

ST GILES CHURCH, NOKE

NOTES ON SITE VISIT 9 SEPTEMBER 1991

Three trenches had been dug against the chancel, to the N, to the S and on the S side of the chancel arch. They were required by Mr Young the engineer to investigate weakness which was causing cracks down both sides of the E wall of the chancel, which had opened early in the year and were now closing again.

The chancel seems to have been extensively modified, with later work utilising large ashlar on the N side and on both E quoins. Pevsner describes the E window as e. 19th-century, but implies that the lancets in the S wall are original and are indicative of an EE date.

The N trench (II) showed an expanded footing to a depth of 1.3 m. below drain gully, bonded with a grey sandy mortar which had also been used for the wall above. This may all date from the creation of the tomb niche here which, if it was meant to take the very weathered figure which is presently propped up in the subsidiary niche within it, may have been done in the e. 17th century. This would suggest a major rebuild of this N side at this time. A similar grey mortar was seen in the footing of the nave just E of the chancel arch buttress in Trench III, where there is similar generous use of ashlar in the wall.

The S wall of the chancel with its lancets was distinctive in using smaller rubble generally, and well coursed, so this may be undisturbed EE work as Pevsner implies. It was interesting however that in Trench I this walling could be seen to start at the level of the existing drain gully, overhanging by 0.1 m. a well-built face of small rubble, which must be a previous phase of wall. There was a clear break in the masonry at this level, and it seems certain that a previous chancel had been demolished and the present wall built on a disturbed course and a new line.

This lower wall would therefore seem to be the earliest detectable masonry, a phase earlier than the EE and potentially therefore Saxon. It was trench-built, as was shown by the clear construction trench rising from the top of the footing where it was offset. The lower footing stones, going down to 1.4 m. below gully, were very irregular, but the top three courses were laid, and above this was the offset of c. 0.1 m.

The interest of the site lies in the remarkable depth of the earliest footings, which perhaps suggests that the builders were aware of the risk of 'heave' in the clay subsoil. It would repay a further watch if there is to be further trenching or underpinning. It is understood however that this is less likely now in view of the depth of existing footings and the gradual improvement of the cracking. It seems instead that the engineer may specify a 'root-barrier' between the church and a ? oak tree at the edge of the churchyard. This would take the form of a trench up to 3 m. deep filled with concrete, and Mr Dell for the church was interested to know the DAC attitude to the use of a machine to excavate this. He seemed to recognise that there would be an archaeological impact which might require a watching

brief.

Other points of interest are that Mr Dell had retained the ends of the tie-beams from the nave, showing 50 and 60 rings, which JM of OAU agrees might be worth dating if there is any question about the 14th-15th-century date which Pevsner gives it. It is interesting to see the canted tie-beam of a truss immediately against the chancel arch, which poses the question of whether this roof was made for the church or was reused from elsewhere.

On one of the quoins of the SW corner of the chancel was a complex design of curves and straights which seemed too complex to be a mason's signature. A socket at the intersection of the straights suggests that it was a sundial.

BD 9.9.91