

## Archaeological Excavation

### St Sampson's Church Cricklade Wiltshire

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Report No: BA0411BSSS

# BORDER ARCHAEOLOGY

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# 1 Non-Technical Summary

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*The origins of St Sampson's Church are obscure, the earliest fabric dating from the 10th-11th centuries AD. Despite the antiquity of the church and its graveyard, surprisingly few inhumations were uncovered or disturbed. Two separate inhumations and a single burial vault were investigated and appeared to be of late 18th-19th century date. The majority of disarticulated bones were found to have been disturbed by later burials.*

## Report Specification

Archaeological fieldwork supervised by Paul Jones BA  
Historical research carried out by Stephen Priestley MA  
Report and artwork by Paul Jones BA  
Report edited by George Children MA

## 2 Introduction

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Border Archaeology was instructed by Bartosch & Stokes on behalf of St Sampson's Church Parochial Church Council to excavate by hand two receptor pits and a drain trench within the southern area of the churchyard extending from the external facade of the south aisle.

Due to the likely numbers of human remains extant within the ground, the purpose of the works was to facilitate the laying of drains by the appointed contractor and to determine the existence of human remains.

The work followed usual on-site procedures that complied with standards set by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Copies of this report will be submitted to the PCC, Bartosch & Stokes and to the county Sites and Monuments Record.

## 3 Historical & Archaeological Background

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The town of Cricklade lies on the S bank of the Upper Thames at a point where the wide alluvial valley was crossed by Ermine Street, the Roman road from Silchester to Cirencester. It was evidently a place of major strategic importance and evidence has been found of a substantial Roman villa and village settlement (dating from the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) around the site of the later north gate of the town (Radford, 1972, 94-95). The place name Cricklade incorporates the Celtic place name element *craig*, meaning rock, and the Old English element (*ge*)/*lad* 'passage', presumably referring to the crossing of the Thames at this point (Gover et al., 1939, 42-43).

The origins of the present town of Cricklade date from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, when a planned, fortified urban settlement or borough was established there, probably by King Alfred, forming one of a chain of fortified boroughs organized to defend the frontiers of Wessex against the Danes during the late 9<sup>th</sup>-early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The borough at Cricklade was certainly in existence by the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as it is mentioned in the Burghal Hidage, a list of the boroughs of Wessex compiled in about 910-920 AD. A single main street – High Street – runs through the centre of the Saxon walled town with a series of medieval lanes and streets branching off. These include Bath Road, which, prior to recent development around Parsonage Farm, would have been a main thoroughfare on the route between Bath and Cricklade.

The regular quadrilateral plan of the defences of the Saxon borough of Cricklade and the gridiron street layout within the defences have been the subject of extensive archaeological investigations during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These have shown that the construction of the defences fell into three phases. The initial defences consisted of an earthen rampart with timber revetment and palisade, which was in turn replaced by a stone revetment wall in the late 10<sup>th</sup>-early 11<sup>th</sup> century. The last phase witnessed the destruction of the walled defences, which, it has been suggested, may have been carried out in 1016 by the Danish leader Cnut, who appears to have carried out a deliberate policy of razing existing fortresses to consolidate his position in Wessex (Wainwright, 1956, 162-66; Radford 1972, 61-111; Haslam, 1982, 77-81; Haslam 1984, 107-10).

The origins of St Sampson's Church, a Grade I listed building standing in the SW quarter of the Saxon borough of Cricklade (EH Listed Building Ref 317731), are obscure. It is usually assumed to be of 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century origin, contemporary with the foundation of the borough. However, the possibility should not be discounted that it may already have been in existence when the borough was founded in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The dedication to St Sampson, a Cornish-Breton saint of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, suggests an early, Celtic origin. The first documented reference to the church is in the will of Ealdorman Aethelmaer, dated 982 AD. The earliest fabric of the church dates from the 10<sup>th</sup>-11 centuries AD, consisting of fragments of stone carving embedded in the wall above the great N door and in the S wall of the nave, where a complete pilaster strip survives *in situ* above the S arcade.

In c.1050-60, St Sampson's Church was given by Edward the Confessor to his favourite, Robert Fitz Wimarc the Staller. After the Conquest, the church came into the hands of King William I, who granted it, along with other lands in Cricklade, to Westminster Abbey at some point before the Domesday survey of 1086. The charters relating to this grant are particularly interesting, as they state that St Sampson's was the 'mother church' of Cricklade and the surrounding district. This would explain the large size of the church, which may have been occupied during the pre-Conquest period by a college of priests ministering not only to St Sampson's but also the church of St Mary in Cricklade (which may have been a dependent chapel of St Sampson's) and other churches in nearby villages (Haslam, 1984, 106; Thompson, 1961, 1-2).

There is evidence indicating that the church was altered, presumably by the monks of Westminster, in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the N and S arcades were added to the old Saxon nave. The church underwent a substantial process of enlargement during the mid-late 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the addition of the N and S aisles and transepts, the rebuilding of the chancel and the remodelling of the nave arcades (Pevsner, 1963, 199-200). The chancel was again altered during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The next major phase of alterations occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the addition of the gabled N porch, the remodelling of the chancel windows and the addition of the N chapel by Sir Edmund Hungerford (d.1484). The last major addition to the fabric of the church was the impressive crossing tower, an ornate example of the late Perpendicular style, of two stages with large octagonal corner towers with spires. The tower is supported on massive panelled piers, with elaborate heraldic decoration and niches for statues. It was begun in about 1512-13 by the Hungerford family of Down Ampney, but not finally completed until about 1553 at the expense of John Dudley Duke of Northumberland (Pevsner; 1963-199-201). The church was damaged by fire in 1823; however, a full-scale restoration of the building did not take place until 1863-64, supervised by the architect Ewan Christian. The fabric of the chancel and S aisle underwent particularly heavy restoration.

The churchyard contains a diverse range of monuments dating from the late medieval period up to end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of which are listed structures. The octagonal stone base and part of the shaft of a churchyard cross have survived, along with the elaborate, well-preserved 14<sup>th</sup> c. Town Cross, which was removed from the High Street crossroads to its present location in c.1817-20. In the NE corner of the churchyard there are a number of late 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century tomb chests dedicated to the Rice-Vaughan family, which are Grade II\* listed monuments, as well as numerous other 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century tombstones. The churchyard was officially closed to new burials in 1882.



## 4 Geology

The Soil Survey of England & Wales (1983) identifies three soil associations within the research area: THAMES [814a], Newchurch 1 [814b] and WICKHAM 2 [711f]. The THAMES [814a] soils are stoneless, mainly calcareous and clayey, and are affected by groundwater. These soils occur on flat land that is prone to flooding. The underlying geology consists of river alluvium.



Plate 1: View of trench, looking north

The Newchurch 1 [814b] soils consist of deep, stoneless, calcareous clayey and fine silty soils over marine alluvium. The groundwater level in these areas is controlled by ditches and pumps, the generally flat land with low ridges giving a complex soil pattern.

The WICKHAM 2 [711f] soil association consists of slowly permeable, seasonally waterlogged, fine loamy over clayey, fine silty over clayey and clayey soils. Small areas of slowly permeable calcareous soils are found on steeper slopes. The geology of these areas consists of drift over Jurassic and Cretaceous clay or mudstone.

Cricklade is located on land that gradually slopes towards flat alluvial gravels of the Upper Thames series. There is also a gentle slope towards the E and W of the town. Close to the town's northern rampart is a slight scarp marking the edge of the valley floor. S of the southern rampart is a shallow valley. The highest point within the town is the ground surrounding St Sampson's Church, which lies at 91.5m (above ordnance datum), the lowest point being the NE corner of the town (79.2m AOD).

## 5 Methodology

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A trench was excavated by hand within the southern area of the churchyard extending from the S facing external facade of the S aisle (**Plate 1, Fig. 1**). The trench measured 38.00m x 0.30m and was oriented SW-NE, the depth varying between 0.45m and c.0.75m below existing ground level to comply with designated gradient requirements. In places where further investigation of areas of bone deposition was deemed necessary, excavation depths exceeded these requirements, its purpose being to ensure that subsequent works would not disturb either articulated inhumations or disarticulated remains.

At the termination of the SW section of the trench, a stepped receptor pit measuring 2.10m x 2.10m x 1.60m was excavated by hand. This formed the area for the insertion of an associated backdrop manhole.

A further pit measuring 0.50m x 0.50m x 0.45m (base 87.47 AOD) was excavated 1.5m to the W of the main trench and c.5.00m N of the S boundary hedge for the redeposition of disarticulated human bone found during the excavation.

A policy of total excavation was implemented in respect of any burials encountered, the depths being dependent on the relative graded depths of the trench, while burials unlikely to be impacted by the insertion of the services were subject to limited recording.

Full written and drawn records of all excavated contexts were made in accordance with archaeological practices set out by the Institute of Field Archaeologists. The trench was photographed using monochrome, colour print and colour transparency film. A detailed stratigraphic record was made using a context numbering system (100-105). All surveying was carried out with reference to a known spot height located outside No. 32 Parsonage Farm Close, opposite the S boundary hedge of the churchyard (value 87.05m OD).

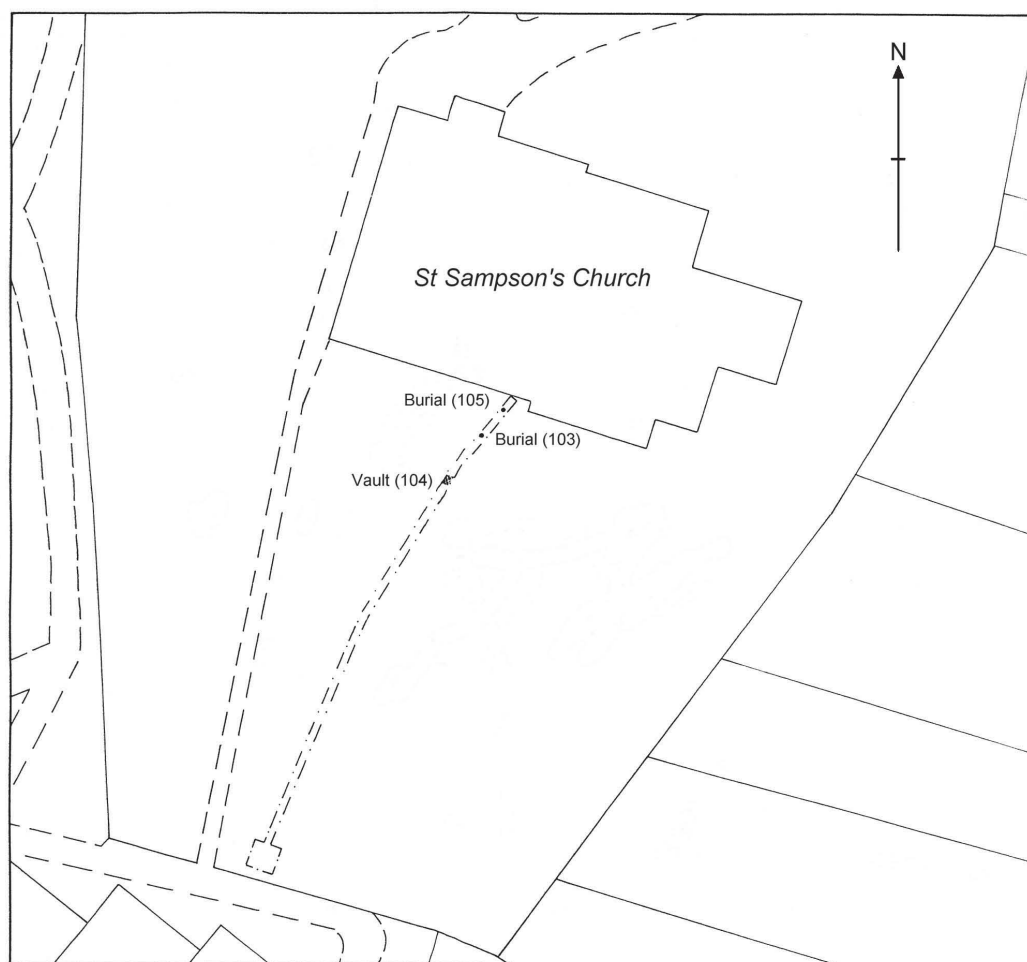


Fig. 1: Plan showing position of trench and burials (103) and (105) and vault (104)

## 6 Excavation

The first 1.60m section of trenching extending away from the S aisle required the lifting of three reused 19<sup>th</sup> century ledger stones forming part of a pathway around the church.

Six contexts were revealed within the trench, of which two were *in situ* inhumations. A single burial vault was investigated.

### 6.1 Trench 1

The first context encountered (100) was a turf deposit comprising a fine silty, moderately compacted dark brown organic soil approximately 0.14m in thickness. A number of 19<sup>th</sup> century and residual late Saxon pottery sherds along with disarticulated human bone fragments were recovered. Underlying this deposit was a blackish-brown, tightly compacted coarse sandy colloidal clayey deposit (101), which formed the base of the trench and was recorded at depths of 0.14m-0.75m below the existing ground level. This also contained fragments of disarticulated human bone, medieval and Saxon pottery sherds and three residual fragments of Roman latticed



box flue tile. Exposed at certain depths and intervals were inhumations (103) and (105).



Plate 2: Lower portion of an articulated inhumation (105) showing tibia, fibula, tarsals, metatarsals and phalanges

Located c.1.00m from the external facade of the S aisle at a depth of 0.30m was the lower portion of an articulated inhumation (105) oriented E-W. This burial was contained within deposit (101) but no grave cut could be identified. The exposed remains comprised the tibia and fibula, tarsals, metatarsals and phalanges and a series of regularly spaced reddish stains interpreted as decayed iron nails were identified around the burial indicating that this individual had been placed in a coffin, probably of the shouldered and tapered type.

The second inhumation (103) was located 2.50m from the southern edge of the S aisle. As this individual lay at a depth of c.0.80m (88.06m OD), total exposure and lifting of the inhumation was not essential. The burial was oriented E-W and consisted of an extended articulated post-juvenile. Owing to the width of the trench, only that part of the individual extending from the mandible and hyoid bone to the lumbar vertebrae was exposed. Determination of sex and type of deposition (i.e. shroud /coffin) was not possible due to the limited trench width.



Plate 3: Extended articulated post-juvenile inhumation (103)

A single trench-built vault (104) was exposed 1.65m to the S of burial (103) at a depth of 0.30m (88.52m AOD). Rectangular in plan and oriented E-W, it comprised an uninscribed ledger stone over a red brick superstructure. Although the length could not be determined, the structure stood 0.70m high and 0.60m wide and was of a single skin construction with English garden wall bond. The apparent absence of human remains suggests either that any remains had been removed or that the vault was never used, the absence of a table tomb above the vault suggesting the latter.

The projection of the trench necessitated the removal of a single headstone located c.1.00m to the S of the burial vault. The inscription on the stone read:

*Here lies the body of Frances Ferris the wife of Anthony Ferris who departed this life the 26<sup>th</sup> November Anno [sic] Domini 1670*

Excavation of the trench within the area of the headstone revealed no associated grave cut, which suggests landscaping of the churchyard and repositioning of this and other headstones.





Plate 4: Receptor pit at SW end of trench

## 7 Summary

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Despite the antiquity of the church and its graveyard, surprisingly few inhumations were uncovered or disturbed. Two separate inhumations and a single burial vault were investigated and appeared to be of late 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century date. Disarticulated bones had mostly been disturbed by later burials.

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