

Holyrood Abbey

Abbey Crossing: Bench Installation

Proposed Works

The works involve the installation of a new bench immediately to the east of the Abbey in the area of the former crossing (Figures 1&2). The bench footprint measures approximately 1600mm by 500mm, and weighs approximately 600kg. To accommodate this a section of the existing turf will be cut back from the edge of the existing path (as detailed on the accompanying plan). Top soil will then be removed to a depth of 300mm and then the area filled with 100mm hardcore, 100mm blinding, 50mm whin dust & 50mm blais.

Lifting gear and transport will be required to move the bench from its current position to the proposed location.

Historical Background

The Augustinian Abbey of Holyrood was founded by David I in 1128 and initially consisted of a small church (aisle-less and cruciform) of which the sole upstanding survival is its east processional doorway at the east end of the south nave wall. A major rebuilding in the 13th century created a structure of cathedral-like proportions. The surviving nave demonstrates that this was an elegant and ambitious structure with a choir and transepts to the east.

However, following ransacking by English forces in 1547, as well as the change in worship following the Reformation, the choir, crossing and transepts were demolished in 1570 as the commendator could not afford the upkeep. A screen wall was then erected across the east end of the nave, forming a building which was used as the Canongate parish church, and which remains upstanding today.

The parish church was in use until 1687 when James VII converted the nave into a royal chapel for his revived Order of the Thistle. The nave was reroofed in 1758 with stone slabs replacing the lead, however in 1768 the extra weight caused the vaulting to collapse taking much of the north arcade with it. Since then the Abbey has been in a ruinous state, although burials continued in and around the nave.

Archaeological interest in the Abbey remains started in the late 19th century with proposals to landscape the Palace grounds.

“As the portion of the original edifice which was pulled down in 1570, consisted of the transept, choir, and the aisles to the east of the great central tower, it would be most desirable that the foundations, so long covered with soil and rank grass, should also be cleared out, surrounded with a gravel walk, and inclosed [sic] within the pleasure grounds of the Palace”¹

However these plans came to nothing and it wasn't until 1909 that the buried remains of the former Abbey (choir, crossing and transept) were excavated and consolidated by the Ministry of Works. Further excavations in 1924 uncovered the remains of the original 12th century church (Figure 3).

Excavations and archaeological monitoring were carried out in 1999 for replacement of a water pipe on a pre-existing route running N-S along the crossing. This work revealed *“considerable evidence of burials, both disturbed and undisturbed [...] encountered in the trenches throughout the crossing [...] burials in the centre of the crossing included a shallow pit 1m wide and 0.25m deep that contained*

¹ Laing, D (1855) pp.115

disarticulated human bones: possibly reburial after disturbance, perhaps after the erection of the east wall of the present church in 1570”².

Assessment of Archaeological Sensitivity

Previous archaeological work has been carried out in the vicinity of the proposed bench location. It is unclear whether the investigations carried out by the Ministry of Works in the early 20th century targeted the area to the west of the modern path through the crossing. An image held in the HES Collections (SC 1171767³) (Figure 4) indicates that at some point during the investigations the proposed location was covered in wooden scaffolding and therefore may not have been investigated.

The route of the water pipe replacement ran along the west side of the path which runs N-S through the crossing, in the immediate vicinity of the proposed location, although the exact route in relation to the path and proposed location cannot be ascertained.

The monitoring work carried out by Kirkdale Archaeology during this replacement revealed a host of significant archaeological deposits including walls relating to the 12th century church, levelling deposits for the church, graves and human remains as well as burial pits for re-deposited human remains. It also indicated that the archaeological deposits started at a depth ca. 0.46m below the surface, beneath the modern path and its bottoming material, and this holds true across the 35m section east of the Abbey (Figures 5&6).

All of the archaeological work carried out has demonstrated existence of significant archaeological remains and deposits across the area of the Abbey and its surroundings. Thus the area is highly sensitive to both ground breaking and above-ground works.

Proposed Mitigation

The location of the bench is in a highly sensitive area which previously was the centre of the 13th century abbey church. This area is known to be of high archaeological potential and previous work in the vicinity has demonstrated that archaeological deposits relating to both the Abbey buildings and burials remain in the area. While the results of previous investigations suggest that significant archaeological deposits should not be encountered within the depths required for the bench foundations, we cannot rule out the possibility that some or all of the area, and thus archaeological deposits, between the path and the Abbey wall has not been disturbed by previous investigations.

For this reason it is recommended that close archaeological monitoring is undertaken by an archaeologist during the turf and topsoil removal. This will involve hand excavation of the foundations to the required depth by the MCU, close monitoring and recording of any significant deposits. If significant archaeological deposits are encountered during excavation, work will stop immediately and Historic Environment Scotland CRT and Heritage Directorate should be consulted and a new location for the bench will then be determined.

Due to the sensitivities across the whole area it is also recommended that any vehicles used during the works stay on the route of the modern path, with boarding being used when not on the path or for any stabiliser legs used. Any upstanding remains (low walls etc.) and foundations should be avoided.

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² Ewart & Gallagher (2013) pp. 32

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1171767>

Appendix 1: Figures

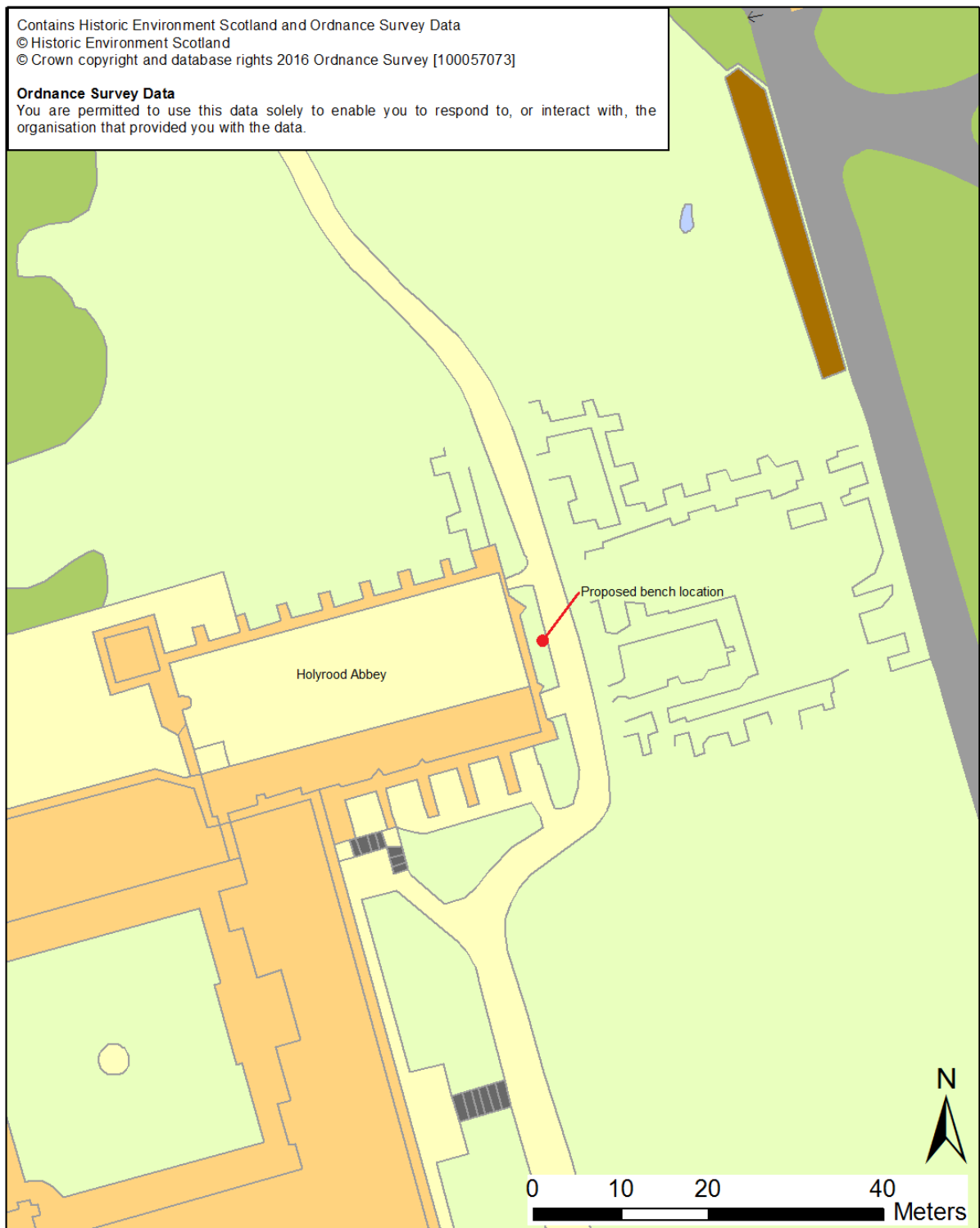


Figure 1: Proposed Bench Location, Holyrood Abbey



Figure 4: Image showing remains encountered during Ministry of Works excavations, note wooden scaffolding in front of Abbey east wall (facing west)

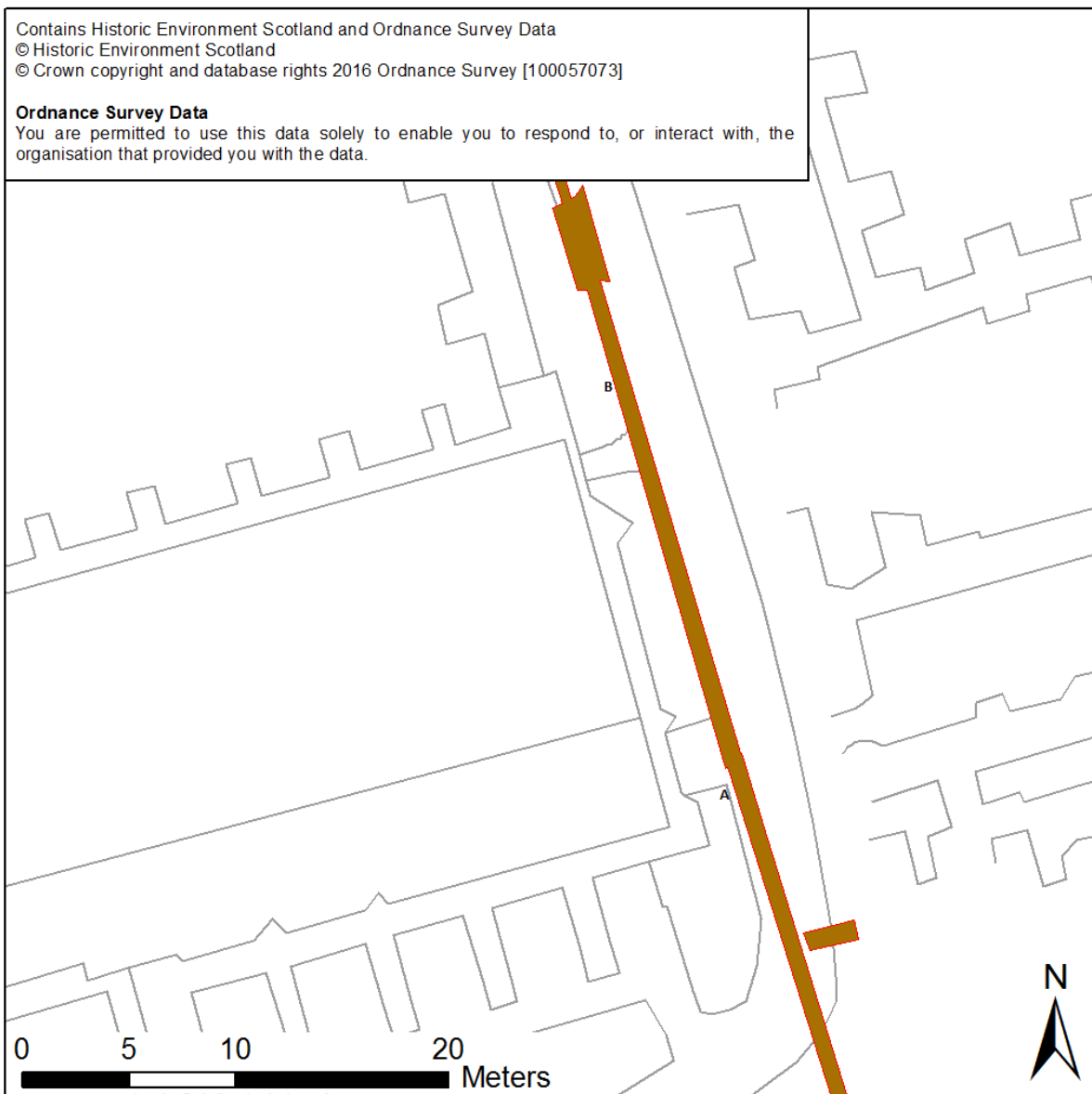


Figure 5: Location plan of 1998 monitoring work during pipe replacement, including location of section A-B

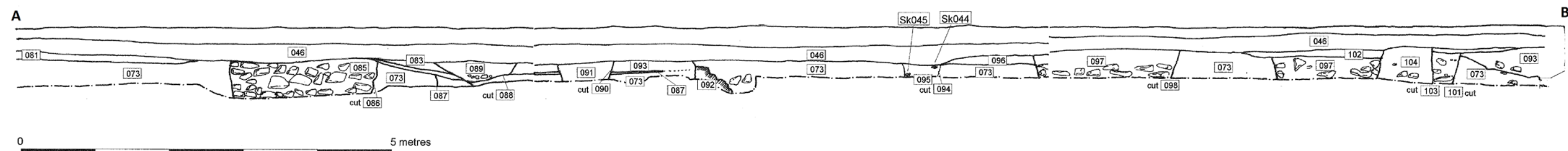


Figure 5: East facing section A-B as recorded during 1998 monitoring works (Adapted from site report)

Contexts of particular interest

- 045- Path
- 046 – Path bottoming
- 073+093 – 12th century Abbey building rafting/levelling
- 085+097 – 12th century Abbey walling
- 089 – pit of disturbed/re-deposited human remains
- 094+095 – grave
- 103+104 – grave