

# ST PETER'S CHURCH, WOLVERCOTE, OXON

## PROPOSED ARCHAEOLOGICAL MITIGATION STRATEGY

### Introduction

Oxford Archaeology (OA) recently produced a desk-based assessment (DBA) of the archaeological potential of the site of St Peter's Church, Wolvercote, Oxon. for the Parochial Church Council of that church. The document was prepared in advance of proposed building works within the western and north-western part of the churchyard. The works entail construction of a single story extension to Church House and to the western part of the church.

The DBA was submitted to the local Planning Authority for approval. Oxford City Council requested a more detailed archaeological methodology, which is outlined below. This document should be viewed as an addendum to the above mentioned DBA. The methodology below will need the approval of the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, Julian Munby, as part of Faculty approval for the above development.

### Summary of the desk-based assessment

The area of proposed development lies within the north-western and western churchyard of the Church of St Peter, Wolvercote. The DBA identified a fairly low potential for archaeology dating to the prehistoric, Roman and early medieval periods, but a very high probability that churchyard burials dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are present within the development area. Whilst medieval burials were commonly simple shroud burials, there remains the possibility of coffined burials (wooden or even stone sarcophagi, although the latter are rare). Medieval burials vary considerably in depth, some being very shallow. Similarly, the depth of post-medieval burials is unpredictable, the 'six foot deep' rule only being introduced after the 1840s, and then, was by no means faithfully adhered to. Post-medieval burials were usually coffined, most commonly wooden, but are sometimes lead-lined. The coffins were often decorated by metal fittings that will require recording and cataloguing. *Departum* plates on the breast, head and feet may survive well enough that the name, age and date of death of the deceased may be known.

Given the longevity of worship at this site, at least five centuries of burial within the churchyard is assumed. A site visit revealed that the level of the churchyard was markedly higher than the church and surrounding land. This tentatively suggests a considerable density of burials. Considerable intercutting of burials and fairly large amounts of chancel should be expected. Density of burial does vary considerably from churchyard to churchyard, and indeed, within a single churchyard, so predicting burial density is highly problematic.

There is a high probability of encountering 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century extra-mural brick-built structures, such as shaft graves and vaults. The uppermost courses of these structures and their overlying ledgers often lie just below the modern turfline and subsoil, and hence, there is high probability that the development will impact upon them. Their presence (particularly if found in large numbers) may also have adverse structural implications for the planned development.

At least 21 upstanding memorials lie within the development area, and will need to be recorded before removal. In addition to these visible markers, it is by no means uncommon to discover fallen memorials or recumbent ledgers beneath the turfline. Commemorating the dead by stone memorials is a relatively recent practice, beginning in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, earlier burials will be unmarked. In addition, the north-western corner of the churchyard (in the location of the proposed extension to Church Hall) appears to have been landscaped. It is highly probable that upstanding memorials were relocated during these works, and hence, an absence of memorials in that area should not be taken as an indication of a lack of burials in that area. Ground reduction during this landscaping may have removed shallow burials altogether, but deeper burials may now lie close to the present ground surface.

### **Impact of the proposed development on the archaeology**

The preliminary design for the two extensions comprises a raft construction for the two single storey extensions. The extent of the archaeological impact of this development obviously depends on the depth of the foundations and the extent of ground reduction within the footprint of the buildings. These in turn are dependent on ground conditions and the design of the structures that they are required to support. Shallow foundations of rafted structures often impact only on more shallow burials, allowing deeper burials to rest undisturbed. Their impact on brick-built burial structures often only involve the uppermost courses, allowing preservation *in situ* of most of the structure and the burials at their base. Infilling of these structures is sometimes required to improve ground stability. Alternatively, they may be overlaid with re-inforced concrete slabs.

### **Proposed archaeological monitoring and recording**

The Church of England and English Heritage (2005) *Guidelines for best practice for the treatment of human remains excavated in Christian burial grounds in England* recommend that all ground reduction in a churchyard should be undertaken under archaeological supervision, and that disturbance of archaeology should be avoided or kept to a minimum. In keeping with this, it is thus highly probable that an archaeological condition will be attached to the Faculty for permission to undertake the development. The exact requirements of this Faculty will be determined by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor for Oxford, Julian Munby. Hence, the methodology proposed below is subject to his approval.

OA would suggest that the most appropriate strategy would be the implementation of an archaeological watching brief during ground reduction for the raft foundations for the proposed store in the western churchyard and the extension to Church Hall. Should the architects require ground reduction within the footprint of the buildings, this should also be undertaken under archaeological supervision, as will the excavation of any service trenches leading from the proposed buildings.

## ***Proposed fieldwork methodology for rafted buildings and service trenches***

### *General fieldwork methodology*

Excavation will be undertaken using a small mechanical digger. An osteoarchaeologist will be in attendance at all times. All spoil will be checked for charnel and all disarticulated bone removed and will be collected for reburial. Spoil will be mechanically removed down to the first visible layer of burials, at which stage the excavation will be made safe and available to the archaeologist.

The objectives of the archaeological works will be to remove all burials from the development area that will be affected by the construction. Each burial will be rapidly excavated to reveal details of burial position, grave goods, and coffins and their fittings. Burials will be characterised and their location recorded. Aspects of funerary ritual (such as orientation, body position, coffins and their associated fittings, dress fastenings and grave goods) will be recorded on pro forma sheets.

The manner of excavation and the level of recording will comply with the OA Field Manual (Wilkinson 1992), supported by the *Procedure for the excavation and recording of burials* (McKinley and Roberts 1993), except where covered in this specification. A single context recording system will not be employed. Experience on similar church burial grounds has shown that this can be time-consuming and not necessarily informative (cf Bashford and Pollard 1998, 155). For example, grave cuts (where they can be identified) vary only in their dimensions and fills are generally of a fairly uniform character. It is considered more useful to record grave contents on a single burial sheet, with additional sheets for recording osteology/palaeopathology and coffins, rather than separate context sheets for grave cut, fill, coffin and skeleton. Thus, the grave cut, fill, coffin and skeleton of a burial will be assigned a single group number. Specialised recording forms will be available for the recording of both coffins and skeletons.

Plans will be drawn at a scale of 1:50 or 1:20 as appropriate. The location of each burial will be planned, but individual burials will not be planned routinely. A register of plans will be kept.

Long sections of trenches showing layers will be drawn at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, as appropriate, and their location annotated on the trench plan. A register of sections will be kept.

A black and white and digital photographic record, illustrating in both detail and general context the principal features and finds, will be maintained. The photographic record will also include working shots to illustrate more generally the nature of the archaeological work. Photographs will be recorded on OA Photographic Record Sheets.

### *Human remains*

The osteoarchaeologist will rapidly analyse the articulated skeletons on site. The following features will be recorded:

- Minimum number of individuals

- Preservation and completeness
- Age and sex estimation
- Stature estimation
- Dental pathology
- Gross skeletal pathology

This strategy is based on the understanding that the size of the skeletal assemblage will be small, and hence, of limited statistical merit. Should this prove to be otherwise during the course of the fieldwork programme, this approach may need to be reviewed. All changes in methodology will be discussed with the client and Diocesan Archaeological Advisor before implementation.

Charnel and disarticulated remains be collected for reburial but will not be recorded as it is of limited osteological potential.

### *Coffins and coffin fittings*

Given the known historical date of burial within the churchyard, and the date of death inscribed on upstanding monuments within the development area, it is highly probable that the remnants of post-medieval coffins and their fittings will be discovered during excavation. Wooden and lead coffins and any associated fittings, including nails, will be recorded on the coffin recording sheet. Particular attention will be paid to biographical information on *departum* plates. All surviving coffin fittings will be recorded in detail by reference to the published corpus of material from Christ Church, Spitalfields (Reeve and Adams 1993) as well as the unpublished catalogue of material from assemblages from St Nicholas, Sevenoaks (Boyle 1995), St Luke's, Islington; St George's, Bloomsbury; St Nicholas', Forest Hill and Rycote Chapel, Oxon, and the Quaker burial ground, King's Lynn, Norfolk (Mahoney 2004). Where individual types cannot be paralleled, they will be sketched or photographed as appropriate. These will be valuable additions to the master catalogue currently being compiled by OA.

The human remains and coffins will be removed and contained within opaque burial sacks with attached identification/location tags, and removed from the immediate vicinity for storage prior to their reburial. This process will continue down to impact level. Wherever feasible, complete burials will be removed, rather than truncate them, but burials extending far beyond the limits of the excavation will be left *in situ*.

### *Grave memorials*

Grave memorials, such as head and footstones, may be associated with specific burials. Extramural above-ground memorials became increasingly common in the post-medieval period. Recent work by Mytum (2002) and Tarlow (1999) has traced changing traditions in the shapes, iconography and text inscribed on these memorials. Headstones also offer valuable biographic information on individuals interred in the graveyard.

Head and footstones are structures and will be accorded an individual context number. They will also be included as part of the grave group, if the association with the burial is clear. It is important to note that many memorials have been moved from their original position in recent years, and care in establishing an association with a specific burial should be made.

Descriptions of gravestones will follow guidelines set out by Mytum (2002) and include details of

- Shape
- Dimensions
- Type of stone used
- Iconography (an illustration may best describe these features)
- Inscription (*verbatim* record of inscription; font of the lettering)
- Stylistic type

This recording will be undertaken by OA. The location of the gravestones will be recorded before removal.

#### *Extra-mural vaults and brick shaft graves*

A scaled plan of each shaft grave or vault will be produced. Location, dimensions and method of construction will be recorded on a *proforma* context sheet, as will the contents (which may include multiple burials). It is proposed that the burials located in the bases of these structures are left undisturbed, if possible.

Recording of vaults and brick shaft graves should follow the guidelines for brick built structures laid out in the Oxford Archaeology Field Manual (Wilkinson 1992).

#### *Lead coffins*

OA does not undertake the removal of lead coffins but can recommend a reputable exhumation company who is happy to undertake such work. Lead coffins that require removal will be removed by a specialist and reburied unopened with the rest of the human remains. Only external features of sealed lead coffins will be recorded archaeologically. Where lead coffins are damaged or broken the human remains may be recorded by the osteoarchaeologist. However, no fleshed remains will be examined.

#### *Other structures*

All structures and non-burial deposits that cannot be recorded with the above methodology will undergo full archaeological excavation and recording as described in the OA field manual (Wilkinson 1992). The objectives of this work will be to characterise any archaeological remains relating to the church complex and earlier land use on this site.

#### *Recent burials*

No recent burials (i.e in the last 100 years) are known to lie within the development area. OA does not undertake the removal of recent burials but can recommend a reputable exhumation company who is happy to undertake such work, in the unlikely event that such recent burials are present. Detailed archaeological recording of these burials is not desirable, and only their location will be noted.



### *Storage of remains and reinterment*

Human remains, grave goods and associated coffins and fittings will be stored on site (possibly within the church) until reburial within the churchyard. Personal effects, such as wedding rings and dentures, will be recorded but reburied with the associated skeleton. No artefacts from within the grave will be retained. Fleshed remains will be immediately reburied.

Although this has yet to be discussed with the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of St Peter's Church, it is anticipated that disturbed human remains and coffins will be reburied in within the churchyard, at a location to be decided by the PCC. It is possible that excavation of this feature will disturb further burials. An archaeological watching brief is recommended and costs are included. It is anticipated that reburial will be undertaken soon after the excavation is complete. The timing of reburial, however, will depend on the number of burials recovered in relation to the space available, and on the conditions of the Faculty.

### **Archive and publication**

The site archive (paper and photographic record) will be prepared for long-term storage in accordance with standard guidelines (Walker 1990). No artefacts associated with burials will be retained for archiving. Agreement will be sought for the full indexed archive of the project to be deposited as a publicly accessible collection, having been first offered to the RCHME for security copying. The detailed report of the results will be part of this archive and two copies will be submitted to the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record for inclusion in the Oxfordshire County record. Copies will also be made available to the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor and the PCC.

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