Church of St Michael the Archangel, Mere, Wiltshire:

Results of an archaeological watching brief

NGR 381090, 132245

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On behalf of:
Mere PCC

AC archaeology

CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL, MERE, WILTSHIRE:

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief during groundworks associated with new drainage at the Church of St Michael the Archangel, Mere, Wiltshire (NGR 381090 132245), was carried out by AC archaeology Ltd during October 2020 and January 2021. The watching brief revealed human skeletal remains, some of which were in-situ and of a probable late medieval or early post-medieval date. Structural remains were also revealed; notably part of a brick structure of uncertain function and stone foundations which appear to possibly relate to the medieval west tower.

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   This report sets out the results of an archaeological watching brief relating to groundworks at St Michael's Church, Mere, Wiltshire (NGR 381090 132245) Fig. 1. The investigation had been requested by the archaeological advisor to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC).

1.2   The work, carried out by AC archaeology Ltd during October 2020 and January 2021, comprised the monitoring of groundworks associated with the provision of new WCs on the ground floor of the church tower, together with a new drainage system within the west side of the churchyard. The removal of flagstones in the west end of the north and south aisles, necessary for the insertion of new pipework, was also undertaken.

1.3   The church lies at around 107m OD, with the underlying geology comprising West Melbury Chalk Formation, a sedimentary bedrock that was formed approximately 94 to 101 million years ago in the Cretaceous Period.

2.   ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1   In Domesday the town is listed as *Mera.* The town is dominated by Mere Castle, which was built by Richard, Duke of Cornwall in 1253.

2.2   The church itself is a Grade I listed building and is known as the Church of St Michael, The Archangel. Although it has some remnants dating to c.1190, including the lower part of the tower and part of the nave, most of the church dates from between the 13th and 15th centuries. The chancel is 13th century with aisles rebuilt in the 14th century and the north and south chantries are of a similar date. The west tower, nave and north and south porches are largely of 15th century date. The remains of a churchyard cross exist which in part dates to 1556 or earlier.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The principal aims of the archaeological watching brief were;
- To record any archaeological features and finds which may be revealed or disturbed by the groundworks within the church and churchyard;
- To ensure that any human remains are suitably recorded and re-interred and;
- To provide an archive and interpretive report on the results of the monitoring.

3.2 The site investigation was undertaken in accordance with a written scheme of investigation approved by the archaeological advisor to the DAC (Clark 2018). Attendance by the site archaeologist was comprehensive: an archaeologist was *present during all relevant ground disturbance.*

3.3 Site observations were recorded using the standard AC archaeology Ltd. *pro forma* recording system, comprising written and graphic records and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2*. A digital photographic record was also made.

3.4 The archive has been prepared using the unique site code ACW1082.

4. RESULTS

Inside the church

4.1 An area in both the north and south aisles, where pews were removed and new flagstones laid, was monitored. A pipe trench for a drainage system for the new toilets was also excavated, initially within the west tower floor.

4.2 After the removal of the flagstones in the floor of the tower, a trench was excavated measuring 0.4m wide and dug mainly to a depth of 0.25m, but in some areas it reached a depth of 0.4m. The trench was excavated through a layer of compacted silty rubble, 0.15m thick (context 101). This appeared to represent a base layer or foundation for the overlying floor level. Below this was a deposit of compacted limestone and greensand tabular and angular slabs (context 102). These measured up to 0.3m in size and were bonded by a light brown sandy mortar. This deposit appears to represent foundation material, possibly associated with the tower walls. It appears that this foundation was also exposed slightly further to the west within pipe trench A (see Plate 1).

Outside the church

4.3 Three trenches were excavated outside the church; one running west from the tower (referred to here as trench A on Fig 1) to link to an existing sewer in the street; a second (B) westwards from the north-west corner of the north aisle, and a third (C) alongside the churchyard wall linking trenches A and B. (see Fig. 1).

4.4 In summary, both articulated and disarticulated human bone was present in the western extent of Trench B and the east extent of Trench A, along with part of a brick structure of

uncertain date. A number of post-medieval and modern drains and a service cable was also encountered. All of the human bone recovered was later re-buried below the depth of one of the pipe trenches.

4.5   Trench A was generally excavated to a depth of 0.8m, but reached a maximum depth of 1.3m at its western extent. The trench cut through both a concrete surface and a grassed area (context 200) which overlay a generally uniform deposit of mid- to dark-grey, sandy clay containing limestone and greensand pieces. This layer appears to represent raised ground (context 201/202). Cutting through this layer was a large post-medieval ceramic drain and a further post-medieval brick culvert/drain, along with two modern cables situated to the western extent of the trench and immediately outside the west tower. Natural chalky marl (context 205) was encountered at 1.2m below the ground surface at the far west end of the trench only. A small quantity of disarticulated human bone and coffin nails was recovered from context 201.

4.6   Trench B was excavated from the north-west corner of the north aisle, terminating close to the western boundary wall of the churchyard. It was generally excavated to a depth of 0.6m, but reached a maximum depth of 1m at its western extent. It was excavated through the same soil sequence as found in trench A. Three modern drainage pipes and a cable trench were exposed, along with a large relatively recent soakaway, all revealed within the eastern extent of the trench.

4.7   At the east end of Trench B was a clay deposit (context 203) overlying part of brick structure (S204). This was exposed at a depth of 0.5m and appeared to continue under the wall of the north aisle of the church. Where exposed it measured 0.5m in length. Its west extent was uncertain as no further excavation was undertaken in this area of the trench. Its construction comprised narrow bricks bonded by a light sandy mortar and appearing gully-like in nature (Fig. 2a & b: Plate 2).

4.8   A large quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered up to a depth of 1m in the western half of the trench, before articulated remains were exposed at the base of the trench. Evidence for at least two burials, disturbed possibly by the cutting of later graves and other disturbance, was noted (Fig. 2c: Plates 3 & 4). These burials were left in-situ.

4.9   Trench C was excavated to a depth of 1m to a maximum 1.3m. No evidence for any archaeological deposits or skeletal remains where encountered.
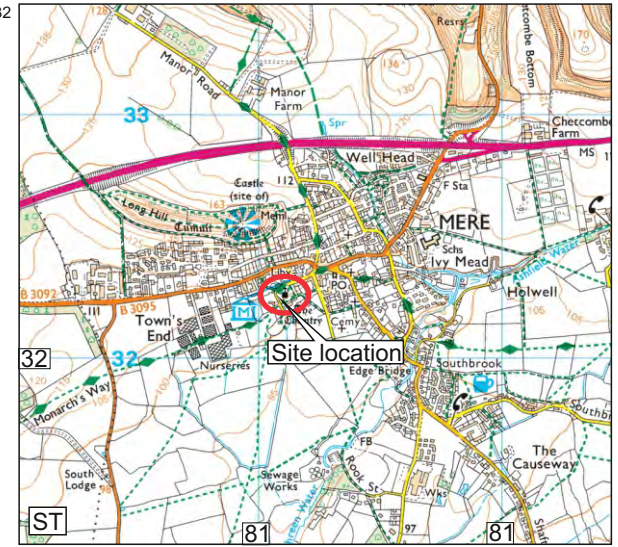
5.   COMMENT

5.1   The watching brief results identified both in-situ and disarticulated human skeletal remains in two of the drainage trenches excavated. The quantity of disarticulated bone in the upper levels had presumably derived from the re-cutting into former graves, although it was not possible to identify any edges of grave due to the uniform nature of layer 201/202. Later disturbance comprising both post-medieval and modern drainage trenches / cables is also likely to have contributed to the disturbance of the burials. The remains present are of uncertain date but considered to be of late medieval or early post-medieval origin, given the condition of the bone and the depth of burial.

5.2   In both the west tower floor trench and the eastern extent of Trench A, stone foundations were revealed. The purpose of these foundations is unclear, but given their location, it is possible that they relate to the foundations of the west tower. The brick structure recorded in Trench B appeared to continue below the west wall foundations of the north aisle. The date of the north aisle is of mid-15th century; however the date of the brick structure is uncertain although the bricks themselves appear to be of an early date, their dimensions (approx. 0.25 x 0.1m x 0.3m) possibly suggesting a Tudor origin.

5.3   No dateable artefacts were present. Given the limited archaeological results it is not proposed to deposit a formal archive. A copy of this report will be submitted to the Wiltshire Historic Environment Record and uploaded to OASIS.

6.   REFERENCES

Clark, R. 2018. *Church of St Michael the Archangel, Mere, Wiltshire: Written Scheme of Investigation for an archaeological watching brief*. Document ref. ACW1082/1/1
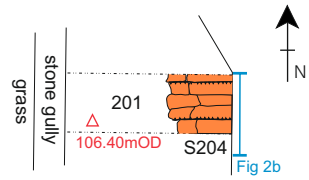
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Site location

Existing IC

CL: 100.13
IL: 97.81
ToW: 101.25
100.86

Note that all new drainage runs and inverts are to be confirmed on site.

Fig 2c   New drainage run   Fig 2a

B

Exg. 300 dia Sewer

C

A   New drainage run

Water supply to rise to run above ceiling and drop to Store.

Note the presence of pipework and cabling to the North wall. Allow to form servery around pipework

Kitchen waste to run through wall to Stack. Head of drain.

Assumed point of rise of water feed, allow to run as shown to serve Kitchenette and WCs

Prior to formation of porch, allow to reconfigure 2no existing heating pipe runs located to East side of existing porch

Pipes to Porch excerpt 1:50

Unclip No.1 pipe run flow pipe, and reposition next to No.1 pipe run return pipe to allow for formation of platform Provide cast iron grille over pipes

Allow to divert section of No.3 pipe run flow and returns where pew frontal repositioned.

Re route 2no pipe runs (No.1 pipe run flow and return) and set back from edge of ramp.

Re route 2no pipe runs (No.4 pipe run flow and return) and set back from edge of ramp.

Allow to divert section of No.2 pipe run flow and returns where pew frontal repositioned. Chase out to access pipe currently routed through floor within North aisle, and divert.

Unsure of final pipe run - To be investigated.

Existing Resin bound gravel path (shown indicatively)

Note that there are heating pipes present to the South side of the tower. Allow to draw these back as required to allow for the formation of the WC and Store.

Electrical Distribution board

ToW: 100.46
FFL: 100.00
100.12
99.35   99.38   99.31

0   N   10m

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PROJECT
Church of St Michael the Archangel, Mere

TITLE
Fig. 1: Location of site and areas of archaeological monitoring

a) Plan of Trench B (east)

grass

stone gully

201

△ 106.40mOD

S204

Fig 2b

N

b) Section, Trench B

N

church wall

S

200

200

203

S204

106.40mOD

c) Plan of Trench B (west)

N

boundary wall
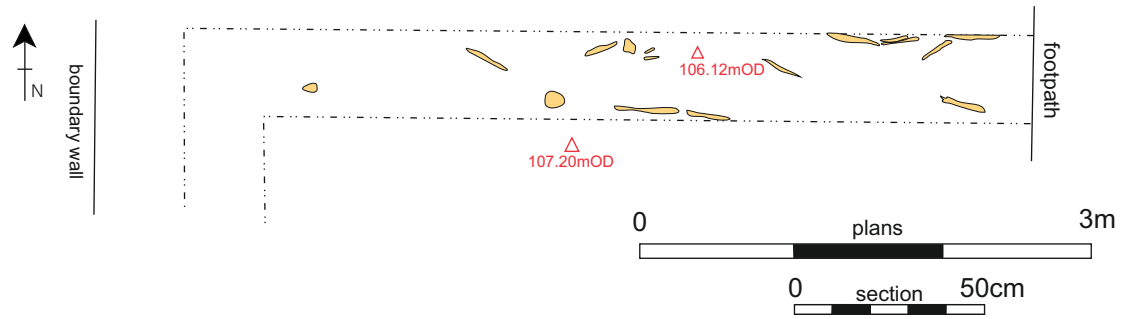
△ 106.12mOD

△ 107.20mOD

footpath

0 — plans — 3m

0 — section — 50cm
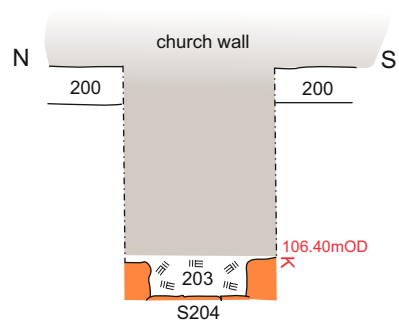
Plate 1: Stone foundation, 102

Plate 2: Brick structure S204

Plate 3 and 4: Articulated human remains in Trench B

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APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL RECORD PHOTOGRAPHS

Stone foundation 102

Brick structure 204

Trench B viewed from the west

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Trench A brick culvert

Trench A viewed from the east

Trench B viewed from the east

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