

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

**Report No.204**

April 1992

**Holy Trinity Churchyard, Sutton Coldfield  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

by

Peter Leach and Jon Sterenberg

For further information please contact:

Simon Buteux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

The University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2TT

Tel: 021 414 5513

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### 1.0 Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological evaluation in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Parish Church, Sutton Coldfield, commissioned by the Parochial Church Council. The investigation was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) in January 1992, following the granting of a faculty by the Diocese of Birmingham to permit an excavation within the churchyard. The need for an archaeological evaluation arose as the result of proposals to build a church hall and provide vehicular access and car parking within part of the existing churchyard. The evaluation was planned therefore to investigate the survival, character and period of human remains and of any other surviving archaeological evidence, and thus to assess the impact of development proposals upon the area.

### 2.0 The Site

The Parish Church of Holy Trinity, Sutton occupies the highest point towards the southern end of a sandstone ridge overlooking the valley of the Plants Brook (Fig. 1). Founded, in all probability, early in the 13th century, the earliest record of the church is in 1291, at which time it was dedicated to Holy Trinity (Dugdale 1730, 914). The parish church was built to serve a growing community around a market place just to the north, at the junction of roads from Lichfield, Coleshill and Birmingham. Subsequently, under the patronage of the Earls of Warwick, Sutton obtained its charter as a town in 1298 (*ibid.* 911). An earlier centre may have been the hunting lodge and later manor house and chapel on Manor Hill across the Plants Brook valley to the south west. This latter site served as a base for hunting in Sutton Chase by successive Saxon and medieval kings and earls, but the focus of development evidently shifted to Trinity Hill, where the later medieval village and market town was centred.

As the population slowly expanded, so the church will have been modified or rebuilt in part. The tower is of 15th-century construction, and has been added on to the west end of the nave. Further major additions date from the early decades of the 16th century in the time of Bishop Vesey. Vesey was also responsible for founding the Grammar School in 1541, which was located within a strip of land bordering the south west boundary to the medieval churchyard and overlooking Mill Street (Fig. 3b). It was this piece of land which was eventually incorporated into an enlargement of the old churchyard in 1832 (Evans 1988, 72-4) (Fig. 1c). The existing south west boundary was then established on the crest of the hill at the edge of a steep slope created by earlier quarrying. The sloping nature of the ground occupied by the Old School and its gardens required considerable infilling to level it up almost to that of the surface of the original burial ground and make the area more suitable for burial (*ibid.* 77).

### 3.0 Method of Investigation

The site eventually chosen for evaluation was within that part of the churchyard lying immediately west of the tower and beyond the path which gives access to the west end of the church (Fig. 1c). This relatively level, turfed area now stands over 2m above the level of the path at the top of a steep bank (Fig. 3a). No grave mounds or memorial stones were visible in situ within the area of investigation, the latter having been cleared and re-sited along the present western boundary to the burial ground in 1950. A trench 15m long by 3m wide and aligned with the axis of the church, was positioned here to allow investigation of portions of the burial ground lying on either side of the original pre-1832 churchyard boundary. Excavation thereafter proceeded by hand throughout, with

the objective of assessing and recording the character, survival and date of human remains or other archaeological evidence, down to the anticipated foundation levels of the projected development or to the surface of natural sandstone underlying the churchyard. Certain areas, identified as 'steps' or 'baulks' on the plan (Fig. 2a) were not excavated down to the level of surviving burials within the trench, to facilitate access and the removal of spoil from the deeper areas of excavation. Written, scale-drawn and photographic records were created in the course of excavations, and both artefact and human remains were collected and documented from individually identified contexts and deposits. The information obtained by these procedures has been analysed and presented in this report as the basis for an interpretation of the evidence recovered and its implications for the potential development of the churchyard.

#### 4.0 Archaeology

4.1 The evaluation trench was excavated and recorded over a two-week period in January 1992, entirely by hand. This strategy was adopted in part because no convenient access for a mechanical excavator existed, but also in view of the potential survival of human remains close to the surface and to minimise the extent of disturbance within the churchyard. Up to 2m of overburden was removed in places, although elsewhere the underlying natural Keuper sandstone survived little more than 1m below the present surface of the churchyard. The archaeological evidence is reviewed here with reference to the two zones of the churchyard encompassed by the excavation, that is the original Holy Trinity churchyard and its post-1832 extension. By definition this implies a chronological presentation of the evidence, although there is inevitably some overlap or uncertainty in the exact sequence of events represented in the archaeological record.

#### 4.2 The Old Churchyard

The original western boundary to Holy Trinity churchyard is still extant for a short distance as a brick-built wall extending south eastwards from the present 'Sons of Rest' building in the north west corner of the churchyard. Its original line continued on that south-east alignment towards the site of Bishop Vesey's original grammar

school on Blind Lane, now Trinity Hill (Figs. 1c and 3b). This line was no longer visible within the enlarged western graveyard but could be identified in excavation. The surviving remains comprised a degraded bank of compacted gravel and clay over a finer sandy gravel (1008) which rested upon the natural sandstone c.1.0m below the present graveyard surface (Fig. 2b). The original brick boundary wall had evidently been completely removed and the gravel, probably the remains of a footing for the wall, had been encroached upon or removed completely by later grave cuts of the 19th-century churchyard extension (4.3, below). Immediately to the east the most westerly grave cuts in the old churchyard had evidently been made right up against the original boundary, their western ends visibly shaping the surviving strip of natural sandstone which underlay that boundary (Fig. 2a).

East from the old churchyard boundary approximately 10m of the earlier burial ground were sampled by excavation. Over 1m of relatively clean and featureless buff-pink sandy soil (1002) was excavated by hand before the first articulated burials were encountered. This corresponded with a horizon where the natural sandstone first appeared, as isolated upstanding areas of stone, carved and truncated by the cutting of the graves. Over a dozen graves where wholly or partly excavated at this level, and the outlines of portions of several others were recorded (Fig. 2a). The majority were orientated on a common east-west alignment, which does not quite correspond to that of the church's axis. The best-preserved graves were cut wholly or partly into the sandstone at slightly variable depths, and were closely spaced; later graves commonly encroaching upon and thus disturbing these earlier burials. The zone within which burials survived more or less intact was rarely more than 0.50m thick, although at least one partly-excavated double grave, F29 at the east end of the trench, was cut almost 1m deep into the bedrock.

The remains recovered from within these graves, which were partly or completely excavated, comprised human skeletal material, the remnants of coffins and their fittings, and occasional remains, both human and artefactual, incorporated accidentally into the grave fills as a consequence of disturbance of other graves.

Articulated human skeletons of adults and children were laid out extended, with heads to the west. Bone preservation was generally poor, although most major bones survived quite recognisably and could be lifted intact. Several instances of multiple burial were recorded. The grave F21 from which HB16 was removed, also contained an earlier interment immediately beneath, which was left in situ. A large rectangular cut of double coffin width (F29) near the east end of the trench apparently contained the remains of two individuals buried side by side, although these were not fully excavated or removed (Fig. 2a). No detailed report has been prepared on the sex, age or pathology of the individuals removed in this excavation, although written and photographic records have been made of the bones represented and artefacts present in each burial. A summary of this evidence and the archive of records and finds have been deposited with the diocese.

From the majority of graves excavated iron handles and occasional nails testify to the former presence of wooden coffins, although these had otherwise almost completely disappeared. Several graves contained copper or tin alloy coffin plates with embossed or impressed decoration. These were, for the most part, badly corroded and it was not possible to decipher inscriptions or names which might give a clue to the identity of the deceased. Also within the backfill of these graves were items incorporated accidentally during grave digging and backfilling. Fragments of human remains deriving from earlier burials disturbed by later ones, were the most common items. Several of the burials excavated were in fact incomplete and visibly disturbed by later inhumations (e.g. HB18 in F25 and HB8 in F11). Coffin fittings from earlier burials were also mixed into the fills of later graves, as were occasional fragments of pottery, tile fragments, clay pipes, coins and other metal objects.

While in no instance could the former identity of these burials be established, from features such as coffin fittings and artefacts buried accidentally within grave fills, it was established that almost all of the intact burials excavated and removed, in whole or part, within the old cemetery were of later 18th- and early 19th-century date.

Whether or not an earlier sequence of burials had been disturbed by this group of remains could not be determined, the density of 18th-century burials being such as to have destroyed all datable remains of earlier periods. The only clue to earlier activity in the churchyard here were a few sherds of medieval pottery from later grave fills, themselves not necessarily indicative of burials here at that period.

### 4.3 The 19th-century Churchyard Extension

As mentioned previously, the original western churchyard and boundary had been obliterated at the time of the extension of the original churchyard to the west in 1832. This extension took in the former garden of the old Grammar School and involved raising the original ground level of the garden somewhat, to render it more suitable for burials to take place (Evans 1988, p.77). Only a gravel foundation survived to mark the line of the old boundary in this excavation, which had itself been encroached upon by subsequent burials within the 19th-century burial ground.

A handful of these were examined within the small portion of the churchyard extension sampled by the excavation (Fig. 2). One grave (F7) contained two superimposed adult burials, only one of which (HB5) was removed. This grave penetrated to almost 2m below the modern churchyard surface, its lower portion cutting into natural sandstone bedrock. The upper levels excavated within this area (1003) had also been cut through in part by this and the surrounding contemporary graves. The material contained within these levels was very variable in character, including domestic rubbish of early 19th-century date, and showed clear signs of rapid accumulation - evidently a result of building up the level of the former Grammar School garden. Another group of burials partly excavated here comprised two infant burials HB4 and 4a within a single coffin (F6), and at least two adults (HB13 and HB17) superimposed within the same grave (F17/F22), immediately to the east. This grave had breached the former boundary line and thus lay largely within the old churchyard area.

Coffin remains and the bone of these inhumations were not noticeably better preserved than those of the old churchyard burials, except

within the deeper grave F7. Once again, identifying evidence such as gravestones or coffin plates was absent or poorly preserved. Grave orientation follows that of the old churchyard burials, and although a fair density of burials is suggested, there was no evidence for intercutting and disturbance of earlier graves by later burials within the extension. In the main, new graves within the extension to Holy Trinity churchyard ceased to be dug around 1880, when a new cemetery for Sutton Coldfield was opened.

#### 4.4 Recent History

As mentioned above (2.2), over one metre of almost featureless sandy soil (1002) overlay the latest burials within the old churchyard. Fragmentary human remains and occasional coffin fittings and artefacts within this layer suggest that it had been subject to extensive disturbance. Such disturbance may well be the result of previous grave digging, which would account for the occasional disarticulated human bone fragment, although no sign of individual grave cuts could be distinguished throughout this deposit until the level of articulated burials was reached. The excavated infill and re-excavation of graves within the old cemetery undoubtedly accounts for much of this layer and its character, but other activities may have contributed further to the build up.

It was reported in the Vestry Minute Book of 1817 that soil of the churchyard was piled six to eight feet above the floor of the aisles and around the north and south walls of the tower (Evans 1988., 78-9). Removal of this accumulation and further extensions to Holy Trinity Church in 1874 and 1879 when the Vestry was built and the North aisle created, may well have contributed towards the build up of the overburden on the churchyard in this area west of the tower.

The latest event in the history of the churchyard has been the clearance in 1950 of almost all the memorials marking the sites of graves and their relocation along the perimeters of the churchyard. Whether or not any of these could relate to the burials which were located in this excavation, it seems that some tombstones and grave surrounds were broken up at the time of the clearance. Parts of two substantial pits (F1 and F2) revealed at the east end of the excavation contained numerous

fragments of broken memorial stones, grave surrounds and bricks, evidently re-buried after the graveyard had been cleared.

#### 5.0 Discussion

The evaluation of Holy Trinity churchyard, by means of a single excavated trench to the west of the church tower, has provided specific information relating to this area, and provides a basis for extrapolating the probabilities of occurrence and preservation which might pertain elsewhere within the western half of the churchyard.

Sampling by excavation across the pre-1832 western churchyard boundary revealed not only the remnants of that boundary but also the contrasting circumstances on either side of it. To the east, the old churchyard contained numerous intercutting graves penetrating into the soft sandstone bedrock and pressing close up against the old boundary. Bone preservation was generally not good, supporting an 18th-century observation that the churchyard is 'taken notice of for consuming the bodies deposited therein very quickly' (Bonell, 1762). Coffins and their fittings were similarly in poor condition when recovered. The zone of best-surviving articulated remains was generally restricted to the vicinity of the bedrock, which survived at variable depths between one and two metres below the present churchyard surface (Fig. 3a). None of the burials could be identified as being earlier in date than mid or late 18th century, and there was no sign of earlier archaeological deposits through which they may have been cut. A handful of medieval pottery sherds was the only evidence of any earlier activity in this area, funerary or otherwise.

Burials within the post-1832 churchyard extension were evidently closely spaced and cut to levels very similar to that of the main burial horizon in the old churchyard, penetrating into the bedrock. However, there was no evidence on this part of the site for intercutting graves, although at least one had cut through the old churchyard boundary, and surface indications suggest that the 19th-century burial ground extension was well filled before burial ceased.

Both groups of burials, pre- and post-1832, lie at a depth in excess of one metre below the present churchyard surface level. This level has

evidently been artificially built up by prolonged excavation of graves during the 18th and 19th centuries and possibly earlier, supplemented perhaps by redeposition of spoil from around the church during episodes of clearance or new building works. There is clear evidence that all these processes disturbed earlier human remains. Some of this material was evidently reburied haphazardly within the zone of sandy soil overburden which now seals the surviving articulated remains, as pits F1 and F2 demonstrate. Within the new cemetery extension no build-up of equivalent overburden had occurred, the level here having been raised by the dumping of mixed sand, soil, gravel and some domestic rubbish to provide a sufficient depth for the cutting of graves.

From the profile through the cemetery and excavation west of the church (Fig. 3a) it is clear that the original natural sandstone bedrock on the top of the hill always stood somewhat higher than the church floor levels. The processes of burial and other accumulative activity have now raised the churchyard to an even higher level above the floor levels within and around the west tower. To what extent these circumstances pertain elsewhere within the churchyard west of the present path must remain to some extent uncertain, although the evaluation is likely to be representative. The slope of the present churchyard downhill to the south west is likely to reflect approximately the original configuration of the ground beneath its cover of burials and subsequent overburden. The depth of imported makeup within the extension probably increases in that direction, and in the far corner beside Trinity Hill may survive the buried remains of Bishop Vesey's original 16th-century Grammar School (Fig. 3b).

## 6.0 Implications and Recommendations

As was to be expected, this evaluation has demonstrated the survival of intact inhumation burials within the western part of Holy Trinity Churchyard, and has provided information concerning their age and preservation, depth of burial, and the depth and occurrence of the underlying natural sandstone bedrock. In the event of a major development affecting this part of the churchyard, several implications arise:

1. Within a zone of c.1.20m depth from the present churchyard ground level archaeological remains and structures, including burials, survive only sparsely and with little coherence.
2. Sandstone bedrock survives at variable depths according to the grave cuts, from a highest point of 131.00m AOD seen in the evaluation trench, to a lowest level of 129.01m in the deepest excavated grave (F29).
3. Between these extremes coherent remains of articulated human burials survived relatively well, the majority within a zone 0.50 to 1.0m thick immediately above or cut into the bedrock.
4. The density of burials at that level is indicated by the recovery or recognition of at least 30 individuals within the area opened. Within the old churchyard a minimum surviving burial density of one per square metre must be allowed, and perhaps one per 1.5 square metres in the churchyard extension.
5. Despite the relatively poor quality of surviving bone, most of the burials could be individually recorded and their remains were recovered fairly intact, although little or no evidence of their identity appears to survive. The period of burial spans a century or more, from the mid- or late-18th century to at least 1880 within the churchyard extension. No burials of earlier periods were identified in this evaluation but their survival elsewhere in the churchyard cannot be ruled out.
6. In the event of development proceeding within the churchyard provision should be made for a further archaeological presence to undertake observation and recording by means of a watching brief during the course of all earthmoving operations.

## 7.0 Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Rector, Canon Longman, the Churchwardens and to other staff of Holy Trinity for their co-operation and assistance; to Donald Grove of Harborne & Grove, Architects, and to Dr Mike Hodder, Diocesan Archaeological Consultant, for discussion and advice throughout the project.

The evaluation was directed in the field by Peter Leach and Jon Sterenberg with the assistance of Bob Burrows, Mark Hewson and David Kendrick. The report was produced by Liz Hooper and Ann Humphries and edited by Simon Buteux.

## 8.0 References

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# SUTTON COLDFIELD Holy Trinity Church 1992

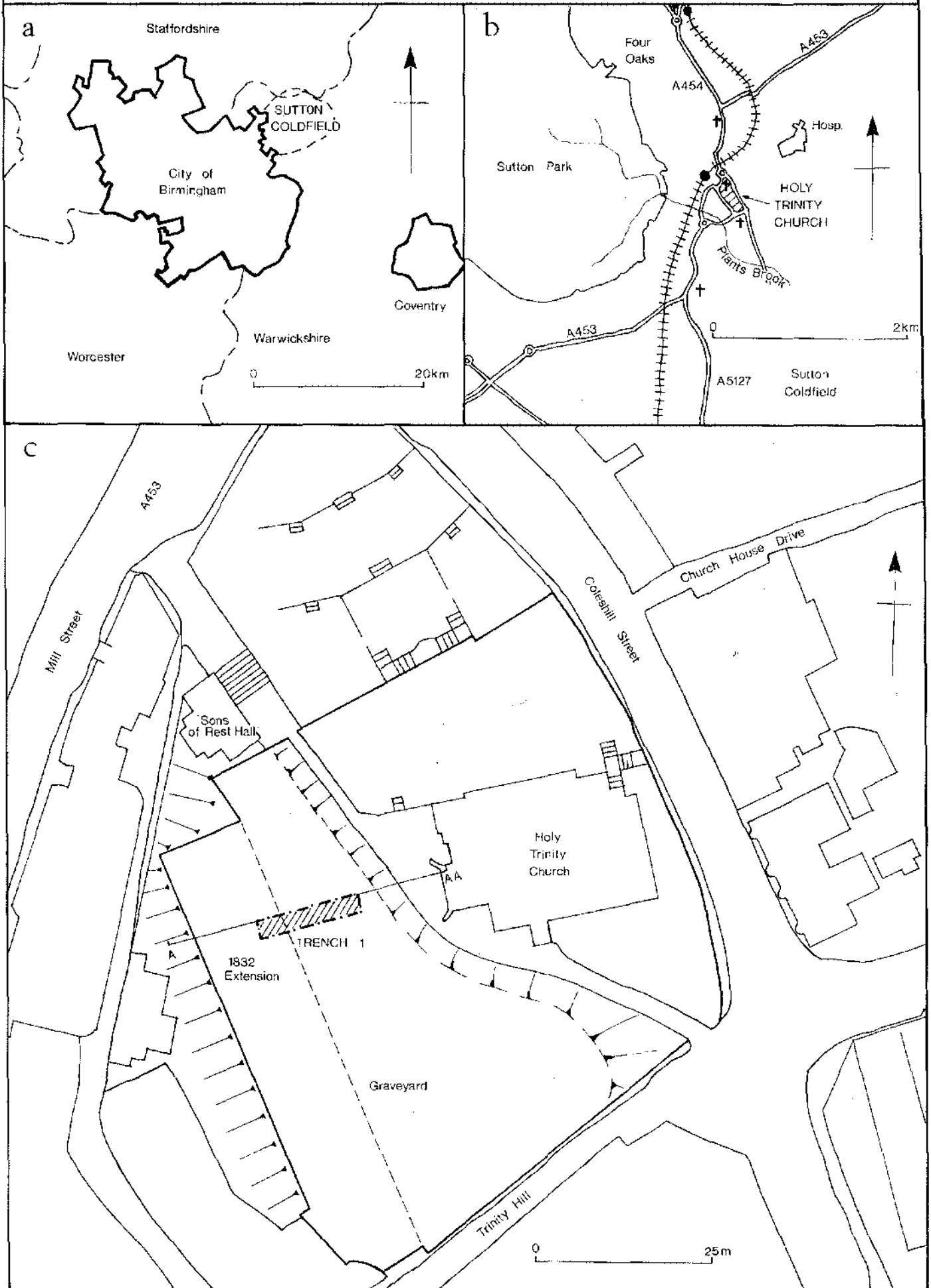
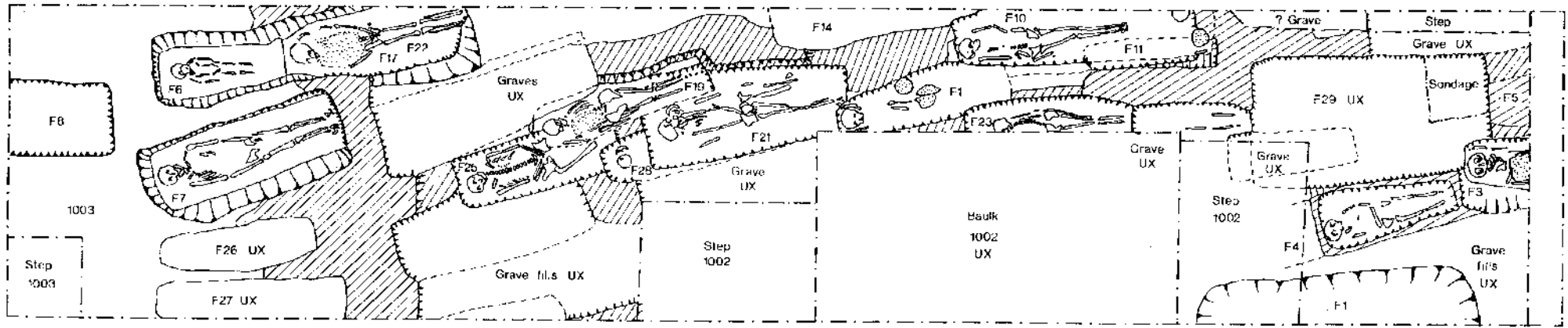


Figure 1

a Plan



b Section

UX - Unexcavated

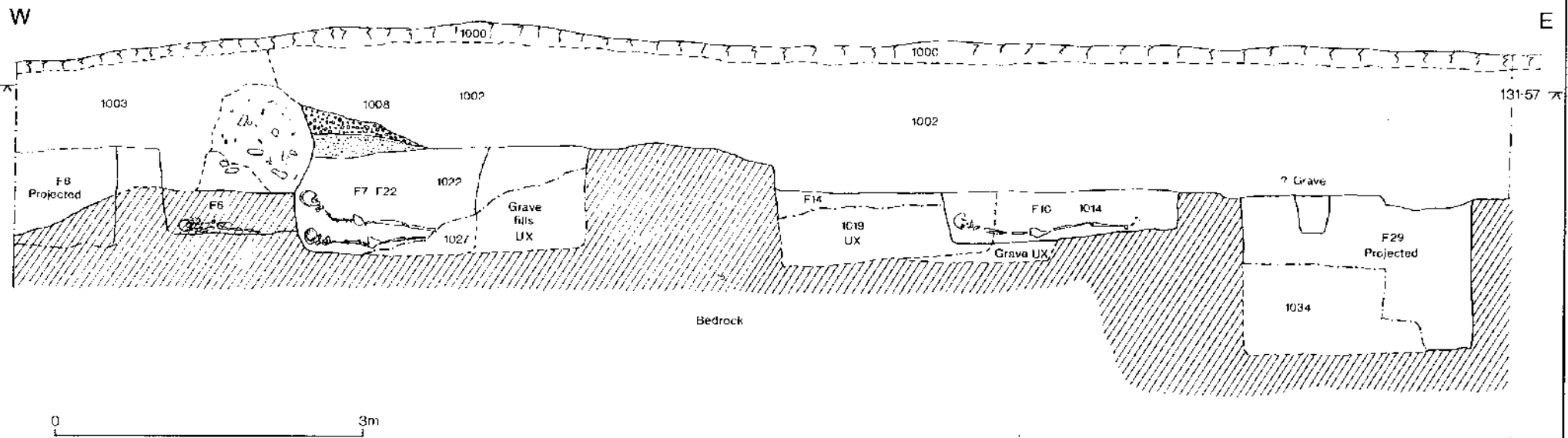


Figure 2