



HEREFORDSHIRE  
COUNCIL

**Herefordshire Archaeology**  
Conservation and Environmental Planning  
Planning Services  
Environment Directorate  
Herefordshire Council

**The Churchyard of the Parish Church of  
St John the Baptist, Letton:  
A Topographic Survey**

**Herefordshire Archaeology Report No. 136**

Report prepared by  
Richard Lello

**Contents**

Summary  
Introduction  
Aims and Objectives  
Location and Geology  
Previous Records  
Methods  
Results  
Discussion  
Conclusion  
Archive  
References  
Acknowledgements

**Herefordshire Archaeology** is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

# **The Churchyard of the Parish Church of St John the Baptist, Letton: A Topographic Survey**

**Herefordshire Archaeology Report No. 136**  
Herefordshire Archaeology, September 2004

## ***Summary***

*A topographic survey of the churchyard of the parish church of St John the Baptist, Letton (EHE80088) was undertaken by Herefordshire Archaeology in partnership with the Caring for God's Acre project of the Diocese of Hereford. The aims of the survey were to produce an accurate plan of the churchyard, and to investigate topographic features and their relationship to the archaeology and geology of the churchyard and its environs.*

*A plan of the churchyard was drawn at a scale of 1:200. The churchyard and its environs are discussed based on field observations and archival research. A long history of continuity and change is recognised at Letton, dating at least from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.*

## **Disclaimer**

It should not be assumed that land referred to in this document is accessible to the public. Location plans are indicative only. NGRs are accurate to approximately 10m. Measured dimensions are accurate to within 1m at a scale of 1:500, 0.1m at 1:50, and 0.02m at 1:20.

Figures contain material from the Ordnance Survey. The grid in this material is the National Grid taken from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. This material has been reproduced in order to locate the site in its environs.

Contact details: Herefordshire Archaeology, PO Box 144, Hereford, HR1 2YH  
Copyright Herefordshire Council 2004

## ***Introduction***

The parish church of St John the Baptist, Letton is located in the village of Letton, Herefordshire, approximately 16km north-west of Hereford. At the time of the Domesday survey, Letton was held by Roger de Lucy, and the presence of a priest was recorded here (Thorn and Thorn, 1983). The present church is constructed of local sandstone with some tufa, and the roofs are covered with stone slates. The earliest structural fabric of the church, the north wall of the nave, is dated to the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century (RCHME, 1934).

The parish church stands in the northern part of the churchyard. A topographic survey of the churchyard was undertaken on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2004 by *Herefordshire Archaeology* staff in collaboration with the Caring for God's Acre project of the Diocese of Hereford.

## ***Aims and Objectives***

The aims of the churchyard survey were:

- To produce an accurate plan of the churchyard at a scale of 1:200;
- To investigate topographic features of the churchyard and their relationship to the archaeology and geology of the surrounding area.

## ***Location and Geology***

The parish church of St John the Baptist, Letton is located in the Wye valley at NGR: SO 33351 24645. The church is sited approximately 0.7km north of the present course of the River Wye at an elevation of 60m OD (Ordnance Survey, 1999).

The underlying bedrock of the Letton area is the Raglan Mudstone Formation of the Lower Old Red Sandstone. The bedrock consists mainly of easily weathered red-brown mudstones with subordinate sandstones and limestones (calcretes). The bedrock is overlain by glacial deposits of the Newer Drift, composed of till, gravel and silt. The till consists mainly of reddish brown, clayey to sandy silt, with unsorted clasts predominantly of small cobble size but also including larger cobbles and boulders (British Geological Survey, 1989).

The post-glacial alluvial deposits of the Wye valley in the Letton area are pale buff-brown silts derived mainly from the Silurian rocks of central Wales (British Geological Survey, 1989). These deposits give rise to typical brown alluvial soils of the Teme Series (Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1983). To the north-east of, and impinging upon, the churchyard is an extensive area of marshy, or previously marshy, land. This is the site of a former lake impounded by the Staunton Moraine (glacial deposits) to the east. The lacustrine alluvium of the area has given rise to waterlogged gley soils of the

Conway Series (British Geological Survey, 1989; Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1983).

### ***Previous Records***

A search of the Herefordshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) revealed the following records for the parish church and the immediate environs:

<b>SMR</b>	1705
<b>Site Name</b>	St John the Baptist, Letton
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3351 4645
<b>Site Type</b>	Church
<b>Period</b>	Medieval
<b>SMR</b>	5692
<b>Site Name</b>	Bull Farm, Letton
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3360 4660
<b>Site Type</b>	Dwelling
<b>Period</b>	Post medieval
<b>SMR</b>	20004
<b>Site Name</b>	Old Rectory, west of church, Letton
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3344 4640
<b>Site Type</b>	Dwelling
<b>Period</b>	Post medieval
<b>SMR</b>	21736
<b>Site Name</b>	Letton Court Gardens
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3360 4630
<b>Site Type</b>	Landscape Park
<b>Period</b>	Post medieval
<b>SMR</b>	25765
<b>Site Name</b>	Letton
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3300 4600
<b>Site Type</b>	Settlement
<b>Period</b>	Medieval
<b>SMR</b>	35449
<b>Site Name</b>	The Old Rectory
<b>NGR</b>	SO 3362 4687
<b>Site Type</b>	Parsonage
<b>Period</b>	Post medieval

A description of the parish church and its fittings can be found in:

RCHME (1934) *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Herefordshire, Vol. III, North-West*. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England. London: HMSO. pp133-135.

### **Methods**

A topographic survey of the churchyard was undertaken using an Electronic Distance Meter (EDM) with a reflective prism. Observations were recorded and a plan was drawn in the field at a scale of 1:200 using a plane table, protractor and scale ruler.

A ‘desk-top survey’ was undertaken to identify archaeological sites and features recorded in the immediate area of the churchyard, and any previous archaeological research. General aspects of the geology, geomorphology and soils of the Letton area were investigated by reference to published literature of the British Geological Survey, the Ordnance Survey, and the Soil Survey of England and Wales.

### **Results**

A plan of the churchyard was drawn at a scale of 1:200, based on data recorded during the survey. Topographic features observed are described below, and their relationship to the archaeology of the churchyard is discussed. Archaeological sites and features are referred to by their unique Herefordshire Sites and Monuments Primary Record Numbers, prefixed by ‘HSM’.

### **Discussion**

The parish church of St John the Baptist, Letton (HSM 1705) is located in the northern part of the churchyard. The land surface is fairly level within the churchyard, rising slightly in the south-west part. The churchyard is approximately oval in form, and the present boundaries are curvilinear on the north, east and south sides, and linear on the west side. The boundaries are marked by stone walls capped with brick on the north, east and north-west sides, by a brick wall on the west side, and by a hedge and earthwork terrace, or lynchet, on the south side.

The main entrance to the churchyard is on the east side, with an iron gate. Additional entrances are located on the west side, with an iron gate; at the south-west corner, with a wooden gate; and at the north-east corner, presently sealed with a wooden fence.

The churchyard is bordered on the north and east sides by access roads. A garden is located on the south side of the churchyard; a house (HSM 20004, Old Rectory) and garden is located on the west side.

## **Topographic Features**

The land surface of the churchyard is generally level, however, several changes of elevation were observed. In the south-east part of the churchyard, a circular area approximately 6m in diameter rises to a height of up to 0.75m above the level of the surrounding area. The change of elevation is associated with the growth of a yew tree at this location, and probably the subsequent dumping of material around it.

On the south side of the parish church, a terrace up to 0.35m high runs parallel with the south walls of the nave and chancel, and the east wall of the south transept. This feature is associated with modern drainage facilities.

The curvilinear boundary on the south side of the churchyard is marked by a south-facing earthwork terrace, or lynchet, up to 0.45m high. The terrace is consistent with the southern boundary of the churchyard shown on the Parish of Letton Tithe Map of 1840.

## **Boundary Changes**

As a result of the survey, no evidence was observed of major changes to the boundaries of the churchyard during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The present boundaries are consistent with those recorded on the Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> edition map of 1891, and, generally, with those recorded on the parish tithe map of 1840. It was observed, however, that the linear western boundary, marked by a brick wall, and the angular boundary at the south-west corner post-date the parish tithe map of 1840, and are inconsistent with the curvilinear boundaries on the remaining sides and with the rounded corners of the churchyard.

The access roads present today on the north and east sides of the churchyard, and the house and garden present on the west side, are recorded on the maps of 1891 and 1840. The boundary of the present garden on the south side of the churchyard is recorded on the Ordnance Survey map of 1891. This area is shown as part of a larger field, however, on the parish tithe map of 1840.

## **Built Structures**

The earliest structural fabric of the present church (HSM 1705), the north wall of the nave, is dated to the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Architectural features of the north wall include an external string course of tufa, and internal 'herring-bone' work. The nave appears to have been reconstructed during the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century. The chancel was also constructed or rebuilt at this time, and was lengthened in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The south transept was added c. 1330, and the north tower was begun soon after. The timber-framed top stage of the tower, with its plain boarding and pyramidal roof, was probably constructed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The south porch, constructed of wood with stone footings, is modern. The church was restored in 1883 (RCHME, 1934).

A timber framed two storey house (HSM 20004), located on the west side of the churchyard, is dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and is reported to have been a former rectory. The upper storey of the house projects on three sides; on the east side there is a gabled two-storeyed porch and two gabled dormers; on the west side, a central gable is present (RCHME, 1934).

A house, known today as the Rectory (HSM 35449, The Old Rectory), is located 0.5km north of the parish church on a minor road from Letton to Kinnersley. This building was constructed in 1870 by the Rev. Henry Blisset of Letton Court; it replaced an earlier parsonage. The Rectory is recorded on the Ordnance Survey map of 1891. An earlier parsonage is recorded on the tithe map of 1840. (The tithe apportionment records the owner as the Rev. Henry Blisset.) It was located 0.25km north of the parish church at the junction of the present A438 and the Letton to Kinnersley road, on the north-east side. The parsonage is not recorded on the Ordnance Survey map of 1891.

Letton Court is located to the east of the churchyard. The present house was built in 1925, and is the latest of several houses to occupy the site. The previous house, destroyed by fire in 1924, was built by the Rev. Henry Blisset in 1863, and is recorded on the Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> edition map of 1891. The house replaced an earlier structure built in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and recorded on the parish tithe map of 1840. The architect of the 1863 house, Samuel Teulon, also designed the Rectory (HSM 35449). Letton Court is surrounded by gardens (HSM 21736) that extend westwards to the south of the churchyard (Whitehead, 2001). The buildings of a 'model farm', constructed in 1861, are located to the north of the churchyard.

## ***Conclusion***

The oval form and curvilinear boundaries of Letton churchyard, including the earthwork terrace, suggest at least a medieval origin. Similar features have also been associated with churchyards and burial grounds dated to the first millenium (see, e.g., Ray, 2001). Limited evidence of boundary change was observed in the form of the linear west wall and the angular south-west corner. These changes appear to have made between 1840 (parish tithe map) and 1891 (Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> edition map), and may be associated with reconstruction work undertaken by the Rev. Henry Blisset.

The presence of a priest at Letton during the 11<sup>th</sup> century is recorded by the Domesday survey. The continuing presence of priests at Letton is attested by a sequence of rectories, or parsonages, dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to at least 1870.

The earliest structural fabric of the existing church, the north wall of the nave, has been dated to the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century (RCHME, 1934). Two architectural features that form part of the early fabric, tufa stone blocks and counter-pitched masonry (producing a herring-bone effect) may be indicative of the former existence of a pre-Norman structure (see Ray, 2001 for discussion of architectural features associated with 1<sup>st</sup> millennium churches).

A long history of continuity and change from the 11<sup>th</sup> century is recognised at Letton. Moreover, topographic features of the churchyard and architectural features of the oldest structural fabric of the parish church suggest the possibility of a first millennium origin for the earliest church and churchyard at Letton.

### **Archive**

1. Plan of Letton Churchyard (Scale 1:200)
2. This Document

### **References**

British Geological Survey (1989) *Geology of the country between Hereford and Leominster*. London: HMSO.

Ordnance Survey (1891) *Ordnance Survey 6" to 1 mile Map (1st edition)*. Southampton: Ordnance Survey Office.

Ordnance Survey (1999) *Explorer 201, Knighton and Presteign, Scale 1:25 000*. Southampton: Ordnance Survey.

Ray, K. (2001) 'Archaeology and The Three Early Churches of Herefordshire'. In A. Malpas et al. (eds), *The Early Church in Herefordshire*. Leominster: Leominster Study Group. pp99-148.

RCHME (1934) *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Herefordshire, Vol. III, North-West*. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England. London: HMSO.

Soil Survey of England and Wales (1983) *Soils of Midland and Western England, Sheet 3*. Southampton: Ordnance Survey.

Thorn, F. and C. Thorn (1983) *Domesday Book: Herefordshire*. Chichester: Phillimore.

Whitehead, D. (2001) *A Survey of Historic Parks and Gardens in Herefordshire*. Hereford and Worcester Gardens Trust.



## ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to acknowledge the co-operation of the Caring for God's Acre project of the Diocese of Hereford.

I would like to thank Dr. Keith Ray, the County Archaeologist, and Tim Hoverd, Archaeological Projects Officer, for their advice and editorial comments in the preparation of this report.

## **Validation**

Herefordshire Archaeology operates a validation system for its reports, to provide quality assurance and to comply with Best Value procedures.

This report has been checked for accuracy and clarity of statements of procedure and results.

Dr. Keith Ray, County Archaeologist