

NAU Archaeology

Report No. 1087

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at St Cuthbert's Church,
Thetford, Norfolk**

5914 THD

Michael Boyle, March 2006

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BAU1262

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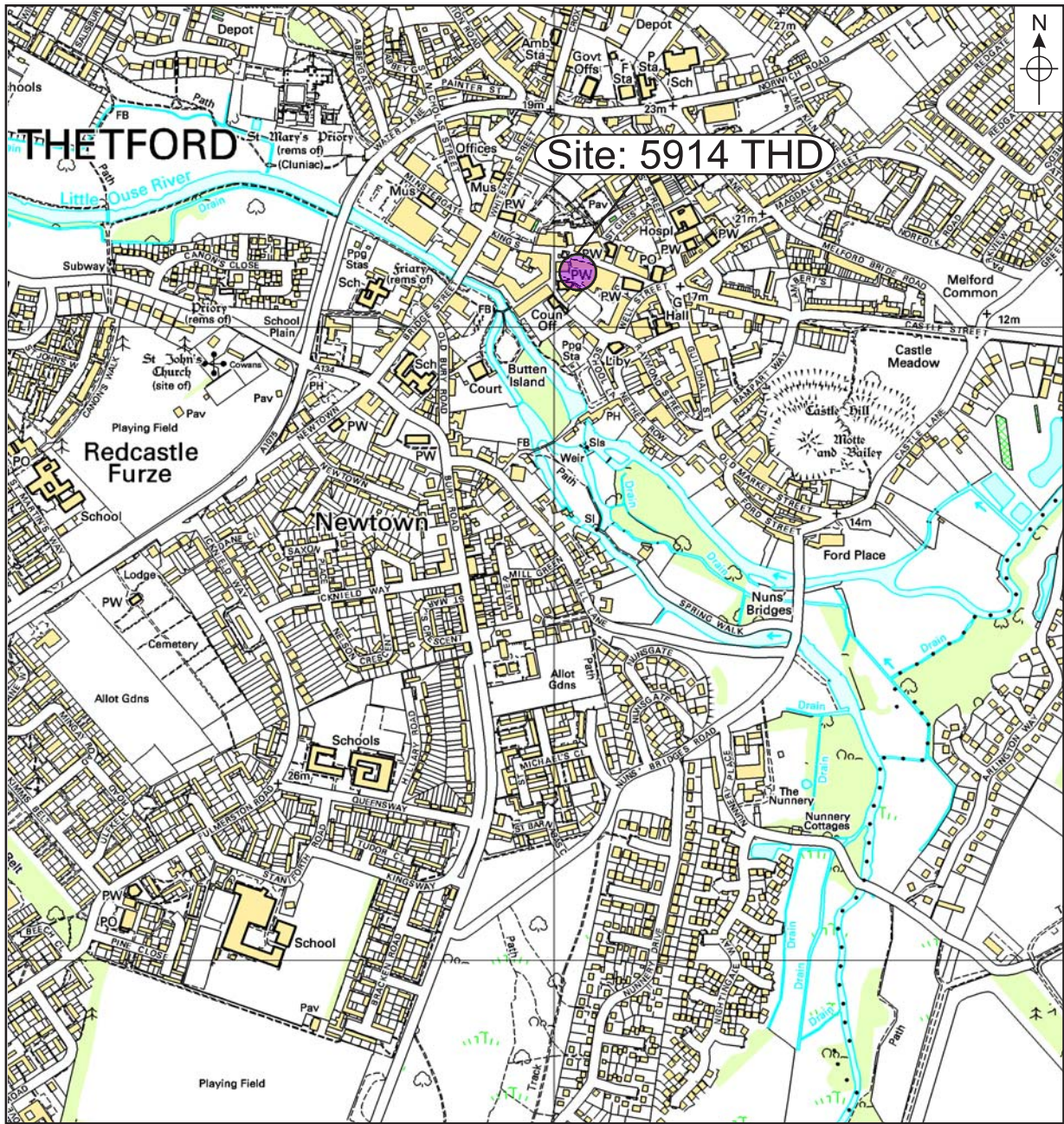


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

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Location: St. Cuthbert's Church, Thetford, Norfolk
District: Breckland
Grid Ref: TL 8713 8306
HER No.: 5914 THD
Date of fieldwork: 12th to 31st January 2005

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at St. Cuthbert's church, Thetford during groundworks associated with the improvement of an open space adjacent to the west of the building. The area had formerly been used as a cemetery.

Displaced tombstones suggest it was in use during the 18th- and early 19th-centuries. An undated brick built burial chamber was uncovered during the works along with a quantity of disarticulated human bone.

1.0 Introduction

(Fig. 1)

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) in order to monitor groundworks associated with improvements to an open space adjacent to St. Cuthbert's Church, Thetford. The space was situated to the west of the church and covered an area of c. 286 sq. m.

This archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: ARJH/28/02/03).

Both the fieldwork and report were commissioned and funded by Breckland Council.

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 lies in an area of East Anglia known as Breckland, a low plateau with long, gentle slopes leading to flat bottomlands. Soils are developed in coversand over chalk-sand drift. Periglacial action has produced striped soil patterns of rendzinas and brown sands on the slopes and polygonal patterns on the plateau. In the bottomlands (where this site is more specifically located) sandy colluvium sometimes develops a striking podzol. The underlying solid geology of the site is white chalk of the Upper Cretaceous period (Funnel 1994).

The area to be developed consisted of a fairly level, low plateau with its northern, western and southern sides sloping steeply down into peripheral drainage gullies some 0.50m below, with paving beyond. The church bound the eastern edge of the site.

The site lay at an elevation of 16.50m OD and appeared to drain freely into the adjacent surface water drains.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

One of only three remaining ancient churches in Thetford, the dedication could well date from before the Conquest, but no evidence for this exists. Having the third highest value in 1291 suggests relative importance and the impression is maintained in 1368 when it had the second highest valuation and was well provided with goods. Medieval documentation mentions the church, and its wealth probably reflects a key position in the town at the focus of routes converging on the Grass Market. St Cuthbert's cross was located opposite (Davidson 1993).

The church has a simple early 13th-century south doorway with shafts, and in the chancel a 13th-century double arched piscina. The western tower was rebuilt after a collapse in 1852. The southern aisle is perpendicular and the northern aisle erected in 1902. The chancel chapel was converted to a vestry in 1820 and extended in 1899. There was general restoration in 1862, the nave was re-roofed in 1902 and the chancel in 1882. The font was moved from St. Mary the Less in 1976. Square with tapering sides, primitive volutes at the corners and with incised bands of scallops in between it looks Norman but could be 17th century (Pevsner and Wilson 2000).

St Cuthbert is an unusual medieval dedication for Norfolk. It is curious that the only other church of the northern English saint was in Norwich and that it lay close to the southern side of Tombland, the market centre of pre-Norman Norwich. If the suggestion for a revised northern perimeter is correct (K. Penn pers. comm.), then St Cuthbert's Church could have been a church near an exit from the town. Like its namesake in Norwich it may also have overlooked an early market place (Dallas 1993, 209).

4.0 Methodology

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during groundworks prior to the creation of a public space incorporating both garden and paved areas with seating.

The Brief required that occasional monitoring of the works by an archaeologist when areas had been stripped of topsoil but prior to the laying of any foundations or base courses, to record any archaeological remains that may be uncovered by the works.

The programme of works to be carried out by the contractors was to be as follows.

The existing flagstones that covered the majority of the site were to be removed along with a 0.08m layer of sand onto which they were bedded. The concrete and flint cobble revetting which supported the northern, western and southern edges of the site was to be broken-up and removed along with a concrete platform situated at the northern end. In addition two mature trees situated at the northern and southern ends of the site respectively were to be cut down and the stumps removed. On completion of removal of all these elements the whole of the surface of the site was to be reduced by 0.25m to allow for re-surfacing.

On completion of this phase of works foundation trenches for a new revetment wall were to be excavated to a depth of c. 0.80m by 1.20m wide along the northern, western and southern perimeters of the site. In addition two short 1.60m long trenches of a similar depth and 0.60m wide were to be excavated in the south-west corner of the site to provide footings for flanking walls for a set of steps giving access to the public space from the pavement. The area between these footing trenches was

to be graded to a gentle slope to provide space for the building of the steps themselves.

It was also stated at this stage that there might be a need to replace several sections of surface water drains that were situated within the area of development (Fig. 2).

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.

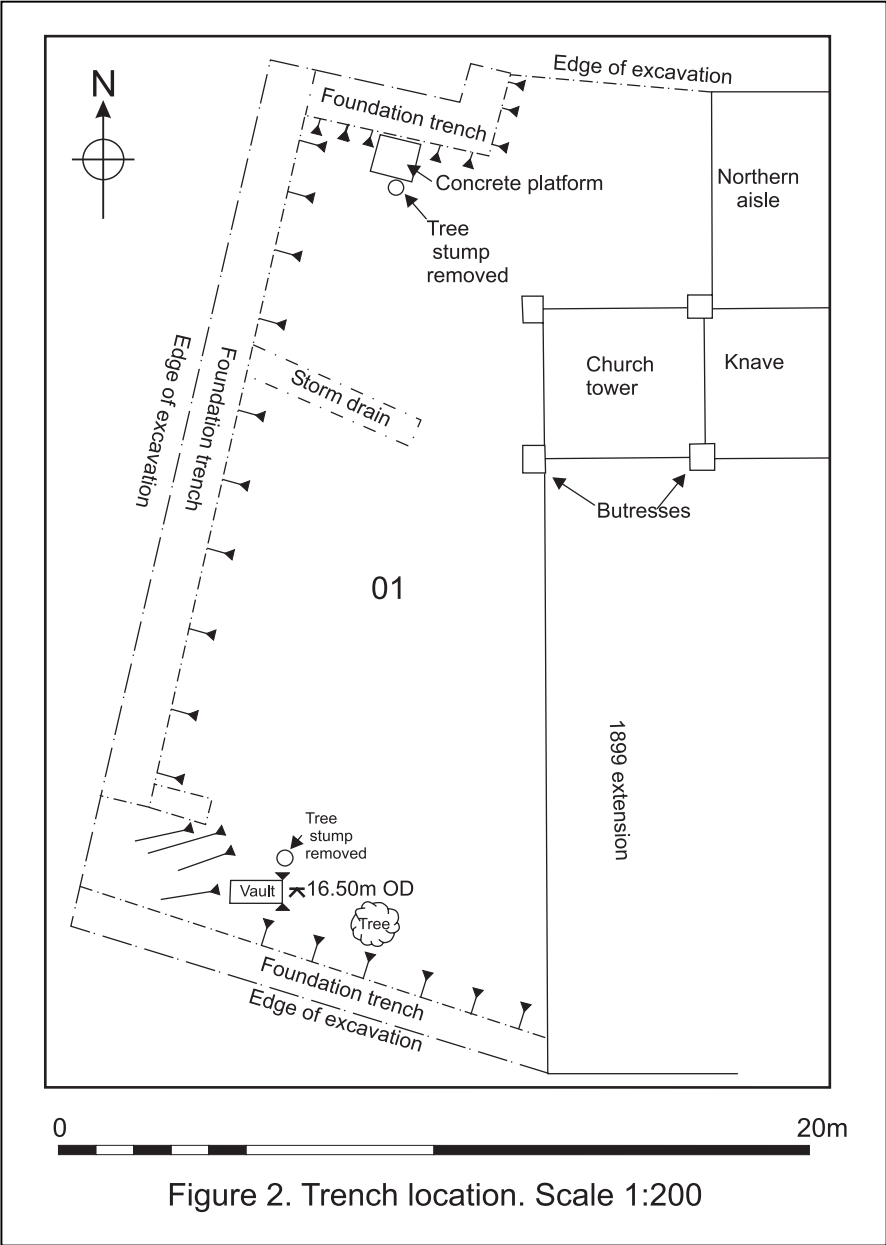


Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:200

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using 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.

Levels were transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark of 17.01m on the north-west corner of the wall of a shopping development adjacent to the west of the north-west corner of the site.

Due to the lack of suitable deposits, no environmental samples were taken.

Access to the site was gained through a small gate in the north-east corner. Conditions were cramped as the contractors had a mini digger and a dumper in the relatively small, fence enclosed area. The weather was often wet and always cold.

5.0 Results

(Fig. 3)

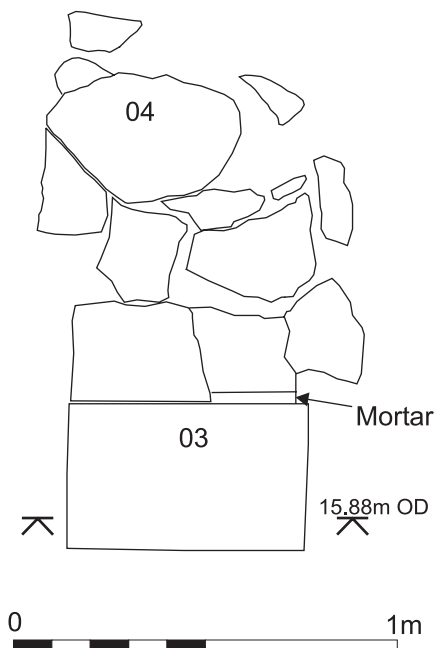


Figure 3. Section of burial vault. Scale 1:20

On removal of the flagstones, layer of bedding sand, concrete platform and concrete and flint cobble revetment at the northern end of the site, a mid greyish brown churchyard/garden soil ([01]) was revealed. The sloping edges of the previously revetted edges of the site provided a free section and it was observed that this deposit extended to their base (0.25m). At this stage a small quantity of disarticulated human bone was collected and bagged.

The next stage of the works involved the removal of the tree stumps. This was done using the mini digger and chains, the resulting hollows producing a further quantity of human bone

that had been disturbed by the tree roots. Subsequent to this operation a finished level for the site was established by removing an average depth of 0.25m from the surface of the churchyard/garden deposit. Again a quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered from the spoil and bagged.

The contractors then embarked on the next phase of works, the excavation, by mini digger, of the foundation trenches for the new revetment wall around the periphery of the site. This was achieved by partially truncating the sloping edges of the site to make them vertical and then excavating a further 0.30m depth of material from their bases in order to obtain the required depth and width. An undetected electricity cable was found along the full length of the western edge of the site within the path of the trench. This was made safe by the relevant authority. A further north-west to south-east aligned trench was excavated to a depth of 1.10m and 0.70m wide in the central western portion of the site in order to replace an existing surface water drainage pipe (Fig. 2). A large quantity of disarticulated human bone was collected from these excavations.

The final phase of excavations was the footing trenches for the flanking walls of the new steps in the south-west corner of the site (Fig. 2). At the north-east end of the southernmost of these trenches a subterranean structure was encountered (Fig. 3). The surface of the feature was hand cleaned and found to consist of a rectangular brick built (four courses) burial chamber ([02]) that measured 1.40m long (east-to-west) and 0.60m wide (north-to-south). The chamber had been sealed using four sandstone flagstones ([03]) on top of which had been placed a number of irregularly shaped chalk blocks ([04]). The mini digger had accidentally dislodged the westernmost flagstone making it possible to observe the interior of the structure which contained the remains of a small wooden coffin, the lid of which had collapsed obscuring any human remains which may have survived. After recording the feature the dislodged flagstone was reinstated and the structure covered with a breathable membrane. A layer of crushed stone was laid over this and finally a large metal plate completed the protective measures. The remainder of the excavations associated with the steps produced a small quantity of disarticulated human bone.

No deposits other than the churchyard/garden soil ([01]) were encountered during the watching brief.

6.0 The Finds

No portable finds were recovered during the watching brief.

7.0 Conclusions

Due to an absence of reliable dating evidence and the limited scope of the excavations observed during this watching brief it was not possible to ascertain at what point in the past this site had begun to be used as a burial plot. There were however clues in the vicinity to suggest when the practise may have ended. Ten tombstones set into the wall of the relatively modern shopping development immediately adjacent to the western edge of the site were very probably either from the site itself when it underwent a change of use from churchyard to public seating area in the recent past or were originally located within the foot print of the shops. The tombstones date from 1765 to 1816. It therefore may be tentatively concluded that the area was being used as a burial ground between these dates and that there is a possibility that the area became full with few burials taking place there after this time.

The absence of any articulated human skeletal remains on the site was due to several factors. Much of the material excavated during the scope of the watching brief had already been disturbed by modern services or works associated with paving/drainage on the periphery. The mature trees that were removed possessed substantial root systems that had disturbed the burials in their immediate vicinity by intrusive growth and on their removal from the ground. A further likely reason was the truncation of earlier graves by later ones. All the human bone that was collected during the watching brief was stored beneath the church to await appropriate reburial by the vicar at a later date.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
01	Deposit	Church yard/garden soil	
02	Masonry	Red bricks	
03	Masonry	Flagstones	
04	Masonry	Chalk blocks	

