

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH RUDBAXTON PEMBROKESHIRE



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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH, RUDBAXTON, PEMBROKESHIRE

Gan / By

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SUMMARY

A site visit was made to St Michael's Church, Rudbaxton after a number of human remains had been exposed during the excavation of a new footpath and service trench. On this visit the burials were recorded and it was noted that there were other features of archaeological interest exposed within the excavated area. A second visit was therefore carried out in which the exposed deposits and related topological features were recorded.

BACKGROUND TO THE SITE

This short background information is from N D Ludlow's report on Rudbaxton Church, part of a Cadw grant-aided study in 2003. St Michael's is a medieval parish church, comprising chancel, nave, south aisle, south porch and west tower. It was listed in the Taxatio of 1291. It may have been in existence c.1110 and granted to Gloucester Abbey? It was conferred upon Slebech Commandery 1152-76 along with Gloucester's other Pembrokeshire churches. The regular, sub-rectangular churchyard was formerly smaller, the northwest corner of the smaller yard showing as a rectilinear cropmark on aerial photographs. The churchyard is closely associated with the Anglo-Norman motte, only 15m to the east, the manor, and deserted medieval settlement (DMV). The church is dedicated to St Michael, but the Royal Commission of Ancient Monuments of Wales suggest that it was originally dedicated to the 'Celtic' St Madoc, like the nearby St Madoc's Well, but this may be without foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Cambria Archaeology Field Services were asked to record a number of human remains exposed during construction work at St Michael's Church, Rudbaxton, Pembrokeshire SM 9602 2056). The work consisted of removing the existing footpath and excavating a trench for new services along the length of the path prior to its replacement. This resulted in a 35m long trench, approximately 0.30m wide, up to 0.70m in depth.

St Michael's Church is situated in close proximity to Rudbaxton Motte, which lies immediately to the east. The edge of this medieval castle mound is only 14m from the start of the excavations. Furthermore in the fields surrounding the churchyard there are a number of earthworks visible (see Photo. 1) that relate to an abandoned medieval settlement in the area usually referred to as a DMV (deserted medieval settlement).

It was therefore considered possible that important archaeological remains associated with medieval activity may have survived within the churchyard and that these maybe revealed or impacted by this development.

The objectives of the watching brief were to characterise and record the extent, chronology and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits identified during the groundworks.

RESULTS

A site visit was made to St Michael's Church when the excavation for the new path and services was well advanced. On the first visit there were eight discrete areas of human bone visible in the trench section representing at least five burials. The 20m of footpath nearest the church had cut through an area that

had been used so often for burials that it consisted entirely of grave fill. There were only very faint grave cuts visible, as the later graves had cut through earlier graves and this was represented by fragments of residual bone evident in both the section edge and the excavated spoil (see Photo. 3). The relatively shallow depth of these graves combined with a lack of any coffin nails or furniture would suggest that these were fairly early burials, although a definite date could not be possible to determined.

These graves were recorded on the first visit, however examination of the trench revealed that nearer the car park there was an area of natural looking subsoil and a layer of stony built up material exposed in the section (see Photo. 4). Given the proximity of this part of the churchyard to the motte it was decided that this was worth further investigation.

On the second visit this section was cleaned to reveal an area of possibly natural sub soil (104) approximately 5m in length consisting of a mid-brown silty-clay with about 40% small angular stone inclusions. However, at least four burials had cut into this context so it only survived in small discrete patches (see Photo. 5). The built up material (105) was a mid grey brown clay silt with up to 70% angular shale inclusions. Although it would be reasonable to expect (105) to overlie (104) the relationship between these contexts was not discernable due to the presence of a grave cutting through the interface (see Photo. 6). It does appear however that (105) lies alongside (104) possibly within a cut feature or that (104) is in fact redeposited natural but without further excavation it is not possible to resolve this relationship.

However an observational survey of the surrounding area was able to offer a possible interpretation of this feature (105). Although the motte has been heavily truncated, by the church's access road and car park on the north and west and by the farm yard and buildings of Great Rudbaxton farm on the south and east there is still a small section of its surrounding ditch and counterscarp bank surviving on the northeast. Once the circuit of this earthwork has been extrapolated it is apparent in the topography of both the churchyard and the neighbouring field to the northeast of the church see (Photos. 7 & 8). It is therefore likely that (105) is the outer edge of this counterscarp bank that has survived later levelling work by being within the confines of the churchyard. There is also a very shallow earthwork in the field to the northeast of the church that suggest that the motte may have in fact had two banks surrounding it. This earthwork is extremely ephemeral but if in fact it is a secondary bank it may well be preserved in the small copse to the north of the castle mound.

Other features noted in the surrounding area was a circular stone well inserted into the moat of the motte just to northeast. Alongside this well is what appears to be a stone bridge or causeway crossing the ditch. However these observations were made from the road and therefore exact descriptions or measurements were not possible. There were also a number of earthworks noticeable in the fields to the north and west of the church that may relate to the DMV. The most prominent of these was a long curvilinear raised bank approximately 20m to the west of the churchyard. This feature appears to be over a metre in height and over 40m in length and is very clearly visible on aerial photographs of this area. Its purpose is not obvious but may relate to earlier land divisions such as a hedge bank although it does seem rather large for this purpose. There is also the foundation of a structure, possibly a house persevered as a rectilinear earthwork to the northeast of the church (see Photo. 9). Stonework is visible in the southern gable end of this structure although once again observations were made from the road and so it could not be acutely recorded.

CONCLUSIONS

The burials revealed by the new service trench indicate that the church path has not always followed the same route. The path may well have been moved after the construction of the south aisle c1500. The opening of the trench at the western edge of the churchyard has revealed that at least part of the outer earthworks of the castle mound have been preserved within the church boundary. It is also possible that other early features have survived but the concentration of burials nearer the church make preservation in this area less likely.



Figure 1. Location map, based on the Ordnance Survey. Scale 1:25,000.

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Figure 2. Plan showing location of graves and earthworks.

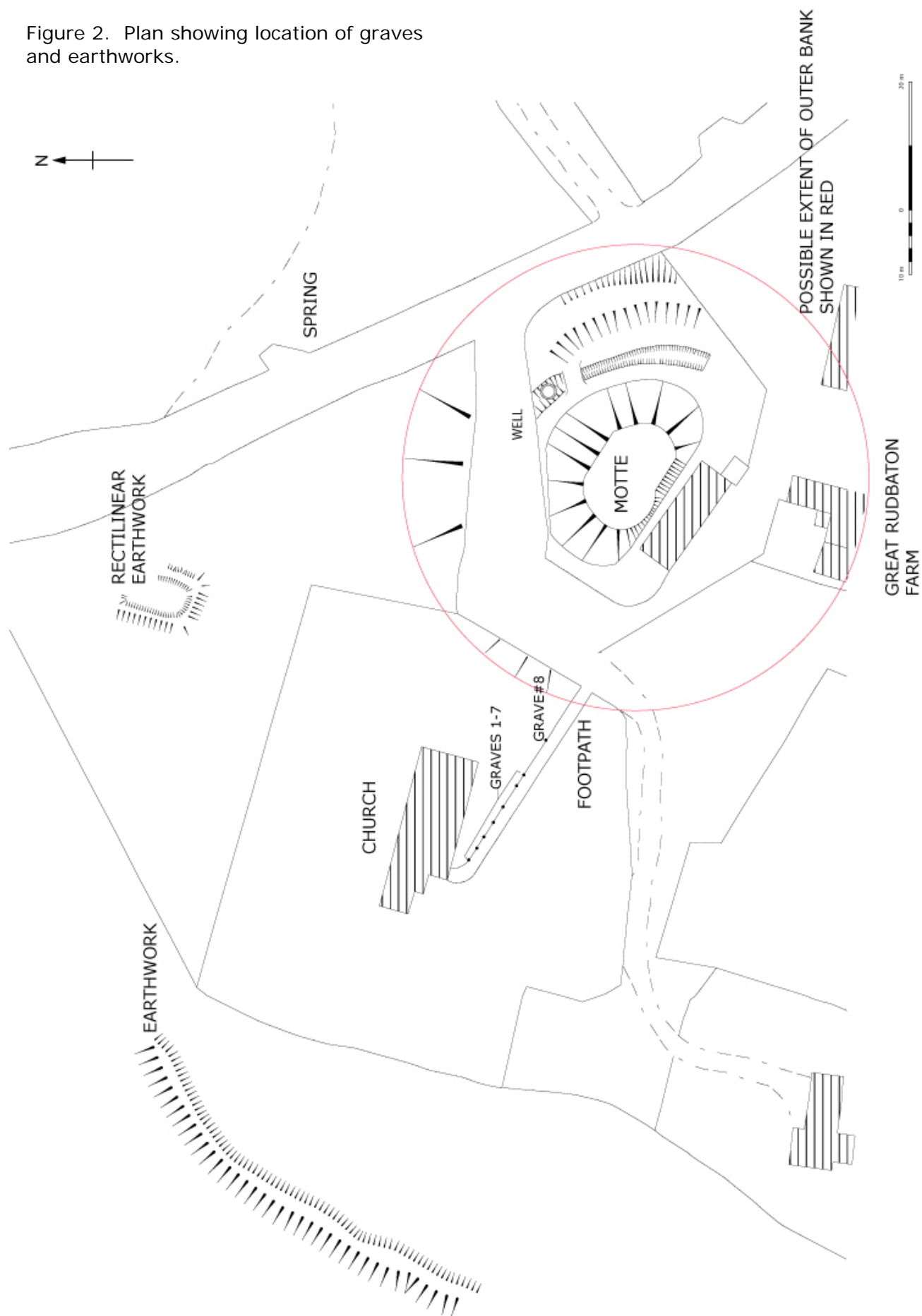




Photo 1: Aerial photograph of the medieval field systems west of St Michael's Church, Rudbaxton 1979.



Photo 2: General view of excavated trench with red and white pegs showing positions of exposed burials.



Photo 3: Section view of grave #3 with arm bones in base of excavated trench with hipbone and pelvis showing in the section. Bone fragments are visible on the spoil in the foreground.



Photo 4: View looking west with natural orange subsoil and dark grey built up material showing in the base of the trench. The motte is just visible in the background.



Photo 5: Grave #8 cut into (104) with thighbone visible in section.



Photo 6: Section through (104) and (105).



Photo 7: Outer rampart of motte visible as faint earthwork in the topography of the field just to the northeast of the churchyard.



Photo 8: View of the edge of the rampart preserved in the western end of the churchyard.



Photo 9: Rectilinear earthwork indicating a possible structure.

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