



THE CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, HARLINGTON, BEDFORDSHIRE: Precautionary Archaeological Attendance and Reporting

Albion Archaeology Project No: SM1205

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Introduction

In November 2006 three service trenches were excavated as part of a project to install floodlighting at the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Harlington, Bedfordshire (NGR: TL 377 305). The Diocesan Archaeological Advisor issued a brief¹, recommending that the work be observed archaeologically in case there was a need to record evidence discovered or disturbed by it.

Albion Archaeology was commissioned by the Parochial Church Council to undertake archaeological monitoring of the ground disturbance during insertion of the electricity cable for the new outdoor lighting.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Alison Bell (Archaeological Supervisor). The project was managed by Mark Phillips (Project Officer), under the overall management of Drew Shotliff (Operations Manager). This report has been prepared by Alison Bell; the figures were produced by Joan Lightning (CAD Technician).

The site archive, consisting of documentary records created during fieldwork, will be stored by Albion Archaeology until its deposition at Luton Museum. The museum is at the present time unable to accept new archives.

Site Description

The Church of St Mary the Virgin is situated within the historic core of the village of Harlington, approximately 10km to the north-west of the centre of Luton (Figure 1).

The churchyard is located at c.110m OD and slopes gently down to the north. At the northern edge of the churchyard, there is a steep drop down to the road beyond. The underlying geology at Harlington is Gault Clay, though the churchyard itself is on a pocket of Upper Greensand.

¹ DAA (January 2006) *Brief for precautionary archaeological attendance and reporting at the church of St Mary the Virgin, Harlington, Bedfordshire*



Historical Background

The main fabric of the church dates from the early to mid 14th century. The west tower was built in the 15th century. The south porch and vestry were built in the late 15th century and the nave heightened during the early 16th century. Documentary evidence indicates the presence of a church or chapel on the site in the late 12th century².

Fieldwork

The observation of the cable trench took place on the 21st November 2006. Excavation of the trenches was carried out by the site contractors with an archaeologist in attendance (See Figure 2 for location of the trenches).

Trench Location

Three trenches were excavated in the western part of the churchyard. A central trench began at the southern wall of the tower and extended westwards. The other two trenches branched off from the central trench towards the north and south. The central trench was 21.4m long and 0.15m wide. The southern trench was 18.70m long and 0.20m wide. The northern trench was 25.6m long and 0.15m wide. All of the trenches were excavated to a depth of approximately 0.45m. The north and central trenches were excavated with a trenching machine and the southern trench was excavated by hand.

Observations

No archaeological features were visible in either section or plan within the trenches.

The overburden within the trenches was homogenous across the site and consisted of 0.15m-0.20m of topsoil (100), overlying 0.25-0.30m of sandy silt subsoil (101). The bottom of the trench never exceeded the depth of this deposit, which contained small quantities of disarticulated human bone, tile, brick and stone. The majority of the human bone recovered was from the southern trench.

Towards the church wall in the northern trench, four tiles were recovered. These were of the type used to form garden borders or path edging, with a decorative, shaped upper edge. The tiles showed signs of wear and in some places were broken. The northern trench produced two pieces of disarticulated human bone, four impressed tiles and two pieces of modern pottery. The tiles were all of uniform size (0.15m by 0.15m) and were machine made. They were flat on one face with an impressed design on the other. Two of the tiles had a simple square in the centre of the tile; the other two were divided into 9 squares with a lion stamp in the centre square (see photo, Figure 2).

A single piece of bone was recovered from the central trench, along with several pieces of brick and a large piece of worked stone. The worked stone was 0.76m long, 0.46m wide and 0.06m thick. The stone was made from a soft sandy limestone and had two worked edges; the others appeared to have been broken and worn. One face retained some mortar.

The tile and worked stone were retained by the church, and human remains were reburied.

² Pickford, C. 1998, *Bedfordshire Churches in the Nineteenth Century: Part II Parishes H to R*, Bedfordshire Historic Record Society Vol. 77



Conclusions

The results of the observations demonstrate that the trenches were cut through layers of topsoil and subsoil that contained a small amount of modern debris and disarticulated human remains.

The tiles from the southern trench may have been derived from a flowerbed or edging for a path. The trench crosses a gravelled path leading to the south door of the church. The impressed tiles from the northern trench are likely to be floor tiles of 19th or 20th century manufacture. The impressed designs probably served to key into a mortar-bedding layer. The worked stone from the central trench could have once been part of a burial monument, graveyard structure or part of the church building. However, it was not found *in situ* and the plain worked faces give no indication of its former use.

No archaeological features or *in situ* burials were revealed in the course of the work.

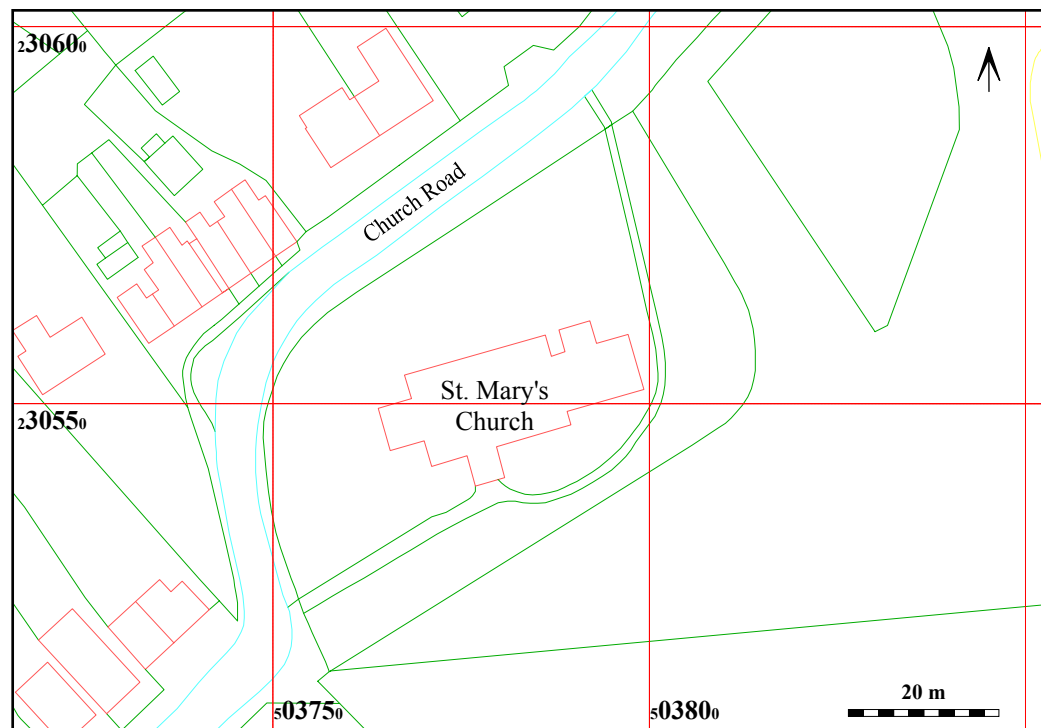
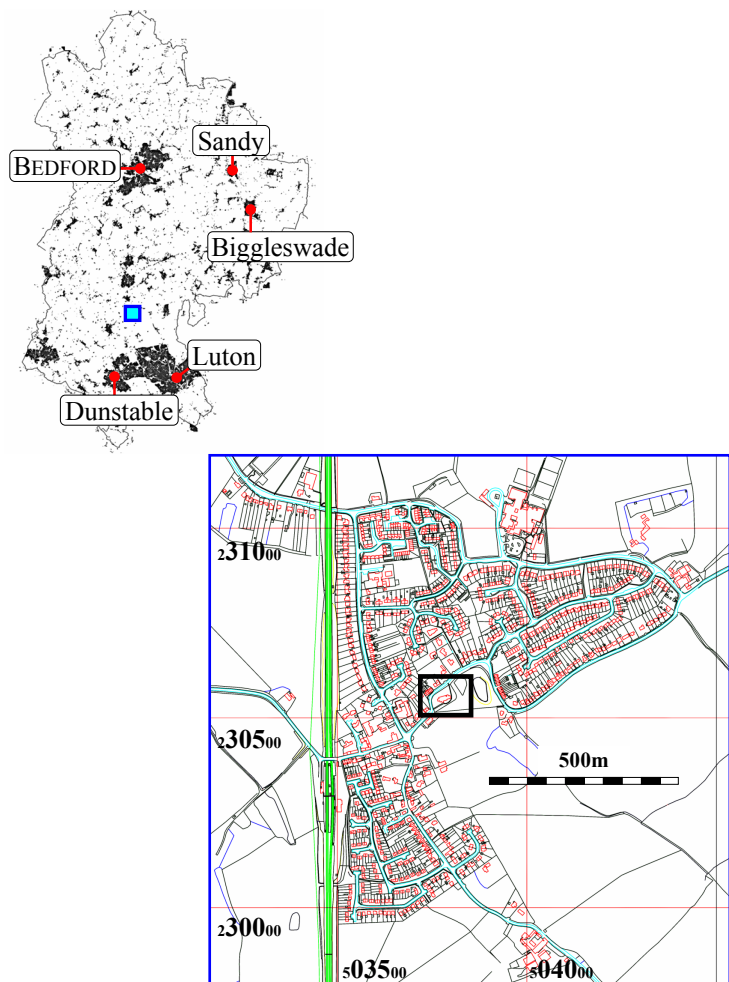
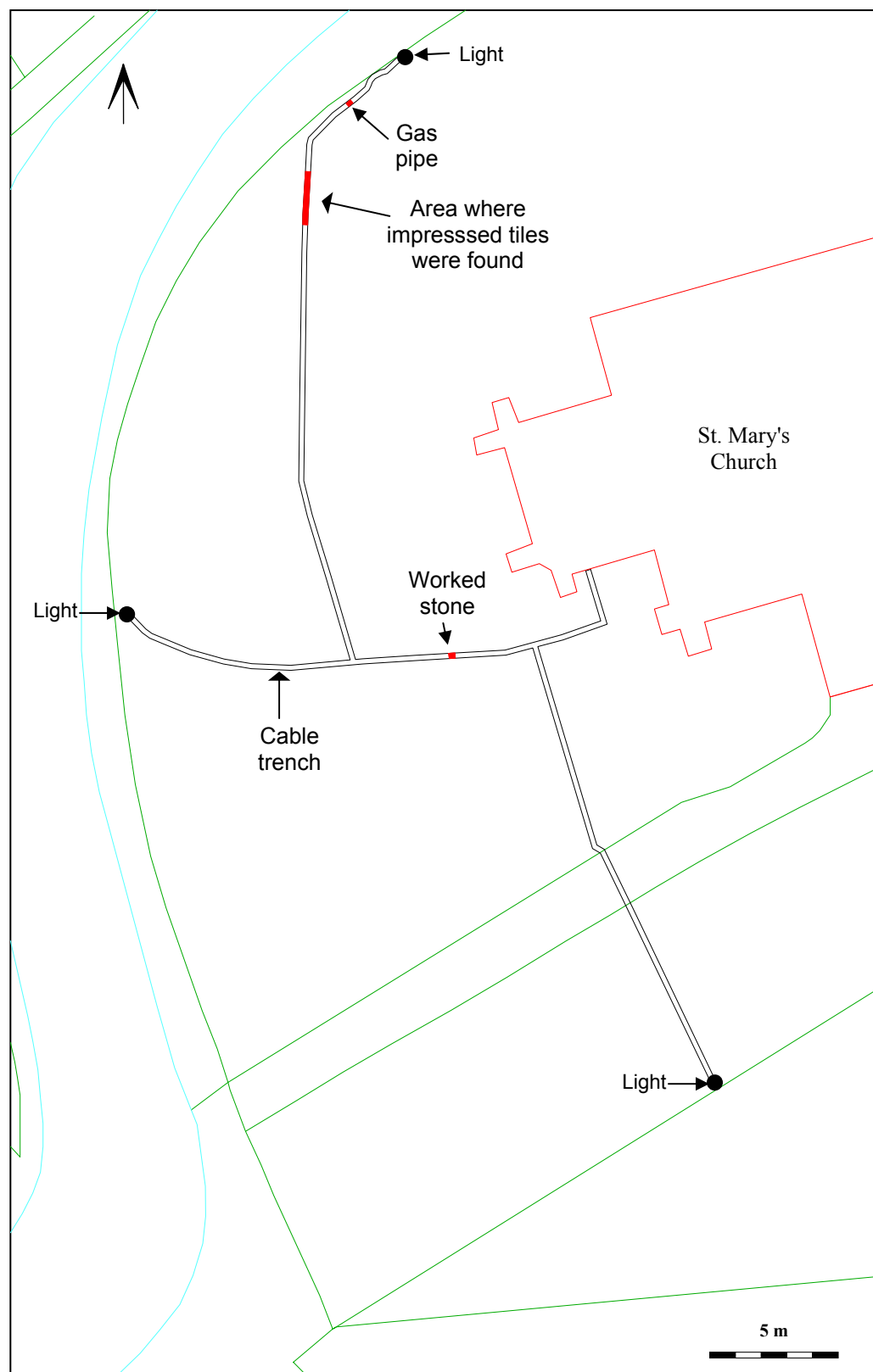


Figure 1: Site location map

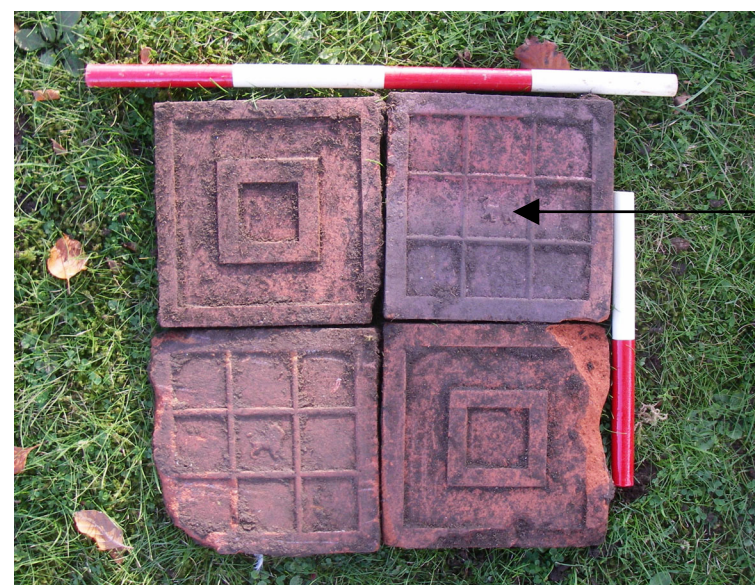
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St. Mary's Church: photomosaic view looking north



Southern cable trench: looking north



Impressed tiles (scales 20cm and 40cm)



Lion detail

Figure 2: Location of archaeological observations and selected photographs