THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES
BIDDENHAM
BEDFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Project: JB1432

Document: 2009/60
Version: 1.0

7th May 2009

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Produced for:
The Victor Farrar Partnership

On behalf of:
The Parochial Church Council

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Preface

Every effort has been made in the preparation of this document to provide as complete a summary as possible within the terms of the method statement. All statements and opinions in this document are offered in good faith. Albion Archaeology cannot accept responsibility for errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by a third party, or for any loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in this document.

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Albion Archaeology would like to acknowledge the assistance of the staff of the Victor Farrar Partnership and the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (David Baker) and the staff of Prestige Restoration.

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Version History

Version Number	Date of issue	Reason for Amendment
1.0	7th May 2009	n/a

Structure of the Report

After the introductory Section 1, this report presents the results watching brief (Section 2). This is followed by a brief conclusion (Section 3).

Key Terms

Throughout this report, the following terms or abbreviations are used:

Albion	Albion Archaeology
Client	Parochial Church Council (PCC)
Architect	The Victor Farrar Partnership
DAA	St. Albans Diocese Archaeological Adviser
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
Procedures Manual	*Procedures Manual Volume 1 Fieldwork*, 2nd Edition 2001. Bedfordshire County Council

Non-Technical Summary

Albion Archaeology was commissioned by the Victor Farrar Partnership on behalf of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of the Church of St James, Biddenham, Bedfordshire to undertake a programme of archaeological works during ground work for the construction of a French drain around the chancel and north aisle of the church. The church is situated towards the western limit of the present village of Biddenham, centred on NGR SP 501409 249937. An intermittent archaeological watching brief was undertaken between 14th and 21st April during the excavation of the trench for the drain. A trench up to 0.5m deep and 0.6m wide was excavated around the external walls of the chancel and north aisle.

The existing building history suggests that the present structure probably originated as a two cell nave and chancel in the 12th century with modifications to the chancel in the 14th century and the addition of the north aisle in the early 16th century.

Investigations on the chancel showed a different construction in the foundations of its eastern and western bays. The eastern part of the chancel was set on a foundation plinth, although no separate foundation was visible for the western part of the chancel. It is possible that the eastern end of the chancel was reconstructed or extended, perhaps in the 14th century when the east window was constructed.

Buttresses on the chancel appear to be additions, with differences to the adjacent wall foundations. The full relationship of the southern buttress to the western bay of the chancel could not be investigated due to a later addition on this side. It is suggested that the northern buttress could have been a later replacement constructed to stabilise the chancel wall which bulges outwards at this point. The masonry of the buttress contrasts with that of the nave and southern buttress. It is also larger than its southern counterpart.

The north aisle was produced in a single phase of construction during the early 16th century; the surviving construction contract is dated December AD1522. A vertical break in the lower part of its masonry shows where it was built against the existing masonry of the nave. This area is complicated by the disturbed appearance of the masonry in the angle between the chancel and the north aisle, which could have been a product of earlier constructional differences between the chancel and the nave.

The project archive will be deposited at Bedford Museum under accession code 2009/40.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As part of a program of works at the Church of St James, Biddenham, a French drain was to be created around the external walls of the north aisle and the chancel. The Diocesan Archaeological Adviser (DAA), for the Diocese of St Albans issued a brief (Baker 2008) which indicated the nature of the recommended archaeological response. Albion Archaeology was commissioned by the client's Architect, the Victor Farrar Partnership to carry out a scheme of archaeological works during the excavation of the drainage trenches.

1.2 Site Location and Description

The church is situated towards the western limit of the present village of Biddenham, centred on NGR SP 501409 249937 (Figure 1). At *c.*36.5m OD, the church occupies a slight rise with the ground gently sloping away, to both the river in the west and the village in the east. The church is *c.*300m from the River Great Ouse, which defines a wide loop enclosing Biddenham on three sides.

1.3 Historical and Architectural Background

The earliest surviving masonry in the church, the chancel arch and parts of the south wall of the nave, date from the 12th century (Pickford 1994, 114). Although only a small amount of structural evidence is known from this early period, it is considered most likely that the church would have been a two cell structure, consisting of the nave and chancel.

The tower was added in the 13th century at the west end. The original chancel was rebuilt or enlarged either before or during the 14th century when the large east window with reticulated tracery was added.

A significant building programme was undertaken in the 15th and early 16th century. The south porch and parvis, south aisle and upper stage of the tower were built during this period and new windows were inserted in the north and south walls of the chancel. The contract for the construction of the north aisle survives in the Public Record Office and is dated 16th December AD1522. It was commissioned by Sir William Boteler and constructed by John Laverok of St Albans.

In the mid-19th century repairs were undertaken to the roof. The latest major addition to the building was the vestry, added to the north-west corner of the building in 1974.

1.4 Previous Archaeological Work

During a previous phase of works (Albion 2002) a trench for a French drain was excavated around the exterior of the south aisle. A slight mismatch between the positioning of the foundations of the south aisle and the walls above, particularly at the corner buttress, were interpreted as possible evidence

of more than one phase of construction. Differences in the masonry of the porch and the south aisle also suggest that these belong to separate construction phases.

2. RESULTS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS

2.1 Introduction

Works by the building contractors began on 14th April. The first part of the work consisted of breaking out the concrete apron which extended 40cm from the base of walls around the chancel and the north aisle. Subsequently, the trench for the new drain was excavated and measured up to 60cm wide and 50cm deep. It narrowed in parts where it was constrained by *in-situ* grave markers and did not extend around the buttress on the north side of the chancel where a modern brick and concrete structure formed an obstruction. In some sections of the trench the top of a foundation plinth was uncovered. Where this was the case the building contractors did not extend the trench below the top of the plinth, leaving the foundation level of the masonry undisturbed.

Archaeological monitoring and recording took place on the 17th and 21st of April. Trenches were planned at a scale of 1:20 and photographed.

2.2 Observations

In the paragraphs below the results of the observations are described. The description of the trenches starts with the section of trench on the south side of the church closest to the nave and proceeds in an anti-clockwise direction around the chancel followed by the north aisle.

2.3 Chancel

The chancel measures 9.4m E-W and 6.1m N-S. It is built in roughly coursed limestone rubble with dressed stone quoins on the north-east and south-east corners. The north and south walls each have a single buttress built in limestone rubble. These are positioned asymmetrically, situated approximately two fifths of the length of the chancel from its eastern end. A door in the south wall has a pointed arch with a plain chamfer. The chancel has four windows. The two in the south wall and that in the north wall are in the perpendicular style. The east window is in the decorated style with reticulated tracery. The windows in the western bay of the chancel in both the north and south walls have been modified to raise the cills from a low level to a level similar to that of the other windows in the church. A small structure has been added to the outside of the south wall, between the buttress and the south door during the modern period. It has a rough-cast finish and tiled roof.

2.3.1 South wall of chancel

The western section of the trench along the south wall of the chancel was up to 0.5m deep (Plate 3). The lower part of the wall visible in this section of trench consisted of up to five courses of roughly coursed rubble masonry. The limestone masonry includes thin slabs and thicker blocks up to 0.3m long and up to 0.1m thick. There was no sign of a foundation plinth within the depth of the trench.

The central section chancel wall was obscured by the base of the small modern structure that had been added to the side of the building. This is nearly square in plan, measuring 1.2m from east to west by 1.1m from north to south. It appears to be situated on a relatively thin, *c.*0.15m thick, concrete raft foundation directly above soil.

The buttress on the south wall of the chancel measures 0.6m from east to west by 0.66m from north to south at its base (Plate 4). The buttress is on a roughly built foundation situated only 0.1m below the current ground level. The foundation projects only slightly beyond the face of the buttress (0.08m) and consists of random rubble with irregular limestone blocks with some pebbles. The limestone in the foundation included at least one block of soft, shelly limestone of a type not noticeable in the rest of the building.

The trench dug along the eastern section of the south chancel wall was 0.45m deep at the buttress, decreasing to 0.2m at the eastern end of the wall (Plate 4). The upper face of a foundation plinth was visible in the deepest part of the trench. The plinth projects 0.14m beyond the face of the wall and consists of blocks of limestone *c.*0.2m long. The foundation appeared to be continuing towards the east but was not exposed where the trench became shallower towards the east. Up to five courses of masonry were visible above the foundation in this part of the trench. This consists of roughly coursed rubble masonry comprising limestone in slabs up to 0.3m long by 0.1m thick and sub-square blocks up to 0.25m long. A lead pipe was observed which exits the wall just below ground level, 1.4m from the east end of the chancel. The pipe is 0.04m in diameter and projects 0.36m from the wall. A patch of mortar above the pipe would appear to be the repair to the wall for the hole created for the pipe.

2.3.2 East wall of chancel

The trench against this part of the building varied from only 0.1m deep in the centre to 0.2m deep at the corners. Only a small section of the wall below ground level could be seen and no useful observations can be made.

2.3.3 North wall of chancel

The trench next to the eastern end of the north wall of the chancel was excavated to a depth of 0.34m (Plate 5). In this section of the trench the upper surface of a foundation plinth was partially visible in the base of the trench. The remains that could be seen comprised irregular or broken limestone towards the east end and a rectangular slab adjacent to the buttress. The foundation projected 0.24m beyond the face of the chancel wall. The wall above the foundation consisted of four courses of masonry within the trench. This consists of roughly coursed limestone masonry constructed mainly of unshaped blocks up to 0.25m long and less than 0.1m thick with some thinner slabs.

The buttress on the north wall of the chancel projects 1m from the face of the wall at its base and is 0.8m wide from east to west (Plate 5). It is built in roughly coursed limestone masonry with large sub-rectangular limestone

blocks up to 0.5m long and 0.2m thick. Within the depth of the trench up to three courses of masonry were visible with no evidence for a separate foundation. The northern edge of the buttress appeared to have been damaged below ground level by the construction of a brick and concrete lined channel that runs parallel to its northern face.

The trench next to the western end of the north wall of the chancel was excavated to a depth of 0.45m (Plate 6). No evidence of a distinct foundation was seen along this section of the chancel wall to the west of the buttress. The walling visible within the trench consisted of up to five courses of rubble masonry. The largest blocks in the wall, measuring up to 0.4m long and over 0.1m thick, are situated in the part of the wall closest to the junction with the nave. The remains of a disused brick and concrete lined duct containing a broken cast iron pipe met the wall *c.*1.5m to the west of the buttress. This was presumably part of a heating system.

2.4 North aisle

The north aisle is constructed of roughly coursed rubble masonry with ashlar masonry for the facing of the buttresses and quoins. The windows are in a late perpendicular style. There is a diagonal buttress on the north-west corner, a single buttress in the middle of the north wall and a blocked door towards the western end of the north wall. The base of the north aisle has a plain chamfered course just above ground level and a moulded chamfer above. The mouldings are continuous along the east and north walls and around the buttresses. The upper section of the aisle has gargoyles and is finished with a straight parapet and pinnacles at the corners.

2.4.1 East wall of north aisle

The trench dug along the east wall of the north aisle was 0.2m deep for most of its length but deepened to 0.45m below ground level at its southern end where the wall of the aisle joins the north side of the chancel.

The foundation plinth for the wall is 0.2m below ground level. It consists of rectangular and irregular shaped blocks of varying size resulting in an irregular foundation projecting between 0.08m and 0.24m from the base of the wall. The foundation is more irregular towards the south and in the last 0.6m there is no trace of a separate foundation plinth.

The base of the wall below ground level consists of two courses of roughly coursed rubble masonry above the foundation plinth. This included blocks of limestone up to 0.4m long and 0.12m thick. Changes in the masonry are evident at the southern end of the wall close to the junction with the chancel wall (Plate 6). A clearly defined vertical break lies 0.6m from the north wall of the chancel. This was visible from the base of the trench up to the lower side of the moulded chamfer, around 0.6m above ground level. The plain chamfered course of stone terminates on this line whilst the moulded chamfer continues over it. The position of this vertical break corresponds to the likely location of the north-east corner of the nave before the addition of the north aisle. At the junction with the chancel wall the masonry appears very irregular

with small jumbled blocks and it is possible that this represents another break in the masonry.

2.4.2 North-east buttress of north aisle

The north-east corner of the north aisle has a diagonal buttress, projecting 0.6m from the junction with the north and east walls and 0.6m wide at its base (Plate 7). It is constructed of squared and faced limestone. It was set on a foundation of irregular limestone blocks in mortar forming a base *c.*1.2m long and 1.1m wide.

2.4.3 North wall of north aisle

Along this wall the trench was dug up to 0.3m below the ground level to the top of the foundation plinth. The top of the foundation consists of approximately rectangular unshaped slabs of limestone between 0.12m and 0.4m long, laid in a fairly regular pattern, resulting in slightly sinuous outer edge that projected between 0.04m and 0.14m from the base of the wall. The foundation for the central buttress is made of flat limestone slabs set in mortar forming a regular square base projecting 0.8m from the face of the wall and 0.8m wide.

The base of the wall below ground level consists of up to three courses of roughly coursed rubble masonry set on the foundation plinth. It is constructed of thin slabs and larger blocks up to 0.4m long and 0.1m thick. The lower part of the buttress in the mid part of the wall is constructed of ashlar masonry set directly on the foundation.

2.5 Graveyard soil

The upper part of the soil profile consisted of a dark brown soil. In the lower parts of the trench the soil was mid yellowish brown sandy silt that contained occasional small stones and small fragments of limestone. The fragments of stone are presumably waste material resulting from building works. The greatest concentration, including some larger material, occurred in the section of trench adjacent to the east wall of the north aisle. It is possible that some of this material represents the backfill of a construction trench for the foundations.

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Discussion

A general building history based on the dating of surviving remains and documentary records can be constructed for the church. The earliest surviving fabric in the building dates from the 12th century with the chancel arch and part of the south wall of the nave dated to this period. It is likely that the present church originated as a two cell structure, nave and chancel, during the 12th century. The insertion of a large east window indicates that work took place on the chancel during the 14th century. Documentary evidence and the architectural style of the north aisle give a date for its construction in the early 16th century.

3.1.1 Chancel

The character of the masonry of the chancel is similar throughout. However there are differences between the eastern and western parts at foundation level. The walls in the western section of the chancel have no distinct foundation plinth whereas the walls of the eastern section have an offset foundation plinth. This difference suggests the two parts indicate separate phases of construction. It is not possible to say whether such a difference represents a short break in construction or if the parts belong to completely different periods. It is possible that the eastern end is a later addition or rebuild. The presence of the large decorated window in the eastern end suggests this part of the building was subject to some reworking during the 14th century.

The chancel buttresses appear to be applied to the walls as later additions particularly the northern one. The masonry above ground supports this impression, although it is difficult to be certain due to the effects of modern pointing. Below ground there is no evidence for the buttresses being integrated into the masonry of the wall with differences in the details of the foundations. However, it should be noted that the western side of the southern buttress was not examined due to later additions in this area.

Details of the northern buttress suggest that it is a later addition or repair. Its masonry differs in character from that of the chancel and the southern buttress. It is marked by the use of larger, thicker stones, presumably obtained from a different source. The position of the buttress coincides with a noticeable outward bulge in the upper part of the wall. It is possible that the buttress was constructed to stabilise the north wall of the chancel, probably as a larger replacement for an earlier buttress at the same location.

3.1.2 North aisle

The north aisle is the product of a single phase of construction. A surviving contract for its construction is dated 16th December 1522. In the eastern end of the aisle a vertical break in the masonry probably represents the location where the foundations of the new construction were butted to the existing nave. The disturbed appearance of the masonry in the angle between the north aisle and

chancel may be the result of earlier construction differences between the chancel and the nave.

3.2 Project Archive

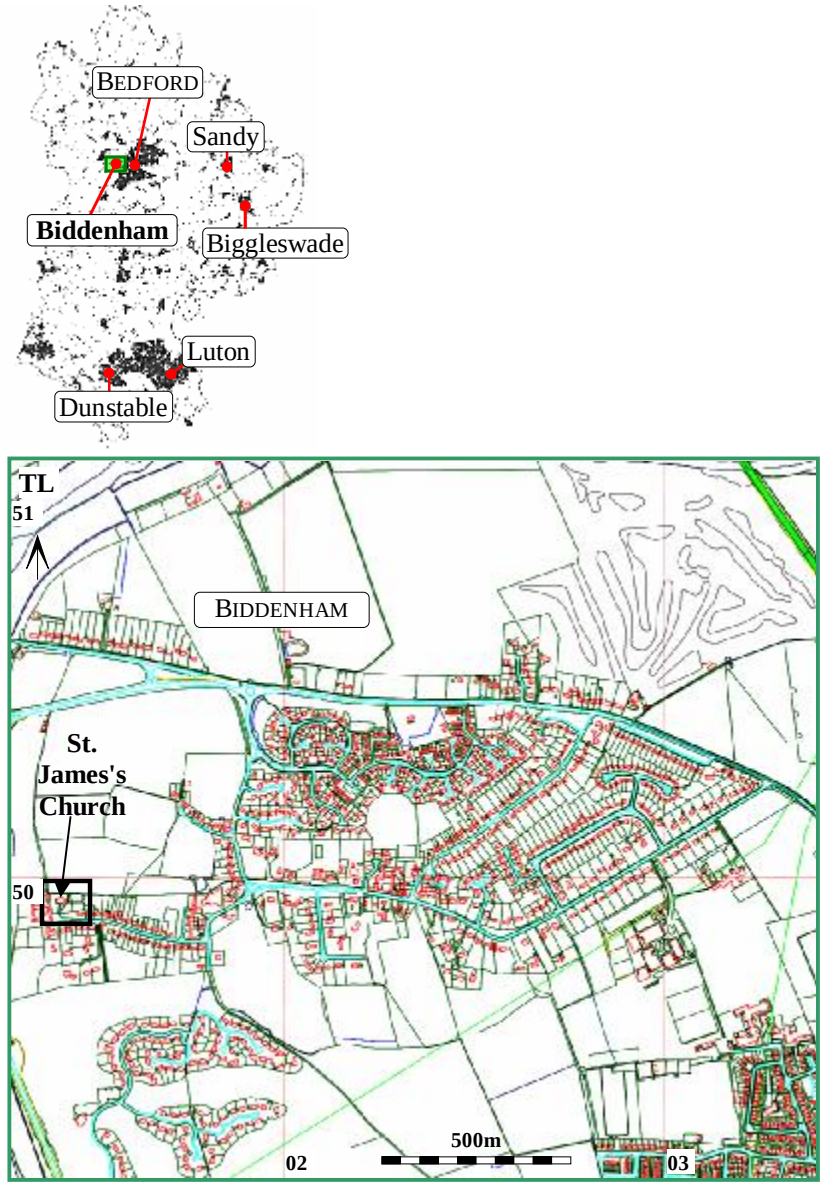
The project archive will be deposited at Bedford Museum under accession code 2009/40.

4. REFERENCES

Albion Archaeology 2001 Procedures Manual Vol. 1 Fieldwork 2nd edition.

Baker D B 2008 *Brief for Archaeological Investigation, Recording, Analysis and Reporting at the Church of St James, Biddenham, Bedfordshire*.

Pickford C (ed) 1994 Bedfordshire Churches in the 19th Century Part 1 Parishes A-G *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society 73*.



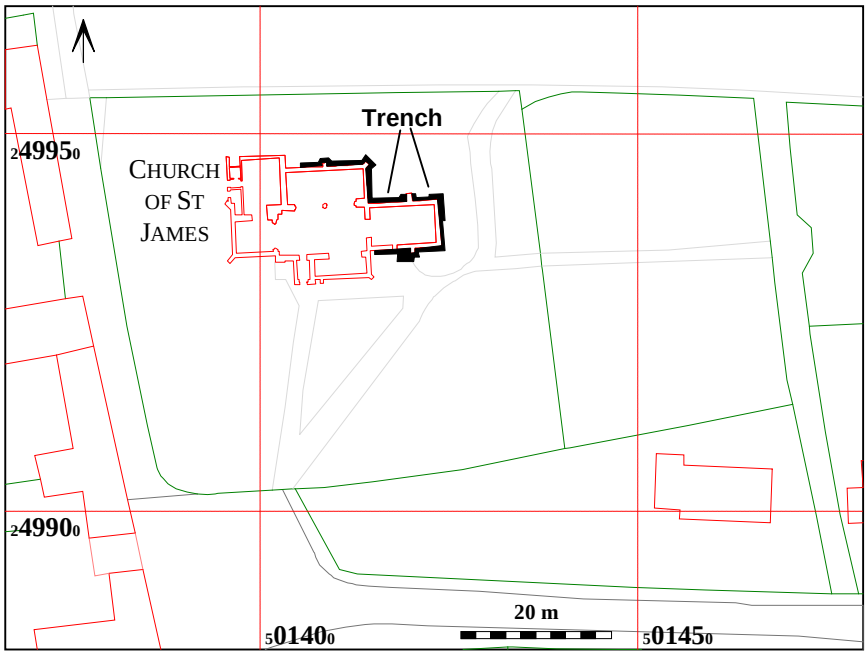


Figure 1: Site location plan

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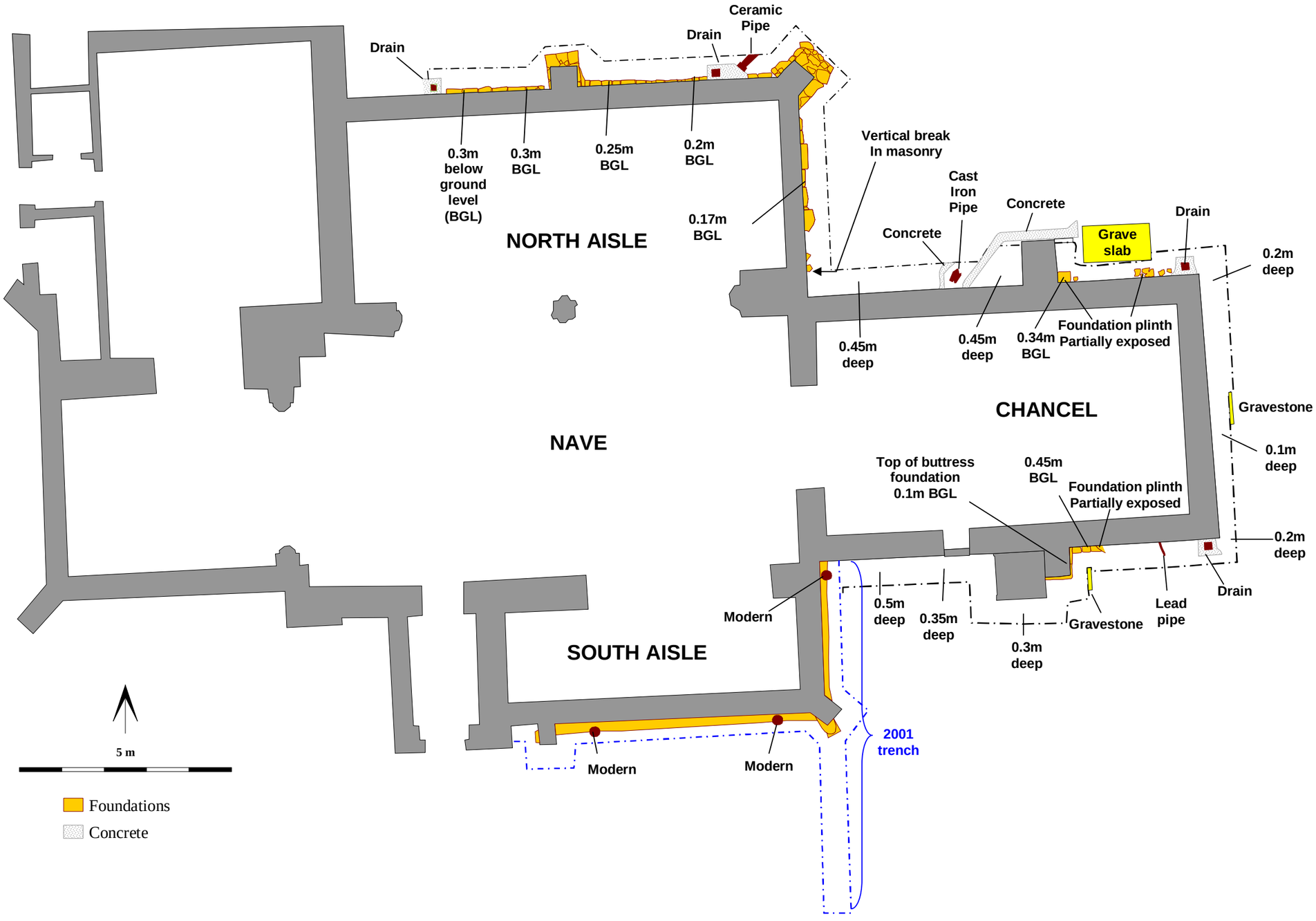

Figure 2: All features plan

Plate 1: General view of the area of works on south side of the church

Plate 2: General view of the area of works on the north side of the church

Plate 3: South wall of chancel, showing western end

Plate 4: South wall of chancel, showing eastern end and buttress

Plate 5: North wall of chancel, showing western end and buttress

Plate 6: Junction of north wall of chancel and east end of north aisle

Plate 7: North-east corner of north aisle