

T H A M E S V A L L E Y

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**Church of St Mary Magdalene,
Dunton, Bedfordshire**

Archaeological Watching Brief

by Ellen McManus-Fry

Site Code: MDB16/11

(TL 2375 4423)

Church of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, Bedfordshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief

For the Parochial Church Council of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton

by Ellen McManus-Fry

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code MDB 16/11

April 2016

Summary

Site name: Church of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, Bedfordshire

Grid reference: TL 2375 4423

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 15th-22nd February 2016

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Ellen McManus-Fry

Site code: MDB 16/11

Summary of results: Monitoring of the excavation of the dry area, drainage trenches and soakaways recorded the presence of 14 individual inhumations, all aligned approximately east-west, as well as deposits of disarticulated human bone. Artefacts included coffin decorations and nails of broadly post-medieval date and three sherds of late Saxon and medieval pottery.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Bedford Museum in due course, with accession code BEDFM:2016.11.

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Church of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, Bedfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief

by Ellen McManus-Fry

Report 16/11

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, Bedfordshire (TL 2375 4423) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Alan Frost, of Alan Frost Architects, Windmill House, Wingrave, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP22 4DD, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, Bedfordshire.

A faculty has been gained from the Diocese of St Albans to install rainwater drainage and a dry area at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Dunton, which would require the digging of three new soakaways and drainage trenches in the churchyard and the digging of a drainage pipe trench in the dry area surrounding the church. An archaeological watching brief was requested to take place during groundworks due to the potential for the works to disturb skeletal or archaeological remains. The project followed a generic brief prepared by the St Albans Diocesan Archaeological Adviser. The fieldwork was undertaken by Ellen McManus-Fry and Rebecca Constable from 15th to 22nd February 2016 and the site code is MDB 16/11.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Bedford Museum in due course, with accession code BEDFM:2016.11.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located within the churchyard of St Mary Magdalene, which stands in the centre of the village of Dunton, located approximately 8km east of Biggleswade in central Bedfordshire (Fig. 1). The churchyard is bordered to the north, south and west by roads and to the east by houses (Fig. 2). The area of the excavations comprised the dry area around the majority of the external walls of the church and three locations to the north-west, south-west and south-east of the church building. The church is still in use although the churchyard is no longer used for burials. The underlying geology is quaternary till (chalky, sandy, stony clay) of the Lowestoft Formation (BGS 2001). A silty clay natural geology with gravel and flint inclusions was encountered during the excavations. The site is at an elevation of 50m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The site is located within the churchyard of St Mary Magdalene, which is a Grade II* listed building. The earliest portions of the church (the nave, chancel, south aisle and porch) date from the 14th century, with the north aisle dating to the 15th century. In 1861 the church was extended and the west tower rebuilt in a 14th-century style. The village was mentioned in Domesday Book as belonging to the estate of Archbishop Stigand at the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, and has Saxon origins (Williams and Martin 2002).

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was:

- to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the groundworks;
- to record any footings exposed during the creation of the dry area, prior to the walls being repointed and backfilled; and
- to record and osteologically assess any articulated human remains.

The extents of the areas examined are shown on Figure 3. Excavation of the pipe trench in the dry area was carried out by hand digging with spades due to the small size of the trench. A mini-digger using a range of toothless buckets was used to excavate the soakaways and associated drainage trenches. Due to the small size of the digger the soakaways were dug in two halves, with one portion being dug to its full depth before moving onto the other portion. Where articulated human remains were encountered which extended into the unexcavated portion of the soakaway this was taken down to the same depth before the skeleton was excavated. Where bones extended into the section they were dug out until all intruding bones were removed. Any parts of the skeleton not intruding into the soakaway were left *in situ*. Due to the final depth of the soakaways, the sides of the soakaways were stepped to enable the safe excavation and recovery of human remains found beyond a depth of 1.2m. Burials were hand-cleaned, excavated and recorded. Spoil heaps were monitored for finds.

Articulated human remains were subject to a brief osteological assessment of sex, age and pathology (Ubelaker 1978; Brothwell 1981; Brooks and Suchey 1990; Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994) and all human remains were bagged and returned to the church for reburial.

Results (Fig. 3)

Apart from the human burials, no archaeological remains were noted in any of the excavations. The articulated human remains are summarized in Appendix. 1.

Dry area

The topsoil had been removed prior to the commencement of the watching brief and the masonry exposed around the base of the church wall had already been repointed and covered with protective hessian fabric (Pls 1 and 2). The spoil heap from these works was examined and some human remains were recovered. The pipe trench in the dry area was hand dug using spades to a depth of approximately 0.2m and a width of 0.2-0.3m (Pls 1 and 2). Due to the prior removal of the topsoil the stratigraphy observed consisted solely of a loose, mid orange-brown, clayey silt (50) with infrequent inclusions of charcoal and small stones. Disarticulated human bones were recovered from the dry area on the southern and eastern sides of the chancel.

One articulated skeleton, SK51, was uncovered during excavation in the dry area on the eastern side of the chancel (Pl. 3). Due to the narrow width of the pipe trench, the remains uncovered consisted solely of the proximal portions of the femora, distal portion of the pelvis, metacarpals and phalanges. From the bones visible the burial appeared to be aligned with the head to the west in a supine, extended position. If these human remains are indeed an articulated burial then it would extend under the eastern chancel wall. SK51 was found at the maximum required depth for the pipe trench so removal of the remains after recording was not necessary. Excavation in the dry area around the north of the church did not uncover any further human remains, either loose or articulated, and material removed from this area consisted primarily of building rubble.

Soakaway 1

Soakaway 1 was located to the south-east of the church building, adjacent to the present boundary hedge. It was excavated using a 0.6m-wide toothless bucket and was a 1.5m x 1.5m square. The stratigraphy exposed consisted of 0.12m of topsoil, above a 0.03m thick lens of charcoal-rich, dark brown clayey silt, overlying 0.75m of a mid orange-brown, clayey silt with flint inclusions and disarticulated human remains (50) (Pl. 4). This overlay the natural geology, a light yellow-orange clayey silt with gravel and flint inclusions. The cut (1) of a grave in the natural was visible from 0.9m and the skeleton was exposed at a depth of 1.2m. The burial consisted of a complete subadult skeleton (SK52), aligned with the head to the west, in a supine, extended position (Pl. 7). On-site osteological assessment of dental development indicated that this individual was a child aged 6±2 years. The grave cut was 0.27m wide and 0.9m long and dug to a depth of 0.4m into the natural geology. No coffin fittings were found. The fill of the grave was a firm, dark orange-brown, clayey silt (53) containing occasional charcoal, flint and small stones along with a sherd of late Saxon or early medieval pottery. SK52 was recorded and removed, and the soakaway was dug to a final depth of 1.6m with no further human remains observed.

Soakaway 1 drainage trench

The drainage pipe trench was dug from the northern edge of the soakaway to the dry area at the southeast corner of the chancel using a 0.3m-wide toothless bucket to a depth of 0.75m. No human remains were found, although a possible grave cut was observed, aligned E-W, approximately 1.5m from the edge of the dry area. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.15m topsoil, overlying loose, mid orange-brown clayey silt (50).

Soakaway 2

Soakaway 2 was located to the north-west of the church building, immediately east of the current entrance path. It was dug using a 0.6m-wide toothless bucket to a depth of 1.6m, and an area of 1.5m x 1.5m. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.2m of topsoil, overlying 1.2m of a loose, mid orange-brown clayey silt (50), overlying 0.2m of a light orange brown clayey silt with gravel, which appeared to be redeposited natural. A total of 6 complete or partial inhumations were uncovered during the excavation of soakaway 2 (SK54, SK55, SK56, SK57, SK61 and SK62). These were hand cleaned, recorded and, with the exception of SK62, removed. All of the inhumations were aligned E-W with the body in a supine, extended position. None of the inhumations in soakaway 2 had visible grave cuts, although three (SK54, SK55 and SK56) were found with iron nails, indicative of burial in a coffin.

SK54 was discovered at a depth of 0.85m, across the north-east portion of soakaway 2. It consisted of *c.* 90% of a well-preserved skeleton of a young adult female (Pl. 8). The skeleton was in a supine, extended position with hands by its sides. The skull and left scapula and humerus extended into the northern section and were not disturbed, although the mandible was removed; the feet extended into the eastern section and were not disturbed. No grave cut or distinct grave fill was observed. An on site osteological assessment indicated that the individual was female and between 19-24 years of age, based on age- and sex-related morphology of the pelvis. The only pathology observed was a number of dental caries to the lower right M¹, M², and P¹ and lower left M¹ and P¹. The mandibular third molar was fully erupted on the left but congenitally absent on the right. Iron nails were observed along both sides of the skeleton. A sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from the soil amongst the remains.

The poorly preserved skeleton of an elderly individual (SK55) was found at approximately the same level and to the south of SK54. The fragility of the bones meant that they were badly disturbed by the machine bucket and relatively few elements were left *in situ*. The lower legs of the skeleton extended into the eastern section and were not disturbed. The skeleton was positioned E-W in a supine, extended position. On-site osteological assessment of the pelvis suggested that this individual was an old, probable male. Osteoporosis was observed

throughout the skeleton and there was osteophytic lipping on the vertebrae, pathologies which support the assessment of old age. One humerus (unsided) was recovered which exhibited a well healed but poorly aligned fracture to the midshaft and thickening of the bone shaft due to osteitis. Dental caries were also observed in a loose molar. Iron nails were recovered with the skeleton, but considering the disturbance to SK55 and the close proximity to SK54, which was clearly associated with coffin nails, it is possible that these nails were not originally associated with SK55. A sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from its fill.

SK56 was uncovered below SK55 in the southern half of the soakaway and consisted of 60% of a well-preserved skeleton of an adult male. The skeleton was in a supine, extended position, with the feet extending into the south-east corner of the soakaway and the right humerus and rest of the upper body extending in the western section. The left humerus, ulna, proximal radius and ribs had been truncated by a later burial (possibly SK57).

SK57 was uncovered at a depth of 1.4m in the northern half of soakaway 2. It consisted of the lower arms, lumbar vertebrae, pelvis and legs of a fair/well preserved adult female. The position of these elements suggested that the body was in a supine, extended position with the arms by the sides. No coffin fittings were found with this individual.

The soakaway was dug to a maximum depth of 1.6m, at which level the adult skeleton SK61 was exposed. The skull and vertebrae were uncovered, which indicated that the skeleton was aligned E-W in a supine position, but as no further digging was required beyond the level of the majority of the skeleton it was only necessary to remove the skull. Another inhumation, SK62, was uncovered in the north-eastern corner of the soakaway. The postcranial skeleton extended into the baulk and was not disturbed, so only the skull was removed. On-site osteological assessment indicated the individual was an adult male.

Soakaway 2 drainage trench

The trench for the drainage pipe connecting the soakaway to the drainage pipe in the dry area was dug using a 0.3m-wide toothless bucket to a depth of 0.75m. The stratigraphy observed consisted of 0.15m topsoil, overlying loose, mid orange-brown clayey silt (50). No human remains were uncovered.

Soakaway 3

Soakaway 3 was located to the south-west of the church and was excavated by a 0.6m-wide toothless bucket to a depth of 1.65m and an area of 1.5m x 1.5m. The stratigraphy observed consisted of 0.2m topsoil, overlying 1.15m of loose, mid orange-brown clayey silt (50), overlying the natural geology (Pl. 6). Five partial skeletons (SK58, SK63, SK64, SK65 and SK66) and numerous disarticulated elements were recovered from this soakaway.

The skeleton of an old adult male (SK58) was uncovered at a depth of 0.9m, oriented east-west in a supine, extended position. The skeleton was approximately 50% complete and in a good state of preservation. The cranium and upper cervical vertebrae extended into the north-western corner of the soakaway and were not disturbed by the excavation. The skeleton had been truncated by later burials on both sides, with the right femur, pelvis, ribs, scapula, arm and hand absent, and the left arm and hand missing also. An on-site osteological assessment of the pelvis revealed that the individual was an old adult (>45 years) male. The thoracic and lumbar vertebrae exhibited ossification of the right anterior longitudinal ligament which is characteristic of Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis (DISH) (Rogers and Waldron 2001) (Pl. 12). This is a pathological condition of unknown aetiology which is generally seen in adults over the age of 50. In addition the individual had osteoarthritis in the left knee, demonstrated by eburnation on and morphological changes to the medial portions of the proximal tibial and distal femoral articulations. The proximal right tibia also exhibited similar (although less severe) signs of arthritis. The sternum had a bifid xiphoid process, which is a non-pathological variation relating to the development of the sternum. Six iron nails were found with SK58, under the feet and along the centre of the burial. Additional coffin fittings (iron studs and two iron plates) found along the left side of SK58 and originally recorded in association with SK58 were later found to be associated with SK63, which truncated the left side of SK58 and was discovered during the removal of SK58.

SK63 was at approximately the same level as SK58 and again was laid in an extended, supine position with the head to the west. The skeleton was approximately 30% complete and was in a good state of preservation (Pl. 10). The left lower leg and right foot extended into the north-eastern section of the soakaway and were not disturbed by the excavation. The right humerus, pelvis and left femur extended into the north-western section of the soakaway; as these intruded into the soakaway they were removed but the remainder of the upper part of the skeleton was not disturbed. An on-site osteological assessment of the pelvis indicated that the individual was an old adult (>45 years) male. A number of pathological changes were observed in this individual. The metatarsals of the right hand displayed severe osteophytic lipping, eburnation and porosity on the distal articulations, indicative of arthritis (Pl. 11). The right radius exhibited enthesal changes (bony changes to the attachment site of a ligament or tendon) to the radial tuberosity. Changes such as this can be caused by mechanical stress and are also often associated with age. The right pelvis has extensive osteophytic growths on the ventral aspect, which is likely to be age-related but could possibly be pathological. The skeleton had been buried in a coffin, of which three iron coffin handles (two on the right side and one on the left) and numerous iron studs were recovered. The iron studs were arranged in two lines along the side of the coffin and were likely decorative rather than

structural. There was some dark staining underneath the skeleton, which was probably the remains of the wooden coffin. In addition to the iron coffin fittings, a white button was found to the outside of the proximal right femur, near the right hand.

Once this skeleton was removed, machine digging of soakaway 3 continued until 1.33m in depth, at which level SK64 was uncovered. The preservation of this skeleton was poor and only *c.* 20% was complete (cranium, spine, sacrum, left ribs and left arm); the remainder appeared to have been truncated. An on-site osteological assessment of the dentition indicated that the individual was a child, aged 8±2yrs. Due to the young age of the individual sex assessment was not possible.

SK65, represented solely by the right and left pelvis, sacrum and right metacarpals and phalanges, was uncovered in the southern corner of the soakaway. This appeared to be part of an extended, supine burial oriented east-west, the majority of which was undisturbed by the excavation.

At a depth of 1.44m the partial skeleton of an adult male, SK66, (in a fair state of preservation and approximately 30% complete) was uncovered. The right arm, left humerus, upper spine and cranium extended into the south-western section of the soakaway and the right lower leg extended into the south-eastern section. Iron nails recovered from the proximity of the skeleton indicated the original presence of a wooden coffin. Once SK66 had been removed the soakaway was excavated to its maximum depth (1.65m); no further articulated human remains were found.

Soakaway 3 drainage trench

A drainage trench (drain 1), 0.3m wide and 0.9m deep, was excavated between the northeast corner of soakaway 3 and the drain beneath the path using a toothless bucket (Pl. 5). An offshoot (drain 2) was excavated from this trench to the dry area. The observed stratigraphy consisted of 0.2m topsoil overlying a loose, mid orange-brown clayey silt (50). Some disarticulated human remains were found in the lower levels of the trench and at the base of the trench for drain 1 (0.9m) the skeleton of an infant, SK67, was uncovered. The skeleton was in a fair state of preservation, and *c.* 50% complete. It was in a supine, extended position with its head to the west, and poorly preserved wooden fragments and iron nails underneath the skeleton and a fragment of metal plate between the legs indicated that the individual had been buried in a coffin (68) (Pl. 10). The state of mineralization of a loose incisor suggested that the individual was probably less than a year old. Due to the young age, an evaluation of the sex of the individual was not possible. A metal safety pin was found by the inside of the left femur. Once SK67 was removed no further articulated human remains were found.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 3 sherds with a total weight of 61g. It was recorded using the conventions of the Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service type-series (eg Baker and Hassall 1977), as follows:

B01: T1 (1) type St Neots Ware, c. AD900–1100. 1 sherd, 5g.

B07: Medieval Shelly Ware, AD1100–1400. 1 sherd, 5g.

C60: Hertfordshire-type Greyware, mid/late 12th – mid 14th century. 1 sherd, 51g

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Appendix 2. All the wares are types which are well-known in the region.

The sherd of Hertfordshire Greyware is a strap handle with thumbled edges from a jug. Such handles are very common on vessels of this type, and generally date to the 13th century (Blackmore and Pierce 2010, 174 and Fig. 103). The other two sherds are plain, and are bodysherds from jars. All the pottery shows slight abrasion, and is the product of secondary deposition.

Conclusion

The excavations for three soakaways and associated drainage trenches were monitored in the churchyard surrounding St Mary Magdalene, Dunton. A total of 14 inhumations, both partial and complete, as well as fragments of disarticulated human bone were identified, recorded and removed (Appendix 1). Some of these lay within grave cuts, some with coffin nails and fittings surviving, although several had no signs of a grave. All of the graves were oriented parallel to the nave of the church and can therefore reasonably be associated with it. The inhumations are not well dated though three contained individual sherds of late Saxon and/or medieval pottery, with others containing nails, coffin handles and a safety pin suggesting they are broadly of later post-medieval date. The presence of the medieval pottery need not indicate that the burials are of that date, as the soil in graveyards is typically reworked over centuries. If SK51 was in fact complete, it would appear to underlie the eastern chancel wall and thus may predate this part of the church.

No other features of archaeological interest were identified.

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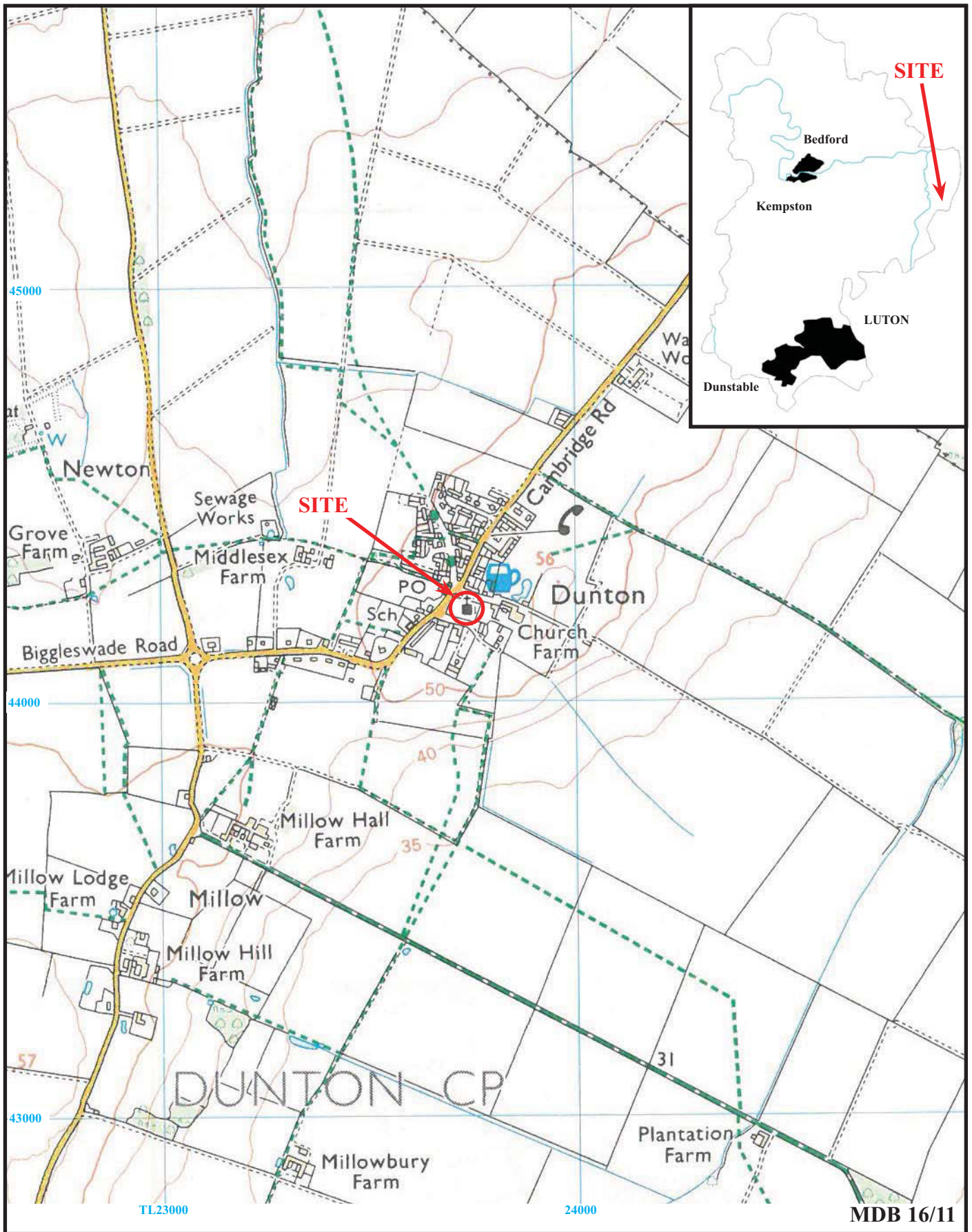
APPENDIX 1: Catalogue of skeletons

<i>Skeleton no.</i>	<i>Preservation</i>	<i>Completeness</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Coffin</i>	<i>Pathology</i>
51	Good	10%	I	Adult	N	None
52	Good	95%	I	4-8yrs	N	None
54	Good	90%	F	16-24yrs	Y	Dental caries. Congenitally absent upper right 3rd molar.
55	Poor	50%	m	45yrs+	Y	Osteoporosis. Healed fracture to humerus and associated osteitis. Dental caries.
56	Good	60%	M	Adult	Y	None
57	Fair	40%	F	Adult	N	None
58	Good	50%	M	45yrs+	Y	DISH Arthritis of knee. Bifid xiphoid process.
61	Fair	5%	I	Adult	N	None
62	Fair	5%	M	Adult	N	None
63	Good	30%	M	45yrs+	Y	Arthritis of hand. Enthesopathy of right radial tuberosity. ? Osteophytic growth on pubic bone.
64	Poor	20	I	6-10yrs	N	None
65	Good	10%	I	Adult	N	None
66	Fair	30%	M	Adult	Y	None
67	Fair	50%	I	<1yr	Y	None

Sex categories: M= male; F = female; m = possible male; f = possible female; I = indeterminate

APPENDIX 2: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

<i>Context</i>	<i>B01</i>		<i>B07</i>		<i>C60</i>	
	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>
Sk52	1	5				
Sk54			1	5		
Sk55					1	51
Total	1	5	1	5	1	51

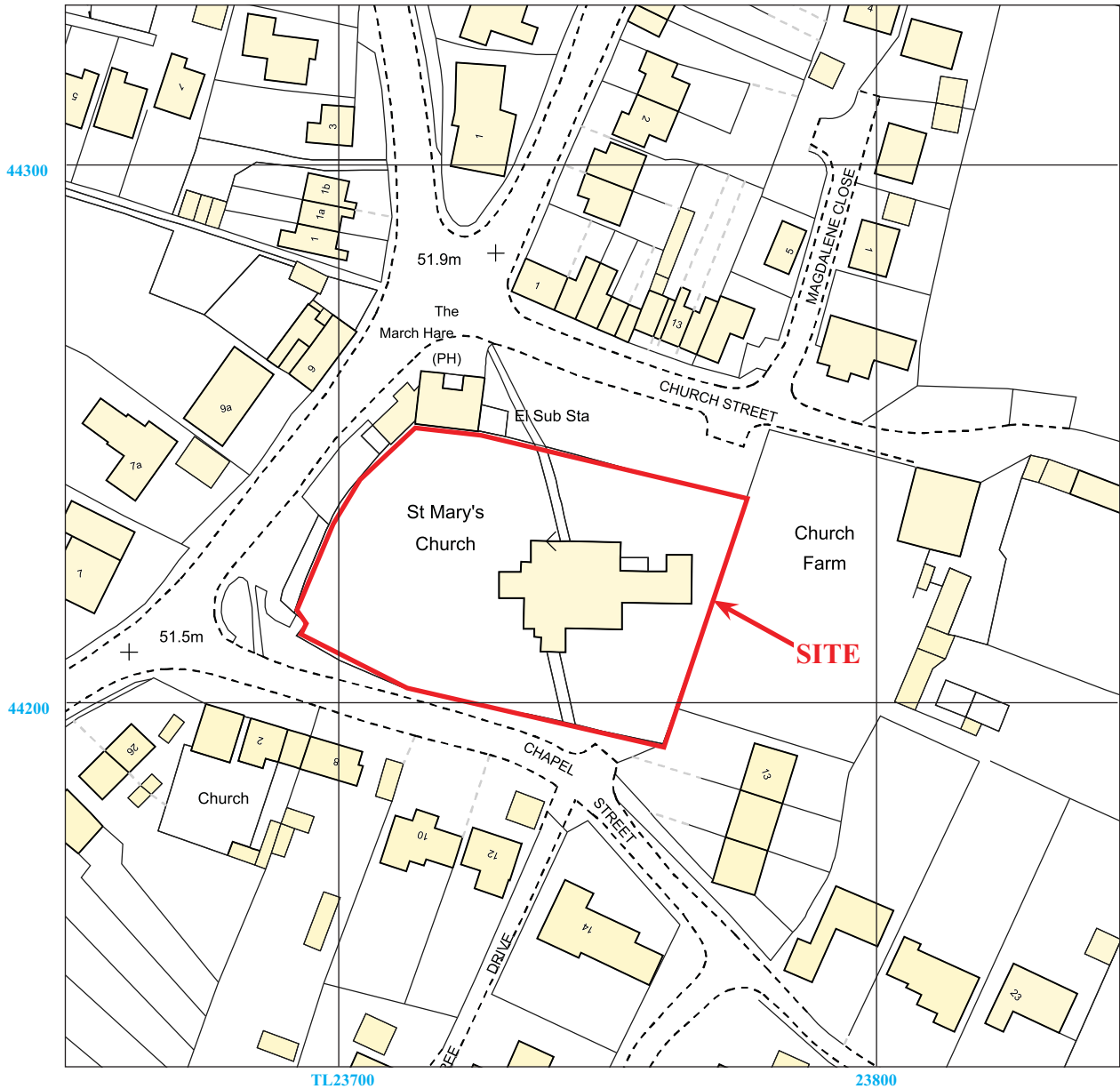


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 Figure 1. Location of site within Dunton and Bedfordshire

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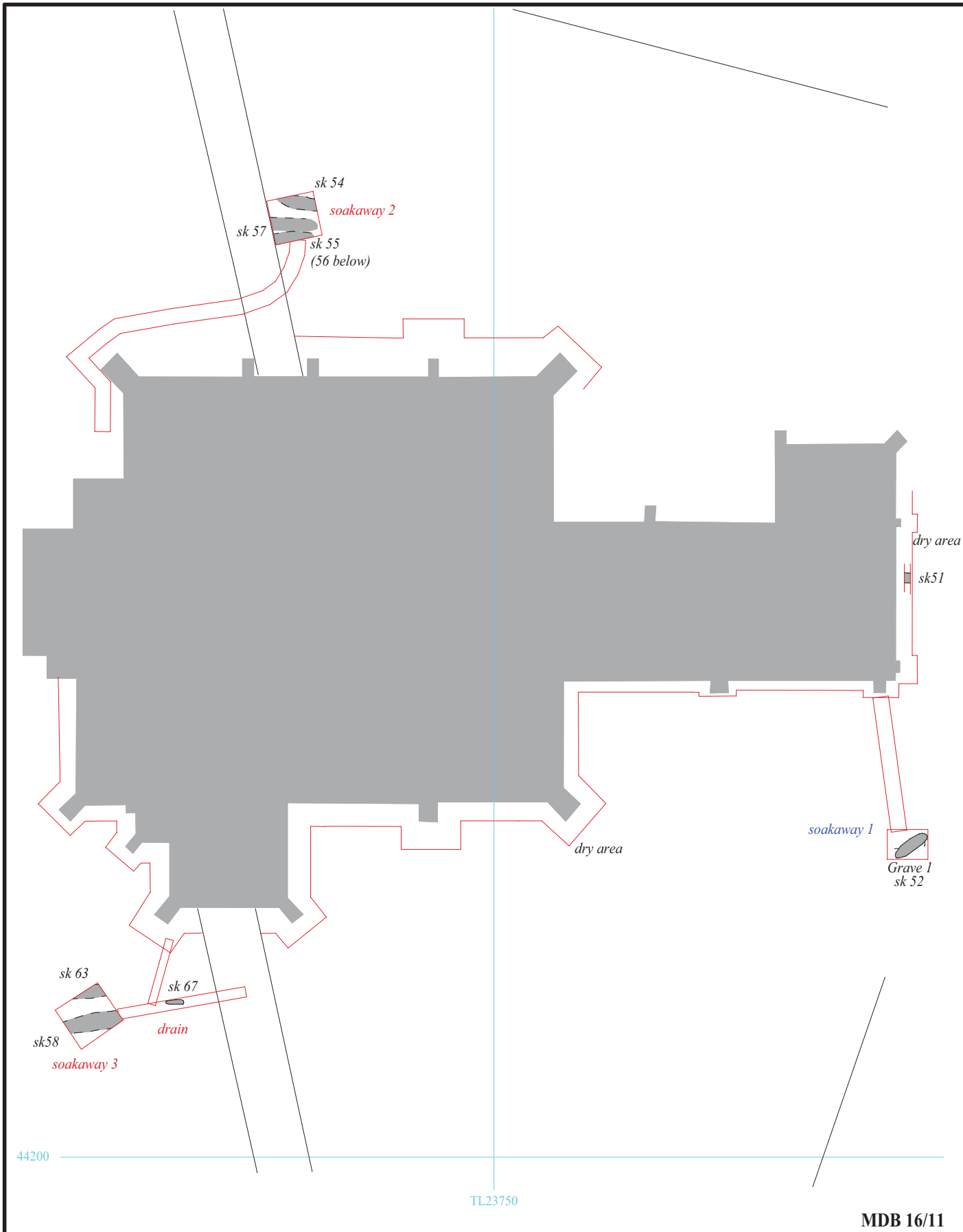
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Figure 2. Detailed location of site.

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Figure 3. Location of observed areas.



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Plate 1. Chancel dry area, looking west, Scales: 1m and 0.3m.



Plate 2. South aisle dry area, looking south-west, Scales: 1m and 0.3m.

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Plates 1 - 2.**

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Plate 3. SK51 in chancel dry area, looking west, Scales: 0.5m and 0.1m.



Plate 4. Soakaway 1 section, looking south, Scales: 2m and 1m.

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Plate 5. Soakaway 3 drainage pipe trench, looking west, Scales: 2m and 1m.



Plate 6. Soakaway 3 section, looking east, Scales: 2m and 1m.

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Plates 5 - 6.**

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Plate 7. SK52, looking south-east, Scales: 0.5m and 0.3m.



Plate 8. SK54, looking north, Scales: 1m and 0.1m.

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Plate 9. SK67, looking west, Scale: 0.5m.



Plate 10. SK63, looking north, Scale: 1m.

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Plate 11. Right metacarpals of SK63 showing severe arthritis.



Plate 12. Thoracic and lumbar vertebrae of SK58 showing evidence of DISH.

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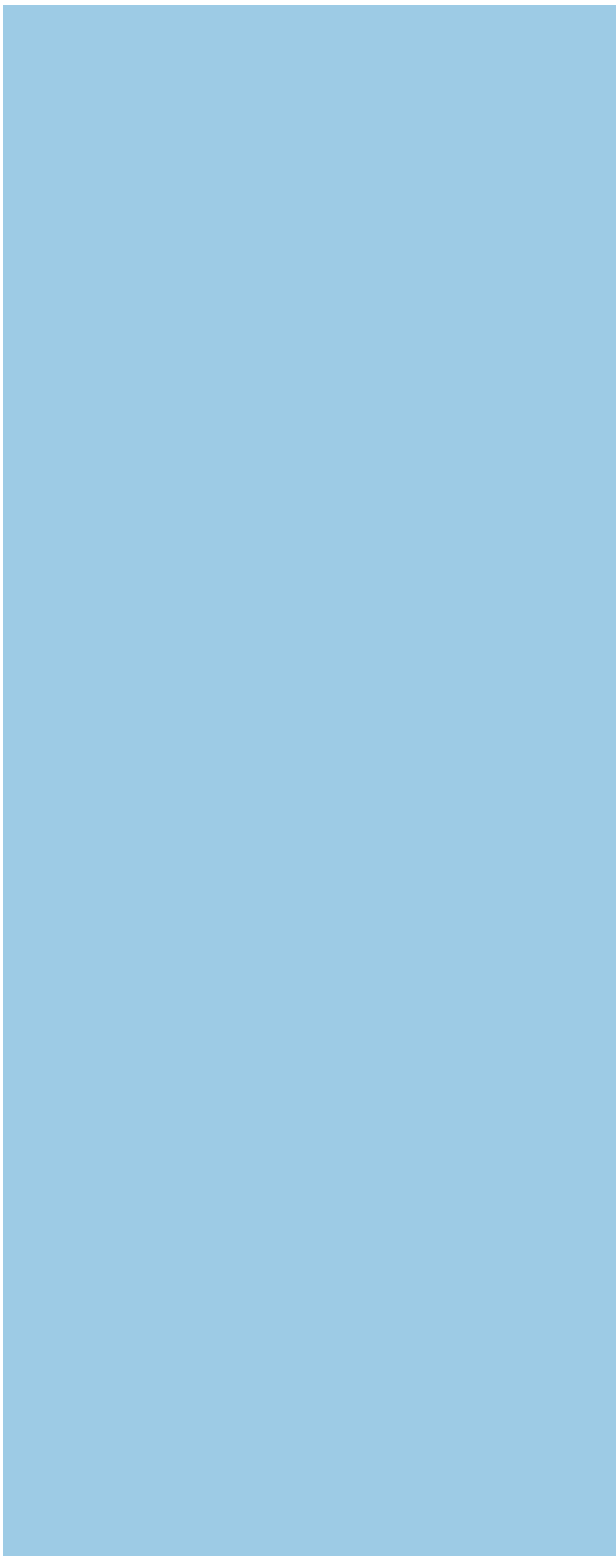
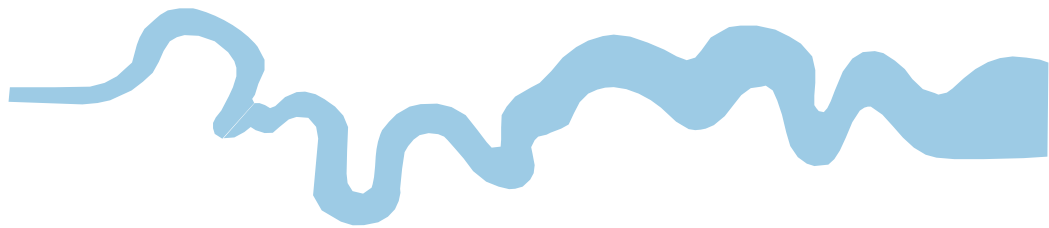
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Plates 11 - 12.

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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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