



ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE CARE OF CHURCHES

ARCHAEOLOGY (– it is not as scary as you think - probably!)

A Guide for Parishes (March 2009)

INTRODUCTION

These notes are intended for parishes and others concerned with developments in churches and churchyards. They explain the various archaeological issues that may be encountered and how they can be addressed.

THE CONSIDERATION OF ARCHAEOLOGY WITHIN THE FACULTY PROCESS

Although the archaeological implications of individual Faculty applications need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, there are a number of general points and principles involved.

The approach to archaeology adopted within the Diocese of Salisbury is similar to that generally used throughout England, and is in line with the civil planning system. The latter was much influenced by a document produced in 1990 by what was then the Department of the Environment, entitled Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Archaeology and Planning). Archaeology is recognised as an integral part of the planning process, and where appropriate a prospective developer is required to provide the authority that will decide a planning application with information on the effect that a development would have on archaeological remains. If appropriate, that authority can then place conditions on a grant of planning consent that require archaeological fieldwork that acts as mitigation for the impact on archaeological remains or, in occasional cases, refuse an application because of its impact on archaeological material.

The provision of the archaeological information and the archaeological fieldwork are normally undertaken by archaeological contracting companies. Details of such companies can be obtained from your County Council Archaeology Service and/or the website of the Institute for Archaeologists.

A consequence of this situation is that there is no central government or other

funding for archaeological work during a development. It is seen as the responsibility of the developer (whether a construction company or a parish) to have the work undertaken and so to pay for it. However, there should be no requirement for that developer to fund archaeological work that is purely for research, only what is required to mitigate their development. Early consideration of archaeology within a project is advisable, not only because of cost implications but also since it may be possible to design a development to avoid disturbing archaeology.

The information that a developer is required to provide with an application can be of two forms. The first is a desk-based assessment, which gathers evidence from documentary sources (written accounts, maps, etc), many of which will be held in County Record Offices and the Historic Environment Records which are usually held by County Councils. The second, which often follows on from the first, is an evaluation, which is a small-scale archaeological fieldwork exercise. Within churches and churchyards, this may occasionally involve geophysical survey but most often will be the excavation of one or more trial trenches.

The archaeological fieldwork required as mitigation could take several forms. For below-ground archaeology, it may take the form of an archaeological excavation before the development commences, or a 'watching brief' where an archaeologist is present during groundworks and records any archaeological material that is disturbed during that work. Archaeological recording of all or part of a standing building is also a possibility (please see below).

Advice on the above can be obtained from the Salisbury Diocesan Advisory Committee's archaeological adviser and the archaeological service of your local County Council.

A copy of an archaeological report, whether produced to support a faculty application or describing work undertaken as mitigation, should be deposited in the County Historic Environment Record (the parish may of course wish to keep a copy for itself as well).

What follows is an outline of the different types of archaeological evidence that can be expected inside and outside a church.

BURIED ARCHAEOLOGY WITHIN A CHURCHYARD

It is often thought that archaeologists are interested in churchyards because they are full of old bodies. However, because of re-use it is likely that the majority of intact burials here date from the post-Medieval period (roughly the past five hundred years). Those of the past two-three hundred years are likely to be marked by gravestones or the like.

Detailed investigation of post-Medieval burials is expensive and usually only of value if a large-scale analysis can be undertaken. In practice, this is unfeasible for most parishes and ways of avoiding it should be sought. Otherwise, the archaeological work tells us little more than that 'people buried their dead in churchyards', which we have all worked out for ourselves anyway.

Contrariwise, archaeological excavation can be a way of ensuring that human remains are lifted carefully and that the bones are kept together to allow appropriate re-deposition away from the site of a development.

In general, the most archaeologically-sensitive area is that close to the present church. Elsewhere, extensive disturbance is likely to have been caused by more recent burials, but this area seems to have been avoided in modern times (presumably for the very practical reason that a deep hole could undermine the foundations of a church). Hence, there is the potential for the survival of Saxon and Medieval burials (which can provide important archaeological information on the local population, methods of burial, etc) and remains of earlier church buildings (which can provide valuable information on the development of the building and churches in general).

Experience has shown that in most cases archaeological remains are unlikely to be present in the top 0.3m of a churchyard. Hence, if the maximum depth of disturbance caused by works such as the installation of service cables can be kept to less than 0.3m, then there is unlikely to be an archaeological impact.

Removal of trees within a churchyard can have an impact on archaeological remains particularly if the trees are uprooted whole or if the roots are grubbed out. This can be avoided by cutting the tree at ground level or as near as possible to this, and either leaving the stump to rot *in situ* or treating it with an appropriate herbicide.

Developments that extend outside the churchyard, e.g. provision of utility supplies, could have other archaeological implications and would lie beyond the remit of the Faculty system. Please contact the appropriate County Archaeological Service for advice on such matters.

BURIED ARCHAEOLOGY INSIDE CHURCHES

There are two main areas of archaeological interest beneath an existing church.

1. REMAINS OF EARLIER CHURCHES – Records often indicate that parishes had churches before the present building was constructed, even when that building dates from the Middle Ages. Replacement churches were generally built on or close to the site of their predecessor, so that remains of earlier churches can survive below the floors of existing churches. Archaeological investigation of these can tell a great deal about the early history of a parish and indeed the development of the early church in this country.

2. HUMAN REMAINS - Burial within a church is a practice that ceased with the

introduction of the Burials Act in the mid-19th century, so any burials here are likely to be of some age and consequently of potential archaeological interest. Some will have tombstones above them, which could provide information to supplement the archaeological results – contrary to this, though, is that they are seen more as individuals and may have identifiable local descendants. Many burials within churches are in vaults, within which bodies can often be identified, at least to family level. The presence of a vault beneath a wall or the like can sometimes affect the church's structure.

N.B. It should be noted that when a church was extensively rebuilt in the 19th century, often a deep void was dug beneath the floor to aid air circulation and so prevent problems of damp within the building. Such work is likely to have removed most or all of any earlier archaeological remains.

THE EXISTING STRUCTURE OF A CHURCH

Archaeology is not simply about what lies below ground. Archaeological recording techniques can be applied to standing structures, of which churches are a prime example, to reveal important information about the origins and development of these structures.

Consequently most churches, particularly those with surviving Medieval fabric, have great potential for archaeological research. In practice, however, the conservation principle means that major modifications to historic fabric that need archaeological mitigation will occur only rarely. That mitigation is likely to involve recording by scaled drawing and photography.

Minor changes to historic fabric (e.g. putting a cable or service pipe through a wall below ground level) are generally acceptable. In some cases, where work does not affect historic fabric directly, but does affect it visually (e.g. re-ordering), it may be appropriate for a 'before and after' photographic record to be made.