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ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH, SEAVINGTON: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF THE NAVE AND CHANCEL

Introduction

In 2007 a proposal to re-floor the church was put forward as one of a number of measures to improve the conditions in the building, in particular the alleviation of damp. The new floor, a continuous stone floor throughout the church, removing the existing step up into the chancel, was to have underfloor heating, which required a considerable depth of foundation and insulating material beneath it. The whole interior of the church was therefore to be dug out to this depth beneath the existing floor levels, with obvious implications for any remaining archaeological deposits. Early in 2007, very limited work was carried out to try to assess the extent of any deposits, but with limited results. It was clear, however, that at least the areas of aisle within the nave contained significant deposits from the medieval church. A programme of archaeological work was therefore agreed, and in February 2008 the whole of the interior of the church was excavated and recorded to the depth required by the proposed works. The archaeological excavation was carried out in advance of and at times alongside the ongoing building works. The detailed archaeological records can be found in an archive at the Somerset Record Office (reference A/BHF/19) together with the full report, of which this is an extract.

Structural development

The excavations revealed the foundations of the

church past and present (Fig. 1), with evidence of at least four structural phases (Fig. 2) culminating in the late 15th century form seen today. Though the 11th or 12th century may be the most likely date for the first period of building – against the historical background of the Norman conquest and the arrival of new owners of the land – the small church shown by the excavations could be pre-conquest. Perhaps the building of the chancel was the first Norman work, symbolising the power of the new rulers. Though the sequence of development is clear, the absolute chronology is elastic with the few broadly fixed points based only on architectural style.

Origins, 11th–12th century

The primary feature revealed by the excavations was a wall foundation beneath the north side of the present nave (Fig. 1, A). This comprised a foundation of oolitic limestone rubble in clay, 2 feet (0.65m) wide and 18 inches (0.45m) deep below the contemporary ground surface. It was revealed in three places, surviving between the later graves, running west from the present chancel arch for at least 6.5 metres. This was the foundation for the north wall of a building pre-dating the present nave, and running slightly skew to it. Its line is indeed parallel to the north side of the foundation revealed beneath the south wall of the present nave (Fig. 1, J), which could be the contemporary southern foundation, incorporated into the later, enlarged foundation. This rectangular building was therefore about 10 feet 6

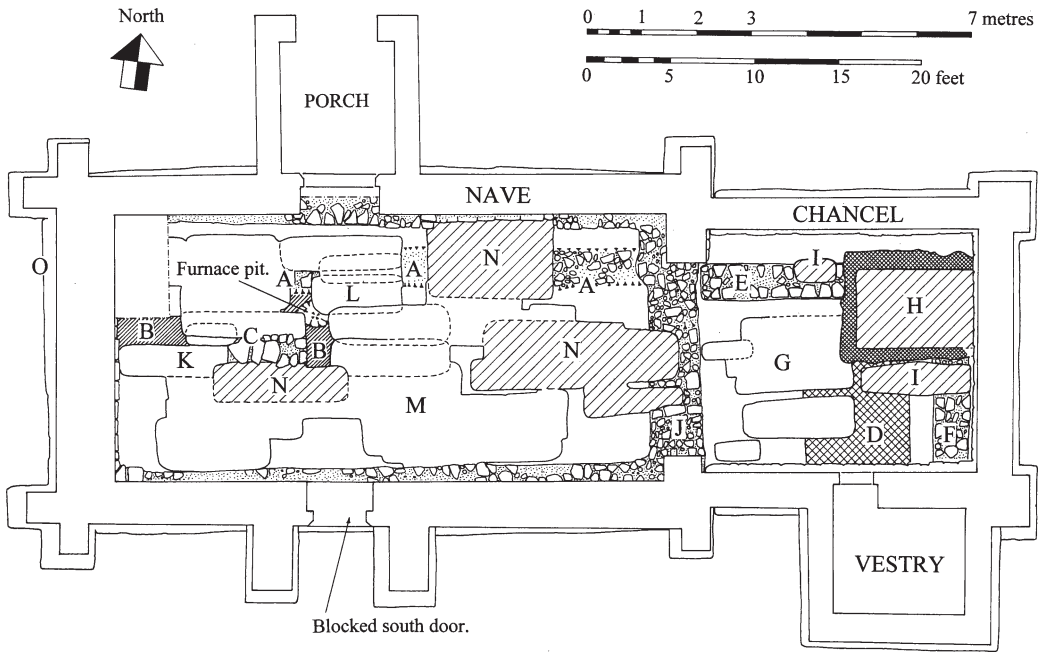


Fig. 1. The excavated area within the nave and chancel showing all revealed features. A Remains of the north wall of the Norman church. B Surviving areas of primary floors within the Norman church including the lead furnace pit. C Stone rubble, probably a stone-packed grave rather than a foundation and the primary grave in this area of the church. D Ditch to the east of the church. E and F Foundations of the north and east wall respectively of the primary chancel, added against the east side of the Norman structure and above the now infilled ditch. D. G Graves within the primary chancel, forming a row west of the High Altar. H Stone-lined and plastered vault, probably 18th or 19th century, built into the corner of the enlarged chancel. I Two graves postdating the enlargement of the chancel in the 15th century. The child grave could be associated with the group of graves to the south; the coffin-shaped adult grave is probably much later, perhaps contemporary with the vault, lying behind an altar in the western part of the chancel. J Wider foundations of the rebuilt and enlarged nave. Elements of the southern foundation may be preserved from the earlier nave, being the reason for the evident misalignment of wall and foundation. K Sequence of three graves and floor surfaces in the west end of the nave. L Sequence of at least five graves and floor surfaces adjacent to the north door. M Area of intercutting graves in the nave. N Latest graves within the nave, probably post-Reformation and respecting the position of box pews in the nave. O Line of the wider foundation exposed around the outside of the church.

inches (3.20m) wide internally (slightly narrower than the present chancel arch). Its eastern end lay beneath the present chancel arch but no evidence of its western wall was found, though remains of its internal floors (Fig.1, B) indicate that it was as long as the present nave (Fig.2), at about 30 feet (9.50m).

Internal floors of lime mortar and earth survived in two small areas at its western end (Fig.1, B), lying specifically within the line of its north wall. In the small, more easterly of these two areas, a hard thin band of white lime mortar lay above the clay subsoil.

This was the primary floor and was overlain by a band of finely laminated silty loam, probably representing a long period of gradual build-up of dust and trample on the floor, which was then re-surfaced with lime mortar. Within this sequence was a small, bowl-shaped pit, that appears to have been the fire-pit for a lead-working furnace. This feature was 0.60m across and 0.20m deep and had been dug from the surface of the floor sequence, the surface of which was reddened and deeply burnt around its southern edge. Small pieces of spilt molten lead were

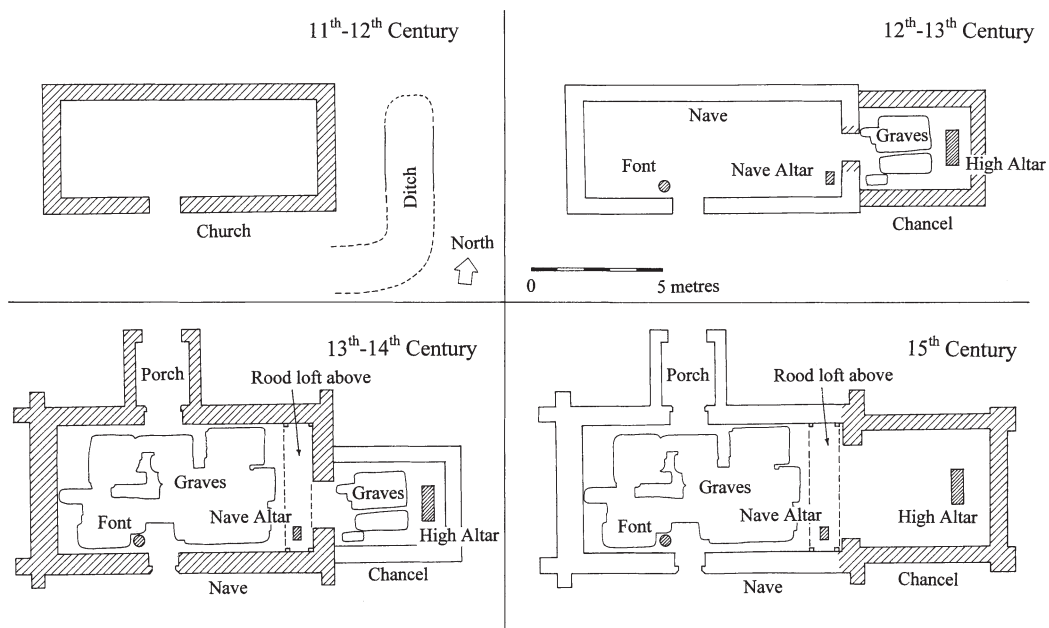


Fig. 2 The structural development of the medieval church, 1000–1500. For each phase, the new work is shown hatched. Some attempt has also been made to show the internal organisation of the church, with the position of font and altars as suggested by the extent of the graves. Of importance is the rood screen and loft, separating the nave and chancel.

11th–12th century Only the outline of this structure is clear, the south door based simply on what is known of the later church. Remnants of early floors survived in the west end of the building, suggesting a considerable period of use prior to the earliest burial within the structure.

12th–13th century Again it is only the outline of the structure that can be shown with any certainty and the positions of the two altars and the font are surmised. That burial in the chancel began at this stage is indicated by the 13th century effigy in the chancel, and burial in the nave is probable in this period, though specific graves of this date could not be recognised.

13th–14th century The form of the church is clear at this stage, with north and south doors, porch and a rood loft supported by the corbels visible in the nave walls today. Burial in both nave and chancel continues and the extent of the graves respects the location of the rood screen and loft across the east end of the nave.

15th century With the rebuilding of the chancel the church assumed the form seen today. Burial in the chancel may have ceased at this time, the old graves marked by memorials and slabs, as the later graves appear considerably later.

recovered from the infill of the pit as well as hard burnt clay fragments, probably from the above ground structure of the furnace. The remains suggest a lead worker's furnace, set up inside the nave during a period of building works, probably roofing or window glazing. After the infilling of the pit and removal of the furnace the area of floor was patched with lime mortar flush with the existing surface. A similar sequence of primary floors remained to the west, comprising finely laminated lime mortar and silty loam with patches of ash and charcoal.

No dateable material was recovered from these

excavated layers and there is no direct evidence of the construction date of this building. To the east, however, there appears to have been a contemporary ditch parallel to it and some 6 feet away (1.80m). This was revealed during excavations in the chancel (Fig. 1, D), and was a steep-sided V-shaped ditch just over 6 feet wide (1.80m) and about 3 feet deep (not, however, fully excavated). It was traced for a length of 2m in the southern part of the chancel, being cut away by graves further north. There does, however, appear to have been a gap in it below the north wall of the later chancel (it was not evident in the thin

strip of extant deposits between the vault and the chancel wall) presumably an entrance or crossing point. Though the feature could be the east side of an enclosure specifically around the church (Fig. 2) it could equally be an element of a much wider system of boundaries.

The ditch had an infilling of dark brown, clayey loam, with a distinct band of mortar fragments in the upper part sloping into the ditch from the west, and presumably weathered from the nearby building. The upper fill of the ditch produced a single sherd of medieval pottery, being the soot-blackened rim of a cooking vessel with a date range of 11th–12th century. The sherd is important in giving a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the primary chancel (below). It is of the type defined at Ilchester as Saxo-Norman (Pearson 1982, 171, fig. 81,597), and see also Mephram 1992 (fig. 4.5) who gives a 12th–13th-century date. A date in the 12th century for the final infilling of the ditch is probable.

The addition of a chancel, 12th–13th century

The construction of a chancel against the east side of the building described above is clear from the revealed foundations. Smaller than the present chancel, it measured internally about 14 feet by 10 feet (4.50m by 3m) and was symmetrical with the pre-existing structure (Fig. 2). Parts of the north and east wall foundations were revealed by the excavations (Fig. 1, E and F), comprising coursed stone rubble in clay in a trench 2 feet wide and at least 18 inches deep (0.40m), directly comparable with the foundations of the earlier structure described above. The southern return would have lain beneath the present south wall of the enlarged chancel. The eastern foundation included fragments of burnt Ham Hill stone, clearly derived from an earlier structure, as well as a single fragment of a flat brick, Romano-British in origin. Though this could indicate the presence of a Romano-British structure in the immediate vicinity, material such as this could as easily be coming from the ruin of the large courtyard villa over the hill at Dinnington to the south, which was massively quarried for stone and other materials in the medieval period.

The west end of the north wall footing trench had clearly been dug up to a pre-existing foundation as there was an area of undisturbed clay subsoil between it and the present eastern foundation of the nave (Fig. 1, E and J). It could be argued that this foundation had been built up to the substantial footing revealed in the excavations that supports the walls of the

enlarged nave (below). Its clear symmetry with the earlier nave, however, argues against this and the sequence shown in Fig. 2 seems to best fit the excavated remains.

The construction of the chancel must have involved the partial demolition of the east wall of the earlier church if only for the insertion of the chancel arch, but the extent of this demolition and rebuilding is unknown. A relatively narrow opening is, however, likely (Fig. 2). No evidence of floors within this chancel remained. The surface of the clay subsoil was exposed at a higher level than in the nave, indicative of a step up, but was covered only by the make up layers for the much later floor.

With the construction of the chancel the church assumed the standard form of nave and chancel typical of many parish churches. The development would imply the presence of a nave altar as well as the high altar in the chancel, and a rood screen is certainly possible at this date. That this took place in the later 12th or 13th century is suggested by the pottery sherd from the infilled ditch beneath it but there is other evidence of the 13th-century church. The plain font present today and dated to the early 13th century would have been an element of this church, as would the effigy of a layman, dating to the later 13th century. That this may originally have been in the chancel is uncertain, but a number of graves (Fig. 2 and below) were revealed which lay within this early chancel. In addition, the earliest description of the church includes the words ‘in the chancel lies the effigy in stone of some unknown person’ (Collinson 1791). It has been suggested that the figure may be that of Adam le Denys who held the manor of Seavington until his death in 1284 (Anon n.d.) and his interment in the chancel is certainly possible. A connection between a powerful and wealthy local family and the construction of the chancel and its subsequent use for burial is not unlikely.

Rebuilding the nave, 13th–14th century

The nave described above was at some stage completely demolished and rebuilt on a larger scale, being the present nave of the church. Though not evidently increased in length, its width was expanded with an extra 4 feet added to the north. The excavations revealed the foundations of this new nave (Fig. 1, J), being coursed limestone rubble and clay packed into a trench more than 2 feet deep (0.60m) below the contemporary ground surface. Its full width of 3 feet (0.90m) was only exposed beneath the present chancel arch, where it was

continuous across the east end of the nave. These larger foundations may have incorporated elements of the earlier, narrower foundations (particularly beneath the south wall where foundation and wall appear misaligned), but this cannot be conclusively demonstrated. Where the full width of the foundation was exposed there was no evidence of more than one period of construction and the increased size of the foundations probably reflects the increased width and height of the nave walls. The walls were generally about 2 foot 6 inches thick (0.75m) with the exception of the west wall which was a full 3 feet thick, presumably reflecting the construction of the belfry.

The two doorways in the north and south nave walls are evidently contemporary with its construction, as may be the porch. Limited documentary evidence suggests that the porch was built in the late 13th century (VCH, 1974, 209), though the heads that form the corbels for the rood loft across the east end of the nave have been dated to the late 14th century (Pevsner 1958, 285). Reconciling the archaeological evidence with the documentary and architectural evidence need not be problematic. The dismantling and reassembly of a porch during the rebuilding of the nave is not impossible and many changes such as refenestration and decorative corbels need not have been part of the major structural changes evident in the foundations. Burial within the nave continued, with the area of graves expanding up to the new north wall. The presence of the rood loft is shown by the absence of graves in the east end of the nave (Fig. 2).

Rebuilding the chancel, 15th century

The church assumed its present form with the demolition of the existing chancel and the construction of a larger one, symmetrical with the already enlarged nave. This had a wider foundation of coursed stone which butted up to the existing

foundations of the east end of the nave. This work included the construction of the wide chancel arch that stands today. Architecturally the panelled arch is Perpendicular, and dates to the 15th century as do the chancel windows and the piscina in the south wall. Close examination of the north side of the chancel arch (Fig. 1) shows its realignment from the line of the rebuilt east wall of the nave, which had evidently followed the line of the even earlier nave wall. Though no structural changes were made to the nave, all five windows are of 15th century date, though stylistic differences between them suggests the piecemeal refenestration of the older windows during that century. Traces of this work, in the form of masons' debris and fragments of window glass were found in the upper layers of the excavated sequences of floors in the west end of the nave.

The 15th century therefore saw the transformation of St Michael's church into a contemporary building in the Perpendicular style, and many of the parish churches of Somerset achieved their finest aspect in this period. It was, however, to be the last major period of building at the site for a long time.

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A MEDIEVAL ENGLISH HAND 'RELIQUARY' FROM GLASTONBURY ABBEY?

The Roman Catholic Church of St Etheldreda, Ely Place, Holborn, acquired a number of relics after its restoration to Catholic use in 1874. Amongst these items was a fragment of the hand of St Etheldreda, gifted to the church by the Dominican convent at Stone, Staffordshire in 1876.¹ In 1903 this relic was translated to a hand-shaped reliquary of apparent

medieval English origin. The reliquary remains in the sacristy of the church to this day and each year it is exposed for veneration of the relic on the feast of St Etheldreda. Intriguingly, this hand 'reliquary' has a Glastonbury provenance, although this has not previously been recognised.

The reliquary (*see Front Cover images*) takes the