

External excavations at St. Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks

Watching Brief by Oxford Archaeological Unit - May to July 1994
Archive Report - 1st Draft

Introduction

A certain amount of external excavation was required in order to construct a stairwell and a series of lightwells to serve the undercroft. Three lightwells are to be situated on the north side of the church, and three lightwells and a stairwell on the south. The strong likelihood of archaeological and human remains in these areas required the presence of an archaeologist during excavation.

The trenches were excavated by machine to a depth of approximately 1.20m, when shuttering was put in. The remainder was then dug out by hand. Within the constraints of the watching brief it was possible to draw sketch sections and elevations as well as a plan of each trench and, when possible, wall foundations were cleaned up and photographed. However, the speed of excavation and the necessity of avoiding delaying the contractors made it impossible to judge the number of burials in each trench or to retrieve many finds. It was also almost impossible to ascertain the existence or nature of any coffin remains.

Trench 1

Dimensions: 2.00m x 3.00m.

The stratigraphy consisted of a thin layer of topsoil (9012) approximately 0.15m thick and containing small cobble stones, overlaying a homogenous silty sand deposit 1.20m thick (9019). This appeared to be grave earth and contained a large amount of bone including 4 complete skulls. Much of this was probably charnel, although it is likely that there were medieval graves towards the bottom. Rapid removal by machine made it difficult to ascertain the number of burials in the trench, but some articulated remains were observed. No evidence for coffins could be seen associated with these early burials, although a few late coffin handles were recovered from the trench. Natural sand (9020) lay below this grave earth deposit. The trench was excavated to a depth of approximately 3.40m below ground level.

Features

A shallow stone wall (9013) ran east-west through the trench just below the ground surface about 1.30m away from the church wall. This was 0.30m deep and 0.30m wide. It continues through trenches 2 to 5 and so appears to run the length of the church. The ground level rose slightly to the south of this wall, with all the visible graves in the cemetery situated to the south of it. It is likely therefore to be the remains of a retaining wall for the cemetery, and is probably no earlier than 19th century.

The wall appeared to cut the trench for a Victorian or later drainage pipe (9014) which ran east-west through the trench, just to the north of wall 9013 and about 0.20m below ground

level.

Brick Vaulted Grave

A grave (9018) covered by a stone grave slab, and with a headstone (illegible) lay immediately to the south of this trench. The headstone and slab were removed to allow machine access to the trench. At a depth of about 1.20m it was discovered that this grave contained a brick vault (9017), which projected 0.15m into the trench. The top of the vault collapsed causing a section collapse which exposed most of the grave. It was therefore necessary to remove the contents of the vault and largely dismantle it. The grave was approximately 2.20m long and 0.95m wide and reached a depth of 2.50m. The vault itself was 1.30m high, and was constructed of bricks with a vaulted roof. Three rows of bricks lay across the base of the vault to support the coffin (9053). This was wooden and contained one adult burial. A brief examination recovered three coffin handles, but no evidence for a coffin plaque could be found. There were no sign of any copper studs.

Wall Foundations

Part of the foundation for the south wall of the church (9021) and for one of the buttresses (9023) was revealed. Part of the wall foundation had been knocked away from inside the church during the present development. The wall foundation was approximately 1.30m deep (below the present ground surface). At the base it extended out about 0.35m from the wall of the church. The foundation was constructed of large irregularly shaped blocks of stone in irregular courses. The face was fairly smooth, with the stones firmly mortared together. The buttress foundation was of similar build but with a much brighter yellow mortar. It extended out 0.20m eastward from the buttress and 0.80m southward. It reached a depth of 1.10m below ground level. There was a straight joint between the buttress foundation and the wall foundation.

Finds

5 large bags of charnel
1 complete skeleton (from brick vault)
Several fragments of plain tile
1 fragment of pot
1 fragment of glass
7 coffin handles (3 from brick vault)
1 iron door knocker

Trench 2

Dimensions: 2.00m x 3.00m

A large part of this trench had been previously excavated by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust as part of their evaluations in 1992. Consequently much of the fill consisted of backfill (9029) and contained nothing of significance. This backfill was approximately 0.80m thick, below which natural sand (9020) was reached. Beyond the area of the Canterbury trench grave earth (9031) was found. This reached a depth of approximately 1.00m below ground level in the north facing and east facing sections. At least two burials could be seen in the sections. One of these may have been associated with two coffin brackets which were recovered. Not surprisingly very little chanel was retrieved from this trench (approximately half a large bag). An area 1.30m x 0.60m in the north-west corner of the trench was filled with concrete underpinning. This had been put in from the interior of the church and had obliterated any archaeology in this area. The trench was eventually excavated to a depth of about 3.30m below ground level.

Features

The shallow stone wall running east-west in Trench 1 also appeared here (9026), as did the Victorian drainage pipe (9027), which ran underneath the wall at the west end.

Brick Vault

As in Trench 1 a vault projected 0.20m into the trench on the south side. This related to a grave (9036) just to the south of the trench, from which the headstone (illegible) was removed. The grave was 2.15m deep and contained a vault (9035) 0.95m high. The coffin shaped vault was constructed of brick and roofed with stone slabs. On discovering that this vault contained an intact lead coffin (9034), it was decided to reduce the size of the trench slightly to avoid the necessity of breaking up the vault and removing the coffin. The coffin had a wood covering decorated with iron studs. The coffin plaque showed the burial to be that of a Reverend Arthur Henry Glasse, who died in Sevenoaks in 1847 aged 4(0) years. There is no record of a vicar of this name at St. Nicholas Church. After noting the name on the plaque the vault was resealed.

Wall Foundations

A collapse of the east facing section revealed part of one of the buttress foundations (9037), fairly roughly built and flush with the face of the buttress above. There appeared to be a straight joint between this and the wall foundation (9032). As in Trench 1 part of the wall foundation had already been knocked away from the inside of the church. When the remainder was cleaned up it showed what appeared to be two separate builds, one on top of the other. The earliest (at the eastern end) consisted of unshaped rounded stones irregularly coursed and with no apparent mortar. The remainder partly overlay this and was constructed of much more regular, squared off stones with a smooth face and solidly mortared together. Neither of these builds was exactly the same as that in Trench 1, although the latter was closer. The total depth of the foundation was 1.30m, and at the base it extended out about 0.30m from the church wall.

Finds

½ large bag of charnel
Several pieces of tile
2 iron coffin brackets
2 iron nails
1 coffin handle plate

Trench 3

Dimensions: 2.00m x 3.00m

The stratigraphy consisted of a layer of topsoil (9039) approximately 0.20m thick, containing small cobble stones, overlaying a deposit of grave earth (9043) 1.00m thick. This contained a large amount of charnel, including 5 skulls, and some coffin fittings. Some of the bones appeared to come from intact burials, but this was difficult to ascertain while excavation by machine continued. An area of soil approximately 0.60m x 2.50m on the north side of the trench had already been removed from the interior of the church, destroying any archaeology in this area. Below the grave earth lay natural sand (9020). The trench was eventually excavated to a depth of 3.50m below ground level.

Features

The east-west wall found in Trenches 1 and 2 continued in Trench 3 with the same dimensions (9040). The Victorian drainage pipe also continued underneath it (9041). An additional intrusion into the grave earth could be seen in the east facing section (9052). This consisted of a silty soil containing frequent stones, mortar fragments and tile (9051). This may have been associated with the buttress foundation (9044) which lay to the west of the section. Close investigation of this deposit was not possible due to the difficulty of access to the trench prior to shuttering.

Graves

One grave could definitely be identified directly below the wall (9040) and drainage pipe (9041), and at a depth of 1.20m below ground level. This was noticed due to the large amount of brown staining in the soil indicating the remains of a coffin (9055). This was

briefly examined, and a large number of coffin nails (18) recovered, in addition to most of the bones. There also appeared to be some fragments of metal coffin plaque which were too decayed to retrieve.

Charnel Pit

In the north-east corner of the trench at a depth of approximately 1.20m below ground level was a large deposit of densely compacted charnel (9047), 1.20m x 1.00m and 0.20m thick. This appeared to be cut by both the grave containing the decayed wooden coffin (9055) and the buttress foundation (9044) to the east. Three large bags of charnel and a few coffin nails were recovered.

Post-Medieval Grave

As in Trenches 1 and 2 a grave (9050) lay just south of the trench, towards its west end, its presence indicated by a headstone and footstone. The former was removed to allow machine access. This grave was approximately 2.60m deep and extended 0.20m into the trench. It did not contain a vault, but the remains of one side of a wooden coffin (9057) were observed, and 3 coffin handles were recovered.

Wall Foundations

The foundations for the church wall in this trench (9046) were 1.20m deep, and extended out 0.20m from the wall at the west end, and about 0.35m at the east end. At the west end the foundation had a very smooth face and consisted of fairly neat courses of regularly shaped stones, firmly mortared together. Towards the east end, however, the foundation gradually became more roughly built and more irregularly coursed. It appeared to be of one build with the buttress foundation on the east (9044), which was very similar in build. The buttress foundation extended out 0.40m westward from the buttress and 0.10m southward. It was 1.20m deep.

Finds

8 large bags of charnel (3 from charnel pit)
Several pieces of plain tile
26 iron coffin nails (18 from single burial in wooden coffin)

1 fragment of clay pipe stem
4 coffin handles (3 from late grave to south of trench)

Trench 4

Dimensions: Approximately 6.00m x 2.50m

This trench was dug on the south side of the church in order for a stairwell to be constructed. As in Trenches 1 to 3 the basis stratigraphy consisted of a thin layer of topsoil containing small ironstone cobbles (9081) overlaying an early grave earth deposit 1.10m thick (10023) which contained a large amount of human bone. Natural sand lay below this deposit. The trench was excavated to a depth of 2.60m below ground level at the northern end, sloping up gradually to a depth of 0.60m below ground level at the southern end.

Features

The shallow stone wall seen in trenches 1 to 3 continued into this trench (10016) where it turned and ran southward to meet up with the buttress (10029). The Victorian drain pipe also continued into this trench (10018) where it followed the course of wall 10016 running directly underneath it. Another Victorian drain (10026) ran into this trench, possibly joining up with

10018.

Charnel Pit

A charnel deposit (10024) was found at a depth of approximately 1.80m below ground level. It consisted of a large amount of densely compacted bone with some iron coffin fittings in a sandy matrix.

Post-Medieval Graves

Three graves (10020, 10022, 10028) extended partially into this trench to the east of wall 10016 which they seem to respect. These graves were all marked by headstones which were removed to allow machine access. They were probably 18th or 19th century in date. The fills consisted of a dark brown sandy silt and were indistinguishable in section. No coffin wood was visible in any of these graves although some coffin handles were recovered from their vicinity.

Wall Foundations

The wall foundation visible in this trench (10011) was constructed of squared blocks of sandstone, ironstone and ragstone arranged in rough courses and with a fairly smooth face, very similar to that seen in Trenches 2 and 3. It was 1.30m deep and extended 0.20m out from the wall. In the north-west corner of this trench the eastern wall of the south porch joined onto the church wall. There appeared to be a straight joint between these two foundations although the porch wall foundation (10013) was of a very similar build to 10011. This would suggest that the porch was added on to the south side of the church at a later date. This wall foundation was 1.50m deep. A buttress at the southern end of the porch wall had a foundation (10029) which was of one build with the wall foundation 10013. However it was more roughly constructed. It was not fully exposed and its depth is unknown.

Finds

5 large bags of charnel
4 iron coffin handles
1 iron coffin bracket
3 iron coffin fittings from charnel pit
2 fragments of lead
1 clay pipe stem
1 fragment of pot

Trench 5

Dimensions: 1.00m x 1.50m

This small area was excavated on the south side of the church for the construction of a duct. As in Trenches 1 to 4 the stratigraphy consisted of a layer of topsoil (9058) containing small

cobble stones, overlaying medieval grave earth (9063). This contained some charnel, including one skull. The trench was excavated to a depth of 1.30m without reaching natural sand.

Features

A continuation of the shallow stone wall seen in Trenches 1 to 4 was visible in the north facing section (9068).

At the east end of the trench, brickwork could be seen underneath the wall and extending out from it for 0.20m (9060). This was 0.90m deep. It may be related to the Victorian brickwork visible at approximately this point inside the church, or to the construction of the Amhurst vault in the south-east corner of the church.

Graves

One definite grave (9062) 1.00m deep could be seen in section. The fill of this was slightly darker and more friable than the surrounding grave earth.

Wall foundations

The wall foundation visible in this trench (9059) was constructed of large irregular blocks of ragstone and sandstone with no visible mortar. It extended out 0.20m from the wall. The buttress foundation (9063) was of a similar build to the wall foundation, although slightly more regular. It extended out 0.40m eastward from the buttress. There appeared to be a straight joint between the two foundations. Neither of the foundations was fully exposed and their depth is therefore unknown.

Finds

½ large bag of charnel

Trench 6

Dimensions: 1.90m x 2.60m

A diagonal strip across this trench had already been excavated and recorded as Trench A. Heavy rain caused much of the trench to collapse into the body of the church as soon as excavation began. The precarious nature of the sections made access to the trench impossible and therefore all measurements are approximate only. In addition, the nature of the deposits in this trench were uncertain. However, it appears that the upper deposits were fairly late backfills and make up layers. The topsoil (9001) overlay a very sandy make up layer (9006), which in turn overlay a burnt sand and stone dump layer (9007). These may be contemporary with the construction of the boiler room and vestry in the early 20th century (see below). Below 9007 was a sandy silty layer (9008). This seems to have filled up most of the trench to a depth of 1.10m and would appear to be a make up or backfill after alterations made to the wall foundations in this area (see below). A thin layer of residual grave earth (9075) 0.40m thick lay below this deposit, from which a small amount of charnel was recovered. Natural sand lay below this. The trench was excavated to a depth of 3.60m below ground level.

Features

The remains of wall 9005 which had been observed in Trench A could be seen in the south facing section. This was approximately 0.50m deep and ran east-west for 0.90m from the west end of the trench. From Trench A it was known that this wall turned and ran north-south toward the church. The remains of mortar on the church wall foundation suggest that wall 9005 joined up to it, although due to the collapse of the trench this could not be confirmed. It seems likely that this wall was a fairly late retaining wall for the cemetery, similar to that found on the south side of the church which ran east-west along the length of the church.

Wall Underpinning

The lower part of the original wall foundation (9073) appears to have been replaced by later underpinning (9074). This consisted of stone and mortar extending 0.30m outwards from the upper foundation. This underpinning rested on a layer of horizontal grave slabs, on one of which a date of 1711 could be seen. The reason for this addition is unknown. The gravestones used may have come from this corner of the cemetery, since other early 18th century graves are found just to the north and west.

20th Century Vestry and Cellar

In the early 20th century a vestry with a boiler room beneath it was added to the north wall of the church. The brick wall of this boiler room (9070) was visible in the west facing section of this trench. It reached a depth of 2.90m below ground level.

Graves

One grave could be seen in the south facing section (9069). This was marked on the surface by a headstone and footstone and is likely to have been 18th century. It was slightly truncated by wall 9005. The section shows that the headstone and footstone must have been removed and then replaced during subsequent 19th or 20th century disturbances.

Wall Foundations

The upper 0.80m of the wall foundations below ground level (9073) consisted of regular blocks of ragstone very similar to, and flush with the wall above. Close examination and cleaning was not possible due to the inaccessibility of the trench.

Finds

½ large bag of charnel

Trench 7

Dimensions: 1.80m x 2.70m

Stone paving slabs (9088) largely covered the surface of Trenches 7 and 8 extending out 1.05m from the church wall. The remainder of the surface of the trench was covered with turf (9078). Below this, the upper part of the trench to a depth of approximately 1.50m below ground level was taken up with a Victorian or later trench containing a large brick drain (9091) and a number of ceramic drainage pipes. This had largely removed the backfill of the construction trench for vault 9003 which could be seen only in the west facing section. It also appeared to have truncated cut 9095 which ran along the south side of the trench (see below). These late intrusions meant that only a very small amount of medieval grave earth 0.70m deep and 0.20m wide (9083) remained in this trench, from which a small quantity of charnel was recovered. Natural sand lay below this deposit. The trench was finally excavated to a depth of 3.80m below ground level.

Features

A circular brick drain with a stone cap (9091) was situated near the centre of the trench. It measured 0.90m in diameter at the base and was 1.30m deep. It lay within cut 9090 which also contained ceramic drains running to 9091 from the south-east corner of the trench and from 9091 into Trench 8 to the west. These are likely to be Victorian or later in date.

The top of the wall foundation 9086 had been covered and squared off with a hard mortar deposit (9089). This ran the length of the trench and continued into Trench 8. Layers of slate covered the mortar on the top and to the side and appeared to intrude into the wall foundation beneath the wall. The use of slate suggests that this may be an attempt at damp proofing.

Brick Vault

A large brick vault (9003) with a decorative stone plinth on top lay just to the north of this trench. The south face was visible in the south facing section. A bricked up arch was visible in this face. This may have been used for subsequent interments, since the upper part of the tomb would have been very difficult to remove. The vault reached a depth of 1.20m below ground level. It remained intact.

Wall Foundations

The north wall foundation in this trench (9086) reached a depth of 1.50m below ground level and extended out 0.45m from the wall. It was constructed of large irregular blocks of stone bonded with a soft yellow sandy mortar. There was no regular coursing, and the face was fairly rough. The buttress foundation (9084) was of one build with the wall foundation and reached a depth of 1.80m below ground level. It extended out 0.70m westward from the buttress and, like the wall foundation, was constructed of very large irregular blocks of stone bonded with a soft yellow mortar.

Finds

- ½ large bag of charnel
- 1 fragment of glass
- 1 fragment of plain tile
- 1 iron object (part of a drain cover?)

Trench 8

Dimensions: 2.40m x 2.10m

The stratigraphy in this Trench was very similar to that found in Trench 7. Much of the upper part of the trench, below the topsoil 9096 and stone paving slabs 9088, was taken up with a cut (10002) containing drainage pipes and brick drains. This reached a depth of 1.00m below ground level at the eastern end of the trench. Below this was a grave earth deposit (9099) approximately 0.30m thick which contained at least 3 intact burials as well as some charnel. Below this deposit lay natural sand. The trench was excavated to a depth of 3.10m below ground level.

Features

Two square brick drains (10001 and 10009) could be seen in the west facing and east facing sections respectively. The first was 1.30m deep and the second 0.90m deep. One ceramic pipe ran east-west between these two drains while another ran from a drain in the south-west corner of the trench to 10001.

The mortar covering for the wall foundation seen in Trench 7 continued into this trench (10004) still covered with slate.

Wall Foundations

The wall foundation in this trench (10005) was very similar to that in Trench 7, being constructed of large irregular blocks of stone bonded with a soft yellow sandy mortar and

reaching a depth of 1.50m. It appeared to be of one build with the buttress foundation (10007) which was also 1.50m deep. The wall foundation extended out 0.45m from the wall and the buttress foundation extended out 0.30m eastward and 0.60m northward from the buttress.

Finds

2 large bags of charnel

Conclusions

South Side of the Church

The same basic stratigraphy was common to all five trenches. This consisted of topsoil, overlaying medieval grave earth, overlaying natural sand. The grave earth was cut by the church wall foundations.

In addition a shallow stone wall appeared in every trench. This was 0.30m wide and ran east-west approximately 1.20m from the church wall, turning to run north-south in Trench 5. All the late graves which extended into the trenches appeared to respect this wall, suggesting that at one stage it formed a retaining wall for the cemetery, since overgrown. Also overgrown, and found in all the trenches was a cobbled surface between the church wall and the approximate position of the retaining wall. A ceramic drainage pipe ran east-west through trenches 1 to 4, partially underlying the stone retaining wall.

The grave earth contained a number of burials, although the exact quantity could not be ascertained. The amount of charnel recovered from these trenches suggests a fairly high density of burials. Some of these burials are likely to have been cut by the foundation for the church wall. It was not possible to ascertain whether any of the burials found in this area

were interred subsequent to the construction of the church wall, or whether this area was left clear of graves.

Wall Foundations

Although not all of the wall foundations were exposed, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the development of the church. A straight joint between the south wall of the church and the east wall of the south porch suggests that this porch was a later addition. It was also possible to confirm that the part of the church wall assumed to have been a transept was in fact added to on the east and west. In addition, the two easternmost buttresses appear to have been added on to the wall rather than being of one build.

North Side of the Church

Despite the much greater degree of late disturbances on this side of the church, it appears that the same basic stratigraphy of topsoil, medieval grave earth and natural sand is found as on the south side. Very little of the medieval grave earth remained in the three trenches excavated due to the presence of a number of drains and drainage pipes, alterations made to the wall foundations, and the addition of a vestry and cellar in the early 20th century. There also appears to have been a certain amount of ground make-up on this side.

The possible remains of a cemetery retaining wall similar to that on the south side were found only in Trench 6. This had similar dimensions to the wall on the south side, and ran northwards from the church wall, then turning to run westwards parallel to the church wall for at least 0.90m. It is not known if this wall continued any further westward since Trenches 7 and 8 were not wide enough to have picked it up.

Wall Foundations

The section of wall foundation exposed in trenches 7 and 8 appeared to be all of one build, including the buttress foundations. The relationship with the foundation in Trench 6 was not exposed, but it did appear to be differently constructed. The bottom 0.30m had been replaced or added on in the 18th century or later. The reason for this is unknown. Additions had also been made to the top of the foundations in Trenches 7 and 8, a mortar deposit covered with slate having been placed over the top. The reason for this is uncertain but it may have been an attempt to prevent water getting into the foundations.

As a result of the watching brief, a certain amount of information regarding the wall foundations was gathered. This supplemented and clarified information gained from the internal excavations. As regards burials it can be stated that medieval graves did exist outside the existing church walls, but it was not possible to gain any information concerning the number of these or any details about the burials.

External Trenches to the North of the Church

Two diagonal trenches were dug by the contractors through the cemetery to the north of the church. These were orientated north-west - south-east, and were 0.20m wide and 0.60m deep. The two trenches were planned, photographed and briefly recorded during the period of the excavation of the choir vestry (April - May 1994).

Trench A

This ran north-westwards for approximately 4 metres from the corner of the north wall of the church and the 20th century vestry. It consisted of a layer of topsoil (9001), 0.15m thick, overlaying a yellowish silty sand deposit (9006). A thin layer of burnt sand and gravel (9007) lay below this, which in turn overlay a mid brown silty sand deposit (9008). At the north-west end of the trench the topsoil overlay a darker siltier deposit (9009), which appears to be grave fill.

The trench contained some structural remains. Two stone walls (9005) ran approximately east-west and north-south, joining together in the south-west facing section of the trench. They appeared to be cutting the grave fill (9009) to the north. The walls were 0.30m wide and were excavated to a depth of 0.45m.

Further examination of these deposits and features was possible when a lightwell trench was excavated in this area (see Trench 6).

Finds

Lead frag x 1	9005
Lead frag x 1	9006
Glass frag x 1	9006
Pot x 1	9008
Glazed tile x 1	9009
Pot x 1	9009

Trench B

This trench continued on the same alignment as Trench A, after a gap of about 1.00m. It was approximately 6.00m long, and consisted of a 0.20m layer of topsoil (9002), overlaying a brown silty sand deposit (9010, 9011) 0.40m thick which may be grave earth. It also contained the remains of an east-west orientated stone wall (9004) approximately 0.25m wide and uncovered part of vault 9003 (see Trench 7 for a description of this).

Finds

Fe nails x 2	9010
Pot x 3	9010

SEVENOAKS, ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, STAIRWELL FOR THE UNDERCROFT

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, on behalf of the parish church. The watching brief began on 18th July and finished on 19th July 1994. An area of approximately 35.25 sq. m. is to be redeveloped, as a stairwell for the undercroft, next to the new vestry and boiler house.

On arrival an area of 22 sq. m. had been removed by machine and the presence of a large brick storage-tank only left an area of 2.5 sq. m. which could be observed for the survival of significant archaeological deposits. This was reduced further by the presence of a manhole ((10), 1m x 0.75m x 1.20m) and a drain running NE from the manhole.

In section there were four main layers, the earliest appeared at first to be an intact wooden coffin with copper studs and an iron handle ((9), sf 1000) set in dark brown sandy silt (0.25m thick). It was, however, the fragments of a disturbed burial, probably debris of the construction of the manhole (10). Layers (7) and (8) (0.40m thick respectively), which overlay layer (9), contained brick, stone and tile fragments with the occasional fleck of charcoal. These were also associated with the construction of the manhole. The topsoil (6) (0.20m thick) covered both of these layers.

Further monitoring of the area was not felt to be required due to observed ground disturbance from the construction of the tank storage and the manhole.

Olivia Pierpoint
OAU
July 1994

Excavations at St. Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks

Watching Brief by Oxford Archaeological Unit - 2nd November 1994

Introduction

A single trench (Trench 9) was excavated to the north-east of the church in order to construct a soakaway. The area appeared to lie outside the limits of the eighteenth and nineteenth century cemetery. A watching brief was required in order to ascertain the presence or otherwise of any archaeological deposits and/or human burials.

The trench measured 1.20m square and reached a depth of 5m. It was excavated rapidly by machine and, due to the instability of the edges, shuttering was put in place immediately. There was sufficient opportunity to observe and briefly sketch the four sections. The location of the trench in relation to the church was also plotted.

Description

The upper part of the trench consisted of a sand and concrete backfill (10031) for the construction cut (10032) of the adjacent stairwell. This reached a maximum depth of 0.70m below ground level at the southern edge of the trench. Below this what appeared to be medieval grave earth (10033) could be seen to a depth of approximately 1.60m below ground level. A quantity of human bone was recovered from this deposit. This is likely to have been articulated although the speed of excavation made this difficult to ascertain. No evidence for coffin remains was observed. Natural sand (9025) occurred below the grave earth.

No finds were recovered from this trench, and no evidence was observed for any archaeological structures or deposits other than medieval grave earth.

Contexts from Trench 9

<u>Number</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Description</u>
10031	47-50	Redeposited sand and concrete backfill. Up to 0.70m thick. Extends over whole of trench. Fill of cut 10032.
10032	47-50	Construction cut for stairwell to north of church. Constructed during the present development. Slopes downwards to the south. Maximum depth 0.70m.
10033	47-50	Mid brown silty sand. Maximum depth 1.50m. Contained human bone, possibly articulated. Probably medieval grave earth.

Excavations at St. Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks

Watching Brief by Oxford Archaeological Unit - 14th and 15th November

Introduction

A 4.00m x 5.50m square shaft (Trench 10) was required to be excavated to a depth of 7.00m at the east end of the church in order to construct a pump house. The likelihood of archaeological and human remains in this area meant that an archaeological watching brief was required. The excavation was closely observed and sketch sections drawn as well as a trench location plan.

Description

The stratigraphy consisted of a thin layer of topsoil (10034), 0.10m thick which overlay a sandy deposit (10035) which had the appearance of medieval grave earth. At least two articulated skeletons were observed in the sections and more may have existed. The speed of excavation made further identifications impossible. No coffin remains were observed in this deposit. This grave earth deposit was found to a maximum depth of 1.70m below ground level and directly overlay natural sand (9025).

Structures

Two brick vaults were uncovered within this trench. The first (10037) extended partially into the trench with only the south west corner visible, showing it to be a brick structure covered with stone slabs. It was not necessary to further disturb this vault. However it could be seen to contain at least one decayed wooden coffin.

The second vault (10040) was found in the south east corner of the trench. It was constructed entirely of bricks with a vaulted roof. The total destruction of this vault was necessary, and consequently professional body removers were contracted to remove the three lead coffins which it contained. Detailed examination of these coffins was not undertaken. However, they were all adult burials, and the lead plaque on the topmost coffin showed the burial to be that of: Rev Nathaniel Evenson, who died on the 12th May 1786, aged 32 years. These three coffins are to be reinterred, along with all charnel recovered, within the backfill of this trench.

Other Features

Two further brick structures were observed within this trench. The first (10047), seen only in the west facing section, was visible as a brick lined cut. It may have been a burial vault, which had been previously emptied and backfilled. No evidence for any burial was evident within it, and the backfill (10046) consisted of some building debris mixed with silt. Alternatively, this feature could have been a brick lined cut with some other function.

The other brick feature (10048) was a hollow octagonal structure found in the north west corner of the trench. This measured 1.90m x 1.90m and was 1.80m deep. It was entirely removed by machine and did not appear in any of the sections. Its function and date are unclear, although it may have been connected with the water supply since water pipes appeared to run into it. A large quantity of charnel was found below this structure and around its sides indicating that its construction disturbed a number of existing graves.

A cut (10043) containing a plastic water pipe was visible in the west facing section.

Wall Foundations

A small section of the foundations of the eastern wall was revealed. It was not possible to clean up or examine this closely. However the foundations appeared to be approximately 1.20m deep and to be constructed of large irregular stone blocks.

No finds were recovered from this trench. A quantity of charnel was recovered, which (as mentioned above), will be reinterred in the backfill of this trench.

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Contexts from Trench 10

<u>Number</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Description</u>
10034	51-54	Loose dark brown sandy loam. 0.10m thick. Topsoil.
10035	51-54	Mid brown silty sand. Up to 1.60m thick. Contains charnel and articulated skeletons. Probably medieval grave earth.
10036	51, 52	Brown sandy silt. 1.90m thick. Fill of cut 10038 for vault 10037.
10037	51, 52	Cut for vault 10037. 3.75m deep.
10038	51, 52	Brick vault roofed with stone slabs. 1.90m high. Only partially exposed in the north-east corner of the trench and full dimensions therefore unknown. Appeared to contain at least one burial in a wooden coffin, but full investigation was neither possible nor necessary as the vault was not required to be further disturbed.
10039	52	Brown sandy silt. 2.00m thick. Fill of cut 10041 for vault 10040.
10040	52	Brick tomb with vaulted roof. 2.35m high. 1.10m wide. 2.20m long. Contained three adult lead coffins which were removed by professional body removers. The plaque on the upper coffin showed the burial to be that of the Rev. Nathaniel Evenson, died 12th May 1786, aged 32 years. The coffins were resting on 3 rows of bricks.
10041	52	Cut for vault 10040. 3.80m deep.
10042	52	Fill of cut 10043. 0.70m thick. Includes plastic water pipe. Of fairly recent date.
10043	52	Recent cut for water pipe. Seen in section only. 0.70m deep. 0.75m wide.

<u>Number</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Description</u>
10044	54	Wall foundations for east end of church. Approximately 1.20m thick. Constructed of large irregular stone blocks. Further details unknown as access to the foundations was not possible.
10045		Octagonal brick structure. 1.85m x 1.85m. 1.80m deep. Possibly connected with the water supply since water pipes led into it, but may have had another purpose originally.
10046	52	Light brown silt and building debris. Fill of cut 10047. 1.95m thick.
10047	52	Cut for brick structure 10048. 1.20m wide. 1.95m deep.
10048	52	Brick lining within cut 10048. 1.00m high. 1.20m wide. Seen in section only. Possible vault or brick lined shaft which has been emptied and backfilled.