

Church of St Mary, Bletsoe Bedfordshire

Trial trenches December 2014 / January 2015



Historic Environment Conservation

March 2015 - final draft

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE, BEDFORDSHIRE:

Trial trenches December 2014 / January 2015

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Summary

Four trial trenches were excavated at the church of St Mary Bletsoe, to the north of the chancel and in its attached roofless vestry. The aim was to evaluate archaeological deposits and structural evidence within the 60cm depth required to achieve the formation level for proposals to add a new lobby area and insert a DDA-compliant WC. The lobby area trenches encountered rubble probably generated by the mid 19th-century restoration and confirmed substantial foundations for the adjacent walls of the chancel and north transept. The vestry trenches showed unusually wide and substantial 19th-century footings under its north wall and against the north wall of the chancel. Three sherds of pottery were found in 19th-century contexts, two medieval and one post-medieval. The work did not identify any archaeological constraints that would obviously override the benefits to be derived from development of the proposed uses and associated conservation of historic fabric, for which appropriate archaeological mitigation is recommended. Preliminary proposals are also made for mitigation of impacts from works to the interior of the chancel.

1 Introduction

1.1 Bletsoe is a Bedfordshire parish about seven miles north-west of Bedford. This evaluation was commissioned by the Bletsoe Parochial Church Council and the Friends of St Mary Bletsoe.

1.2 Four trial trenches (SMB14-1 to SMB14-4) were excavated in December 2014 and January 2015 to the north of the chancel of the parish church of St Mary Bletsoe on the site of a proposed lobby extension. Level access for wheelchair users between the chancel, the currently roofless vestry (proposed WC) and the lobby requires a finished floor level for vestry and lobby 300mm below the existing ground level and a formation level at 600mm.

1.3 The work was licensed by an Archdeacon's Letter from the Diocese of St Albans. It was undertaken by the writer (David Baker FSA MCIfA) as joint principal of the CfA RO consultancy 'Historic Environment Conservation', with the assistance of churchwarden Mike Gibbons. The potential conflict of interests with his role as Diocesan Archaeological Adviser was mitigated by prior submission of the Written Scheme of Investigation to the Planning Archaeologist for Bedford Borough Council.

1.4 The trial trenches obtained the required information for the proposed development, but also raised some archaeological issues that could not be fully addressed within their limited scope.

2 The church of St Mary Bletsoe

2.1 The church of St Mary Bletsoe is listed at Grade II*. Its earliest origins are obscure, but there may have been a parish church standing above a Domesday settlement, itself perhaps the product of Norman planning around what is later called the 'Great Green'. The currently central tower has been compared with Saxo-Norman west towers at nearby Clapham and Stevington, though there is no dating evidence at Bletsoe earlier than the 14th century.

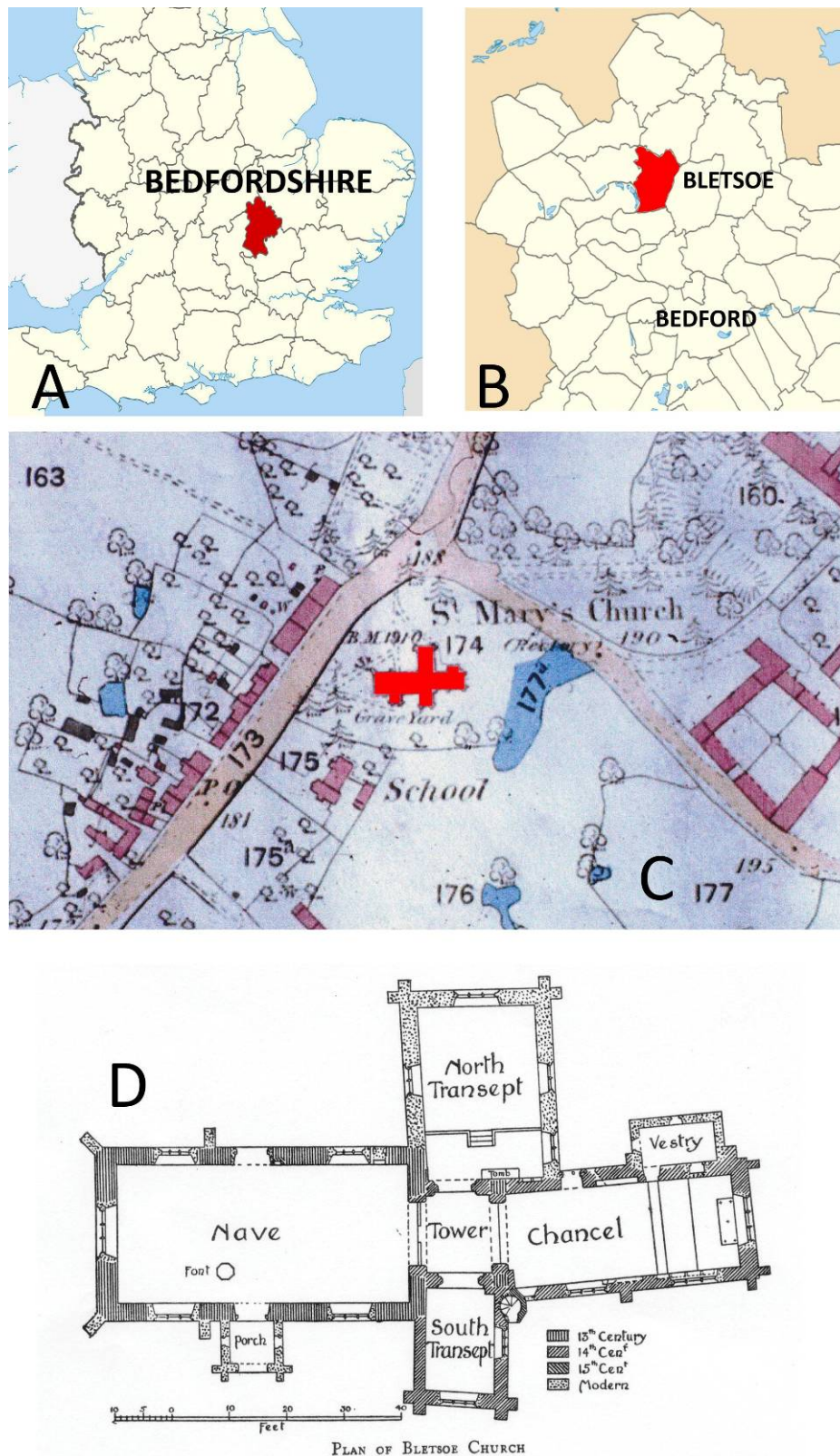


Fig 1 location plan A – Bedfordshire; B – Bletsoe parish in North Bedfordshire; C – extract from 1884 OS map showing village and church; D - plan of St Mary Bletsoe, from VCH Beds vol iii (1912) p40 showing now disused vestry and chancel (dating of walls subject to review)

2.2 The plan of the church (Fig 1c) is cruciform but irregular; its evolution is only partly understood. The window tracery replaced in a heavy mid 19th century restoration indicates 14th century work on the assumption that it replicates what was there earlier, though these may not necessarily have been the first windows in their compartments.

2.3 The *chancel*, blocked off from the tower by a brick wall since the 1970s, was definitely rebuilt in the 14th century. Its alignment is slightly askew to the north and its new south wall was erected one wall's width further south.

2.4 The documentary evidence for a medieval *vestry* attached to its north side comes from a pre-restoration reference by Archdeacon Bonney (c1820-1840) that "it seems (from a small door blocked up on the North side of the Chancel) that there was once a Vestry there" (Christopher Pickford, *Bedfordshire churches in the C19*, BHRS vol 73, 131). Thomas Fisher's watercolour of c1810 (Fig 2a) showing a blank external wall on the north-east side is probably reliable. As part of the major restoration works of the 1860s, the vestry was rebuilt and the door to the chancel reopened. The new vestry fell into disrepair in the 1970s; its roof was removed and walls capped in the 1980s.

2.5 The *north transept*, wider to the north than the side of the tower which it abuts, probably originated in the 13th century as the chantry chapel for the Pateshull family, then lords of the manor. It became a mausoleum for their successors, the St John family, whose major 19th-century restoration altered the east wall by replacing the central window and inserting a new window to the south.



A



B

Fig 2 Views of church facing south-west. A - c 1810 by Thomas Fisher, showing medieval vestry demolished and door to chancel blocked. B - 2014: 1860s vestry roofless; north transept east wall central window rebuilt smaller and new window inserted to south.

3 The aims of the evaluation

3.1 The purpose of the trial trenches was to sample the stratigraphy within the 60cm depth of ground reduction in the proposed lobby and existing vestry, and to ascertain the presence or absence of significant archaeological deposits, structural evidence or inhumations.



Fig 3 N side of chancel and 19-century vestry in the mid 1970s before roof repair / removal, showing the site of the proposed lobby



elevation as proposed

Fig 4 Outline proposals showing reroofed vestry, new lobby and reduced ground level

4 Trial trenches SMB14 1-4 (Figs 5, 6)

4.1 Originally, four 1m x 1m trial trenches were proposed, located in the vestry, against the east wall of the north transept and the north wall of the chancel, and across the line of the north wall of the proposed lobby. In the event, the function of the last-mentioned was covered by moving the transept trench (1) slightly further north; the trench against the internal north face of the vestry (4) was extended across its full width, and an additional trench (2) was excavated against the north side of the north vestry wall. Four-digit numbers bracketed in the text descriptions for each trench and on the photographs below refer to the list of contexts in Appendix 1.

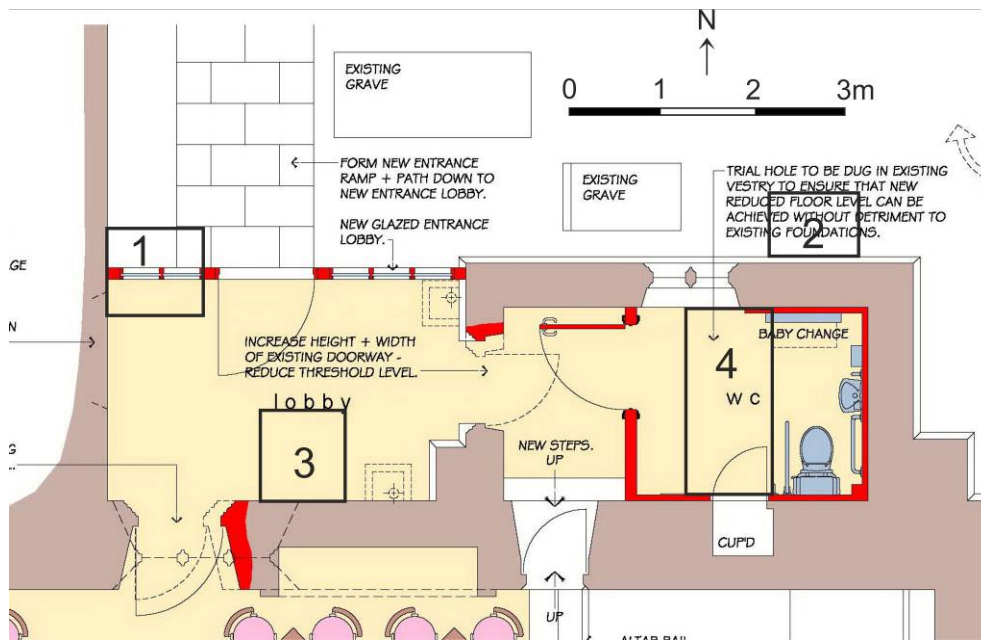


Fig 5 Location of trial trenches superimposed on architect's preliminary proposals for lobby and WC

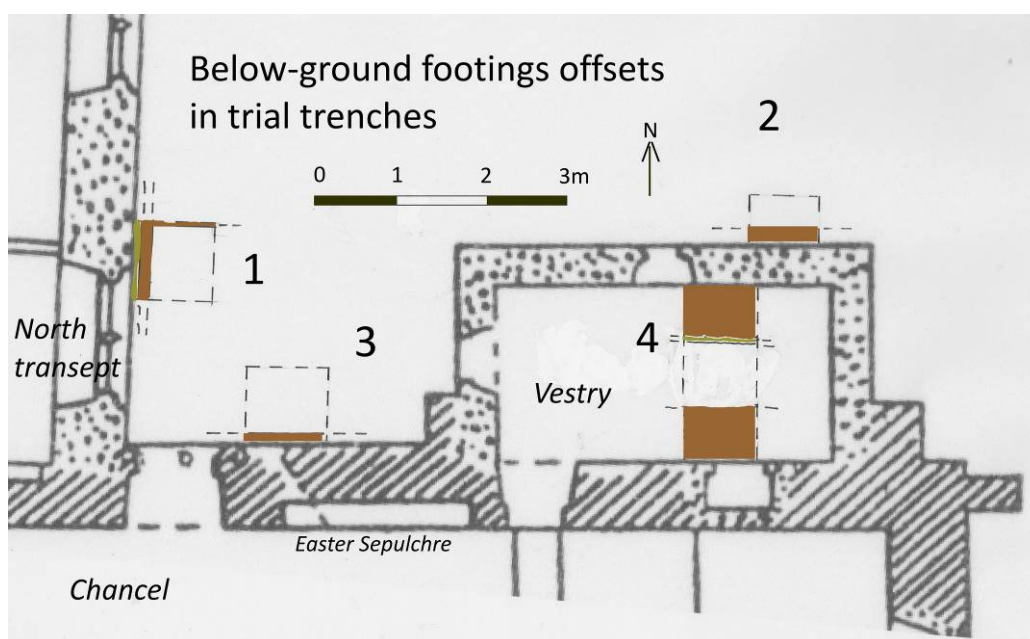


Fig 6 Plan of trial trenches on base plan from VCH 1912 showing excavated footings in brown

SMB14-1: against north transept (Fig 7)

4.2 Trench 1, 1m x 1m, placed against the east wall of the north transept, covered parts of both the proposed lobby area and the external reduced ramp.

4.3 About 15cm of topsoil (0101) lay over about 30cm of yellow clayey earth (0102) with some small rubble. Within the latter was a modern red tile drain (0103) running south-north, its mid-point 42cm east of the north transept wall. The yellow clayey earth lay over a mixed layer of mortar, clay and large pieces of limestone rubble (0105), not fully excavated at 60cm below modern ground level.

4.4 The east wall of the transept (0104.1) had one course 15cm thick below modern ground level standing on a 10cm wide offset (0104.2), the southernmost stone of which was chamfered. The offset was of roughly coursed rubble and itself stood on a further 28cm wide offset (0104.3) at a depth of 50cm below modern ground level. Apparently bonded into this offset and in the north section of the trench was the side of a large stone structure (0104.4), covered in the north-east corner of the trench by loose large pieces of limestone rubble.

4.5 The only obstacle to the required ground level reduction indicated by this trench is the aforementioned large stone structure, if it runs as far east as the lower part of the path down to the lobby entrance. Significant amounts of rubble might be expected; dating evidence, if recovered, may show it belongs to the major 19th-century restoration of the north transept rather than to any earlier or original construction phase.

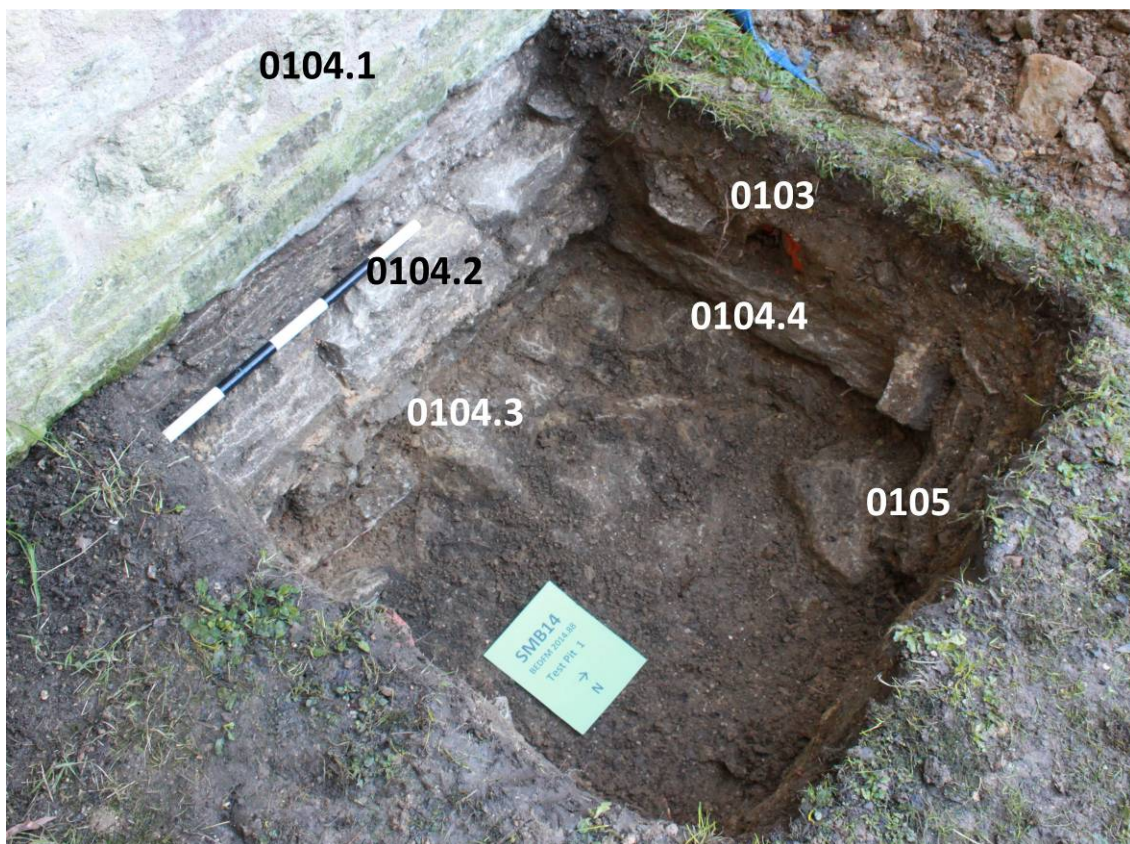


Fig 7 SMB14-1 facing NW, showing wall offsets at left and tile drain over large stone structure in north section at right, scale 50cm

SMB14-2: against north wall of vestry (Fig 8)

4.9 Trench 2, 87 x 63cm was excavated against the external north side of the vestry in order to assess the foundations. An intention to place it centrally on the wall was thwarted by two grave slabs laid flat along the wall immediately east of the headstone to Antonia (d 1844) and Hester Bainbridge.

4.10 About 5cm of topsoil and gravel (0201) covered the grave slabs (0202) and yellow mortar rubble (0205) in the rest of the trench. Just east of the end of the grave slabs was a row of bricks (0203) indicating the east end of a vault abutting the vestry wall. At 25cm below modern ground surface the vestry wall had a rough offset plinth (0206.2) about 13cm wide, itself sitting on a hard stone and mortar surface (0207). On first sight and in a limited space the vault seemed to have been cut into the offset foundation of the vestry wall. But if the date on the headstone refers to the vault it would have been constructed first and the vestry fitted between it and the side of the chancel.

4.11 Subject to architectural assessment, and even though this trench could not be excavated to 60cm depth, the indications are that the foundations are adequate on this north side, especially bearing in the extent of foundation found inside the vestry (SMB14-4 below).



Fig 8 SMB14-2 north exterior face of vestry: left facing west, right vertical; scale 50cm

SMB14-3: against chancel (Fig 9)

4.5 Trench 3, 1m x 1m, was placed against the north wall of the chancel, east of the main door, and adjacent to an obvious break in the above-ground wall. It was excavated to a depth of 56cm.

4.6 Up to 12cm of topsoil (0301) lay over mixed mortar earth and some clay (0302), not fully excavated at a depth of 56cm. Within the latter was a modern drain, presumably running east-west and joining up with that found in Trench 1. Not easily distinguishable from 0302 was a pile of large limestone pieces (0304) in the south-west corner of the trench, and probably equivalent to the rubble found in Trench 1 (0105).

4.7 Six rubble courses of the chancel wall (0305.1) below modern ground surface sat on a 12cm wide offset at 56cm depth (0305.2). The two large stones visible just below modern ground level are offset slightly forward and at an angle from the main footing underneath. Initially this was thought to indicate the 14th century rebuilding of the chancel wall on a slightly different alignment to its presumed predecessor. However, this curving join in the wall superstructure clearly represents the Easter Sepulchre set into the southern side of the north chancel wall; when it was built, the northern side of the wall was also rebuilt, effectively obscuring any relationship between an earlier and a later footing.

4.8 This trench has not produced any evidence for obstacles to ground reduction by 60cm, though substantial limestone rubble might be expected.



Fig 9 SMB14-3: left, facing south east; right vertical: showing rubble, chancel wall offset and construction join for Easter Sepulchre.; scale 50cm

SMB14-4: vestry interior (Fig 10)

4.12 Trench 4 was excavated across the vestry after clearance of undergrowth (0401) and loose 19th-century plain floor tiles (0402) on a hard cement base (0403). It was initially intended to assess the foundations of the north wall but was subsequently extended across the full width of the vestry.

4.13 An unexpected discovery was a broad yellow mortared footing (0404) immediately under the plain tiles on the north side, extending some 60cm into the middle of the vestry. Extension of the trench showed a similar arrangement about 70cm wide (0407) on the south side. Both footings had pieces of brick in their top courses so are probably mid -19th-century in date rather than reused medieval foundations. If that is the case, the purpose of the southern footing, which presumably abuts the north chancel wall, is unclear, and the placing of the upstanding north wall on the north side of the northern footing appears to be an attempt to squeeze the maximum width between the chancel and the Bainbridge vault (see above trench 2, fig 8).

4.14 The area in between these footings was excavated to 53cm. The upper fill under where the tile floor had already been removed was loose yellow mortar and rubble (0405) up to 18cm deep, coming down on to a bitumen-like surface (0406) at 22cm below the top of the concrete slab visible in the photograph below, on a yellow mortar seating (0408). This was laid across the top of the lower courses of the adjacent footings, so is presumably also mid C19 and contemporary with them. Below this was a layer of mixed clay, earth and small rubble (0409) coming down at 53cm below the concrete slab on to a headstone with a



Fig 10 SMB14-4 vestry: left, facing E, showing footings and excavated area between them; right, facing N at 56cm, showing flat headstone (0410) and lower possible footing (0411): scale 50cm

curved top (0410) lying flat face down. There was a yellow mortar-filled line up the middle indicating either a repair or a fixing against a surface in its original position. The west side of the headstone ran under the trench section so no attempt was made to lift it. At the same level as the headstone a row of flat stones (0411) was seen under and on the same alignment as the footing on the north side: whether it too relates to the later vestry or to its medieval predecessor is unclear.

4.15 Subject to architectural assessment it would seem possible to reduce the ground level in the vestry by removing the upper part of the broad 19th-century footings on either side where they do not appear to have any significant structural function. Its solidity ought to limit the requirement for a full 60cm excavation to the central part.

5 Finds

5.1 No human remains were found, either articulated or disarticulated as might be expected in the upper levels of a parish churchyard. Apart from the loose mid-19th-century plain floor tiles in the vestry, the only finds from all the trial trenches were three sherds of pottery, none in a stratigraphically significant position. Jackie Wells, Ceramics Officer at Albion Archaeology Bedford, kindly confirmed the identifications and provided the Bedfordshire Fabric Type Series (BFTS) numbers.

Context	Description	BFTS	Date
0302	jug handle with portion of rim, in late medieval reduced ware	E01	C14 – C15
0409	cooking pot rim, in medieval shelly ware (developed St Neots)	B07	C12 – C13
0409	pipkin body sherd and tripod foot, in glazed red earthenware	P01	C17



A 0302 – jug handle



B 0409 – cooking pot rim



C 0409 – pipkin tripod foot

Fig 11: ceramic finds

6 Discussion

6.1 Several archaeological issues were raised or remain unresolved by these trial trenches.

6.2 Chancel The sequence of construction and alteration in the north wall east of the door needs further consideration. It had been thought that the part west of what is now recognised as the insertion of the 14th-century Easter Sepulchre was residual pre-14th-century work from the preceding first chancel, and that the two long stones under the insertion found just below ground level indicated the slight northwards angle of its successor. Possibly those stones are part of that insertion postdating the rebuilt chancel; examination further east was restricted by the width of the trial trench and would be further restricted by the 19th-century vestry.

6.3 North transept The function of the *in situ* stonework seen running east in the north edge of the trench against the wall is unclear. If it represents an earlier buttress, the lack of traces on the upstanding wall or on the c1810 Fisher watercolour must make it part of an earlier superstructure. Alternatively, the lack of dating evidence does not preclude it being part of 19th-century alterations, such as those seen in 2012 inside the building on the other side of the wall when a subsidence in the St John Chapel floor was repaired.

6.4 There are similarities in width and depth between in the lowest offsets within the 60cm excavation limit for the chancel and transept walls. Not too much should be made of very limited exposures, but if confirmed by further work it might cast doubt on the current dating sequence. That sees the north transept as existing by the later 13th-century according to documentary evidence for a chantry and chantry priests for the Pateshulls, with a presumably Norman chancel rebuilt in the 14th-century. Above ground, certainly, the east wall of the transept abuts, and is therefore later than, the north wall of the chancel.

6.5 The mid 19th-century restoration would have been an extremely disruptive process, especially where substantial parts of the church were rebuilt. The amount and depth of rubble encountered in the two trenches outside the vestry suggests that it occupies much of the ground that would have to be taken away in order to achieve the formation base for level access between lobby, chancel and vestry / WC. The absence of disarticulated human bones or any other indications of burials supports this conclusion.

6.6 The C19 vestry raises several problems. The date for demolition of its predecessor is not known and could have been as early as the 16th-century, as hinted by a documentary reference of 1578 to the churchwardens reporting that “our chancel is a little out of repayre” (Christopher Pickford, *Bedfordshire churches in the 19th-century*, BHRS vol 73, 128). There is no hint of it on the c1810 watercolour, and Fisher was a sufficiently good antiquarian draftsman to pick up anything reasonably visible. The excavated foundations are massive for reasons that are unclear, but placing the north wall on one side suggests problems in finding room for the new structure, perhaps due to the proximity of graves. Within the vestry where excavation was possible, what looks like a damp-proofing layer is unusual for its depth, and the function of the headstone laid flat at 53cm depth is enigmatic.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

7.1 The extent to which the information obtained from these trial trenches will facilitate or hinder a required ground level reduction by 60cm is a matter for assessment by the project architect. It appears possible in the area of the proposed lobby without adversely impacting upon significant structural evidence or burials, much of the depth being taken up by mixed earth and rubble probably associated with the major mid 19th- century restoration works. The old vestry is more problematic: at least 30cm depth of the remarkably broad 19th-century interior footing would have to be removed; whether there are structural implications may require further assessment.

7.2 Assuming that the project proceeds as currently proposed, the reduction of ground levels for both lobby area and old vestry should be carried out archaeologically in order to record any significant surviving evidence that would otherwise be lost from an area of considerable potential sensitivity.

7.3 Other tasks of archaeological recording are likely to be required as part of the development process, though the list that follows is provisional until it can be reviewed against a full specification of works.

- Analytical building recording of upstanding walls to be covered up by the lobby structure will be required, particularly the north face of the north wall of the chancel and the east face of the east wall of the north transept. Within the chancel, the face of the length of wall running west from the doorway must be similarly recorded before re-plastering. A photographic / drawn record as appropriate will be needed for any stonework exposures arising from plaster repairs generally. It is unlikely that any medieval wall paintings survived 19th-century restoration and re-plastering, but a preliminary assessment ought to be made.

- Reflooring in the chancel will require removal of existing uneven and damaged 19th-century tiles and excavation to achieve a new formation level. The chancel floor is already at the required level so needs to be lowered no more than a maximum of 30cm. The use of ground penetrating radar in order to identify any voids was considered but experience elsewhere suggests it would not add to what would be found anyway during ground level reduction.

- Reforming the 19th-century doors into the chancel and old vestry to facilitate wheelchair access will require detailed recording as existing and a watching brief to record any moulded architectural fragments found during the works that raise their heads and lower their sills.

- Services trenches into and out from the vestry / lobby / chancel area will require archaeological investigation or observation according to the specification yet to be written. Management of the WC outflow through a 'trench-arch' soakaway rather than connection to the mains sewer would reduce both archaeological requirements and construction costs.

Appendix 1 – list of contexts

Context	Description	Dimensions	Relationships	Notes
0101	topsoil	> 15cm thick		all over trench
0102	clayey yellow earth	>30cm thick	under 0101	some small rubble; all over trench
0103	red tile drain		in 0102	running N-S; mid point 42cm E of N transept wall above ground
0104.1	E wall N transept	down to 15cm below MGS as mostly one course	0101 0102 against it	upstanding wall
0104.2	E wall N transept	offset 10cm wide at 15cm below MGS, capping rough coursed slightly inset rubble footing down to 50cm below MGS	under 0104.1	top course well laid as three large stones, S-most with good chamfer, middle and N rough-shaped no chamfer
0104.3	E wall N transept	lower offset at least 28cm wide, no chamfer	under 0104.2	at limit of excavation
0104.4	E wall N transept	side of large stone structure	under 0103, 0105	running E in NE corner trench
0105	mortar clay large rubble	only partly excavated at 60cm below MGS	under 0102 0103 over 0104.4	no dating evidence but assumed related to C19 restoration
0201	topsoil gravel	>5cm thick	over 0202	
0202	flat grave slabs			E of headstone for Antonia (d 1844) and Hester Bainbridge
0203	brick ? vault wall		cut into or respected by 0206.1, 2	forming E limit of ? vault
0204	fill of ? vault cut		cut into or respected by 0206.1,	
0205	yellow mortar and large rubble	20cm thick; all over trench except where cut by 0203, 0204	cut by 0203, 0204	possibly construction rubble for C19 vestry
0206.1	C19 vestry N wall	chamfered plinth **cm above MGS; extends down 25cm below MGS on to offset footing		relationship with 0202-4 uncertain: should be later but evidence inconclusive
0206.2	C19 vestry N wall	rough offset footing 13cm wide at 25cm below MGS	under 0206.1	relationship with 0202-4 uncertain: should be later but evidence inconclusive
0207	hard stone and mortar surface	at 27cm below MGS	cut by 0203; laid against 0206.2	
0301	topsoil	>12cm depth; all over trench		
0302	mixed mortar earth and some clay	from 12cm – 56cm below modern ground surface and not completely excavated	under 0301; cut partly by 0303	finds: late medieval jug handle
0303	modern red tile drain	runs E > W	cut through 0301, 0302	
0304	large limestone rubble pieces	in SW corner of trench against W section and church wall 0305	under 0301, probably same as 0302	sizes up to 20x10cm but loose in clay and not laid; not excavated
0305.1	north wall	about six courses of rubble		

	chancel superstructure	seen in trench down to 56cm		
0305.2	offset	12cm wide at 56cm depth	under 0305.1	
0305.3	bottom of fill for Easter Sepulchre	2 large stones 12 x 35cm	part of 0305.1	running at slight angle to north
0401	loose earth rubble	unevenly across vestry floor: vegetation		
0402	red black tile floor		under 0401	where trench excavated red & black tiles
0403	cement base for tile floor		under 0402	
0404	yellow mortar limestone footing (N)	upper offset is 50cm wide; one course 10cm deep on lower offset 13-15cm wide	under 0402	
0405	loose yellow mortar and rubble	up to 18cm deep	under 0403 and over lower offset of 0404	
0406	? bitumen	2-10mm thick; at 22cm below top of concrete slab in E of vestry	under 0405; on top of edges of 0404, 0407	
0407	yellow mortar limestone footing (S)	upper offset is 50cm wide; one course 10cm deep on lower offset 13-15cm wide	under 0402	
0408	yellow mortar seating		under 0406	
0409	clay earth rubble	between 0404 0407 only	under 0408	
0410	headstone laid flat	at 53cm below concrete slab; W side in section	under 0409	curve top to N; yellow mortar-filled break up middle; not lifted
0411	foundation	at 53cm below concrete slab	under 0409; at same level as 0410	edge seen in N side of trench

Appendix 2 – OASIS record

OASIS ID: historic6 - 203536	
Project details	
Project name	Church of St Mary Bletsoe
Short description of the project	Four trial trenches were excavated at the church of St Mary Bletsoe, to the north of the chancel and in its attached roofless vestry. The aim was to evaluate archaeological deposits and structural evidence within the 60cm depth required to achieve the formation level for proposals to add a new lobby area and insert a DDA-compliant WC. The lobby area trenches encountered rubble probably generated by the mid C19 restoration and confirmed substantial foundations for the adjacent walls of the chancel and north transept. The vestry trenches showed unusually wide and substantial C19 footings under its north wall and against the north wall of the chancel. Three sherds of pottery were found in C19 contexts, two medieval and one post-medieval. The work did not identify any archaeological constraints that would obviously override the benefits to be derived from development of the proposed uses and associated conservation of historic fabric, for which appropriate archaeological mitigation is recommended. Preliminary proposals are also made for mitigation of impacts from works to the interior of the chancel.
Project dates	29-Dec-2014 to 13-Feb-2015

Previous/future work	Yes
Associated project reference codes	Bedford Museum accession ID BEDFM 2014.88
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	Listed building
Site status (other)	Conservation Area
Current Land use	Churchyard
Monument type	Anglican church – medieval and post-medieval
Significant Finds	Three sherds of pottery, two medieval and one post-medieval
Investigation type	Excavation of trial pits
Project location	
Country	England
Site location	Churchyard of St Mary Bletsoe
Postcode	MK44 1QB
Site coordinates	TL 502266 258381
Project creators	
Organisation	Historic Environment Conservation
Project brief originator	Diocesan Archaeologist
Project design originator	David Baker
Project director	David Baker
Sponsor/funding body	Bletsoe PCC
Project archives	
Physical Archive Exists?	Pot sherds held by PCC
Digital Archive recipient	Bletsoe PCC and Bedford HER
Project bibliography 1	
Publication type	Grey literature
Title	Trial trenches at the church of St Mary Bletsoe, 2014-15
Author(s)/Editor(s)	David Baker
Date	2015
Issuer or publisher	Historic Environment Conservation
Place of issue or publication	Bletsoe, Bedford.
Description	Digital file of text, plans and photographs, 16pp