

# St Helen's Church Abingdon



## Archaeological Excavation and Watching Brief Report



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OXFORDSHIRE*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AND WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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## Summary

*Between the 13th October and 11th December 2003 and on 11th November 2004 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological investigation during work to install a new heating system, drainage, organ power supply and subsequent reflooring within the Church of St Helen's in Abingdon. The work was instructed by architects Maguire and Co. on behalf of the Church. The investigations demonstrated that the ground beneath the interior of the Church had been heavily disturbed by the insertion of post medieval graves and vaults and the subsequent extensive Victorian refurbishment of the church interior. The refurbishment during the Victorian period included a total reordering of the floor with the construction of aisle and nave walkways incorporating a heating system. The investigation uncovered the remains of the south wall of the church prior to the addition of an outer south aisle in 1539. Walling that may indicate the existence of a Chapel pre-dating the 1539 construction was noted below the present west wall of the vestry. A possible buried medieval soil was noted under the present north porch.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work (Figs 1 - 3)

- 1.1.1 St Helen's church lies at the junction of West and East St Helen's Street immediately to the east of the confluence of the River Ock with the Thames at NGR SU 4985 9708.
- 1.1.2 A reordering of the interior of the church has been approved. The first phase of this reordering included:
- creation of an altar platform in the nave
  - removal of all existing pews
  - installation of an underfloor heating system
  - installation of an access ramp from the north porch
  - repositioning the organ and installing a new air supply.
- 1.1.3 These operations required the removal of the existing nave and aisle floors to reduce the level by 0.2 m and the excavation of heating access chambers, a service run for a new air supply for the organ through the south porch into the outer south aisle and a heating duct from the north porch into the outer north aisle. The reduction of the floor took advantage of existing sub floor cavities within the nave and aisles but required the demolition of aisle walkways along the centre and edges of each aisle and around the edges of the nave.
- 1.1.4 Service trenches for the organ power supply, electricity, water and drainage were also to be excavated in the graveyard to the south of the church.



- 1.1.5 The reduction of the aisle walkways, excavation of the service trench through the south porch and into the nave for the organ air supply, excavation of the heating access chambers and heating duct from the north porch were carried out by OA and the excavations in the graveyard were subject to an archaeological watching brief. The work was carried out to a project specification written by the *Diocesan Archaeological Advisor* (Julian Munby).

## 1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The underlying geology consists of terrace gravels overlying Kimmeridge Clay. The church stands on level ground at 53 m OD with a slope to the River Thames 30 m to the south.

## 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The Church of St Helens has been the subject of a Desk Top Assessment (OAU 1999), the results of which are summarised below.
- 1.3.2 St Helen's church lies within the historic and prehistoric core of Abingdon. Excavation has shown that Abingdon has been relatively densely occupied for approximately 2600 years.
- 1.3.3 Flint tools of the early Mesolithic period have been found on the edge of the Thames on the north side of Andersey Island and from the new Abbey House.
- 1.3.4 Groupings of flints and several sherds of Peterborough Ware from the area of the Abbey House indicate early occupation from this date nearby. This appears to have continued into the later Neolithic period with flints and a fragment of grooved ware being recovered from excavations in the Vineyard. It has been suggested that fragments of human skeletal material recovered in a recent evaluation of the Vineyard area may also be Neolithic in origin (OA 2003). Burials and ceremonial monuments of this period on higher ground overlooking a valley are typical and have been identified on the periphery of Abingdon's built up area on Radley Road, Daisy Banks and Caldecotte Road.
- 1.3.5 The main focus of Bronze Age activity continued to be around the known Neolithic monuments, with the development of barrow cemeteries on the periphery of the modern town. Finds attributable to the Bronze Age have also been recovered from the centre of Abingdon at the Abbey Day Centre, the Vineyard and close to the church on East St Helen's street.
- 1.3.6 Permanent large-scale settlement within Abingdon begins during the Early Iron Age in the vicinity of the Abbey House and encroached southwestwards to the area of the church by the Middle Iron Age. A number of features of this date have been recorded on both West and East St Helen's street. By the Late Iron Age Abingdon was a thriving community enclosed by defensive ditches. A masonry building dating to before AD120 was excavated on East St Helen's street.

- 1.3.7 Occupation of the area continued throughout the Roman period though areas within the Iron Age town had fallen out of use by the end of the period indicating a possible decline
- 1.3.8 Roman occupation in the town's core was succeeded by an early Saxon settlement indicated by the presence of 5th century sunken featured buildings and Saxon pottery from sites under the Abbey House and Old Gaol. Sherds of Saxon grass tempered pottery were recovered from East St Helen's street.
- 1.3.9 Occupation within Abingdon continued throughout the Saxon period and was associated with a possible royal hunting lodge on Andersey Island. Monastic foundations are often associated with the location of royal residences. It has been suggested that the presence of a slipway immediately to the southeast of the present church may indicate the presence of an ancient ford over the Thames that would have led to a focus of activity in the immediate vicinity prior to the construction of the bridge and subsequent movement of the town focus to its present location by the abbey gates.
- 1.3.10 The church of St Helen is located in the southwest corner of the late Saxon town. Monastic chroniclers make the unusual admission that St Helen's pre-dates the foundation of the Abbey, known to have been founded in AD 675 by Hean. St Helen's is said to have been founded as a nunnery by Hean's sister Cilla. St Helen is recognised as an early British saint who had a part in the discovery of the True Cross and as the mother of Constantine the Great. It is thought that she was born in either York or Colchester.
- 1.3.11 A church certainly stood on the present site by AD 995 when the Abbey chronicle records the sanctuary of a felon. By the time the parochial system was introduced St Helen's had an extensive parish encompassing the later chapelries of Radley, Drayton, Shippon and Dry Sandford. This extensive parish suggests that Great St Helen's was a primary parish and minster church with a separate jurisdiction from the Abbey which only possessed the advowson and only appropriated the rectory in AD 1261. The only matter that St Helen's deferred to the Abbey over during the post-conquest period was that of burial rights. All townsmen continued to be buried in the abbey cemetery until the 16th century. A short hiatus apparently occurred in the mid 14th century, possibly in response to the black death. It is possible that burials pre-dating the appropriation of the burial rights by the Abbey exist close to the present church, possibly under the almshouses to the west that are built on church land.
- 1.3.12 No structural evidence for a pre-conquest church has been recorded on the site of St Helen's. If there was an early church on the site it would probably have stood in the location of the present outer north aisle. The Church was rebuilt in the 13th century and the tower and some features of the east wall are of this date. Further rebuilding took place in the 14th and 15th centuries and the structures visible in the northern four aisles date mainly to this period. The 13th and 14th century construction within the north aisle are of thin coursed limestone rubble, the later additions are of large



ashlar masonry. The southernmost aisle and the south porch were added in the 16th century, a memorial plaque above the south door gives the date 1539, the year of a benefaction by Katherine Audlett of Barton. At this point the Abbey church was being demolished, following its dissolution, and it is feasible that stone from this was used in the construction of the new aisle.

- 1.3.13 The topography of this part of Abingdon suggests that some terracing may have been necessary when the church was extended to the south. Refurbishment in the 19th century caused below ground disturbance with the placement of heating ducts, organ power, drainage and a replacement of the original flooring. The font was moved to its present location by the north door at this point. Recent observations have found cavities below the pew platforms.
- 1.3.14 As St Helen's is an important foundation within Abingdon it was considered likely that there would be a significant number of post 16th century burials below the 19th century flooring and in the graveyard. The excavation for graves and vaults would have severely disturbed pre-existing structures and archaeological deposits but it was considered possible that significant deposits could have survived in localised areas. Large masonry structures associated with earlier phases of the church, especially where walls were replaced by open arcades, were considered likely to have survived at least in part.
- 1.3.15 Overall, the archaeological potential of the church footprint was considered to be very high for evidence of later prehistoric and Roman settlement of Abingdon, for the Saxon monastic or minster church and for information regarding the chronology of development for the present church structure.

## 2 EXCAVATION AIMS

- 2.1.1 The aims of the investigation were to determine the character and survival of any remains of the earlier medieval phases of the church inside the present church (including walls floors and graves) and to establish the location, extent, date, character, and state of preservation of any earlier archaeological remains surviving on the site.
- 2.1.2 The presence of burial vaults and post-medieval building activities within the church were to be generally observed and recorded.
- 2.1.3 Features and graves revealed during the excavation of service trenches outside the church were to be recorded.
- 2.1.4 Attention was to be given to remains of all periods. This was to include evidence for past environments, with provision for environmental sampling included.
- 2.1.5 The investigation would seek to clarify the nature and extent of any modern disturbance and intrusion on the site.



- 2.1.6 The results of the investigation were to be made available in the form of a written report.

### **3 EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Fieldwork methods and recording**

- 3.1.1 Upon removal of the existing floor to expose the underlying scree the scree was brushed and hoovered clean and inspected for evidence of underlying voids indicative of vaults and graves and evidence for earlier walling associated with the present arcades.
- 3.1.2 The Victorian walkways in the centre of each aisle and around the edge of the nave were removed with hand tools to the level of the Victorian scree. Prior to this the sleeper walls and heating units with their flues were generally recorded.
- 3.1.3 Sub tile make up and ballast were removed along the eastern side of the nave using a drill to break the sub tile concrete and hand tools to remove the ballast.
- 3.1.4 The reduction in level for the heating access chambers, organ power and heating supply were excavated with hand tools, exposed vaults, graves and features associated with the early fabric of the church were recorded.
- 3.1.5 Plans were drawn of the reduced areas, excavated service trenches and features of archaeological significance at either 1:50 or 1:20 and tied into the base plan of the church provided by the architects. Sections and elevations were drawn at 1:10 where appropriate. Photographs were taken, both B/W and colour slide, of the works in progress and major features. Ledger inscriptions where visible on re-used stones were copied. Levels were taken for plans, sections and elevations and tied into the ordnance datum.
- 3.1.6 Archaeological features, deposits and structures were issued a unique context number. All recording was undertaken according to the OA fieldwork manual (OAU 1992).

#### **3.2 Finds**

- 3.2.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context.
- 3.2.2 Human remains, where found, were retained within the church for reburial

#### **3.3 Palaeo-environmental evidence**

- 3.3.1 No deposits were encountered that would have produced any environmental data.

### 3.4 Presentation of results

- 3.4.1 A general description of the features, structures, vaults and graves will be given. This is followed by descriptions of finds and a discussion of the results. Details of individual contexts are given in Appendix 1.

## 4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

### 4.1 The Victorian aisle walkways and scree (Figs. 4 and 5)

- 4.1.1 The scree (45) was fairly uniform in thickness where this was exposed and had been laid across the interior of the church and voids for graves and vaults which had been backfilled with soil. This backfill had since settled within graves 60, 61, 62, 63 and 64 leaving the scree unsupported over voids up to 0.5 m deep.
- 4.1.2 A representative section of a walkway was excavated in the location of one of the new heating chamber inserts in the south aisle.
- 4.1.3 The aisle walkways and the walkways to the south and the north of the nave all had a similar construction incorporating elements of a heating system (02). The walkways were supported from under the scree level by brick sleeper walls (04 and 10) that continued for two courses above the scree. The flues (01) were of brick construction running along the centre of the walkways and were also floored in brick, how this was supported was not apparent at the impact level. The space between the sleeper walls and the flues was filled in for the most part with topsoil (05) from which some human charnel was recovered suggesting that this material was re-deposited from under the floor or from the graveyard. The flues were filled with an ashy material (07) and sealed by modern cement (03 and 09). On the west side of the church interior a significant amount of tile and stone rubble (72) was incorporated into the infill. The walkways were sealed by a layer of stone rubble in cement prior to the placement of floor tiles.
- 4.1.4 The reduction of the eastern walkway in front of the lady chapel, altar rail and vestry showed the Victorian floor tiles to be laid over a layer of rubble (54) consisting for the most part of broken limestone. This rubble extended westwards (43) to the location of the trench excavated for the new organ air supply. Fragments of worked and decorative stone were recovered from this material. Ceramic drainpipes had been placed under the rubble 54 feeding into each of the screed areas of the nave and aisles. No cut was apparent for these, suggesting they were placed and the rubble then laid over. This indicates that the rubble material was probably deposited as part of the Victorian refurbishment. This is further demonstrated in the section of the trench excavated for the new organ air supply where the rubble 43 overlies a soil (44), that contained a sherd of 19th century white earthenware, and overlay the brick graves and vaults (66, 67, 68 and 69) within the trench.



## 4.2 The Victorian heating system (Figs. 4 - 6)

- 4.2.1 The remains of the Victorian heating system were exposed during the course of the excavation. The heating system consisted of five heating units connected to a flue system that ran along the length of three of the aisle walkways and the walkways at the north and south end of the nave. The flue system combined into one in the western walkway and fed into a chimney to the south of the inner west door. An iron hatch set into the wall gives access to the chimney. One heating unit (02) was recorded in plan and photographed as an example.
- 4.2.2 All five units were orientated east-west with a bricked fuel bunker to the east. The fuel bunkers had a concrete and brick roof reinforced with cast iron ties in mid-section and reused ledger stones laid inverted to each side. A coke hatch was placed at the east end of the bunkers. Access was open to the fire plate with a 3 rung iron ladder to the south. The fire plate was constructed in a brick crosswall and formed part of the main firebox. The fire box had two hatches, one above the other, for fuel and ash. The manufacturers, *J. Grundy's, patent, London and Tyldesley* were named on the doors. The fire box was of cast iron with heating vanes and was in two parts, the top could be removed. The firebox connected through another brick crosswall into a vaned cast iron pipe in two sections joined at a flanged collar. The pipe fed into the flue system through another brick crosswall. A hatch gave access to the beginning of the bricked flue (01). The firebox and heating pipe lay within a brick construction that was unroofed and no doubt used to be covered by iron grills. The fire box and heating pipe probably represented the primary heating element of the system. The voids to either side of the firebox would have provided air circulation around the fire box.
- 4.2.3 The bricked flues (01) had been backfilled with rubble and sealed by concrete. The presence of galvanised steel mesh as a reinforcement for this concrete and fragments of newspaper and sweet wrapper in the flue fills indicated that the flues were filled in and sealed in the 1970's - 80's. It is possible that before the heating system fell out of use the flues acted as a secondary heating element under the walkway tiles.

## 4.3 Re-used ledger stones (Figs.4 and 7)

- 4.3.1 Ten re-used ledger stones (14 - 23) were incorporated into the five Victorian heating units as roofing for the fuel bunkers. In each case they had been inverted. Five of the ledger stones (14, 16, 18, 21 and 22) still had traces of an inscription. Ledger stone 15 had an angel motif carved into its top but bore no associated inscription. Ledger stones 17, 19, 20 and 23 bore no decoration or inscription.
- 4.3.2 The ledgers were as follows:
- 14. Length 1.13 m, width 0.71 m exposed, thickness 0.085 m. Cut from limestone with cherub motifs in top corners and partly legible inscription.



- 15. Length 1.37 m, width 0.66 m, thickness 0.075 m. Cut from limestone with angel motif at top but no inscription.
- 16. Length 1.18 m, width 0.65 m exposed, thickness 0.09 m. Cut from limestone with half an inscription partly legible.
- 17. Length 1.36 m, width 0.65 m exposed, thickness 0.10 m. Cut from limestone no visible decoration or inscription.
- 18. Length 1.15 m, width 0.64 m exposed, thickness 0.06 m. Cut from limestone with a partly legible inscription
- 19. Length 1.04 m, width 0.68 m exposed, thickness 0.07 m. Cut from limestone with no visible decoration or inscription.
- 20. Length 1.54 m, width 0.68 m, thickness 0.1 m. Cut from limestone with no visible decoration or inscription.
- 21 Length 1.34 m, width 0.67 m exposed, thickness 0.07 m. Cut from limestone with inscription partly legible.
- 22. Length 1.39 m, width 0.66 m exposed, thickness 0.06 m. Cut from limestone with half a partly legible inscription.
- 23. Length 1.37 m, width 0.66 m exposed, thickness 0.08 m. Cut from limestone with no visible decoration or inscription.

#### 4.4 Exposed vaults and graves (Figs. 4 and 8)

- 4.4.1 Five brick, vaulted graves (65, 66, 67, 68 and 69) and five brick graves (60, 61, 62, 63 and 64), were identified in the course of the investigation. The vaulted graves were all located running across the trench excavated for the new organ power supply leading to the present south porch.
- 4.4.2 Vault 65 was immediately inside the south porch outer door and was identified by its arched bricked roof that rested against the walling below the outer door of the south porch.
- 4.4.3 Vault 66 lay just inside the south porch inner door. This vault had an arched brick roof which was butted against the porch wall (55).
- 4.4.4 Three vaulted graves (67, 68 and 69) lay immediately to the south of the remnant medieval walling of the outer south aisle arcade. These vaults appeared to be single graves constructed of brick with rider walls extending above the arched brick roofing to support a floor above.
- 4.4.5 Three graves (60, 61 and 62) were identified in the southeast corner of the outer south aisle where the scree had collapsed into the underlying graves. These graves appeared to have no roof and had been backfilled prior to the addition of the scree.

This backfill has since settled to form a void under the scree. No burials were visible within the graves. Grave 60 in the extreme southeast of the outer south aisle was a double grave.

- 4.4.6 A grave (64) was identified during the reduction of the outer south aisle walkway below the insertion of the heating chamber. The grave was only apparent through a hole in the base of the heating chamber pit. No structure could be ascertained for the grave but a lead coffin was visible covered by backfill that had settled under the scree.
- 4.4.7 A grave (63) was identified in the outer north aisle where the scree had collapsed into the underlying void against the northernmost aisle walkway. The grave was bricked and roofless and had been infilled prior to the addition of the scree. The infill has since settled creating a void under the scree.

#### 4.5 Medieval features (Figs. 4 and 8 - 13)

##### *The South Aisle wall (Figs. 4, 8 and 9)*

- 4.5.1 A length of limestone walling (13) was revealed running for 6.0 m along the line of the northern arcade of the outer south aisle. The walling was partly obscured by overlying scree and the placement of the arcade pillars, subsequent Victorian underpinning and consolidation with concrete. An insert (39) had been placed into the walling in the location of the trench excavated for the new organ power supply.
- 4.5.2 The walling was best preserved in the location of the trench excavated for the new organ power supply and was investigated to the impact depth of 0.5 m at this point. Three components to the walling were identified. The wall fabric (13) was 0.50 m thick and was constructed of roughly hewn limestone blocks set in a matrix of mortar. This walling was abutted by a 1.20 m length of infill of rough limestone blocks (39) 0.25 m wide resting on a cambered infilling of limestone rubble (56) 0.50 m wide. The walling (13) was not keyed into this infill.
- 4.5.3 The infilled section of walling aligns directly with the present south door of the church and suggests a doorway may have existed at this point in the pre-1539 south wall.
- 4.5.4 The pillars of the northern arcade of the outer south aisle post-dated this wall. Pillar 50 overlay a stub of limestone construction (51) obscured by scree that extended 0.60 m to the south of the wall line. This feature may be the remnant of an original exterior buttress for the pre-1539 south wall of the church.
- 4.5.5 Two shallow slots (47 and 48) had been inserted into the mortar at the base of pillars 36 and 50 suggesting a beam passed between the two pillars over the wall infill (39) at this point.
- 4.5.6 The remnant walling was noticeably more ephemeral and thinner to the west of pillar 50 and heavily obscured by overlying scree.



***Possible Chapel wall (Figs. 4 and 10)***

- 4.5.7 The remnant of a wall (24) was observed underlying the present west wall of the vestry where the church floor was reduced between the ledger stones laid against the vestry wall. The walling 24 extended 0.40 m on an east-west alignment into the outer south aisle and had been demolished at this point prior to the building of the present vestry.
- 4.5.8 This wall was 0.85 m wide and was made up of roughly hewn limestone blocks set in mortar with ashlar facing on the exterior. A piece of worked stone (28) was placed within the southern face of the wall. This stone was a fine limestone block 0.20 m in height, width and depth with a sloping recess cut into its western face 0.10 m high, 0.15 m wide and 0.05 m in depth (see detail on Fig. 10). This block may potentially have been the chamfered base of a buttress, suggesting that this wall was an original exterior wall.
- 4.5.9 This may have been the south wall of a small chapel, or an earlier vestry; however, it is also possible that it was linked to the medieval aisle wall previously described. Those foundations did not continue into the easternmost bay of the aisle, and it was noted that the existing eastern bay of the aisle arcade has a different moulded capital from that used in the bays further west. Thus there could have been a three-bay chapel or vestry projecting southwards from the earlier aisle, prior to the construction of the vestry and new south aisle in the 16th century.
- 4.5.10 Fragments of possibly monumental masonry, stone window tracery and two masonry stencils were recovered from the limestone rubble 43 in the vicinity of the remnant wall.

***The North Porch (Fig. 11)***

- 4.5.11 A pit, 0.70 m in depth, was excavated in the north porch for the placement of the new heating supply. The lowest horizon visible in the pit was a buried humic material (35) from which ten sherds of medieval Abingdon ware and a single Romano British potsherd were recovered. Above this was a layer of yellowish brown silty sand (34) that lay under the present rubble and plaster ballast (33) for the porch floor.

***The South Porch (Figs 8 and 12)***

- 4.5.12 The walling (55) under the outer south door was recorded prior to its removal to accommodate the new organ power supply inserted through it. The visible walling (55) comprised seven even courses of Limestone Ashlar facing set in a fine mortar with lime stone rubble infill. The single stone of the outer porch step was laid above the top most course. A brick vault (65) was later inserted against the internal face of the porch walling (55). This vault comprised a half arch of brick 0.70 m wide butted against the wall (55).



#### 4.6 The watching brief (Figs. 2 and 3)

##### *The service trenches (Fig. 2)*

- 4.6.1 Four trenches (29, 30, 70 and 71) were excavated in the church yard to the south of the church. Trench 30 was for the organ power supply and ran around the west and north walls of the pump house to the south porch. Trench 30 was excavated for drainage against the south wall of the church. Two trenches (70 and 71) were excavated for water supply and gas to the south east of the south porch.
- 4.6.2 All the trenches impacted into a topsoil up to 1.0 m in depth. No archaeological features or graves were noted within the trenches. The area of Trenches 29, 70 and 71 had been previously disturbed by tree roots and the placement of services. Disturbed human charnel and a sherd of Romano British pottery were noted within the trenches and on the spoil tips. The disturbed human remains was kept within the church for reburial.

##### *The Organ pit (Fig. 3)*

- 4.6.3 A square pit was excavated at the eastern extent of the previously excavated organ pipe trench. This pit was 2.50 m square and 0.45 m deep. No structural features were identified. The pit was cut into limestone rubble and earth backfill (44) which was overlain by concrete into which the modern floor tiling was bonded.

### 5 THE FINDS

#### 5.1 Pottery: Paul Blinkhorn

- 5.1.1 The pottery assemblage comprised 18 sherds with a total weight of 353g. The bulk of the assemblage is of medieval date, although four sherds (74g) of redeposited Romano-British wares were also present.
- 5.1.2 The pottery was recorded utilising the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows:
- 5.1.3 OXAG: Abingdon ware, mid-late 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century. 13 sherds, 270g.
- 5.1.4 WHEW: Mass-produced white earthenwares, mid 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century. 1 sherd, 9g.
- 5.1.5 The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

5.2 Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

	RB		OXAG		WHEW		
Context	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	Date
N. Aisle	1	32					U/S
Graveyard	1	10					U/S
35	1	4	10	117			L11th C
44	1	28	1	33	1	9	19thC
54			2	120			L11th C
Total	4	74	13	270	1	9	

### 5.3 Worked stone

- 5.3.1 Fragments of masonry were recovered during the course of the investigation from the make up rubble (43) underlying walkways in the southwest corner of the church. One piece was a fragment of rounded window tracery. A second piece was decorative and may once have been part of a tomb or altar. Both these fragments came from material that could represent demolition of the possible vestry or chapel represented by the surviving wall stub 24. The rubble however overlay a soil material (44), containing 19th century white earthenware, sealing underlying post medieval vaults and graves. None of the masonry pieces was diagnostic and could not be assigned a date less approximate than medieval.

### 5.4 Masonry stencils

- 5.4.1 Two lead alloy masonry stencils were recovered from the limestone rubble (43) under walkways in the south-east corner of the church. These can possibly be associated with the 1539 construction phase but are otherwise undiagnostic.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

### 6.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 6.1.1 The archaeological investigation showed that the interior of St Helen's Church has been significantly disturbed by post medieval re-ordering, notably in the Victorian refurbishment. The surviving pre-1539 fabric of the church could be recognised where it was not obscured by the extensive Victorian scree and underpinning but the requirements of the investigation only permitted excavation to the top of the scree level. It is still possible that further features and deposits relating to the medieval church constructions and earlier remains are hidden below this level.



## 6.2 Overall interpretation

- 6.2.1 The remnant walling in the north arcade of the outer south aisle continues in line with the existing north wall of the vestry. The presence of a possible buttress base 51 suggests that this was an exterior wall pre dating the 1539 extension of the south aisle. If this is the case the present north wall of the vestry may be part of the 15th century phase. The surviving wall fragments along the north arcade of the outer south aisle are only 0.50 m in width, somewhat less than the 0.70 m thickness of the vestry walls. No ashlar was noted to be facing the remnant wall and it is possible that the difference in thickness is due to the removal of any ashlar facing for re use in the new build of 1539.
- 6.2.2 The insert in alignment with the present south door is of note. The surviving walling (13) definitely terminates to both sides of the infill (39 and 56). It is likely that a door existed at this point in the 15th century phase and it is possible that the ground was raised to the south of the church prior to the 1539 construction of the present outer south aisle. The insert into the wall at this point may therefore represent a temporary raising of the porch step associated with the raising of the ground level as preparation for the 1539 construction of the outer south aisle. Alternatively it may represent a blocking of the doorway prior to the 1539 extension.
- 6.2.3 The fragment of walling 24 below the present west wall of the vestry does not continue any of the present walls. The west wall of the present vestry is clearly carried over this stub of walling which extended to the west before its demolition. The presence of a probable buttress chamfer 28 incorporated into this walling suggests that this was an exterior wall, possibly representing the southern extent of the 15th century vestry or the existence of a Chapel prior to the 1539 construction. This is supported by the retrieval of carved masonry, including possible tomb or altar decoration from the rubble (43) immediately to the west of the wall stub. It is worth noting here that, if this structure extended west for only one bay, there is a change in the south arcade at this point, with the capitals of the final (eastward) bay being carved in a different style from those in all the bays further west.
- 6.2.4 The rubble (43) in the southeast corner of the reduced area is of note as carved masonry and masonry stencils were recovered from this material. The rubble overlay a soil horizon (44), containing 19th century white earthenware, that sealed underlying vaults. It is possible that the remains of wall 24, underneath the present west wall of the vestry, extended further westwards before the Victorian refurbishment and was fully removed at this point to facilitate the re-ordering of the floor within the church interior. The rubble 43 could be derived from this demolition.
- 6.2.5 The pit excavated in the north porch revealed a buried soil horizon (35) that contained ten fragments of medieval pottery dating to the 11th - 13th centuries and a single sherd of Romano British pottery. This material was sealed by a sandy subsoil material (34). The soil horizon 35 could represent an original ground surface of medieval date pre-dating the 15th century construction of the north porch.



- 6.2.6 The investigation clearly demonstrated that the interior of the church has been significantly disturbed by the placement of post medieval graves and vaults. Further disturbance to the underlying deposits was associated with the Victorian refurbishment, though this appears to be confined to levels above earlier post medieval disturbance. The ledger stones incorporated into the heating systems were probably original memorials within the church re used for their present purpose. The survival of the two medieval wall remnants (13 and 24) in the outer south aisle and a probable buried medieval soil (35) in the north porch suggest that archaeological features and deposits relating to earlier phases of the church (and before) could still survive, in part, under the present church.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
001	Structure	Flue		Victorian
002	Structure	Heater		Victorian
003	Layer	Floor		Victorian
004	Structure	Wall		Victorian
005	Deposit	Backfill		Victorian
006	Deposit	Ash in Flue		Modern
007	Deposit	Backfill		Late C 20th
008	Layer	Mortar		Late C. 20th
009	Layer	Mortar		Late C 20th
010	Structure	Wall		Victorian
011	Cut	Cut for 001		Victorian
012	Layer	Topsoil		Victorian
013	Structure	Wall		C.15th
014	Masonry	Ledger Stone		1771 - 1777
015	Masonry	Ledger Stone		C.18th?
016	Masonry	Ledger Stone		Early C.19th?
017	Masonry	Ledger Stone		C.18th?
018	Masonry	Ledger Stone		1793
019	Masonry	Ledger Stone		C.18th?
020	Masonry	Ledger Stone		C.18th?
021	Masonry	Ledger Stone		1797
022	Masonry	Ledger Stone		Early C.18th?
023	Masonry	Ledger Stone		C.18th?
024	Structure	Wall		C.15th
025	Layer	Topsoil		Modern
026	Sondage			Part of Works
027	Structure	Buttress Base?		C.15th
028	Masonry	Buttress Chamfer?		C.15th
029	Trench	Watching Brief		Modern
030	Trench	Watching Brief		Modern
031	Layer	Scree Floor		Victorian
032	Structure	Wall		Victorian
033	Structure	N.Porch Floor		Victorian
034	Deposit	Buried Soil		
035	Deposit	Buried Soil	Pottery	Medieval
036	Structure	Pillar		Tudor
037	Structure	Pillar		Tudor
038	Structure	Pillar		Tudor
039	Structure	Wall Insert		Tudor?
040	Layer	Rubble		Post Medieval



041	Structure	S. Porch Step		Victorian?
042	Layer	Make Up		Victorian
043	Layer	Rubble	Worked Limestone, Masonry Stencils	Victorian
044	Layer	Backfill	Pottery	Victorian
045	Layer	Scree Floor		Victorian
046	Layer	Backfill		Victorian
047	Structure	Cill Slot		
048	Structure	Cill Slot		
049	Structure	Pillar		Tudor
050	Structure	Pillar Base		Tudor
051	Structure	Buttress Base?		Medieval
052	Structure	N.Porch Step		
053	Layer	Backfill		Victorian
054	Layer	Rubble	Pottery, Worked Limestone	Victorian
055	Structure	S.Porch Footing		Tudor
056	Structure	Wall Insert		Tudor?
057	Cut	Service		Modern
058	Void			
059	Structure	Stone facing to 24		C. 15th
060	Void	Double Grave		C. 17th-19th
061	Void	Grave		C. 17th-19th
062	Void	Grave		C.17th-19th
063	Void	Grave		C.17th-19th
064	Void	Grave	Lead Coffin	C.17th-19th
065	Structure	Burial Vault		C.17th-19th
066	Structure	Burial Vault (Double)		C.17th-19th
067	Structure	Bricked Grave		C.17th-19th
068	Structure	Bricked Grave		C.17th-19th
069	Structure	Bricked Grave		C.17th-19th
070	Trench	Watching Brief		Modern
071	Trench	Watching Brief		Modern

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- IFA, 1992 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations*  
Mellor, M. 1984 *Oxford Pottery: A Synthesis of middle and late Saxon, medieval and early post medieval pottery in the Oxford region*. Oxonensia 49 (17 - 217)  
OAU, 1992 *Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D. Wilkinson)  
OAU, 1999 *St Helen's Church Abingdon. Archaeological Appraisal of proposed Re-ordering*  
OA 2003 *An archaeological evaluation of the Penlon Site, Vineyards, Abingdon* (Unpublished client report)

### APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

**Site name:** St Helen's Church, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

**Site code:** ABSTH 03

**Grid reference:** SU 496 698

**Type of excavation:** Recording of refurbishment works within the church of St Helen's Abingdon and watching brief on excavation of service trenches to the south of the church.

**Date and duration of project:** 13/10/2003 - 11/12/2003 and 4/11/2004 - /11/2004

**Summary of results:** Identification of an original south wall of the church and possible vestry or Lady Chapel dating to the 15th century and a possible buried medieval soil under the north porch..

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service.



**St HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON**  
**Berkshire**

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AND WATCHING BRIEF REPORT***

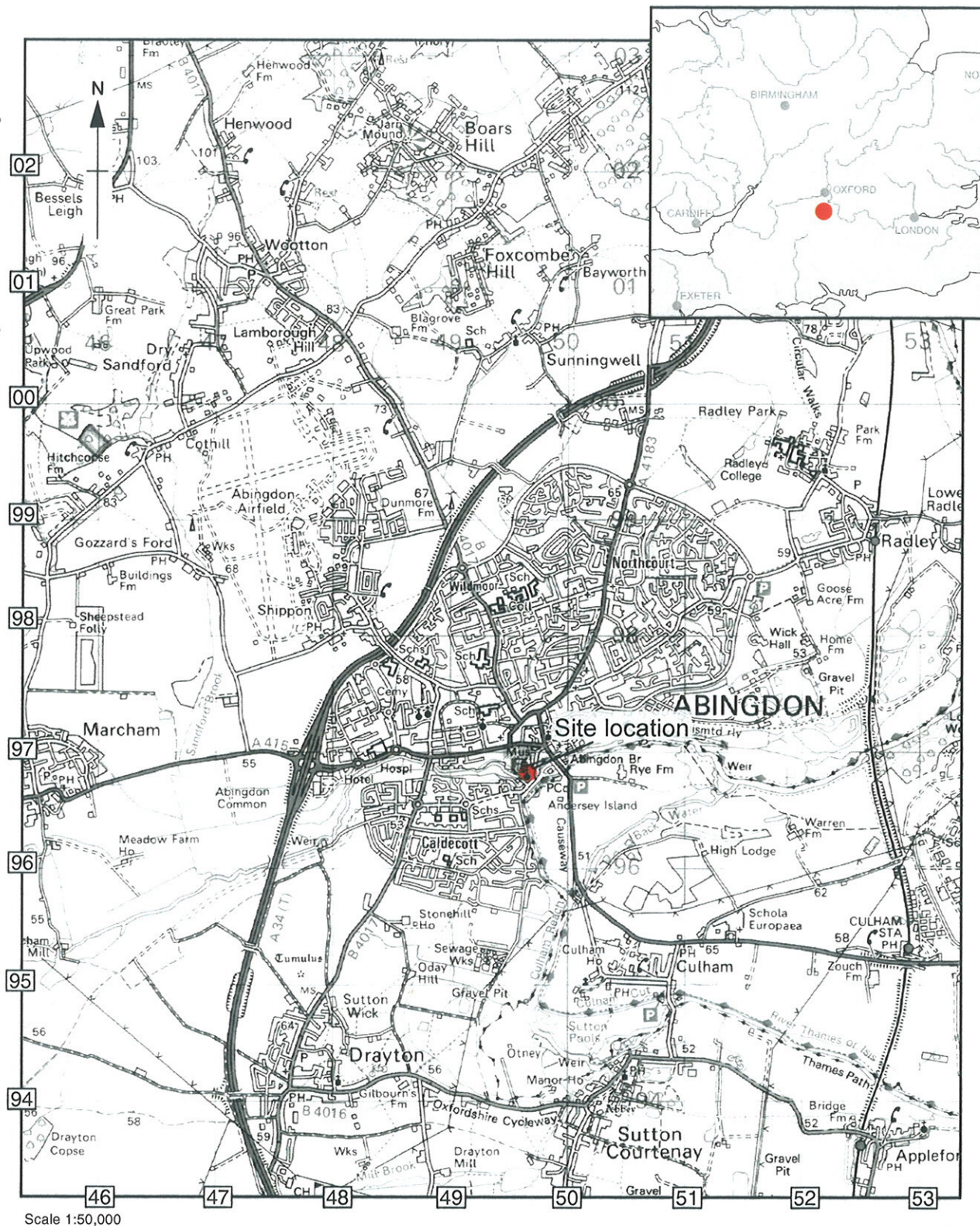
***Addendum to Archaeological Report***

This note clarifies the description of the worked stone (28) given in the report §4.5.8 and illustrated in Fig. 10, Section 2 (and inset). With the lack of any surviving photograph of this feature, there has been some confusion about the actual character and significance of the stone.

It seems unlikely that the stone can have been part of a plinth or buttress base in its present position. It has a sloping face but is not splayed (as correctly shown on Section 2). The left-hand (north side) 'jamb' apparently has two chamfers: a larger one on the north side and a smaller one on the south side (which does not taper as implied by Fig. 10 inset). Thus it is likely to be an *ex situ* window jamb of some kind, with a sloping sill and a chamfered jamb (the larger outer chamfer is more likely to have been a break rather than a deliberate cut); however it cannot function in its present position and orientation. This means that it must be re-used and has no special relevance for the architectural character of the wall into which it is built.

The item was drawn and photographed *in situ* and was not removed in the course of the works. By misfortune the photographic record of this area was faulty and so the stone cannot be further illustrated.

Julian Munby  
*Diocesan Archaeological Advisor*



Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location





Figure 2: Location of service trenches excavated in the graveyard

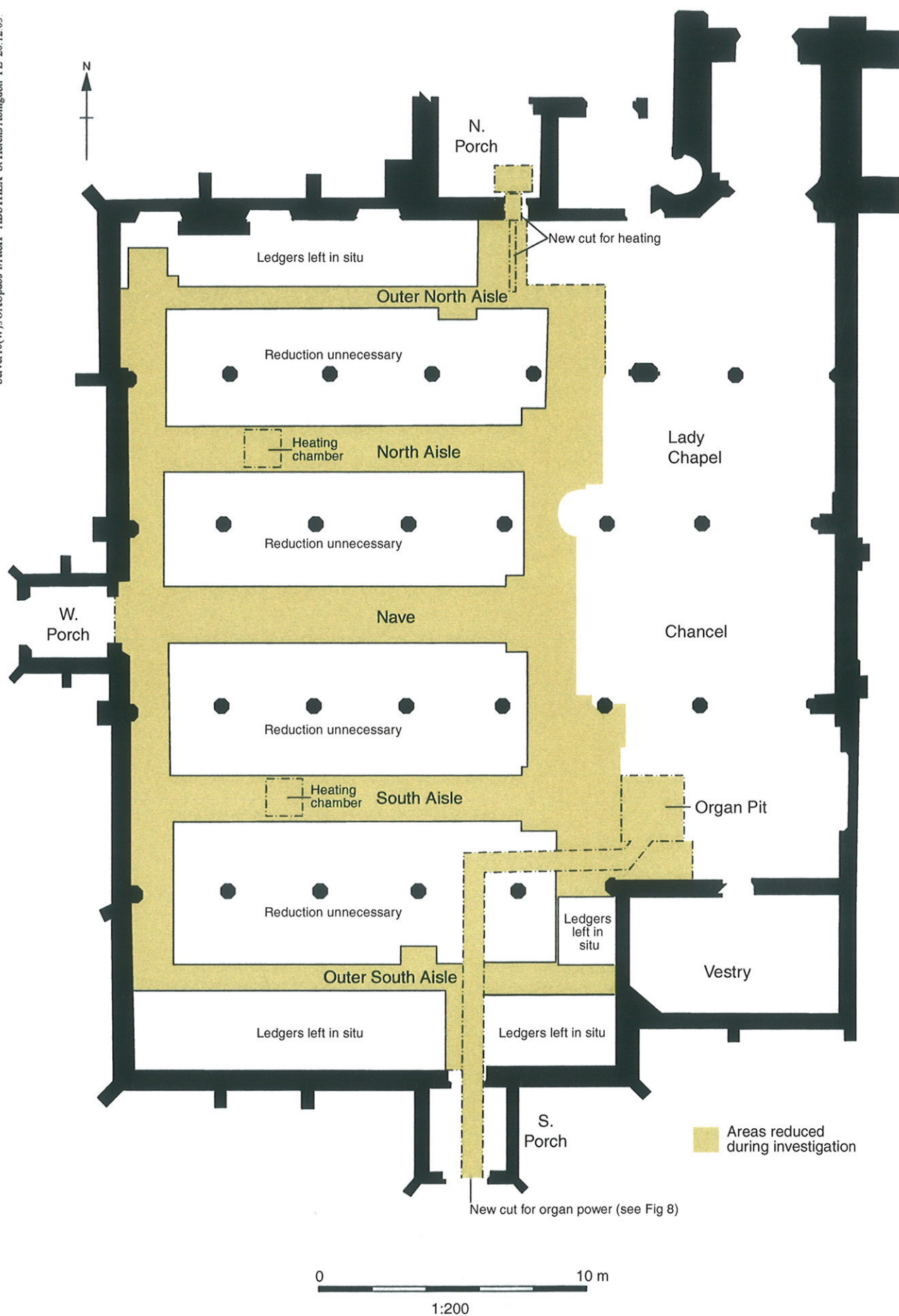


Figure 3: Plan of reduced areas & areas requiring excavation



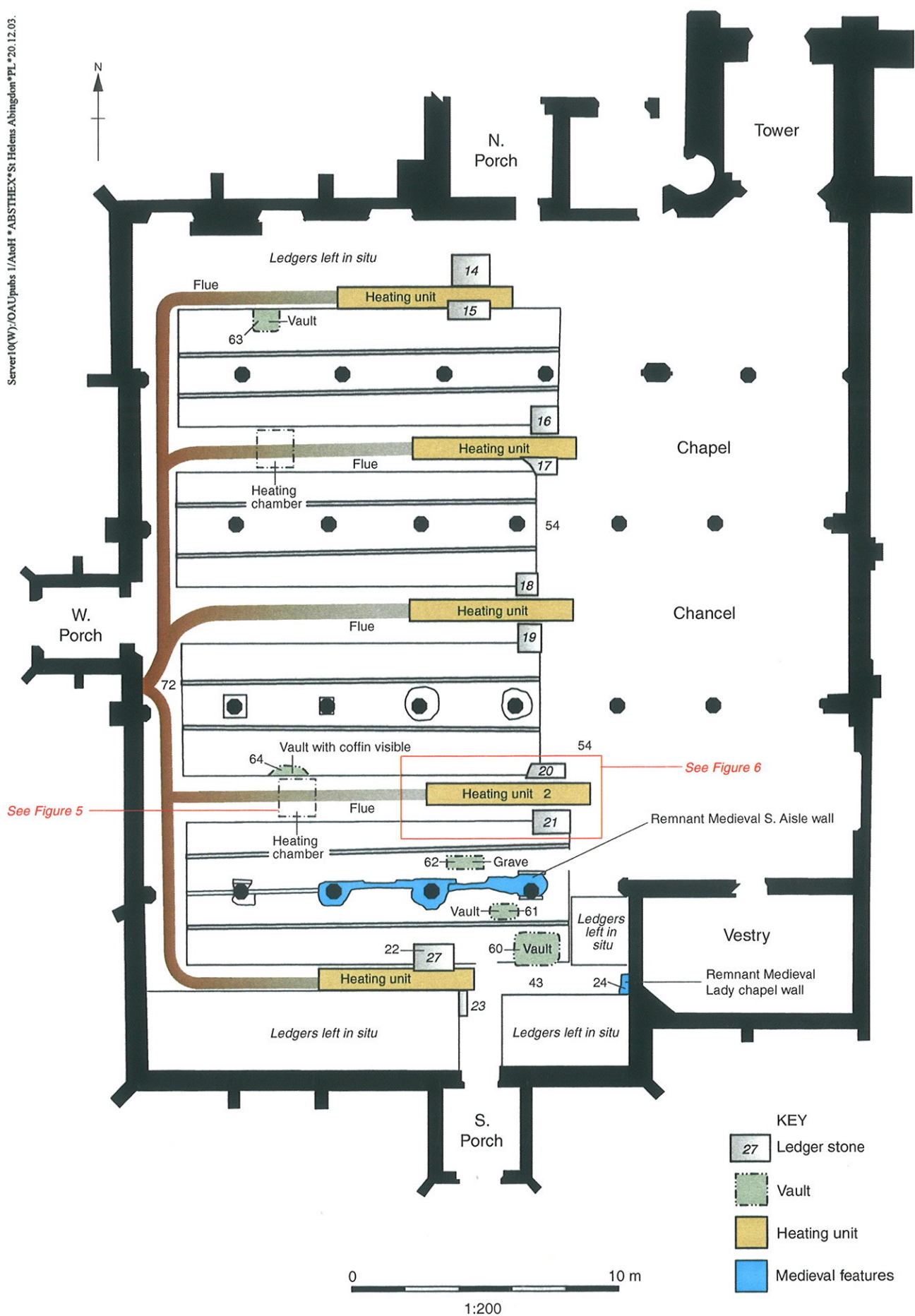


Figure 4: Plan of Victorian features, reused ledger stones and located graves & Medieval walls

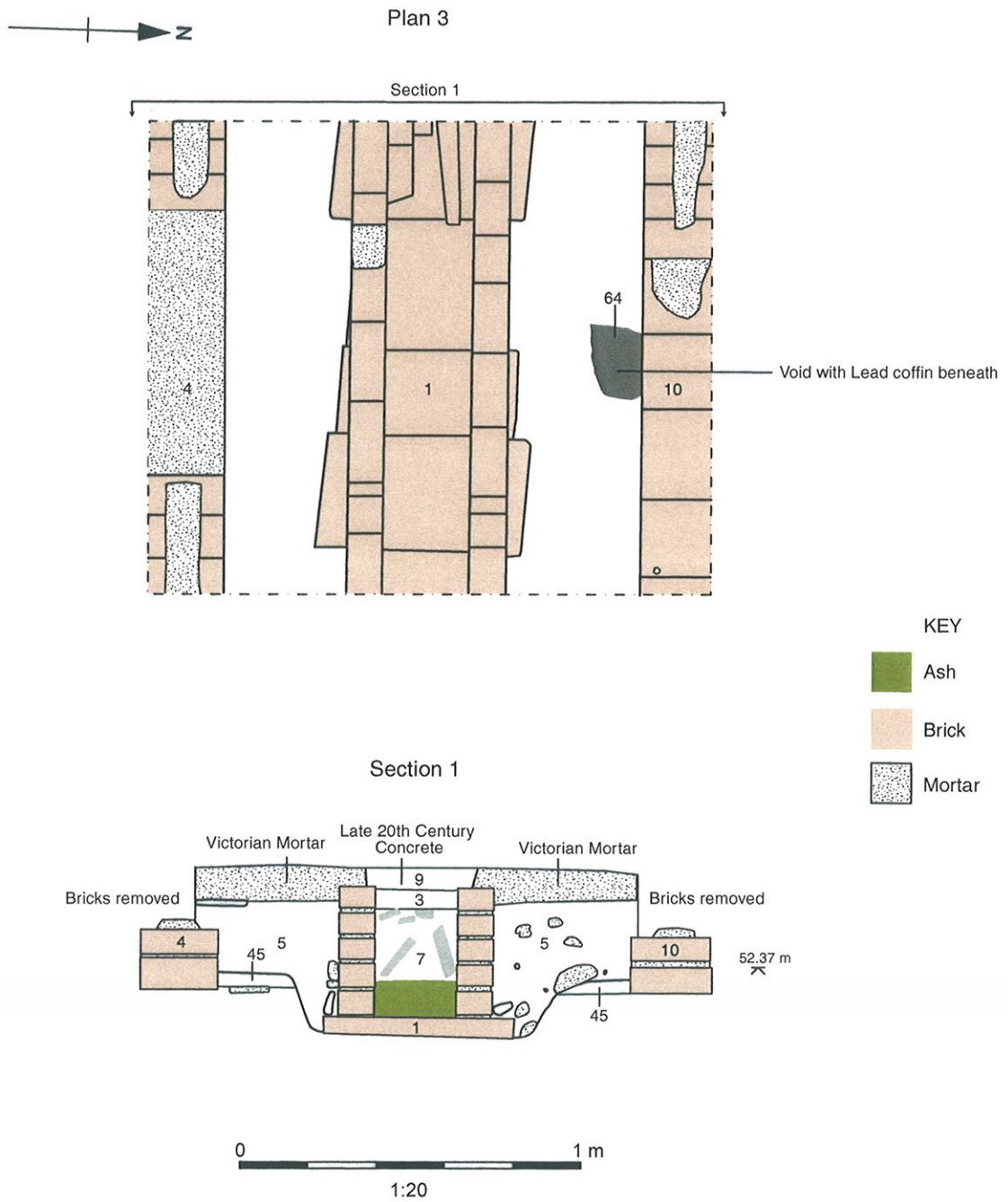


Figure 5: Plan and section of Victorian walkway and flue



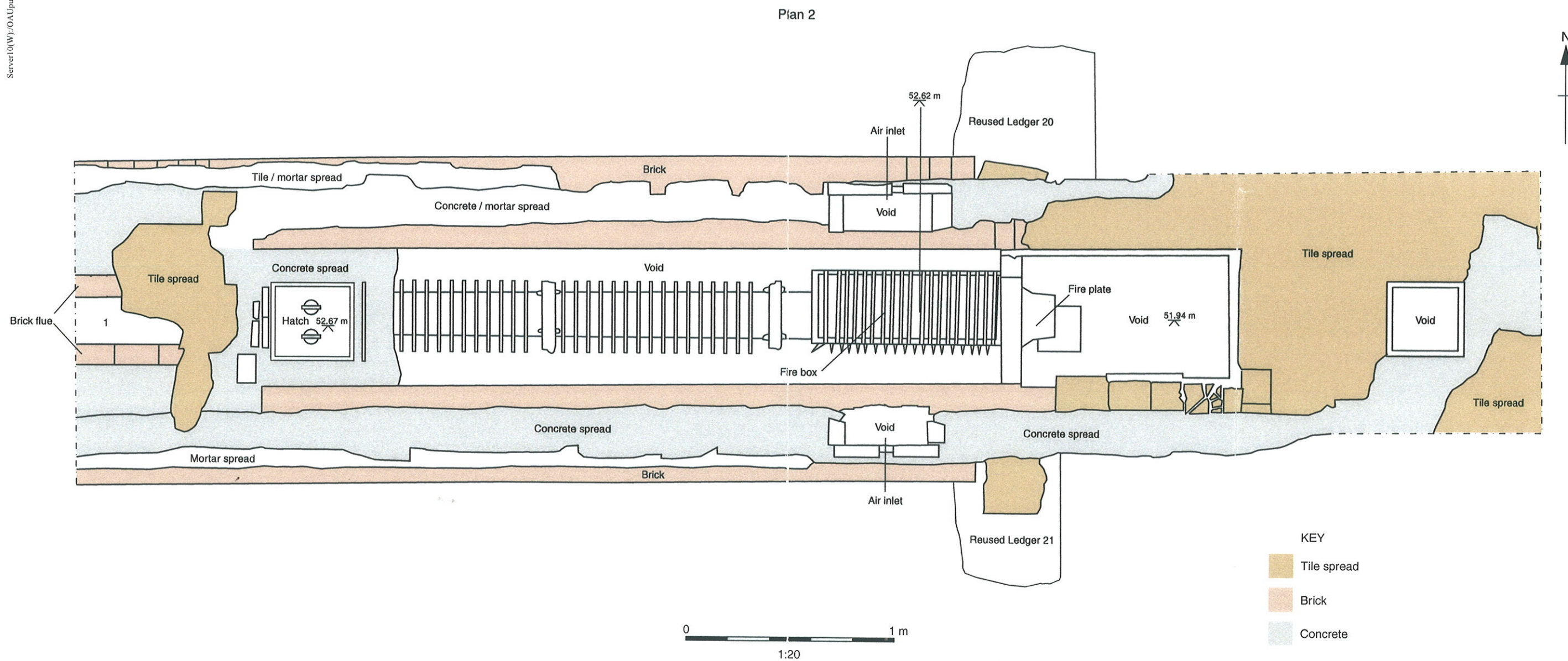


Figure 6: Plan of heating system

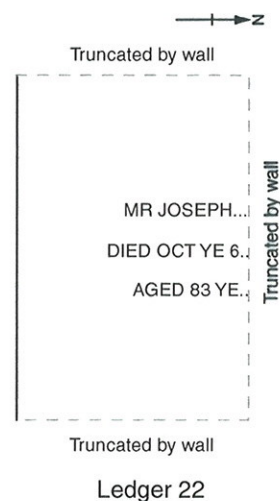
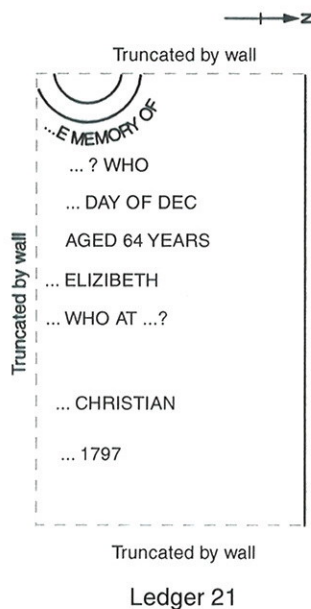
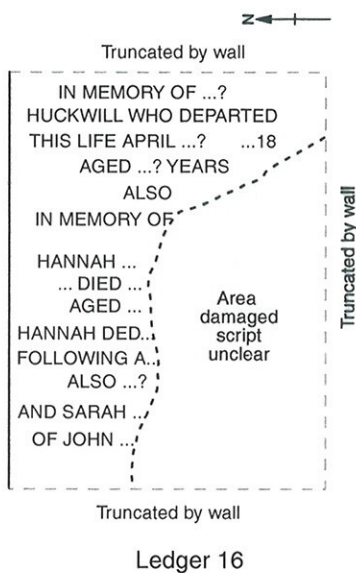
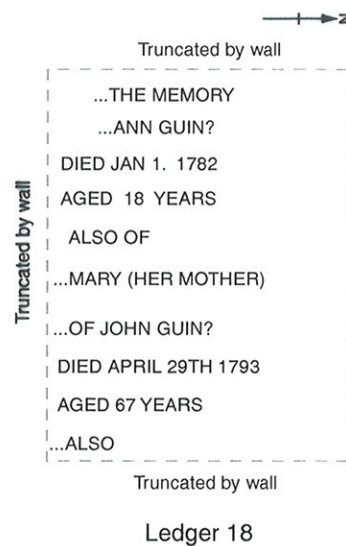
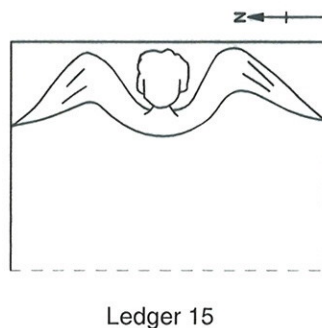
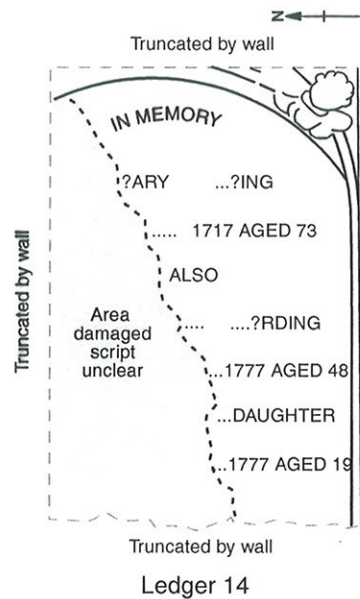


Figure 7: Reused ledger stone inscriptions (not to scale)



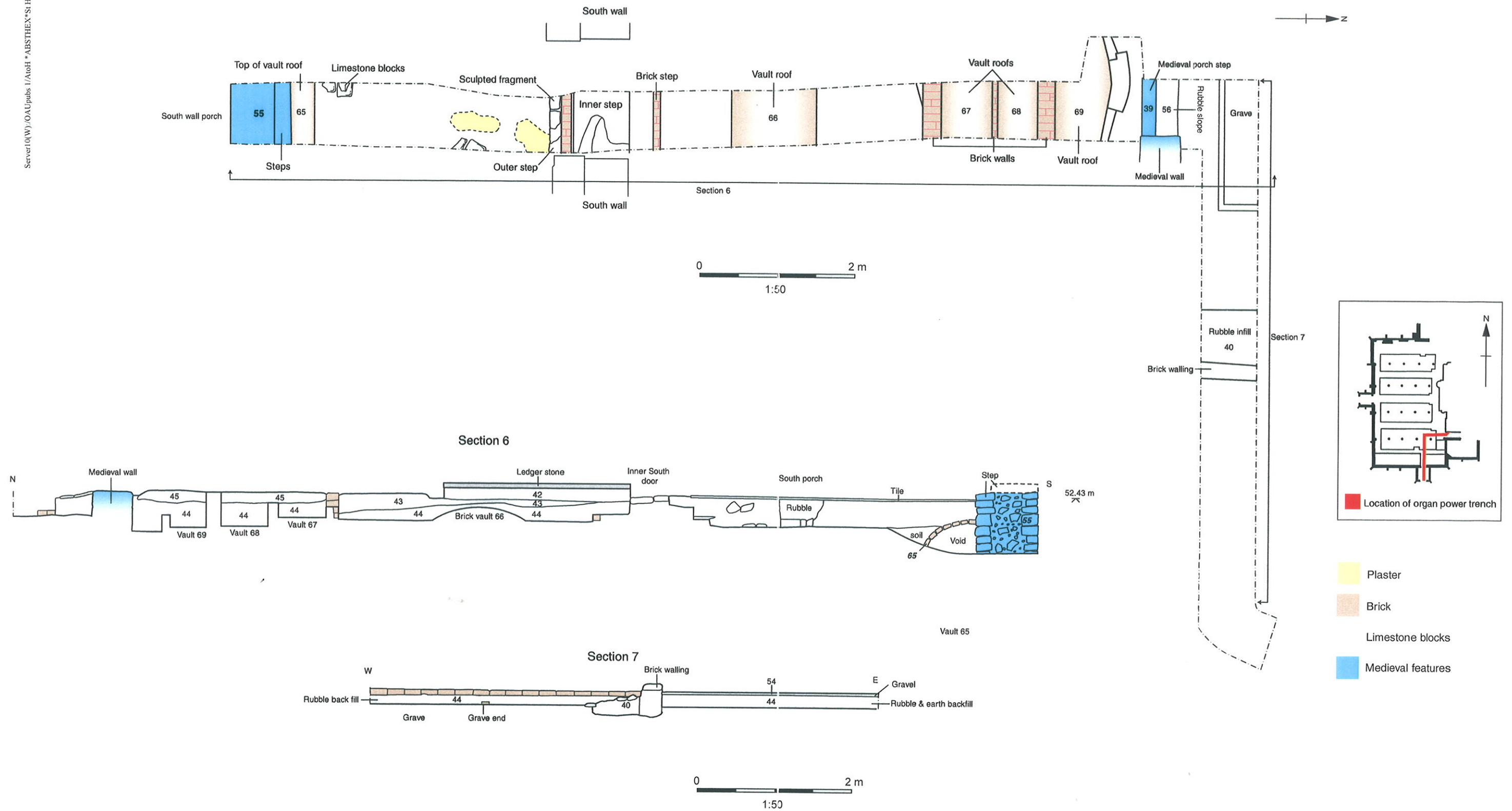


Figure 8: Plan & section of trench excavated for organ power

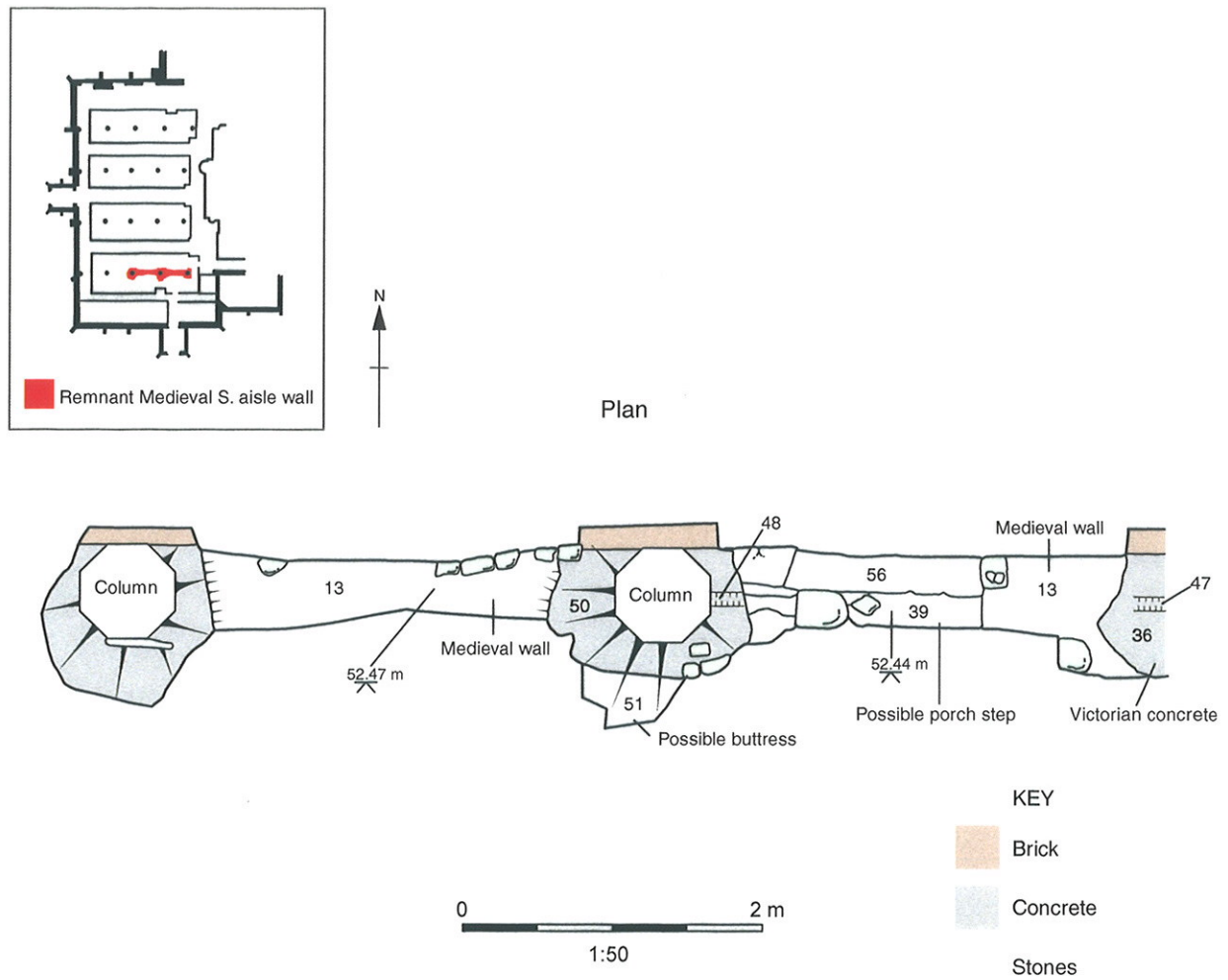
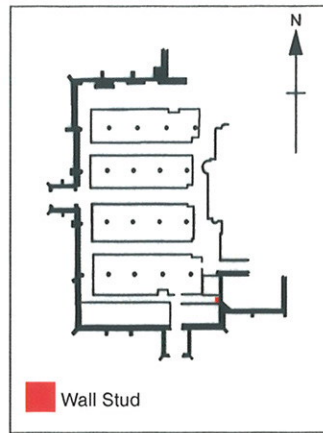
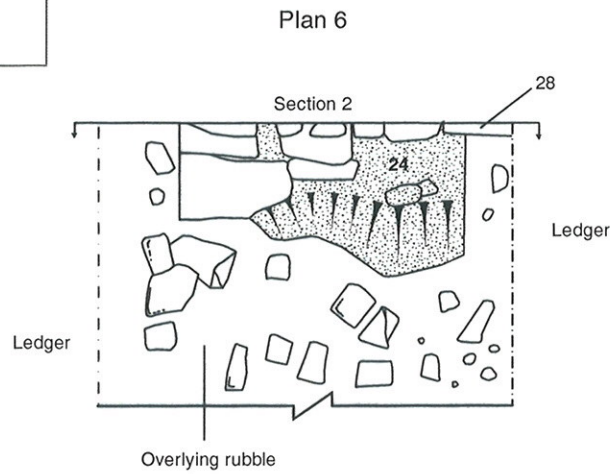


Figure 9: Plan of remnant of pre 1539 South wall



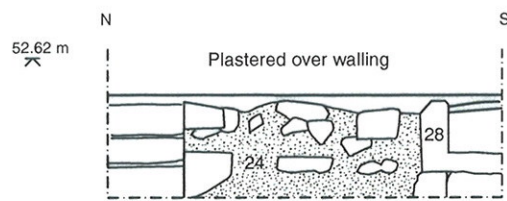


Mortar



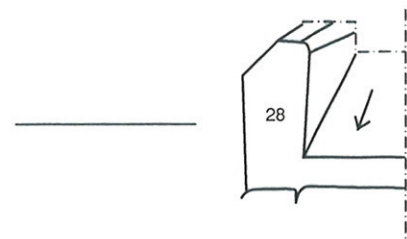
### Section 2

Mortar



0 1 m  
1:20

### Isometric detail of stone 28



0 500 mm  
1:10

Figure 10: Plan, section and isometric detail of possible Lady chapel wall stub

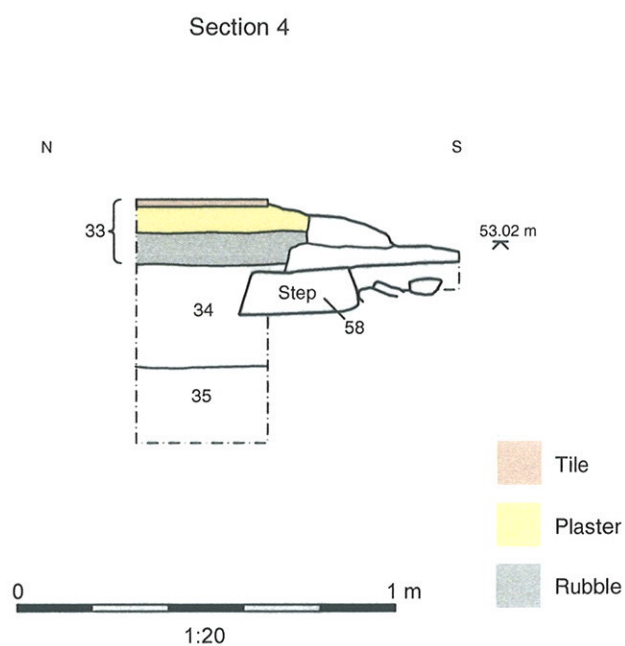


Figure 11: Section of pit excavated in North porch



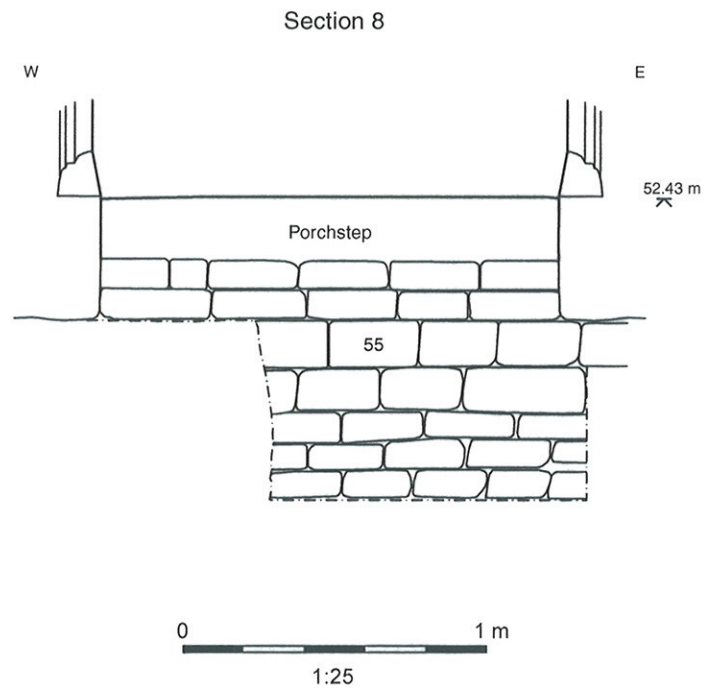


Figure 12: Elevation of wall under South Porch door step

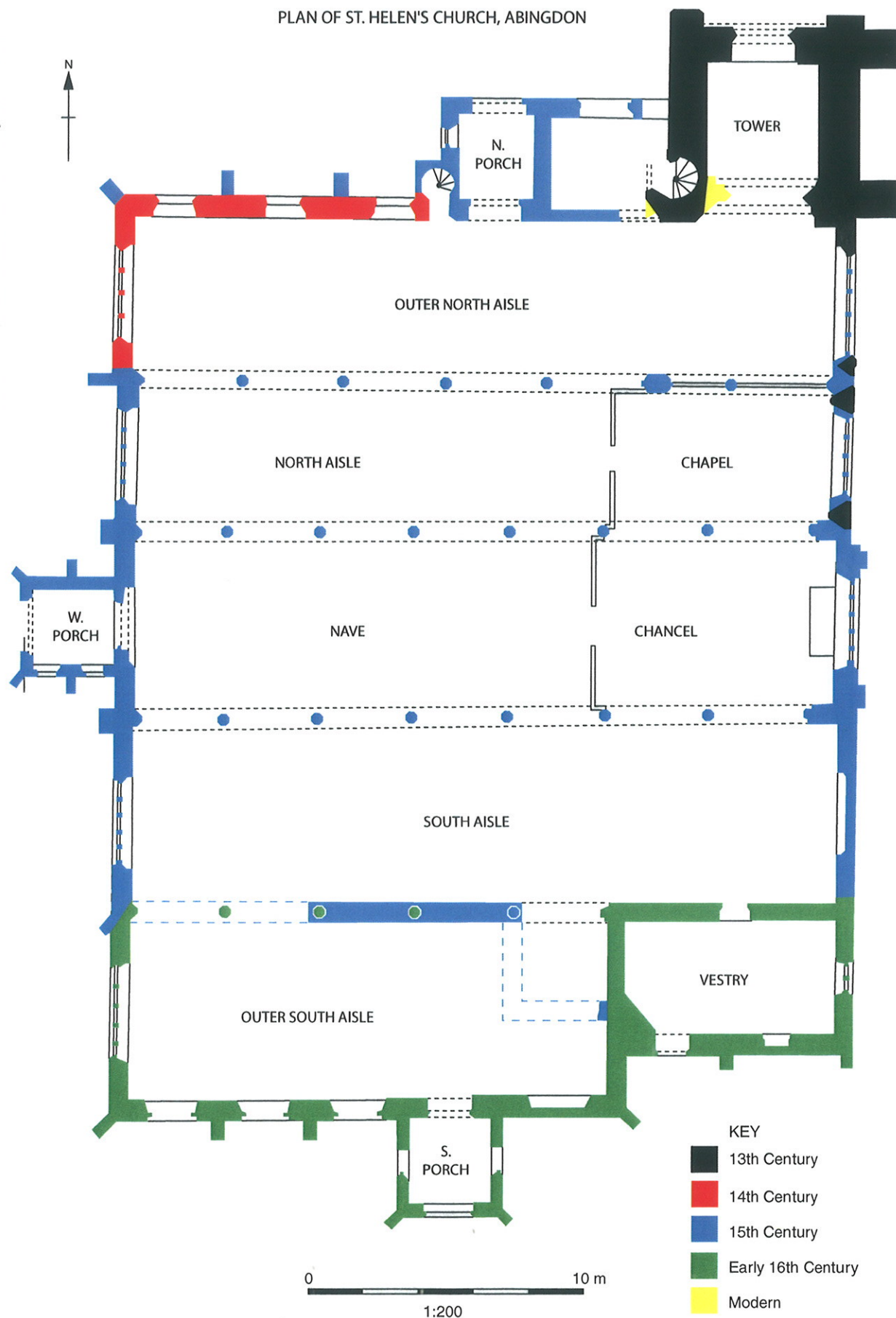


Figure 13: Chronology of known church structure  
(Reproduced from St Helen's Church, Abingdon archaeological appraisal of proposed reordering, OAU 1999)





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