

**T H A M E S      V A L L E Y**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

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

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

**Archaeological Watching Brief**

**by David Platt and  
Andrew Muddin**

**Site Code: SEB14/76**

**(SP 5831 2227)**

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

**An Archaeological Watching Brief  
for The Incumbent and Church Wardens**

By David Platt and Andrew Muddin  
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code SEB14/76

**October 2015**

## Summary

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

**Grid reference:** SP 5831 2227

**Site activity:** Archaeological Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 30th April 2014– 30th September 2015

**Site supervisor:** David Platt and Andrew Munding

**Site code:** SEB14/76

**Summary of results:** Disarticulated bones were recovered from all the test pits, and were reinterred at the church. Test Pit 3 revealed a single stone of large proportions and with a faced side, this may have been part of the foundations for the church tower, but the test pit was too small to ascertain this for certain. A soakaway excavated to the south-west of the church uncovered five graves, of which only four contained human bone. The drain which led to this was excavated down the side of the western church path. This uncovered the corner of a brick crypt. On inspection of the french drain which used the old channel on the side of the church, further disarticulated bone was recovered as before. Two crypts were uncovered in the southern church path. These were both recorded and in filled.

**Location and reference of archive:** The written archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course. All finds were retained at the church.

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

## **An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by David Platt and Andrew Muddin

**Report 14/76**

### **Introduction**

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

A faculty has been gained from the Archdeaconry of Oxfordshire to allow works to continue on updating and improving the drainage which first started with the french drain on the exterior of the choir vestry. First three test pits were required for a structural engineers to view the foundations of the tower. The following year the digging of a soakaway was undertaken, with the digging out of the existing drainage channel and a french drain laid being the final works after the scaffolding for the south aisle parapet had been completed. These works have been carried out in accordance with a specification following a brief previously prepared for other works at the church by the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser (Munby 2012).

The fieldwork was undertaken by David Platt, Andy Taylor and Andrew Muddin between 30th April and 1st May 2014, 27th and 28th April 2015 and 21st to the 30th September 2015. The site code is SEB 14/76. The written archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course. All finds were retained at the church at the time of excavation.

### **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 at the junction of Church Street, The Causeway and Church Lane. The underlying geology consists of cornbrash formation limestone, with alluvial deposits left by the River Bure to the north and east (BGS 2002). Natural geology was only reached by the soakaway excavation in this phase of the works which was cornbrash. The ground level is approximately 72m 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 (re-)founded as a Minster 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 (Munby *et al.* 1975; Blair 2003). Several small archaeological investigations have identified enough of the Priory structure to suggest its form and locate elements such as the Priory Church, Cloister and other ancillary buildings. Other works to the south examined the precinct boundaries (Hull and Preston 2003). To the north, part of a Middle Saxon graveyard has been uncovered in the car park of the (modern) Catholic Church on the other side of Church Street (Lewis *et al.* 2014)

The nave's 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 during the 15th and the 18th centuries, added the tower in the west, raised and rebuilt the roof and retraced the windows (Munby 2012). Since 2012, several stages of archaeological monitoring have been carried out during works associated with the modernization of the church's flooring and drainage (Crabb and Munding 2012; Munding 2013; Munding and McNicoll-Norbury 2015). Medieval pottery and floor tiles have been recovered in the exterior and interior, as well as human interments and brick crypts.

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the excavation. The main aims of the project were:

- 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 further groundworks proceed, the discovery and height of archaeological structural elements that could not be lifted or removed, where further action would be required.

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

disturbed. Three test pits were hand dug under constant archaeological supervision. Most of the french drainage channel was hand excavated, with portions of the linking drain to the main soakaway mechanically excavated.

## **Results (Fig. 3)**

### *Structural Test Pits (Fig.3)*

#### Test Pit 1

Test Pit 1 was 0.70m long, 0.70m wide and 1.0m deep and the stratigraphy consisted of 0.30m of stone paving overlying 0.22m of dark brown grey sandy clay which in turn overlay a mid yellow brown sandy clay with frequent stone inclusions. Some disarticulated human remains were recovered from this context.

#### Test Pit 2 (Pl. 1)

Test Pit 2 was 0.50m wide, 0.50m long and 1.0m deep and the stratigraphy consisted of 0.30m of stone paving overlying 0.28m of dark brown grey sandy clay which in turn overlay a mid yellow brown sandy clay with frequent stone inclusions. Again, some disarticulated human remains were recovered from this context.

#### Test Pit 3 (Pl. 2)

Test Pit 3 was 0.50m wide, 1.0m long and 0.60m deep and the stratigraphy consisted of 0.33m of stone paving overlying 0.28m of dark brown grey sandy clay. Further disarticulated human remains were recovered from this context. This context overlay a pale yellow silty sand with frequent stone inclusions. A single piece of sandstone measuring more than 0.50x0.50m was found at the base of this test pit (Fig. 4). The only accessible side (eastern) was excavated down by 0.05m and this appeared to be faced suggesting that it was part of a structure, possibly an earlier phase of the church as the alignment appeared to be the same.

### *Soakaway and main pipe trench (Fig.3)*

An area to the south-west of the church was chosen to contain the main storm water soakaway for the site. As this was located partially in the church path and part on the site of possible graves, with headstones on the western boundary wall, a 2m standoff was allowed. The hole itself, needed to be 6.5m x 3m and 2m deep. Upon excavation, it was visible that three graves were seen to cut the grave soil. The first, grave 201, was encountered at 1.2m deep towards the centre of the area and the feet (sk 257) of another, grave 200, encountered at 1.35m deep in the southern part. This uncovered 0.4m of the length of grave 200.

Grave 200 only uncovered the feet of this burial, which were lifted before further mechanical excavation took place. The grave fill (252) was a loosely compacted pale grey-dark brown mixed fill of sandy silt and clayey silt, with a moderate amount of included limestone.

Grave 201 was 1.55m in length by 0.65m wide with the skull in section (sk 258). Grave 201 was filled with a moderately compact pale brown grey mixed fill of sandy silt and clayey silt (253).

Grave 203 was observed in the northern section of the soakaway and had to be partially excavated with the machine due to depth. This grave was recorded at a depth of 1.4m, and measured 1.5m in length. It was filled with a loosely friable pale grey/dark brown homogenous fill like grave 201, and recovered the skull, upper body, right and left arm and the left side lower leg (sk 259).

Grave 204 only contained a small amount of bone. It was unclear if this was an *in situ* burial or disarticulated remains from when it was originally dug. The eastern end of this grave was encountered between 203 and 201. This was filled with a similar homogenous fill as seen in the other graves (255) cut at this depth of 1.35m. This grave was recorded as being 0.96m long by 0.74m wide.

At a depth of 1.3m, the natural cornbrash geology was reached. Grave 202 was noted at 1.65m in section and contained limited bone. Medieval pottery was noted in both of the fills that made this grave (250 and 251). Fill 250 was a firm pale grey brown clayey sandy silt with frequent limestone inclusion. Fill 251 was a firm pale yellow brown grey clayey silt with frequent limestone and contained human bone. Rib bones were recovered and part of the upper left arm and scapula (sk 256). The western end of this grave was contained in the section. A record of the final finished excavated depth was taken once 2m had been reached and all five of the graves were visible in the western section (Pl. 1).

The excavation of the main pipe trench was observed down the western side of the church path. This was 0.4m wide and dug to a depth of 0.9m. A small collection of disarticulated bone was recovered from the graveyard soil and natural geology was not reached. Three chambers were placed along its route which were dug 2.2m square (IC08, IC09, IC10). At 4m from the northern edge of the soakaway and visible in the western section of the trench, a brick crypt was encountered (205). This was similar to those that have been identified previously with the top graveslab 0.46m below ground level. The eastern end was disturbed by the machine in order to view the interior. This grave had had limited soil ingress. The coffin within was in a poor condition and bone was visible in the mix of disturbed coffin and fittings at the base of the crypt. Once the pipe had been laid this end of the graveslab was replaced and mortared in place.

When the french drain was excavated the linking trenches to the chambers were dug. Two of these were 0.9m deep and 0.5m wide, linking IC08, and IC10. The link to IC09 was only 0.32m, with the grated channel only 0.14m deep in front of the west door. Two small pieces of human bone were recovered from the trench leading to IC08. No other finds were recovered from the excavation of these three trenches. No crypts were encountered during the excavation of these linkage trenches.

#### *French drain and linking trenches (Fig. 4)*

Excavation of this trench began by hand to the east of the northern porch. This first of all broke through the brick channel at the base of the existing drainage trough next to the church wall. Once dug through, 0.4m of soil was removed and in doing so exposed the step on the north aisle foundation. This was in good condition and made up of limestone blocks. On excavation of the trench by the north-east corner buttress of the porch the foundation was seen to be rubble coursing with no step. The corner buttress sat on two courses of poor condition limestone blocks (Pl. 2). It was noted by the architect that this porch contains cracks suggesting it is subsiding. There was no indication of a lower course, though the base of excavation ceased at 0.6m deep. Digging in front of the north doorway encountered the pipe trench containing the gas pipe that had been laid the previous year. The drain then turned down the west side of the porch, rejoining the existing drainage trough down the side of the north-western corner of the church to the tower. Once it reached the northern face of the tower, the trench had to be raised and was only 0.5m deep, as the first step for the tower foundation was uncovered. The trench then halted at the north-western corner buttress of the tower. A sparse quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered from these excavations. No pottery was recovered.

Excavation continued from the south-western buttress of the tower breaking through the existing drainage trough that ran along the south-facing wall. This led all the way around the southern tower face with the first step of the tower foundation encountered at the base of excavation at 0.6m with the trough 0.45m wide. This led to the south-west corner buttress of the south aisle, which was seen to be in good condition, made up of three courses of blockwork and extended lower than the excavated extent.

The southern wall had gravestones mortared in place along the drainage trough and these had to be lifted. A photographic record was made of the condition of these while they were moved. Many of these are from the Philips family. Once these had been removed excavation continued past the south door and encountered brickwork in the southern section.



This brickwork was in poor condition and fell within the excavated trench. A crypt (206) was discovered here, but had long since filled with soil as the top slab had fallen with the crypt. It was unclear if this was a deliberate backfill as a void had appeared under the church path. Once the two overlying graveslabs in the path had been lifted the full extent of the crypt was visible. These graveslabs dated from the 1850's. Crypt 206 was 2.2m long by 0.78m wide. The top of the soil in the interior was only 0.4m deep. This soil (263) was excavated on the northern half of the crypt to allow access to the northern section wall and exposed the interior of the top six courses of the northern side of the crypt. This wall was then rebuilt and the void within in filled with Type 2 stone (Pl. 3). A complete gravestone was lifted from the interior of this crypt. Its inscription read (Pl.5)

*A. J*

*Keep faith and true[*

*]pentance Still*

*then Welcom death*

*Com when it will*

*1700*

No human bone was observed in this crypt, but no excavation deeper than 0.4m occurred in the interior.

While the works where being carried out the dumper was using the southern church path. A hole opened up under the dumper (Pl. 4). It was observed that a crypt (207) existed at this location just 2.3m south of 206. This exposed the centre of the crypt and showed that it was infilled with soil though the void in the path from a depth of 0.9m deep. This crypt was 2.4m long and 0.77m wide. No soil was excavated from its interior. Once the cobbles had been removed and a broken graveslab was lifted it was observed to contain script. This read 'M.C 1717' (Pl. 6). This was then photographed and the void filled in with Type 2 stone. No human bone was observed in this crypt.

During the rebuilding of Crypt 206, the excavation of the drainage channel continued. This removed the existing brick channel at ground level and excavated to a depth of 0.42m. This exposed the foundation of the southern aisle buttress which was seen to be in poor condition (Pl. 8). When the trench reached the south aisle chapel it narrowed to 0.4m (Pl. 7). The foundation was seen to step out 0.19m, but was not disturbed to allow the pipe to be laid. None of the gravestone paving slabs required lifting along this length. This then turned along the eastern end of the south aisle wall and stopped at the chancel wall to link with existing drainage that continued down the church path to the east. The existing drainage was broken at the south-east corner of the south aisle then linked to the new run. Nothing further of archaeological interest was observed in this stretch.

## Finds

The finds included very fragmented and disarticulated human remains, which could not be closely identified and were retained at the site for re-interment. Tile fragments were also not clearly diagnostic and could not be classed as being of interest unlike the types seen in 2013. Two sherds of Medieval pottery recovered from both fills of Grave 202, were retained on site. One clay tobacco pipe stem was recovered from Grave 203, as were fragments of coffin furniture from Grave 201, 204 and 203.

## Conclusion

The work, as in the previous years of investigation, unsurprisingly uncovered human burials and crypt structures within the graveyard. All human bone was retained by the church, but the pottery evidence as with some of the graves found in 2013, suggest Medieval burial is preserved in this historic graveyard. The grave (202) uncovered here is particularly deep (>1.5m) suggesting that 19th-century use of the graveyard could still have preserved earlier burials at greater depth.

The investigation of the foundation of the church found it to be in a poor state in some areas especially on the exterior buttress of the south aisle. The porch buttress in the north-east was only 0.5m deep.

## References

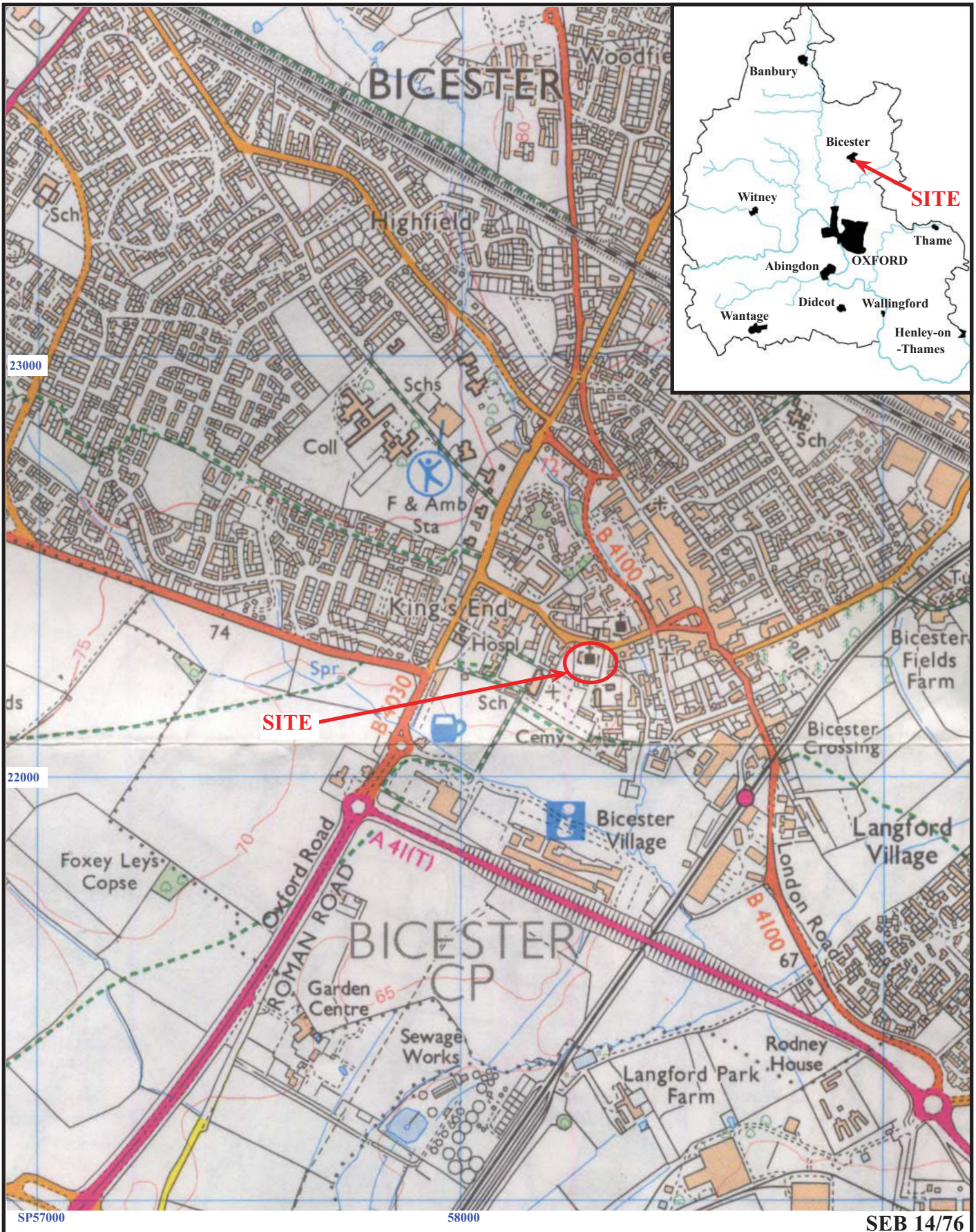
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**APPENDIX 1: Test Pit details**

<i>Test Pit</i>	<i>Length (m)</i>	<i>Breadth (m)</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	0.70	0.70	1.0	0–0.30m stone, 0.30-0.52m dark brown grey sandy clay, 0.52m+ mid yellow brown sandy clay.
2	0.50	0.50	1.0	0–0.30m stone, 0.30-0.58m dark brown grey sandy clay, 0.58m+ mid yellow brown sandy clay.
3	1.0	0.50	0.60	0–0.30m stone, 0.33-0.40m dark brown grey sandy clay, 0.40m+ mid yellow brown sandy clay.

**APPENDIX 2: Feature details**

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill (s)</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Dating evidence</i>
200	252, Sk 257	Grave	Post-Medieval	Stratigraphy
201	253, Sk 258	Grave	Post-Medieval	Coffin fitting, stratigraphy
202	250, 251, Sk 256	Grave	Medieval	Pottery
203	254, Sk 259	Grave	Post-Medieval	Coffin fittings, stratigraphy
204	255, Sk 260	Grave (Disarticulated remains)	Post-Medieval	Stratigraphy
205	262	Crypt	Post-Medieval	Stratigraphy
206	261, 263	Crypt	Post-Medieval	Gravestone d.1700
207	264	Crypt	Post-Medieval	Gravestone d.1717

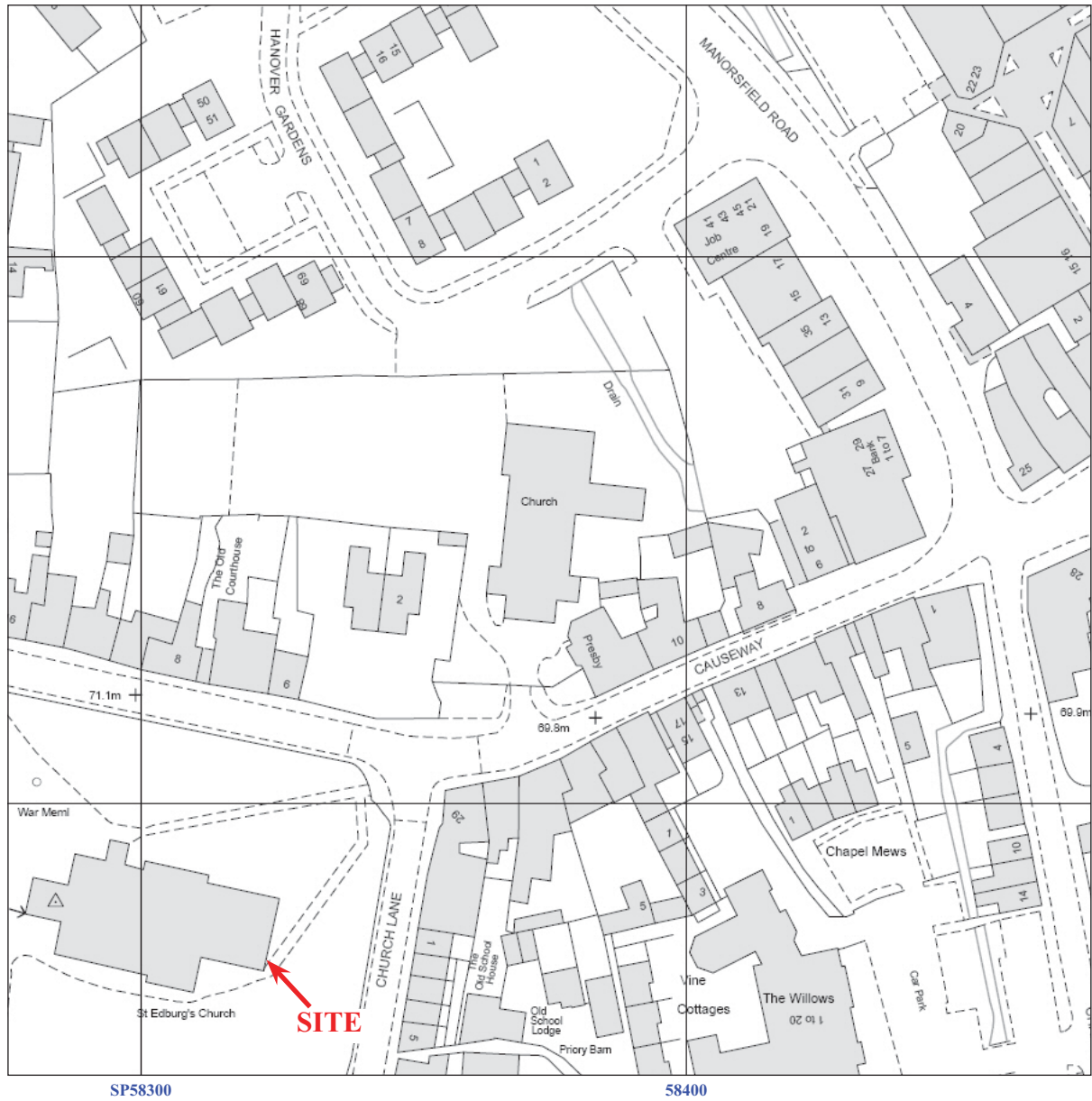


**St Edburg's Church, Church Street, Bicester, Oxfordshire, 2014  
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Figure 1. Location of site within Bicester and Oxfordshire.

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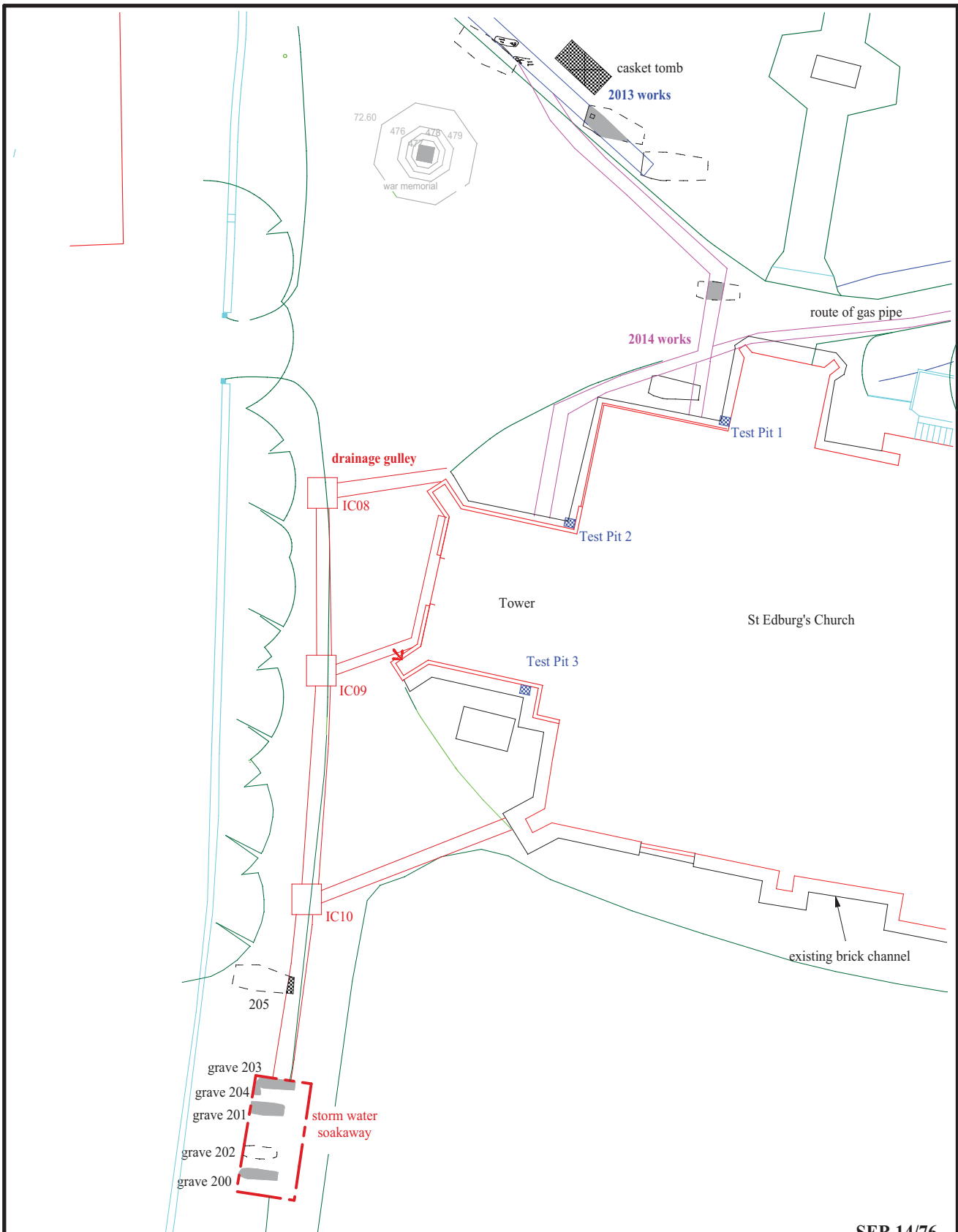
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Figure 2. Detailed location of site off The Causeway.

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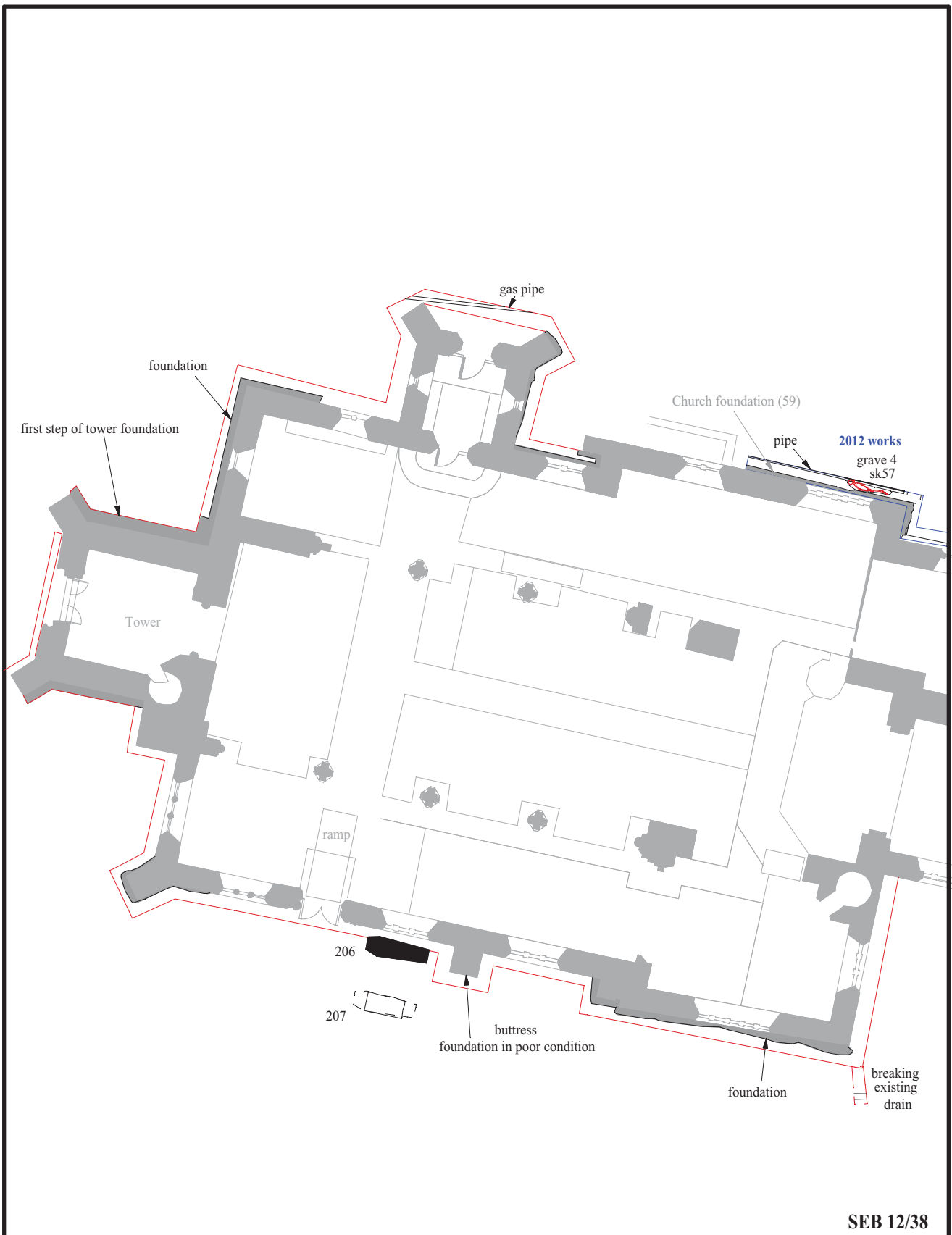
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Figure 3. Location of 2014 test pits (in blue) and 2015 exterior works.



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Figure 4. Detail of new drainage trenching includes 2012 french drain trench.







Plate 1. Soakaway section, looking west, Scale: 1m.



Plate 2. North east buttress foundation on porch, looking west, Scale: 0.5m.

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**St Edburg's Church, Church Street,  
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Plates 1 - 2.

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Plate 3. Crypt 206, after wall rebuild and prior to backfill, looking west, Scale: 0.5m.



Plate 4. Crypt 207, looking west, Scale: 0.5m.

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Plates 3 - 4.

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Plate 5. Gravestone recovered from Crypt 206, Scale: 0.5m.



Plate 6. Gravestone recovered from Crypt 207, Scale: 0.5m.

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Plates 5 - 6.

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Plate 7. Foundation on South Aisle Chapel, Scale: 0.5m.



Plate 8. South Aisle buttress foundation , Scale: 0.5m.

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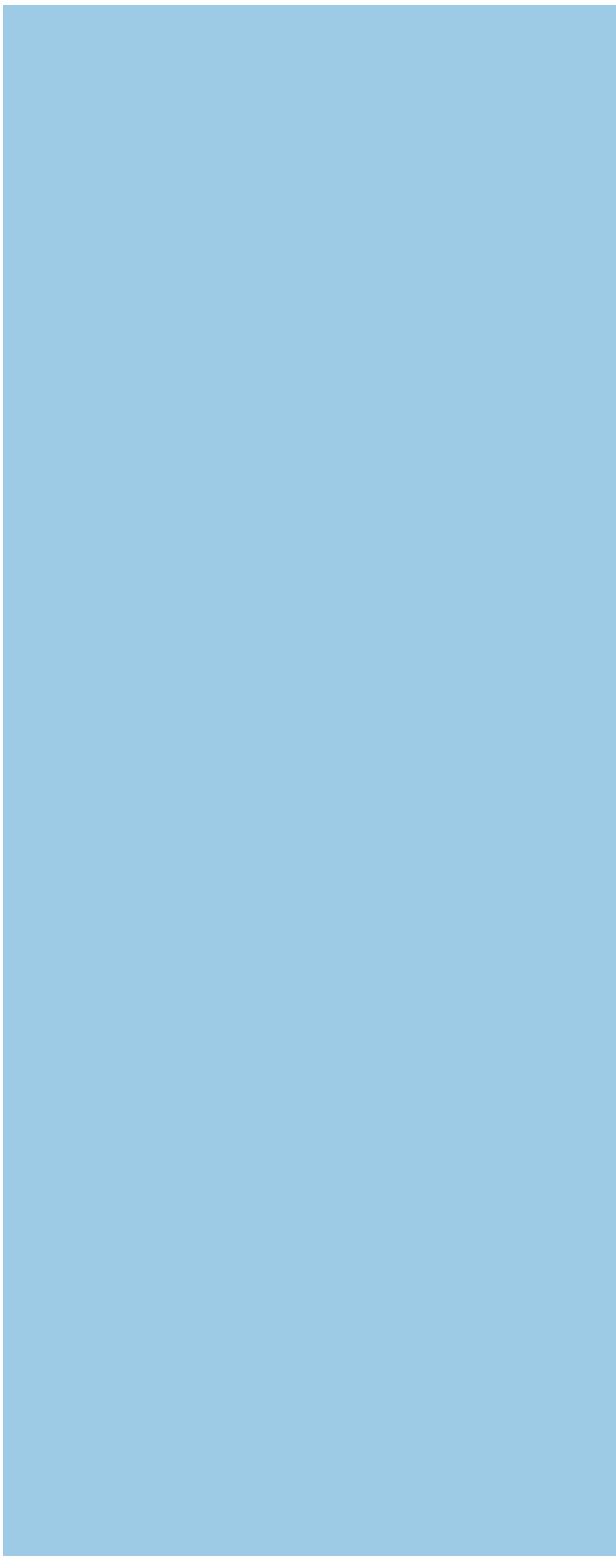
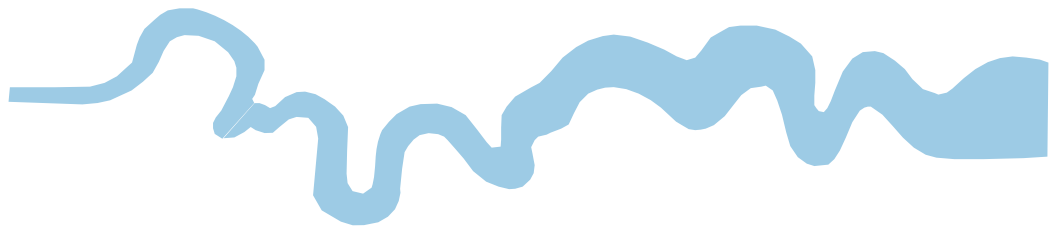
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Plates 7 - 8.**

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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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