

St Giles Church
Imber
Wiltshire



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



September 2006

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SUMMARY

Between 8th August and 25th August 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Giles Church, Imber, Wiltshire (NGR: TL 965 485). The work was commissioned by the Churches Conservation Trust in advance of the renewal of existing drains and the removal of concrete drainage gullies. The watching brief revealed worked soils overlying undisturbed natural. No evidence of earlier phases of church construction or of features predating the church were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Between 8th August and 25th August 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Giles Church, Imber, Wiltshire (NGR: TL 965 485). The work was commissioned by the Churches Conservation Trust in respect of a proposal to renew existing drains and to remove concrete drainage gullies along the south side of the church and replace them with "French Drains".
- 1.1.2 A project design detailing the standards and level of archaeological recording was agreed between OA and the Churches Conservation Trust.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is located approximately 15 km south of Devizes within the area of Salisbury Plain. The church is situated on a gentle north-west facing slope on a hillside overlooking the old village of Imber and lies at approximately 126 m above OD (Fig. 1). The underlying geology is Middle Chalk of the Cretaceous period (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet no 282).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological and historical background to the watching brief had been prepared for an earlier archaeological assessment of the church (OA, 2003) and a summary of that report is reproduced below.

Prehistoric period

- 1.3.2 Within the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA) there is much evidence for prehistoric activity from the Neolithic onwards. Environmental evidence, mainly from the valleys, suggests that clearance of the woodland on the chalk began at that date and that it was grassland by the Early Bronze Age.
- 1.3.3 Little settlement evidence has been found, but there are numerous Neolithic long barrows and round barrows dating to the Bronze Age. There is a partly levelled long barrow on Imber Down, about 300m above the church to the south. On the downs north of the village are the remains of three round barrows. During the later

prehistoric period a vast network of fields was developed across much of the SPTA, including the downs on the north side of Imber. No settlements or hillforts have been identified in the vicinity of the village. It is thought that that mixed farming was being carried out during this period, and some earthworks suggest seasonal enclosures.

Roman period

- 1.3.4 During the Roman period large settlements were constructed on the Higher Plain, but the focus of activity shifted towards river valleys, where villas have been identified. No Roman material has been found within the area of Imber Church, but potsherds were found at an earthwork enclosure about 1000 m to the west of the church.

Early medieval period

- 1.3.5 There was a settlement at Imber by the 10th century, when the name 'Imemerie' appears in a charter of 967. The land was held by the Abbess of Romsey as part of the Edington estate. The name is thought to mean Imma's pond, suggesting that there was a good water supply. There is still a stream, Imber Dock, running through the village.

Medieval period

- 1.3.6 By the time of the Domesday survey in 1086, Imber had been divided between the Abbess of Romsey, who held the land south of the road including a church, and Ralph Mortimer, Earl of Hereford, who held the land to the north. At that date there was a population of about 50 people. The present St Giles church was built in 1280, but it is likely that it was on the site of the earlier foundation, listed in Domesday.
- 1.3.7 By the late 13th century the population of Imber had increased to 250 and the manor had passed to the de Rous family, later the Lords of Hungerford. They paid for alterations to the church where some family members were buried.
- 1.3.8 Apart from the church no buildings remain which can be dated to the medieval period, although one 14th century timber-framed structure survived until WW I when it burnt down.
- 1.3.9 Evidence for medieval activity also comes from the earthwork remains of the former extent of the village. The church is now somewhat isolated from the core and manor. Either side of the road banks survive from earlier land divisions, the most extensive area is about 1 km west of the church, where possible building platforms can be distinguished.

Post-medieval period

- 1.3.10 In the 16th century, following the Dissolution, Imber became the property of the Thynne family of Longleat who remained patrons of St Giles into the 19th century. Other families acquired land from the 17th century, including the Wadmans who

rebuilt the manor house as Imber Court. Agriculture was the principal occupation of the inhabitants, with a mixture of arable on the lower slopes and sheep farming on the downland. The earthworks to the west were reused for sheep folds and sheep washing.

- 1.3.11 The population of Imber rose, reaching a peak of 440 in 1851. After the railway reached Warminster in 1859 a drift towards the town began. By 1900 there were only 261 inhabitants.
- 1.3.12 In 1897 military activity on Salisbury Plain began, increasing rapidly during WW I. Troops were billeted at Imber Court in 1916. Movement was restricted for the population of the village because of the danger from firing. From 1927 the War Office began systematically to take over land across the plain, leasing it back to farmers. By 1932 all the farmers in Imber had sold up, but the army only used the land for a short period in the summer.
- 1.3.13 Houses along the High Street were demolished by the army in 1938 and the cottagers rehoused. By the start of WW II the population had dropped to 150. Military demands on the Imber area increased until, in 1943, evacuation notices were issued in order to clear the village.

History of the church

- 1.3.14 Imber was held by the Abbess of Romsey by the end of the 10th century and it is likely that a church was built there in the 10th or 11th century. The font was Norman, but there is little evidence for an early building. In 1280 a new church was built with nave, chancel and aisles. Traces of painted decoration can be seen on the arches, the arcade pillars and on the west end of the north wall and these have been ascribed to this period. There had been a chapel in the south aisle where an aumbry and raised floor area survive, but this may have been added at a later date.
- 1.3.15 During the 15th century the tower and north porch were added. The tower is embattled and has five pinnacles. During this same period the wagon roof in the nave, with mitred churchmen on the roundels, was constructed. Some internal alterations were carried out, including widening of the aisle windows. The painting on the north wall is also thought to be 15th century. Its subject is uncertain, it is usually described as 'The Seven Deadly Sins', but the vicar in the 1920s claimed it told the story of St Giles.
- 1.3.16 During the 15th century the local landowners were the Rous family, whose arms are above the porch. There were two Rous tombs in the south chapel with effigies of recumbent knights, one a figure of Walter, 1st Lord Hungerford.
- 1.3.17 Although no structural changes are recorded for that period, a number of fittings and decorations were added during the 17th century. The box pews removed in the 19th century were probably constructed then also. The font had a wooden cover, there was an Jacobean altar a screen between the ringers and the nave. In 1635 a new set of five

- bells was installed, replacing a ring of three. The ringing changes painted on the wall of the ringing chamber has the date 1692. Elsewhere in the church was a Royal achievement of arms from 1639. Graffiti in the porch were also added in the 17th century.
- 1.3.18 The south aisle appears to have had some alteration in the 18th century. This included the insertion of an oval leaded window *c* 1714. In the north aisle painted texts, partly obscuring the earlier decoration, are thought to date from this period.
- 1.3.19 In 1849 the chancel was demolished and rebuilt in the perpendicular style for Lord Bath, whose Thynne family held the surrounding land. The north vestry is contemporary with it, although the royal heads around the window have been reused. The wall paintings in the north aisle were uncovered during this phase of restoration. Apart from the 'Squire's pew' in the south aisle, the box pews were removed.
- 1.3.20 A further phase of restoration was carried out in 1895, when the 'Squires pew' was removed. A new harmonium was installed in the 19th century, following removal of a musicians' gallery. It is not known when the gallery was removed, or the date of its original construction.
- 1.3.21 In 1915, according to a Faculty in the Diocesan records, two bells were recast and all five were rehung after repair work to the belfry. No further changes to the church have been recorded until the village was taken over by the army. The building was boarded up and some valuables were removed for safekeeping during WW II, but most of the fittings were not removed until the early 1950s. The fabric of the church was damaged by wartime vandals and by a shell which pierced the chancel.
- 1.3.22 In 1961 repair work was carried out to cope with fallen masonry, an insecure roof, shattered windows and the damaged chancel. The south door has been blocked up. Since then only some routine maintenance has been carried out.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological deposits or features that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of the groundworks.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as a series of site visits during the period of groundworks. These consisted of approximately 70 m total length of hand dug, 0.6 m wide trenching. The depth of excavation varied between 0.4 m and 0.65 m. Sample

sections were recorded in order to illustrate the exposed stratigraphy. The majority of this work followed the alignment of the existing drains but some new trenching was excavated.

- 2.2.2 A plan showing the extent of the excavations was maintained at a scale of 1:100 (Fig. 2) and any recorded sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations and sections were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The stratigraphy exposed was identical within all the recorded sections (Fig. 3, Sections 1-3) and the written description can be applied throughout the excavations.
- 3.1.2 The underlying natural, a light grey clay silt (2) was encountered at a depth of 0.15 m below the current ground level. This deposit contained numerous chalk inclusions as well as many small to medium sized flint nodules and probably represents a pre-historic colluvium. The depth of this layer could be seen to be in excess of 0.5 m within the side of the trench. This was sealed by a 0.15 m deep layer of dark grey clay silt loam (1). This contained many small pieces of clay roofing tile and represents a layer of topsoil and turf.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Numerous small fragments of roofing tile identical to those on the church roof were observed within layer 1. These may have been deposited during the construction of the church or possibly as the result of subsequent damage and neglect since the village of Imber was commandeered. Their presence was recorded but they were not retained. No other dating evidence or artefact was recovered.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The stratigraphy observed was composed of a worked soil directly overlying a natural Colluvium. No evidence for earlier phases of the church construction, or for features pre-dating the church, was observed during the course of the watching brief. No human charnel or human inhumations was encountered during the course of the watching brief.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width/ Height</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Layer	0.15 m	-	Topsoil and turf	Roofing tile	Post- medieval
2	Layer	> 0.5 m	-	Natural Colluvium	-	-

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

IFA, 2001 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OA, 2003 *Imber, St Giles Church: An Archaeological Assessment*

OAU, 1992 *Field Manual (ed. D. Wilkinson)*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: St Giles Church, Imber, Wiltshire

Site code: IMBER 06

Grid reference: ST 965 485

Type of watching brief: Hand excavation of new drainage works and removal of concrete gully.

Date and duration of project: Between 8th and 28th of August 2006, 3 site visits

Area of site: Approximately 0.12 hectare

Summary of results: The watching brief observed worked soil directly overlying natural colluvium. No evidence for any earlier phases of the church construction or any earlier features was observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Wiltshire Heritage Museum in due course.

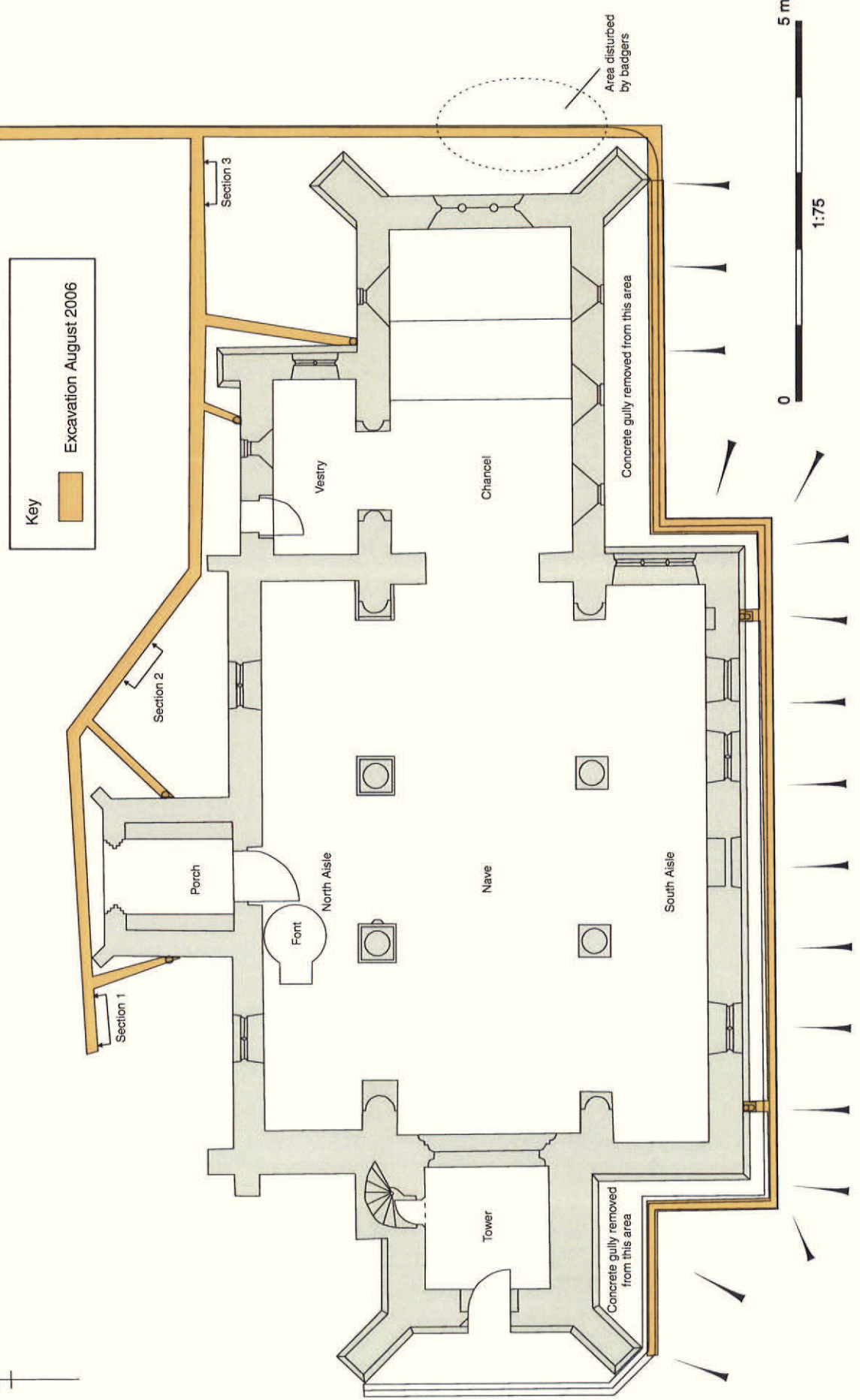
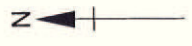
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Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location



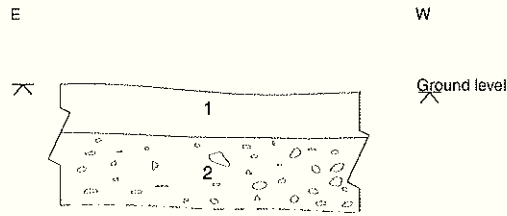
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Excavation August 2006

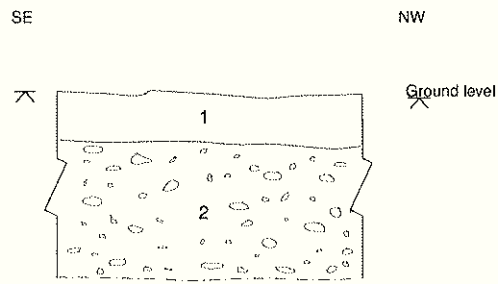
Figure 2: Site plan



Section 1



Section 2



Section 3

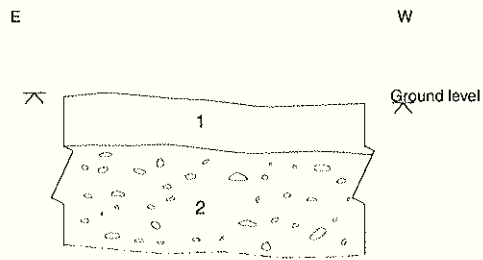


Figure 3 : Sections



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