

Summary

A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services on the 17th September 201 for part of a trench that showed that burials were present. The excavation of a storm water drainage trench was necessary to take away rainwater collected by the church roof.

Two human burial deposits were observed in the trench during the ground-works. Both contained evidence for having been buried in coffins.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location

The church is located in the centre of the village of Checkendon, South Oxfordshire located at Grid reference SU66830 at approximately 65m OD.

Checkendon is a village and civil parish about 6 miles (10 km) west of Henley-on-Thames in South Oxfordshire and about 9 miles (14 km) north-west of Reading in Berkshire.

The underlying geology is sand and gravel of unknown origin but probably associated with the Older River Gravels according to the British Geological Survey maps of the area (BGS 1982).

1.2 Archaeological Background

The parish has a record of continuous settlement recorded for Checkendon since the 7th century. It is listed in the Domesday Book as Cecadene (Old English for "Ceaca's hill or hill-pasture").

The Church of England parish church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul is a 12th-century Norman building. All but one of the windows were replaced later in the Middle Ages with Decorated Gothic and Perpendicular Gothic ones, and the Perpendicular Gothic west tower is also a later addition. The building is Grade I listed.

The church has an early 13th century wall painting of Christ in Majesty above a procession of Apostles. The murals were faithfully repainted when they were rediscovered, but more recently this has been considered over-restoration.

2 STRATEGY

2.1 Research Design

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and section drawings compiled where appropriate and possible.

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994).

Figure 1: Location of Drainage Trench

2.2 Methodology

The excavation of part of the storm drain trench was carried out under the supervision of the archaeologist when it became apparent that burials were present within the impact level. The layers were excavated incrementally allowing the archaeologist to monitor the soil changes and/or the presence of archaeological features or burials.

Where burial deposits were exposed they were recorded, temporarily removed for safe keeping and then re-interred in the same place following the laying of the storm drain pipe.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in [] indicate features i.e. pit cuts; while numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

During the trench digging for the storm drain only two layers were recorded which were above the burials, a topsoil (101) around 0.10m deep and a subsoil (102) at 0.20m in depth. Both the top and sub soil were identified as being modern, heterogeneous 'graveyard' soils that had been constantly mixed as burials were added to the churchyard. It is normal that additional burials to churchyards result in them being continually re-modelled and re-landscaped as it evolves over time.

3.2 The Burial Deposits

During the excavation of the pipe trench only the skull of Skeleton 1 (104) was revealed but it was noted that it was an adult in the supine position aligned west-east. The presence of a coffin (105) was inferred from a number of coffin nails recovered from the mid-orange, brownish silty-clay fill (103). However, no other items of coffin furniture were observed or recovered. The grave cut [106] was only visible briefly in plan, so its full dimensions are conjectural.

A little further along the trench to the west the remains of Skeleton 2 (109) were identified as being those of an adult male. However, they were situated below the impact level of the pipe trench so were observed *in situ*. As such, they were not excavated and observation was made from the trench edge. This deposit also contained traces of a coffin as decorative lacework and a metal footplate were present in the fill (107). As with Skeleton 1, the dimensions and nature of the grave cut were conjectured from the measurements that could be made from the surface.

4 FINDS

No finds were retained from the archaeological layers (101) or (102) as they represent 'modern' layers of landscaping, made ground and 'mixed' graveyard soil as detailed earlier in the report.

A number of coffin nails were recovered from the fill (103) of Skeleton 1 but subsequently replaced with the burial.

None of the burials contained grave goods of any kind, or indeed any random finds or intrusive material that may have entered during the back filling phase of the burial or the collapse of their coffins.

5 DISCUSSION

As noted earlier in the report, the method of excavation was one of monitoring and supervision of the part of the trench digging. This methodology was adopted to ensure that the building contractors were not unnecessarily delayed before they could recommence work and that any human remains were dealt with respectfully before their re-interment in the churchyard.

The two Skeletons were recorded and, where they had been disturbed, re-interred in the same area from which they had come. Furthermore, the excavator ensured that they remained as intact as possible and that their integrity as a burial deposit was not compromised.

It should be noted that the human remains were barely 0.30m below the current churchyard ground surface. While it is relatively common to find infant burials at such a depth it is rare to find adults in such shallow burials.

No other burials were exposed in the rest of trench excavated by the contractors.

6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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