

Marches Archaeology

The Church of St James Stirchley Shropshire

Report on an archaeological building assessment

June 2005

Marches Archaeology Series 387

This report is produced by

Marches Archaeology

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**The Church of St James
Stirchley
Shropshire**

**Report on an
Archaeological Building Assessment**

NGR: SJ 6998 0671

**Report by
Nic Appleton-Fox**

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Summary

The church of St. James in Stirchley is a bit of an enigma. The chancel arch is obviously early but the work carried out during the 18th century has robbed it of much of its context. It is likely that medieval fabric survives beneath the 18th century work. Any Norman footings are probably beneath the current church.

1 Introduction

The Church Commissioners are considering vesting the Church of St James, Stirchley, in the Churches Conservation Trust. The site is situated at NGR: SJ 6998 0671 (Fig 1). As part of the preliminaries the Trust wished that an archaeological assessment be carried out and has commissioned Marches Archaeology to undertake the work.

2 Scope and aims of the project

The purpose of Desk-based Assessment is defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists as “to gain information about the known or potential archaeological resource within a given area or site (including presence or absence, character and extent, date, integrity, state of preservation and relative quality of the potential archaeological resource), in order to make an assessment of its merit in the 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 formation of a strategy for further investigation, whether or not intrusive, where the character and value of the resource is not sufficiently defined to permit a mitigation strategy or other response to be devised; the formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research”.

The Trust requires that the assessment include:

- Documentary study about the history and topography of the church and of the site
- Plans and photographs which give evidence of its history
- Assessment of the structural history and of the likely archaeological potential

3 Methodology

A site visit was made and a photographic record of the church made using black and white and colour slide film with additional digital photographs.. The structure of the church was examined and building phases identified. The churchyard was walked over in an attempt to identify any possible buried remains from the early church.

The appropriate local Sites and Monuments Record was consulted. The following sources were also considered, as appropriate:

Ordnance Survey maps; Tithe maps; Estate maps and other historical maps;
Previous published and unpublished archaeological reports and archive work;
Written non-archaeological sources.

The archive will be donated to an appropriate repository. Marches Archaeology will arrange for such deposition.

This illustrated client report has been produced which details the aims, methods, and results of the project. A non-technical summary and details of the location and size of the archive is included. Copyright of this report is vested in Marches Archaeology.

4 Timetable

The research was undertaken during May 2005.

5 Archaeological and historical background

Stirchley

Stirchley is mentioned in the Domesday Book only as a note as an outlier of the holding of Thorold at Longford (Thorn & Thorn, 1986), so no details are available of what then existed there. The name Stirchley is of pre-Norman origin and is derived from 'Stirk' meaning cattle and 'Leah' the Old English for pasture (Lias, 1991). This is the late usage of 'leah', its earlier meaning was woodland, which suggests a later foundation of the settlement. The relatively early appearance of a church suggests a fairly substantial settlement.

Now incorporated onto the new town of Telford, Stirchley remained a small agricultural settlement until the 19th century. Industrial growth began with the coming of the railway but the population only really blossomed with the foundation of Telford.

St James' Church

The church lies within a polygonal churchyard, and is believed to be the main burial ground for Stirchley from at least the 13th century. A portion of a field to the north has been included for burial in more recent years.

The earliest part of the church is the Norman chancel, with its contemporary windows dated to the 12th century. The level of decoration of the chancel arch suggests that this church was of quite high status at that time. The church and churchyard are Scheduled Ancient Monuments and are listed on the National Monument Record (NMR_NATINV-71898) and on the County Sites and Monuments Record (00694 & 08110).

The church is obviously of early foundation, probably initially as a chapel of ease within the parish of Shifnal and was subject to Idsall (Anderson, 1864). The parish of Stirchley was formed in the 13th century probably before 1238 when the church was given to the priory at Wenlock. This did not last long for only nine years later in 1247 the church was transferred to the abbey at Buildwas (*ibid*).

The church had an extensive glebe and in the taxation of Pope Nicholas of 1291 the church was valued at £2 13s 4d. In 1341 it was rated at 40s 'to the ninth' also saying, as if in explanation, that 'there were no sheep here...' (Anderson, 1864). By 1380 the value had increased to £5 (VCH, 1985), and in 1534 the rector received a rather handsome salary of £6 13s 4d considering the small size of the parish (Anderson, 1864). The value increased over the years being £26 in 1639, £30 in 1705 and £50 in 1772 (VCH, 1985).

The church ceased to be used for religious services in 1975. Ownership passed to the Telford development corporation who restored the church in 1979 in a failed bid to use it as a museum.

No archaeological interventions have been recorded for the site.

6 The results

No surface evidence for the buried remains of the early church was seen. It is quite likely that the ground level has been altered over the years thus masking any evidence. It is also probable that any remains of the Norman church lies under the 18th century rebuild.

In his 1985 study of the church, Bob Meeson describes it as enigmatic. This it certainly is. There are anomalies that make for difficulties in a chronological history of the development of the church. Several phases of building are easily identified. However, to explain them is not as easy as it seems. The main area of confusion is the large chancel arch in the west wall. This can be answered only by the presumption of a frenzied period of building activity in the Norman period, the reason for which can only be inferred from the rapidity that the church changed hands almost two centuries later in the 13th century. There must have been something about this small settlement that made it an attractive catch. In this report this 'X' factor is assumed.

Phase 1 The chapel of ease (Figs 2 & 3, Plate 1)

The first phase of building appears to have taken the form of a simple chapel probably no larger than the surviving chancel. There was a door in the west end of the south wall, the thickness of the wall, compared to the symmetry of the doorway suggests that they are not contemporary. Scarring is visible immediately to the west of the construction break where the 18th century church butts up against the original. This may be the clue to the fact that the west wall is actually later than the initial construction. There is a slanting piece of stone at a height of 3 metres above the ground that represents the height of the relieving arch for the door. The rebate in the east wall suggests that there was a floor or ceiling above the chapel at this time.

The chapel was lit by six slit windows with rounded heads. Two each in the north, south and east walls.

The style of this building is no later than early to mid 12th century.

Phase 2 The later chapel of ease (Figs 3 & 4)

The chapel was extended to the west with the addition of a nave and a plain arch being included in the newly rebuilt west wall and the doorway in the south wall being blocked. The

evidence for this is the change in build seen to the immediate west of the blocked door in the south wall. The simple form of the arch places it in the middle part of the 12th century. It presumes that the nave was constructed of wood, evidence for which is now masked beneath the present Georgian one. How far it extended is not known. The blocked central opening in the west wall indicates that there was still a first floor room in this phase.

Phase 3 The later Norman church (Fig 4)

In this phase the size of the arch was reduced and the plain arch replaced with a highly decorative one consisting of three orders of vousoirs supported on two orders of shafts. The pillars are ornate with scalloped and foliage capitals and the vousoirs have an elongated chain pattern on the lowest and zigzag decoration on the upper two.

Phase 4 Later medieval alterations (Fig 2)

The walls of the nave do not line up with those of the chancel and late medieval wall painting was reported as being seen during work to the east wall of the nave. This suggests an intervening phase between the later Norman work and the Georgian rebuilding. The inserted window in the south wall is in the Early English style and may belong to this phase. However, without intrusive work to the fabric of the building the extent of this phase must remain speculative.

Phase 5 The Georgian rebuilding (Plates 3 to 5)

During the 1740s the nave was rebuilt in brick, obscuring any intermediate phases that may have occurred after the later Norman work. This brickwork is thought to clad earlier stonework. The choice of brick was unusual for an area so rich in building stone and may represent an attempt to show the wealth of the benefactors. The nave is quite plain as was the style at the time, with a tower at the west end. The tower incorporates a small minstrel's gallery. The nave has two stained glass windows in the south wall with rounded heads

The body of the church was fitted out with box pews, pulpit and reading desk which remain in place today.

In the tower is another large rounded head window behind the gallery.

Phase 6 The 19th century north aisle

In 1838 a north aisle was added again in brick. It housed a gallery that could seat 120 people and was erected by a local businessman to accommodate his workforce. This gallery was so large that it projected into the nave obscuring the view of the chancel.

Phase 7 The early 20th century (Plate 6)

In 1919 the roof had become dangerous and needed replacing. Whilst this work was being carried out the opportunity to reduce the size of the north aisle gallery was taken and it was reduced to its present size. At some unspecified date in the early part of the century, possibly at the same time, the lower of the two windows in the east wall was replaced with a larger one

to allow in more light. At a later date this was removed and the window returned to its original size.

Phase 8 The later 20th century

After the church ceased to be used for religious services in 1975 the church was subject to a refurbishment by the Telford development corporation as part of a failed plan to turn the building into a museum leaving the building as it is seen today.

7 Discussion

The first phase of this building poses the biggest problem in determining the development of the building. The presence of the door in the south wall, the internal plinth and blocked opening in the west wall all suggest that it was built as a single celled chapel. However, there is no obvious construction break for the later insertion of the plain arch. It is possible that the design was changed very early in the building programme, this would explain the plinth, but not the blocked opening towards the top of the wall. The evidence suggests that the west wall was completely rebuilt early in the history of the chapel, probably when a nave was added. Either way a lot of activity and changes went on in its early life. This may reflect that Stirchley was a fertile and productive settlement. Certainly the number of times it changed hands in the 13th century suggests it was a valuable asset as abbeys frequently coveted rivals holdings. As the floor of the nave is raised it is quite possible that evidence for the Norman end later medieval alterations to the church may survive relatively intact beneath the current floor.

7 References

Anderson, J,C, *Shropshire: its early history and antiquities*, 1864

Lias, A, *Place names of the Welsh borderlands*, Palmers Press, 1991

Meeson, B, *The enigmatic Norman chancel of the Church of St. James*, Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society, Vol. LXIV, 1985

Thorn, F, & Thorn, C, *The Domesday Book, Shropshire*, Phillimore & Co., 1986

8 Acknowledgements

The illustrations were provided by English Partnerships after Bob Meeson.

9 The Archive

The archive consists of:

- 2 Photo index sheets
- 1 black & white negative film
- 1 Colour slide film
- 20 digital colour photographs
- This report

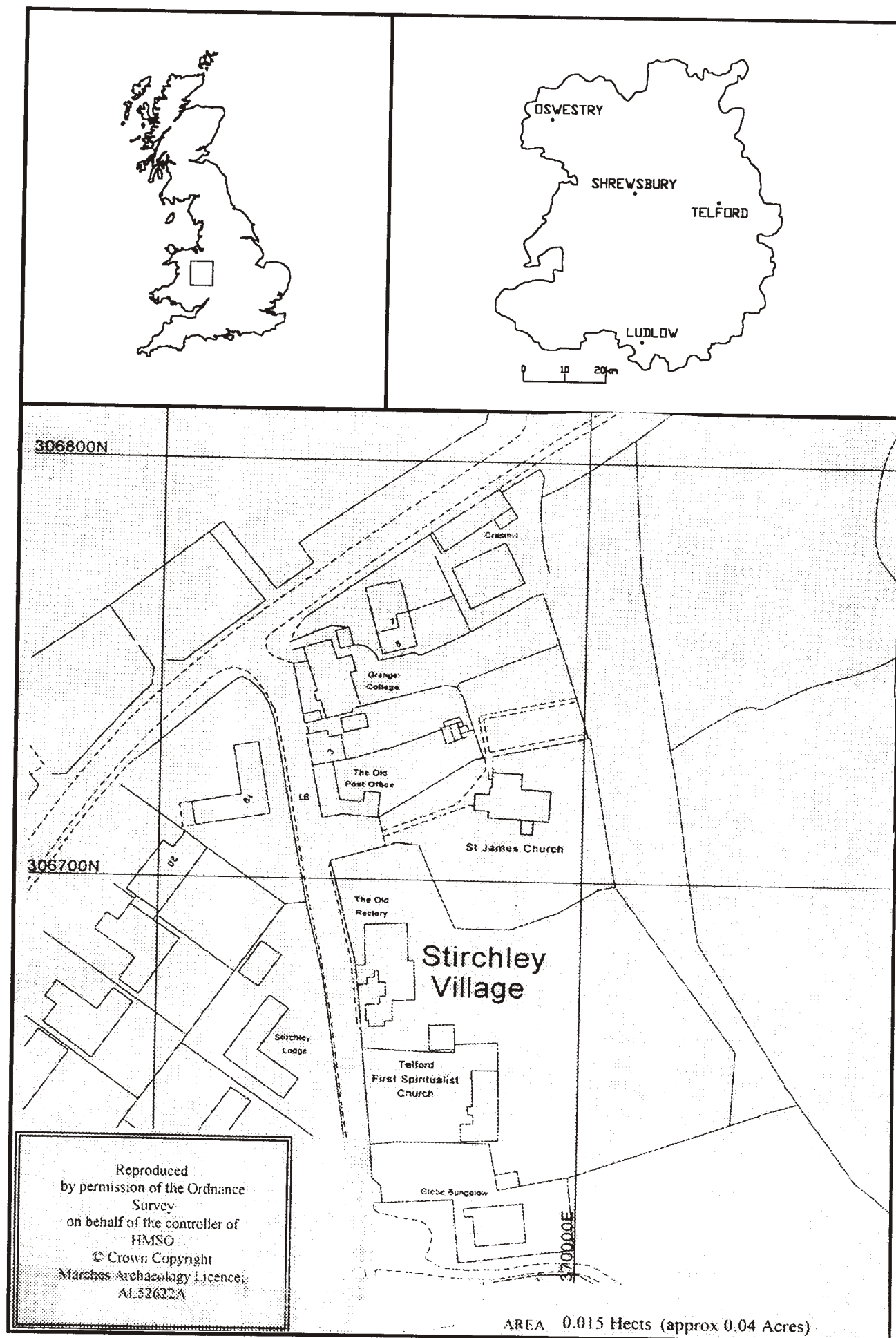


Fig 1 Location of site

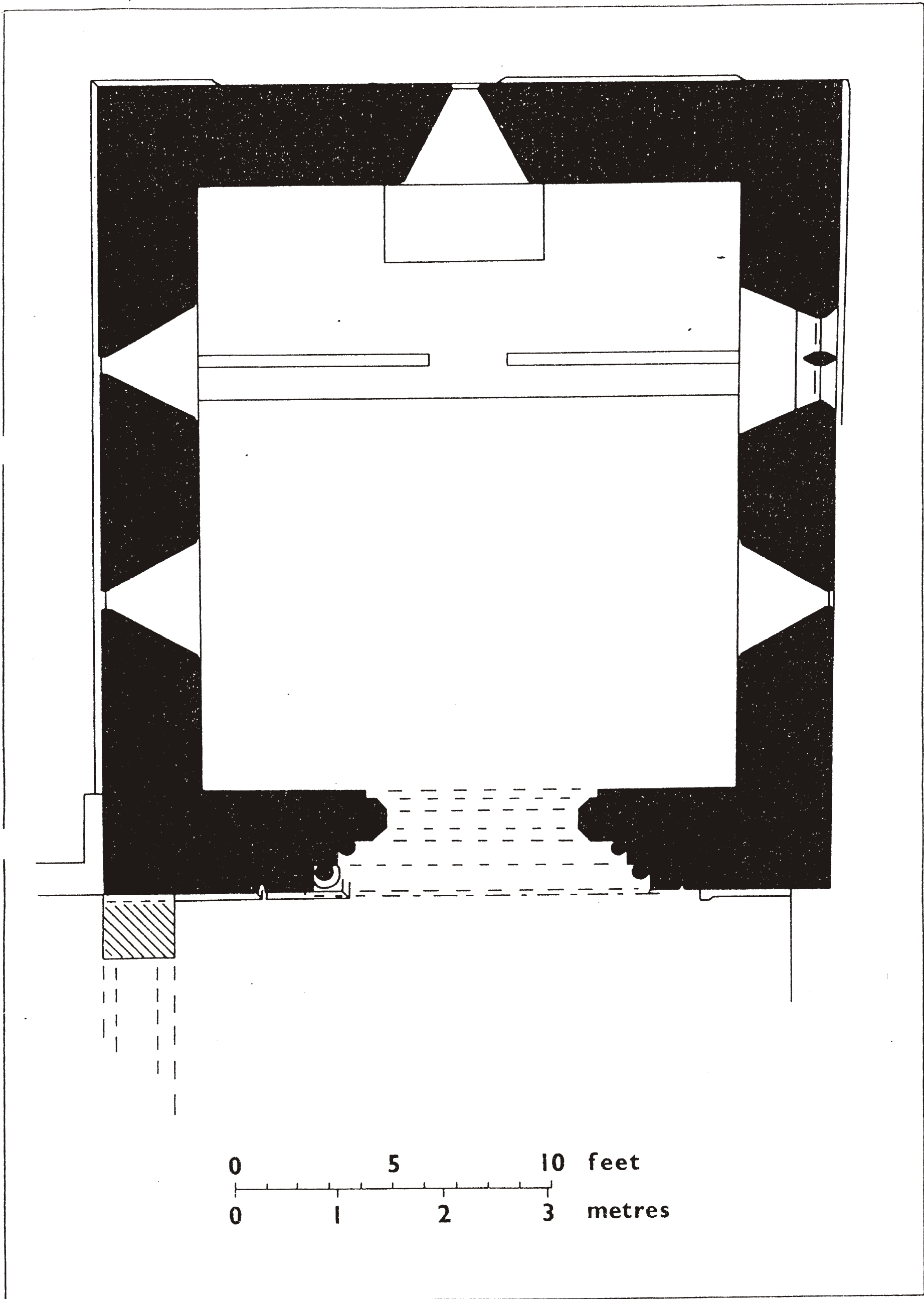
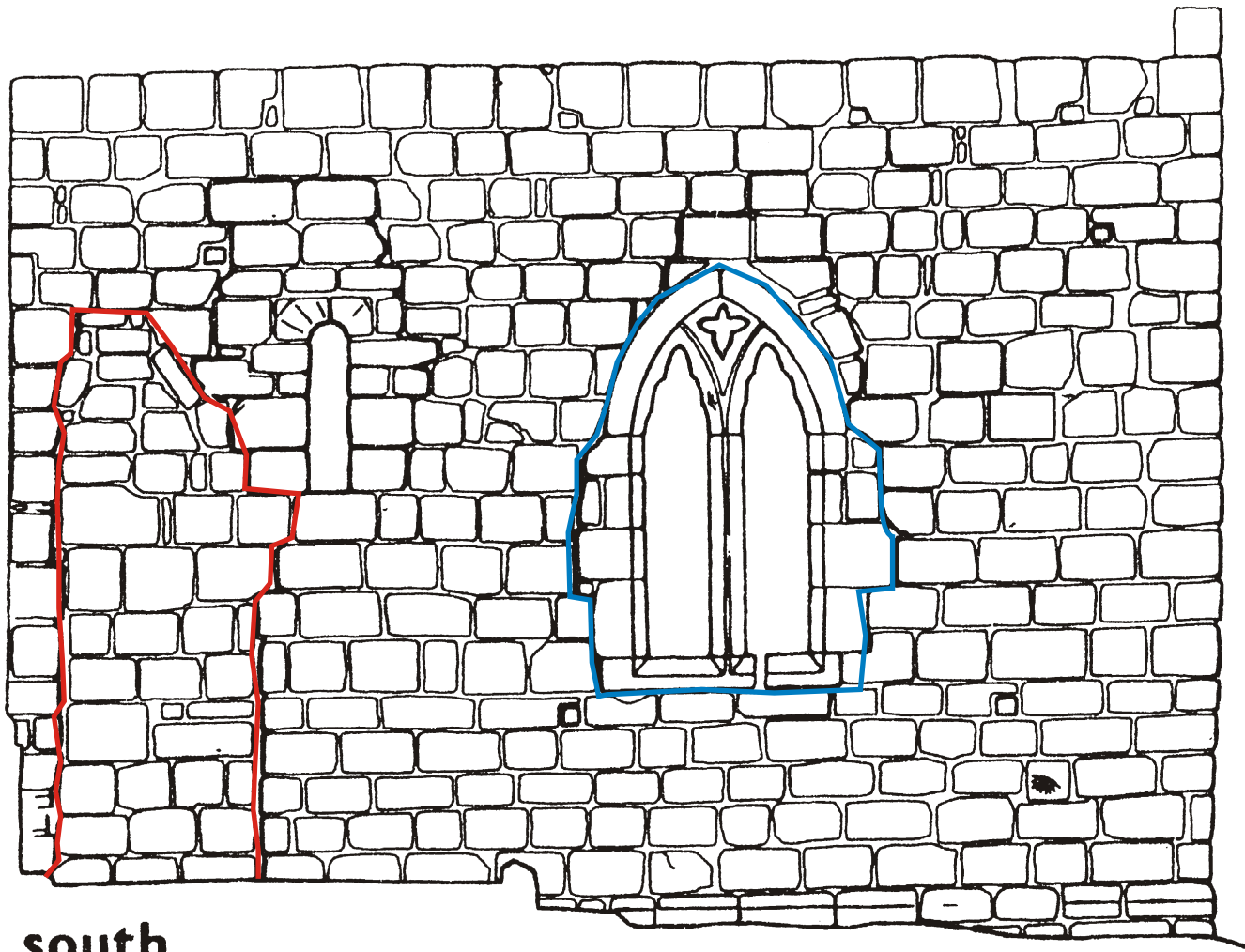
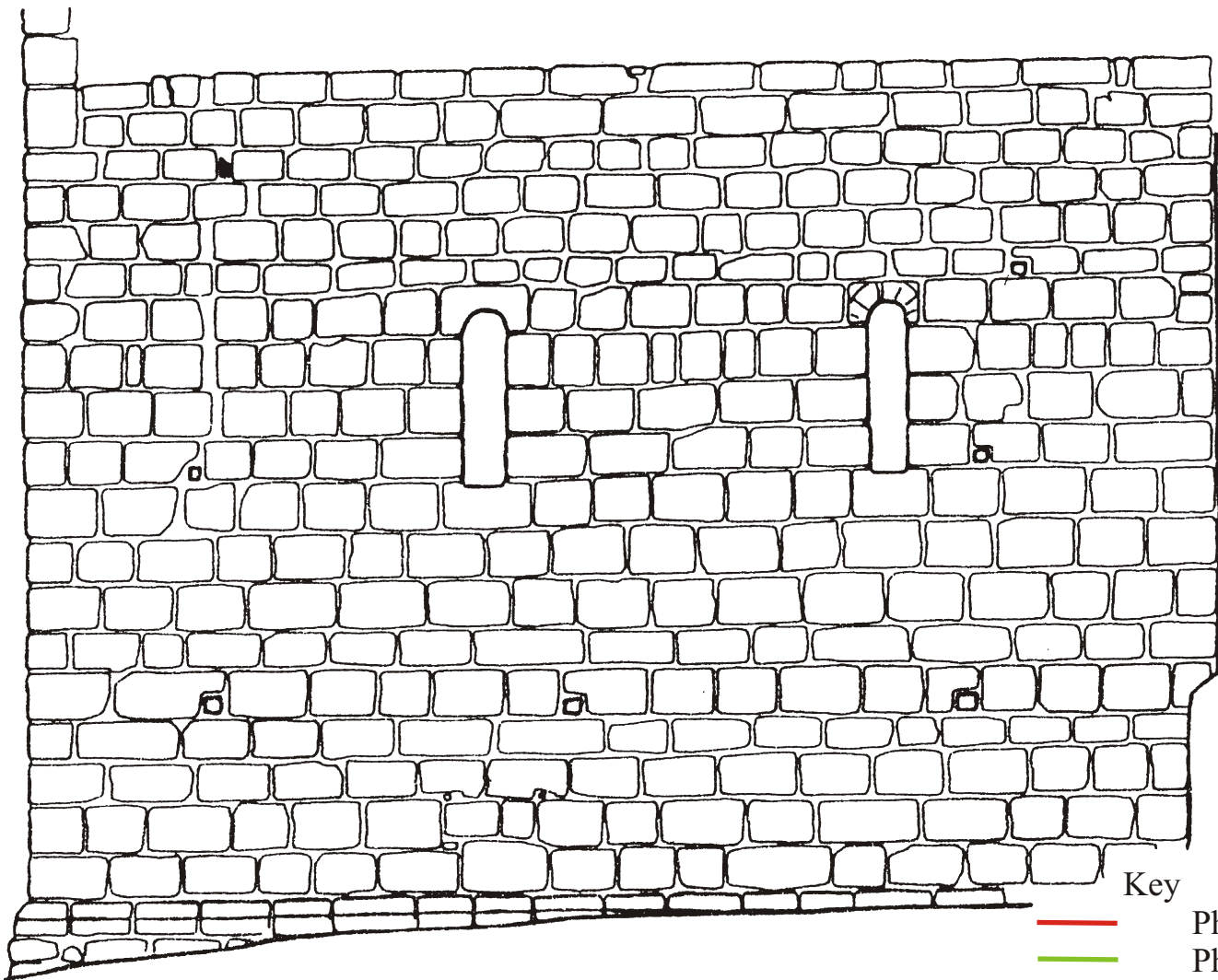
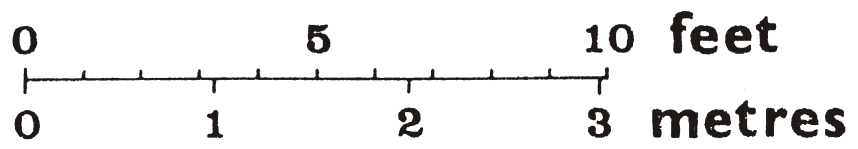


Figure 2 Plan of the Chancel/Chapel of Ease



south



north

- Key
- Phase 1
 - Phase 2
 - Phase 3
 - Phase 3a
 - Phase 6

Figure 3 The north and south elevations

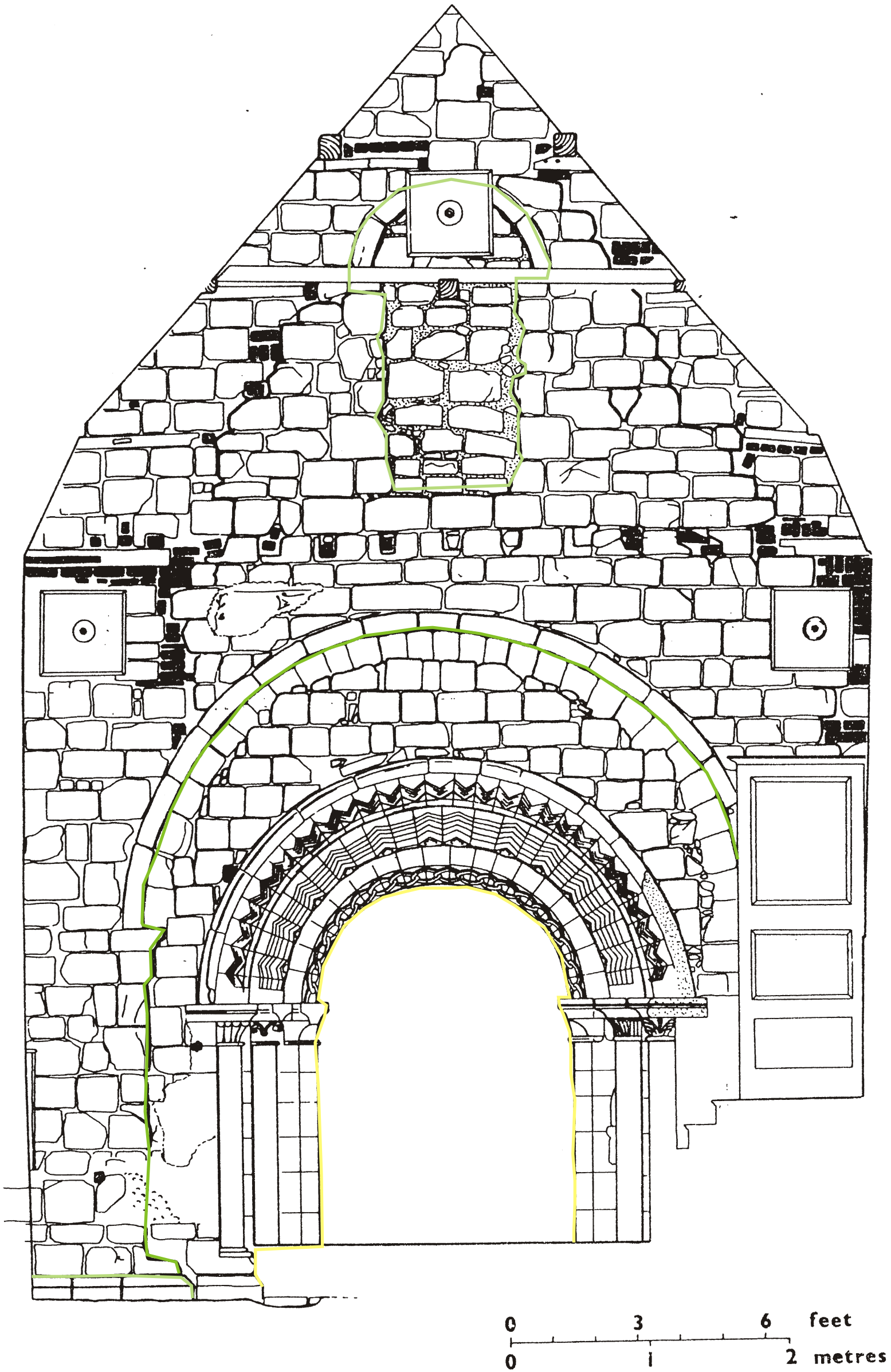


Figure 4 The west wall of the chancel

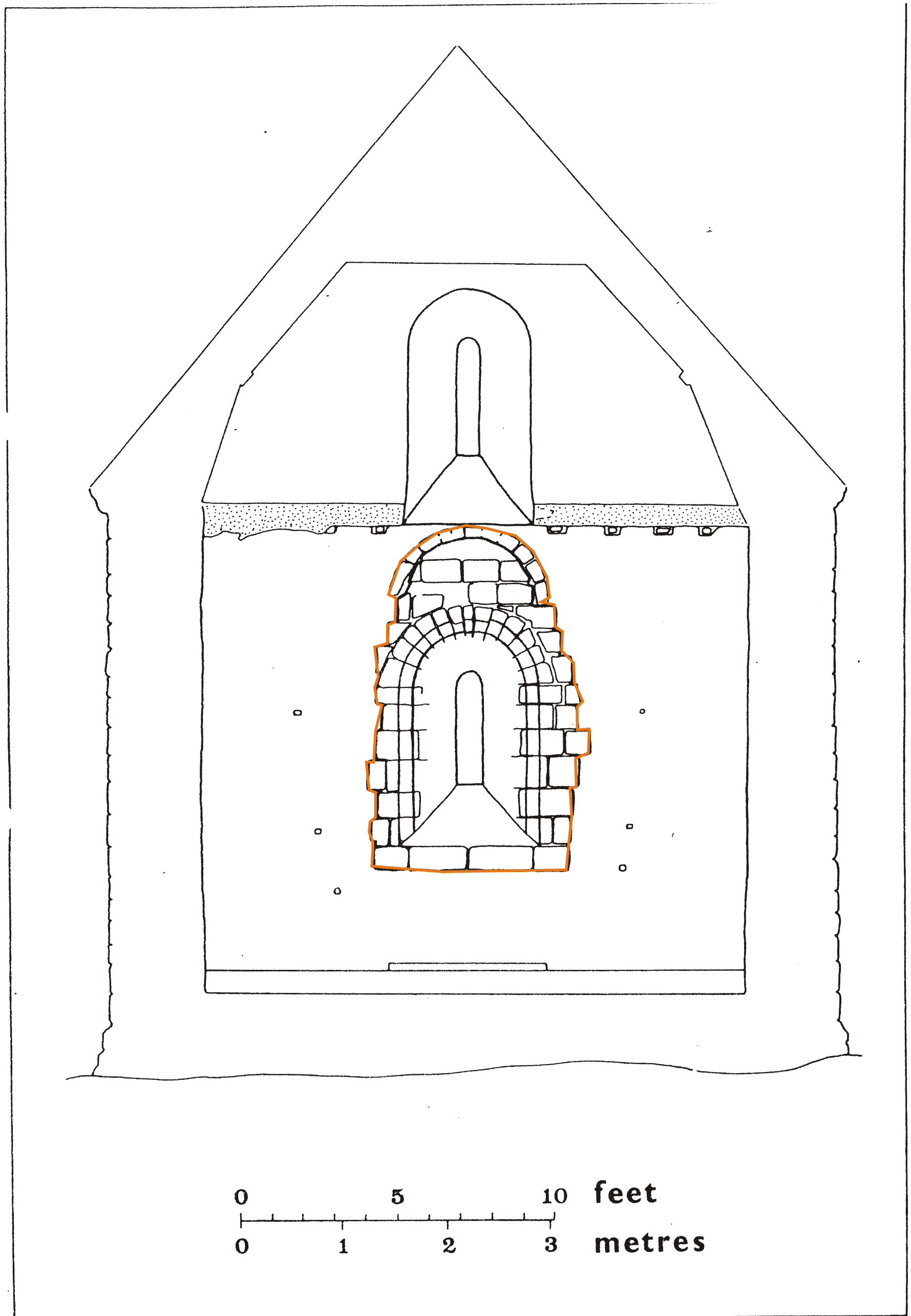


Figure 5 The east wall



Plate 1 The blocked doorway in the south wall



Plate 2 The blocked opening in the west wall



Plate 3 The Georgian rebuild



Plate 4 The Georgian pews and pulpit



Plate 5 The minstrel gallery



Plate 6 The balcony in the north aisle