

ST BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH, SPROXTON, LEICESTERSHIRE
Archaeological monitoring of installation of new
drains in the churchyard, and associated works



Network Archaeology

for

CEL group

on behalf of

Sproxton PCC

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OASIS Summary Form

Summary

Installation of new drains at St Bartholomew's Church, Sproxton, Leicestershire, was monitored, in late February and early March 2017. Ground disturbance was mostly confined to the upper layers of the churchyard, generally to a depth of no more than 550mm, except for a silt collection chamber at a depth of 900mm and a soakaway pit, 1.10m deep.

South of the church tower, a grave slab, provisionally dated to the first half of the twelfth century, was discovered, buried beneath the surface. Elsewhere, a moderate quantity of disarticulated human bone was noted, much of it from a single location where bones from previously disturbed graves had apparently been re-buried. Other finds included single sherds of medieval and early post-medieval pottery, a number of ferrous metal nails, and a cast iron cross.

Introduction

Network Archaeology was commissioned in February 2017 to monitor works to be carried out on the installation of new drains in the churchyard of St Bartholomew's Church, Sproxton, Leicestershire (Fig 1), grid reference: SK 85653 24915

The prime objective of the archaeological fieldwork was to mitigate the impact on the archaeological resource of the groundworks within the churchyard (Lingard 2017). This was to be achieved by:

- establishing the presence or absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains
- locating, investigating and recording archaeological deposits
- recovering, recording and conserving significant archaeological finds
- producing a site archive and report for submission to the receiving museum and Leicestershire HER, as appropriate.

Groundworks centred around the excavation of drainage trenches, to take 100mm-diameter plastic pipes, and of the pits for silt traps beneath the gullies collecting rainwater from downpipes from the roof, inspection chambers at changes of direction in the drains, and a silt collection chamber and a soakaway to the north-west of the church building.

The church and churchyard

Location and layout

Sproxton parish church lies 500m to the north of the village, on a locally high point in the landscape at just over 150m OD (Fig 1). The site therefore has a very open aspect with long views, especially to the south-west, where the hills of Charnwood Forest form the distant horizon. Approaching from the north, the road from Croxton Kerrial and Saltby takes a sharp right-hand turn at the north-eastern corner of the churchyard to run along the northern side of the site, downhill towards the village. Beyond the eastern boundary of the churchyard, the north-to-south line of the road is continued as a footpath leading to Manor Farm; the southern wall of the churchyard looks out over the fields and paddocks to the north of the farm. Further eastward, the wall gives way to a fence and hedgerow, running down to the narrowly pointed western end of the site, near the junction of Church Lane with Saltby Road.

Overall, then, the churchyard is a long triangular shape, around 425m east to west and 62m north to south at its widest, along the eastern side. The ground level within the churchyard is up to a metre higher than the road surface, with the churchyard wall acting as a revetment. The difference in levels is less marked on the eastern and southern sides, and disappears downhill towards the western tip of the site.

The main gateway opens from Saltby Road, just over half way along the northern side of the churchyard. A slightly curving gravel drive runs southwards from the gate, beyond the western side of the tower, to meet a more or less clearly defined grass path. This path runs past the porch of the church and onwards to the east.

The church building (Photos 1-3)

The oldest part of the present church building that can be confidently dated is the lower part of the tower, which has round-arched windows, capped on the outside of the wall by monolithic pointed-arched lintels, giving the appearance of gothic lancet windows. This suggests a late eleventh-century date during the transitional period between the Norman and Early English style. The tower presumably abutted the west end of a contemporary nave, though it is not clear

whether any of the fabric of this earlier building has survived the subsequent re-workings of the main body of the church.

In the later thirteenth century, an aisle was added to the south side of the nave, and the chancel was extended. The porch was added to the south aisle in the fourteenth century, when the upper stage of the tower was also added. A buttress on the south aisle may also have been added at this time. These additions are in dressed limestone, unlike the earlier work, which uses fossiliferous ironstones in irregular courses between freestone quoins.

In the fifteenth century, the arcade between the nave and aisle was rebuilt and the nave roof raised by the insertion of a clerestory of three windows on each side. The steeply sloping profile of the earlier roof-line is visible on the east face of the tower.

Very little further work was done on the church until a programme of restoration, undertaken in the early 1880s. The nave and chancel were re-roofed, and parapets added to the roofs of the nave, chancel and aisle. Two new additions were made to the south side. An organ chamber with a south-facing gable end was added to the east end of the aisle and, adjoining to the east, a small vestry was added to the chancel wall. The organ chamber is now used a storage room.

The churchyard

The grass track running past the porch, although poorly defined, seems to have been a long-standing feature of the south side of the churchyard as the headstones and other grave-markers all respect it. To the south of the track, opposite the eastern window of the aisle, a stone cross, of Anglo-Saxon date is unique in Leicestershire. This had been removed after the reformation and was lost until the early eighteenth century, when it was recognised during ditch-clearing work, serving as a footbridge over a nearby dyke, and duly restored to the churchyard.

Beyond the cross, ten or twelve regular rows of headstones continue eastward. The headstones are either slate or local limestone, the preservation of the slate stones being far better than those of limestone, on many of which the inscriptions are no longer fully legible. The inscriptions, where readable, generally show dates or death in the late eighteenth or first half of the nineteenth century.

A plan of the churchyard on the wall of the vestry, undated but perhaps drawn in the 1960s or 70s, shows ten rows to the west of the cross, but there are fewer now surviving in this area (Photo 12). Some may have been deliberately cleared, either to provide a parking area or because they had been disturbed by the roots to the two large trees in this area, making them unsafe.

North of the grass path, in the area immediately to the south of the chancel, vestry and old organ chamber, headstones are closely spaced in rows. Beyond the east end of the chancel, the pattern of rows of headstones continues across the width of the churchyard, almost to the eastern boundary wall. Memorials are otherwise much sparser in the northern part of the churchyard.

To the west of the church, there are a few scattered memorials in the region between the end of the church and the gravel driveway. On the far side of the driveway, more recent graves run part way down the slope, those towards the lower end including some newly dug.

Construction work monitored

Following a short site visit on the 16th February 2017, construction work was monitored on five more days between 20th February and 1st March. The renewal of the drains followed repair work to the gutters and downpipes from the roofs. There are seven downpipes from gutters on the south side of the building and three on the north. These had emptied into grids set in brick silt traps, short lengths of pipe conducting the water away into the surrounding soil.

The brick surrounds of these old gullies were removed using a pneumatic breaker and new silt traps were installed in 500mm-deep hand-dug pits (Photo 6). Drain pipes, 100mm in diameter,

were then laid from each of these gullies, connecting to main drains on the south and north sides of the church building (Fig 2). The trenches to hold these drain pipes were machine-dug using mini-digger fitted with a 150mm-wide toothed bucket. These trenches were nowhere more than 550mm deep, the natural slope of the ground allowing a sufficient fall to be achieved along the length of the drains without much increase in their depth below the surface. As excavated, the trenches were typically less than 250mm wide at the base and 350 to 450 mm at the ground surface.

The drains were positioned to avoid any visible grave markers, although in places, notably at the south-eastern corner of the aisle, this involved squeezing the trench through narrow gaps between headstones (Photo 5).

At the west end of the church, the main southern drain turned northward past the tower and joined the main northern drain (Photo 24). The combined drain continued northward (Photo 26), discharging into a 900mm-deep concrete-lined manhole, acting as the main silt collection chamber (Photo 25). This, in turn, fed into a 1100mm-deep, 2.40m by 2.90m soakaway pit (Photos 27-30).

The overall layout of the new drains can be deduced by the positions of rodding eyes installed where the pipes change direction, the manhole cover over the silt collection chamber, and an inspection chamber over the junction of the two main drains.

Observations

The deposit sequence was seen to be generally similar throughout, with a fairly loose, rich loamy topsoil or turf layer, around 250mm deep, over a paler reddish-buff silty clay, containing angular shaly inclusions. Because of the nature of this brashy subsoil, it was not easy to tell if the ground had been disturbed, or to distinguish cut features in the sides of the pipe trenches, though the density of graves, particularly to the south of the building, would suggest that the ground had been extensively reworked.

South of the chancel, vestry, organ chamber, aisle and porch

There were very occasional fragments of disarticulated human bone throughout the drainage trenches on the south side of the church (Photos 4, 7-9, 11) but the region where the drains from the vestry and the eastern end of the organ chamber discharge into the main southern drain (Photos 7, 9) produced a substantial assemblage of human remains. In all, 157 bones or bone fragments were retrieved from this area. This total included 70 cranial fragments, probably representing at least two skulls. There were five fragments of mandible, paired humerus and ulna shafts, tibia and fibula shaft fragments, two matching clavicles, seven vertebrae, five phalanges, and scapula and numerus rib fragment within this assemblage (Photos 33-35).

The distribution of bone elements, the presence of matching paired bones and absence of any obvious duplicated bones, and the overall similarities of size and robustness suggest that most of these bones were from a single skeleton. However, a second skull seems also to have been present, judging from the quantity of cranial fragments.

These remains were at no great depth, with the main concentration of skull fragments being no more than 280mm below ground surface. The bones were not seen to be articulated, although there was some pattern to the way they were buried, with the skulls at the eastern end of the deposit and the other bones extending to the west.

The same region of the site also produced a humerus shaft from a neonate or young infant. Other finds from this area included a bird bone, the distal end of a right tibiotarsus, probably from a member of the crow family and very plausibly a forerunner of the rooks that nest noisily in the churchyard beech trees. A single sherd of Midland purple pottery, dated to the mid-

fifteenth to sixteenth century (Photo 31) was recovered from the drainage trench running south from the chancel.

A corroded ferrous metal object, 182mm long, 8mm thick and tapering from a maximum width of 22mm, found just to the east of the angle of the aisle and the porch, is probably an old knife blade (Photo 32 top). A strip of lead, 220mm long, 6mm wide and 2mm thick, from the same area, is likely to have been fitting for a roof slate. Neither of these metal objects is readily datable. Five pieces of human bone were also recovered from this area included fragments of two ribs and two hip bones.

A second piece of pottery, a body sherd from a medieval green-glazed vessel from the thirteenth or fourteenth century (Photo 3), was retrieved from the drain trench where it passed in front of the porch. A corroded ferrous object, either a nail or broken off bolt, was recovered from the same part of the trench (Photo 32 left), along with three human bone fragments, including a piece of tibia shaft.

North side of the church

The simpler plan of the north side of the church allowed an unhindered main drain, with short spurs running from three gullies, below the downpipes from the chancel roof and either end of the nave roof. The lack of extant grave markers close to the walls also simplified the design of the drains here (Photos 10, 21). Notably, no human bones, nor any artefacts were seen in any of the drain trenches in this part of the churchyard.

West side of the church, including silt collection chamber and soakaway

There were local concentrations of the disarticulated human skeletal remains where the southern drainage trench passed the south-western corner of the porch and south of the tower, thirty-nine fragments in all, including a sternum, thirteen pieces of skull, a tibia shaft and a radius, clavicle, phalanx and seven pieces of rib.

Wholly unexpected, a buried grave slab was uncovered during the excavation of the drainage trench between the south-west corner of the aisle and the corner of the tower (Photos 15, 17-20). This was roughly aligned with the southern light of the western window of the aisle, 2.80m from the aisle wall and 2.50m from the southern wall of the tower. It was covered by around 200mm of soil and turf, and there was no indication of its presence visible on the surface.

The grave slab is 1.77m long, measured along its centreline but is slightly asymmetric, the left side, when viewed from above, being 1.72m long and the right side 1.80m. Tapering from 0.52m wide at the top to 0.41m wide at the bottom, it is up to 140mm thick. The upper face has a square-sectioned chamfer, 30mm deep, all round the edge.

The face has an incised decoration of a simple expanded-arm circular cross-head and shaft. The cross-head is 230mm in diameter and the shaft is 1.20m long, tapering slightly along its length from 38mm wide at the top to 28mm at the bottom. A short cross-piece, 131mm wide and 42mm deep, forms the foot of the shaft; the shape and dimensions of this foot is reminiscent of the top of the handle of a garden spade.

Around 1.20m to 1.40m from the top of the slab, there is a pre-existing area of damage, probably caused by frost cracking, where irregular areas of the surface have spalled off. From half-way along the left side, and angled diagonally upwards, a line of fresh damage is the result of the initial encounter with the mini-digger. Otherwise, the grave slab is in good condition, probably as a consequence of its relatively deep burial.

Stone grave slabs of trapezoidal shape, used to seal and protect graves, were used from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, or perhaps longer. However, this example is probably from the early twelfth century. The most likely date is in the range AD 1100 to 1150, as the chamfered edge is characteristic of this period and the expanded-arm, or Maltese style, cross was fairly commonly

used in the eleventh and twelfth centuries before the 'bracelet' cross style became more common in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Aleks McClain, pers comm).

The grave slab was probably laid on the surface above the grave, and was buried by a combination of worm action and of overgrowth of turf, over the intervening centuries.

Other finds from the western end of the church include a cross of ferrous metal, probably cast iron (Photo 22). This was recovered from the drain trench just to the north of the silt collection chamber. A broken off finial from the gable end of one of the roofs, or part of an elaborate grave surround are possible interpretations. It is likely to date from some time in the nineteenth century.

There were also five corroded ferrous metal nails from this part of the churchyard: two from south of the tower (Photo 32, centre right), two from west of the tower (Photo 32, centre left), and one from the silt collection chamber (Photo 32, right). These are not readily datable but at least some appear to be hand-made, presumably forged by the village smith before industrial manufacture became commonplace. It is tempting to interpret these finds as coffin nails, but in the course of centuries of repairs, alterations and additions to the building, many nails could have been lost in the churchyard.

The excavation for the silt collection chamber, 1.10m square and 0.90m deep (Photos 23, 25), produced twenty-nine human bone fragments including thirteen pieces of cranium, the distal end of a humerus and eleven ribs. Continuing to the north-west (Photo 26), it was the scarcity of finds that was most notable. In particular, the excavation of the large pit, 2.90m long by 2.40m wide and 1.90m deep, for the soakaway (Photos 28-30) produced no human remains nor any artefacts.

Discussion and conclusions

The grave slab, of probable early twelfth century date, is a significant find, and it is recommended that this should be published, possibly as a note or short article in an appropriate journal.

The presence of the Anglo-Scandinavian cross in the churchyard, implies that this was a sacred site before the earliest construction phase of the present building. However, there were no artefacts that could be dated earlier than the grave slab, of probably early twelfth-century date, and the archaeological record maintained its silence about any earlier land use.

Ground disturbance resulting from digging of the new drains was fairly limited and much of it was confined to deposits that had been previously disturbed, either by digging of graves or possibly by earlier construction or maintenance work. This reworking would easily account for the small quantities of scattered human bone found throughout the trenches to the south of the church. Any ground disturbance in a long-established churchyard would be expected to yield human bone from early disturbance.

However, the assemblage of human bones collected from the junctions of the main drain with drains from the south-eastern corners of the chancel and vestry is more than would be accounted for by its accidental inclusion in the backfill of a later intrusion. These bones did not appear to be articulated, although most of them seem to be from a single individual. Most parts of the body, especially the upper body, are represented in this assemblage, with no obvious duplications. Although no attempt was made to reassemble the cranial fragments, their quantity might suggest that a second skull had been buried alongside the more substantial remains of the first individual.

The most plausible explanation for this assemblage is that they were from a skeleton, and parts of a second skeleton, disturbed while digging a later grave. They seem to have been carefully collected and reburied by the gravedigger. The shallowness of this group of bones is noteworthy; this part of the churchyard, to the south of the chancel, seems to have been the most heavily used and burials and the wish to avoid disturbance of earlier remains may have resulted in

progressively shallower burials. Or it may simply be the case that re-burial of disturbed remains was not considered to require excavation to as great a depth as regular interments.

The general overall pattern of the observations has relevance to any future work that may need to be carried out in the churchyard. In particular, the work has confirmed that the density of burials conforms to the common pattern of the southern and eastern parts of churchyards having been far more popular than the north and west. In the case of Sproxton, the contrast between the southern and the much more austere northern aspects of the church, as well as the slope of the ground, is likely to have accentuated this preference.

Archive

In addition to a copy of this report, the documentary archive consists of photographic indexes, and digital photographs. No artefacts have been retained for deposition with the archive. The grave slab has been repositioned within the church, between the central piers of the arcade between the nave and aisle.

The other artefacts are from unstratified deposits and have little archaeological significance, but the iron cross and the two pottery sherds may be of some local interest or educational value and it is hoped that these also will be kept in the church.

All of the skeletal remains have been returned to the churchwardens for reburial.

With the approval of the clients, a copy of this report will be uploaded to the OASIS website of Archaeological Data Service (ADS).

Acknowledgments

Network Archaeology acknowledges the support of Sproxton Parochial Church Council and we would like to thank Alex Ford of CEL, Keith Hamilton of DarntonB3 Architecture, and the drainage sub-contractors for their help and co-operation during the watching brief.

We should like to record particular thanks to Aleks McClain of the University of York, for her discussion of the grave slab, and to Jane Young for identification of the pottery sherds.

References

Lingard, C. 2017. St Bartholomew's Church, Sproxton, Leicestershire: Archaeological Method Statement, Network Archaeology, Lincoln

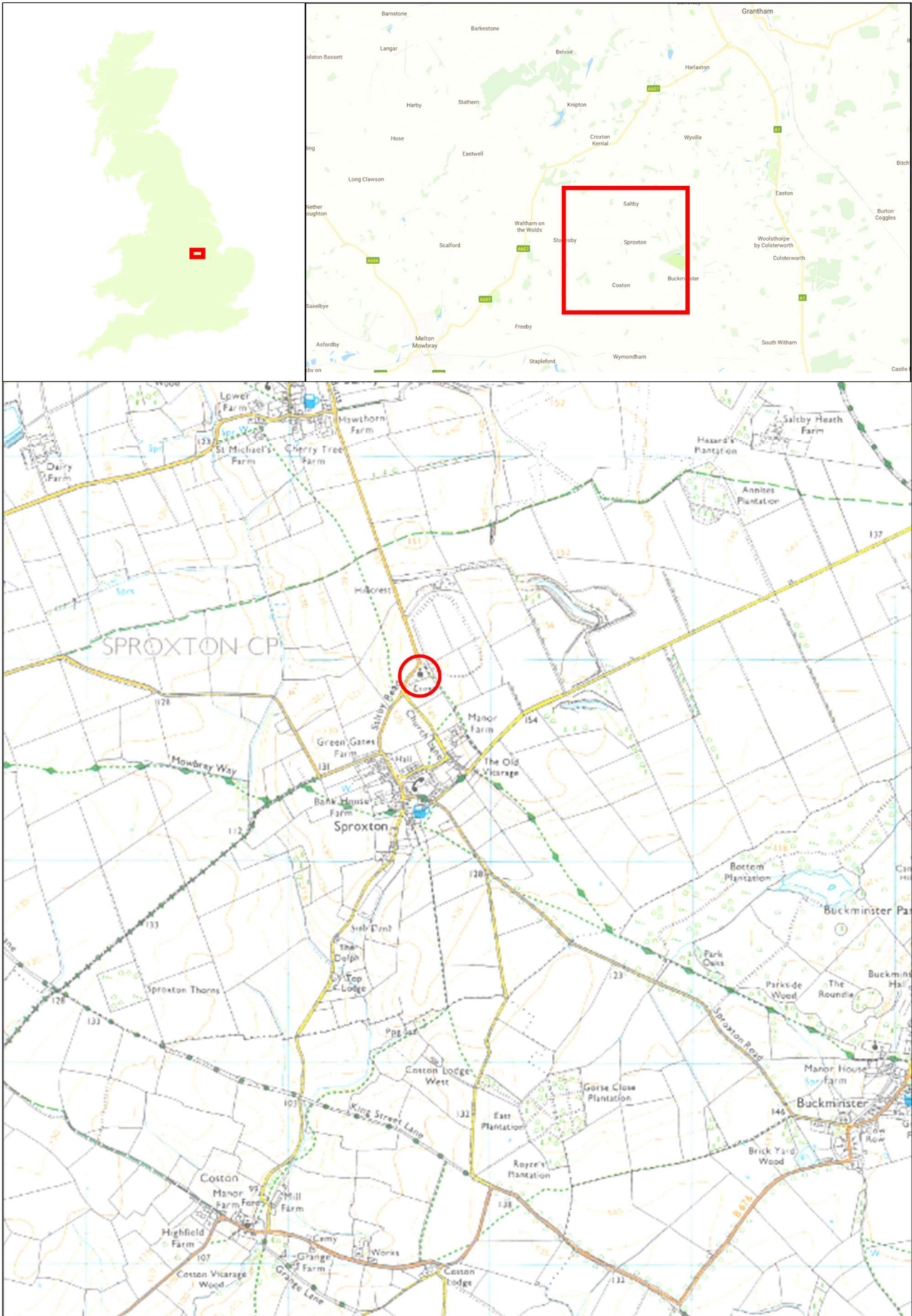


Figure 1: Location of St Bartholomew's Church, Sproxtion, scale (main map) 1:25,000

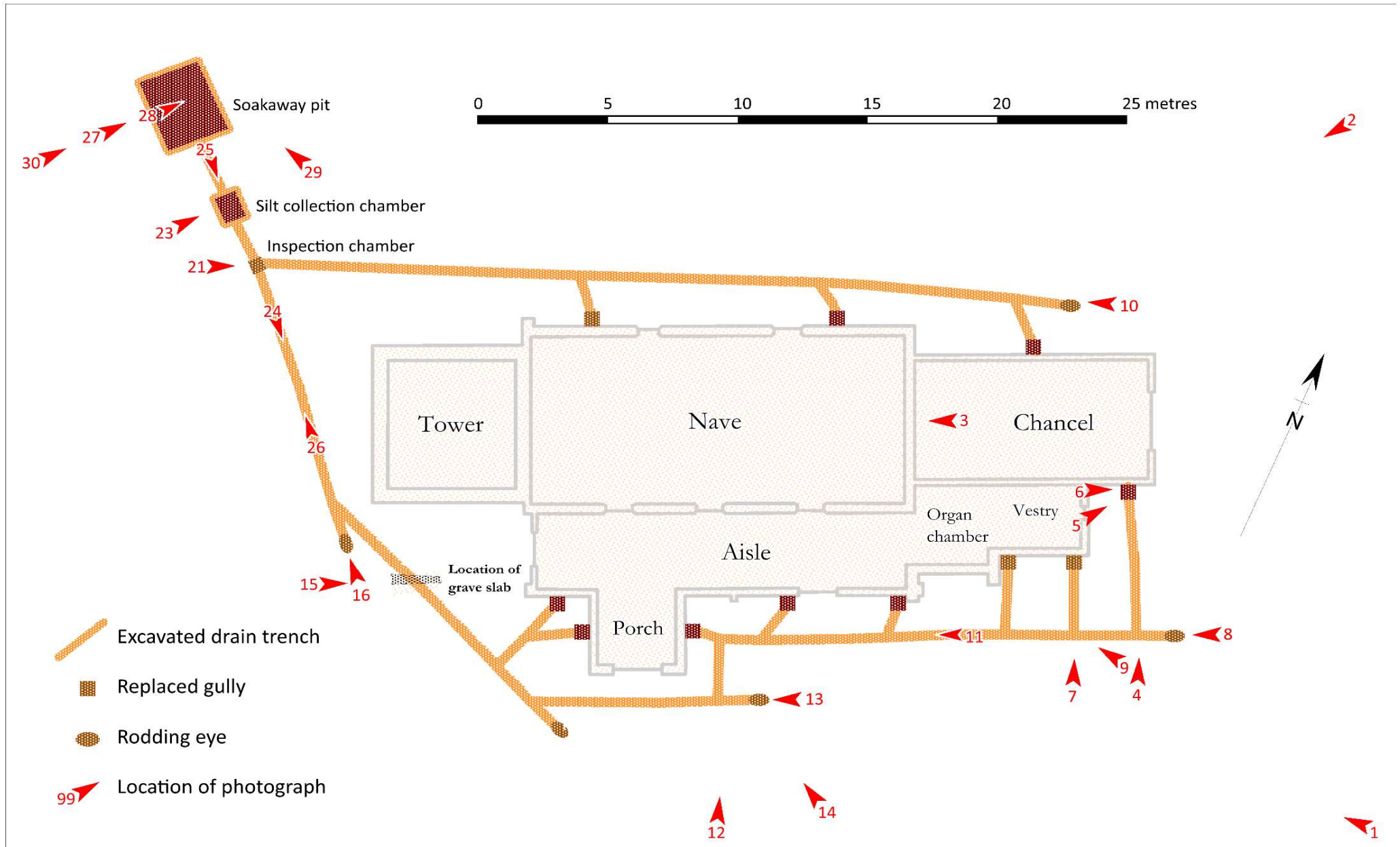


Figure 2: Plan showing layout of the drains as installed, in relation to the structure of the church, scale 1:200



1: The church viewed from the south-east, showing the tower, nave and chancel, with the later additions of the aisle, organ chamber and vestry built onto the south side.



2: The church viewed from the north-east, showing the windowless north wall of the chancel and the single window and blocked door in the north wall of the nave, below the clerestory level. The sparsity of memorials north of the building is also clear



3: The interior of the nave looking west towards the tower



4: Trench for the drain from the south side of the chancel: looking north



5: The corner of the vestry, showing the closeness of the headstones to the building here, looking north-east



6: Hand-dug pit to take the trap below the corner of the vestry, looking east



7: Trench for drain from corner of vestry looking north



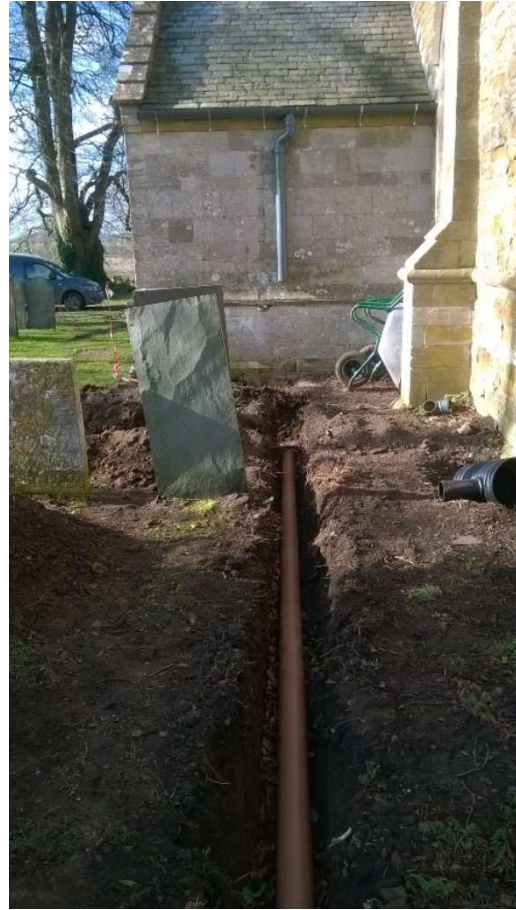
8: Trench for main drain along the side of the aisle, looking west



9: Trench for drain from gully below downpipe from organ chamber gutter, looking north-west



10: The trench for the main drain along the north side of the chancel and nave, looking west



11: The main drain along the south side of the aisle, towards the porch, looking west



12: The south side of the church during the installation of the drains, showing the Anglo-Scandinavian cross, side on, on the right, and the relative sparsity of other memorials in this part of the churchyard, in comparison with the area to the east



13: The trench for the main drain passing south of the porch, looking west



14: The porch during excavation of the trenches, looking north-west



15: The area to the west of the aisle, showing the line of the drain trench and the area where the grave slab was buried, looking east



16: The trench for the drain leading to the silt collection chamber and soakaway, looking north



17: Overall view of the grave slab immediately after it had been displaced away from the construction work, trowel = 238mm



18: Detail of the expanded arm cross



19: Detail of the 'spade handle' foot of the cross



20: Detailed view of the chamfered edge of the grave slab



21: Excavated trench along the north side of the church, looking east



22: Cast iron cross, found while digging the trench just north of the silt collection chamber, trowel = 238mm



23: Excavated 900mm-deep pit to take silt collection chamber, looking east



24: Pipe partially laid for main drain across west end of church, looking south-east



25: Partly installed concrete-lining of manhole for the silt collection chamber, to north-west of the tower, looking south-east



26: View of the trench to the junction of the south and north drains and the excavated pit for the silt collection chamber and main soakaway beyond



27: Part of west-facing side of 1.10m-deep pit for the soakaway, looking east



28: West-facing section of 1.10m-deep pit for the soakaway



29: North-west facing view of the pit for the soakaway pit, showing its location behind the headstone for the grave of John Edward Brown, died 11th May 1919, and in relation to the slope down to the driveway. The more recent graves in the eastern part of the churchyard are visible in the background beyond the driveway



30: The north side of the churchyard viewed from the soakaway pit



31: Pottery sherds: medieval Green-Glazed ware (left) and late medieval Midland Purple ware



32: Ferrous metal finds: knife blade and nails



33: Paired human humerus bones from drains south of the vestry



34: Assortments of skull fragments from south of the vestry



35: Fragmentary human bone including mandible, clavicles and ribs from south of the vestry

Appendix: OASIS summary page

St Bartholomew's Church, Sproxton; installation of new drains in the churchyard - Network Archaeology Ltd

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Versions

View	Version	Completed by	Email	Date
View 1	1	Richard Moore	richardm@netarch.co.uk	30 March 2017
View 2	2	Richard Moore	richardm@netarch.co.uk	26 April 2017

Completed sections in current version

Details	Location	Creators	Archive	Publications
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	1/1

Validated sections in current version

Details	Location	Creators	Archive	Publications
No	No	No	No	0/1

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Boundary file submitted?	No	Boundary filename
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