

# St. Mary's Church, Beenham

NGR SU 591 685

## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

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ST MARY'S CHURCH, BEENHAM, BERKSHIRE  
SU 591685  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

### *Summary*

*A watching brief carried out at this church during restoration work examined a number of burial vaults of 18th and 19th century date.*

### **Introduction**

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) at St Mary's Church, Beenham, Berkshire, during the replacement of the wooden floor of the nave and aisles of the 19th century church. The work was carried out on behalf of the PCC of St Mary's through the Architects, Gotelee Orchard-Lisle, in response to advice from Babbie Shaw and Morton (planning consultants to Berkshire county Council) to the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Council. The floor replacement work was carried out in two stages and the church was therefore visited twice, on August 2nd and August 22nd 1996 to inspect the south and north aisles respectively, after the removal of the old floor timbers. Exposed features, mostly relating to burials, were recorded but were not examined in detail since none needed to be disturbed in the course of installing the new floor. Only at the west end of the south aisle were *in situ* deposits, of relatively slight archaeological significance, partly removed by the builders (see below) subsequent to their examination. The site code was BEEN96 and the project archive will be deposited with the Newbury Museum.

### **The Church**

The body of the present church dates from 1859 and is by Woodyer. The chancel was added in 1871. These parts are in flint with ashlar details. The west tower, of brick, is slightly earlier, being built after a fire of 1794 (Pevsner 1966, 85). The north and south aisles are separated from the nave by simple arcades each of four piers. The two wooden floors are set around the piers, one serving the north aisle and northern part of the nave, the other the southern part of the nave and the south aisle. In the following report these are referred to as the north and south blocks respectively. Between the two blocks of timber flooring, and on all sides against the exterior walls of the church, are solid, tiled floors presumably dating from 1859.

## The Floor Voids

The floors to be replaced were of wooden boards resting on joists placed north-south across east-west aligned voids. The voids were an integral part of the structure of the mid-19th century church. Each was lined with mortared brickwork offset within the edge of the tiled floors with the top of the bricks generally c 0.15-0.18 m below the tiled floor level. In addition, each void was divided into three parts by further east-west lines of bricks, lying close to the brick arcade pier bases, which carried sole plates providing additional support for the floor joists and effectively dividing each block into three 'bays'. The present depth of the voids is generally in the range 0.20-0.30 m, with 0.25 m typical, though locally it is less, particularly between the pier bases and at the west end of the south aisle. The total depth of the brick structures is not known. The bottoms of the voids contained loose rubbish derived from the floor, and mortar and other building material from the construction of the Victorian church. Fragments of tombs were visible at various points and 'soft spots' indicated the likely presence of further graves not marked by stones or other features.

### North Block (Fig 1)

An inscribed tile in the north-east corner of the north aisle marked the position nearby of the 'Bostock Family Vault'. The vault itself apparently lay entirely within the north-east corner of the void, just to the south of the tile. The vault, as seen, had two cap stones, both c 1.17 x 1.01 m, laid edge to edge, but only the easterly of the two (Stone 3) was inscribed. The cap stones lay on a brick structure, the north-west corner of which was visible as the stones had been slightly displaced there. The north-south sole plate immediately north of the north arcade piers may have been laid directly on the cap stones, as there was no clear indication of brickwork at this point.

The centre of the southern bay of the north block was occupied by the convex top of an east-west aligned brick vault projecting some 0.10-0.15 m above the base of the void. The top of the west end of this feature was only 0.07-0.08 m below the modern floor level. The vault was 2.15 m long and as seen had a maximum width of 0.63 m.

Immediately to the west was part of a further, possibly related vault which had been badly disturbed by the construction of the Victorian church. Part of a north-south brick wall, which might have been common both to this and to the round-topped brick vault, was seen through a gap in the capping stones at their eastern end. The surviving cap stones indicated an east-west dimension of 2.13 m for the vault and a north-south dimension of at least 1.40 m from the north-east corner. The north side had been disturbed for the construction of one of the aisle piers, and the present south edge of the cap stones was very irregular, with loose material to the south of it. This suggested considerable disturbance to the vault at this point as well as removal of part of the cap stone. The surviving cap stone was in three parts, none inscribed, of which the largest fragment (to the west) had

a very rough upper surface. The reason for this is not clear, but it is possible that this fragment had been lifted and replaced upside down, revealing its original underside. The top of a lead coffin was seen through the gap between the two easterly cap stone fragments, 0.33 m below the level of the top of the stone.

Two 'soft spots' were located in the north block, one just east of the round-topped brick vault and one north of it in the northernmost 'bay'. These are likely to indicate the positions of further graves, but as both lay well below the level of the new floor they were not examined.

### **South Block (Fig 2)**

A tile in the tiled floor close to the south-east corner of the south aisle indicated the location of the 'Carter Family Vault' in exactly the same way as the corresponding Bostock vault to the north. The vault itself lay just to the north of the tile, within the south-east corner of the south void. Only the two capping stones of the vault, both inscribed, were really visible, and although it was evident that these lay on a brick structure the precise form of the latter was unclear. The more westerly stone (Stone 2), aligned north-south, lay just beneath the west end of the east-west aligned Stone 1, and its southern end had been overlain by the sole plate supporting the joists on the south side of the block. It is likely that Stone 2 had been slightly displaced by the construction of the church floor, perhaps being pushed slightly to the north and possibly having its level reduced. The top of Stone 1 was only 0.06-0.07 m below the present tile floor level and the joists of the Victorian wooden floor had rested directly upon it.

North of the Carter vault, at the northern edge of the south block, a dip in the level of the brickwork corresponded with an east-west hollow in the base of the void at this point. This probably indicated the position of a grave. This feature was not investigated and the weakness in the brickwork was subsequently bridged by a concrete lintel to provide secure support for the new floor without having to disturb the feature below.

In the western half of the southern 'bay' of the south block the ground level between the east-west lines of brickwork was higher than elsewhere in the church, having a slightly mounded appearance. This mound was sectioned (Fig 3) since it was necessary for its level to be reduced to allow passage of air below the new floor joists. It consisted of a compact, dark grey-brown sandy loam with flint pebbles, at least c 0.15 m deep and distinct in character from any other soils seen within the church. The relationship of this deposit to the adjacent brickwork was not absolutely clear. While it appeared to lie against the bricks it is possible that the latter were set into it (see Discussion below).

## The Finds

The principal 'finds' were the three inscribed grave slabs. In addition to these a tiny fragment of a further slab occurred amongst the loose material in the south block. Apart from these the only artefactual material noted consisted of building material, principally bricks and peg tile fragments, all of which could be related to the 1859 church building. Samples of these were not retained.

## The Memorial Slabs

All the slabs appeared to be of a fine limestone. The orientation of each slab is given with the top of the inscription first. Where possible the exact spelling is followed, but variations in the script have not all been reproduced here. Uncertain letters are underlined>.

Stone 1. East-west, c 1.71 x 0.96 m. Finished (moulded) edges on east, west and north sides. (The inscription on this stone relates to that on Stone 2, but the numbers assigned in the site records have been retained here).

To the pious Memory  
of Margery the Widow of the aforefd.  
John Carter Senr. who was a tender  
Mother of all the faid dutiful and  
virtuous children  
She departed this life June ye 11th  
Anno Dom 1756 Aged 78 Years

Underneath this Tomb  
lies ELIZ the widow of  
JN CARTER Jun  
Interred June y 13th 1785  
Aged 66 Years

Alfo JOHN CARTER Esq.  
late of Shinfield Wilts. died 7th May  
1820 Aged 54 Years

Also SARAH Widow of the above  
JOHN CARTER Esqr  
Died Decr 23rd 1827  
Aged 57 Years

Stone 2. South-north, 1.40 + x 0.86 m. Moulded edges on east and north sides. Top (south side) obscured.

(Number of missing lines unknown)

Underneath this Tomb  
lies JNo CARTER Jun.....  
Sept. y 21st 1741 Aged 40 Years

Edwd Carter interr'd AD 1725 Aged 22 )  
Joannah Carter interr'd AD 1728 Aged 19 )  
Eliz Stroud interr'd AD 1729 Aged 25 ) Years  
Mary Aldworth interr'd AD 1731 Aged 26 )  
Richd. Carter interr'd AD 1738 Aged 26 )

All the dutiful and virtuous children of  
JNo. CARTER Senr. by Margary his yet  
furviving Wife  
This Tomb was erected in teftimony of her  
refpect for her deceaf'd Relations by  
ELIZ: CARTER the forrowful Relict  
of JNo. CARTER Jun

Securus Morit yir qui fcit fe morte renafci  
Mors ea non dici fed non Vita poteft  
Calcanda Semel Via Lethi

Stone 3. West-east, 1.01 x 1.17 m. Edges fairly straight but not moulded.

Sacred to the Memory of  
the Revd. JOHN BOSTOCK of Beenham  
House M·A Rector of St. Benet Fink London  
and Vicar of Hungerford, Eldest Son of  
the late Revd. JOHN BOSTOCK D·D Canon of  
Windsor by MARY his first Wife, Sister of  
CHARLES HOPSON Esqr. Died October 27th  
1817. Aged 74 Years.  
Alfo of SARAH BOSTOCK his Wife  
died 23rd April 1820 Aged 70 Years

## Discussion

The earliest datable features observed were the burial vaults; no traces were seen of any church building earlier than the present one, though it is possible that such traces survive beneath Victorian construction levels.

The inscribed stones indicate that the Carter burial vault was in use from the 1740s to the 1820s and the Bostock vault was also last used in 1820. Both these vaults, and those located in the southern 'bay' of the north block, predate the 1859 church, and in its original form the Carter vault was probably earlier than the church building represented by the late 18th century west tower. The undated vault(s) may be of broadly similar date to those dated by inscriptions.

The linear 'mound' sectioned in the south block consisted of fairly clean soil of a character consistent with that of the present day churchyard. In other words, this area was probably incorporated within a church structure for the first time in 1859, having hitherto formed part of the church yard. If so, the 19th century brickwork must have been set into this layer rather than being abutted by it, although this was not entirely clear during inspection. If this part of the present south aisle lay within the churchyard before 1859 it is quite possible that the same applies to the Carter vault, though this could perhaps have lain within a transept of an earlier church building. In either case, the predecessors of the 1859 church were smaller than the present building, unless they were sited further north. The alignment of the present west tower, however, suggests that at least the immediate predecessor of the 1859 building was on the same axis as the present church.

It is unclear if the Bostock vault could also have been situated in the churchyard originally. This would have been possible if the church in its early 19th century form had had no aisles or transepts, but this is uncertain. The vaults in the southern part of the north block must presumably always have been situated within a church structure, the floor of which may therefore have been at least at a level very close to that of the present church, to allow for the rounded top of the brick built vault to lie beneath it. The dates of the additional graves indicated by settlement and 'soft spots' in the base of the underfloor voids are of course unknown.

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## Reference

Pevsner, N, 1966, *Berkshire* (The Buildings of England), London

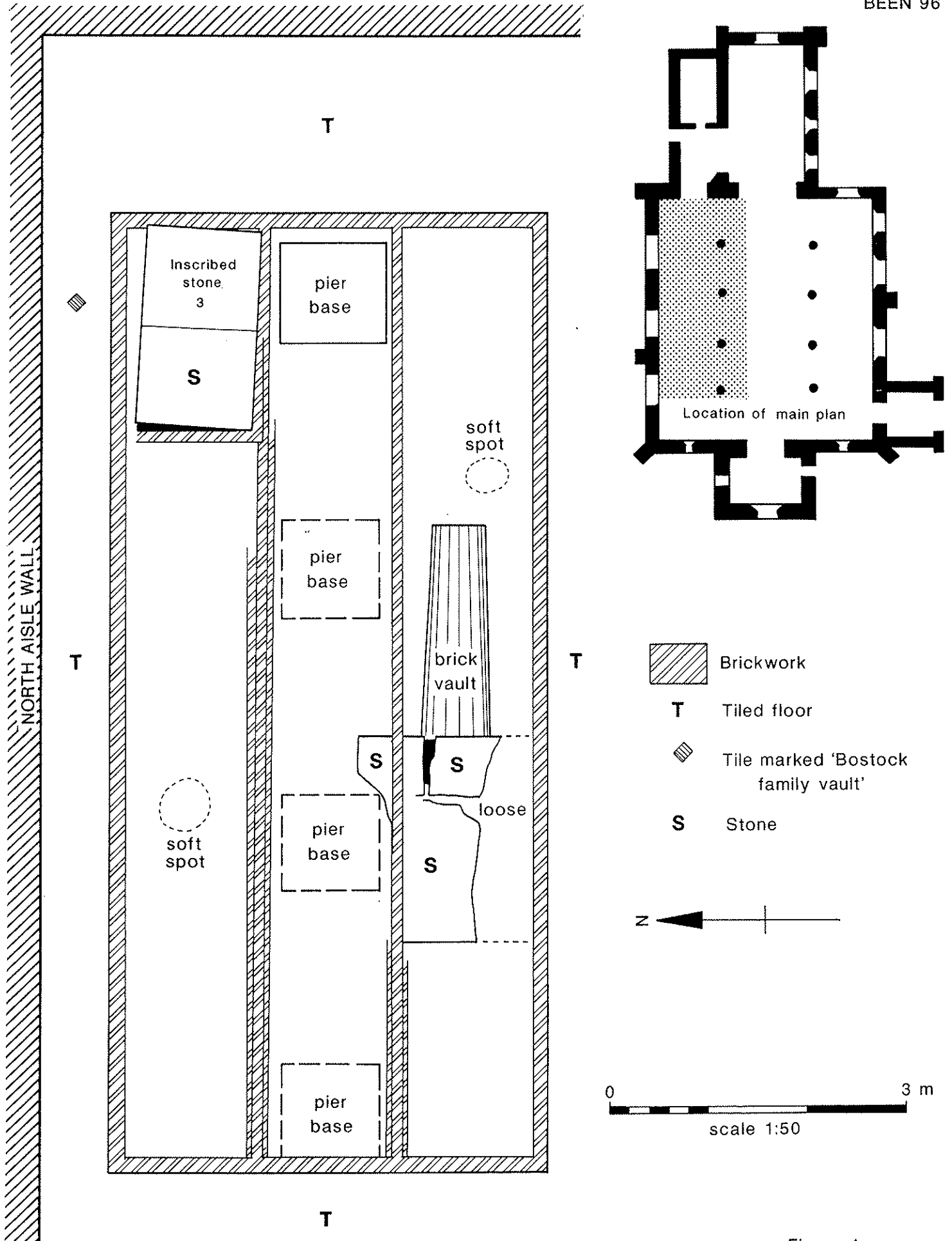


Figure 1





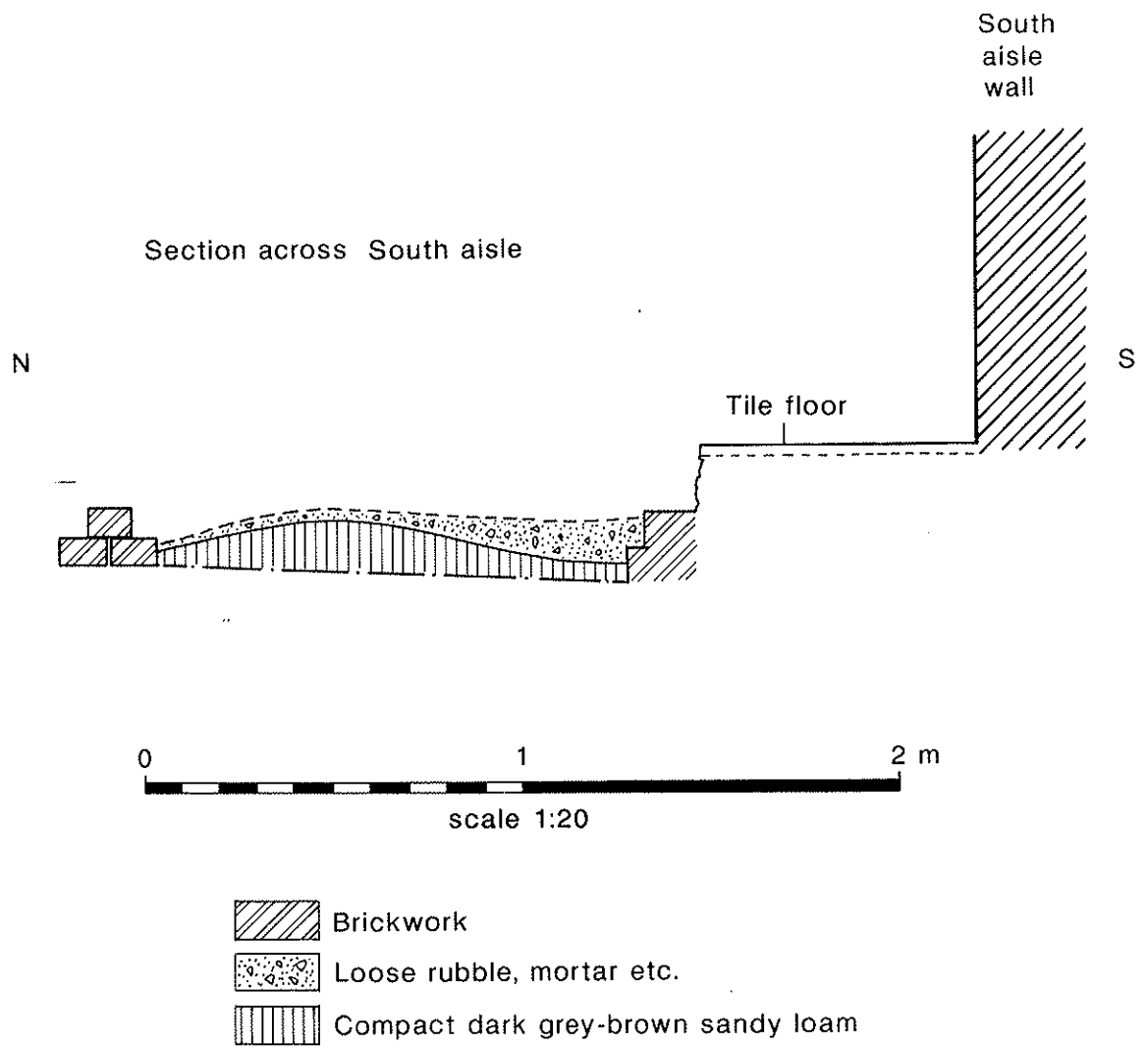


Figure 3



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