

**St Mary's Church Meeting Room,
Bungay
BUN 101**

Archaeological Monitoring Report

SCCAS Report No. 2013/054

Client: Friends of St Mary's Bungay

Author: David Gill

April/2013

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HER Information

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Summary

Archaeological monitoring of the groundworks for the installation of toilets and the construction of a meeting room at St Mary's Church, Bungay produced evidence of a flint footing possibly for a previous version of the building together with an earlier clay floor. Burials that may pre-date the existing nave suggest that the current church encroached over part of the graveyard when it was re-built in the 15th century were also found, along with evidence of the remedial work carried out on the church after the great fire of Bungay in 1688.

In the graveyard an earlier perimeter wall built just inside the current boundary was found. The earlier wall constructed in c.15th century was built over an existing burial without disturbing the skeletal remains and demonstrates how the graveyard edge has fluctuated over time.

1. Introduction

This report provides a record of the archaeological monitoring at St Mary's Church Bungay in which the groundworks for the installation of toilets and the construction of a meeting room were observed. The report has been prepared to a specification issued by Dr Abby Antrobus of Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service and is intended to fulfil the archaeological condition placed on planning permission for the alterations (Waveney District Council application DC/12/0082).

The aim of the monitoring was to make a permanent record of the west end of the nave's interior, record any archaeological deposits disturbed by the alterations and create an archive which could be deposited with the county HER.

The meeting room was to be created by partitioning off the westernmost bay of the nave. It was to be built around a steel frame set on a concrete slab foundation, which required a reduction of the existing floor level. The meeting room would be a free standing structure and not impact on the church fabric. The new toilets were to be built in the ground floor room of the tower, which is located at the west end of the south aisle. Excavations for the toilets involved the laying of drainage pipes from the tower, southward across the graveyard, to the mains sewer in St Mary Street.

The work was commissioned by architects Inkpen Dowine Architecture & Design Ltd on behalf of their clients Friends of St Mary's Bungay and was undertaken between November 2012 and January 2013.

2. The location, geology and topography of the site

St Mary's Church is Grade I listed and is located in Bungay's town centre at TM 33687/89734. It occupies a prominent position within a large rectangular block of land, bordered by the twin axial roads within the town's street pattern. The early medieval market-place and castle (BUN 004) are at its head to the north and the line of the town ditch lies to the south (Fig.1). The earlier round-tower church of Holy Trinity (BUN 020) stands opposite St Mary's to the east and arguably has Anglo-Saxon origins.

The town is situated on (slightly) raised ground above the 10m contour, within an oxbow of the river Waveney; it is contained on three sides by the river and its water meadows

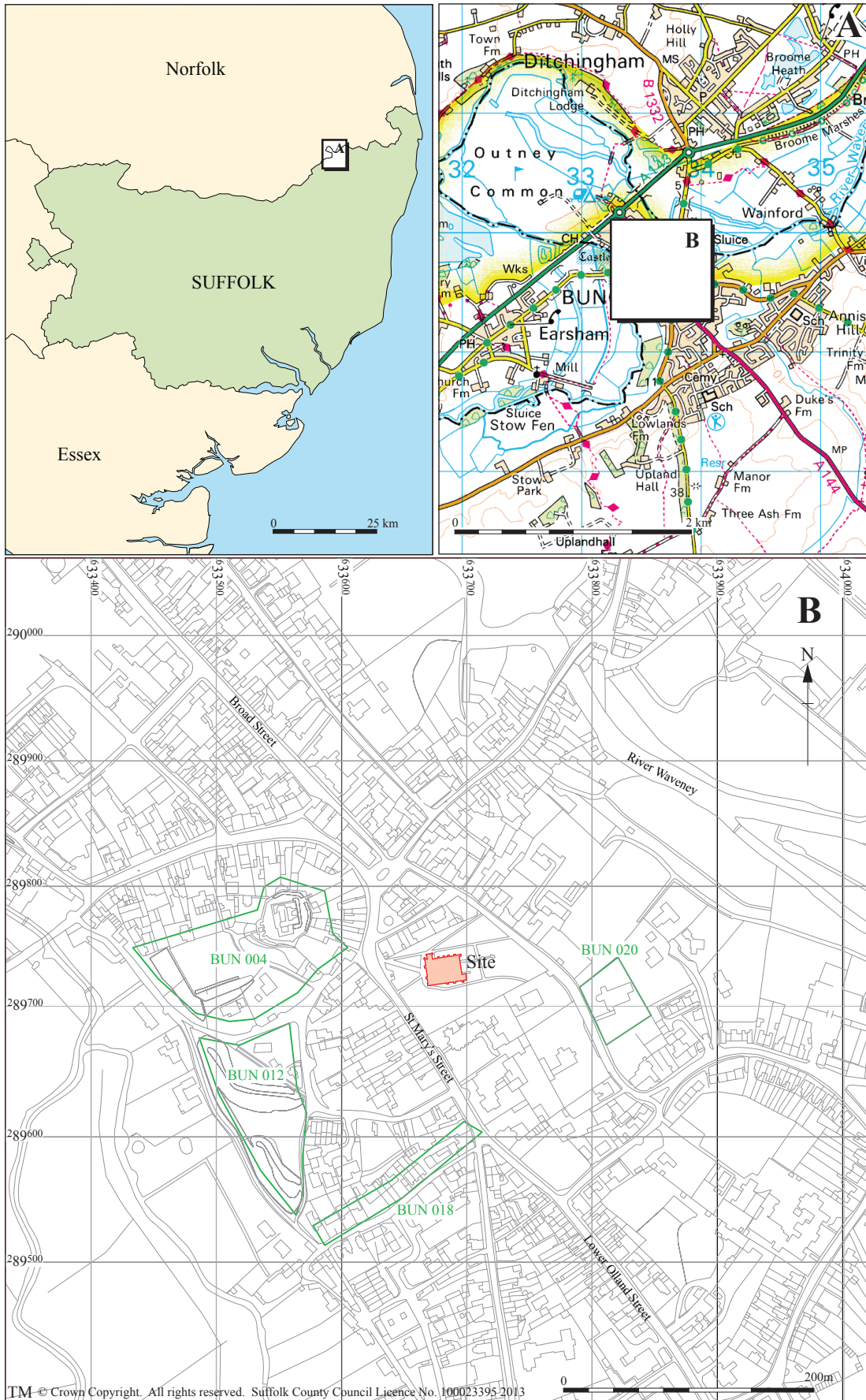


Figure 1. Location of site

and is enclosed by defensive earthworks (BUN 007 and 018). In a good defensible position, it has been a settlement since at least the Anglo-Saxon period. The surface geology is sands and gravels of the river terrace over crag.

3. Archaeology and historical background

St Mary's probably occupies the site of one of the five churches recorded for Bungay in the Domesday Survey of 1086. A Benedictine nunnery, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Cross, was founded here in 1160 by Roger de Glanville and Countess Gundreda, and in AD1287 it was recorded as having a prioress and fifteen sisters. The present church probably represents the parochial nave to which the nun's choir and priory building were attached and which now lie in ruins beyond the east end. The tower, the church's finest feature, stands 90ft high and dates from 1470; the nave dates from the beginning of the 15th century when the 12th century original was replaced. The west end, with its large doors and imposing window rising above, would have formed the main ceremonial entrance to the church. The nunnery was dissolved by the Act of Suppression during the 1530's and was deserted by 1536. The precinct was once enclosed by a wall, fragments of which still stand to 2-3m fronting St Mary's and Trinity Streets.

In March 1688 the church was damaged during the great fire of Bungay which consumed many of the buildings in the town centre including the two market crosses. The fire ruined the south aisle of St. Marys and so badly damaged the rest of the church that extensive rebuilding was required. The town was virtually rebuilt following a public appeal which brought in donations from all over the country and the new town with its fashionable architecture, Assembly Rooms and theatre attracted the Georgian gentry.

Latterly, St Mary's church became redundant and passed into the care of the Churches Conservation Trust in 1981.

4. Methodology

The monitoring archaeologist was in attendance during the all major ground moving operations; observing the reduction of the floor levels in the western most bay of the nave for the slab foundation of the meeting room and the excavation of service trenches within the tower and across the churchyard.

All excavation surfaces and sections were cleaned by hand and scale plans and sections drawn. The site was recorded under a new HER site code, BUN 101, issued at the start of the project.

An OASIS form was completed and a digital copy of the report has been submitted for inclusion on the Archaeological Data Service database (<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/library/greylit>)

5. Results

Meeting room

The excavations for the meeting room took in the complete western bay at the rear of the nave, extending across its entire width between the two pillared arcades and the work involved reducing the ground level by 400mm. Over most of this area of the church the floor was solid and laid to (Victorian) tiles but the east edge of the excavation also encompassed the final three rows of pews which rested on a suspended wooden floor. The site reduction was by mini-digger under the observation of the monitoring archaeologist.

The suspended floor beneath the pews

The suspended floor had been created probably in the 19th century (the date of the pews) by lowering the original medieval (15th century) floor level either side of the central aisle to form an air gap, 26cm deep, which the timber floor spanned. The floor joists were supported around the edge of the void and along its centre on dwarf walls made up of re-used, mainly broken, bricks. The bricks, which included purple-red and gault coloured examples, were a completely mixed collection that had been salvaged from a variety of sources. The bricks were all plain 'handmade' types, about 2³/₈" thick, and are likely to have been made before the 17th century. The walls were built off a base of very hard mortar screed laid over crushed brick and charcoal, which floored the area within the void and the void itself contained a mix of mortar and flint debris which was not considered particularly old.

The north and south edges of the voids ran along the line of each of the colonnades and almost undermined the piers by exposing and cutting into the rough flint work foundations beneath the dressed stone columns. The large flints within the foundations

had become loose, due to mortar decay and those directly below the column were contained by being boxed in by the dwarf walls (Pl. 2).

The base of the carved stonework of the piers was just below the existing floor level indicating that the floor level had barely altered since the 15th century. The exterior ground level however had been built up and was 440mm higher than internal levels, partly burying the moulded stones at the base of the west door jambs and necessitating the building of additional steps to overcome the drop.

Lowering of the solid floor

In the westernmost bay of the nave, the remains of a mortar screed, the bedding for the previous tile floor, were recorded at a depth of 150-200mm beneath the existing surface. This level was consistent with the start of the carved stonework of the columns of the aisle arcades, which were built off bonded flint footings and had no carved stone below floor level; the laying of the current floor over the top of its predecessor raised the floor level only slightly burying the chamfered foot at the base of the column (Pl. 2).

The earlier tile floor had been laid directly over a dark loam-like 'topsoil' (0007); this was a thoroughly reworked deposit which was homogenous over almost the entire excavation area. It contained disarticulated human bone (which occurred commonly), lumps of re-deposited green clay and fragments of 'Tudor bricks'. The layer's deposition pre-dated the church and the building's footings, such as they were, cut through it and the west wall of the nave (built without foundation) lay over it.

The outlines of what appeared to be graves could be just be discerned once the soil level had been reduced; the apparent grave edges were often defined by linear deposits of green clay rubble. At least four grave cuts could be picked out, all at the northern end of the excavations; many others almost certainly existed to the south of these (within the area shaded brown in Fig. 2) but here individual grave cuts could not be made out. Test trenches were excavated to an additional 300mm below the reduced dig level to ensure that the individuals within the graves would not be disturbed by the foundation and, whilst the depth of the test trenches was entirely within on-going grave fill, no articulated bone was actually encountered.

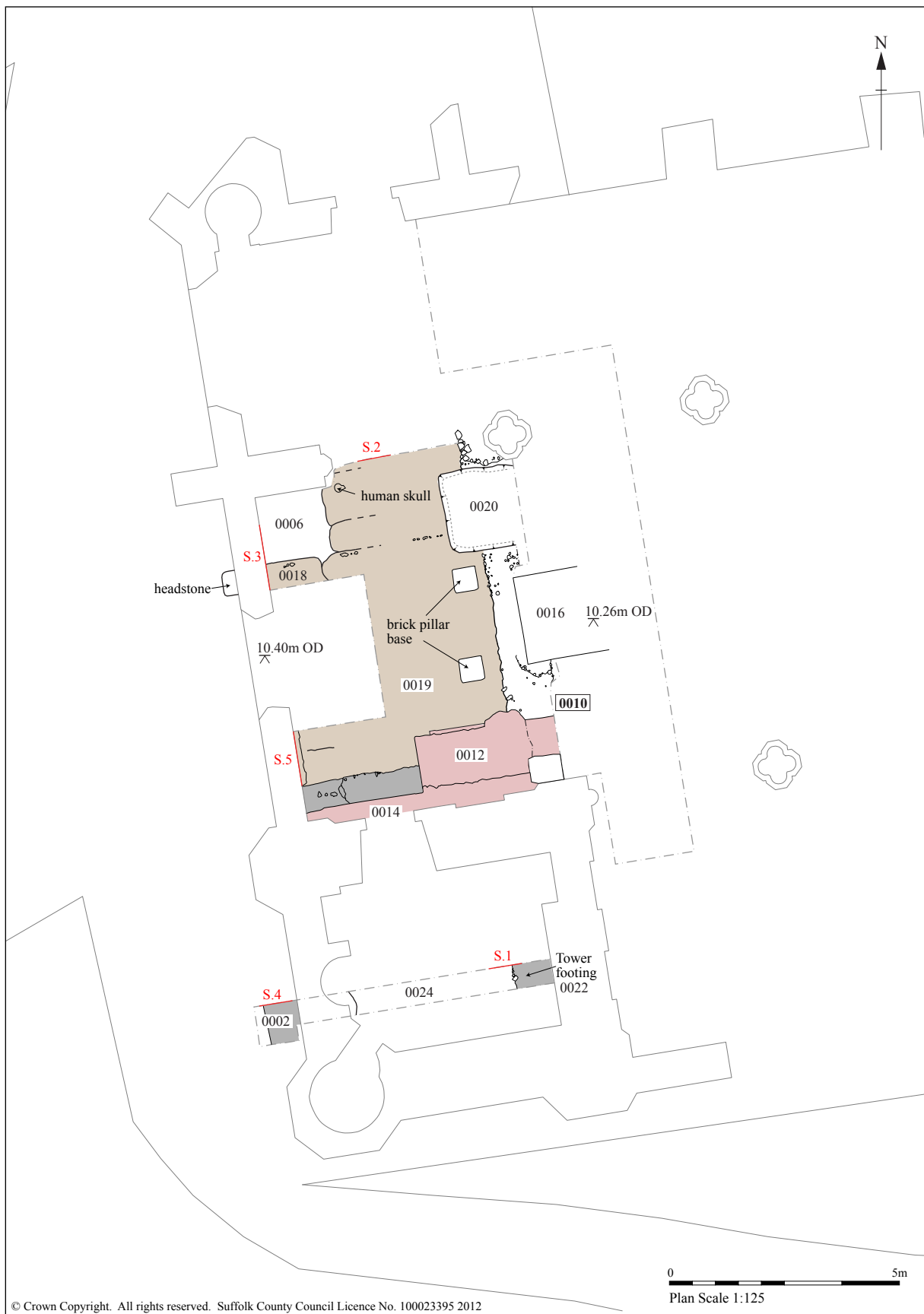


Figure 2. Plan of archaeological features within the west end of the church after the removal of soil layer 0007

A layer of gravel, 0006 (Fig. 2), was recorded in the north-west corner of the site and again in Section 5 in the SW corner. The gravel was well-laid in a flat, compacted surface from which the overlying 'topsoil' layer 0007 came away cleanly. The gravel layer was 100mm thick, cut by the graves and sealed a dark loam (probably the fill of earlier graves) beneath it. The west wall of the nave was constructed, seemingly in an act of faith, without any foundation at all and built directly off what had been the existing ground surface.

The dark 'topsoil' layer 0007, the gravel layer 0006 and grave 0018 extended beneath the west wall nave and were recorded in section (Fig. 3, S3). Interestingly there is a gravestone fixed to the exterior of the west wall at the head of the grave 0018, located inside the church. The grave stone is orientated correctly for the grave and at the right distance from the foot end and, apart from the intervening wall, in every way would appear to be the marker for this grave. The author has never come across this arrangement (where a burial inside a church is marked by an external monument) and it seems more likely that the gravestone may have been moved from elsewhere in the graveyard and its position a coincidence. The gravestone has been weathered smooth but its scrolled top and the faint depiction of a winged skull in bas-relief would indicate a mid 18th century date.

Medieval footings

The remains of a 1.1m wide masonry footing, 0010 (Fig. 2) were recorded at the east side of the excavations running N-S between the NE corner of the tower and the north arcade. The footing was constructed of small flints bonded with white lime mortar which was loose and powdery and interleaved with lenses of soil. The footing pre-dated the other features in the area and was cut by a brick plinth (0014) at the base of the tower and by large disturbance, 0020, on the north side. It was also truncated when the suspended floor was built and cut by grave 0016 in the central aisle.

The end column on the north arcade was slightly off centre of the linear footing, 0010, and whilst the mortar of the foundations below the pier was similar to 0010, the flints were much larger with nodules 150mm across and therefore thought to be a separate build. Whilst colonnades are often built off a continuous linear footing, examples of these run east to west, along the line of the arcade rather than joining opposing

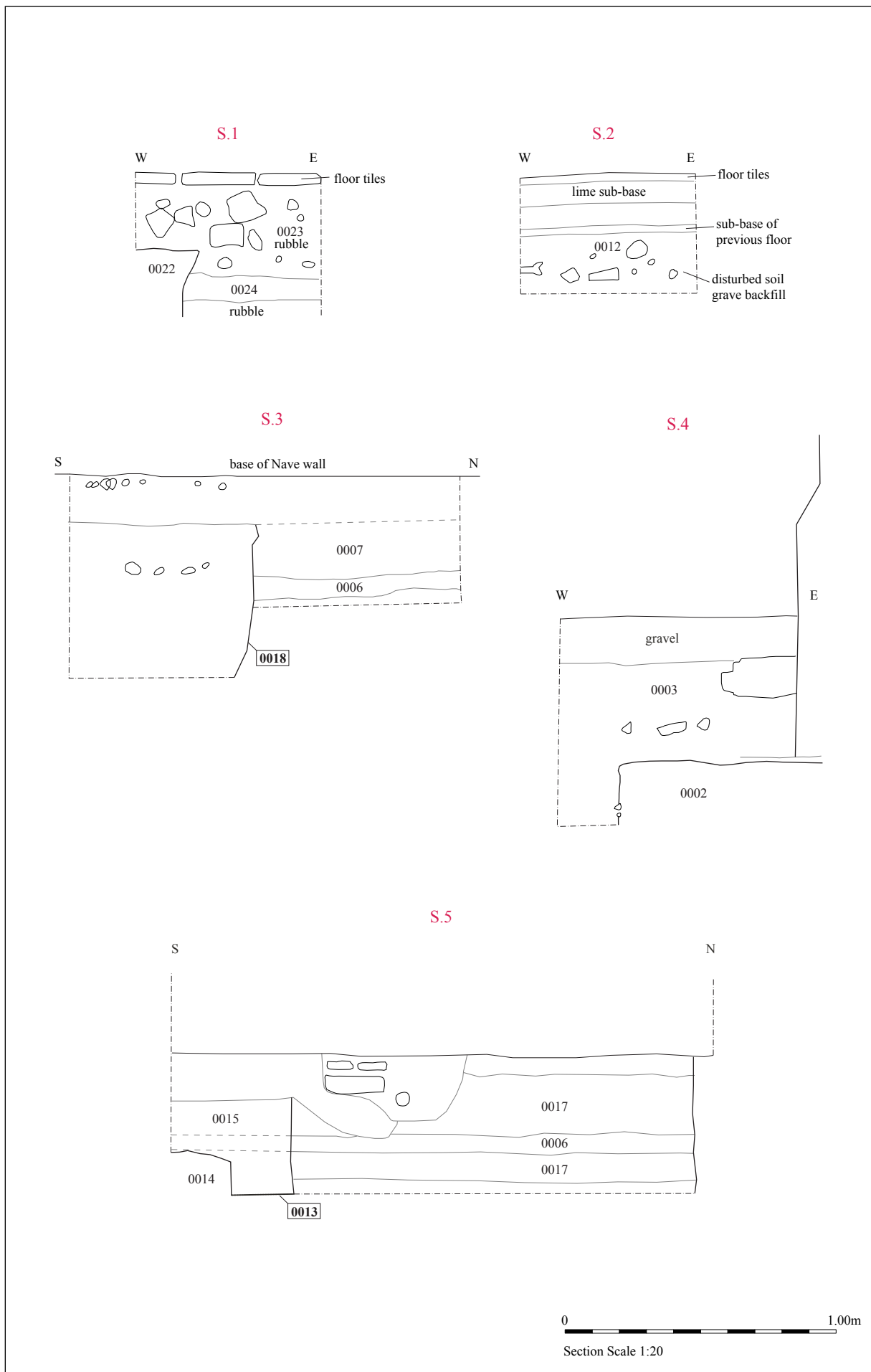


Figure 3. Sections within the west end of the church

columns and this together with the off-set position of the NW pier and the footing would seem to indicate that these two elements are unrelated phases of build.

Along the south side of the excavation was a second bonded flint footing, 0021; this was more robustly built with a stronger lime mortar than footing 0010 and it was thought to be a different phase of work. The footing ran east-west and was probably the footing for the north wall of the tower; similarly wide footings were recorded in excavation beneath the east and west tower walls which were numbered 0002 and 0022. The top surface of footing 0021 was ragged suggesting that it had been truncated and it was unlike the smooth, neatly finished tops of the east and west wall footings.

Post-medieval footings

Consolidating and underpinning the north side of the tower was a wide brick-built plinth which was constructed over and was cut into the top of flint footing 0021 and which was wholly below ground. It projected out 1.2m from the face of the tower wall to form a flat-topped, rectangular platform. The bricks were thought to date from the 18th century and, despite being a below ground feature were worn, suggesting that they might be re-used. At the base of the tower were (at least) four courses of bricks, which underpinned the wall and were rendered over with cement which was moulded to give the appearance of a projecting stone plinth. At the base of the NE corner a well-finished limestone block or slab had been encased in the later brickwork; notably the remains of a limestone block lay on the line of, and possibly related to, the earlier footing 0010.

Service trench in the tower and through the graveyard

The new washrooms were to be located on the ground floor of the tower and the trench for the drain was monitored through the church and the graveyard. Inside the church a buried floor surface, 0024, (Fig. 2) was recorded near the base of the trench (Fig. 3, S1). It was made of compacted, imported green clay and it extended across almost the entire width of the tower. The clay was 100mm thick and laid over a deposit of gravel and brick/tile rubble; it was cut at the east end by the footings of the tower (0022) and at the west by a large rubble filled pit. The clay was buried beneath a thick rubble layer of broken bricks (0023) which had been bonded with a cementitious mortar. The bricks were similar in both appearance and mortar type to those seen underpinning the tower's north wall. The surface of the green clay floor was 400mm below the existing pavers and lower than the 15th century floor level in the nave.

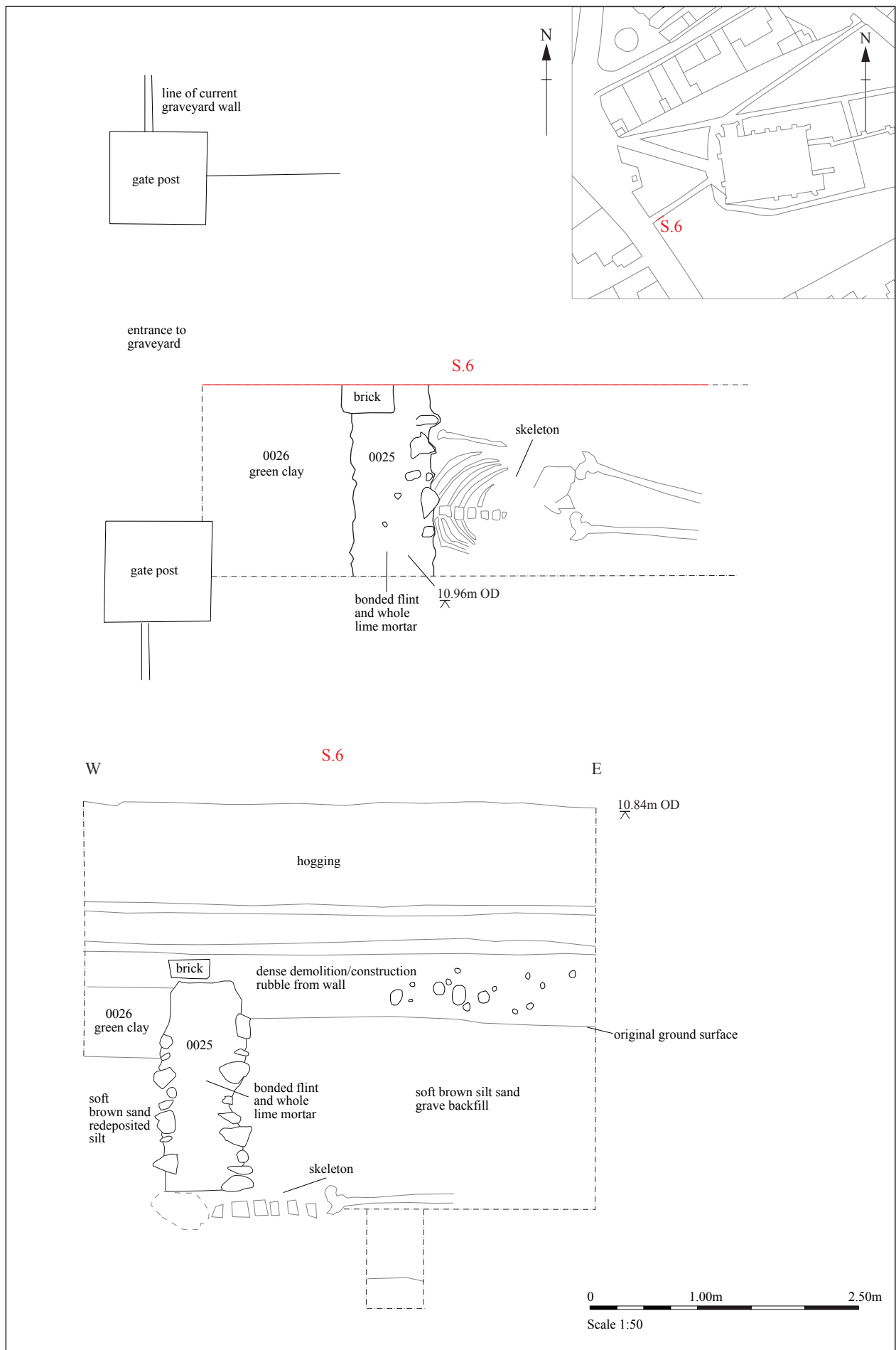


Figure 4. Plan of section of former graveyard/precinct wall and burial at west end of the service trench

The drain trench cut through the west wall of the tower; the bottom of the wall was 600mm below the external ground surface and built off a solid footing (0002) which stepped out from the face of the wall by 700mm (Fig. 3, S4). It was cast, in the manner of concrete, in flint and (?)lime and was very hard. The backfill around the footing was a dark loam, 0003, which included Tudor brick fragments and green clay, possibly displaced from the floor inside the tower. A single sherd of Glazed red-earthenware, probably a jar or chamberpot which dated to the 16th-18th century, was the only find recovered from soil layer 0003.

Through the graveyard the pipe-trench followed the edge of the existing path and was cut through the backfill of graves but was sufficiently shallow to avoid disturbing any intact burials. At the west edge of the graveyard the footing for a former precinct or graveyard wall (0025) was recorded 600mm inside the existing boundary (Fig. 4 S6). The flint and mortar footing was 300mm thick and was truncated 700mm below the current ground surface. Above ground the wall had been built of bricks and a single example remained bonded to the top of the footing. The brick was a soft, plain handmade red; it was 1½" thick and probably dated to no later than the 15th century. West of (outside) the wall was a thick layer of green clay, 0026, the surface of which coincided with the change to brick on top of the footing and on the inside of the wall was a spread of rubble, either from the building or demolition of the wall confirming that this level was once the ground surface.

The wall had been built over an articulated skeleton which was recorded at a depth of 1.4m. The burial was intact but the base of the wall was within a few millimetres of the bone, covering the head and shoulders of the individual; the skeleton was planned but left in place.

6. Discussion

The monitoring has produced a record of hitherto unknown evidence that relates to the past history of the church and its possible predecessor. There are two indications of the previous building: the flint footing that runs across the width of the central aisle and the remnant of a clay floor within the tower. The clay floor cut by the footings of the tower is at the same level as the gravel surface recorded in the north-west corner of the excavation. Both the gravel and clay surfaces are c.400mm below the 15th century floor

level and suggest that the ground level was raised prior to the present church being built.

The apparent burials were initially thought to pre-date the existing nave and it was considered that the church encroached over part of the graveyard when it was re-built in the late 14th and 15th centuries. The clear evidence that one of the graves continued beneath the west wall would seem to support this, together with the absence of post 15th century finds from the soil layers overlying the graves. The graves themselves were cut through a pre-existing gravel (exterior) surface but also contained clay in their backfill similar to the clay surface recorded in the tower which may suggest that they had been dug through a similar type, or a continuation of this floor; the floor of a structure that predates the current church(?). The existence of an 18th century headstone affixed to the exterior face of the west wall which seems to mark on the grave inside the building also challenges the hypothesis that these are pre-14th century burials but it seems unlikely (and slightly disrespectful) that the burial would have been manoeuvred partly under the wall during internment.

The footing which runs across the central aisle is thought to be part of an earlier building but the top of the footing is higher than the clay floor and gravel surfaces of the previous phase.

The church was known to have been damaged during the great fire of Bungay and the brick underpinning of the tower may relate to the remedial work carried out at this time. Many of the bricks used in the later structures within the church, including the dwarf walls of the suspended floors, use second hand brick that date to around the period of the fire and may reflect an abundance of rubble that was available following the rebuilding of the town.

In the graveyard the discovery of an earlier perimeter wall built just inside the current boundary demonstrates how the graveyard edge has fluctuated over time. The earlier wall clearly did not closely follow the line of its predecessor as it impinged on a pre-existing burial when it was constructed in c.15th century.

Appendix 1 Plates



Plate 1. Area of excavation showing the dwarf walls that support the suspended floors exposed.



Plate 2. Flint foundation beneath the NW pier showing the absence of worked stone beneath the existing floor. The columns were built from floor level at the beginning of the C15th since when the floor levels have remain unaltered.



Plate 3. Steps down into the church showing the change in internal and external ground levels. The steps are later additions constructed to overcome the rising external levels.



Plate 4. Possible grave 0018 cutting gravel surface beneath the west wall of the nave. The grave is cut from 200mm below the wall which is constructed with foundations.



Plate 5. Footing 0010 facing south, the scale positioned parallel to footing against its western (right) edge. The footing is cut through by the brickwork at the far end and later disturbances.



Plate 6. Disarticulated human remains with soil layer 0007 at the west end of the nave.



Plate 7. Burial on the south boundary of the graveyard underneath the footings of the former boundary wall, facing south



Plate 8. Brickwork (0014) underpinning the north wall of the tower. Alongside the scale is a flint footing, probably the original medieval foundation for the tower.



Plate 9. Excavation against the external face of the tower's west wall showing flint flushwork built off a substantial footing. Pottery dating to between C16-18th was recovered from the dark soils in the trench to the left of the footing.

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