

St. Mary's Church
Garsington, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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St MARY'S CHURCH GARSINGTON, OXON.

NGR SP458203

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at St Mary's Church Garsington, Oxon in December 1994, during the excavation of surface water drains and soakaways around the church, by the contractors Wooldridge & Simpson.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Church stands on a slight terrace at the SW edge of the village, and comprises a 12th century W Tower and Nave with 13th century N and S Aisles, and a 14th century Chancel.

No recorded archaeological excavation has taken place in the vicinity of the Church, but a watching brief on the replacement of some of the floor in 1992 revealed deposits which were interpreted as the robbed footings of earlier phases of the Church (St Mary's Church, Garsington, Oxon. Archaeological Watching Brief Report. OAU 1993).

METHODOLOGY

The site was visited on two occasions during the progress of the work. The excavated drain trenches were visually inspected and recorded. The W soakaway (No 1) was largely archaeologically excavated, once the evidence of intensive burial activity in the area became apparent. The E soakaway (No 2) was examined on its completion.

RESULTS (Fig. 1)

Drain Trench

The drain trench around the Church averaged 0.60 m wide and 0.30 -0.40 m deep. No archaeological deposits were revealed with the exception of the top of the wall footings, particularly along the N Aisle. These were stepped out from the wall by approximately 0.20 m and consisted of unworked slabs of limestone.

Soakaway 1 (0.75 m x 0.75 m)

Undisturbed natural subsoil (3) a compact pale yellowish brown sandy silt, was identified at a depth of approximately 1.40 m below present ground level. This was slightly cut by a partly revealed grave (4), oriented W-E. The grave contained the decayed remains of a coffin (6), including a tinplate coffin handle, and an adult inhumation (5), of which the legs were exposed by the

excavation.

The cut of the grave, visible in the undisturbed natural subsoil, was indistinguishable in the overlying deposit (2); both layer 2 and the backfill of the grave (7) were a mix of dark brown sandy silt and pale yellowish brown sandy silt, to a depth of 1.30 m. From this material the disturbed bones and bone fragments of at least five inhumations were recovered, along with a fragment of 14th century pottery. Sealing these deposits was a silty loam topsoil (1).

After excavation and recording, the exposed burial was left in situ. The recovered human bones were also redeposited in the excavated soakaway prior to its backfill with hardcore.

Soakaway 2 (0.75 m x 0.75 m)

The deposits revealed appeared to be similar to those in Soakaway 1, comprising a topsoil of approximately 0.20 m over a mix of dark brown sandy silt and yellowish brown sandy silt. The depth of excavation was restricted to 1.00 m. Natural subsoil was not exposed. No grave cuts were visible in plan or section, and no burials, disturbed or intact, were exposed.

DISCUSSION

From the coffin handle found with the coffin (6), the intact burial can be dated to the first half of the 19th century. The amount of disturbed human bone in the backfill of the grave (7) and the surrounding deposit (2) indicates that the area to the W of the Tower has been intensively used for burial since medieval times, even though there are no grave markers there today.

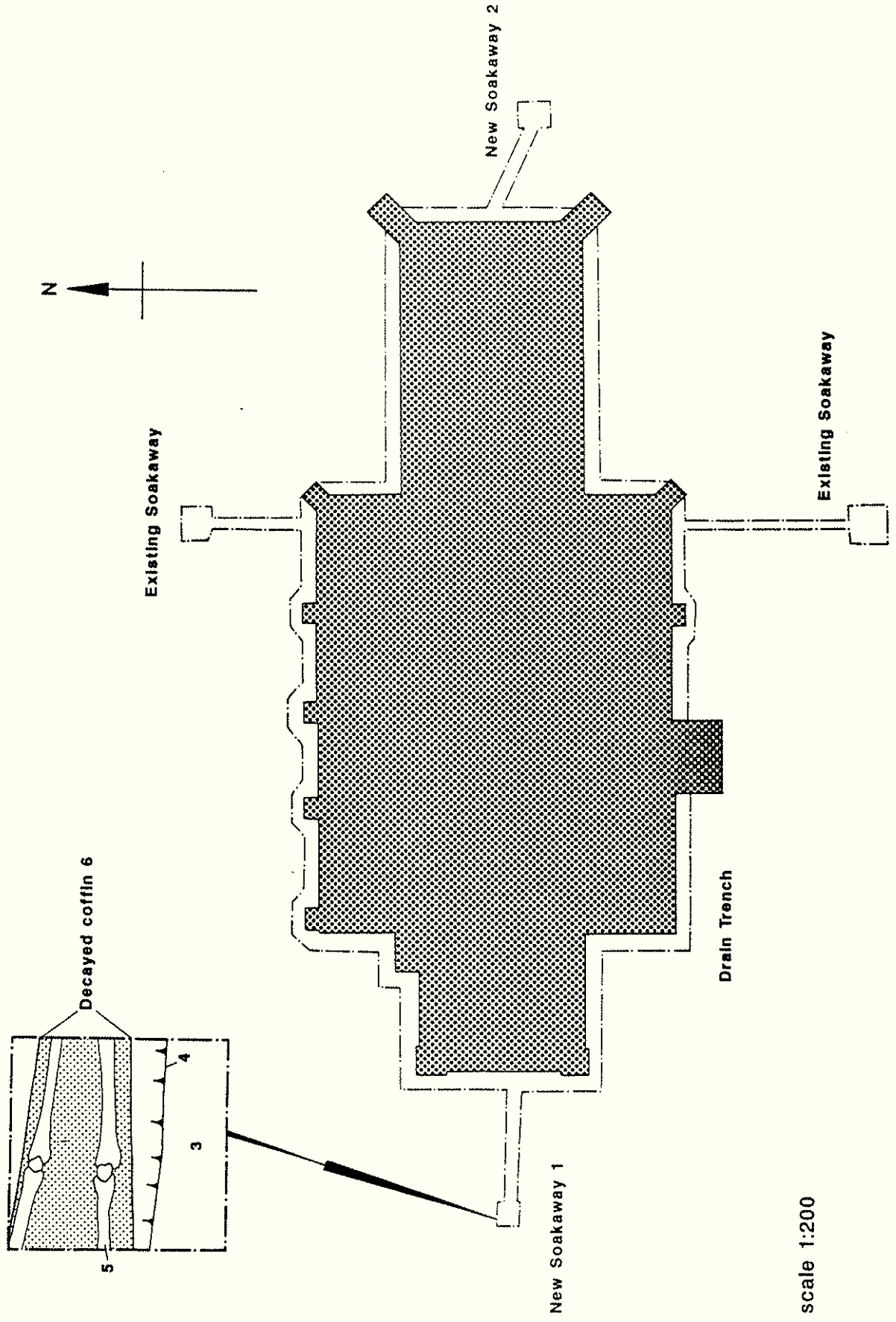
Soakaway 2 is sited on the edge of the existing path around the Church, which might explain the lack of evidence relating to burials found within the exposed deposits.

The level of the undisturbed natural below the present ground surface is almost certainly due to burial activity, although the possibility that there has been substantial levelling up of the W-E slope of the hillside to form the terrace itself cannot be entirely ruled out. Only further and more extensive excavation would clarify this point.

No evidence was found which could be related to the findings of the 1992 watching brief. As interpreted, the earlier phases of the church did not appear to extend beyond the present Tower or Aisles, and the depth of the excavated drain trench was insufficient to reveal more than the tops of the present footings.

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Garsington: St Mary's Church



scale 1:200

figure 1

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