

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE – RESTORATION OF CHANCEL AND VESTRY

Progress report 1

1 These notes cover the first four weeks which included Easter. The main contractor, Underwood & Weston [A], began on site on 19 March, Albion Archaeology have been in attendance almost from the outset, and members of the local community have helped with archaeological excavation and recording. Good progress has been made despite extremely wet weather conditions. Thanks are due for generous local and national grants and donations and the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

2 Effective protection to enable continuing use of the nave and safeguard the organ was installed in the nave tower arch [B]; the reredos and Easter Sepulchre in the chancel have also been boxed.



A B

3 The 1970s brick wall in the chancel arch is no more. Removal of the first brick in the apex was watched by an appreciative village audience on the west side under the tower. At the crucial moment a sunbeam on the other side of the new hole lit up a wooden angel in the chancel roof [C]. Two villagers who remember the wall being built were given souvenir bricks [D].



C D



Going



.... going



.... gone

4 The defective tiled floor [D] in the chancel was removed. Earlier damage and use of cement in the 1860s restoration meant relatively few tiles are re-usable. Un-evenness in the floor was partly explained by the discovery of memorial ledgers underneath it, mostly displaced from their original positions during the earlier restoration [E]. Surviving legible inscriptions were recorded by a village team [F]. One records the first wife, Ann, of Thomas Walker, an 18th century rector: she died in 1733. Thomas' memorial plaque (1770), also to his second wife, also Ann, who died in 1775, stands above on the north wall of the chancel. All three are recorded in the parish burial registers. The work of uncovering and deciphering the ledgers was recorded by students of Sharnbrook Academy Media Department who are making a video of the whole project [G]. All but one of the buried ledgers have been removed after recording; those with surviving lettering have been put to one side for future consideration. The large remaining ledger [E] will be lowered in its existing position so that it does not affect the new floor which will run over it.



D E



F G

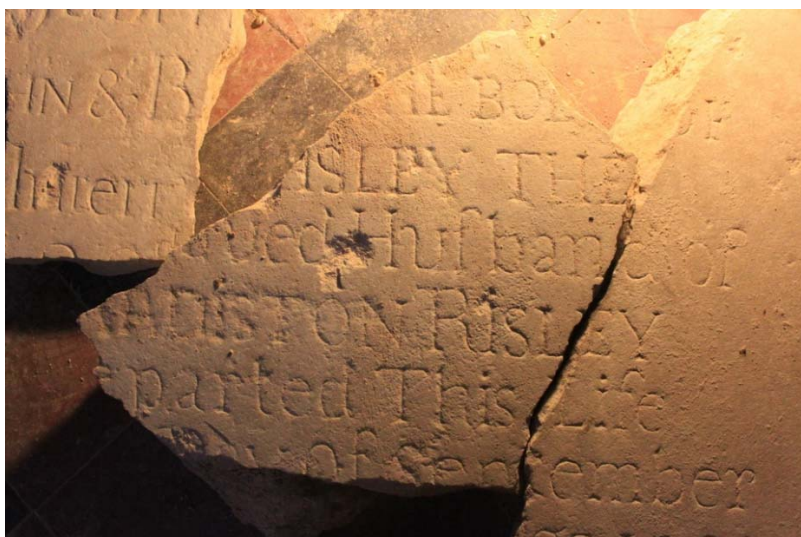


5 The reduction of the chancel floor by 600mm to achieve the new formation level mainly involved digging out a thick layer of clean brown sandy soil with some rubble, imported in the 1860s – more pick-and-shovel work than delicate brush and trowel archaeology. This was not expected and simplified reduction of the central area in the chancel to the new formation level, now largely completed by Albion Archaeology and a support group of villagers. In the process, the foundations for 19th century pew platforms incorporating fragments of inscribed ledgers were removed [H]. At the west end of the chancel the tops of two intact pre-19th century brick burial vaults exposed at the new floor formation level [J] will be left undisturbed under the new floor. At the east end, the main level of the chancel floor is being extended to provide more space and facilitate access to the toilet that will be installed in the vestry.



H J





6 The floor of the vestry has been reduced to a new formation level which when completed will be the same as the chancel. This will enable wheelchair access on the level through enlarged 19th century doors which have been recorded archaeologically [K] in advance of their alteration. A trial trench dug in 2014 had encountered largely disturbed earth and rubble from the 1860s when the vestry was built, and this was confirmed.



K L

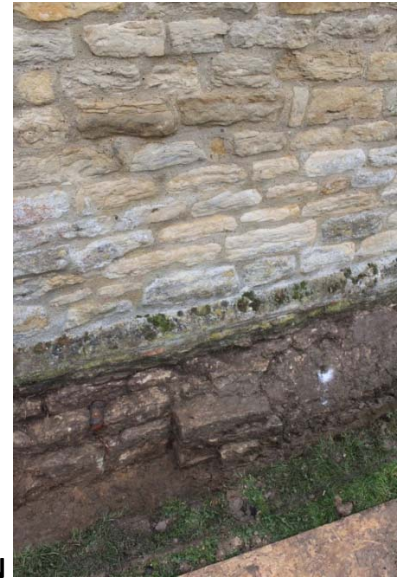


7 Drainage trenches around the footings of the 1860s vestry showed how it was squeezed into position in what was then a much more crowded churchyard. One of the few headstones to survive the 1962 clearance, to Fanny Bainbridge 1831-1841, predating its construction and tight against its north side has been moved [L] for later re-siting slightly further north to accommodate the drain trench. Also on the north side was a brick-lined vault, predating the vestry and filled when it was built, with its south side just under the north wall. It was identified in the trial pit of 2014/15; removal of the two courses at each end allows the specified drain to be formed. Clearly the vestry has had structural problems in the past, with tie-rods on the inside and a massive underpinning of the north-east corner and north side.

8 A small excavation at the north-west corner of the transept, inside and outside, for bringing water and gas supplies into the building, confirmed that the south transept is later than the nave, with its west wall abutting against the nave south wall.



M N



9 Outside the chancel a proper drainage system is being installed to take rainwater away from the church and prevent further outbreaks of damp in the reclaimed parts. A trench dug around the outside wall exposed the upper foundations and provided new information about original construction [N]. On the south side, the chamfered offset is at a different level in the two bays of the chancel, suggesting it was built in two stages, and at a third, surprisingly lower, level on the east wall of the south transept. The chamfers were meant to be seen above contemporary ground surface, so should indicate changing levels within the adjacent churchyard – a matter raising more new questions. At the south-east corner of the chancel, modern concrete repairs to the foundations are part of earlier attempts to deal with the cracks in the wall above by the unreliable method of underpinning.

10 Digging out the trenches for the storm water / land drains on the south side has been completed in very difficult working conditions due to bad weather; inserting pipework and backfilling will begin shortly [P]. While gutters and downpipes on the chancel have been well maintained, there seems to have been no provision for taking the water away from the walls to a soakaway, thus explaining the problems of damp in the chancel. Careful digging of the new trenches with a toothless machine bucket located parts of up to nine burials, all probably pre-19th century. Recorded archaeologically before unavoidable temporary removal, the affected bones will be re-interred as close as possible to the point of discovery.



P

