

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING REPORT

SCCAS REPORT No. 2013/137	Parish: Polstead
St Mary's Church, Polstead. Installation of an extension to the drains drain to the west of the	Planning Application No.: N/A
	OASIS No.
	HER Event No.: PLS 044
Address:	Grid Reference: TL 9888/3808
	Number of Site visits: 2
	Date of visits: 22-23 October 2013

Project Background

A short run of new drains were laid within the graveyard of Polstead church. The drain was to run from the west end of the north aisle, where a kitchen area was to be sited, to the detached toilet block on the south side of the church where it connected into the existing drainage system (Fig.1).

The church is one of the most interesting in the county. Set on an escarpment overlooking the Box Valley, the sites early Christian significance is implicit in St Cedd's reputed visit to preach here in the 7th century and certainly the church constructed at the end of the 12th century seems to respect the importance of this place. The nave and chancel date to the end of the Norman period (c.1200 AD) and are innovative in so much that arguably they make use of the earliest bricks (after the Roman period) produced in England. The bricks were used in primary features in the church including the arcades that divide the nave from the two aisles and the dressings to the, now blocked, clerestory and chancel windows. The original Norman side aisles were replaced in the 14th century but the layout of the building we see today must, to some degree, echo that of the original. The original Norman church's extended layout, together with its imposing west door (now enclosed within the later tower), is more sophisticated than the simple two cell plan of the smaller parish churches of the time and is reminiscence of a Minister church (albeit in miniature).

The line of the drain ran to the west of the church between what had been the ceremonial west front of the Norman building and the site of the Gospel Oak where St Cedd is believed to have sermonised. The current church is likely to have replaced an earlier one and therefore the trench had the potential to expose evidence relating to the precinct of the Norman church or evidence of its predecessor.

Results

The trench was excavated in the presence of the monitoring archaeologist. The route of the drain trench was plotted and representative sections of the trench sides were drawn at two places along its length and at the junction with the north aisle (Fig 1). The trench was 600mm wide and the rising ground meant that the trench became progressively deeper towards the north end. Where the drain was to enter the aisle the trench, was 1m deep whilst at the southern end it was only 0.4m.

The excavations demonstrated that the soil around the western end of the church had been completely re-worked as a result of centuries of grave-digging and, as a consequence, none of the original soil profile or archaeological evidence remained. The pipe trench was excavated wholly within grave backfill and natural sand was only seen at the base of the trench at its deepest point alongside the north aisle. Beneath the topsoil the soil profile is composed of two distinct horizons; a pale loose grey sand (0001) over a compacted yellow-brown silt (0002). Broken and disarticulated human bone was common throughout both soil layers and the lower of these horizons was interpreted as being composed of the backfills of innumerable intercutting graves. Within the two horizons, the soil was homogenous and only three individual graves, which cut through both, could be identified (S2 Fig 2). The stratigraphic evidence identified these three graves as the latest burials in the area and none were marked with headstones.

Discarded building materials relating to the church were found within the upper fill around and to the south east of Manhole 1. This material included whole floor tile and bricks dating to the early post medieval period (C16th-18th) and an extensive spread of large flints (0004). The stones were 'building' flints that had clearly been selected for size and were thought to be the remains of a stockpile of material brought to site for church repairs; the flints had no mortar attached so had remained unused. The flint pile predated and was cut through by an unmarked grave (0005) which produced an ornate Victorian iron coffin handle suggesting that the stones have lain here for at least 100 years. At the north end of the trench early post medieval brick rubble and lead smelting waste (0005) was recorded at the interface between layers 0001 and 0002 (S3 Fig. 2); typically when church windows were replaced the lead kames, that secure the glass, were often recovered on site by re-melting them in temporary hearths and the evidence suggests that this has occurred here.

At the base of north aisle wall the trench uncovered a substantial buried footing (S3 Figs

1-2 and Pls. A-B), this was made from small and medium-sized brown flint cobbles, tightly packed and bound with a sandy mortar. The flint type contrasted with the decorative large, black, knapped flint which made up the lower part of the above ground wall. The face of the footing projected 700mm forward of the line of the aisle west wall and, because of this together with the change in the character of the flint and its general robust nature, the footing was initially interpreted as possibly the remains of an earlier wall. Examination of the footing's core in the hole cut through the wall however, indicated that aisle wall and the footing were a single phase of construction. The surrounding soil up to the face of the footing was disturbed and there was no indication of a cut trench into which the footing was built.

The top of the footing was c.650mm-700mm above the floor level inside the north aisle. The floor levels inside the church have however been lowered by between 150-400mm since the church was first built so that the carved 'foot stones' of the Norman arcade piers and west door are now perched above the ground (Pls C and D); the exposed foundations beneath them having been dressed with tiles then plastered to give the illusion of a finished face.

During the monitoring the floor beneath some of the north aisle pews was being replaced and this exposed a section of well-worn ceramic tile floor. The tiles were plain and post medieval dating to between the 16th-18th centuries; similar tiles have been observed in the south aisle (Pl. C).

Discussion

The results of the monitoring failed to find any evidence relating to an earlier building but highlighted the intriguing difference between floor/ground levels inside and outside the church. The indication that the upper layer was cut only by three graves¹ implies that this soil was deposited, raising the ground level after most of the burials occurred. The current exterior ground level is compatible with the 14th century footing of the north aisle and the plinth of the similarly dated tower, but is interesting to note that the former Norman floor is at approximately the same level as the change in soil type observed in the trench. It is quite a step up from the Norman-built west door to the current one so is it possible that the change in soil seen in the trench represents the former ground level? And was the

¹ Only three identifiable graves cut the upper soil on the line of the trench, but the graves marked by headstones in the area, which date from the early 19th century and later must also have done so.

deposition of the upper soil is related to the works associated with the remodelling of the church? A survey of the levels of the architectural features in and around the church would make an interesting study to establish how and when the ground levels have been altered.

Recorded by: David Gill

Date: 20th June 2013



A) Footing beneath the west wall of the aisle. The base of the footing was c.1m below the existing ground surface and sat on natural sand; the whole depth of the footing was exposed within the trench footing. The orange pipe is part of the *french drain* that surrounded the church at the base of the wall and cut into the top of the footing



B) Footing seen from above showing how far it projected forward of the wall. The brickwork is a later addition cemented to the top of the medieval flintwork to consolidate the footing.



C) Worn floor tiles in the north aisle exposed during repairs to the timber floors. The large tile were unglazed earthenware dating to 16th-18th century. The tiled surface is below the level of Norman stone work at the base of the piers indicating that the floor had already been lowered by the time the tiles were laid.



D) Pier base of the Norman arcade illustrating by how much the floor has been lowered.



E) Column bases, part of what was once the west and main door of the church which is now enclosed in the 14th century tower. Outside the tower the ground level is higher than this and the west door of the tower is reach by a short flight of steps. .