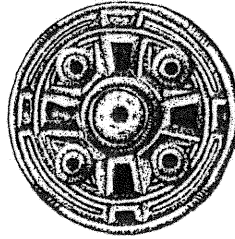


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Archaeological Field Unit

**Archaeological recording within the South Aisle of St  
Bene'ts Church, Cambridge.**

S.N: Kemp

2001

**Cambridgeshire County Council**

Report No. A189

Commissioned by Parochial Church Council of St. Bene'ts Church, Cambridge.

**Archaeological recording within the South Aisle of St Bene'ts  
Church, Cambridge**

S.N. Kemp BA MSc AIFA

2001



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## **SUMMARY**

*The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook archaeological observation and recording within the South Aisle of St. Bene's Church on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 2001.*

*Removal of the existing floor indicated that archaeological deposits lay at a depth of approximately 0.40m below present floor surface and therefore below the proposed impact of the development. These archaeological deposits consisted of mortared floors and robber trenches. The floors pre-date the Victorian renovations of the church, but due to the absence of artefacts remain undated. However, they are likely to be more recent than the early fourteenth century when a fire is known to have burnt down part of the church. The robber trench is likely to be of Victorian date and corresponds to the line of the former southern wall to the South Aisle which defined the southern extent of the church prior to the 1872 expansion.*

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## **Archaeological recording within the South Aisle of St Bene'ts Church, Cambridge.**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council as commissioned by the parochial Church Council of St Bene'ts Church to monitor alterations to the church structure with particular reference to recording the pre-Victorian archaeology exposed during the development. Architectural recording was undertaken by Tony Baggs, the Diocesan Archaeological advisor and has been presented as a separate report.

The development consisted of the insertion of a screen and second floor within the Southern Aisle of St Bene'ts Church. Archaeological work was to make an appropriate record of any structural remains disturbed by the trenching required for the insertion of a folding screen.

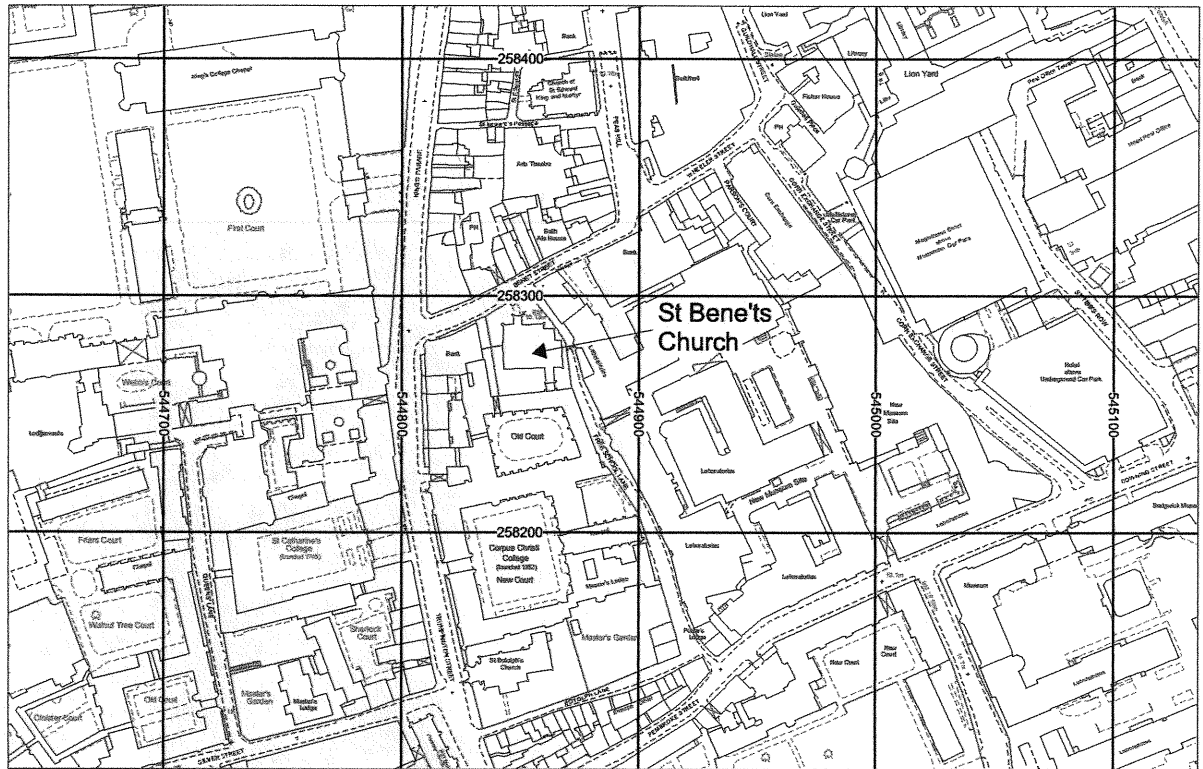
### **2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

St Bene'ts Church lies within the centre of Cambridge next to Corpus Christi College and just off King's Parade at TL4485/5828. The church lay within the confines of the Saxon King's Ditch. The area defined by the ditch was entirely built up by the mid thirteenth century (Taylor 1999 p.77).

St Bene'ts church is believed to be the oldest surviving church in Cambridge with the tower built in about 1025 AD. Of this building, the tower, four angles of the nave and much of the south wall of the chancel survive. The base of the south wall was uncovered in 1872 and consists of Barnack Stone (RCHME 1988).

During the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) the church was badly damaged by fire. The chancel was subsequently enlarged, and the nave arcades and aisles rebuilt. The church was used as a college chapel for Corpus Christi until 1579. Between 1487 and 1515 the College had invested in the addition of a new chapel, the south vestry, a gateway and gallery to join St. Bene'ts with the College. In 1853 the north aisle was widened and a porch added following the designs of J.R. Brandon. In 1872 the south aisle was rebuilt and widened by A.W. Blomfield (*ibid.*).

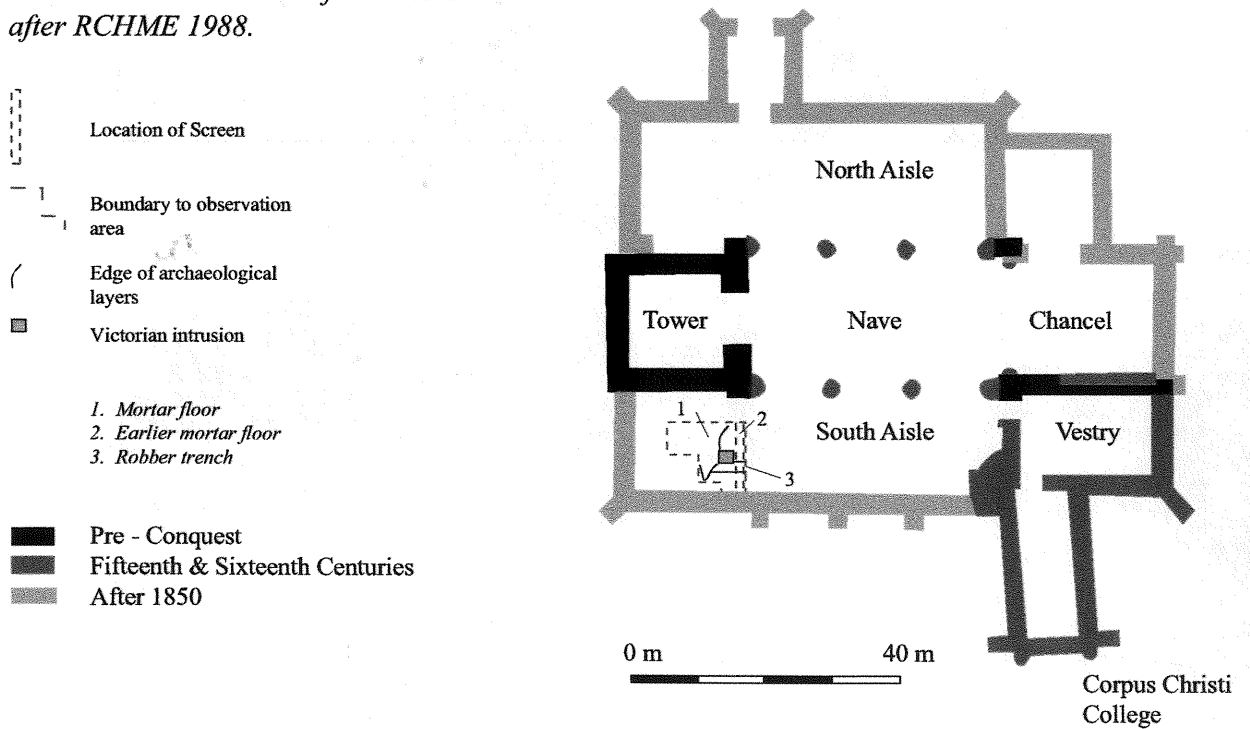
Excavations by Tim Malim of the AFU within the churchyard of St Bene'ts in 1988 showed considerable Victorian activity which had damaged many of the earlier ground surfaces. The remains of earlier wall foundations lay at a depth of 0.50m below the present ground surface. The earliest pottery recovered dated to the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries although a medieval gravestone dating to the mid-twelfth to thirteenth century was found within the Victorian deposits. Malim suggests



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**Figure 1** Location Plan

**Figure 2** Plan of St Bene'ts showing observation area in the South Aisle. Plan of St Bene'ts after RCHME 1988.



that up to 1.50m of surfaces and graveyard deposits external to the church were removed from the site at the time of the Victorian reconstruction (Malim 1988).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

Archaeological work entailed monitoring ground disturbance following the removal of the Victorian wooden floor within the area specified for the folding screen. Recording was carried out on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 2001.

Whilst the 1988 excavations had shown major Victorian disturbance to the land immediately outside of the church because of the known survival of elements of the eleventh century church within the existing building, and as the Victorian period saw an expansion rather than contraction of the church, it was expected that important and interesting remains were likely to be exposed. This was providing that ground works penetrated beneath expected Victorian demolition and make-up deposits which were expected to lie within the church.

Building recording was undertaken by Tony Baggs (Diocesan Archaeological Advisor) and was presented as a separate report.

The work to be undertaken was outlined in documents prepared by Flett & Woods Architects and the Archaeological Field Unit Cambridgeshire County Council (Flett 1999, Kemp 1999)

### 4 RESULTS

Removal of the Victorian wooden floor within a 7m<sup>2</sup> revealed that the wooden floor and floor joists were raised between 0.48 and 0.40m above the archaeological deposits. The floor was supported by Victorian bricks set within a foundation trench which cut into earlier archaeological deposits.

Cleaning of the exposed deposits which entailed brushing and trowelling of a dark brown loose to firm deposit which represented a combination of settled dust and occasional fragments of brick and mortar from the Victorian alterations revealed white mortar floors. At the base of this deposit gradual accumulation of dust and rubble, and at the interface with the mortared floor, lay a single, very decayed wooden wedge of 80mm long and 30mm length.

Figure 2 shows the extent of the two mortared surfaces. The most recent of these, which is a rough mortar mix with occasional brick fragments would appear to have extended as far as the existing southern wall to the church where it overlies a deposit of firm gravels. The other which is a more homogenous mortar mix only extends as far as an east west orientated band of loose gravels which lie within a cut feature

presumed to be the robber trench for an earlier wall. The alignment of this cut feature and gravel fill would suggest that this is the location of the pre-Victorian wall to the southern aisle.

Other than a single wooden wedge and brick fragments in the upper mortared floor, which were firmly set into the deposit and not available for close examination, no finds were found which might have provide a date for any of the archaeological surfaces.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

The floor surfaces lay at a depth that it was not necessary to disturb in order to insert the new screen. Therefore these deposits were not excavated and were covered initially with polythene along the course of the screen. Polythene was used simply to separate the modern material from the historic and the ground surface was subsequently built up in preparation for the brick foundation which would form a solid base to the screen.

Archaeological investigations have shown that pre-Victorian floor surfaces to the south aisle do survive within the church although the date of these surfaces is presently unclear. The rough mortared floor which extends further south than the south aisle wall which was believed to have been removed during the 1872 alterations would appear on this information to be Victorian, however, the Victorian brick work penetrates this deposit and the Victorian floor lies on a level some 0.50m above. This suggests that parts, if not all of the southern aisle had been widened by 1872. Alternatively this may have been a temporary surface used after 1872 and prior to the insertion of the wooden floor.

The lowest of the exposed mortar floors clearly predates the expansion of the southern aisle and was associated with a wall which sat along the line of the robber trench. No evidence of burning was found at this level so it is more than likely that this floor is more recent than the fire which occurred in the late thirteenth century or early fourteenth century)

## **7 CONCLUSION**

Archaeological recording identified mortared floors surviving beneath the existing Victorian floors. A gravel in filled robber trench was also found which demarcates the southern aisle wall prior to the Victorian expansion of the aisle which is believed to have occurred in 1872.

The existing floor surface of the church is raised between 0.40 and 0.48 m above the archaeological deposits. These mortared floors were therefore below the level



affected by the insertion of a new screen so these deposits were covered without excavation being undertaken.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank The Parochial Church Council of St Bene'ts Church Cambridge who commissioned and funded the archaeological work and Don Flett of Don Flett & Woods Architects who acted as their agent. The project was managed by Tim Malim. We would also like to thank Tony Baggs for his assistance and insight during the course of the archaeological recording. Ground works were undertaken by Hibbitt & Sons Victoria Road who provided assistance in exposing areas for archaeological observation.

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