

Mr J T Ducker

The Church of the Holy Rood. Ampney Crucis,
Gloucestershire.

NGR SP 0650 0189

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Date: *2/12/98*

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Date: *8/12/1998*

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Summary

In November 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at the Church of the Holy Rood, Ampney Crucis, Gloucestershire (NGR SP 0650 0189), during works to replace a failed pew platform in the north-west corner of the nave and the installation of a new central heating system. Two partially articulated but heavily disturbed burials were located, aligned east-west, plus a quantity of human charnel at the western end of the nave. One fragmented human skull was located immediately beneath the tiled floor at the eastern end of the nave during the installation of pipework for the new central heating system. No finds were retrieved, although it is thought likely that the inhumations are of medieval date. All of the human bone, after cleaning and recording, was bagged and stored in the church for reburial in the churchyard.

1 Introduction (Fig. 1)

The development proposal comprised the installation of a new central heating system and the replacement of a failed pew platform in the north-west part of the nave, as a part of a larger programme of work within the church. The church is a Grade I Listed Building and the works required consent from English Heritage and the granting of a Faculty from the Diocese of Gloucester.

The watching brief was commissioned by Mr J T Ducker, the Churchwarden, on behalf of the Church of the Holy Rood. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the County Archaeological Officer, and in consultation with the Gloucestershire Diocesan Advisory Committee's Archaeological Advisor.

2 Background

The church is thought to date from the Saxon period, and it contains some Saxon masonry, including the north doorway. Small Early Norman windows, one of which has been blocked up, are situated on either side of the doorway. The transepts date from the 13th century, and an early 14th century wall painting has been identified in the north transept. The west tower and *sanctus bellcote* date to the 15th century. The church underwent a programme of restoration in 1870, which saw the addition of the vestry (Verey 1979).

This watching brief is further to one undertaken by Gloucestershire County Council in the south-west corner of the nave in November 1991, during the replacement of another failed pew platform here. This investigation revealed the presence of seven articulated inhumations, aligned east-west, at between 0.29 m and 0.56 m below the floor of the nave. Two of these burials were dated to the 15th century or earlier. The remaining articulated inhumations were also thought to be of medieval date, although no dateable evidence was recovered. Human charnel and a residual sherd of Romano-British pottery were also encountered (Parry 1991).

The site lies on limestone bedrock, which is overlain by upper lias (British Geological Survey Map 235).

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works to established OAC standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance.

4 Methodology

The area of investigation measured 2.05 m north-south by 5.85 m east-west, being bounded to the south by the tiled aisle floor (which lay at a height of 103.67 m OD), to the west by the west tower adjoining the nave, to the north by the north wall of the nave and to the east by a limestone step which partly forms the entrance to the boiler room.

The timbers comprising the failed pew platform were removed and were found to rest upon three longitudinal sleeper beams which had rotted. These beams were supported on sills made from alignments of red brick laid flat. The sills were laid upon a brownish earth, the surface of which was covered with loose stones, fragments of brick and occasional pieces of unarticulated human bone. There was no requirement for formal palaeopathological recording, but notes were kept on all human remains encountered, and these are reproduced below.

Excavations commenced on the 3rd of November when three longitudinal trenches were excavated by hand. These were against the southern edge of the area, in the centre and against the north wall. The trenches were dug to an approximate width of between 0.30 and 0.35 m, and to a maximum depth of 0.43 m below the nave floor. Reinforced concrete was poured into the trenches on 4th of November to form sills to support the new floor joists. The level of the earth between the newly laid concrete sills was reduced on the 4th 5th of November to permit clearance below the new joists; the area was lowered from its original height of c. 103.50 m OD to c. 103.40 m OD. Spoil from the excavations was sorted by hand for stray finds, bone etc before being removed from site in wheelbarrows and placed in a skip. All of this material was subsequently removed to a landfill site. Work at the east end of the nave was confined to minor excavation at the eastern end of the pew platforms here in order to facilitate the installation of new central heating pipework.

The numbering sequence for deposits was begun at (50) and for inhumations at (100) in order to avoid confusion with those numbers issued during the 1991 watching brief.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits and features exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil descriptions use standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results (Fig. 2)

Limestone bedrock, numbered as (50), and a natural limestone clay, was encountered in all three trenches, although its level did not remain consistent. This material was identified as a solid deposit of Forest Marble, identical to that seen in the 1991 watching brief. At its highest this natural deposit lay at approximately 103.27 m OD, 0.38 m below the tiled floor of the nave. Portions of this deposit were removed to the contractor's cut-off point at the base of dig.

The bedrock was sealed by patches of decayed limestone natural, numbered as (51), and both were sealed by (52) a substantial deposit of yellow/brown clay silt which measured 0.29 m at its thickest point: the highest point of the upper horizon of this deposit lay at c.103.29 m OD, 0.17 m below the tiled nave floor. Context (52) contained the vast majority of the human bone recovered during groundworks: it was interpreted in the 1991 watching brief as a mixed deposit created by the excavation and backfilling of graves, and nothing was found to contradict this.

The articulated human remains located during excavation within context (52) were identified as adult inhumations laid supine and extended, aligned east-west with their heads to the west; it was not possible to distinguish between male and female. Articulated bone from two burials was recovered, along with two masses of charnel and a single disarticulated skull; however, the presence of much human charnel throughout (52) and (51) would appear to indicate that more burials were originally present and that these had been disturbed by later grave digging and/or works to the fabric of the church. For example, burial (100) was located in close proximity to the north-west end of the tiled nave floor and had been extensively disturbed: its presence immediately below makeup for the tile floor, and the presence of brick and tile fragments within the central mass of disturbed bone, would seem to imply that this disturbance occurred during construction of the floor. Similarly, burial (104) consisting of one fragmented skull was found at exactly the same height at the extreme eastern end of the nave, implying that this activity is not confined to the western end of the church. All human skeletal material was cleaned and recorded before being lifted, bagged and stored at the church for subsequent reburial in the churchyard.

The human remains encountered, both articulated and charnel, are briefly described as follows:

Burial (100) lay immediately below the makeup for the tiled nave floor in the first, southernmost, trench to be dug, in the extreme south-western corner of the site. The only articulation present was one set of femur, tibia and fibula plus an incomplete set of foot bones; the other leg bones were not seen and may lie below the tiled floor, outside the area of excavation. Pelvis, vertebrae, rib bones, lower jaw and sundry teeth formed a mass of bone with some skull fragments extending to its west. No evidence for a grave cut was seen. The central mass of bone lay at 103.10 m OD.

Burial (101) comprised a mass of rib and arm bones, with some articulation visible in four vertebrae within the central mass. No evidence for a grave cut was seen. The central mass of bone lay at 103.08 m OD, and was located in the last, northernmost, trench to be dug.

Charnel (102) was located in the central trench, and comprised a mass of disarticulated charnel which apparently had been deposited either in a purpose-dug or pre-existing void. The top of the bones lay at 103.085 m OD.

Charnel (103) was located at the eastern end of the southernmost trench, and comprised a slightly scattered mass of disarticulated charnel. No evidence for a grave cut was seen. The top of the bones lay at 103.075 m OD.

Charnel (104) was located at the extreme eastern end of the nave, and comprised a fragmented skull minus the lower jaw sitting upright immediately below makeup for the tiled floor. No evidence for a grave cut was seen. The top of the skull lay at 103.10 m OD.

Context (52) was sealed by (53), a layer of patchily mortared limestone pieces, several of which appeared to have been worked, and which varied between 0.12 and 0.15 m thick. This supported a single course of red housebricks, context (54), which surrounded the area of investigation and which formed the sills supporting the rotted longitudinal timbers. The top of the bricks were level with the upper horizon of the tiled nave floor. Context (54) marked the upper horizon of archaeological deposits.

6 Discussion

Context (52), which incorporated both articulated burials and charnel, was the earliest archaeological deposit observed during the watching brief. This deposit, and the burials it contained, had been extensively disturbed by grave digging and periodic works to the church, principally the construction of the tiled nave floor.

No dating evidence was recovered from any of the deposits and close dating is not possible on the evidence retrieved, although it is likely that these burials are contemporary with those seen during the 1991 watching brief, two of which were dated to the medieval period due to their truncation by the construction cut for the west tower.

Stratigraphically, the relative height of the burials encountered is of some interest; the location of burials almost immediately below the present floor level of the nave would seem to imply that the burials were inserted from a floor level in the nave some degree higher than its present level. It is possible that the floor level was reduced with the consequent disturbance of other burials during the 1870 renovation works (Verey 1979). If this were the case it would also explain the presence of unarticulated bone seen under the floor joists on the upper surface of (53) during both the 1991 watching brief and the present monitoring exercise. This material was seen all across the area of investigation, but there was no suggestion of *in situ* inhumations any further towards the north-west corner than burials (100) and (101).

The level of the internal floor prior to the 19th century remains unknown at this time; however, the exterior ground level at the north west corner of the nave is higher than the internal floor surface by approximately 1.5 m. Whether the internal floor level was once at a similar height is not known; the consequent very high level of dampness in the north-western corner of the church accounts for the accelerated rotting of the old

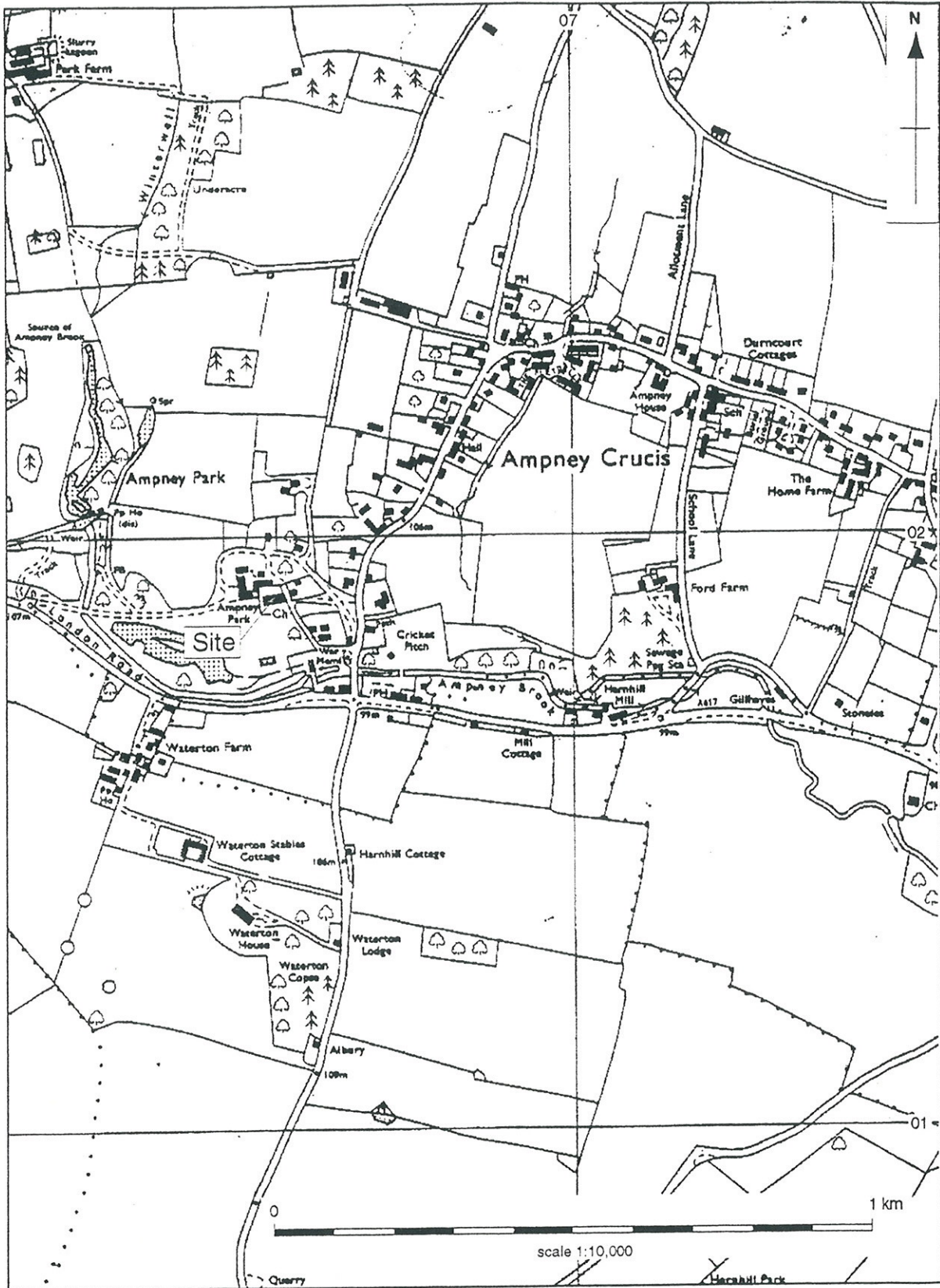
pew platform and timber supports and may also account for the absence of *in situ* burials in this area.

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Figure 1

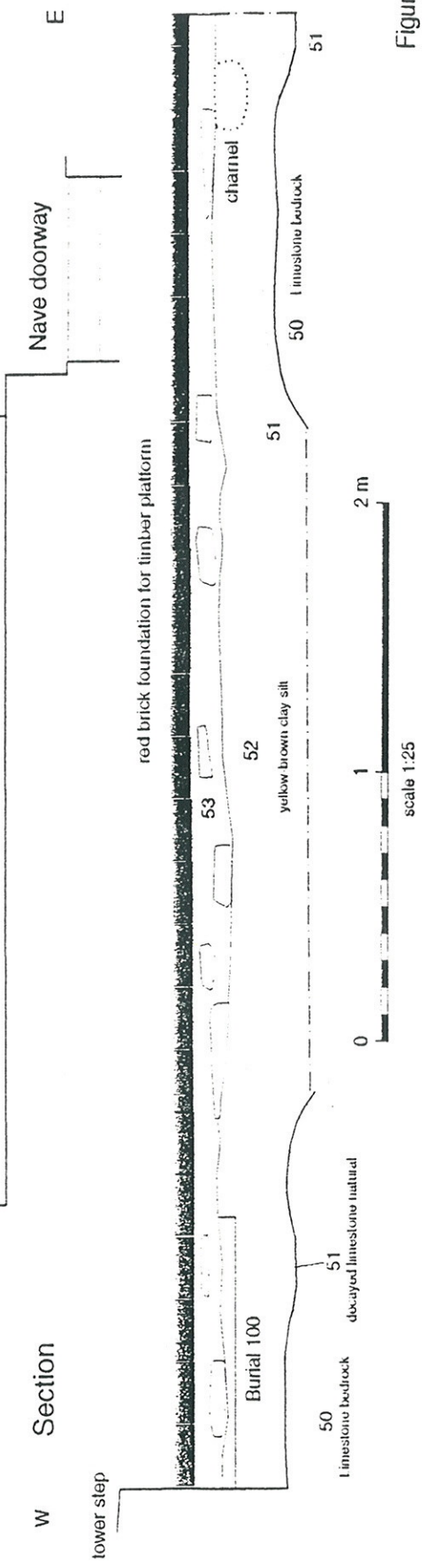
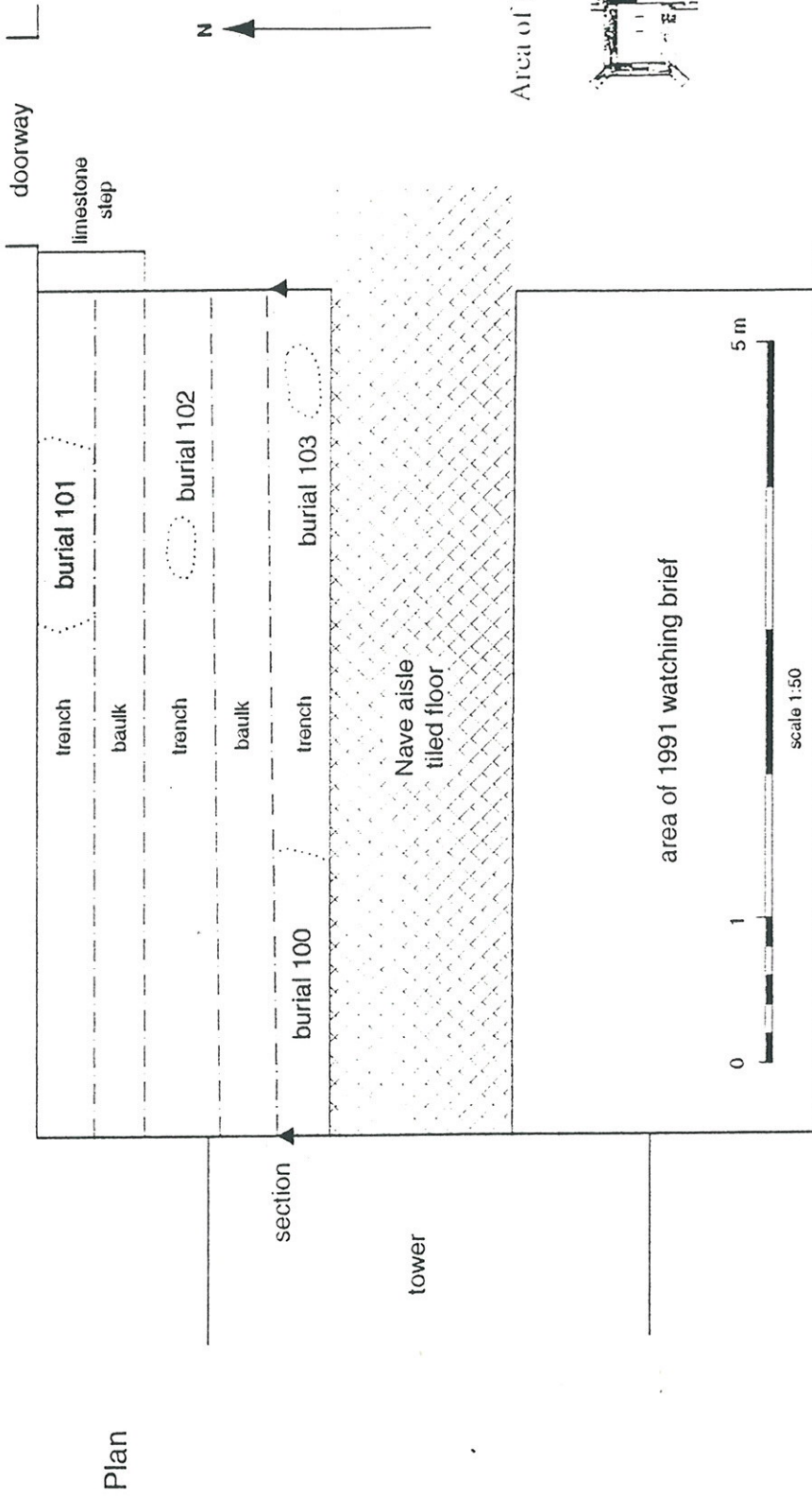


Figure 2



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