

**Archaeological investigation at
St Nicholas' Church,
Copt Hall Lane,
Little Wigborough, Essex**

January 2019



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**commissioned by
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**on behalf of
St Nicholas' Parochial Church Council**

CAT project ref: 19/01i
NGR: TL 9810 1453 (centre)



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1 Summary

A programme of archaeological investigation was undertaken by Colchester Archaeological Trust at St Nicholas' Church, Copt Hall Lane, Little Wigborough, Essex in January 2019. The work was undertaken in advance of underpinning works.

One test-pit was observed by CAT, dug against the west wall of the nave and the south-west buttress of the church. The foundations recorded in this test-pit are similar in composition to the foundation observed in the 2005 evaluation (CAT Report 350), and appear to be the original 15th-century foundations of the building. The uniform foundations in this location also suggest the south-west buttress is original to the building.

2 Introduction (Fig 1)

This is the archive report on monitoring at St Nicholas' Church, Copt Hall Lane, Little Wigborough, Essex in advance of the start of repair works and underpinning to the church. The archaeological work was commissioned by David Whymark on behalf of St Nicholas' Parochial Church Council, and carried out by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) in January 2019. St Nicholas' Church can be found at the end of Copt Hall Lane in Little Wigborough. It is located on the edge of former saltmarsh, at NGR TL 9810 1453 (Fig 1).

The archaeological investigation was prompted by the excavation of a trial-hole adjacent to the church's foundations, intended to assess the level of structural damage prior to any repair work being undertaken.

All archaeological work was carried out according to standards and practices contained in the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (2014), *Management of research projects in the historic environment* (Historic England 2015), *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14) and *Research and Archaeology Revised: A Revised Framework for the East of England* (EAA 24).

3 Archaeological background

The following archaeological background draws on the Colchester Historic Environment Record (CHER) and the Essex Historic Environment Record (EHER).

The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments and others date the church to the 15th century (RCHME 1922, 175; Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 124). The church is uniformly built of small blocks of Kentish Ragstone ashlar. It is conjectured that the church is a complete 15th-century rebuild of an earlier church in or near the same location, and stands within this earlier building's pre-existing graveyard. Significant extensions or alterations after the 15th century and before the 19th century are not readily apparent.

CAT has undertaken two previous investigations at St Nicholas'. The first (in February 2005) consisted of a test-pit excavated in the interior of the church, in the north-western corner of the nave. This test-pit was dug to determine the cause of subsidence in this corner of the church. It exposed the base of the nave wall foundations at 1.55m below the present floor-level (CAT Report 308). The observed foundations consisted of coursed stones, mainly flint and septaria, and were unquestionably medieval. The test-pit also showed that the tower arch had been underpinned in brickwork. This underpinning would have followed the earthquake of 1884 during which the tower collapsed.

The second investigation by CAT was in November 2005. Four test-pits were dug around the exterior of the church, two to the north of the chancel and two to the south

of the nave and tower (Fig 2). These trial-holes were, again, intended to determine the cause of subsidence around the church (CAT Report 350). These test-pits showed that the church has extremely substantial foundations of Kentish Ragstone, particularly to the north (TP3 and TP4). Some of these foundations were found to have been underpinned with concrete. The foundations of the (demolished) south porch were also uncovered (in TP2). These foundations had been cut through by two late 18th-century graves, proving that the porch must have been demolished prior to this date. The test-pit to the south of the tower (TP1) uncovered brick underpinning (similar to the earlier phase of work inside the church; CAT Report 308). Also present in this test-pit was a layer of rubble which was postulated to belong to a building pre-dating the current church.

These previous phases of investigation have exposed several different phases of underpinning, constructed variously of concrete, Kentish Ragstone and brickwork. The original foundations of the church were also exposed, consisting of Kentish Ragstone laid in lime mortar.

The extent of work undertaken on the church after the 1884 earthquake is uncertain. The upper part of the tower has clearly been rebuilt in septaria, as have the gables at the west end of the nave on either side of the tower and the gable of the east wall of the chancel. The brick underpinning observed in various test-pits is also likely the result of the post-1884 restoration work, but there is the possibility that other aspects of the church may also date from this period. For example, it has been suggested that the entire tower may have been rebuilt and some of the buttresses on the north and east sides of the church could have been added to the building at this time (CAT Report 350, 2).

Historically the church has been subject to movement before the earthquake of 1884. Cracks on the south side of the church were noted in 17th-century visitations (Essex Record Office D/ACV 5 f.30v; D/ACV 9E f.70), and were probably the impetus for some of the earlier underpinning.

Subsequent to the repairs associated with the 1884 earthquake, several other phases of repairs have been undertaken in the 20th century. The chancel is recorded as being underpinned in 1903 (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 124), and a crack in the north-eastern corner of the church was repaired in 1997 (Morton Partnership report 2005, 3). The north-west corner of the church was substantially underpinned in 2005 (CAT Report 350). Despite all these repairs the church still has significant structural problems. Most prominently the south wall of the nave has moved outwards at the south-western corner, and a large crack has formed between the nave and the south-west buttress.

4 Aims

The archaeological investigation was undertaken to determine the nature of and record the foundations of the church exposed in the test-pit.

5 Results (Figs 2-3)

The single test-pit was located against the exterior western wall of the nave, adjacent to the west of south-west buttress (Fig 2). It measured 1.5 x 0.6m in size and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.1 below the current ground level. It partially overlapped with the position of TP1 from CAT Report 350 (Fig 2).

Excavation occurred through two layers. A modern topsoil (L1, c 0.2m thick, soft, dry, dark brown/black sandy-silt) sealed L2 (a firm, moist, medium brown sandy-clay silt with abundant mortar flecks). As with the previous investigations on the site, L2 is interpreted as a working layer, probably deposited during repair work to the church post-1884 (CAT Report 350, 3).

The exposed west nave and buttress wall foundation (F15) consisted of much the same material as observed in the 2005 (Fig 3). The foundations were a uniform vertical face of Kentish Ragstone bonded in lime mortar. Two small fragments of peg-tile were also observed within the foundations fabric. The full depth of the foundation was not reached in the test-pit, but it is known to be 1.35m deep based on previous investigation (CAT Report 350).

As postulated in 2005, these appear to be the original 15th-century footings of the church.



Photograph 1 Test-pit showing foundation of nave and south-west buttress. Substantial crack in wall visible to left. Photograph taken facing east.

6 Finds

No archaeological finds were recovered.

7 Discussion

This investigation, although limited in its scope, seems to corroborate the conclusions of the 2005 test-pit evaluation (CAT Report 350). The exposed foundation is identical in composition to the one observed in TP1 in 2005, where it was interpreted as the original 15th-century foundation of the church.

Two further points can be made based on the results of this investigation. First, the layer of rubble observed within TP1 in 2005 and postulated to be associated with a building that pre-dates the church was not present within the 2019 test-pit. This may be because of the shallower depth reached during this investigation or it may have been misidentified in 2005. Second, the continuous nature of the nave and buttress foundation proves that the south-west buttress is original to the church and not a later addition.

8 Acknowledgements

CAT thanks David Whymark for commissioning the investigation and St Nicholas' Parochial Church Council for funding the work. The project was managed by C Lister and carried out by M Baister. Figures were prepared by E Holloway and C Lister. The project was monitored by CBCAA Jess Tipper.

9 References

Note: all CAT reports, except for DBAs, are available online in PDF format at <http://cat.essex.ac.uk>

CAT Report 308	2005	<i>A watching brief at St Nicholas' Church, Little Wigborough, Essex February 2005</i> by C. Crossan
CAT Report 350	2005	<i>An archaeological evaluation at St Nicholas' Church, Copt Hall Lane, Little Wigborough, Essex November 2005</i> by K. Orr and H. Brooks
CIfA	2014	<i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>
DCLG	2012	<i>National Planning Policy Framework</i>
Gurney, D	2003	<i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> . East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 14 (EAA 14).
Historic England	2015	<i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment (MoRPHE)</i>
RCHME	1922	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England, <i>An inventory of the county of Essex, vol 3, North-East Essex</i>
Rodwell, W, & Rodwell, K	1977	<i>Historic churches – a wasting asset</i> , Council for British Archaeology Research Report 19
Medlycott, M	2011	<i>Research and archaeology revisited: A revised framework for the East of England</i> . East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Papers 24 (EAA 24)
The Morton Partnership	2005	<i>Structural assessment to parts of St Nicholas' Church, Little Wigborough, Essex</i> , unpublished report

10 Abbreviations and glossary

CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust
CBCAA	Colchester Borough Council Archaeological Advisor
CHER	Colchester Historic Environment Record
CIfA	Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
context	specific location of finds on an archaeological site
EHER	Essex Historic Environment Record
feature (F)	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a drain: can contain 'contexts'
layer (L)	distinct or distinguishable deposit (layer) of material
medieval	period from AD 1066 to c 1500
modern	period from c AD 1800 to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid Reference
OASIS	Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations, http://oasis.ac.uk/pages/wiki/Main
Section	(abbreviation sc or Sx) vertical slice through feature/s or layer/s

11 Contents of archive

Finds: n/a

Paper and digital record

One A4 document wallet containing:

The report (CAT Report 1375)

Original site record (feature and layer sheets, plans)

Site digital photos and log, architectural plans, attendance register, risk assessment

12 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Roman Circus House, Roman Circus Walk, Colchester, Essex, CO2 7GZ.

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Distribution list

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Appendix 1 Context list

Context number	Context type	Description	Date
L1	Topsoil	Soft, dry, dark black/brown sandy-silt	Modern
L2	Working layer	Firm, moist, medium brown sandy-clay silt with abundant mortar flecks	19th century

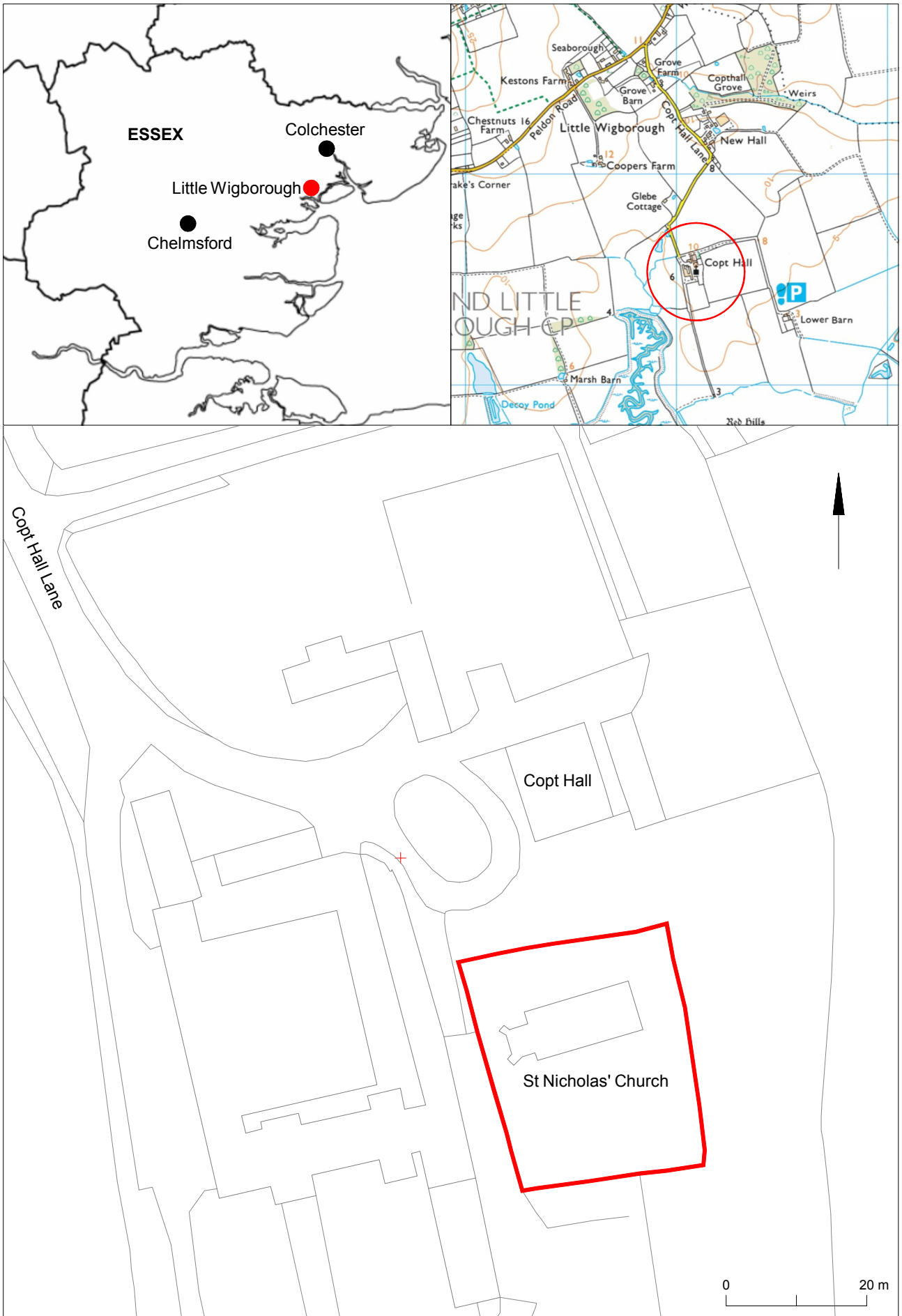


Fig 1 Site location.

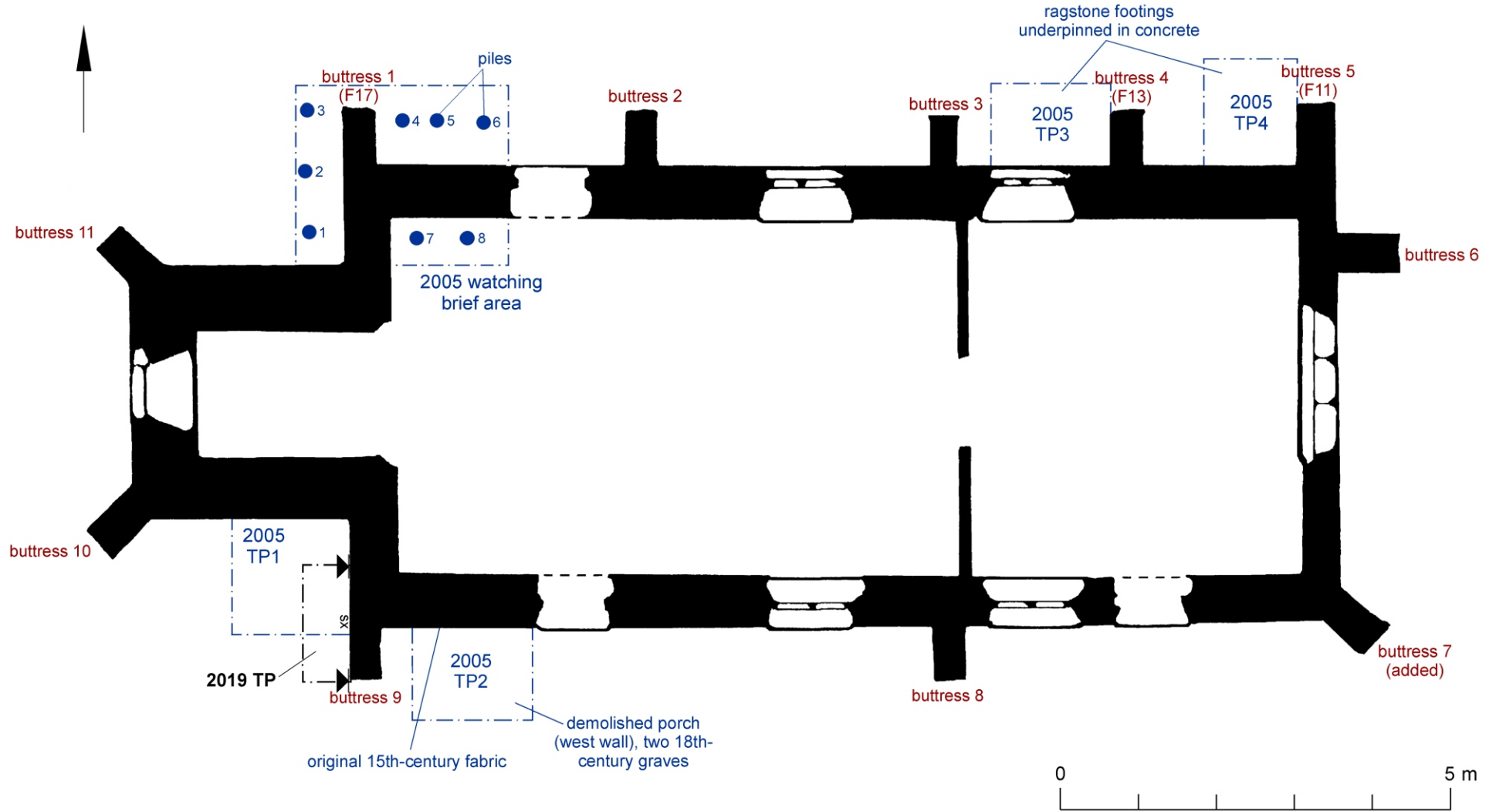


Fig 2 Plan of the church showing test-pit location and areas investigated in 2005 (in blue).

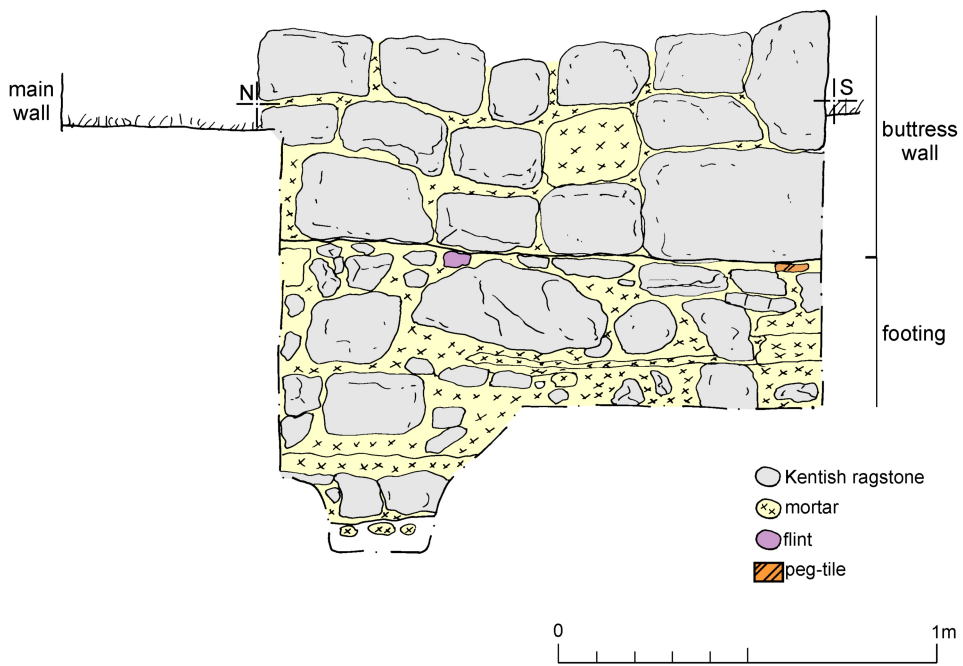


Fig 3 Representative section.