

Archaeological recording at St Margaret's church, Bygrave, August-September 1993: a brief summary report

During the course of emergency works to eradicate dry rot in the mediaeval parish church of Bygrave, the Field Archaeology Section of the North Hertfordshire Museums Service was invited by the Parochial Church Council, on the advice of the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser, to carry out recording work.

At the stage at which the archaeologists were called in, the building contractor had already removed not only the rotten wooden pews and floor boards in the nave, but also had dug out up to 300mm of deposits beneath the pews either side of the central aisle. This was unfortunate since the excavated deposits consisted of earlier floor levels going back to mediaeval times. However, by very careful cleaning of the exposed surfaces, and by means of very detailed recording techniques, the archaeologists were able to glean important information about the structural development and history of this fascinating small mediaeval parish church. Nevertheless, it is a fact that significant historical information has been lost because the archaeologists were not called in early enough, before the floor was excavated below the pews.

At a later stage, the archaeologists were permitted to excavate two small sections across the central aisle, and to excavate beneath the flagstones between the north and south doors. This exercise provided very useful extra information. In addition, it was decided to take the opportunity, for the first time, to make a complete and accurate scale ground plan of both the interior and exterior of the church, and to draw scale elevations of much of the interior and exterior of the building. A photographic survey was completed also.

In the end, despite the problems, and also due to the cooperation of the parishioners, the church architect and the building contractor, the archaeologists were enabled to complete successfully an important project. St. Margaret's, Bygrave, will be one of the best archaeologically studied rural Mediaeval churches in Hertfordshire, once the final full report is available. Work on this is in progress.

Before the archaeological project began, it had long been known from architectural studies of the standing structure that the nave was built in the 12th century; the chancel re-built in the 14th century; and in the 15th century all the windows were altered, a staircase to the rood-loft was constructed, and a small turret added at the west end to give access to the bells. The south porch is of the 18th century.

As a result of the recent archaeological recording, it is now possible to say that the present nave walls were re-built in the 12th century, since the standing walls cut through at least two earlier successive floor levels, the later of which has produced Late Saxon pottery. In fact, a sequence of at least four floor levels was identified. From the top, these included a mid-19th century floor consisting of flagstones at the west end and along the central nave aisle, with a wooden floor supporting the pews either side of the aisle; this was preceded by a thick tamped chalk floor, apparently very long used, and dating from perhaps the 15th century. In turn, this overlay the Late Saxon floor which produced potsherds of the 10th/11th centuries. The latter surface was laid over another earthen floor deposit, the earliest reached in the sequence, which

yielded no dating evidence unfortunately. It could date from the 8th or 9th centuries, as residual potsherds of that date were found in later deposits, both inside the church and outside in the graveyard. Against the north nave wall some Romano-British pottery was unearthed, suggesting that the church might overlie, or be near, a site of that period.

Other archaeological features recorded include the original foundation of the east end of the 12th century nave, before the present chancel was added; about a dozen Post-Mediaeval graves, all now unmarked, between the north and south doors; several similarly dated graves in the central nave aisle; two possible Late Mediaeval graves on the south side of the nave; two or three Mediaeval bell-casting pits, and a forgotten early 19th century brick vault containing at least two lead-lined wooden coffins.

Perhaps the most significant result of the archaeological exploration has been the positive identification of at least two Saxon phases of construction, proving for the first time the existence of a Saxon church on the site. Previous studies had suspected a Saxon church existed here, and indeed a priest is mentioned at Bygrave in Domesday Book (1086). However, it is satisfying now to have the archaeological evidence.

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