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**St Helen's Church
Skipwith
North Yorkshire**

Archaeological Watching Brief

**February 2000
MAP 05-01-00**

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Contents	Page
Figure List	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Historical and Archaeological Background	3
3. Methods	4
4. Results	4
5. Conclusions	5
6. Bibliography	5

Figure List

Page

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Site Location. Scale 1:10000 | 6 |
| 2. | Location of Cable Trench | 7 |

St Helen's Church
Skipwith
North Yorkshire

Archaeological Watching Brief

1. Introduction

A Watching Brief was carried out at St Helens Church, Skipwith during the excavation of electric cable trenches for a lighting system to illuminate the southern elevation of the Church. The Watching Brief was carried out by Map Archaeological Consultancy Ltd on 25th-26th January 2000.

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2. Historical and Archaeological Background

A consideration of the history and fabric of the Church illustrates the importance of this building and its immediate environs.

The Church was given by the King to the Bishop of Durham in 1084 and passed to Durham priory in the early 12th century who in turn used it to establish the prebend of Skipwith in the collegiate Church of Howden in 1280.

The West tower is Anglo-Saxon in date and of two consecutive construction periods. The lower part was originally a porch attached to a short nave. It was converted into a tower by adding to it in the Eleventh century. In the Fifteenth century a new bell stage was added on top. Built into the lower part of the inside north wall of tower and covered by a small door is an Anglo-Scandinavian, of Ninth to Eleventh century date, carved scene of a confused crowd of human figures and animals which has been interpreted as showing the destruction of the gods at Ragnarok, where Thor fights with the world serpent and Odin is eaten by the wolf Fenir.

The north aisle was added in 1190, but only two bays which probably correspond to the original length of the nave. The clerestory is of post Reformation date. The church was conscientiously restored in 1876-7.

In the churchyard are two gravestones and the base and broken shaft of medieval cross. The churchyard wall is largely capped by medieval grave slabs, some with decoration and traces of inscriptions. Some twenty-three are coffin-shaped and at least five are coped, one of which has a bas-relief cross, sword and shield. Three others have crosses. By the south porch a Thirteenth century relief cross slab, coffin-shaped with hollow moulded double chamfer.

3. Methods

The cables trenches were dug from where the individual lights were to be located and then extended to join with a power point in the tower of the Church. All trenches were approximately 0.25m wide and 0.45m deep. This was to provide sufficient coverage for the cables. An L shaped trench west of the church ran directly through the graveyard of the Church (Fig 2: A). Other trenches followed the line of paths and the boundary wall of the church (Fig. 2 B - I), although in a church of this age the line of modern features does not preclude the presence of burials.

All excavation was by hand.

4. Results

West of the church (Fig. 2A) a dark topsoil was observed for the full depth of the excavation. In some places a sandy brown subsoil was also reached. The topsoil contained frequent truncated human bone fragments. These were collected as the trench was excavated and replaced during backfilling.

Near the tower the course of the trench was altered to pass south of a large horizontal grave slab. This trench intersected the main power cable trench running north-south from the tower (Fig 2: B). A short spur was taken from the east-west trench to power two light fittings. The deposits in the trench running from the tower around the front porch of the church and following the line of a path around the building (Fig 2: C) were a homogenous brown clayey sand to the base of the excavation.

Upper spits contained frequent gravel from the surfacing of the path (Fig 2: D). Fewer bone fragments were present in this material. A deep sandy deposit was encountered under the fragments of the main path into the church and this appeared to be modern bedding material.

Three spurs from this trench to light fittings at the eastern and southern faces extended into the graveyard (Fig 2: E - G) but again only topsoil and disarticulated human bone fragments were encountered.

A trench following the eastern edge of the main path (Fig 2: H) showed a shallower topsoil deposit with brown sandy subsoil occurring at a depth of 0.25m-0.3m. Frequent disarticulated long bones and large fragments of bone suggest that burials might have been disturbed during previous construction work such as the laying of the bedding for the path, with the bones being re-interred to one side of the path.

The trench turned ninety degrees to the east following the northern edge of the current boundary wall (Fig 2: I). Again a dark topsoil was encountered with frequent disarticulated human long bones. Approximately 5m from the eastern edge of the path a concentration of human long bone fragments may have been bone encountered during the construction of the wall and dumped in a single charnel pit (Fig 2: J).

At the angle of the trench adjacent to the path (Fig 2: K), the top of a human skull was exposed at the limit of the depth of the trench. This skull was in good condition and might have been an articulated burial. However because of the depth of the trench it was possible to cover the skull and leave the burial undisturbed.

All of the fragments were re-interred within the back fill of the cable trenches.

5. Conclusions

Within the graveyard surrounding the church it appears that the working of soil by grave digging has created a thick topsoil. This deposit contains the remains of burials disturbed by later graves and general maintenance of the church.

Closer to the church building a homogenous clayey sand deposit appears to be the material on which the church is founded. It was not possible to detect whether this was natural or a levelling material brought it at a time when the church was extended. Within the graveyard deposits of undisturbed subsoil were encountered.

6. Bibliography

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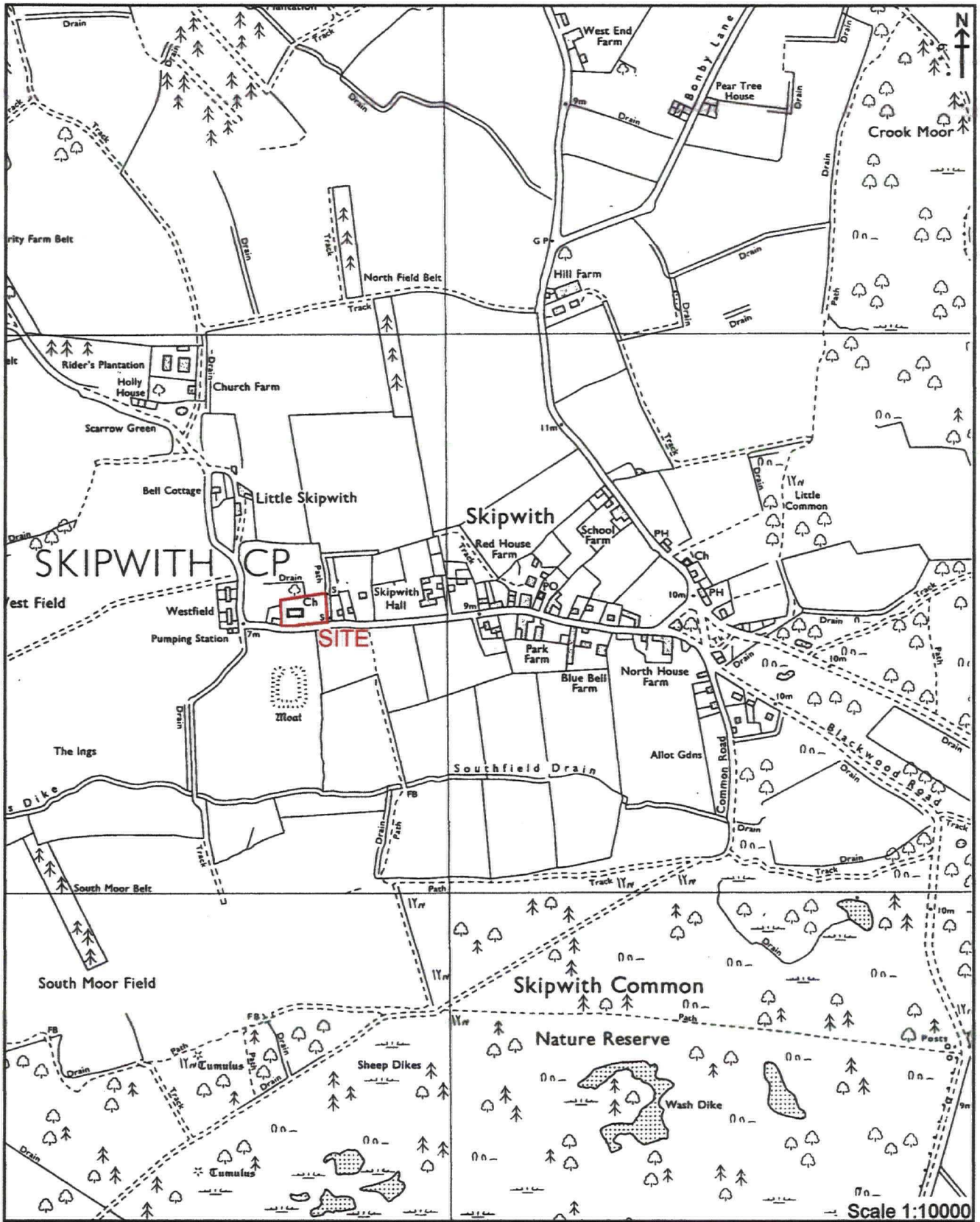


Figure 1. Site Location.

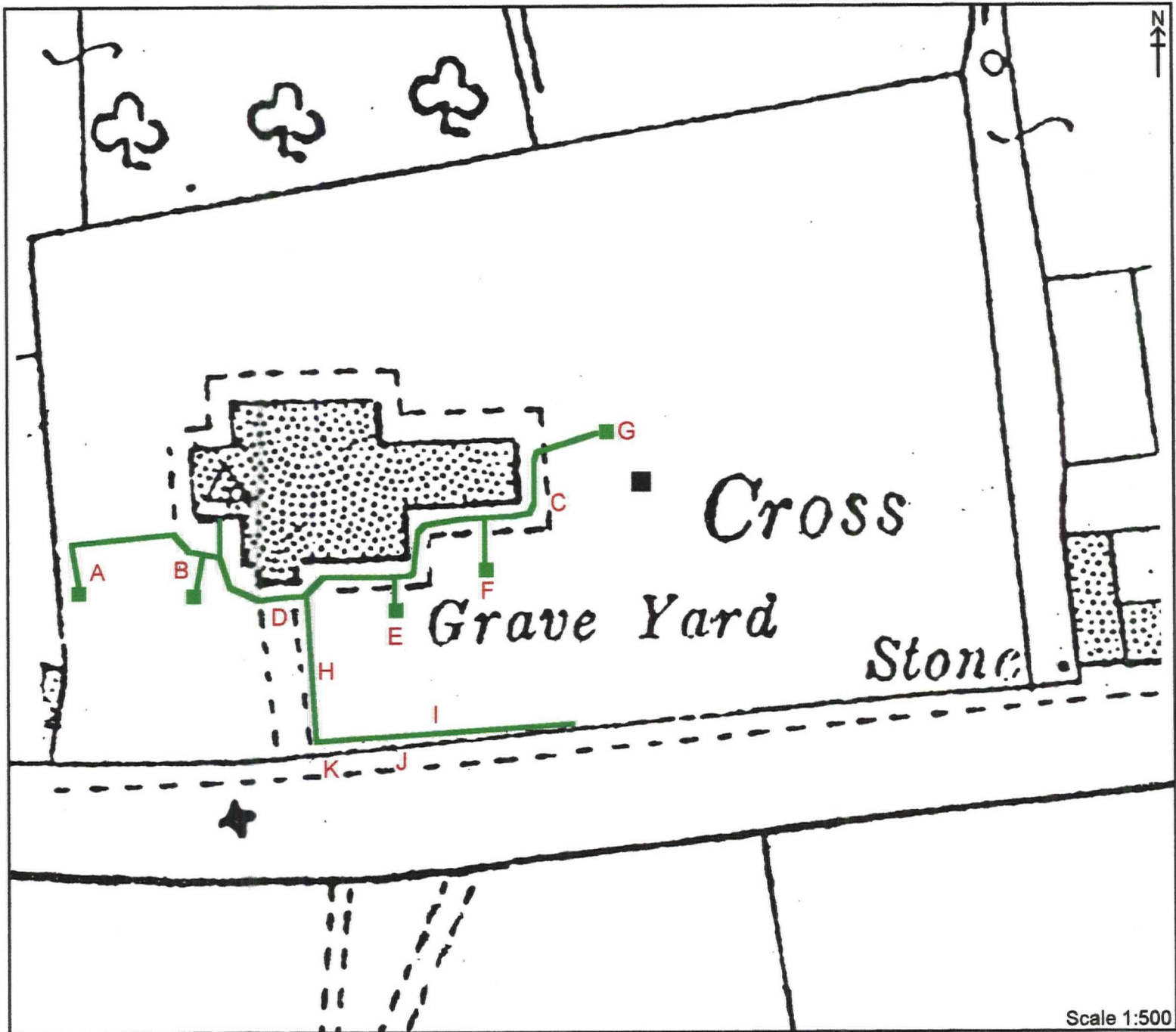


Figure 2. Location of Cable Trench.