HORSPATH (OX) HSGC

ST GILES CHURCH, HORSPATH: WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION.

In the July of 1992, work commenced on improvements and repairs to St. Giles Church in Horspath, situated south of Wheatley in the green belt, approximately five miles from the centre of Oxford.

The work was devised by John Perryman Associates of Beaumont Street, Oxford and was carried out by Wooldridge and Simpson of Frenchay Road, Oxford. The work comprised the repair and refurbishment of existing drains and the digging of a channel for a new drain, paralleling the north wall of the church.

St. Giles dates from the twelfth century, although there is comparatively little of the original fabric remaining. The area affected by the work is confined to the north side of the church, where a channel .50m wide was dug parallel to the wall, after the removal of the existing concrete drainage channel. Three test pits were also dug in order to expose the drains being renovated and replaced.

STRATEGY.

All the digging was by hand and was carried out by the contractor. The three test pits were the first to be dug and these subsequently were inspected for archaeological deposits and/or finds, as were their spoilheaps.

RESULTS.

TEST PIT 1.

The section revealed a layer of rich topsoil, .19m deep, overlying a clayey subsoil .18m deep. The subsoil contained several large pieces of stone, both sandstone and limestone. They occurred entirely at random and lay throughout the layer. The subsoil overlay a silty moist gray clay loam. No features were seen here and no finds were recovered either from the test pit or from the spoilheap.

TEST PIT 2.

The section here revealed a profile similar to that seen in Pit 1; the topsoil was of the same consistency and reached a depth of .17m. It overlay a subsoil .11m thick, identical to the subsoil seen in Pit 1. This layer also incorporated inclusions of stone and, in this case, random patches of mortar. Similarly layer 3, a moist gray clay loam, also contained random inclusions of mortar. No features were seen and no finds were recovered.

The contractor also exposed the drain's soakaway here. Constructed of brick and sandstone it extended at least .80m beyond the bottom of the test pit.

TEST PIT 3.

The section here revealed a profile similar to that seen both in pits 1 and 2. the topsoil was of the same consistency and reached to a depth of .16m. It overlay a subsoil .15m thick and of the

same consistency as that seen previously; it contained brick pieces and mortar flecking, although to a markedly lesser extent than that encountered in pits 1 and 2. The subsoil overlay a third layer, .26m thick, consisting of a moist silty clay loam. As with 2/3, random inclusions of mortar were seen in this layer.

Under this occurs a deposit of roof slates and tiles, laid to the north of the underground drainpipe. They were seen in the section,those in situ being too far under the modern concrete of the above ground rainwater channel for further investigation to be possible. Several examples were sampled from the contractor"s spoilheap and taken back to the Unit for further examination.

PIPE TRENCH (context number 4).
The trench was dug to a depth of .51m. The northern section, as far down as it went, revealed a profile similar to that seen in pits 1, 2 and 3. The southern section showed five courses of stone between the base of the above ground blocks of stone in the north wall and its footings. Intermittent charcoal flecking was observed mixed in with 4/2, the mortar/rubble layer in the pipe trench. Also pieces of roof tile similar to that found in pit 3 were seen to be incorporated into the lower courses of the foundations and the footings themselves.

The portion of the pipe trench dug to the north of the fifteenth century tower (context number 5) revealed massive, ragged foundations. The butresses at each corner of the tower are supported by piers, large single blocks of stone approximately 1 metre across at their northern face. All of the foundations and footings consisted of large blocks of limestone reaching to a depth of .45 metres as seen in this trench, but certainly continuing for at least one course below that. The northern part of this section is identical to that seen in the rest of the pipe trench, except for a culvert constructed of post mediaeval roof tiles and lined on the outside with small stones and pebbles.The culvert occurred at a depth of .32 metres below modern ground surface. No finds were recovered from it, nor from the rest of this part of the pipe trench.

COMMENTS ON THE RESULTS.
The presence of mortar and rubble along almost the entire length of the north wall of the church would seem to indicate some fairly large scale destruction/construction activity. We know the north wall to be nineteenth century and it is therefore probable that what we are seeing is a wide spread of rubble associated with its construction. A surprisingly wide range of finds came from the pipe trench, including very large quantities of roof tile, to which Paul Booth of the Unit has given a tentative post-mediaeval date. Also found were plaster, bone, oyster shell and a nail. However, in the absence of any more datable finds, we unfortunately cannot say which are contemporary with the nineteenth century wall and which are earlier and were disturbed and redeposited as a result of its construction.

The three test pits tell a similar story. In pit 3 the post-mediaeval roof tiles occur in a layer identifiably below those containing mortar and stone. This gives us only a relative, and therefore imprecise, date for the activity resulting in the .

deposition of the mortar and rubble. On the evidence from pit three we can say only that it occurred at some point after the mediaeval period.

The absence of useful dating evidence from the finds need not be fatal, however. The north wall is securely datable, and the re-use of post-mediaeval roof tiles in its foundations and footings would appear to indicate a link between it and the destruction debris; i.e. one was the direct result of the other. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary this would appear to be the most likely scenario. The absence of rubble and mortar to the north of the fifteenth century tower cannot, in this event, be without significance.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Any further work undertaken in or around the churchyard should be monitored for the presence of more datable finds, and for any other indications as to the date and nature of the rubble and mortar layers and the precise nature of their relationship to the nineteenth century wall.

John Dalton
OAU
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