

Anglican Water

Many readers will know of the recent project to modify the vestry area of St Faith's church, adding a WC and an area for preparing and serving refreshments, involving connections to mains water and drainage services. Inevitably, one village wag dubbed the project "Anglican Water" ...

In view of the location – the church is a scheduled monument – county and church authorities insisted on archaeological supervision of the work ... and being in the right place at the right time, I was fortunate to be offered the temporary post of Supervising Archaeologist. I was therefore permitted to delve around under the church floor, monitor the digging, examine the holes and trenches, sift through spoil heaps, and collect finds for cleaning and analysis. In archaeological terms, the aim was to use the opportunity to discover whatever possible about the church's construction, the extent of the graveyard (it was not necessarily limited in the past by the borders that surround it today) and anything else of interest. Any bones found were to be re-buried after examination.

I also sifted through the documents I have collected over the years relating to Kilsby church's history – and found hints in old records that focused my attention on specific areas of the site. Finally, I opened my eyes and took a fresh look at the churchyard and Church Walk – and on combining the workmen's excavations with this new examination, some humps and bumps that I had "looked at without seeing" for 40 years started to take on new meaning.

Church Construction

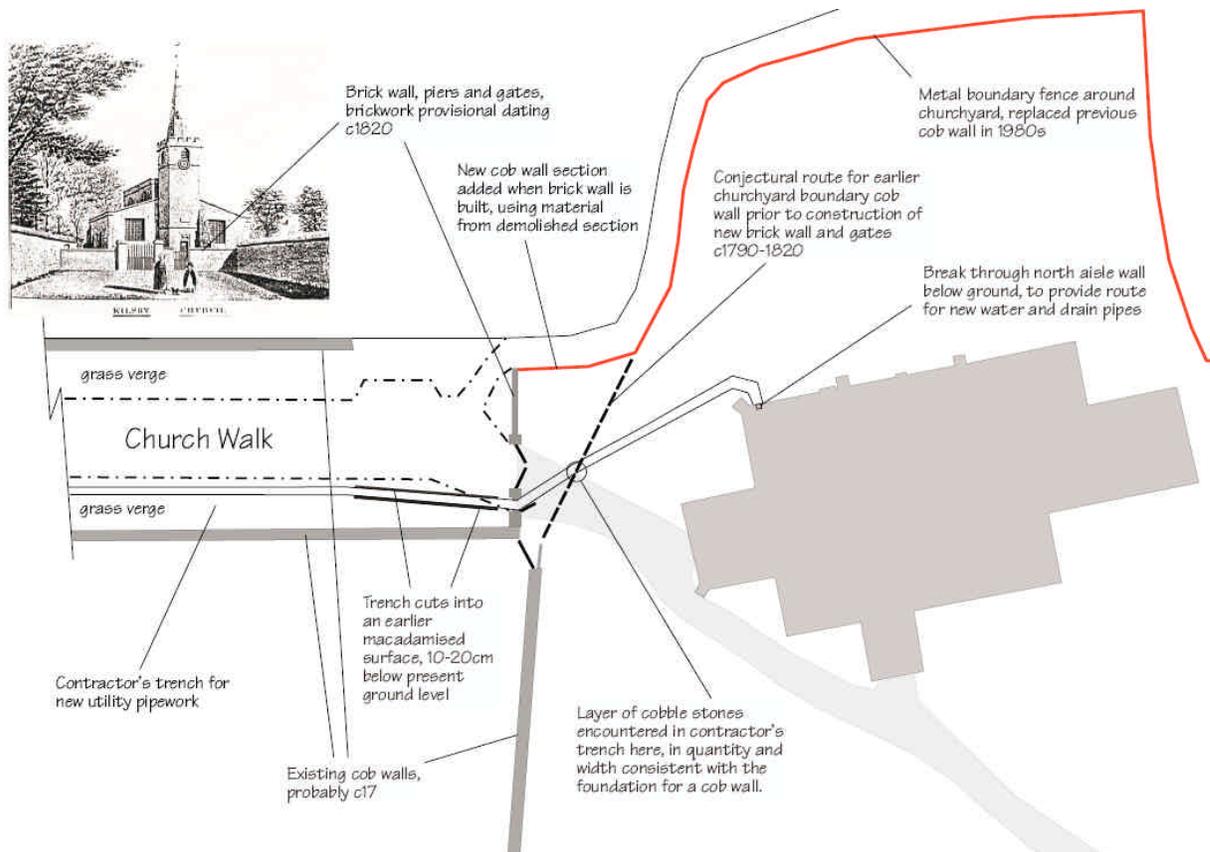
I had already done some earlier excavation when the nave pews were refurbished in 2006 – and on that occasion I found traces of a rare late-1300s Penn tiled floor, with a 17th-century tiled floor above it, both lying below the present flagstone floor. Records from 1932 also state that an even earlier stone-flagged floor had been found in the nave, 48cms below present floor level – so I was thrilled to find evidence of a very early tiled floor under the north aisle at exactly the same depth, 48cms. I also found a fragment of a 12th/13th-century roof-tile (see photograph) embedded in the middle of the north aisle wall, down near its foundations. Piecing together all this evidence, shows that the north aisle was added to the 12th-century nave in the 1200s, with a tiled aisle floor extending the stone floor of the nave – and the roof-tile fragment suggests that both nave and north aisle were tiled originally, before being leaded later.



I found another curiosity in the north aisle foundations – bones from the skeleton and skull of a cat (confirmed by an experienced small-animal vet). This casts a fascinating light on Kilsby's history in the 1200s, as it is indisputable evidence of a common medieval practice – the body of a cat (already dead, one hopes!) was often buried in the wall of a building as protection against witchcraft.

Graveyard and Church Walk

Outside the church too, further new discoveries were made. Using a combination of aerial and ground-level photographs, old paintings and sketches, observation of the humps left by collapsed former cob walls, and underground details revealed by the pipeline trench, it was possible to demonstrate that:



- The original churchyard boundary was a cob wall crossing the churchyard path several metres closer to the church than the present brick wall.
- The brick wall and gates were probably erected in the 1820s (perhaps to celebrate the end of the Napoleonic Wars). The former section of cob wall was demolished (see sketch); the materials were re-used to join the new brick wall to the retained cob sections (which collapsed in the 1980s and were replaced by the present chain-link fencing)
- Outside the new brick wall and gates, the top of Church Walk was squared off and covered in a smart layer of stone chippings (the new process of “macadamising” with compacted chippings was introduced in 1816 by Scottish civil engineer John MacAdam), providing a firm wide surface to allow horse-drawn carriages to turn at the church gates.
- This area was then surfaced with a layer of hot tar, to provide a watertight seal – the process was called “tar-macadamising”, which we now abbreviate simply as “tarmac”.

All this new information was combined with the findings from the previous work in the nave in 2006, to produce a 24-page illustrated archaeological report, copies of which were deposited with the county Heritage Environment Record and Peterborough diocesan authorities. The diocesan secretary commented “Many thanks ... the report adds significant information on the history of the building of the church, which will be valuable to add to the known history”.

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