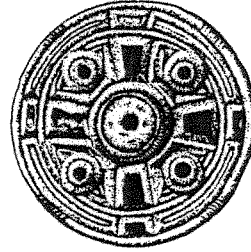




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Churchyard Extension at Felmersham Parish Church, Bedfordshire: An Archaeological Evaluation

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Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. N14

Commissioned by Felmersham and Radwell Parish Council

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An Archaeological Evaluation**

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation of approximately 450 sq. m. of land at the eastern end of the churchyard surrounding the parish church in the centre of Felmersham village in north-west Bedfordshire was undertaken by the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit in December 1999. Trenches revealed features including post-medieval foundations cut into a large ditch which contained Anglo-Saxon and later medieval pottery.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	1
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	1
METHODOLOGY AND CONSTRAINTS	3
RESULTS	3
CONCLUSIONS	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
BIBLIOGRAPHY	6
CONTEXT LIST	6
CONTENTS OF SITE ARCHIVE	6

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1	Site location plan	2
Figure 2	Trench plan and section	4

**Churchyard Extension at Felmersham Parish Church, Bedfordshire:
An Archaeological Evaluation
(SP 9919 5786)**

INTRODUCTION

In December 1999 the Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an evaluation to reveal archaeological remains at land on the eastern end of the churchyard of St. Mary's Church, Felmersham (SP 9919 5786) (Fig. 1). The work was carried out on behalf of Felmersham and Radwell Parish Council before change of use of the land to a burial ground. The evaluation follows earlier archaeological work on the site, by Bedfordshire County Council Conservation and Archaeology Section, in advance of housing development.

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies in the valley of the river Great Ouse. It is on a low cliff on the southern bank of the river at a height of approximately 45m OD. The ground rises gently to the south. The geology of the site is gleyed brown earth overlying river terrace gravels. The area was formerly part of the garden of The Plough public house and was taken into the churchyard following development of the site.

The village of Felmersham lies approximately 10km north-west of Bedford on the south bank of the Great Ouse. The site lies to the east of St. Mary's churchyard on land that was partly built on in the post-medieval period.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The gravel terraces of the river Great Ouse have been settled from prehistoric times into the Roman period. The site is located on high ground close to a crossing of the Great Ouse. Iron Age and Roman pottery have been reported from the churchyard (County Historic Environment Record (HER) 1345). Excavations in the village have revealed Anglo-Saxon and medieval remains and it is suggested that the church may have origins which pre-date the present 13th century structure. Evaluation trenches, dug in 1993, uncovered Iron Age, Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval remains on the site.

The site lies to the east of the present churchyard which was extended eastwards in the early twentieth century. The 1765 Enclosure Map indicates buildings on the site which were demolished during the nineteenth century. Opposite the site is the fifteenth century Felmersham tithe barn.



SP **Figure 1** Development area showing position of archaeological trench

METHODOLOGY AND CONSTRAINTS

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a specification approved by the Bedfordshire County Archaeological Officer. A 2.5m test pit was dug as close to the street front as possible and a further trench (12.4m long with two 5m extensions) was dug on an approximately north-south orientation (Fig. 1).

The topsoil was removed using a mini-digger (with a 1m wide bucket) until archaeologically sensitive levels were reached. Remains were noted at between 0.3m and 0.4m below the present ground surface. The base of the trenches were trowelled clean in order to define the archaeological deposits.

Trenches were planned at 1:50, photographed and features were sample excavated in order to establish their character, date and state of preservation. Features were recorded using the standard techniques of the AFU, in this report fill/deposit numbers are shown in plain text and cut numbers in bold text. Ordnance Survey heights were surveyed in from the 45.97m bench mark on St. Mary's church. Finds were returned to the AFU offices for cleaning and analysis and the written and material archive will be archived at Bedford Museum.

RESULTS

Test pit

Approximately 0.3m of topsoil sealed a layer of large angular limestone blocks which tipped down towards the north. Beneath these blocks (which varied in size from 0.2m – 0.5m) were smaller blocks and limestone rubble which was set in a sandy clay matrix. This was partially removed by hand and a single sherd of pottery was recovered. The bulk of this deposit was removed by machine. This foundation material extended 0.6m below the present ground surface and was bedded into the sandy gravel natural.

The foundations would appear to date to the post-medieval period and probably relate to the building shown close to Church End on the eighteenth century Enclosure Map. No earlier features were visible or survived beneath the foundations.

Trench

The trench to the north of the test pit and the 1993 evaluation trench 2, was located to determine the presence (or absence) of Anglo-Saxon burials. It was 12.4m long, oriented approximately north-south, with two 5m extensions to the east and west (Fig. 1). The trench was sealed by 0.3-0.4m of topsoil (1) over a thin clay silt subsoil (2). Just over 1m from the southern end of the trench an area of rough, undressed, stone blocks (3) extended 7.5m in a north-westerly direction. These blocks probably form the foundation of a post-medieval building. The blocks were bedded in a sandy clay matrix (similar to that noted in the test pit, see above) and there was no evidence of mortar being used. The eastern trench extension showed this area of stones spread 2.5m to the east with an area of large rounded pebbles (5) which may have formed a

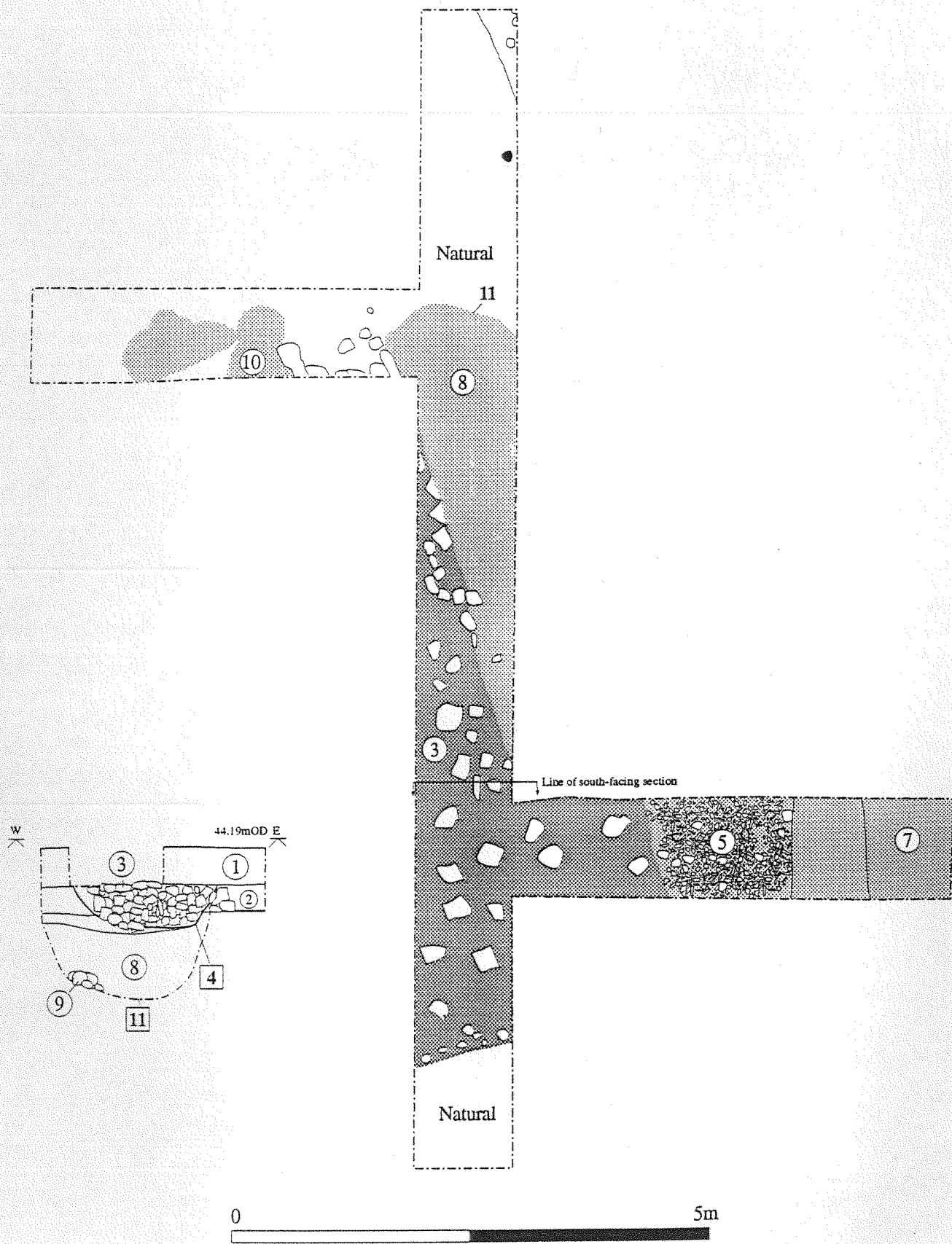


Figure 2 Trench plan and south-facing section

cobbled area or yard adjacent to the building (Fig. 2). The foundation material (removed by machine) was 0.5m deep and appeared to be cut into the top of a large pit (11), or possibly a ditch, 0.7m deep. The dark brown slightly clay silt fill (8) contained fragments of late medieval shelly wares, reduced wares (dated between 1350-1500) and sherds of an Ely-type small jug (15th/16th century), animal bone and oyster shell. The base of the pit/ditch contained a jumble of small stone blocks (9).

In the western trench extension an irregular shallow pit or butt end of a ditch was cut into the natural gravel. The fill (10) was a dark grey brown silt clay which contained fragments of animal bone and St. Neots-type/Northamptonshire shelly wares (12th/13th century).

At the northern and southern end of the trench a slightly silty sandy clay natural was visible. Cut into this material at the northern end of the trench were two small sub-circular hollows, 0.15m diameter. The fill of these was indistinguishable from the sub-soil and no artefactual material was recovered from them. The presence of roots in the sub-soil and natural indicate trees or substantial shrubs on the site in the recent past.

CONCLUSIONS

The test pit and trench in the proposed churchyard extension did not reveal the presence of extensive archaeological remains beyond the post-medieval building foundations. Pottery from the features suggests limited occupation of the site during the medieval and post-medieval period which is in keeping with its village centre location.

It is not clear whether the medieval features relate to structures or to other activities associated with rural habitation, although they are undoubtedly truncated by the post-medieval structure.

The absence of further Anglo-Saxon burials suggests that if there was a pagan Anglo-Saxon burial ground which has been superseded by the Christian graveyard it lies to the west or else was destroyed during medieval or post-medieval activity on the site. The absence of Anglo-Saxon finds discovered during grave digging, however, suggests that the two burials found during the 1993 evaluation were isolated and the presence of other, undated, isolated burials in the parish has been noted (Oake, pers. comm.). Further work in the churchyard is unlikely to reveal complex archaeological remains as post-medieval and modern activity has had a considerable impact on the site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Felmersham and Radwell Parish Council which commissioned and funded the work. The project was managed by Paul Sperry. Chris Montague worked on site with the author and Jon Cane produced the illustrations.

The brief for archaeological work was written by Martin Oake, County Archaeological Officer, who also visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

Thanks are also due to several villagers who made us welcome and gave us useful information.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Plough, Church End, Felmersham Stage 1 Archaeological Evaluation Report by Bedfordshire County Council Conservation and Archaeology Section

CONTEXT LIST

Context	Category	Type	Description
1	deposit	topsoil	dark brown slightly clay silt
2	deposit	subsoil	dark yellowish brown clay silt
3	deposit	foundation	irregular, angular limestone blocks
4	cut	foundation	0.75m wide, 0.5m deep
5	deposit	surface	large rounded pebbles, cobbled area
6	cut	pit	post-medieval rubbish
7	fill	pit	clay silt with modern rubbish
8	fill	ditch	dark grey brown clay silt, occasional stones
9	deposit	rubble	small irregular angular limestone blocks
10	fill	pit/ditch?	dark grey brown clay silt, occasional stones
11	cut	ditch	linear, >2m wide, >7m long

CONTENTS OF SITE ARCHIVE

The archive site records and finds produced during this evaluation consist of the following:

- 12 *pro forma* context record sheets
- 2 A3 format site drawings
- 2 35mm films (colour slide and colour print)
- 1 box ceramic artefacts and animal bone/shell



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