

ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH, MYDDFAI, CARMARTHENSHIRE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2014



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SUMMARY

Following subsidence into a void beneath the Victorian tile floor at St Michael's Church in Myddfai, a scheme of remediation was necessary to make repairs. As the remediation works could impact upon potential archaeological deposits a requirement for an archaeological watching brief was placed on the works by the archaeological advisor to the Diocese of the Church in Wales. DAT Archaeological Services were commissioned at short notice to carry out this watching brief by Roger Clive-Powell Architects.

The attending archaeologist dug out the subsided material beneath the floor to record any significant finds or features and to inform the subsequent remediation works to be undertaken by others.

The subsidence was found to have been caused by the backfill of two graves having settled, creating a void beneath the tile floor. The grave backfill and other material that had collapsed into the voids from the sides was removed down to the level at which natural bedrock was exposed in the sides of the grave cuts.

Excavation ceased at this level since it provided a stable layer upon which the repair work could be undertaken. Although numerous disarticulated redeposited human bones were found in the backfill, the incumbents of the graves were not exposed or disturbed. No human bone was removed from the site. No structural remains were revealed by the works.

The excavated void was left open to enable the repairs to be undertaken and made good by others.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Commission

- 1.1.1 This report has been prepared by DAT Archaeological Services in response to a request from Mr Roger Clive Powell, to provide an archaeological watching brief during remediation works relating to floor subsidence at St Michael's Church, Myddfai, Carmarthenshire.
- 1.1.2 Remediation of the subsidence required the excavation and removal of the loose material from the subsidence void.
- 1.1.3 The requirement for an archaeological watching brief to be undertaken during the remediation works was required by the archaeological advisor to the Faculty of the Church in Wales. The requirement was placed on the works in order that any exposed archaeological remains could be identified and recorded prior to the repairs being undertaken.
- 1.1.4 Being located within the church, the proposed works had a very high potential to expose, damage or destroy archaeological remains potentially associated with the presumed early origins of the church. This could include both structural remains and burials.

1.2 Scope of the Project

- 1.2.1 The purpose of the excavation was to identify and record any features of archaeological significance that might be revealed during attempts to identify a stable layer upon which a metal grid could be placed to span the area of collapse and to support the repair to the tile floor.

The project objectives were:

- To identify and establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works;
- To appropriately investigate and record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works; and
- To produce an archive and report of any results.

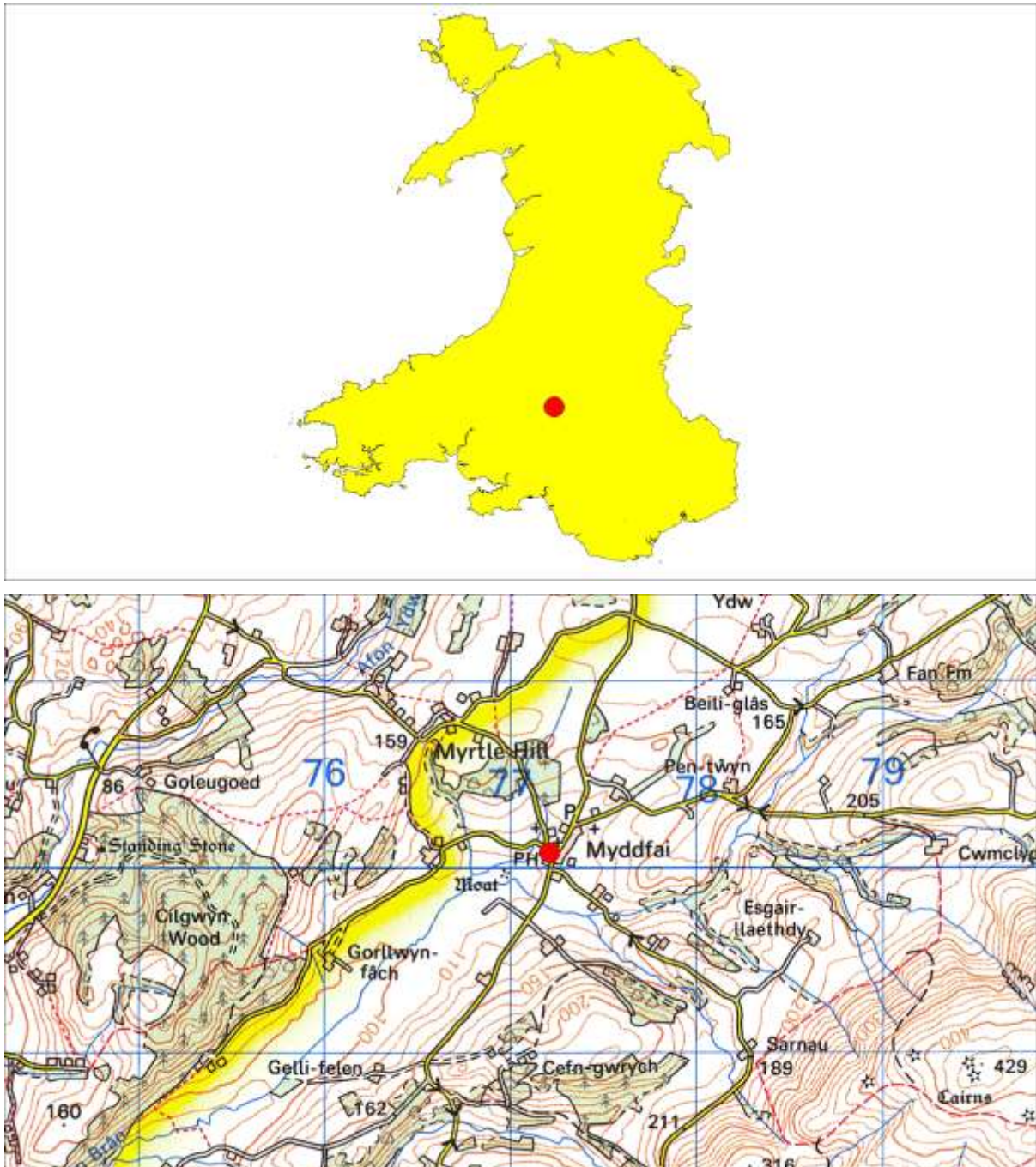


Figure 1: Location of Myddfai based on 1:50000 Ordnance Survey map

Reproduced from the 2011 Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 scale Landranger Map with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office,
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2. THE SITE

2.1 Location

St Michael's Church (PRN4090) lies in a roughly circular churchyard at the heart of the village of Myddfai, Carmarthenshire (NGR SN 7723 3013).

2.2 Description

- 2.2.1 The church is first mentioned in 1284 but has possible early medieval origins (Ludlow 1998). In the 12th and early 13th centuries, Myddfai was part of the Lordship of Llandovery and along with Llanddeusant and Gwynfe, was one of three manors in Cantref Bychan.
- 2.2.2 The main church building, all of medieval date, includes a north aisle with a chapel at its east end separated to the south from the nave by an arcade of arches. The chancel and altar are at the east end of the nave. The south porch was added in the early 17th century. The vestry was added in the 19th century and a gas plant in 1926. The southern aisle now forms the Nave, with the chancel and altar at its east end. A full description of the church is available in the Cadw Historic Churches Project Report (Ludlow 1998).
- 2.2.3 The church retains much of its original fabric, but has been altered at several times. Most significantly, the floor levels of the altar and north chapel appear to have been raised, probably in 1926 (see Ludlow 1998 for details).
- 2.2.4 The tiled floor of the chancel was probably also laid at about this time. The floor to the north of the chancel of the main church in the chancel area of the north chapel is formed by several carved memorial stones. These may be in their original locations, or may have been moved when the tiled chancel floor was laid.

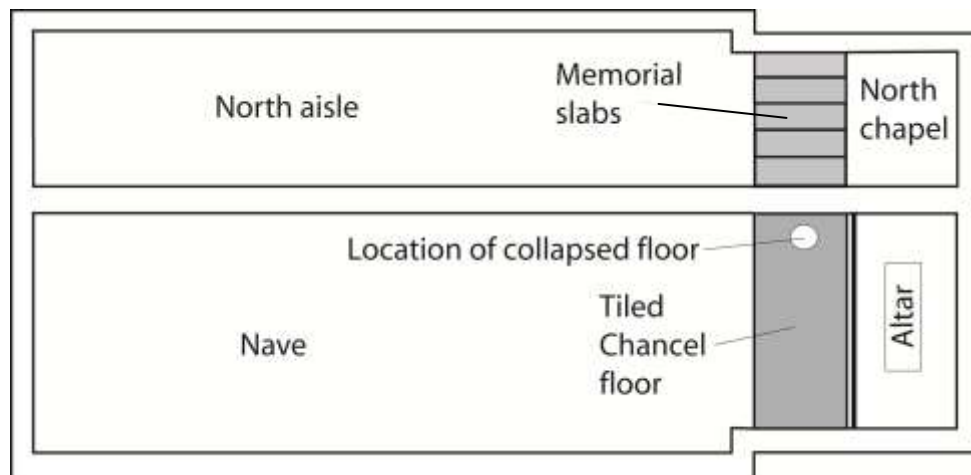


Figure 2: Schematic plan of the church indicating location of the collapsed floor of the chancel (not in proportion, not to scale, not all elements represented)

2.3 Archaeological Background.

- 2.3.1 Previous archaeological work has been undertaken on the exterior of the church during drainage improvement works, but only part of the church wall footings and some burials were exposed (Wilson 2002).
- 2.3.2 The current investigations were undertaken at the west end of the church beneath the tiled floor of the north chapel chancel (see Figure 2). No archaeological investigations have previously been undertaken inside the church.

3. METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 Loose subsided grave backfill was removed by hand back to establish the extent of the subsidence and to reveal more stable material or structures which could support the proposed metal grille.
- 3.2 All human bone and other artefacts were put aside for later reburial within the excavated hole. The excavated soil was piled outside adjacent to the north wall of the church.
- 3.3 A photographic and drawn record of the excavated area was made. The hole was left open for the subsequent repair work.

4. RESULTS

- 4.1 The original assumption was that a stone or brick-built burial vault beneath the floor had collapsed. The purpose of the archaeological intervention was to identify clean and record the remains of the assumed structure prior to using it to support a suspended metal grid over which the floor could be replaced.
- 4.2 The area of collapsed tile floor measured approximately 0.8m by 0.75m and was found to have subsided into a void extending beyond the edges of the hole in all directions.
- 4.3 Having removed all the loose subsided material, no evidence of a stone or brick vault was revealed. Instead it became apparent that beneath the floor tiles was a layer of local tilestone roof tiles (no more than 0.05m thick) acting as a levelling deposit upon which the tiled floor was originally constructed. The stone roof tiles were presumably originally from an earlier roof of the church.
- 4.4 Beneath the tilestones was an approximately 0.4m thick layer of light brown, dry, loose friable clayey silt containing numerous redeposited human bones and occasional clay tobacco pipe fragments. This deposit appears likely to have been a 'levelling-up' layer, deposited when the floor levels at the east end of the church were raised. Approximately the bottom half of this levelling-up deposit had collapsed into voids formed within two underlying east-west aligned grave cuts. The voids appear to have formed as backfill deposits within the two grave cuts, had settled down (presumably as the coffins within the graves decayed and collapsed).
- 4.5 Within the working area, enough of the collapse deposit was removed to ascertain the approximate dimensions of the grave cuts separated by approximately 0.10m of 'cemetery soil'. The northern grave cut (Grave A) measured approximately 2.2m by 0.7m. The southern grave cut (Grave B) measured approximately 2.15m by 0.75m. The length of both graves could only be estimated because it was not possible to fully excavate them, for reasons of safety.

- 4.6 Iron nails and coffin handles encountered along with fragments of redeposited human bone may have belonged to the former coffins within the graves, but no traces of decomposed wood were observed, so they too may have been redeposited from earlier burials.
- 4.7 Both graves were excavated to a depth of 0.8m below the level of the chancery floor. No evidence of coffins or articulated skeletons within the graves was visible at this depth.
- 4.8 At a depth of approximately 0.65m below the tile floor, the top of the natural geology, comprising a pale grey shale bedrock, was revealed in the sides of the grave cuts. For the purposes of identifying a stable layer upon which supports for the repair work could be built, no further excavation was necessary as this level was adequate.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The following explanation of the processes leading to the subsidence below the chancel floor is based on interpretation of the available evidence and observations made during the watching brief. Excavation of a larger area, under different circumstances, might provide additional evidence to support alternative explanations of the processes involved.
- 5.2 The soil beneath the tile floor contains redeposited artefacts and appears to be a levelling up deposit laid over earlier grave cuts when the floor level was raised.
- 5.3 The underlying grave cuts may originally have been covered by carved memorial slabs that were removed and re-used as flooring elsewhere in the church at this time (possibly those present in the floor of the north chapel).
- 5.4 Having removed these slabs, the voids beneath were probably backfilled with 'cemetery soil'. However, as the contents of the graves continued to settle, new voids developed within the grave cuts, into which the overlying 'levelling -up' deposit has now subsided.
- 5.5 There are likely to be more similar voids developing beneath the tiled floor. If so, further subsidence can be expected in the future.
- 5.6 In the absence of masonry burial vaults or other built structures, the natural bedrock is the only likely reasonably solid material upon which a supporting structure for the floor repairs could be constructed. The depth, number and degree of intercutting of graves within the church may, however affect the stability of the natural bedrock surviving between grave cuts.
- 5.7 The use of the metal grill suspended across the natural bedrock has meant that further below ground disturbance is unnecessary and the identified burials will remain undisturbed.

6. REPORTING AND ARCHIVING

- 6.1 This report is fully representative of the results of the fieldwork. The digital project folder stored in the regional Historic Environment Record in Llandeilo constitutes the project archive.

7. SOURCES

7.1 Database

Dyfed Archaeological Trust Historic Environment Record.

7.2 Unpublished

Ludlow, N. 1998, *CADW Historic Churches Project: Carmarthenshire Churches*. Cambria Archaeology. PRN57045.

Wilson, H. 2002, *St Michael's Church Myddfai: Archaeological Watching Brief*. PRN46408.

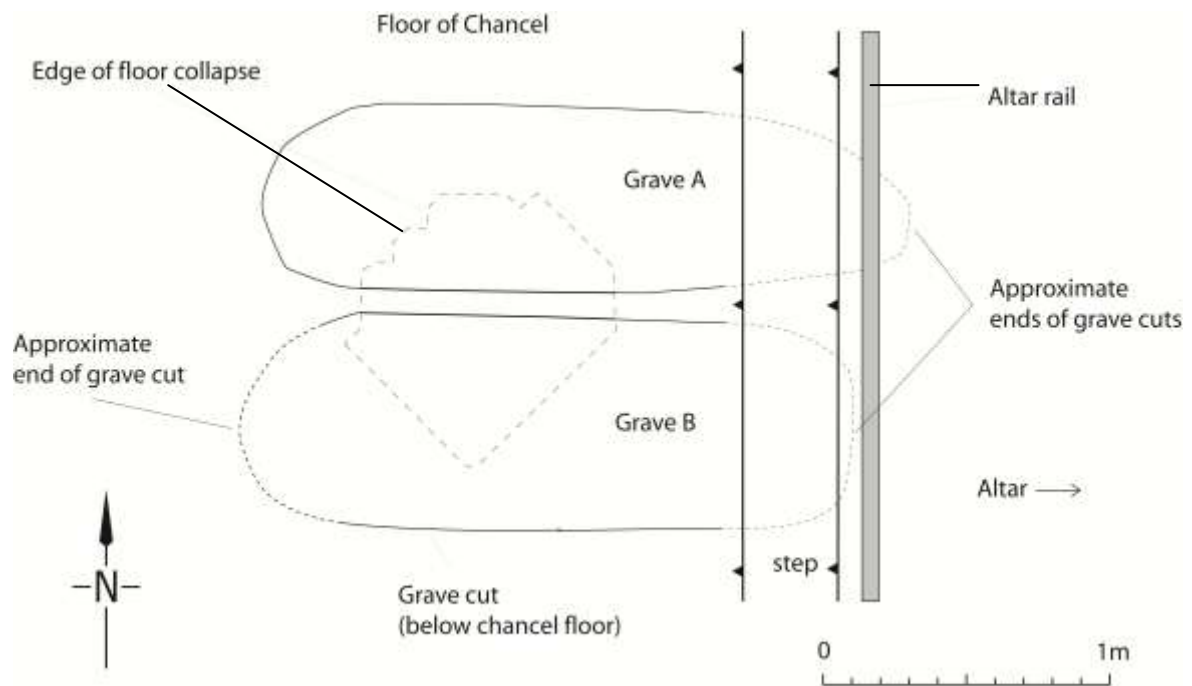


Figure 3: Plan of excavated graves below chancel floor

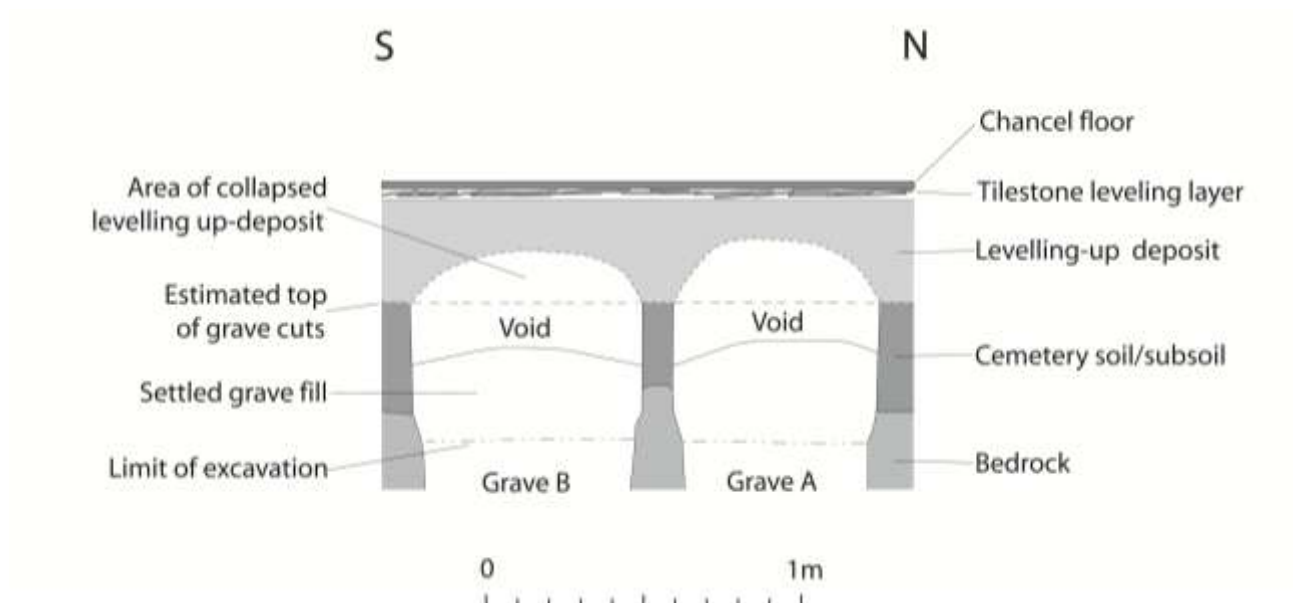


Figure 4: Schematic section through deposits and features below the chancel floor



Photo 1: The area of floor collapse prior to excavation (facing north)



Photo 2: The void (having removed the collapsed and loose material to reveal the two grave cuts) facing west. Note the grey shale bedrock visible in the side of Grave A (right side).



Photo 3: The two grave cuts (facing east) containing partially removed loose fill (Grave A on left).

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Paratowyd yr adroddiad hwn gan /
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Llofnod / Signature




Dyddiad / Date: 30/10/14

Mae'r adroddiad hwn wedi ei gael yn gywir a derbyn sêl bendith /

This report has been checked and approved by: **James Meek**
ar ran Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf. /
on behalf of Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd.

Swydd / Position: **Head of DAT Archaeological Services**

Llofnod / Signature



..... Dyddiad / Date: 30/10/14

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sydd gennych ar gynnwys neu strwythur yr adroddiad hwn*

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