

archenfield archaeology ltd

project ref AA_109



St Gregory's Church, Morville, Shropshire
archaeological monitoring

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2008

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archenfield archaeology ltd

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*St Gregory's Church, Morville, Shropshire: archaeological monitoring
2008*

*The author would like to acknowledge Perry Construction Ltd
Jeremy Milne, Regional Archaeologist for the West Midlands National Trust, and
Andrew Pike, Hereford Diocesan Archaeological Advisor for their assistance during the
groundworks. Thanks are also due to Martin Roseveare of Archaeophysica Ltd, for
providing information on the geophysical survey undertaken in 2005*

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cover photograph: St Gregory's Church, Morville, looking south

archenfield archaeology report number 204



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Summary

Archenfield Archaeology Ltd were commissioned by Mr Tim Ratcliffe (the client) on behalf of the Morville Parish Council to monitor works within the grounds of St. Gregory's Church. The site lies within the grounds of Morville Hall, a National Trust property. The church originated from the 12th century and was added to and altered during later centuries. A Benedictine priory was also sited in the vicinity.

The work to be carried out was for the provision of toilet and basic kitchen facilities in the church vestry at the bottom of the church tower. As part of this work the floor of the tower needed to be removed. Two trenches were also to be excavated, one for the installation of the water supply and the other to connect drainage pipes to an existing sewer in the adjacent field belonging to the National Trust.

A condition in the Faculty Consent from the Diocese stated that archaeological monitoring must take place during the excavation in the church tower. The National Trust required monitoring whilst digging across their field to reach an existing manhole.

The site-work was carried out between January and March 2008.

The only archaeology present consisted of fragments of disarticulated human bone from within the tower and, at a deeper level, four further disarticulated skeleton remains including crania, scapulae, vertebrae and phalanges. A 20th century brick soakaway, which assisted with drainage from the roof, was also found.

1 Introduction

NGR: SO 3669 2939

Related National Trust SMR numbers: 55,678 St. Gregory's Church, 55,679

Churchyard, 55,680 Lych-gate

Archaeological Planning Authority: Shropshire County Council

Tim Ratcliffe Associates Ltd (the client) commissioned a programme of archaeological monitoring at St. Gregory's Church, Morville in accordance with the written scheme of investigation (WSI) issued by Archenfield Archaeology Ltd. Trenches for water and waste pipes were to be excavated through the current churchyard for the addition of a kitchen block within the current church building. This work required archaeological monitoring to be conducted to satisfy the planning conditions.

The proposed development involved reducing the floor level inside the western church tower and installing water access and drainage for a toilet and kitchen area.

2 Site location and description

The village of Morville lies 3 miles north-west of Bridgnorth and 5 miles south-east of Much Wenlock within Shropshire on the A458. St Gregory's Church lies to the south-east of Morville Hall frontage.

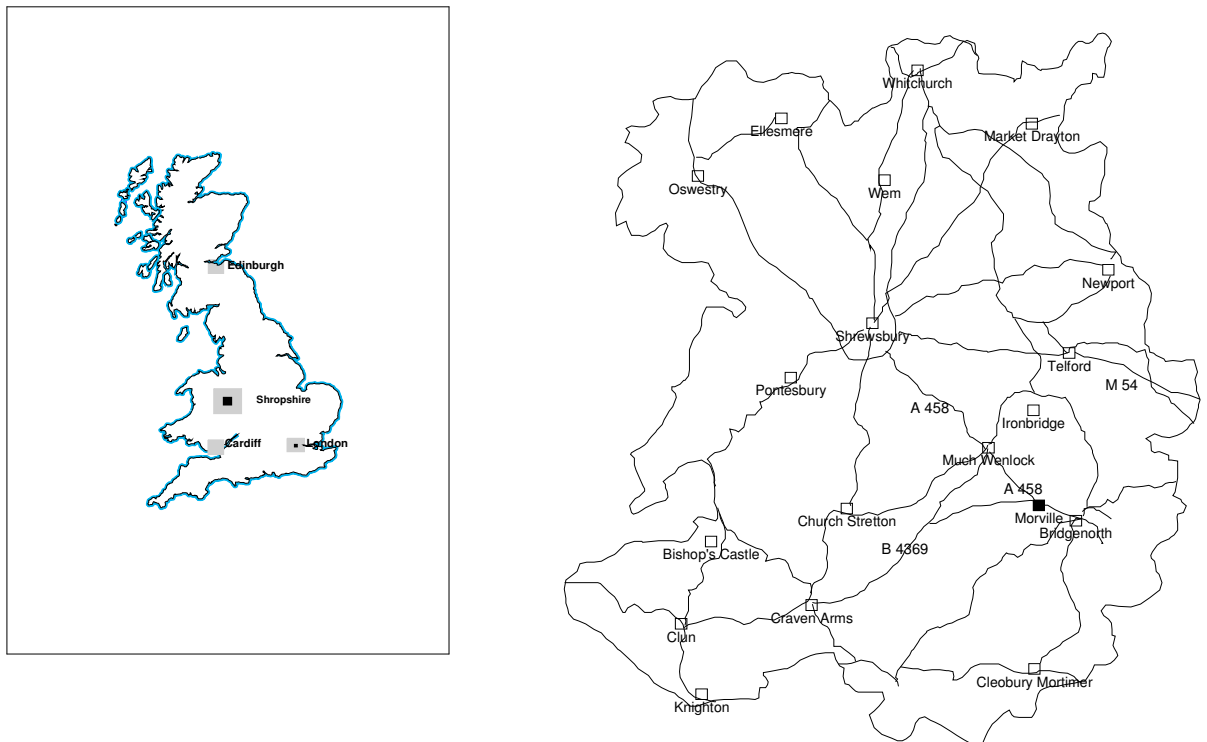


figure 1: location of Morville within Shropshire and the UK

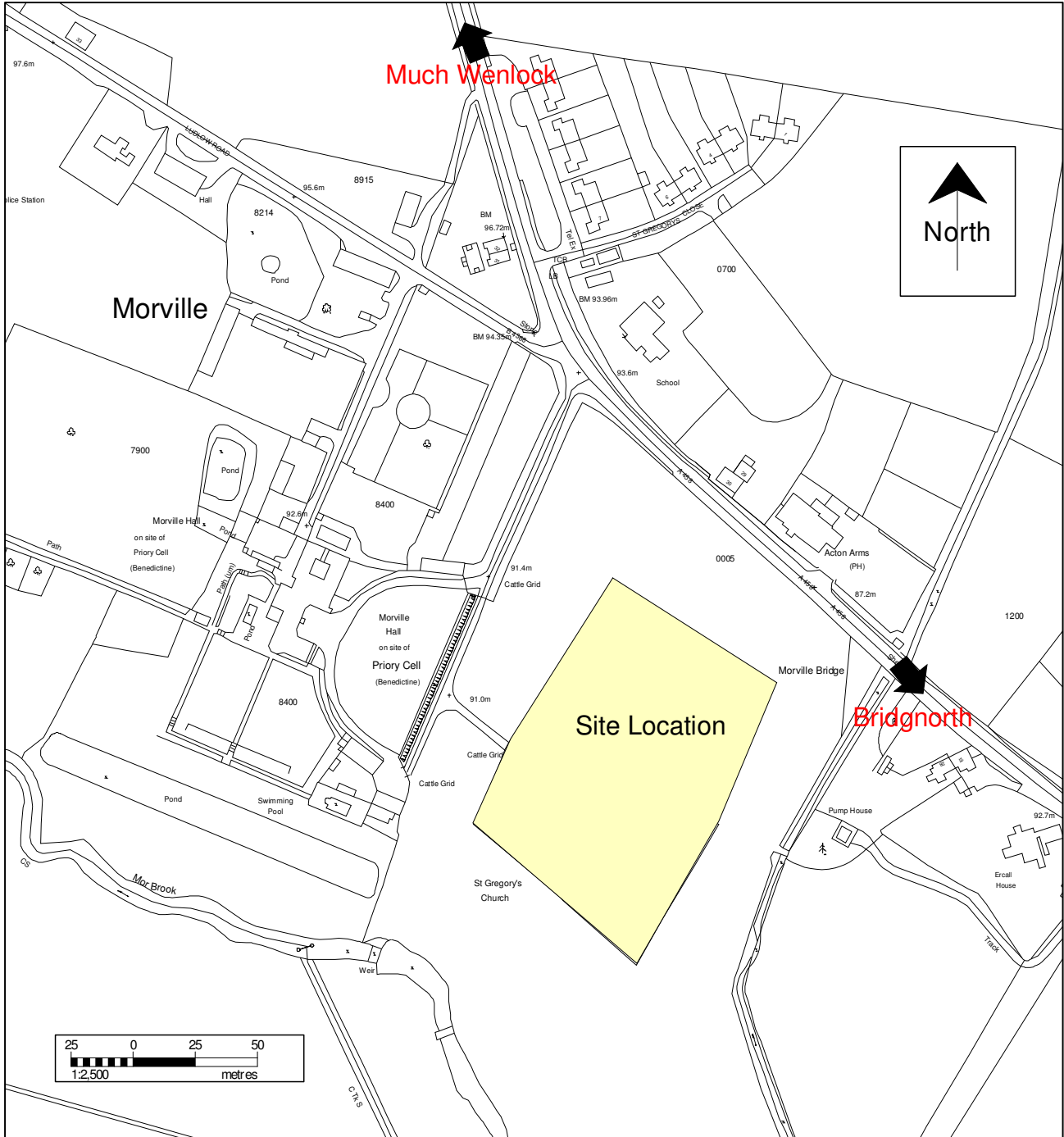


figure 2: site specific location plan

3 Geological, historical and archaeological background

3.1 Geological background

The solid geology surrounding Morville consists of Lower Old Red Sandstone including Downtonian (OS Geological Survey, 1979). The site is currently a churchyard and farmland under pasture, within a National Trust property estate.

3.2 Historical background

A fully comprehensive archaeological and historical landscape survey of Morville Hall, the village and the church was undertaken by Archenfield Archaeology (Meadows and Phillips, 2006). Information relating specifically to St Gregory's Church (apparently the patron saint of Morville) is summarised here.

In 1118 a church with a short chancel and an aisle-less nave was built by the monks of Shrewsbury. It is debatable as to whether the Norman church was built on the foundations of the Saxon structure as there is no trace of the collegiate church remaining. It appears more likely that the Saxon church was in the same field but nearer the road. Indeed, when a grave was being dug in 1859 on the north side of the present churchyard, and where there were no signs of previous burials, the ground was found to be full of human bones. Saxon Christians had a strong prejudice against burying on the north side of any church and if these bones came from Saxon burials then it is assumed that they were made on the south side of the Saxon church (*ibid*, 2006).

When this new church was consecrated by the Bishop of Hereford Geoffrey de Clive, following the ceremony a heavy thunder storm scattered the crowd which had flocked to the service and two women and five horses were killed by lightning (Leach, 1891).

In 1138 Robert de Bethune, the next Bishop of Hereford, granted an appropriation of Morville Church to Shrewsbury Abbey and the church became a Benedictine priory, shorn of all its original influence, remaining subject to the abbey until the Reformation. One prior and two monks were sent and charged with the spiritual welfare of the parishioners and to carry out '*a full discharge of the duties of hospitality there, in proportion to the local means*'. They also had to provide lodging for the Bishop on his journeys around the diocese (Eyton, 1854, 36).

During the reign of Stephen, the bishop provided new chapels,¹ and apart from being places of worship they were refuges for the poor and oppressed and enjoins that all these chapels 'be still subject to the Mother Church at Morville, so that on great festivals, the people shall attend the latter, and the priest of the latter, if he so wills, have the bodies of the dead carried thither for burial'. He also stipulates that the endowments of the chapels always shall be at the disposal of the 'Mother Church' (*ibid*, 1854, 37).

Around 1168, because the church was deemed too small for the monks and their daily offices, the church was enlarged. The north and south aisles were added and the chancel lengthened, piercing the side doors of the nave with three large arches. A square tower was erected against the west wall of the building for the reception of four bells (Meadows and Phillips, 2006).

That there was a village in medieval times is well documented and, although its exact location and that of the original church are not known, they are likely to be in the vicinity of the present church. The fact that the church is some distance away from the present village leads to conjecture that the original village was demolished at some point prior to the late 1800s in order to improve the view from the hall. This theory is supported by the results of the recent geophysical survey which identified the probable remains of former structures along the road associated with the village

1 By 1138 this has taken place at Astley Abbots; Billingsly; Oldbury; Tasley. Soon others were added: Aldenham; Aston Ayres; Underton. The only remaining chapel is at Aston Ayres.

(Roseveare, 2006, 8). Today only the (much altered) church remains; there are no visible traces of any monastic buildings.

When a funeral takes place at Morville the joy bells are rung – the church bells are chimed instead of the tenor bell being tolled alone. This custom prevails in many other parishes in Shropshire and in some of them it is called 'ringing home'. At the time of the Reformation the church possessed four bells. In 1759 they were taken down and replaced by six new bells which were cast in Gloucester by Abel Rudhall.

3.3 Archaeological background

Previous archaeological work in the area includes a detailed archaeological and historical landscape survey of the Morville Hall Estate in 2005 (Meadows and Phillips, 2006) and a geophysical survey of the field to the east of Morville Hall by Archaeophysica Ltd (Roseveare, 2006). This has identified the probable site of the Deserted Medieval Village (DMV) and that of the priory. The conclusions include the statement: *'The most significant result was the probable identification of former structures along a road and presumably an element of Morville village demolished somewhere in the late 1800s'*. And that *'The recognition of buried structures within the former extent of the medieval burial ground and associated with the north aisle of the church means that the most likely site of the priory has been identified this should remove any ambiguity as to its location'* (ibid, 2006, 8). Prior to this the site of the priory was identified by the Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record as being where the hall now stands.² Others placed it near to, or within the field adjacent to, the present church. The results can be seen below in figure 6.

Monumental Inscriptions from St Gregory's churchyard have also been recorded by the National Trust and Shropshire Family History Society (Milln *et al*, 1996).

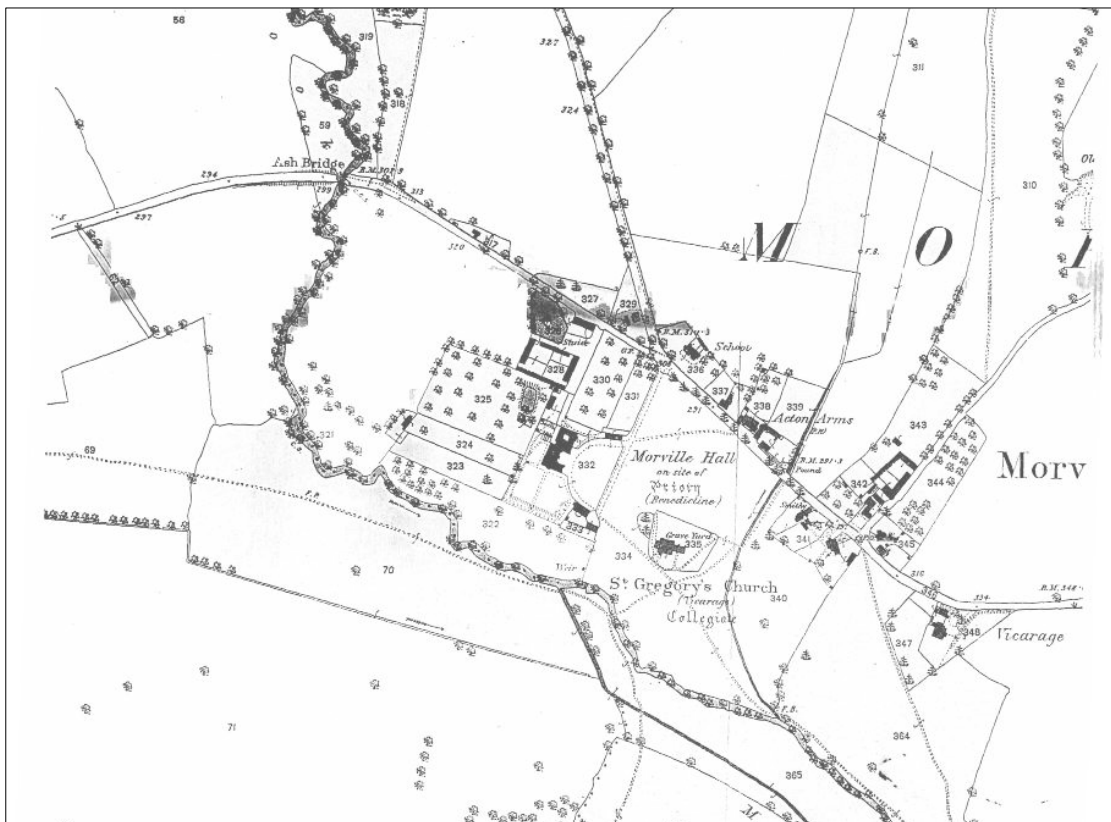


figure 3: 1st edition 1884 Ordnance Survey map of Morville

2 SMR Reference: SA 603

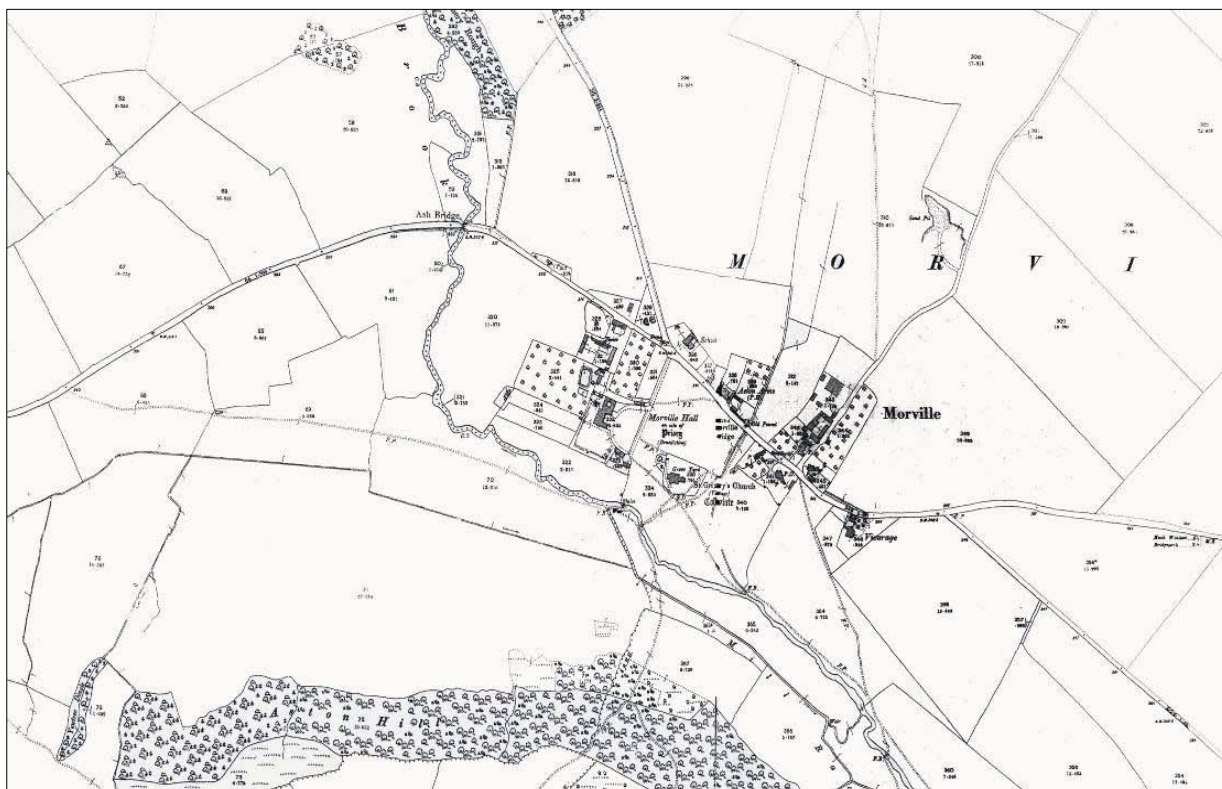


figure 4: 1902 Ordnance Survey map of Morville and environs

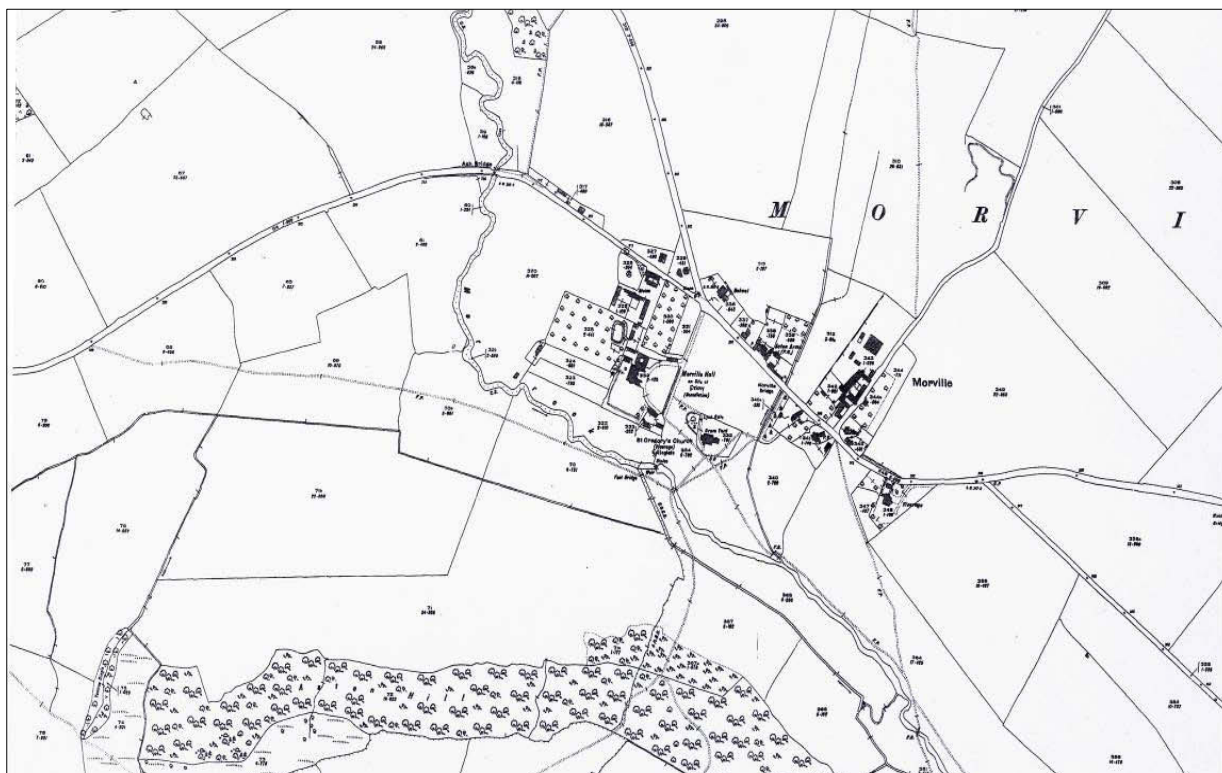


figure 5: 1920 Ordnance Survey map of Morville and environs

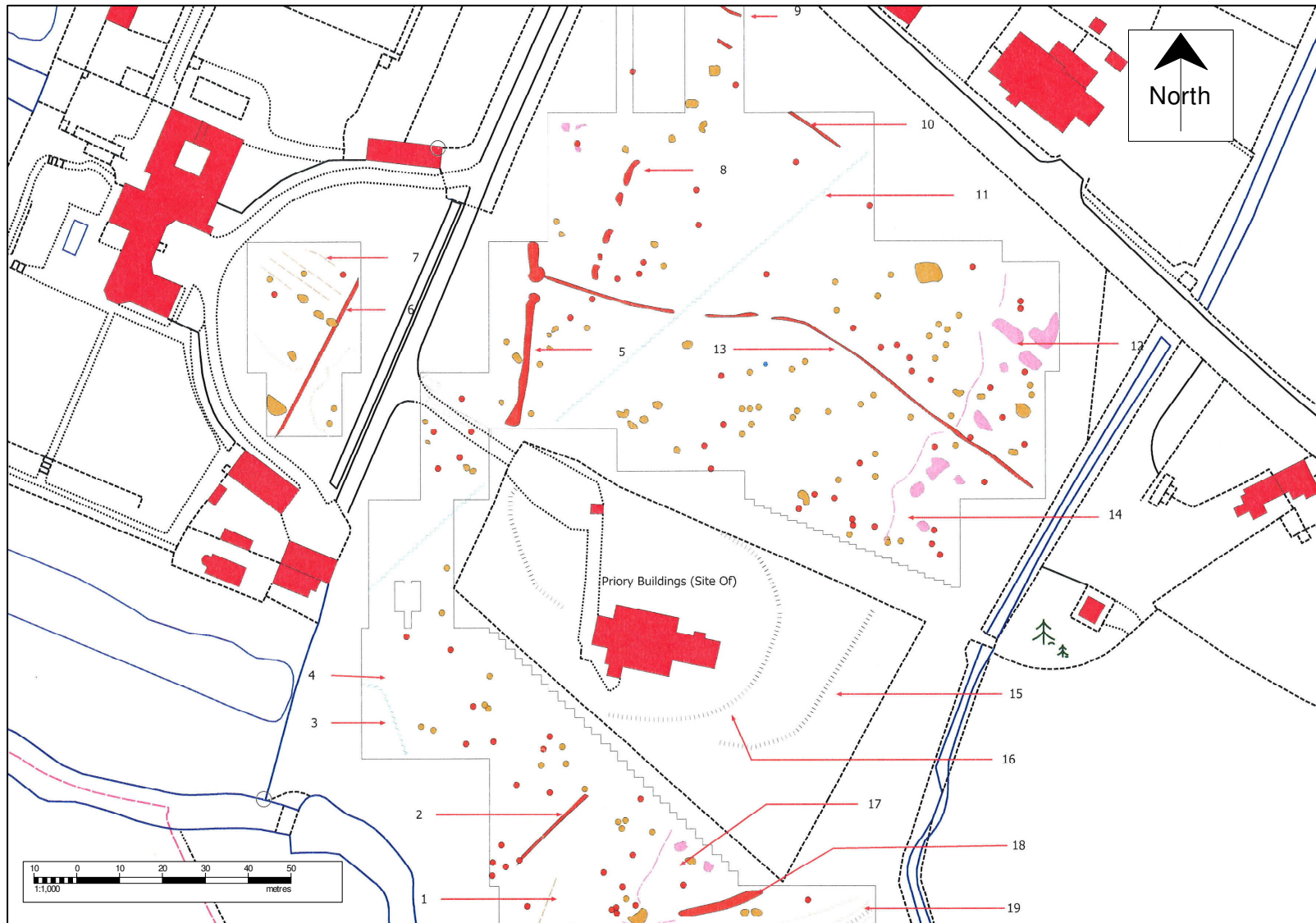


figure 6: results of the geophysical survey by Archaeophysica Ltd

4 Aims and Objectives

4.1 Aims

- to monitor archaeological deposits beneath the church tower floor
- to make a record of any evidence of buildings and structures relating to the Benedictine priory during excavation of the trenches
- to discover whether there are unmarked burials within the modern churchyard, relating to the Benedictine priory or earlier Saxon church
- to record any other archaeology within the churchyard or adjacent field

4.2 Objectives

- to provide an assessment of the results and how they fit into previous reports and projects relating to the Morville Hall Estate
- to disseminate the results of the project

5 Methodology

archaeological monitoring took place throughout the development and all ground disturbances were recorded. During the work the archaeologist, where necessary, made small or large scale interventions to safely mitigate the removal of any necessary archaeological deposits

preservation of the archaeological resource by detailed record or by preservation in situ

the ground-works were recorded photographically with a digital camera, using photographic scales where necessary.

scaled plans and sections were drawn where necessary to locate and record stratigraphic information of any ground disturbance.

finished excavation levels were measured to metres OD.

skeletal remains were recorded in situ and re-interred on site after ground-works had been completed.

all ground-works were recorded to the recognised IFA standards.

6 Results

6.1 Stratigraphy

The church tower floor reduction

The stratigraphy in the church tower consisted of a concrete floor, including re-laid sandstone flagstones, a gravestone in the north-east corner and a marble cross, 0.1 metre thick (context 1) (figures 7 – 11). Below this, context 2 was a layer of loose coarse reddish brown sand; dark brown silt and fragmented white mortar 0.20 metres in depth across the site. This also contained frequent inclusions of fragmented disarticulated human bone, occasional animal bone, clay pipe and an iron horse shoe which would probably date from the 19th.or 20th century (figure 12)

In the north-west and south-east corners of the floor, remnants of the original flagstone floor base survived, with areas of a loose white mortar layer (context 3), previously disturbed when the floor was re-laid in 1990. (figures 13 and 14)

Context 4 was a layer of compact clay with occasional inclusions of rounded river stone. This layer had a 1 square metre hole excavated for the water pipe installation and a smaller trench 0.40 metres wide and 0.30 metres in depth from the south-western wall to the hole on the northern wall. Whilst excavating through context 4 further disarticulated human skeletal remains were recovered including crania, scapulae, vertebrae and phalanges.

The maximum depth that the excavation reached was 87.90 metres OD.



figure 7: concrete floor of church tower laid in 1990 before work began



figure 8: fragmented gravestone from church tower flooring (without scale)



figure 9: fragmented gravestone from church tower flooring (with scale)



figures 10 and 11: marble cross incorporated into church flooring (with and without scale)



figure 12: church tower floor context (2) with most of the concrete removed



figure 13: area of mortar flooring (3) in the north-west of the church tower, looking west



figure 14: remnants of white mortar flooring (3) for church flagstones in south-east corner of the church tower, looking south



figures 15 and 16: trench for water pipe connection within the church tower, overall and close up



figure 17: tower floor re-levelled before concreting

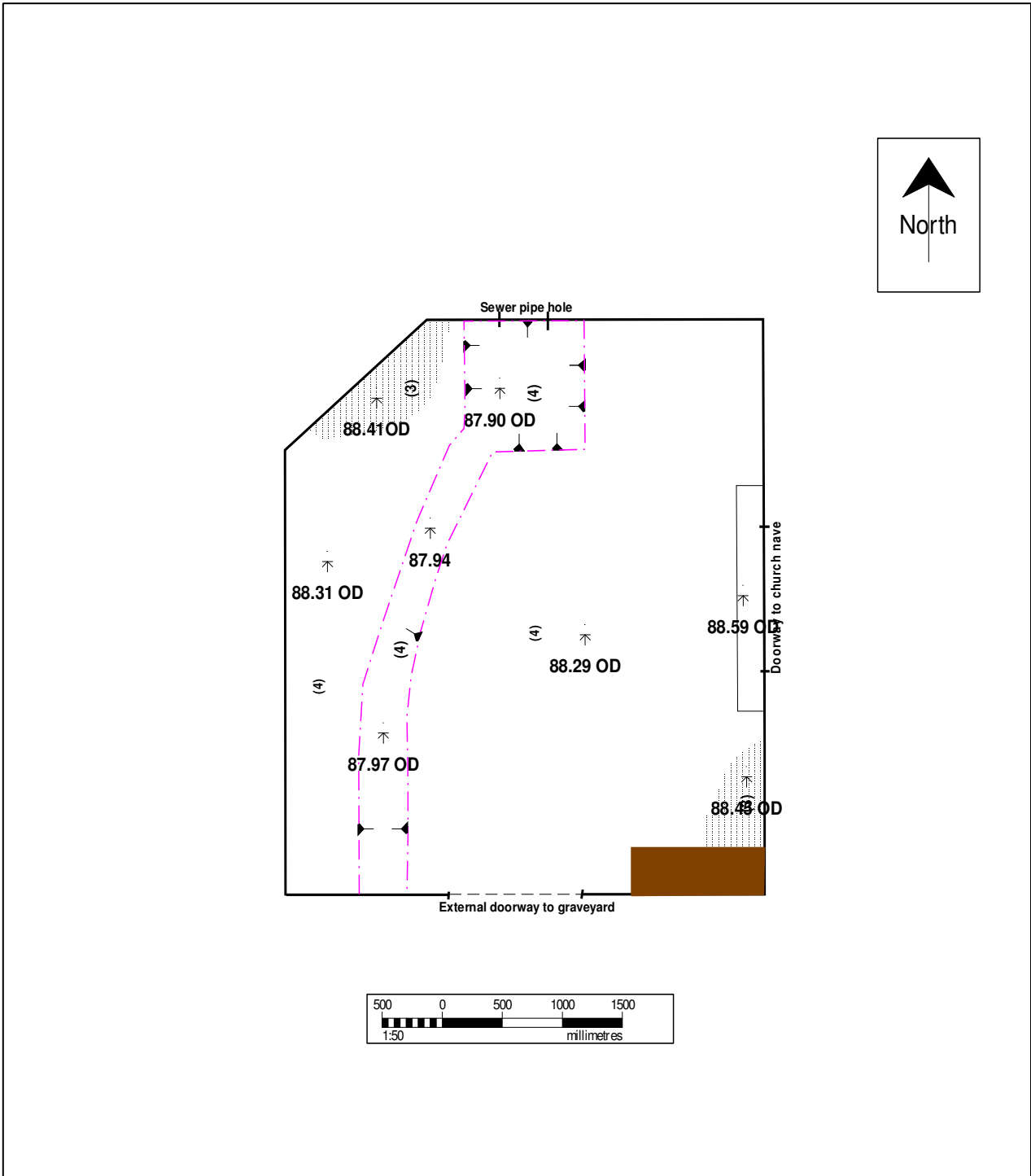


figure 18: church tower plan after floor excavation showing floor levels and water pipe trenches

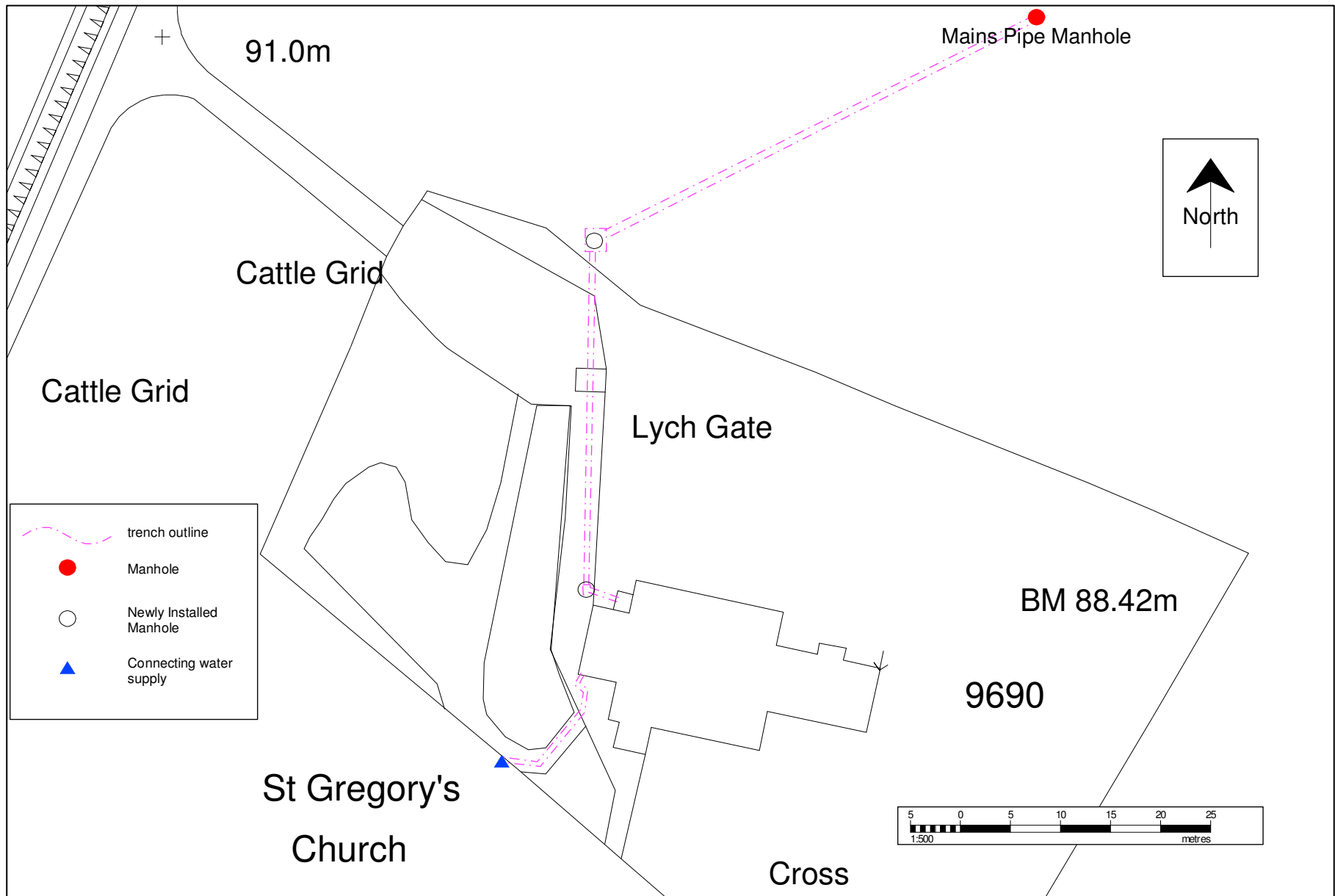


figure 19: trenching within the graveyard and on land belonging to the Morville Estate

Water supply trenches

To the south of St Gregory's Church, along the line of the present footpaths, pipe trenches 0.3 metres wide and 0.3 metres deep were excavated to connect the current water supply. The trenches covered a total of 15 metres in length. The stratigraphy consisted of a loose dark brown silty clay beneath a thin covering of grey pebbles for the footpath. The ground had been previously disturbed by electricity and land drain trenching. No archaeology was discovered. The maximum depth reached was 89.02 metres OD.



figures 20 and 21: trench connecting water supply to the church, across footpath, looking south-west

Waste water trenches

The pipe trenches for the waste water pipes were inserted through the northern church wall into the basement and ran west for 3.5 metres until it reached the footpath. Here a new manhole was installed and then the trench turned north and ran for 35 metres up the current footpath and through the lych gate (figures 29 and 30) until it reached the outside of the current churchyard. Another manhole was installed at this point and here the pipe trench turned north-east for 50 metres to connect with an existing manhole for the mains sewerage. The waste water trenches were 0.50 metres in width with minimum fall of the pipes from the church to the mains sewerage manhole.

The topsoil beneath the pebble path of the church was context 5. It consisted of very dark grey topsoil from 0.3 metres in depth with tightly compacted reddish brown silty clay containing moderate and small pebbles from 0.30 metres in depth in the south-west trench. Beneath this was layer 6, up to 0.50 metres deep, and was a reddish brown clay with occasional disarticulated human bone. Underlying this was a natural yellowish brown clay layer 0.30 metres to the base of the trench.

The trenches cut through the footpath and uncovered the occasional thin layer of tarmac of 0.05 metres in depth and compact orange clay 0.10 metres in depth. A circular modern brick soakaway with a diameter of 0.80 metres was discovered in the north-facing section of the pipe trench at the north-west corner of the church. This was capped with 0.30 metres of concrete and connected to the current roof drainpipes

The stratigraphy within the pipe trenches in the field to the north of the churchyard did not contain any archaeology. A reddish brown silty clay topsoil 0.50 metres thick lay above a reddish brown clay 1 metre thick and a compacted red clay and river gravel at the base 0.20 metres in depth.



figure 22: excavation of the trenches from the basement to the footpath



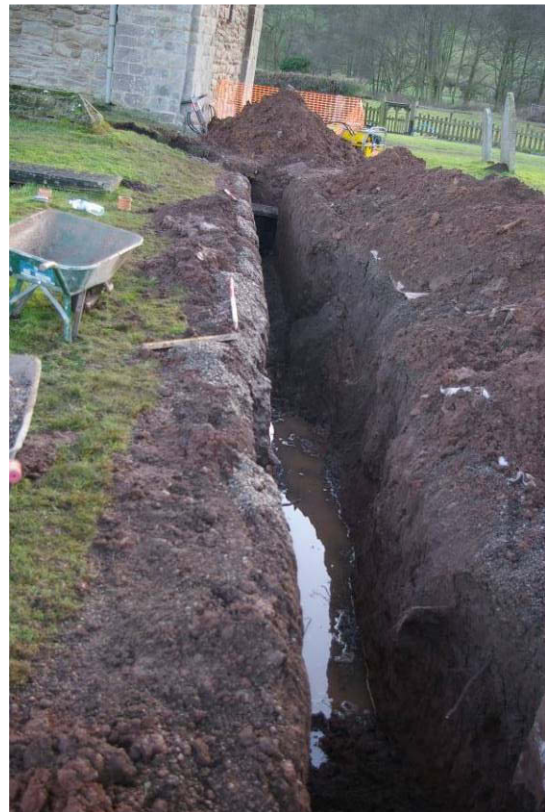
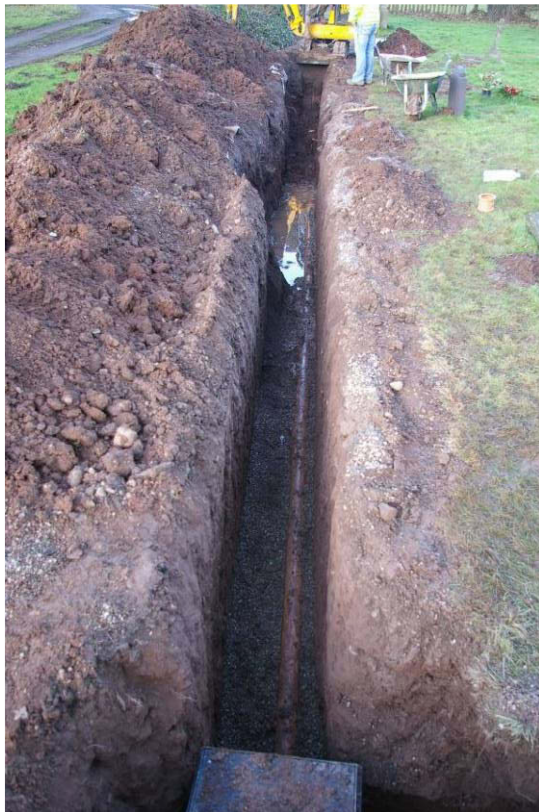
figure 23: brick soakaway with concrete capping, looking south-west



figure 24: sample of modern bricks from soakaway well construction



figures 25 and 26: modern brick built soakaway, looking south from above, with and without scale



figures 27 and 28: footpath excavation in January 2007 – looking north; looking south



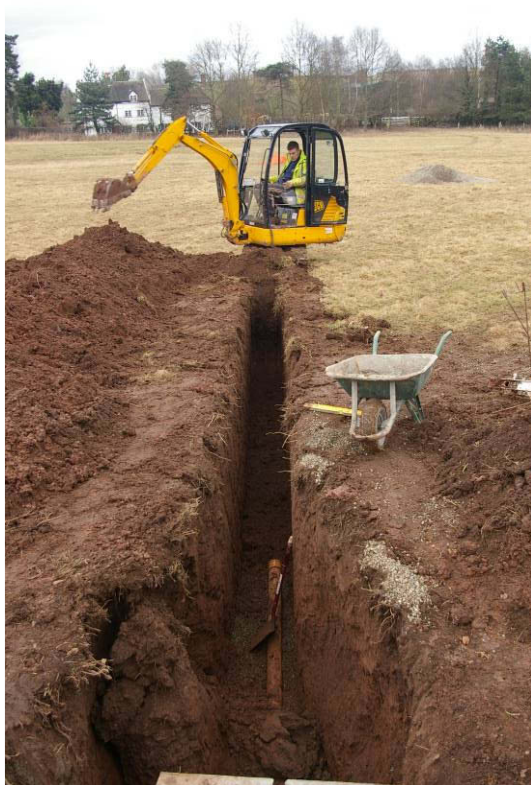
figure 29: continuation of excavation during March 2007 looking north towards the lych-gate



figure 30: looking south from concrete manhole towards the lych-gate and church with previous trenches re-instated.



figure 31: tarmac surface and compacted clay base in west-facing section of footpath trench



figures 32 and 33: excavation of trench in field north of graveyard in progress; full length from concrete manhole to connecting mains manhole



figures 34 and 35: disarticulated bones recovered during excavation

6.2 Finds

All disarticulated bones recovered from the reduction of floor level within the church were respectfully re-interred within the water pipes trenches backfill in the graveyard after the ground works were completed. All other modern finds were discarded on site.

7 Conclusion

The archaeological monitoring at St Gregory's Church, Morville revealed that the floor of the church tower had been recently disturbed and re-laid with concrete, incorporating some old gravestones and a marble cross. The fill beneath contained co-mingled disarticulated human skeletal remains both intact and fragmented. These were carefully removed and reburied as close to the church as possible. In the north-west and south-east of the church tower, remnants of the old mortar floor survived.

Outside in the church graveyard, trenches to connect the water supply to the church tower revealed no archaeology. The only archaeological structure revealed during the external excavations was a modern brick-built soakaway. The trenching crossing the field did not disturb any of the archaeological features detected on the geophysical survey undertaken in 2004 by Archaeophysica Ltd that were also visible on the ground.

The ground-works did not damage any archaeological structures or deposits.

8 Archive deposition

The primary project archive, consisting of the excavated material and any original paper records, will be prepared and stored in accordance with the guidelines laid down in the Institute of Field Archaeologists' guidelines for the preparation and storage of archives. The primary archive will be stored with Bridgnorth Museum.

A copy of the digital archive, stored on CD and consisting of context, artefact and ecofact data, together with the site plan and selected photographs, will accompany the primary archive.

The client, in consultation with the project manager, will make provision for the deposition of all finds from the excavation with the Bridgnorth Museum. On completion of the fieldwork and the processing, collation, recording and analysis of the finds from the excavation all finds will be handed over to the museum staff, along with the project archive. Arrangements will be made with the museum for the transfer of title.

9 Publication and dissemination proposals

Paper copies of this report will be lodged with the Historic Environment Officer to Shropshire County Council, Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record and Shrewsbury Library. A short note on the project will be prepared for publication.

CDs of this report, together with the supporting archival material will be available from Archenfield Archaeology Ltd. Information will also be available on OASIS, after completion of the report and an OASIS form (<http://.ads.ahds.ac.uk>)

The complete photographic record and database will be retained by Archenfield Archaeology Ltd.

