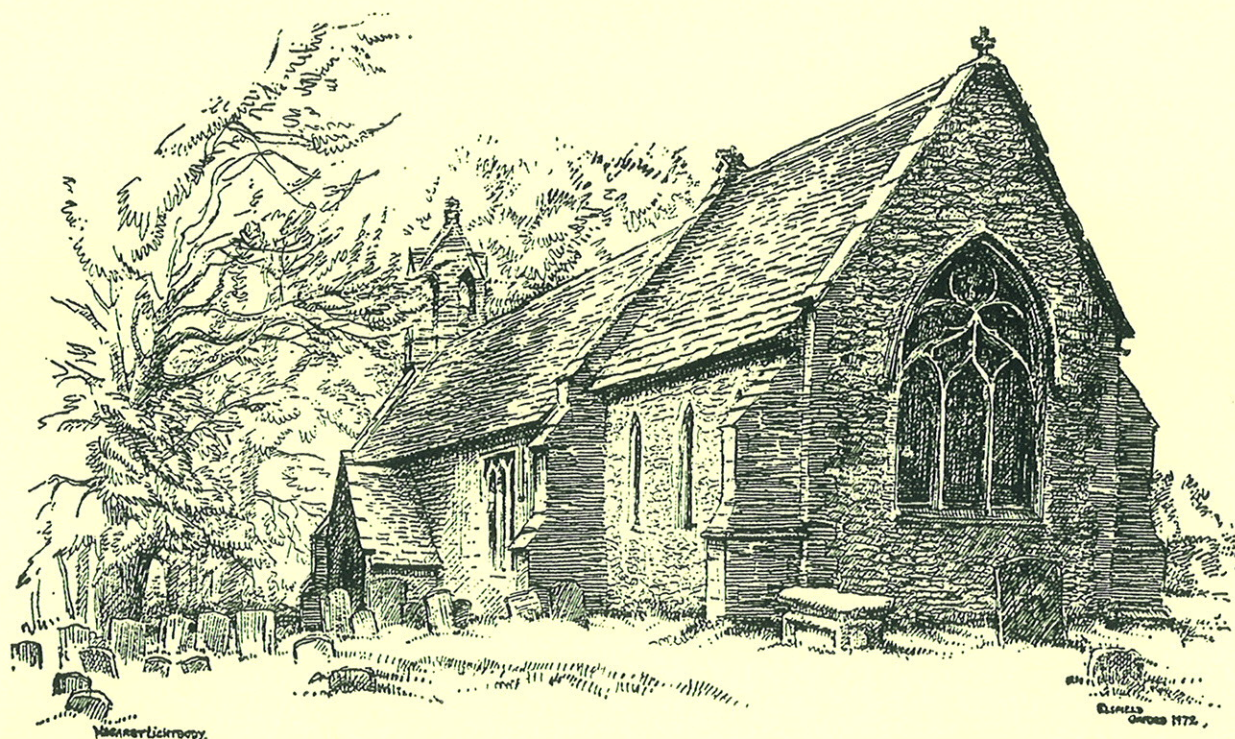


Carden and Godfrey

Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury
Elsfield, Oxon.
NGR SP 5407 0998

Archaeological Field Evaluation Report



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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

June 1999

Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield, Oxon.
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Archaeological Field Evaluation Report

1 *Summary*

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an archaeological field evaluation at the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield, Oxon. in May 1999, on behalf of Carden and Godfrey, architects of Long Acre, London. Two Test Pits were excavated to the north side of the church. Two articulated skeletons were observed at a depth of 0.7-0.8 m in Test Pit 1, and these are thought to be of post-medieval date. Test Pit 2 revealed no significant archaeological features or deposits.

2 **Introduction and Background**

2.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an archaeological field evaluation at the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield, Oxon. (Fig. 1) on behalf of Carden and Godfrey, architects of Long Acre, London. The work was undertaken on the 18th and 19th May 1999, in advance of the construction of a new room on the north side of the church. The evaluation was carried out upon the recommendation of the Diocesan Advisory Committee's archaeological advisor, before the foundation design for the new building is finalised, owing to the risk of disturbing human remains, or other significant archaeological features or deposits. This report details the methodology used in the evaluation and presents a description and discussion of the results. Illustrations and tables of appendices detailing the information recovered from the fieldwork can be found at the end of the report.

2.2 The Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury is an aisle-less church with chancel, nave and a modern west bellcote. The church is thought to date to the 12th century, though the first reference to a church in Elsfield itself comes from a charter of Robert d'Oiley in the time of William the Conqueror. Of the earliest identifiable structure, only the late 12th century chancel arch remains. The church was rebuilt and re-dedicated (to St Thomas) in the late 13th century. Its layout has remained essentially unchanged, although there is some historical evidence for a late medieval aisle or chantry chapel attached to the north side of the nave, suggested by the survival of elements of two large arcade arches and one small one incorporated into the fabric of the north wall of the nave. These remains were visible until the restoration of 1849. (see *de Vere* 1981, 1-2, and *Clark* 1957, 121-122.).

A full restoration was undertaken here in 1849, which endeavoured to restore the essential Early English character to the church. G.E.Street restored the floors and seats in 1859 (*Pevsner and Sherwood, 1974, 591-2*).

2.3 The underlying geology of the site is clay overlying bedrock.

3 Investigation Aims

The aims of the investigation were as follows:

3.1 To establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the proposed area of the new building: specifically the presence of articulated human remains (other than those known from 19th-century gravestones) or other significant archaeological remains that might be encountered during construction work.

3.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains.

3.3 To establish the artefactual potential of any archaeological features and deposits.

3.4 To define any relevant research priorities in advance of any further possible investigation.

3.5 To make available the results of the investigation, in the form of a written report, within three weeks of the end of on-site work.

4 Strategy

4.1 Two Test Pits were excavated within the area proposed for the new building (Fig.2). Test Pit 1 was excavated in the north-west corner of the proposed building outline, and the pit measured 1.4 m by 1 m. Test Pit 2 was excavated at the east side of the building footprint. Excavation proceeded to the top of the first significant archaeological horizon, or to natural geological horizons. The Test Pits were located away from extant gravestones and headstones (see Fig. 2).

4.2 All recording was carried out in accordance with the OAU Fieldwork Manual (Wilkinson, 1992) using the single context recording system. A fully cross-referenced drawn, written and photographic record was made of the excavations, details of which can be found with the site archive.

5 Results (Appendix 1)

5.1 Test Pit 1

This Test Pit measured 1.4 m by 1 m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.88 m (Fig. 3). Natural deposits were not exposed in this pit. The earliest deposit at the south end of the pit was a layer of reddish-brown sandy clay loam (10), at least 0.55 m deep, though its full depth is unknown. At the north end of the pit the earliest soil layer (3) was a light grey-brown sandy silt at least 0.32 m deep. The function of the soils is unclear, though they may represent the fills of graves.

Layer (3) was cut by an east-west aligned grave (4) that contained the articulated remains of a child or young adult. The skeleton (5) was supine, and the lower part of

the pelvis, both femur and the upper parts of the tibia were exposed. None of the bones were disturbed. The bones were exposed 0.8 m below the top of the Test Pit. The skeleton was overlain by the grave fill (6), a dark grey-brown sandy loam. No finds were recovered from the fill. Grave fill (6) was cut to the south by grave cut (7). The grave was aligned east-west and adjacent to the east side of the Test Pit the top of an adult skull (9) was visible. The top of the skull lay at a depth of 0.79 m from the top of the Test Pit. The fill (8) of the grave consisted of a grey-brown silt loam with occasional limestone corn-brash inclusions; no artefacts were recovered from this deposit.

The fills of the graves and layer (3) were overlain by a modern ceramic drainpipe (2) inserted beneath the present topsoil (1).

5.2 *Test Pit 2*

Test Pit 2 measured 1.35 m by 0.95 m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.06 m (Fig. 3). The top of the natural clay (25) was exposed at the base of the pit. The clay was reddish-brown, and had a silty texture. Above the clay lay a 0.5 m thick layer of fine grey compacted silty-sand (24), interpreted as the natural subsoil. A possible pit (22) cut the subsoil to a depth of 0.41 m. The south edge of the pit was vertical descending to a flat base. The pit was in-filled with a mixture of gravel, silty sand and up to 40% pieces of limestone corn-brash (23). The pit fill lay beneath a 0.3 m thick layer of brown silty sand including pieces of limestone and tile. Several pieces of wall plaster were found in this deposit. Topsoil (20) overlay layer 21. No evidence for graves was observed in the course of excavation.

5.3 *The Finds (Appendix 2)*

Few finds were recovered from the excavations. Layer 3 in Test Pit 1 produced a single stone roof tile and two iron objects of uncertain function. Context 23 in Test Pit 2 produced five red roof tile pieces, two pieces of wall plaster and a single sherd of abraded glazed pottery of uncertain date.

6 **Discussion and Conclusions**

The presence of two graves within the limit of Test Pit 1 may be taken as a general indication of the density of graves likely to be present within the proposed area of the new building. The two skeletons were exposed *c* 0.8 m below the present ground level of the churchyard, and this depth indicates a general level for the interring of burials in this churchyard. The possibility remains however that others may not be buried as deep. In general, though, the evaluation indicates that human remains may be expected from a depth of *c* 0.8 m below present ground level.

Precise dating of the burials in Test Pit 1 was not possible within the limited scope of the investigation. No dateable artefacts were recovered from either of the graves containing visible remains; the skeletons appear to have been interred without any grave goods or elaborate coffin fittings. The absence of coffin nails suggests that these were simple burials, perhaps pauper burials, which are usually interred wrapped only in a shroud. Grave 4 was cut by a later grave (7), indicating that graves have been dug

over a length of time. Deposits 3 and 10 may be the fills of other graves here, both cut by the later graves, so there is potential for further earlier graves in the graveyard. Fragments of human bone found during the excavation of Test Pit 1 are indicative of earlier burials being cut by later burials, which leads to the redistribution of the bones around the graveyard. This confirms that this part of the churchyard has been in intensive use for burials. The other visible graves in the area of the proposed building are Victorian, so it is likely that these skeletons are of no later than post-medieval in date.

It is significant that Test Pit 2 yielded no evidence of grave digging, either in the form of grave cuts, redistributed bone fragments or accumulated grave soil, as was the case with Test Pit 1. Indeed, the natural subsoil (context 24) showed no sign of disturbance other than that caused by the pit (22). The close proximity of two 19th/20th century graves argues that, for some reason, the immediate area was only recently made accessible for grave digging.

In the medieval period the north side of a church was commonly considered less 'holy' than the south side, a sentiment which extended to the burial ground itself, so that it is not unusual to find the concentration of burials decreases markedly on the north side of the church. However, one would still expect to find a reasonable spread of graves of all along the north side of the church at Elsfield. There is no reason to think that there may have been a lack of demand for burial space. A distinct north-south earthwork in the churchyard to the east of the church building suggests that at some time in the past the burial ground has been extended to the east - presumably because of a lack of space.

A possible explanation for the lack of pre-19th century burial activity in the vicinity of Test Pit 2 could lie with the aisle or chantry chapel that was built against the east end of the north wall of the nave.

If this structure extended far enough to the west, then the vicinity of Test Pit 2 would be within the building, and therefore not subject to disturbance by grave-digging. The feature cut in Test Pit 2 might represent a robbed-out wall or some internal feature relating to such an aisle or chantry. Alternatively, the pit may have been excavated to dispose of building debris associated with a phase of building or demolition work.

This limited investigation produced few finds of note; the presence of roof tile in both Test Pits, and small pieces of wall plaster in Test Pit 2 may derive from the restoration works of 1849, or possibly from the demolition of the structure along the north wall, which appears to have happened before the restoration of 1849 was undertaken.

7 Site Archive

The site archive including the finds will be deposited with the Oxfordshire Museums Service.

Jonathan Hiller
(with contributions by Alan Hardy)
Oxford Archaeological Unit, June 1999

References

Clark, Sir G.N. 1957 *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire Vol V* (ed Mary D Lobel) 116-122.

Pevsner, N and Sherwood, J 1974 *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire*

De Vere, A 1981 *The Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield* - pamphlet

Wilkinson, D 1992 *OAU Fieldwork Manual*

Cover illustration by Margaret Lightbody, 1972, provided courtesy of the church

Appendix 1: Table 1 - Context Information

Context	Type	Depth	Width	Comments
1	Layer	0.14 m	-	Topsoil, Test Pit 1
2	Layer	-	0.14 m	Modern drainpipe
3	Layer	0.32 m+	-	Layer or ?grave fill
4	Cut	0.56 m+	0.38 m+	Grave cut for skeleton 5
5	Deposit	-	-	Human skeleton in grave 5
6	Fill	0.56 m+	-	Grave fill in grave 4
7	Cut	0.65 m+	0.62 m+	Grave cut for skeleton 9
8	Fill	0.65 m+	-	Grave fill over skeleton 9
9	Deposit	-	-	Skeleton in grave 7
10	Layer	0.55 m+	-	Soil layer or ?grave fill
20	Layer	0.17 m	-	Topsoil Test Pit 2
21	Layer	0.18-0.35 m	-	?C19 building debris
22	Cut	0.3 m	0.8 m+	Pit filled with building debris
23	Fill	0.3 m	-	Fill of pit 22
24	Layer	0.5 m	-	Natural subsoil
25	Layer	-	-	Natural clay

Appendix 2: Table 2 - Finds Information

Type	Context	No. pieces/ Sherds	Comments/dating
Stone roof tile	3	1	?uncertain
Ceramic roof tile	23	5	Victorian
Iron objects	3	2	Undiagnostic objects
Pottery	23	1	Abraded green-glazed sherd from Victorian context – possibly redeposited medieval
Wall plaster	23	2	Undated



scale 1: 25 000

Figure 1 : site location

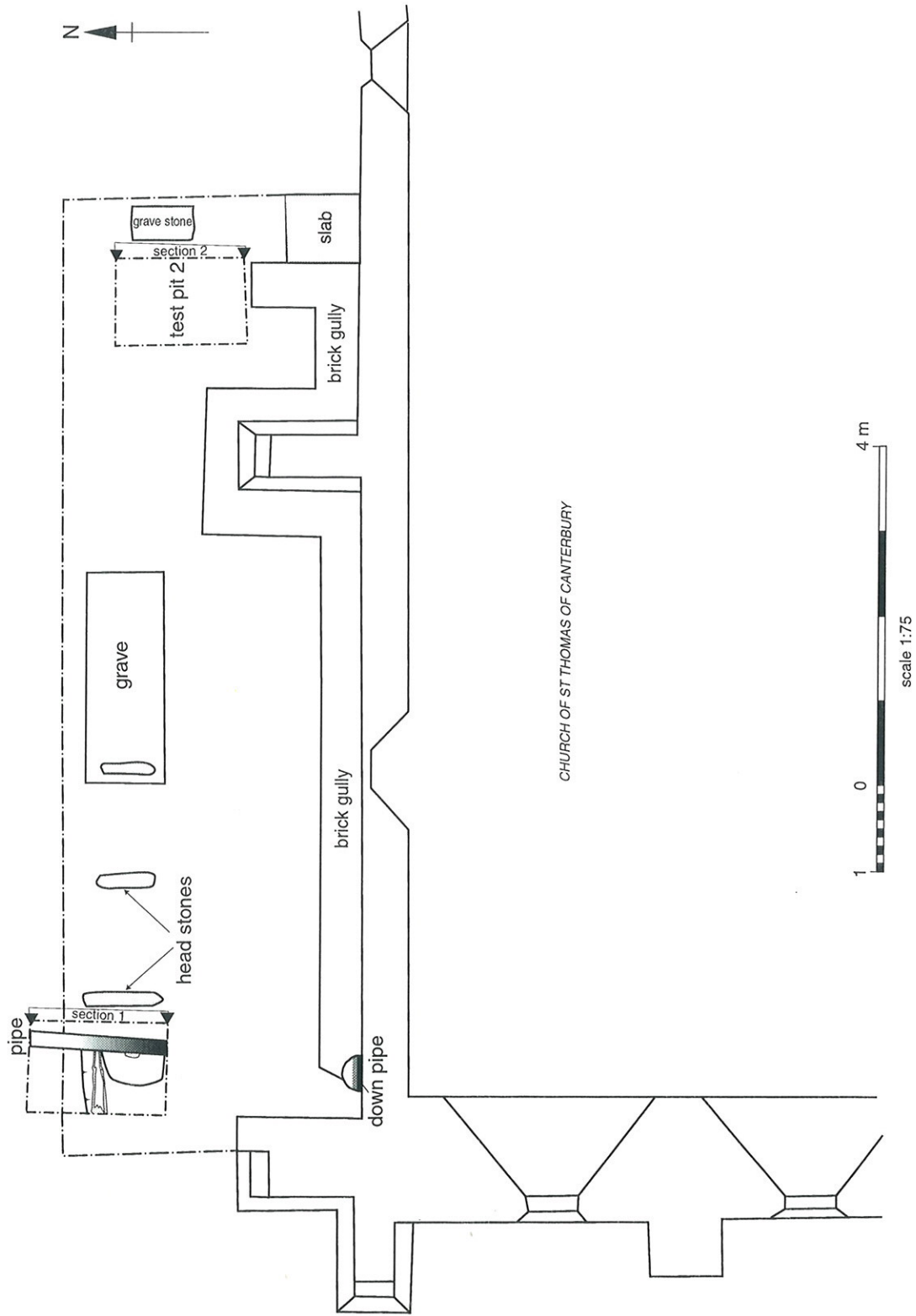
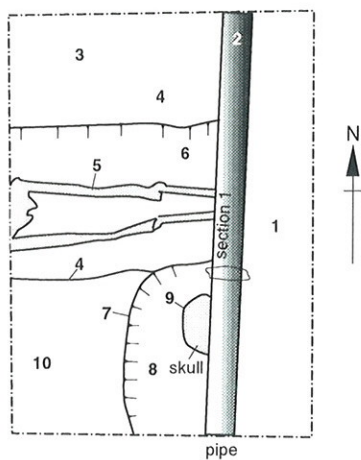


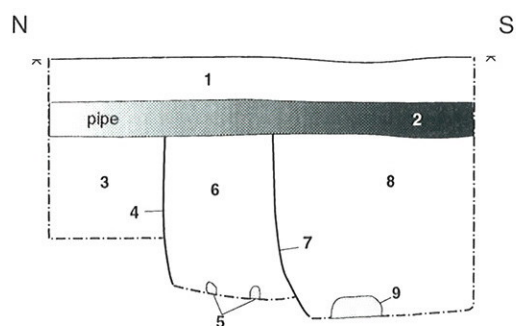
Figure 2 : plan of trial pit locations.

test pit 1

plan



section 1



test pit 2

section 2

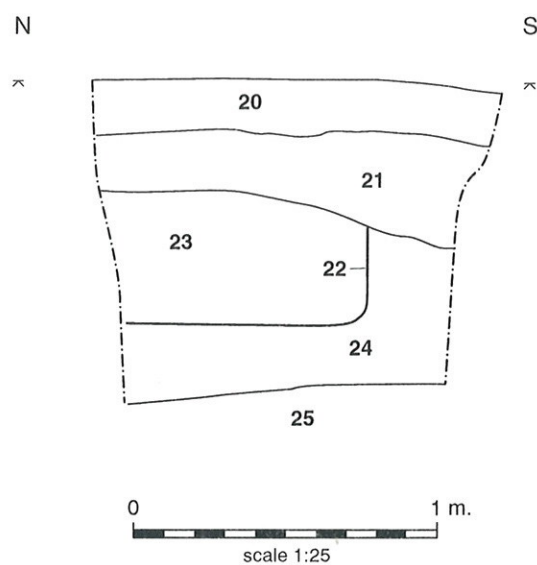


Figure 3 : test pits 1 and 2, plan and sections.



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