

St Mary's Church Boundary Wall Aylesbury Buckinghamshire



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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St Mary's Church, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

In July and August 2007, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Mary's Church, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (NGR: SP 8176 1388). The work was commissioned by Aylesbury Vale District Council in advance of an application for the restoration of the boundary walls and gate. The watching brief revealed deposits of post-medieval graveyard soil and the foundations for the boundary wall. No significant archaeology or articulated human remains were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 In July and August 2007, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Mary's Church, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (NGR: SP 8176 1388). The work was commissioned by Aylesbury Vale District Council in respect of a planning application for the restoration of the boundary walls and gate (Planning Application No. 06/01371).
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set by David Radford the Archaeological Officer for Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service (BCAS). This was in line with PPG 16 and the Local Planning Policy (Radford, 2007).
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief (OA, 2007).

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is located in the centre of the town of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (Fig. 1). The churchyard is situated on level ground at the top of a low hill, at a height of approximately 92 m above OD and occupies an area of c0.8 hectares. The site is bounded by public thoroughfares on all four sides. The underlying geology is alluvium over Portland Stone (British Geological Survey, sheet no. 237).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The following section is reproduced from the brief prepared by Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service (Radford, 2007), full references can be found in that document
- 1.3.2 The present church is thought to date from the 13th century and lies within an Iron Age hillfort, and the later Saxon and medieval core of Aylesbury. The present St Mary's is thought to be built on the site of an earlier Saxon church that may have originated as a Minster church and been the focus of a Saxon royal estate. Iron Age and medieval pottery has been recovered during the excavation of foundations for the Baptist Hall in St Mary's Square. To the east of the medieval and post-medieval

churchyard, burials of possible Saxon origin have been recovered, suggesting an earlier cemetery of greater extent. A number of bronze keys, possibly medieval or post medieval in date, have also been recovered from the churchyard. The works therefore have a potential to expose archaeological deposits of prehistoric through to post-medieval date.

- 1.3.3 The nearby place name 'Kingsbury' is indicative of the site of a Saxon Royal Manor, probably a defended site. Furthermore, the site lies within a Middle Iron Age hillfort, the ditch of which was recorded at 31/33 Kingsbury. In 1934, works to the extension of the Museum revealed a number of 're-deposited' burials that may have originally been uncovered when the Museum premises were extended in c1714. The burials are likely to relate to an earlier phase of St Mary's churchyard.
- 1.3.4 In 1993-4, work to build a new art gallery extension to the County Museum revealed features of Iron Age date, dark soil of potentially late Saxon date and abundant evidence for 12th-14th-century activity. Two phases of inhumations, dating to the 13th century, were also identified and are believed to indicate that St Mary's churchyard extended beyond its present limits for part of the medieval period. Its easterly extent has not yet been established. One unusual burial was recorded (an inhumation with a wooden plank). Late medieval and post medieval features were also identified, some of these may have been related to previous documented building work on the site, and in particular the construction of the Grammar School in 1718. A number of human burials have been recorded near the Museum entrance when an electricity substation was built in the 1960s.
- 1.3.5 The County Museum buildings in Church Street comprise the former Grammar School and Ceely House (Grade II*). The School buildings embody part of a 17th-century precursor and Ceely House originated as a timber framed jettied building, dated by dendrochronology to 1473. It has been suggested that Ceely House started life as the 'Brother House' of the Fraternity of the Virgin Mary, founded in 1450 and dissolved, along with other chantries, in 1547.
- 1.3.6 It is conjectured that a religious house or hospital once occupied the site of Hickman's Almshouses, adjacent to Parsons Fee, south of the churchyard. A number of skeletons were found under the pavement of Parsons Fee in the 1960s.

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, in particular those relating to burials and to Iron Age, Saxon and medieval activity.
- 2.1.2 To recover dating evidence and artefacts from the excavated material.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as a series of site visits during those works likely to impinge upon archaeological deposits. These works included the dismantling of some existing walls and excavation of the soil behind the walls to enable the new walls to be built upright.
- 2.2.2 A plan showing the extent and location of the excavations was maintained at a scale of 1:100 and any recorded 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

- 3.1.1 The majority of the work took place along the south-eastern section of the boundary wall (Fig. 2). This took the form of the removal of the wall in discrete bays. The stratigraphy exposed was similar throughout the work and a representative description can be applied throughout.
- 3.1.2 The excavations were a total of 0.8 m deep (Fig. 2, Section 1). These cut 0.4 m deep into the top of a layer of grey-brown silty loam (1001). This contained many fragments of brick and examples of 18th and 19th-century pottery and clay pipe stem. a small number of bone fragments and dis-articulated human remains were also recovered from this deposit. Its composition suggests that it forms a layer of graveyard soil. This was cut by a 0.5 m wide, vertical sided trench (1010). This measured in excess of 0.6 m deep, and its full depth was not exposed in section.
- 3.1.3 The trench contained the footings for the standing 0.45 m wide brick wall and the brick gate pillar (1009). This was built using a machine made frogged red brick measuring 0.225 m x 0.115 m x 0.072 m bonded with a white lime mortar laid using English stretcher bond. The dimensions and method of manufacture of the brick suggest a 19th century date for the construction of the wall. The brickwork was capped with shaped limestone slabs (1006) measuring 0.42 m wide by 0.32 m long by 0.1 m deep. The north-eastern side of the brick gate pillar overlaid the stone slabs (1008) forming the path leading from St Mary's Row into the churchyard suggesting that the stone slabs predate the construction of the wall.
- 3.1.4 The exposed height of the wall was 0.8 m above the pavement bounding the churchyard and 0.4 m high above the churchyard.
- 3.1.5 Overlying layer 1001 was a 0.3 m to 0.4 m deep layer of dark grey-brown silt loam (1002), containing a large quantity of lime mortar and small brick fragments, suggesting that it post-dates the construction of the brick boundary wall. This had been cut by the modern cable trench (1002), and backfilled with redeposited material (1003).

- 3.1.6 At the southern end of the wall, a layer of grey-brown silt loam (1013) was exposed at the base of the excavations (Fig. 2, Section 2). This contained fragments of 18th and 19th century pottery and clay pipe stems and also fragments of disarticulated human bone suggesting that it was a continuation of the earlier churchyard soil (1001). This had been cut by the foundation trench (1010) for the brick boundary wall. During the dismantling of the wall the top of a shallow brick arch (1011) was exposed in the base of the wall, approximately 2 m north-east of the Church's Street corner of the churchyard. Further investigation showed that this had been constructed to span a cast iron water main which entered the churchyard at this point. Aside from the arch mentioned, the brick wall (1009) was constructed using identical materials and techniques to that previously described.
- 3.1.7 Overlying layer 1013 was a 0.3 m deep layer of dark grey-brown silt loam (1012). This deposit produced fragments of brick and lime mortar suggesting that it is a continuation of layer 1000.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of 18th and 19th-century brick, pottery and clay pipe stem were recovered from layers 1000, 1001, 1012 and 1013. These were evaluated on site, but were not retained. Fragments of disarticulated human bone were recovered from layers 1001 and 1013. These were not evaluated and were reinterred on site.

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 The watching brief showed that the wall fronting the churchyard along the south-eastern side of the boundary was of 19th-century construction. The deposits exposed behind the wall were dated to the 18th and 19th-centuries and represent layers of churchyard soil.
- 4.1.2 No evidence for burials, either in the form of grave cuts, vaults or articulated burials were observed during the course of the watching brief. This may be explained by the limited depth of excavation (seldom more than 0.6 m). This limited depth (approximately level with the current street level) is the probable reason for the absence of any evidence earlier than the 18th century.
- 4.1.3 No evidence for Iron Age, Saxon or medieval activity, either in the form of features, deposits or residual finds was encountered.

APPENDICES**APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY**

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth/ Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1000	Layer	0.25 m	-	Churchyard soil	Brick, pottery	C19th
1001	Layer	> 0.6 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	Brick, pottery, bone, clay pipe stem	C18th/ C19th
1002	Cut	0.4 m	0.3 m	Electric cable trench	-	C20th
1003	Fill	0.4 m	0.3 m	Backfill of cable trench	-	C20th
1004	Cut	0.4 m	0.25 m	Trench for street lighting cable	-	C20th
1005	Fill	0.4 m	0.25 m	Backfill of cable trench	-	C20th
1006	Structure	0.1 m	0.42 m	Stone capping for wall 1009	-	C19th
1007	Structure	0.8 m	0.45 m	Brick boundary wall	-	C19th
1008	Structure	0.1 m	0.6 m	Stone slabs forming footpath alongside boundary wall	-	C19th
1009	Structure	> 0.3 m	0.5 m	Brick foundation for wall 1006	-	C19th
1010	Cut	> 0.6 m	0.5 m	Foundation trench for structure 1009	-	C19th
1011	Structure	0.35 m	0.6 m	Brick arch within foundations 1009	Cast iron water main	C19th
1012	Layer	0.3 m	-	Churchyard soil	Brick, pottery	C19th
1013	Layer	> 0.6 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	Brick, pottery, bone, clay pipe stem	C18th/ C19th

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Radford, D. 2007 *St Mary's Church, St Mary's Square, Aylesbury: Brief for an
Archaeological Watching Brief*

IFA, 2001 *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OA, 1992 *Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson)

OA, 2007 *St Mary's Church, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Archaeological Watching Brief
Report*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Boundary Wall, St Mary's Church, St Mary's Square, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire

Site code: AYSMBW 07

Grid reference: SP 8176 8388

Type of watching brief: Restoration and repair of churchyard boundary wall

Date and duration of project: July and August 2007, approximately 5 weeks duration, 10 site visits.

Area of site: 0.8 hectares

Summary of results: The watching brief showed that the boundary wall along the south-eastern edge of the churchyard wall was of 19th-century origin. The deposits exposed behind the wall represent 18th and 19th-century churchyard soils.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum Service in due course, under the following accession number: AYBCM:2007.99



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Figure 1: Site location

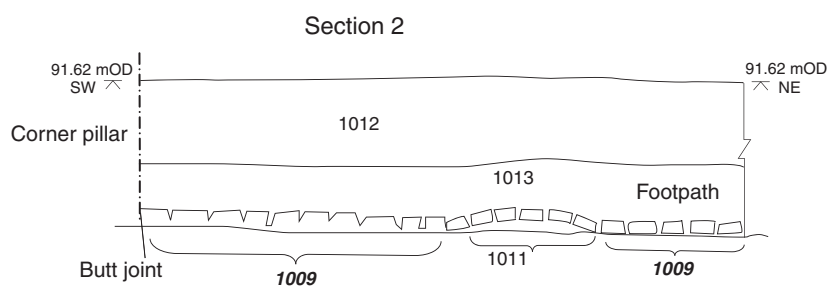
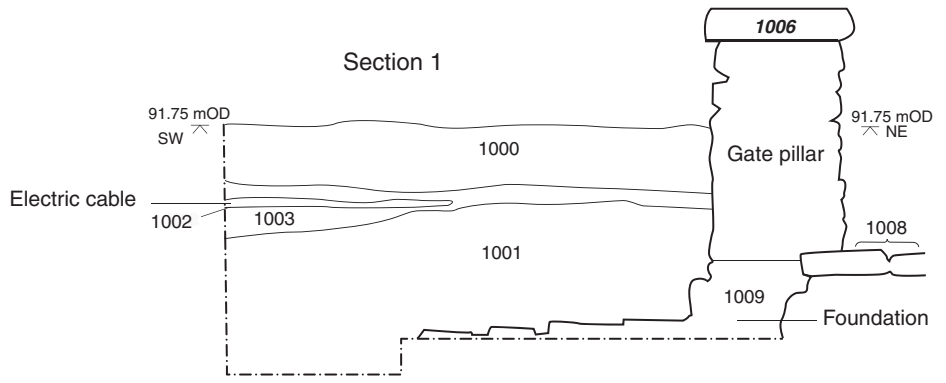
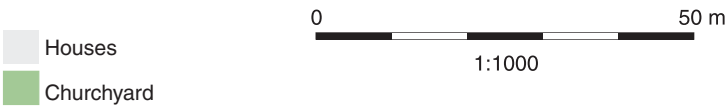
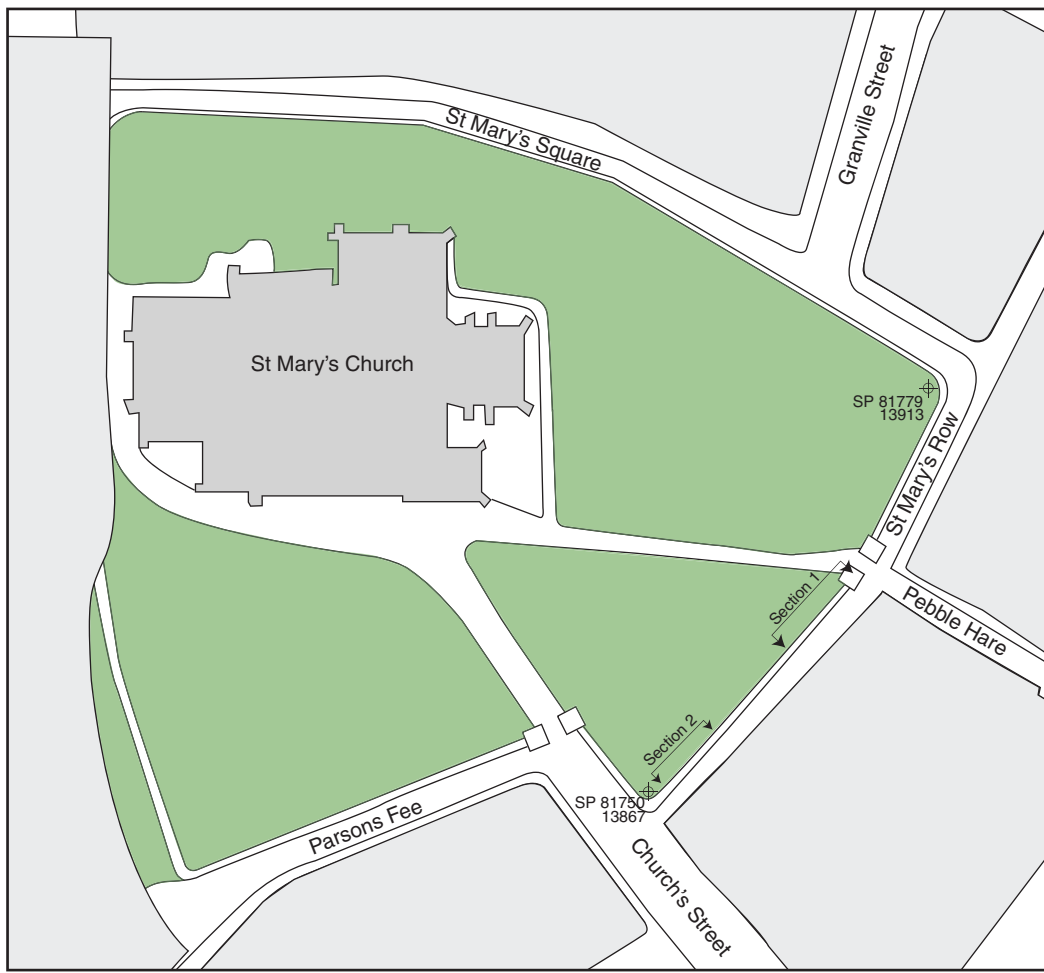


Figure 2: Plan and sections



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