

# CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, LAUNCESTON, CORNWALL

(NGR SX 33208 84675)

Results of an archaeological watching brief

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On behalf of:  
St Mary's PCC

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AC archaeology

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## Results of an archaeological watching brief

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## Summary

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out by AC archaeology in September 2016 at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Launceston, Cornwall. The work was undertaken during the installation of a new underfloor heating system.*

*The majority of the works were contained within the brick conduits of the 19th-century underfloor heating system. Where new trenches were excavated these revealed only made ground of 19th-century or modern date. The area observed was devoid of graves, although some disarticulated human bone was observed and retained on site for reburial by the church.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This document sets out the results of an archaeological watching brief which was undertaken by AC archaeology in September 2016 at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Launceston, Cornwall (NGR SX 33208 84675; Fig.1). The work was commissioned by Le Page Architects Ltd on behalf of the PCC.
- 1.2 The work was carried out during groundworks associated with the installation of a new underfloor heating system. The watching brief was carried out in the interior of the church.
- 1.3 The church is located in the historic core of the town of Launceston at approximately 129m aOD. The underlying solid geology comprises slate of the Yeolmbridge Formation (BGS 2016).

### 2. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The church is a Grade I Listed Building (National Heritage List no. 1280301), with the following description.

#### CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE

Chapel, later church to serve the town of Launceston. Late C14 tower, otherwise 1511-24 for Sir Henry Trecarrel of Trecarrel; restored 1852 and 1893. Carved granite and granite ashlar with embattled parapets and coped gables; dry Delabole slate roofs. Tower is coursed greenstone. Plan: West tower (originally detached); nave/chancel; north and south aisle of same length and south porch. 4-stage embattled tower with setback angle buttresses; stair-tower to SE side. West front with moulded, pointed-arched doorway right of centre; 3-light traceried window above trefoil-headed light. C16 church is buttressed and has elaborate carved decoration up to parapet cornice returned as string at ends. Decorative motifs include: plinth quatrefoils alternating with coats of arms and fleur-de-lis; above this tracery with coats of arms and letters. The letters, from the chancel door eastwards read: AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM, SPONSUS AMAT SPONSAM, MARIA OPTIMAM PARTEM ELIGIT. O QUAM TERRIBILIS ET METUENDUS EST LOCUS ISTE. VERE ALIUD NON EST HIC NISI DOMUS DEI ET PORTA CEL. Above the letters a course of rose-and-thistle ornament. Weathered buttresses dividing bays also carved: 7 bays east of porch; arms of Henry III to E gable and niche with figure of Mary Magdalene. Original traceried windows, central north window with thick C18 glazing bars, others with leaded glazing: 4-light windows except for 5-light chancel window. 2-storey south porch has diagonally-set buttresses; 4-centred arched doorway with square hoodmould and nook shafts; two 1st-floor 2-light windows with round-headed lights flanking central niche with terracotta statue of Mary Magdalene. INTERIOR: plastered walls; 8-bay arcades with cruciform-on-plan piers with central round shaft and 3 roll mouldings to each compass point; late C19 carved oak waggon roofs (copies of 1524 roofs), coloured memorial glass to S aisle and E end. Porch has octagonal piscina right of inner 4-centred arched doorway and corners of porch have moulded imposts of former vault. Fittings: Norman font bowl used as base for 1914 font with carved cover; exceptionally fine quality C16 octagonal painted carved oak pulpit; a 1654 pew back, otherwise oak pews by Arnold Fellows 1894; arms of George I over choir vestry door; 1723 oak organ front with fielded panels

possibly by Thomas Schwarbrick rebuilt and enlarged 1904 by Hele of Plymouth and last rebuilt in 1960 but retains much of its C18 fabric; alabaster reredos by Harry Hems of Exeter; lectern 1895 to George and Emlin Gifford by Rattee & Kett of Cambridge; carved oak parclose screens, 1904; carved oak chancel screen 1911 by Rashleigh Pinwell, memorial choir stalls 1893 to John and Sarah Jane Ching, and triptych in the Lady Chapel. Monuments: freestone and slate to S wall 1667 to Sarah wife of John Ruddle; large 2-storey marble to N wall 1731 to Granville Pyper and Richard Wise, both former mayors, with Corinthian and Ionic orders, moulded entablature, central panel with mother and 3 children and urn finial flanked by busts; marble and freestone memorial to Reverend William Bedford died 1787 aged 63, and Mary his wife died 1783 aged 55, and their sons. Large monument behind organ loft to Elizabeth Herle of Dockacre House, "Depart ye life ye December 1714 by starvation or other unlawful means"; C17 carved figures from Piper monument inside S door. Mid/late C19 stained glass includes memorial of 1883 to Sir Henry Trecarrel. HISTORY: The most spectacular late medieval church in Cornwall. The exceptionally elaborate carved ornamentation is paralleled by the near-contemporary work at St Mary Truro (now part of the cathedral) and Probus.

**2.2** The name Launceston is made up of Celtic and Saxon words. Lann meant church in Cornish. So it was the Lann of St Stephen. The 'ton' comes from the Saxon word 'tun' which meant farm, hamlet or estate. By the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 Launceston was an important settlement and had a mint. In 1067 William the Conqueror's half-brother Robert of Mortain was made Earl of Cornwall and built a castle at Launceston, which was of wood, but was replaced with stone in the 13th century. Through the middle ages Launceston remained an important town. It had a priory and stood on the main road from Devon to Cornwall and was the only walled town in Cornwall. Launceston became the county town for Cornwall (a position it retained until 1835).

### **3. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

**3.1** The aim of the watching brief was to observe, investigate, excavate and record any surviving below-floor archaeological features, deposits and artefacts across the area affected by the work, in particular those associated with graves or structural remains of the church.

**3.2** The watching brief was undertaken with reference to the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (revised 2014). All groundworks were monitored by the site archaeologist. Excavation was undertaken by hand.

**3.3** All pre-modern archaeological features and deposits exposed were recorded using the standard AC archaeology pro-forma recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (revised August 2012).

**3.4** Where human remains were encountered they were left on site for reburial by the church.

## **4. RESULTS (Fig. 1)**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The groundworks involved the removal of the pipes from the previous underfloor heating that had been largely placed in brick conduits. These were reused, but new trenches were also excavated to accommodate the new system, namely at the east end of the north aisle, the west end of the nave and in the west end of the Lady Chapel, which is located at the east end of the south aisle.

#### **4.2 East end of the north aisle (Plate 1)**

The area in front of the organ and beside the large 2-storey marble monument to Granville Pyper and Richard Wise, both former mayors of Launceston, and dated 1731, was excavated to a depth of 0.50m. The floor slabs rested on modern fill material which contained fragments of human bone and some animal horn. The monument itself appeared to sit on a thin concrete slab laid on top of the same material.

#### **4.3 West end of the nave (Plates 2 and 3)**

An area in the corridor at the west end of the nave, between the main south door and a north door was opened up using irregularly-shaped trenches. The deposits revealed were 19th-century or modern made ground formed from light brownish grey sandy silt.

#### **4.4 West end of the Lady Chapel (Plates 4 and 5)**

A trench measuring 4.20m long (N-S) by 0.70m wide and 0.50m deep was dug at the west end of the Lady Chapel. Fragments of disarticulated human bone were observed, but the matrix was one of 19th-century or modern infill which also contained pieces of brick and wood.

### **5. COMMENTS**

- 5.1 The monitoring of the groundworks within the Church of St Mary Magdalene at Launceston revealed no significant archaeological features or deposits. The majority of the new system was placed within the former piping ducts and where new trenches were dug it was clear that these were placed in 19th century or modern infill. A published work by Robbins (1888) notes that during renovations in 1852 the vaults beneath the church were filled in, and any individual burial vaults were otherwise sealed with cement and brick. The watching brief observations do not contradict this.

### **6. ARCHIVE**

- 6.1 The paper and digital archive is currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd under the project number ACD1453. This will initially be stored under controlled conditions at the offices of AC Archaeology in Bradninch, but will ultimately be deposited at the Cornwall Record Office. Longer-term storage arrangements will be made with the Cornwall Record Office once a decision has been made on the future acceptance of archives.

### **7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 7.1 The work was commissioned by Le Page Architects Ltd and managed for AC archaeology by Andrew Passmore. The site work was undertaken by Abigail Brown. The illustrations for this report were prepared by Leon Cauchois.

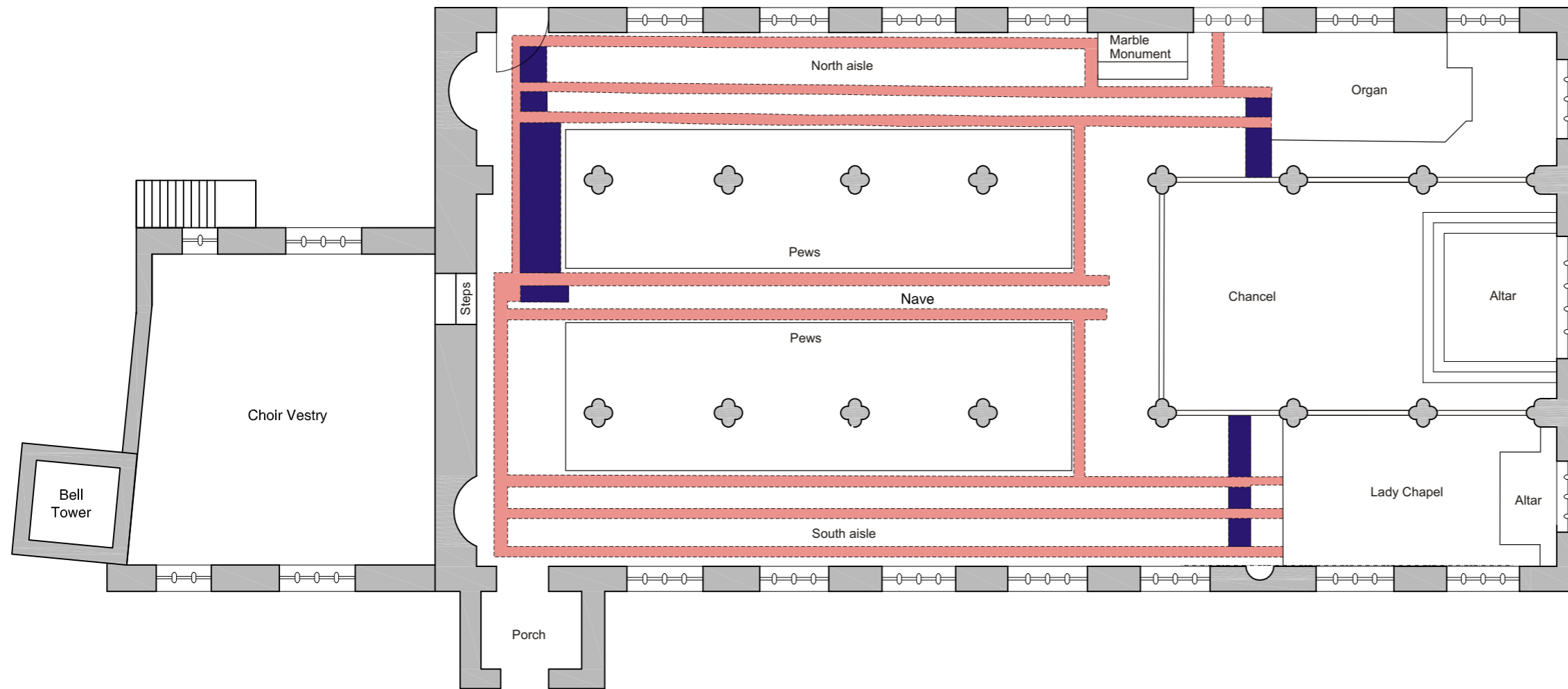
### **8. SOURCES CONSULTED**

BGS 2016, *British Geological Survey On-line Viewer* ([www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk))

Robbins, Sir Alfred, F. 1888, *Launceston Past and Present – Historical and Descriptive Sketch*



- Reused existing brick conduits
- New trenches



0  5m  
Scale 1:100@A3

PROJECT  
**St. Mary Magdalene Church,  
 Launceston, Cornwall**  
 TITLE  
**Fig. 1: Location of site and plan  
 showing location of watching  
 brief observations**





Plate 1: North aisle, works in progress, looking east

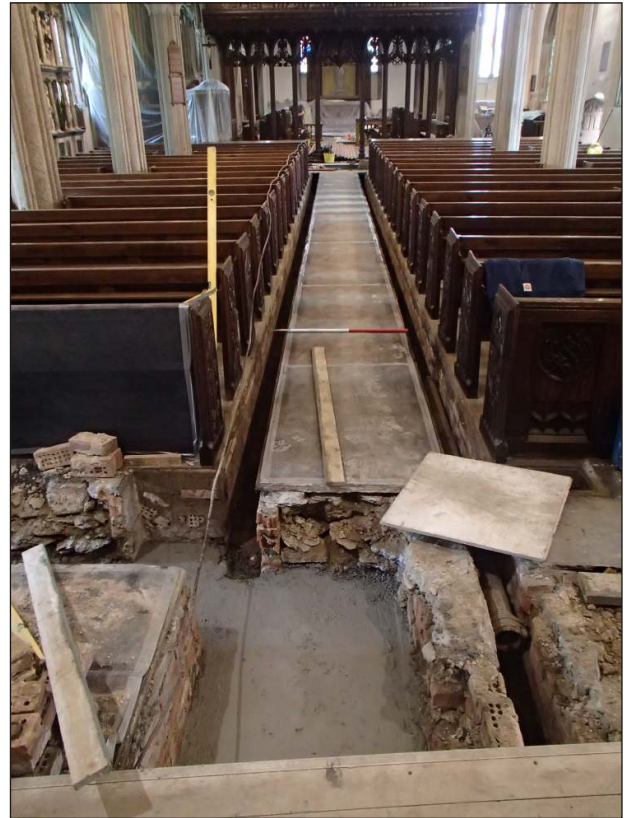


Plate 2: Nave, looking east (1m scale)



Plate 3: Nave, west end, looking north (1m scale)

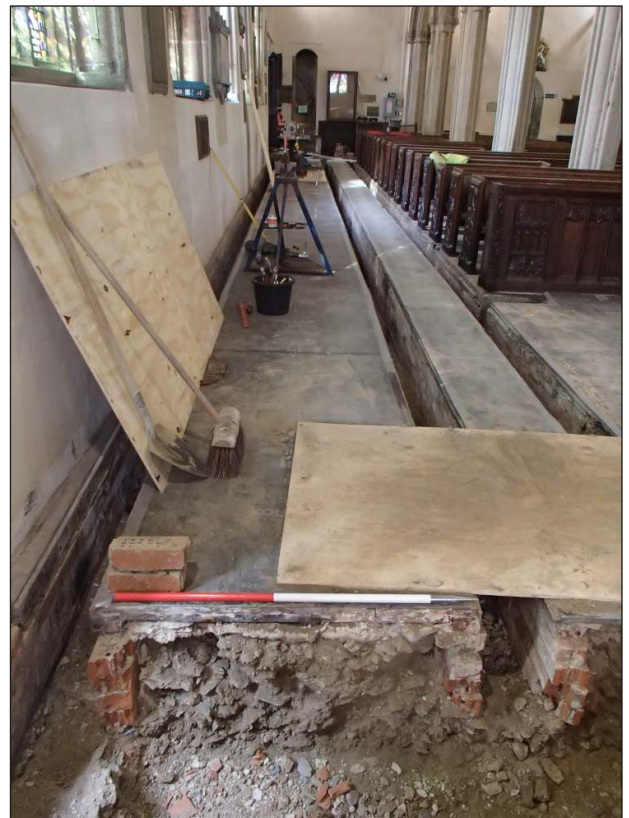


Plate 4: South aisle, looking west (1m scale)



Plate 5: Lady Chapel, works in progress, looking northeast



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