

Watching Brief

St Lucia's Church, Upton Magna, Shropshire

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Non-technical summary

A programme of archaeological works involving a standard watching brief was undertaken at St Lucia's Church, Upton Magna, Shropshire during the installation of rain-water drainage trenches, a soakaway and the excavation of two small postholes for the erection of a sign. All ground-breaking activity was watched by an archaeologist and all archaeological deposits or features were sufficiently recorded. The brief was to cause minimal disturbance to any human remains encountered. In summary, two articulated burials were encountered, one of which was below the level of impact and was, therefore, left *in situ*; whilst the other was within the area of impact and was excavated. In addition, what are thought to be six partial graves were encountered in the sections of the drainage trench and isolated bone fragments were encountered throughout. All the human bone collected was suitably stored and remained within the church grounds for reburial.

1. Introduction

1.1 A programme of archaeological works was carried out at St Lucia's Church, Upton Magna, Shropshire consisting of a watching brief on the ground-breaking activities associated with the installation of rain-water drainage, a soakaway and the excavation of two postholes for the erection of a sign. The works took place from the 12th to the 15th of August 2019.

1.2 The work was carried out by Jack Rowe (BSc) under the supervision of Caroline Rosen (BSc, MA, PhD).

1.2 The works focused on the ground immediately adjacent to the southern elevation of the church building and to the south-west of the building (Fig. 1). A watching brief was required as the drainage trenches, soakaway and post-holes were being excavated within the church graveyard. The brief required minimal disturbance to any *in situ* human remains encountered, and where such graves were unavoidably encountered, excavation of these was to proceed.

1.3 Two full graves and six partial graves were encountered. One of the full graves was observed in the bottom of the trench and was therefore left *in situ*, apart from the removal of a few bone fragments which had been disturbed. The second full grave necessitated excavation. The six partial graves are presumed to be full graves, though during excavation only part of these were exposed in the trench. Any bone fragments which had become dislodged from the graves were removed. In addition, many isolated bone fragments were observed within the excavated material from the drainage trench and soakaway, these were collected.

1.4 The Church of St Lucia's has a long history dating back to at least the 12th century AD. Both the nave and chancel were built at this time, however only parts of the original building survive. The tower was built in the late 15th century. Substantial rebuilding and enriching were undertaken in the mid-nineteenth century by the architect G E Street (PRN 13389).

2. Geology and soils

2.1 The British Geological Survey have classified the bedrock geology at Upton Magna as the Bridgnorth Sandstone Formation and the superficial geology is classified as Devensian till deposits. The soils encountered in the churchyard comprised a dark blackish-brown sandy-silt topsoil (100) with occasional small sub-angular stones and was approximately 0.35 m thick. This overlay a brownish-brown clayey sand subsoil deposit (101) approximately 1.15 meters thick. At approximately 1.50 meters below the surface and occurring beneath the subsoil was an orangey-red slightly silty sand with occasional sub-angular to sub-rounded mediums sized stones (103) (this deposit was only revealed in the base of the soakaway trench).

3. Methods

3.1 The archaeological programme of work detailed herein was carried out in accordance with recognised sources of professional guidance, including *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (CIfA 2014a) and *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* (MoRPHE) (HE 2015). Caroline Rosen and Jack Rowe adhere to the *CIfA Code of Conduct* (CIfA 2014b).

3.2 The programme of archaeological works at St Lucia's Church, Upton Magna comprised a standard archaeological watching brief. The rain-water drainage trench and soakaway were excavated systematically using a mechanical excavator with toothless bucket and by hand where access was problematic. All works were subject to archaeological observation and features and deposits of archaeological interest were identified during this process.

3.3 All features and deposits were recorded using the standard recording procedure of *pro forma* context sheets, plans and sections (where appropriate), photographs and sketches. The fragmented human remains were collected for reburial. The single articulated skeleton which was excavated was stored separately to the fragmented bone.

4. Results

4.1 The rain-water drainage trench was excavated along the southern elevation of St Lucia's Church. The main drainage trench was approximately 450mm deep and between 300-400mm wide and extended for a distance of approximately 31 meters east-west. In addition, five trenches were excavated (Gullies 1-5), running perpendicular to the church building and intercepting the main drainage trench (Fig 1).

4.2 The soil removed from this trench was largely homogenous consisting (101) a mid-brownish-brown clayey sand. Overlying this was an anthropogenic gravel layer forming a path/surface around the Church. Isolated fragments of human bone were found throughout (101) and collected for reburial. Only two very small pieces of post-medieval pottery and a very small fragment of clay pipe were recovered from the trench immediately in front of the church porch.

4.3 The current drainage trenches were intended to follow the line of a pre-existing trench which was revealed to have been brick/tile lined. As this pre-existing trench was dug by hand, it did not follow a straight trajectory and its depth/fall was not compatible with modern drainage needs. As such, it was necessary to deviate from its path at times, resulting in the excavation of undisturbed deposits.

4.4 Two burials were observed within the east-west orientated trench running parallel to the church building (Fig. 1). Skeleton 1 (SK1) was observed at the bottom of the trench (0.5 meters below ground level), just beyond the limit of impact and was therefore left *in situ* (Fig. 2). A few bone fragments were disturbed, however, and these were removed. From what could be observed, the skeleton was articulated, measuring 1.07 meters long and was orientated east-west with the cranium positioned to the west. No discernible grave cut was visible, however there were some patches of reddish staining and the soil immediately adjacent to the skeleton was less compacted.

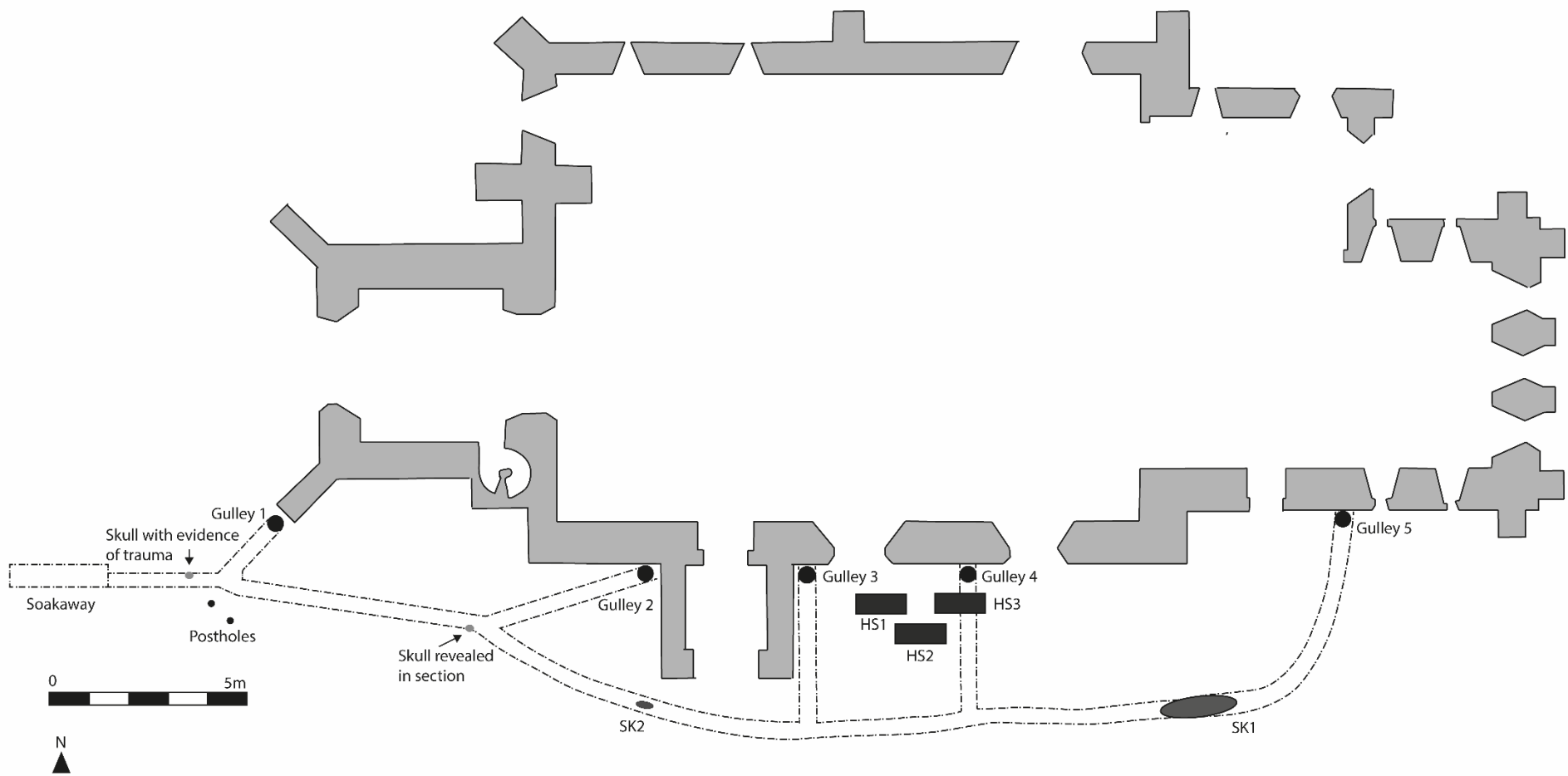


Figure 1 Plan showing the drainage trench, soakaway, postholes and skeletal remains locations



Figure 2 Skeleton 1 (SK1). The cranium visible is in the west.

4.5 A second burial (SK2) was revealed to the south-west of the church porch (Fig. 3). This burial was within the impacted area, approximately 0.5 meters below ground level, and, therefore, it was necessary to excavate this individual to reach a suitable fall in depth to facilitate drainage. The skeleton was that of an infant, measuring approximately 0.39 meters in length with a maximum width of 0.13 meters. The preservation of this individual was fair, with all bones present apart from the majority of the smaller bones of the extremities. However, the bones were fragile and despite careful handling, some broke during excavation. No grave cut was visible, however the soil immediately around the skeleton was less compacted. Green staining, consistent with degraded copper alloy, was observed in the area where the bones of the extremities were and may represent the remains of a brass or bronze item of coffin furniture. These remains were stored separately from the fragmented bone collected from other areas of the site.



Figure 3 Skeleton 2 (SK2). The cranium visible is in the west.

4.6 In addition to the two full graves observed (SK1 and 2), part of a cranium was observed within the section edge of the main drainage trench where the trench from Gulley 2 intercepted it (Fig. 1). As this was only partially revealed it was left *in situ*. It is unclear whether this represents an isolated fragment or part of an articulated burial. A skull was also recovered from the main drainage trench

where Gulley 1 intercepted it. This skull had evidence of trauma in the form of cutmarks and a possible bullet wound (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 Photograph of cranium with evidence of trauma found at the intersection of the main drainage trench and Gulley 1.

4.7 Three recumbent headstones were observed on the surface to the east of the Church porch, orientated east-west (Fig. 1 and 5). The original plans suggested locating the Gulley 4 trench diagonally to intercept the main drainage trench by the church porch. As this would have necessitated moving two of the headstones, the Gulley 4 trench was moved to meet the main drainage trench at a perpendicular angle and, therefore, only necessitating the removal of one of the headstones. As such, headstone 3 was lifted and placed against the church wall to facilitate the excavation of the trench leading from Gulley 4 to the main drainage trench. No inscriptions were visible on either side of the headstone. It is possible that these three headstones represent a previous episode of graveyard clearance as no grave was associated with it and it is not uncommon to place removed headstones near to the church.



Figure 5 Three recumbent headstones to the east of the Church porch.

4.8 A soakaway measuring approximately 0.60 x 2.5 meters and to a maximum depth of 1.5 meters was excavated approximately 3 meters from the south-west corner of the church building (Fig. 1). The sequence of soil encountered were slightly different comprising an upper turf/topsoil horizon (100) approximately 0.35 meters thick. This overlay (101) the subsoil deposit encountered in the drainage trenches. At the very base of the soakaway an orangey-red slightly silty sand with occasional sub-angular to sub-rounded mediums sized stones (103) was observed and corresponds to the natural geology of the site.

4.9 The soakaway trench encountered four partial burials in each of its sides. In order to cause minimal disturbance to these burials, the depth of the trench was stepped-up by 0.5 meters in the west. Although minimal disturbance was caused to these burials, some bone fragments were dislodged and were, therefore, collected.

4.10 The burials are believed to represent *in situ* graves due to the regularity of their positioning and orientation. However, as these were only partially revealed in section it is unclear as to their integrity. These burials were at a much deeper depth than those from the main drainage trench being encountered at approximately 1 meter below the surface.

4.11 Finally, two postholes were excavated near to the junction of Gulley 2 and the main drainage trench for the erection of a sign (Fig. 1). The postholes measured 0.2 x 0.2 meters and were approximately 0.5 meters deep. No finds or human bone were recovered.

5. Summary conclusions

5.1 The discovery of human remains was expected given the location of works in the southern section of the churchyard. The remit was to cause minimal disturbance to any remains encountered and this was achieved for all of the burials/suspected burials apart from the infant burial (SK2) found near the church porch. The two burials (SK1 and 2) were interred in an east-west orientation, typical of Christian burials. From what could be observed, this also seems likely for the other five partial burials.

5.2 Generally, the skeletal remains appeared to be in a reasonable state of preservation given the sandy and, therefore acidic, geology. No coffins or coffin furniture was preserved, apart from the green staining present around the foot area of SK2 which may have been the degraded remains of copper alloy coffin furniture. Given the level of preservation, it seems likely that the human remains encountered are not of any great antiquity and probably date to the post-medieval period. However, this could only be confirmed with scientific dating.

6. References

CIfA (2014a) *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief*. The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists.

CIfA (2014b) *Code of Conduct*. The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists.

HE (2015) *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)*. Historic England