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ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

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

Archaeological Watching Brief

by Andy 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 Andrew Mundin

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code SEB14/76b

July 2018

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: 5th – 6th June 2018

Site supervisor: Andrew Muddin

Site code: SEB 14/76

Summary of results: Observations were undertaken on the continuation of the French drain trench against the side of the church; here on the south and east sides of the chancel and east of the sacristy to the north-east corner doorway. Observations of a soakaway and a joining trench linking it to the drain were also made. Human remains, with two disturbed, but distinct fragments from skulls from two different burials were located in graveyard soils. Sparse finds indicated that all of the remains identified were of Post-Medieval (not earlier than 17th century or more likely 18th century) date.

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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An Archaeological Watching Brief

by Andrew Munding

Report 14/76b

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 originally 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, and this second stage was commissioned by Mr Matthew Clements, outgoing churchwarden.

A faculty has been gained from the Archdeaconry of Oxfordshire for updating and improving the drainage of the church on its exterior, with a buried French drain circling the church. Work on this had originally started on the exterior of the choir vestry and sacristy in 2012. Following on with a continuation of the drainage trench in the west; around the porch and tower in 2014, around the south aisle in 2015, another branch of drain is now being dug exterior to the south and east wall of the chancel and the east wall of the sacristy. A new soakaway is also required after the now redundant, previous drainage was broken in 2015. Archaeological monitoring of these works has 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).

This phase of the fieldwork was undertaken by Andrew Munding on 5th and 6th June 2018. The site code is SEB 14/76, and this is the second report regarding the southern drainage. In total, four previous reports have been issued regarding observations made during the excavation of the previous parts of the new drainage and interior works (Crabb and Munding 2012; Munding 2013; Munding and McNicoll-Norbury 2015; Platt and Munding 2015). A summary of the findings, so far, is detailed below.

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), at the junction of Church Street, The Causeway and Church Lane. The church is situated centrally within the historic graveyard,

with mature trees on the walled boundaries to the east and south. 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 with limestone reached at a depth of 1.3m, underneath graveyard soils within the historic churchyard at St Edburg's. 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 Late Saxon Minster (*St Eadburh's*) recorded at the time of the Norman Conquest (Munby *et al.* 1975; VCH 1959). The neighbouring Augustinian Bicester Priory was founded in 1182 (Munby *et al.* 1975; Hinton 1968). The Priory was larger and governed more land than St Edburg's Church and it was acquired from the manor in 13th century, with development of both buildings continuing until the Dissolution.

Several phases of archaeological investigations since the 1960s have identified enough of the Priory structure to recreate its basic layout, and it was recently revisited during redevelopment work, recreating the full plan of the Priory Church, from *in situ*, but fragmentary structural remains (Riccoboni 2012; Čelovský 2014). The 16th-century square dovecote stands on the site of the Priory's original dovecote, south of Old Place Yard, though Bassett Lodge and its boundary walls are thought to be modified parts of the original Priory hospice, sited off the Priory Lane further to the south. The converted stables are also present here.

Other works to the east located an 11th-century boundary of the Minster precinct (Hull and Preston 2003). To the north, a Middle Saxon graveyard was uncovered in the car park of the (modern) Catholic Church on the other side of Church Street (Lewis *et al.* 2014). If these religious sites were linked by this common enclosure, the precinct would have been substantial (Blair 2003). There is clear separation, however, by the River Bure Causeway, of these religious centres, to the west, from the Saxon and later Medieval settlement in the east. The east bank of the River Bure shows 6th-7th century Saxon settlement, most likely the point of origin of the 12th-century planned town of Bicester which developed independently from the Priory (Harding and Andrews 2003; Blair 2003, 139).

Historical development of the church (Fig. 4)

Of St Edburg's Parish Church, both (north and south) east end walls of the nave, indicate the remains of winged transepts of a 12th-century church which followed an aisleless, cruciform shape (Blair 2002, 134). The large,

later, inserted windows in both these walls are Perpendicular-style. The interior columns in the east of the nave strengthened the original central crossing arches in the 13th century to create the support for a central tower (Sherwood and Pevsner 1974, 453). Also during the 13th century, the chancel was rebuilt, and lengthened and the southern aisle was added. The Decorated windows present in the south aisle seem to be 14th century. The north aisle was added in the 14th century, with the north porch slightly later, and the choir vestry and sacristy also on the north side, initially built as a chapel. The western tower is from 1420, and the 15th-century clerestory raised the roof line, and in doing so caused the dismantling of the central tower. The window tracery present on the chancel and the choir vestry are 19th-century replacements in Gothic-style, as part of an extensive restoration of the church by C. N. Beazley and G. E. Street in 1862-3 (VCH 1959).

Previous works during the drainage works

Since 2012, several stages of archaeological monitoring have been carried out during works associated with the modernization of the church's flooring and exterior drainage (Crabb and Munding 2012; Munding 2013; Munding and McNicoll-Norbury 2015; Platt and Munding 2015). Burial or crypt structures have been located throughout these phases of work. Historic burial in the graveyard has mostly been located between 0.8-1.2m deep. The only exception was *in-situ* remains located 0.4m deep against the exterior choir vestry wall (Crabb and Munding 2012). Most burials have been undated, though a handful, with coffin fittings, are 17th- to 19th-century in date. Sparse remains can be attributed to the Medieval period, located north-west of the church (Munding 2013). Two brick crypt-tombs, located incidental to works to the south of the church, were dated with two gravestones taken from their interiors, both from the 1700s (Platt and Munding 2015).

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. Though standing gravestones were generally to be avoided, destabilized stones close to the church walls, behind which the trench had to be excavated, were photographed before excavation, in case they needed to be moved or laid flat for safety reasons. Most of the French drainage channel was hand excavated, with the linking drain to the main soakaway mechanically excavated.

Results

Soakaway and joining trench (Fig. 3)

A location 5.4m south-east of the south-east chancel corner was excavated for a storm-water soakaway. The excavation was 2.4m long by 1.3m wide and 1.55m deep (Pl. 1). It was aligned to the corner of the church on a WNW-ESE axis, with the linking trench joining a new junction at the SE corner chancel buttress (Fig. 3, Pl. 2). This junction was 0.35m deep. The machine excavation of the soakaway was positioned through a 2m wide gap between two gravestones. It was anticipated this would avoid any remains associated with the marked headstones. The pit was dug through the topsoil turf, 0.15m deep and encountered limestone pieces of rubble, some with dressed facing on one or two sides. In the south-west side this was no deeper than 0.3m (264). This rubble was loosely infilled with a light brown sandy silt. The densest layer of rubble was on the north-east face of the excavation, reaching a thickness of 0.45m. None of these remains formed an *in situ* buried structure. Below 0.3m was a homogenous light brown sandy silt with limestone and brick rubble to a depth of 0.6m (265). From 0.6m deep, the highest layer of buried graveyard soil was encountered, which was 0.28m thick to a total depth of 0.88m. This loose, light brown sandy silt with occasional sub-angular limestone fragment inclusions (266) contained disarticulated human bone, with one area of a fragmentary, partial skull. This skull had been previously disturbed and was smashed. No parts of the cranium could be excavated *in situ*. The only diagnostic piece recovered from this location was the mandible, indicating it belonged to a child of 7 years (+/- 24 months), with milk teeth present. The two lower front adult incisor teeth were erupting within the jawline. Though other long bones were recovered from this context, none were associated with the remains of this skull. No grave cut could be defined.

At 0.88m, a secondary layer of grave soil (267) was encountered. This reached a depth of 1.23m where the top of the natural was encountered. The second grave soil layer was a light brown clayey silt with frequent sub-rounded limestone fragments. Human bone was recovered, but again, none of the remains encountered were considered to be *in situ*. A single, discrete area indicated the location of the back part of a skull, though no other

bones than the fragmentary base of the cranium with the mandible and part of the maxilla were identified. From these remains, this appeared to be a 46+ years old male, with missing molars and extensive wear to the incisors. No limb bones were located and no grave cut could be identified. This skull belonged to a mature individual who had died with poor dentition, and a severe abscess on the right side below the jaw line, that in life would have caused considerable inflammation and pain. In total, three large bags of bone were recovered, mostly of cranial fragments, though five portions of long bones, of various size and condition, were also recovered.

The base of excavation was dug 0.28m into the natural Cornbrash geology to reach a final depth of 1.55m. No structural remains were encountered. Finds from the layers were sparse, almost no pottery was encountered throughout the excavation, other than a brown-glazed redware sherd in the first layer of grave soil (266). A single stem of clay tobacco pipe of thick stem but narrow bore was recovered close to the skull fragment, which would be of 17th- or more likely 18th-century date. The only find of Medieval date was a piece of red and yellow patterned floor tile, with patchy of orange-brown glaze, found in the secondary lower layer of grave soil (267). Other sparse fragments of floor tile have been identified in previous works at the church, notably of Medieval date, in interior test pitting and in the exterior works to the south-west and north-west.

French drain and exterior exposed church building foundation (Fig. 4)

The continuation of the French drain excavation was undertaken by hand from the south-west corner of the chancel wall. The trench was dug to a depth of 0.3m and removed the two lines of brick that had previously created a trough from the down pipe. Under this was limestone rubble, concrete and brick within a brown grey clayey silt. No grave soil was encountered at this depth, and no human bone was encountered.

The foundation of the chancel was photographically recorded, to add to the information gained from the other observations from around the church (Fig. 4). The south and east wall of the chancel foundation stonework was in fair state, more so than the 12th-century foundation stonework of the Lady chapel, which had some spalled facing. Missing stones were evident, especially at key points in the upper foundation of the south-east corner buttress (Pl. 2). The east foundation of the sacristy wall was in good condition (Pl. 3), and so was the doorway wall on the north-east corner. Soil from behind several gravestones, in close proximity to the exterior of the church, was reduced to the rear of the stones and stabilized, with a small step of mortar below ground level, to secure them (Pl. 4). Most stones required no disturbance, other than a broken gravestone that had fallen over and was leaning against the exterior wall of the sacristy and needed to be lifted.

Finds

The finds included very fragmented and disarticulated human remains, much of which could not be closely related to single graves. All were retained at the site for re-interment. The two distinct areas of skull fragments were photographed (of which the mandibles were the largest surviving piece), to give an indication of age, but no sexing information was available.

The two sherds of glazed, light green-yellow pottery came from layer 267, and were 14th-century (or later) date and of local production. A piece of bichrome inlaid floor tile was also recovered from deposit 267. It is of a fairly hard, evenly-fired medium-grained sandy fabric with occasional coarse sand inclusions, and a pale red body colour. The white inlaid clay and body are covered with a thin glaze, and the thickness is 16mm. The piece comprises c. 20% of a complete tile, and the partial motif is a small gothic trefoil bub, possibly part of a larger fleur-de-lys. The pattern is deeply inlaid onto the tile, and the motif and fabric suggest a date in the 13th or 14th century. Inlaid tiles of this type were produced in great quantities in the Medieval period in Penn, Buckinghamshire (van Lemmen 2000), and given the location of the site it is possible that this example is a product of that industry. Previous phases of either the parish church or the Priory would have contained similar tiles, as other examples have been found in the Priory excavations (Riccoboni 2012).

The stem of clay tobacco pipe was a wide diameter with a small bore (6mm). Its length was 20mm long and such pieces are late 17th or early 18th century in date.

Conclusion

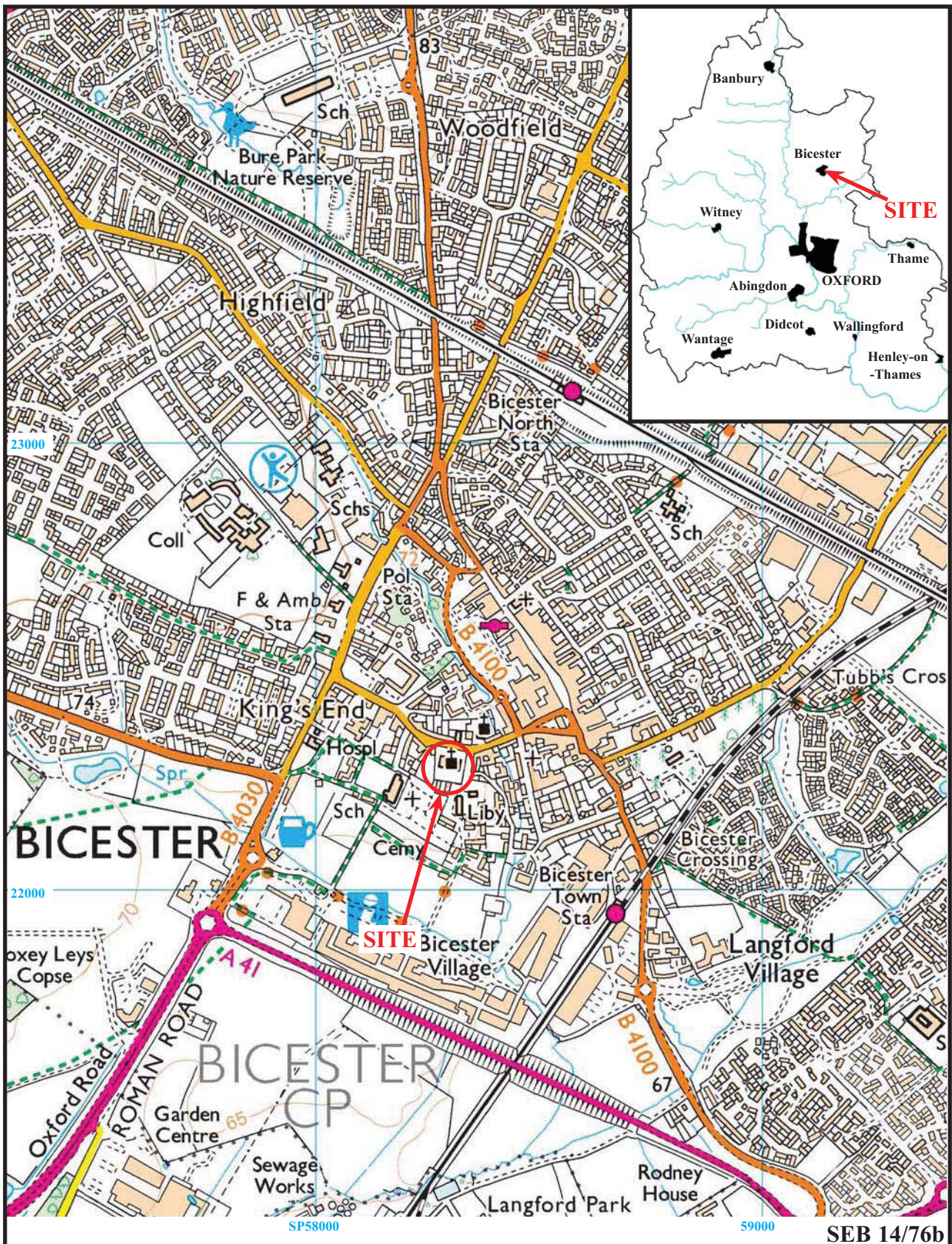
The work, as in the previous years of investigation, unsurprisingly uncovered disarticulated human burials within the historic graveyard. All human bone was retained by the church. The sparse dating evidence within the homogenous graveyard soil places the lowest deposit (267) in the 17th-18th century although there are also medieval finds such as the fragment of tile and two sherds of Medieval pottery, which can only be deemed to be residual.

The investigation of the foundation of the church found a better state of preservation of the chancel and sacristy walls than the 12th-century foundation of the Lady chapel. There were some holes, missing stones, on the SE chancel corner buttress and occasional missing stones out of the top courses of the foundation. In 2015, damp had created the level of spalling seen on the 12th-century wall of the southern transept wall and had caused the stone of the later 15th-century southern aisle buttress to the 13th-century south aisle, to deteriorate to a point it was offering little support at foundation level (Fig. 4). The south aisle foundation was in fair condition,

however. The only other part of the foundation missing stone support, was the north-east corner buttress of the 14th-century north porch, noted in 2014.

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

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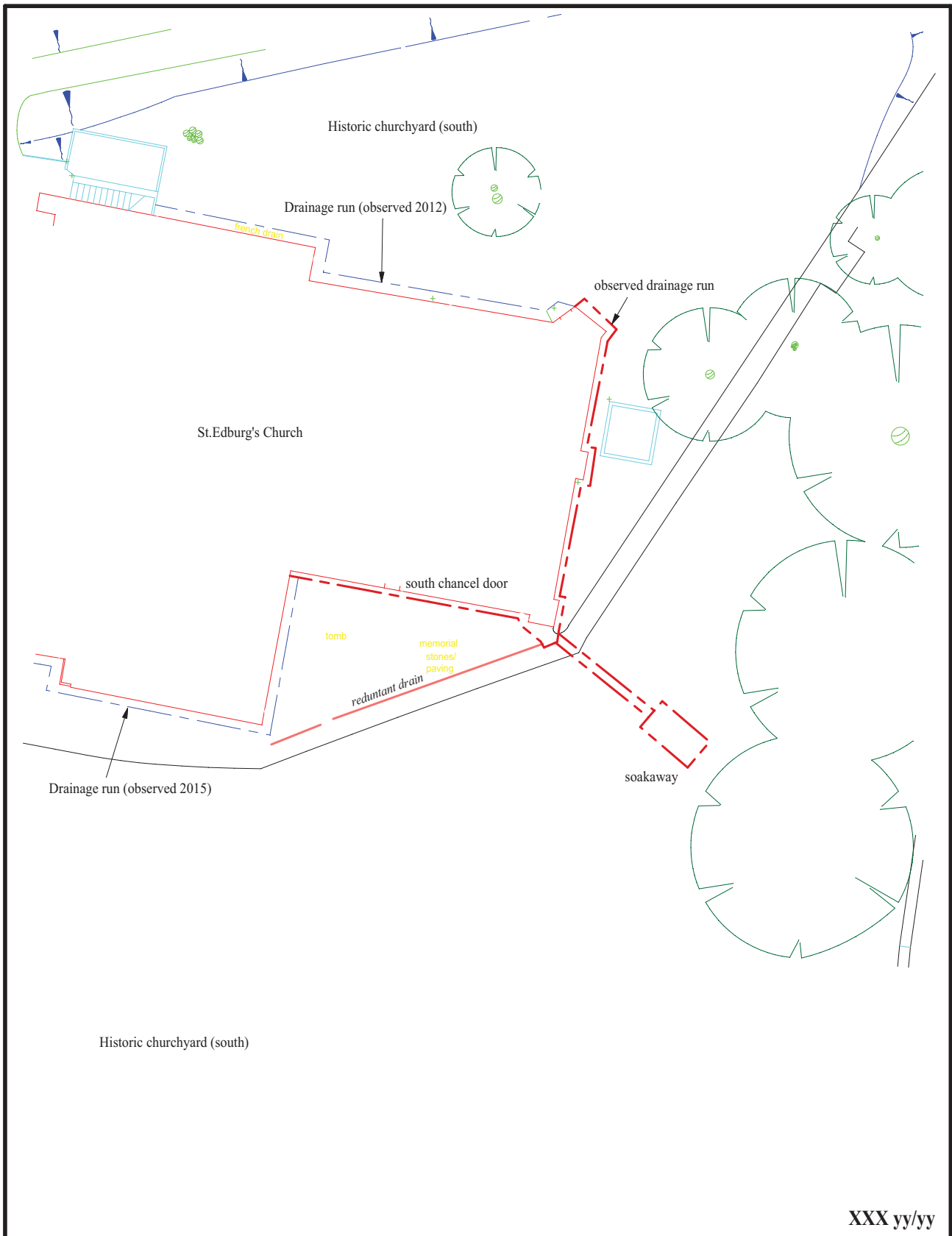


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Figure 2. Detailed location of site off Church Street.

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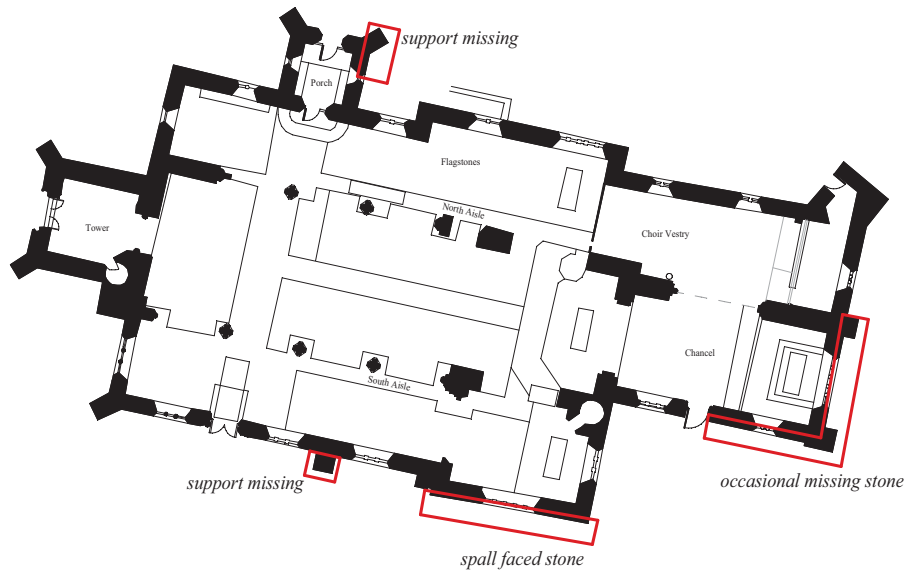
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Figure 3. Location of 2018 observations.



0 25m

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Figure 4. Summary of foundation condition and age.
(phase plan modified from VCH, 1959)





Plate 1. Soakaway section, looking south-west, Scales: horizontal 1m, vertical 1m.



Plate 2. South-east corner buttress foundation of 13th-century chancel, looking west, Scale: 0.3m.

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

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Plate 3. East Sacristy wall foundation, looking west-north-west, Scale: 0.3m.



Plate 4. Gravestone in proximity to east chancel wall, looking west, Scale: 1m.

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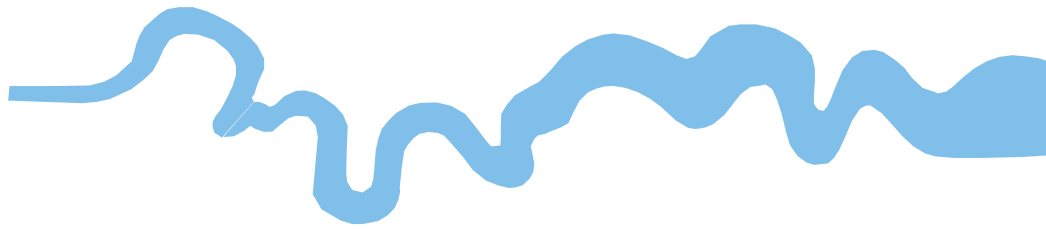
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Plates 3 and 4.

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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 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





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