

**CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS
STEVENAGE
HERTFORDSHIRE**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
AND REPORTING**

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Compiled by	Checked by	Approved by
Christiane Meckseper	Joe Abrams	Drew Shotliff

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Planning Background*

A condition placed on planning consent for drainage works at the Church of St Nicholas, Stevenage, Hertfordshire required the implementation of a programme of archaeological investigation and reporting, the requirements for which were set out by the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser (DAA 2009). Albion Archaeology was commissioned to carry out the work by The Victor Farrar Partnership on behalf of the Parochial Church Council.

1.2 *Site Location*

The Church of St Nicholas is located in the north-western part of Stevenage, immediately north of the A1072 dual carriageway, also known as Martins Way. It lies to the west of the Martins Way roundabout and is centred on grid reference TL 24068 26195 (Figure 1).

1.3 *Archaeological Background*

The church of St Nicholas may have been located at the centre of the original Saxon settlement of Stevenage which lay about half a mile east of the Great North Road. This routeway, from London to the north of England, was the focus of the later, medieval and post-medieval market town which grew up beside the road from around the 12th century onwards (Page 1912).

The church is a Grade I listed building, consisting of a chancel with a north vestry, a nave with north and south aisles, a south porch and west tower. It is built of flint, although a large proportion of its walls are now covered in cement.

The oldest surviving elements of the church are its western tower which dates from the 12th century, although the church may have had an earlier predecessor. The rest of the church was rebuilt in the 13th century. In the 14th century a chancel was added and the aisles were widened to their present dimensions. The upper part of the church, including its roof, was rebuilt in the 15th century when a bell chamber was also added to the tower (Page 1912). The southern transept and southern porch date from 1841.



2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Description of Groundworks*

The purpose of the works was to replace ineffective drainage around the church through the construction of a new French drain and three soakaways. Four drain receptors were installed along the northern side of the church, linked to Soakaways 1 and 2 (Figure 2). During these works an area of tarmaced paving, c.100mm thick, around the northern and western side of the church was removed and the ground reduced by a further c.100mm. A stone plinth, c.300mm in height around the base of the church was removed at the same time. This exposed the lower 0.50m of masonry of the northern and north-western church walls and buttresses which were recorded (Section 3.1).

A new French drain was excavated around the south-eastern corner of the church (Figure 3). This was connected to Soakaway 3 (Figure 2).

One change was made to the proposed works. The course of the proposed pipe trenches linking the drain receptors at the north-western part of the church to the soakaway north of the tower was altered from the original plans in order to avoid disturbing graves (Figure 2).

Archaeological monitoring of the groundworks was undertaken during five visits to the church between 14th and 24th June 2009.

2.2 *Archaeological Methodology*

The methods employed during the project complied with the Institute for Archaeologists' *Code of Conduct* and *Standards and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (1999), English Heritage's *Management of Archaeological Projects* (1991), and Albion Archaeology's *Procedures Manual* (2001).

A digital photographic record was made of the works and all significant remains. In accordance with the DAA brief and *Taking Care of Human Remains* (2000), issued by the Chancellor of the Diocese of St Albans in 2000, all human bone was left securely on site for reburial.

A copy of this report and the project archive, which comprises all written and photographic records, will be stored at North Hertfordshire District Council Museum. Copies of the report will also be forwarded to the Historic Environment Record located at County Hall, Hertford, and the OASIS online database.



3. RESULTS

3.1 *Drainage Works on North Side of Church*

Exposed lower wall segments consisted of the same flint stonework that is visible in the exposed upper sections of the church walls (Plates 1-3). At the base of the wall, a narrow foundation plinth of mortared flint pebbles extended outwards for *c.* 100mm (Plate 1).

Buttresses along the north wall are partly built of red brick of varying sizes, supporting a core of flint rubble masonry that ties in with the walls of the church (Plate 2). Stone ashlar blocks around the door surround in the north wall are backed by coarse yellow bricks, tied in with the flint masonry of the main wall face (Plate 3).

Ground reduction below the tarmaced paving exposed a layer of mid orange brown clay with frequent chalk flecks and fragments and moderate flint fragments. A drainage trench 0.40m wide and 0.20–0.70m deep (the required drainage gradient from east to west) was excavated by machine into this layer.

No archaeological features were revealed in this area. A small number of isolated human bones were retrieved during the excavations and retained on site for reburial.

3.2 *Soakaways 1-3*

Three soakaways were excavated to the north and south of the church. They were 1.50m in diameter and 2m deep. Pipe trenches measuring 0.40m wide and 0.70m deep were excavated between the soakaways and one of four drain receptors located on the north wall (Figure 2).

Layers within the soakaways consisted of 0.20m of topsoil above a graveyard soil consisting of mottled dark brown and white silty clay and chalk with moderate inclusions of small and medium sized flint pebbles (Plates 4 and 5). Undisturbed chalk bedrock was reached at a depth of 1.20–1.80m below ground level.

The sides of the south-eastern Soakaway 3 showed the remains of possible grave cuts (Plates 4 and 5). A thin layer of darker soil in the base of one of the grave cuts may represent organic material, possibly the remains of a coffin. Isolated iron nails and a coffin handle were found within the soil.

No articulated human remains were revealed within the soakaways. A large number of disarticulated human bones were retrieved and were retained on site for reburial.

3.3 *French Drain*

A new French drain was laid at the eastern end of the church (Figure 3). No archaeological features or articulated human remains were revealed. A small number of disarticulated human bones were retrieved and were retained on site for reburial.



4. CONCLUSIONS

No archaeological features or traces of an earlier church building were revealed within the groundworks. Ground reduction and removal of a stone plinth around the base of the church exposed the lower courses of flint masonry that were identical in nature to the upper courses of stonework of the church walls. The top course of a flint pebble wall foundation that extended c.100mm outwards from the upstanding wall was revealed at this reduced ground level.

No *in situ* burials were revealed and only a small number of disarticulated human bones were recovered from the French drain and the ground reduction works immediately adjacent to the church building. A varying number of disarticulated human remains were retrieved from Soakaways 1-3. These were retained on site for reburial along with the small number of coffin nails and one coffin handle.



5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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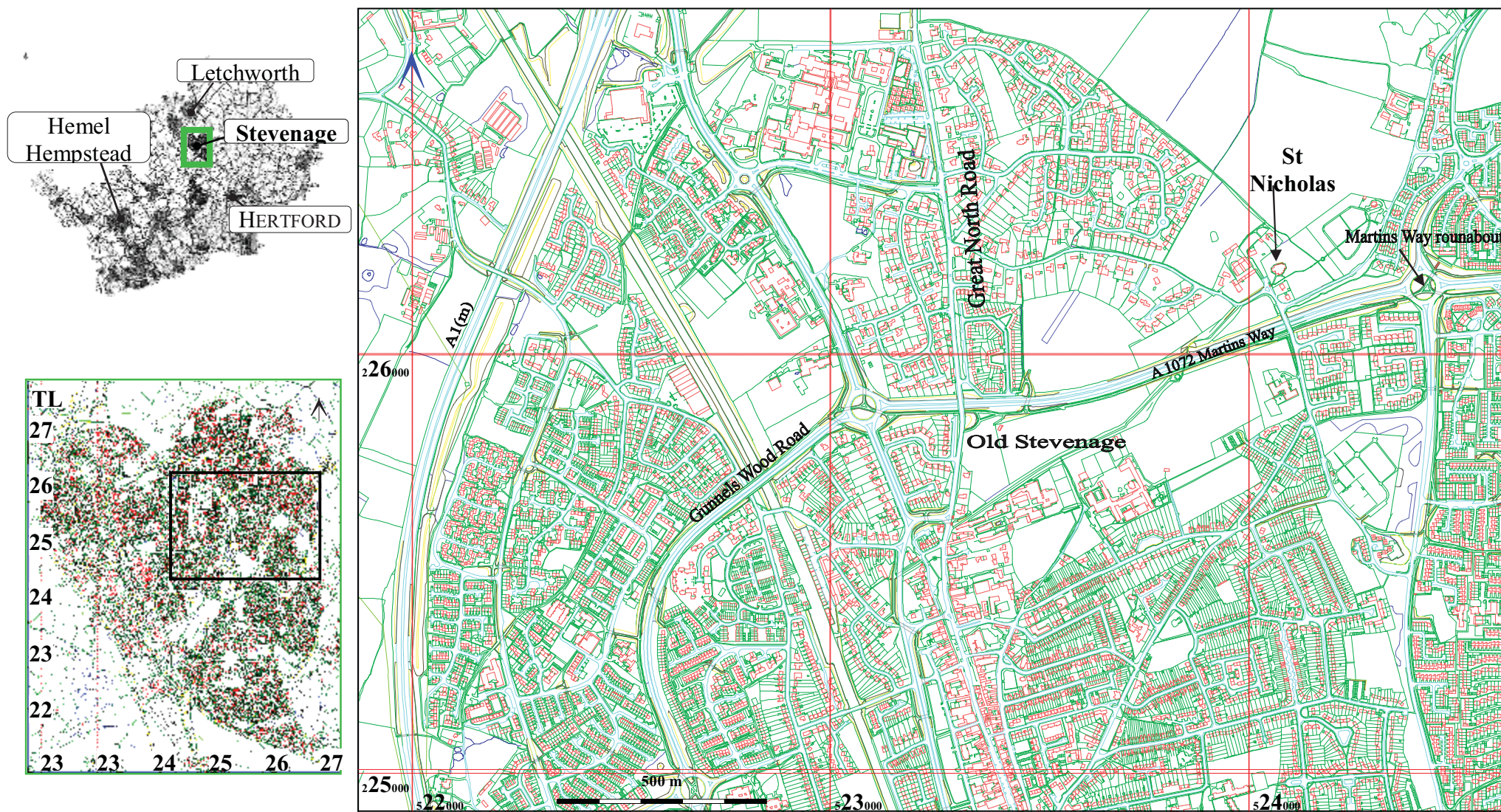


Figure 1: Site location

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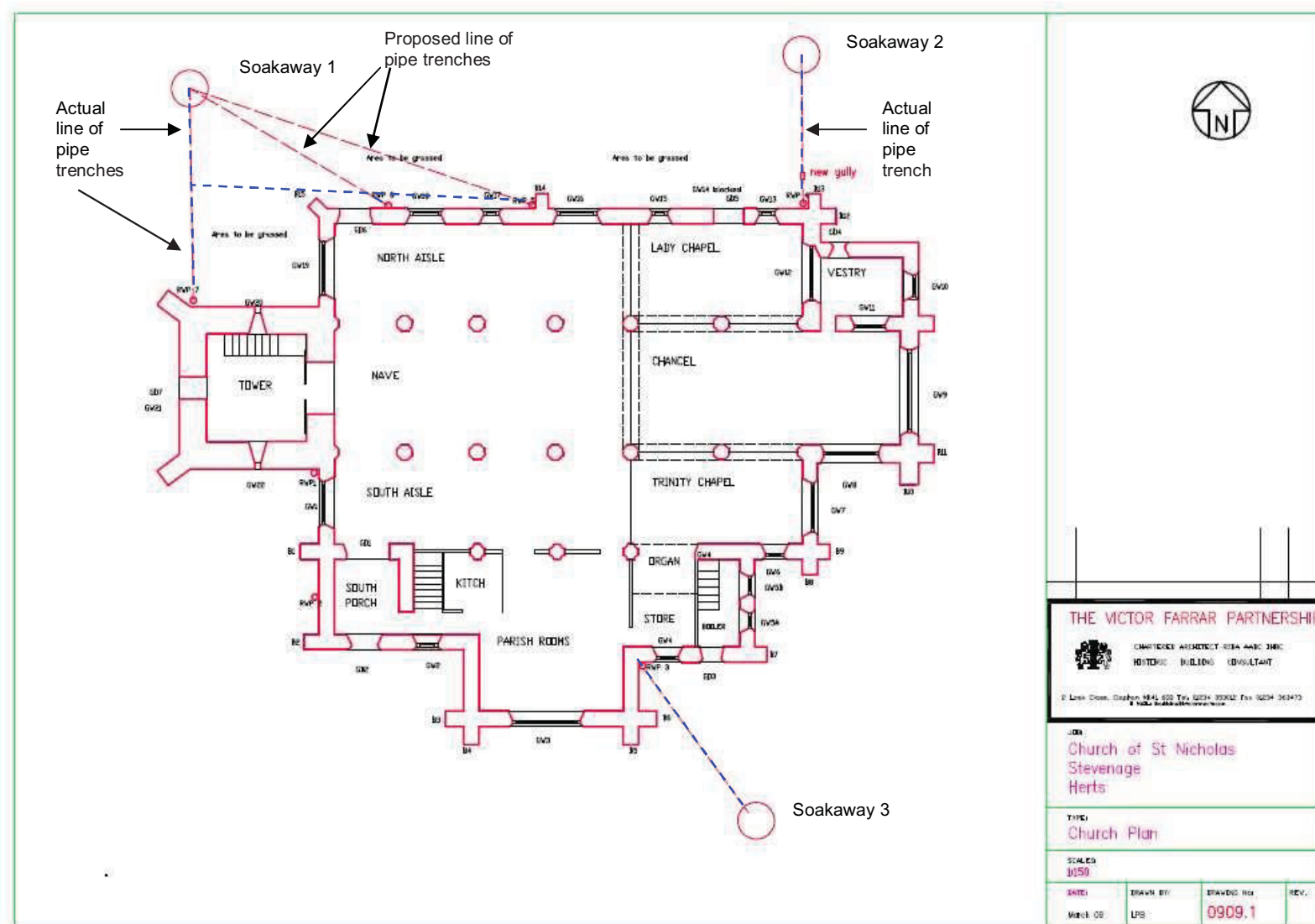


Figure 2: Location of soakaways
(based on The Victor Farrar Partnership drawing 0909.1)

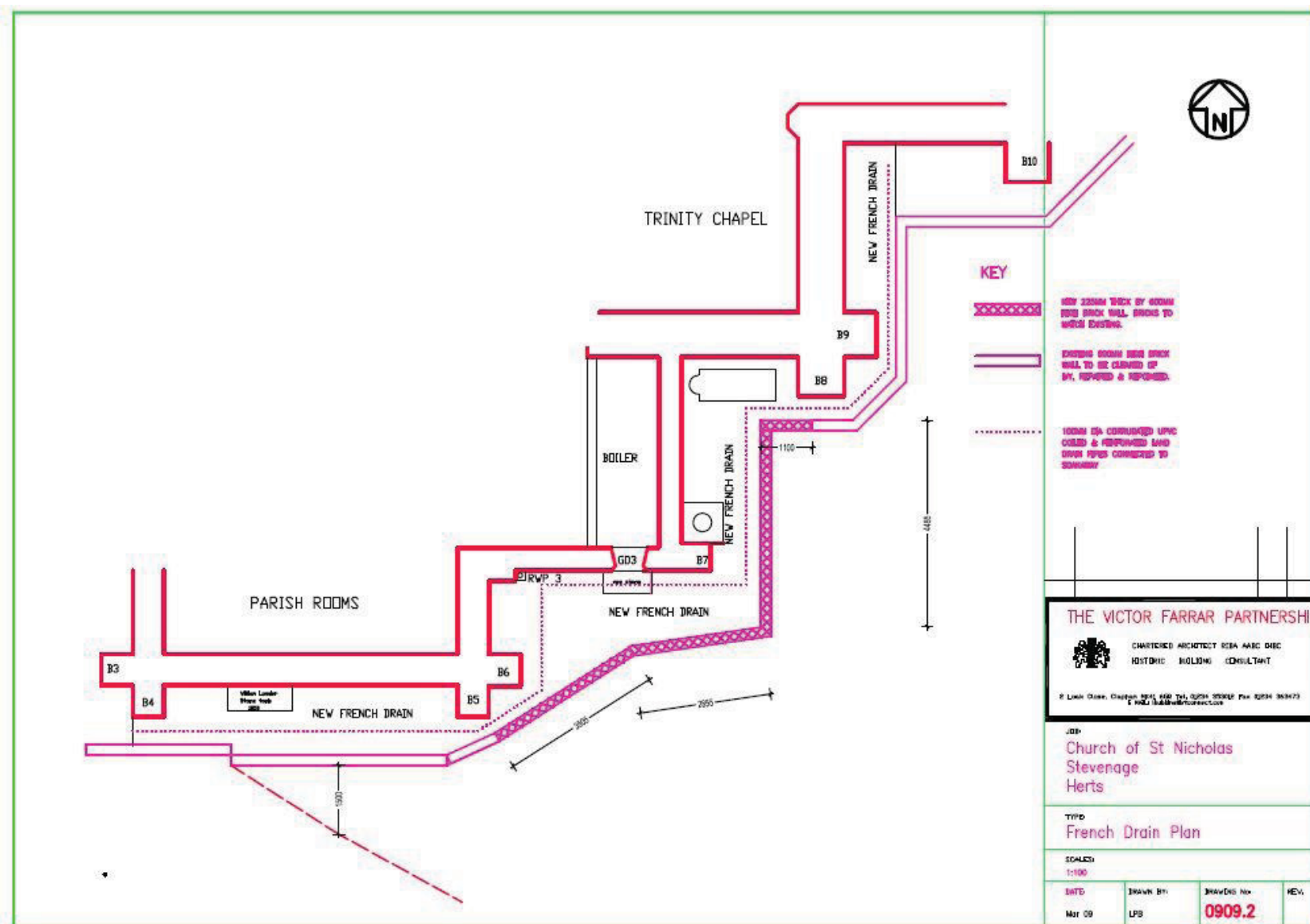


Figure 3: Location of French drain
(based on The Victor Farrar Partnership drawing 0909.2)



Plate 1: Flint masonry and flint foundation. Northern wall.



Plate 2: Brick masonry in buttress. Northern wall.



Plate 3: Yellow brick around door in northern wall



Plate 4:
Grave cuts in
west-facing
section of
Soakaway 3



Plate 5: Grave cut in
north-facing section of
Soakaway 3