

Archaeological watching brief at St John's Church, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire.



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Status: Version 1
Date: 17 March 2017
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Project reference: P5015
Report reference: 2422
HER reference: WSM 68499
Oasis id: Fieldsec1-279632

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Archaeological watching brief at St John's Church, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire

Andrew Mann

With contributions by Jane Evans and Carolyn Hunt

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on behalf of St John's Church Bromsgrove, Worcestershire (NGR SO 95697 70672; HER ref WSM 68499). The watching brief related to the excavation of drainage works. During the watching brief the foundation of the church's northern aisle was recorded, and these remains illustrate its three phases of development. Few articulated burials were located close to the church, but within the graveyard large numbers of burials were encountered. These were located c 1.10m below the current ground surface and were stacked between 3–4 individuals deep.

Report

1 Background

1.1 Reasons for the project

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at St John's Church, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, (NGR 395697 270672; Fig 1). It was commissioned by John Jackson, The Treasurer of St John's Church. The watching brief focussed on the construction of drainage and soakaways along the northern side of the church. A faculty was obtained from the Diocese of Worcester for the works.

The church is considered to include heritage assets and potential heritage assets, the significance of which may be affected by the works. These assets would relate to the church (WSM 01365) which may have early medieval origins as a minster (WSM 19680). The project conforms to a brief prepared by the Planning Advisory Section of Worcestershire County Council (WCC 2016), and for which a Written Scheme of Investigation was produced (WA 2017).

The project also conforms to *Standard and guidance: Archaeological watching brief* (ClfA 2014a), *Standards and guidelines for archaeological projects in Worcestershire* (WCC 2010).

2 Aims

The aim and scope of the project are given in the brief (WCC 2016, section 3) and are in accordance with "to record and advance understanding of the significance of any heritage assets to be lost (wholly or in part) in a manner proportionate to their importance and the impact, and to make this evidence (and any archive generated) publicly accessible" (National Planning Policy Framework, DCLG 2012).

More specifically the watching brief will aim to:

- Monitor all ground works associated with the improvements to the drainage on the north side of the church and to excavate and record any archaeological remains including graves/human remains that will be damaged or removed by these works.

The brief indicates that significant deposits may be defined as those likely to be of medieval and post-medieval date.

In particular the project will have the following research aims, as identified in *The archaeology of the West Midlands: a framework for research* (Watt 2011).

- Attempt, within the facility made available by the drainage ground works, to identify the presence or absence of an earlier minster, which is a question small-scale, trenches might address (*ibid*, 2011). This is particularly significant as the brief indicates that the church is in the precinct of a former minster.

3 Methods

3.1 Personnel

The project was led by Andrew Mann (BA (hons); MSc), who joined Worcestershire Archaeology in 2004 and has been practicing archaeology since 2001. The project manager responsible for the quality of the project was Simon Woodiwiss (BA (hons)). Illustrations were prepared by Carolyn Hunt (BSc (hons)), Jane Evans (BA, MA, MCIfA) contributed the finds report.

3.2 Documentary research

Prior to fieldwork commencing a search was made of the Historic Environment Record (HER).

3.3 List of additional sources consulted

Cartographic sources

- OS map 1884, Worcestershire Sheet XV.SE (six inch to 1 mile)
- OS map 1903, Worcestershire Sheet XV.SE (six inch to 1 mile)
- OS map 1929, Worcestershire Sheet XV.SE (six inch to 1 mile)
- OS map 1938, Worcestershire Sheet XV.SE (six inch to 1 mile)

3.4 Fieldwork strategy

A detailed specification has been prepared by Worcestershire Archaeology (WA 2016).

Fieldwork was undertaken between 19 January and 10 February 2017. The site reference number used by the Historic Environment Record to record archaeological "events", and site code used in the archive is WSM 68499.

A number of narrow pipe trenches were excavated along the northern side of the church that connected to a large trench to the north in a grassed area surrounded by tarmac paths and an access road (Figs 1 and 2). The pipe trenches amounted to 22.30m² in area, and the larger trench amounted to 13.60m² in area.

Deposits considered not to be significant were removed using a 360° tracked excavator, employing a toothless bucket and under archaeological supervision. Subsequent excavation was undertaken by hand. Clean surfaces were inspected and selected deposits were excavated to retrieve artefactual material and environmental samples, as well as to determine their nature. Deposits were recorded according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012).

The initial drainage plan was to excavate a new French drain down along the northern side of the church which would connect to two new soakaways to be located in the northern grassed area. The drains and soakaway number 1 were excavated to the required depth without encountering significant archaeological deposits, however when soakaway 2 was excavated a number of burials were encountered that would have required excavating to attain the required depth to insert a second soakaway. Upon discussion with the DAC advisor (Victoria Bryant), John Jackson (St John's Church Treasurer) and Simon Woodiwiss (WA project manager) it was decided that a more appropriate solution could be found to protect significant archaeological deposits. It was subsequently decided that soakaway 2 would be abandoned and the new French drain would also be connected to an existing drain, after repair, running from the church to the west.

Prior to the drainage design being changed a number of skeletons were excavated to establish the complexity and density of the graveyard. These were not fully analysed and reburied during the reinstatement of the soakaway trench.

3.5 Structural analysis

All fieldwork records were checked and cross-referenced. Analysis was effected through a combination of structural, artefactual and ecofactual evidence, allied to the information derived from other sources.

3.6 Artefact methodology, by Jane Evans

The finds work reported here conforms with the following guidance: for findswork by ClfA (2014b), for archive creation by AAF (2011) and for museum deposition by SMA (1993).

3.6.1 Artefact recovery policy

The artefact recovery policy conformed to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012; appendix 2).

3.6.2 Method of analysis

All hand-retrieved finds were examined, being identified, quantified and dated to period. A *terminus post quem* date was produced for the single context that produced finds. All information was

recorded on a *pro forma* Access database table. No artefacts were recovered from environmental samples.

The pottery and ceramic building material was examined macroscopically and referenced as appropriate to the fabric reference series maintained by Worcestershire Archaeology (Hurst and Rees 1992 and www.worcestershireceramics.org).

3.7 Environmental archaeology methodology

3.7.1 Sampling policy

Sampling is undertaken according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012), however not deposits were encountered that were deemed suitable for environmental analysis.

4 The application site

4.1 Topography, geology and archaeological context

The church (Plate 1) sits at c 95m AOD on a sandstone hill (Bromsgrove Sandstone Formation) overlooking the town to the east at c. 85m AOD. Around the base of the hill on the east, south and west are alluvial and superficial sand and gravel deposits of the Holt Heath Member.

The present church dates from the 12th century although it is suggested that an earlier minster may exist at this location due to the similarity of this location to other known minster sites. Although some elements of the church date to the 12th century the building is predominantly of 14th-15th century date.

4.2 Current land-use

A graveyard still surrounds the church although it stopped receiving new burials in 1850.

5 Structural analysis

The trenches and features recorded are shown in Figures 1-2.

5.1.1 Phase 1: Natural deposits

Natural deposits, from light pinkish red sand and gravels (116), were only encountered in the soakaway trench at c 1.25m below ground surface (bgs). The pipe trenches to the south along the wall of the church were only excavated to c 0.70-85m below ground surface and natural was not encountered.

5.1.2 Phase 2: Medieval

The only confirmed medieval deposits encountered were the foundations of the church's northern aisle, which were exposed in all the pipe trenches abutting the church. Three phases of construction were identified. The first phase is thought to be foundations of the northern transept (110) which was recorded in bay 2 (Plate 2). Only a 1.50m length, including the western corner of the transept was visible as the eastern side had been hidden by buttress 3 or had been truncated by the foundations of the later aisles. The transept was constructed of uneven coursed blocks of red and grey sandstone of the Bromsgrove Sandstone Formation (the local resource). These had been bonded with a gritty cream lime mortar, in beds 20–50mm thick. The sandstone blocks rested on sandstone rubble foundations (114) that only extend for 50mm beyond the limits of the wall. The full depth of these foundations was not established. The northern face of the transept was aligned 2 degrees off the face of the aisles, and protruded a further c 200mm to the north than the face of the northern aisle.

To the west of the transept the foundations (105) and lower courses of the western side of the northern aisle (107) were recorded in bays 3 and 4. These consisted of large sandstone rubble blocks over which were lain regularly coursed sandstone blocks bonded with gritty cream lime

mortar 20–50mm thick (Plates 3 and 4). The depth of the foundations was not established during the watching brief, but they were a minimum of 0.40m thick and extended a maximum of 0.32m out from the northern face of the wall. The lower two courses of wall consisted of lower course of flat faced blocks (0.20m thick) sitting on the rubble foundations overlain by a chamfered course of sandstone blocks (0.18m thick). Above the chamfered course was another course of sandstone blocks (0.26m thick) which was in turn overlain by a sandstone string course which protruded from the face of the wall by 80mm. This arrangement of courses was consistent in both bays 3 and 4, however due to the natural topography of the site a second course of sandstone blocks had been added below the chamfered course in bay 4 to keep the coursing level. The current external floor level around the northern side of the church was at the same level of as the top of the chamfered course of sandstone. This suggests that, as the lower chamfered stone course would have originally been visible, the ground level has risen over time and that the original ground level would have been between 0.18-0.38m lower. This also suggests that only the lower course of stone was originally below ground level.

In bays 1 and 2, to the east of the northern transept the foundations (104 and 109) and lower courses (106) of the eastern wall of the northern aisle were recorded. These varied in composition to bays 1 and 2. In bay 2 the foundations and wall butted up against and overlay the transept wall (110; Plate 2) and the wall of the northern aisle to the east did not contain the lower chamfered course seen to the west (Plates 2 and 5). One to four courses (below current ground surface), of flat faced sandstone blocks (regularly coursed), sat directly on the sandstone rubble foundations. These were overlain by large sandstone blocks which had been chamfered along the upper half and appeared to be at a similar height, although slightly higher, to the string course to the west of the aisle. In bay 1 the foundations rose considerably so that halfway along the bay the wall (106) lay directly onto a buried soil (113) only 0.12m below the current ground level (Plate 5).

5.1.3 Phase 3: Medieval to post medieval

To the north of the aisle a graveyard soil (102, 103 and 115) was observed in all the trenches. In the pipe trenches closest to the church this consisted of a mid-light brown, soft, coarse silty sand a minimum of 0.38m deep. The lighter colour and sandy nature of the soil closer to the church suggests it had not been reworked as much and did not contain as many burials as in the soakaway trench. There the graveyard soil (115) a dark brown, soft, silty sand was more humic and was between 0.50-1.10m thick. This had been sealed by redeposited natural (117) and red-deposited graveyard soil (118) which had probably both originated from the displacement of these layers during later, deeper, post-medieval burials.

The rarity of articulated skeletons and disarticulated skeletal remains in the pipe trenches also suggests this area had not been the focus of burial activity. Only two articulated skeletons (111) and (112) were seen in these trenches although the narrow width of the machine bucket did not make it easy to identify articulated remains. These skeletons were only partially seen in the northern baulks of the trenches in Bays 2 and 3, aligned east (head) to west (feet) between 0.45–0.60m below ground surface (Fig 2).

Articulated skeletons and disarticulated skeletal remains were more common inside the soakaway trenches in the grassed area to the north of the church. Approximately five boxes (45x27x18cm) of disarticulated skeletal remains were recovered from the soakaway trench and articulated remains were encountered at around 1.00–1.10m bgs. Only four partial skeletons (120, 128, 135, 138), were excavated during the watching brief before it was decided to alter the drainage design (Fig 2, Plates 6–9). All of the excavated skeletons were aligned roughly east to west and overlay each other within the lower 0.30–0.40m of the graveyard soil. Based on that density it was estimated that a minimum of 25 other articulated skeletons would be identified in the footprint of soakaway 2. It is difficult to date the skeletal remains as there was no associated coffin furniture or finds, although iron coffin handles (displaced) were found in the graveyard soil suggesting at least some of the skeletons were of post medieval date.

The eastern ends of the excavated skeletons had been truncated by a later grave cut (143) which had cut through the natural sands and gravels (Plate 10). The burial inside the cut was not encountered and was therefore a minimum of 1.50m bgs.

5.1.4 Phase 4: modern

The upper layers of the graveyard soil in Bays 1–4 had obviously been reworked recently, possibly during earlier drainage works along the northern side of the church. The upper 0.10–0.30m of the soil, a mid-orangey brown, coarse silty sand contained frequent post-medieval ceramics and glass.

5.2 Artefact analysis, by Jane Evans

The artefact assemblage is summarised in Tables 1 and 2. It included fragmentary building materials probably derived from the church (window glass, ceramic and stone tile) and a general assortment of 19th and 20th century rubbish (glass bottles, clay pipe fragments and pottery). All finds were derived from a single context; a graveyard soil close to the church (fill 101).

period	material class	material subtype	object specific type	count	weight(g)
post-medieval/modern	ceramic	earthenware	clay pipe	8	20
			pot	8	51
			roof tile	1	87
	glass	assorted green	bottle	21	1000
			pale green	window	16
	metal	iron	nail	1	44
stone	lias	roof tile	2	172	
undated	organic	coal	fragment	8	297

Table 1: Quantification of the assemblage

Building materials

A number of the finds are likely to derive from the structure of the church; pale green window glass, a fragment of ceramic roof tile, and two fragments of stone roof tile. A heavily corroded nail appeared to have lead sheet attached, so may also relate to roofing.

Pottery and glass vessels

The pottery assemblage (Table 2) comprised two sherds from late stoneware jars (Fabric 84.1), possibly Bristol Stoneware. These date broadly to the 19th to early 20th century. The remaining sherds were all modern china (Fabric 85), also broadly 19th to 20th century in date.

The glass comprised assorted fragments from mould made bottles in green glass, including hand applied lips. These all dated broadly to c 1820–1920. A number of fragments were embossed; one with 'Birmingham', one 'Northampton,' one 'Walsall' and one with the name 'Corbett and Co Bromsgrove' alongside a heraldic shield with a bird and an elephant.

Other finds

These comprised six stem fragments and two bowl fragments from clay pipes, all undiagnostic. These are not closely datable, but are likely to be contemporary with the other finds. The only other finds were fragments of coal and clinker.

broad period	fabric code	fabric common name	count	weight(g)
Modern	81.4	Miscellaneous late stoneware	2	19
	85	Modern china	6	32
total			8	51

Table 2: Quantification of the pottery by period and fabric-type

5.2.1 Site dating

context	material class	object specific type	count	weight(g)	period	start date	end date
101	ceramic	clay pipe	8	20	post-medieval/modern	1800?	1900
		pot	2	19		1800	1950
			6	32		1800	2000
		roof tile	1	87		1540	2000
	glass	bottle	21	1000		1820	1920
		window	16	109		1540	2000
	metal (fe)	nail	1	44		1540	2000
	stone	roof tile	2	172		1540?	2000
	organic	fragment	8	297	undated	undated	

Table 3: Summary of context dating based on artefacts grouped in phase order

5.3 Recommendations

5.4 Further analysis and reporting

No further work is required on these finds.

5.5 Discard and retention

The research value of the finds is believed not of sufficient significance as to warrant retention by a museum, though the museum has not confirmed this.

6 Synthesis

Although not analysed or dated it is probable that a significant proportion of the skeletons in the graveyard are of medieval to post-medieval date. These are densest 3m to the north of the church outside of paved areas which appear to contain fewer burials. This suggests some of the paths around the church may be of considerable age which may have dissuaded people from using

these areas for burial. Although only small the excavation in the grassed area has shown that burials are preserved well in the graveyard and in places are at stacked at least 4 deep.

The watching brief also confirmed that earlier remains of the church (the northern transept), which roughly aligns to the 1250 plan of the church (Henderson 2015, Fig 3) survive below the building in its current form. The western side of the northern aisle, the foundations of which were recorded in bays 3 and 4 are of 14th century date, while the eastern side of the northern aisle (bays 1 and 2) was built c 1478 (Henderson 2015). These alterations are visible in both the foundations and structure of the church, with the joint between the western and eastern sides of the northern aisle still visible on the upper wall in bay 3. The different window styles of the western and eastern sides of the northern aisle are however the more striking indication of the buildings phasing (Plate 1).

6.1 Research frameworks

The project had attempted to use the small trenches to identify remains of the earlier minster which is thought to have occupied the hill on which the church now stands. Such aims within the limits of small drainage works have been identified in *The archaeology of the West Midlands: a framework for research* (Watt 2011). Whereas the watching brief did not identify evidence for an earlier minister, it did however indicate that earlier building phases do survive below the church. Given the very shallow nature of the some of the foundations it is probable earlier structures also survive below the church. The watching brief also identified the level at which well-preserved earlier burials survive at in a number of areas in the churchyard. This information will be useful when considering future development within the churchyard.

7 Publication summary

Worcestershire Archaeology has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, Worcestershire Archaeology 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.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on behalf of John Jackson, the treasurer of St John's Church Bromsgrove, Worcestershire (NGR SO 95697 70672); HER ref WSM 68499). During the watching brief the foundations of the church's northern aisle was recorded and these remains illustrate its three phased development. Few articulated burials were located close to the church but within the graveyard large numbers of burials were encountered. These were located c. 1.10m below the current ground surface and were stacked between 3-4 individuals deep.

8 Acknowledgements

Worcestershire Archaeology would like to thank the following for their kind assistance in the successful conclusion of this project, John Jackson (St John's Church) and Victoria Bryant (WCC and DAC advisor).

9 Bibliography

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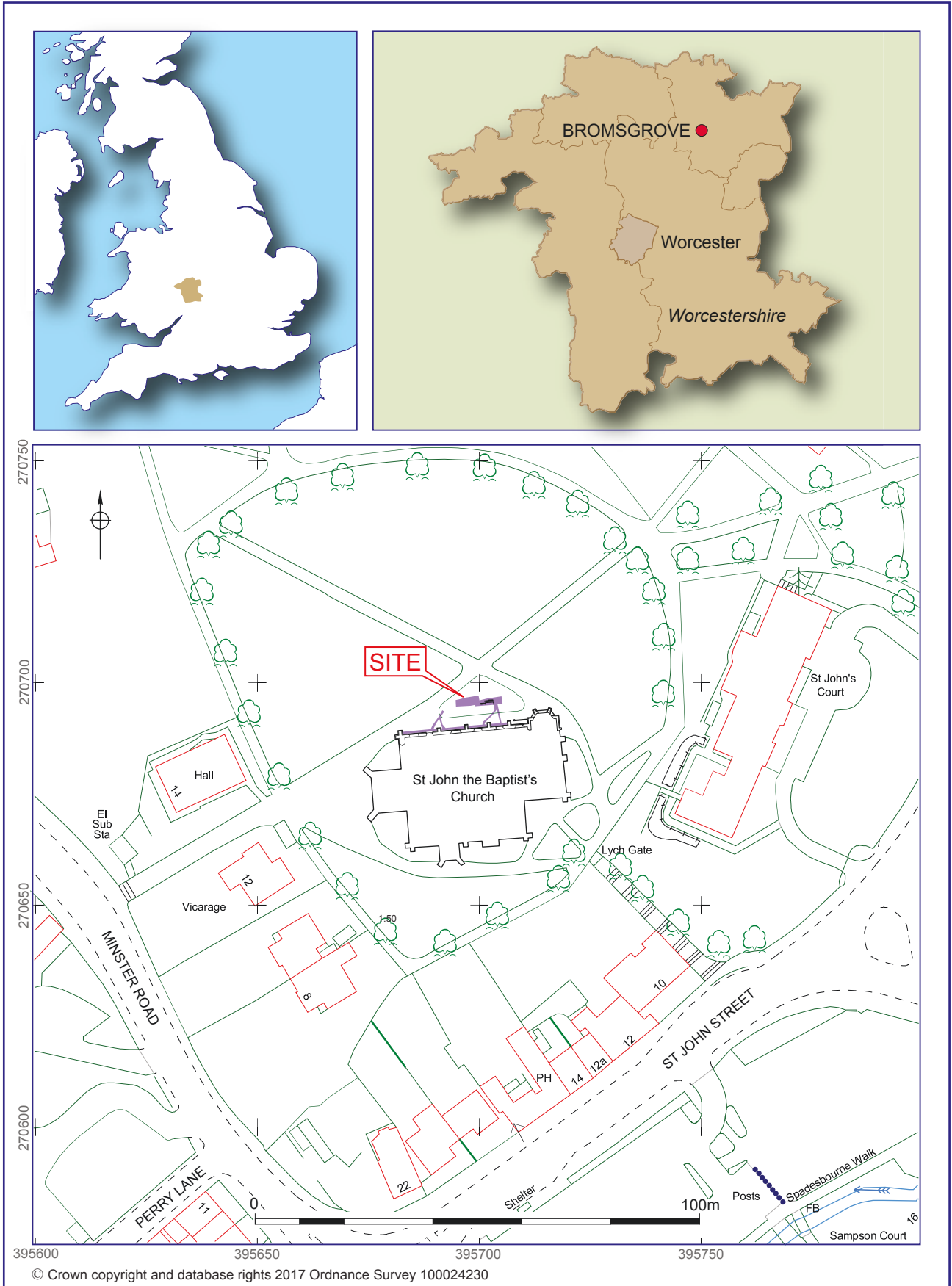
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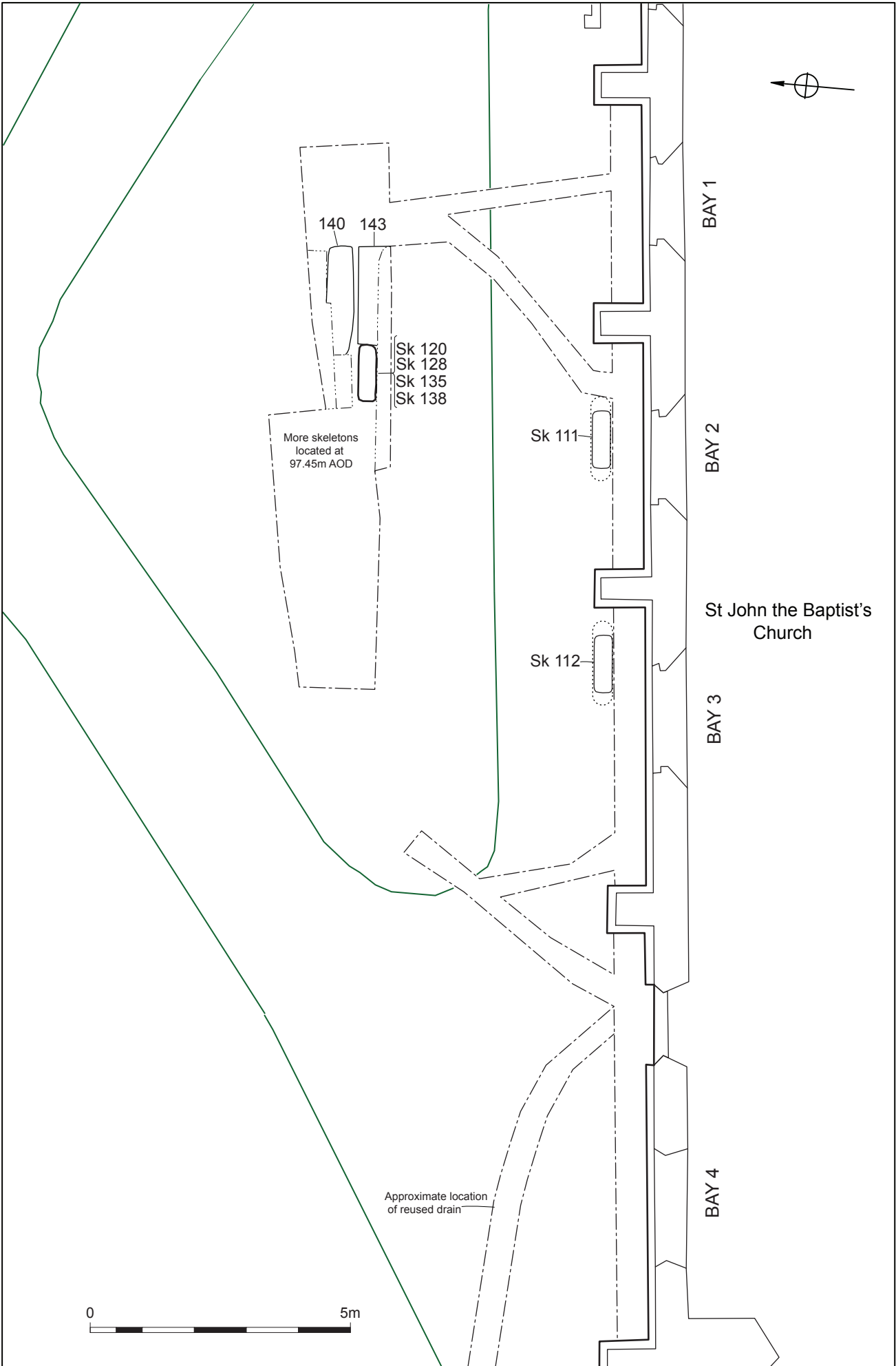
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Figures



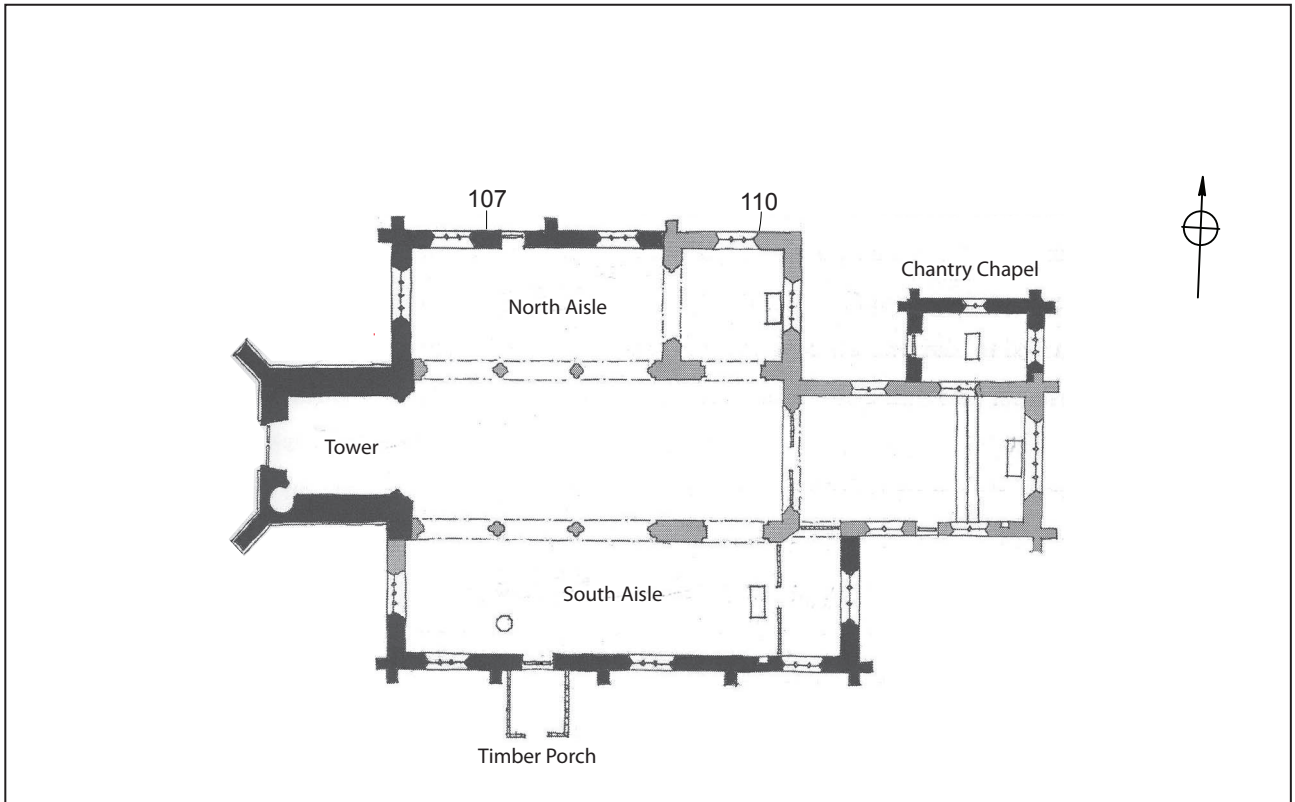
Location of the site

Figure 1



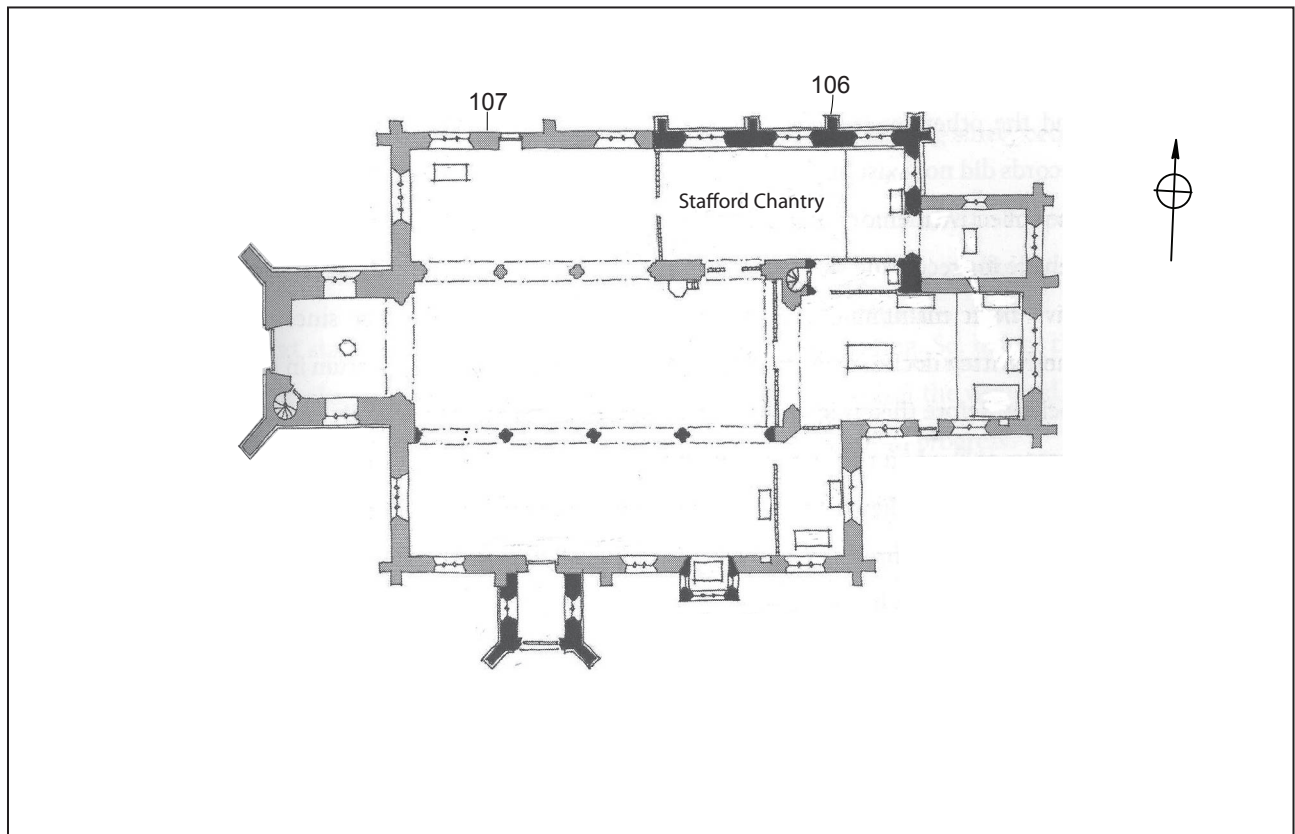
Plan of trench

Figure 2



Plan of St John the Baptist Church c.1380. Changes since 1250 are in black (from Henderson 2015, pp47)

Figure 3a



Plan of St John the Baptist Church c.1500. Changes since 1238 are in black (from Henderson 2015, pp79)

Figure 3b

Plates



Plate 1: The north side of St John's Church



Plate 2: Northern transept wall (110) in the western side of bay 2, 2x1m scales



Plate 3: Wall (107) and foundation rubble (108) in bay 4, 1m scale



Plate 4: Wall (107) and foundation rubble (105) in bay 3, 2x1m scale



Plate 5: Wall (106) and foundation rubble (109) in bay 1, 2x1m scale



Plate 6: Skeleton 120, 0.50m and 0.30m scales



Plate 7: Skeleton 128, 1.30m scales



Plate 8: Skeleton 135, 1m scale



Plate 9: Skeleton 138, 1m scale



Plate 10: Grave cut 143 to the east of SKs 120, 128, 135, and 138, 2x1m scales.

Appendix 1 Technical information

The archive (site code: WSM 68499)

The archive consists of:

39	Context records AS1
2	Field progress reports AS2
2	Photographic records AS3
119	Digital photographs
1	Drawing number catalogues AS4
11	Scale drawings
1	Context number catalogues AS5
5	Skeleton records AS6
1	Box of finds
1	CD-Rom/DVDs
1	Copy of this report (bound hard copy)

The project archive is intended to be placed at:

Worcestershire County Museum
Museums Worcestershire
Hartlebury Castle
Hartlebury
Near Kidderminster
Worcestershire DY11 7XZ
Tel Hartlebury (01299) 250416

Summary of data for Worcestershire HER

WSM 68499**P5015****Artefacts**

period (note 1)	material class	object specific type	start date	end date	count	weight(g)	specialist report? (note 2)	key assemblage? (note 3)
post-medieval/ modern	ceramic	clay pipe	1800?	1900	8	20	yes	no
		pot	1800	1950	2	19	yes	no
			1800	2000	6	32	yes	no
		roof tile	1540	2000	1	87	yes	no
	glass	bottle	1820	1920	21	1000	yes	no
		window	1540	2000	16	109	yes	no
	metal	nail	1540	2000	1	44	yes	no
	stone	roof tile	1540?	2000	2	172	yes	no
undated	organic	fragment	undated		8	297		no
