



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

AT

ST BLAISE, MILTON,

OXFORDSHIRE OX14 4EW

NGR SU 48536 92417

*On behalf of
PCC St Blaise Milton*

APRIL 2017

REPORT FOR PCC St Blaise Milton
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FIELDWORK 23rd, 28th February, 16th-17th, 22nd-24th, 27th March 2017

REPORT ISSUED 24th April 2017

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JMHS Project No: 3594
Site Code: MISB17
OASIS ID: johnmoor1-280899
Archive Location The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to Oxfordshire Museums Services with the accession number OXCMS: 2017.47



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SUMMARY

This document represents an investigation of the potential for archaeological remains at St. Blaise Church, Milton, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 48536 92417). In the north east corner of the extant North aisle, there was what appeared to be some of the remains of the 1817 north aisle extension which was subsequently replaced in the 1852 rebuild by E.G. Street (Tyack et al 2010:385). Also, an historic vaulted crypt to the west of the extant Ledger Stone located on the floor of the Nave was also located and recorded, but left otherwise undisturbed. Excavation of a service trench through the graveyard revealed 5 inhumations, which were recorded, lifted and reburied. In addition a series of gravel deposits thought to be associated with late 19th century alterations to the curtilage of the graveyard were recorded.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The development site is located within the Grade II* listed building of St. Blaise Church and its surrounding graveyard in Milton, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 48536 92417).

The site lies at approximately 60m AOD. The underlying geology is Summertown-Radley sand and gravel, superficial deposits formed up to 3 million years ago in the Quaternary Period. These rocks were formed from rivers depositing mainly sand and gravel detrital material in channels to form river terrace deposits, with fine silt and clay from overbank floods forming floodplain alluvium, and some bogs depositing peat; includes estuarine and coastal plain deposits mapped as alluvium.

1.2 Planning Background

The faculty proposed by the Oxfordshire Diocese to replace the floor and install drainage at St Blaise, Milton was approved by the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) in autumn of 2016. Due to the archaeological and historical importance of the structure, a condition was attached to the permission requiring an archaeological watching brief to be maintained during the course of building operations on the site.

1.3 Archaeological Background

The church's earliest reference is when John de Allecanygges was appointed by Edward II in July 1325 as the first rector of 'Middletune' (Davenport 1927). St. Blaise was adopted as the patron Saint by the wool combers, therefore the dedication of the church to St. Blaise is likely linked to the wool trade which was a staple trade of the area at that time and continued well into the 17th century, until the Civil War (1642-51) severely stunted the industry.

Of the original 14th century structure, only the timber south porch and the unbuttressed west tower remain (Tyack 2010: 385). The North Aisle (furthest from the main entrance) was first built in 1817 and is largely credited to 'Thomas Bowles Esq of Milton Hill' in the churchwarden's book. In 1849-51 the west end of the chancel was taken into the nave, and the chancel extended, by Henry Woodyer. In 1852, G.E. Street rebuilt the north aisle of 1817 and added the organ chamber (now the vestry) north of the chancel.

There are no records of what the earlier North Aisle looked like or its dimensions, however, it is rumoured to have been of poor quality, thus requiring the rebuild relatively soon after the original extension. Furthermore, little is known about the previous use of the church grounds which were used to accommodate the extension of the North Aisle. It is possible that it was used as burial ground making up part of the church's cemetery, though prior to excavation, no records were able to be found to confirm this hypothesis.

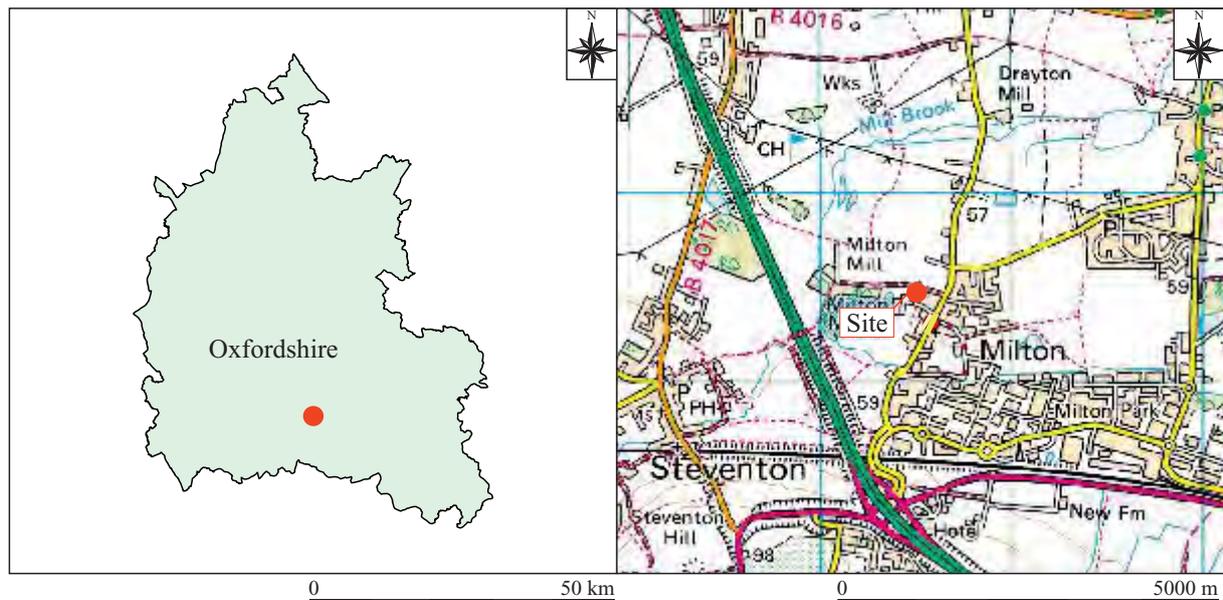


Figure 1: Site location

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The aims of the watching brief as laid out in the conditions were to:

- Monitor for evidence of structural evidence shedding light on any of the pre-existing architectural elements which might contribute further understanding of the various building phases and changes to the structure over time.

In particular:

- To assist in the identification and respectful handling of any human remains potentially associated with the previous use of the land by the church, and especially the area currently occupied by the 19th century extension of the North Aisle.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Methodology

Where archaeological horizons were encountered they were cleaned by hand and excavated appropriately. 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. A photographic record was also produced.

The resultant spoil from the works was visually scanned, especially for finds relating to early medieval through post-medieval activity and any human remains.

The first phase of work involved the removal of the extant floor surface within the interior of the nave and north aisle. The area impacted was approximately 9m wide and 11.5m long (see Figure 2).

This was followed by the excavation of a very shallow foundation to level the area for the new flooring and services for the building. The trenches were excavated down to a maximum depth of 0.32m below the floor surface in the south west corner (Plate 1). Four archaeological features were identified in the second phase of work; a crypt of 19th century construction, two cuts from previous architectural elements from earlier phases of the church, and a possible disturbed grave. The only finds were unstratified human remains within the surface deposit in the NE section of the church. These were all disarticulated and were redeposited and reburied *in situ*.

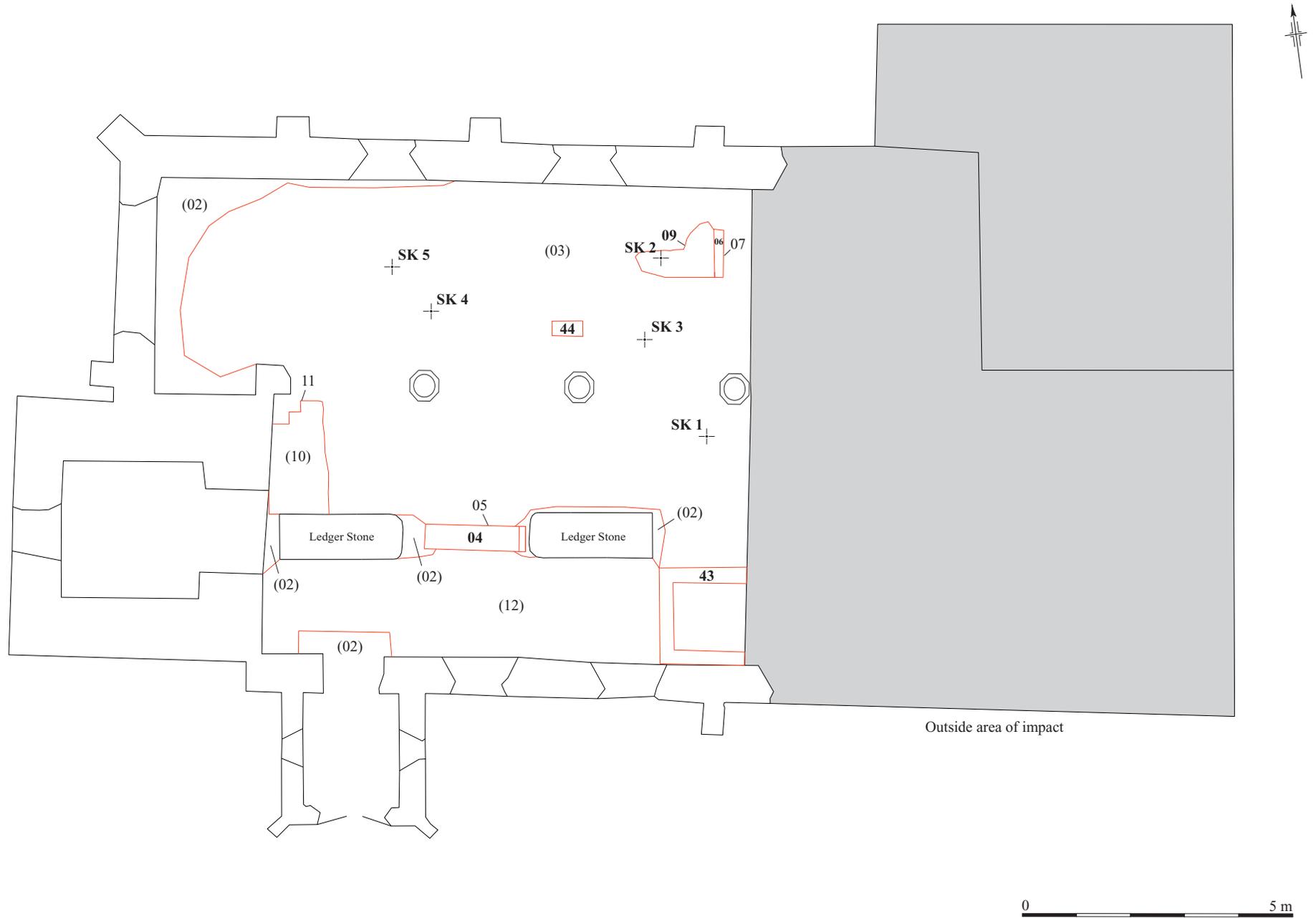


Figure 2: Post excavation plan of interior floor surface



Plate 1: Limit of excavation in SW corner on the interior floor surface facing west. Located with the entrance to the south, bell tower to the west and ledger stone to north. Looking west.

The final phase of work involved the excavation of a service trench through the graveyard. The trench followed the line of the existing gravel path through the graveyard in a north west – south east direction; it measured approximately 41m in length, with a width of 0.45m and a maximum depth of 1.10m. During excavation a number of inhumations were exposed; in keeping with the faculty these were recorded *in situ*, before being lifted and reburied at the base of the trench in the same location as they were found. Several fragments of disarticulated human bone were also found during excavation; these were also reburied at the base of the trench.

4 RESULTS

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers without brackets indicate features i.e. pit cuts, numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material, while numbers in bold indicate structural features.

4.1 North Aisle and Nave (Figure 2)

There were 12 contexts identified during the floor removal and levelling activities within the church. Of these, four archaeological features were identified; a crypt, **04**, was of mid-19th century construction based on the non-regulated brick dimensions and the technically perfect appearance of the bricks (Hammond 1990: 31). Crypt **04** was in foundation cut 05, the remnants of a section of foundation wall **06** with its foundation cut 07 and the negative evidence of a previous architectural element 11 from earlier phases of the church's layout, and a possible disturbed grave **09**.

The lowest observed deposit in the southern half of the project area was a friable, mid brown-grey silty loam layer (12), identified as a disturbed construction layer, and recorded to a depth of *c.* 0.27-0.35m below the modern floor level. This layer was not excavated fully, only to a maximum of 80mm thick.

The lowest observed deposit in the northern half of the project area was a friable, mid brown-grey silty loam layer (03), identified as a disturbed construction/demolition layer with occasional stone inclusions, measuring <35mm in diameter and occasional disarticulated human bones apparently disturbed by previous renovations to the north aisle. This layer was recorded to a depth of *c.* 0.27-0.3m below the modern floor level but was not excavated. The surface of (03) was only fully revealed in the NE quadrant while much of the NW area remained covered by the overlying remnants of the floor foundation deposit, (02). All disarticulated human remains were left *in situ* or replaced if disturbed in the levelling actions, and subsequently reburied in accordance to the instructions given by the faculty.

Overlying the lowest horizons (in the southern half of the project area (12), and (03) in the northern half) was the floor foundation deposit (02) which was a compact but slightly degraded concrete, light yellowish grey and extending to 0.2-0.27m in depth as seen.

The modern floor surface (01) overlaid the aforementioned layer. It was comprised of both wooden floorboards and ceramic tiles, 0.2m in thickness.

A sub-circular possible disturbed grave **09** or charnel pit was found in the eastern portion of the north aisle. The grave was filled by a loose, mid-brown grey silty loam deposit (08) and measured 1.8m long by 0.7m wide (it was not excavated so there is no thickness). This deposit contained a large amount of human remains, though these appeared to have been badly disturbed (possibly redeposited). This feature was truncated by the remnants of a previous foundation wall **06** in foundation cut 07, which was exposed 0.7m long and 0.2m wide running in an N-S alignment. It was made of worked stone similar to those observed used in the foundation. Approximately 2.5m SW from **06**, a portion of a substantial stone, **44**, was uncovered 0.3m long by 0.2m wide, which could be part of the original north foundation wall of the structure prior to either North Aisle extensions in the 19th century.

An angular negative feature 11, was exposed in the nave abutting the bell tower. Only an area 1m long by 0.5m wide was exposed (abutting the NW corner of the bell tower). It was not excavated therefore further characterisation was not possible.

A recessed masonry feature **43**, was exposed in the nave abutting the subterranean wall between the chancel and the nave, leading to the main crypt. This recessed feature **43** had been fully excavated by the time an archaeologist was contacted to attend the monitoring of the interior area, therefore contextual and artefactual information is not available. It was apparent that steps down in a spiralling manner were part of the original entrance design, but had been removed. Only the shadow of the steps could be seen in the upper point of contact with the chancel wall and the lower point of contact on the recessed flooring 1m below the surface. The structural element measured 2m long by 2m wide and reached 1.1m in depth, abutting the SE corner of the nave which appeared to have been a bricked up entrance into the extant and still used crypt under the chancel.



Plate 2: Possible grave 09 shown here to have remains of timber and plaster debris over top, abutted by the stone foundation wall 06. Looking east.

Finally, a vaulted crypt of apparent 19th century construction, **04**, was discovered between the two extant ledger stones in the nave on an E-W alignment. The crypt measured approximately 183cm x 51cm x 106cm (imperial = 6' x 20" x 42"). The bricks measured 9cm x 26cm x 5cm (imperial = 10.2" x 3.75" x 2") and were laid in stretcher bond. There were a minimum of two adults individuals interred within, based on the superficial observation of two human skulls visible from the top aspect when peering into the crypt.

4.2 Service Trench (Figure 3)

The lowest observed deposit in the service trench was (16) a compact mid reddish brown fine gravel with a maximum excavated depth of 0.1m. This deposit extended beyond and below the limit of excavation (l.o.e) and was interpreted as the geological horizon. This was truncated by two grave cuts; 25 and 31. Grave 25 was located 5m from the north western end of the trench. The cut measured 0.4m in length by 0.45m in width, extending beyond the l.o.e. to the north; the grave was filled by **sk08** which was heavily truncated from the lower upper body down and (26) a friable dark greyish brown silty loam (Fig. 3, Section 1). The grave had been heavily truncated by 23, a

later gas pipe trench. This cut was 0.40m in depth >0.35m in width and ran the length of the excavation. The cut extended beyond the l.o.e. to the north. 1m in length and 0.50m in width; the grave was filled by **sk12**, which was moderately well preserved and (32) a firm mid brownish grey silty clay (Fig. 3, Plan 2; Plate 3). The cut had been heavily truncated, resulting in the removal of the upper body of **sk12**. It is likely that the grave had been truncated by a later grave cut, although no cut was visible in plan or section; this was recorded as 41, with fill (42) indistinguishable from (17). This was overlain by (17) a firm dark brownish grey silty clay that extended beyond and below the l.o.e. with a maximum thickness of 0.33m; a layer of reworked subsoil.

Graveyard soil (17) was truncated by three grave cuts: 13, 27 and 29. Within the trench grave 13 was 1m in length and 0.45m in width, extending beyond the l.o.e. to the northeast; the grave was filled by **sk07**, which was well preserved and seen to be complete within the area exposed (Fig. 3, Plan 6, Section 2; Plate 4). The presence of iron nails and coffin handle mounts provided evidence for a coffin (15), which was overlain by fill (14) a friable dark greyish brown silty loam. Grave 27 was 1.6m in length and 0.3m in width, extending beyond the l.o.e. to the north; the grave was filled by **sk10** (Fig. 3, Plan 4; Plate 5), which was well preserved and seen to be complete within the area exposed and (28) a firm dark brownish grey silty clay. Grave 29 was 1.1m in length by 0.40m in width and also extended beyond the l.o.e. to the north; the grave was filled by **sk11**, which was well preserved, and (30) a firm dark greyish brown silty clay (Fig. 3, Plan 3; Plate 6). The grave was truncated by 23, a later gas pipe trench (this was the same gas trench that had truncated **sk08**), which had resulted in the removal of the upper body and feet of **sk11**.

The graves were overlain by a further layer of graveyard soil (19), a firm dark greyish brown silty clay with a maximum thickness of 0.35m. This extended beyond the l.o.e. and was visible in the trench for 30m, reducing to nothing toward the south eastern end of the trench. Fragments of disarticulated human bone were noted and reburied.

At the south eastern end of the trench (19) was overlain by a series of gravelly deposits (Plate 7). These were visible in the trench for a length of 12.5m, increasing in thickness toward the south easterly limit of excavation. The lowest of these was (40) a compact mid brownish yellow sandy gravel 0.3m in thickness containing moderate, poorly sorted fragments of brick and angular limestone; a brick recovered from this deposit measured 230mm x 110mm x 67mm and appeared to be of late 19th century date. This deposit extended below and beyond the l.o.e. and was overlain by (39), a compact mid yellowish grey sandy gravel 0.21m in thickness that contained occasional fragments of brick and tile. This was overlain by (38) a compact mid brownish yellow sandy gravel, 0.32m in thickness which in turn was overlain by (37) a discreet deposit of friable dark greyish brown clayey silt, 1.2m in length, >0.35m in width with a depth of 0.12m. This deposit extended beyond the l.o.e. to the north. The last deposit in the sequence was (36) a compact light greyish yellow fine gravel, 5m in length, >0.45m in width and 0.11m in thickness.

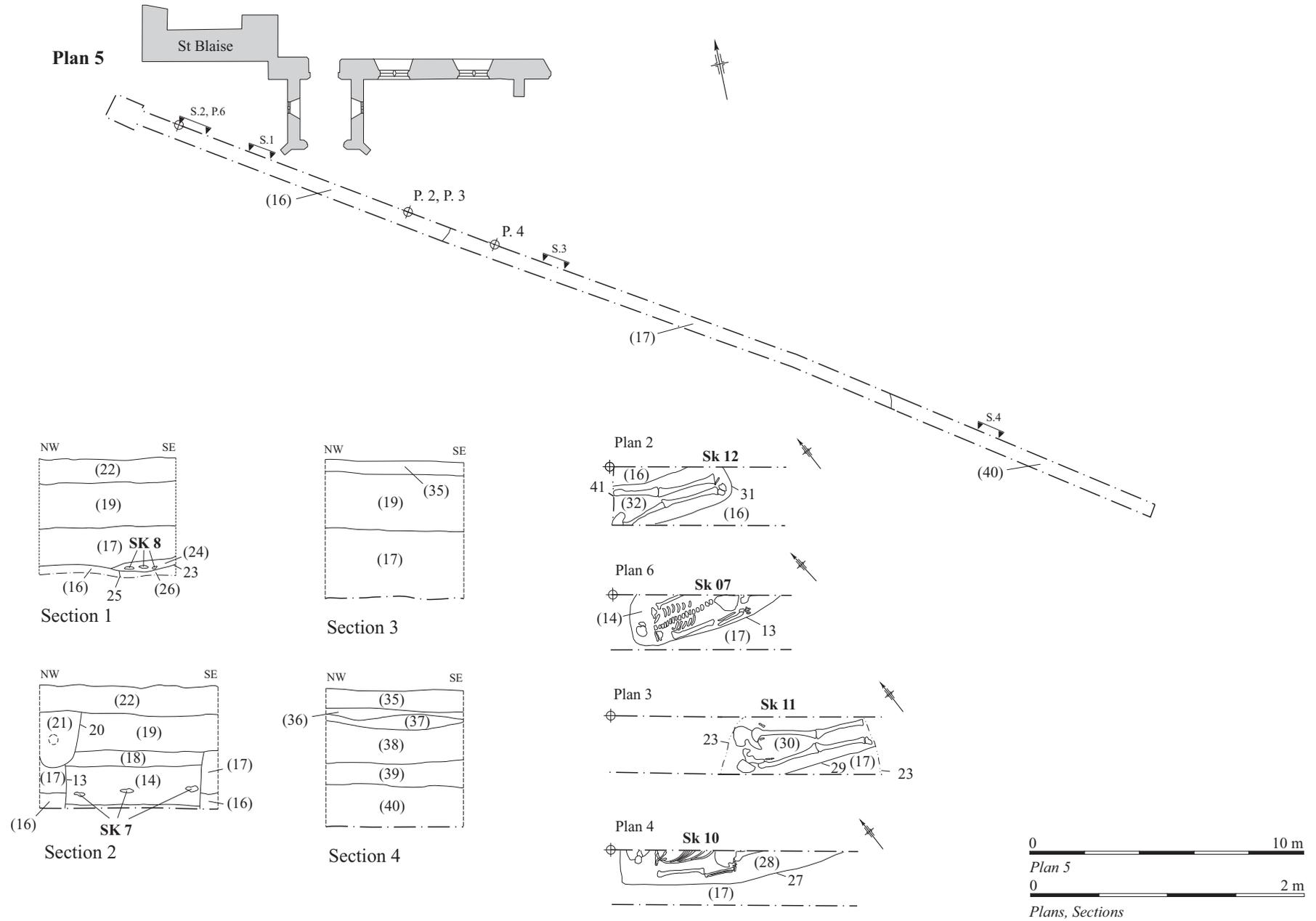


Figure 3: Service trench plans and sections



Plate 3: Skeleton 12 within grave cut 31, showing truncation to upper body.



Plate 4: Skeleton 07 within grave cut 13.



Plate 5: Skeleton 10 within grave cut 27.



Plate 6: Skeleton 11 within grave cut 29, showing truncation to upper body.



Plate 7: Section 4, showing gravel levelling layers (36) to (40). Looking north east.

Gravel deposit (36) was cut by a 20th century gas pipe trench 23. This cut was 0.40m in depth >0.35m in width and ran the length of the excavation. The cut extended beyond the l.o.e. to the north. Skeletons 08, 11 and soil layer (19) were truncated by the cut. It was filled by (24) a soft dark greyish brown silty clay. This was in turn truncated by a modern replacement pipe trench 20, filled by (21). Fill (21) was overlain by gravel path (35), which had a maximum thickness of 0.15m and ran the length of the excavation.

In places within the trench a further, more topsoil-like, graveyard soil (22) was apparent.

5 FINDS

The finds were limited to the structural elements which remained *in situ*, such as the crypt, **04**, and the possible remains of the earlier North Aisle foundation, **06**. Additionally, the fill (08) of possible grave 09 was observed to contain what appeared to be timber and plaster debris (see Plate 2).

A single complete brick was recovered from deposit (40) but not retained. The brick was frogged, with dimensions of 230mm x 110mm x 67mm and was of 19th century date (Hammond 1990: 31).

Both articulated and disarticulated human remains were found during both phases of excavation; these were reburied in accordance with the faculty proposed by the Oxford Diocese.

6 DISCUSSION

The primary aims of this investigation was to monitor for human remains and pre-existing structural elements. Evidence of both of these were recorded, though due to limits of current works underway, were not further investigated or intruded upon.

North Aisle and Nave

All human remains were recorded using point providence and indicated on the plan. The remains were all disarticulated and unstratified within a layer of previous demolition work likely dating to the mid-19th century.

The vaulted brick crypt, **04**, discovered in between the two ledger stones was likely an addition from the last renovation of the nave in 1849-52. This is confirmed by the mid-19th century date for the bricks based on their dimensions and construction. It was put forth by one of the PCC members that her research suggested a possibility that the two adults inhumed within may have been relocated from an earlier location, and potentially, the occupants may have been named on the ledgers which flanked the crypt to both the east and west. However, the ledger stones are no longer legible, so identification based on these was not possible.

The stone foundation, **06**, and the timber and plaster debris in fill (08) of possible grave 09 were likely remains from the original north aisle extension from c.1817, which was demolished in the mid-19th century.

The partially exposed footprint of a possible negative feature, 11, can be potentially linked to the works referenced to have taken place in 1849-51 by Henry Woodyer (Tyack 2010: 385), or that the feature was associated with the rebuilding of the bell tower in the 18th century. No diagnostic material was recovered from the area.

Service Trench

Excavation of the service trench through the graveyard revealed a series of graveyard soil layers and intercutting burials, highlighting the continual use of the graveyard over hundreds of years. Given the nature of the work undertaken the recorded inhumations have not been dated, however their location below the current path provides a rough *terminus ante quem* of the mid-19th century; the path is first depicted on the Tithe Map of 1841.

Two possible explanations can be proposed to account for the gravel deposits recorded at the south eastern end of the service trench.

Historically the eastern side of the graveyard formed part of the grounds of the adjacent rectory, and is depicted as such on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1875 (by the second edition of 1899 the current boundary of the graveyard has been established). It is therefore possible that the gravel layers seen in the trench are associated with this change in use, representing levelling layers deposited in order to raise the ground level of the former rectory grounds to that of the graveyard.

The alternative is that these layers represent evidence of the ‘church pond’ mentioned briefly by Davenport in her 1927 history of the village and described as follows: ‘*A few people remember the Church Pond, it being eventually filled in and included in*

the Churchyard'. This pond appears on the 1875 OS map and is located immediately to the south west of the footpath. The gravels may therefore represent a series of infilling and levelling deposits associated with the former pond.

7 ARCHIVE

Archive Contents

The archive consists of the following:

Paper record

The project brief

Written scheme of investigation

The project report

The primary site record

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to the Oxfordshire Museums Service under accession code OXCMS: 2017.47.

OASIS: johnmoor1-280899

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