

# St. James' Church, Smisby, Derbyshire

## Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief



**ARS Ltd Report 2011/81**  
August 2011

Oasis no: archaeol5-108667

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*In August 2011 Archaeological Research Services Ltd was requested by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor for Derbyshire, Dave Barrett, to undertake an archaeological watching brief in the grounds of St. James' Church, Smisby. The monitoring was carried out during groundworks for a new series of drainage channels that are to be linked to a trench-arch drainage system to the north-east.*

*The work involved two narrow pipe trenches being excavated, one running from the west wall of the porch to the south wall of the tower (Trench 1), and one running from the east wall of the vestry north-east into the churchyard (Trench 2). The floor level around the vestry door was also reduced in order to provide a new alternate entry into the church. During the excavation of Trench 1, several isolated disarticulated human bones were uncovered, along with two assemblages of human bone that are possibly the result of earlier disturbance and reburial.*

*The reburied assemblages consisted of a middle-aged woman with a possible slight congenital deformity of the skull and of a woman of indeterminate age, along with several fragmentary bones from other individuals. An assortment of coffin fittings was uncovered with Disarticulated Burial 2, and Disarticulated Burial 1 appears to have been originally buried with several copper or copper alloy items. Although suppositional, the condition of the remains indicates a probably late medieval to post-medieval date. No dateable grave goods were recovered from any of the burials, or from the subsoil layer.*

*No other features of archaeological significance or buried land surfaces were revealed.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

In August 2011 a watching brief was requested by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor for Derbyshire, Dave Barrett, at the Church of St. James, Smisby, Derbyshire (Fig. 1). The work was carried out during groundworks for the insertion of a new mains water line into the church building.

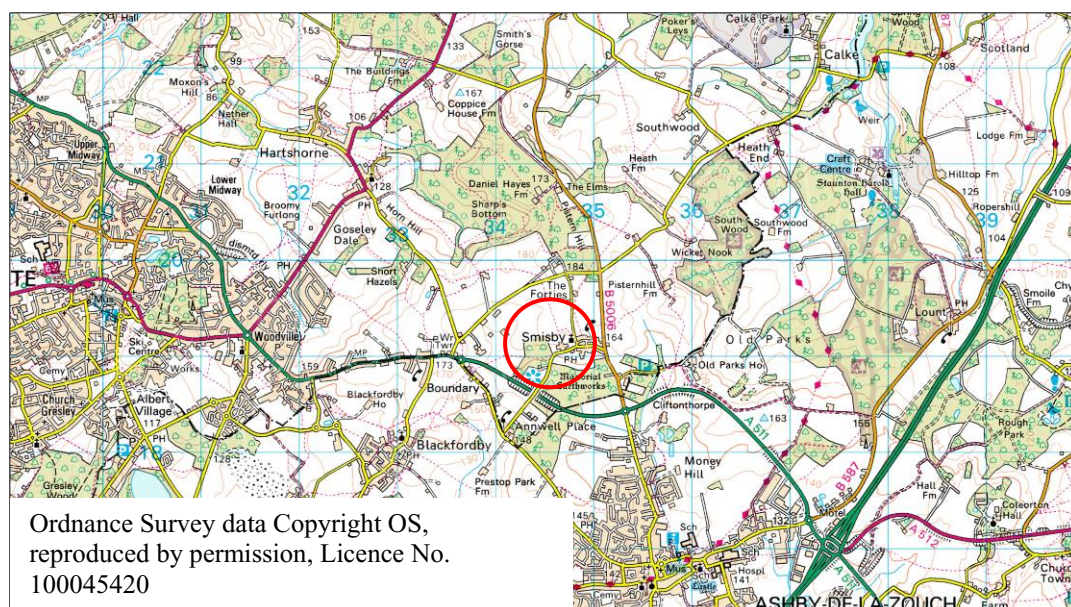


Figure 1. Site location

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### 1.2 Location and geology

The site is centred at SK 34796 19126 and stands approximately 3.5 km to the east of Swadlincote and 5km to the north west of Ashby-de-la-Zouche.

The site sits on the Bromsgrove Sandstone Formation (sandstone), approximately 20 metres north of the Bromsgrove Sandstone Formation (mudstone). The superficial geology consists of clay and sand (British Geological Survey 1978).

### 1.3 Background

Smisby was settled in Saxon times, the name coming from the Old Norse name 'Smidesbie', which translates as 'Smith's Farm'. The village is referred to as *Smidesbie* in the Domesday Book. The first known church at the site was built as a Chapel of Ease by the Repton Monks in 1098. Parts of this building allegedly survive as the south aisle of the present church ([www.smisby.org.uk/about-the-church.html](http://www.smisby.org.uk/about-the-church.html)). The nave and chancel were added sometime before 1350 and the present church contains 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century work as well as 16<sup>th</sup> century interior wood panelling. It is Grade 1 listed (No: 82873).

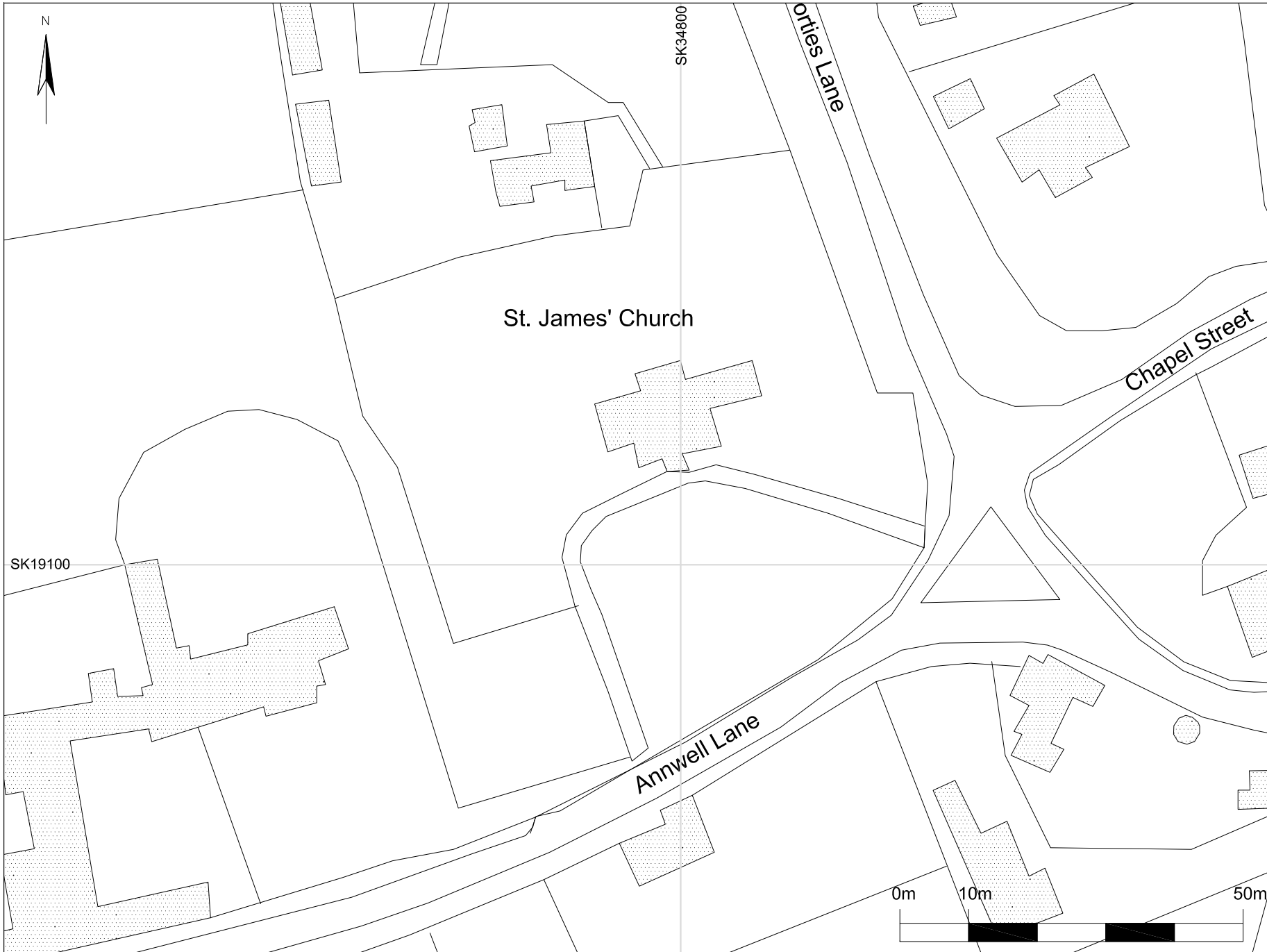
1.3.2 The churchyard was subject to a previous watching brief during groundworks for a drainage system in 1995. This uncovered the possible foundations of an earlier structure, incorporating an architectural fragment (Barrett 1995, archive SDR19331).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The specification required that a watching brief should be carried out to observe any groundworks taking place for the proposed development, in order to identify any potential archaeological remains. This involved monitoring the excavation of two trenches, and the reduction of the ground level outside the vestry (Fig. 2). Trench 1 ran from the west wall of the porch to the south wall of the tower and Trench 2 ran from the east wall of the vestry north east into the churchyard.

Both trenches were excavated by machine, using a back-acting toothless ditching bucket under continuous archaeological supervision. The machine removed the topsoil (001) in level spits until the lowest depth required for the pipe was reached (0.75m) or until any archaeological finds were observed. The area outside the vestry door was excavated to a depth of 0.7m. The exposed surfaces were then cleaned using hand tools in order to interpret any archaeological features.

A single context recording system was employed. Each layer encountered was given a unique context number and a full written description. Photographs were taken in black and white print and digital format in order to record the ground work.



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Figure 2:  
 Site plan

Key:

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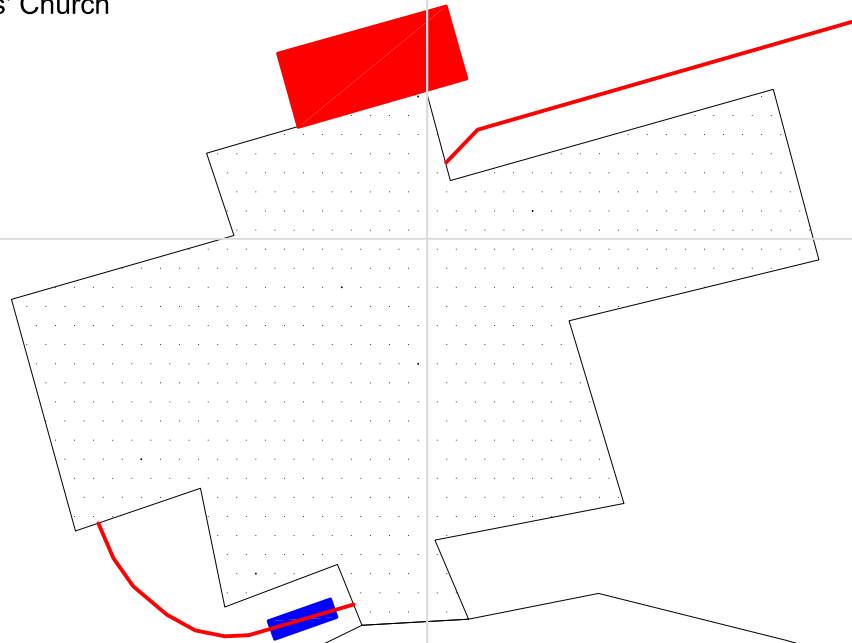


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St. James' Church





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Figure 3:  
Site plan

Key:

 Areas of excavation

 Area of concentration of disarticulated remains including Disarticulated Burial 1 and Disarticulated Burial 2

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0m 5m 20m





### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Topsoil

The topsoil (001) covered the whole of the observed site and averaged 0.2m in depth. It consisted of coarse-medium dark greyish-brown sandy silt with inclusions of small stones.

#### 3.2 Subsoil

Subsoil deposits covered the entire observed site but changed in composition from the north end of the churchyard to the south end. In Trench 2 and the area of reduced ground the subsoil consisted of a clayey sand of medium texture, light yellowish orange in colour with patches of red, yellow and white (103), while in Trench 1 the composition changed to silty sand of a light orangey yellow colour (102).

Both of the different subsoils were well mixed and patchy, indicating that both were made-ground. Finds of disarticulated bone in Trench 1 confirm this, as does the presence of earlier drainage pipes in Trench 2.

#### 3.3 Disarticulated human bone

A large amount of disarticulated human bone was recovered from the area immediately to the west of the porch in Trench 1. Many of the bones were isolated and unrelated spatially to other remains, however two distinct assemblages were also recovered. It is possible that these deposits are earlier reburials of disturbed remains. A brief description of the two assemblages can be seen below.

#### 3.7 Disarticulated Burial 1

Disarticulated Burial 1 was recovered approximately three metres west of the porch wall and consisted of the following:

Element	Preservation
Cranium with facial bones	3
Left petrous portion	2
Parietal fragments	2
Manubrium	3
Right humerus	2
Left humerus (fragmentary)	2
Scapula (unknown siding, fragmentary)	2
Right scaphoid	2
4 x rib (fragmentary)	2
Metatarsal (unidentified proximal epiphysis)	2
Tibia (unknown siding, fragmentary)	2
3 x cervical vertebrae	3
Thoracic vertebra	3
Fibula (fragmentary)	2
Femur (fragmentary)	2

Surface preservation of the remains was graded from 0 to 5+. A Grade 0 bone would be described as having a 'surface morphology (which is) clearly visible... (a) fresh appearance... and no modifications' (Brickley and McKinley 2004: 16). A bone valued as Grade 5+ would have been described as having 'heavy erosion... across (the) whole surface, completely masking (the) normal surface morphology... with extensive penetrating erosion resulting in modification of (the) profile' (2004: 16). As several of the cranial bones were duplicated, the minimum number of individuals in this assemblage is two.

No visible pathologies were identified on appendicular skeleton, however the skull is noteworthy. Although the occipital and the posterior aspects of the parietals have been damaged post-mortem, it is clear that the cranium is elongated beyond that of normal morphology in relation to the size and shape of the facial area. The frontal bone appears to be extended on the superior aspect, which is likely to be the reason that the cranium as a whole looks elongated. The brow region of the frontal bone is heavily sloped, adding to the illusion of extra length. The facial region of the individual is also unusual. The orbits appear enlarged and the maxillary region appears much shorter than it should be, possibly due to the obvious ante-mortem loss of teeth and subsequent resorption of the gums. It is evident that at time of death the only maxillary dentition still present was the left first incisor, which has been lost post-mortem. The surface morphology of the skull is generally good, although there are areas of post-mortem erosion. Green staining is also apparent in a circular pattern on the forehead, indicating the placement of a coin before burial that has since corroded. Green staining is also visible on the left zygomatic bone and right temporal and parietal. These may indicate hair or hat pins, shroud pins or other similar items.



Figure 3. Disarticulated Burial 1 – front view. Note the circular green discolouration indicating placement of a coin. Scale = 10cm.



Figure 4. Disarticulated Burial 1 – side view. Scale = 10cm.

The age and sex of these remains is difficult to determine due to the absence of the pelvis in the assemblage. There are also no teeth to examine so dental attrition cannot be used as a method of age determination. However, cranial suture closure analysis indicates that this individual was between 35 and 55 years of age (Meindl and Lovejoy 1985, 59). The sloping forehead may be a feature of the enlarged cranium and so cannot reliably be used as a sex indicator, however the small mastoid processes and nuchal crest indicate a female.

### 3.8 Disarticulated Burial 2

Disarticulated Burial 2 was uncovered approximately one metre west of Disarticulated Burial 1 and consisted of the following:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Preservation</b>
Cranium	3
Frontal bone	1
Mandible	1
Left petrous portion	2
Maxilla and attached left zygomatic	2
Left zygomatic process	2
21 x skull fragments	2
1 x ethmoid fragment	3
Left scapula	2
Left distal femur	3
Right proximal tibia	3
Right distal femur (fragmentary)	3

Cervical vertebra	3
Atlas	2
5 x rib fragment (adult)	3
2 x rib fragment (juvenile)	4
Metarsal (proximal, juvenile)	3

One fragmentary sheep mandible was also included within the assemblage. As there were both adult and juvenile elements present within the assemblage, and the adult frontal bone and petrous portion were duplicated, the minimum number of individuals for this assemblage is three. A corroded iron coffin handle was found below the skull, and five iron nails were discovered within the soil that had accumulated inside the skull during burial.

There are no obvious pathologies on the remains, other than an almost complete ante-mortem loss of teeth, similar to Disarticulated Burial 1. Both the maxilla and mandible are present here, and the only tooth still remaining is the maxillary left canine which shows a medium degree of attrition and a patch of staining on the distal interdental surface. It is clear that the neighbouring tooth (the first premolar) was present at death but was lost post-mortem and so this stain would have been located between the two teeth. It is interesting to note that the root of this remaining canine tooth is longer than usual. It can be seen that at the time of death the right maxillary canine and the right maxillary first molar were present, and have been lost post-mortem. The right second maxillary molar appears to have been lost close to the time of death, as the void was in the process of healing. Similarly there is a void on the mandible that is in the process of closing, in approximately the location of the right canine. All other teeth were lost ante-mortem and the gums have healed.



Figure 5. Disarticulated Burial 2 – front view. Scale = 10cm.



Figure 6. Disarticulated Burial 2 – side view. Scale = 10cm.



Figure 7. Disarticulated Burial 2 – mandible showing ante-mortem tooth loss. The holes on the front surface are foramen for the blood supply. Scale = 10cm.

As with Disarticulated Burial 1, it is difficult to determine sex and age at death as there is no pelvis present in the assemblage. The skull is small, with a heavily bossed occipital. The mastoid processes are small and the nuchal crest is extremely small. These features indicate that the individual was female. The rounded jaw and small mental eminence support this determination. Due to erosion of the skull surface in several places, cranial

suture closure could not be used as an accurate age estimation technique. The remaining canine is unfortunately not enough to age the remains by dental attrition techniques; therefore the age at death of the remains cannot be determined.

### **3.4 Small finds**

A small amount of disarticulated animal bone fragments were recovered from the subsoil layer. No other small finds were uncovered.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

4.1 During the excavations at St. James' Church, Smisby the reinterred disarticulated remains of a minimum of five individuals were uncovered, along with a large amount of unrelated disarticulated human bone. The reburied assemblages consisted of a middle-aged woman with a possible slight congenital deformity of the skull and of a woman of indeterminate age, along with several fragmentary bones from other individuals. An assortment of coffin fittings was uncovered with Disarticulated Burial 2, and Disarticulated Burial 1 appears to have been originally buried with several copper or copper alloy items.

4.2 Although suppositional, the condition of the remains indicates a probably late medieval to post-medieval date. No dateable grave goods were recovered from any of the burials, or from the subsoil layer. It is likely that these individuals were disturbed during later excavations and the bones collected as best as possible and re-interred.

4.3 No other finds, features or buried land surfaces were uncovered.

## **5. PUBLICITY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND COPYRIGHT**

5.1. Any publicity will be handled by the client.

5.2. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will retain the copyright of all documentary and photographic material under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act (1988).

## **6. ARCHIVE DEPOSITION AND PUBLICATION**

6.1 A digital and paper archive will be prepared and deposited with Derby Museum and Art Gallery by September 2011. This will consist of all primary written documents, plans, sections, photographs and electronic data associated with the project. An accession number has been requested from Derby Museum and Art Gallery. A request was submitted prior to commencement for an accession number and this is still awaited. The human remains will be reinterred within the churchyard at Smisby.

6.2 A summary of the project, with selected drawings, illustrations and photographs will be submitted within 2 years of the completion of the project to the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal for publication. The results of the work will be published at least in summary form in the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal.

## **7. STATEMENT OF INDEMNITY**

7.1 All statements and opinions contained within this report arising from the works undertaken are offered in good faith and compiled according to professional standards. No responsibility can be accepted by the author/s of the report for any errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by any third party, or for loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in any such report(s), howsoever such facts and opinions may have been derived.

## **8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

8.1. Archaeological Research Services Ltd would like to thank all those involved in this project, in particular the Parish Council of St. James' Smisby, Anthony Short and Partners, and Dave Barrett, the Diocesan Advisor.

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