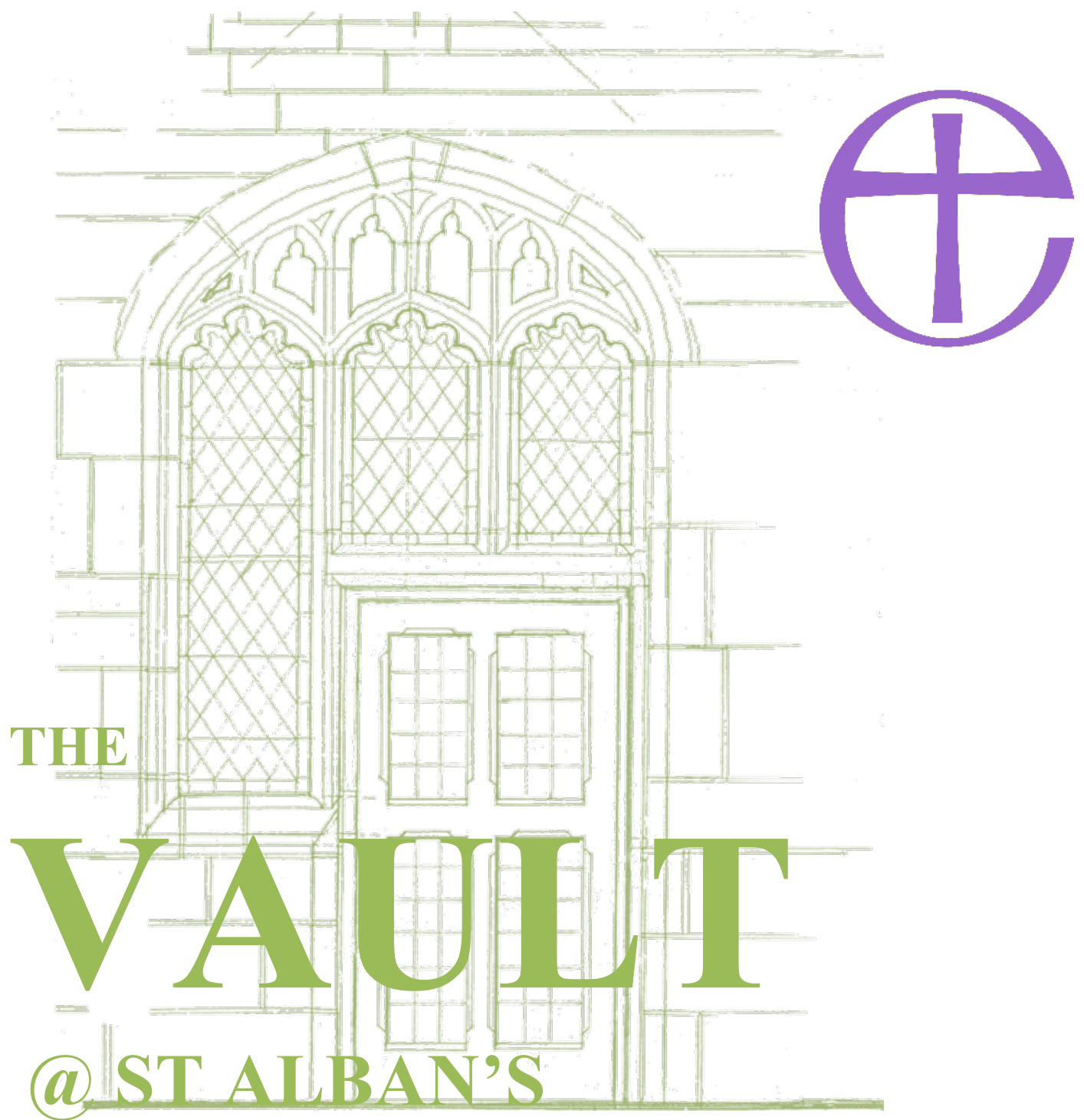


Archaeological Survey



The Parish Church of St Alban, Tattenhall

Excavation 2009 Tattenhall St. Alban's Graveyard

Kevin Cootes



Hello everyone, as you probably all know by now there has been an excavation going on for the past couple of months in the northern graveyard of the church, ahead of the planned extension to build a new meeting room and facilities. Now that it's finally over I thought I would write this article for the parish newsletter to let you all know what has been discovered about the history and development of this unique building. The purpose of this excavation was

therefore to investigate the spots where the architect has planned to place the foundations for the new structure, an endeavour deemed necessary for several reasons.

Firstly, only the presence and location of burials from the last two and a half centuries are known in this section of the graveyard. As the dedication to St Alban indicates an early Anglo-Saxon dedication, there was a very strong probability of ancient, unmarked graves in the vicinity of the church. If present, these interments would likely be relatively close to the surface (six feet under is a tradition that comes into practice in the 18th century) and would therefore be vulnerable to any construction work which may take place. Secondly, the cutting for a new drain in 1982 revealed a high status painted Roman building block beneath one of the southern buttresses. This Painted surface had later been covered with a lime wash, a practice common in early Christian sites of the late Roman Period. Unfortunately, the find was not properly recorded so the only surviving photo does not actually reveal whether the block is in its original position or has been salvaged from a nearby ruined building and used as a base when the medieval church was built. My excavations therefore had two main objectives, firstly to identify

whether there were any unknown burials in the northern graveyard which might need further archaeological attention, and secondly to see if there was any evidence for structural remains which might relate to the Roman, Saxon and Medieval structures.

The first six trenches were placed within the graveyard and on the pathway. Excavation of Trench 1 (on the small patch of grass by the church wall where the two paths meet) uncovered the skeleton of a premature baby. Although partially destroyed by a later drain, there was enough evidence to suggest that the infant had originally been buried in a coffin sometime in the 19th century. Whether the child had been baptised or not is open to debate, and may have been placed in the northern churchyard (the unholy or devil's part) for this reason. Excavating to a maximum safe depth of 1.2m, no other intact burial was found, although a change in colour and texture of the soil represented the grave cut for a deeply buried coffin. As a footnote to this trench, it was decided that the best course of action would be to excavate the baby's remains for immediate storage in the church and later reburial in another part of the graveyard.

Trenches 2, 3 and 4 likewise produced little evidence of intact burials until the maximum depth of 1.2m was reached, upon which my team and I uncovered 19th century coffins. Due to the acid nature of the soils, these burials were in a sorry state,

with the wood having the consistency of paper and where visible, the



bone being extremely degraded. Trench 5 was significantly different to the others. What was uncovered was a series of layers of ash, earth, and building material which represented the dumping of waste material, presumably from the demolition and rebuilding of the main body of the church in 1869.

What made these first five trenches really interesting was the sheer volume of finds which they produced, the earliest of which was eight fragments of Roman pottery. Whilst a few pieces originated from locally made vessels of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, several originated from a form of military pottery called Black Burnished Ware, dating to the 2nd – 4th centuries AD. Made in Dorset by a pro-Roman tribe, this ceramic type took varying forms, from cooking pots, dishes and even lids for making stews. Finally, a fragment of mixing bowl called ‘mortarium’, dating to the 2nd/3rd centuries AD was found. Although these finds do not prove by themselves that the Roman building is under the church, they do suggest that it is very close.

Whilst these finds were impressive, the artefacts recovered which relate to the medieval church were even more numerous and impressive, with every trench producing building material, window glass, pottery, iron nails and animal bones (including the tusk of a boar!).



New information also came with the recovery of glazed, decorated floor tiles which would once have covered the church floor. The better preserved and larger examples showed heraldic decoration with three different designs. Fragments from at least two tiles depicted a lion, whilst a winged, two-headed mythical creature was depicted on another and finally a bunch of grapes on another. The existence of such a

decorated floor provides us with new information about the medieval church.

Whilst Trench 6 (on the pathway) produced very little in the way of finds, Trenches 7 and 8 were a different story. Trench 7 was placed against the north east buttress to ascertain if the foundations of older buildings or archaeological levels existed. Excavation quickly revealed that the entire area had been trashed by 19th and 20th century drainage, with only the foundation for the northern wall being revealed. Trench 8 however, produced some unexpected surprises. Situated on the buttress directly east of the Trench 7, excavation revealed that this buttress was sited only partially on the underlying support stone, suggesting that during the 1869 rebuild, the medieval foundation stone had been left in place, with the new construction sited only partially on the old foundation. The surprises didn't end with this discovery. The test trench revealed two large and worn sandstone blocks, one placed on top of the other. Whilst the top block was not in contact with the modern church, its underlying counterpart disappeared under the medieval support stone for the present buttress. As the trench was not large enough to reveal the full extent of these stones, their purpose and date is as yet unknown. That they are at least medieval is beyond doubt, but their size and shape suggest that they could be weight bearing blocks from the original Roman structure. Only further excavation of this area may reveal their true purpose. All in all then the excavation has been a success. Whilst the abundance of finds has shed new light on the church's past, we can also say that the northern portion of the graveyard was never used for burial until the 19th century. Anyway, I hope you've found this article as interesting as I found the excavation, and I would just like to let everyone know what a pleasure it's been to unravel the past and possible origins of the church and the village of Tattenhall, and not least the pleasure of meeting the congregation and locals of your wonderful village.

Finds From Tattenhall Graveyard Excavation 2009

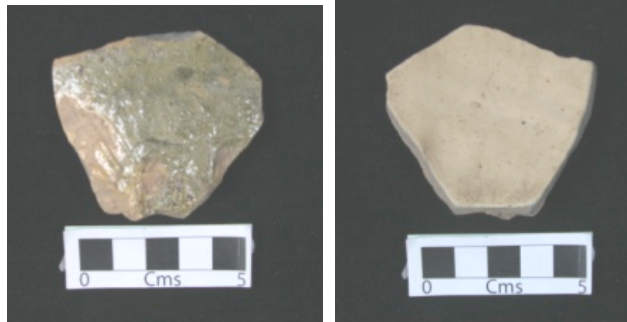


Figure 1 - 13th/14th century glazed red/grey ware with finger impressions

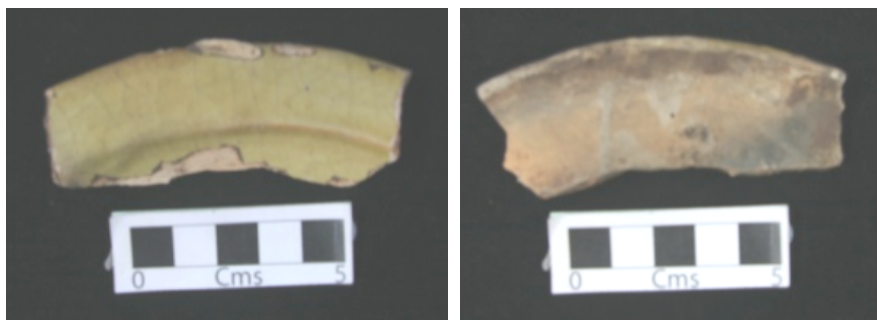


Figure 2 - 17th century yellow ware dish fragment



Figure 3 - Late medieval glazed floor tile with heraldic image of a lion



Figure 4 - Glazed, decorated late medieval floor tile



Figure 5 Late medieval glazed floor tile with grape decoration

