

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

POLSTEAD CHURCHYARD, POLSTEAD POL 038

A REPORT ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 2007
(PRE-APPLICATION)



St Mary's, Polstead

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Contents

List of Figures
Summary
SMR information

Introduction
Methodology
Results
Discussion and Conclusion

List of Figures

1. Site location plan
2. Trench plan
3. Trench 1: Plan and sections
4. Trench 2: Plan and sections

Summary

An evaluation was carried out in the area of a proposed extension to Polstead Churchyard. A group of small pits, Early Bronze Age pottery and flintwork suggested a degree of settlement activity on the site and its commanding position overlooking the valley of the River Box would be typical of a prehistoric settlement. A field boundary ditch, thought to be medieval in date was also found.

The archaeological horizon is sealed beneath a deep layer of re-deposited soil; this included small, post medieval tile fragments and had a high flint content; this may be building debris associated with the church and transferred to this location as grave excavation spoil.

SMR information

Planning application no.	Pre-application
Date of fieldwork:	30th May 2007
Grid Reference:	TL 9180 5582
Funding body:	Polstead Parish Council
OASIS Ref:	suffolk c1 28405

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Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in part of the field adjacent to and south of Polstead Church, within an area of a proposed extension to the churchyard. The evaluation was undertaken on the advice of, and in accordance with a brief from, R.D.Carr, archaeologist for the Diocesan Advisory Committee in advance of a formal planning application. The work was undertaken by members of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service Field Team on 30th May 2007.

The church of St Mary's, Polstead lies on the outskirts of the village at TL 9889 3803 (Fig. 1), above the 40m contour on a promontory overlooking the valleys of the River Box to the south and one of its tributaries to the north and east. The earliest part of the church dates to the end of the 12th century but in its construction uses tile, dressed sandstone and tufa blocks robbed from an earlier Roman building, the site of which is unknown. Adjacent to the churchyard are the remains of an ancient tree known as the Gospel Oak which is the site from where the missionary St Cedd is reputed to have preached in the 7th century.

The proposed extension to the churchyard would enclose a small part of 'The Horscroft', former parkland surrounding Polstead Hall, by straightening a dog-leg in the present field edge (Fig 1). The limit of the area coincides with the extent of a relatively flat plateau from which the ground level drops away steeply and gives the impression of being an artificially created platform. The area is currently grazing land and the surface geology is silt/sand gravels with areas of clay.

The aim of the evaluation was to determine if archaeological deposits were present which, in the event of rows of graves being excavated, would be completely destroyed and to ascertain if the profile of the topography is a natural one.

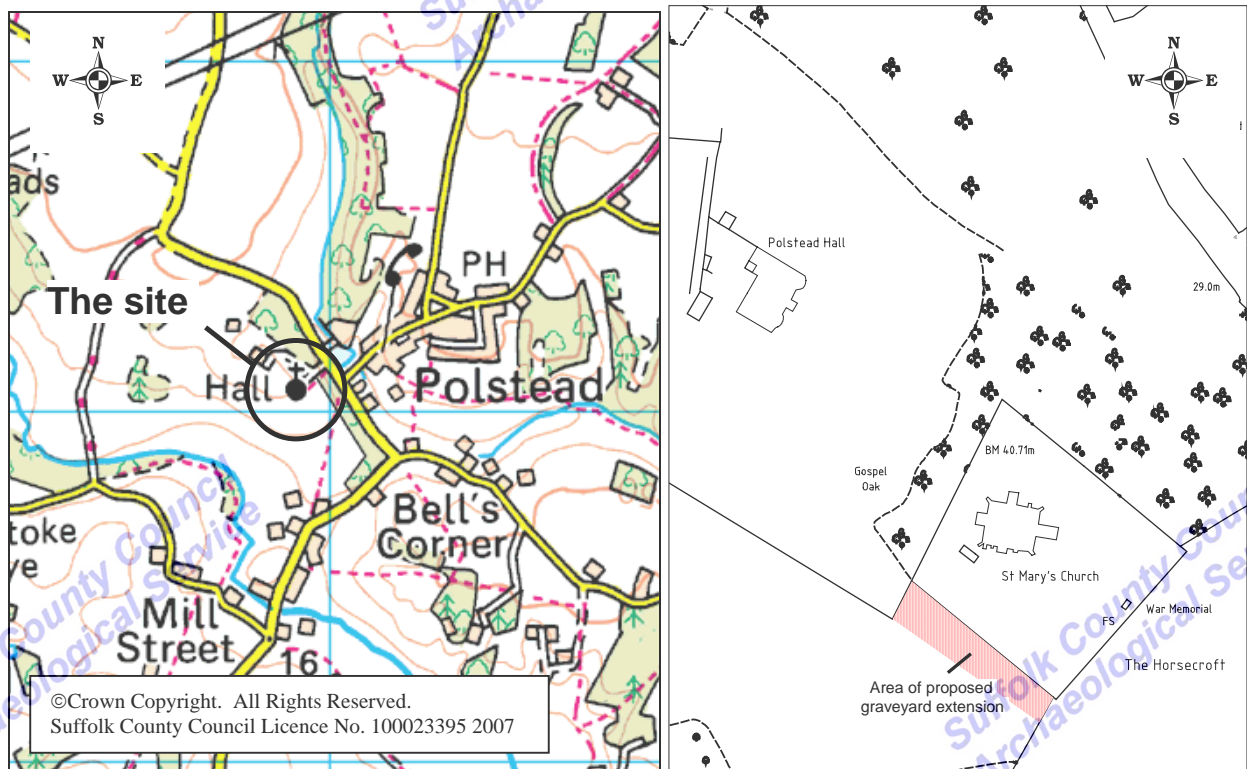


Figure 1. Site location plan

Methodology

Two linear trenches were excavated by a back-acting wheeled digger fitted with a 1.8m toothless bucket and under the constant supervision of an archaeologist. 43sq metres were excavated, 4.5% of the application area.

The machine removed the topsoil and an overburden to expose the surface of the subsoil. All possible archaeological features were sampled by hand excavation to at least the minimum requirements of the specification (Appendix 1). Plans and sections were recorded at 1:20 and the positions of the trenches plotted on to an OS map.

All pre-modern finds were retained for analysis and the site data has been input onto an MS Access database. The finds and site records have been archived in the small and main stores of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service at Bury St Edmunds and with the County Sites and Monuments Record under the parish code POL 038. A copy of the report has also been lodged with the OASIS on-line database (ref: suffolk c1-28405).

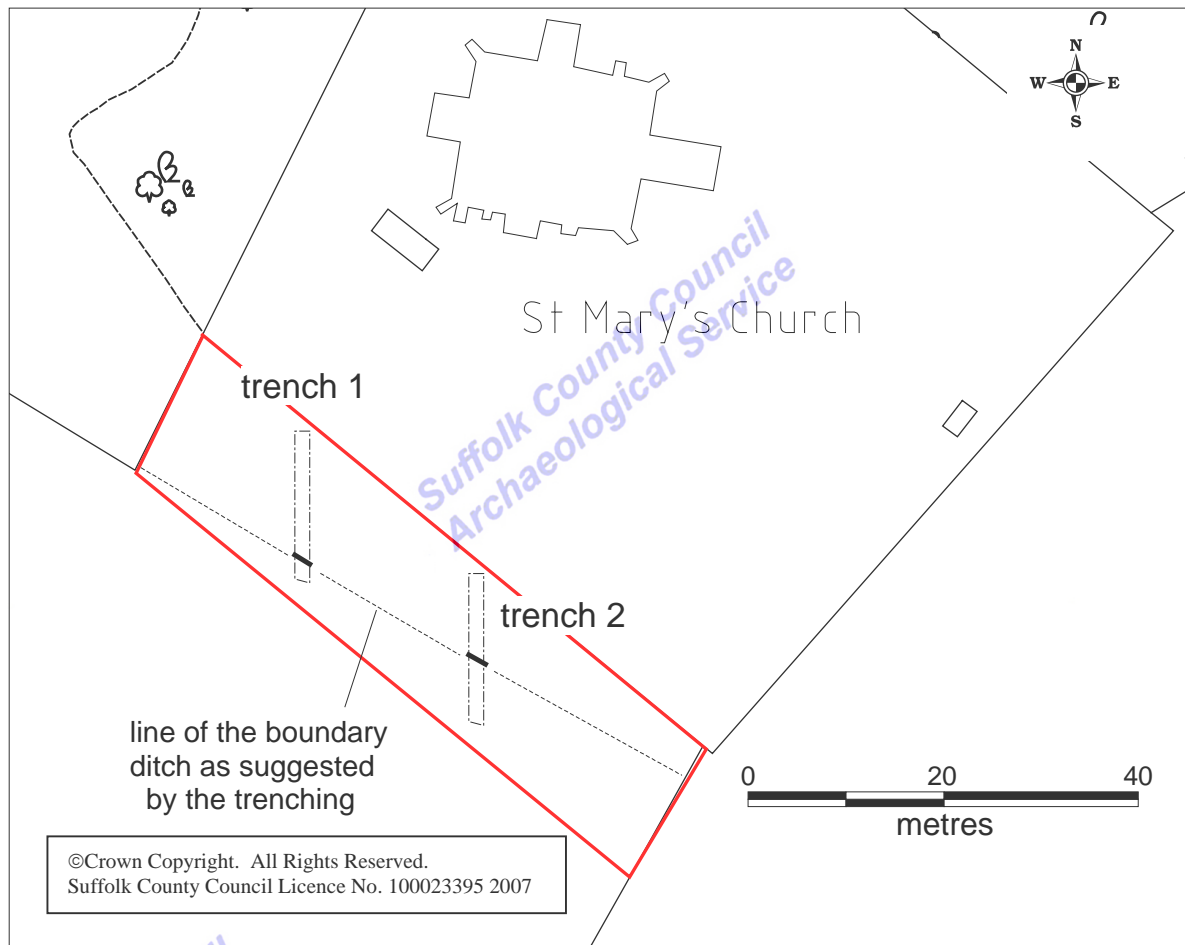


Figure 2. Trench plan

Results

Trench 1 (Figs. 2 and 3)

Trench 1 was 14.5m long and the top of natural subsoil encountered at 0.8m below the present ground surface. The depth of soil had been built up with a re-deposited layer of silt loam 0002 which was laid to a constant 0.3m thickness across the full length of the trench. It included a great number of small-medium flints, which made it distinct from the relatively stone-free topsoil above, and silt layer below it. Small fragments roof tiles recovered from throughout 0002, were handmade, but post medieval in date. 0002 sealed a layer of brown fine silty loam which

was thought to represent an earlier buried topsoil level and this produced a single sherd of prehistoric pottery probably dating to the Early Bronze Age.

A narrow ditch, 0005, crossed the trench at close to the southern end and a small pit 0003 was excavated against the trench side at the north end. Both features were filled with brown silt similar to layer 0004 and were sealed beneath the dump layer 0002. Neither of the features could be dated but the soil profile above ditch 0005 suggested that it was identifiable as a shallow depression when the layer 0002 was deposited (Fig. 3).

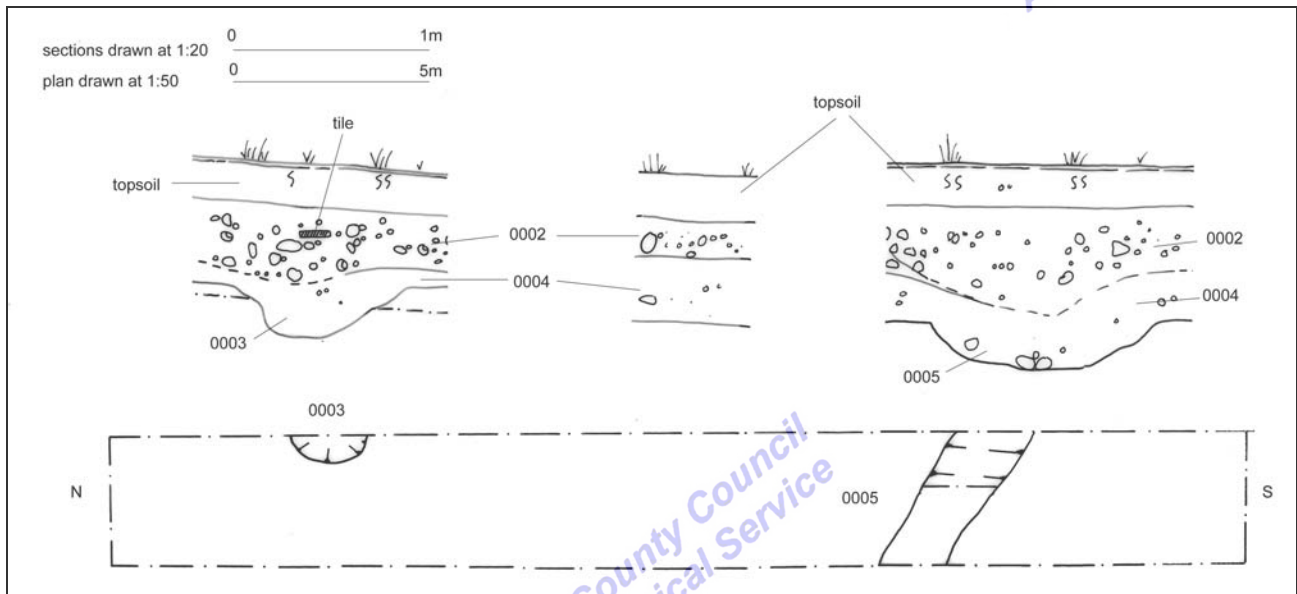


Figure 3. Trench 1: plan and sections

Trench 2 (Figs. 2 and 4)

The composition of the soil profile in Trench 2 was the same as that recorded in Trench 1 with the spread of the re-deposited soil, 0002, continuing into this area. Sealed below this layer was a group of small circular pits and the continuation of the ditch encountered in Trench 1 (Fig. 4).

Pit 0006 was filled with a grey silt with patches of grey clay; the extent of the clay suggested that the pit was cut from just below layer 0002 but edges of the feature could not be identified above subsoil level.

Pit 0010 was similar to 0006, it was filled with brown silt and was cut by and predated ditch 0012. The ditch was a continuation of the feature excavated in Trench 1 and was infilled with a single fill of pale silt.

Posthole 0008 in contrast to the pits was filled with charcoal rich silt and had a narrow steep-sided profile. It was interpreted as a post setting and is likely to have been part of a timber built structure.

Single, small and abraded sherds of prehistoric pottery were recorded from pits 0006 and 0010, and a sherd of similar pottery along with a flint flake was recovered from the ditch. This material was similar to the assemblage collected from Trench 1. None of the features were, however, well dated and it is possible that the finds may be residual.

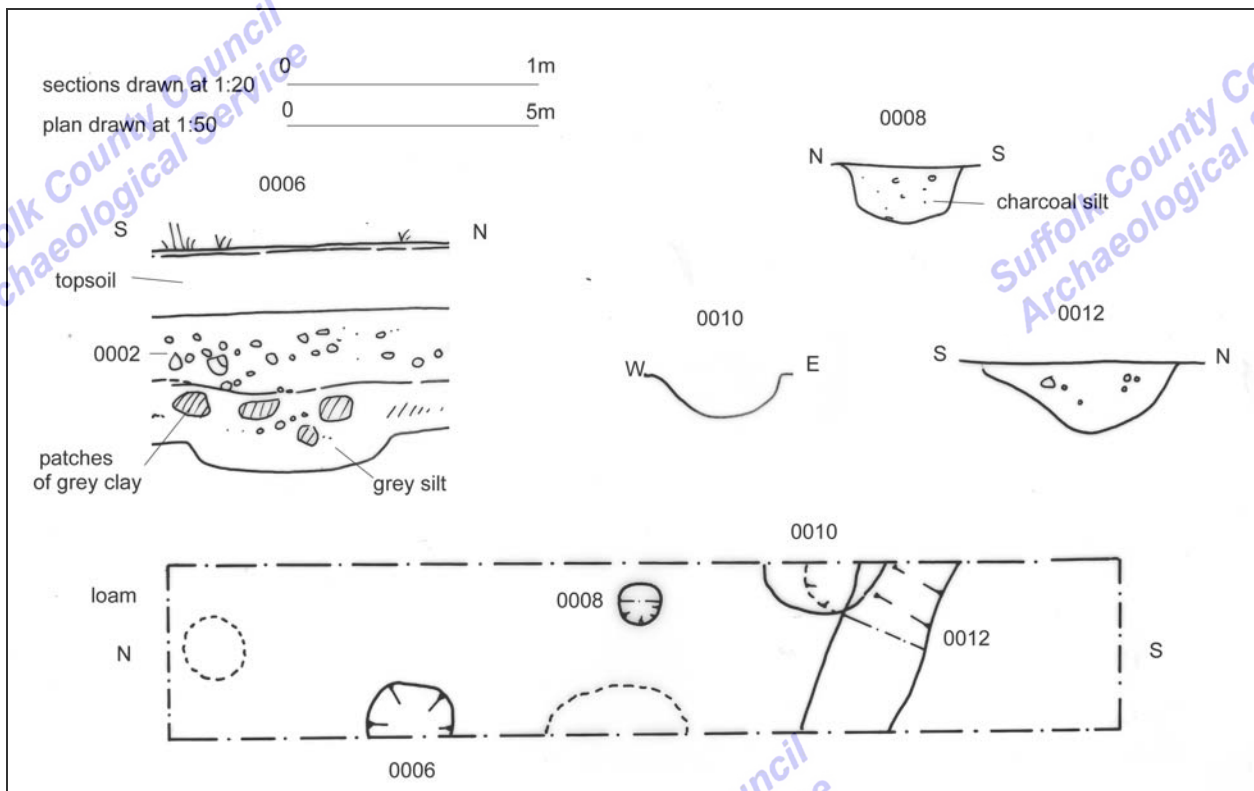


Figure 4. Trench 2: Plan and sections

Discussion and Conclusions

The presence of cut features, prehistoric pottery and flintwork in both trenches demonstrates that there has been a degree of previous settlement activity on the site. The artefactual material would suggest that this occurred during the Early Bronze Age and the site's commanding position overlooking the valley would geographically, be typical of prehistoric settlement. The features themselves are not well dated and the paucity of the finds and the abraded nature of the pottery suggests that the finds may be residual, but despite this there are no later finds to suggest an alternative date.

The ditch, however, is probably later and its alignment suggests that this may be a continuation of the south boundary of the grounds of Polstead Hall, with the current dog-leg in the field edge being an alteration to the original boundary. The overlying soil profile suggests that although the ditch was infilled in antiquity (it was gone by 1880 when the first edition of the Ordnance Survey was produced) it was still apparent as a shallow linear depression when a deep layer of soil was laid over the area sometime during post-medieval period (17th-18th century?).

The archaeological horizon is sealed beneath a deep layer of re-deposited soil. The re-deposited soil includes small, post medieval, tile fragments and has a high flint content, this may be building debris associated with the church. Its deposition within this area could be the result of deliberate landscaping or discarding of spoil from centuries of grave excavations.

The evaluation has shown that there is a sealed archaeological level within the area of the proposed extension to the graveyard and this is at a depth that it will be totally destroyed by the excavation of graves. It is therefore recommended that the area be subject to an open area excavation to fully record this deposit, should the proposal go ahead.

David Gill
June 2007

Disclaimer

Any opinions expressed in this report about the need for further archaeological work are those of the Field Projects Division alone. The need for further work will be determined by the Local Planning Authority and its archaeological advisors when a planning application is registered. Suffolk County Council's archaeological contracting service cannot accept responsibility for inconvenience caused to clients should the Planning Authority take a different view to that expressed in the report.

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