CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, STOCKLAND BRISTOL, BRIDGWATER, SOMERSET TA5 2PZ

Report on the Archaeological Monitoring & Recording of Structural Engineering, Trial Hole Excavations

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The PCC of the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Stockland Bristol

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CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, STOCKLAND BRISTOL, BRIDGWATER, SOMERSET

Archaeological Monitoring and Recording of Structural Engineering, Trial Hole Excavations.

Summary

Archaeological monitoring and recording of four trial holes revealed 19th Century? foundations and construction disturbance, graveyard soils containing disarticulated human bone fragments, a possible in-situ burial and modern landscaping activity.

Location & Geology

The site is located at NGR ST 2401 4362 Stockland Bristol, Bridgwater, Somerset TA5 2PZ.

The underlying geology consists of Sedimentary bedrock of the Langport Member Group, Blue Lias Formation and Charmouth Mudstone Formation (BGS 2025).

Introduction

The PCC commissioned their structural engineer to undertake a survey in the form of four external trial holes alongside the church walls to investigate movement in above ground masonry and examine the typical foundation depth.

Future proposed reordering works include the installation of an external drainage system for a new WC and kitchenette inside the church. Two small percolation test holes were also excavated on the north side of the church in advance of this proposed external drainage scheme.

Consent for the trial holes was granted in the form of a DAC Licence, and a Condition of the licence was that the holes would be dug under archaeological supervision.

The PCC of the Church of St Mary in consultation with their architects Chantrey Conservation Architects Ltd appointed the writer of this document to carry out the archaeological monitoring and recording.

The trial holes were monitored and recorded on the 17th of October 2024.

Archaeological Background

The Church is Grade II Listed, List entry number 1059049 (Historic England 2025), It is recorded as a Parish church. 1865 from documents; on the site of an earlier parish church; for Daniel family of Stockland Manor (qv); by Arthur of Plymouth. Coursed

and squared blue lias rubble, Bath Stone dressings, tile roofs with bracketed eaves, copings with cruciform finials.

Decorated style with much buttressing; nave with a north aisle and South porch, West tower, chancel with a heated north vestry and a South chapel. Three stage tower, diagonal buttresses to first and second stages, parapet pierced with quatrefoils, stair turret, 2-light bell chamber openings with louvres 3-light West window, West door, carved heads stops. Three bay nave, 2-light windows; single bay chancel, 2-light window and a lancet, 3-light West window; 3-light South window to short South chapel. Plain interior, plastered walls, tile floors wagon roofs to nave and chancel, that to nave un-ceiled; scissor braced roof to north aisle. Arcade on octagonal piers.

Both the octagonal font and the chancel screen are C15, reused from the earlier church; the latter restored and installed by F Bligh Bond c1920 as a memorial to the fallen of the Great War. Remainder of fittings of 1865; notable the stone pulpit with 10 detached Purbeck shafts, similarly the reredos. Much C19 stained glass, that to chancel by Clayton and Bell. Two re-sited C17 tablets to South chapel, 2 C19 tablets. Bells of 1865. Well balanced and precise copy of a Decorated building. Thomas Daniel was the rector.

The Somerset Historic Environment Record (SHER) Record No: 10851, Church of St Mary Magdalene (South West Heritage Trust 2025) contains a similar description too the official listing.

Methodology

The locations for the trial and percolation test holes were determined by the structural engineer (Fig. 1).

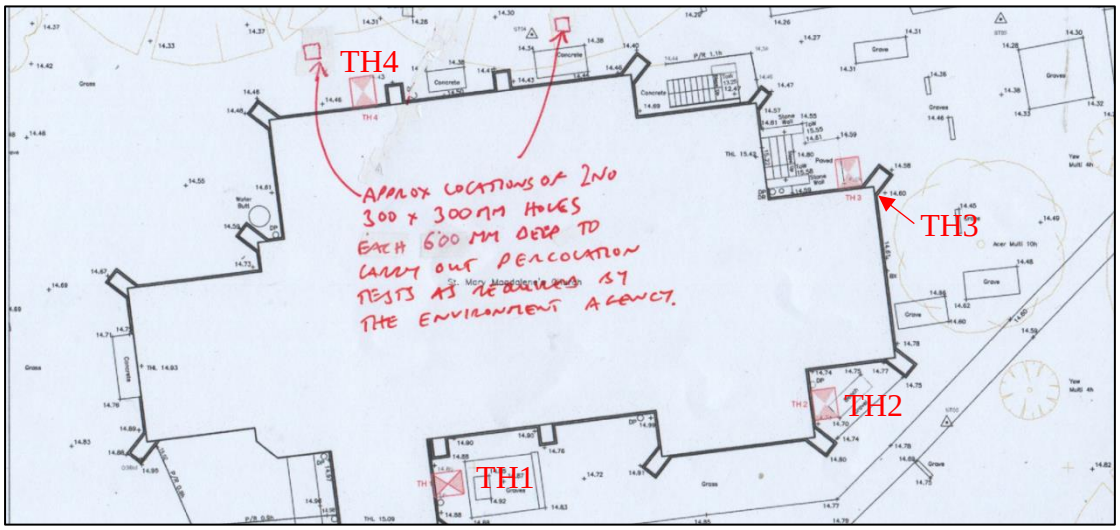

Figure 1. Trial Hole Locations (after Mann Williams Structural Engineers).

All of the holes were excavated by hand and any disarticulated human bones that were recovered during the excavations were placed back into the relevant trial holes prior to backfilling.

The trial holes were prefixed with the code TH for ease of recording. TH1 was located on the east side of the south porch, TH2 at the east end of the church, south side, TH3 had to be relocated to the south side of the buttress on the northeast corner of the church due to a Ledger/Memorial stone being in the location envisaged for this hole and TH4 was located on the west side of a buttress on the north side of the church. The two percolation test holes were both located in the churchyard on the north side of the church

The trial holes were recorded by written descriptions supplemented by digital photography and appropriate scales.

Results

TH1 was 400mm long N-S x 550mm wide E-W and up to 850mm deep and located on the east side of the south porch (Fig. 2). The general stratigraphy comprised 100mm of dark brown garden soil on top of mid brown silty clay containing frequent roof slate fragments, lumps and flecks of lime mortar, charcoal flecks and lumps, occasional small lumps of angular Lias Stone and human bone fragments.

Figure 2. TH1 Location: facing NW.

Vertical Lias Stone foundations were observed to the base of the excavation, generally bonded with clay with occasional joints of hard ashy cement/concrete and lime mortar (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. TH1: facing NW, 1m scale.

TH2 was 400m long E-W x 500mm wide N-S and up to 750mm deep, south side of east end of church (Fig. 4). This hole comprised of 50mm of modern gravels and membrane on top of similar mid brown silty clay deposit as recorded in TH1. Occasional human bone fragments and a single sherd of 18th or 19th Century pottery was also recovered from this clay deposit.

Similar Lias Stone foundations were also revealed in this hole and again bonded with clay and the hard ashy cement/concrete and lime mortar (Fig. 5).

Figure 4. TH2 Location: facing NW.

Figure 5. TH2: facing NW, 1m scale.

TH3 was located on the northeast corner of the church (Fig. 6) and was 900mm long N-S x 600mm wide E-W and up to 1m deep. The stratigraphy comprised of 150mm of topsoil above similar brown silty clay as observed in TH1 and TH2 but contained frequent human bone fragments, occasional brick fragments and sherds of 18th/19th Century glazed earthenware's. A possible in-situ burial was also revealed at the north end of this hole at a depth of 1m.

Figure 6. TH3 Location: facing W.

Vertical Lias Stone foundations were revealed again in this hole, but they were then offset up to 100mm at a depth of 650mm to form the buttress foundation at the north end of this area (Fig. 7). Only clay bonding was observed within these foundations.

Figure 7. TH3: facing W, 1m scales.

TH4 was located on the north side of the church, west end (Fig. 8) and was 600mm long E-W x 500mm wide N-S and up to 900mm deep. Again a similar clay deposit as seen in TH1, TH2 and TH3 was revealed, containing occasional human bone fragments, a single 18th/19th Century glazed earthenware sherd and clay tile/drainage pipe fragments.

Figure 8. TH4 Location: facing SE.

The foundations were offset up to 140mm northwards at ground level and the exposed below ground foundations were again vertical as were the buttress foundations. At a depth of 160mm a single 60mm thick Lias Stone block and a bed of lime mortar and slate had been placed on an angle to tie in the church wall and the buttress? (Fig. 9). Clay and hard ashy cement mortar were again observed within these foundations.

Figure 9. TH4: facing S, 1m scale.

The two percolation holes were 400mm square x 600mm deep and were located 9.3m apart and 2.6m north of the church (Fig. 10). Both comprised of 200mm of topsoil on top of mid brown silty clay with occasional Lias Stone rubble (Figs. 11 & 12) no human bone was found within these holes.

Figure 10. Percolation test holes location: facing W.

Figure 11. East percolation test hole: facing N, 1m scale.

Figure 12. West percolation test hole, from above: 1m scale.

Conclusion

Due to the limited size of the excavations it is not really possible to draw any definitive conclusions on the below ground archaeological deposits. There was no obvious evidence for the existing church being constructed on the foundations of the earlier medieval church. All of the exposed foundations were on the same alignment as the later church apart from those exposed in TH4 which were slightly offset to the above ground walls, but only a very small area was exposed.

The exposed foundations in TH1, TH2 and TH4 all contained traces of a cement-based mortar within the joints or had been smeared/rendered with this material suggesting that these foundations must have been either constructed or at least exposed at some point in the 19th Century or later due to the use of this cement-based mortar. Only clay was revealed in the foundation joints in TH3 but again these were on the same alignment as the above ground walls.

Due to the confines of TH3 the possible in-situ burial was not revealed further and was immediately recovered with soil.

The mid brown silty clay deposit observed in all four trial holes and the percolation test holes would appear to be the mixed and redeposited fills of centuries of grave-digging activity that was also further disturbed during the 19th Century rebuild of the church.

No obvious signs of movement in the exposed foundations were noted by the writer during these works but any observations made during the structural engineer's site inspection of these holes will be discussed in their report.

Acknowledgements

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Keith Faxon, February 2025.

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