

**All Saints Church, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire**

**Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

**Oxford Archaeological Unit  
February 1993**

## HIGH WYCOMBE. ALL SAINTS CHURCH. HWAS 93.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief at All Saints Church, High Wycombe, Bucks (SU), specifically to investigate three burial vaults revealed under the chancel during the relaying of the floor.

The present church building still retains some elements dating back to the 13th century, but for the most part has been subject to extensive rebuilding in the 19th century, in the Gothic Revival.

### RESULTS.

The site was first visited on January 29th, 1993. The roof of the vault had been disturbed at its W end, which was situated approximately 5.0m from the E end of the Chancel, and slightly to the N of the centre line of the building. Sufficient of the roof of the vault was removed to allow access.

#### Vault 1.

Structure (Plan 1. 2.):

A flight of 8 brick steps led down into the vault, which measured 4.6m W-E, 2.5m N-S, and was 2.0m deep under the highest point of the barrel roof. The walls and ceiling were plastered over brick, and whitewashed. A small area of the ceiling (c. 0.3m x 0.3m) had collapsed and had been crudely repaired from above. At the W end of the vault two RSJ's had been inserted across the vault to support the roof. Over the steps at the W end, the vaulting was of roughly mortared brick, unrendered. Fixed to the wall on either side of the steps was what appeared to be the remains of a crude wooden handrail. Extending from the E end of the vault was a recess leading via a stone duct to an opening in the outside of the E wall of the Chancel. This presumably served as a ventilation shaft.

On both the N and S sides of the vault were built in niches for six coffins, in two tiers of three per side. Three more niches formed a single tier at the E end. On the floor of the vault was a brick dais 4.0m W-E x 1.0m N-S x 0.35m high. This was surmounted by two engraved grave slabs lying end to end. The engraving of both slabs was mostly obscured by coffins, but a date of 1659 was noted on one (F1) and 1732 on the other (F2). The name of Welles was noted on both slabs.

Contents (Plan 2. Table 1.):

Each niche contained one coffin, excepting A1 which was empty but for two coffin plates. All of the coffins were of adult size except that in E1, which was c. 0.9m in length and identified as that of an infant by the coffin plate. The coffins seem to fall into four groups; those dating (by attached plate or style of construction) to the 18th century and associated with the Welles family - A1, A3, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2, D3, E2, E3: two unnamed coffins - B1 and B2 - which by their construction and style of brass plated fittings suggest a date in the early 19th century; one infant coffin - E1 - , not, apparently a member of the Welles family; and two coffins - F1 and F2-, resting on the central dais, which are noticeably more modern in construction and in a considerably better state of preservation than the others.

At the bottom of the steps was a scatter of human long bones and a large

fragment of skull.

#### Interpretation.

From the earliest established burial, that of Mary Welles, in 1710, a date of construction of the vault can be suggested as being at the end of the 17th century. However, it is possible that the dais does contain the two burials suggested by the slabs on top, which would put the vault's construction back by fifty years or more. Although the latest coffin plate is dated 1786, the coffins B1 and B2 are almost certainly later members of the Welles family. Mrs. Bell, referred to on the plate of the infants coffin E1, was clearly a close associate of the family, possibly a housekeeper. By their style and preservation, coffins F1 and F2 were probably brought into the vault no earlier than the end of the 19th century. Neither carried any identification or date, but one may suggest that they are later members of the Welles family, maybe husband (F2) and wife (F1).

It is known that major building work took place in the chancel in the 1920's, and probably this coincided with the removal of the original entrance to the vault and its replacement with the rough brick barrel vault. This work apparently weakened the W end of the vault roof, requiring the insertion of the RSJ's. This operation may explain why there is no coffin in niche A1. Any coffin may well have been removed or destroyed. The scatter of bones at the foot of the steps were probably unearthed from various graves disturbed in the work in the Chancel and dumped into the vault prior to its final sealing.

A large memorial plaque on the N side of the Chancel records the Welles family in the 18th and 19th centuries, and notes that their distant ancestor was Hugh de Welles, Bishop of Lincoln in the 14th century.

Further work at the W end of the Chancel disturbed the crown of another vault, (2) and suggested that a third vault, (3) lay between the two.

#### Vault 2.

##### Structure (Plan 1. 3.):

Access was gained through the disturbed part of the roof. Eight brickwork steps led down to the brick lined vault, which measured 2.5m W-E x 2.0m N-S x 2.2m tall under the highest part of the barrel vaulted ceiling. The original entrance at the W end had been replaced with a roughly mortared barrel vault. The E end of the vault was sealed by an apparently roughly mortared brick wall separating this vault from vault (3) to the E. This wall was evidently a later construction than the vault itself, and deposits of mortar on the E ends of the coffins indicate that the E wall was built after the Vault was filled.

##### Contents (Plan 3. Table 1.):

The vault contained two coffins, resting on the floor on the N and S sides of the vault, and oriented W-E. Both were constructed of wooden outer and inner coffins, although only the inner coffin of (A) was still intact. Ornate plated brass fittings were noticed amidst the coffin debris and two coffin plates were recorded, indicating that the two burials were of Samuel Rotton and Sarah Rotton, who died in 1796 and 1827 respectively.

### Interpretation.

The vault was probably constructed towards the end of the 18th century, specifically for these two, who were probably husband and wife. The structure of the vault was apparently slightly foreshortened at its E end to accomodate Vault (3). The rough brick barrel over the W end is very similar to that over the W end of Vault (1), implying that this vault was also finally sealed in the 1920's.

### Vault 3.

#### Structure (Plan 1. 4.):

With the authorisation of the D.A.C. access was gained to the vault via a small hole cut in the E wall of Vault (2). It was seen at once that this vault was not, as was surmised, a contemporary structure to Vault (2), but a larger, more elaborate and later construction.

The brick-built vault measured 5.2m W-E x 3.3m N-S x 2.5m deep under the centre of the groin-vaulted roof. Stone shelves had been set into the N, S, and W walls to form 15 coffin niches, although the shelves on the S wall had later been removed. At the E end of the vault was a blind arch, the S half forming a doorway, evidently the original access to the Vault. This access had been blocked with neatly mortared stone blocks.

#### Contents. (Plan 4. Table 1.):

The vault contained 7 coffins, one of which, (A1), was that of an infant. Four coffins were wooden, covered in velvet (possibly beize), and featured round headed pin decoration and heavy brass handles. Two coffins were wooden, with lead inners, and one was simply lead. Two coffin plates were recorded. One etched brass plate dated to 1837, the other an engraved lead plate dated to 1832, which read: "Robert, the infant son of the Hon. Robert John Smith, only son of the Right Hon. Robert Lord Carrington - Member of Parliament for the borough of Chepping Wycombe and of his wife Elizabeth Katherine Daughter of the Right Honourable Cecil Lord Forester and of the Lady Katherine Daughter to His Grace the Duke of Rutland died 28th January 1832 aged 8 months."

A third plate was visible on the top of coffin E1, but the confined space made it impossible to read the inscription.

### Interpretation.

The earliest indicated burial in the Vault is dated 1832. It is therefore reasonable to suggest a construction date of about 1830. The evidence shows that the construction of this Vault entailed the foreshortening of Vault (2). It is unlikely that this would have taken place before Vault (2) was fully occupied, that is, 1827. The fact that the Smith family, as indicated by the inscription on the infant's coffin, was related to the nobility is reflected in the quality of the Vault's construction and the opulence of the heavy brass coffin fittings. However, although the Vault was designed to accomodate 15 coffins, it contains only seven, and the style of these coffins and their state of preservation suggest that the Vault was finally sealed well before the end of the 19th century.

## CONCLUSION

Plan 1 shows that these three vaults cover virtually all the available space under the Chancel. No doubt social status played a great part in determining the location of a family vault, and it is pertinent to note that, in the construction of the Smith Vault (3), little respect was shown for the sanctity of that of the Rottons; conversely, the Welles family were a long-established and well-respected local family, whose most sacred of resting places, under the Altar itself, was beyond even the Smiths' aspirations.

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O.A.U.  
Feb. 1993.

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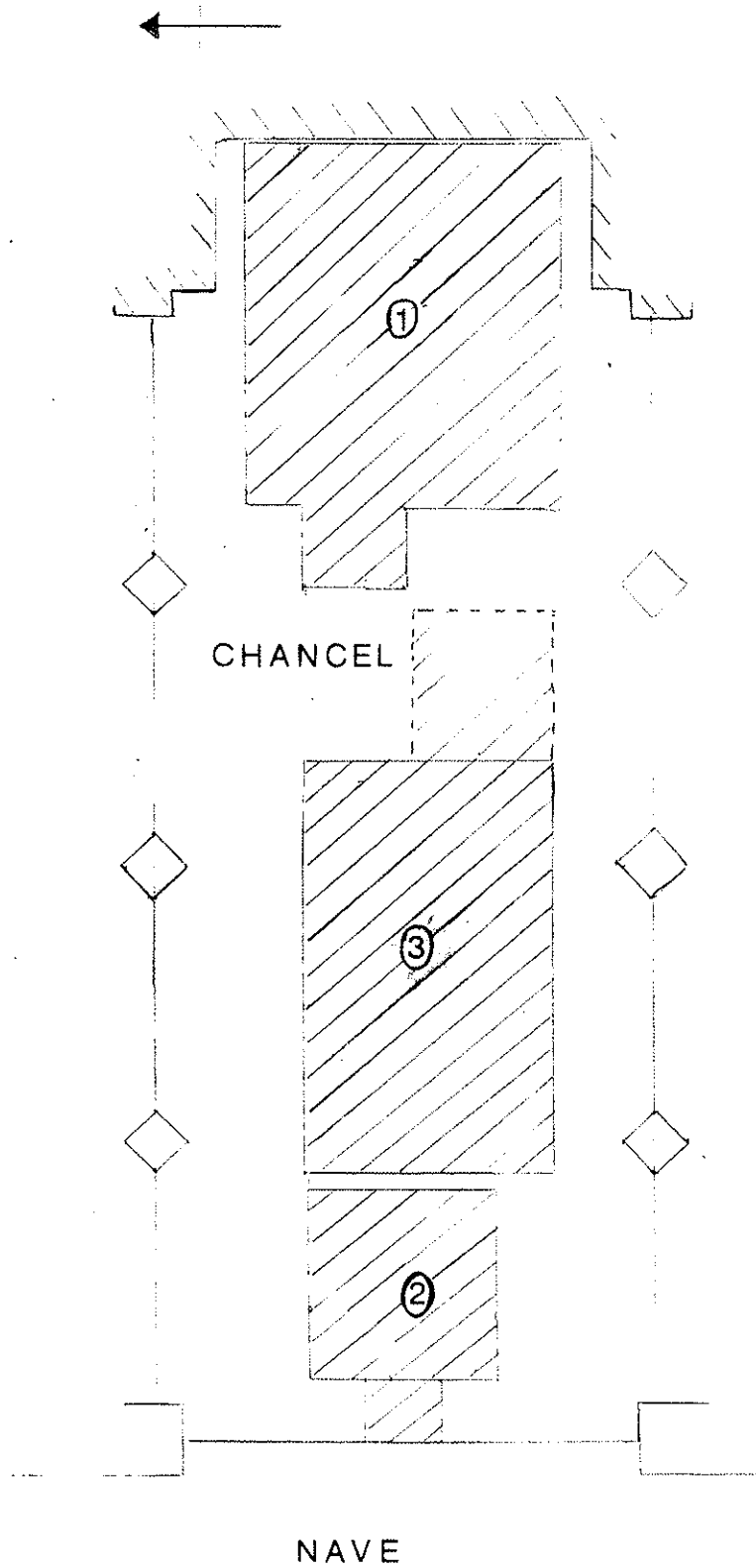
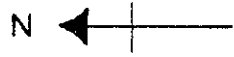
TABLE 1. VAULT CONTENTS.

VAULT	LOC.	COFFIN DESCRIPTION	CONDITION	IDENTIFICATION
1	A1	-	-	Lead plate: "Anne Welles d. 1736. Aged 27." Lead plate: "Mary Welles d. 1710. Aged 40."
1	A2	Wood	decayed	Lead plate: "Samuel Welles. d.1712. Aged 47."
1	A3	Wood. Lead inner	decayed	-
1	B1	Velvet over wood. Brass fittings. Lead inner.	partially decayed	-
1	B2	Velvet over wood. Brassed fittings. Lead inner.	partially decayed	Brassed plate. Name unreadable. Date 1806.
1	B3	Wood. Lead inner.	decayed	-
1	C1	Velvet over wood. Lead inner.	decayed	-
1	C2	Velvet over wood. Lead inner.	decayed	-
1	C3	Velvet over wood.	decayed	-
1	D1	Velvet over wood. Wooden inner.	decayed	Lead plate:" Samuel Welles. Son of Samuel and Isabella Welles. d. 1775.
1	D2	Wood. Wood inner.	decayed	-
1	D3	Wood. Lead inner.	decayed	-
1	E1	Wood. Brassd fittings.	partially decayed	Lead plate: "Mrs. Bell's infant". No date. Also lead plate."Sarah Welles. Daughter of Samuel and Isabella. d. 1786 aged 23.
1	E2	Velvet over wood.	decayed	-
1	E3	Wood. Wood inner.	decayed	-
1	F1	Wood.	sound	-

1	F2	Wood.	sound	— Also: lead plate: "Harriet daughter of Samuel and Isabella Welles. d. 1775." and lead plate: "Samuel Welles. d. 1750 aged 45.
2	A	Wood. Wood inner. Brassed fittings.	decayed/ collapsed	Brass plate: "Samuel Rotton Esq. Died 11th Sept. 1796 In the 60th year of his age."
2	B	Wood. Wood inner. Brassed fittings.	collapsed	Brass plate: "Mrs. Sarah Rotton Died 5th Dec. 1827 Aged 85 years.
3	A1	Wood. Lead inner. Infant.	decayed	Lead plate: (see description)
3	A2	Velvet over wood. Lead inner. Heavy brass fittings	sound/ decayed	—
3	A3	Velvet over wood. Lead inner. Heavy brass fittings.	sound/ decayed	—
3	B1	—	—	—
3	B2	Velvet over wood. Lead inner. Heavy brass fittings.	sound/ decayed	Etched brass plate: "The Honourable Jane Amelia Smith. Died 7th Oct 1837 Aged 51 years.
3	B3	Wood. Lead inner.	decayed/ collapsed	—
3	C	Lead.	partially collapsed	—
3	E1	Velvet over wood. Heavy brass fittings.	sound/ decayed	Brass plate visible, not readable.

PLAN 1 VAULT LOCATION

SCALE: 1:100



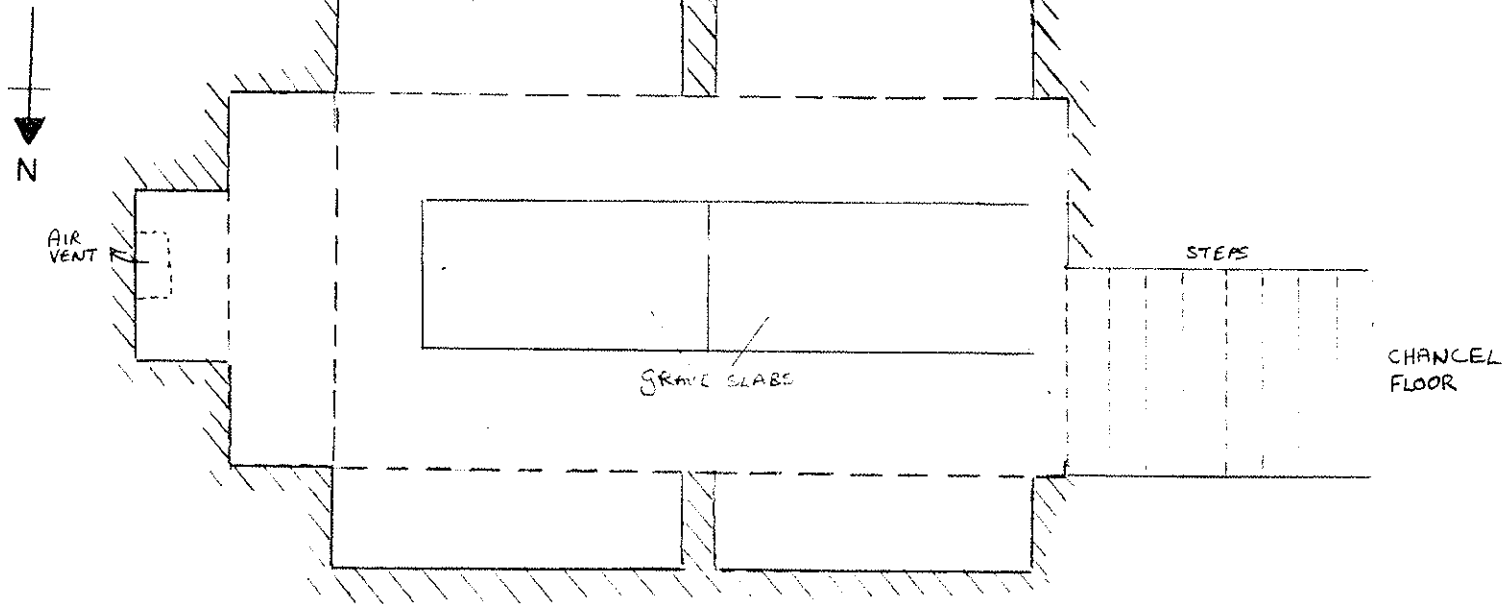


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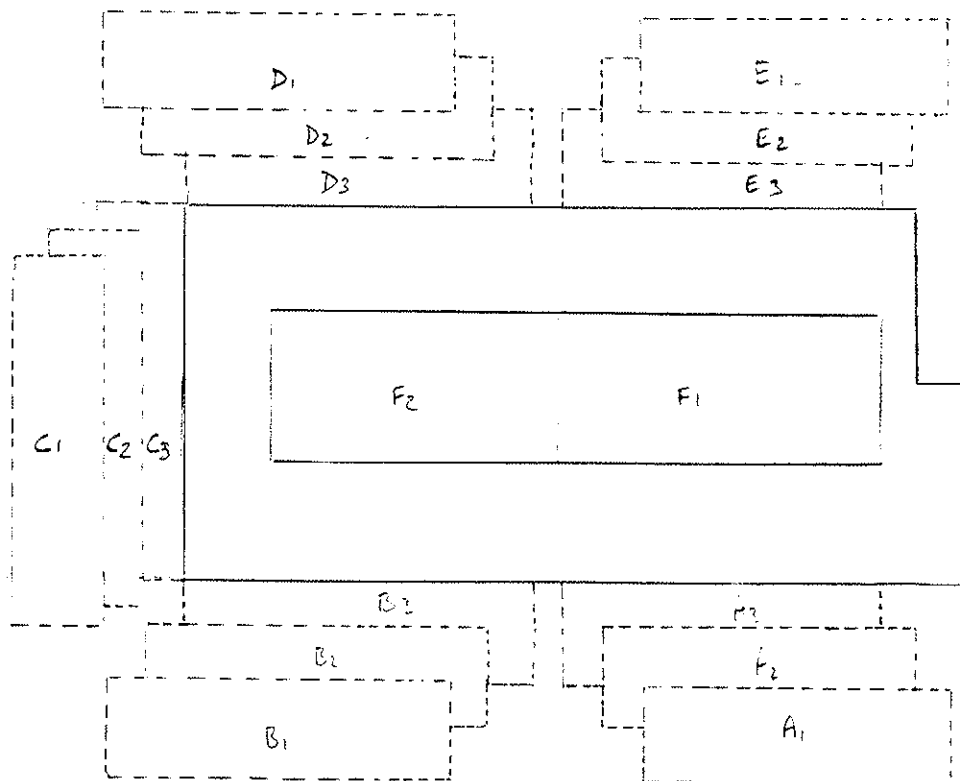
PLAN 2

VAULT 1

scale 1:50



arrangement of burial niches

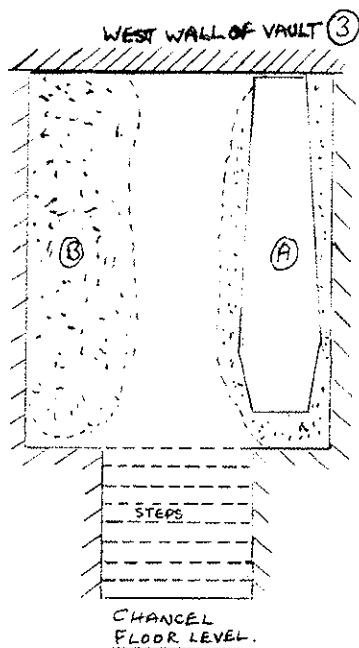


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PLAN 3

VAULT 2

SCALE: 1:50



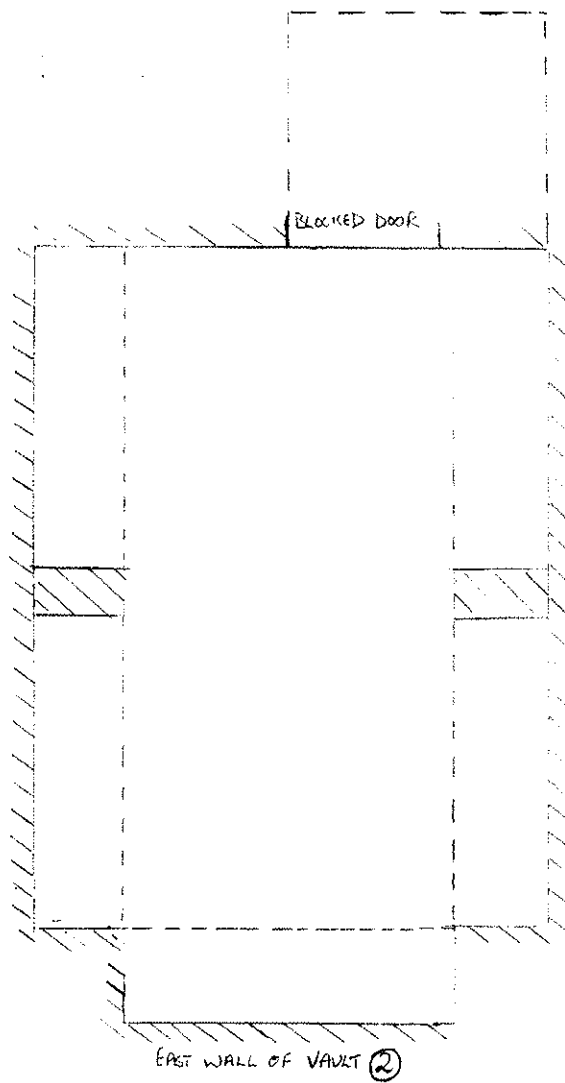
COFFIN DEBRIS

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PLAN 4

VAULT 3

scale 1:50



arrangement of  
burial niches

