

# **St Michael's Church, Stewkley Buckinghamshire**

## **Report on Watching Brief**



**OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT**

**June 1995**

## ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH, STEWKLEY, BUCKS

### SUMMARY

*A watching brief during the replacement of an existing 19th century stone and concrete gully with a new 'French' drain, around the external walls of the church, failed to reveal any significant earlier structural evidence with the exception of the brick bases of two 19th century buttresses at the east end of the Chancel. The excavation of deeper trenches and soakaways in the graveyard disturbed one 19th century wood-coffined burial and revealed an 18th century brick-lined grave, which remained undisturbed. The base of a post-medieval gravestone with traces of floral carving was also located.*

### INTRODUCTION

Oxford Archaeological Unit were requested by Rev. Norman Cotton and the Parochial Church Council to undertake a watching brief during the first phase of works at St Michael's Church, Stewkley, following approval of a faculty for the work by the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Committee. The intended works can be summarised as follows:

- 1 Remove existing stone/concrete gully around the outer walls and replace with a 'French' drain. Excavate trenches and lay pipes to three new soakaway pits, each approximately 5m distant from the church walls.
- 2 Excavate trench across graveyard and lay new gas supply.
- 3 Detach pews from floor and remove boarded floor and joists in the Nave. Consolidate material below as appropriate and lay new timber floor to previous finished level.

Phase 1 was undertaken by Paul Beasley Builders during May and June 1995 and forms the basis of this report. It is anticipated that Phases 2 and 3 will commence later in the summer of 1995. The appointed architects for the work are the Thomas Rayson Partnership of Oxford under the supervision of Christopher Rayson RIBA.

Three visits were made by Robert Williams on 19th, 23rd and 26th May 1995, during the excavations around the church walls and the excavation of the trenches and soakaway pits, to record any findings and generally advise the architect and builders on the archaeological implications arising from the building work.

### BRIEF HISTORY

St Michael's Church is one of only three churches in the country built in the Norman period to have survived without any significant later additions to their original plan. The church was built about 1150 AD in the late Norman style and consists of a central Tower, Chancel and Nave with a Porch and Vestry both attached to the south side, added in 1867 and 1910 respectively. In 1862 a major restoration was carried out by the well known Victorian architect G. E. Street.

## RESULTS

The principal purpose of the phase 1 work was to replace an earlier drain with a 'French' drain around the outer walls. It is intended that this new drain would both reduce water seepage into the church through the walls, and collect and discharge water from the downpipes through new pipes into three large soakaways dug into the graveyard. The original drain, which only extended along the north and south sides, had been constructed of cut stone slabs set approximately 300mm below the ground surface with an outer concrete edging. The existing down pipes issued into catch-pits with 4" salt-glazed pipes extending into the graveyard to unknown locations. The stone and concrete gulley could have been constructed during the major restoration of 1862, although it could equally be of later date.

The original gulley was entirely removed by the builders leaving a substantial trench along the north and south sides of the church. Where necessary this trench was increased by hand excavation to 500mm wide and up to 500mm deep. Where no gulley existed, principally at the east and west ends, a new trench was hand dug to a similar depth and width, except around the modern vestry, subterranean boiler room, and across the thresholds of the west door and south porch door.

The trench was examined in detail for evidence of any earlier features but none were evident apart from two brick buttress bases described below. It was entirely excavated through a brown stony loam containing no artefacts of note. No attempt was made to clean up or record in any detail the outer exposed face of the stone foundations. It was, however, noticeable that the foundations at the west end of the Nave were significantly more irregular and protruded further away from the wall line than elsewhere.

A 3" sectional ceramic land drain, of probable mid to late 19th century date, was noted running east to west at a distance of c. 500mm away from the south wall between the porch and vestry. The purpose and projected continuation of this drain was not apparent but, since it undoubtedly predated the erection of the vestry, it may have been an earlier attempt to drain water from a downpipe off the porch roof.

During the excavation of the trench for the 'French' drain the only features located of any note were the brick foundations for two earlier diagonal buttresses at the north-east and south-east angles of the Chancel. The foundation at the south-east corner was almost fully exposed and recorded in plan. It consisted of a rectangular brick base, 1.10m wide and 1.35m long, projecting at a 45 degree angle from the corner of the walls. The depth of the foundation was not established. It had been overbuilt by four stepped courses of bricks supporting a stone-built angle buttress. The earlier brick diagonal buttress in the north-east corner was only partially exposed. It had been demolished to a lower level and had been overbuilt by seven stepped course of bricks supporting the later buttress.

Smith-Masters (1923), in his detailed history of the church, comments that brick buttresses built in 1844 were replaced by stone buttresses during the 1862 restoration. A copper plate engraving of 1776 (Smith-Masters 1923, 8) does not show any buttresses of any form supporting the corners of the Chancel. Consequently it seems highly probable that the bases located within the trench were the bases of the 1844 buttresses, which were subsequently reused as the foundations for the stone buttresses built eighteen years later.

A number of 500mm wide trenches were excavated on the north and south sides and east end

of the church to contain pipes connecting the 'French' drain with several small chambers and three more substantial soakaway pits.

The trenches ranged from 550mm to 1.15m deep to allow for the appropriate fall away from the walls. The trenches, which were excavated by a mini-excavator, were examined for evidence of any earlier features or graves. The spoil was also scanned for artefacts. A layer of stony mortar was noted at a depth of 350mm below the surface in the trench at the east end. No dating evidence was located but the layer is probably associated with the 19th century restoration. Elsewhere the trenches had been dug through a brown stony loam, noticeably clayier on the north side of the church. At no point was the underlying natural clay substrate revealed in any of the trenches. A number of human bones were located during the excavation, but no significant articulated remains were noted. It is assumed that most, if not all, of the bones had resulted from post-medieval disturbance of earlier burials during the excavation of graves over a long period of time. It was noticeable that the soil on the south side of the church contained a greater volume of human remains than that on the north side.

On the south side of the church, approximately 2 m south of the junction of the Nave and Tower, the base of a limestone gravestone, which was *in situ* but not visible at ground level, was located and removed from the trench. The stone was a maximum of 600mm high, 640mm wide and 100mm thick. The upper 160mm of one side of the stone had been cut back and showed the base of carved leaf swags. Although no inscription survived the stone is likely to have been of 17th to 19th century date on the evidence of the carved design.

A brick-lined grave was located in a trench 5.65m south of the south wall of the Nave, approximately equidistant between the Porch and Vestry. Only the centre of the grave, which was 0.95m wide, was revealed in the trench. It had been well constructed with low-pitched barrel vault constructed of eleven bricks on edge, with the highest point of the vault only 600mm below the ground surface. The bricks were 225mm long and 70mm thick, but insufficient of the grave was revealed to expose the full width of any single brick. The full depth of the grave was not exposed. The closest gravestone located just west of the grave, commemorating a member of the Tofield family and dated 1869, was both slightly off line and probably too recent to have been the gravemarker for the vault. The type of bricks and the style of the brick-lined grave suggest a late 17th or more likely 18th century date (Litten 1991, 221).

Although it was originally intended that one of the soakaways was to be excavated to the south side of the brick-lined grave, it was relocated, following discussions with the architect and vicar, to the north to avoid any further disturbance to the burial.

## CONCLUSION

The watching brief failed to reveal any earlier structural features, with the exception of the foundations of two 19th century buttresses. Apart from a considerable number of human bones, disturbed by previous grave digging in the churchyard, the only significant burials revealed were a 19th century wood-coffined burial and a brick-lined grave, of probable 18th century date, on the north and south sides of the church respectively. No artefacts of any note were either observed or collected. The broken base of the gravestone, removed from one of the trenches, was left in the churchyard. The drawn, written and photographic record of the watching brief will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum.

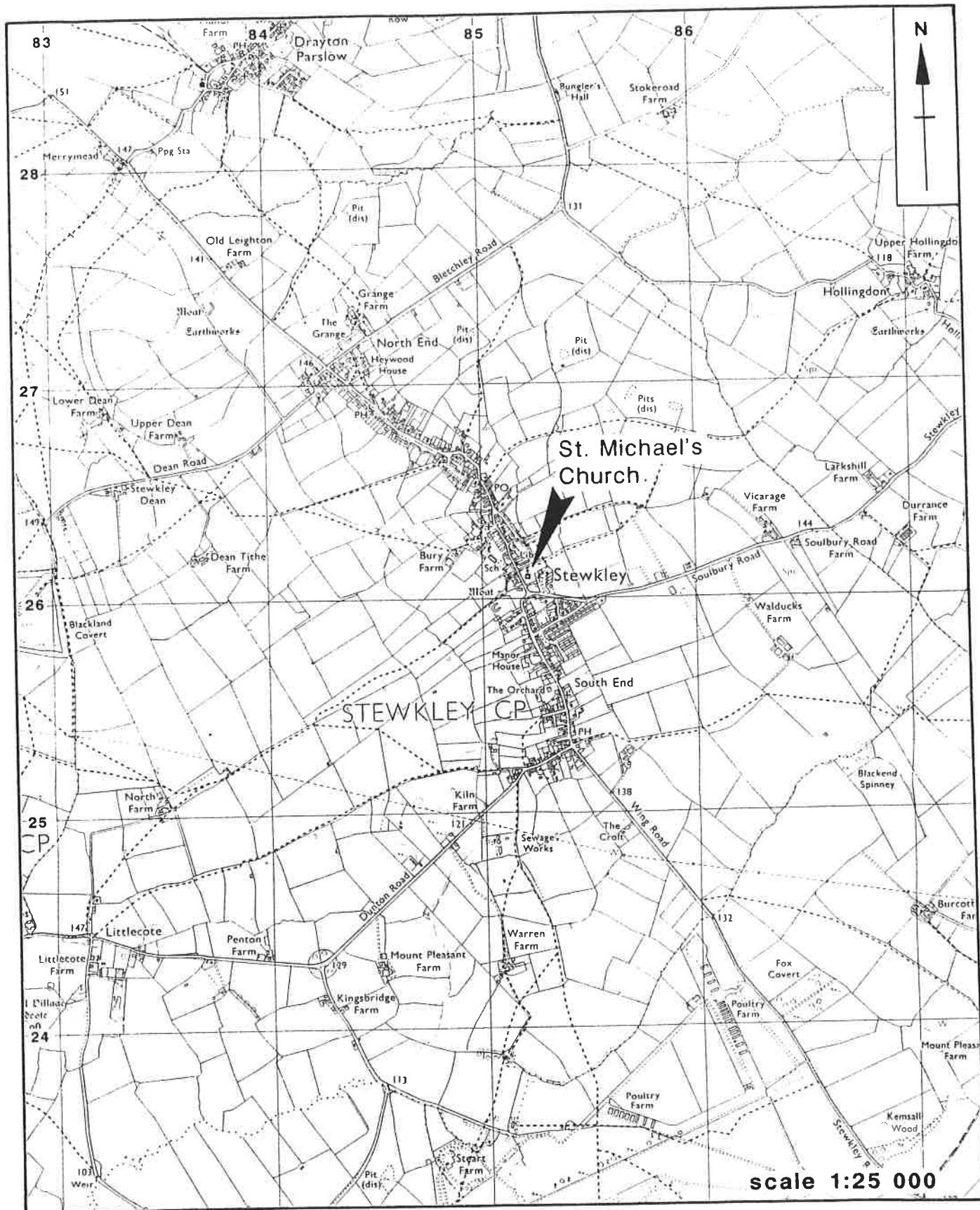
## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Litten J. 1991 *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450*

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SP 82/92

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Figure 1

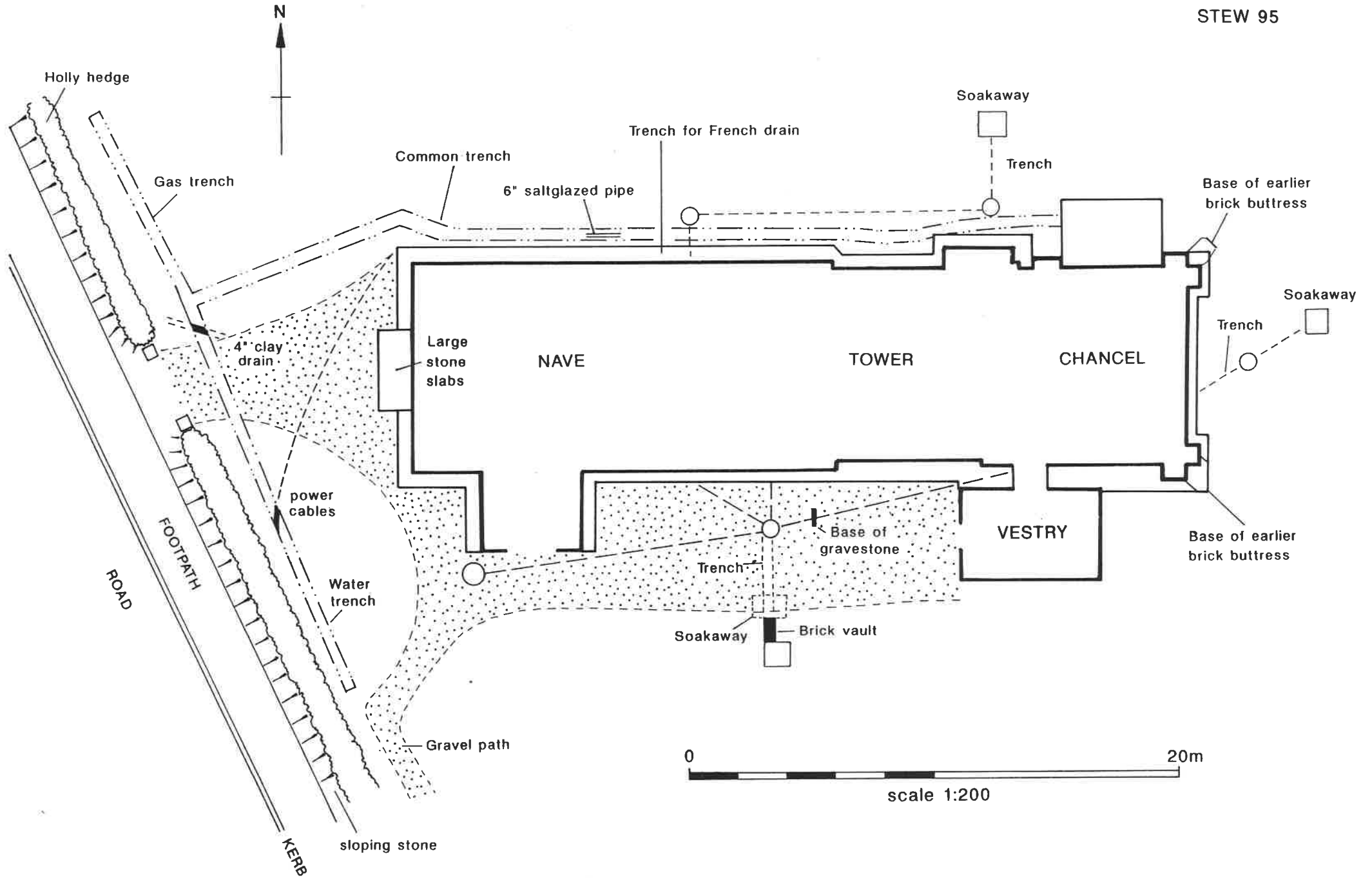


Figure 2

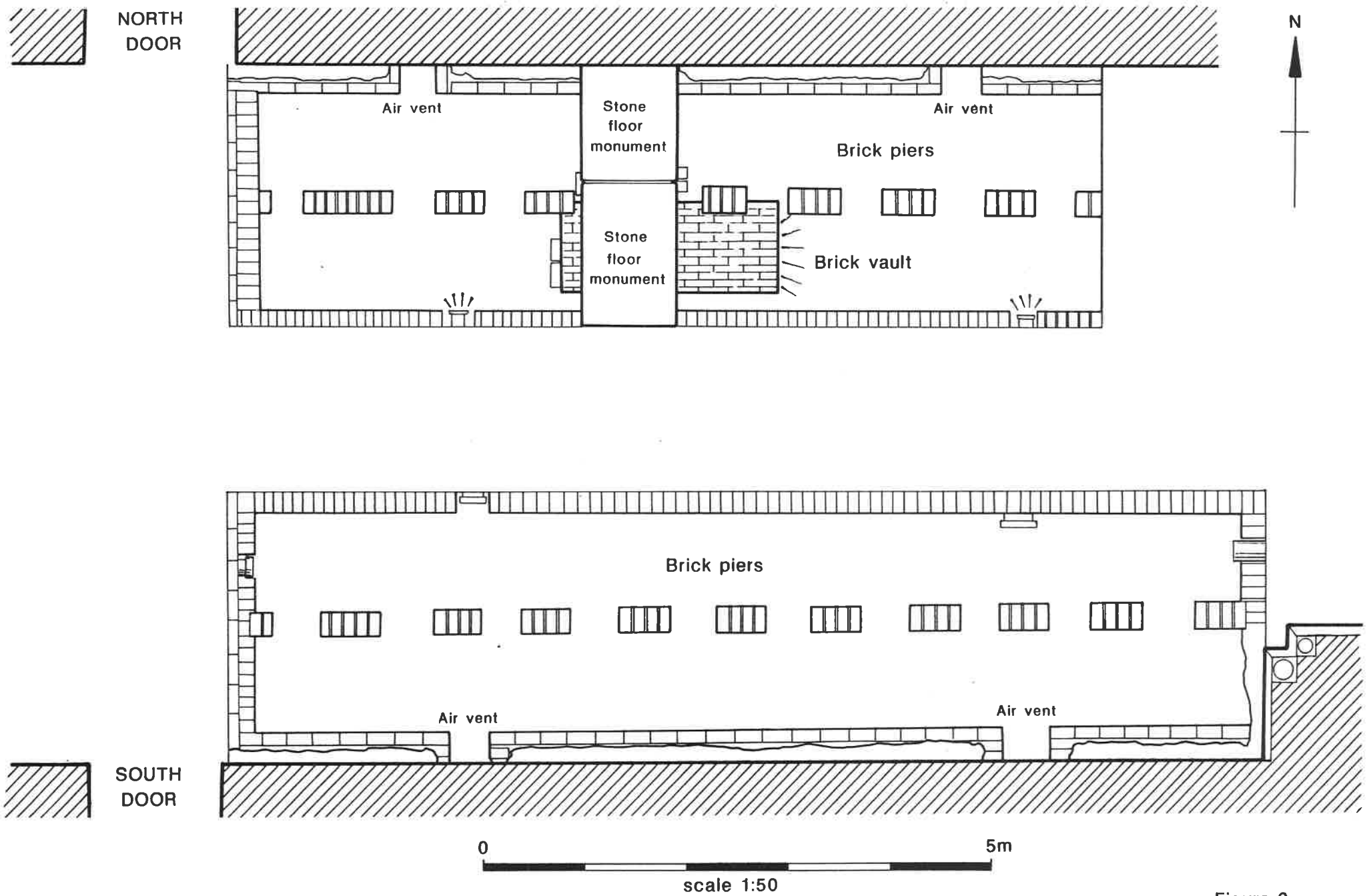


Figure 3





## ***SUMMARY FOR RECORDS OF BUCKS***

**Stewkley - St Michael's Church**

**SP 852261**

A watching brief was undertaken by Bob Williams of Oxford Archaeological Unit during renovation work at St Michael's Church, Stewkley. The building work consisted of replacing a 19th century stone and concrete gully with a new 'French' drain, around the external walls of the church, excavating service trenches to the north and west of the church and replacing the wooden floor within the Nave. Apart from the brick bases of two buttresses, constructed in 1844 and demolished in 1862, no significant earlier structural evidence was revealed. The excavation of deeper trenches and soakaways in the graveyard disturbed one 19th century wood-coffined burial and revealed an 18th century brick-lined grave, which remained undisturbed. The base of a post-medieval gravestone with traces of floral carving was also located. The only significant feature exposed during the work inside the Nave was a barrel vaulted brick vault, which was also left undisturbed.

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