

## Northamptonshire Archaeology

An archaeological watching brief during  
the excavation of a French drain  
around the perimeter of the church  
of St John the Baptist, Flitton,  
Bedfordshire



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**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF DURING  
THE EXCAVATION OF A FRENCH DRAIN AROUND  
THE PERIMETER OF THE CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST,  
FLITTON, BEDFORDSHIRE**

*Abstract*

*A watching brief during the excavation by hand of a French drain around the exterior of the church of St John the Baptist in Flitton, Bedfordshire revealed evidence of the foundations to both the church and the De Grey mausoleum.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The church of St John the Baptist lies on the northern side of the village of Flitton, Bedfordshire (Fig 1, NGR TL 059359). It lies within the archdeaconry of Bedford.
- 1.2 Faculty was granted in 2003 from the Chancellor of the Diocese of St Albans to the Parochial Church Council (PCC) for various works of repair to the church to be undertaken. This work included the insertion of a ventilation drain around the exterior of much of the perimeter of the building which includes, on the north side, the De Grey mausoleum (Fig 2). Previous trial trenching had been undertaken (Dix 2003). On the advice of Mr D Baker, the St Albans Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (DAA), a proviso to the faculty required the implementation of a programme of archaeological monitoring works.
- 1.3 A brief was prepared by in order to secure the fulfilment of that requirement (Baker 2003). A specification was prepared in response to that document and subsequently approved.
- 1.4 The excavation of the perimeter trench and associated soakaway drain trenches was carried out by hand by the contractor (Steve Todd) and commenced in January 2004 and was completed in February of the same year. The watching brief was carried out over the same period.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 St John the Baptist church is known to have existed at Flitton from the twelfth century, though the present structure dates from the fifteenth, more specifically the period 1440-1489 (Pickford 1994). This date was implied by heraldry on the south porch, unfortunately obliterated in the early part of the twentieth century, but previously recorded by early topographers.
- 2.2 In the nineteenth century further additions included the erection of a gallery at the west end of the church for the poor and a new reading desk and pulpit in 1835-36. The gallery was removed in 1893-94, probably when new open seats

were erected in the aisles. Further restoration was carried out under Arthur Lodge and Geoffrey Lucas in 1911.

- 2.3 The church is now most widely known for the De Grey mausoleum which is an important later addition to the church, the earliest part being the western arm which was added in the early seventeenth century by Lord Hastings, Earl of Kent to house his own monument and that of his father. This section would most likely have been the almost same length as the chancel. The northern, eastern and southern sections were added in 1705 and turned the mausoleum into a large cruciform building. Both phases of the mausoleum are built of brick above ground, but this is now almost entirely covered with nineteenth century white cement render. There is a simple chamfered plinth of stone which continues that present on the main body of the church. Unusually for a mausoleum, there are large windows, several of which are blind.

### **3. THE WATCHING BRIEF**

- 3.1 The watching brief was carried out in a programme of visits undertaken as the contractor opened sections of the French drain around the church. The excavation started on the west side of the south porch and continued in a clockwise direction until returning to the south porch from the east (Fig 2). Various sections were left un-excavated due to the presence of a grave and vault, modern cremations and the topography of the site which at the east end of the church adjoins a neighbouring property. The soakaway drain runs and soakaway pits were monitored separately after the completion of the French drain.
- 3.2 West side of south porch and south side of south aisle (Fig 2, sections 1 and 2). The southernmost part of the west side of the porch foundation was obscured by a modern brick drain setting, but the northern section could be seen and was off-set slightly from the wall above. The foundation was here of irregular construction made from un-dressed iron stone blocks bonded in a creamy white lime mortar. This same foundation continued around the angle of the wall where it turned west to form the south side of the south aisle, though in this section the foundation was more neatly constructed (Plate 1). At the west end of this section is a diagonal buttress; the foundation for this is much larger than the above ground masonry and also on a slightly different alignment. The south-western limit of this larger footing was not identified as it lies outside the line of the French drain trench.
- 3.3 West end of the south aisle (Fig 2). The foundation to this section of wall is essentially flush with the masonry above and has no off set. The stonework is of fairly small undressed ironstone blocks bonded in a creamy white lime mortar for three to four courses. However, the bottom of the French drain trench revealed a solid mass of masonry that extended from the diagonal buttress along this section and the full width of the trench. It has the appearance of a wider foundation though the western limit was not established.

- 3.4 The stair turret and south side of the tower (Fig 2, Fig 3 sections 3 and 4, Plate 2). The stair turret comprises three straight faces though the foundation is constructed with an irregular curve. The stonework is mixed and comprises some very large stones with smaller fragments roughly coursed. The footing is off set from the wall above and continues neatly along the south side of the tower. The south side of the stair turret sits on the same mass of masonry identified on the west end of the south aisle, though again its southern limit was not established due to the narrowness of the trench.
- 3.5 The west side of the tower and the north and south diagonal buttresses (Fig 2, Fig 3 section 5, Plate 3). The foundations of both of the diagonal buttresses were built flush to the walls above, and retain no off set. The section of wall between, the west face of the tower, has an off set foundation built of coursed iron stone bonded in a creamy white lime mortar.
- 3.6 The north side of the tower and the west wall of the north aisle between the two diagonal buttresses (Fig 2). This section of the church wall was not excavated due to the presence of modern cremations.
- 3.7 The north side of the north aisle between the north-west corner buttress and the buttress to the west of the north door revealed a simple off-set iron stone foundation (Fig 2, Fig 3 section 6).
- 3.8 From the east side of the north door to the western side of the De Grey mausoleum the foundation comprised a simple off set stone foundation (Fig 2, Fig 3 sections 7 and 8, Plate 4). In the east angle of the westernmost of the two buttresses the contractor found a Jetton in the topsoil (Fig 2, see below, section 4.2). At the far eastern end of this section of wall the remains of an angled corner buttress could be seen which indicate that this corner of the north aisle was free standing and there was no contemporary chapel on the north side of the chancel where the western arm of the mausoleum now stands (Plate 5). The corresponding south-east corner of the south aisle retains a similar *in situ* corner buttress.
- 3.9 Where the mausoleum juts northwards from the north aisle wall the foundation is wider and constructed of larger pieces of stone (Fig 2, Fig 3 section 9, Plate 6). Along the north side of the mausoleum the foundation continues in the same fashion, but does not run exactly parallel to the upstanding wall, rather it is wider at the western end and narrows slightly towards the east. This is probably no more than a reflection of the fact that foundations are often roughly made and when the upstanding wall is constructed any correction in alignment is effected at this stage. The stone foundation stops short of the current length of the north wall of the mausoleum, and as this part of the building is earlier than the rest it might indicate that this early part was slightly shorter than the chancel. If this is the case, however, the two windows in this side of the mausoleum must have been altered as they are central to the present length of this wall. However, since the external walls are covered in cement render no indications of alterations can be seen. The remainder of the mausoleum drain trench on the north side revealed that the foundation was generally of brick in line with the upstanding wall (Fig 2, Plate 7). A single

exception to this was a small area on the north side of the eastern arm of the mausoleum in an area investigated by B Dix. A short section of ironstone, circa 1.8 long and projecting from the wall to a maximum width of approximately 20-25cms, was uncovered at the base of the drain trench. It appears to be part of an earlier structure and to have been built over by the brickwork of the mausoleum. Its purpose is unclear and it could not be dated. The east end of the mausoleum forms the current boundary of the churchyard, and the ground level on this side is lower and lies within the garden of a neighbouring property. For both of these reasons no drain trench was dug along this side.

- 3.10 The south side of the mausoleum comprised the same vertical brick foundation as on the north. Two brick drains were revealed, both comprising narrow channels formed by parallel brick sides capped by the same type of red bricks laid cross ways over the top (Plate 8). At the west end of the southern wall of the mausoleum the stone footings of an angled corner buttress were revealed (Fig 2, Plate 9). The brick wall of the mausoleum and the parallel brick drain both overlay this stonework. The presence of the buttress footing indicates that this corner of the church was originally the eastern limit of the chancel.
- 3.11 Only one other small section of French drain was excavated on the remainder of the south side of the church due to the presence of a brick vaulted tomb and an undisturbed grave which had been identified previously (Dix 2003, Fig 2).
- 3.12 Five soakaway pits were dug in which the rainwater from the drains could dissipate (Fig 2). Two of these soakaways already existed and the new drain runs were simply connected to them (soakaways 1 and 5). No articulated burials were uncovered in soakaways 2 and 3, though some disarticulated bone was recovered (Fig 2, Plate 10). This was left at the church for re-burial. In soakaway 4 one undisturbed grave was partially uncovered in the northern side of the drain run; this was left *in situ* (Fig 2). In the soakaway pit at the southern end of the drain run the side of a stone coffin was revealed. Only the very edge was uncovered and it was not possible to determine if the coffin was complete or fragmentary or whether it contained a burial. The soakaway pit was completed to one side and the coffin left *in situ*.

#### **4. FINDS**

- 4.1 Few finds were retrieved apart from post medieval pottery and glass fragments. These were not retained as they did not add to the understanding of the development of the church. A number of disarticulated human remains were uncovered during the excavation of the drain. Their *ex situ* location meant that they were not suitable for study and were therefore not investigated further. They were retained on site for re-burial by the vicar.
- 4.2 A single copper alloy Jetton was found by the contractor during the excavation of the drain trench on the north side of the church (Fig 2). The obverse depicts three open crowns and three fleur de lys arranged alternatively around a rose within an inner circle of rope pattern. The legend is

HANNS.KRAVWINKEL.IN.NVR. The reverse depicts the Reichsapfel within a double tressure of three curves and three angles set alternatively within an inner circle of rope pattern. The legend reads GOTES.REICH.BLIBT.EWICK. These finds are notoriously difficult to date other than to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 The French drain around the church at Flitton revealed that the foundations to the church were built in a rough fashion and were generally off set. No clear distinctions could be made between the different parts of the church which appears to have been built in a single phase.
- 5.2 The south wall of the 1705 phase of the mausoleum sits over a stone angled corner buttress foundation which formerly supported the south-east corner of the chancel. A similar angled buttress on the north-east corner of the north aisle indicates that there was no chapel on the north side of the church where the western arm of the first phase of the mausoleum now stands. It therefore appears that the church was built in a single phase and has had no additions other than the mausoleum. The short section of stone foundation which lies beneath the north wall of the eastern arm of the mausoleum cannot easily be reconciled with the church and may not be related to it.
- 5.3 The mausoleum is known to have been built in two phases, this has been confirmed by the investigation during the French drain digging. The foundation of the north wall of the western section of the mausoleum is constructed of large ironstone blocks whilst the remainder is of red brick, added in 1705. It may be that the stone foundation of the early phase of the mausoleum, which appears to stop short of the current western arm indicates that this early section was slightly shorter than the chancel, indeed it only needed to be small at that stage as it was to contain only two tombs.

## **ADDENDUM**

In early 2006 an additional soakaway pit was dug to the west of the path leading to the south door (Fig 2, soakaway 6). After consulting with the Mr D Baker, the St Albans Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (DAA) agreement was made that archaeological recording would only be undertaken if human or other remains were encountered. The soakaway and connecting drains run were excavated by Steve Todd who had undertaken the previous work. He reported that one drain run was on the line of a previous drain, and that no remains were found in either the new drain run or soakaway pit. The trenches were not, therefore, recorded apart from their location.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Dix, B 2003. *Archaeological observations in connection with proposed drain installation at St John the Baptist church, Flitton, Bedfordshire. September 2003*

## ILLUSTRATIONS

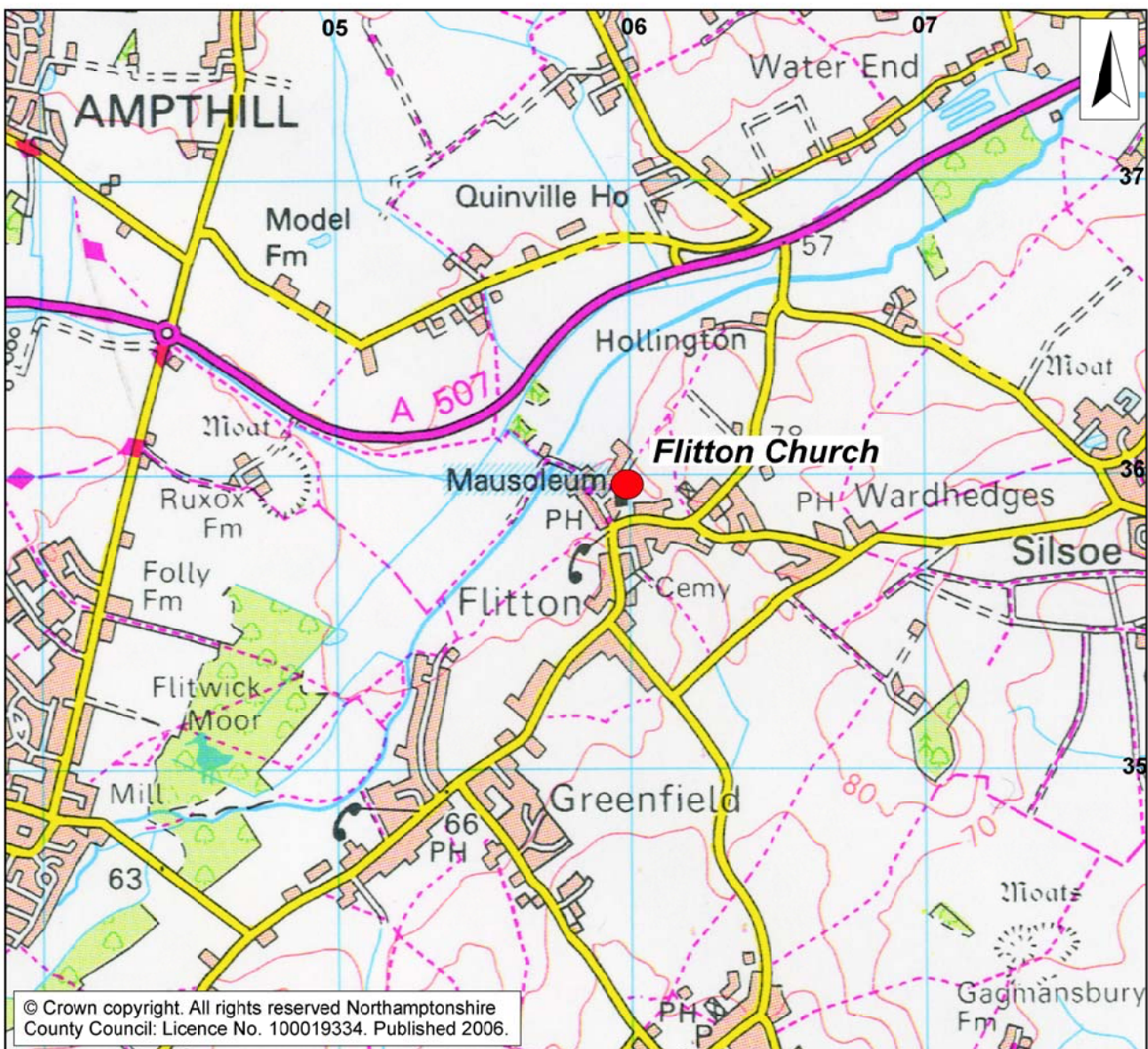
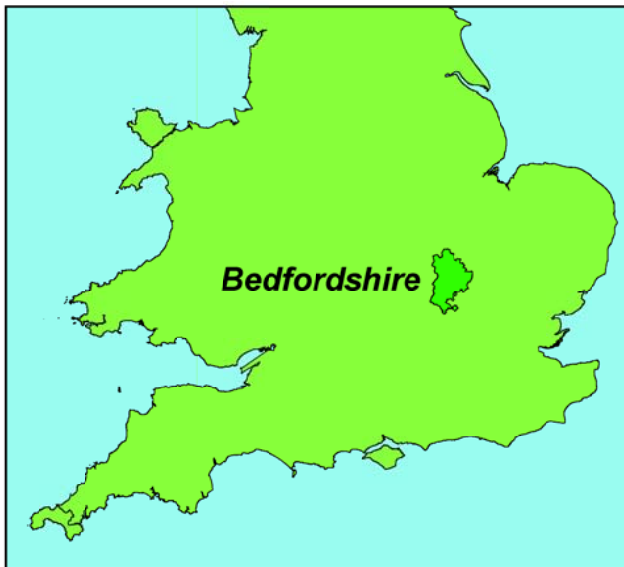
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| Fig 1 | Location of the site  |
| Fig 2 | Plan of the church showing the locations of the French drain trenches |
| Fig 3 | Sections of the foundations   |

## PLATES

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
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| Plate 2  | Tower stair turret foundation from the south-west   |
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| Plate 7  | Northern arm of the mausoleum (phase two) looking south-east  |
| Plate 8  | East side of the southern arm of the mausoleum (phase two) looking north-west   |
| Plate 9  | Remains of the angled corner buttress at the south-east corner of the chancel built over by the mausoleum wall (phase two)              |
| Plate 10 | Soakaway pit 3 from the tower   |

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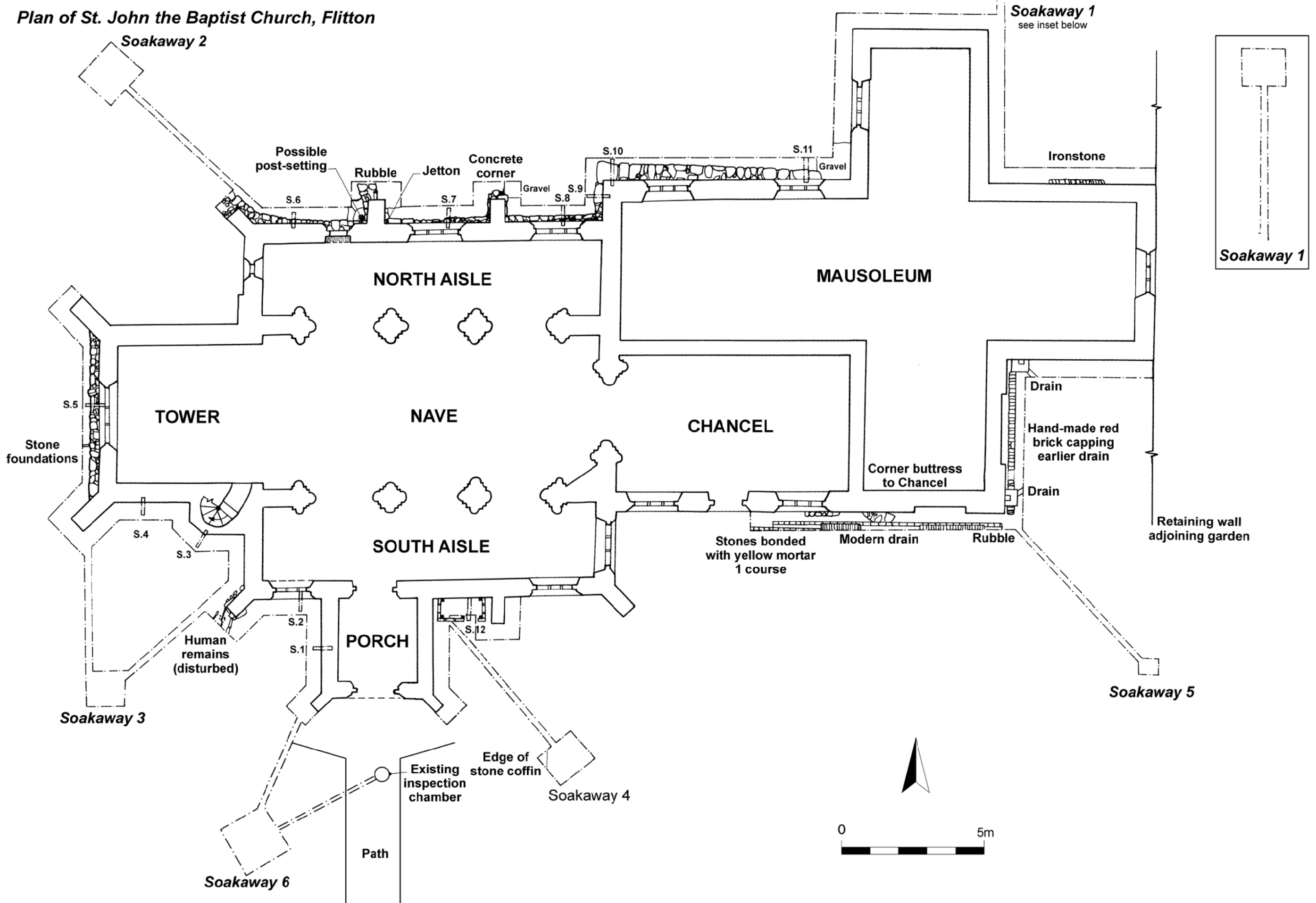


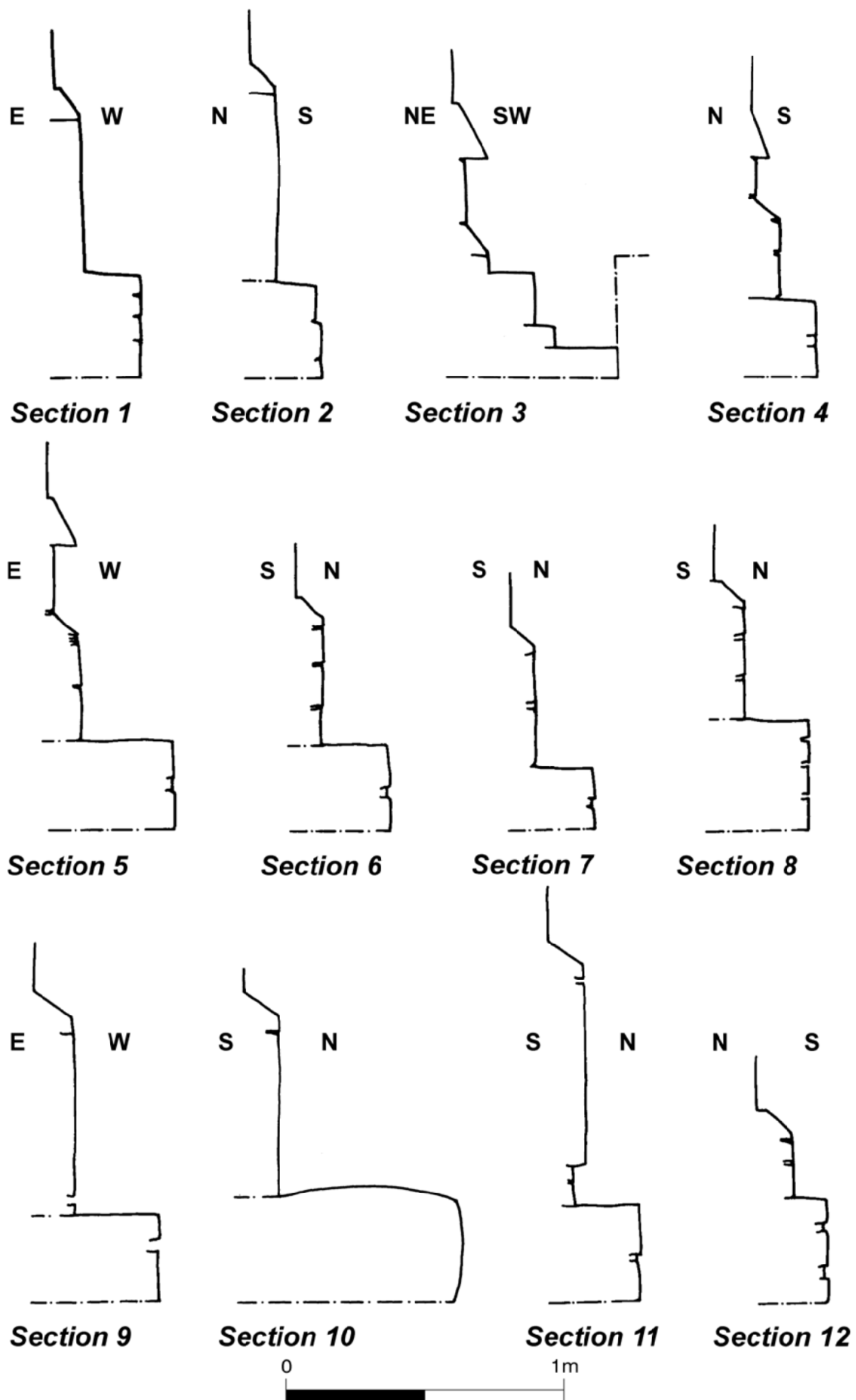


Site Location Fig 1



***Plan of St. John the Baptist Church, Flitton***





Sections of Wall Fig 3



Plate 1



Plate 2





Plate 3



Plate 4





Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8





Plate 9



Plate 10