



Archaeological Field Unit

**Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

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March 2005

Cambridgeshire County Council

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SUMMARY

On the 15th and 16th of March 2005, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation within the footprint of a proposed extension to the Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire.

The evaluation area, a single trench covering approximately fifty square metres, lay immediately outside the (blocked) north door of the church. Excavation ceased at an average depth of 0.80m at a level where in situ burials were encountered. Twenty-six burials were recognised, though there was no intrusive excavation below this level and it is estimated that the trench could contain between thirty and a hundred burials.

TABLE OF CONTENTS











INTRODUCTION	1
GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY	1
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	1
METHODOLOGY	2
RESULTS	5
Human remains	5
Material other than human remains	5
CONCLUSIONS	6
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
REFERENCES	7

LIST OF FIGURES AND PLATES




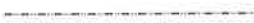


Figure 1 Location of excavated area and development area	3
Figure 2 Excavated area	4
Plate1 The site before excavation - looking south	8
Plate 2 The site after excavation – looking east	8

Drawing Conventions

Sections

Limit of Excavation	
Cut	
Cut - Conjectured	
Soil Horizon	
Soil Horizon - Conjectured	
Intrusion/Truncation	
Top of Natural	
Top Surface	
Break in Section	
Cut Number	
Deposit Number	117
Ordnance Datum	$\frac{18.45m}{\wedge}$ ODN

Plans

Limit of Excavation	
Deposit - Conjectured	
Natural Features	
Intrusion/Truncation	
Sondages/Machine Strip	
Illustrated Section	
Cut Number	118

**Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford:
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1 INTRODUCTION

On the 15th and 16th of March, 2005, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation within the churchyard of the church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire. The proposed development entails the construction of an extension to the north of the church to provide a meeting room, WC, kitchen and store room.

The evaluation area, a single trench covering approximately fifty square metres, lay completely within the footprint of the extension and immediately outside the north door of the church. The door has long been blocked by the construction of a deep boiler room cum coal store.

The work was carried out at the request of the churchwardens, to a brief designed by Christopher Taylor and approved by A. Baggs, Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (Taylor 2003). All works are authorised by a Faculty granted by the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Ely.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Whittlesford Church is situated on the north-eastern edge of the village at *c.* 25m OD on a low spur overlooking the River Cam. The underlying geology consists of river terrace sands and gravels (British Geological Survey, Sheet 205).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are no known find spots of prehistoric material in the immediate vicinity of the church. However, directly across the broad Cam valley (800 metres due north of the church) lies the Iron Age promontory fort of Borough Hill in the parish of Sawston (SAM 24407). There has been apparently continuous occupation at the site from the Mesolithic period to the present day (Mortimer 2001).

There is no direct evidence for Roman occupation immediately around or beneath the church, however, Roman pottery has been discovered in the general area of the church. There are three known find spots: 400m west-south-west of the church during roadworks; 300m to the south-east during building work; 100m to the north from field-walking. This suggests that an extensive Roman settlement *may* have lain in the area of the present church.

There is also the likelihood of Saxon occupation within the area, and of pre-Norman church buildings.

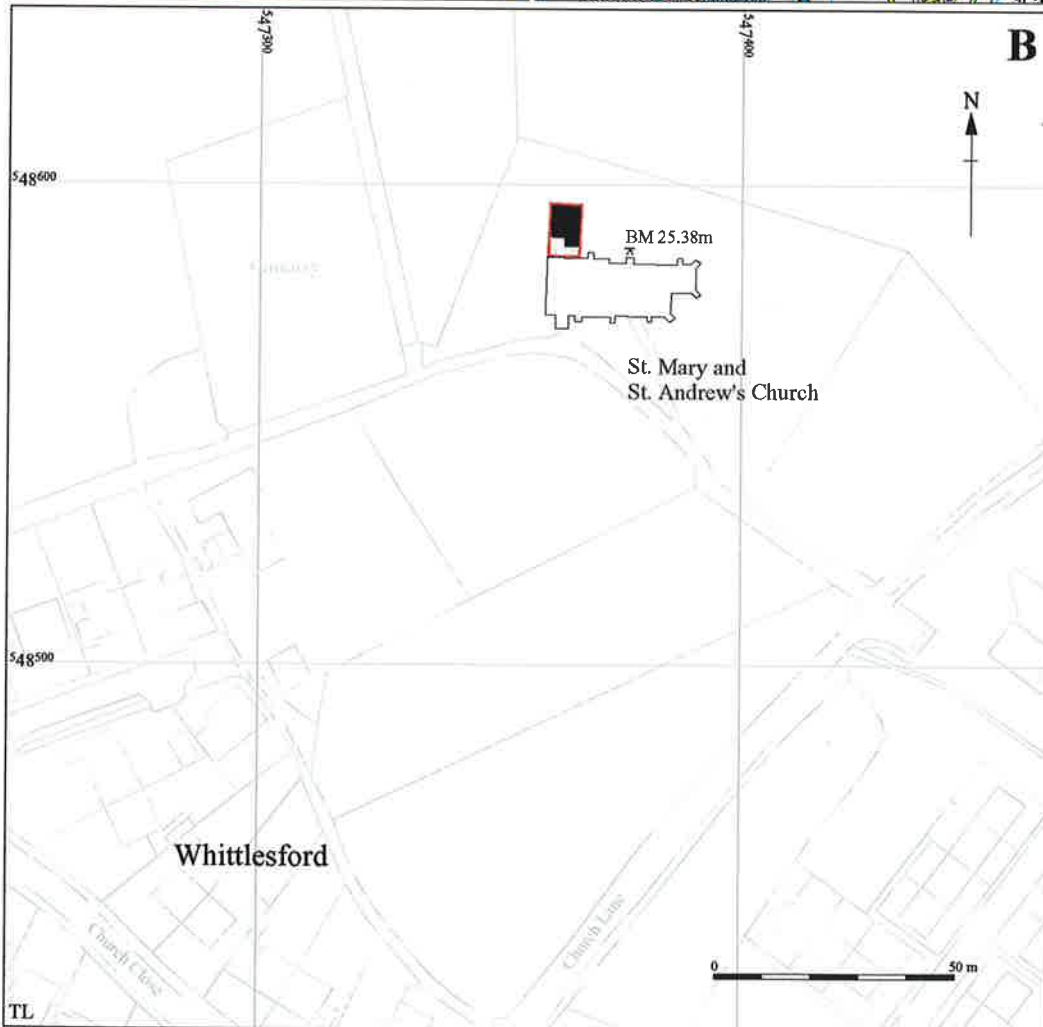
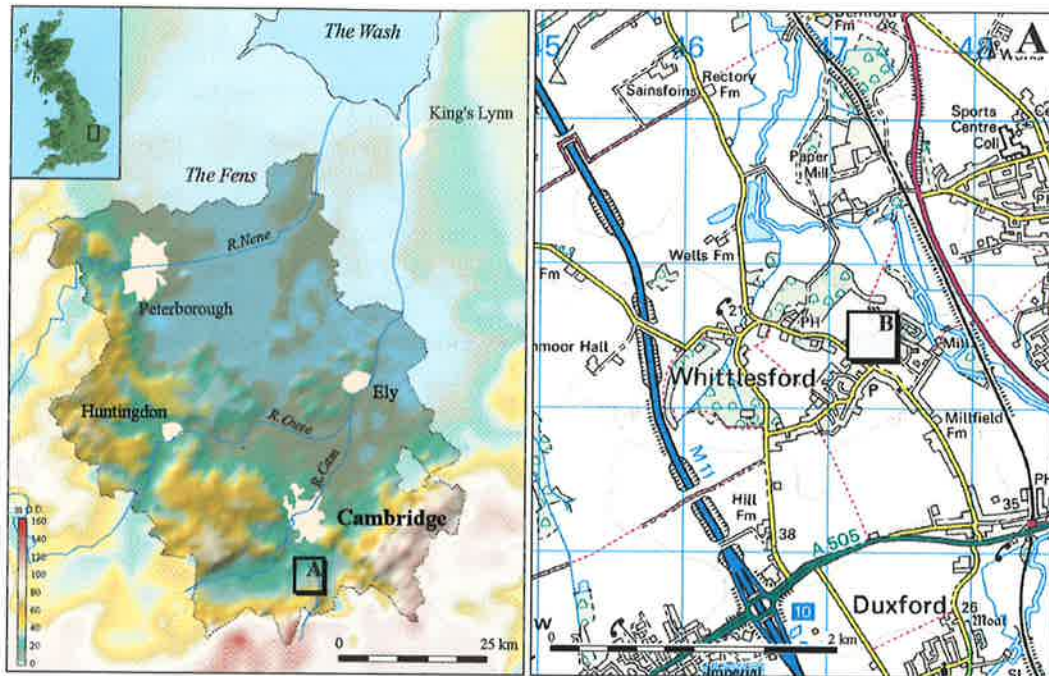
The earliest surviving fabric of the church (SMR 04271) is of early 12th century date – in the nave, tower and chancel. There have been extensive alterations and extensions but the north wall of the nave and the lower part of the tower remain *in situ*.

The moated site of Whittlesford Manor (SMR 01001) is located 150m to the east. Excavations here in 1994 revealed late medieval and early post-medieval remains (SMR11415). Excavations at Butts Green, just to the south of the manor, also revealed medieval features (SMR11513). Traces of earthworks (SMR 11256) in the vicinity may be related to the medieval development of the village.

4 **METHODOLOGY**

The excavation design called for mechanical excavation (using a mini-digger with a four foot wide ditching bucket) of the entire footprint of the building either to the level of the natural subsoil or to the level of *in situ* burials, dependant on which was encountered first. Should any burials require excavation this should be undertaken with care, individually and by hand.

The southernmost part of the building footprint has been very heavily truncated by the boiler room and coal chute (Plate 1). No excavation was possible, or indeed necessary, here, thus reducing the excavation area from approximately seventy to fifty square metres.



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Figure 1 Location of excavated area (black) and development area (red)

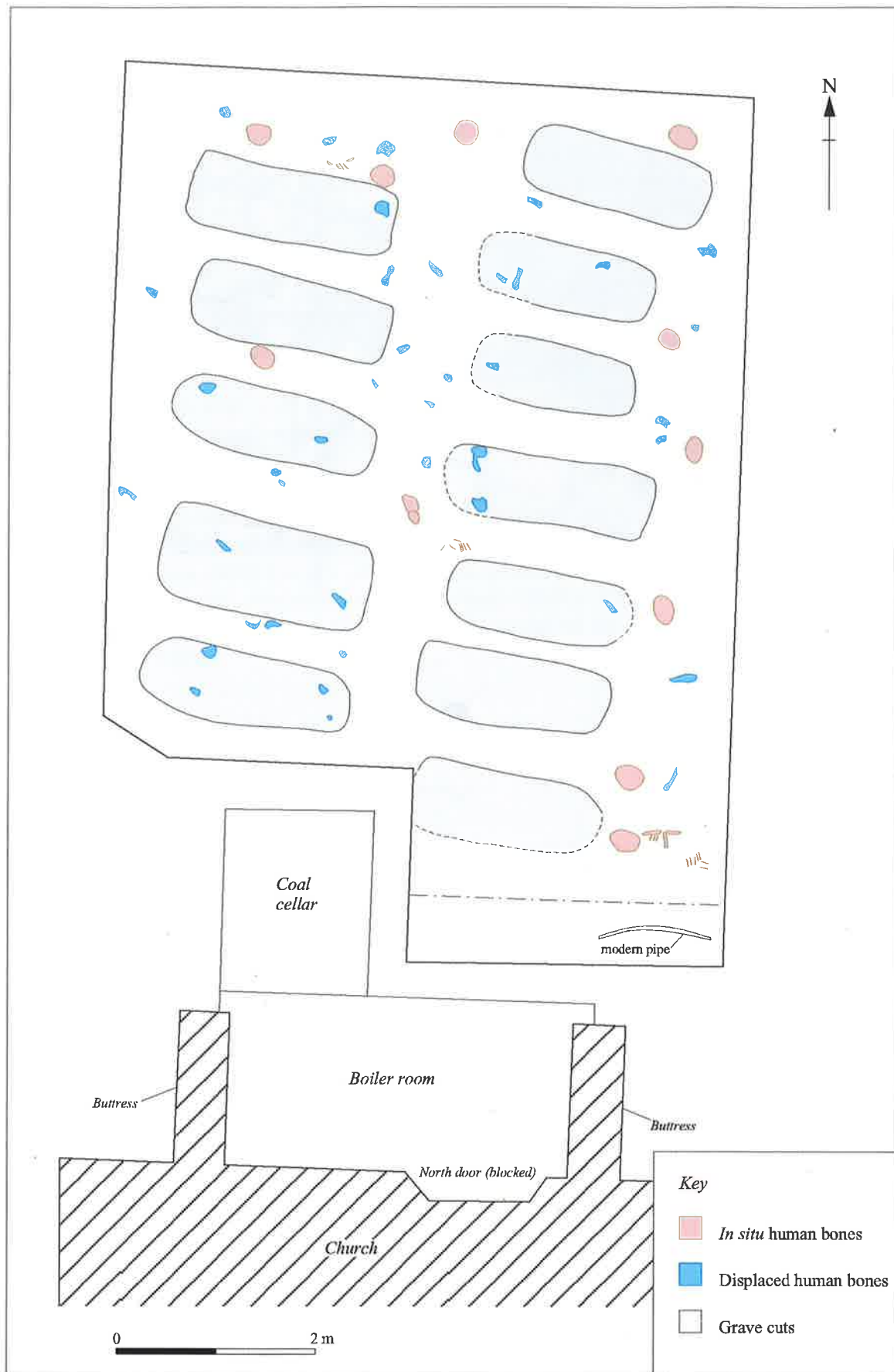


Figure 2 Excavated area.

5 RESULTS

Mechanical excavation was stopped at an average depth of 0.80m at a level where *in situ* burials were encountered. The first burials revealed were those of children and babies, buried in shallower graves than those of adults. The skulls of eleven individuals were uncovered along with the remains of three babies. These burials were not the latest in the sequence and all lay within a relatively homogenous burial soil. Individual grave cuts could not be recognised within this soil, partly being obscured by rows of later grave cuts.

This latest phase of burial consisted of two well-ordered rows of graves containing twelve burials. None of the human bone seen within the fills of these graves belonged to *in situ* burials, all visible bone being redeposited from earlier burials. These later grave cuts were easily recognisable chiefly due to their depth – all had cut into the underlying natural gravels and therefore contained redeposited gravel to variable degrees (see Plate 2).

Two areas, in the south-west and north-east corners of the site, were tested by hand-auger to determine the total depth of the burial soil. These depths were 1.85m and 1.35m respectively, but with the slope of the land away from the church to the north, the base of the grave soil lay at the same level in both places – c.23.95m OD. The height of the gravels will vary dependant upon the depth of the individual grave cuts and it is unlikely that any of the original natural gravel surface survived un-truncated.

In total twenty-six burials were recognised, though there was no intrusive excavation below this level and it is estimated that the area could contain between thirty and a hundred burials.

Human remains

The only context excavated on the site – context 001 – was the upper 0.80m of burial soil. Most of this context was removed by machine and all human bone observed during excavation was collected and bagged. The base of the trench was then cleaned by hand to enable the area to be planned and photographed (see Figure 2; Plate 2). Human bone encountered during this stage was left *in situ*, whether as part of an intact burial or as redeposited material.

The human remains collected during machining have been left within the church for reburial. The site itself, with the *in situ* burials, has been backfilled.

Materials other than human remains

A very small quantity of material other than human remains was collected during excavation of context 001: eight sherds of pottery, principally 16th to

19th century in date but including a sherd of possible developed St Neots ware; three fragments of post-medieval floor tile, a single fragment of post-medieval stained window glass; a number of roof tile fragments, two small slates and part of a 19th century glass bottle. All this material reveals is that the grave soil has been continuously worked, by burial, since at least the 16th century. This material is kept at the AFU offices.

6 CONCLUSION

This part of the cemetery, despite being immediately outside the north door of the church, has been heavily exploited for burial over many centuries. The number of burials encountered prohibited excavation to the level of the natural gravel subsoil and thus no pre-burial activity was seen. This being said, the lack of disturbed and redeposited material in the grave soil, of any date other than medieval and post-medieval, suggests that there is unlikely to have been any earlier settlement-related activity with the immediate area. The complete lack of any Romano-British material precludes there being direct Roman period occupation on this part of the site. However, prehistoric or Saxon settlement sites can sometimes be more difficult to recognize from finds evidence alone since they produce considerably less material than Romano-British or medieval sites. Earlier burial on the site cannot be ruled out either – while it is most likely that all the redeposited human bone collected or recorded relates to medieval burials, it is possible that earlier burials are also being disturbed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the Parish Council who commissioned and funded the archaeological work, Professor Spufford, churchwarden, Chris Taylor who supplied the background information and visited for on-site discussion, and Ashley Arbon of the Whittlesford Society for his interest and input - both archaeological and practical. The project was managed by Judith Roberts and Carlos Silva produced the illustrations.

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Plates 1 & 2 The site before and after excavation.



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