

St Laurence's Church Northfield Birmingham

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING



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*Working for
Warwickshire*

Project: Watching Brief during excavation inside St
Laurence's Church, Northfield, Birmingham

Commissioned by: Jan Bakewell, on behalf of the PCC

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Planning Reference: N/A

National Grid Reference: SP 02541 79335

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SUMMARY

A programme of archaeological recording was undertaken during groundworks associated with the construction of an internal glass porch in the south aisle of St Laurence's Church, Northfield, Birmingham, following the discovery of a cobbled footing in the doorway area of the south aisle.

The south aisle was constructed at the end of the 13th century as a replacement for an earlier 12th-century version and it is believed that the cobbled footing relates to this early church. No significant finds were recovered during the work

A small amount of human bone recovered was bagged for reburial.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Archaeological recording took place at St Laurence's Church, Northfield, Birmingham, after a suspected 'early' wall footing was uncovered during ground reductions for a new internal glass porch within the south aisle of the church. St Laurence is one of the oldest medieval churches in Birmingham. Although Faculty had been granted without the requirement for archaeological monitoring, the discovery of an early wall footing was sufficient prompt for the PCC to organise archaeological recording before it was covered by the new floor.
- 1.2 Archaeology Warwickshire were commissioned to record the exposed archaeological deposits in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists Standards and Guidelines (2020) on February 5th 2021. This report presents the results of that work.
- 1.3 The project archive will be stored with Archaeology Warwickshire under Site Code BL21 until deposition at the Birmingham Museum.

2 SITE LOCATION

- 2.1 St Laurence's Church lies in the centre of the former village of Northfield, centred at National Grid reference SP 02541 79335 (Fig 1). The church occupies an elevated position at the top of Church Hill, with the ground sloping down to the south. The area of works was within the south aisle in the area immediately north of the present doorway.
- 2.2 The underlying solid geology of the site is mapped as Mercia Mudstone, however this is overlain by Alluvial Fan Deposits of Sand and Gravel (British Geological Survey 2012).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Northfield is a pre-conquest settlement (HER 20634) and the extant church, a Grade I Listed Building (see Appendix A), has its origins in the 12th century (HER 01189) although a priest at Domesday suggests there was a Saxon precursor. Prior to the conquest *Nordfeld* was held by Alwold, son of Erngeat, and by 1086 it was held by William Fitz-Ansculf. The church at Northfield was granted to the priory of Dudley by Gervase Paynel and was held until the priory was dissolved in the 16th century. Northfield was in the county of Worcestershire until 1911, when it became part of Birmingham, and therefore in the county of Warwickshire. The church and churchyard (HER 20086) lie within a conservation area and churchyard walls (HER 02343) are Grade II Listed. Northfield medieval village is an Area of Archaeological Importance (Area No 139).
- 3.2 The church of St Laurence is located in the centre of the former village, standing in a small churchyard, which was enlarged considerably to the south-east in the 19th century. Pevsner describes it as being 'tucked away in a tightly enclosed village setting' and containing some of the finest Early English work in the county (Pevsner and Wedgwood 1966, 193). The earliest feature in the church is a round-headed doorway dating from c.1170, which has been re-set in the early 20th-century north aisle wall. Two 12th-century windows have been inserted into the tower walls. The chancel dates from the 13th century and is described by Pevsner as 'the glory of the church' being complete and unspoilt (Pevsner and Wedgwood 1966, 193-4). The south aisle is also of 13th century date and the nave is a 14th-century rebuild. The tower dates from the 14th century and the porch was added in the 15th century. The north aisle was built in 1900 in a 14th-century style. Burials from the site of the north aisle have been interred in a grave in the churchyard extension to the south-east and a memorial stone raised to commemorate them.
- 3.3 On the exterior of the church there are traces of a structure against the south wall of the chancel, opening from the south aisle by an arch, of which the northern springing remains (VCH 1913, 200). There are also traces of the bonding of the eastern wall, indicating the existence of an earlier south aisle, replaced at the end of the 13th century with the present one.

- 3.4 One of the earliest buildings in the area, other than the church, is the Listed (HER 02368) Rectory outhouse, which probably dates from the 16th century. Other archaeological sites in the vicinity include the site of the village pound, probably of 17th-century date (HER 01191). This is an enclosure with modern paving and a sandstone wall to the road; The Great Stone, a glacial erratic, has been set in the centre of the former pound. It stands between the 18th-century Great Stone Inn (HER 01190) and early 19th-century Rose Cottage (HER 02367) both of which are Listed Buildings. Other Listed Buildings in the village include St Laurence's Church of England School, built in 1837 with 1870 exteriors (HER 01192) and an 18th-century house on Church Hill (HER 02344).
- 3.5 An archaeological watching brief at Rose Cottage (HER 20202) recorded worked flint, medieval pottery, evidence for structures and medieval ridge and furrow. On the east side of the church was Northfield Moat, which was apparently filled by the City Council in 1930 and subsumed in a housing estate in 1965 (HER 02947).

Previous work at St Laurence's church

- 3.6 In 1984 a trench was monitored during groundworks for electric cables for spotlights, through soil that had previously been disturbed for services or featureless topsoil (HER EBM154). In 2012 an extensive watching brief was carried out when a major programme of drain replacement was undertaken (HER EBM649). A length of masonry was recorded in a trench to the north of the chancel, which may have represented an early wall parallel to the chancel (Coutts 2012). A possible ledger stone was recorded to the north of the tower. In trenches cut into the paths particularly south of the church, earlier surface levels could be seen, suggesting the ground had previously been much lower here. The many fragments of human bone exposed during the work were collected and re-buried within the graveyard.
- 3.7 In 2014 a further watching brief took place during groundworks for a new area of cremation burial to the south-west of the church. A large quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered from the area excavated, within a charnel pit, with two articulated burials were recorded at a lower level, partly truncated by the charnel pit. A large brick-built feature, thought to be the remains of an old boiler room, was recorded within the area excavated.

4 AIMS AND METHODS

- 4.1 The main aim of the work was to record the remains of the footings uncovered and any other significant archaeological deposits revealed by the development, to collate the fieldwork records into an archaeological archive and present the results of the fieldwork for dissemination.
- 4.2 An experienced archaeologist was present to record the remains exposed after being notified by the client.
- 4.3 Groundworks for the new internal porch were all carried out by hand and the excavated spoil removed in bags. The herringbone wooden floor tiles were lifted, as were the stone slabs and ledgers, all to be relaid once the work is complete.

5 RESULTS

- 5.1 Geological natural was not recorded during the groundworks, which mostly reached a depth of 0.40m below ground level. The area examined was c.2.30m square at the time of the site visit, with a further 0.65m wide strip to the east still under concrete at the time of recording. The lowest level cut into was a layer of reddish brown sandy silt (7). This layer contained fragments of mortar, pebbles and larger stones and a small quantity of disarticulated human bone, which was bagged for later reburial.

Medieval

- 5.2 immediately below the line of the standing, late 13th-century, south aisle wall, and projecting 0.30m to its north, was a footing made up of cobbles of various sizes bonded with a mixture of compacted soil and lime mortar (1). The visible width of this footing was 0.70-0.80m and 0.20m height was exposed. The foundation trench for the 13th-century wall (13) appears to have cut through the earlier footing and it is possible that the later footing was constructed slightly further to the south, allowing for a larger south aisle. The cobbles were overlain by a thin layer of soft reddish brown sand (2).

Post-medieval

- 5.3 Either side of the door openings were two dwarf brick walls 1.90m apart (3 and 4), both c.0.35m high, to support the weight of the large flags (10) at the entrance to the south aisle. To the west of wall 4 and immediately north of the aisle wall was a double-width brick footing with a stepped base (6). Overlying footing 6, immediately west of brick wall 4 was a 0.20m deep deposit of compact dark grey grit which contained fragments of broken brick and lumps of mortar (5). On the western side of the trench layer 5 was overlain by a thick layer of concrete that contained a large amount of broken brick and mortar lumps (14). Layer 7 and concrete 14 were overlain by 50mm of concrete screed for the wooden floor (9).

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The archaeological work provided a record of an early cobbled wall footing preserved in the doorway of the late 13th-century south aisle wall that may have been the footing of the 12th-century aisle wall the former is said to have replaced. Cobbled footings have also been recorded at the 13th-century church of St Andrew, Great Ness, Shropshire, where the footing was thought to belong to an earlier north aisle of 12th- or 13th-century date (Baker 2004). A watching brief at St Mary's Church, Aldridge, recorded a cobbled footing of late 12th- or early 13th-century date (Lang and Meeson 1991). More recently a cobbled footing was recorded below the north wall of St Botolph's Church, Burton Hastings, Warwickshire (Coutts 2021). This suggests that many of the Midlands early churches utilised non-quarried stone for the foundations of the buildings, where the stonework would not be visible, and retailed quarried stone for the elevations that could be seen.
- 6.2 Later post-medieval activity appears to have destroyed the cobbling to the west, with dwarf walls being inserted to support modern flooring.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDICES

A List of contexts

Context	Description	Length (m)	Width (m)	Thickness (m)	Interpretation
1	Cobbled wall footing in a matrix of lime mortar and hard clay	2.00	0.70	0.20	12th-century south aisle footing
2	Layer of soft reddish-brown sand, loose	2.00	0.70	0.05	Overlies cobbled footing
3	Brick wall, single skin	1.96	0.11	0.35	Support wall for flooring, E of doorway
4	Brick wall, single skin, roughly mortared	1.96	0.11	0.35	Support wall for flooring, W of doorway
5	Compacted dark grey grit with lumps of brick and mortar	1.96	0.35	0.20	Infill to west of wall 4
6	Stepped brickwork against south wall of church	0.35	0.24	0.20	Support walling
7	Layer of reddish brown sandy silt, contained some human bone fragments			0.35+	Material removed during ground reduction
8	Layer of concrete screed			0.05	For parquet floor
9	Oak herringbone parquet flooring			0.02	
10	Stone floor slabs/ledger stones				In centre of doorway area
11	Cut for support wall 4			0.35	Cuts into cobbles 1
12	Cut for support wall 3			0.35	Cuts into cobbles 1
13	Cut for 13th-century south aisle wall				Cuts into cobbles 1
14	Concrete layer to west, contains large amount of broken brick and mortar lumps as ballast			0.12-0.18	Overlain by screed 8
15	South aisle wall				Standing wall



1: South aisle doorway and cobbled footing (1)



2: Detail of cobbled footing with brick support wall to right



3: Brick walling 4 and 6 with fill 5 and thick concrete 14 to west of doorway

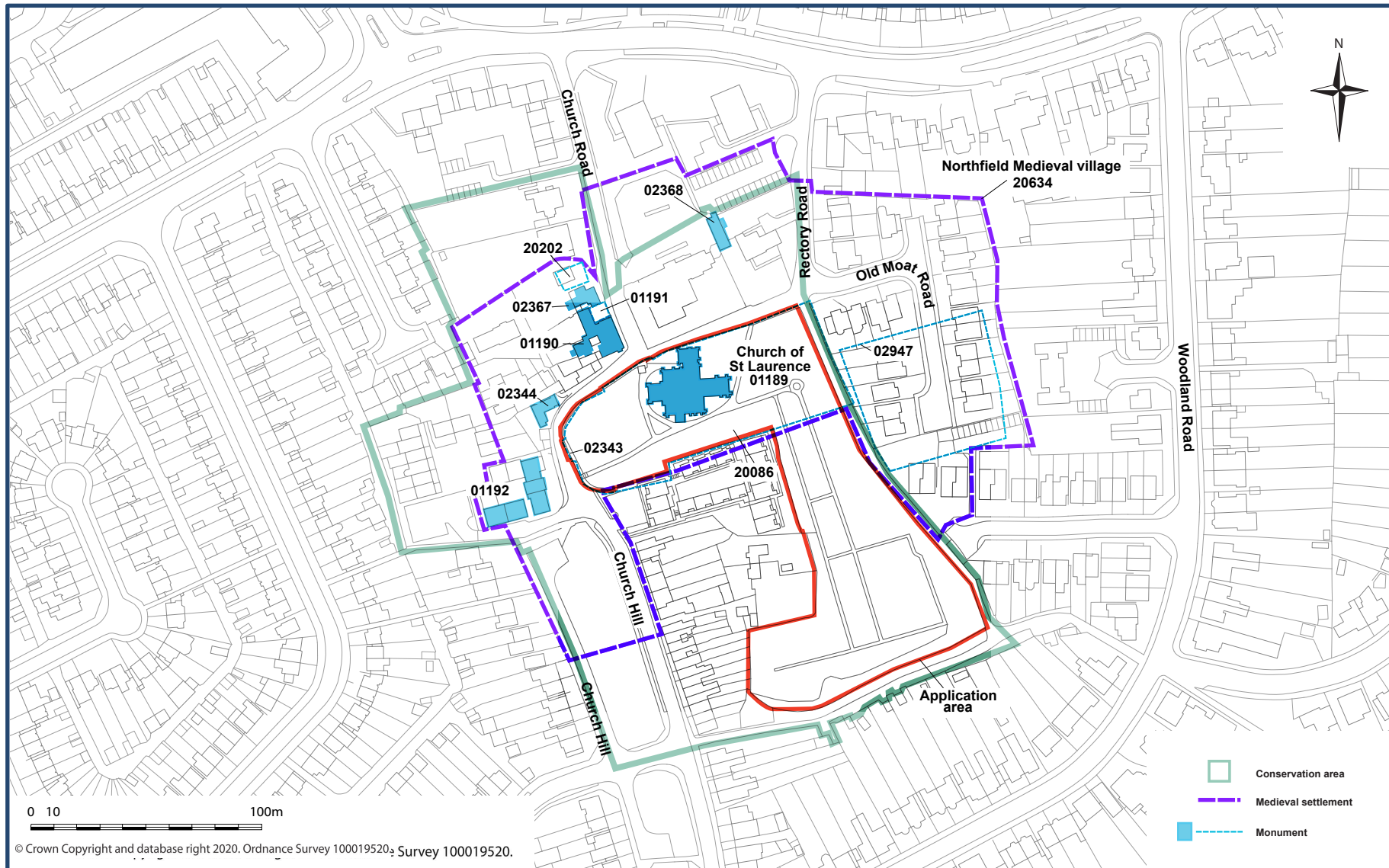


Fig 1: Location of application area

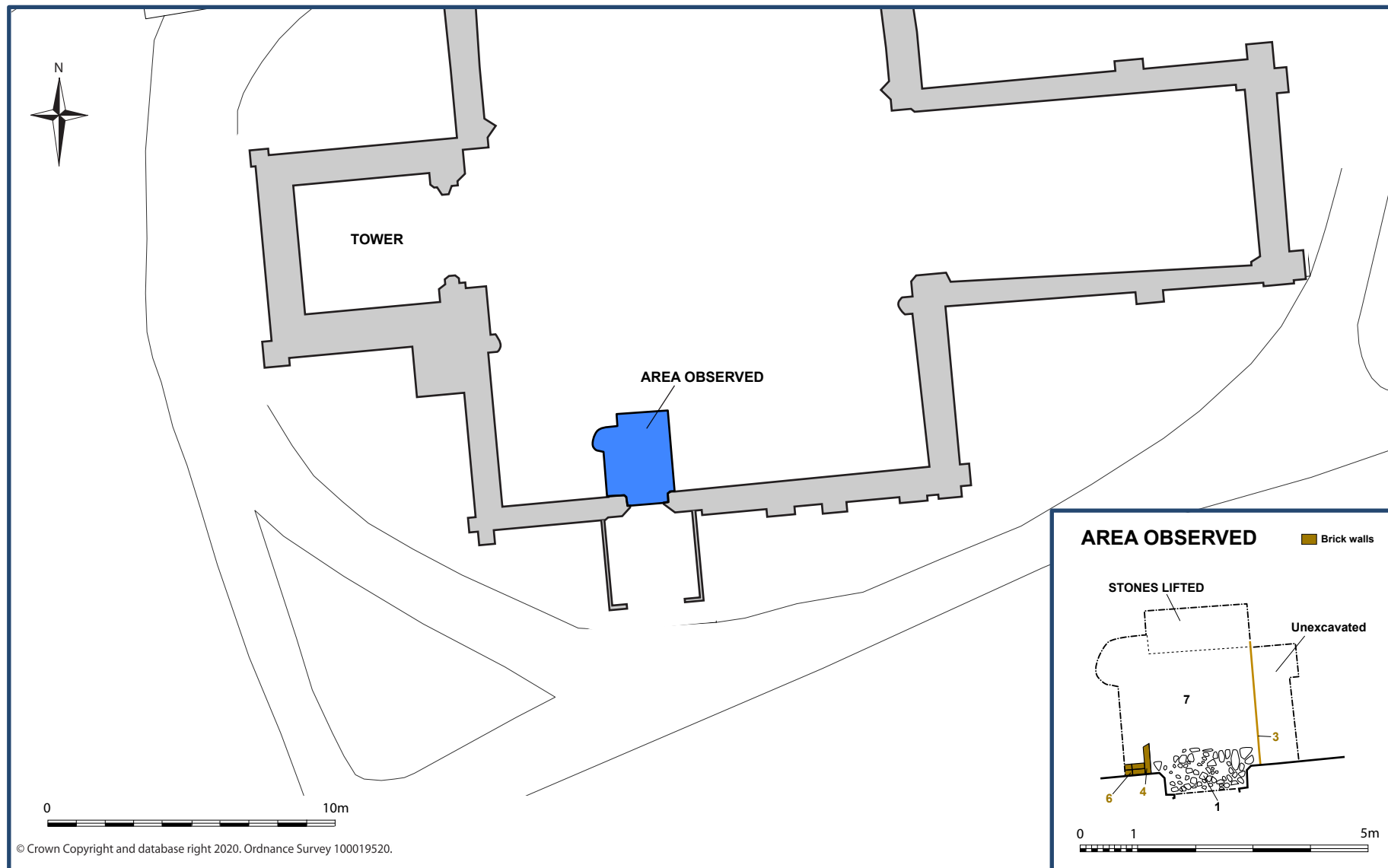


Fig 2: Area observed