

Archaeological Investigation at St Mary's Church Hook.
A community archaeology project.



Dr J Kenny MCIFA – December 2023

Contents

Acknowledgements.

1. Introduction.
2. Historical Background
3. Methodology and Results
4. Evaluation for further work on the floor
5. Sources

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Some of our Volunteers at St Marys, March 2023.

1. Introduction

The community led investigation at St Mary's Church, Hook was undertaken under the supervision of the author of this report Dr Jon Kenny from Jon Kenny – community archaeology. I was consulted by the vicar of the church Rev Philip Ball because he was undertaking a renovation and improvement project on the floor of the nave. This would re-floor the nave introducing underfloor heating and removing the fixed pews that dominate the nave at present. The new floor would improve the experience for worshipers and other community users of the church, while replacing the pews with stackable chairs would open the space for a wide range of worship and community activities.

Prior to removing the present stone flag suspended floor archaeological assessment was required to evaluate the possibility that burials may be exposed by the removal of the stone flags. The east end of the south transept of the church had already been exposed in the 1980s when work was undertaken to remove pews along the transept wall. Removing some of the flags during that process revealed a lead coffin lid level with the surface of the underlying 'floor'. Some 0.25m below the flags of the floor. The team at the time decided to take a look inside the lead coffin. They observed a skeleton with white and yellow shrouds with its head laid on a 'silk' cushion. Because of the lead coffin, location inside the church and quality of the shroud and cushion the team decided that this must be a Knight and of great importance to the village. Concerned at the potential cost of inviting archaeologists to observe and excavate the coffin the lid was replaced, and the floor was remade. The story was out though, and the knight became part of community legend in the village.

The need to evaluate the void beneath the suspended floor led to the idea of returning to that corner to both:

- Better understand what archaeology may be encountered when it came to replacing the suspended floor.
- To better record what was visible of the proposed Knight of Hook buried in the church.

Rev Ball obtained a faculty to remove the slabs from the floor in that Southeast corner of the nave / transept and to observe and record the burial. That is where I came into the project, as a community archaeologist I led a small team from the local community to undertake the work. This report is the result of our investigation.

2. Historical Background

Local Historians Susan and David Walker give us a good overview of the history of the church in Hook (2013). The Walkers follow the history of the church from the beginnings as a chantry chapel for the de Hook family in 1224 through to the historical period the Walkers follow a story of a small chantry chapel granted to the Lords of the Manor of Hook to a fully functioning parish church. Recent investigations of the medieval moated site just to the south of the church have suggested that at least some of the time people of some rank were in residence at Hook. So, these families might have been related to the person buried in the church.

The following brief history written by Susan and David Walker gives us an idea of the possible high-ranking parishioners who might be buried inside the church at Hook:

“There was once a hermitage at Hook, a place where those of great piety dedicated their lives to the service of God. They lived under strict conditions following the rule of St Benedict.

Records show that Hook Church was consecrated in 1225. the Abbott of Selby, Richard de Kellesay (1224-1237), granted a license to have a chantry in the chapel of his courtyard in 1224 for the manor house of Baron John de Houke. It may have stood on the site which is surrounded by the moat southwest of the church.

A chantry provided for the singing of mass for the soul of the founder. They were abolished under Henry V111.

In 1639 the churchwardens of Hook took the churchwardens of Airmyn to court for non-payment of dues. The people of Airmyn were using Hook church and they had been asked for a contribution towards its repair. In 1689 there had been forty-one burials and of those twenty-one were from Airmyn.

On old maps the church has been named as St John’s chapel.

In 1844 the church was partly restored at a cost of £900. the north wall was rebuilt, and other walls repaired. There was a new roof, slating, coping, cornice and gutter.

The pillars and arches were scraped, walls plastered and washed, and the windows were repaired and glazed. New open seats, a new desk, pulpit, and communion rail were installed. The vestry was paved, and the porch rebuilt. New windows and a stone cross were added, and the head of the west window was filled with stained glass.

In the vicar's vestry a commemorative plaque can be seen for the restoration giving details of costs and donations.

In 1848 the Parish of Goole was created to a large degree out of the Parish of Hook. A map from that time is in the archives at Doncaster.

The Churchyard

In 1493 the Bishop of Dromore (acting as a suffragan) was authorised to consecrate the churchyard for the inhabitants of Hook, Goole and Airmyn.

In the northeast end of the churchyard there are cholera graves. They can be recognised by their design. They are small square stones about 12 inches in size inscribed on top with a letter C. The cholera epidemic was in 1832 and the Goole area had the highest death rate in Yorkshire, losing 8.5% of its population. They are buried here in Hook. The last cholera death was in 1850.

Memorials

St. Mary's has several monuments which are mostly in the form of Brass Plaques. At the rear of the altar a plaque bears the inscription, 'To the Glory of God and in memory of Jarvis Empson fell asleep March 28th, 1871, AET 77 and also Elizabeth his wife fell asleep July 22nd 1867 AET 83.'

In the chancel there is a plaque which reads, 'James Lees. Died 7.10.23. For more than 30 years organist of this church.'

On the north wall there is a plaque, 'To the Glory of God and in memory of Annie Kenyon, Died Nov. 1921. Teacher in this Parish for 32 years. Aged 60 years.'

In the clergy vestry there is a plaque inscribed, 'This church was restored and partly rebuilt in the year 1844 at a cost of nearly £900 of which the township of Hook and Goole contributed by rate £50.'

Other types of memorials include one of stone in the chancel, 'Near to this place are interred the remains of Elizabeth, relict of William Godfrey late of Hooke, Gent. She departed this life the 21 February 26th, 1766, aged 65 years.'

There are two floor slab memorials at the chancel steps. One is inscribed, 'Here lieth interred the body of George Empson of Gouile. Gentleman, who departed this life the 7th day of April in the 62 yeare of his age. Anno domini 1677' while the other reads, 'Under this stone lieth the body of William Godfrey, Clerk. Late vicar of Crowle in the Isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire who departed this life July 28th, 1782. Aged 60 year.'

The East Window

The east window is very interesting with many symbols. Notice the XPC (representing a Greek word for Christ); AO (the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, an early Christian symbol for the eternity and infinite God; IHS (the Latin form of a Greek word for Jesus).

It also has Agnus Dei (Latin for Lamb of God, the words spoken by John the Baptist at the baptism of Jesus in John 1:29. The lamb carries the banner of victory representing both the suffering and victory of Christ. There is also the 'Pelican in her Piety' which is often seen in religious art. The story is that whenever her chicks are about to die of hunger and no food can be found the pelican will pierce her breast and feed her young with her own flesh and blood. This became a symbol for Christ's self-sacrifice to redeem the world. This same symbol can also be seen in the east window of Airmyn church. Notice the halo with its three red rays displayed behind the pelican, the lamb and Jesus. It has also become the symbol of the RAF Benevolent Fund, representing those who gave their lives for others during the war.

This window was most likely added during the restoration work in 1844. The Overseers' Book, in the parish records, gives details of the local custom of eating cakes and drinking spiced wine at all the funerals in Hook. No pauper was laid to rest without this custom as it would have caused anger against the Overseers. Some paupers were even buried with ale and cakes.

As you walk around look for the carved stone heads on the corners of the walls. They are most likely Victorian. Look also for the trademark mouse of Robert Thompson of Kilburn on our church notice board.

There is the grave of Rev'd Chamberlain (Vicar 1912 - 1937) and a small grave by the south wall of Margaret Amy Paley daughter of Rev'd Paley (Vicar from 1845)

The churchyard contains many fine trees including oak, silver birch, yew and horse chestnut but nothing compares to the magnificent copper beech (by the church path) and the Norway maple further into the churchyard.

To comply with disabled access legislation in 2005 the church path was lowered at the northwest corner of the church to allow level access to the church porch. The work was overseen by John Lister, Churchwarden.

The Nave

There are two rows of early English pillars which support medieval arches. The pews are stained pine from early in the nineteenth century. They have side panels to seat an extra person.

In the Goole Overseers' Book, 15 July 1732 it states that Alex Mould and John Priestly have built a pew in Hook church and that John Priestly must have a seat there for him and his family as long as it shall stand.

The pews in the north and south aisles were removed because of their condition. The floor was reflagged.

The nave has a very attractive beamed ceiling.

The lectern, a fine brass eagle, was presented in 1913 in memory of James Lees who served as clerk and sexton here.

On the north wall alongside the village War Memorial is a memorial to five Australian and one British airman who lost their lives when their aircraft crashed in the field opposite the church on 8 June 1944. Each June six red roses arrive from Australia in their remembrance.

Above the chancel arch is an oak cross which was crafted from wood saved when the local Methodist chapel was demolished. The chancel arch is 15th century and so too is the carved head on the left-hand base.

The pulpit dating from 1844 is, unusually, on the right-hand side of the nave.

During redecoration work in 2007 wall paintings were discovered on the east wall. The angel on the left is particularly fine with much detail remaining of the face and wings. Above the apex of the window is a figure showing Jesus on His heavenly throne. There are also paintings of pelicans and fleur de lys. It is thought that when the window was added in 1844 it cut through the existing wall painting.

Another important window is the one to the right of the altar. It shows Queen Victoria wearing spectacles and seated in a wheelchair.

The Chancel

Under the Queen Victoria Window is a Jacobean chair. By the door which leads into the vicar's vestry look for what is believed to be the consecration cross. The doorway is 13th century and the door has 15th century wood and iron work which has been preserved with a Victorian boarding.

In the vestry is a wooden grave marker dated 1839 and a Jacobean table (c.1720). There is also a stained-glass window depicting St Peter & St Stephen."

The historical notes above contain points of interest regarding the restoration of many parts of the church in 1844, but not it seems building the suspended flag floor in the nave and transepts. Other records suggest however that the suspended stone flag floor was inserted at this time. Wright's notes also highlight the work done in the south transept in the 1980s that revealed the burial.

3. Methodology and Results

a) Methodology.

St Mary's church in Hook is located to the west of the linear village and sits to the north of the remains of the moated manor house (see figure 1 below).

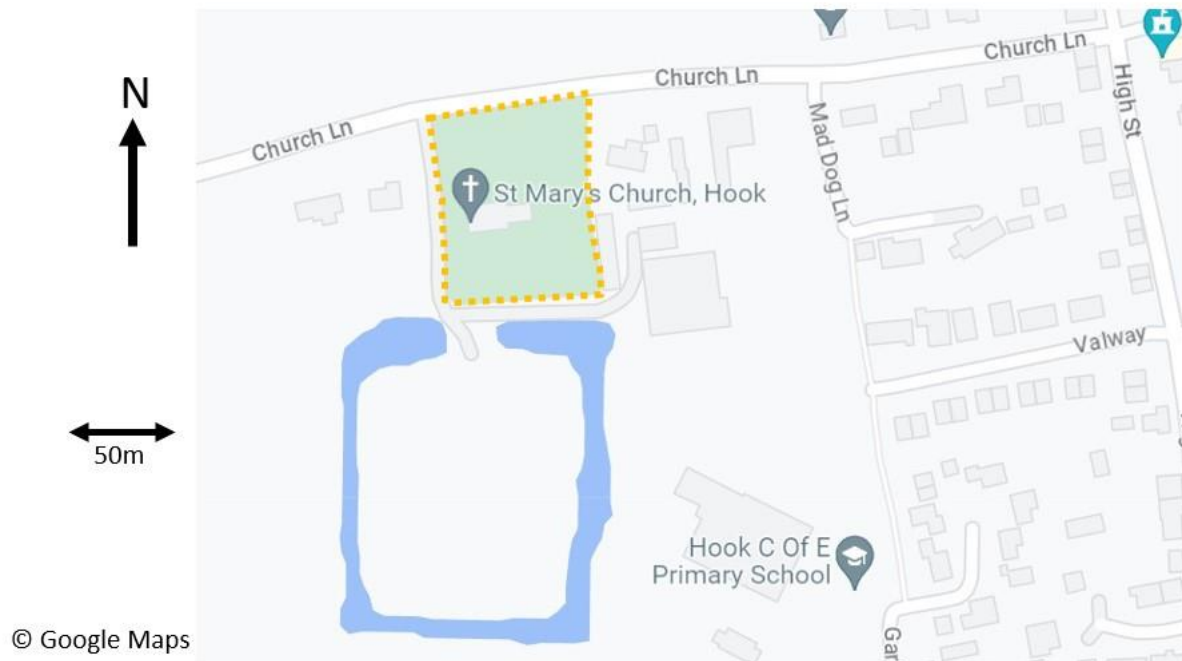


Figure 1: Location of St Mary's Church, Hook.

The section of the suspended flag stone floor that was lifted sits in the east end of the south transept of the church (see figure 2 below). This area was investigated because it had previously revealed the lid of an in-situ coffin and was important that we understood the floor level in relation to burials prior to replacing the floor.

The investigation was undertaken in March 2023. The work was carried out by a team of volunteers supervised by Dr Jon Kenny (the author) from Jon Kenny – community archaeology and contractor Tony Challenger. In summary the flag stones in the corner of the church were lifted between the south wall of the church and the first brick built supporting sill / sleeper beam. This opened up an area measuring approximately 4m by 1.20m. We discovered that the area that had been previously investigated had been back filled to cover the burial discovered, right up to the floor slabs. The fill consisted of wooden slats, with reinforced concrete slabs overlying them. This was then covered by plastic sheeting and finally limestone gravel. Beneath the back fill we located the original floor level, probably created when the suspended floor was put in place in 1844 (see figure 3 below), and the cut of a grave cutting into the floor. This contained a coffin (figures 4 and 5 below). The coffin had been severely damaged by the material placed over it. The wooden slats had rotted and the concrete slabs, that were not supported by the floor had sunken down through the coffin. The coffin lid had been ripped open by the slabs. We invited Jordi Ruiz from York Osteoarchaeology to attend the investigation

and make observations on the skeleton, which, along with the lining of the coffin had decayed very considerably since the opening of the coffin in the 1980s and the subsequent rupture on the lid.

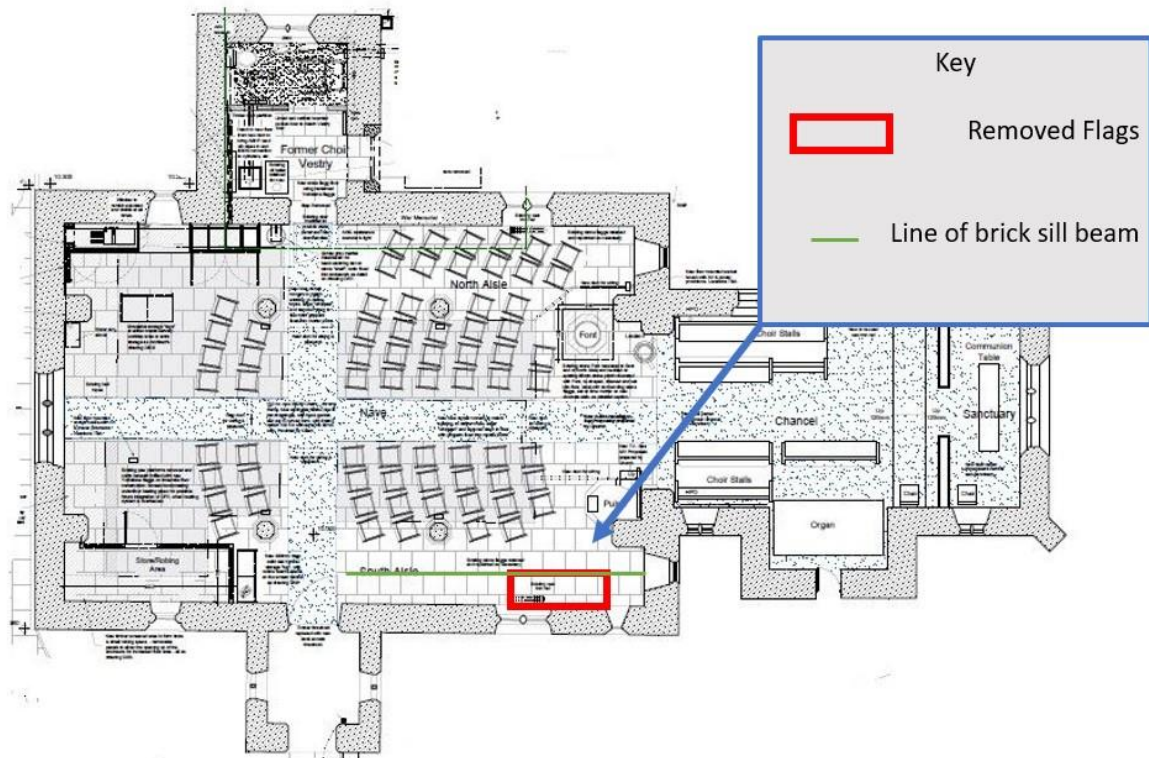


Figure 2: Architects drawing of St Mary's Church Hook showing the location of the removed stone flags and the underlying brick sill beam.

Details of the observations and conclusions drawn from the investigation are contained in the remains of this report below.

b) Results

The archaeological investigation of the section of floor exposed can be understood in 4 phases. These are described in detail below, working forward from phase 1 which we believe dates from before 1766 (possible date of the burial), to phase 4 the back filling of the void overlying the burial in 1980s.

Phase 1

This is the earliest phased material observed in the investigation. It was not excavated but was observed in the west end of the area investigated. It was the earth floor of the church assigned context number 04 (see figure 3 below) . The floor had probably been created by lowering the dirt floor level of the church to allow the creation of a suspended floor in 1844. As a result, the only dating we can ascribe to this deposit is an earliest date which would be the construction of the building in or before 1225 and the insertion of the burial, probably in 1766.



Figure 3: The floor created to take the brick sill / sleepers to support the suspended flag stone floor inserted in 1844. The cut of the grave and the lead of the coffin are just visible in the foreground.

Phase 2.

The second phase in the investigation is the making of a grave cut (context [14]), the insertion of a coffin and the back filling of the grave. The full extent of the grave cut was not visible as it disappears under the sill / sleeper walls on each side and the bottom end was not revealed. The west end of the cut was visible and can be seen marked in figure 4 below, showing the east end of the area investigated.

The coffin was easily observed (see figures 4 and 5 below). It consisted of three skins at outer one that had rotted down to a pulp (context 18). A centre skin made of lead (context 16) that was easily visible and noted by the people who investigated in the 1980s. The inner wooden skin (context 12) was more roughly made as it was not intended to be seen. The planks of the inner skin of the coffin were visible through the tear in the lead coffin. This was caused by the concrete slabs and overlying limestone gravel pressing down on the coffin over 30 to 40 years.

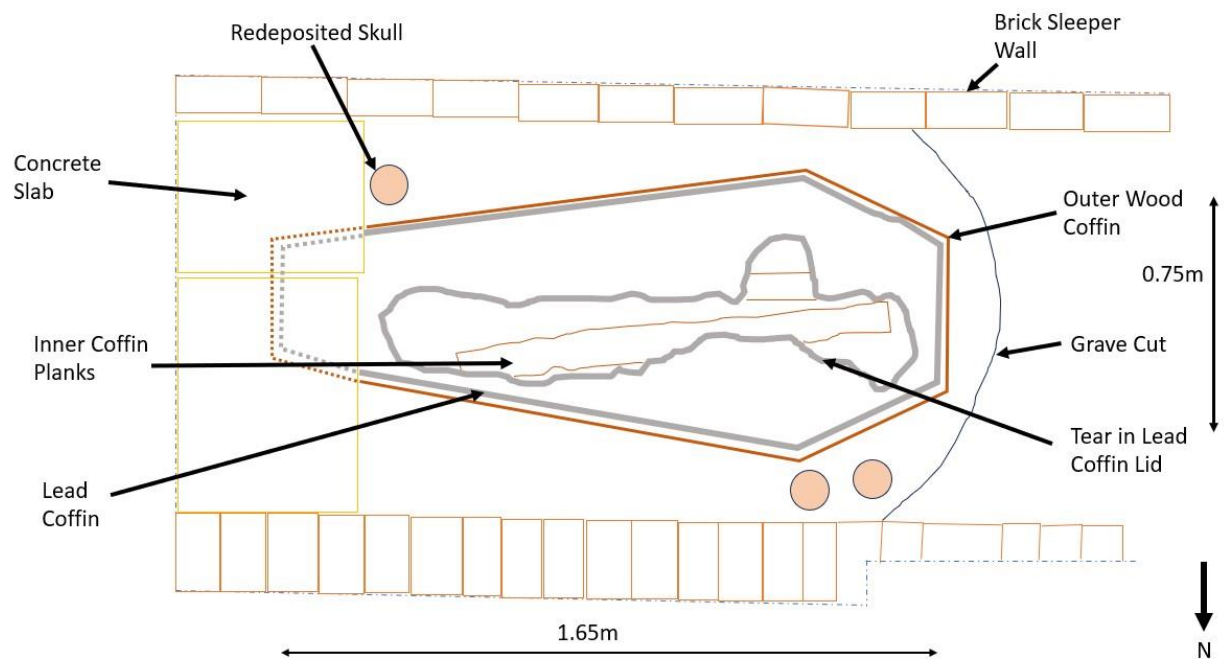


Figure 4: Plan showing the coffin sitting in the grave cut observed in the area investigated. The grave cut is only observable at the west end as the rest is covered by the brick sleeper walls.



Figure 5: Lead coffin exposed showing the tear down the centre of the lid.

Coffin studs were located in the grave fill (context 13) outside the coffin, representing decorative studs visible on the outside of the coffin. The same type of coffin studs were also located on the inside of the coffin, recovered as coffin goods (context 15), suggesting they were used to attach the lining on the inside by tacking material to the inner wooden skin. Examples of some of the coffin studs can be seen in figure 7 below. Examples of woodworking nails were also recovered inside the coffin, used in its construction.

Prof. Harold Mytum (University of Liverpool) was consulted regarding the dating and structure of the coffin. The shape of the coffin and its triple skin suggests that it dated from 1750 onwards, (see also figure 6 below).



Figure 6: Typology of coffin shapes produced by Kjellberg (2015). Using Swedish excavations so there may be some variation in the dating of style changes.



Figure 7: Coffin studs with copper alloy heads, some embedded in fragments of wood that had fallen into the coffin as it was ruptured by the weight of the overlying concrete slabs.

Remains of the coffin lining were still visible on the inside of the coffin where it had not been physically damaged. These were not investigated any further as we were not undertaking excavation. They were however, photographed (see figure 8 below).



Figure 8: Lining of the coffin, reputed to have been in good condition in 1980s when the coffin was opened and reburied.

The carpentry on the interior wooden skin of the coffin was revealed to be created using planks joined together using biscuit joints. These were observed and an example of the joinery is shown in figure 9 below. The wood was probably oak as it was very resistant to rot. Some sections of the staves on the sides were held together with a fillet at the corners of the coffin and there was some indication of tongue and groove joinery. The lid staves were 0.11m wide, the lid was made up of 6 joined staves.



Figure 9: section of the inner wooden coffin skin showing a biscuit joint. The wood is strong and resistant to rot, probably oak.

The centre skin of the coffin was made from lead sheeting. Only the lid of the lead coffin was visible to the investigation as the sides and bottom were obscured by the inner wooden coffin and the coffin contents. The lid was constructed from a single sheet of lead about 0.02m thick. The coffin was 0.50m wide at its widest point and the top and bottom ends were 0.33m wide. The length was 1.90m. The coffin depth was approximately 0.40m deep. The lid was attached by the edges being moulded around a thickened ridge along the top of the sides. The centre of the lid was ripped open by pressure from the concrete slabs and gravel laid over it to protect it (see figures 4, 5 above and 10 below).



Figure 10: View of the lead centre skin of the coffin, looking eastwards.

The outer skin of the coffin (context 18) was made of wood and used studs to hold it together and also as decoration. The wood itself had almost been rotted away and was only detectable as a paste running around the lead coffin. Any wooden lid had been removed in the 1980s or by the reduction of the floor level in 1844. Unfortunately, this also meant that any name plate was also removed at that time.

We were visited by Jordi Ruiz from York Osteoarchaeology. Ruiz was able to offer an opinion on the human remains (see figure 11). He considered that the skeleton was female and was quite short in stature. There was not opportunity to offer more osteological analysis because the skeleton was not removed from the site and was reburied. The human remains were said in the 1980s to be well preserved. This is not the case now. The remains were much degraded in the centre section, even losing the large bones in the arms. There were no ribs remaining and only a few lower vertebrae. The skull still remained as did fragments of the pelvis and the legs. The foot end of the burial was not exposed, so feet couldn't be detected. Although the condition of the burial was disappointing, at least we could suggest the skeleton was female through surviving sacral notches from the pelvis (see figure 11) and the gracile skull. At the foot of the coffin there was a nest created with rubbish including plastics, this suggests the ingress of rats to the coffin after the lid was ripped open. It is possible that the rats have degraded the central part of the skeleton, including the rather large arm bones. Some fingers survived.



Figure 11: Surviving fragment of the pelvis showing the wide sacral notch.

Alongside the skeleton it appears that the shroud had now decayed to black dust, visible in figure 11 above. Beside the skull there was a large lump of black material that may have been the very decayed remains of a pillow under the head (see figure 12 below). Amongst the rotted down shrouds there were located 3 silver pins (see figure 13 below).



Figure 12: Fragment of decayed pillow.



Figure 13: Silver shroud pins from the decayed shroud dust with a 20p for scale.

The final action in phase 2 of the deposits investigated, is the back filling of the grave. This back fill is particularly notable for the presence of 3 redeposited skulls. The dark brown deposit contained other human bone and ceramic building material and a few glass fragments. The deposit was not excavated but was cleaned up for the image in figure 14 below.



Figure 14: Grave back fill showing two of the three skulls redeposited.

The third skull is just east (above) the one in the foreground.

The presence of the three skulls suggests that three earlier burials (before c1750) had been disturbed by the insertion of the burial under investigation. This confirms that there are likely to be burials in other locations inside the church from before 1750. A single femur and a number of hand bones were observed.

Phase 3

The third phase of activity in the area investigated was the reduction of the dirt floor level (context [19]) and the insertion of a suspended floor made up by creating sleeper walls (contexts 06 and 07) running east to west with stone slabs / flags (context 01) laid on top of them to form the floor. The construction of the new floor can be seen in figure 3 above and figure 15 below. The floor was probably inserted in or around 1844 at the same time as other substantial work was undertaken.

The sleeper walls were constructed using bricks and were 3 bricks thick. There was a combination of stretchers and headers used. Some headers were missed to allow air or water to circulate or drain out. The bricks were 9 1/8 inches x 4 9/16 inches x 1 7/8 inches in size. They were handmade and sand moulded displaying straw marks. The size of the bricks suggests they were made between 1700 and 1850. They may have been reused or bought at the time the work was undertaken.

The sleeper wall to the north of our investigation showed slumping into the grave back fill (see figure 15 below). This may suggest that the grave fill extends further north and may contain another burial.

As a whole this phase suggests that an earlier floor was removed to be replaced with the current one,

probably in 1844, but possibly earlier. But not earlier than about 1750 when the coffin shape suggests an earliest burial date. When the old floor was removed it seems likely that the dirt floor surface was reduced and levelled to take the sleeper walls. The reduction appears to have hit the burial (possibly removing the wooden lid) which was then left and covered over by the limestone flags.



Figure 15: Northern sleeper wall built to accommodate the suspended limestone flag floor above.

Note drain / air circulation gap and subsidence to the east (right) and slumping to the east (right).

Phase 4

The fourth and final phase of activity is the covering over of the burial after it was encountered while undertaking work in the 1980s. The Limestone flags were lifted to gain access to the wall to the south and the burial, exposed back in 1844 was found again. Following a quick and tentative look inside, the coffin was closed back up and left, as archaeological investigation might have proved expensive. To cover up the burial the team laid wooden slats (possibly a broken-up pallet) running north-south over the coffin (context 08). But not extending beyond the grave cut edges.

A set of four reinforced concrete slabs were then laid on top of the wooden slats (context 09). The concrete slabs appear to have been sections of a prefabricated concrete coal bunker. The two removed slabs can be seen in figure 16 below.



Figure 15: Concrete slabs that collapsed through the lead coffin lid. Here removed and propped up outside. Possibly part of a prefabricated concrete coal bunker.

On top of the concrete slabs was laid a sheet of plastic membrane (context 05) that was then covered with limestone gravel (context 03). Finally, to support the limestone flags mortar 'blobs' (context 02) were used to level the flags. The last action was to lay the limestone flags again (context 01).

Further Research

The team were interested in the probable burial of a relatively high-status woman inside the church between the mid-1700s and mid-1800s. A search of the burial records found only one high ranking female burial in that period. This was Elizabeth Godfrey, the wife of William Godfrey late of Hook who had died 26th February 1766. This burial fits well with the phasing of our investigation. A memorial is also attached to the chancel wall just around the corner from the burial (see figure 16 below). Chris Collins a historian from Howdenshire Archaeological Society undertook research into the Godfreys.

Elizabeth's maiden name was Woodhouse. She was born in 1701 and was the daughter of John Woodhouse and Lydia Scholey Woodhouse of Norton. Elizabeth married William Godfrey of Hook, 'a man of good estate' on Sunday 30th September 1722 in Hook. Their son, William, was baptised at Hook in 1723. Elizabeth's husband, William, was buried on 12th August 1738 at Campsall. Elizabeth was buried at Hook on 1st March 1766 aged 65.

Most of the money in the Godfrey family appears to come from bequests to Elizabeth, although William is described as a man of great estate. Elizabeth's memorial on the wall in the church has a lot of space on it and might have been originally installed for William but not inscribed. Only at the death of Elizabeth was her memorial finally used. This notes that there is a lot going on in Elizabeth's life

when her husband died in 1738. Her mother died in 1733, her uncle Reuben died in 1734 leaving her a large inheritance, and her sister Mary died in 1736.

Chris and I believe that it was their son William Godfrey became a reverend. He went to school in Beverley and was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1742. He achieved his BA in 1747. He was buried on 30th June 1782, at which time he was serving at Crowle in the Isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire . We have no evidence that he was ever a vicar at Hook. At the time of the enclosure map (1768) a Rev William Godfrey is listed as one of the three Lords of the manor in Hook. He appears to be an absent landlord being vicar at a different church.



Figure 16: Memorial to Elizabeth Godfrey. Possibly the burial investigated by the team in March 2023.

Making good the damage

After the removal of the gravel and concrete slabs over the burial and subsequent investigation the team set about preventing further damage. In consultation with Malin Holst at York Archaeology we covered the skeletal remains with inert Terram fabric and sand and then back filled the coffin with pea gravel to support the damaged coffin lid and protect the burial. The spaces around the coffin were also back filled with pea gravel to prevent further crushing. The burial was then recovered with the removed limestone gravel (see figure 18 below). Prior to the relaying of the floor slabs a short prayer was said by Rev Ball and the investigation team to both Elizabeth Godfry and the three unidentified individuals that her burial had disturbed.

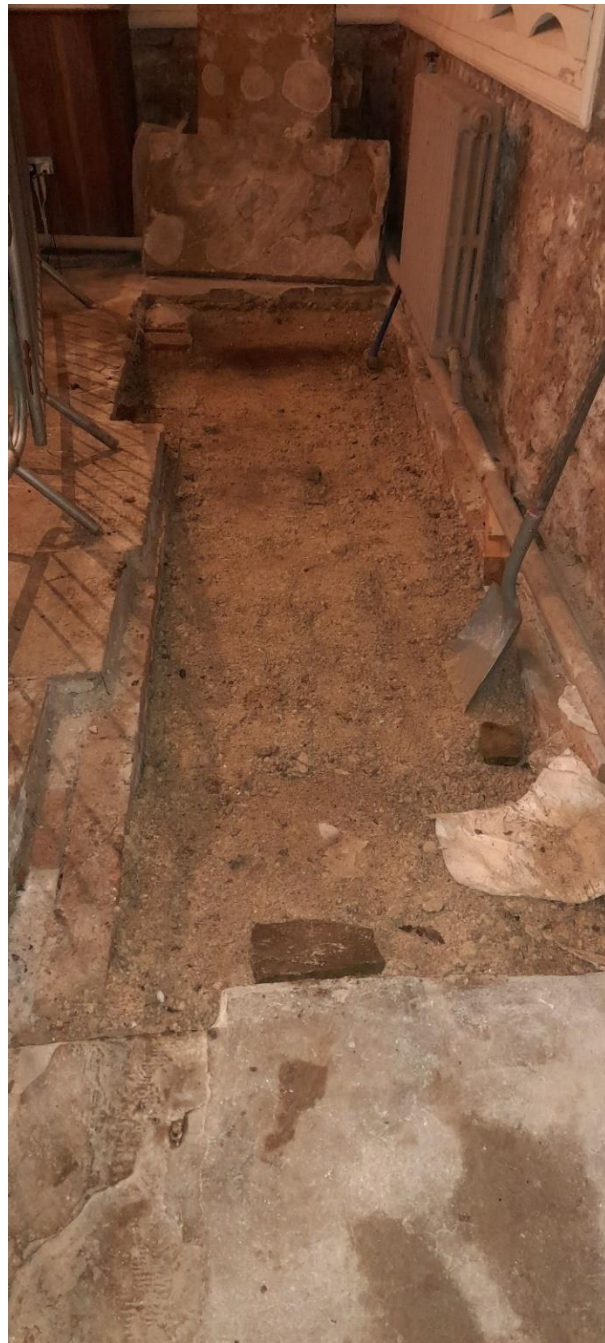


Figure 18: The back filled investigation area.

4. Evaluation for further work on the floor.

The investigation of this part of the transept showed the way that the floor had been constructed, limestone flags suspended on brick sleeper walls. Prior to the insertion of this floor there was probably a solid dirt floor that probably had slabs laid directly onto it. The fact that Elizabeth's burial was so close to the surface suggests that the level of the surface had been reduced (until they hit the coffin!) when the suspended floor was put in. This suggests that further burials may also be at a fairly shallow depth below current ground level. The investigation team did look through gaps in the floor beneath the pews. The pews are a wooden construction without stone slabs beneath, allowing us to look through. There was no evidence for further burials actually exposed, but they may be encountered fairly quickly if floor level is reduced further.

The investigation had also hoped that we might prove that a medieval burial appeared in the lead coffin reported in the 1980s. This was not the case; however, the burial is probably from the mid-1700s onwards and in all probability that of Elizabeth Godfrey buried in 1766. Elizabeth was still an important member of the landowning community in Hook, she was married to a man of good estate William Godfrey who was buried in Hook in 1738. Their son William Godfrey was a reverend (in Crowle in the Isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire for some of his life), a clerk at the church in Hook and was a Lord of the manor of Hook. He was buried here in 1782 and has a memorial floor slab at the chancel steps. Not far from his mother and possibly father.

5. Sources

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