



**Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History  
Society**  
**41 Long Street, Devizes, Wiltshire, SN10 1NS**

**Archaeology Field Group**

## **Watching Brief**

# **The Church of Saint Thomas à Becket Tilshead, Wiltshire**



**Report No.**

WAFG-301

**OS Grid Reference**

SU 03469 47983.

**Client**

Tilshead Church Wardens

**Report date**

July 2007

**Author**

Jim Gunter

## SUMMARY

### Location

Saint Thomas à Becket church is situated in the centre of Tilshead village, just to the north of the seasonal River Till. The village is in the local authority area of Salisbury District Council.

### Geology and land use

The underlying site geology is chalk. The area has been in use as a churchyard since medieval times.

### Archaeology

There has been a church recorded on this site since c1100. Late Bronze Age pottery fragments have been recorded from the churchyard.

### Date of Intervention

15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> March 2007. The watching brief was carried out by Brian Clarke (Dip Arch), Jim Gunter (BA/MA), Robin Holley (BA) and Wendy Smith (BA); the desk top study was undertaken by Stella Maddock (MA).

### Watching Brief Aims

An archaeological watching brief was carried out to record the nature and extent of any archaeology revealed during the installation of an underground tank in the churchyard.

### Summary of Results<sup>1</sup>

The disordered graves of over 20 individuals were uncovered. It is probable that the majority of these mark the reburial of remains uncovered during the extension of the nave in 1846 being superimposed over 2 original earlier graves.

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<sup>1</sup> It is essential that this summary is read in conjunction with the detailed finds results

## Location

The intervention site was in the churchyard of Saint Thomas à Becket church adjacent to, and to the west of, the porch entrance. It occupied an area 2.5m x 2.5m and was centred at Ordnance Survey NGR SU 03469 47983.

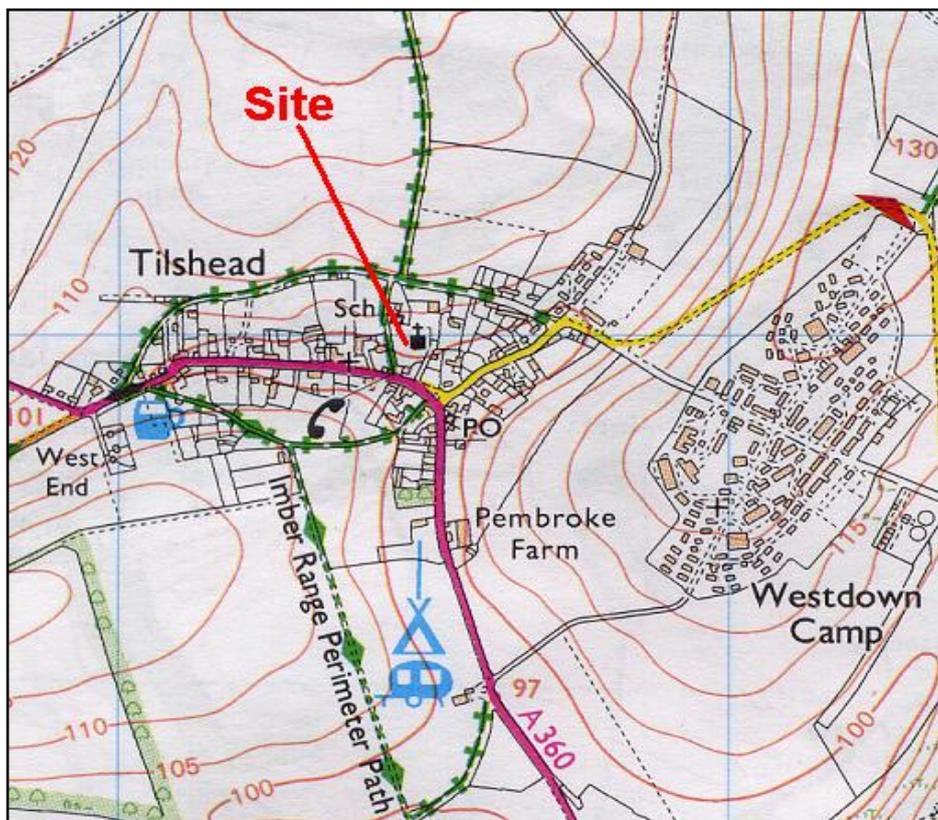


Figure 1: Location of Site

## Archaeological Background

A search was undertaken of the Wiltshire Sites and Monuments Record which indicated that a number of sites lie close to the environs of the intervention site. In addition the site was immediately east of a site, excavated by the WANHS Archaeology Field Group in 2005/06 (Gunter & Stidolph, 2006, 260: Gunter *et al*, 2007, 224). Combined, this provided the following background to the archaeology of the area:

### ***Neolithic/Bronze Age/Iron Age/Romano-British***

The WANHS excavation of the adjacent land produced signs of occupation from Early Neolithic pottery through to an Iron Age round house and child's burial, and on to the Romano-British period (Gunter and Stidolph 2006; Gunter *et al* 2007).

### ***Bronze Age (SMR: SU04NW150)***

Unassociated Late Bronze Age pottery fragments were found during the digging of a grave in the churchyard in c.1947.

### ***Saxon (SMR: SU04NW401)***

It is suggested that Tilshead was a flourishing late Saxon settlement centred on the area around the churchyard.

### ***Late Medieval (SMR: SU04NW452)***

Fragments of 13<sup>th</sup> century floor tiles have been found at the site of the Old Vicarage, just to the west of the church.

### ***Modern (SMR: SU04NW551)***

5 skulls were found in 1947 (Underwood 1948) during whilst digging a grave in 1947 and over 40 burials were discovered in 1845-6 when earth was removed for the enlargement of the north aisle. (Johnson 1866; Goddard 1900).

As this site was covered by Diocesan planning procedures the relevant authorities had been obtained from both the Salisbury Diocesan Faculty and Dorset County Council before the work commenced. Copies of these authorities are at Appendix 4.

## Methodology

A desk-based assessment was undertaken in advance of the construction work. Details are reported under *Archaeological Background* above.

The excavation of the 2.5m x 2.5m, 1.8m deep hole for the underground drainage tank was completed by mechanical excavator using a 1-metre wide straight edged bucket. Close archaeological supervision and observation for any archaeological features, in particular human skeletal material, was maintained at all stages. When features were encountered they were hand-dug by the Watching Brief team.

The objective was to determine, as far as possible, the character, extent, condition, date and significance of any archaeological remains; to recover any human remains; to record relevant details.

As other interventions in the churchyard had discovered unmarked burials, it was anticipated that, by the very nature of the site, there might be more, although the proposed location for the underground tank was in an area where there were no tombstones and no record of graves. In the event that human remains were uncovered the aim was to ensure these were treated with all due respect in line with the recommendations contained in the Church of England/English Heritage (2005) *Guidance for best practice for treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds in England*.

## Results

Figure A1, in Appendix A, shows the location of the intervention site in relation to the church.

### Contexts

The topsoil comprised a layer of brownish loam that extended to a depth of a maximum of 1.8m on to natural chalk. This had been extensively mixed to form a homogeneous mass. Throughout this layer there were many pockets of burials but with no clear context for any of them.

### Archaeological Features

At the base of the cut there were (2) shallow grave cuts but the contents had been disturbed. These probably marked the site of original interments. There was no visible sign of any other archaeological feature cut into the surface of the exposed chalk.

### Small Finds

Throughout the depth of the cut, numerous bones were uncovered. These appeared to be in approximately 28 areas although many of these groups overlapped one another. The vast majority were human and were placed roughly east-west. It was possible from examining the bones to estimate the number of persons involved, and very questionably, the sex ratio, as follows:

16 male      5 female      1 perinatal child.

A detailed analysis of the bones by type, etc. is given in the *Finds Register* at Appendix 2.

One skull displayed some unusual characteristics. It had a very large occipital section, a low forehead and a small face. It also had a round hole at the top of the skull, approximately 2cms in diameter (Photo 1).

There were also fragments of animal bone, notably cow and sheep. Along with 5 fragments of metal grave furniture and 5 pieces of pot – all dated from 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Discussion and Conclusion

It would appear that there had been two early (probably 17<sup>th</sup> century) shrouded burials in the site chosen for locating the septic tank (Photo 2). On top of these, the remains of up to 22 other people had been placed although not in an orderly fashion. There was no complete skeleton, although one was almost intact.

The pottery and metal fragments in the grave would seem to indicate that none of the disordered burials were interred later than the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the metal finds from a coffin included traces of wording (Photo 3) interpreted as “- - - MAN” and a date of 18- -. Taking into account the known history of the site, it is possible that these remains were part of the re-interment of over 40 burials that were disturbed in the 1845-1846 extension to the church. More burials were observed in the exposed sides of the cut that may be a continuation of this mass reburial (Photo 4). However, Johnson’s note (1866) implies that the bones may be from much earlier burials as he records an element of surprise “...when the earth was moved for the enlargement of the north aisle where it was supposed no interments had ever taken place, many skeletons were found”.

All the bones recovered were reburied on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2007 in the extreme north-west corner of the churchyard, in a plot centred 1m from the base of the school wall and 1.6m from the railings alongside School Lane.

## Archive Location

All archive material (the retained small finds, a hard copy of this report, a digital copy of this report and a digital copy of the photographs) is deposited with the Tilshead Church Wardens.

## Bibliography

Goddard C V 1900 'Wiltshire Notes' Book 22 in WANHS Library Ref. DM(58).

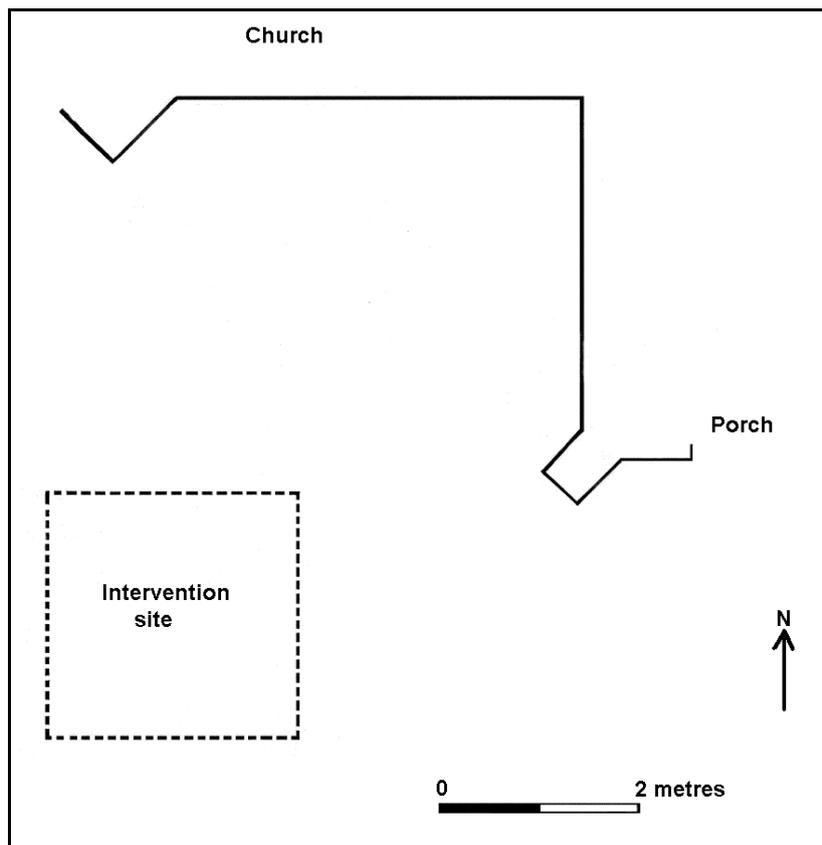
Gunter, J & Stidolph, S 2006 "The Archaeology Field Group: recent activities and future plans" in *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* vol.99, pp259-260; Devizes

Gunter J, Clarke B, Holley R, Staff, C 2007 "WANHS Archaeology Field Group: recent activities and future plans" in *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* vol.100, pp224-225, Devizes.

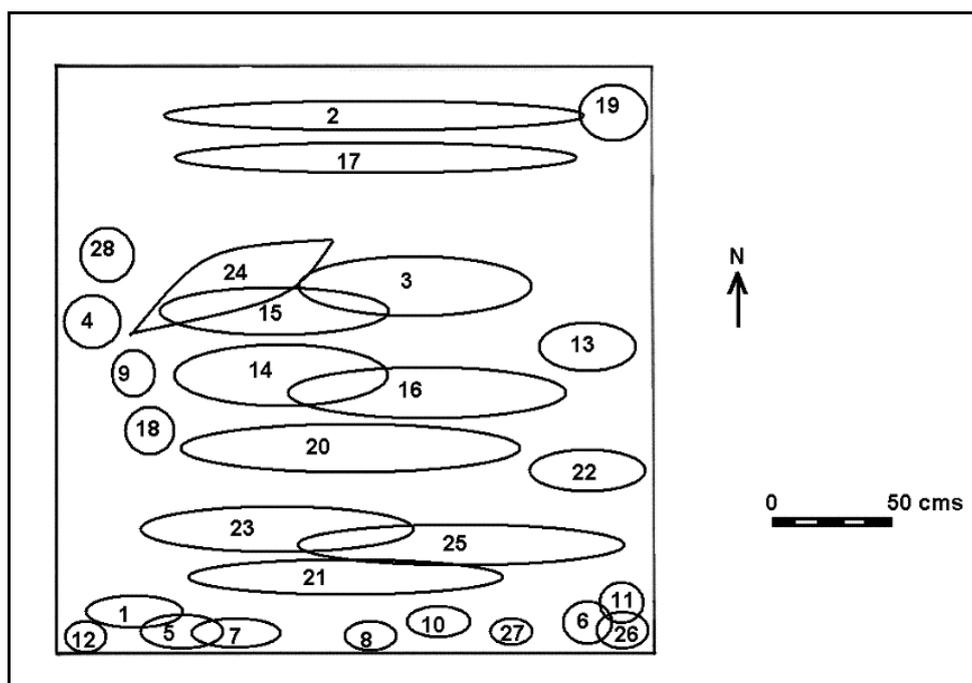
Johnson, Rev. J H 1866 "Notes on Tilshead" in WANHS Library Box 8 Mss 936.

Underwood Guy 1947-8 "Notes: Tilshead" in *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* vol.52, pp392, Devizes.

### Appendix 1: Plans



Plan 1: location of Intervention Site



Plan 2: approximate location plan of areas of human remains

## Appendix 2: Finds Register

Details of remains in Body Groups (by Wendy Smith BA)

Body Group	Depth	Bones	Notes/Other finds
1		a) ribs; long bones b) 3 skull fragments; 2 mandible fragments; 5 long bone fragments; carpal and tarsal fragments.	Possibly mother and neo-natal child. 2 nails.
2	0.74m	26 hand and 8 foot bones; 27 vertebrae fragments; 2 pelvic fragments; 6 skull fragments; 1 skull (nearly complete); 1 mandible with 12 teeth; 1 maxilla with 7 teeth; 1 ulna fragment; 1 femur (36cms); 1 humerus (33cms); long bone fragments.	Coffin furniture metal fragments  Pottery sherds: 1. green glazed (82mm x 32mm x 10mm) 2. black
3		1 femur (47cms); 1 tibia fragment (32cms); 1 tibia fragment (28cms) 1 male pelvis (in pieces); 1 ulna (18.5cms)	
4		1 skull; 1 maxilla with 15 teeth; 1 mandible with 16 teeth; 1 femur (43cms); 2 femur fragments; 1 tibia (37cms); 1 femur (42cms) 1 tibia (35cms)	1 large iron coffin handle
5		1 long bone fragment (38cms); 1 ulna fragment (28cms); skull fragments.	Coffin furniture – metal; nails. Clay pipe. Pot: red exterior; brown/black interior
6	0.76m	1 femur (40cms); 1 humerus (31cms); 1 tibia (32cms) 2 femur heads (disparate).	Possibly female
7	0.76m	2 disparate femur parts; 1 humerus (31cms); 1 tibia (32cms) 2 femur heads (disparate).	

8	0.87m	1 tibia (22cms) 1 fibula fragment (30cms); 2 tibia proximal ends (disparate); skull fragments.	
9	0.99m	1 proximal end femur fragment; skull fragments.	
10	0.89m	2 tibia fragments; 2 skull fragments.	
11		1 tibia (35cms).	
12	1.02m	Skull fragments; 2 tibia fragments; 2 radii (20cms x 2).	1 animal tibia. Neck of a brown jug.
13	0.90m	3 disparate proximal femur fragments; various fragments too small to classify.	
14	0.90m	1 large coccyx; 1 pelvis (fragments); plus other unidentified fragments.	
15		1 tibia (35cms); 1 humerus (32cms); 1 femur (41cms).	
16		1 femur (43cms); 2 humerus (32cms); 1 humerus proximal fragment; 1 part humerus; 3 fibula (34.5cms); 1 tibia (35cms).	Coffin plate with lettering (Photo 3)
17		Skull plus fragments of maxilla and mandible; no sign of wisdom teeth; very low forehead; trepanning hole?; 1 long bone fragment.	(see Photo 1)
18		4 parts of a scapula; some rib and vertebrae fragments.	Metal coffin furniture.
19		Large skull (from supra orbital notch to exterior occipital protuberance); 2 matched tibia fragments; vertebrae.	
20	1.07m	Tibia fragment; humerus fragment; pelvis and skull fragments.	

21	1.07m	1 tibia (38cms); 1 tibia fragment; 2 humerus parts (31 and 29cms); 2 pelvises from disparate individuals; 4 femur proximal ends with ball joints; 1 ball joint very diseased and misshapen; skull fragment.	1 large mammal bone.
22		Skull fragments; maxilla and mandible with 32 teeth; 1 sternum.	
23		1 femur (41cms); 1 femur fragment; skull fragments; pelvic fragments; 1 sacrum.	
24	1m	2 femurs (both 41cms); 2 tibia (both 34cms); 1 humerus (33cms); 2 femur fragments from discrete individuals; 1 skull fragment.	Grave cut in chalk bedrock; cut 1.42m long into side wall of trench; 40cms wide (shoulders) tapering to 30cms.
25		Small fragments; measurements or counts not possible.	2 <sup>nd</sup> grave cut: (photo 2). 1.70m x 30cms (shoulders) 20cms (feet)
26		1 pelvis fragment; 1 sacrum; 1 long bone shaft; vertebrae.	Pottery sherd.
27		Vertebrae; 1 humerus (29 cms); skull fragments.	
28		1 pelvis fragment; 1 sacrum.	

### Appendix 3: Photographic Register



Photo 1: Skull with large hole. ©Brian Clarke



Photo 2: Outline of shrouded burial in chalk at base of pit. © Bill Perry



Photo 3: fragment of coffin label with traces of lettering. ©Bill Perry



Photo 4: northern section of pit showing exposed parts of skeletons (numbered in red).

©Brian Clarke

## Appendix 4: Authorities

Faculty No 0532

CARE OF CHURCHES AND ECCLESIASTICAL JURISDICTION MEASURE 1991  
Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2000

Form No 5  
Rules 7(4), 12(2), 16(6) and 27

### FACULTY

**In the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Salisbury**

**Parish of: Tilshead**

**Church of: St Thomas A Becket**

**His Honour Judge JOHN SAMUEL WIGGS, Chancellor of the Diocese and Official  
Principal of the Right Reverend David Stancliffe, the Bishop of Salisbury**

**To: The Reverend Susan Armitage (Team Vicar)  
Mr William Arthur Perry (Churchwarden)  
Mr Colin Williams (Churchwarden)**

A petition presented by you has been submitted to the Registry of this Court together with designs, plans, photographs or other documents, requesting a faculty authorising the works or other proposals specified in the petition.

And a public notice was duly displayed giving an opportunity to all persons interested to object and give reasons why a faculty should not be granted and there are no objections under the Rules to the granting of a faculty

This Court now grants a faculty authorising you to carry out the works or other proposals in accordance with the designs, plans or other documents accompanying the petition and subject to the conditions set out in the Schedule below.

The works should be completed within 24 months from the date below or such further period as this Court may allow and the certificate of completion is to be sent to the Registry within the period allowed.

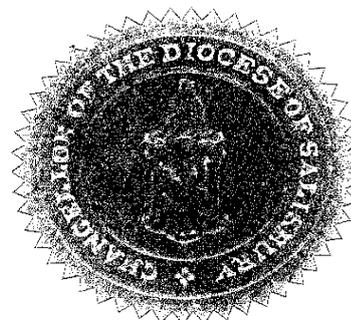
A copy of this faculty is to be supplied by you to the architect or surveyor and contractors to be employed in respect of the authorised work before any work is commenced.

This faculty is duly authenticated by the seal of this Court.

Dated 16 December 2004



Registrar



**SCHEDULE****At the Parish Church of St Thomas A Becket at Tilshead***Description of Works or Proposals and any conditions attached to the faculty*

- 1 The installation of storage and a sink unit/tea making facilities at the west end, the refurbishment of the vestry and the installation of a new frontal storage cupboard behind the high altar.
- 2 The removal and disposal of the harmonium.

All in accordance with the specification, dated March 2004, and drawings 895/05, 895/06 and 895/b/08 prepared by Michael Drury Architects; the letter, dated 10 April 2004, from W A Perry to the DAC Secretary and accompanying catalogue illustration/specifications of the heater.

*The following conditions were attached to the Faculty:*

1. If anything of apparent archaeological significance is found, work must stop until an archaeologist has inspected the site and given advice. Any archaeological implications are to be addressed to the satisfaction of the DAC archaeology consultant, Mr S Wallis.
2. The work referred to above is to be supervised by the church's Inspecting Architect.

**Amendment**

On the directions of the Chancellor of the Diocese, the Schedule to this faculty is hereby amended to include the installation of a septic tank for drainage in accordance with the letter dated 4 September 2006 from Mr W A Perry to the Diocesan Registrar.

**Further Conditions**

- 1 All archaeological implications are to be addressed to the satisfaction of DAC member/archaeology consultant Mr S Wallis.
- 2 The excavations for the septic tank are to be carried out in accordance with the Archaeological Considerations contained in the Specification dated March 2004 prepared by Michael Drury Architects.
- 3 The location of the septic tank is to be assessed to avoid burials, if possible.

*Andrew Johnson*  
*Registrar*  
*16<sup>th</sup> November 2006*



Mr W A Perry  
Noads House  
Tilshead  
SALISBURY  
Wiltshire  
SP3 4RY

**Planning Division**  
County Hall, Colliton Park  
Dorchester  
Dorset DT1 1XJ

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Web site: [www.dorsetforyou.com](http://www.dorsetforyou.com)

Date: 27 February 2007  
Your ref:  
My ref: 2/AM/32

Dear Mr Perry

**ST THOMAS A BECKET CHURCH, TILSHEAD**

Thank you for your letter of 16<sup>th</sup> February concerning the proposed arrangements for archaeological monitoring of the installation of the septic tank.

These arrangements seem fine to me. I hope all goes well.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Wallis".

Steve Wallis  
Senior Archaeologist

cc. Mrs Sue Cannings, Secretary, Salisbury Diocesan Advisory Committee  
Helena Cave-Penney, Wiltshire Archaeology Service



Director for Environment Miles Butler



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE