Archaeology & Built Heritage

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Church of St Dionysius, Church Square, Market Harborough, Leicestershire: An Archaeological Watching Brief

NGR: SP 7349 8749

Undertaken on behalf of

The Parochial Church Council

by

Neil Finn

Archaeology & Built Heritage

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1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents the results of an Archaeological Watching Brief undertaken during intrusive investigative works at the Church of St Dionysius, Church Square, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 7NB.

1.2 The archaeological investigation was commissioned by the Parochial Church Council through their architect David Spragg, of Acanthus Clews Architects, and undertaken by Neil Finn of Archaeology & Built Heritage on the 6th and 7th of February 2018.

1.3 The Archaeological Watching Brief was requested by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, in respect of an application to the Diocesan Advisory Committee for a Faculty for the proposed reordering of the church interior and erection of a new kitchen extension against the north aisle.

1.4 The investigative works were required for structural engineering purposes, to inform the design process.

1.5 The Archaeological Watching Brief was undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) submitted to and approved by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (Finn 2018).

2. Location, Topography and Geology

2.1 Market Harborough is a market town in the Harborough District of Leicestershire in midland England. The town is located 14 miles (22.5 km) south-east of Leicester and 10 miles (16 km) west of Corby, close to the county boundary with Northamptonshire (Figure 1).

2.2 The Church of St Dionysius occupies a prominent position within the town centre, east of the High Street, at National Grid Reference: SP 7349 8749 (Figure 2; Photos 1-3). It has no churchyard, though early maps and engravings show that the church was formerly enclosed by railings. Immediately to the south of the church is the Od Grammar School, erected in 1614.

2.3 A benchmark on the corner of the church tower has a value of 78.76m above Ordnance Datum. External ground level is at about 78m above Ordnance Datum.

2.4 The solid geology of the area is Mudstone of the Charmouth Mudstone Formation, a sedimentary bedrock formed in the Jurassic Period. This is overlain by alluvial deposits consisting of clay, silt, sand and gravel, formed up to 2 million years ago in

the Quaternary Period (British Geological Survey Geology of Britain Viewer accessed 22.01.2018).

3. Statutory Designation

3.1 The Church of St Dionysius is included on the statutory national list of buildings of special architectural of historic interest maintained by the secretary of state for culture media and sport. It was listed at grade I on 25.07.1952 with the following description:

> Parish Church originally built as a Chapel of St Mary in Arden (qv) during the earlier part of the C13. Architectural features of present church mainly C14 and C15. The town is dominated by the early C14 grey ashlar tower with its fine crocketed brooch spire. Rest of church in coursed sandstone rubble with crenellated parapet. Buttresses. Nave and Chancel with Clerestory windows, Aisles and North and South Porches. Crocketed cross as finial at east end of both Nave and Chancel. South face of tower has large sundial. Inside, galleries of 1836 remain. Fine achievement of Royal Arms of 1660 at West end. Good C15 timber roof was restored, in same style, in 1954. Fragments of medieval wall painting discovered in 1959 at east end of North Aisle. The Church of St Dionysius is a prominent feature of many near and distant views of the town. It is also the dominant feature of several town centre groups.

4. Historical Background

4.1 The history of Market Harborough and its relationship to Great Bowden has been published elsewhere and is not repeated here (e.g. Lee and McKinley 1964; Hoskins 1949; Harrod 1808).

4.2 The town came into existence around the middle of the 12th century, prior to this being only an outlying part of the fields of the manor of Great Bowden. This is reflected in the place-name, first recorded in 1153 as *Haverbergam*, meaning 'The hill where oats are grown' (Cox 2009, 171).

4.3 Market Harborough is located at the point where the main Leicester to Northampton road crosses the River Welland, roughly equidistant between the two county towns. This became an important trading centre and the place-name is recorded in 1219 as *mercati de Haverberegh*, from the Latin *mercatum* meaning market (*ibid*.).

4.4 The Church of St Dionysius was originally a dependant chapel of St Mary in Arden, which was itself a chapel of Great Bowden church. Market Harborough chapel is first documented in *c*. 1220 (Lee and McKinley 1964). Church Square was formerly known as Chapel Yard and is named as such on the plan of 1776 published in Harrod's history of the town (Harrod 1808, Vol. III, Pl. CLII).

4.5 The oldest part of the present church is the west tower, which Pevsner dates to *c*. 1300 or a little earlier. The steeple he describes as one of the finest in England (Pevsner and Williamson 1992, 306). Other elements date from the 14th and 15th centuries. The 15th century timber roof was restored in the same style in 1954. North and south galleries were installed in 1836 and extended to the east in 1844. Fragments of medieval wall painting were uncovered in the north aisle in 1959 (Pevsner and Williamson 1992, 306-7; Listing Description).

5. Research Aims and Objectives

5.1 Regional research aims are defined in *East Midlands Heritage: An Updated Research Agenda and Strategy for the Historic Environment of the East Midlands* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012), which builds on an earlier resource assessment and research agenda: *The Archaeology of the East Midlands: An Archaeological Assessment and Research Agenda* (Cooper 2006).

5.2 It was determine that the archaeological investigation had the potential to contribute towards themes defined in Section 6.7 of *East Midlands Heritage: An Updated Research Agenda and Strategy for the Historic Environment of the East Midlands*, which provides a research agenda for the High Medieval period (1066-1485), specifically aspects covered in paragraph 7.5: *Religion*; and also Section 6.8 which provides a research agenda for the post-medieval period (1485-1750), specifically paragraph 8.6: *Ecclesiastical structures, estates and burials* (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012, 94, 108).

5.3 The specific objectives of the archaeological programme, as set out in the WSI, were:

- To identify the presence/absence of buried archaeological remains or historic fabric within the areas affected by the investigative works;
- To establish the character, extent and date range of any remains that are encountered;
- To record any archaeological remains or historic fabric that are present;
- To interpret any such remains within the context of the known current and previous use of the site and the wider area;
- To produce a report and archive of the results of the investigation.

6. Scope of the Investigative Works

6.1 The intrusive investigative works involved:

6.2 The excavation of trial pits at either end of the nave, to determine the character of the existing heating ducts and assess the makeup of the floors and sub-floor deposits (Interventions 1 & 2).

6.3 Removal of a section of the timber floor to the choir stalls on the south side of the chancel, to determine the nature of the sub-floor deposits (Intervention 3).

6.4 Opening up to expose the fabric of the north aisle gallery, to assess condition and clarify structural details (Interventions 4 & 5).

6.5 The excavation of a series of trial pits against the external face of the north aisle, within the boiler house and adjacent to the north boundary wall, to determine the depth, width and character of wall foundations (Interventions 6-10).

6.6 Determination of the wall thickness and fabric of the east wall of the north porch (Intervention 11) and south wall of the south aisle (Intervention 12).

7. Methodology

7.1 Archaeological investigation and recording was undertaken in accordance with the methodology set out in section 7 of the approved Written Scheme of Investigation.

7.2 The groundwork and other intrusive investigations were undertaken by building contractors from W W Brown & Sons of Market Harborough.

7.3 All of the trial pits were hand excavated and were no larger than was necessary to address the specific structural engineering questions.

7.4 Sections of timber flooring were lifted within the choir stalls on the south side of the chancel (Intervention 3) and within the north gallery (Intervention 4).

7.5 A small section of plaster on lath was removed from the underside of the north gallery (Intervention 5).

7.6 All areas were reinstated by the contractors following completion of the investigations.

8. Results

8.1 The areas of intrusive investigation are shown on Figure 3 and described below as Interventions 1-12.

Intervention 1 (Photos 4-5; Figure x)

8.2 Trial pit located towards the west end of the nave, adjacent to the westernmost pier of the north arcade. Two adjacent 600mm square and 50mm thick concrete paving slabs were lifted to expose the heating duct below. The brick-lined heating duct, on a north-south alignment, was 400mm wide and 550mm deep. The test pit was subsequently extended to the east, partially exposing a massive mortared ironstone foundation on the north side of the pier base, at a depth of 300mm below finished floor level. The deposits overlying this foundation were recent in date and included sheet insulation of expanded foam type.

Intervention 2 (Photo 6; Figure x)

8.3 Trial pit located on the central axis of the nave towards its east end, 1.24m west of the chancel arch. A 600mm square and 50mm thick concrete paving slab was lifted, exposing an east-west aligned heating duct with a branch off to the north. The heating duct was 370mm wide and 460mm deep. The test pit was subsequently extended to the south with the removal of a stone floor slab measuring 550mm x 370mm x 75mm thick. A 350mm square sondage 500mm deep was excavated within this area. The deposit sequence consisted of a sand bedding for the slab to a depth of 200mm below finished floor level, beneath which was an orange-brown sandy clay with inclusions of chalk and unmodified flint fragments, which appeared to be the geological natural ground.

Intervention 3 (Photo 7).

8.4 A *c*.300mm x 100mm section of the tongue and groove timber boarded floor of the choir stall on the south side of the chancel was cut out using an electric saw. The stone-paved floor terminated at approximately 1.8m north of the south wall of the chancel. To the south of this was a void to a depth of 360mm below the level of the stone floor (460mm below the level of the timber floor of the choir stall). The exposed ground was a clean orange coloured sand, possibly the geological natural ground.

Intervention 4 (Photo 8)

8.5 To determine the size of the trimmer supporting the front (south) side of the north gallery and the detail of its fixing to the arcade piers, it was examined from above (Intervention 4) and below (Intervention 5). Intervention 4 also served to expose the joists supporting the gallery and confirm the extent of previous remedial repairs. Loose floorboards were lifted to expose the trimmer and joists from above; this had no adverse impact on historic fabric.

Intervention 5 (Photo 9)

8.6 A section of the ceiling to the underside of the gallery, measuring 160mm x 100mm, was removed adjacent to the second pier from the west end of the north arcade, in order to expose the junction of the trimmer supporting the front of the gallery and the pier. The ceiling at this point consisted of lime plaster on lathe. It was apparent from Intervention 4 that a large part of the ceiling below the gallery had previously

been replaced with plasterboard, when iron strengthening plates were inserted from below to support the gallery floor joists.

Intervention 6 (Photo 10; Figure x)

8.7 Trial pit located against the inside (southern) face of the stone-built boundary wall enclosing the external staircase to the boiler house on the north side of the church. Measuring 500mm x 400mm x 700mm deep, its long axis aligned north-south. This trial pit was intended to determine the foundation depth of the wall along the northern boundary of the church property. A 600mm square and 50mm thick concrete paving slab was lifted against the internal face of the wall. Below this was a mid-brown sandy clay deposit containing stone, brick and mortar fragments, including bricks stamped 'Phorpress', which were manufactured by the London Brick Company (LBC) between 1910 and 1974. This deposit was deeper than the trial pit, which was excavated to a maximum depth of 700mm. The ironstone boundary wall has a brick-built foundation, the base of which is 550mm below the level of the concrete slab floor of the area it encloses.

Intervention 7 (Photos 11-12; Figure x)

8.8 Trial pit located against the external face of the north wall of the north aisle, intended to determine the foundation depth of this wall. The trial pit measured 800mm x 550mm, its long axis aligned north-south. Below the concrete slab surface was a dark brown sandy clay soil, within which was a 5" ceramic drainage pipe of 20th century date. At a depth of 250mm below ground level the footing of the north wall was encountered, projecting out from the wall face by 350mm. This consisted of clay bonded ironstone. The base of the footing was at 680mm below ground level. Beneath this was an orange brown sandy clay with inclusions of chalk and unmodified flint fragments, apparently the geological natural ground.

Intervention 8 (Photo 13; Figure x)

8.9 Trial pit located against the external north-east corner of the north aisle, intended to determine the foundation depth of the wall at this point. The trial pit measured 950mm north-south by between 550mm and 700mm east-west; its maximum depth was 700mm. The deposit sequence consisted of modern block paving on a sand bed to a depth of 200mm, below which was granite mill waste to a depth of 500mm below pavement level, beneath which was an orange-brown sandy clay, apparently the geological natural ground. A projecting ironstone footing to the east wall of the north aisle was exposed at 350mm below pavement level, the base of which was at 0.65m below pavement level. The clay-bonded footing consisted of a large, roughly squared block of ironstone at the corner of the buttress, with smaller, less-regularly shaped pieces above and to the south of this. Further to the south, the foundation courses of the east wall of the north aisle are exposed above the level of the block-paved surface.

Intervention 9 (Photo 14)

8.10 Trial pit located within the boiler house, towards the north-west corner, intended to determine the foundation depth of its brick-built north wall. The trial pit measured 500mm north-south x 300mm east-west x 250mm deep. The excavated deposit

sequence consisted of blue brick paviours 75mm thick laid on a thin levelling bed of clinker, directly overlying the geological natural ground, consisting of a yellow brown coloured clay gravel. The bottom of the north wall of the boiler house was 110mm below the internal floor level.

Intervention 10 (Photo 15)

8.11 Trial pit located against the inside (southern) face of the brick-built retaining wall at the base of the steps down to the boiler house, intended to assess the foundation depth of this wall. The trial pit measured 350mm x 300mm x 250mm deep. Beneath blue brick paviours 75mm thick was a cast iron drainage gulley, below which was clinker make-up/bedding. No archaeology was encountered and the geological natural ground was not exposed in this trial pit. The base of the retaining wall was at 150mm below ground level, corresponding with the level of the same wall in Intervention 9 (above).

Intervention 11 (Photo 16)

8.12 The thickness and construction of the east wall of the north porch was assessed, where it is proposed to form a new doorway opening into the new kitchen extension. This intervention, which involved drilling through the wall to determine its thickness, was not monitored but the external face of this wall was examined and photographed (Photo 16). The internal face is lined with plasterboard and is not visible. The wall is constructed from squared, coursed ironstone rubble and there are no historic architectural features such as windows, doors, string courses, etc., in the area where it is proposed to form the new door opening.

Intervention 12

8.13 A visual assessment was made of the fabric of the south wall of the south aisle, where it is proposed to form a new doorway opening into the upper floor room over the south porch. The south face of this wall is rendered, but the north face is exposed masonry consisting of ironstone rubble. No historic architectural features will be affected by the creation of a new opening at this point, other than the masonry that will be removed.

9. Discussion

9.1 Two trial pits were excavated inside the nave of the church (Interventions 1 & 2). No evidence was seen in either of these for earlier floor levels, although the extent of undisturbed ground that was exposed was limited. A substantial mortared ironstone foundation was partly exposed within one of these trial pits (Intervention 1), at a depth of 300mm below floor finished level. This may have been a footing for the adjacent pier of the north arcade. The full extent and depth of this foundation could not be determined within the constraints of the trial pit.

9.2 Intervention 3 determined that the stone floor of the chancel terminates *c*. 1.8m west of the internal face of the east wall. This may reflect the position of earlier choir stalls that were narrower than the extant stalls.

9.3 Interventions 4 & 5 served to clarify details of the construction and fixing of the north gallery. According to Pevsner the galleries within the north and south aisles were installed in 1836 and extended to the east in 1844 (Pevsner and Williamson 1992, 306). The delicate gallery staircases are presumably also of 1836. Conversion of the north gallery into a multi-use meeting room/creche will involve removal of the box pews which are also attributable to 1836 and/or 1844 (Photo 8).

9.4 Two of the external trial pits (Interventions 7 & 8) served to clarify the depth of the north and east wall foundations of the north aisle, which are relatively shallow. The bottom of the north wall foundation, exposed in the Intervention 7 trial pit, was 1.30m below the underside of the ogee-shaped string course that runs around the north aisle. The bottom of the east wall foundation, as exposed in the Intervention 8 trial pit, was 1.06m below the underside of the same string course. No buried archaeological remains were encountered in either of these trial pits, with recent deposits directly overlying the geological natural ground in both.

9.5 The depth of the north wall foundation of the north aisle and east wall foundation of the north porch are also apparent from within the boiler house, where these walls are underpinned by the brickwork of the later boiler house walls (Photos 17-18).

9.6 No archaeological remains were exposed within any of the other test pits (Interventions 6, 9 & 10). It is probable that any buried archaeological remains within the footprint of the boiler house and its external staircase would have been destroyed by the construction of this subterranean structure. The possibility of buried archaeological remains surviving in the area to the east of the boiler house, in the narrow strip of land on the north side of the north aisle, cannot be discounted.

9.7 The proposal to form a doorway in the east wall of the north porch will not impact on any features of particular historic architectural significance (Intervention 11). Similarly the proposal to form a new doorway in the south wall of the south aisle, opening into the room above the south porch, will not impact on any features of particular historic architectural significance (Intervention 12).

9.8 The trial pits and other areas of investigation were reinstated by the building contractors following completion of the work.

10. Archive

10.1 The project archive will be deposited with Leicestershire Museums Service under accession number: TBC.

11. Publication

11.1 A report on the results of the investigation will be submitted for publication in a suitable regional or national archaeological journal within one year of completion of fieldwork. The length and content of the report will reflect the significance of the archaeological discoveries.

12. Bibliography

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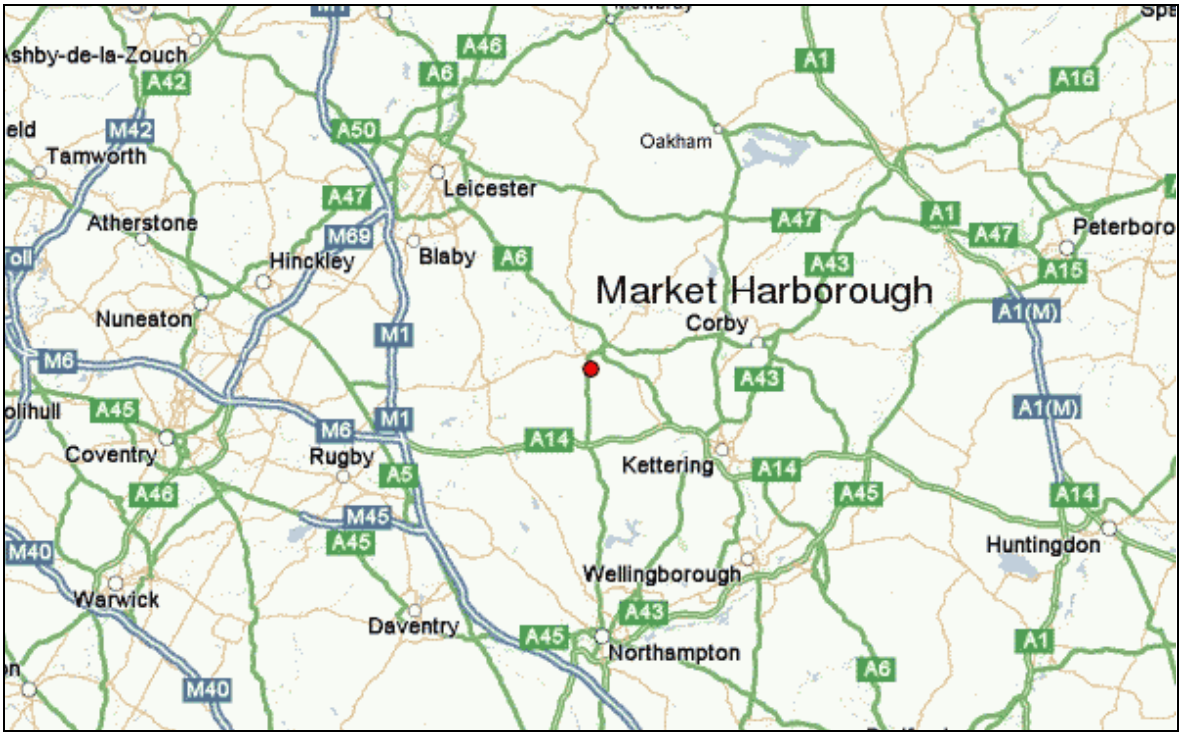

Figure 1. General Location Plan of Market Harborough (red dot).

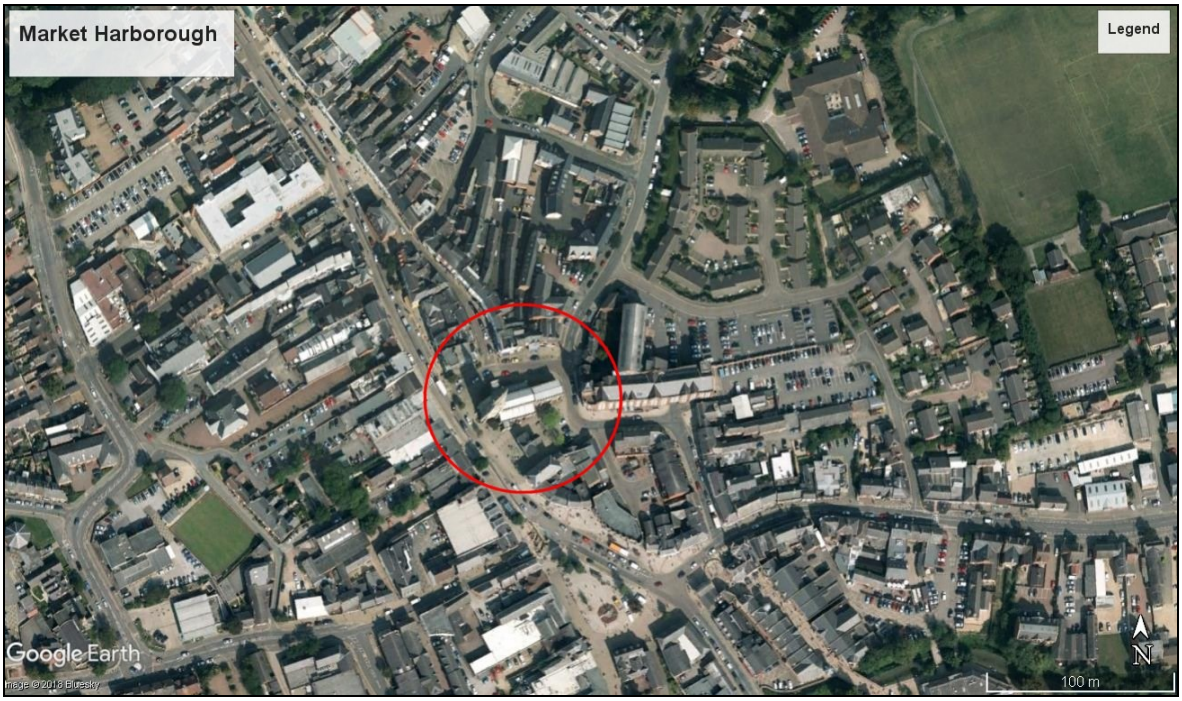

Figure 2. Location Plan, Church of St Dionysius circled (Google Earth).

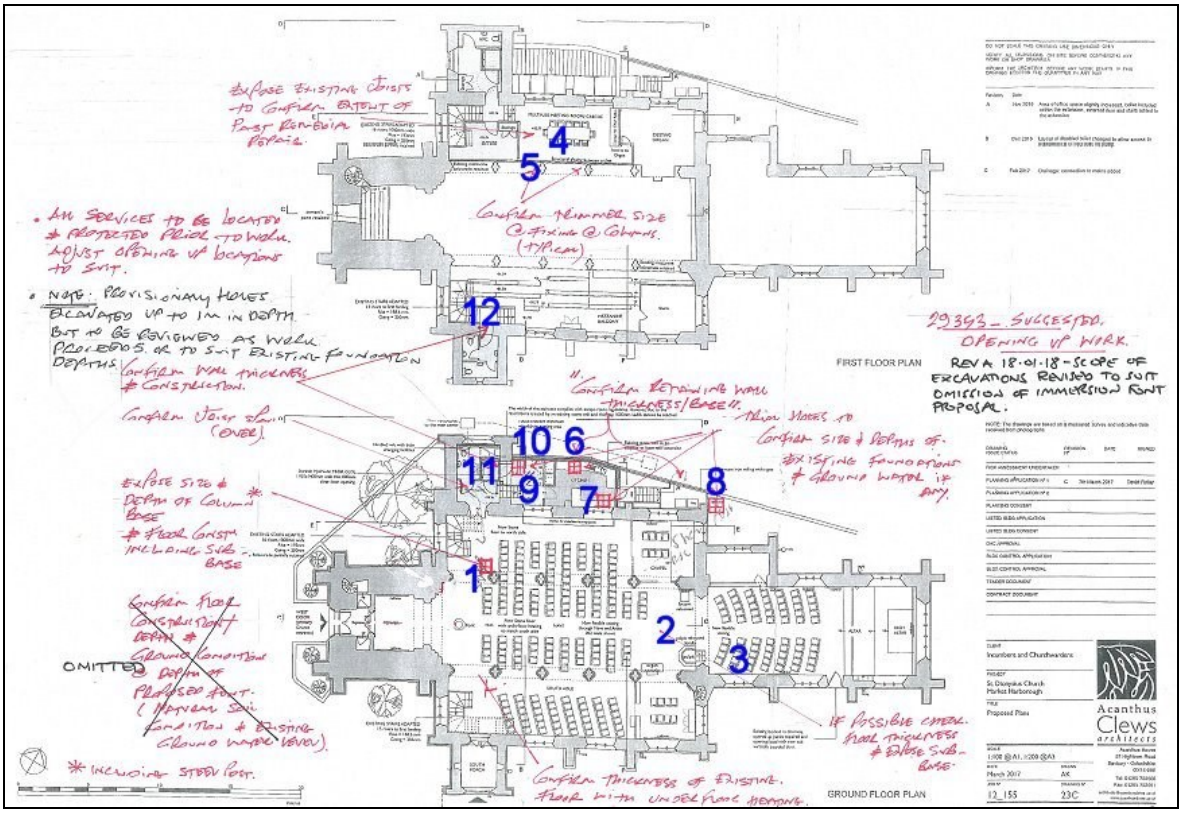

Figure 3. Location of investigation areas (Interventions 1-11). Plan supplied by David Spragg.

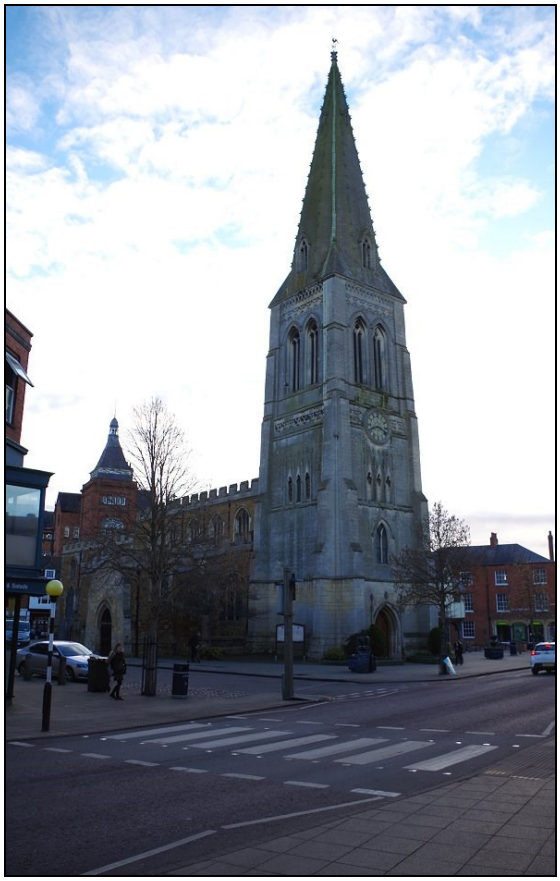

Photo 1. Church of St Dionysius, Market Harborough, looking SE.

Photo 2. North aisle and porch, looking SE.

Photo 3. View E along nave towards chancel during excavation of test pit (Intervention 2).

Photo 4. Intervention 1: Showing heating duct & stone footing below pier base, looking SE.

Photo 5. Intervention 1: Detail of mortared ironstone footing below pier base, looking SE.

Photo 6. Intervention 2: Heating duct (left) and geological natural ground (right), looking E.

Photo 7. Intervention 3: Opening in floor of choir stalls on south side of chancel, looking SE.

Photo 8. Box pews in N gallery, looking E. Intervention 4 involved lifting loose floor boards.

Photo 9. Intervention 5: Plaster removed from ceiling below N gallery, looking S.

Photo 10. Intervention 6: Trial pit excavated through 20th century made ground, looking N.

Photo 11. Intervention 7: Trial pit against exterior of north wall of north aisle, looking S.

Photo 12. Intervention 7: Detail showing stepped footing to north wall of north aisle.

Photo 13. Intervention 8: Footing exposed at north-east corner of north aisle, looking SW.

Photo 14. Intervention 9: Geological natural ground exposed within boiler room, looking N.

Photo 15. Intervention 10: trial pit looking N.

Photo 16. External face of east wall of north porch, looking W.

Photo 17. Brick-built south wall of boiler house underpinning stonework of north wall of north aisle, looking SW.

Photo 18. Brick-built west wall of boiler house underpinning stonework of east wall of north porch, looking W.