

T H A M E S      V A L L E Y

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire**

**Archaeological Watching Brief**

**by Andrew Mundin, Andy Taylor and Tim Dawson**

**Site Code: SLW16/79**

**(SU 8274 9496)**

# **St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief**

**For The Diocese of Oxford**

by Andrew Munding, Andy Taylor and

Tim Dawson

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code SLW 16/79

**October 2017**

## Summary

**Site name:** St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

**Grid reference:** SU 8274 9496

**Site activity:** Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 31st May 2016 and 25th August 2017

**Project manager:** Steve Ford

**Site supervisor:** Andy Taylor, Tim Dawson

**Site code:** SLW 16/79

**Area of site:** c. 28 sq m

**Summary of results:** Two test pits initially examined the ground within the area to be excavated on the north-west side of the Church. These pits identified that a sequence of deposits survives adjacent to the tower. The brick foundation of probable 19th-century construction was located, but the overburden of topsoil and potential graveyard deposits were seen below levelling deposits up to a depth of between 0.7m to 0.9m. During observations of the footing excavation for the new structure, graveyard deposits were reached and three areas of human remains were located. Of the three, skeleton 50 by the tower was the most complete and undisturbed. It was lifted and kept at the Church for reburial.

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

*This report may be copied for bona fide research or planning purposes without the explicit permission of the copyright holder. All TVAS unpublished fieldwork reports are available on our website: [www.tvas.co.uk/reports/reports.asp](http://www.tvas.co.uk/reports/reports.asp).*

Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford ✓ 18.10.17 Steve Preston ✓ 09.10.17
---

# St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire An Archaeological Watching Brief

by Andrew Mundin, Andy Taylor and Tim Dawson

**Report 16/79**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire (SU 8274 9497) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Joshua Harrison, of Cohanim Architecture on behalf of the Church.

Planning permission (15/08322/FUL) has been gained from Wycombe District Council to create a new north-western extension on the Church of St Lawrence. In accordance with the Department for Communities and Local Government's *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF 2012) and the District's Council policies on archaeology, the consent is subject to condition (4) relating to archaeology, in this instance requiring an archaeological watching brief during the works.

The Church is a grade I listed building and the site is in the immediate proximity of a Scheduled Monument, an earthwork of Church Hill to the north and west, identified as an Iron Age promontory enclosure. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Philip Markham of Buckinghamshire County Council, on behalf of Wycombe District Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Andy Taylor on 31st May 2016 and Tim Dawson on 25th August 2017. The site code is SLW 16/79.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading, and will be deposited with Buckinghamshire Museum Service in due course. All human remains have been returned to the Church.

## **Location, topography and geology**

The site is located at the top of Church Hill, to the north-west of west Wycombe in the eastern Chilterns (Fig. 1). The hill forms a locally prominent promontory overlooking the valley of the River Wye to the south and west. West Wycombe is a hamlet on the north-western edge of the much larger High Wycombe which has expanded almost to absorb the smaller settlement. The church and a mausoleum occupy the interior of a roughly circular earthwork. The underlying geology is Lewes Chalk Formation (BGS Geindex; BGS 2005), an Upper Chalk, with clay with flint evident on the promontory on the north west. The site is approximately 150m above Ordnance Datum, with the base of the Mausoleum (153.8maOD) lower than the base of the church, which is more at the centre of the earthwork.

## **Archaeological background**

The area is of high archaeological significance. The earthwork at the top of the hill would represent a partially bi-valliate rampart on an inland promontory (Fig. 2), seen elsewhere in southern England and the Chilterns, such as Cholesbury and Whelpley Hill (Farley 1995, 29). Views overlooking dry valleys between the Icknield Way and the Thames make this area ideal for settlement in prehistory.

West Wycombe Park is a Grade I Listed Park and Garden and is curated by the National Trust. The Church of St Lawrence is Grade I Listed with foundations of the 13th century, with elements existing in the tower being 14th century in date. Extensive remodelling of the church in the 18th century is probably associated with the architect, Nicolas Revett, who worked on West Wycombe county house and estate, owned by the Dashwood family.

Extensive remodelling has occurred to the church in the last 200 years, to maintain the grand 'Egyptian inspired' hall within the nave of the church, which is in the Neo-classical style (Fig. 3). An older foundation is hinted at with the thickness of the chancel walls, filled probable 14th-century arched windows in the south wall and gable, in addition to a probable 14th-century foundation of the tower. The church is surrounded by a historic graveyard, though most are extant memorials from the 18th to 20th century. A flint-built mausoleum to the south east is also of 18th-century date.

A previous watching brief was undertaken during pipe laying (Poore 2000). In these works, though confined, two sections of large ditched features were identified, thought to be associated with the rampart defensive circuit in the north, or entrance to the earthworks associated with the Iron Age activity on the hill. Limited material was recovered to provide dating for such a theory, though unstratified flint tempered pottery was recovered.

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits under immediate threat from development. Sufficient time was to be allowed to carry out the works within the schedule of the groundworkers without causing unnecessary delay. The work was undertaken by hand with continual observation by an archaeologist during the work.

Any human remains which were of post-medieval or modern date were to be summarily recorded but not otherwise archaeologically excavated. The bone remains were to be returned to the church for re-interment. Any

human remains of Medieval or earlier date were to be archaeologically recorded and excavated as necessary following receipt of the appropriate Consistory Court approval.

Specific aims of the project were:

to determine the extent to which human remains survive within the extension area;

to observe the presence of graves or vaults;

to record any deposits associated with the prehistoric promontory earthwork.

All excavation was carried out under constant archaeological supervision with a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a grading bucket. All spoilheaps were extensively checked for finds, and care was taken to remove the fills identified stratigraphically.

## Results

### *Test pit excavation (2016 works)*

Prior to construction works, two north–south aligned test pits (TP) were excavated north of the tower at the west end of the church. The former structure at this location had become structurally unstable, so had been taken down 'some time ago' (J. Harrison, *pers comm*). The stratigraphy consisted of 0.05m of turf above 0.65–0.85m of chalk rubble with brick, above the natural chalk. The footing for the removed brick structure was observed in both test pits, surviving as four courses of brickwork, down to a depth of 0.9m (Pls 1 and 2). The internal corner of this foundation was observed in the western test pit TP2. A fragment of cranium was recovered from the homogenous overburden just above natural chalk at a depth of 0.8m in TP 2, but did not appear to be associated with any *in situ* human remains. No other finds of archaeological interest were encountered.

### *New footing observations (2017 works)*

The excavation of the new footing required a 0.6–0.7m wide trench that was excavated to a depth of 0.75m (Fig. 4; Pl. 4). Most of the topsoil was stripped over the area, and a small depth of turf (0.05–0.1m deep) was removed to expose the top of the previous brick foundation (Fig. 3) and the same layer of chalk/brick rubble, which overlay natural chalk at a depth of between 0.55m and 0.75m (deepening from east to west).

Once a depth of 0.55m was reached the ground changed to a grey brown silt with chalk rubble; the underlying silt (53) only thickened towards the tower in the south (Fig. 4). Human bone was identified in two locations in the south facing section of the north excavated footing, but both had been disturbed previously

(Sk51 and Sk55). A Queen Victoria 1882 penny and a copper alloy top of a firing cap were recovered within the soil above remains Sk55.

In the western footing a brick culvert crossed the trench west–east on a line that would have taken it along the north side of the aisle: it may belong with the 18th-century building or could be later.

In the southern footing, 0.35m north of the tower, Grave 1 with backfill 52 and containing Sk50, was 1.04m long and 0.45m wide (Fig. 4; Pl. 3). The grave was aligned west–east, parallel to the tower. The grave fill was a loose light brown chalky silt with frequent flint gravel and chalk crumbs. A large part of the elements of this skeleton were present and articulated, which included the base of the skull, both arms, the torso and pelvis. The legs had been both truncated by a later pit at just below the knee. The body with was a juvenile, probably aged between 10 and 14 years old. It is not possible to determine sex of such a young individual. No finds were associated with the burial and it is only assumed that it post-dates the tower foundation construction.

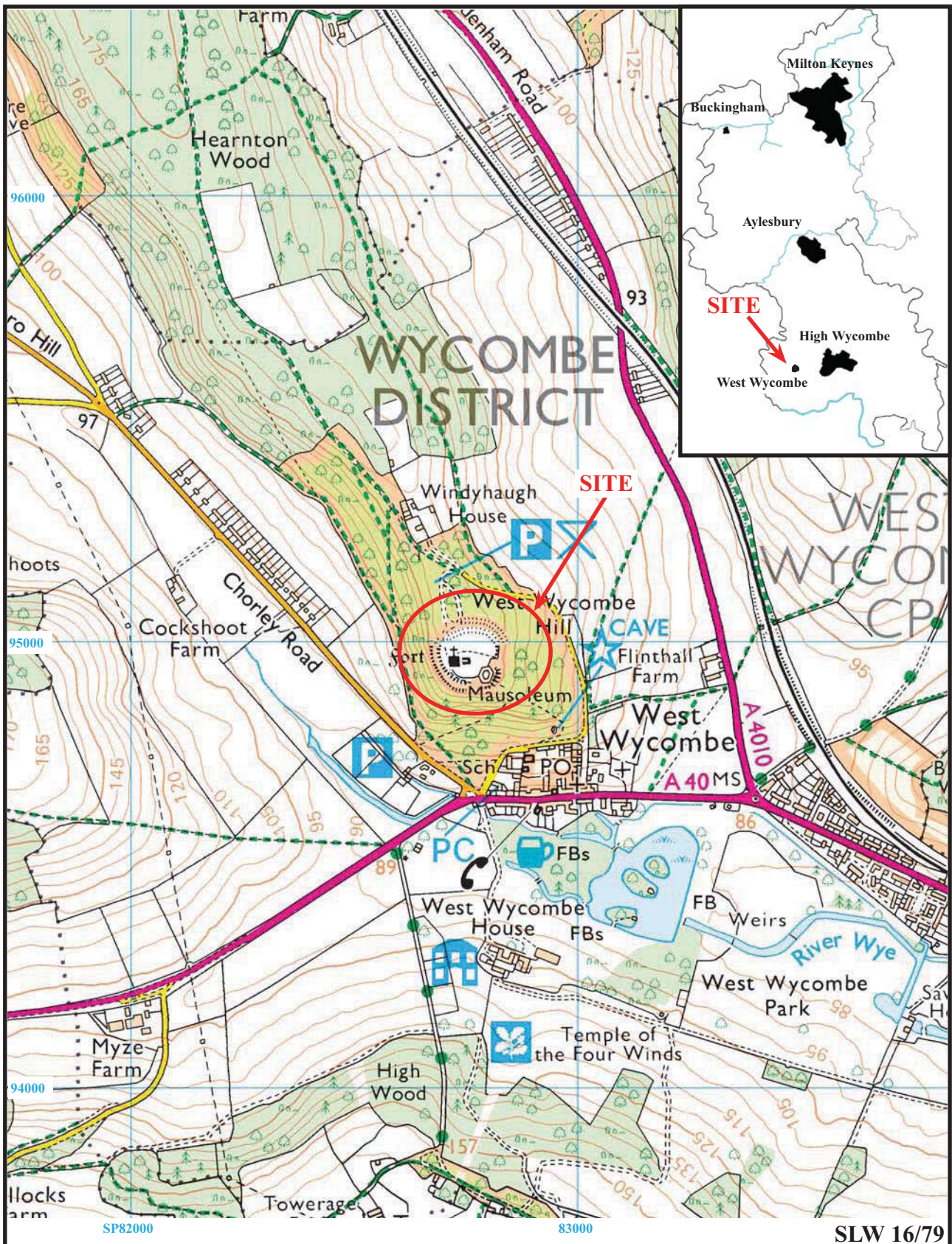
## **Conclusion**

The work was successful in identifying human remains at the site. These were retained with the Church for reburial. Grave 1 might be considered the 'oldest' deposits of the finds identified during the works, but with no datable remains it can only give a relatively broad date. Most other material identified would be considered to be of 18th or most likely, 19th century date. The coin was potentially good dating evidence, but was only recovered from just below the topsoil. No deposits nor artefacts of Iron Age date were recorded.

## **References**

- Farley, M, 1995, 'The Buckinghamshire Chilterns in late prehistory', in R Holgate (ed), *Chiltern Archaeology Recent Work A Handbook for the Next Decade*, Dunstable, 28–30  
NPPF 2012, *National Planning Policy Framework*, Dept Communities and Local Govt, London  
Poore, D, 2000, 'St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, Archaeological Watching Brief report', Oxford Archaeological Unit, Oxford





**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire**

**Archaeological Watching Brief**

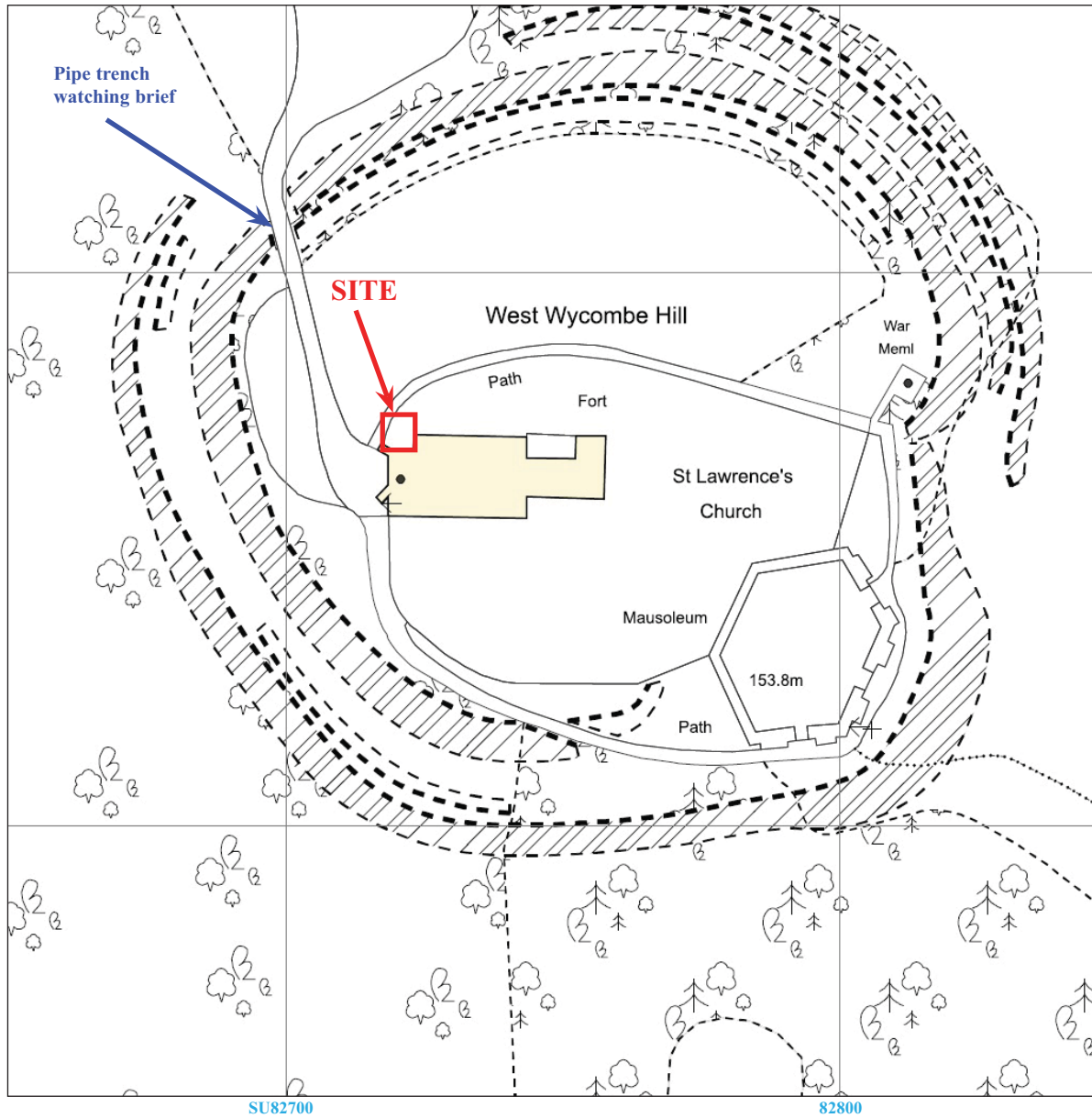
Figure 1. Location of site within West Wycombe and Buckinghamshire.

Reproduced under licence from Ordnance Survey Explorer Digital mapping at 1:12500  
Crown Copyright reserved

THAMES VALLEY  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**  
SERVICES

SLW 16/79





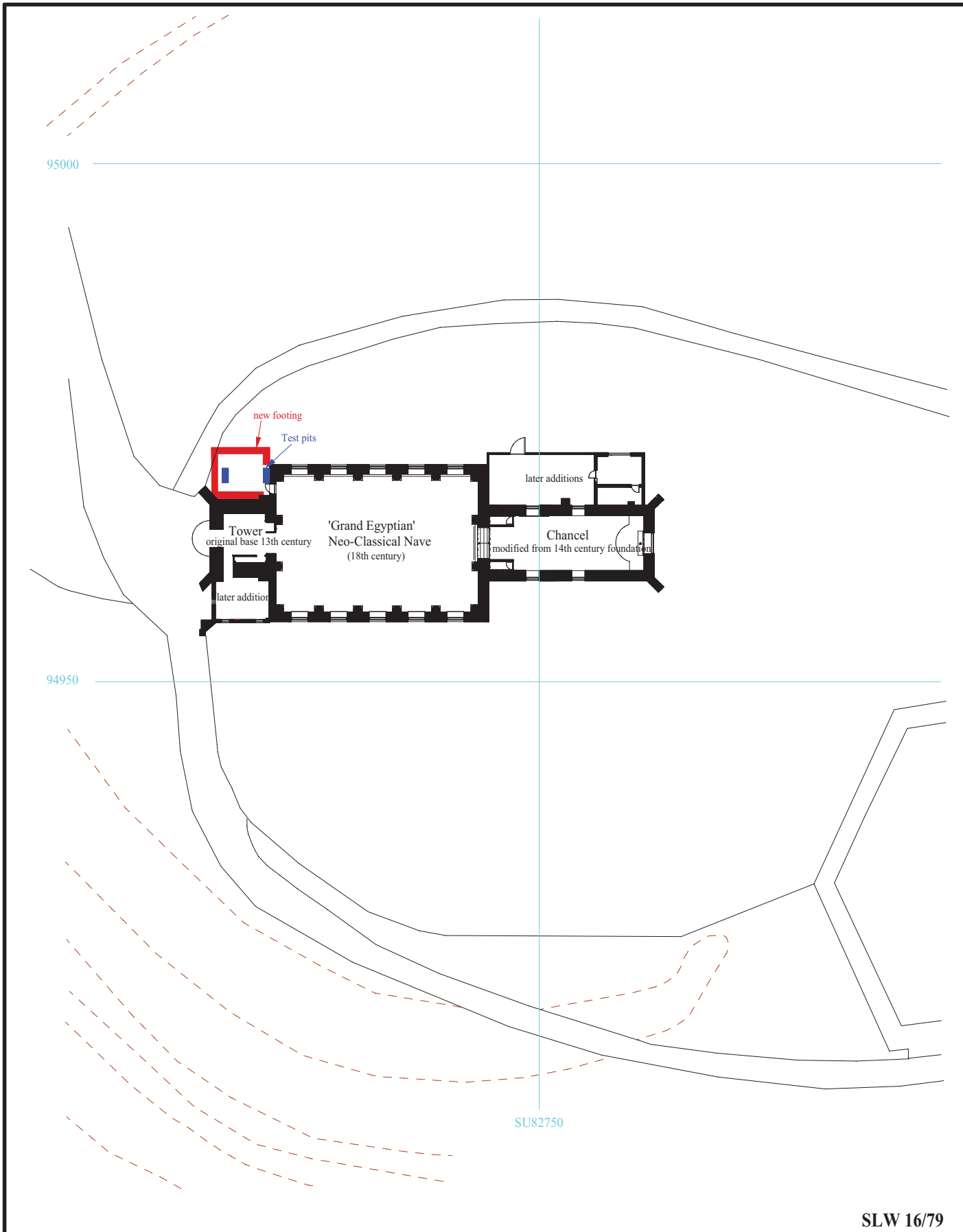
SLW 16/79



**St. Lawrence's Church,  
West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief**  
Figure 2. Detailed location of site.

Reproduced from Ordnance Survey Digital mapping under licence.  
Crown copyright reserved. Scale 1:1250

THAMES VALLEY  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**  
SERVICES



SLW 16/79

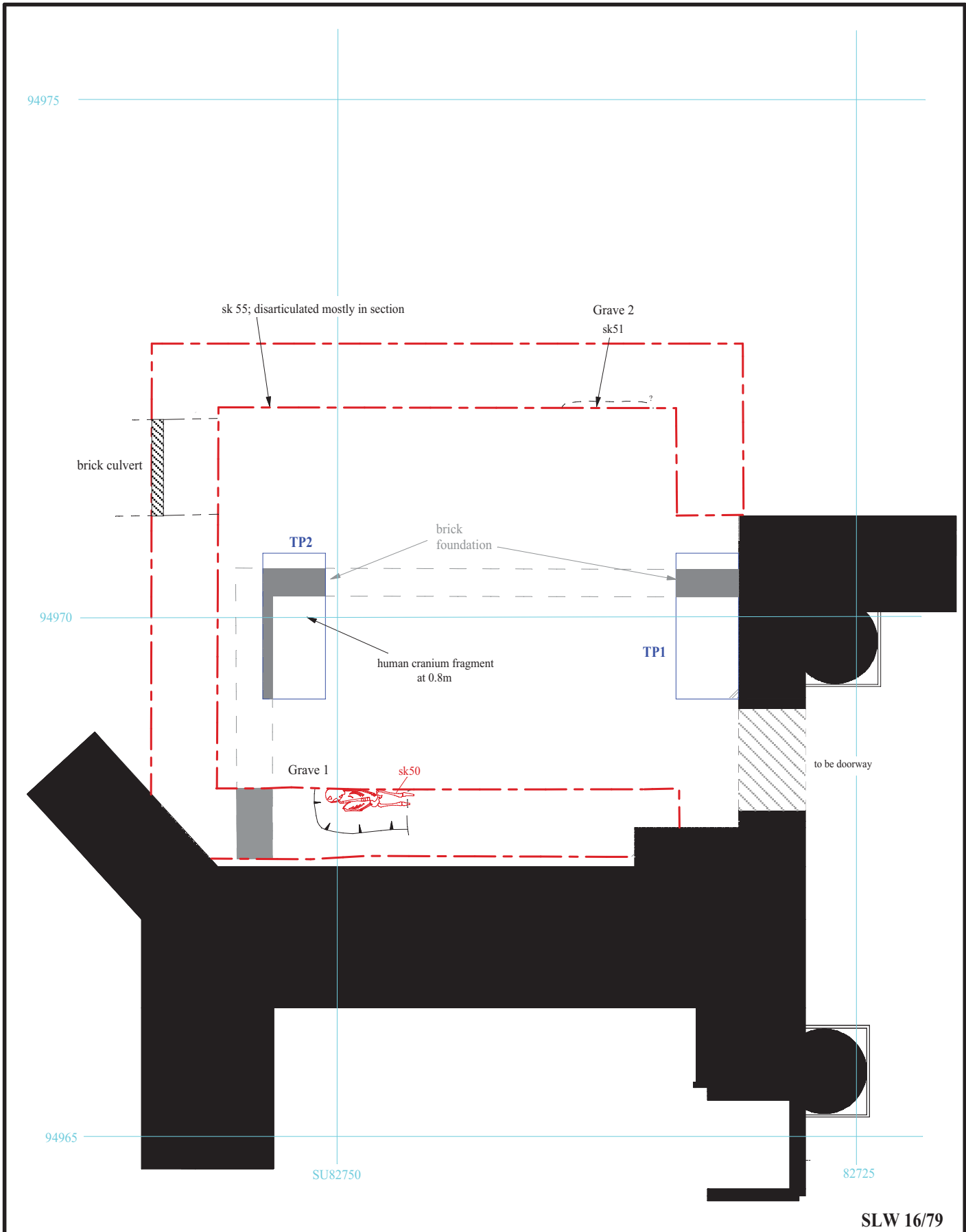


**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief**

Figure 3. Location of observed areas.



THAMES VALLEY  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
SERVICES

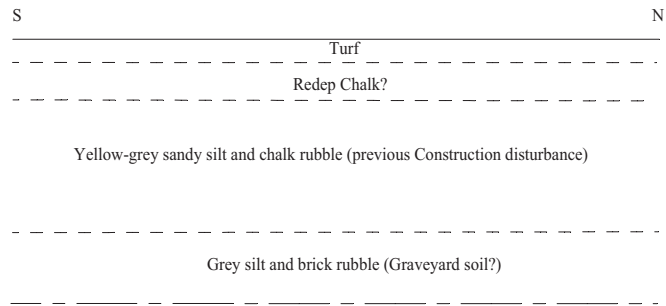


**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief**

Figure 4. Detail of observed footing.



*Test pit 2*



SLW 16/79

**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief**

Figure 5. Representative test pit section.



THAMES VALLEY  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
SERVICES



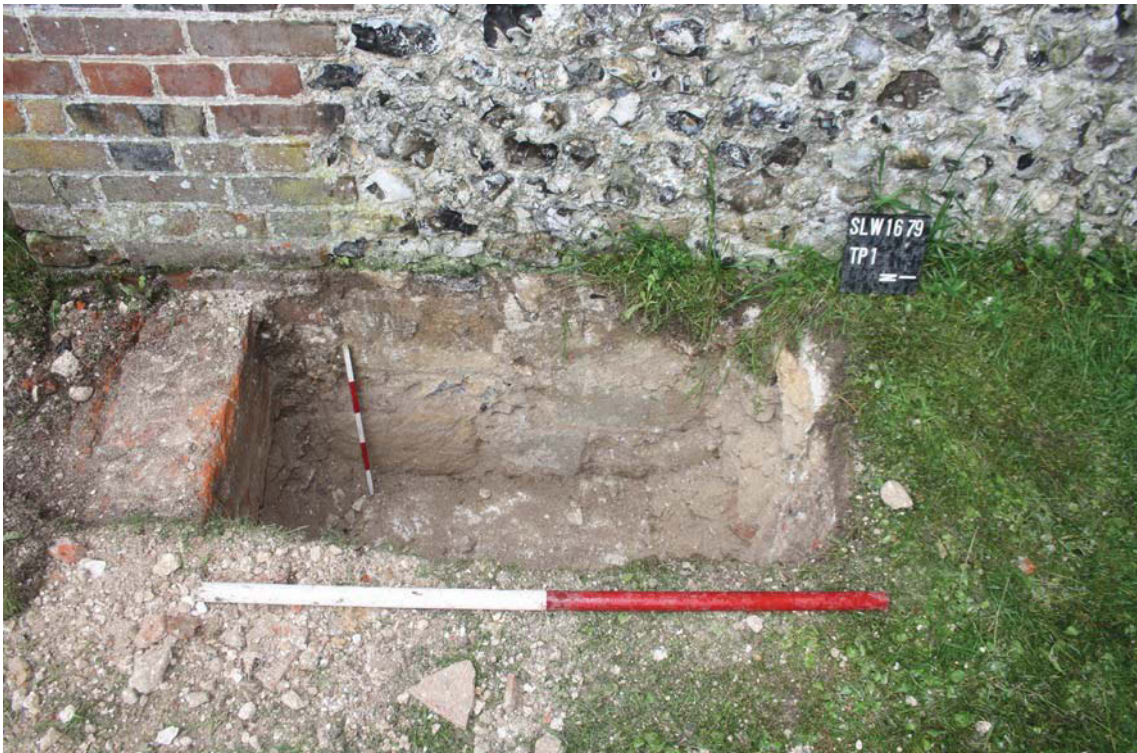


Plate 1. Test pit 1, looking east, Scales: horizontal 1m, vertical 0.5m.



Plate 2. Test pit 2, looking east, Scales: horizontal 1m, vertical 0.5m.

SLW 16/79

**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief  
Plates 1 - 2.**

THAMES VALLEY  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
SERVICES





Plate 3. Footing trench, grave 1, sk 50, looking west, Scales: 0.5m and 0.3m.



Plate 4. New footing, looking south east, Scales: 2m and 1m.

SLW 16/79

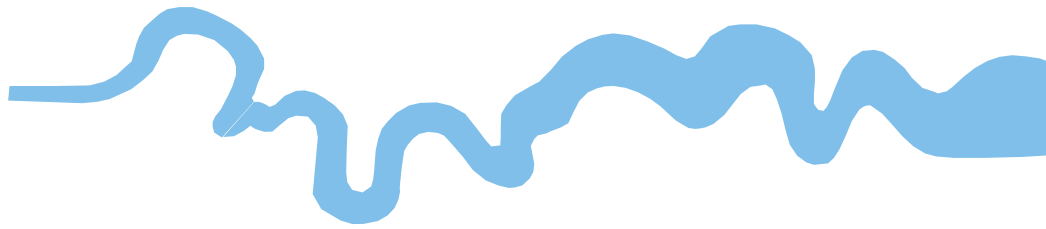
**St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological Watching Brief  
Plates 3 - 4.**

THAMES VALLEY  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
SERVICES

## TIME CHART

	Calendar Years
Modern _____	AD 1901
Victorian _____	AD 1837
Post Medieval _____	AD 1500
Medieval _____	AD 1066
Saxon _____	AD 410
Roman _____	AD 43 AD 0 BC
Iron Age _____	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





**Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd,  
47-49 De Beauvoir Road,  
Reading RG1 5NR**

**Tel: 0118 9260552  
Email: [tvas@tvas.co.uk](mailto:tvas@tvas.co.uk)  
Web: [www.tvas.co.uk](http://www.tvas.co.uk)**

*Offices in:  
Brighton, Taunton, Stoke-on-Trent and Ennis (Ireland)*