

Late Saxon burials at All Saints Church Little Billing, Northampton

by

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Summary

Archaeological excavation was undertaken at All Saints Church, Little Billing, Northampton, on the footprint of a proposed extension and along associated service trenches to the north of the church. Many of the burials encountered relate to the late medieval and post-medieval usage of the graveyard. However, two burials had stones placed around the head, an early medieval burial practice that is likely to pre-date the Norman Conquest. The deepest burials, beyond the proposed foundations of the extension, were left in situ.

Introduction

A watching brief followed by excavation took place prior to the construction of a small extension and associated services at All Saints Church, Little Billing, Northampton (NGR SP 8044 6178; Fig 1). A full report on the results of the excavation has been produced, and will be available online through the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) (Chinnock 2014).

The development took place on the north-west side of the church, and there were two areas of archaeological investigation (Fig 2). A rectangular area measuring 4m by 3m over the footprint of the church extension was excavated to a depth 0.4m below the level of the church floor, to accommodate the new foundations. Burials below this level were left unexcavated and remain *in situ*. The second area comprised the length of the new service trench which ran roughly north-west across the churchyard and into the rear garden of Hastings Cottage. All human remains were kept inside the church during the excavation and were reburied within the churchyard following completion of the fieldwork. No detailed osteological examination of the human remains was possible and no radiocarbon dating was undertaken. The excavation of the main area was carried out between July and September 2013 and the watching brief on the service trenches in September 2013.

The church datum point indicates a level of 58.86m aOD. The underlying geology is recorded as Whitby Mudstone Formation with overlying superficial river terrace deposits of sand and gravel (BGS Geotitles - <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/geotitles/>).

Acknowledgements

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Historical background

The early history of Little Billing Church (MNN141062) remains unclear due to the multiple entries in the Domesday Book of 1086 (RCHME 1985). Between AD 1107 and 1123, the church was obtained by St Andrew's Priory, Northampton. A tub-shaped carved Saxon stone font is of great interest because of its Latin inscription and early date (Pevsner *et al* 2013). The earliest surviving fabric dates from the 14th century, comprising the chancel and north chapel (RCHME 1985).

The service trench

At least nine burials, B21-B22, B30-B36, were encountered during the excavation of the service trench (Fig 2). The size and depth of the trenches precluded full excavation and recording of the skeletons, though photographs and detailed notes were taken. Most were adult individuals occurring at depths of between 1.1m and 1.5m.

The main excavation area

A total of 36 graves were identified during excavation of the footprint of the proposed extension and associated service trenches. All of the excavated graves contained individuals buried in a supine position with the arms arranged by the side or occasionally crossed over the waist. All graves were aligned west to east, with the head to the west. The small area for excavation meant

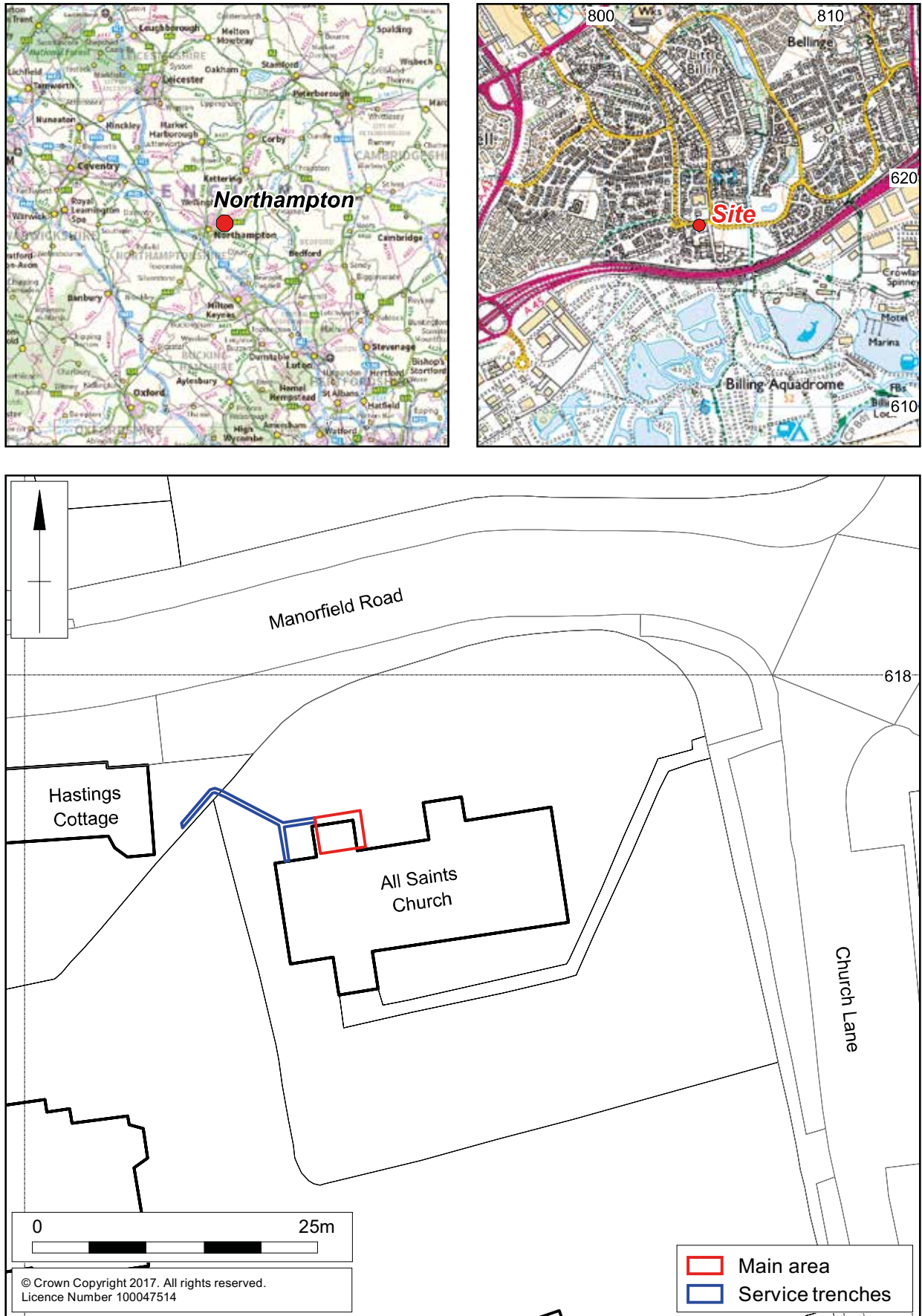


Fig 1: Site Location

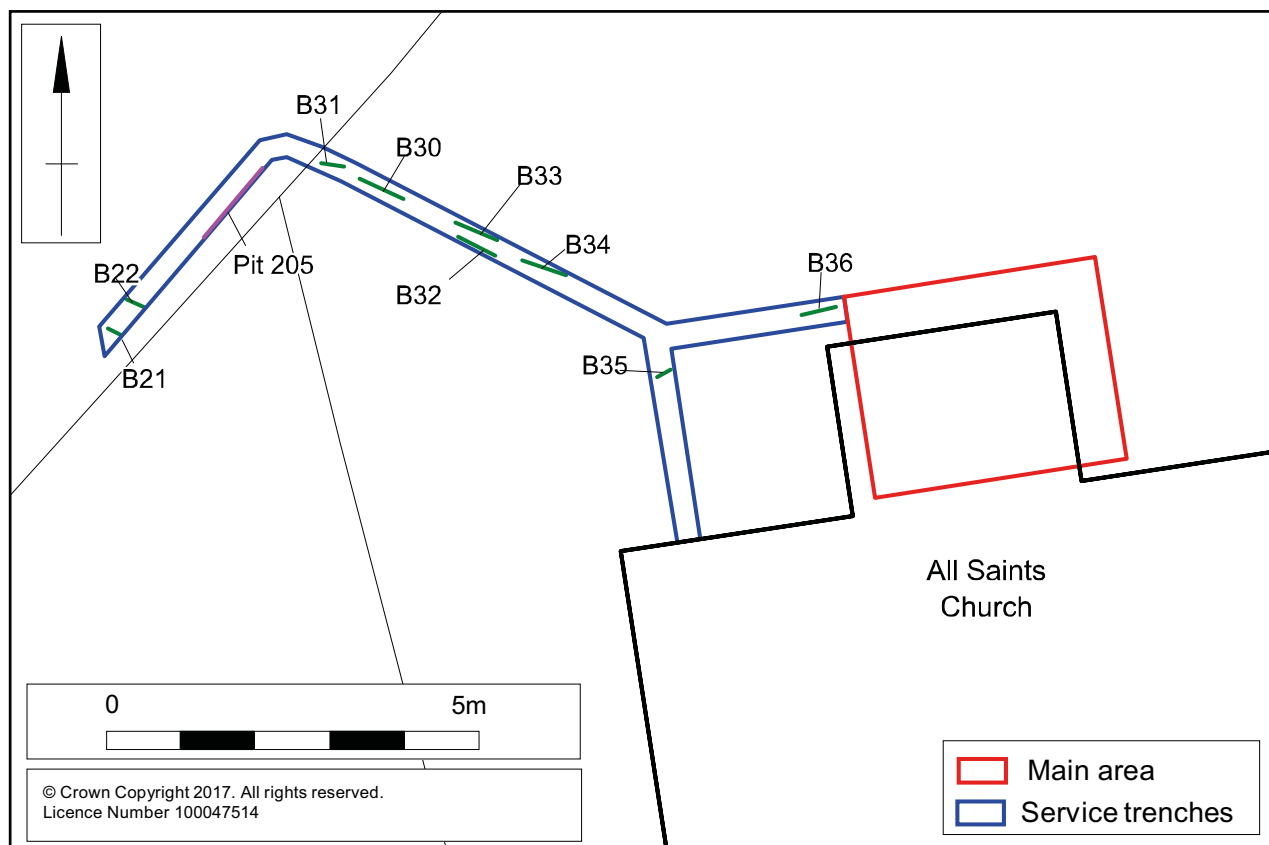


Fig 2: The excavated area and the service trenches

that observation of cemetery organisation was difficult, though it appeared likely that the graves were arranged in rows.

Within the main excavation area the burials were planned at four arbitrary levels, which do not reflect any uniform historic period of burial. Only the plan of Level 2, with the addition of a single burial from Level 3, is illustrated here (Fig 3). It appears that the churchyard was used intensively prior to its closure in April 2007, though recent burials were not located on the northern side of the church. Whilst orderly rows of west-east graves was the norm, as can be seen in the uppermost juvenile burials, overcrowding and repeated truncation of graves became the norm amongst the earlier interments.

Level 1

This level lay at 57.00m aOD and was the limit of the excavation as required to accommodate the raft foundation for the proposed extension to the church. None of the graves identified at this level were excavated. Unlike the higher levels, the graves were clearly visible against the natural 168. At least six graves were recorded at this level (Fig 3), with human bone visible in at least three 182, 185 and 175. Grave 177 was particularly wide and possibly represents a double burial or two separate burials, one truncating the other. A large post-medieval charnel pit 105 had cut through this level from much higher in the sequence, consequently removing earlier remains.

Level 2

This level was at a height of 57.13m aOD, approximately 0.87m below the present ground surface. At least seven burials were identified but only two, burials 147 and 156, are described here as they are likely to date to the medieval period or earlier (Chinnock 2014, fig 7).

Burial 147 was of particular interest as the individual was buried with rough, angular limestone slabs framing the skull, a practice characteristic of early burial traditions (Fig 4). The skeletal material is in excellent condition with >75% of the individual present. Some epiphyseal lines were visible at the time of excavation; the mandibular third molars were partially erupted. This individual is likely to have been in their late teens to early twenties. The individual was categorised as a probable male based on the skull morphology. Severe supra-gingival calculus was noted on the lower incisors. No other obvious trauma or pathology was noted. One fragment of early-mid Saxon pottery was also recovered from the fill surrounding this individual.

Burial 156 was very well preserved with >75% of the skeletal material present. Upon excavation, it was clear that many of the bones had moved or rotated slightly, especially the skull which was displaced approximately 0.3m to the south of its normal anatomical position (Fig 5). This perhaps indicates that this individual had been buried in a coffin allowing the individual bones to move before the coffin structure had fully decomposed. The individual was an adult as indicated by the dentition and the devel-

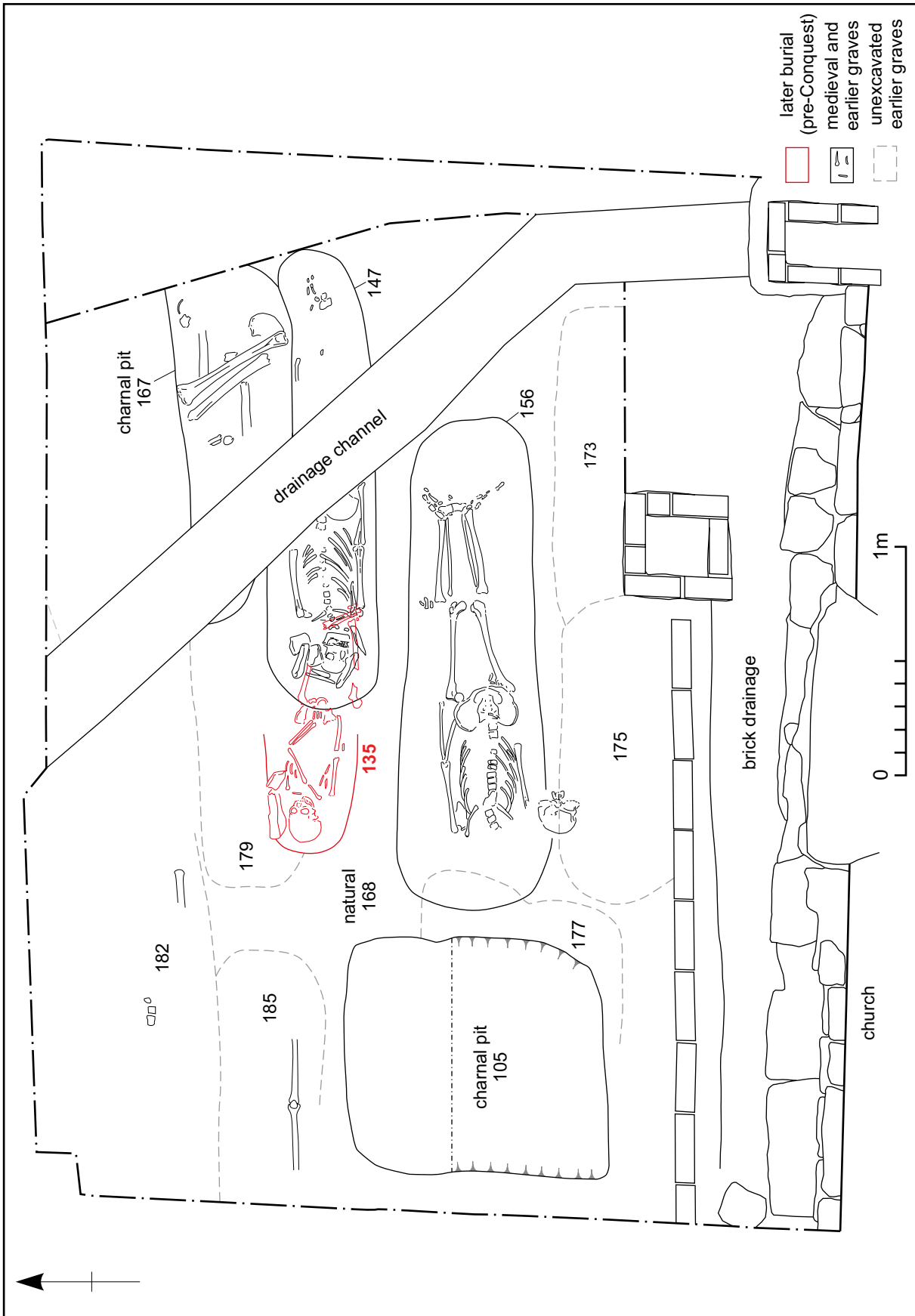


Fig 3: The excavated area north of the church



Fig 4: Burial 147, looking west

opmental progression noted throughout the skeleton. Severe supra-gingival calculus was noted on several teeth. The left maxillary molar was impacted, erupting at an improper angle causing irregular wear patterns on its occlusal surface and those of adjacent teeth. No other obvious trauma or pathology was noted. A cast iron grip, possibly a coffin handle was discovered in close association with this individual, further suggesting a coffin burial rather than a shroud burial as was common throughout the medieval period.

Pit 167 which truncated Burial 147 contained a large quantity of disarticulated human remains, probably a charnel deposit of later medieval or post-medieval date, though no dateable evidence was recovered from the fill.

Levels 3 and 4

Burial 135 at this level may pre-date the Norman Conquest. This burial had two rough, angular limestone slabs framing the left side of the skull, much like Burial 147 beneath, and had been truncated at the mid-thigh by a later grave. The skeletal remains were in good condition. Much of the lower limbs were missing apart from the upper two thirds of the left femur (Fig 6). The dentition and skeletal fusion indicated that these were the remains of a juvenile individual. The straight break on the femur can probably be attributed to the spade of a grave digger rather than pre/peri-mortem amputation of the leg. No other trauma or pathology was noted.



Fig 5: Burials 147 and 156, looking west



Fig 6: Burial 135, looking west

A number of other burials present at these two levels of excavation were dated to the post-medieval or modern period. In addition, two pits containing charnel material

were recorded. Neither pit was securely dated; though it is likely they form part of the later use of the churchyard following reorganisation in the later medieval or post-medieval period. A full description of the excavation and each burial can be found in the client report (Chinnock 2014).

The pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprises 35 sherds, weighing 355g. This includes a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and later pottery which suggests that there has been activity at the site from the early/middle Saxon period (5th-mid 9th century) until the present day.

Three sherds were dated to the early-middle Anglo-Saxon period.

F1: Fine Quartz. Sparse to moderate sub-angular quartz up to 0.5mm, most less than 0.2mm. Rare calcareous material. 3 sherds, 19g.

The late Saxon and later pottery was quantified using the chronology and coding system of the Northamptonshire County Ceramic Type-Series (CTS), as follows:

- F100: T1 (1) type St. Neots Ware (AD850-1100), 1 sherd, 20g
 F200: T1 (2) type St. Neots Ware (AD1000-1200), 1 sherd, 3g
 F330: Shelly Coarseware (AD1100-1400), 11 sherds, 67g
 F319: Lyveden/Stansion 'A' ware (AD1150-1400), 2 sherds, 12g
 F329: Potterspury Ware (AD1250-1600), 2 sherds, 26g
 F322: Lyveden/Stansion 'D' ware (AD1400-?1500), 1 sherd, 14g
 F401: Late Medieval Oxidized Ware, (AD1450-1550), 3 sherds, 40g
 F403: Midland Purple ware (AD1400-1600), 3 sherds, 74g
 F404: Cistercian Ware (AD1470-1600), 1 sherd, 3g
 F415: Creamware (1740-1820), 1 sherd, 5g
 F426: Iron-Glazed coarsewares (late 17th – 18th century), 4 sherds, 45g
 F1000: Misc 19th and 20th century wares, 2 sherds, 27g

Discussion and Conclusions

The excavations undertaken in advance of the church extension have confirmed the presence of unmarked burials in the northern area of the churchyard. This comprised several, seemingly continuous, periods of inhumation burial. It is also clear that the current churchyard boundary does not accurately represent the limit of the burial area. The presence of inhumations in the rear garden of Hastings Cottage, immediately to the north-west of the churchyard, puts the boundary at least 3-4m beyond its current location. A building likely to be Hastings Cottage or its immediate predecessor can be seen on the

1885 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map, this date could be regarded as *terminus ante quem* for burial in this area.

Cemetery contraction such as that noted at Little Billing is not uncommon and has been recorded elsewhere. Excavations at Rothley, Leicestershire identified a contraction in the cemetery boundary, dated to the 10th century AD (Upson-Smith 2016, 131). Furthermore, lay encroachment into designated burial grounds is well attested during the medieval period. William of Malmesbury (c 1139) reported that Bishop Roger of Salisbury built a castle partially on the land of the cemetery and only a stone's throw from the church (Daniel 1997, 113). The growing problem of encroachment was described, and the penalties outlined, in the Acts of Exeter Cathedral in 1390 whereby *'the laity who fixed poles and posts in the graveyard and closed certain portions of it with the walls of their houses ... [should remove poles and palings under] pain of excommunication'* (Myers 1969 in Daniel 1997, 113).

It is interesting to note that there was a dense quantity of intercutting and stacked burials on the north side of the church at Little Billing. It is often said that the northern part of a churchyard ought to contain fewer burials. Daniel (1997, 99) notes that 'it is possible that cemeteries were divided in more and less desirable areas: the south side being more favoured than the north and the churchyard cross being a magnet for burials. Excavation of the early medieval church and churchyard at Raunds, Furnells, Northamptonshire, identified that there was a higher density of burial to the south and east of the church, though the northern side of the church had been used for burial from the outset (Boddington 1996, 69). Here the idea of the north side being used only when the south was full is not supported by the archaeological evidence. Due to the very small area investigated, it remains unknown how the density to the north of the church at Little Billing would compare with the density of burials in the southern, eastern and western parts of the cemetery.

The Reverend W L Gibson, writing in 1803, stated that 'The portion of churchyards lying towards the south, east and west are by the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods, and by those I believe of other places, held in superior veneration; being still emphatically and exclusively styled the 'sanctuary'' (Gibson in Boddington 1996, 69). It is possible that if the south, east and west parts of the churchyard were regarded as 'the sanctuary', then those buried in the northern part of the cemetery fell outside of 'the sanctuary' and as such may be regarded as distinct from the rest of the interred population for some reason. Guidelines written by the Augustinian canon John Mirk (c late 14th century) describe a number of instances where individuals would be excluded from burial within 'the sanctuary' (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 71). These included but were not limited to: thieves slain in his theft, a man or woman slain in adultery unless he cries mercy and he that dies in jousting, unless he asks a priest before he dies (*ibid*). It is not clear whether John Mirk's reference to 'the sanctuary' is the same as that of the Reverend Gibson, though if comparable it may go some way to explaining how the northern side of the church would be populated.

Little Billing differs from the middle to late Saxon burials at Harringworth (Atkins 2004) and Rothley

(Upson-Smith 2016) in that burial was taking place directly to the north of the existing church and burial appears to have continued through the medieval period and into at least the post-medieval era.

Any selective distribution of individuals within the Little Billing churchyard is likely to have become less prominent as space within the churchyard became limited. Certainly by the latest phase of burial recorded at Little Billing, the individuals comprised almost exclusively children buried at a comparatively shallow depth. Despite all of the archaeological evidence, which indicates that for whatever reason the northern side of the church had been used for burial throughout the Saxon, medieval and post-medieval period; during the modern period up until the churchyard's closure in 2007 the northern side of the church had been avoided. This may indicate a resurgence of the belief that burial in this area was unfavourable.

Whilst the fabric of the present church buildings dates to the 14th century, it is notable that the presence of an early Christian, possibly Saxon, stone font inside the church may hint at pre-Conquest origins. It is of course possible that the font was brought from elsewhere or from an early manifestation of this church that may not necessarily have stood in exactly the same place. Nevertheless, Little Billing is a good example of how, due to the great depth of the grave earth, early Christian burials and possibly other related features can survive despite post-medieval and modern use of the burial ground.

Due to the nature of the proposed foundations for the church extension, the lowest identified layer of graves was not excavated and the remains were left *in situ*. It is likely that these graves would have contained yet more evidence of Anglo-Saxon burial. This was certainly the case for at least one of the unexcavated graves 179, which was overlain by burials 147 and 135 identified as late Saxon (Fig 3).

The use of limestone slabs to frame or secure the head, in two of the burials 147 and 135 is of great interest. Similar practices were recorded in burials at Raunds, Furnells where stone arrangements of rough irregular limestone occurred in more than half of the burials (Boddington 1996). Some examples showed stones encasing the skull, almost identical to those observed at Little Billing. Dating from Raunds, Furnells suggests that this tradition dates to between the 10th and mid-12th centuries, but is most likely to occur in burials pre-dating the Norman Conquest (Audouy and Chapman 2009). These burials form a minority of Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices in the country. Lucy (2000, 101) has noted that 'sometimes burials are found to have stone, either as grave covers or forming a lining to the grave'.

Two large pits containing charnel material indicate that parts of the medieval or early post-medieval churchyard had been re-organised and cleared of burials to allow for continued use of the burial ground: 'while the disturbance of corpses in a partially decomposed [or skeletonised] state might seem repugnant to us, it was clearly a common occurrence, certainly down to the middle part of the last century' (Rodwell 1989, 158). In their study of medieval monastic cemeteries, Gilchrist and Sloane note

that 'intercutting was a fairly basic principle of medieval Christian cemetery management: cemetery plots were not inviolable and it was acceptable to disturb the bones of the dead, with no part of the body deemed untouchable' (2005, 50). The archaeological evidence from the church at Little Billing supports this view, as almost every grave below the latest inhumations had been truncated to greater or lesser degree.

Excavations at Raunds, Furnells identified a single episode of medieval reorganisation, the replacement of the small pre-Conquest church with a larger church in the mid-12th century, which included the displacement of a number of burials, the remains from which were 'unceremoniously dumped into pits in the northern cemetery' (Boddington 1996, 70). It is interesting to note that these pits were only present north of the church and not elsewhere in the churchyard (*ibid*, fig 25). Whilst the area excavated at Little Billing was very small, the presence of two large pits containing charnel material is potentially significant. It is possible that the north side of the church was favoured when choosing where to deposit charnel material following reorganisation of a cemetery, perhaps in order to preserve more desirable/valuable space in other parts of the churchyard. Further work is needed to qualify this theory and it would be useful to see if similar distributions of clearance pits can be observed in other medieval churchyards.

It has been noted that 'by the eighth century clothed burials had virtually disappeared for everyone except clerics, and burial in a shroud in the style of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world was almost the universal style, based on the gospel description of Christ's burial' (Taylor 2001, 174). This tradition continued through much of the medieval period. The lack of coffin furniture and the well-articulated, tightly packed presentation of most of the burials at Little Billing may suggest that most were buried in this fashion. There are three exceptions to this, likely medieval in date; two of the burials had coffin nails associated with the skeletal remains. Also a possible cast iron coffin handle was recovered from Burial 156.

At Little Billing, individuals had been buried at different levels. This effect is partly due to the steady raising of the ground level through the accumulation of grave earth, so that earlier burials do generally lie deeper than those of later periods, but this is further complicated by variations in the depth of the graves dug within any one period of use. This broadly holds true until modern times, as a number of the latest graves were evidently dug to greater depths than was previously common, so that the interments lay at the same level as the late Saxon or medieval ones. The two large pits, which contained charnel material, were also dug to great depth and had truncated or removed several earlier burials. On occasions there may also be deliberately tiered burials, with graves dug to a shallower depth to avoid known burials below, probably most common within defined family plots. However, in the typical churchyard, as already noted, little regard is shown for the integrity of the earlier occupants in the digging of new graves.

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