St Mary's Church, Great Abington, Cambridgeshire

Archaeological Monitoring

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With graphics by Vicki Herring and John Moller

Summary

An archaeological investigation was conducted within the churchyard of St Mary's Church, Great Abington, Cambridgeshire, in advance of the construction of a new north porch and associated services. A total of twenty-seven articulated inhumations were encountered. The grave earliest of these interments had been lined with stone and is likely to be Late Saxon in date. The churchyard subsequently remained in use until the late 19th century, and burials dating from most of this intervening period are also represented.
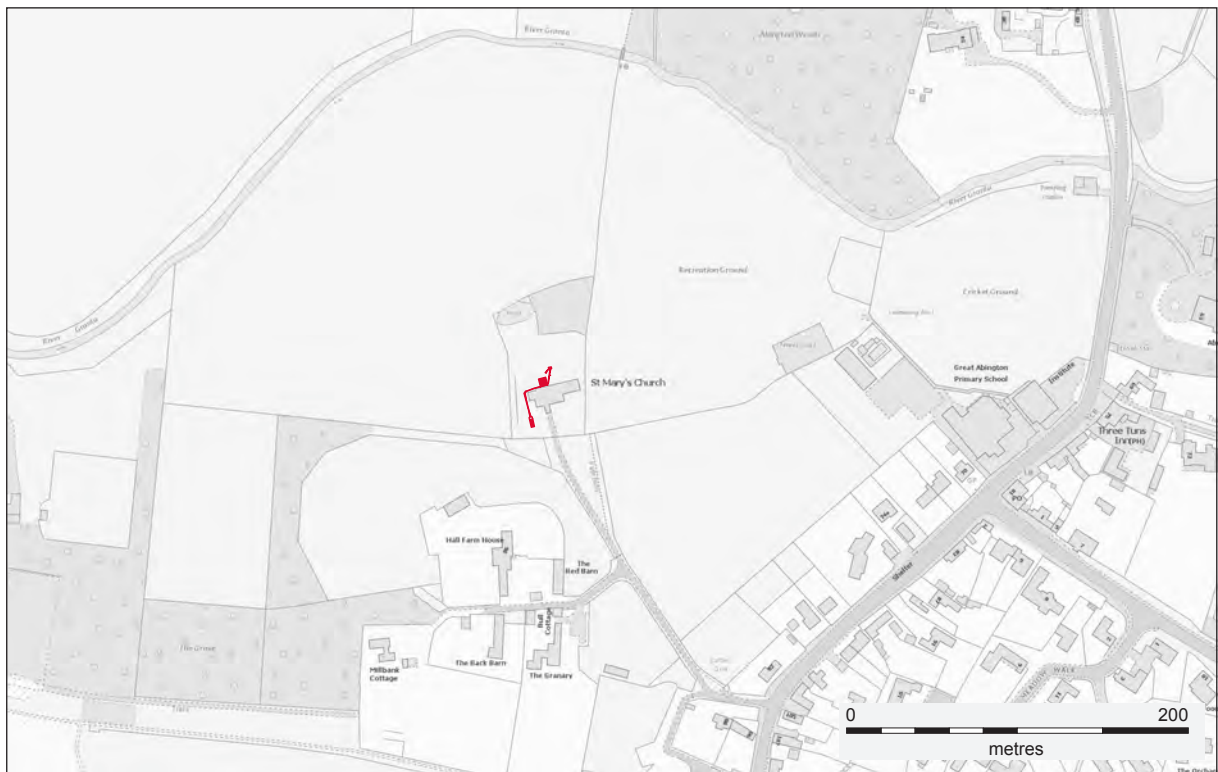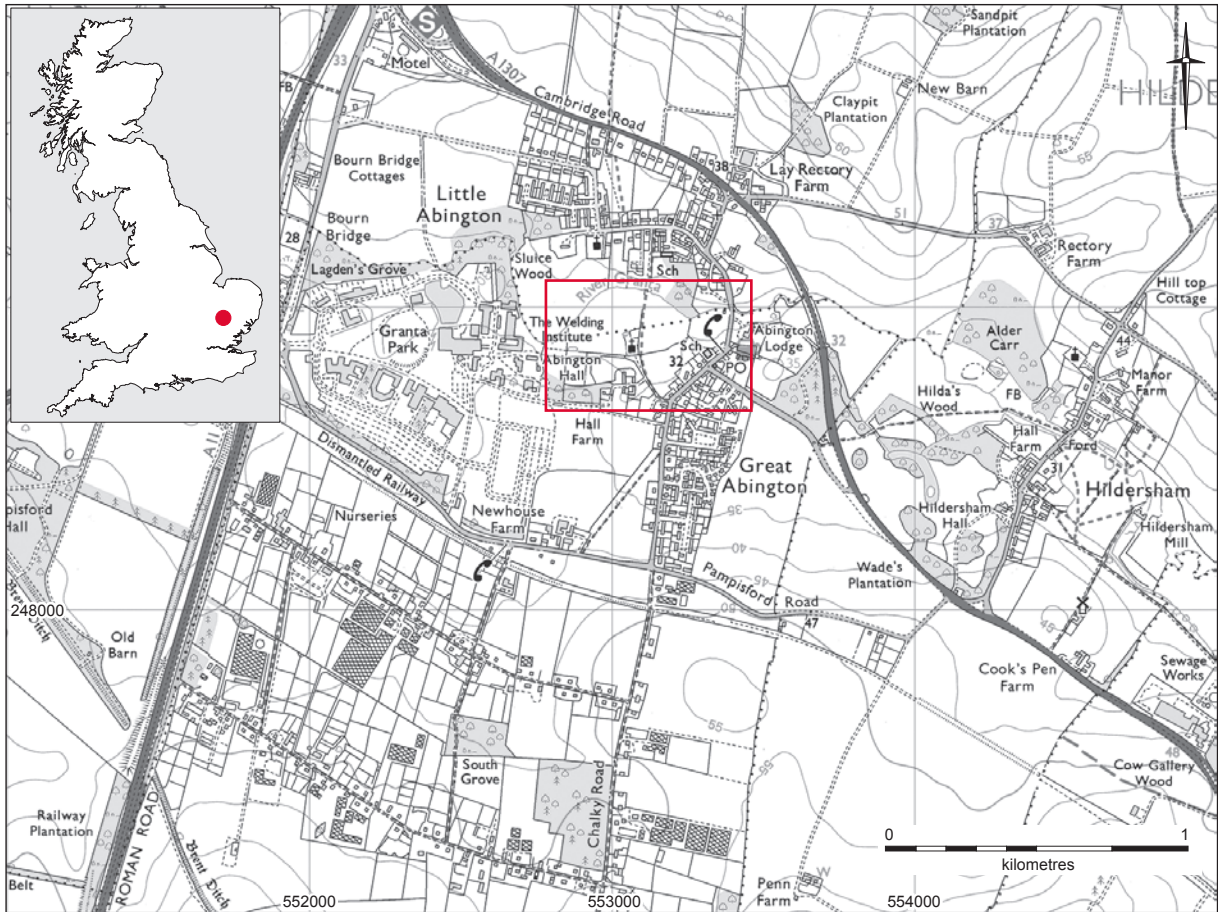
Figure 1. Site Location

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an archaeological investigation conducted by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) at the parish church of St Mary, Great Abington, Cambridgeshire (Figure 1). The investigated area comprised a combined total of 46.5 square metres in area. Work on the site, centred on grid reference TL 5306 4886, was conducted in two phases; an initial trial pit investigation took place on the 23rd of May 2014, while the principal phase of monitoring and investigation occurred between the 6th and the 27nd of April 2016. The investigation was undertaken in response to a brief issued by the Cambridge Historic Environment Team (CHET) (McConnell 2014), and followed the specification produced by the CAU (Dickens 2014). It formed part of a project to construct a new north porch containing an accessible lavatory (Freeland Rees Roberts 2013).

Geologically, the site falls across two distinct areas. The southern half of the churchyard, up to and including the church itself, is situated upon First Terrace river gravels overlying chalk (Melbourn Rock member), while the northern half lies upon silty clay alluvium deposited by the nearby River Granta. The present surface height across the investigated area varied between 28.83m and 29.22m AOD; natural gravels were encountered at 27.88m AOD in Trench 7.

Methodologically, the trenches were dug using a tracked mechanical excavator with 0.3m and 1.0m wide toothless buckets. The trenching process was closely monitored and stripping was halted whenever archaeological remains were encountered. All stratified features were then cleaned by hand and recorded using the CAU-modified version of the MoLAS system (Spence 1994). Any human remains that were identified were cleaned *in situ*, recorded and lifted before being handed over to the church for reinterment (this has since been carried out and the remains are reburied in the churchyard close to the main entrance). No skeletal material was removed from the site. Base plans were drawn at a scale of 1:20, whilst sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10. A digital photographic archive was also compiled. All work was carried out with strict adherence to Health and Safety legislation and within the recommendations of FAME (Allen & Holt 2010). The site codes for the project were **GCP15** and **GCP16** and the event number was **ECB 4385**.

Historical and architectural background

In Saxon times*,* Abington (*Abintone* in Domesday Book) appears to have comprised a single settlement. It contained two manors, which were divided before the Norman Conquest; thereby eventually giving rise to the separate but closely adjacent *vills* of Great Abington and Little Abington. Great Abington lies

to the south of the River Granta, and Little Abington to the north. The southern boundary of Great Abington is also the county boundary of Cambridgeshire; the northern boundary of Little Abington runs along the ancient Wool Street. To the west both parishes are bounded by a branch of the Icknield Way (Wright 1978, 3). The medieval *vill* of Great Abington initially appears to have been centred around the focal point of the church, but subsequently shifted further east to the present-day High Street by 1603 (CHER no: 08154).

Historically, Wulfwin son of Alfwin, a thegn of King Edward, held six hides at Great Abington prior to the Norman Conquest. After 1066 these lands were granted to Aubrey de Vere, who by 1086 held the whole township (Wright 1978, 5). In the mid-11th century Little Abington was held by Edeva the Fair, who also held a hide at Great Abington of which the tenant was a priest 'who could not withdraw without her permission' (this hide was also granted to Aubrey de Vere post-Conquest). Based upon this evidence, it has been suggested that the church at Great Abington may have originated as an estate minster that ministered to all of Edeva's estates in Chilford Hundred (Oosthuizen 2001, 63). But although there is some tentative architectural evidence for a pre-conquest church at Little Abington, perhaps a manorial chapel which later evolved into the parish church (Woudhuysen 1997, 17), no such evidence has yet been identified at Great Abington itself.

Architecturally, the earliest extant elements of the Grade II* listed church, which was first recorded with a dedication to St Mary in 1518, comprise the chancel and nave (both of *c*. 1200, and originally thatched – the nave until 1783 and the chancel until 1816), plus the west tower of *c*. 1225 (CHER no: 871214; Pevsner 1970, 394-95; Wright 1978, 17). These elements are constructed of flint rubble/field stones with clunch and limestone ashlar dressings. Several early lancet windows survive. During the 14th century the tower arch was appended, as well as the south arcade, south aisle and south porch. In the 15th century the windows to the south aisle and nave were replaced. Extensive restorations of the fabric were undertaken in 1895-7 and again in 1900. The present roofs are covered with slates and plain tiles, while the spire is covered with lead. Internal features include an early font and double piscina; a rood screen remained in place until 1742 (Wright 1978, 17).

RESULTS

Due to the multi-phased nature of the development, the investigation was conducted in several stages. Consequently, the following results have been sub-divided by area (split into Trenches 1-7; see Figure 2 for locations). Overall, a total of 27 articulated burials were encountered, the majority of which were located in Trench 7; details of these burials are summarised in Table 1, below.
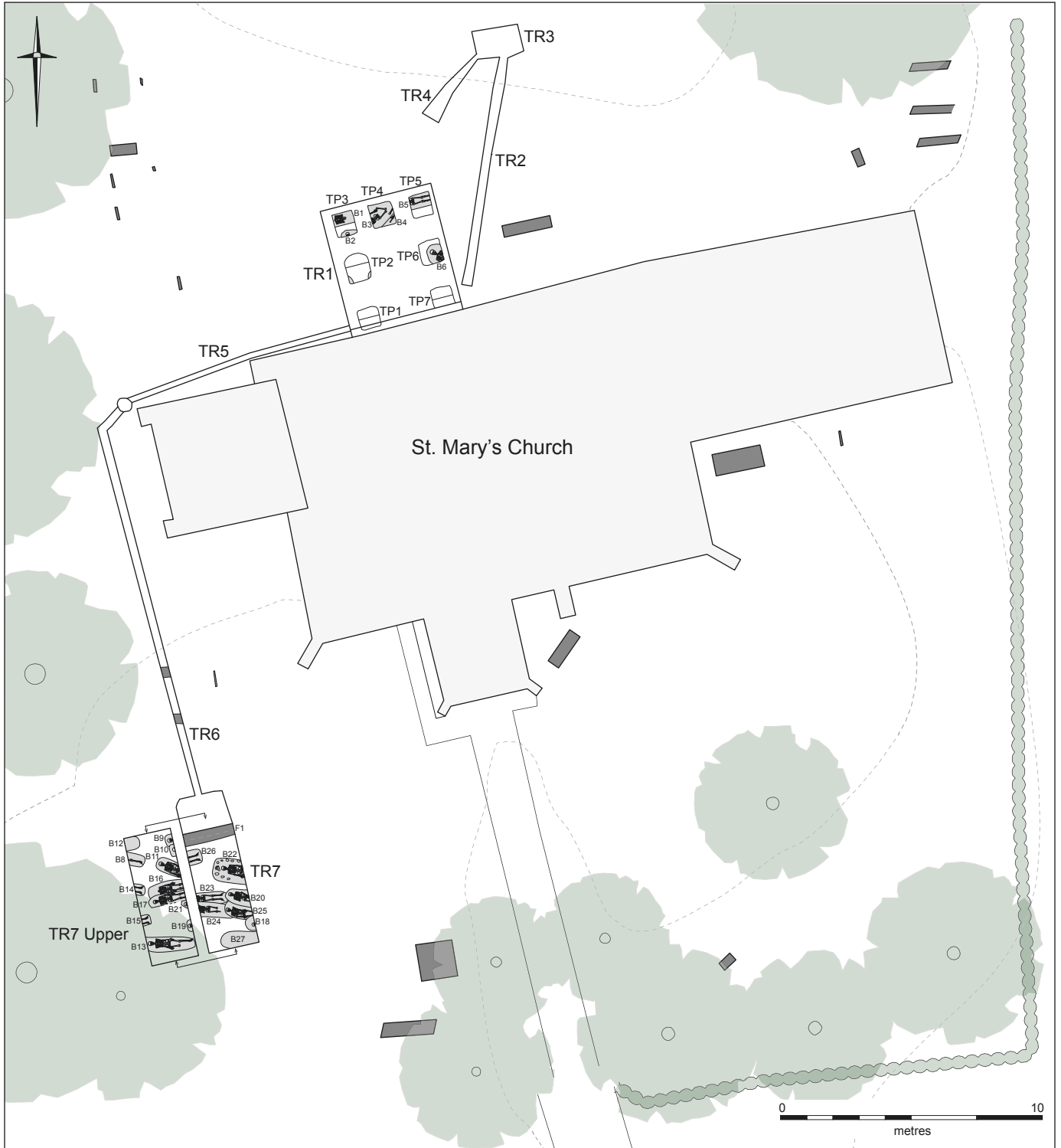
TR3

TR4

TR2

TP3 TP4 TP5
              B5
TP3 B1 B5
         B3 B4
     B2

TR1 TP2 TP6
              B6

TP1 TP7

TR5

St. Mary's Church

TR6

B12 B9
B8 B11 B10 F1
              B26 B22
B16
B14 B23 B20
B17   B25 B18
B15 B21 B24
TR7 Upper B19
B13   B27

TR7

0   10
metres

Figure 2. Trench Plan

Burial No.	Trench No.	Probable date	Position relative to church	Depth (top of skull to base of cut)	Degree of exposure	Elements present	Age	Orientation	Evidence of coffin?
1	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Lower legs	Adult?	W-E	N
2	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Skull and neck	Adult?	W-E	N
3	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Skull, torso, arms, pelvis and upper legs	Adult	W-E	N
4	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Right arm	Adult	WSW-ENE	N
5	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Legs	Adult	WSW-ENE	N
6	1	Medieval?	North	0.60 - 0.80m	Partially exposed	Skull and upper torso	Adult	NW-SE	N
7	6	Post-med	West	0.45 - 0.55m	Partially exposed	Upper torso	Adult?	W-E	Y
8	7	Post-med?	South West	0.80 -0.90m	Partially exposed	Left leg	Adult	NW-SE	N
9	7	Post-med?	South West	0.90-1.10m	Partially exposed	Skull and neck	Adult	W-E	Y?
10	7	Post-med?	South West	0.80 -0.90m	Partially exposed	Skull and neck	Adult	W-E	N
11	7	Post-med	South West	0.80 -0.90m	Partially exposed	Skull, neck, torso, arms and pelvis	Adult	NW-SE	Y?
12	7	Post-med?	South West	1.60-1.65m	Partially exposed	Skulls, limbs, hands and other fragments	Child?	W-E	N
13	7	Post-med	South West	0.70-085m	Fully exposed	Complete	Adult	W-E	Y
14	7	Post-med?	South West	0.90-1.10m	Partially exposed	Pelvis, legs, hand and feet	Adult	NW-SE	N
15	7	Post-med	South West	0.90-1.00m	Partially exposed	Legs and feet	Adult	W-E	Y
16	7	Post-med?	South West	0.80 -0.90m	Near fully exposed	Torso, arms, hands, pelvis and legs	Adult?	W-E	N
17	7	Post-med	South West	0.80 -0.90m	Near fully exposed	Skull, torso, arms, hands, pelvis and upper legs	Adult?	W-E	Y?
18	7	Post-med?	South West	1.20-1.35m	Partially exposed	Skull	Adult	W-E	N
19	7	Post-med?	South West	1.05-1.20m	Partially exposed	Skull	Adult	W-E	Y
20	7	Medieval?	South West	1.10-1.30m	Partially exposed	Skulls, torso, arms, hands, pelvis and upper legs	Adult	NW-SE	N
21	7	Medieval?	South West	1.00-1.20m	Partially exposed	Skull and upper vertebrae	Adult	W-E	N
22	7	Late Saxon?	South West	1.10-1.30m	Partially exposed	Skulls, torso, arms, hands and pelvis	Adult	NW-SE	N
23	7	Medieval?	South West	1.10-1.20m	Partially exposed	Legs and hand	Adult	NW-SE	N
24	7	Medieval?	South West	1.10-1.20m	Partially exposed	Torso, arms, hands, pelvis and legs	Adult	NW-SE	N
25	7	Medieval?	South West	1.00-1.30m	Partially exposed	Skull, torso, arms, hands, pelvis and upper legs	Adult	W-E	N
26	7	Post-med	South West	1.10-1.20m	Partially exposed	Legs and feet	Adult	W-E	Y
27	7	Medieval?	South West	1.10-1.20m	Partially exposed	Arms, ribs and legs	Adult?	WNW-ESE	N

Table 1. Catalogue of articulated burials

Upper Phase Plan

0   2
metres
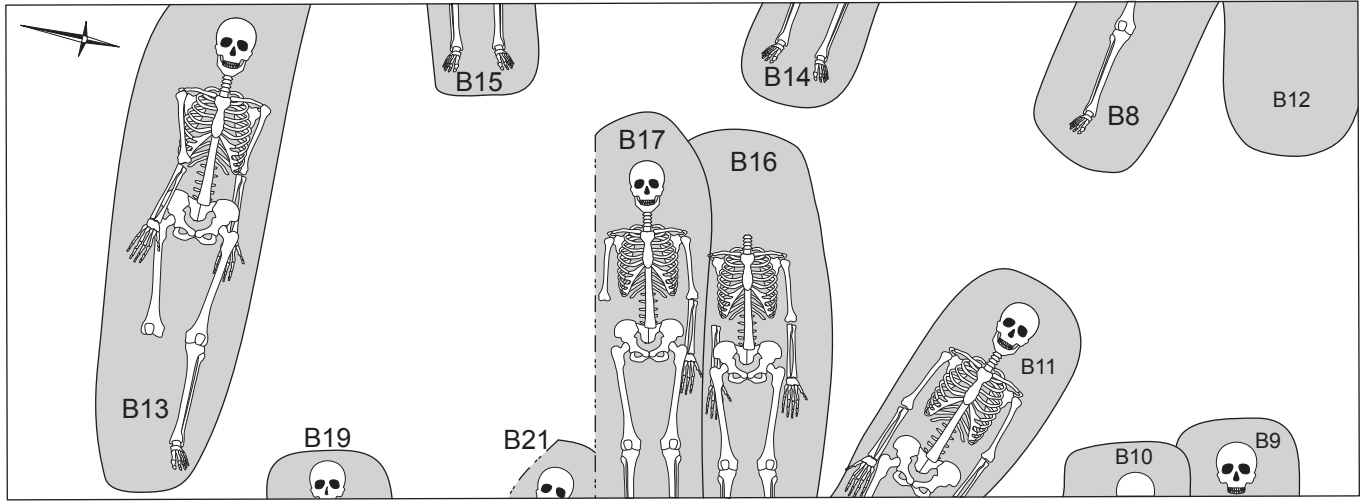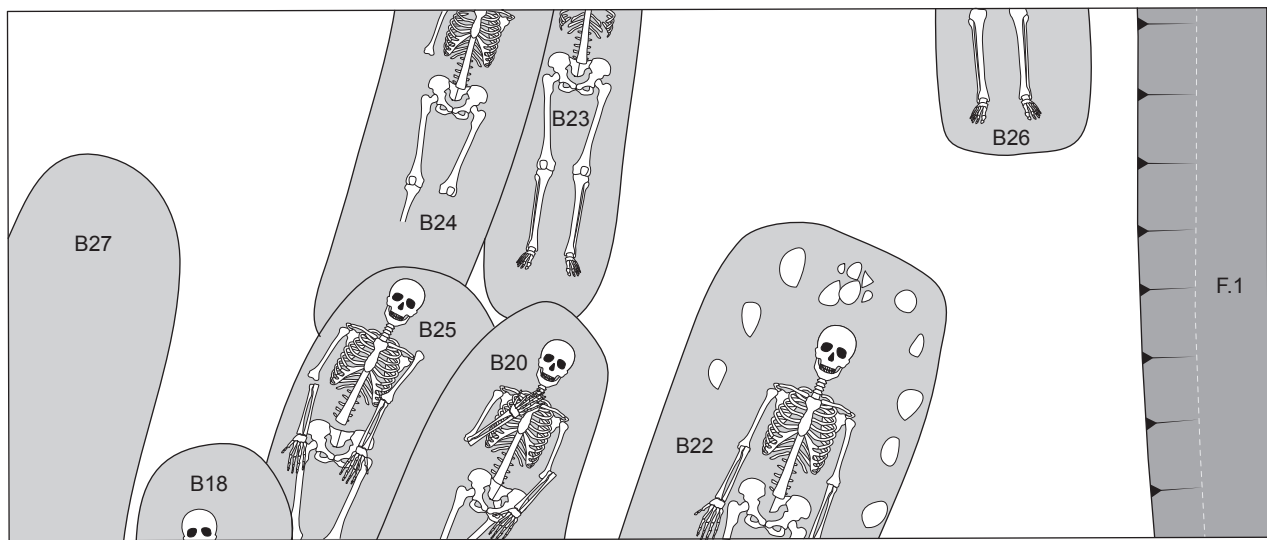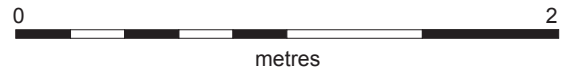
Lower Phase Plan

Burial Matrix

Relationship to natural uncertain
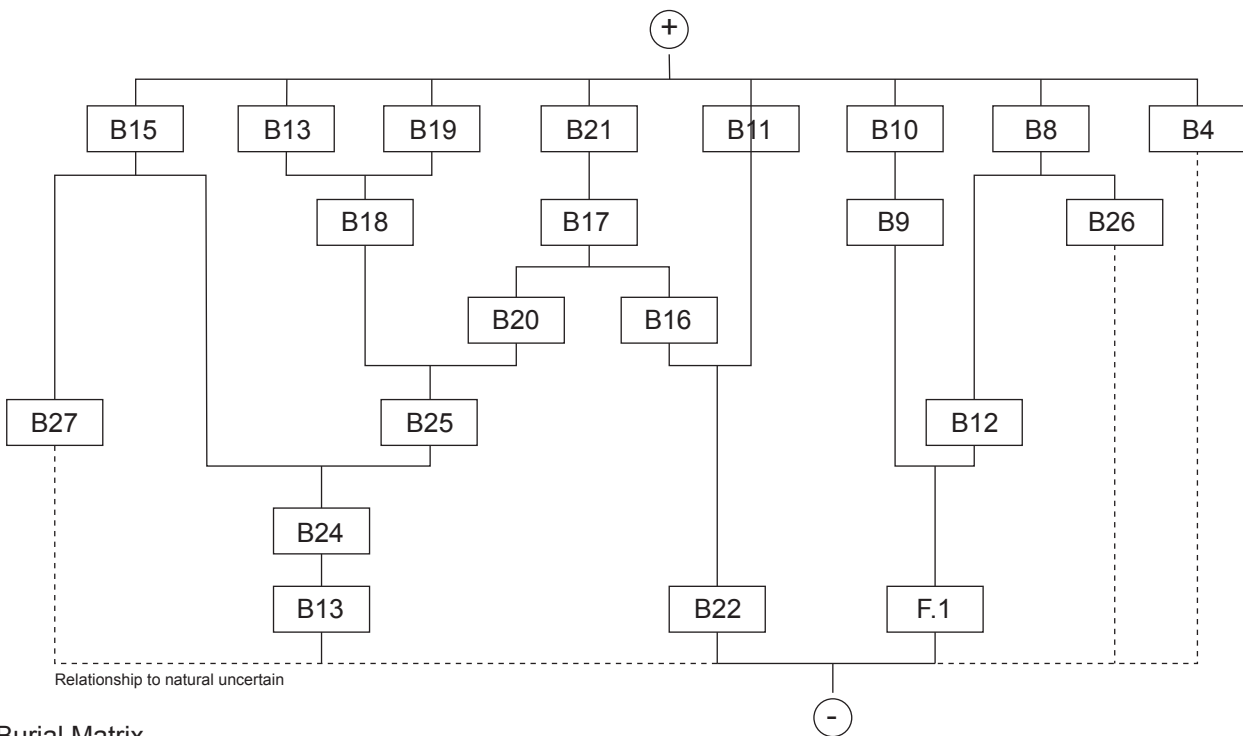
Figure 3. The burial sequence in Trench 7

Figure 4. Photographs of Trench 7, showing initial horizon of burials, facing west (top), and stone-edged burial 22, facing south (bottom)

Trench 7

Trench 7 comprised the southernmost area to be investigated, and was situated at the greatest remove from the church (Figure 2). Intended to house a septic tank, it measured 5.0m by 1.9m in extent and was excavated to the base of the sequence at a depth of 1.3m (natural gravels were encountered at 27.88m AOD). A total of twenty articulated burials were identified within this trench, extending in an intercutting sequence from the Late Saxon to post-medieval periods.

The earliest grave to be identified, based upon both stratigraphic evidence and the nature of the mortuary ritual employed, was Burial 22 (Figures 3 and 4B). Aligned NW-SE, this relatively wide grave contained the remains of an extended, supine adult whose head and shoulders were surrounded by a series of carefully positioned stones. The exposed cut measured 0.92m wide by 1.28m+ long and its base lay 1.3m below the contemporary ground surface (at 27.88m AOD). Significantly, the graves of uncoffined Late Saxon (*c*. 900-1100 AD) burials were often lined in this fashion, typically with stones, crushed chalk or charcoal (Hadley and Buckberry 2005, 132-38; Hadley 2011, 291). The tradition largely disappeared following the Norman Conquest, indicating that this burial is very likely to be Late Saxon in origin. Further support for this attribution comes in the form of an abraded sherd of 3rd-4th century AD Roman Hadham red slipped ware that was recovered from the backfill surrounding the grave; no later material was present.

A short distance to the north of Burial 22, enigmatic E-W linear feature F.1 was present (Figure 3). Similarly early on stratigraphic grounds, its cut had moderately sloping sides and a flat base. It was filled with a homogenous dark reddish brown sandy silt deposit that contained occasional disarticulated human bone fragments. Given its form, this feature – which measured 0.52m+ wide by 1.9m+ long and 1.25m deep – could potentially represent an early ditched boundary to the churchyard. Alternatively, however, due to the narrow width of Trench 7 it is not impossible that F.1 instead represents part of a large grave cut, the interment of which lay beyond the limit of excavation. In the latter scenario, this would comprise a large grave that was potentially very similar in form to adjacent Burial 22. From the upper portion of F.1's fill a sherd of 10th-12th century St Neots-type ware was recovered, although this was not necessarily associated with the feature's initial infilling.

Succeeding Burial 22 were a further nineteen stratified W-E aligned supine burials, plus a significant quantity of associated disarticulated remains (a matrix detailing the burials' stratigraphic relationships is presented in Figure 3,

alongside phased plans of their layout). In date they appear to range from the medieval to the post-medieval periods; burial activity eventually ceased within the churchyard in 1885 (Wright 1978, 17). Two broad categories of burial could be identified. The first consisted of shrouded individuals (Burials 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 27), the second of those who had been encoffined (Burials 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19 and 26; all of which are likely to be post-medieval in date). For the majority of both types, the associated grave cuts were difficult to identify (the principal exception being modern interments where a coffin stain remained highly visible; see Figure 4A). This is a common occurrence within intensively intercutting cemeteries, where repeated disturbance and reinterment often results in the formation of a homogenous deposit that is commonly referred to as 'cemetery soil'.

A very similar process appears to have occurred at the present site, leading to the generation of a homogenous reddish brown sandy silt cemetery soil with occasional small to medium sub angular gravel inclusions that measured up to 1.3m in depth. This deposit represents a combination of upcast soil generated by grave digging allied with the undifferentiated upper portions of many of the burials themselves. The cemetery soil also contained frequent disarticulated human remains in the form of charnel. Although often occurring in relatively discrete 'clusters', these charnel deposits were in fact redeposited within the upper fills of graves as opposed to representing discrete features in their own right. Indeed, given the large quantity of charnel material that was identified, allied with the presence of post-medieval burials that had penetrated to the base of the sequence, it appears that the number of burials identified represents at most 50% of the original number present.

What then can be determined of the cemetery's development from this small sample of its population? In the first instance, it is clear from both the number and depth of the interments that several 'generations' of burial are represented. In this context, a generation is defined as "the period of time taken to fill the space available before burying over it again" (Heighway & Bryant 1999, 195). But although six stratigraphic phases of burial have been identified (Figure 3), these cannot be directly equated to a corresponding number of generations. Graves that comprised part of the same horizon of burial might potentially have intercut, for example, particularly if the length of time between interments was such that the location of the earlier burial was no longer readily apparent (a common occurrence in medieval times). Furthermore, within the limited confines of a trench it is possible for a generation of burials to be either absent or severely underrepresented due to truncation. Nevertheless, it is apparent that this southern portion of the cemetery at least saw relatively intensive usage, probably continuing from the Late Saxon period through into the 19th century.

Trenches 1-6

Investigations within the remaining six trenches at the site were undertaken on a more limited basis. As determined by the requirements of the development, the majority of these areas were not excavated to a depth sufficient to encounter *in situ* burials leaving any that may have been present undisturbed (Table 2).

Trench No.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Max. depth	0.95m *28.05m AOD*	0.50m *28.40m AOD*	1.75m *27.05m AOD*	0.45m *28.35m AOD*	0.40m *28.60m AOD*	0.50m *28.50m AOD*

Table 2. Depths of investigation in Trenches 1-6

The principal exception to this pattern was Trench 1. Situated immediately to the north of the church (Figure 2), this comprised the foundation trench for the new porch extension. Here, the bulk of the area was reduced by 0.3m, disturbing only a relatively small quantity of disarticulated human bone. Within the footprint of the trench, however, seven additional metre square post-pad pits were hand-excavated in order to mitigate the impact of the porch's footings (Figure 2). Extending to a depth of 0.95m (28.05m AOD), these pits encountered a total of six articulated inhumations (Burials 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). In each instance, only a small portion of each interment was uncovered. The absence of coffin nails and homogeneity of the associated reddish brown sandy silt cemetery soil indicates that the majority of these burials are likely to be medieval in date. The limited scale of their exposure, allied with the evidence of extensive tree root disturbance in Test Pits 2 and 3, limits the potential for further analysis. Whilst it may initially appear that, when comparing Trench 1 to Trench 7, the density of the cemetery population is lower to the north of the church than to the south, this cannot be confirmed without larger-scale exposure.

No *in situ* burials were encountered within Trenches 2, 3, 4 and 5, although disarticulated remains were present in every instance. This dearth is primarily attributable due to the trenches' limited depth. An exception to this pattern is Trench 3, the deepest of the seven overall at 1.75m (natural gravels were encountered at 27.95m AOD), but its limited size means that the absence of identified burials cannot necessarily be regarded as indicative of a diminution in burial activity. In Trench 6 to the south of the church a single grave – Burial 7 – was identified, while a nearby cluster of charnel is likely to have lain within the upper fill of a further, otherwise unidentified interment. Both are likely to be post-medieval in date.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

A very small quantity of material culture was encountered during the investigation. Aside from a single fragment of clay tobacco pipe stem of generic 16th to 19th century date in the backfill of Burial 11, the assemblage entirely consisted of pottery. The human remains were not retained but reburied on site.

Ceramics (Richard Newman)

A small ceramic assemblage, totalling four sherds weighing 48g, was recovered. The earliest sherd comprised an abraded fragment of 3rd to 4th century AD Hadham red slipware, weighing 4g, which was recovered from the backfill of Burial 22. In addition, a rim of 10th-12th century St Neots-type ware (weighing 30g) was recovered from the upper fill of putative ditch F.1. This fabric was widely used during the Late Saxon period (Hurst 1956; Hurst 1976, 320–23). Two sherds of 13th-14th century coarseware were also present in the backfills of Burials 16 (6g) and 9 (8g) respectively. Given the heavily intermixed nature of the cemetery soil into which these burials were inserted, the sherds cannot be used to provide a definitive date of interment; nevertheless, they provide a useful *terminus ante quem.*

Human remains (Richard Newman)

In general, the human remains that were encountered at the site were in good condition. Amongst the *in situ* interments the degree of preservation was high (Figure 4). Disarticulated material was more fragmentary, however, often showing evidence of repeated disturbance and reinterment; a typical pattern in intensively used cemeteries.

DISCUSSION

The presence of large numbers of burials clustered around a long-established church is typical of the archaeology of English churchyards, particularly those situated in a rural milieu (O'Brien and Roberts 1996; Rodwell 2012, 146-66). Churchyard burial became a universal practice in England during the 10th century (Blair 2005, 463-71), meaning that over a millennium of sepulchral activity can be represented at parochial sites. While a degree of spatial patterning was sometimes instituted in such contexts, particularly in the early centuries of the medieval period, more often than not the palimpsest of later burials – the repeated insertion of which has often disturbed and/or removed many preceding interments – renders this very difficult to identify or interpret without large-scale open area excavation and detailed specialist analysis.

At Great Abington St Mary's itself it appears that sepulchral activity probably commenced during the Late Saxon period (with Burial 22 belonging to that phase). It is possible that this phase was associated with an enclosed cemetery – the boundary of which is putatively represented by F.1 – which would consequently have been associated with an earlier ecclesiastical structure than

the present standing church. In this respect, it is notable that the presence of a minster in pre-Conquest Great Abington has previously been proposed on documentary grounds (Oosthuizen 2001, 63). The archaeological evidence appears to support this supposition, although it must be stressed that in the absence of direct dating evidence any such interpretation must perforce remain provisional. The conjectural Late Saxon church did not necessarily stand in the same location as its medieval successor. Across Cambridgeshire, many polyfocal early medieval settlements were reorganised in a nucleated pattern during the 12th and 13th centuries (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000; Taylor 2002); this process often resulted in a significant shift in the focus of occupation.

As is typical in a parochial cemetery – especially when investigated on a limited scale, in trenches that were primarily restricted to a shallow depth – the majority of burials that were encountered were post-medieval in date. Unfortunately, given the lack of associated sepulchral monuments (such as gravestones or coffin plates) and the absence of associated datable material culture, little information pertaining to spatial patterning or temporal development could be discerned within the post-medieval mortuary sequence.

Internationally, the archaeology of post-medieval death and burial represents a growing area of research. A recent gazetteer has attempted to collate much of the available post-medieval data from Britain and Ireland in order to allow wider synthetic study (Cherryson, Crossland and Tarlow 2012). A variety of issues remain, however. In particular, mortuary archaeology is overwhelmingly undertaken in response to the threat of destruction posed by development as opposed to representing targeted research (Tarlow 2015, 1-2). As a result, much of the available data is skewed towards particular geographical locales, typically larger cities, and represents only those portions of a churchyard or cemetery that were directly impacted upon by development.

To counteract this trend, specific research agendas have been devised (Boyle 2015). Although the results derived from the present site are too fragmentary to contribute directly to such a discussion, were further phases of investigation to occur in the future it is possible that the cumulative results – incorporating multiple iterations of study – would provide a useful dataset.

Acknowledgements

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OASIS FORM

OASIS ID: cambridg3-260269	
Project details	
Project name	St Mary's Church, Great Abington
Short description of the project	An archaeological investigation was conducted within the churchyard of St Mary's Church, Great Abington, Cambridgeshire, in advance of the construction of a new north porch. A total of twenty-seven articulated inhumations were encountered. The grave earliest of these interments had been lined with stone and is likely to be Late Saxon in date. The churchyard subsequently remained in use until the late 19th century, and burials dating from most of this intervening period are also represented.
Project dates	Start: 23-05-2014 End: 27-04-2016
Previous/future work	No / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	GCP16 - Sitecode
Any associated project reference codes	ECB4385 - HER event no.
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Other 4 - Churchyard
Monument type	GRAVE Early Medieval
Monument type	GRAVE Medieval
Monument type	GRAVE Post Medieval
Significant Finds	POTTERY Roman
Significant Finds	POTTERY Early Medieval
Significant Finds	POTTERY Medieval
Investigation type	"Part Excavation","Watching Brief"
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPS
Project location	
Country	England
Site location	CAMBRIDGESHIRE SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE GREAT ABINGTON St Mary's Church, Great Abington
Postcode	CB21 6AA
Study area	46.5 Square metres
Site coordinates	TL 5306 4886 52.116401136481 0.235711403583 52 06 59 N 000 14 08 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 27.88m Max: 27.95m
Project creators	
Name of Organisation	Cambridge Archaeological Unit
Project brief originator	Local Planning Authority (with/without advice from County/District Archaeologist)
Project design	Alison Dickens

originator	
Project director/manager	Alison Dickens
Project supervisor	David Webb
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	St Mary's Church, Great Abington
Project archives	
Physical Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Physical Archive ID	GCP16
Physical Contents	"Ceramics"
Digital Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
Digital Archive ID	GCP16
Digital Contents	"Ceramics","Stratigraphic","Survey"
Digital Media available	"Spreadsheets","Survey","Text"
Paper Archive recipient	Cambridgeshire County Archaeology Store
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