

# ST MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH, LAUNCESTON, CORNWALL

(NGR SX 33214 84695)

## Results of an archaeological watching brief

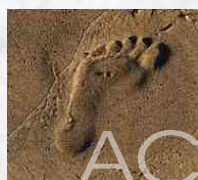
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Prepared by:  
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On behalf of:  
St Mary Magdalene PCC

Document No: ACD1731/2/0

Date: November 2018



AC archaeology

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Checked by	Andrew Passmore
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## Acknowledgements

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## Summary

*In October 2018 AC archaeology undertook recording during repairs to a burial vault in the churchyard of St Mary Magdalene Church, Launceston; this followed on from an initial investigation carried out in December 2017. The work was commissioned by St Mary Magdalene PCC following observations that the capping of the vault had moved, apparently as a result of root intrusion from an adjacent tree and possibly indicating degradation of the vault structure below. The vault covering had collapsed at least once before, on its north corner, in 2004 and had been repaired and re-capped with a slate slab. The purpose of the work was to record the structure of the vault during repairs to its capping.*

*It was noted during the recording that the underlying structure of the vault is currently in reasonable condition. However, the movement in the capping appeared to be uplift caused by tree roots growing between the two large concrete slabs rather than subsidence as previously suspected. The roots would have continued to collapse the original slate covering to the vault which lies below the concrete cap and it was possible that future root growth would further affect the upper portion of the vault retaining wall which is partially constructed of un-bonded slate. The capping was removed and the vault infilled without disturbance to the material within. Observations are made concerning the contents of the vault.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1; Plate 1)

- 1.1 This document sets out the results of the investigation and recording of a burial vault in the churchyard adjacent to St Mary Magdalene Church, Launceston, Cornwall (NGR SX 33214 84695; Fig. 1; Plate 1). The work was commissioned by St Mary Magdalene PCC, and followed on from an earlier investigation carried out by AC archaeology in December 2017 (Farnell 2018).
- 1.2 The section of the churchyard containing the vault is located on land to the immediate northeast of the church at a height of 130m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology is slate of the Yeolmbridge Formation (BGS 2018).

### 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Plate 2)

- 2.1 The Church of St Mary Magdalene, Launceston, is a Grade I Listed Building (National Heritage List for England no. 1280301). It has a late 14th-century tower and otherwise was built between AD 1511-1524 for Sir Henry Trecarrel and refurbished in 1852 and 1890. It is described in the Listing information as the most spectacular Late Medieval church in Cornwall with exceptionally elaborate carved ornamentation.
- 2.2 This church site was a chapelry of St Stephens, so did not have an ancient historic churchyard, but there is documentary evidence of a cemetery and burials around the church going back at least to the 16th century. Polsue (1870, 75-6) reports:

*On August 1, 1521, John Baker, prior of Launceston, and the convent, conveyed the fee of Le Polholme gardyn lying between the chapel of St. Mary Magdalen on the west part, and the town wall and the road leading to Le Blindhole, and to another garden of the priory, on the east side, to Richard Mille, the then mayor, John Chamond, and Henry Trecarrell, Esqs., and the burgesses of Launceston. In return for this grant the mayor and corporation bound themselves to pay yearly at Michaelmas a consideration of six shillings and eightpence. The piece of ground was wanted for a cemetery, and the chapel, of elaborate workmanship, was then rebuilding.*

- 2.3 The burial registers date back to 1559 and include:

*The following with many others were soldiers of the king's forces under Sir Ralph Hopton; 1642, April 25, John Arundle, an ensign, was buried; 1643, June 22, Captain Fran: Polwhele; 1644, August 13, J. Millett, a lieutenant; September 10, Alexander Winceborough a souldier.*

- 2.4** Research by local historian Arthur Wills has suggested that the churchyard was closed to further interments in 1882 (A. Wills, pers. comm.). In 2004 Arthur Wills also made observations during works to repair a collapsed corner of the vault, in which he noted the presence of a lead coffin and loose bones including a skull, possibly derived from a former wooden coffin which had disintegrated. Details of the vault construction were not recorded at this time. Repair works included the addition of a slate slab capping stone. In 2016 it was noted that the covering of the vault appeared to be collapsing or subsiding, and further investigation demonstrated that the roots of an adjacent tree were affecting the structure of the vault (Passmore 2016; Farnell 2018).
- 2.5** Due to the root disturbance, the weight of the modern concrete slabs, and the loose construction of the upper parts of the vault retaining walls, it was expected that damage would continue to the vault and ultimately threatening the remains within and create a hazard within the graveyard (Plate 2). Following the December 2017 investigation it was thus proposed that appropriate treatment to reduce further damage and eliminate the hazard would be the filling of the vault. This required the removal of the original slate and modern concrete capping stones and was achieved under the supervision of an experienced archaeologist. A precedent for the filling of vaults at St Mary Magdalen Church has been established within the church itself where Robbins (1888, 343) notes that during renovations in 1852 the vaults beneath the church were filled in, and any individual burial vaults were otherwise sealed with cement and brick.

### **3. AIMS**

- 3.1** The aims of the work were to record the vault during the consolidation and repair works, and to prepare an updated illustrate report on the results of the 2016, 2017 and 2018 archaeological investigations.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1** The investigation was undertaken with reference to the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures* (2014) and *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (2014).
- 4.2** Removal of the burial vault capping was undertaken by machine, by the contractor (a conservation stonemason) as this was not possible by hand due to the size and weight of the concrete slabs.
- 4.3** Recording was undertaken using the standard AC archaeology *pro forma* recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (revised August 2012).

### **5. RESULTS (Figs 2 and 3; Plates 3-6)**

#### **The covering of the vault (Figs 2a and 2b)**

- 5.1** This originally comprised two layers of slate slabs. This covering had substantially collapsed in the past and was partially replaced by two large cast concrete slabs, each measuring 2.2m x 1.3m in plan and up to 0.1m thick. The capstones were supported principally by three slate lintels

on edge, with each measuring 0.4m wide by 0.05m thick spanning the vault from northwest to southeast and dividing the vault into four bays. The sides of the narrow lintels are buried in the upper loose slate wall which provides them with lateral support. A large slate slab overlay and was mortared to the concrete capping at the north corner of the grave. This was placed over a hole in the concrete and slate capping and was placed there in 2004.

### **The burial vault structure (Fig. 3)**

- 5.2** The burial vault is almost rectangular in plan, aligned northeast-southwest with internal dimensions of 2.5m by 2.1m, except that the south half of the northwest wall steps out by 0.2m. It measures approximately 1.42m deep. A retaining wall, measuring 0.4m thick, where observed in plan, lines the grave which comprises the 'vault'. The wall is built of rendered stone and brick to approximately 0.3m from the top, where-upon a distinct break in the construction is present, with the upper 0.3m being finished in un-bonded slate slabs and fragments; a small shelf of unknown function forming part of this construction was present in the north corner. On the northeast side of the vault the slate wall has been cement bonded most likely during repair work and the southwest bay of the tomb was covered by a thick plastered roof, providing a solid cover to that area; this was left in place during the repairs.

### **The interior**

- 5.3** The vault interior contains substantial debris of slate from the collapse of the original covering, stone possibly from former collapse of the retaining wall, and late Victorian rubbish including glass beer bottles, stoneware preserve jars, a brown-glazed teapot and umbrellas. How this rubbish came to be present is unknown, however it indicates that an opening through to the burial vault was present and had been left open and untended for a period of time in the late 19th or early 20th century. A skull was observed following the partial collapse of the slate covering in 2004 and this was once again identified in the north corner of the vault.
- 5.4** A single lead coffin is present in the vault. It is aligned northwest-southeast across the vault and supported off the floor on an iron frame or trestle. The trestle continues to the southwest with space for a further two coffins stacked one above the other. A second empty trestle was observed against the SW retaining wall. The coffin appears to be plain, however, the view was limited as considerable dust and debris overlies it. The previously recorded skull attests to the presence of a second burial, presumably in now rotted wooden coffin.

### **Condition**

- 5.5** The lower side retaining walls of the burial vault structure are in good condition with no obvious damage. The upper part of the structure was built in loose slate, which may have collapsed at least once in the past and would be vulnerable to damage by intrusive tree roots. Such damage was not however observed at this time. Visible tree root damage was limited to near surface roots which had grown between the two modern concrete capping slabs. This had the effect of raising the northeast edge of the southwest slab and had most likely contributed to the further collapse of the original slate covering below. It is apparent that there has been several phases of previous repairs.

## **6. COMMENTS**

- 6.1** The uncovering of the burial vault provided no direct evidence for the dating of the construction of the vault or the date of the burial within, although the use of bricks in its construction indicates that the structure is not likely to be earlier than the later post-medieval period. It was certainly in a damaged state by the late-19th century when people were using it as a handy receptacle for the disposal of rubbish.

## 7. ARCHIVE AND OASIS

- 7.1 The paper and digital archive is currently held at the offices of AC archaeology Ltd under the project number **ACD1731**.
- 7.2 An online OASIS entry has been completed, using the unique identifier **307893**, which includes a digital copy of this report.

## 8. SOURCES CONSULTED

BGS, 2018, *British Geological Survey Geology of Britain On-line Viewer* ([www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk)).

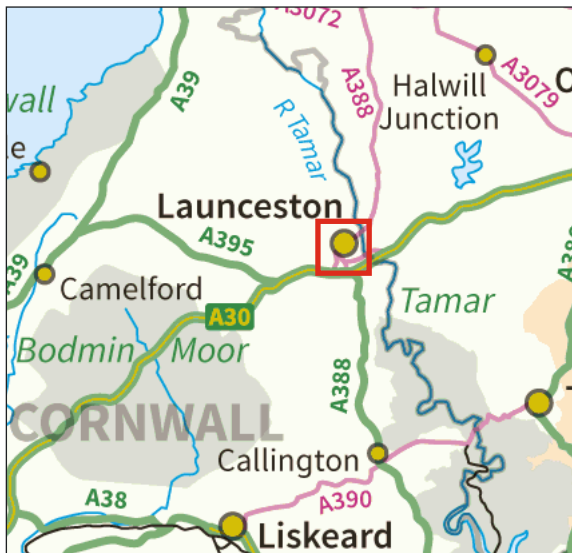
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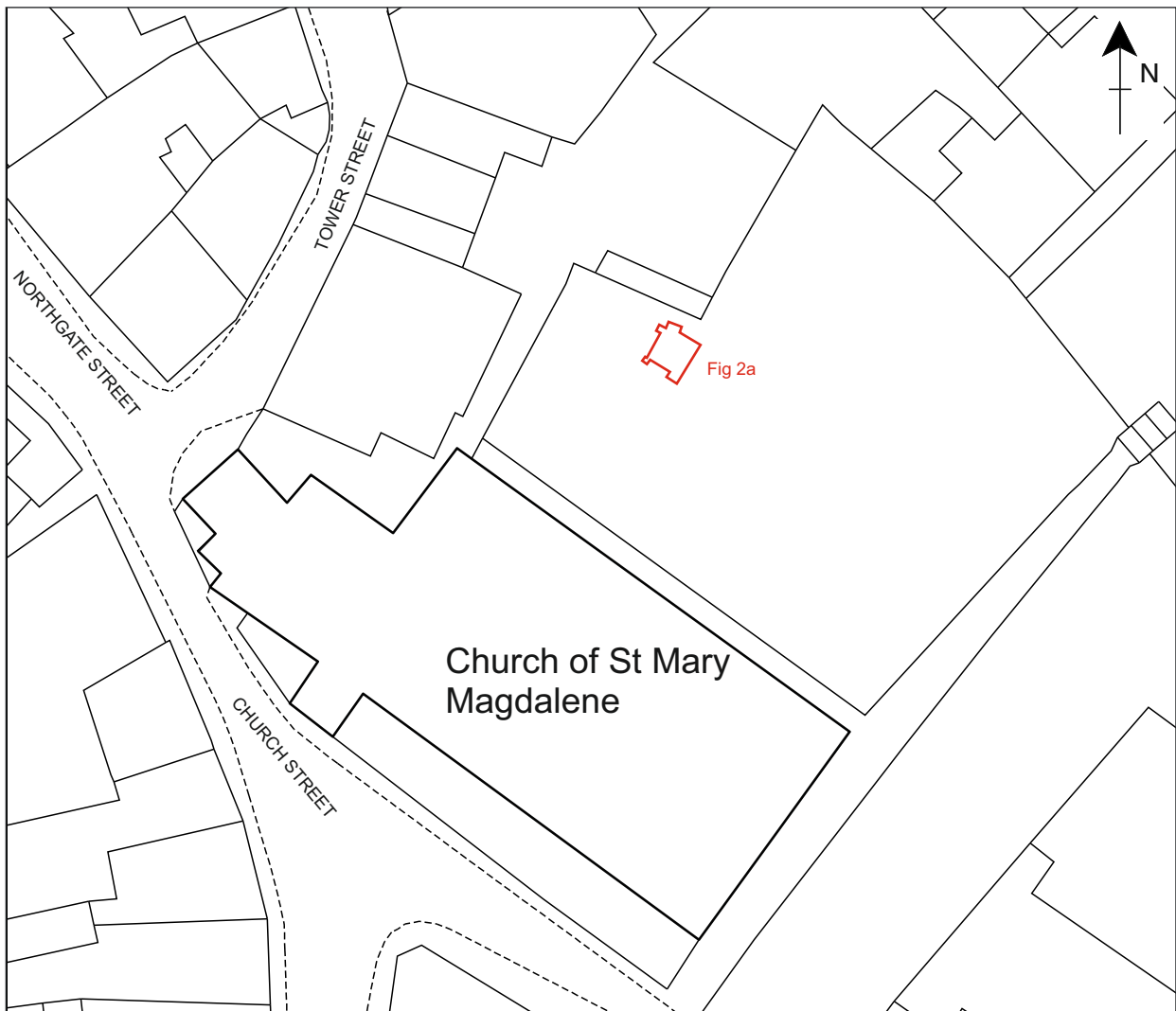
Polsue, J., 1870, *Complete Parochial History of the County of Cornwall*, Vol. III. W. Lake: Truro.

Robbins, Sir Alfred, F., 1888, *Launceston Past and Present – Historical and Descriptive Sketch*. Walter Weighell: Launceston.

Wills, A., 2004, Personal observations, notes and sketches. Unpublished documents held by St Mary Magdalene PCC.



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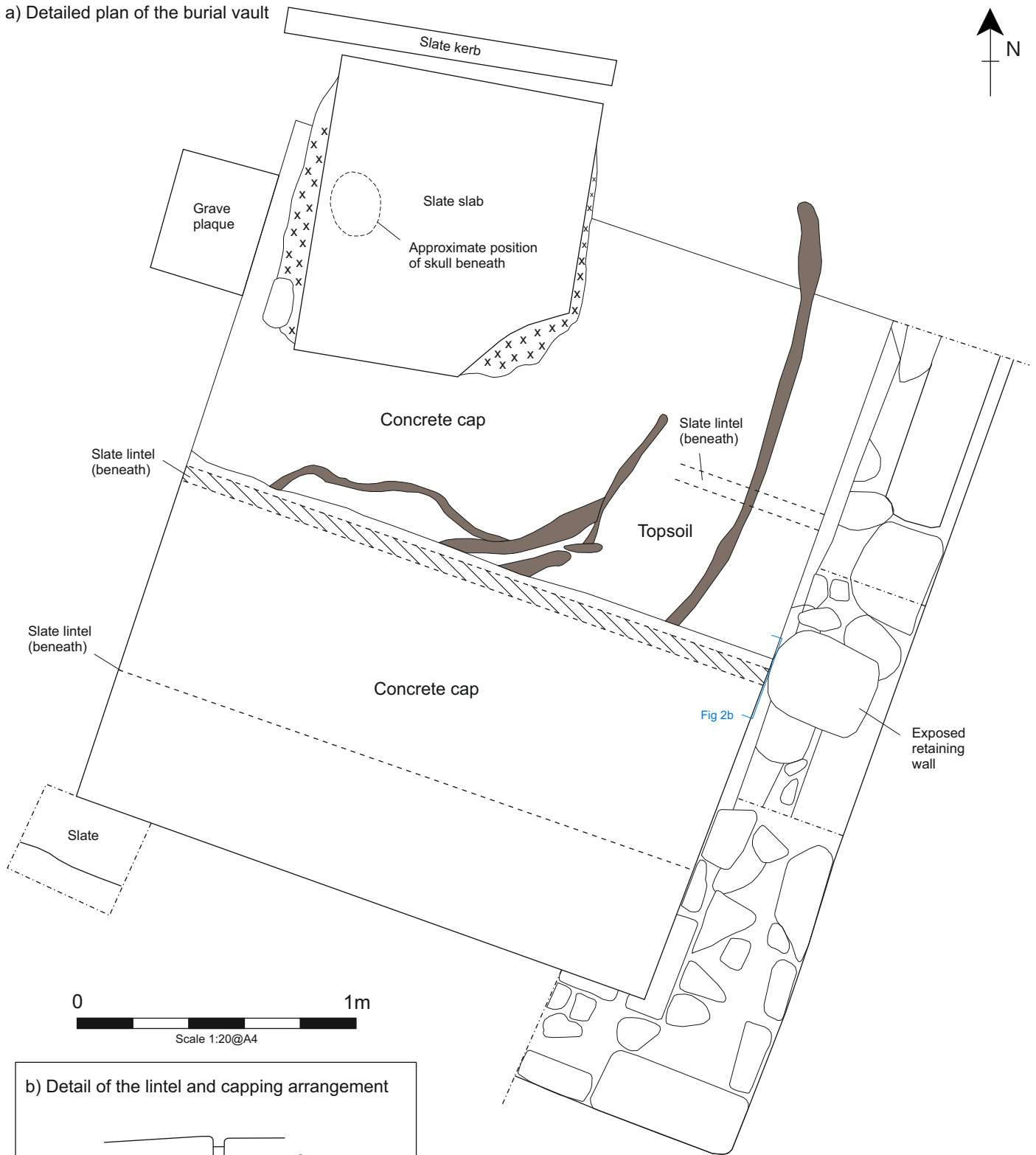
PROJECT  
St Mary Magdalene Church, Launceston, Cornwall

TITLE  
Fig. 1: Site location

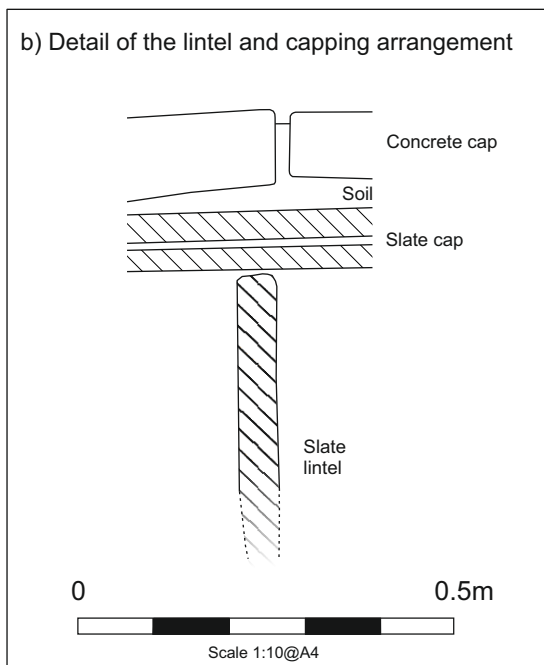




a) Detailed plan of the burial vault



b) Detail of the lintel and capping arrangement

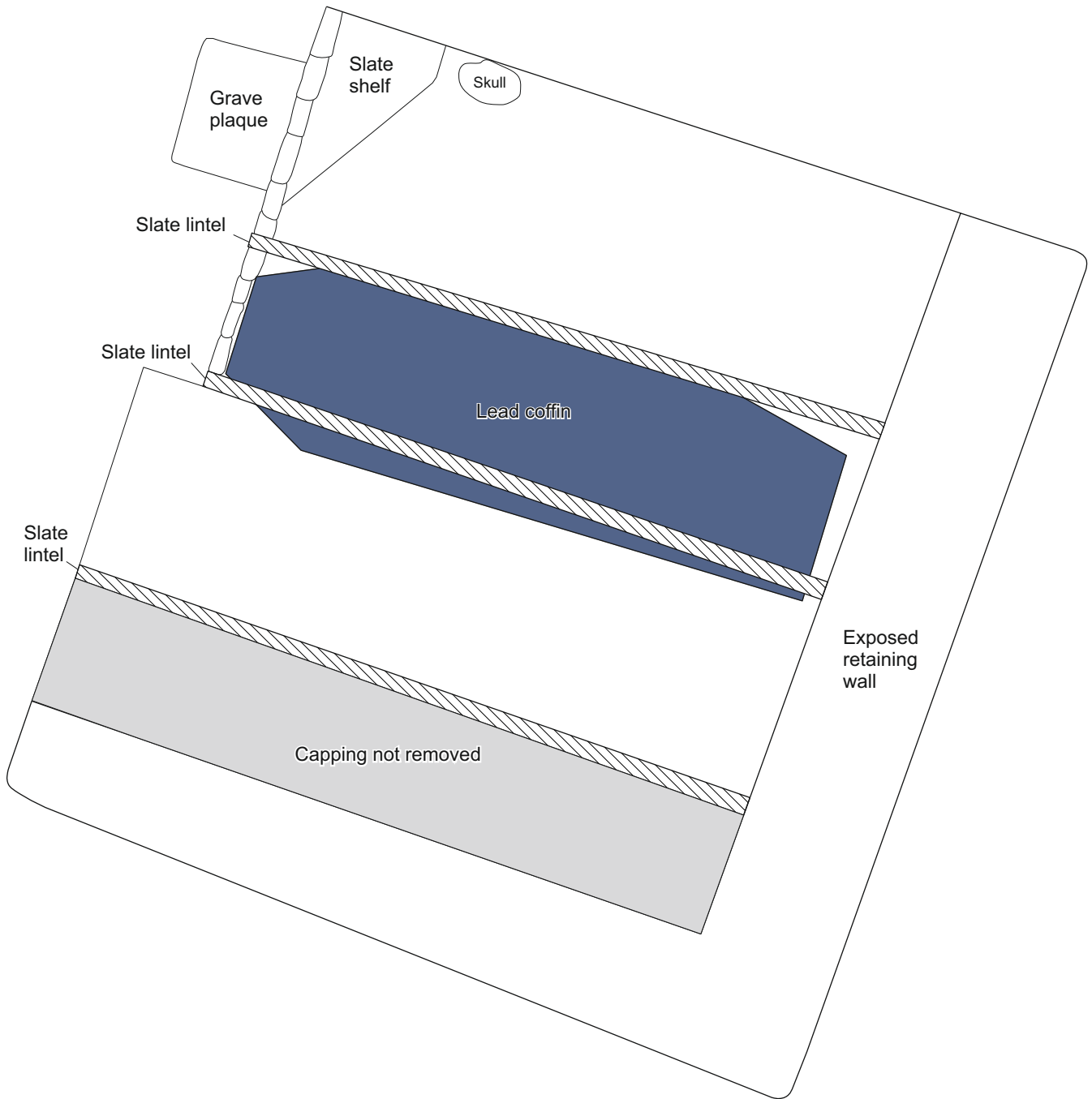


Key	
	Stones
	Cement
	Roots

PROJECT  
St Mary Magdalene Church, Launceston, Cornwall

TITLE  
Fig. 2: Detailed plan of the burial vault and detail of the lintel and capping arrangement





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PROJECT  
St Mary Magdalene Church, Launceston, Cornwall

TITLE  
Fig. 3: Detailed plan of the burial vault following the removal of the capping stones





Plate 1: General view of the churchyard with grave in foreground, looking west



Plate 2: View of intrusive tree roots, concrete capping and later slate slab forming the repair dating to after 2004, looking southwest (1m scale)



Plate 3: View of the burial vault with slate and concrete capping removed, looking northeast (1m scale)





Plate 4: View of the burial vault with slate and concrete capping removed, looking southeast (1m scale)



Plate 5: View of the burial vault with slate and concrete capping removed, looking southwest (1m scale)



Plate 6: View of the burial vault with slate and concrete capping removed, looking northeast (1m scale)

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