

**PRIORY CHURCH OF ST PETER
DUNSTABLE**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
AND REPORTING**

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Contents

Preface	4
Version History	4
Structure of the Report.....	4
Key Terms.....	4
Non-Technical Summary	5
1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 Planning Background	6
1.2 Site Location.....	6
1.3 Archaeological and Historical Background.....	6
2. METHODOLOGY	7
2.1 Description of Groundworks	7
2.2 Archaeological Methodology.....	7
3. RESULTS	9
3.1 Archaeological Features Outside the West Door.....	9
3.2 Observations in North-west Entrance Lobby	9
3.3 Foul Water Drain.....	10
4. SYNTHESIS	11
4.1 The South-western Buttress and Foundations.....	11
4.2 Former Floor Levels	11
4.3 Churchyard and Wider Surroundings	11
5. BIBLIOGRAPHY	12



List of Figures

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Areas of groundworks subject to investigation (Phases 1 and 2)

Figure 3: Phase 2 works detail

Figure 4: Foundation of south-western buttress

Figure 5: Early 20th-century paving slabs and make-up layers

Figure 6: Two scaffolding postholes

Figure 7: Foundation of south-western buttress in plan

Figure 8: Foundation of south-western buttress elevation detail

Figure 9: Section of foundation and compacted earth layers at eastern end of foul water drain outside north-west doorway

Figure 10: Foul water drain looking north-west towards Church Hall

Figure 11: Dressed foundation or threshold blocks within north-west doorway

Figure 12: Foul water drain inside entrance lobby (fully excavated)



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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Structure of the Report

Section 1 is an introduction to the project. The methodology and results of the fieldwork are presented in Sections 2 and 3. Section 4 contains conclusions drawn from the results of the project, while Section 5 is a bibliography.

Key Terms

Throughout this report the following terms or abbreviations are used:

DAA	Diocesan Archaeological Advisor
PCC	Parochial Church Council
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
<i>Procedures Manual</i>	Albion Archaeology 2001. <i>Procedures Manual. Volume 1: Fieldwork</i> , 2nd edition



Non-Technical Summary

A condition placed on planning consent for refurbishment works at the Church of St Peter, Dunstable required the implementation of a programme of archaeological investigation and recording.

Refurbishment works consisted of:

- *alterations to the paved area outside the main west door to construct a new set of steps and a disabled access ramp;*
- *The excavation of two small concrete pad footings inside the main door. This was in preparation for the construction of a new glass vestibule inside;*
- *The refurbishment of the existing entrance lobby to provide for lavatory facilities and the formation of a refreshment area at the west end of the north aisle.*

Archaeological remains observed during construction works outside the west entrance comprised the foundation cut for a 15th-century (south-western) buttress and clunch and tile fill associated with the foundation and underpinning.

Several compacted earth make-up layers were exposed and partially excavated. These represent previous surface layers and date from the post-medieval to modern periods. The works also revealed postholes for scaffolding, most likely erected during repair work on the buttress in 1930.

Removal of the current stone slabs and the underlying make-up layers revealed a level of earlier, broken-out paving slabs, lining the sides of the west central door. These most likely date to a floor level in existence during the early 20th century.

The excavation of the foul water drain revealed clunch rubble and compacted earth make-up layers below the flagstones in the north lobby. Within the churchyard it cut through a homogenous graveyard soil, containing only a very small number of disarticulated human remains which were re-interred immediately.

Beyond the churchyard the top of a post-medieval drain or culvert was exposed below the lawn outside the church hall.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Planning Background*

A condition placed on planning consent for refurbishment works at the Church of St Peter, Dunstable 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 Bruce Deacon Architects on behalf of the Parochial Church Council (PCC).

1.2 *Site Location*

The Priory Church of St Peter is located in the centre of Dunstable, to the south-east of the junction of the A505 (Church Street) and the A5 (High Street).

The topography of the area is level ground at 145m OD. The priory church is located at grid reference TL 0213 2187 (Figure 1).

1.3 *Archaeological and Historical Background*

The priory church of St Peter, Dunstable is all that now remains (above ground) of a much larger medieval monastic complex — the Augustinian priory of St Peter, founded by Henry I around the year 1132. The original priory, which took around 80 years to build, incorporated a church on a much larger scale, probably on a cross-shaped ground plan with a central bell tower and two towers on its western front (Smith 1904).

Two western towers and the roof of the presbytery were destroyed in a storm in 1222 leading to extensive rebuilding of the western façade. Alterations, repairs and improvements were carried out to the church and monastery throughout the Middle Ages. The main north-western tower dates to the middle of the 15th century and the south-western buttress was probably added around that time (Fowler 1959).

Rebuilding came to an abrupt halt when Dunstable priory was dissolved in January 1540. It became subject to plunder and ruin soon after (Fowler 1959). All that remained standing was the nave of the church, which had been given over for worship to the townspeople some 200 years previously on the condition that they were responsible for its repair.

Much of the subsequent upkeep of the church was, according to both Smith and Fowler, of the “worst executed class” (Smith 1904, 76) and by 1845 the building had become “very ruinous” (Fowler 1959, 17). A programme of restoration began, during which the south aisle was rebuilt, the north aisle was improved, with a new bay added to its eastern end, and the north door was re-opened. The tower and south-western buttress were repaired in 1930 and in 1962 the east wall was rebuilt with windows being added.



2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Description of Groundworks*

The purpose of the works was to re-open the central west door as the main entrance into the church thereby providing a new refreshment area and restroom facilities in the north aisle and the entrance lobby of the church.

Archaeological monitoring of the groundworks was undertaken during four visits, between 16th September and 9th November 2010. The work was carried out in two phases:

Phase 1: Alterations to the paved area outside the main west door to construct a new set of steps and a disabled access ramp; plus, the construction of a new glass vestibule inside the main door (Figure 2).

Groundworks involved the removal of the current low step immediately outside the west door and the lifting of paving slabs located around the door. Slabs were removed up to a small, fenced-off bin area at the south end of the western façade. Subsequently, the ground was reduced by a maximum of 300mm to allow for the ramped disabled access coming in from the north. Sharp sand below the paving slabs was reduced by a minidigger with a toothless ditching bucket working under constant archaeological supervision.

Two concrete pad footings were excavated inside the west entrance to serve as foundations for the new glass vestibule. The pads were less than 0.20m square and 0.10m deep.

Phase 2: Refurbishment of the existing west entrance lobby to provide for lavatory facilities and the formation of a refreshment area at the west end of the north aisle (Figures 2 and 3).

Groundworks comprised the construction of a new foul water drain from the new lavatories (at the back of the entrance lobby) across the churchyard to the existing inspection chamber adjacent to the Church Hall. This was excavated by a mini digger with a toothed bucket working under constant archaeological supervision. The trench was 0.6m wide where it crossed tarmac paths and 0.3m wide in the grassed churchyard. It was up to 0.55m deep.

The section of the foul water drain inside the entrance lobby was excavated by hand. The trench was 0.3m wide and up to 0.4m deep.

A built-in cupboard at the back of the entrance lobby was removed to make way for the new lavatory and the ground beneath reduced by hand by c. 300mm.

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, 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 Luton Museum. Copies of the report will also be forwarded to the Historic Environment Record located at Central Bedfordshire Council, Chicksands, and the OASIS online database.



3. RESULTS

3.1 *Archaeological Features Outside the West Door*

Archaeological features and deposits were reached after the removal of the current paving slabs and underlying sharp sand. This involved ground reduction of 210mm.

In the area immediately outside the west door, the remains of earlier paving slabs were revealed below the modern floor foundation. They consisted of large, flat concrete-like paving slabs (002) sitting flush with the base of the walls. The outside facing side of the slabs was broken off and the remains were no more than 0.30m wide (Figures 4 and 5).

The slabs sat on a foundation of isolated ashlar blocks (003) and a mixed make-up layer (008) that extended throughout the entire area of investigation. The deposit consisted of a of 20mm deep, firm, mid to dark grey sandy silt with frequent small fragments of clunch, flint, chalk and tile, and charcoal flecks. A fragment of green-glazed, post-medieval pottery and roof tile were observed within the layer on site but were not retained.

Two postholes [004] and [006] were also revealed (Figures 4, 5 and 6). They were 0.26–0.30m in diameter and 0.10m deep. Posthole [006] was cut into foundation material (012), part of the foundation cut [010] for the southern buttress on the western façade. Removal of deposits (011) and (012) within foundation cut [010] (Figures 4, 7 and 8) revealed that it was 0.30–0.50m wide and filled with roughly hewn, large and medium-sized clunch blocks (011). Smaller clunch fragments and fragments of tile filled the gaps between the larger stones and were pushed underneath the first course of ashlar masonry of the buttress itself. The stones were bonded by a pale yellow, sandy, lime mortar (012).

The foundation was cut into a further make-up layer (013) which consisted of firm mid yellowish grey sandy silt with frequent small fragments of clunch, flint and chalk and moderate small tile fragments (Figure 4). It extended throughout the area of investigation outside the west door and was left *in situ* as formation level had been reached.

3.2 *Observations in North-west Entrance Lobby*

Groundworks in the north-west entrance lobby consisted of ground reduction of c. 300mm below an in-built cupboard that had been removed to make way for the proposed lavatory (Figures 3 and 12). Made ground below the cupboard consisted of compact clunch rubble. Some of the rubble blocks were roughly hewn and must represent re-used masonry from other parts of the church.

No archaeological remains were revealed during ground reduction. The lower part of the northern internal wall between the entrance lobby and the north aisle was exposed. This showed that the lower courses of the wall were stepped outwards twice to a width of 0.11m and 0.13m respectively to provide extra stability and serve as a foundation.



Lifting of the flagstone floor in the entrance lobby revealed that many of the flagstones were re-used grave slabs, most likely dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. Modern concrete bedding and a rammed-earth make-up layer, similar to deposits (008) and (013) outside the entrance, were excavated below the slabs.

In the centre of the lobby a compact layer of clunch stone, c. 2.20m long with an even surface, was revealed and partially removed (Figure 3). The function of this layer is unclear.

Part of the foundation of the north-west doorway, consisting of dressed ashlar blocks, was revealed at a depth of 0.22m below the current paving slabs in the centre of the north-west door (Figure 11). The blocks are probably too far below ground level to represent an earlier threshold.

3.3 Foul Water Drain

Within the churchyard, the trench for the foul water drain revealed a homogenous graveyard soil (025) below a thin layer of turf c. 100mm thick (Figure 10). The graveyard soil contained occasional fragments of brick and tile and a small amount of disarticulated human bone, which was re-interred.

Outside the priory grounds, halfway between the churchyard wall and the Church Hall, the top of an arched brick drain or culvert was revealed 0.30m below the modern ground surface (Figure 2).

The eastern end of the foul water drain, outside the north-west door, revealed two courses of dressed clunch with white mortar (023), part of the foundations underneath the northern buttress. A series of thin layers of grey sandy silt with moderate small stones and tile fragments (020) and (022), interspersed with a thin compacted chalk band (021) were recorded in the side of the trench (Figure 9). These layers are reminiscent of the make-up layers recorded in plan outside the main, central entrance and may represent further former ground surfaces.

The area outside the north-west door was considerably truncated by modern services.



4. SYNTHESIS

4.1 *The South-western Buttress and Foundations*

Ground reduction works outside the west central door revealed parts of the foundations of the south-western buttress. The foundation cut was considerably larger than the buttress itself and on a slightly different alignment. It was exposed and cleaned. Its size and alignment do suggest that it could have been part of the foundation cut for the original 15th-century buttress.

Some of the clunch rubble fill in the top of the cut came away easily from the sides of the buttress. This loose deposit may have been disturbed previously and it is considered likely that the upper layers of this deposit, as well as some of the clunch blocks and small tile fragments exposed below the dressed masonry, actually date from the restoration of the buttress in 1930.

Similarly, the two postholes excavated immediately adjacent to the buttress and western façade most likely represent the remains of scaffolding, probably erected to aid repair work to the buttress in 1930.

Roughly hewn and dressed clunch stone foundations were also exposed within the north-west doorway and near the north-west tower, in the eastern end of the foul water drain. The date of these is unclear.

4.2 *Former Floor Levels*

Several make-up layers and old ground surfaces consisting of compacted earth with some chalk and tile fragments were excavated and exposed outside the western façade and also inside the north-west entrance lobby.

Prints dating to the 18th and 19th centuries record a time when the church was in disrepair; they show that its western approach consisted of bare earth. In some cases, the graveyard seems to extend right up to the west door. It is, therefore, likely that some of these compacted earth layers represent former ground surfaces outside the west entrance, dating to the post-medieval and modern periods. The small, glazed, post-medieval ceramic fragments observed within one of the make-up layers would corroborate this date.

The broken-out floor slabs, exposed below the recently removed step and flagstones outside the central door, most likely date to the middle of the last century. A drawing by Fowler of the west front of the church in 1945 shows a paved walkway leading up to the central door and the remainder of the ground also seems to be paved (Fowler 1959, 18). In addition a larger part of the pedestal for the rows of columns flanking the west central door is exposed on the drawing, suggesting that the floor level was lower several decades ago.

4.3 *Churchyard and Wider Surroundings*

No *in situ* burials were revealed within the graveyard and only a small number of disarticulated human bones were recovered from the foul water drain. A post-medieval or modern drain was revealed outside the churchyard perimeter near the current Church Hall.



5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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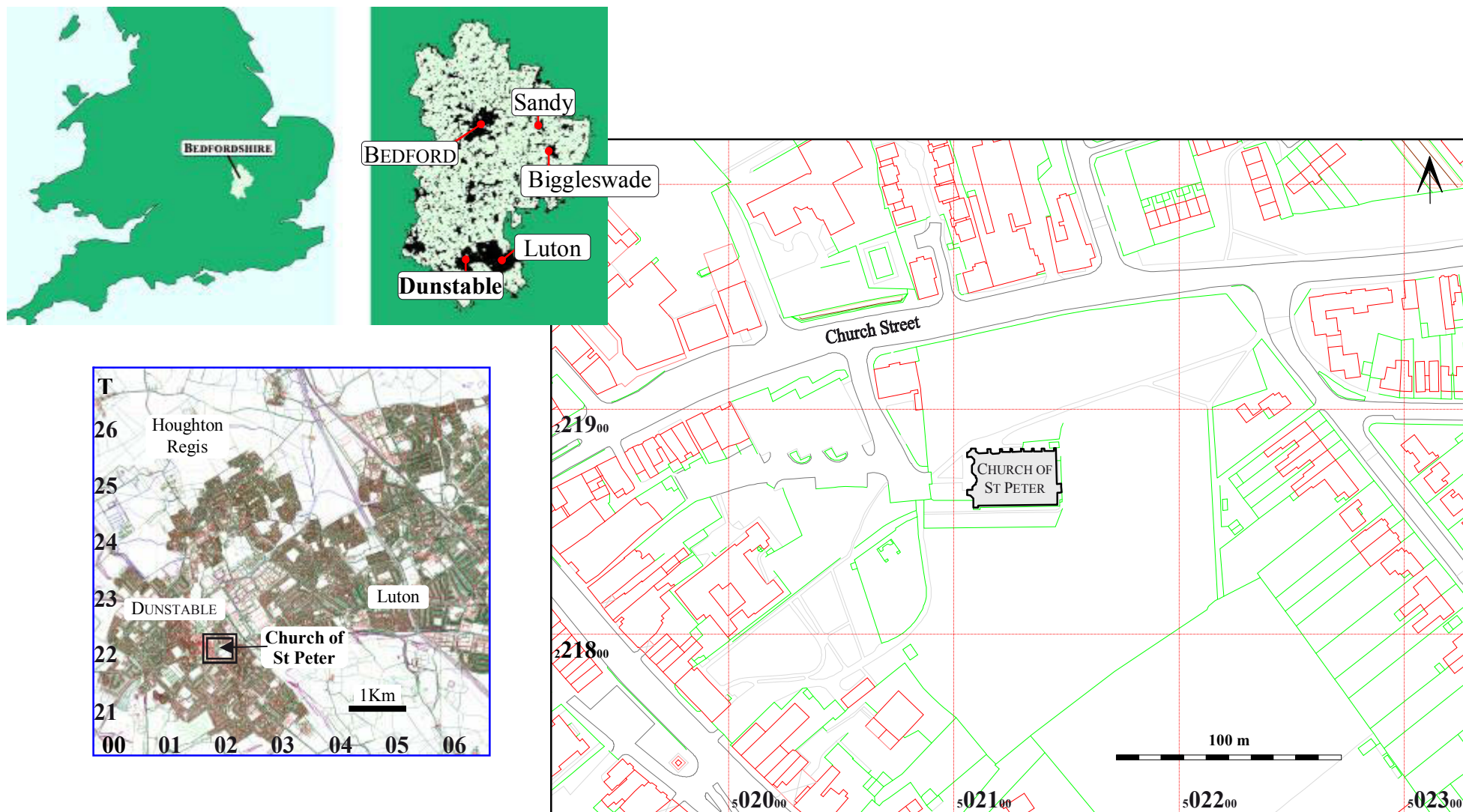


Figure 1: Site Location

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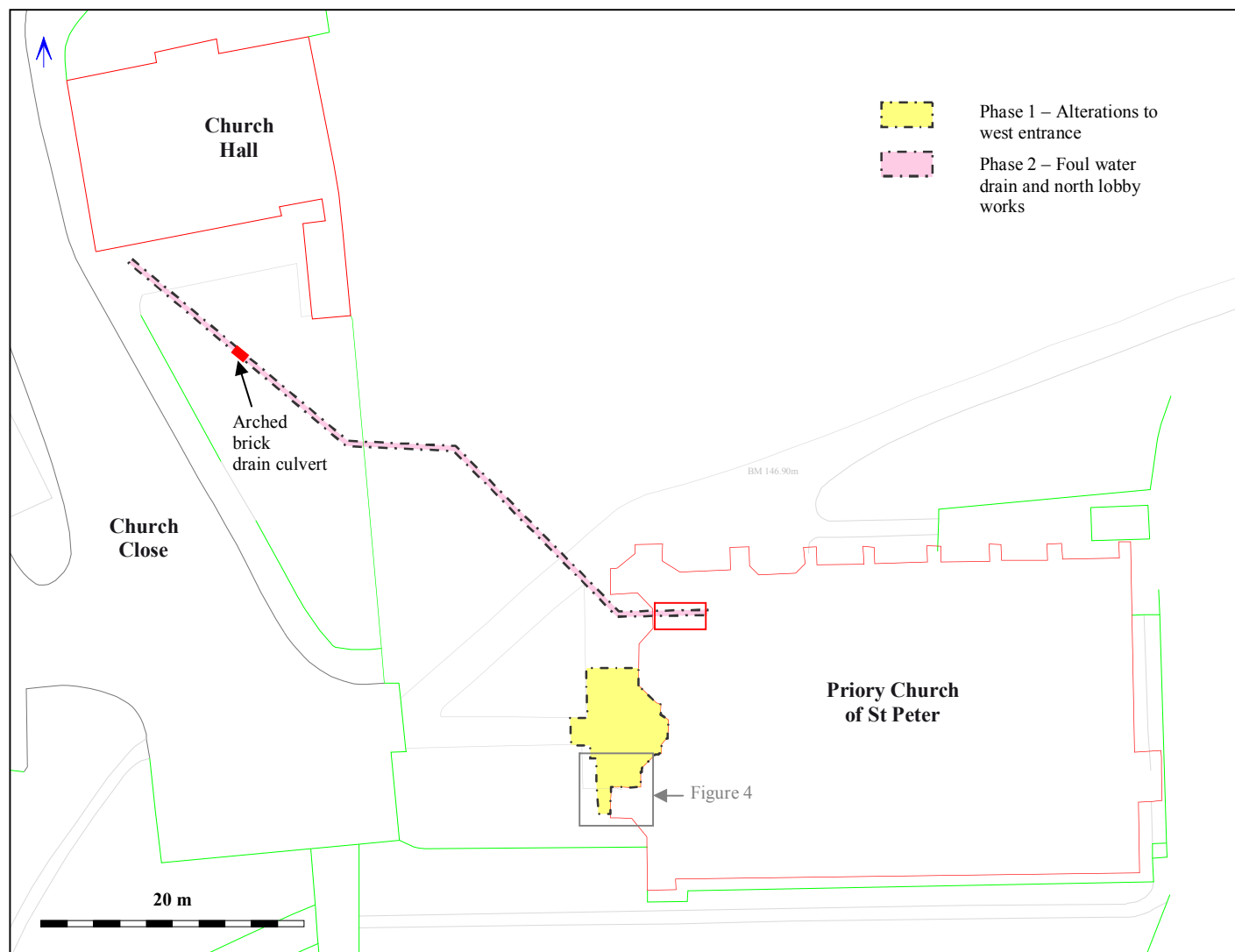


Figure 2: Areas of groundworks subject to investigation (Phases 1 and 2)

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Figure 3: Phase 2 works detail. Section of foul water drain in north-west lobby and in-built cupboard removed. Based on Bruce Deacon Construction Drawing 194-001c (not to scale)

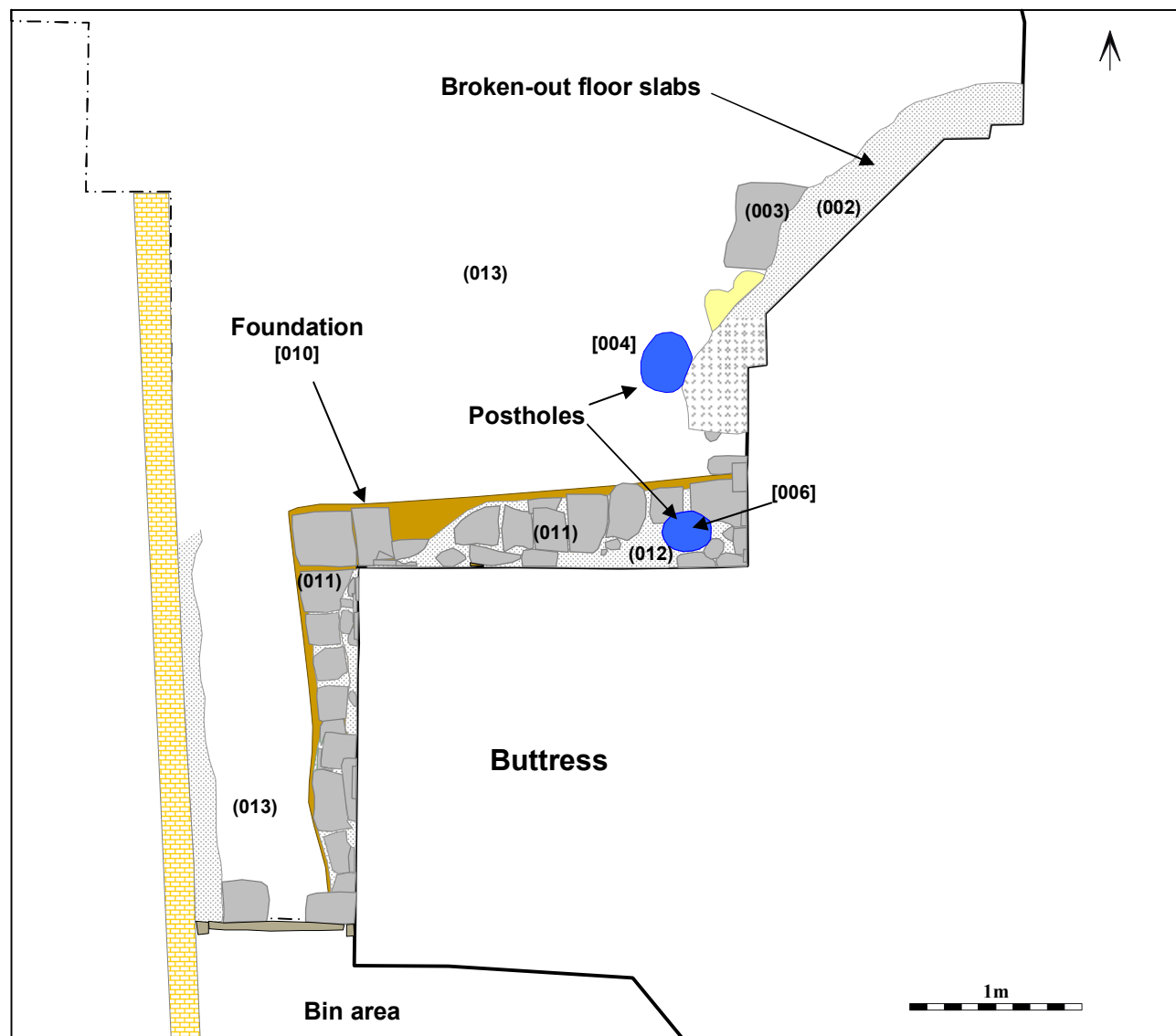


Figure 4:
Foundation of south-western buttress
(for location of plan see Figure 2)



Figure 5: Early 20th-century paving slabs and make-up layers (0.5m scale)



Figure 6: Two scaffolding postholes, truncating buttress foundation and make-up layers (0.5m scale)



Figure 7: Foundation of south-western buttress in plan



Figure 8: Foundation of south-western buttress elevation detail

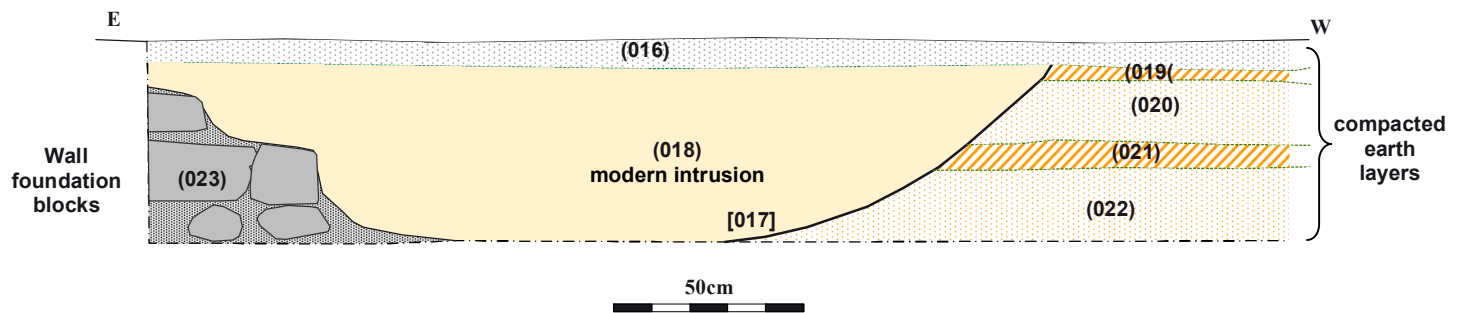


Figure 9: Section of foundation and compacted earth layers at eastern end of foul water drain outside north-west doorway (for location of section see Figure 3)



Figure 10: Foul water drain looking north-west towards Church Hall



Figure 11: Dressed foundation or threshold blocks within north-west doorway



Figure 12: Foul water drain inside entrance lobby (fully excavated)