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A to Z of Church Maintenance

Archaeology in Churches and Churchyards

The church, with its churchyard, is often the most significant archaeological monument in its parish. Both the building and the ground upon which it stands reflect much of the history of the area, and some churches stand on or close to older sites or monuments. Alterations to the fabric of the church building, works of repair or conservation and excavations inside or outside the church can destroy or impair archaeological evidence. Whenever such works are proposed the archaeological implications should be considered from the outset. To do so will inform the work, and may result in the discovery of much new information. Failure to do so might cause unexpected expense and delays to faculty petitions.

All Parochial Church Council members have a responsibility to recognise the historical, architectural and archaeological importance of the churches in their care; when repairs or alterations are under consideration the archaeological implications should always be borne in mind. Petitions for faculties should always include adequate information, including details of any necessary archaeological provision, to enable the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) to give appropriate advice to the Chancellor. Delays and unexpected additional expenditure can sometimes be avoided by ensuring that the archaeological implications of repairs or alterations are considered from the outset.

Why is archaeology necessary?

There may be a need to record archaeological information at an early stage of project development in order to aid understanding and inform proposed works upon the standing church building or within the churchyard.

If the proposed works are likely to result in features being lost or hidden a record of those features might be required:

- to mitigate, the loss of historic fabric or deposits, to facilitate an awareness of hidden details and thereby inform future works, and / or
- to retain historically, architecturally or archaeologically significant information for educational and other uses in the future.

Works that might carry archaeological implications

Works that might carry archaeological implications include:

- any alterations or repairs (including conservation work) that might disturb the fabric,
- the removal or alteration of fixtures and fittings,

- structural extensions,
- the excavation of drainage, service or foundation trenches in the church or churchyard,
- works upon monuments and boundary walls.

Many grants in support of works upon historic churches are conditional upon an adequate level of archaeological recording and analysis being incorporated into the programme of work.

What is involved?

The archaeological responses that might prove appropriate or necessary include either

- a simple site or building appraisal,
- a watching brief,
- a site or building evaluation,
- archaeological excavation of the site,
- recording of part of the building before or during works,
- or a combination of these.

The stages of the process

Appraisal - By inspecting the church, its churchyard, and a few readily available local records, a suitably qualified archaeologist might quickly determine that proposed works do not justify any professional archaeological involvement. If an appraisal discovers that more archaeological information or action might be required this might lead to a watching brief, or equally the next step may include an evaluation.

Watching briefs - When it is clear from the initial appraisal of the church or churchyard that a watching brief would be an appropriate response to the proposed works it is the responsibility of the PCC to appoint an appropriately qualified archaeologist to advise them upon the level of works necessary. A watching brief may involve a couple of days watching a trench being excavated by a contractor working in the churchyard, or it may extend to a substantial programme of recording during works upon the fabric of an historic church building. Should a watching brief prove necessary it should be costed and included in the overall budget; most grant-giving bodies will include essential archaeological provision in their consideration of financial assistance. The petition for a faculty should be accompanied by a written schedule which defines and describes the proposed watching brief and names the archaeologist or archaeological unit appointed to undertake it.

Evaluation - The initial appraisal might indicate that more information is required before a decision can be taken about an appropriate archaeological response to proposed works; in such circumstances an evaluation is necessary.

An evaluation is intended to provide a better understanding of the archaeological implications of proposed works upon the church or in the churchyard. An evaluation should be carried out by an appropriately-qualified archaeologist or archaeological unit. The work may involve original documentary research, the preparation of scale drawings, limited opening up works, or trial excavations. When it proves necessary to carry out investigations which involve opening up of the fabric or trial excavations the evaluation will require a Faculty.

The evaluation report might indicate that:

- i. no further archaeological measures are necessary,
- ii. on conservation grounds the proposed scheme of work should be revised so as to minimise impact upon the church building or its churchyard,
- iii. a further more detailed scheme of full archaeological investigation will be necessary prior to or during the proposed works, or
- iv. in exceptional circumstances, the scheme as proposed should not proceed as it would be detrimental to a nationally significant archaeological monument.

Conservation

When an appraisal or site evaluation indicates that a proposed scheme of work would have a detrimental impact upon significant historic fabric of a church, its fixtures or fittings, or its churchyard, the preferred option is to investigate the means of conserving such features by amending the proposals. For example, if significant archaeological remains would be vulnerable to proposed building works it is sometimes possible to conserve them beneath the building by redesigning the foundations.

Wherever possible conservation through a reconsideration of the scheme is preferable to recording in advance of disturbance; in extreme cases there may be good reason to recommend the Chancellor to refuse a petition for a faculty on the grounds that the proposed works would be detrimental to significant and vulnerable archaeological structures or deposits.

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Full excavation and recording

Necessary repairs can sometimes result in the removal of evidence which is crucial to a full understanding of the historical development of the church or buried structures within the churchyard. When an appraisal or site evaluation report indicates that such essential works would remove or impair archaeological evidence arrangements should be made to ensure that it is recorded prior to and / or during the course of works. A schedule of the proposed archaeological recording work, including the funding arrangements, should be submitted with the faculty petition along with the name of the appropriately qualified archaeologist or archaeological unit who will carry out the work.

Advice

The need for archaeological provision in a proposed scheme of work often becomes apparent at the time when a preliminary enquiry is made. Guidance

from that point through each of the stages outlined above is available by first contacting the [DAC secretary](#). It is essential to ensure that each stage of the process is adequately documented by appropriately detailed written reports, which should be copied to the architect, the relevant Archdeacon, and the DAC.

This page is taken from a guidance note prepared by Bob Meeson and published by the Lichfield Diocesan Advisory Committee in September 1998.

Further Information

- Your DAC Secretary - a list of DAC Secretaries can be found elsewhere on the site.
- [English Heritage](#) - the Government's lead body for the historic environment in England and can provide help and advice on all aspects of caring for historic buildings.
- Caring for Church Archaeology published by Cadw (the Welsh equivalent of English Heritage) is available online at the [Clywd-Powys Archaeological Trust](#) site. Paper copies are available from [Cadw](#).
- The [Council for British Archaeology](#) works to promote the study and safeguarding of Britain's historic environment, to provide a forum for archaeological opinion, and to improve public interest in Britain's past.

July 2001