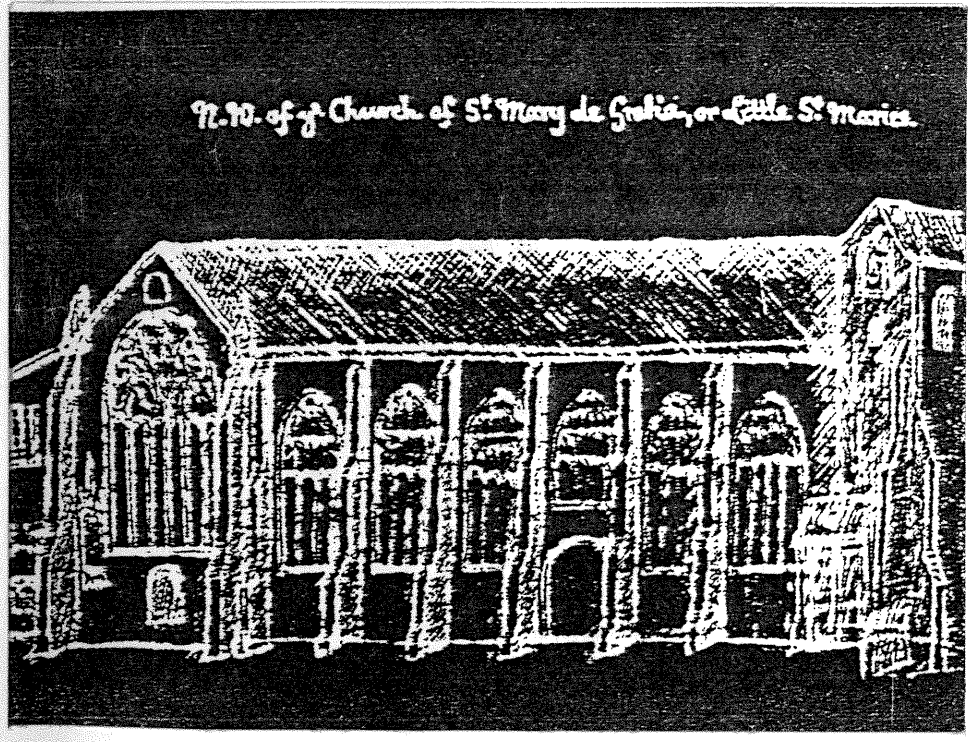


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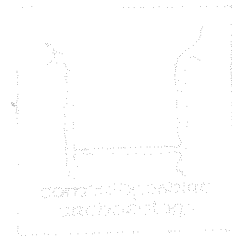
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ST. MARY-THE-LESS 1990



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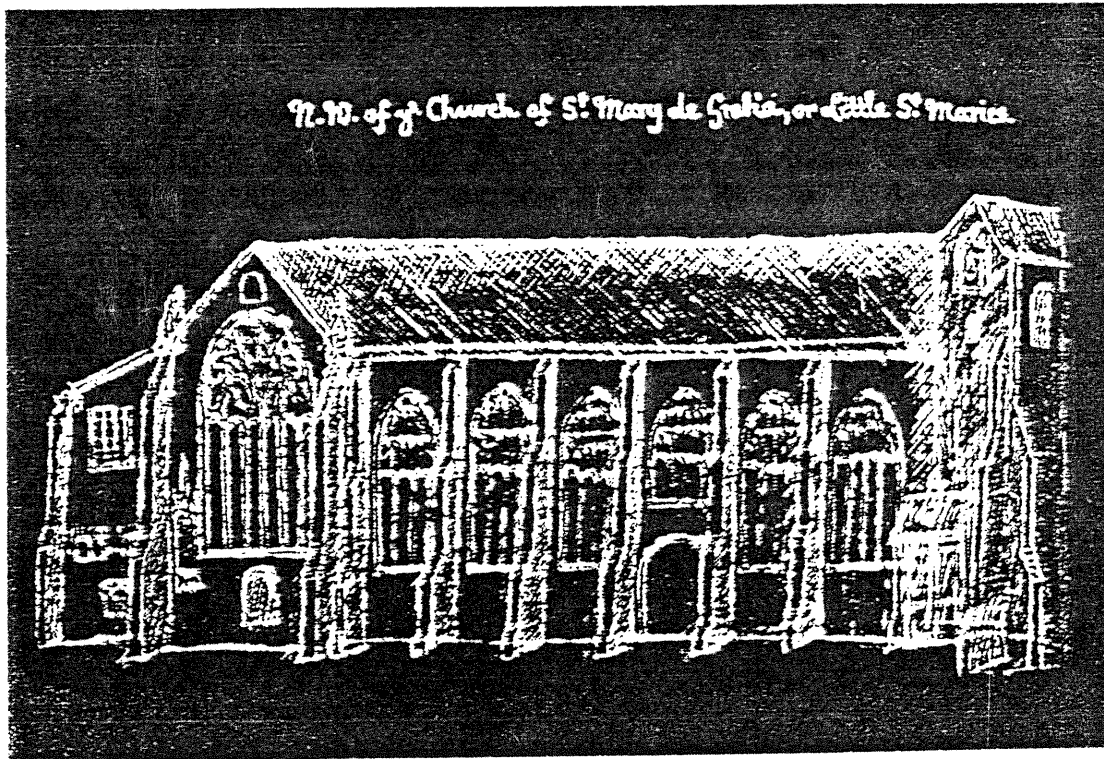
Rural Strategy



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ST. MARY-THE-LESS, CAMBRIDGE

TL/4486/5799
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ST. MARY-THE-LESS, CAMBRIDGE

INTRODUCTION

One aspect of the Planning conditions for an extension to the vestry within the churchyard of St. Mary-the-less was that prior to the extension, a trial excavation within the relevant area should be carried out to recover anything of archaeological significance. This work was conducted by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Section between the 21st and 23rd May 1990. The project was funded by the Parochial church council, and there was some expectation that the foundations of the earlier church might be uncovered.

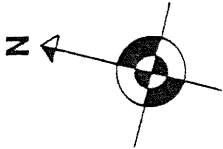
BACKGROUND

Fragments of Anglo-Saxon interlace grave slabs built into the south wall of the present 19th century vestry may imply Saxon beginnings, but the first substantial evidence pertains to a later period. Documentary sources (Cur. Reg. R. v. 39) indicates that the origin of the church dates at least back to the mid-12th century, which is supported by architectural evidence from the west tower, specifically the east wall and tower arch of small pebble-rubble construction, as well as a Norman stone chevron reset in the south-west angle of the tower. The most notable aspect of this 12th century church, then known as St. Peter-without-Trumpington Gate, was its orientation in contrast with the later building. It lay accurately aligned east-west, whereas the later church is more east-north-east/west-south-west.

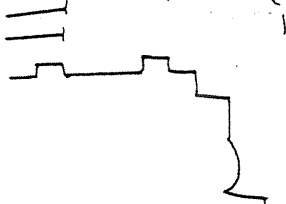
In 1286, upon the foundation of the first college in Cambridge, the church was appropriated as the college chapel and gave its name to the college, Peterhouse. The appropriation was however contested by the former owners of the advowson, St. John's Hospital (established about 1208, and upon which St. John's College was later founded), but they lost the dispute, and from 1339-40 until 1632 the church was used as a chapel by Peterhouse. Yet by the time the college had safely won the patronage, the church had fallen into a state of disrepair, and so between 1340 and 1352, the church was largely rebuilt along a new orientation, perhaps aligned with the college, and finally rededicated to the Virgin Mary. However, it is not impossible that much of the former church still stood, for the sixth bay was not built until the 15th century; inside the church can be seen evidence for a former chancel arch, at exactly the point where the new building would have met the old (ie. the sixth bay), and outside at the

LOCATION PLAN

ST. MARY-THE-LESS



- 12th century
- 14th century
- 15th century
- 16th century
- 19th and 20th century



Little St. Mary's Lane

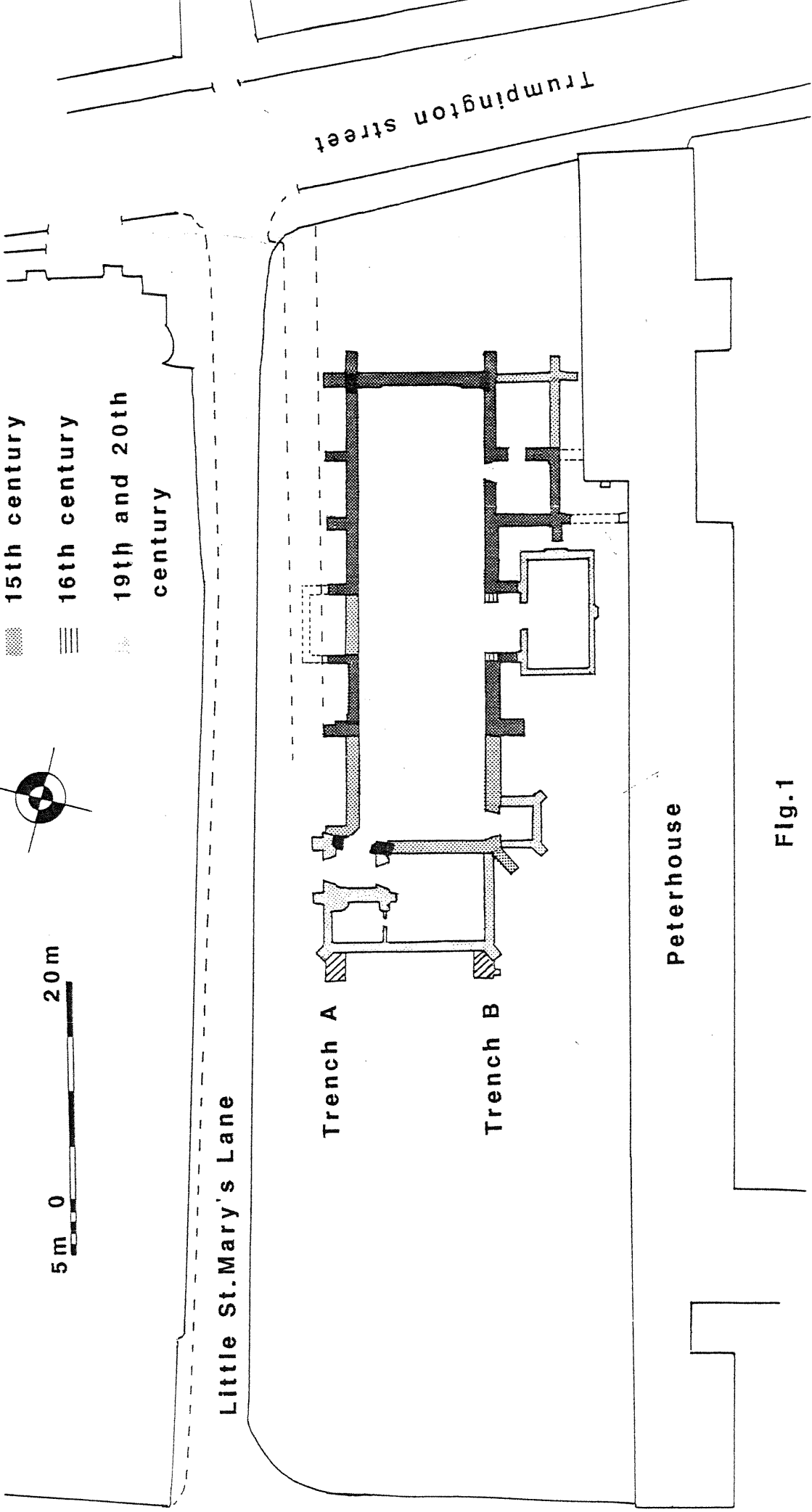
Trench A

Trench B

Peterhouse

Trumpington street

Fig.1



same point are buttresses of much thicker and rougher proportions. Certainly the original tower appears to have been retained (see fig.1).

Thus, in the 15th century, the new church was extended westwards, demolishing all of the original Norman church save the tower; in the same century, three chantry chapels were added, one on the north side and two on the south, all by masters of Peterhouse.

The most recent phase of construction dates to the late 19th and early 20th century, when the tower had fallen or was pulled down, and a new vestry was built (1892), two of the chantry chapels were demolished, and a new southern one was erected (1931).

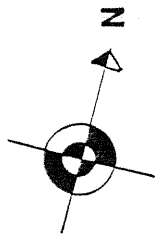
EXCAVATION STRATEGY AND RESULTS

Given the limitations of documentary and architectural evidence, particularly for pre-Norman times, archaeology is a major if not sole source of historical information, and recently it is proving especially informative on early church development, often refuting conventional wisdom. The vestry alteration at Little St. Mary's involved an extension 2 metres westwards, with new foundations to a depth of at least a metre; consequently, two sondages (1 x 2m) were cut at either end of the western side of the vestry, to 'rescue' any archaeological information that might be present.

The test trenches were excavated by hand, with three people in three days. Most of the features were revealed in the first day, and were common to both trenches. They were disappointingly modern (see fig.2). Two ceramic drains associated with the vestry gutters lay less than half a foot beneath the flower-bed topsoil, with a packing of clinker; at the same level are the gravel foundations or remains of a former path, which goes round the back of the church. Presently, the course of the path is marked by paving slabs, but it follows the original one which is marked on the 1:25 inch OS map of 1886, before the vestry was built. Two alternate layers of gravel (including a great deal of brick fragments) and soil, just under a foot in thickness, make up the path. Both the flower-bed, which lies between the vestry and the path, and a narrow slit trench for a water pipe cut through these foundations (see fig.3).

Beneath all these features lay mixed topsoil, the accumulated build-up typical of a graveyard. This thick layer of grave-earth was followed down to about a metre in depth over the next two days, and contained a great deal of disarticulated bones of the human body (which have been returned for reinterment), and to a lesser extent animal bones, as well as broken bottle glass, clay-pipes, iron nails, handles and coffin plates, and earthenware pottery and brick. Of rather more interest are two pieces of probably post-medieval bronzework (a large-headed pin

TRENCH PLAN



TRENCH B

Mortar band

TRENCH A

Water pipe trench

Gas pipe

Edge of Path

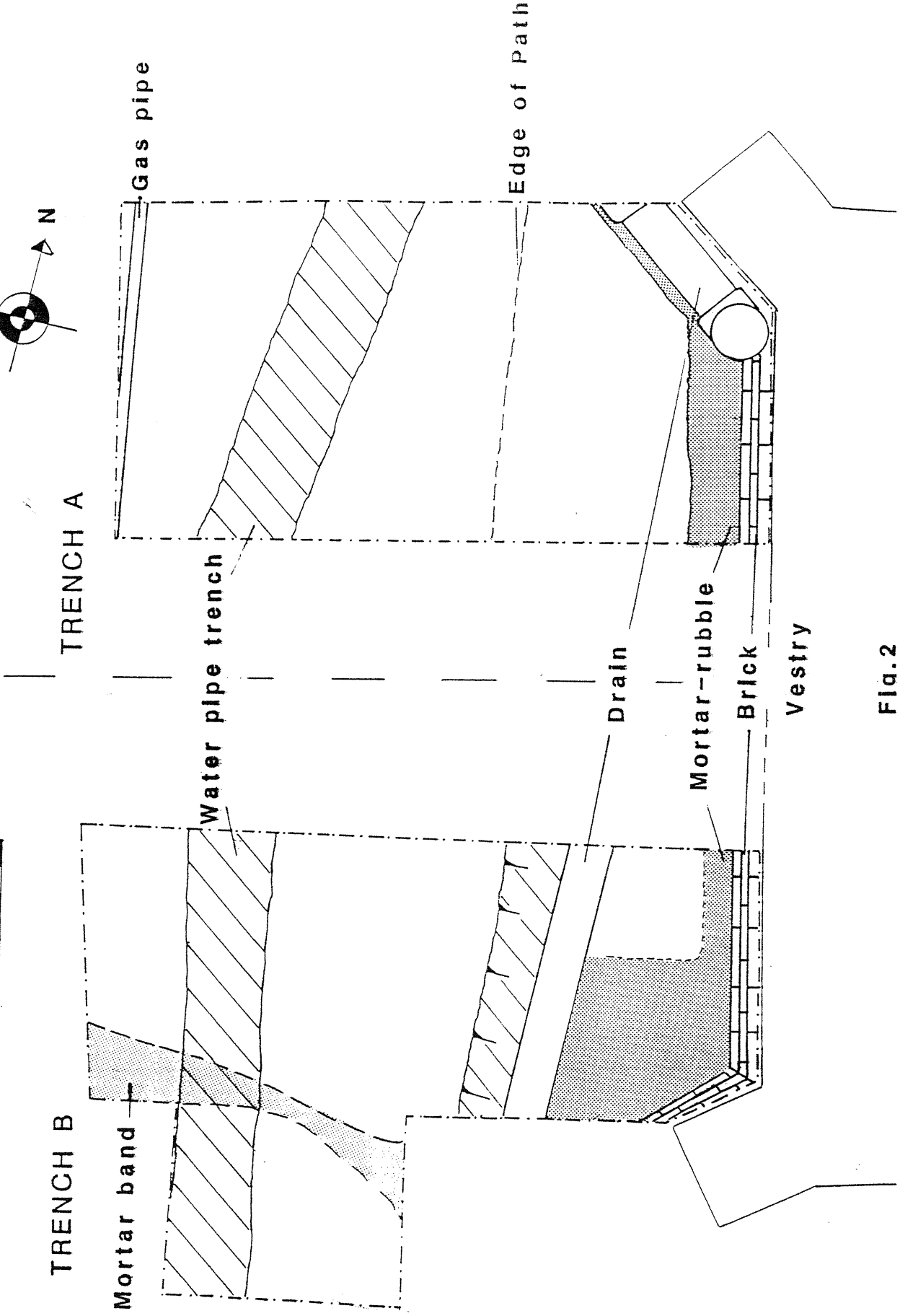
Drain

Mortar-rubble

Brick

Vestry

Fig. 2



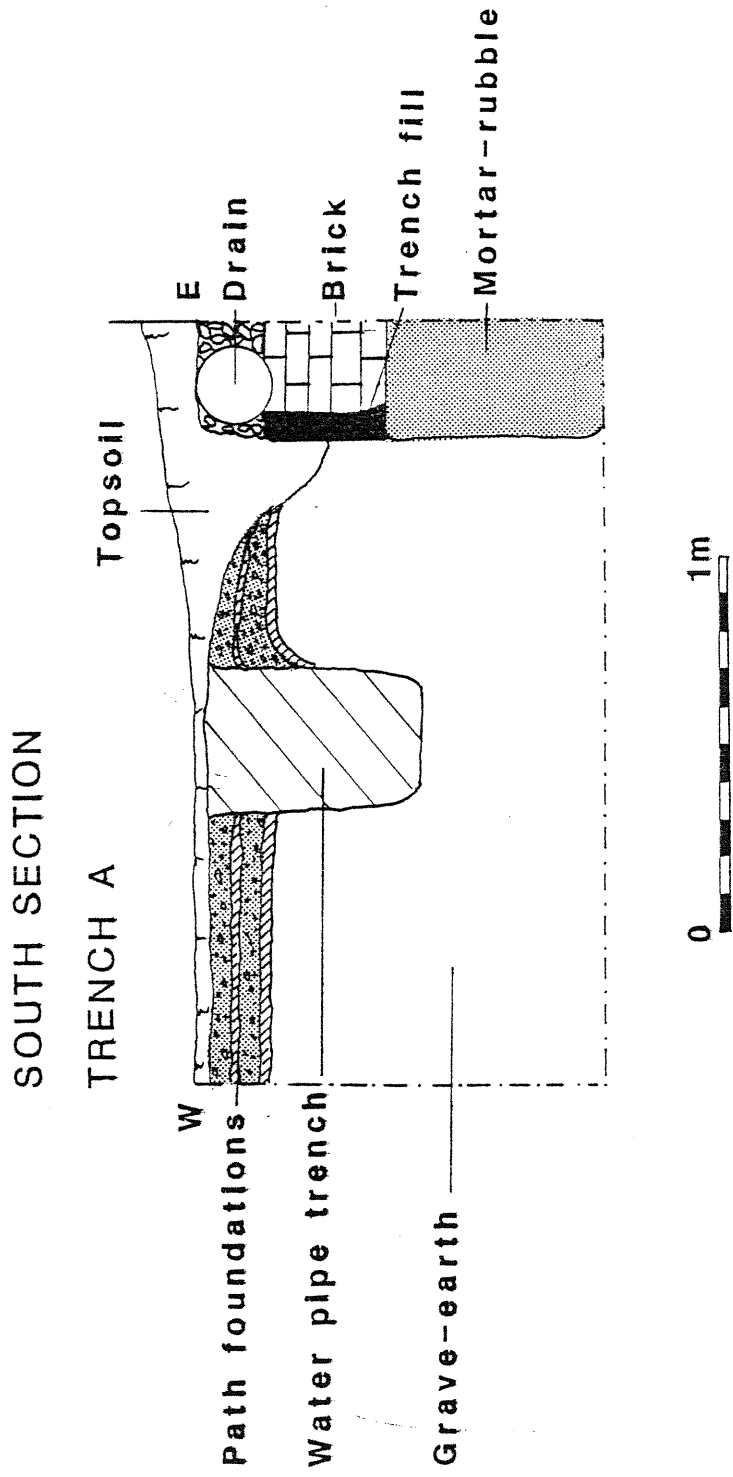


Fig.3

and an evolved ringlet) and a few sherds of early Medieval coarseware, including Thetford and St. Neots ware pottery (11th-12th century). (see fig. 4).

The greater the depth, the less artefacts were found, and there was a proportionate increase in human bone, some semi-articulated, as well as intact skulls. The bottom of the grave-earth was not reached, but a small bore-hole indicated that it continued down at least another half a metre. Since the foundations for the extension were unlikely to go deeper than this, there was no necessity to reach undisturbed subsoil.

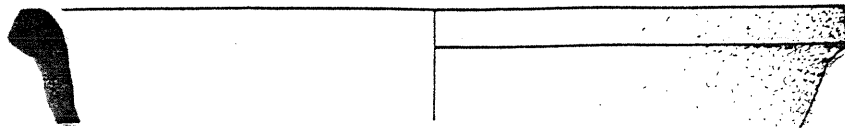
Only one possible feature lay within this matrix, a thin narrow band of compact chalk/lime which ran east-west in the south trench (B). Its function is unknown.

DISCUSSION

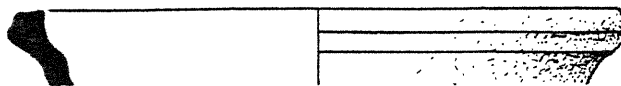
The results from the test trenches therefore revealed very little regarding the earlier history of the church - no foundations were discovered, and the presence of St. Neots ware pottery, although Saxo-Norman and dating to around the 12th century, merely corroborates a Norman date, and gives no positive indication of pre-Norman activity. It also supports Addyman and Biddle's settlement pattern (based on pottery distribution) for late Saxon Cambridge, falling within the southern-most settlement area just south of the King's Ditch (Addyman and Biddle, 1965; 94-99).

The main reasons why nothing significant was found appears to be twofold. First, grave-digging would have destroyed most of the sub-surface features: the churchyard at Little St. Mary's is very small, and the graves, which jostle amidst a profusion of wild flowers, lie very close to the church itself. Moreover, because of limited space, a practice of exhuming bodies every fifty years to make room for new interments, would have increased disturbance of soil. This continued upto the mid-19th century, when all burial within the churchyard ceased. Also, if extra soil was brought in from outside for garden purposes, it would build up the depth of topsoil, and may account for the fact that subsoil and associated features were not found after a metre of digging.

Secondly, from the orientation of the upstanding remains of the original Norman church of St. Peter, it seems unlikely that any foundations could be expected to appear in the test trenches. If any survive, they probably lie at the western end of the church, either under the nave and just outside the north wall, or under the modern vestry as well (a dowser and member of the congregation at St. Mary-the-less, has independently come to the same conclusion, as well as locating the two chantry chapels which were demolished, and possibly an apse at the eastern end of the church.) The foundations of the vestry, uncovered by the sondages, extended beyond the 1.2 metre deep trench, with four



ST. NEOTS WARE



EARLY MEDIEVAL COARSEWARE

0 10cm



LARGE-HEADED PIN



EVOLUTED RINGLET

0 5cm

Fig.4

courses of brickwork on top of a mortar-rubble fill, laid into a deep, tapering trench. These foundations would also have caused a certain amount of damage to any archaeological features.

Since the trial excavation was rescue-orientated rather than research-orientated, there is nothing lamentable in the dearth of information recovered, although negative evidence is still evidence. The early history of Little St. Mary's still awaits elucidation.

Gavin Lucas
1/6/90

Acknowledgements

To colleagues Simon Bray and Ben Robinson, who made up the rest of the excavation team. To St.Mary-the-less parochial church council for the funding and opportunity to work in the most beautiful churchyard in Cambridge. To the Canon J. Owen, churchwardens and members of the congregation for their interest and comments, and particularly Catherine Hall for her informed views on the church.

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The frontpiece shows a north-west view of Little St.Mary's church from an engraving by William Cole of Milton, March 28th 1743.

APPENDIX I

Catalogue of Finds

N.B. No bones are listed below, since they were returned for reinterment, and there was no time for studying them or properly distinguishing the few animal bones from the majority of human remains.

Trench A

context [01] layer of topsoil; 0.3-0.5m deep, mid grey-brown, friable loam, occasional small-large pebbles.

clay pipe stems (11)
glass fragments (8)
iron nails (4)
oyster shells (2)
iron block (1)
clay pipe bowl (1)
willow pattern ceramic sherds (2)
unglazed earthenware sherds (3)
stoneware sherd (1)
glazed earthenware sherd (1)
St.Neots ware sherd (1)

context [02] path foundations; two alternate layers of;
a) light yellow-brown, loose gravelly sand
b) dark grey-brown, compact sandy silt
both with occasional small-large pebbles.
Overlaid and cut by [01], cut by [03]

clay pipe stems (10)
glass fragments (3)
oyster shells (3)
glazed earthenware sherds (4)
unglazed earthenware sherd (1)
bronze evolute ringlet (1) - see fig.4

context [03] water-pipe trench; (0.35x0.65m) mid greenish grey-brown/light yellow-brown friable gravelly loam, with frequent small-large pebbles.
Overlaid by [01], cuts [02] and [04].

clay pipe stems (2)
white stoneware sherd (1)
glazed earthenware sherd (1)
Thetford ware sherd (1)

context [04] layer of grave-earth; >1.6m deep, mid grey-brown compact-friable sandy loam, with occasional small-

large pebbles. Overlaid by [01] and [02], cut by [03].

coin; old penny (1)
clay pipe bowl (1)
glass fragments (46)
clay pipe stems (29)
unglazed earthenware sherds (2)
willow pattern ceramic sherds (3)
white stoneware sherds (3)
slipware sherds (3)
glazed earthenware sherds (8)
iron coffin plates (3)
iron nails (15)
marble (1)
oyster (1)
lead strip (1)
copper strip (1)
Thetford ware sherds (3)
St. Neots ware sherds (3) - see fig.4
Early medieval coarseware sherds (8) - see fig.4

Trench B

context [01] (same as trench A)

context [02] drain-pipe trench; light grey-brown loam, with frequent small stones and clinker. Cuts [04].

glass fragments (5)
iron nails (3)
clay pipe stem (1)
silver (?) plate (1)
willow pattern ceramic sherd (1)
Wadsworth (Cambridge) ceramic, mineral water bottle (1)

context [03] (same as trench A)

iron stake (1)
copper plate (1)

context [04] (same as trench A)

iron coffin handle (silvered ?) (1)
white stoneware sherd (1)
bronze large-headed pin (1) - see fig.4

context [05] White chalk/lime border, hard with fragments of clunch and tile (0.1-0.3x0.07m).

APPENDIX II

Watching Brief

Between the 24th May and the 5th June 1990, work on digging the foundations for the vestry extension was under frequent observation by members of the archaeology section at Shire Hall, in case anything of interest should appear that our trenches missed. The footing trench being excavated essentially connected our two trenches at the western ends, and was of roughly the same proportions, that is a metre deep and a metre wide, leaving a large rectangular baulk standing free except along the eastern side where it butts the present vestry. The only features discovered were two brick vaults, (at least one of which was made up in three tiers), about 0.1m beneath the surface and descending to a depth of about 2m below the surface, where they rested on subsoil. One was situated at the southern corner of the builders trench, the other in the middle, orientated east-west. Separating each tier of the middle vault were stone slabs, and within the top one at least, lay an articulated skeleton with the decayed remains of the coffin. As I understand, these vaults are to be left undisturbed, and a deeper trench dug around them for a concrete infill. Certainly one of the interesting facts that came out of this was the discovery of subsoil, and hence the depth of grave-earth - between 1.8 and 2m.

Gavin Lucas
6/6/90