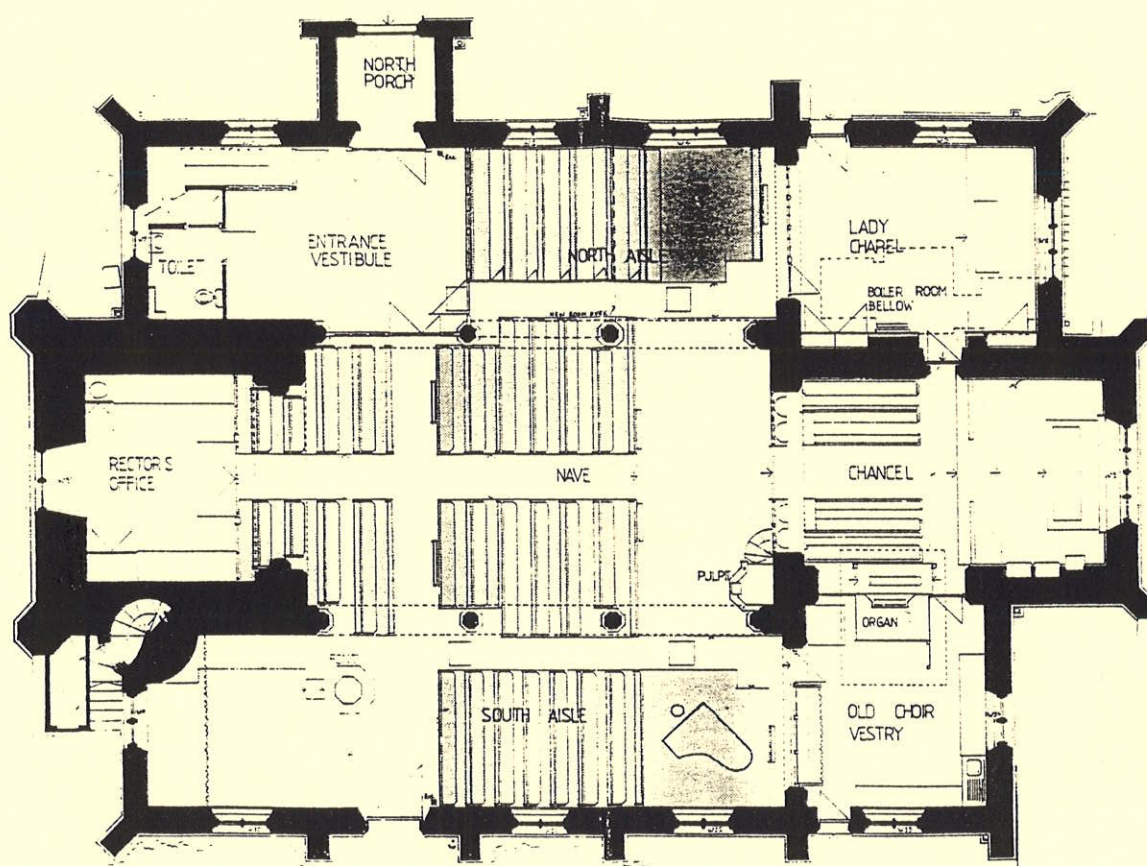# Church of St Mary-Le-More
Wallingford, Oxfordshire

Archaeological Watching Brief

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

March 1995

CHURCH OF ST. MARY THE MORE, WALLINGFORD, OXFORDSHIRE

NGR SU 60718933

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Renovation work being carried out at the Church of St Mary the More, Wallingford, involved the replacement of existing floors in the north and south aisles and chemical treatment of the floor timberwork in the nave (Fig. 1). An earlier foundation wall was discovered by the contractors during the process of removing the old floorboards and their supporting sleeper walls. A brick vault was also revealed in the nave when floorboards were removed for the chemical spraying. The project architects, J Alan Bristow and Partner, contacted the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) and requested that a monitoring visit be made so that any necessary recording could be undertaken. Examination and recording of the features was carried out during the week starting Monday 20 February 1995. The results are described in this report.

LOCATION

Wallingford, formerly in Berkshire, is one of the most important towns in the Upper Thames valley. It was among the Burghal Hideage list of defended Wessex strongholds compiled in c. AD 919. Large parts of the Anglo-Saxon defences survive in good condition, especially in the Bull and Kine Crofts along the W side of the town. A pagan Saxon cemetery was discovered to the SW of the defences in 1924, and sherds of early Saxon pottery are occasionally recovered from excavations.

The rectilinear street pattern within the defences is generally thought to be contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon defences. A castle was established in the north-east quarter of the town after the Norman conquest. By the early 13th century Wallingford contained a Benedictine priory of the Holy Trinity (in the Bull Croft), a hospital of St John the Baptist (outside the south gate), a college and chapel of St Nicholas within the castle precinct, and eleven parish churches. Only four of the latter were still in use by the middle of the 15th century, and today only three survive (the churches of St Mary the More, St Peter and St Leonard). It is possible that these were all pre-Conquest foundations, although Domesday only mentions one church (Airs *et al* 1974, 156-7). The church of St Mary the More lies in the very centre of the town, immediately south of the Town Hall in the Market Place.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (VCH 1923, 539-544)

The earliest known record of the church of St Mary the More dates to 1077-1093 when a Niel Daubeney and his wife Amice gave half the church to the abbey of St Albans. The church was passed to the priory of the Holy Trinity (a cell of St Albans) before 1160 and then to the crown following the dissolution of the priory in 1526. Cardinal Wolsey was granted the church for his college at Oxford, but on his attainder it reverted to the crown until 1853 when the patronage was transferred to the Bishop of Oxford.

The earliest visible feature of the church is the 14th century tower arch. The foundations of the tower are believed to be 14th century or earlier. The upper part of the tower was rebuilt in 1653 as a consequence of extensive damage during a thunderstorm in 1638. Only the chancel walls and west tower are medieval work; the church was completely rebuilt in 1854.

METHODS

Workmen had removed the floorboards in both aisles, and the sleeper wall in the eastern half of the south aisle, before OAU visited the site. The sleeper wall in the north aisle was removed with OAU in attendance, while that in the west half of the south aisle was left *in situ*. New sleeper walls were made in concrete, on the same alignments but narrower. The underfloor voids below the boarding contained a layer of dust, wood chippings and rubble. The contractors did not reduce the levels any further.

The west end of the south aisle was fully cleaned by OAU to expose the wall described below. The continuation of this structure through the rest of the south aisle was traced by selectively cleaning small areas along its presumed line. An attempt was made to determine whether any distinct building phases could be identified in the masonry.

The north aisle was examined rapidly, but no archaeological features or structures were seen. The level was not reduced by excavation, however, and any archaeology could therefore have been concealed by the dust and rubble.

The exposed brick vault was examined, and as full a record as possible was made. Access was difficult because only a few floorboards had been lifted.

The sleeper walls contained numerous pieces of stone as well as bricks. It was obvious that the stones were reused, probably from the medieval church. Most of the material comprised coarse undressed quarry stone, but a few ashlar pieces and/or structural elements were also noted; these were retained.

Recording followed standard OAU procedures, and walls, layers or other features were given separate identification numbers (contexts; Wilkinson 1992). An Ordnance Survey benchmark on the west face of the church tower was used to provide levels related to Ordnance Datum.

RESULTS (Figs 2-3)

Removal of the floorboards at the west end of the south aisle (see Fig. 1) revealed the lower portion of the west wall. This was offset from the flint masonry above and was of a completely different build, incorporating chalk and limestone as well as flint (context 6). Wall 6 had two courses of internal facing stones visible and would be 1.6 m wide if the external face of the Victorian wall was continuous with the original external face. The masonry was bonded with the lower portions of the circular stair turret attached to the south side of the tower.

Wall 2 lay at right-angles to and was bonded with the original western foundation wall (6). Cleaning revealed the eastward extension of wall 2 (revealed only in plan) as far as the font (approximately 5 m). The 1.05 m-wide wall was constructed of rough-hewn chalk and limestone of varying size (averaging 100 mm x 100 mm x 50 mm) with some sub-angular flint, bonded with light grey-brown sandy mortar.

The sleeper floor support walls had already been removed in the eastern half of the south aisle, and a new concrete wall had been built. Limited excavation revealed the continuation of wall 2 (here numbered as context 8). The wall had the same characteristics, but facing stones (typically 240 mm x 160 mm x 70 mm) were occasionally

present on the internal edge (see Fig. 2).

The facing stones at the south end (ie corner) of wall 6 had been removed, probably during the insertion of the brick foundation (4) of the Victorian rebuild; foundation 4 comprised hard-fired red bricks in alternating header and stretcher courses, bonded with hard mid-grey cement/mortar and turning east to continue as the foundation for the present south wall of the church. The brick measured 150 mm x 65 mm x 220 mm, and the foundation was much less substantial than wall 2. A course of fully faced chalk stone blocks was also present.

A segmented floor support wall (1) ran east-west along the earlier wall (2) at the west end of the south aisle. Wall 3 lay perpendicular to 1 immediately to the west of the font. Both walls were 0.4 m wide and 0.22 m high, consisting of rough chalk and limestone blocks, partially faced limestone (both varying in size) and occasional hard-fired red brick, typically 150 mm x 65 mm x 225 mm. The walls were irregularly coursed and bonded with hard grey-white mortar. The west end of wall 1 was cut into wall 2, while wall 3 abutted wall 1.

A section of floorboards had been lifted between the nave and north aisle (see Fig. 3) revealing an underground brick structure. It was built with red/orange-red hard fired bricks measuring 150 mm x 65 mm x 225 mm with hard grey-white sandy mortar. The structure comprised a staircase (five steps measuring 0.225 m x 1 m x 0.20 m depth) leading down to an arched vault. The entrance had been sealed with a hard mid grey concrete/mortar. The staircase and vault lay within brick retaining walls constructed around a column foundation/base. The complete extent of the vault was not discernible due to the floor support walls built onto the structure.

Seven pieces of medieval worked stone were collected. Three have faces cut at an angle and presumably derive from window sills. One includes a sunken moulding, perhaps a door rebate, and there is a fragment of crenellation. The most impressive pieces, however, are a fragment of hollowed moulding from a door or window jamb and a large piece from a pier or respond. The latter appears to have been reused at some point, as it has been cut down to form a sloping sill. No other finds were recovered.

CONCLUSIONS

It was clear that walls 2, 6 and 8 formed part of an earlier building and there can be no doubt that the masonry is of medieval date. It represents the external south wall or foundation of the medieval church, and the Victorian rebuild which involved widening the south aisle had partially removed and robbed the original work. Wall 6 was bonded with the base of the circular stair turret on the south side of the tower, establishing that the turret is also of medieval origin (if extensively rebuilt). It was notable that large cracks in the Victorian flint masonry and the interior plaster rendering focus on the junction between the medieval wall/foundation (6) and the Victorian foundation (4). The latter was inferior in build and scale, and structural stress has obviously resulted from the imbalance.

Unfortunately there was no evidence for constructional phasing within the medieval masonry. This probably reflects the limited nature of the investigation rather than a unitary build for the medieval church. It is unfortunate that cleaning and investigation could not be essayed immediately to the south and east of the font, because this is

probably the most likely area where a sequence of construction could be found. The west end of the aisle is effectively a chapel, and it is conceivable that the medieval aisle originally ended in line with the east side of the tower. The south-west chapel would then represent an addition, and this would be traceable in the medieval masonry which survives below ground. This suggestion, however, must remain speculative in the absence of positive evidence.

There is little that can be said about the brick vault. The rebuild of 1854 lengthened the nave by shortening the west end of the chancel, thus positioning the vault under the pews instead of adjacent to the chancel. The bricks suggest a late 18th or early 19th-century date. There was no information on the name/family of the vault, but parish records could be informative.

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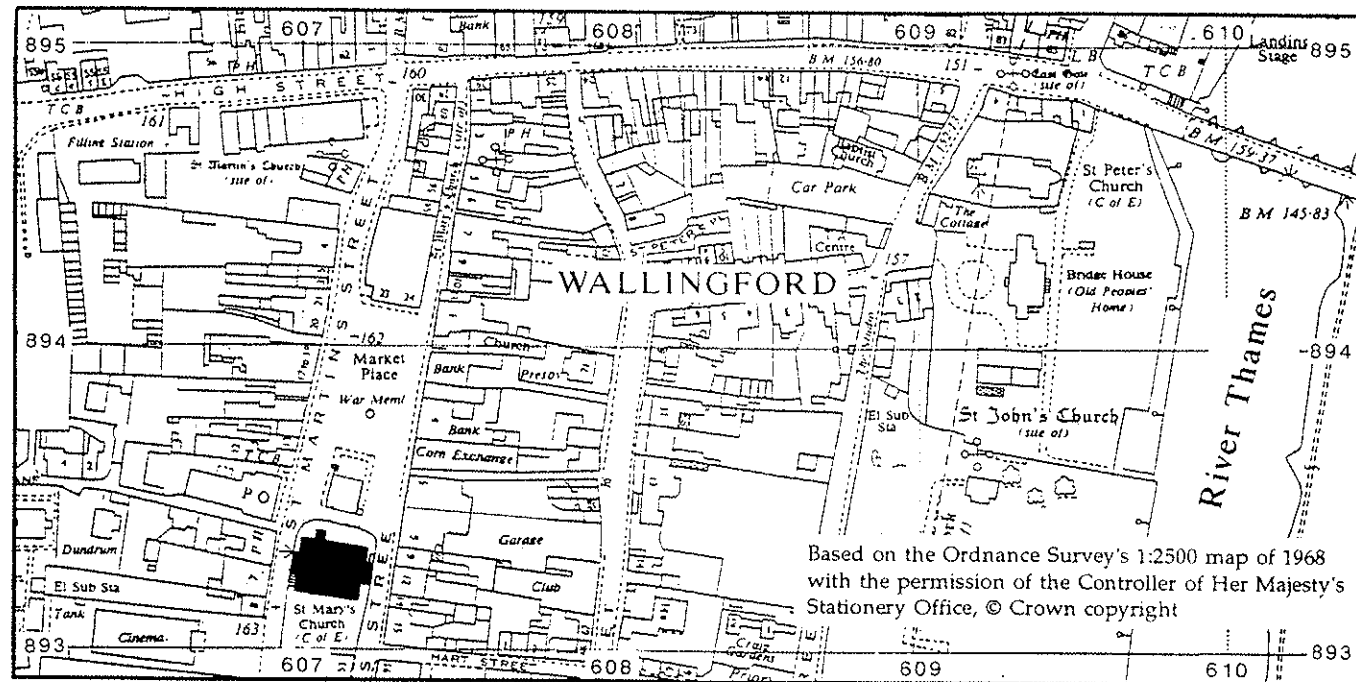
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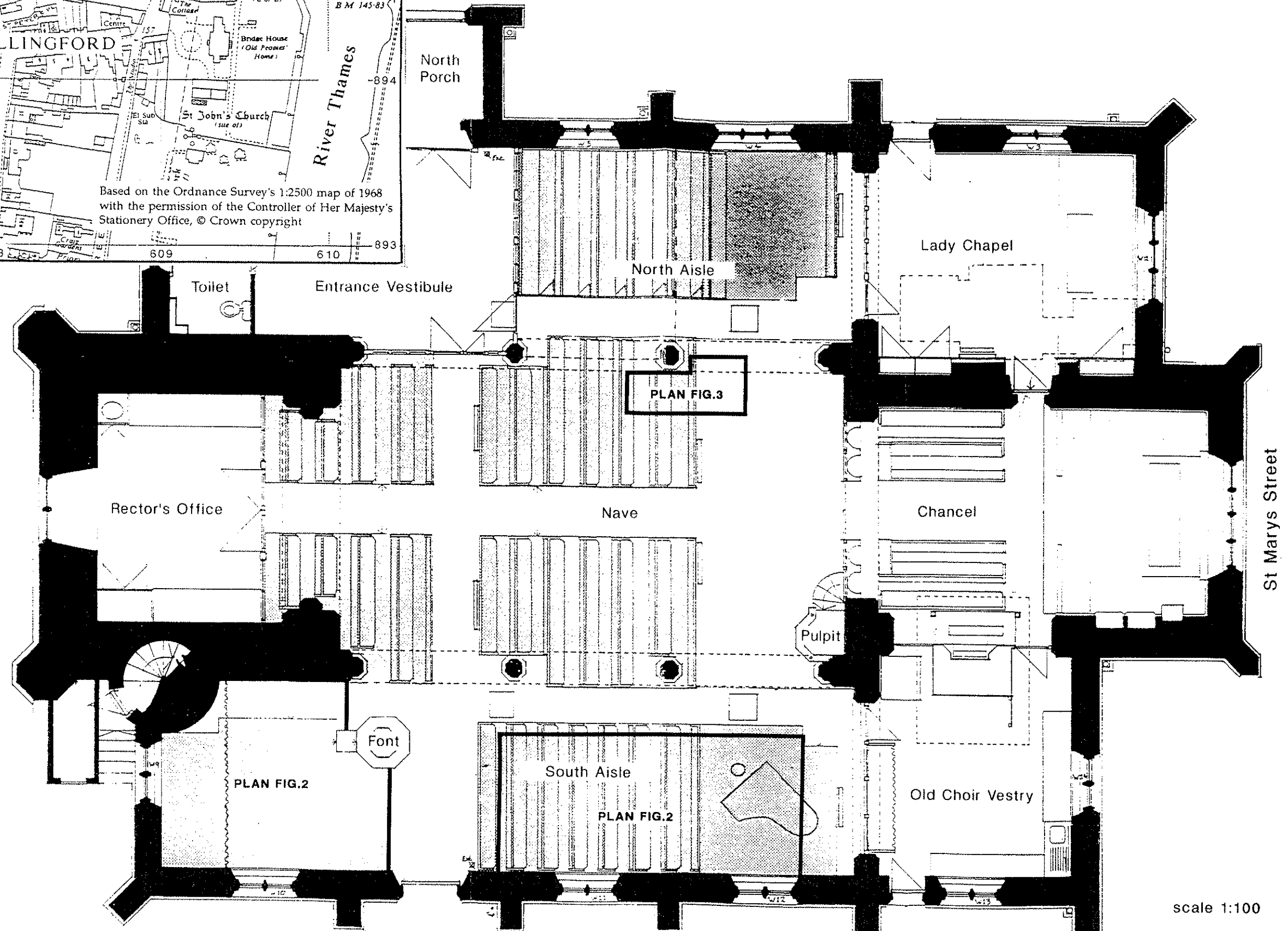
Wilkinson D 1992, *OAU Field Manual* (Oxford)

TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

Cxt	Type	Comments
1	Structure	Victorian support walls
2	Structure	Medieval foundation wall
3	Structure	Victorian floor support wall
4	Structure	Victorian foundation of existing wall
5	Deposit	Post-Victorian make-up layer
6	Structure	Existing E-W foundation wall
7	Deposit	Demolition debris, modern
8	Structure	E-W continuation of 2
9	Structure	?Victorian brick-built vault

R Brown and G D Keevill, with J T Munby (notes on worked stone)
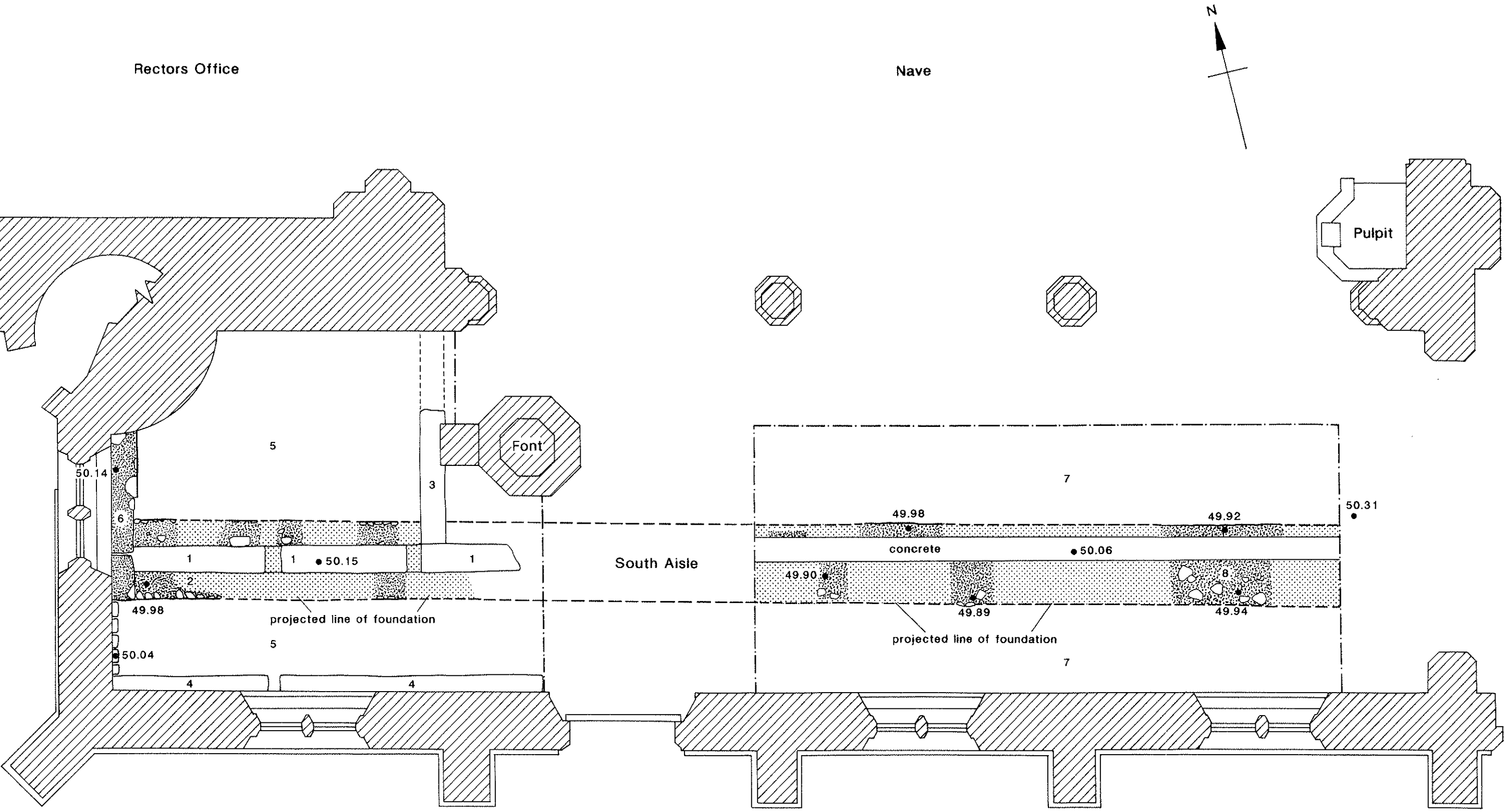Oxford Archaeological Unit
21 March 1995

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WALLINGFORD

River Thames

North Porch

Toilet

Entrance Vestibule

North Aisle

Lady Chapel

PLAN FIG.3

Rector's Office

Nave

Chancel

Pulpit

Font

PLAN FIG.2

South Aisle

PLAN FIG.2

Old Choir Vestry

St Martins Street

St Marys Street

N

scale 1:100

figure 1

Plan of South aisle

Rectors Office

Nave

N

Pulpit

5

50.14 ●

3

Font

6

7

49.98 ●

49.92 ■

50.31 ●

concrete

● 50.06

1

1 ● 50.15

1

South Aisle

49.90 ●

8

2

49.89 ●

49.94

49.98 ●

projected line of foundation

projected line of foundation

● 50.04

5

7

4

4

scale 1:50

figure 2

Plan of Nave, North-East corner

N

blocked vault entrance

stairs

arched vault

50.38

9

48.42

49.59

49.84

Nave

scale 1:50

figure 3