

# OXFORDSHIRE

## ST NICHOLAS CHURCH ABINGDON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



THE OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, ABINGDON.

SU 49839708

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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## Introduction

In October 1992 an evaluation was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) on behalf of St Nicholas Church Council in advance of plans for the construction of a church room on the N side of St Nicholas Church. The site is approximately 0.19 hectares in extent at a height of 54 m O.D. and is currently a garden. The evaluation brief was set by Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services who also monitored the work. There were three elements to the archaeological deposits:- an extensive area of later medieval deposits associated with the culvert of the River Stert, at least seven graves, and a wall which may be medieval.

## Archaeological background (Fig.1)

The site is in the centre of Abingdon which lies at the confluence of the Thames and the Ock. An important ford across the Thames (bridged in 1416) has made Abingdon a route centre since early times. Prehistoric to Saxon sites have been found within and surrounding the town which has retained its medieval street plan. St Nicholas Church is part of the medieval buildings forming the former Abbey gateway. The Abbey was initially founded in AD 675 and refounded in the 10th century. The abbey was one of the wealthiest monastic houses in England (Rodwell 1975, 33-40).

The new offices for the Vale of the White Horse District Council, to the NE of the site, cover the lay cemetery of Abingdon Abbey. Excavations also revealed Iron Age and Roman settlement (Allen 1989, 45).



The abbey church of St Nicholas probably dates from around 1180 and was serviced by a vicar and a rector. The rectory of St Nicholas Church lay to the N of the church at the end of the site away from Stert Street. The rectory was present from the dissolution of the abbey in 1538 until it was demolished in 1797 when the site became a graveyard (Allen 1990, 1).

A public house called the Two Brewers occupied the front of the site facing on to Stert Street from 1599 or earlier until around 1881 when the church was remodelled and the use of the site as graveyard and public house ceased (Smith and Carter 1989, 9-10; Allen 1990, 2-3).

The River Stert flows down the line of Stert Street on the line of the pavement on the E side of the street. It was put into a culvert in 1791 when the streets of Abingdon were paved. The section of culvert running across the site may predate this as an engraving of 1782 shows that The Two Brewers had been built over the line of the Stert (Preston 1929, 169-171 and see cover to this report). The N wall of St Nicholas Church has a relieving arch for the Stert which is visible at ground level.

### Assessment strategy (Fig.1)

The assessment strategy was based on a 12.5% sample of the area. The sample consisted of one 11 m long and 1.2 m wide hand dug trench. The trench was excavated to a depth of 0.9 m which is the proposed depth of the footings. Grave 42 was dug to a depth of 1.08 m because the grave fill was very soft and actually



collapsed to that depth. One of the objects of the evaluation was to determine whether cellars associated with the Two Brewers public house were present but because the E end of the trench was occupied by graves excavation could not proceed to a depth greater than 0.9 m.

The archaeological deposits were sampled by hand to determine their nature and depth and to recover dating evidence. Features were planned and their sections drawn where they were excavated. The N section and part of the S section of the trench were drawn. All the plans and sections drawn were at a scale of 1:20.

## Results

### **Soils**

The general soil type was a slightly sandy silt. The underlying gravel and subsoil was not found. The soil of the garden overlaid a make-up layer of soil and some building debris (layer 2).

### **Archaeology (Fig. 2)**

There were three elements to the archaeological deposits:- an extensive area of later medieval deposits associated with the culvert of the River Stert, at least seven graves, and a wall which may be medieval.

The earliest feature encountered was a N-S wall (48) which may be the rear wall of the Two Brewers public house which was demolished in around 1881. This

wall was overlain by layer 37 which abutted a later wall (40). Layer 37 contained one sherd each of Roman, medieval and 19th century pottery.

The culvert for the River Stert (60) was 3 m wide within the limit of excavation as the W end of the construction trench lay outside the trench. The trench was excavated to 0.9 m on either side of the culvert (Fig. 2). The culvert was constructed from flat limestone pieces, and barrel vaulted. The construction trench for the culvert was not definable within the excavation. The trench had been backfilled with layers of soil (45, 52, and 54-7) containing much pottery, tile, and metalworking slag.

A new wall (40) with a shallow footing had been built to form the new W end of the cemetery (Fig. 2). Its construction trench cut layer 54. A scar had been left in the N wall of the church when this wall was removed.

The graves (62, 42 and 43) at the W end of the cemetery had been dug down the E face of wall 48. There were three brick lined vaults (29, 15 and 64 in graves 28, 43 and 62 respectively) and four unlined graves (23, 31, 34, and 42). All the graves were aligned E-W. Three bodies were revealed to determine the depth of human remains:- skeleton 24 in grave 23 in the NE corner of the trench was at 53.2 m OD (ie at a depth of 0.75 m below the modern ground level); skeleton 35 in grave 34 in the centre of the trench was at 53.43 m OD (ie at a depth of 0.49 m); and skeleton 65 in grave 42 at the W end of the trench was at 52.94 m OD (ie at a depth of 1.08 m). The skeletons were left *in situ*. Excavation could not

proceed to any greater depth and so it was not possible to determine whether cellars lay to the E of wall 48.

These deposits had been covered by dumped material (layers 2 and 53; see Fig. 2). Six shallow N-S gullies (3, 5, 7, 9, 17 and 19) cut into layer 2 (Fig. 1). These may have been associated with the construction of the adjacent Trustee Savings Bank. The backfilled layers of the culvert construction trench and one of the gullies had been cut by a pit (11) which contained most of a large medieval green glazed jug.

### **The pottery and other finds**

Approximately 200 sherds of pottery (total weight 3.2 kg) were recovered during the evaluation. Sherds were found in topsoil, modern features, 18th and 19th century graves, and contexts associated with the culvert. The pottery was rapidly recorded by fabric, date, and form where identifiable. Fabric codes conformed to the Oxfordshire type series where possible (Haldon and Mellor 1977). Roman, Saxon-Norman (11th-12th century), medieval (12th-16th century), post-medieval and Victorian wares were found.

The most interesting contexts were the backfill layers over the barrel vault of the culvert (52, 54-7). These fills contained significant amounts of Saxo-Norman and medieval pottery, with no sherds later than the 15th century. The earliest pottery (ie 11th-12th century) is likely to be residual, perhaps indicating Saxo-Norman activity on the site. The pottery from contexts 52 and 54-6 would suggest



a principal period of activity during the 14th-15th centuries. Small quantities of Roman pottery were found in some of the contexts. Most of the medieval pottery came from the Brill/Boarstall kilns in Buckinghamshire. Several baluster jugs from that source were found.

The graves contained very mixed assemblages of pottery, with Roman, medieval and 19th century pottery all present. The Roman and medieval sherds must have been disturbed from underlying deposits by the action of grave digging. The 19th century pottery dates the graves themselves.

Modern features such as 9, 17 and 19, contain mostly 18th-19th century pottery. There is, however, one important exception. Pit 11 was dug into the culvert backfilling. The uppermost filling of the pit contains Victorian pottery, but the bottom of the pit contained a large assemblage of medieval pottery (75 sherds) along with two 19th century sherds. Seventy-two of the medieval sherds belong to a single vessel - a bung-hole pitcher of 15th century date (Pearce and Vince 1988, Figs 110-112, nos 434-7). The pot belongs to the Surrey Whiteware tradition, and is characteristic of products from the Hampshire-Surrey border (Pearce and Vince 1988, 52-60). The sherds have very slightly abraded edges, suggesting that it had only recently been broken when it was thrown into the pit. The latter was dug deeply into the culvert backfill, and it is very likely that the vessel originally came from those fills and was broken during the digging of the pit.

Tile was also recovered from several contexts. Some of the tile was simple

roofing material of Victorian date, typically occurring in grave fills or modern features. Culvert backfills 52, 54 and 55, however, contained numerous pieces of glazed roof tile (including two fragments of crested ridge tiles). The fabrics and glaze are typical of Buckinghamshire tile products of the 14th-15th centuries.

Most other finds came from modern contexts. Copper alloy pins, probably shroud pins, were found in gullies 9 and 19. One fragment of window glass was found in gully 19, and a lead window came (eg frame for a small piece of stained glass) was recovered from culvert fill 52. The latter context also contained an iron ring and a fragment of lava; the latter may have been from a quernstone. A gun flint was found in the top of unexcavated layer 61 (probably a grave fill). Small quantities of slag, shell and animal bone were found in several contexts. Culvert backfills 52 and 57, however, contained large amounts of metalworking slag.

### **Environmental**

Soil samples were not taken. There was no evidence for environmental potential in any of the archaeological deposits.

### **Comments on the results**

#### **Reliability of field investigation**

The sample size was sufficient to define the line and date of the culvert of the Stert and the W limit of the cemetery. It also determined the date and depth below the surface of surviving graves. The underlying archaeology has been extensively disturbed by those graves. The possible E wall of the Two Brewers

public house was also found. The N wall of the inn probably lies approximately 1 m S of the TSB building.

### **Overall Interpretation**

Brick vaults for burial are characteristic of the post-medieval period, and especially the late 18-19th century. Medieval brick-lined graves are occasionally found, as at the Dominican Friary in Guildford (Poulton and Woods 1984, 52 and Fig. 32). Medieval hand-made bricks, however, are easily distinguished from 18th and 19th century mass-produced examples. The latter were used in the graves at St Nicholas church.

Brick vaults can be found within churches, as at Barton-upon-Humber (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 306) and St Mark's Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 30-2; 92), and also externally in cemeteries (Keevill 1988, 4). Several 18th and 19th century headstones can be seen at the E end of the evaluation area. These have clearly been moved from their original position. It is likely that the cemetery occupied much of the area immediately N of the church, being constricted by the Two Brewers on the Stert Street frontage, and the Rectory House at the E end of the curtilage (Preston 1929, Fig. 2).

Grave depth varied considerably. The shallowest burial (skeleton 35) lay 0.49 m below the current ground level, while skeleton 65 was 1.08 m below ground. Most graves were not excavated, but all of the brick vaults appeared to be at least 0.9 m deep. Contrary to popular belief, burial 'six feet under' is a later



Victorian and modern practice. The possibility of earlier burials underlying those revealed in the trench cannot be discounted, although they would obviously have been heavily disturbed by the 18th and 19th century graves.

Burial plots were evidently closely supervised by the sexton. The graves were very tightly spaced, with little or no room to spare. They had also been laid out in N-S rows. The restricted cemetery area would have determined such economical use of space. It is also likely that multiple burial would occur in some plots (ie family graves).

Whether the graves cut into cellars associated with the public house was not determined, nor whether there are layers corresponding to the Roman and Iron Age occupation discovered on the site of the new Vale of the White Horse District Council offices at the Vineyard. The presence of Roman and medieval pottery in several grave fills suggests that deposits of those periods lie below the maximum level of excavation.

The excavations at the Vineyard (only 25 m away) found that the natural gravel was 1.8 m below the modern ground surface and that features had been cut through the gravel to a maximum depth of 2.5 m. Any features lying more than 0.9 m below the present surface would not have been exposed in this evaluation. The depth of penetration into any deposits by the graves makes it unlikely that medieval or earlier deposits will be found E of wall 48 within the 0.9 m depth of the proposed foundation trenches.

The position of the site just outside the gateway to a very rich Abbey and adjacent to a market in the centre of a medieval town would make it very attractive for building. The evidence of pottery and tile from the backfilling of the culvert trench suggests that the Stert immediately to the N of St Nicholas church was covered over in the 14th or 15th century. The amount of earlier pottery is suggestive of activity on the frontage before that date. Wall 48 seems to be broadly contemporary with the culvert and should therefore also be seen as a medieval feature. It is impossible to be sure whether it is the back wall of a building fronting into Stert Street, or the front wall of a building behind (ie E of) the culvert.

The Two Brewers public house was in existence by the end of the 16th century. A late 18th century engraving, reproduced on the front cover of this report, shows the pub straddling the Stert stream, which was otherwise still open for the length of Stert Street. It seems likely, therefore, that wall 48 belongs either to the pub itself, or to an earlier building on the same site. Construction probably occurred during the 15th century. The void between the barrel vault of the culvert and the floor of the building was simply used for rubbish dumping.

**Appendix One: Context list**

CTX	TYPE	NOTE	L	W	D
1	deposit	topsoil	ubiquitous		
2	deposit	layer under topsoil	ubiquitous		
3	cut	shallow gully		0.40	0.16
4	deposit	fill of 3			0.16
5	cut	shallow gully		0.40	0.14
6	deposit	fill of 5			0.14
7	cut	shallow gully		0.40	0.15
8	deposit	fill of 7			0.15
9	cut	shallow gully		0.39	0.20
10	deposit	fill of 9			0.20
11	cut	pit	0.90	0.45	0.49
12	deposit	fill of 11			0.12
13	deposit	fill of 11			0.19
14	deposit	fill of 11			0.30
15	masonry	wall of vault in 43	2.2	0.10	
16	deposit	grave fill of 43 in 15			
17	cut	shallow gully		0.40	0.15
18	deposit	fill of 17			0.15
19	cut	shallow gully		0.43	0.21
20	deposit	fill of 19			0.21
21	deposit	mortar layer	0.29	0.20	0.05
22	deposit	mortar layer	0.30	0.20	0.05
23	cut	grave cut	0.9+	0.4+	0.5+
24	skeleton	in 23			
25	deposit	grave fill of 23			0.5+
26	deposit	fill of 33			
27	deposit	fill of 33			



28	cut	grave cut	2.0	0.4+	
29	masonry	brick vault	0.64	0.10	
30	deposit	fill of 29			
31	cut	grave cut	0.8+	0.4+	
32	deposit	fill of 31			
33	cut	N-S cut at E end of trench	1.2+	0.8+	
34	cut	grave cut	1.90	0.4+	
35	skeleton	in 34			
36	deposit	fill of 34			
37	deposit	layer of culvert trench back fill			0.22
38	masonry	limestone wall		0.59	0.25
39	deposit	matrix around 38			
40	structure	wall formed by 38 and 39			
41	deposit	fill of 42			0.9+
42	cut	grave cut	2.25	0.60	0.9+
43	cut	grave cut	2.50	0.4+	
44	deposit	fill of 43			
45	deposit	layer in culvert trench		0.2+	
46	masonry	limestone wall		0.80	
47	deposit	matrix around 46			
48	structure	wall formed by 46 and 47			
49	cut	possible construction trench for 48		0.05	
50	deposit	fill of 49			
51	void				
52	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.6+
53	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.14
54	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.12
55	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.18
56	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.08

57	deposit	layer in culvert trench			0.30
58	masonry	limestone pieces		3.0+	
59	deposit	mortar around 58			
60	structure	culvert formed by 58 and 59			
61	deposit	grave fill?			
62	cut	grave cut			
63	deposit	fill of 62		0.9+	
64	masonry	brick vault	0.30	0.10	
65	skeleton	in 42			

## Appendix Two: List of pottery by context

CXT.	No. of Sherds	Fabric	Date	Comments
1			C11 Victorian	
2			"	
10			Victorian	
12			"	
14	1 2 2 9 63	OXAG OXAM	late C12 C13 C19 C15	Slip-decorated pitcher Brill/Boarstall Highly-decorated PM red ware Hants/Surrey Coarse Border ware. Splashed glaze. Wide strap handle. Probably bung-hole pitcher. Reconstructable.
18			C19	
20			C18/19	
25		OXBR	Roman?	Shell tempered. Seacourt Type. Flint & quartz tempered. Saxo-Norman. smoothed/wiped. Late med/post med. Denham/Nettlebed
26		OXY	Roman Roman Roman Medieval	Early storage jar Rim Grey wares Oxidized ware Wall sherd
32	3 1	ESCQ	C19	PM AS
37	1 1 1	OXAM	C19 C14 Roman	PM Baluster jug. Rim, splashed glaze. Brill/Boarstall Grey ware, burnished
41	1 4 1 3 6	OXAQ OXAG OXAM	C12-C14 C12/C13 C13 Roman C19	Ludgershall type Pitcher: Camley Gardens, Maidenhead (Berks) Brill/Boarstall Grey wares PM
52	6 28 5 6 4 4	OXAG OXAM OXY MDCL OXBK/OXAC OXBF	C12/C13 C13/C14 C12/C13 C11/C12 C11/C12 Roman	Slip-decorated pitchers, cooking pot. Brill/Boarstall jug, slashed & stabbed handle Pitcher Saxo-Norman? Including Samian Bowl form, and storage jar
53	2 2		C19 C14/C15	PM garden Baluster base
54	1 1 1 1	OXAG OXY(?)	C14/C15 C12/C13  Roman Roman?	Baluster bases - very hard fired/stoneware finish  Coarse ware
55	1 2 1	OXY OXAG OXBF OXAM	late C12 C12/C13 C11/C12 C14/C15	Cooking pot rim  Saxo-Norman Brill/Boarstall - baluster sherd
56		OXAM	C14	Brill/Boarstall
57			Early C2 <sup>nd</sup>	Roman storage jar. Grey ware rim



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Location Plan.

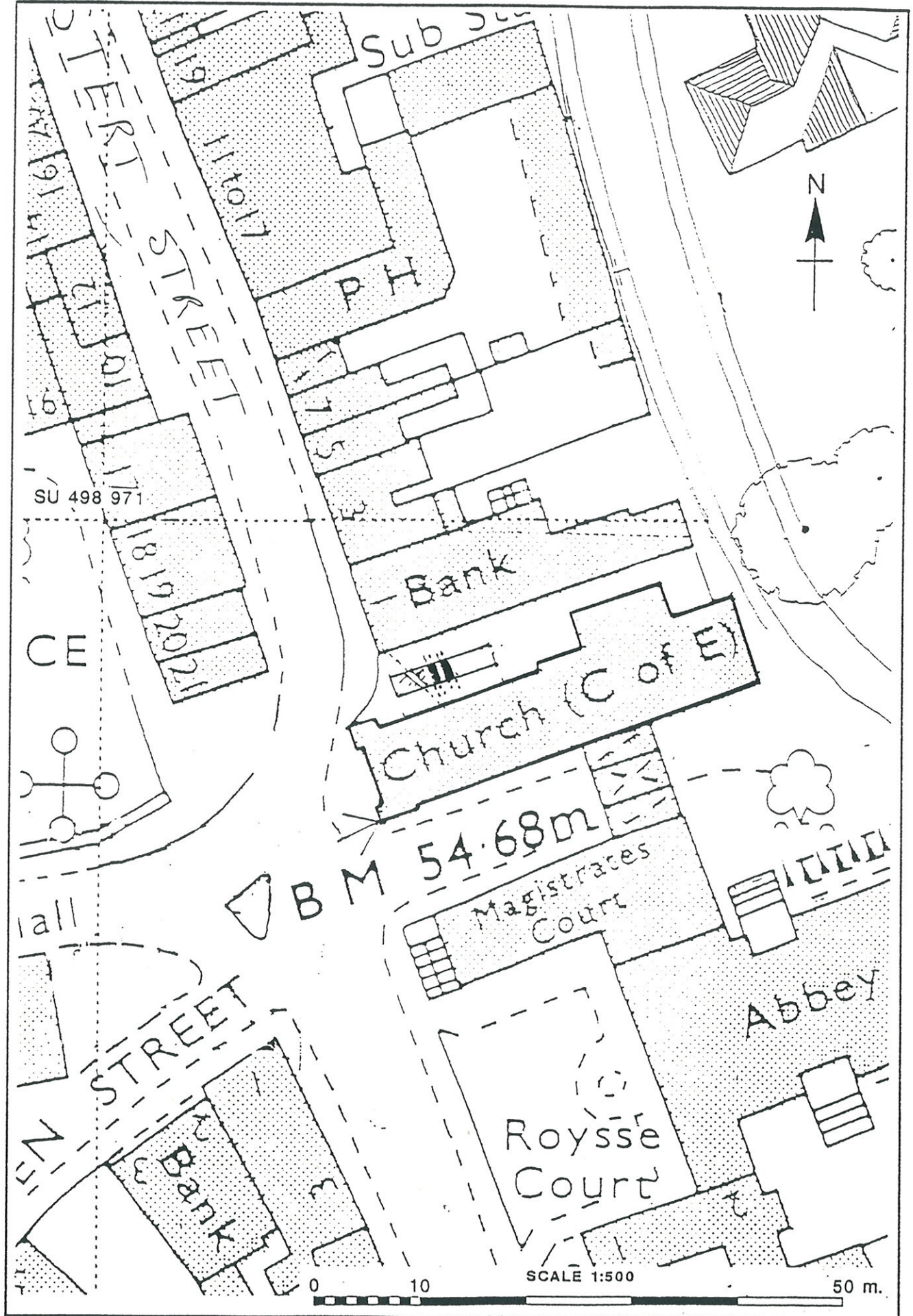
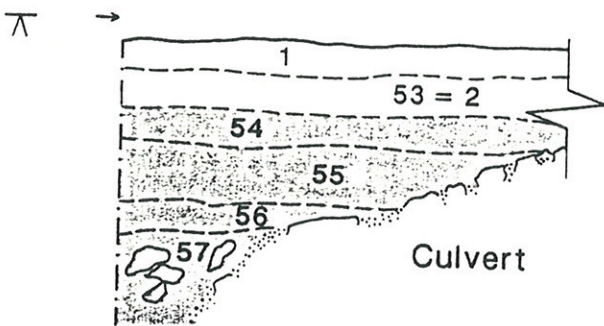
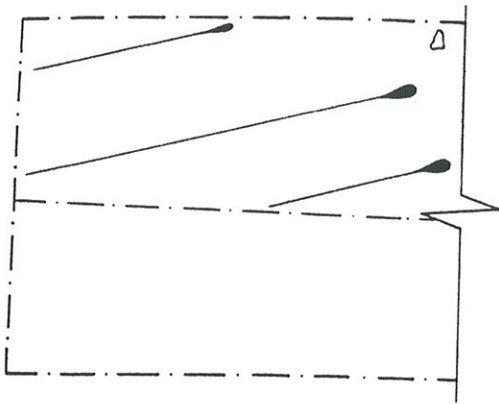
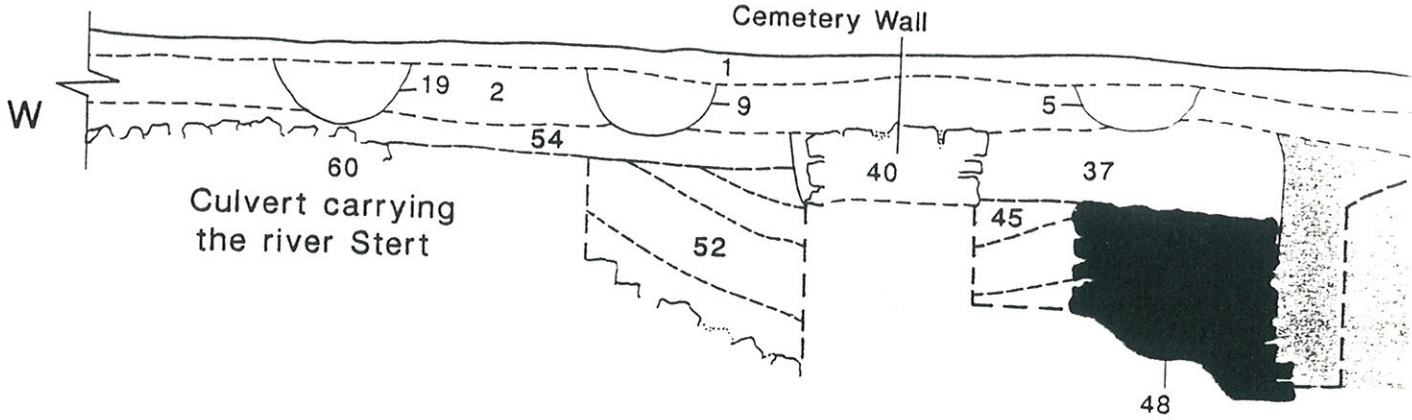
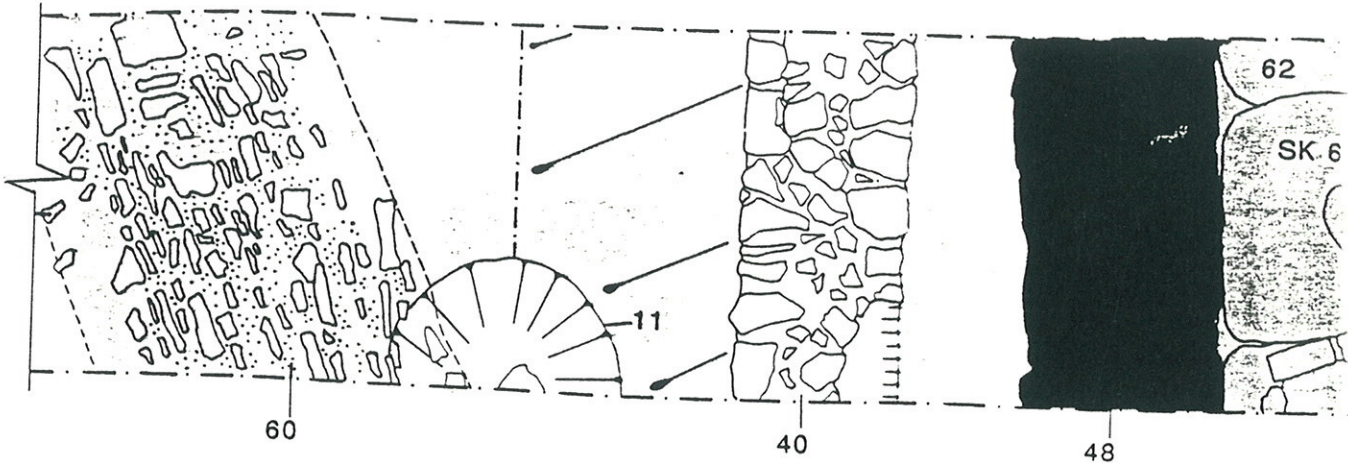


Figure 1.



# Evaluation Trench : PLAN & SECTION





## ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH, ABINGDON - NORTHERN BOUNDARY WALL

### Introduction

As part of the Vineyard Action Area redevelopment, and in order to include all the church land adjacent to the church of St. Nicholas on the north side within the enclosure wall of the churchyard, the Church Commissioners propose to demolish the existing boundary wall abutting the church on the north side and erect another wall running north from the east end of the chancel (planning application ABG/10981/1). Since this wall was believed to follow the line of the former abbey precinct boundary, doubts were expressed about the desirability of moving the wall, whose date was uncertain. The Oxford Archaeological Unit was commissioned to survey the architectural and documentary evidence relating to the wall and, when this failed to resolve the matter, to excavate a trench to establish the true date of the existing north-south wall.

### Topographical and Documentary background

The line of the existing wall runs straight northwards for c. 110 m, and forms the boundary between the properties along Stert street and the former cattle market. Before being used as a cattle market the land east of the wall was occupied by an orchard, and the boundary is shown along the same line on the first Ordnance survey of 1881 and on the Christ's Hospital Map of 1844 (Figure 1).

It is evident from Rocque's map of Berkshire of 1757 that the boundary was on a similar line at that date, but the scale of the map does not allow detailed comparison. Excavation has established that from 1645 to c. 1661 during the English Civil Wars, when the orchard was owned by the Verney family, it was used as a cemetery during the Parliamentary occupation of the town (Allen 1989; Allen 1990). At a point some 45 m north of the church the excavation extended to within 2 m of the existing boundary line, burials were found within 4 m of it, and no trace of any alternative boundary was found, so that the boundary at that time must have lain either on or very close to the existing line (Figure 2). Given the straightness of the boundary it is unlikely that the boundary has shifted eastwards due to encroachment by the tenements along Stert street.

Before this time the whole of the former abbey grounds were in the hands of the Blacknall family, who are believed to have kept the property intact and unaltered since they acquired it in 1553. There is thus reasonable evidence that the boundary has in general occupied the same line since the Dissolution of the abbey in 1538. Stretches of an old stone wall survive at intervals along the boundary, and in general the individual lengths are of similar construction, consisting of courses of roughly dressed limestone of varying thickness; these may be parts of one continuous wall.

Some doubts however remained about the particular stretch of wall adjoining the church:

- 1) The rectory of St. Nicholas lay on Stert street, outside the abbey precinct on the north side of the church. St. Nicholas was



served both by a rector and a vicar, and in order to support them both a vicarage with its own court was granted to St. Nicholas in 1386, this lying within the abbey precinct on the north side of the chancel (Preston 1971, 53). Since the church owned property either side of the precinct boundary, and there was direct access from rectory to vicarage, it was not certain that the precinct wall would have remained unmodified along this stretch.

2) A.E.Preston claimed (Figure 3, reproduced from Preston 1971 Figure 2) that the precinct wall between the rectory garden and vicarage stood on an earth mound, and was of slighter construction than the wall further north. Lengths of the existing boundary wall some 100m north of the church do stand proud of the surrounding ground surface on what may be an earth bank, but nothing of this was visible above ground adjacent to the church.

3) At the very north-east corner of the chancel (at the point where the Church Commissioners wish to build the new wall) is a broken face of masonry protruding from the line of the north chancel wall. The purpose of this was uncertain, and it was thought that it might represent an earlier phase of precinct boundary wall.

Accordingly it was decided to dig a trench in the angle between the north wall of the chancel and the north-south boundary wall, running along the chancel wall as far as the north-east corner of the church (see Figure 4).

#### The excavation

A trench 1.35 m east-west and 0.75 m north-south was dug alongside the boundary wall. It is clear from the upstanding boundary wall that there was originally a doorway through it, now blocked, whose edge was only 0.18 m from the church (see Plate, Figure 5). The doorway was 1.20 m wide, so the trench was extended 0.75 m north to incorporate a short length of wall either side of the door (see Plate, Figure 6).

Ground level was at OD. Below this the first 0.20 m consisted of a thin layer of concrete bedded upon a gravel and rubble make-up, and this overlay garden soil 4512, 0.30-0.35 m deep. The bottom of the boundary wall (numbered 4501), and of the blocking, was found c. 0.55 m below ground. The wall was built without foundations, bedded upon a thin layer of gravelly sandy loam 4510, and overlay a thin mortar floor 4509. Four courses of the boundary wall were exposed below ground, the lowest of squared blocks up to 0.60 x 0.22 m across, the succeeding courses being less deep and consisting of smaller stones. The short wall-stub south of the door and abutting the church bottomed at the same level, but directly overlay the foundation trench for the chancel wall, numbered 4503 (see Figure 5 and Plate, Figure 7). This suggests that the boundary wall and the north chancel wall were both built at around the same time.

Below 4501 and cut by 4503 were a series of thin floors and occupation layers 4511 and 4506-4509. No finds were recovered from these, but they presumably relate to the use of the vicarage set up in 1386. Full descriptions of these and their stratigraphic relationships is given in the Appendix.



At the east end of the trench an indistinct soil change was observed in line with the east end of the chancel wall at the bottom of the garden soil. This overlay the foundation trench of the chancel wall 4503, and may possibly have been the very bottom of the robbing of a later wall projecting north from the east end of the church. Below this 4503 continued around the corner of the chancel and returned south. Adjacent to it was a small shallow pit or posthole 4504, which cut into floor 4506 and bottomed on make-up layer 4511. This was undated. Beyond the east limit of 4503 and south of 4504 in the very corner of the trench the soil was different, and is numbered 4505.

#### Conclusions of the excavation

The archaeological evidence appears to show that the construction of the north chancel wall and of the boundary wall were virtually contemporary. Although the boundary wall butts up to the chancel wall, the fact that it directly overlies the construction trench of the chancel shows that little time elapsed between the construction of one and the other. No finds were recovered, but the chancel is dated to the 15th century by the architectural evidence of the window in the S wall (Preston 1971, 8-9; Pevsner).

#### Documentary Research

The freshness of the masonry along the north wall of the chancel suggested that the wall might have been repaired or renewed, so a search was made of the Ecclesiastical Faculties for St. Nicholas in the Oxfordshire County Record Office and of the parish records, held in the Abingdon Long Alley Muniment Room. The Faculties did not record any structural alterations to the fabric of the church between 1870 and 1939.

The newspaper account of the 1881 restoration given in the Abingdon and Reading Herald for 3rd December 1881 however states that the window now visible in the north chancel wall was inserted, copying that in the south wall, and that the foundations of the existing walls were replaced in places. Which walls were involved is not specified, but such indications as there are would appear to indicate the nave, and since the nave floor was lowered the underpinning of foundations is also likely to have been on the inside.

Before this date a letter of 1829 records a survey of the chancel, indicating that the chancel wall was bulging, and suggesting that buttresses be erected N and S of the east chancel wall to support it. One of these buttresses still stands at the SE corner of the chancel. There is no dated document stating when this work was carried out, but the churchwardens' accounts of 1837 include a large payment to a builder, which was perhaps for this purpose. The letter of 1829 indicates that there was to be a buttress at the NE corner, and the removal of this buttress is probably what gave rise to the scar at the NE corner of the church.

The churchwardens' accounts prior to 1800 could not be scanned in detail within the time available, but no documentation suggesting alteration to the chancel was found.



## Discussion

The evidence can be interpreted in two ways. It is firstly possible that the north chancel wall was not itself substantially altered after its construction in the 15th century, and that the boundary wall abutting St. Nicholas church on the north side dates back to the late Medieval period as well, being part of the precinct boundary of Abingdon Abbey.

Alternatively it is possible that the outside face of the north chancel wall was replaced in the 1881 restoration. This might explain the unusual inset at the NW corner of the chancel, an earlier buttress being demolished and the north, but not the east, chancel wall being refaced. If so, then the small stub of boundary wall abutting the church, which exactly overlies the width of the chancel foundation, was rebuilt in 1881 as well, creating or perpetuating a doorway through the wall from W to E.

Such a doorway is however implied as early as 1587 by the dispute between William Blacknall, owner of the former Abbey precinct, and Guy Dobbins, rector of St. Nicholas, over the leasing of both vicarage and rectory to Robert Rythe, which implies access between the two (Preston 1971, 208-210). This access to the area N of the church must have been maintained, since a pub called The Two Brewers had occupied the Stert Street frontage from as early as 1599, so that access to the rectory from the Stert Street side would only have been through the pub (see also Green's engraving of 1782 in Preston 1971, 170). The rectory stood N of the church behind the pub until 1797, when it was demolished to make way for a cemetery, which was in use until shortly before 1881. Access to the cemetery will probably have been obtained via the door in the boundary wall, or possibly through a door in the north wall of the church, if such existed.

Part of the 1881 restoration involved inserting an arch in the north wall of the chancel for access to a new vestry and organ chamber, and a new door gave access from the organ chamber to the land N of the church. In the same year The Two Brewers pub was demolished, and access to the churchyard north of the church was available both from Stert Street and from the church. From this time on a door through the boundary wall would only have served to link the churchyard to Mr. Trendell's private land.

The evidence would thus suggest that the door, and thus the wall, predated the 1881 reconstruction, and may date back to the 16th century or earlier. The window inserted into the north chancel wall in 1881 is bonded with different mortar to that of the rest of the wall, which might also indicate that the facing of the chancel wall is earlier, though this window might have been repointed subsequently.

## Conclusion

In the absence of dating evidence from the layers stratified immediately below the wall, it is not possible to date the construction of the wall with certainty. Two dates are possible, one Late Medieval, the other 18th century or earlier but following the line of the medieval precinct wall. On balance the weight of evidence favours a medieval rather than a later date for the boundary wall.

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Christ's Hospital map of  
Abingdon 1844



Figure 1



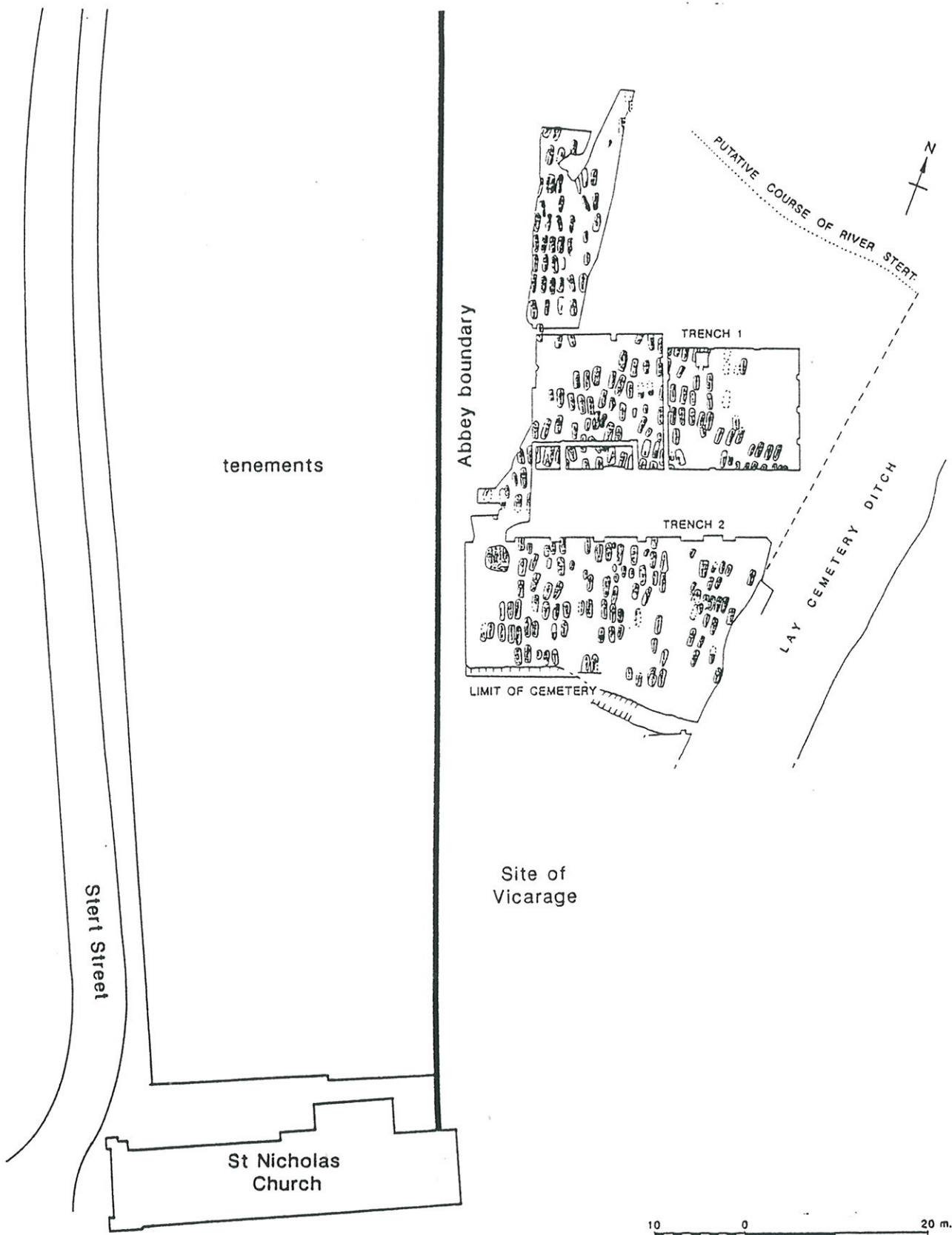


Figure 2

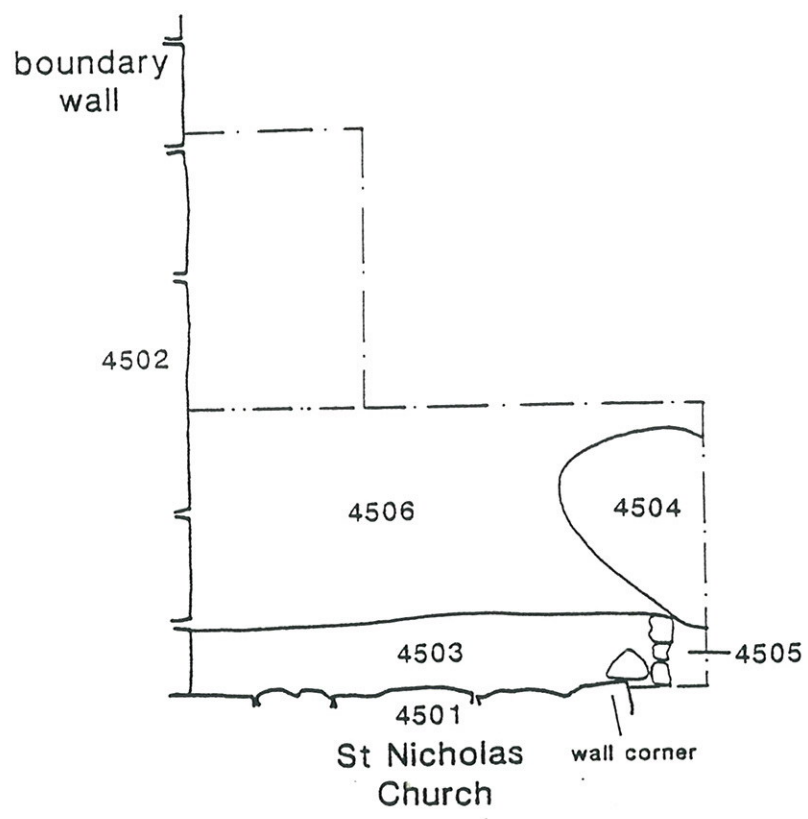
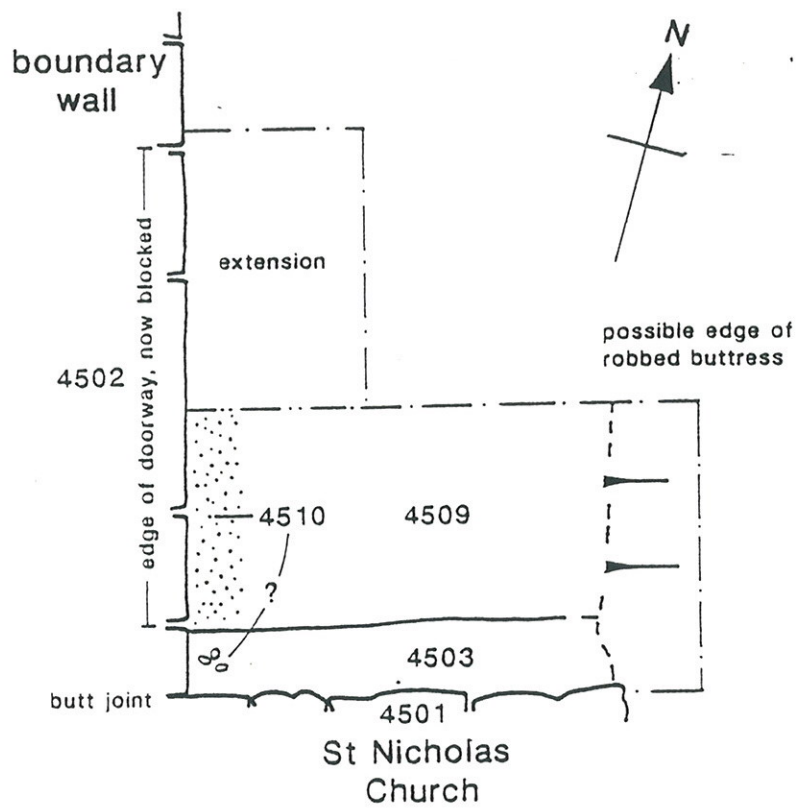


Figure 4



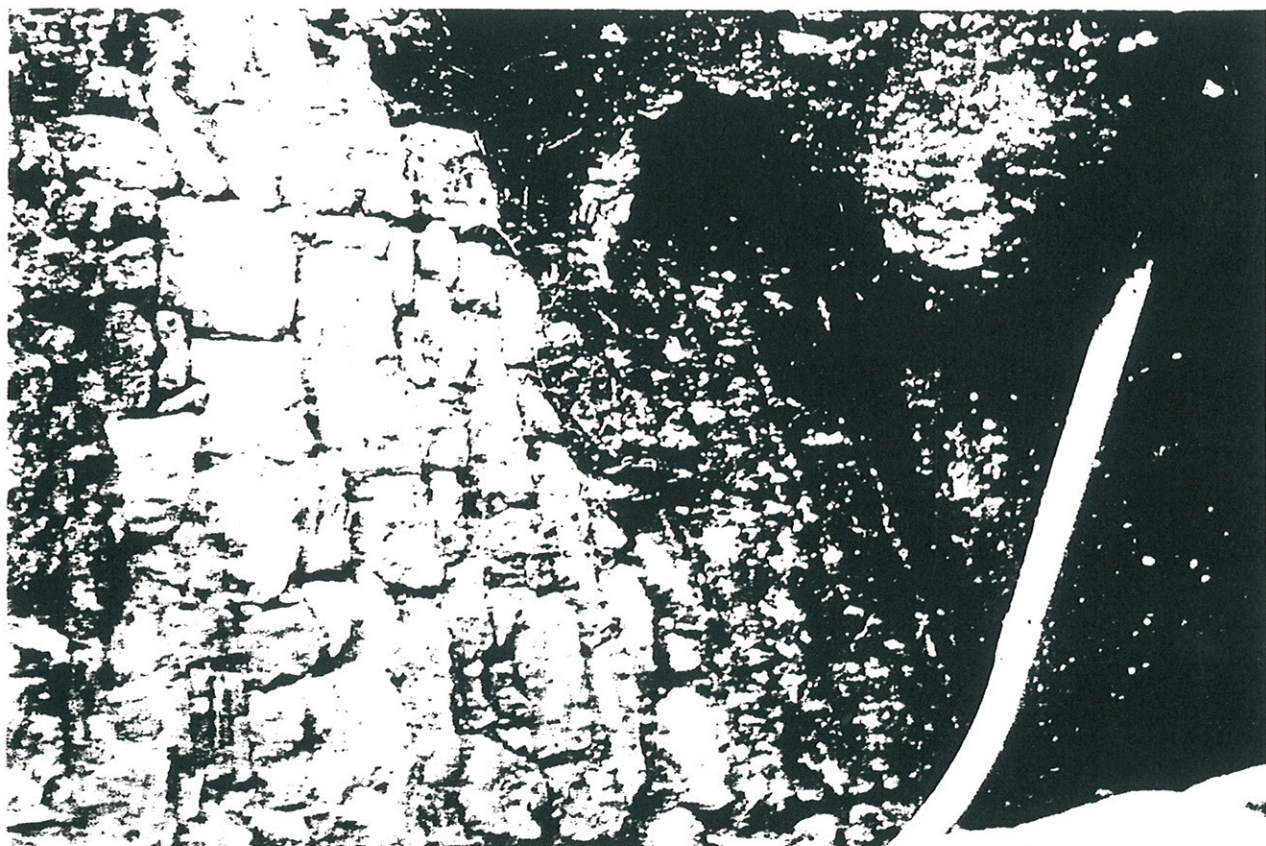


Figure 6



Figure 5





Figure 7