

# AN EMERGENCY EXCAVATION AT APPLEBY MAGNA CHURCH, LEICESTERSHIRE

*by*

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## *Introduction*

In June 1975 it became known that the Parochial Church Council of Appleby Magna was about to embark, on the advice of its architects, on a campaign to alleviate the dampness in the outer walls of the church of St Michael and All Angels. A major item in this campaign was to be the improvement of the exterior drainage by the excavation of a trench for a perforated plastic pipe around the walls of the church; the proposed trench was to be approximately 0.50 m. (1 ft 8 in.) wide and up to 1.00 m. (3 ft 3 in.) deep, and dug directly against the north and south aisle walls, following a sinuous route to avoid the buttresses. From the archæological point of view this proposal constituted a threat of the most serious kind, to which attention has been drawn in a recent publication of the Council for Places of Worship.<sup>1</sup>

The church, consisting of west tower, aisled nave and rectangular chancel with north chapel, is datable on art historical grounds to the fourteenth century,<sup>2</sup> though it is possible that the fabric, even of the north and south aisles, is of earlier date than the arcades and fenestration. It is not possible to investigate the structural history of the church visually; the interior is plastered and emulsion-painted, and the external masonry gives every appearance of homogeneity. As the excavation was to prove, however, there is clear evidence—both archæological and documentary—that there was on at least one occasion substantial, albeit local, interference with the south aisle wall; the fabric has been sufficiently tidied up to leave no superficial trace of this, and it is quite possible that further structural changes have taken place, but cannot be recognized merely by looking at the masonry. Apart from the possible pre-fourteenth-century history of the church, the extent of restorations in 1827-32 and 1870-71 is not fully known.<sup>3</sup>

The potential value of any stratigraphic information, particularly of possible construction levels, was thus regarded as high, and the threat to the external archæology that much the more serious. In his capacity as Diocesan Archæological Consultant, the writer, in consultation with the Chairman of the Leicester Diocesan Advisory Committee, decided to excavate a trial trench in advance of impending contractors' activity in order to assess the actual nature of the evidence, with the ultimate aim of delaying the work should that prove necessary. The excavation lasted four days in

June and July; Leicestershire Museums kindly made available some tools and two assistants for three days.

*The trial trench*

The area investigated was approximately 3.00 m. (9 ft 10 in.) square. It was laid out at right angles to the south aisle in the third bay and incorporated the third buttress from the west (Fig. 1). The position was chosen in the hope of obtaining maximum specific as well as general information; the trench was adjacent to the assumed site of a vanished south porch shown in Schnebelie's engraving of 1790,<sup>4</sup> and it was hoped to assign the building and demolition of this porch to their correct chronological positions in the history of the church fabric. Despite the existence of a faculty of 1827, attached to which is a most detailed specification, there is some doubt as to whether the porch was demolished during this restoration or at some other time; the faculty plan at ground level shows the porch *in situ* and the south door unblocked, and the specification indicates only that the north door was to be walled up. Another plan of the church shows seating different only in detail from that specified in the faculty, but buttresses are shown in place of the porch walls and a window in place of the south door. This plan is unfortunately not dated, but is drawn on paper watermarked 1829. It is therefore likely, though not actually provable, that the porch was demolished in the course of this restoration, although permission to do so had been neither sought nor granted.<sup>5</sup> It was anticipated that an excavation in the position chosen might clarify this point.

Immediately below the topsoil was found a recent gravel path which ran parallel to the south aisle wall just outside the line of the buttresses. In the south-west corner of the trench was the foot of a grave or part of a pit filled with stiff clay. Over most of the trench the subsoil was a much disturbed brown earth which merged almost imperceptibly with clay as the depth of the trench increased; it was heavily mixed with mortar and building debris of no special character. A strip down the west side of the trench, approximately the same width as the buttress, was distinguishable as having a much higher concentration of building material, especially mortar, and appeared to be the fill of a robber trench. When emptied, this feature proved to overlie wall footings made up of irregular limestone slabs and smaller fragments, which projected from the south aisle wall at an oblique angle (see Fig. 2). At the north end two large slabs (D), partly underlying the buttress, formed the sole remains of an upper course on these footings. In the southern part of the trench an eastward projection was composed of rather smaller stone fragments. The clay-filled feature noted above had cut through these footings on the west side.

This masonry is interpreted as the east wall of the destroyed south porch, and the eastward projection as its buttress. Assuming the latter to be a corner buttress, almost the full extent of the porch wall is now known, although its width is uncertain. It appears to be secondary to the aisle wall, although this is not stratigraphically demonstrable, as will be explained below. The structure of the porch wall, at least in its lowest course, is rather different from

that of the aisle with its two projecting foundation courses (A and B/C on Fig. 2) of mainly regular stone blocks. There is no sign that the outer part of the lower of these courses (C) was represented in the porch wall, and the upper and innermost course (A) appears to continue its east-west line under the aisle buttress.<sup>6</sup> It is possible to argue that the slabs immediately above the porch footings (D) equate with the inner part of the lower aisle foundation course (B) and that the next course of porch walling might have been set back to correspond with the upper aisle foundations (A). Since the slabs (D) are not set back on their foundations, however, this does not make the two fabrics sufficiently similar to argue for their contemporaneity. But it is impossible to be dogmatic about the masonry since so little was exposed and since both porch and aisle walls had been disturbed by grave-digging and other activities. It remains likely, however, that the break in course C was caused by the insertion of the porch wall. The porch buttress, on the other hand, is decidedly rubble-built, and thus quite dissimilar from the aisle masonry, so that if an argument for a primary porch were to be sustained, the buttress would have to be regarded as additional to it. There was no archaeological evidence for such an assumption.

The solution to the relationship of the porch and the aisle lay potentially in the area immediately to the east of the aisle buttress. It had, unfortunately, been subjected to two local disturbances. The later of these was a grave dug through the mixed earth and debris layer immediately against the aisle foundations, thus destroying any possible evidence of construction layers or foundation trench. At the head of the grave there was still a small area which might have been informative, but this had previously been confused by the earlier of the two disturbances. Fig. 2 shows that there is a gap in the outer course of the south aisle foundation (C). This gap had been filled with hard-packed clay. It was not clear whether the stone(s) had been removed from the aisle foundations when the porch was constructed or at some other time. The disturbances in this area (including that described below) and the wet conditions in the lower part of the grave made it difficult to interpret the relationship between the clay filling the gap and the predominantly clay soil flanking the porch wall footings. The latter was probably the fill of the foundation trench for the porch wall, but it was not possible to be certain whether the former was part of the same fill. The presence of the grave made it impossible to relate the porch foundation trench to that of the aisle wall. The secondary nature of the porch, which is likely, could not therefore be proved.

What was clear is the chronological position of the aisle buttress. As Fig. 2 shows, its south end rests upon the largest slab of the demolished porch wall; the buttress cannot therefore have been built before the demolition. It is probably safe to assume that this took place in the course of the 1827-32 restoration of the church, and the details of the masonry indicate what a careful restoration that was. The buttress concerned is superficially so similar to its medieval companions along the south aisle that only close inspection in the light of the excavation evidence reveals the differences in the cutting and laying of the stonework. As mentioned in the introduction,

there are no apparent traces of structural alteration in the aisle fabric but quite apart from the construction of the buttress under discussion (and of the next buttress to the west), there must have been a blocking and refacing of a south door, the former existence of which is implied by the porch and indicated on the 1827 faculty plan. This refacing was equally carefully carried out. There is, incidentally, no sign of the blocking in the interior either; the lower part of the wall is covered by box-pew panelling; between that and the sill of the (nineteenth-century) window which now occupies this bay the wall is plastered.

At the time of or before the demolition of the porch there appears to have been excavation right up to the south aisle wall. This would account for the amount and the even spread of demolition material in the main substantially brown earth layer described at the beginning of this section. This layer continued down to approximately 85 cm. (2 ft 9½ in.) from the 1975 ground surface, that is to say about the level of the remains of the porch wall footings. The demolition material (mainly fragments of roofing tiles with some mortar, stone, glass and window lead) was presumably the product of the restoration work c.1830. Since Nichols in 1811 and the faculty of 1827 agree that the aisle roof was covered with lead before the restoration,<sup>7</sup> the material can be assumed to derive largely from the demolition of the porch itself. If this is correct, then the demolition was not completed before the backfilling of the excavated area, since the robber trench noted above, filled with similar material but with less earth and more mortar, was clearly distinguishable from the layer of brown earth and debris. The latter can hardly have arisen from the gradual digging in of debris which had accumulated on the ground surface. There is no evidence for later disturbance down to the necessary depth apart from the two graves mentioned, and in any case such thorough disturbance would have obliterated the robber trench. The whole of the area must have been dug over, therefore, at the time of the restoration or at the time of the demolition of the porch if that preceded the general restoration work. Since there is no concentration of debris at the bottom of the layer, demolition did not take place when the excavation stood open. The distribution of the demolition material in this layer was consistent with excavation having taken place with debris lying on the surface and having been mingled with the upcast in the course of digging out and backfilling. It is possible, though slightly unlikely, that this debris was the product of earlier work and had simply been left lying about; all that can be said with confidence is that the excavation must have taken place before the demolition of the porch was completed. The motive for the excavation is obscure; like its 1975 successor it revealed the aisle foundations down to their third course, and it may be that it was a response to a dampness problem similar to that which occasioned the present investigation.

### *Conclusion*

Assuming that this nineteenth-century excavation was a general and not a local phenomenon, it was concluded that archæological evidence was likely to have been substantially destroyed all round the church. The information

yielded by the present excavation was not of sufficient importance to justify either the effort and expense of further investigation or the abandonment of the drainage scheme. It was not thought profitable to complete the excavation down to natural, since the small area available and the wet conditions at the trench bottom made circumstances less than ideal for archaeological investigation, and since a point had been reached below which the contractors' trench was unlikely to penetrate.

Apart from this negative conclusion, a small amount of positive information was obtained. The former existence of the porch and position of its east wall were confirmed, and the third buttress from the west was identified as a nineteenth-century structure, together with the south aisle window and surrounding wall-facing in the bay to its west and the next flanking buttress. Dating evidence was lacking, but the porch appeared to be secondary to the south aisle wall and to have been demolished in the course of the restoration between 1827 and 1832.

#### NOTES

1. Council for Places of Worship, *Churches and Archaeology* (1974), a leaflet which discusses the problems of digging operations in and around churches
2. A. H. Thompson, *Archaeol. J.*, 90 (1933), 371; N. Pevsner, *Leicestershire and Rutland* (Buildings of England, Harmondsworth, 1960), 47
3. The architect in 1870-71 was J. P. St. Aubyn, whose only other work in Leicestershire was St. Andrew, Thringstone, 1862-3, the chancel of Holy Trinity and additions to St. Helen, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, 1866 and 1878 respectively. On the previous restoration at Appleby see below and note 5
4. Published in J. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 4.2 (1811), Pl.LXIII facing 431
5. Confirmation that it was intended to demolish the porch at this date is provided by an estimate dated 4 August 1829 which includes quotations for two new buttresses and for making good under a new south window. I am indebted to Mr. R. J. Eyre for this reference. The documents mentioned here, together with a wealth of other nineteenth-century material, are in the care of Leicestershire Record Office. It is hoped to publish on a future occasion a detailed account of the restorations of Appleby Church based on a study of these documents
6. The two stones shown in broken line in Fig. 2 appear to show a return course A, but are irrelevant to the porch structure. They stand on a clay pack and are secondary to the buttress, having been introduced since the restoration for purely cosmetic reasons
7. Nichols, *op. cit.*, 433