



CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS, WILDEN, BEDFORDSHIRE

PROGRAMME OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS

Albion Archaeology Project No: CNW943

Report No: 2004/4

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Introduction

A Faculty was granted for the construction of new toilet and kitchen facilities in the base of the tower at Wilden Parish Church with associated new drainage works in the churchyard. The Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, David Baker, stipulated that ground reduction works and drainage excavations in the churchyard would need to be undertaken archaeologically unless pre-works evaluation could demonstrate the absence of significant archaeological deposits. These requirements were detailed in his Brief.¹ Albion Archaeology was invited by the project architect, Bruce Deacon acting on behalf of the Parochial Church Council, to undertake the evaluation. A Project Design² was submitted by Albion Archaeology detailing a proposed methodology for evaluation of potential archaeological deposits. This was approved by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor on 6th September 2003.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Mark Phillips, Lawrence Coulter and Adrian Woolmer. The project was managed by Reuben Thorpe (Project Officer) and Drew Shotliff (Operations Manager). This report has been prepared by Mark Phillips (Assistant Project Officer) with figures prepared by Joan Lightning (CAD technician).

The fieldwork was carried out between Monday 22nd and Monday 29th September 2003. Evaluation work within the tower comprised lifting of the stone flagstone flooring and excavation of two evaluation trenches, approximately 1.5m by 0.75m in extent and up to a maximum 0.4m deep. Excavation of the trenches for associated drainage works was carried out by the main contractors, A P Lewis, at the same time as the archaeological evaluation and was monitored by the archaeologists on site. (See Figure 1 for location of evaluation trenches and pipe trenches).

During the course of the evaluation, the work was monitored by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor. On the basis of his observations he recommended that no further archaeological intervention was required. Mitigation measures comprised

¹ Brief for Archaeological Evaluation and Reporting at the Church of St Nicolas, Wilden, Bedfordshire. David Baker, Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, 21st August 2003.

² Church of St Nicholas, Wilden, Bedfordshire. Project Design for Archaeological Field Evaluation. Albion Archaeology Document 2003/44. 29th August 2003.



modification of the proposed building work to preserve archaeological deposits *in situ* beneath the floor of the tower.

Historical Background

The church consists of a nave, chancel, west tower and south porch. The earliest documentary mention of the church in Wilden dates from 1231.³ The majority of the building is believed to date mainly from the 15th century with a few architectural elements surviving from an earlier building.⁴

Results of Evaluation Trenches within Tower (Figures 2 and 3)

Floor Surface

The current floor surface consists of flagstones (1). These are laid in rows of unequal width orientated east-west. The slabs appear to be machine cut, with uniform finish; they are exactly the same thickness with perfectly straight edges and 90° corners. The corners of the slabs are set on circular pads of cement (2) which are laid on a thin skim of hard cement (3) used to cover an earlier floor surface below.

Earlier Floor Surface

An earlier floor was found beneath the flagstone flooring. In trench 1 it consisted of limestone slabs (4) and in trench 2 a mixture of the same limestone slabs and tiles (13). Most of the slabs were sub-rectangular or polygonal in outline and were laid in an irregular pattern with smaller stones infilling gaps. One area in trench 1, towards the west door of the tower, appeared more regular with rectangular slabs measuring up to 500mm by 400mm. Throughout, the surface was uneven and heavily worn with many of the slabs broken by numerous cracks. The tiles found in trench 2 were of two sizes, 160mm square by 30mm thick and 130mm square by 25mm thick. They were of unglazed, red clay. The upper surfaces of many were covered by a thin, dark grey deposit, which may have been remnants of a floor finish or accumulated grime. The position of the tiles suggests that they formed a strip, approximately 1m wide, along the east side of the tower floor.

The limestone slabs and tiles were set on a thin layer of mortar (5). In trench 1 the mortar lay above a layer of gritty sand (6) which may have formed a thin bedding layer for the stone and tile floor surface.

Levelling Deposit

A layer of mid yellow brown, sandy loam (14), up to 130mm thick, lay beneath the mortar layer (5) in trench 2. This relatively clean, homogenous layer may have been deposited to level up the floor prior to the construction of the limestone (4) and tile (13) floor.

Cut Feature

In trench 1, a shallow cut [7] was found, sealed by the construction deposits (5 and 6) associated with the limestone flooring (4). This was a shallow, flat based cut 120mm deep. Only the western side of the feature was observed in plan; it was straight and

³ Victoria County History

⁴ 'Bedfordshire Parish Churches in the Nineteenth Century', Part III Parishes S to Y, ed Chris Pickford, *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society* 79 (2000) 807-813.



orientated north-south. The fill of the feature (8) consisted of loose mid yellow brown silty loam. No evidence was found to suggest a function for this feature.

Soil Layers

Layer (9), yellow brown clay silt in trench 1 may be the equivalent of layer (15), yellow grey silty clay in trench 2. The former contained two undiagnostic pot sherds (9g) in shell tempered (type B07) and sand tempered (type C01) fabrics⁵, dateable to the 12th-13th century. Layer (10) in trench 1, yellow brown clay silt with frequent grit and stones probably equates to (16) in trench 2, yellow grey silty clay with frequent stones. Layer (16) yielded seven undiagnostic pot sherds (73g) in shell tempered (types B07 and B09) and sand tempered (types C01 and C05) fabrics. With the exception of two sherds of Lyveden/Stanion ware (type B09), a regional import from Northamptonshire, all are of local manufacture. All are datable to the 12th-13th century. Trench 1 contained an additional layer of yellow brown clay silt (11) which lay directly above the natural stratum (12).

These soil layers may be make-up layers. The stony, mid layer (10, 16) in particular has the appearance of material that might have been deliberately selected and deposited to consolidate the floor.

Foundations of Tower

In trench 2 an area of sub-angular and irregular stones, set in mortar and clay (20), was found in the northernmost part of the trench, towards the north wall of the tower. Only the upper part of this masonry was observed. There was no sign of a separate foundation cut so it is likely to have completely filled its construction cut. At its eastern limit, this masonry appeared to terminate against the foundation of the western end of the nave (19), described below. This masonry may have been part of a foundation raft for the tower or it may belong to an earlier phase of construction (see conclusions section below).

In the trench excavated by the building contractors through the churchyard, the foundations of the tower were examined where their trench reached the west side of the tower. The foundation under the southern side of the west door consisted of roughly squared stones, the largest of which measured more than 750mm long and approximately 300mm square.

Foundations of West End of Nave

In the easternmost part of trench 2 there was a clearly defined wall footing (19) constructed of sub-angular stones, mostly around 100mm in diameter set in mortar. This is almost certainly the remains of the foundations of a former west end of the nave. This foundation was probably constructed within a foundation trench [17], backfilled with yellow brown silty clay, very similar to the surrounding natural clay. The existence of this foundation trench cannot be definitely confirmed, it was only recognized in plan based on slight differences in the texture of its fill and the surrounding clay.

⁵ Fabric types identified in accordance with the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series, held by Albion Archaeology.



Natural Strata

A layer (12) interpreted as undisturbed natural strata was observed in the base of both trenches. This consisted of yellow brown slightly silty clay with occasional small stones and flecks of chalk.

Monitoring of Drain Trench

A trench was excavated along the line of the footpath that runs inside the western perimeter of the churchyard for the insertion of foul water drainage pipes (Figure 1). This work was undertaken by the main contractors using a mini-digger. The work was monitored at frequent intervals by the archaeologists excavating the evaluation trenches within the tower.

The trench was cut through relatively homogenous yellow brown clay soils. No evidence of human remains was noted within the trench other than one small fragment of skull. This fragment was located in the continuation of the trench outside of the present graveyard, in the church car park and was re-buried within the excavation inside the churchyard.

The only significant observations in this trench occurred where the trench met the threshold of the western doorway of the tower. The foundations of the tower were exposed at this point and are described above.

Conclusions

The present flooring within the tower is a modern feature dating from the late 19th or 20th century. This flooring is constructed of machine cut stone using modern techniques and materials.

The earlier floor surface, constructed of limestone slabs and tiles probably dates from the late post-medieval or modern period. The wear and tear on the slabs and tiles suggests that they were in use for a considerable period before the floor was renewed. The churchwardens' accounts⁶ record that in 1830, floors were paved with brick and tiles. It is possible that the area of tile flooring found in the tower formed part of this work.

The shallow, flat based cut feature found in trench 1 predated the floor surface discussed above but is otherwise undated. Insufficient of this feature was observed to ascertain its purpose.

The series of soil layers found (9-11 and 15-16) is of uncertain origin though it is suggested that some may have been deliberately imported and deposited. A small amount of pottery recovered from layers (9) and (16) dates from the 12th-13th century.

Masonry in trench 2 is interpreted as a former west end to the nave and part of the foundations of the tower. The soil layers discussed in the above section overlie both of these foundations. If the pottery in these layers accurately dates them to the 12th-13th century, then the foundations must be of a similar or earlier date. If that were the case then the foundations would be remains of an earlier predecessor to the present building,

⁶ 'Bedfordshire Parish Churches in the Nineteenth Century', Part III Parishes S to Y, ed Chris Pickford, *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society* 79 (2000) 807-813.



which has been interpreted as being largely of 15th century construction. In this case, the pebble foundation raft on the northern edge of the trench (20) could perhaps be reinterpreted as remains of the foundations of an earlier tower or perhaps a buttress situated on the corner of the earlier nave.

Context Summaries

Context	Type	Description	Trench
1	Stone floor	Current floor within tower made of machine cut flagstones.	1 & 2
2	Cement pads	Rounded pads of cement used to support the flagstones.	1 & 2
3	Cement layer	Thin skim of hard cement used to cover a former floor surface (5 & 13) prior to construction of flagstone floor.	1 & 2
4	Limestone slabs	Floor layer comprised of limestone slabs laid in irregular pattern, up to 0.5m by 0.4m and 50mm thick. The slabs were heavily worn and broken.	1 & 2
5	Mortar Layer	Thin layer of mortar used as bedding layer for limestone flooring.	1 & 2
6	Levelling layer	Mid yellow brown gritty sand. Preparation layer for floor (4).	1
7	Cut	Shallow flat based cut 120mm deep with straight west side orientated north-south.	1
8	Fill	Loose mid yellow brown silty loam with occasional stones.	1
9	Layer	Mid yellow brown clay silt with occasional small stones. Two pot sherds (9g) in shell tempered (type B07) and sand tempered (type C01) fabrics, dateable to the 12 th -13 th century.	1
10	Layer	Mid yellow brown clay silt with frequent grit and small/medium stones.	1
11	Layer	Mid yellow brown clay silt with occasional small/medium stones.	1
12	Layer	Mid yellow brown slightly silty clay with occasional small stones and chalk flecks. Natural strata or subsoil layer.	1 & 2
13	Masonry	Tiled surface. Unglazed, red earthenware tiles in two sizes found adjacent to limestone slabs (4).	2
14	Layer	Mid yellow brown sandy loam with frequent small stones. Possible deliberate levelling, make-up deposit put down prior to construction of floor (4) and (13).	2
15	Soil layer	Mid yellow grey silty clay with occasional small stones. Possible equivalent of layer (9) in trench 1.	2
16	Soil layer	Mid yellow grey silty clay with frequent small stones and occasional medium/large stones. Possible equivalent of layer (10) in trench 1. Seven pot sherds (73g) in shell tempered (types B07 and B09) and sand tempered (types C01 and C05) fabrics, all datable to the 12 th -13 th century.	2
17	Cut	Possible construction cut for nave wall foundation (19).	2
18	Fill	Mid yellow brown silty clay, occasional small stones. Very similar to natural (12)	2
19	Masonry	Sub-angular stones c.100mm in diameter, set in mortar. Foundation of former west end of nave.	2
20	Masonry	Sub-angular/irregular stones up to 150mm, set in mortar and clay. Possible foundation raft of tower.	2

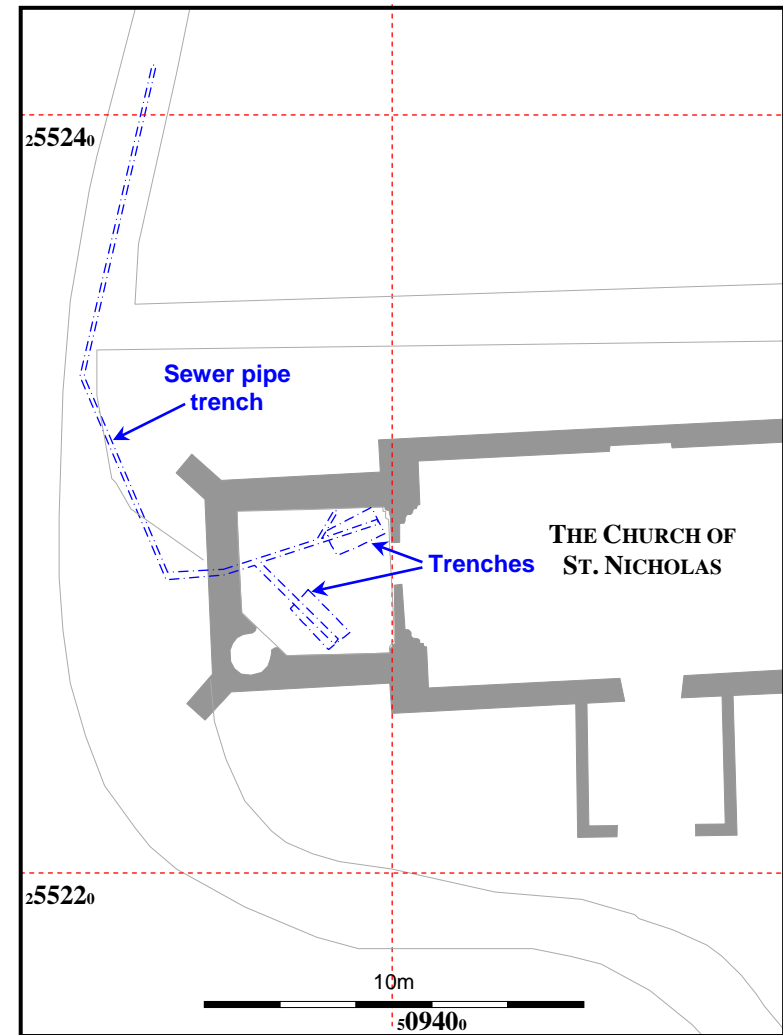
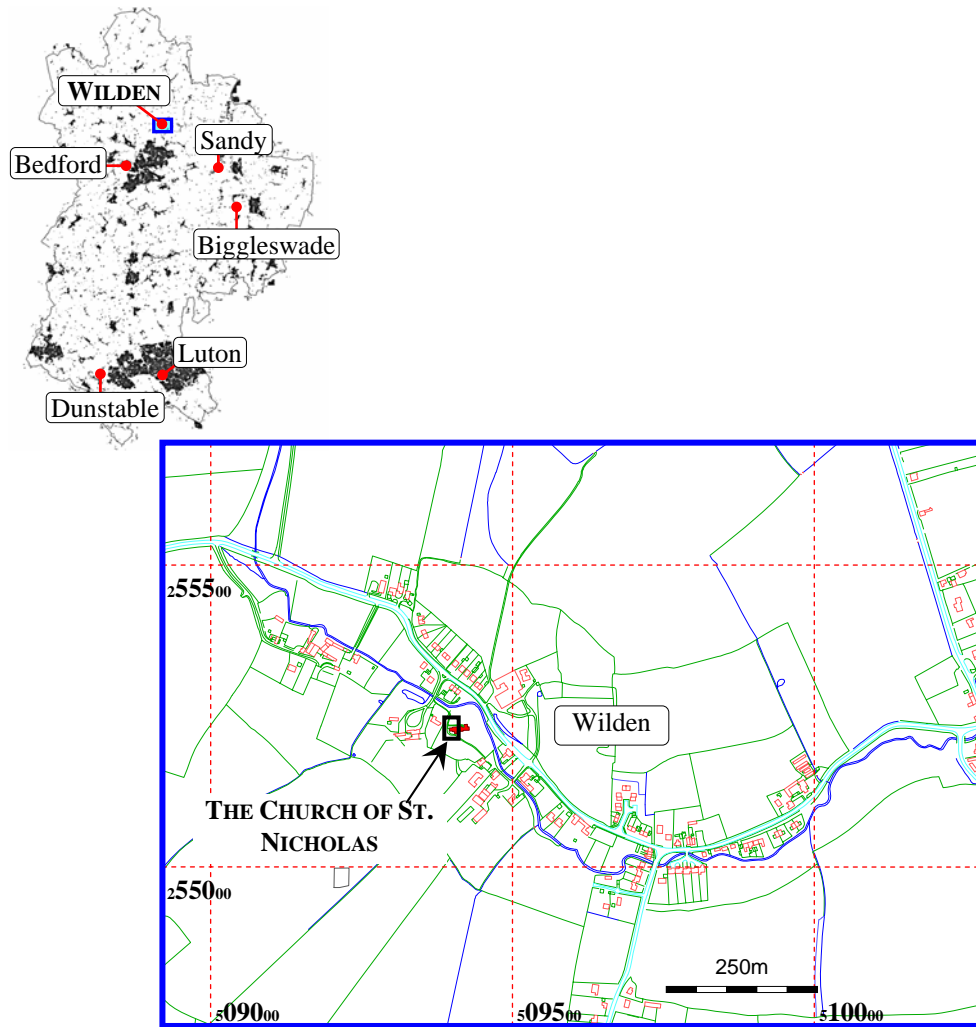
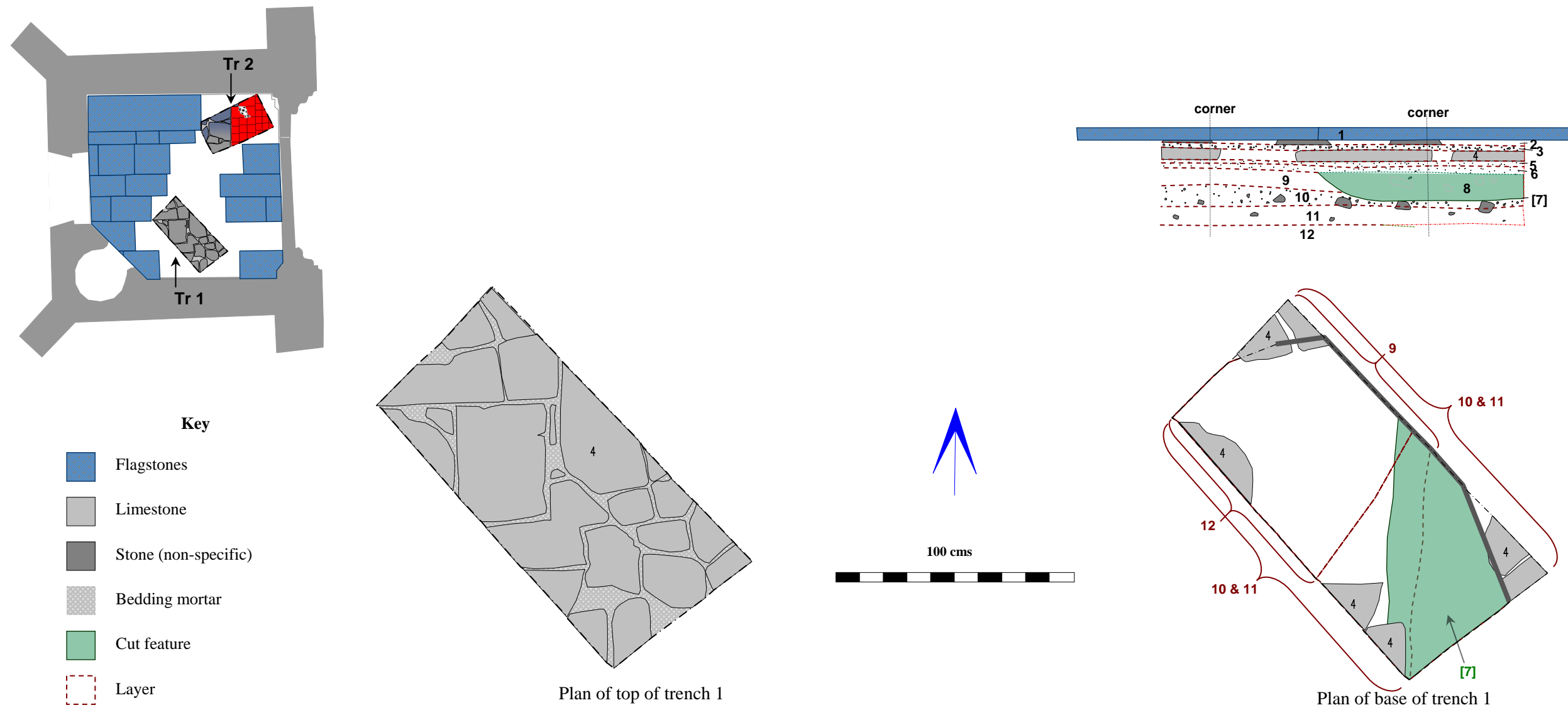


Figure 1: Location of site

Base map reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, by Bedfordshire County Council, County Hall, Bedford. OS Licence No. 076465(LA). © Crown Copyright.



Photograph of top of trench 1



Photograph showing cut [7] prior to removal of layers 9-11



Photograph of base of trench 1

Figure 2: Trench 1, all features plan and section drawing

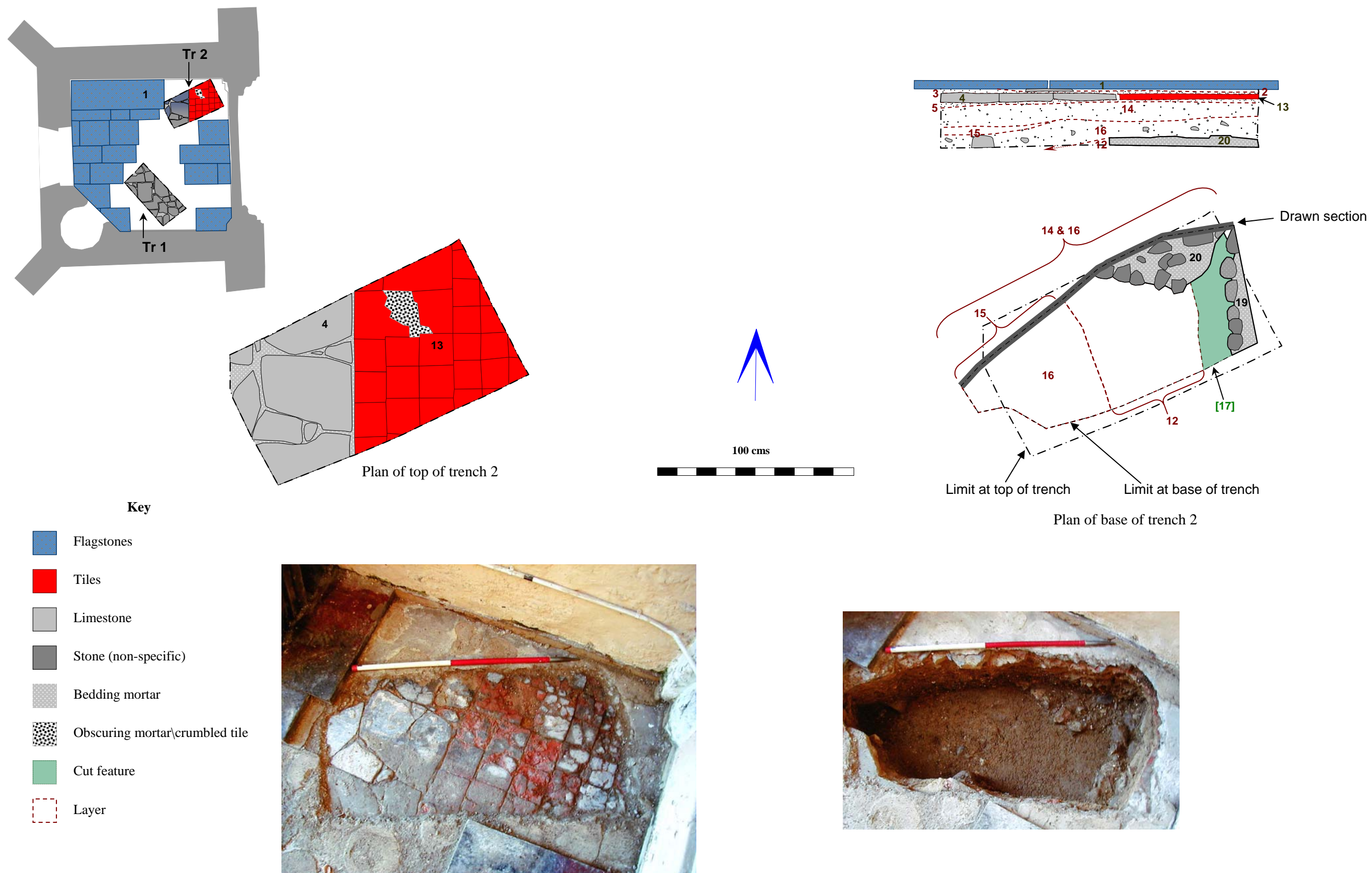


Figure 3: Trench 2, all features plan and section drawing