



## **Monitoring Report No. 139**

**St. Mary's Church of Ireland  
Comber  
Co. Down**

**LICENCE NO.: AE/07/145**

**BRIAN SLOAN**

## Site Specific Information

*Site Name:* St. Mary's Church of Ireland, Comber, Co. Down

*Townland:* Town Parks

*SMR No. :* DOW 010:026

State Care                      Scheduled                      Other                       [delete as applicable]

*Grid Ref.:* J 4606 6921

*County:* Down

*Excavation Licence No. :* AE/07/145

*Planning Ref / No. :* X/2005/1268/F

*Dates of Monitoring:* 12-14<sup>th</sup> September, 10-12<sup>th</sup> October 2007

*Archaeologist Present:* Brian Sloan

### *Brief Summary:*

Archaeological supervision of intrusive groundworks was carried out at St. Mary's Church of Ireland, Comber, Co. Down in advance of the construction of a new south transept for the church (planning ref: X/2005/1268/F). St. Mary's Church of Ireland reportedly is sited on the grounds of the late twelfth-century Cistercian foundation known as Comber Abbey (DOW 010:026) although there are no remains of this site above ground.

The original methodology for this project stipulated the removal of the foundations of the current choir vestry (constructed in the early 1970s) and the excavation of four sump holes to provide adequate foundation for the corners of the new transept. However, upon commencement of the programme of works, a substantial amount of disarticulated human bone was observed in the darkish grey graveyard soil (Context No. 105). The first sump hole was mechanically excavated under archaeological supervision by the director and Dr. Philip Macdonald (CAF). The mixed graveyard deposit (Context No. 105) continued to a depth of approximately 2.2m when the natural subsoil was encountered. Elements of the recovered skeletal assemblage appeared to be articulated from the very base on the graveyard soil, so it was decided to adjust the methodology in an effort to avoid any unnecessary damage to any articulated remains. Rather than the excavation of four deep sumps for the foundations, it was decided, on consultation with the onsite construction company from Mc Gimpsey and Kane, that steel piles would be driven into the subsoil to provide adequate foundations. The area between these piles would then be mechanically excavated to a depth of approximately 0.5m. This work was carried out under archaeological supervision with all disarticulated bone excavated from the foundation slots gathered.

*Type of monitoring:*

Mechanical excavation of foundations for new transept carried out using toothless 'sheugh' bucket.

*Size of area opened:*

An area approximately 8m (east/west) by 3.5m (north/south).

*Current Land Use:* Church and graveyard

*Intended Land Use:* Extension of church with development of south transept.

## **Brief account of the monitoring**

### *Introduction*

St. Mary's Church of Ireland is situated within a roughly rectangular graveyard, approximately 50m to the east of the town square, Comber, Co. Down (Figures 1-3). The church reputedly is located within the confines of a late twelfth-century Cistercian Abbey (DOW 010:026), although there are no above ground traces of this today. The church wish to extend St. Mary's with the demolition of the choir vestry located against the southern wall of the church, and the construction of a south transept in its place. Due to the archaeological potential of this site, monitoring of all invasive groundworks was requested by Neil Yeaman, Case Officer for the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage.

### *Historical Background*

The site of St. Mary's Church of Ireland is located within an area of archaeological sensitivity. The proximity of the town of Comber to the northern shore of Strangford Lough, as well as the presence of the Enler and Glen rivers that flow through the town, meant that the area of Comber has been subject to anthropogenic influence for millennia. The importance of the rivers in Comber is testified by the name of the town; An Comar – a confluence (here meaning the joining of the Enler and Glen Rivers).

That the site of St. Mary's is located directly within the confines of the Cistercian Abbey is unfortunately speculative, as no *in situ* structural elements have been excavated. Medieval cut stones (complete with mason's mark) have been incorporated into the northern boundary wall of the present graveyard (Plate 6), and dressed stone, presumably from a door or window arch, have been found in the vicinity of the Church (Rev. J. Barry *pers. comm.*). Following the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1540, the abbey at Comber was left in a ruinous state, the stones of which were incorporated into the construction of Meeting House which was constructed on the site in the early seventeenth century (Mc Erlean et al 2002, 289). The existence of this structure is testified by the presence of headstones dating

to the seventeenth century, as well as a fragment of green-glazed seventeenth-century roof tile (identified by Ruairi O'Baoill) discovered during this archaeological investigation.

### *Monitoring of invasive groundworks*

The rubble associated with the demolition of the choir vestry was designated Context No. 101 and was the uppermost strata excavated during the monitoring exercise. The foundations of the 1970 Choir Vestry were exposed following the removal of the rubble demolition layer (Context No.101). These were observed as a course of concrete blocks running parallel to the southern wall of the present church, and were assigned Context No. 102.

Following the removal of the foundations for the 1970 (Context No. 102) choir vestry, more foundation stones (Context No. 103) were observed approximately 0.3m to the north of the 1970 foundations (Context No. 102). These foundations (Context No. 103) comprised quite large sub-rectangular sandstone blocks (average size: 0.4m x 0.35m) which were bonded together with lime mortar. This feature has been interpreted as the remains of the foundations of the first choir vestry constructed in the early twentieth century (Rev. J. Barry *pers. comm.*). A cache of curated human bones (Context No. 104) was recovered from the western corner of these foundations (Figure 1 and Plate 3). Provisional analysis of this assemblage indicates that at least four adults are represented. One complete cranium was recovered in this assemblage. This cranium represents a male, and due to the fusion of the spheno-occipital synchondrosis, it is estimated that the person was at least 25 years old at the time of death. Other pathologies evident of this assemblage are areas of eburnation (polishing of the joints) on some of the long bones. This also suggests that the assemblage represents adult burials (Clare McGranaghan *pers. comm.*).

The foundations of the choir vestries (Context Nos. 102 and 103), as well as the foundations for the present church (Context No. 106) were excavated into a dark grey sticky clay (Context No. 105). This deposit was interpreted as a graveyard soil, primarily due to the humic consistency as well as the presence of a large assemblage of disarticulated bone. The original research design for this project stipulated the

excavation of four 1.5m square sumps to accommodate the corners of the new transept. However, the amount of disarticulated human bone that was being recovered from the graveyard soil (Context No. 105) prompted a revision of the excavation methodology. Dr. Philip Macdonald (CAF) was called to site and under his supervision, the first sump was excavated in an effort to assess the level of the subsoil. The graveyard soil extended for a depth of approximately 2.2m when the natural subsoil, red orange boulder clay (Context No. 108) was encountered. Many more fragments of disarticulated human bone were recovered from the graveyard soil (Context No. 105). At the very base of the graveyard soil (Context No. 105), an articulated burial was disturbed (Context No. 107). An intact cranium, mandible and the atlas and axis vertebrae were disturbed by the mechanical digger. The presence of these articulated remains suggest that an intact burial horizon exists below a substantial matrix of disturbed graveyard soil and disarticulated remains. On consultation with the contractors, McGimpsey and Kane Ltd, it was decided that eight steel piles would be driven into the subsoil from the surface of the graveyard soil (Context No. 105). This would be done in an effort to minimize the disturbance to the burial horizon underlying the disarticulated remains.

Following the driving of the steel piles, strip foundations were mechanically excavated around and in between them. The maximum depth that these strip foundations reached was 0.7m below the present ground surface, effectively excavating approximately 0.3-0.4m into the graveyard soil (Context No. 105). A large assemblage of disarticulated human bone was recovered from the foundation slots, and is currently being processed at Queen's University Belfast.

### *Finds*

A number of artefacts were recovered from the grave yard soil (Context No. 105). Several sherds of unglazed medieval coarse pottery (Cormac Mc Sparron *pers. com.*) were recovered. Although in an unstratified position, the presence of these sherds may relate to the use of the site as a Cistercian Abbey from the twelfth century until the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. Also recovered was a fragment of a green-glazed roof tile of probable seventeenth century date (Ruairi

O'Baoill *pers comm.*). This may be related to the meeting house that was constructed on site in the early seventeenth century.

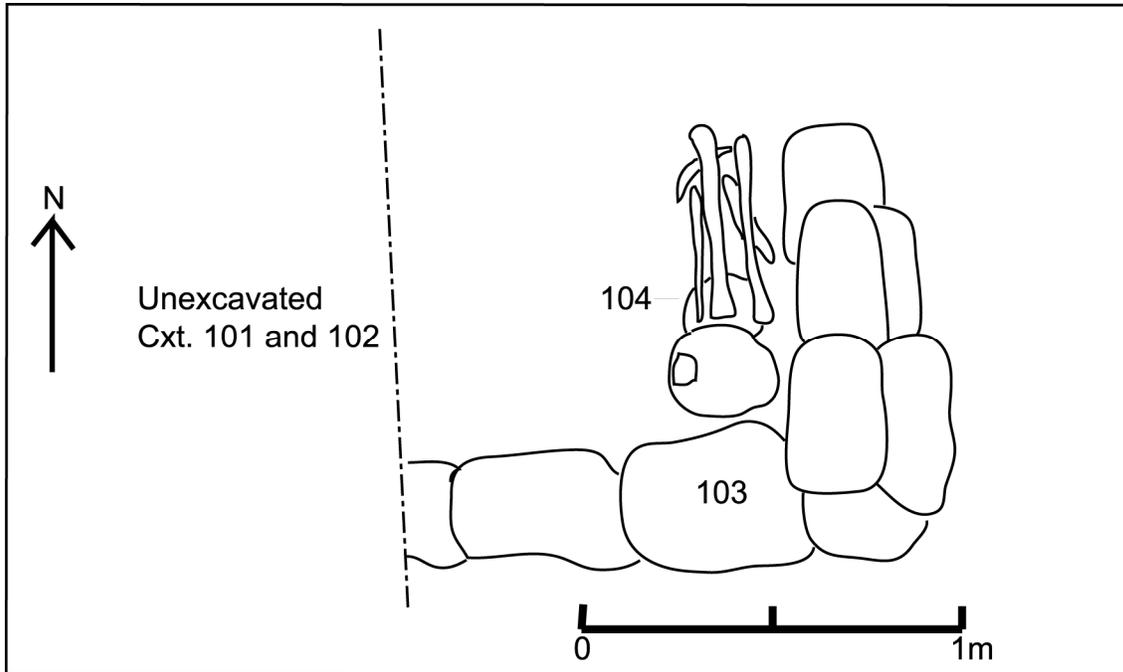


Figure 1: Schematic plan of 'curated' cache of human bones (Context No. 104) within the foundations of the choir vestry constructed in the early twentieth century.

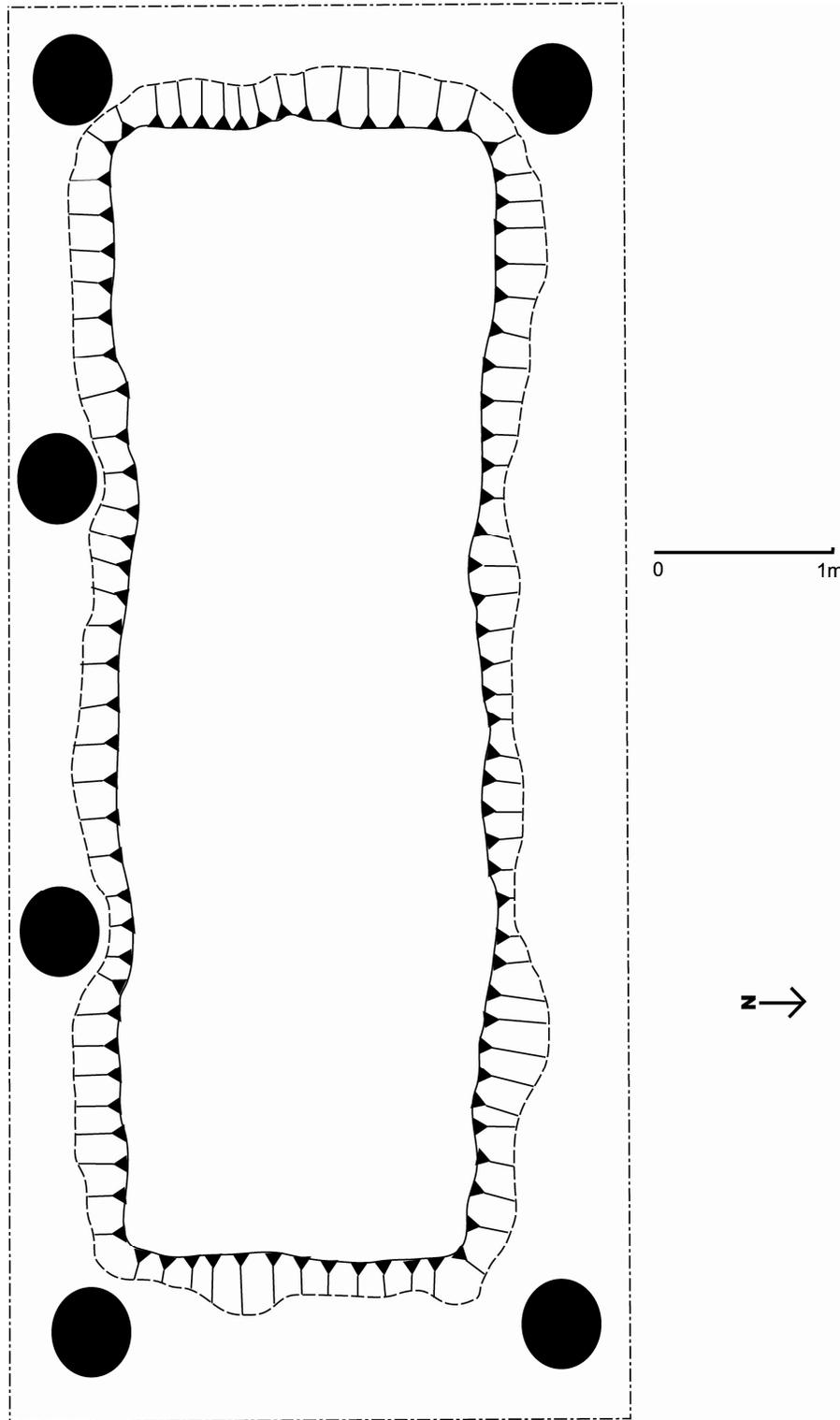


Figure 2: Post excavation plan following excavation of the strip foundations around the piles (shaded black).

## Recommendations

A substantial amount of disarticulated human bone was recovered during the monitoring exercise at St. Mary's (70 kg in all). The human bone assemblage is currently being processed in Queen's University Belfast. It is recommended that analysis is carried out on the entire assemblage by an osteoarchaeologist.

It is also recommended that the articulated burial that was disturbed should be put forward for radiocarbon dating. Should this burial turn out to be medieval in date, it would indicate that a horizon of burials, possibly associated with the use of the site as the Cistercian Abbey, survive undisturbed below the disturbed graveyard soil and disarticulated remains. The accompanying Costed Assessment gives further details on the proposed cost of further work associated with this project.

## References

McErlean, T, McConkey, R & Forsythe, W. 2002. 'Strangford Lough: An Archaeological Survey of the Maritime Cultural Landscape'. Blackstaff Press

**Archive:**

*Finds:* The finds recovered from the monitoring exercise are currently housed at the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

*Photographs:* The photographs taken during the monitoring exercise are currently housed at the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

*Plans / Drawings:* All drawing compiled during the monitoring exercise are currently housed at the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

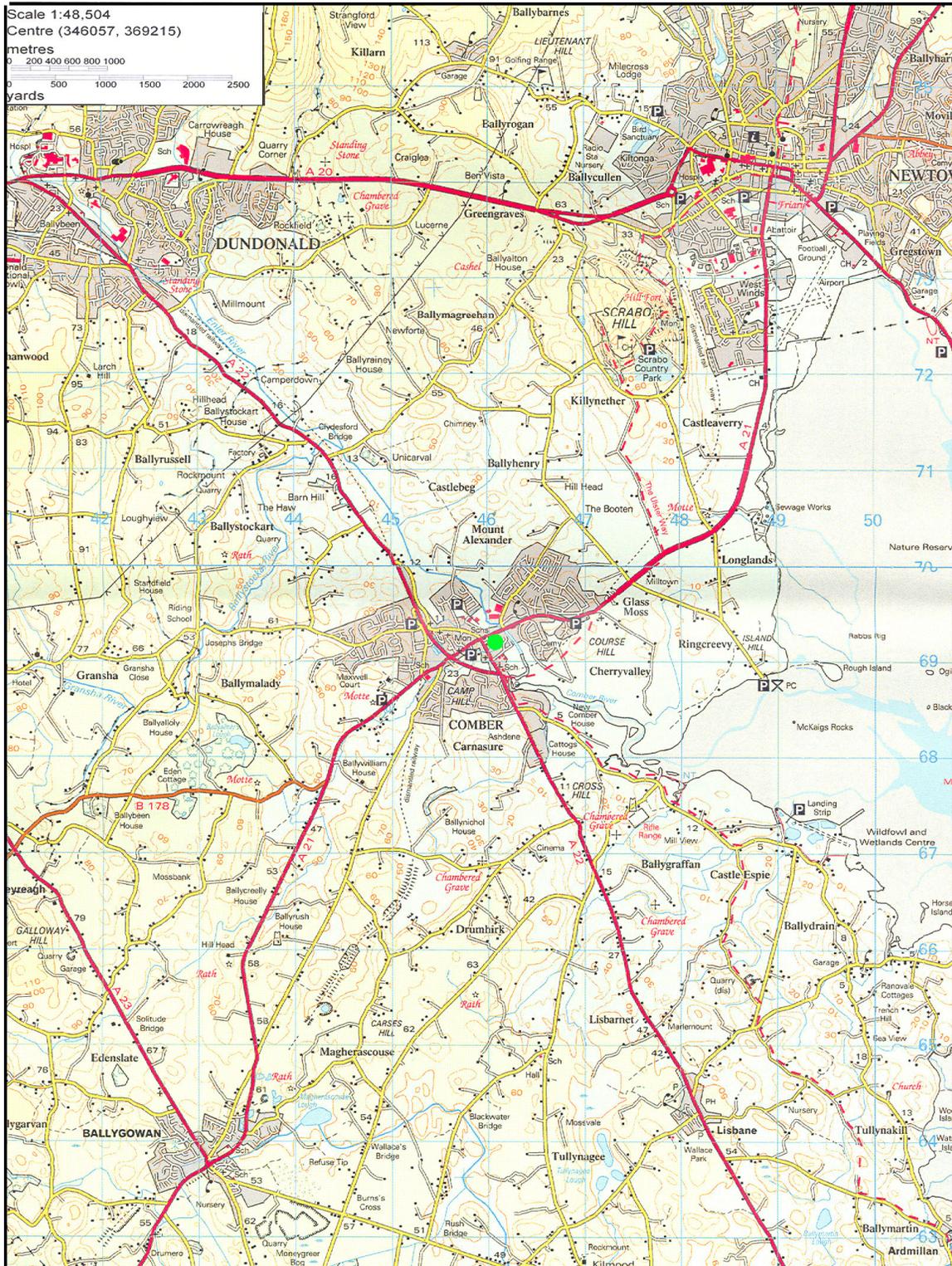


Figure 3: General map showing application site (green dot).

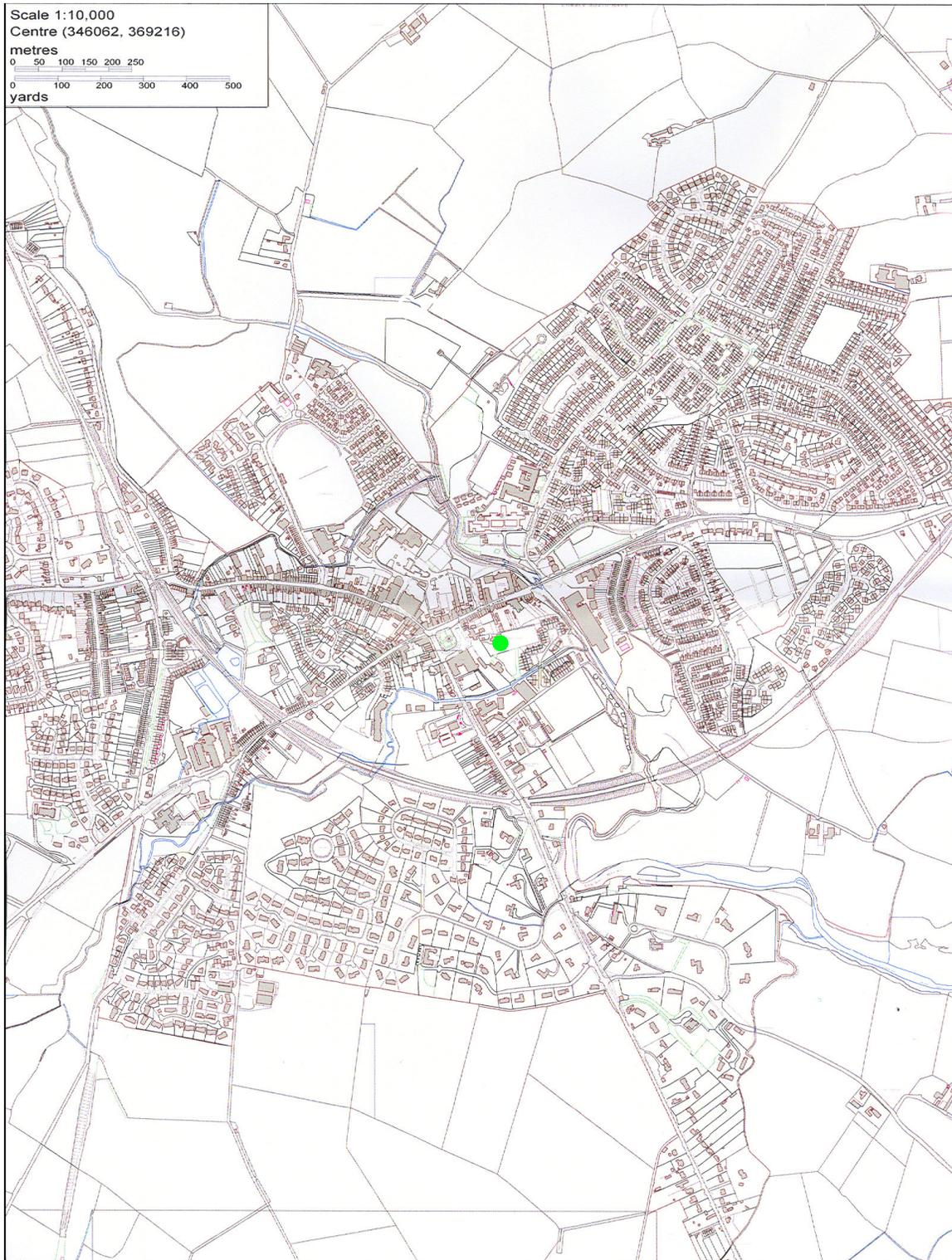


Figure 4: Detailed location map showing application site (green dot).





Plate 1: Seventeenth-century headstone, earliest inscription dates to 1661.



Plate 2: Evaluation area following demolition of choir vestry, looking north-west.



Plate 3: Curated disarticulated human bones (Context No. 104) cached in corner of early twentieth-century choir vestry foundations.



Plate 4: Northern strip foundation showing graveyard soil (Context No. 105) and foundations of the present church (to left of the picture).



Plate 5: Evaluation area following excavation of the strip foundations around the piles, looking east.



Plate 6: Dressed stone incorporated into the northern boundary wall of the churchyard. The SMR states that this is possibly a medieval dressed stone with mason's mark (DOW 010:026).