

St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire

HN1123

Report No. 857

Site name and address:	St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire		
County:	Hertfordshire	District:	St Albans
Village/town:	Wheathampstead	Parish:	Wheathampstead
Planning reference:	N/A	NGR:	TL 17664 14020
Client name and address:	Wheathampstead PCC, c/o Michael Dales Partnership, 95 Sharpenhoe Road, Streatley, Luton, LU3 3PS.		
Nature of work:	Service trench / ducts	Present land use:	Church / Churchyard
Site Status:	Grade I listed	Reason for investigation:	Diocesan Faculty
Position in planning process:	N/A	Project brief originator:	N/A
Size of affected area:	16.9m ²	Size of area investigated:	16.9m ²
Site Code:	HN1123	Other reference:	n/a
Organisation:	Heritage Network	Site Director:	David Hillelson
Project type, methods etc.	Observation and Recording	Archive Recipient:	St Albans Museum
Start of work	11/03/2014	Finish of work	12/03/2014
Related HER Nos:	HER 2877	Periods represented:	N/A
Oasis UID:	heritage1-175878	Significant finds:	None
Monument types:	None		
Physical archive:	None		
Previous summaries/reports:	Snee, J. 2012a St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire. Archaeological Monitoring Report. Heritage Network report no.724 Snee, J. 2012b St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire. Archaeological Monitoring Report. Heritage Network report no.731 Winter, M. 2011 St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire. Archaeological Monitoring Report. Heritage Network report no.645		

Narrative:

As part of the faculty requirements for internal and external works at St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire, the Heritage Network was commissioned to undertake a programme of archaeological monitoring of groundworks.

The study area lies in the village of Wheathampstead and within the grounds of the St Helen's Church, centred at NGR TL 17664 14020 (Figure 1, Plate 1).

External Works

The external groundworks consisted of a hand excavated service trench for a new gas main, measuring 46m in length, 0.25m in width and 0.5m in depth. The trench ran from the north-eastern corner of the churchyard, alongside the public footpath from the High Street to the north-eastern corner of the vestry (Figure 2, Plate 2). It was aligned north-east to south-west, with some diversions to avoid marked graves.

The stratigraphy exposed in the trench sections comprised very dark greyish brown (10YR 3/2) loose sandy silty clay with occasional sub-angular flints and some root activity (Plates 3 – 5). This has been interpreted as a cemetery soil. The natural substratum was not reached during the present works.

A number of unstratified finds were present in the spoil. These included fragments of disarticulated human bone, post-medieval brick and tile fragments, oyster shell, sherds of post-medieval brown-glazed pottery and a clay pipe bowl of probable 17th century date. The disarticulated human bone fragments were reburied on site.

No significant archaeological features or deposits were revealed during the external works.

Internal Works

Two L-shaped trenches, to accommodate heating ducts, were inspected at the west end of the chancel, on the eastern side of the tower crossing (Figure 2). Both measured 2.52m east – west and 2.30m north – south (Figure 3). The trenches were 0.45m in width and approximately 0.33m in depth.

The stratigraphy exposed in both trenches was very similar, comprising modern stone slabs, 0.03m thick, above a layer of steel reinforced concrete, 0.11m in depth. Below this was light yellowish brown (10YR 6/4) loose sand, over 0.19m in depth, containing occasional flint cobbles and post-medieval brick fragments (Plates 6-8).

A small opening in the sand layer in the north-eastern trench revealed a brick vault below (see Plate 8). This appeared to extend east beneath the chancel. A photograph supplied by the contractors show that the vault was a narrow rectangular space, built of brick and with an arched roof (Plate 9).

Other trenches were dug within the tower crossing but, due to an oversight, these were not made available for inspection.

Discussion:

St Helen's Church dates to the 13th century. It is not the first building on the site, as foundations for an earlier, smaller church, with an apsidal east end, were observed beneath the nave and chancel during renovation works in the mid- to late 19th century. Although Canon Davys has suggested that these were late Saxon in date, more recent research has suggested that they represent the remains of an 11th or 12th century church.

The present groundworks were located at the western end of the chancel and within the north-eastern quadrant of the churchyard. The internal works exposed modern flooring above a sand bedding layer. A brick vault was encountered, but not disturbed, below this layer on the northern side of the chancel. The evidence suggests considerable modern reworking of the floor in this area.

The external trench for the new gas main ran on a sinuous north-east to south-west alignment beside the path from the High Street. No evidence for cut graves or other archaeological features was observed and the only finds recorded were of post-medieval date and of negligible significance.

Overall the limited extent of the works, and the adoption of hand excavation by the contractor, has kept the impact on the archaeological resource to a minimum.

Illustrations:

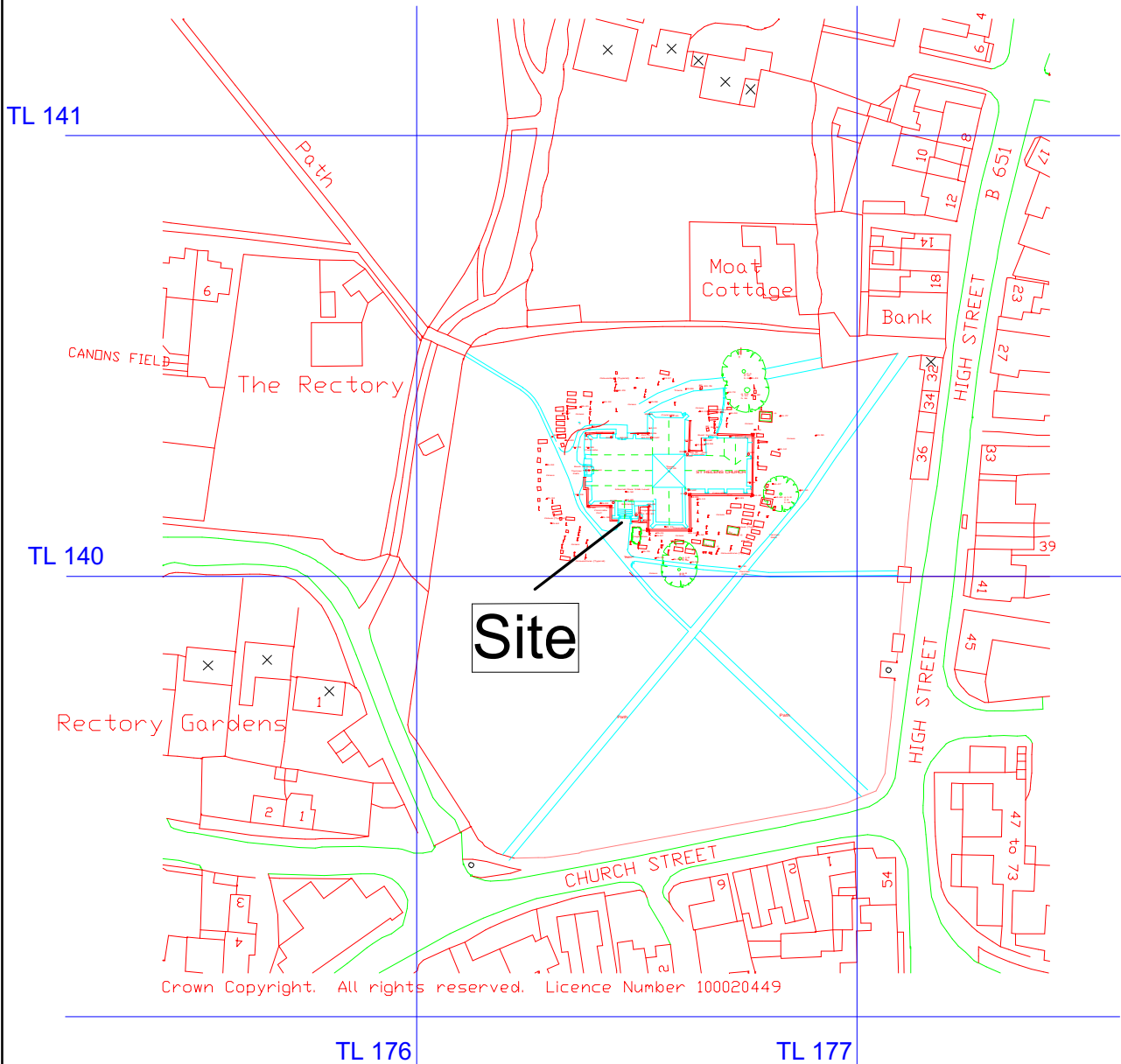
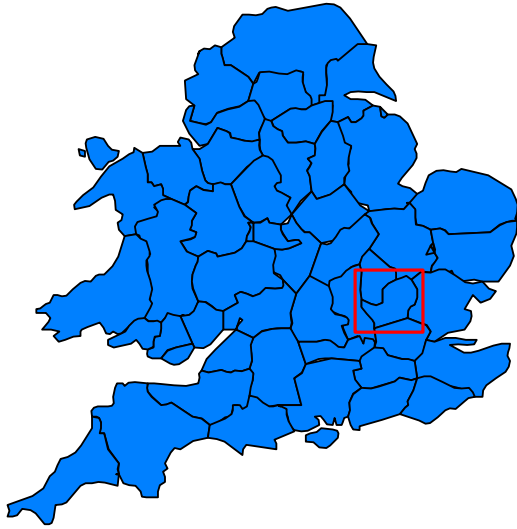
Figure 1	Site Location
Figure 2	Site Layout
Plate 1	Site looking northwest, showing St. Helens Church
Plate 2	Area of work for gas main, looking west
Plate 3	East section of trench, looking west
Plate 4	Middle Section of trench, looking southwest
Plate 5	West Section of trench, looking southwest
Plate 6	South-eastern internal trench, looking east
Plate 7	South-eastern internal trench, looking south-east
Plate 8	North-eastern internal trench, looking north
Plate 9	Vault beneath the chancel, looking east

Daniel Phillips
March 2014
Revised and updated September 2014

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St. Helen's Church,
Wheathampstead, Herts.

HN1123

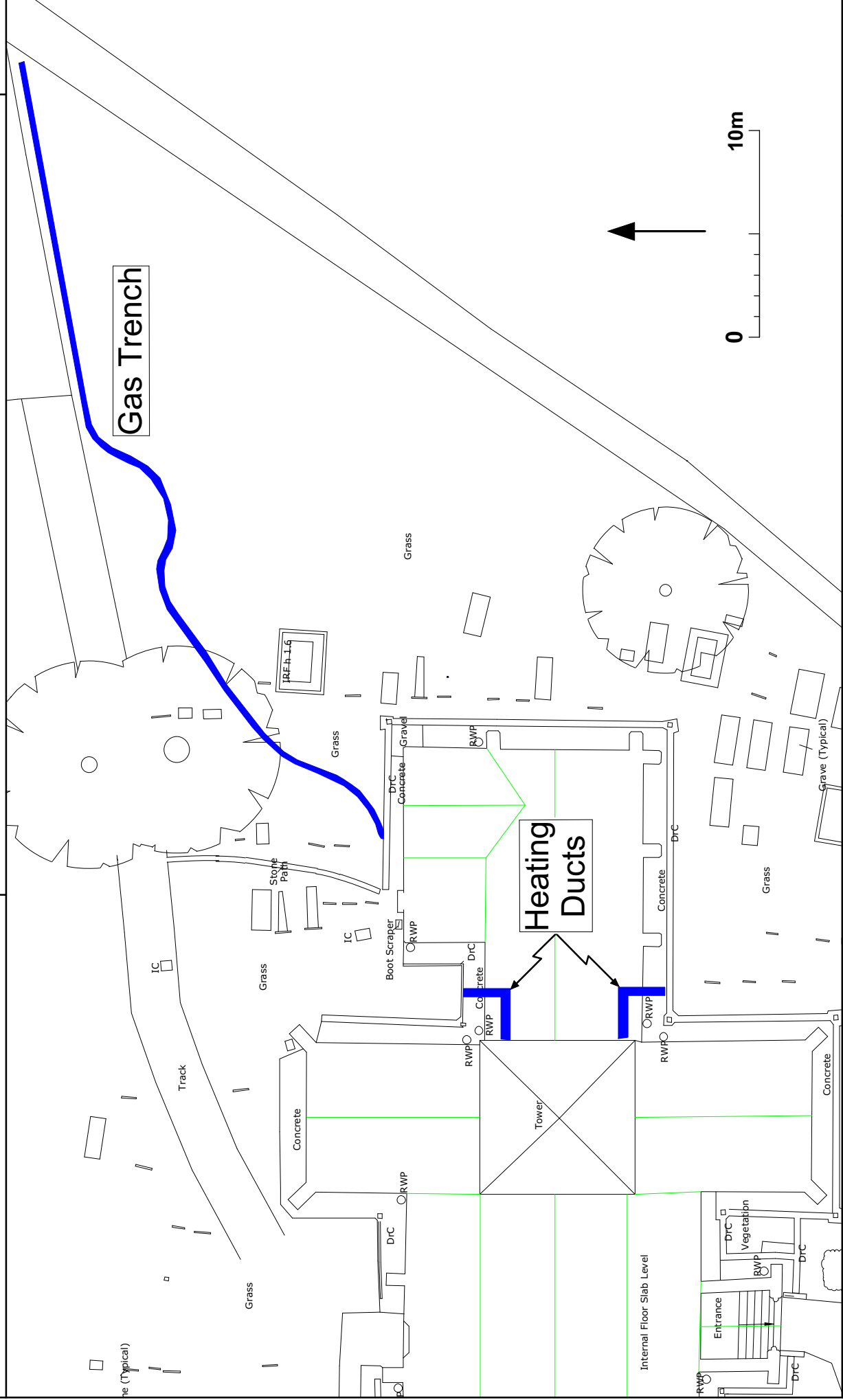


Site Location

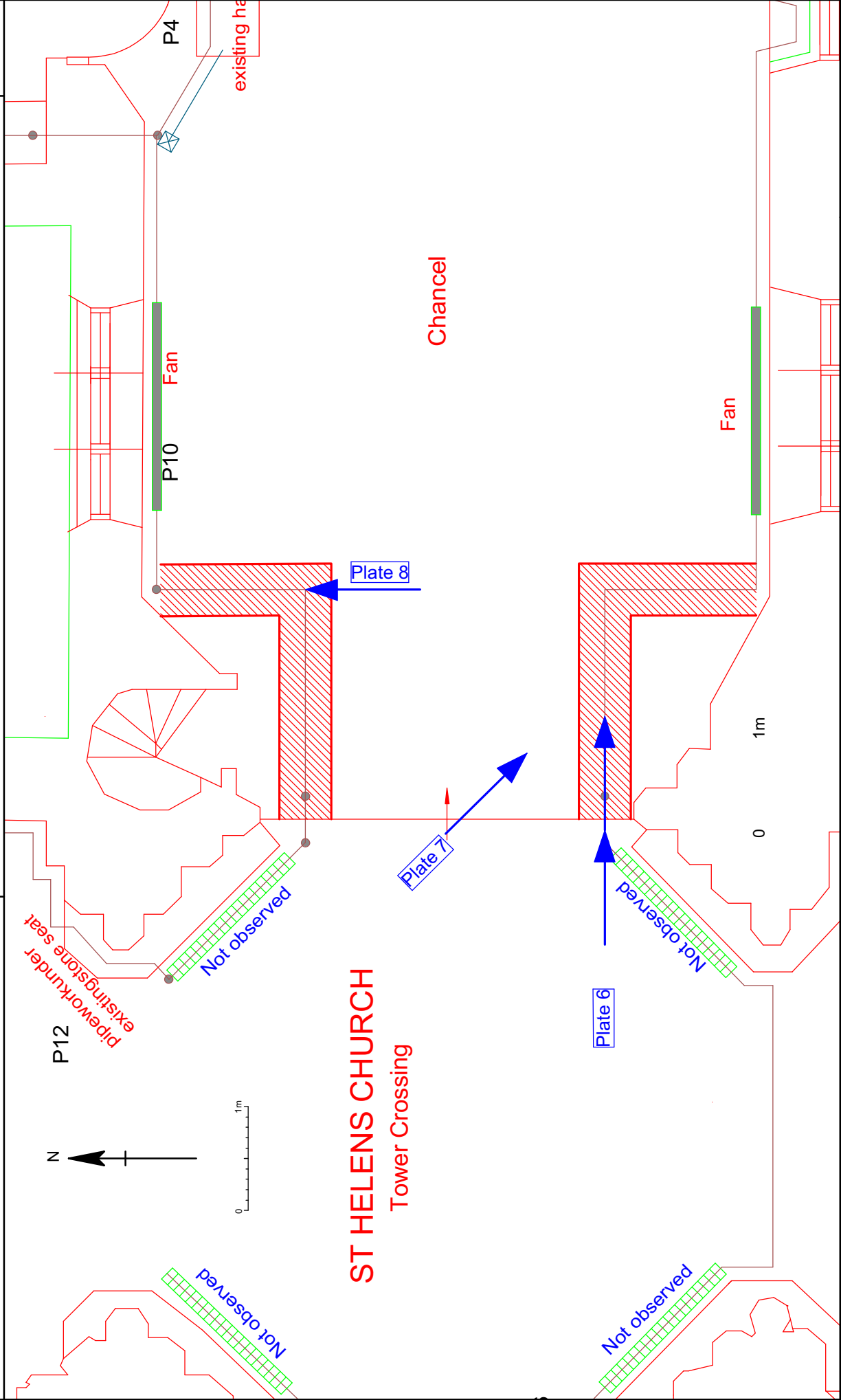
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Figure 1



Site Layout



Observed heating ducts



Plate 1: Site looking northwest, showing St. Helens Church



Plate 2: Area of work for gas main, looking west



Plate 3: East section of trench, looking west



Plate 4: Middle Section of trench, looking southwest



Plate 5: West section of trench, looking south-west



Plate 6: South-eastern internal trench, looking east



Plate 7: South-eastern internal trench, looking south-east



Plate 8: North-eastern internal trench, looking north



Plate 9: Vault beneath the chancel, looking east. Photograph supplied by contractors.