



1 WEST HILL, CHARMINSTER, DORSET
Archaeological Observations

Prepared on behalf of:

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Summary

A watching brief was undertaken during the construction of an extension to the house at 1 West Hill, Charminster, Dorset. The site is situated adjacent to the southwest corner of St. Mary's, Charminster churchyard. Historic mapping evidence suggests that the site had once been within a much larger churchyard, probably part of the Saxon Minster church.

Eleven, possibly twelve, graves were exposed during the groundworks. These were all aligned east-west and arranged in rows and it is assumed that they are associated with the earlier graveyard. The skeletons were not lifted but were immediately reburied. No dating evidence for the burials was obtained but it is possible that they are of Saxon or early medieval date.

A single earlier undated feature was also exposed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.2 This project was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Yarker to comply with the planning condition set by the Local Planning Authority for an archaeological watching brief during the erection of a new extension to their property at 1 West Hill, Charminster. This request is in accordance with Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning (1991).
- 1.3 The development comprised an extension running the full length of the northern side of the house, taking up part of the rear garden of the property .
- 1.4 The site (NGR SY67889270) lies immediately adjacent the southwest part of St. Mary's Church churchyard, in the centre of the village of Charminster (Figure 1). It lies on the western edge of the floodplain of the River Cerne. The ground is flat and lies at a height of about 63 m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology is mapped as alluvium over Upper Chalk (Geological Survey of England and Wales Sheet 328 *Dorchester* 1:50000 Drift 1981).
- 1.5 The fieldwork was carried out on 4th–11th September and 14th December 2000.
- 1.6 Terrain Archaeology would like to thank Tim and Gwen Yarker for their interest, hospitality, help and understanding during the project and also acknowledge the help and cooperation of the contractor, Terry Jones, whose help and interest made the fieldwork immeasurably easier on site. Teresa Hall provided much useful information on Minster Churches and David Hinton (*University of Southampton*) kindly agreed to have a look at the stratified potsherd. Thanks are also due to Steven Wallis, Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council; Claire Pinder of the Dorset County Sites and Monuments Record; and the staff of the Dorset Record Office. The fieldwork was undertaken by Peter Bellamy and Rod Brook. This report was compiled by Peter Bellamy. Pottery identification was by Jo Draper with additional identifications by Lorraine Mepham and Rachel Seager Smith (*Wessex Archaeology*) and David Peacock and Elaine Morris (*Southampton University*).

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Charminster was certainly a minster church, though there is no surviving documentary record of this (Hall 1997). Minster churches were established from about the end of the 7th century to provide parochial care in the countryside within well-defined large territories or '*parochiae*' (Blair 1985, 1988). They appear to have been founded as part of Royal policy in some areas and they are located centrally within their *parochiae*, which probably consisted of royal or Episcopal estates. As the large royal estates were split up, a series of manorial church foundations took place on these new independent land units and the minster churches exercised rights over these new 'daughter' churches (Hall, 1997). The place-name evidence (Charminster = 'the church on the River Cerne' (Mills 1977, 338-9)) suggests that it was a primary settlement, probably donated to the bishopric from Royal Demesne (Hall 1997, 187) and it had three, possibly four chapels (at Pulson, Stratton, Forston and perhaps Frome Whitfield).
- 2.2 The Parish Church of St. Mary, Charminster contains some fabric from an 11th century cruciform church. The nave and south aisle are of late 12th century date, the south chapel was added in the 15th century and the west tower dates to the 16th century (RCHME 1970, 60-63). The form of the churchyard shows that it was originally much larger and extended further south and west of its present boundaries (Hall 1997, 128). The Site was clearly cut into the western side of the original churchyard (Figure 2).
- 2.3 At present, the house at 1 West Hill is the only building on the site, however, in the late 19th and early 20th century most of the site was built over. The 1839 Tithe Map (DRO T/CMR) shows a row of cottages along the West Hill frontage on the western side of the site. By 1902 (25-inch Ordnance Survey map sheet Dorset XL.11, 2nd edition), the present house had been inserted into the southeastern corner of the site. Another row of cottages had also been built along the northern edge of the site, fronting onto Church Lane. The area between was largely taken up by outbuildings (Figure 2). The cottages along the West Hill frontage were demolished in the earlier 20th century, but the rest of the buildings were still depicted on the 1959 Ordnance Survey map (1:2500 scale SY6792) and were presumably demolished after that date.
- 2.4 There have been no previous archaeological excavations or observations in the area immediately adjacent to the churchyard in Charminster.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 The objective of the archaeological observations was to establish and make available information about the archaeological resource existing on the site.
- 3.2 The archaeological works aimed to observe and record all the *in situ* archaeological deposits and features revealed during the groundworks to an appropriate professional standard.

4. METHODOLOGY

- 4.1 The work was undertaken in compliance with the specification (T3043) prepared by Terrain Archaeology in August 2000, and in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standard and guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (1994, rev. 1999).
- 4.2 The groundworks consisted of the excavation of footings trenches by a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket. The topsoil was stripped prior to the commencement of the archaeological works.
- 4.3 The location of all archaeological features and deposits was planned using taped measurements from the existing property boundaries. The archaeology was recorded using components of the Terrain Archaeology recording system of complementary written, drawn and photographic records.
- 4.4 Where human bones were encountered during the groundworks, the exposed parts of the skeletons were recorded and lifted, then the bones were immediately reburied within the original grave cut.
- 4.5 The records, and all materials recovered, have been compiled in a stable, cross-referenced and fully indexed archive in accordance with current UKIC guidelines and the requirements of the receiving museum, Dorset County Museum.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Natural deposits and ancient soils

- 5.1.1. Alluvial sands and gravels (107) were exposed at the base of the footings trench, at a height of about 61.63 m above OD (Figure 4). These lay beneath a layer of yellowish brown silty clay soil (105), about 0.4 m thick. The upper 0.2 m of this deposit was much

more mixed (106). This was interpreted as the remains of an alluvial soil, partially reworked by later activity.

5.2 Graveyard

5.2.1. Cut into the alluvial soil 105/106 was a number of graves containing extended inhumation burials. Eleven, possibly twelve, graves were partially exposed (Figure 3). Eleven of these graves contained articulated human skeletons and, where enough of the grave had been exposed to determine posture, the bodies had been laid supine with the head to the west (Table 1; Plates 1-4). The bones were not lifted, but simply moved aside, so no analysis was done on them, consequently no data is available on age, sex, pathology and date. All of the skeletons appeared to be adult. The twelfth, possible, grave (147) was in the northeast corner of the trench and only a very small part of the west end was exposed.

Grave	Skeleton	Orientation	Comments
104	103 Adult supine inhumation with knees and feet together and R hand over pelvis	E-W with head to W.	Upper R arm & shoulder removed by machine. L side of body not exposed.
110	109 Adult supine with knees together.	E-W with head to W.	Only part of the legs and knees exposed.
116	115 Adult	Head to W	Only part of skull exposed.
119	118 Adult supine with knees together.	E-W with head to W.	Only part of the legs and knees exposed.
123	122 Adult supine inhumation	E-W with head to W.	Only part of torso exposed. Partly disturbed by machine but many of the bones had been displaced within the grave fill.
126	125 Adult supine inhumation. R hand on top of pelvis, L hand below.	E-W with head to W.	Lower L leg removed by machine. Much of R side not exposed. Some displacement of bones.
133	132 Probable supine inhumation	E-W with head to W.	Only part of rib cage and R arm exposed. Burial continued beneath the present house.
136	135 Probable supine inhumation	E-W	Only L leg exposed.
143	137 ?Adult	?E-W	Only top of skull exposed.
144	138 Adult, probable supine inhumation	E-W with head to W	Only L upper leg and pelvis exposed. Part of skeleton removed by later disturbance.
145	139 Adult supine inhumation	E-W with head to W	Only skull, torso and part of R arm remain. L side disturbed and lower part probably removed by machine.
147	No human bone recovered	—	Only W end of cut exposed. Possible grave.

Table 1: List of graves

5.2.2. Where it could be determined, the grave cuts were rectangular, or subrectangular, with vertical sides and flat bottoms (Figure 4). They measured between 0.45 m and 0.65 m in width and were dug to a depth of between 0.9 m and 1.1 m below present ground level. The graves were all on a very similar E-W alignment with some indication that they were arranged in rows (Figure 3). None of them had been cut into earlier graves. The burials appear to be most densely packed on the west side, however, there was more disturbance to the northeast part of the trench and conditions during the observations of this area

were considerably worse. Consequently, there is a possibility that further graves had existed in this area. The position of grave 133, clearly shows that it is earlier than the present house and similarly graves 143, 144 and 147 are likely to continue beneath the churchyard wall, indicating that they are earlier than the present churchyard boundary.

- 5.2.3. There is no secure dating evidence for these graves. The only find was a single sherd of pottery incorporated in the fill of grave 104. This sherd is of probable Roman date and is likely to be residual in this context.

5.3 Other features

- 5.3.2. Apart from some late post-medieval structures, the only other feature encountered on site was a small pit (128), which was partly exposed in the western part of the trench (Figure 3). Much of this feature had been destroyed by later activity: the eastern part was cut by grave 126 and the northern part was removed by cut 130. It may have originally been circular or oval in plan shape with steeply sloping sides and a flat bottom (Figure 4). It measured at least 0.45 m across and was dug to a depth of 1.5 m below present ground level. It was filled with fairly compact brown silty clay (127) with sparse flint gravel and chalk and charcoal flecks. The only material recovered from this feature was some rodent bone, which was not retained. This pit was the earliest feature exposed on site, being stratigraphically earlier than the graves. Unfortunately, no dating evidence was recovered and there is not sufficient evidence to be able to interpret it with any degree of confidence.

5.4 Modern features and disturbance

- 5.4.2. A well was partly exposed in the southwestern part of the trench, (Figure 3; Plate 3). This was circular with an overall diameter of about 1.5 m and a mortared rubble limestone lining (111). It survived to just below the present ground surface, where it was capped with concrete (Figure 4). The shaft had been backfilled with loose brown soil (113) with frequent stone, brick and slate rubble and 19th– 20th century pottery. This well was probably associated with the row of cottages along the street frontage, which were demolished in the earlier 20th century.
- 5.4.3. The northwestern part of the trench was disturbed by fairly recent activity. A steep-sided cut (130) had removed part of grave 126 and pit 128 (Figure 4). This cut was filled with loose grey brown clay loam soil with frequent flint rubble (129) and beyond this to the north was a mass of cemented stone rubble. This has been interpreted as the remains of

the outbuildings, which stood in the centre of the site until the second half of the 20th century.

- 5.4.4. All the earlier features were sealed below a mixed layer of loose dark brown clay loam (101) with frequent flint rubble and quantities of clay tobacco pipe, later post-medieval pottery, animal bone etc, measuring up to 1 m thick. It has been interpreted as a levelling layer associated with the construction and/or demolition of the various buildings on the site. The mixed nature of this deposit is probably a result of a number of different episodes of activity. This layer was sealed beneath a layer of topsoil, which had been removed prior to the archaeological observations.

5.5 Finds

- 5.5.2. The only find from a stratified context was a single pot sherd from context 102 (the fill of grave 104). This is a small fragment of grey wheel-thrown pottery, not identified to type, but probably Roman in date (L. Mephram, R. Seager Smith and E. L. Morris pers. comm.). It has a fine sandy fabric with 1% rounded quartz grains (1.0-2.0 mm) and 1% angular(?) sandstone (1.0-2.0 mm) (E. L. Morris, pers. comm.). It is probably residual in this context.
- 5.5.3. A number of pieces of 19th century pottery, both earthenwares and industrial whitewares, clay tobacco pipe, etc were recovered from context 101. These were not catalogued or quantified in detail and have not been retained.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The topographic and historic map evidence strongly suggests that this site was once part of the churchyard. The presence of graves on this site confirms this hypothesis. The burials were all laid along a broadly similar east/west axis and there is some indication that they were arranged in rows. In places, the graves are tightly packed in places but there is no indication that any of the graves disturbed any others, suggesting they were marked in some fashion.
- 6.2 The date of these burials is not known. However, the earlier enlarged churchyard layout is likely to be associated with the Saxon Minster church, rather than with the parish church. It is not known when the site was carved out of the earlier churchyard. At other minster sites, the indications are that the churchyard contracts at an early date (T. Hall, pers comm.). Therefore, there is a possibility that the burials are Saxon or early medieval in date.

7. PROJECT ARCHIVE

7.1 The archive will be deposited with the Dorset County Museum, which has agreed in principle to accept the archive, subject to fulfilment of the Museum's requirements of the preparation of archaeological archives. A copy of the microfiched archive will be deposited with the National Monuments Record.

7.2 The indexed and cross-referenced project archive consists of:—

File 1:	1.1	Specification T3043.1
	1.2	Report 5069.1
	1.3	Context index
	1.4	Context record
	1.5	Context finds record
	1.6	Drawing register
	1.7	Photographic register and monochrome contact sheets
File 2:	2.1	Monochrome negatives
	2.2	Colour transparencies

The Finds — 1 box.

8. REFERENCES

- Blair, J., 1985 'Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book' in P. H. Sawyer (ed) *Domesday Book: a Reassessment*.
- Blair, J., ed., 1988 *Minsters and Parish Churches: The Local Church in Transition*.
- Hall, T. A., 1997 Minster Churches in Dorset. MPhil thesis, University of Leicester, submitted May 1997. Unpublished.
- Mills, A. D., 1977 *The Place-Names of Dorset* 1. English Place-Name Society volume 52.
- RCHME 1970 = Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset* 3 Central.

Appendix 1: List of all contexts

Context	Description	Interpretation	Depth below surface
101	Loose dark brown clay loam with frequent flint gravels.	General levelling and garden make up.	0.3 m
102	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and chalk flecks. Sparse charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 104	0.6 m
103	Supine adult skeleton	Inhumation burial in grave 104	0.8 m
104	Rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	1.0 m
105	Yellowish brown silty clay with sparse charcoal flecks.	Subsoil	0.9 m
106	Dark yellowish brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel.	Upper part of layer 105, more mixed.	0.7 m
107	Loose grey brown sands and flint gravels.	Natural gravels	1.2 m
108	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 110	0.7 m
109	Supine adult skeleton – only knees exposed.	Inhumation burial in grave 110	0.9 m
110	Sub-rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	1.0 m
111	Cemented limestone pieces.	Well	0.3 m
112	Vertical-sided circular shaft.	Cut for well shaft	0.3 m
113	Loose brown loam with frequent stone & brick rubble, slate and mortar debris.	Infill of well	0.3 m
114	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 116	0.7 m
115	Skeleton — skull only exposed.	Inhumation burial in grave 116	0.8 m
116	Rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	0.9 m
117	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 119	0.75 m
118	Supine adult skeleton – only knees exposed.	Inhumation burial in grave 119	0.85 m
119	Rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	0.9 m
120	Scattered human bones within 121.	Disturbed bones of skeleton 122 in grave 123	0.9 m
121	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel.	Fill of grave 123	0.8 m
122	Supine adult skeleton	Inhumation burial in grave 123	0.95 m
123	Rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	1.1 m
124	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 126	0.95 m
125	Supine adult skeleton	Inhumation burial in grave 126	1.05 m
126	Rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat bottom. Oriented E-W.	Grave	1.2 m
127	Brown silty clay with occasional flint gravel and sparse chalk and charcoal flecks.	Fill of pit 128	1.2 m
128	Steep-sided, flat-bottomed cut.	Pit cut	1.55 m
129	Loose brown clay loam with frequent flint rubble and moderate charcoal flecks.	Fill of disturbance 130	0.9 m
130	Curving, steep-sided cut.	Disturbance from previous development on site	1.65 m
131	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and charcoal flecks.	Fill of grave 133	0.7 m
132	Supine adult skeleton — R torso and R arm exposed.	Inhumation burial in grave 133	0.8 m
133	Cut with vertical sides and flat base.	Grave	0.9 m
134	Brown silty clay with moderate flint gravel and	Fill of grave 136	0.6 m

Context	Description	Interpretation	Depth below surface
	charcoal flecks.		
135	Supine adult skeleton — L leg exposed	Inhumation burial in grave 136	0.8 m
136	Cut with vertical sides and flat base.	Grave	0.95 m
137	Human skull	Inhumation burial in grave 140	0.7 m
138	Supine adult skeleton — L leg exposed, R leg disturbed and missing.	Inhumation burial in grave 141	0.9 m
139	Supine adult skeleton — skull, torso and R arm exposed.	Inhumation burial in grave 142	0.8 m
140	Grey silty clay loam.	Fill of grave 143	0.6 m
141	Grey silty clay loam.	Fill of grave 144	0.6 m
142	Greyish brown silty clay loam.	Fill of grave 144	0.8 m
143	Cut with slightly rounded sides and base.	Grave	0.85 m
144	Cut with slightly rounded sides and base.	Grave	1.1 m
145	Cut — disturbed and not fully recognised.	Grave	1.0 m
146	Grey silty clay loam.	Fill of 147	0.55 m
147	Cut with slightly rounded sides and base.	Possible Grave	0.8 m

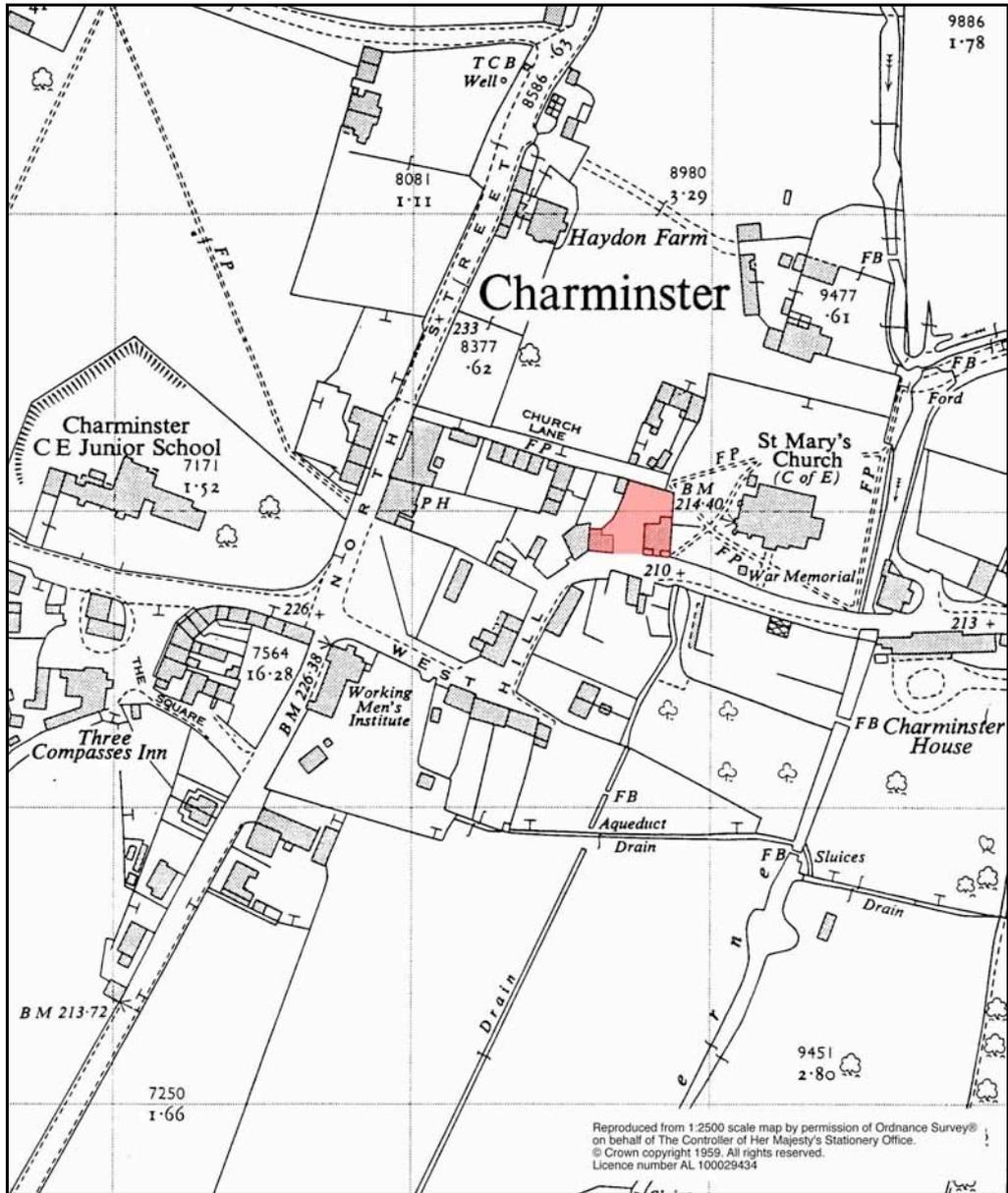


Figure 1: Site location map

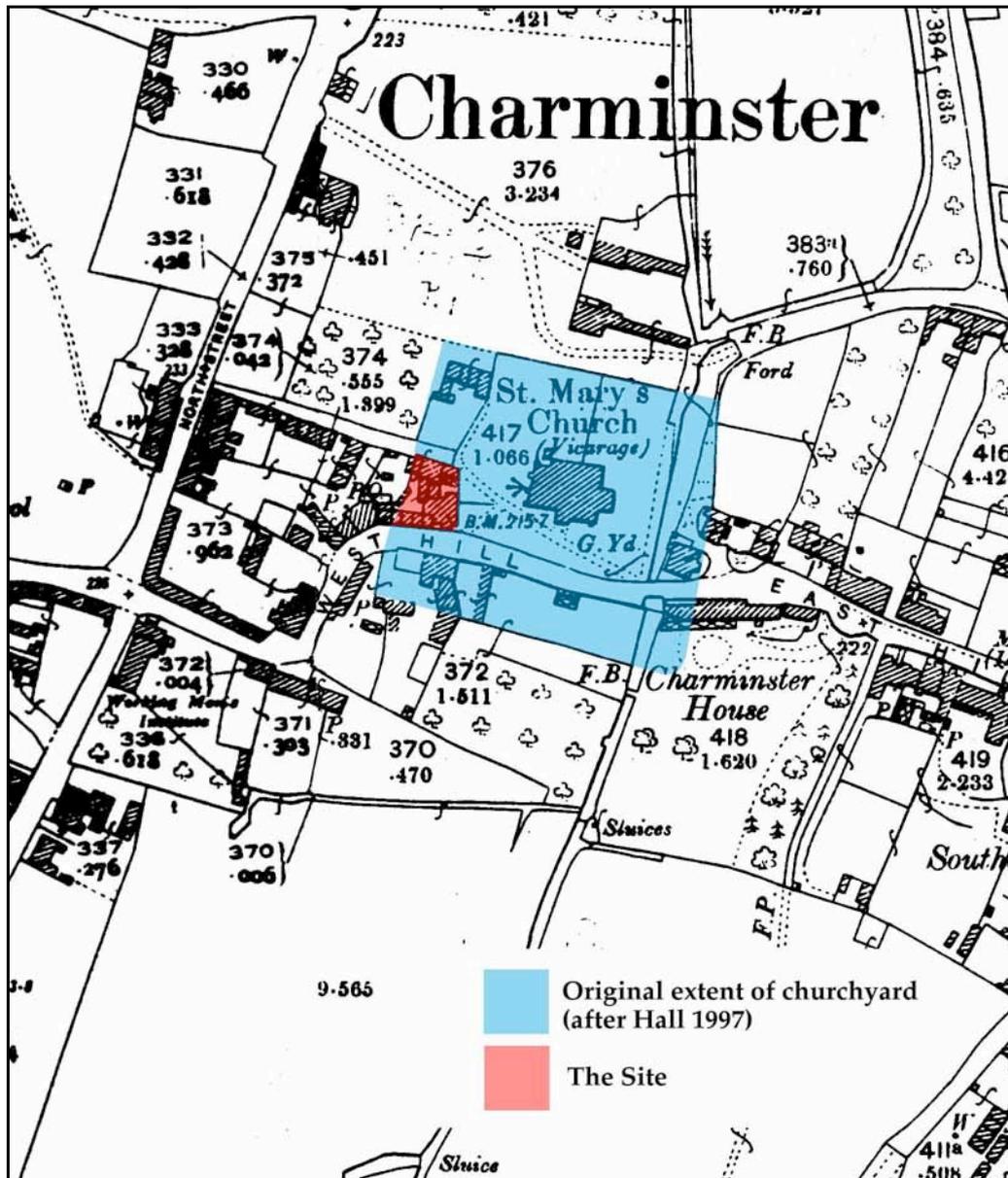


Figure 2: 1902 Ordnance Survey 25-inch map showing probable original extent of churchyard.



Figure 3: Plan of observations

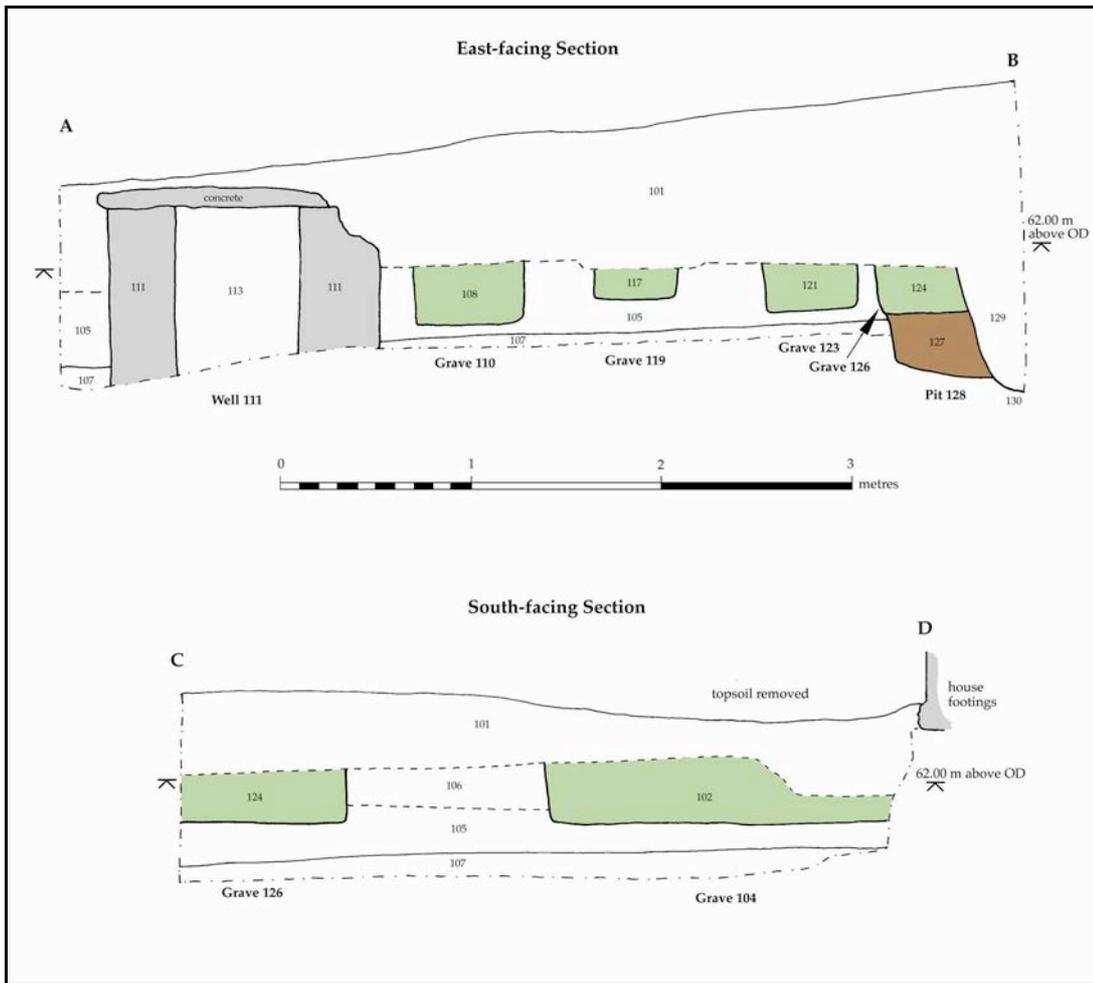


Figure 4: Sections



Plate 1: General view of grave 104 with the churchyard in the background.



Plate 2: Detail of grave 104.



Plate 3: Well 111 with grave 110 in background



Plate 4: Graves 123 and 126.