

Excavations at the Church of St John the Evangelist, Coulsdon

by LESLEY L. KETTERINGHAM

According to the *Victoria County History of Surrey* (4, 202-5), the manor of Coulsdon was held of St. Peter's Abbey, Chertsey, at the time of the Domesday Survey, 1086, when a church was mentioned. This has led to the tradition that there was a Saxon church standing on the site of the present parish church. The wood floors beneath the choir stalls on the north and south sides of the chancel were recently found to be rotten and had to be renewed, thus giving an opportunity to investigate the foundations. Through the good offices of the archaeological consultant to the Southwark Diocesan Advisory Committee, Mr D. J. Turner, and with the permission of the rector, the Rev. G. E. Mayo, an excavation was carried out by the Bourne Society Archaeological Group in 1975. The small finds are in the charge of the Churchwardens of St John's as requested by the rector.

The present fabric is almost entirely 13th century and, according to the *VCH*, was the work of Chertsey Abbey in 1250. The chancel is set slightly askew to the nave, being 9.8 m long by 5.2 m wide at the west end and 4.8 m wide at the east end (see Fig. 1). The north, east and south walls appear to be consistent with a 13th century date, but the windows seem to have been reset in 15th century stonework. There is a 13th century Priest's Door in the south wall which is described as a window in the *VCH*.¹ The outside step of this door is almost 1 m above the original ground level and 0.63 m above the probable 13th century floor level (see Fig. 2, D), showing that, unless the door has been lifted, which does not seem likely, there were steps up to it both outside and inside the church.

The entire floor of the chancel, with the exception of the wood floors beneath the choir stalls, was tiled in 1898. It was therefore not possible to excavate more than the allotted areas, i.e. 4 m by 1.2 m on each side.

THE NORTH SIDE

Floors

The sequence of floors found was as follows:

- A A wooden floor laid at the end of the 19th century over 22 cm of builders' rubble and sand. A ledge of tiles and brick was cemented against the wall and the central tiled floor to support a wooden frame for the floorboards. There were no special features.

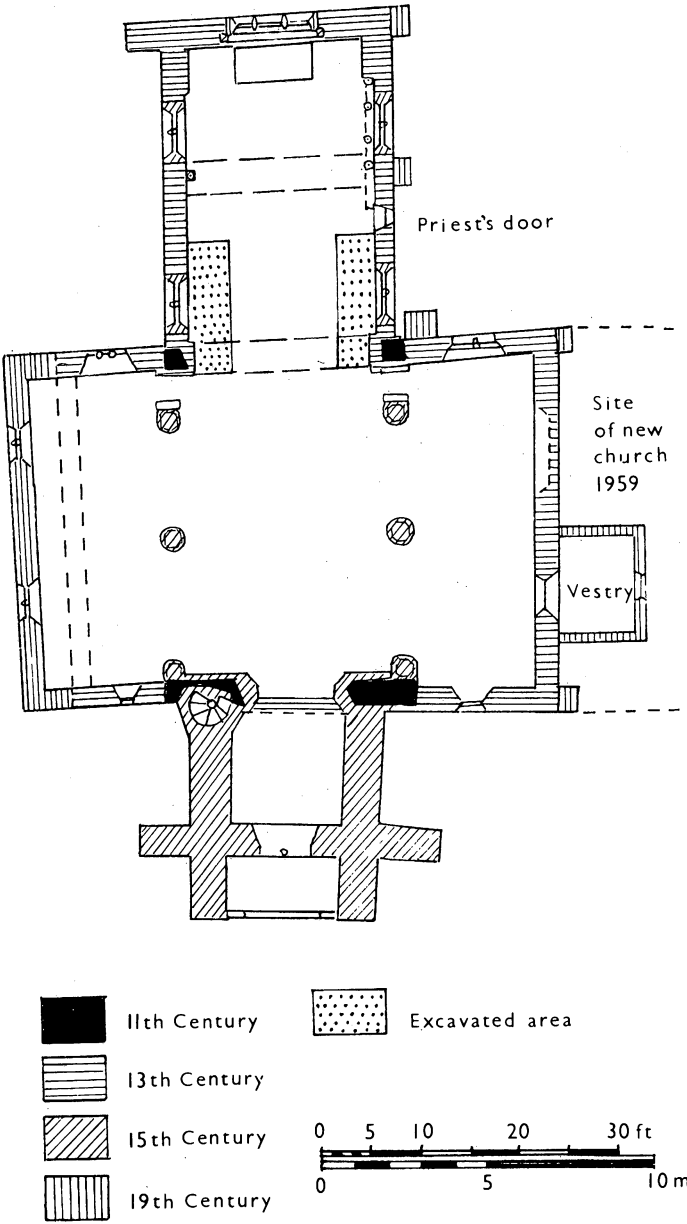


Fig. 1 Plan of St John's Church Coulsdon, based on the *Victoria County History*

- B 3 cm of dark beaten earth floor, hard and even with no features. This may have been covered by a thin skin of plaster, beneath which was 14 cm of sandy gravel with scattered chalk lumps and broken tiles, some medieval. A serviceable though rather poor floor for a parish church, possibly laid at the time of the 'churchwardens' repairs' in 1807 (*VCH*) when other patchy renovations were made to the church, and since it was covered by the choir stalls it may not have been thought necessary to spend much money on it. A few 18/19th century sherds were in the fill beneath it, and also some pieces of medieval floor tile.
- C 3 cm of dark beaten earth floor. Hard and dry except for a faint damp patch 50 cm wide running along the face of the wall. There was no fill between Floor C and Floor D.
- D 3 cm of plaster, broken, but apparently once laid as a floor, very little of which remains. Beneath this level was 10 cm of sandy soil with flecks of charcoal. The damp patch was still visible along the wall. In the south-east corner was a grave, 1.3 m long by 0.6 m wide. There were traces of plaster floor against the wall and pieces of plaster in the soft fill of the grave, which had been laid in a clay-lined pit. Adhering to the clay were traces of rotten wood. This is the floor of the 1250 church.
- E A thin hard line of dark soil and stones, with flecks of charcoal. The damp patch was now seen to be dark clay laid in a trench which contained the chalk lump foundations. This layer was probably the old soil level as it coincided with the field outside the churchyard wall and with the top of the chalk foundations. It may also have been the earliest floor. The grave of skeleton No. 2 was excavated and found to extend downward for 76 cm, i.e. 22 cm below the bottom of the foundations. One 13/14th century Limpsfield type sherd was found in the fill. This grave must have been inserted some time between Floor D and Floor C, i.e. between 1250 and the 15th century.

The hard sandy earth between Floors D and E may have contained one or two patches where the earth had been renewed.

Foundations

The foundations of the Chancel wall were set in a trench subsequently filled with dark clay. They consisted of 7 cm of small chalk lumps without mortar. A line of large flints and a further 8 cm of small chalk lumps without mortar. The subsoil was sand and gravel.

Possible Norman channel arch

At right angles to the wall at the west end of the trench was a very hard platform or foundation of flint, chalk and clay, roughly faced with sandstone.

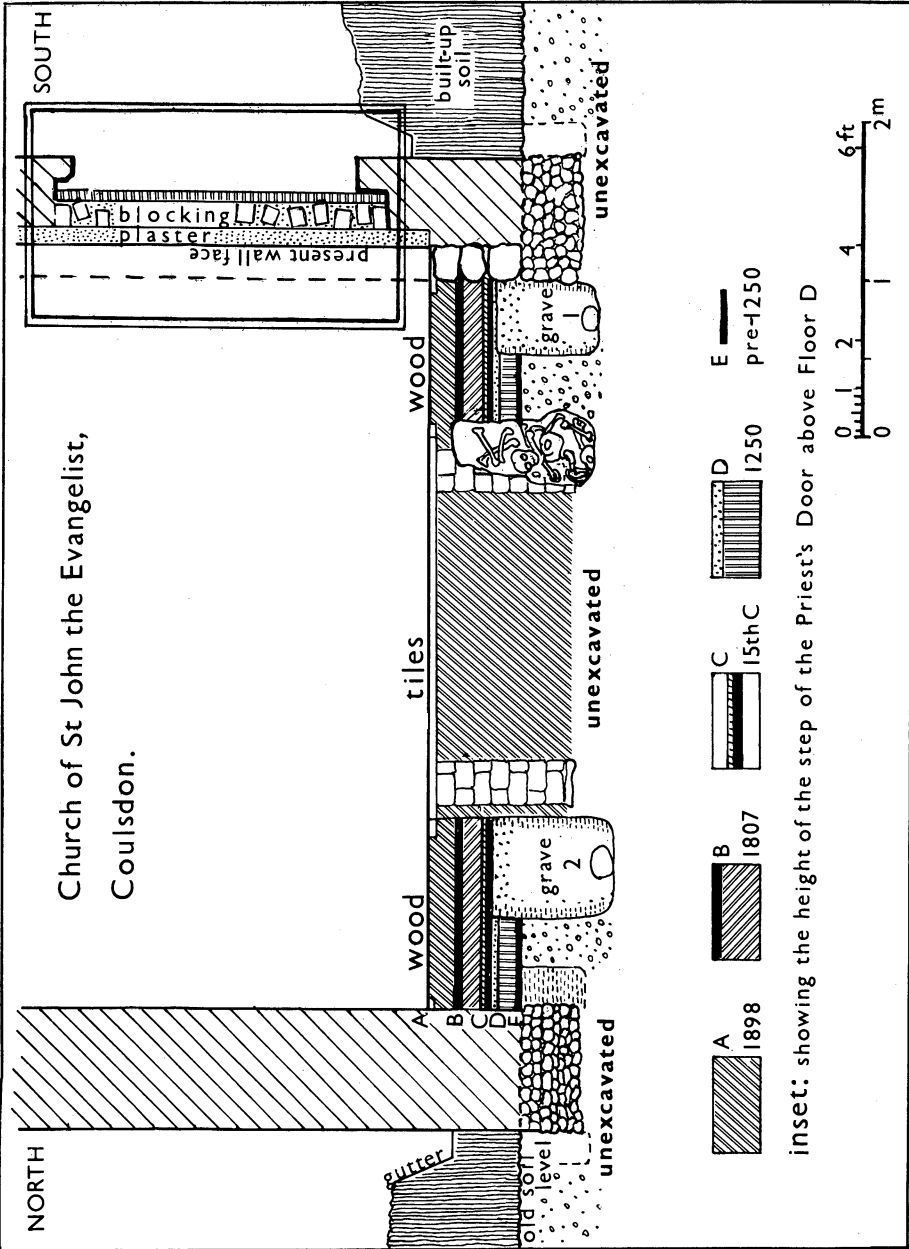


Fig. 2 St. John's, Coulsdon: section through the chancel.

Its base was level with the bottom of the chalk foundations and its top was 2 cm higher than the top of the foundations. It extended towards the centre of the chancel for 1.37 m and was at least 1.2 m wide, but the western edge was covered by the western edge of the trench and it was therefore not possible to obtain its exact width. Nor was it possible to find the corresponding construction in the trench on the south side because a 19th century brick flue had been cut through this position, but if there had been such a platform the resulting space between them would have been 2.3 m, sufficient for a low thick-walled chancel arch. The present lofty 13th century arch, which is cut back to the walls, stands directly over this platform and its shallow piers are underpinned with floor tiles of 18/19th century date. The bases of the piers have been renewed, possibly when repairs were carried out in 1807.

If this interpretation is correct, this is the only evidence revealed by the present excavation of a church on this site earlier than 1250.

THE SOUTH SIDE.

Floors

- A The 19th century wooden floor above 22 cm builders rubble and some disturbed human bones. A few Victorian and earlier sherds.
- B 3 cm dark beaten earth floor with traces of thin plaster covering. A brick and tile heating conduit was laid diagonally across the west end of the trench obliterating earlier levels. 14 cm sandy gravel with chalk lumps and broken tile containing a few 17/18th century sherds.
- C 3 cm dark beaten earth floor with traces of plaster. This and earlier floors were very much disturbed but it was possible to see a damp patch of soil running parallel to the wall, which consisted of large sandstone lumps and flints, loosely set against the 1250 wall.
- D Possibly two or three earth floors, very much disturbed, extending down through 15 cm. Some pieces of plaster. The large stones and flints against the wall were still present.
- E Darker soil with traces of charcoal. The large stones were now seen to be standing on a ledge formed by the chalk foundations which protruded into the trench for 20 cm and stood in a clay-filled foundation trench, as for the north side. At the east end was the head end of a grave, the rest of which lay under the tiled floor and contained the skull and shoulders of a skeleton (No. 1).

All the floors on the south side were so much disturbed that little detailed description is possible, but it is evident from the traces left that they correspond to the floors on the north. The central tiled floor laid in 1898 (VCH) was constructed on a raft supported by brick piers which had been built in pits dug through all levels to the subsoil. The central area had also

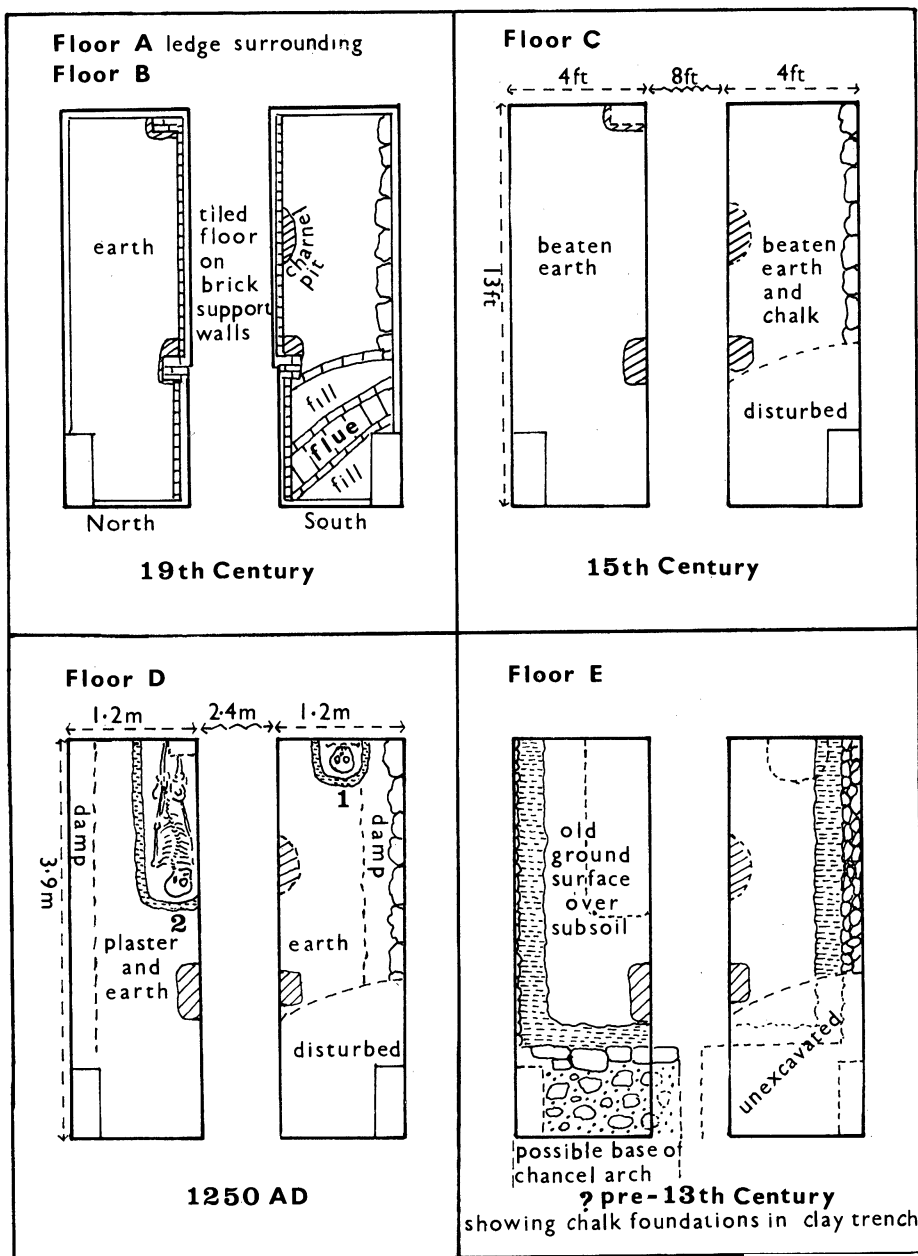


Fig. 3 St John's, Coulsdon: areas beneath the north and south choir stalls, showing the major floor levels

been entirely excavated and the graves which had been there were dug out, the whole being filled with builders rubble. The bones from the graves were then collected together and buried in a chancel pit beside one of the piers, some of the bones actually sticking to the cement of the brickwork. At least four, possibly more, individuals were present in the pit.

The grave at the east end of the trench was inserted between 1250 and the 15th century. It was not so deep as No. 2, reaching to only 5 cm below the bottom of the foundations and it may not have been confined as the clay lining contained no traces of wood.

Foundations

The entire wall of this part of the south side of the chancel appears to have been cut back from its original width of about 75 cm (the width of the north wall) leaving a thin stone and flint wall only 52 cm thick. The chalk lump foundations are 22 cm wider than the wall on the inside. The ledge thus produced was built up with large rough sandstone blocks and flints to the level of the cemented tile and brick frame on which the 19th century wooden floor A was laid. There is a similar clay-filled trench to that on the north side in which the foundations were laid, but this has been much disturbed. The foundation of a possible Norman chancel arch was obliterated by the heating flue and the trench in which it was laid.

SMALL FINDS

Floor Tiles

Found all broken in the floors between A and C.

- 1 15.8 cm by 15.8 cm by 3.1 cm. Edges straight. Pale yellow glaze, plain. Other pieces showed black, dark green and cream glaze.
- 2 10.7 cm by 10.7 cm by 2.5 cm. Edges bevelled. Pale yellow glaze, plain.
- 3 Probably type 1 with white slip, glaze missing.

Glass

10 small pieces of window glass, 8 very thin. Almost black or dark green (?rotted paint). No design visible.

1 piece clear white with patination and traces of where it was set into a lead came along the straight edge. All from disturbed levels.

Pottery

2 sherds of pale grey ware with fine dark fill. 1 sherd had a dark grey surface inside and out. Probably Limpsfield, 13/14th century.

1 of these was found in the fill close above the skeleton in Grave 2. Many post-medieval to 19th century sherds between Floors A and C.

Wall Plaster

1.2 to 1.9 cm thick, cream coloured. Some pieces shading through the thickness from white to dark red. Painted yellow, white or cream.

Animals' Teeth

2 horse incisors, very worn. 1 sheep's molar.

Flint Tools

1 scraper 5 cm wide by 5 cm long, point broken
1 ?arrowhead unfinished. 30 mm long by 12 mm wide.

Iron

4 coffin nails and 7 short nails. 1 coffin nail in situ from Grave 2.
2 coffin handles, possibly 17/18th century, from the south side.

THE SKELETONS

I am indebted to Mrs. Mary Shepherd for the identification of the bones.

- No. 1 The skull was in a very delicate state, the bones being almost paper-thin. The teeth were those of an old person. Many of them were missing and nearly all those left showed cavities. The bone had closed between the gaps in the jaws.
- No. 2 All the bones were in excellent condition. The teeth were examined by N. Cripps, Dental Surgeon, of Caterham, who reported as follows: all the teeth were present except one which had fallen out after death and all were unusually sound, only one small cavity being present in a left lower molar; there was very little sign of wear, which is unusual in a medieval skeleton; part of the reason for this appeared to be that the lower jaw protruded beyond the upper jaw and the wear on the incisors was on the opposite sides to that in normal mouths, so that the molars were unable to perform the usual grinding function and therefore remained largely unworn; in addition there were no wisdom teeth and no provision for any. The skeleton was that of a fully grown person, lying head to the west, the skull being turned to the right. The vertebrae seemed to be twisted, but the legs, which were visible as far as the knee, seemed to be fully extended. The protection afforded by the coffin may have had some effect on the excellent condition of the bones.

THE PRIEST'S DOOR

Although this was not originally intended to be part of the operation, the position of the Priest's Door was examined as it had a bearing on the building of the south wall in 1250 and because the *VCH* does not record a Priest's Door. The doorstep in the outside of the wall is almost 1m above the top of the chalk foundations. The height of the door to the centre of the arch is 1.8 m and the step does not appear to have been raised as there is sufficient clearance for a normal man. At least three steps would have been necessary to mount to the step from the outside and another three steps through the thickness of the wall to descend to the inside at Floor D level. The outside pointed arch and jambs must have been blocked and plastered, probably during the 'churchwardens repairs' in 1807, when the inside was also filled with bricks and rubble and given a thick coat of very hard plaster. The door is still not visible from the inside, and it is not known when the unblocking of the outside took place, but it must have been after 1912 when the *VCH* was published. The stonework of the jambs and arch is 13th century and similar to that in St Lawrence, Caterham, which has a priest's door in the same position but not so high in the wall. This is dated to the early part of the 13th century and was cut through the wall after the apse was removed² and tends to confirm the date 1250 for the building, or re-building of the south wall of St John's

CONCLUSIONS

No evidence of a Saxon church was found in the area available for examination. There was a possible 12th century foundation if the construction at right angles to the north wall was the base of a narrow, thick-walled chancel arch. The foundations were laid down when the field was level with the land outside the churchyard wall. The first church, small, two-celled, possibly with an apse though it was not possible to establish this, had a beaten earth floor, renewed two or three times. A major re-building took place at about 1250 when the old chancel arch was removed, part of the south wall thinned and plastered and a blind arcade added on each side. At this time the windows would have been enlarged and if there was an apse this would have been removed and the east end extended and squared, which may account for its long length in relation to the nave. The piscina and sedilia were also added at this time in the eastern part of the south wall, which is of the original thickness, i.e. about 75 cm. The floor of the chancel was probably tiled with black, or dark green and yellow glazed tiles in the centre and the walls were plastered and painted yellow and cream. Traces of red paint remain on the chancel arch.

The next major additions to the church were in the early 15th century and it is at some time before then and after the laying down of Floor D (c 1250) that the burials took place. The floor of the chancel has been raised by

57 cm since it was first built, and it is interesting to note that the church-yard to the south has increased its height by over a metre during the 7-800 years of its existence.

NOTES

- 1 The *VCH* notes that 'there is a coeval low-side window with pointed head, now blocked up, in the south wall! This is probably the Priest's Door, as the writers would have been unable to see the iron hinges and bar-hole which are now visible from the outside, owing to the blocking.
- 2 Spence, J. *The old parish church of St. Lawrence, Caterham*, 1953.