



**YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST**



**ST HELEN'S CHURCH, BILTON IN AINSTY,  
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

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**REPORT NUMBER 2012/51**



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## Abbreviations

YAT York Archaeological Trust

AOD Above Ordnance Datum

## **SUMMARY**

*A watching brief during surface drainage works observed a wall foundation of possible 12<sup>th</sup> or pre 11<sup>th</sup> century date immediately north of the current church, associated with up to 0.30m of underlying occupation deposits. To the south, the probable medieval graveyard was identified at 0.25m – 0.65m below ground level, overlain by up to 0.60m of charnel-rich graveyard soil. All bones and burials were re-interred within the drainage trenches.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

A watching brief was undertaken at St Helen's Church, Bilton in Ainsty, North Yorkshire, to observe the insertion of new drainage channels and soakaways. The watching brief was undertaken by J.M. McComish on 15<sup>th</sup> August, and by I. Milsted on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> August.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The works comprised the excavation of a number of trenches 0.3m wide and between 0.5 and 0.65m deep around the church, together with two soakaway pits 4m x 0.60m in plan and up to 1.5m deep. All groundworks were undertaken using a mechanical mini-excavator with a 0.24m wide bucket, which resulted in trenches 0.24m to 0.3m wide. All groundworks were observed by an archaeologist, and any human remains uncovered were retrieved, logged and reburied on site, as close to the point of discovery as possible, in accordance with the faculty.

Prior to the commencement of the watching brief a modern concrete drainage channel which ran round the northern, eastern and southern walls of the church had been removed. The failure of this channel was allowing rainwater to seep beneath the church foundations, necessitating the renewal of the drainage.

## **3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

To the north of the churchyard is the B1224 York to Wetherby road and to the west is a minor road leading south to Bilton in Ainsty village. To the south and east are fields.

The superficial geology consists of glacial till with outwash deposits of sand and gravel, overlying bedrock of the Sherwood sandstone group

(<http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/viewer.html>

accessed 12/11/12). The graveyard is generally fairly flat, but gently drops away to the east.

#### **4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The church is mainly late Norman, with much surviving masonry detail, and several preserved fragments of Anglian crosses (Pevsner, 1967, 101-102). The small splayed windows in the west wall may be re-set from a putative Anglian church (Edward Pope pers. comm.). The porch door, dated to 1633 (Pevsner, 1967, 102), bears a satirical carving of a crowned snake, believed to have been made by a Royalist officer held captive in the church after the battle of Marston Moor in 1644 (Russell Marwood, pers. comm.). The 12<sup>th</sup> century priory of Sinningthwaite (now Syningthwaite), within the parish, seems to have controlled the church until handing it to the Archbishop of York in 1293 (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=36252&strquery=Bilton%20in%20Ainsty> accessed 12/11/12). A brass monument survives in the church and is believed to represent a 14<sup>th</sup> century abbess of Syningthwaite (Edward Pope, pers. comm. and Pevsner, 1967, 102).

#### **5. RESULTS**

##### **5.1 TRENCHES TO THE NORTH OF THE CHURCH**

Trench 1 was located beneath the present 1.4m wide tarmac path immediately to the north of and parallel to the northern wall of the church (Figure 2, Plates 1-10). This trench started adjacent to the third buttress from the western end of the church and continued for a distance of 25m to the east of the church, terminating in a soakaway measuring 3m x 0.60m. The trench was connected at the western end to a downpipe from the church roof located immediately to the west of the third-from-west buttress. The trench was between 0.24m wide at the base and 0.3m wide at the top and was between 0.5m and 0.65m deep. The soak away was 1.5m deep. Joining the main run were two trenches aligned north-south, running from the downpipes in the angle of the chapel and chancel, and from the mid-point of the chancel (Figure 2 for the full run, Figure 3 for detail; Plate 2).

The earliest identified deposit in the Trench 1 area, observed in the soakaway (Figure 4, Plate 4), was 1012, a firm mixed orange-grey sandy clay, seen at 1.02m BGL and interpreted as natural. Overlying this was 1011, a 0.14m thick layer of mixed orange-grey sandy silt, which lay beneath 1010, a soft mid grey silt that was identified at 0.76m BGL. This was equated with 1008, a layer of very similar grey sandy silt that was sealed beneath a possible

wall foundation (1007) in the drainage trench at 0.68m BGL. 1008/1010, and 1011 are interpreted as possible buried soil/occupation deposits of unknown date.

Sealing the occupation layer was 1007, a spread of packed rounded cobbles measuring 1.6m x 1.6m and projecting beyond the northern limit of excavation (Figure 3, 4, Plates 5-7). 1007 was observed at the junction of the main west-east trench with the easternmost north-south trench (Figure 3) and was interpreted as a probable foundation for a wall aligned north-south. Foundation 1007 was 0.30m high in places, although it appeared to have collapsed and spread to the west (Figure 4), whilst on the eastern side it retained a vertical profile. The southern end of the foundation was been truncated by a possible shallow pit (Figure 3), probably dug to rob some of the cobbles after demolition of the wall. No construction cut was discernible, and it is therefore possible that the footing was built on 1008 and soil then banked against it. No evidence for this survived, however, as the overlying deposits appear to relate to the demolition of this wall. Earlier construction deposits may have bioturbated into the later deposits, or else been removed when the wall and its foundation were demolished.

The wall was sealed to the east by 1006, a bank of mixed grey-brown sandy silt with occasional cobbles that may represent a dump of soil laid to bury the wall remains. To the east, in the soak away trench, this deposit is held to relate to 1009, a very similar layer 0.25m thick. 1006 and 1009 lay beneath 1005, a substantial layer of soft-very soft mid grey-brown, very sandy silt with orange sandy patches and streaks that is interpreted as a major landscaping episode following demolition of the wall, bring the ground level across the whole northern area up to at least 0.20m below current levels. The sandy content probably derives from disturbed natural material, and it is suggested that 1005 may represent material excavated during the construction of the Norman church and used to landscape the future graveyard. This also suggests that wall 1007 could pre-date the church; this is discussed further in **5.3**.

To the south of the main trench, the two north-south spur trenches showed that the demolition deposits associated with the wall petered out very rapidly and were replaced by homogenous graveyard soil (1014) of mid brown-grey sandy silt beneath the current turf, which was cut close to the church wall by modern drains. A small amount of disturbed human bone was recovered from 1014; this is discussed below in the concluding part of this section.

Two bands of sloping deposits sealed 1005; 1004 consisted of a 0.10m thick layer of limestone gravel in a friable mid orange-brown sandy silt, and 1003 was a deposit of firm-friable mid orange-brown very sandy silt with frequent stones up to 0.20m thick; both were

interpreted as levelling deposits laid to raise the ground level during landscaping associated with the previous programme of drain improvements at the church that are probably mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in date. These works have almost certainly truncated any earlier surfaces formerly present in this area, as on the basis of the exposed plinth of the church, they would have been close to the modern ground level.

The footpath was represented by 1002, a 0.11m thick make-up layer of mixed dark grey brown gritty clayey-silt with stone fragments and cobbles up to 15mm x 10mm x 8mm in size with patches of crushed limestone chippings, overlain by 1001, the 0.07m thick tarmac surface. At the western end where the trench was connected to the downpipe the remains of a brick lined drain were seen (Context 1013, Plate 9) which comprised a basal brick with two bricks laid at an angle to either side to create a shallow channel, the bricks being bedded on limestone chippings. The bricks were laid header to header, were machine made, and measured 230mm x 111mm x 51mm, and dated from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century or later. This drain continued along the northern side of the church, and clearly predated the concrete drainage channel removed by the contractors prior to the watching brief.

Throughout trench 1, there was no trace of any disturbance indicative of earlier pits or graves, and no *in situ* human remains were present. As referred to above, in the easternmost north-south trench, a small amount of disturbed human bone was identified in deposit 1014 at a point 1.7m from the southern end of the trench (Plate 8). Many of the bones had old breaks clearly showing that they had been broken and redeposited at some stage. There was no clear sign of a cut or pit in the section within which the bones were located. Careful searching of the spoil heap resulted in the recovery of one further fragment of rib bone c.50mm in length and an additional infant humerus. On completion of excavation, the trench was deepened slightly, and the bones reinserted and then covered with pea-gravel prior to the insertion of the modern drainage pipe.

## 5.2 TRENCHES TO THE SOUTH OF THE CHURCH

Trench 2 commenced half-way along the south wall of the chancel and ran west, following the line of the church around the porch where it met with a spur running south and south-east from the angle of nave and porch (Figure 2, Plates 11-22). This trench was up to 0.40m wide and was excavated with a gradual fall, with the base at c.0.45m BGL at the start points, falling to c.0.65m BGL by the southern soakaway. This soakaway was located 11m south of the porch door and measured 4m x 0.60m x 2m deep.

The initial run of the trench immediately south of the chancel was to have lain some 0.50m south of the wall through the turf of the graveyard rather than the tarmac of the footpath, but



*in situ* burials were encountered only 0.25m below the surface (Figure 2, Plate 12) and so the trench was re-located against the church wall to avoid disturbing intact graves where possible.

Burials were again encountered at the south-east corner of the porch, this time at c.0.45m BGL. The width of the trench limited the assessment that could be made of the sequence, but the disturbance to the porch's cobble foundation suggested that the burials post-dated the building, as one would expect (Figure 2, Plates 13-15). These burials were not lifted.

In general, the sequence as observed south of the church commenced with two deposits, 2006 and 2005, interpreted as natural (Figure 5, Plate 22). These were identified in the southern soakaway, with 2006, a compact-friable yellow-brown sand, observed from 1.67m BGL. 2005, a 0.47m layer of stiff, orangey grey very sandy clay, overlay 2006 with its upper surface at 1.20m BGL.

Overlying natural was 2004, a 0.43m layer of fairly soft, dark grey sandy silt. This deposit, only observed in the soakaway, contained at least 8 *in situ* burials. The trench was too narrow, and by 1.20m BGL too deep to safely excavate these burials individually. A discussion between Mr Edward Pope, the archaeologist and Martin Stockwell of YAT took this and the time constraints into consideration, and the decision was made to carefully remove this graveyard soil mechanically in spits and deposit the soil onto boards by the trench, where the archaeologist carefully sorted through it and removed all visible human bone (Plates 20, 21). At the end of the excavation, this material was re-interred at the base of the soakaway. All the burials were adult and supine, aligned east-west, and several had the 'rolled-in' appearance typical of medieval shrouded burials. No artefacts were recovered to suggest coffins, and it is suggested that the very sandy nature of the soils has destroyed any trace of these, if they existed.

Overlying 2004, and visible throughout the drainage trench (Figure 5) was 2003, a layer of soft grey sandy silt up to 0.60m thick, the top of which was observed at c.0.17-0.20m across the whole southern area. This deposit contained frequent disarticulated human bones, which were clearly not *in situ* and were bagged and re-buried as close as possible to the position of discovery in the base of the trench along its entire length (Plate 19). This 'zone' of charnel-rich graveyard soil was only not in evidence along the south wall of the church, where the modern drainage channels had truncated it to beyond the depth of the new trench, and became markedly 'richer' in charnel the further south it was observed (Plates 18,19).

These deposits were sealed by a layer of crushed stone make-up up to 0.14m deep (2002) over which lay the 0.03 - 0.05m deep tarmac surface of the path.

### 5.3 DISCUSSION

The slight variation in natural deposits seen across the site is typical of post-glacial environments and to be expected. The drop of c.0.20m from north to south is not extreme over an area of c.40m, and may in fact result from truncation by the probable medieval graveyard in the southern area.

In the northern area, the presence of wall 1007 and the c.0.30m of possible occupation soils underneath it were a slight surprise and could potentially be of great significance to the history of the church. The projected line of 1007 appeared to broadly coincide with the eastern wall of the chancel, if one accepts that these cobbles are a foundation and that the wall above would be positioned along the centre line. Although no dating evidence was recovered, the cobble foundation was stylistically reminiscent of Anglian period foundations seen by the author at St Helen's, Skipwith (Kendall, 2005, 62), although this is not offered as definitive evidence. The basis for interpreting wall foundation 1007 as earlier than the current church lies partly in the suggestion of Anglian activity already made (Edward Pope, pers com), but mainly in the extent of deposit 1005 that sealed it. It is likely that only a significant ground disturbance could have created this amount of 'spare' soil and the most likely local candidate is the 12<sup>th</sup> century construction of the church. However, the church has significant later additions, notably the 15/16<sup>th</sup> century chancel chapels (Pevsner, 1967, 102), the northernmost of which is immediately adjacent to the area in question. It may be, then, that the wall foundation 1007 relates to a structure contemporary with the earliest extant elements of the standing church. It is not possible to associate 1007 with any element of the standing church without a programme of detailed building recording, but the potential for further research is noted here.

The lack of *in situ* burials and relatively small amount of charnel in the northern area is also possibly significant, and may suggest that the clearance of the structure associated with foundation 1007 also entailed the clearance of the graveyard during the major landscaping suggested by the archaeology. In this case, it would then seem more likely that the demolition of 1007 and the subsequent landscaping took place in the 15/16<sup>th</sup> century rather than the 12<sup>th</sup>, therefore removing any later medieval burials in this area.

In the southern area, this watching brief has succeeded in defining the extent of the medieval cemetery. Burials have been located beneath the turf across the whole area, starting from c. 0.25m BGL immediately south of the chancel and dropping to c.0.65m BGL by the location of

the southern soakaway. This fall may betray a slope originally present in the medieval graveyard, but it seems more likely that a greater intensity of grave-digging further south of the church has truncated and disturbed higher burials, and created the extensive, charnel-rich 'graveyard soil' shown to overlie undisturbed burials in this area.

## **6. LIST OF SOURCES**

<http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/viewer.html>

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=36252&strquery=Bilton%20in%20Ainsty>

Both accessed 12<sup>th</sup> November 2012

## **7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Illustrations	I. Milsted
Editor	M. Stockwell

## **8. BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Pevsner, N. and Radcliffe, E., 1967. *The Buildings of England: Yorkshire, The West Riding*, Penguin, London

APPENDIX 1: FIGURES AND PLATES

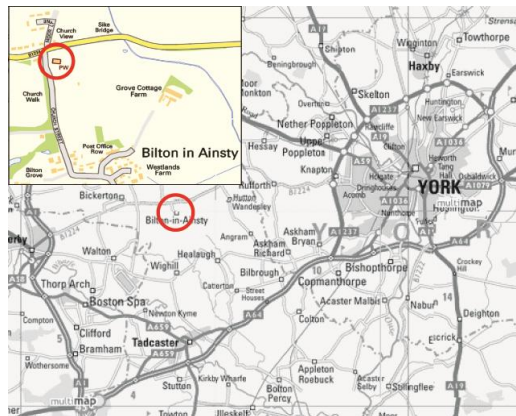


Figure 1 Location of site

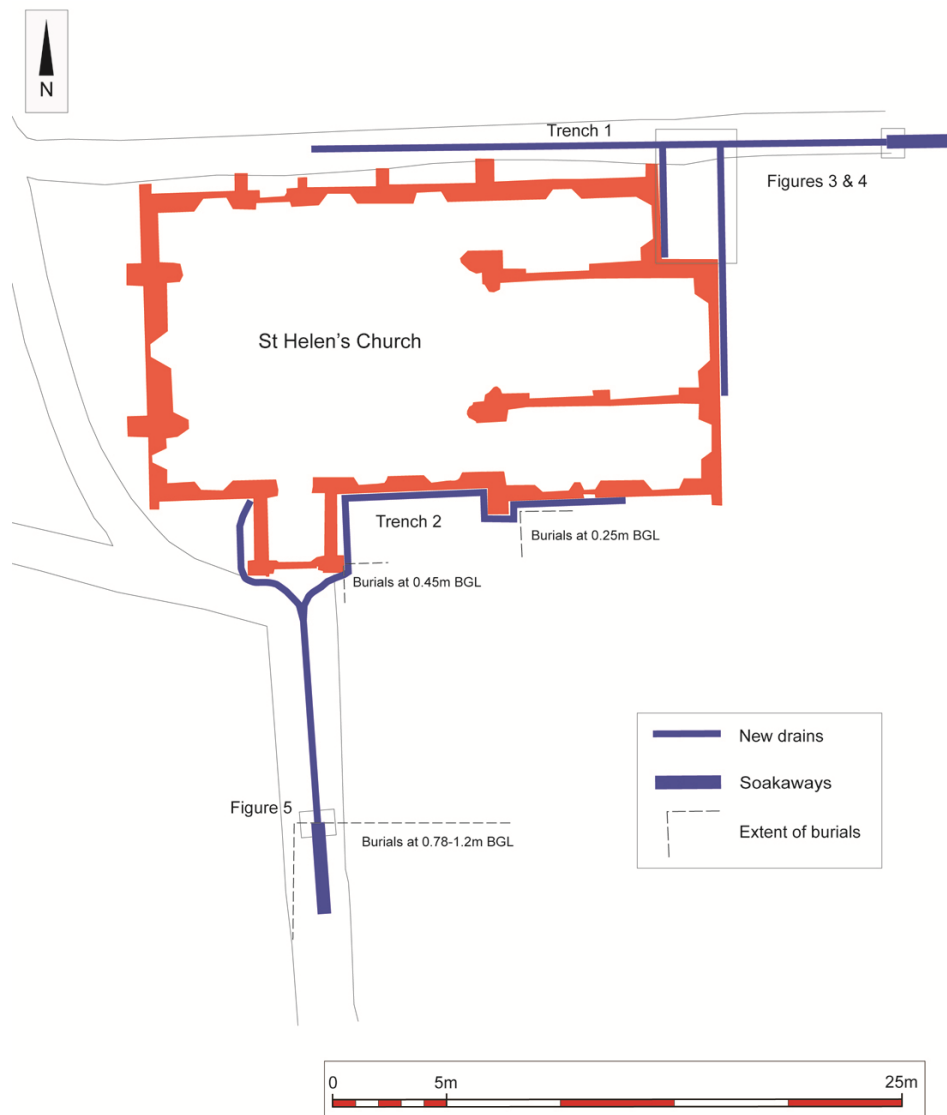


Figure 2 Location of trenches and burials

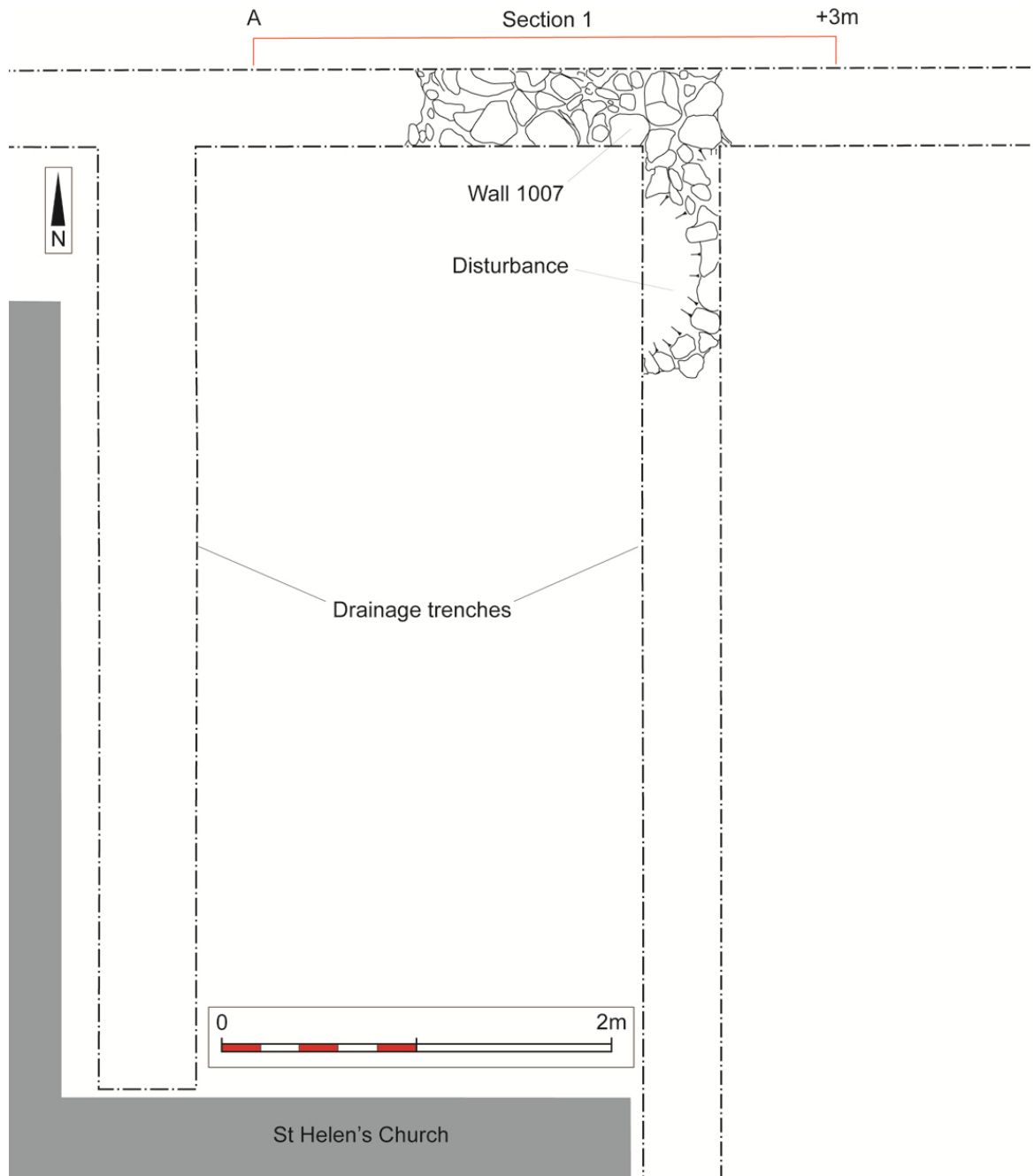


Figure 3 Wall foundation 1007 in Trench 1

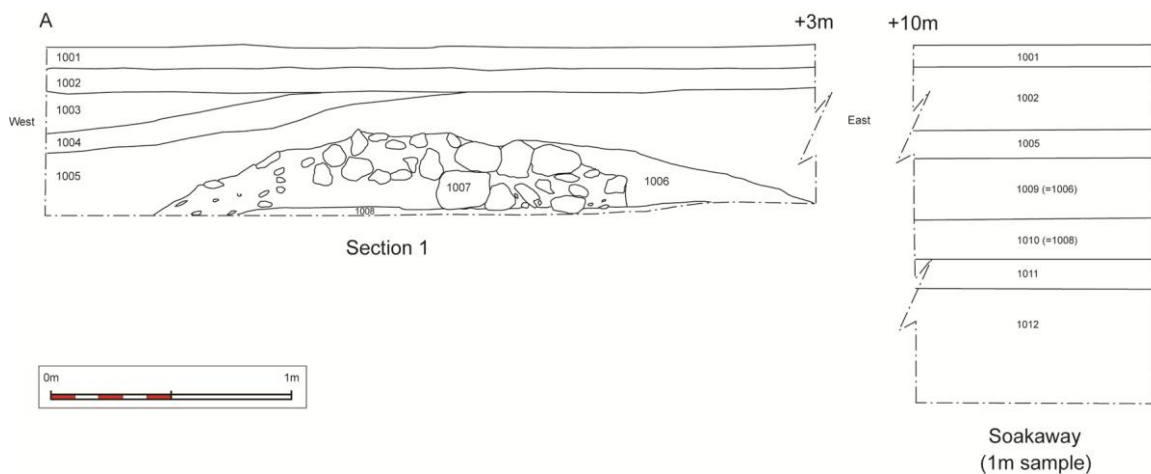


Figure 4 Trench 1 south facing section

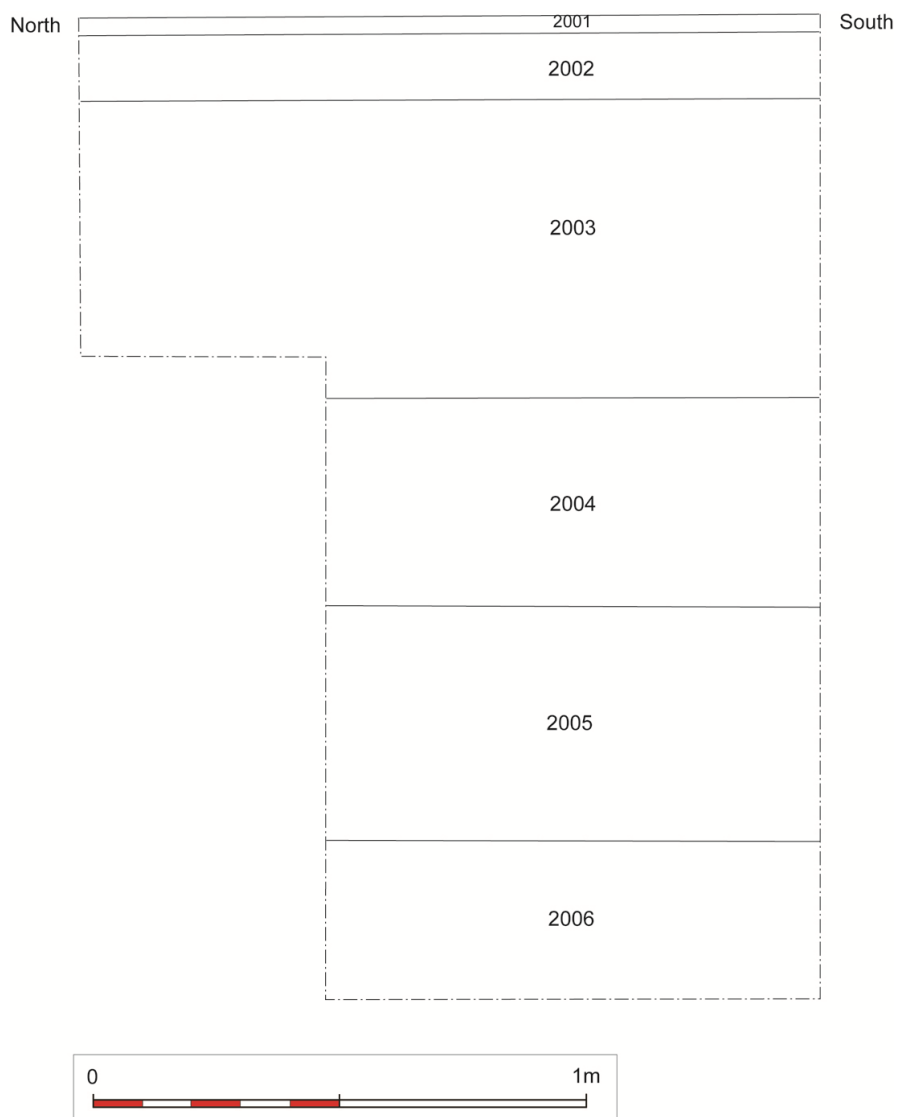


Figure 5 Trench 2 west facing section





Plate 1 Trench 1 looking east



Plate 2 North-south spurs to trench 1, looking south





*Plate 3 Trench 1 eastern end, looking east at the soakaway during excavation*



*Plate 4 South facing section of the northern soakaway*





Plate 5 Wall foundation 1007, looking west



Plate 6 Trench 1 south facing section, eastern end





*Plate 7 Trench 1 south-facing section, western end*



*Plate 8 Charnel recovered from deposit 1014*





*Plate 9 The brick lined drain Context 1013 (beneath the scale) with the present tarmac path to the left and northern wall of the church to the right, looking east-south-east*



*Plate 10 Typical section of trench 1, looking north*





Plate 11 Southern area, looking west



Plate 12 Burial at 0.25m BGL immediately south of the chancel, looking north





Plate 13 Trench 2 on east side of porch with sample of charnel, looking west



Plate 14 Porch foundations, disturbed by burials at c. 0.45m BGL, looking west





*Plate 15 East facing section through porch foundations*



*Plate 16 Confluence of drainage trench 2 in front of porch door, looking NNE*





Plate 17 Charnel from deposit 2003 near to porch door



Plate 18 More intense charnel further south from deposit 2003





*Plate 19 Charnel re-interred in base of trench 2, looking south*



*Plate 20 Southern soakaway, showing spoil on boards for examination, looking south*





Plate 21 Southern soakaway showing spoil on boards for examination, looking east



Plate 22 West facing section of southern soakaway trench