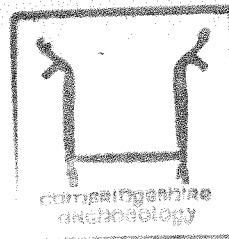
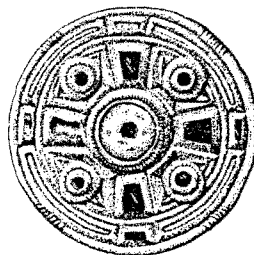


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Archaeological Field Unit

St. Peter's Church, Offord D'Arcy Archaeological Recording

A Hatton

1996

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A77

Commissioned By The Church Conservation Trust

**St. Peter's Church, Offord D'Arcy
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Editor: Tim Malim BA

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SUMMARY

During October and November 1995, the Archaeological Field Unit of the Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological watching brief on behalf of The Church Conservation Trust at St. Peter's Church, Offord D'Arcy (TL 217664), in advances of the construction of a new drainage system which involved the excavation of pipe-trenches and soak-away pits.

The excavation of each soak-away pit revealed extensive skeletal evidence of burial. Only three sherds of medieval pottery were recovered during the excavation, all of which came from soak-away, pit B. Unfortunately the pottery could not be given an accurate context due to the disturbed nature of the subsoil's, but the date of the pottery conformed with major episodes of church construction. The excavation of the pipe-trenches revealed no evidence of the early church foundations, which may be due to the depth of the pipe-trench being insufficient, or that the earlier church had been totally incorporated into the present building.

INTRODUCTION

On the 26th, 31st October and the 3rd November 1995 a watching brief was carried out on behalf of The Churches Conservation Trust at St. Peter's Church, Offord D'Arcy (TL 217664), in advance of the construction of a new drainage system involving the excavation of pipe-trenches and soak away pits (*Figure 1*). The work was conducted in the presence of an archaeologist from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council, all relevant measures were taken in view of the possible emergence of evidence concerning archaeological activity.

GEOLOGY

The British Geological Survey 1:50000 map shows the village of Offord D'Arcy lying on 1st terrace river gravels overlying Oxford Clay.

BACKGROUND

The village of Offord D'Arcy is mainly situated on the higher land to the east of the B1043 Godmanchester to St Neots road, away from the low-lying flood plain located along the banks of the River Ouse to the west. The church of St Peter, however, is located only c. 100m from the river on a slight rise in land levels which (together with the main line railway) offers a degree of protection from seasonal flooding (*Figure 1*).

The present church is a period building with its initial construction starting during the early 12th century. The original small church consisted of a chancel, nave of two bays and a north aisle, and was later lengthened by the addition of a western bay. During the following four centuries parts of the church were rebuilt and additions were made which include the western tower and spire (late 14th century) the latter being rebuilt in 1860 (VCH 1974; Tricker 1992).

METHODOLOGY

The four-soak away pits and eight pipe trenches were excavated by hand because of the limited space available within the church yard. Each of the pits averaged 1m², with a maximum depth of c. 1.2m or to the level of the underlying gravel if higher. The pipe trenches were c. 450mm deep and varied in length depending on the proximity of the associated soak-away (*Figure 1*), finally the pipes were laid in each trench and bricks placed in the soak-aways which together with the gravel would aid the drainage process, and the previously excavated soil was replaced.

The archaeological methodology consisted of observing the excavation of the pipe trenches and soak-away pits, in order to identify, record and recover any archaeological/historical remains revealed during the watching brief.

RESULTS

Pipe Trenches

All the pipe trenches were excavated to a depth of c. 400 to 450mm, and showed in section a topsoil depth of c. 250 to 300mm which would appear to be the average across the site. The underlying subsoil was a mid reddish brown colour with silty sand texture, which had been disturbed through occasional human burial activity.

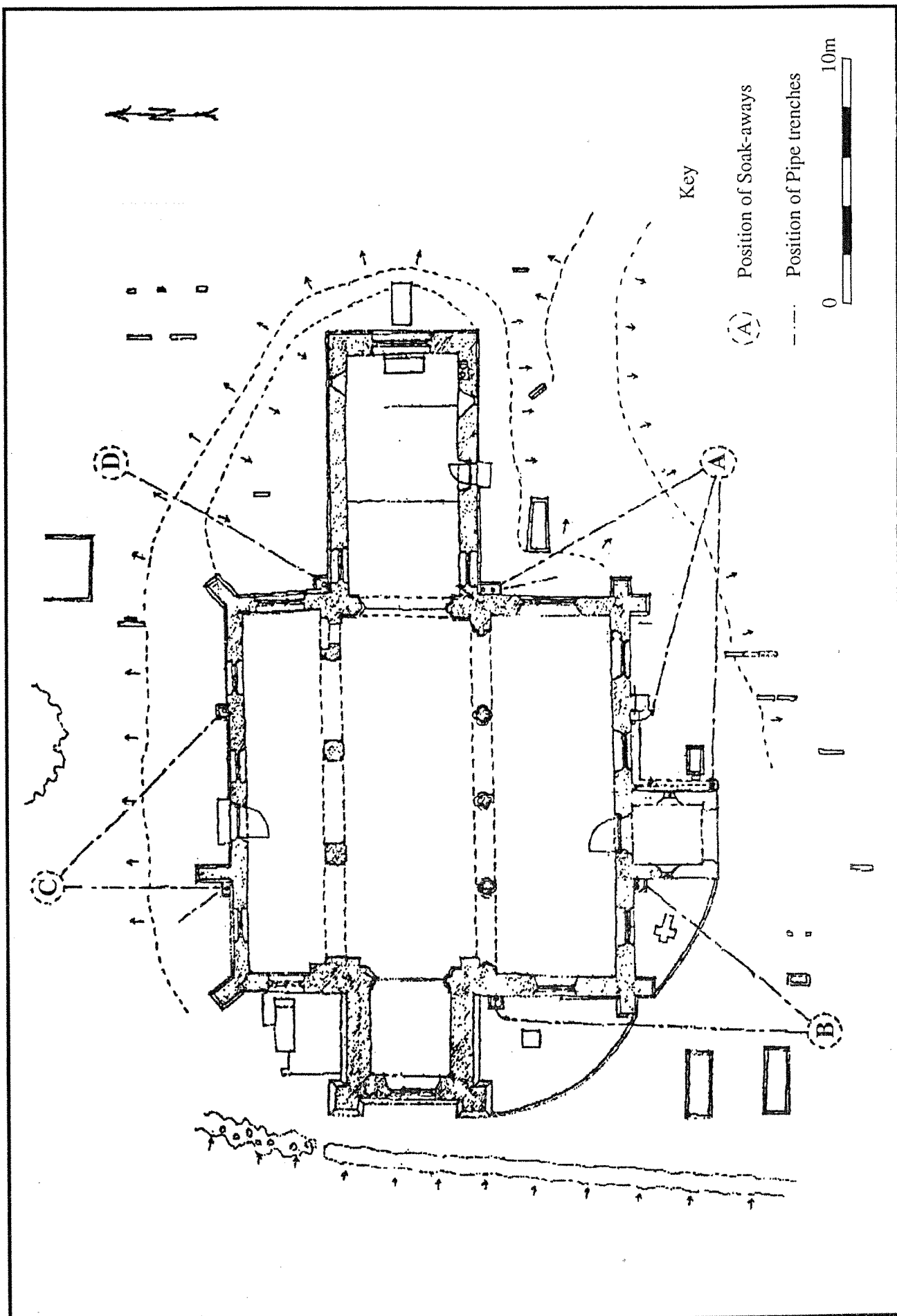


Figure 1 Plan of St. Peter's Church

Soak-away pit A, south of the Chancel (Figure 1 and 2):

Location, c. 6 metres south of Chancel

Width, c. 1.25m square

Depth, 1.4m

The initial removal of the topsoil (1) (depth 250mm) went down onto a mid reddish brown soil (2) (depth 1m) which on excavation was found to be very disturbed due to the continual re-excitation of the soil for the burial of at least 5 bodies, (at least two of which were buried at a shallow depth of c. 600mm). The lowest deposit consisted of a light yellowish brown silty soil (depth c. 200mm) with occasional small stone/flint inclusions which suggested the close proximity of the natural gravel geology. The excavation of subsequent soak-away pits B, C and D revealed gravel at c. 1.1m, however, pit (A) was located on top of a slight rise in the land level to which there is no explanation.

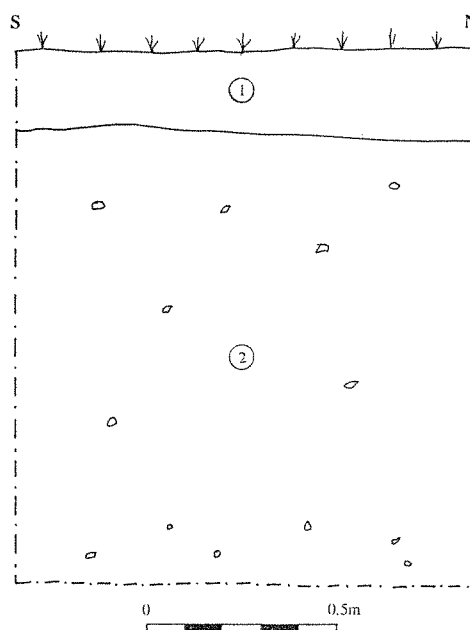


Figure 2 Soak-away pit A

Artefactual evidence was virtually non-existent. The very occasional survival of coffin handles suggests that wooden coffins may have been originally employed as body containers. Unfortunately, the high rate of wood-decay on site does not allow us to quantify the evidence with a reasonable degree of confidence. Thus, it cannot be discounted that a proportion of inhumations were uncoffined. There was no evidence for more substantial forms of body-containers.

Soak-away pit B, south of the Tower (Figure 1 and 3)

Location: c. 7 metres south of the Tower

Width: c. 1 metre square

Depth: 1.1 metres

The removal of the soil from the soak-away revealed a topsoil (1) depth of 300mm, and a subsoil (2) depth of 800mm at which point the natural gravels were uncovered indicating the correct depth of the pit (see above). The soil type was very similar to that observed in pit A and later in pits C and D i.e. the topsoil (1) removal (depth 300mm) went down onto a mid reddish brown soil (2) (depth 800mm) with a low percentage of

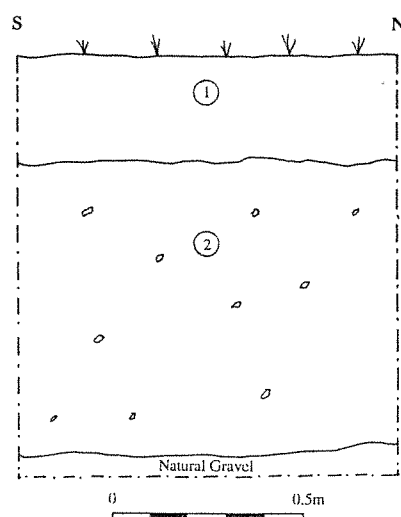


Figure 3 Soak-away pit B

stone inclusions which became less with depth. The recovery rate of human bone increased as a greater depth was achieved through excavation. One fairly abraded rim sherd of pottery was recovered from pit B (2), which has been identified as a small St Neot's standard ware cooking pot with a manufacturing date ranging between the 9th and mid 12th century AD. A further two sherds of pottery were recovered from the spoil heap, which were later described as Bourne 'D' ware, and dated to the mid/late 15th century. Unfortunately the pottery recovered could not be given an accurate stratigraphical context due to the very disturbed nature of the soil caused by continual re-excitation for burial purposes.

Soak-away pits C and D, (Figure 1)

The pits were excavated to a depth of c.1.1m at which point the upper most level of the gravel was revealed. No further archaeological recording methods (other than the observing the pits excavation) was employed, ultimately because the soak-away pits C and D had very similar soil deposits (including depths) and artefacts (human remains) evident

DISCUSSION

With all the soak-away pits observed in the course of the watching brief, very shallow graves were identified (see above), a burial practice that continued until the late 19th century. At a lower depth the human remains became very disarticulated due to disturbance caused by later interments; in some cases only the skull remained which could have been left as an (underground ?) marker to signal the presence of an earlier burial (?).

Although the ceramic evidence retrieved from the site is small, and cannot be given an accurate context it is still of importance when associated (by date) to the major building phases of the church. The St Neot's ware rim sherd with its date of c. 9th to mid 12th century has the potential for being in use as a cooking vessel (see above) during the initial construction of the church during the early part of the 12th century. The two remaining sherds of pottery (Bourne 'D' ware) dated to the mid to late 15th century

coincide with another major phase of construction, when the north aisle was rebuilt and a clerestory was added to the nave (VCH 1974).

The lack of archaeological evidence associated to the initial constructional phase of the church may have two reasons: i) the pipe trenches were not excavated to a great enough depth; ii) the original church was incorporated into the present building, but not demolished and rebuilt at a later date as was the case with other early medieval churches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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