



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

**AT**

**ST. MARY'S CHURCH, MARSH GIBBON,**

**BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

**NGR SP 64756 23228**

*On behalf of  
Aylesbury Vale District Council*

**September 2010**

**REPORT FOR** Aylesbury Vale District Council  
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## **Summary**

*John Moore Heritage Services conducted an archaeological watching brief during the demolition of the existing churchyard wall and excavation of footings for a new wall at St Mary's Church, Marsh Gibbon, Buckinghamshire. Evidence was uncovered to show the 19th century raising of the graveyard levels and repairs to the wall. A small quantity of disarticulated human remains was also found.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)**

The site is located on the west side of Station Road just north of the junction with Church Street in Marsh Gibbon (NGR SP 64756 23228). The underlying geology is Peterborough Member (BGS 2002).

### **1.2 Planning Background**

Planning permission was granted by Aylesbury Vale District Council for the repair and restoration of the churchyard wall. Due to the potential for the work to disturb archaeological deposits and human remains, a planning condition was attached to the permission requiring that an archaeological watching brief be maintained throughout the dismantling of sections of the churchyard wall and the excavation of new wall footings. This is in line with PPG16 (in place at the time permission was granted) and Local Plan policies.

### **1.3 Archaeological Background**

The Mary's Church is Grade II\* listed with parts of the church dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Historic Environment Record reference CAS2538). The church was restored in 1879-80 (Pevsner & Williamson 1994). The remains of a 15<sup>th</sup> century churchyard cross (Grade II) are present within the churchyard. The listed building designation does not include the graveyard wall.

To the south is the Grade II\* listed Manor House (CAS4907; NGR SP 64739 23123) with historic records indicating a medieval and post-medieval manor. The present house is 16<sup>th</sup> century with 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century alterations and extensions. A Grade II 19<sup>th</sup> century barn (SP 64743 23204) south of the church and a Grade II 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> century timber framed barn (SP 64725 23235) to the west of the church are associated with the manor. There is a 15<sup>th</sup> century reference to a dovecote at the manor.

Marsh Gibbon is mentioned in the Domesday Book and therefore is at least a medieval settlement. Along the east part of Church Street are houses, some listed, dating from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century with later 19<sup>th</sup> houses and a former library further west. To the north of the church on the west side of Station Road are houses dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

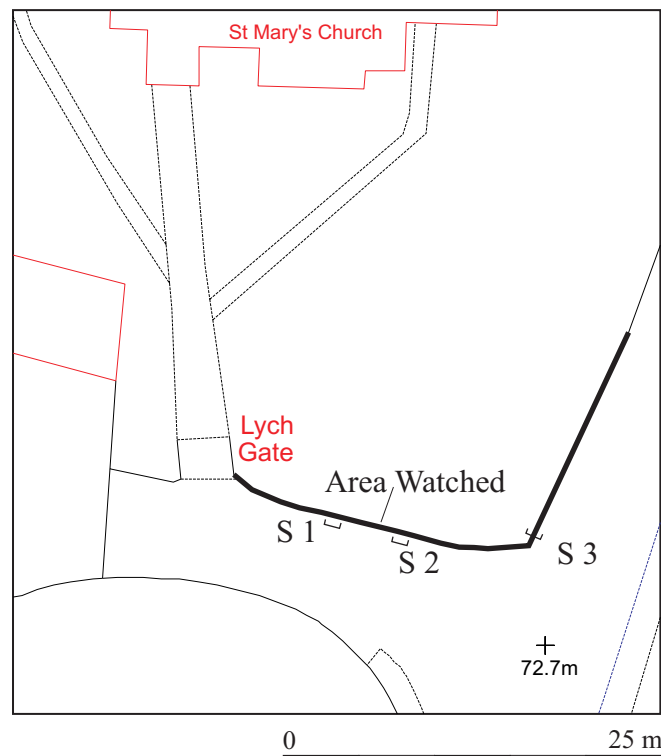
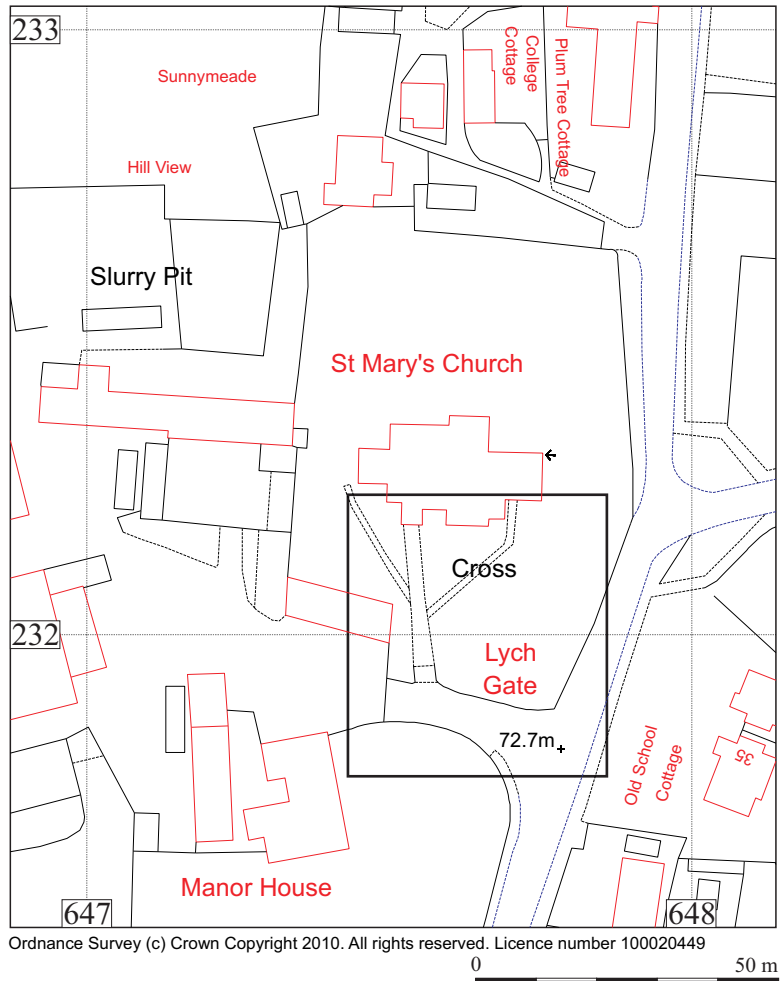


Figure 1. Site location

## **2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were as follows:

- To record any archaeological remains that will be impacted on by the development.
- In particular to record and arrange preservation of any buried human remains.

## **3 STRATEGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Services (BCAS).

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (2008).

### **3.2 Methodology**

An osteoarchaeologist monitored the course of all invasive groundworks that had the potential to disturb or destroy human remains.

The southern section of the churchyard wall, a length of c. 22m was entirely dismantled, prior to new footings being cut 1.05m into the exposed section of the graveyard and 0.25m below the base of the current wall. Sections of the wall to the east and northeast of the church were dismantled, but built up again within the structure of the existing wall, with little disturbance to the graveyard soils behind.

No *in situ* human remains or partial burials were encountered. Disarticulated remains were collected, assessed and reburied within the graveyard fill behind the new build. No human remains were removed from site. Ceramic finds were encountered in the soils, spot dated on site and also returned to the graveyard fill.

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**

All features were assigned individual context numbers. Numbers in ( ) show feature fills or deposits of material. A general description of the contexts observed are given below.

#### **4.1 Excavation Results**

The lowest natural geological deposit in the area was an outcrop of natural bedrock (07), observed about 0.50m below current street level in the location of the southeast corner of the churchyard wall. Above this was a compact yellowish-brown sandy clay natural (06), between 0.50m and 0.80m thick.

A dark brown silty loam deposit was observed in section on both the southern (04) and eastern sides (08) apparently overlying the clay layer (06).

Overlying this was a fairly compact dark yellow-brown sandy clay (03), containing charcoal flecks and frequent small stones. This subsoil deposit was on average 0.60m thick.

The cut 9 for the present churchyard retaining wall (01) was not observed in its entirety on the southern section of the wall and is likely to be outside the area of the current excavation. However it was easily observed on the eastern section where it apparently was cut in to layer (03).

The wall (01) was made up of around 13 courses of buff coloured sandstone blocks. These were faced on the exterior and bonded with an off-white sandy mortar. The interior and churchyard side of the wall was roughly constructed with sandstone rubble. The southern section of the wall was capped with hog-back shaped concrete blocks, whilst the east side had a more haphazard capping of concreted stone. The wall was observed to contain several fragments of modern looking ceramic building material (tiles and bricks) as well as occasional fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery.

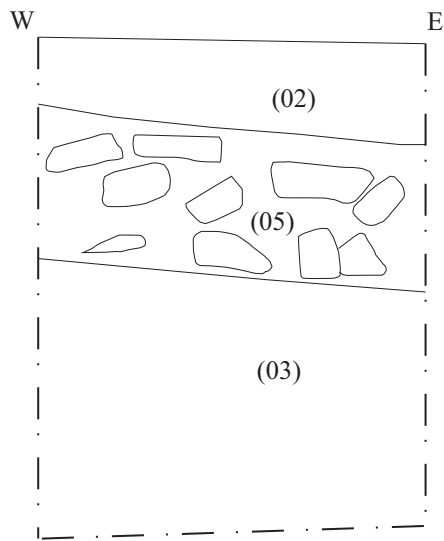
Directly behind the wall (01) was a deposit of sandstone rubble (05) up to 1m thick. On the southern section near to the Lych Gate and extending to the east for about 3m this layer of rubble (05) was approximately 0.4m thick and was observed to cover layer (03). The eastern section showed that the wall (01) was constructed on top of rubble that appeared to be part of the same deposit.

The uppermost layer across the entire site was a dark brown-black silty loam topsoil (02) that was up to 0.40m thick. This contained occasional charcoal and ceramic building material flecks, with a great deal of root and animal action.

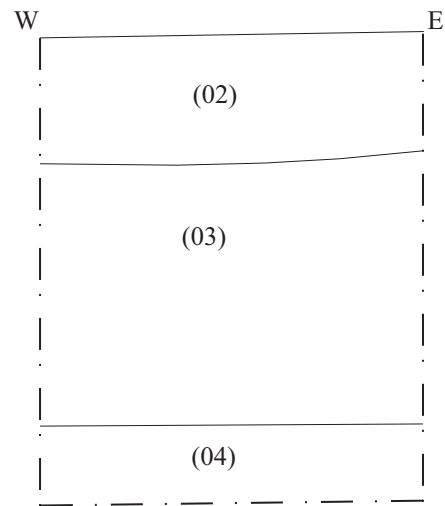
#### **4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results**

The results can on the whole be considered to be good. The osteoarchaeologist was alerted to all invasive groundworks being undertaken on site and was given full access to the site. The majority of the work took place on dry days.

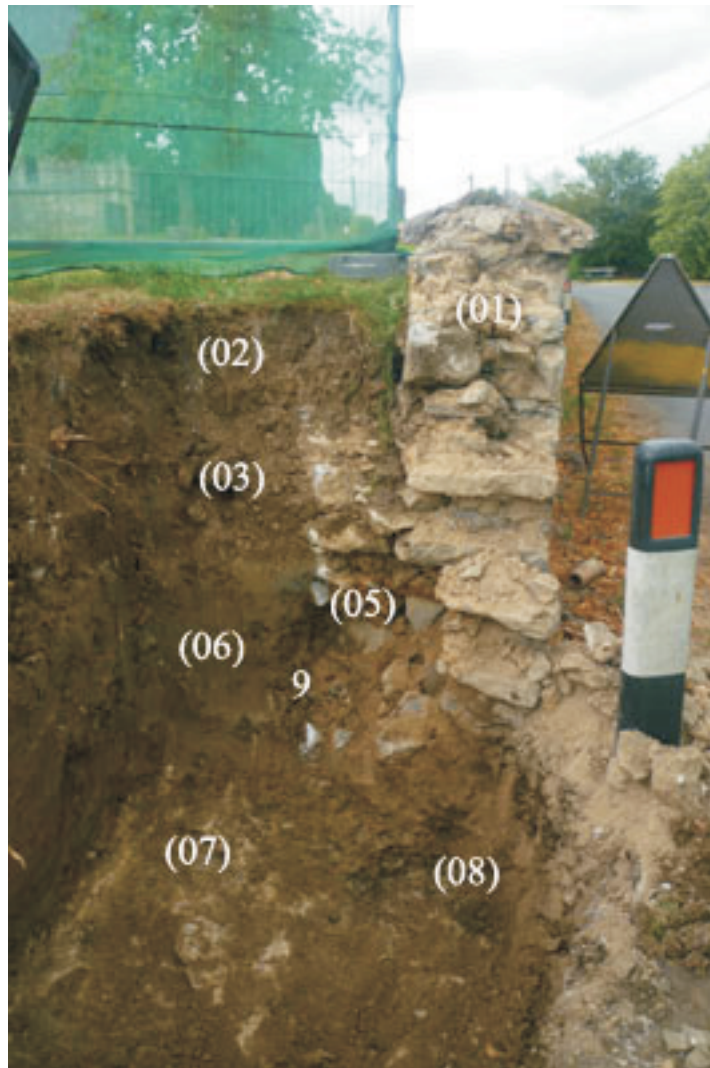
Section 1



Section 2



0 1 m



Section 3

Figure 2. Sections



## 5 FINDS

### 5.1 Pottery *By David Gilbert*

The pottery was examined on site and not retained. It was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit type-series (e.g. Mynard and Zeepvat 1992; Zeepvat et al. 1994).

Contexts (02) and (03) both produced sherds of:

Red Earthenware (PM8) dated 1550+

Creamware (PM23) late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Mass-produced White Earthenware (PM25) mid 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century

### 5.2 Human remains

A total of five fragments of disarticulated human bone were encountered during the groundworks at St Mary's Church. These were assessed on-site following both IFA and English Heritage standards and guidelines (Brickley & McKinley 2004, Mays & Brickley *et al* 2004 respectively), before being reburied behind the newly constructed wall. Disarticulated 'charnel' remains are common finds in church soils, where graves have been cut and re-cut throughout the period of use of the cemetery.

The minimum number of individuals (MNI) recovered is one (1) as no skeletal elements were repeated and all identified fragments recovered were considered to be adult (older than 18 years old at time of death). Sex could not be determined for any of the fragments and no pathological conditions were present. An inventory of the recovered skeletal remains is presented below in Table 1.

Context	Fragment count	Element	Side	Age
02/03	1	3 <sup>rd</sup> metacarpal	Right	Adult
02/03	1	Tibia (anterior fragment)	-	Adult
02/03	2	2 rib (small shaft fragments)	-	-
02/03	1	Undiagnostic long bone fragment	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>			

*Table 1: An inventory of the recovered human remains from St Mary's Church, Marsh Gibbon.*

## 6 DISCUSSION

Only five fragments of human bone were recovered during this watching brief, despite the disturbance of a 22m long section of churchyard wall and the soils behind it. No in situ burials were disturbed either, despite the close proximity of upstanding grave markers near the wall. Such a small number of disarticulated fragments is unusual for a churchyard with 13<sup>th</sup> century origins and use throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods.

The wall displays signs of several phases of repair during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rubble layer (05) may be material associated with the fabric of an earlier wall,

however the cut 9 that contains this material is unlikely to be the original foundation trench.

The limited amount of charnel material within layer (03) appears to indicate that it is not heavily disturbed. This layer also contains pottery of a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century date. It seals deposit (04) on the southern section (fig. 2 section 2), but its relationship to deposit (08), thought to be the same as (04) on the eastern section is not so clear.

Anecdotal evidence from local sources indicates that renovation work in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century (renovation is noted in Pevsner & Williamson as 1879-80) may have included the raising of the level of the graveyard with soils from nearby railway construction. The level is supposed to have increased from practically level with the current road to its current height, around 1.50m higher.

Deposit (04)/(08) could represent a buried land surface or old topsoil. The eastern section appears to show that the rubble (05) has a more formal arrangement at higher levels and indeed may be part of an earlier wall. A new higher facing wall was then constructed. It would appear that this new wall (01) was built to retain deposits (03) and (02).

Given finds within the wall and adjoining topsoil and subsoil deposits date to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems likely that the construction of the wall was contemporary with the raising of the level of churchyard. In light of this more recent date, the lack of human remains makes sense.

## 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 records

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to the Buckinghamshire Museum Service.

## 8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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