

**CHURCH OF ST JOHN  
LITTLE LEIGHS  
ESSEX**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL TRENCHING**



**Essex County Council  
Field Archaeology Unit**

**NOVEMBER 2011**

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**LITTLE LEIGHS**  
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As part of our desire to provide a quality service, we would welcome any comments you may have on the content or the presentation of this report. Please contact the Archaeological Fieldwork Manager, at the

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**CHURCH OF ST JOHN**  
**LITTLE LEIGHS**  
**ESSEX**  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL TRENCHING**

Client: Fergusons Chartered Architects

NGR: TL 7189 1673

Site Code: GLLL11

Planning Ref:

Oasis No: 114271

Dates of Fieldwork: 14th to 16th November 2011

**SUMMARY**

*Archaeological trial trenching was carried out at the Church of St John, Little Leighs in advance of the construction of new Parish Rooms. A single T-shaped trench, totalling 21m in length, was excavated across the c.150 sq m site.*

*Although there is cropmark evidence for archaeological remains of probable prehistoric date to the north-west and south-east of the church no remains of this date were identified, nor were any pre-dating the construction of the church in the 12th century.*

*Numerous cut features, all on the same north-east/south-west alignment as the church, are believed to represent a series of intercutting graves. The earliest dated graves were two brick lined graves of probable 17th century date and the most recent, dating to the 19th century, were identified by the presence of in-situ coffin nails and a coffin handle. Five dark-filled and regularly spaced graves at the south-east end of the trench may constitute a line of broadly contemporary burials of a probable modern (19th/20th century) date.*

*Several burials were of un-determined post-medieval date and it is possible that a few may be of medieval date. The recovery of a small number of unstratified medieval and late medieval finds supports this theory and suggests the likelihood of medieval activity taking place within the near vicinity of the churchyard.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation by trial trenching carried out at the Church of St John, Little Leighs, in advance of the construction of new Parish Rooms. The archaeological work was undertaken by the Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit (ECC FAU) on behalf of Fergusons Chartered Architects for the Parochial Church Council (PCC).

A planning application (00002/11/CHL) was submitted to Chelmsford Borough Council (CBC) in January 2011 for the construction of the Parish Rooms, along with a similar application to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). In view of the archaeological potential of the area the Essex County Council Historic Environment Management team (ECC HEM), in their capacity as archaeological advisors to CBC and the DAC, recommended that a full archaeological condition be placed on any grant of planning consent. This recommendation, based upon guidance given in PPS5: Planning for the Historic Environment, required that a programme of archaeological works be undertaken in advance of the development.

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with an archaeological Design Brief issued by ECC HEM (2011) and a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by the ECC FAU (2011).

Copies of this report will be supplied to Fergusons Chartered Architects, the PCC, ECC HEM and the Essex Historic Environment Record. A digital version of this report will be submitted, along with a project summary, to the Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations (OASIS) (<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/oasis>). The site archive and copies of the report will be deposited at Chelmsford Museum.

## **2.0 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Topography and Geology (Fig. 1)**

The Church of St John lies on the west side of Church Lane, at NGR TL71891673, with agricultural land to the west and a grass car park located within a former quarry pit to the north. Lying to the south-east is a large fishing lake situated within an area of grassland. The new Parish Rooms are to be located to the west of the church and form a single L-shaped block measuring approximately 13m by 11m. No marked graves are located within the footprint of the development although three graves of probable 19th century date lie to the immediate north.

The churchyard in the vicinity of the development is broadly flat, at an approximate OD of 48.5m. The underlying superficial geology consists of glaciofluvial sand and gravel overlying bedrock deposits of London Clay.

## **2.2 Archaeology and History (Fig. 1)**

This archaeological and historical background is based on the Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER) held by Essex County Council at County Hall, Chelmsford.

The new Parish Rooms are situated in the graveyard enclosure of the parish church of St John the Evangelist (EHER 5966-68), which lies within the dispersed village of Little Leighs. The church dates from the 12th century and is constructed from flint rubble with dressings of limestone and clunch. In addition to the high potential for burials of medieval and post-medieval date to be present a number of cropmark features have been identified by aerial photography in fields to the north-west (EHER 6130) and south-east (EHER 45497) of the church. The line of a possible trackway has been identified that probably extends through the churchyard, whilst other cropmark features indicative of prehistoric settlement and activity lie close by.

## **3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

### **3.1 Aims**

The aim of the archaeological trial trenching was to determine the presence or absence, location, extent, date, character, condition and significance of any surviving remains. Information provided by the evaluation would be used to determine the necessity for any further archaeological work to mitigate the impact of development, based on recommendations from the ECC HEM monitoring officer.

### **3.2 Objectives**

In the event that significant discoveries were made the report would seek to identify appropriate research objectives for any future work, in line with those laid out in *Research and Archaeology: a Framework for the Eastern Counties, 2. research agenda and strategy* (Brown and Glazebrook 2000). As no remains other than burials were encountered the results at this stage of the project are unlikely to contribute to any of the research objectives.

#### **4.0 METHOD (Fig. 1)**

A single T-shaped trench, measuring 1.6m wide by 15m north-west/south-east and 6m north-east/south/west respectively, was excavated under archaeological supervision by a machine fitted with a flat-bladed bucket. The trench was positioned to investigate the footprint of the new Parish Rooms and part of the new access pathway to the south without unduly compromising the main external wall foundation runs at this early stage in the development.

Potential archaeological features were cleaned and hand excavated. Identified graves were cleaned and planned and sample excavated to confirm depths and dates of burial. ECC FAU excavation, artefact collection and recording methodologies were employed throughout. ECC FAU is a Registered Archaeological Organisation with the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) and all work was carried out in accordance with IfA by-laws and guidelines (IfA 2010; 2008) and complied with Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England (Gurney 2003).

#### **5.0 FIELDWORK RESULTS**

Trench depths ranged from 0.64m to 0.98m. The overburden consisted of 0.25-0.30m of mid to dark brownish grey sandy silt topsoil over an undefined deposit of brownish grey pebbly clayey silt representing mixed grave backfill. At the north-west end of the trench topsoil overlay relatively undisturbed mid to light brownish grey sandy silt subsoil.

The underlying natural strata comprised of mid brownish orange sand and sandy gravel which appeared root-disturbed in places and was generally slightly concreted.

Numerous graves were identified throughout the trench - most are likely to be of post-medieval date. No archaeological remains pre-dating the construction of the church in the 12th century were identified. Detailed context information is presented in Appendix 2.

##### **5.1 North-west/south-east arm (Fig. 2)**

A series of parallel north-east/south-west aligned cuts, interpreted as inter-cutting graves, were recorded in the centre and south-east of the trench. Graves in the north and centre of the trench (Plates 1 and 2) cut natural sand whilst graves in the south appeared to cut earlier grave backfill (Plate 3). The northern-most grave (1) contained mid brownish grey sandy silt

and was excavated down to the top of the skeletal remains (leg bones) at an OD of 47.46m. Two small fragments of possible post-medieval brick were recovered from the fill.

In the centre of the trench the highest recorded skeletal remains were revealed directly below machining, in grave 14 . The remains consisted of two fragmented leg bones exposed at an approximate height of 47.7m OD.

In the south-eastern third of the trench five roughly equally-spaced linear deposits of damp dark brownish grey silty clay (contexts 7, 8, 9, 12 and 13) are interpreted as later grave cuts. Most contained fragments of post-medieval tile, in addition to one sherd of late or post-medieval pottery recovered from grave 9 and seven small fragments of slag recovered from grave 7. A few fragments of decayed unarticulated human bone were visible in the fills but no articulated skeletal remains were exposed. Grave 9 was machined to the same depth as grave 14 in the centre of the trench, whereas the lack of skeletal remains at the south-east end of the trench meant that graves 7, 8, 12 and 13 could be machined 0.20m or so deeper. Graves 7 and 9 were investigated by means of two small sondages and near-vertically sided cuts were visible in both instances. Grave 9 was in excess of 0.3m deep and grave 7 was over 0.45m deep. No articulated human bone was observed implying that both graves continued deeper. Between the five graves were deposits of dryer and consequently slightly lighter mid brownish grey silt. One of these was investigated and found to also be a grave as it contained an articulated leg bone at a depth of 0.15m (47.36m OD). It is presumed that the remaining intervening deposits also represent the fills of earlier grave cuts.

## **5.2 North-east/south-west arm (Fig. 2)**

Two brick-lined graves (5 and 6) were recorded in the north-east/south-west arm of the trench (Plate 4). Both were 2.3m long and consisted of a coffin-shaped line of mostly whole bricks arranged in stretcher fashion and bonded with a light yellowy brown lime mortar. Traces of a narrow construction cut were noted at the north-east end of grave 5. Each grave lining consisted of at least three courses of brick. Significantly, no mortar was present on top of any of the bricks forming the upper course suggesting that this was the top of the structure and had not been truncated, although it is feasible that they had some form of un-mortared stone capping which was subsequently removed. The bricks were relatively clean and crisp and did not appear to have been re-used. Two bricks retained for analysis were dated to the late 16th or 17th century.

Part of the northern side of grave 5 was truncated by a later grave (3) filled with dark grey sandy silt. Several 19th century iron clasp nails, most probably from a decayed wooden



coffin, were recovered from the western end of this grave at an OD of 47.96m. To the east of grave 3 was a probable further grave (4) filled with greyish brown sandy silt. This grave appeared to underlie grave 3 although it was uncertain whether it actually continued below grave 5. An in-situ 19th century iron coffin handle and further clasp nails recovered from the east end of this grave seemingly indicated that it was of 19th century date. However, it was not clear if this coffin furniture represented the end of grave 4 or the beginning of a further grave continuing eastwards beyond the limit of the trench.

## **6.0 FINDS** by Alan J Jacobs

### **6.1 Introduction**

A total of 33 fragments of brick, tile, iron, slag and pottery weighing a total of 7952 grams, were recovered from eight stratified and one unstratified context. All of the material has been sorted into context and recorded by count and weight. The finds are described and tabulated below (Appendix 2).

### **6.2 The medieval and later pottery** by Helen Walker

A total of four sherds weighing 200g were excavated from two contexts. It has been catalogued according to Cunningham's typology for post-Roman pottery in Essex (Cunningham 1985, 1-16), but is not considered of sufficient significance to be entered on to the FAU database. The earliest material comprises sherds from an early medieval ware H2 cooking-pot rim datable to the early 13th century (from unstratified context 10). From the same context is a (virtually) unglazed frilled base in sandy orange ware from a baluster form, showing faceting above the base. It is thick-walled and from a relatively large vessel as the base measures around 100mm in diameter, which would suggest it is from a jug rather than a pedestal-base cup. The frilled base suggests it may be copying imported German stoneware and indicates a 15th century date for this piece.

From context 9, is a single sherd of unglazed sandy orange ware, it is thick-walled and coarse and could be contemporary with the frilled base in context 10, although a much later, possibly even modern, date cannot be precluded.

### **6.3 Other finds**

A total of two complete bricks (contexts 5 and 6) weighing 5128 grams were removed from the top layer of two brick grave surrounds. These bricks are of a distinct type (Ryan 1996) that date to the late 16th to 17th century. The bricks are slightly irregular in shape and display pressure marks and slightly rounded arrises. Traces of lime mortar were present on

the bases of the bricks. In addition two small fragments of possible brick/fired clay were recovered (context 2); these were too abraded to be identified more closely. Post medieval roof tile was recovered from just three contexts (7, 8 and 9), and consisted of four fragments weighing 304 grams. These fragments although small were primarily fairly curved, indicating that they were of post medieval date. A single fragment of floor tile (context 10) was recovered from an unstratified context, this was not clearly dateable.

Metal finds consisted of 11 iron clasp nails, weighing 28 grams (contexts 3 and 4) and a single iron handle weighing 10 grams (context 4). These are of modern 19th to 20th century date and represent coffin furniture. The only other finds recovered consisted of eight fragments of slag weighing 1970 grams (contexts 7 and 10). The single fragment of hearth base recovered from unstratified context 10 made up the bulk of this material and may well be of medieval date.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

This is a limited assemblage, the lack of artefacts hampering interpretation beyond a broad dating of the features uncovered during excavation. The presence of medieval pottery and the hearth base is however, significant, in that it indicates the possibility of earlier medieval activity in the vicinity of the graveyard.

None of the material should be retained, due to the funerary nature of most of the artefacts they should be reburied within the churchyard.

#### **7.0 DISCUSSION**

No archaeological remains pre-dating the construction of the 12th century church were identified. All cut features within the trench appeared to be grave related and would have truncated any earlier remains. It is estimated from the plan (Fig. 2) that there at least 20 graves within the trench with the possibility of several more.

The earliest finds were two joining sherds from an early 13th century cooking pot, a 15th century jug base and part of a slag hearth base of possible medieval date. All were recovered unstratified from the mixed overburden at the south-east end of the trench. It is probable that these finds were a residual element in later grave backfills although perhaps originally accidentally deposited in graves of contemporary date and as such may attest to medieval activity in the vicinity of the churchyard. It is possible that some of the un-investigated graves within the trench were medieval although without comprehensive

excavation this is uncertain. It is likely that the acidic nature of the sand and gravel would be detrimental to bone survival particularly within the earliest graves.

Grave 14 was perhaps the earliest identified grave as it was the shallowest burial at only about 0.80m (47.7m OD) below the present ground surface and contained bone in a fragmentary condition. The earliest securely dated graves are the two brick lined graves of probable 17th century date. The proximity of the two graves and similarities in construction suggest that there may be a family connection between the interned individuals. As the bricks appeared un-weathered it is unlikely that they were exposed to the elements and may always have been part of a below ground structure. It is possible that the lining supported an un-mortared stone capping but its main function may have been to support the sides of the graves prior to burial due to instability in the surrounding natural sand and gravel. It was not determined whether the grave contained a coffin or shroud burial.

Many of the graves contain pieces of post-medieval roof tile and are therefore likely to be of post-medieval or later date. The five potential damper dark-filled graves at the south-east end of the trench were all roughly equally spaced apart (0.55-0.60m) and may constitute a line of broadly contemporary burials. All five were in excess of 1m deep (from the present ground surface) with grave 7 being over 1.4m deep. The depth of these graves and damp clayey nature of the fills might suggest that they are of relatively more-recent origin, perhaps dating to the 19th or early 20th century. Underlying grave 11 was clearly earlier but the exposed bone was in good condition suggesting a post-medieval date for this inhumation as well.

The most recently dated graves, probably belonging to the later 19th century, were found at the north-east end of the trench and were identified by the presence of in-situ coffin nails and a coffin handle.

## **8.0 ASSESSMENT OF RESULTS**

Although there is cropmark evidence for archaeological remains of probable prehistoric date to the north-west and south-east of the church no remains of this date were identified. However, this is not unsurprising given the restricted size of the trench and that much of its length, other than the north-west end, had clearly been truncated by later burials. The burials range in date from the 17th to the 19th century with several being of un-determined post-medieval date and the possibility that a few may be of medieval origin. The recovery of

a small number of unstratified medieval finds supports this theory and suggests the likelihood of medieval activity taking place within the near vicinity of the churchyard .

The depth of burials is variable with the shallowest skeletal remains being exposed about 0.80m below the surface at 47.70m OD and the deepest about 1.10m below the surface at 47.36m OD. However, at least one grave of probable later date, at the south-east end of the trench, was in excess of 1.4m deep, continuing below an OD of 47.06m. The two brick lined graves were only 0.64m below the surface at 47.96m OD, though the burials within them are likely to be deeper than this. Overall, it would therefore appear possible to remove about 0.7m from the building footprint and proposed access paths with minimal disturbance to the underlying burials.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

ECC FAU would like to thank David Ferguson for commissioning the work on behalf of the PCC. The archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Trevor Ennis and Lucasz Miciak of the ECC Field Archaeology Unit. Finds were analysed by Alan Jacobs and Helen Walker. The report was prepared by Trevor Ennis with illustrations by Andrew Lewsey. The project was managed by Adrian Scruby and monitored on behalf of the Local Planning Authority by Richard Havis of ECC HEM.

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## APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT DATA

All dimensions given in metres

Context	Type	Description	Period
1	Grave cut	0.70m+ long x 0.54m+ wide x 0.27m+ deep	Post-medieval
2	Fill of 1	Mid brownish grey sandy silt	Post-medieval
3	Grave	Dark grey sandy silt, 1.7m x 0.6m+	19th century
4	Grave	?1.5m x 0.78m, greyish brown sandy silt	19th century
5	Grave	Brick lined, coffin shaped, 2.3m x 0.88m, 3 courses + deep	17th century
6	Grave	Brick lined, coffin shaped, 2.3m x 0.54m+, 3 courses+ deep	17th century
7	Grave	1.4m+ x 0.45m+ 0.45m+ deep, dark brownish grey silty clay	Post-medieval
8	Grave	1.3m+ x 0.48m, dark brownish grey silty clay	Post-medieval
9	Grave	1.4m+ x 0.64m, dark brownish grey silty clay	Post-medieval
10	Finds	Unstratified finds from south-east end of trench	Med/late medieval
11	Grave	1.3m+ x 0.52m+ x 0.15m+ deep, mid brownish grey silt	Post-medieval
12	Grave	1.4m+ x 0.40m+, dark brownish grey silty clay	Post-medieval
13	Grave	1.4m+ x 0.50m, dark brownish grey silty clay	Post-medieval
14	Grave	1.04m+ x 0.50m+, exposed leg bones (fragmented)	Undated

## APPENDIX 2: FINDS DATA

All weights in grams

Context	Feature	Count	Weight (g)	Description	Date
2		2	26	Brick/fired clay fragments, sandy fabric, quite highly fired.	Post medieval?
3		7	10	Iron clasp nails, fragments of several examples, up to 50mm long.	19th to 20th century
4		4	18	Iron clasp nails, fragments of several examples, up to 50mm long.	19th to 20th century
		1	10	Iron coffin handle, traces of hinge at one end.	19th to 20th century
5		1	2570	Brick, complete, orange red fabric, 218mm by 105mm by 62mm. Slightly irregular in shape. Pebble and angular flint inclusions, fairly regular slightly rounded arrises, fairly smooth faces with diagonal pressure marks, smooth base with striation marks sanded top. Traces of lime mortar on base.	Late 16th to 17th century
6		1	2648	Brick, complete, orange red fabric, 220mm by 105mm by 60mm. Slightly irregular in shape. Pebble and angular flint inclusions, fairly regular slightly rounded arrises, fairly smooth faces with diagonal pressure marks, smooth base with striation marks sanded top. Traces of lime mortar on base.	Late 16th to 17th century
7		2	76	Tile, oxidised sandy fragments imperfectly fired, slightly curved form, post medieval?	15th to 18th century
		7	58	Slag, small fragments.	
8		1	210	Tile, oxidised sandy fragment imperfectly fired, one edge surviving slightly curved form, post medieval?	15th to 18th century
9		1	18	Tile, oxidised sandy fabric, too small to define more closely	13th to 18th century
		1	16	Sandy orange ware; thick-walled unglazed body sherd, showing striated external surface and single incised line	15th/16th C or later
10	U/S	1	196	Floor tile, fragment, unglazed coarse fabric large flint inclusions sanded base	
		1	1912	Slag, hearth base, high iron content, 150mm by 140mm by 60mm.	Medieval/post medieval?
		2	20	Early medieval ware, comprising joining sherds from an H2 cooking-pot	Early 13th C
		1	164	Sandy orange ware; frilled base, from baluster form, faceting above the base, unglazed apart from splashes of decomposed/weathered glaze on underside of base, its thick walls and relatively large size, with a base diameter of around 100mm suggest it is from a jug rather than a pedestal base cup	15th C
<i>Total</i>		33	7952		

## **APPENDIX 3: CONTENTS OF ARCHIVE**

**Site Name: Church of St John, Little Leighs, Essex**

**Site Code: GLLL11**

### **Index to Archive:**

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Brief
- 1.2 Written Scheme of Investigation

#### **2. Research Archive**

- 2.1 Client Report
- 2.2 Finds Reports

#### **3. Site Archive**

- 3.1 Context Record Register
- 3.2 Context Records (1 to 14)
- 3.3 Plan Register
- 3.4 2 Trench Record Sheets
- 3.5 Trench location plan
- 3.6 Photographic Register
- 3.7 Site Photographic Record (1 set of colour prints, colour contact prints + 1 digital images on disk)
- 3.8 Miscellaneous notes/plans

#### **Not in File**

2 large plan sheets

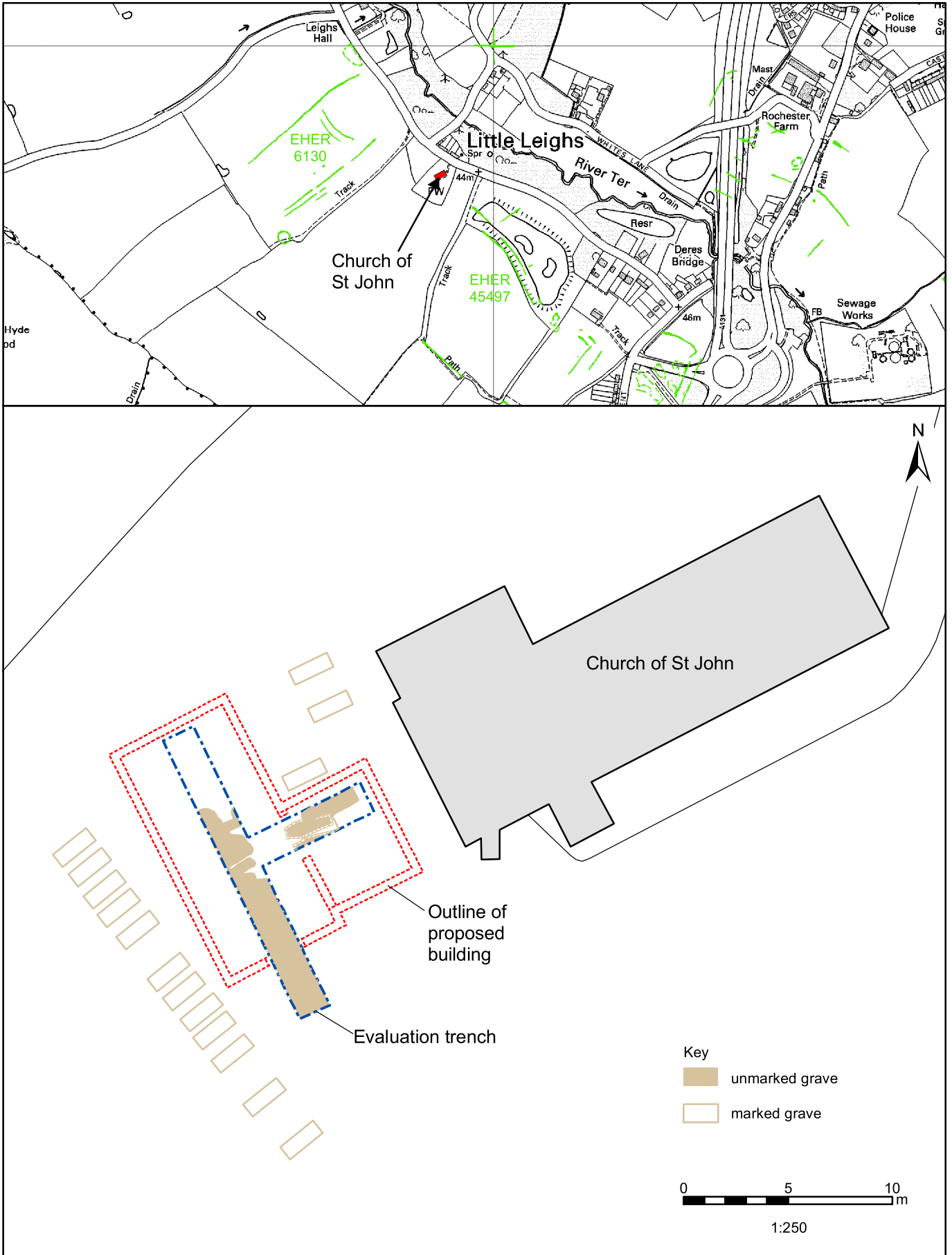
#### **Finds**

None of the finds have been retained.



#### APPENDIX 4: ESSEX HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT RECORD SUMMARY SHEET

<b>Site name/Address:</b> Church of St John, Little Leighs, Essex	
<b>Parishes:</b> Great and Little Leighs	<b>District:</b> Chelmsford
<b>NGR:</b> TL 7189 1673	<b>Site Code:</b> GLLL11
<b>Type of Work:</b> Archaeological Evaluation by Trial Trenching	<b>Site Director/Group:</b> T. Ennis, ECC Field Archaeology Unit
<b>Dates of Work:</b> 14th to 16th November 2011	<b>Size of Area Investigated:</b> c.150 sq.m.
<b>Location of Finds/Curating Museum:</b> Chelmsford	<b>Funding source:</b> Client
<b>Further Seasons Anticipated?:</b> No	<b>Related HER Nos.:</b> 6130, 45497
<b>Final Report:</b> EAH summary	<b>Oasis No.:</b> 114271
<b>Periods Represented:</b> Post-Medieval, Modern	
<b>SUMMARY OF FIELDWORK RESULTS:</b>	
<p>Archaeological trial trenching was carried out at the Church of St John, Little Leighs in advance of the construction of new Parish Rooms. A single T-shaped trench, totalling 21m in length, was excavated across the c.150 sq m site.</p> <p>Although there is cropmark evidence for archaeological remains of probable prehistoric date to the north-west and south-east of the church no remains of this date were identified, nor were any pre-dating the construction of the church in the 12th century.</p> <p>Numerous cut features, all on the same north-east/south-west alignment as the church, are believed to represent a series of intercutting graves. The earliest dated graves were two brick lined graves of probable 17th century date and the most recent, dating to the 19th century, were identified by the presence of in-situ coffin nails and a coffin handle. Five dark-filled and regularly spaced graves at the south-east end of the trench may constitute a line of broadly contemporary burials of a probable modern (19th/20th century) date.</p> <p>Several burials were of un-determined post-medieval date and it is possible that a few may be of medieval date. The recovery of a small number of unstratified medieval and late medieval finds supports this theory and suggests the likelihood of medieval activity taking place within the near vicinity of the churchyard.</p>	
<b>Previous Summaries/Reports:</b> none	
<b>Author of Summary:</b> T. Ennis	<b>Date of Summary:</b> November 2011



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Fig.1. Location of archaeological evaluation trench





Plate 1: NW/SE arm looking SE (1m scale)



Plate 2. NW/SE arm central area looking NW (1m scale)



Plate 3. NW/SE arm SE end looking NW (1m scale)



Plate 4: NE/SW arm looking SW (1m scale)