The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Letchworth.

An Archaeological Investigation
THE CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, LETCHWORTH

An Archaeological Investigation

by

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Abstract

A brief investigation around the foundations of Letchworth church (St Mary the Virgin) was carried out in advance of nearby construction work at Letchworth Hall Hotel. Limited excavation against the west and south walls of the nave and the south wall of the chancel proved inconclusive.

The cover illustration shows a bronze book-clasp, almost certainly from an ecclesiastical volume, found in St Mary's churchyard in 1930. The zoomorphic character of the design indicates Anglo-Saxon workmanship, probably of the ninth or tenth century AD (Westall 1935). The reconstruction below, by Caroline Wingfield, shows how the clasp may have been mounted for use.

The clasp is on display in Letchworth Museum.
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1: Introduction

1.1 St Mary's church is situated approximately one hundred metres north of Letchworth Hall Hotel, which retains as its core the medieval and later manor house of Letchworth. In December 1989, after much local discussion and debate, planning permission was granted for an extensive expansion of the hotel buildings.

1.2 As part of the permission for development granted by the Local Planning Authority, an investigation of the church structure and fabric was required under a Section 52 Agreement of the Town and Country Planning legislation. The proposals to extend the hotel had caused concern amongst some local residents about the structural integrity of the church, a small flint and rubble building with freestone dressing, dating from the twelfth century.

1.3 Following discussions between the hotel and church architects and the archaeological officer of the County Council, the Field Archaeology section of Letchworth Museum (Department of Engineering and Leisure) was invited to excavate a number of trial pits to investigate the church foundations, and to carry out a photographic survey of the church structure. Consequently, this work was undertaken in February 1990, and is reported on here.
2: A Brief History of the Development of St Mary's Church

2.1 The earliest indication of a church at Letchworth is a reference to a priest serving nine householders in the 1086 Domesday survey of lands held by Robert Gernon (Morris 1976). This evidence, together with an Anglo-Saxon book-clasp (of almost certainly ecclesiastical origin) of c900 AD, found in St Mary's churchyard in 1930 (Westell 1935; see cover illustration), strongly suggests the presence of an earlier structure on the site of the present church.

2.2 At the time of Domesday, Robert Gernon, an Essex baron with his major seat at Stanstead Mountfichet, held the manor and the advowson of the church. Robert passed the inheritance to his son William Montfichet. In the reign of Henry I (1100-1135), William, his wife Rohesia and son Gilbert gave the church with twelve acres of land and all appurtenances to the monastery of St Alban's (Salmon 1728). The present standing structure dates to the twelfth century, and the first rector, William de Hadleigh, was appointed in 1230.

2.3 Whilst the church structure remained consistently under monastic control, the fortunes of the Manor were not so steady. The second Sir Richard Montfichet, fourth in descent from William, lost all his possessions to the crown in 1268, and in 1278 crown officers transferred the lordship of Letchworth Manor to the Knights Templar (Johnson 1976). After the dissolution of the Templar Order in 1312, the manor passed to the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (The Knights Hospitaller) (Miller 1989). A miniature effigy of an equipped knight resting on a window ledge in the north nave is alleged to be that of Sir Richard Montfichet (Pollard 1904).

2.4 In the reign of Henry VI (1452, according to Chauncy 1700), Thomas Barrington, the sheriff of Hertfordshire and Essex acquired the manor. He also married into the Montfichet family and acquired its arms. The manor later passed into the hands of the Hanchett family and thence in 1547 to Thomas Snagge. His grandson, another Thomas, was Member of Parliament for Bedfordshire in 1571, Attorney General in 1577 and Speaker of the House of Commons in 1588; his eldest son was knighted by James I in 1603 and later sold the manor to Sir Rowland Lytton of Knebworth (Miller 1989).

2.5 The monastery of St Albans retained the church until the dissolution, when the crown received the property. In 1538 William Igrave was presented with the living, and in 1622 George Kympton. By 1676 the advowson of the church and possession of the manor were united, as in the twelfth century, by the Lytton family.

2.6 In 1796 the Lyttons sold the manor to John Williamson, a Baldock baker. He died in 1830 and the Hall remained empty until his grandson, the Reverend John Alington came to Letchworth. He was banned by his rector from holding very unorthodox services in the church, and took them instead in the Hall, which he embellished. After his death in 1863 the estate returned to obscurity until its purchase by the Garden City Pioneer Company in 1903 (Miller 1989). The church has been retained by the church commissioners.

2.7 Cussans (1870) states that the church dates from the 1280s; however, it is apparent that the present structure is much older. The nave walls are of twelfth century origin, possibly contemporary with or shortly subsequent to the transference of the church to the monastery of St Albans between 1130 and 1135, and probably replacing an earlier structure. The chancel is a later addition or replacement, noticeably out of line with the nave, dating from the thirteenth century (RCHM 1910), possibly a reconstruction under the auspices of the first rector, William of Hadleigh c1230.

2.8 Doorways were added to the south chancel wall and north nave wall in the fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century the porch was added, perhaps at the instruction of Thomas Barrington; the church roof and walls were raised and the buttresses improved. Some of the original timber beams, trusses and windbraces of this phase may still be seen. At this time the windows in the west and north nave walls were inserted, probably replacing earlier windows.
2.9 The east chancel wall was rebuilt in the sixteenth century and a new window (three lights under a square head) was added. The bellcote was also constructed, resting on a four-point wooden arch. The original version of the present chancel arch was probably also built around this time. Nineteenth-century restoration included the addition of new stonework on the buttresses and alterations to the southern nave windows.

2.10 In 1940 death-watch beetle caused the collapse of the bellcote arch, and this together with other structural timbers in the roof, had to be replaced (T.... 1988). The roof repairs were accompanied by new layers of rendering on the western gable end, the bellcote and the eaves. The cement surface of the east chancel wall and other limited areas may also date from this time, as the medium is similar to that used on the roof, and the alterations do not appear on a detailed sketch of the church made in 1932.

2.11 More recent work can be seen on the corner buttresses of the west nave wall: the inclusion of artificial stone blocks supported by tile packing. Further changes were apparent around the foundations (see excavation results).

2.12 A note on the graveyard

The graveyard has been the subject of a recent study (Nickels 1987) designed to record the monumental inscriptions for the aid of family historians. There are very few memorials which pre-date the Garden City, and only three earlier than the nineteenth century. There is a group of memorials to Garden City pioneers, including Howard Fearsall, one of the Company’s first directors, which is of importance for the history of the Garden City, but which is beyond the scope of the current investigation.

2.13 A note on the Dedication

The dedication of Letchworth church is unknown, the present title having been given around the turn of the twentieth century. A graffito uncovered around 1907 in the previously blocked fourteenth-century priest’s door in the south chancel wall reads AVE MARIA. This, together with the position of the church on the pilgrims’ route to Walsingham and an inscription on a fourteenth-century bell AVE MARIA GRATIA PLENA suggest that the early dedication was also to the Virgin Mary (Pollard 1907).
Letchworth Church (St Mary The Virgin)
Trial Pit Location
February 1990
3: Methodology

3.1 The excavations at St Mary's church were designed to recover information concerning the major phases of construction, and to investigate the possibility of stone or timber precursors or ancillary buildings, as well as to ascertain the condition of the foundations.

3.2 Three one-metre square trial pits were dug adjacent to the church walls, located so as to illustrate the methods and sequences of building. These pits were dug manually, the soil layers removed systematically, and all deposits and features given context numbers and fully described on pro-forma record cards. Field drawings were made, and the heights of features calculated in relation to a bench mark on the north-west buttress of the nave. Finds were kept for analysis and a photographic record was maintained.

3.3 On completion of the trial pits, the church foundations were examined by the church architect (Mr B Hooker) and the pits backfilled, replacing the layers in their original sequence.

3.4 The records and finds were checked and analysed, final illustrations were prepared from the field drawings, and this report produced.
4 Results

4.1 Pit 1

Trial pit 1 was located against the west nave wall, at the junction with the south-western buttress (see figure 2) in order to investigate the construction process and the chronological relationship between these features.

The turf layer (01) was removed to reveal a series of shallow layers of re-deposited silty loam (02) and (08) and a band of grey silt (03) which represent weathering deposits from the nave wall.

Layer (08) was stripped away, exposing the upper fills of a large (0·68m wide) trench skirting the wall and buttress base. Two layers of reddish brown sandy silt (10) and (11) were excavated to uncover a slightly stony silt loam backfill (18), which in turn was removed to expose a uniform layer of sandy gravel (19) lying within the trench, presumably acting as a drainage medium. Beneath (19) lay a densely-packed matrix of broken eighteenth to twentieth-century bricks and occasional tile fragments (26). This layer covered a light brown ceramic drainage pipe (130mm in diameter), which had been broken into segments to accommodate the angle around the buttress and allow the ingress (and egress) of water. This modern trench (see summary) was evidently dug in order to construct a concrete revetment around the wall foundations (31). The top of the concrete equates approximately with the modern ground surface. After forming a step 0·1m wide away from the nave wall, the concrete descends at an angle of approximately 10° from the nave wall (20° from the buttress) to a depth of 0·96m (probably below the level of the original foundations), before levelling out to form an impermeable base to the trench, which was subsequently backfilled with materials designed to aid drainage away from the walls.

The western edge of the trench cut (14) was not clad in concrete, and truncated four earlier layers, leaving a small 'undisturbed' area in the north-west corner of the trial pit. The upper layer (12), a mid brown sandy silt loam, interpreted as re-deposited graveyard material, was removed to reveal a layer of light yellowish brown sandy silt loam (33). Layer (33) was subsequently excavated to expose a similar layer (34). This cut was by a small grave (41) containing a coffin (represented by coffin nails (40)) and a supine infant inhumation (38). The inhumation was orientated towards the nave wall and had been disturbed by trench (14), which had removed the skull. After recording, the inhumation was covered over, and excavation continued slightly to the north. The ensuing layer (46) of mid yellowish red silty clay loam was also truncated by an infant burial (45) in a small grave cut (52). This burial (also disturbed by trench (14)) was cleaned, recorded in situ and covered. At this stage the limitations of available space within the trial pit determined the end of excavation.

The packing material within trench (14) presumably reflects the reuse of local building débris, largely nineteenth and twentieth-century brick-ends, with occasional tile fragments displaying a date range from the later medieval period to the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the extent of the trench allowed only a small area of the remaining graveyard levels to be examined, and no datable evidence was recovered from those contexts with the exception of a residual piece of residual twelfth to fourteenth century Hertfordshire grey ware from layer (34).

The infant graves could not be dated closely due to the lack of finds in the associated layers and a limited knowledge of the decomposition rate of bone in this environment; however, a tentative date of eighteenth to nineteenth century may be ascribed given the lack of subsequent disturbance of the remains before the cutting of trench (14).

The upper layers — (8), (10) and (11) — produced several disarticulated fragments of adult human bone (51), presumably deriving from a burial originally situated near the western nave wall, disturbed during construction of the concrete revetment, and subsequently buried with the backfill (see Appendix 1).
SML’90 Trial Pits

Pit 1

Pit 2

Pit 3

Key:
- The
- Brick
- Stone
4.2 Pit 2

This pit was located against the south wall of the nave, 1.4m from the eastern buttress.

A shallow layer of loose turf ([01]) was removed to reveal an accumulation of redeposited mid yellowish brown silt loam ([04]) rising against the nave wall. This layer contained yellow mortar and red tile fragments (possibly residual from the roof repairs of the 1940s) as well as nine copper alloy studs, interpreted as coffin furniture, some of which still had fragments of wood adhering.

This layer was removed to display the upper elements of a similar trench and concrete revetment to that seen in Pit 1. The upper trench backfill ([15]) was a mid yellowish red sandy silt loam, extending 0.95m from the nave wall and containing a further thirty-five copper alloy studs as well as tile and mortar fragments, presumably from the same source as those in layer [04]. A small (0.1m wide) circular depression ([21]) in the surface of this layer may indicate the relatively recent presence of scaffolding.

Layer [15] was excavated to expose a widespread deposit of gravel and shingle in a sandy matrix ([25]). Beneath this material lay two layers of drain packing ([43] and [29]), the latter similar to layer [26] in Pit 1. Layer [29] was removed revealing the broken ceramic pipe ([37]) lying in a shallow layer of sandy silt ([36]) above the concrete floor of the trench ([44]).

The southern edge of the foundation trench ([28]) descends nearly vertically from a point 0.7m from the nave wall to the level of the concrete base (80-28m OD), truncating earlier layers to the south. The first of these layers, [17], a mid brown clay silt containing fragments of possibly medieval tile, was interpreted as redeposited graveyard material. This was stripped to reveal a small linear feature composed of yellow mortar pressed into the natural sandy subsoil ([48]). The mortar strip was 0.2m deep and 0.8m wide with impressions of bricks in its upper surface. After running parallel to the nave for approximately 0.5m, the mortar strip turned through 90° to the north and continued for approximately 0.1m before being truncated by the construction trench ([28]). This feature was interpreted as the remains of a structure, possibly the footings of a box tomb. The stratigraphy implies that it was destroyed before trench [28] was dug, and a photograph of the church taken in 1911, pre-dating the trench (see summary), shows no sign of any structure (Johnson 1976).

Unfortunately the finds from Pit 2 all emanate from extremely disturbed contexts and may have been redeposited several times to arrive in their present layers. Layer [04] produced a farthing of Charles I as well as a sherd of eleventh-century Saxo-Norman Stamford derivative ware, and two fragments of twelfth to fourteenth-century Hertfordshire grey ware. Layer [15] yielded one sherd of mid to late Saxon Ipswich type ware (ninth to tenth-century), two pieces of twelfth to fourteenth-century Hertfordshire grey ware and one fragment of glazed eighteenth or nineteenth-century brown pottery.

Both layers [04] and [15] produced fragments of redeposited adult human remains which were removed in the process of excavation (see Appendix 1). It was not possible to establish the sex of these remains, but the mutually exclusive assemblages strongly suggest that only one individual is represented. The presence of the copper alloy coffin studs in these layers may suggest a common source for all this material, a disturbed grave near the nave wall, perhaps the earlier box tomb.
4.3 Pit 3

This pit was situated at the junction of the southern nave and chancel walls, by
the eastern face of the south-eastern nave buttress (see figure 2).

As seen in the two previous pits, the modern drainage/construction trench (531)
had completely removed all evidence of earlier activity within an area 0·8m wide
adjacent to the wall and buttress bases.

The concrete revetment (44) covered, and probably descended below, the level of
the older church foundations. The hard-core fills above the concrete trench base were
similar to those in the other trenches: gravel, rubble, brick and tile fragments (27,
32 and 35) in a silty sand matrix, covering the broken ceramic drainpipe (371). The
upper backfills, a layer of pea-grit and silt (22) and a mixture of gravel and mid
yellowish grey sandy silt loam (13) lay beneath a widespread layer of mid yellow
brown sandy silt loam (06), directly beneath the friable mid brown sandy silt loam
topsoil (05)).

The southern edge of the construction trench (531) truncated two layers: a
friable, slightly stony light grey-brown silty sand (24) above a mid brown clay silt
loam (42)). These layers were interpreted as two truncated grave fills. Layer (42)
contained an adult skull, left in situ, as it was probably part of an articulated
skeleton oriented to the south or east. This discovery determined the limit of
excavation (see Appendix 1).

The concrete foundation cladding appeared to taper away near the sill stone of
the fourteenth-century priest's doorway. It was hoped that there would be a break in
the revetment at this point, allowing examination of the original foundations. However,
a small extension to the trial pit proved otherwise, the sill stone having been left
unrendered while further down the concrete continued as elsewhere.

The brick and tile fragments filling the trench were comparable with the material
from the other pits and were predominantly nineteenth and twentieth-century in
appearance. The topsoil layer (051) produced a fragment of blue glazed nineteenth-
century china and a china cord terminal, perhaps from a bell or light-pull (nineteenth
or early twentieth-century). Layer (061) rendered one body sherd of sixteenth-century
glazed grey ware, as well as some fragments of redeposited human bone (see
Appendix 1).
5: Conclusions

5.1 Unfortunately, due to the presence of the thick concrete rendering to the footings of the church, it was not possible to get a view of the church foundations at any point. Because of this, it was not possible to ascertain the structural condition of the foundations. It is likely that the concrete lining of the drainage trench extends well below the church foundations, but it is not possible to say this with certainty. All one can say is that the concrete was in good condition and because of this, and because of its thickness, after consultation with the church architect, it was decided not to attempt to remove any of it.

5.2 However, it is the view of Mr Hooker, the church architect, that although obviously done with the best of intentions, the drain with its concrete lining are probably doing more harm than good to the church fabric. The concrete is in fact trapping damp in the foundations rather than allowing them to 'breathe' and drain. It is extremely curious that the drainage pipe laid in the bottom of the trench has been deliberately broken to turn corners. In this condition it cannot possibly function as a drain and is thus utterly redundant.

5.3 There is no clear evidence of the date of this trench. It is perhaps logical to assume that it was constructed at the same time as the restoration work on the bellcote and roof in 1940, although none of the newspaper accounts at the time mention this (Tennant 1988). The Reverend Robinson, however, has suggested that it may have been built c.1955 on the basis of information supplied by one of his parishioners. Without documentary evidence, it is impossible to be clear one way or the other, although the earlier date does seem the most likely.

5.4 From the archaeological point of view, the construction of the drain is a total disaster. There is no doubt that it extends right around the church (as was confirmed by probing), divorcing it completely from the stratigraphy of the churchyard and leaving it on an 'island'. The digging of the drainage trench has utterly destroyed all stratigraphic information and relationships connected with the constructional phases of the church. This is doubly unfortunate since the church is a largely intact, relatively undeveloped medieval structure with only minimal eighteenth and nineteenth-century reconstruction. There were high hopes of important medieval structural information being revealed before the drainage trench was uncovered.

5.5 In the process of destroying the stratigraphy around the foundations, the drainage trench has churned up and redeposited important dating evidence which would have been related to the stratigraphy, not to mention disturbing several human burials of uncertain date. Nevertheless, some of these redeposited unstratified artifacts are interesting, at least in indicating periods of activity which match the use and alterations of the church. In particular, the late Saxon Ipswich-type ware from Pit 2 layer [15] and the Stamford-derivative ware from Pit 2 layer [104] help to indicate the pre-Norman Conquest foundation of the original church. With the evidence of the ninth to tenth-century book clasp from the churchyard, these finds suggest a foundation date for an original (perhaps timber) church on this site in the tenth century AD. This is much earlier than has previously been suggested.

5.6 Finally, from what was seen of the foundations, there seems to be no evidence of serious structural problems (although this is really for the architects to comment upon). In view of the considerable distance (about 100m) between the church and the hotel extension, there seems little likelihood of the its construction having any detrimental effect upon the church foundations or structure.
6: The Building Fabrics

6.1 A brief structural survey of the building fabrics was undertaken at the time of the excavations in order to complement the excavated results with data from the standing structure. As the excavations were unable to uncover the foundations of the church and the original stratigraphy had been completely destroyed, this structural survey has assumed a greater significance in reconstructing the history of the church.

6.2 In all, eight main phases of building activity can be detected in the fabric, although the presence of fourteenth-century windows and doors not tied in to any particular fabric indicate a ninth (Phase III). It should be noted that it has not been possible to indicate every fabric on the plan of the church (figure 2), which shows only the major phases of development and not minor repairs or alterations.

6.3 Phase I (the construction of the nave c1150±15)

The main fabric [A] consists of flints and rounded pebbles of about 100mm in diameter set in a matrix of yellowish-white coarse mortar. This fabric forms the main part of the nave walls and the core of the nave buttresses, especially visible on the western buttresses. Because of later rendering, this fabric is not visible on the south-western nave wall.

Phase II (the construction of the chancel, possibly on old foundations c1230±10)

The earliest fabric evident in the chancel [B] consists of flints set in a greyish white chalky mortar. This is most easily visible on the north wall of the chancel.

Phase III (the addition of new priest doors and a window in the north chancel wall c1350±50).

It is not possible to tie this phase in with any specific building fabric, although the presence of doors and a window later than the fabrics into which they are incorporated indicates activity in the fourteenth century.

Phase IV (the construction of the porch, raising the nave roof and new windows, c1450±25).

The fabric extending the height of the nave walls [C] consists of pebbles and flint in a whitish sandy/chalky mortar with occasional tile inclusions. The same mortar was used to rebond the buttresses, with new masonry heightening them and maintaining the corners of the nave, especially on the west. A similar mortar bonds the two fifteenth-century windows in the north wall of the nave. Although the porch is heavily covered in late (nineteenth-century?) white rendering, it appears to have been constructed in this fabric.

Phase V (rebuilding of east wall of chancel c1550±50)

The east wall of the chancel was rebuilt in the sixteenth century, but the wall has been covered with cement relating to the restoration work of 1940 and the fabric is not visible. It may be the same as fabric [D], flints set in a yellow mortar, visible as a bonding for the east corners of the chancel to fabric [B], although this may be a later repair.

Phase VI (repairs to the buttresses c1700±100)

A pinky-cream coloured cement (fabric [E]) associated with the north nave buttresses may be connected with seventeenth or eighteenth-century brick repairs to the buttresses, although this cannot be proven.

Phase VII (restorations c1880±10)

The south-west wall of the nave is coated with a greyish yellow-brown cement (fabric [F]) which is possibly connected with the two new windows of c1880±10; there are traces of repairs to all the buttresses with a gritty grey cement holding some stone coping, which is possibly contemporary with this fabric.
Phase VIII (repairs following the collapse of the bellcote in 1940, (T—— 1988)

The eaves, the western gable end and the bellcote are covered with a mid yellow-brown fine sandy cement (fabric [G]), which was also used to render the east wall of the chancel and effect repairs to the southern and northern walls of the nave and the north wall of the chancel.

Phase IX (later twentieth century repairs).

A whitish grey coarse, gritty cement bonding composite artificial stone blocks in the western buttress, packed with numerous modern tiles (fabric [H]), appears to post-date the bellcote repairs.
Appendix 1: Redeposited Human Remains

Without authority to exhume articulated human remains from the graveyard layers of St Mary's church, the discovery of in situ burials within the trial pits defined the limits of excavation (see 4.1 and 4.3, above). However, numerous disarticulated fragments of human bone (the result of earlier grave disturbances) were collected during excavation. Apart from physical damage, all the bone fragments were in a reasonable state of preservation, and some attempt at evaluation was made before the remains were reburied in the backfill of Pit 2.

Pit 1 Redeposited bone [51]. Layer [06] produced a fragment of a right radius; layer [10] produced two rib fragments, and a fragment of the proximal right radius; layer [11] produced one rib, one metacarpal and a fragment of a right scapula. This is likely to have come from a single adult burial, at least the upper right part of the body having been disturbed at an earlier date.

Pit 2 Redeposited bone [09] from layer [04] consisted of a fragment of clavicle, thoracic vertebrae and skull fragments; redeposited bone [20] from layer [15] consisted of two phalanges (toes), eight skull fragments, a left mandible, a fragment of left humerus, a fragment of left ulna and the distal end of a left femur. This is likely to have come from a single body, the left side at least having been disturbed at an earlier date. The forty-four copper alloy coffin studs from the same pit perhaps derive from the same source.

Pit 3 Redeposited bone [07] in layer [06] consisted of the proximal section of a right femur, the proximal end of a right ulna and one phalanx (toe). These also derive from a single adult, quite possibly the same individual as that found in Pit 2.

Appendix 2: Tile Samples

Most of the layers excavated in the three trial pits contained fragments of red ceramic roof tile. Unfortunately, due to the disturbed nature of the deposits, none was found in a closely datable context. However, given the age of the structure, the possibility that certain quantities of tile date from the medieval period must be investigated. A fabric series will be constructed from samples taken during excavation; this may then be compared with other fabric groups from better-dated contexts from nearby excavations and may reflect the dates of major alterations to the church, especially the mid fifteenth-century alterations to the roof.
8: Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to F Copson plc for commissioning this investigation which has, despite some disappointments, nevertheless provided confirmatory evidence for the early foundation of Letchworth's ancient parish church. Our thanks to Mr Roy Rushton, executive consultant architect to the Letchworth Hall Hotel, and to Mr Bruno Hooker, the church architect, for their advice and consultation. The Reverend R R Robinson and Mrs J Young should be thanked for their assistance and forbearance during our investigation. Not least, our thanks, too, to our skilled assistants, Adam Garwood, Tony Offord and Faith Pewtress.
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Figure 4: Graffiti from the Church Porch
Above, initials A G 1601; below, arms of Montfichet-Barrington

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