

# Church of St. Nicholas, East Challow, Oxfordshire

NGR SU 3808 8825

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

August 1995

## INTRODUCTION

Renovation work being carried out at the Church of St Nicholas, East Challow, near Wantage (Fig. 1) involved the excavation of new drainage trenches to the N and S of the church. These are necessary to remove rainwater from the church roofs via downspouts. The work also involved repair work to the roofs. The project architects, Jewell & Co, asked the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) to monitor the groundworks. A Written Scheme of Investigation was prepared, and approved by English Heritage. The watching brief was undertaken in late May and June 1995. The results are described in this report.

## LOCATION

East Challow is a small village 1.8 km W of Wantage, Oxfordshire (formerly in Berkshire until local government reorganisation in 1974). The township of Challow (Ceueslaue, 11th century) is now divided into two civil parishes, East and West, and lies to the N of Letcombe Regis; the Letcombe Brook forms the boundary with East Challow (VCH 1924, 222). The subsoil is predominantly Gault clay. East Challow's population rose steadily through the 19th century, from 229 in the 1801 census to 431 in 1901 (VCH 1907, 239).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

East Challow lies in the deanery of Wantage. The village church was a chapel of ease in Letcombe Regis parish during most of the medieval period, although there appear to have been problems maintaining the incumbency: a visitation of 1560 recorded that East Challow was one of several chapels of ease with "a curate, or curates, or ought to have" (VCH 1907, 35). In 1541 the rectory belonged to the nuns of Amesbury, who had had extensive interests in the area: they held the church of Letcombe Regis in 1086, and on dissolution in 1541 they also held West Challow. Thereafter the advowson of East Challow passed with Letcombe Regis to the Dean and Chapter of Winchester (VCH 1924, 228).

The Church of St Nicholas is probably of 12th-13th century origin (Pevsner 1966; VCH 1924, 226-7) and has a simple plan. There is a nave, chancel, S aisle and (late Victorian) SW tower. The earliest building would have comprised the nave and probably the chancel as well. Unfortunately the church (especially the W end) was drastically restored in 1858, removing several original features. A photograph taken in 1855 (reproduced in VCH 1924) shows a fine, simple W door of probable 12th-century date, and there was a further 12th-century door in the S aisle (VCH 1924, 226). Sadly both features were removed during the work of 1858. The loss was exacerbated in 1884 when the tower was built, in the words of VCH (1924, 226) 'a low embattled structure of poor design'. Most of the fenestration is late medieval or early post-medieval.

## METHODS

An initial site visit was made by Graham D Keevill on 26 May 1995 to meet Mike Higgins of Jewel & Co, the building contractor, and David Mann of the Parish Church Council. The purpose of the meeting was to establish the contractor's programme of works and thereby to devise a schedule of site visits. Work started in the following week, and relevant groundworks lasted for approximately two weeks. The principal recording visits

were made on 30 May and 2 June 1995, with further brief visits during the following week in which no archaeological recording was necessary. Recording followed standard OAU procedures, and walls, layers etc were given separate identification numbers (contexts; Wilkinson 1992).

The building contractor hand-dug two trenches, one on the S and one on the N side of the church. Both trenches were 0.3 m wide and typically 0.6 m deep, although the S trench was deeper at its E end because soil had been banked up against a retaining wall. 0.7 m-square and deep manholes were also dug. The trench on the S side of the church did not contain anything of archaeological significance; photographs were taken but no further record was made. No human bone was present, and the single animal mandible recovered by the contractor's workmen was not retained.

Significant archaeology was noted in the N trench, and a small amount of hand excavation was undertaken by G D Keevill. The results are described in the following section. The plastic drainpipe was laid in the trench without damage to the exposed archaeology.

## **RESULTS (Fig. 2)**

During excavation of the N drain, the workmen encountered solid stone immediately below the turf and topsoil 1.5 m from the W end of the trench. Work was suspended and G D Keevill was called in to undertake further investigation. It was clear that masonry had been exposed, and there appeared to be a cut or face along the N edge within the trench. The soil against this was excavated by G D Keevill, and a small extension of the trench was made up to the church wall. There were no finds.

Structure 103 comprised coursed large rough-dressed limestone slabs bonded with a sandy, pea gritty mortar. Six courses were visible (the structure continued beyond the depth of excavation), while an additional course is probably represented by a single stone which was just visible through the turf and which was bonded in to the nave N wall. The masonry had suffered obvious truncation in the past, with some stones broken and missing. It was clear, however, that the straight line across the N of the masonry was the original face. A skim of soft mortar on this face may have resulted from stone decay, but it could also have been the remains of a mortar render.

The structure was 1.03 m long (E-W) and extended for 0.74 m from the nave N wall. There was one 0.12 m offset between the second and third courses down, and a further 0.06 m offset between the first and second courses. Neither offset was chamfered. The masonry appeared to be bonded in with the foundations of the nave N wall. These had a narrow offset (0.05 m) immediately below the turf.

All faces of the masonry were butted by a cohesive and plastic medium-dark brown silty clay (102). This was an undifferentiated cemetery soil, but no human remains (articulated or disarticulated) were exposed anywhere in the trench. A modern soakaway pit (104, fill 105) cutting through this layer was seen at the E end of the trench. The pit fill was sealed by the topsoil and turf (101).

## **DISCUSSION**

Masonry structure 103 represents the buried remains of a buttress to the N wall of the

medieval nave. There are three unevenly-spaced buttresses surviving above ground: one to the E of 103 at the junction of the nave and chancel, and two to the W flanking a trefoil window with square head. The gap in between is occupied by a 16th-century square-headed triple-light window. Insertion of this major feature would have required at least the truncation of any existing buttress here, and this provides the obvious context for the reduction of 103 to foundation level. A buttress here would even up the arrangement on the N wall, although the spacing would still not have been equal. All the buttresses appear to be bonded with the N wall, and they exhibit chamfered offsets above ground.

The coincidence of the N wall offset and the level of reduction of 103 immediately below the modern ground level shows that there has been very little accumulation of soil since the 16th century. The nave offset may have been visible above-ground originally, but the square offsets in 103 contrast with the chamfers above-ground in the surviving three buttresses. The reduced masonry may therefore reflect the original 12th or 13th-century construction level quite closely. This suggests that the churchyard has not been used extensively for burial until fairly modern times. The parish registers begin noticeably late (1813 for baptisms, 1837 for marriages, and 1867 for burials; VCH 1924, 227). As a chapel of ease St Nicholas may not have enjoyed rights of burial during the medieval period. The churchyard is small (c. 1660 m<sup>2</sup> including the church itself) and very constrained on the S side. Most of the grave monuments to the N of the church are modern.

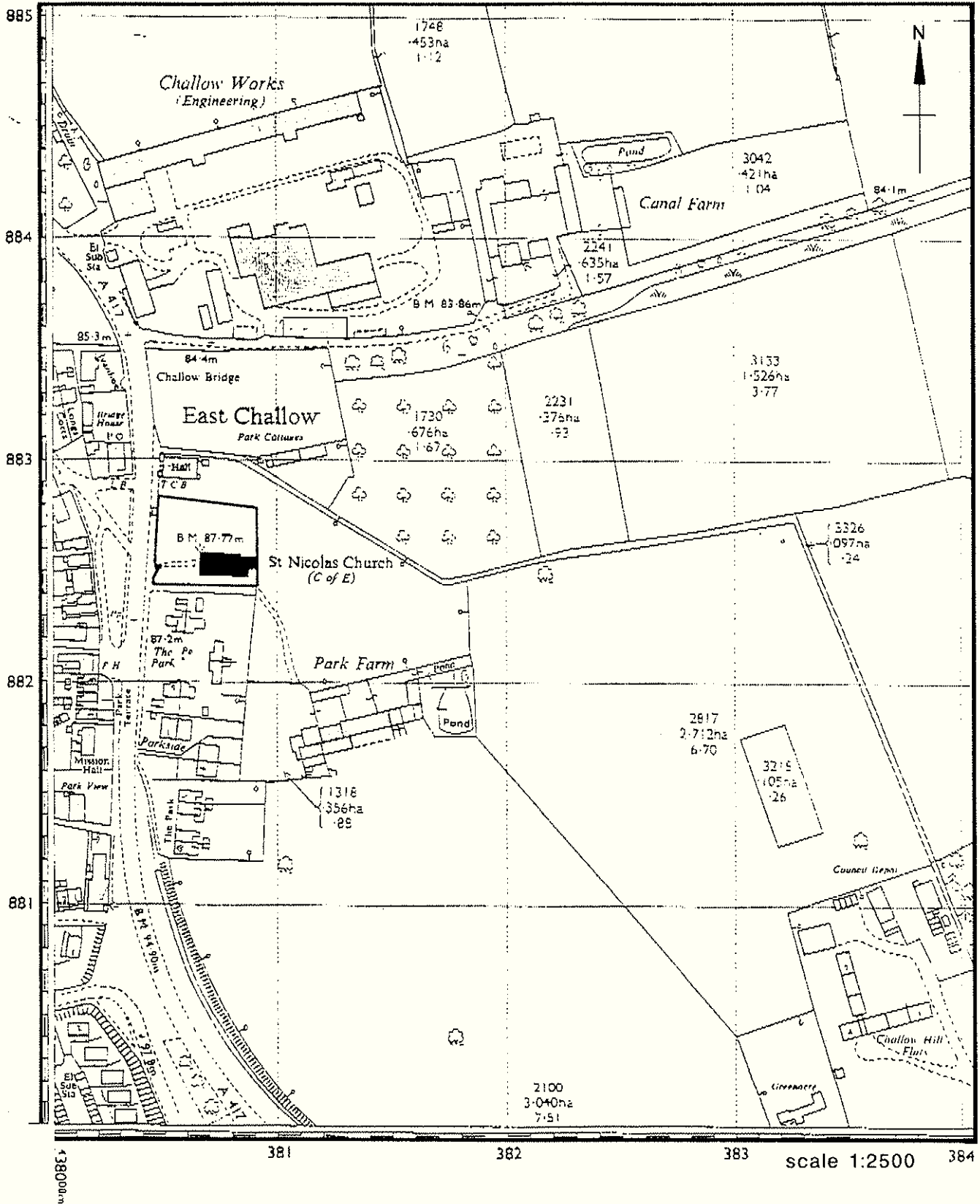
## CONCLUSION

A buttress foundation was located and recorded during the watching brief at St Nicholas Church, East Challow. It is suggested that the foundation was a primary structural feature of the medieval church, and that it was removed when a new window was inserted into the nave N wall during the 16th century. The foundation was left intact by the current works.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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11 August 1995



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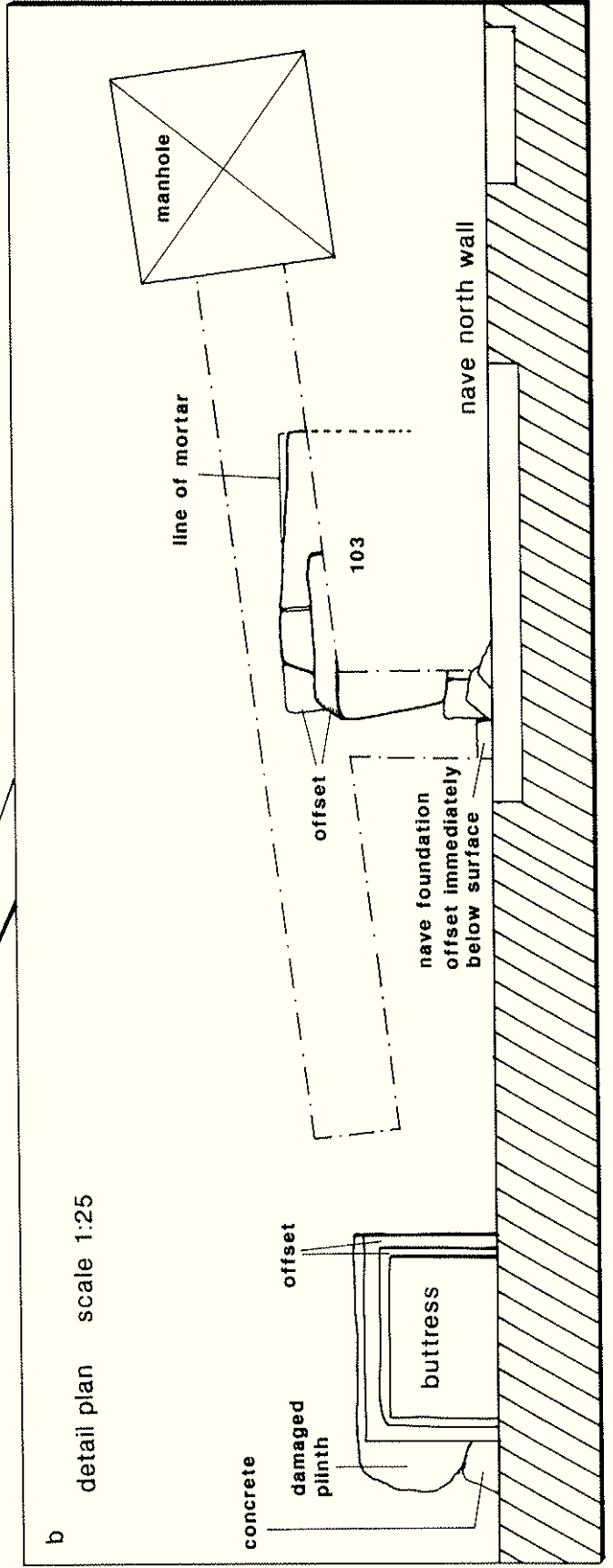
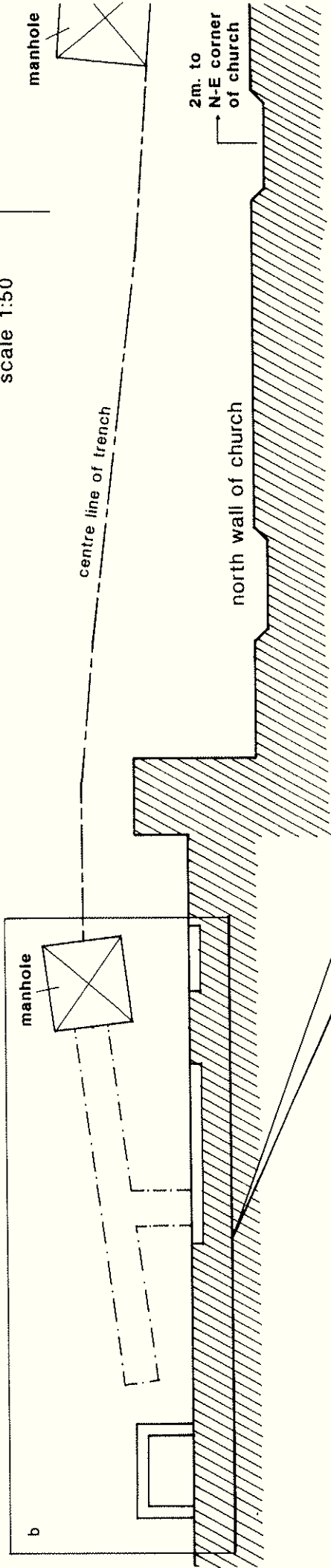
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site location

figure 1



scale 1:50



detail plan scale 1:25

trench location plan

figure 2



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