

# **Interim Report on Excavation of the Vestry at St. Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks**

## **Aims of the Excavation**

The purpose of the excavation was to record all the archaeological deposits within the choir vestry prior to their total destruction. The significance of these deposits is that as the vestry was constructed during the 15th century, any burials found would be of early medieval date, and undisturbed by post-medieval burials. It was hoped that this would lead to the discovery of better preserved medieval coffins than in the main body of the church, and that a more accurate estimation of the density of extra-mural burials could be made. It was estimated that between 20 and 30 burials would be found within this area (approximately 4.30m x 2.90m).

## **Excavation Method**

After initial cleaning it became apparent that the site consisted of a homogenous grave earth deposit in which it was almost impossible to distinguish individual grave cuts. However a number of burials could be identified very close to the surface. It was therefore decided to excavate the burials as they appeared, rather than stratigraphically, and work out their stratigraphic relationships during the course of the excavation, and during post-excavation analysis by the use of overlaying skeleton plans. Generally this appears to have been a valid method, although some errors in the stratigraphic matrix cannot be ruled out. This inability to distinguish grave cuts continued until the graves were deep enough to cut natural sand. The grave earth was removed in two spits (8001 and 8026) in order to identify the burials.

## **Graves**

A total of 36 graves were identified. Of these, 6 were too truncated to contain any skeletal remains, and one appeared to be a multiple burial containing 4 individuals. A total of 33 skeletons were recovered, of which 5 were more or less complete and 9 were juveniles. The majority were truncated by the wall foundations of the vestry. All burials were orientated east-west, lying in a supine position, and, with only one exception (see below for details), had the arms positioned at the side of the body.

Generally speaking the preservation of bone improved the deeper the grave. Those which lay very close to the surface were in a poor state of preservation, with many bones missing or very crushed. This would appear to be the result of horizontal truncation due to levelling of the ground surface during relaying of the floor during the 19th century. In addition, adjacent to the west wall of the vestry, animal burrows had led to the displacement of many bones.

As mentioned above, grave cuts were almost impossible to identify except where they cut the natural sand. Where they could be discerned, they were rectangular with near vertical sides, flat bases and slightly rounded corners. The deepest grave was 0.80m deep (1.14m below the top of the foundation wall).

The densest concentration of burials was found close to the western wall of the vestry (about one half of the skeletons). In the eastern part of the vestry, away from the foundation walls, there were areas of grave earth which did not contain any burials. However, graves below this deposit appeared to have been truncated. In the central area of the vestry only two burials were found, both of which were very close to the surface and poorly preserved. This suggests that other, shallow burials may have existed here, but were destroyed or removed by later activity, during or after the construction of the vestry. This would imply an even greater original concentration of graves in this area than has been excavated.

## **Coffins**

Evidence for wooden coffins was found in 21 graves, and consisted of soil staining and coffin nails.

Survival of coffin wood was very poor, consisting only of faint staining in the soil seen in 9 of the graves. In only two of these (8049 and 8091) was it possible to determine the shape of the coffin. In both cases these appeared to be straight sided rather than tapering. Iron coffin nails were found in 16 of the graves and, where possible, their positions were planned. No brackets, handles or plaques were found.

### Grave 8033

An iron belt buckle was found in this grave associated with skeleton 0909. The buckle lay over the right pelvis, was oval in shape, and measured 50mm x 35mm. It was in very poor condition and was lifted in several pieces.

### Grave 8061

This appears to have been a multiple grave, containing 3 adult individuals and a probable juvenile. The 3 adults were all placed in individual coffins, and lay adjacent to, and slightly overlapping each other. They were truncated at the chest by the east wall of the vestry.

### Grave 8097

Unlike all the other burials where the arms were visible, this skeleton had the arms flexed with the hands together over the pelvis. The lower part of the body was cut away by the buttress foundation, but the grave cut was extremely narrow, only just wide enough to contain the burial, and contained no evidence for a coffin. This suggests that the body was buried in a shroud rather than a coffin.

## **Other Features**

Several non grave features were identified. One of these was a rectangular cut 0.90m x 0.60m, 0.30m deep (8067). The fill consisted of a loose sandy silt containing building debris (mortar, bricks and tile) as well as some bone. The feature has no relationship with any of the walls, but appears to be later than any of the graves. The fill suggests that it is relatively modern, but its function is unknown.

Two smaller features (8015 and 8025) were found adjacent to the eastern wall. The first was a semi-circular cut against the wall, 0.30m x 0.20m and 0.12m deep. It lay above all the graves in this area, and although it is possible that it was cut by the wall, its loose silty fill containing mortar fragments suggests it may be fairly late. It cuts a similar shaped and sized feature just to its northwest. The two features together could be interpreted as a post hole for scaffolding.

During the course of this excavation a charnel pit (8093) was discovered by the contractors underneath the floor of the 20th century cellar adjacent to the vestry. It was approximately 0.80m square and contained coffin wood and handles as well as a large amount of charnel. Its position and depth below ground level suggest that it dates from the construction of the cellar in the 1920s.

A brick lined pipe duct (8087) leading from the adjacent cellar to the church was largely removed prior to excavation. This was 0.60m deep and 1.30m x 1.00m. It included some stone underpinning of the southern vestry wall and had truncated three graves.

## **Wall Foundations**

Excavation of the graves revealed almost all of the wall foundations in the vestry, as well as the remains of a buttress against the south wall.

The foundations of the vestry walls were approximately 1.10m deep, and were constructed of large irregular blocks of ragstone and sandstone, mortared together and arranged in very rough courses. No construction trenches could be seen, suggesting that the foundations were trench built. The foundations jutted out between 0.10m and 0.30m from the walls, although the upper 0.50m of the northern wall foundation (8006) had been cut away so that it formed a smooth face flush with the wall above.

Much of the foundation for the western wall (8098) had been cut away in order to build a chimney in the adjacent cellar, which had been constructed for use as a boiler room. A pipe duct in the south west corner of the vestry leading from the boiler room to the church had also removed much of the foundation, including the relationship between the western and southern foundations.

The buttress (8009) was situated against the southern vestry wall. It was 1.10m high, and 1.00m x 1.15m. It was constructed of large and medium sized blocks of ragstone and sandstone firmly mortared together and irregularly coursed. The faces were fairly smooth, although slightly rougher on the west facing side. There was no construction trench visible. There was a straight joint between the eastern edge of the buttress and the southern vestry wall foundation. On the west side however the buttress appeared to be of one build with the small section of wall remaining east of the modern intrusion. This would suggest that the buttress and the remaining wall to the west of it are part of the northern wall of the church, with the vestry being added on. It is likely that there would have been a straight joint between the western and southern wall foundations had this not been destroyed by 20th century intrusions.

### Site Data

<b>Total Contexts</b>		132
Graves	36	
Coffins	21	
Skeletons	33	
Structures	7	

### Finds Data

<b>Total Finds</b>		97
<b>Metals</b>	80	
Lead	1	
Iron Nails	78	
Iron Buckle	1	
<b>Pot</b>	4	
<b>Flint</b>	12	
<b>Glass</b>	1	