

# Subterranean Church Structures in Leicestershire

## Steve Mitchell

The purpose of this article is to put together a preliminary gazetteer of Leicestershire churches with subterranean structures under the footprint of the building. This is work in progress, and is not an exhaustive survey. Omissions and new discoveries will come to light, and information to correct and extend this survey is welcome. Care needs to be taken when visiting churches in search of such structures, and in the cases of private vaults, permission from the owners. The results below are based on site visits and some detailed structural surveys over the last 15 years, and I am grateful to local parishioners and others who have helped provide additional information.

Most of these subterranean structures appear to have been primarily built and used for burials, sometimes over a long period of time, and the term 'vault' is used here in the sense of a burial vault or chamber. 'Crypts' are structurally similar to vaults, the main difference being that crypts were used for the storage of sacred objects for veneration, although these might be the body, or body parts, and always lie close to the sacred part of the building. This definition is for pre-Conquest structures and differs from that used by English Heritage (1). The use of crypts mainly pre-dates the Conquest, after which time the concept seems to have fallen out of favour. (2) Listed amongst the few surviving pre-Conquest crypts in England, are those at Brixworth (Northamptonshire); Hexham (Northumberland); Repton (Derbyshire); Ripon (Yorkshire); and Wing (Buckinghamshire). (3) New examples come to light occasionally, for instance those at Bamburgh Castle and Jarrow which have been detected by ground-penetrating radar (GPR) techniques. (4)

There are no examples of any subterranean structures being used as chapels for worship i.e. with an altar, in Leicestershire, although they exist elsewhere, typically under some cathedrals of Norman foundation. Nor has research to date revealed an unambiguous example in Leicestershire of a medieval undercroft, a space probably not primarily used for religious purposes, such as the one at St John Baptist Kingsthorpe (Northamptonshire). The 'undercroft' at Whitwick is the nearest example, although this does not appear to have ever been used for burials, its original purpose is not known but was probably to provide access to the underground stream. It is presently used as offices and meeting rooms.

Excluded from this survey are burial chambers that are not intended for perambulatory access i.e. burial pits, also boiler rooms, heating pipe corridors and other forms of access for maintenance unless they have been formed out of an earlier subterranean void.

Of the Leicestershire sites which have been inspected, similarities have been noted between the eighteenth century vaults at Birstall and Prestwold, both in date and construction, although the Birstall vault occupies the space of a much earlier crypt, and as such is a rare and important find. (5) The site locations of these subterranean structures vary, some being found under the chancel, others under the nave or aisles.

### Gazetteer

Readers planning to visit sites are strongly recommended to ascertain access and key holder information in advance. Contact details can be found both on the internet, and in publications such as *Crockford's Clerical Directory* (usually available at larger libraries).

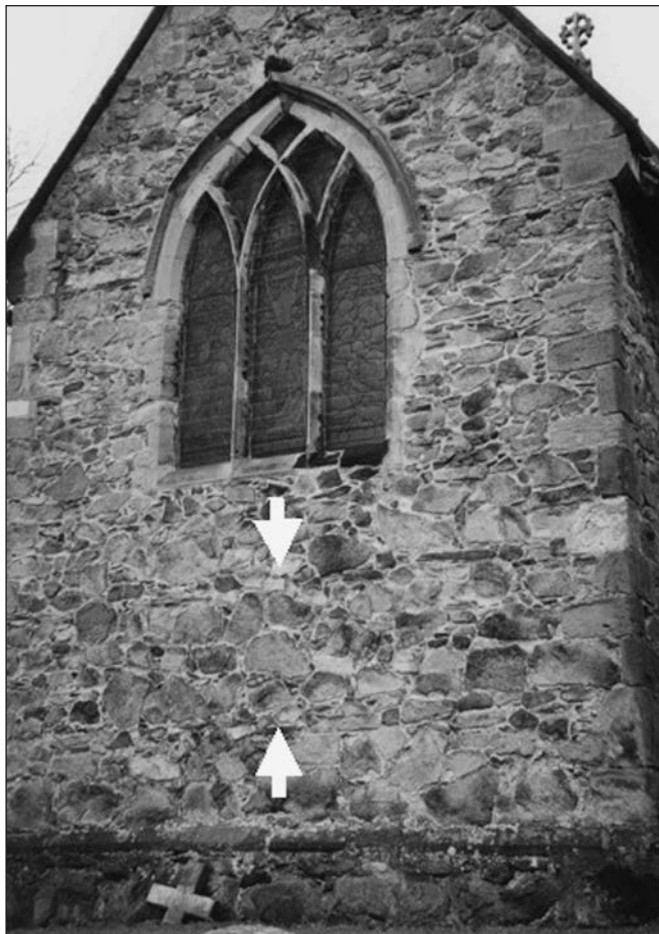
#### *Under the chancel*

**Barkby, St Mary:** Essentially late thirteenth century. Active private burial vault of the Pochin family. Route of access not known. The footprint of this chamber is similar to that of Birstall, although the chancel is much wider, and further investigation might reveal that it occupies an earlier void. (6) These vaults are only ever entered when the present owner dies. The general arrangement is probably the same as that recently excavated at St Denys, Kelmarsh, Northamptonshire. (7)

**Birstall, St James the Greater:** Inactive private burial vault. Access is from a stone trapdoor near the foot of the former sanctuary. There are several wooden coffins dating from the first half of nineteenth century. The void was originally roofed by a full barrel-shaped ceiling but was lowered to form this typically Georgian-style vault. The arrows on the illustration of the external east wall mark the top and bottom of a hole through which the builders could enter the original pre-Conquest crypt. They lowered the ceiling, (and the floor of the sanctuary), by about a metre. The wall dates from the Norman period when the crypt fell

*Leicestershire Historian 2012*

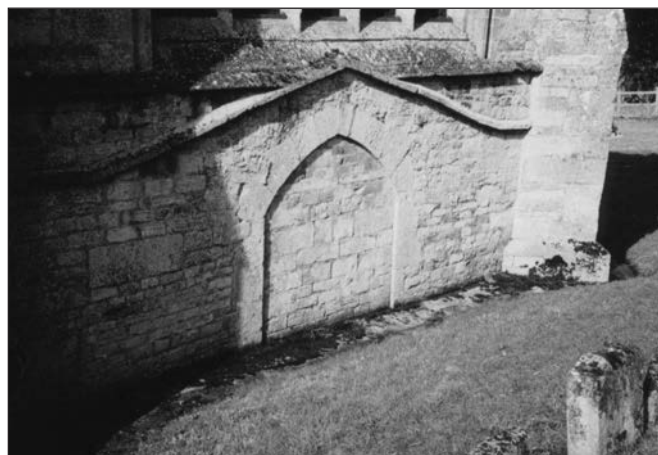
into disuse. The apsidal-ended chancel was squared-off, but in this rare surviving example of a 'lost crypt' type the chancel floor was neither completely lowered nor back-filled. See also below.



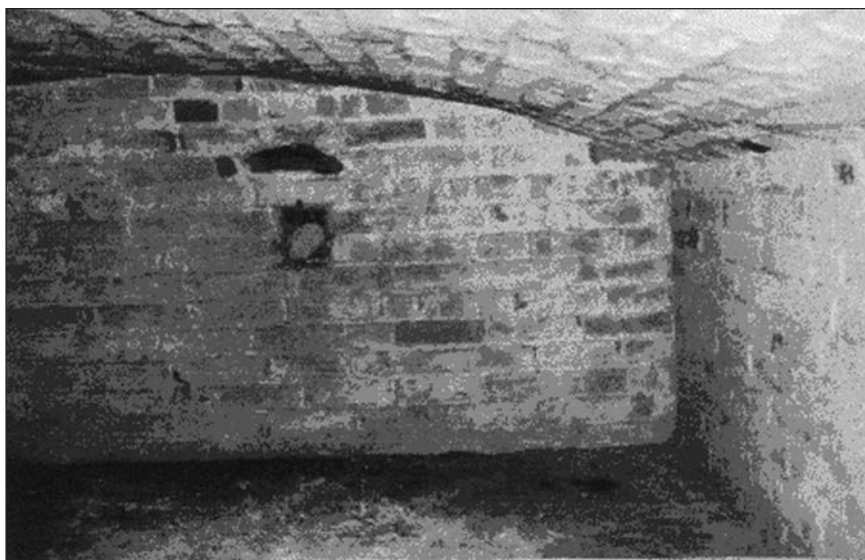
*Birstall. The east wall of the chancel, looking west.*

**Bottesford, St Mary:** Inactive private burial vault under the sanctuary, with various tomb types and effigies of the Lords of Belvoir. Pevsner makes no reference to this space, nor to its memorials. He notes that the lower portion of the chancel walls display evidence of decoration that is thirteenth century 'at its latest' which leaves open the question whether there was a pre-Conquest crypt before it was re-used as a burial chamber. (8)

**Buckminster, St John Baptist:** The site of what is probably a private burial chamber which lay outside the east wall of the chancel but which was accessed from inside. The blocked doorway behind the altar is still visible. A post-Medieval mausoleum of the Dysart family is on the same axis but further up the slope. The date of the construction is not known but it was demolished before c1792 as the exposed doorway can be seen in Nichol's illustration, (9) This arrangement is similar to St Nicholas, Stanford (Northamptonshire) where the Cave family vault is still intact as a mound with access into the chamber via a door in the east wall of the sanctuary.



*Buckminster. Believed to be the site of a former private burial chamber.*



*Birstall. The upper part of the brick-lined burial chamber, looking east.*

**Claybrooke, St Peter:** Herbert hypothesised that a founder tomb lies under the chancel together with the access route by an external blocked staircase, although recent inspections of the fabric have failed to confirm this analysis. (10) However, what appears to be a blocked air vent can be seen at the base of the north chancel wall towards the west end as illustrated. The chancel dates to c1340. (11) Three moulded plinth stones of this date have been cut away and a hole created. This has been blocked with brick sometime in the post-Medieval period. Was this hole a fresh-air vent to a subterranean void, possibly a burial vault, under the west end of the present chancel?

**Edmondthorpe, St Michael:** The undercroft (?) here was seen by Nichols (12), when it was possibly used as a chancel store. The three quatrefoil lights must have been open in the late eighteenth century, but are now blocked by dressed stone. The access must have been from inside the church but has now disappeared. The void may have been emptied but it is not known whether it was back-filled. Pevsner suggests that the floor has been lowered since Nichols' visit. (13)

**Great Bowden, St Peter & St Paul:** Inactive private burial chamber under the present sanctuary ventilated by four external vents in the exterior of the east wall of the chancel. Route of access not known. The photograph shows the east wall of the chancel looking west. Four fresh-air vents mark the position of a burial chamber under the sanctuary floor. This is probably the private vault of the Shuttleworth family, and may date from the late eighteenth century.



Great Bowden. East wall of the chancel looking west.

**Hallaton, St Michael:** A low door set in the east wall gives access to the present sanctuary by a short flight of steps. Its purpose is unclear but it might be connected to the cult of St Morrell. (14) On balance there is no evidence that the internal arrangement of steps was designed to do anything but lead out on to the sanctuary floor, which was lower than at present. There is a 'chancel store' immediately under the sanctuary platform, however, there is more than enough room for a full-height crypt without having to dig away much of the natural slope.

**Noseley, St Mary (private chapel):** Described by Nichols as 'a chancel store below nave', (15) this is a 14 metre (approx) long by 3 metre (approx) wide pit below the chancel. The vault lies on the east-west axis and is vented by slots in the south and east walls. Access is by brick stairs set centrally in the central aisle and covered by wooden traps. Most of the burials are in wooden coffins. There a few lead coffins – the oldest are at the west end and are of the rare anthropoid type. Only a few have survived elsewhere, mostly from the seventeenth century, but these are thought

to be much earlier, perhaps from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. (16) The chapel is private with no public access.

**Prestwold, St Andrew (ordinary peculiar):** Active private burial vault of the Packe family. A full-height brick-lined chamber runs under the vestry and across the line of the chancel about 4-5 metres from the east end. Believed to date from no earlier than the eighteenth century, and is probably contemporary to the reconstruction of the east end of the chancel. (17) Access is by brick stairs in the vestry and coffin slide in the centre of the chancel. All the burials are in lead-lined coffins in individual *loculi* resting on slate shelves. (18)

**Whitwick, St John Baptist:** Single-arch vaulted chamber or undercroft (?) of indeterminate use possibly only to provide structural support to flying chancel extension. More probably it is to provide essential access to an inspection chamber for maintenance of a culverted stream that runs under the church. The trap door to the inspection chamber is in the south-west corner of the 'undercroft'. (19)

*Under the nave*

**Birstall, St James the Greater:** Large void(s) detected immediately to the west of the chancel – thought to be a burial vault or vaults, but might be a central stairway to an early crypt.

**Claybrooke, St Peter:** A burial vault containing 6 coffins belonging to the Dicey family was seen in 1964 when a new heating duct broke through the vault ceiling. The chamber lies across the central portion of the nave just west of the chancel and is thought to have been entered by a brick stairs from the south aisle. (20)

**Prestwold, St Andrew:** Full-height burial vault seen recently by the owner. Slightly to the south of the main axis at the east end of nave.

*Under the aisles*

**Bottesford, St Mary:** Inactive private burial vault of the Earls of Rutland under the east end of the north aisle.

**Great Dalby, St Swithun:** There is documentary evidence for stairs access to a burial (?) vault under the south aisle. (21) The site of the trap door is thought to have been located about 3 metres west of the east end of the aisle, inside and right against the south wall. Possibly the vault lies under the immediate exterior below the existing concrete path. (22)

*Leicestershire Historian 2012*

**Great Easton, St Andrew:** A brick-lined vault under the east end of the south aisle, built by Thomas Waldram in c1536, has been documented. (23) There is a private burial vault associated with the former chantry chapel, immediately over it. Access is via the present boiler room, but the original access was by stairs from the south aisle still *in situ* but now blocked. No coffins survive.

**Hallaton, St Michael:** Private burial vault under the east end of the north aisle. Access is by external steps to a door at the west end of the aisle.

**The Birstall 'lost-crypt'**

A subterranean void below the chancel was hypothesised by Pevsner (24). A recent metrical survey by the author determined the sequence of building alteration required to build the vault. Enquiries lead to the discovery of the existence of a photographic record taken at the time of an exploration of the vault some time in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The footprint of the brick-lined chamber dating to the Georgian period revealed in these photographs confirmed the conclusions of the metrical survey, as well as reinforcing the probability that it was occupying the void created by a much earlier chamber. Given the date and geometry of the immediate superstructure, then it is highly probable that this was the original pre-Conquest crypt that has been 'lost'. (25)

A survey of Leicestershire churches, currently in progress, has found other examples of the 'lost-crypt' type, although the crypt chambers have long since been demolished and back-filled. Examples found so far are at Foxton, St Andrew; Great Easton, St Andrew; Hathern, SS Peter & Paul; Lockington, All Saints, and Queniborough, St Mary. (26)

The author would welcome information that will correct and extend the survey. He can be contacted at [steve@berkeleycottage.co.uk](mailto:steve@berkeleycottage.co.uk)

**References:**

1. 'Crypt: A vault, often located under a chancel or chancel aisle, containing an altar and usually used for burials.' *English Heritage Thesaurus of Monument Types*, [www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/chr](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/chr)
2. J. Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of the Saints in the Early Christian West c300-c1200*, (Clarendon Press, 2000), Oxford Historical Monographs, pp.176-206.
3. S. Mitchell, *Hand-list of pre-Conquest crypts in England*. (Unpublished, updated 2012).
4. [www.bamburghresearchproject.co.uk/](http://www.bamburghresearchproject.co.uk/), and [www.stpaulschurchjarrow.com/](http://www.stpaulschurchjarrow.com/)
5. S. Mitchell, *Church of St James the Greater, Birstall, Leicestershire. a report on the lost-crypt*, (2007), Historic Environment Record (HER) ref: MLE 13820, [www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/)

6. Personal communication with Mr Pochin of Barkby Hall.

7. R. J. Ivens, *Archaeological Recording Action at the Church of St Denys, Kelmarsh, Northamptonshire*. (R. J. Ivens, 2007).

8. N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland*. (Penguin, 1984), 2nd ed, rev. by Elizabeth Williamson. see also [www.stmarysbottesford.co.uk/history/history.php](http://www.stmarysbottesford.co.uk/history/history.php)

9. J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, (J. Nichols, 1795), vol. 2, pt 1, p.122ff.

10. A. Herbert, 'The Church of St Peter, Little Claybrooke', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 12 (1912), pp.197-200. The author has placed a copy of his present findings in the church for public inspection.

11. Pevsner, (1984), op.cit.

12. J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, (1795), Vol II Part 1, p175ff.

13. Pevsner, (1984), op.cit.

14. G. Jones, *Saints in the Landscape*. (Tempus, 2007), pp.129-31.

15. J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, (J. Nichols, 1795), vol 2, pt 2, p.739ff.

16. Personal communication from Sir Arthur Hazlerigg of Noseley Hall.

17. Pevsner, (1984), op.cit.

18. Personal communication from Mr S Packe-Drury-Lowe.

19. Access by kind permission of the Vicar. A full history of this unusual structure can be found in *A Guide to St John the Baptist Church, Whitwick* by John Colledge, published privately, c2000.

20. From a report written by the Rev H. V. Atkinson, April 1964, Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR): DE4912/40/1. My kind thanks to Mr N. C. Jenkins for supplying this information.

21. Report by the Architects, Goddard & Paget. May 1886, and a Faculty dated 29th March 1887.

22. My kind thanks to Steve Houghton and Annie Johnson for their time and enthusiasm as well as making various documents available to me.

23. G. F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes*, (1929-30), 4 vols.

24. Pevsner, (1984), op.cit.

25. My kind thanks to Tony Bloxham, Churchwarden for making the crypt photos available to me.

26. From various work by the author of this article including: *Foxton, Leicestershire: the lost-crypt*, (in preparation), A talk given to the Great Easton Heritage Society by the author c2002; *A short report on the south chancel wall at the church of St Peter, Hathern* for the Churchwardens following a field trip in 2007; *St Nicholas, Lockington, Leicestershire: a brief analysis of the early structure and its probable morphological development*, (2008 – submitted to the HER), Correspondence with Rosemary Smith, Churchwarden, Queniborough.