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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

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

**Church of St. John the Baptist, Church Street, Fifield,  
Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire**

**Archaeological Watching Brief**

**by Andy Mundin**

**Site Code: SFCF21/02**

**(SP 2394 1874)**

**Church of St John the Baptist, Church Street,  
Fifield, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief**

**For the Parochial Church Council**

by Andrew Munding

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code FCF 21/02

**September 2021**

## Summary

**Site name:** Church of St. John the Baptist, Church Street, Fifield, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire

**Grid reference:** SP 2394 1874

**Site activity:** Archaeological Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 1st June to 25th August 2021

**Site supervisors:** Andrew Munding, Pierre-Damien Manisse

**Site code:** FCF 21/02

**Summary of results:** A circuit drain including silt traps was installed adjacent to the base of the church wall. The infilled stonework of a probable doorway was exposed at the south wall of the chancel at foundation level. These remains are likely to predate the rebuilding of this face of the chancel in the late 19th century, but by how much is uncertain. Human burial was represented by fragmentary remains found to the west, north and south sides of the church including three in-situ burials and modest amounts of disarticulated bone. A single sherd of Medieval pottery and some clay pipes were also noted.

**Location and reference of archive:** The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service or Archaeology Data Service in due course. Human remains were retained for reburial at the church.

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# **Church of St. John the Baptist, Church Street, Fifield, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by Andrew Munding

**Report 21/02**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief at the Church of St. John the Baptist, Church Street, Fifield, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire OX7 6HF (SP 2394 1874) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Henry Sanders, of Hestia Architects Ltd, 12 Poplar Road, Oxford, OX2 9LB, working on behalf of the Parochial Church Council.

A Faculty (2020-057284) has been granted by the Office of the Archdeacon of Oxford for a new circuit drain around the church. An archaeological watching brief has been requested to satisfy conditions implemented by the Diocese Advisory Committee (DAC), to take place during these groundworks. The church is Grade II\* Listed (1283580) and dates from the 13th century.

The work was carried out to a specification (WSI) agreed by the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser.. The fieldwork was undertaken by Andrew Munding and Pierre-Damien Manisse between 1st June and 25th August 2021. The site code is FCF 21/02. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service or Archaeology Data Service in due course.

## **Location, topography and geology**

Fifield lies close to the border of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire between the Cotswolds market towns of Burford and Stow-on-the-Wold (Fig. 1). The church stands north of Church Street, central to the village (Fig. 2). The churchyard, gradually slopes west to east with the soil level higher than the internal church floor in the west. The existing brick-lined gully surrounding the church is slightly sunken in relation to the raised churchyard soils. The underlying geology is Salperton Limestone Formation (BGS 1998), It lies at a height of c.162m above Ordnance Datum (OD).

## **Archaeological background**

The village has late Saxon origins. The manor of '*Fifhide*', (an Old English place name meaning 'five hides') was recorded in Domesday Book of 1086 (William and Martin 2002, 433). The earliest record of a parish church is that of a chapelry of Swinbrook in a deed dated to 1220.

The Church of St. John the Baptist (Grade II\*; 1283850) is based on a two-cell Medieval structure, though rebuilt and modified through history, including the later addition of a north vestry (Fig. 3). An unusual octagonal west tower is said to be Medieval (Brooks and Sherwood 2017), though elsewhere is said to have contained a date stone 'I.B 1699' (Parker 1846). Octagonal towers are also featured in medieval churches at, for example, Cogges and Standlake (Brooks and Sherwood 2017). The core of the church has changed at least twice in the 19th century, including expansion of both sides of the nave and the forementioned addition of a vestry in the north. The chancel has also been rebuilt at least twice since its probable Norman origins, the last dated to 1897 (Brooks and Sherwood 2017).

A Grade II Listed chest tomb lies east of the church dated to the 1790s, dedicated to John Piercy, with five other similar dated stones under the east window of the chancel. There is another grouping of contemporary stones in two rows, south of the chancel. A second Listed 18th century chest tomb lies to the west (Fig. 3).

In general, this area of the Cotswolds is particularly known for its group of Neolithic burial monuments (Darvill 2010). Idbury Camp (SAM1014558) 1.3km to the north-west of the village is an Early Iron Age univallate enclosure (Copeland 2002).

## **Objectives and methodology**

The aims of the project were to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the works. This involved monitoring of all areas affected during the excavation of the new circuit drainage trench and any links required to an existing soakaway. If human remains were present in these locations, these were to be recorded and protected, either by lifting fragmentary remains under immediate threat of destruction or by preservation of *in situ* remains at depth through adjustments made to the continuation of excavation in order to avoid further disturbance where intact burials were presumed. Any structures exposed by groundworks, including elements of the church's foundation, were also to be recorded and a note on their condition made.

## Results

Excavation was undertaken by hand, the trench being dug through turf and topsoil, through underlying grave yard soil from between 0.33m and 0.83m deep. Soil heaps were observed for human bone and other artefacts. The discovery of any human remains was first assessed by the archaeologist, before careful lifting if deemed under threat from these works. Larger remains were retained in-situ where possible or placed as close as possible to the point they were discovered. A list of assigned contexts can be found in Appendix 1.

### *South church circuit*

The trench to the south of the church was aligned east-west, and was 0.75m deep at its deepest. Generally, the trench was 0.55m wide, the same width as the existing brick at the base of the wall. The grey bricks removed from this gully measured 225mm x 110mm x 80mm. The brick layer was 0.13m thick, overlying the brown grey silt topsoil (50). This soil, particularly adjacent to the south chancel wall, was excavated to 0.33m, with no natural geology uncovered at its base. No finds of note were encountered.

The deposit exposed at the base was a brown sandy silt with frequent limestone (51). The lower course of a former doorway was exposed at the base of the south elevation (Pls 1-2). This comprised two stone jambs, each 0.32m wide and 0.28m wide, with the left comprising two blocks and the right a single block. The inner edge of each has a chamfer with a straight stop at the base. Between the jambs is a stone with a chamfer, 0.77m wide and 0.15m thick, forming a step. The main body of the wall is a later phase of construction which has removed the former doorway above its lowest course. Above the step, the doorway between the jambs is infilled with a single course of stone in a loose calcareous mortar, which may represent a separate phase of stonework.

A concrete plinth was observed in section at the base of the nave south wall (Pl. 3). The plinth was recorded covering the foundation on the preceding faces of the nave and the south porch, and was 0.2m thick. Documentary evidence suggested the nave had been widened both to the north and south, with the most recent major phase in the later 19th century, and it appears the plinth belongs to this latest phase.

Fragmentary human bone was recovered from excavations adjacent to the west and east of the nave wall, which represents disarticulated pieces within the graveyard soil. Three short clay tobacco pipe stems (not closely datable but broadly indicative of post-medieval disturbance) were recovered from the base of the trench, at 0.35m deep along the course of the trench adjacent to the south nave.

From the excavation west of the south porch, there was a layer of limestone rubble (54) below the topsoil (50) from depth of 0.33m deep. It was interpreted as a past demolition dump layer, which has raised the level of

the graveyard in the west. It was typically 0.15m deep and was observed throughout the trench in the western sections, adjacent to the south-west nave tower, north-west nave and vestry.

Adjacent to the tower, the trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.75m. At foundation level, four foundation stone courses lay under the south-west corner of the nave. These were roughly-hewn rectangular limestone blocks. A fifth course of foundations was on a slightly different alignment to the wall and foundations (Pl. 5). The trench was widened in this location for a silt trap, measuring 0.38m by 0.22m and excavated to a depth of 0.82 deep. At 0.65m deep, human bone comprising a fragmentary skull (sk59) of a probably elderly individual was discovered. It was not found to be associated with further *in situ* remains. Underlying this was an intact skull (sk57). This was exposed and recorded, and appeared to be part of an *in situ* grave 4, and was not lifted. It is likely to represent a female adult, with more of the remains extending beyond the limits of the trench to the east at 0.83m deep.

To the south of the tower, the stratigraphy was recorded as topsoil (50), 0.15m thick, overlying limestone rubble to 0.3m deep (54). This overlay graveyard deposit 51 which contained a modest quantity of fragmentary loose human bone at a depth of between 0.4m and 0.7m. Further human bone in this area represented likely *in situ* burials (Fig. 3). Remains recorded as sk53 (in grave cut 2) comprised lumbar vertebrae and ribs and some smaller fragments, and were encountered to the south of the tower. This grave appears to have been truncated by a pit (1) infilled with a charnel deposit. The charnel pit was recorded in section, and measured 0.6m wide and 0.38m deep. It was infilled with brown clay silt with moderate fragments of limestone (52), and contained four rib bones and lower forearm bones. These are likely to represent remains moved from elsewhere and redeposited in the pit and their date is uncertain.

To the south-west of the tower, two human long bones were encountered in section at a depth of 0.4m-0.5m, within light brown grey graveyard soil (61) below the limestone rubble deposit, and are thought to be disarticulated remains.

### *North church circuit*

Excavation of the drain circuit to the north of the church exposed the base of the north-west corner foundation and northern portions of the nave, vestry and the north chancel (where an existing ceramic drain was observed).

To the north-east of the vestry, an area was excavated for a silt trap. Here, the remains of probable *in situ* grave (grave 3, sk55; Pl. 4) were recorded at a depth of 0.75m, though heavily truncated from above. This was observed in the east face of the section, with the top of the grave found at 0.48m deep (Pl.6), with an infilling

deposit of a dark brown clayey silt (56). Further remains from this grave were likely to exist east of this location and no further disturbance was necessary. A single sherd of pottery (see below) was recovered from the base of excavation close to this grave and within the grave yard soil (61).

## **Finds**

### *Pottery by Sue Anderson*

A single sherd (22g) of pottery was collected from the excavation, in a new silt trap pit that was part of the new pipe trench, located north-east of the vestry. The sherd is a rim fragment from a jar of limestone-tempered Wychwood-type ware (NW Oxfordshire Ware; Mellor 1994). It is slightly abraded and shows traces of sooting on the rim edge. The extrapolated rim diameter is 150mm, and is 7% complete. It is similar to an example published by Mellor (1994, fig. 45, no. 3), and may be of 13th-century date.

### *Human bone*

Most of the fragmentary human bones identified, were disarticulated and not associated. One intact and in situ buried deposit was lifted due to its impending probable destruction during works and collected for the church to rebury. Remains found in a pit (1) were redeposited as a charnel deposit. The majority of the remains encountered at 0.7m deep in the base of the trench were left *in situ*. Other than fragmentary skull pieces (recorded separately as sk55 and sk57, sk59 in graves 3 and 4), the rest of the associated remains lay east of the excavated areas. Another deposit, south of the tower, included three lumbar vertebrae, fragmentary ribs and the upper portion of the right pelvic bone (sk53, in grave 2). This was fragmentary but was in any case left *in situ*.

### *Clay tobacco pipe and other finds*

Three short fragments of clay pipe stems (less than 20mm long) were recovered during the southern circuit trench in subsoil (51). None were particularly diagnostic beyond being generally of late 18th-19th century date. Two small copper alloy studs, likely to represent coffin furniture from a Late post-Medieval grave were identified in the back fill of grave 4 (58).



## Conclusion

The watching brief was carried out throughout the hand excavation of the drainage trenches and silt trap areas. Structural remains of a former doorway (the lower part of the jambs, and a step at the base) were identified at foundation level on the south chancel wall. Its location suggests it is the remains of a priest's doorway (typically on the south side of the chancel), and although it cannot be closely dated, it predates the last remodelling of the chancel in the late 19th century.

The excavation of the drain trench revealed human remains from a range of deposits. This included *in situ* remains in grave cuts (recorded but not lifted), and disarticulated remains within grave earth and a charnel pit.

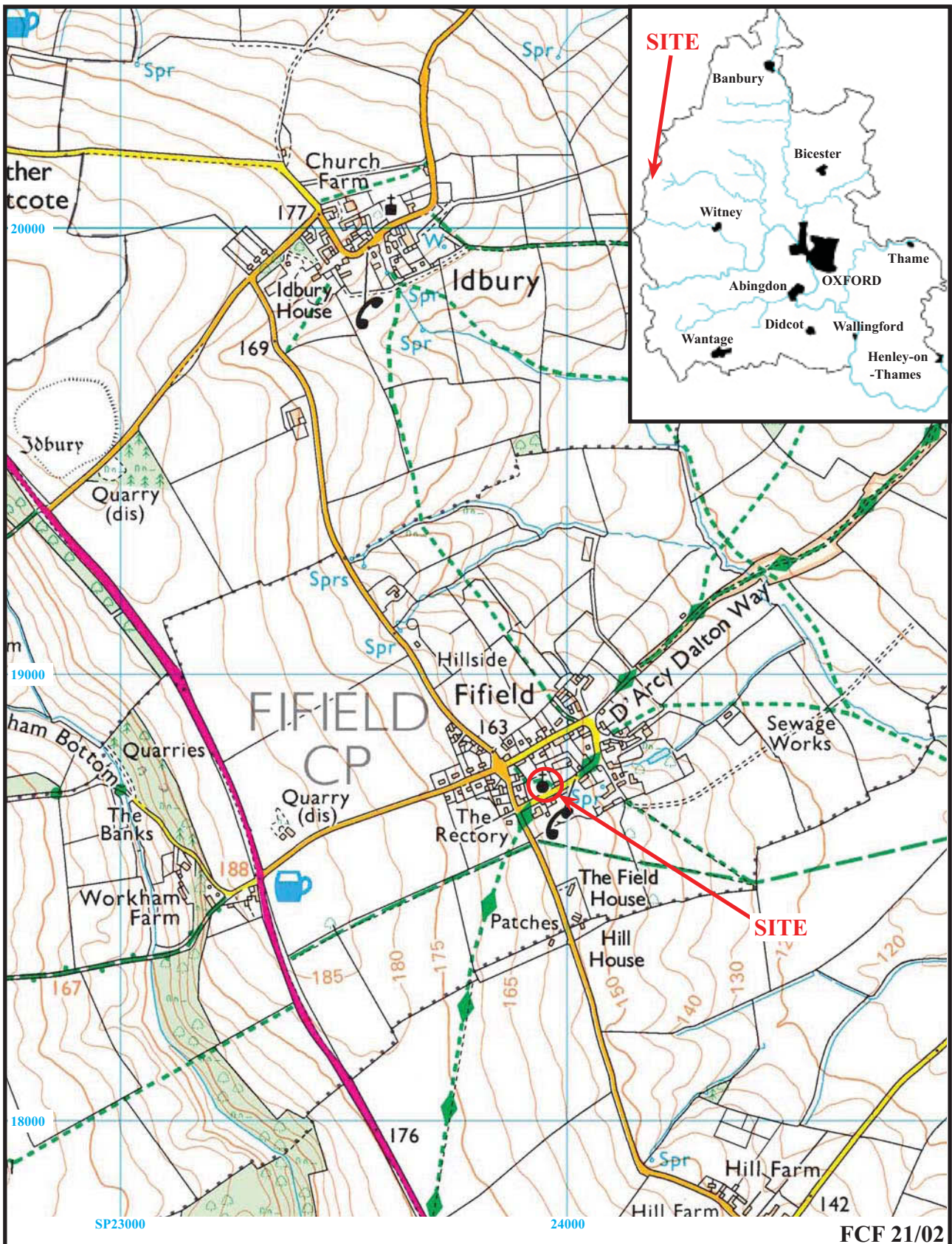
The burials may represent two possible phases, tentatively based on associated finds. Copper alloy studs from Grave 4 found in the south circuit indicate this was of late post-Medieval date, with fragments of clay pipe recovered nearby, from the base of trench adjacent to the south nave. One sherd of medieval pottery represents the earliest datable material, encountered adjacent to the 19th century vestry, but the deposit cannot be confidently dated on the basis of this fragment which is almost certainly residual. It was associated with a grave, though disturbance of this grave, particularly where there were obvious changes at foundation level to the tower and west end nave in the 19th century, seems highly probable.

## References

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**APPENDIX 1: List of contexts**

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Max depth (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
	50	Topsoil	0.15	Churchyard turf and topsoil
	51	Modern levelling	0.4-0.75	Modern graveyard accumulation
1	52	Fill	0.55	Backfill of charnel pit, with human bone disturbed from elsewhere.
2	53	Grave backfill	0.7	Fragmentary grave truncated from above, contains partial remains vertebrae and ribs.
	55	Skeletal remains		
	54	Demolition rubble	0.15-0.33	Limestone rubble layer, dump after construction in 19th century.
3	56	Fill	0.72	Backfill of grave, partially exposed to recover and record the location of in situ skull fragments.
	57	Skeletal remains	0.7+	Skull of a in situ burial
4	58	Fill	0.83	Backfill of a grave, partially exposed to recover the complete skull
	59	Skeletal remains	0.8+	Skull and two vertebrae of in situ burial
	60	Fragmentary skull	0.55	Above sk59, possibly associated
	61	Churchyard deposit	From 0.52-0.82+	Soil containing human bone, and lower deposit of works, cut by graves

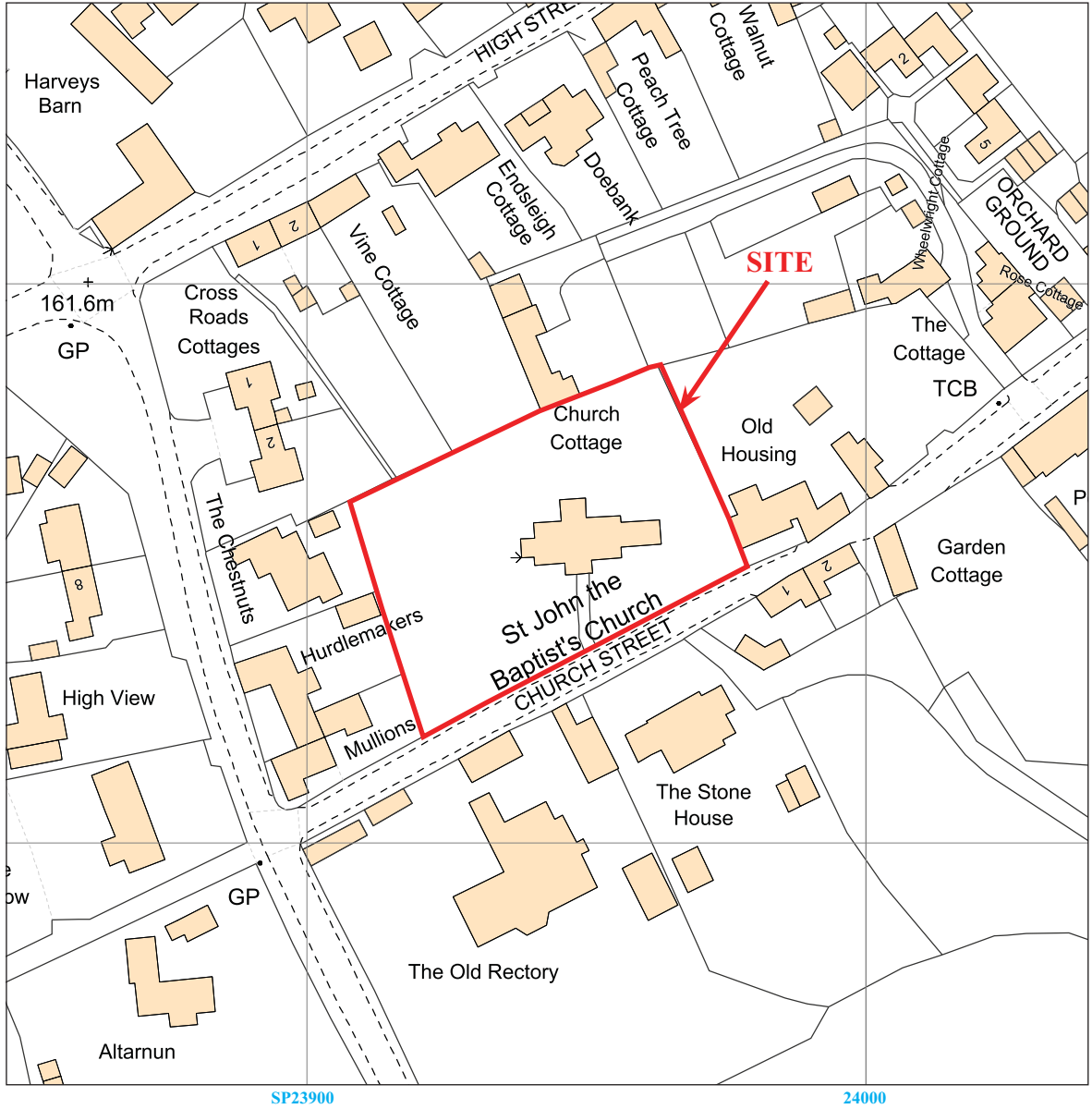


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Figure 1. Location of site within Fifeild and Oxfordshire.

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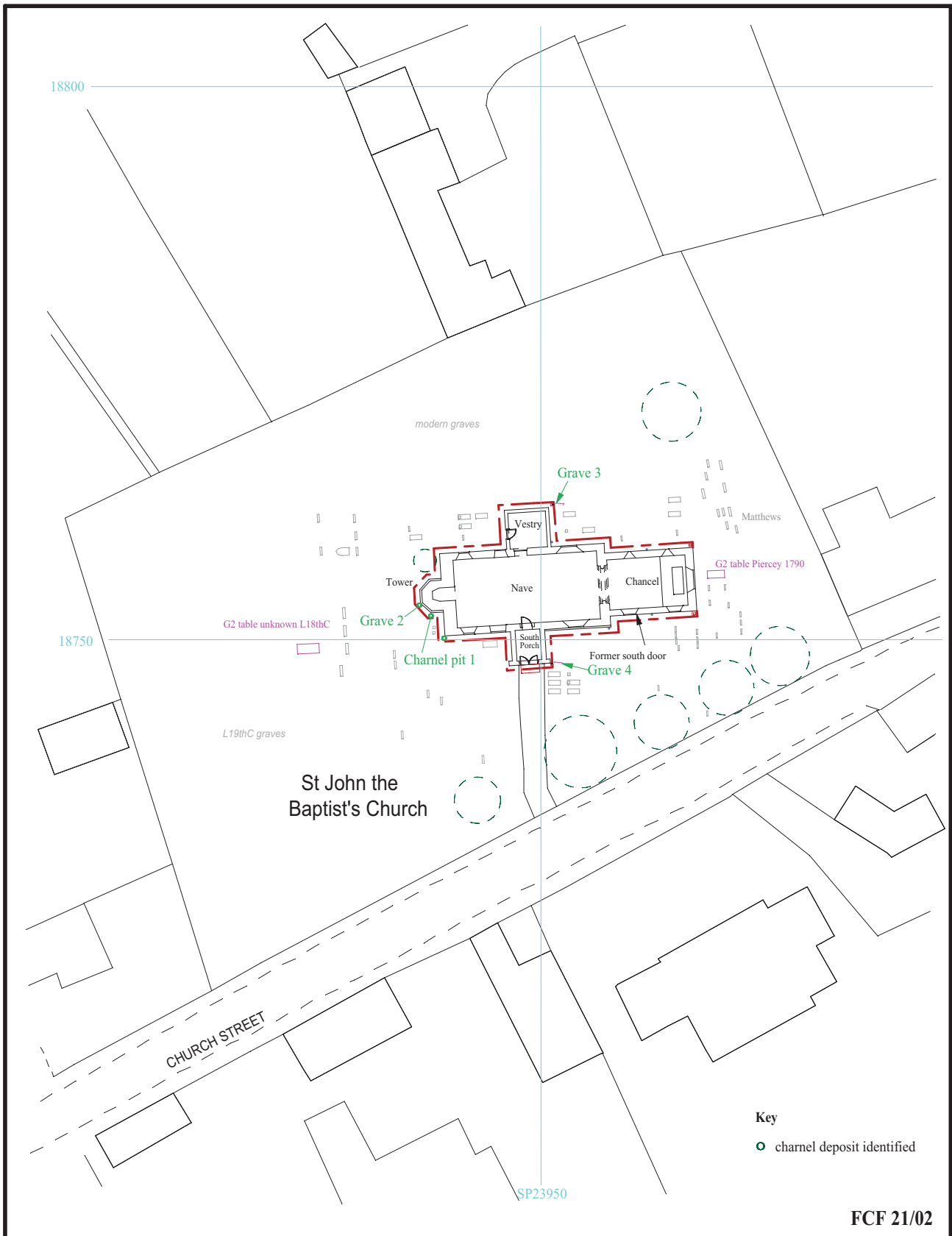


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Figure 2. Detailed location of site off Church Street.

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Figure 2. Location of drainage trench, remains and grave markers.





Plate 1. South circuit drain, Reconstructed wall above older foundation of chancel, looking North, Scales: horizontal 2m, vertical 0.3m.



Plate 2. South circuit drain, Detail of former doorway, looking North, Scales: horizontal 1m, vertical 0.3m.

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Archaeological Watching Brief  
Plates 1 and 2.**

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Plate 3. South circuit trench, Exposed foundation, south porch, looking west,  
Scales: horizontal 0.3m, vertical 1m.



Plate 4. Fragmentary articulated remains (sk55) from truncated grave 3, looking south, Scales: 0.5m

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**Church of St John the Baptist, Church Street,  
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Archaeological Watching Brief  
Plates 3 and 4.**

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Plate 5. South circuit drain, South west corner nave foundation, looking West,  
Scales: horizontal 1m, vertical 1m.



Plate 6. North circuit drain, fragmentary skull of *in situ* burial (3),  
Scales: vertical 0.3m, horizontal 0.1m,

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Plates 5 and 6.**

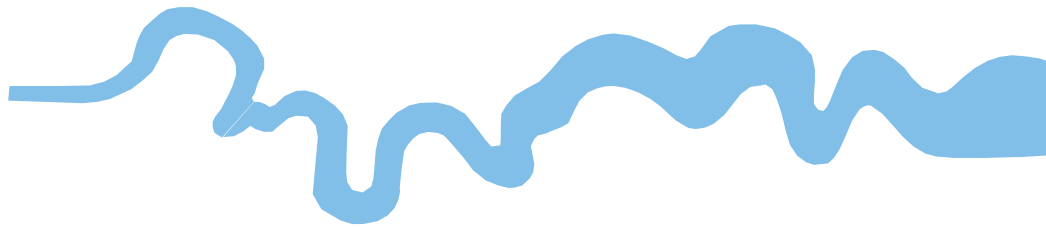
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## TIME CHART

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