

Archaeological Field Unit

St Andrew's Church, Soham: An Archaeological Evaluation

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Report No. B41

Commissioned by the Vicar and Parish Council of St Andrew's Church, Soham

Summary

During November 1998, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological evaluation on behalf of the Vicar and Parish Council of St Andrew's Church, Soham (TL 5930 7317) in advance of the construction of a new church hall.

A trench located almost immediately outside the south porch of the church revealed a large amount of disarticulated human bone together with coffin handles and nails. A single burial was encountered at a depth of 0.6m below the present ground surface, but was not removed. No finds were noted with it, and the burial is thought to be post-medieval or later. No evidence was found to confirm the existence of an earlier religious building and associated cemetery which is traditionally thought to have been located within the churchyard. There was likewise no evidence of the pagan Saxon cemetery which is also traditionally located on or near the site.

The lack of archaeological evidence is probably due to the restricted depth of the excavation (0.75m), which was conditioned by the depth of disturbance likely to be caused by the development. Alternatively, the lack of evidence may be due to a genuine absence of earlier remains within the development area.

**SAINT ANDREW'S CHURCH, SOHAM:
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 5930 7317)**

by Andrew Hatton

1 INTRODUCTION

On the 16th and 20th of November 1998 two evaluation trenches were excavated in the graveyard of St Andrew's Church Soham (TL 5930 7317) by staff of the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council. This archaeological evaluation was commissioned by Thomas Nash Architects and the Vicar and Parish Council of St Andrew's, Soham, in response to a brief prepared by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Office - Development Control (Kaner 1998). The object of the evaluation was to determine the location, extent, character, date and state of preservation of any surviving archaeological remains on the site.

The area of the proposed development lies immediately to the south of St. Andrew's Church, Soham within the confines of the present graveyard. The proposed development consists of offices, meeting rooms, a kitchen and WC's contained within a single building covering an area of 166 square metres.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The village of Soham lies near the southern Fen-edge some 8km south-east of Ely, on the A142 between Ely and Newmarket. It is located on an irregular peninsular of Chalk marl and river gravels, jutting into the Fen between the Isleham embayment and the former Soham Mere (British Geological Survey, Sheet 188). St Andrew's Church lies at the centre of the historic core of the village, surrounded by a churchyard of considerable antiquity.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The archaeological and historical background of the site and its surrounding area has already been the subject of a separate desktop study (Hatton 1998). The reader is referred to that work for an account of the archaeological background. In summary, however, it may be said that the area of the development appeared to have great archaeological potential. The main interest around St Andrew's church is the location of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery which is thought to lie within or near the churchyard, and a 7th century Minster and monastery, reputedly founded at Soham by St Felix. Although plausible finds of Early Saxon grave goods have been made in the churchyard, the exact location of this cemetery is unknown. Similarly, whilst tradition would place the location of Felix's early foundation near to or beneath the present 12th century church, its exact location

remains unknown. A single sherd of late Saxon pottery recovered from a grave fill in the churchyard may be evidence of later occupation of the site.

The site has probably been used as a graveyard for at least the last 1000 years and the digging of graves within the churchyard, especially in more recent times, was thought likely to have destroyed or disturbed any earlier remains.

Nevertheless, it was still thought possible that archaeological evidence relating to the Saxon cemetery or the early monastery might be preserved within the churchyard. The recovery of further information about the location and character of these important early remains therefore formed a major element in the project's research design, along with the search for more general information on the origin and development of Soham.

4 METHODOLOGY

The area of investigation was excavated using a mini excavator and latterly a JCB-type excavator, a process that was observed archaeologically throughout. Written records were supplemented by photographs as necessary. The spoil removed from the trench was scanned for artefacts, both visually and using a metal detector.

5 RESULTS

Trench 1 (excavated 16th November 1998) was located between the southern edge of the tarmac immediately outside the south porch of the church and the sites of known burials, indicated by tombs and headstones, to the south. It was excavated with a mini excavator with a 0.5m ditching bucket. The excavated length of trench 1 was 2m with a depth of approximately 0.4m: at this depth yellow tape was encountered warning of an electrical cable, and the trench was backfilled and abandoned.

Using the mini excavator a start was made on removing the tarmac south of the church porch as this was now the only area where a trench could be located. However, it was soon discovered that the mini excavator did not possess the power to dig through the tarmac and the concrete onto which it had been laid, so a decision was made to use a more powerful JCB-type mechanical excavator

Trench 2 (excavated 20th November 1998) was excavated using a JCB-type machine and was located 1m from the south porch of the church. It ran in an east-west direction parallel to the church and had a total length of 9m and was 1.9m wide. The trench was positioned so as to sample the area of the footprint of the proposed building but to avoid a large 19th-century tomb to the west.

Excavation of Trench 2 commenced with the removal of the tarmac and underlying concrete, which revealed a deposit of sand and gravel that was acting as a foundation layer. The trench was excavated to a depth of 0.75m along half its length with the remaining being excavated to a depth of 0.6m due to the discovery of an articulated skeleton which could not be removed. The skeleton was that of a juvenile, buried in an extended, supine position and aligned east-

west. No grave-goods or other finds were noted. In accordance with the brief no excavation of this burial took place and the remains were immediately covered and reburied. No grave cut was seen in the trench section, which showed an upper layer of sand and gravel c. 0.20m deep, below which was a layer of dark yellowish brown homogenous soil continuing to the base of the trench. The overall thickness of the homogenous layer was c. 0.55m. Artefacts recovered from the it consisted of disarticulated human bone, coffin nails and coffin handles.

With the archaeological recording completed, and in consultation with Andy Thomas of the County Archaeology Office - Development Control, the trench was immediately backfilled to prevent any danger to the public.

6 CONCLUSION

The lack of archaeological evidence from trench 2 could be attributed to the fact that the soil appeared to have been regularly turned over and re-deposited, perhaps as a result of the site's use as a burial ground. This would also account for the large amount of disarticulated human skeletal remains recovered from the soil. The single burial is also not an unexpected find in a grave yard. Its orientation (east-west) and the lack of accompanying grave-goods suggest that it is unlikely to be part of the pagan Saxon cemetery thought to exist on or near the site. It may possibly form part of the graveyard of the early monastery also thought to exist here, but the fact that it is of a juvenile suggests that this is also unlikely. The most plausible explanation is that the burial is of post-medieval, or later, date.

The absence of archaeological features within the evaluation trench does not necessarily mean that no such features exist elsewhere within the development area or at a greater depth. Nevertheless, the evaluation has suggested that archaeological features belonging to earlier buildings probably do not exist within the footprint of the proposed development at a depth likely to be disturbed by its construction.

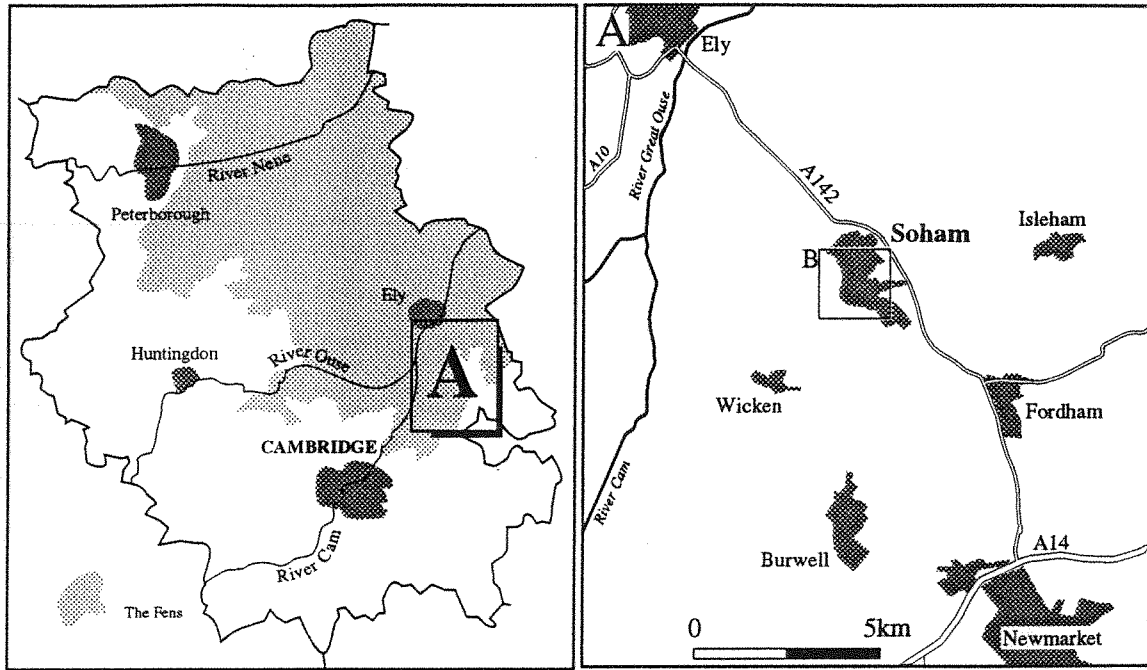
The depth of foundations for the proposed building is set out in the desk-top study as 750mm (Hatton 1998). The single burial was encountered at a depth of just over 0.60m. Although this burial remains undated and its archaeological significance has not been established with certainty, it is likely to be disturbed by the proposed construction work. The possibility of other burials occurring within the footprint of the proposed new building cannot be ruled out.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

- Hatton, A 1998. *Saint Andrew's church, Soham: An Archaeological Desktop Study*. Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeology Report A136.
- Kaner, S 1998 *Design Brief for Archaeological Evaluation of Saint Andrew's Church, Soham*. Cambridgeshire County Council, County Archaeology Office - Development Control



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Figure 1 Location plan showing SMR data

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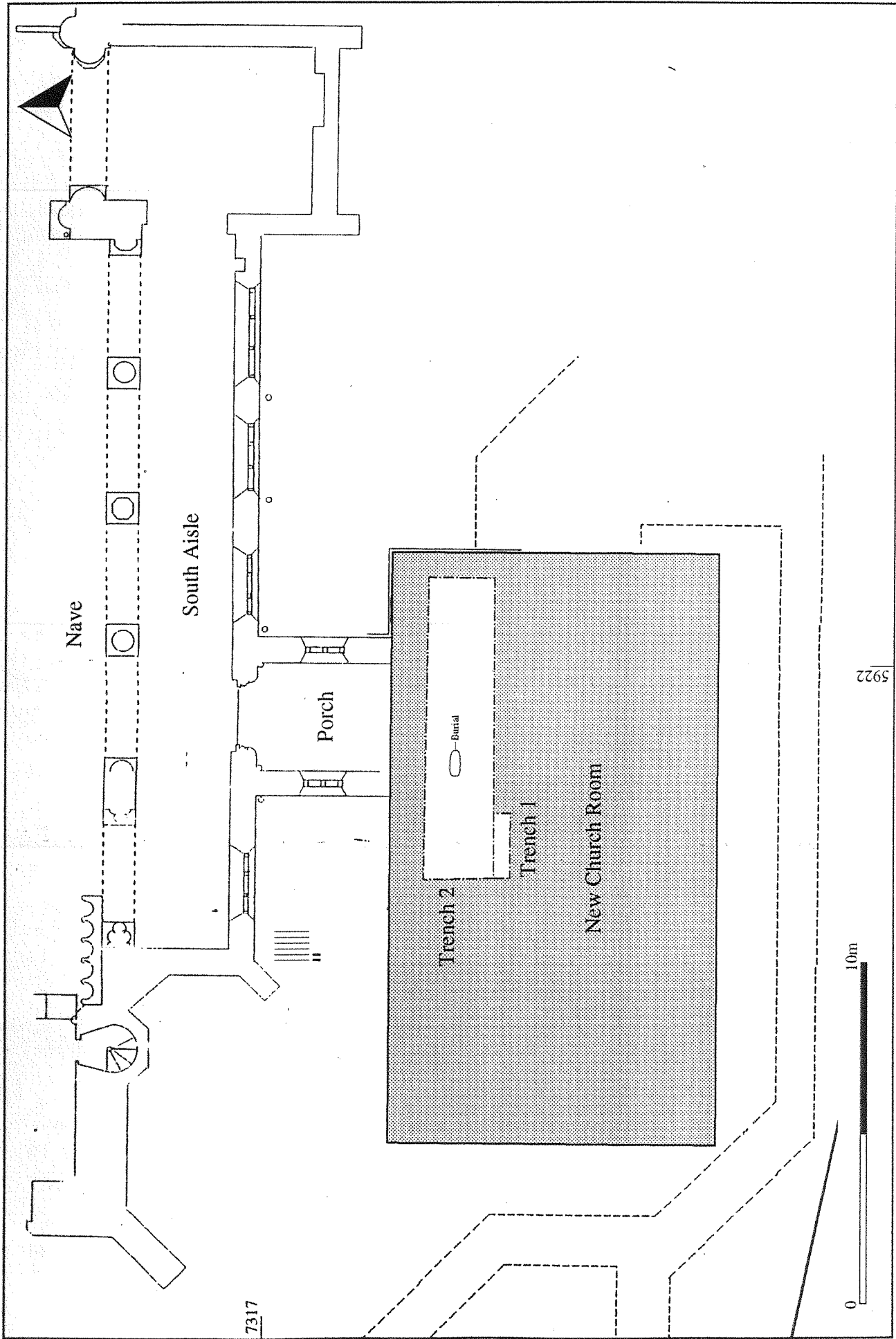


Figure 2 Plan showing the south side of St Andrews Church, the footprint of the new building and position of archaeological trenches



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