

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 1020

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at St Michael's Church
Aylsham**

7402 AYL

(Amended)

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Location: St Michael's Church, Aylsham
District: Broadland
Grid Ref: TG 1924 2701
HER No.: 7402 AYL
Date of fieldwork: 1st to 2nd November and 27th November 2004

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at St Michael's church, Aylsham, in advance of the construction of a new floor and kitchen. The earliest objects recovered were two prehistoric struck flints, but these were not in situ and only represent a general prehistoric presence in the area. Probable medieval cuts for the church walls and western pillars were also found but, unfortunately, contained no dating evidence. A foundation trench between the two pillars also seemed to date from the same period.

Various graves/charnel pits and a brick 'soak-away' cut the floor of the church and were thought likely to date from the 18th century or earlier. Three brick crypts were found during the course of the work, along with related late 18th-century memorials, one of which was more fully examined and found to still hold human skeletal remains and wooden coffins. All loose bones and archaeologically sensitive structures were either re-buried or left in situ beneath the new-floor level.

1.0 Introduction

(Fig. 1)

St Michael's church is positioned in the centre of the market town of Aylsham. The survey area was located at the western end of the church, and within its northern aisle. The area at the western end measured 7m by 14.50m and the area within the northern aisle 2.5m by 22m. Development was undertaken in the church as part of a millennium project and Draper and Nichols Ltd, who funded this report, conducted the building work. This archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (Edwin Rose, 9 April 2004).

The Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards, currently hold the site archive.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site overlies a solid geology of upper chalk with overlying sands and gravel (Funnell 1994), and the soil landscape consists of loamy loess overlying coarse outwash or glacial till (Corbett and Dent 1994). The church of St Michael's is situated in the centre of the town of Aylsham, next to the market and on an elevated plateau to the north-east of which the land slopes gently away towards the River Bure. The site is well drained and the deposits encountered generally firm from many years of compression under the large church structure.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

Aylsham as a settlement is first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 AD, and as a market town it is known to have existed before 1296 (Penn 1994). The origins of the town are, however, still unclear and further archaeological work within the town is therefore important. Various individual finds hint at the early nature of the town. A bronze Antoninianus of the Roman emperor Claudius was found in the garden of a house off the Cromer road, north of St Michael's church (Norfolk Heritage Environment Record 7398) and late Bronze Age metalwork has been found in gardens in Sir Williams Way (NHER 7396). Domesday mentions that the Earl of East Anglia, Gyrth Godwinson, held the parish of Aylsham (Elesham) before the conquest and being an important estate, it was taken by Ralph Guader and held for the king after the Norman invasion.

For much of the Middle Ages the Duchy of Lancaster held the manor. Possible remains of 14th- and 15th-century buildings have been noted around the marketplace. A possible undercroft beneath 18 Market Place, comprising a brick barrelled vault with chamfered ribs, is of particular note. The market is first recorded in Aylsham in 1296 (Blomefield 1807, 270). The wealth of Aylsham was, however, based on the manufacture of textiles (Pevsner and Wilson 1962), particularly canvas and linen (Aylsham Web was a particular type of linen). By the 17th century the knitting of woollen items was the main employment of the population of Aylsham and this continued through the 18th century (Blomefield 1807, 283-4). The Georgian period was particularly wealthy and this has given the town much of its physical character. Many of the gravestones within the environs of the church date from this period of prosperity.

The church of St Michael has seen little archaeological work, and little about the early history of the church is known. It is known, however, that the church is a large and complicated cruciform building (Rose 1978; 1992; 2002 unpublished reports in NHER). The majority of the structure is early 14th-century in date, with finishing touches dating to the late 14th century (possibly paid for by John of Gaunt). The chancels and chapels were rebuilt in the late 15th and early 16th centuries and there is an excellent rood screen dated to 1507. As the church appears now, the outside of the building is later than the inside, principally because of a large-scale restoration by Rev. Edmund Yates between 1842-52. The six-bay arcades with their alternating circular and octagonal piers appear to be late 13th-century in date (Pevsner and Wilson 1962).

4.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2)

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during redevelopment of the western and northern parts of the interior of St Michael's Church. The building works required the excavation of an area of narrow trenching at the western end of the church, and in the northern aisle, a more general removal of deposits to the depth of 0.15m from the top of the flagstones. Draper and Nichols Ltd excavated the trenches prior to the construction of load-bearing walls designed to support a new raised floor surface at the western end of the church. Each 'arm' of the trenching was excavated to a depth of 0.40m and had an average width of 0.50m. The lengths of the various

parts of the trenching varied dependent on position. In the near future the construction of a kitchen and toilet block is also proposed for the north-western end of the church. The existing flagstones were removed and kept for re-laying on top of the new surface that will be around 0.40m higher than the present level. Memorials were removed and kept for re-laying after the works.

The Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology required that an archaeologist be in constant attendance whenever the works affected remains of archaeological importance.

After two days of archaeological recording, the development was halted due to a revision of the works programme. The first two days had consisted of uncovering the full extent of a brick crypt [12], the extent, position and nature of which required a new architect's plan be devised. The second period of archaeological work involved the examination of the trenches already opened at the north-western end. The revised architect's plan required that Draper and Nichols Ltd excavate down to the base of the crypt (1.90m from the ground surface level). This deep trench was two metres long from north-to-south and 1.20m wide from east-to-west. The development also involved the removal and transfer of a large marble monument (dedicated to Jermy) from the south-west corner to a position further east within the church. A final return to site occurred in early December, to record trenches dug in the south-western corner beneath the marble monument, and to examine the lowered deposits of the northern aisle.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those that were obviously modern.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using the NAU *pro forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

A level was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 33.03m OD situated on the north-east corner of St Michael's church and a temporary benchmark created immediately to the west of the western entrance to the church. This benchmark was used to level the development area. The current earthen floor surface of St Michael's, beneath the flagstones, was found to be at a level of 32.40m OD. Due to the lack of suitable deposits, no environmental samples were taken. Context numbers were started from [10].

Access to the site was good, and help and advice given readily in a cordial manner by the staff of Draper and Nichols Ltd.

5.0 Results

(Figs 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9)

The earliest deposit encountered on the site was the naturally deposited pure orange sand ([27]) that had a very firm compressed nature when encountered *in situ*. The top of this deposit lay 0.64m below the current surface of the church, at a level of 31.76m OD. Within a deep trench at the centre of the site the orange sand ([27]) had a visible and continuing depth to 1.50m. There was also a relatively sharp change from the natural sand ([27]) to a more mixed light brown fine silty

sand ([15]). The more mixed appearance of this layer may be due to the influence of natural weathering processes prior to the building of the church.

Immediately to the west of the church font, excavations on the eastern side of brick crypt [12] revealed a linear cut ([44]) stretching for an observed length of 3.70m and of at least 0.70m width (Fig 9). This was filled with a very firm deposit of frequent flint nodules held in a matrix of cream mortar and smaller flint fragments. The material was very similar to fill [14] of nearby cut [13] (Figs 4 and 5), which had an observed width of 4m and a known depth of 0.38m. In plan, cut [13] can be seen as a roughly circular pit lying below the main north-western column of the church. This was undoubtedly designed to take a foundation material to support the column and is almost certainly of medieval date. A further foundation cut ([47]) was found beneath the south-western column, with a fill [48] composed of the same material as [14]. Although no dating came from these fills, the similarity of the materials used may indicate that they are of the same phase of construction of the church. Linear cut [44] also appears to have been a foundation trench.

Within the trenching at the western end of the church, the linear foundation cut [16] for the church walls was observed. Cut [16] was only partially truncated by the development and had a known depth of 0.38m, its visible width from the inside of the wall to the edge of the cut varying from between 0.20m to 0.45m. In section, cut [16] was observed to have slightly concave profile with gently sloping sides. Its fill ([17]) comprised cream-coloured coarse sand. Again no dating evidence was found, but the feature is almost certainly of medieval or early post-medieval date. Only a part of cut [16] was visible, leaving open the possibility that the cut represented an episode of later underpinning.

Two features were observed in trenching at the north-western end of the church. The first of these was a sub-rectangular cut [20], which measured 1.96m east-to-west and measured at least 0.32m in a north-to-south direction. The fill was light brown fine silty sand that contained occasional brick fragments. This cut was likely to have been a grave, the brick fragments suggesting a post-medieval date. Just to the east of [20] was a small oval cut ([22]) of unknown purpose, which measured a minimum of 0.5m x 0.4m. This had a yellow brown sand fill [23] and may have been a post-hole.

Within the deep excavations on the northern side of crypt [12], a pit ([28]) measuring 1.26m east-to-west was observed. The sides of the feature were uneven and almost vertical in most places. The fill of pit [28] was loose light brown silty sand that had darker lenses towards the base and the southern and eastern sides.

A semi-circular brick structure ([30]) lay within pit cut [28]. This measured 0.80m east-to-west, and was three courses thick. The lower course had single bricks placed on their sides, at intervals of between 50mm and 80mm, and above this the two courses were largely half bricks laid end to end in a curved pattern. None of the courses had any bonding. The bricks, where complete, measured 110mm x 70mm x 230mm. The structure was probably a soakaway, and its position in this part of the church suggests it was placed to take water from an earlier font. It had been truncated by the cut for crypt [12], which gave it a pre 18th-century date.

It is worthy of note that in the mid 17th-century a law was passed that forbade the “standing of fonts in Popish places” and they were moved to the north wall. In the late 19th century most were moved back again (E. Rose pers. comm.). The current octagonal font (of early 15th-century date but altered in 1852) was moved to its present position in the 1920s.

Three features were observed to the west of the brick crypt [12] (Fig.8). The most northerly of these was a small charnel pit or possible grave cut ([36]) which measured 0.50m in width by 0.64m in depth. It had a dark grey silty sand fill ([37]). On its eastern side it was truncated by a grave ([33]) and just to its south was another small feature ([38]) that measured 0.52m in width by 0.70m in depth, with an unknown length. This feature was also possibly a grave or charnel pit, it had a light brown silt sand fill ([39]). The last feature ([40]) was 1.00m in depth with at least 0.90m of width and an east-to-west length of at least 0.40m. Like the other two features its extent beyond the section remained unknown. The fill ([41]) of feature [40] was also of light brown silty sand that had some human bone visible in the section, possibly *in situ*. Dating from these small features was problematic but they are likely to be post-medieval.

A grave cut ([33]) truncated [36], [38] and [40] and measured 1.52m by 0.46m. It contained an *in situ* skeleton ([34]) and was filled with a mid grey brown silty sand backfill. Two fragments of clay tobacco pipe within the fill were not closely datable and suggested only a general post-medieval date, supported by one sherd of Glazed red earthenware with a date range of 16th to 18th century. The skeleton was positioned 1.90m below the earthen surface of the church and was left in position below the development. A small pit ([42]) of unknown extent was observed (Fig.8), this truncated [28] and [36], its fill ([43]) was light grey silty sand. The latest historical feature observed on the site was a large shallow cut ([31]) which extended over the whole area and contained a small cement surface of 0.06m thickness. The cut was filled with a light grey silty sand ([24]) and was almost certainly representative of the last major ordering of the western end of the church. Two possible prehistoric and residual worked flints were found within this fill. Two sherds of Glazed red earthenware and one sherd of Iron glazed ware pottery, though found within fill [24], were also probably disturbed from earlier contexts.

Three brick crypts were found during the excavation. The most intensively examined was crypt [12]. This had an east-to-west length of 2.76m and a north-to-south measurement of 3.20m. The structure consisted of a square brick shell with a barrel-vaulted roof and two strengthening walls running east-to-west through the roof. The top course of bricks of the crypt had been truncated by the large shallow cut ([31]) and also by a hole in the top measuring 0.50m by 0.40m, which had probably been opened at the same time in order to check on the contents of the tomb. Fragments of slate had been used to cover the hole after the original investigation of the tomb. Possibly three broken wooden coffins could be seen through the hole, the most northerly of which had a skeleton visible. A large stone slab was found next to the crypt which bore a damaged dedication ‘IN MEMORY OF MARY HAMMOND WIDOW OF THE LATE W.HAMMONDS, DIED MARCH 2ND 179? MARY HAMMOND DIED 179?’. The memorial slab was retained and moved by the developers to a safer location.

The crypt was built within a large rectangular cut ([10]) that measured 4m by 3m with a shallow profile at the top becoming vertically sided towards the base. Around the crypt was a light brown-yellow silty sand backfill which contained some disarticulated bones which probably came from truncated features [36], [38] and [40]. The base of the crypt was revealed on its western side and found to lie at 30.50m O.D.

A second brick crypt ([25]) was located in the northern aisle and measured at least 2.50m by 1.80m. This was only observed in plan, and was composed of possibly hand-made red bricks and mortar. Examination of the north-western arm of the trenching revealed that vault [25] was built within a cut ([18]; Fig.6), of unknown size, which contained a cream coarse sand backfill ([19]). To the east of vault [25], and also within the northern aisle was a further crypt ([46]; observed only in plan) that measured 2.90m by 0.90m. On the church wall close to crypt was a dedication that is likely to refer to vault [46]. 'IN THE VAULT NEAR THIS PLACE ARE INTERRED THE REMAINS OF EDWARD PIGGON GENT, FORMERLY SURGEON OF THIS PARISH WHO DIED THE 12TH OF MAY 1803 AGED 73 YEARS. HE WAS AN EMINENT PRACTITIONER, A SINCERE FRIEND, AND A TRULY HONEST MAN. ALSO IN THE SAME VAULT ELIZEBETH HIS WIFE WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE 16TH APRIL 1798 AGED 64 YEARS'. In both cases only a thin spit of soil was removed from around the structures and little further information was gathered. Between vaults [25] and [46] was a stone laid flat *in situ* bearing the dedication 'THE ENTRANCE INTO M.DRAKES VAULT' which suggested that there was at least one further unseen vault in that area. It is likely that further vaults would have turned up in the northern aisle if the development had removed a greater depth of deposit.

6.0 The Finds

The finds evidence from the site is presented in tabular form with basic quantitative information in Appendix 2: Finds by Context. In addition to this summary, more detailed information on specific finds and environmental categories is included in separate reports below. Supporting tables for these contributions are included in the Appendices.

Pottery

(Appendix 3)

The site produced four sherds of post-medieval pottery (0.069kg). The assemblage consists of three fragments of Glazed red earthenware dating from the 16th to 18th centuries and a single sherd of Iron glazed ware of similar date.

Ceramic Building Material

(Appendix 4)

The site produced five examples of post-medieval ceramic building material weighing (2.538kg). The assemblage was quantified (counted and weighed) by form and fabric. The fabrics were identified by eye and the main inclusions noted. Fabric descriptions and dates are based on the provisional type series established by Sue Anderson.

The brick recovered from the site is of a medium sandy orange fabric with coarse inclusions of flint, ferrous and grog. The group includes a complete example in sanded form ([30]) the dimensions of which are recorded in the archive. Two pieces of plain roof tile in similar fabrics to the bricks were collected, together with an iron glazed tile fragment of either pantile or ridge tile.

Metalworking Debris

Two pieces of bronze casting waste were recovered (0.169kg).

Flint

Three flakes were recovered from the site, all from [24]. Two have clearly been struck by hard hammer and the smaller of these is a small chip-like piece that is fresh in appearance. It is possible that this may be debris from building flint. The other two pieces are probably residual and of prehistoric date.

7.0 Conclusions

The recovery of two worked flints suggests that there was prehistoric activity in the area. This is to be expected from the well-drained high position of the church. The extent and nature of that activity is unknown.

The medieval/early post-medieval features recorded were the most intriguing findings of the watching brief, and of these, the probable wall foundation cut ([44]) is of principal interest because it lacked a related structure. As a linear cut between the two large columns, it could have supported a horizontal beam to assist the column foundations ([13] and [47]) take the downward force of the church. Alternatively it could have been a construction trench for a (lost) wall or other structure. Unfortunately, there was no dating for the feature and no relationship with the cut for the church pillar base ([13]) or wall ([16]). However, the possibility remains that it might have been part of a construction cut for an earlier phase of church.

The brick crypts are likely to have been 18th-century in date. The four sherds of pottery from the site indicate that the main disturbance of the church floor took place during the 16th to 18th centuries which tallies with the date of the brick vaults and the increasing prosperity of the town.

Acknowledgements

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The author undertook the fieldwork.

David Dobson prepared the illustrations, Lucy Talbot processed and reported on the finds and Sarah Bates looked at the flints. The report was formatted and produced by David Dobson and Julie Curl and edited by Alice Lyons.

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

| Context | Category | Description | Period |
|---------|----------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 10 | Cut | Cut for crypt [12] | 18th century |
| 11 | Fill | Fill of cut [10] | 18th century |
| 12 | Masonry | Brick crypt | 18th century |
| 13 | Cut | Cut for church pillar base | Medieval? |
| 14 | Fill | Fill of cut [13] | Medieval? |
| 15 | Deposit | Light brown silty sand | - |
| 16 | Cut | Cut for church walls | Medieval? |
| 17 | Fill | Fill of [16] | Medieval? |
| 18 | Cut | Cut for crypt [25] | - |
| 19 | Fill | Fill of [18] | - |
| 20 | Cut | Possible grave cut | - |
| 21 | Fill | Fill of [20] | - |
| 22 | Cut | Possible post-hole/pit | - |
| 23 | Fill | Fill of [22] | - |
| 24 | Fill | Fill of [31] | 19th/20th century |
| 25 | Masonry | Brick crypt | 18th century? |
| 26 | Masonry | Small brick and cement floor | 19th or 20th century |
| 27 | Deposit | Natural sand | - |
| 28 | Cut | Cut for [30] | Pre 18th century |
| 29 | Fill | Fill of [28] | Pre 18th century |
| 30 | Masonry | Possible 'soak away' | Pre 18th century |
| 31 | Cut | Late church ordering cut | 19th or 20th century |
| 32 | Not used | Not used | Not used |
| 33 | Cut | Grave cut | 16th to 18th century |
| 34 | Skeleton | Skeleton of cut [33] | 16th to 18th century |
| 35 | Fill | Fill of grave [33] | 16th to 18th century |
| 36 | Cut | Possible grave cut | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 37 | Fill | Fill of [36] | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 38 | Cut | Possible grave cut | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 39 | Fill | Fill of [38] | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 40 | Cut | Possible grave cut | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 41 | Fill | Fill of [40] | Pre 16th to 18th century |
| 42 | Cut | Cut of a small pit | - |
| 43 | Fill | Fill of [42] | - |
| 44 | Cut | Cut of wall foundation | Medieval? |
| 45 | Fill | Fill of [44] | Medieval? |
| 46 | Masonry | Brick vault | 18th century? |
| 47 | Cut | Cut for church pillar base | Medieval? |
| 48 | Fill | Fill of [47] | Medieval? |

Appendix 2: Finds by Context

| Context | Material | Quantity | Weight (kg) | Period |
|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 24 | Pottery | 3 | 57 | Post-medieval |
| 24 | Flint – worked | 3 | - | Prehistoric |
| 29 | Ceramic building material | 4 | 118 | Post-medieval |
| 29 | Metalworking debris | 2 | 169 | ?Post-medieval |
| 30 | Ceramic building material | 1 | 2412 | Post-medieval |
| 35 | Pottery | 1 | 12 | Post-medieval |
| 35 | Clay pipe - stem | 2 | 9 | Post-medieval |

Appendix 3: Pottery

| Context | Fabric | Form | Quantity | Weight (g) | Object Date |
|----------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 24 | Glazed red earthenware | Body sherds | 2 | 0.055 | 16th to 18th century |
| 24 | Iron glazed ware | Body sherds | 1 | 0.002 | 16th to 18th century |
| 35 | Glazed red earthenware | Bowl rim | 1 | 0.012 | 16th to 18th century |

Appendix 4: Ceramic Building Material

| Context | Form | Quantity | Weight (kg) | Period |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 29 | Brick | 1 | 0.066 | Post-medieval |
| 29 | Roof tile | 2 | 0.030 | Post-medieval |
| 29 | ?Pan/Ridge tile | 1 | 0.030 | Post-medieval |
| 30 | Brick (complete) | 1 | 2.412 | Post-medieval |

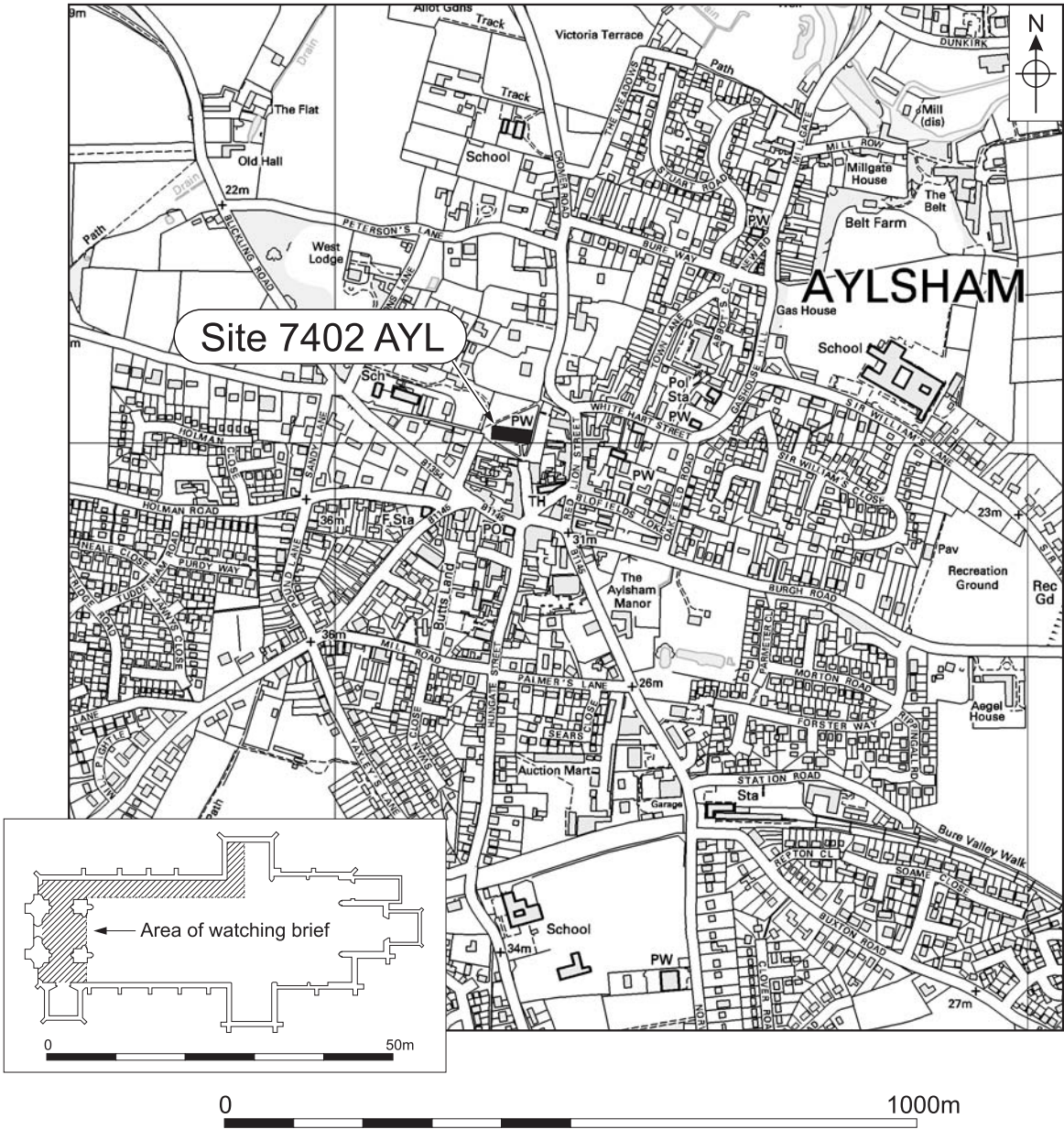


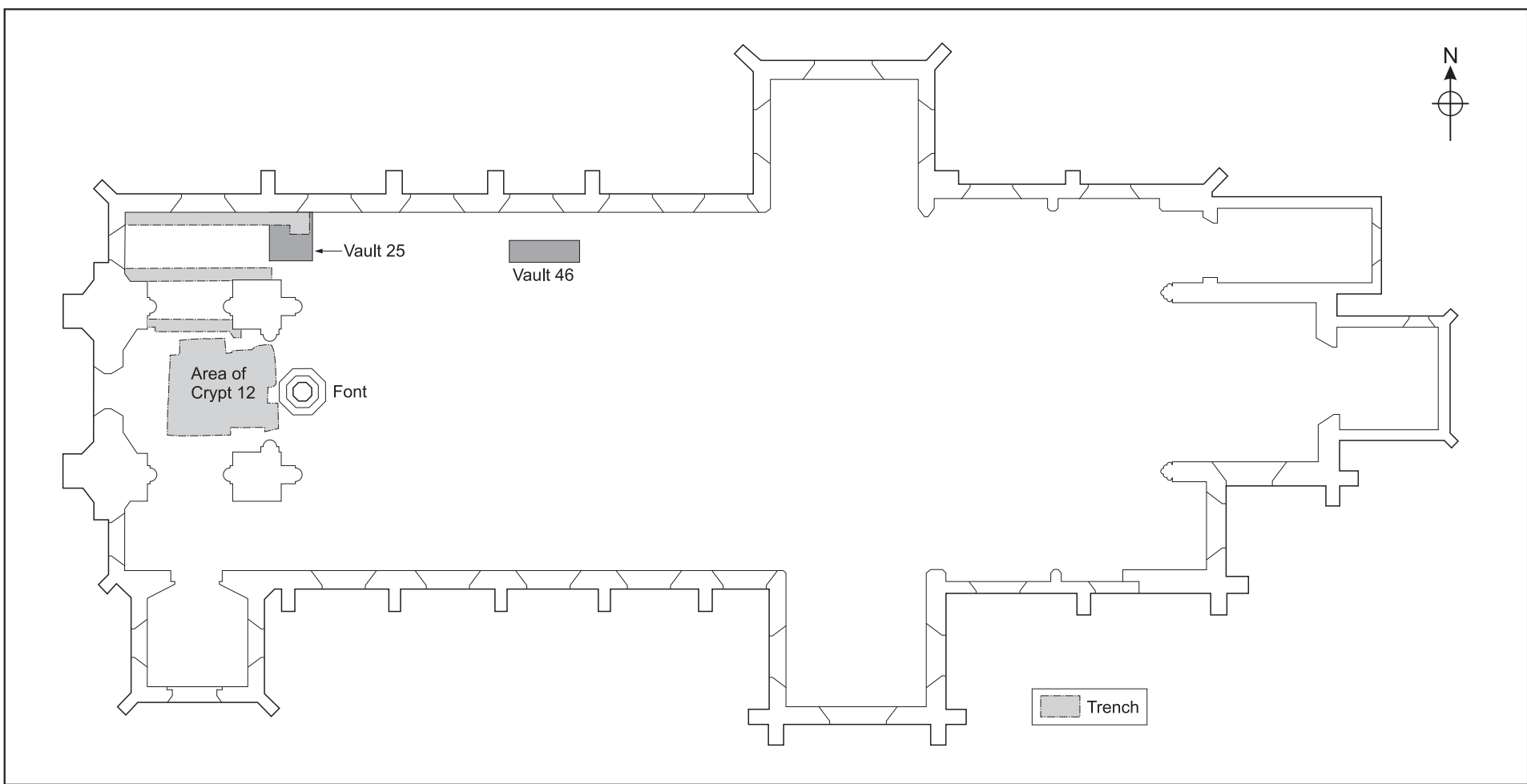
Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

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0 10m

Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:250

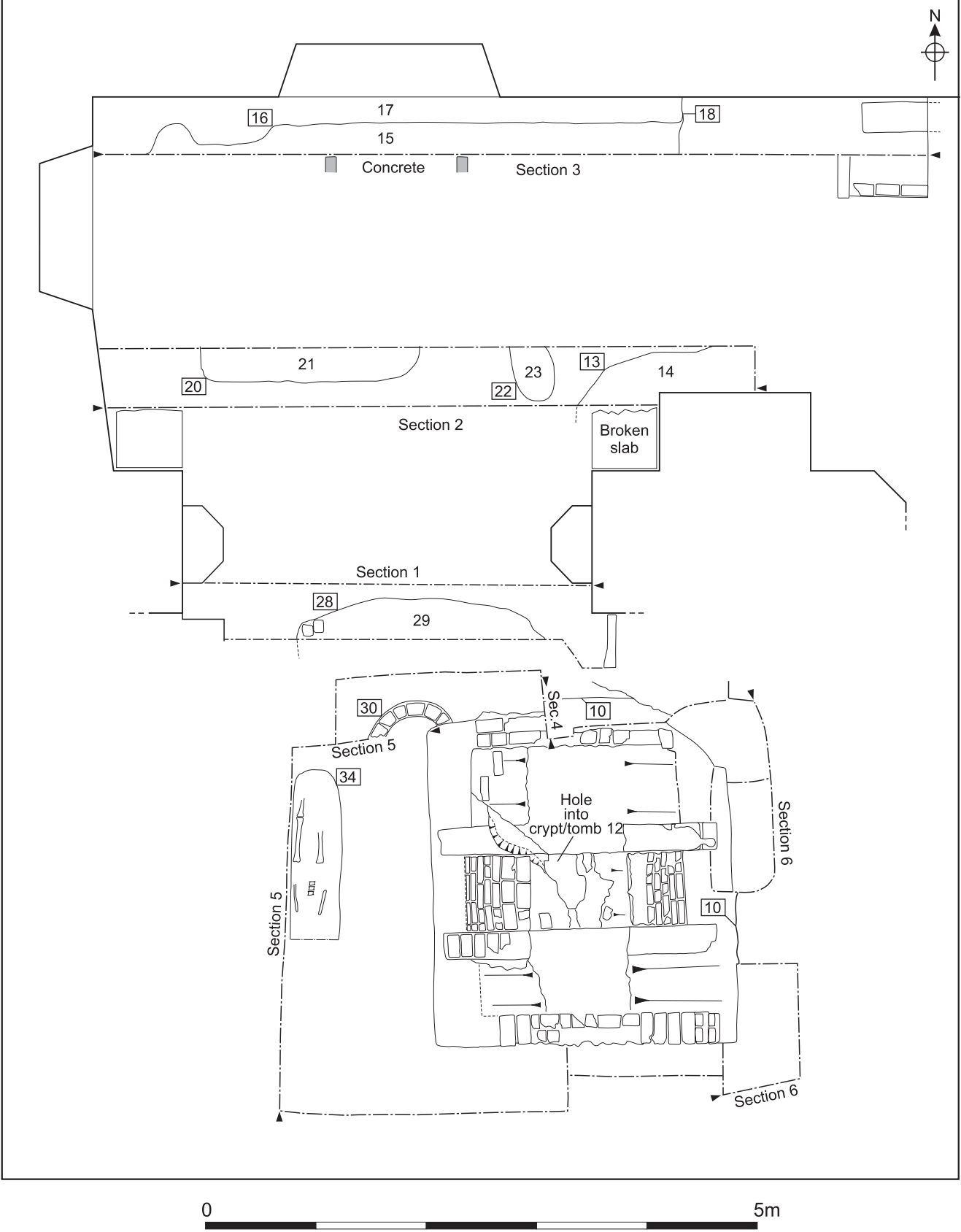


Figure 3. Plan of archaeological features. Scale 1:50

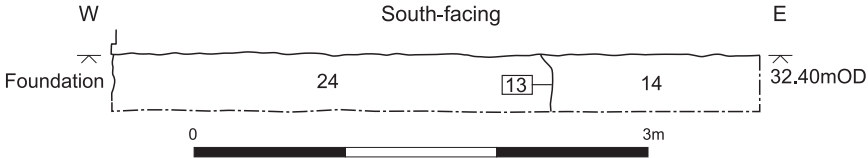


Figure 4. Section 1, south-facing. Scale 1:50

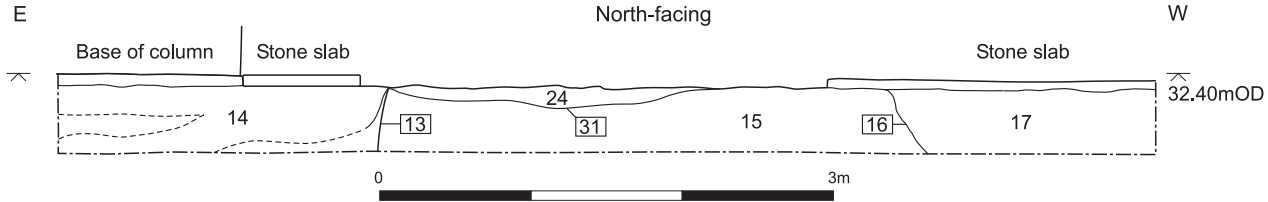


Figure 5. Section 2, north-facing. Scale 1:50

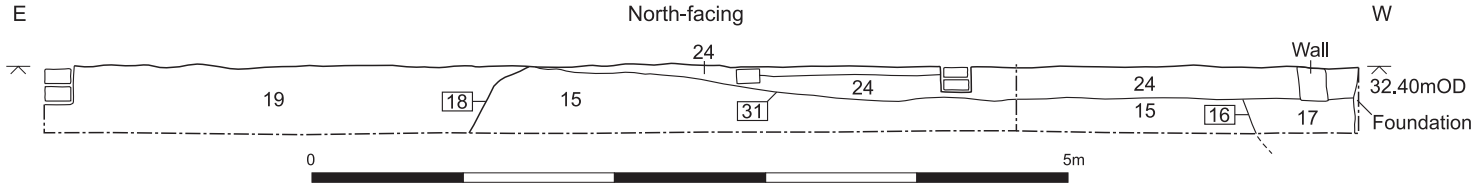


Figure 6. Section 3, north-facing. Scale 1:50

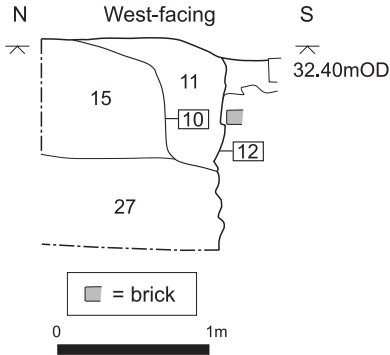


Figure 7. Section 4, west-facing.
Scale 1:50

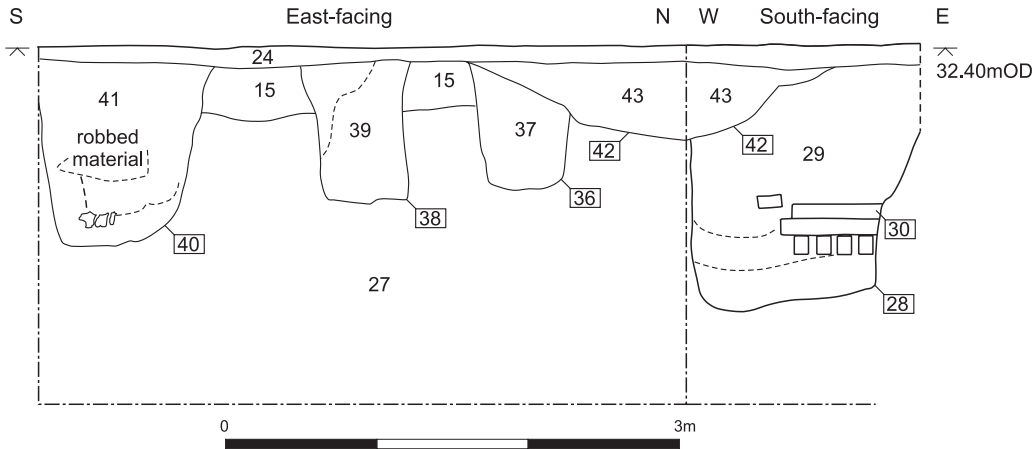


Figure 8. Section 5, east and south-facing. Scale 1:50

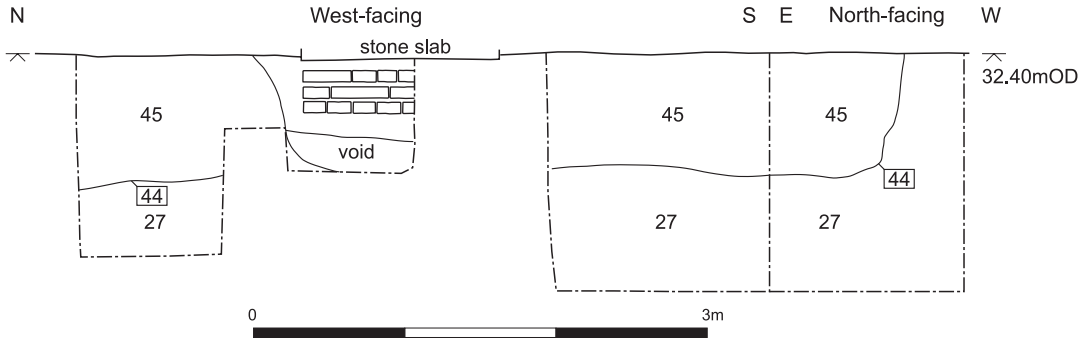


Figure 9. Section 6, west and north-facing. Scale 1:50