

NAU Archaeology

Report No. 1176

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at All Saints' Church,
Besthorpe, Norfolk**

NHER 9137 BES

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Location: All Saints' Church, Besthorpe, Norfolk
District: Breckland
Grid Ref: TM 0657 9562
HER No.: 9137 BES
Date of fieldwork: 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 8th May 2006

Summary

This report presents the results of an archaeological watching brief in the churchyard of All Saints' Church, Besthorpe, to monitor excavations for the installation of a septic tank with associated drainage. Several fragments of medieval pottery were recovered from redeposited topsoil in one of the trenches; otherwise, no features or finds of archaeological interest were observed within the groundworks.

1.0 Introduction

The archaeological watching brief was carried out in the churchyard of All Saints' Church in order to observe the excavation of a hole for a septic tank and drainage trenches.

The watching brief was commissioned by Wearing, Hastings and Norton, Chartered Architects, through John Youngs Ltd of Norwich.

The groundworks were part of a project of renovation for the church, which includes restoration inside the building. This work has been funded in part by National Lottery contributions.

The area affected by the groundworks measured approximately 49m in length, consisting of a line from east to west (within the churchyard), a width of disturbed ground to the north of the church (approximately 5m), and a 2.6m² hole to the south-west of the church.

This archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA Ref: EJR 06/02/06).

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

2.0 Geology and Topography

The underlying solid geology of the area is Upper Chalk overlain by Boulder Clay (mainly of the Lowestoft Till and other Anglian tills) (Funnell, 2005). A yellow sandy clay subsoil was observed to be overlying the Boulder Clay in the deepest part of the excavation. Topsoil in the area of the site varied between sandy silt and organic loam. The site appeared to be well drained overall, with some seepage of groundwater being observed at a depth of approximately 2.4m.

The site is located on a slight rise at 43.60m OD with a benchmark of 44.61m OD on the north-west corner of the church tower, with ground sloping away to the north, west and south.

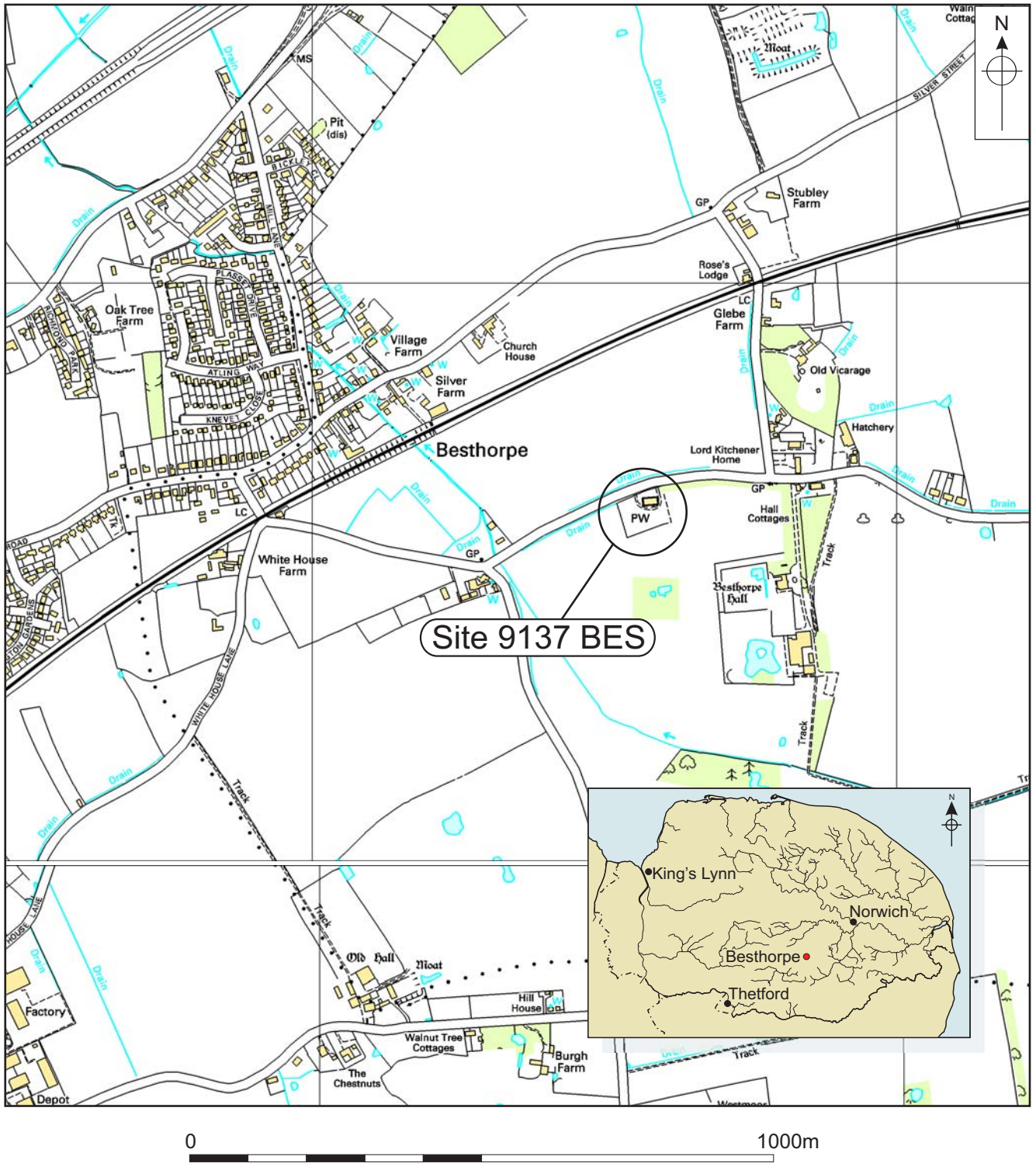


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

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3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

All Saints church is an early 14th-century building, mainly unaltered until restoration in 1876 and 1883, when the roof and some stonework was renewed. Reused Norman stone within the tower indicates the likelihood of an earlier church on the site. A possible 15th-century south vestry was demolished in the 19th century when the north vestry was built. A fine alabaster monument to Sir William Drury (1597–1639) is contained in the east end of the church (Pevsner & Wilson, 2000).

Close by the church to the south-east is Besthorpe Old Hall (Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER) Number 9233), a former manor house and originally a two-storeyed 15th-century building with an original first-floor corridor and alterations dating to the 16th century.

Fieldwalking and metal detecting in the area between the church and hall (NHER Numbers 29171; 31253) has produced evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British habitation through finds of coins, pottery and artefacts, as well as material from the medieval period. To the south and south-west of the church, scatters of burnt and worked flint and pottery have also been noted in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record secondary files.

Previous archaeological work in the area has consisted of fieldwalking and detector surveys by Black Carr Research Group and others, from the early 1990s to date.

4.0 Methodology

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during the excavation of drainage trenches and a hole for a septic tank in the churchyard of All Saints church.

The Brief required that an archaeologist attend all phases of excavation during the groundworks for the project.

The groundworks were excavated using a 360° tracked mini-digger, and, where access was severely restricted, by hand. The trenches were excavated with a 0.35m-wide toothed bucket to an average depth of 0.50m, dropping to 0.70m to the west to account for the necessary fall to ensure flow through the drains. Shingle was laid in the excavated trench and plastic pipes were inserted and linked to provide the drainage system. The overall length of the trench system was approximately 49m from the north-west side of the church to the western boundary of the graveyard.

The hole for the septic tank measured 2.6m² and was excavated to a depth of 2.5m into natural boulder clay.

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 which 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.

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

Access to the site was good and observation was facilitated by the weather being dry and bright.

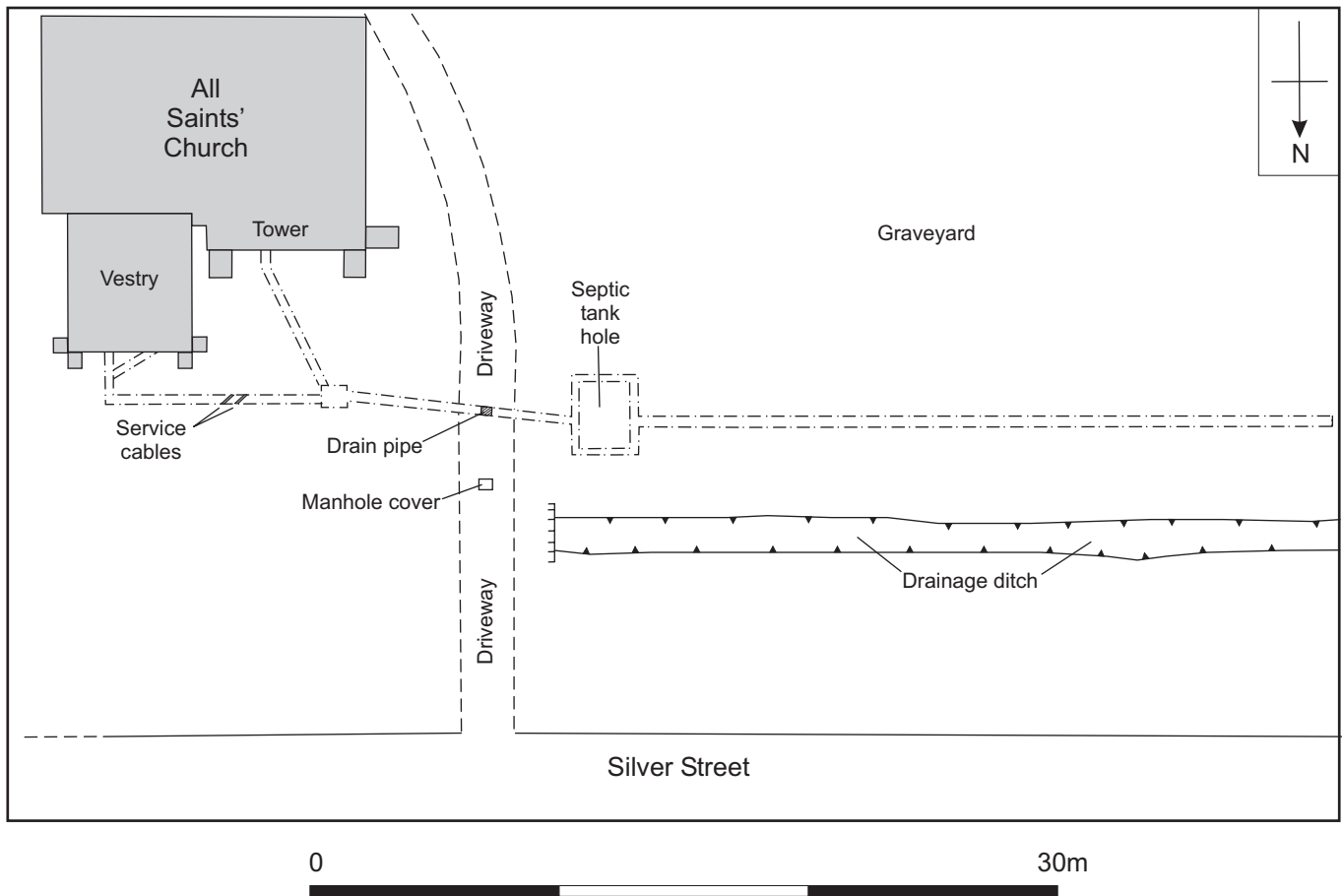


Figure 2. Trench plan. Scale 1:300

5.0 Results

The drainage trenches were begun from the north-facing wall of the church; one from the base of the tower, running north-west, and a sewer discharge pipe from the vestry, running west. Both trenches joined at a manhole 4.3m to the north-west of the tower. The deposit seen in these 0.50m-deep trenches was a mid-brown sandy silt [10], containing fragments of building rubble including brick, tile and flint with chalk and mortar flecks. The trenches were excavated up to the base of the wall of the church and revealed the foundation of the building. The 19th-century vestry wall was built of flint on brick/tiles at ground level, below which was flint in mortar, with one half brick at the very base. The tower foundation, of which 0.40m was exposed, was flint in mortar to the base of the trench with a stone coping extending out at ground level.

The main east-to-west trench was excavated through disturbed ground, following the line of a pre-existing ceramic drain, with an electricity cable and water pipe from the road to the north crossing the line of the trench. This drainage trench was then extended to the west, through the driveway leading to the church from the road. The driveway was composed of gravel over thin tarmac set in a deposit of rubble 0.20m thick, overlaying the topsoil. In the centre of the driveway was a concrete-clad storm drain, the presence of which caused the pipe trench to be excavated beneath it. This had the effect of increasing the fall of the drainage from the church and consequently meant that the septic tank hole had to be increased in depth by approximately 0.50m.

The churchyard topsoil [11], exposed in the sections of the trench in the area of the driveway, was a mid- to dark-brown sandy loam containing small flints and occasional fragments of red tile. Below this was a thin deposit of more sandy silt subsoil [12], with some mixed clay and small flint pebbles at the base of the trench. From an area approximately 0.5m to the west of the church driveway, several sherds of pottery and a fragment of burnt flint were recovered from the loam topsoil spoil [11] from the trench. This was the only pottery recovered from the excavations and was in all probability redeposited.

The hole for the septic tank was located 1.5m to the west of the church driveway. It measured 2.6m² and was excavated to a depth of 2.5m. The deposits observed in section were 0.80m of loamy topsoil [11]; 1m of yellow sandy clay subsoil [13]; and approximately 0.40m of grey-yellow natural boulder clay [14], to the base of the hole. No features were observed in the sections of the hole and no finds of archaeological interest were recovered from the spoil.

The excavated deposits were relatively dry (probably due to a drainage ditch located between the graveyard and the road to the north) apart from the north-east corner of the hole near the base, where groundwater was observed to be seeping through the subsoil at a depth of approximately 2.4m. This slight flow of water, probably originating from the drain in the church drive, later hindered the placement of the septic tank.

The trench for the run-off water pipe from the tank was excavated for approximately 28m to the west of the hole within the restrictions of the graveyard, due to instructions from a local building inspector. This involved painstakingly moving the tracked machine between gravestones and plots to cut the trench first from the east and then the west, with hand-digging supplementing the machining along part of the trench's length.

With skilful manoeuvring by the machine driver no graves were disturbed and no bones observed in either the trench or the spoil. Several fragments of glass and modern ceramic, including a vase base, were observed in the upcast earth but not retained. The trench was excavated through topsoil only, to an average depth of 0.50m, and cut through several substantial tree roots that further impeded progress. The colour and texture of the topsoil, as previously seen, were consistent all along the trench until the last 1.5m of the trench, where a patch of clay subsoil was observed in section, probably indicating backfill from a grave cut. No finds of archaeological interest were recovered from the spoil throughout the length of this section of trench.

6.0 The Finds

A total of seven sherds of pottery, weighing 0.069kg, and a single fragment of burnt flint were recovered from a single context [11], which was a topsoil of probable post-medieval or modern date; hence the sherds were probably redeposited.

The ceramic assemblage consisted of five local medieval unglazed body sherds and a bowl rim, and a single glazed strap handle fragment of a non-Grimston type. All the sherds are of 13th- to early 15th-century date.

The fragment of burnt flint cannot be accurately dated but is consistent with similar fragments as found on known prehistoric sites.

7.0 Conclusions

The trenching through the churchyard directly in front of the vestry and north side of the tower cut mainly through already disturbed ground. This was evidenced by the two services cables and the old drain pipe which was under the line of the new pipe trench; the soil from the trench also contained building rubble. Plans of the church dating from the late 1980s show a series of proposed or actuated drainage trenches surrounding and connected to the outer walls of the church.

The adjoining trench from the base of the tower cut through sandy silt, again with fragments of flint, tile and mortar in the spoil. It is likely that this is the remains of previous building and restoration work of the church fabric.

The topsoil [11] in the area of the driveway and throughout the graveyard to the west, in comparison with that in front of the church, was a darker, more homogenous loamy silt containing frequent roots and occasional small flints. The only pottery recovered during the watching brief came from this soil near the church driveway and due to the nature and usage of the area in all probability represents redeposited material from grave excavations and subsequent soil spreading. The single fragment of burnt flint is consistent with the location of scatters of similar material previously located by fieldwalking to the south and south-west of the churchyard.

The relatively shallow depth of the run-off trench from the septic tank precluded any observation of deposits beneath the thick topsoil. Only where the trench passed close to a grave cut was the disturbed underlying subsoil exposed in section. No finds were made from the spoil of this stretch of trench other than modern vestiges of the graveyard, such as china plant pots and glass jars.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Architects Wearing, Hastings and Norton for their cooperation and interest concerning the watching brief at Besthorpe church. Thanks also go to Pat and Scott from Newell Construction for their interest in the watching brief and their skill and deliberation during the delicate excavations in the graveyard.

The pottery from the site was processed and assessed by Lucy Talbot. Background information for the site was provided by Kenneth Penn. The report was produced by Julie Curl and edited by Sarah Harrison.

Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
10	Deposit	Topsoil	Post-medieval/modern
11	Deposit	Topsoil	Post-medieval/modern
12	Deposit	Subsoil	Post-medieval
13	Deposit	Subsoil	Natural
14	Deposit	Boulder clay	Natural

Appendix 2a: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Period
11	Pottery	7	0.069	Medieval
11	Flint-burnt	1	0.010	Prehistoric

Appendix 2b: NHER finds summary table

Period	Material	Quantity
Prehistoric (500000BC to 42AD)	Flint-burnt	1
Medieval (1066 to 1539AD)	Pottery	7

Appendix 3: Pottery

Context	Total by context of sherd count	Total by context of sherd weight (kg)	Fabric	Form	Quantity	Weight (kg)	Ceramic date
11	7	0.069	LMU	Body sherd	5	0.020	13th–15th century
			LMU	Bowl rim	1	0.016	13th–15th century
			LMG	Jug handle	1	0.033	14th century

Appendix 4: Flint

Context	Total by context of fragment count	Type	Quantity
11	1	Burnt flint	1