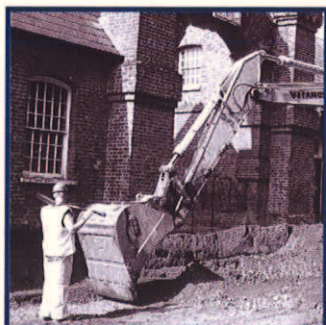


# Minster of St Mary the Virgin Reading Berkshire



## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



May 2006

**Client: Broadway Maylan**

Issue N<sup>o</sup>: 1  
OA Job N<sup>o</sup>: 3195  
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10/5/06

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Reading, Berkshire*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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## SUMMARY

*On 12th April 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733). The work was commissioned as part of the consulting process prior to building work on the west and south walls of the church. The watching brief revealed evidence of earlier (Victorian ?) underpinning below a subsidence crack on the west wall of the church, a truncated skeleton (probably cut during construction of the tower) and exposed a flint rubble wall foundation supporting the south-west corner of the south aisle.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 On 12th April 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief of trial pits at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733). The work was commissioned as part of the ongoing site investigations during renovation work on the west and south walls of the church.
- 1.1.2 OA agreed a specification for the watching brief with the architects, engineers and the Church Commissioners.

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies within the central area of Reading, south of the River Thames and the railway station (Fig. 1). The site itself is on a very gentle south facing slope running down towards Holy Brook and is located at approximately 44 m above OD. The underlying geology is valley gravels over alluvium (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet no. 268).

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 Historic Reading straddles the gap in a gravel ridge through which the River Kennet flows. With the supplanting of the Roman road system based on Silchester, Reading became an important communications centre during the medieval period. The roads from Oxford to Southampton and from London to Bristol passed through or close to the town and, although the town does not lie on the banks of the River Thames, it was sufficiently near to the river to provide easy access to London, Wallingford and Oxford. The ease of access from the capital and the major provincial towns has ensured that Reading has retained an important place in the country's communications.
- 1.3.2 Reading is first documented by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 870-1 AD when the Danes wintered there and repulsed the attacks of King Ethelred and his brother Alfred. Although the Danes wintered again in 1006, no further mention is made of

the settlement here until the later 11<sup>th</sup> century. A reference to Reading in Domesday indicates that it had become a town by 1066. A royal borough, separately mentioned, which included 29 *hagae*, a pasture called “portmansbrook” and land held for official guests, points to an urban community.

- 1.3.3 The post-Conquest history of Reading is dominated by the presence of the abbey and its effect on the town. Henry I’s foundation of the abbey in 1121 AD gave the town an increased impetus to urban development. Construction of a new bridge over the Kennet by 1186 and the creation of another wide street, London Street, with burgage plots either side were part of this phase of urban expansion. London Street runs to the south-east of St Mary’s.
- 1.3.4 The major industry for this period came to be cloth working, with its attendant trades, weaving and fulling. By the mid 13th century fulling mills along the Kennet are documented as well as the town wharf with its wool beam. By the 14th century Reading had become established as the major town in Berkshire, having long outstripped Wallingford. In the 15th and 16th centuries the population had probably tripled, and there was a corresponding increase in manufactories and commerce.
- 1.3.5 The town’s prosperity was, however, severely dislocated during the Civil War, with the alternate occupations by the Parliamentary and Royalist forces between October 1642 and July 1644. These occupations hastened the decline in the old industries of cloth and leather working, and contributed to a reorientation of the town’s economy. This reorientation was finally achieved with the completion of the Kennet and Avon canal, linking Reading with Bristol in 1810. The decline in the clothing industry was offset by the manufacture of gauze, silk and sailcloth, whilst the brick and tile making and tanning had expanded considerably. The success of the town’s economy is reflected in the virtual rebuilding of the town centre in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- 1.3.6 The site itself is situated on the south-eastern extent of the medieval town of Reading. To the south-east of the site is the 12<sup>th</sup> century church of Saint Giles, whilst to the south west are the preserved remains of a medieval tile kiln.
- 1.3.7 Pevsner describes the building as having a Norman doorway, possibly reset, within the north wall and a southern arcade *c* 1200. At the east end of the north aisle an arch *c* 1300 must once have connected to a north transept with an eastern chapel. The west tower, built of chequer flint and stone with polygonal buttresses dates between 1550-3. The chancel dates to 1864 and the north aisle to 1872.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.

2.1.2 To provide information in order to develop a mitigation strategy for future work in the area.

2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

## 2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken as a continuous archaeological presence during the hand excavation of the trial pits.

2.2.2 A plan showing the location of the trial pits (Fig. 2) was maintained at a scale of 1:100 and any sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Description of deposits

#### *Trial Pit 1*

3.1.1 This Trial Pit measured 1 m square and was located 4 m south of the tower, immediately below the window in the west wall of the south aisle. It was dug in order to investigate whether a visible crack in the wall had penetrated the foundations. A Victorian brick lined drainage gully had been removed prior to excavation.

3.1.2 A compact grey-brown clay silt (12) was encountered at a depth of 0.35 m below ground level (Fig. 3, section 1). Upon further excavation the pelvic area of a articulated, east-west oriented adult skeleton (15) was encountered at a depth of 0.67 m, showing that this deposit was gravefill. Closer examination of the skeleton showed that it had been truncated across the femurs, probably during the construction of the tower, with the construction cut (16), backfilled with redeposited material and fragments of charnel (17). This inhumation was left in situ and excavation was halted at that depth. Cutting the backfill (17) was a vertical sided feature (13), running parallel to the wall. This contained a foundation constructed using lime mortar, stone and flint (14), possibly a Victorian underpinning constructed to support the cracked wall. This was sealed by a 0.37 m thick layer of dark grey-brown silt loam (11) which contained many tile fragments, a fragment of clay pipe stem and glazed earthenware suggesting a 19th century churchyard soil.

#### *Trial Pit 2*

3.1.3 This Trial Pit also measured 1 m square and was located 2.2 m south of Pit 1, at the base of a buttress built against the south-west corner of the south aisle. As in Pit 1 the Victorian drainage gully had been removed prior to excavation.



- 3.1.4 A layer of compact grey-brown clay silt (22) was encountered at a depth of 0.4 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, section 2). This had been cut by a trench (23) running parallel to the wall and buttress. This was filled by large flint nodules compacted together to form a raft (24), which was probably the original footings for the west wall of the church. This was overlain by a layer of dark grey-brown silt loam (21), a continuation of the church yard soil (11) observed in Pit 1.

### ***Trial Pit 3***

- 3.1.5 This measured approximately 2 m by 1m and was located against the north-east corner of the present vestry.
- 3.1.6 A compact layer of yellow-brown clay silt (31) was encountered immediately below the stone slabs forming the pathway adjacent to the vestry (section not illustrated). This layer contained lenses of mortar and gravel and many fragments of brick and tile, and probably relates to the construction of the vestry and the chancel in the late 19th century. Excavation proceeded to a depth of 0.6 m below the ground level, but no other deposits were exposed.

### **3.2 Finds**

- 3.2.1 Fragments of brick and tile were observed within layers (11), (21), and (31). These were of 19th century origin and were noted, but not retained. A single fragment of clay pipe stem and a sherd of glazed earthenware, both of 19th century date, were recovered from layer (11), but no other dating evidence was observed.

### **3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains**

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

## **4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1.1 Trial Pit 1 revealed that subsidence and associated cracks in the wall had been a problem in the past and that the underpinning (14) had been installed in order to stabilise the crack below the window in the west wall of the church. Trial Pit 2 exposed the original construction of the wall foundations below the west wall. Pit 3 exposed deposits relating to the Victorian refurbishment of the chancel and vestry.
- 4.1.2 No deposits or features relating to any earlier phases of construction of the Minster were observed, although the presence of earlier architectural features within the structure suggests that may have been earlier buildings on the site prior to the 16th century construction of the tower and west wall. The presence of the truncated skeleton within Pit 1 suggests that there was a cemetery already on site prior to the construction of the tower.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| <i>Context</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>Depth/<br/>Height</i> | <i>Width</i> | <i>Comments</i>  | <i>Finds</i>                         | <i>Date</i> |
|----------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Trial Pit 1    |             |                          |              |  |                                      |             |
| 11             | Layer       | 0.35 m                   | -            | Churchyard soil  | Brick, tile, clay pipe stem, pottery | C19th       |
| 12             | Fill        | > 0.3 m                  | -            | Grave fill   | -                                    | Pre 1550    |
| 13             | Cut         | > 0.3 m                  | 0.45 m       | Underpinning trench  | -                                    | C19th       |
| 14             | Structure   | > 0.3 m                  | 0.45 m       | Underpinning   | -                                    | C19th       |
| 15             | Skeleton    | -                        | -            | Adult supine skeleton, truncated by the construction cut for the tower | -                                    | Pre 1550    |
| 16             | Cut         | > 0.3 m                  | 0.55m        | Construction cut for the tower   | -                                    | c 1550      |
| 17             | Fill        | >0.3 m                   | 0.55 m       | Backfill of construction cut   | Human charnel                        | c 1550      |
| Trial Pit 2    |             |                          |              |  |                                      |             |
| 21             | Layer       | 0.4 m                    | -            | Churchyard soil  | Brick, tile                          | C19th       |
| 22             | Layer       | > 0.3 m                  | -            | Earlier soil   | -                                    | -           |
| 23             | Cut         | > 0.3 m                  | 0.35 m       | Foundation trench  | -                                    | C16th       |
| 24             | Structure   | > 0.3 m                  | 0.35 m       | Original footings for west wall of church                              | -                                    | C16th       |
| Trial Pit 3    |             |                          |              |  |                                      |             |
| 31             | Layer       | >0.6 m                   | -            | Probable Victorian construction layer                                  | Brick, tile                          | C19th       |



**APPENDIX 2    BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES**

IFA 2001 *Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OA 1992 *Field Manual* (1st edition, ed. D Wilkinson)

Pevsner, N. 1966 *The Buildings of England, Berkshire*. Penguin.

Astill, G. 1978 *Historic towns in Berkshire; An archaeological appraisal*

**APPENDIX 3    SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS**

**Site name:** Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire

**Site code:** REMINM 06

**Grid reference:** SU 714 733

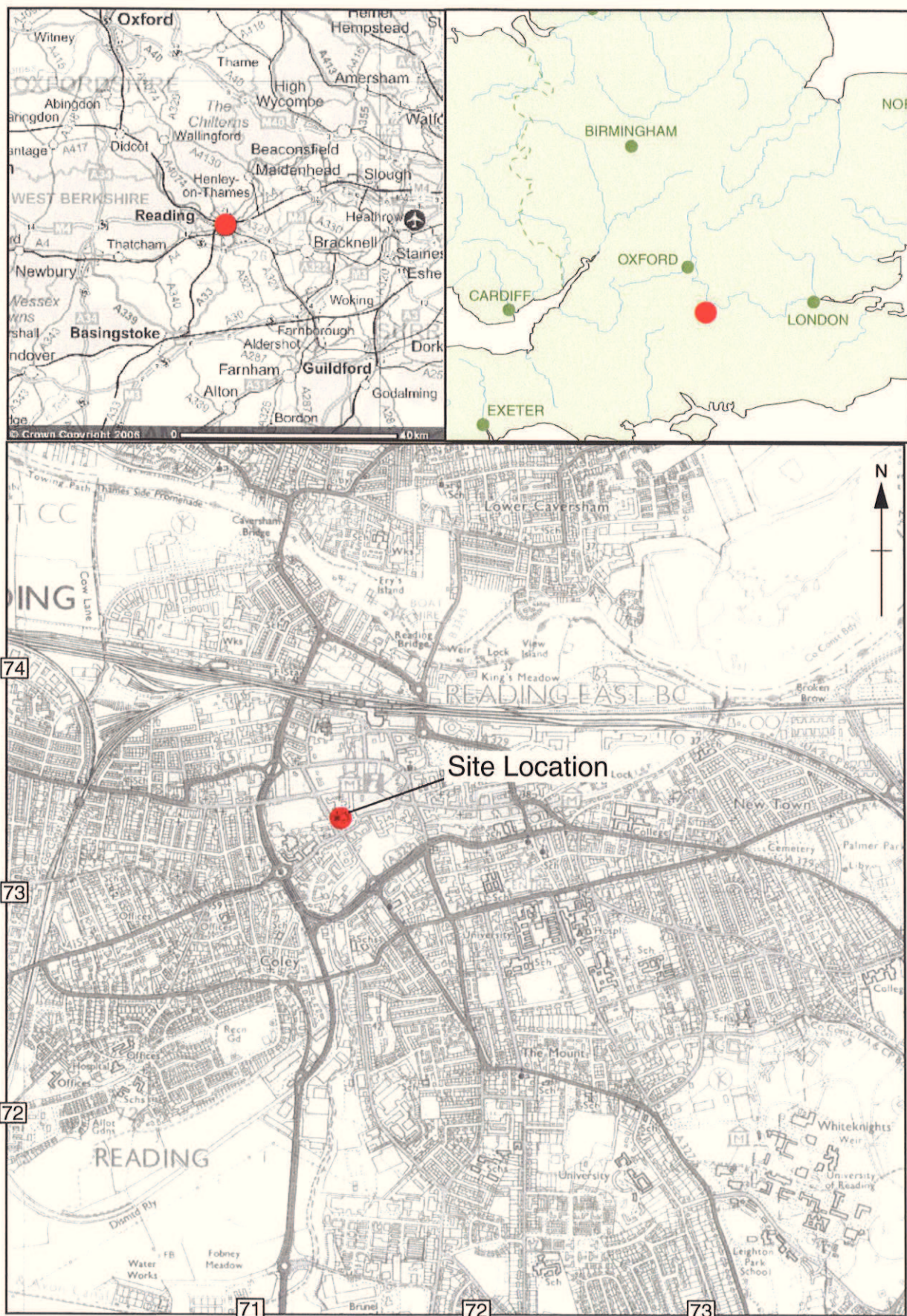
**Type of watching brief:** Hand excavation of 3 trial pits.

**Date and duration of project:** 12.04.06, 4 hrs

**Area of site:** 1300 m<sup>2</sup>

**Summary of results:** The watching brief exposed evidence of the original construction of the church footings and evidence of Victorian underpinning, also human remains predating the 16th century construction of the tower.

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Reading Museum Service in due course.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site Location



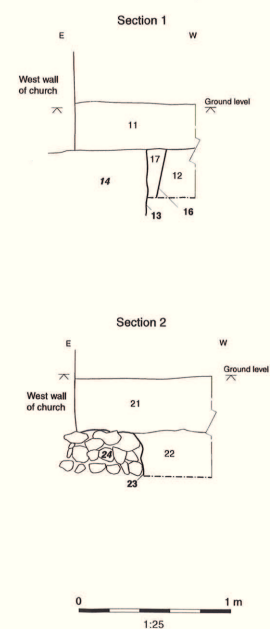
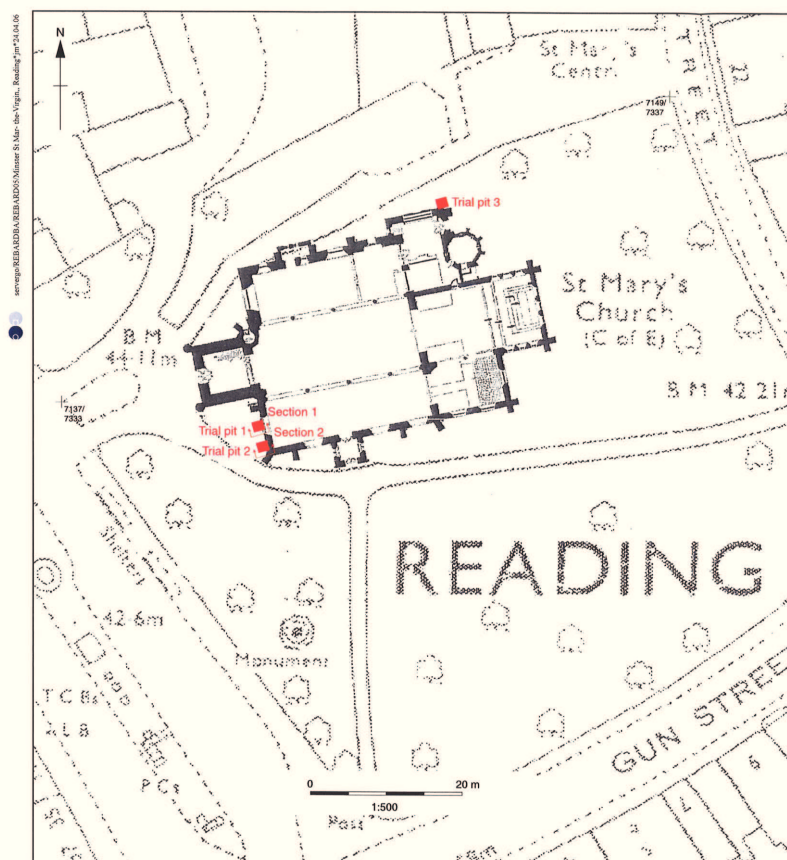


Figure 2: Site plan and sections 1 and 2



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