

# BUILDING SURVEY REPORT

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## ST MARGARET'S CHAPEL, WENHASTON with MELLS HAMLET WMH 003

A REPORT ON THE BUILDING RECORDING AND SITE  
INVESTIGATIONS, 2007



St Margaret's Chapel, Mells

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## Acknowledgements

This project was funded by English Heritage and was monitored by Bob Carr (Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, Conservation Division).

The field work was carried out by David Gill and Jonathan Van Jennians, data processing by John Duffy, all from Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, Field Team.

## Summary

A survey to record in elevation and plan the ruins of the chapel of St Margaret's at Wenhaston with Mells Hamlet was undertaken in advance of urgent repairs to stabilise the structure. St Margaret's dates to the early 12th century, it has been robbed completely of all its valuable building material and has had lost every piece of dressed stone. Documentary records state that the chapel was out of use from 1465 and it was a ruin by the time Hodkinson drew his map in 1783. The excavation of a test hole showed that the original floor had been removed, but a brick surface laid post 17th century was uncovered. The extent and function of the surface is unknown but it may have been a previous attempt to consolidate the arch or present the ruin as a picturesque folly.

## SMR information

|                          |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Planning application no. | N/A                   |
| Date of fieldwork:       | 4th and 5th July 2007 |
| Grid Reference:          | TM 4057 7676          |
| Funding body:            | English Heritage      |
| OASIS Ref                | C1-31159              |

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## Introduction

A survey was undertaken of the ruined chapel of St Margaret's at Mells, near Halesworth. The building is a Schedule Ancient Monument (SAM 69 Suffolk old number) and is on the English Heritage and Suffolk County Council's buildings at risk registers. The survey was in advance of repair work to the remains of the chancel arch, which had become in a parlous state and in danger of collapse. The intention was to stabilise the remains with the construction of a new arch with voussoirs cut from fresh stone. The building work would conceal some details of the original structure and the aim of the survey was to provide a record of the monument as it stands presently. In addition a trial hole was excavated at the base of the arch to locate the precise inner face of the arch and determine the original ground level.

The survey was commissioned by architect Tim Buxhall and funded by English Heritage. An outline brief was prepared by R.D.Carr of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service (SCCAS) Conservation Team and the field work completed by members of SCCAS Field Team on 4th and 5th July 2007.

## The site

St Margaret's lies at TM 4057 7676 in the hamlet of Mells which is part the parish of Wenhaston and was formerly in the union and hundred of Blything. It stands on private land adjacent to the yard of Old Chapel Farm. The chapel is on the 15m contour, situated atop a steep-sided promontory overlooking a crossing of the River Blyth and above the hamlet, which follows the edge of the river flood plain (Fig. 1).

The chapel is a two celled building constructed of flint and rubble and is in a ruinous state. The chancel walls survive to a height of *c.*2m but in the nave these have been reduced to close to ground level, a complete circuit of the walls however, does remain. There is no mention of a chapel at Mells in Domesday, the church at Wenhaston is recorded and had by its preceding existence established itself as the parochial church. The round-headed chancel arch and the clear horizontal coursing to the flintwork indicate an early Norman date (*c.* 1100-1120) and records of

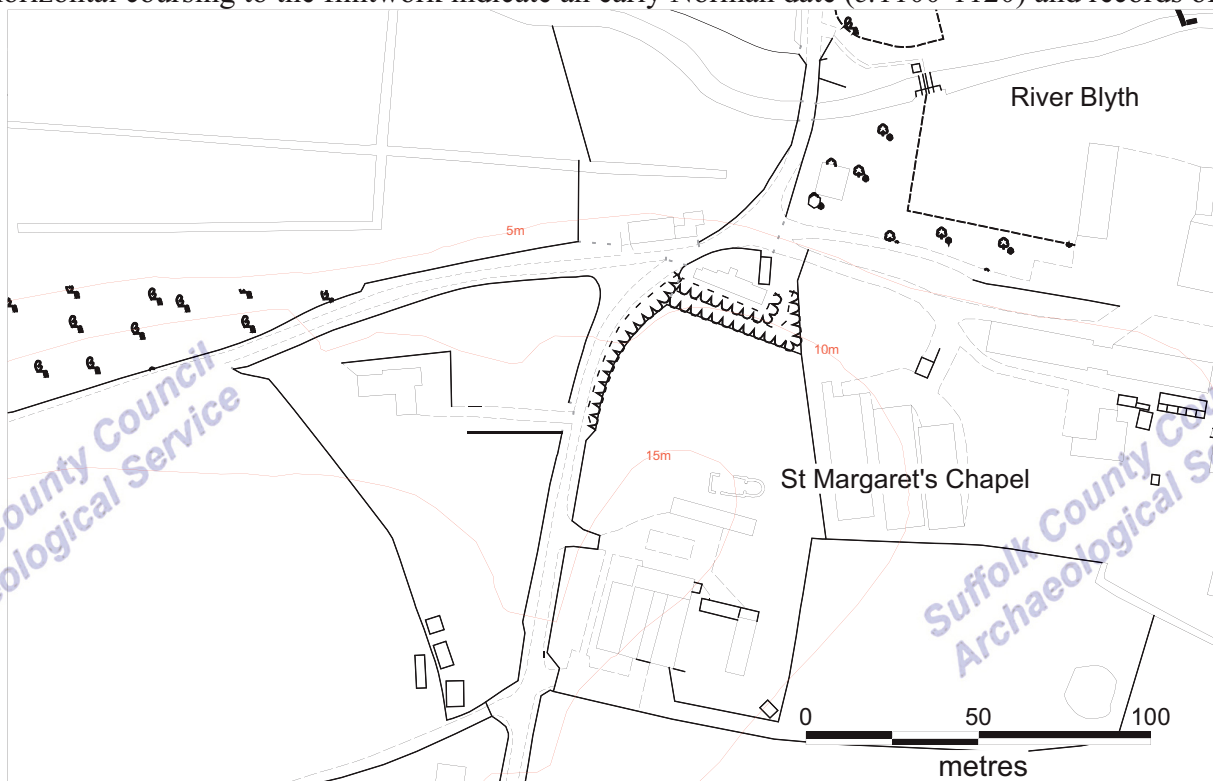


Figure 1. Site Location Plan

gifted tithes from the manor suggest that it may have been built as early as 1104. The manor of Mells is very large and there were several attempts by those who held it to establish the manor as a separate parish and make St Margaret's the parish church. The dispute was referred to Pope Honorius II and in 1217 his commissioners found against the manor and that St Margaret's was to remain subordinate to the 'mother-church' at Wenhaston. It is also believed because of this that there were no rights for burial at the chapel (Gowers 1894).

In the 14th century the manor passed to Mettingham College and priests were supplied from the college. A document of 1550 states that after 1465 the chapel was only used on the eve of St Margaret's and then not at all after 1467 (Goult 1990); it is shown as a ruin on Hodskinson's map of 1783.

## Methodology

Both elevations of the cross wall and chancel arch, and a ground plan of the chapel were surveyed using an EDM. The drawings were annotated describing the fabric and outlining the areas of recent repair. A photographic record of the cross wall was made using both film and digital cameras and this was tied to the survey data by a series of target chalked to the walls. A general photographic survey of the whole building was also undertaken using a photographic scale. The survey data was downloaded using LisCad and converted into mapinfo tables, which were used to produce scale plans and drawings for the report.

A 1m<sup>2</sup> trial hole was hand-excavated to subsoil level at the base of the north side of the arch. This exposed the base of the west elevation of the crossing wall and the inner face of the arch. The trial hole was drawn in plan and section at 1:20 and its position located onto the ground plan. Photographs were taken level and the record of the below ground structure tied into the elevation drawings.

The survey data, photographs 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 WMH 003. A copy of the report has also been lodged with the OASIS on-line database (ref suffolk c1-31159).

## Results

The surveyed plan of the chapel is shown on figure 2 and described below. The subsoil is gravel sand and the ground around the chapel has been quarried away leaving the building on an elevated platform, the sides of which drop steeply from the base of the chapel walls. This is particularly evident on the north-east side of the building where the change in ground level is 1.7m.

## The Chapel

The chapel has a two-celled plan with an apsidal end; the wall line is stepped with the chancel being slightly narrower than the nave. The nave measures 9.4m x 4.5m internally and the chancel 3.70m x 4.20m, all of the external walls were 950mm thick and the cross wall 700mm. The walls are constructed of a mix of large, unworked rounded flint cobbles and brown sandstone pebbles, these are laid in well defined courses and bonded with a lime mortar. The flints have been selected and are quite uniform in size. A fine grit sand has been used in the mortar but the chalk in the lime is in quite large nodules, variations in the coarseness of the mix could be identified from lift to lift. The fabric of the walls is weathered so that the face of the flints project 3-4cms from the bedding mortar but in places inside the building, (above the arch, and below ground) small areas of near-flush pointing survive. This was applied secondary to the construction of the wall but in antiquity, and maybe the remains of an original rendered finish. The core of the wall is similar to the face, but uses less regular and smaller flints. The flints are laid in vague rows but are not as strongly coursed as the facework.

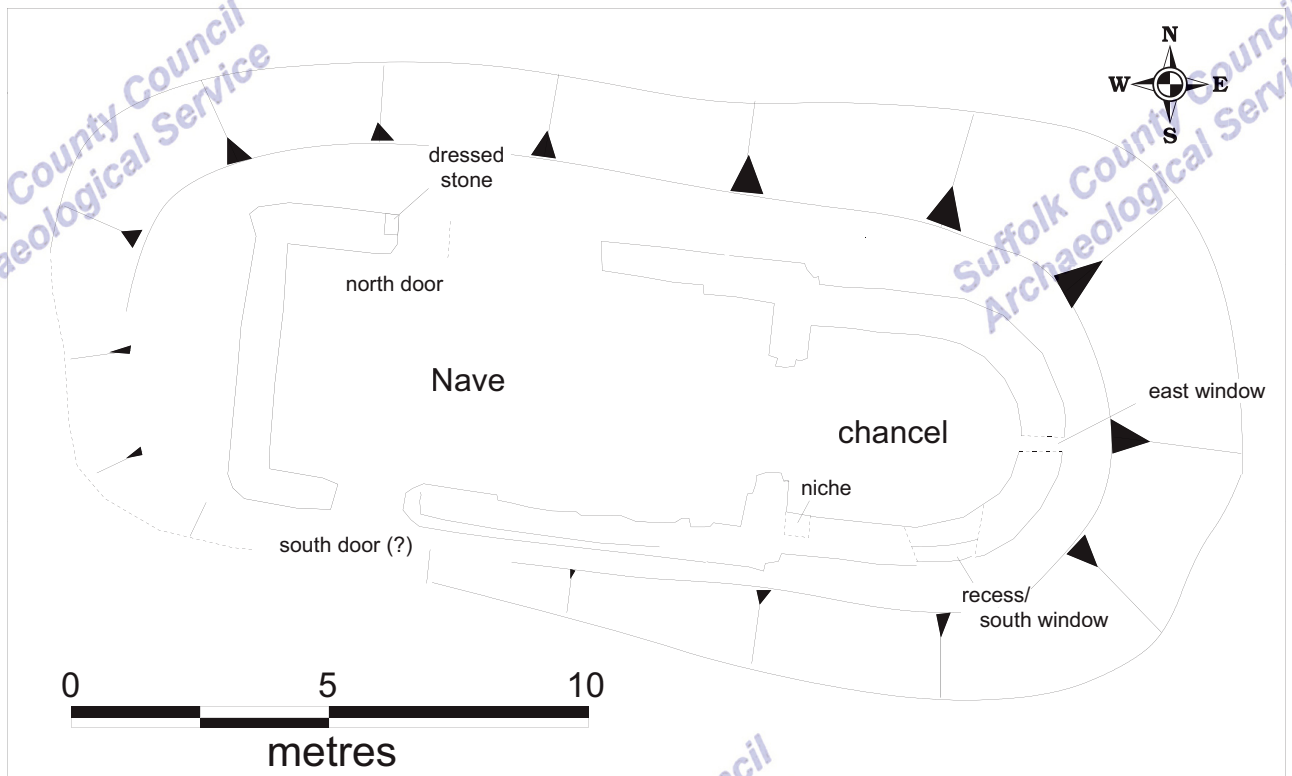


Figure 2. Chapel Ground Plan

Lift lines could be traced between the nave and cross wall and through the face to the core suggesting that the walls were built together with the face and core being raised simultaneously. A row of putlog holes was observed *c.* 1m-1.25m from the present ground surface around the chancel and these passed completely through the wall; two more putlogs were recorded above the arch.

The nave walls have been demolished to within a few courses of the ground leaving little in the way of details of the building. The external corners of the nave, at the west end and at the junction with the chancel, have been damaged suggesting that the building has been robbed of its



Figure 3. Building details, showing horizontal coursing of the flint, missing quoins and putlog hole

limestone quoins (Fig 3). There are breaks in both the nave north and south walls, these are almost opposed and likely to be what remains of the doors.

The gap on the south side is both the right width and in the correct position for a door. The break in the north wall is very wide and probably largely the result of collapse but the west side of the opening is genuine and a single piece of dressed stone, part of the door surround, remains *in situ*.

The chancel is better preserved and in places survives to a height of *c.*2m. There is a small window at the apex of the curve at the east end, and on inside of the south wall there is a reveal for a recess. This extends close to present ground level to form a low sill and at this level is blind (Fig.4). Where the reveal is most apparent the wall is completely pierced but whether this actually an opening or the result of collapse is unclear, but a large window in a chapel of this date is unlikely. The wall on the north side is in too bad a state of repair to determine if there was an opposing recess or window but W.R Gowers describes a possible window here in his essay on the building in 1894 (PSIA Vol VIII pt.3). A small vaulted niche (Fig. 5) is built into the south wall at the junction with the cross wall, its position is shown on the plan (Fig. 2) and its profile on the east facing elevation drawing (Fig. 8)

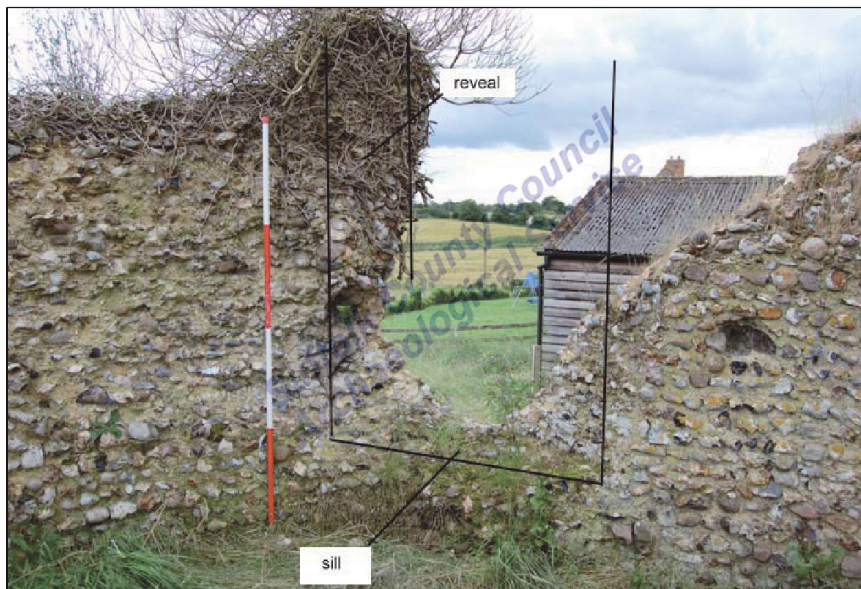


Figure 4. Recess/window south wall of the chancel



Figure 5. Niche in the chancel south wall also repair to chancel arch using an iron bar.



## The Chancel Arch

Both faces of the arch were recorded and are shown in two drawings (Figs. 7 and 8). These show the outline of the extant ruin, areas of surviving facework and are annotated with descriptions of the building fabric. The cross wall was raised along with the nave and lift lines within the core fabric could be traced through into the nave wall.

The arch itself has been removed leaving only the opening but evidence enough survives to suggest the original dimensions of the arch and indicate from where dressed stones have been robbed. The arch was a round-headed type, typical of the Romanesque style of architecture of the early Norman period. Between the responds the opening would have been *c.*2.1m but at the base of the head of the arch it is slightly wider suggesting the arch itself was built off an *abacus*. The test hole excavation identified the probable original floor level and this gives the full height of *c.*3.75m. The cross section of the edge of the opening was recorded at the base of the north respond and shows a rebate where the stone blocks and voussoirs, which once faced the arch, were set (Fig.6 and 11). The rebate could be seen on both faces of the north haunch and to a lesser extent on the east face of the south haunch; where best preserved this suggested that the blocks were 220mm wide by 200mm deep. The stone blocks seem to have been only on the two leading edges of the opening and not on the flat face of the *intrados* or responds. The inner face of the arch appears to have been finished in flint, on the underside of the haunches the face of the flint is projecting but is well laid, at the apex this was covered with a smoothed mortar suggesting that there may have been a render. A similar use of stone, only on the edges of the arch, can also be seen in the ruins of the Abbey church at Bury St Edmunds.

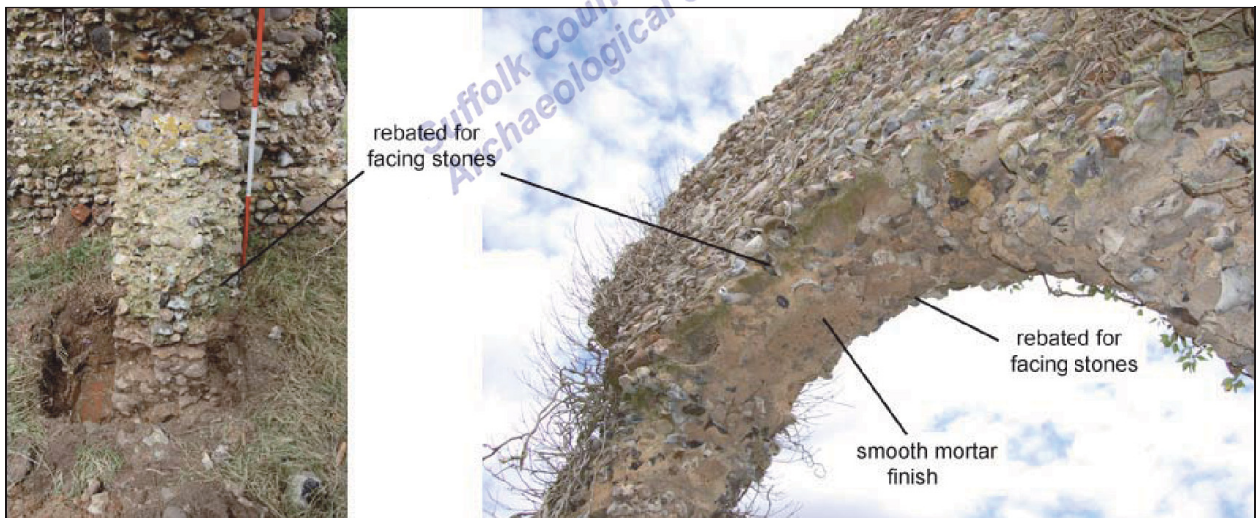


Figure 6. Chancel arch details

There has been an extensive loss of flintwork at mid-height of both responds and notably the outline of the break is mirrored approximately on each side of the arch. It is unclear whether this is due to an architectural feature having been removed or simply the pattern of arch collapse. The south side has been infilled with a repair in grey granite pebbles and edged with an iron bar; the repair has underpinned the arch preventing the whole cross-wall from falling down.

Above the arch on both elevations the pointing of the flints is almost flush with the face of the flints, the mortar is lime based and thought to be original. The shape of the arch is not reflected in the pattern of flintwork that surrounds it and the rhythm of the horizontal coursing which exists below the springing point is unbroken. This contrast with other buildings (Abbey Church, Bury St Edmunds) where a strainer arch constructed of flints laid in radial bands contribute to the load bearing over the openings.

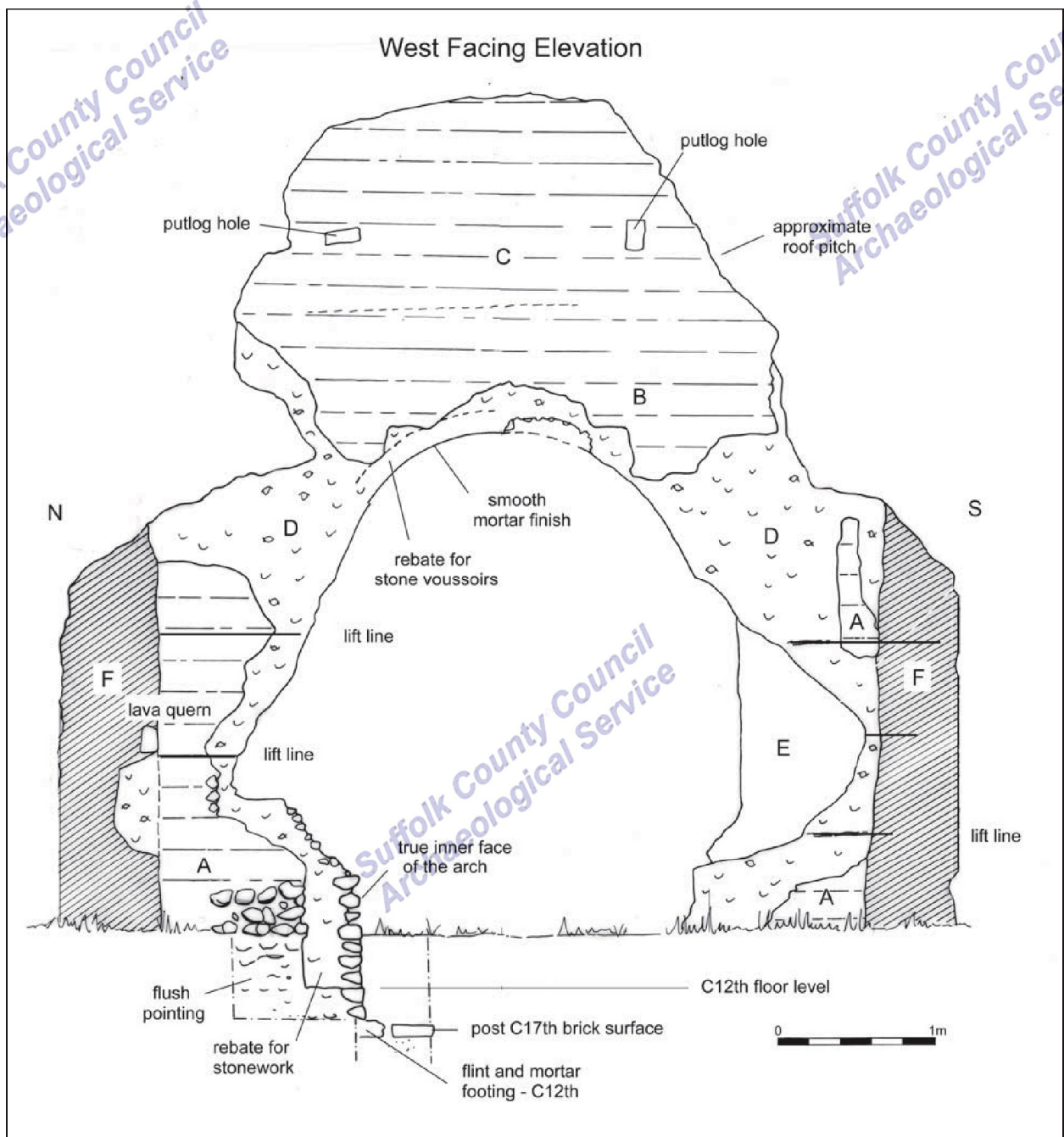


Figure 7. West facing elevation of the chancel arch

Key:

- A. Flint facing: Large rounded flint cobbles and brown sandstone pebbles. Generally well coursed, but coursing a bit uneven at bottom lift due to variety of stone sizes. Most of the pointing weathered so that flints project 3-4cms
- B. Pattern of coursing over arch continuous with that below springing point
- C. Mixed large flints closely spaced good coursing, some flush pointing.

- D. Exposed core. Core fabric - pale brown, fine sand, mortar with large chalk inclusion. Mortar mixes distinct from lift to lift. Smaller flints than facing stones, but laid vaguely in courses.
- E. Modern repair
- F. Cross section of nave walls

NB lift lines continuous across nave and cross walls.

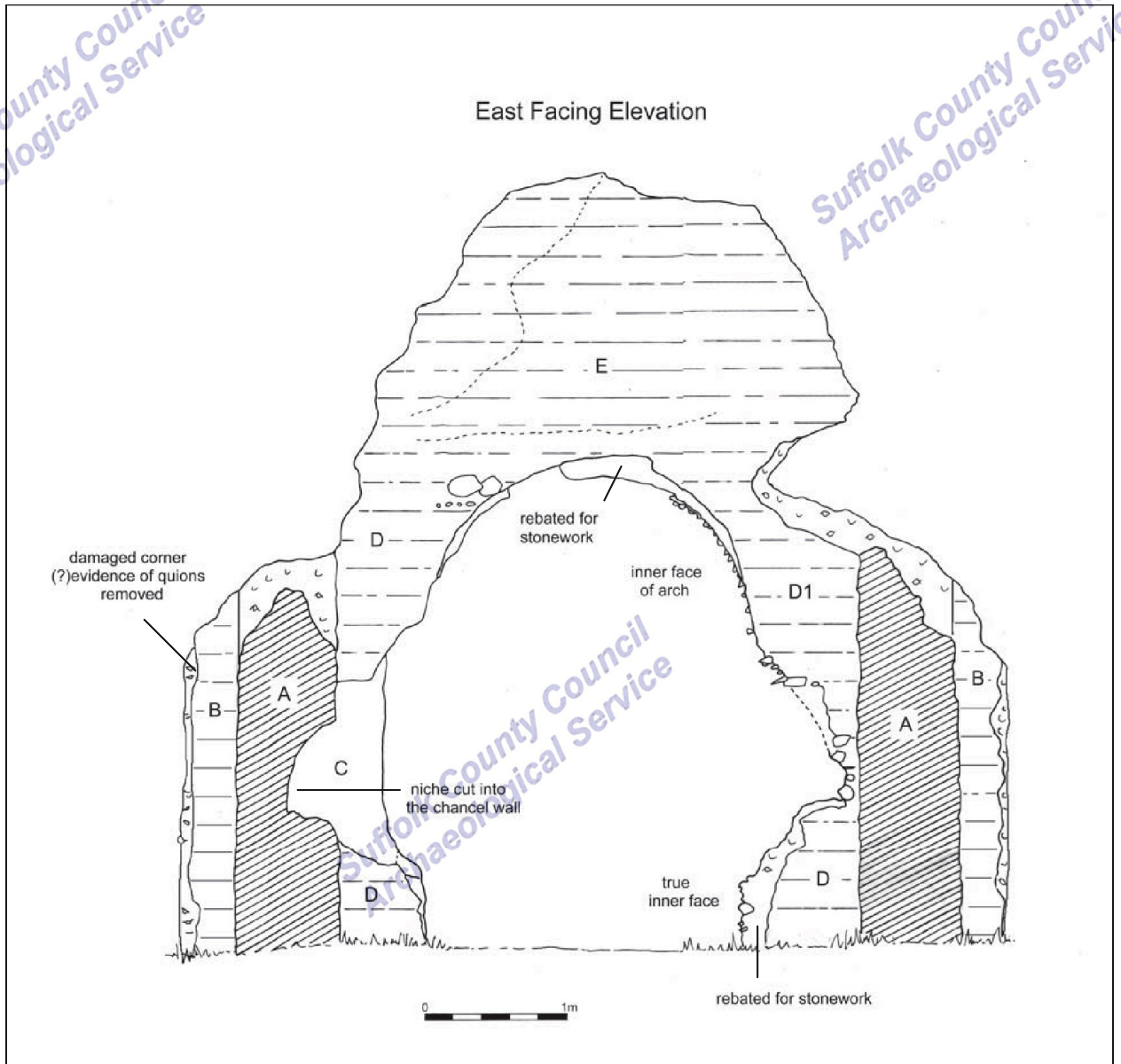


Figure 8. East facing elevation of the chancel archaeological

Key:

- A. Cross-section of the chancel walls
- B. Nave walls, projecting beyond the line of the chancel
- C. Repair section
- D. Flint facing: large, rounded flint cobbles and sandstone pebbles. Pale

- brown, fine sand mortar with large chalk inclusions. D1 includes many large elongated flints laid horizontally.
- E. Point flush with the face of the flints.

The outline of the ruin above the arch has been eroded and the apex has gone, but although difficult to survey because of the remains of the ivy cover, the sloping side particularly on the south side is indicative of the angle and line of the roof.



Figure 9. East elevation: Flush pointing and horizontal coursing

## Test-hole excavation

Inside the chapel there is a build-up of flint and fine crushed mortar rubble, which has raised the ground level by 400-500mm. A testhole was excavated alongside the northern respond down to the surface of the undisturbed subsoil. The results are shown on the main elevation (Fig 7) and in plan and photographs (Figs 10 and 11). Below ground level the wall surface had been protected and was not weathered revealing the original full depth of pointing. The rebated bed for the limestone blocks continued and a ledge for the bottom block was recorded at 240mm below the present ground surface. The position of the base of this block is probably a good indication of the Norman floor level but there was no evidence of the original floor surviving. The bottom of the wall was at 550mm, and was built off a shallow footing comprising a mortar and small stone mix; this was laid directly onto the subsoil surface. The footing projected beyond the line of the

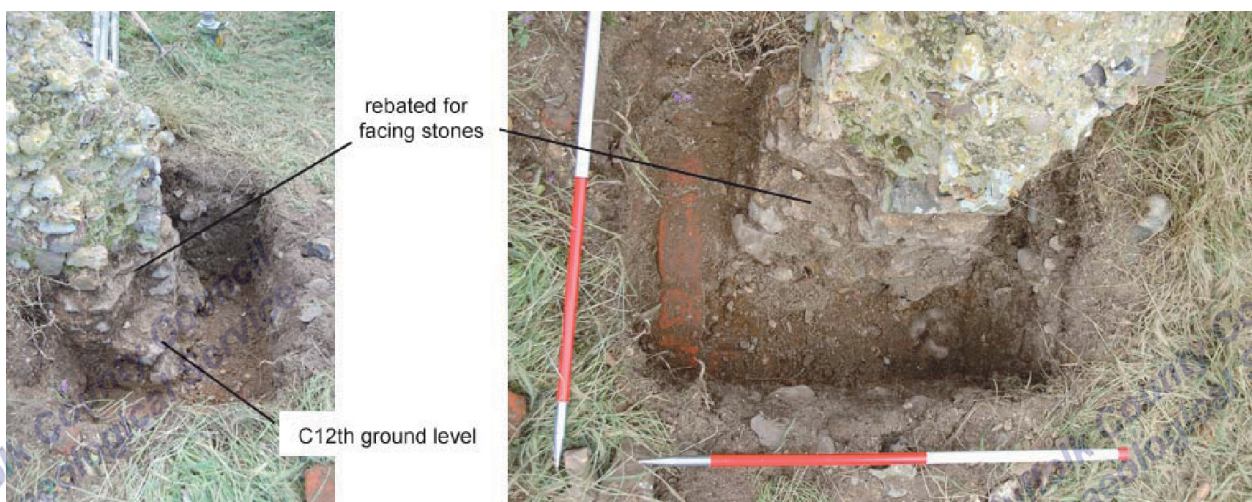


Figure 10. Test hole

respond slightly but did not extend across the opening of the arch. At the base of the test-hole was a surface of bricks, laid dry in stretcher bond. The bricks were plain, handmade, soft reds measuring  $9\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4\frac{3}{4}'' \times 2\frac{3}{8}''$  and could date to the mid-16th century. The bricks had old mortar adhered to them so in this context were re-used and were laid directly onto the natural sand.

There were no definable layers in the soil overlying the bricks suggesting that this had accumulated or been deposited in a single event.

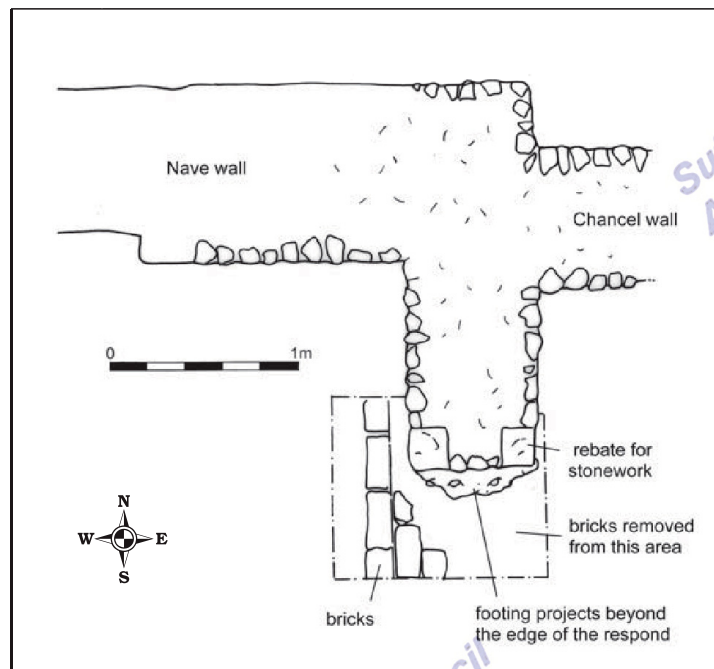


Figure 11. Plan of the test-hole

## Discussion

The Chapel of St Margaret's is a valuable example of an early Norman building; it is a single phase construction with no evidence of subsequent builds or repair. The position of the chapel close to the crossing of the River Blyth is interesting as bridges often have chapel associated with them to allow travellers to take mass at the start of their journeys, although in this case there is no proven link. The chapel has been robbed completely of all valuable building material, every piece of dressed stone has gone but there is no indication of it being used in the surrounding buildings. There was some loose flint rubble within the site but the vast majority of the material that made up the walls has been taken away. Documentary records state that the chapel was out of use from 1467. After this date the proportion of the manor's tithes gifted to the Chapel for the buildings upkeep and payment for 'spiritual services' may have passed to Wenhaston church and the demolition could have begun soon after. The chapel was a ruin when Hodkinson drew his map in 1783.

There is enough evidence to suggest that the arch was round-headed with only the leading edges constructed of stone, and it was probably built off an abacus. The very survival of the cross wall and its longevity as a ruin demonstrates that the stone vousoirs that made up the arch were not, until now, actually necessary to its structure and functioned as a decorative element. The extensive erosion to each of the responds also shows that the load is not transferred to the ground vertically. The replacement of the stone now would, however, protect the exposed core from weathering further decay.

The fabric of the original floor has been removed and it is unlikely that the brick surface uncovered in the test-hole was ever part of the chapel. The bricks dated to the mid-16th century but were already second-hand when laid. The extent and function of the surface is unknown, but it may have been a previous attempt to consolidate the arch or to present the ruin as a 'picturesque' or a rustic folly.

David Gill August 2007

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