

**BUILDING RECORDING AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING**  
**AT ST MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH**  
**WETHERSFIELD**  
**ESSEX**



**Essex County Council**  
**Field Archaeology Unit**

**June 2011**

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**HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING**  
**AT ST MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH**  
**WETHERSFIELD**  
**ESSEX**

**Client:** Wethersfield Parochial Church Council

**FAU Project No.:** 2333

**NGR:** TL 7122 3125

**OASIS No.:** 103332

**Dates of Fieldwork:** January - March 2011

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

A programme of building recording and archaeological monitoring was undertaken at St Mary Magdalene Church by Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit (ECC FAU) prior to the conversion of the south porch to create new toilet facilities. The work was commissioned by the architect, Gerald Barrett, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council and carried out in accordance with a brief issued by the Historic Environment Management team of Essex County Council (ECC HEM), who also monitored the work.

As well as the Church Council, copies of the report will be supplied to ECC HEM and the Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER) at County Hall, Chelmsford. The archive will be kept at Braintree Museum. An OASIS online record has been created at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/oasis/index.cfm>.

St Mary's is a Grade I Listed church that has developed over many centuries. The north-west corner of the nave is believed to be part of the original Saxon church. The tower is dated to the 12th century and the nave and chancel were rebuilt in the 13th and 14th centuries. Two porches were added in the early 15th century. The south porch contains the remains of two windows blocked during the 18th-century but fully-exposed at the start of the building works and are the main subject of the building record.

## **2.0 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Site location and description**

Wethersfield lies on the B1053 road between Braintree and Saffron Walden at TL 7122 3125. The church is located on the south side of the High Street in the centre of the village (fig. 1). It is surrounded by an irregular-shaped churchyard sloping to the south toward Wethersfield Hall.

The church (cover plate & plate 1) is Grade I Listed and built from flint and pebble rubble with limestone and clunch dressings below a peg-tile and leaded roof (LBS 115693). The present structure has a broad western tower which has an unusual shingled spire of Germanic design (Pevsner 1954). The nave has two side aisles added in the 14th and mid 15th centuries. The chapel, also 14th century, is slightly canted to the north. There are two 15th century porches to north and south. The north porch was rebuilt in brick in c.1750 and the south porch (plate 2) has two contemporary brick windows inserted into earlier gothic ones.

### **2.2 Planning background**

A planning application was made to the Diocesan Committee for the conversion of the south porch. Mindful of the importance of the listed structure, the inevitable impact to its historic fabric and archaeological implications of new services being excavated within the graveyard, ECC HEM placed a full archaeological condition on the plans, based on advice given in Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment (DCMS 2010).

### **2.3 Historical background**

The following is intended as a brief overview of the development of the church, based on existing published sources, mainly the list description and a visitor's guidebook produced by the parish. No new research was undertaken.

Wethersfield takes its name from 'Wutha', believed to be one of the many Viking settlers who sailed from Scandinavia to Mersea in the 8th-10th centuries and then up the River Pant (Guidebook). Upon arrival, Wutha made a clearing in the forest, the Saxon word for clearing being 'feld' (felled) or field- hence 'Wutha's feld'. A settlement was established with a Saxon church on the present site. In fact part of the north-west corner of the original nave survives inside the church.

The west tower was constructed in the 12th-century (LBS 115693). Foundations of the original nave (without side aisles) and a small chancel believed to be part of the late 12th

century church (but perhaps part of the pre-conquest church) were found during the Victorian restoration (Guidebook). The present bell-chamber dates to the late 13th century and is situated below a replaced modern spire said to be erected in 1916 (Scarfe 1968). The north aisle was added to the nave in the early 14th century and the chancel in mid 14th-century.

The two porches (north and south) were constructed in the early 15th century along with the south aisle and clerestory. The north porch was rebuilt in brick in the Georgian period, 1750. New side windows were inserted in the south porch at the same time, blocking the two earlier ones.

The church was restored in the Victorian period between 1874 and 1876. Like many other parish churches at the time, St Mary's was in poor condition, particularly the chancel, which had been previously used as a school but had become derelict (Guidebook). The vestry and organ chamber were added on the south side of the chancel.

Mention is made of the two early porch windows in the RCHME Inventory of Historic Monuments of 1916 (vol. 1), which states: "the east and west walls each have a moulded window, now blocked; the jamb stones are of the 15th century".

Restoration works were carried out on the south porch in 1986. In 2010 conversion proposals were submitted for its conversion and the presence of the early windows was reported by the architect and there after highlighted in the subsequent ECC HEM brief.

### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the archaeological work, as outlined in the brief (ECC HEM 2010), was twofold. Firstly, to photograph and produce annotated and scaled drawings of the west and east walls of the porch that were directly affected by the conversion works, and secondly to monitor all groundworks associated with the conversion.

### **4.0 DESCRIPTION OF WORKS**

Plans and elevations of the church porch were supplied by the architect and a site visit made to inspect the west and east internal walls before they were stripped of wall plaster (plates 3 & 4).

Once the plaster was removed, the full extent of the 15th century windows was exposed and the walls drawn (at 1:20 scale) and recorded. No record was required of the north and south walls, though photographs are available in the archive. Digital and black and white photographs were taken of the affected areas, along with more general views of the exterior, a representative selection of which is reproduced at the back of the report as plates 1-10.

Archaeological monitoring was undertaken after flooring was removed in the south-west corner of the south aisle and inside the south porch. Groundworks around the porch footings and a pipe trench along the existing pathway were also monitored (fig. 1).

## **5.0 THE SOUTH PORCH**

### **5.1 *General description***

The external walls comprise well-coursed and densely-packed flints and stones below an 18th century crenellated brick parapet, built in English bond (plate 2). The porch is entered through a 15th century moulded two-centred archway, partly restored with plastered brick at the base of the jambs, exposed during the current works. The west wall has a surviving 18th century plain arched window of red brick, (plate 3). A corresponding window on the east wall was blocked-in during the 1874 restoration to form a recess for a disused 15th century font (plate 4). It is interesting to note that the flintwork covering the former window matches the existing flintwork, suggesting the exterior was re-faced in the restoration.

### **5.2 *Internal west and east walls***

The wall fabric inside is typified by a roughly-coursed combination of medium flint nodules, pebbles and occasional pieces of limestone bonded in a chalky lime mortar. The size and coursing of the fabric varies substantially and generally appears less regular than the external walls.

Only the limestone jambs remain of the blocked windows in the porch which are quite large given the size of the structure. They survive to approximately 2.1m in height and 1.5m in width, with an internal opening of c.1.9m by 1.3m. All tracery was removed when the windows were blocked prior to the construction of the new, plainer ones in the 18th century, and their heads levelled off when the upper part of the porch was rebuilt in the same phase. Therefore it is difficult to imagine how the windows originally appeared. It is worth noting that the height of the roof, which by all accounts is original, would not allow for windows with two-



centred arches (like the doorway), but could only accommodate flatter four-centred heads (figs. 3 & 4).

The replacement 18th century windows were much narrower, with simple plain arches built of soft red bricks. Brick dimensions, form and colour conform to those of 18th end early 19th century date (Ryan 1996). The same bricks were used to build the brick crenellations above. High up in the internal brickwork are timber rails that perhaps held laths for plastering (figs. 3 & 4), brick being a flatter material to 'key in' the plaster than flintwork.

Of the 18th century plain-arched windows, only the western one is still in use. Originally this was taller than it is today at approximately 2m, with sill level similar to that of the 15th century window (fig. 3). Subsequently the sill was raised, probably during the Victorian restoration, to form the current window. On the other side, the eastern window was completely blocked during the restoration, presumably to create the alcove for the font. Only the window head and north jamb remain; the south jamb has been cut out (fig. 4). There is some evidence that the brick window here was shorter than the other since the outline of the former sill appears to survive (fig. 4), suggesting an opening of approximately 1.5m in height.

## **6.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING**

Three areas were monitored during groundworks. The first was an area of rotting wooden flooring removed inside the church; the second was the south porch where the internal floor was lowered and a small drainage trench excavated around its exterior; and the third the cutting of a new drainage pipe trench along an existing pathway within the graveyard. The results are outlined below, and their locations shown in figure 1.

### **6.1 Wooden floor (c. 2m x 2m)**

A small area of wooden flooring was lifted in the south-west corner of the church (fig. 1). The surrounding floor is tiled. Beneath it lay a patchy spread of lime mortar (plate 7), probably relating to the 19th century restoration phase. No further excavation took place.

## **6.2 South Porch**

### **6.2.1 Internal**

Groundworks within the porch consisted of the removal of the existing brick floor which was composed of 50mm thick, flat flooring bricks and the removal of a small amount of the underlying bedding layer of orange silty sand. An exploratory pit was then dug through the

deposits in the south-east corner of the porch on the line of the proposed drainage run (plate 8). The orange sand was revealed in section to be about 0.08 m thick and to overlay a 0.02m thick seam of greyer silty sand. Beneath was 0.05m of more mixed grey sandy silt containing occasional pieces of flint which overlay a foundation deposit of small to medium sub-angular flints in a light brown to buff sandy mortar with small lime inclusions. The foundation deposit protruded 0.10m out from beneath the southern wall of the porch and was in excess of 0.35m thick.

### **6.2.2 External**

The foundation deposit was further exposed in a shallow drainage trench, c.0.30m wide by 0.30m deep, excavated around the outside of the porch. In the southern wall (west of the entrance) the foundation was sealed by a single course of flat red bricks, measuring 225mm by 60mm, of possible Tudor or 17th century date, though most probably re-used to form the base for the 18th century brickwork supporting the porch doorway (plate 9). The top of the foundation exposed on the western side of the porch was notable for the use of several large flints/stones in its upper courses. A layer of bricks was also noted laying above the foundation but here obscured by render. The excavation of a drainage run beneath the stone slab (coffin lid) of Purbeck marble forming the porch threshold revealed that the foundation was not continuous and that there was a convenient c.0.40m wide break in the foundations beneath the centre of the entrance threshold.

### **6.3 Drainage run**

Monitoring was undertaken on the excavation of a new drainage run. This led from the porch doorway to a new manhole and partly along an existing grass pathway that followed the natural slope to the south-east. The trench was mostly 0.60m wide and varied in depth from 0.20m to 0.80m. The overburden generally consisted of 0.10m-0.20m of topsoil overlying greyish brown sandy silt. No distinct features or grave cuts were visible in the silt which is likely to be made up of mixed grave backfill. A large lens of light orangey brown sandy mortar with occasional flints was noted within the silt about halfway along the trench on its western side (plate 10). Also visible in this area was a band of small pebbles that separated the topsoil from the silt and may have been remnants of a former path surface.

## **7 0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The Royal Commission identified the two porch windows as early 15th century in their buildings inventory of 1916; however, quite how these windows originally appeared is difficult to judge since their tracery and window heads were removed in the Georgian era. Given the height of the porch roof, which is believed to be unaltered, the windows would have been of the four-centred arch design, which was a contemporary form but would not have matched the more pointed two-centred arch of the porch doorway, and that of the doorway into the church. It is also true to say that the limestone windows are disproportionately large given the size of the porch, and relatively low, meaning the interior would have been rather exposed to the elements, a likely factor in their replacement. It is possible therefore that the windows are not original to the porch and are possibly reused from elsewhere, perhaps from another part of the church during one of the medieval alterations.

In terms of comparison with existing windows in the church, the earlier windows in the porch are similar in width to the 14th century chancel windows, but taller. The closest comparison is the east window of the vestry, which has approximately the same dimensions. However, this is not a useful parallel since this is a reused south chancel window that was re-set and lowered when the vestry was built in 1874 (RCHME 1916).

Monitoring works exposed quite shallow wall foundations to the original 15th century porch and brickwork beneath the porch door, revealing the extensive nature of the 18th century work. No deposits or features of archaeological interest were recorded beneath the floors of the south aisle and porch or outside the church in the drainage run, which showed a typical mixture of graveyard soils and was too shallow to disturb any burials in this area.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks are due to the parishioners of St Mary Magdalene for their help and interest in the fieldwork. Survey drawings were supplied by the architect, Mr. Gerald Barrett. Survey works, recording and photography in the porch were undertaken by the author and monitoring works carried out by Trevor Ennis and Adrian Scruby. Illustrations were prepared by the author and digitised by Andrew Lewsey. The project was managed by Adrian Scruby of ECC FAU and monitored by Teresa O'Connor of ECC HEM on behalf of the Local Planning Authority.

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Fig.1. Location of areas of archaeological monitoring

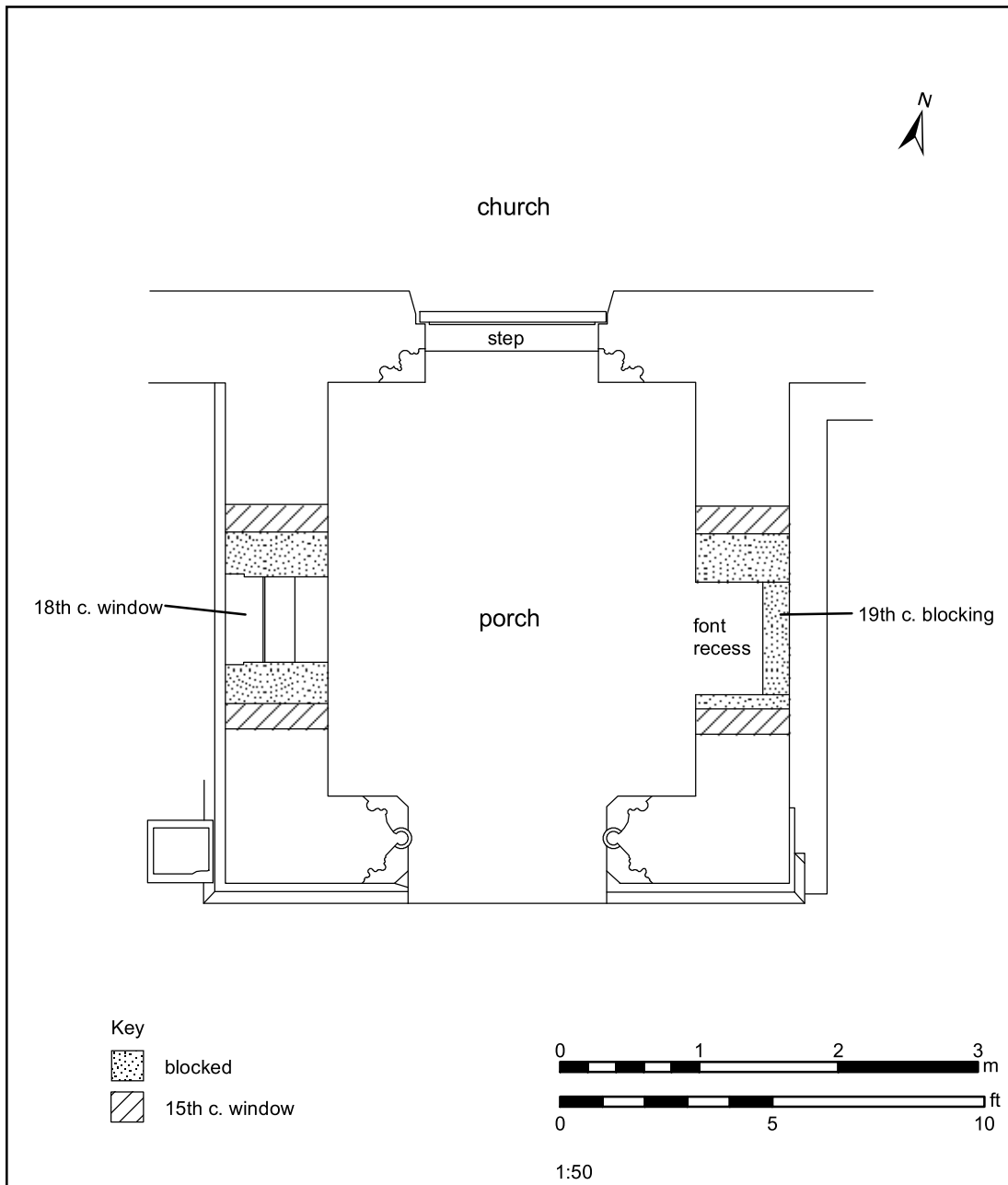


Fig.2. Plan of porch

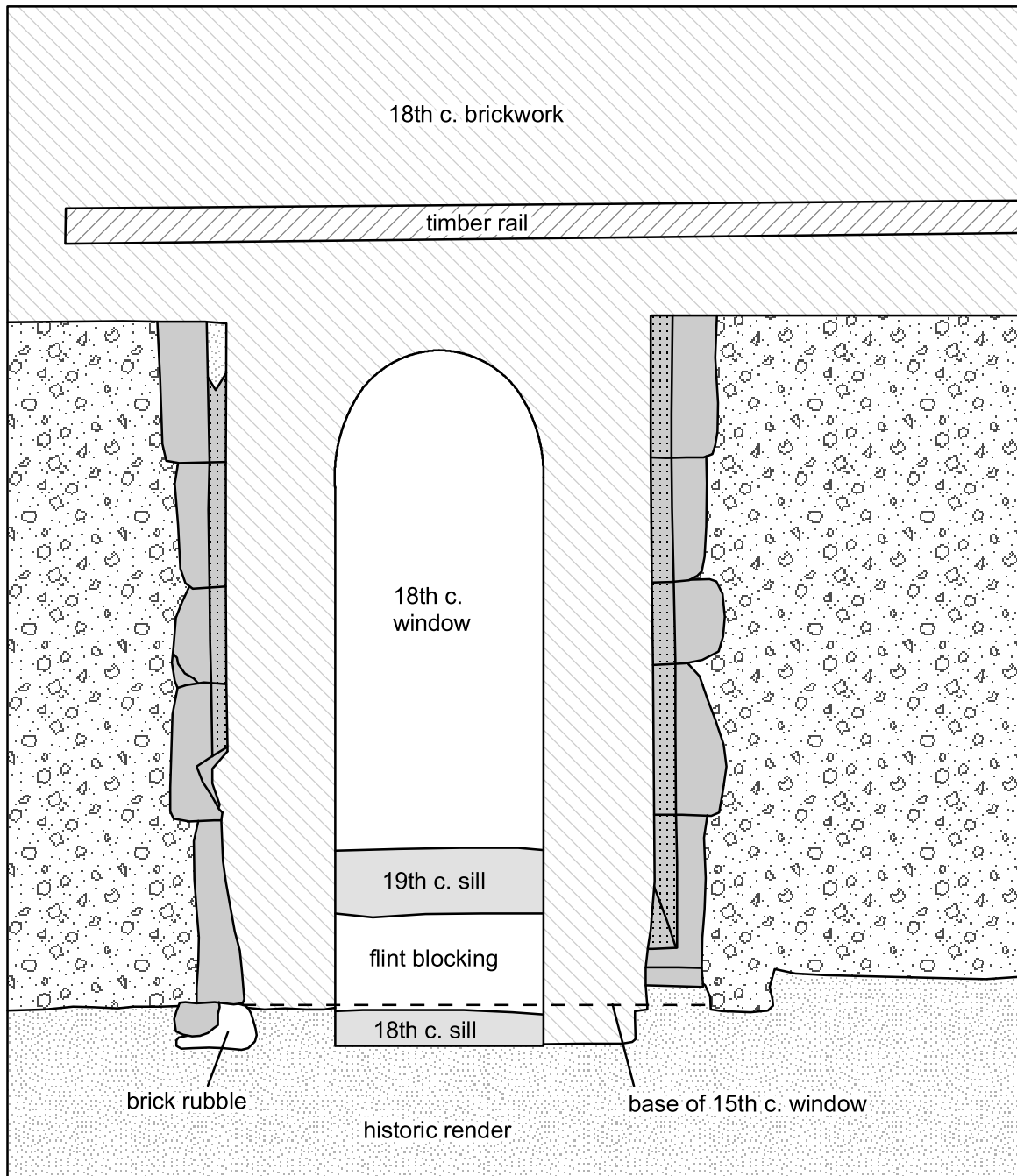
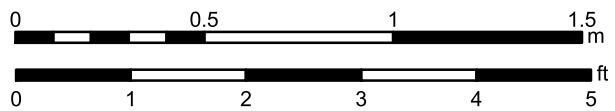









Fig.3. West wall



**Key**

-  18th c. brickwork
-  15th c. flintwork
-  historic render
-  window sill
-  15th c. window
-  window rebate
-  timber

1:20

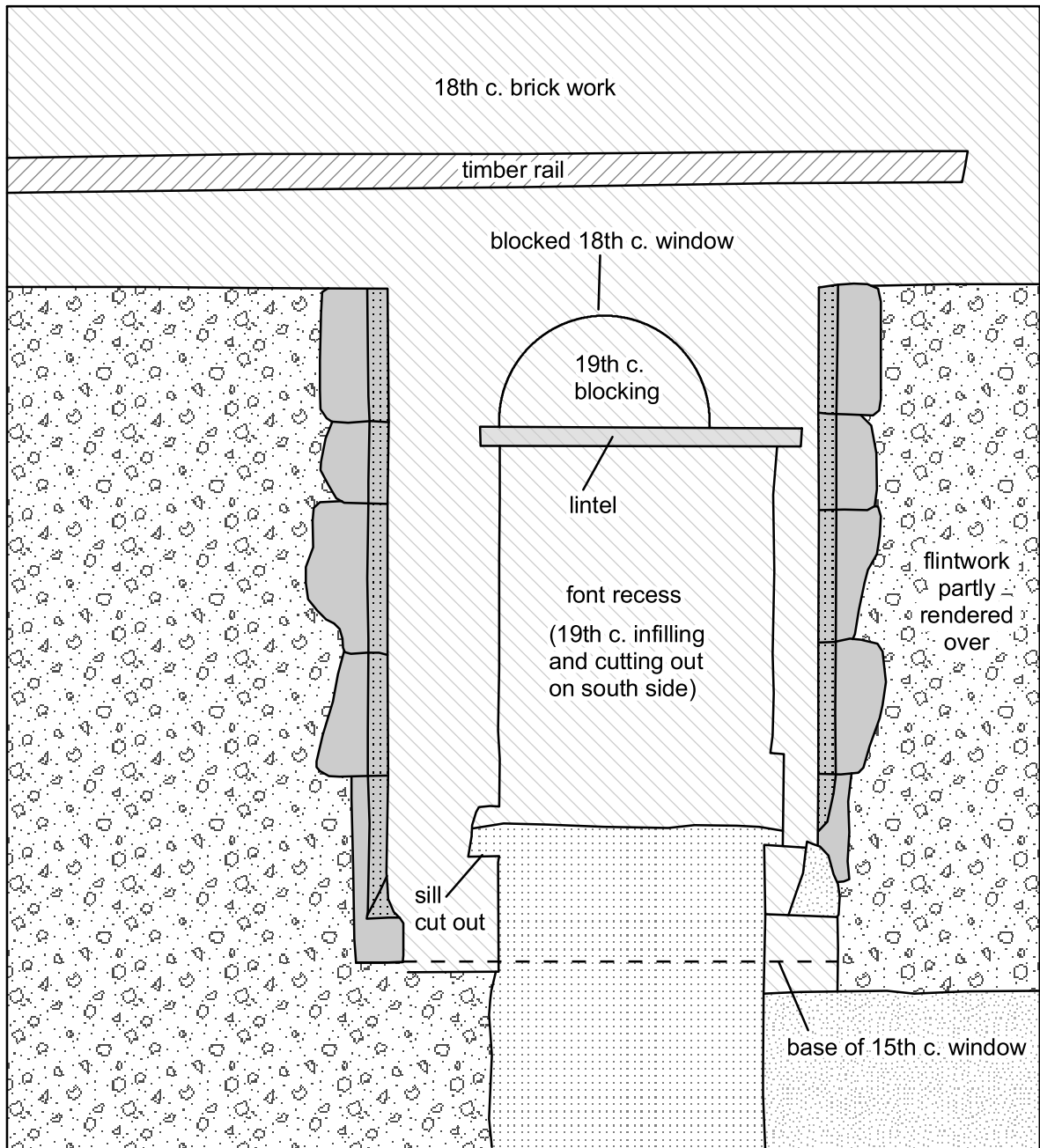








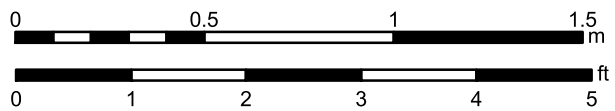


Fig.4. East wall

**Key**

-  18th c. brickwork
-  15th c. flintwork
-  historic render
-  modern render
-  window sill
-  15th c. window
-  window rebate
-  timber



1:20





Plate 1 South side of church



Plate 2 Southern porch



Plate 3 West wall of porch before start of works



Plate 4 East wall of porch before start of works



Plate 5 Exposed 15th and 18th-century windows on western wall



Plate 6 Exposed 15th and 18th-century windows on eastern wall



Plate 7 Area of removed flooring



Plate 8 Internal foundation exposed in exploratory pit looking south (0.5m scale)



Plate 9 External foundation for porch looking north (1m scale)



Plate 10 Mortar lens and pebble band in drainage run (1m scale)

## **Appendix 1: Contents of Archive**

**Site name: Church of St Mary Magdalene, Wethersfield, Essex**

**Project no: 2333**

### **Index to the Archive:**

Document wallet containing:

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Client/archive report
- 1.2 Unbound version of report
- 1.3 CD containing digital photographs & copy of report, pdf-formatted

#### **2. Site Archive**

- 2.1 Photographic record (digital images & photographic register)
- 2.2 Site notes and annotated survey drawings
- 2.3 Architect's drawings

## Appendix 2: EHER Summary Sheet

<b>Site Name/Address:</b> Church of St Mary Magdalene, Wethersfield, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Wethersfield	<b>District:</b> Braintree
<b>NGR:</b> TL 7122 3125	<b>OASIS No.</b> 103332
<b>Type of Work:</b> building recording & archaeological monitoring	<b>Site Director/Team:</b> Andrew Letch ECC FAU
<b>Dates of Fieldwork:</b> January to March 2011	<b>Size of Area Investigated:</b> service trenches
<b>Curating Museum:</b> Braintree	<b>Funding Source:</b> Wethersfield PCC
<b>Further Work Anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related LBS No.</b> 115693
<b>Final Report:</b> Summary in EAH	
<b>Periods Represented:</b> Medieval, post-medieval & Victorian	
<p><b>SUMMARY OF FIELDWORK RESULTS:</b></p> <p>A programme of building recording and archaeological monitoring was undertaken prior to the refurbishment of the south porch of Wethersfield Church to provide toilet facilities. The main element of the work was to examine, draw and record the remains of two 15th century windows that were fully-exposed after the west and east walls were stripped of plaster prior to building works. Archaeological monitoring took place during the removal of two areas of removed flooring and the excavation of a service trench around the porch and out into the graveyard.</p> <p>Both windows survive as limestone jambs. The heads and sills were lost when they were blocked in brick in the 18th century, to accommodate new, narrow-arched windows as part of restoration work. Therefore their original form is unknown and since the work was finished, are now hidden again from view.</p> <p>Monitoring works examined the porch foundations, deposits beneath the porch floor and the western side of the south aisle floor. A pipe trench was dug along the line of an old path in the graveyard but was too shallow to encounter any burials. No finds were recovered.</p>	
<b>Previous Summaries/Reports:</b> None	
<b>Author of Summary:</b> Andrew Letch	<b>Date of Summary:</b> 17th June 2011