

# Interim Report

## on the replacement of the nave floor of St Edburg's Church, Bicester, March 2020



Christopher Young, MA, DPhil, FSA  
23 London Road  
Bicester OX26 6BU

[youngoakthorpe@btinternet.com](mailto:youngoakthorpe@btinternet.com)

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## **Abstract**

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out in St Edburg's Church, Bicester, in March/April 2020 during lockdown, on works to replace the suspended raised timber pew platforms in the nave, dating to 1862, with a new suspended floor at the same level as the rest of the nave and aisle floor. It was known from earlier work in 2013 (Mundin 2013) that the floors were suspended over a void and that the new floors could be installed without any disturbance of archaeological deposits. No works were carried out in the north or south aisles or elsewhere in the church.*

*The removal of the floors exposed the footings of the north and south aisle walls which had been reused to support the piers of the aisle arcades which had been cut through the aisle walls. The outer faces of the walls were not seen and the inner faces were faced with stone blocks; probably the walls had rubble cores.*

*The 1862 pew platform had been created by digging out the void and revetting its sides with brick dwarf walls with air spaces. The north-south floor joists were supported on the dwarf walls and on small dwarf brick piers down the centre of each part of the void on either side of the central tile-walk.*

*Evidence of the heating system installed in 1862 was discovered. It had been a hot-air system heated from a boiler under the north aisle with very large ducts and metal grilles in the tile walks. It was later converted to a hot-water system, the pipes of which were placed in the same ducts.*

*The only significant find was a grave marker for Robert Smith who died in 1837.*

## **Introduction**

St Edburg's Church is the historic church of the town of Bicester. Though possibly originating as a Saxon minster, the earliest parts of the surviving building are Norman when the church was rebuilt as a cross shaped church with a central crossing. The south aisle was added in the C13th and the north aisle in the C14th. The west tower is C15th. The church underwent a very thorough restoration in 1862 which, among other works, removed the galleries around the church along with all the box pews, and inserted new windows in appropriate style at the east ends of the chancel and the south aisle. The whole church interior, apart from the choir and the sacristy was filled with wooden pews placed on raised timber pew platforms. These have been removed in stages over much of the last century (see Buxton, Hathaway and King 2010).

In March 2020, at the beginning of the first Covid lockdown, the pews and pew platforms in the nave were removed (see Cribbes 2020). The pew platform had rotted in places and was in a poor state of repair. It was replaced by a new suspended timber floor at the same level as the tiled walkways installed during the 1862 restoration of the church. A watching brief of the floor works was carried out. Some initial observation of the 1862 heating system was also made and some radiators were moved.

Some information on what was below the existing pew platforms was available from test pits dug by Thames Valley Archaeological Services in 2013 (Mundin 2013). Three test pits were dug – TP1 in the nave crossing, TP2 at the west end of the pew platform north of the central tiled walkway, and TP3 at the west end of the pew platform in the south aisle (Mundin 2013, 3-5, Figs 3, 4, Plates 1, 2). All showed that the pew platforms were suspended on timber joists over a void between 0.28m (TP1) and 0.35m (TP2, TP3) deep. In all three test pits, TVAS said that they had found a concrete surface at the base of the void, which they assumed had been constructed during the 1862 restoration. Similar findings were observed

when the (then) Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out trenching in the north aisle in 1984 (Durham 1984)

On the basis of this information, it was decided that all work necessary to replace the floors could be carried out within the voids left by the Victorian reconstruction and that there would be no disturbance of existing fabric or archaeological deposits below the void. It was agreed that a watching brief by an archaeologist would be sufficient and this was carried out while works were in progress by Dr Christopher Young, a member of the congregation, formerly a Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Head of International Advice at English Heritage. An initial note on the results was published in *Contact*, the parish magazine of the Bicester Team Ministry (Young 2020).

### **Results of the Watching Brief**

The building work was essentially the replacement of the suspended timber floors of the two pew platforms installed in 1862 by another suspended timber floor at a slightly lower level to provide a new level floor in the nave of the church. Some work was also done to the heating system to re site some of the radiators. All work was carried out within the void created in 1862, and there was no disturbance of archaeological deposits or structures. Possibly for this reason, the concrete layer reported by Muddin was not observed, and it may have been more obvious in section than in plan. No work was carried out within the crossing since pews there had been removed and the floor renewed when the platform for the nave altar was installed in 1994 (see Fig 1).

The eastern limit of the work was therefore within the 1862 floor void. The western limit of the work was the west end of the void. To the north and south, the edge of the 1862 void followed the edge of the tiled walkways installed in 1862. These came out to surround the column bases of both nave arcades so that there are series of rectangular projections into the void. The new floor follows the same plan (see cover picture). The work was observed archaeologically and records were made of features visible once the old floor structure had been removed and the debris left in the void in 1862 had been removed (see Figs 3 and 4)

### The walls of the nave

The earliest features found are the footings of the north and south walls of the nave from the early 12th century which were subsequently used to support the columns of the south and north aisles. The fact that an external string course with zig-zag ornament from the nave north wall survives at high level **above** the north aisle arcade (see Fig 2) shows that the openings were cut through the earlier wall and the columns and arches were inserted into the standing wall. The inner faces of both the south and north wall footings were observed. The outer faces were not seen and must lie under the Victorian tiled walkways. On the south side, the visible width of the wall is 1.2m from the edge of the tiled walkway, and on the north side 1.05m.

The wall footings were best preserved on the south side; where between the second and third pillars from the east the top few centimetres of the facing stones were seen (Figs. 5, 6). The largest stone is over 0.5 x 0.35m while the others are around 0.4m along the wall face. The remains suggest that the wall has a rubble core set in sandy mortar which obscured the rear faces of the facing stones. The reason for the better survival of the wall in this bay is not clear, but it is possible to trace the footings of the south nave wall for the whole length of its exposure.

On the north side of the nave, the wall footings of the north nave wall were observed. Here the south-west pier of the nave crossing is extended to include a triangular headed opening which has been claimed as Saxon. The whole alignment of the north and south faces of this

pier are at a slight angle to the overall alignment of the north aisle arcade and the footings of the north wall of the nave. The facing of this pier appears to drop vertically as opposed to the other piers in this arcade which appear to sit on the wall footings. The difference in alignment and the apparent greater depth of the pier foundations may suggest that it is a survivor from an earlier building, which would also account for its different alignment and the incorporation within it of the triangular-headed opening to the north of the nave. Equally these facts could just indicate the role of this pier as one support of the putative crossing tower. While the remains of the north nave wall footings are less diagnostic than those of the south nave wall, the wall is clearly there with a mortary matrix and an apparent face, of which the top course of facing stones may have been robbed, around 1.05m from the edge of the tiled walkway (Fig 6).

#### The construction of the 1862 pew platform

The underfloor void was created in 1862 by digging out the pre-existing deposits to create air space below the timber floor. A dwarf brick wall, two courses high, was constructed around the void following the edge of the tiled walkways in the centre of the nave and in the north and south aisles. They may have been intended as revetment to the tile walks, and they certainly acted as supports for the joists of the Victorian floor. The tiled walkways themselves are higher than this revetment and they lie on a base made up of small stones. The lower course of the dwarf wall was laid horizontal and the upper course was vertical. There were ventilation spaces built into these perimeter walls. The joists for the floor ran from north to south and were supported on the tops of the dwarf walls around the perimeter of the void.

Because of the width of these pew platforms, the joists were further supported by an east-west stretcher running the full length of each pew platform. This was supported on a series of dwarf brick piers built off the floor of the void. There were 11 piers on the south side and ten on the north. The bricks were laid flat with their long axis north-south. The piers were only one brick high and the number of bricks laid side by side in each pier varied from two to five (see Fig 4).

#### The 1862 Heating system

According to a contemporary press report at the end of the 1862 restoration, a new heating system was installed. This was provided, according to the report, by a company in Trowbridge though the reporter appears to have mis-reported its name. If, as is likely, the company was Haden of Trowbridge, it will be possible, once access to the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham is again available, to check their surviving order books to confirm this.

A boiler in a chamber under the north aisle heated hot air which passed through large ducts and entered the body of the church through iron grilles in the north and central tiled walkways. Access is possible to the ducts, almost high enough to stand in, in both aisles and further investigation is needed in due course. That in the north aisle curves round towards the boiler house (Figs.8 - 10). The one in the central aisle stops on either side of the end grilles in the floor and it is not yet certainly established how heat would have reached it. It could have been served by a duct from that in the north aisle or it could have contained its own furnace.

A line of large stone slabs (possibly re-used grave slabs turned upside down) running north-south under the north pew platform may cover a duct which could have joined the tunnels under the two aisles, but access under the slabs was not possible. Further examination of the two ducts under the north and central tile walks may reveal blocked openings in their walls which would have communicated with a duct under these massive stone slabs. (Fig 11)

The heating system was re-used to house hot water pipes from the boiler room at some time when the heating system was changed (more work is needed on when this might have happened). The hot water pipes were then carried under the south pew platform to the south aisle in a small duct (Fig 12). It was necessary to open up this duct to carry out changes to pipe work necessitated because of essential alterations to the heating system. The duct had brick walls and was capped with thin stone slabs of uniform size. Its overall width was 0.5m and its interior width was 0.35m. It contained two large bore iron pipes laid down its central axis one above the other. It appeared to continue under both the central and south aisle tiled walkways. It is probable that this duct was installed specifically for the hot water system and the wooden floor above it showed signs that it had been opened at some point in the past.

Finally, gas pipes were found under the south pew platform and under the chancel stalls. That in the nave ran under the edge of the central tile walkway with two spurs running under the south pew platform, one of which terminated in a upstand, presumably to a gas light. The 1862 press report says that gas lighting was installed in the church.

Further documentary research and inspection of this heating system is needed and will be carried out when time permits.

#### Grave marker of Robert Smith

There were few finds. The most interesting discovery was a roughly rectangular stone c.23cms x 17cms. It was 8cms thick on one side and 5cms thick at the other and could have been a re-used voussoir from an arch. On one side the letters R S had been incised into the surface of the stone which had been roughly smoothed. On the other side is a silver disc, 7.5cms in diameter which had been stuck to the stone (figs 13, 14). When found by the workmen, the silver disc had been largely covered by a layer of mortar or plaster. On it is inscribed (Fig 15):

Robert Smith  
DIED 7TH FEB  
in his 22nd year

This is the same Robert Smith who has a wall tablet memorial (Fig 16) above the area where the stone was found. He was the son of a Vicar of Bicester who had died two years previously with a memorial tablet above that of his son. The purpose of the stone is unclear, but it was possibly a footstone for his actual grave under the box pews which would have been there in 1837. More research is needed on this.

## **Bibliography**

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I am also grateful to Julian Munby for his advice on the footstone of Robert Smith.

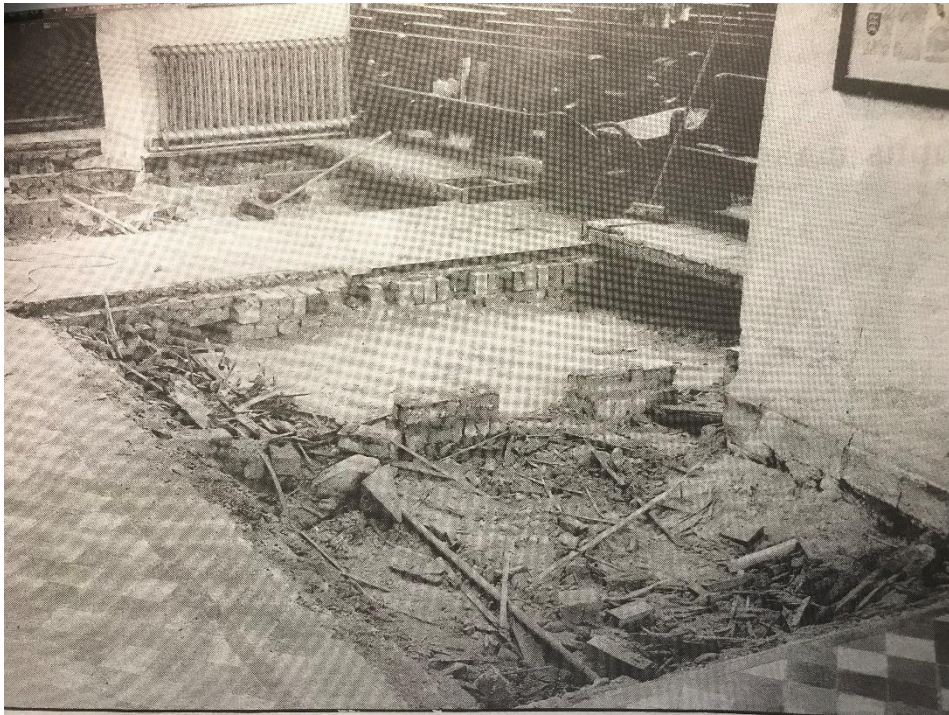


Fig.1 Floor replacement in nave crossing (Bicester Advertiser 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1994)



Fig 2 Nave north wall showing exterior string course pierced by aisle arcade



Fig 3 North pew platform removed

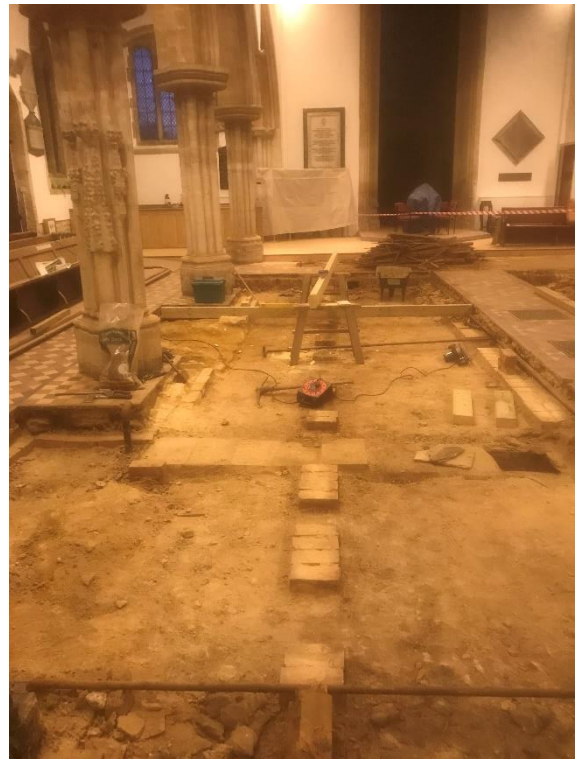


Fig 4 South pew platform debris cleared



Fig. 5 South nave wall footing from north; gas pipe visible on left



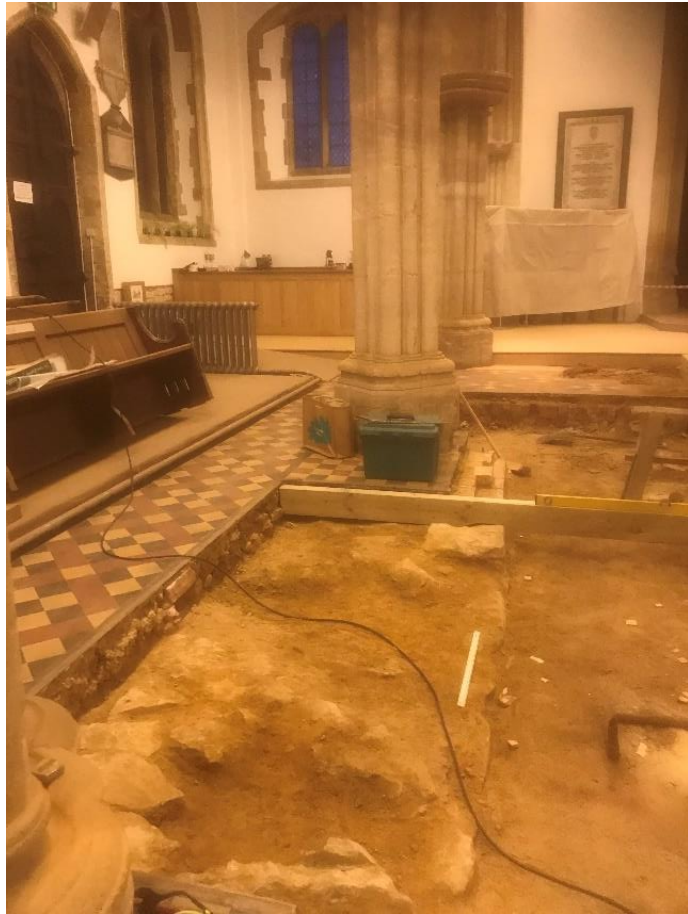


Fig 6 South nave wall footing from east (scale 0.5m)



Fig 7 North nave wall footing from east (scale 0.5m)



Fig 8 Entrance to north aisle duct



Fig 9 Entrance to north aisle duct from below



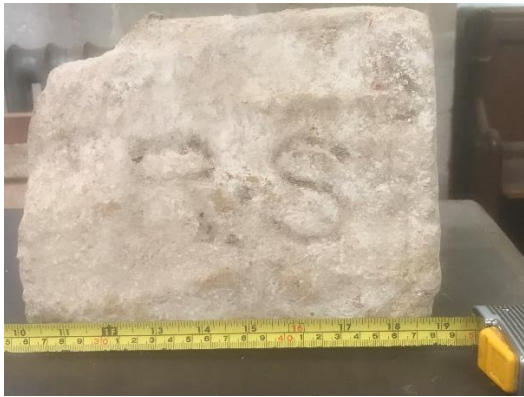
Fig 10 Duct going down to boiler room



Fig 11 Massive stone slabs, possibly capping a duct across north side of nave (Scales 0.5m and 1 m)



Fig 12 duct containing water pipes across south side of nave



Figs 13 + 14 obverse and reverse of Robert Smith grave marker



Fig 15 engraved silver disk



Fig 16 wall tablet to Robert Smith