

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT
ST JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH,
LITTLE MISSENDEN,
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

SU 920 989

On behalf of

Acanthus Clews Architects

JULY 2010

REPORT FOR Acanthus Clews Architects
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Summary

John Moore Heritage Services carried out a watching brief on the 28th of June 2010 during the lifting of a ledger slab in the north chapel in the church of St John The Baptist in Little Missenden in preparation for its repair.

Previous repair of the floor in the post-medieval/modern period was evident. Medieval tile found in the fill of the vault was also present in other parts of the churches flooring, bonded with concrete mortar, suggesting a re-use or re-setting of these tiles in the modern period. During examination of the vault fill three fragments of human bone were identified. All bone and artefacts were returned to the vault prior to levelling.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The Church of St John the Baptist is located in the town of Little Missenden, Buckinghamshire. The church is located at SU 920 989 on an area of ground north of Abbott Road and south of the River Misbourne.

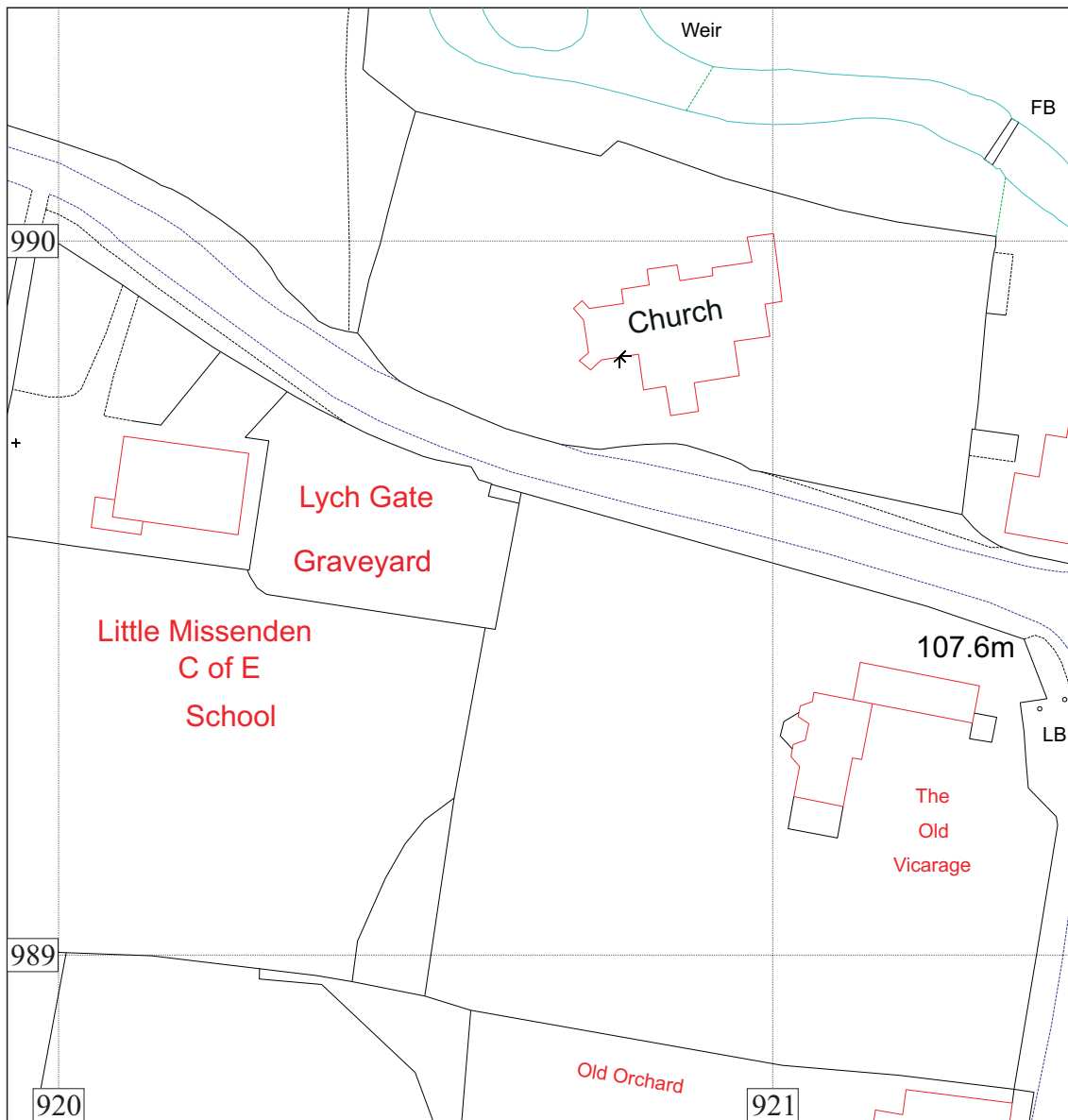
1.2 Planning Background

Permission for an interlocutory faculty for repair to the floor was granted by the Chancellor, provided there was direct archaeological supervision of the lifting of ledger slab and any other disturbance. The work was carried out by John Moore Heritage Services to an Archaeological Brief prepared by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor.

1.3 Archaeological Background

The church of St. John the Baptist at Little Missenden was granted by Gilbert Basset and his wife Egelina to the monastery of Bicester in 1182, 'for the good of his own soul, that of Egelina his wife and those of his children,' and was confirmed to it in 1315 by Edward II (Page 1908).

The church consists of a chancel measuring 17 ft. by 12 ft. 10 in., a nave 36 ft. 2 in. by 16 ft. 9 in., a north chapel 25 ft. 10 in. by 12 ft. 8 in., a north aisle 7 ft. 4 in. wide, a south aisle 12 ft. 7 in. wide with a south porch, and a western tower 11 ft. 1 in. square (all measurements are internal). It is believed that the nave and chancel date from the beginning of the 12th century. Around 1250 the south aisle was added, and late in the same century a north aisle. The chancel shows no features earlier than the 13th century, but its plan and perhaps its walls are of the same date as the nave walls. This was remodelled in the 13th century. The north chapel, where the lifted ledger stone is located, was added to it in the 14th century. The tower and north aisle are 15th century addition, and in the 18th century the south aisle was rebuilt. In the last 100 years the church appears to have undergone minor repairs and building work associated with wiring and heating (Page 1908).



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Figure 1. Location

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The relevant aims of the investigation as laid out in archaeological brief prepared by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, Julian Munby were as follows:

- To directly supervise the work
- If any disarticulated human remains were discovered, to reverently rebury them as soon as possible
- If any articulated human remains are discovered, work in that area stops pending further written direction from the Chancellor.
- No artefact or ecofat discovered during the work is removed from the church without further written Order of the Court.

The main objective was to make a record of any archaeological remains present.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to the archaeological brief prepared by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, Julian Munby. 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 for Archaeologists (1994).

3.2 Methodology

An archaeologist maintained on site during the course of all work that had a potential to disturb or destroy archaeological remains. The original brief called for the lifting of both the northernmost ledger, and the ledger to its immediate south. On examination of the northernmost ledger the decision was made to leave it *in situ*, as it was not likely to cause any future damage to the flooring.

The ledger to the immediate south was lifted by experienced stonemasons. Upon its removal, the archaeologist examined the vault fill for any artefacts and/or dateable material. A written record was completed, including scale plans and section drawings. Photographs of all deposits/finds encountered were taken. Approximately 0.05m of fill was removed under archaeological supervision to make room for levelling materials and the re-laid ledger. Any human remains or artefacts were reburied prior to this.

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.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Results (Figure 2)

All features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in () indicate feature fills or deposits of material.

The church floor (001) consisted of a mixture of materials dating to different periods. Replacement of the floor tiles at some point in the last 200 years meant that the western part of the church floor was raised by approximately 0.15m. The area of investigation was located in the north chapel where the lower floor level was preserved. The floor (001) to the west of the vault consisted of hand made bricks bedded on yellow sand. Some of these were removed in preparation for the lifting of the ledger slab. They were later replaced. The flooring to the east of the vaults consisted of large square orange tiles. The floor to the north of the vaults had been removed and replaced at some point in the last 100 years. This conclusion was reached after the discovery that this part of the floor had been re-laid using modern concrete, probably in association with the introduction of piping associated with the heating system (a radiator was located against the interior wall c.1.00m to the northeast of the vault). Medieval decorated tile was re-used in the flooring under the arch formed by a canopy tomb. There was also evidence of some repair of the ledger slabs using concrete and lime mortar. The removed ledger slab was constructed of a single sheet of slate, 0.07m in thickness, 1.7m in length and 1.00m in width. The surface of the ledger was heavily abraded. A partial bronze plaque on the ledger states the date of death of the interred individual as being the 10th of December, 1646. It is likely this was added at a later date, as an earlier etched inscription is also partially visible. Multiple burials and rededications often occurred in church vaults (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005: 158-9).

Fill (002) appeared to fill the vault completely, obscuring its original depth. This fill consisted of loose and friable light brown silty gravel containing numerous flint gravels. It contained numerous amounts of demolition material including CBM pieces and flecking throughout. This included handmade brick, tile (undecorated and decorated) and a single piece of peg tile. Rare pieces of coal were also present. Disturbance in the upper layers of this fill by rodent burrowing, specifically by *glis glis*, was discovered. The resultant hollows under the floor were filled in using a lime based mortar. This bioturbation would have caused minimal disturbance to the archaeology. Tile examined from fill (002) was the same as that used in flooring to the north (under the canopy tomb arch) and within the drainage system (covered by an iron grid to the west, located on the same floor level as the vaults). The level of fill (002) was reduced by 0.05m. Approximately 5 bags were removed by the stonemasons under archaeological supervision in preparation for the lime-based mortar on which the repaired ledger would be bedded. Any large or decorative pieces of tile were left within the vault fill after being photographed.

Examination of the northernmost ledge slab revealed previous repair on its southern edge using an iron 'stitch' (essentially a large staple). The stitch had subsequently corroded, forcing the natural laminate within the stone to separate and causing substantial damage to the external surface and fabric of the ledger.

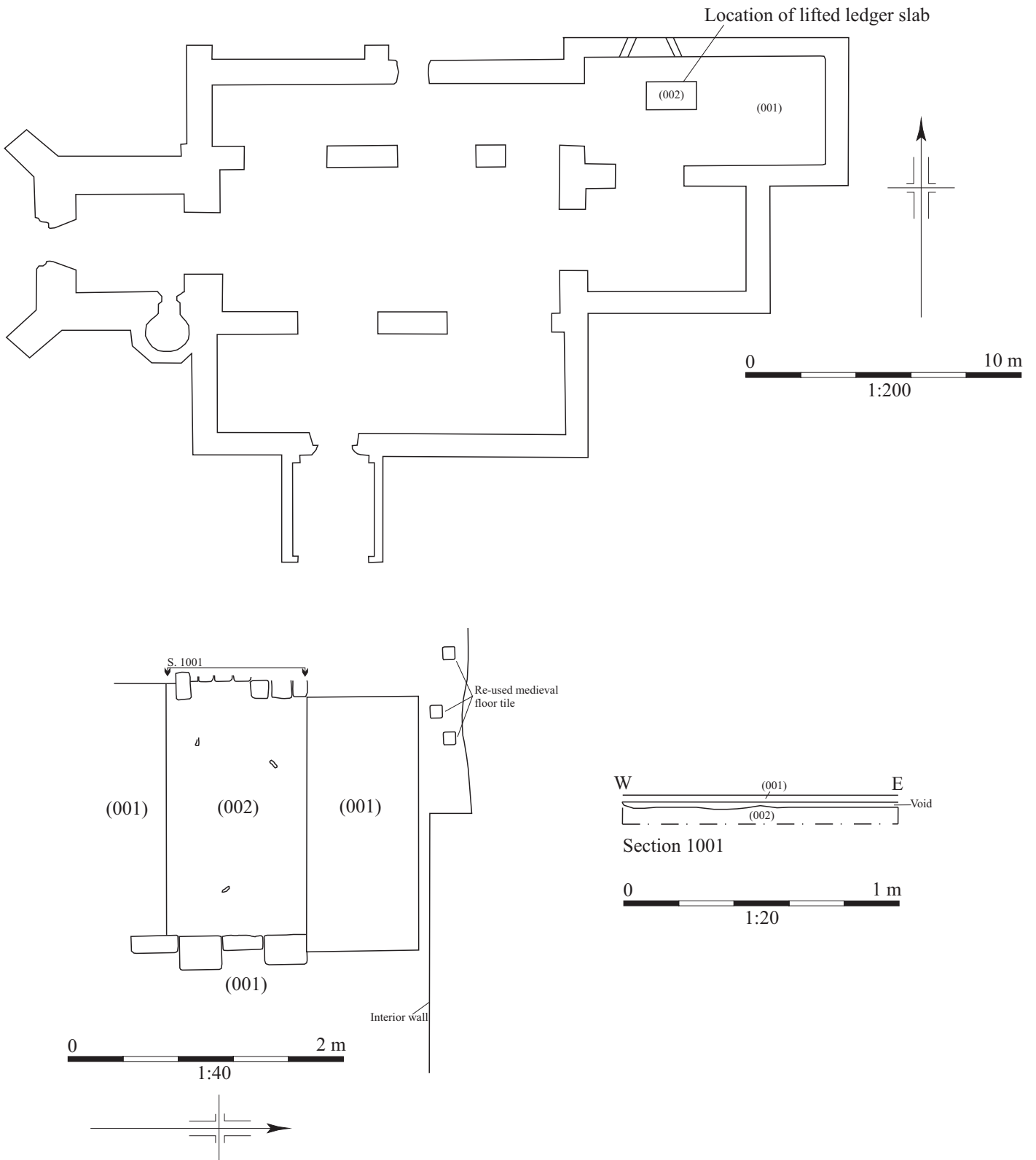


Figure 2. Plans and sections

The decision was made to leave the ledger *in situ* as it was not subsiding and therefore unlikely to cause future issues with the flooring. In addition, any movement would only cause unnecessary and likely irreparable damage to the ledger. The corroded iron stitch was removed and replaced with a stainless steel one and the surface damage repaired.

5 FINDS

5.1 The Medieval tile (Figure 3)

None of the material was removed from site, and therefore weights were not obtained. The tiles examined measured approximately 0.12m in length and width and were typical of flooring tiles produced for churches and large domestic buildings in the medieval period. This type of tile was produced by stamping an impression into the wet clay before applying a white slip (Lemmen 2000: 6). This was left to dry and then the tile was scraped level and overglazed. The tiles at Little Missenden were made from a red firing clay and had a well-mixed fabric containing very few inclusions.

Three decorative types were observed within fill (002) and cemented into the floor of the church. This included a 6 pointed flower/wheel design which only occurred on the tiles mortared into the flooring under the canopy tomb in the north chapel. The second type displayed 3 heraldic shields in a band at the base of tile. This occurred on a tile found in fill (002) and also one cemented into the covered floor of the drainage system. The remainder were parts of an unidentifiable geometric circular design that would have been created by placing numerous tiles together, probably in multiples of four.

None of the tiles were observed in their original context and it is therefore difficult to make any solid conclusions. It is likely that these once covered the entire floor of the church. They appear to have been re-used at some point in the last 100 years in areas of the flooring that are largely out of view, presumably because they did not fit in with the current scheme of plain tiles.

5.2 Bone

Three pieces of probable human bone were recovered from the upper part of fill (002). Two of these pieces were highly degraded. One of these was a partial long bone, and the other a possible metacarpal or metatarsal. The third bone was identified as a proximal phalanx bone, from the middle part of the hand. All bone was reburied in the vault prior to the introduction of levelling materials for floor repair.

6 DISCUSSION

Removal of the slate ledger slab revealed successive repair events of the floor and slabs. The infilling of the vault probably occurred during the last 200 years, possibly during previous construction or repair work. The presence of medieval floor tiles and 18th/19th century peg tiles does not conclusively date this deposit. Repair on the northernmost ledger slab using concrete and an iron stitch suggests that the slabs have been lifted before, possibly at the same time that the vaults were backfilled.



Fill (002) after removal of ledger



Medieval tile from fill (002)



Medieval tile re-used in flooring



Medieval tile re-used in under-floor drainage

Figure 3. Photographs

The presence of disarticulated human bone is not uncommon in this context. Backfilling of church vaults would have utilised local materials when possible, of which human remains would undoubtedly have formed a part after years of accidental incursion into unmarked grave spaces during the burial of later individuals or building work. Bioturbation caused by small animals burrowing under the floor would have further disturbed remains.

7 ARCHIVE

Archive Contents

The archive consists of the following:

Paper record

The project report

The primary site records

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to the County Museums' Store.

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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