

WATCHING BRIEF  
AT  
St PETER'S CHURCH, POWICK,  
WORCESTERSHIRE

Angus Crawford

Illustrated by Carolyn Hunt

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Project P2714  
Report 1428  
WSM 34319



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## Archaeological watching brief at St. Peters Church, Powick, Worcestershire

**Angus Crawford**

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### Background information

<i>Client</i>	St. Peter's, Parish Parochial Council
<i>Site address</i>	St. Peter's Church, Powick, Worcestershire
<i>National Grid reference</i>	SO83445152
<i>Sites and Monuments Record reference</i>	WSM34319
<i>Planning authority</i>	Diocesan Advisory Committee
<i>Project parameters</i>	IFA 2001

### *Previous archaeological work on the site*

A previous watching brief within the grounds of the St Peter's Church was undertaken in 2001 during trenching for a storm water drain and soakaway (WSM30538, Lockett 2001). This brief identified reworked soils containing fragments of brick, tile and human bone. The artefacts suggested continued disturbance from the medieval until the modern period. No *in situ* human burials were revealed due to the limited depth and width of trenching, although the reworked soils were identified as potential grave fills.

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### Aims

The aim of the watching brief was to record archaeological remains exposed during the removal of an area of Victorian wooden pews and associated decayed flooring, dating from 1841.

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### Methods

General specification for fieldwork	CAS 1995
Sources consulted	Historic Environment Record Cheetham 1971 Lockett 2001 Pevsner 1992
Date of fieldwork	7 <sup>th</sup> –8 <sup>th</sup> April 2005
Area of site	c 11.74m <sup>2</sup>
Dimensions of areas observed	Timber Floor    5.06m 2.32 m Burial Vault    length 2.15m width 2.00m depth 1.81m

### *Access and visibility*

Observation of the area was undertaken during and after the removal, by hand, of the affected floor area. The exposed floor beams were recorded in plan as well as by digital photography. Surfaces were sufficiently clean to observe the building fabric as well as archaeological deposits, though any less clear may not have been identified.

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*Statement of confidence*

Access to, and visibility of deposits allowed a high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved.

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**Summary description of structures**

Context	Description	Date	Interpretation
100	Oak flooring frame work (joists and crossbeams).	1841.	Original oak flooring framework , believed to have been built in 1841.
101	Oak banister rail	Post 1841.	Reused stair or railing banister utilised, post 1841 for bracing decayed flooring.
102	Óak bannister rail	Post 1841.	Reused Stair or railing banister utilised, post 1841 for bracing decayed flooring.
103	Brick, underground burial vault. Brick coursing in English garden style. Brick faces are 115mm long and 70mm deep. All surfaces have been white-washed.	No later than 1838.	Large Victorian family burial vault. Containing a single coffin internment of Sarah France. Constructed around 1838. East-west width of 215cms, north –south width of 200 cms and height of 181 cms.
104	Sandstone capstones.	Prior to construction of timber floor in 1841.	Burial vault capstones of contemporary date to 103
105	Victorian Coffin	No later than 30 <sup>th</sup> of January 1838.	Coffin of traditional shape made of nested boxes of wood and lead.
106	Partial masonry foundation	c12th C	Possible foundation of original south wall of Norman church.

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**Discussion**

The church of St Peter at Powick has fabric dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century (Cheetham 1971, 189-190; Pevsner 1992, 245). A watching brief was undertaken during the removal of timber flooring in the Nave to identify any evidence of previous medieval alterations or evidence of earlier foundations that could assist with interpreting the various changes to the church's fabric (Figs 1 and 2).

The removal of the timber flooring and associated church pews in the southwest area of the Nave revealed a severely deteriorated structural timber framework. Some joists were in extremely poor condition with evidence of rot and deathwatch beetle infestation, indeed preservation was so poor that a main bearer was almost totally decayed (Plate 1). The floor was evidently repaired at some stage between 1841 and the present work. These included the reuse of a banister to replace decayed joists rails (contexts 101 and 102; Fig 3). Brick and stonework had also been used to support the timber bearers on an east west axis through the centre of the exposed area. This appeared to have been undertaken at the same time as the repairs incorporating the reused banister rails. The rails had been used as a method to brace the already weakened timbers. Further brick and stonework at the north, west and southern extremity was to support the chamfered timber framework and floor joists for the 1841 flooring.

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Removal of the floor exposed a large flat rectangular slab of sandstone close to the central aisle (Plate 2). The idea that this indicated a small tomb or family burial vault was confirmed by shining an electric torch through a gap in the stonework, which revealed a sizeable void. After discussions with the County Archaeologist it was decided to enter the tomb to check its structural integrity and, while doing this, record and identify any interments present.

The vault was solidly constructed in brick with a barrel-vaulted roof, excluding the area covered by the capstone. The vault itself measured 2 metres from north to south, 2.15 meters east to west and its height from floor to capstone was 1.81 metres. The bricks were of a size produced after the introduction of the brick tax of 1784, which resulted in brick makers increasing the thickness of bricks to a minimum of 3 inches. The brick courses were of English Garden Wall bond with flush pointing and a whitewash finish. The base of the vault was also brick paved.

The vault contained a single coffin lying on an east west axis (Plate 3). The coffin would have been an expensive one for the period, as it was manufactured utilizing a three-layered construction method, incorporating a sealed lead box with an outer and inner woodwork. The damp environment of the vault had caused the outer woodwork to fall away revealing the lead beneath it. The lead had also suffered from the damp within the vault, becoming oxidised and collapsing inwards in parts to reveal the inner woodwork (Plate 4). The decay of the outer woodwork had caused the side mounted decoration and coffin furniture to fall off. One handle was recovered and consisted of an ornate pressed metal backing plate with remains of gilding on both it and the attached metal handle. (Plate 5).

A coffin plate (*depositum* plate) of shield form was still *in situ* on the coffin lid. It was well preserved, engraved and legible and recorded the death of Sarah the wife of Thomas France who died on January 30<sup>th</sup> in 1838 aged 39 (Plate 6). This date confirmed the inferred construction date for the vault of between 1784 and 1841, taken from the brick morphology and the construction date for the pews and timber flooring.

Two large pieces of timber lay *in situ* directly below the capstone on the floor of the vault and were probably placed there at the time of the burial to support the coffin when it was lowered directly down from above (Plate 7). This would not only reduce the noise when the coffin was lowered to the floor but would make it easier to move the coffin into its final position.

Further inspection of the exposed area directly under the removed timber floor revealed the possibility of further vaults. The exposed area had an undulating surface that could indicate the presence of more barrel-vaulted structures. Further, the stone and brickwork at the western end of the opened area appear to have integrated arches within the fabric of the construction (Fig 4). This would indicate that there are, potentially, further vaults outside of the area of the watching brief.

Knowing the identity of the deceased and recognising that the timber and lead coffin within a large and well-constructed vault indicated a expensive and high status burial, the church was searched to locate any wall mounted memorial plaque referring to Sarah France. A white marble scroll-shaped memorial, matching the details was located high on the north side nave (Plate 8). However the bulbous scroll style of the plaque made the stone almost impossible to read from floor level and was still difficult to read when viewed from the top of two-meter ladder (Plate 9). The plaque referred to a vault beneath its location showing that it had not moved from its intended placement. This may indicate that a display of wealth through expense over rode consideration of a more visible memorial. The memorial revealed further details about Sarah France's life revealing that she had lived at Ham Hill Cottage, Powick.

Potential evidence of a wall replaced by the construction of the south aisle was observed. This consisted of a low course of mortared rubble stone at the base of one of the south nave columns (Plate 10). The small amount of stonework appeared to be integral to the colonnade but it cannot be ruled out that it is a later addition or that it is associated with an earlier floor structure predating the current timber flooring. Further investigation would be required to clarify this feature if the area of flooring to be replaced is increased

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## Conclusions

The watching brief ensured that the Victorian pews and floor were recorded to an appropriate standard. It also led to two interesting discoveries with significant implications.

While the watching brief identified the possibility of a masonry structure associated with the earliest development of the church, the scant remains make it essential that any further work in the area should be monitored so that the structure can be more conclusively identified and dated.

The discovery of the burial vault strongly suggests that others exist within the Church. This possibility should be taken into consideration in any future internal groundworks.

The fact that the burial could be identified also opens potential areas for further research into the life of Sarah France. Record office searches for various birth, marriage and death certificates may provide information on areas such as cause of death, children if any and information about Sarah France's husband Thomas. As the vault and coffin type indicate a family with considerable wealth research may also reveal if this is reflected in their property or business.

In summary the watching brief has potentially identified earlier foundations of the building and revealed a small window into local burial practises during the Victorian period. It has also resulted in further avenues of research that may reveal a clearer picture about society, status and the social economics of Powick during the Victorian period

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## Publication summary

The Service has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, the Service intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

*A watching brief was undertaken on behalf of St Peter's, Parish Parochial Council at St Peter's Church, Powick, Worcestershire (NGR ref SO83445152; SMR ref WSM 34319). Phases of work undertaken to the Church floor were identified from 1841 and subsequent latter repairs. A possible 12<sup>th</sup> century wall foundation, at the southern extent of the watching brief was also observed but requires further research to clarify the date and nature of the deposit.*

*A burial vault below the timber floor was identified and entered to investigate its structural stability and to identify any potential internments. The vault contained a single coffin dating to 1838 and containing the remains of Sarah France. Further investigation of the church revealed a stone memorial to the deceased and closer inspection of the under timber-floor area revealed the possibility of further crypts within the church.*

*Masonry remains were also identified that may date to the initial construction of the church, however further work would be required clarify their date in relation to the church fabric.*

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## Archive

Fieldwork progress records AS2	1
Abbreviated context records AS40	2
Drawings	2
Computer disks	1

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The project archive is intended to be placed at:

telephone

Worcestershire County Museum  
Hartlebury Castle, Hartlebury  
Near Kidderminster  
Worcestershire DY11 7XZ  
01299 250416

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### **Acknowledgements**

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Plate 1: Decayed main bearer supported by brick work (Facing north)



Plate 2: Burial vault capstone and entrance (Facing west)

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Plate 3: Over shot of coffin (Facing east)

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Plate 4: Decay of coffin caused by damp vault conditions (Facing north)



Plate 5: Gilded coffin handle (Facing north)

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Plate 6: Coffin plate engraved 'Sarah the Wife of Thomas France, Died Jan(uary) 30<sup>th</sup> 1838 aged 39 Years'.

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Plate 7: Detail of one of two parallel position timbers placed on the floor to receive the coffin when originally lowered into the vault (Facing west)

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Plate 8: Location of memorial plaque to Sarah France.

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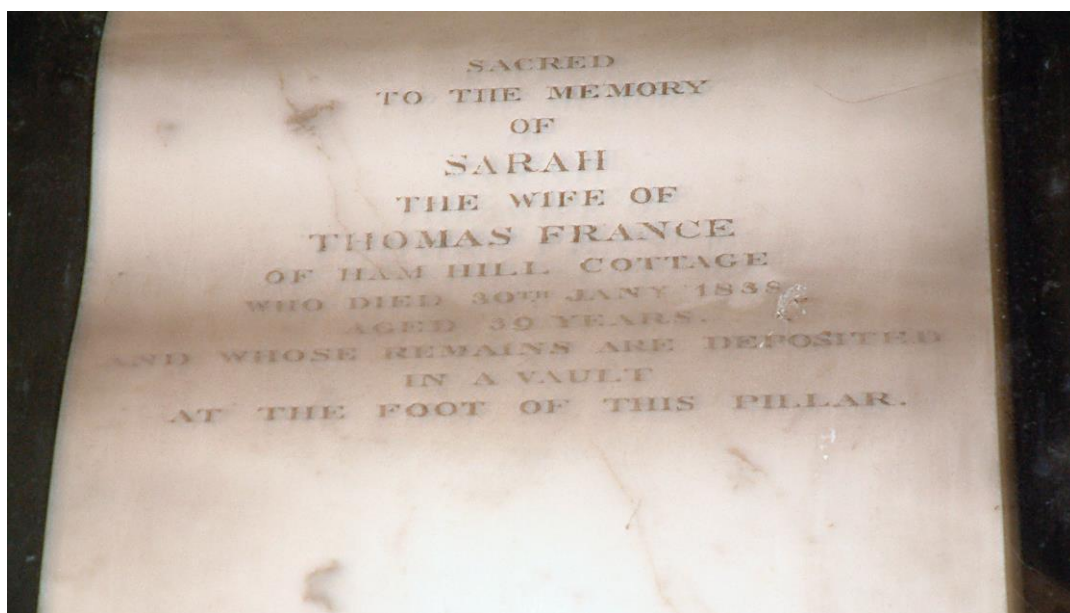


Plate 9: Sarah Frances' memorial plaque.

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Plate 10: Base of nave column with possible earlier wall foundation at lower left corner (Facing south)

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