

 THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

DIOCESE OF SALISBURY

ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE CARE OF CHURCHES

**ARCHAEOLOGY - A GUIDE FOR PARISHES
(January 2024)**

*'Our churches are our history shown,
In wood and glass and iron and stone'*

John Betjeman



The handsome Grade I listed, 14th-century Church of St Lawrence, Stratford Sub Castle, Wiltshire
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ARCHAEOLOGY - A GUIDE FOR PARISHES

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INTRODUCTION

Parish churches are some of England's most important historic buildings, often sitting at the heart of a community, both spiritually and spatially. Most are listed, often at Grade II* or Grade I, because of their architectural, historical, and archaeological significance. Churches and their churchyards are important, both to the local and wider community, as important historic buildings, and as historic places of burial. They often constitute some of our most significant archaeological sites, containing important sources of information about our shared past. They often contain structural remains, such as earlier phases of church buildings, as well as evidence for past populations from the burials within their graveyards.

These notes have been prepared for parishes and other parties concerned with proposed developments in churches and churchyards. They provide general archaeological advice only. Every church and every development proposal within it is unique and so the Archaeological Advisors to the Salisbury DAC are always willing to provide specific advice above and beyond the general advice provided here.

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 some 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 enshrined in the National Planning Policy Framework (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, last revised December 2023). 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 and, if appropriate, their setting. If appropriate, that authority can then place conditions on a grant of planning consent that requires a programme of archaeological work that acts as mitigation for the impact on archaeological remains or, in occasional cases, refuse an application because of an unacceptable impact on archaeological remains.

It should be noted that some churches and churchyards contain archaeological monuments that are Scheduled Monuments, such as the Bronze Age barrow within the Grade I listed Church of St Andrew at Ogbourne St Andrew, Wiltshire. Scheduled Monuments are statutorily protected. There is a presumption against any impact on them or their setting. Any work on a Scheduled Monument requires Scheduled Monument Consent, granted by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, as advised by Historic England. Scheduled Monument Consent is entirely separate from Faculty and planning permissions,

i.e. planning permission may be granted but Scheduled Monument Consent may not.



The impressive Bronze Age barrow and Scheduled Monument in the graveyard of St Andrews Church, Ogbourne St Andrew, Wiltshire. Image courtesy of Mike McQueen.

Archaeological services in relation to programmes of archaeological work are normally provided by archaeological practices, details of which can be provided through the Archaeological Advisors to the DAC or through the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists ([Welcome | Chartered Institute for Archaeologists](#)).

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 the impacts of their development. Early consideration of archaeology within a project is therefore advisable, not only because of cost implications but also since it may be possible to design a development to avoid disturbing archaeological remains.

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 Historic Environment Records which are usually held by County Councils. The second, which often follows on from the first, is a field evaluation, which is a small-scale, exploratory, archaeological investigation. Within churches and churchyards, this may occasionally involve non-intrusive geophysical survey but most often will be the excavation of one or more exploratory trial test pits or 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 remains that are disturbed during that work.

Archaeological recording of all or part of a standing building may also be required (see below). The programme of archaeological work will conclude with the preparation of a report, commensurate with the significance of the archaeological results. It should be noted in particular that where the recovery of articulated human remains is involved, detailed scientific analysis and reporting is time-consuming and costly. A copy of the archaeological report, whether produced to support a faculty application or describing work undertaken as mitigation, should be deposited in the relevant County Historic Environment Record and the Online Access to the Index of Investigations (OASIS), administered by the Archaeology Data Service. The parish may of course wish to keep a copy for itself as well.

Advice on any of the above can be obtained from the Archaeological Advisors to the Salisbury DAC and the archaeological service of your local County Council. 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

Many churchyards have been places of burial for centuries. They can therefore contain skeletal remains and associated items such as coffins, grave goods and memorials that provide direct evidence about our past and can be of the utmost importance. Continuing burial within an active graveyard may often disturb earlier, unmarked interments but this is a natural consequence of the use of graveyards for their intended purpose. Many of the intact burials within a churchyard are therefore likely to date from the post-medieval period (post 1600) and those of the past three hundred years are likely to be marked by gravestones or other memorials but this does not preclude the survival of earlier burials at greater depth.

Archaeological importance normally refers to burials more than 100 years old and therefore burials from, for example the 18th- and 19th- century, may still have archaeological significance. Skeletal remains from a named individual can be particularly archaeologically valuable in understanding the demography, health, and origins of past populations. Depending on the scale of the proposed development, archaeological desk-based assessment, followed by exploratory field evaluation, may therefore be required to help determine the potential significance of any burials that might be affected.



Partial but still articulated remains of a medieval(?) burial in the graveyard of the Grade II* former Church of St Edmund, Bedwin Street, Salisbury. This and other possible medieval inhumation burials survive despite continuous burial in the graveyard up to the 19th-century. Image reproduced by kind permission of AC Archaeology Ltd. Copyright AC Archaeology Ltd.



Un-coffined, earth-cut burials and a coffined burial in a brick-lined vault, dating between the 17th- and 19th-century in the graveyard of the Grade II* former Church of St Edmund, Bedwin Street, Salisbury. Note the shallowness of the earth-cut burials. Image reproduced by kind permission of AC Archaeology Ltd. Copyright AC Archaeology Ltd.

Proposed developments within a churchyard should therefore seek to remove the risk of, or minimise, the disturbance to burials as there is a presumption in favour of their preservation *in situ* and this is the most desirable outcome archaeologically. Wherever possible, avoidance of disturbance to burials is the preferred option. In addition, the archaeological investigation and analysis of human remains can be time-consuming and costly. Therefore, if the disturbance of human remains is acceptable to the relevant authorities and subject to archaeological investigation, the scope of the excavation and post-excavation analysis should be fully understood and planned for in advance of any development.

Where a new building is proposed within a graveyard that has the potential to impact on burials, shallow raft foundations should be considered to mitigate the impact on archaeological deposits. Piling should only be considered if wholly exceptional circumstances prevail, and the public benefit outweighs the harm caused to the significance of the archaeological remains (Historic England, 2019). Exploratory archaeological investigation may be required to understand fully the archaeological implications of a new building to enable an informed decision on foundation design to be made.

Burials may also occur in a vault, which may not always be the preserve of the rich. Such burials therefore can provide information on the social hierarchy of a parish. Simple brick-lined vaults can occur in rural graveyards and the nature and structure of the vaults may also require archaeological recording.



Collapsed brick-lined vault, probably of late 19th-century date, in the graveyard of the Grade I listed Church of St Mary the Virgin, Upavon, Wiltshire. It is unclear if the vault has an occupant below the collapsed material (and traffic cone!). ©Wiltshire Council.

In broad terms, the most archaeologically sensitive area for burial is that closest to the present church. Elsewhere within the graveyard, disturbance may have been caused by

more recent burials, but those areas close to the church may have been avoided for burial in modern times to reduce the risk of undermining the foundations of the church. However, assumptions on the presence of pre-modern burials should be avoided and earlier Saxon or medieval burials can survive even where areas of the graveyard that have witnessed repeated burial. Desk-based research may be required in some instances to understand the archaeological potential of any part of the graveyard.

The graveyard may also include evidence for an earlier church or other building on the site, or phases of growth and contraction of the graveyard which may add to its archaeological significance.

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 a significant archaeological impact. Any below ground impacts within the graveyard should be kept to the minimum depth possible. If service runs are required, they should, where possible, avoid known graves and memorials, be routed where there is less likely to be graves e.g. along historic pathways, or existing service runs. Even shallow works within the graveyard may require archaeological monitoring if there is a possibility of the works revealing archaeological remains.



A shallow service trench running through a church graveyard in Dorset. Precise location uncertain. Image reproduced by kind permission of Steve Wallis, Dorset Council.

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 of the churchyard, e.g. provision of utility supplies and drainage systems, 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.

Remains of Earlier Churches

Medieval churches often occupy a site of earlier significance, and their form and orientation may follow an earlier church or other building on the site. 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.



A small hole enabled this image to be taken of stacked, coffined burials within an otherwise sealed vault below the floor of the Grade I listed, 12th-century Church of St Mary, Maiden Newton. Image reproduced by kind permission of Steve Wallis, Dorset Council.

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. Many burials within churches are in vaults or crypts, 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. Specific advice on the archaeology of crypts is provided by Cox (2001).

It should be noted that often, when a church was extensively remodeled in the 19th-century, a deep void was dug beneath the floor to aid air circulation and so prevent problems of damp within the building. Such work may have removed most or all of any earlier archaeological remains. Exploratory archaeological investigation may be required to assess any proposed impacts below the existing floor level.



Suspended Victorian wooden floor revealing a void below at the Grade I listed, 12th-century, Church of St Mary, Maiden Newton. Image reproduced by kind permission of Steve Wallis, Dorset Council.

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 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. 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.

This concludes our advice note, which provides general archaeological advice. Please do not hesitate to contact the Archaeological Advisors to the DAC if you have any queries regarding the archaeology of your Church. We will always be pleased to assist you.

'...for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.'

Middlemarch, George Elliot

Guidance Documents

Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England, 2015, 'Large Burial Grounds. Guidance on sampling in archaeological fieldwork projects'

Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England, 2017, 'Guidance for Best Practice for the Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England' Second Edition

Association of Diocesan and Cathedral Archaeologists, 2010, 'Archaeology and Burial Vaults. A guidance note for churches', Guidance Note 2, July 2010

Church of England, Cathedral and Church Buildings Division, 2021, 'A Brief Guide to Church Building Works with Archaeological Implications', February 2021

[CCB Archaeology Guidance Feb 2021.pdf \(churchofengland.org\)](#)

Cox, M, 2001, 'Crypt Archaeology' Chartered Institute for Archaeologist, Professional

Practice Paper 3

Historic England, 2019 'Piling and Archaeology. Guidance and Good Practice', Swindon