

Sawtry Abbey Survey 2016

Archaeological Evaluation

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Summary

Sawtry History Society (SHS) is seeking permission from Historic England to carry out a geophysical survey of the site of Sawtry Abbey.

1 Introduction

1.1 Location and scope of work.

Sawtry CP is situated in the county of Cambridgeshire and sits astride the A1 Motorway roughly half way between the town of Huntingdon and the city of Peterborough. The site of Sawtry Abbey is in the extreme eastern part of the Parish.

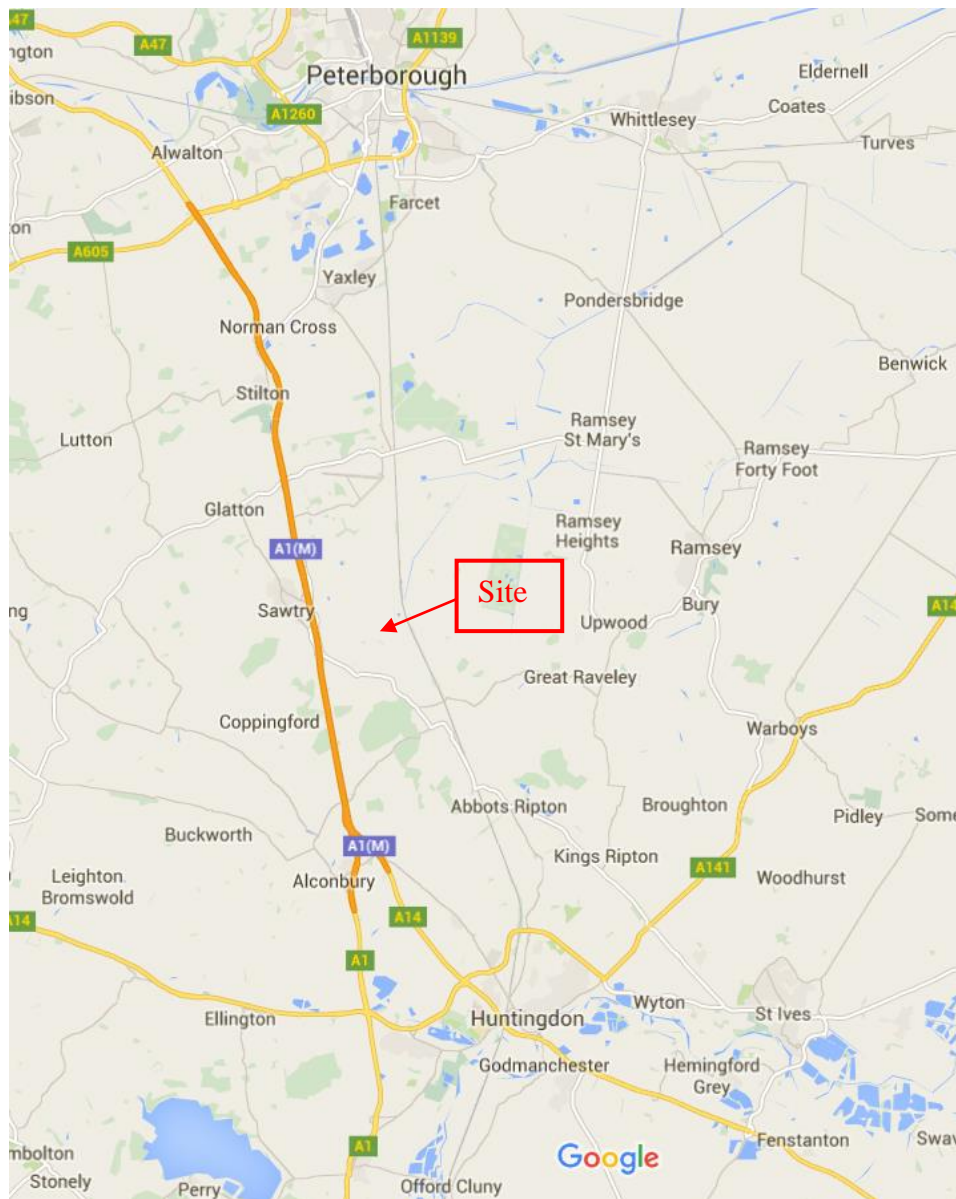
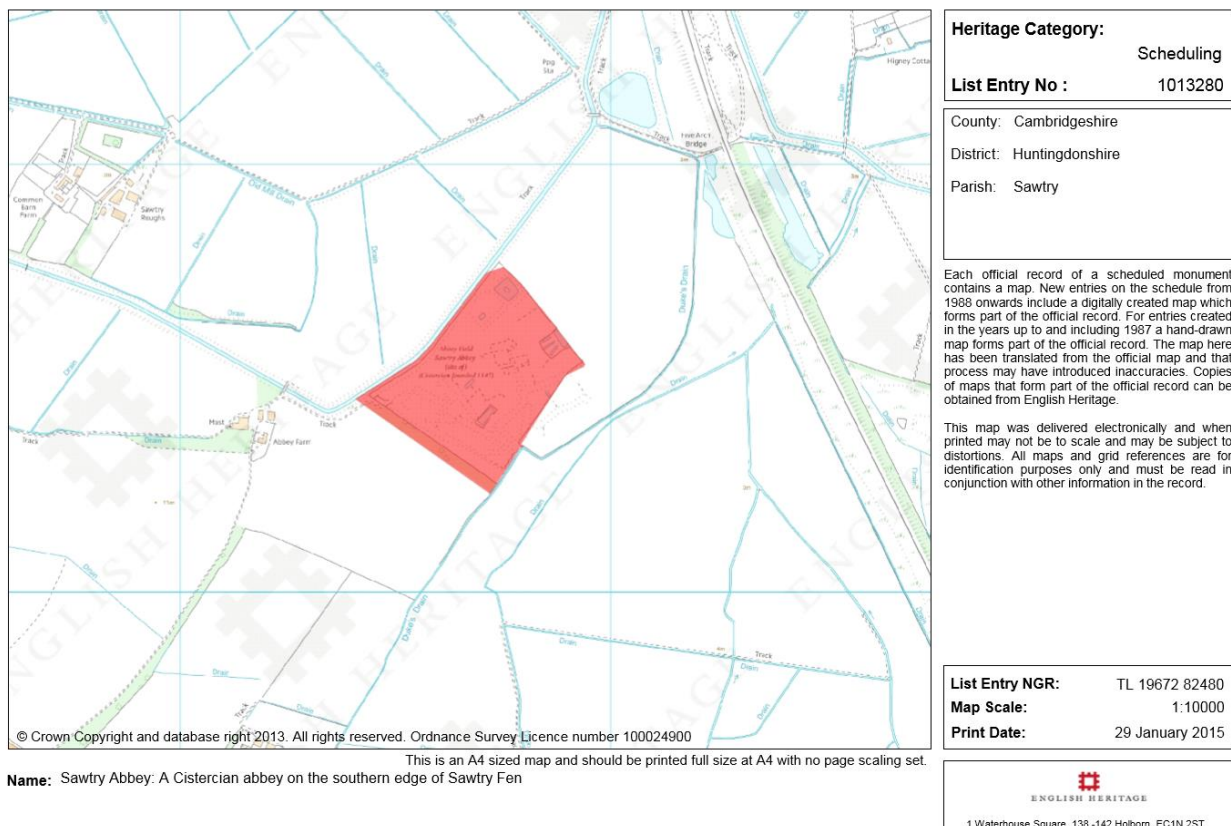
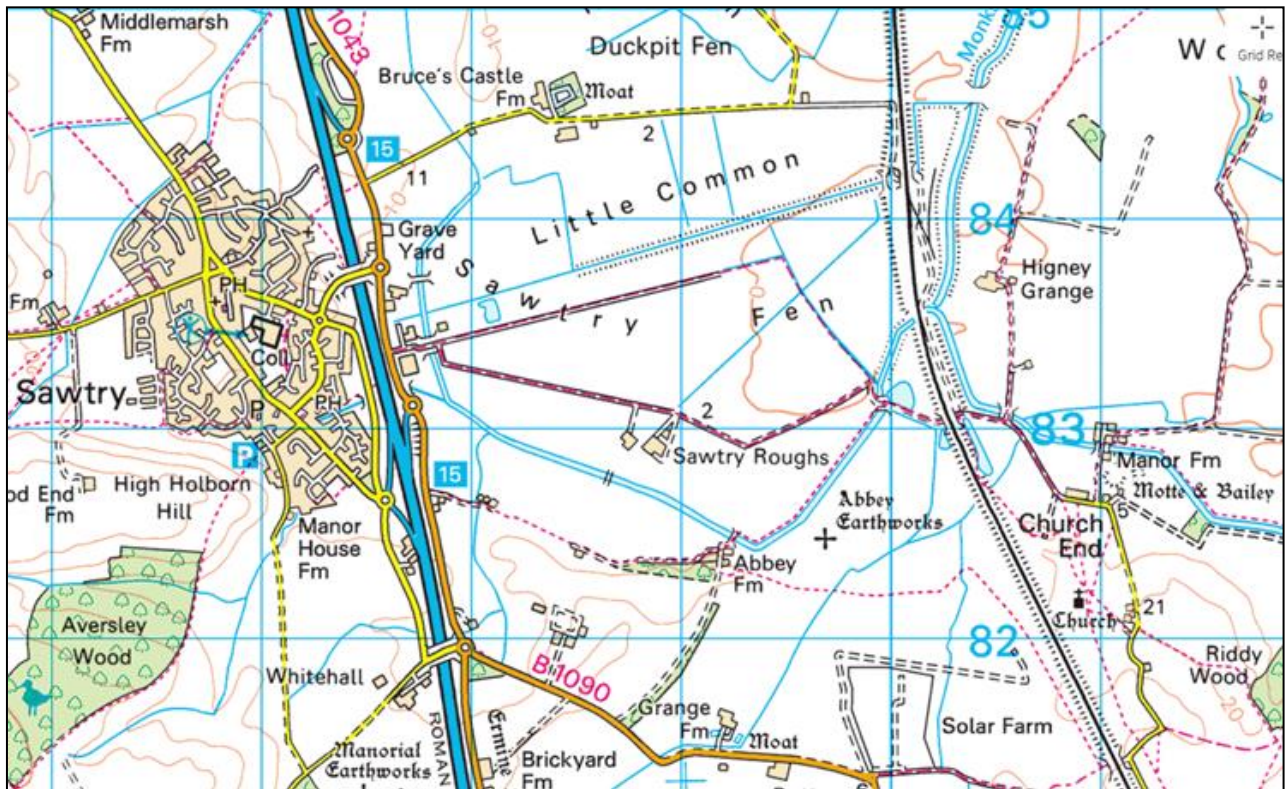


Figure 1. Location map of Sawtry, Cambridgeshire (Google Maps).



1.1.1 A geophysical survey is to be conducted at Sawtry Abbey in June 2016 by members of SHS supported by students from University Centre Peterborough, students from Sawtry Community College and volunteers from the wider 'Jigsaw' archaeological community. The works will be limited to a geophysical survey and no other form of archaeological evaluation is planned. The work is designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the area, in accordance with the Jigsaw Cambridgeshire and Institute for Archaeologists' guidelines.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The abbey lies near the tip of a low clay spur on the southern edge of Sawtry Fen, to the east of the Great North Road (A1) and some 2km to the south east of the modern village of Sawtry. The monument includes the remains of Sawtry Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in 1147 by monks from Warden Abbey in Bedfordshire, on land granted by Simon de St Liz, Earl of Northampton and Huntingdon (Historic England).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 Sawtry Abbey is the only Cistercian monastery in Cambridgeshire, and is well documented from its foundation in the 12th century to the period of the Dissolution. Although the walls of the main buildings have been robbed, floor surfaces and other buried features will survive which, given the period of about 90 years between the abbey's foundation and the consecration of the church, will include extensive remains of earlier timber structures. Evidence for the abbey's economy is provided both by documentary sources, and by the well preserved earthworks within the surrounding precinct. The warren and fishponds, would have provided a constant and renewable supply of food and income to the abbey, and the putative mill may indicate the wider cultivation of the high ground on which the abbey stands(Historic England).

1.3.2 The remains take the form of a group of earth works contained within an area of pasture measuring approximately 400m north east to south west by 300m. The foundation charter dictated that the abbey be isolated within a precinct defined by ditches, some of which remain visible around the edges of the field (<http://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1013280>).

1.3.3 At the Dissolution in 1536 the abbey was reduced to only 12 monks and 22 lay brothers. The numbers may have previously been reduced ahead of the Dissolution. In the following year the site and its lands were granted to Sir Richard Williams (alias Cromwell), and the monastic buildings were demolished soon after.

1.3.4 There is no reason to believe that the destruction of Sawtry Abbey was any different to other Monastic houses in Britain and it is likely that within two years almost nothing of value remained above ground. Michael Sherbrook's account of the destruction of Roche Abbey in Yorkshire in 1538 spell out the likely course of events at Sawtry Abbey in 1536 (Sherbrook cited in Fergusson & Harrison 2013).

1.3.5 Any remains of the Abbey were finally removed in the middle of the 19th century when a local farmer employed out of work railway workers to remove the foundations of the Church and Claustal range of buildings for road and

bridge repairs. Sydney Inskipp-Ladds a local architect and antiquarian who surveyed the site between 1912 and 1920 sums up the site today.

- 1.3.6 *“in short not one stone stands upon another – but in a large green field may still be seen the trenches whence the stones have been dug to mend the roads, the fish ponds from which the worthy monks supplied their needs and many of the water courses which provided for their various necessities: And thus it is possible for the archaeologist of today to trace out the lines of its walls and to reconstruct in his imagination the buildings that once stood upon the spot” (Inskipp-Ladds 1921)*
- 1.3.7 The site was scheduled (listed) in October 1954 (scheduling list entry 1013280) and the last amendment of any kind took place in October 1995. In short no modern archaeological techniques have been used in the previous investigations of the site.

1.4 Acknowledgements.

SHS gratefully acknowledges the help and assistance of the following;

Steven Juggins of Abbey Farm, Sawtry.

Sarah Poppy, Historic England.

Jigsaw CAMBS./Oxford Archaeology East

2 Aims and Methodology

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The objective of this survey is to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the area.
- 2.1.2 Inskipp Ladds surveyed the entire site extensively between 1907 and 1912. His plan mapped out the robber trenches made during the excavation of the site between 1850 and 1860 (see fig 4). The Inskip Ladds drawings include the Abbey Church and most of the Claustral range as *“walls shown by well defined trenches”*, however many of the walls are labelled as *“ill-defined, inferred, or uncertain”*, suggesting that the robber trenches were less well defined even 50 years after the event. There is a possibility that Inskip Ladds drew what he expected to find, Cistercian Abbeys have, after all, a fairly standard ground plan and may even be built to a standard set of plans. Bearing this in mind it may be useful to compare the Inskip Ladds plan of Sawtry Abbey with other Cistercian Abbeys of a similar size and founded at the same time. Rufford Abbey (founded 1146) and Roche Abbey (founded 1147) are remarkable for their similarity to Sawtry Abbey in size and both were founded within 12 months of Sawtry. A comparison of all three sites suggest that there are important parts of Sawtry Abbey that were perhaps not robbed away following the Dissolution. A Cistercian Abbey would have had two infirmary buildings, one for the monks (usually east of the Cloister) and one for the lay brothers (usually west or southwest of the Cloister). Both of these are conspicuous by their absence on the Inskip Ladds plans (see figs 4 & 5). The greater part of the Abbots Lodgings are also absent.

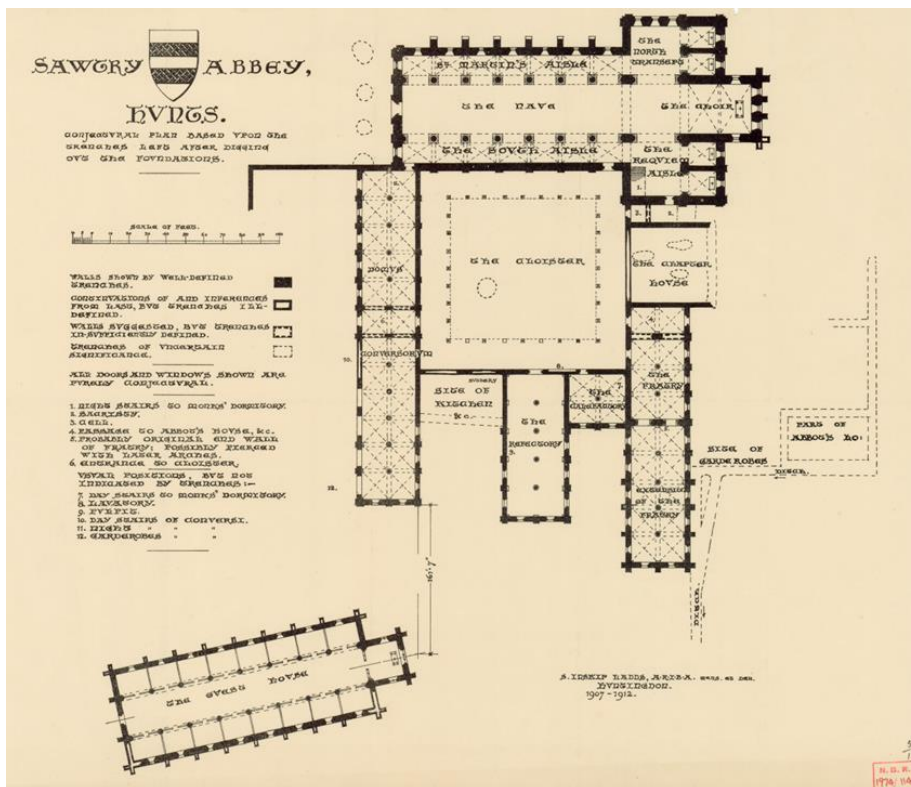


Fig. 4 Inskipp-Ladds plan of Sawtry Abbey buildings (Historic England)

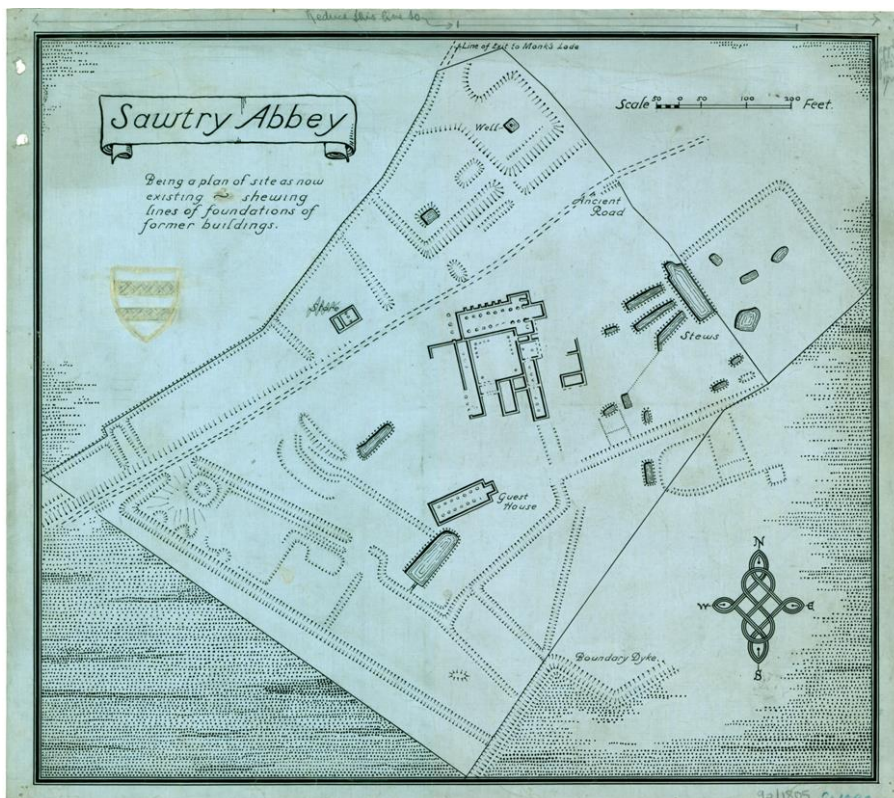
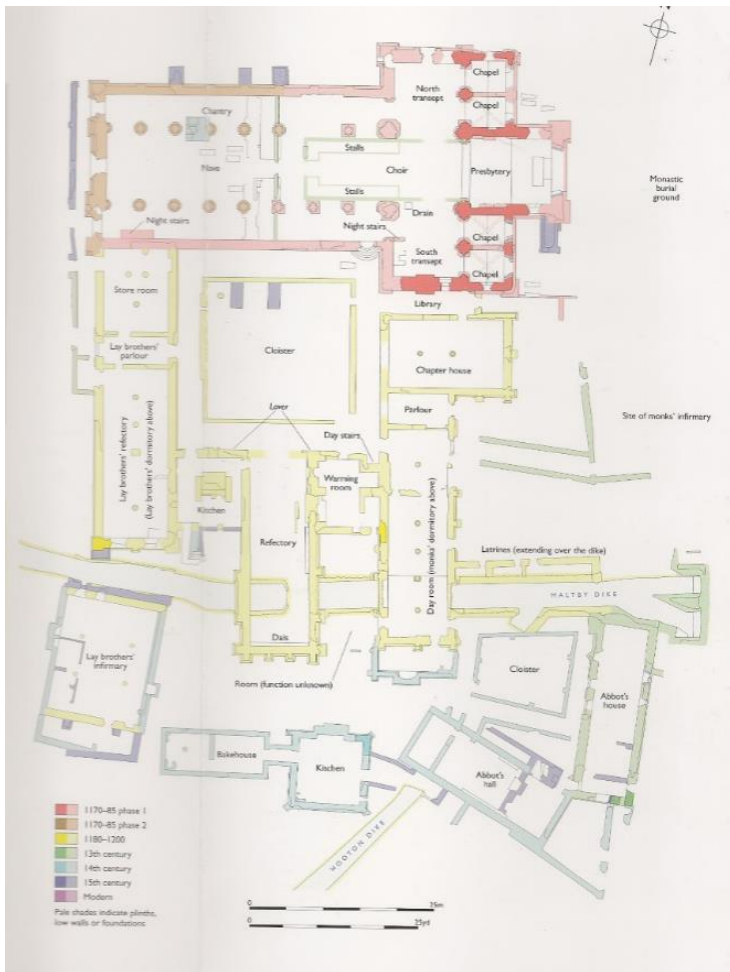


Figure 5. Inskip Ladds plan of Sawtry Abbey site (Historic England).

2.1.3 Compare these plans to that of Roche Abbey (figure 6) and the similarity is obvious as are the 'missing' structures. The Abbey Church and Claustral range are identical in size as is the position of the Garderobe latrine block.

Figure 6. Roche Abbey (Historic England).



The monks infirmary is to the east of the cloister, the lay brothers infirmary to the south/west of the cloister and the entire Abbots Lodgings are south and south east of the complex. At Roche there is no separate guest house, it is presumed that guests lodged in the Abbots Hall.

The Google Earth image (figure 7 below) shows how accurate the Inskipp Ladds plans are and it also hints at the location of the missing structures.

Figure 7. Google earth image from 2016. The robber trenches of the Abbey Church and Cloister clearly visible in the centre of the image.



2.2 Methodology.

- 2.2.1. "The abbot's house, a rectangular structure measuring 15m by 8m, lies to the south east of the claustral range, to the north of which are several less well defined platforms indicating the position of the abbot's kitchens and the infirmary. The foundations of these latter buildings have not been disturbed" (<http://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1013280>).
- 2.2.2. SHS intend to survey these areas using both types of geophysical equipment available from Jigsaw. FM256 fluxgate gradiometer magnetometry and RM85 resistivity meters. To aid with interpretation of results it will be necessary to establish at least two temporary bench marks (TBM) for the purpose of manipulating the results using QGIS. The proposal is to put these TBM's inside the fenced areas surrounding the two larger ponds on the site. The TBM will be a 600mm X 75mm round fencing post driven into the ground so that 300mm is visible. These will be located and levelled using Leica GPS.
- 2.2.3. An 80 metre base line will be established running south of the south transept of the Abbey Church along the line of the eastern side of the cloister. The 20m X 20m grid will extend east of this baseline so that an area 80m X 60m will be surveyed in the first phase (see figure 8 below).

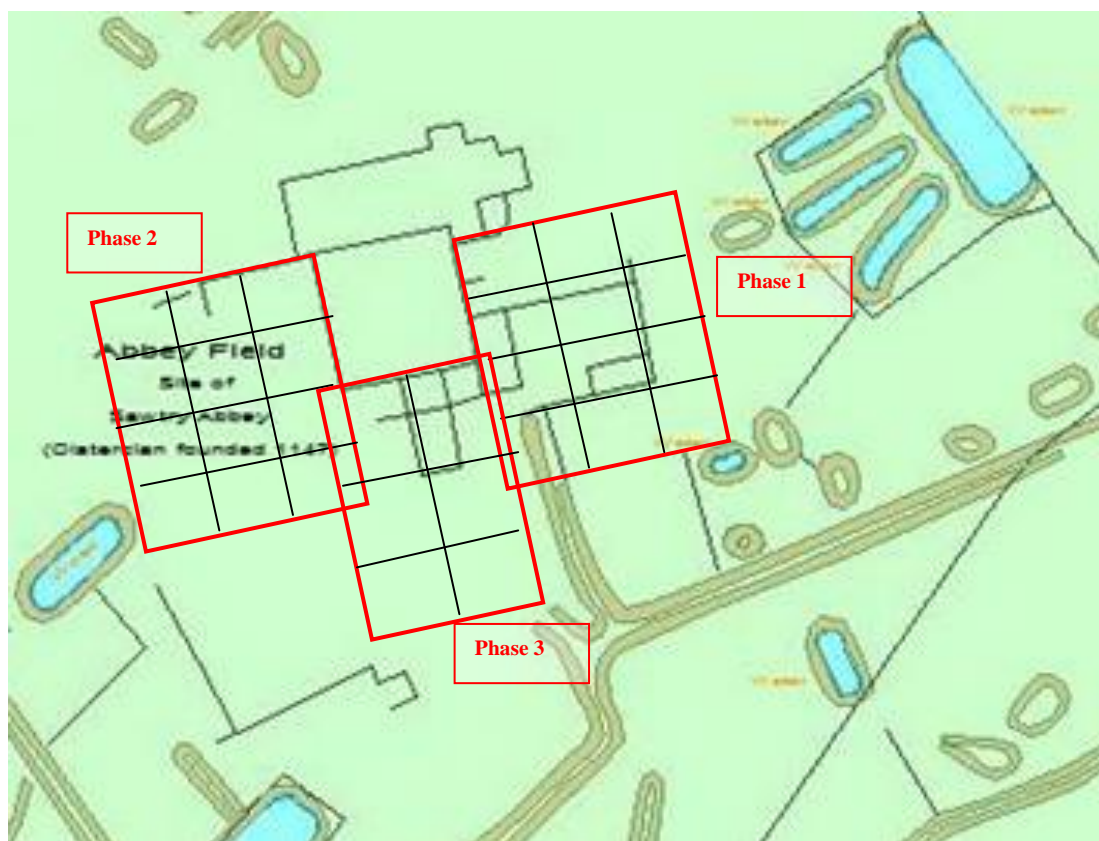


Figure 8. Planned area of geophysical survey.

- 2.2.4 The second phase will be directly opposite on the western side of the cloister and phase three will attempt to close the gap along the southern side.
- 2.2.5 This is a deliberate attempt to locate any walls and/or floors that may still remain in situ. Once SHS volunteers are proficient in the use of the equipment

and interpretation of the data it is intended to attempt to locate other Abbey structures such as the gatehouse complex and 'domestic' type buildings such as brew house, stables etc.

3 Further Research Discussion

3.1 The image below is from the Chatsworth Atlas, an encyclopaedia of all Cavendish land holdings in England drawn in 1612. It clearly shows a church and manor house standing in the vicinity of the site of Sawtry Abbey about 80 years after the Dissolution. This is probably St Marys church and the manor of Sawtry Judith. Of interest also is the apparent dwelling in the centre of the Abbey Site and the reference to 'Boners Ground' which may be a reference to the monks' cemetery which was usually located east of the Abbey church. Even at this early date (1612) nothing much remains on the site of the Abbey. SHS plans include a geophysical survey of the fields surrounding Abbey Farm in an attempt to locate the 'missing' Medieval village of Sawtry Judith.



Figure 9. Sawtry Abbey site as shown in 1612 (Chatsworth Archives).

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