

All Saints Church, Mendham  
New meeting room  
MDM 132

**Archaeological Evaluation Report**

SCCAS Report No. 2015/003

**Client: Mendham Parish Council c/o Haward Architects**

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January/2015

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## HER Information

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**Site Code:** MDM 132 (ESF22726)  
**Site Name:** All Saints Church, Mendham. New meeting room  
**Report Number** **2015/003**  
**Planning Application No:** **1577/14**  
**Date of Fieldwork:** **January 2015**  
**Grid Reference:** **TM26965 82962**  
**Oasis Reference:** **suffolkc1-199597**  
**Curatorial Officer:** **Dr. Abby Antrobus**  
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**Client/Funding Body:** **Mendham Parish Council**

Digital report submitted to Archaeological Data Service:  
<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/library/greylit>

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Prepared By: David Gill  
Date: January 2015



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## **Summary**

An evaluation in the graveyard of All Saints Church, Mendham was undertaken to assess the site of a proposed meeting room; a detached new building that was to be linked to the north aisle. Mendham is of particular significance as it is believed to have its origins as an Anglo-Saxon episcopal site.

The results of the excavation showed that the ground has been completely disturbed by a millennium of grave-digging. Although there are few remaining grave-markers left in this part of the churchyard, the site seems to have been used for burial throughout the 19th century when deeper interments became the norm. These late burials are closely spaced and have removed any potential evidence relating to the site's early history; either as an Anglo Saxon episcopal site or the shallower graves of a medieval cemetery.





## **1. Introduction**

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Planning permission (planning ref 1577/14) has been given for the construction of a meeting room on the north side of All Saints Church, Mendham (Pl. 1). The meeting room will take the form of a separate annex-building that will be joined to the aisle of the medieval church by a linking vestibule, enclosing and making use of the existing north door (Pl. 2). The church grounds have high archaeological importance as they are thought to relate to an Anglo-Saxon episcopal site; in addition the proposed building will in all probability be located in an area of buried human remains.

The planning consent is conditional on the implementation of a programme of archaeological investigations designed help minimise the impact of the development on the potential archaeological site and to mitigate for the loss of any archaeological deposits. The first stage of this programme was an evaluation of the site by the excavation of trial trenches. The excavations were designed to assess the site for archaeological deposits and record their depths. The working premise is that the meeting room will be constructed on a raft foundation c.400mm deep; the details however have not yet been finalised and it is intended that the evaluation results will be used to inform the ultimate foundation design.

The work was commissioned by Haward Architects on behalf of Mendham Parish Council and the fieldwork completed in January 2015.

## **2. Site location, geology and topography**

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The church is located at TM 2696 8296 and lies on the west side of the village alongside the River Waveney at a crossing point (Fig.1). It is positioned on the edge of the floodplain and below the 15m contour. The surface geology is clay of the Lowestoft Formation with sand and gravels of the river terrace.

## **3. Archaeology and historical background**

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The fabric of the present church (MDM 008) dates from the 14th century but the site origins are likely to be earlier. Two churches are mentioned in the entry for Mendham in Domesday and in his will the Anglo-Saxon bishop 'Thodred of London' (AD 945-951) makes mention of the minster at 'Mynham'. A Cluniac priory, secluded within Mendham Marshes 1.3km to the south west, was founded c.1155 and in 1385 the prior provided a

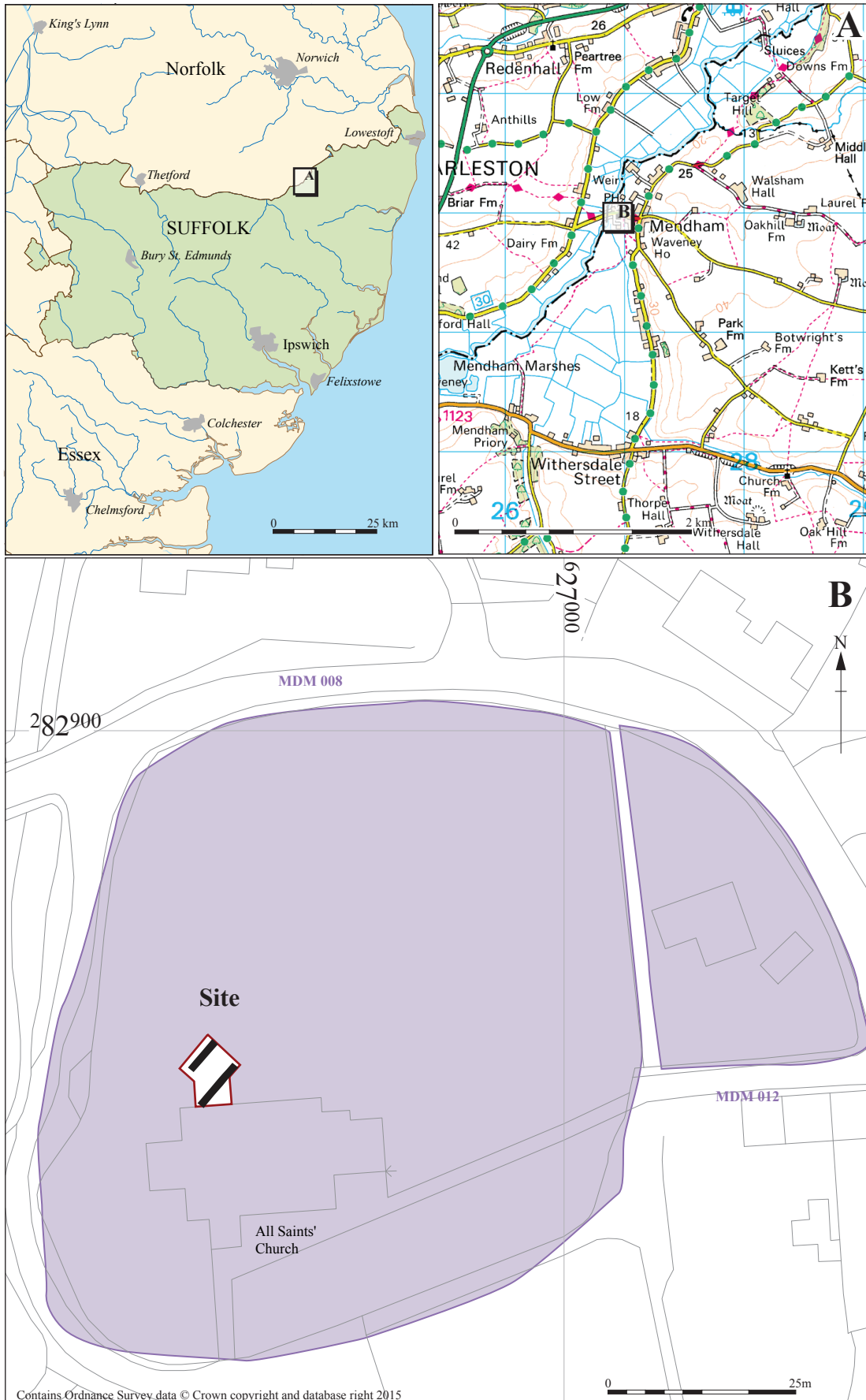


Figure 1. Site location and trench plan, showing extent of churchyard (purple area).

chaplain to serve in the 'private' chapel of St Mary which was located on the east side of the churchyard. The chapel became a chantry where masses could be said in perpetuity for its dead patrons. These institutions were abolished in 1547 and following a long period of secular use the building was finally demolished at the start of the 19th century. Flint footings and human remains (MDM 012) were discovered at the chapel/chantry's location during the construction of 'Little Mead' (Fig. 1).

The church's tower dates to the 14th century and the main body of the building to the 15th century. The church was heavily restored in the late 19th century including the complete replacement of the chancel, the re-fenestration of most of the windows and extensive repairs to the roof. Inside the church, the chancel arch is, unusually, formed by a pair of arch braces; similar arches have been recorded at Denham and Ilketshall St John and are the only known examples in the county.

## **4. Methodology**

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Two trenches were excavated by machine within the proposed footprint of the new meeting room. The machine was fitted with a toothless bucket 1m wide and worked under the supervision of an archaeologist to remove the topsoil down to a level where the cuts of graves were visible. Hand-excavated sondages were used to sample the graves to determine the depth of any articulated skeletons; disarticulated human bone was collected and re-interred when the trenches were backfilled.

The trenches were recorded in plan and section according to the method statement set out in the *Written Scheme of Investigation* prepared before the commencement of the project (Appendix 1). The site records have been archived under the HER site code MDM 132 and an OASIS record (suffolkc1-199597) has been compiled.

## **5. Results**

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A plan showing the position of the trenches is presented in Figure 2 and described by trench below. The trenches were located alongside the north aisle; a neat grass path bordered this side of the church and within the development area the path was bounded by a short linear bank formed from discarded spoil from grave-digging and, on the west side, a tangle of shrubs and a large yew tree. In the graveyard to the north of the site, all the headstones had been relocated and aligned along the western margin to form, what



Figure 2. Trench plan

is in effect, a memorial stockade; only the large, stone tomb-chests have been left to mark their intended graves.

The finished floor level (FFL) of the new building is equivalent to the threshold step of the north door; this was used as a datum or temporary bench mark (TBM) during the evaluation and all depths quoted in the report are measurements below TBM (BTBM). The ground surface was at its highest closest to the church and dropped slightly (by c.150mm) at the north end of the development area.

## Trench 1

Trench 1 extended from the north wall of the aisle, just to the west of the door and was 6.50m long (Pl. 3). A storm-water drain pipe was encountered at 370mm below the TBM and at the base of the north aisle wall was a modern 'French-drain'; a gravel filled trench 400mm deep which surrounded the entire building to combat damp. The bottom of the north aisle wall was found at 650mm (BTBM), the bonded fabric was built over a sand/gravel filled footing trench. The stratigraphic sequence seemed to suggest that the upper part of the backfill of the footing trench post-dated the disturbed soils (the result of grave digging) within the churchyard. This suggested that the church footing and the base of the wall had been revisited relatively recently probably when the church was comprehensively refurbished at the end of the 19th century.

Away from the church wall the remainder of the trench was cut through the soft, disturbed soil backfill of centuries of grave-digging. The trench was excavated in general to a depth of 850mm (BTBM) without encountering undisturbed articulated skeletons or geological soil. Individual grave cuts could be identified from a depth of 450mm (BTBM) and four E-W aligned graves were recorded and are shown as the darker fills in the figure 2 plan; the nearest visible grave to the church was 2m from the aisle wall. The visible graves represented only the final phase of grave digging in this area and had been cut through the infill of previous burials (shown as paler brown on the plan). The later grave backfill included patches of green clay brought up from the underlying geology indicating that the final burials were the deepest and probably

conformed to modern burial practise. Sondages were hand-dug in two places to 1.10m below TBM without finding intact human remains or the grave bottoms.

Loose, disarticulated human bones (Pl. 6) from disturbed earlier graves occurred commonly across the entire length of the trench and included a mandible with an enviably full set of teeth which were caries-free, generally a sign of the sugarless diet of the pre-industrial age, but worn low from eating stone-ground bread. In addition to the bones the finds assemblage comprised a sherd of local medieval unglazed pottery (a Norfolk-type) dating to the 12th-14th century, a base of an internally green-glazed, late medieval-transitional pot (15th-16th century) and a body sherd of green-glazed pottery with a slipped lattice decoration of a similar` date.

Large (fist-sized+), rounded flint cobbles occurred with notable abundance throughout the trench including the backfill of the later graves. The flints are not a feature of the clay geology of Mendham and are likely to have been brought to the site (no doubt extracted from the gravel terraces along the course of River Waveney) as building materials for church. There was no evidence of attached mortar, or that the flints had ever been bonded into a wall and it seems likely that the flints are the remains of a redundant stockpile that became worked into the ground. Major building campaigns were completed in 1868, when a restoration of the body of the church was undertaken, and during the 1880's when the chancel was renewed. The flints could well be associated with either of these events and, if so, would date the visible graves to after this time.

## Trench 2

Trench 2 was positioned parallel to, and was just inside, the line of the north west wall of the proposed new room and was 5.6m long (Pl. 4). The ground here was the rough, meadow-like grassland of a country churchyard and the south west end of the trench was amongst shrubs; the ground surface at the NE end of the trench was 280mmm below the new-build's intended finished floor level (FFL).

The upper soil level in this area was made up of dark, fine textured topsoil, which was 500mm deep. The soil gave the appearance that it had been reworked, or put through a riddle, and was completely stoneless. This soil may have been imported, brought in to raise the ground level and it sealed an underlying topsoil that, by contrast, was full of

large building-flints and a sparse rubble of early post-medieval brick (15th-16th century) and pammments. This buried stony layer was encountered across the entire trench length, at depths of 650mm at the NW end and 750mm (BTBM) at the SE, and was 200mm thick. A small area of undisturbed natural geological clay (PI.5) was recorded at the southwest end of the trench at a depth of 870mm (BTBM) but the remainder of the trench was completely disturbed by grave-diggings. A small section of the trench, within the area of cut graves was excavated to a depth of 1.2m BTBM and at this level the excavations were still shy of finding intact burials or the undisturbed ground.

Fragments of a quernstone made from volcanic lava together with hand-made bricks were recovered from the rubble and part of a gravestone depicting death with a representation of a skull (Pl. 7). The human skull was a common motive on headstones of the 17th and 18th century, but atypically for the region this one was made from a sandstone (rather than a limestone) and the representation was in an interesting, unfamiliar naïve style.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations for further work**

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The results of the trenching show that the ground has been completely disturbed by a millennium of grave-digging. Although there are few remaining grave-markers left in this part of the churchyard, the site seems to have been used for burial throughout the 19th century when deeper interments became the norm. These late burials are closely spaced and have removed any potential evidence relating to the site's early history; either as an Anglo Saxon episcopal site or as a medieval cemetery. The evaluation has shown that there is a low potential for intact burials within 1.0m depth of the proposed finished floor level; if any shallow graves exist they are only likely to occur with 2m of the church wall where deep sampling was inhibited.

The presence of surviving natural clay in Trench 2 indicates the natural ground profile and the degree of truncation across the graveyard. Finding intact ground within a churchyard is quite unusual and there must have been a longstanding reason which prevented burials in this spot. There is a large yew tree nearby which would make grave

digging awkward and this may be perhaps the latest in a long line of trees to have inhabited this area of the graveyard.

The evaluation close to the church was hampered by the position of an extant storm water drainpipe, and further examination of the church's below ground fabric to complete this record would be worthwhile during any subsequent excavation work.

## **7. Bibliography**

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Mortlock, D.P., 2009. *A Guide to Suffolk Churches*. Lutterworth Press

Paine, C., 2008. *Guide to All Saints Church Mendham*. 2MPrint Ltd, Norwich



## 8. Plates

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Plate 1. North side of All Saints Church. The proposed new building will occupy the area of disturbed soil in the centre of the picture and be connected to the north aisle by a linking vestibule that will be accessed from and enclose the north door.



Plate 2. The north door is original to the 15th century aisle and was restored during the 19th century. The new building will extend from and incorporate the buttress on the right and the finished floor level will approximate the existing threshold step.



Plate 3. Trench 1 showing disturbed soil of backfilled graves at a depth of 850mm below the north door step.



Plate 4. Trench 2 showing disturbed soil of backfilled graves at 870mm below the north door step.



Plate 5. A small area of natural geological clay surviving between grave cuts at the SW end of Trench 2.



Plate 6. Disarticulated human bones collected from Trench 1. The bones are from earlier graves disturbed by the final phases of burials.



Plate 7. Fragment of a headstone carved to depict a human skull. The skull was a common motive on headstones of the 17th and 18th century, atypically for the region this one was made from a sandstone and the representation is in an interesting naïve style.





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