

**ST. MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH,
ST. CLEARS,
CARMARTHENSHIRE**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING



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SEPTEMBER 2002

ST MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH, ST CLEARS, CARMARTHEN

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING

By

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CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION	1
2.0	THE NORTH DOORWAY	2
3.0	THE CRYPT	3
4.0	CONCLUSIONS	5

FIGURES

- Figure 1: Elevation of north wall before underpinning
Figure 2: Elevation of north wall as recorded in 2002
Figure 3: Cross section through the north wall

PHOTOGRAPHS

- Plate 1: External View of Crypt Entrance
- Plate 2: Dressed Limestone Medieval Door Jamb, Brick Vault, and Brickwork
- Plate 3: Lead Coffins Within the Crypt
- Plate 4: The Chapman Memorial Inside the Church
- Plate 5: East Side of the Medieval Doorway and Crypt Entrance
- Plate 6: West Side of the Crypt Entrance
-

REPORT ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES ASSOCIATED WITH
THE BLOCKED NORTH DOOR OF
ST MARY MAGDALENE CHURCH, ST CLEARS.

PRN 46045
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INTRODUCTION

This document is a brief report on the recording of the crypt exposed in the north wall of St Mary Magdalene church, St Clears. The historical background outlined below is taken from various letters and documents contained in the DRF file (PRN 3880) for the church that is held in the Carmarthenshire Sites and Monuments Record at the Cambria Archaeology offices in Llandeilo. A more detailed discussion of the history and description of the architectural fabric of the building is presented in the Cadw Welsh Historic Churches Project (Ludlow, N. 2000).

St Mary Magdalene, St Clears is one of the most important parish churches in west Wales. The church site has a long history and there is evidence for pre-conquest (pre 1066) religious use of the site in the form of a Celtic dedication (suggested to be 'St Clarius'). St Mary Magdalene Church was a Parish church during the Medieval period, of the Deanery of Carmarthen. The church was also granted as a cell to the Cluniac Priory of St Martin-des-champs, Paris between the years of 1147 to 1184. Architecturally the earliest phases of construction are represented by 12th Century Norman Romanesque style chancel arch, considered to be the finest in the country. The nave walls are suggested to have an outer skin dated to the 13th century. It is also possible that the Norman priory was built on an earlier church or cemetery site. The existence of surviving archaeological remains of Priory buildings has been recently proven by geophysical survey.

Where not already disturbed by Victorian drainage trenches, the area around the church is particularly important because it marks the junction between the buried and upstanding archaeology of churchyard and church and potentially contains evidence of whether the church was built over an earlier cemetery, phases of build of the church itself and burials, perhaps in vaults, close to the church.

In August 2000, in anticipation of the installation of a new heating system for the church, a trench was machine excavated along the north wall of the church in the vicinity of the blocked north door. This work was carried out without a faculty and before the submission of a planning application. There was therefore no opportunity for archaeological guidance or monitoring of the work.

By the time archaeologists were made aware of the excavation, a trench approximately 1.8m wide, 7m long and 1.8m deep had already been dug. In addition to the destruction of any significant deposits or features relating to the north door of the church that may have existed, shuttering inserted on the three sides of the trench away from the wall effectively obscured most of the sections exposed by cutting the

trench. From what was still visible, however, it was clear that at least one burial and presumably other significant deposits had been disturbed. Fortunately it was possible to photograph and sketch the exposed deposits beneath the north wall of the church before concrete was poured in to underpin the exposed foundations (see figure 1).

Since the work to this point had been undertaken without sufficient consultation and without planning permission, further work was halted until archaeological and other requirements and issues relating to the proposed scheme of works were clarified.

To this end, further archaeological recording was undertaken in September 2002 by Duncan Schlee on behalf of Cambria Archaeology. The purpose of this work was to record the character of the exposed remains; to clarify the sequence of constructional events they represent; and thereby to better inform decisions regarding the proposed alterations to the surviving fabric of the building.

When visited in September the north, west and east faces of the trench were concreted as was the base of the trench. On the southern side there was concrete underpinning the exposed foundations of the north wall of the church. This obscured most of the deposits below the wall foundations (which had previously been sketched) except for the portion below the medieval doorway where there were no foundations to underpin (see plate 1).

The main features of interest that remained exposed in 2002 were the blocked medieval north door of the church and subsequent modifications. These included the insertion of a window in the north wall of the church, partly destroying the earlier doorway, and the construction of access to a crypt below the church, through the previously blocked doorway. Later events include various alterations to the crypt entrance as it was opened and re-sealed at various times, and the insertion of a heating system through the blocked doorway in 1898.

Scale drawings of the north facing elevation of the north wall were made and a cross section through the wall was drawn (figures 2 and 3). Photographs of the contents of the crypt were also taken.

Complete understanding of the constructional sequence and the various modifications made to the fabric of the building in this location is hampered by the fact that later alterations mask the earlier arrangements. Without removing more material from the entrance to the crypt, there is a limit to what can be stated with confidence. The interpretation of the existing fabric is therefore based on the most likely explanations for what can be seen at present.

THE NORTH DOORWAY

Previous examination of the fabric of the church has noted that the nave side-walls lean out markedly. It is suggested that they were consequently thickened, at an early date, with outer 'skins' that batter inwards proportionately. The blocked north doorway that is visible on the exterior of the north wall of the church is thought to be 14th century in origin and is presumed to date from when the outer 'skin' was added. Originally the doorway would have had a plain segmental head but virtually all the

evidence for this has been truncated by the insertion of a 19th century window in the north wall. There is a suggestion that there was an earlier (also inserted?) window in the same location.

The thickness of the wall between its external north face and the northern end of the crypt (exposed during this investigation) is not the entire thickness of the north wall of the church (see figure 3). What is thought to be the remains of a dressed limestone door jamb was revealed on the eastern side of the doorway/crypt entrance (Plate 2, and figure 3). This stonework is thought to be the remains of the original doorway which may therefore indicate the original north wall face before the outer 'skin' was added. An area of brick infill inserted beneath this door jamb may indicate the position of the original threshold which would have been removed when the crypt was inserted.

THE CRYPT

The external entrance to the crypt is situated within the blocked medieval doorway in the north wall. A later window has partly destroyed the east side of the doorway. On the interior of the church there is a memorial plaque on each side of the window that truncates the blocked doorway. The eastern plaque has been damaged and any indication of its dedication is lost. The plaque to the west of the window is dedicated to the Chapman family (see plate 4). The sculptor of the plaque was John Maliphant of Kidwelly (1751-1836) and the wording on the memorial is as follows:

'Underneath are deposited the remains of Owen Chapman Eldest son of William Chapman of this Parish Gent who died March 9th 1759 aged 9 years

Also the Body of William Chapman second son of the aforesaid William Chapman he died April 17th (check 7th?) 1759 aged 3 years

Also the Body of William Chapman the elder Gent who died August 7th 1774 aged 69 years

Here also lieth interred the Body of William Thomas Son of Rees Thomas of this Parish Gent and grandson of the aforesaid William Chapman he died December 3rd 1789 aged five weeks

And also the Body of Mary Chapman Widow and Relict of the aforesaid William Chapman she died February 1780 aged 61 Years'

Before the wall was underpinned, the remains of another crypt were noted on the sketch elevation made at the time (figure 1), situated immediately to the west of the crypt that is visible at present. Field notes made at the time suggest that this was the Chapman crypt. A patch of brickwork visible in the church wall was thought to be the surviving southern end of the crypt, the northern continuation having been truncated by the digging of the trench. The trench sides that would have confirmed this were not visible at the time due to shuttering and now everything is encased in concrete. An alternative possibility is that the brickwork noted was in fact the blocked entrance to a

crypt beneath the church, similar to the crypt that is exposed at present. If so the Chapman crypt may still survive intact.

Examination of the interior of the crypt indicated that there were four lead coffins (plate 3). No skeletal material was visible. The Chapman memorial lists five burials, since only two of these were adults it is doubtful that the four full size coffins observed can be equated with those of the Chapmans.

It therefore seems likely that the crypt exposed at present may belong with the damaged monument on the east side of the window on the church interior.

Differences in the brickwork sealing the entrance to the crypt are visible on photographic records of the crypt taken before the sealing was removed. This suggests that the crypt had been opened and re-blocked at least three, possibly four times. When the site was visited in 2002 most of the loose brickwork blocking for the crypt had been removed with only mortared brickwork remaining. As a result it was not possible to ascertain the exact sequence of the brickwork or how it related to the mortared brickwork that still remains in-situ. The hole that now exists giving access to the crypt has now been temporarily blocked up with loose stones.

Built against the stonework forming the sides of the medieval door opening are two mortared brick piers that form the mouth of the entrance to the crypt (plates 5 and 6). Surviving fragments of stone above these brick piers suggest that they originally supported a slate lintel. At some stage this lintel was destroyed when the crypt was opened. This may have been because the ground level outside the church had risen to such an extent that the original crypt entrance could not be easily accessed.

The brick vault that now forms the roof of the opening may have been constructed to replace an earlier roof removed when the slate lintel was removed. The vaulted roof to the crypt entrance does not in fact appear to span the whole opening. In the western half, flat roof slates are visible above which there is mortar no vaulting is apparent. It seems probable that part of the brick vault of the crypt entrance has been truncated by the construction of another vault immediately to the west, or some other later modification. There is a void between the roof and the brick infill and a portion of a wooden plank is visible but has no clear purpose (plate 2). The complexity of this area but the exact explanation would require the removal the mortared brickwork that blocks the entrance to the crypt. Beneath the existing crypt blocking a stone slab overlying the sub-foundation soil marks the base of the entrance to the crypt.

The interior of the crypt was not accessible and could not be accurately measured during this investigation. Its internal measurements appear to be approximately 2.5m north-south and 2.0m east-west. The side walls of the crypt are built of stone. The roof of the crypt is a vault constructed from red bricks. The coffins are raised off the floor of the crypt by brick piers.

The interior of the crypt is wider than the 14th century doorway through which it is accessed, suggesting that construction of the vault would have required the removal of part of the original north wall. It is not clear how much of the material above the brick vault roof of the crypt is likely to be original fabric and how much is later infill (see figure 3). The extent of survival of original fabric will depend on whether the crypt

was excavated from above (inside the church) or from the outside. From what is visible it appears that all of the material above the crypt vault within the thickness of the wall is of late origin.

The pipe for the heating system that was installed in 1898 runs within a duct through the wall on the east side of the 14th century doorway, above the level to which the door was demolished when the nearby window was inserted (see figure 3). The material above the truncated brick vault in the entranceway to the crypt is therefore all likely to be contemporary with the insertion of the later window. It is at present impossible to ascertain how much of the western side of the 14th century doorway survives within the wall (beyond what is visible on the exterior), since it is obscured by later brickwork infilling of the entrance to the crypt (see plate 6). As yet there is no reason to suppose that it is not intact.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the medieval doorway and the brick jambs of the 18th century crypt entrance are significant features. The roof of the crypt entrance is partly obscured by the brick infill, but appears to be a brick vault that has been partly truncated to the west, possibly by the construction of a neighbouring crypt or some other later modification such as the insertion of the nearby window. The structural integrity of this arrangement is not certain but the wooden planks and mortared brickwork that survive in the entrance to the crypt still offer it some support at present.

From the architects drawings for the proposed heating system is clear that location of the duct would require the majority, if not all of the east side of the 14th century doorway to be removed, including the possible early door jamb that forms one side of the entrance to the crypt. It would also require part of the north end of the interior of the crypt vault to be removed. This would most likely necessitate considerable disturbance to the contents of the crypt and would effectively block off access to the interior of the crypt from its original entrance. There would also be implications for the structural integrity of the crypt entrance and the window above.

What ever is decided in respect to the proposed heating system, the crypt entrance will need to be re-sealed, possibly with additional support for the 'ceiling'. This need not interfere with the interior of the crypt. It is recommended that all the existing blocking brickwork be removed before the entrance to the crypt is re-sealed. This would be needed in order to support the overlying wall fabric and would also allow the extent of survival of the west side of the 14th century doorway and the possible earlier door jamb to be ascertained.

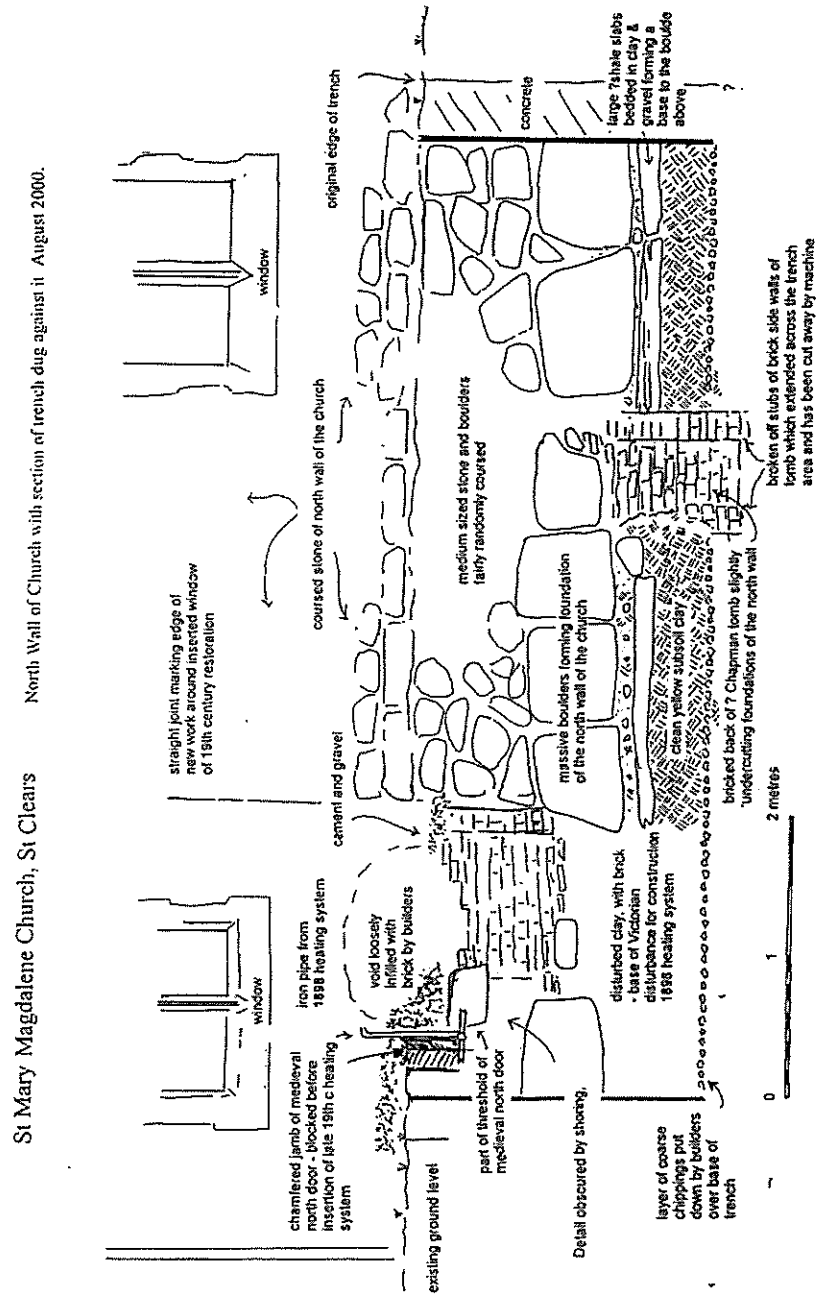


Figure 1: Elevation of north wall before underpinning

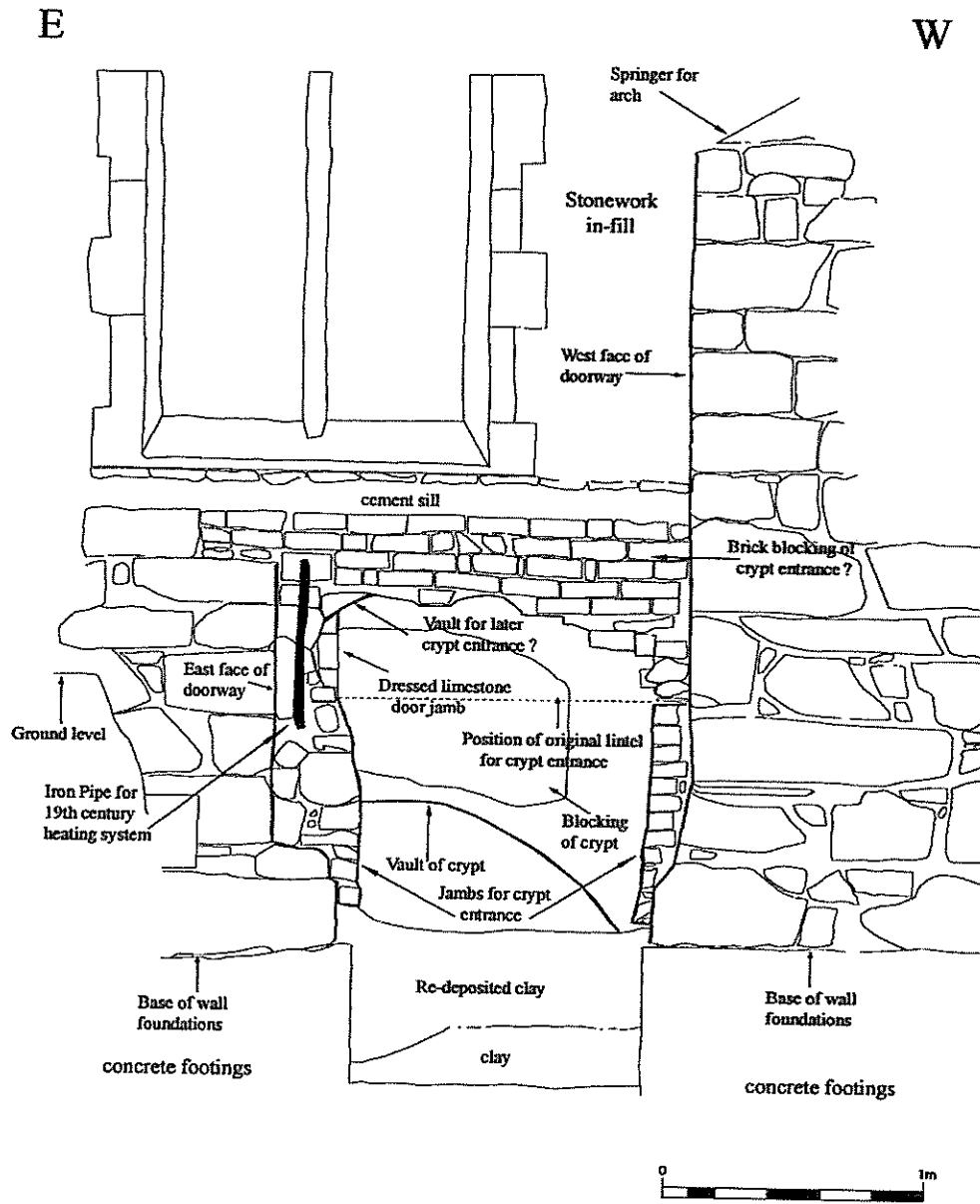


Figure 2: Elevation of north wall as recorded in 2002

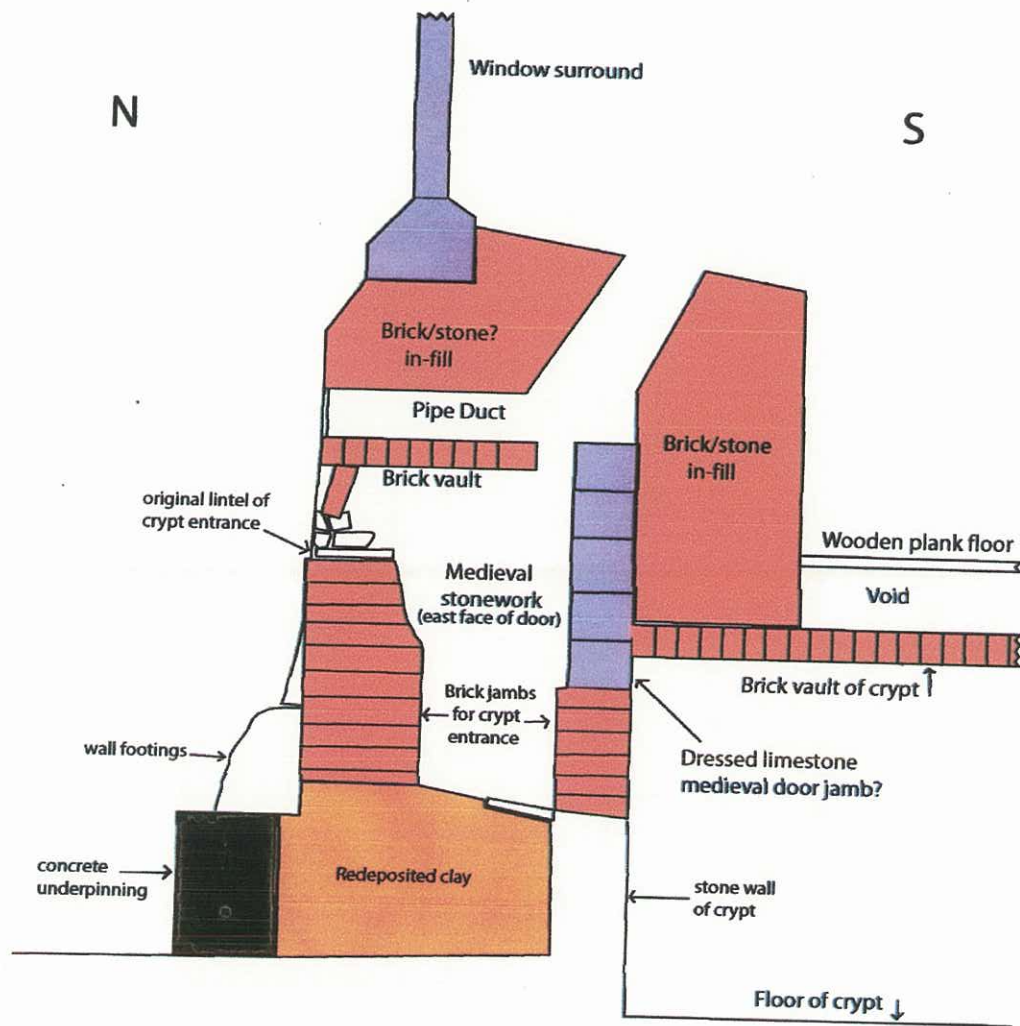


Figure 3: Cross section through the north wall



Plate 1: External view of the crypt entrance



Plate 2: Dressed limestone medieval door Jamb (left), brick vault (above) and brickwork blocking the entrance to the crypt



Plate 3: Lead coffins within the crypt



Plate 4: The Chapman memorial inside the church

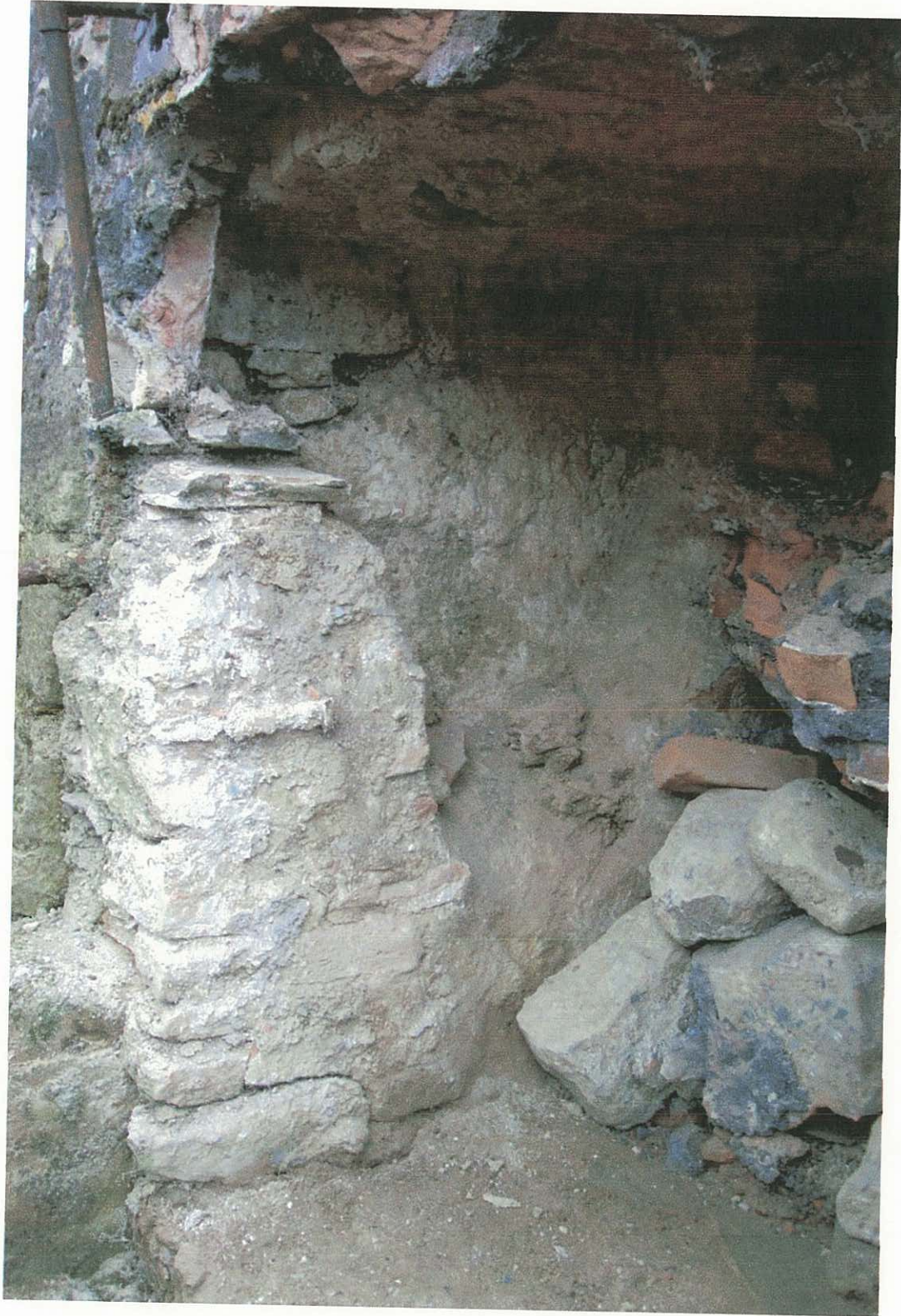


Plate 5: The east side of the medieval doorway with brickwork and lintel fragment (above brickwork) of the crypt entrance



Plate 6: West side of the crypt entrance (right) with brick blocking (left)

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This report has been prepared by Duncan Schlee

Position : Archaeologist

Signature Date

This report has been checked and approved by on behalf of Cambria Archaeology, Dyfed
Archaeological Trust Ltd.

Position

Signature Date.....

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