

***A watching brief on work  
to the churchyard wall at  
Mill Street, Wem,  
Shropshire, 2013***

by  
H R Hannaford

Archaeology Service



**A WATCHING BRIEF ON WORK TO THE CHURCHYARD WALL  
AT MILL STREET, WEM, SHROPSHIRE, 2013**

by

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A Report for

**Environmental Maintenance – North,  
Shropshire Council**

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Photo 3: partial skeleton 11, looking N (scale 0.5m)

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## SUMMARY

*In March 2013 the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council carried out a watching brief on work to Wem churchyard wall, Wem, Shropshire. The watching brief accompanied groundworks associated with cutting back and rebuilding of a length of the wall at the north end of Mill Street. It was considered possible that archaeological remains might be encountered during these works. A quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered from deposits behind the churchyard wall, and the partial remains of two intact burials were encountered in the base of the foundation trench for the new wall. No other significant archaeological features or deposits were seen during the watching brief.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

**1.1** Wem is a small town in north Shropshire about 10 miles north of Shrewsbury town centre. St Peter and St Paul's Church (HER 05530) and its churchyard lie in the centre of the modern town and of the medieval settlement of Wem (Shropshire Historic Environment Record [HER] No. 05575), at the junction of High Street and Mill Street.

**1.2** In March 2013 work was carried to the churchyard wall on the corner of Mill Street and High Street, Wem (NGR SJ 512 288). This work involved taking down the existing wall, cutting back the churchyard by approximately 0.6m, and re-erecting the wall. The Church of St Peter and St Paul (HER 12517) is a Grade II\* listed building (National Ref: 259939), and a Grade II listed war memorial (National Ref: 488226) lies immediately adjacent to the proposed works area.

**1.3** The site of these works lay on the northeastern edge of the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul's Church (HER 05530). The site of the works also lay 60m to the northeast of the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Wem Castle (National Monument No.: 34913 "Wem Castle: a motte castle immediately south west of St Peter and St Paul's Church"). The castle (HER 01135) probably dates to the late 11th or early 12th century and originally will have occupied a larger area than the surviving castle mound. It is probable that the church and churchyard originally lay within the grounds of the castle.

**1.4** Encroachment on the High Street frontage of the churchyard began in the 16th century (HER 05571) and it was still occupied by buildings in the early 20th century. Later in that century the buildings on the frontage were demolished and the land was returned to use as part of the churchyard. The churchyard wall on Mill Street has also previously been set back and repaired in the 1970s.

**1.5** The site of the works was nevertheless considered to have some archaeological potential with any below ground archaeological remains being likely to be affected by ground disturbance associated with the work. There was also a possibility of human remains being disturbed by the works. It was recommended that the work to the wall be accompanied by a programme of archaeological work in order to record any archaeological deposits that might be disturbed by the groundworks.

**1.6** The programme of archaeological work was to comprise a watching brief on these groundworks. The aim of the programme of archaeological work was to allow for the preservation by record of any archaeological remains that were encountered during the works.

**1.7** The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned to carry out the archaeological watching brief in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (WSI) approved by the Historic Environment Team, Shropshire Council.

## **2 THE WATCHING BRIEF**

**2.1** An archaeological watching brief was carried out on the groundworks associated with the cutting back of the existing churchyard wall and the excavation of the foundation trench for the new wall.

**2.2** The existing ground surface of fine stone chippings (Figs. 3a & 4; 2) immediately behind the existing churchyard wall had been removed up to the Grinshill stone flagstone surface (1) around the war memorial prior to the watching brief. The Grinshill stone face (4) of the churchyard wall had also been removed. A layer of topsoil about 0.25m deep (3) was then cut back by mini-digger (with a toothless bucket). The topsoil sealed the concrete backing to the wall face (5), which belonged to a previous episode of work to the wall in the 1970s; the concrete was then also broken out and removed.

**2.3** The deposits behind the concrete wall backing were then cut back by 0.6m width at the southern end of the work area tapering to c. 0.1m width at the northern end. The concrete was seen to have filled a terraced cut and a deposit of very loose greyish brown sandy loam (Fig. 3a; 7) filled the cut behind the concrete. Some disarticulated and fragmentary human bone (which was collected and bagged for reburial on site) was recovered from this fill.

**2.4** At the northern end of the section, the topsoil (Figs. 3a & 4; 3) overlay a deposit of very dark greyish brown sandy silty loam (14) with brick fragments, stone, cobbles, and mortar flecks. This deposit may have been associated with the demolition of the buildings on the High Street frontage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**2.5** The soil deposits behind the churchyard wall were all cut down in thin spits to the level of the wall's plinth course (about 0.2m above street level). At the southern end of the section, the 1970s works to the churchyard wall were seen to have cut into a layer of mixed dark brown sandy loam (Figs. 3a & 4; 6) about 0.3m deep. This deposit was also removed in thin spits, and contained numerous fragments of brick, some pieces of broken sewer pipe, and again some disarticulated and fragmentary human bone. It lay over a deposit about 0.1m thick of a dark grey sandy humic loam (9) which contained brick fragments, and pebbles. This in turn lay over a deposit of dark brown sandy loam (10) about 0.5m thick, which contained a quantity of disarticulated and fragmentary human bone. The jumbled nature of the bones, and the lack of stratigraphy or evidence for cuts within this layer of soil, suggested that this deposit represented either repeated disturbance of existing burials or a clearance deposit from an earlier episode of groundworks in the churchyard – there was not a sufficient density of skeletal remains to suggest that this was a single charnel deposit.

**2.6** A trench 0.5m wide by 0.45m deep was then cut into this deposit (Figs. 3a & 4; 10) for the foundations of the new wall. The trench was cut in thin spits with a narrow toothless bucket. The dark brown sandy loam deposit (10) continued to a depth of 0.35m below the level of the top of the plinth course. Beneath this was a deposit of brown sand (12). Only the upper 0.10m of this deposit was removed, but it revealed parts of two inhumations (Fig. 4; 11 & 13), cut into the top of this deposit, and aligned east-west with their feet to the east. Each inhumation was represented by some of the lower legs (the upper parts of the burials lay beyond the edge of the works area, and the feet lay beyond the eastern edge of the new foundation trench). Neither burial was complete. The first (Fig. 3b; 11) was represented in the trench by the tibia and fibula of the left leg, and the ankle bones of the left and right legs (the right tibia and fibula were missing). The second burial (Fig. 3c; 13) was represented in the trench by the left tibia

and the right tibia and fibula (the left fibula was missing). There was no obvious grave cut apparent in the sand (12) for either burial, and there was no evidence for any coffin or coffin furniture.

**2.7** No further significant archaeological features or deposits were encountered during the watching brief.

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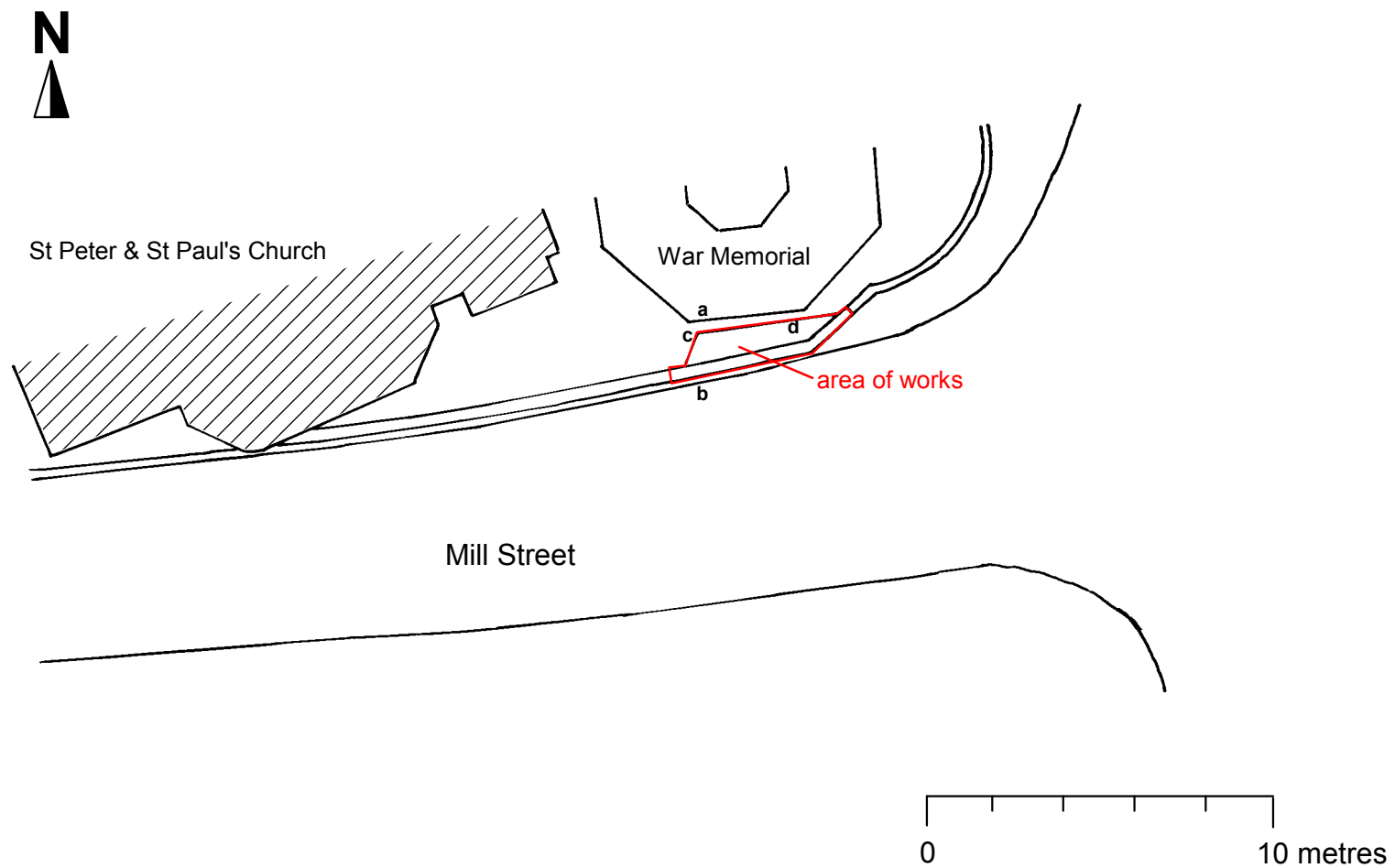
### **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>AOD</b>	Above Ordnance Datum
<b>EP-NS</b>	English Place-Name Society
<b>HER</b>	County Historic Environment Record, Shirehall, Shrewsbury
<b>OS</b>	Ordnance Survey
<b>SA</b>	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
<b>SCAS</b>	Shropshire Council Archaeology Service
<b>SCCAS</b>	Shropshire County Council Archaeology Service
<b>TSAHS</b>	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
<b>TSAS</b>	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society





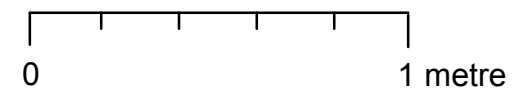
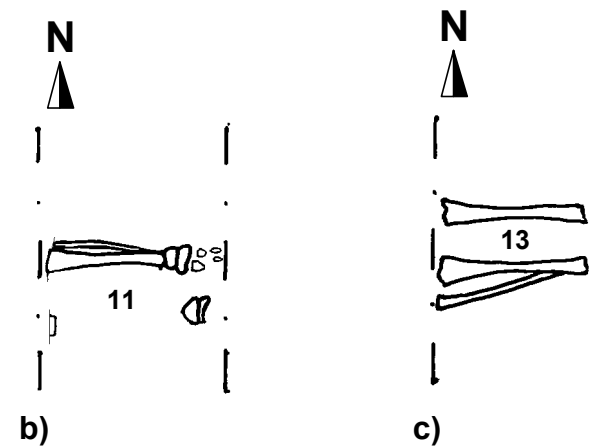
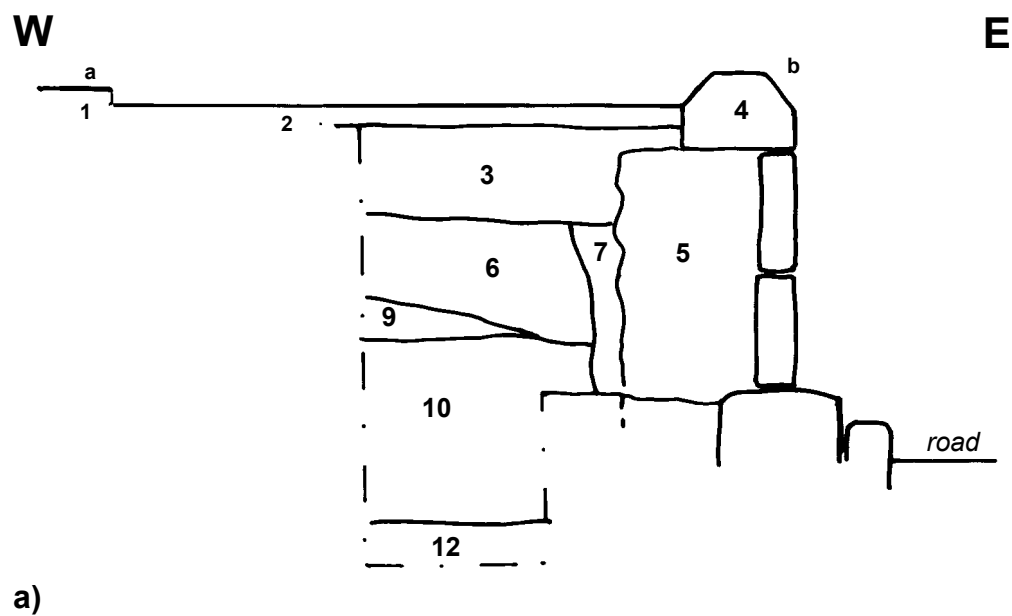




## MILL STREET, WEM 2013

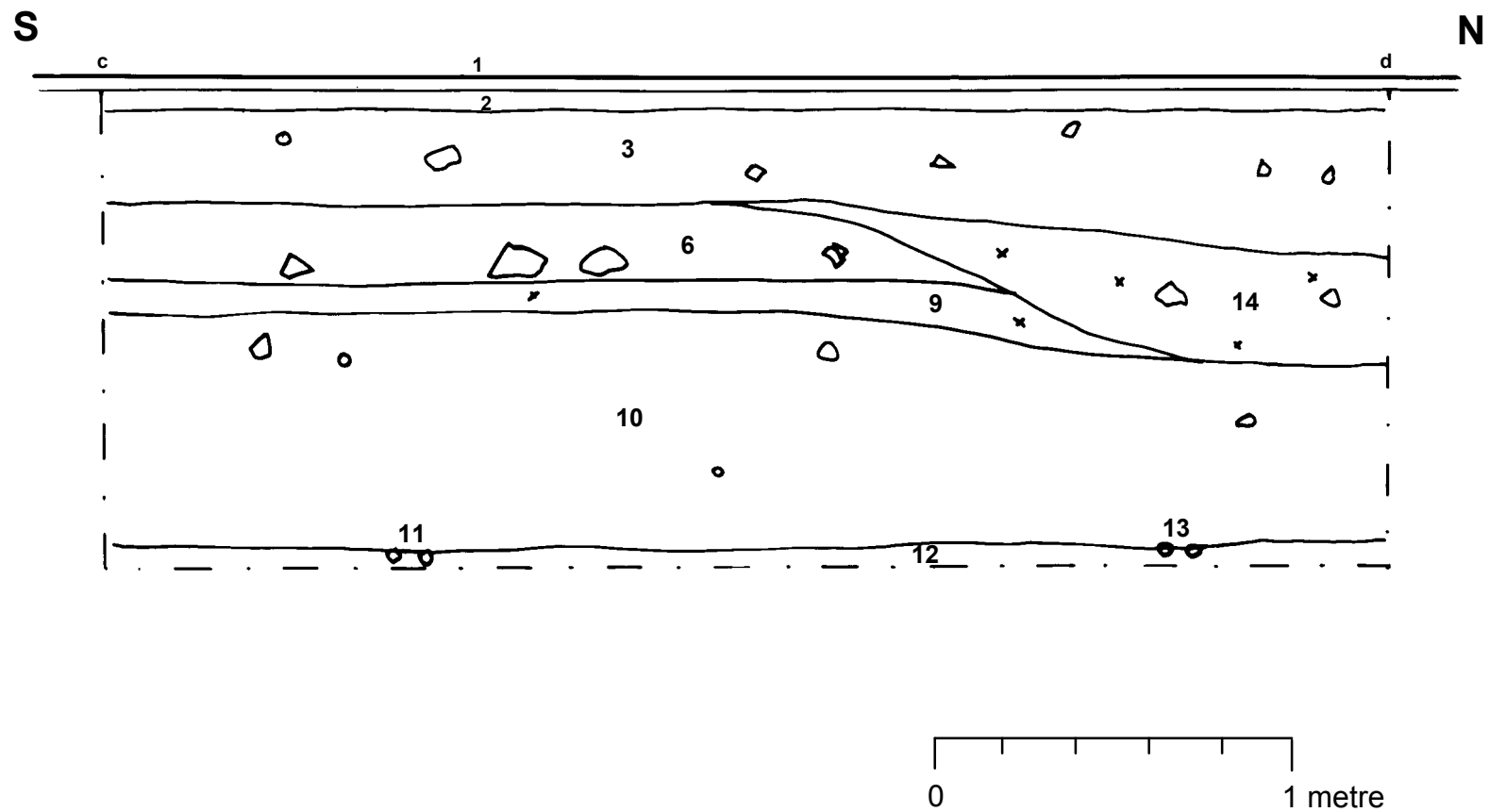
Figure 2: The area of the works to the churchyard wall, showing the location of drawings 3a (a-b) and 4 (c-d), plan view; 1:200 scale





# MILL STREET, WEM 2013

Figure 3: a) south-facing section through the deposits behind the churchyard wall (for location, see Fig. 2); b) burial 11, plan view; c) burial 13, plan view; 1:20 scale



MILL STREET, WEM 2013

Figure 4: East-facing section through the deposits behind the churchyard wall (for location, see Fig. 2); 1:20 scale



Photo 1: The churchyard wall at the beginning of the site works, looking SW



Photo 2: The section behind the wall, looking W (scale bar 1m)



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Photo 5: The completed section, looking NW (scale bar 1m)