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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION
HERBERT CHAPEL, ST MARY'S PRIORY CHURCH
ABERGAVENNY, GWENT

REPORT ON FURTHER WORK

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Summary

During work to construct a new floor in the Herbert Chapel, St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny, GGAT Contracts was commissioned to undertake recording and excavation of archaeological features.

The features of archaeological interest included two brick burial vaults, probably 18th century in date, the south door of the chapel, and a vault underlying the monument of Sir William de Hastings (previously reported).

The subsequent lifting of the slabs of the Sir Richard Herbert and Sir William ap Thomas monuments led to further archaeological recording (described here), and it is now possible to describe the development of the structures in some detail.

In addition to recording the structures, a quantity of finds were recovered, including metal coffin fittings, pottery, glass (including further pieces of stained glass), and a piece of residual Roman pottery.

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by M Locock BA AIFA, (Projects Manager (Assessments), Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust), with the assistance of other GGAT staff.

The author is grateful to the vicar and churchwardens of St Mary's Abergavenny and Mr F Olding of Abergavenny Museum for their help during the project.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Development and commission

St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny, contains one of the finest groups of medieval and post-medieval funerary monuments in Britain; these monuments are currently undergoing conservation. The work is being done on behalf of St Mary's Abergavenny Parochial Church Council, and is being grant-aided by the Historic Buildings section of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments.

As part of this work, many monuments are being removed from their present locations, and it is intended that a new floor should be constructed in the Herbert Chapel of St Mary's Church to house the monuments following conservation. The construction of the new floor has necessitated the lifting of the existing floor and the excavation of material below, to a depth of 0.3m - 0.5m; this work has been overseen archaeologically by Mr F Olding of Abergavenny Museum. The removal of the floor exposed several structures which were considered to require archaeological investigation, and GGAT Contracts was commissioned to investigate the features prior to their alteration and/or removal. Following completion of the first stage of work, the slabs of two monuments were lifted, and a further programme of recording initiated.

1.2 Specification

The scope of the intended works was agreed between Mr Olding and GGAT Contracts at a site meeting on 20/9/94, comprising two elements: investigation of the Sir Richard Herbert monument and burial chamber, and the recording of the Sir William ap Thomas monument, prior to their partial dismantling.

No specification for the work was prepared; the project was undertaken in accordance with the relevant GGAT manuals of practice.

1.3 Layout of the report

The report describes the position of the site (Section 2) and the nature of previous work (Section 3), before summarising the results of the work (Section 4) and drawing conclusions (Section 5). Detailed data is contained in Appendices.

1.4 Abbreviations used

Sites previously recorded in the county Sites and Monuments Record are referred to by their Primary Record Number (PRN) and National Grid Reference. Archaeological deposits are identified by their three-figure context numbers.

2. Location

St Mary's Priory Church lies at the foot of the hill upon which Abergavenny Castle stands, to the east of the medieval town walls. The church was founded c. 1090 as the priory church of the Benedictine priory of St Mary, whose claustral buildings lay to the south of the church (an area now designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument). Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the church became the parish church of Abergavenny, and has continued in use to the present day.

The church is a grade B Listed Building, and contains many monuments of the medieval and post-medieval periods. The church has a typical monastic plan, with a central tower separating the nave to the west and the chancel and choir to the east, with a Lady Chapel in the north aisle. To the east of the north transept lies the Lewis chapel; the Herbert chapel is south of the choir, east of the south transept.

The Herbert Chapel is rectangular; on the north side are two large arches into the nave, the westernmost of which is now blocked by the monument to William Baker. On the south side are three large windows: the central window recess contains the monument to Sir William de Hastings. To the east of the eastern window is a small doorway with a shallow straight-sided arch.

Although the structure is clearly of some complexity and interest, extensive restoration in the 19th century has left the constructional history of the building largely hidden.

3. Previous work

The programme of conservation on the monuments has involved the removal of the effigies, the dismantling of their plinths, followed by the lifting of the floor (laid in 1828).

The dismantling of the monument to Sir William ap Thomas, in the centre of the chapel, led to the discovery of a chamber within the plinth containing human bone and other objects. These objects were cleared by GGAT Contracts (see Page 1994; GGAT report 94/016), and have now been handed to Abergavenny Museum.

The floor laid in 1828 consisted of stone slabs, most of which were re-used grave slabs. Those with inscriptions were recorded by the architects. When the slabs were lifted, a deep layer of loose, dry soil was exposed, containing numerous disarticulated human bone and related funerary fittings. This layer was removed by the building contractors to a depth of 0.3m-0.5m to allow the new floor to be constructed; they also removed the bricks which had blocked the south doorway of the chapel.

A brick-built heating duct running north-south across the chapel was also exposed. Three possible graves were also found: two brick-built vaults, and an arrangement of slabs in the southeast corner of the chapel. These structures needed to be partially dismantled to allow clearance for the new floor; since the graves were of unknown depth, it was considered possible that the burials would lie immediately underground and so would require lifting. GGAT Contracts was commissioned to examine the possible graves and some other features which were visible (Locock 1994: GGAT report 94/060).

Doubts about the stability of the stone slabs underlying the Sir William ap Thomas and Sir Richard Herbert monuments led to the decision to lift the slabs. GGAT Contracts was commissioned to record the slabs and then to investigate the chambers below.

4. Excavation results

4.1 Method

When the parts of the site were handed over to GGAT, the monuments of Sir William ap Thomas and Sir Richard Herbert had been removed to floor-slab level. The slabs were recorded, and then removed by the building contractors. Following this, the structures were recorded and partially excavated in order to lift any material likely to be affected by the construction of the new floor.

This work involved the excavation of the contents of the burial chamber of the Sir Richard Herbert tomb (111) (which proved to include two 17th-century inserted burials and clearance debris), and the exposure of the original rubble raft below the Sir William ap Thomas tomb (115).

Levels were recorded by reference to the intended new floor level in the chapel; thus they form an internally-consistent group but are not (at present) reducible to Ordnance Survey levels. The excavations were located by reference to the walls of the chapel, as shown on the surveyed 1:24 plan of Bartosch & Stokes (2223/7/A); all archaeological drawings were made at 1:20. A series of mortar samples from key structures was also taken.

4.2 Features identified

4.2.1 Sir Richard Herbert and Margaret monument

This tomb lies in the east archway between the Herbert Chapel and the choir, orientated east-west, abutting the west pier of the arch. It is dedicated to Sir Richard Herbert (of Coldbrook) (second son of William ap Thomas), who was executed in 1469, and his wife Margaret.

The structure of the tomb consists of the effigies supported on a rectangular base, resting at floor level on a kerb. The kerb is constructed mostly of re-used stone mouldings; at the north side it has disturbed by the southern burial in the chancel.

The kerb overlies masonry foundations; on the north, these are solid, but on the east, a series of square stone slabs overlies a well-built rectangular chamber of total depth of 0.8m (presumably housing the burials). The solid masonry is well-faced on the south, and includes (at the base of the west end) a very large (presumably re-used) dressed stone. The arm of masonry supporting the slabs runs south and then east, and is c.0.2m wide. The return wall at the east end of the chamber is missing, but its position is suggested by a stone forming the internal southeast corner. The floor of the chamber is rubble with a mortar skim; at the east end, this changes to large stones, perhaps indicating an earlier feature. There is no scar on the

solid wall where the east wall would have joined; the facing of the solid wall abuts that of the west wall. The relationship of the tomb to the west pier was not clear, but the tomb would probably have been a little later.

The original occupants of the tomb were not in situ.

As noted, the east end of the chamber has been removed (by breach 114); this operation probably did not disturb the main monument. Into the chamber were deposited a layer of soil (112/121) containing a few disarticulated bones and coffin fittings, and two coffin burials (108 and 110). The coffins had rotted, leaving a wood stain, but the iron fittings remained in the correct positions.

The first burial (118) was almost complete (the feet had been partially removed by 105). The burial was of a small, mature, gracile individual, probably female.

The second burial (120) was complete to the upper leg (again removed by 105). This was a larger, more robust individual, probably male. Found with this burial was a clay pipe bowl which dates it to 1670-1710.

Overlying the burials was a dump of mixed soil at the east end of the chamber (113), completely filling it at the end, which contained disarticulated bone and numerous brick fragments. This layer is probably spoil from the construction of vault 105 to the east.

4.2.2 William ap Thomas monument

The tomb lies in the centre of the Herbert Chapel, as might be expected of the founder of the Herbert lineage.

It consists of the effigies supported on a rectangular base incorporating re-used carved stones (and containing a chamber with bone and mixed rubbish within it), resting on three re-used grave slabs. Two of the slabs retain cross carvings; that in the southeast corner has been split longitudinally. The base was mortared to the slabs.

The slabs lay on a layer, 0.1m deep, of compacted soil 116.

This overlay a large rubble raft (117) of tabular stones mortared with a lime mortar (including numerous air spaces). Three stones of an upper course remain in situ with mortar traces implying that a further course was once present (there is no trace of mortar on the base of the slabs).

This raft was at least 0.5m deep, and was largely undisturbed: there is no reason to doubt that the coffins (probably stone with

lead lining) of William ap Thomas and Gwladys lie under the raft. The south edge had been slightly damaged by grave 119 (which retained articulated femurs and pelvis); this may have been responsible for the damage to the slab. A shroud pin was found within the grave, and there was a slight brown grave stain (perhaps from a coffin). This grave would have been tucked under the south edge of the main slabs. The burial is of 17th century date. Where the grave has disturbed the raft, it has exposed a void, into which have been placed three long bones, probably disturbed by the cutting of 119.

4.3 Finds

This work recovered a further group of finds, chiefly from Sir Richard Herbert's chamber. These are dominated by metal coffin fittings, of 17th-18th century date.

Also found were parts of green-glazed floor tile, a stone roof tile, and a small quantity of late medieval and post-medieval pottery.

Some window glass was also found (some with traces of decoration).

A clay pipe bowl was found in association with burial 120.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Sir Richard Herbert monument

The method of construction of the tomb, and its location, suggests that it is of similar date to the construction of the Herbert Chapel itself, and it is therefore likely that the effigy has always been sited there.

There is some doubt as to the nature of the masonry on which the north part of the tomb sits: it could be an earlier wall or foundation (perhaps the south wall of the church destroyed by Owen Glyndower), or else deliberately built to support the monument. Certainly the mortar and stonework of wall and chamber are closely similar, supporting the latter view.

There is no reason to suppose that the burials did not take place; certainly Sir William, Richard's brother, executed at the same time after the battle of Banbury, was brought back for burial at Tintern.

However, by the late 17th century the burial chamber had been breached and cleared, prior to the deposition of layer 111/121 and the insertion of two new coffined burials into the chamber space. No satisfactory explanation for the removal of the initial burials can be suggested, although Mr J Litten has commented (in litt) that such clearance prior to re-use is not uncommon.

These new burials were then disturbed by the insertion of brick vault 105, which, in order to fit between the piers, encroached under the east slab of the Richard Herbert monument.

5.2 William ap Thomas monument

This monument, in contrast to that of Richard Herbert, has been extensively remodelled on a number of occasions, so much so that the authenticity of most of the elements is open to question.

The original rubble raft (117) is no doubt original, built in the mid 15th century, and probably overlies the burials. This rubble raft is mortared, and was once at least 0.1m higher than at present.

The monument was altered and the coursed raft replaced by a layer of soil (perhaps to raise the level, but more probably to allow the slabs to settle), on which the re-used cross slabs were positioned.

The superstructure of the monument consists of two rectangular rubble pillars supporting the effigy, surrounded by a re-used

carved stone frieze (probably from an altar). The space between the pillars contained the assorted material which was the subject of the first GGAT recording work. This material shows that the space was last disturbed in the 19th century, perhaps at the time that the floor was re-laid (in 1828).

Appendix One: List of Contexts (all work from September 1994)

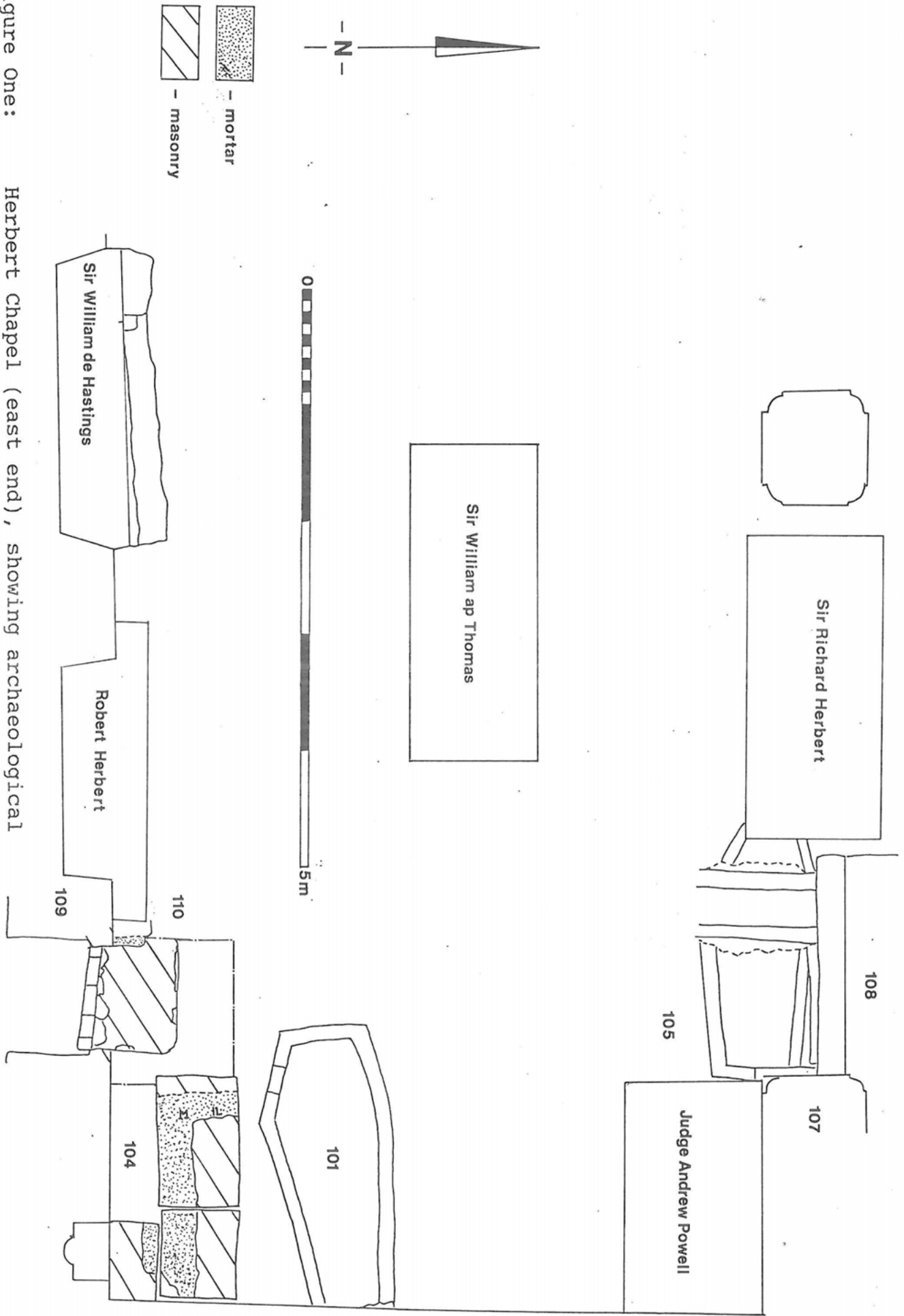
100	Layer	General layer throughout chapel below slab floor
101	Structure	Brick vault against E wall of chapel
102	Layer	Fill of 101 (partially excavated)
103	Layer	Layer of soil, similar to 100 below 104
104	Structure	Group of three stone slabs in SE corner of chapel
105	Structure	Brick vault at N side of chapel
106	Structure	Heating duct
107	Structure	Pier base
108	not used	-
109	Structure	Stone slab inside doorway
110	Structure	Blocking wall in doorway
111	Structure	Monument to Sir Richard Herbert
112	Layer	Fill of chamber in 111
113	Layer	Late fill at E end of 111
114	Void	Breach in E end of chamber 111
115	Structure	Monument to Sir William ap Thomas
116	Layer	Soil between slabs of 115 and rubble 117
117	Structure	Rubble foundation of 111 with mortar and voids
118	Other/burial	Coffin burial in 111
119	Other/burial	Remains of burial S of 115
120	Other/burial	Coffin burial in 111
121	Layer	Base fill of 111 (= 112)

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Figure One:

Herbert Chapel (east end), showing archaeological features recorded



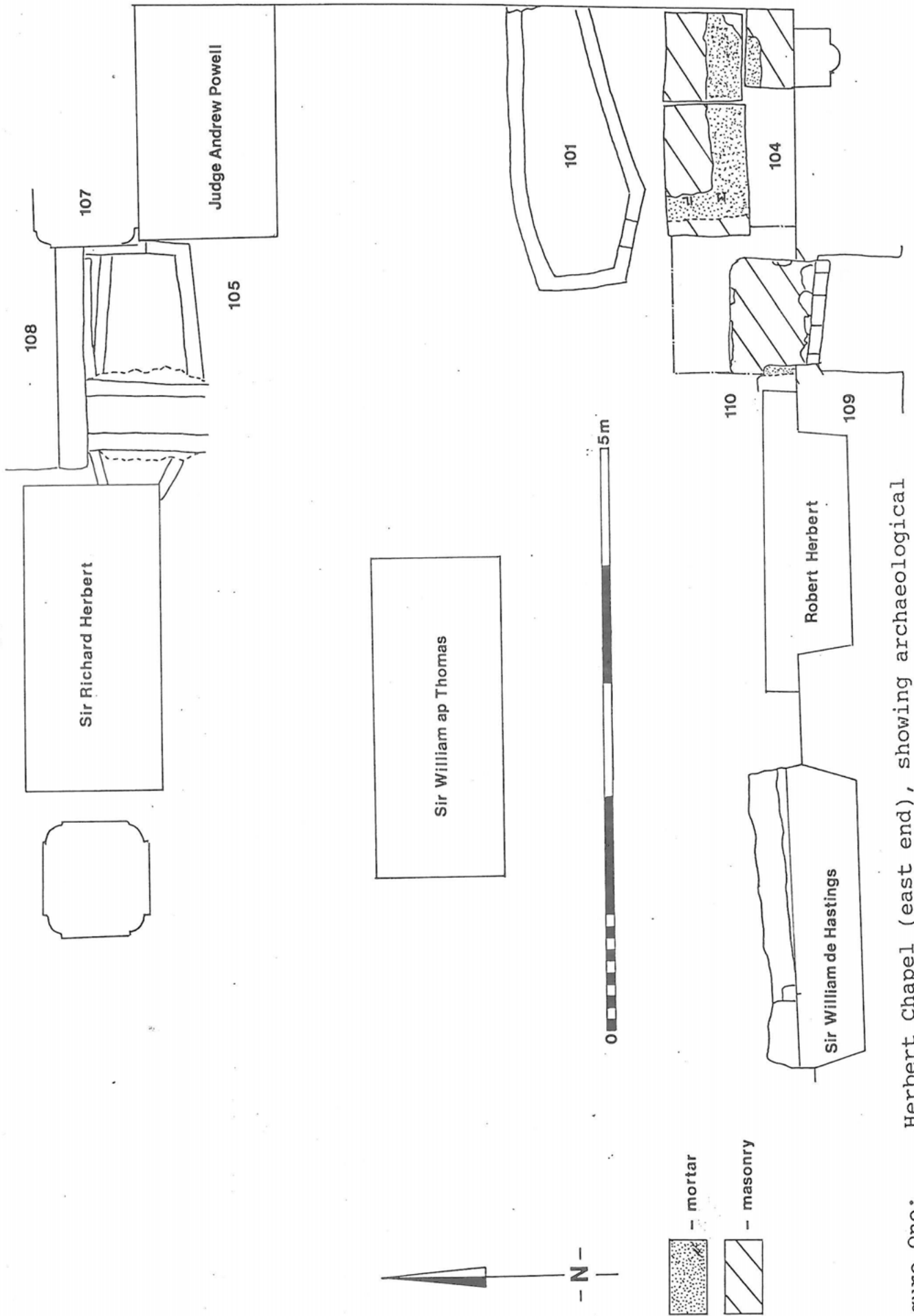


Figure One: Herbert Chapel (east end), showing archaeological features recorded

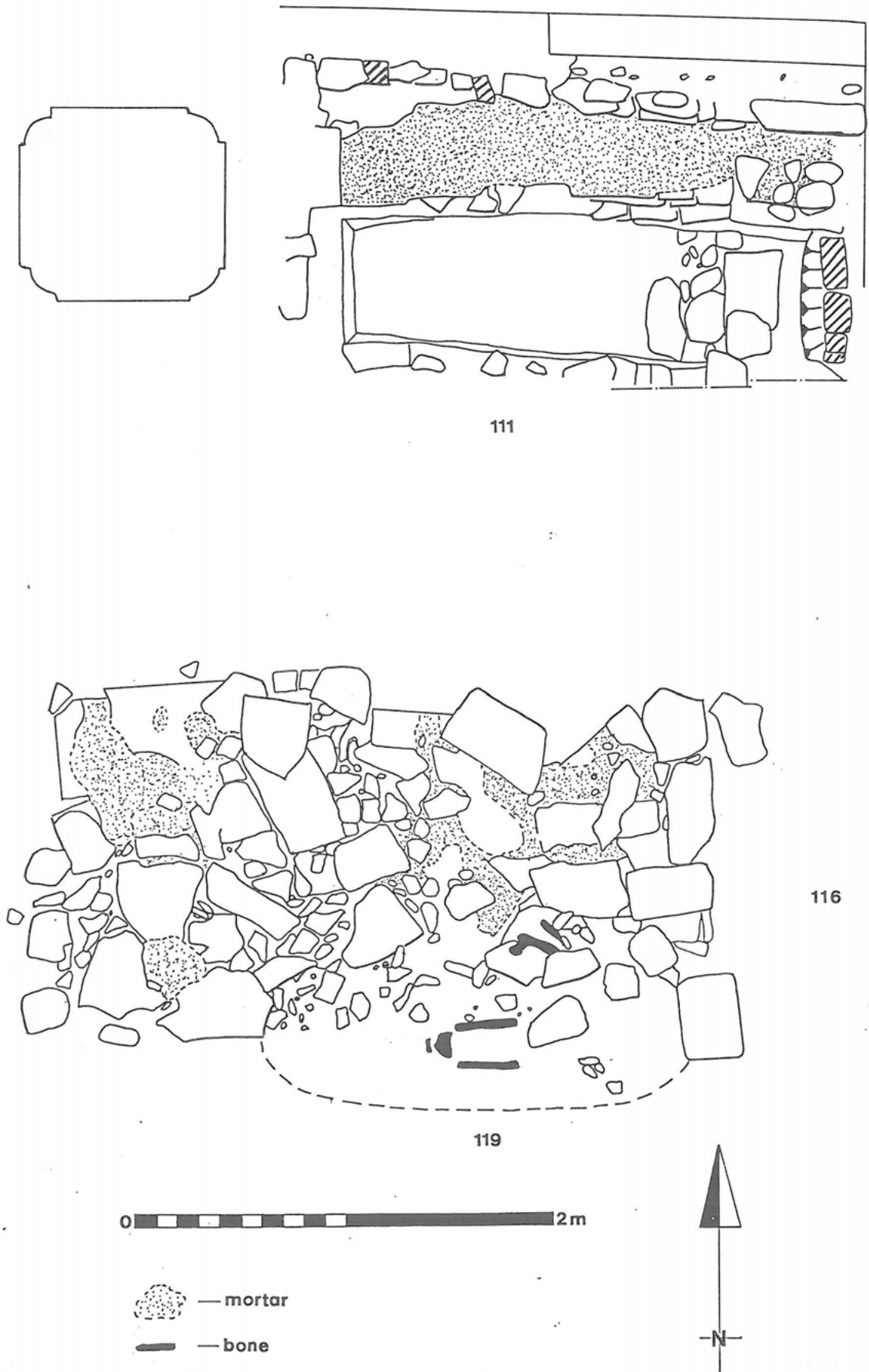


Figure Two: Detail showing William ap Thomas monument after removal of slabs and Sir Richard Herbert monument after excavation

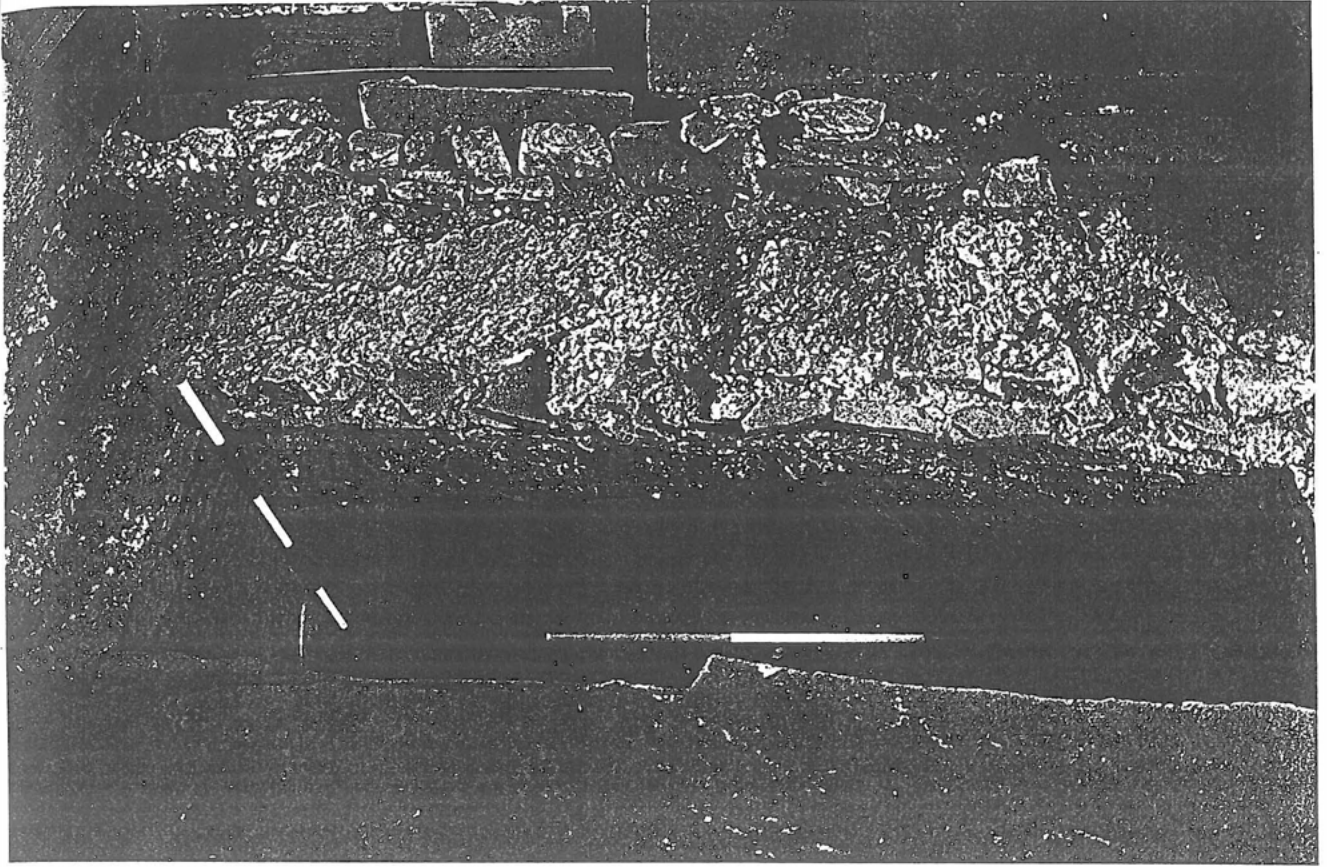


Plate One: Sir Richard Herbert monument, looking north, after excavation, showing burial chamber

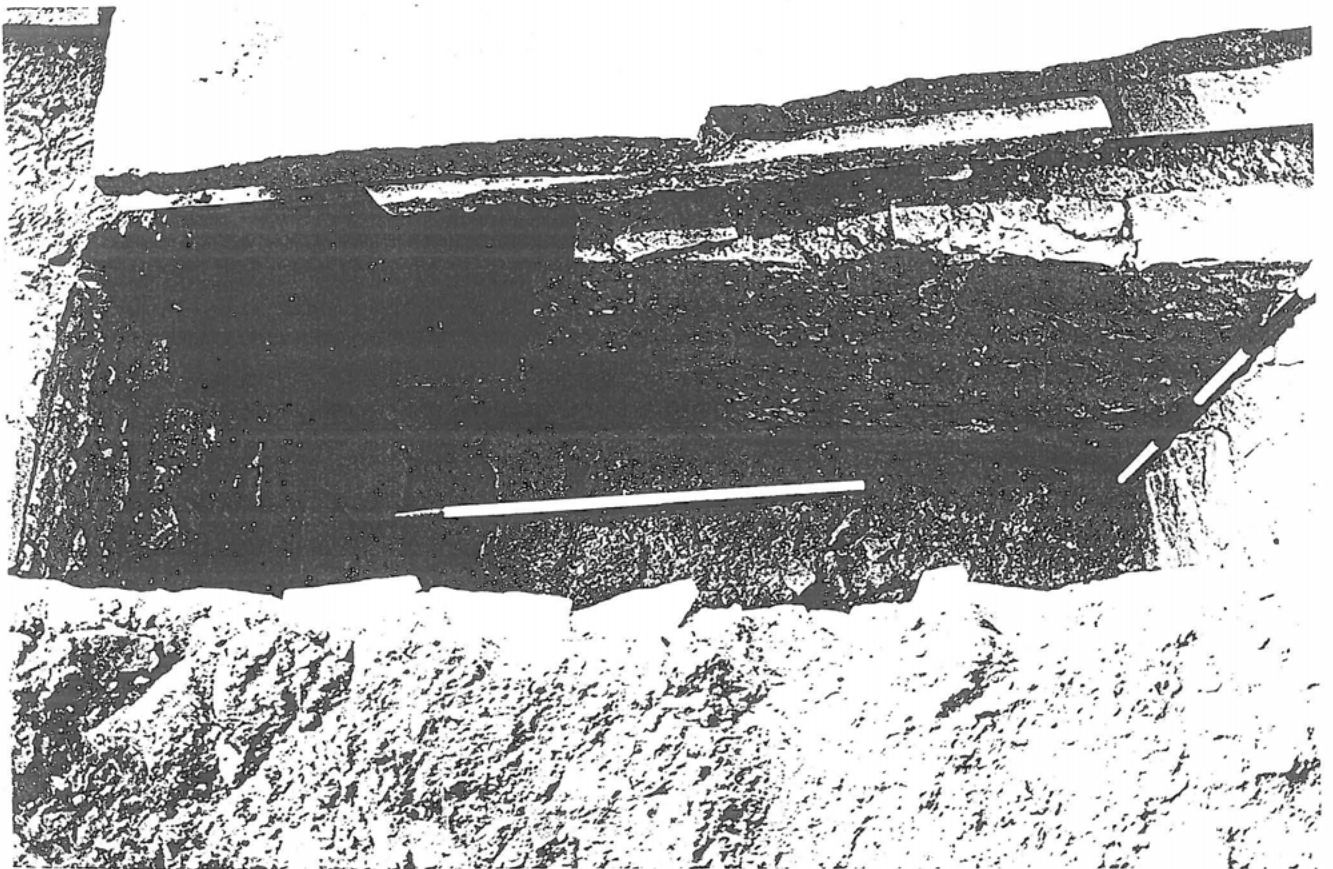


Plate Two: Sir Richard Herbert monument, looking south, after excavation, showing breaching of south wall at east end