

CHURCH OF SAINT LAURENCE, EAST HARPTREE, PROJECT NEWTON

Summary Report on the Archaeological Monitoring & Recording of Access Improvements to Churchyard, South Porch & Rebuilding of South Entrance Pathway Wall

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The PCC of the Church of Saint Laurence, East Harptree

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The photograph on the cover shows the well-preserved teeth of the female skeleton.

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Introduction

There was a possibility that some of the new proposals were likely to affect the archaeological importance of the church and therefore the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) advised that archaeological monitoring and recording should be undertaken during the works.

The PCC of the Church of Saint Laurence in consultation with their architects Benjamin + Beauchamp architects Ltd appointed the writer of this document to carry out the archaeological monitoring and recording.

The subsequent works were monitored between the 8th of June and the 22nd of November 2022.

Methodology

The works involved the reduction of the existing path running along the north side of the church out to the east entrance and a service trench excavated along the north side of this reduced area. The wall running from the east gateway to the south pathway entrance was also taken down and rebuilt due to its unstable condition. The existing ground surface was also lowered outside the south porch to allow level access.

Deteriorating plaster was also removed from the lower sections of the internal walls within the chancel.

The main excavations were undertaken using a mini digger fitted with a flat bladed bucket under archaeological supervision. As soon as any archaeological features were revealed machine excavation ceased and the deposits were hand excavated, cleaned, and recorded. Any disarticulated human bones and fragments collected during the excavations were placed back into the trench prior to backfilling.

The works were recorded by written descriptions and scaled drawings supplemented by digital photography and appropriate scales.

Results

- South Porch

A short trial trench was excavated on the west side of the porch to assess the below ground deposits in this area and this revealed intact burials at depths of approximately 150mm and 400mm below the existing pathway surface. The stone pathway was

subsequently removed over an area 4.5m long E-W and 800mm wide N-S in front of the south porch and then hand excavated to determine if further burials existed in this area.

Three charnel deposits were uncovered outside the entrance (Fig. 1) and the complete skeleton of what appeared to be an adult female was revealed just east of the entrance (Fig. 2). Excavation and removal of the charnel deposits uncovered a further burial on the north side of the most easterly charnel deposits (Fig. 3). No clear grave cuts were observed but the female skeleton appeared to have cut through an earlier burial (Fig. 4). A few small sherds of medieval coarseware pottery were found within the deposits surrounding the burials.



Figure 1. Charnel deposits outside South Porch: facing N, 2m scale.



Figure 2. Female skeleton, E of South Porch: facing N.



Figure 3. Burial on N side of charnel deposits: facing W.



Figure 4. Remains of burial in S side of trench, cut through by female skeleton: facing SW.

The charnel deposits were recorded and removed to enable the level access into the church but the complete skeleton was left in-situ as it was possible to obtain the required levels without causing further disturbance. The charnel deposits were reburied within the east end of the original trial trench, but the widening of this area revealed a further burial (Fig. 5). After recording the exposed burials were covered with sieved soil (Fig. 6) before being further protected using a breathable membrane.



Figure 5. Burial in east end of original trial trench: facing E.



Figure 6. Burials covered with sieved soil: facing W.

- Pathway Reduction & Service Trench

The removal of the existing pathways along the north side of the church out to the east gateway (Figs. 7 & 8) only revealed modern landscaping deposits, modern service pipes, mixed red silty clays, and previously disturbed burials. The red clay appeared to be the usual mixed deposits containing frequent human bone fragments that you would expect to observe in churchyards.

Disturbed partially articulated burials were encountered at a depth of 800mm in the service trench running E-W along the north side of the North Aisle and at a depth of 1.8m to the north of the Chancel. Burials were also recorded at a depth of 800mm during the reduction of the area for the proposed new steps, NE of the chancel.



Figure 7. General view of removed path and service trench: facing E.



Figure 8. Pathway reduction in progress at east end of site: facing E.

Fragments of decorated and plain medieval floor tiles were found within the red clay at the east end and north side of the Chancel and at the west end of the North Aisle. One of the tiles recovered from the west end of the North Aisle shows the top lion within a shield set diagonally (Fig. 9), representing ‘England’, and dating from the late 13th early 14th Century.



Figure 9. Medieval tile with lion decoration.

- East Gateway to South Entrance Wall

The existing wall was in a very poor state of repair (Fig. 10) and part of the new works required it to be dismantled and rebuilt. Prior to the commencement of the works the exposed face of the wall was known to contain 17th Century gravestones and various architectural fragments including Romanesque style voussoirs.

It was originally envisaged that most of these items would be built back into the new wall, but once removed it became apparent that some of the stones were significant enough to be moved into the church to stop any further deterioration. A catalogue of stones for potential display has been produced for the PCC (Faxon 2022).

During the dismantling of the wall numerous, previously unseen architectural fragments were recovered from the wall foundations and these included window mullions, window tracery, hood mouldings, jambs, a corbel, and 18th Century chest tomb fragments (Fig. 11). All these items were removed and put into storage as they potentially represent earlier construction and modification phases of the church's fabric.



Figure 10. East gateway to South entrance wall: facing SE, 1m scale.



Figure 11. Selection of architectural fragments from wall foundations.

- South Chancel Wall

The removal of deteriorating plaster from the lower section of the south Chancel wall revealed at least seven phases of construction and infilling. The various phases included the blocked up lower section of the west window, a section of Bath Stone ashlar at the west end, areas infilled with brick and tile, sections constructed from local limestone and Doultong Stone rubble and a small section of Doultong Stone ashlar (Figs. 12, 13 & 14).

A scaled section drawing was made of this exposed wall, but further documentary research will be required to assist with the potential interpretation of the various phases of activity.



Figure 12. Chancel wall, W end: facing SE, 2m scales.



Figure 13. Chancel wall, central section: facing S, 1.5m scale.



Figure 14. Chancel wall, E end: facing S, 1.5m scale.

Discussion

The shallow burials outside the South Porch are probably medieval in date and formed part of the south facing sloping churchyard that was reduced during the construction of the porch in the 16th Century. The chancel deposits that had been carefully placed just below the stone pathway are possibly from burials that were disturbed during the path widening works in the 19th Century.

The deposit containing the medieval tile fragments appeared to be the usual disturbed grave soil containing fragments of human bone which you would expect to find in churchyards. There was no visible distinct layer within this deposit containing the tiles, but it is assumed that these tiles were once located within the church and formed part of a fairly high-status floor covering. The internal floors of the church were obscured with a protective covering during these works so it was not possible to see if similar tiles survive elsewhere within the church. The tiles will be retained by the church for their own heritage interpretation display.

The dismantled wall appeared to be of a 19th Century construction and was roughly built from local limestone faced with various architectural fragments that must have become redundant and had been kept within the churchyard.

A catalogue of stones for display within the church was produced by the writer of this document but this was based mainly on the justification for not putting some of the stones back into the new wall. A fine collection of 17th Century memorial stones that were removed from the face of the wall show the social and economic status of some of the villagers at this time and were deemed worthy of preservation within the church rather than continue to deteriorate if exposed in the face of the newly constructed wall.

The Romanesque style fragments were chosen because of their early historic value as they are possibly from the earlier 11th or 12th Century church and it was suggested by the project architect that these items could possibly form a small display in the newly refurbished South Porch. The stones found within the foundations of the existing wall are all probably from earlier phases of the church and as significant if not more than those chosen for display, but due to a lack of display space it was suggested that these were put into storage until they could be expertly assessed.

Acknowledgements

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Keith Faxon March 2023

References

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