Excavations at Oxford 1969
SECOND INTERIM REPORT

By T. G. Hassall

The Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee's second season of excavations was again solely concerned with the redevelopment of St. Ebbe's. Excavations took place for a total of seven months, which included a four week season at Easter, followed by a thirteen week season during the Summer. During the latter period a maximum of forty people were on the site at one time. Finally from October to Christmas a small force of paid labourers was continuously on the site, helped by volunteers from the City and the University.

This year the work begun in 1968 was greatly extended, since the progress of the demolitions had made many more sites available for excavation (FIG. I). The general archaeological importance of the area has already been discussed in the previous interim report.¹

Many thanks must go to the supervisors and their assistants who were Messrs. H. Blake, S. Harris, J. Haslam, J. Huntriss, Miss R. Lisicki and Mr. I. Sanders. The surveying was in the charge of Messrs. G. Morgan and P. Sorowka. Photography was carried out by Messrs. D. Carpenter, K. W. Sheridan and M. S. Wade, while the pottery shed was under the control of the Misses J. Cox and J. Smith. Mr. H. Richmond was responsible for producing the published plans, while conservation was carried out by Mr. B. V. Arthur of the Oxford City and County Museum with helpers from the Institute of Archaeology, London.

Once again the Excavation Committee is extremely grateful to those members of the staff of Oxford Corporation and Oxfordshire County Council who contribute so much in so many ways. The City Engineer's Department and the City Estates Surveyor's Department constantly helped and advised, providing practical assistance and accommodation. The County Treasurer, Mr. H. C. Bedwell, and his staff, in particular Mr. J. H. R. Day and Mr. A. J. Wilkes, again controlled the finances. Miss Z. R. Carson and her helpers, especially Mr. C. McLellan, at the County Council canteen fed the multitudes. In addition, the Balliol Boys' Club made accommodation available at no charge

¹ Oxoniensia, xxxiv (1969), 5-20.
FIG. 2

Based on City of Oxford Central Area 1:500 survey, by permission of the City Engineer.
EXCAVATIONS AT OXFORD 1969

during the Summer, while Crawford Caterers Ltd. helped out with weekend catering. As last year, Ameys Ltd., Cliffplant, J. H. B. Equipment Ltd., Lovell Plant Hire Ltd., and Oxford Plant Ltd. provided free or cheap use of goods and services. The Oxford Fire Service provided their turntable escape ladder, free of charge, for photography.

In addition to the actual excavations, Dr. Hilary L. Turner continued her documentary survey of the area under investigation. This survey has now been completed and has greatly extended H. E. Salter’s survey. The history of each tenement has been traced right up to the latest compulsory purchase orders. The survey has been particularly valuable in tracing the division of the Greyfriars site after the Dissolution.

CHURCH STREET (PL. II, FIGS. 2 and 3)

Excavation of the two tenements on the north side of Church Street, St. Ebbec’s, was continued. The general nature of the site had become apparent last year and in particular the problems of pit excavation, when employing open area techniques, had become all too obvious. During the 1968 season two methods of pit excavation had been tried; the first being the conventional method of horizontal clearing, followed by the sectioning and excavation of individual pits, but because of the complexity and density of the pits this method proved unworkable. The second method tried was to excavate deep post medieval features and then work outwards from them. This method also proved unworkable for several reasons: only the wells went deep enough to gain complete sections of the surrounding medieval pits; horizontal planning became extremely difficult; and excavation became hazardous owing to the depth of the excavation. Also the metric co-ordinate system of planning and survey, as used on the site, demanded a fairly constant level surface if it was to be effective. So this year a new system of excavating the pits was evolved. Once the site had been trowelled down to the top of the natural ground surface, below which no structures could reasonably be expected, the site was divided into long, fairly narrow trenches with 50 cm. baulks between them, purely to preserve the main sections and not for access. These trenches were then excavated in surveyed spits with plans being drawn at 50 cm. intervals (PL. IIA). If a pit was located within a spit, but its edges were uncertain, then its edges were proved by small cuts working outwards from the centre of the pit. Any Natural was excavated with the pits to preserve a level working surface. Thus together with the standing record of the main sections the pits could be planned using the metric co-ordinate system. Any mistakes made at a higher level could easily be seen and corrected lower.
down. Finally, narrow standing sections were removed as soon as they could be read and planned.

31 Church Street, Whitehall (FIG. 3)

The documentary evidence for the site has already been reviewed in the previous interim report. This tenement produced the only really coherent structural evidence which had already begun to appear in 1968. The major structure was a low dry stone footing, probably 14th-15th century in date, and surviving on three sides of the building. This footing presumably supported a timber-framed structure of approximately 3.5 m. by 5 m. (internal measurements). The structure may have had more than one storey since

\[ \text{FIG. 3} \]

\[ ^2 \text{Oxoniensia, xxxiv (1969), 8-9.} \]
it was carefully strengthened at its north-east corner and at a second point on its eastern side where the footing bridged earlier pits. No associated floor levels were found and they probably existed at a higher level than the footing actually excavated. A hearth (?) and two ovens, earlier than the structure itself, were also found at the front of the site. One of the ovens was very badly damaged, but the other was well preserved. This latter oven was dug in a pit with the normal stone walls, clay floor and dome. Neither oven could be associated with any other structure, although there was a marked area of burning around them which must presumably represent the only occupation layer found on the site. To the north of the structure of Whitehall there was an area of gravelled surfaces associated with another hearth and these features presumably represent a courtyard area.

32-34 Church Street, Domus Mirifeld (Fig. 3)

The excavation of the larger tenement—called domus Mirifeld in the Oseney Abbey rentals—revealed even less traces of structure than Whitehall. The structural features on the street frontage comprised a corner of a dry stone footing comparable in construction and at the same level as the Whitehall footing; a series of post holes (PL. II B, post holes 1-7 on Fig. 3) forming part of the eastern and southern sides of a (?) rectangular structure, the rest of which had been destroyed by pit digging; and a series of ovens and, at the rear of the site, several hearths, the most southerly of which is shown on Fig. 3. The post holes appear to have belonged to a building earlier in date than the dry-stone footing. Post Hole 5 produced a fragment of base in hard sandy fabric, thumb pressed, with a poor quality light green glaze over a grey, external surface. This sherd would be consistent with a 13th century date and possibly dates the whole structure. It could possibly be that here, as at Seacourt, one is witnessing the transition from tradition of post hole construction to one of timber framing.3 The ovens on the street frontage were again typical, as already described at Whitehall. Unfortunately, not only were they badly damaged but also their relationship, if any, to the stone footing could not be established.

No stratification of structures was recovered as the ground level seems to have remained at a fairly constant height from at least the 12th century to the present day, only building up at the back of the tenement in the pit area. In addition to this factor all structure found was confined to the eastern half of the tenement while the western half, including the street frontage, seems largely to have lain vacant and been used for pit digging; probable documentary proof of this fact comes in the will of John Coleshill in 1325, in which the

3 Cf. Oxoniensia, xxvi/xxvii (1961/2), 120.
house and the vacant plot next to it are left to his widow. In this vacant area the shattered remains of a large stone-built oven were found well beneath the ground level, near the boundary with Whitehall. The remains of this oven provided an instructive example of the destructive effect of the pits; in this case pits had destroyed all but the very eastern side of the oven, indeed its western end may well originally have extended into the adjoining property.

In conclusion, although the whole site was remarkably undisturbed in the post medieval period, little medieval structure was found and it seems probable that this will be the pattern of all future tenement site excavations in Oxford. One is obviously dealing with buildings whose construction leaves little or no trace in the soil. Certainly this form of construction must have been employed for the structures which common sense dictates must have existed above the rubbish pits, either in the form of special purpose buildings or, as has been suggested, even ordinary houses. In this kind of situation negative evidence, i.e. the lack of pits in a given area or gravel courtyard surfaces coming to an abrupt end may well be the only clues as to the whereabouts of structures. It could well be, however, that the only real hope for finding early structures will be in areas sealed since the early medieval period, such as under the Castle Mound where pit-digging must be fairly limited. It must be noted that not all the structures found on the Church Street site were along the street frontage, at least one substantial structure stood in the back garden of domus Mirifeld but this structure has been almost completely destroyed by pit digging. If at an early period any structures had stood back from the street frontage later pits would have totally obscured this fact.

The lack of structures on the site was also mirrored by the lack of any trace of the property boundary dividing Whitehall and domus Mirifeld, except where it was delineated by the eastern wall of Whitehall itself. The actual boundaries must have been a very simple affair and the fact that pits are dug indiscriminately across its presumed course shows that it probably only became stabilized by the 13th century.

THE GREYFRIARS (PLS. III and IV, FIGS. 4 and 5)

The trial trench dug in 1968 in Circus Yard was greatly extended. The pier bases discovered last year were found to give a misleading impression of the state of the preservation of the building. Indeed only those portions of the building which had been incorporated within the post-Reformation

4 Liber Albus Civitatis Oxoniensis ed. H. E. Salter (1909), no. 3.
6 Oxoniensis, xxxiv (1969), 11.
OXFORD ST EBBE'S
GREYFRIARS CHURCH
PLAN SHOWING FOOTINGS AS EXCAVATED

PHASE I MASONRY
PHASE II
PHASE III
PHASE IV
PHASE V
PHASE VI
UNCERTAIN

BURIALS 

CITY WALL?
property boundaries survived to any height. The rest of the building was very heavily robbed, many of the footings having been completely removed, while the remainder only survived at the Medieval ground level. The whole site was covered with up to three metres of post-Reformation build up, while the highest medieval level was only 75 cm. above water level (Autumn, 1969).

The first attempt to recover the plan of the building was made by digging four extended trenches across its presumed line. These trenches showed that the building lay further to the east and the south than was anticipated. In addition, the heavy robbing made it impossible to make sense of the plan where walls were encountered, although the north wall of the choir, south wall of the nave, north wall of the aisle and the west end were correctly identified. Accordingly the whole area of the north aisle was stripped mechanically and all structural features excavated. The north wall of the choir was found to coincide with the upstanding stretch of wall heretofore assumed to be City Wall. The choir with the exception of its north wall was only excavated rapidly by machine in a very limited time, hence the unsatisfactory nature of the plan at this point.

No conventual buildings other than the church were excavated with the exception of one wall of a building lying to the north of the walking place. This building was a substantial stone structure which must have fallen into disuse, since it was robbed by the friars themselves and its site was thrown into the cemetery. It is tempting to interpret this building as the first school for which Agnellus was responsible. This school must have been within the walls and was the finest of the early buildings, though nothing was found to support this interpretation.

Throughout the excavation Dr. W. A. Pantin provided constant advice and encouragement and much of the success of the excavation of the Greyfriars together with its interpretation must be owed to him.

The basement of the Westgate Centre and particularly its piled foundations will all but destroy what remains of the building. However, in the area of the east end of the aisle the service bay is to be built above the Medieval level so that it will prove possible to retain the surviving moulded pier bases within its floor.

The Church (Figs. 4 and 5)

No trace was found of the original chapel (built c. 1225) which must have lain inside the City Wall and was presumably pulled down on the completion of the new church. This new church was in the process of erection in 1246,

7 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, City of Oxford (1939), map facing p. 136, 161.
9 A. G. Little, loc. cit.
and in 1248 mention was made of the fact that it was to lie astride the line of the City Wall with its north side forming an integral part of the Wall.

The new church must be represented by Phase I of the building excavated. It consisted of a choir, a walking place, a nave and a north aisle.

The east end was partially excavated and revealed an external buttress at the point shown on the plan. The presumed line of the City Wall has a kink in it at this point. There may be opportunities in 1970 to examine this area further and in particular to see how the junction between the choir and the City Wall was actually achieved. The dual nature of the north wall of the church was emphasized by the existence of a culvert piercing the choir, presumably designed to take storm water out of the town (PL. III). On the south side of this culvert, i.e. on the church side of the wall, a stone-lined gutter came through the thickness of the wall and was therefore probably used to take water from the roof of the church (PL. IIIIB). The bottom of the culvert was carefully lined with dressed stones, beneath which was clay puddling. The storm water must have run under the choir and so out to the Trill Mill Stream to the south. The choir’s construction was very primitive with little mortar, compared with the rest of the building. It is possible that this part of the church may be earlier than the rest of Phase I. The choir was divided from the nave by a heavily robbed sleeper wall. The north aisle was separated from the nave by an arcade whose piers were built on individual bases and not on a continuous sleeper wall. The aisle must therefore have existed from the first. It is not clear how the east end of the north aisle was terminated. The excavation proved inconclusive on this point: the evidence was entirely lacking either in the form of foundations or robber trenches, possibly due to subsequent re-building. The plan here must have been complicated by the existence of the conventual buildings discussed above. It is not impossible that this building may have opened into the aisle.

Apart from the footings and the culvert, few architectural details survived from Phase I. The jamb of an opening at the west end of the north wall of the choir, one of the pier bases discovered last year, and small sections of external plinth on a western and northern buttress survived. The latter plinth (PL. IVA) owed its survival to the fact that it was sealed by a later phase (Phase IV) and in turn became incorporated in a post-Reformation property boundary. These were graffiti, possibly masons’ marks, on each of the worked blocks, forming this plinth.

The length of the church was increased by one bay throughout the width of the nave and aisle in Phase II. The Phase I west end was then largely robbed out by burials. The Phase I wall at the end of the original arcade was retained as a pier base alongside the new Phase II pier.
OXFORD ST EBBE'S
GREYFRIARS CHURCH
INTERPRETATION PLANS 1969

PHASE I

PHASE II

PHASES III - V

FIG. 5
In Phase III a stretch of the north wall of the aisle was entirely rebuilt with a new wall and buttresses, although at least one of the Phase I buttresses remained in situ. The new buttresses now no longer exactly corresponded with the piers of the arcade, which remained in their Phase I positions. This Phase may represent a major repair of a deteriorating structure or possibly even a reroofing or a refenestration.

No mouldings or other dating evidence survived from Phases II and III, but it is likely that they were completed before c. 1325 by which time it can be presumed that the church had reached its greatest extent.

In Phase IV a large northern extension was built. The point at which this extension joined the north aisle was excavated in 1969 and the greater part of the rest of the plan was recovered during the observation of the contractor's excavations in early 1970. There is only definite evidence for one Greyfriars church in England having a transept, namely Coventry, although it is possible that Reading had one, while the churches at Llanfoes and Chester had transeptal projections. Oxford was such an important House that the existence of a transept which effectively doubled the preaching area, should cause no surprise. If this interpretation is correct, then the plan of the church would bear a remarkable resemblance to a number of Irish friars' churches and would go a long way to explain William Worcestre's description of the building in 1480. One architectural feature which might have helped with the dating of this Phase was the moulding on the jamb at the base of the opening leading into the extension (pl. IVB), but this moulding was not particularly remarkable. However, a large fragment of window tracery from the robber trench of the north wall can be dated to c. 1300.

A further minor addition was made in Phase V when a small structure was built outside the aisle. From the evidence of the footings it is not clear whether this structure was a porch or a chapel. No isolated chapel is mentioned by William Worcestre and it seems more likely that this structure represents the northern entrance to the church.

Phase VI represents the last structural work on the church. Incorporated within this wall were fragments of a small 14th century statue (pl. V), and this piece of sacrilege may indicate a post-Reformation date. This wall became a post-Reformation property boundary. On the other hand, it was of a much higher standard of craftsmanship than any other post-Medieval wall on the site and it had been very carefully fitted around surviving mouldings. Further, although it was narrower than any of the external walls of the church,
its footings went to a similar depth suggesting that it was load-bearing (PL. IVB). A possible interpretation is that this wall represents a period of retrenchment after William Worcestr's visit in 1480, when either the additional space afforded by the 'transept' was no longer required, or the building needed massive internal reinforcement. Possible support for this latter interpretation comes from the report of the commission which visited the Friary in 1538 when the building was described as a 'great hoge howse conteyning moche ruinose bylding'.

The excavation has obviously left problems unsolved, some of which may be answered next year, as a result either of new excavation or of observation of building work while it is in progress. However, this year's work has provided the larger part of the plan of a really major friar's church, of which nothing other than William Worcestr's tantalizing description existed beforehand. In addition to the actual structure, finds included many floor tiles, stained and painted glass, and burials including one stone coffin.

CITY WALL (PL. VI, FIG. 6)

This year it was possible to undertake a detailed examination of the city wall with the following aims in view: to establish its exact course across St. Ebbe's, to date the surviving structure, to look for traces of the earliest defences and finally to investigate the relationship between the wall and Greyfriars. The work involved examination of the surviving, upstanding wall, together with sections across its line and its presumed line.

Although the line of the wall in St. Ebbe's has been questioned, nevertheless the alignment published by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments was found to be substantially correct. The course of the wall where it crossed the Greyfriars site seemed at first to be on a strange alignment, but this alignment was found to be due to the fact that this length of the wall represents that part of the wall which was incorporated into the north wall of the choir of the Greyfriars church after 1244. Eastwards from the Greyfriars church the line of the wall is still problematical and it is hoped to investigate this line in 1970. Westwards from the Greyfriars church the line of the wall could again be traced in modern property boundaries. The Westgate Centre will destroy all upstanding portions of the wall and only the deepest footings will be sealed beneath the new building whose southern limit has been designed to echo the line of the wall.

A puzzling aspect of the wall's line which emerged during the course of

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13 A. G. Little, op. cit., 117.
13 Oxoniensia, xxv (1960), 135; Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, City of Oxford (1939), map facing 136, 161.
the excavations was that, although it stands at the extreme end of the gravel terrace, in the medieval period the actual steep scarp of the terrace must have run both parallel and close to the south side of Church Street. This more northerly, natural slope would at first sight seem to be the obvious place for positioning a line of defence utilizing the natural terrain, however there were obviously compelling reasons for putting the wall further south. Alternatively the whole area between the present line of the wall and Church Street may have been hollowed out to form a level platform for the church, thus artificially exaggerating the steepness of the scarp near Church Street.

As has been stated above, the longest surviving stretch of wall in St. Ebbe's appeared to fulfil the dual function of city wall and north wall of the choir of the Greyfriars Church. At the west end of the church, only a small wall was observed following the line of the city wall and the way in which it joined the city wall was not satisfactorily ascertained.

The city wall, section 1 (PL. VIA, FIGS. 2 and 6), was dug at Christmas 1969 in order to examine a length of wall unaffected by modifications due to the construction of the Greyfriars. The section revealed two distinct phases of construction beneath a post medieval wall which preserved the line of its medieval predecessor. These two phases were clearly separated, the first phase only surviving as a footing, the second phase surviving both as a footing and the lower courses of the wall itself. To the north of the wall a series of pits had cut away the profile of the natural gravel, but it appeared that the wall was built just off the scarp of the gravel on the marshy flood plain. Neither phases of wall produced satisfactory dating evidence but it seems likely that the upper phase dates from the main period of wall building in the 13th century. The earlier wall was quite clearly both separated and set back from the upper wall, and appeared to be a totally different period of building and not just simply a rather bad attempt at foundation work. This wall lay well below the water level (Christmas, 1969). Almost certainly it cannot be dated to a period earlier than the construction of the castle, 1066–1071, since this sector of wall looks in plan very much like a re-alignment once the castle had been built and the walls had to be brought in to meet it. The earlier wall probably represents a local strengthening close to the Westgate at an indeterminate date. Alternatively the lower wall could be 13th century and the upper wall’s period of construction could be 14th century after the main period of murage grants.

The early wall discussed above was probably therefore nothing to do with the late Saxon defences of the town, of which no positive remains were encountered. An attempt was made to examine the possible nature of the late Saxon defences where its presumed line was straddled by the nave and the
north aisle of the Greyfriars church. Several sections were cut across this line and one trench in particular was dug in an area chosen, since the post-medieval disturbance was fairly limited and the levels beneath the floor were intact. The disturbance by graves was quite considerable, but enough of the natural soil survived to show that the floor of the church had been built directly on the natural gravel without any of the original sub-soil surviving. At the vital point where the line of the pre-church defence could be presumed to have run there was no disturbance of any kind. It therefore seems certain that the pre-church wall must have been basically an above-ground structure, i.e. an earth rampart rather than a stone built wall whose foundations would have survived if only in the form of robber trenches. This negative evidence agrees with the theories already adduced as to the nature of the pre-13th century defence of the town, and accounts for the reason why Henry III was prepared to allow the major modification of the earthen wall in return for a new stone wall-cum-church.\textsuperscript{15}

In conclusion it must be said that none of the wall investigated this year

\textsuperscript{15} Oxoniensia, xvi (1951), 30-1.
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can be regarded as typical, since it reflects modifications brought about by the construction of both the castle and the Greyfriars. It is clear that the whole question of the town's defences must remain a major theme of future excavation policy. The evidence of the Burghal Hidage is obviously of paramount importance. This evidence is difficult to interpret since alternative readings of the text give four possibilities for the length of the late Saxon defence, 3,300 yards, 2,062\( \frac{1}{2} \) yards, 1,787\( \frac{1}{2} \) yards and 1,925 yards.\(^{16}\)

CHURCH OF ST. BUDOC (PL. VI, FIG. 2)

During 1969 Castle Street was realigned. In the course of this work the old street level was reduced and immediately under the eastern pavement the contractors uncovered a stone coffin marking the site of St. Budoc's church. This church was destroyed in 1216 by Fawkes de Bréauté when constructing an outer defence for the castle.\(^{17}\) The site had not been positively identified before, although a second stone coffin was reported to have been found in 1682 somewhere in this area.\(^{18}\) A fragment of the coarse cloth in which the skeleton had been wrapped still survived. The coffin lay immediately alongside a wall, which presumably represented the south wall of the church. All other remains of the church had been destroyed by 18th century cellars to the east, and services to the west. The coffin and wall overlay a rubbish pit which contained fragments of a tripod pitcher, thus reinforcing the theory that the church was a 12th century foundation.\(^{19}\)

The following have made grants or donations in 1969: Ministry of Public Building and Works; Oxford City Council; Oxford Preservation Trust; Oxfordshire County Council; Pilgrim Trust; All Souls College; Balliol College; Brasenose College; Christ Church; Corpus Christi College; Exeter College; Jesus College; Keble College; Lady Margaret Hall; Lincoln College; Merton College; New College; Nuffield College; Oriel College; Pembroke College; Queen's College; St. Anne's College; St. Antony's College; St. Catherines College; St. Hilda's College; St. Hugh's College; St. John's College; St. Peter's College; Somerville College; Trinity College; University College; Wadham College; Worcester College; B. H. Blackwell Ltd.; Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd.; Blackwell Scientific Publications Ltd.; and other private donors.

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\(^{16}\) David Hill, 'The Burghal Hidage : the establishment of a text.' Medieval Archaeology, xiii (1969), 84–92, footnotes 13 and 25.
A. Pits in the western half of Domus Mirifeld seen from the north during excavation. The present street level can be seen at the top of the photograph, while the natural gravel under the undisturbed subsoil is visible in the right hand section. Scales = 2 m. p. 7.

B. Postholes 1–5 from the south, dug into the undisturbed subsoil. The adjoining property boundary with the present ground level is seen on the right. Scales = 2 m. and 50 mc. p. 9.
A. The culvert under the north wall of the choir from the north.
   Scale = 2 m.  p. 12.

B. South side of the same culvert showing stone-lined gutter on the left. Scales = 2 m.  p. 12.

Photos: K. W. Sheridan

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A. External plinth of the Phase I north wall and a buttress from the north after the removal of the Phase IV wall. Scale = 50 cm. p. 12.

B. View from the east of the jamb at the base of the opening leading into the north extension. The jamb is resting on the footing of the Phase I north wall, part of whose external plinth is visible. On the left is the blocking of the final phase, Phase VI. Scale = 2 m. p. 14.

Photos: K. W. Sheridan
GREYFRIARS CHURCH

Fourteenth century statue, possibly representing St. James of Compostella, found incorporated within the Phase VI wall. The statue was painted red and is 56 cm. (21 ins.) high. p. 14.

Photos: D. Carpenter

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EXCAVATIONS AT OXFORD 1959
A. CITY WALL SECTION FROM THE NORTH

Showing Phase II of the wall with its footing above the Phase I footing. Scale = 2 m. p. 16.

Photo: K. W. Sheridan

B. CHURCH OF ST. BUDOC, CASTLE STREET

View from the east of the coffin and (?) south wall of the church as uncovered by contractors.
Scale = 50 cm. p. 18.

Photo: G. S. Baker

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