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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS
AT ST. BENET'S, CAMBRIDGE 1988

Prior to the building of a kitchen and lavatory extension to the NE corner of St. Benet's church, a 2m by 3m trench was dug to assess whether any archaeological remains would be disturbed during building.

The excavation lasted from 4th - 8th April 1988 and went as far as 150cm below ground surface before it was too deep and unsafe to continue. The deposits were not bottomed and considerable activity in the Victorian period and 20th century meant that very little from earlier periods remained in situ.

The lowest deposit uncovered was a dark tan silty sand (context 24) which extends right across the trench where not disturbed. In the north eastern section of the trench it had been cut by mortar wall foundations which still survive to a height of 40cm. The top of these foundations was 50cm below the surface and follow an orientation slightly more NW-SE than the present retaining wall of Free School Lane.

Overlying context 24 a series of at least 3 articulated skeletons were found, layered 15cm apart in a homogeneous deposit of clayey silt with gravels (context 12). This appears to represent a well ordered burial regime in that the lower burials were not disturbed by the later ones. The highest of these bones were just 50cm below the surface, and the skeletons were orientated west-east.

A brick sided coffin-shaped grave had been cut through context 12. It was orientated west-east, and its foot end goes beneath the brick retaining wall of Free School Lane. This may be the vault for John Challis, 1838, whose tombstone was propped against the church nearby.

A pit also had been cut through context 12. It contained a black sticky fill at its east end, and a compacted clayey silt with much gravel and small stones in the west end. On its surface this second fill (context 23) had part of a Medieval gravestone lying upside down. Glass and china fragments from the pit give it a 19th century or later date. Directly above this pit,

and cutting the brick vault and the clay silt deposit 12, were large clay drainpipes put in to drain the roofs of the Victorian Organ Chamber and North Aisle. The backfill around these pipes appeared to be redeposited clay silt and gravels from context 12, with much rubble and displaced bone. This also formed the fill of the brick-sided vault, and all of the west section, which lay below the concrete gutter around the Victorian buttress.

A black topsoil approximately 20cm thick overlay the trench.

19th century pottery was found in all layers except the deepest (context 24), and context 12 which contained the articulated skeletons. Some 17th/18th century pottery is represented, but no Medieval wares were found.

The articulated skeletons may be of Medieval date but we have no evidence to support this. The fact that they went beneath the 19th century buttress, and were cut by the brick vault means they were 18th century burials at the latest. The pit that was cut into context 12 probably was a 19th century sump. The earliest feature was the mortar wall foundation, which was dismantled down to its present level before the construction of the brick-sided vault. Presumably it was an earlier boundary between the graveyard and Free School Lane, following a different alignment from that of the present one.

A drop of 150cm from the level of present day Free School Lane to the churchyard, and the proximity of the burials to the surface suggests that the Victorians removed the top part of the graveyard during re-building work in the 1850s. In support of this a drawing of St. Benet's in 1842 (Cambs Local Collection, ref. 2934) shows the ground level higher against the tower than it is now.

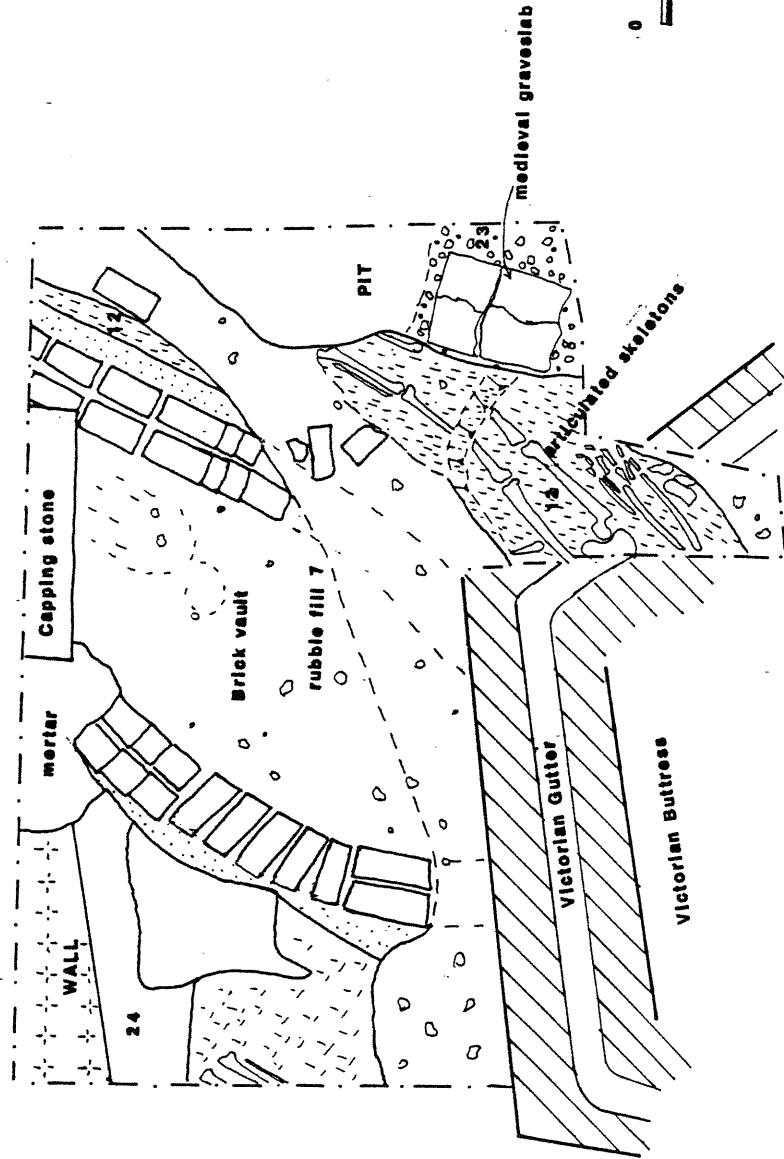
14 April 1988

Tim Malim

PLAN OF FEATURES

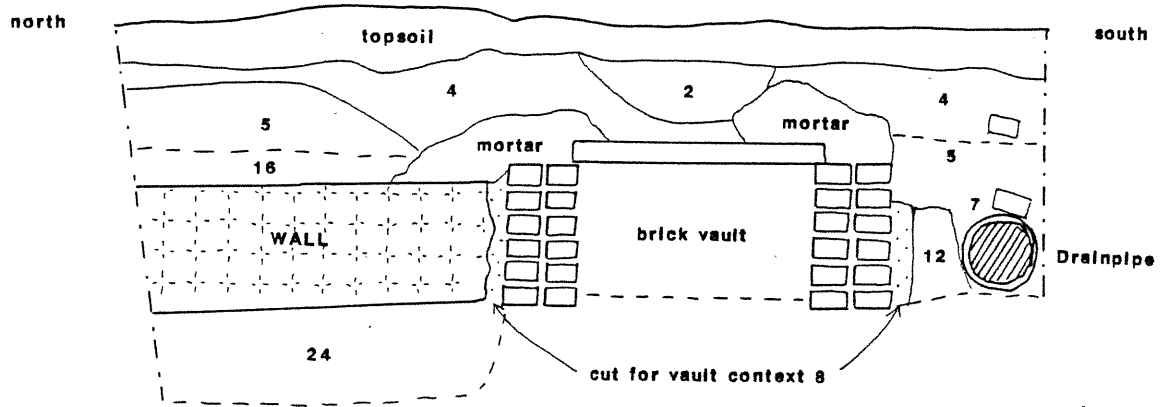
FREE SCHOOL LANE

North



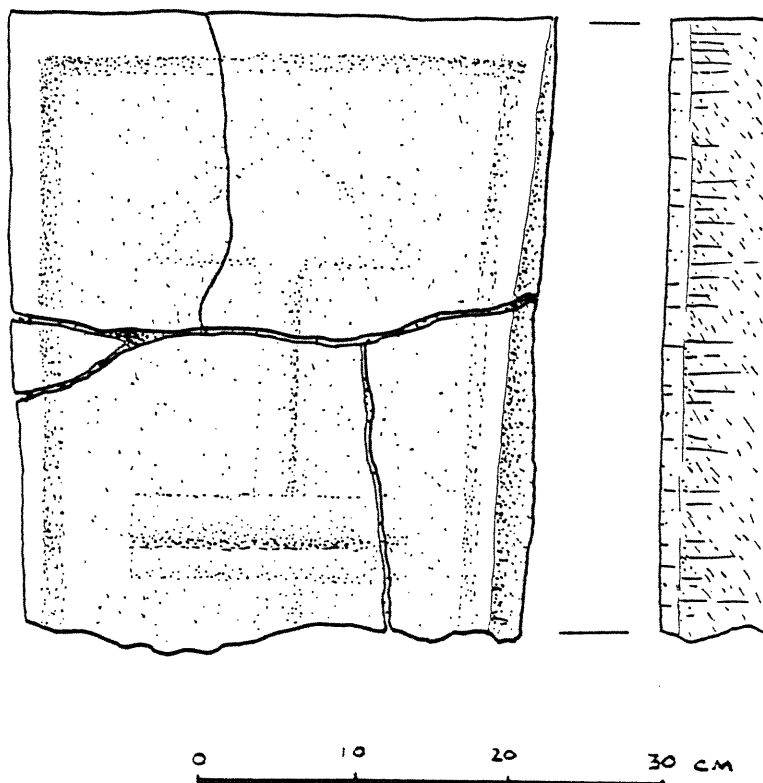
1 metre

WEST FACING SECTION



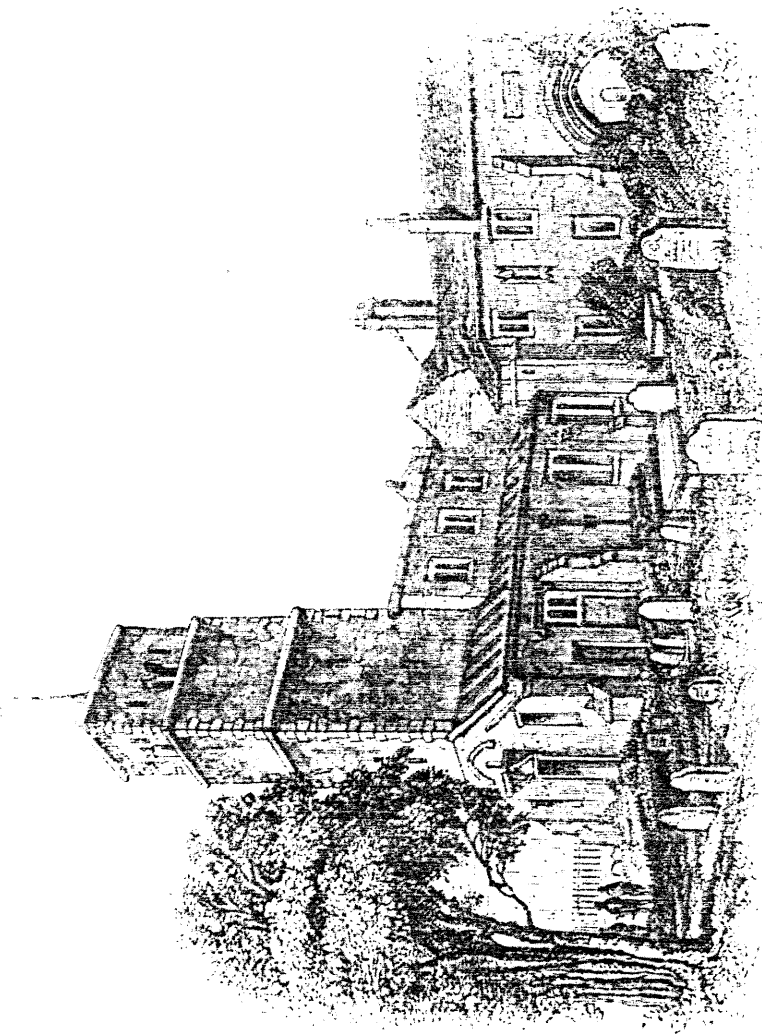
0 1 metre

MEDIEVAL GRAVESTONE



The Medieval Graveslab

The medieval gravestone found at St. Benet's has been broken into 5 pieces and when reassembled it is missing its foot end. It would appear not to have been much more than a metre in total length, by 30cm width, and is made of Barnack stone. It has cambered sides and an incised line traces the edge of the stone. A central ridge is bisected by at least two cross arms, and appears to finish at the head end in the shape of a triangle. This simplicity of design fits in with the paucity of bold new patterns at Cambridge and the loss of ability to carve intricate knotwork noted in the immediate period post-Conquest (Butler, 1957, *Medieval Gravestones...* in PCAS vol. 50, p.89-100). The design motif on the gravestone would suggest a date of mid 12th century - 13th century. It should be noted that a similar, but far longer gravestone, lies within the church itself, and contains not only the median ridge but also a double omega motif in the middle of the stone.



ST. BENET'S CHURCH IN 1842





ST BENE'T'S CHURCHYARD

April 1988

This is a mixed assemblage of large fragments and some complete bones, total 178, giving an MNI of seven adults and three children. As far as it is possible to determine, the children were in the age range 4 - 8 years, two in the upper range (c. 6-8 years) and one c. 4 years. An adult-sized but unfused femoral head indicates another individual of approximately 18-20 years.

In only one case was it possible to associate some bones in terms of sex/age/morphology: a robust young adult male is represented by a complete cranium and partial mandible, a nearly-complete L innominate, a R femoral head and a pair of tibiae. There are no signs of disease in this skeleton other than in the dentition, where there is a medium degree of calculus present, extensive alveolar resorption and ante-mortem tooth loss - probable indicators of poor dental hygiene. The mandibular canine is rotated due to crowding; the bite was edge-to-edge, common in earlier periods of history but uncommon in modern Britain.

Another adult tibia shows a healed fracture of the medial malleolus, which is displaced laterally and ankylosed to the articular surface. This kind of injury requires operative reduction if there is not to be permanent displacement of the ankle joint, as there would have been in this case. There are also signs of ankylosis of the distal fibula, with an infective reaction, which suggests that there may have been an additional

fracture of the lateral malleolus of the fibula: this is a commoner injury, although resulting from greater violence than the fracture of one malleolus alone.

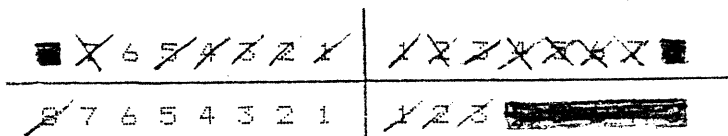
Certain of the isolated vertebrae show osteophytic 'lipping' indicative of the common degenerative arthritis found in most adult spines.

Inventory

* = immature

Skull

Complete skull with left mandibular corpus (male)



Vault bones with associated R temporal

R parietal

*L frontal

*L frontal

*L frontal

R mandibular ramus and part corpus with socket for 8

Vertebrae

C7, T2, probably associated, with osteophytic lipping lower right of body

T12, L1, associated

Upper thoracic

Lumbar body, with osteophytic lipping lower left of body

11 fragments

Rib

26 fragments

Sternum

2 fragments

Clavicle

L complete

L complete

Scapula

L coronoid process

R acromion process

*L glenoid fossa

Humerus

L and R distal (pair)
*R distal without epiphysis
2 fragments

Ulna

R shaft
R head
L distal
*L shaft without distal epiphysis

Radius

L complete
L distal
2 fragments

Innominates

L broken
L pubis (including symphysis but too worn to age)
L ischium
R ischium
Part acetabulum
*R ilium
*L pubis
*R pubis and part acetabulum
9 fragments (some immature)

Femora

R head
R head
R lateral condyle
*L and R complete (c. 8 yrs)
*R proximal (c. 4-5 yrs)
*L distal (c. 4-5 yrs)
*L shaft showing distal growth plate
*Proximal epiphysis
*Proximal epiphysis (adult size but unfused)
5 fragments

Patella

R complete

Tibia

L and R complete
L distal
L distal with fracture
*L and R proximal (< 8 yrs)
*R proximal
7 fragments

Fibulae

R distal
R distal
L distal
5 fragments

Carpals/tarsals

Lunate

R calcaneus and talus associated

R calcaneus

L calcaneus

L calcaneus

L calcaneus

L calcaneus

R talus

Metacarpals/metatarsals/phalanges

21 complete, broken and fragments

Unidentifiable

22 fragments

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