

YORK



ARCHAEOLOGICAL
TRUST

**MINSTER ROAD,
RIPON,
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**REPORT ON AN
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF**

**1999 FIELD REPORT
NUMBER 19**



NYCC HER	
SNY	8383
ENY	1903
CNY	
Parish	6031
Rec'd	

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ABSTRACT

An archaeological watching brief carried out during the construction of a new footpath and the relocating of an existing kerb to the north of Ripon Cathedral revealed a number of burials believed to be of medieval date close to the north transept door. Several phases of burial were identified. Of particular interest was a cist burial which had been truncated by the construction of a brick tomb in the 19th century.

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 15th, 20th and 28th April 1999, York Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological watching brief during the construction of a new footpath adjacent to the north side of Ripon Cathedral, North Yorkshire (NGR SE 3144 7113) (Figure 1). Part of this work involved the relocation of an existing kerb (Figure 2; plan 1) which had originally formed the property boundary between Ripon Cathedral (North Yorkshire County Monument No 1282) and Minster Road which is situated immediately to the north. The work was commissioned by the Dean and Chapter of Ripon Cathedral in compliance with section 2 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act, 1979 (as amended)(NYCC ref. B6265/3/13 EW).

2. METHODOLOGY

The work carried out initially involved the observation and archaeological recording of the contractor's excavation of a foundation trench for the re-location of the sandstone kerb (Figure 2; plan 1). The kerbstones were relocated to the south of their original position, to run between the west side of the north transept door to the east side of a second door, located at the western end of the north side of the Cathedral. Upon completion of this phase of work the excavation of a foundation trench for the relocated footpath was carried out. This incorporated the fore-court to the north transept doorway (Figure 2). All of the ground-works were carried out using a JCB back-actor under archaeological supervision. The main contractors for this work were North Yorkshire County Council. All of the human remains recorded during the work were replaced in their burial position before footpath construction took place.

The deposits and features exposed in the foundation trenches were recorded as drawn sections at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20 and planned at 1:20 as well as being described using pro-forma context recording sheets. A number of 35mm colour print photographs were also taken.

The site records are currently stored with York Archaeological Trust under the Harrogate Museums accession code HARGM: 9791.



Scale 1:25 000

BASED UPON ORDNANCE SURVEY 1:25000 MAP DATA WITH PERMISSION OF THE CONTROLLER OF HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE, CROWN COPYRIGHT, YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST CROMWELL HOUSE, 13 OGLEFORTH, YORK. YO17FG. LICENCE NUMBER AL854123

Figure 1, Site location plan

3. RESULTS

3.1 KERB RELOCATION TRENCH

The kerb re-location trench (Figure 2, plan 1, A – E; Figure 3) was 29.20m long, 0.60m wide and 0.50 to 0.60m deep. The earliest deposit observed was a natural sub-soil consisting of a loose coarse grained orange brown sand and pebble gravel (935) with inclusions of moderate decayed sandstone fragments and small to large pebbles. This was observed at 0.60m BGL (metres Below Ground Level) and continued beneath the base of the trench.

The sub-soil had been truncated by grave cuts 934 and 921 (Figure 3; C - D). Cut 934 was not excavated or even fully exposed; the eastern end was concealed beneath later deposits and the northern edge continued beyond the northern limit of excavation. The visible western area was rectilinear in shape, orientated east – west, was 1.38m long and over 0.28m wide. The skeleton which it contained (916) also remained un-excavated. The skeleton was that of a supine adult, orientated east – west with the head to the west and the right forearm overlying the pelvis. The surviving bone (articulated vertebrae, ribs and fragmentary skull) was in an average to good condition. The lower limbs remained concealed beneath later deposits. Skeleton 916 was also partially obscured by the back-fill of grave cut 934 which consisted of a loose mid brown sand (913) with inclusions of occasional charcoal flecks and moderate flecks to small fragments of decayed sandstone.

Grave cut 921 also remained un-excavated. This was located 0.12m to the south of cut 934, was rectilinear in shape, had a similar east – west alignment and was fully exposed on its east – west axis. This extended for a length of 1.76m and was 0.23m wide, up to the point where it ran beneath the southern limit of excavation.

The skeleton which it contained (920) was in a fragmentary condition with the surviving bone, which included a displaced left humerus, vertebrae, ribs and left clavicle, in a good state of preservation. The position of the surviving fragments suggested an east–west alignment, with the head to the west; the dimensions of the grave cut suggested that this was also an adult. A larger proportion of the skeleton may have survived but remained concealed beneath grave back-fill 910 which consisted of a loose mid brown sand with inclusions of occasional charcoal flecks and moderate flecks to small fragments of decayed sandstone.

Skeleton 917 (Figure 3; D – E) had no visible grave cut but was laid directly on top of the natural sub-soil (935). This interment was located 5.18m to the east of grave cuts 921 and 934 and, as the remaining bone suggested, was supine, orientated east – west, with the head to the west. The surviving bone was in a poor condition and included fragmentary ribs, right humerus, and small teeth in a fragmented, powdery skull. The lower extremities may have survived but were concealed beneath later deposits. The small size, some 0.24m in length, of the exposed skeleton suggested that this interment was that of a very young infant.

Context 919 (Figure 3; D – E) was an east–west alignment of small to large cobbles which may have been a light footing. It would seem more likely, due to a similar stone lined grave being in the close vicinity, that this was the lining to a grave. This feature was not fully understood as very little of it was seen.

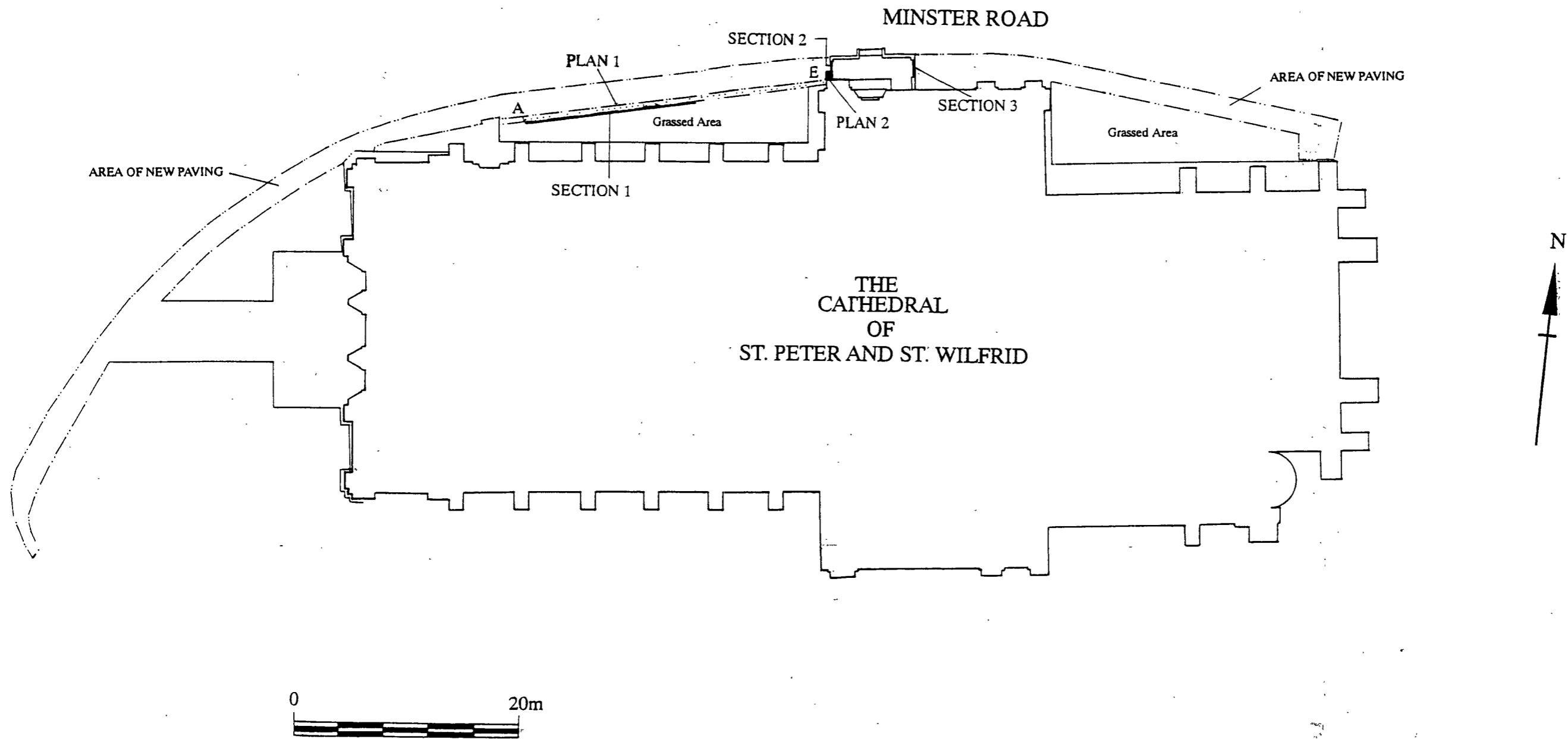


Figure 2; Location of Ground - works, Plans and Sections

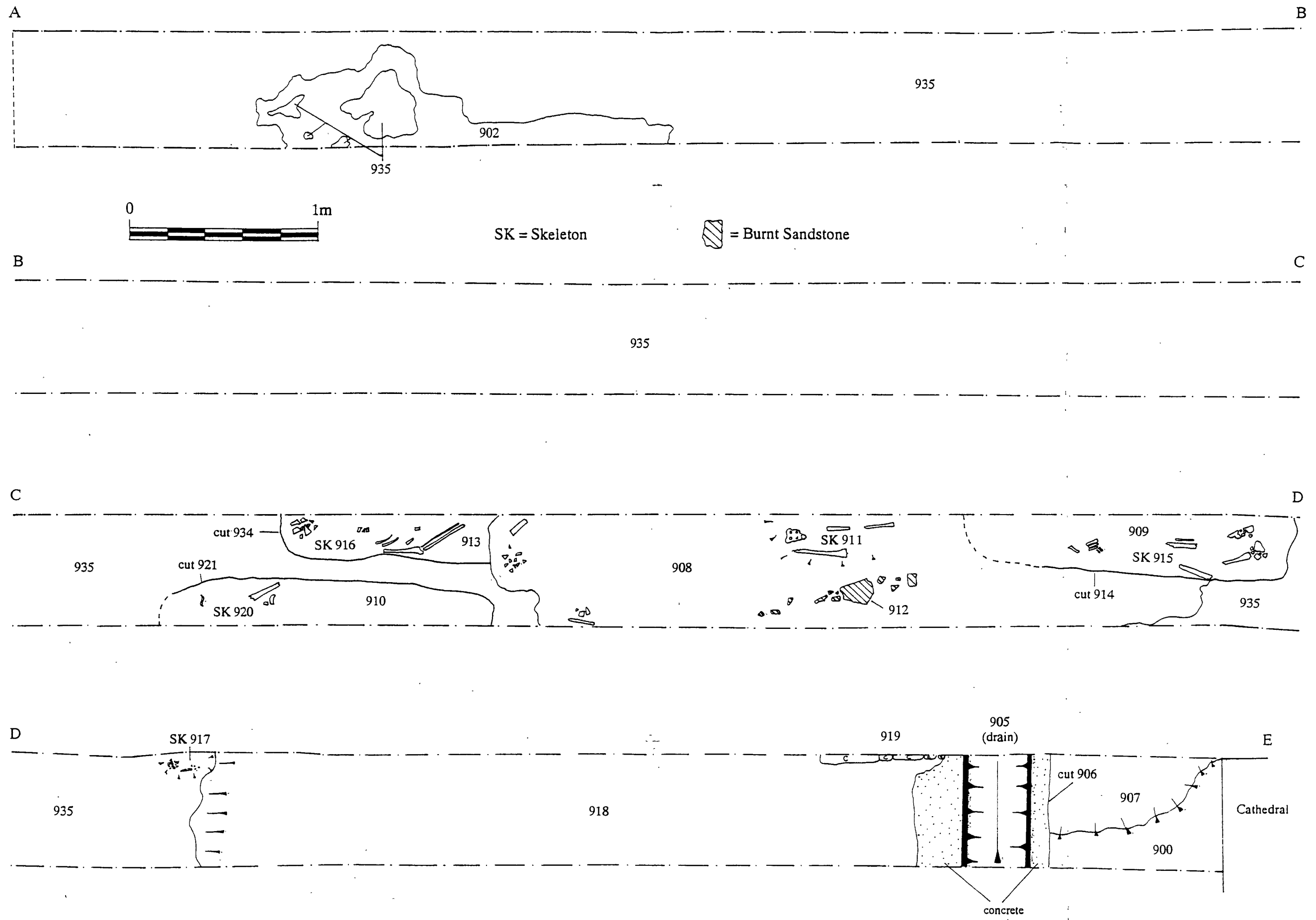


Figure 3; Plan 1 Showing Base of Wall Re - alignment Trench

Both skeleton 917 and context 919 were sealed by an extensive dump or build-up of a loose pale grey brown silt sand (918), (Figure 3; D – E).

Context 913, the back-fill of grave cut 934, was sealed by context 908 (Figure 3; C – D) which consisted of a loose coarse grained mid grey brown gritty sand with inclusions of occasional disturbed human bone, charcoal flecks, mortar flecks and small pebbles. This deposit was difficult to interpret as it was only seen in the base of the trench and was not fully excavated. The most marked difference between this and the surrounding deposits was its dark colour. Context 908 extended for 3.76m to the east of grave cut 934 and ran beneath the northern and southern sections. It may represent the limits of a mass burial, or charnel pit, the human bones from which have been heavily disturbed. Alternatively it may represent a surviving grave yard soil lying in a hollow in the ground surface.

A group of small to large heavily burnt sandstone fragments (912), (Figure 3; C–D) was sealed by context 908. Context 912 had a distinct north-east–south-west alignment which suggested that they were the edging to a grave. The rest of this edging was concealed by context 908 or lay outside the southern limit of excavation.

Skeleton 911, located 0.20m to the north of context 912, was also sealed by context 908. The surviving bone, a fragmentary left and right femur, left tibia and sacrum, was in average condition. The body of which they were part would have been aligned east–west with the head to the west.

The eastern limit of context 908 was truncated by grave cut 914. This was orientated east–west, was rectilinear in shape, 1.72m in length and 0.32m wide where it ran beneath the northern limit of excavation. The skeleton which it contained (915) was orientated east –west with the head to the west. The surviving bone which included articulated right phalanges, a displaced fragmentary right tibia, left tibia and left and right fragmentary tarsus, was in fair condition. The position and size of the exposed skeletal material suggested that this was a supine adult inhumation with both feet close together, which may be indicative of the use of a burial shroud.

Skeleton 915 was partly concealed by a grave back-fill which consisted of a loose mid brown sand (909) with inclusions of occasional small pebbles, flecks to small fragments of decayed sandstone and charcoal flecks.

Contexts 909, 918 and 910 were directly beneath an extensive levelling deposit of re-deposited natural. This consisted of loose coarse grained orange brown sand (904) (Figure 4) with the inclusion of very occasional charcoal flecks, 0.27m thick, which extended to cover most of the trench. This was sealed by a large 0.20m thick dump of crushed limestone (902) (Figure 3; A – B, Figure 4), which may have formed part of the same levelling operation as context 904 or represented the accumulation of waste material arising from repairs or alterations to the fabric of the Cathedral.

Stratigraphically above context 902 were contexts 903 and 901 (Figure 4). Context 903 consisted of a 0.05m thick spread of compacted loose creamy white sandy lime mortar which had been spread over a wide area, extending for some 4.60m to the east of 902. This deposit may represent a temporary surface, i.e. to a pathway or work area, the discard of demolition or

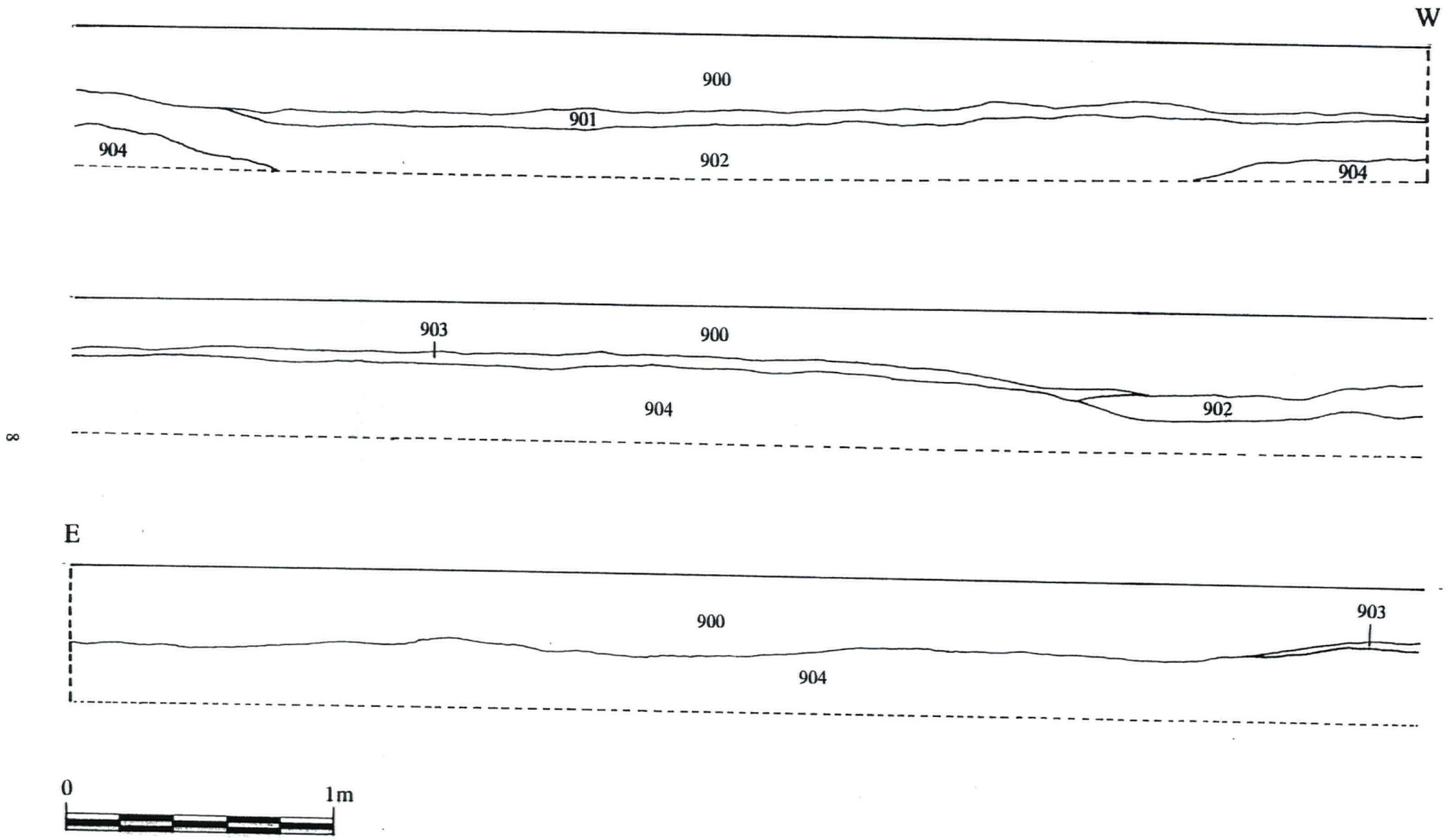


Figure 4, Section 1; North Facing

construction waste or a spread of material forming part of the levelling operation associated with contexts 902 / 904.

Context 901 was a 0.05m thick deposit of small to medium pebbles in a matrix of stiff mid orange brown clay which was spread at the same level as context 903 and may have performed the same function, i.e. was the make up of the same surface.

Both contexts 901 and 903 were sealed by a build-up or dump of friable dark grey slightly clay sand silt (900) which formed an approximately 0.30m thick topsoil, under grass, at the time the watching brief was undertaken. Context 900 also sealed a build-up or levelling deposit which consisted of a pale reddish brown coarse grained sand and pebbly gravel (907) (Figure 3; D – E) with inclusions of occasional mortar and charcoal flecks. How this deposit related to those lying to the west is unknown as the relationship between them had been severed by the construction of a drain.

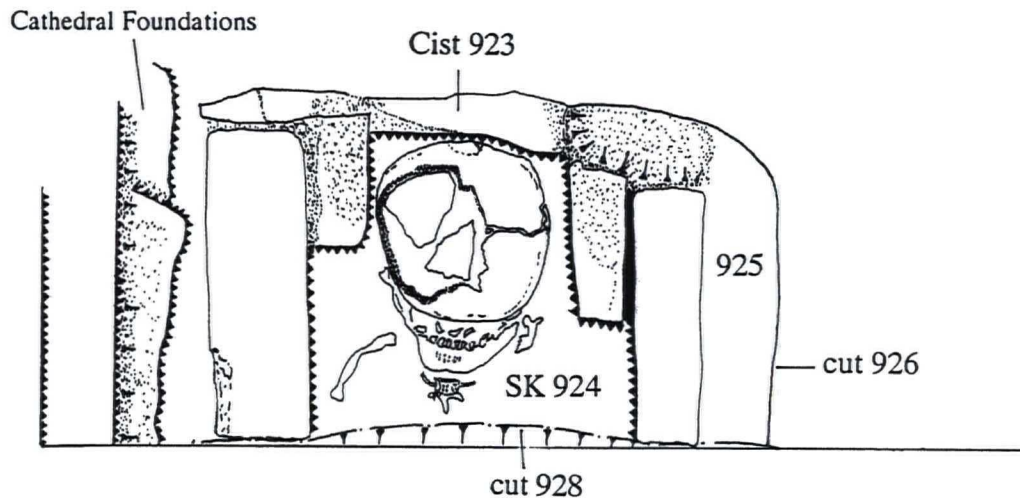
Drain construction cut 906 had truncated topsoil 900 and contained a open rectilinear concrete gully (905) which was still in use at the time the watching brief was carried out.

3.2 FOOTPATH CONSTRUCTION TRENCH

After the kerbstones were set in their new position the footpath construction cut was excavated (Figure 2; 'Area of new paving'). The new footpath was designed to incorporate an existing footpath, which was also re-paved, at the western end of the Cathedral. A completely new section was constructed from the north door at the western end of the Cathedral to the west side of the fore-court outside the north transept door. This was then extended from the east side of the fore-court to curtail at the eastern end of the Cathedral. The foundation trench was 2.0m wide and, at only 0.30m deep, generally failed to reach a depth which would compromise any archaeological deposits or burials. The exception to this was the area adjacent to the north transept door (Figure 2, plan 2; Figure 5, 6, sections 2 and 3).


On the western side of the door (Figure 6, section 2), the earliest deposit observed was the continuation of context 907 (as seen in the kerb relocation trench). This was located at 0.23m BGL and was excavated to a depth of 0.04m, to continue beyond the base of the excavated area. 907 had been truncated by grave cut 926 (Figure 5; Figure 6, section 2), which was not excavated. In plan the cut appeared to have been rectilinear in shape and was orientated east – west.

The one factor that made this grave stand out from those previously recorded was the fact that it contained a stone cist (923; Figures 5 and 6, section 2) containing the inhumation 924 (Figure 5). The cist, burial and grave back-fill (925; Figures 5 and 6, section 2) were all truncated by cut 928, which had removed a greater part of their eastern extents, leaving only the westernmost 0.45m intact. The remainder of cist 923 was constructed from several fragments of a fine grained sandstone. The north side was constructed from a single piece of edge-set sandstone 0.08m wide, 0.29m deep and 0.33m in length. The south side was similarly constructed except that the single piece of sandstone was slightly larger, 0.12m wide, 0.31m deep and 0.40m in length. Both of these fragments were re-used from elsewhere as the internal faces of the stones were finely finished and had barely visible tooling marks.



931
(paving)

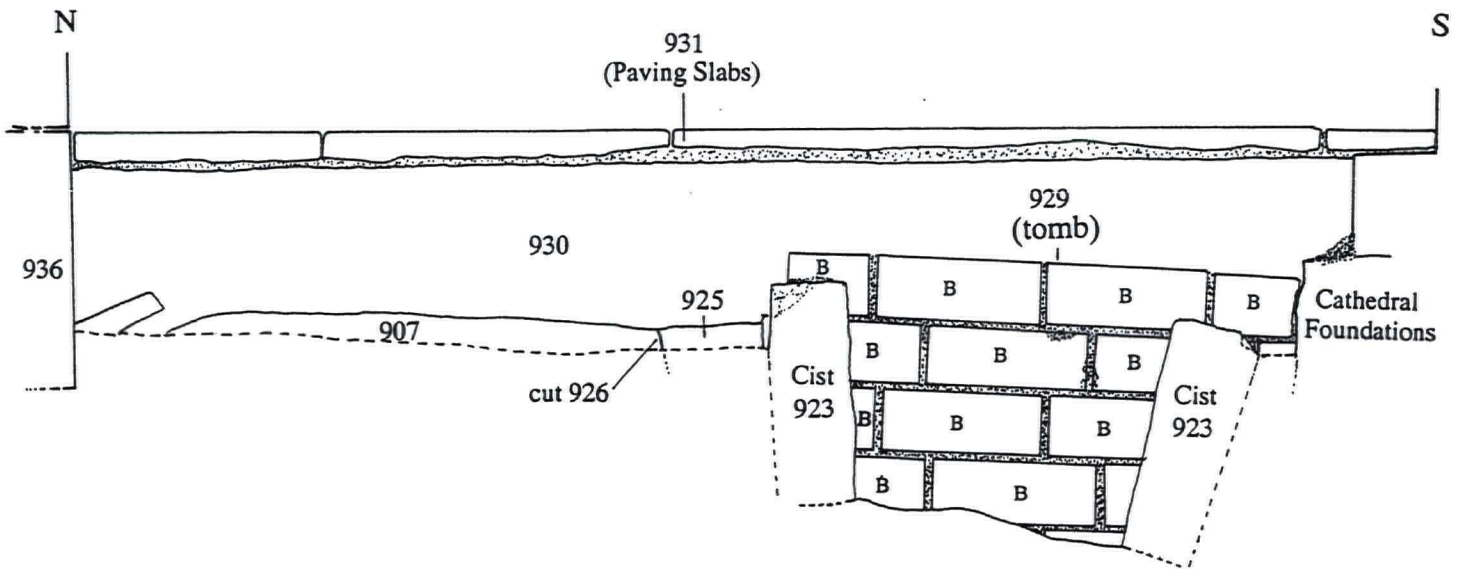
 = Mortar

 = Void




Note - All Stone Sandstone

Figure 5; Detail of Cist Burial 924

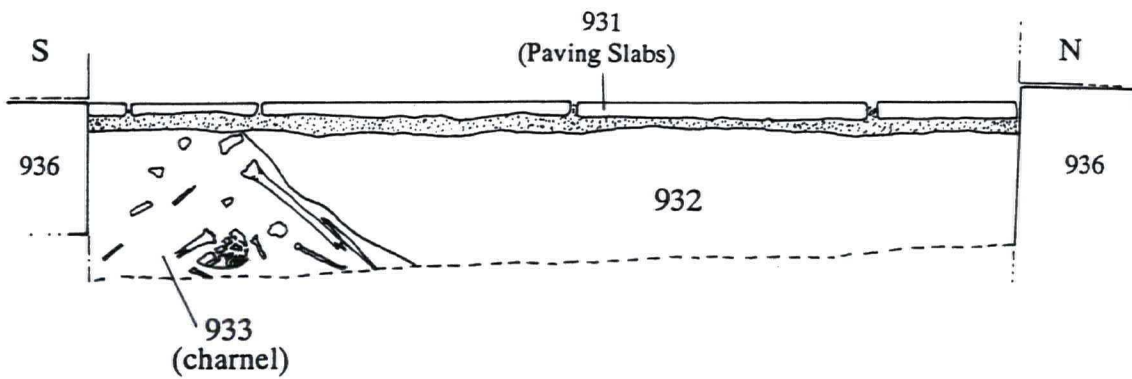


Section 2; West Facing

B = Brick

 = Mortar

Note - All Stone Sandstone



Section 3; East Facing



A recess to take the head of the interment was formed by the insertion of two smaller blocks of sandstone. These were placed against the internal faces of the stones forming the sides, at their western ends. The western end of the cist was then closed by two irregular fragments of sandstone. The whole structure was bonded together with a soft off-white lime mortar.

Of the skeleton (924) which it contained, only the fragmentary skull, lower mandible, teeth, right clavicle and one vertebra had survived. The bone, although soft, was generally in a fair to good condition. From what remained of the skeleton, it would appear that the body would have been laid in a supine position, orientated east-west with the head to the west.

The back-fill of the grave cut (925) consisted of a loose mid brown fine to medium grained sand with inclusions of occasional mortar and charcoal flecks, small mortar fragments and small pebbles. The cist was back-filled with a friable mid grey brown silty sand (927) with inclusions of occasional small mortar fragments, a small brick fragment, small pebbles and charcoal flecking. This material would have been introduced when the lid of the cist was removed, during the original excavation of cut 928 (Figure 5).

Cut 928 lay mostly beyond the limit of excavation and contained a brick tomb (929; Figure 6, section 2). The size, 0.21m x 0.10m x 0.08m, and type of brick used suggested a date in the 19th century for its construction. 929 was sealed by a levelling deposit (930), 0.19m thick, consisting of a loosely friable mixed coarse grained mid grey silt sand with inclusions of moderate brick fragments, sandstone fragments, mortar fragments and small gravelly pebbles. The lack of a noticeable construction cut for 929 within this deposit suggested that it was later in date than the crypt and most likely related to the levelling of the area after remedial work had been carried out to the Cathedral or, more likely, was related to the formation of the elevated fore-court of the north door.

It was not certain whether the large sandstone blocks (936; Figure 6) forming the kerb of the fore-court had been inserted prior to the levelling of the area or were constructed at a later date. They may have been in position when the area was levelled (930) before the laying of a mortar bedded sandstone pavement (931) which is still in use.

On the east side of the fore-court the earliest deposit seen consisted of a levelling deposit of a loose mid greyish brown silt sand 0.19m thick (933; Figure 6, section 3) with inclusions of moderate dis-articulated human bone, occasional small stone fragments and pebbles. The human bone that was present was from more than one individual, suggesting that several graves had been disturbed during ground-works associated with alterations or repairs to the Cathedral. The lack of any inhumations at this side of the fore court suggested that these graves were disturbed during the construction or repair of the forecourt, before the skeletal material was dumped and concealed beneath the paving.

Directly above this was a final levelling deposit (932) consisting of a loose coarse mid brown sand with inclusions of occasional cobbles, small sandstone fragments, charcoal and mortar flecks. This had been used to raise the ground level by 0.17m before the area was paved (931).

As with the western side of the forecourt there was no visible construction cut for the sandstone kerbing (936), suggesting that it was in situ before the deposition of contexts 933 and 932.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The earliest deposit seen was a natural subsoil (935) at 0.50 to 0.60m BGL. This had been truncated by the earliest of two or possibly three phases of burial. All of the burials were, with the exception of grave lining 912 and 919, orientated east-west with the head to the west. Context 912 and 919 were orientated more or less on a north-east-south-west axis.

The earliest of these burials appeared to have been cuts 934 and 921 which contained skeletons 916 and 920. Skeleton 917, an infant burial with no visible grave cut or grave fill, rested directly on the natural ground surface and, although by no means certain, most likely belongs to this phase.

The backfill of grave cut 934 (913) was sealed by a build-up or dump of material (908). Within this layer was skeleton 911 which had no visible grave cut.

Context 912, also sealed by context 908, was a north-east-south-west alignment of burnt sandstone fragments. Unexcavated in its lower levels it may represent the lining to a grave. The different alignment suggests that this belongs to a different phase of burial than the graves noted above. An alignment of cobbles (919) which was also thought to represent a grave lining and which was also on a slightly different alignment, towards north-east – south-west, probably belongs to the same phase as context 912.

Grave cut 914 had truncated the eastern edge of context 908 which suggested that it and the burial that it contained (915) belonged to the final phase of burial in this area of the cemetery.

With the exception of cist burial 924 and contexts 919 and 912 there was no evidence for the use of a coffin with any of the remaining burials. The feet of skeleton 915 were set close together which may indicate that the body was tightly wrapped in a shroud before burial.

Cist burial 924 could not be assigned to any of these phases of burial as it was isolated from the main grouping of graves with intervening deposits un-excavated. The use of a stone cist (923) inferred that the individual contained within was a person of some prestige within the local community. The high(er) status of this individual was reinforced by the fact that the cist was sited very close to the north transept door-way.

The lack of any evidence, such as pottery sherds, coffin fittings, personal effects or shroud pins, from any of these burials or the surrounding deposits renders the dating of these graves as speculative. The stone cist, however, suggests a high medieval date for that burial, for during the period between the 9th and 12th century, the position and condition of the body, and especially the head, became important. 'Head niches' became more common in coffins chiselled out of solid pieces of stone. At the other extreme two large pebbles (commonly known in archaeology as 'ear muffs') were placed at the ears to stop the head rolling sideways (Daniell 1998, 180). The other burials in the vicinity, with the exception of brick tomb 929, could also be medieval in date. The construction cut (928) for tomb 929 had truncated the cist burial (and probably removed its lid) in the 19th century.

Both cist 923 and crypt 929 were very close to the surface, 0.20m deep and 0.16m deep respectively, and both appeared to be lacking their lids. This may infer that the lids, when in situ,

were meant to be seen, i.e. flush with the ground surface, and were possibly decorated (more likely in the case of cist 923) or inscribed with the details of the deceased. The lid to crypt 929 was most likely removed during alterations or repairs to the fore-court of the north door-way. Contexts 930, 932 and 933 are all levelling deposits that may have been associated with this work, undertaken before the area was re-paved (931).

The burials encountered in the kerb relocation trench were similarly close to the surface, at a depth of between 0.50m to 0.60m. This suggests that the ground level of the surrounding area had previously been reduced, possibly to the level at which skeletons were visible. This would most likely have occurred during the construction of Minster Road in 1884. Contexts 918 and 904 may be levelling deposits associated with this work, being used to reinstate the area and hide the skeletons from the gaze of the public. There were no visible grave cuts within these deposits which also suggested that they were later than the last interment.

Contexts 918 and 904 may also relate to the levelling of the area after the ground level was reduced in order to affect repairs to the fabric of the Cathedral. Context 902, a dump of crushed magnesian limestone may relate to this levelling operation, or may be an accumulation of waste material produced by the repair works. Contexts 903, a thin spread of mortar, and 901, a thin spread of clay and pebbles, may have also been produced by this work or have functioned as a temporary surface, while the repairs or alterations were being carried out. Both contexts 903 and 901 were sealed by the topsoil and turf (900) of the existing lawned area, lying to the west of the north transept door of the Cathedral, which had been truncated by the construction cut of an existing drainage gully (905).

5. LIST OF SOURCES

Daniell, C. (1998) *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066 –1550*

6. LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Watching brief and report	Bryan Antoni
Illustrations	Bryan Antoni
Editor	David Brinklow