

**An archaeological watching brief at
St Michael's Church, Kirby-le-Soken, Essex
July and October 2007**

**report prepared by
Kate Orr**

**commissioned by
the Morton Partnership
on behalf of
St Michael's Church PCC**



CAT project ref.: 07/7a

NGR: TL 2195 2203

Colchester and Ipswich Museums accession code: 2007.78

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CAT Report 441

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Contents

1	Summary	1
2	Introduction	1
3	Aim	1
4	Archaeological background	1
5	Methods	2
6	Results	2
7	Specialist reports on the wooden pile F5	
7.1	The radiocarbon dating	5
7.2	The wood identification <i>by Rowena Gale</i>	5
8	List of all finds	6
9	Discussion	6
10	Acknowledgements	7
11	References	8
12	Glossary and abbreviations	8
13	Archive deposition	8
14	Appendix: radiocarbon-dating certificate	10

Figures after p 12

EHER summary sheet

List of figures and plates

Plate 1 (front cover) the underpinning along the south aisle of St Michael's Church, view WNW.

Plate 2 Burial F4, view west.

Plate 3 Wooden piles F5, F6 and F7, view north-west.

Fig 1 Church ground-plan (after RCHME 1922).

Fig 2 Plan of south aisle, showing finds and features.

Fig 3 Plan of burial F4 within pit dug for underpinning.

Fig 4 South-facing elevation of south aisle and section within pit dug for underpinning.

1 Summary

Underpinning of the south aisle of the church was carried out in July 2007. The hand-excavation was monitored archaeologically. Two articulated skeletons were recorded plus some other pieces of disarticulated human bone. Three water-logged wooden piles probably dating to the late 14th or early 15th century were exposed at the western end of the south aisle, below the tower. One or possibly two lead coffins were found under the floor of the south aisle in October 2007.

2 Introduction (Figs 1-2)

- 2.1 This is the archive report on an archaeological watching brief at St Michael's Church, Kirby-le-Soken, Essex. The investigation was carried out during underpinning works to the south aisle, between the 4th and 23rd of July 2007. A further visit was made on the 16th October 2007 after a lead coffin had been uncovered under the floor of the south aisle. The watching brief was carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT), on behalf of the St Michael's Church PCC.
- 2.2 The church is located along the southern side of the street towards the western end of the linear settlement of Kirby-le-Soken, which is in the west of Tendring district (NGR TM 2195 2203).
- 2.3 Subsidence of the south aisle was causing large cracks to appear at the western end where the south aisle joins the tower. St Michael's Church PCC received faculty consent for works to underpin the south aisle in order to rectify the problem.
- 2.4 A brief for the project was written by Adrian Gascoyne of the ECC Historic Environment Management (HEM) team. CAT submitted a written scheme of investigation (WSI) for the project which received approval from the ECC HEM team officer.
- 2.5 This report mirrors standards and practices contained in the Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CM 2002) and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (CM 2003), and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IFA 2001). Other sources used are *Management of research projects in the historic environment* (MoRPHE), and *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment* (EAA 3), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy* (EAA 8), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14).

3 Aim

The aim of the investigation was to record the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains. Particular attention was paid to the potential for evidence of earlier phases of the church and evidence of grave cuts.

4 Archaeological background (Figs 1-2)

- 4.1 Only the 14th-century chancel and north aisle and the apparently 15th-century west tower survive from the medieval church (Essex Historic Environment Record or EHER no 3572). The tower is 'surprisingly big and important looking' (Bettley & Pevsner 2007, 514). The church is now, essentially, a 19th-century building following the complete rebuilding of the nave, south aisle and chapel. Rodwell and Rodwell (1977, 111) state that the south aisle, nave and chapel were completely rebuilt in 1833 and restored in 1870-73. However, Pevsner and Bettley (2007, 515) state that the chancel was rebuilt in 1870 and the nave restored in 1872, including new arcades, new south aisle and organ chamber on south side the chancel.

- 4.2** The name 'Kirby' originates from two Scandinavian-derived words, ie 'Kirk' meaning church and 'by' meaning village. This is of great interest since it implies the existence of a church here by or during the Danish Viking period, ie the 9th or 10th century. The expectation, therefore, is that the 14th-/15th-century church was built on the site of a much earlier church. No evidence of an earlier church has yet been discovered, however.
- 4.3** The graveyard has been partly tidied and gravestones moved. The church and churchyard form an important archaeological complex and the underpinning had the potential of disturbing or destroying important archaeological deposits.
- 4.4** Two test-pits were hand-dug along the exterior of the south aisle in 2005 as part of a structural investigation. One was located at the south-western corner of the south aisle, between the two buttresses, and the other was located 7m to the east. The first of these test-pits was monitored by David Andrews of Essex County Council (ECC HEM team). He recorded 400 to 500mm-deep foundations overlying a layer of gravel which may have been put down in advance of the construction of the aisle. Below this was a mottled grey brown clay, assumed to be natural. A cut filled with stony grey loam with some brick and charcoal had been made into this clay. The cut was directly underneath the gravel layer and may have been a grave, although no bone was observed.

5 Methods (Fig 2 and Plate 1)

- 5.1** The south aisle wall was underpinned by contractors hand-digging 21 rectangular pits (or 'pins') in a staggered fashion all the way along the exterior which were then filled with concrete. These pits were dug to a depth of 2.5m below ground-level and were wide enough to extend underneath the aisle foundations. By this method, a continuous strip foundation was achieved (see Fig 2).
- 5.2** The CAT archaeologist made ten visits and inspected all the pits but was not present on site all the time. Time was allowed for the archaeologist to excavate the two burials that were revealed within the underpinning pits. The CAT archaeologist made a further visit while a dip in the floor of the south aisle was being investigated.
- 5.3** All features and layers (F1, F2, L1, L2, etc) revealed were planned, and their profiles or sections recorded. The normal scale was for site plans at 1:20 and sections at 1:10.
- 5.4** Individual records of features were entered on CAT pro-forma recording sheets.
- 5.5** Finds were registered on CAT pro-forma record sheets and assigned finds numbers according to context. Finds were washed, marked with the site code number, and bagged according to context.
- 5.6** Colour photographs of the main features, sections, the general site and the site environs were taken with a digital camera.
- 5.7** All the human bone was bagged up but not taken off-site. It has been re-buried by Rev Coley, the vicar of St Michael's Church.

6 Results (Figs 2-4 and Plates 1-3)

Individual records were made of each of the 21 pits. However, their fills were quite uniform and so they will not be described individually here.

6.1 The central and western end of the south aisle

The pits dug along the central and western end of the south aisle encountered approximately 150mm of topsoil (L1) overlying between 550mm and 750mm of mortar-rich brown clayey loam containing brick and tile fragments (L2). At between 700mm and 900mm below ground-level, L2 gave way to a mottled greyish brown clay, assumed to be natural (L3). This clay continued to the base of the pits. On the church side of the pits, the foundations to the south aisle were exposed. These were fairly uniform, consisting of two or three brick courses (F1) overlying a concrete foundation 200-300mm thick (F2). The concrete foundation extended out 220-300mm from the exterior wall face. Judging from the previous test-pits that had been dug (see section 4.4), it was not expected that the foundations would be any deeper. However, the concrete foundations had been laid on top of a wide deep rubble foundation

which extended at least to the base of the pits (F3). This consisted mainly of rough nodules of flint but included some blocks of chalk, and some chunks of greensand and septaria, plus occasional brick. The rubble was loosely packed with earth which contained flecks of mortar. Kango hammers had to be used to remove it.

The rubble foundation (F3) was not a uniform width, but was 1.1m wide at its narrowest. It generally only extended out as far as the concrete foundation above it. This is probably why the rubble foundation was not encountered in the first test-pit that was dug in 2005. However, in some places it extended out further than the concrete, almost as far as the end of the buttresses. Under the eastern end of the south aisle it did not exist at all (see section 6.2). In the central section of the south aisle, four large pieces of dressed stone were picked out from this rubble foundation by the contractors. These are pieces of window jambs from the medieval church. The presence of brick argues against this foundation being medieval. It is thought to consist of rubble from the demolition of the medieval south wall in 1833 which was then re-used as a foundation by the 19th-century builders.

The pit dug at the extreme western end of the south aisle, where it joins the tower, proved to be of interest. The pit was dug to a depth of 2.3m below ground-level and the rubble foundation (F3) was removed. Natural greyish clay had been reached and water was starting to seep up into the base of the pit. Two water-logged wooden piles (F5 and F6) were exposed and later inspection exposed a third (F7). All three were in the north-western corner of the pit and were upright. They were circular and had been cut flat on top. The only fully exposed pile (F5) had a diameter of 130mm, although F7 looked wider than F5 and F6. All three piles projected 470mm up from the base of the pit and were driven into the clay. They were underneath the rubble foundation (F3). No attempt was made to remove the piles; they were left *in situ*. A sample of F5 was taken for radiocarbon dating. A box was then made around the piles to protect them, and the pit was filled with concrete.

One articulated skeleton was partially exposed at the western end of the south aisle (F8) beneath the buttress, at 2m below ground-level. All that was exposed was two lower leg bones on an east-west alignment. The western end of the skeleton was beyond the limit of the pit. The bones were very degraded and inaccessible. Staining from a wooden coffin could be seen within the clay in the north-facing section of the pit. Photographs were taken, a sketch made, and the bone removed for reburial before the pit was dug any further.



Plate 2: burial F4, view west.

Disarticulated human bone was found in two other places (see Fig 2), at least 1m below ground-level. The bone came from within the clay layer (L3) and no grave cuts could be discerned. As the clay at this level contained fragments of bone, this indicates that it is not natural after all.

6.2 The eastern end of the south aisle corresponding with the vestry

The pits dug at this end of the south aisle showed a similar soil profile to the others but a slightly different foundation. Instead of two or three courses of brick (F1), there were four courses and the concrete foundation (F2) was thicker, at 500-540mm thickness. The rubble foundation (F3) was less substantial and was mixed with clay. In some places it was absent. The difference in the foundations may be explained by the vestry being a smaller building and perhaps requiring less substantial foundations. One pit was dug inside the vestry under an internal buttress. Nothing of archaeological significance was revealed here.

One articulated skeleton was found here, consisting of leg bones (F4). The contractors had already picked up some of the foot bones. The head end would have been to the east and was outside the reach of the pit. The skull and another long bone were found while digging the adjacent pit to the west. Another piece of skull and an arm bone, probably of another individual, were found above the leg bones. The skeleton was encountered at 780mm below ground-level. It appeared to be lying on top of lumps of septaria which seemed to belong to the 19th-century rubble foundation F3. If so, then the burial post-dates the rubble foundation and therefore is post-1833. Peg-tile was the only datable find from the burial but this was in use from c AD 1200 to the present day.

More disarticulated human bone was found in two more pits up at the eastern end of the south aisle. Two fragments of possible human arm bone were found over 1.5m below ground-level, below the foundations, within the clay layer (L3). This was found by the contractors and although the author checked the area that the bone purportedly came from, she could not find any further fragments or indeed a grave cut. This again calls into question whether the clay layer (L3) is actually natural. Another piece of human bone was found under the foundations at between 700mm and 900mm below ground-level. The presence of this human bone indicates that there were further burials in this area that had been disturbed by the digging of foundation trenches in 1833.

After the burial F4 had been removed and the pit dug down further by contractors, a plank of charred wood was retrieved from near the base, from the clay layer. This was found by the contractors so its exact provenance is unknown. It is possibly a rafter from the roof of the former south aisle before the aisle was demolished and rebuilt in 1833.

6.3 The floor of the south aisle

Inside the church, a dip in the floor of the south aisle caused by subsidence was investigated. In order to do this, the contractors removed the tiles and mortar bed, effectively opening up a hole approximately 1m by 600mm wide. Under the mortar were two York stone slabs. One looked as if it may have slipped from its original position as it was not flush with the one higher up, and this is probably what caused the floor above to subside. There appeared to be a void under the slabs, and shining a torch in between the cracks brought a lead coffin into view. Probing down the side of the coffin detected a hard surface 1m below floor-level which may well be another coffin underneath the first one. The upper coffin could just be seen between the gaps in the slabs and was on an east-west alignment. It is possible that the coffin or coffins lay within a brick vault, but without removing the York stone slabs, it was not possible to determine if this was true. The York stone slabs extended southwards under the pews and could not be removed in one piece. It was decided, therefore, not to attempt to move them. It is not known whether these slabs were the original floor surface or some capping stones to a vault. Further to the west, the floor sounded hollow and it is likely, therefore, that there are vaults elsewhere.

7 Specialist reports on the wooden pile F5

7.1 The radiocarbon dating

A sample of the wooden pile F5 was sent to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) in Glasgow for radiocarbon-dating. The sample was measured using their AMS facility. The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration programme (OxCal3).

Results

The radiocarbon date, when calibrated, indicates two probable date ranges. At 1 sigma (68.2%), the probable date lies at 1315-1350 or 1390-1420, and at 2 sigma (95.4%), the probable date ranges are 1300-1370 and 1380-1440. In other words, the felling of the tree used to make the pile can almost certainly be dated to the 14th to mid 15th century and probably c 1330 or c 1400.

The calibration plot can be found in the appendix (pp 11-12).

7.2 The wood identification

by Rowena Gale (independent wood anatomist, Leominster)

The report presents the species identification of a wooden pile from the western end of St Michael's Church. The wood was water-logged, firm and well preserved. The sample was prepared using standard methods (Gale & Cutler 2000). Anatomical structures were examined using transmitted light on a Nikon Labophot -2 compound microscope at magnifications up to x 400 and matched to prepared reference slides of modern wood. The maturity of the wood was assessed and the stem diameter recorded.

Results

The pile was identified as elm (*Ulmus* sp.). The pile consisted of wide roundwood measuring 125mm in diameter. The wood was intact to the wood/bark interface but the bark was absent. About 14 annual growth rings were present. These were wide and indicated fast-growth, suggesting that the tree had grown in optimal conditions with little competition from other vegetation.



Plate 3: wooden piles F5, F6 and F7, view north-west.

8 List of finds

Table 1: list of all finds.

finds no	context	description and date	retained	weight (in g)
1	F3 – 19th-century rubble foundation, at SW corner of south aisle	post-medieval pottery	no	not weighed
2	F4 - burial	peg-tile, c 1200 to present day	yes	73
2	F4 - burial	septaria chips, undated	yes	57
3	unstratified	peg-tile, c 1200 to present day	no	not weighed
3	unstratified	iron nail, undated	no	not weighed
4	F5 – wooden pile	sample of wooden pile, wood dated certainly to 14th-mid 15th century and probably c 1330 or c 1400	yes	1,710
5	F3 – 19th-century rubble foundations to south aisle	4 large pieces of stone window jamb	yes (by St Michael's Church)	not weighed
6	L3 – clay layer, at 2.5m below ground-level	charred wooden plank - roof rafter?, medieval or 19th century	no	not weighed

9 Discussion

The underpinning trench exposed a very substantial 19th-century foundation to the south aisle (F3). This was made up of flint and septaria rubble from the demolished south wall of the medieval church. Four pieces of dressed stone from medieval window jambs were retrieved from this foundation. The rubble foundation was not so much in evidence at the eastern end of the south aisle. Concerns about the load-bearing capacity of the ground at that time may have made it necessary to create a substantial foundation. Alternatively it may have been more expedient for the 19th-century builders to dump the demolition debris on site rather than having it taken off-site.

Three water-logged wooden piles (F5, F6, F7) made of elm were exposed where the tower joins the south aisle. The piles were under the south wall of the tower. The radiocarbon date of one of the three wooden piles suggests that the tower was built in the 14th or first half of the 15th century. This accords with the date of the tower on stylistic grounds. Presumably all three piles are contemporary and were inserted by the medieval builders when constructing the foundations to the tower, the wet ground conditions as well as the massive proportions of the tower probably necessitating such piling. The stone foundation that the piles supported had presumably been removed by the substantial 19th-century foundations.

Two articulated skeletons were exposed. The first burial (F4) was 780mm below ground-level and appeared to be cutting the rubble foundation (F3) which is 19th century. It is possible that F4 could be a post-1833 burial. The second skeleton (F8) was much lower down at 2m below ground-level and was overlaid by the rubble

foundation (F3). Previously it had been assumed that the construction of the 19th-century south aisle foundation would have completely destroyed the burials it cut through, but this is evidently not the case. Disarticulated bone was found in four other areas which would indicate some disturbance of burials, either from the digging of 19th-century foundation trenches or from earlier activity, eg repeated grave-digging within the churchyard.

Within the church, one lead coffin with a possible second below it were exposed during removal of the floor in the south aisle. These coffins were covered by York stone slabs that could not easily be removed. The coffins were probably within a brick vault, and there is a strong likelihood that there are more vaults in this area. Near the coffin or coffins is a plaque on the wall of the south aisle commemorating four members of the King family, buried between 1733 and 1827. It is possible that the individuals in the lead coffins are two of those commemorated on the plaque. Lead coffins were used for burials in this country in the Roman period and again from the medieval period. They were used to inter individuals of high status and they often encased a wooden coffin. In 1813 it became law for individuals buried within church buildings to be buried in lead coffins although this law was not always adhered to (Cox 1996, 110). The position of the coffin or coffins within the church gives an indication of the line of the former south aisle. It must have been further south than the coffin as the coffin would have been inside the south aisle.

No evidence of an earlier church was revealed by the groundworks. This is not surprising, as one would expect the footprint of an earlier church to be smaller than the existing later one and therefore any remains would probably be found below the church floor and not at the exterior of the church.

10 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by The Morton Partnership and funded by St Michael's Church PCC. The contractors were Bakers of Danbury. The Trust would like to thank the PCC members for their help, particularly John Beale and Rod Cutting. Ed Morton from The Morton Partnership and Adrian Gascoyne and David Andrews from Essex County Council also provided valuable advice and assistance. The fieldwork was carried out by Kate Orr.

11 References

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------|--|
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| CM | 2002 | <i>Guidelines on standards and practices for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i> |
| CM | 2003 | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums</i> |
| EAA 3 | 1997 | <i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 3 , ed by J Glazebrook |
| EAA 8 | 2000 | <i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 8 , ed by N Brown and J Glazebrook |
| EAA 14 | 2003 | <i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 14 , ed by D Gurney |
| Gale, R, & Cutler, D | 2000 | <i>Plants in archaeology</i> |
| IFA | 1999 | <i>Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief</i> |

IFA	2001	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
MoRPHE	2006	<i>Management of research projects in the historic environment</i> (English Heritage)
Rodwell , W, & Rodwell, K	1977	<i>Historic churches – a wasting asset</i> , CBA, Research Report, 19
RCHME	1922	<i>Inventory of Historic Monuments in Essex</i> , Royal Commission of Historic Monuments

12 Glossary and abbreviations

AOD	Above Ordnance Datum, ie height above sea level
context	specific location on an archaeological site, usually a feature or layer
ECC	Essex County Council
EHEN	Essex Historic Environment Record, ECC
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain, a floor
HEM	Historic Environment Management team, ECC
medieval	the period from 1066 to c 1500
modern	the period from the mid 19th century to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	period from c 1500 to the mid 19th century
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 410
RCHME	Royal Commission of Historic Monuments of England (now part of English Heritage)

13 Archive deposition

The finds and the digital and paper archive are held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at 12 Lexden Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3NF, but both will be permanently deposited with Colchester and Ipswich Museums under accession code COLEM 2007.78.

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Distribution list:

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14 Appendix: radiocarbon-dating certificate



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RADIOCARBON DATING CERTIFICATE

29 August 2007

Laboratory Code	SUERC-15129 (GU-15660)
Submitter	Kate Orr Colchester Archaeological Trust Camulodunum 12 Lexden Road, Colchester Essex CO3 3NF
Site Reference Sample Reference	Kirby Le Soken Church 2007.78 find no 7
Material	Waterlogged Wood : oak?
$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ relative to VPDB	-27.4 ‰
Radiocarbon Age BP	560 \pm 35

- N.B.**
1. The above ^{14}C age is quoted in conventional years BP (before 1950 AD). The error, which is expressed at the one sigma level of confidence, includes components from the counting statistics on the sample, modern reference standard and blank and the random machine error.
 2. The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program (OxCal3).
 3. Samples with a SUERC coding are measured at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre AMS Facility and should be quoted as such in any reports within the scientific literature. Any questions directed to the Radiocarbon Laboratory should also quote the GU coding given in parentheses after the SUERC code.

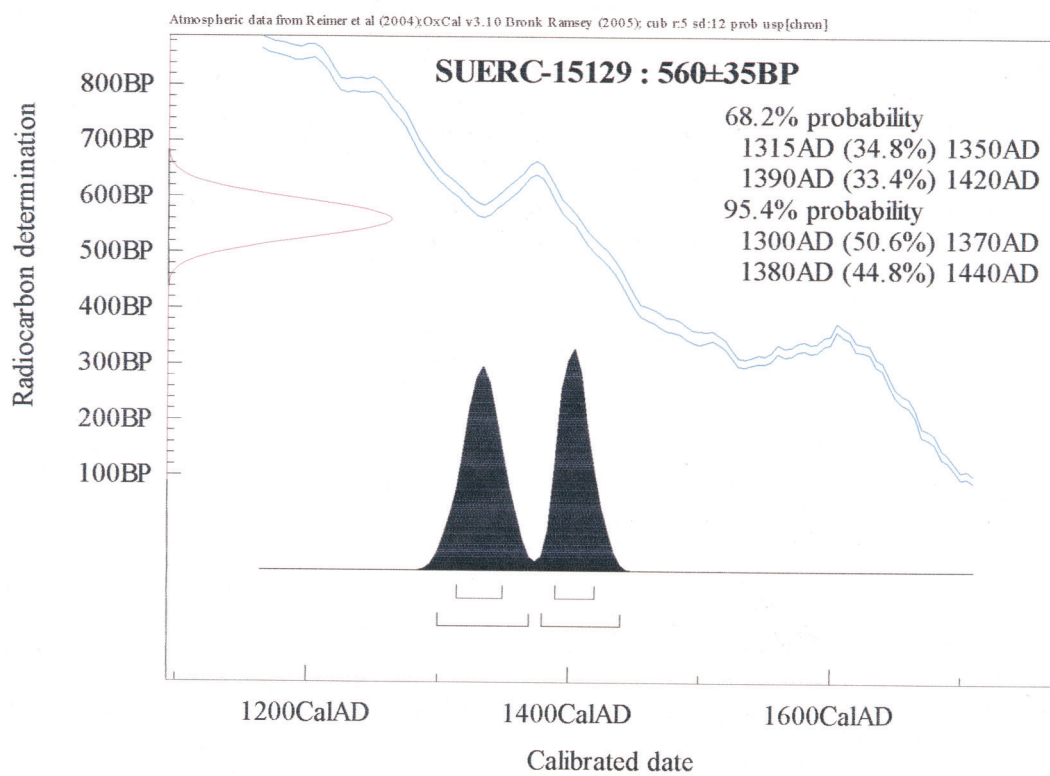
Conventional age and calibration age ranges calculated by :- *P. Naysmith*

Date :- 29-8-07

Checked and signed off by :- *Gordon Cook*

Date :- 29-8-07

Calibration Plot



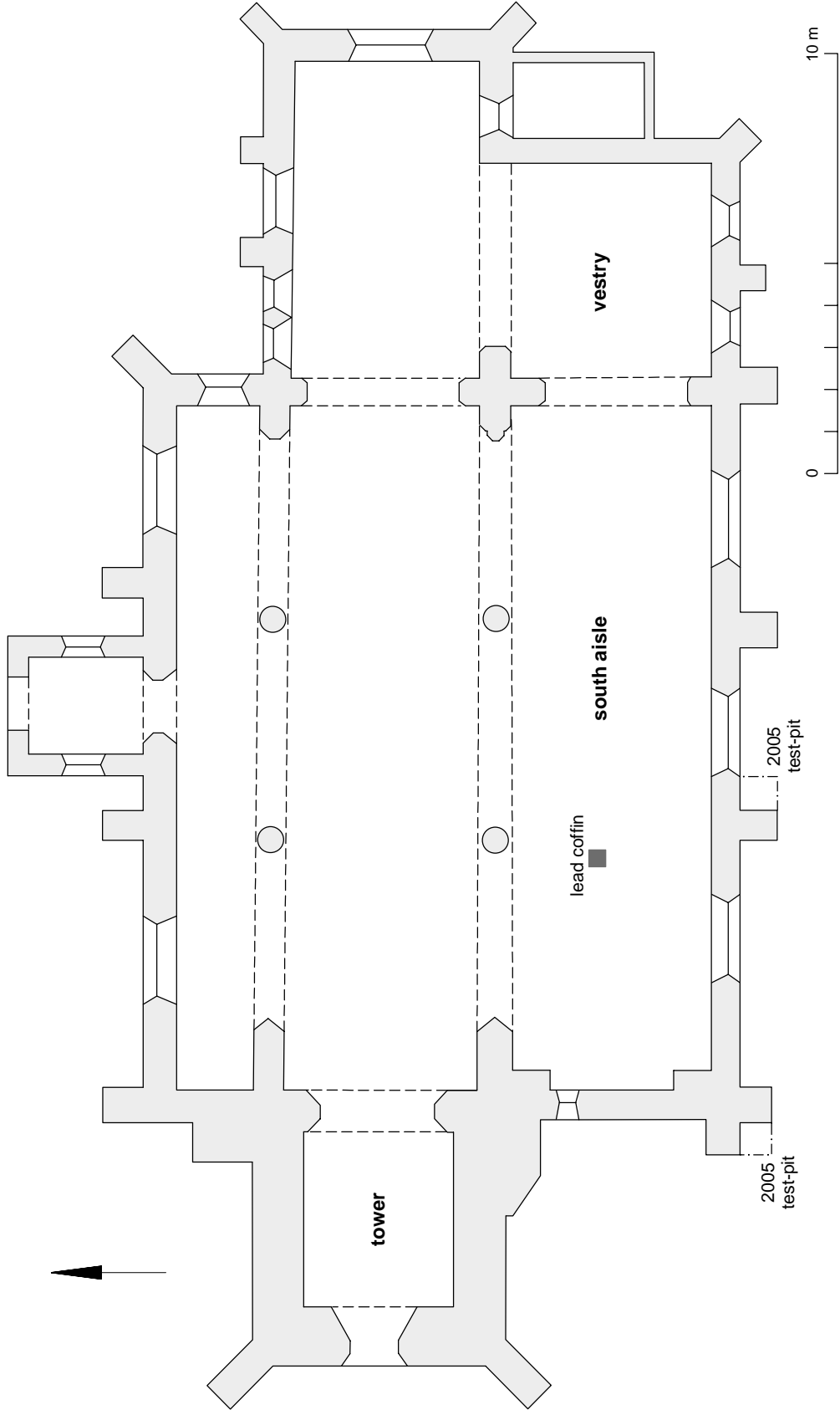


Fig 1 Church ground-plan (after RCHME 1922).

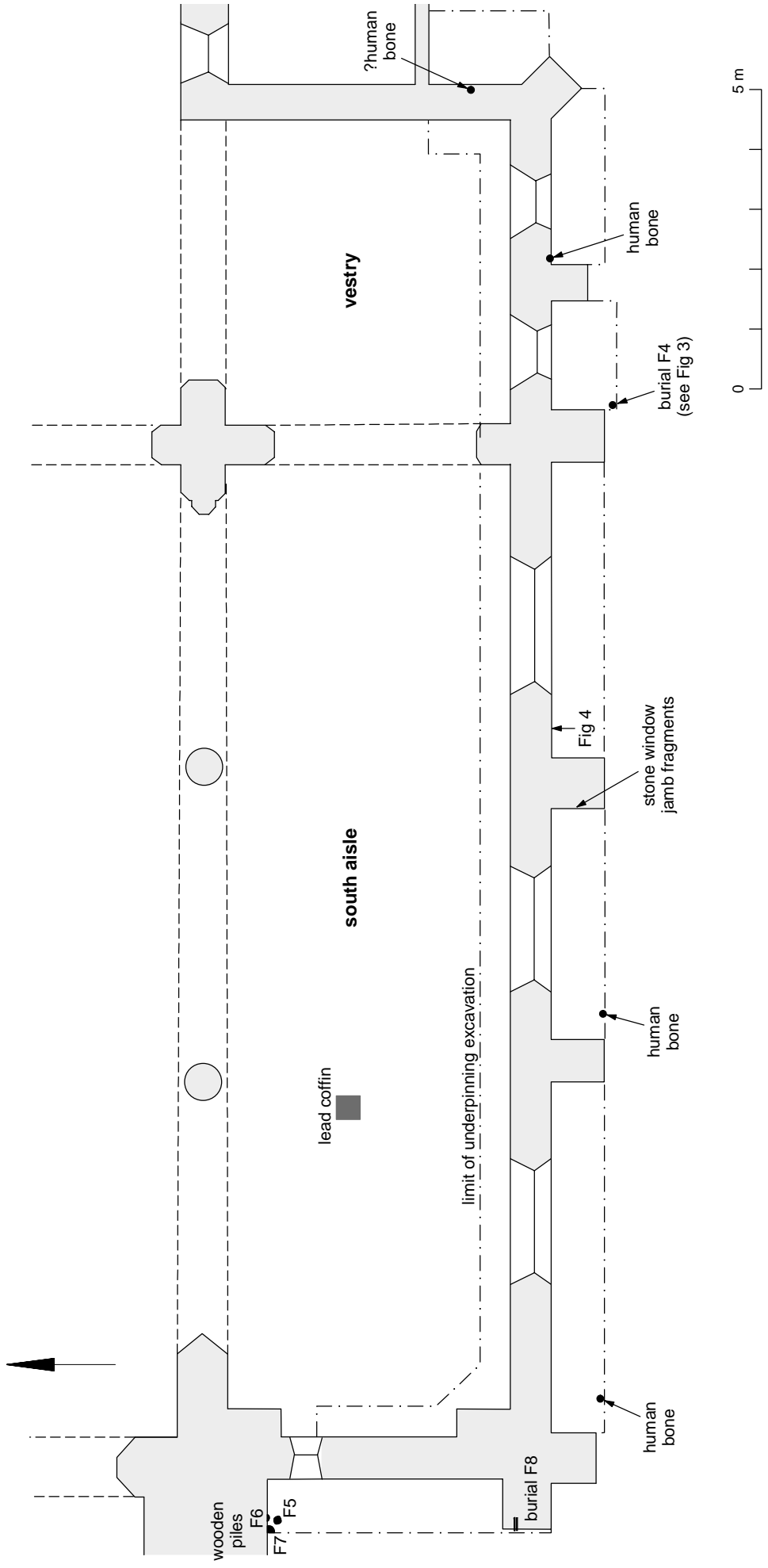


Fig 2 Plan of south aisle, showing finds and features.

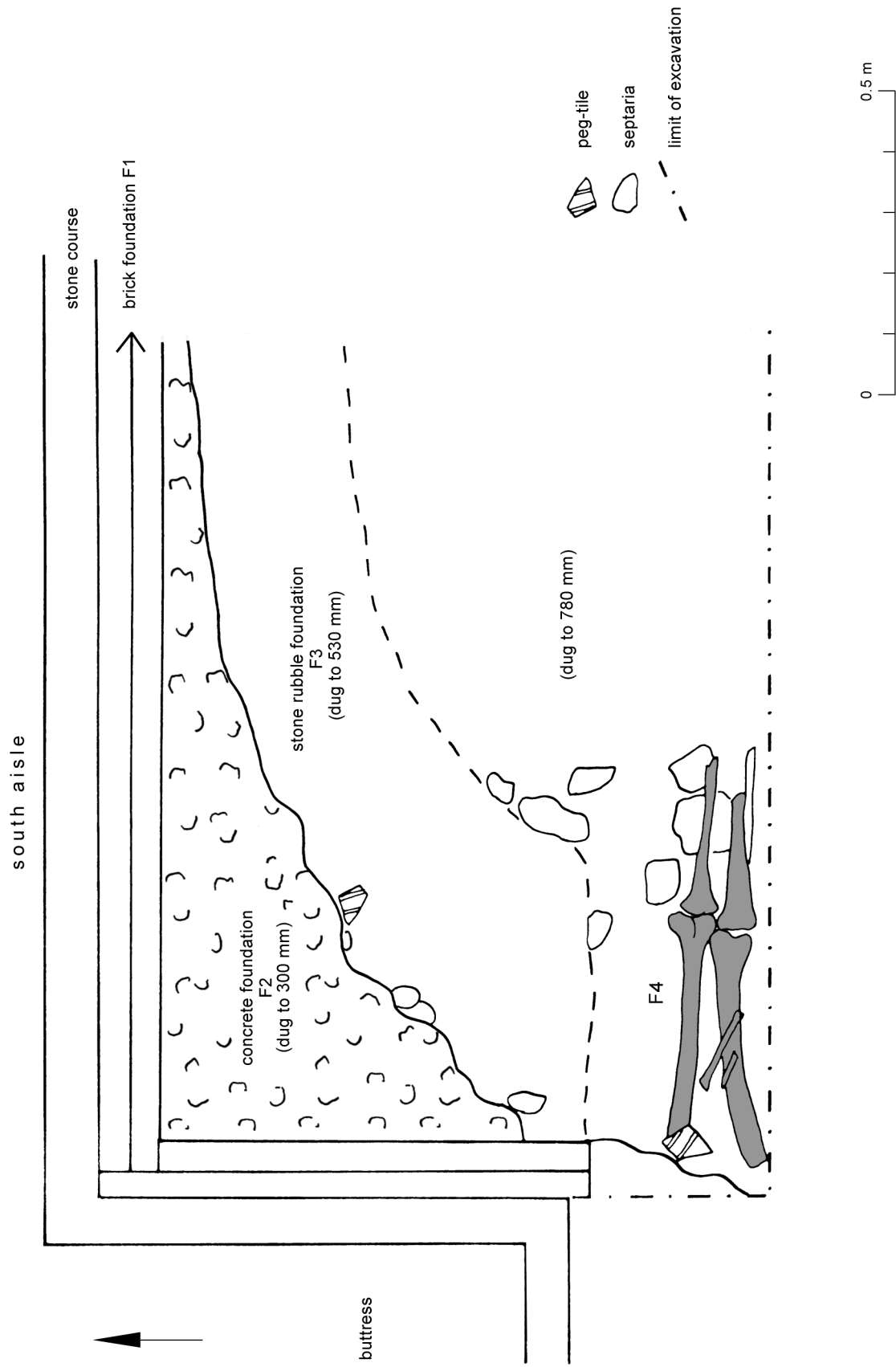


Fig 3 Plan of burial F4 within pit dug for underpinning.

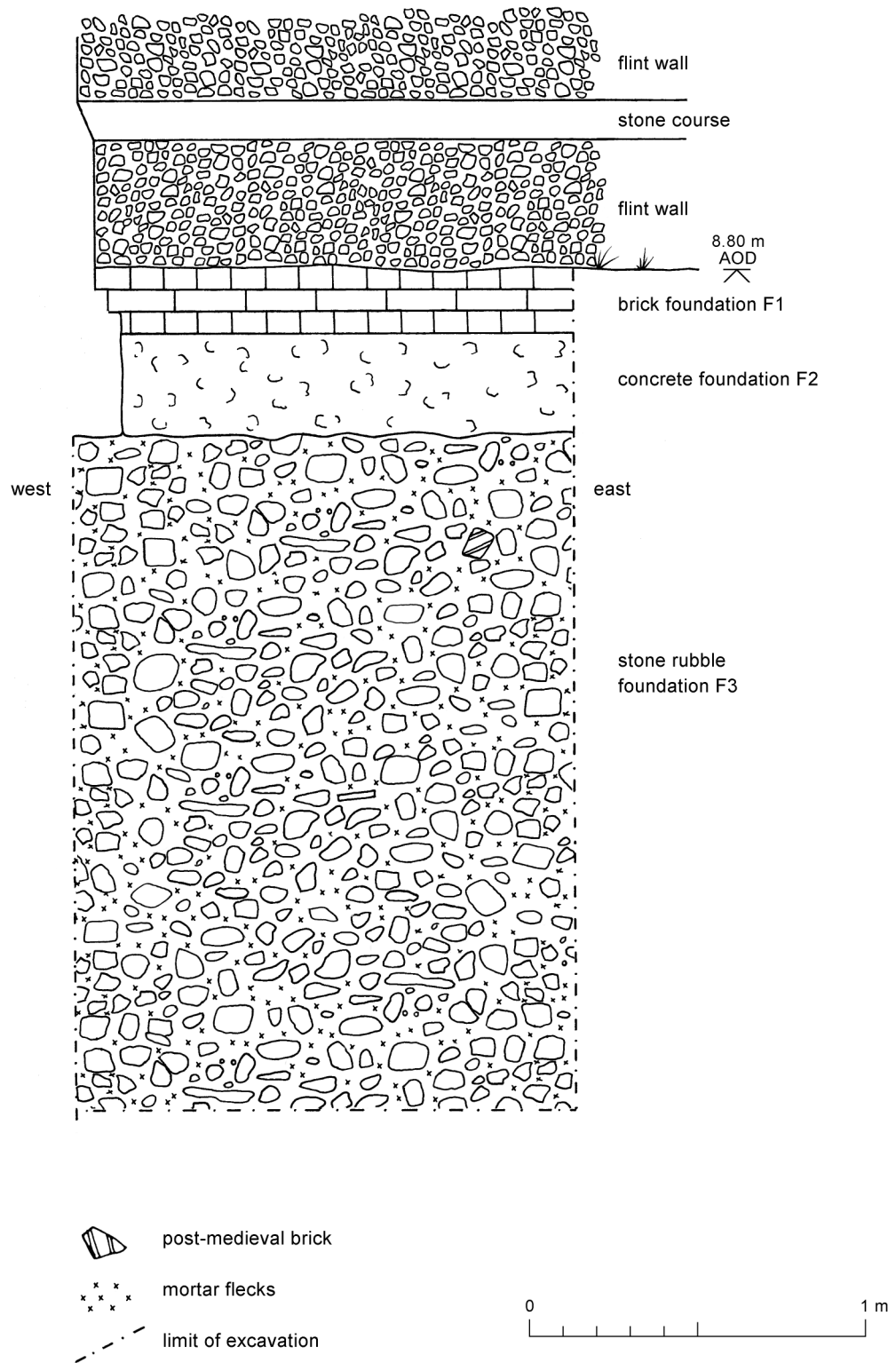


Fig 4 South-facing elevation of south aisle and section within pit dug for underpinning.

**Essex Historic Environment Record/
Essex Archaeology and History**

Summary sheet

Site address: St Michael's Church, Kirby-le-Soken, Essex	
Parish: Frinton Walton	District: Tendring
NGR: TL 2195 2203	Site code: Museum accession code: 2007.78 HEM code: FWKC 07
Type of work: Watching brief and excavation on underpinning	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: July and October 2007	Size of area investigated: 21 pits of approx 1m ² area
Location of finds/curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums	Funding source: St Michael's Church PCC
Further seasons anticipated? No	Related EHER nos: 3572
Final report: CAT Report 441 and summary in <i>EAH</i>	
Periods represented: medieval, post-medieval, modern	
Summary of fieldwork results: <i>Underpinning of the south aisle of the church was carried out in July 2007. The hand-excavation was monitored archaeologically. Two articulated skeletons were recorded plus some other pieces of disarticulated human bone. Three water-logged wooden piles probably dating to the late 14th or early 15th century were exposed at the western end of the south aisle, below the tower. One or possibly two lead coffins were found under the floor of the south aisle in October 2007.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports: None	
Author of summary: Kate Orr	Date of summary: December 2007