

Marches Archaeology

St Margaret's Church Alderton Gloucestershire

Report on an archaeological evaluation

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Marches Archaeology Series 336

This report is produced by

Marches Archaeology

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**St Margaret's Church
Alderton
Gloucestershire**

A report on an archaeological evaluation

NGR: SP 0020 3311

**Report by
Jane Kenney**

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**St Margaret's Church
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A report on an archaeological evaluation

Summary

A small trench was excavated in the centre of the proposed site for a toilet/store building. This located a previously unknown but recent grave but revealed no other significant archaeology.

1 Introduction

A proposal was submitted to erect a toilet/store building in the churchyard of St Margaret's Church, Alderton, Gloucestershire. The site is situated at NGR: SP 0020 3311 (Fig. 1).

The Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor recommended that an archaeological field evaluation be carried out. He produced a "Brief for an archaeological field evaluation". Mr. J Roberts (for the client, the Parochial Church Council) commissioned Marches Archaeology to provide the archaeological services detailed in the Brief.

The work was carried out on 13th April and the report was issued on 22nd April 2004.

2 Aims and objectives

The Brief stated that the archaeological project would consist of:

- 1 The consultation of Gloucestershire County Council's Sites and Monuments Record
- 2 a trial trench 1.5m square in plan excavated to the top of any significant archaeology or to the base of the ground impact required for the development, whichever is encountered soonest.

An archaeological evaluation aims to "gain information about the archaeological resource within a given area or site (including presence or absence, character, extent, date, integrity, state of preservation and quality) in order to make an assessment of its merit in the appropriate context, leading to one or more of the following: the formulation of a strategy to ensure the recording, preservation or management of the resource; the formulation of a strategy to mitigate a threat to the archaeological resource; the formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research" (Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluations).

3 Methodology

Documentary research

The documentary research was completed before the commencement of the fieldwork. Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record was consulted for information on the church and the village in general. The County Record Office was visited to examine the available historical maps. The early Ordnance Survey maps and an Inclosure Award map were consulted, but the Record Office does not hold the tithe map for this area. Available published works were also consulted. None of the aerial photographs held by the Sites and Monuments Record covered the site and a visit to the National Monuments Record to consult their aerial photographs was considered to be unlikely to produce enough information to justify the extra expense and time.

Fieldwork

A single trench measuring approximately 1.5m by 1.5m was excavated in the middle of the area proposed for the new building (Fig. 2). The upper deposits were excavated by mechanical excavator to the natural subsoil as no deposits or features of archaeological significance were seen in plan. A wooden coffin was seen in one section and the whole trench was cleaned by hand and recorded. All artefacts recovered from the mechanical excavation and hand cleaning were retained.

The recording system included written, drawn and photographic data. Context numbers were allocated and context record sheets completed. The trench was planned at a scale of 1:10, and two of the trench sections were drawn at 1:10. The trench was located on a plan provided by the client's architects at a scale of 1:200 (Fig. 2). The photographic record was made using black and white negative and colour transparency film.

Office work

On completion of fieldwork a site archive was prepared. The written, drawn and photographic data was catalogued and cross-referenced and a summary produced. The artefactual data was processed, catalogued and cross-referenced and summaries produced.

4 Site description

The proposed site of the new toilet/storage building is close to the northern boundary of the churchyard of the Church of St Margaret of Antioch. The church lies in the south-eastern corner of the village of Alderton (Fig. 1). The village is situated on the lowlands to the north of the Cotswold escarpment. Alderton Hill and Woolstone Hill rise to the north-east and south-west of the village, the latter reaching 223m OD, but the village itself is at an altitude of 50-60m OD on the northern bank of Washbourne Brook. The lowland is composed of Lower Lias clays while the hills are of Upper and Middle Lias. A strip of alluvium has been deposited along the route of the Brook. A patch of Cheltenham sand overlies the clay on the north bank of the Brook and the village is positioned on this more fertile soil produced by the sand (VCH 1965, 189). Not all the soil beneath the village is sandy as clay occurs throughout the churchyard (pers. comm. John Roberts, churchwarden).

5 Archaeological and historical background

The clay soil of the area may have deterred settlement in the prehistoric period but the area was occupied by the Iron Age, as there is a hill fort on Dixton Hill, south of Alderton. Aerial photographs show cropmarks including rectilinear and circular features in a field north of Alderton (SP 001 335, PRN 12653), which may also be of an Iron Age date. A motte and bailey were constructed on the south-eastern end of the Dixton hillfort and occupation of this site has been continuous since the Norman period, the motte and bailey being superseded by a manor house.

The estate of Alderton and Dixton in the Hundred of Tewkesbury is mentioned in the Domesday Book. It was held before the Conquest by Dunning and an unnamed thegn and after the Conquest by Humphrey (Moore 1982). The manor of Dixton originally included Alderton, but by 1505 they were listed as separate manors, part of the honour of Gloucester. (VCH 1965, 189).

Prior to enclosure the lowlands were open arable and meadow with pasture on the hills. The arable land around Dixton was enclosed in the 16th century and converted to pasture, but the rest of the parish was not enclosed until after an Act of 1807 (VCH 1965, 189). Manor Farmhouse was the medieval manor house of Alderton and survives as a much altered medieval hall house. There are also several timber framed cottages from the 17th and 18th centuries in the village (Verey and Brook 2002, 137-8).

There are suggestions that the Church of St Margaret of Antioch (PRN 8295, grade II* listed building) has Saxon origins as the remains of a font were excavated from near the north door in the late 19th century (VCH 1965, 196), however, few details about this discovery seem to be published. In 1175 the church was described as a chapel of Winchcombe parish church, but it had acquired the status of a parish church by 1283. However, inhabitants of Alderton continued to be buried at Winchcombe until 1379 when a graveyard was established at Alderton (VCH 1965, 195). Burials pre-dating the late 14th century are therefore unlikely within St Margaret's churchyard.

Most of the present church dates from the 14th and 15th centuries, but a font in use until recently appears to be of 12th century date, and some pieces of 13th century masonry are included in the walls of the chancel. The building was restored after a fire in 1722, with the porches added in the 18th century and further restorations in 1880 and 1892 (VCH 1965, 196, Verey and Brook 2002, 137).

The shape of the churchyard has not changed significantly since 1809 (Figs 3 and 4). The south-eastern corner was alternately included and excluded; it is included within the churchyard on the Inclosure map 1809, but not on the 1884-1923 maps, and is currently part of the churchyard again. The maps show no change in the northern boundary, but a scarp about 1.5m south of the present fence (Fig. 2) suggests that the boundary was once slightly further south and probably included the yew tree now inside the churchyard. Whether the boundary of the graveyard established in the late 14th century was the same as the present boundary is not known.

An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the groundworks for an extension at 10 Church Road (SP 00150 33120, PRN 15191) immediately south of the churchyard but no significant archaeological deposits or finds were seen. Other watching briefs in the area were also negative. These consist of watching briefs at the White House to the west of the

churchyard (SP 00080 33220, PRN 15435), at 15 Church Road (SP 00300 33100, PRN 20614) to the east, and at 1-3 Blacksmiths Road (SP 00180 33240, PRN 21196) to the north (see Fig. 1 for the locations of some of these).

6 The evaluation (Figs 5 to 7)

The single small trench measuring 1.5m square was dug in the centre of the site of the proposed new building (Fig. 2).

The natural subsoil [109] was found at a depth of 54.05m OD (*c.* 0.8m below the present general ground level). It was a yellow-brown clay containing occasional small pieces of rotted sandstone and some gravel and concretions. This merged gradually into the layer above, which was a dark brown silty clay with occasional small stones [108]. This layer was darker and stonier towards the top containing flecks of charcoal and cinders but became cleaner and lighter in colour with depth until it became largely indistinguishable from [109]. [108] contained one sherd of late medieval pot, but also a sherd of post-medieval pottery and a piece of clay pipe stem, as well as bone fragments some of which may be human. The layer seemed to represent a gradual development of soil on the clay substrate, which probably built up over a long period of time and formed the ground surface for the churchyard in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Cut into layer [108] was a grave. This had a steep sided grave cut [107] and contained a wooden coffin [106]. The head end of the coffin was visible in the west facing section of the trench, but it was not exposed in plan. The coffin [106] was made of planks, presumably of oak, with a single plank forming the head end and other planks for the lid and sides. The coffin was 240mm wide and over 260mm high, it was not exposed to the base. The planks were well preserved as the coffin was waterlogged, water flowing out of the base of the grave cut when the coffin was exposed.

The grave cut was filled with yellow-brown clay [105] similar to the natural clay but denser and more malleable. Grey silty clay filled vertical root holes penetrating the fill. When the grave cut was being dug the upcast was dumped on the north side of the grave. After most of this was backfilled into the grave a 0.15m thick layer of clay [104] was left over the surface of [108]. Some of this deposit had eroded and slumped over the grave fill [105], so that even though [104] was deposited before the grave was backfilled some of the material from [104] overlaid the grave fill.

Above [104] 0.26m of soil had built up. This deposit [103] was a dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional small stones containing fragments of bone, some possibly human and resulting from the disturbance of earlier burials. This produced one sherd of late medieval pottery but also a sherd of post-medieval pot and a sherd of vessel glass. Layer [103] was covered by a 0.12m thick layer of yellow-brown clay [102], which was rather uneven and patchy in places. [102] was similar to [104] and presumably the upcast from a grave post-dating [107].

The topsoil [101] was a dark grey silty clay with few stones. The trench cut into part of the scarp seen along the northern boundary of the churchyard (Fig. 2) but this proved to be composed entirely of topsoil, which was 0.25m thick over the bank but only 0.14m thick elsewhere. The bank was built up after grave [107] had been dug, so it appears to be a very recent feature created by landscaping the topsoil.

7 Discussion

The only archaeological feature found was the grave [107] with its coffin [106]. This was demonstrated to be quite a recent burial as it cut layer [108], the upper part of which produced post-medieval artefacts. Grave [107] was also roughly in line with a row of three graves to the south, and probably formed part of the same line. The head stones on these three dates record burials between 1964 and 1994, so grave [107] is presumably also of mid or late 20th century date.

No earlier features or layers were discovered except the general soil deposit [108], which appeared to have built up over a long period of time possibly from the late medieval period through to the 19th century. However, only one sherd of late medieval pottery was found in this layer and there was no evidence that it represented intensive activity, but was just the churchyard soil building up gradually through normal soil forming processes.

8 Conclusions

The evaluation trench demonstrated that the row of recent graves continues, despite the absence of head stones, into the area proposed for the site of the new structure. The coffin found was located at 53.95m OD, *c.* 0.78m below the current general ground level, with the natural clay at 54.05m OD, *c.* 0.8m below the ground. There was no evidence of earlier graves or other activity in this area.

9 Recommendations

Disturbance of the recent grave should be avoided either by moving the location of the new structure or redesigning the foundations. It is likely that there are no other graves in the corner of the churchyard to the west of the current proposed site for the structure, but this cannot be proved without further archaeological work. As the structure is to be small it would be simpler, and would avoid the necessity for further archaeological work, if the foundations were redesigned. The best solution would be to use a concrete raft foundation and to ensure that groundworks penetrate no more than 0.5m below the present general ground level (*c.* 54.20m OD). This should ensure that neither coffin [106] nor any other unknown graves are likely to be disturbed by the works.

10 References

Maps

Alderton Inclosure map with table for reference (GRO PC 1703), 1809

Ordnance Survey County Series map Gloucester sheet XIII.10, 1884, 1900, 1923

Published references

Moore, JS, 1982, *Domesday Book 15 Gloucestershire*, 1, 43

VCH, 1965, *The Victoria County History of the Counties of England. A History of the County of Gloucester*, vol. VI, 189-197

Verey, D and Brook, A, 2002, *The Buildings of England, Gloucestershire 2: The Vale and the Forest of Dean*, 137-8

11 Archive

The site code is SMAG04A. The archive consists of:

- 8 context sheets
- 1 trench sheet
- 1 drawing index sheet
- 4 field drawings on 1 sheet
- 1 sheet of levels
- 1 sheet of site diary and notes
- 2 finds sheets
- 2 photo record sheets
- 1 film of black and white photographic negatives
- 1 film of colour photographic transparencies
- 2 bags of finds

The archive is currently held by Marches Archaeology awaiting transfer to Cheltenham Museum.

Appendix I

List of finds

Context 103	1 pot sherd	post-medieval
	1 pot sherd	late medieval
	1 frag. brick/tile	post-medieval
	1 sherd vessel glass	post-medieval
	4 fragments of bone (some possibly human)	post-medieval
Context 108	1 pot sherd	post-medieval
	1 pot sherd	late medieval
	1 piece of clay pipe stem	post-medieval
	5 fragments of bone (some possibly human)	post-medieval