

# St Mary's Church, Hopesay, Shropshire

## Archaeological Watching Brief



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## Non-technical Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at the Church of St Mary in the village of Hopesay, Shropshire during groundbreaking activity in the churchyard associated with the installation of a new composting toilet system. The new composting toilet itself was located in an adjacent field, however a new path and a service trench was installed in the churchyard.

The excavations revealed the stone foundation courses of the former churchyard boundary. A disturbed in situ burial was partially revealed in the service trench immediately adjacent to the south elevation of the church and to the west of the church porch. Loose or fragmented human remains were relatively frequent. The majority of these derived from the soil layers directly beneath the tarmacked path in front to the church porch and it is possible that when this path was constructed, loose human bone was collected and redeposited here when the path was initially installed. A small assemblage of artefacts was also recovered. The artefacts were primarily from the corner where the south elevation of the church meets the west elevation of the church porch and were all collected from near the surface. It appears that this corner was used for storing/depositing waste material, including clippings and garden waste.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Project background

St Mary's Church in the village of Hopesay, Shropshire was granted permission to install a new composting toilet system in a field immediately to the south of the churchyard boundary. Within the churchyard, a new pathway was created from the church porch on the southern elevation of the church to the new composting toilet system in the adjacent field. In addition, a service trench was excavated immediately adjacent to the southern elevation of the church wall and the western elevation of the church porch to allow for drainage of grey water from a sink in the Church and rain water into a new soakaway.

As groundworks were occurring within the churchyard, with extant gravestones in close proximity, an archaeological watching brief was required on all groundworks within the churchyard. The excavations within the adjacent field and associated with the composting toilet were not subject to an archaeological watching brief.

The path and water/greywater pipe trench from the church porch to the field was excavated using a mini digger with a toothless bucket. It was not possible to use a digger to excavate the service trench along the south elevation of the church and western elevation of the porch. As such, excavation here occurred by hand.

Fieldwork took place on February the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024. The weather conditions were generally fair.

## 1.2 Site location, topography and geology

The village of Hopesay is located approximately 4 kilometres to the west of Craven Arms in Shropshire (Fig. 1). It is located within a sheltered valley oriented north-south, with steeply sloped hills on all sides; dominated by Aston Hill, Burrow Hill, Hopesay Hill and Wart Hill. St Mary's Church is located at c. 172 metres AOD, occupying an elevated position within the village on its western side. It holds a national grid reference of SO 38928 83283.

The British Geological Survey (BGS 2024) record the superficial geology of the church as being located at the junction of Devensian Till deposits and Clay, Silt, Sand and Gravel Head deposits. The solid bedrock geology is mapped as Ludlow Rocks (undifferentiated) – Mudstone, Siltstone and Limestone.

## 1.3 Methods

### 1.3.1 Watching brief

Close monitoring was undertaken on all ground-breaking activity associated with the installation of the path and service trench (in association with the installation of the composting toilet) leading from the church to the church boundary.

All works were conducted in accordance with the relevant published ClfA standards - *Standards and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (ClfA, 2020a).

The recording system included a written and photographic record. The primary written record comprised of *pro forma* context sheets, site notes and sketches. The photographic record was made using a 10 mega pixel DSLR camera.

Artefacts and animal bone recovered during the project were allocated a context number and brought back to the office for cleaning and identification.

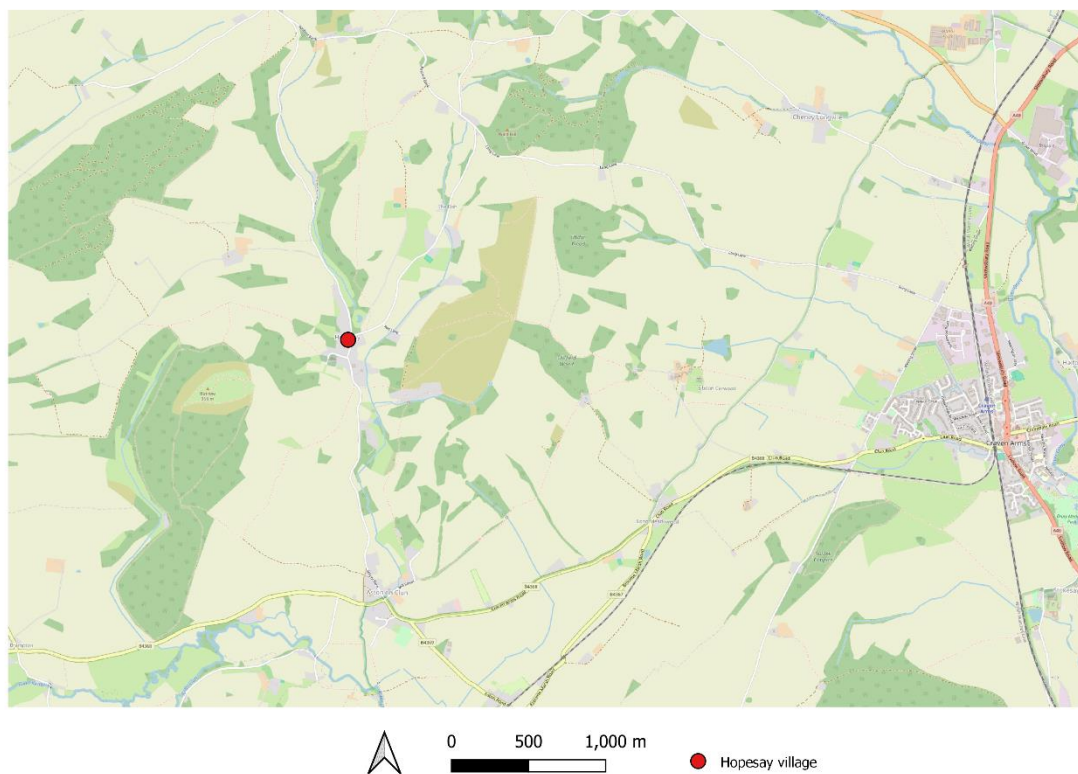
All loose/fragmented human remains were recovered as works progressed. One area in the hand excavated trench revealed what appeared to be a disturbed in situ burial, orientated east west and located immediately adjacent to the church wall – these remains were also recovered. All human remains collected have been left in a safe place within the church for later reburial at the church's discretion.

With regard to the human remains, the aim was to avoid the excavation of in situ graves. If no other alternative was possible and a grave was encountered, these remains were excavated by hand.

### 1.3.2 Post-excavation

The artefactual finds recovered from the site will be returned to the church as they are deemed to be 'modern'. As such the project resulted in no material archive.

This report comprises the paper archive and has been deposited with the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) through the OASIS portal. A copy has also been sent to The Church of St Mary's, Hopesay and Shropshire Historic Environment Record.



*Figure 1 Location map showing the village of Hopesay.*

## 2. Archaeological background

The Church of St Mary lies in the parish and village of Hopesay, situated in a sheltered valley dominated by Aston Hill, Burrow Hill, Hopesay Hill and Wart Hill. Hopesay itself was the main village of the parish but, restrained by the surrounding topography, it was later overtaken in size by Aston-on-Clun. Originally, it lay in the limits of the Church of St George of Clun, but was not part of the possessions of Wenlock Priory and was more of a free chapel, founded and endowed by the lords of Hopesay (Shropshire Parish Register Society, 1921). The placename Hopesay reveals the Anglo-Saxon origins of the village, with Hope deriving from the Old English 'Hop' likely meaning sheltered valley in this instance. The suffix 'say' denotes the name of the first Norman feudal owner Picot de Say (UoN, 2024).

At the time of the Norman Conquest, the village and lands of Hope were held by Eadric Silvaticus or Eadric the Wild. At this time the land was valued at 10 pounds, dropping to 3 pounds by the time of the conquest and regaining its original value by the time of the Domesday survey in 1086. Hopesay is here recorded as having 14 villagers, 6 slaves and 2 others and comprised 14 ploughlands (Powell-Smith, 2024).

The earliest available detailed mapping of Hopesay is that of the tithe map of 1841 which details the church in plot 125 and a small number of dwellings, primarily located on the east side of the road (Fig. 2). By the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion of the village can be seen by an increased number of dwellings on the western side of the road (Fig. 3).

There is little, freely available, and accessible information on the church. A brief overview of the parish and church and its incumbents is provided in the parish registers (Shropshire Parish Register Society, 1921). A search of national and local databases provides scant information beyond that provided by the Listed Building (Historic England, 1986) description which is primarily concerned with architectural details. This states that the church is of late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> century date, with later medieval and post-medieval additions and alterations, a restoration dating to c.1880 and some 20<sup>th</sup> century additions. The primary construction materials are that of uncoursed limestone rubble with ashlar dressings and a modern machine tile roof. It comprises a nave, chancel, south porch, north organ chamber and a low, heavily buttressed 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century tower to the west with a 17<sup>th</sup> century double pyramidal top. The earliest elements appear to be the late 12<sup>th</sup> century south doorway which has a plain tympanum, late 12<sup>th</sup> to early 13<sup>th</sup> century lancets and the bases and moulded capitals of the chancel arch which are c.1200. A dug-out chest by the south door has 13<sup>th</sup> century ironwork.

The online Shropshire Historic Environment Record listing (HER Number: PRN13613) mostly comprises a reiteration of the Listed Building description and notes a watercolour of the church from 1791 (Fig. 4) and the inclusion of the church in a Heritage Impact Assessment for the construction of a new house in the village in 2016.





Figure 2: Extract from Tithe Map of 1841

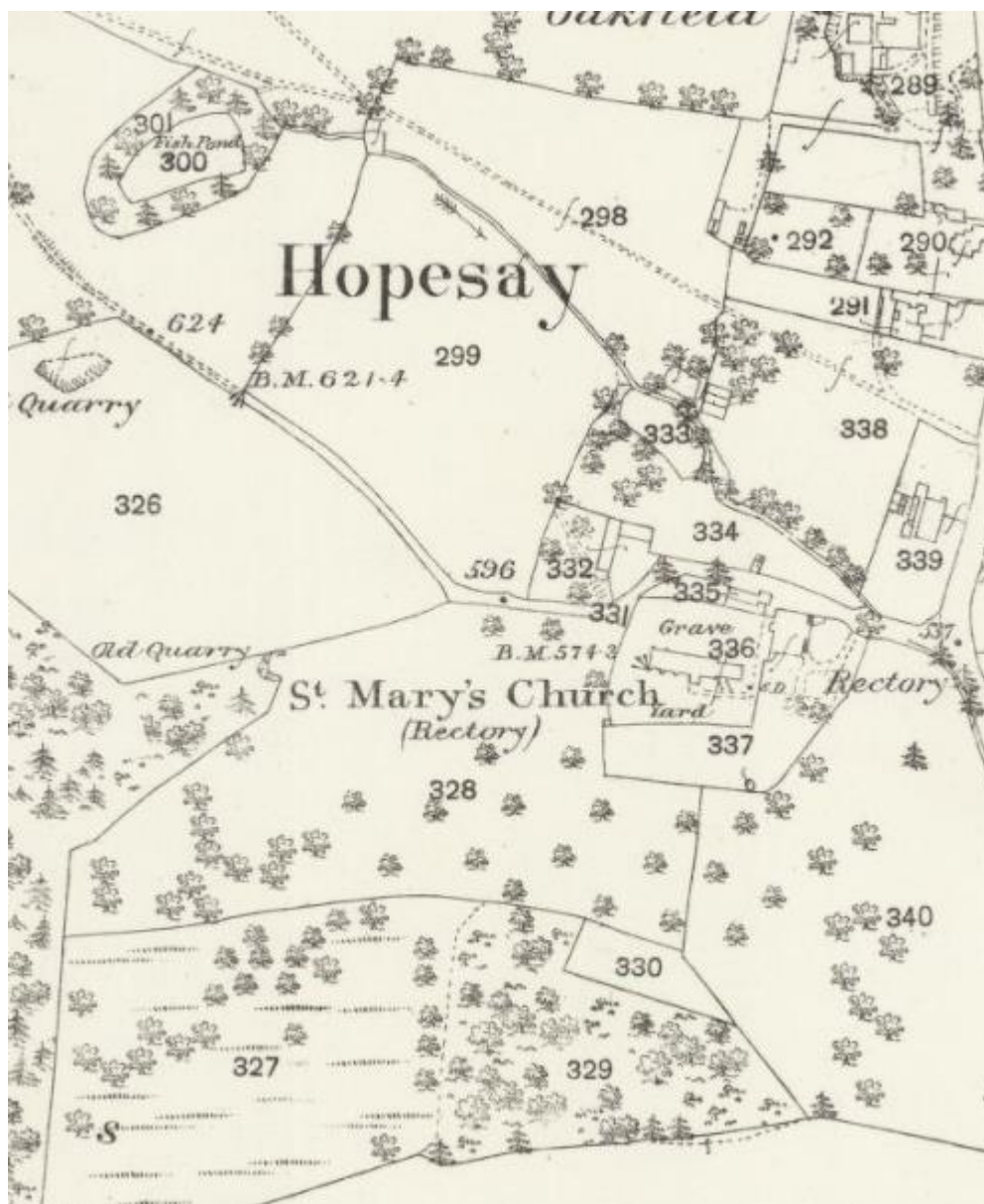






Figure 4: Watercolour of the tower and south elevation of St Mary's church by The Rev Edward Williams 1791 (Shropshire Archives)



Figure 5: early-20th century view of the Rectory and church from the east.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Service trench

A service trench was excavated by hand and had a width of 0.5m and was 4m in length east west and 4m in length north south located along the western elevation of the porch and then continuing west along the southern elevation of the church (Plates 1 and 2). It was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.85m in the west and 0.55m in the south. The soil comprised an upper topsoil layer, (100), a dark-brown humic soil with a significant component of twig-type debris (particularly in the corner where the two lengths of trench met) between 0.3 and 0.2 m thick. Context (100) overlays a churchyard soil deposit, (101), of a mid-greyish brown silty loam with frequent small and medium sized subangular and subrounded stones. The majority of artefacts collected derived from the topsoil deposit (100) in the junction where the two lengths of trench met. Apart from one piece of possible medieval tile (see Appendix Plate 15), the finds from this area were all post-medieval or modern.

Disturbed human remains were encountered in the east west orientated trench near its western extent. The bones were positioned in broad anatomical position and the parts of the skeleton revealed were the pelvis area and the lower limbs. However, previous disturbance of these remains was evident, possibly from burrowing animals. Immediately adjacent to this east west oriented trench was a large headstone and it is likely that this disturbed burial was an interment associated with it (Plates 3 and 4). The date on the inscription nearest the disturbed burial is from the 1790s.

Along the western elevation of the porch was a large piece of stone (see Plate 1). This was removed to facilitate digging the service trench here. On the reverse side there was a headstone inscription (Plate 5). It is intended that the headstone is placed back in this position once works are complete to further protect the inscription from weathering.



*Plate 1 Photograph looking east showing the western elevation of the porch and, to the left, the southern elevation of the church prior to excavation.*





*Plate 2 Photograph showing the east-west orientated trench along the south wall of the church. Looking east.*



*Plate 3 Photograph showing the headstone immediately to the south of the east-west orientated trench along the southern church wall. Looking east.*





*Plate 4 Photograph showing the headstone inscription which may relate to the disturbed burial found immediately adjacent to it. Looking east.*





*Plate 5 Photograph of the inscription of the headstone leaning up against the western elevation of the porch.*

### 3.2 Path from the church porch to the churchyard boundary

A new path 1m wide was excavated from the church porch south to the churchyard boundary (Plate 6). Within this 1m wide area approximately 0.15-0.20m of turf and topsoil was removed. The topsoil (102) comprised of a dark-brown humic soil. Directly in front of the church porch was a tarmacked

surface. This tarmac was removed to a depth of 0.2m. In a broadly central position running along the length of the path a service trench was excavated, approximately 0.3m wide and 0.3m deep. Where the new path met the formally tarmacked area directly in front of the church porch, the service trench divided in two, with one trench set at an angle towards the hand dug service trench (discussed above) and the second one set at an angle towards the southeastern corner of the church porch. The subsoil deposit (103), beneath the tarmac, which this service trench dug through was similar to that described above, however it was significantly less stony.

The excavation of the topsoil material along the length of the path revealed the foundation courses of a former stone-built boundary wall of the churchyard (Plate 7). This wall was 0.5m wide and orientated east west. The surviving wall comprises one or two courses with a height of at least 0.10ms. It was built from dressed facing stones with a small rubble core and a brick was observed in the lower course of the south facing elevation (Plate 8). It was located 1m to the north of the current churchyard boundary which is now marked by an agricultural wire fence. Its position and orientation suggest that it lined up with the stone wall currently present between the churchyard and the Old Rectory (Plate 9).

The presence of a grave was also detected after this topsoil strip. The grave was located to the north of the former church boundary wall. The soil within the grave cut is a slightly lighter colour than the surrounding subsoil substrate. In plan, this grave measured 0.8m in width and 0.45m in length, though it was only partially revealed. This grave also has some bricks lining the edge of the grave (Plate 10). The headstone associated with this grave dates to 1882 (Plate 11). The service trench dug through the centre of this path was moved to the east slightly to avoid disturbing this grave.

The tarmac immediately to the south of the porch was removed and two narrow service trenches were excavated (Plate 12). This area produced the majority of the fragmented human bone found on the site. It is possible that when this tarmac path was installed, any human remains encountered were reburied beneath this path. The service trench continued down the new path towards the field and the new compositing toilet system (Plate 13).



*Plate 6 Photograph looking south showing the location of the new path prior to excavation.*





*Plate 7 Photograph of the foundation courses of the former stone-built churchyard boundary wall. Looking east-northeast.*



*Plate 8 Photograph of the former stone-built churchyard boundary wall showing what remains of its south-facing elevation.  
Looking north-northeast.*





*Plate 9 Photograph looking east showing how the former churchyard boundary wall lines up with the eastern boundary wall (extant) of the churchyard.*



*Plate 10 Photograph showing the plan view of the brick lined grave observed after topsoil stripping for the new path.*



*Plate 11 Photograph looking west showing the brick lined grave and its associated headstone.*





*Plate 12 Photograph showing the service trenches immediately south of the porch. Looking north.*



*Plate 13 Photograph showing the service trench running down the centre of the new path from the porch to the new composting toilet system. Looking north.*

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The archaeological watching brief recovered fragmented human bone, primarily from the soil deposit beneath the tarmacked area immediately to the south of the church porch. A disturbed in situ burial was also partially revealed along the southern elevation of the church and is likely a burial associated with the adjacent headstone dating to the 1790s. All human remains encountered were collected and left in a safe place in the church for reburial at the church's discretion.

The stone foundation courses of the former churchyard boundary wall were revealed approximately 1 metre to the north of the current boundary fence. It is likely that this foundation survives along the length of the boundary's former extent.

The artefacts collected were primarily from the corner where the western elevation of the porch meets the church wall. The artefacts were found near to the surface and are primarily modern, apart



from one medieval floor tile. The artefacts recovered have been quantified and photographed and are presented in the appendix of this report. The finds assemblage has been returned to the church.

## 5. References

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## Appendix

*Table 1 Quantification of finds by location. All finds were unstratified.*

Location	Glass	Animal bone	Ceramic	Tile/CBM	Clay pipe	Metal
Trench to west of church porch	n. 81	n.3 (cattle)	n. 7	n. 13	n. 2	n. 1
Beneath tarmac to the south of the church porch	n. 2	-	n. 9	n. 6	n. 6	n. 12
New path running to the south of the church porch	n. 3	n. 3	n. 10	n. 15	n. 1	n. 4



*Plate 14 Glass from trench to the west of the church porch.*



*Plate 15 Possible medieval tile from trench to the west of the church porch.*



*Plate 16 Tiles from trench to the west of the church porch.*



*Plate 17 Ceramic vessels from trench to the west of the church porch.*



*Plate 18 Metal and clay pipe stems from trench to the west of the church porch.*





*Plate 19 Metal from beneath the tarmac immediately to the south of the church porch.*

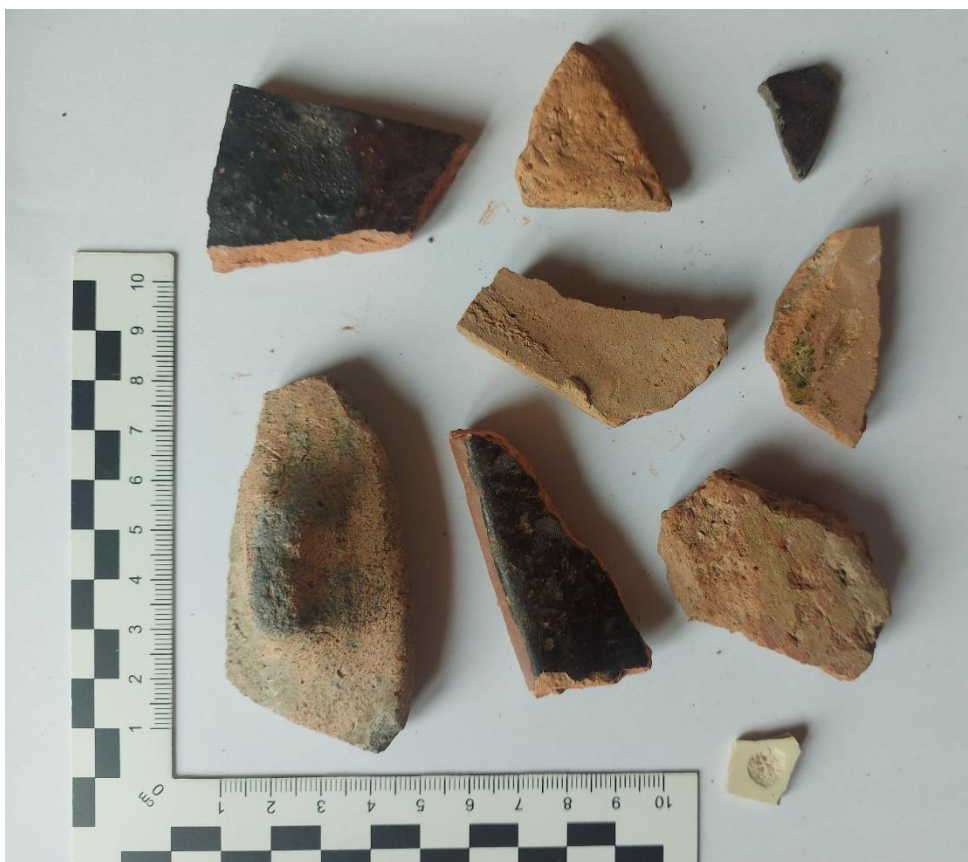


*Plate 20 Clay pipe stems from beneath the tarmac immediately to the south of the church porch.*





*Plate 21 Glass from beneath the tarmac immediately to the south of the church porch.*



*Plate 22 Ceramic vessels from beneath the tarmac immediately to the south of the church porch.*



*Plate 23 Tile from beneath the tarmac immediately to the south of the church porch.*



*Plate 24 Tile from the new path running south from the church porch.*



*Plate 25 Clay pipe bowl from the new path running south from the church porch.*



*Plate 26 Metal from the new path running south from the church porch.*





*Plate 27 Ceramic vessels from the new path running south from the church porch.*