

THE SITE OF THE OLD CHURCH AT HARTWELL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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The present church at Hartwell, Buckinghamshire, completed in 1755, replaced an earlier parish church. Now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust the eighteenth-century building was for several decades roofless but has recently been re-roofed. Although the old church was clearly sited near to the present structure, its precise location was not known. This article outlines the information available about the old church and its setting, and describes the results of a geophysical survey which was carried out in an attempt to locate the site more precisely. The survey results, although not entirely conclusive, appear to indicate a structure in the area where the church was expected to be from documentary sources.

In the course of the study, the source of the facing stone which was used in the eighteenth-century church was identified as a local pit.

The early layout of the village of Hartwell, prior to the expansion of the grounds of Hartwell House, which appears to have removed a road and possibly several houses, is considered.

THE PRESENT CHURCH

The present Hartwell church, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, standing in the grounds of Hartwell House, was designed by Henry Keene for Sir William Lee Bt and built between 1753 and 1755 (Figs.1-3). It is described in some detail by Lipscomb (1847, 319-23) and by Smyth (1851, 11 – including a view – and 1864, 19-20 – including a plan). Its condition was allowed to deteriorate seriously before the Second World War, despite the protests of the Society (Anon 1947, 144 and 1952, 320). Eventually the roof collapsed and the building finally passed into the hands of the Redundant Churches Trust, now the Churches Conservation Trust. The church has most recently been described in Pevsner (1994, 374). There is also a useful description in the *Victoria County History* (VCH 1908, 293-7) but unfortunately it was not included in the Buckinghamshire Royal Commission volume of 1912, since buildings constructed after AD 1700 were not described in their early surveys.

Included amongst the Hartwell papers in the Buckinghamshire Record Office (BRO) is a full series of accounts relating to the construction of the

church (D/LE/D13/1-22). This is not the place to describe these in detail but, in passing, the invoice for 'The great Stucco ceiling to the body of the church ...with Gothick moldings and ornaments... £250' may be noted, and, of particular local interest, an invoice which records the source of the stone used in its construction. The bulk of the stone accounted for was '9631 feet of plain ashlar done of Wadden Hill Stone at 6d per foot work only ...£240 -15-6'; but also from the same source '... 3320 feet of moulding work [ditto] at 9d per foot £124 -15-6' (D/LE/D/13/11). For finer mouldings, stone from the long-lived quarries at Totternhoe in Bedfordshire was used.

'Wadden Hill' lies less than a mile from the church, today being marked by Whaddon Hill Farm sited on a rise and shown on an estate map of 1777 as 'Whatton Hill' (BRO: D/X 1045/1). Air photographs of the area (Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service, Run 507, 1985) showed the probable site of the Wadden Hill pits a short distance west of the farm. A field visit confirmed a substantial depression, still circa 3m deep, to be present (Fig. 2). Mr Jack Woodford of Lower Hartwell Farm recalls that a previous occupant of



FIGURE 1 Aerial view of Hartwell House, church and grounds (copyright Michael Farley)



FIGURE 2 Location of Hartwell House, the eighteenth-century church and quarry on Whaddon Hill, based on six-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1925

the land did much infilling here, and observed that the whole hill has a limestone cap.

The authors are grateful to Michael Oates who examined the stone of the church and subsequently visited the site of the pit. He comments:

'The facing limestone in Hartwell church appears unusual for the area, being fairly massive freestone, available from a bed of at least 0.4m thickness. It is initially difficult to date positively as

Portlandian (Upper Jurassic) as characteristic fossils are rare. The rock itself is a buff/yellowy silty micrite with pervasive bioturbation in the form of large burrow fills (normally of a lighter hue than the matrix). Inspection of the field brash on the site of a degraded stone pit on Wadden Hill (SP 7865 1332), revealed the same lithology. This massive limestone has also been used in walling of the adjacent farmyard where, on the basis of a few

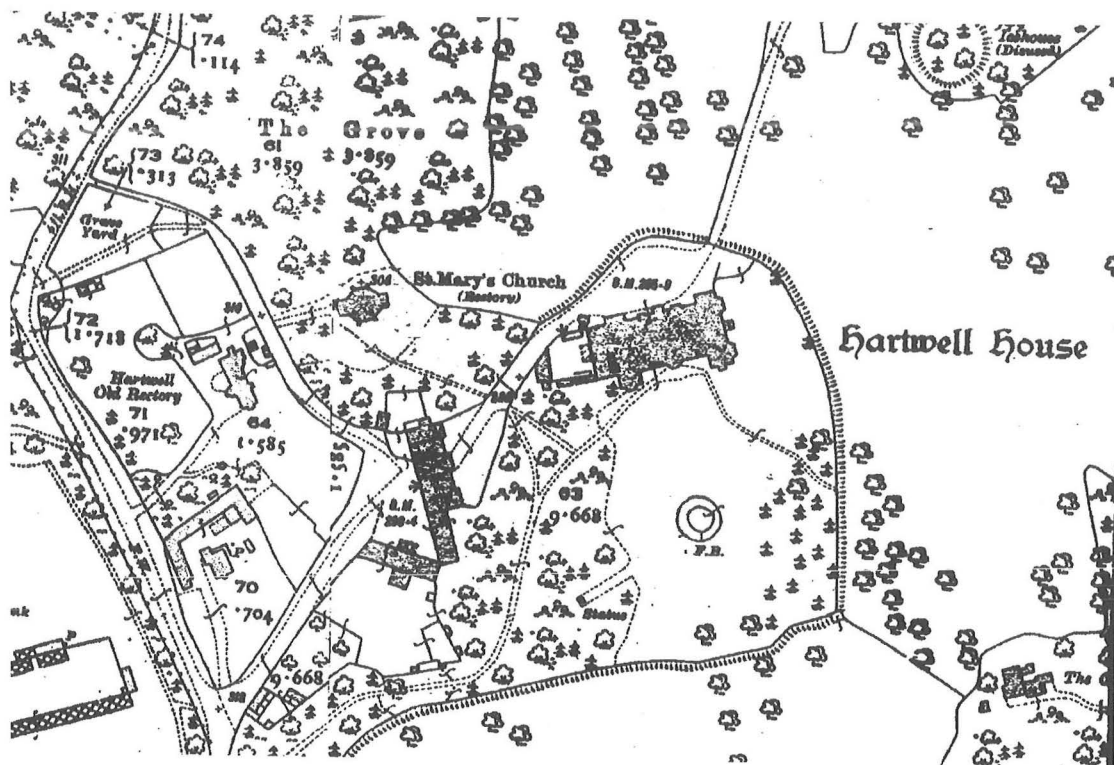


FIGURE 3 Location of Hartwell House and eighteenth-century church, from 25-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1921

Laevitrigonia gibbosa, a positive Portlandian age could be assigned. The interior of the church includes a substantial quantity of the more normal Portlandian limestone, of a rubbly nature typical of the Aylesbury Limestone member.

'The Portlandian Limestone in the Aylesbury area is divided by a metre of 'Crendon Sand' into lower 'Aylesbury Limestone' and upper 'Creamy Limestone' members. The lower unit is quite uniform and generally exhibits a dark yellow-grey colour, and a fair proportion of silt, along with an abundant and characteristic fossil fauna. The upper unit is more variable, often less fossiliferous, and my initial impression is that this limestone from Whaddon Hill represents a locally developed 0.4m thick bed from this 'Creamy Limestone' that was exploited in the construction of the 'new' Hartwell church. There is no doubt that it is from the Portlandian limestones of the type dug at Whaddon Hill.'

The geology of the Hartwell/Stone area is com-

plicated, since within a mile of Hartwell House there have been clay and sand pits as well as stone pits. It is very satisfactory to be able to relate one particular pit to a surviving structure.

Hartwell House and its grounds as a whole are described in several of the sources noted above, to which may be added Harris (1979) and, most recently, Strong (2000). Both conveniently include illustrations of the Nebot paintings in the Buckinghamshire County Museum, which will be referred to shortly in connection with the old church. One of us (ET) is currently working on a definitive study of the house and landscape gardens, which it is hoped will be published elsewhere.

THE OLD CHURCH

In 1752 Sir William Lee obtained a faculty to pull down the old church and build a new one (BRO: D/LE/D13/19). Subsequently, in 1756, he obtained

a further faculty to close the old churchyard and create a replacement which was to 'remain for evermore the only churchyard and burying place for the parishioners and inhabitants of the said parish in the place and stead of the present churchyard ... and to inhibit the present and all future parishioners from burying any corps or body in the said parish churchyard'. The outcome of these actions was, in effect, to ensure that the new church became a family church within the estate bounds. Lee's relatives were exhumed from the old church (from a vault, according to the faculty), and removed into the substantial vault beneath the new church. There are several accounts of the names of those removed, including that in the *Victoria County History* which notes '...over the north and south doors are two boards bearing painted inscriptions commemorating those whose remains were placed there at the building of the church, having been removed from the old structure, and many whose bodies have been placed there since. The earliest name recorded ... Sir Alexander Hampden buried 1617 ...' (VCH 1908, 297). Lipscomb (1847, 319-27) observes that 'recent examination' of the coffins in the vault showed some which clearly pre-dated construction of the church. No monuments today remain in the main body of the new church, which is only a shell, but there are a few external burial monuments. The vault itself has not been investigated by the writers.

The effectiveness of the arrangement in ensuring that the most parishioners would in future be buried in the new burial ground and not within the church, is confirmed by the following entries in the parish register for 1756 – 1758 (BRO: PR 96/1/2):

Burials 1756. Richard Horton Widower May 17th in ye old Church Yard

1757 No Burials

1758 In ye new burial ground Sarah Green an infant. January 8th.

Henry Clark was buried Novbr 16th.

The Rt Honble Sr George Lee Kt Dean of ye Arches & Judge of ye Prerogative Court of Canterbury One of his Majesties most Honble Privy Council was buried Decbr 28th In ye vault

the parsonage and separated from the former churchyard by the road into the village' (Lipscomb 1847, 323).

Sir William Lee's new church was, according to the faculty, to be built 'in the churchyard of the parish church of Hartwell aforesaid some small distance from the Ground whereon the said church now stands ...' The land for the new churchyard was gifted by Sir William to the rector in exchange for the old site. The location of the old site was described: 'the present churchyard which encompasses the said parish church containing about half an acre of land more or less bounded on the east and south by the common highway and on the west by the garden and outward courtyard belonging to the said Rectory... the parsoll of land hereafter mentioned that is to say one half acre of land more or less lying about thirty yards north west of the said parish church'.

The Old Rectory survives today. Given that the Old Rectory is on the 'west', and the churchyard was stated to be 'bounded on the east and south by the common highway', the 'south' must now be the road leading into the grounds of Hartwell House. There is today, however, no road to the east, an area which now lies within the grounds of the house and is under grass or shrubs. This suggests that at some stage that there has been a major restructuring of the landscape. This major change must have taken place before 1777, at which date a post-inclosure map shows the situation to be roughly as it is at present (BRO: D/X 1045/1).

Fortunately, in the Society's archives is a hand-drawn copy in colour of an earlier map of the area (Fig. 4). The Society's copy is by F.G. Gurney. He did it on 7 September 1932, and neatly annotated the fact accordingly (BAS 1997A/23D). Gurney, however, was apparently copying a Victorian version of the map which was in turn headed 'Copied from a Map in the Possession of John Lee Esq LLD Octr 1841, entitled "A Platt of part of the Mannors of Hartwell and Stone in the County of Buckingham Belongeinge to the Right Worshippfull Sr. Thomas Lee Barokt. taken in the monthes of Septembr. & Octobr. in the thirteenth yeare of the Reigne of King Charles the Second by John & Wm Brudenell Surveyors Anno Dom 1661.'" The whereabouts of the original 1661 map, and of the putative copy map, is at present unknown. One of

The new churchyard remains today, as Lipscomb described it, 'inclosed with a wall at a little distance westward, contiguous to the site of

eral confirmation of the position of the earlier church which, together with other evidence, will be referred to below.

The 1661 map includes an image of the church itself, although this is probably schematic (Fig. 4). It shows the church with pitched roof and west tower and spire lying beyond the perimeter wall of the principal house, within a roughly circular enclosure. Helpful also are the oil paintings by Balthasar Nebot in 1738, now in the County Museum, depicting views of the Hartwell Estate. Two of the views clearly looking from the east (Harris 1979, Figs 194 b & f, and Pl. XXb; Strong 2000, Figs 283 & 286) show the church turret, apparently with louvres. A detail from one of these is included here (Fig 5). Both views indicate that the pitched roof of the nave was tiled, and one view shows the end of the chancel with a three-light window, the building itself apparently being of stone. From the oil paintings it is apparent that the old church is very close to the position of the modern one. It is depicted also at a higher level than the house, which matches the situation of the modern church. Other work on the paintings in relation to the modern landscape (by ET) has shown that the accuracy of Nebot's views can be generally relied upon.

These views plus the '30 yard' distance from the new churchyard noted above, together with the statement that the new church would be constructed 'some small distance from the Ground whereon the said church now stands', define the general area of the building. On the ground, traces of an irregular gently-curving slope, accompanied by an intermittent hollow on its east, lying north-east of the present church, appear to indicate the course of the old former eastern road. This probably also reflects the eastern boundary of the old churchyard.

To return to the description of the old church itself. The earliest account appears to be a return of a visitation of 1637 transcribed by Gibbs (1890, 158: this document is now in the BRO, ref. D/A/V/15):

'... Two windows on the S. side of the chancel partly boarded [up] ... no pulpit-cloth ... no hood ... the base of the Comm. Table too wide ... therefore a banister to be put between every space ... the fences of the church porch are

naught ... the N. door broken: Mr Lea and the minister's wife's [pews] too high'.

Although the old church's appearance is later described by Smyth (1851) and subsequently Lowndes (1862), both utilise the manuscript notes of Browne Willis now in the Bodleian Library (Willis Collection mss 16294-16403). It is not always clear from the manuscripts themselves whether Willis visited a site or whether he depended on a local correspondent, since the volumes show that he helpfully provided local correspondents with a pro-forma containing a series of questions about local antiquities. Nor is the date that the description of Hartwell was prepared obvious, although it is certainly pre-1760.

Willis in fact penned three versions of the description, one now in Volume 1 (mss 16294), 636, and two in Volume 77 (mss 16371). These are not easy for the novice transcriber to read. In respect of the buildings, however, the descriptions are very similar. The transcripts published by Smyth prove to be fairly free interpretations. The new transcripts below relate only to the structure, not to the monuments, parish register entries, etc., which Willis also describes. The living of Hartwell was held with Little Hampden.

'The church of Hartwell which is dedicated to the Honour of the Assumption (as I learn from the observation of the wake kept the Sunday following August 15) is scituate in the deanery of Wendover and the Arch... ry of Buckingham in the diocese of Lincoln.' [Willis 77 page 21 left]

[The church] 'is a very mean building consisting only of a body and low north aisle sloped[?] from the church with a roof like a shedd and small chancel and vestry or a ... mal [?small] building on the south side at the upper end of the church next the chancel. The west wall and roof support a small turrit in which hangs one little bell the whole is covered with tile and seems of ... of Edw the 3rd reigne. There is nothing as I observed in it ... of painted glass or arms of any sort except one ... Achievement of the Lees neither ... any monument or inscription except the following on a brass in the chancel fixed to an ... marble thereon the portrayture of a man on a plate in brass and underneath this inscription at this feet.' [Willis vol 77 p 21 right]



FIGURE 5 Detail from Nebot painting of 1738 showing the old church (reproduced by permission of Buckinghamshire County Museum)

‘The church of Hartwell is a very ordinary building consisting of a body north aisle and chancel with a small building on the south side in which are the seats of family of the Lees. The west wall and roof supports a small wooden turrit in which hangs one small bell. The whole is tyled and is only in length 68 foot and in breadth 25 foot’ [Willis 77, p 21 left]

‘...length of the ch and chancel 23yds Breadth of body and aisle 8 yards’ [Willis 1, p 637]

‘There is nothing of arms or painting in it except the Pourtrayture of the Blessed Virgin in the chancel ... windows’ [Willis 77, p 21 left]

The whole suggests, as Willis himself states, a very simple structure of chancel, nave with a

north aisle, and bell turret with a small chapel, probably where the Lee family pews and monuments were, on the south side near the chancel. A tentative reconstruction of the plan is possible (Fig. 6).

The reference to the depiction of the Virgin in the chancel could refer to an image of stained glass. However, one of us (ET) was responsible for the discovery, and identification, of a rare and beautiful medieval stone statue of the Virgin and Child in St Mary’s Church, Aylesbury (removed c.1955 from the nave west-end apex). Sir William Lee leased the Prebendal, which stands beside St Mary’s, at the time of the demolition of the old Hartwell church and it is possible that this could be the same image, brought here to save it from destruction (Throssell, forthcoming).

THE CHURCH IN ITS SETTING

The general area in which the old church was thought to lie, defined above by fieldwork and pictorial and documentary research, was the area determined for geophysical survey, which is described below. The limit of the area of search to the north was restricted by the presence of trees and shrubs, which prevented obtaining as broad a picture as might be desired.

A number of factors relevant to the geophysical survey have to be taken into account. There was, for instance, no mention among the accounts of the building of the new church of the demolition of the old one, or the fate of the materials from which it was built. The stone from the old church would probably not have been utilised in the new one, since it is likely that the old church would have continued in use until the new one was ready. Depending on how useful the stone from the old church would have been – and in general much of the local Portlandian does not weather well – it might have become incorporated into local farm buildings or buildings around the estate. If the

stone was useful, it may have been removed below ground as well as above, in which case the course of the old walls would be marked archaeologically by 'robber trenches' not walls. The removal of the Lee family graves would certainly have caused some internal disturbance, but other locals do not appear to have had the opportunity of transferring their ancestors into the new vaults.

As previously noted, the 1661 map and some field evidence showed that there was formerly a road east of the church which would partly lie in the survey area. The map also showed that although some buildings which exist at Hartwell today certainly also existed then, at least a dozen houses have disappeared. In particular four houses once lay north of the church in what is now part of the estate called 'The Grove'. These fronted a further short stretch of road which is no longer extant, and may also have been removed during expansion of the park.

Not surprisingly, the influence of Hartwell House on the landscape since the eighteenth century has been profound. Prior to that period,

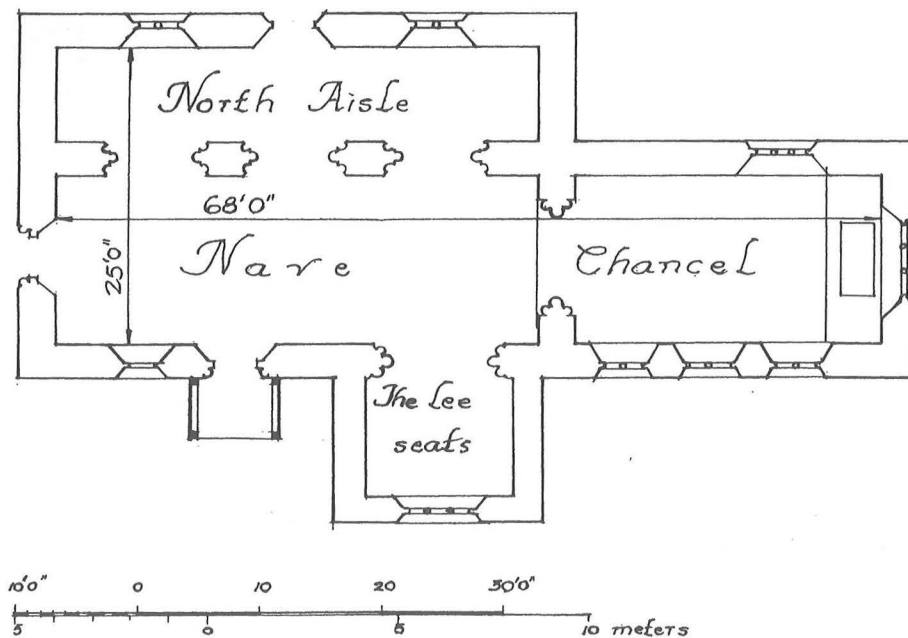


FIGURE 6 Hypothetical plan of the old church, based on Browne Willis's description

although the house was itself important, it lay on the eastern margins of what was previously a fairly typical Buckinghamshire Vale village with about eighteen dwellings. In this context the recent incidental discovery of two sherds of medieval pottery adjacent to the church is unsurprising. The close proximity of manor house and church is common in the county and such relationships can on occasion also indicate earlier Saxon settlement areas. Finally, the geophysical survey area would probably incorporate also the site of a demolished arcaded eighteenth-century garden feature. Against this background the results of a geophysical survey were unlikely to be completely unambiguous, but nevertheless they have proved to be of interest.

THE GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

by Alister Bartlett, Bartlett Clark Consultancy

(i) Introduction

This geophysical investigation of the presumed site of the old St Mary's church within the grounds of Hartwell House, Hartwell near Aylesbury, commenced on 15 December 1999.

The factors described above strongly suggested that any surviving remains of the old church should be found within the area investigated, which is indicated by the extent of the survey plots on Figures 7 and 8.

(ii) Survey Procedure

The survey was located by reference to a site grid measured to the existing church and the boundary wall at the west of the park. Coverage was extended as far to the north as the adjacent woodland and dense shrubbery would permit.

The geophysical method usually employed for detecting buried masonry wall footings is resistivity surveying, and the area as indicated was covered in detail by this technique. The possible depth of burial of any wall footings present was unclear in advance of the survey, as was the extent to which paving or foundations might have been robbed. The depth of penetration of a resistivity survey increases with the probe separation, and readings were therefore taken at both 0.5m and 1m mobile probe spacings (using a Geoscan RM15 resistivity meter with multiplexed probe array). The 1m survey (with readings taken at 0.5m intervals along

traverses 1m apart) should respond to larger or more deeply buried features (to a depth of 1m+). The 0.5m survey (in which readings were collected on a 0.5m grid) provides more detailed resolution to a depth slightly exceeding 0.5m. The 0.5m survey proved to be more informative, and plots of the data are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

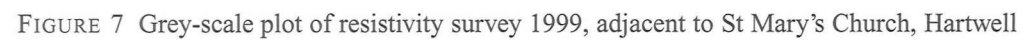
The resistivity survey was supplemented by a magnetometer survey covering the less obstructed parts of the site. This method is unlikely to respond directly to buried masonry, although it may detect such features as silted pits or ditches. The main purpose of the magnetometer survey in this case was, however, to discover whether the site has been subject to significant modern disturbances, including pipes or services which could affect the interpretation of the resistivity survey.

(iii) Results

The resistivity plots show considerable variation in the readings, although many of the stronger anomalies are located in the more wooded parts of the site and are probably caused by reductions in soil moisture content in the vicinity of tree roots. (The positions of the larger trees and bushes are indicated by missing readings in the survey plots.) Close examination of the 0.5m grey-scale plot (Fig. 7) does, in addition, suggest the presence of some linear features. Figure 7 is a filtered plot in which a mean value calculated from neighbouring readings has been subtracted from each reading in turn. This allows smaller-scale features of potential archaeological interest to be seen against a more uniform background. Figure 8 represents the initial (unfiltered) data, and shows the full range of variations in response. The possible intermittent linear anomalies are difficult to identify against the disturbed background, but the clearest of them, as seen in both plots, are indicated by the outline superimposed on Figure 8.

It is possible that other subsurface features or disturbances may have been detected by the survey in addition to remains of the medieval church. There may once have been an eighteenth-century garden pavilion within the area investigated. The survey also takes in some of the original churchyard, and may be the site of earlier medieval occupation. These factors may affect the overall level of disturbance visible in the plots, although individual features are difficult to interpret.

It is also possible there could have been more



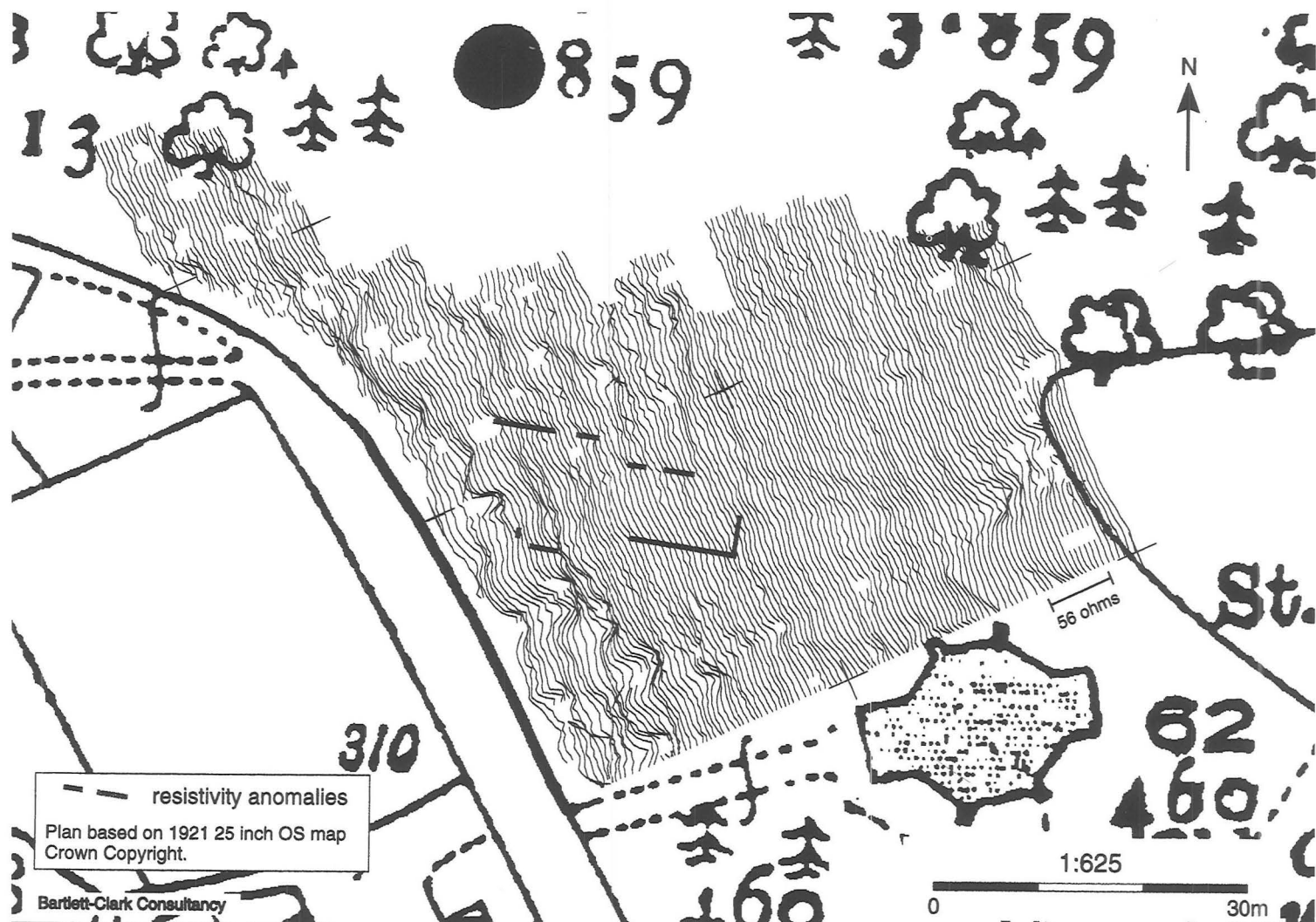


FIGURE 8 Plot of resistivity survey adjacent to St Mary's Church, Hartwell, 1999, with interpretation showing linear resistivity anomalies possibly indicating location of medieval church

recent disturbances at the site, given that we were told by a former estate worker that army huts were erected in or near to this area during the Second World War. The findings from the supplementary magnetometer survey showed numerous strong anomalies which could indicate iron or rubble of recent origin in some areas of the site, but the presumed location of the old church appeared to be comparatively undisturbed.

(iv) Conclusions

The resistivity survey has detected weak linear features which could be interpreted as rather incompletely preserved and insubstantial wall footings. There are other similarly aligned anomalies in the plots, and so the possibility that these disturbances could be of comparatively recent or other non-archaeological origin cannot be finally excluded on the survey evidence alone. The features as indicated do, however, bear some similarity to known characteristics of the old church.

The resistivity anomalies as marked on Figure 8 could be seen as representing a structure with a nave, north aisle and chancel, of which the south-east corner of the building, together with the south wall of the chancel and the north wall of the nave or aisle, have been most clearly detected. If so, the dimensions of the structure are possibly 23.5m in length, and 7m wide across the chancel. The length is uncertain, given that the west end is not clearly defined in the plots, but these dimensions (77' x 23') are not greatly different from the size of the old church, which was recorded as 68' x 25'.

The orientation of the detected features also compares well with the NW – SE alignment shown on the 1661 map, and the possible structure is centred at a position some 30 yards from the south-east corner of the new churchyard.

CONCLUSION

This study has utilised a range of sources in an attempt to locate the 'missing' church. The combined results of the search, although not entirely unambiguous, appear to have been successful. Only excavation would probably now finally determine whether the tentative conclusion which has been reached is correct. In practice, however, excavation would be undesirable since in order to finally resolve the matter a major and fairly

destructive intervention would probably be required.

Subsidiary results from the study include the identification of the stone quarry used for construction of the later church, and a better appreciation of the village's topography prior to the expansion of the grounds of Hartwell House.

ADDENDUM

In September 2000 a watching brief was carried out at the site by Bedfordshire County Archaeological Service during the excavation of two drain runs and a soakaway north of the present church, and two drain runs and a soakaway to the south. These extended c.7m from the present church, short of the presumed site of the old church. At least four inhumations were encountered and the natural geology was found to be a 'firm to hard mid grey silt with moderate small to medium limestone fragments'. No structural evidence was encountered (Beds CAS 2000).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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