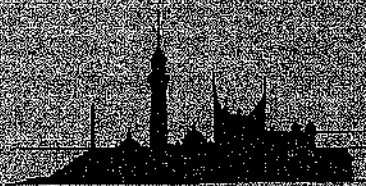
BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

ST. MARY'S CHURCH, ROSS-ON-WYE, HEREFORD & WORCESTER

An Archaeological Evaluation

1991



B.U.F.A.U.

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 173

August 1991

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by
A.E. Jones

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

1.1: The evaluation

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation within part of the graveyard of the Church of St. Mary, Ross-on-Wye, Hereford and Worcester (Figures 1a and 1b: centred on NGR. 59792405), and their archaeological implications. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned in July 1991 by Hook Mason, Architects, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council, to undertake the evaluation, in advance of the submission of proposals for the construction of a church hall and toilets.

The archaeological evaluation was sited to the south of the West Tower of St. Mary's Church (Figure 1C: Hereford and Worcester County SMR No. 4033).

1.2: The site and its setting

The Church of St. Mary is sited on the northern edge of a plateau, overlooking the town centre, which is located to the northeast, on a steep northeast-facing slope, on the east bank of the River Wye. A date in the 12th century for the earliest church on this site is suggested by the re-use of calcareous tufa in later builds (RCHME 1932). The present church was built in the last quarter of the 13th century, and dedicated in 1316 (Pevsner 1963). The West Tower was added in the early 14th century, and the North and South Porches were also added in that century. The West Tower was rebuilt in 1721, using the original building materials (RCHME 1932): the entire church was extensively restored some time after 1877.

Within the area adjoining the proposed development, the existing graveyard contains standing, stone memorials dating to the last quarter of the 19th century. The sites of other closely-set graves, not marked by stones, are indicated by slight rectangular depressions in the modern ground surface.

1.3: Evaluation aims and methodology

The aims of the evaluation were to assess the nature, extent and significance of any buried archaeological deposits within the area of the proposed development, and to make recommendations for further archaeological input, if appropriate. In particular, it was intended to examine the constructional sequence at the base of the West Tower, and to determine the presence and survival of a possible medieval cemetery beneath the modern graveyard.

The brief for the evaluation, prepared by the Archaeology Section of Hereford and Worcester County Council, and the accompanying plan, specified the manual excavation of three trial trenches within the area of the proposed development (Figure 1c). Trench I, measuring 1m by 2m, was dug against the south elevation of the south wall of the West Tower, to examine the wall footings below the level of the modern tarmac path. Trench II, measuring 3m by 4m, was dug through the modern path, in the area proposed for toilet facilities in the new development, where an increased depth of ground disturbance, associated with services, was anticipated. Trench III, measuring 2m by 1m, sited within the modern graveyard, was re-aligned to lie west-east, in conformity with the orientation of the graves, to cause the minimum possible disturbance to burials.

In Trenches I and II the modern tarmac path and its hardcore foundation were removed by jack-hammer; the grass and topsoil in Trench III were excavated wholly by hand. Excavation of archaeological deposits and features was limited to the definition of their upper levels, without further excavation of intact deposits, except insofar as was required to understand their significance. Recording was by means of written pro-formas, accompanied by plans, sections and photographs, held in the archive. The stonework exposed by excavation in Trench I was drawn, photographed and recorded.

All human remains excavated during the evaluation were reburied in the trenches before backfilling.

2.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

2.1: Trench I (Figure 2a)

The upper horizon of the natural red-brown sandy subsoil was located at 1.3m below the surface of the modern tarmac path (at 206.86m AOD), and the coursed stonework at the base of the south wall of the West Tower was exposed and recorded to this level. There was no evidence of a cut in the subsoil for the foundation trench, in plan or in section, and the foundation courses appear to have been inserted against the southern face of the cut. The earliest structural element of the wall exposed consisted of three courses of roughly-hewn, green sandstone footings (1006), notably misaligned with the outer face of the wall above. The footings were overlain by three courses of badly-weathered, red sandstone ashlar blocks (1007). Above 1007, a single course of moulded sandstone ashlar (1008) was overlain by a chamfered plinth of green sandstone ashlar (1009), visible above the modern ground level.

A layer of mid-brown clay silt (1010), 0.5m in depth, sealed the natural subsoil and contained crushed sandstone fragments, but no pottery was recovered from this layer. It was overlain by a dark brown clay silt (1003), partly defined by a tip of stone roof-tile fragments at its base. This layer contained a fragment of a tripod-based cistern or jar with a *terminus* in the 15th-16th century, and a fragment of 17th-18th century black-glazed pancheon rim. The upper soils comprised a brown clay silt (1002), above 1003, containing a quantity of construction debris, sealed by a grey clay silt (1001) mixed with brick, stone and mortar fragments, below the tarmac path (1000).

At the southern end of the trench, a foundation trench (F100), aligned approximately west-east, had been dug through 1001 and 1002 for a wall comprising a single course of mortared, red bricks, capped by a single course of sandstone blocks (1005); but neither the full width of the wall nor the foundation trench was seen in Trench I.

2.2: Trench II (Figure 3)

Exposed below the make-up for the tarmac path (2000), was a modern service trench, aligned northwest-southeast, cut diagonally across the trench. Due to this disturbance it was decided to limit excavation to the southwestern half of the trench, on one side of this service.

A narrow band of undisturbed natural subsoil, equivalent to the subsoil in Trench I, was exposed between two grave-cuts, at a depth of 1.00m below the modern surface (at 207.32m AOD).

A group of inhumations, cut into natural subsoil, was exposed at a depth of 1m below the modern surface. The upper horizons of all burials were disturbed by later activity, and only the base of each cut survived, within which some of the human remains had also been truncated. The identification of individual grave-cuts proved difficult both as a result of this extensive later activity and because of the limited area of excavation.

The most distinct grave-cut (F203), measuring a maximum of 0.4m in width, was exposed just inside the southern baulk. The skull, set in a dark brown clay silt (2008), was exposed by the partial removal of a later stony clay silt capping to the grave (2007). This layer contained pottery with a *terminus* in the 17th-18th century. Parts of three, closely-set, articulated skeletons, each aligned west-east, were exposed in a single grave-cut (F206), which extended to the south and east, beyond the southeastern corner of the trench. This cut contained Hereford or Malvern Chase ware pottery with a *terminus* in the 15th-16th centuries. A third, very indistinct cut (F207), exposed in the centre of the trench, was excavated to reveal a skull and articulated leg bones within the grave. This cut contained pottery with a *terminus* in the 17th-18th-century. The western end of this cut was disturbed by a later burial (F200: see below). The southern edge of a further, possible, grave (F204), aligned approximately west-east in the northwestern corner of the trench and cut into the natural subsoil, was exposed, but was not excavated.

An extensive layer of mid-brown clay silt (2005), 0.20m in depth, sealed all the burials bar F200. This levelling-deposit was, in turn, sealed

by a dump of stone chippings and mortar (2002), concentrated in the southwest corner of the trench, a layer which also contained sandstone blocks, broken brick and tile fragments, becoming shallower and more mixed to the north. This layer contained two sherds of redeposited Roman pottery, and other sherds with a *terminus* in the 17th-18th century.

A grave (F200), and an irregularly-sided trench (F201) were cut through this construction horizon on an approximate west-east alignment. The southern trench (F200), measuring 0.6m wide, contained a human burial, set in a coffin, of which survived only the iron coffin plates to which were attached handles. The northern cut (F201) was dug through 2002 to the level of the clay silt (2005) below. This cut contained a quantity of dis-articulated human bone, including fragments of at least three skulls.

A steep-sided ?pit (F205), was recorded in the south baulk (not illustrated), cutting through the ?construction debris (2002), to the level of the *in-situ* burials below. The clay silt (2001), above 2002, was cut to the north by a service trench (F202), which defined the limit of excavation in the northeast of the trench.

2.3: Trench III (Figure 2b)

The natural subsoil here was located by augering at 1.3m below the modern surface (at 207.56m AOD). Excavation here was limited to the exposure of an *in-situ* human burial (F300), encountered at 1.1m below the modern surface (at 207.76m AOD). The burial had been extensively disturbed: only part of the skull, rib-cage and small fragments of the iron fittings of the coffin survived *in situ*. The burial was sealed by a dark brown clay silt (3003), containing a quantity of dis-articulated human bones, sealed by a mid-brown clay silt (3002), measuring 0.5m in depth. This layer was cut by a flat-based ?pit (F301), which continued to the west beyond the trench backfilled with a brown silt (3001), mixed with fragments of green sandstone and a quantity of loose human bone, and which contained a sherd of medieval or late medieval pottery. The pit was sealed by the modern topsoil (3000).

3.0: DISCUSSION

3.1: The West Tower (Figure 2a)

Despite the limited extent of the footings exposed during the evaluation, it is probable that the structural sequence revealed in Trench I belongs to two distinct periods. The earliest build comprises the rough sandstone footings (1006) and the coursed red sandstone ashlar above (1007), including a single block of tufa. The later build consists of the single course of moulded sandstone (1008) and the chamfered plinth of green sandstone (1009). The earliest build revealed here may pre-date the 14th-century tower, while the re-use of tufa from the 12th-century church (RCHME 1932), may provide an approximate *terminus post quem* for this event. There is no evidence of an equivalent build of red sandstone in the west or north walls of the tower, which are exposed at an equivalent height above modern ground level. The earlier build may therefore survive to a higher level in the south wall than elsewhere.

The tip of stone tiles recorded in Trench I may allude to the refurbishment of the Church, and, in particular, may relate to the reconstruction of the West Tower, possibly in 1721. The deposition in Trench II of a possible mason's working floor composed of stone chippings (2002), which contains pottery with a *terminus* in the 17th-18th century, may also be evidence for this, or another, episode of rebuilding.

There was no evidence for the presence of inhumations in Trench I. The brick-founded wall recorded in Trench I probably represented the southern limit of an ornamental flower border, which pre-dated the modern tarmac path.

3.2: The Graveyard (Figures 2b and 3)

Natural subsoil was encountered at a depth of between 1.00-1.3m below the modern ground surface in Trenches I and II respectively. A total of five *in-situ* inhumations was identified within three separate graves, cut below the level of the subsoil in Trench II. Despite the undoubted truncation of the grave-cuts, and of some of the skeletal material, it appears that this closely-packed, and possibly contemporary group of inhumations, has been afforded some protection

from further disturbance by the levelling-up deposit (2005) immediately above. The dating evidence is unclear, and indicates a *terminus* in the wide range between the 15th and 18th centuries. A number of redeposited sherds of Roman pottery was also recovered from these burials.

A later burial episode is represented by further inhumations (F200, F202), post-dating the construction deposit in Trench II (2002).The burial of a quantity of dis-articulated bone in a narrow trench (F201), approximately following the orientation of the burials, probably represents an attempt at cemetery clearance and management.

4.0: IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

4.1: Implications

Despite the limited area within the proposed development examined by the evaluation, the exercise has provided important information concerning the nature of archaeological deposits within the development zone, and also relating to the constructional sequence at the base of the West Tower. Although the limited scope of this present exercise has precluded the accurate dating of the *in-situ* inhumations, it is clear that the graveyard formerly extended to beneath what is now the tarmac path, possibly to within 2m of the West Tower, although its exact northward limit could not be established. The density and survival of graves (in Trench II), indicates the survival of archaeologically sensitive deposits of some importance, located at 1m below the modern surface. The presence of residual Roman pottery raises a number of intriguing possibilities.

4.2: Proposals

If the development is to proceed as envisaged, proposals are required to minimise the impact of the development upon the proven archaeological resource.

A) The preferred design option would involve rafting the foundations, to prevent sub-surface intrusion into archaeologically sensitive deposits. Alternatively, the floor level could be raised artificially by importing soil to build-up the existing ground level.

B) To avoid further disturbance to archaeologically sensitive deposits, it is recommended that sub-floor services be routed in a zone 2m south of the West Tower, an area within which no graves were recorded (Trench I).

The excavation (if required) of any service trenches outside this zone, to a depth in excess of 1m below the modern surface should be archaeologically excavated or monitored to ensure the identification and recording of deposits before destruction. The monitoring of groundwork disturbances within the 1m depth limit could in any case provide further useful information on the site and may be considered.

C) If the design options outlined in A) above are not technically feasible, all threatened, sensitive archaeological deposits should be examined and recorded by controlled archaeological excavation. This will allow the archaeological deposits potentially affected by the development to be preserved by record,in the form of a published excavation report in the appropriate local journal.

D) All stonework at the base of the West Tower exposed during the groundworks should be drawn and recorded.

5.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Hook Mason, Architects of Hereford, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council. The excavation was supervised by Alex Jones, assisted by Ed Newton, David Redhouse and Lynne Bevan. The project was monitored by Iain Ferris who read and commented on an earlier version of this report. The illustrations were prepared by Mark Breedon, and the report was produced at BUFAU by Liz Hooper. I am grateful to Malcolm Cooper and Simon Woodiwiss of the Archaeology Section, Hereford and Worcester County Council for discussion of the results. Victoria Buteux advised on the identification and dating of the pottery.

6.0: REFERENCES

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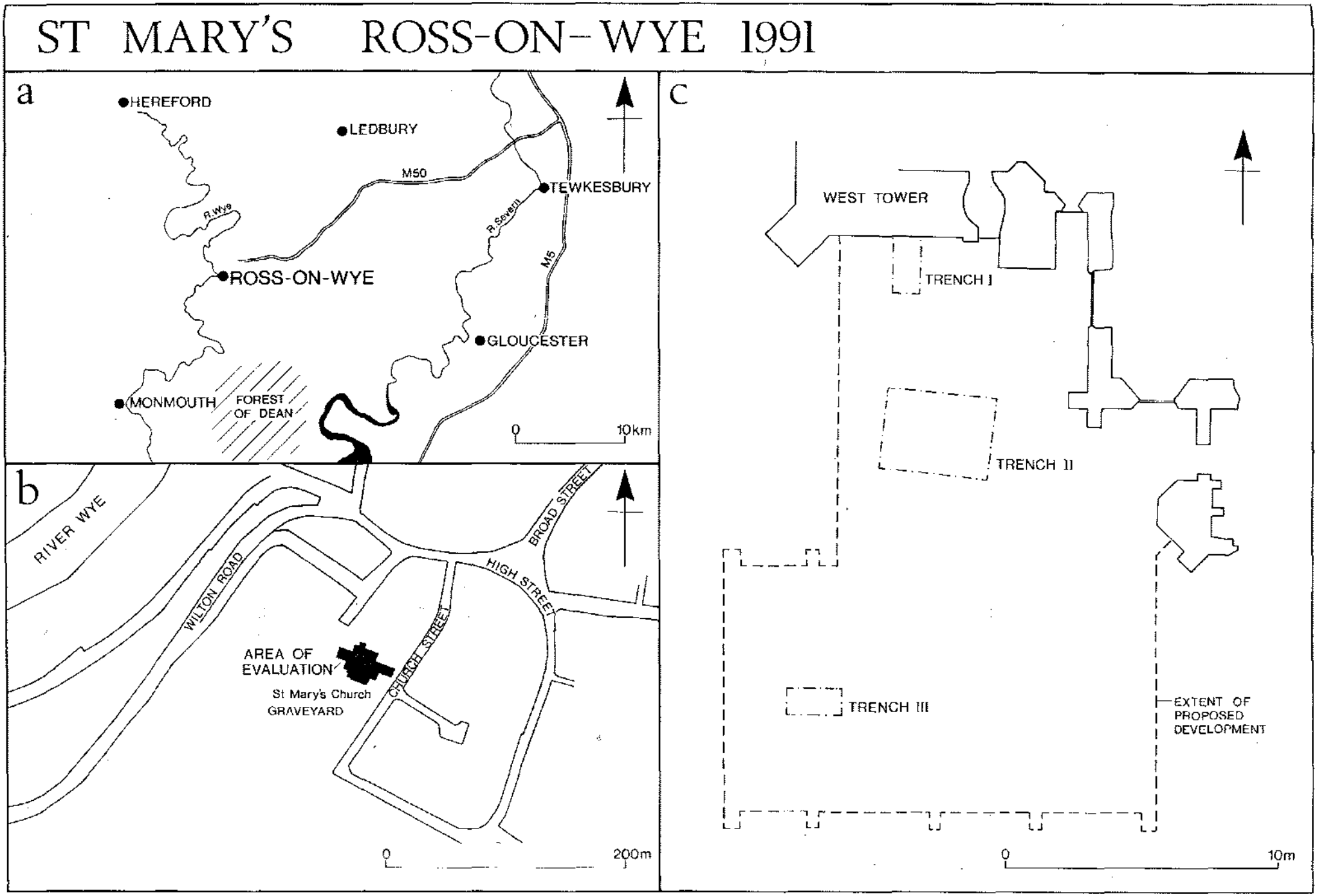
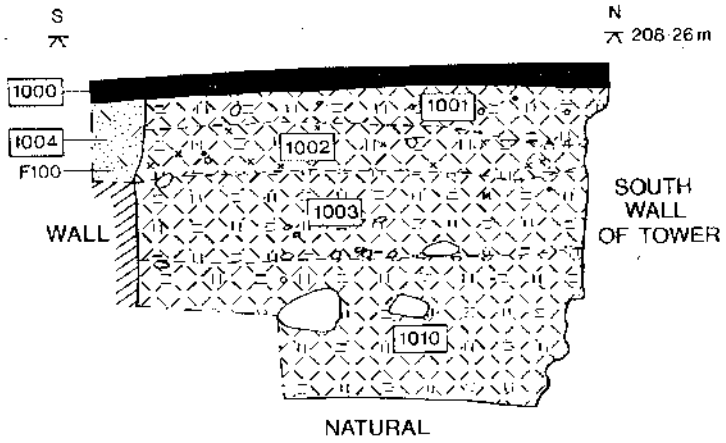

ST MARY'S ROSS-ON-WYE 1991
a
HEREFORD
LEDBURY
M50
TEWKESBURY
R.Wye
R.Severn
M5
ROSS-ON-WYE
GLOUCESTER
MONMOUTH
FOREST OF DEAN
0
10km
b
RIVER WYE
WILTON ROAD
BROAD STREET
HIGH STREET
CHURCH STREET
AREA OF EVALUATION
St Mary's Church
GRAVEYARD
0
200m
c
WEST TOWER
TRENCH I
TRENCH II
TRENCH III
EXTENT OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT
0
10m

Figure 1

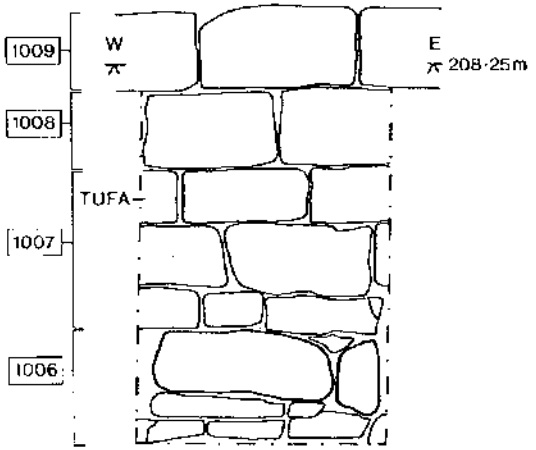
ST MARY'S CHURCH 1991

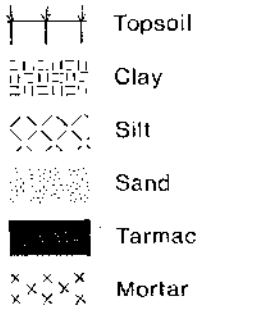
a

TRENCH I, EAST FACING SECTION



TOWER SOUTH FACING ELEVATION





b

TRENCH III, NORTH FACING SECTION

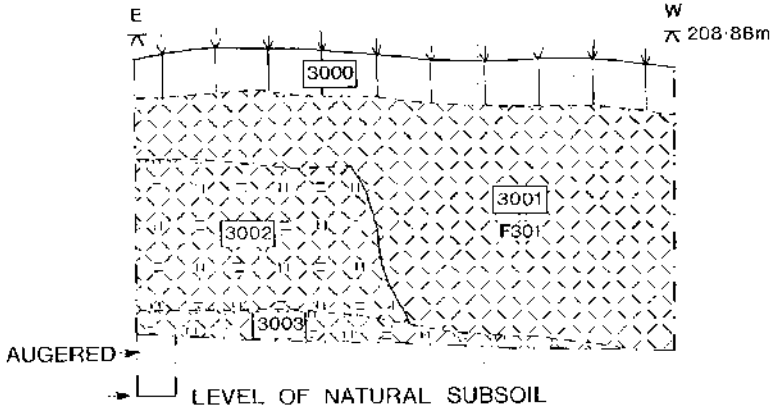
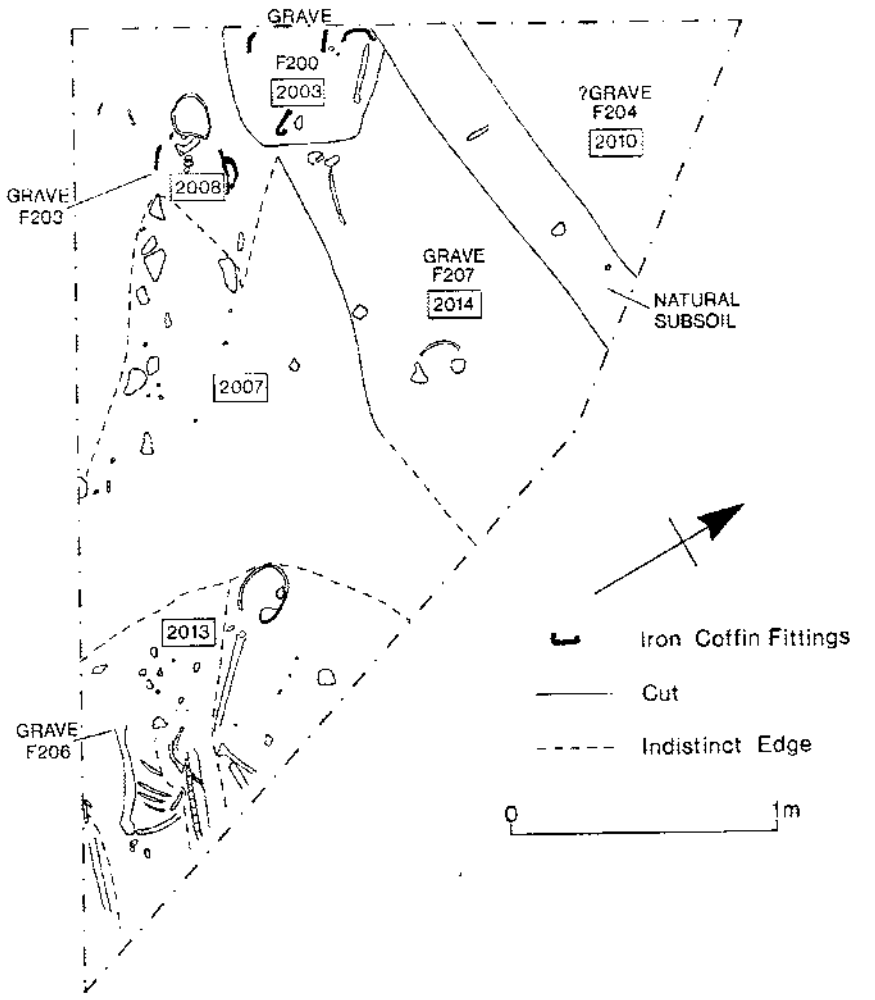


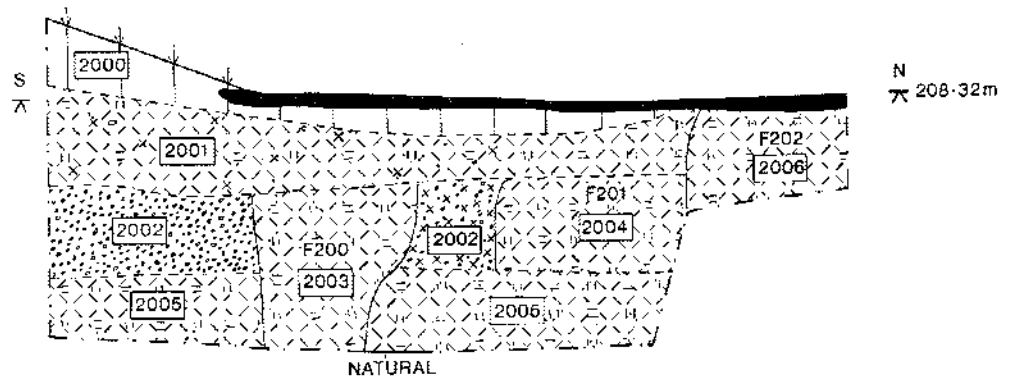
Figure 2

ST MARY'S CHURCH 1991

a TRENCH II, PLAN



b TRENCH II, EAST FACING SECTION



Topsoil
Clay
Silt
Mortar
Tarmac
Stone Chippings
0
1m

Figure 3