area of the prison car park, at the east end of the Abbey church, much more was visible. The scan appeared to confirm the line of the inner area of the ambulatory, where Slade had

made his excavations. Likewise the outer wall of the ambulatory showed up and was marked in blue.

To the north of this, at right angles and moving north, the scan showed signs of an unexpected feature. Further north of this, still in the car park area, a T shaped with a smaller line to its west, lying in a north-south direction was observed. Once again no known archaeology relating to the Abbey was known to exist in this area.

In the apse itself several features were identified, which Stratascan suggested were indicative of graves.

Subsequent analysis of the scan showed up another anomaly at the main entrance into the school. This can be seen in the two light blue lines just to the east of the wording 'Forbury Gardens Day Nursery'.



These may be the remains of 19th century work but they are in just the right position for a pulpitum at the entrance to the Abbey choir. Without excavation to determine their age this must remain as a speculative hypothesis but one that would be consistent with later medieval developments in church design.