

**Further Archaeological Investigations**  
**at**  
**The Church of St. Mary and St. Thomas**  
**Knebworth Park**  
**Hertfordshire**

**by**  
**Christine Colley BA,**  
**with**  
**Gilbert Burleigh BA,AMA,MIFA**

**North Hertfordshire District Council Museums**  
**Field Archaeology Section**  
**Department of Engineering and Leisure Services**  
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# **The church of St. Mary and St. Thomas, Knebworth, Hertfordshire.**

**NHDC Museums site reference : Kneb-1'92 (TL 231 210)**

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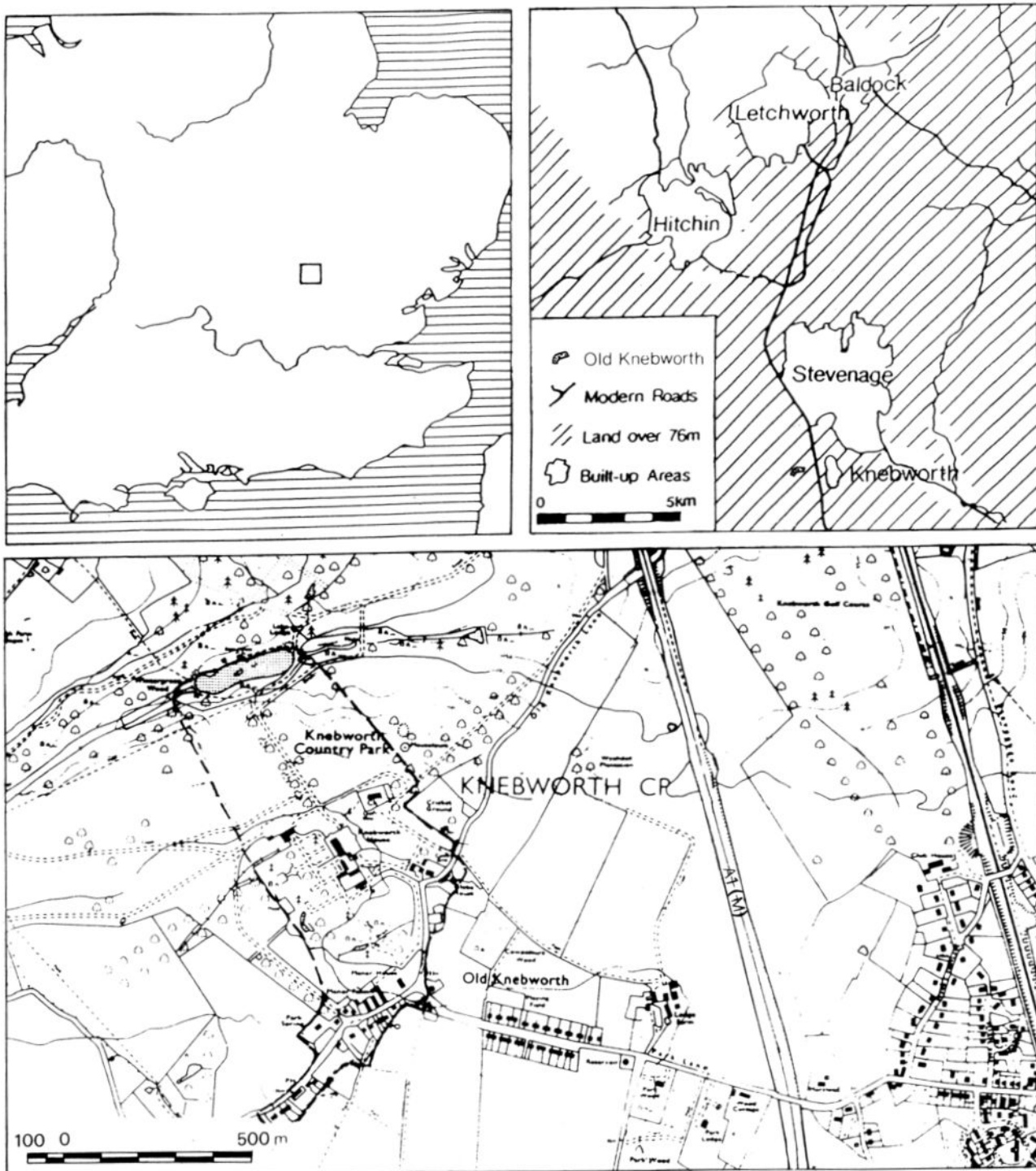
*Figure 4* : Knebworth Parish Church, ground plan and location  
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*Cover Illustration*: Machining to the north of the church.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to express our thanks to the Parochial authorities for allowing us access to the site, and to D.E. Pateman, the building firm engaged in the construction work for their cooperation and patience during this project. Thanks are also due to the following staff for their assistance in the field: Tony Offord and Andy Richmond.

*NB: The views expressed in this report are those of the authors who take full responsibility for them. They are not necessarily the views of the North Hertfordshire District Council.*



*Figure 1. The church of St. Mary and St. Thomas, Knebworth park, Location map.*

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Within days of the publication of Matthews' et al, "An Archaeological Investigation at the Church of St. Mary and St. Thomas, Knebworth Park, Hertfordshire." (June 1992), it was discovered that construction had begun on a new extension to the north side of Knebworth church without the benefit of planning permission. This was extremely unfortunate in view of the recommendations made by Burleigh in the above report (pp.22-3).

1.2 David Went and Christine Colley from the NHDC Field Archaeology Section visited the site on Friday 12 June following a telephone message from Mike Daniells the County Archaeologist to Gil Burleigh the Keeper of Field Archaeology. The extension, a new toilet and small kitchenette, were to be built within a small rectangular area adjacent to the north nave wall formed by the projecting walls, the 18th century buttress of the Lytton chapel and the vestry, (figure 4).

1.3 A concrete plinth covering the south-eastern corner of this area had been removed and trenches for foundations and drain pipes cut through the remaining area (fig 3).

1.4 The building firm, D.E. Pateman had

apparently received their instructions from the church warden, Mr S. Harding. The builders further revealed that a water pipe trench was to be excavated from the toilet block to join with the water supply located on the east side of the porch on the south side of the church. The trench was to encircle the western end of the church to avoid known vaults to the east (Fig.4). The builders agreed to inform the team prior to excavation so that a watching brief could be carried out on the pipe trench. The builders had not been informed about the possibility of disturbing burials nor of how to proceed should this likely event occur.

1.5 Following a telephone call from the builders on Monday the 15th June, Christine Colley and Andrew Richmond began a watching brief to locate and record features disturbed by the excavation of the water pipe trench. The excavation took three days. Christine Colley and Tony Offord returned on Tuesday 23rd June to establish the height of the Temporary Bench Mark. This report therefore records the results of this salvage archaeological work at Knebworth Church in June 1992, and it is intended to supplement the earlier Report.

## 2. A Brief History of the Church

2.1 The parish church of St. Mary and St. Thomas of Canterbury, Knebworth, stands in parkland to the east of Knebworth House, near the edge of a slight plateau, the ground dropping away to the north and the east, Fig.1. A stream runs eastwards through the valley to the north, eventually joining the River Beane near Watton-at-Stone. When the park was created the former settlement was relocated about half a kilometre to the south, leaving only the church and some earthworks as

evidence for the Medieval village. The actual date for the emparkment is unclear though it probably occurred in the late thirteenth century (Keene and Grant 1953) (Fig 2).

2.2 The church is currently a six cell structure; the nave, chancel and tower forming the basic core. To the north of the chancel is a small annexe used as the Lytton family's private chapel; to the north of the nave is a two roomed vestry, and to its south is a porch (Fig 4). As with most churches, its present form is

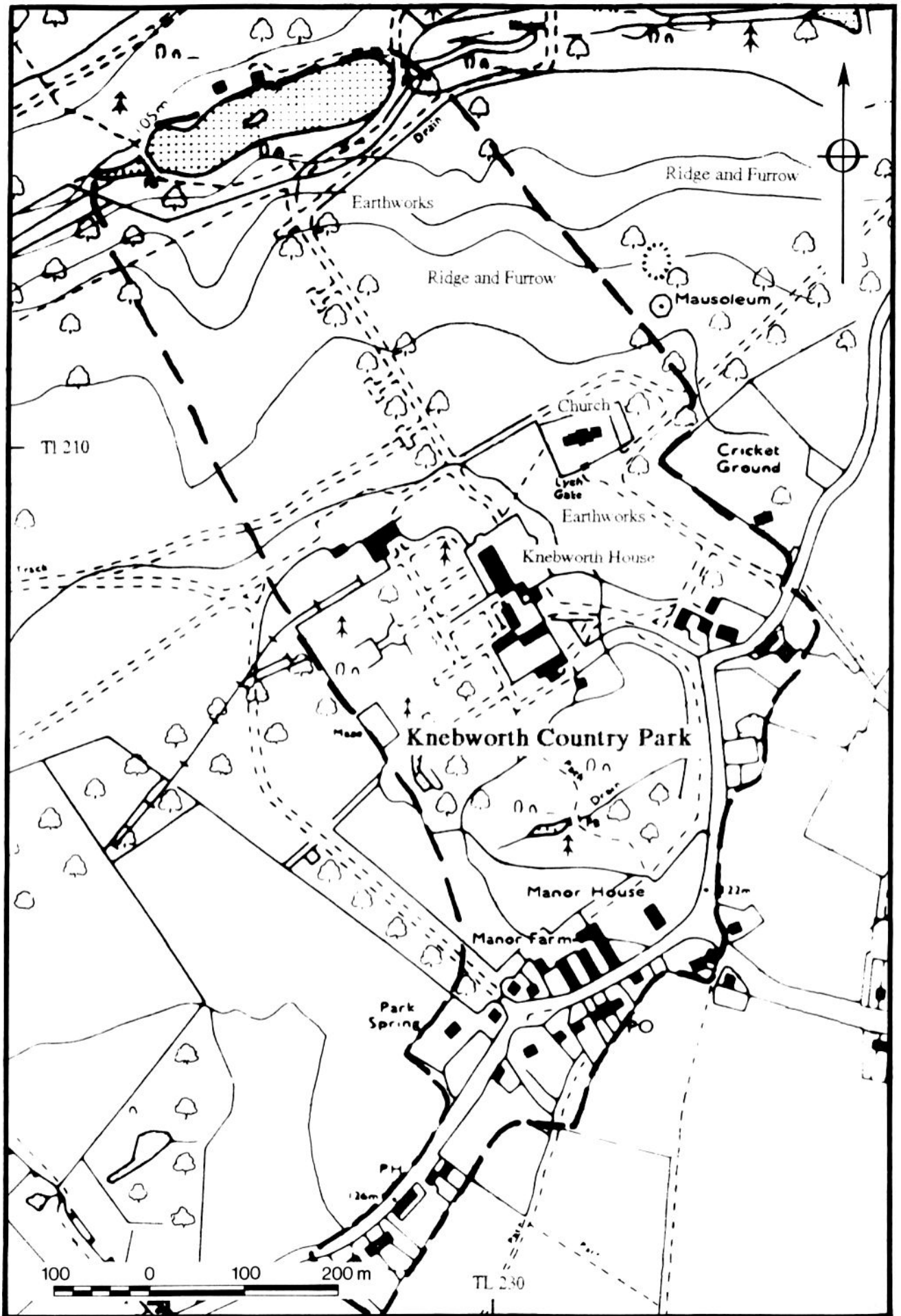


Figure 2. Knebworth Church and environs.

the result of many centuries of addition and rebuilding.

2.3 During the previous survey of the church undertaken by the field team in 1988, reused Saxo-Norman stonework was discovered incorporated in the nave wall. This raised the possibility of the existence of a pre-Conquest church, such a structure is likely to have been wooden - the stone in question is of a shape to suggest that it derives from a free-standing cross - no other trace of which was discovered during the limited excavations of that year. A community certainly existed here before the conquest, being recorded in the Domesday Book (Herts. 31,1) as the village of Cheneperworde (Morris 1976). There was no mention of a priest in 1086, but this does not necessarily preclude a church.

2.4 The earliest part of the present church is the twelfth century nave; the chancel is of a later date. An inscription recorded in 1728 by Salmon, suggests a date of 1408. It is impossible to be certain of this dating although

it may be suggested that the original chancel was replaced by one built at this time.

2.5 The tower was built under the patronage of Sir John Hotoft, who owned Knebworth in the early fifteenth century, and whose death in c.1442/3 provides a *terminus ante quem* for its construction.

2.6 The north chapel was probably added in the early sixteenth century, as the arch giving access to it from the chancel is of this date (1520+/-10). In the early eighteenth century (1720+/-20) the chapel windows were replaced and a doorway blocked up. Contemporary with the alterations to the chapel are the buttresses on its north and west walls.

2.7 The last major structural changes took place in the mid- nineteenth century, when the chancel was demolished and apparently rebuilt on its old foundations, and the vestry was added to the north of the nave. A number of small changes have taken place during the twentieth century

### 3. Methodology

3.1 The archaeological recording was made possible in this instance by the cooperation of the builders. The recommendations outlined in the previous Knebworth report (No. 16, section 10) could not be enacted as work had begun prior to planning permission being received, and so in advance of any formal agreement regarding the archaeology.

3.2 The area of the new extension was cleaned and recorded after the drainage and foundation trenches had been excavated.

3.3 The water pipe trench was excavated using a mini digger with a 0.30m toothed bucket. The trench was excavated to a depth of 0.60m. No formal route had been planned for the trench baring the fact that it would give a wide berth to the church to avoid damaging foundations, without straying too far into the

known burial areas.

3.4 The machining was watched by one archaeologist whilst the other recorded previous finds. In this way the workmen were not unduly delayed.

3.5 The trench was planned by offset measurements from the church walls [Fig.4]; features discovered in the trench were located on this plan and additional detailed plans were drawn and heights recorded with reference to a temporary bench mark. Inhumations when disturbed, were cleaned, photographed and planned with the minimum of hand excavation required to elucidate posture and identify the bones present. The skeletons were then covered and backfilled. In the case of inhumation [06] the legs were only 0.26m below surface necessitating their removal after recording to

allow the trench to be excavated by hand to the required depth. The bones were then re-intered. The church warden, Mr. Staverly Harding, who visited the excavations on Tuesday, was unable to shed any light on the required procedure for re-intering human remains but suggested it was probably best to cover them as quickly as possible.

3.6 Due to the homogenous nature of the graveyard soil matrix and the narrow trench (section 4.2) it was impossible to distinguish the grave fills. Therefore finds associated with burials were assigned the context number allocated to the relevant skeleton as opposed to the general graveyard fill [12].

## 4. Results

### The vestry extension

4.1 The toilet and kitchenette were to be built adjoining the east wall of the vestry in an area neatly enclosed by the nave, the chapel wall and its eighteenth century brick buttress. The entrance was to be knocked through the east vestry wall. The other walls would be free-standing within the area, but the roof would continue the pitch of the main roof.

4.2 The concrete plinth that covered the south eastern corner of this area had already been removed, exposing the entrance steps leading to the 1855 boiler house which had been partially filled with rubble. Drainage and foundation trenches had been excavated through the remaining area leaving two upstanding triangular "islands" representing the original depth of stratigraphy, approximately 0.60m deep.

4.3 The area was recorded without the necessity to hold up the building work as the builders were about to leave as archaeological recording began.

4.4 The entrance to the boiler house consisted of two stair treads featuring decorative grey diamond cut tiles bounded by three retaining brick walls. Additional treads may have existed under the hard-core rubble partially filling this entrance. Above the stairs in the vestry wall a brick arch, no doubt led on to the brick vault ceiling of the boiler house, itself contemporary

with the vestry construction c.1855 (Matthews et al, 1992).

4.5 The remaining area had been used to store coal and was littered with debris from the boiler fire, indicated by layers stained with cinders and coal dust (mortar and rubble), [13], approx. 0.40m deep. This layer was in turn capped by rubble of mixed brick and tile, 0.20m deep [17]. The excavation of the pipe trenches effectively destroyed evidence of earlier foundation trenches except a possible cut seen running parallel to the nave wall. The material adjacent to the nave wall consisted of yellow sand and mortar [14] with the coal-dust and rubble matrix [13] running parallel.

4.6 All the walls apart from the brick buttress were rendered. The nave and the chapel wall had an applied footing or pediment of nineteenth century date, perhaps contemporary with the vestry. On the nave a flint dressing was visible beneath the brick coping. The mortar fill [14] within the trench skirting the nave wall would appear to be contemporary with this nineteenth century revetment rather than the original nave wall. The chapel revetment was rendered below the brick courses but the original wall material was visible where the pediment had crumbled.

4.7 The 1720's brick buttress foundations were 0.30m below the modern ground surface resting on a redeposited mixture of mortar, silt and 20% flints, [15] probably spread from

VESTRY WALL

BRICK BUTTRESS

A  
R  
C  
H  
W  
A  
Y

BUILDERS BACKFILL

RUBBLE

RUBBLE  
BUILDUP OF  
TILE & COAL  
DEBRIS

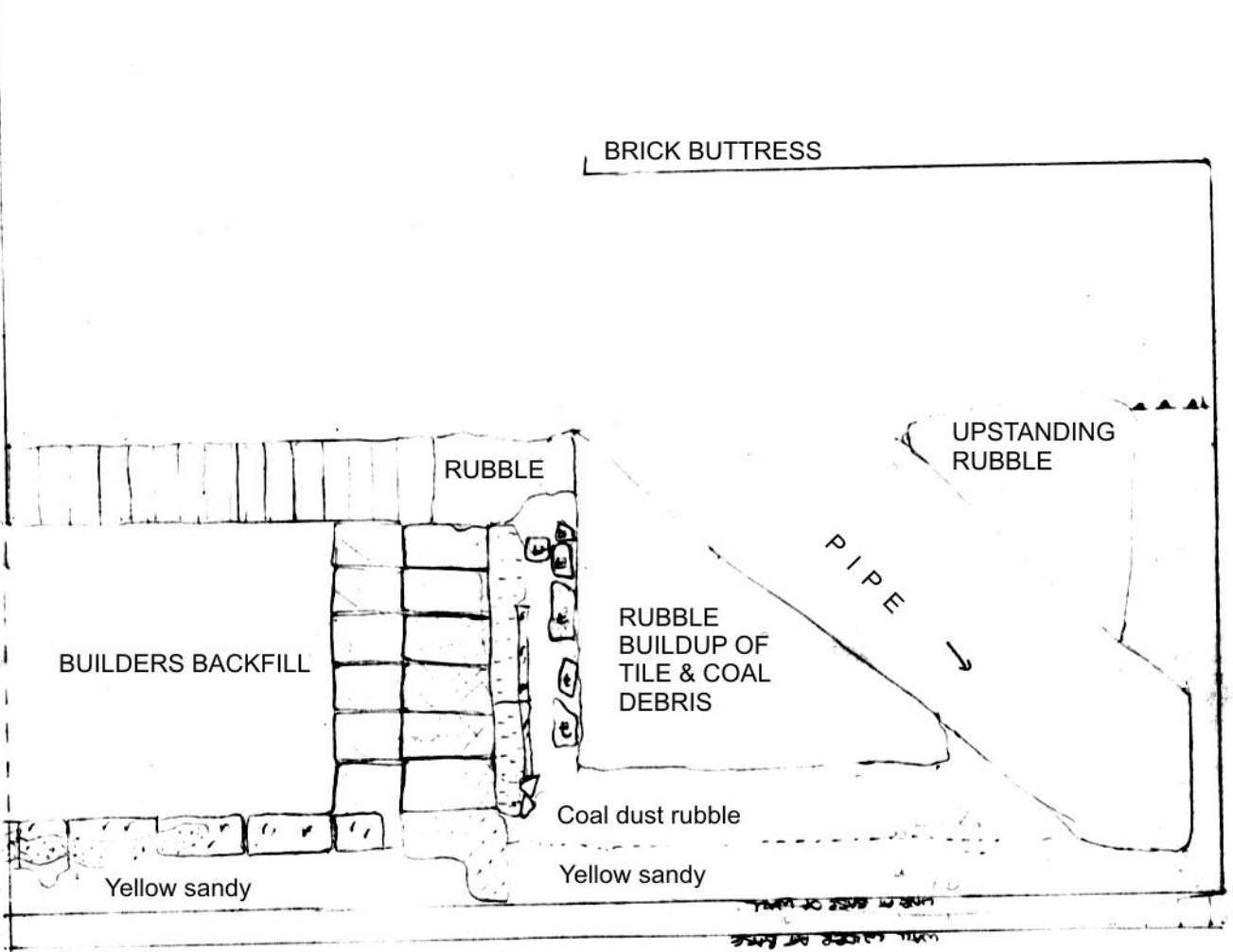
UPSTANDING  
RUBBLE

PIPE

Coal dust rubble

Yellow sandy

Yellow sandy



earlier church building activity, rather than deliberate foundations as the material was seen to be present in the base of the modern foundation trench.

4.8 It was hoped that an investigation of this area would further increase our knowledge of the phasing and dating of the church. The excavation of four 1m test pits at key points around the church in 1988 (Report 16) revealed significant deposits relating to the Mediaeval and post-Mediaeval structure. Unfortunately this area provided little additional information on the structural development of the church being largely disrupted in the mid-nineteenth century. However, since most of the new construction work on the foundations had been completed before the archaeologists were given an opportunity to make a record it must, unfortunately, remain uncertain as to whether any useful Mediaeval stratigraphy was destroyed by the new foundation trenches.

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## The graveyard

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4.9 The churchyard at Knebworth is typically undulatory in nature, to the north of the church it is fairly even but the area to the west and south rises away from the church. The pathways leading from the west to the tower, to the south porch and, from the porch to the tower form shallow hollow ways. It is not clear whether the yard has been lowered around the church, or, whether the area to the south and west has been raised in the past; probably the latter due to burial activities.

4.10 Graveyard soils are by their nature very heavily disturbed by the constant cutting of graves. The soil thus becomes homogenous making it extremely difficult in the case of the older burials to distinguish any change between the grave fill and that surrounding the grave.

4.11 At Knebworth the graveyard consisted of a shallow layer of turfed topsoil up to 0.20m

deep, then a mass of light yellow/brown sandy clays, [12] containing large flint nodules up to 0.15m long, with a relatively high proportion of tile debris.

4.12 Modern disturbance was rife throughout the churchyard, the water trench revealed a large number of modern service trenches containing drains, very shallow cuts containing electricity cables to the exterior lights, and the buried portion of a lightning conductor (Fig. 4).

4.13 The water pipe trench followed the line of an earlier modern drain for approximately 6m to the west of the tower. The excavation of the drain, to a depth of over 0.60m had obviously disturbed earlier burials. Scattered among the backfill were redeposited human remains. To the north of the church a modern (twentieth century) soakaway [02] contained large blocks of worked stone and clunch probably reused from the church. A sample of the stonework was retained.

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## Inhumations

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4.14 To the north of the church three burials were disturbed, (Fig 4). Inhumation [01], discovered at a depth of 0.64m, was articulated, orientated with the head to the west but prone (face down). This is unusual as early Christian lore dictated that the laity should be laid with the head to the west facing upwards, and the priests should be laid with their heads to the east. Thus at the resurrection priests would be facing the congregation which would face east. It can perhaps be tentatively suggested that burial [01] could be that of a suicide a theory borne out by the fact that the body was buried to the north of the church in an area that receives little sunlight and was therefore not a favoured burial plot, often reserved in the middle ages for miscreants and vagrants buried by the parish.

4.15 The right hand side of the skeleton was exposed. The skull was broken during excavation and the ulna and radius removed. The ribs, pelvis and part of the femur were exposed in situ, the size indicating a juvenile or female.

4.16 Inhumation [03] was located approx. 7m to the west near the tower. The right hand side of the skeleton was exposed in the trench, at a depth of 0.48m, with the lower leg and foot hidden in the section. It was decided to use the machine to remove approximately 0.30m of soil from the upper half of the body with the remainder to be removed by hand by the archaeologist. Unfortunately, the skull of a second skeleton [04] was discovered lying directly on the skull of the lower skeleton at a depth of only 0.32m. The skull [04] was damaged by the machine but as in the case of [01] it appeared to be lying prone, the rest of the skeleton remained undisturbed in the section. The lower skeleton [03] was orientated with its head to the west, supine (face up) and extended. The lower jaw did not contain any teeth nor were teeth sockets visible. Teeth were also missing from the upper jaw although the roof of the mouth had survived and was photographed with the lower jaw. The survival of the delicate bone but the absence of the teeth and sockets suggests that the lower teeth had been lost some years before death occurred; perhaps an elderly individual.

4.17 To the west of the church tower the trench followed the line of an earlier drainage trench with the excavation turning up the redeposited remains of one or more individuals. In a 7m stretch of trench a femur, a lower jaw, ribs, a metacarpal and patella were recorded and re-interred.

4.18 To the south of the church the trench was excavated through the gravel path leading from the south porch to the tower door. To the south of the tower two skeletons were located in close proximity to each other. Skeleton [05], at a depth of 0.44m, was represented by the tibia the fibula and part of the ankle (probably from the left leg). The epiphyseal union was not

fused at the top of the fibula indicating that the leg belonged to a young adult between 16-23 years.

4.19 Adjacent to [05], inhumation [06] was revealed being only 0.26m deep. The pelvis, sacrum and the right femur, tibia and fibular were present, though broken. The left femur had been partially removed by the machine, but the patella and lower leg seen in the section were still undisturbed. A fragment of sixteenth century pottery handle was recovered from the fill above this skeleton giving the earliest possible date for this burial.

4.20 Approximately 2.5m from [06] a further two skeletons were uncovered, [09] and [10].

4.21 [09] was the only skeleton to be associated with a coffin represented by two lines of gilded copper alloy studs, one course facing up, the other adjacent but facing down. Virtually all the studs were attached to small pieces of wood. Iron coffin nails were also recovered and an iron object removed from the baulk was found to be a coffin handle. Over 50 studs were recovered intermingled with the bones. The coffin can be tentatively dated to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. The bones, at a depth of 0.38m, appeared to be semi articulated possibly with a second individual present confusing the picture. The pelvis and the tops of the femurs were visible, a few disarticulated ribs were found in the trench and an articulated hand, probably the right hand adjacent to the pelvis. Protruding from the southern side of the trench side above the pelvis was an articulated rib cage. This was not excavated.

4.22 Inhumation [10] was discovered below and to the west of [09]. It consisted of a broken skull, a disarticulated lower jaw, part of the scapula and a broken humerus, 0.49m below the surface.

4.23 Two other inhumations were located, [11] a disarticulated skeleton represented by a skull fragment and part of a humerus perhaps belonging to a partially disturbed burial at a

deeper level. The remaining individual consisted of a few fragments of long bones located to the south west of the porch.

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## Structural Remains

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4.24 The 1988 investigation at St. Mary's clearly demonstrated that there were important surviving stratified archaeological deposits relating to the construction and development of the church. To avoid disturbing these deposits the trench was located away from the church walls. If the trench had followed the original wall line, the church would be divorced from the surrounding graveyard and any structural information contained within it. Without the provision for proper archaeological excavation this would have had a catastrophic effect on further research into the church's structural history. However, as the present day church is the result of many centuries of addition and rebuilding it was also possible that earlier phases would be represented in the churchyard.

4.25 To the north of the church near the vestry, foundations 0.40m wide and over 0.53m deep were discovered approximately 0.15m below the surface. This feature consisted of 40% large flint nodules and 60% yellow clayish sand, [16] similar to the foundation material beneath the eighteenth century buttress. The foundations orientated east west ran down the trench for

over 2m. The nature of the foundation material suggests that it is of a pre-eighteenth century date, being similar in nature to context [15] located beneath the brick buttress foundations which are known to have been constructed in the early 18th century. Tile fragments contained within the foundations were retained and checked against the tile series from 1988. Unfortunately the tile did not match the series so no absolute dating could be obtained.

4.26 To the south of the church porch a pair of footings were discovered 2.8m apart. Context [07] to the west of the porch entrance and at a depth of 0.35m was revealed as a section of flint and yellow mortar footings, compact in nature and orientated north south. It was truncated to the east by the insertion of an electric mains cable but was at least 0.40m wide. A sherd of pottery associated with the footing dates to the sixteenth century.

4.27 Further to the east a similar feature,[08], which existed at the same depth, was orientated SSW-NNE. A matrix of yellow sandy mortar and yellow/brown clay contained large flint nodules up to 0.20m in length. The footings were at least 0.40m - 0.50m deep and 0.50 - 0.60m wide.

4.28 The spacing of the footings is similar to that of the present day porch. From the location flanking the door in the nave wall it could be tentatively suggested that the footings represent an earlier porch of sixteenth century date.

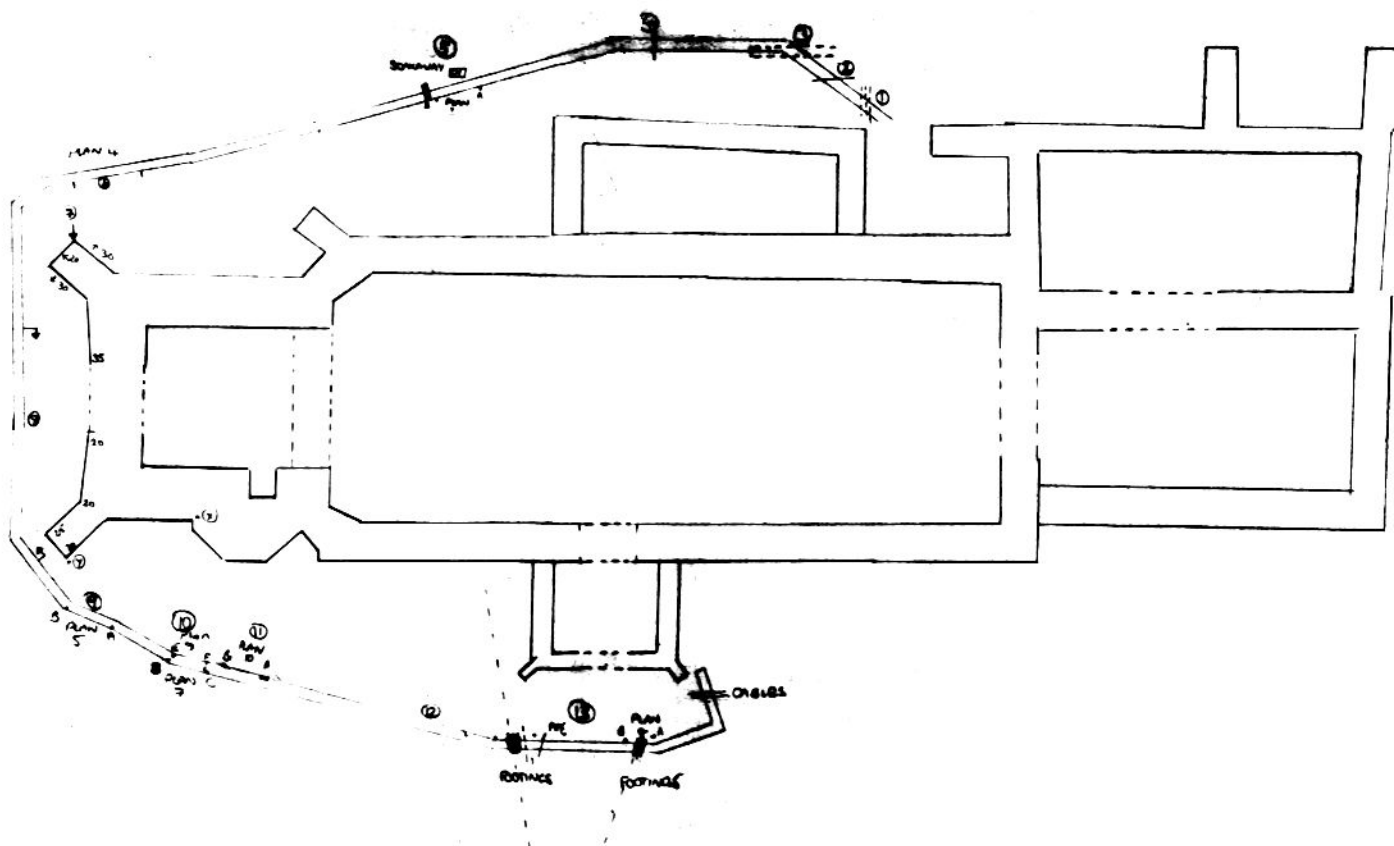
## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 The building work at Knebworth church although only small scale construction, is important in archaeological terms.

The excavations for the extension to the vestry exposed stratigraphy and wall foundations previously covered which, whilst not crucial to our understanding of the phasing and dating of the church, did further illuminate the building

techniques used in its construction.

5.2 The area had been used as a coal store, for raking out boiler waste and as an entrance to the stoke hole. However, archaeological excavation of this area may have revealed traces of the trenches relating to the original construction of the church which unfortunately appear to have been removed, unrecorded, by



#### Notes

- 1 3 Pipes. 2 drainage. Middle iron.
- 2 Lightning conductor.
- 3 Foundations 40 cm wide to a depth of at least 0.53 m below surface. Flint 40%/yellow sand 60%, occasional tile [Tile Sample 1].
- 4 3 electric cables c 20 cm below surface.
- 5 Skeleton [01] and soakaway.
- 6 Skeletons [03] and [04].
- 7 T.B.M. located on corner of outcropping wall.
- 8 Trench following line of earlier modern drain disturbed human remains - ribs, femur, jaw, finger, patella.
- 9 [05] and [06] skeletons.
- 10 Skeletons [09] and [10] with coffin remains.
- 11 Skeleton leg only.
- 12 Redeposited remains.
- 13 Footings.

the recent excavation of the new foundation and drainage trenches.

5.3 The excavation of the water pipe trench uncovered the remains of at least ten individuals, hardly remarkable within a graveyard but nevertheless is of historical interest. Only one skeleton [06], could be dated, and then only loosely by a sherd of 16th century pot handle. Inhumation [09] is probably later, perhaps eighteenth century, as fragments of a coffin survived. Both burials certainly pre-date the inception of the path which links the porch area to the tower. The date of the path is not known, however and it would be rather premature to suggest that this routeway is contemporary to the building of the porch during the seventeenth century or the tower during the fifteenth century.

5.4 It is tempting to suggest that the presence of two inhumations to the north of the church in the least favoured burial area, both buried in the prone position were suicides or other social outcasts of the middle ages, although such a theory could not be proven during the limited excavations which took place.

5.5 It is not necessarily the case that the burials disturbed by the water pipe trench were placed in unmarked graves. A survey of early gravestones carried out in 1988, when compared to a list of memorials recorded by W.B. Gerish some eighty years before, revealed that about forty-two memorials of earlier periods had been removed from the graveyard. The wooden markers, or "bedsteads" may well have decayed long since.

5.6 Foundations discovered to the north of the church may well be Mediaeval in date, perhaps the remains of an otherwise unknown north chapel, pre-dating the 16th century Lytton chapel. One sherd of pottery, dating to the 16th

century located with the foundations [07] to the south of the porch may be residual or redeposited during the excavation of a trench for the electricity cable which truncates this foundation. Although not parallel the foundations [07] and [08] do appear to be a pair perhaps indicating an earlier porch on the south side of the church, perhaps of a sixteenth century date.

5.7 The site for the deep flask septic tank was excavated just outside the current northern graveyard boundary. This area could possibly have once been part of the graveyard, or if not, probably within the pre-fourteenth century village settlement area. Unfortunately the excavation for the flask tank and the drain running from the toilet block was not monitored. The builders did not identify any human remains nor saw anything they could identify as structural during these excavations. However, the builders had not been informed of the possibility of shallow, unmarked graves and consequently were not observing the excavations for bone. Since no opportunity for archaeological recording was provided by those responsible, it is impossible to know what historic information has been lost from this area.

5.8 In spite of the limited nature of the work at Knebworth, and the lack of clear dateable evidence associated with the structural and human remains, the archaeological recording is important. It is apparent from the recent extension of pipe trenches and the insertion of the large septic tank as well as the service trenches located in the graveyard that piecemeal destruction is taking place and that valuable information concerning the historic development of the present church or its possible precursor is being lost without satisfactory archaeological recording.

## 6.0 Recommendations

6.1 It is both ironic and sad that despite the strong recommendations made in the previous report on the church of St. Mary and St. Thomas, with their explanation of the historical and archaeological significance of any ground disturbances, and despite the best efforts of the archaeologists to enable a full record to be made of the construction works, a situation was allowed to develop whereby planning legislation was pre-empted, and, in effect, the archaeological requirements largely by-passed; with the consequent loss of unique historical information.

6.2 This situation seems to have arisen through a combination of human error and lack of

communication. It can only be hoped that all those concerned - the Diocesan Advisory Committee, parish authorities, architects, planners and archaeologists - will set up systems to ensure that in future the kind of problems experienced at St. Mary and St. Thomas's, Knebworth may be avoided when historic churches are to be affected by construction work. Then hopefully, the archaeologists will be enabled to make full records before construction commences. This will allow a better understanding of the historic churches of the Diocese and their development which should be of interest to all concerned and the community at large.

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