

EXCAVATIONS IN THE ABBEY FIELDS, FEBRUARY 1989

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An unexpected opportunity to help out in an archaeological dig in the Abbey Fields, Kenilworth presented itself to the History and Archaeology Society in February of 1989.

The Severn-Trent Water Authority were given permission by the Warwick District Council to lay a new water pipeline through the Abbey Fields. Having laid out a course particularly to avoid any known Abbey buildings and fenced it off, a digger commenced to scrape off the top soil; however, when work began just beyond the main footpath, not far from the stream, south and west of the bridge, an area of old sandstone stonework and tiles appeared (SP 284721).

One of the K.H.A.S. members who was keeping an eye on developments quickly spotted this and notified the Warwickshire County Museum Field Archaeologist, Helen Maclagan. After a preliminary walk over the area it was decided that a team from the Museum would investigate the site and that Severn-Trent be asked to co-operate accordingly. Helen kindly agreed to members of the K.H.A.S. joining in the rescue dig under the supervision of the site manager for the Museum, Stuart Palmer. Severn-Trent agreed to postpone the pipe-laying for a few weeks to give time for the site to be fully examined and also to fund some of the expense.

The area of the dig was some 30 metres in length by about 10 metres wide and most of it was under about a foot of topsoil somewhat churned up. Quite quickly the team of four museum workers and a few members of the K.H.A.S. uncovered the remains of stone walls and a flagged floor area, lying diagonally across the site, showing one corner of a building only: the rest was somewhere under the grass outside the fenced-off area. A further similar building alongside was later found, though somewhat damaged by the digger disturbing the stonework. Quantities of broken tile and pottery pieces were also found in this area.

The site had been disturbed some time in the past when a surfaced path had been laid down near to the walls; how long ago this was is difficult to guess, but it had long since been grown over by the grass and no signs were visible from the surface. Does anyone remember a path cutting through at this point or was the direction of the main path up the hill changed at some time?

As there was a shortage of time for excavating, it was decided that it would be less damaging to the site if the trench for the pipe were to be dug out by hand; any finds could then be recorded on the site plan and a plastic covering laid down over the stonework to protect it from the digger's traction as it laid the pipe.

The weather at this point turned very wet, valuable time was lost; when you could excavate it was not so much a dig as a bail-out and boots could be sucked off whilst moving about the site in the clay and mud.

The experts from the Museum decided that the building, or rather the part of the building, we had uncovered was that of a mediaeval workshop probably lying at the back of the ancient Abbey Mill, which is known to have stood near the site, by the Finham Brook. Obviously both the Mill and the workshops suffered the same fate as the rest of the Abbey, which was razed to the ground by Lord Leicester prior to 1575 to improve the Castle.

Unfortunately no further excavation of the area beyond that of the dig was possible at this point as it would have meant mounting a full scale excavation, requiring permission from English Heritage and W.D.C., plus of course the enormous cost involved. If it had been possible we might even have found the remains of the Mill, who knows?

Amongst the interesting 'finds' from the dig were a whetstone, a bronze buckle, a horseshoe, the blade of a knife and a small metal object which could have been a thimble. The pottery was mainly thirteenth century ware and included a rare part of a mediaeval 'face jug' with the complete little face intact, even to its rather aquiline nose.

Severn-Trent has now laid the pipe and replaced the turf across the Abbey Fields. In time the scar will fade away we hope, but I must say that, as one of the diggers, I shall retain happy memories of those few weeks and the finding of that little face.