

# CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, MESHAW, DEVON,

## *Archaeological Monitoring and Recording*

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### SUMMARY

*This report presents the results of a programme of archaeological monitoring undertaken at St. John the Baptist, Meshaw, Devon. The works focused on the replacement of timber flooring within the north aisle of the GII Church and the excavation of a service trench for water and drainage outside the church. The investigations revealed four grave cuts, three to the south of the church and one inside the nave of the church, none of the features were dated. Two wall footings were discovered to the west of the tower, which suggest that the church was formerly longer, and that these footings pre-date the rebuilding of the tower in 1691.*

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## CONTENTS

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<b>1.0</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	PROJECT BACKGROUND	2
1.2	TOPOGRAPHICAL AND GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	2
1.3	HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	3
<b>2.0</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	INTERNAL WORKS	6
2.2	EXTERNAL WORKS	6
<b>3.0</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY &amp; REFERENCES</b>	<b>7</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

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COVERSHOT: VIEW OF SERVICE TRENCH ALONG MAIN CHURCH PATH. FROM THE NORTH-EAST (1M SCALE).

FIGURE 1:	SITE LOCATION (@PROMAP).	4
FIGURE 2:	PLAN OF SITE SHOWING FEATURES WITH DETAILED INSET OF RUBBLE BUILD FORMING WALL FOOTING [103].	5
FIGURE 3:	FIRST PHASE OF TRENCHING FROM THE VESTRY, VIEWED FROM THE WEST (SCALE 1M).	8
FIGURE 4:	COBBLED SURFACE (101) UNDER TARMAC (100) AT VESTRY THRESHOLD (SCALE 1M).	8
FIGURE 5:	EXCAVATION INSIDE THE CHURCH SHOWING TOMB [115], FROM THE EAST (SCALE 1M).	9
FIGURE 6:	TOMB [115], FROM THE SOUTH (SCALE 1M).	9
FIGURE 6:	(LEFT) SHOT OF WALL FOOTINGS {103} VIEWED FROM NORTH (SCALE 1M).	10
FIGURE 7:	TRENCH RUNNING ALONG PATHWAY, VIEWED FROM NORTH (SCALE 1M).	10
FIGURE 8:	EDGING STONES WITHIN (101) CURVING AROUND CORNER OF TOWER UNDER TARMAC (100) (SCALE 1M).	11
FIGURE 9:	SOUTHERN END OF SERVICE TRENCH ALONG CHURCH PATH (SCALE 1M).	11

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

South West Archaeology Ltd. (SWARCH) undertook archaeological monitoring and recording during the replacement of flooring and installation of services at the Church of St. John the Baptist, Meshaw, Devon. The fieldwork was carried out by S.H. Walls with internal works and trenching beginning on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2023 and external works being undertaken on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2024. The work was carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (Boyd 2023) agreed with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) the Devon Council Historic Environment Team (DCHET).

### 1.2 TOPOGRAPHICAL AND GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The proposed site is located at the heart of Meshaw village with an almost rectangular churchyard. The church has residential housing to the north, south and west with agricultural enclosures and open countryside to the east and beyond the village. The site lies at a height of c.172m AOD. The soils of this area are the slowly permeable seasonally waterlogged clayey soils of the Hallsworth 1 Association (SSEW 1983). These overlie the sedimentary mudstone of the Pilton Mudstone Formation (BGS 2022).

### 1.3 HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The church of St. John the Baptist lies in the village of Meshaw, in the parish of the same name, in the historic hundred of Witheridge and the deanery of South Molton (Lysons 1822). The manor of Meshaw belonged to the Avenells during the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries before being split between the Fleming and Furneaux families. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the larger share belonged to Richard Preston, esq., M.P. The Church of St. John the Baptist is Grade II Listed.

The listing text (Historic England, 2025) reads: *Church of St. John the Baptist 20.2.67 - II Parish church. Medieval foundation, tower rebuilt 1691 in memory of James Courtenay, nave-cum-chancel in one, rebuilt 1838, vestry added mid C19, new sanctuary and a porch added in 1879. Coursed local stone rubble, snecked rubble to porch and sanctuary, freestone dressings, slate roofs to coped verges, lead ridges, cruciform finials. Plan: nave, chancel, south porch, north vestry, plain and simple low tower, austere Commissioners Early English style with High Victorian Gothic Early English porch and chancel. Exterior: 2 stage west tower with small diagonal buttresses to the bottom stage, embattled capping which appears rebuilt, weathercock on a tall wood pole, small simple rectangular bell-chamber openings with louvres, C14 style west window inserted probably in 1879; above an incised stone plaque commemorating the rebuilding. Buttressed 4-bay continuous nave-and-chancel, lancets with simple Y- tracery, except 2 at the east end with the tracery removed. Sanctuary of lower height with a triple-lancet, east window. Porch in conforming style to south with pointed-arch inner and outer door openings. Small north vestry. Interior: plain plastered interior on slate floors. Nave with depressed 4-centred arch shaped plaster ceiling; braced truss on carved corbels marking the division with the chancel, panelled ceiling to sanctuary with thin ribs. Octagonal style Perpendicular type font which may be recut from an original. Victorian High Gothic pulpit of 1879; High Gothic sanctuary with contemporary altar rails, encaustic tile pavement, altar table, reredos with decalogue plaques and 3-light stained glass east window. Pews, choir stalls and organ replaced in 1904. Large wood lecturn carved as an eagle, probably Victorian but may be earlier. Good monument to James Courtenay of 1658, coloured and gilded, flanking Corinthian columns support a pediment capped by achievements. Three early C20 wall monuments. Small painted Royal Arms of 1838. 3 stained glass windows of 1854, 1861, and 1879. Encaustic tile pavement under tower.*



FIGURE 1: SITE LOCATION (©PROMAP).

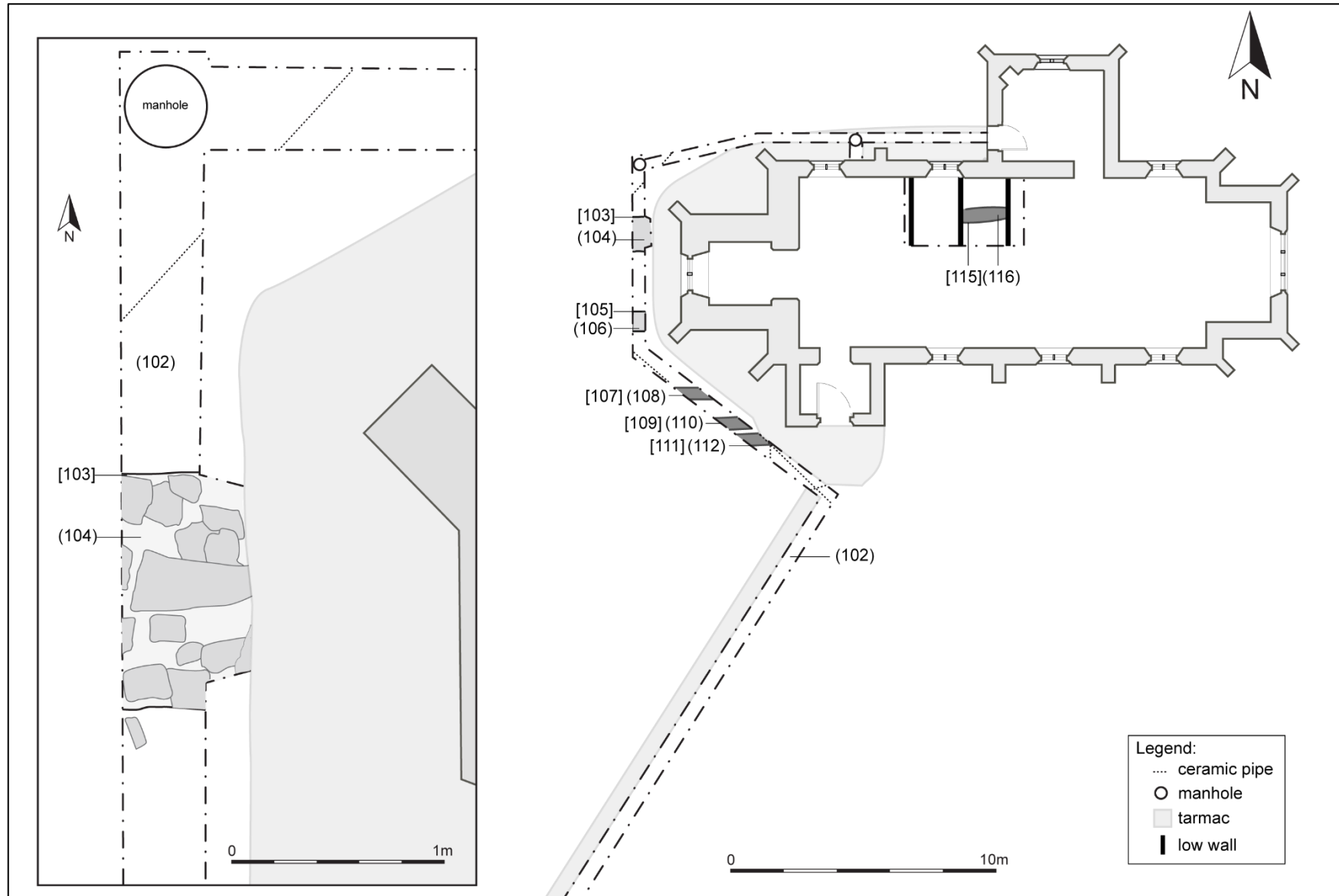


FIGURE 2: PLAN OF SITE SHOWING FEATURES WITH DETAILED INSET OF RUBBLE BUILD FORMING WALL FOOTING [103].

## 2.0 RESULTS

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### 2.1 INTERNAL WORKS

Internal works were undertaken in the north aisle to replace the existing timber floor as it was rotten. An area measuring c. 2.5m x 4.5m within the nave was removed, revealing a large void underneath. The timbers in this area had been suspended on low dwarf walls.

Removing the timber exposed a stone lined tomb [115] coffin shaped with a slightly sunken fill (116). The cut of the tomb measured 1.67m in length with a width varying from 0.44m at the head, 0.68m in the middle and 0.4m to the foot. Both the feet and the head extended under the low dwarf walls and were partially covered by these. The tomb itself was covered with dust and loose rubble from Victorian floor works, including one fragment of roof slate.

Within the vestry the flooring seemed to have been recently replaced with a modern timber floor.

### 2.2 EXTERNAL WORKS

A trench measuring c. 55m was cut leading from the vestry and followed along the main pathway around the church. The trench was cut in two phases, the first measuring 0.3m wide and covering a small stretch from the vestry door to the manhole located near the northwest corner of the tower. The second stretch of trenching measured 0.4m wide and 0.8m deep and continued from the manhole south, round the tower and along the path leading from the church.

The first stretch of trench was cut through the path, a layer of modern tarmac (100) measuring 0.06m thick. This was overlying (101) a cobbled surface of large sub-angular to sub-rounded stones measuring c.0.15m x 0.1m x 0.07m. Towards the west of the trench (101) began to thin and the stones became smaller. Cobbles were bedded on edge in a matrix of grey-yellow brown silt-clay up to 0.18m thick. (101) was laid directly on top of the natural (102) a firm yellow clay with shillet.

The stratigraphy of tarmac path (100) onto cobble stones (101) continued along the second stretch of trenching around the tower. The cobbles here had good edging stones, sub-rectangular in shape and measuring c. 0.16m x 0.05m x 0.02m thick. The edging stones were exposed in the edge of the trench edge below the layer of tarmac and would be seen curving around the corner of tower (figure 7).

To the west of the tower, under the tarmac path (100) and cobble surface (101) two stone wall footings were uncovered. These were in line with the walls of the tower. The most northernmost wall footing {103} was rubble built and measured 1.15m wide and was the better surviving of the two footings. The footing was built of good sub-rectangular blocky stone, typically measuring 0.6m x 0.2m x 0.18m. The footing was exposed from a depth of 0.4m below the present ground level and extended beyond the base of the excavation, 0.3m(+) deep.

The second wall footing {105} was located c.2.85m south of the first, but had seemingly not survived as well. Wall {105} measured 0.9m wide and was seemingly shallower at 0.3m deep.

The service trenching once it had turned to the south of the church, exposed three individual grave cuts which were all lined up with the rows of graves visible in the churchyard. The first grave [107] was in the third row of graves back from the main pathway entrance. [107] was overlaid by cobbled surface (101) and measured 0.5m wide and upwards of 1.6m long and 0.5m deep. Filled by (108) a dark yellow-grey clay loam with occasional medium sub-angular to sub-rounded stones.

The second grave [109] was in the second row from the path, adjacent to a grave stone dated 1841. Again, the grave was underlying cobbled surface (101). Skeletal remains identified at a depth of c. 0.1m below this and within fill (110). The bone was very spongy and friable in texture.

The third grave [111] uncovered was located the closest to the pathway in the first row of graves, with the feet effectively by the porch of the church. Human remains were identified at a depth of 1m below the ground surface within (112). The skull located within the trench had been disturbed by the ceramic drain above it leaving the skull flipped upside down, with the mandible facing upwards and fragments of arm bones having been previously disturbed and located next to the skull.

The trench then passed directly along and adjacent to the pathway that leads to the entrance to the church, this part of the route was cut through the topsoil (113) and subsoil (114) to a depth of 0.65m. No further graves or features were noted along this length.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

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The archaeological investigation revealed four grave cuts, three within the trench outside the church and one underneath the floor in the north aisle of the church. None of these features were dated, but the 3 graves to the south of the church are likely 19<sup>th</sup> century in date. The grave inside the church is undated, but clearly pre-dated the Victorian floors. Human remains are to be expected when working within churches and churchyards and the graves were not excavated further as they were not being disturbed further. Any human bone that was encountered was carefully recovered and much of it had been seemingly disturbed by previous service trenching. Any bone was carefully recovered and was reinterred in a ceremony within the churchyard during the works.

The two wall footings are interesting as they are aligned with the church tower, and whilst not dated they presumably relate to an earlier church layout, which must predate the 1691 replacement tower, and suggest that the church was formerly longer.

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FIGURE 3: FIRST PHASE OF TRENCHING FROM THE VESTRY, VIEWED FROM THE WEST (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 4: COBBLED SURFACE (101) UNDER TARMAC (100) AT VESTRY THRESHOLD (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 5: EXCAVATION INSIDE THE CHURCH SHOWING TOMB [115], FROM THE EAST (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 6: TOMB [115], FROM THE SOUTH (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 7: (LEFT) SHOT OF WALL FOOTINGS {103} VIEWED FROM NORTH (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 8: TRENCH RUNNING ALONG PATHWAY, VIEWED FROM NORTH (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 9: EDGING STONES WITHIN (101) CURVING AROUND CORNER OF TOWER UNDER TARMAC (100) (SCALE 1M).



FIGURE 10: SOUTHERN END OF SERVICE TRENCH ALONG CHURCH PATH (SCALE 1M).

