

**REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING DURING RE-SURFACING  
AND DRAINAGE WORKS IN THE CHURCHYARD TO THE SOUTH OF THE PARISH CHURCH OF  
ST BARTHOLOMEW, CORSHAM, WILTSHIRE**

James L. Brigers BA, June 2017 on behalf of the Parochial Church Council of St Bartholomew, Corsham

**NGR: ST 7421 0530**

**LAT. 51.433615; LONG: -2.1823405**

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## **SUMMARY**

A watching brief was conducted during limited groundworks at the above location through March and April 2017. Immediately within the southern boundary four infant burials were located, each of which shallow and most likely informal. Elsewhere further burials were encountered including an adult individual in a very well constructed lined grave. To the south of the church a double-chambered lined grave was exposed which did not respect the alignment of others in the area; this appeared to have been re-used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and may be considerably earlier. A further early structure may be represented by the remains of a wall, also the south of the church, which also lay on an alignment at variance with the existing building. This does not appear to have formed part of a building and may mark the position of a former boundary. At the western edge of the churchyard the surface of a probable road or track was identified, sealed by material containing a sherd of medieval pottery, and may indicate the eastward continuation of the line of the earlier version of Church Street prior to the establishment of the current form of the churchyard.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Location & Geology (Fig. 1)**

1.1.1 The parish church of St Bartholomew stands at the above grid reference within a large churchyard 120m to the south of Corsham Court and at eastern end of Church Street the eastern edge of the town of Corsham in north west Wiltshire. The underlying geology in the area of the site consists of mudstone of the Forest Marble Formation<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> British Geological Survey, digital map data

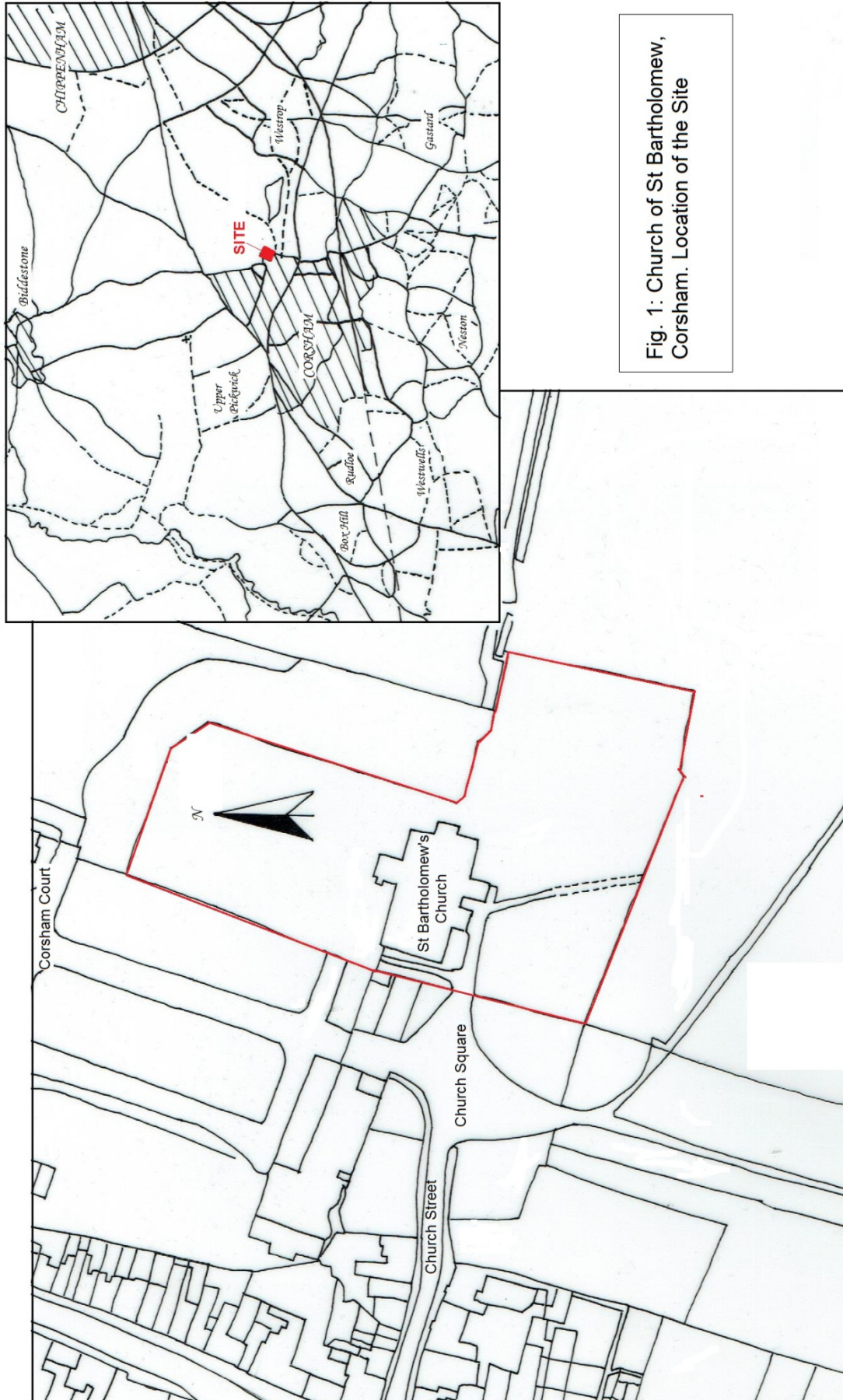


Fig. 1: Church of St Bartholomew, Corsham. Location of the Site

## **1.2 Historical & Archaeological Context**

1.2.1 The modern town of Corsham has pre-Conquest origins and by the late Saxon period comprised a substantial royal estate with a proto-urban principal settlement with 70 households, two mill and two churches<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the medieval period the economy of the town benefitted heavily from the cloth trade and later the production of Bath Stone.

1.2.2 The existing church of St Bartholomew probably occupies the site of one of those referred to in Domesday although no fabric of earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century can be identified within the standing fabric which is largely the result of re-modelling and extension during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The church was heavily restored in 1875-8 to the design of G. E. Street during which time the central tower was removed and replaced by the existing structure to the south.

1.2.3 The only recorded archaeological investigation in the vicinity consisted of monitoring of groundworks for new services in the churchyard in 2009. This limited work recorded the presence of a sequence of boundary features close the existing western edge of the churchyard which included a north-south ditch and two earlier phases of wall.

## **1.3 Project Background and Acknowledgements**

1.3.1 This project was conducted to satisfy a requirement of faculty consent to mitigate the impact of essential re-surfacing and drainage works in the churchyard to the south and west of the church. The work was wholly funded by the Parochial Church Council of St Bartholomew to whom thanks are due. In addition gratitude is due to William Lloyd-Murphy and Richard Thackeray for the provision of detailed drawings and background information and finally to the on-site contractors for their assistance and co-operation throughout the fieldwork phase.

## **2.0 THE ARCHAEOLOGY**

### **2.1 Aims & Objectives**

The principal purpose of this programme of archaeological monitoring was to satisfy the requirements of a condition of faculty imposed by Bristol Diocesan Council with the intention of implementing a schedule of works designed to assess the nature, extent, date and state of preservation of any surviving archaeological remains within the scope of the area under the impact of the development and preserve such remains by accurate record as they were encountered during activities associated with the proposed development.

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<sup>2</sup> Domesday Book, Wiltshire; Phillimore; text 1,11

## 2.2 Methodology (Figs. 2 & 3)

2.2.1 Four principal areas of the churchyard were impacted by the drainage and re-surfacing works. Adjacent to the southern boundary a trench was excavated to a depth of up to 1.00m to allow the construction of a soakaway (Area/Trench 1); running north north west from the southern boundary a broad reduction of up to 0.20m was accomplished for the new tarmac surface to the existing path (Area/Trench 2); The area between the tower and south porch was reduced by up to 0.20m to accommodate a tarmac surface and trenches up to 0.30m in depth were excavated for new drainage (Area/Trench 3); immediately to the south and west of the church an area of approximately 100m<sup>2</sup> was reduced by an average of 0.20m with further trenching to the south of between 0.30m-1.00m to carry drainage to a new soakaway trench to the south west (Area/Trench 4). All of the excavations were achieved through the use of a machine fitted with a toothless bucket with an archaeologist present during the formation of the deeper trenching; intermittent monitoring was deemed sufficient during the shallow reductions for the new surfaces in Areas 2 & 4.

2.2.2 The trenches and spoil heaps were examined regularly to determine the presence of archaeological material and allow the collection of artefacts and human bone. At completion the exposed surfaces were cleaned, photographed and sections drawn at a scale of 1:20 where appropriate; where significant archaeology was present the record was supplemented by plan at a scale of 1:20. The position of the trenches and principal archaeological features were plotted on a plan of the whole area at a scale of 1:100 (figs. 2 & 3). Each archaeological context was allocated a unique identification number and characteristics of each were described on pro-forma record sheets. Finds were retained, bagged and labelled using the appropriate context number and the unique site code, CSB 17, with the exception of C19th and later pottery, glass and building materials from top-soil layers which were discarded on site following recording of their presence and context. All work on site was carried out in accordance with guidelines for Watching Briefs issued by the Institute for Field Archaeologists<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Institute of Field Archaeologists 'Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief', 1994; revised 2008; updated 2011

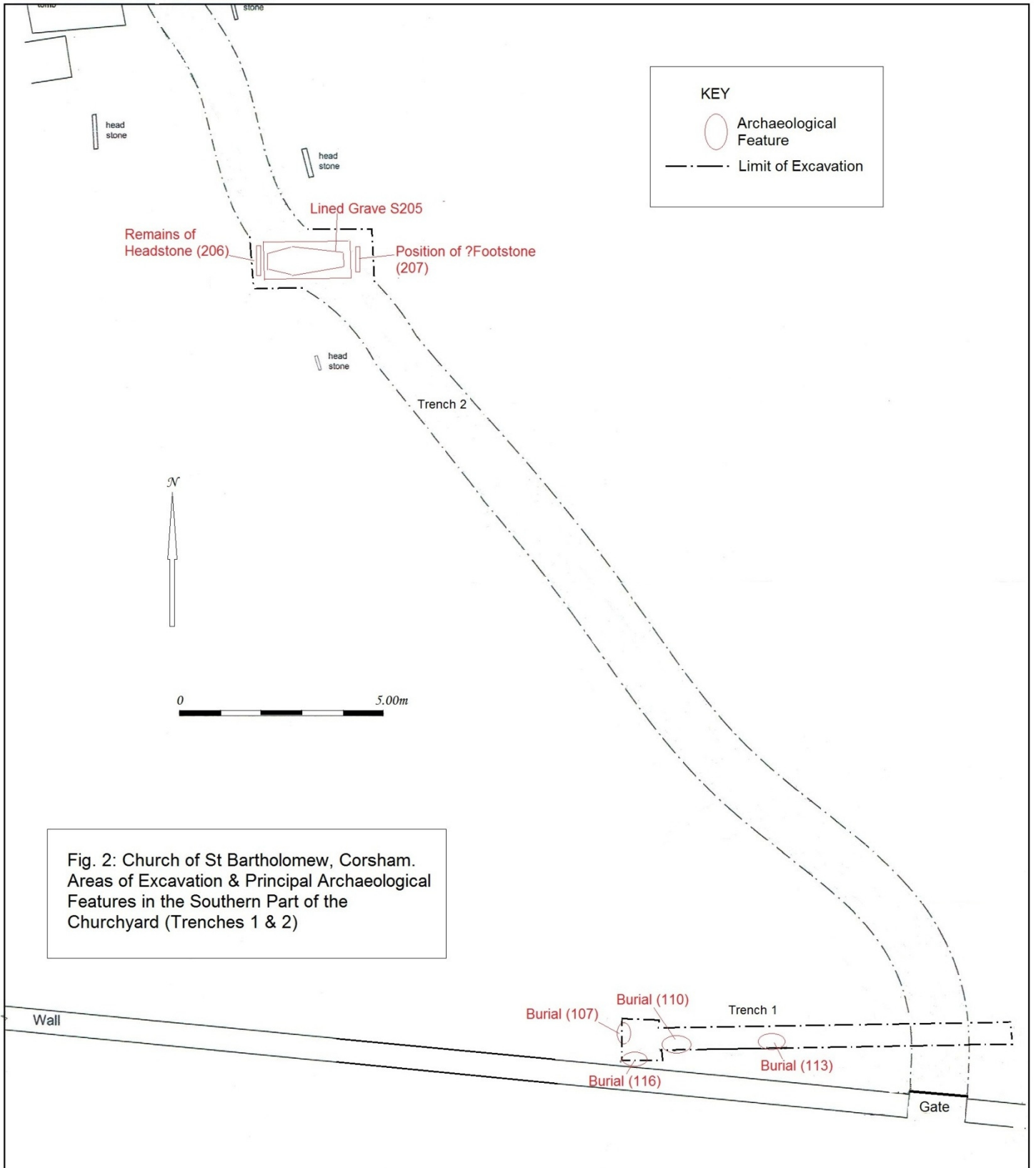


Fig. 2: Church of St Bartholomew, Corsham. Areas of Excavation & Principal Archaeological Features in the Southern Part of the Churchyard (Trenches 1 & 2)

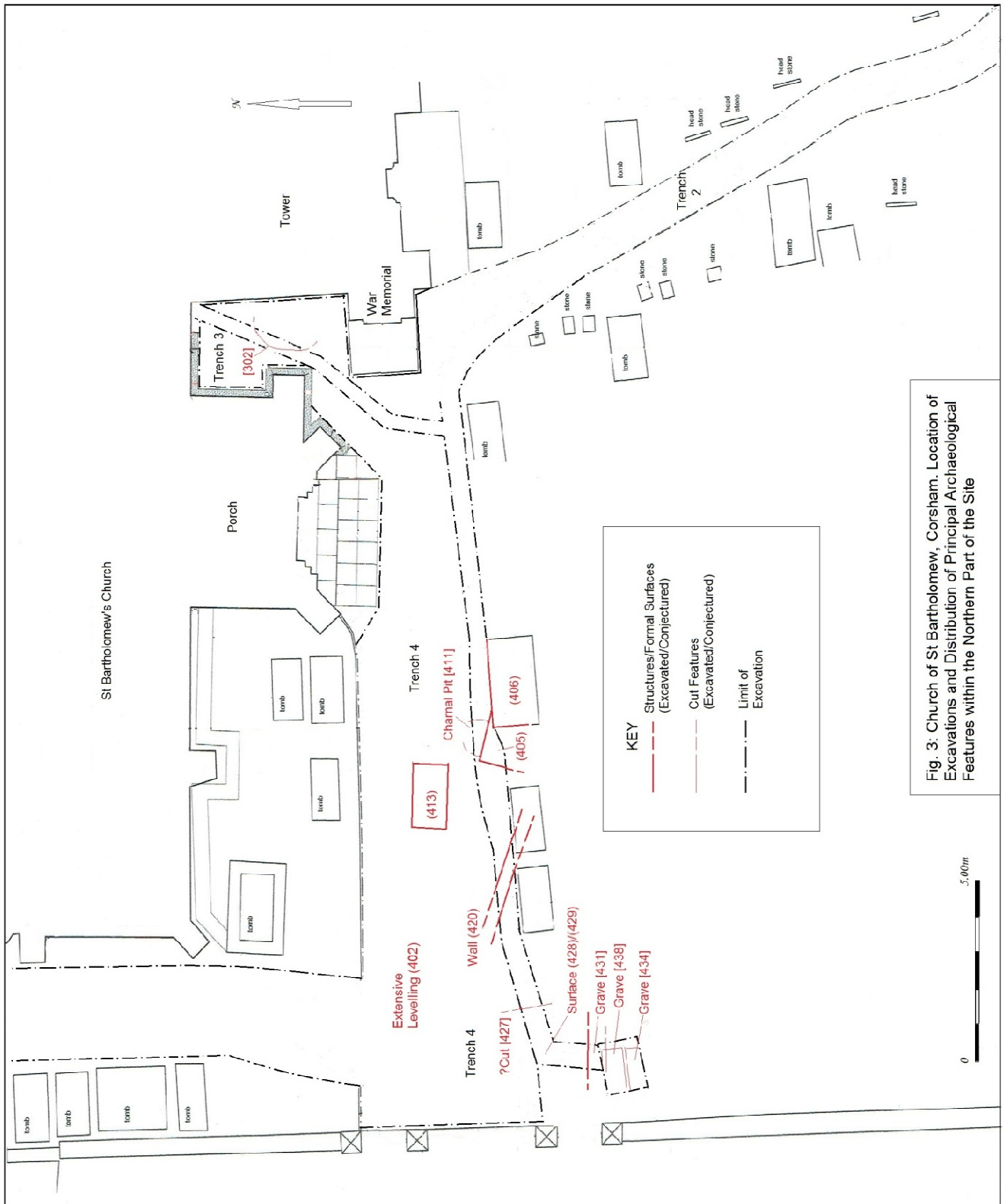


Fig. 3: Church of St Bartholomew, Corsham. Location of Excavations and Distribution of Principal Archaeological Features within the Northern Part of the Site

### *Post Excavation & Reporting*

2.2.3 All original written, drawn and photographic material generated during the fieldwork will comprise the 'site archive' which will be deposited with Wiltshire Council Museums Service with the retained finds and accompanied by a copy of this report. Further copies of the report will be sent to the Parochial Church Council of St Bartholomew, Corsham (as Sponsor) and Wiltshire Council Historic Environment Service, for inclusion on the local authority's Historic Environment Record. Further copies will be available from the author upon request.

### **2.3 Results & Description** (Appendix i)

#### *Trench 1*

(Fig. 2; Pl. 1-4)

2.3.1 A single trench 9.50m in length was excavated parallel to the southern boundary wall of the churchyard, for the most part 0.50m in depth but extended to 1.08m at its western terminus (pl. 1).

2.3.2 At the maximum depth of excavation a deposit of compact dark grey silty-clay (105) was exposed possibly representing an early buried soil horizon. This was sealed by a further extensive build-up of mid red-brown silty-clay (104) extending to a level of between 0.45m & 0.50m below the modern ground surface. The surface of (104) was cut by four shallow oval pits with concave sides and none greater than 0.25m in depth or 0.40m in length and each containing the remains of a neonate infant inhumation all four of which were similar in size and therefore, it may be assumed, stage of development, probably dying within hours or days of birth. All of these were deposited in a flexed or foetal position with knees drawn up to their chests and hands/arms raised to the front of the skull but only (110) in cut [111] (pl. 3) had been buried according to the Christian burial convention of orientation with head to the west, of the remaining three (113) was orientated east-west but with head to the east (pl. 4), (107) north-south with head to the north (pl. 2) and (116) appeared to be of a similar orientation. Fills (112) (sealing burial (113)) and (115) (above (116)) both yielded un-abraded pottery sherds of the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

2.3.3 The fills of the group of shallow graves were subsequently sealed by an homogenous dump of mixed yellow-brown clay and limestone rubble (101) and a deposit of grey silty-clay (102) before these were cut by the construction of the earlier path [118] running north from the gate to the park.



**Pl. 1: E-facing section of Trench 1; cut for infant burial (116) visible in profile centre right (view from E; scale=1m)**



**Pl. 2: Remains of Infant burial (107) as excavated (view from S; scale=0.60m)**





**Pl. 3: Infant burial (110) as excavated (view from E; scale=0.60m)**



**Pl. 4: Infant burial (113) from N (scale=0.60m)**

## *Trench 2*

(Fig. 1; Pl. 5 & 6)

2.3.4 The trench extended northwards from the south gate into the churchyard to a point 4.00m south east of the church tower and consisted of a reduction averaging 1.80m in width and 0.20m-0.25m in depth.

2.3.5 Throughout the majority of the area the trench penetrated into a top soil build-up of mid grey-brown clay-loam (203) which contained fragments of limestone, charcoal, coal ash and a small quantity of human bone fragments. At a point 25.90m to the north of the south gate this was cut by the construction of a burial structure S204 with well-constructed lining of tightly-jointed dressed Bath Stone, coffin-shaped in plan and capped initially with roughly-cut limestone slabs and finally with a dressed capping consisting of a single dressed slab of limestone with long axis orientated east-west and measuring 2.00m x 0.92m. The upper slab (204) bore no inscription and it may be assumed that the contents of the grave were remembered on a headstone of which only the base of which survived to the west (206) (pl. 6). The remains of a smaller vertically-set memorial (207) set to the east of the capping may be part of a foot stone associated with the same structure and would appear to suggest that more than one inhumation lay within the structure. The upper burial (of which only partial visual examination was possible) was the skeleton of an adult extended, supine with head to the west and lay within the remains of timber coffin of which the lid seems to have collapsed which in turn seems to have had a lead outer casing, the entire structure was flooded and the remains lay immediately below the water level at a depth of approximately 1.20m (pl. 5).

2.3.6 Throughout the length of the trench the line of the earlier path was identifiable as a dense deposit of limestone rubble (201) laid within a broad linear cut [202] which post-dated grave structure S204. All the features in this area were finally sealed by a thin accumulation of friable dark yellow-brown top soil (200) to the level of the modern ground surface.



**Pl. 5: Interior of lined grave S204, from E**



**Pl. 6: Lower capping (205) of S204 as exposed; stump of headstone (206) visible  
In background (view from E; scales=1.00m)**

### *Trench 3*

(Fig. 3; Pl. 7)

2.3.7 Reduction of the area between the tower and south porch by removal of up to 0.25m of existing surfaces of mixed clay, soil and limestone rubble (300) revealed only an extensive spread of further dumped material (304), predominantly of yellow-brown clay and the fills of earlier drainage and service trenches.

2.3.8 Trenching to an increased depth to c0.40m below the existing surface for a central drainage run exposed the upper edge of a possible large feature [302] cutting the surface of (304) and containing a single visible fill of clean mid grey silty-clay (301). No further features or deposits were recognised in the area.



**Pl. 7: Area 3 viewed from SE at completion of reduction (long scale=1.00m)**

### *Trench 4*

(Figs. 3-5; Pl. 8-10)

2.3.9 A large area to the south and west of the church was cleared of existing modern tarmac and make-up to a depth of 0.20m (401) to reveal a generally homogenous spread of mixed clay, soil and stone rubble levelling (402). The area was bounded to the south by a

excavation for a new drainage trench to a depth of up to 0.80m, falling to 1.00m in a pit for a soakaway adjacent to the western boundary of the churchyard. Within the wider area of reduction levelling (402) was interrupted only by a previously unknown grave marked by large east-west aligned limestone slab (413) probably capping a further lined grave to the south west of the porch.

2.3.10 A greater complexity of stratigraphy was demonstrated by the evidence visible in the profile of the deeper trenching to the south. Here, possible undisturbed natural clay (412) was revealed at a depth of 0.60m in the centre of the trench, falling away beyond the limit of excavation to the east and west. Towards the western boundary this was sealed by an extensive spread of highly compacted surface of worn/rounded pale yellow-brown limestone and gravel (428) with a probable edge to the south marked by a band of clean, crushed limestone (429) (pl. 8; fig. 4). This was truncated to the east by the edge of a large probable feature [427] but continued westwards beyond the limit of excavation. There can be little doubt that this was a deliberately-laid surface and possibly marks the line of an early track or more formal road surface and a single sherd of pottery recovered here appears suggest a date in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century for its use. In this area the surface was sealed by a sequence of deposits of clay and sand that also appeared to slump into cut [427] culminating with a substantial dump of red-brown silty-clay (421) which contained significant quantities of limestone rubble including some examples showing evidence of having been worked.



**Pl. 8: Return of Trench 4 to S showing surface (428)/(429)  
(view from N; scale=0.60m)**

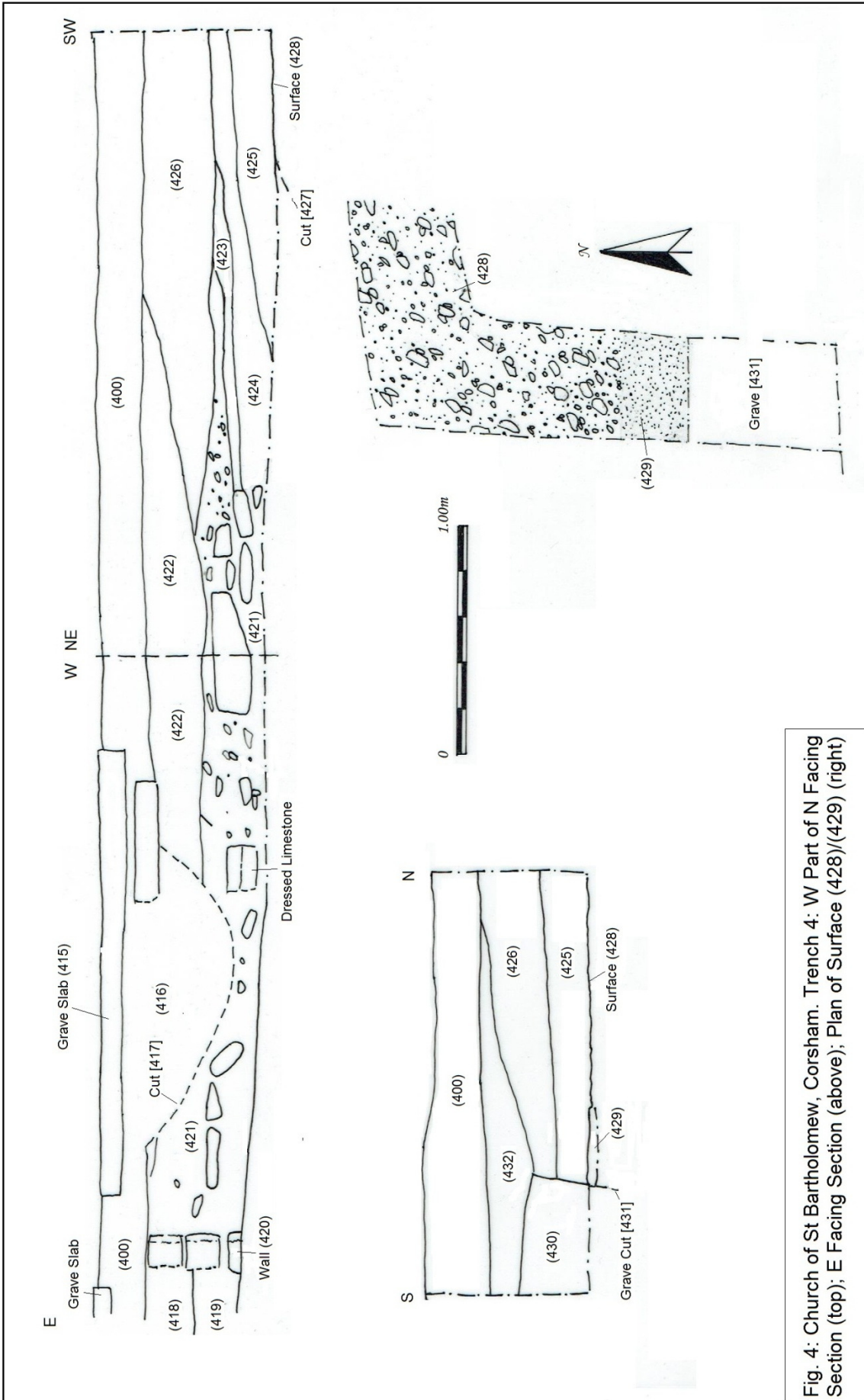


Fig. 4: Church of St Bartholomew, Corsham. Trench 4: W Part of N Facing Section (top); E Facing Section (above); Plan of Surface (428)/(429) (right)

2.3.11 To the north east deposit (421) was bounded by the remains of a north west-south east aligned wall consisting of at least three surviving courses of roughly squared limestone masonry with no discernible bonding material (pl. 9; fig. 4). The wall appeared to be founded on probable natural (412) and therefore it may be suggested that the structure is broadly contemporary with surface (428) although no direct relationship could be determined. Given the established relationship between wall (420) and dump (421) it seems probable that much of the rubble in the latter could have been derived from the demolition of the former. The north eastern face of wall (420) was directly sealed by a dump or possible buried soil horizon of mid grey-brown clay-loam (419) which in turn was sealed by an extensive dump of pale yellow-brown silty clay and limestone fragments (418) neither of which produced diagnostic material.



**Pl. 9: Detail of N facing section of Trench 4; remains of wall (420) (left of centre)  
And probable demolition dump (421) (view from N; scale=0.60m)**

2.3.12 To the east possible natural red-brown silty-clay (412) became exposed in the base of the trench at a depth of 0.60m below modern ground level. Here it was cut by the construction of a substantial stone structure (405) of which only the north western and north eastern sides were visible (p. 10; fig. 5). The structure was probably rectangular in plan with sides built of edge-set limestone slabs sealed by rough limestone capping; a dressed component was visible forming a step in the north west wall. The interior of the structure was partially in-filled with loose material but was divided into two cells by an

interior wall running north east-south west. The structure was later overlain, and seemingly incorporated into, a grave structure (406) of more conventional form and alignment (in the context of surrounding structures) with a date of 1786 and containing the remains of members of the Freame family. Immediately adjacent to the earlier structure the surface of the surrounding material was cut by a steep-sided pit [411], the principal contents of which consisted of disarticulated human bone, predominantly pelvis and long bones of more than one individual and clearly re-deposited following disturbance during grave digging or, quite likely, the cleaning out of the original contents of structure S405 prior to re-use in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



**Pl. 10: Probable grave structure S405, overlain by C18 memorial S406; disarticulated human bone filling pit [411] is visible against the base of the central component of S405. (View from N; long scale=1.00m)**

2.3.13 Towards the western boundary of the site Trench 4 turned to the S and excavated to a depth of 1.00m. In this small area the surface of natural clay was cut by two east-west aligned graves [434] & [438], the latter containing a supine adult inhumation (436) of which only the pelvis and lower limbs were exposed. To the north earlier clay dump (426) was cut by a third east-west aligned probable grave [431] which also truncated the southern edge of surface (428)/(429). Throughout the area of beyond the southern edge of the existing surfaces the above features and deposits were overlain by a build-up of friable dark-yellow-brown clay loam top soil (400) to the level of the modern ground surface.



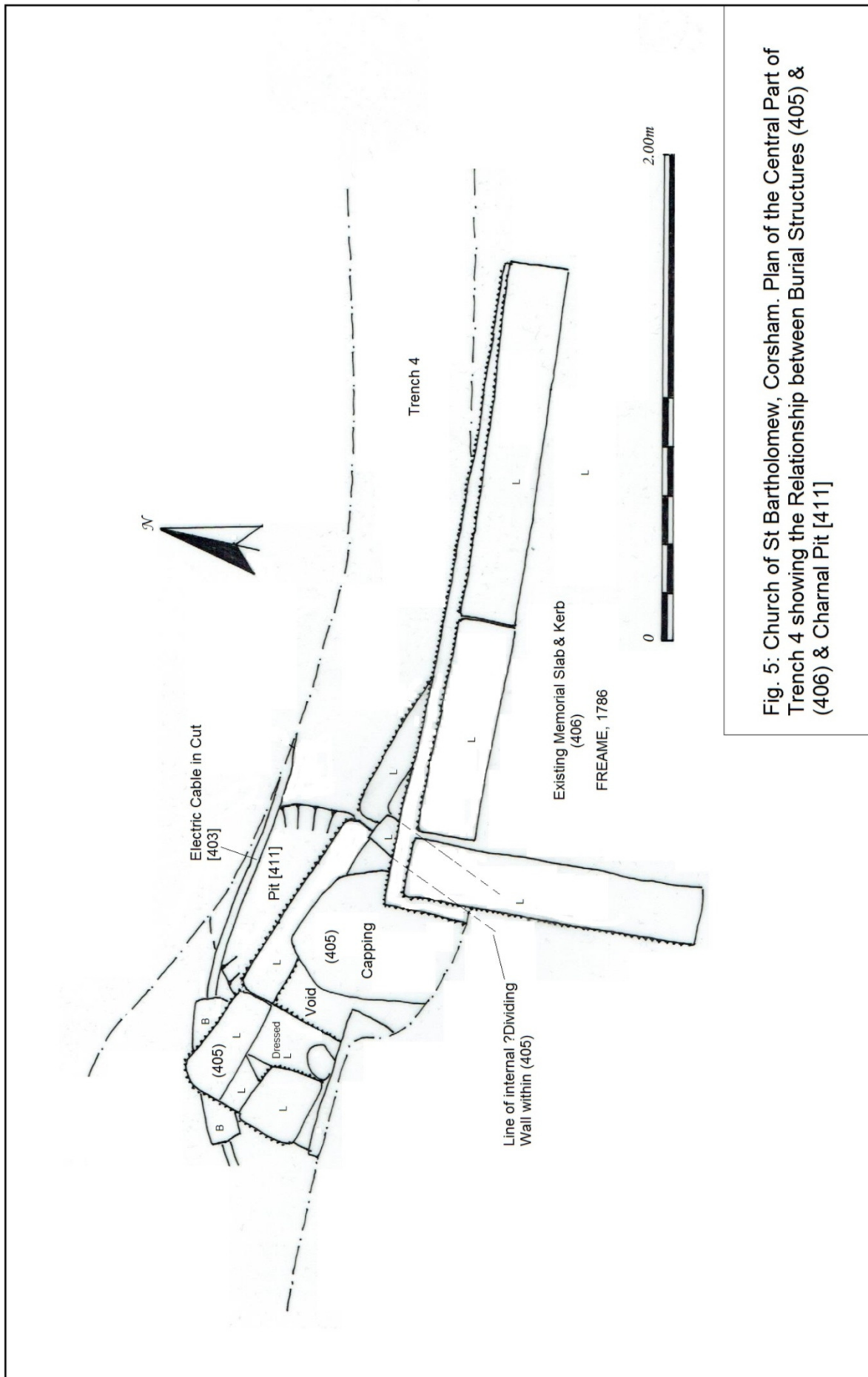


Fig. 5: Church of St Bartholomew, Corsham. Plan of the Central Part of Trench 4 showing the Relationship between Burial Structures (405) & Charnel Pit [411]

### 3.0 MATERIAL EVIDENCE

#### 3.1 Overview (Appendix ii)

3.1.1 As is often the case with parish churchyards artefacts were scarce, other than recent material from top soil contexts, and only three sherds of pottery were recovered during the entire investigation. These included a sherd of a late or early post medieval jug from (112), associated with infant burial (113); the coarse limestone inclusions in the fabric of this suggests it may be of local manufacture. Context (425) sealing probable road surface (428) produced a single small sherd of sandy coarseware, possibly a fragment of a cook pot or jar and most likely dating from the later 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century. The third sherd was excavated from substantial dump to the south of the churchyard that sealed the fills of the infant burials here and is characteristic of a fragment of un-glazed flower pot, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at earliest. Few further conclusions may be drawn from such a small assemblage.

### 4.0 INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

#### 4.1 Early Activity

4.1.1 The majority of the excavations undertaken during this project were shallow and limited exposure of archaeological material to relatively recent levelling dumps and top soil horizons. However, the deeper trenching for drainage in Area 1 at the southern boundary and Area 4 to the south of the church provided, albeit limited, opportunities to examine features of seemingly greater significance in the early development of the church and its surroundings. The features in this category comprised wall (420), surface (428)/(429) and probably burial structure (405); there is also the strong possibility that putative large feature [427] may also form a component of the early landscape.

4.1.2 The rammed limestone surface (428) that became available for examination is of particular interest as this appears to represent part of a potentially extensive area of hardstanding to the south of the church that would seem to pre-date the modern western boundary of the churchyard and the majority of graves and grave structures. While it is not possible to draw any objective conclusions regarding the function, extent and date of this feature the scant evidence obtained allows the suggestion that it had fallen out of use possibly as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century and its position and probable east-west alignment would place it on the line of modern Church Street if this was continued from the square to the east and therefore one possible interpretation is that the surface forms part of the street pattern of the medieval settlement that was abandoned with the establishment of a formal enclosure around the church. However, this interpretation is not supported by the findings of the 2009 investigation which produced no evidence of an equivalent surface in Church Square to the west; here the earliest deposit consisted of an un-dated buried soil

horizon most likely derived from long term cultivation. This area was found to have been extensively disturbed and it remains possible that the surface had originally continued but had been subsequently destroyed by later activity.

4.1.3 Two possible candidates for enclosure ditches have been revealed during this investigation and the previous work in 2009. Feature [427] was not excavated to any great extent but could represent the remains of a substantial north-south ditch that may have formed the western boundary of the churchyard as first defined following the disuse of surface (428). Ditch [223], recognised in profile in 2009, was found to lie on the line of the existing western boundary and was superseded by two walls at the same location. If [427] does represent the early boundary, the suggestion is that the churchyard was at some later period extended to the west.

4.1.4 The relationship between the features discussed above and wall (420) to the east cannot be established with any certainty but it may be assumed that this is a potentially early structure. From the short length visible it is not possible to determine its date or function but it seems unlikely that it formed part of building and may represent another boundary, possibly contemporary with surface (428) and defining its northern limit and retaining material to a higher level to the north east as suggested by the presence of deposit (419) which may be the truncated remains of the contemporary ground surface at this location.

4.1.5 Probable burial structure (405) is worthy of discussion in this section by virtue of its unusual characteristics and, primarily, orientation. The churchyard of St Bartholomew's contains numerous graves and burial structures the orientation of which agrees with that of the church and they, therefore, follow a convention repeated in thousands of locations across the Christian world. Structure (405) does not obey the rule and the visible sides are at variance from the surrounding structures and the church by some 20°, on approximately the same alignment as wall (420) which may also be significant in understanding the relationship of these two structures. The structure pre-dates the construction of more conventional grave (406) which has clearly been built over it and possibly indicates re-use in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the original contents being removed and re-interred within adjacent charnal pit [411]. Without further evidence, which could only be provided by wider excavation, it is not possible to adequately explain this discrepancy but there is a strong chance that the feature is of potentially very early date and may have been associated with with an early medieval church on a slightly different orientation that must have been replaced by the 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries based on the earliest surviving fabric visible in the standing building.

## 4.2 Burials & Burial Structures

4.2.1 There is a high density of marked graves within the churchyard and It is of course not surprising that further burials were encountered during the works and these included those interred in simple earth-cut graves and two lined graves of a type commonly employed in the Bath area during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of particular interest are the poignant remains of four infants packed into a small area immediately inside the southern boundary wall. With the exception of one case these were not buried according to Christian orientation convention, were in generally shallow pits with no obvious formality of layout. Until relatively recently the rules of the Church strictly forbade the burial of un-baptised individuals on consecrated land which caused no doubt immense distress for Christian families who lost children either during or very soon after birth and before a priest could be present to administer the appropriate rite. In the hope that burial on or close to consecrated land would allow access to the after life the surviving families would covertly and illegally bury the remains in an easily accessible part of the churchyard, or even adjacent to the boundary on the outside and sometimes within a disused and derelict religious building, if one such was available. These burials are clearly examples of this practice and, given the number encountered in the small excavated area, it may be suggested that a great density of informal infant burials lie within the southern extremity of the churchyard, presumably in an area that was accessible and suitably secluded in the past.