

CHURCH of St MICHAEL and ALL ANGELS, EAST COKER, SOMERSET

Report on Archaeological Investigations external to the West door



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The PCC of the Church of St Michael and All Angels, East Coker

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The photograph on the cover shows the variation in road surface levels at the NW corner of the church.

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Archaeological Investigations external to the West door

Summary

Archaeological excavation of a trial hole on the south side of the West door recorded a French drain running along the west side of the church, modern levelling layers and geological deposits.

Location

The site is located at NGR ST 5388 1219 East Coker, Yeovil, Somerset BA22 9JW.

Introduction

The west door is used at weddings and funerals but has the disadvantage of three steep steps immediately inside the door. The PCC are exploring the possibility of constructing a narthex and potentially lowering the west door to create level access into the nave. These proposals would also involve lowering the external ground surface by approximately 600mm and would involve excavating foundation trenches to a depth of 1600mm, foundations being 1000mm below the new finished floor level.

There was a possibility that archaeological remains may have existed on the site, but little was known of their extent or their state of preservation. Some of the works may have archaeological implications and it was therefore recommended that archaeological trial pits were excavated externally at the west end of the church to investigate the below ground deposits.

It was originally envisaged that a series of five trial holes would be excavated externally around the west end of the church to establish the depth of the church foundations, the depth of the churchyard wall footings and the general ground make-up in this area. After consultation with the church architects and the PCC it was agreed that a single trial hole located on the south side of the west door (in the road surface, owned by the church) would establish the stratigraphy in this location and identify any archaeological deposits and give an indication of the depth of the church foundations and determine why the internal level is lower than the external ground surface. It was hoped that this excavation would be indicative of whether it was worth the church pursuing their proposals before committing to the expense of further trial excavations.

A licence had been granted (DAC 2020) for the creation of trial holes in the churchyard on condition that the trial holes shall be dug under archaeological supervision and shall be the subject of assessment by the archaeologist. Any human remains disturbed in the course of the work shall be reinterred reverently in the churchyard.

Prior to the commencement of the works a Written Scheme of Investigation had been produced for the Archaeological Investigations (Faxon 2020).

The PCC of the Church of St Michael and All Angels in consultation with their architects Benjamin & Beauchamp Architects Ltd appointed Keith Faxon Archaeological Consultant to undertake the archaeological investigations.

The subsequent works were undertaken by the author and Mr Andrew Stevens between the 10th and the 13th of November 2020.

Archaeological Background

The Church is Grade II* Listed, List entry number 1345781 (Historic England 2021), It is recorded as being late 12th Century with 15th and 19th Century work.

The Somerset Historic Environment Record (SHER) records the church has having fabric of 13th Century origins which was refashioned later. The lateral tower is late 18th Century and replaces a former central tower. Close examination of the fabric and proportions suggests that the church has Saxon origins. The church is of Ham Hill stone and has a north tower in a transeptal position. Thought to be earlier than the 14th Century but remodelled in the early 19th Century, SHER Record No: 53909 (South West Heritage Trust 2021).

Methodology

The trial hole was located 130mm south of the West door and was cut out in the existing asphalt road surface at 1100 mm long E-W and 1000mm wide N-S (Figs. 1 & 2). Once the asphalt surface was removed all further deposits were hand excavated until their stratigraphic relationships could be established and understood and were sampled for evidence of function and date. The trial hole was excavated to a maximum depth of 1000mm below the existing road surface.

All archaeological deposits were assigned sequential Unit numbers **(100-109)** and for ease of descriptions the trial hole was labelled Trench 1. The Units were recorded by written descriptions and digital photography and a measured plan to an appropriate scale was made showing the location of the excavation area relative to other features of the site. Each excavation Unit was also recorded before it was removed in whole or part and cross sections were also drawn to scale. The drawings and archaeological deposits were levelled to Ordnance Survey Datum.

The west side of the church was fenced off for the duration of the works and once the excavations were completed the French drain was reconstructed, the trial hole was backfilled and the asphalt road surface reinstated.

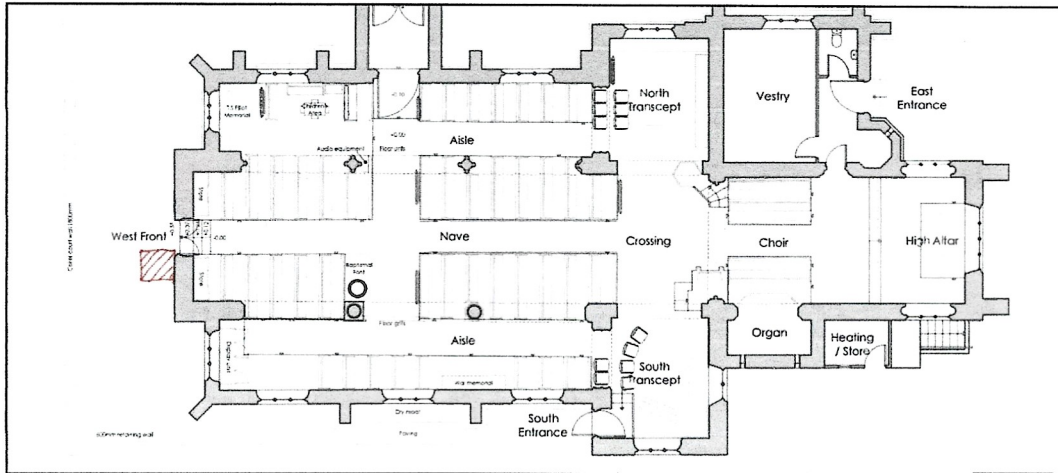


Figure 1. Proposed Trial Hole Location (Benjamin & Beauchamp Architects Ltd).



Figure 2. Trial Hole Location: facing E, 1m scales.

Results

(Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8)

The asphalt road surface **(100)** was up to 80mm thick and removal of this deposit revealed a layer of pink gravels **(101)** up to 20mm deep and below this was a layer of yellow gravels **(102)** up to 140mm in thickness. These compact gravel deposits were bedding material for the road surface.

The gravels sealed deposits of mixed green and yellow silty clay **(103)**, dirty green silty clay **(104)** and chamfered plinth course/offset footings **(105)**. The mixed green and yellow clay was in the west side of the trench and was at least 500mm wide E-W and up to 100mm thick and the dirty green clay was 220mm wide E-W and up to 60mm

thick and both deposits ran for the entire length of the trench N-S. Both clay deposits contained occasional angular limestone and flecks of charcoal.

Removal of the clay deposits revealed compact yellowish sandy clay with small angular sandstone and thin beds of sandstone **(106)**, this appeared to be undisturbed and was interpreted as a geological deposit. The east side of this deposit contained a vertical cut **(107)** which was up to 250mm wide and at least 800mm deep.

The cut contained Ham stone rubble **(108)**, occasional modern perforated brick fragments, glazed ceramic service pipe fragments a stone roof tile fragment, and a single animal bone. Removal of this rubble deposit exposed the upper surface of a ceramic pipe **(109)** at least 110mm in diameter, this feature appeared to be a modern French drainage system.

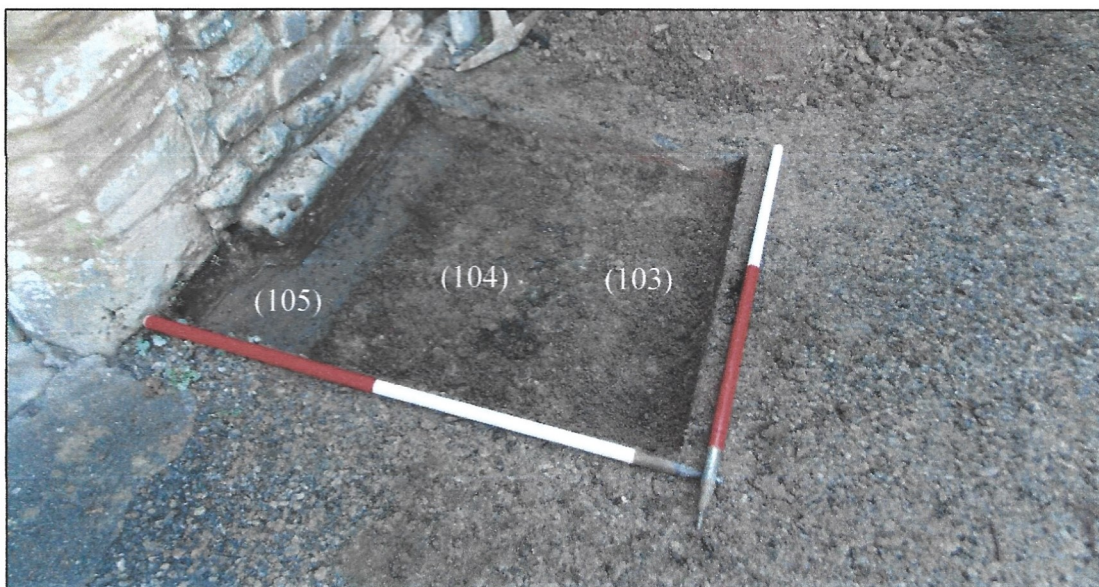


Figure 3. Units **(103)**, **(104)** & **(105)**: facing S, 1m scales.

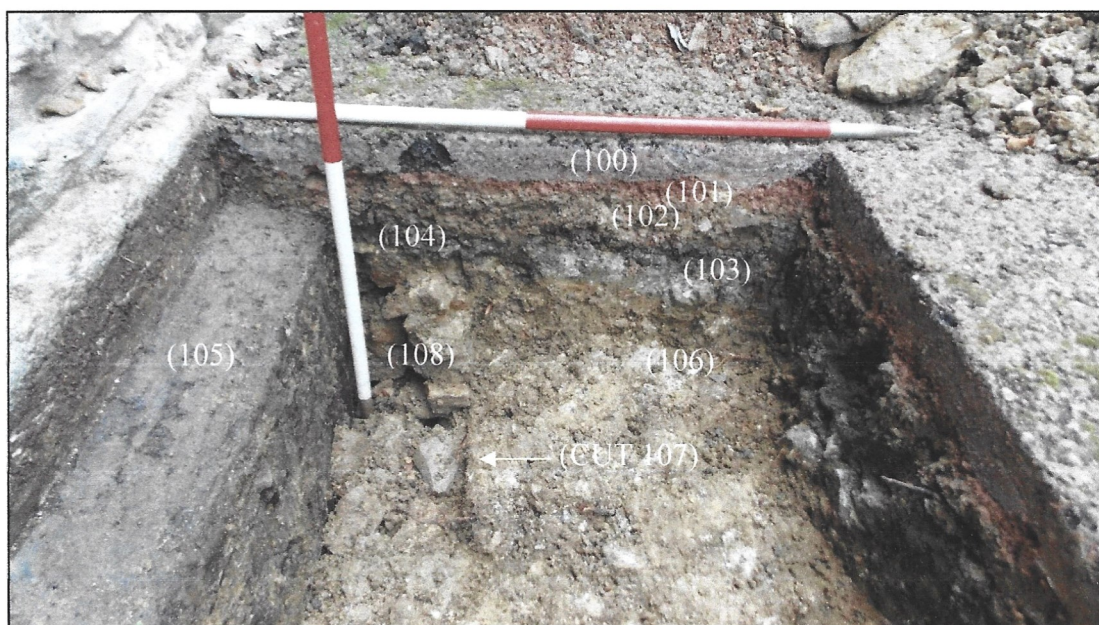


Figure 4. N facing Section: facing S, 1m scales.

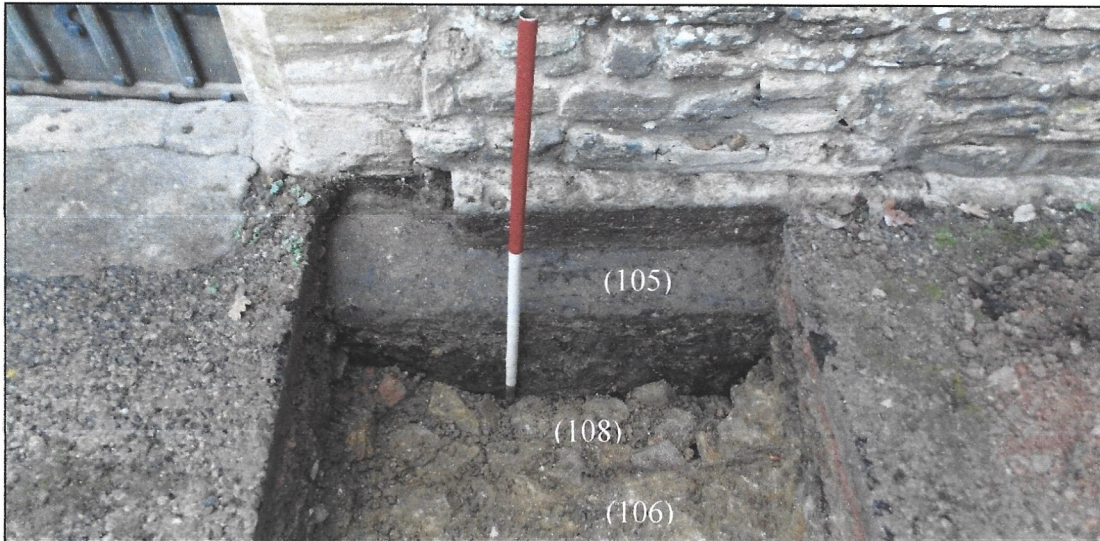


Figure 5. French drain partially excavated: facing E, 1m scale.

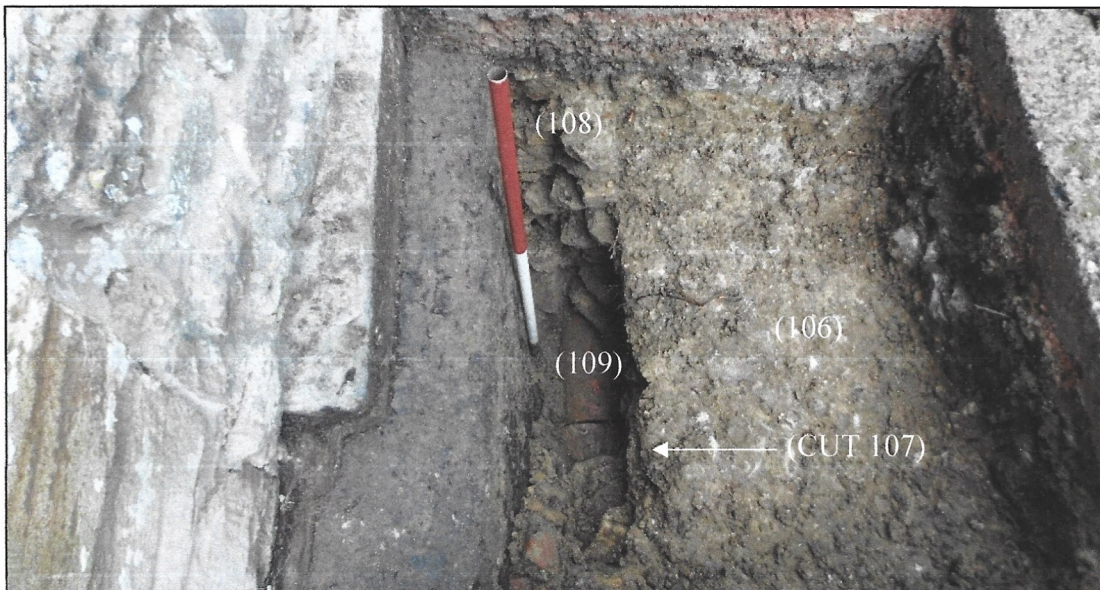


Figure 6. French drain fully excavated, showing ceramic pipe (109): facing S.



Figure 7. Close up view of ceramic pipes (109): from above.



Figure 8. Chamfered plinth course/offset footings **(105)**: facing E, 1m scales.

Conclusion

The excavation of the trial hole has demonstrated that there is a build-up of up to 300mm of landscaping deposits **(100, 101, 102 & 103)** above a French drain and what appear to be geological deposits **(106)** within this area.

The chamfered plinth course/offset footings **(105)** are offset up to 140mm from the above ground exposed offset course of stonework and is at least 1000mm deep below the existing road surface. These foundations were not bottomed due to the drainage pipe **(109)** in the base of the trench. The bottom of the chamfer was 180mm below the road surface and it assumed that it was exposed at some point in the past prior to the road construction. This chamfered section of the foundations would appear to be constructed from coursed rubble which has been rendered and appears to have been waterproofed with some form of sealant.

The Ham stone **(108)** filled French drain had been cut through clay **(103)** and natural deposit **(106)** and clay **(104)** would appear to be redeposited clay similar to **(103)** which forms the upper fill of the drain. The offset foundations **(105)** form the west side of the drain and as this feature appeared to be still functioning the ceramic pipe **(109)** was left in-situ.

No earlier road or path surfaces were revealed below the modern road and bedding materials apart from the thin band of clay **(103)** which may be the remains of a buried soil (churchyard) which was in existence prior to the road construction.

The geology around the church is recorded as Limestone, medium – to fine grained. Thin argillaceous partings or interbeds of calcareous mudstone with minor sandstone beds (British Geological Survey 2021). The deposit **(106)** was very clean and appeared undisturbed and this is assumed to be a geological deposit, only circa 200mm of the

depth of this deposit was removed as further disturbance would have compromised the French drain.

If (106) is a geological deposit, then this would suggest that the west end of the church has been terraced into the natural hillslope like that as can be seen on the SW corner (Fig. 9). No sign of a cut for a foundation trench or terracing was seen during these works but this could have been destroyed during the construction of the French drain.



Figure 9. South end of church set into hillslope: facing W.

The west door surround would appear to be a later insertion using reclaimed masonry and the Ham stone doorway jambs on the south side appear to have been constructed on top of the chamfered plinth course also suggesting that the doorway has been inserted into an existing wall. The top step must also be a latter addition as this is higher than the chamfered plinth course.

Although the excavations were limited to a small area no earlier structures or burials were encountered during these works.

It is probable that further investigative work will be required, depending on the design and approval of the proposed entrance and this may take the form of further archaeological trial holes, bore holes (Window Sampling) or archaeological monitoring (with a provision for excavation) during the construction works.

Consultation with the church's architects, the Diocesan Advisory Committee, and the senior archaeological officer (South West Heritage Trust) will be required to attain suitable mitigation strategies.

Acknowledgements

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Gillian Smith is especially thanked for attending site every day to allow access into the church and letting us use the welfare facilities and for her interest during the works.

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Keith Faxon, February 2021

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