

St. Mary's Church, Thame Oxfordshire

NGR SP 7037 0631

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 1997

Summary.

A Watching Brief was undertaken at St Mary's Church, Thame, Oxfordshire. No archaeological features were seen and no finds were recovered. No human remains were seen during the course of the works.

1. Introduction.

In February 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at St Mary's Church, Thame, Oxfordshire (NGR SP 4704 2063), during the provision of new heating for the chancel. This involved the excavation of a small scale pipe trench around the south transept and chancel of the church; the installation of four external flue terminals and guards plus low level gas pipework to the chancel, and the installation of four Temcana Kestrel 400 room sealed heaters, to be mounted on the existing floor surface.

The watching brief was necessitated by PPG 16 as the site is of archaeological importance, both in terms of buried archaeology and of the church itself. In 1990 the OAU undertook an evaluation to the north of the church, which identified the presence of an extensive graveyard containing Anglo Saxon burials.

2. Background.

St Mary's Church is situated in the north western part of Thame. The Victoria County History speculates that, as an ancient manor of the Bishop of Dorchester, it was likely that Thame had a church early in the Anglo Saxon period. By the Norman Conquest it possibly was already the mother church for the three neighbouring chapelries of Tetsworth, Sydenham and Towersey which were embraced by the later prebend. It may possibly have been a very early foundation indeed since Wulfhere, Anglo Saxon King of Mercia (AD 657-74), swore 'on the altar' at Thame.

At some point between AD 1070 and 1086 the see of Dorchester was moved to Lincoln, and the bishops of Lincoln became the lords of Thame. By 1146 the church had been made a prebend of Lincoln Cathedral and the Prebendal House, directly opposite the church, may well originate from this time (fig. 1). This was one of the richest prebends in Lincoln Cathedral, being valued at £35 in 1254 and £112 in 1291.

Pevsner describes the cruciform shape of St Mary's and the several rebuilding phases. The chancel is circa 1220 AD; the aisles are described as being widened in the 14th century (agreeing with the Victoria County History) and in the 15th century the tower was heightened and the transepts remodelled. Reconstruction of the north transept was begun in 1442, and it may be assumed that the south transept was also begun at this time. Any mediaeval wall decoration would have been covered in whitewash in 1548. This occurred during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, when many alterations occurred in church building generally. Very little would appear to have been done to the fabric in the late 16th and 17th centuries. Various repair and rebuilding works took place in the 18th and 19th centuries.

3. Aims.

To record any archaeological remains exposed during the excavation of the pipe trench, and the associated works, to previously established standards (Wilkinson, 1992).

4. Methodology.

The pipe trench itself was both dug and reinstated by hand. Four holes were core drilled through the chancel wall, where the gas supply was to be connected to the individual radiators, using a Hilti 1.5 DCM drill with a 67mm core bit. Portions of the interior wall in the location of the new radiators were replastered with a lime plaster, as used elsewhere in the chancel.

5. Results.

The pipe trench was dug to a uniform depth of 0.46m. The pipe corridor was cut through both the concrete walkway surrounding the south transept and chancel, and through the grass of the surrounding modern graveyard (fig. 2). Where this occurred the section displayed 0.46m of mid brown/gray gritty clay loam, containing 2% silt and pea gravel, numbered (8). This material appeared to be completely sterile, containing neither finds nor human remains. Where the corridor cut through the concrete walkway the thickness of this material was reduced to 0.25m. It was sealed by (7) a 0.05m thick layer of retarded tar, in turn sealed by (6) a 0.09m thick layer of mid brown/yellow mortar clay loam, containing 2% silt and 10% mortar pieces. This in turn was sealed by (5), the concrete pathway itself (fig. 2).

Four holes, numbered 1-4, were drilled through the chancel wall to facilitate the connection of the internal radiators to the gas supply. They provided the following information; the north and south chancel walls were 1.015m thick and the east chancel 1.03m thick, and was constructed from a shelly limestone which can be seen throughout the church. Other material was also noted within the wall; holes 1-3 were composed of limestone but in hole 4 flint and a large piece of quartzite stone occurred in the middle of the south chancel wall presumably forming part of a rubble core (see fig. 2; a sample of the limestone and quartzite were retained).

6. Discussion.

The four drilled holes through the chancel wall have given a valuable insight into the construction of these portions of the church.

The pipe trench yielded no finds nor in situ archaeology. Despite its passage close to several grave markers no human remains were disturbed. In itself, the graveyard soil would appear to be completely sterile; the material directly beneath the concrete walkway is interpreted as a dump intended to raise/level and/or consolidate the existing ground surface, prior to the deposition of the concrete path.

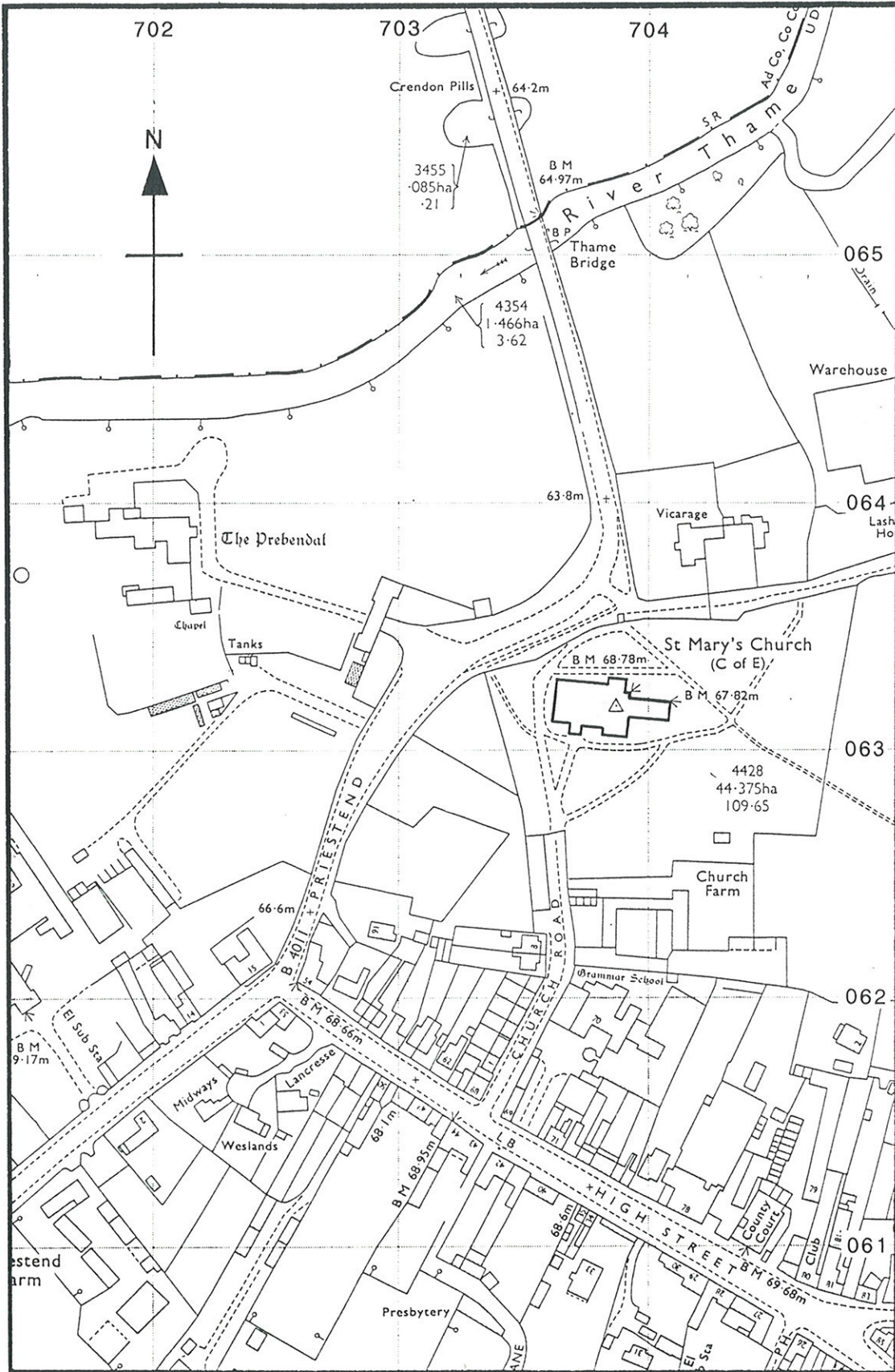
The provenance of the mortar pieces seen in (6) is unknown at this time, however they were not seen to be in association with any stone, either worked or unworked, and it is felt that this deposit represents the reuse of some construction/demolition material in the laying of the concrete walkway.

The watching brief successfully recorded that material which was revealed during the course of the works, and successfully prevented any accidental intrusion into grave fills.

Bibliography.

Pevsner, N "Buildings of England; Oxfordshire", 1974.
"Victoria County History of Oxfordshire", No. 7, Dorchester and Thame Hundred.
Wilkinson, D (ed.) OAU Fieldwork Manual, First Edition, 1992.

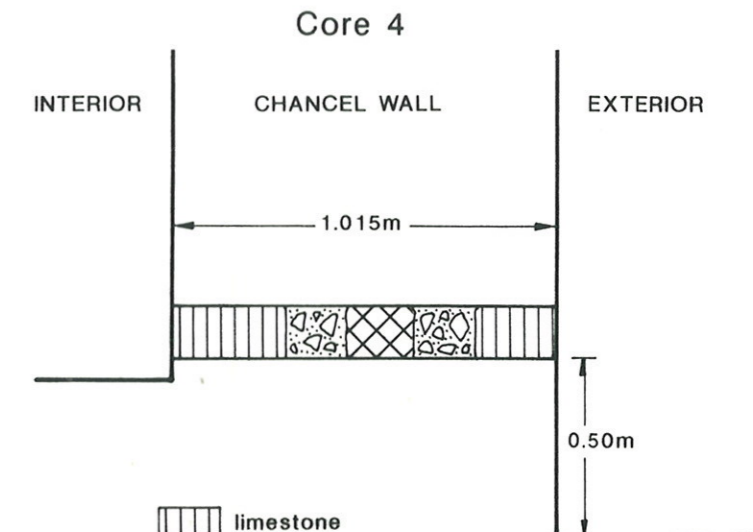
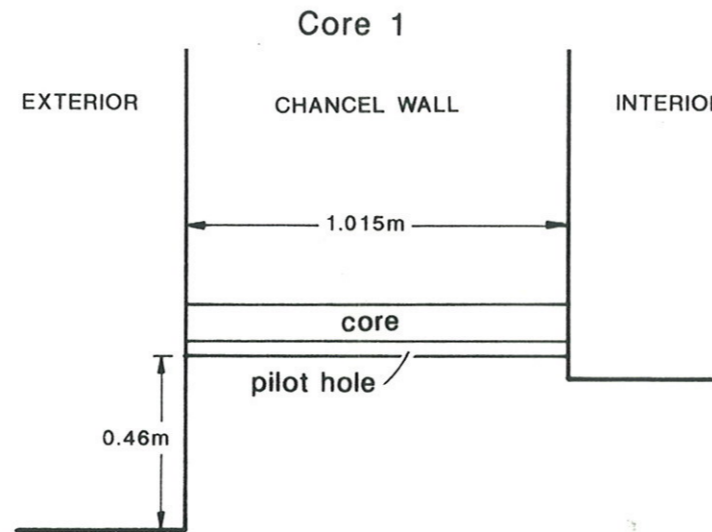
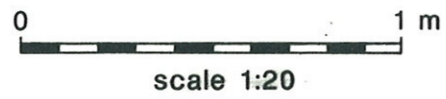
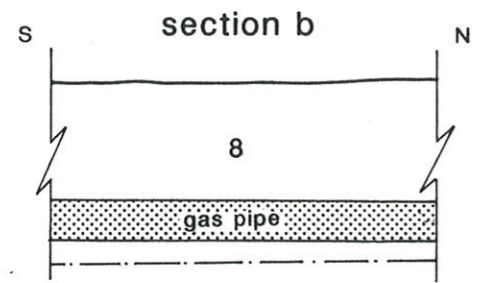
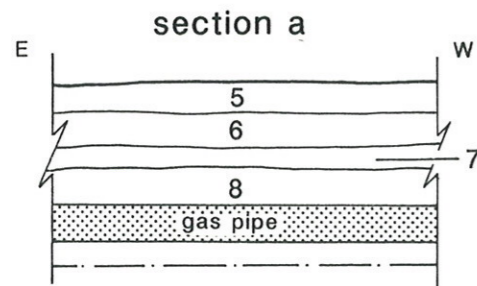
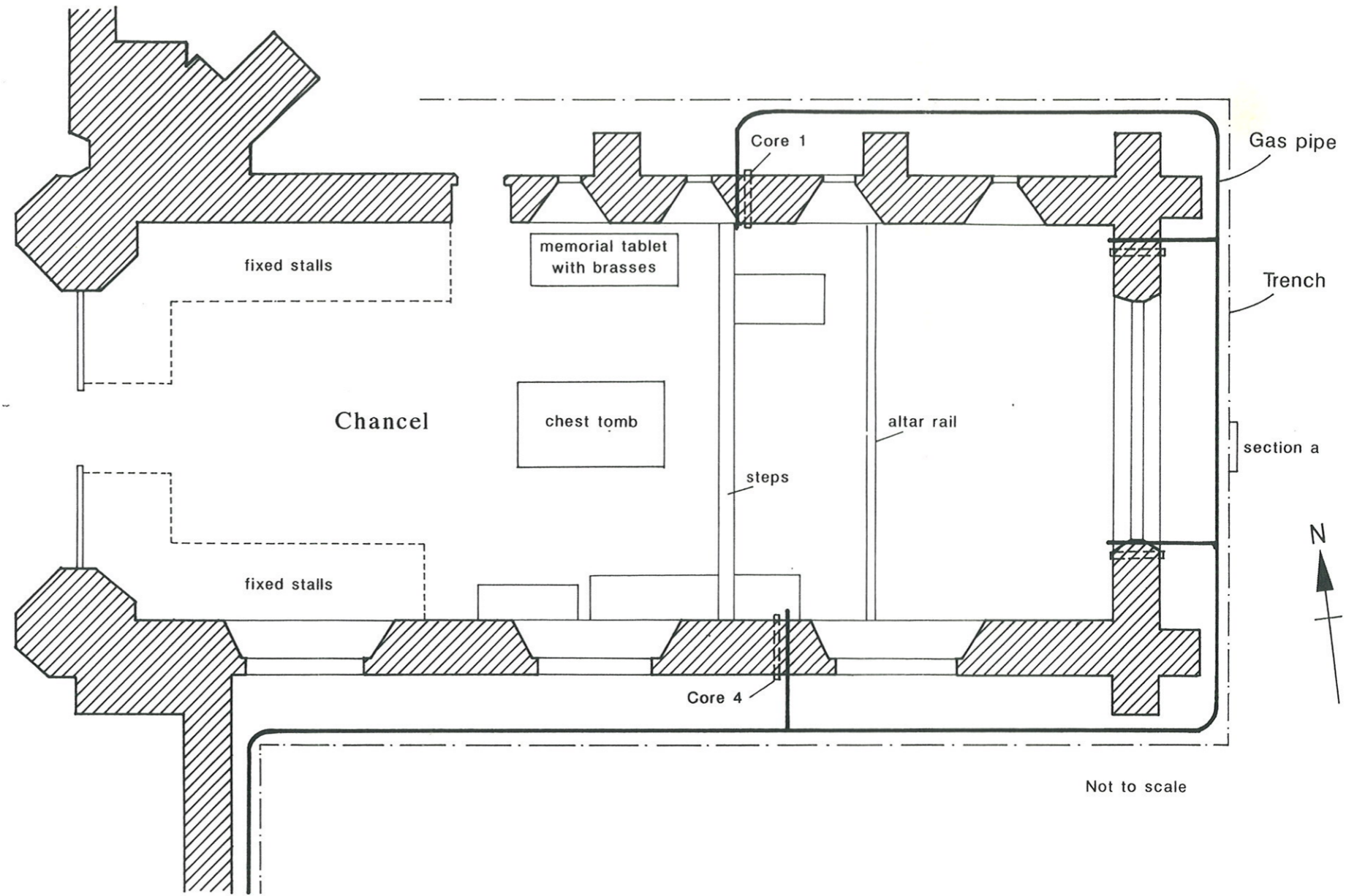
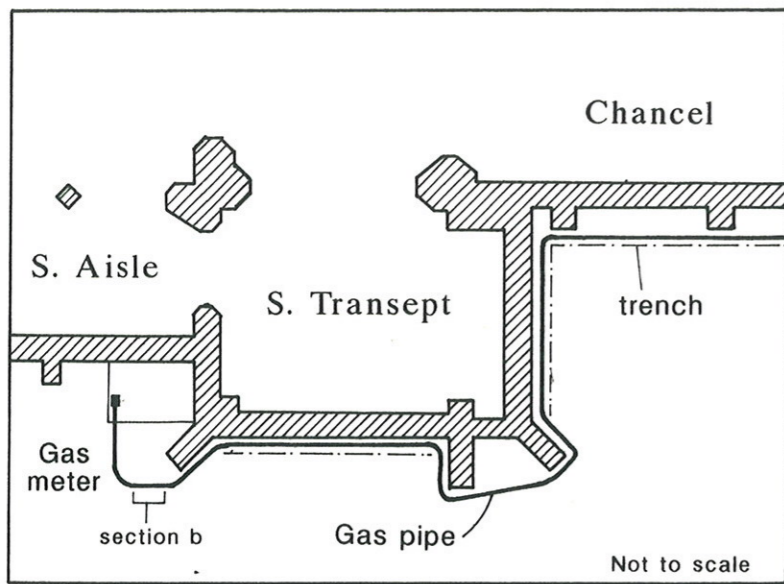
John Dalton/Andy Parkinson
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scale 1:2500

Figure 1



- limestone
- loose rubble inc. flint
- quartzite stone



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