

ST MICHAEL'S CHAPEL, TORRE, TORQUAY

SX 9031 6509

A new survey

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On behalf of:
Torbay Council

Document No: ACD1067/2/1

Date: revised June 2016



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ST MICHAEL'S CHAPEL, TORRE, TORQUAY: A NEW SURVEY

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Conservation of St Michael's Chapel, funded by English Heritage and Torbay Council, was carried out in 2015. The Chapel is located on a prominent outcrop above Torre in Torquay; the work allowed for new archaeological recording and a reconsideration of this medieval chapel. The felling of trees in the surrounding landscape has also restored the potential to understand this medieval chapel as a possible beacon with views to the sea.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

In the earlier 20th century it appears, if the popular guidebooks of the time are to be trusted, that tourists sojourning in Torquay would be remiss indeed if they failed to take a walk from their hotel to the pleasure grounds and its jewel of a chapel at Chapel Hill, Torre. The anonymous author of the Ward Lock guide said that this was 'one of the most popular short strolls' and that the chapel was a 'mystery [as] no one knows who built it or why it was built in such a position, right away from the old village of Torre' (Ward Lock undated, 54). Another guidebook author described the chapel's barrel roof as 'remarkable' (Winbolt 1929, 42).

To a certain extent the mystery remains, but the popularity of the site as a place to visit dwindled dramatically in the second half of the 20th century. The chapel became overgrown and visited only by a few people. By 2015 (Figs 2 and 3) the chapel was defaced by graffiti and suffering from vegetation damage with access denied by an iron-railing door. The door was first inserted in the mid-1980s and continuously strengthened in the face of vandalism. At the same time a large internal wooden scaffold was inserted; ostensibly to maintain the integrity of the roof it proved to have had no structural relevance.

In 1952 St Michael's Chapel was both scheduled as an Ancient Monument (National Heritage List for England No. 1019131), and listed Grade II (NHLE No. 120674). It is located on a rocky, predominantly limestone (but see below) promontory at a height of 80m above Ordnance Datum (NGR SX 9031 6509). Until recently people passing along the busy A3022 Torquay to Newton Abbot road have mostly been unaware of the chapel sitting on the rocky eminence above them, but with the removal of surrounding trees during the works reported here, glimpses of the

chapel are now to be had. The lofty location looks most impressive from the southwest (Fig. 4), but the steepness of the promontory on this side has been accentuated by quarrying for limestone (18th century – documented in 1788; cited in Travers 1998); the much ruined remains of a lime kiln survive at the base of the quarry close to the main road. The quarrying, involving blasting (the drill holes are still visible in the quarry face), stopped only at the foot of the chapel and there is a possibility that damage has occurred to the chapel resulting in loss and/or repair.

The chapel is constructed predominantly of limestone rubble with rare red breccia/sandstone and slate/schist fragments set in lime mortar with red sandstone and breccia dressings. It measures 11.2m east-west by 6.6m north-south with walls up to 1.2m thick (Fig. 5). It has a single arched entrance located towards the western end of the south wall and is approached through a ruined porch. The east gable (Fig. 6) accommodates a large arched window and the north and south walls have opposed windows; the north had been blocked historically and was reopened as part of the current project and the south has been partly blocked and its opening reduced in size. The west gable has two small windows at different heights. The roof is completely of stone construction with a barrel vault of local slate blocks. A stone cross was erected above the east gable in the early 19th century by a prominent evangelical; it was removed during the recent works. The plain construction of the chapel and the erosion and removal of dressings which may have been diagnostic has led to problems in dating. Nikolaus Pevsner (1952, 292) concluded that St Michael's was 'hard to date', although elsewhere a 13th or more probably 14th century date has generally been accepted.

Outside of the chapel to north and south, modern walls provide a barrier to the quarry face and the north wall joins with a tall freestanding stone structure – part tower, part curtain wall with a small window. These form the remains of a late 19th-century meteorological observatory that is not discussed further here. It should be noted, however, that the observatory and not the chapel stands on the highest summit of the promontory, indicating that the chapel builders did not select the very highest point for the chapel, but the closest near level platform.

The work reported here resulted from Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) that was granted for conservation and consolidation works. The historic building recording was required under condition (m) of the grant of SMC. The scope of the work was set out in a specification produced by Hal Bishop the Senior Historic Environment Officer of Torbay Council. The chapel has been on the Buildings at Risk Register, now the Heritage at Risk (HAR) Register for many years. Prior to the conservation works reported here the most recent, October 2014, HAR report described its

condition as *extensive significant problems* and its principal vulnerability as *collapse*. The approved conservation and repair works included: the removal of vegetation from the walls and roof of the chapel; the removal of modern poorly executed repairs; repairs and replacement to the building fabric; and the removal of the internal timber scaffold.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Speculation in regard to the origin and specific function of the chapel was presented in Ellis (1930, 67-8) and has often been repeated. A votive chapel built by shipwrecked sailors or a seamark to aid navigation are less preferred by Ellis to it belonging to Torre Abbey, the Premonstratensian house founded in 1196 and located on the coast a short walk from St Michael's, and thus functioning as a retreat or Chantry. However, no documentary evidence has been found to support an association with the Abbey. Noting the bare rock floor several commentators have opined that the chapel may mark the location of a religious 'vision' or revelation (e.g. Jones 1997, 2). Preece (2014, 163) includes St Michael's in a list of possible late medieval lighthouses, although the author notes its location as being over a mile inland from the sea. Such a function echoes that of Russell (1960, 13) who notes the opinion that the porch was substantial enough to have held a superstructure from which a light could be shown.

Reverend John Swete (1752-1821) described the scene in November 1793 and provided a watercolour view in the picturesque style (Gray 1997, 173-4). Swete's painting shows a dramatic view with the chapel sitting on a bare peak of rock with no trees. The chapel appears to stand much as it does today with the ruined porch clear in the image. The quarry is evidently in operation (matching the document of 1788) as the lime kiln is also shown and described. Not so clear is how much of the cliff face below the chapel is an artefact of quarrying. The profile of the cliff indicates that the chapel may have always been close to the precipice on the west as the cliff appears to step out at a level lower down; a step, which if it is not a conceit of the artist, is not present in the quarried cliff face today. A further view produced by Swete shows Torre Church with the chapel in the distance rising on a rocky pinnacle (Gray 1997, 176). This view provides little detail of the chapel, but does indicate that its situation was devoid of trees and that the chapel was more prominent in the landscape than it has been when obscured by trees in more recent times. The earliest depiction of the chapel is in an engraving of Torre Abbey dated 1662 in which it appears to have been squeezed in to the frame and positioned close to Torre Church. In contrast

to later images it shows the chapel on a gently sloping hill, where it is named *St Maries*, its earliest documented name.

PREVIOUS WORK

The only modern detailed archaeological description of the chapel is a report by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) which provides a written description, measured plan and cross-section and a photographic record (Jones 1997). This is complemented by two reports of historic records research by Evans (1986) and Travers (1998) which failed to find any documentation relating to the chapel dating to earlier than the 18th century. The RCHME report provided the baseline for the current survey.

THE EXTERIOR

The porch

The porch measures 3.5m by 3.5m, constructed of local grey limestone, and is later than the main building which it abuts. It has been partially renovated since an upside-down carved benchmark stone has been re-used at the southeast base of the east wall of the porch. The walls have in-turned jambs at the south end, although there is no evidence to indicate that these supported an arch. A gable scar on the chapel roof shows that the porch had once been provided with a pitched roof.

South elevation (Figs 7-8)

The main elevation faces south across Tor Bay towards Brixham. The southeast corner has red breccia quoins. Access to the southwest corner was not possible due to the proximity to the cliff edge, but it is clear that this too is dressed with breccia quoins. At eaves level there are two thin courses of masonry with the lower a string course of schist/slate and the upper mostly of schist/slate but with some red breccia. The primary splayed window facing south has been narrowed with limestone block jambs reducing the width from 1m to 0.45m, but retaining a height of approximately 1m. The original window features appear to have been removed, cutting the slate/schist string line above, and the infilled scar is set with light grey/light yellow cement which is distinctive from other repairs.

The doorway measures 2.8m high by 1.4m wide and on the east side has a red breccia jamb giving way to limestone and breccia towards the base which may be repairs (Fig. 8). The base stone on this east side has an external rebate for a door and an internal stop. It appears to be *in situ* as it has been dressed to overlie the natural bedrock. The west jamb is limestone and appears to be part of a rebuild, although the lowest courses may be earlier. The door head is arched and on the east side ten of the original voussoirs in breccia survive; the west side, including an off-centred keystone, are red sandstone replacements.

East elevation (Fig. 9)

Much cement render survives, particularly higher up. Breccia quoin replacements are situated at both corners, with some lower down eroded ones perhaps being original; these are also in red sandstone, although some individual stones show bedding of both breccia and sandstone. The east window measures 2.5m high by 1.2m wide and has breccia jambs which are angled internally forming part of a splay. It has a shallow arched head which becomes a pointed arch internally. The cill has been repaired with three courses of mixed rubble. The window sits within a clearly defined break in the limestone masonry (also visible in Fig. 6), although this is less clear on the south side due to later cement repairs. Either the opening has been narrowed or the wall was prepared to accept the window once completed. The gable above the window has been subject to several repairs.

North elevation (Fig. 10)

The northwest quoins are in breccia with a few repairs higher up. A step back on the west elevation close to eaves level is clear on this elevation. As with the south elevation a string course formed by two rows of schist/slate is located at eaves level. This has been cut above the north window, as on the south side, and lost to late 20th century repairs at the east end and becomes wider and less formal as it approaches the west end. The primary splayed window facing north had been blocked historically, but was reopened as part of this project; it measures 1m by 1m. No detail of the original window was exposed and a new shallow arch has been built. A possible infilled putlog hole was identified to the west of the window.

West elevation (Figs 11-12)

The west elevation sits above the steep drop into the quarry and access was restricted and only possible when scaffolding was present. At eaves level the elevation steps back creating a distinct ledge 0.25m deep. The upper gable contains more breccia than elsewhere in the chapel wall and is arranged roughly in rows of up to three courses; perhaps indicating that above the ledge is a distinct phase of construction or rebuild. The south pitch of the roof also appears to poorly match the top of the gable and is not keyed in. The vault was built east to west, with the gable being built up to it on the west end after the vault's completion. A pair of putlog holes are placed symmetrically close to the base of the gable; the northernmost is infilled while the other is open through to the interior. There are central windows to each section. The higher window is small, measuring 0.9m high by 0.5m wide and much masonry has been lost. It has two cill stones of oolitic limestone (possibly Bath stone). A single vesicular volcanic trap jamb survives on the north side (Fig. 12). It is heavily worn but has chamfered inner and outer faces. The side face of this jamb incorporates two glazing bar sockets; the upper one 30mm wide by 23mm deep and the lower 20mm wide by 15mm deep with both 15mm thick. The head of the arch is pointed but the dressing is missing (the window as a whole is splayed to a square internally). It was not possible to access the lower window externally to allow detailed description, but it is small, measuring 0.4m high by 0.3m wide, splayed and has heavily eroded red sandstone jambs, lintel and probably a cill of the same material.

The roof (Fig. 13)

The roof is covered by schist/slate blocks laid horizontally with a bevelled outer edge matching the pitch of the roof. The ridge line is flat. The south pitch contains more original material than the north which has suffered from a significant amount of modern repairs. During the conservation works much of the modern repair work was removed and the core, or extrados, of the vaulted roof revealed. It comprises large blocks of breccia with voids into which the slate/schist is set. All is bonded by light cream gravelly lime mortar, with yellowish and pinkish hues in places.

THE INTERIOR

The interior has large patches of lime render surviving on the walls and ceiling. At the east end of the south wall is a square niche measuring 800mm by 800mm which is probably positioned to hold a piscina. The barrel vaulted ceiling converges on a central point creating a pointed arch (Figs 14

and 15). From floor level it appears that the north wall and the west end of the south wall have a small ledge at eaves level (Fig. 16). Closer inspection of these show that the north wall feature is very uneven and narrow (a maximum of 30mm deep) and in places it is obscured by lime render. On the south wall it is a more formal feature, forming a level shelf up to 60mm deep continuing from the southwest corner for approximately 4.8m. Early thoughts that this ledge may be a scarcement to hold the floor for a loft at the west end of the chapel is not sustained by the small size of the features, along with its covering by render, and instead it appears only to mark the difference in build from the vertical wall to the barrel roof section.

The floor

There is no evidence to indicate that there was ever a formal constructed floor. This is peculiar as the floor is uneven with exposures of natural bedrock which steps up from west to east in two flights. The bedrock is predominantly limestone, with an outcrop of breccia on the north side opposite the door. Between the bedrock exposures is a filling of dark brown soil.

DISCUSSION

There can be little doubt that St Michael's was built as a chapel and was at some distance from any significant population centre. It is medieval in character, but has been stripped of almost all embellishment which might provide more diagnostic evidence for dating. What remains shows that some non-local stone was being sourced which indicates that it had at least some pretensions to grandeur. Nicholas Orme (1996, 84) has noted that 'many [chapels] occupied picturesque places in the landscape: hills, caves, woods, springs and islands' and that in doing this their builders represented a wish to Christianise such places. He also notes that the hill chapels were frequently dedicated to St Michael, though as noted the earliest historical references is to St Mary.

It is clear from the use of stone exotic to the site that some architectural embellishment had been present. One remaining jamb stone base shows that a moulded door frame had once been present; this rather oddly has the door opening outwards, perhaps this was due to the uneven floor internally. Further glimpses of architectural embellishments come from the upper window in the west elevation where a volcanic trap jamb and oolitic limestone stone cill survive. Difficulty of access to this window may have resulted in the survival of these pieces; more easily accessed architectural pieces had gone missing prior to historic recording and the scars around the east, north and south windows may have resulted from their removal.

The single-cell and complex vaulted stone roof is unusual for medieval ecclesiastical buildings in the immediate local context – it would also have been extremely expensive to build and keep in good repair in the absence of endowed income. There are regional comparisons. The closest and perhaps most similar is the Chapel of St Michael at Rame Head in southeast Cornwall (NHLE No. 1159655). This chapel is located on an exposed hilltop promontory overlooking the western approach to Plymouth Sound. It is thought to date to the 13th century and has documentary evidence for its use as a lighthouse and had already fallen out of use for formal ecclesiastical purposes in the 16th century. On the Dorset coast the isolated 12th century St Aldhem's Chapel (NHLE No. 1120256) has a peculiar square plan with rib-vaulted ceiling and has also been regarded as the possible location of a navigational light on its exposed headland position.

Channel Islands chapels may also be compared with St Michael's Chapel as the barrel vaulted roof is seen as typical of the work of Jersey masons (Sebire 2005, 140). At St Brelade, Jersey the Fisherman's Chapel (States of Jersey Historic Site Reference BR0115) has been dated to the 11th century and has a pointed barrel vaulted roof. Its lack of significant architectural embellishment contrasts with splendid wall paintings dating to the 14th century. The small 12th century oratory chapel of St Hellier's Hermitage (HE1426) shares the simple architectural design and like St Michael's has a floor of outcropping rock; an elongated depression in the natural stone is known as St. Hellier's bed, and the hermitage was built to mark the shallow cave which was the residence of the later canonised hermit. An annual pilgrimage is maintained to the chapel which is situated on a rocky islet.

The reasons for establishing a chapel in medieval times are many and varied from the result of a dream to commemorating a battle or other events (see Orme 1996, 83-4). A chapel on a bridge or for a lighthouse often relied on a chapel keeper or hermit to maintain them and attend to liturgy. St Michael's link with the sea may at first consideration be regarded as a tenuous one. Its situation is 1 mile inland and its view is oblique to the bay; although it does take in the area of the current outer harbour. However, distance inland may not be too great a problem if the location is an exposed one. At Carn Brea in Cornwall, another chapel dedicated to St Michael has a beacon hermitage recorded in the 14th century and is located 3 miles inland (Wooding 1996; Preece 2014); the views of the sea beyond the north coast are extensive from this location.

The uneven surface within the chapel which appears never to have been covered by a suspended floor indicates that it is unlikely that the chapel ever served a congregation and is

perhaps the most significant clue regarding the location of the chapel. Could it be that a significant religious revelation or 'vision' took place at this location and chapel built to protect this important point in the landscape? This was a possibility suggested by the RCHME surveyors (Jones 1997, 3). Orme (1996, 94) refers to the erection in 1351 of a chapel by the canons of Frithelstock Priory in north Devon to mark an 'image of Mary'; Bishop Grandisson ordered its demolition. Geologically the site is distinct in having sandstone and breccia infilling of crevasses in the earlier limestone and could have made the site stand out as different, it has already been noted that the natural flooring incorporates both types of rock. The outcrop is on the Sticklepath Fault line which may provide further opportunities to note geological distinctiveness along with other natural wonders such as springs (Hal Bishop pers. comm.).

Active maintenance of the chapel probably ended in the 16th century, although many commentators note that Catholic seafarers from foreign vessels continued to seek it out (see e.g. Ellis 1930, 67). The 409 parishes of medieval Devon had at least 1,300 public and private chapels, the majority were abandoned during the Reformation, however a survey of 92 Devon parishes in 1755 found that 115 chapels were still standing or their locations known (Orme 1996, 82, 102).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The survey was commissioned by Hal Bishop for Torbay Council. The site works were carried out by Stella De-Villiers, Andrew Passmore and Paul Rainbird. The helpful advice of Hal Bishop was appreciated during the course of the work and the preparation of this report. The figures were prepared by Elisabeth Patkai. The archive from the project will be deposited with Torquay Museum

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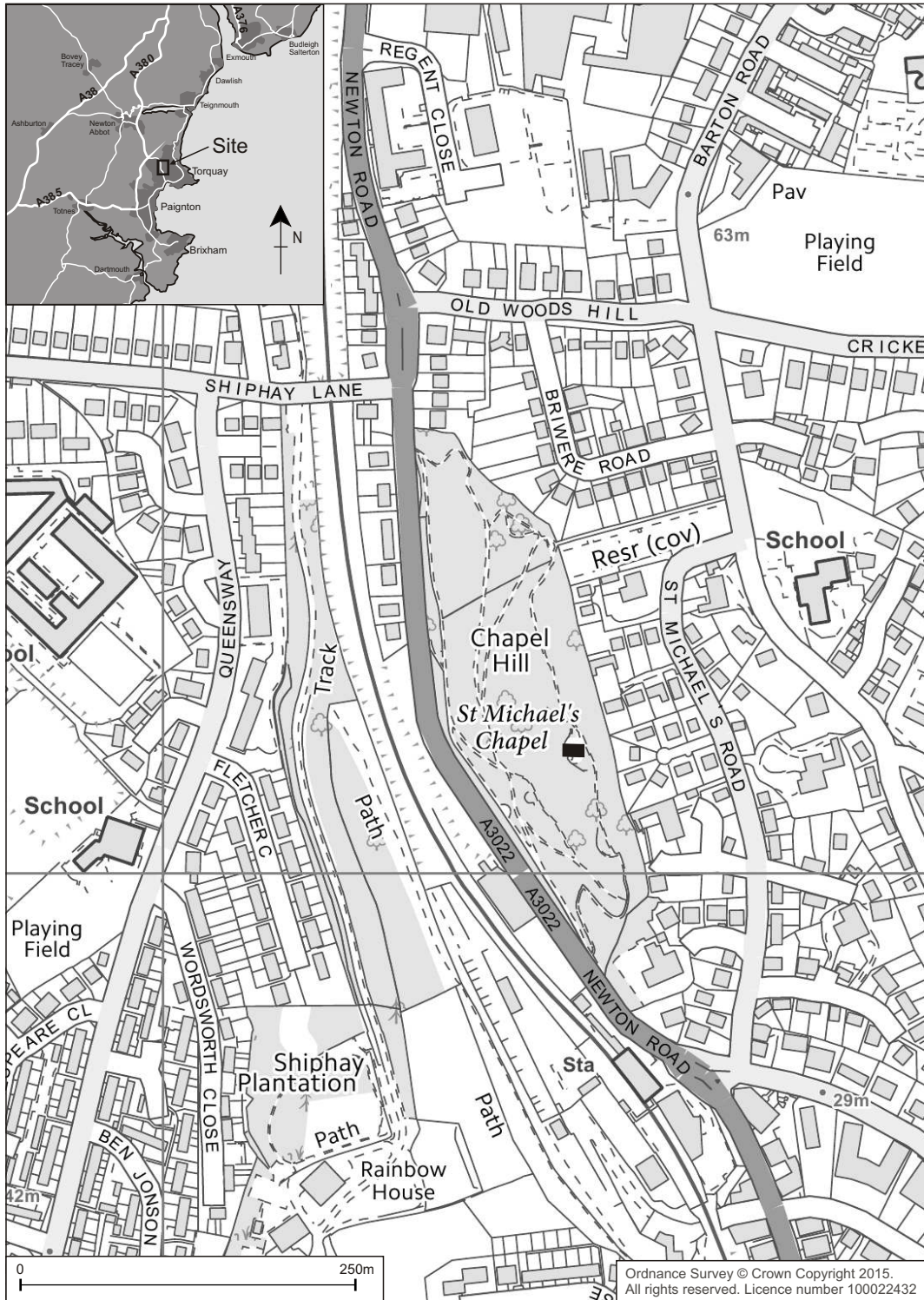


Fig. 1: Location of St Michael's Chapel, Torre



Fig. 2: St Michael's Chapel, Torre prior to conservation works. Viewed from the south-east (2m scale)



Fig. 3: St Michael's Chapel, Torre prior to conservation works. Viewed from the north (2m scale)



Fig. 4: St Michael's Chapel, Torre following the removal of trees from the limestone quarry. Viewed from the south-west

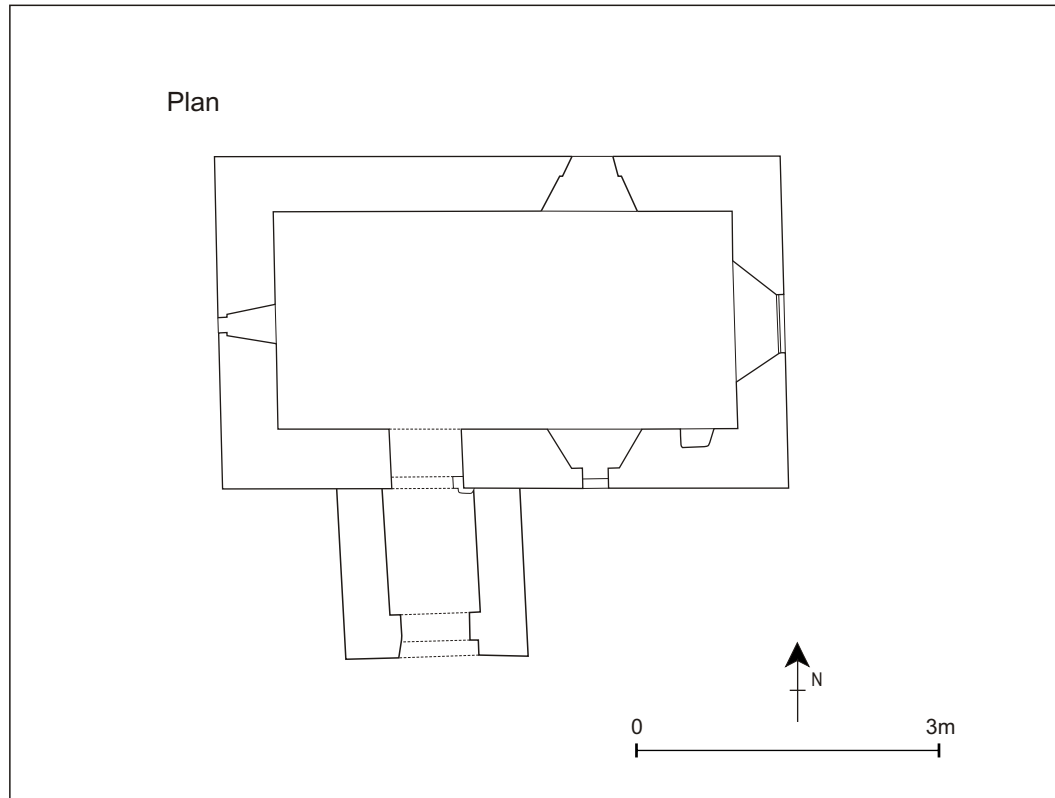


Fig. 5: St Michael's Chapel, Torre. The RCHME plan (after Jones 1997, with amendments)



Fig. 6: St Michael's Chapel, Torre east gable end prior to the removal of the 19th century cross (2m scale)

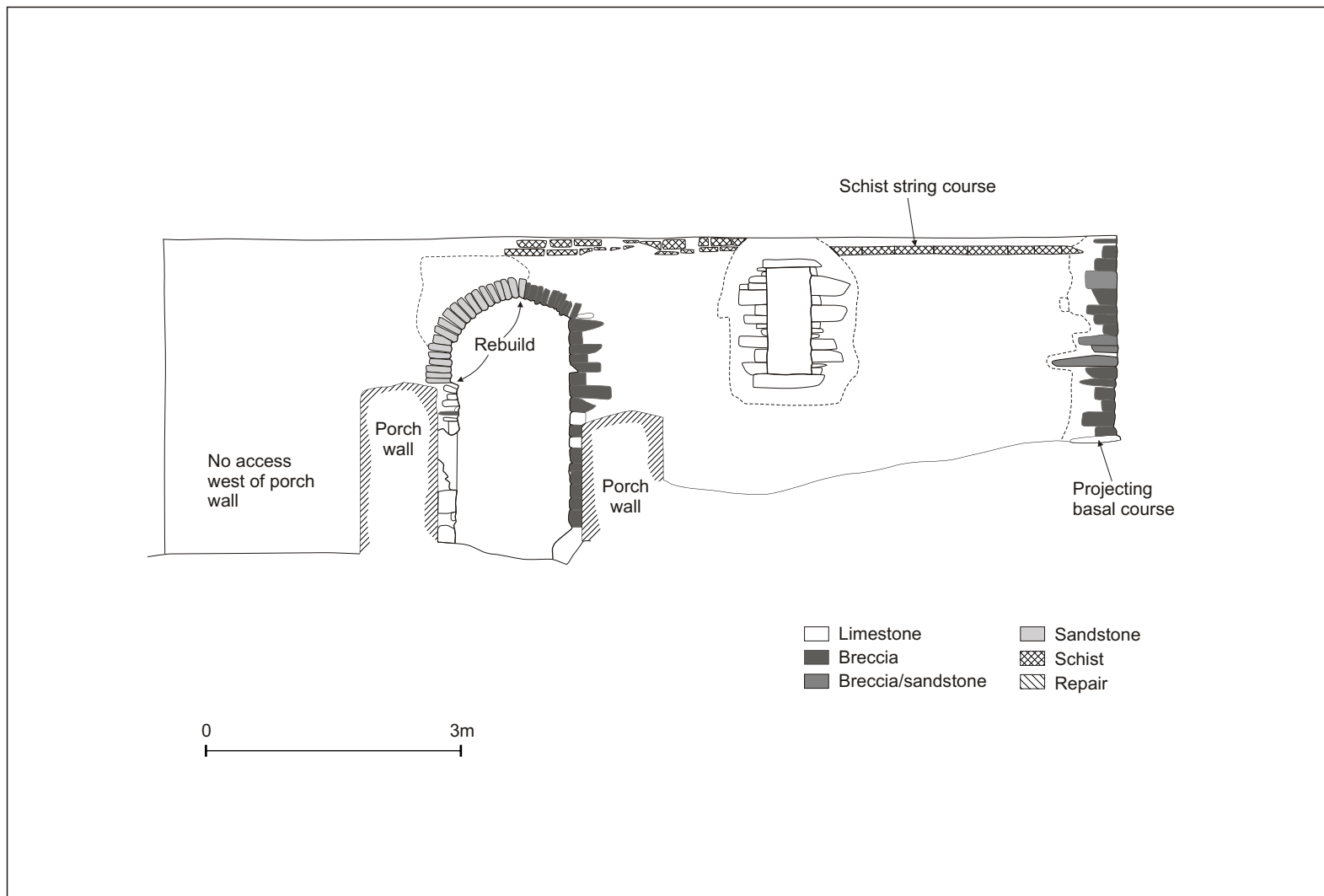


Fig. 7: St Michael's Chapel, Torre south elevation measured drawing



Fig. 8: St Michael's Chapel, Torre doorway, prior to conservation work (2m scale)

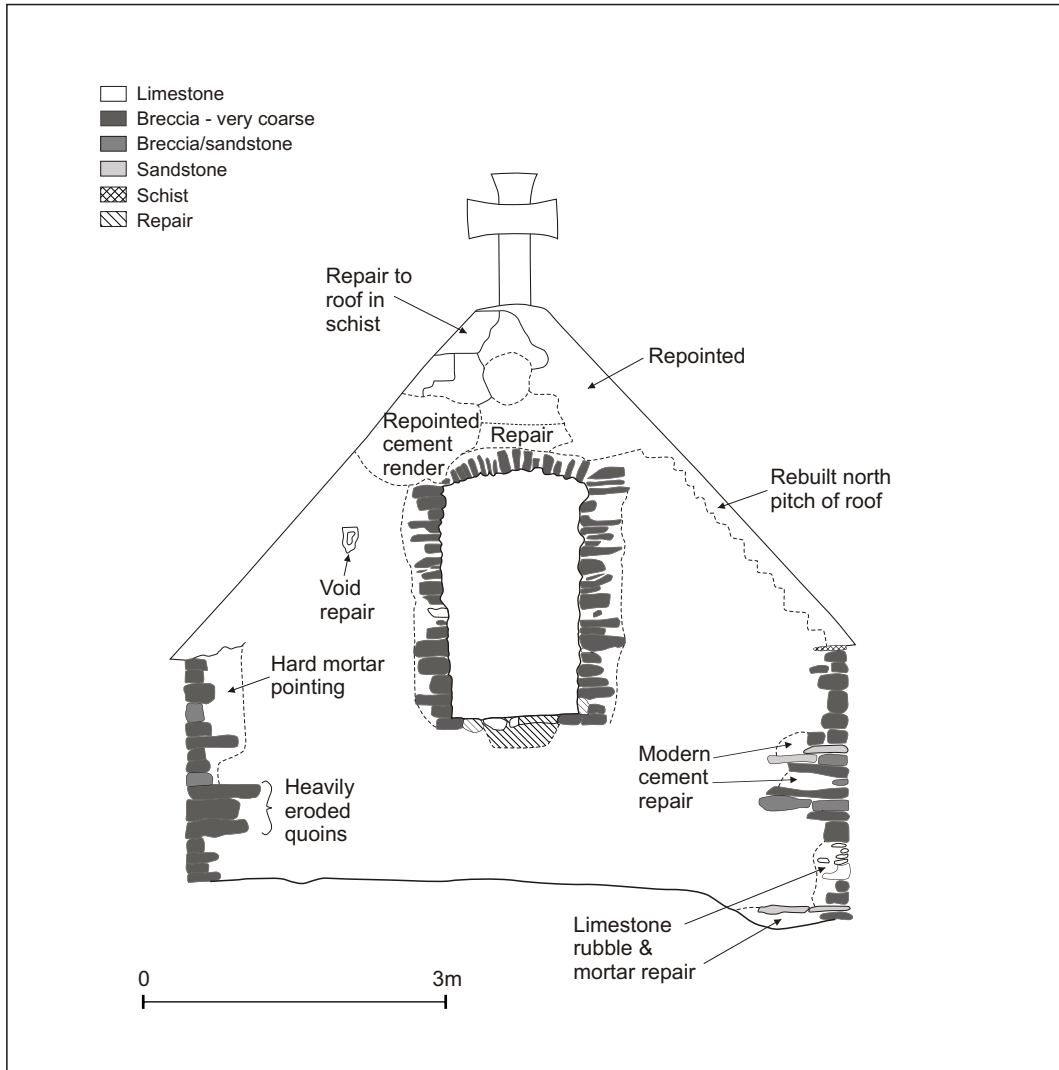


Fig. 9: St Michael's Chapel, Torre east elevation measured drawing

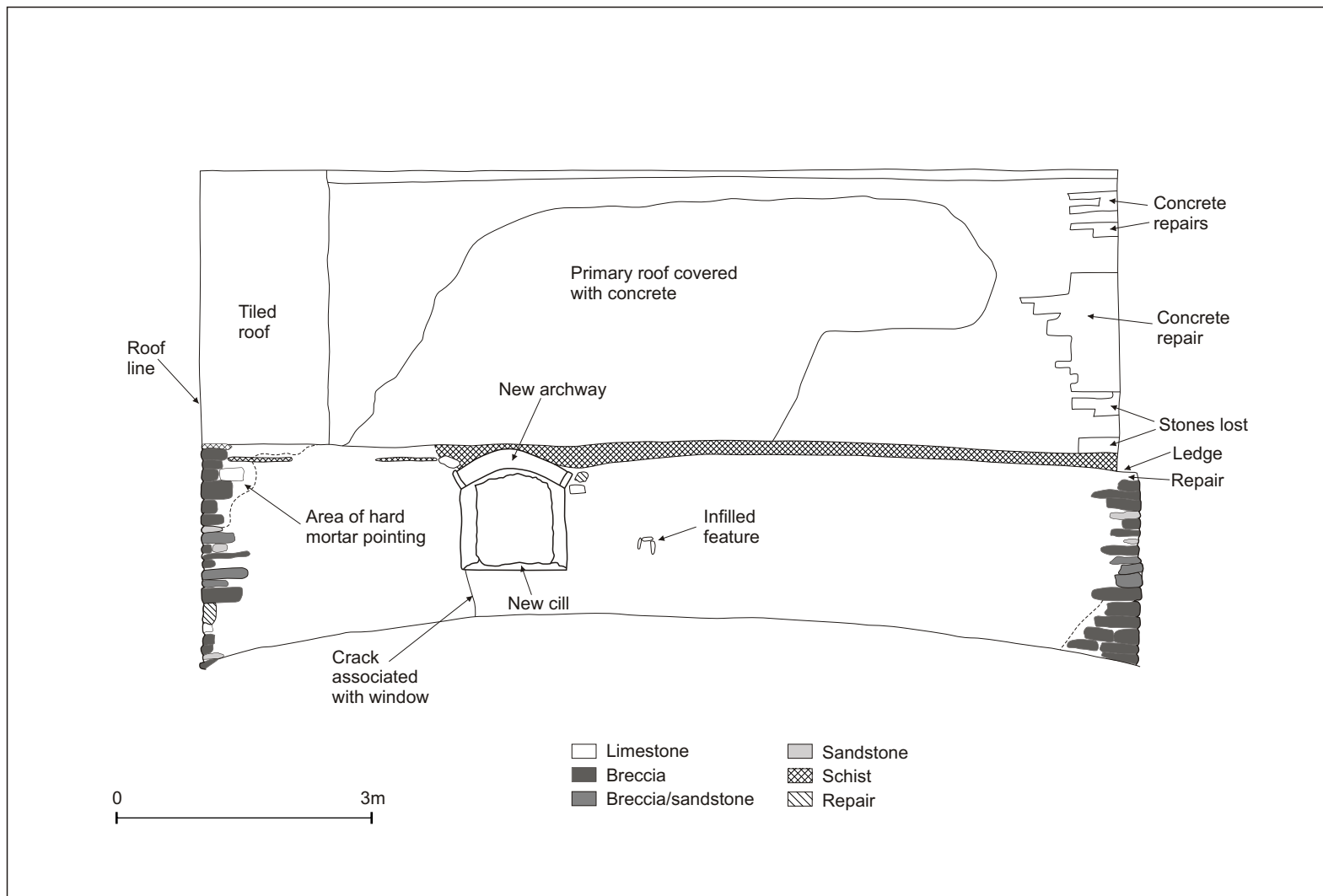


Fig. 10: St Michael's Chapel, Torre north elevation measured drawing

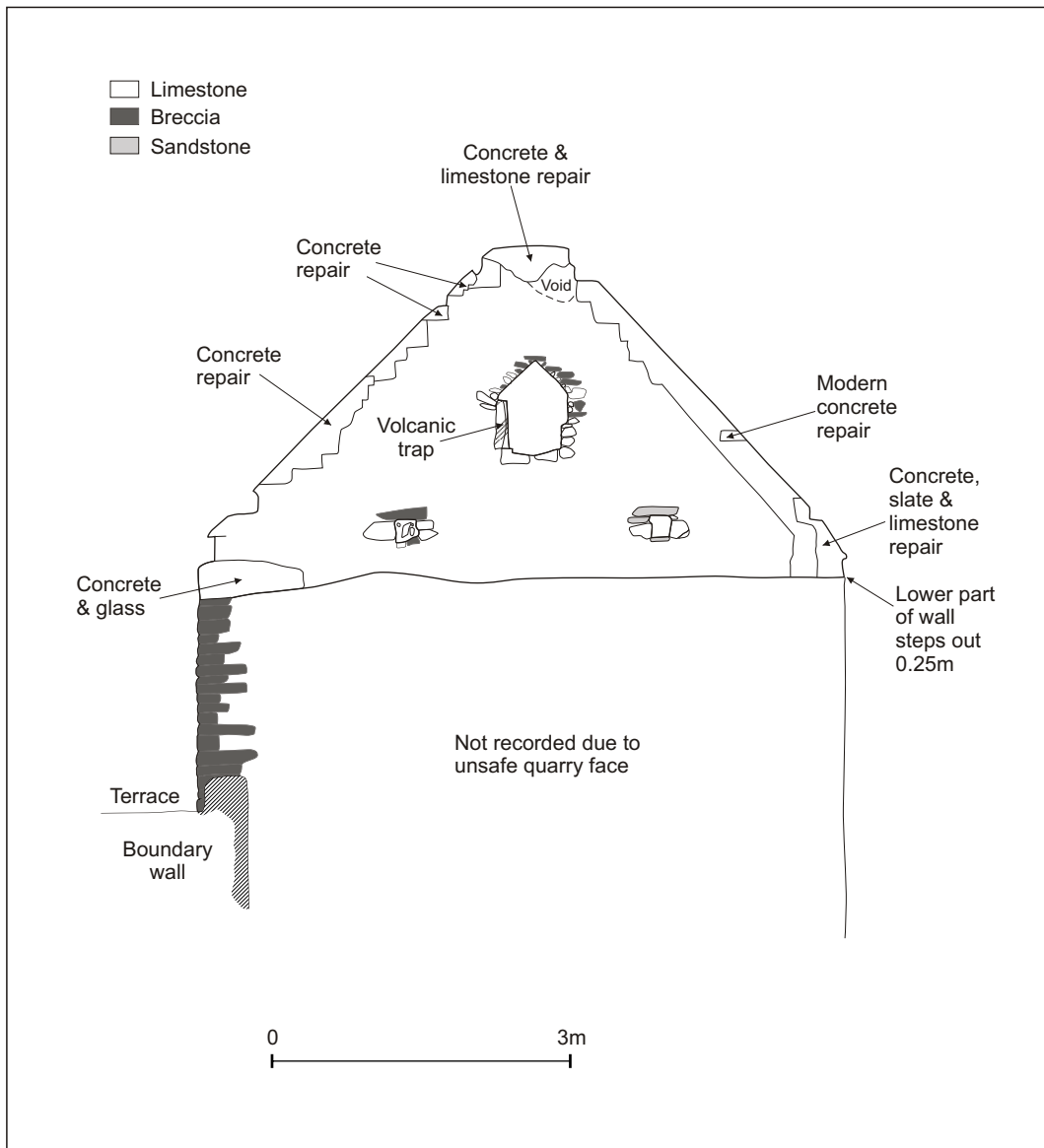


Fig. 11: St Michael's Chapel, Torre west elevation of gable measured drawing



Fig. 12: St Michael's Chapel, Torre higher west window, detail of north jamb



Fig. 13: St Michael's Chapel, Torre northern pitch during conservation works, showing vaulted roof core material



Fig. 14: St Michael's Chapel, Torre interior, during conservation works, showing vaulted roof and west end

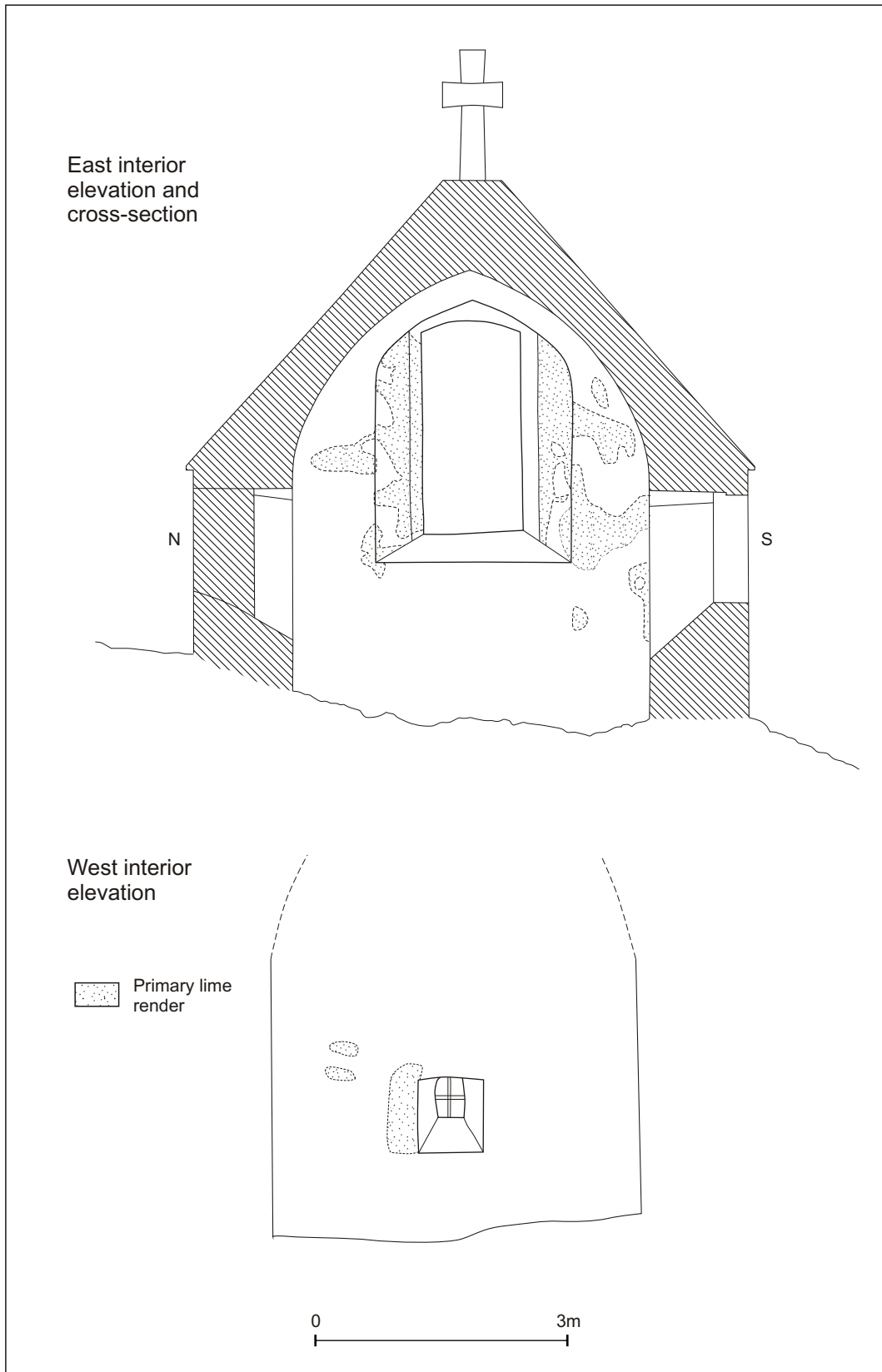


Fig. 15: St Michael's Chapel, Torre, east and west interior elevations measured drawings

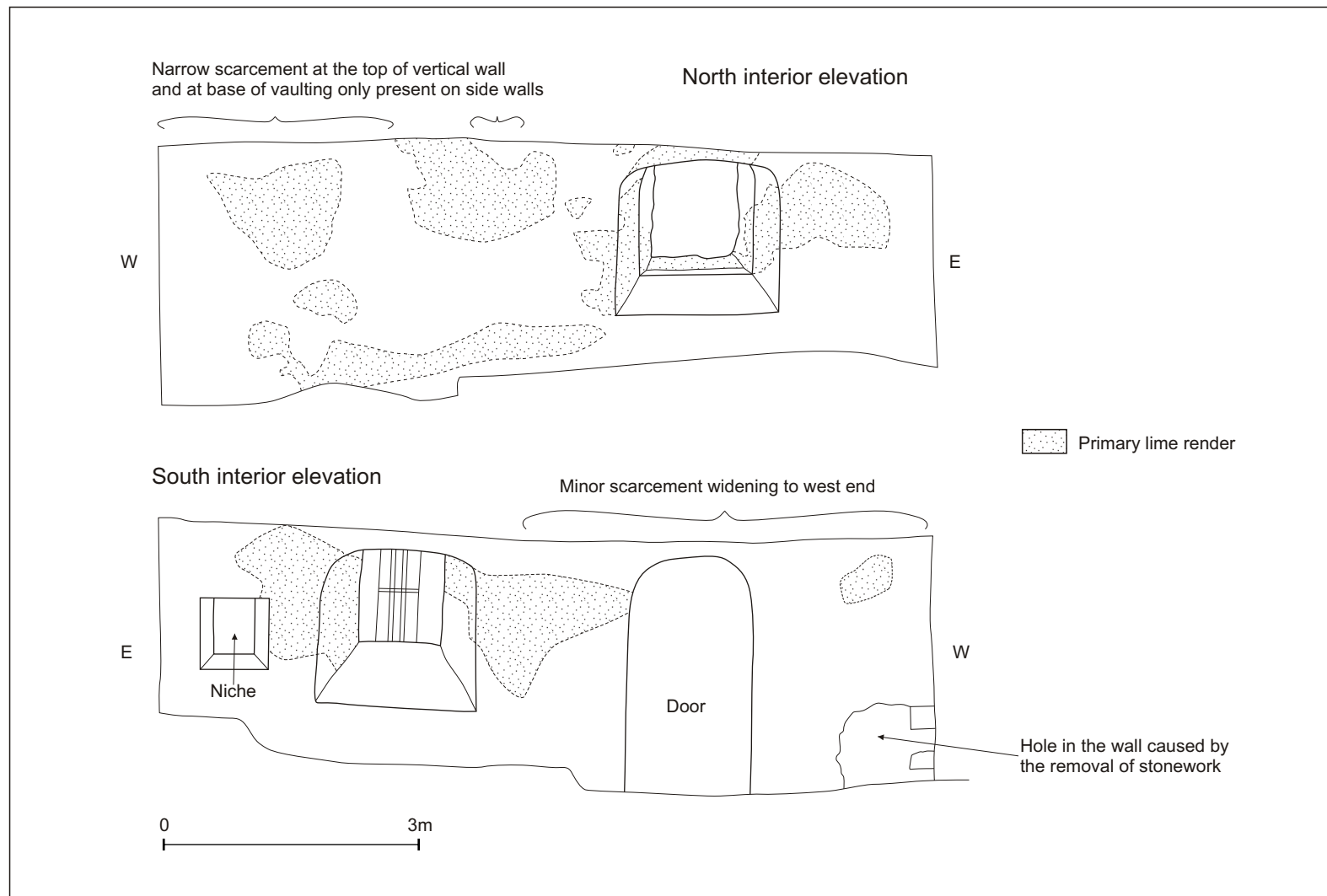


Fig. 16: St Michael's Chapel, Torre, north and south interior elevations measured drawings

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