

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, CONWY
WATCHING BRIEF (G1319)

REPORT NO. 162

G1319

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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SUMMARY

The excavations for an extension at the rear of the nineteenth century church of St. John's Conwy, revealed the remains of the foundation walls of previously demolished buildings contemporary with the church. No earlier archaeological remains were observed as it appeared that this area had been stripped down to the natural sub-soil, before being built up for the construction of the church.

1. INTRODUCTION

A planning application was made to Aberconwy Borough Council for an extension to the existing property at the rear of St. John's Church Rose Hill Street, Conwy. The Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service (GAPS), in its role as archaeological advisor to the local planning authorities, provided comment on the proposed development. GAPS indicated that, considering the location of the proposed development within the walled medieval town and only some 40m from St. Mary's Church, it was possible that important archaeological remains would be disturbed.

An archaeological condition was therefore attached to the grant of planning permission by Aberconwy Borough Council. As a result, GAPS produced a project brief for the applicant defining the nature of the work required.

The applicant subsequently commissioned the Trust's Contracts Section to carry out a watching brief during the excavations for the foundations of the development.

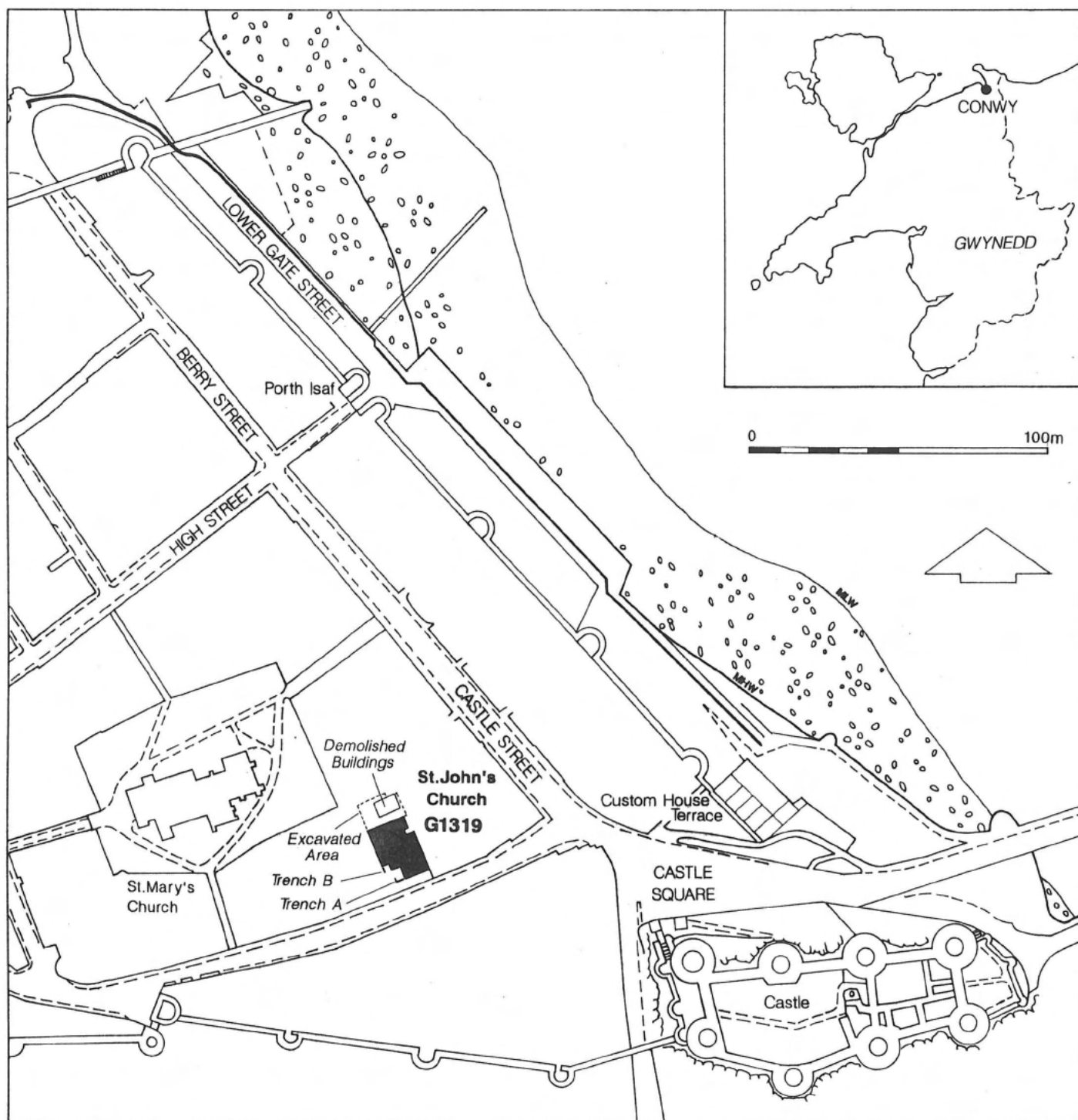
2. BACKGROUND

The site is located at the rear of St. John's Church on the north side of Rose Hill Street (see figure 1) and approximately 40m east-south-east of St. Mary's Church (SH 7810 7754). Parts of the church have been dated to the twelfth century and it is, therefore, thought to be part of the Cistercian abbey of Aberconwy which was founded on the site in 1172. The exact lay-out of the abbey precinct is still unclear and it was hoped that evidence for the extent or use of the abbey's land may have been forthcoming.

St. John's Church was built in the second half of the nineteenth century, cartographical evidence from the eighteenth century suggests that previous to this the northern side of Rose Hill Street (or Horse Mill Street as it was then known) consisted of open gardens or lots. The most recent 1:2500 OS map indicates the presence of one large and one smaller rectangular building situated at the rear of the Church (see figure 1) which are believed to be contemporary with the church. These buildings were apparently demolished within the last ten years.

3. AIMS AND METHODS

The site of the development was levelled by the contractors (Ashworth Gorst Ltd.) by machine. A small, modern extension directly adjacent to a doorway at the rear of the church had already been demolished along with its concrete floor. A partially tiled platform in the north corner of the area, thought to represent the smaller of the demolished rectangular buildings (an outside toilet?), was also removed at this stage. Two small foundation trenches (Trenches A and B) for an entrance porch were also excavated at the front of the church (see figure 1). The excavation for the foundations commenced on Wednesday 15th of February, 1995 and conti-



G1319. St John's Church - Location in Conwy

nued until Friday the 3rd of March, 1995. Work was hampered by cold and wet weather with frequent snow and hail showers resulting the instability of some of the trench sides. This work was monitored by a single member of GAT staff and consisted of fourteen brief site visits. Recording involved photography both black and white prints, and colour transparencies all at 35mm format and written descriptions of the deposits and features encountered.

4. RESULTS

A large rectangular area, 8m to 10m by approximately 16m, was excavated at the rear of the church. This was between 1m and 1.2m in depth in the western half and 0.85m to 1m in the eastern half. The lowest recorded context was an orangy brown, shaly silty clay (context 003) which was interpreted as undisturbed natural. From the interface of this context with the overlying context (002), a fragment of course late nineteenth century pottery was retrieved.

Context 002 was found at a depth of approximately 0.85m; a dark to mid-brown clayey silt, virtually stone free and well sorted, it contained animal bone fragments, a small amount of charcoal and shell fragments. Shell horizons were also noted in this context in the north-west corner of the area.

Three service pipes crossed the north-west corner of the area in north-east to south-west directions. Very subtle cuts, cutting 002, were just visible for these pipes, they appeared to have been backfilled with disturbed 002. Modern pottery fragments and animal bones, including a skull and mandible of a dog, were present in these cuts. A small brick drain manhole with a clay pipe running parallel along the northern enclosing wall was also recorded.

A number of stone wall foundations were removed from the north-east half of the area. They all appeared to be of the same construction: undressed stones, externally heavily mortared with loose rubble cores. Approximately 0.8m high and 0.3m wide. No cuts for these walls were visible. Context 002 and a stony, mid-brown sandy clayey silt with a band of sand (context 006) which overlay 002 at a depth of 0.3m, butted against these walls. Context 006 was not present in the south-west of the excavated area. A fragment of modern pottery was retrieved from this layer. An 'u'-shaped cut directly above the walls, cutting 006 and 002 and filled by a stony, dark grey clayey silt was interpreted as resulting from the removal of the upstanding walls during the demolition process.

The location of these walls corresponded with the projected location of the demolished nineteenth century buildings, this along with the pottery evidence indicates that they were indeed the remains of the foundation walls of these buildings.

The removal of the ground adjacent to the rear of the church, also revealed an unexplained irregular hole, approximately 1.5m by 0.4m in size, in the north-west half of the church basement wall. It had been roughly filled by unmortared bricks.

The two trenches at the front of the church were to facilitate foundations for a new porch (the smaller original one having been demolished).

Trench A was 'L'-shaped with the main axis running in a east-north-east to west-south-west direction. It was 2m long by 1.75m to 2m wide and 0.7m deep. The lowest context recorded was a light brown clayey silt, containing small fragments of coal. Overlaying this at a depth of 0.15m was a very stony, dark brown clayey silt, interpreted as footing for the overlaying tarmac surface.

Trench B was 5m long and 0.8m wide and 1m deep. It ran in a north-west to south-east direction. The lowest context appeared to be the same light brown clayey silt as found in the base of Trench A, but in this trench it directly underlay the tarmac surface. An opaque fragment of

a nineteenth or twentieth century mineral/tonic bottle was retrieved from this layer.

5. INTERPRETATION

The location and artefactual evidence from the walls uncovered, indicate that they represent the remains of the nineteenth century buildings recorded on recent maps and demolished in the last ten years. The absence of cuts for these walls and the artefactual evidence suggest that the main make-up of the area (002) is material purposely used to build up and level the area which had been stripped down to the undisturbed natural during the construction of the church and the recently demolished buildings at the rear of the church.

