

EXCAVATIONS AT THE CHURCH OF ST LAWRENCE, HEANOR

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The Vicar and Parochial Church Council of St Lawrence, Heanor, recently faced the necessity of a major rebuilding programme. Conscious of the antiquity of the site, they consulted Trent Valley Archaeological Research Committee while planning their programme. In 1978 T.V.A.R.C. was invited to observe trial holes and in 1981 was commissioned to carry out rescue excavations, with the help of a team from the Eramber Community Task Force.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

The church stands on a small sandstone outcrop, immediately northeast of the market place. A church is recorded in 1086 (Morgan, 1978: 7, 6), but the first dateable evidence of a stone building is a mid-twelfth century tympanum, decorated with incised chevrons (Burton, 1901). The later mediaeval church (Fig 1) was predominantly Gothic: 'some of the work may have been Early English; but the church was certainly repaired in the Decorated Period, and also considerably remodelled during the Perpendicular Style' (Cox, 1879: 238). Early English work in the chancel in the nineteenth century included two lancet windows in the north side and a gable headed buttress at the east end (Fig.2). Work of the Decorated Period comprised hood moulded windows on the south and east sides of the chancel and a window on the north side of the nave. A stone decorated with ball-flower ornament survives (Burton, 1901).

It is uncertain when the south aisle was constructed and the clerestory added. Perpendicular work included a window with tracery at the east end of the south aisle and three windows with wide internal splay and flat square labels in the south wall (Cox, 1879: 238). Many post-mediaeval funerary monuments survive but no building work is recorded, with the exception of the gallery at the west end. A number of mediaeval glass windows was described in 1662, there were fewer in 1710 and none remain (Cox, 1879: 237). The gradual decline of the church is confirmed by a visitation of 1823, which found it dirty and damp (Austin, 1974: 101). In 1868 'by a much to be regretted decision' (Cox, 1879: 237) — prophetic words — the church, with the exception of the fifteenth-century tower, was demolished. Its Victorian successor is now being partially demolished and rebuilt.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The excavations, to locate and determine the nature of surviving features, were limited by structural considerations to two areas, one in the nave (Area A) and one in the chancel (Area B) (Fig.1).

Area A. The Nave

The Victorian church was constructed upon a platform of rubble and concrete 0.5m thick, immediately above the white mortar floor and north wall of the church demolished in 1868. Below the floor, and dug through the fragmentary remains of four similar floors, were two bases constructed of stone and nineteenth century brick, with foundations extending 0.8m down to sandstone bedrock. These were probably replacement supports for the seventeenth century gallery. One or two burials and a large pit containing human long bones, probably a charnel, lay below the floors and were disturbed by the bases. The foundations of the north wall, surviving 0.8m high above

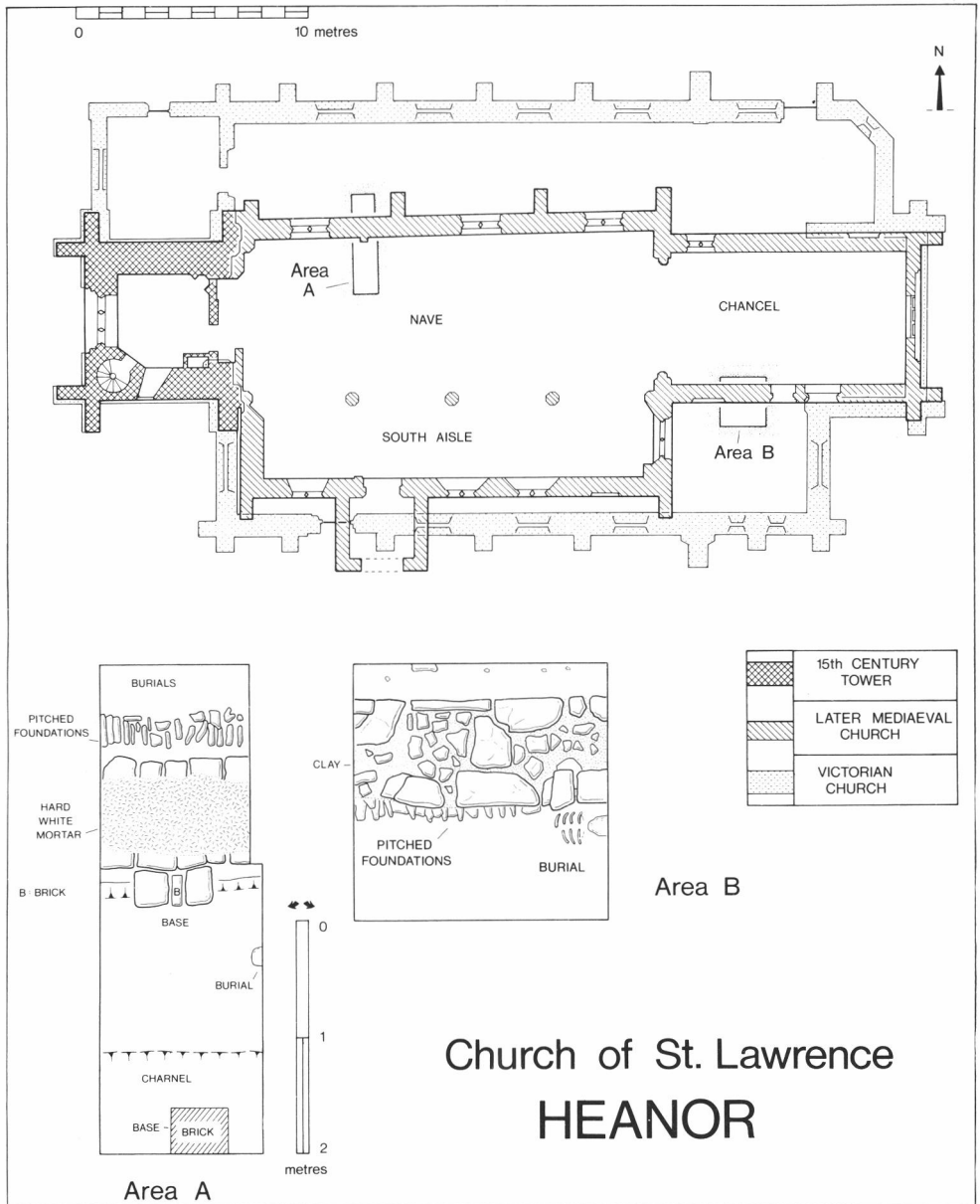


Fig. 1 Ground plan of the church of St Lawrence, Heanor, showing excavated areas.

bedrock, were constructed of coursed sandstone rubble and reused stone, laid in a yellow mortar. The reused stone included whitewashed, chamfered, blocks from the plinth of an earlier structure. Above the foundation there was a single course of a narrower wall, built of magnesian limestone blocks in a hard white mortar. This may represent either a localised patching or a rebuilding of the north wall. To the north, the wall cut away an earlier foundation of pitched sandstone, dug into the natural subsoil. There was no trace of any building to the north, but at least three burials, the earliest eighteenth century, were located.

Area B. The Chancel

Below the Victorian rubble platform, excavation revealed the south wall of the chancel constructed of sandstone blocks set in yellow clay. To the north lay a flagstone floor. The wall rested on a foundation of pitched sandstones, set 0.4m into natural subsoil. The pitched sandstones, similar to those in Area A, were on a different alignment from the chancel wall, indicating an earlier phase of walling, perhaps curving to form an apsidal end. The area to the south was disturbed by recent burials.

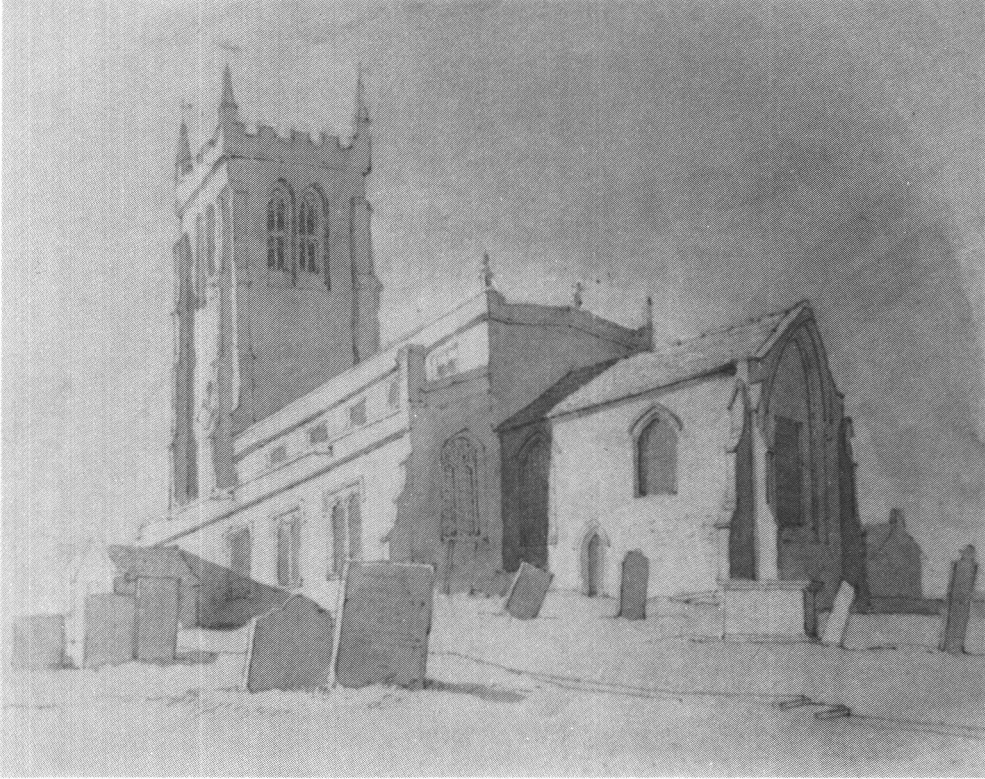


Fig. 2 The church of St Lawrence, Heanor, in 1823.

CONCLUSIONS

The pitched stone footings in Areas A and B represent the earliest recorded building on the site and, if contemporary, indicate a sizeable church of Anglo-Saxon or Norman date. This was completely replaced by the Gothic church, of which three phases were identified. The chancel wall may be of the Early English period, but the two phases recorded in the nave were quite different and are probably later.

Construction work, necessary to conserve ancient buildings, often requires the excavation and hence destruction of early levels and phases of the structure. Recently archaeologists have been invited to carry out or observe the progress of such work at Blyth, Edwalton, Headon, Worksop (Notts) and Melbourne (Derbys) (Drage, 1981 and forthcoming; Drage and Garton, 1981). The Vicar and Parochial Church Council of Heanor are to be congratulated on their decision to commission an excavation which has elucidated the development of the church at no cost to the limited national archaeological budget. It must be the desire of all concerned with our ancient buildings that their example is followed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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