

ST JAMES' CHURCH, FINCHAMPSTEAD, BERKSHIRE

SU 793638

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit
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St. James' Church, Finchampstead, Berkshire

SU 793638

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Summary

A nineteenth century brick structure and mixed soils were observed. Fragments of human bone related to previously-disturbed burials of uncertain date. No other burials or features were present.

1. Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was carried out in September 1996 within the churchyard of St James' Church, Finchampstead during the excavation of trenches for a new drainage system located to the east of the existing church building. The work was commissioned by the church on the recommendation of the Diocesan Advisory Committee's Archaeological Advisor. This report details the work carried out and the results deriving from it. The site code was FHSJC 96 and the project archive will be deposited at Reading Museum.

2. Location, Geology and Topography

The church is situated at NGR SU 793638 on the western side of Finchampstead village. The village lies on sands of the Bagshot Beds, and the natural subsoil encountered on the site was a slightly loamy sand. The site of the church itself is fairly level but elevated with a good view to the south. East of the church within the churchyard itself the ground falls away to the east and south-east.

3. Archaeological background

The main body of the church is Norman, with an apsidal east end. The chancel arch is Perpendicular and a room on the north side of the chancel may be of 1590. The brick-built west tower was built in 1720. An enlarged window was inserted into the apsidal east end of the church in 1853, and other fairly extensive Victorian alterations were made at this time, including the addition of downpipes and insertion of a drainage system around the periphery of the church building. At some time there has been a remodelling of parts of the graveyard with a re-arrangement of tombstone groupings. It is possible that this formed part of the Victorian work, and may have involved further ground disturbance.

4. Methodology

A series of four trenches, 0.5 m wide, leading to a drainage sump measuring 1.1 m wide x 1.5 m long x 1.6 m deep were hand excavated to the east of the church (Fig 2). The trenches were on average 0.9-1.0 m deep. They were intended to replace the existing Victorian drainage system adjacent to the church walls. The work was carried out by the building contractors between Monday 23rd September and Friday 27th September 1996. During this time three visits were made to the site and recording was carried out in accordance with standard OAU procedures. Written records were made and sketch plans and sections drawn. A full photographic record was also made.

5. Results (Figs 2 and 3)

The natural subsoil, a clean, very slightly loamy sand (11) was located in the area of the drainage sump at the north-east end of Trench 4 at a level of 0.94 m below the modern ground surface. A 0.58 m depth of this deposit, to the bottom of the sump pit, was observed.

Above this deposit was a layer of light brownish orange, slightly loamy sand (4), which was widely observed within the excavated trenches, within which it was usually the lowest layer observed. The layer generally had a maximum observed depth of 0.4 m, except in the sump pit where it was 0.62 m deep. Layer 4 contained several seemingly randomly distributed pieces of human bone, presumably from previously disturbed burials within the area.

About 0.5 m from the south-east corner of the church two parallel east-west aligned brick walls 0.4 m apart (5 and 6), surviving to a maximum height of two courses only, were found in Trench 3. These lay above a fill of orange sand with brown loam mottles (8) apparently within a vertical-sided cut (7). The relationship of the cut to an adjacent deposit of loose dark brown loam up to 0.4 m thick and containing mortar flecks and tile and bone fragments (10) was slightly uncertain, but it was thought most likely that this deposit abutted the brick structures rather than being cut by trench 7.

The area immediately adjacent to the church buildings within Trenches 1, 2 and 3 had been previously disturbed, with the existing Victorian drainage downpipes connecting to a network of pipes running to the east. One of these pipes (9) was seen within layer 10 (above) but with no visible trace of a cut for its insertion, which may indicate that the laying of the pipe and the deposition of layer 10 were approximately contemporary events. Comparable soil spreads containing post-medieval building materials up to c 0.2 m thick (eg 3 and 2) were noted in section adjacent to these drains in Trench 2 and a similar sequence was seen in Trench 3. These deposits may represent debris from the insertion of the drains. No previous structures survived at the depth of the present excavations.

In all trenches the sequence was completed with the modern topsoil of blackish-brown loam (1). This varied in thickness from c 0.1-0.45 m, with its greatest recorded depth in Trench 2.

5. Finds

Very few finds were recovered during the watching brief. These consisted of a single sherd of post-medieval red earthenware (not closely datable within a range from the early-mid 17th century to the 19th) from layer 10, five fragments of post-medieval brick and tile (a peg tile fragment from layer 4, the rest, including half a brick 46 mm thick, probably for flooring and of uncertain date, from layer 3), and a clay pipe fragment from layer 3. Disarticulated human bone fragments from layers 4 and 10 were not examined in detail and were reburied on the site.

6. Discussion

Adjacent to the church wall itself, only the Victorian drainage system was evident, although it is possible that earlier structural remains survive beneath the level of current excavations here. The function of the parallel brickwork structure 5 and 6 within Trench 1 is not known for certain but it is most likely that these formed a component part of the Victorian drainage system. Layers 2, 3 and 10 appear to have been directly associated with these 19th century drainage operations.

The inclusion of human bone fragments and a piece of post-medieval tile within the otherwise fairly clean loamy sand layer 4 indicates that this layer has been disturbed or perhaps consists entirely of redeposited material above the apparently undisturbed natural subsoil (11). The precise date of the episode or episodes of disturbance is not clear, though certainly assignable to the post-medieval period. Since it is possible that Victorian alterations to the church extended to a remodelling of at least part of the surrounding graveyards, it may be that layer 4 was a result of that remodelling, perhaps involving not only the rearrangement of tombstones but also the wholesale removal of graves, but this remains speculative.

Bryan Matthews,
OAU, November 1997

Appendix 1: Table of Contexts

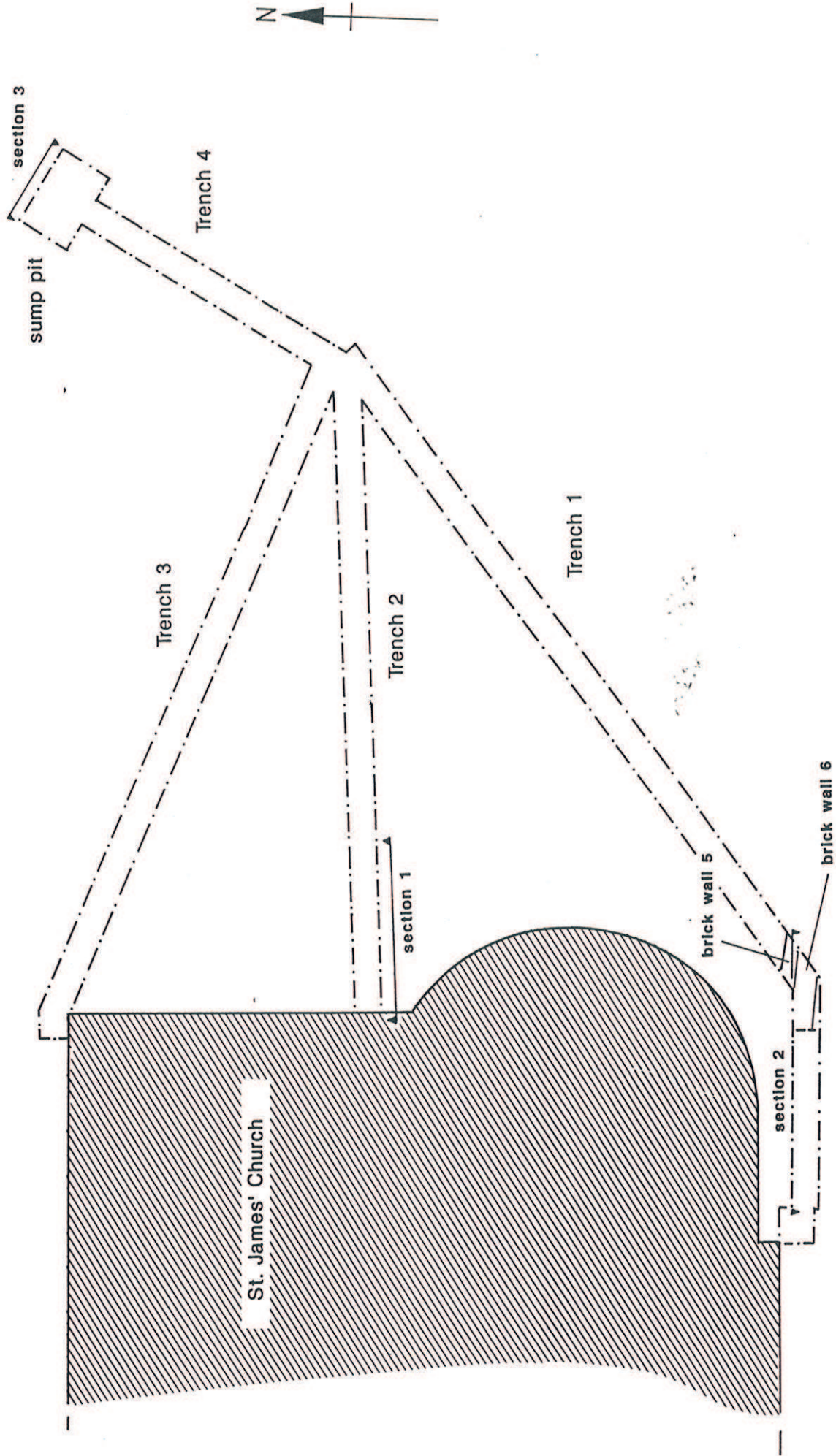
Context number	Type/description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Findings
1	Topsoil	0.15-0.45	-	-	-
2	Layer - ?backfill	0.2	-	-	-
3	Layer	0.24	-	2.35 +	brick, tile, pottery (post-medieval)
4	Layer	0.62	-	-	human bone, tile (post-medieval)
5	Wall	0.16	0.07	1.0 +	-
6	Wall	0.16	0.06	1.65 +	-
7	Cut	0.33	-	-	-
8	Fill of 7	0.14	-	-	-
9	Drainage pipe	-	0.11 dia.	-	(Victorian)
10	Layer - redeposited	0.4 +	-	-	human bone, tile (post-medieval)
11	Natural subsoil	0.3 +	-	-	-



scale 1:50,000

Site location

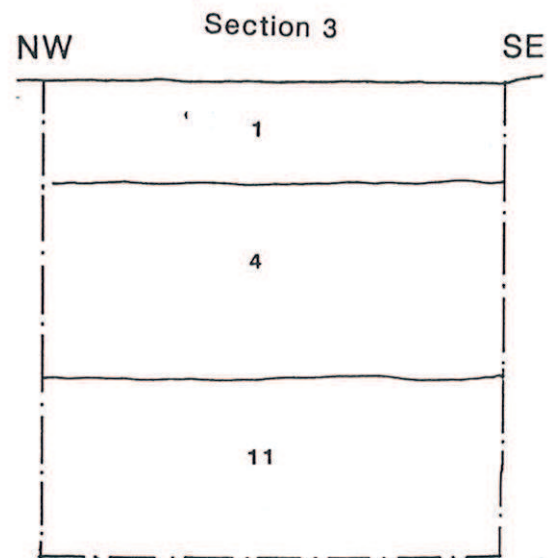
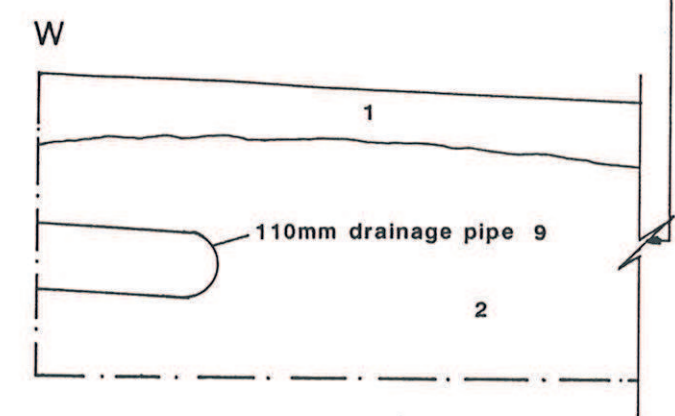
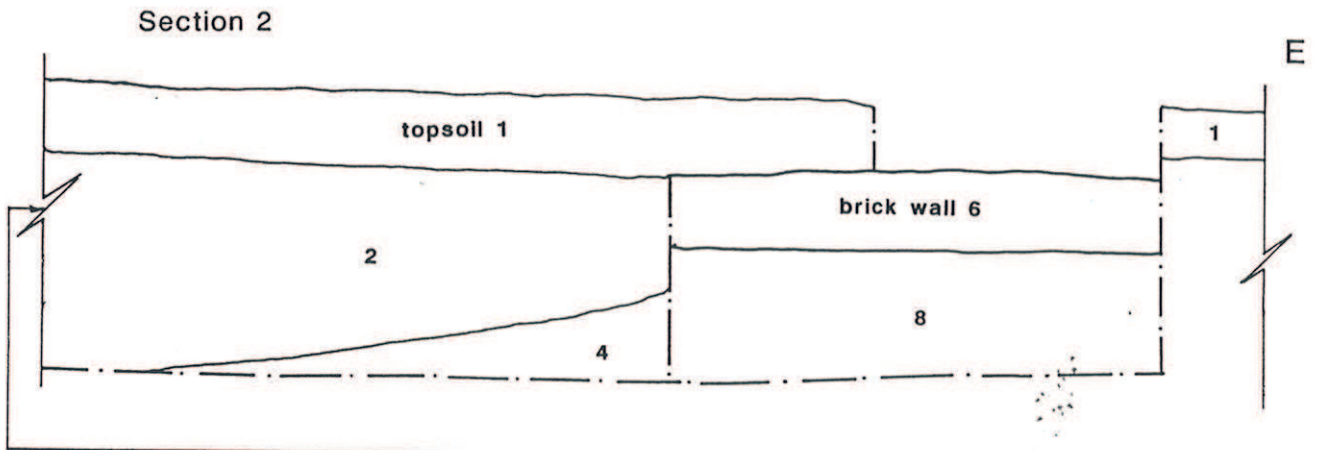
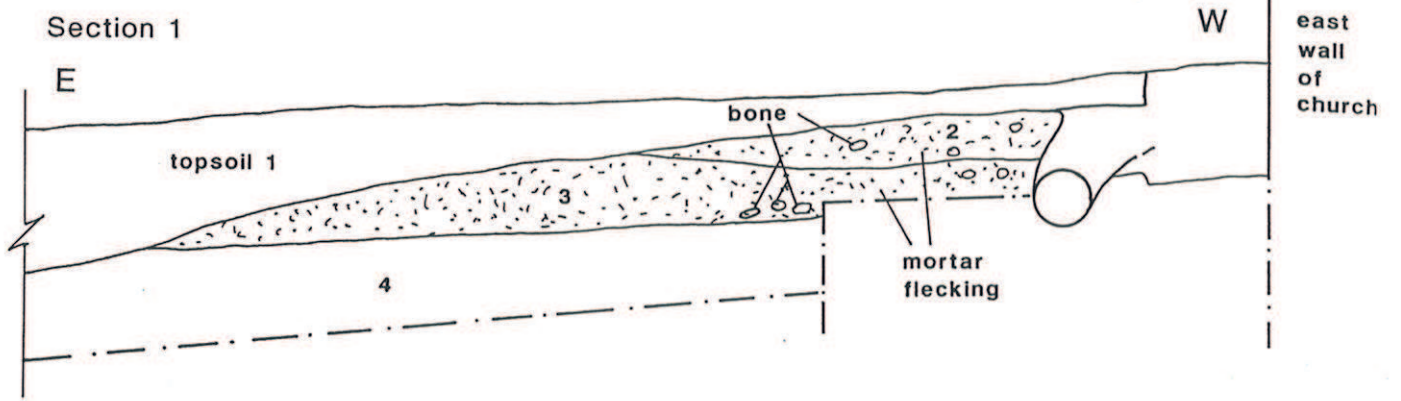
Figure 1



scale 1:100

Trench location at east end of church

Figure 2



scale approximately 1:25

Sections

Figure 3



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