

An Archæological Evaluation on the west side of Kenilworth Abbey Gatehouse

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IN JULY 2014 a small archæological excavation was carried out over a period of five days adjacent to the west wall of Kenilworth Abbey Gatehouse. Kenilworth Abbey Advisory Committee (KAAC) is promoting a scheme – the Harry Sunley Memorial Project – to refurbish the Kenilworth Abbey Gatehouse by making the two surviving chambers available for public access. An essential pre-requisite is bringing mains electricity to the Gatehouse, and KAAC is currently in discussion with Warwick District Council (WDC) and English Heritage about the route. It has been agreed by all parties that it should be an underground cable. KAAC's preference is that the source should be the Swimming Pool building to the south, which already furnishes limited power supply to The Barn museum but if this proves impossible then a source might have to come down the hill from High Street.

The excavation was carried out to find if it was possible to bring the new electricity trench into the western side of the gatehouse and it was considered likely that this would be the easiest access point with the lowest chance of disturbing archæological deposits and avoiding entirely the existing graveyard of St Nicholas' parish church. The excavation was mainly carried out by members of the Kenilworth History and Archæology Society along with several afternoons' help from pupils taking 'A' level archæology at Trinity Catholic School, Leamington. They were directed by Bryn Gethin, an archæological project officer with Archæology Warwickshire [AW] (part of Warwickshire County Council) and the whole was overseen by Dr Richard K. Morris, whose extensive interest and knowledge of medieval stone buildings include being the recognised expert on the fabric of both Kenilworth Abbey and Castle.

Before excavation took place, an elevation drawing had already been prepared by Richard. This showed two large scars on the west wall of the gatehouse which indicated the position where it was formerly met by at least two walls. The drawing also clearly shows the blocked remains of a 19th century opening which is now partly infilled with a barred window.

The excavators were in luck as the initial digging, very largely carried out by Roy Crick and Keith Croucher of the KHAS, rapidly began to uncover the well-preserved ashlar masonry of the gatehouse itself along with two buried stone

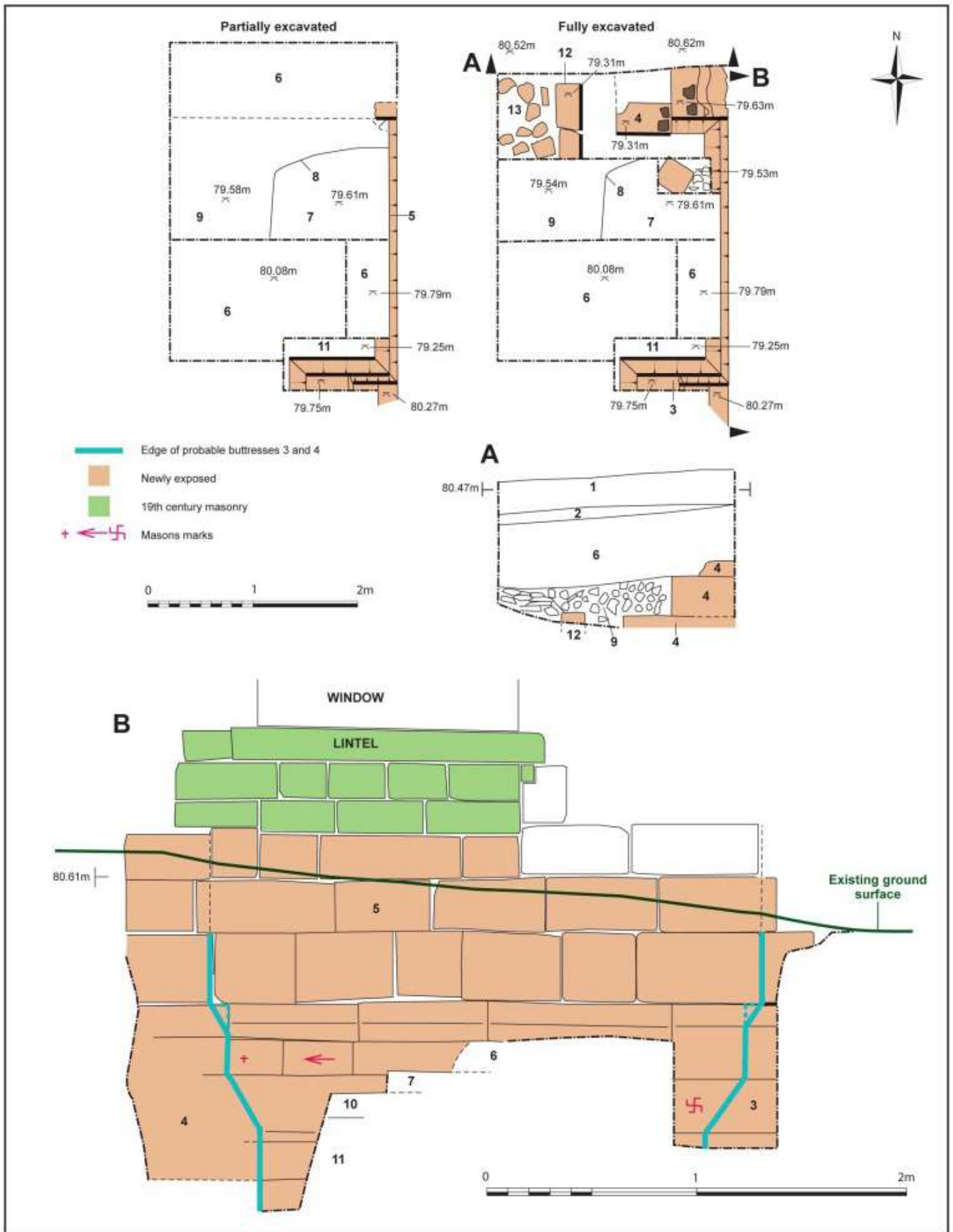


Fig 1: The Plans and Sections of the Excavated Trench

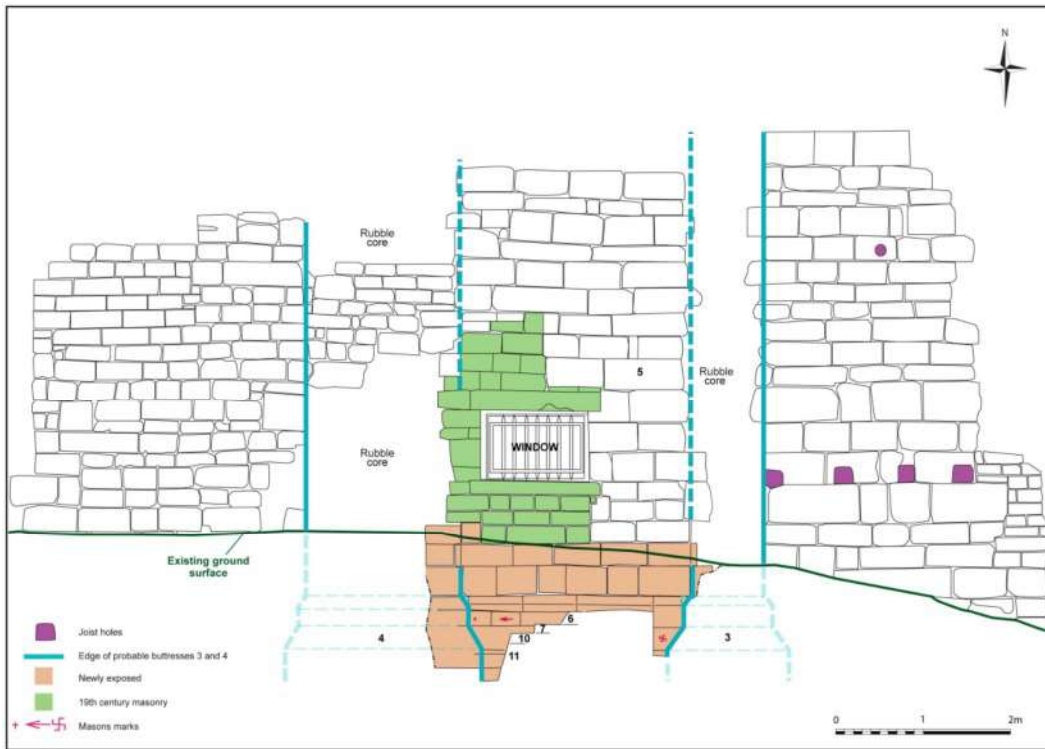


Fig 2: The elevation of the west side of the gatehouse, as originally drawn by Richard Morris, with additional information

features (Figs 3 and 4) which corresponded with the position of the wall scars. These two features consisted of well-made stone walls, both with double-chamfered plinths which were tied into the plinth revealed on the gatehouse wall itself. They were all clearly contemporary with each other and probably dated to the

rebuilding of the gatehouse under the tenure of Prior Bradway (1361-75). The features appeared to be buttresses although it remains possible that the larger of the two represented the inner precinct wall of the abbey where it met the





Figure 3

gatehouse. The deepest part of the trench also revealed part of another probable stone wall (12, Fig 1). This was a relatively rough foundation and

it was considered that it might either represent a building constructed against the side of the gatehouse or possibly a building that predated it. The great depth of the foundation below the ground suggested it was not part of a post-medieval building built after the Dissolution, such as the one indicated by the joist holes in the south side of the west face of the building. The larger 'buttress' (4, Fig 1) and the rough wall (12, Fig 1) seemed to have been robbed of stonework at the same time as a stone robbing trench (8, Fig 1) followed the line of them. This



Fig 4: The remains of both probable buttresses and the lower part of the gatehouse wall

contained fragments of roof tile, floor tile and broken stone, essentially the disposable rubbish left over from demolishing abbey buildings, including the upper floor of the gatehouse.

In fact, no medieval pottery was found at all during the excavation. This ought not to be too surprising as the trench was relatively small and the inner court of a rich medieval abbey is likely to have been fairly clean and disposed of its rubbish elsewhere. The medieval floor tiles found during the excavation were all worn totally smooth except for a single example, an edging tile with a fleur-de-lys and castle design. The same type was found during the excavations on the abbey church in the 1920s.

One further series of finds was recovered from the topsoil shortly after work started. It consisted mostly of glass and stoneware bottles, mostly for mineral water made by 'The Leamington Spa Aerated Water Company', one of which was conveniently dated 1913. It seems plausible that this was rubbish left by people using the park and that someone, possibly the verger, had dug a shallow hole to bury the rubbish and tidy the area up.

The results of the excavation answered most of the questions which had been raised beforehand. They showed why the west face had two large scars in the masonry and also just how well preserved the buried stonework was. It gave a good indication of the original appearance of this side of the building and showed what over 470 years of extra exposure to the elements had done to the upstanding masonry. A possible location for the new electricity service was also indicated between the two probable buttresses, in a position which would cause the least damage to any buried archaeological remains.

The final act of the excavation was the onerous task of backfilling the trench by hand. Although photographs appear to show a small trench a very large amount of soil was removed from it. Luckily the members of the KHAS were up to the task and a large group carried out the job in quick time. I am very grateful to all of those who helped out on the job. They consisted of members of KHAS under Richard Morris (Jan Cooper, Roy Crick, Keith Croucher, Henrietta Denny, Michael Formstone, Margaret Kane and Philip Stock) and pupils of Trinity



Catholic School under Richard Grove (Justin Dobson, Mike Dobson, Eloise Jones, Cassie Ollhoff, Chloe Parker, Devon Rees, Daniella Reynolds and Molly Underhill). Apologies to anyone who gave extra help, but is not mentioned. Photographs are by Bryn Gethin, illustrations by Candy Stevens.