

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING
BRIEF AT ST. MARY THE VIRGIN AND CHANTRY
HOUSE, HENLEY ON THAMES**

SU 7626 8270

On behalf of

The Parochial Church Council

MARCH 2004

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REPORT FOR: The Parochial Church Council
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FIELDWORK: November/December 2003

REPORT ISSUED: March 2004

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SITE CODE: HYSM 03
JMHS PROJECT NUMBER: 1301
OXFORDSHIRE MUSEUMS ACC. NO: 2003.112

REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT ST. MARY THE VIRGIN AND CHANTRY HOUSE, HENLEY ON THAMES

ABSTRACT

An archaeological watching brief was carried at St. Mary's Church by John Moore Heritage Services during the ground-works for a new toilet block and connecting corridor. The site was located between the Chantry House, a 16th century timber-framed building, and the eastern end of the church, an area previously disturbed by the construction of a boiler house. The watching brief followed on from a geophysical survey and field evaluation which suggested that earliest surviving evidence was likely to be of post-medieval date. No deposits or structures pre-dating the Chantry House were identified during the evaluation, nor was there any evidence relating to its earliest use.

The watching brief reinforced the conclusions of the evaluation and uncovered a succession of burials. The earliest pre-date the late 14th century St. Leonard's Chapel and the north aisle of the church. Later burials, of 18th or 19th century date, included two examples of brick-vaulted tombs, both of which were hand excavated prior to demolition for the new building.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Planning Background

Planning permission for new toilet facilities and a new corridor link at the eastern side of St. Mary's Church was granted by South Oxfordshire District Council (P00/S0573/LB & P00/S0582/LB). Owing to the probability that significant remains would be uncovered by the ground-works, the County Archaeological Service advised that an archaeological evaluation should be undertaken prior to the determination of the planning application. This was to involve the excavation by machine of three trenches in the area affected by the development. In the light of the evaluation results (John Moore Heritage Services 2001) an archaeological watching brief was required in order to monitor the proposed ground reduction for the toilet facilities and trenching for the services. The scope of the watching brief was defined in a Written Scheme of Investigation, which was agreed with the County Archaeological Service, and included a detailed strategy for preserving by record any significant archaeological remains.

1.2 The Site

St. Mary's Church is situated on the northern side of Hart Street at SU 7626 8270 (Figure 1). The area of the development lies between St. Mary's Church and Chantry House at an elevation of approximately 36 metres OD (Ordnance Datum). On the southern side, the site was bounded by the north aisle of the church, and to the west by St. Leonard's Chapel. A connecting passage alongside the Red Lion Hotel and Chantry House formed the eastern site boundary. At the time of the watching brief the development area consisted of a abandoned garden bed, a covered passageway running between the church and Chantry House and the footings of a demolished boiler house in the angle between the north aisle of the church and St. Leonard's Chapel (Figure 2). The evaluation had established that the depth of archaeological deposits across parts of the site reached some 0.95 metres. Below this level, the geology consisted of the Younger Coombe deposits lying above the First Terrace Gravels.

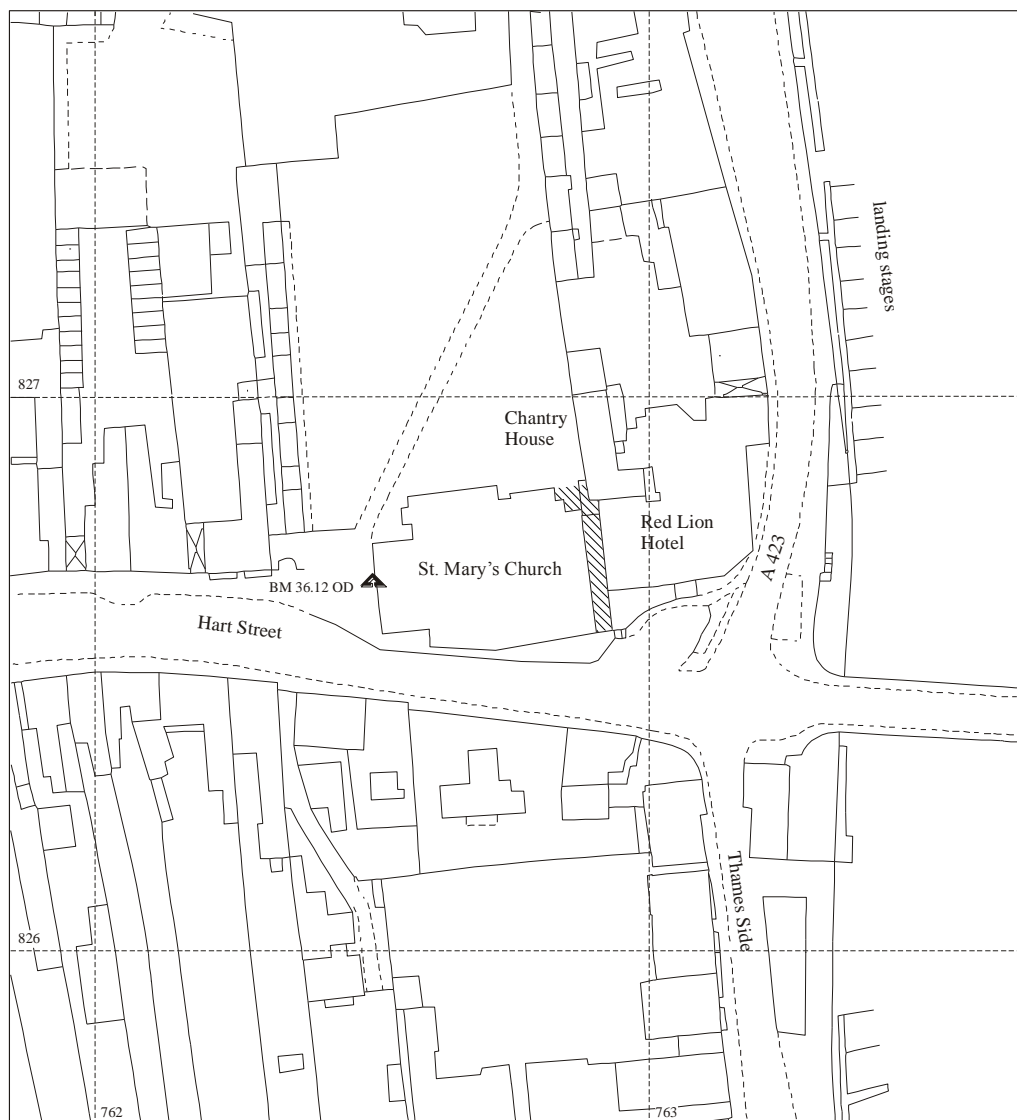


Figure 1: site location map (scale at 1 to 1250)

1.3 Historic and Archaeological Background

St. Mary's Church is a Grade II listed building that includes architectural elements dating to the 13th, 15th and 19th centuries and the late 14th century St. Leonard's Chapel.

Chantry House is situated to the north-east of the choir of St. Mary's, between Hart Street and New Street. The Grade I listed building is timber-framed, with wide cross-bracing, plaster infill and later herringbone brickwork. It was built around AD 1500 as a trading, or store house for wealthy corn merchants, but by AD 1553 it was being used partly as a school. The building continued to function as a school until the late eighteenth century, after which it passed into the ownership of the Red Lion Hotel. Chantry House became a church property in 1923 and remains so today.

The evaluation work, which included a geophysical survey, identified a number of features in the development area. These included two brick-built burial vaults against the eastern wall of the 14th century chapel (Figure 2, 003 and 005) and a grave with an infant burial that extended under the chapel foundations (ibid, 004). A single adult grave (Figure 2, 007) was found in between the two brick vaults, one of which had cut into the burial. Although it was undated, burial 007 was clearly earlier than the 18th or 19th century brick burial vaults. The lower legs and feet of two further burials dating from the 17th century or later were found at the edge of the passageway evaluation trench (Figure 2, burials 11 and 12). The stratigraphic sequence revealed by the evaluation and the finds analyses indicated a build-up of graveyard soil from the 14th century to at least the 16th century.

The frequent discovery of disarticulated human bone suggested that later burials, the construction of the boiler house and laying of services had disturbed a number of earlier graves. However, the possibility of intact burials surviving below the level of the evaluation trenches, or beneath the footings of the boiler house, could not be discounted.

No conclusive evidence was found for the lane providing access to the granaries and storehouses which had stood behind Chantry House and the other commercial properties. The lane appears to have fallen into disuse with the decline of river trade from the middle of the 16th century, and is now believed to lie partly under a row of Almshouses and partly beneath the eastern end of the graveyard.

The evaluation report concluded that no structural remains earlier than the post-medieval period were likely to survive on the site. However, since the development plans involved significant ground reduction and deep trenching for services, it was argued that further burials would almost certainly be encountered during the ground-works. The brick-built vaults were clearly at risk, as they would need to be demolished to accommodate the proposed ground reduction. Failing any possibility of *in situ* preservation, the vaults would require careful dismantling to allow for the recording and removal of human remains under controlled archaeological conditions.

2 THE WATCHING BRIEF

2.1 Watching Brief Aims

The Written Scheme of Investigation called for the appropriate recording of any significant remains uncovered during the course of the ground-works, and included provision for the removal under archaeological conditions of all human remains for subsequent reburial. Of particular concern was the potential survival of evidence for the lane and the commercial properties, which had stood between the wharf and the graveyard, and evidence for the earlier phases of the church.

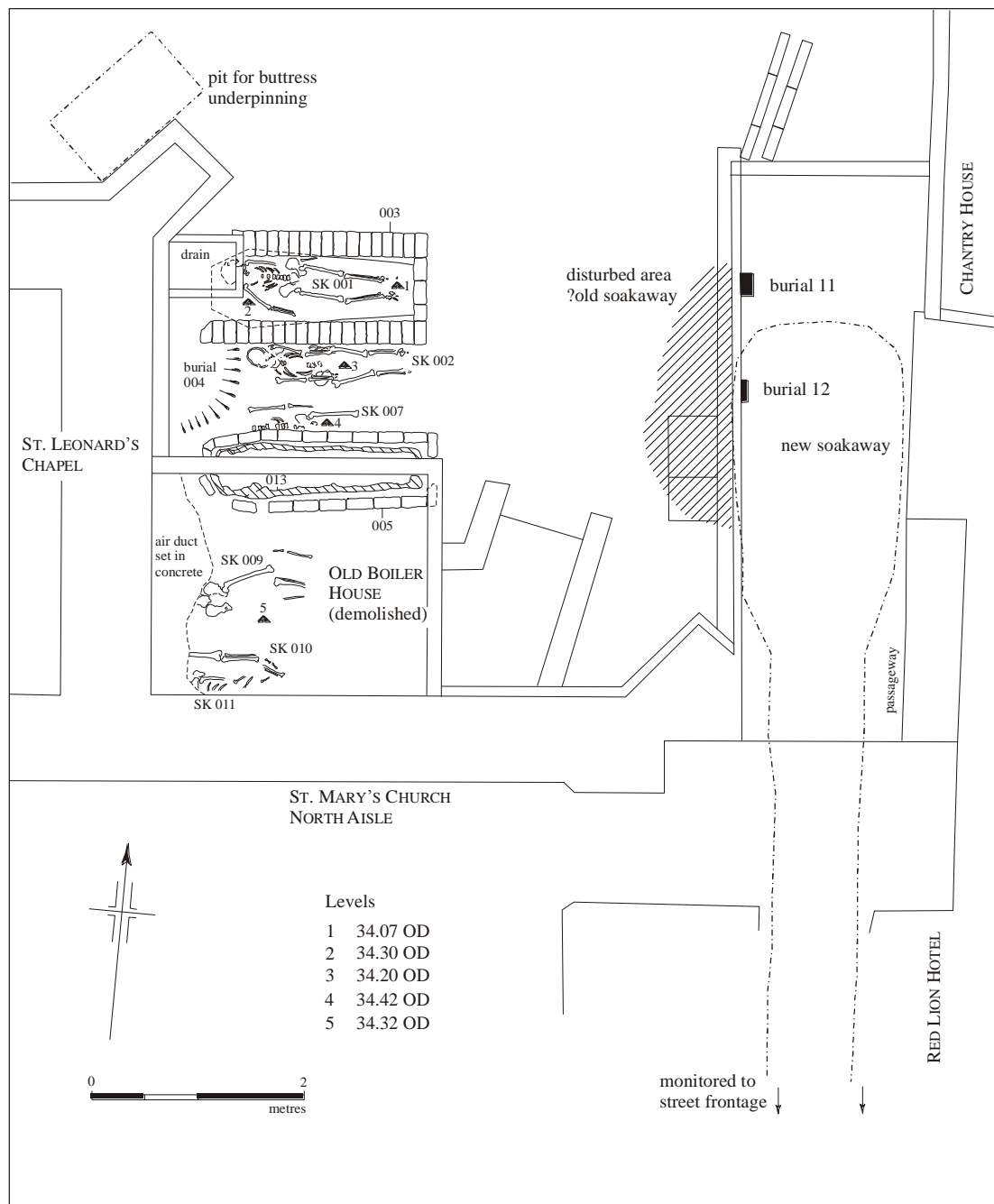


Figure 2: plan of the development site showing details of the watching brief

2.2 Fieldwork and Conditions

The fieldwork was carried out during seven visits at intervals between the 17th of November 2003 and the 19th of December 2003. The work in the corridor between the church and hotel involved the machine excavation of a narrow service trench leading from the soak-away to Hart Street. Conditions for this part of the watching brief were favourable, with adequate opportunity to scan the spoil removed from the trench.

In contrast, working conditions were more difficult during the ground reduction across the area formerly occupied by the boiler house. The construction of the boiler house and associated services had caused significant disturbance to the area and this was exacerbated further by their removal. Although several intact burials were encountered in that part of the site (Figure 2), the proliferation of disarticulated human remains suggested that the eastern part of the graveyard had been intensively used. This had inevitably resulted in the disruption of earlier graves, and even where the skeletons were partly intact it proved difficult to identify the grave cuts with any confidence.

2.3 Watching Brief Results

The service trench excavated in the passageway between the church and hotel was approximately 1.0 metre wide and 1.70 metres deep. Along part of its length the trench followed the line of an old water pipe which had supplied the boiler house. Between the church and hotel the exposed sections revealed a sequence of made ground as far as the street frontage, where the machining exposed concrete beams underpinning the north-west corner of the church. None of the deposits above the natural gravel that had been recorded during the evaluation could be identified in the southern half of the service trench.

At its northern end the service trench passed through one of the evaluation trenches and terminated in a large soak-away alongside Chantry House (Figure 2). The stratigraphy revealed in section corresponded to the sequence of layers recorded during the evaluation. Burial 12 was relocated at an approximate depth of 1.0 metre below the ground surface.

Throughout its length the new service trench produced fragments of human bone, which became more numerous towards the northern end. Small and very abraded fragments of animal bone were also found, as well as several pieces of clay pipe stem. Aside from these, the only other finds were fragments of post-medieval brick and tile.

The barrel vault of the more northerly brick-built tomb (Figure 2, 003) was dismantled by hand prior to the ground reduction. This revealed a near complete skeleton in an extended supine position with its head to the west (*ibid*, SK 001). Traces of a wooden coffin were indicated by a dark staining in the soil around the body and the presence of badly decayed wood fibres. The iron coffin fittings were heavily corroded and included a plate at the head end which was fused to the brickwork.

The second brick-built tomb had been severely damaged by the footings of the boiler house, which passed through the centre of the structure destroying the entire vault (Figure 2, 005). Hand excavation of the tomb revealed a lead coffin crushed by the concrete footings (ibid, 013). Despite the damage, the lead coffin was sufficiently well-preserved to show that it was open at the top, with the upper part of the sides rolled over to form a robust rim. It measured 2.0 metres in length and 0.35 metres in depth. Only a few jumbled fragments of human bone remained within the lead coffin, which had evidently enclosed a wooden coffin. All that remained of this were fragments of badly decayed wood, corroded iron fittings and a few brass studs with fibrous material attached. The funerary remains were mixed with a dark stony soil that also contained fragments of post-medieval brick and tile, flint and chalk. This deposit was undoubtedly the backfill of the foundation trench for the concrete footings, which were found to be fused with further fragments of human bone and some iron coffin fittings.

A backfilled grave cut against the chapel wall between the two brick-built tombs (Figure 2, 004) marked the position of an infant burial excavated during the evaluation. The remains had been covered by a plastic sheet and left *in situ*. The burial extended under the wall of the chapel, which is known to date from the late 14th century.

A second burial nearby had also been discovered during the evaluation and left in place (Figure 2, SK 007). This adult inhumation lay 0.53 metres below the level of the infant burial and was clearly earlier than the brick-built tomb (Figure 2, 005) which had been partly cut through the burial. Alongside burial SK 007 was a second, near complete adult burial (Figure 2, SK 002) lying at a depth of 0.22 metres below the SK 007. Traces of the grave cut were just visible on the southern side of the burial, but at the opposite side the grave had been truncated by the brick burial vault (Figure 2, 003). Both adult inhumations and the infant burial were supine with the heads to the west.

Three other disturbed, but partly articulated burials were found to the south of the brick-built tomb 005 (Figure 2, SK 009, 010 and 011). The first of these was represented by the pelvis and parts of the lower limbs; the remainder of the skeleton was probably destroyed or dispersed during the construction of the boiler house. The only surviving parts of the second (SK 010) were the lower left limb and displaced bones of the lower left arm. Both burials were supine and aligned with the heads to the west, and judging from their position the upper parts must have extended under St. Leonard's Chapel. Unfortunately, the wall footings were obscured by a concrete ledge carrying a ceramic air duct, but even allowing for this the burials seem certain to pre-date the late 14th century chapel. The final burial in this area (Figure 2, SK 011) was also supine and aligned with its head to the west, but only the fragmentary remains of the thorax and the lower left arm survived. The remainder of the skeleton lay beneath the wall of the north aisle, which may have been remodelled during the 14th century when the Lady Chapel was built (Radford, 2000).

No grave cuts were identified in association with burials SK 009, 010 and 011 which were excavated down to 34.32 metres OD (Ordnance Datum). The spoil removed from above the burials by machine and that removed during the hand excavation was devoid of coffin furnishings; the only finds were two sherds of post-medieval salt-

glazed earthen ware, two fragments of clay pipe stem and numerous small fragments of human bone. However, despite the poor condition of the remains they do demonstrate a sequence of burial pre-dating the late 14th century and culminating in the 18th or 19th century, when the brick-built tombs are likely to have been constructed.

The machine cut for the new soak-away in the area of the corridor evaluation trench revealed burials 11 and 12 which had been left in place (Figure 2). The lower legs and feet found during the evaluation were in fact the only parts of these two skeletons to survive. Both were in an area that had been disturbed by an old soak-away associated with boiler house, and although the machining produced large quantities of disarticulated human bone, as well as some animal bone, none of the remains could be linked with the truncated burials.

A machine cut pit excavated alongside the north-eastern buttress of the church extended to a depth of 1.20 metres onto the natural gravel. Numerous fragments of human bone were recovered, but none of the remains were articulated. The only feature was the edge of a cut which appeared at the surface of the natural gravel in the northern corner of the pit. This may have been a grave cut, but since it lay mostly outside the area to be affected by underpinning, and below the level of any further digging, it was not investigated.

All of the human remains encountered during the watching brief were treated with due respect and placed in temporary storage prior to reburial. Wherever possible bones from largely intact burials were kept separate from disarticulated remains. The lead coffin was also retained onsite for reburial.

2.4 Conclusions

Despite the variable ground conditions the watching brief results can be regarded as an accurate reflection of the archaeological potential of the site. The results reflect those of the earlier evaluation, and in particular they confirm that no structural evidence pre-dating the post-medieval period survives. Throughout the watching brief area, later disturbance had destroyed any trace of medieval commercial or domestic activity, nor was there any evidence that might be linked to the earliest use of the Chantry House.

Perhaps not surprisingly the burial record shows a long history of interment, with the earliest graves pre-dating the late 14th century. The latest burials are likely to be represented by the brick vaulted tombs, probably dating to the 18th or 19th century, although some of the other burials in the same area may be broadly contemporaneous.

The large quantities of disarticulated human bone recovered during the watching brief is typical of graveyard deposits. Much of the bone is likely to have entered the soil as a result of multiple episodes of grave digging cutting through earlier burials. Moreover, significant ground disturbance had been caused by the numerous services and the footings of the boiler house, which had damaged and dispersed several burials. This added to the difficulty of defining grave cuts and determining if any stratigraphic relationships survived. The largest area of undisturbed natural to be

exposed lay beneath the boiler house, and although the surface was somewhat truncated, it did show that no further burials were present below 34.32 metres OD in that part of the site.

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