

East Stoke: The Archaeology of the Old Church of St Mary

This is the second of two reports relating to research and fieldwork at the site of the Old Church of St Mary, East Stoke (see Hewitt, Russell and Manley 2009). These investigations were undertaken in conjunction with the East Stoke Heritage and Archaeological Group. This paper presents the results of limited non-intrusive archaeological fieldwork.

The Old Church is approximately 2.6km west of Wareham and 1.2 km east of Wool. At Stokeford, on the south side of the A352 (NGR 387250 087100), stands the early nineteenth-century Church of St Mary the Virgin, immediately beyond which a minor road crosses the Poole to Weymouth railway, and bridges the River Frome.. The settlement of Stoke where the site of the ruined Old Church can be found, is ca 300m northwest of Manor Farm.

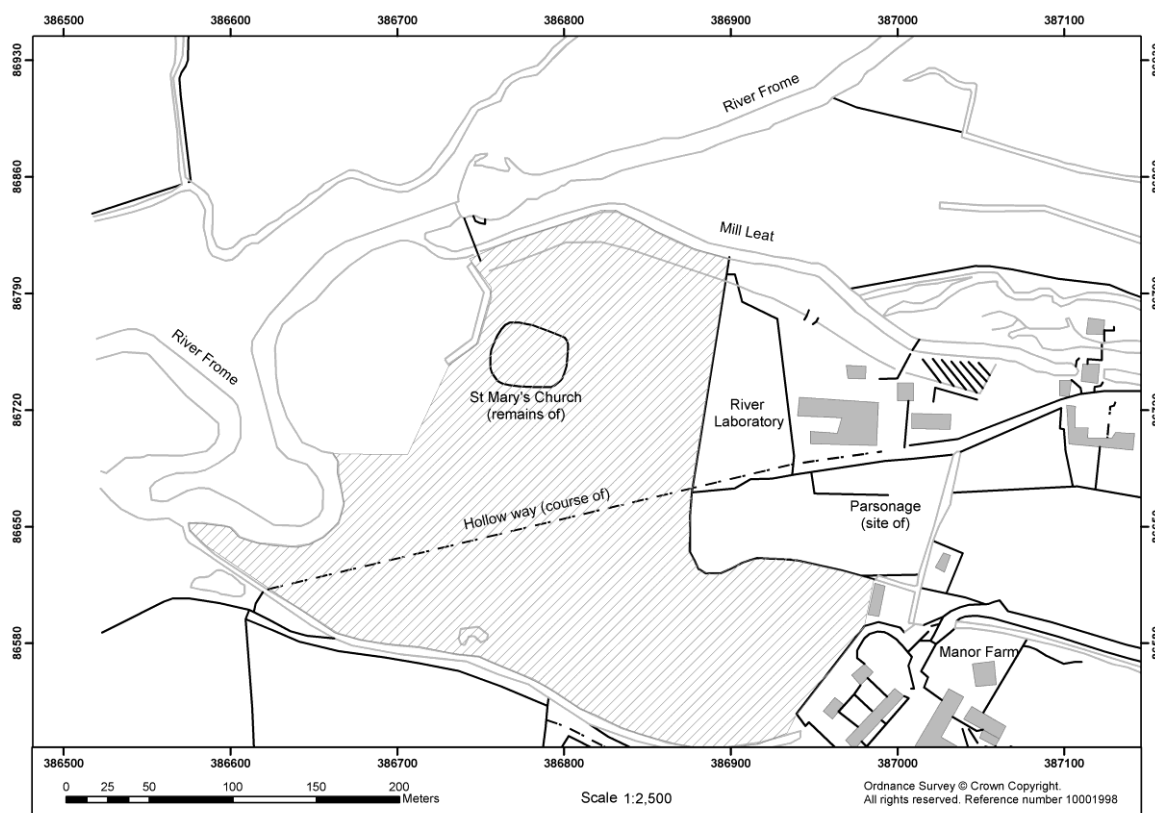


Figure 1: *The location of East Stoke Old Church relative to extant buildings.*

Investigation of the Old Church site

Sample excavation of the Old Church site was considered but rejected for three reasons:

1. The church and churchyard constitute a time capsule of parish life that extends from ca AD 1300 or earlier. Interpretation of this invaluable resource would be seriously jeopardised by a sampling strategy based upon test pits and trenches.
2. Opportunities for geophysical survey of the site and its context was limited by ground conditions. As a consequence it was not possible to construct a viable project design for excavation of all or part of the site.
3. The cost of excavation lay outside the scope of the available budget.

Given the above constraints, an application for Scheduled Monument Consent for excavation of the Old Church or its periphery could not be justified.

Topographical survey

During September / October 2003, a topographic survey of St Mary's Old Church and Stoke Meadow was carried out using a Leica GPS 500 differential global positioning system (GPS). Data was collected using a resolution not greater than 5m x 5m. The positions of the extant church remains and the gravestones were also recorded and mapped. The site was revisited after the GPS survey in order to carry out visual inspection of the monument. The results of the survey revealed a number of features in addition to the Old Church and its churchyard.

The survey was constrained by the thick vegetation that covers much of the site (Figure 4). Much of the ground vegetation is bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) and stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*). These were particularly problematical within the area of the surviving section of the south wall of the church. Additionally, a number of saplings are invading the site, notably elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and these caused obstruction to measurement (Phillips 1977). The remaining walls of the church, particularly the junction between

the south wall and the east wall of the south porch, have been invaded by ivy (*Hedera helix*) which obscured, and made inaccessible, a substantial area of the surviving fabric. Consequently, it was not possible to determine the ground plan of the Old Church beyond previous estimates (Hewitt *et al* 2009, 36).

Earthworks

St Mary's Old Church is situated in Stoke Meadow where a number of earthworks can be seen. The former purpose of some of these earthworks is certain because they have identifiable functions that have been recorded in documentary sources, such as the mill leat and water meadows. Even so, none of these features has been securely dated. The extent to which the Old Church was ever central to a nucleated settlement is a vexed issue. Good (1979, 59) classifies Stoke as an existing village that has undergone change. In saying this, Good is not necessarily using the term *village* to make a case for nucleation, but he does go on to suggest that some of the earthworks in Stoke Meadow could be house platforms.

The mill leat

The leat is represented as a section of a deep east / west negative feature (Figure 1)

Paths and routeways

South of the mill leat is the churchyard which is shown in Figure 1. The survey indicates that the churchyard was approached by two paths, one from the east, and the other from the southeast. The east / west path began at Stoke Mill. This path is easy to detect in the field until it reaches the churchyard where it merges with the boundary ditch of the churchyard (Figure 2). The second path emerges from the northwest end of the Parsonage / Glebe plot and connects directly to the east end of the churchyard. It is reasonable to suppose that this second path is what remains of the parson's path to the church but it also connects to a pronounced hollow way which lies to the south of the two paths discussed above. It represents the former spur road from Bindon Lane to Stoke. From the east, this road originated at Stoke

Mill and ran alongside the northern boundary of the Parsonage / Glebe plot where it survives as a public footpath. From the Parsonage plot, the road continues westwards where it is lost within a drainage channel.

Sub-rectilinear feature

At the west end of the survey, just south of the point at which the hollow way merges with the drainage channel, there is a substantial feature comprising two earthen banks (Figure 2). The close proximity of this feature to the hollow way might be significant. Visual inspection suggests that it is a platform although it bears a close resemblance to an enclosure on the GPS survey. Good (1979, 59) mentions the presence of house platforms in Stoke Meadow but he was not specific about their precise location. It is possible that this 'enclosure' feature was what he had in mind. Interpretation is not possible without excavation.

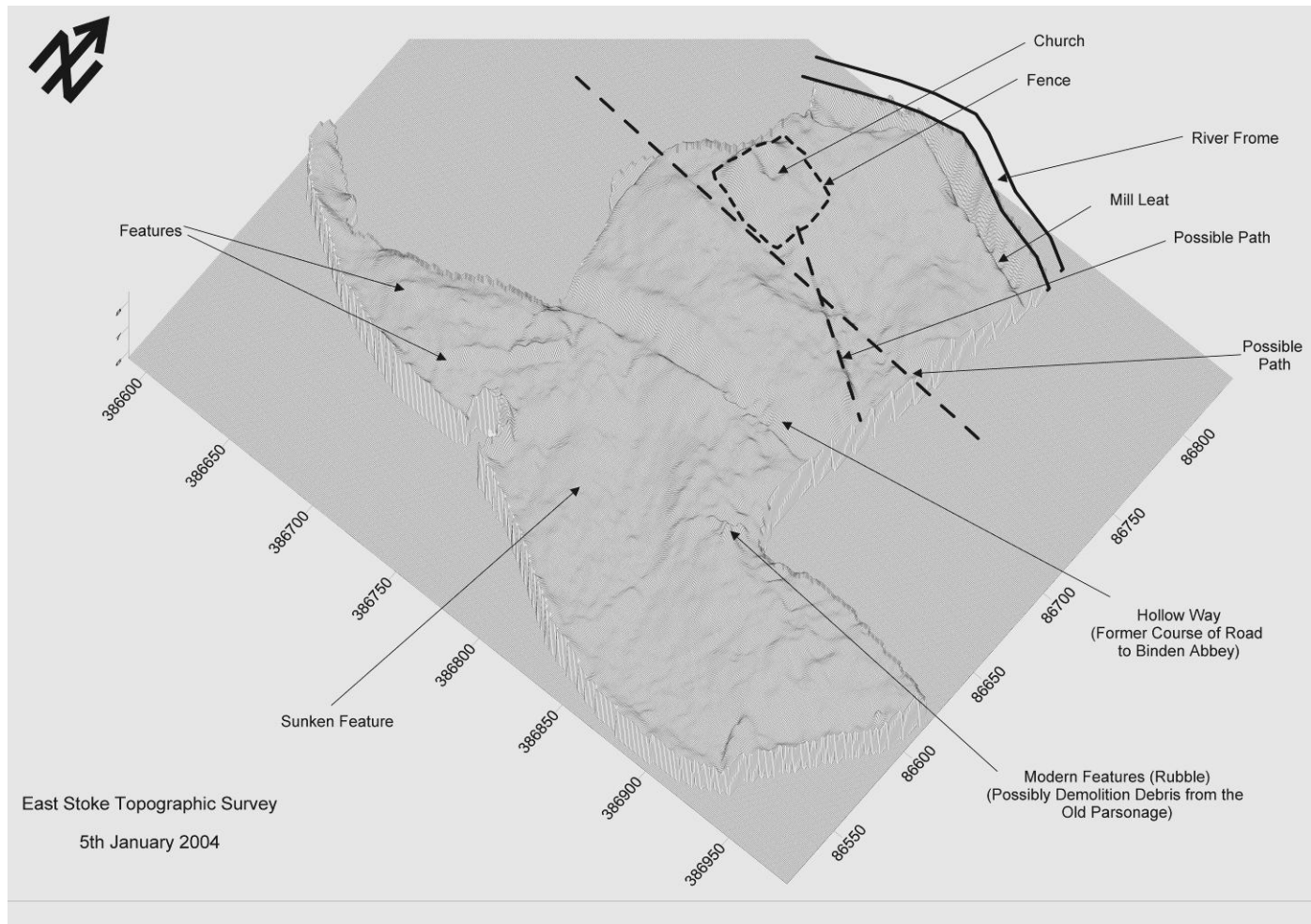


Figure 2: *Results of the GPS survey of Stoke Meadow.*

Modern features include a grassed-over rubble heap near to the southwest corner of the Parsonage plot. The precise nature of this material is not known although it may represent demolition debris from the Old Parsonage or from the forerunner of Manor Farmhouse (once Stoke Farm).

Water meadow features are not obvious in Stoke Meadow although it is known that it was seasonally flooded (Dorset County Council D/BOH: E49). The GPS survey detected traces of series of parallel linear features to the southeast of Stoke Meadow that run up to the southern boundary of the Parsonage plot. It is quite possible that these linear features were water meadow carriers. A continuous ditch that may have acted as a drain for the carriers defines the perimeter of the Parsonage plot. Possible traces of other carriers to the south of the hollow way were noted during a site inspection in the aftermath of heavy rain.

The Old Church and churchyard The churchyard is demarcated by a boundary ditch (Figure 2). Within the churchyard the Old Church is off-centre towards the west. The floor of the building is a rectilinear hollow surrounded by a raised perimeter that represents the residual walls of the structure. Other numerous undulations within the churchyard bear witness to successive generations of grave-digging. Negative features to the south of the church may indicate the position of a path to and from the south porch. A path on this alignment would be consistent with the arrangement of the 17th and 18th century gravestones in this area.

Wall fabric

The third edition of Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1861, 422) describes the Old Church of St Mary as a small church with chancel and tower. However, this description would have applied to the church as described in the first edition of Hutchins work (1774) and not to the 1861 edition by which time St Mary had been almost wholly demolished. Today, there are no above ground remains of the chancel or tower. The north, east and west walls have gone too. All that remains are sections of the south porch, and a section of the south nave wall adjacent to and east of the porch. The church has been dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments 1970, 274) but the surviving wall fabric suggests a different story.

The remaining south wall stands at ca 3.0m maximum height though precision of measurement was prevented by ivy cover. The wall is of rubble construction, a material that was probably accessed locally from the Bagshott Beds and which includes fragments of Carstone (Heathstone). Examination of the nave interior suggests that this was finished with a lime plaster. However, the abutting porch wall consists of rough-finished limestone blocks (Figures 3 and 4) and differences between the materials used and the construction techniques employed, suggests that there is a chronological divide between the two surviving components of the church. No architectural features remain in the south wall of the nave and so the time lapse between the building of the nave and the porch can only be guessed at (Hewitt *et al* 2009, 36-7).

The visual survey revealed that the south elevation of the porch, east of the entry arch, shows signs of reconstruction. Close to the ground is a slab-like stone that seems to be out of place in a vertical position (Figure). Furthermore, it is a limestone of a slightly different hue to other component stones of the porch. This, together with apparent re-cutting lines of the stone blocks immediately above it, suggests that the porch had been re-assembled having formerly graced a previous site, perhaps either of the monastic

houses of nearby Bindon Abbey and East Holme Priory after their Dissolution in 1539.

Scratch dial (mass dial)

The south face of the east porch wall has an unpublished scratch, or mass dial upon its surface, incised into a single limestone block (Figure 3). Mass dials are pre-Reformation features and so this example is likely to be contemporary with the erection of the porch in the 15th or 16th centuries (Friar 1996, 437-8). If the porch was imported from another site then this scratch dial is a fairly late example because it is perfectly positioned for its purpose and it is not a re-used feature. In common with many dials of its type, the East Stoke example comprises an incised horizontal line (220mm) that passes through a central hole (ca 25mm diameter) that also served as the socket for the gnomon. The socket is the starting point for 6 (possibly 8) radiates arranged in protractor fashion and spaced at approximately 15 degree intervals. Each radiate is of ca 110mm length. At a point roughly midway between the fourth and fifth radiates from the left, and ca 600mm beneath them, a peg hole has been impressed into the mortar between two stone blocks. Clearly, this peg hole is part of the dial and probably indicates the time at which mass was to be performed.

Carved into the stone block immediately below the scratch dial are the letters ED, the largest of the letters being 75mm in height. The incisions are of both letters are approximately 15mm in width. One block further down has been incised with two further sets of letters: TH and, immediately beneath, RH. The style and size of engraving is much the same as the ED above which suggests that all three may be contemporary. However, the letter R is by far the most pronounced at 120mm in length. A date for the graffiti cannot be determined but all of the letters are indicative of an unskilled style that would not be out of place from the late 19th century through to the mid twentieth century.

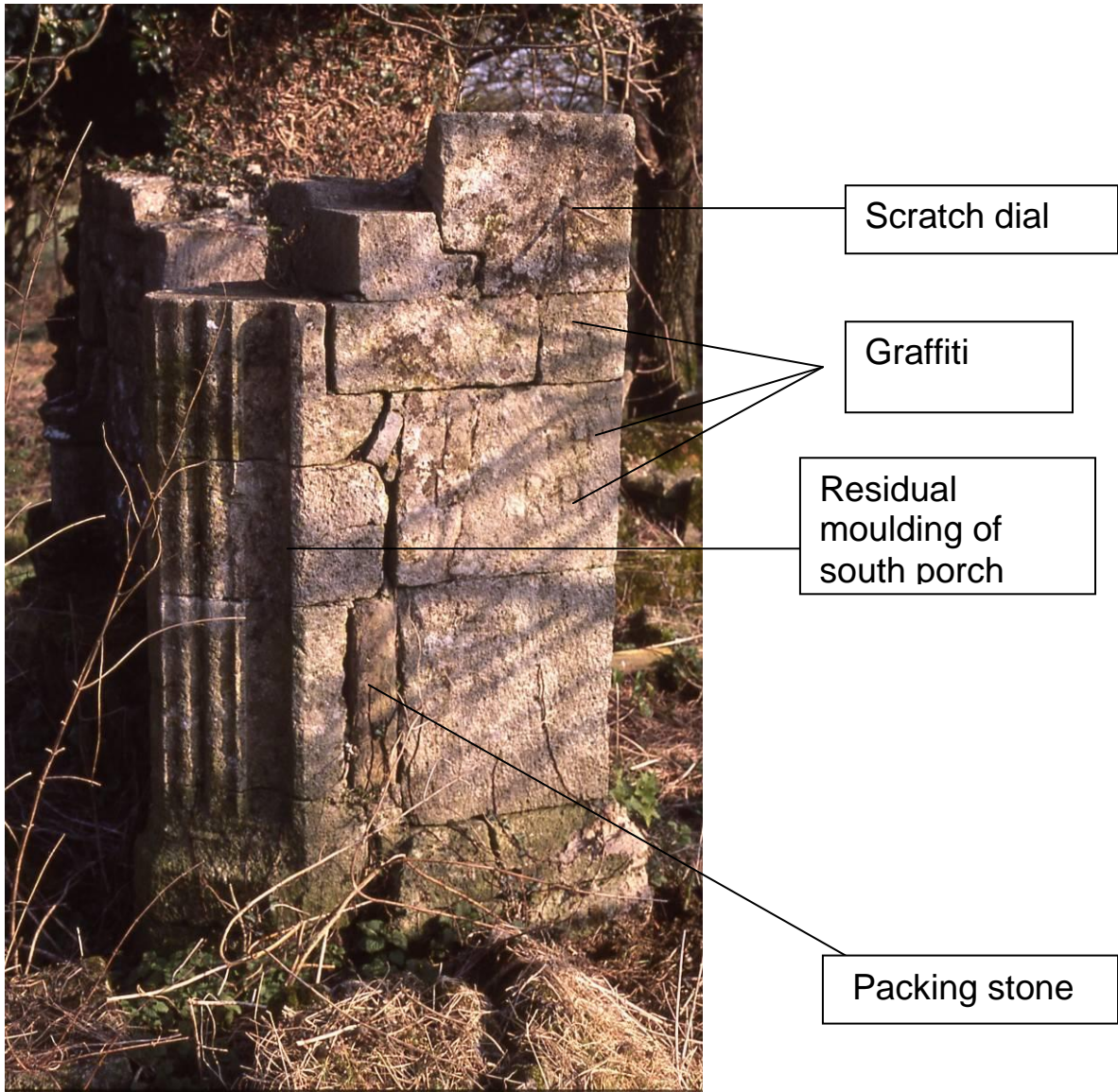


Figure 3: *Southeast wall of south porch showing features as described. The porch sits on a plinth finished in a single sunken chamfer (Child 2008: 39).*

In common with other church porches of the 15th or 16th centuries, the south-east interior of the porch contains a holy water stoup at the point where the latch of the nave door would have been. This example is constructed from three limestone blocks, of the same geological origin as the porch. It has a chamfered arched head with an octagonal base underneath which a flat stone has been removed. The central pillar is cylindrical and has annulets at either end. The bowl is incomplete, about 50% of it having been broken away.

However, sufficient of the bowl remains as to suggest that originally it was circular and of ca 250mm depth.

Bench-seating

The porch also contains stone bench-seating. On the east wall this feature remains almost complete but there are traces of it on the west side too. This seating would have been for the use of the Church Wardens and other parochial worthies (Figure 4). Above and centre, the remaining wall dips downwards. This was the position of a quatrefoil window that has vanished since it was recorded by the Royal Commission (1970, 274-5). The creeping incursion ivy is self-evident.



Figure 4: *Interior east wall of the south porch showing the relative locations of the stoup (left) and the stone bench. The dip in wall above indicates the former position of the quatrefoil window. Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is firmly rooted into the top of the fabric.*

The south porch arch

Only the lowest levels of the south porch arch survive in position (Figures 3 and 4). Other component stones lie scattered around the site of the arch with no indication that any are missing.

Chest tombs

Three chest tombs are known to have formerly stood within the churchyard of the Old Church. The remains of two of these are to the north-east of the church where they must have been either very close to the nave or the chancel. A third chest tomb formerly stood at a point close to the south porch where two end slabs are the only identifiable remains. These end slabs are of limestone and each one has a single decorated side. One panel has a cartouche within which is the image of a cherub in relief. The other has a similar cartouche also with an image in relief but this time of a skull within a wreath.

Conclusion

The high archaeological potential of the churchyard hardly needs stressing. However, it would not be safe to assume that the churchyard boundary defines the limit of the archaeological resource. Zadora-Rio (2003) has demonstrated that Early Medieval cemeteries could contract upon a focal point, such as a church. Such a phenomenon could give rise to earlier burials becoming 'stranded' outside the limits of a Later Medieval churchyard. In order to ascertain the nature of the wider context of the Old Church, consideration will need to be given to other investigative techniques including geophysical survey.

Of concern are feature stones of the Old Church that remain within the surviving fabric and scattered about the churchyard. These would also include the fine late eighteenth and early nineteenth century headstones that align the pathway to the south porch. The comparatively recent loss of the quatrefoil window from the east wall of the porch indicates that feature stones of this type are attractive and therefore vulnerable to theft. The scratch dial is

particularly susceptible. Future management of the site needs to take this issue into account.

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