



# Sain Tathan's Church St Athan

Archaeological Watching Brief



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Report No. 598

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# Sain Tathan's Church, St Athan

Archaeological Watching Brief

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## ***Non Technical Summary***

*An archaeological watching brief carried out during the construction of a new drainage system in the graveyard of Sain Tathan's Church, St Athan, revealed evidence for the sustained use of the site over the centuries since its construction. Evidence of the disturbance of burials to enable the digging of new graves was identified, together with landscaping that covered over existing burials and rejuvenated the graveyard. A small number of in situ graves were identified but not disturbed.*

### **1. Introduction**

In October 2009, Cambrian Archaeological Projects were commissioned by Jonathan Saunders of Caroe and Partners to undertake an Archaeological Watching Brief during drainage works at Sain Tathan's Church, St Athan, Vale of Glamorgan (ST 02354 68418).

The groundworks were undertaken by Ellis and Co. The French drains and the drains and soakaway on the northern side of the Church were dug by hand. The drains, inspection pit and soakaway on the southern side of the Church were dug using a one tonne mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket.

All works were carried out in accordance with the IFA's *Standards and Guidance: for an archaeological watching brief* and current Health and Safety legislation.

### **2. Location and Geology**

Sain Tathan Parish Church is located in the centre of the village of St Athan, around 2km north of the South Wales coast (fig. 1). It is sited on a slight rise in the topography, at around 40m OD. The underlying geology is Carboniferous Limestone.

### **3. Aims and Objectives**

The aims and objectives of the watching brief were to record any archaeological features identified during the works and mitigate against the disturbance of burials.

### **4. Watching Brief Methodology**

The watching brief was carried out during the excavation of two soakaways and a series of drains within the graveyard of Sain Tathan's Church. The drainage works were carried out in three phases:

- Digging French drains along the northern and southern walls of the Nave.
- Digging a pipe trench and soakaway in the graveyard to the north of the Church.
- Digging a series of pipe trenches, soakaway and inspection pit within the path on the southern side of the Church.

Following discussions with Caroe and Partners and Ellis and Co. it was decided that full archaeological monitoring was necessary during the excavation of the drainage features in the graveyard and through the path as these areas constituted undisturbed ground. The French drains were to be dug through pre-existing drainage features and so were not subject to a full

watching brief.

## **5. Watching Brief**

### **5.1 Soil and Ground Conditions**

The weather conditions during the watching brief were generally poor, with heavy rain and strong winds. As a result the ground was waterlogged and sticky.

### **5.2 Distribution of Deposits**

The northern graveyard was laid to turf which overlay a thick layer of redeposited material 0.6m deep. This contained large quantities of rubble and some human bone. In the southern graveyard, the drains cut through the paths in front of the south porch. The paths overlay a similar deposit, which was up to 1.25m deep. The redeposited material overlay the natural yellow clay.

*In situ* graves were identified in both areas, but these were not disturbed.

### **5.3 Results**

#### *5.3.1 French Drains*

Drainage trenches were excavated following the line of the Nave wall on both the northern and southern sides of the Church (plate 1). The trenches also extended around the entrance porch and along the western wall of the vestry. The trenches were 0.3m wide and up to 0.81m deep. They followed the line of existing drains, and were excavated through redeposited materials and gravel.

No archaeological features were identified, although fragments of human bone were recovered from the fills. A number of graves are located close to the Church wall on the southern side of the Nave, and it is likely that these, and other possibly earlier graves, have been disturbed during previous drainage works. On the northern side of the Nave, a thick layer of redeposited material, which contained large quantities of human bone, was identified. The bones from the drainage trench on the northern side of the Nave are likely to derive from this deposit.

Butchered animal bone was also recovered from the fill of the drainage trench on the northern side of the Nave.

An interesting feature of Church construction was noted on the Nave wall to the east of the porch. Here, the outline of an arch can be clearly seen in the stonework, apparently sitting on the foundation stones (plate 2). The underlying stonework does not indicate the presence of a filled in doorway, and the function of the arch remains unknown.

#### *5.3.2 Northern Graveyard*

A drainage trench and a soakaway were dug in the northern graveyard. These were carefully positioned to avoid all extant graves.

The drainage trench extended westwards from the northwest corner of the Vestry, linking the French drain with the soakaway. The drainage trench was 5m in length, 0.3m wide and 0.5m deep. It cut through a layer of redeposited topsoil, clay, rubble and mortar that contained

fragments of human and animal bone, post-medieval pottery and tile. The depth of the redeposited material in this trench was not ascertained as the required drainage depth was reached before the natural surface was encountered. At the eastern end of the drain a rough stone wall was encountered. The wall measured 0.4m in depth and comprised packed and loosely mortared unworked rubble. The wall was around 0.3m thick and appears to form part of a low wall that runs along the western wall of the Vestry and then curves around to meet the northeastern wall of the graveyard.

The soakaway trench measured 1m by 1m and was excavated to a depth of 0.61m. The same redeposited soil, clay and rubble was encountered, with a considerable quantity of human bone fragments distributed throughout. The bones included a number of vertebrae, part of a lower jaw containing a well-worn wisdom tooth, a fragment of pelvis, the crushed skull of a probable foetus or new-born baby, several ribs and many unidentifiable bones. A pair of partly articulated legs was also identified at a depth of 0.4m, within the redeposited material (plate 3). Both femurs were present, together with knee caps and tibiae, and the fibula of the right leg. Despite the apparently articulated nature of the legs, both had been broken at the ends of the tibia, and the left leg at the top of the femur. No foot bones were found. No grave cut was identified, and the shallow depth of the bones together with their partial survival suggests that they had been redeposited from their original grave.

It is thought that the redeposited material was laid down to raise the level of the graveyard to allow its continued use. The wall identified at the eastern end of the drainage trench appears to form the boundary of the raised graveyard. The oldest visible grave in this part of the graveyard dates to 1861, which provides a *terminus ante quem* for the landscaping of the burial ground. As the Church dates to the fourteenth century, it is likely that this area was used extensively for burial. The deposition of a thick layer of rubble, soil and clay would have covered over the existing graves and essentially created a fresh graveyard. The presence of such large quantities of human bone within this deposit attests to the extensive disturbance of graves during the successive phases of use.

The redeposited material overlay the natural reddish yellow clay. Cut into the natural on the southern side of the soakaway trench, a linear feature was partly revealed. This was orientated east/west, measured at least 1m in length by 0.6m wide and contained a fairly compact fill of organic soil containing charcoal, bone fragments and stone (plate 4). A small sondage was excavated into the deposit at the western end of the trench to test its depth. This revealed that it continued for at least a further 0.1m. It is likely that this feature is a grave that pre-dates the landscaping of the graveyard in the Victorian period.

Following discussions with Jonathan Saunders, the planned depth of the soakaway was reduced and the putative grave was not disturbed (plate 5).

### 5.3.3 Southern Graveyard

Four drains, an inspection (manhole) pit and a soakaway were excavated on the southern side of the Church, within the path immediately in front of the porch.

Three of the drains connected to the French Drains laid around the walls of the Church; these converged in the inspection pit (plate 6). The drains were between 5m and 8m in length, 0.3m wide and up to 0.6m deep. The drains cut through a layer of redeposited topsoil containing rubble and some charcoal. Only small quantities of human bone, predominantly unidentifiable fragments, were recovered from these drains. One *in situ* burial was partly revealed in the base of the drain extending from the southeastern corner of the church. Only the tibiae were exposed, but these were orientated east/west and corresponded with lines of extant burials to both the north and south of its position. No grave cut had been identified in the overlying deposits, and their relatively shallow depth suggests that they were perhaps a secondary burial

within a grave. The bones were covered over and the drain laid on top.

The inspection pit measured 1m by 1m and was 0.6m deep. The fourth drain was orientated north/south and connected the inspection pit with the soakaway. It measured 6m in length, 0.3m wide and was 0.6m deep. Both also cut through redeposited material containing rubble and bone. No *in situ* burials were revealed.

The soakaway measured 1.9m by 1.5m and was excavated to a depth of 1.25m (plate 7). It also cut through the redeposited materials, but contained a significant quantity of human bone – approximately 30kg. The bone was found in discrete collections throughout the soakaway, some as little as 50mm below the surface. The bones included a number of femurs, ribs, fragments of pelvis, vertebrae, jaw fragments and large quantities of unidentifiable fragments. The remains of five skulls were found, including the unfused skull of an infant, together with numerous other skull fragments. Only one skull retained the lower jaw, and three had some teeth in place in the upper jaw. These teeth were worn flat, suggested the individuals were elderly. The skulls were generally found within a cluster of bone, suggesting that the collected bones had derived from individual burials that had been disturbed and then reburied. One cluster of bone also contained large quantities of elaborately decorated tin from the outside of a coffin, and two coffin handles.

At a depth of 1.25m two *in situ* burials were identified. In both cases articulated vertebrae and ribs were found. The position of the burials corresponded with the rows of extant graves either side of the path. The depth of the burials (4ft from the original ground surface) indicates that they either predate the seventeenth century when the 6ft depth for burial was established, or that they are secondary burials within graves. A decision was made to reduce the planned depth of the soakaway (designed to be 2m deep) to ensure that the burials were not disturbed, and they were covered over with soil and the soakaway constructed on top.

All of the bones collected from the soakaway were reburied in the base of the soakaway trench (plate 8).

## **6. Discussion and Conclusions**

The excavation of the drains and soakaways has revealed interesting details about the history of Sain Tathan's Church graveyard. The site has evidently been used for burials for over seven hundred years, however only burials from the last three hundred years are visible today – the earliest grave marker in the graveyard dates from 1705. The quantity of bone recovered in both the northern and southern areas of the graveyard demonstrates the level of disturbance that has occurred, with early graves redug to allow additional burials, and the bones removed and reburied. Much of the bone was extremely friable and badly degraded, indicative of an early date, however some was relatively fresh and some even partly articulated. In these cases, the bodies are unlikely to have been in the ground for a particularly long time before being dug up to make way for a new grave. The identification of three *in situ* graves confirms that within the graveyard there are burials that are no longer marked.

The deposition of large quantities of soil and rubble within the northern part of the graveyard is thought to have been an attempt to prolong the life of the site, covering early graves and providing a 'fresh' surface into which graves could be dug. This is likely to have happened around 1860.



## **7. Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Graham and Duncan from Ellis & Co for all their assistance during the ground works and to the Vicar and Churchwardens of Sain Tathan's Church for their patience.

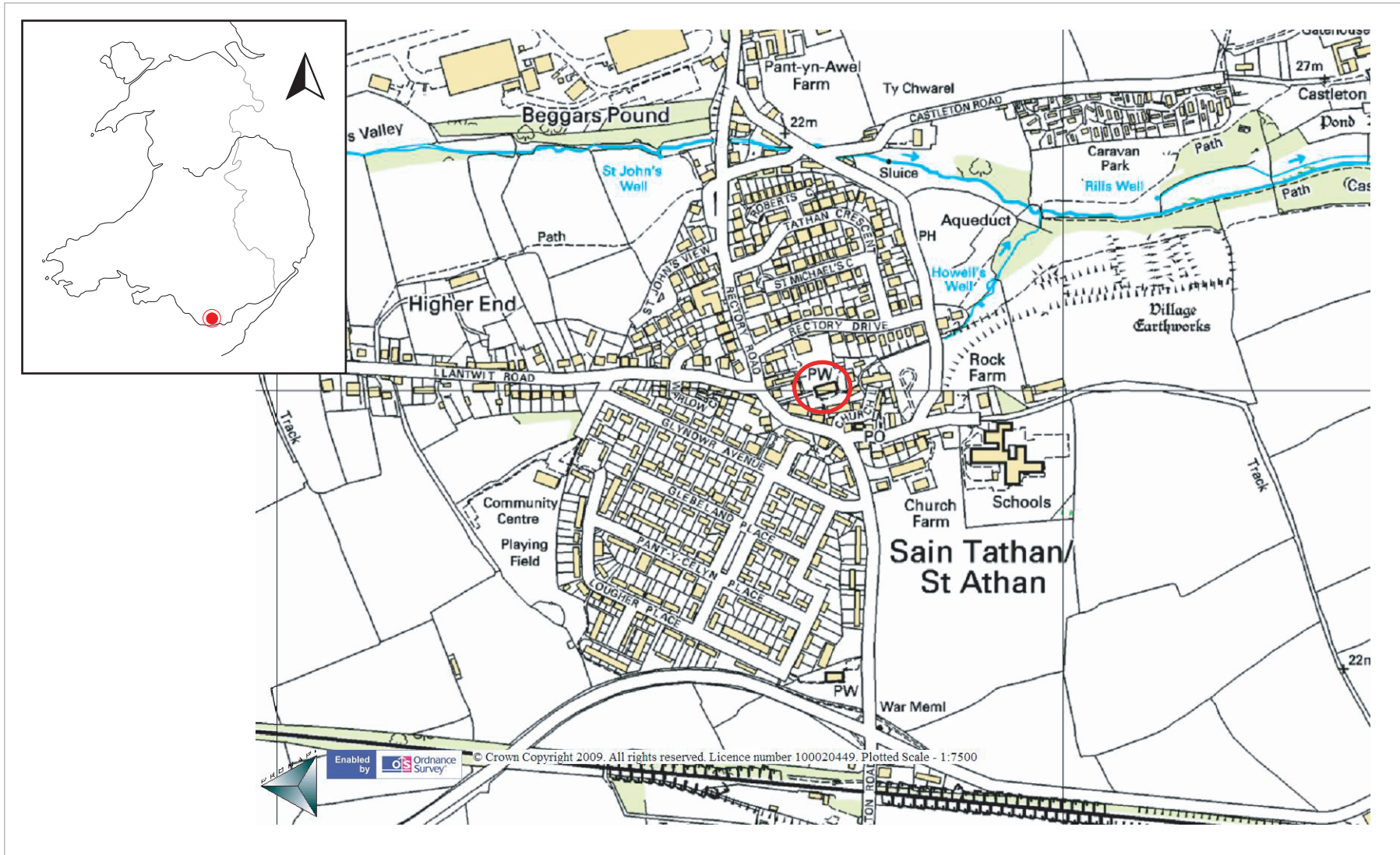


Fig 1: Map showing location of Sain Tathan's Church



Plate 1.  
French Drains  
around  
the Church



Plate 2.  
'Arch' feature  
built into south  
wall of Nave



Plate 3.  
Partly articulated  
leg bones in  
northern  
soakaway



Plate 4.  
Putative grave cut  
in northern  
soakaway



Plate 5.  
Northern  
Graveyard  
soakaway and  
drainage trench



Plate 6.  
Drains on southern  
side of Church





Plate 7.  
Drain and  
soakaway on  
southern side of  
Church



Plate 8.  
Bones recovered  
from soakaway  
prior to reburial



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