



NEGATIVE WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

**Holy Trinity Church,
Sunderland,
Tyne and Wear**

NGR: NZ 40594 57192

Contractor: Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd (Durham Office)

The Rope Works, Broadwood View, Chester-le-Street, Durham, DH3 3AF

Contact: Aaron Goode Telephone: 0191 377 1111 Email: AGoode@pre-construct.com

Client: The Churches Conservation Trust

PCA Report Number: 14626

PCA Site Code: HTC21

Oasis ID: preconst1-427126

LOCATION

Planning Authority: Sunderland City Council

District: East End, Sunderland

County: Tyne and Wear

Site address: Holy Trinity Church, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear

DEVELOPMENT DESCRIPTION:

An appropriately specified programme of archaeological work was requested by the Tyne and Wear Archaeology Service in association with planning permission to change the use of Holy Trinity Church, Sunderland (Figure 1) to a new community venue and heritage attraction with various external works and installation of new drainage facilities, which was granted in 2017 (Planning Application: 17/00674/FU4 & 17/00675/LB4). Pre-Construct Archaeology was commissioned by the Churches Conservation Trust to undertake an archaeological watching brief on the excavation of three trenches, to enable the installation of new drainage, power, and gas services. A specification for the work was produced by the Tyne and Wear Archaeology Service (MON 15062). Faculty to carry out the ground works was granted by the Diocese of Durham 23rd February 2018, on condition that an archaeological watching brief was carried out in accordance with the specification.

This work forms the final part of a phased programme of archaeological investigations at the site (watching brief). This phase of archaeological work comprised archaeological monitoring of two trenches to the east of the church (Trenches 1 & 2) and a trench located to the west of the church

(Trench 3) (Figure 2). All three trenches were hand excavated by the clients appointed contractor under archaeological supervision.

REASON FOR WATCHING BRIEF:

The following text is a brief summary of the historical background to the church taken from the desk-based assessment (PCA 2016).

Built in 1718–1719, Holy Trinity served the growing merchant classes around the port area (previously known as Old Sunderland). Holy Trinity had a dual role for worship and civic administration; the vestry was used as the town hall/magistrates court and the town's first library was in the room above.

The church is Baroque in style and built of brick laid in Flemish bond. It has sandstone dressings, a low pitched slate roof and forms a seven-bay rectangle with west tower and apsidal east end. Completed in 1719, the overall plan has been relatively unaltered apart from the addition of an apse and the removal of a later boiler house. The roof was originally covered in lead but was raised in 1803 by Thomas Wilson, a local engineer who designed the iron bridge across the River Wear (1793-6). The nave and aisles are of six bays and the tower, lobbies and vestry take up the seventh. Each bay has a large round-headed window with stone surround, moulded imposts and triple keystone. At the east end there was originally a shallow chancel recess to which was added the apse some fifteen years after the church was built and under which is a burial vault. On the western elevation are three entrances each with their original doors. The main entrance was through central double six-panelled doors. Above the entranceway is a tower with three clock faces and two sundials; the tall west facing window has the only original glass left after damage in World War II.

Holy Trinity was inaugurated with a sermon by Thomas Mangey D.D., on 'The Holiness of Christian Churches'. The first baptisms and marriage took place in May 1719. The church and its churchyard, taken from the town moor to the south, were not consecrated until 5th September, when the first internment also took place. Parishioners of Sunderland continued to be buried at Bishopwearmouth for a time afterwards.

Daniel Newcombe, formerly vicar of Hunmanby was inducted in the rectory of Sunderland in July 1719, remaining in office until his death in 1738. It was rumoured that he spent the greatest part of his income in beautifying and adorning the church (Meikle & Newman 2007, 174). The work was completed over many years, with the elaborate chancel being added as late as 1735. Newcombe added the apse beyond the chancel arch in 1735, and a burial vault was constructed below the apse for the rectors of the church (CCT 2010, 6 & 8). Daniel Newcombe would have been the first to be interred in the vaults in 1738. A source from 1834 (Mackenzie & Ross, 280) contains a reference to a vault under the chancel known as Rector's Vault: "within this vault were interred the remains of some of the rectors of Sunderland, with branches of their families". It is highly unlikely, however, the families were buried within the vault at Holy Trinity as Sunderland Antiquarian Society (1902, 6) notes that no burials were allowed in the church except those of the deceased rectors.

Reverend Robert Gray died in 1838 and was buried within the parish churchyard (“to be with his beloved people...”) so it is likely that the rectors from Newcombe up to Gray are all buried in the Rector’s Vault. A poster held in Sunderland Local Studies Library, produced by Friends of Sunderland Old Parish Church, reads:

Below this apse lie five of the early rectors of Sunderland Parish
Daniel Newcombe inducted 25 July 1719, died 1738
Richard Swainston 1739-1758
George Bramwell 1758-1762
John Coxon 1762-1788
James Smyth 1788-1793
John Hampson 1795-1819

No documentary evidence has been discovered to suggest that the burial vault has been emptied and it is therefore considered likely that the bodies of the rectors remain in the church beneath the apse.

Mackenzie and Ross (1834, 280) observe that burial is with great propriety prohibited in every other part of the church. The church yard itself is recorded as one of the largest in England and has, at different times, been improved and raised by ballast (Mackenzie & Ross 1834, 280). On July 28, 1819, part of the adjoining moor, which had been added to the cemetery, was consecrated by the bishop of Oxford. The whole space is recorded being already covered with tombs and head-stones and in the centre stood a small watch-house, from which the approach of resurrectionists could be observed (resurrectionists were employed by anatomists to exhume the bodies of the recently dead).

In 1842 side galleries were added to the church providing an additional 320 seats. In 1856 the tower clock was installed and the raised platform at the east end of the nave was constructed c. 1887 and communion rails set up along its step and in line with the easternmost piers of the nave arcade.

In 1935 there was a major restoration within the structure; side galleries were removed, the west gallery refashioned, box pews in the nave replaced with the present seating, a new solid floor laid in the nave, panelling introduced around the pier bases, the chancel area extended westwards beyond its 1887 limit and communion rails put in their current position and the nave roof restored. In the following year the organ was also substantially rebuilt and in the 1940s the existing ceiling was installed after being damaged during World War II.

In the late 20th century the sliding sash windows were replaced with replicas and glazed with Perspex due to ongoing vandalism, and the boiler house situated by the north side of the apse was removed with the access blocked up.

In 1988, because of a dwindling congregation and the need for expensive repairs, the church was closed and is now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.

The historical value of Holy Trinity Church lies mainly in its date which makes it one of the earliest remaining buildings to survive in Sunderland and also in its subsequent re-orderings as the economy and population changed. Additional significance is observed in the additional roles of the church played in the civic functions, and its impact on social change in the area relating to shipbuilding and trade around the port. The importance of the church is reflected in its Grade I listing. It is of interest not only for its considerable architectural quality but also because of its key role in the political and social history of Old Sunderland. The newly built church as well as being a great achievement for the shipbuilders and merchants of the area also became their centre of civic administration for over 100 years.

Holy Trinity churchyard was in use from 1719 to 1909 (HER 17304). The HER entry notes that the parish churchyard contains over 100,000 burials; the Burial Register for Holy Trinity Church is held in Durham Record Office and this lists all burials from May 1719 (EP/Su.HT 1/93) to December 1909 (EP/Su.HT 1/113). The churchyard is now much reduced in scale and only a small section around Holy Trinity Church remains with the remainder now called the Gray Memorial Gardens. The gravestones have since been cleared but once occupied the area up to the church. Within the Memorial Gardens, to the south of development boundary, are a memorial to Jack Crawford, and the tombstone of Reverend Robert Gray, Sunderland's rector from 1819 to 1838. Gravestones are also laid flat against the eastern boundary of the gardens. During restoration of the Donnison School an intact inhumation was found by builders under the floor. This appears to have been an exceptional burial as no further remains were found on the school site (or the site might have been partly cleared before the school was built in 1764 within the churchyard). Unfortunately, the skeleton was not recorded by archaeologists, and was dealt with by Sunderland Coroner's Office.

In February 2007 during reconstruction of a revetment wall between the churchyard and the Donnison School, a quantity of disarticulated human bones was disturbed. The bones were lifted by archaeologists from Tyne and Wear Museums under a Home Office Licence. One of the skulls had green staining on the left and middle aspect of the frontal bone which suggests the use of copper alloy shroud pins.

A 19th-century burial plan of the churchyard at Durham Record Office (DRO) shows that the area around the church contains numerous burials; 1180 in total (DRO ref. EP/SU.HTI/319). The precise date at which this plan was compiled is not known. The burials on the plan span the period 1736 to 1901 but the plan is far from complete given the known number of burials in the churchyard. The HER for Holy Trinity states that there are over 100,000 burials at the church but the plan only records 1180. Numerous burials will therefore be present within the gaps on the burial plan and the potential for human remains being present anywhere within the site boundary is highly likely. On the plan the churchyard is separated into eight burial plots (Wards A to H) with Ward D being within the development area. Burial numbers 1 to 231 within Ward D and are spaced throughout the entire area with a number of burials close to the south wall of the church and a few around the apse. Burials are most densely packed in the area immediately between the Church and the former Donnison School adjacent to the northern boundary in Ward D. The earliest burial in Ward D recorded on the plans is Thomas Teasdale who died in 1736 and is buried within plot 17, with the latest recorded burial being Mary Rodgerson within Ward F in 1901. From the record it is clear that the first internments were adjacent to the church and moved outwards to the south in later years.

The body snatchers William Burke and William Hare are said to have made a trip to Sunderland in 1820 and in 1824 with the situation so serious that Rector Gray ordered a deep ditch to be dug inside the perimeter wall of Holy Trinity Church; they were finally caught in Edinburgh in 1828.

No gravestones, memorials or tombs survive in site within the development boundaries and with the exception of two gravestones built into the south wall of the church, all have been removed from the area to the south and east of the church. Multiple graves and human remains will however still be present below ground.

The depths at which human remains may be encountered below ground level around the church is not known and may well be variable; as graveyards were increasingly used with time, burials were placed above earlier one. A high incidence of intercutting and overlying graves is considered likely due the known number of burials at Holy Trinity. The earliest burial shown on the 19th-century plan (within the development boundary) dates from 1736, however the graveyard was in use from 1719. Just 1180 graves are shown on this plan yet 100,000 burials are known to have taken place at Holy Trinity. The area to the immediate east and south of the church graveyard was initially used for burial; it is therefore very likely that early burials within the boundaries of the development site are not marked on this plan. High levels of intercutting and disturbance are common in medieval and post medieval churchyards (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 50; 194–195); this is because the repeated use of cemeteries associated with churchyards over considerable lengths of time means that, whatever the size of the cemetery, its capacity will be exceeded (Cherryson 2007). Disturbed bones were often deposited within the backfill of the new grave, with varying degrees of consideration (Cherryson *et al.* 2012, 93). Large charnel pits for the disposal of disturbed bone from multiple burials have also been recorded, for example at St Martin's-in-the-Bull Ring in Birmingham (Brickley and Buteux 2006, 25).

Previous archaeological work at the site includes a desk-based assessment undertaken by PCA in 2016 and two phases of archaeology watching brief undertaken intermittently by PCA between 2016 and 2019.

The archaeological watching brief work undertaken by PCA in October 2016 involved the monitoring of five hand excavated trial pits along the external southern elevation of the church and the apse on the eastern external elevation to investigate historic movement of Holy Trinity Church and water ingress to the structure. To this end two brick structures thought to represent walled burials along with disarticulated human bone.

This was followed by further archaeological monitoring work undertaken September – November 2019 along involving the installation of service trenches for drainage along the southern and eastern perimeter of the church along with monitoring of a test pit within the choir area, the excavation of the dais/chancel, and an area within the apse to assess the condition of the underlying burial vault (PCA 2020). Five burials were encountered within the drainage trench as well as four additional vaults/burial slabs that were either within the trench section, so not excavated, or were not in situ. Other structural remains uncovered included walls that may have related to a former cemetery wall to the south of the church entrance and part of the demolished boiler house to the north of the

apse. Internally the support foundations of the pulpit were uncovered. The condition of the burial vault below the apse that housed the remains of the former rectors was assessed during removal of the apse floorboards. To this end human remains were visible however these had been disturbed at some point as they were scattered around the burial vault.

Archaeological work provides potential opportunities to address key research objectives as set out in *Shared Visions: The North East Regional Research Framework for the Historic Environment* (NERRF) (Petts & Gerrard 2006). The NERRF highlights the importance of research as a vital element of development-led archaeological work. It sets out key research priorities for all periods of the past so that all elements of commercial archaeological work can be related to wider regional and national priorities for the study of archaeology and the historic environment.

The archaeological work was considered to have good potential to make a significant contribution to existing archaeological knowledge of Sunderland in general and of the post-medieval and modern development of the city. Specific research objectives to be addressed by the project were formulated with reference to two existing archaeological research frameworks. The NERRF identifies the key priority within the research agenda for the post-medieval period which is of direct relevance to the project:

- **PMi** – Culture and ethnic identity
- **PMv** – The growth of civil life

The specific research objective to be addressed by the project was:

- Do any sub-surface archaeological remains in the areas of investigation provide evidence of further structures related the church building;
- To preserve by record any human remains encountered within the areas of investigation.

DATES WORK UNDERTAKEN:

Archaeological work was undertaken at the site on the following dates:

- Monday 12/04/2021
- Thursday 22/04/2021
- Thursday 06/05/2021
- Monday 05/07/2021
- Thursday 08/07/2021

RESULTS:

During the archaeological investigation, separate stratigraphic entities were assigned unique and individual context numbers, which are indicated in the following text as, for example [123]. The archaeological sequence is described by placing stratigraphic sequences within broad phases, assigned on a site-wide basis in this case. An attempt has been made to add interpretation to the data and correlate these phases with recognised historical and geological periods.

Three trenches (Trenches 1, 2 & 3) were hand excavated by the clients appointed contractor under archaeological supervision (Figure 2).

Trench 1 ran north from the northern corner of the churches' apse for c. 1.20m, turning to an NNW-SSE orientation for c. 4.83m to the churchyard wall and continued NNW beyond the churchyard wall

for a distance of 2.00m. Trench 1 was generally 0.45m wide with the exception of an area located immediately to the south of the churchyard wall that had dimensions of 1.40m x 0.88m to allow for the installation of a service inspection chamber (Plate 1). The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.70m at the location of the proposed inspection chamber with the remaining trench excavated to depths of between 0.40m to 0.60m.

Trench 2 was orientated NNW-SSE and was located c. 1.40m north-east of Trench 1. The trench ran SSW from the churchyards gated access for a distance of 3.76m, was 0.50m wide and excavated to a maximum depth of 0.60m (Plate 2).

Trench 3 was located within a paved courtyard area to the west of the church and comprised two main service trench runs orientated NNW-SSE and three short service trench sections orientated ENE-WSW (Plates 3 & 4). The two main service trench runs each had dimensions of c. 16.60m long trenches that were joined by a WSW-ENE orientated service trench c. 2m long at its central location. The service trenches were generally 0.35m wide and were excavated to a depth of 0.42m with the exception of the shorter adjoining service trench that was excavated to depth of 0.70m and a sump that was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.80m at the at the SSW extent. Two further short sections of ENE-WSW orientated service trenches were excavated from the western courtyard wall adjoining the southernmost main service trench run. Each section was c. 1.00m long by 0.50m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.40m.

A short length of a sandstone wall foundation [152] was exposed in the northern part of Trench 1 for a distance of 0.35m ENE-WSW and was at least 0.80m wide by at least 0.25m high (Plate 1). The foundation wall itself was encountered c. 0.36m below present ground level and was built using roughly hewn sandstone blocks (maximum 350mm x 400mm x 70mm) and brick bonded with light grey lime mortar. This wall was encountered during an earlier phase of archaeological watching brief work within a service trench located to the west and is thought to represent part a foundation wall associated with boiler house that formerly occupied this location.

The wall, [152], was directly overlain by a levelling deposit comprising friable mid greyish brown silty clay [154] that extended across Trenches 1, 2 & 3 and was exposed to a maximum depth of 0.80m.

In Trench 3 levelling deposit [154] was directly overlain by c. 20mm thick sand bedding deposits for the current stone slab surface.

Outside the church the modern ground level within the former cemetery comprised friable dark brownish grey clayey silt [155] and was c. 0.28m thick in Trenches 1 & 2.

No features or deposits of archaeological significance were observed during this phase of investigation.

REFERENCES:

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ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTATION:

Figure 1- Site Location

Figure 2- Detailed Site location

ARCHIVE DEPOSITION:

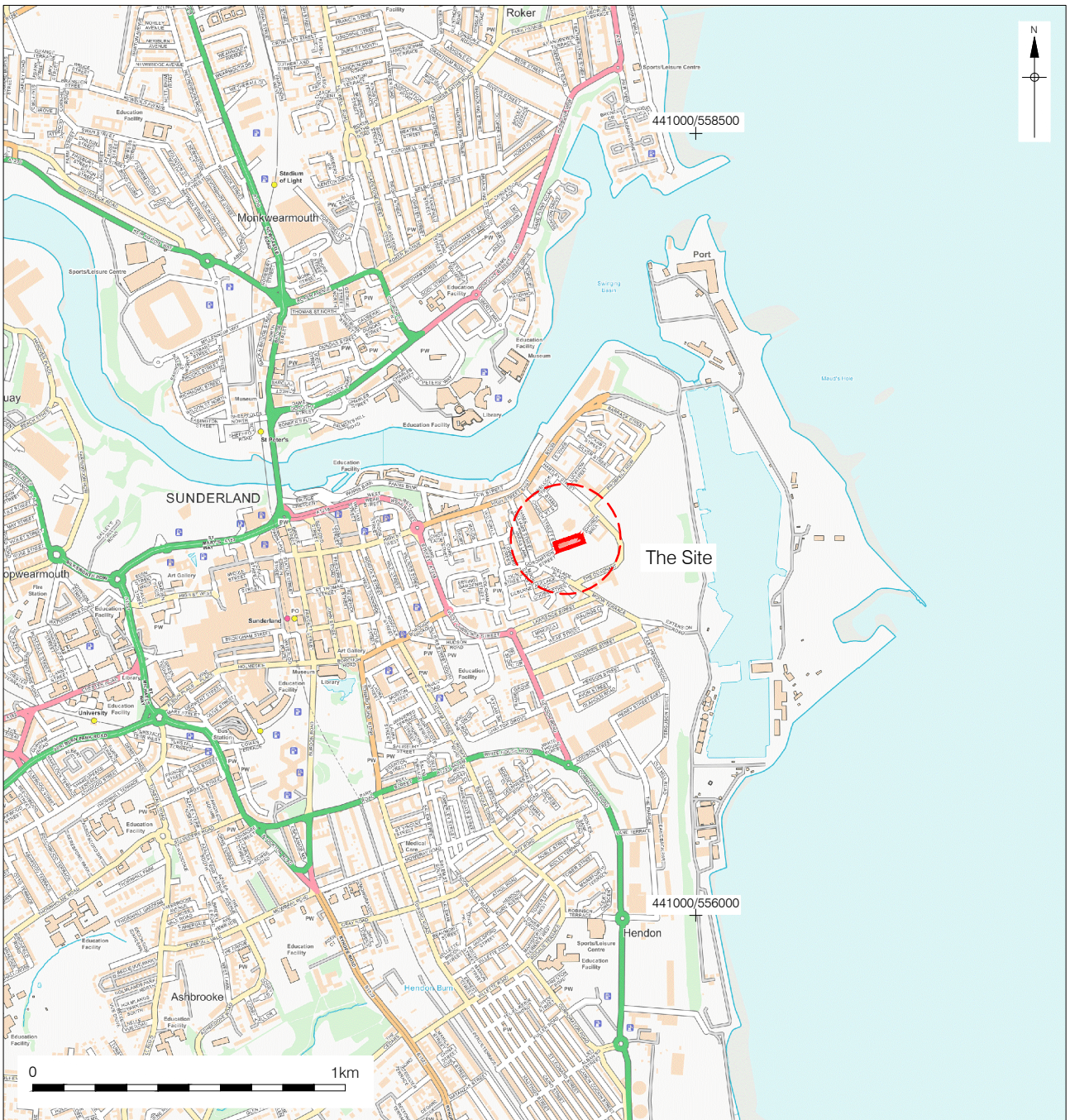
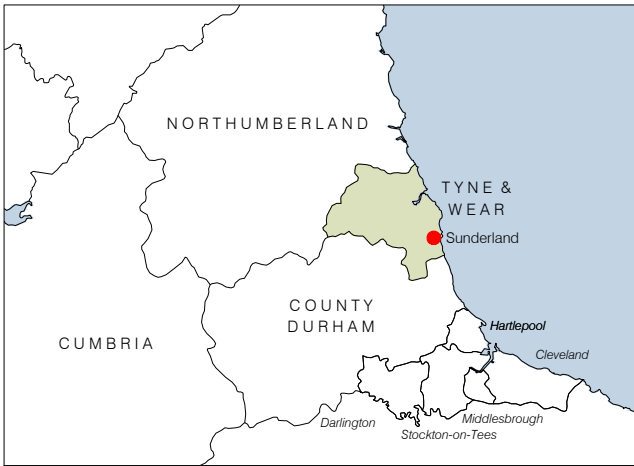
All documentation resulting from this project will be archived internally by PCA.

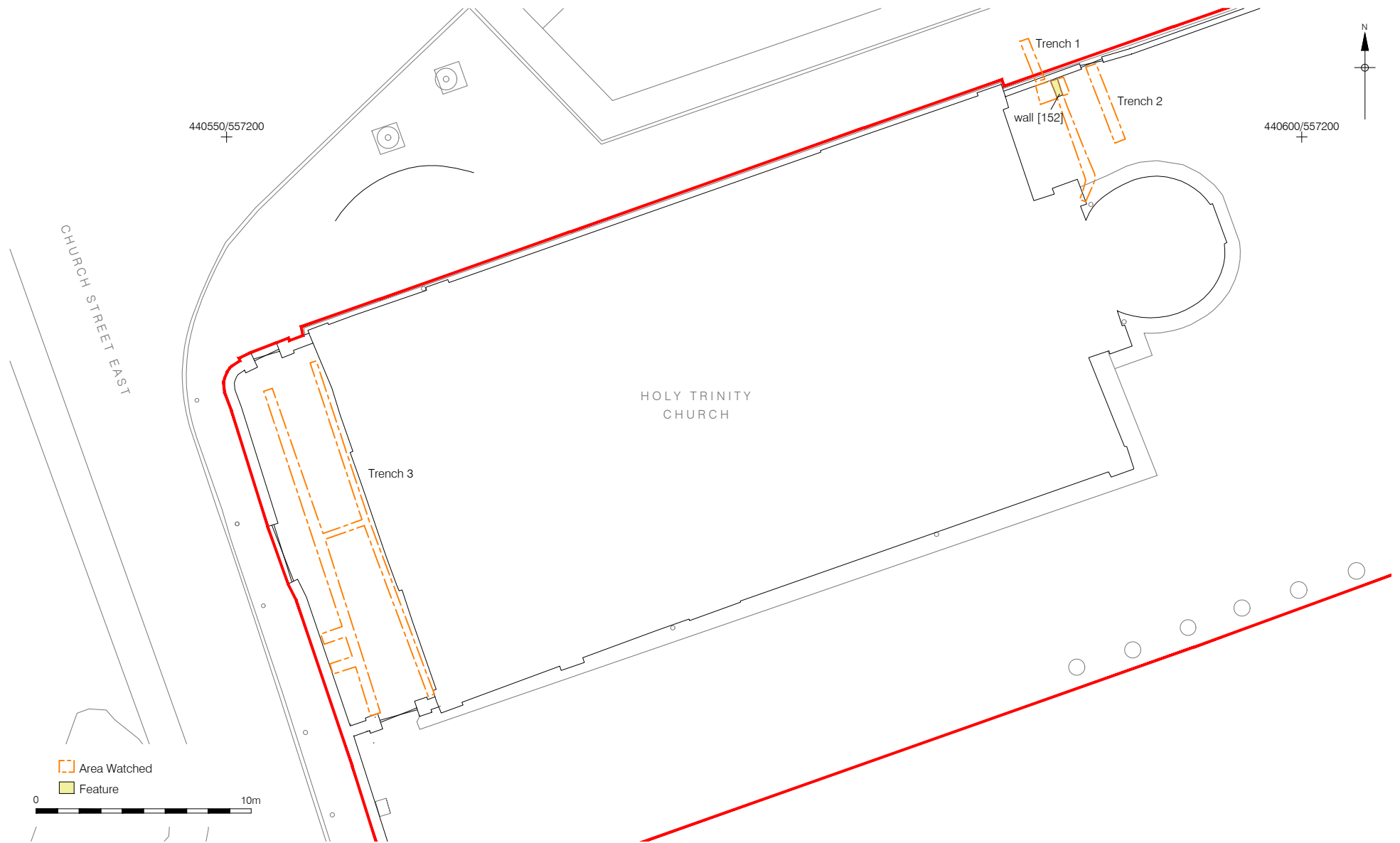
Author: Aaron Goode

Checked: Aaron Goode

Authorised: Aaron Goode

Date: 06/08/2021





PLATES:



Plate 1: Trench 1 View of wall [152], facing NNW, 1m scale.



Plate 2: Trench 2 view of service trench run, facing NNW, 1m scale.



Plate 3: Trench 3 view of service trench runs, facing NNW, 1m scale.



Plate 4: Trench 3 view of short service trench runs, facing WSW, 1m scale.

PCA

PCA DURHAM

THE ROPE WORKS, BROADWOOD VIEW
CHESTER-LE-STREET
DURHAM DH3 3AF
t: 0191 377 1111
e: durham@pre-construct.com

PCA CAMBRIDGE

THE GRANARY, RECTORY FARM
BREWERY ROAD, PAMPISFORD
CAMBRIDGESHIRE CB22 3EN
t: 01223 845 522
e: cambridge@pre-construct.com

PCA LONDON

UNIT 54, BROCKLEY CROSS BUSINESS CENTRE
96 ENDWELL ROAD, BROCKLEY
LONDON SE4 2PD
t: 020 7732 3925
e: london@pre-construct.com

PCA NEWARK

OFFICE 8, ROEWOOD COURTYARD
WINKBURN, NEWARK
NOTTINGHAMSHIRE NG22 8PG
t: 01636 370 410
e: newark@pre-construct.com

PCA NORWICH

QUARRY WORKS, DEREHAM ROAD
HONINGHAM
NORWICH NR9 5AP
T: 01603 863 108
e: norwich@pre-construct.com

PCA WARWICK

UNIT 9, THE MILL, MILL LANE
LITTLE SHREWLEY, WARWICK
WARWICKSHIRE CV35 7HN
t: 01926 485 490
e: warwick@pre-construct.com

PCA WINCHESTER

5 RED DEER COURT, ELM ROAD
WINCHESTER
HAMPSHIRE SO22 5LX
t: 01962 849 549
e: winchester@pre-construct.com

