

SPARSHOLT (OX)

CHURCH OF THE HOLY ROOD,  
SPARSHOLT

Archaeological Investigation



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

# CHURCH OF THE HOLY ROOD, SPARSHOLT

## Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned to undertake a watching brief and excavation at the Church of the Holy Rood, Sparsholt, Oxon, (SU 435 188) during the installation of French drains and soakaways around the church building.

The church is of Norman foundation, which was enlarged in the 13th century. The transepts to the north and south were added in the early 14th century. The north transept was demolished in 1785, and a small porch, incorporating the foundations of the west wall of the transept, was built.

## Description

The site was visited on Tuesday 24 March 1992, by which time the four soakaway pits had been dug, each approximately 2 m square and 2.5 - 3.5 m deep. With the exception of the stretch across the north transept, the 1.5 m wide by 0.5 m deep drain trench had been excavated, as had the 0.5 m wide by 0.5 m deep pipe trenches leading to the soakaways.

An examination of the sections in the trenches and soakaways revealed no archaeological features, although fragments of human bone were noted which presumably came from graves disturbed in antiquity.

Between March 30th and April 1st the OAU hand excavated that part of the demolished north transept to be affected by the drainage work.

A trench 1.6 m wide by 0.5 m deep was dug, against the present north wall of the nave, from the porch to the buttress which marks the original east side of the transept.

The trench was then extended northwards, on the proposed line of the pipe trench leading to the soakaway as far as was necessary to establish the original extent of the transept.

Beneath a fairly uniform layer of turf and topsoil (1) were layers 6, 10, 12, 13, all dumpings of clay, crushed chalk, decayed mortar, and sand. At the east end of the trench the first in a north-south line of late 18th century headstones was cut through these layers. Fragments of human bone (from previously disturbed graves), 19th century pottery, and medieval inlaid floor tile were recovered.

The foundations of the two existing buttresses were revealed. The east buttress had been built directly onto the demolished east wall of the transept (16).

The foundation of the west buttress was a chalk rubble dump (22) cut into the make up (20) of the original transept floor. Upon the chalk rubble were laid large, well-cut limestone blocks, overlaid by two coarse of bricks.

Beneath the post - 1785 backfilling was a thin layer (7) of crushed mortar and light gravel. This overlaid remnants of flagstone floor (8).

Incorporated within the floor was (9) a flat limestone grave slab. A brass nameplate [Small Find 2] was recovered from the surface of the slab where it had originally been fixed by rivets. The inscription indicated a burial date of 1605.

To the east of (9), and again incorporated in the floor was (19) a limestone/tomb lid/effigy 1.8 m by 0.6 m wide.

After recording 'in situ', it was removed revealing an east-west orientated cist, roughly defined by chalk blocks (23), which contained a fill of loose soil and gravel. This was not excavated, but a small fragment of glass [Small Find 1] was recovered from the surface of the fill.

The effigy is now awaiting conservation in the OAU store.

To the north and east of (19) was evidence of a light stone foundation (18), (1 course deep) of small to medium unworked chalk and limestone slabs, which also may have originally overlaid (11), a bedding layer.

The northern extension of the trench was somewhat irregular in shape to avoid the 19th century tomb slab (26). The inside edge of the east wall (16) of the transept was traced throughout its length and the full width of the east-west return wall (25), of the transept was revealed.

In the corner formed by (16) and (25) was the edge of a brick vault (24) and infilling (28), dated by the adjacent memorial to the mid 19th century.

A further watching brief was undertaken on April 13th when the north-south pipe trench was machine dug through the east edge of the brick vault (24) and northwards to the soakaway. No further archaeological features were revealed.

### **Interpretation**

The limitation on the depth of the archaeological investigation precluded any examination of the early structure of the transept. Only the partially robbed remnants of the final floor were revealed. This was removed to construct the infilling wall and to build the west buttress. The presence of fragments of medieval inlaid floor tile suggest that some of the floor may have been tiled rather than flagged.

The effigy figure is that of a priest, and has been dated to the Late 13th

century. It would appear that it once covered a stone tomb situated elsewhere in the church. After the building of the transept, the contents of the tomb were reburied in a rough cist, and the tomb lid set on top, at ground level. The adjacent light stone foundation may have supported a wooden canopy or surround.

The identity of the effigy is at present unknown.

The establishment of the line of the east and north walls of the transept indicate that the transept was of similar size to the south transept, but there was no indication as to the reason for its demolition.

The insertion of the 19th century vault (24) suggests that virtually all of the rest of the transept floor has been destroyed.

OAU  
April 1992

