Abbey Remains Project
Archaeological Brief
November 2026

'REDISCOVERING TAVISTOCK ABBEY PROJECT'

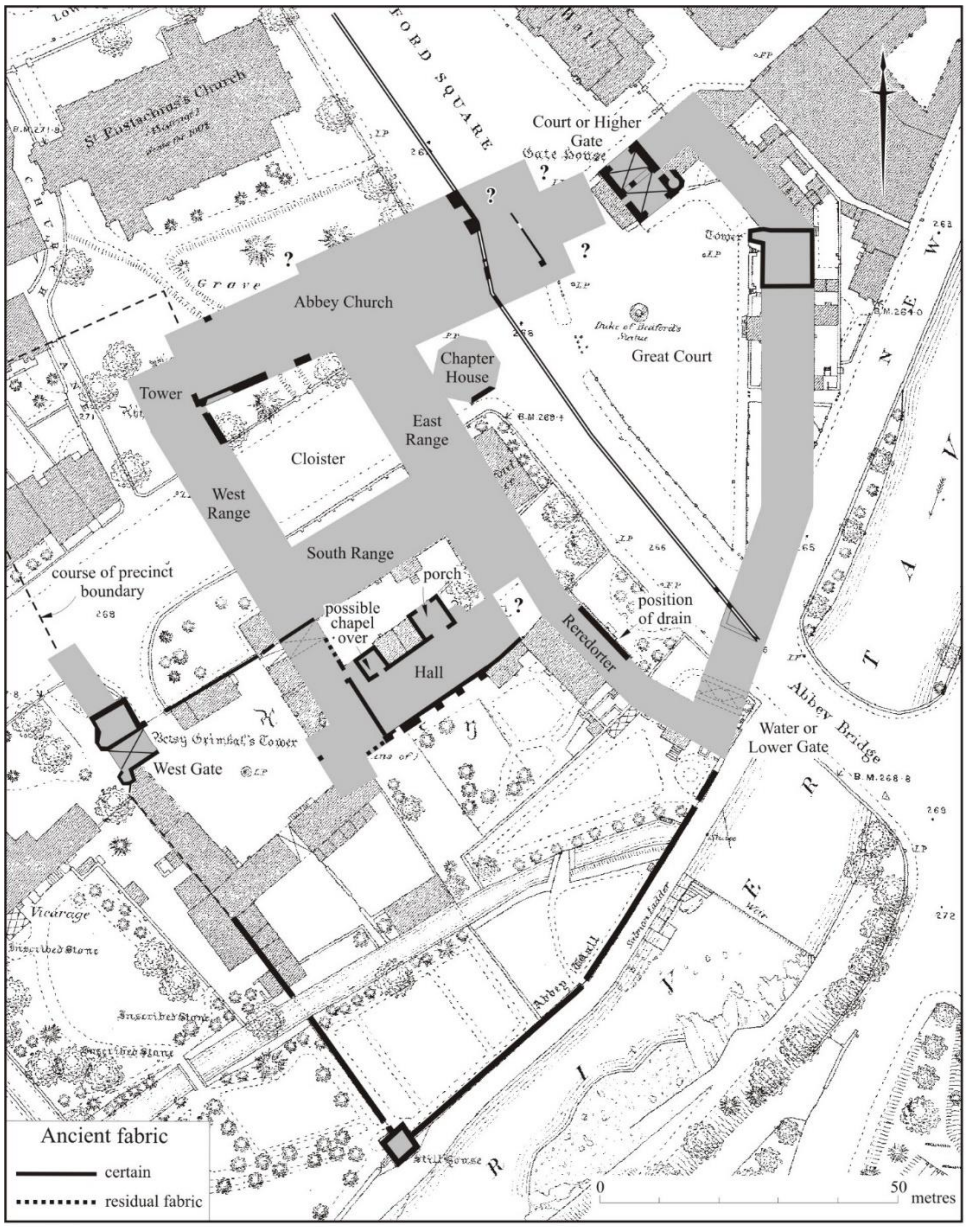


Fig. 4 Conjectural reconstruction of the main elements of the plan of Tavistock Abbey, superimposed on the OS 1:500 town plan of Tavistock, sheet CV.8.17, of 1885 (revised version of Blaylock 1998, fig. 3; and Stead and Blaylock forthcoming, fig. 11).

Fig 1: A copy of Dr Blaylock's plan of the abbey

BRIEF

FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSULTANT TO OVERSEE AN EXCAVATION PROGRAMME AT BETSY GRIMBAL'S TOWER AND THE CLOISTER RUIN WHICH FORMS PART OF THE *'REDISCOVERING TAVISTOCK ABBEY PROJECT'*

TAVISTOCK HERITAGE TRUST

Tavistock Town Council
Working for the local community

Made possible with Heritage Fund

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1. Summary

Tavistock Town Council as Client and Accountable Body invites tenders from consultants with the relevant skills and capability to carry out planning and execution of archaeological excavations (CIfA standards), associated reporting writing, handling of finds and digital archiving of the areas shown on drawings Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Due to the time sensitivities relating to the overall wider project deliverables, on appointment, contractors are required to apply for the necessary consents to enable the excavation works to take place, which includes one scheduled monument application for the two sites, presenting a robust and focussed archaeological project design and Written Scheme of Investigation that poses the relevant research questions and provides clear justification for the works taking place under SMC. This will include full sections on human remains, archaeological science and proposals for post-excavation analysis. After the consultant has liaised with Historic England (site meeting with project team has already occurred with Historic England in August 2026), the target is to ensure that the **SMC is submitted no later than end January 2027**. The appointed consultant will also assist the client with the Faculty application relating to Abbey Cloisters Ruin excavation.

As part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund grant conditions, when considering pricing the works an appropriate allowance should be made for working closely with volunteers, as it is the intention to deliver this project with a community engagement approach, pertaining to volunteers under supervision carrying out actual digging and on-site curation.

The consultant should allow for contacting sector specialists and statutory bodies as part of a desk top exercise to ascertain what previous equivalent survey work exists which will inform the works programme. In addition, the project team has commissioned a Ground Penetrating Radar Survey and the report should be available for the end of 2026, which will inform the strategy relating to the SMC application regarding the findings, especially within the Abbey Cloisters Ruin area.

On completion of the excavation works, the contractor will produce a written report which is suitable to inform next steps with regards to providing valuable insight to the research team and interpretation consultants. It should also be in an appropriate format for public perusal as the results will feed into a wider interpretation programme, both digital and physical. As a minimum the report should include: title page, summary of project background, executive summary of results, description and illustration of site locations, methodology, plans and reports of all documentary and other research, description of the results, interpretation of the results, summary and location of project archives, site layout plans, plans showing locations of excavations, detailed plans of areas where archaeological features are recognised along with adequate OD spot height information, section drawings of deposits and features, site matrices where appropriate, photographical records, consideration of evidence in wider context, summary table and descriptive text showing features, classes and number of artefacts recovered and soil and stonework profiles for interpretation and confidence rating.

The consultant must allow for the costs of data archiving, within 6 months of completion of the report, including completing the online OASIS entry and depositing the digital archive with the Archaeological Data Service.

The brief is also available on the Tavistock Town Council website.

The estimated budget allowance for this project scope is between £17,000 to £24,000 plus VAT.

The start date for contract and preparing for applying for consents is mid-December 2026, with excavation work targeted for either school summer holidays or just after in September 2027. The production of the report would need to follow shortly afterwards to inform the research and interpretation objectives of the project.

2. Project Background

This contract forms part of the Rediscovering Abbey Remains Project. The objectives are wide and diverse; part of the project is to ensure the continuous repair and care of the Tavistock Abbey remains - Betsy Grimbal's Tower and the Still House. Further elements include a geophysical survey, extensive archaeological investigations including the remains of the Cloister, research into the abbey and its life and power and the creation of AV interpretation of the finds and research. This will ensure long term interest both from the local community and visitors, and provide knowledge of the abbey (which until now has been rather piecemeal) as well as creating an educational resource for schools and research.

Tavistock Abbey is a Scheduled Monument SAM 1020401.

Archaeological work as part of the project is necessitated by the partial and uneven knowledge of the structural remains of the Abbey, many details of which remain poorly understood. Archaeological excavations in the town have been limited, and there has been little work done within the Abbey Precinct. There were excavations by GH Radford (1914, 1929) in the Abbey Church and excavations by Exeter Archaeology (Stead 1999) in Bedford Square and the end of Plymouth Road. Further work was carried out by Cotswold Archaeology in the same general area (Steinmetzer 2012).

The extant remains of Betsy Grimbal's Tower have been detailed in various reports by Blaylock (1998 & 2001), Govier (2017). These studies outlined the surviving structure, the masonry and architectural elements, and attempted a phasing of the remains based on the visible data. Some elements of this phasing have been questioned and some substantiation is needed. Betsy Grimbal's Tower has always been interpreted as a late mediaeval structure, perhaps part of the Abbot's lodgings or a guest house, which have been subjected to ruin, partial repairs, and possible enhancement through the 18th & 19th centuries. This interpretation has recently been called into question by a new theory that the building is largely, if not entirely, relatively recent 'folly' (Geddys, blog posts and pers comm.).

In view of this proposal by a respected local historian, it has become necessary to re-examine both the historical records and the structural remains. These have produced tantalising but inconclusive data which could conceivably support either interpretation and it is believed that only by examination of the buried remains of foundations and walls, and any dating evidence that may be associated with them, can this question be resolved and a reasonably definitive history of the building be constructed.

The Cloister ruin has been described several times, but has not been subjected to any sort of detailed structural analysis since its examination by Radford in 1914. No report of this excavation exists, and the only record consists of comments in papers on the abbey (Radford 1914 & 1929) including a drawn elevation of the North side of the wall as excavated. (More information is included in section 5.)

3. Location Plan of sites

This plan shows the two locations for the excavations (marked in red) as well as the wider geophysical survey area being completed by others in Nov/Dec 26.
See Appendix II J26.014

4. Location Plans for excavations

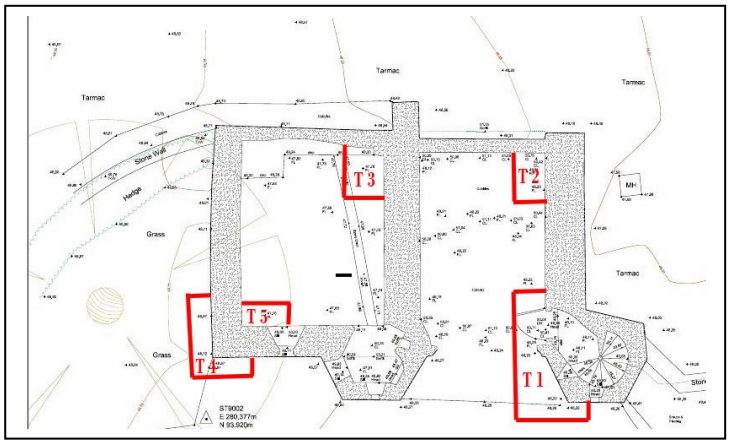


Fig. 2. Location of trenches at Betsy Grimbal's Tower. (Base drawing Le Page Architects)

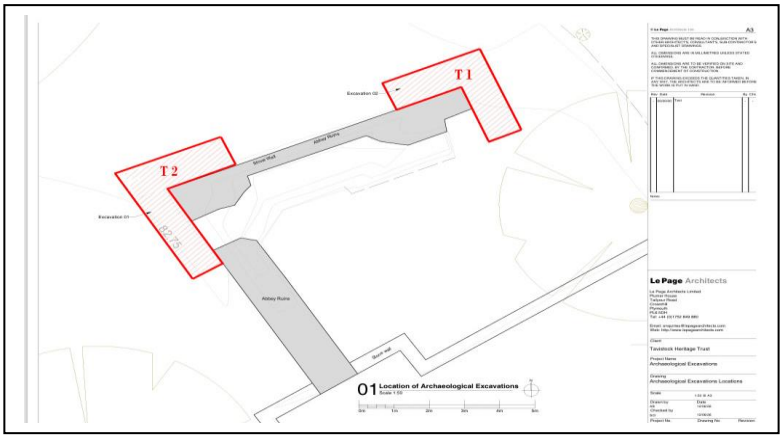


Fig. 3. Location of Trenches at The Cloister ruin. (Base drawing Le Page Architects)

5. Location Plans for excavations

Betsy Grimbal's Tower: Aims by Trench

T1: The main interior trench at the western entrance to the gate, along the south-east wall. Approx 4.2 m^2 inside structure (1.2m^2 external), intended to

- Locate any earlier floor level/s in the gateway, particularly the level at which the spiral stair ends.
- Locate the lower pintle of the gate.
- Assess the nature of the surface immediately outside the gate to see whether there is a road or track leading to the gate.
- Clarify the sequence and relationships between floor levels and the walls/foundations comprising the gate, the passage, and the flanking stair tower.

T2: Small trench (1.2m x 1.2m) at opposite end of the gate passage to investigate:

- The relationship between the south-east and north-east (precinct side) walls of the gate
- The surviving early floor level/s in the passage to confirm T1 findings.

T3: Small trench (1.5m x 1.0m) in eastern corner of the Extension to investigate:

- The relationship between the SE wall (NW wall of the Gatehouse) and the NE wall, some of which survives in that corner, and at foundation level.
- The relationship of the drain to the foundations of the NE wall here.
- The original ground level into which the foundations were cut.

T4: Trench around the external western corner of the extant structure (1.5 x 0.6m on SW side, 1.5 x 0.5m on the NW [reducing tree root damage]). Intended to

- Examine the relationship between the gable end wall and the Extension wall at foundation level, to clarify the conflicting evidence above ground.
- Look for any dating evidence for the Storehouse structure or the Extension.
- Look for remains of the precinct wall beneath the NW wall.

T5: Small triangular trench (c. 0.5m^2) in the angle between the SW stair tower and the precinct wall to the S. To investigate the position of the original precinct wall at this point, and its relationship to the stair tower.

Note: T1 and T4 section on front elevation only already completed by others.

Abbey Cloisters Ruin Rationale

The Cloister ruin (Fig 3) was excavated in 1914 by Lady Radford but the records of this dig are minimal. It is evident from the published section that a trench was dug alongside the north side of the extant wall, and continued for a short distance on the NW side to the entrance e to the churchyard. The exact length and dimensions of the trench are not known, although it apparently reached the level of the internal tiled floor, some 7 feet (2.1m) below the present surface level. It is also not known whether the excavations continued on the

southern and western sides of the extant wall. There must also have been a trench of unknown size to locate the north wall of the abbey church, now marked by a granite block on the surface. This last we expect to be confirmed by the geophysical survey and no intrusive excavation is planned on the north wall.

The current proposed trenches (T1 & T2, Fig 3) will be located along the northern side of the surviving wall, one at each end, and will project around the ends to examine the continuation of the church wall. These will permit a re-examination and proper recording of the buried medieval floors and surface levels on both sides of the church wall, as it was exposed by Radford; and to further examine the masonry at both ends of the wall where there is some evidence of alterations or consolidations of uncertain phasing. Where possible, the new excavations will be kept within the bounds of the 1914 trench, although with the expected depth of the floors it will be necessary in compliance with health and safety legislation to widen the upper part of the trench. The majority of this lateral extension will be within the level of known 19th century infill, with only a small portion of the earlier churchyard being disturbed to create the step.

The gap between the two Cloister trenches is positioned to avoid further disturbance of a grave found in Radford's trench. It appears that most other graves were set back from the north side of the wall so that it may be possible that no other graves fall within the limits of excavation. An allowance should be made to address if the excavations do disturb any human remains.

6. Project Management

The archaeological consultant contract will be managed by Tavistock Town Council in conjunction with Tavistock Heritage Trust and in liaison with the relevant landowners. Information about the Tavistock Town Council is available on www.tavistock.gov.uk, and the Tavistock Heritage Trust on www.heritageintavistock.org.

7. Submission requirements

Applicants should note that submissions should be made by **post** and must be received no later than the stated deadline. It is the tenderers responsibility to ensure that their tenders arrive at the office address and by this date and time. Tavistock Town Council does not undertake to consider late tenders.

If you are interested in tendering for this project please return your tender in writing in a sealed envelope by no later than **midday on Monday 7th December 2026** marked**:**

CONFIDENTIAL – REDISCOVERING TAVISTOCK ABBEY PROJECT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL to:

The Proper Officer, Tavistock Town Council, Town Council Offices, Drake Road, TAVISTOCK, Devon, PL19 0AU.

For tender enquiries please contact Wayne Southall on 01822 616134 or via email wayne.southall@tavistock.gov.uk

For site access please contact Becky Rowe on 01822 616134 or via email becky.rowe@tavistock.gov.uk

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Note – prospective tenderers are prohibited from contacting staff or councillors to canvass or encourage support for their tender outside of the prescribed process.

The tenders will be assessed 60% price, 40% technical return.

As part of the price submission, a half day rate and day rate should be included for any potential additional works commissioned.

The technical return should include:

- Methodology/programme for delivering the project scope, including health and safety considerations
- Evidence of suitable insurance cover, including professional indemnity
- Schedule of anticipated stage payments
- QA documentation relating to key personnel and communication arrangements
- Two suitable references
- Evidence of experience in delivering/and or managing two projects of a similar scope/size
- Evidence of experience in undertaking excavations within scheduled monument sites

The price return should include:

- All necessary work to apply for and secure consents relating to SMC and Faculty
- Desk top research to inform next steps relating to the above (including review of the GPR survey which may alter the SMC application strategy)
- Management and oversight of all excavations as listed above, working in conjunction with selected community volunteers, including provision of associated equipment and health and safety/site security interventions
- Production of Report as outlined above
- Management of finds and associated analysis
- Digital archiving as outlined above
- Allowance of three days post Sept 2027 for additional community engagement activities and liaison with research team/interpretation consultants