

**St John the Baptist Church
Hatherleigh Devon.**



Results of the Archaeological Monitoring and Recording carried out between 20th of October and the 31st of October 2025.

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Summary

This report presents the results of Archaeological monitoring carried out during the reordering work which was associated with the construction of Kitchen and toilet facilities at the rear of the nave of the church as detailed in fig 1a, 1b and 2 below.

Project background.

This writer, (RJ Lane,) was commissioned by the PCC of St John the Baptist, Hatherleigh to undertake archaeological monitoring and recording as part of the faculty conditions for the proposed Kitchen and Toilet facilities in the nave of the church and the monitoring of the trenchwork through the churchyard to join with sewer and water supplies. This work was carried out in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI).

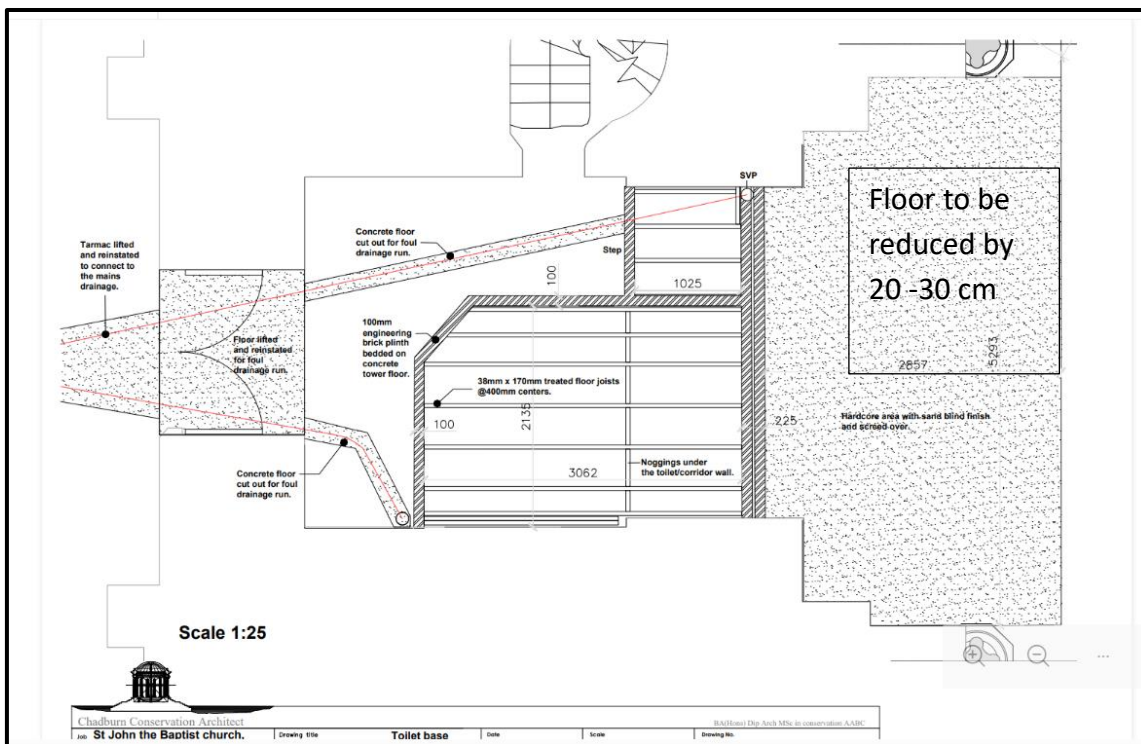


Fig 1a. Showing the area of the nave to be excavated to achieve correct level.

Permission Chadburn Conservation Architect

Topography and Geological aspect of the church.

Hatherleigh is located on the A386 road some 12km north of Okehampton. The church is near the centre of the settlement and overlooks the town at 87m OD. The bedrock is carboniferous of the Crackington type.

Description of the church.

The standing fabric of the church is mainly 15th century with some late 19th century alterations. The church is dedicated to St John the Baptist. However, it has been suggested that it was originally dedicated to a local martyr. Saint Joannas (Kerslake 1877:426) (See also Devon HER MDV 265 available Devon Heritage Gateway). A full description of the church is given in Devon HER MDV 265.

Hatherleigh is recorded in the Exon Domesday book in 1086 as *Hadreleia*. Probably based on the Old English word *hæðra* a heath grown place (Gover, Mawer et al. 1931:143). In 726CE King Athelheard of Wessex gave to Glastonbury Abbey 10 hides of land in Torric. Thought to be Hatherleigh and Jacobstowe. (Finberg 1951) This land was later transferred to the new Abbey of Tavistock. A church or Oratory most probably stood on this site circa late 8th to early 9th century, Excavations at St James, Jacobstowe, do show that whatever the date of the standing fabric of a church of a much earlier date was most likely in existence see (Lane and Blaylock 2017)

Methodology

This work was undertaken in accordance with the WSI previously submitted by the architect. These excavations were undertaken under archaeological supervision to the depth of the top of archaeological features/deposits. Exposed archaeological features were excavated by hand and recorded.

Results of archaeological monitoring and recording.

The groundworks subject to this monitoring consisted of: -

- 1, A service trench some 50 meters long were dug from the tower North along the church path to connect with the public sewer at the point shown on the plan at fig 2 above. This trench was dug by a mechanical digger using a toothless shovel some 0.30m wide to a depth of circa 0.70m. No archaeological features or graves were uncovered.
- 2, The area inside the church at the rear of the nave, that is to be used as a kitchen, was reduced to a depth of circa 20/25 cm from the floor level that was under the former pew platforms. The pews and their timber platforms had been removed before this work had been started. (see fig 1b above)
- 3, The area prior to excavation was seen to be covered with loose soil, bricks, large stones, redundant central heating pipework on the surface and half buried in the

ground. The area appears to have been disturbed sometime in its history due to the installation of central heating pipework and the construction of pew platforms.

4, Finds both buried and half buried on the surface included broken slates, lime mortar debris, furnace lining bricks (see fig 3 below).



Fig 3. Furnace lining bricks found throughout the excavation area both on the surface and half buried,

5, As the floor was lowered to about 10cm disarticulated human remains of at least six people that were scattered throughout the excavation area were uncovered. It is assumed that these were disturbed during the installation of the central heating system and the construction of the pew platforms, and other unrecorded works. These were boxed and handed to the vicar for later interment.

6, At the final level of circa 20/25cm a cyst 1.8m by .70m covered with large stone and slate slabs was uncovered. These were cleaned off and recorded by photograph (see fig 4) below.

7, These stones and slates were carefully removed to reveal a stone lined shaft with a lime mortar render 1.1m deep by .70m wide containing a lead coffin covering the length of the shaft, (see fig 5 below).

8, The coffin did not appear to have been a lead lined wooden coffin. Over the coffin was a layer of an organic matter about 50 – 70mm thick. Upon removal to see if there was an inscription on the coffin the remains of a large rotted wooden cross were disturbed and broke up. The timber forming the cross was made up of a plank circa 10cm wide and 2.5cm thick. The outline of the cross shows up as a feint stain on the coffin (see fig 6),

9, Samples of this wood were sealed in a vacuum pack for a C¹⁴ dating later. The human remains that were found scattered throughout the excavation area were interred in this void later.



*Fig 4,
Grave
slabs
before
removal.*



*Fig 5 Grave chamber showing Lead
coffin and lime plaster render to the shaft.*



Fig. 6. Showing the faint outline of the stains from the wooden cross.

Excavation drawings

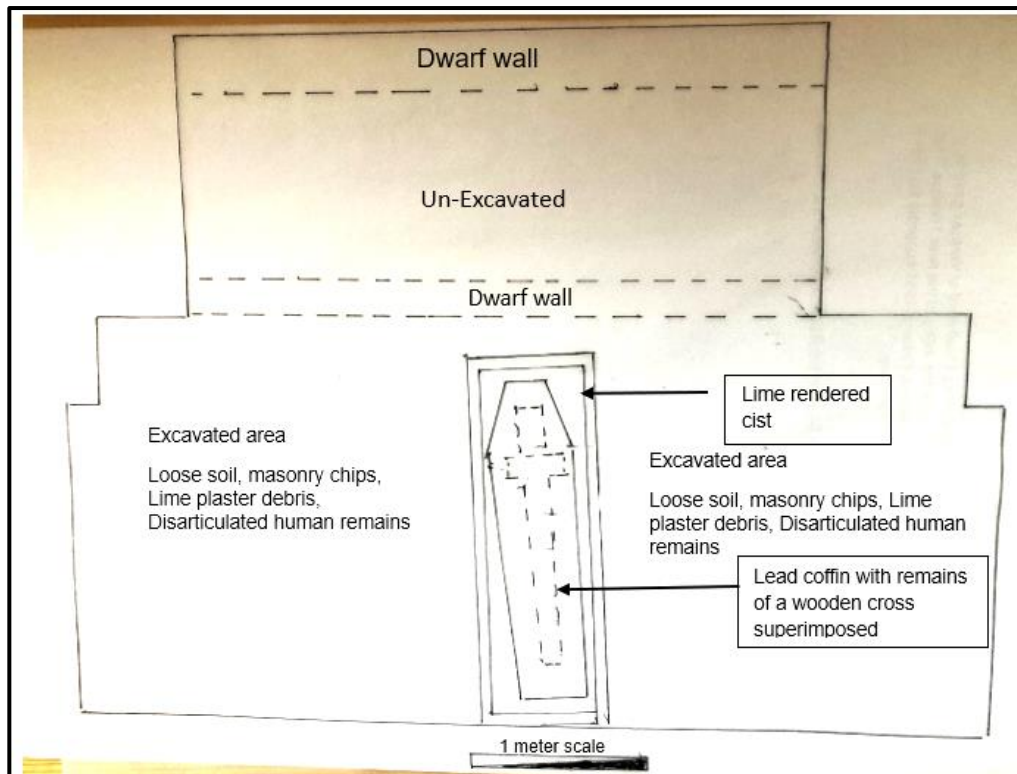


Fig 7. Excavated area in plan.

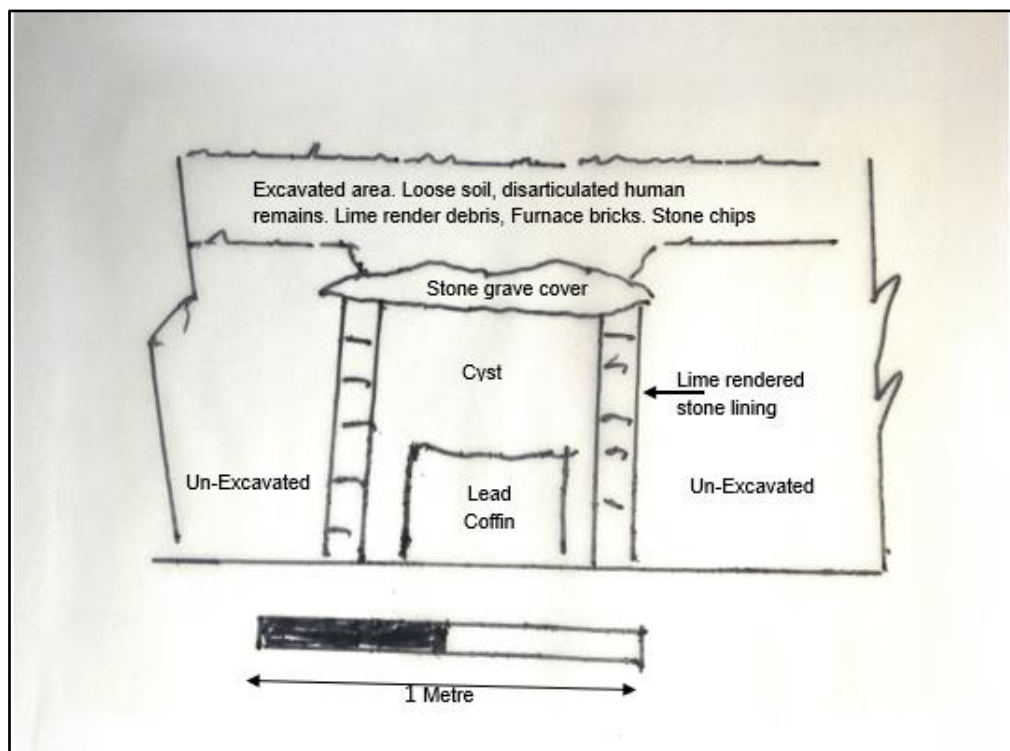


Fig 8. Section through cyst

Discussion.

The finds.

Furnace Bricks. Recent reordering's of churches have produced evidence of a lead smelting hearth in many churches. Carpenters and blacksmiths carry out their work in their own workshops but lead casting by plumbers needed to be carried out on site and indoors to prevent winds from cooling the melt too quickly. These smelting furnaces were built inside the church. Recent archaeological finds has shown that bell casting too was carried out inside churches (Rodwell.W 2012: 260).

The Lead Coffin. Lead coffins were generally reserved for Royal or noble burials. Other than for royal or noble burials lead, as a coffin, was not employed as a coffin material from the end of the Roman period to the 17th century. After which lead lined coffins became fashionable, these were wooden coffins lined with lead (Rodwell.W 2012: 312.321). The coffin found here was not the lining of a wooden coffin where the wood had rotted away as the chamber was clean of any rotted wood except for the rotted remains of a wooden cross aid over this coffin. A sample of the rotted wooden cross was sent to Beta analytics in Miami USA for radio carbon dating. The results show a conventional date of 130 +/- 30 BP. (between 1790CE and 1820. Report in appendix).

The C¹⁴ date is for the date of the cutting of the tree for the wood not the date of the burial. If the wood was seasoned prior to the carpentry, it could be 7 years or more older than the burial, or it could have been the occupant's personal possession.

The time, effort and expense of preparing this grave and the lead coffin would have been created by a family that could carry this expense or the burial was for someone much loved and respected in the community. The random stone and slate that covered this grave does not do justice to the status of it. A slate slab with an inscription would have been expected similar to others that are currently within the nave of the church. Given the depth of disturbed soil and disarticulated human remains that overly it perhaps it was removed during late 19th century work and placed elsewhere as are others along the external passage to the vestry.

Research of the burial records and an inspection of the slate slabs lining the passage to the vestry may identify the occupant of this grave.

General Discussion

Christianity came to Britain during the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries and by the 4th century it was sufficiently organised to be able to send 3 British bishops to the synod of Arles in August 314CE (Frend 1982). It is not known when Christianity reached Devon but it was probably a good deal earlier than the oldest evidence in the region. There is a piece of pottery found in Exeter dated to the 4th century with the letter XP (the first 2 letters of Christ) scratched upon it. Also missionaries from Wales and

Ireland were coming into the west country in the early 5th century (Orme 2013: 2.4). St Pirran is an example of this.

The early church in this period was more spiritual and reflective. During the early 7th century, the Roman Church started to pursue their religious disciplines and at the synod of Whitby in 664 CE the date of Easter was set but the leaders of the churches in the North and West were reluctant to agree and a schism was formed which prompted Gidas ("*the ruin of Britain*") (Oosthuizen 2019:20) To castigate certain British Kings for rebelling against Rome and the Roman Church.

Before the English-speaking Kings of Wessex invaded Devon over a period between 614CE and culminating at the battle of *Hehill* situated West of the River Taw and North of Dartmoor (*Anglo Saxon Chronicles*) in 682CE. when the Britons were driven to the sea (Hoskins 1960:17). The language of Devon and Cornwall was Britonic (Cornish/ Welsh) and probably continued in the countryside for several generations.

Church Dedication.

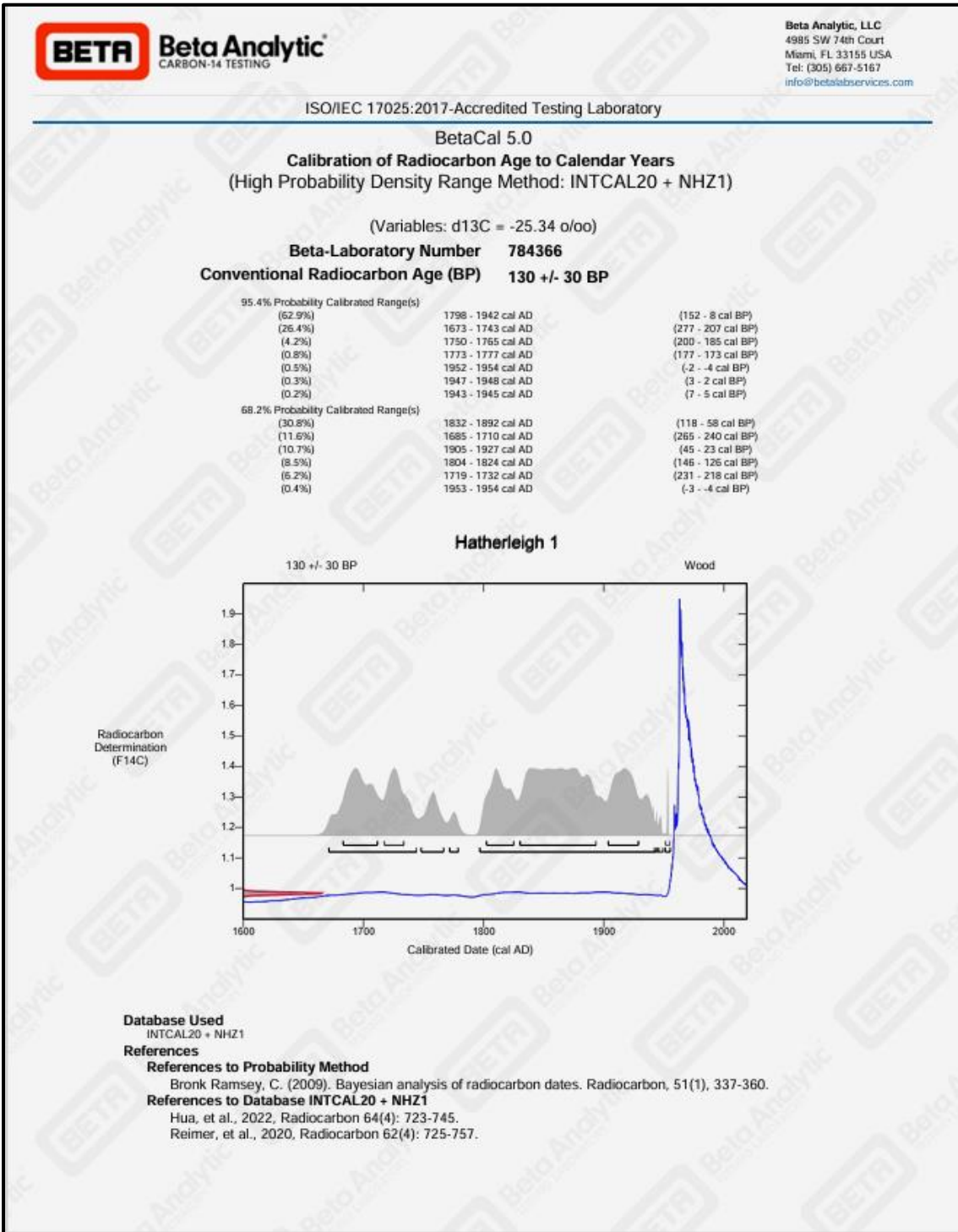
The road signs leading to Hatherleigh indicate that the church is 15th century suggesting that that is the date of the church. The evidence, based on the balance of probability, is that this church is most likely to have been 800 years earlier than that, i.e. over 1200 years. No church with medieval fabric, however much restored or rebuilt can with a trained eye find a story to tell (Lane and Blaylock 2017:153).

Churches in Britain are mostly dedicated to a holy being. In the Southwest of Britain there is a basic division that falls roughly along the line of the River Tamar where churches carry the names of saints who are presumed to have been ministering during at latest the 6th and 7th century's (Pearce 1978:133). Also, dispersed throughout Devon are churches that carry the names of "Celtic" saints e.g. locally Bridestowe (St Bridget), Petrockstowe (St Petrock), Germansweek (St Germanus), Pancrasweek (St Pancras), Hartland (St Nectan), and Tavistock (St Ruman). Doble (1939) suggests that St Petrock was the dedication of some 20 churches in Devon at one time.

In 726 CE King Athelstan of Wessex gave to Glastonbury Abbey 10 hides of land in *Torrice* (Hatherleigh and Jacobstowe) (Finberg 1951). Therefore a church would have been built then if there was not one already there. A religious house would be expected to assume the responsibility for a church that existed on an estate granted to it or found one if there was not one. The dedication of any existing church may be preserved if it was deemed preserving or it may be changed to relate to that monasteries own traditions (Pearce 1978:135).

Kerslake (1877) quoting Leyland, who suggests that there is a certain town by the River Torridge that is the burial place of a martyr Joannes suggesting that this was the original dedication of the church at Hatherleigh and not the St John the Baptist to whom the church is dedicated today.

Appendix



References

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