
St. Mary's Church: **Conwy**



Archaeological Watching Brief

GAT Project No.2157

Report No. 950

May, 2011

St. Mary's, Conwy

Watching Brief

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Prepared for

Tarmaster Jones

May 2011

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St. Mary's, Conwy

Watching Brief

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ST. MARY'S CHURCH, CONWY (G2157)

Archaeological Watching Brief

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out within the grounds of the church hall and the graveyard and boundary wall at St. Mary's Church Conwy, during the construction of a path between the churchyard, through a new breach in the churchyard wall, to the church hall. The ground around the frontage of the church hall was heavily disturbed with service trenches, and no archaeological deposits were noted. In the churchyard, the topsoil was removed onto archaeological levels only at the northern end of the path, where it was noted at a depth of 0.1m. One grave cut was identified within the excavated area. The south east corner of the churchyard had clearly been used as an area to dump material from churchyard clearance, and a three gravestones, and a number of monument fragments, that had been moved out of their original positions were located within the topsoil deposits, along with a fragment of medieval window tracery that was probably replaced in the church during the 19th or early 20th century. The breach in the churchyard wall to the church hall was through 20th century grey bricks, a replacement for an earlier wall that had clearly become unstable and had been supported with buttresses, although the earlier foundations remained.

1 INTRODUCTION

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) was asked by *Tarmaster Jones Architects* to provide a cost and project design for carrying out a phased programme of archaeological mitigation, as a planning condition, in advance of and during ground works at St. Mary's Church and Church Hall, Conwy (Fig. 1).

Based on information listed in client drawings **AL/2047/5/08-SU02/ AL/2047/5/08-PL02 to 08**, the ground works programme included:

- construction of a new path through St. Mary's Church graveyard: length c.16.0m, width 1.20m, depth 0.10m. Path to have a gravel finish, with a change in level accommodated via timber risers. The path was excavated by a mini-digger through the existing graveyard. No visible gravestones or slabs were to be affected. The path was to connect the churchyard path to the southern boundary wall (which will be breached), providing access to the rear of the Church Hall.
- breach of existing southern boundary wall to connect churchyard and rear of Church Hall. A wooden staircase was constructed to accommodate the height change between the respective plots. The breach was positioned between two existing stone-built buttresses. A wrought iron gate will be positioned across the new opening. The wall to be breached measured 2.26m in height and was constructed from English Garden bond (at this location only, where visible).
- construction of a new oak staircase linking the churchyard to the Church Hall via the new breach. Staircase will be set onto galvanised support beams/concrete pad (0.10m thick) within the Church Hall yard.
- landscaping of the Church Hall frontage parallel to Rose Hill Street. Two planting areas to be constructed, both with bullnose concrete path edging. Surrounding area at front was to have tarmacadam surface, and the entrance gateway was to be remodelled. The current centre post for iron gates was to be removed (centre post not an original feature). The rear of the Church Hall will not be resurfaced, but overgrowth cleared and the surface area cleaned down and joints raked out and sealed.

1.1 Acknowledgements

The assistance of the Rector of Conwy, *Tarmaster Jones Architects* and Jenny Emmett and Ashley Batten of Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service (GAPS) with this project is gratefully acknowledged.

2 SPECIFICATION AND PROJECT DESIGN

A project design was prepared for Tarmaster Jones (T0079) and agreed by GAPS. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust's proposals for fulfilling these requirements were:

- Watching Brief and Limited Assessment
- Photographic Record
- Report

The report conforms to the guidelines set down in the Institute for Archaeologists (IFA) *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological Watching Brief* (2001).

3 METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

3.1 Photographic Record (Southern Boundary Wall)

A photographic record of the wall portion between the two buttresses using a digital SLR camera set to maximum resolution (both from the graveyard side and the Church Hall side) was carried out.

A measured survey and description of the structural phasing was carried out: a preliminary visit to the site identified English Garden bond brickwork for the wall and stonework for the buttresses. Additional phasing may also be identified.

3.2 Intensive watching brief

The watching brief monitored the construction of a new path through St. Marys' Church graveyard, dug to a length of c.16.0m, 1.20m wide and 0.10m deep. Also a breach on the existing southern boundary wall between the churchyard and the rear of the Church Hall was to be observed, along with the construction of a new oak staircase linking the churchyard to the Church Hall via the new breach, and landscaping of the Church Hall frontage parallel to Rose Hill Street. A photographic record using a digital SLR camera set to maximum resolution was maintained during the project.

3.3 Archive

A full archive including plans, photographs, written material and any other material resulting from the project was prepared. This is currently held by GAT under project code **G2157**

4 TOPOGRAPHY

The site of the town of Conwy lies between the Afon Conwy to the east, the Afon Gyffin to the south and the coast to the north, whilst being protected by Conwy Mountain to the west. The castle was built on a dramatic craggy rock outcrop, whilst the town lay on ground sloping up to the west. The location of the town at the head of the Conwy valley also allowed for communications from the coast into the mountainous interior.

5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

5.1 Introduction

The first known settlement at Conwy dates from the establishment of the Cistercian monastery in about 1192 on the west bank of the river and close to the confluence with the Afon Gyffin. The monastery had been established by monks from Strata Florida, who had first settled in north-west Caernarfonshire in 1186, but had moved to Aberconwy by 1192. The importance of the monastery grew under the patronage of Llewellyn ab Iorwerth, who was buried there in 1240, and who kept a hall there for his use. However Edward I decision to use the site for a new town and castle required the monks to move up river to Maenan, the monastic church forming the core of the parish church.

5.2 General History

The parish church of Conwy, a Grade I Listed Building (3353), was established as a monastic church of the Cistercian order in 1197. Only small areas of the monastic church survive, which includes part of the west front of the church. There is a single lancet in the north wall of the parish room that is probably dateable to the monastic period of use of the church.

The church was damaged during the conquest of 1282, and was then changed to parochial status to serve the new borough town of Conwy when the abbey was moved south to Maenan. Part of the original Cistercian church survives, although most of the present church is a 14th century rebuilding. It consists of a west tower, nave with north and south isles, south transept, and a chancel with a north vestry. Further additions took place in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the church was much restored in Victorian times.

St. Mary's in its current form is mainly a 13th and 14th century church, with many surviving memorials and surviving woodwork.

The churchyard is enclosed by buildings to Castle Street, High Street, Church Street and Rose Hill Street (centred on NGR SH7816377526), and would appear to date from the foundation of the abbey of Aberconwy. It is irregular in form and is bounded by the high stone walls of the gardens and outbuildings of properties adjacent to the churchyard, with the churchyard deposits forming a bank against the inside of the boundary walls. It has entrances on the north-east, north, west and south which are all public thoroughfares. It is probable that a larger enclosure may have existed, surrounding the present churchyard, defining the precinct of the Cistercian Abbey. It is shown on an estate map of 1776 (Fig. 3; Bangor MSS 2383), and it can be suggested that the block of land defined by the line of the High Street (Great Street in 1776), Castle Street, Rose Hill Street (Horse Mill Street in 1776) and Church Street may represent the fossilised area of the monastic precinct. This conclusion has been reached because of the way this block interrupts the regular grid system of the streets of the Edwardian Borough and it is probable that the Edwardian street was laid out to avoid the area of the precinct. The area occupied by the church hall is shown as garden on the 1776 map (marked as '8'), and referred to on the schedule as a *garden*. The raised ground level noted in the rear yard of the church hall may be the result of many years cultivation.

The Church Hall was built as a school in 1887 and has a frontage onto Rose Hill Street; the rear of the property faces the church, but is separated by the church boundary wall. These are shown on the 25 inch 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map of 1900 (Fig. 4).

6 RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF

6.1 The Church Hall

Excavations were carried out on the church hall forecourt to a depth of 0.3m on the south side of the hall (Plate 9; Fig. 2). The deposits consisted of 0.1m of tarmacadam overlying make-up layers of mid yellowish brown silty clay (002), within which was a service trench containing a drainage pipe. All deposits noted formed part of make up layers or service trenches cut through them, and there was no prospect of recovering any archaeological evidence. The concrete yard surface to the rear of the hall was undisturbed.

6.2 The Graveyard of St. Mary's Church, Conwy

6.2.1 Boundary Wall

The churchyard boundary wall between the church hall and the churchyard of St. Mary's consisted on the churchyard side of 0.5m of rounded and angular shale blocks. These were topped by grey concrete bricks, making a total height for the wall of 2.9m on the graveyard side and 2.2m on the hall side, and the wall was supported by quarried granite buttresses, up to 1.2m high. The suggested interpretation of these is that there was a probable instability or collapse of an earlier churchyard wall, surviving now as

the bottom 0.5m on the churchyard side. This would initially have required the construction of the supporting buttresses and later the rebuilding of the wall at a height of greater than 0.5m (Plate 4). This suggests that the problem was a chronic one, and was probably the result of pressure from the church hall side of the wall, which was 0.6m higher than on the churchyard side. It would not have been possible to replace the lower courses of the wall as they formed a revetment for the hall yard.

A breach 1.06m wide was made in this wall between the eastern and middle buttresses down to the level of the old wall on the graveyard side (Plate 3; Fig.2). The brick part of the wall was 0.25m thick and 0.45m wide.

6.2.2 The Graveyard

The new path from the churchyard to the church hall leads from the tarmac footpath at the east end of the church south-eastwards to the churchyard wall (Plate 5; Fig.2). It was dug through the graveyard topsoil to a depth of 110mm-200mm. The soil consisted of a dark greyish brown sandy silt, with occasional charnel fragments and small shale fragments (101), and overlay a mottled mid orangey brown clay silt, which was only noted close to the path edge.

A possible grave cut [103] was noted 1.95m north of the tarmacadam path (Fig.2). It was 0.8m wide and 0.9m of the western end of its length was visible in the trench. The fill consisted of a light greyish brown sandy silt with small to medium rounded and sub angular stone inclusions (104). The grave was cut into a mid orangey brown clay silt subsoil (102) at a depth of 0.19m below the modern ground surface, and was not investigated further. Further south the excavation did not extend beyond the depth of the topsoil, so no further grave cuts were encountered.

A number of gravestone and other fragments of material, including a side panel of a former box tomb (Mytum 2003) were uncovered within the topsoil along the route of the path. All the gravestones had been moved from their original positions, and were located within the topsoil deposits. A slate ledger grave slab 1.8m by 0.9m and 0.06m thick [105] was uncovered, clearly moved from its original location, possibly as part of the buttress construction (Plate 6). The inscription, on the upper part of the stone read:

Sacred
to the memory of
MARGARET
Wife of OWEN WILLIAMS *Bryngwynog*
Who died March 6th 1843 AGED 61
=====

Also the above named
OWEN WILLIAMS
who died April 4th, 1864
AGED 83

A second slab 0.9m by 0.46m and 0.03m thick, was a semi-circular and shoulder topped headstone [107], a very common design in the 19th Century, with the simple inscription 'W.R' (Mytum 2003). It was out of position and recumbent, having formerly been an upright headstone (Plate 7).

A third headstone, to Absalom Davies [108] was uncovered in material adjacent to the churchyard boundary wall, in an unstratified context, clearly moved as part of graveyard clearance, and within a deep topsoil deposit between the boundary wall buttress. The headstone was a broken fragment, with a rounded top with a slightly convex top edge 0.7m by 0.68m and 0.04m thick, had the inscription:

IN MEMORY OF
ABSALOM DAVIES
WHO DIED DECEMBER 29: 1857
Aged 77

6.2.3 Medieval Window Tracery Fragments (Plate 10)

A loose fragment of former window tracery was uncovered within the rubble and topsoil material adjacent to the churchyard wall. It consisted of a single mullion fragment of red sandstone with an ogee profile, 0.3m by 0.28m. It was almost certainly removed from the church during 19th century restorations which are known to have been carried out on the building (Plate 1). The material was recovered from within the rubble against the churchyard wall, strongly suggesting the area of the churchyard was formerly used for clearance (Plate 8).

7 CONCLUSION

The ground around the frontage of the church hall was heavily disturbed with service trenches, and no archaeological deposits were noted. All deposits consisted of made ground, with modern service trenches cut through them.

In the churchyard, the topsoil was removed onto archaeological levels only at the northern end of the path, where it was noted at a depth of 0.1m. One grave cut was identified within the excavated area. The south east corner of the churchyard, against the boundary wall, had clearly been used as an area to dump material from churchyard clearance, and three gravestones with a number of monument fragments that had been moved out of their original positions, were located within the topsoil deposits. A fragment of medieval window tracery that was probably replaced in the church during the 19th or early 20th century was also identified.

The churchyard boundary wall between the church hall and the churchyard of St. Mary's consisted on the churchyard side of 0.5m of rounded and angular shale blocks. These were topped by grey concrete bricks, the wall was supported by quarried granite buttresses, up to 1.2m high and the phasing of these developments was noted.

8 SOURCES CONSULTED

8.1 Unpublished Sources

Bangor University Archives

Bangor MSS 2383 *Map of Conwy Town* 1776 revised 1810

8.2 Published Sources

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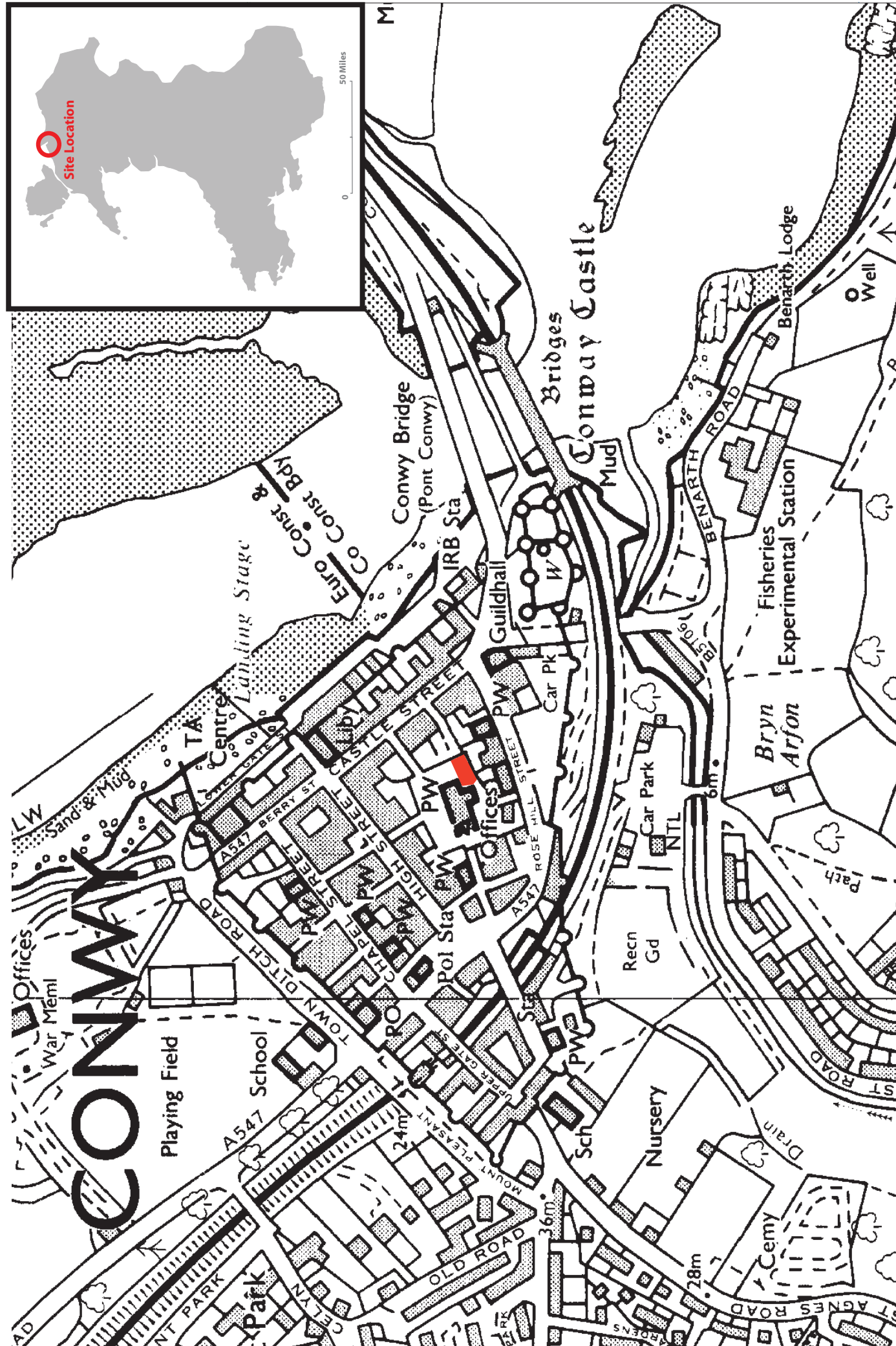


Fig. 1 Site Location. Base map taken from 1:10 000 Ordnance Survey sheet SH 77NE. Development area outlined in red. Scale 1:6000

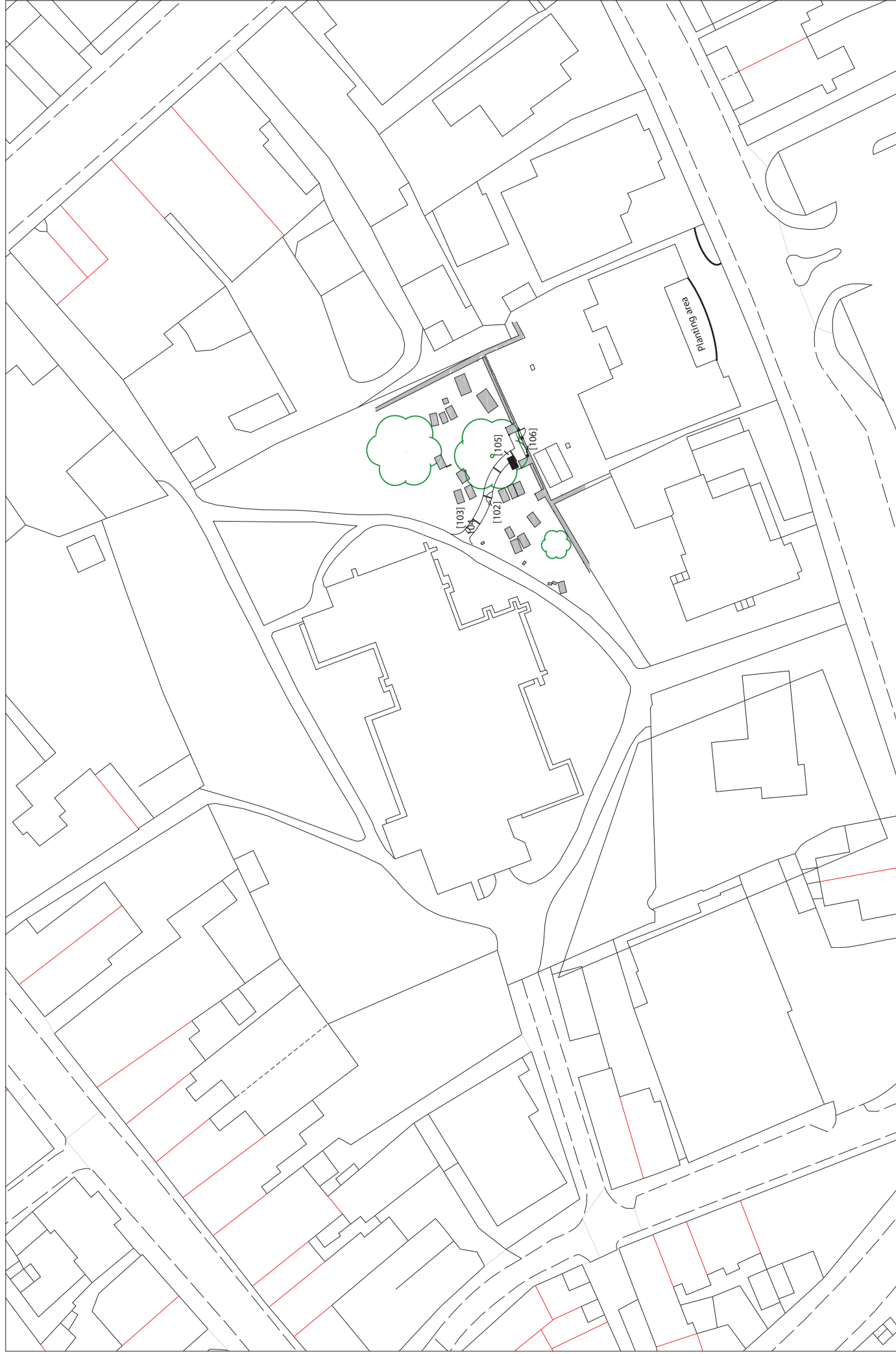


Fig. 2 Location of features identified in the text. Features identified in the text are shown in brackets. Background information taken from *Tarmaster Jones*
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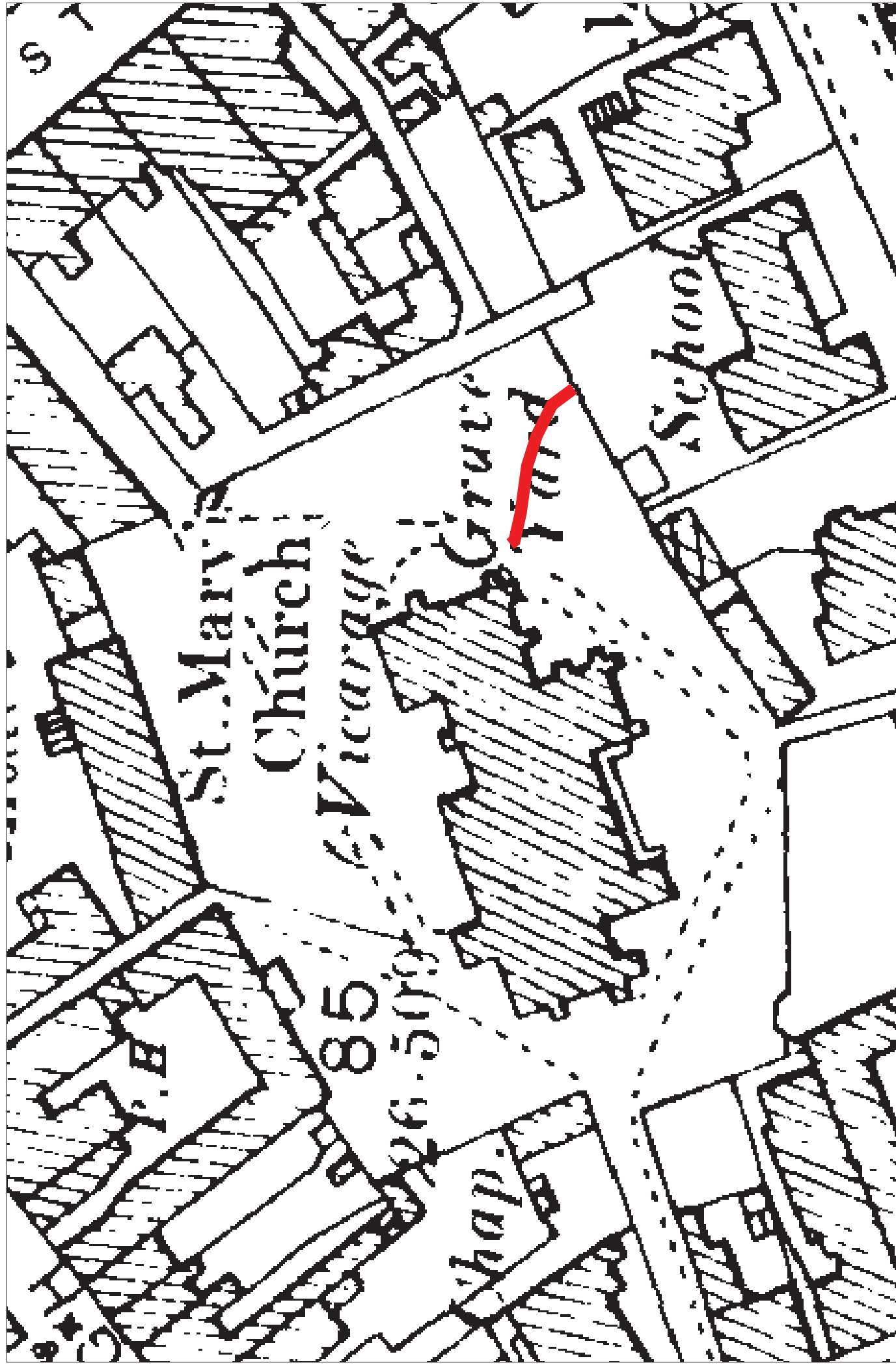


Fig. 4 Ordnance Survey 25 inch 2nd edition map of 1900, Caernarvonshire sheet XLI.2. Approximate line of path shown in red. Scale 1:500



Plate 1: South East corner of South transept of St. Mary's church



Plate 2: General shot of path area prior to excavation - view looking South East



Plate 3: Breach in churchyard walls - Scales 1m



Plate 4: Buttress detail - View from South East - Scales 1m



Plate 5: Top soil stripping for path - view from North East. Grave cut annotated with a black outline



Plate 6: Grave stone [105] - Scale 1m



Plate 7: Grave stone [106] - Scale 1m



Plate 8: General view of wall area during excavation of soil build up



Plate 9: Church hall during initial ground works - View from Rose Hill Street to the South



Plate 10: Fragment of medieval window tracery - Scale 1m



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