

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
DURING CONSTRUCTION OF
EXTERNAL STEPS AT
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
CHURCH, WITLEY COURT,
GREAT WITLEY, WORCESTERSHIRE

WSM 73343



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Archaeological Watching Brief during construction of external steps at St Michael and All Angels Church, Witley Court, Great Witley, Worcestershire

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1 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Witley Church (St Michael and All Angels) by Mike Napthan Archaeology in July 2020. A set of wooden sleeper steps is being constructed on the southern side of the church to provide improved access to the fire exit doorway at the east end of the church.

The new steps lie in an area to the south east of the church immediately behind the retaining wall of the western service yard of Witley Court; the service yard is approximately 10m lower than current church-yard ground level to the west of the wall. The nature and height of the brick-built multi-phase retaining wall strongly suggests that there would have been a substantial construction cut (or "batter") within the churchyard boundary to permit safe construction of the retaining wall.

During the late 20th Century a fire exit doorway was provided at the east end of the church; this opens onto a metal framed platform suspended over the service yard approximately 10m below. Access from the fire exit platform to the church yard is via an artificially formed earthen ramp built along the back of the retaining wall in the 1980s. The archaeological watching brief was undertaken during construction of steps down the flank of the earthen ramp.

The observed works impacted only on the earthen ramp built as part of the fire-exit scheme, and consisted of shallow excavations (maximum 0.5m deep) into the turfed bank to create a flight of timber fronted earthen steps. Only the bottom-most step was cut below the general original (18th Century) surface level of the churchyard; the remainder of the steps were cut into the modern fire exit ramp.

As the observed works did not impinge below 20th Century topsoil horizons no archaeologically significant deposits were observed. The late 20th C exit ramp appeared to have been constructed (or clad with) imported sandy brown loam. The core of the ramp was not seen. The excavations were too small and shallow to reveal the extent of the likely construction cut for the 19th Century retaining wall construction.

No significant artefacts were observed.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The country house complex at Witley Court includes the parish church of St Michaels and All Angels (SO 76950 64978). A watching brief (WSM73343) was undertaken during construction of steps in the churchyard to the south-east of the church. Planning Consent has

been granted for construction of the steps (MH 19/01129/FUL) The recording was undertaken by Mike Napthan Archaeology on behalf of the parish council. Witley Court has a long and complex history which has significantly influenced the neighbouring church, the buildings being physically linked by the 18th Century with a corridor from the first floor of the house to the eastern end of the church. There is a very large deeply sunken service yard between the east end of the church and the main house. In the 1860's the church was largely remodelled in the Italianate style and re-faced in Bath stone by Samuel Daukes.

- 2.2 Witley Court, and the 18th Century Church are both Grade I listed buildings, and many of the outbuildings and garden ornaments are also listed. These are mainly listed Grade II, but the Curved Link block and the Triton fountain are both Grade II*, and the Perseus and Andromeda fountain is itself separately Grade I Listed.

3 Method

- 3.1 A single site visit was undertaken on 20th July 2020 during hand excavation of steps into the flank of the existing fire exit ramp. No significant deposits were observed, and the extent of the works were recorded photographically and on plan.



Location of new steps on flank of fire exit ramp (view facing north)

- 3.2 Limited historical research was undertaken to determine the principal phases of church construction and its setting in the well documented estate of Witley Court. The estate as a whole has been subject to numerous previous archaeological interventions, principally related to the main house and garden features
- 3.3 Previous work archaeological work in the immediate area of the churchyard included a possible watching brief by unknown persons on works for the construction of steps to the north of the church 13/00841/FUL

4 Historical background

- 4.1 As befits a house of Witley Court's obvious stature and long history, it has often been mentioned in local and regional histories of the area and in several architectural books. There are also several illustrations of the house showing it in its various phases since c.1700.
- 4.2 Both Witley Court and the church are described in typical brief but concise detail in Pevsner's Worcestershire volume of his Buildings of England series, published in 1968, and mention is made of the medieval undercroft at the heart of the house. The listing details, up-dated in the early 1980's, provide a description of the upstanding remains of the Court, Church and surrounding buildings including the fountains. There is no attempt to analyse its development, and the undercroft is considered to be 'C15 undercroft of earlier manor house'; the Hereford Archaeology Unit have more recently dated it to the 13th or possibly very early 14th century.
- 4.3 The Listing description for the church is as follows:

6/83 Church of St Michael 29.7.59 CV I

Parish church. Consecrated 1735, refaced c1860. Attributed to Gibbs for Thomas, first Lord Foley, refaced by S W Daukes for Lord Ward, later first Earl of Dudley. Brick core, Bathstone refacing, slate roof. Rectangular in plan with shallow projections to north and south of east end, forming transepts, west porch. Baroque. Moulded plinth, rusticated quoins, listel cornice and balustraded parapet with urn finials to corner and intermediate dice. Keyed semi-circular arched windows with moulded impost string, recessed panels to pilasters, and bracketed sills. West entrance elevation: 2 storeys, 3 bays; central slightly forward break defined by quoins, square bell tower over with open arcaded octagonal cupola, pedimented porch supported on Tuscan columns, ground floor windows with slightly cambered keyed heads. South lateral elevation: 1:3:1 bays, projecting eastern bay and bay to west defined by quoins, windows to east end bay and central 3 arched windows with keyed hoodmoulds, bracketed sills and pilasters in arched recesses with keyed hoods continued from label strings, Venetian window to east end. Interior: with west gallery and central organ housing richly decorated in an Italian manner with gilded rococo style stuccoed ornament arranged in panels to the walls and window reveals, coved ceiling with triangular penetrations above windows of papier maché with similar gilded enrichments, ceiling paintings by Antonio Bellucci; main central painting of the Ascension flanked by the Nativity and the Deposition; a further twenty small medallions also decorate the ceiling; signed stained glass in the windows by Joshua Price of York, with dates 1719-1721 from designs by Francesco Sleter (or Slater). The ceiling paintings and stained glass were acquired by the second Lord Foley from the chapel of the Duke of Chandos at Canons in 1747, the gilded ornament in stucco and papier mache were copied from the originals at Canons. The work at Canons was by the stuccadore Pietro Martire Baquitti. Wooden pews and pulpit attributed to Daukes, the pulpit incorporates a piece of C18 stair-rail; white marble font by James Forsyth, circular bowl supported by 3 kneeling figures; organ case in west gallery also acquired from Canons. Monuments: north transept signed by Rysbrack c1743 commemorates first Lord Foley, white marble base surmounted by grey marble sarcophagus and obelisk with seven figures in classical dress; reclining figure of Lord Foley with woman and child above sarcophagus flanked by allegorical figures and 2 further figures above on draped support and flanking urn; heraldic ornament towards summit of obelisk; south transept: tablet commemorates Thomas Foley died 1677, black and white marble with two columns and swan-necked pediment over segmental one, central inscription panel. An earlier church stood a short distance further west of present church. A gate pier at western driveway is reputed to be a surviving section of this building (not included). (BoE; VCH, Vol IV: Great Witley Church, Rev Canon J G Barnish, MA). Listing NGR: SO7695064978

- 4.4 In 1733, Lord and Lady Foley (the then owners of Witley Court) petitioned the Bishop of Worcester to knock down the mediaeval church that stood some 100 yards from the court

and rebuild a new church so that it was physically attached to the court. Permission was granted and the new St Michael and All Angels (a rather plain edifice designed reputedly by Gibbs) was erected and consecrated by 1735. Lady Foley with her son, the 2nd Lord Foley filled the church with spectacular paintings and windows of the Italianate Baroque period which they had purchased in 1747 from Cannons, the Duke of Chandos' Estate in Edgware. Apart from the ceiling paintings by Belucci, there is the only complete set of ten Joshua Price windows. There is also a funerary monument by Rysbach

- 4.5 When the Foley family sold the court in 1837 to Lord Ward, a wealthy industrialist, the court gained a royal connection. The Prince of Wales was a great friend and would often be a guest at Witley Court. Also Queen Adelaide was a guest for 2 years (1842-4). In each case, they would most certainly have worshipped in the church. Lord Ward (the Earl of Dudley) also lavished money on the church. It was he who took out the old pews and replaced them with oak ones with ornately carved heads, each to a slightly different design in a restrained baroque style. He also commissioned the Forsythe Brothers to carve a new Pulpit and Font in a classically Baroque style.
- 4.6 The 1860s re-facing of the church appears to have included substantial alterations to the roof, which had possibly been previously altered in circa 1747 to allow insertion of the Italianate ceiling from Cannons. The present roof structure is certainly of at least four principal phases, the earliest elements of which are likely to be of circa 1735. These elements are not readily discernible in terms of form or technical advancements from the likely 1747 alterations, but the earliest timbers appear to be Baltic softwood (Memel or Dantzig slow grown fir) and there is at least one purlin that has been adze trimmed and bears part of a Baltic timber-merchant's mark (incised with a raze-knife). Such marks only survive on timber that has not been further reduced in scantling after arrival in Britain, so absence on other timbers, (particularly trusses) may be accounted for by the timbers being trued up in the carpenters yard. The sandwich form of the roof (with trusses overlaid and underlaid by later framing and tie-beams concealed by girders) makes any interpretation of the core structure fraught with difficulty as the timbers are not very visible. The church was modernized in the 1860s, by removal of the box-pews and the Foley family pew that had been provided with a fireplace, a new organ was also installed at this time (Worcestershire Chronicle 10th October 1860, p5).



Area prior to excavation

5 Observations

- 5.1 The turf was manually stripped and a series of five shallow steps excavated into the underlying topsoil; a deeper level slot at the front of each step was cut to provide space for concrete bedding beneath the oak sleepers which form the risers.
- 5.2 The topsoil contained small amounts of slate, flower-pot , clay tobacco pipe stem, mid 20th Century brick, concrete fragments, tarmac and white china; no significant artefacts were observed. The soil matrix was a light brown friable slightly clayey sandy loam, apparently imported to the site as a topsoil cover for the fire-exit ramp.
- 5.3 No subsoil or graveyard soils were observed; no cut features were observed; all deposits were consistent with relatively recent deposition (post 1970s).



View of excavation for new steps facing north



6 Interpretation

- 6.1 The construction of the new steps did not impinge below modern surface and ramp make-up levels. Whilst a precise date for the fire-exit ramp construction has not been determined it is likely to date to the mid-late 1980s or later – the fire exit doorway being inaccessible without its associated metal platform and ramp. The ramp clearly post dates three phases of brick retaining wall which directly support it and the plinth of the 18th Century Church.
- 6.2 The core of the ramp was not seen but a core make-up of hardcore/broken tarmac and rubble would seem highly probable. The ramp lies immediately behind the retaining wall and is likely to overlie an area of 19th C infilling, representing the construction cut for the retaining wall/service yard. Given the depth of the service yard it is highly probable that the eastern edge of the churchyard was cut back to a sloping batter at least several yards wide to facilitate construction of the retaining wall.
- 6.3 The archaeological potential of this area of the church-yard would appear to be extremely low, and essentially limited to residual artefacts within the construction cut for the retaining wall. The fire -exit ramp along the eastern boundary of the churchyard appears to have been created with imported materials in the late 20th Century.



Retaining wall and sunken service yard of Witley Court immediately to east of fire exit ramp

7 **Bibliography**

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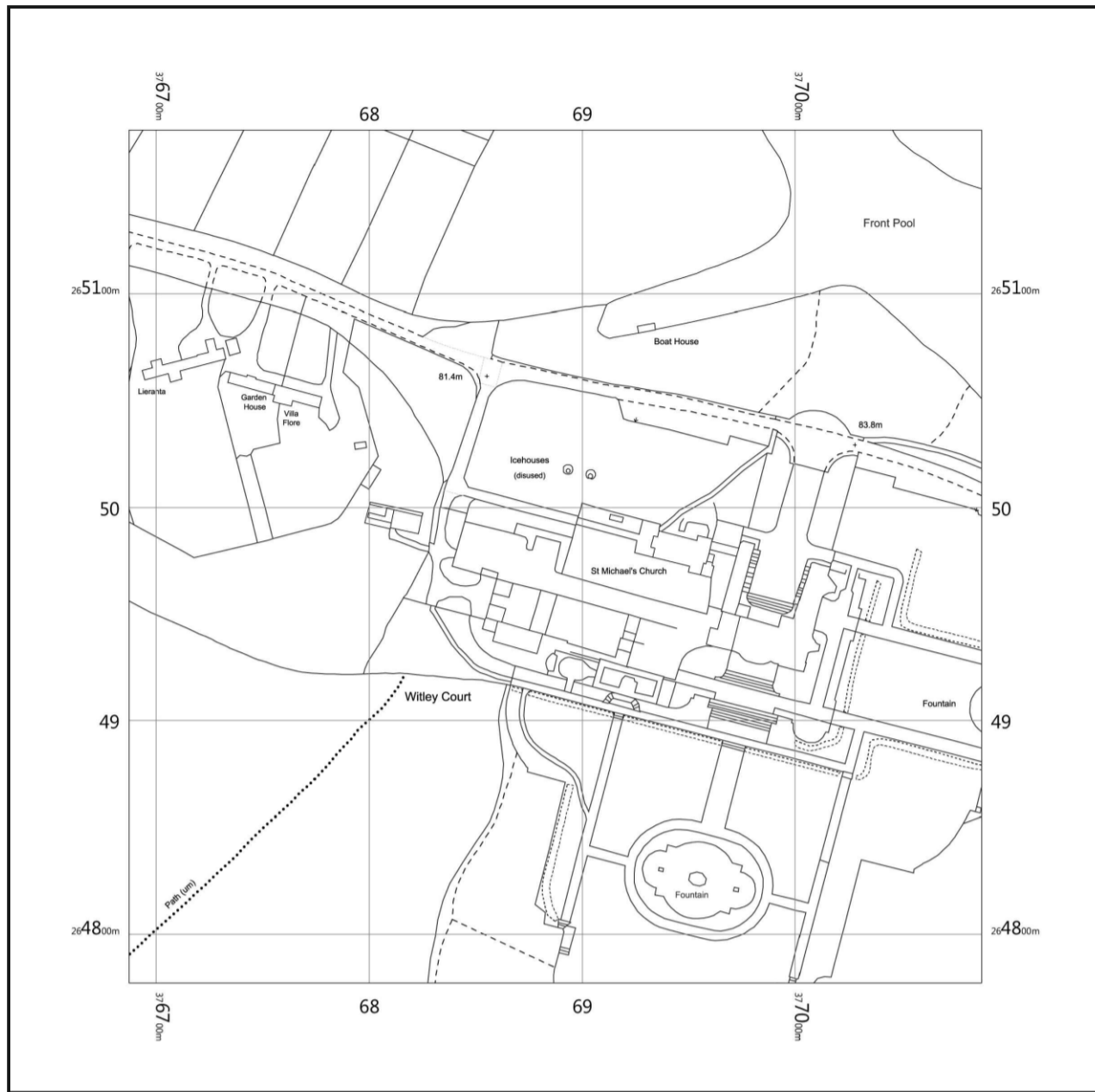
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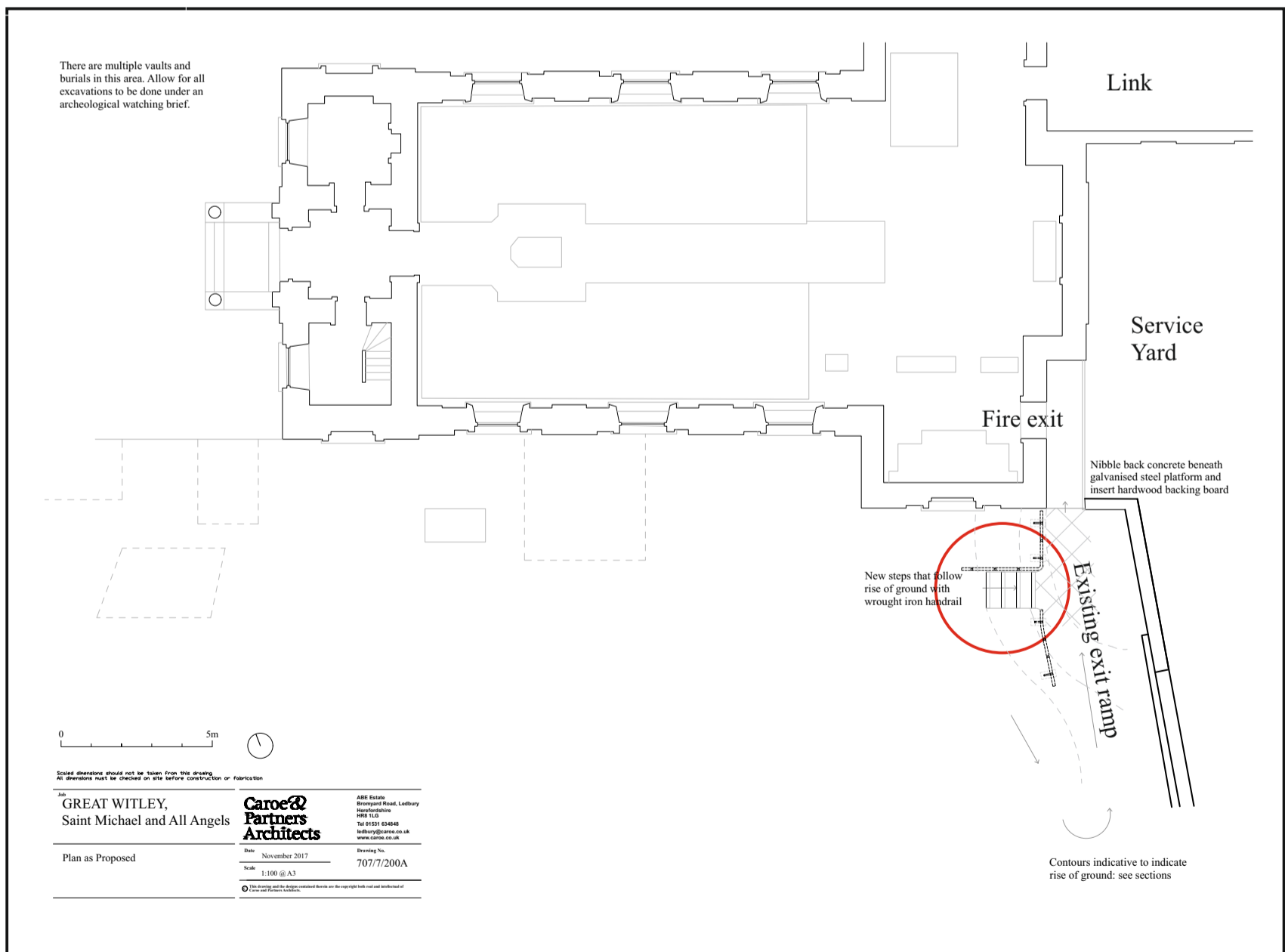
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8 **Acknowledgements**

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Location



Site plan