

## Archaeological Observation

**St Laurence's Church  
Church Stretton  
Shropshire**

NGR: SO 4524 9367

# **BORDER ARCHAEOLOGY**

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# 1. Non Technical Summary

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The programme of archaeological observation undertaken by Border Archaeology within the medieval parish church of St Lawrence, Church Stretton, revealed significant concentrations of disarticulated human skeletal remains. These remains were largely located within the Chancel, at a depth of between 0.20-0.50m below the existing ground level, although another concentration of human remains was identified next to the N wall of the North Transept.

These concentrations of disarticulated human remains could well indicate the position of former graves located within the Chancel and North Transept, which appear to have been largely removed during the extensive Victorian restoration of the church undertaken in the late 1860s.

Of especial significance was the unexpected discovery of a substantial brick barrel vaulted structure, located in the centre of the Chancel, probably of 18<sup>th</sup> century date, which had been heavily disturbed and backfilled during the restoration of 1867-8. This structure may be tentatively identified as the Wilding family vault recorded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is clear, from the quantity of human remains found, particularly in the Chancel, that by no means all of the human remains disturbed during the Victorian restoration of the church were re-interred in the churchyard in accordance with the proposals made by the architect; indeed the shallow depth (only 0.20-0.40m below existing ground level) and heavily disarticulated nature of the remains suggest a somewhat hasty reburial.

## 2. Introduction

Border Archaeology was instructed by Mr K. Sampson, BKS Architects, acting on behalf of Church Stretton PCC, to carry out archaeological observation of groundworks relating to the reduction of floor levels within the Nave, Chancel and Transepts of the parish church of St Lawrence, Church Stretton, prior to the installation of a new floor.

Copies of this report will be submitted to the client, the Hereford Diocesan Advisor and the Shropshire County Council Sites & Monuments Record (SMR).



Fig 1: Site Location Plan

### 2.1 Soils & Geology

The majority of the town lies within an area of stagnogleyic argillic brown earths of the SALWICK series (572m), consisting of deep reddish fine loamy soils and some deep well-drained coarse loamy soils overlying reddish till and glacio-fluvial drift. The western area of the town comprises typical brown podzolic soils of the WITHNELL 2 series (611e), consisting of well-drained loamy soils, sometimes reddish and shallow locally, over pre-Cambrian sandstone, siltstone and conglomerate (SSEW, 1983).

### 3. Brief Historical and Archaeological Background

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The parish church of St Lawrence at Church Stretton, a Grade I Listed building (SMR Record No. 10770) chiefly dates from the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, with extensive alterations in the late 1860s, when the church was extensively restored. The earliest fabric consists of the Nave (dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century), while the Chancel, crossing and transepts were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The central tower was raised by the addition of an upper storey in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and further minor alterations were made in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The church underwent a substantial restoration and reordering in 1867-68 (under the supervision of a local architect, Samuel Pountney-Smith of Shrewsbury), which involved the addition of aisles to the North and South Transepts, the removal of the original flooring over the whole area of the church, the laying of new encaustic tiled floors in the Nave, Chancel and Transepts and the installation of new pews in the Nave and Transepts and choir stalls at the W end of the Chancel. According to the architect's proposals, the ground level of the interior was to be reduced by a depth of 18 inches and any burials encountered were to be reinterred and graves and vaults stopped down with earth (Grounds, 2002, 195-202).

Although many funerary monuments predating the mid-Victorian restoration of the church have either disappeared or moved from their original locations, earlier antiquarian accounts by Hardwick and Williams record the presence of several graves within the Chancel and Transepts, including a large burial vault in the Chancel belonging to the Wilding family (Grounds, 2002, 156).



Plate 1: Watercolour view of St Lawrence's parish church in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century prior to the restoration in the late 1860s

(Reproduced by courtesy of Shropshire Archives)

## 4. Methodology

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Fieldwork was carried out in accordance with archaeological practices set out in Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief (IfA 1994, revised 2001). Border Archaeology adheres to the IfA Code of conduct and Code of approved practice for the regulation of contractual arrangements in field archaeology.

The fieldwork comprised the archaeological observation of ground reduction works within the Nave, Chancel and Transepts of the church, initially reduced to a depth of 0.40m below existing ground level; however this was subsequently modified to an approximate depth of 0.20m. All materials were removed by hand or by machine and toothless bucket.

Written and graphic records were made using pro forma record forms and sheets, in accordance with archaeological practices set out by the IfA (1994, revised 2001). Any identified archaeological deposits, features and structures were recorded in plan and section/elevation at scales of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50. A photographic record was made using a 10.3 MPX digital camera.

A temporary benchmark with a value of 196.67m AOD was established on the site.

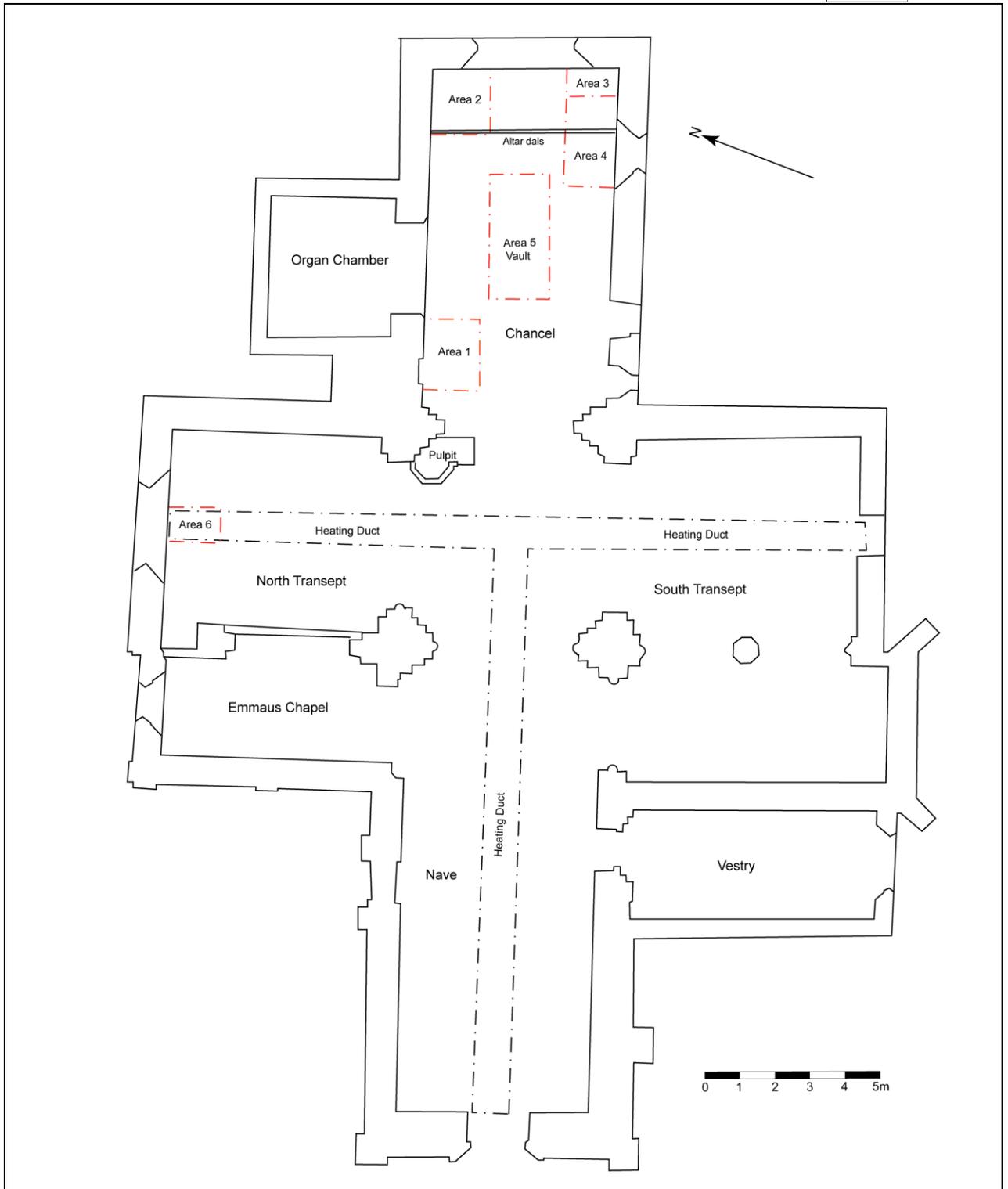


Fig. 2: Plan (Scale 1:100) showing location of concentrations of disarticulated human remains identified during ground reduction works within the church of St Lawrence, Church Stretton

## 5. Results

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### 5.1 Phase 1: Chancel

The first phase of groundworks, undertaken on 26th-27th January 2010, comprised the reduction of ground levels within the Chancel, initially to an approximate depth of 0.30-0.40m below the existing ground level, which was subsequently modified to a depth of 0.20m. Significant concentrations of disarticulated human remains were identified in five specific areas within the Chancel (Areas 1-5), one of which (Area 5) comprised the remains of a substantial brick vault of post-medieval date.

#### 5.1.1 Area 1

The first area of the Chancel to be reduced, measuring 2m (E-W) × 1.5 m (N-S) × 0.30m was located immediately S of the N wall of the Chancel adjacent to the Pulpit, previously occupied by choir stalls. A total of three contexts were identified within this area, the uppermost consisting of (101), a strongly indurated concrete slab sub-floor surface, measuring 0.05m thick. Underlying this was a layer of greyish mortar (102), about 0.02m thick, with frequent inclusions of gravel, which in turn overlaid a friable light greyish brown gravelly silt (103), approximately 0.20m thick, with frequent mortar inclusions, small to large sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and encaustic tile and brick fragments. Contained within this deposit was a moderate scatter of disarticulated human skeletal remains, which included one partially complete skull and 15 smaller skull fragments.



Plate 2: View looking N showing reduction of floor level in area of former choir stalls, adjacent to the N wall of the Chancel

### 5.1.2 Area 2: NE Corner of Chancel

This area, measuring 2m (E-W) × 2m (N-S) × 0.40m (max depth) was located in the extreme NE corner of the Chancel. A total of five contexts were identified within this area, the uppermost consisting of (101), a strongly indurated concrete slab sub-floor surface, measuring 0.05m thick. Underlying this was a layer of greyish mortar (102), 0.02m thick, which in turn overlaid a friable light greyish brown gravelly silt deposit (103) with frequent mortar inclusions, small to large sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments, approximately 0.10m thick. Underlying (103) was a firmly compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit (104), 0.20-0.25m in thickness, with frequent mortar inclusions and small to large angular and sub angular stones as well as a quantity of CBM including a single large fragment of yellowish brown salt glazed floor tile which appeared to be late medieval in date.

At the W end of Area 2, immediately underlying the mortar sub-base for the concrete floor surface, a low brick wall (105) was identified, consisting of two courses of unfrosted red bricks (105) bonded with a coarse greyish white mortar, extending N-S across the Chancel, which appeared to represent a raised dais upon which the altar was situated. Also contained within this deposit were a significant quantity of disarticulated human skeletal remains, consisting of two partially complete skulls and numerous other fragments, including a partially intact pelvis and several tibia and femur fragments. No evidence of a grave cut was identified; however the grouping of the remains suggested deliberate deposition rather than a random scatter.



Plate 3: View looking E showing disarticulated human remains as found in the NE corner of the Chancel following reduction of ground levels.

### 5.1.3 Area 3: SE corner of Chancel

This area, consisting of a trench oriented N-S and measuring 1.5m (N-S) × 0.8m (E-W) × 0.40m (max depth) was located in the extreme SE corner of the Chancel. A total of four contexts were identified in this area, identical to those encountered in Area 2, consisting of (101), a strongly indurated concrete slab sub-floor surface, measuring 0.05m thick. Underlying this was a layer of greyish mortar (102), about 0.02m thick, with frequent inclusions of gravel, which in turn overlaid a friable light greyish brown gravelly silt deposit (103) with frequent mortar inclusions, small to large sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments, extending to an average depth of 0.10m.

Underlying (103) was a firmly compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit (104) with frequent mortar inclusions, fragments of tile and small to large sub angular stones, extending to a depth of 0.25m, together with a concentration of disarticulated human skeletal remains, including several pelvis and rib fragments and an intact tibia and fibia. The remains of what appeared to be a partially disarticulated skeleton were revealed in the N facing section of the trench at a depth of 0.35m, however no discernable grave cut was identified.



Plate 4: View looking S showing partially disarticulated skeletal remains identified in section extending beneath S wall of Chancel

5.1.4 Area 4: S side of Chancel



Plate 5: View looking E showing dais wall (105) overlying gravel make-up deposit (103) and sandy silt deposit (104)

Within this area, measuring 2.5m (E-W) × 1.8m (N-S) and located against the S wall of the Chancel the ground level was reduced by approximately 0.50m. Immediately beneath mortar deposit (102) underlying the existing concrete sub-floor (101), a low brick wall was identified (105) identical to that encountered in Area 2, its visible dimensions measuring 1.8m (N-S) × 0.20m (E-W) × 0.15m depth, comprising two courses of unfrosted red bricks extending N-S across the Chancel, which appeared to represent a raised dais upon which the altar was situated.



Plate 6: View looking S showing S wall of Chancel and reduction of ground level following demolition of dais wall (105) visible to right of scale



Plate 7: View looking E towards the E end of the Chancel showing a significant concentration of disarticulated skeletal fragments adjacent to the S wall (visible in foreground)

Underlying the brick wall was a friable light greyish brown gravel make-up deposit (103) with frequent mortar inclusions, small to large sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments, approximately 0.10m thick which in turn overlaid (104) a well compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit with frequent mortar inclusions, fragments of tile and small to large sub angular stones. Following the removal of brick wall (105) and reduction of the ground level immediately to the W, along the S side of the Chancel, two significant concentrations of disarticulated human skeletal remains were identified, contained within (104) at a depth of between 0.30-0.50m.

These appeared to represent the remains of several individuals and included a partially intact skull, several intact ulna, fibula and tibia bones, femur fragments and a large pelvis fragment. Although the remains were disarticulated they appeared to have been deliberately deposited in two groups, one roughly located beneath the raised step or dais, while the other was located approximately 0.50m W of the first group, immediately adjacent to the S wall of the Chancel. Other pieces of coffin furniture were also identified in association with these remains, specifically heavily corroded Fe coffin nails.

*Area 5: Brick Vault in the Centre of the Chancel*

In the course of reducing the ground levels in the centre of the Chancel, the remains of a substantial red brick, barrel vaulted chamber were uncovered, immediately beneath the mortar sub-base (1002) underlying the existing concrete slab sub-floor (1001). The bricks were unfrogged (average measurement 0.25m × 0.12m × 0.10m), laid in an irregular Flemish bond and bonded with a coarse greyish white mortar. The visible dimensions of the vault (1003) measured 3.5m (E-W) × 1.7m (N-S) × 0.70m (at least eight courses of brick were visible); with evidence of a segmental arched opening at the W end of the chamber.

The full extent of the vault could not be ascertained due to the fact that it had been partially filled in; the backfill deposit (1005) consisted of a firmly compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt (similar to (104) encountered in Areas 2-4) with frequent CBM and mortar flecking, occasional, heavily corroded Fe coffin nails and Cu alloy handles and very occasional blue and yellow glazed pottery sherds (which appeared to be mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century in date). Remains of lead sheeting (presumably representing lining for the coffins) were identified towards the base of the excavation but not removed. Towards the W end of the vault, there appeared to be a void beneath the backfill material however the maximum depth of the vault was not ascertained.



Plate 8: View looking W showing brick barrel vault revealed following removal of concrete flooring in centre of Chancel

A significant quantity of disarticulated human remains was identified within this backfill material, which appeared to represent the remains of several individuals. Two separate concentrations of human remains were also identified on the N and S sides of the vault, which may have constituted the remains of two distinct individuals although the remains were again heavily disarticulated. It was evident that the vault had been heavily disturbed and had been subsequently backfilled, probably during the Victorian restoration of the church (due to the occurrence of mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery within the backfill material).

## 5.2 North and South Transepts

The next phase of groundworks, carried out on 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> January 2010 involved the removal of the low brick walling for the heating ducts in the North and South Transepts to the level of the surrounding floor surface.

Within the North Transept, a total of five contexts were identified, the uppermost being the existing strongly indurated concrete sub-floor (001), measuring 0.05m thick, which in turn overlaid a deposit of greyish mortar (002), between 0.02-0.03m thick. Underlying (002) was a friable, light greyish brown gravel make-up deposit (003) with frequent mortar inclusions, small to medium sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments, extending to a depth of 0.15m. Cut from (003) was [004] the cut for the heating ducts, measuring 9.0m (N-S) × 1.0m (E-W) rectangular in plan with a sharp break of slope at the top with a flat base, which was lined by the brick duct walls (005) consisting of four courses of unfrogged red bricks standing to a height of 0.30m laid in an irregular English Garden Bond and bonded with a coarse greyish white gravelly mortar.



Plate 9: View looking NW showing location of skeletal remains adjacent to N wall of the North Transept, disturbed by 19<sup>th</sup> century brick heating duct

Contained within (003) at a depth of approximately 0.22m and partially disturbed by the cut for the heating duct [004] was a concentration of disarticulated human remains, located centrally against the N wall of the North Transept, within an area roughly measuring 1.5m (N-S) × 1.0m (E-W). The remains found appeared to belong to more than one individual; although there was no visible evidence of a grave cut, the grouping of the remains suggested that they had been deliberately deposited in that location. A small number of heavily corroded Fe coffin nails were found in association with these remains.

Within the South Transept, the contexts revealed were identical to those revealed in the North Transept, however the groundworks revealed no evidence of human skeletal remains or other features, finds or deposits of archaeological significance.

### 5.3 Nave

The final phase of groundworks, undertaken on 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> January, comprised the removal of the low brick walling of the heating duct running axially E-W through the centre of the Nave. No evidence was revealed of human skeletal remains or other deposits, finds or features of archaeological importance during this phase of activity.



Plate 10: View looking W showing 19<sup>th</sup> century heating ducts in Nave following removal of concrete flooring

## 6. Conclusion

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The programme of archaeological observation undertaken by Border Archaeology identified significant concentrations of disarticulated human skeletal remains in the Chancel and, to a lesser extent, adjacent to the N wall of the North Transept.



These concentrations of disarticulated human remains could well indicate the position of former graves located within the Chancel and North Transept, which appear to have been largely removed during the extensive Victorian restoration of the church undertaken in the late 1860s.

It is clear, from the quantity of human remains found, particularly in the Chancel, that by no means all of the human remains disturbed during the Victorian restoration of the church were re-interred in the churchyard in accordance with the proposals made by the architect; indeed the shallow depth (only 0.20-0.40m below existing ground level) and heavily disarticulated nature of the remains suggest a somewhat hasty reburial.

Of particular interest was the unexpected discovery of a substantial brick vault located in the centre of the Chancel, probably of 18<sup>th</sup> century date, which evidently had been heavily disturbed and filled in during the restoration of 1867-8. Although no evidence was found therein to permit a conclusive identification, this structure may be tentatively identified as the Wilding family vault recorded by antiquarians in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## 7. Copyright

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Border Archaeology shall retain full copyright of any commissioned reports, tender documents or other project documents, under the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988 with all rights reserved; excepted that it hereby provides an exclusive licence to the client for the use of the report by the client in all matters directly relating to the project as described in the Project Specification.

## 8. References

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### 8.1 Bibliography

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## 9. Appendix: Context Register

### 9.1 Chancel

Context No	Description
(101)	Strongly indurated concrete slab floor surface, measuring 0.05m thick. Overlies (102).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Existing concrete sub-floor dating from the mid-Victorian restoration of the church</i>
(102)	Friable greyish mortar with frequent gravel inclusions, approximately 0.02-0.03m in thickness. Underlies (101). Overlies (103), (105).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Greyish mortar deposit underlying existing concrete slab flooring</i>
(103)	Friable light greyish brown gravelly silt with frequent mortar inclusions, small to large sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments and moderate quantities of human bone fragments, approximately 0.10-15m in thickness. Underlies (102), (105). Overlies (104)
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Make-up deposit probably contemporary with the mid-Victorian restoration of the church</i>
(104)	Firmly compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit (104) with frequent mortar inclusions, fragments of tile and small to large sub angular stones, extending to a depth of 0.20-0.25m (max visible depth). Containing a significant quantity of human skeletal remains. Underlies (103).
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Heavily disturbed deposit associated with the mid-Victorian restoration of the church, containing several concentrations of human skeletal remains that were presumably deposited during the removal of graves and vaults within the church.</i>
(105)	Two courses of regularly coursed unfrogged red brick walling aligned N-S, visible dimensions 5.2m (N-S) × 0.20m × 0.15m (d) bonded with a coarse greyish white mortar. Underlies (102), Overlies (103).
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Brick wall probably contemporary with the mid-Victorian restoration of the church, representing a raised dais on which the altar was situated.</i>

#### 9.1.1 Area 5: Brick Vault in the centre of Chancel

Context No	Description
(1001)	Strongly indurated concrete slab floor surface, measuring 0.05m thick. Overlies (1002).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Existing concrete sub-floor dating from the mid-Victorian restoration of the church</i>
(1002)	Friable greyish mortar with frequent gravel inclusions, approximately 0.02m in thickness. Underlies (1001). Overlies (1003).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Greyish mortar deposit underlying existing concrete slab flooring</i>
(1003)	Brick barrel vaulted chamber, visible dimensions 3.5m (E-W) × 1.7m (N-S) × 0.70m (eight courses visible depth). Bricks unfrogged (average measurement 0.25m × 0.12m × 0.10m) and bonded with a coarse greyish white mortar. Underlies (1002).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Burial vault of probable 18<sup>th</sup> century date</i>
[1004]	Cut, rectangular in plan, dimensions 3.5m (E-W) × 1.7m (N-S) × 0.70m. Filled by (1005)
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Hypothetical cut for brick vault (cut not visible)</i>



(1005)	Firmly compacted dark greyish brown sandy silt, with frequent CBM and mortar flecking, occasional, heavily corroded Fe coffin nails and Cu alloy handles and very occasional blue and yellow glazed pottery sherds, containing large quantities of human skeletal remains. Fills [1004]
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Backfill of brick vault, probably deposited when the vault was disturbed and filled in during the mid-Victorian restoration of the church.</i>

## 9.2 North and South Transepts

Context No	Description
(001)	Strongly indurated concrete slab floor surface, measuring 0.05m in thickness. Overlies (002).
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Concrete sub-floor surface dating from the mid-Victorian restoration of the church</i>
(002)	Friable greyish mortar with frequent gravel inclusions, approximately 0.02-0.03m in thickness. Underlies (001). Overlies (003), (005)
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Mortar deposit underlying sub-floor surface</i>
(003)	Friable, light greyish brown gravelly silt with frequent mortar inclusions, small to medium sized angular, sub-angular and rounded stones and tile and brick fragments and moderate quantities of human skeletal remains, extending to a visible depth of 0.15m. Underlies (002). Cut by [004]
<i>INTERPRETATION:</i>	<i>Make-up deposit probably associated with the mid-Victorian restoration of the church</i>
[004]	Cut, rectangular in plan, dimensions 9.0m (N-S) × 1.0m (E-W) × 0.30m depth with a sharp break of slope at the top and a flat base. Cuts (003). Filled by (005)
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Cut for 19<sup>th</sup> century heating duct</i>
(005)	Brick masonry wall, dimensions 9.0m (N-S) × 1.0m (E-W) × 0.30m depth, standing to four courses in depth, laid in an irregular English Garden Bond and bonded with a coarse greyish white gravelly mortar. Fills [004]. Underlies (002)
<i>INTERPRETATION</i>	<i>Brick masonry lining of 19<sup>th</sup> century heating duct.</i>



## Document Control

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