



WORCESTER DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE CARE OF CHURCHES

Advice on managing archaeological work in churches and churchyards

Introduction to the archaeological process and the role of the DAC Archaeological advisor

The Diocese of Worcester is very aware that parishes are heritage-rich but can be resource-poor. It has produced this advice to help minimise costs whilst ensuring that valuable information about the history of your church and community is not lost.

Churches, whatever their date, are a key part of the history and archaeology of any town or village. They are important monuments in their own right, but they also tell the story of religious, social and economic changes in the parish they serve.

Necessary changes in the church or graveyard may result in damage to the building or below ground deposits but they also provide an opportunity to uncover further information about the history of the parish and ensure that this is recorded on the relevant Historic Environment Record (covering Worcestershire, Dudley or Worcester City) and is not forgotten.

The DAC Archaeological Advisor's role is to advise the parish and the DAC on building recording and/or archaeological work in churches, to ensure that the work is carried out by a reputable archaeological company by approving the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) before work commences and that the report of the findings is deposited with the Diocese and the relevant Historic Environment Record (HER). The Archaeological Advisor may also wish to visit the church to inspect archaeological work underway.

Building work inside churches and churchyards

Whilst most people think of archaeological work as excavations, historic and listed churches may also have:

- Evidence of wall paintings (medieval to seventeenth century) under more recent paint or limewash – either on surviving plaster or as flecks of pigment on walls scraped clear of plaster in the Victorian period.
- Evidence of older partially dismantled timber structures and ancient pews or re-working of older panels of pews into a more recent layout.
- Evidence of changes to windows and doorways which can be visible as “ghost” structures in historic stonework.
- Evidence of removed or moved doors, shutters or opening windows which can be identified through apparently redundant hinge pins and other metal fixings.
- Evidence of historic heating systems.

Understanding and accurately recording what is present within a church is key to writing an effective Statement of Significance. For faculty consent to be granted, a robust argument needs to be made balancing potential loss of significance with the need for change.

It is usually possible to plan something new in a church in such a way that loss of significant features is minimised, for example:

- Patch repairs in lime plaster to water-damaged plaster, rather than removal and re-plastering.
- Adaptations to the most modern and least significant woodwork after identifying which areas are historic and which are more modern.
- Pieced-in repairs and tile repairs to stonework rather than large scale replacement of stone.
- Routing cables, pipes and other services around features, taking advantage of redundant heating trenches or old pipe runs to route cables and pinning cables into mortar joints.

Building and below-ground work in churches and churchyards

Churches and churchyards by their very nature will contain the remains of people buried in line with Christian rites and traditions. Churchyards on very ancient sacred sites may also contain much older pre-Christian remains. For example, a Saxon or Norman church in a churchyard with a round boundary is likely to be occupying an ancient pre-Christian site.

If you are planning works which include any kind of building or below ground works in the church or the churchyard, including trial holes for percolation tests etc., the first step is to contact the DAC Archaeological Advisor who will advise you on what needs to be done.

Finding ways to avoid damage to the building and buried remains will save money and help to ensure that your application for Faculty goes through speedily when you submit it. **Please contact the DAC Archaeological Advisor before you pay for detailed architectural plans.**

Archaeological Work

The type of archaeological work needed will depend on what work is being done. This includes:

- **Building Recording**
The archaeological recording of the exterior and/or the interior of the church where changes will destroy or cover older features. In most cases a photographic record is all that is needed. If there are no changes to the church building, then this will not be necessary.
- **Watching Brief**
An archaeologist observes trenches being excavated by contractors and intervenes only to clean and record features and any finds. This is the most common intervention in churches.
- **Excavation**
Archaeologists excavate trenches, percolation holes etc. and record archaeological remains and finds. This is the least common intervention.

Once work is completed, a report will be produced by the archaeological contractor. This will be submitted to the DAC Archaeological Advisor and, once this has been approved, copies will be sent to the Diocese and the relevant Historic Environment Record. This ensures that the work has been done as agreed and the information is accessible in the future.

Any finds from the site are the property of the PCC and will be returned to them once the report has been completed.

Further help and guidance

For further help and guidance please contact the Church Buildings Team on churches@cofe-worcester.org.uk or call 01905 732809.

Appendix 1

How to avoid disturbance of historic remains to reduce the need for archaeological work.

Digging any kind of hole or trench in a church or churchyard risks disturbing buried human remains and other archaeological evidence but with careful planning this can often be avoided and therefore archaeological costs kept to a minimum.

The risk of disturbing archaeological remains increases with the age of the churchyard and depth of the hole. The location within the churchyard is also a factor.

1. Limiting the depth and size of the hole

Since 19th century or later, burials in a churchyard should normally be at circa 6 feet below ground level. Because of this shallower holes or trenches cause less disturbance and there is less chance of disturbing burials. An electrical cable or water pipe route often does not need to be this deep. Where possible it is worth considering a trench arch rather than a sewage pipe for new toilets. Trench arches are generally less destructive of deposits than a septic tank for example.

2. Avoiding burials where possible

If at all possible, it is worth planning the location or route of a pipe or cable trench to avoid known burials and vaults.

Christian burials are aligned east-west with the head of the deceased facing east and the grave marker, if present, at the head end. A memorial or gravestone provides obvious evidence of a burial, but these may have been fallen into disrepair or been cleared away. A graveyard plan may exist and the churchwarden will have a burial register. Certain areas of the churchyard were historically more popular for burials than others.

Children were often buried close to church paths on the route to the main door. Babies may be buried close to churchyard walls or close to the walls of the church and are unlikely to have grave markers.

There are unlikely to be burials under the route of paths in nineteenth and twentieth century churches constructed on green-field sites, as the paths will have been laid out when the church was built.

Where churchyards have been extended, the old boundary may present a narrow strip free of burials.

3. Understanding earlier excavations in the churchyard

Prior to the middle 19th century burials could be quite shallow. If a medieval church was extended in the later 19th and early 20th centuries it would have been necessary to remove large amounts of graveyard material to ensure the floors of the new extensions were at the same level as those of the original church. In areas where this has happened surviving burials may be very close to the surface of the modern graveyard

4. The location of Vaults within the church

The creation of vaults within the church was common practice in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The tops of these vaults may be very close to the underside of pew platforms and floors re-laid in nineteenth century re-orderings. It is worth identifying these and avoiding them if possible.

Appendix 2

What happens when human remains are encountered?

Churchyards that have been used for burials over many centuries are much higher than the surrounding land – often up to 1.5 to 2m. In churchyards such as this, older burials will have been disturbed repeatedly when newer graves were dug. The left-over soil from digging a grave which won't fit back in the hole is then often spread around at the edge of the churchyard or under churchyard trees; this is highly likely to contain small pieces of human bone. Disarticulated fragments of human bone are likely to be found when any hole is dug in a churchyard.

Disturbing articulated human remains should be avoided if possible. Where this is not possible the DAC Archaeologist will require the archaeological contractor to provide a human bone specialist to visit the site and prepare a report. This is because removal of human remains from the churchyard is not necessary except in exceptional circumstances and removal will require a Home Office Licence which takes time and money.

Best practice is that human remains stay within consecrated ground, are treated reverently, and are placed in a lidded box before being re-buried.