

Introduction: The Abingdon Excavation Committee

By DAVID MILES and MICHAEL PARRINGTON

THE Abingdon Excavation Committee was formed in 1971 as a result of the recommendations of a working party of the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the small market town of Abingdon (1975 pop. 19,500) was undergoing extensive redevelopment in the town centre with the construction of a new shopping precinct, a new relief road (Stratton Way), a housing scheme immediately north of St. Helen's Church and many smaller projects. The areas immediately outside Abingdon were being radically changed by the construction of new housing estates, such as Barton Farm, Peachcroft Farm to the north-east, and gravel extraction to the south and east of the town. In 1971-2 the Abingdon By-Pass (A34) was constructed around the west side of the town. Much redevelopment had in fact taken place without any professional archaeological provision in the town.

Abingdon has received intermittent attention from archaeologists over the past fifty years but the results have been prolific. The Abbey, thanks to the synthesis of Mrs. Gabrielle Lambrick and Martin Biddle, is known to be one of the most potentially interesting Saxon and Medieval ecclesiastical sites in the country.¹ The whole of the urban area also appears to overlie a Romano-British settlement. Immediately outside the town to the south a Saxon cemetery was located when the Saxton Road housing estate was constructed,² while to the north-east E. T. Leeds located the now famous neolithic Abingdon Causewayed Camp³ with its associated avenue of barrows at Barrow Hills, also the site of a Romano-British cemetery and Saxon settlement.⁴ The formation of the Abingdon Archaeological Society in 1968 meant that rather more systematic observation of redevelopments began and large quantities of Romano-British material were recovered from the line of the Stratton Way and other urban sites. Two important excavations were carried out by the society; at Tithe Farm, under the direction of Mrs. Eve Harris, where part of an unusual Romano-British building was uncovered, and at the gravel pits at Wilsham Road (directed by Mr. R. Henderson) where Neolithic, Bronze Age, Romano-British and Saxon features were found. The Society also observed the line of the Abingdon By-Pass in 1971-2. In 1971 the Department of the Environment sponsored a small excavation at the southern end of West St. Helen Street under the direction of Mr. Nicholas Clayton and this, with a small excavation in the rear of 30 East St. Helen Street, confirmed that extensive archaeological deposits underlay Abingdon.

¹ M. Biddle, *the late Mrs. H. T. Lambrick, and J. N. L. Myres, 'The Early History of Abingdon, Berkshire, and its Abbey', Medieval Archaeology*, xii (1968), 26-69.

² E. T. Leeds and D. B. Harden, *The Anglo Saxon Cemetery at Abingdon* (1936).

³ E. T. Leeds, 'A Neolithic site at Abingdon, Berks (1st report), 1936', *Antiq. J.*, vii (1927), 438-64.

⁴ R. J. C. Atkinson, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks, 1944-5', *Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii (1952-3), 14-35.

The Abingdon Excavation Committee appointed a director of excavations (David Miles) in April 1972 on a three-year basis. Work in that year was concentrated in two small urban excavations on West St. Helen Street and the Market Place, and also on the crop-mark complex at Barton Court Farm. A headquarters was established at 10 Broad Street, the former Steam Plough public house, thanks to Morland and Co. Ltd. who provided this building for the Committee, rent free. The house was divided into offices, finds processing rooms, stores and a drawing office. At the end of the first year's work an exhibition 'Digging up the Past' was shown in the County Hall, Abingdon, and an afternoon of lectures was held in John Mason's School hall. Expenditure in 1973-4 was approximately £5,600.

In 1973 Michael Parrington succeeded David Miles as the Committee's Field Officer, the latter becoming Assistant Director of the newly-formed Oxfordshire Archaeological Committee, with which the Abingdon Committee became federated. The principal excavation was carried out on the north side of Broad Street, the site of extensive redevelopment involving the construction of a multi-storey car-park. Work was also carried out on the site of the Old Gaol and a number of small sites within the town (FIG. 1).⁵ Excavation was able to continue at Barton Court Farm, owing to delays in the proposed construction programme. Progress was made towards the publication of the Committee's excavation by employing a draughtsman and finds processor in the Broad Street headquarters. In the second year expenditure was approximately £10,000.

The Excavation Committee must particularly thank its donors, notably the Department of the Environment, Abingdon Borough Council, Amey Ltd., Abingdon Rural District Council, Oxford Preservation Trust, British Academy, J. Curtis and Sons Ltd., Berkshire Archaeological Society, Newbury and District Field Club, Prehistoric Society, C.P.R.E., St. John's and Pembroke Colleges, and Radley College. Berkshire County Council and the Pilgrim Trust gave substantial grants for 1973-4. Many other individuals and local firms also made donations. Messrs. Benfield and Loxley, and Amey Roadstone Construction, have been most helpful in allowing us to observe their operations on site.

All archaeological work is of necessity a team effort and our thanks go to the many volunteers who have helped with excavation and publication and to the Committee's long-term staff, Diane Collins, Patricia Roberts, Wendy Lee, Christopher Balkwill, Lindsay Parrington, Roger Thomas, Maeve Fleischmann, Karen Parrington, Swantundra Pidera, Marshall Rumbaugh, Bob Sylvester, Simon Timms, and the active members of the Abingdon Archaeological Society. We are also grateful to those who have contributed specialist reports, Richard Bradley, Jo de Goris, Eric Edwards, Regina Haldon, Martin Jones, Denys Pringle, Warwick Rodwell, and Bob Wilson.

Successive mayors of Abingdon have taken on the task of chairing the Excavation Committee, and Dr. Joan Harcourt Norris, Mr. Michael Matthews and Mr. Peter Merrit have enthusiastically supported archaeological work in the town. We would like to extend our grateful thanks to them and to all the other members of the Committee, especially Tom Hassall and Trevor Rowley, who were particularly helpful in the formation of the excavation unit. We must gratefully acknowledge

⁵ M. Parrington, 'Small Excavations in Abingdon, 1973', *Oxoniensia*, xxxix (1974), 34-43.

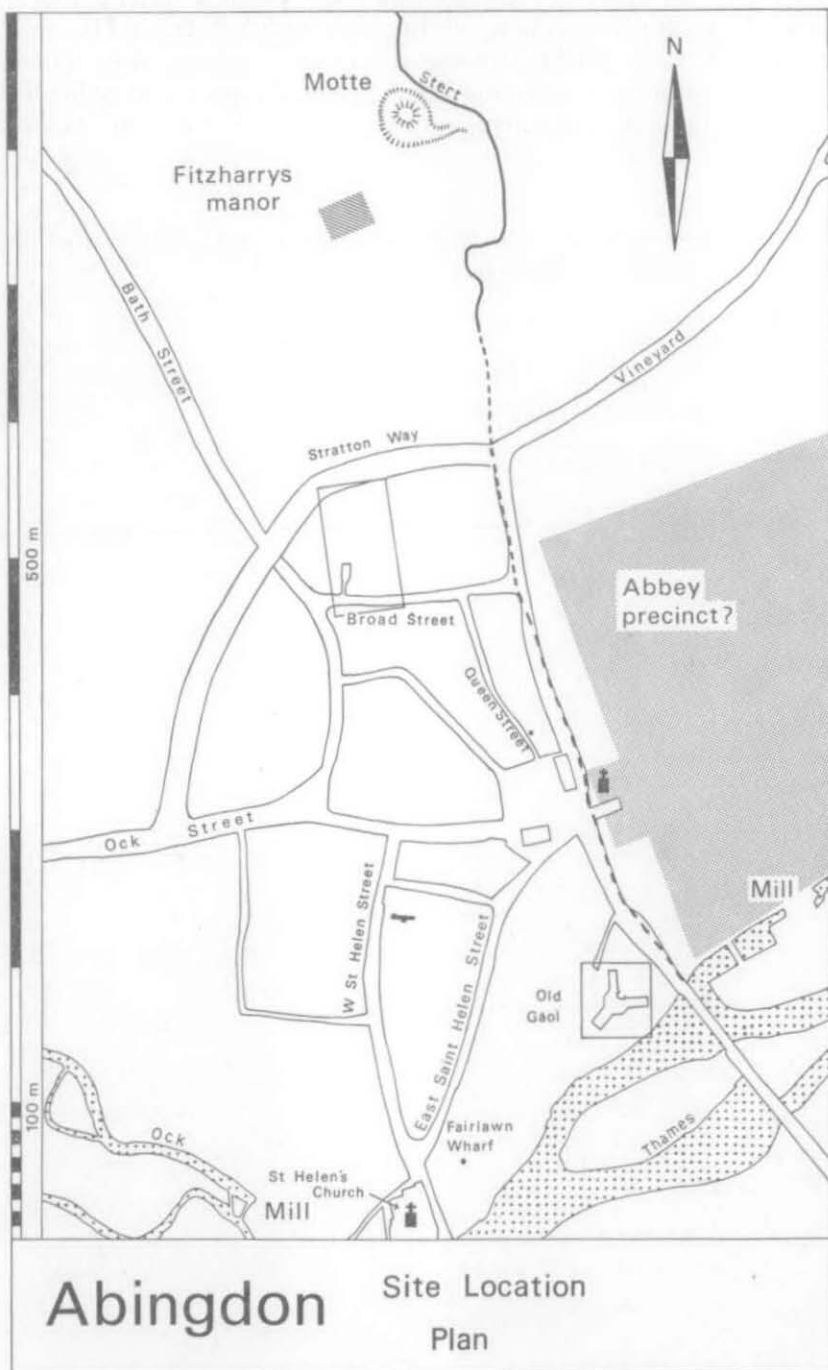


FIG. 1
Location Plan of Sites Excavated in Central Abingdon.

the assistance given by officers of Abingdon Borough Council : Mr. J. Jones, Deputy Town Clerk, Mr. K. Rathbone, Borough Engineer, and Mr. David Heavens, Mr. K. Manning, Mrs. M. Cox and Mr. George Austin of Abingdon Museum. Last but not least we take pleasure in extending our thanks to the people of Abingdon who at all times have shown such an interest in our work and visited the excavations in great numbers.

Publication of these reports has been made possible by a grant from the Department of the Environment which is gratefully acknowledged.