

Marches Archaeology

St Peter's Church, Worfield, Bridgnorth Shropshire

Report on an archaeological watching brief

July 2004

Marches Archaeology Series 345

This report is produced by

Marches Archaeology

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**St Peter's Church, Worfield,
Bridgnorth, Shropshire**

A report on an archaeological watching brief

NGR: SO 37583958

**Report by
Susan Fielding**

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Summary

Marches Archaeology was commissioned by Trevor Hewett Architects, on behalf of Worfield PCC, to carry out a programme of archaeological work at St Peter's Church, Worfield. This consisted of an archaeological watching brief of ground level reduction within the western part of the nave and north aisle, and within the graveyard adjacent to the north-west corner of the church.

Within the church an archaeological deposit containing large quantities of disarticulated human remains was identified. This has been interpreted as a clearance deposit, probably formed during the Victorian restoration of the interior of the church.

Externally a number of probable grave fills were observed, but only one grave was excavated down to the skeleton. This was retained by the contractors on behalf of the PCC for re-interment.

1 Introduction

A number of alterations have been planned for the interior of St Peter's Church, Worfield, Shropshire (NGR SO 37583958) for the provision of a crèche. Marches Archaeology was commissioned by Trevor Hewett Architects, on behalf of Worfield Parochial Church Council, to carry out a programme of archaeological work during the proposed developments.

The development involved the reduction of the floor level within the western end of the nave and western half of the north aisle, as well as the moving of a number of monuments and tombs within the church. A fire door was put into the western end of the north wall, and the ground level to the north of the door was reduced for the provision of steps and a ramp.

The site had been previously evaluated by Shropshire Archaeology Section (Hannaford, 2000) and this work had identified the archaeological potential of the site and the impact of the proposed works. It was recommended therefore that in order to adequately protect the archaeological resource, an archaeological watching brief be carried out during any groundworks caused by the development.

Marches Archaeology produced a written scheme of investigation based on the proposals set out by Trevor Hewett, which was agreed by the Local Planning Authority's Archaeological Advisor.

2 Aims and objectives

The aim of a watching brief is defined as:

- The observation of all topsoil stripping, other earthmoving and trench excavation until natural subsoil is reached.
- The sequence of soil deposits present and all archaeological deposits and features shall be recorded
- All artefacts shall be collected, identified and catalogued
- If significant archaeology is identified the archaeologist on site should inform the County Archaeological Officer and Project Engineer immediately in order that appropriate action may be taken to minimise the damage to such deposits and to record them appropriately.

The objective of an archaeological watching brief is defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists as:

‘to allow within the resources available, the preservation by record of archaeological deposits, the presence and nature of which could not be established (or established with sufficient accuracy) in advance of development or other potentially disruptive works’

and

‘to provide an opportunity, if needed, for the watching archaeologist to signal to all interested parties, before the destruction of the material in question, that an archaeological find has been made for which the resources allocated to the watching brief itself are not sufficient to support treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard’

3 Methodology

Documentary research

The evaluation report (Hannaford, 2000) summarises the interests of the site and it was not deemed necessary to undertake further documentary research during this project.

Fieldwork

All external groundworks were carried out under archaeological supervision, using a Mini-digger with a toothless bucket. Excavation was carried out by machine until archaeological features were observed, with further excavation and cleaning then taking place by hand. The floor reduction and monument removal inside the church was not carried out under full archaeological supervision, but archaeological inspection took place at intervals during the reduction.

The recording system include written, drawn and photographic data. The written record consisted of Marches Archaeology *pro forma* trench record sheets and context sheets, accompanied by site notes. Plans were drawn at 1:20 or 1:100 as appropriate, with sections

drawn at 1:10. The photographic record consists of 35mm colour slide and black and white negatives.

Human remains revealed during the work were retained by the contractor on behalf of St Peter's Church for re-interment.

Office work

On completion of the fieldwork the written, drawn and photographic data was fully cross-referenced and catalogued and a site archive prepared. An assessment of the archive was made and this report, which includes a non-technical summary, was produced.

4 Site description

St Peter's Church is located in the centre of the village of Worfield, some 5 miles to the east of Bridgnorth, Shropshire (Fig.1). The church is surrounded on all sides by a graveyard (Fig.1).

The underlying solid geology is sandstone of the Bromsgrove/Helby sandstone formation of the Triassic period.

5 Archaeological and historical background

The following background is based on that in the evaluation report produced by Shropshire Archaeology Service (Hannaford, 2000).

Before 1066, Worfield appears to have formed part of a larger estate held by Algar, King of Mercia. This estate also included Claverley, Kingsnordeley, Alveley and the Forest of Morfe, and lay outside the county of Shropshire, into which it was incorporated shortly after 1086.

When the Domesday Survey was compiled in 1086, Worfield was held by Hugh, son of Roger of Montgomery, the Earl of Shrewsbury. The church and its tithes, together with half a fishery on the River Severn were granted to the Abbey of La Sauve Majeure at some time between 1095 and 1098. Hugh was killed in 1098 and, when Roger's oldest son Robert de Belleme rebelled against the king in 1102, the estate was forfeited to the crown. It remained as crown property until the reign of Richard I, who granted it to Ada, wife of Henry of Hastings in which family it remained throughout the medieval period.

The present church of St Peter's (SMR No. SA12136) is Grade II Listed, and appears to be largely 14th century in date, with some evidence of Norman and 13th century fabric remaining. A large restoration project took place in 1861-2, carried out by F & H Francis.

In addition to the church there is a medieval preaching cross in the churchyard (SA1938, Shropshire monument No. 27564) and a holy well (SA565) in the western part of the churchyard.

6 The watching brief

Trench 1 (Fig.2)

Trench 1 was excavated from the north boundary wall of the churchyard in a south, then south-westerly direction, in order for the provision of an access road during the proposed works. The trench was excavated to a depth of 0.25-0.30m in order to remove topsoil and lay a gravel surface.

Over much of the trench the topsoil (100), directly overlay a dump deposit containing modern materials such as tarmac and brick rubble (101). This deposit was largely left intact, but where (101) was not present (in the southern end of the trench), or where it was removed a mixed sandy soil was observed (104). No grave cuts were clearly identified within this deposit, but it is likely that these are grave soils.

A single human skull was retrieved from the north – west corner of the trench. This was sat in the top of (104), and was not associated with any further human remains or with a grave cut. It appeared that this skull had been previously disturbed, probably by later inhumations, and re-deposited below the topsoil.

A short length of sandstone wall (103) was also uncovered during the work, which was not excavated and therefore only seen in plan. This was aligned roughly north–west south–east, and was approximately 2.40m in length. This was constructed of roughly worked sandstone blocks, with smaller, more random rubble in the core of the wall. There was no evidence of any mortar within the joints of the wall, the rubble core held together by a loamy clay matrix. Incorporated into the rubble core were a small number of clinker/slag fragments.

Trench 2 (Fig.2)

Trench 2 was excavated against the north wall of the church, in order to reduce the ground level for the provision of a ramp and staircase leading from the fire door created in the north wall. Reduction of this area took place in two stages, the second stage of which was not covered by an archaeological presence.

A similar depth and type of topsoil (200) was observed as in Trench 1, which in this area directly overlay a layer of grave deposits (201). These were represented by mixed red, brown and yellow sands, within which only one grave cut [203] was distinctly visible. This was excavated within the confines of the trench only, with the head and scapulae (under the western baulk of the trench) left *in situ*. The skeleton (202) was retained by the contractors on behalf of St Peter's Church, in order that it may be re-interred at a later date. No study of the bones has therefore been carried out. The grave fill also contained a degraded iron coffin plate and two iron coffin handles.

Natural subsoil, consisting of a dark reddish brown sand, was observed only in one small area in the western corner of the trench.

Internal level reduction (Trench 3) (Fig.3)

Within the western end of the nave and north aisle of the church, the floor level was reduced by a depth of between 0.50-0.60m, and a number of small holes dug into the resulting surface for footings and services.

The only archaeology observed was in the south-east corner of the trench, where deposit (300) was observed across an area approximately 4.5m by 4m within this part of the nave. (300) consisted of a mixed deposit of very loose silts containing fragments of mortar and large quantities of disarticulated human bone. Within the south-east trial pit it was revealed that in the western and southern part of this area, this deposit was approximately 0.27m thick, but increased dramatically in depth in the north and east sections of this trial pit to the depth of excavation. In this area it appeared to be infilling a vertically cut feature [303], which may represent a large pit or trench dug for the purpose of depositing human bone cleared from the interior of the church.

Below this clearance layer to the west and south, a thin layer of very hard, compacted reddish brown sandstone (303) was present. This directly overlay the natural sandy subsoil (304), seen to a maximum depth of 0.55m. (303) and (304) were alternatively seen across the area of the rest of the trench, with only two other features cut into their surface. The first of these was a small brick structure (302), located immediately to the west of the underground boiler house. It was constructed of bricks with regular, rectangular frogs, which appear to be 19th or early 20th century in date, and was part of the airing/heating ducts that ran along the length of the aisle. The second consisted of three parallel brick footings, observed in the north-west corner of the north aisle and immediately below the removed monument. Each footing was one brick thick and 2.75m long, and was constructed of hand made bricks bonded with cementacious mortar.

7 Discussion

The watching brief undertaken at St Peter's Church, Worfield revealed a number of features and deposits of post medieval or modern date, including a single complete inhumation and a number of disarticulated human remains.

The deposits revealed within trench 1 are all likely to be post medieval or modern in date, with both topsoil 100 and layer 101 containing modern material. A single human skull, 102, was recovered from the top of layer 104, and was probably disturbed by more recent grave digging activity, and is re-deposited in this context. A short stretch of sandstone wall was also revealed. The presence of clinker embedded in the core of this wall suggests that it is likely to be post medieval or modern in date but its alignment and form give no clear indication as to its function. This feature was left *in situ* as no further reductions in levels in this area of the trench was planned.

A single grave cut (203) was identified in trench 2, although layer 204 is likely to represent the indistinguishable fills of other inhumations. Grave 203 contained a single fill, layer 201, which sealed an adult inhumation 202. This was an extended supine inhumation, aligned west east. The head of the skeleton lay to the west, beyond the confines of the trench, and was left *in situ*. The grave cut appears relatively narrow in proportion to the burial, although the presence of two coffin handles and a coffin plate, recovered from fill 201, indicates to the presence of a coffin. These also suggest that the inhumation is likely to be post medieval or modern in date.

All three of the features identified within trench 3, within the church, are thought to be Victorian in date. Two of these are brick built – brick structure 302, which forms part of the ducting system for the hot air from the heating system, and 305, which comprises three

parallel brick supports for a post medieval monumental tomb, moved during Victorian restoration work. The third feature, a large pit (303), lay in the area of the nave, only partially within the confines of the trench. A trial pit excavated through this revealed a single upper deposit, layer 300. This loose deposit contained significant amounts of disarticulated human remains, thought likely to represent the clearance of material from within the church or churchyard. It seems likely that this pit was excavated specifically to contain this charnel material, which probably relates to the Victorian re-flooring of the church.

8 Acknowledgements

Marches Archaeology were commissioned by Trevor Hewett Architects, and Sarah Butler of this company is acknowledged for her assistance. Both Henry Gough and the on site contractors from Henry Gough and Sons are thanked for their co-operation and help during the site work, in particular Alan Challenor (Site foreman).

9 References

Maps

British Geological Survey Solid Geology Map. *Mid Wales and the Marches*, Sheet 52°N 04°W 1:250,000

Unpublished references

Hannaford, H. 2000. *An archaeological evaluation at St Peter's Church, Worfield, Shropshire*

10 Archive

The site code is WCB 03A The archive consists of:

- 1 skeleton sheet
- 3 trench sheets
- 1 drawing index sheets
- 3 field drawings on 2 sheets
- 4 photo record sheets
- 2 films of black and white photographic negatives
- 2 films of colour photographic transparencies

The archive is currently held by Marches Archaeology awaiting transfer to Shropshire County Council Museum Services.

Appendix I: Trench summaries

Trench No.1	18m x 5m	north – south / north east – south west	mOD
Context	<i>Description</i>		Thickn ess (m)
100	Topsoil – dark grey-brown silty loam.		0.35
101	Thin deposits of modern dump material including tarmac and brick rubble. Occurs in patchy areas below the topsoil.		N/E
102	Human Skull. Disarticulated and not part of a full skeleton or within a discernable grave cut. Probably disturbed and re-deposited during later interments.		
103	Short length of sandstone wall running roughly east-west across the trench. Constructed of large blocks of roughly worked Red Sandstone with no evidence of mortar between the blocks. Core of wall infilled with small rubble in a clayey-loam matrix. This rubble also contained fragments of clinker.		N/E
104	Mid reddish brown, soft sandy-loam visible within small areas of the trench where (101) does not occur or has been removed.		N/E
Note			

Trench No.2	3.7m x 4.4m	north east - south west	mOD
Context	<i>Description</i>		Thickn ess (m)
200	Topsoil - dark grey-brown silty loam.		0.35
201	Grave fill. Contained degraded coffin plate and 2 coffin handles, all of iron.		0.38
202	Human skeleton. Head and scapulae were outside the west boundary of the trench and were left unexcavated. The rest was excavated and left for re-interment.		
203	Cut for grave containing (201) and (202). Cuts (204) and (205)		
204	Grave soils, various grave fills of mixed sands covering the majority of the area of the trench.		N/E
205	Natural subsoil seen only in small area in SW corner of the trench. Consists of a red sand.		N/E
Note			

Trench No.3	m x m	East-west	mOD
Context	<i>Description</i>		Thickn ess (m)
300	Deposit of loose silts and mortar fragments containing a large quantity of disarticulated human bone. Possible charnel/clearance deposit dating from the Victorian restoration of the church.		0.26 – 0.55++
301	Thin layer of very hard, compacted dark red-brown sand. Observed underlying (300) in the SE trial pit.		0.03
302	Brick structure, visible in plan, cut into the natural subsoil within the north aisle, immediately to the west of the boiler house. Constructed of bricks with very regular rectangular frogs, and which appear to 19 th /early 20 th century in date. Part of the air/heating duct system associated with the boiler house.		N/E
303	Cut of large pit (?) seen in north and east sections of SW trial hole and containing majority of (300).		N/E
304	Natural subsoil of dark reddish brown compacted sands.		N/E
305			
Note			