

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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**Archaeological Observations at St Nicholas Church,
Austrey, Warwickshire. 2002.**

by
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Fig. 1 Site Location

Fig. 2 Site Plan

Archaeological Observations at St. Nicholas Church, Austrey, Warwickshire. 2002.

Summary

Restoration work on St. Nicholas Church, Austrey Warwickshire (centred on NGR SK 296 062), carried out by William Sapcote and Sons Limited on behalf of The Reverent S. Banks and the Parochial Church Council resulted in the commissioning of The University of Birmingham Field Archaeology Unit. In order to carry out an archaeological watching brief during the digging of a drain and soak away pit at the north-west corner of the church, through the graveyard. The work did not disturb any in situ human burials, or any structures relating to the early development of the church. Although it did cut through a considerable depth of made-up ground which appears to be a general build up of graveyard soils.

1.0 Introduction

This report details the result of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St Nicholas churchyard, Austrey, Warwickshire (centred on NGR SK 296 062) in May 2002. A project of renovation undertaken by William Sapcote and Sons Limited on behalf of the Reverent S. Banks and the Parochial Church Council required the excavation of a drain and soak away pit within the confines of the churchyard. An archaeological watching brief was required to monitor the groundworks in case any archaeological deposits were disturbed during the course of this work.

2.0 Location

St Nicholas church is located to the south of the village of Austrey a small village, one of the more northerly in Warwickshire, close to the border with Staffordshire and Leicestershire.

A stone built wall borders the churchyard. Pasture and allotments surround the site to the north and west. Church Lane, a small access route borders the churchyard to the south. A narrow ally runs along the eastern extent of the churchyard.

The cut for the drain and the soak away is located within the graveyard of St Nicholas. Starting close to the north west corner of the nave and extending in a generally northerly direction towards the northern boundary wall of the churchyard.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

There has been a settlement of some description at Austrey since at least the 10th century, probably as a manorial complex (VCH 1965). A St Nicholas church is recorded as early as the late 12th century at Austrey (*ibid.*). The church now standing on this site in the majority dates to the 13th and early 14th century although the frontage of the church has been refaced in the mid-19th century (*ibid.*).

Test pits excavated around the church less than ten years ago would indicate that although there is little evidence of specific archaeological features around the area of the watching brief. Some medieval pottery was retrieved from this area, which could indicate activity relating to the early development of this church might still be preserved *in situ*. As the church of St. Nicholas was recorded about a century prior to the earliest date of the present buildings, it is possible that an earlier building phase could be present in the area of this watching brief.

4.0 Aims and Method

The objectives of the observation and recording was to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features which might be present below the modern ground surface and to provide an understanding of the history and significance of the archaeology as a whole.

The aims were achieved by a visit to the site in May 2002, whilst the groundworks were undertaken. A full record of all stratigraphic sequences, supplemented by scale drawings, was made. Stratigraphy was recorded using pro-forma context and feature record cards. Plans, sections and photographs, form the site archive and are currently stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

5.0 Results

The cut for the drain 6.65m long and 0.55m wide and was dug to a maximum depth of 0.75m below the modern ground surface. The cut for the soakaway was at the northern extent of this drain, close to the northern boundary wall for the graveyard. This was in plan a square cut measuring 1.8m wide and was dug to a maximum depth of 1.8m below the modern ground surface. The stratigraphy revealed in both of these was the same and shall be discussed together here.

The bottom of the cut for the soakaway revealed a layer of compact sandstone (1004). This was reached at a depth of 1.8m. Above this was a layer (1003) of compact grey silt and sand 0.2m deep. This was relatively clean, although some charcoal and building rubble was present within this fill. Above this was a layer (1002) of compact grey clay and silt with some rubble throughout several fragments of dis-articulated human bone was noted in this layer. These layers were only excavated in the area of the soakaway. Above 1002 was a layer (1001), 0.7m deep, of friable brown humic sand silt and clay. This had some building rubble within the fill including brick, tile and sandstone, this was concentrated at the bottom of this layer. A small amount of dis-articulated human bone was present within the fill. Sealing the area of the watching brief was a layer of turf 0.2m deep.

A modern water main (F102) was cutting 1001 at the southern end of the pipe trench close to the church. This seemed to have been capped with a piece of sandstone masonry,

although this may have coincidentally been part of the back fill when this water main was installed. A drain (F100) which also cut 1001 and to which the drain being dug was to be connected had a wet humic brown sand and silt fill (1005) with a relatively large amount of post medieval pottery.

6.0 Discussion

The stratigraphy which was observed in the course of this archaeological watching brief is probably the result of a general build-up of graveyard soils during the lifetime of the this burial ground. The modern ground surface is much higher within the boundaries of the churchyard than the surrounding land, and the top of the boundary wall is considerably lower than the ground surface in the graveyard. This supports the theory that the ground surface had generally built up over time. It seems possible that the concentration of building rubble at the bottom of 1001 is related to a period of renovation or improvements to the church.

7.0 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all at Sapcote and Sons Limited and to Reverent S. Banks and the Parochial Church Council. Thanks are also due to the following Birmingham University Field Archaeology Staff.

8.0 Bibliography

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