

Colchester Archaeological Group



St John's Abbey, Colchester



Bulletin No. 56
2016

The front cover image is a satellite photograph (Microsoft 'Bing') of the Abbey precinct overlaid by the site of the Abbey Church (discovered in 2010) and the positions of the two trenches dug by Colchester Archaeological Group in 2015

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, Colchester Archaeological Group had the opportunity to investigate a site in the precinct of the former Benedictine Abbey of St John, now the premises of the Colchester Garrison Officers Club and used for its sports facilities. An excavation was to be carried out at the request of the Colchester Archaeological Trust to determine whether Colchester's missing Roman amphitheatre might be located in the south east corner of the precinct. Chances to excavate such a site, close to the town centre and with the possibility of finding a feature as important and exciting as an amphitheatre are rare, and the project generated a great deal of interest among seasoned diggers and new members of the Group alike. The Abbey precinct is a Scheduled Ancient Monument so permission had to first be obtained from English Heritage for the geophysical survey and for the excavation. A summary of the results are included in this publication.

As a background to the excavations, research was required into what was known about the changing landscape and usage of the site, from the foundation of the Abbey to the present day. The results of that research are published as 'A Visual History of the Precinct of the St John's Abbey, Colchester, 1095-2016' and form the bulk of this publication.

About forty people signed up to dig, with others volunteering to do finds processing back at Roman Circus House. This last activity was much appreciated as large quantities of material began to emerge from the ground from day one, some of which was extremely interesting. In particular, the finding of two skeletons and a cremation with grave goods created a lot of excitement as many diggers had never been involved in these types of features before. Although the results turned out to be not quite what was expected, everybody who participated in the excavation found it a most enjoyable, sociable and rewarding experience.



A VISUAL HISTORY OF THE PRECINCT OF ST JOHN'S ABBEY, COLCHESTER, 1095 - 2016

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. JOHN'S ABBEY¹

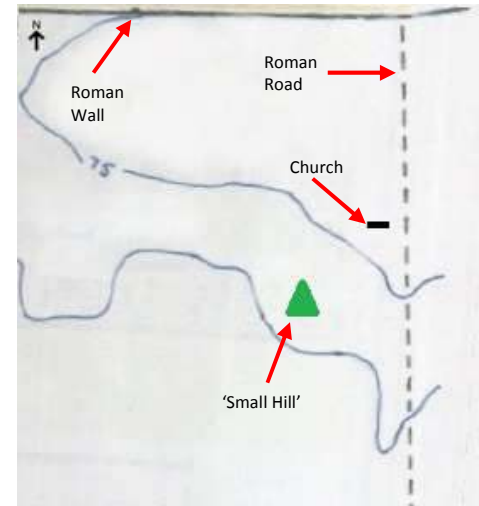
Monarch	Date	Key Events
William II	1095	The Benedictine Priory of St John the Baptist is marked out on the ground on a site close to the Saxon Church of St John the Evangelist. It was founded by Eudo de Rie, 'Dapifer' (Steward) of King William II.
do	1096	Eudo lays the first stone, and building work commences. The cloister and other monastic buildings are sited on the north side of the Church, due to the presence of a ' <i>small hill</i> ' on the south side.
Henry I	1104	The Priory is upgraded to an Abbey by Pope Paschal II, and the first Abbot, Hugh of York, is appointed and ordained.
do	1115	The Abbey is completed and consecrated, but it is not certain whether the cloister and other monastic buildings are still on the north side.
do	1120	Eudo dies in France and his body is brought back to Colchester for burial in the Abbey Chapter House.
do	1133	Fire destroys the Church of St John the Evangelist and much of the Abbey. The Abbey is rebuilt on a cruciform plan, with the cloister and other monastic buildings on the south side of the Church (the ' <i>small hill</i> ' having been levelled). Building work commences on St Giles' Church.
Henry II	1170	Around this date the Abbey acquires its most treasured relic: a phial containing the blood of St Thomas Becket.
do	by 1171	St Giles' Church is completed and becomes the Parish Church, replacing the Church of St John the Evangelist.
Edward II	1320	Eudo's body is said to have been re-buried in the Abbey Presbytery.
Richard II	1381	The Abbey is attacked during the Peasant's Revolt. As a result, the precinct walls are strengthened.
do	1399	The Abbot is ' <i>mitred</i> ' by Pope Boniface IX, thereby becoming one of only around two dozen ' <i>Lords Spiritual</i> ' entitled to sit in the House of Lords.
Henry V	1417	Around this date the current gatehouse is constructed.
Henry VIII	1539	The Abbey is dissolved.
do	1539	The last Abbot, John Beche (AKA Thomas Marshall), is hanged for high treason (having denied the right of the King to suppress the Abbey).
do	1544	The Abbey is leased to Sir Thomas D'Arcy.
Edward VI	1548	The site is acquired by John Lucas, Town Clerk of Colchester. Demolition of the Church and other buildings on the site commences and the Lucas family construct a house, either by converting existing buildings

		(probably the Abbot's house) or a new build using materials from the demolition. The gatehouse and precinct walls are retained.
Elizabeth I	1591	Stones from the Abbey are used in the re-building of Bourne Mill, acquired the previous year by Sir Thomas Lucas.
James I	1610	The first detailed map of the site is published, showing a building (possibly the ' <i>Lucas House</i> ') and a partly-demolished church.
Charles I	1642	The Abbey is ransacked by Puritan supporters from the town.
do	1648	Parts of the house, much of St Giles' Church and remaining monastic buildings, plus the upper storey of the gatehouse and parts of the precinct walls are destroyed in the Civil War, during the siege of Colchester.
Charles II	1665	Dutch prisoners are held in the " <i>house called St. Johns</i> ", and the then occupier, Mr Cockshutt, seeks " <i>some remedy or recompense</i> " from the Treasury ² . This is the last recorded mention of the house.
George II	1748	The first detailed map since the Civil War shows that every building within the precinct has disappeared, and the area has become woodland and gardens.
William IV	1830	A house is built within the precinct.
do	early 1830's	The 'nurseryman' Edward Auston occupies the site and turns it into a market garden, which appears to have lasted until the War Office purchases the site in 1860.
Victoria	early 1840s	The upper storey of the gatehouse is rebuilt and the lower storey is repaired. For a while, the site becomes known as the ' <i>Pinnacle Garden</i> '.
do	1843	William Wire records in his journal ³ that two skeletons have been discovered in " <i>the Pinnacle Garden.....on the side nearest the brewery</i> ". This would have been Osborne's brewery, in ' <i>Brewery Street</i> ', which bordered the Abbey grounds on the north side.
do	1860	The last private owners, Thomas and Frederick Baring, sell the site to the War Office, and it becomes part of the Garrison. The 1830s house is given the name ' <i>Abbey Farm</i> ', shortly to become ' <i>Abbey House</i> '.
do	1867	' <i>Human remains</i> ' are said to have been discovered in the area of the ' <i>Mount</i> '.
do	1887	The ' <i>Abbey Garden Club</i> ' (later the ' <i>Officers Club</i> ') is founded to provide tennis and other social facilities for Army officers and their families.
Elizabeth II	1965	The site is designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument.
do	1972	Colchester Archaeological Trust excavates the Saxon Church of St John the Evangelist.
do	2010	Colchester Archaeological Trust discovers the location and layout of the Abbey Church.

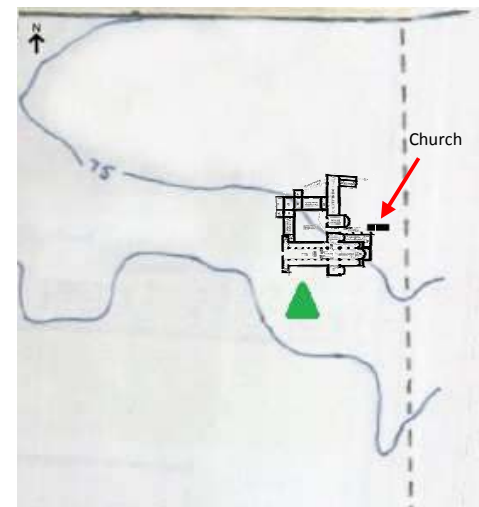
THE ABBEY CHURCH AND MONASTIC BUILDINGS

Unlike many monastic sites, no trace of the Abbey Church or any other monastic buildings within the precinct remain above ground - indeed, the precise location of the Abbey Church was unknown until 2010. Today, the only visible remains are the northern gatehouse, with the lower walls of the former porter's lodge attached, and over half of the heavily restored boundary walls which surrounded the approximately 13-acre site.

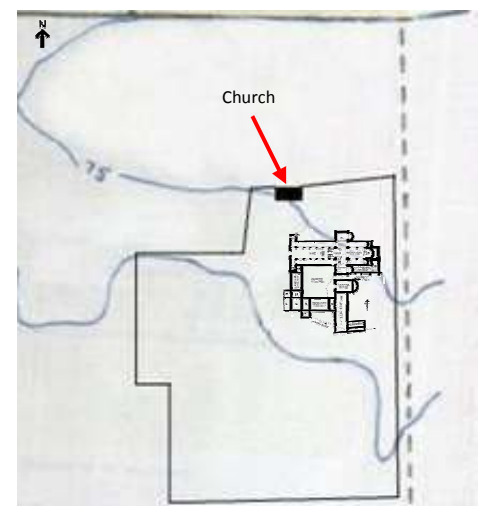
When Eudo de Rie founded the Benedictine Priory of St John the Baptist in 1095, he sought a prominent site, and found one to the south of Colchester, on rising ground just to the west of the Roman Road to Mersea Island. There were, however, two obstacles: firstly, there was already a church on the site - the small Saxon Parish Church of St John the Evangelist, and secondly, more seriously, there was a '*small hill*', possibly a burial mound, described in a medieval text⁴ as both "*collicus*" (small hill) and "*montibus*" (small mountain). This lay exactly where the cloister would be sited if the Priory was built with a traditional southern cloister. The landscape is shown on the conjectural map (right).



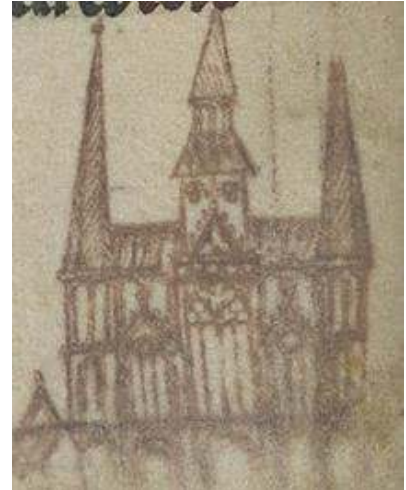
This did not, however, deter Eudo and his builders. They pressed ahead with the building of the Priory, which, whilst under construction, was upgraded to an Abbey by Papal decree. After twenty years, in 1115, the construction was complete, and the two problems had been overcome by the simple expedient of reversing the traditional monastery layout, placing the cloister to the north, and by siting the Abbey Church just below the existing Parish Church, as shown on the conjectural map (right). This map uses the ground-plan of Earl's Colne Priory (circa 1115) as a template for the Abbey.



The Abbey was re-built following a disastrous fire in 1133, and it is even possible that there had been an earlier re-building to distance the monks from the noise of the town. In either event, before work started, the '*small hill*' was levelled and the Abbey assumed the traditional layout, with the cloister to the south. The Saxon Parish Church was also a victim of the fire, and a new, larger, Parish Church dedicated to St Giles was built to the north of the Abbey. The whole site was surrounded by a wall, and this basic layout of circa 1200, shown right, probably lasted until the Dissolution in 1538, although there would have been a number of other buildings: gatehouse(s), Abbot's house etc.

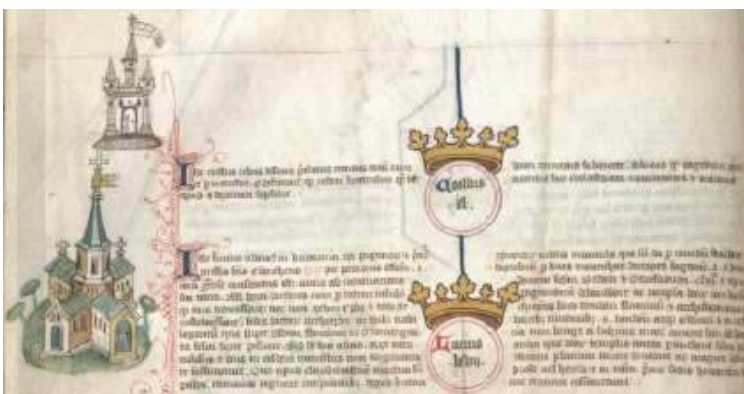


Following the rebuilding of the Abbey, the first known image which **may** show the Abbey itself comes from an early C14th manuscript⁵, with drawings in the bottom margin made at an uncertain later date. According to the British Library, the picture on the left is attributed to either the Castle, Head Gate or a 'View of the Town' and on the right to either the Abbey or St. Botulphs (sic). It dates the images to 1320-1340, and says that "*This is one of the earliest and relatively realistic town views to be created north of the Alps*". Historian Hugh Dukinfield Astley, on the other hand, claimed that "*We may take it as a faithful representation of the Castle and Abbey at the time of the Wars of the Roses*"⁶(1455-1485).



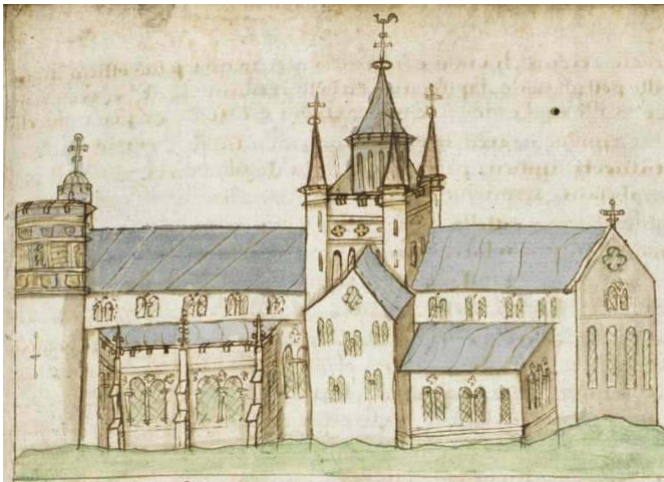
'Colchester Castle and Abbey', 1st half C14th?, and a close-up of the 'Abbey?', right ('Colchester' is written in the upper left margin of the manuscript)

Around 150 years later, in the mid C15th, another manuscript also contained images attributed to Colchester⁷. As the premier religious establishment in the town, the Abbey is most likely to have been depicted, but in this case it appears to be highly stylised, a generic picture rather than an accurate depiction, although it does bear a passing resemblance to the picture above.

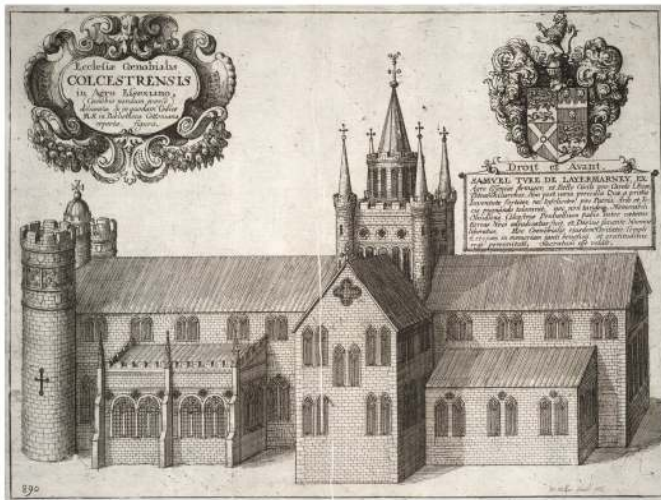


'A Symbolic View of Colchester', 1st quarter C15th , and a close-up of the 'Abbey?', right ('Colcestri' is written on the banner, top left)

It would be another 100 years later, in the second half of the C16th, before the third image of the Abbey Church appeared, illustrated on the next page. It was a freehand pen-and-ink drawing with colour-wash showing the southern elevation of the Church, drawn on a manuscript detailing the history of the Abbey⁸, and was presumably a copy of an earlier, pre-dissolution, drawing. The building is cruciform in shape, with a crossing tower surmounted by a lantern with a small spire. The west end shows a circular crenellated tower containing a narrow slit window, and there appear to be chapels adjoining both the nave and the chancel. Whilst it is potentially the most accurate record available, crucially there is no cloister shown.



The C16th drawing (almost certainly copied from an earlier picture). Another copy of this drawing (without the colouring) can be found in the *'Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society'* 1903.



In 1661 the first edition of the *'Monasticum Anglicanum'*⁹ contained an etching by Wenceslas Hollar, the renowned engraver, as an illustration for an article about the Abbey. Hollar based his etching on the C16th drawing (above) but adopted a slightly elevated viewpoint, showing a second tower at the west end.



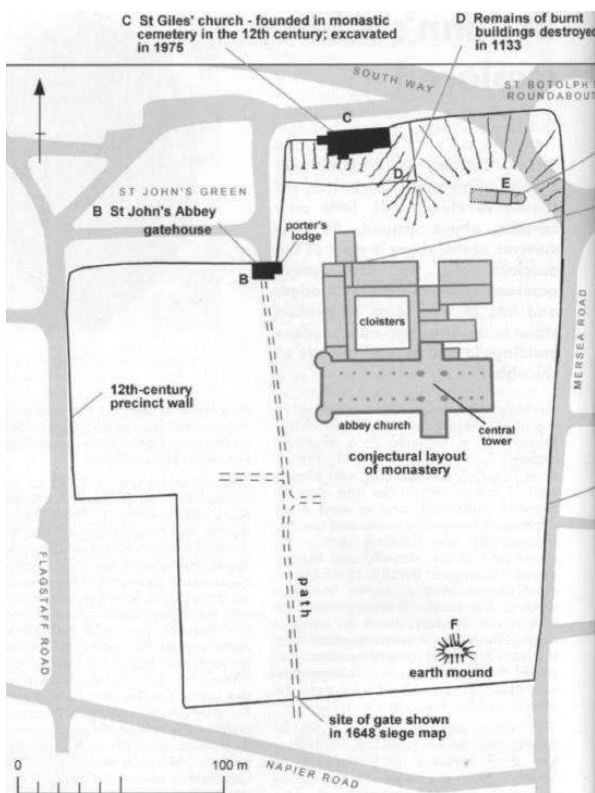
In 1748 yet another version was created by James Deane "from a MS in the Cotton Library" for Philip Morant's *'History and Antiquities of Colchester'*. This shows the 'South Prospect' from the same viewpoint as the C16th drawing.

A further version was drawn by Edward Rooker to illustrate Thomas Sparrow's Survey of Colchester in 1767 (shown in the 'Maps and Plans' section).

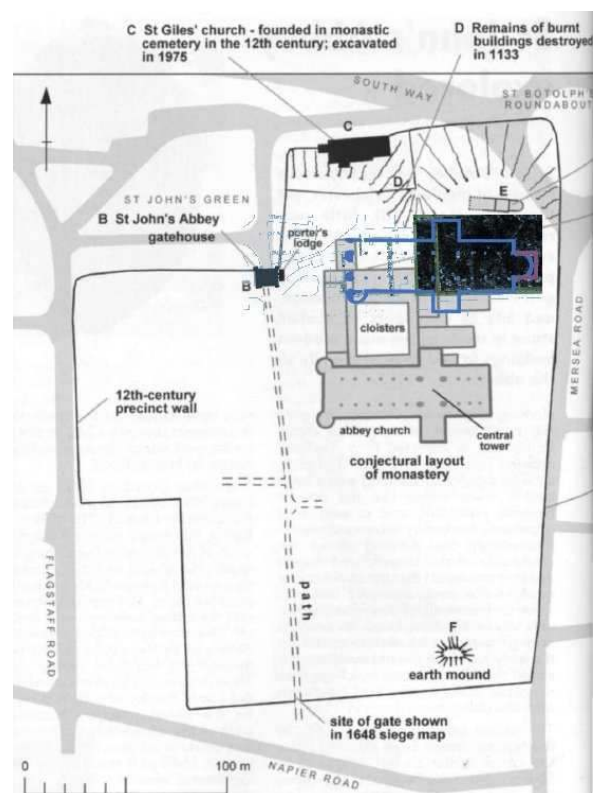
Following a disastrous fire in 1133, the Abbey was rebuilt with the monastic buildings relocated to the south side, a 'small hill' on that side having been levelled. It is very possible, however, that the landscaping had been done earlier, and some or all of the buildings had already moved to the south, as a medieval source¹⁰ states that the "*officine*" (offices) and "*habitalia fratrum*" (monks quarters) were rebuilt on the south side prior to the Abbey's consecration in 1115, some years before Eudo's death in 1120. Another medieval source¹¹ states that only "*all the workshops.... under the Town wall*", (which was presumably the Abbey wall nearest the Town, not the Roman Town wall, some distance away) were moved from the north side to the south side post-1133. These therefore may have been the only buildings still on the north side prior to the fire.

However, with the C16th picture of the Abbey lacking a southern cloister, and a statement that Eudo's body lay undisturbed in the chapter house from 1120 to 1320¹², in more recent times there has been a belief by some historians that the cloister and the chapter house did in fact remain on the north side of the Church. In 1994, the Victoria County History said that *"the cloister and some buildings, including the chapter house, seem to have remained on the north"*¹³; in 2002, Colchester Archaeological Trust created a conjectural plan of the Abbey site portraying this ground plan¹⁴ (below, left); in 2009, historian John Ashdown-Hill stated that *"it seems certain that the cloisters and chapter house always remained on the north side of the church"*¹⁵.

In 2010 the Trust discovered the foundations of the Church, and this put an entirely different complexion on the matter. Plotting the actual position of the Church on the conjectural plan shows that the cloister **must** have been somewhere on the south side, after all.



Conjectural plan of the Abbey Church and monastic buildings drawn by CAT in 2002



Conjectural plan overlaid by the actual site of the Church, showing insufficient room for the cloister on the north side

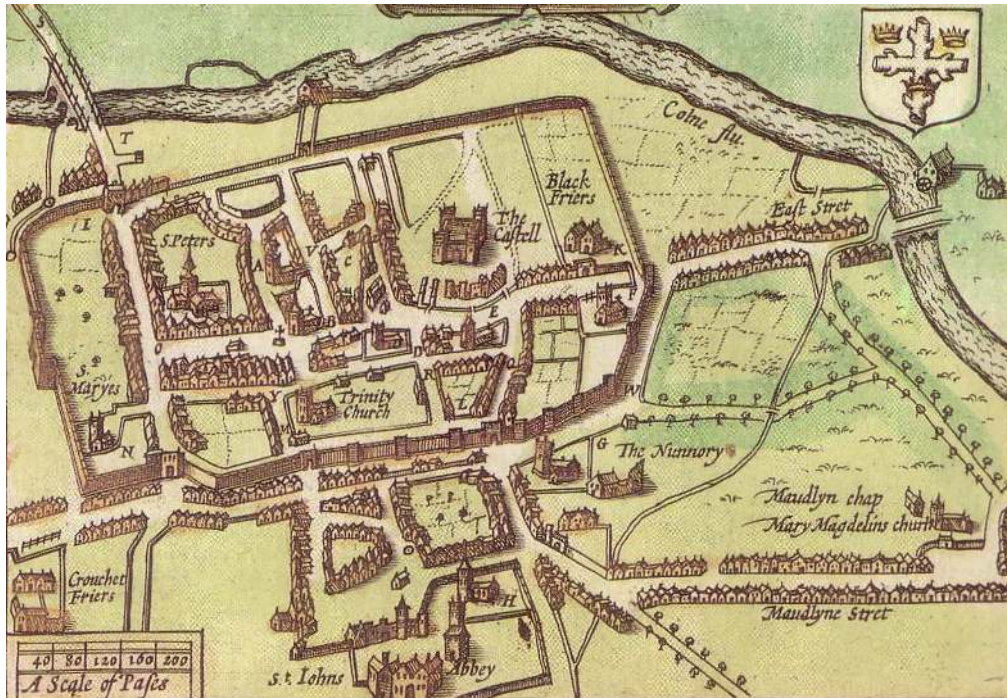
There remains, of course, the anomaly of the C16th 'cloisterless' drawing of the Church. Possibly the cloister was detached from the Church, or the artist was *"economical with the actualité"*. In any event, the location of the cloister remains unresolved.

After the dissolution in 1539 the Abbey passed from the Crown into secular ownership. Following a number of owners it was acquired by the Lucas family, who built themselves a house on the site. Unfortunately, there appear to be no images of the house apart from those shown on the maps on the following two pages. Indeed, there appear to be no images from anywhere within the precinct until the C20th. The surviving northern gatehouse, on the other hand, has been drawn and painted (and later photographed) repeatedly from the C18th onwards.

MAPS AND PLANS

1610 PLAN OF COLCHESTER (SURVEYED 1607) – JOHN SPEED¹⁶

This plan of Colchester is inset into the bottom right-hand corner of Speed's map of Essex.



John Speed's 'Plan of Colchester'

Although the plan does not quite reach the southern end of the Abbey precinct, it clearly shows St. Giles Church (H) within the boundary wall. The northern gatehouse has a tower with a small spire and the Abbey Church appears to consist of a single tower behind a transept or truncated chancel. A gabled building which may be the 'Lucas House' lies to the south-west of the Abbey Church, but detached from it. No light is shed on the location of the cloister.



Detail from John Speed's 'Plan of Colchester'

1648 THE SIEGE OF COLCHESTER – UNKNOWN CARTOGRAPHER¹⁷

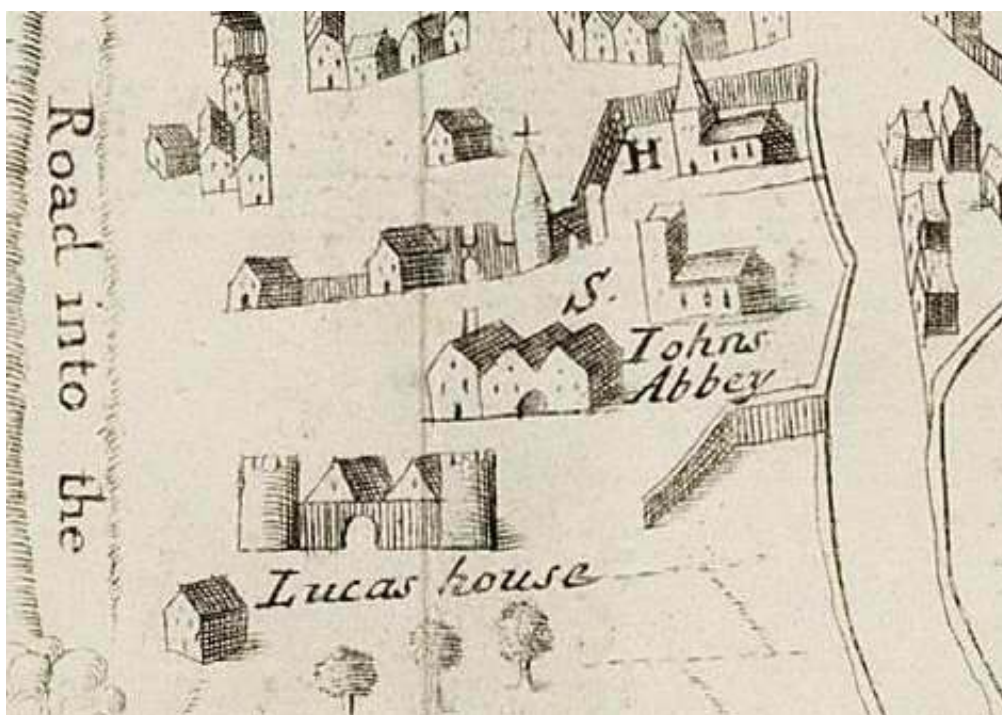
The only other map to show buildings occupying the site was drawn for a broadsheet containing *“A diary of the siege of Colchester by the forces under the command of Generall Fairfax”*. The map itself is headed *“The SIEGE of COLCHESTER by the Lord Fairfax, As it was with the Lines and Outworks 1648”* and is clearly based on John Speed’s map, albeit much extended in size.

The diary runs from Tuesday June 13th to Tuesday 22nd August 1648 and contains a graphic account of the attack on St John’s Abbey during July of that year:

“Friday 14. The new Battery being raised against S^t Iohns, from the Lord Lucas house, 2 pieces of Canon plaid thence, made a breach in the wall. The Soldiers entred fell on immediately, drove the Befieged out of the first Court-yard into the second & thence into y^e Gatehouse....”

“Saturday 15. The Gate-house being a place very considerable & mighty advantagious for us, Our General resolved to storm the same though it had a strong work before it; whereupon 6 Souldiers for 3 shillings a piece undertook to throw in Granadoes, and 20 men to carry Ladders for half a Crown a piece, & a Commanded party of Foot to fform, led on by Major Befcoe, which accordingly they did as soon as 8 piece of Canon had given fire upon the Beseiged, and the Granadoes did great execution, the Ladders were placed with much advantage, the Befieged much dismayed, forced to quit their works & flie into the Gate-house, one Granadoe kindled their Magazin and blew up many of the Befieged, the rest were taken prifoners, and flain; the prifoners confest they were above a hundred in the Gate-house & work and few of them coul^d escape....”

The northern gatehouse retains its tower and spire, with two gabled buildings on its west side, and the Abbey Church has acquired a chancel. The building south-west of the church remains, labelled ‘S. Iohns Abbey’ and the ‘Lucas House’ label is shown under an imposing turreted southern gate-house, with gabled structures on either side of the gate. It is unclear, however, which of the two buildings is actually the ‘Lucas House’. The truncated southern boundary wall heads towards the gatehouse; the detached building south-west of the gate-house is outside the Abbey precinct.



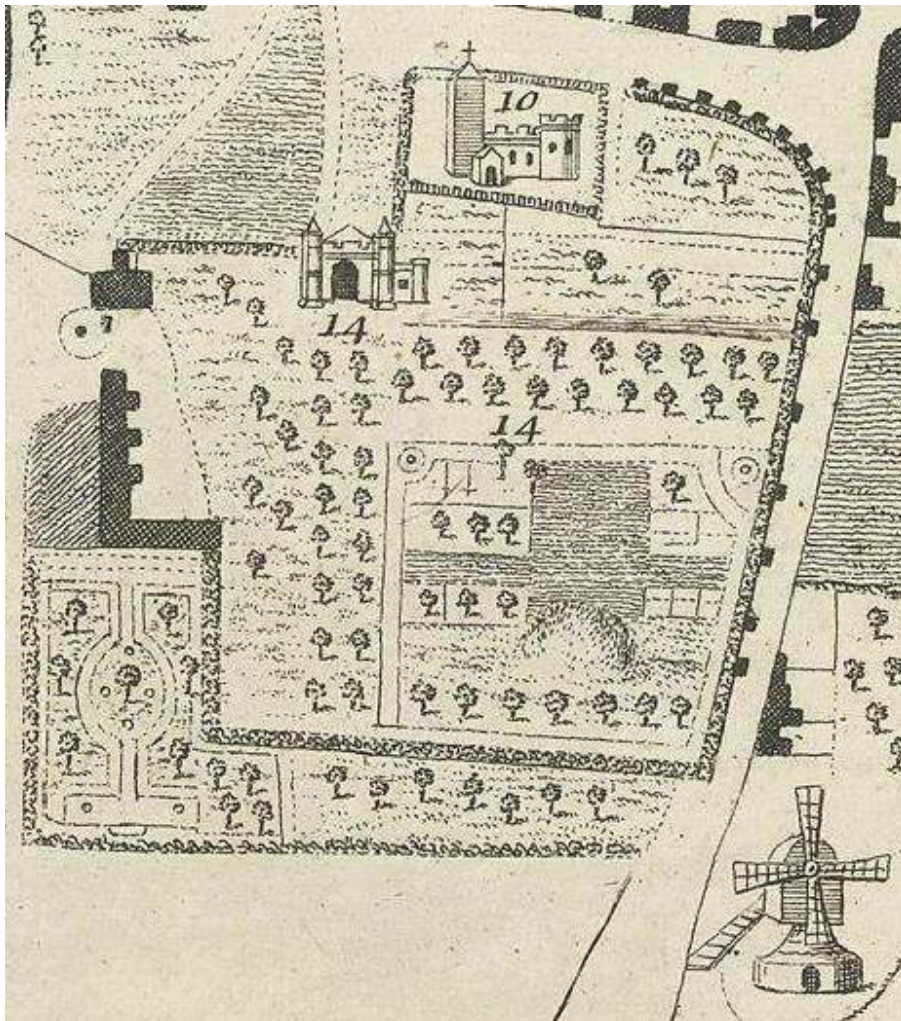
Detail from the ‘Siege Map’

1748 THE ICHNOGRAPHY¹⁸ OF COLCHESTER - JAMES DEANE(?)

It would be another 100 years before the next detailed map of Colchester appeared, published in Philip Morant's *The History and Antiquities of Colchester*. It is titled *The ichnography of Colchester* and the artist/engraver is not known for certain, although it was probably James Deane, a local architect. It was dedicated to the "Honourable Philip Yorke Esqr and his Consort The Lady Marchioness of Grey".

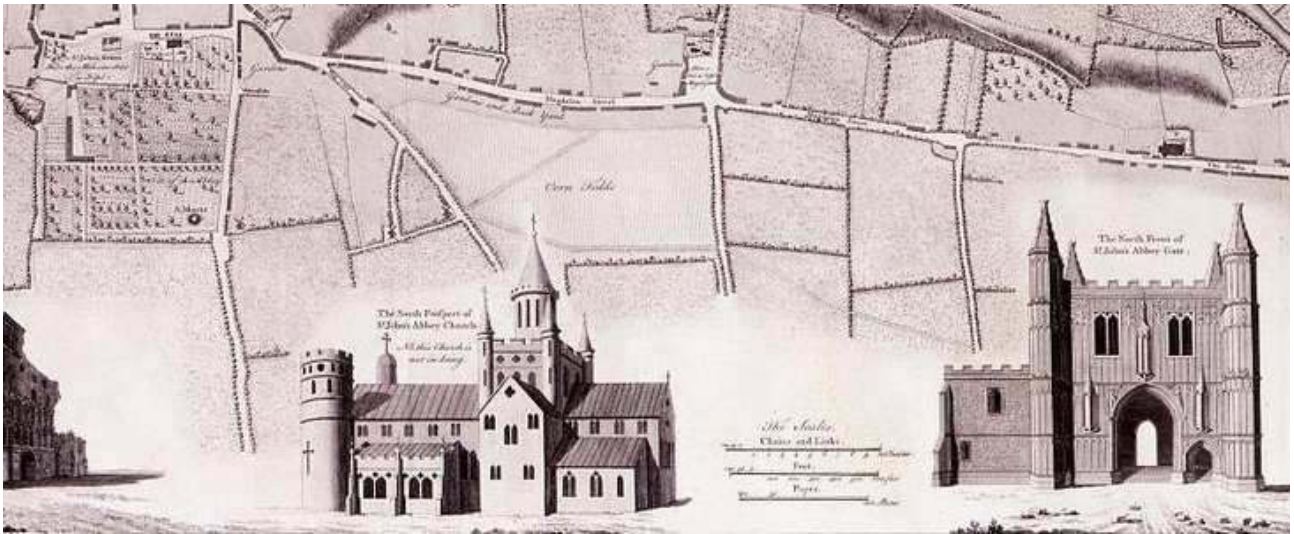
The two buildings shown in detail are the Abbey gatehouse (14), diminished due to the siege, and St Giles Church (10), which has moved further to the west, its actual position. There are some substantial structures on the west edge of the precinct. These appear to be buildings, as identical cartography is used for buildings outside the precinct, to the north and east. Of the Church, the 'Lucas House' and southern gatehouse there is no trace.

Most of the site is shown to be parkland or woodland, with the first depiction of the mound in the south-east corner of the precinct. A formal parterre garden in the south-west lies outside the Abbey walls.



Detail from the 'ichnography of Colchester'

1767 SURVEY OF THE ANCIENT TOWN AND BOROUGH OF COLCHESTER - T. SPARROW

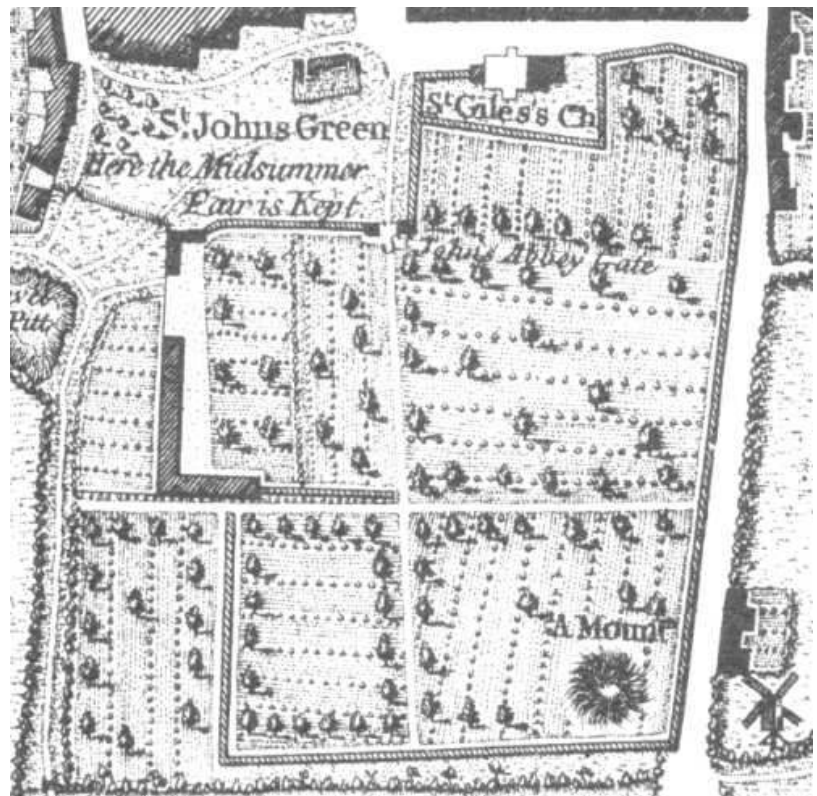


Detail from Sparrow's survey

Nineteen years later Thomas Sparrow of Hammersmith published an engraved map, taken from his own survey. The map is of insufficient scale to print the Abbey precinct in detail, but this extract shows the precinct laid out more symmetrically than the map of 1748 (although the parterre garden is not as intricate). It also names the mound in the south-eastern corner of the precinct as 'A Mount'. The bottom border of the map contains illustrations by Edward Rooker (1712-1774) of the south side of the Abbey Church, with the helpful slogan "*NB this Church is not in being*", plus an image of the northern gatehouse and adjoining porter's lodge, before the damage inflicted during the Siege.

1777 MAP OF ESSEX (SURVEYED 1774) CHAPMAN AND ANDRE, 2.5 INCHES TO THE MILE

John Chapman & Peter Andre appear to have borrowed heavily from Sparrow's work. The map is larger scale but the drawing of the Abbey precinct is virtually identical. The building range on the west and 'A Mount' remain from the two previous maps.



Detail from Chapman & Andre's map



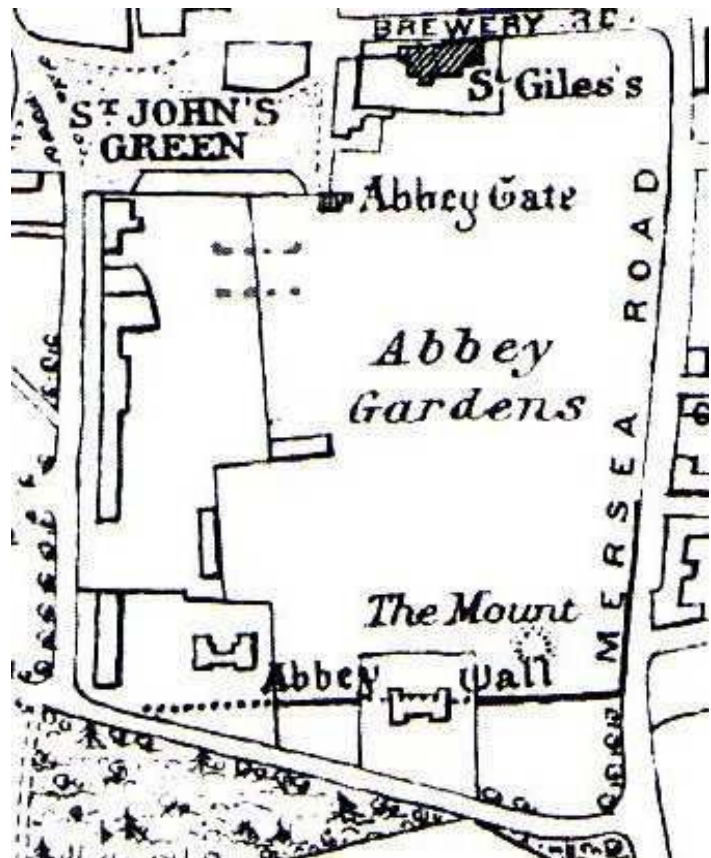
Detail from Cole & Roper's map

1810 MAP OF COLCHESTER COLE & ROPER

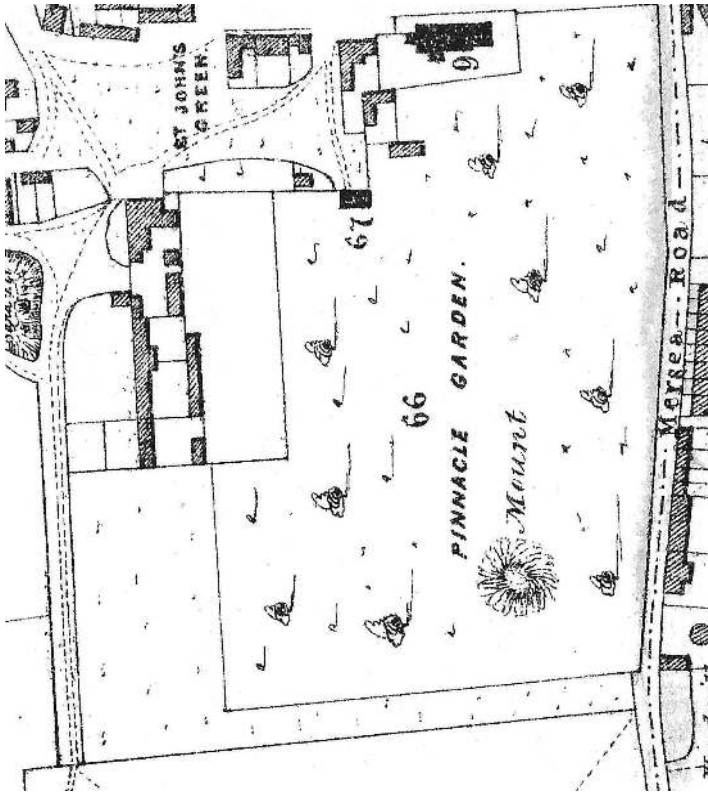
There is little difference between the Abbey precinct in this map and that of Chapman & Andre, apart from it being in full colour.

1846 MAP OF THE BOROUGH OF COLCHESTER AND LIBERTIES G. GILBERT¹⁹

George Gilbert's map is minimal, but he does emphasise the Abbey wall to the south of the site, which contains a building in its centre. This is the first map to provide some road names.



Detail from Gilbert's map



Detail from Monson's map

**1848 MAP OF THE BOROUGH OF
COLCHESTER - E. MONSON
6 CHAINS TO THE INCH (1:4700)**

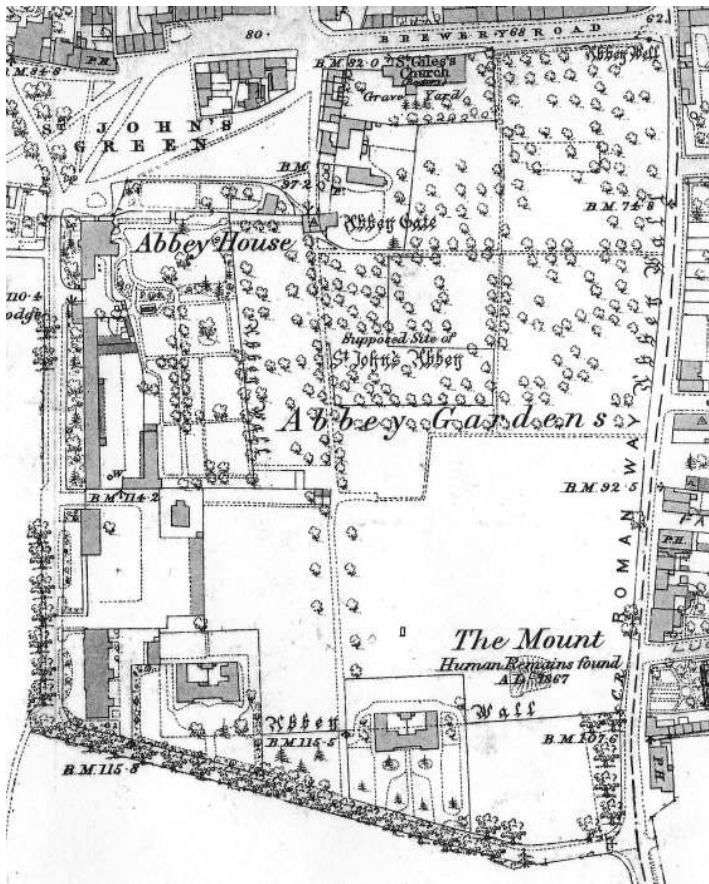
Edward Monson's map is also minimal. He names the '*PINNACLE GARDEN*', and the '*Mount*' is impressive, dwarfing St Giles Church.

**1860 PLAN OF THE BOROUGH OF
COLCHESTER AND THE LIBERTIES IN
THE COUNTY OF ESSEX - G. GILBERT**

Gilbert's second map is much more detailed than his first (see previous page). '*Abbey Farm*' is named in the north-west corner of the precinct, which is shown laid-out in a number of regular plots. This is no doubt a legacy of Edward Auston, a 'nurseryman' who occupied the site in the 1830s, and for an unknown period afterwards. In 1845, Louisa Stuart Costello wrote in '*Bentley's Miscellany*'²⁰ that "*Behind the (Abbey) gateway is a large market garden, the site of the monastery*". Unusually for a detailed map of the period, the '*Mount*' is not shown. This is the last map made when the site was in private hands - in the year of publication the War Office took over ownership.



Detail from Gilbert's plan

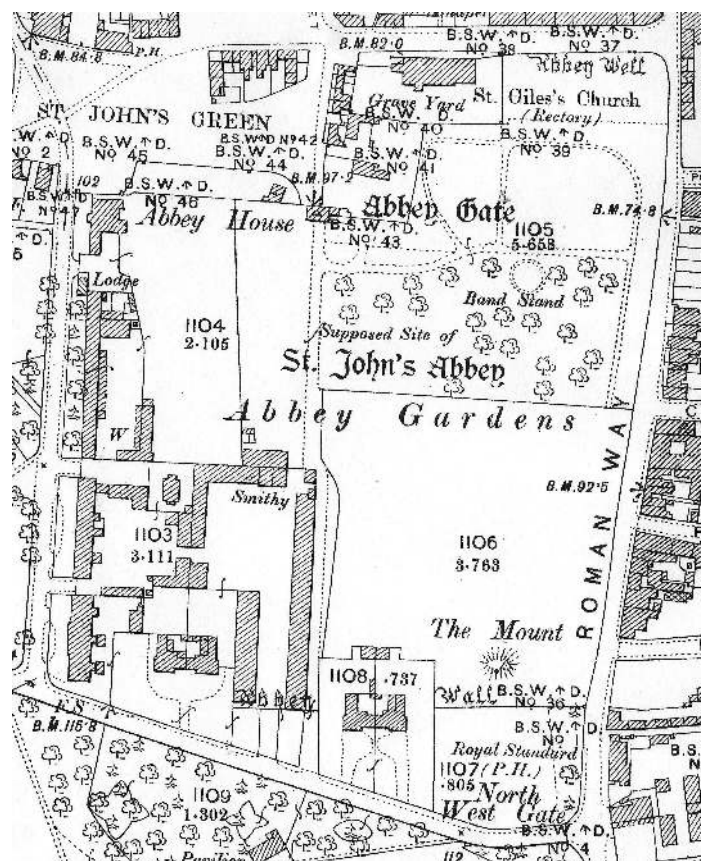


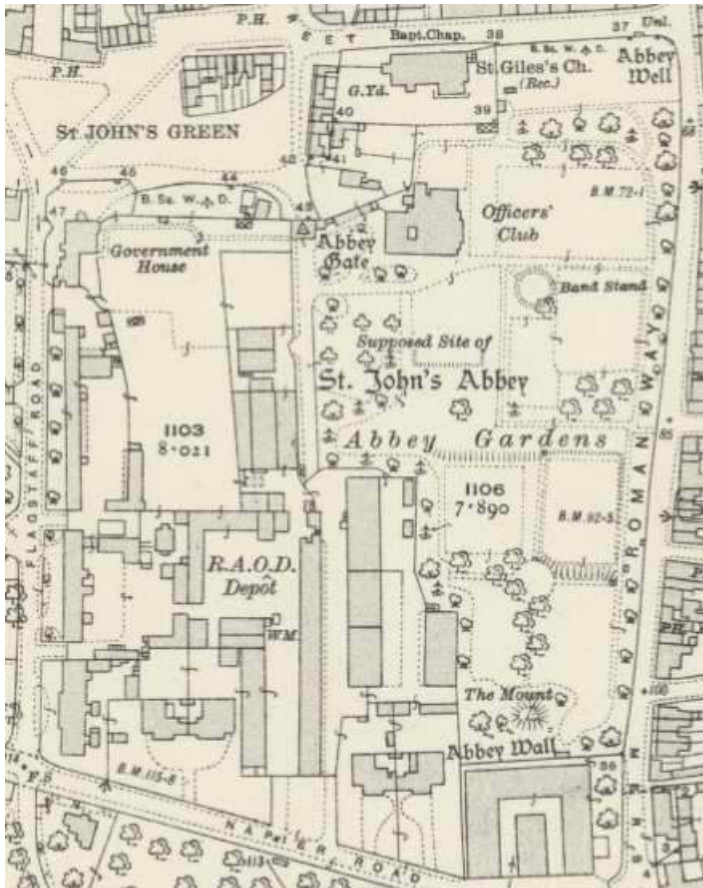
**1875 ORDNANCE SURVEY
25 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:2500)**

This large scale map shows the Abbey grounds after their purchase by the War Office, but as yet there is no sign of any major changes. There is a reference to human remains having been found at 'The Mount' in 1867, but this is as yet unsubstantiated by any other historical source, and there seems to be no mention of the discovery in the 'Essex Standard' of that year. 'Abbey Farm' has become 'Abbey House' and the Mersea Road is named 'Roman Way' - this was the generally accepted route of the Roman Road to Mersea Island.

**1897 ORDNANCE SURVEY
25 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:2500)**

There are now signs of Army ownership. The wooded area to the north of the site has been cleared and paths laid, leading to a 'Band Stand'. The few remaining trees to the south of the site have been removed, and a number of new buildings are shown to the west, including a 'Smithy'.



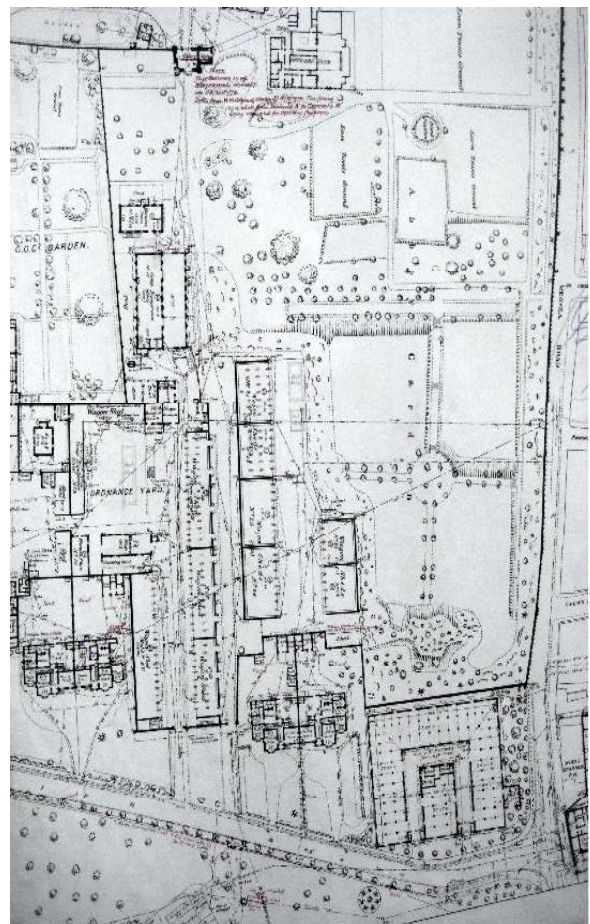


1923 ORDNANCE SURVEY 25 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:2500)

There are now some dramatic changes to the site, compared with the last map. The 'Officers' Club' has been built and a great deal of landscaping has taken place, presumably for tennis courts. 'Abbey House' is now 'Government House', and a considerable amount of building has taken place around the centre, to create the 'R.A.O.D. Depot'. Many trees have been planted, and the area in front of 'The Mount' has been landscaped. This is the first Ordnance Survey map to name 'Flagstaff Road' and 'Napier Road', but Mersea Road is still designated 'Roman Way'.

POST-1924 ARMY SURVEY

This is an extremely detailed plan of the site. Buildings are labelled with their uses and, in many cases, dated. Gas, water and sewage pipelines are included. The latest date shown is 16/8/1924, on a hand-written note relating to a letter from 'HM Office of Works' regarding the historical importance of the Abbey gatehouse. The 'Lawn Tennis Grounds' are all in the north-east of the site, and the landscaped area in the south-east is more formal than in previous maps.



1952 AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH

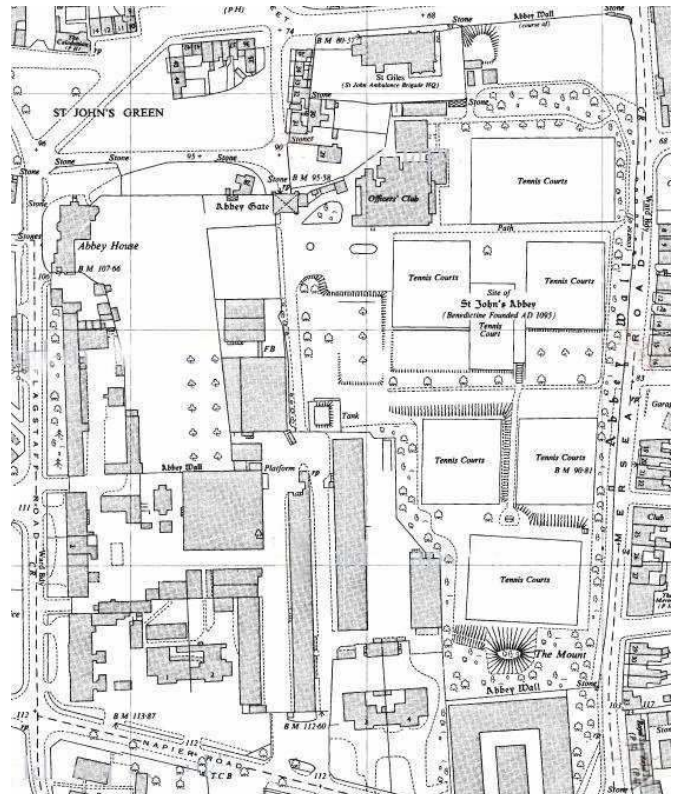
(www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/eaw043690)

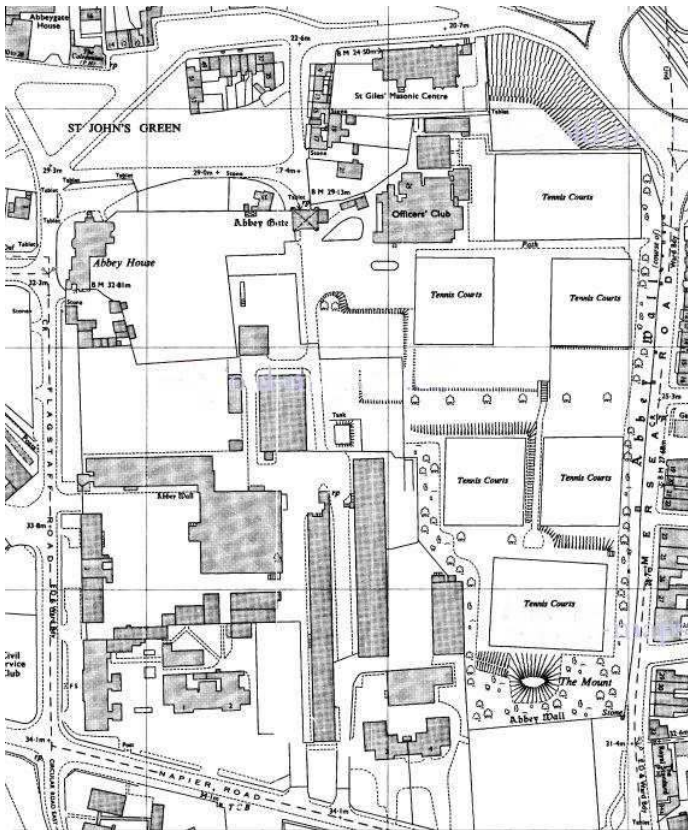


From the 1920s onwards, aerial photography became an invaluable record of landscape, and a considerable archive has been made available to the public through the *'Britain from Above'* project (website address at top of page). In the early views of the Abbey precinct, taken in 1920 and 1927, the definition is not of high quality, neither do they show the whole of the Abbey precinct, unlike the 1952 survey shown above. The gatehouse can be seen left of centre, towards the top and the *'Mount'*, towards the bottom right, is completely covered tree-covered. All the buildings on the site can be clearly identified on the map below.

1966 ORDNANCE SURVEY 50 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:1250)

In this very large scale map, the *'Officers' Club'* is firmly established. Virtually all the area of the former gardens is given over to tennis courts, and the terracing necessary to achieve this in the southern area is clearly shown. There are trees surrounding the tennis courts and the *'Abbey Wall'* is labelled, where appropriate. None of the Garrison structures are named, with the exception of *'Platform'* and *'Tank'*. St Giles Church is now the *'St John Ambulance Brigade HQ'*.



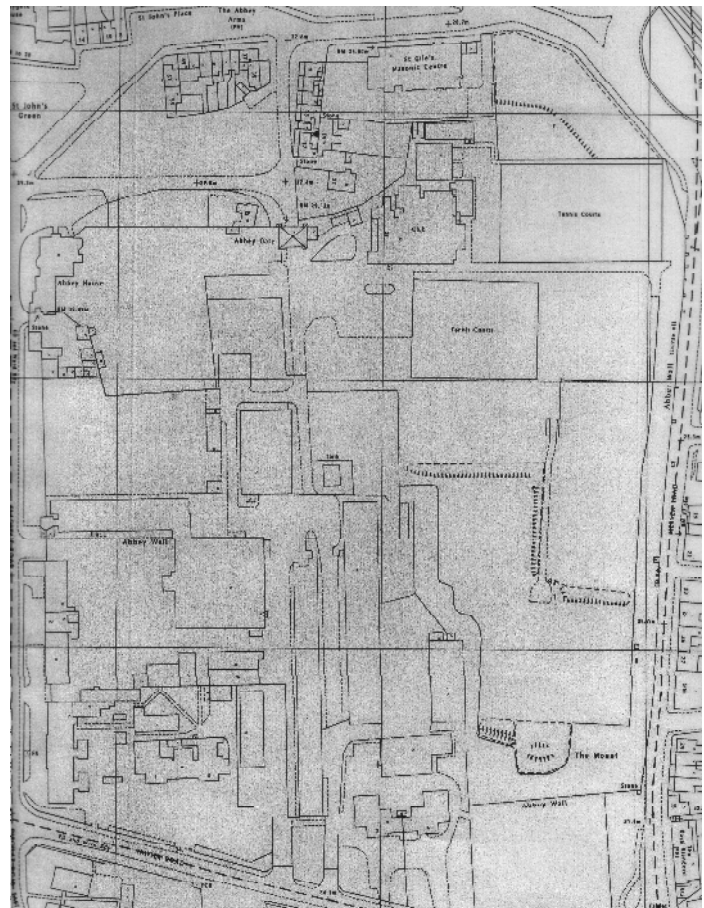


1978 ORDNANCE SURVEY 50 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:1250)

As far as the precinct is concerned, this map differs little from the 1966 map. There are fewer trees shown, and the only Garrison structure named is 'Tank'. St Giles Church has changed from 'St John Ambulance Brigade HQ' to 'St Giles' Masonic Centre'. However, 'Southway' has been constructed, and the north-east corner of the precinct has been cut off by the new roundabout.

1998 ORDNANCE SURVEY 50 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:1250)

This is the last large-scale map to be produced solely on paper. It is simpler than previous maps - the buildings are not shaded, and no trees are shown. The number of tennis courts is drastically reduced and the only Garrison structure to be named remains 'Tank'.





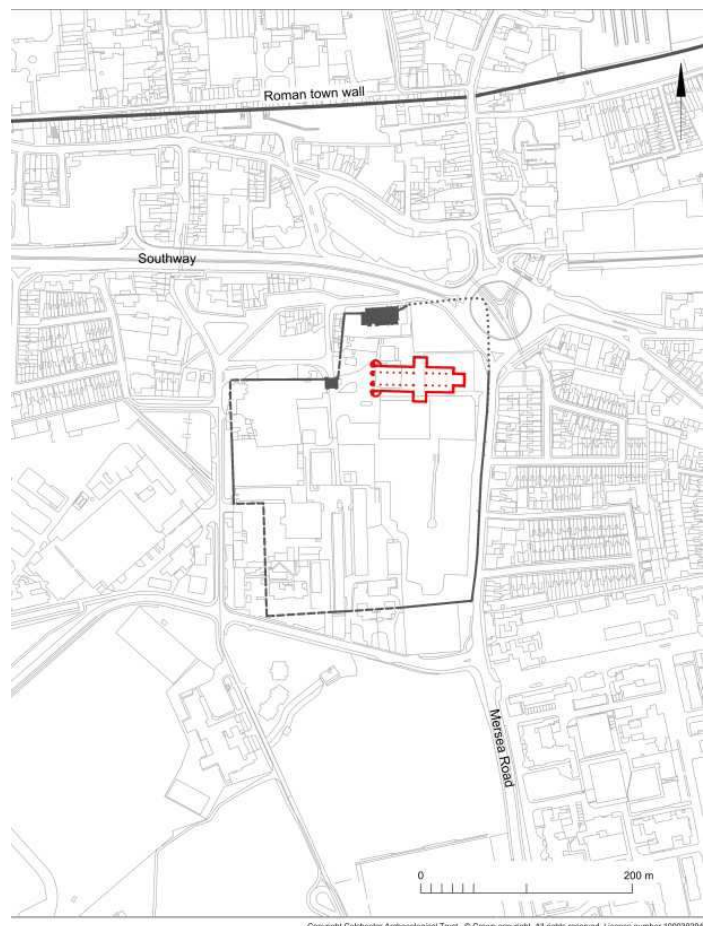
**2004 ENGLISH HERITAGE MAP
(SCHEDULED ANCIENT MONUMENTS)
1:1250**

In 1965, much of the former Abbey grounds became a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Nearly 40 years later, in 2004, Colchester Archaeological Trust uncovered part of the Roman Circus nearby, which was also designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Plotted on the ground, part of the Circus lies under the south-western corner of the Abbey grounds, so the map which accompanied the Abbey Scheduling record was amended accordingly.

The two Scheduled Ancient Monuments

**2011 ORDNANCE SURVEY
25 INCHES TO THE MILE (1:2500)**

Having discovered the position of the long-lost Abbey Church, Colchester Archaeological Trust overlaid the Abbey precinct walls, gatehouse, St. Giles' Church and the site of the Abbey Church onto the OS map. This clearly shows that the cloister must have lain to the south of the Church.



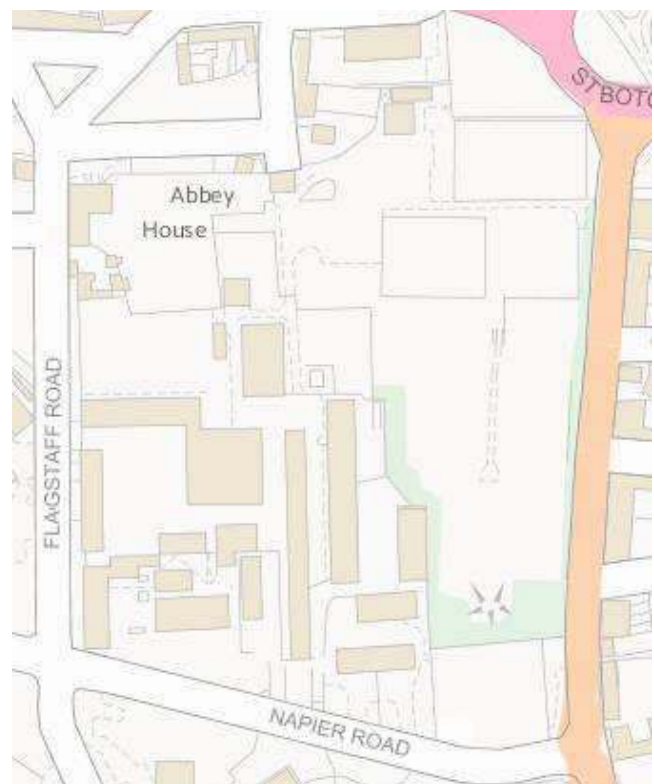
2014 SATELLITE IMAGERY - MICROSOFT BING MAPS, BIRDS-EYE VIEW



In this image, currently the best definition available, the site of the Abbey Church has been overlaid, showing its actual position on the ground, as well as the sites of the two trenches dug by Colchester Archaeological Group in 2015. The conversion of barrack buildings to housing is well under way.

CURRENT ORDNANCE SURVEY DIGITAL MAP (PLANNING), 1:1250

The most up-to-date map is used for submitting Planning Applications. The content is minimal, and the 'Mount' is stylised.



APPENDIX 1 - THE 'MOUNT'

This landscape feature has been shown on every detailed map from 1748 onwards except one, but we have no idea of exactly how old it is. It is not thought to be natural, but as yet nobody has been able to definitively establish its original purpose.

Amongst the suggestions have been:

- A gun platform or another fortification from the siege of 1648
- A windmill mound
- A 'prospect mound' (viewing platform)
- A garden feature
- A plague pit
- The site of the 'lost' Roman amphitheatre



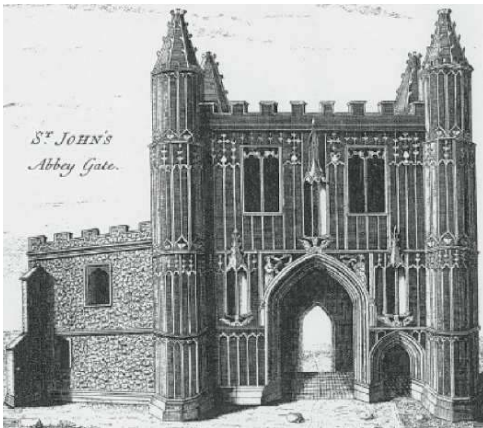
Now covered by vegetation, and dotted with trees, it is not easy to determine the full size of the 'Mount'. It remains a formidable, and intriguing, pile of earth.

However, given its position against the farthest wall of the gardens, looking down on the full length of the gardens, the 'Mount' bears a striking resemblance to the mid-C17th 'Prospect Mound' which overlooks the formal gardens at Boscobel House, Shropshire.



(Photo © English Heritage)

APPENDIX 2 - THE CHANGING FACE OF THE ABBEY GATEHOUSE

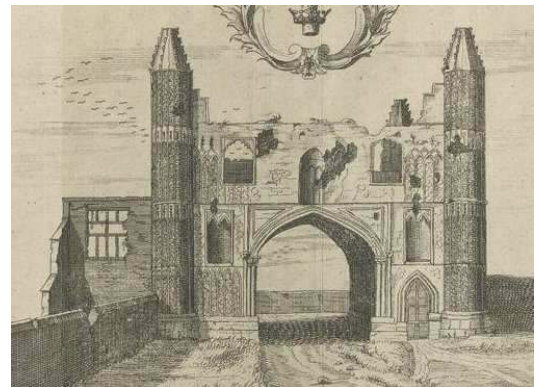


PRE-1648

This engraving is by James Deane and is reproduced in Philip Morant's *'History and Antiquities of Colchester'*, 1748. A similar image by Edward Rooker can be found on Thomas Sparrow's *'Survey of Colchester'*, 1767 (shown earlier). It depicts a completely undamaged gatehouse and porter's lodge, obviously prior to the siege, and must therefore have been copied from a much earlier picture.

1724

This picture is taken from *'A new and exact Prospect of Colchester'* drawn by John Pryer. The Civil War damage can be clearly seen, with the battlements, windows and tracery destroyed, and the porters lodge in ruins.



1831

This is an engraving made by Samuel Lacey (1786-1859) from an original study by artist William Henry Bartlett (1809-1854). Some repairs have been made - the gatehouse and porter's lodge are shown with pitched roofs, and the façade of the gatehouse appears to be in reasonable condition. However, a tree grows up the front.

POST-1840

Extensive repairs were undertaken around 1840, and the building was returned to a close approximation of its original state. The pitched roof was replaced by a vaulted roof, and the battlements were re-instated. At some point in time, however, the porter's lodge has been reduced to a roofless shell. Today, the gatehouse is a Grade 1 listed building in the custody of English Heritage, and is described by Pevsner as *"one of the two most important monastic buildings in Essex"*²¹ (the other being the Gatehouse of St. Osyth's Priory).



APPENDIX 3 - OTHER VISIBLE SURVIVALS FROM THE ABBEY (LOCAL)

THE ABBEY WALLS

Over half of the boundary wall of the Abbey precinct is still in situ, albeit heavily restored. The medieval wall appears to have been refaced in the C16th, and has been repaired and buttressed throughout the ensuing centuries. Some of the medieval wall is, however, still visible.



The junction of Mersea Road & Napier Road Car Park



A section of medieval wall in Flagstaff Road

RE-USED STONE

Given the size of the Abbey Church (around 90m long) and its associated buildings, there must have been a huge amount of recycled building materials in the C16th & C17th. Where it all went is a matter of conjecture, but we do know where some of it was used. In 1590, Sir Thomas Lucas bought Bourne Mill, and the following year he re-built it in the fashionable Flemish style, using a mixture of Abbey stone, Roman brick and local septaria.



Bourne Mill, showing the variety of construction materials



Worked stone from the Abbey in a wall of Bourne Mill

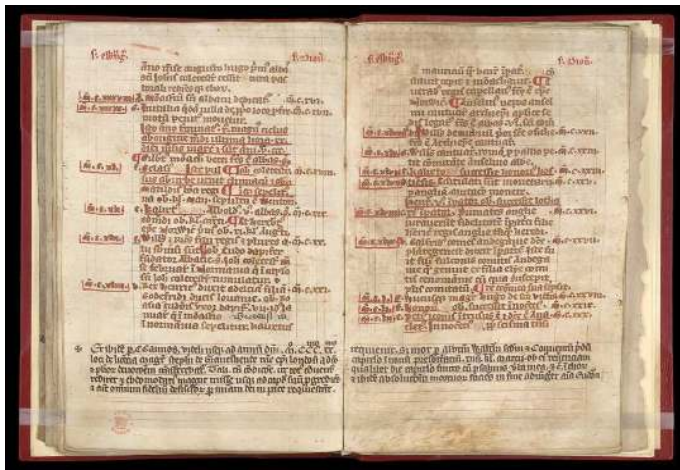
There are other examples of re-used Abbey stonework being incorporated into walls and gateposts in areas around the Abbey site, such as St. Giles and Flagstaff Road, as shown on the right.



Brick gateposts to Abbey Terrace, Flagstaff Road, incorporating Abbey stonework, detail (right)



APPENDIX 3 - OTHER VISIBLE SURVIVALS FROM THE ABBEY (REMOTE)



(Photo © The British Library)

ANNALS OF COLCHESTER ABBEY (ANNALES COLCESTRENSIS) 1115-1130

This book is held by the British Library, and was written for the Abbey. It is dated 1320, two hundred years after the death of Eudo de Rie, and the writing in black at the foot of these pages tells how Eudo's body was originally buried in the Chapter House and subsequently transferred to the Presbytery in 1320.

THE ABBEY SEAL 'AD CAUSAS'

This is a dark-green wax seal, held by the National Archives, Kew. All Abbeys would have had two seals: firstly the 'Great Seal', used to authenticate the most important documents, and secondly the 'Seal Ad Causas', used for ordinary legal and administrative business. The design shows St John the Baptist standing on a plinth holding both a branch and the Lamb of God in his left hand, which he is pointing to with his right hand. The legend round the edge reads "ABB'IS ET COVENT' SCI IOH'IS COLECESTRIE ADCAVSAS".



THE PECTORAL CROSS OF ABBOT JOHN BECHE

The 'Colchester Cross' is a remarkable survivor of the Reformation. After the execution of Beche it came into the possession of the staunchly Catholic Mannock family of Gifford's Hall, Stoke-by-Nayland, and today it is the property of Baron Clifford of Chudleigh. It is on loan to Buckfast Abbey, Devon, "until such time that there is again a ruling abbot of Colchester".



(Photos © Michael Luke Davies/Buckfast Abbey)



One side shows the emblems of the five wounds of Christ on an enamelled blue background. In the centre is the Sacred Heart, surrounded by a crown of thorns. Below the Heart are the letters "IHS", representing the name of Jesus; above is inscribed "INRI", the Latin acronym for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. On the other side are the instruments of the Passion on an enamelled red background. The cross opens up to reveal a figure of the crucified Christ standing on a skull. The inside of the case bears an inscription in Latin, reading "He who will come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me".

FOOTNOTES

1. The early history of the Abbey is derived from translations of four medieval documents, which have some discrepancies: *'Marianus Libro Tertio de Monasterio Colecestretsi et Eius Fundatore'*, part of Cotton Nero D VIII, British Library
'Qualiter Cenobium Colcestrie Inceperit' Gough Essex 1, Bodleian Library Oxford
'Annales Colecestrenses' Harley 1132, British Library
'Computus of Marianus', part of MS 0.7.41, Trinity College Cambridge
2. *'Calendar of Treasury Books'* August 1665, National Archives
3. *'Journal of events transpiring in the Borough of Colchester'* entry dated 26/1/1843 W. Wire, Essex Record Office
4. *'Marianus Libro Tertio de Monasterio Colecestretsi et Eius Fundatore'* Cotton Nero D VIII, C17th, British Library
5. A C14th copy (by an unknown scribe) of a C12th document, *'Historia Regum Britanniae'* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. This page tells the story of Coel, Duke of Colchester and the marriage of his daughter Helena to Constantius, British Library
6. *Medieval Colchester - Town, Castle and Abbey: From MSS in the British Museum'* in *'Trans. Essex Archaeology & History'* Volume 8 1903 HJ Dukinfield Astley (Editorial Secretary of the British Archaeological Society & President of the Essex Archaeological Society)
7. *'Chronicle of the Noble English Kings'* T. Elmham Cotton MS Claudius E IV 1450, British Library
8. as 4 (above) translated by HJ Dukinfield Astley in 6. (above)
9. *'Monasticum Anglicanum or the History of the Ancient Abbies, and other Monasteries, Hofpitals, Cathedral and Collegiate Churches in England and Wales'* Sir W. Dugdale 1661, 4 volumes, translated from Latin in 1692
10. as 8. (above)
11. *'Qualiter Cenobium Colcestrie Inceperit'* C16th copy, Bodleian Library Oxford, translated by G. Rickword in *'Transactions of Essex Archaeology & History'* Volume 16 1923
12. *'Annales Colecestrenses'* C14th, British Library
13. *'Victoria County History: History of Essex'* Volume 9 1994
14. *'Medieval Colchester's Lost Landmarks'* J. Ashdown-Hill 2009
15. *'The Colchester Archaeologist'* Issue 15 2002
16. *'Theatrum Imperii Magnae Britannie'* J. Speed, map from 1616 edition
17. Originally a 'broadside' published by Witham in 1648. Map taken from a later copy, published by Keymer in 1799, original in British Museum Prints and Drawings collection
18. *'Ichnography'* originally meant the tracing out of a section or ground plan of a building, but by the C18th it was used in the wider sense of a plan or map of an area
19. Printed in *'Historic Towns: Colchester'* E. Cutts 1889
20. *'Bentley's Miscellany', Vol XVIII, chapter headed 'Sketches of Legendary Cities - Colchester'* R. Bentley 1845
21. *'The Buildings of England, Essex'* N. Pevsner, 3rd edition ed. J. Bettley 2007

SOURCES AND SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY (in addition to the works mentioned above)

1. *'The History and Antiquities of Colchester'* 2 Volumes P. Morant 1748
2. *'Victoria County History: History of Essex'* Volume 2 1907
3. *'The Abbey of St John the Baptist, Colchester'* in *'Trans. Essex Archaeology & History'* Volume 16 G. Rickword 1923
4. *'CAR Report 1 / CBA Research Report 39: Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester'* P. Crummy 1981
5. *'Colchester Archaeological Report 9: Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester, 1971-88'* ed. P. Crummy 1988
6. *'The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1386-1421'*, ed. J. Roskell, L. Clark and C. Rawcliffe, 1993
7. *'CAT Report 178: An archaeological evaluation on the west side of St John's abbey precinct wall, along Mersea Road'* B. Holloway 2002
8. *'Bourne Mill, Colchester: Historical Report'* Dr. C. Thornton 2007
9. *'CAT Report 601: St Johns Abbey church: An evaluation at the Garrison Officers' Club'* A. Wightman 2011
10. *'CAT Report 737: Archaeological monitoring during the installation of floodlights at the Colchester Garrison Officers' Club'* A. Wightman 2013
11. *'Colchester, Fortress of the War God'* A. Gascoyne and D. Radford 2013

Excavations in the Precinct of St John's Abbey, Colchester, March-October 2015

Introduction

Colchester, in common with most other major towns throughout the Roman Empire, almost certainly had an amphitheatre. To date, no trace of one has been found, and there are few places left where one might have been located. The south-east corner of the grounds of St John's Abbey, an area not previously evaluated archaeologically, was thought to be a possible site. Permission was obtained from English Heritage for a geophysical survey and the excavation of two trenches.

Excavating Trench A. In the background, the spoil is being sieved.



Geophysical Survey

The area surrounding the two trenches was subjected to detailed geophysical examination by a range of techniques, carried out by Tim Dennis. Fig. 2 shows an example of ground penetrating radar 'timeslice' from a depth of very approximately 0.75 m.

The surveys included a strip on an area of grass to the north of the excavation area that may represent the original slope of the site, having avoided landscaping for the tennis courts. Nothing of significance can be seen in it.

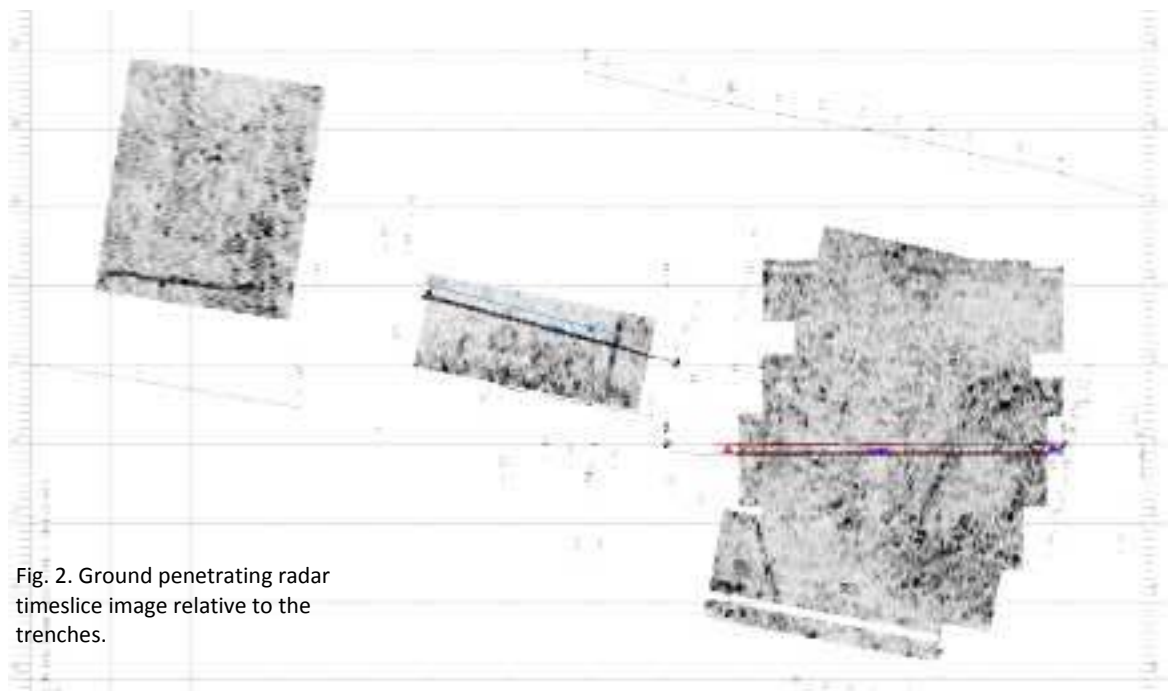


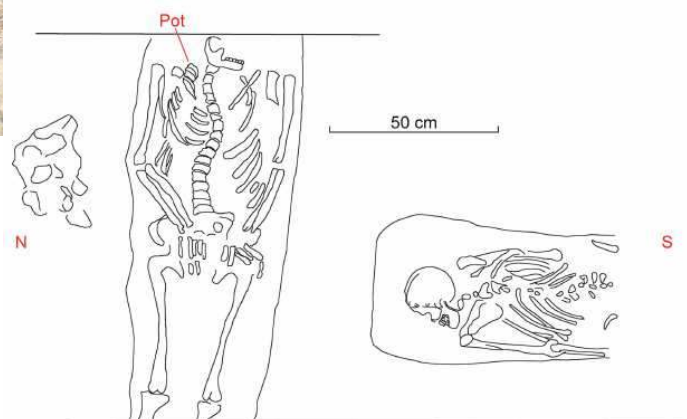
Fig. 2. Ground penetrating radar timeslice image relative to the trenches.

The most interesting feature in Trench A was FA1 at its southernmost end. This was a pit, extending nearly 1m below current ground level, cut some 30cm into the natural, and extending beyond the trench on its south, east and west sides. At its base lay two skeletons from inhumation burials. FA8 lay east-west, with its head under the east baulk, and its feet under the west baulk. It was lying on its back, with its hands resting on its thighs. FA9 lay at the same depth, but lay north-south with its head close to the hip of FA8, and its bottom half under the south baulk. It was face down, and seemed to have been deposited without much care (Figs. 3 & 4). Neither burial showed any indication of having been in a coffin. A horse skull lay slightly higher on the sloping north side of the pit, which had been backfilled with loamy top-soil and natural sand. This contained a number of dislocated human bones, notably vertebrae, not coming from FA8 or FA9, as well as animal bones, a large quantity of Roman pottery, some medieval pottery, and a coin of Edward III.



Fig. 3 Skeleton 1 (FA8 in FA1) lies east-west. Horse head lies to the north

Fig. 4 Drawing Showing Relationship between the two skeletons FA8 & FA9 in FA1



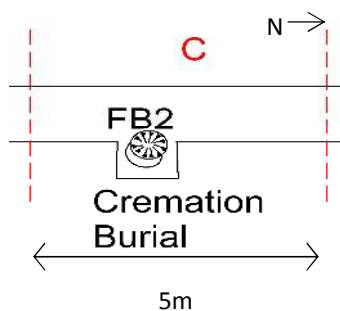
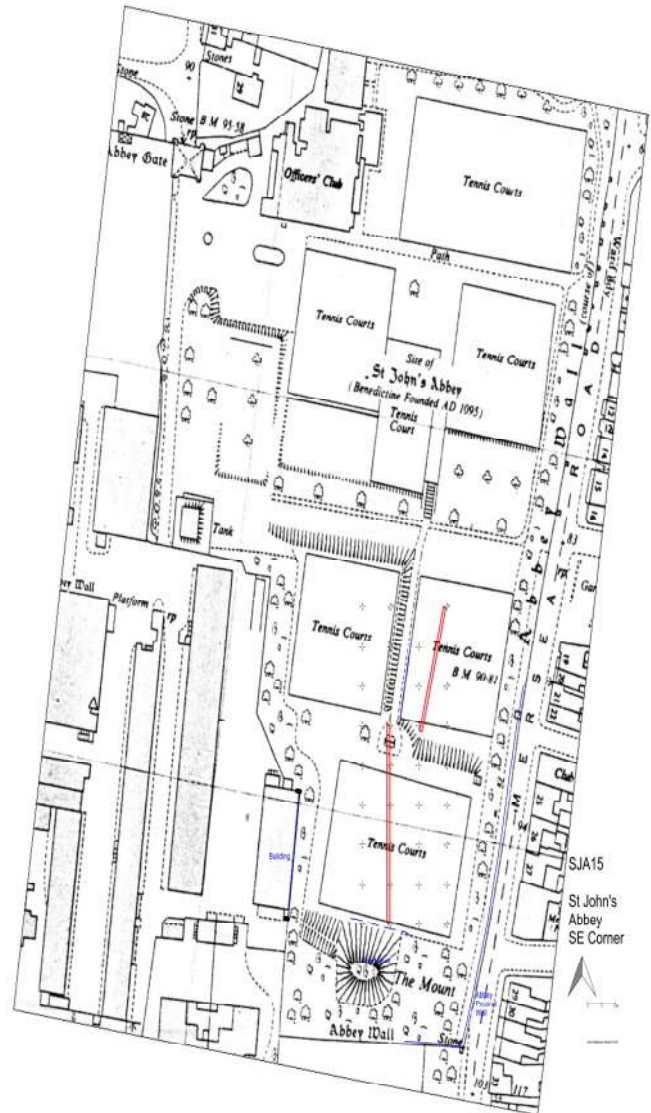
The most notable feature in Trench B was the cremation burial FB2. Fig 1a shows the extension of the trench to the east to include the full extent of the interment. There was no clear indication of the original size of the cut, the surrounding matrix being identical to LB1 elsewhere in the trench. The cremated bones lay in a tightly packed sub-rounded cluster just to the east of the main trench line, resting on, but barely cutting into, the natural LB2. It seems probable that they were in some form of container, though if this was a box, no trace of it remained. A bag seems the most likely possibility. Associated with the bones were two coins which together suggest a date for the cremation of c.280s/90s. Immediately to the west were two small pottery vessels, which had been capped by broken sherds from a third pot (Fig. 5). One of the vessels is a pentice moulded beaker broadly dating to the mid 3rd-4th century. This beaker is in a fine sand greyware fabric with fine silver mica and a black surface. The central body area is rouletted and the base is burnished. There are small, evenly spaced vertical score marks made over the rouletting which appear to have been made by the potter. Unusually, there is an uneven line scored around the neck about halfway up, which is ancient, but has clearly been added after manufacture. The

Dark areas show where there are discontinuities in the under-surface, which can arise from services (the strong linear features – these fit with known pipelines for gas and sewage). Other features are more diffuse, including a rectangular outline near the southern boundary surrounding an area devoid of responses that is crossed by Trench A. While the pipelines were confirmed by the excavations, the diffuse features were not, so their origin and nature remain uncertain.

Trial Trenching

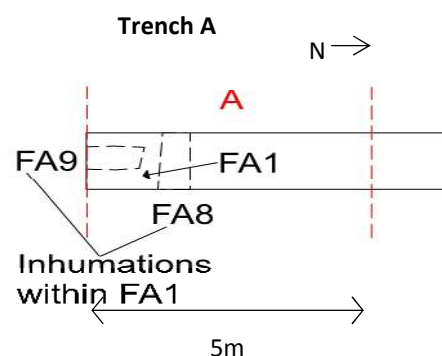
Two trenches 1.2m wide were dug, running approximately north-south down the centre of the site, and together covering most of the total length of the area (Fig. 1). A variable depth of soil was machine stripped from both trenches. In Trench A (southern trench), the depth removed was in the region of 20-30 cm throughout. In trench B (northern trench) a similar thickness was removed from the north end, but at the southern end an approximately 10m length was machine stripped almost down to natural at 50-60 cm below the modern surface. Both trenches were then excavated by hand down to natural over at least half their width.

Fig. 1 St John's Abbey Precinct (OS 1923 map-ping) showing trench positions, TA to the south and TB to the north.



Trench B

Fig 1a showing the areas in Trench A and Trench B where the burials and cremation were found



other pot is very unusual. This is a two handled flask (one handle missing from an ancient break) with a cupped rim and a rounded, slightly pointed, base. Overall the body is slightly pear shaped. For its size the pot appears quite heavy in the hand, indicating a relatively thick body wall.

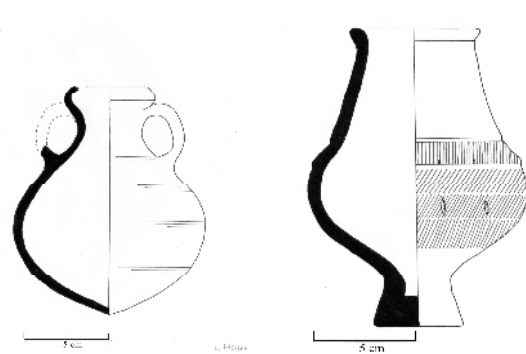


Fig. 5 Cremation Pots in FB2

Small Finds

There was a number of interesting small finds made, including a complete Roman bone hairpin; a Roman bone gaming counter; fragments of painted wall plaster, also Roman in date; pieces of clay pipe stem manufactured in Colchester; five Roman coins. The most interesting coin find was a penny of Henry I, dating from c1111 with a mint signature of Thetford Hargaw. This is a previously unknown moneyer for the Norman coinage, making this a rare and significant discovery.

Three Roman pottery stamps were found, two of them on fragments of Samian ware. Of one, only the letter **.M** survived, meaning *manu* (by the hand of), ie it was made by a potter (but the potter's name is missing). The other shows the letters **DOII (C)**; The complete stamp would have read DOIICCI, for the potter Doeccvs I from central Gaul, who can be dated to about AD 160-190. The third stamp is from a mortarium flange and appears as **ATTICV[/ KANA (B)[**. This is a rare stamp in Britain with only one other published example, from a site at *Verulamium*. The complete stamp would read ATTICVS.FEC/KANABIS.BON which translates as 'Atticus made this at the *canabae* at Bonna' i.e. modern Bonn in Germany.

For the complete list of small finds, see the full report on the CAG website <http://caguk.net/>



Fig 6. Fragments of Potters' Stamps - "Atticus" & "Doeccus"

Conclusions

No trace of the amphitheatre was found. The Trial trenching work by the group's excavators recovered large quantities of Roman building and other ceramic material, typical of 2nd-3rd century domestic activity nearby, but no actual physical structures were found. Geophysical surveys of the surrounding area suggested possible domestic structures within the area, but the group was not able to investigate these further.

Two unusual inhumation burials, and one cremation, all dated to the Roman period, were discovered, recorded and analysed. Who these three people were and why two were buried in such undignified circumstances, will remain a mystery.

The limited number of non-Roman finds suggested that the area had been used for horticultural or agricultural purposes for much of the last 1000 years as part of the historic Abbey precinct and remained untouched by any physical structures during medieval or later times, other than the large, enigmatic exterior walls that run along the Mersea road, towering over local motorists queuing for the roundabout.

The south east corner of the precinct of the medieval St John's Abbey was an area never previously evaluated archaeologically, but which had several features suggesting it to be a suitable candidate for Colchester's missing Roman amphitheatre. In the event the group was able to demonstrate that it was not to be found there and Philip Crummy's search for the amphitheatre goes on.



Excavation Report Acknowledgements

This project was made possible in part by a grant from the Council for British Archaeology's Mick Aston Archaeology Fund, which is supported by English Heritage.

Particular thanks are due to the staff and members of the Colchester Garrison Officers Club, who provided parking, storage and toilet facilities, as well as general support and interest throughout the dig.

All drawings by Anna Moore and Carole Wheeldon. Photographs courtesy of Jon Oldham, Tim Dennis and John Mallinson.

Thanks also to Philip Crummy of Colchester Archaeological Trust, for giving up his time on a regular basis to visit the site, and offering much welcome and authoritative advice.

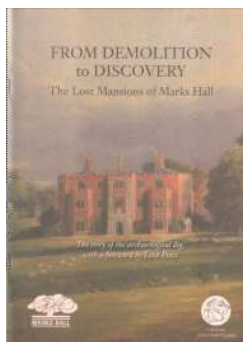
Lastly thanks to all who gave up their time to take part in the work, in whatever capacity. Even though no amphitheatre was found it is hoped that they had an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

The full excavation report can be seen on the CAG website: www.caguk.net

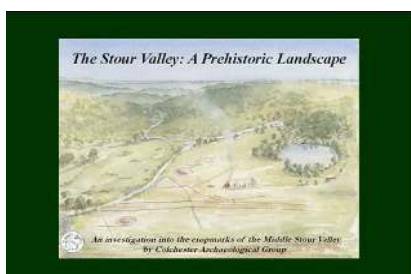


CAG PUBLICATIONS

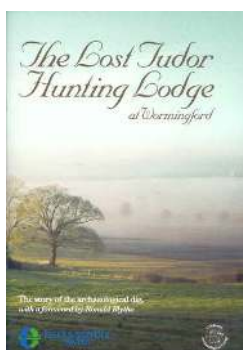
CAG has three current publications, produced during the last few years and based on three major projects. They are all for sale, either at the Monday evening meetings or by e-mailing sales@caguk.net.



In 2011, the CAG field-work team set out to find the footprint of the lost Jacobean mansion of Marks Hall. They found not one, but three mansions on the site, not to mention five separate drainage systems. Read the full story here. £7 per copy + p&p.



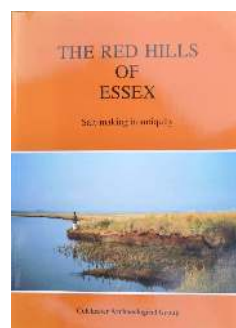
The valley of the River Stour, which separates Essex from Suffolk, is littered with cropmarks revealing prehistoric activity for at least four thousand years. A team from CAG has investigated the area between Bures and Wormingford and sets out its fascinating findings in this book. £5 per copy + p&p.



Rumours of a lost Tudor Hunting Lodge at Wormingford had been circulating for decades before CAG was invited to investigate its alleged site in 2007. As always, the excavations revealed a much more complicated history than previously thought. The story of the dig is told in this book. £2 per copy + p&p or £1 + p&p when bought with one of the above publications.

Also available:

The Red Hills of Essex; the definitive guide to these enigmatic and fast-disappearing sites that appear at frequent intervals around the coast, providing evidence of the salt-making industry of Iron Age and Roman Essex. This comprehensive book was produced by CAG in 1990 and remains the standard text on the subject. £5 per copy + p&p.



The full set of four publications can be ordered for £15 + p&p

Please also note that all available past Bulletins have been digitised and can be downloaded from the CAG website: www.caguk.net

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Bernard Colbron, 1944 - 2016,
who joined the CAG committee in 1995 and served loyally as our
librarian from then until 2016



