

**ST PETER'S CHURCH, FARMINGTON,  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

BY  
NIALL OAKEY  
FOR  
FARMINGTON PCC



*Cotswold  
Archaeological  
Trust*

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GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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Headquarters Building, Kemble Business Park, Cirencester, Gloucestershire, GL7 6BQ  
Tel. 01285 771022 Fax. 01285 771033 E-mail: cots.arch@virgin.net

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## **SUMMARY**

In June and July 1999 Cotswold Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Peter's Church, Farmington, Gloucestershire. Observations were made during groundworks associated with a new drainage system and the provision of a lightning conductor system. The work was commissioned by Andrew Townsend Architect on behalf of Farmington Parochial Church Council.

Most of the work took place to the north of the church and little evidence was found of burial in that area before the nineteenth century. However, the damaged and modified bowl of a medieval font was recovered, re-used as part of a nineteenth-century drainage system.

To the south of the chancel, a stone-lined grave was encountered, containing the remains of the triple shell coffin of Charles Miller who died in 1778. Elements of a decorated stone tomb chest were found within the backfill of the disturbed grave.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### ***1.1 Introduction***

- 1.1.1 This report presents the results of an archaeological watching brief conducted intermittently between 7th June and 2nd July 1999 at St Peter's Church, Farmington, Gloucestershire (centred on NGR: SP 1365 1528).
- 1.1.2 The watching brief on groundworks was required by the Gloucester Diocesan Archaeologist as a condition of the approval of a Faculty for various works associated with the repair of the church roof and insertion of a new rainwater drainage system in the churchyard. In response to a request by Andrew Townsend Architects, Cotswold Archaeological Trust (CAT) prepared and submitted a Project Design for the watching brief (CAT 1998).
- 1.1.3 The fieldwork was carried out in compliance with the Institute of Field Archaeologist's *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (IFA 1994) and *Management of Archaeological Projects* (MAP2) (English Heritage 1991).

### ***1.2 Geology and Historical Background***

- 1.2.1 Farmington church is located at a height of *c* 177m aOD towards the eastern end of a ridge of Great Oolite Limestone. To north and south of the ridge, the land falls steeply to the valleys of headwaters of the Sherborne Brook, one of the tributaries of the River Windrush.
- 1.2.2 Farmington is mentioned in Domesday Book and the church has much surviving Norman work in the nave and chancel, including a fine south doorway with a decorated tympanum. A north aisle was added in the early thirteenth century and a south porch in the fourteenth. The western tower is

of late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century date. Later work at the church included the rebuilding of the north aisle in 1890-1 (Verey and Brooks 1999, 375 - 6).

- 1.2.3 The most prominent feature of the churchyard is the nineteenth-century Waller vault, built against the western wall of the tower with the entrance covered by a ledger stone within the base storey of the tower. The churchyard retains many headstones, the oldest (including seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples) being located to the south of the building. To the north, stones are sparser and predominantly nineteenth and early twentieth century in date. Ground level drops by *c* 1m to the road at the north end of the churchyard and an eastwards upward gradient is apparent in the yard.

### **1.3 Methodology**

- 1.3.1 All groundworks external to the church were observed and recorded by archaeologists. These included excavations connecting downpipes from guttering on the north side of the church to a newly excavated linear soakaway running west-east along the northern side of the churchyard to a soakaway pit near the eastern limit of the yard (Figure 2). Additionally, the provision of new lightning conductors required the excavation of pits near the north-western corner of the tower and to the south of the chancel.
- 1.3.2 Most excavation was undertaken by a mini-digger and avoided all marked graves (marked either by monument or mound). Initially it was thought that the depth of the trenches would require only occasional monitoring and recording visits by archaeologists, but the discoveries adjacent to the tower on the first day, allied with the need to excavate drains to a greater depth in order to overcome the sloping topography, meant that visits were more frequent and prolonged.

## 2. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

### 2.1 *West Tower*

2.1.1 At a distance of 0.50m north of the north-western corner of the tower, test pit 1 measuring 0.60m x 0.80m and 1.00m deep from the present ground surface was dug to accommodate the mat necessary for a lightning conductor on the tower (Figure 2, Plate 1). The pit was completely contained within the foundation trench for the western tower (fill of light yellow-brown sandy clay mixed with small and medium-sized angular limestone fragments) and in its southern face the tower footings were uncovered. The exposed remains comprised three stepped courses of mortared limestone ashlar, the middle course being chamfered. The courses continued below the base of the excavated pit.

2.1.2 The footings had been truncated to the east in order to accommodate a ceramic drain running to the north, alongside a small building of late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century date (possibly a boiler house or coal store) constructed in the angle of the tower and the north aisle. The drain served to carry water from an iron downpipe from the roof of the tower, the base of the downpipe being set into concrete. This part of the drainage system had failed through blockage and excavation quickly revealed that the downpipe drained through a re-used medieval font bowl. As surviving, the octagonal limestone block forming the bowl measured 0.72m x 0.63m and 0.25m thick, but there was evidence of re-shaping on all faces. Five holes had been drilled into the base of the bowl. The central hole was of smaller diameter than the others and may represent the drain for water when the font bowl served its original function, whilst the others were made when the bowl was re-used in the drainage system. The font currently in use in the church is dated 1784 and of a distinctive "Gothick" design (Verey and Brooks, 376).

2.1.3 The re-used font bowl has been excavated and is (July 1999) stored within the church until a decision is reached on its final deposition.



## **2.2 North Aisle**

2.2.1 In order to accommodate drains and a lightning conductor strip a channel was excavated alongside the external face of the northern wall of the north aisle and vestry, then diagonally crossing the area between the north-east corner of the vestry and the north-east corner of the chancel. This involved the removal of existing open groundwater drainage channels formed of nineteenth- or twentieth-century grey bricks and the excavation of a trench 0.45m deep and 0.30m wide. Where this exposed the face of the north aisle wall it failed to disclose any pieces of re-used mouldings or other decorated stonework. The north wall of the north aisle was seen to rest directly upon the limestone bedrock with no evidence of a foundation cut into it. The foundation trench of the north wall cut the graveyard soil and could be seen to be 0.25-0.30m wide with a backfill of unbedded pieces of limestone rubble, in some cases large blocks.

## **2.3 The graveyard north of the church**

2.3.1 A continuous drainage trench was dug from the tower downpipe, curving towards the northern wall of the churchyard and terminating in a test soakaway pit (2m x 1.50m and 1.10m deep) near the east wall (test pit 3). The drain trenches averaged 0.50m in width at the top, narrowing to 0.30m at the base, and varied from 0.50-0.60m in depth. In all cases they were cut through topsoil and graveyard soil, the test soakaway pit being the only case where the top of natural deposits (cornbrash) was reached. At its western end the trench cut through an area of ground raised by a dump of material *c* 0.20m thick which contained occasional medium to large pieces of limestone rubble.

2.3.2 The remainder of the excavated drainage trenches were notable for the lack of redeposited human bones. Only a few fragments were noted, suggesting that this part of the churchyard had been seldom used for burials in the past. Grave cuts were indicated by backfills containing a high percentage of redeposited cornbrash and degraded limestone arising from the cuts penetrating into undisturbed natural deposits (denoted on Figure 2).

2.3.3 A number of modern cremations in wooden caskets were noted and reburied.

## **2.4 *South of the chancel***

2.4.1 A square pit measuring 1m x 1m (test pit 2) was mechanically excavated in order to place a mat for a lightning conductor to the east of the angle of the nave and chancel on the south side of the church. The modern brick-lined open drainage channel alongside the church wall prevented excavation immediately adjacent to the structure of the building.

2.4.2 An area of loose stone rubble filling a grave was soon revealed. The grave was seen to measure at least 1.50m x 0.80m and was excavated to a depth of 1.20m below present ground surface. The eastern and southern faces of the grave cut were lined with dry-stone walls formed of limestone. The western limit of the grave was not exposed, but the northern wall had collapsed into the void of the grave, presumably when disturbed for the construction of the drainage channel alongside the southern wall of the chancel. This had crushed and deformed the single lead casket observed in the grave (Plate 2). Poorly preserved wood was noted in the backfill, probably deriving from the wooden casket forming the outer layer of the triple shells traditionally used in vaults or lined graves (Litten 1991, 101). Four iron nails were retained from the backfilled material, but the majority of the evidence for the elaborate coffin furniture and upholstery fashionable on outer cases between 1725 and 1775 (Litten, 102) was recovered in association with a brass plaque in the form of a shield. This was engraved *Charles Miller esq/ Died 7th Oct. 1778/ Aged 58*. Between this escutcheon and the surface of the lead coffin was poorly preserved wood. When the escutcheon was lifted impressions of fabric could be seen in the remains of the wood and a number of brass-headed tacks were seen penetrating this substance, presumably used to attach the fabric covering to the outer wooden shell and commonly arranged in decorative patterns. No skeletal material was exposed

2.4.3 Within the loose rubble backfilling the grave were a number of decorated stone slabs. In most cases these were very badly eroded and weathered, but the decoration (swirls of acanthus or other foliate material) was always carved on one face only and one or two edges of each slab were bevelled or chamfered. This suggests that the pieces formed part of a slab/s of a tomb chest, possibly one which originally covered the grave of Charles Miller. A drawing of the decoration on one fragment is retained as part of the site archive.

2.4.4 Following discussion with the representatives of the company fitting the lightning conductor, the casket was covered with a layer of soil, the conductor mat was placed above this, and the grave was then backfilled with the spoil from excavation. All the excavated material described above (apart from the iron nails) was redeposited in the grave and the coffin remains (including the escutcheon and brass-headed tacks) were reburied as found.

## 2.5 *Artefacts*

2.5.1 An inventory of retained artefacts is given in Appendix 1, most of them from the gullies dug for the drains on the north side of the church (unstratified). It should be noted that no human remains were kept. On the few occasions that they were encountered, the earliest opportunity was grasped to re-inter them. A few sherds of pottery were found, together with an undateable piece of clay pipe stem. Otherwise, the material is representative of the spoil from earlier building or maintenance campaigns at the church (eg stone roofing tiles, window glass, and lead from either window comes or roofing).

### **3. ASSESSMENT OF RESULTS**

#### **3.1 *Introduction***

3.1.1 This watching brief has materially increased knowledge of aspects of the structure of the church, re-use of its fittings, and the post-medieval use of the churchyard.

#### **3.2 *Church Structure***

3.2.1 This operation has allowed the partial exposure and recording of the substantial foundations of the medieval west tower. It has also served to suggest the extent of later disturbances to the structural integrity of the tower. Within the exposed area on the northern face of the tower, the foundations had been truncated to allow the insertion of the drainage system in the nineteenth century. It is also presumed that the western foundations have been pierced to afford entry to the Waller mausoleum.

3.2.2 The nineteenth-century rebuilding of the north aisle has been demonstrated to be based upon rather insubstantial foundations which do not penetrate the bedrock.

#### **3.3 *The Font bowl***

3.3.1 It is probable (although by no means certain) that the font bowl recovered during this work had originally been used in the neighbouring church. The existing font is of late eighteenth century date and this may indicate the time of disposal of the earlier bowl. The latter was in poor condition when recovered and may have undergone modification or neglect between the time of its ejection from the church and subsequent re-use, as the downpipe from the tower is likely to form part of a drainage system of nineteenth-century date. Any decoration on the exterior of the font bowl has been destroyed.

### **3.4 *Burials in the churchyard***

3.4.1 Observations during the watching brief supported the conclusion that the northern side of the church was not favoured for burial until the later nineteenth century. Traditionally the northern side was looked upon unfavourably because it was in shade and had associations with darkness. Additionally, as in the case of Farmington, the main entrance to the church was usually from the south and all access paths through this churchyard were from the east and south. It was more prestigious to have a memorial in a location where it would be frequently observed by one's former neighbours and their successors as they passed on their way to church. This is reflected at Farmington in the dense collection of fine headstones of predominantly eighteenth century date to the south of the church. Burial to the north seems to have taken place, at least partly, because there was no longer any room to the south.

3.4.2 The grave of Charles Miller was in a prestigious location. Not only does the current path from the road to the south door of the church pass immediately adjacent to his grave, but it is located as close as possible to the church and, moreover, to the chancel itself, the most prestigious burial or memorial location of all. If it was not possible to be buried within the church itself, Mr Miller had secured the next most prestigious location. That he was an individual of high status is affirmed by the grave and burial. The grave is lined with carefully constructed drystone walling and may have been marked by a tomb chest, fragments of which were found within the backfill of the disturbed grave. Tomb chests are rare in Farmington churchyard and this eighteenth century example may have stood out amongst the headstones. Also, Miller's corpse was contained within an elaborate shell including a lead casket and bearing an engraved escutcheon; further signs of high status and disposable wealth. After all this expenditure, it may be seen as unfortunate that Charles Miller's resting place was disturbed and all above ground trace of it removed a century and a half later to accommodate a drainage scheme.

#### **4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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The fieldwork was carried out predominantly by Franco Vartuca and Rick Morton, with assistance from Alistair Barber and Alan Thomas. The project was managed by Niall Oakey, who also compiled the report. Illustrations were completed by Peter Moore and finds analysis was carried out by Emma Harrison.

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Plate 1: Test pit 1. Re-used font bowl and foundations of church tower



Plate 2: Test pit 2. Lined grave containing coffin of Charles Miller, d. 1778

## **APPENDIX 1**

### *Artefacts*

#### **Unstratified**

- 1 medieval pottery sherd (13g)
- 1 late medieval/early post-medieval pottery sherd (6g)
- 2 stone roof tile fragments (632g)
- 4 animal bone fragments (80g)
- 1 clay pipe stem
- 1 Fe nail and 1 bar

#### **Test pit 2**

- 2 vessel and 2 window glass sherds
- 4 Fe nails

#### **Test pit 3**

- 1 medieval pottery sherd (9g)
- 5 post-medieval pottery sherds (115g)
- 1 lead fragment