

**St. Mary's Church, Slaugham,  
West Sussex**

Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief

April 2008

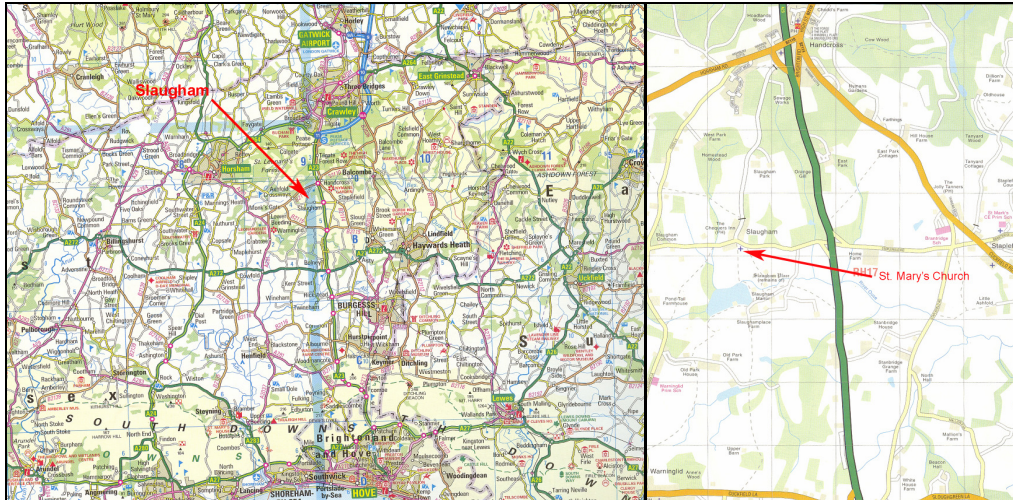


The Covert Chapel viewed from the south-west.

## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

*This document details the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St. Mary's Church, Slaugham, in February & May 2007. A Faculty had been granted to St. Mary's PCC for internal re-ordering to the church, including the alteration of existing floor levels and re-decoration. This Faculty came with a requirement for a watching brief on all works likely to impact upon archaeological deposits. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted under the floors of the nave, chancel & south aisle, but the vault of the Covert family was re-discovered under the floor of the Covert Chapel. In addition paint stripping of the church walls revealed traces of 19<sup>th</sup> century wall paintings.*

## PROJECT BACKGROUND



**Figure 1** Site location. North is to the top of both images. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. License number: AL100036068

1. St. Mary's Church lies at the south end of the village of Slaugham, West Sussex. The village is situated approximately ½ mile to the west of the A23 London – Brighton road, c. 5 miles south of Crawley. The church sits at 88m aOD, OS grid reference TQ 2575 2815. The underlying geology of the site is Wealden clay and sandstones.
2. The PCC of St. Mary's Church, Slaugham, obtained a Faculty for internal re-ordering to the church, including the alteration of existing floor levels and re-decoration. This Faculty came with a requirement for a watching brief on all works likely to impact upon archaeological deposits. West Sussex Archaeology Ltd. was appointed by the PCC to undertake this Watching Brief.
3. The archaeological fieldwork took place in February & May 2007. The results from this fieldwork are detailed below. The project archive will be deposited with West Sussex Record Office.

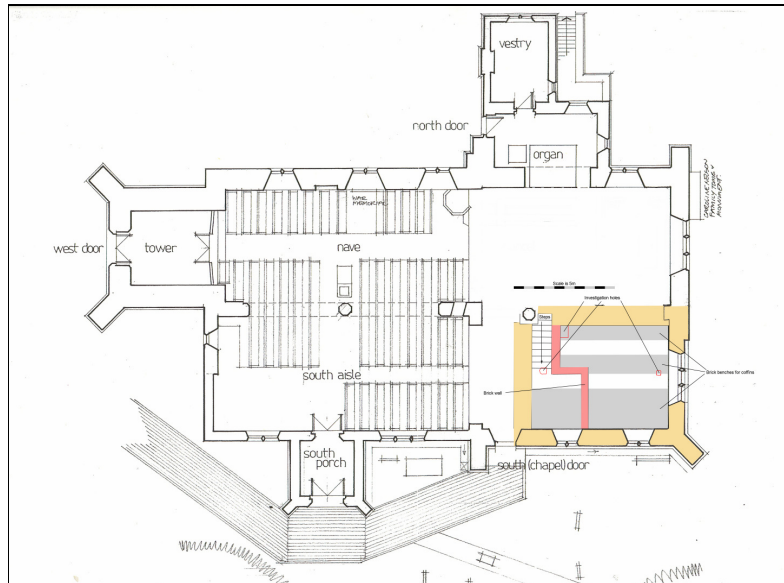
## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. The present Church of St. Mary, Slaugham, consists of a chancel, south chapel, nave, south aisle, south porch, and west tower: there are also modern north vestries. The nave is of early-12th-century date and retains an original doorway in its north wall: possibly the chancel is of the same period, but it retains no 12th-century features. Near the end of the 13th century a narrow south aisle was added, with an arcade of two bays, and the west tower built. The chancel-arch is probably of the same period. In 1613 the south chapel was erected by William Covert: it had a doorway in its west wall. The south aisle was widened to its present limit in 1827, with its own east wall. In 1858–60, however, the wall was pierced by an archway, the west wall of the Covert chapel removed, and the two parts connected by the closure of the gap between them. The upper part of the tower was rebuilt and the organ chamber and vestry added. In 1879 the south porch and a north vestry were added and the organ was removed from the west gallery (VCH 1940)
2. The only previous archaeological investigation to have taken place in the vicinity of the church was an archaeological watching brief carried out in 2004 by C. G. Archaeology during the construction of the toilet block off the south side of the Covert chapel. Eleven inhumation burials were recorded (Greatorex 2004).

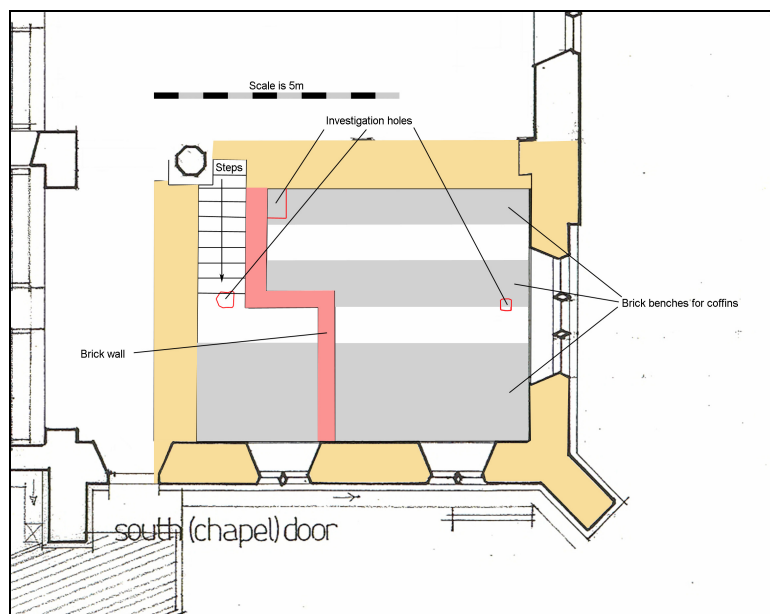
## RESULTS

1. The ground reduction works within the nave, chancel and south aisle revealed nothing of archaeological significance, principally due to the limited depth of the works and the previous 19<sup>th</sup> century refurbishment. However within the Covert chapel, which forms the south-eastern part of the present church, the existence of the family vault was established.

### The Covert Vault



**Figure 2** Plan of Slaugham Church indicating the position of the Covert vault.



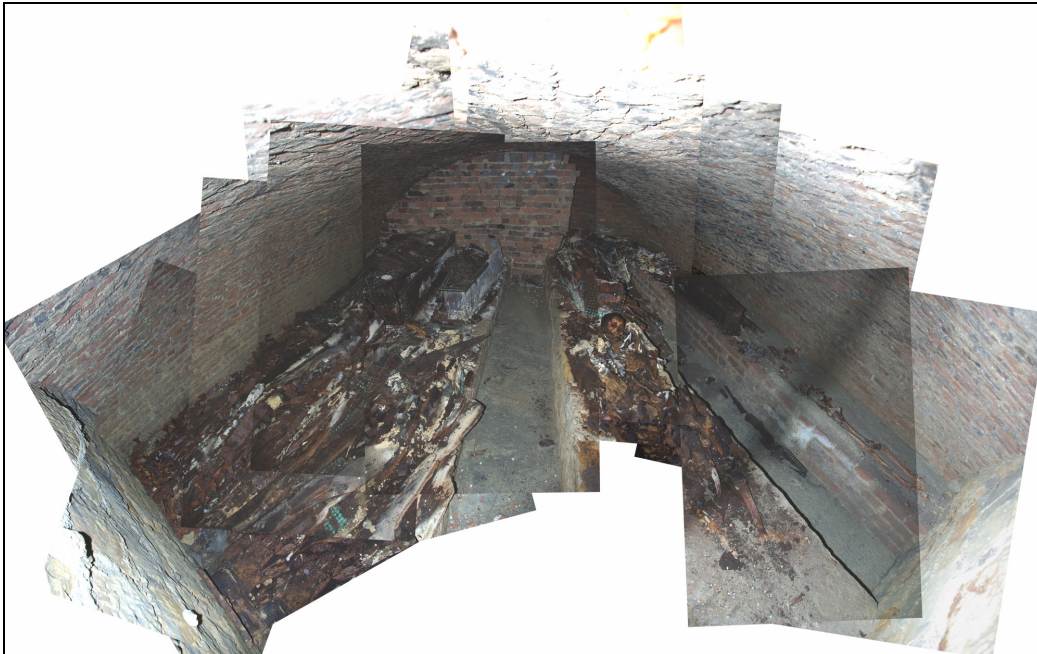
**Figure 3** Plan showing the Covert vault. The three brick benches are in grey, the internal brick wall in red and the lower greensand walls of the vault itself in yellow.

1. During the course of the works involved in lowering the existing ground levels in the Covert Chapel, which lies to the south of the chancel, the Covert family vault was discovered. This was found to consist of a brick-arched chamber, whose dimensions are contiguous with the chapel above, the walls of which use the vault's sides as foundations. It is thus all clearly one work, created in c.1613 by Walter Covert.
  
2. A separate brick arch had been constructed at a later date, probably in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to seal the flight of steps which led down into the vault. A small opening found in this latter brick arch enabled a camera to be lowered into the space below, which revealed the steps descending to the south and ending just short of a brick shelf upon which sat a wooden coffin, enclosing one of lead. The copper name plate set on to the wooden coffin was only partially legible, but appeared to date to 1805 or 1806. Only two persons would fit with this date, Ann Sergison (d. 1806) and "a lady named Sparrow, descended from the Mortons, ..... the last of the [Covert] family buried at Slaugham" (d.1805) (Dengate 1929 p.38). It would seem probable that it is Sparrow who is buried here, partly because it is she who was a Covert, even if not in name, and partly because the last digit on the coffin plate is more likely to be a '5' than a '6'. There is some room for doubt however, since the traces of the name above the date do not readily fit with 'Sparrow'. Whichever is the true identity of this final addition, it is clear that the rest of the vault had been bricked up in advance of its interment, since a wall visible to the immediate east of the coffin obstructed any glimpse of the rest of the vault.



**Figure 4** The 'Sparrow' coffin.

3. A second hole into the main part of the vault was made to the east during the course of the present works, since it was feared, due to the dampness of the chapel walls, that the underground chamber may have flooded. This proved not to be the case, but it enabled a camera to be lowered into the eastern part of the vault to record the state of the interments within.
4. A confused jumble of rotting coffins and skeletons was revealed sitting upon three brick benches c.0.4m high running east-west. Some fourteen or fifteen Coverts are said to have been placed within the vault (Dengate 1929 p.38), the earliest probably being William Covert in 1631. Four Covert memorials are still visible in the church, two within the chancel and two within the chapel. It is in the chancel that the family were almost certainly buried before the building of the chapel, but William Covert may have moved his father Richard's (d.1579) remains into the vault in 1613, since his memorial is set in the chapel's south wall. The other Covert memorial within the chapel, that of John Covert (d.1503), was only moved there in 1860.



**Figure 5** Composite view of the main vault, looking west.

5. It is impossible, save in one case, to identify individual coffins or skeletons within the vault because of the lack of visible coffin plates. The one that can be seen has the inscription "AM 1715 ... B F .." spelt out in copper tacks. This is likely to be Ann Morton, daughter of John Covert, and the penultimate Covert to hold Slaugham, who is said to have died in 1714 (Dengate 1929 p.38); the reason for the discrepancy in date is unclear.

6. Judging by the level of decay exhibited by the remains within the vault, the earliest interments lie against the east wall, starting on the north bench and then get progressively more recent to the south and then the west. There is some evidence that the coffins have been disturbed beyond that expected from decay; at the western end the lid of one seems to have been lifted off and another appears to have been pushed off its brick ledge. This may have occurred when the brick wall was constructed some time between 1736, when the last burial is recorded, and 1805 when Sparrow was interred on the west side of the wall.
  
7. The two holes into the vault mentioned above were sealed up following the investigation and now lie beneath the new floor laid down within the chapel. A third hole excavated at the junction of the internal brick wall and the north wall of the vault was positioned to investigate the date of the former. It was found that the wall running alongside the east side of the steps into the vault was of a contemporary date to the construction of chamber as a whole, based upon the similarities in the bricks. However to the east and south of this, the wall is of a different date, almost certainly built in 1805, as discussed above, to block the original vault and allow room for the last interment outside.

### The Victorian Wall Paintings



**Figure 6** 19th century photograph of the chancel, showing the wall paintings.



1. As part of the internal re-decoration of St. Marys, the existing walls were treated with paint stripper. This revealed traces of wall paintings probably created during the 1860 renovations. These paintings were found in three locations within the church: over the chancel arch facing the nave, on the side walls of the chancel above the arches and on the east wall of the chancel. Little remained of the original paintings in the first two locations due to the strength of the paint stripper used, but a contemporary photograph indicates a single decorated band containing a quotation from Psalm 24, “Be ye Open Up ye Everlasting Doors And the King of Glory Shall Come In”, over the chancel arch and two further bands on each side of the chancel.



**Figure 7** Traces of the biblical quotation over the east window.

2. More remained of the wall painting on the east wall of the chancel since a weaker stripper was used. This consisted of a further band of decoration over the east window containing a quotation from Luke’s Gospel “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace goodwill toward men” and two decorated panels on either side. Within the two panels the lettering, where visible, suggested that they may have contained the Ten Commandments and possibly one of the Creeds. All of these wall paintings had been subsequently painted over.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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