

THE SITE OF OVERCHURCH, UPTON, WIRRAL: A SURVEY

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The site of Overchurch is located at SJ 265891 on the fifty foot contour on a slight ridge which overlooks the Fender valley on the east and the Arrove and Greasby Brooks on the west. Northwards, beyond the town of Moreton, the ground drops to the sandy flats of Hoylake and Meols. Southwards the ridge eventually rises to the 61m contour.

The name Overchurch comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'ofer' shore, and 'circe' church (Fergusson Irving 1893, 279-81). The 'Church on the Shore' would well describe the topography of Wirral in this area during the Anglo-Saxon period when the sea would have joined with the Birket and the Fender to form a promontory of the Overchurch ridge (Fig. 1).

The survey aimed to examine the site of Overchurch by recording the perimeter bank enclosure of the churchyard, and also to plot as many surface features as possible both within the churchyard and in the surrounding open ground. This record was planned to be completed in advance of phase two of the Upton bypass which is routed to the west and north of Upton to connect with the M53 spur road. Although the site itself will not be affected, the route of the spur will run through the adjacent field lying on the north (Fig. 2). The exercise also provided an excellent opportunity for the members of a University of Liverpool Continuing

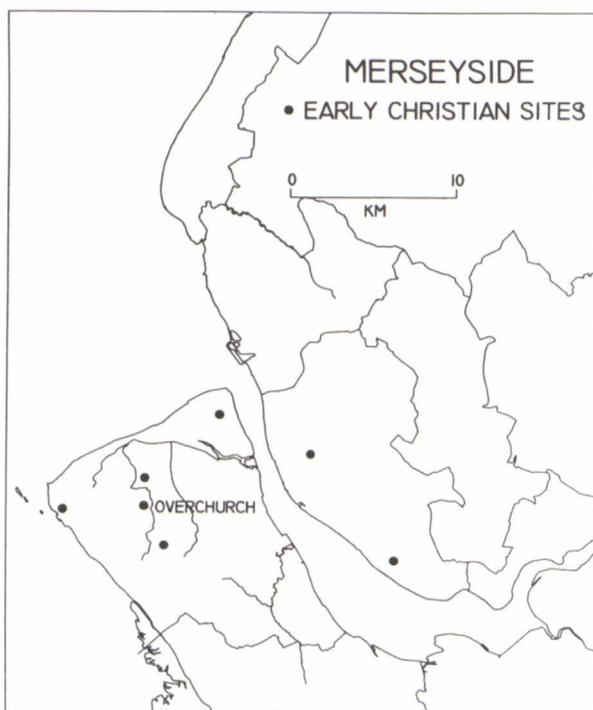


Figure 1: Location of early Christian sites in Merseyside.

Education class to practise a range of archaeological and historical skills.

Documentary evidence for the history of Overchurch indicates that a church existed on the site from as early as Norman times, and there is some suggestion of an earlier foundation. The site (Fig. 3) which at present consists of a sub-circular earthen bank approximately 41x34m encloses the remains of a grave yard. Its flanking fields are now used as a public park. In 1813 the Norman and medieval church was replaced by a new church at Greenbank, Upton, three quarters of a mile to the south (Cox 1893, 305-10). This church remained in use until 1868 when the present, much larger parish church of St. Mary's Upton was built, a quarter of a mile to the south east on the A 5027.

The circular form of the enclosure at Overchurch may well have links with a time prior to the early Christian period, since examples of churches built on pagan sites are not unknown (Piggott and Piggott 1939, 153).

Close inspection of the site at Overchurch shows that the ditch which follows the bank on the north was possibly of later construction. On the inner side, however, is a shallow depression which it is tempting to see as the remains of an internal ditch. Such a feature would correspond to the usual structure of a henge. The dimensions of the Overchurch circle may be compared to the henge at Bryn Celli Ddu, Anglesey (Lynch 1970, 56-7).

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicate an early date for a Christian presence at Overchurch. The circular nature of the enclosing bank compares well with the vallum which surrounded so many early Christian churches and monasteries during the early post Roman period in Britain. Probably the most famous of these is the site of the Columban foundation on Iona, Scotland, where the remains of the vallum can still be seen (RCHMS, 1982, 31-42). Local examples in the Merseyside region occur and although a vallum is not evident, the churches of St. Bridget, West Kirby and Holy Cross, Woodchurch, are both sited within circular churchyards.

The earliest datable evidence for a Christian community at Overchurch is seen in the Aethelmund Stone. This was found in 1887 (Cox 1893, 314) when the stones from Overchurch were reused to build its successor at Greenbank, Upton. This stone formed part of the fabric of the second church. It was retrieved by George Webster, a resident in the neighbourhood (Cox 1893, 314-8) and later presented to the Grosvenor Museum, Chester (Jones 1960, 78). It is now in the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead.

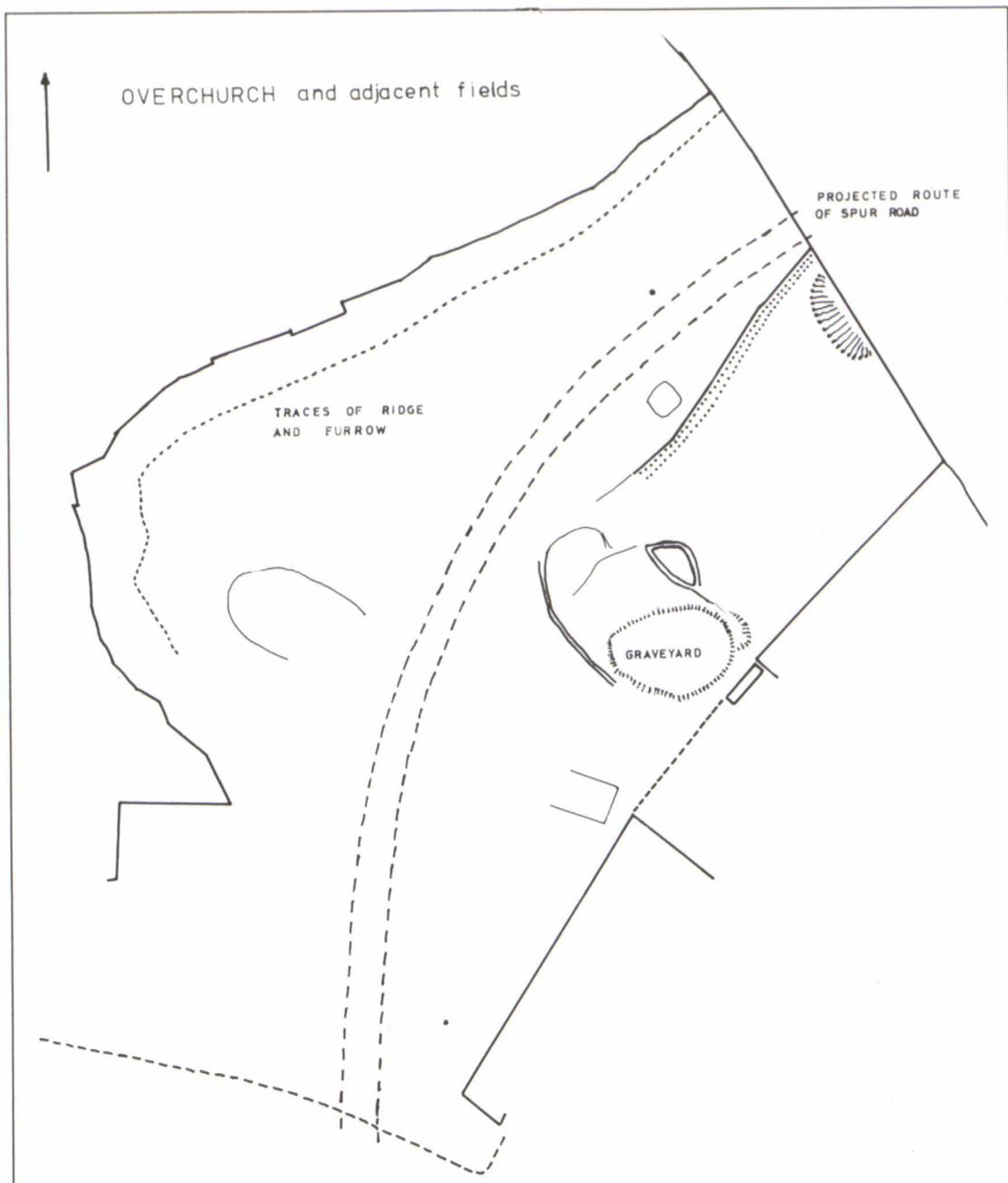


Figure 2: Survey of Overchurch and adjacent fields.

The stone, of carboniferous limestone, measures 511 x 254 x 228mm and is recumbent. On the upper surface is the remains of a carving of interlaced dragons, at one end an arcade, and on one vertical face, an inscription in Anglo-Saxon runes which reads in translation:

'the people erected this monument: pray for Aethelmund'

(Cox, 1983, 316).

Collingwood (Brownbill 1927, 25) suggested on stylistic grounds, a date late in the Anglian period, perhaps 900. On the other hand, Elliott (1959, 147), suggested a much longer date span, from c.700-900, basing his

argument on the lack of information regarding the history of Wirral. Be that as it may, it is an indication that the followers of Aethelmund were Christian, and had a reverence for the site at Overchurch where it may be supposed they raised this stone. There is some uncertainty as to the identity of Aethelmund. Bu'lock (1972, 49) considers that the ninth century Mercian earldorman Aethelmund, described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Garmonsway 1978, 58-9) is a possible candidate. Both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the stone itself indicate that Aethelmund was important enough in Mercia to command a large following.

Although a fragment of a Saxon wheelheaded cross was

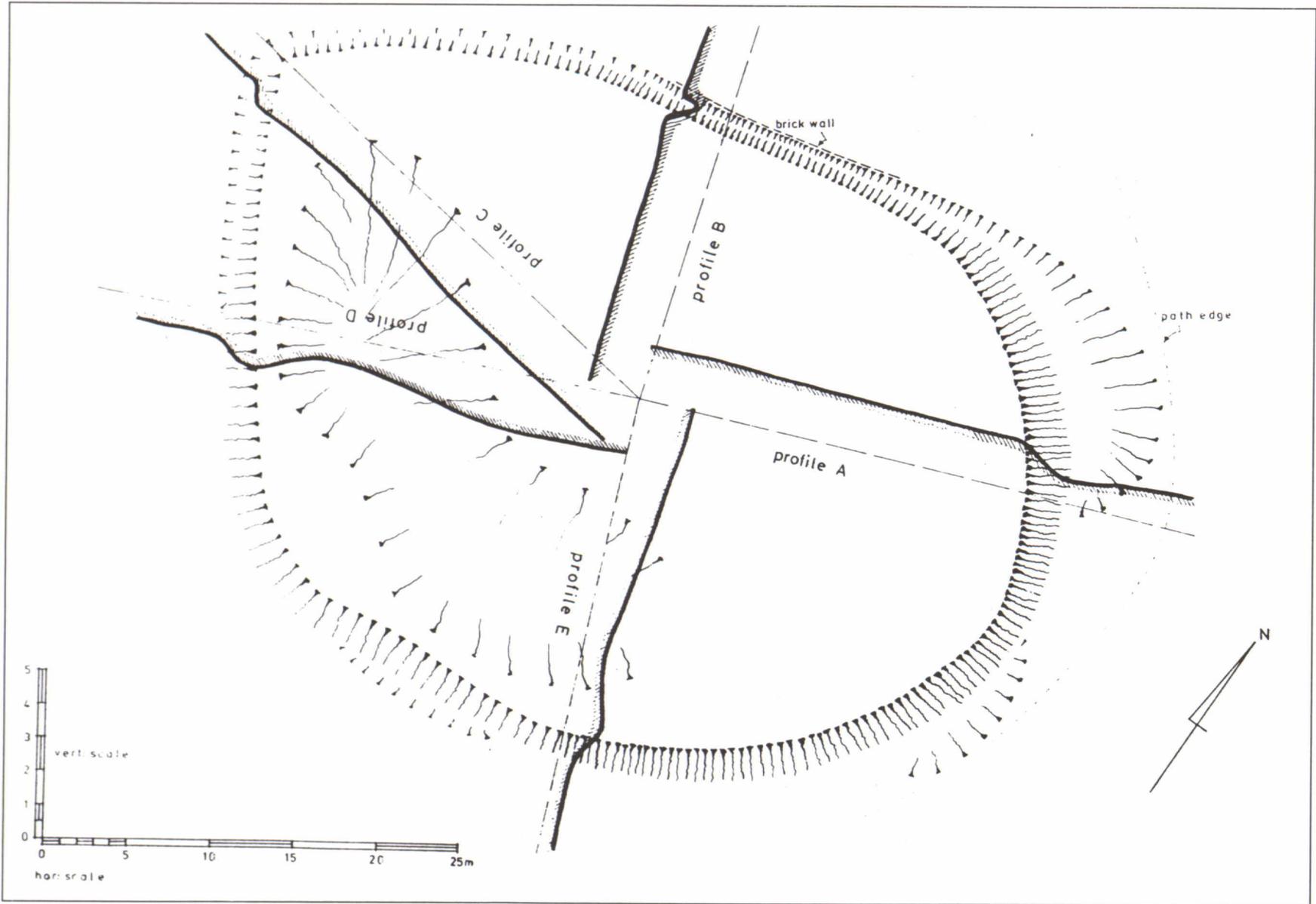


Figure 3: Overchurch church site, ground profile survey, 1984.

found incorporated into the fabric of the Norman church, no evidence exists on the ground for a church of the Celtic or Saxon period. This, however, is not surprising since such structures would almost certainly have been built of wood (Sherley Price 1982, 185).

The evidence for a Norman church is more secure. Cox, working on the basis of an eyewitness account of a small seventeenth century sketch and of stones found during the dismantling in 1887 of the Greenbank church at Upton, made a reconstruction and ground plan of the Norman church (Cox 1893, 302-19). He may also have been aware of Mortimer's description of the church as 'having had pointed arches richly decorated with chevrons and Saxons mouldings' (Mortimer 1847, 249).

It is difficult at this distance to assess the accuracy of Cox's work, as he does not always follow the verbal descriptions of his eyewitness. The tower was said to have been battlemented, but this feature is not shown, either in his reconstruction drawing or in the seventeenth century sketch. The eyewitness could not remember the presence of a vestry, but this is shown. It is possible, however, that Cox recovered the outline of this when he probed for and recovered much of the ground plan of the church. Furthermore, Cox illustrates a number of carved fragments of stone recovered from the fabric of the Greenbank church. In particular he shows a drawing of a voussoir, taken he says, from the south door. This stone is drawn with a double chevron, pellet and small cable moulding. It does not however, correspond exactly to a carved stone incorporated in the wall of the present Greenbank Funeral Parlour, Upton. This stone, much worn, shows an arch, a single chevron and pellet, and no cable moulding (Fig. 4a).

Two grave slabs associated with Overchurch may also belong to the medieval period. Figure 4f is a drawing of a cross marked grave slab which was rescued from the wall of the Greenbank Funeral Parlour in the early 1970s and is now in the Williamson Art Gallery (Newsletter 1982, No. 7). One slab, Figure 4e, is still *in situ* and is recorded as No. 13 in the graveyard survey (Appendix II).

This Norman and medieval church was, by the eighteenth century, falling into decay. The Churchwarden's accounts for the period record a series of repairs, starting after a great storm in 1709 when the roof and steeple were damaged (Green 1980, 1). The accounts also include a note of payments for fencing the churchyard in 1731. It is possible that at this period some of the yew trees which surround the site were planted (Fig. 6). There are notes of frequent ditching in 1749, 1757 and 1762, and for making a new stile in 1757. Evidently a gate was later built, since a bill for £1.8.4½ was paid to J. Pendleton for making two gates for the churchyard in 1771, and in the same year 15/- was paid to Sam. Hill for making a lock and hinges for the gate. This may well have replaced the new stile of 1757. Certainly a gate was described by Cox's eyewitness. The church was given a new slate roof as

late as 1802 (Davey E., personal communication).

Despite this work, the church was burnt and dismantled in 1813 and the building of the new church at Greenbank was begun in the same year (Mortimer, 1847, 249). It was completed in 1815 (Green, 1980, 307), but some fragments were incorporated into the wall built around the Funeral parlour which later occupied the site. These stones include the chevron stone already referred to, two fragments of gravestones with inscriptions in an early eighteenth century style, and one stone which may have a mason's mark (Figs 4a, 4b and 4c).

In 1869, Overchurch was becoming neglected, overgrown and overrun with rabbits. The churchwardens raised money to build a wall around it (Green 1980, 1) and traces of a brick wall which can be seen in the ditch, especially on the north may well be part of this.

Although much overgrown at present, the churchyard of Overchurch is a listed monument, and together with the adjacent fields, forms an area of open space surrounded by a housing estate. The area is under the control of the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral, but is open to the public. It is therefore subject to abuse; much rubbish is dumped, fires are lit, and the remaining grave stones are often vandalised. In addition, the adjacent fields are used as practice runs by motorcyclists and this, to some extent, affects the remains of ridge and furrow which can still be clearly seen. These fields still retain the boundaries indicated on the Tithe map (Fig. 5).

The Children's Home and ornamental gardens so clearly marked as Overchurch Hill House (OS 1850, XIII) was dismantled in the first half of this century, according to local memory. The garden is overgrown and the site reduced to a grass grown terrace. Considerable local interest and concern for the site exist. Mr. Williams of Heswall, who has examined the site with some care, talked of a slab of sandstone with a raised cross, which he says, is difficult to find in the undergrowth. It was not located in the present survey, and may possibly have been destroyed.

In 1965 a small excavation was undertaken by a local teacher with a class of nine to ten year-olds. The children cleared the ground of rubbish and surveyed the site and gravestones. They dug a shallow trench where they hoped to find the foundations of the church. Wall foundations were located, with fragments of slates and stained glass. They replaced the soil and stones when finished and little trace of this work can now be seen (Green 1980, 1).

In September 1977 a magnetometer survey was undertaken by the then Department of the Environment of the field at SJ 264891 to the north of the site (Bartlett and David, 1977, 2-3). The field shows, in appropriate light, the remains of ridge and furrow, and the survey was aimed at testing the ground for evidence

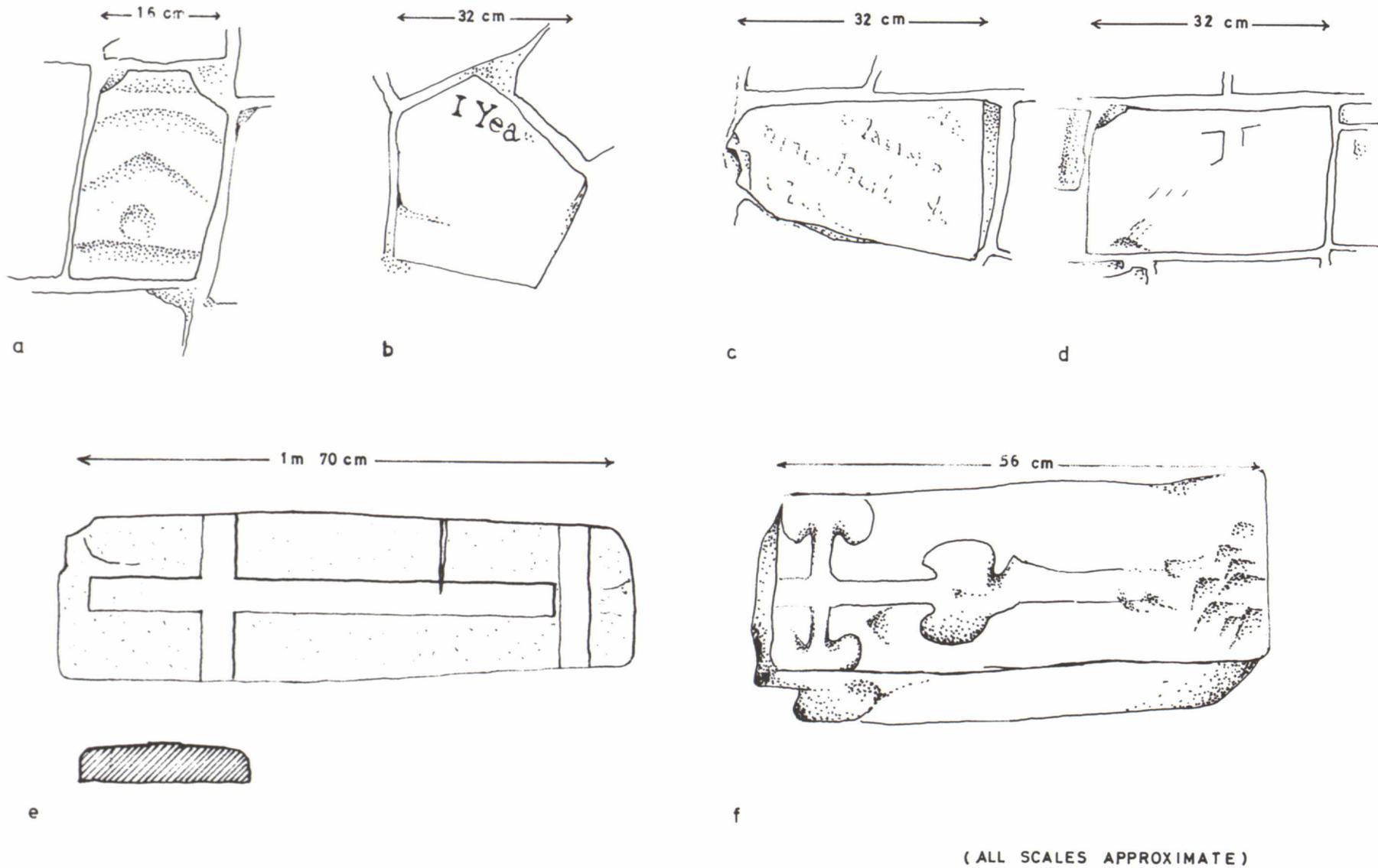


Figure 4: Carved stone and grave covers from Overchurch.

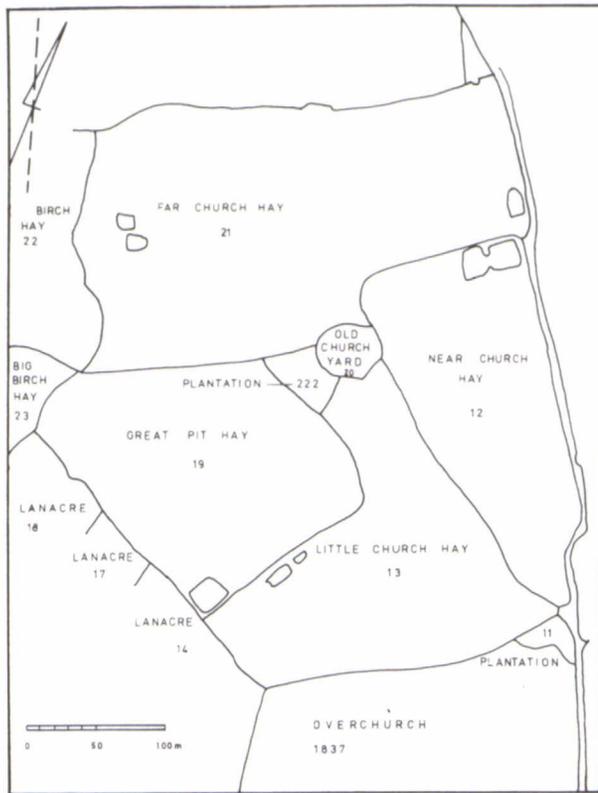


Figure 5: The site of Overchurch from the Tithe Map, 8th December 1837.

of occupation. Although the report was negative, this should not be taken as conclusive.

In conclusion it should be said that the exercise in recording this site, while valuable in itself, will it is hoped, form a record of an area of considerable historic importance at present under threat from modern development.

Appendix I: The Survey

K. Pealin, March 1986

The perimeter bank was plotted by measured triangulation to a temporary centre point. This point was also triangulated to the wall of a block of garages adjacent to the bank. A total of thirteen points was plotted, the positions being chosen to allow measurements between the points and also to plot changes in direction of the bank. The survey team was sufficiently large to allow for the simultaneous use of a level for profiles and range-finding to act as a check on the measured survey. It was decided not to relate the levels to ordnance datum, as the nearest known bench mark was some distance away and of doubtful accuracy. A temporary datum was established on a gutter stone on an adjacent road, and this was identified

for possible future check levels. All readings of both level and tapes were double checked before being recorded.

In drawing up the survey, no appreciable error was noted in the linear tape measurements, although some minor discrepancy in the level ranging readings occurred. This was due to difficulties in sighting through the heavy overgrowth on the site.

The positions of graves and other surface features were plotted both by triangulation and offsets from two intersecting base lines. The positions of as many features as possible were recorded, but as the survey progressed, it became obvious that there were numerous other features just below ground level. none of these was recorded.

The surrounding area was plotted on a 1:1250 scale outline plan of the whole site. Features here, such as ridge and furrow, standing stones, pits and ponds, were plotted by means of triangulation and offsets to known features.

Two survey plans of the site have been prepared to the same scale (Figs 2 and 6). Figure 2 indicates the profiles of the site and its enclosing band and ditch. Figure 6 indicates the positions of all graves and stones found on the site. The suggested plan of the church drawn by Cox has also been indicated (Cox 1893, 312-3). This however, can only be confirmed by excavation. An Ordnance Survey plan (OS 1898) indicates a path to the church from Upton village. Surface inspection in this area showed red sandstone fragments in the bank and embedded in the roots of a dead fir tree. The bank is also somewhat lower at this point.

Appendix II: Grave Memorial Survey of Overchurch

A survey of the remaining gravestones in the churchyard of Overchurch was undertaken and a note made of each stone. The numbers correspond to those shown on the plan.

As shown on the plan (Fig. 6) all the visible gravestones were recumbent, usually because they were collapsed. They were all composed of local sandstone, and generally oriented east to west. All the stones were much overgrown and worn. Only a few still bore decipherable inscriptions and these are recorded below:

- No. 10 Here Lyeth the
 Body of Peter Lowe
 () who Departed
 this life the 22 of
 May Aged 56 1745
 Here Lieth the
 Body of Margret
 Lowe Wife to Arthur
 Lowe who departed

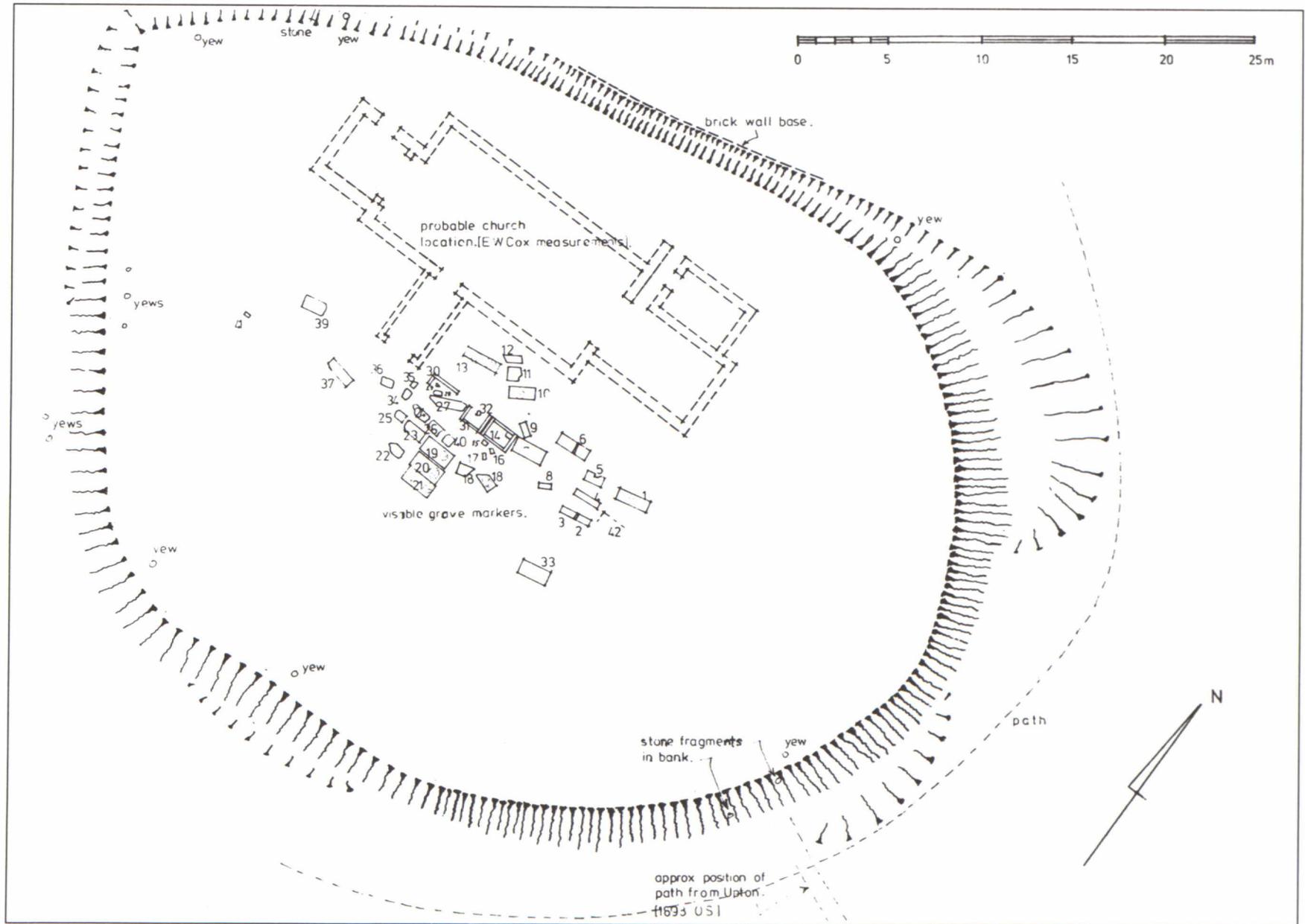


Figure 6: Overchurch church site, ground detail survey, 1984.

- this Life June the
1782 Aged 63
Also the body of
Arthur Lowe
who departed this
- No. 18 in
 memory
 of
Here Lieth
George Lowe
Died on the Home
ward Bound
Passage from Jamai
August 4 1807
Aged 19 years
- No. 19 Here lies the Remains of
Ann Delamore Daughter
of Dan' and Mary Dela
more of Crabhall Hall
who Departed this Life
August 12th 1809 Aged
7 years
- No. 20 Here lieth the
bodey of John Delamore
of Upton who Departed
this life October 6 1810
Aged 68 years
Also the body of
Sarah Delamore Wife of
the above John Delamore
who Departed this life
June 7 1811 Aged 61 years
Also the Bodey of
Thomas Delamore Who
Departed this life
- No. 21 In
Memory of
John Skersbrick
who departed this life
this 13th of October 1804
Aged 71 years
- Other inscriptions which may relate to nos 1, 2 and 3,
were recorded by Mr Williams, a local resident, prior to
this survey, cannot now be read. Mr Williams made
these available to the group.
- No. 1 Charles Middleton 1746
- No. 2, 3 Thomas Young Upton
John Young
son of Thomas Young of Upton
Departed Sep 176-
Age 7-
- No. 13 No inscription
Cross marked slab (Fig. 4e).

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