

THE BRIGANTIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

BRITANNIA CHAMBERS
18A HORSEMARKET
BARNARD CASTLE
COUNTY DURHAM DL12 8LZ

Telephone/Fax Teesdale (01833) 630125



*St AGATHA's CHURCH, GILLING WEST
BURIAL VAULT IN THE NORTH AISLE*

418206 505155

A report to Messrs Birdsall and Swash

NYCC HER	
SNY	673
ENY	304
CNY	1775
Parish	1025
Rec'd	06/02/1999

5,ii,1999

St AGATHA'S CHURCH, GILLING WEST
BURIAL VAULT IN THE NORTH AISLE

SUMMARY

1. On instructions from the architect, Mr Neil Birdsall, small-scale excavations were conducted at the east end of the north aisle of St Agatha's church, Gilling West. Immediately beneath the stone slabs of the floor was encountered a solid masonry structure, which is identified as the vault of members of the Boynton family, apparently constructed and sealed in the sixteenth century.

BACKGROUND

2. The church is of an early foundation: various pre-Conquest fragments have been found in and around it, and parts of the present fabric have Romanesque features. It is possible that a church has been here since the residence at Gilling of Oswyn, king of Deira, in the seventh century. A rather brutal restoration in the 1850's included the rebuilding of the north aisle and the construction of an additional aisle to the north of it: the present works are located in the eastern end of the original (though rebuilt) aisle. Archaeological investigations were prompted by the discovery of a stone structure by contractors engaged in lowering the floor at this point, as part of a wider programme of alteration and reorganisation.

3. No attempt has been made to excavate the feature, other than the removal of enough mortar and other overlying deposits to allow its nature and extent to be established.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FEATURE

4. The masonry remains lie under the stone floor, presumed to be that laid at the time of the nineteenth-century restoration. The structure was separated from the floor only by a thin (less than 5cm.) deposit of stone rubble and rubbish: the presence of small fragments of sawn softwood suggests contemporaneity with the fitting of the pews. This deposit had mostly been removed when the site was first visited, but it is presumed to account for a pile of rubble in the contractors' skip: this included two tiny pieces of painted wall-plaster, which appear to be mediaeval in date. Both are basically maroon in colour; one fragment has a straight black line.

5. The first feature to be recognised was a wall face (AA) directly on the line of the outer face of the north wall of the nave, and believed to represent the outside wall before the construction of the (originally fourteenth-century) aisle and arcade. The masonry, like all of the stonework encountered on this site, was of a fine-grained, honey-coloured sandstone cemented with a hard, lime-based mortar. To the south of the facing stones lay the grouted rubble core of the wall, rather disturbed by operations for the fitting of the pulpit.

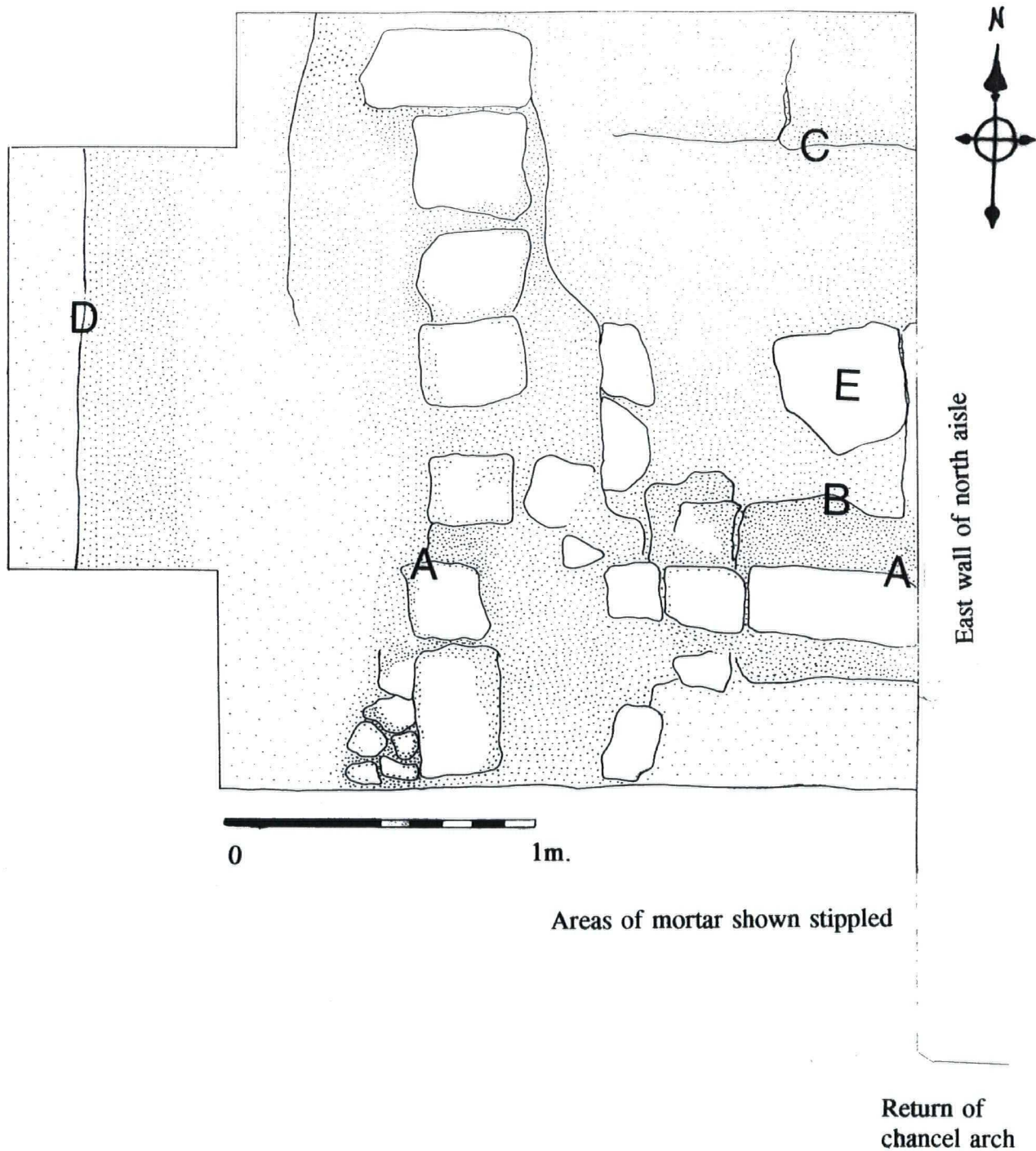
6. The remainder of the features recognised represent the upper surface of a burial vault, constructed of the same pale sandstone and cemented with very hard lime mortar, which had been liberally spread over the surfaces of the stonework. The vault was clearly cut through the line of the early north wall of the nave, indicating construction later than the mid-fourteenth century date suggested for the arcade. A square area on the eastern side appears to be the entrance: it is bounded by the straight edges of masonry at B and C. The western edge of the vault, at D, was plainly visible: to the east of here the crest of the vault is marked by a line of stones, protruding through the mortar, aligned north to south and sloping down to make a distinct hump some 15 to 20 centimetres higher than the surface at D. This suggests a simple barrel vault, with its long axis (rather surprisingly) aligned north and south.

7. The area which has been suggested as the entrance to the vault shows some signs of having been disturbed, probably during the nineteenth-century restoration works. A flat black stone, E, apparently only two or three centimetres thick and certainly unlike any other stone encountered, appeared to overlie a space or void (it sounded hollow when tapped, and two small holes at its edges indicated space below). The prevailing mortar spread had been disturbed at this point, and did not overlie the black stone. This feature probably represents the resealing of the vault's entrance after a small hole had been made by the nineteenth-century builders.

DISCUSSION

8. It is known that, in the sixteenth century, at least part of the north aisle was occupied by a mortuary chapel and chantry of the Boynton family. An imposing memorial slab, probably of Eggleston marble and bearing effigies in relief of Sir Henry Boynton and his wife Isabella (*obit* 1531) is now fixed to the west wall of the nave: it is known originally to have been laid in the north aisle and to have been removed in the nineteenth century. It appears overwhelmingly probable that this once overlay the vault which has now been identified. The eastern end of the north aisle would be the obviously appropriate place for the Boynton chantry.

9. It seems probable that the vault still contains its burials. Although there is evidence for disturbance of the vault entrance, the small hole which has been cut through the mortar seal seems inadequate for anything other than a visual inspection, and certainly too small for anyone to have entered the vault or for burials to have been removed.



St AGATHA's CHURCH, GILLING WEST
TOP OF MEDIAEVAL VAULT IN NORTH AISLE

The Brigantia Archaeological Practice
 February 1999

Neil Janglins, esp-4.

As promised, the note on getting
church, and copies of a couple of letters for
your information.

Y^{rs},
Erwin

material selected from each context was the minimum which, in our judgement, was necessary to represent all the types present in the context, and to maximise the representation of each type. Within the selected material each definable vessel was marked with a unique catalogue number (in our parlance a 'Featured Vessel Number').

In the second stage the Featured Vessels were collected together and arranged by vessel class and type. Joins between sherds were noted and every effort was made to find minimum vessel groupings. A certain amount of the featured material could not be assigned to a recognisable vessel type and was therefore set aside. The remaining subset was recorded in detail and illustrated.

Dating

The dating of the assemblage can be summarised as follows:

1) Jars: Black Burnished 1

The everted rim jars in BB1 all display essentially the same rim form whose characteristics place it early in the morphological development suggested by Gillam (1976, see eg fig 1 no.1). The majority carry the burnished wavy line on the outer

Neil Birdsall, esq., FSA,
Birdsall and Swash,
No 3, Pottle's Alley,
Hingham,
Norfolk NR9 4HS.

18,ii,1999

Dear Neil,

St AGATHA's, GILLING WEST

Thank you for your letter. I am sure that you are right about the strength and thickness of the vault, and its probable ability to survive the removal of the top part. However, given the adamantine nature of the masonry, I would have thought that a lot of force (and probably the use of a small windy-pick) would be needed, and I'd be rather worried about lumps falling from the inside. Certainly, we would need at least to have a look inside if this were to be done, though whether or not this could be achieved by removal of the single black slab (which could well overlie Victorian blocking material) we cannot tell without trial. Strictly from our own point of view (and not taking into account your client's need to have the work done), I would say that the options are: (preferably) to leave it alone, or (failing this) to see if the burials are in fact there and, if so, at least to record everything *in situ* and to consider the possibility of temporary removal during works. I realise, of course, that this would add some costs, which may be another problem.

I'm sure that it is very sensible to be wary of a large void of unknown status so close to the structural wall and arcade!

Please do let us know if there is anything we can do.

Sincerely,

Percival Turnbull

BIRDSALL & SWASH
Chartered Architects & Diocesan Surveyors

Partners:

Neil H Birdsall FSA Dipl Arch RIBA
Michael J D Swash Dipl Arch RIBA

Associate:

Ruth A Blackman Dipl Arch

No 3 Pottle's Alley
Hingham
Norfolk
NR9 4HS

(01953) 850569

15th February 1999

Mr Percival Turnbull
Brigantia Archaeological Practice
Britannia Chambers
18a Horsemarket
Barnard Castle
County Durham
DL12 8LZ

Dear Percival

Gilling West Parish Church

Thank you very much indeed for your note of 5th February 1999 and for your report on the work you have carried out to date at the east end of the north nave aisle and which I found most interesting.

I am not quite sure what the way forward with this one might be and because of the involvement of English Heritage and others I am unable to give you further instructions for the time being. My own view, for what it is worth, is that it seems a pity having got so far not to raise the single slab you have marked as E on your plan. For me to say this may simply demonstrate my ignorance of the way in which archaeology should be tackled in circumstances such as these. There are however two things which might have relevance here. The first is I wonder how thick the crown of the vault is. I believe it to be the case that I have seen two and sometimes three layers of brick or stone voissiors over a burial vault. In the unlikely event there is more than one thickness here might it be possible to take part of the topmost layer off without compromising the structure of the vault at all? Under those circumstances we would be able to achieve the flat floor above which my clients wanted and which lead to the current exercise being put in hand initially. The second thing is that I am always a little uneasy at the knowledge of a sizeable void in any building which cannot be inspected and the structural state of which is therefore unknown. To look at it now, even in the knowledge that the interior is not going to be seen for very many years to come, would be reassuring if it is discovered to be in good order.

As and when I have some further instructions with regard to this matter I will be in touch with you again. In the interim I am most grateful to you for all your help with and interest in Gilling West church.

In his capacity as consultant archaeologist to the diocese of Ripon I felt obliged to send Lawrence Butler a copy of your report. I have sent another copy to Mr Cedric Shaw who is my correspondent in the parish.

With very best wishes.

Yours sincerely


Neil H. Birdsall