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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

**S E R V I C E S**

**St Edburg's Church, Bicester,  
Oxfordshire**

**Archaeological Watching Brief**

**by Steve Crabb and Andy Munding**

**Site Code: SEB12/38**

**(SP 5831 2227)**

# **St Edburg's Church, Bicester, Oxfordshire**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief  
For The Incumbent and Church Wardens  
of St Edburg's Church**

By Steven Crabb and Andrew Muddin  
Thames Valley Archaeological Services  
Ltd

Site Code SEB 12/38

**July 2012**

## Summary

**Site name:** St Edburg's Church, Bicester, Oxfordshire

**Grid reference:** SP 5831 2227

**Site activity:** Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 23rd April – 28th June 2012

**Project manager:** Steve Ford

**Site supervisor:** Steven Crabb, Andrew Muddin, James Earley, Jacqueline Pitt

**Site code:** SEB 12/38

**Summary of results:** Observations were made as the choir vestry floor was reduced for new under floor heating works. An 18th-century brick vaulted crypt was uncovered, thought to be associated with the nearby memorial to Sir Edward Turner and his wife, Dame Cassandra. An exterior pipe trench for a new French drain uncovered the exterior vestry foundation and sacristy, and also uncovered portions of four burials along with redeposited human bone.

**Location and reference of archive:** The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire Museums Service in due course.

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Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford ✓ 04.07.12 Steve Preston ✓ 04.07.12
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# **St Edburg's Church, Bicester, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by Steven Crabb and Andrew Muddin

**Report 12/38**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St Edburg's Church, Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire (SP 5831 2227) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Ms Camilla Finlay, of Acanthus Clews Architects, Acanthus House, 57 Hightown Road, Banbury, Oxfordshire, OX16 9BE, on behalf of The Incumbent and Church Warden of the Church.

A faculty has been gained from the Archdeaconry of Oxfordshire to install underfloor heating ducting and lay a new paving slab floor in the choir vestry within the church. Within the northern churchyard, between the boiler room entrance and the sacristy doorway, a new drainage trench was to be dug to improve the existing drainage up against the vestry wall. Due to the possibility of buried archaeological deposits being disturbed by these works, a condition was attached to allow an archaeological watching brief to be carried during the groundworks.

These works have been carried out in accordance with a specification to follow a brief prepared by the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser, Mr Julian Munby (Munby 2012) followed by procedural clarification with regards to the treatment of in-situ human remains towards the end of the fieldwork. The fieldwork was carried out by Steve Crabb, Andrew Muddin, James Earley and Jacqueline Pitt between 23rd April and 28th June 2012. The site code is SEB 12/38.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

## **Location, topography and geology**

The site is located on the southern edge of the historic market town of Bicester (Figs 1 and 2). It is located off the junction of Church Street, The Causeway and Church Lane. The choir vestry is situated on the north-east side of the current church, with the drain following the exterior wall of the vestry within the original graveyard. The underlying geology consists of the cornbrash formation limestone, with alluvial deposits left by the River Bure to the north and east (BGS 2002). No natural geology was uncovered during the works. The ground is approximately at 70m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).

## **Archaeological background**

The church is a Grade I Listed Building. It is thought that a church has been on this site, from indirect documentary evidence, since the mid 7th century, then was founded as a minster church which existed by the Norman Conquest (Munby *et al.* 1975; VCH 1959). An Augustinian Priory is known to have been founded adjacent to the church, in the 12th century (Blair 2003). Several small archaeological investigations have identified parts of the Priory structure and investigated the surrounding boundaries of the site (Hull and Preston 2003; Blair 2003).

The nave north wall is part of the oldest surviving remnant of the church which originally followed an aisleless, cruciform shape, mostly of 12th-century date. During the 13th century the chancel was rebuilt and the southern aisle was added (Munby 2012). The north aisle is originally of 14th-century construction with the choir vestry, originally built as a chapel, and sacristy added later. Significant refurbishment took place during the 15th century and the 18th century, which added the tower in the west, raised and rebuilt the roof and retraced the windows (Munby 2012).

More recent work, within the car park of the Catholic Church on the opposite side of the road to St Edburg's, during excavations for the new parish rooms, revealed a portion of a Saxon cemetery, but the southern extent of this cemetery was not uncovered (Lewis 2011). This added considerably to a number of burials that had already been discovered in the car park, when it was extended in 2000 (Smith 2009). None of these internments were excavated at that time, but are also thought to be Saxon. The implications of this for the size of the precinct associated with St Edburg's are unclear; unless the original Saxon church was located further north than the current site, it must have had a very large precinct.

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the lifting of the interior flooring and the new drainage trench. The main aims of the project are:

- to minimize the impact of development on any surviving remains of the earlier church;
- to determine the extent to which human remains survive in the affected area, and generally observe the presence of burial vaults and graves; and
- to signal, before work proceeds, the discovery of an archaeological finds for which further action is required.

All human remains that were disturbed by the works were examined and retained on site for reburial; human remains that were uncovered but would not be further affected were recorded in situ and not further disturbed.

The choir vestry was reduced using a 360° type mini-digger and the sacristy was reduced by hand. The new drainage trench was hand excavated up against the exterior wall to a depth of 0.75m, with a mechanical excavator used to excavate the soakaway and drainage trench linking the soakaway to the French drain.

## **Results**

### *Interior flooring works (Fig. 3)*

The existing flooring of the affected part of the church included wooden (sacristy), concrete (vestry) and tiled (vestry) elements. The removal of the wooden floors from the choir vestry and the sacristy did not reveal any earlier floors or features. During the reduction of the sacristy no archaeological features were revealed, however one piece of human rib and two phalanges were recovered at a depth of 0.3m.

The reduction of the choir vestry revealed a small (0.12m x 0.12m) section of tile floor (nine tiles and edging). Given the level and polychrome (red, yellow, and black) pattern this floor was contemporaneous with the tile floor still present. This was therefore recorded and removed. The removal of the concrete floor revealed a 0.40m deep layer of mixed concrete and rubble (including plastic) used to raise the floor level, over a 0.30m deep layer of rubble consisting of a mixture of machine-made frogged bricks stamped London Brick Company (20th-century), with shallow diamond-shaped frogs and hand-made bricks (perhaps early post-medieval). It also contained fragments of carved stone work including a fragment of stonework associated with the windows. This material was observed but not recovered.

This layer sealed a brick-built vault (Pl. 1) containing the remains of two coffins. The coffins appear to be made of wood with leather covering attached by two rows of brass tacks (Pl. 2). The coffins are placed on raised steps either side of a central walkway. They have decayed and collapsed but are still mostly present. The chamber is 2.6m long by 1.8 wide, externally, constructed of a brick arch on brick walls. The walls were built in the English garden wall style and the vaulted roof was built of full and half bricks laid on their sides in alternating strings, with very casually applied lime mortar. The large dimensions of these bricks suggest early industrial brick, late 18th to mid-19th century. The vault appears originally to have been a double skin, but most of the outer layer had been removed (Pl. 1). The western end of the chamber has a roughly square opening which has been bricked up (similar bricks in simple stretcher bond) to seal the vault. Leading from this western end on the surface was a 0.60m long single line of three bricks possibly marking the side of a staircase to the vault. This

probably extended further than recorded but was not further investigated as it lay below the level of the lowest works.

### *Exterior works (Fig. 4)*

#### *French Drain adjacent to church wall*

The new drainage trench was hand excavated to a depth of 0.75m, with a mechanical excavator used to excavate the soakaway and drainage trench linking the soakaway to the French drain. The French drain was excavated up against the north wall of the vestry and sacristy by hand due to the inaccessibility of this area for a mechanical excavator. This trench in total measured 18m in length.

Loosely laid brick paving was removed first, which stepped 0.5m away from the church wall. Beneath the topsoil (54), which has a pronounced slope from the top of the graveyard towards the church wall, was a buried layer (50). This deposit was recorded at a depth of 0.5m. The base of the trench for the new drain was to be 0.25m lower than this so deposit (50) was removed from the base of the trench. Several articulated burials, and much disarticulated bone were encountered in this trench; these were all examined on site and retained for reburial.

The first burial was encountered at a depth of 0.53m. This grave cut (2) contained skeleton (53) and fill (52). Only the right side of this burial was exposed, but uncovered the full length of this grave, which was 1.64m long. Coffin-nails were recovered from the western end of the grave near the skull. This body was prone on its back, with a straight right arm and right leg. A cursory examination of the skull noted that this individual had extensive tooth enamel wear, indicating an age at death of at least 50–60 years old. Morphological characteristics of the skull seemed to suggest this was a male skeleton. The skull of this burial was facing the church wall (south), at the west end. Pottery recovered from the grave fill (52) suggests that it was of Post-Medieval date.

This grave cut a secondary burial that had no obvious grave cut or coffin (skeleton 51). Again, only the right-hand side of the body was uncovered. Only 0.47m of this body was exposed, but of what was discovered, all bones were removed and returned for reburial. An upper and lower arm formed part of this skeleton and part of the pelvis, but the legs had been truncated by grave cut 2 (Pl.4). This burial was thought to be the earliest of the internments found in this phase of works as it was cut by Grave 2.

Two other partial graves were encountered. The right forearm and part of the torso of a burial was encountered. This grave had an identifiable cut (grave cut 3; fill 55, skeleton 56), and a copper alloy tack was recovered from the fill. There is therefore the possibility that any coffin that once housed these remains could

have been clad in leather, suggesting a post-medieval date. These bones were retained in-situ, at a depth of 0.72m in section.

Grave 4 was further to the west, by the north aisle wall. This had been severely truncated by the base of an existing pipe trench that had disturbed the skull and central part of this burial. This grave was 1.53m long. It contained one skeleton (57) and grave fill (58) and a grave cut (4). The top of this burial was identified at 0.65m in section, so only the skull and right arm and leg were lifted for reburial. The remains of the torso were left in-situ, lower than the base of excavation at 0.7m. The skull, lifted and retained onsite for reburial, morphologically identified as being from a young, adult male. Minimal tooth wear was evident. This burial was prone, as all the others, with head in the west, faced north. The right arm was bent with the elbow away from the body, and the right leg was slightly flexed at the knee. No artefacts were recovered from this grave.

During excavation of the drain, the church foundations were exposed showing the upper courses of the foundation stonework. All were seen to be continuous with no perpendicular additions. The only modification of the existing structure was a blocked doorway in the northern vestry wall (Fig. 4). A segmental arch with no visible door jambs was present within the vestry wall. This has been described as a 'Mason's doorway' (Munby pers. comm.), used as a temporary entrance to the vestry during original construction. To the west of this blocked doorway, north facing ashlar blocking was noted in the foundation (60) (Pl. 3). Three of the upper coursing blocks were uncovered within the foundation. This could represent an earlier structure which the vestry replaced. One other piece of carved hounds-tooth decoration, probably of tracery from eastern face of the north aisle, was also noted within the north vestry wall. Otherwise this foundation contained no notable pieces of carved stone; nor any that could be readily identified as being reused. Most of the remaining foundation was of coarse, unshaped limestone under the north aisle wall and eastern end of the vestry (59). The sacristy doorway was supported by a stone slab base.

### *Soakaways*

The soakaway and associated drainage trench (Fig. 4) were excavated by machine. Soakaway 1 measured 1.20m x 1.60m and the stratigraphy comprised 0.23m of topsoil over made-ground (63). Two rows each of a single course of bricks (61) at c.0.10m below ground level were interpreted as a drain (Pl. 5), which truncated Grave 5 and associated fragmented skeletal remains (62). The large size of the bricks suggests a late 18th or early 19th-century date and they appear to have been re-used in this position (perhaps spares from the vault?), so the drain does not appear to be of great age. Excavation of this soakaway was abandoned at c.0.50m below ground level



due to encountering the top of a stone tomb (not further uncovered); the trench was backfilled and relocated north-east (Fig. 4).

The replacement Soakaway 2 measured 1.20m x 1.65m x 2.0m depth. The stratigraphy comprised 0.20m of topsoil above 1.30m of made ground containing frequent disarticulated human bone and corroded coffin fittings; and occasional post-medieval/modern glass fragments, sherds of porcelain and pottery of medieval appearance. This overlay 0.5m of natural geology of compact light yellow brown sand and coarse gravel with flint nodules. Graves 6 and 7 were observed at 1.35m below ground level. Both contained a mid-grey silt fill (66) and (67) with disarticulated human bones and corroded metal coffin fittings, including plate, nails and handles. Grave 6 contained the legs, feet and lower arms of an adult skeleton (65), which did not, however, appear to continue into the section (Pl. 6). Grave 6 was 1.40m long, 0.60m wide at the west end (around the waist) and 0.26m wide at the feet, clearly implying an original coffin. Only a small part of the edge and backfill of Grave 7 (1.40m long, only 0.10m width exposed for 0.10m depth) was noted, with no articulated skeletal remains observed. The (presumed) human remains in Grave 7 were left undisturbed.

The drainage trench linking the soakaway to the French drain measured 5m long, 0.40–0.60m wide with a depth of 0.87m. The stratigraphy comprised 0.20m of topsoil above made ground containing frequent disarticulated human bone; moderate limestone blocks; occasional fragments of medieval pottery; and a small spherical ceramic object, possibly a games 'jack'. No archaeological features were observed.

## **Finds**

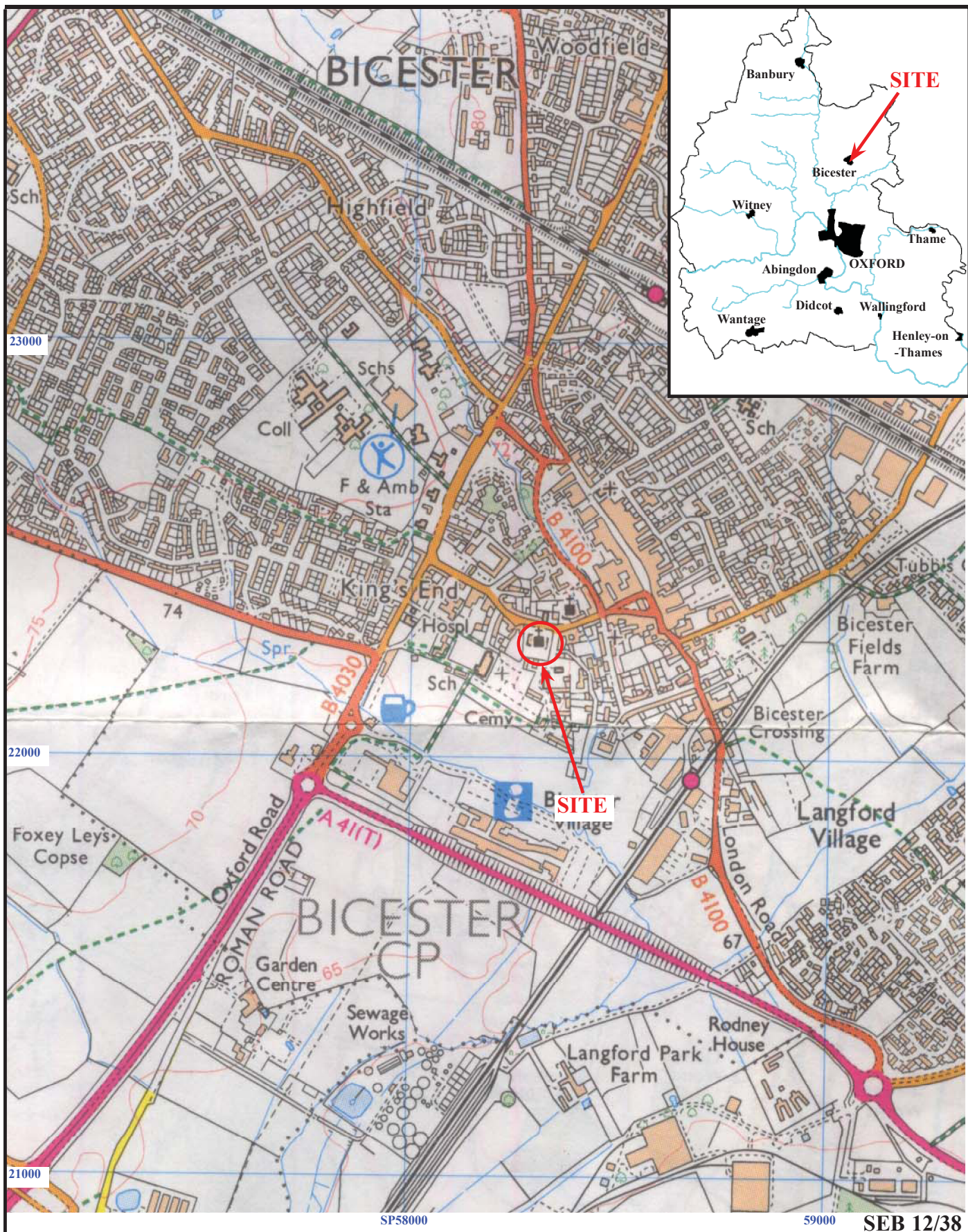
All finds and human remains were retained on site as per the specification. Photographs of the artefacts were taken to allow tentative identifications to be made.

## **Conclusion**

The works have, unsurprisingly, identified human burial practice and interment within the graveyard and under the floor of the vestry. With the presence of an archaeologist on site all human bone has been identified, recovered from immediate damage and returned to the Church to be reinterred. The top of one crypt was observed in the churchyard for a soakaway but was not further examined. A second crypt was observed within the choir vestry containing two leather-clad coffins which are likely to be the final resting place of Sir Edward Turner and his wife, Dame Cassandra.

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Figure 1. Location of site within Bicester and Oxfordshire.

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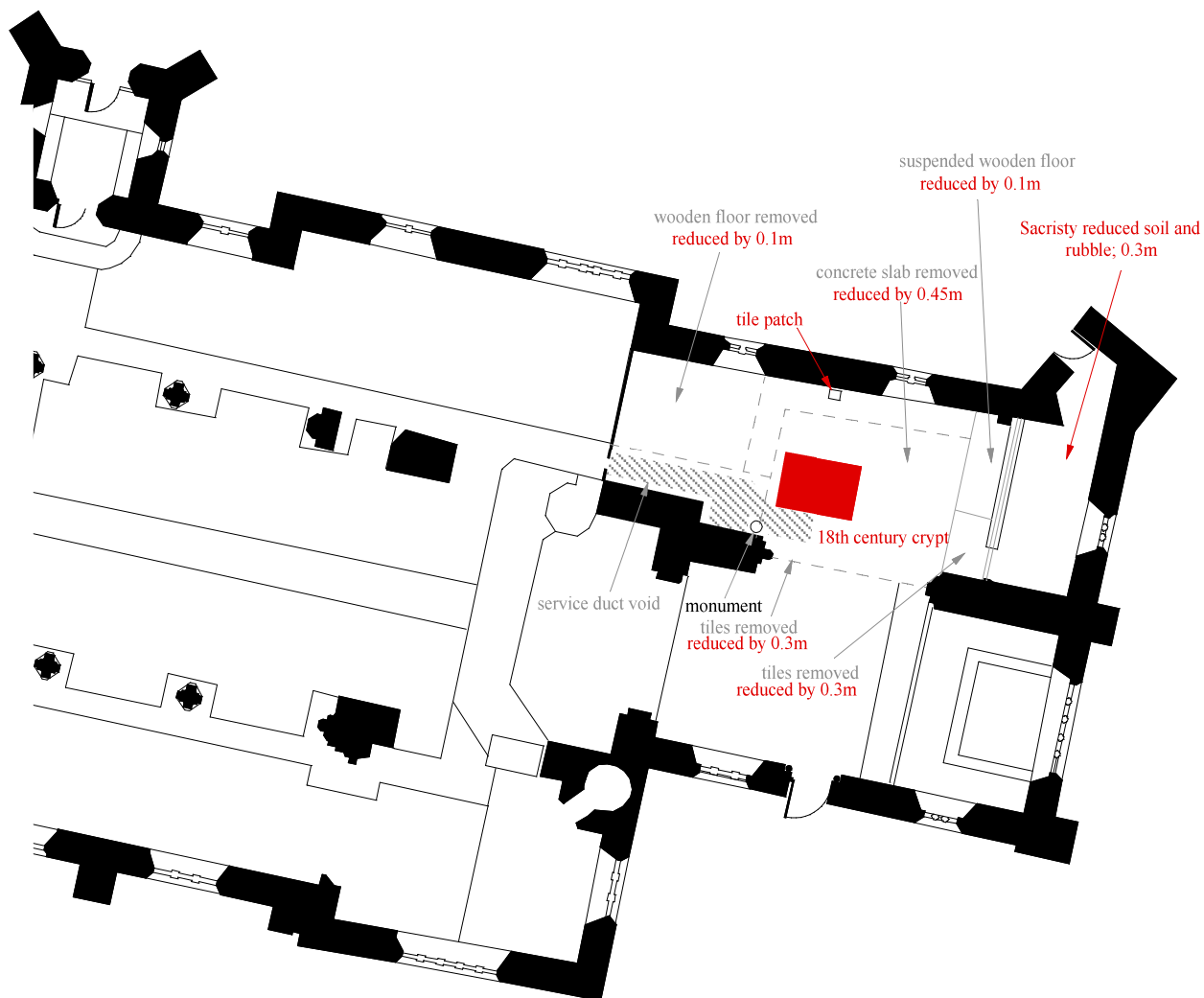


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Figure 2. Detailed location of site off The Causeway.

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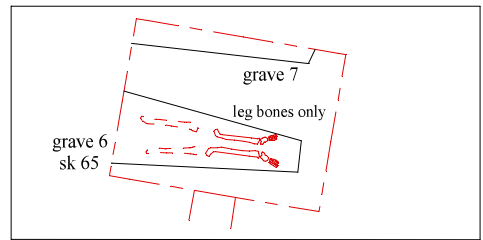
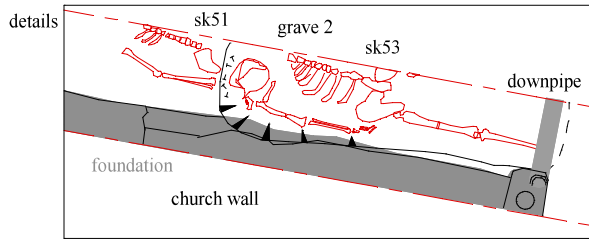


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Figure 3. Detail of areas observed within the church



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Figure 4. Detail of new drainage trench and soakaway.



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Plate 1. Top of crypt, looking east. Scale: 2m and 1m.



Plate 2. Interior of crypt.

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Plates 1 and 2.

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Plate 3. Faced blocking in foundation, looking south east, Scale: 1m.



Plate 4. Sk51 and top of skull (sk53) looking west Scales: 0.5m and 0.1m.

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Plates 3 and 4.

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Plate 5. Upper part of Tomb (Grave 5), looking west, Scale: 0.5m.



Plate 6. Soakaway, Sk65 in Grave 6 looking west Scales: 1m.

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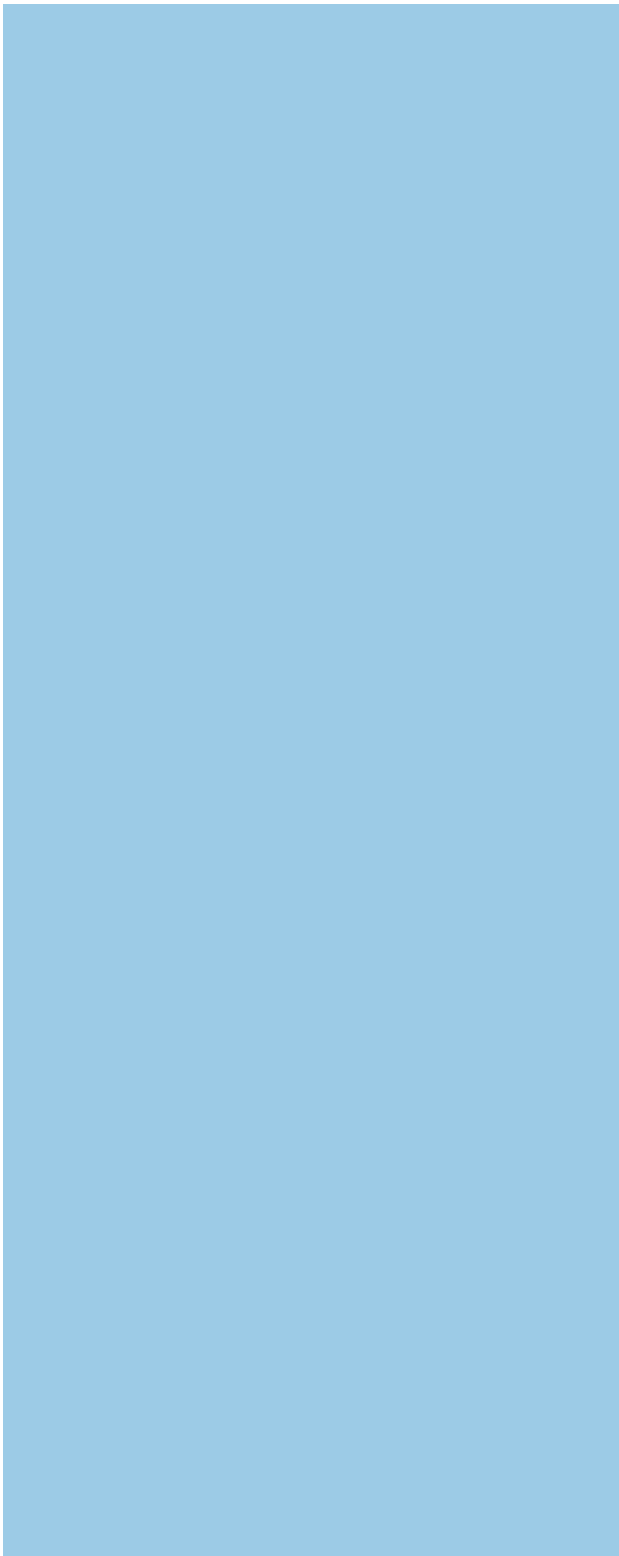
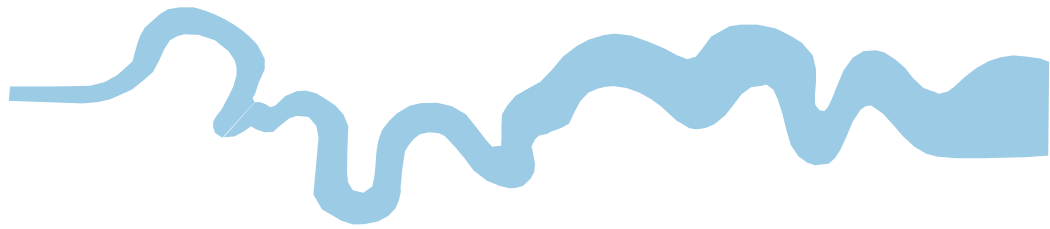
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Plates 5 and 6.

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## TIME CHART

	Calendar Years
Modern _____	AD 1901
Victorian _____	AD 1837
Post Medieval _____	AD 1500
Medieval _____	AD 1066
Saxon _____	AD 410
Roman _____	AD 43
Iron Age _____	BC/AD 750 BC
Bronze Age: Late _____	1300 BC
Bronze Age: Middle _____	1700 BC
Bronze Age: Early _____	2100 BC
Neolithic: Late .....	3300 BC
Neolithic: Early .....	4300 BC
Mesolithic: Late .....	6000 BC
Mesolithic: Early .....	10000 BC
Palaeolithic: Upper .....	30000 BC
Palaeolithic: Middle .....	70000 BC
Palaeolithic: Lower .....	2,000,000 BC
↓	↓



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