CPAT Report No 1173

St Michael's Church, West Felton, Shropshire ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF





THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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1 Introduction

This report describes the results of a watching brief conducted by the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) during the excavation of a service trench within the churchyard of St Michael's Church, West Felton, Shropshire (Fig. 1; SJ 3412 2522), and also some limited works within the tower. The archaeological monitoring was carried out between the 3rd and 9th October 2012. The Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) for Lichfield had commented upon the faculty application (Faculty No. 3720) which was granted with an archaeological condition attached that required an archaeological watching brief to be maintained during groundworks within the main body of the church and within the churchyard. A curatorial brief was produced by Mr Stephen Dean of the Environment and Countryside Unit, Staffordshire County Council in his capacity as archaeological advisor to the Lichfield DAC.



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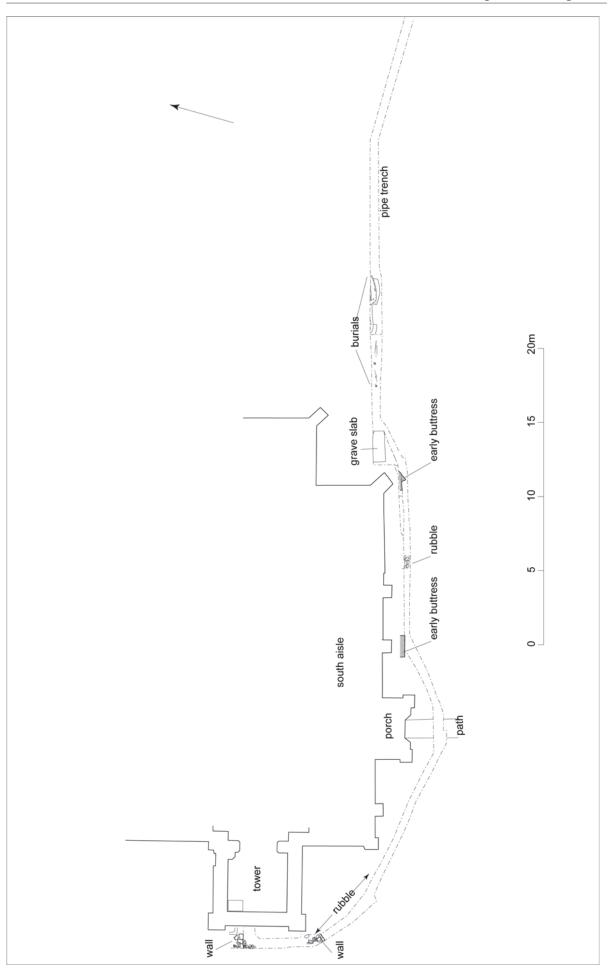
Fig. 1 Location of St Michael's Church, West Felton, Shropshire

- 1.3 West Felton is mentioned at Domesday (1086) when it was held by Rainald from the Earl of Shrewsbury. At that time the manor and perhaps any settlement or village that accompanied it was recorded as 'Feltone'. In 1303 it was referred to as 'Felton by le Knoykn', and by 1397 it had acquired its 'West' affix, differentiating it from Felton Butler. The name 'Felton' is generally considered to reflect a combination of the old English 'feld' (open land) and 'tun' (settlement). Assuming this to be correct, the reference to open land would reflect the settlement's long agricultural history, sited in the generally fertile lowlands of Shropshire.
- 1.4 The church of St Michael (PRN 00903) is a grade II* listed building (listing no 1367365), the earliest surviving fabric of which is in the early 12th-century north arcade of the nave where there are four round-headed arches. The restored four-centred chancel arch is probably 14th-century, and the arch-braced collar beam roof is of likely 15th-century date, as is the octagonal font. The tower dates from 1784, the north aisle was largely rebuilt in 1841, and the chancel was re-designed by George Gilbert Scott and built in 1848. Further refurbishments in 1878/9 included work to the south aisle, the porch and vestry, and the south wall of the chancel.
- 1.5 St Michael's Church sits within a large strangely shaped boundary that points to the removal or 'selling off' of land at some point in the past. Buildings which sit upon land which probably once lay within the churchyard appear to be of later medieval date, seemingly corroborating the contention that the reduction in the churchyard's size was early and took place during the Middle Ages.
- 1.6 The church lies 50m east of a motte (scheduled monument 1019296; PRN 01124) which was probably thrown up in the late 11th century when the manor of Felton formed part of the land held by Roger de Montgomery. At a later date a smaller, circular mound was built on top of the main mound at its centre. This later feature was interpreted as the base of a watchtower, but more recently it has been suggested as a prospect mound on which a summerhouse might have been built for the neighbouring manor house, now Manor Farm.

2 Watching Brief

- 2.1 The watching brief was maintained during the excavation by machine of a narrow service trench, around 0.6m wide and up to 1m deep, which entered the churchyard near its eastern gate and followed the line of the path from the gate towards the church, passing alongside the south aisle and around the tower (Fig. 2). Numbers in brackets illustrated on the site plans and incorporated in the text that follows refer to the individual contexts recorded in the site archive.
- 2.2 The depth of the service trench varied from 1m near the eastern gate, being gradually reduced to 0.5m adjacent to the tower. The undisturbed natural subsoil, a degraded red sandstone with occasional river-rounded pebbles and overlying red sand, was identified at the lowest levels of the excavation. Typically, this was sealed by a cemetery soil of uniform appearance, up to 0.6m thick and consisting of fine, soft, light brown sandy silt (11) which in turn was sealed by a topsoil mixed with a mottled reddish brown sand of variable thickness (0.2 0.4m).





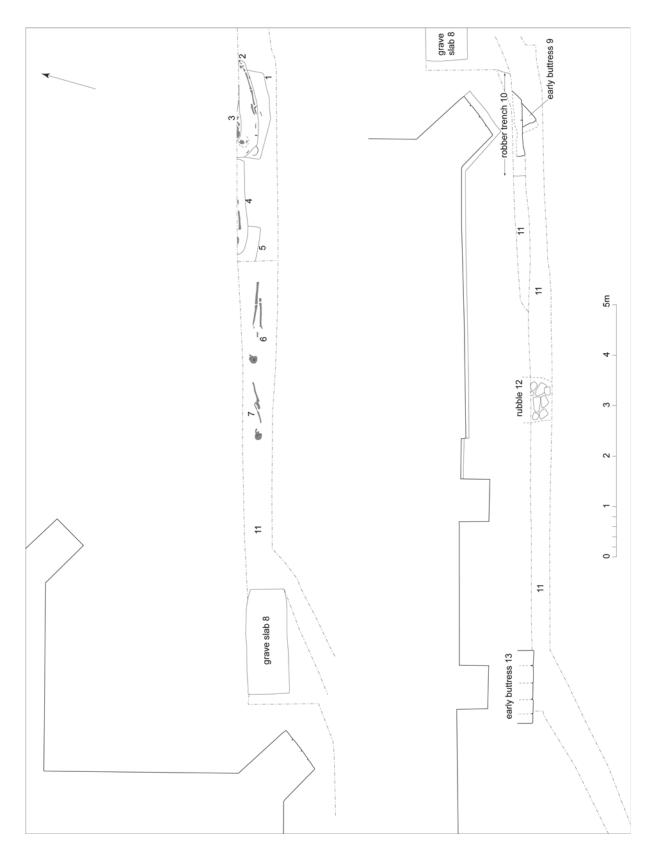


Fig. 3 Detailed plan showing the location of burials and features relating to earlier phases of the church

Structural evidence

2.3 Evidence for the foundations of a presumed medieval church, predating the present structure, consisted of robbed buttresses and wall footings, which in some cases were associated with general demolition debris. The basal courses of two earlier buttresses (9 and 13) were recorded adjacent to existing buttresses along the 19th-century south aisle, (Fig. 3), each around 1.4m wide and surviving to a height of at least 0.45m. In both cases the surviving walling consisted of two courses of lime-mortared, dressed red sandstone blocks, although additional, unexcavated, courses of stonework were visible at the base of each buttress. One of the buttresses (9) was revealed at the base of an obvious robber trench, and was sealed by a demolition layer (10) consisting of degraded red sandstone, slate and river rounded cobbles (Fig. 4) which contained fragments of medieval floor tile and pottery. There was also evidence for a third buttress located between the other two, comprising an isolated band of sandstone rubble (12).



Fig. 4 The remains of an early buttress (9) along the south wall, sealed by demolition rubble (10). Photo CPAT 3535-0029

2.4 To the west of the south aisle the cemetery soil deposit (11) was replaced by a band of demolition rubble (18) sealed by a thin, firm layer of mortar (19) and 0.2m of topsoil. The rubble consisted of fragmented, pink lime mortar, red sandstone and a deposit of fine, light brown/buff silty sand. The change in deposition coincided with the point at which disarticulated human remains were no longer encountered.



Fig. 5 The remains of a second early buttress (13) along the south wall. Photo CPAT 3535-0038

2.5 The rubble, the extent of which continued along the west side of the tower, sealed the remains of two walls (14, 15) aligned roughly east to west and about 5m apart (Fig. 6). Both walls were c. 1.3m wide, survived to a height of 0.4m, and were constructed from red sandstone and river cobbles, bonded with fine brown sand. A similar deposit of cobbles and sand (16, 17) was recorded immediately adjacent to the walls (Figs 6-8). The upper courses of stonework were later carefully removed from the southern wall (14) revealing a foundation trench containing further courses of red sandstone and yellowish buff sand (20).



Fig. 6 The remains of an earlier wall (14) at the base of the church tower, viewed from the south-west. Photo CPAT 3535-0052

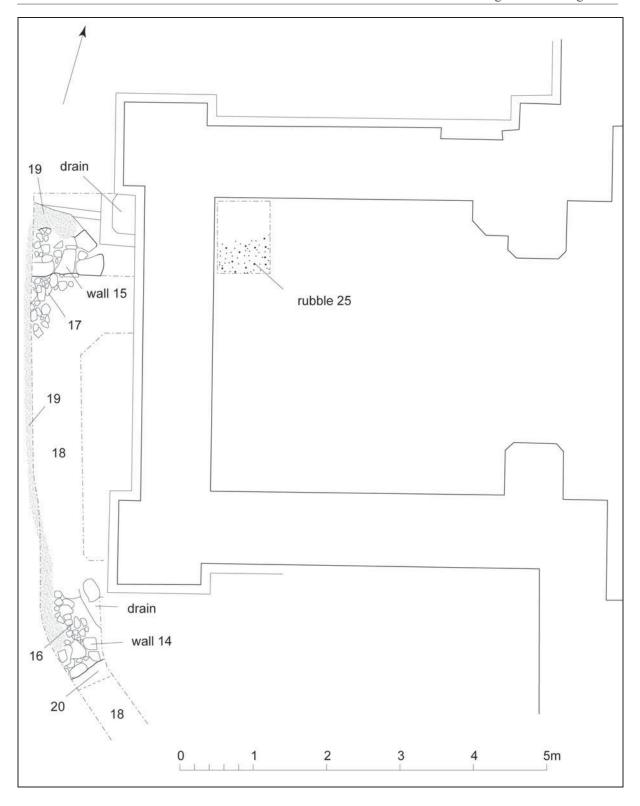


Fig. 7 Features revealed during the watching brief around and within the tower

2.6 The installation of the new services also required the hand excavation of a small trench, 1m by 0.7m and 0.5m deep, internally within the north-west corner of the church tower (see Fig. 7). A band of large river cobbles in a matrix of fine, buff-coloured sand (26), was recorded at the base of the trench. The cobbles, which appeared to lie within a feature orientated east to west, were similar to the stony layers (16 and 17) located outside the tower. The cobbles were

sealed by a layer of fragmented medieval tile (25) and charcoal (24) and degraded red sandstone (23), the latter containing numerous fragments of medieval and later floor tile and post-medieval pottery. A thin (80mm) skim of concrete mortar sealed the rubble, forming a base for the 19th-century tiled floor.



Fig. 8 The more northerly (15) of two earlier walls alongside the tower, viewed from the south. Photo CPAT 3535-0061



Fig. 9 Three successive phases of burial are indicated by grave 1, at the top of the view, which was cut by grave 2, with the latest grave (3) just protruding from the northern section of the service trench. Photo CPAT 3535-0006

Undisturbed burials

- 2.7 Following the discovery of undisturbed burials to the east of the church both the Archaeological Advisor to the DAC and the Principal Archaeologist for Shropshire County Council were informed and advice was sought from the Ministry of Justice regarding any necessary permissions which might be required. In the event, however, through negotiations between CPAT and the contractors, it proved possible to adjust the level of the pipe so that no in situ burials were disturbed.
- 2.8 In total, eight graves were identified within the service trench to the east of the church, all orientated roughly east to west, and seemingly representing three periods of burial (Figs 3 and 9). Skeletal remains were partially exposed in all but two of the graves (5 and 8), and most also contained coffin nails. The two earliest graves (1 and 5) were cut into the natural subsoil at around 1m below the present ground surface. Both graves had been truncated by later burials (2 and 4), one of which (2) was itself truncated by a subsequent burial (3), recorded at a depth of 0.55m. The only dating evidence came from a single sherd of medieval pottery recovered from the fill of grave 1. All of the later burials, including graves 6 and 7, were sealed by the cemetery soil deposit (11) and were located at a depth between 0.65m 0.8m below the present ground surface.



Fig. 10 Skeletal remains within a grave 6, viewed from the south.

Photo CPAT 3535-0014

An in-situ memorial stone was uncovered on the south-east side of the 19th-century chancel (Fig. 12). The memorial, constructed from a large sandstone slab, is inscribed in three sections, one of which is illegible but in the same style as the earliest which reads 'Elizabeth the wife of Richard Burch of Haughton deceased November 30th AN DOM 1663'. The later inscription reads 'Also Ann the wife of Edward Birch Rednal deceased May the 20 1731 aged 37'.



Fig. 11 Skeletal remains within grave 7, viewed from the north. Photo CPAT 3535-0021



Fig. 12 The memorial stone for the Birch family, viewed from the south, records both 17^{th} -and 18^{th} -century burials. Photo CPAT 3535-0026

Disarticulated bone

- 2.10 A moderate amount of disarticulated bone was disturbed in the cemetery soils during the machine excavations; this was collected and stored in boxes within the church to await later re-interment. It was noticeable that the disarticulated bone was concentrated along the south side of the church, especially in front of the porch, with little or no bone being recovered from the first *c*. 20m of the trench through the east side of the churchyard, or to the west of the south aisle.
- 2.11 Following discussions with the Archaeological Advisor to the DAC and the Principal Archaeologist for Shropshire County Council, and in line with guidance produced by the Institute for Archaeologists, it was decided that it would not be appropriate to conduct any further studies of the material, such as estimating the minimum number of individuals. Instead the bone was simply counted and weighed: in summary, 87 fragments of long bones were recovered, weighing 7.125kg, 71 fragments of skull, weighing 1.672kg, and numerous unidentified fragments with a total weight of 4.6kg.



Fig. 13 The complete medieval floor tile, scale 1:1

Finds

2.12 Two sherds of probable medieval pottery were recovered during the watching brief, one of which was from the unglazed base of a jug in a sandy, buff fabric, which came from the fill of a grave (1). The second sherd was recovered from the demolition rubble (10) overlying the remains of one of the medieval buttresses (9) and was in a grey fabric with mottled olive glaze.

2.13 A significant quantity of fragmented medieval floor tiles was recovered from the excavation within the church tower, all of which had been re-used as levelling material. The tiles were all in a sandy red fabric, most having an olive green glaze which often extended onto the underside of the tile, and some retained traces of lime mortar. Some tiles retained parts of impressed and slipped decoration, while others appeared to have been plain. Only one complete tile was recovered, measuring 113mm by 113mm and 22mm thick. This had a very worn surface but retained part of a zoomorphic design which evidently formed one quadrant of a pattern made up of four identical tiles (Figs 13 and 14). It has not been possible to identify comparable tiles from the sources immediately available to us.

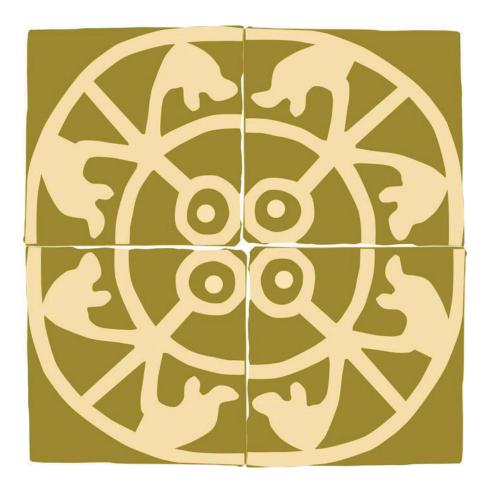


Fig. 14 A reconstruction of the zoomorphic pattern formed by four of the medieval floor tiles

2.14 Several sherds of 18th- to 19th-century pottery were recovered from the demolition rubble underlying the present tiled floor within the tower and consisted of both coarse-wares and fine-wares of predominantly black and brown glazed Buckley and Staffordshire-type wares. Other pottery types included Yellow-ware, White-ware and a single sherd of possible Cistercian-ware, the latter perhaps of earlier 16th-century date. A single piece of clay pipe stem was also noted.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 The watching brief provided significant evidence for earlier phases of St Michael's Church, predating the present south aisle and tower, as well as identifying a number of undisturbed burials. The present form of the church owes much to major refurbishments during the late 18th and 19th centuries, with the rebuilding of the tower in 1784 and the south aisle, vestry, porch and south wall of the chancel in 1878/9. The service trench adjacent to the south wall of the church revealed elements of an earlier structure, consisting of three buttresses which, from their position 1.4m away from the present wall, must be associated with an earlier phase of the church before the south aisle was rebuilt slightly to the north of its original position.
- 3.2 Interestingly, the church is depicted in several late 18th-century watercolours, showing the south aisle and chancel before rebuilding. However, none of these depictions shows any buttresses along the south side of the church, suggesting that the fabric revealed during the watching brief is likely to be from a relatively early build, perhaps contemporary with one of the earlier surviving elements of the church, comprising the early 12th-century north nave arcade and the 14th-century chancel arch. Whatever the date of the early buttresses, the evidence suggests that this side of the church has been rebuilt on at least two occasions.
- 3.3 It is now clear that at least part of the church was floored with decorative ceramic tiles during the medieval period. A significant number of fragmentary tiles were recovered from the relatively small excavation within the tower, which demonstrated that the tiles had been redeposited amongst rubble, presumably when the tower was rebuilt in 1784. The watching brief also identified the foundations for earlier walls adjacent to the tower which presumably relate to a pre-1784 tower.
- 3.4 Unsurprisingly for a church which has been in use since at least the 12th century the watching brief demonstrated several periods of burial, with a number of intercutting graves recorded to the east of the church. The preservation of the burials was generally good, despite being relatively shallow. It was notable that the quantity of disarticulated bone within the general cemetery soil was considerably higher alongside the south wall of the church than elsewhere, perhaps suggesting that much of this material was derived from burials which had been disturbed during the various rebuilding episodes.
- 3.5 All artefacts recovered from the excavations have been returned to the church, while the site archive has been retained for the present by CPAT, with a copy being deposited with the regional Historic Environment Record.

4 Acknowledgements

Thanks to Stephen Dean, the Archaeological Advisor to the DAC; Dr Andy Wigley, Principal Archaeologist, Shropshire County Council; Gareth Edwards, Design and Planning Consultancy Ltd; Robert Jones and Chris Jones, Jones Brothers Weston Rhyn Ltd.