

**Report on an Archaeological Watching
Brief at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk'**

ENF133777

Prepared for:

Birdsall, Swash & Blackman Ltd

on behalf of

Great Bircham Parochial Church Council

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Archaeological Report

CB323R

**St Mary's Church,
Great Bircham, Norfolk**

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Summary

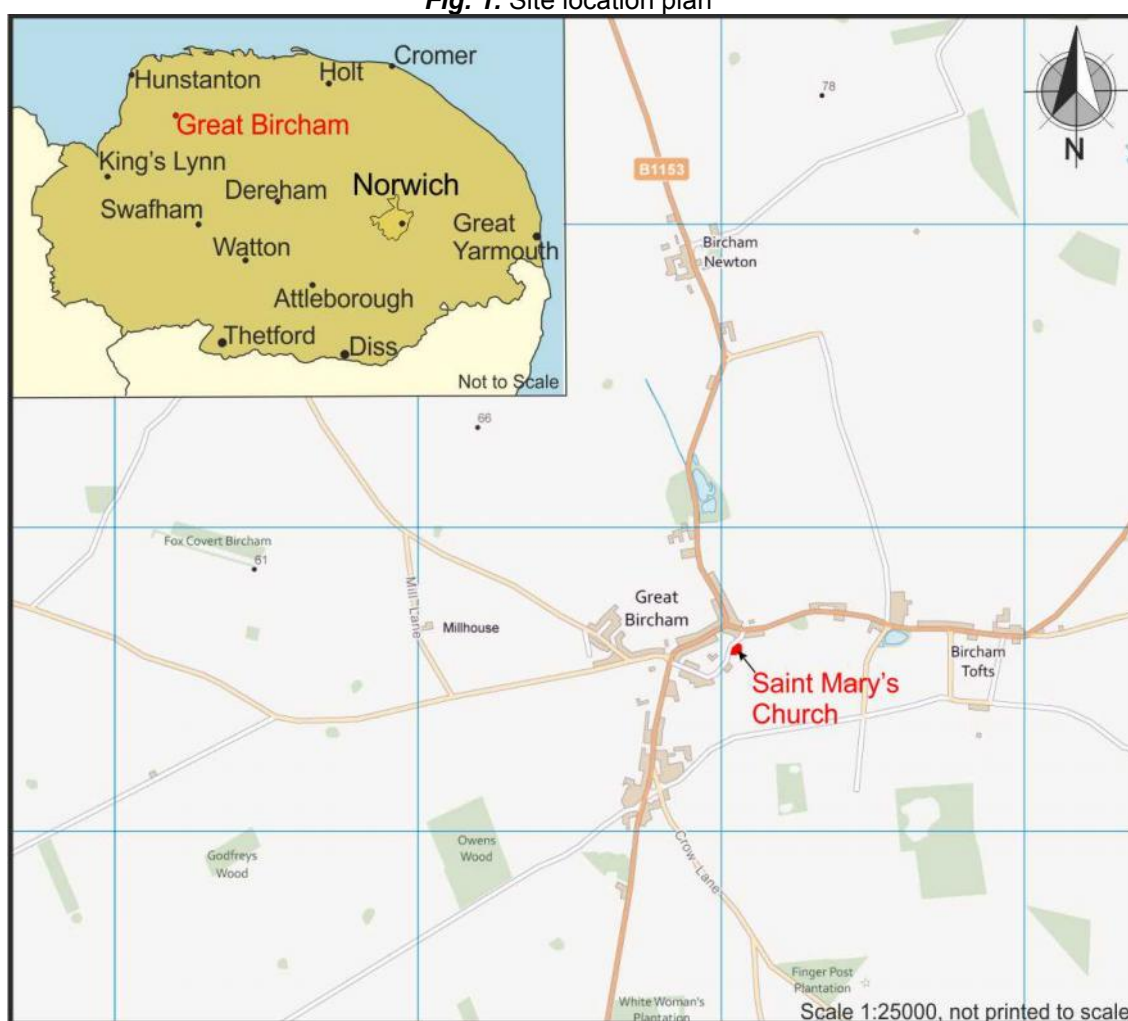
Archaeological monitoring was carried out at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk' (Norfolk Historic Environment Record ENF133777) in 2014 during groundworks associated with the installation of a new surface water drainage system. Despite the potential for remains of possible earlier elements to the church, none were observed.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Archaeological monitoring ("Watching Brief") was carried out during ground works at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk' (grid reference TF 77050 32601, centred at) and was requested by the Norfolk County Council Historic Environment Service.

1.2 This report, CB323R, details how Chris Birks undertook these works and summarises the results. A copy has been submitted to the Norfolk County Council Historic Environment Service.

Fig. 1. Site location plan



2.0 Project Background

2.1 A proposal for improvements including the installation of a new surface water drainage system at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk' was approved subject to a condition for a Programme of Archaeological work. Archaeological monitoring ("Watching Brief") was required at a level of constant attendance.

- 2.2 Archaeological monitoring was undertaken in accordance with a generic Brief issued by the Norfolk County Council Historic Environment Service and a generic Project Design and Written Scheme of Investigation for Archaeological Monitoring ("Watching Briefs") by Chris Birks (Birks 2004, Apr 2013 revision). Specific aims of the project are to determine the presence/absence, date, extent, state of preservation and significance of any archaeological layers or subsoil archaeological features. This forms part of the research agenda for the eastern counties of England in *Research and Archaeology Revisited: A Revised Framework for the East of England* (Medlycott 2011). Contributions to environmental archaeology research aims (Murphy 2000) may also be made. Full details of research aims, methodology and standards are provided in the Project Design.
- 2.3 Norfolk Historic & Environment Record (NHER) number ENF133777; Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations (OASIS) ID: chrisbir-207733.
- 2.4 The site archive will be held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, in accordance with the relevant policy on archiving standards.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

- 3.1 Many entries exist in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER) for Great Bircham and the surrounding area, only those records within the immediate vicinity of the site are described in this report. Further details of these and all other entries can be seen at the Historic Environment Record office at Gressenhall near Dereham by prior appointment.
- 3.2 A polished flint axe was found on the surface of a sugar beet field to the northwest of St Mary's Church in 1969. Possibly broken at the butt and re-chipped.
- 3.3 An archaeological evaluation in 2010 to the west of St Mary's Church revealed two ditches of Saxo-Norman to medieval date, possibly indicating occupation during this time (NHER 55292). A parallel ditch and ditch/furrow were orientated on the same alignment as many boundaries in the village. An excavation in 1975 on adjacent land revealed a Middle Saxon ditch on a similar alignment. It is possible that the lack of field boundaries on similar alignments in medieval and Post-medieval periods could be due to an episode of 'openfield' arable agriculture. The unusually deep topsoil and evidence for the use of lime and modern pottery finds is likely due to the use of the site as allotments during the 20th century.
- 3.4 Features and finds were discovered to the northwest of the church in 1975 during the construction of houses (NHER 6062). Excavated features included Middle and Late Saxon ditches and a Late Saxon pottery kiln. The pottery kiln produced Thetford-type wares. Finds included a Roman roof tile, an Early Saxon brooch and sherds of Middle and Late Saxon
- 3.5 St Mary's Church (NHER 1722) is a medieval church with various Post-medieval elements. The tower has a door from about 1200 A.D. It is unusual that the tower lies at the west end of the south aisle, rather than in line with the axis of the church and may indicate an earlier form of the church once existed. The chancel is early 14th century in date and the nave and aisles date to the mid-14th century. Inside there is a 13th century font. The war memorial cross was the first World War Two memorial to be erected in Britain and was unveiled by King George VI in 1946. Two sherds of medieval pottery have been found during grave digging in the churchyard of St Mary's in 2005 (NHER 42844). A possible quern stone or socket for a door/gate hinge or perhaps a mortar was recovered to the east of the church in 2008 (NHER 52507).
- 3.6 The English Heritage listed building entry (list entry number 1077807) has the following description;
 - 3.6.1 *TF 73 SE BIRCHAM GREAT BIRCHAM 7/17 Church of St. Mary. 5.6.53. - 1 Parish Church. C12 tower door, C13 north door, early C14 chancel, mid C14 nave and aisles. Knapped and rubble flint, cement rendered chancel, slate roofs. South west tower, 4 bay nave and aisles, north porch, 2 bay chancel. 3 stage tower on axis with south aisle has ashlar plinth, string*

courses, and buttresses with set offs. Ground floor stage has 2-light Decorated window with tracery head, rectangular lancets at south-east angle to internal stair- case. 4 lancets to second stage. Bell chamber has 4 2-light Decorated tracery windows with flat parapet cornice above. Nave west gable has fine 5-light Perpendicular tracery window with lower battlemented transoms and rich upper lights with transoms, cusping and sub-cusping, label moulding with carved head end stops. South aisle has 3 straight-headed Decorated 3-light tracery windows in deep reveals with richly cusped and sub-cusped opposed tracery spandrels. Decorated south door. South aisle east window has flowing tracery with 2 cinquefoils and 2 quatrefoils in spandrels. 2 south and one east buttresses. North aisle has one Perpendicular 2-light west window. 2 north 3-light and one east 2-light Decorated windows with same details as south aisle. Perpendicular north porch has chamfered outer arch with capitals, flanking flush work arches. 2 north, one east and west buttresses with set offs. 3 flush work ogee headed niches above. Kneelers with crocketed spirelets. 2 north and 2 south tracery windows. Chancel has one south and 2 north c.1300 'Y' tracery 2 light windows, one south Perpendicular 3-light window. 5-light Perpendicular east window replacement of c.1850. Angle buttresses. Interior: North porch north door C13 has paired columns with bases and capitals, richly moulded pointed arch. North and south sides articulated by rectangular chamfered frame with blank shields springing from wall seats, with two outer and one inner blank arched headed niches. Fine 4 bay north and south Decorated nave arcade has 3 clustered semi-columns with angle fillets and chamfered hollows with base seats. Moulded capitals and bases. Double hollow chamfered arches and half columns responds with same details at east and west. North and south doors have label head mouldings. Fine late Norman c.1200 tower east door into south aisle has single colonnettes with capitals and zig zag moulded arch refashioned presumably later as pointed arch. South aisle piscina. Octagonal C13 Purbeck marble font set on C15 Perpendicular shaft with moulded pedestal and capital, octagonal plinth. Hexagonal C17 pulpit with arched carved panels and cherub heads in spandrels, C18 wooden stairs with carved string and Gothick arched head tracery between balusters. Pre-Reformation stone altar mensa with consecration crosses set in floor in front. C.1850 box-pews with poppyhead bench ends. C.1850 nave and aisle roofs. C.1850 west window stained glass with texts. Fine Decorated chancel arch with moulded bases and capitals, with lower and upper rood stair doors. C15 rood screen, 7 lights. Painted lower panels, tracery dado and upper lights. Blocked C15 north door and blocked north-east window. North and south 'Y' tracery windows have internal hood moulds, on south with stained glass arms of Clare family, C14 patrons. C15 sedilia, 3 seats with carved spandrel and cinquefoil heads. Piscina. C17 Holy Table with "Donum GY 1640". C.1850 4 bay roof with carved wooden corbel heads to wall posts.

- 3.7 The Old Rectory (NHER 17009) lies to the north of the church. The current house dates mostly from the 1830s. It has elements from a previous building dating to 1608, which itself contains medieval bricks from an even earlier building.

4.0 Geology and Topography

- 4.1 Great Bircham lies on a solid geology of the Upper Chalk series bordering Lower and Middle Chalk to the west with areas of overlying Boulder Clays and Norwich Brickearth (Funnell 2005). The Soil Landscape is that of the Good Sands (Williamson 2005).
- 4.2 St Mary's Church is situated to the south of Stanhoe Road and northeast of Church Lane in Great Bircham village at an elevation of c. 62m OD.

5.0 Observations

- 5.1 Monitoring was carried out between 19 March 2014 and 02 June 2014 during excavations associated with the installation of the new surface water drainage system (Fig. 2). Deposits were scanned with a metal detector, only modern finds were present. No context numbers were

allocated due to the lack of significant archaeological remains. Trenches for the new drains measured c. 0.3m wide and inspection chambers measured c. 1m by 1m. Human skeletal remains were retained at the church for reburial.

- 5.2 Site conditions were good and access was gained from Stanhoe Road to the north of the church. The weather remained dry and bright.
- 5.3 Trenches to the north of the church were excavated to a maximum depth of 0.7m beneath present ground level removing c. 0.3m of mid- to dark-grey brown sandy loam topsoil with occasional small-sized subangular flints and light- to mid-brown clayey loam subsoil with rare small-sized subangular flints, the full extent of which was not reached. A total of 28 fragments of disarticulated human bone were recovered from subsoil deposits.
- 5.4 Trenches to the south of the church were excavated to a maximum depth of 0.7m beneath present ground level removing c. 0.3m of mid- to dark-grey brown sandy loam topsoil with occasional small-sized subangular flints and light- to mid-brown clayey loam subsoil with rare small-sized subangular flints, the full extent of which was not reached (*Plate 1*). A total of 35 fragments of disarticulated human bone were recovered from subsoil deposits. No indications of foundations were observed.

Plate 1. Example of a drainage trench, looking approximately southwest



- 5.5 Excavations for 4 soakaways each measured c. 1.8m by 1.8m to a depth of c. 1.8m beneath present ground level (*Plate 2*). Initially, c. 0.3m of mid- to dark-grey brown sandy loam topsoil with occasional small-sized subangular flints was removed that overlay c. 0.6m of light- to mid-brown clayey loam subsoil with rare small-sized subangular flints. Subsoil overlay light-

brown/orange sandy clay undisturbed 'natural' deposits, the full extent of which was not reached. A total of 83 fragments of human bone were recovered from subsoil deposits.

Plate 2. Example of a soakaway during excavation, looking northwest



6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 Despite the potential for archaeological remains to have been present, in particular possible earlier elements of the church to the south of the south aisle, none were observed during groundworks associated with the installation of a new rain water drainage system at St Mary's Church. The precise reasons for this are unknown, any archaeological remains may be located beyond the minimally excavated areas.
- 6.2 No specific information was gained from the small quantity of human bone recovered during the excavations due to the fragmentary nature of the remains. They are typically found in churchyards and are the result of the disturbance of earlier graves through successive grave digging over centuries of use.

Acknowledgments

The project was undertaken by Chris Birks on behalf of Great Bircham Parochial Church Council who also funded the work. Fieldwork was undertaken by Chris Birks and John Simmons and the report was written by Chris Birks.

Many thanks to Ruth Blackman at Birdsall, Swash & Blackman Limited and to Mr Michael Lancefield, Great Bircham Parochial Church Council.

Thanks to Anj Beckham, Alice Cattermole and Heather Hamilton at the Norfolk Historic and Environment Record office based at Gressenhall. Thanks also to James Albone, David Gurney, Ken Hamilton, Kelly Powell, Andrew Rogerson and David Robertson at the Norfolk County Council Historic Environment Service.

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Appendix 1 OASIS Record

OASIS ID: [chrisbir1-207733](#)

Project details

Project name	WB at St Mary's Church, Great Bircham
Short description of the project	Archaeological monitoring at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham' during groundworks associated with the installation of a new surface water drainage system did not reveal any archaeological remains.
Project dates	Start: 19-03-2014 End: 02-06-2014
Previous/future work	Not known / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	ENF133777 - HER event no.
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Other 4 - Churchyard
Monument type	CHURCH Medieval
Monument type	CHURCHYARD Post Medieval
Monument type	CHURCHYARD Modern
Significant Finds	HUMAN BONE Uncertain
Investigation type	"Watching Brief"
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPS

Project location

Country	England
Site location	NORFOLK KINGS LYNN AND WEST NORFOLK BIRCHAM St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk
Study area	180.00 Square metres
Site coordinates	TF 77050 32601 52.8613466683 0.630282429469 52 51 40 N 000 37 49 E Point

Project creators

Name of Organisation	Chris Birks
Project brief originator	Local Authority Archaeologist and/or Planning Authority/advisory body
Project design originator	Chris Birks
Project director/manager	Chris Birks
Project supervisor	Chris Birks
Type of sponsor/funding body	Parochial Church Council

Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Digital Archive Exists?	No
Paper Archive recipient	Norfolk Museums Service
Paper Archive ID	ENF133777
Paper Contents	"none"
Paper Media available	"Map","Plan","Report","Unpublished Text"
Paper Archive notes	Report includes colour digital images

Project bibliography

1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief at 'St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk'
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Birks, C.
Other bibliographic details	Report Number CB323R
Date	2015
Issuer or publisher	Chris Birks
Place of issue or publication	Contractor's Report
Description	Bound A4 single-side printed report with text, site location map, site plan drawing and colour digital images

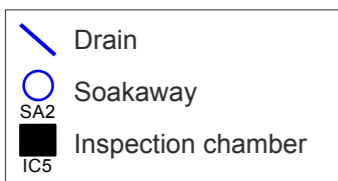
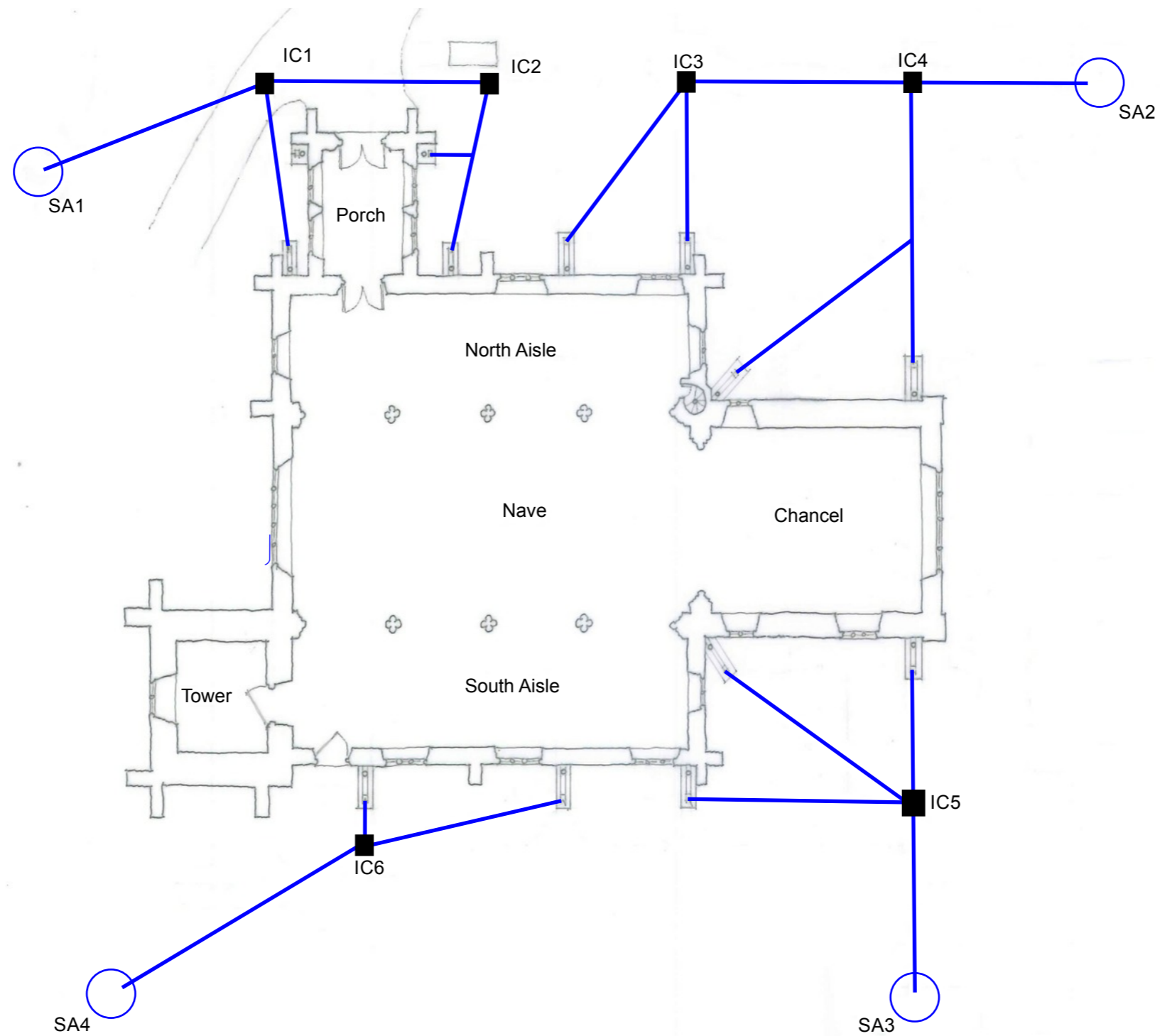
Entered by	Chris Birks (chris@chrisbirksarchaeology.co.uk)
Entered on	31 March 2015

OASIS:

Please e-mail [Historic England](#) for OASIS help and advice

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Chris Birks Archaeological Services - Urban & Rural

St Mary's Church, Great Bircham, Norfolk

Scale 1:200

Report Number CB323R

Based on a drawing kindly provided by Ruth Blackman

Figure 2. Site plan