



**University of
Leicester**

Archaeological Services

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
On land at St. Nicholas' Church,
Bringham, Leicestershire
(NGR: SP 841 921)**

Greg Jones with Nick Hill



ULAS Report No 2009-076.


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Bringham, Leicestershire
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For: Bringham Church

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An Archaeological Watching Brief on Land at Bringham Church, Bringham, Leicestershire (NGR: SP 841 921)

Greg Jones

Summary

University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) carried out an archaeological watching brief on land at St. Nicholas' Church, Bringham, Leicestershire, (SP 841 921) between the 1st and the 8th of May 2009. This work was undertaken on behalf of the Church Warden of St. Nicholas' Church during the ground works for the construction of a French drain on land directly to the north of St. Nicholas' Church, Bringham, Leicestershire (NGR: SP 841 921). The watching brief revealed earlier wall foundations, two burials and a 19th century stone lined drain. The report includes a discussion of the church's development by Nick Hill of English Heritage

The site archive will be held by Leicestershire County Council, under the accession code: [X.A116.2009].

1. Introduction

1.1 University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) were commissioned by Mr Michael Mallock, the Churchwarden of St. Nicholas Church to undertake an archaeological watching brief during groundworks for the construction of a French drain on land to the immediate north of St. Nicholas' Church, Bringham, Leicestershire (NGR: SP 841 921). The watching brief was undertaken between the 1st and the 8th of May 2009.

1.2 Following advice from the archaeological advisor to the Parochial Church Council (PCC) an archaeological watching brief was undertaken during groundworks to confirm the presence or absence of archaeological remains at the site. This report presents the results of the watching brief and includes a discussion of the church's development by Nick Hill of English Heritage.

2. Site Location

2.1 The groundworks were located within the churchyard of the Church of St. Nicholas, Bringham, Leicestershire (NGR: SP 841 921; fig. 1).

3. Geology and Topography

3.1 The Ordnance Survey Geological Survey of Great Britain, Sheet 171 (1979), indicates that the underlying geology is likely to consist of Diamicton till, surrounded by siltstone and mudstone of the Dyham formation. The site sits on the brow of a hill, at a height of *c.* 90m OD.

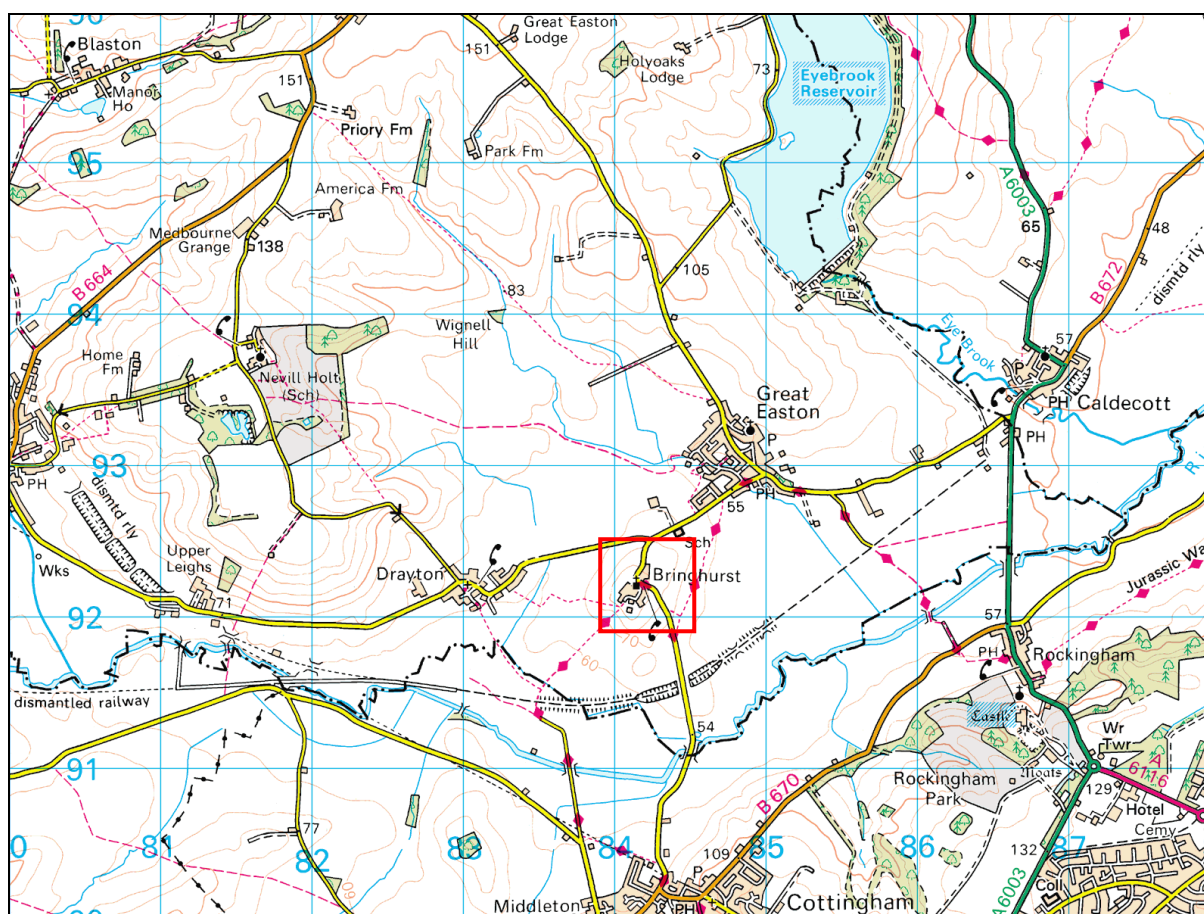


Fig.1 Site location

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4. Archaeological and Historical Background

Place-name evidence suggests that Bringhurst has probable Saxon origins with Bryni coming from the founder's name and Hurst meaning a ring-shaped settlement. Great Easton was originally a daughter settlement of Bringhurst with similar 6th century roots (British History Online).

Located to the north-east of the development site, fieldwalking has recovered a number of worked flints indicating prehistoric settlement (MLE 7193). Among these finds was a Neolithic polished axe. Other prehistoric remains are also known in the surrounding landscape. To the south-west of the development site, at NGR SP 841 916, another assemblage of prehistoric flint tools ranging from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age has been recovered (MLE 1287 & 1288). Close by, a ring ditch, possibly of Early Bronze Age date, is shown on aerial photographs along with a linear ditch (MLE 10158) which appears to be heading towards a rectangular enclosure (MLE 9659) (although these latter two features are attributed to the Late Iron Age-Roman period).

Past settlement in the area from the prehistoric period into the Roman period and later, is further suggested by the recovery of a quantity of Roman building material from a probable villa site (MLE 1286) close to the application site, and Anglo-Saxon pottery from NGR SP 840 916 (MLE 1288).

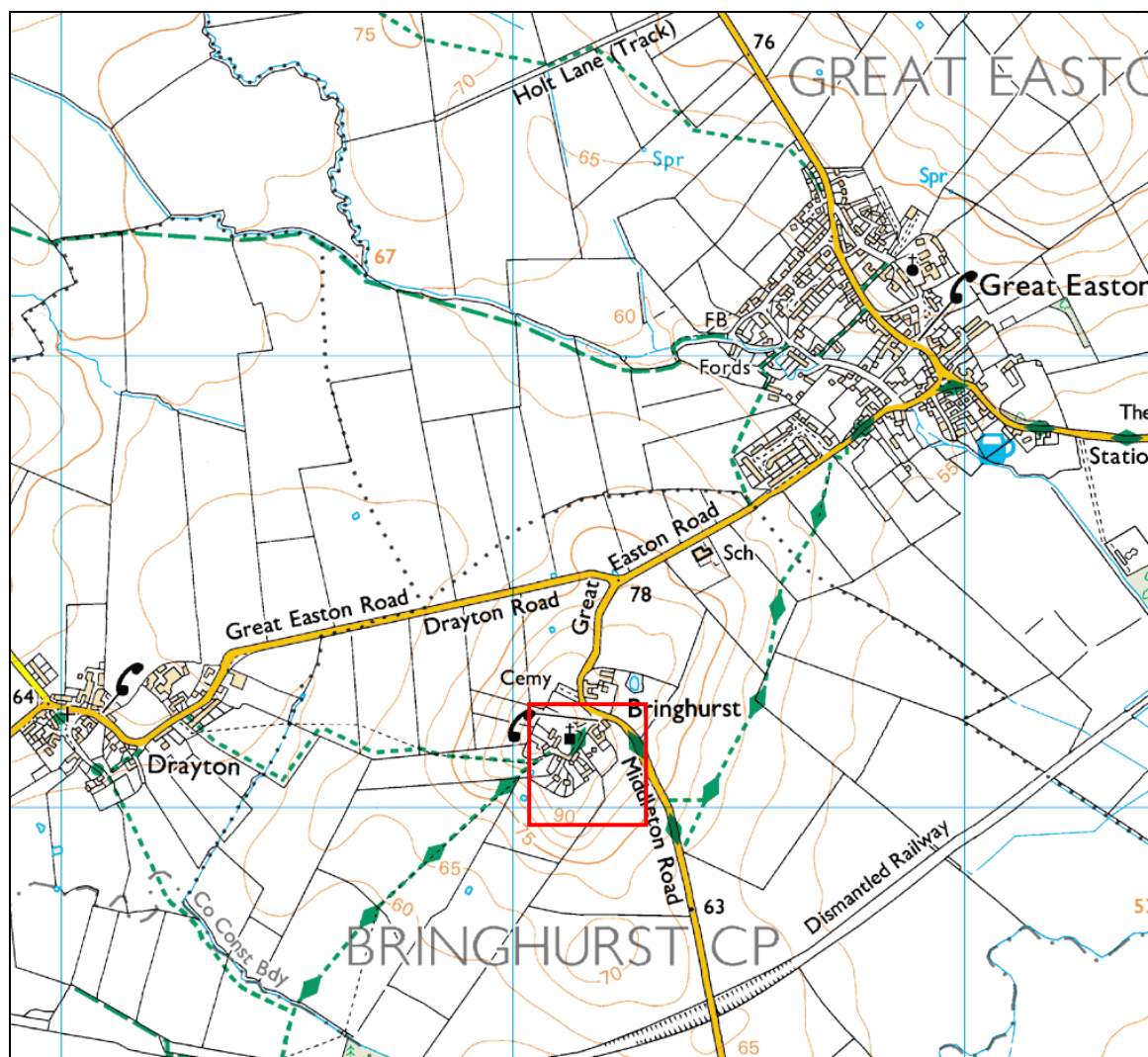


Fig.2 Site location

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The Church of St. Nicholas

The Church of St. Nicholas stands at the highest point of Bringhurst Hill, forming a conspicuous landmark. It is built of ironstone and limestone and consists of chancel, nave, north and south aisles, west tower, and south porch. The original stone church was probably constructed during the late 10th and early 11th centuries. However the earliest visible elements of the present church post-date the Norman Conquest and probably comprised of a typical Norman two cell church (Heselton 1990). The nave was expanded in around 1150 with the construction of the north aisle and this was followed shortly after around 1180 with

the construction of the west tower. The southern aisle was added about 1200 and the chancel was constructed at a much later date possibly during the 16th century (Heselton 1990).

5. Methodology

5.1 All archaeological work adhered to the Institute of Field Archaeologist's (IFA) *Code of Conduct* and *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs and archaeological excavations* the *Guidelines for Archaeological Work in Leicestershire and Rutland* (LMARS). The work followed the approved design specification (Appendix).

5.2 The archaeological watching brief involved the inspection and recording of groundworks to identify any deposits of archaeological importance.

5.3 The main objectives of the archaeological watching brief were:

- 1. To identify the presence/absence of any archaeological deposits.
- 2. To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed ground works.
- 3. To record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works.
- 4. To produce an archive and report of any results.

5.4 Any archaeological deposits located were to be hand cleaned and planned as appropriate. Samples of any archaeological deposits located were to be hand excavated and measured drawings of all archaeological features prepared at a scale of 1:20 and tied into an overall site plan of 1:100.

5.5 Archaeological deposits were to be excavated and recorded as appropriate to establishing the stratigraphic and chronological sequence of deposits, recognising and excavating structural evidence and recovering economic, artefactual and environmental evidence. Particular attention was to be paid to the potential for buried palaeosoils and waterlogged deposits in consultation with ULAS's environmental officer.

5.6 All excavated sections were to be recorded and drawn at 1:10 or 1:20 scale, levelled and tied into the Ordnance Survey datum. Spot heights were taken as appropriate.

6. Results

6.1 Results of the Watching Brief

Trenches were excavated for a 'French' drain along the northern perimeter of the church between the 1st and the 8th of May 2009.

Work began with a topsoil strip along the full northern side of the church starting at the north western corner, which produced only modern pottery fragments.

On the second day excavations continued going down into the subsoil and reached a maximum depth of *c.*0.85m at the western end to *c.*0.6m at the eastern end of the church. The excavations revealed the sandstone foundations along the extent of the northern edge of the Church (figs 4, 5, 6 & 10) and of particular interest along the northern edge of the tower (fig. 10) was observed some ashlar limestone blocks (5) (fig 10) (see discussion below).

Along the northern aisle a line of coursed stones (4) (Figs 4 & 5) was revealed parallel to the north wall of the aisle and set *c.*0.3m to the north of it. The stones ran from the east side of the north doorway up to the northeast corner of the aisle, terminating here. Mainly a single course of stones, and probably only one stone in thickness, though the cross-section of the stone courses was not excavated. The stones were laid quite neatly, to an accurate line, forming a straight face to the south side.

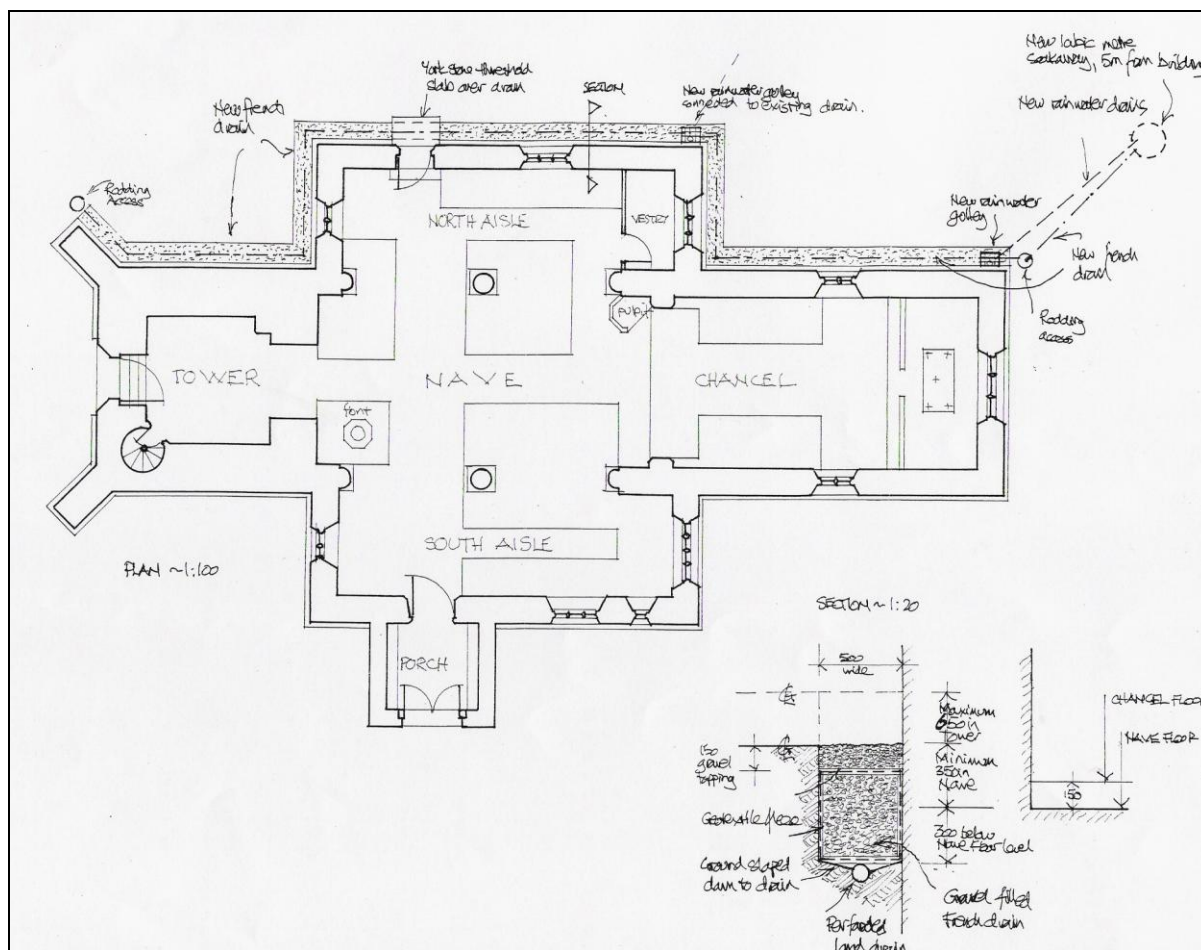


Figure 3 Plan of excavations (supplied by the developer)

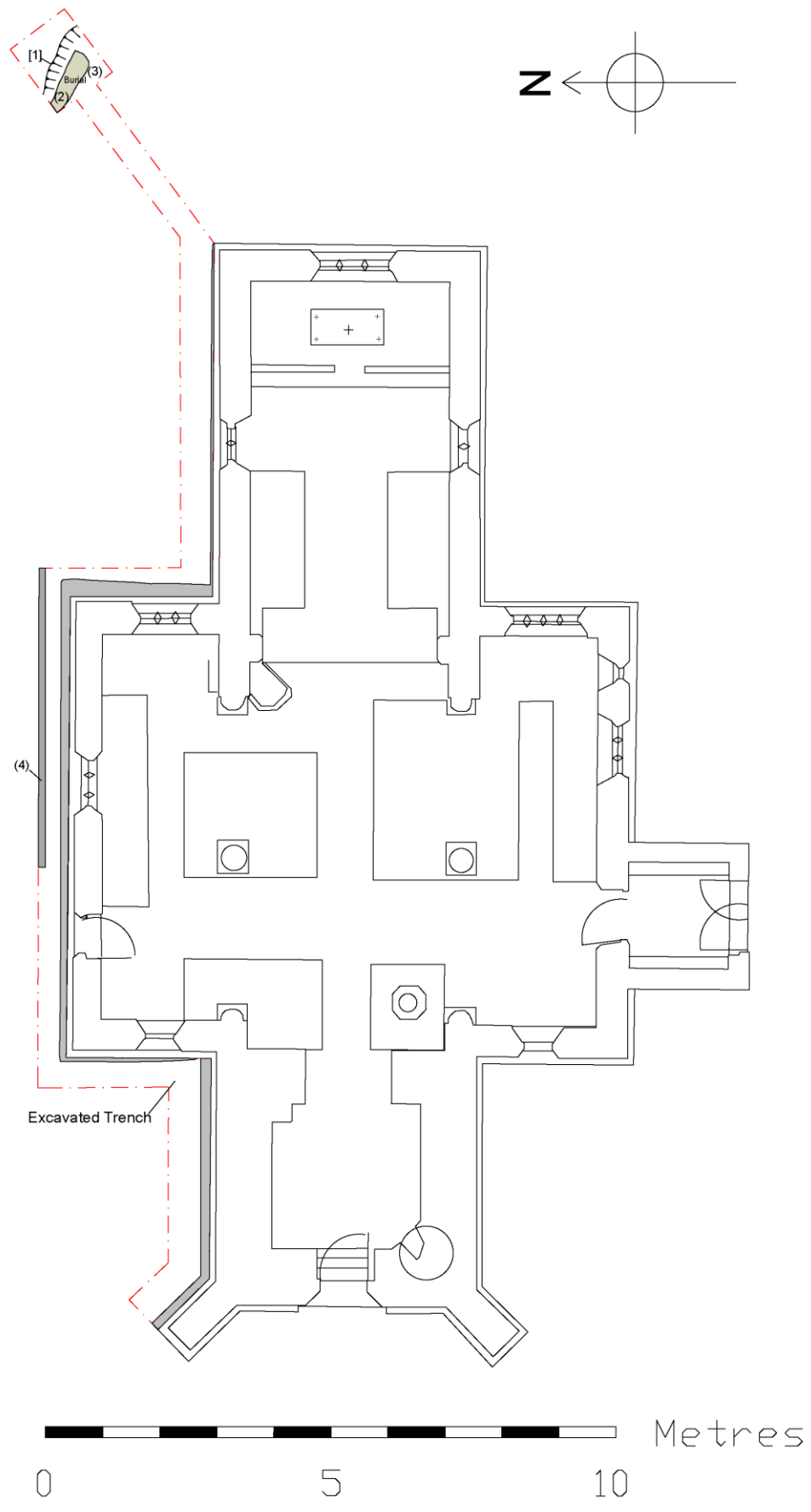


Figure 4 Plan of excavations at St. Nicholas Church

On the final day of the watching brief the soakaway was excavated. Within the soakaway trench, two burials were located, (2) and (3) within what appeared to be a single cut [1], (figs 7, 8 and 9). These were excavated by hand and recorded. The bones were then given to the keeping of the church warden for reburial. The cranium of the skeleton (2) appeared to be that of a female. Fragments of lead and wood remained within the burial fill, suggesting that the coffin was constructed out of these materials. No other finds or features were located within the burial fills (1) and (2). The date for the burials is uncertain although a 19th century date is likely.

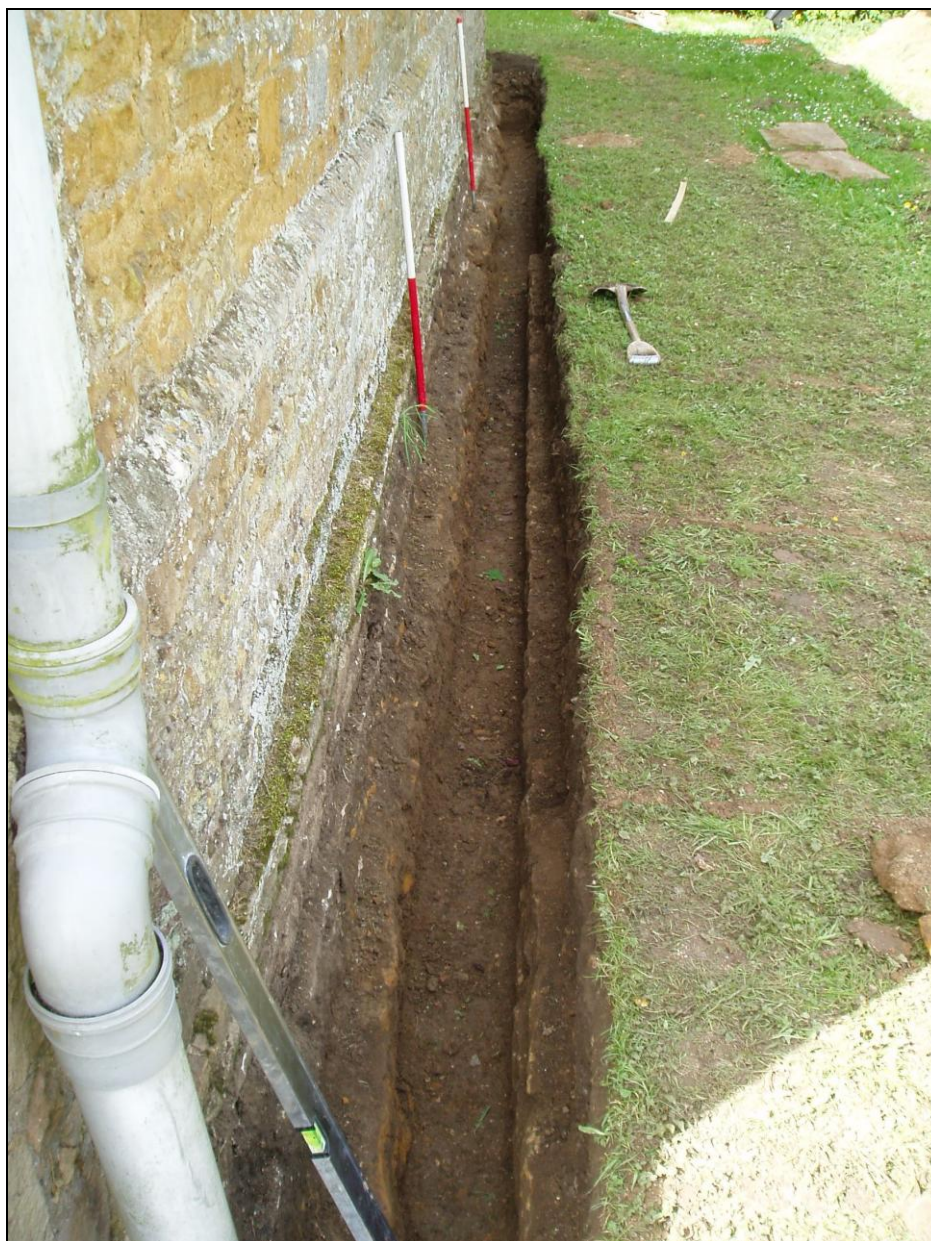


Figure 5 Stone drain (4) looking east



Figure 6 foundations of north aisle looking south

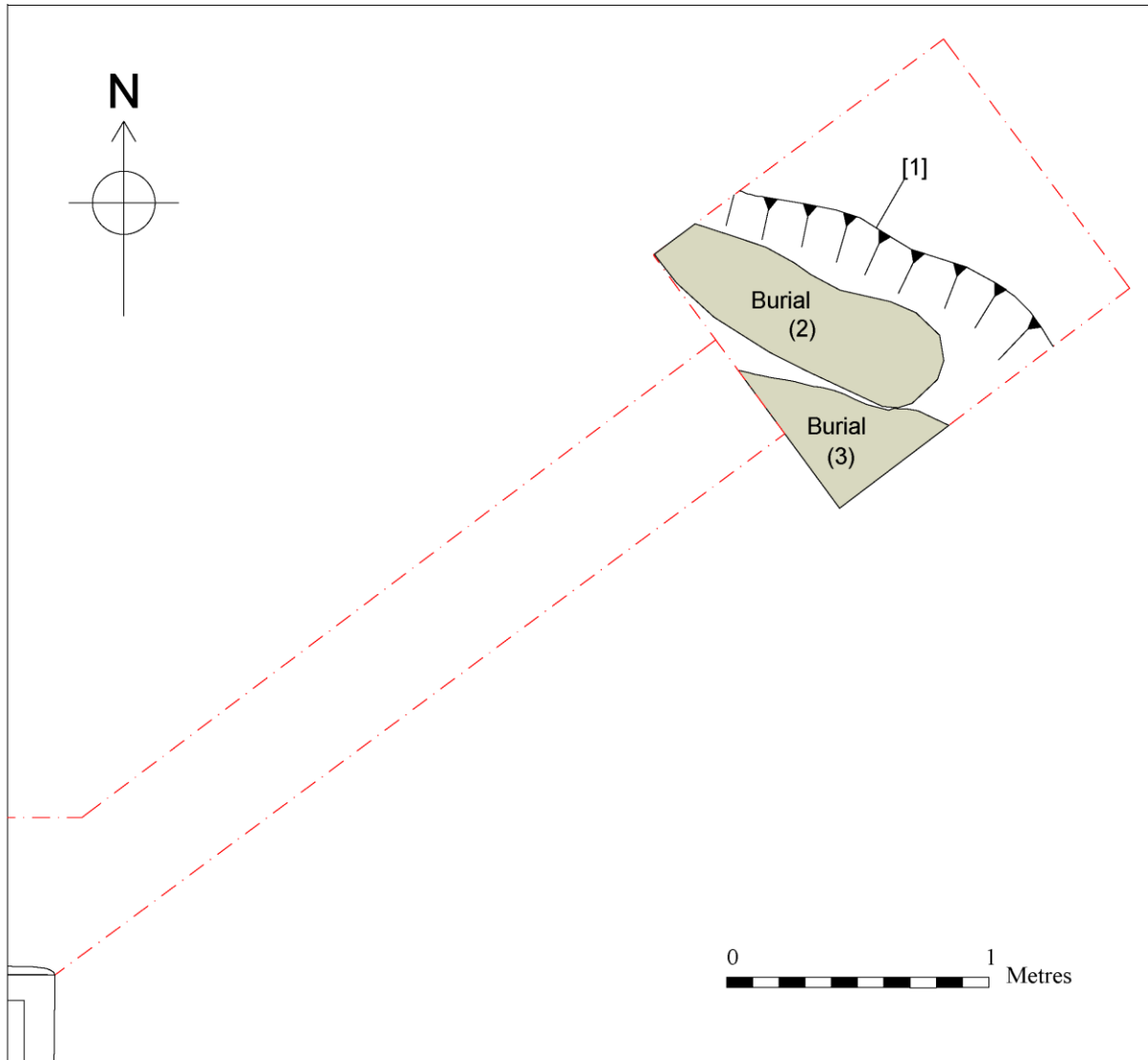


Figure 7 Plan of soak away containing burials [1] and [3]



Figure 8 Soak away containing burials looking east



Figure 9 Soak away containing burial cut [01] looking north



Figure 10 ashlar limestone blocks (5)

7. Discussion by Nick Hill

North Face of Tower

The stepped foundation of the tower was revealed, with three rather roughly formed outward steps in the foundation. This is what one would expect to find, except for the use of some dressed stonework amongst the rougher rubble.

There are a number of smooth-faced ashlar limestone blocks around 100mm in height, set just below the first outward step (5) (fig. 10). Below this is the most unusual feature, several lengths of limestone with a splayed front edge. There are 3 stones to the west, around 700mm long and 2 stones further to the east, 610mm and 680mm long. The stones are *c.*135mm in height, with a *c.*45° angled front which projects about 100mm. A peculiar feature is a small 'V' groove cut in the short vertical face below the angled slope. This 'V' groove is around 5mm deep on the stones to the west, but significantly smaller, *c.*3mm deep on the stones to the east. The stones are all of a high quality, shelly oolitic limestone of local type.

At first sight, the angled stones have the appearance of a projecting plinth course, suggesting that this section of stonework was above ground, and was later buried by raised ground level. Examination, however, shows this is unlikely to be the case. The rest of the stepped footing is roughly built, with irregular outward steps, quite wide in places, which are wholly inconsistent with the construction of a plinth built of well-formed, canted ashlar. The stones are all set in earth, not lime mortar, and are clearly built to form a stepped foundation, not intended to be exposed to view or the weather.

The dressed stones are thus re-used, not made for the purpose. Are they a later insert, or an original part of the construction of the tower? If inserted later, they would have been put in as part of an underpinning operation, to strengthen the tower foundation. It seems unlikely that they were inserted in this way as such long stones would involve digging out lengthy sections underneath the tower wall. An underpinning operation would be more likely to use smaller-sized rubble stone (like the rest of the footing), as this would be much easier to handle and get into place. Although the stepped footing is of irregular character, this is normal in such situations, and does not suggest later re-working, but a single build.

This indicates that the dressed stones pre-date the construction of the tower. The main 3-stage tower with its west doorway, buttresses and various window openings is typical of 14th century Decorated work. The previous use of the angled stones is not clear, though they must presumably have come from the church and therefore represents work of an early date. The puzzling feature is the small groove in the front vertical face. This is a little similar to the V shape of a glazing groove, as found in window mullions. But here the groove is too shallow, particularly on the eastern two stones, and is set too close to the angled corners. It may be that the stones formed a string course, set horizontally with the groove as a rather crude decoration to the front face. The stones are probably now placed upside down as re-set in the foundations. Norman period mouldings did make considerable use of fairly plain chamfered string courses etc, as can be seen in the abacus at the top of the capitals in the north arcade of the church.

The extent and character of the stones suggests that a major piece of well-formed masonry was dismantled in order to build the 14th century tower. The stones probably formed part of the west elevation of the 12th century, aisle-less church, and indicate this incorporated some significant masonry work - perhaps a central doorway, bell-cote or buttresses, incorporating a string course type feature.

North-east part of North Aisle

A line of coursed stones (4) (Figs 4&5) was revealed parallel to the N wall of the aisle and set c.300mm to the N of it. The stones ran from the E side of the N doorway up to the NE corner of the aisle, terminating here. Mainly a single course of stones, and probably only one stone in thickness, though the cross-section of the stone courses was not excavated. The stones were laid quite neatly, to an accurate line, forming a straight face to the S side.

The stonework looks fairly late in character, being very neatly executed, especially for work below ground. It is clearly not a wall foundation, as there could not have been a wall in this location, outside of the body of the aisle. The most likely explanation is that this was a stone-lined drain, dating from around the 19th century. The location of the stonework, from the door to the NE corner, coincides with the area inside the church which suffers most from damp. So it seems this was an earlier attempt to alleviate internal dampness. The drain was probably taller and more fully-formed originally, probably with a stone slab top (as found in normal stone-lined drain construction). It had lost its upper parts and become filled with soil, losing its original function.

A RECONSIDERATION OF ITS DEVELOPMENT IN THE 12TH TO 14TH CENTURIES

Nick Hill

The previous account of the church by Brandwood in 1987 noted the existence of lines of quoins at the west end which remain from the original nave, before the addition of the aisles in the 12th and 13th centuries: 'The development from an aisle-less church can be traced – see the old W corners of the nave in the angles between the tower and the aisles.' (Brandwood, p.24)

Lines of quoin stones are visible to both the north and south sides, of dressed limestone and ironstone. A feature not noted by Brandwood is that several of the larger ironstone blocks, on both north and south sides, also have a section of stone projecting westwards, indicating that there was an original wall or buttress attached to each corner. The surviving masonry, though rather eroded, and the presence of quoin stones indicates that the feature abutting against the end wall of the nave was probably set in by around 75mm from the corner. Buttresses in this location seem more plausible than an attached wall, as walls would indicate an early tower, for which no other evidence survives. Buttresses of this type, inset slightly from the corner, do occur on other buildings of the period. There may have been another buttress at each corner, set on the south and north faces respectively, but any evidence for this is hidden by the west walls of the added aisles.

A further feature which has not been noted in previous accounts is a masonry feature, now resembling a corbel, set at high level at the south-west corner of the north aisle, above the end of the north arcade. Close examination shows that this is the top of a buttress, which remains in situ from the aisle-less church, the whole of its lower part having been cut away when the

north arcade was inserted. The buttress projects only around 175mm from the north wall of the nave, and is around 350mm wide. The buttress top, on which the wallplate of the aisle roof now rests, has a plain angled capping stone which slightly overhangs the buttress pilaster below on all three sides. The top two courses of stonework of the buttress pilaster survive. The top course is a single plain ashlar block, and the lower course has two blocks which are bonded into the nave wall, now forming a corbel. The stonework is of shelly oolitic limestone, neatly, though plainly, cut and squared, with diagonal tool marking over the faces. The buttress is placed rather oddly in relation to the original corner of the nave, being set about 900mm away from the corner – not close enough to form a corner buttress, but too close for a regular spacing of wall buttresses. There can be no doubt, however, that the buttress is original and in situ.

Further analysis of the west end of the church and tower, together with a measured survey, now suggests the following sequence of building development, which differs significantly from previous accounts.

Phase 1: Earlier 12th century

Construction of the aisle-less nave, with buttresses to the corners of the west gable, and other shallow buttresses elsewhere, of which only the top part of one buttress survives at the west end of the north wall. The west gable seems to have been built to only c.650mm thickness, which is unusually thin and suggests other buttresses would also have been needed along the west wall. There may have been a west doorway, bell-cote or other features, which probably incorporated the chamfered string course of which several lengths were later re-used to construct the foundations of the 14th century tower (see below and separate note on the excavations). The date of Phase 1 must be earlier than the mid-late 12th century date of Phase 2. The surviving detail of the north buttress top suggests good quality but plain Norman work (not Anglo-Saxon), while the rather crude V-groove decoration on the re-used string course suggests work of the earlier Norman period. The original nave was probably of the same size as it is now, and would probably have had a south door and a small chancel at the east end. Parts of the upper walls, above the north and south arcades, may also survive in situ from this early church.

Phase 2: Later 12th century

The north aisle was added, with its arcade dating from the later 12th century. Brandwood suggests a mid-12th century date, Victoria County History proposes late 12th century and Pevsner gives it as late Norman. All three sources remark on the similarity of the capitals to those at Morcott, Rutland, which VCH gives as mid-12th century.

The construction of the north aisle involved the removal of most of the north wall of the nave, but left the upper part of the pilaster buttress at the west end. The construction of the arcade's west respond suggests that the west wall of the original nave was also retained.

Phase 3: Early 13th century

The south aisle was added later than the north aisle, with slightly more developed mouldings. Brandwood says 'The arches have a hint of pointing, so perhaps are of c.1200', when Gothic pointed arches first started to displace the Norman round-arched style. Pevsner gives this aisle as early to mid 13th century, and VCH as early 13th century.

The building of the south aisle brought the removal of most, if not all, of the 12th century south wall of the nave. Once again, the construction of the west respond suggests that the west wall of the nave was still intact.

Phase 4: 14th century - The tower

The main part of the west tower has generally been dated to the 14th century. It has diagonally set, gabled buttresses at the two western corners, a western doorway and four belfry windows in the Decorated style of this period. It is built in three stages, of ironstone with limestone dressings and has a moulded plinth and a moulded string course at each of the two upper stages, with a spiral stair incorporated in the south-west corner, lit by small slit windows. Examination shows that, with the exception of the top parapet, rebuilt around the 15th century, the whole of the exterior of the tower is of a single build, with all masonry neatly coursed together and no anomalies. The foundations of the north wall, exposed in recent excavations, also indicated a single build.

Inside, the round arch from the tower into the nave has until now generally been considered to be the surviving base of an earlier tower, dating from around the late 12th century (Brandwood and VCH) or early 13th century (Pevsner). However, following analysis of the measured survey and other details, it is now suggested that the whole of the tower east wall is of the same build as the rest of the 14th century tower, despite the incorporation of a round-headed arch of earlier type.

Consideration of the measured survey shows that the plan form of the tower is of a highly unusual type. The thick east wall of the tower abuts against the face of the nave, with the whole wall thickness lying outside the line of the nave wall. Normally, the east wall of a tower is integrated with the thickness of the west wall of the nave. Such is the case, for instance, in all of the medieval churches surveyed in north Northamptonshire in the Royal Commission study of 1984. At Bringhurst, the east wall is 1400mm thick, just like the west wall, with the plan showing a neatly formed, regular square structure built up against the existing west wall of the nave. Internally, the south-east corner of the tower shows that the south wall is fully bonded to the east wall. If the east wall with its round arch were earlier, one would expect a straight joint in the structure at this point. At the internal north-east corner, a 19th century brick-built boiler flue prevents examination of the bonding detail.

Turning to the problem of the round arch itself, examination of the details also indicates evidence in support of a 14th century date. On the east side, there is a plain outer relieving arch of ironstone blocks, a plain chamfered hood mould mainly of limestone but with some ironstone, and a main arch ring of very neatly cut limestone voussoirs, with double chamfering to the front edge. On the rear west face the arch has a similar outer relieving arch of rough ironstone/limestone blocks and a main arch of well-cut voussoirs, mainly here, on

the unseen side, of ironstone, and square-edged, not chamfered. The whole arch is very neatly and precisely formed, of a quality suggesting work later than the late 12th or early 13th century period. The particular feature, however, which indicates the later date of the arch is the impost moulding at its base. This runs right across the east face of the tower wall and through the full thickness of the wall, under the arched opening, stopping abruptly at the west face. It is clearly built in as an original feature, not a later insertion. Instead of the plainer, chamfered style one would expect in this location for Norman work, the impost has on its underside a hollow cavetto moulding set between small chamfers – a moulding typical of later periods.

The conclusion must be that the whole of the west tower, including the east wall with its rounded arch, must be of a single, 14th century build. Perhaps the round arch was favoured here because it was thought to be stronger than the pointed arch, providing vital support at the base of the tower's thick east wall. It represents a remarkable case of the use of an old-fashioned style, which was well out of date by the 14th century.

The construction of the tower would have involved demolition of the 12th century west gable of the nave. No doubt the nave wall, which as noted above was unusually thin, was considered inadequate for support of the fine new tower, and it was found easier to construct a complete new wall and foundation, outside the line of the west gable. The short return walls by the responds of the north and south arcades against the tower would have had to be refaced once the rest of the west gable was removed. The foundations of the tower made use of several pieces of dressed limestone, as noted above, which probably came from features in the demolished west wall of the nave.

8. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Churchwarden Michael Mallock and volunteer Ann Wallis for their assistance and co-operation on site. I would also like to thank Nick Hill for his significant contributions. Patrick Clay managed the project and the fieldwork was carried out by the author both of ULAS.

9. Archive

The site archive consisting of paper records and digital colour photographs will be held by Leicestershire County Council, under the accession code: [X.A116.2009].

Archive accession code [X.A116.2009] contents:

Copy of Report:	Watching Brief Recording Sheets:	Digital Colour Photographs:
1	5	117

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05/09/2009

11. Oasis Information:

Project Name	St. Nicholas' Church, Bringham, Leicestershire
Project Type	Watching Brief
Project Manager	Patrick Clay
Project Supervisor	Greg Jones
Previous/Future work	No previous work
Current Land Use	Churchyard
Development Type	Insertion of French drain

Reason for Investigation	PPG16
Position in the Planning Process	N/A
Site Co ordinates	NGR: SP 841 921
Start/end dates of field work	01.05.09 – 08.05.09
Archive Recipient	Leicestershire
Study Area	<i>c.</i> 12m ²

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