

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE – RESTORATION OF CHANCEL AND VESTRY

Progress report 2

1 This second report covers weeks 5 – 10, up to the late May Bank Holiday. We are coming to the end of the 'stripping out' phase and the main below-ground archaeological work. Mercifully the weather has improved; services and drainage trenches in the churchyard are nearly completed. Within the chancel and vestry, digging out old damaged floors has also finished, and inserting ducts for services signals the start of building up again for the new floors and finishes. Continuing thanks are due for generous local and national grants and donations and the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

2 An unexpected find in the trench for water and gas dug from the lych-gate to the south transept was a **13th century grave marker**, in four pieces and not in its original position. It has a cross on one side and a rosette pattern (which gives the dating) on the other **A**. It probably was used to mark the churchyard rather than a particular burial. National and locally-based experts (Professor Paul Crossley - who lives next door to the church - and Professor Richard Marks) all agreed it is a fine example, one of the best found in England. It has been removed for safety to secure premises in Bedford with the agreement of the diocese until conservation can be arranged with the specialist firm of Skillingtons in Grantham.



A Service trench near find of 13th century grave marker: the marker before conservation which will include repair of damage

3 Completed gravel drains around the edges of the chancel and vestry run to new soakaways north and south of the church. Given the appalling weather conditions, the finished result is impressively tidy and the churchyard should recover its appearance fairly easily.



B Drainage north of chancel: footings exposed in trench; gravel-filled trench; drainage runs with soakaway in foreground; back-filled area.

4 The soakaways are over a metre deep and excavation was carefully monitored archaeologically. Unsurprisingly in a churchyard used for centuries, parts of several skeletons were found just above and cut into the natural clay sub-soil. They were recorded, lifted and reburied as close as possible to the place of discovery after insertion of the pipework **C**. It was not practicable to re-route the drainage trenches and soakaways because the location of burials generally had been lost when the churchyard was cleared of headstones and kerbstones in 1962. There was little or no dating evidence with these individuals beyond some indications of the early 18th century on the south side soakaway.



B Left: burials found at base of drainage soakaway pit Right: reburial after construction of soakaway

5 Finding the general depth of surviving burials prompted redesign of the new drain from the kitchenette and toilet north to the sewer in Coplowe Lane. Instead of using gravity-fed pipes up to 2m in depth by the time they reach the churchyard wall, outflow will be pumped in pipes in a trench about 0.5m deep, thus avoiding damage to major tree roots and burials. The extra costs of a pumped system will be partly balanced by a shallower trench and the lack of delays in digging it due to the discovery of burials – and the approach was confirmed when the shallower trench was dug **D**.

6 The problem of where to put surplus soil generated by the drainage and digging out the damaged floors in chancel and vestry has been neatly solved. There is now a low sweeping bank in the south corner of the churchyard extension where previously there had been long-accumulated tipping and brambles – a definite improvement for views within the churchyard and from outside it **E**.



D Digging the modified shallow drainage to Coplowe Lane

E Landscaped bank for surplus soil in churchyard south corner

7 Inside the chancel, lowering the existing floor to the depth required for building up the new one confirmed that at least 500mm of material had been imported in the 1860s restoration. George Baxter and others heroically moved much of it; the experience was archaeologically disappointing but a simpler piece of preparation than had been feared. Ledgers hidden under the 1860s floor had to be re-sited so as not to cause problems for the new floor. In the largest case it involved heavy lifting gear to enable resettlement at a lower level **F**. The ledgers along the sides of the chancel, retained as part of the new floor, have been properly supported with new material under their edges to avoid future subsidence and unevenness **G**.



F Resettling a large ledger for reburial under the new floor



G Packing ground under ledgers retained for the new floor

8 The two brick vaults found at the west end of the chancel do not need to be disturbed in order to create the new floor. The requirement for a small repair where old damage had dislodged a brick in the side of the northern one enabled Mark Phillips of Albion Archaeology to make a photographic record. It contains a lead coffin with the decayed remains of the timber on top and fragments of mortar from the vault roof. It is probably related to the wall plaque above it, discussed in our first report **H**.



North side chancel: **H** Coffin in vault; **J** Wall opposite squint in St John Chapel; **K** blocked squint behind site of St John memorial

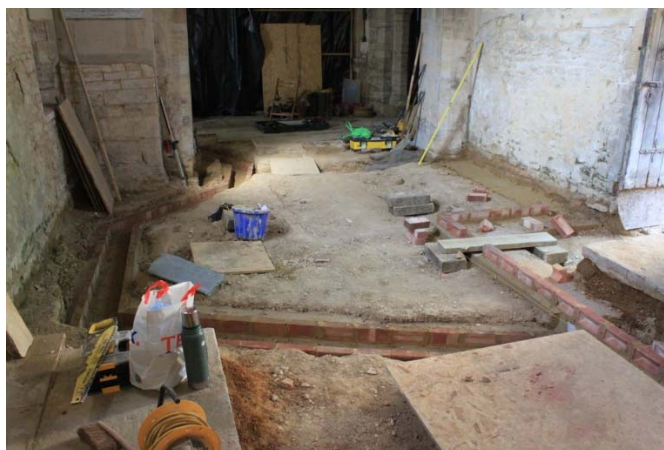
9 The area of wall without plaster above that vault **J** is on the other side of the wall in the St John Chapel where the St John memorial stood until it was moved in the 1980s (to the north side of the nave). Behind it was the remains of a *squint* **K**, giving a view from what then would have been a medieval chantry chapel through the wall to the then main altar in the chancel. A chantry chapel was a special place for a priest employed to say masses for the soul of his patron; the first reference to one in Bletsoe dates from 1279 when John de Pateshull (the lord of the manor at Bletsoe) presented the priest Nicholas de Sarnebroc' to "a chantry in the chapel lately founded". We examined the wall on the chancel side for traces of the other side of the squint, which would have gone out of use probably with the 16th century Reformation. There are definite irregularities in the stonework but it is difficult to see any obvious evidence and later repairs may have removed them.

10 Within the chancel, ducts are being formed for the new services entering the church through the south transept, to serve the kitchenette in the south-west corner of the chancel, and the WC to be

installed in the vestry. They have to skirt round the massive pier foundations supporting the tower **L**. The common-brick channels put in them **M** and the pipes to be put in the channels will be entirely invisible when the new floors are built over them.



L Services channels running from the south transept (right) to the site of the future kitchenette (left)



M General view of brick channels in chancel services ducting.

11 Work in June will complete insertion of the service runs within the building and begin modifications to the two 19th century doors for wheelchair access between the chancel, the vestry and the rest of the building. With the main archaeological work completed, we hope to secure the detailed permissions from the diocese for the 'hunting the headstones' project which has already been approved in principle.

12 Community interest in this ambitious project has generated suggestions that a time capsule commemorating its completion should be placed in the church. Meetings to explore the possibilities and the permissions needed will start shortly.

David Baker, for the Friends of St Mary Bletsoe

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