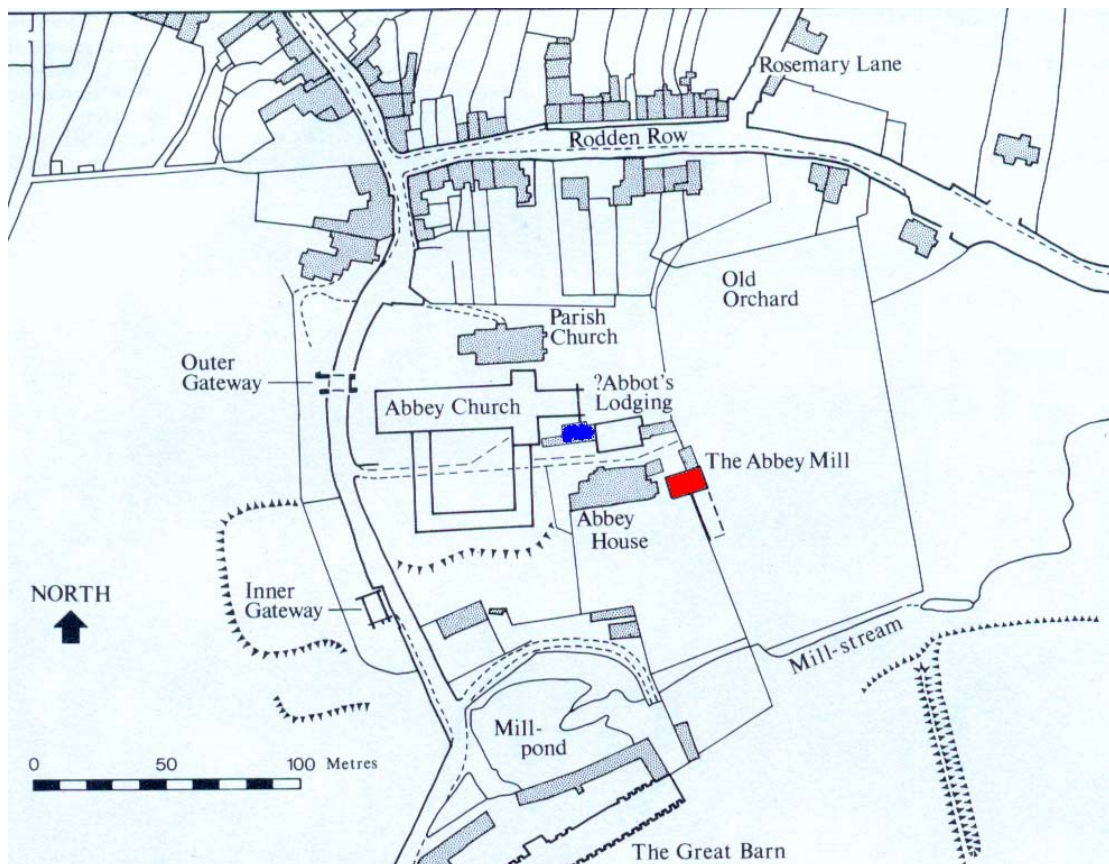


The Abbotsbury Roman Mill

Roger Ross Turner
Peter Laurie



One of the remaining monastic buildings in Abbotsbury is the watermill in the NE corner of the grounds of the Abbey House Hotel. The view in the photograph above is looking somewhat east of north. The arch in the centre opens into the wheel chamber, whose floor is now about 6' below ground level. The building was excavated by Roger Ross Turner, the tenant of the Abbey House in the 1980s.



The mill is marked *red*. The building site referred to in the text is *blue* From Graham



*Roger Ross Turner during
the excavation*

He was a merchant navy officer who had left the service because of an injury. He and his helpers recovered an immense amount of material:



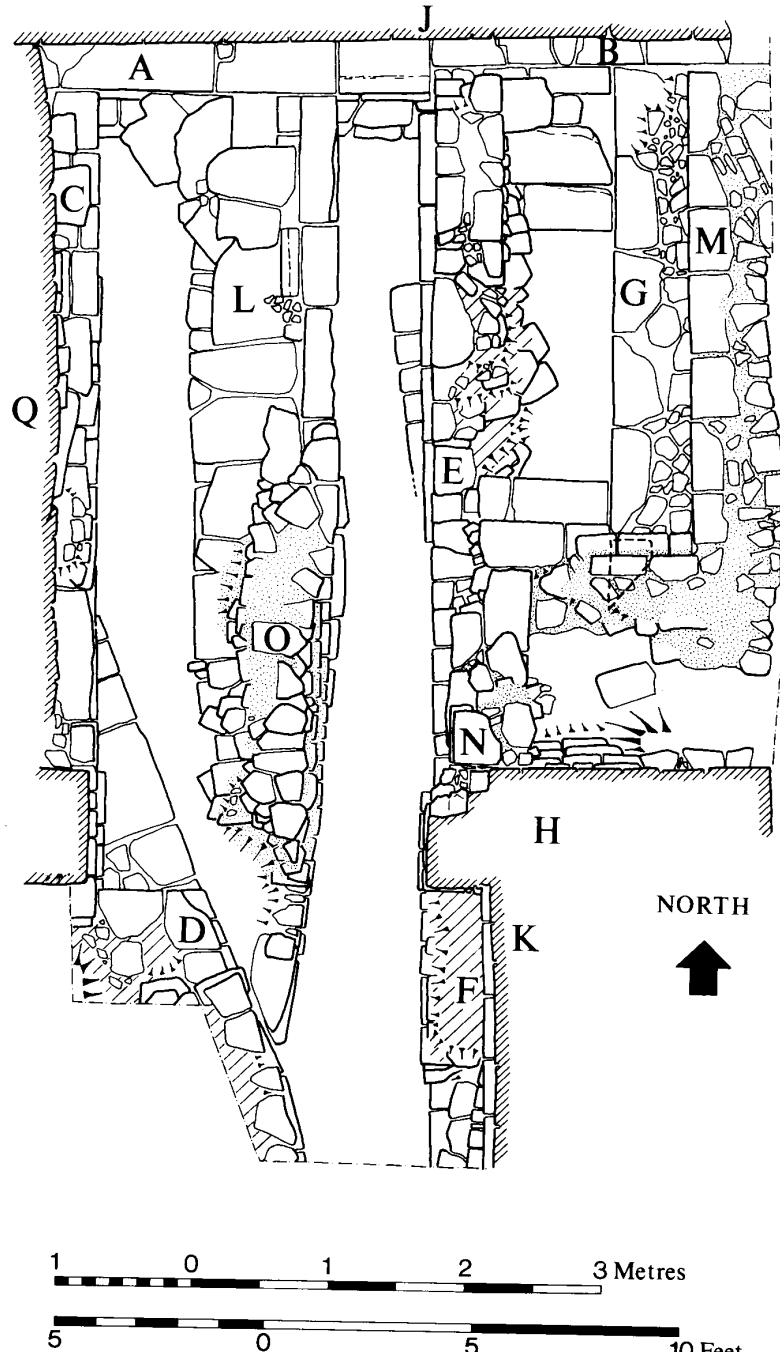
Some of the finds from the mill house. They are mostly medieval or post medieval and seem to have come from a major dig-out of the pond in front of the Tithe Barn in the early 1700s. The material was used to backfill the wheelpits in the mill house and to raise the level of the Abbey House garden.

As a result of this excavation the building was listed Grade 1. A selection of the finds is now held by the County Museum in Dorchester but is not on display. The mill was written up in the *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society*¹ from which some of these illustrations are taken, with our thanks. Over the centuries the building has acquired the name: 'The Old Malthouse'. This must be due to some old misunderstanding, for there is no suggestion that malting was ever its function.

¹ Alan H Graham, *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society*, **108**, 1986 pp 103 - 125

THE OLD MALTHOUSE

PLAN OF SURVIVING WALLS A-Q



Plan of the mill floor, from Graham

Alan Graham, the investigator, found that the history of the mill is roughly:

1. At some time, before C14 (period unspecified) a mill was built here. Its remains are the substantial ashlar blocks marked **A** in the plan above and seen at the back in the photograph below. We would now suggest

that this was Roman for reasons we discuss below. The visible water feed today is a leat from Portesham and there is no reason to think that it was any different then.

2. The building, whose remains we see today, replaced this first mill in C14 at the time of the construction of the Abbey. There were two overshot wheels, fed by wood troughs at about the level of the ground to the north of the mill. The wheel slots can be seen together with circular scrapes on the walls. The masonry blocks of this period are noticeably smaller and less well finished than those of period 1.
3. A substantial building to the east and south was added not long after. (not mentioned by Graham: It has features that suggest it was the hostel for visitors to the Abbey).
4. The wheel chambers and presumably the wheels were rebuilt in the 1400s. The value of the mill doubled between 1401 (when 'in summer they could not grind for want of water') to 1469. Perhaps by then it was more efficient because of the rebuild.
5. A new mill, half a mile down the valley, in what is now The Grove, was in operation by 1593. It was in use until recent years and is fed by a stream and leat from the Tithe Barn pond.
6. The old mill seems to have gone out of use in the 1700s and had been forgotten by 1774.

Ross Turner, with many other people, believed that the first mill was Roman because of the quality of the blocks at **A**. Similar masonry appeared during building works in the '80s in the blue patch on the map above, suggesting that the mill was one part of a larger Roman complex of buildings.

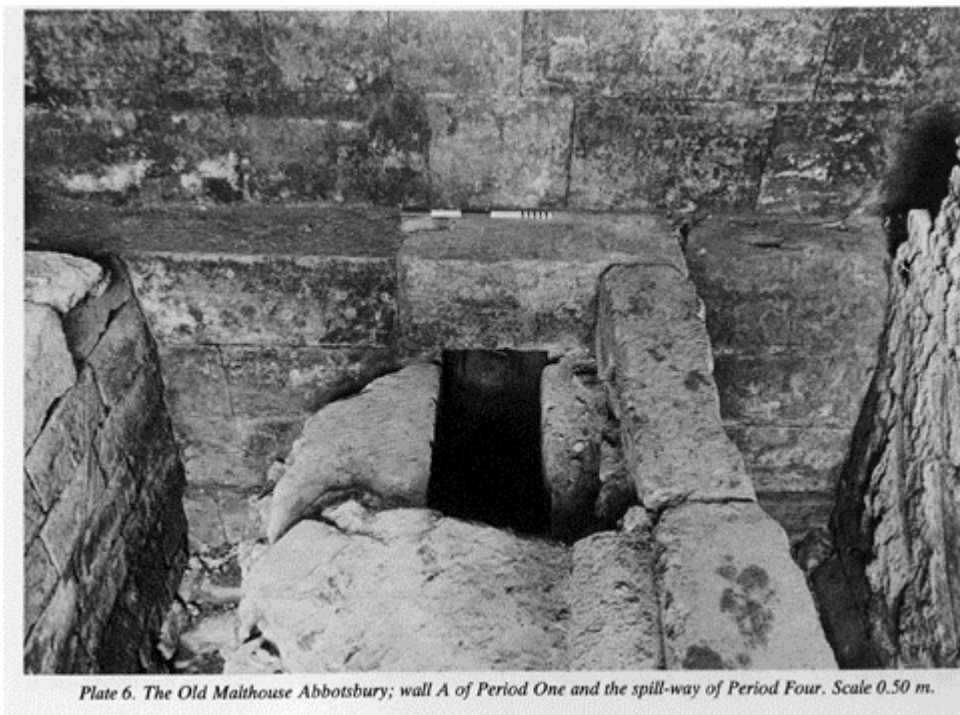


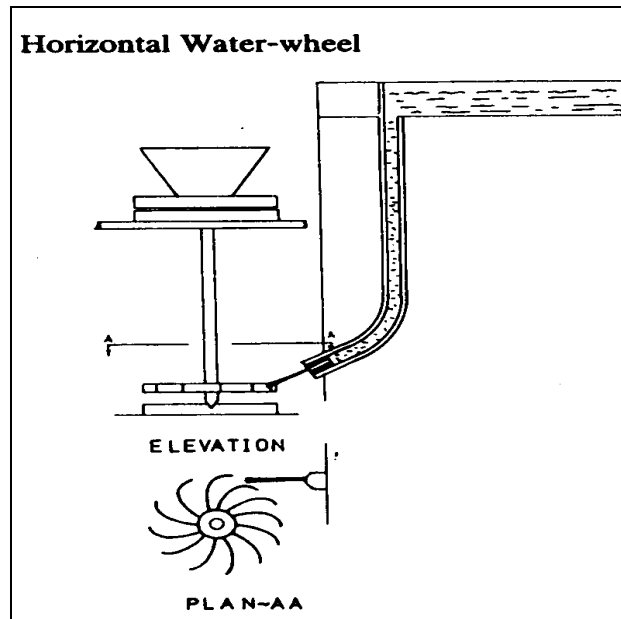
Plate 6. The Old Malthouse Abbotsbury; wall A of Period One and the spill-way of Period Four. Scale 0.50 m.

The lower masonry courses of the two wheel pits of the Abbotsbury mill. The quality of work is reminiscent of Roman practice² From Graham

We are looking into the mill pit. The wheels were removed in the early 1700s. Slots for two vertical wheels are evident and the circular scrapes of the wheels can still be seen on the sides. However, the side and central walls are later additions. The

² Credit Dorset Historical Society (?)

original wheel was probably horizontal³, fed through the square hole at floor level. This hole would have been covered by the walls built to support the C14 vertical wheels.:



The whole appearance of the back wall is very like that of a watermill identified by the Northumberland Archaeological Society⁴ as one of many built by the Romans to feed their garrisons on Hadrian's Wall. The lower courses are large, well dressed stone blocks; with less perfectly finished higher courses added by mediaeval and later millers:



Roman mill in Northumberland with later additions

Since a water mill needs a very specific site, with road access, ample water and a good head over a short distance, it tends to be rebuilt and reused over long periods of time.

The Domesday entry for *Abbate Abedesberiens* (Abbotsbury Abbey) includes 2 mills (which pay 16s 3d). This may mean one mill house with two wheels, or two mill

³ Donald Hill, *A History of Engineering in Classical and Medieval Times*, Routledge, 2002, p 158

⁴ My thanks to ???

houses. In either case, there was clearly a mill here before the Cistercians went to work. The most obvious candidates for the building of wall **A** are the Romans.

Furthermore, Ross Turner found three coins sealed into the lowest layer of the material in the wheel pit. The first is:



*Coin minted by the usurping Emperor Magnentius 350—353.
Found in a concretion in the wheel pit. Millimetre scale.*

Magnentius was a 'usurping' Emperor from 350 – 353 whose section of the Empire included Britain. He died at Lyons. His coinage is almost unique in reproducing the Chi-Rho symbol on so large a scale and has been found in several British coin hoards⁵

The second coin is too badly corroded to photograph well, but the right profile of an emperor wearing a wreath or crown on the back of his head is just visible. The letters 'IUS' can be seen above his brow. It could be from Constantine's issue of 309. The third is a small silver coin with – possibly – an empress wearing a horizontally banded hairstyle on the obverse and a goddess holding a spear in her left hand on the reverse. Altogether these coins leave little doubt that the lowest level of the mill is Roman.

Alan Graham does not seem to have been aware of these finds.

⁵ Richard Abdy, *Romano-British Coin Hoards*. Shire Publications, 2002, p53