

**CHURCH OF ST. MARY, ALDRIDGE, WALSALL  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2025**

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*For: PCC of the Church of St. Mary, Aldridge*

PLANNING REFERENCE: 24/0280

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28/03/2025

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# CHURCH OF ST. MARY, ALDRIDGE, WALSALL

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2025

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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2025

### 1.0: SUMMARY

- 1.1 In September 2023 AJ ARCHAEOLOGY was commissioned by the PCC of the Church of St. Mary, Aldridge, Walsall to undertake an archaeological watching brief within the eastern part of the churchyard (hereafter the site, centred on NGR SK 0601 0073) in advance of the construction of a Garden of Remembrance and associated works (planning reference 24/0280). The archaeological watching brief involved archaeological monitoring and recording during ground reduction for the construction of the new Garden of Remembrance. The project also included a search of historic maps at Walsall Archive and Local History Centre.
- 1.2 Aldridge is located to the northeast of Walsall. The Church of St. Mary is located to the east of the centre of Aldridge, to the south of The Green, and to the north of the A454 through road (Little Aston Road).
- 1.3 The watching brief was undertaken as a condition of the Faculty granted by the Diocese of Lichfield to permit the works to be undertaken, and condition 6 of the planning consent granted by Walsall Council.
- 1.4 No intact burials or monuments were disturbed during the groundworks which were confined within topsoil horizons. The natural subsoil was not recorded. Two intact grave memorials and a possible third were identified during the groundworks, and were retained intact and *in situ*.

## **2.0: INTRODUCTION**

### **2.1: The site**

- 2.1.1 In September 2023 AJ ARCHAEOLOGY was commissioned by the PCC of the Church of St. Mary, Aldridge, Walsall to undertake an archaeological watching brief within the eastern part of the churchyard (hereafter the site, centred on NGR SK 0601 0073, Figs 1-2, Plate A) in advance of the construction of a Garden of Remembrance and associated works (planning reference 24/0280). The archaeological watching brief involved archaeological monitoring and recording during ground reduction for the construction of the new Garden of Remembrance (Fig. 3). The project also included a search of historic maps at Walsall Archive and Local History Centre.
- 2.1.2 Aldridge is located to the northeast of Walsall. The Church of St. Mary (Fig. 2) is sited to the east of the centre of Aldridge, to the south of The Green, and to the north of the A454 through road (Little Aston Road).
- 2.1.3 The watching brief was undertaken as a condition of the Faculty granted by the Diocese of Lichfield to permit the works to be undertaken, and condition 6 of the planning consent granted by Walsall Council.
- 2.1.4 The Garden of Remembrance (Figs 2-3) is located to the east of the Church, and to the south of The Green. It is located within a 19th century extension to the churchyard. The garden will be roughly rectangular in plan, defined on its western and northern sides by horizontal railway sleepers. It will contain an oval area for interring cremations, surrounded by ornamental borders. It will be accessed from the north, along a new path laid between the garden and a new gated access off The Green.
- 2.1.5 The solid geology comprises the Chester Formation, sandstone and conglomerate, interbedded sedimentary bedrock formed 250-247.1 million years ago in the Triassic period ([www.geologyviewer.bgs.ac.uk/](http://www.geologyviewer.bgs.ac.uk/)). The site is located on slowly-permeable, seasonally-wet, slightly acid but base-rich loamy and clayey soils with moderate fertility (Soilscape 6, [www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes](http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes)).
- 2.1.6 The archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2014a) and the *Code of Approved Practice for the Regulation of Contractual Arrangements in Field Archaeology* (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2014b). The detailed methodology of the watching brief follows a revised Written Scheme of Investigation (AJ ARCHAEOLOGY 2023) which was approved by the Planning Archaeologist, Walsall Council, and by a Faculty granted by the Diocese of Lichfield, in advance of implementation.

### **2.2: Legislation, policy and guidance**

- 2.2.1 The *National Planning Policy Framework*, July 2021 ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2)) sets out the Government's planning policies, and how these should be applied. The NPPF is a material consideration in planning decisions. It states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development (para. 2.7), which has three overarching objectives: a) economic, b) a social, and c)

environmental, including the natural, built and historic environment. The NPPF makes a presumption in favour of sustainable development (para. 2.10).

- 2.2.2 Section 16 of the NPPF is concerned with conserving and enhancing the historic environment.
- 2.2.3 Local policies concerning archaeology and heritage are set out in Policy ENV25 of Walsall Unitary Development plan.

### **3.0: BACKGROUND**

#### **3.1: Church of St Mary**

- 3.1.1 The Church of St Mary is a statutorily listed building (No. 1076396, Grade II\*).
- 3.1.2 Documentary evidence (Lockett 2001) indicates that there has been a church on the site from at least the 13th century. Gould (1983) has suggested that the church was founded by 1250 AD.
- 3.1.3 The listed building description ([www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1076396?section=official-list-entry](http://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1076396?section=official-list-entry)) is as follows:

Church. C14, with south aisle of 1841. Extensively restored 1852-3 by Salvin, when the north aisle and chancel were rebuilt. South vestry added 1975. Red sandstone, with some limestone rubble exposed in tower. Tile roof. Comprises a west tower, nave, north aisle under pitched roof, south aisle, and lower chancel. The tower has diagonal buttresses, three string courses, and an embattled parapet. The openings have straight-sided pointed arches. The bell openings each have a mullion and transom. The west window is of two lights with flowing tracery. The west doorway is moulded with crocketed hood and head stops. The south aisle is of five bays, the windows pointed and having flowing tracery of various descriptions. The gabled porch, at the left, has a pointed outer arch with attached columns as responds. The north aisle is of five bays separated by buttresses and has 2-light windows. The east window is of three-lights with flowing tracery.

INTERIOR: four-bay nave arcades, with further bay on north side opening into chancel. Northern arches of sandstone, 4-centred, and chamfered in two orders. Piers octagonal with capitals. South arcade similar, but plastered except for the west bay. The pointed tower arch is chamfered in two orders. Nave roof has queen-post trusses with a central strut and with V-struts above the collar. The east bay of the nave has a collar-rafter roof and the chancel has bolted softwood trusses with arch-braced collars. Chancel has piscina, and an early C14 effigy in an arched recess. A second defaced effigy of similar date stands on a later stone base in the south aisle. Re-set on the north wall of the north aisle are several C18 wall tablets. The timber pulpit has carving in a Jacobean style, and at the west end of the south aisle is a bread cupboard dated: "TP 1694". Windows contain late C19 glass. One window in the south aisle dated 1865, by Powell.

- 3.1.4 The church is located to the east of the historic core of settlement at Aldridge. Aldridge was recorded as *Alrenic* in the Domesday Book (Horovitz 2005, 83), from the Old

English *alor* or alder, and the Old English *wic*. The former references alder trees, the latter a dwelling. The name has been incorrectly interpreted as ‘*alder ridge*’. Aldridge was considerably enlarged in the mid-late 19th century, with the church remaining on the eastern edge of the settlement.

### **3.2: Churchyard (Fig. 2)**

- 3.2.1 The eastern part of the churchyard was trenched in 2001 (Lockett 2001). A total of four trenches were excavated. Trench 2, located within the footprint of the Garden of Remembrance identified a north-south aligned limestone wall, set within a foundation trench. This building material was similar to that recorded within the tower, which may suggest a medieval or early post-medieval date for the wall, although no dating evidence was found by trenching. The wall functioned as the eastern boundary of the churchyard, prior to its eastward extension in 1873. Before that time it was the former garden for the Cooper and Jordan Boys’ School, with a monkey puzzle tree, a species which was popular in the Victorian period, as its focal point. The tree may be around 170 years in age. No evidence for grave cuts was found in this trench, or in Trenches 3-4 to the east (not illustrated on Fig. 2). Also identified within Trench 2 was a buried topsoil and turf horizon.
- 3.2.2 A plan of the monumental inscriptions within the churchyard does not record any monuments within the area of the Garden of Remembrance. However, two monuments were identified during the groundworks in March 2025 (see below), which were retained intact and *in situ* during the works.

### **3.3: Map regression**

- 3.3.1 The earliest available detailed map of Aldridge is dated 1817 (Fig. 4). It shows The Green to the north of the churchyard, and a length of a road, now Little Aston Road, to the south of the churchyard. A further road mapped on a north-south alignment is approximately respected by modern Erdington Road, to the south of the churchyard. A number of buildings are mapped along the road frontages towards the historic core of Aldridge. Most notably the church is mapped within a roughly D-shaped churchyard. The footprint of the church suggests it has been extended on at least three sides. The mapped orientation of the church is incorrect; it is shown with a long axis aligned southwest-northeast, whilst it is orientated east-west following standard practice. The eastern boundary of the churchyard in the early 19th century was stepped, the boundary extending uninterrupted from The Green to Little Aston Road. To the east of the churchyard are two plots of land, each containing a building. The building in the southern plot is H-shaped in plan. The northern plot contains a long rectangular building which adjoins the boundary dividing these two plots. To the north of The Green is a U-shaped structure, The Rectory, and an adjoining rectangular structure, probably a barn or other outbuilding on the frontage. To the rear of the plots adjoining the road frontages are several mostly rectangular fields, presumably either in arable cultivation or pasture.
- 3.3.2 The Aldridge tithe map of 1875 (Fig. 5) illustrates the church on its correct alignment, roughly parallel with The Green. Although detail on this map is in places indistinct, the churchyard appears to retain its D-shaped outline, as mapped in 1817. The eastern churchyard is stepped, continuing the arrangement mapped in 1817. This suggests the map was based on an earlier survey, since the churchyard was extended to the east in

1873, unless the dividing wall was retained temporarily. To the east of the churchyard two plots are shown, the northern containing a single long, rectangular building. The southern plot includes a long terrace adjoining the Little Aston Road frontage, and two further building to the rear. To the north of The Green a Rectory building is named. Compared to the earlier 19th century map, the tithe map illustrates a number of new dwellings concentrated to the west of the church. In contrast, to the east, and north of the church little development has taken place, and the landscape is divided into roughly rectangular fields by enclosure.

- 3.3.3 The First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1886 (Fig. 6) illustrates The Green, Little Aston Road, and Erdington Road. Most notably it illustrates the modern layout in the east of the churchyard, after the eastward extension of 1873, which necessitated the removal of the extreme northern end of the eastern churchyard boundary, to unify the historic churchyard with the extension to the east. The removal of this section of the former churchyard wall had taken place between 1873 and 1883. The map also illustrates the westward expansion of the town, which, again, contrasts with the open fields which survive to the east of the churchyard and the adjoining Schools.

#### **4.0: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

- 4.1 The purpose of archaeological watching brief was to provide a full record of any buried archaeological remains exposed by the consented works.
- 4.2 The detailed aims of the observation and recording were to:
- 1) Record any archaeological features or deposits within the Garden of Remembrance and the associated new path.
  - 2) Recover any disarticulated human remains from archaeological hand-cleaning (if any) and pass these to the PCC for re-burial.

#### **5.0: METHODOLOGY**

##### **5.1: Scope of works**

- 5.1.1 Excavation was undertaken by mini-digger equipped with a ditching bucket, working under continuous archaeological supervision (watching brief). The northern limit of the Garden of Remembrance was slightly reduced, to avoid disturbance to upstanding monuments. Figs 2-3 show the proposed extent of the garden, and Fig. 7 shows the actual extent of excavation for the garden.
- 5.1.2 No excavation was required for the new path (Plate B), which involved slightly raising the existing ground level, to provide level access from The Green.

##### **5.2: Hand-cleaning**

- 5.2.1 The machined surfaces were hand-cleaned and inspected for archaeological features and deposits.
- 5.2.2 Disarticulated human remains were bagged and passed to the PCC for re-burial.

- 5.2.3 In the event no grave cuts or articulated human remains were identified.
- 5.2.4 Fragments of one uninscribed grave memorial and a complete carved rectangular block of sandstone found within the topsoil were photographed and retained on site (see below).

### **5.3: Recording**

- 5.3.1 The groundworks were recorded by means of written description on pro-forma record cards, together with scaled plans and digital photography.

## **6.0: RESULTS**

### **6.1: Groundworks**

- 6.1.1 Archaeological observation and recording was confined to the Garden of Remembrance, since no ground reduction was undertaken for the new path (Plate B).
- 6.1.2 Prior to the groundworks the area of the Garden of Remembrance was laid to lawn (Plates A and C). Ground level sloped gently downwards from west to east (Plate A), reflecting the raising of the ground surface within the historic churchyard, as a result of the insertion of numerous burials.
- 6.1.3 The northernmost surviving section of the north-south aligned eastern wall of the churchyard comprised handmade bricks over a rubble foundation (Plate D). The latter may represent an earlier, possibly late medieval or early post-medieval build. The northern end of this limestone rubble wall was demolished sometime after 1873 when the churchyard was extended eastwards, leaving only its foundations, which were identified in Trench 2 (Lockett 2011). The above-ground element of the east-west churchyard wall was constructed entirely of handmade bricks (Plate E).
- 6.1.4 The natural subsoil was not encountered. Machining exposed horizons of very dark brown-grey clay-silt-sand topsoil (**100**, Plates E-F), which was mixed in places with brick rubble. Foundation trenches (Plates G-H) 0.15m wide and 0.1m deep were cut into the topsoil to retain railway sleepers which defined the western and northern edges of the Garden of Remembrance. The maximum depth of machine excavation through topsoil was an average of 0.2m below the modern ground surface.
- 6.1.5 Two monuments were identified within the Garden of Remembrance. One was upright (**101**), the second was a flat monument (**102**), defined by stone edging (Plate I). Both were retained intact and *in situ* during the groundworks. The eastern edge of a possible flat sandstone monument (**103**) was also recorded along the western edge of the garden. This was also retained intact and *in situ*.

### **6.2: Finds**

- 6.2.1 The notable finds from the excavation of topsoil comprised fragments of an uninscribed memorial stone (Plate J), and an architectural fragment (Plate K), presumably removed from the church during refurbishment or rebuilding. Both were retained on site.



## **7.0: DISCUSSION**

- 7.1 No intact burials or monuments were disturbed during the works. Fragments of disarticulated human bone were passed to the PCC for re-burial.
- 7.2 The groundworks were confined to the topsoil. Two intact grave memorials were identified (**101**) and (**102**), but neither was disturbed during the groundworks. The eastern end of a third possible monument (**103**) was also identified, recorded and retained *in situ*.
- 7.3 The natural subsoil was not recorded during groundworks, which were confined to the topsoil (**100**). Because of the shallow depth of the groundworks the demolished foundations of the former eastern churchyard wall (found in Trench 2, Lockett 2001) were not identified, and will be preserved undisturbed beneath the Garden of Remembrance.

## **8.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 8.1 The watching brief was commissioned by the PCC of the church of St. Mary, Aldridge. NPM Investments. Jen and Pete Ford are thanked for their assistance. The fieldwork was managed and undertaken by Alex Jones, assisted by Nigel Dodds (illustrations). The project was monitored for Walsall Council by Eleanor Ramsey.

## **9.0: REFERENCES**

### **9.1: Map sources**

Walsall Archive and Local History Centre

Plan of Aldridge, 1817

Tithe map of Aldridge, 1875

Ordnance Survey First Edition map 1884/1886

### **9.2: Secondary sources**

AJ ARCHAEOLOGY 2023 *Written Scheme of Investigation: Archaeological Watching Brief, Church of St. Mary, Aldridge, Walsall.*

Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2014a *Standard and Guidance: Archaeological Watching Briefs.*

Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2014b *Code of Approved Practice for the Regulation of Contractual Arrangements in Field Archaeology.*

Gould, J, 1983 *Men of Aldridge.*

Horovitz, D, 2005 *The Place Names of Staffordshire.*

Lockett, N, 2001 *Evaluation at St. Mary's Parish Church, Aldridge, Walsall, West Midlands.*

### **9.3: Internet sources**

Geology

[www.geologyviewer.bgs.ac.uk/](http://www.geologyviewer.bgs.ac.uk/)

Soils

[www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes](http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes)

Historic England – Heritage List

[www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/map-search?clearresults=true](http://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/map-search?clearresults=true)

National Planning Policy Framework, July 2021

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2)





Fig.1



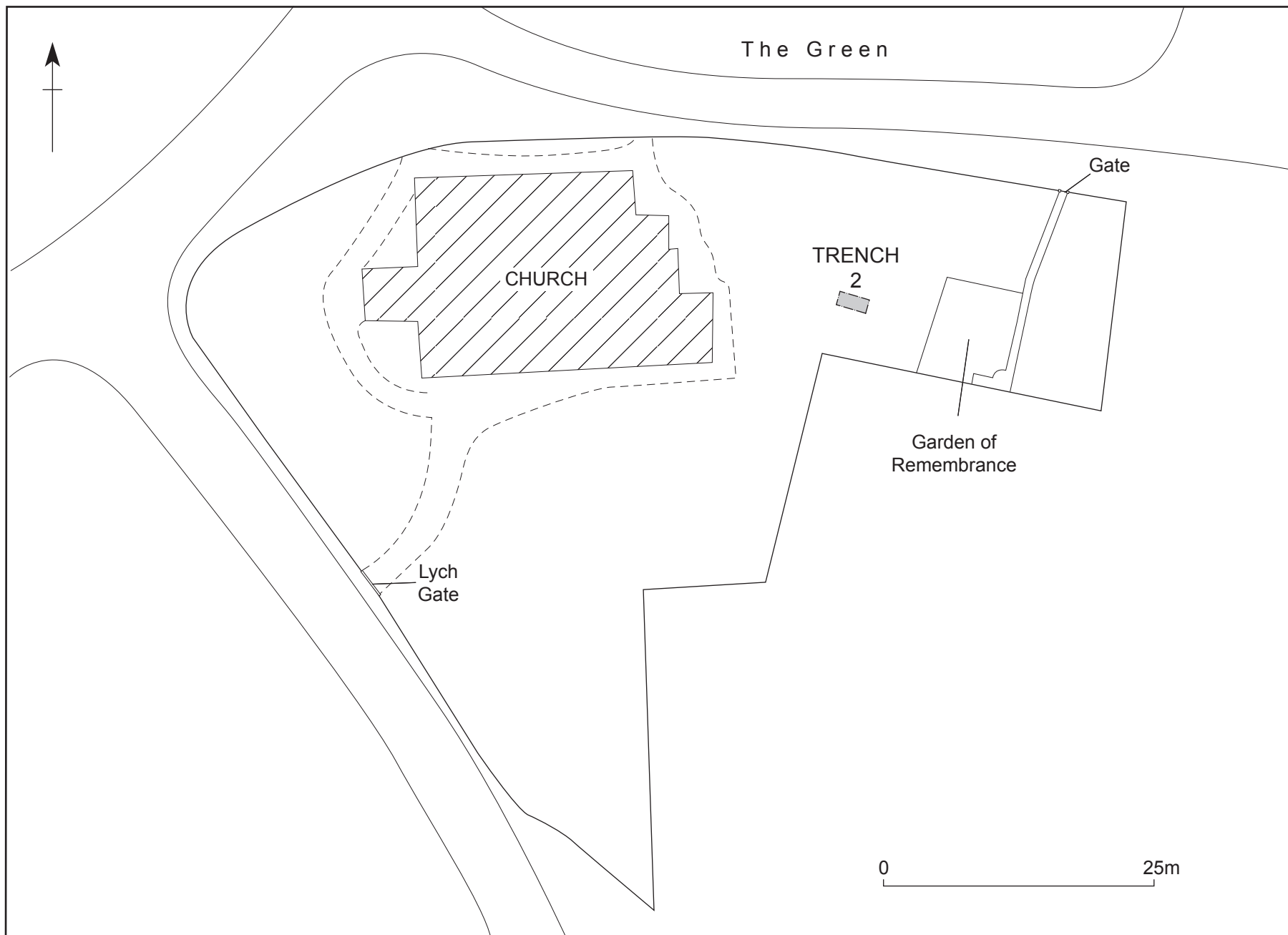


Fig.2

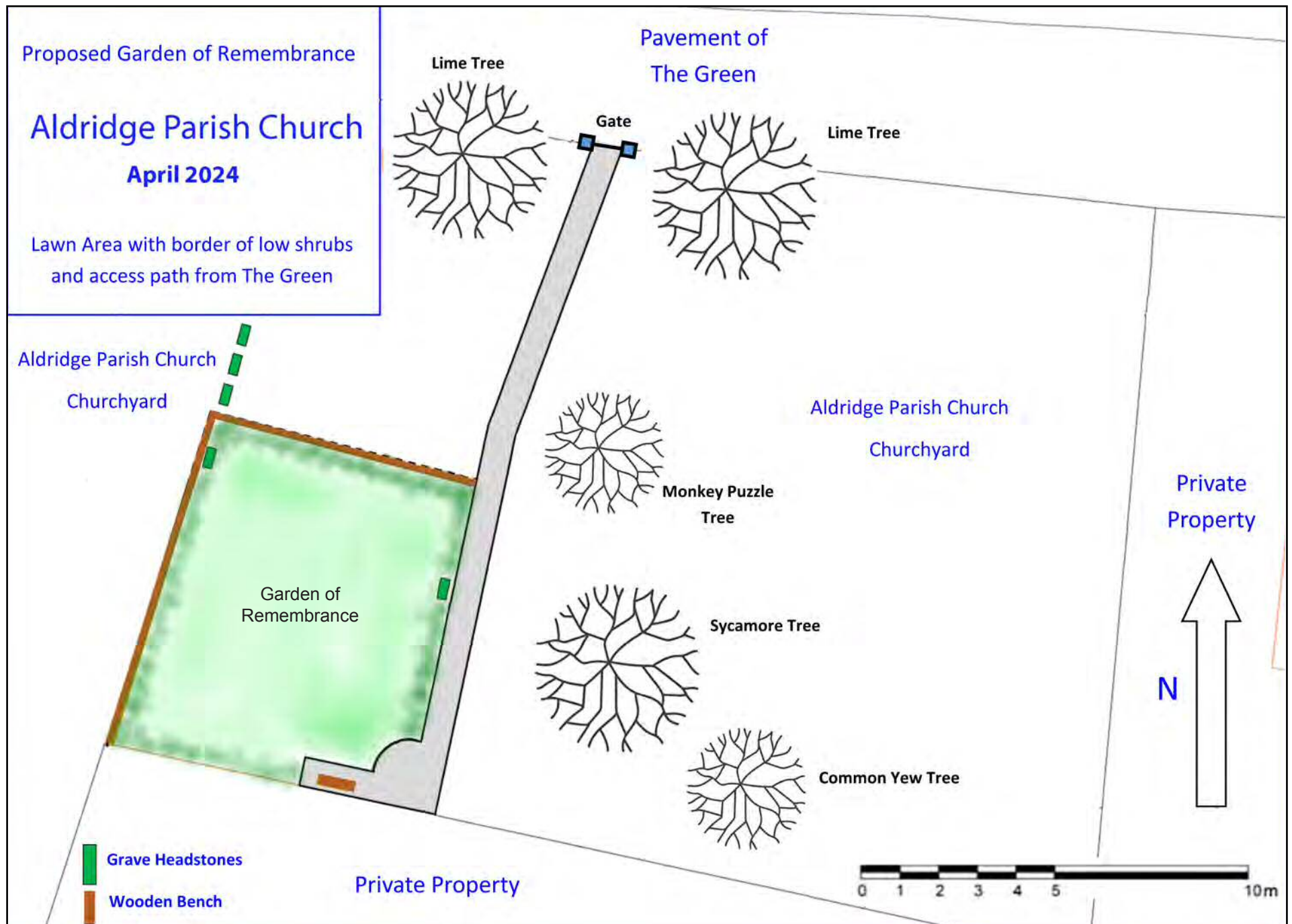


Fig.3





Fig.4





Fig.5

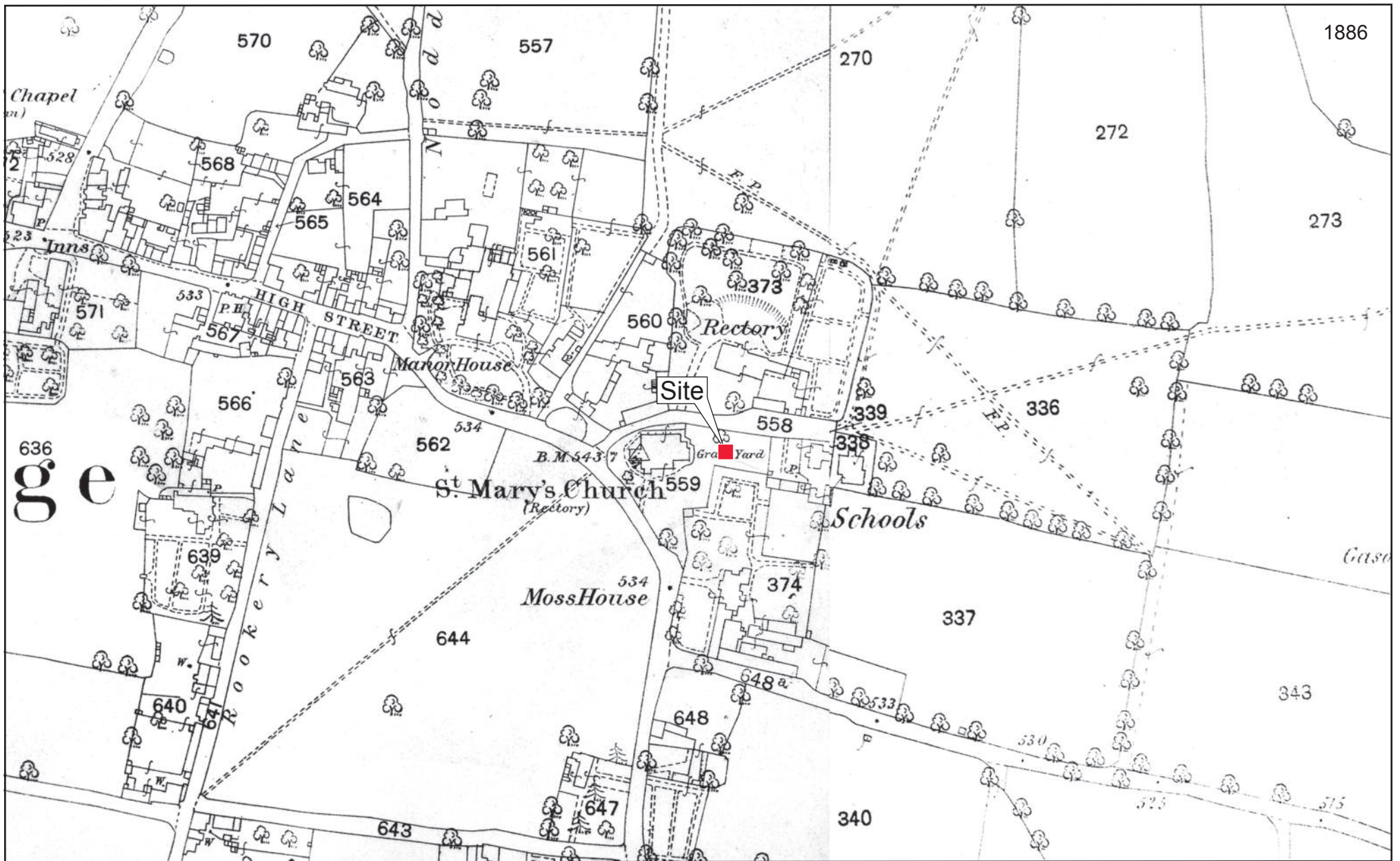


Fig.6



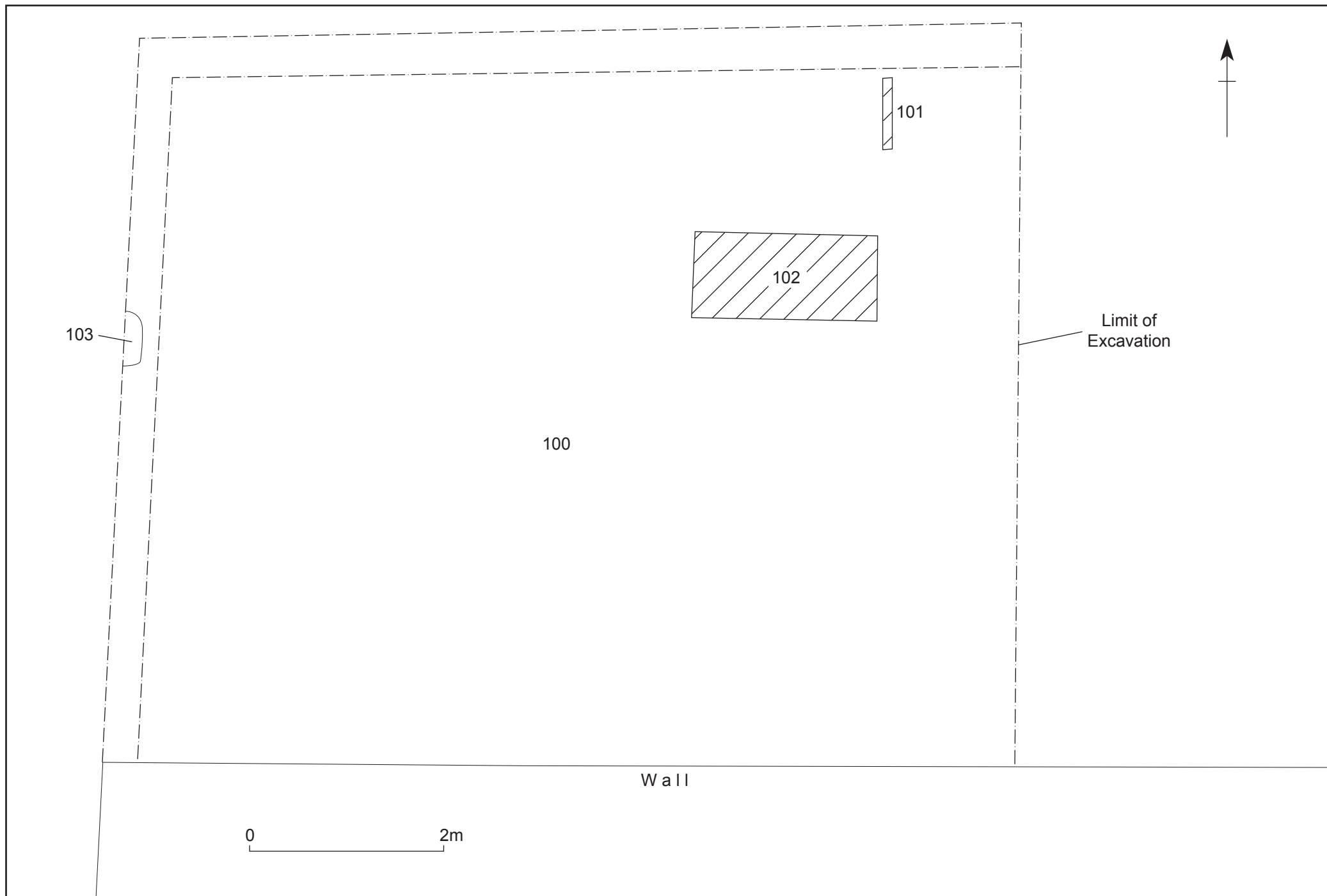


Fig.7



Plate A: Eastern area of churchyard prior to excavation, view: south



Plate B: Area of new path, view: southeast





Plate C: Garden of Remembrance area prior to excavation, view: northeast



Plate D: Churchyard wall with rubble foundation, view: east





Plate E: Garden of Remembrance after machine excavation, view: east



Plate F: Garden of Remembrance after machine excavation, view: west





Plate G: Trench along northern edge of GOR, view: west



Plate H: Trench along western edge of GOR, view: north



Plate I: Grave memorial in west of GOR, view: west



Plate J: Uninscribed headstone





Plate K: Decorated architectural fragment.