

**Historic building recording at
St John's Abbey Wall, Flagstaff, Napier Road,
Colchester, Essex, CO2 7GA**

July 2016



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**commissioned by RPS
on behalf of Taylor Wimpey East London**

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Introduction

This is the report on a Level 1 historic building recording carried out on part of St John's Abbey Wall, Napier Road, Colchester, Essex, prior to conservation work being undertaken. The work was commissioned by RPS, on behalf of Taylor Wimpey East London, at the request of Historic England, as necessary repairs would have slightly altered the appearance of the historic wall. The building recording was carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in July 2016.

All work was carried out according to standards and practices contained in the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures* (2008), *Management of research projects in the historic environment* (MoRPHE), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14). In addition, the guidelines contained in *English Heritage: Understanding Historic Buildings, A guide to good recording practice* (2006) and *RCHME: Descriptive Specification 3rd Edition* were followed.

Results

See Photographs 1-2 and Fig 1.

Discussion

The subject of this report is part of the southern section of the precinct wall of St John's Abbey. The wall was built after the foundation of the abbey in 1095 and before the destruction of the abbey by fire in 1133 (*CAR 1*, 40-41). The face of this section of wall is consistent with the wall elsewhere in the circuit, in that it is composed of fragments of Roman brick, septaria and Kentish ragstone, with some modern repairs. The mix in the medieval wall is about 50% septaria and 50% ragstone, excluding the relatively small amount of brick. The presence of such a substantial quantity of septaria suggests that it is unlikely that the precinct wall was built using stone robbed from the Roman circus, since the circus is built entirely of Kentish ragstone (excluding brick). It is interesting to note that the south section of the abbey wall follows very closely to the site of the eastern half of the central circus barrier. However, investigations in 2015/6 (Flagstaff excavations, report pending) explored the relationship between the circus barrier and abbey wall, and it became apparent that the correspondence between the two is probably fortuitous, or if there is some deliberate correspondence it needs a more complex explanation than simply the reuse of the Roman structure in the medieval wall.

The most obvious repairs to this piece of wall are of granite which is unusual and suggests a very modern date. The top of this wall is also missing. It is hard to judge how much has been removed but it could easily have been twice as high as it is now. Before the recent conservation of the wall took place it was obscured by a row of closely spaced conifers. When they were removed the remains of what appears to be a blocked doorway were exposed at the east end of the wall (Photograph 1-2, Fig 1). Both jams of the doorway are made visible by vertical lines of bricks although there is no sign of the head of the door which we can only assume was removed when the door was filled in. The blocking material in the lost doorway is similar to the material used to build the wall itself. The apparent absence of any peg-tile in the doorway (as in the main wall itself) suggests that it was blocked by the 13th century at the very latest.

The question arises as to the purpose of this blocked doorway. It seems more in keeping with some minor structure built into the rear of the wall or perhaps even integral to it. There is a record of a gate in the south side of the precinct (VCH 1994, 304). The reference gives the impression that we should expect to find a substantial structure, not necessarily on the scale of the abbey gate, but something significant and presumably wide enough for a cart or carriage (unlike this doorway which is only wide enough for a person). Not enough is known of the gate mentioned in VCH to rule out that this doorway is actually it, however VCH does state that the gate was in existence until at least 1640, which is significantly later than the suggested 13th century date for the blocked doorway.

References

CAR 1	1981	<i>Colchester Archaeological Report 1: Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester</i> , by Philip Crummy
VCH	1994	<i>The Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Essex, Volume IX, The Borough of Colchester</i> . Oxford University Press

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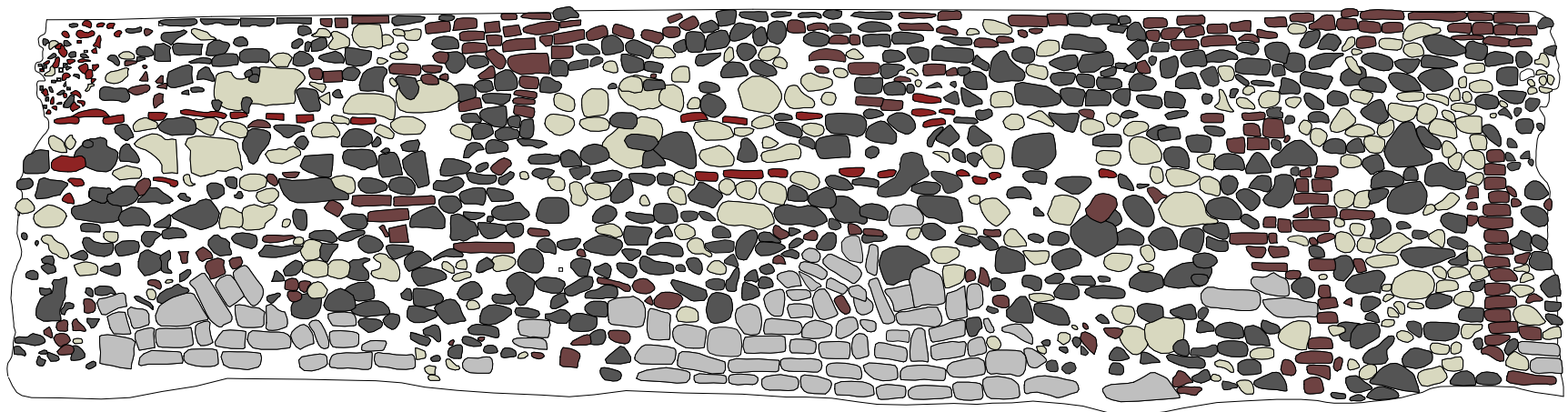
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Photograph 1 St John's Abbey Wall before conservation



Photograph 2 St John's Abbey Wall after conservation



- Roman ceramic building material
- Septaria
- Ragstone
- Granite
- Modern brick



Fig 1 Plan of the wall before conservation