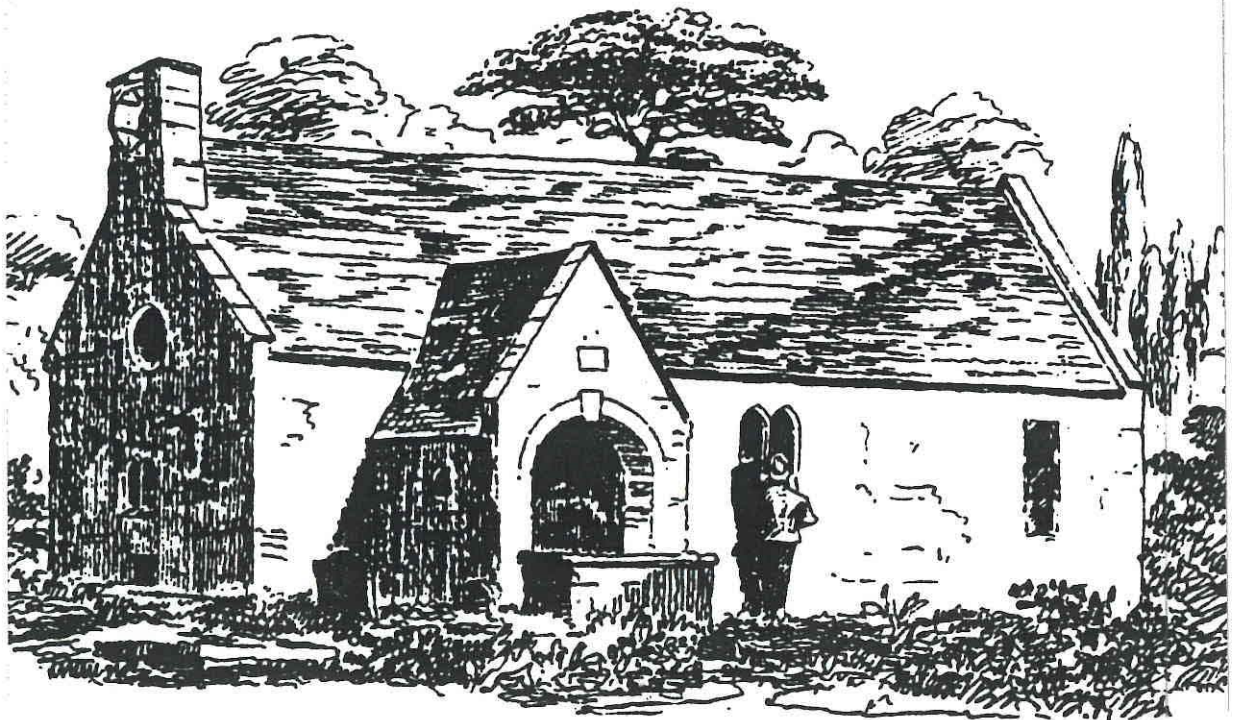


THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*St Cwyfan's Church, Llangwyfan, Denbighshire*

EXCAVATION AND RECORDING 1997



St Cwyfan's from the south-west from Lloyd-Williams and Underwood 1872

**CPAT Report No 270**

*St Cwyfan's Church, Llangwyfan, Denbighshire*

**EXCAVATION AND RECORDING 1997**

**by W J Britnell**

March 1998

Report prepared for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments

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## SUMMARY

Limited excavation and recording was undertaken at St Cwyfan's Church (SJ 12046629), Llangwyfan, in September and October 1977 in response to repair work being carried out on this single-celled church of medieval origin. Excavations funded by Cadw were undertaken to a limited depth in the area below the pews along the north side of the nave during the course of repair work to the sub-floor. This revealed that traces of an earlier earthen floor, probably of early post-medieval date, survived in places in this area and more consistently beneath the central slate walkway. Traces of a number of inhumation burials were also revealed in test pits dug to investigate the footings of the north wall of the nave. Evidence of earlier footings on a slightly different alignment to the present north wall of the nave was also recorded inside the church which appears to relate to various anomalies visible on the rendered external face of the wall. Fragmentary traces of wall-paintings were revealed during repairs to plasterwork on the internal face of the north wall which possibly represent late seventeenth to early eighteenth century Royal Arms.

## BACKGROUND

A faculty application for repairs at the church were submitted to the St Asaph Diocesan Advisory Committee meeting held on Wednesday 4 June 1997. The proposed works included the following: roof repairs; rainwater disposal system; underpinning of north wall and buttress; repointing of stonework; external repainting; internal redecoration; electrical installation.

The following archaeological recommendations were made by the writer acting as archaeological advisor to the St Asaph Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), dated 9 June 1997:

*Ideally, an archaeological contractor would be engaged to liaise with architect, builder, diocesan archaeologist, churchwardens and incumbent and undertake the following:*

- A Excavation and watching brief during digging of new soakaways and the pipetrenches leading to them.*
- B Recording of earlier plasterwork, wall-painting, wall finishes etc after removal of the existing dado at the base of the internal elevation of the north wall of the nave.*
- C Excavations inside and outside the north wall of the church in advance of underpinning.*
- D Maintain watching brief to record any earlier plasterwork, wall-painting, wall finishes etc revealed during repairs to internal plastering.*
- E Production of project report.*

A request for funding the archaeological work was submitted by the writer to Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments in correspondence dated 22 July 1997.

A telephone call was received from the architect on 16 September 1997 to say that repair work had started, test pits having already been dug to either side of the north wall near the buttress to test the condition of the footings. The test pits suggested that the cracking was localised and did not appear to be due to a failure of the wall footings, which appeared to be relatively substantial. The pews and raised wooden flooring on the north side of the church had been temporarily been removed and some soil excavated from the area beneath in order that a thin concrete layer might be laid above a damp proof membrane as a foundation for the joists of the wooden flooring when this was replaced since some of the joists on which this had been laid appeared to have rotted due to dampness. Human remains, some articulated, had been revealed during the lowering of the soil level below the flooring and during the digging of the test pit inside the church.



A meeting to discuss the archaeological implications of the current works was held in the church on 19 September 1997. It was agreed that the writer should be given the opportunity of undertaking cleaning and recording work in the first two days of the following week (22–23 September 1997) in order to assess the archaeological implications of what had been revealed. Contingency funding for the project was confirmed in correspondence from Cadw, dated 24 September 1997.

## **SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH**

The earliest reference to the church is in the Norwich Taxation of 1254. The present structure is single-celled with a south porch and a north vestry, with a bellcote above the west gable. The single-light window with cinquefoil cusping in the south wall of the chancel is probably of fifteenth-century date: other windows are probably of seventeenth and eighteenth-century date, one in the north wall of the nave having a date stone of 1684. The south door has a two-centred arch and is possibly of fourteenth-century date, the porch having a date stone of 1714. There is a blocked door of uncertain date in the west wall of the nave. Otherwise, the dating of the present fabric is uncertain, the external elevations being rendered and the internal elevations being plastered and painted. There are no surviving medieval fittings. The church appears to have escaped from extensive renovation during the nineteenth century, and parts of the existing fabric have been considered to be probably of medieval date. The churchyard is small and rectangular, with an interesting range of eighteenth-century monuments. The earliest view of the church appears to be a sketch by John Ingleby of 1793 in the National Library of Wales.

The north wall of the nave and chancel is one of the only areas where there is some evidence suggesting a sequence of builds. Between the window in the nave and the window in the chancel is an unexplained thickening of the wall, reaching to about half its height, about 1.6m long and 0.1m wide. This is first shown in the plan by Lloyd-Williams and Underwood, published in 1972. This, and the modern brick buttress against the north wall imply failure of the structure in this area over some period of time. Further west, beneath the nave window, is a similar thickening of the wall near ground level.

## **SUMMARY OF EXCAVATION AND RECORDING IN 1997**

Excavation and recording work (Project 747) was undertaken over the course of a number of days in September and October 1997. Context numbers in the following text are given in brackets (see list of contexts in the appendix).

### **Underpinning of buttress against north wall**

When the site was visited on the 19 September 1997 pits had been already been excavated to either side of the buttress against the outer face of the north wall, concrete having been laid against and below the footings in the pit to the west of the buttress. These revealed that the north wall of the nave is set on slightly offset footings (19) projecting about 0.1m from the wall face from about ground level but that at a depth of about 0.3m below ground level was a further line of boulders (20) which extended about a further 0.3m from the external wall-face (figs 1–2). It appears that these, like the similar boulders recorded beneath the internal face of the wall (3) might represent the footings of an earlier wall. There was only an opportunity to make a photographic record of these pits, which were refilled by the time that a return was made to the site on 22 September 1997, the position of the trenches and broader footings being sketched on the accompanying plan (fig. 2).

### **Excavations on the north side of nave**

Limited excavation and recording was undertaken beneath the boarded floor beneath the pews on the north side of the nave on 22–23 September 1997. Prior to this work being undertaken the pews, flooring



and dado had been removed by the builder and a test pit (figs 2–3, context 14), about 0.8m across by 1.7m and 0.9m deep had been dug up against the wall footings on the inner face of the wall to test the nature of the wall footings. Articulated human remains, probably belonging to a number of burials had been found during the excavation of the test pit, none of which remained in situ. Articulated human remains (21) had also been identified by the builder just to the west of the pit (approximate location shown on fig. 2) which were said to run in a north-south direction. These had been recovered prior to archaeological excavation and recording and no attempt was made to re-expose the remains, which were retained in situ.

The builder's test pit (14) provided no evidence that the cracking of the plaster on the north wall of the nave was due to the failure of the wall footings. The proposal to underpin the north wall of the nave was consequently not followed through. The flooring below the pews on the north side of the nave was, however, beginning to fail due to the decay of the joists supporting it. It was therefore proposed to lower the soil level below the flooring and to lay new joists set on a thin bed of concrete above a damp proof membrane.

Consequently the decision was made to undertake an archaeological excavation in the entire area below the boarded floor on the northern side of the nave down to the required level. A conscious effort was made to limit as much as possible the amount of disturbance by building works and archaeological recording. This area, about 1.7m wide and 7.6m long was therefore cleaned down and lowered by between 0.15–0.2m. This comprised a single mixed layer (11) of dark red sandy loam including fragments of lime plaster, wood chippings and offcuts, iron nails, and window glass etc which continued below the limits of excavation. No distinct grave cuts were identified at this level. Towards the eastern end the soil layer was overlain by a number of stone slabs (16) which may originally have supported joists for the boarded floor.

In an area towards the middle of the excavated area appeared to be a patch of an earlier earth floor surface consisting of a thin layer (13) of brownish yellow to yellow sand (10YR 6/8 to 7/8) and ?lime specks, which appeared to have been partly removed or disturbed elsewhere, possibly when the boarded floor below the pews was inserted. The full extent of this earlier floor surface was deliberately not traced, and it is likely that it extends over a broader area throughout the nave and chancel of the church. Fragments of greenish pre-industrial window glass were found immediately upon this surface (see note on finds below). It appears that pews were first installed in 1815 (Thomas 1911, 40).

The north side of the nave was not generally dug below this level with the exception of the test pit against the north wall of the nave, the sides and bottom of which were cleaned up. Cleaning the base of the pit revealed the edges of two probable graves (15, 22) filled with reddish-brown loam cutting into the reddish sandy subsoil in the base of the test pit, at a depth of about 0.9m. In neither of these were any human skeletal remains exposed in situ, however. The details of the wall footings revealed in the north side of the pit are described below.

The sections around the excavated area provided some evidence of the construction of the chancel step, the central walkway of the nave and the footings below the north wall of the nave, which are each described in turn below.

The slate chancel step (7) and the raised floor (8) of the chancel are laid on a layer of gravel and concrete (9) levelling up a layer of rough and voided stone walling overlying the continuation of the soil layer (11) which exists below the pews.

The central slate walkway (figs 2–3, 6) was laid on a levelling layer about 70mm thick of greyish sand and



gravel with flecks of ?lime. This overlay a mixed layer of dark red sandy loam with plaster fragments (12) about 110mm thick. This material was similar to the soil layer (11) below the pews and may have been redeposited as a foundation to the central slab walkway. This soily layer in turn overlay a thin layer (18) about 50mm thick of greyish brown clay with ?lime flecks. The clay layer (18) had a smooth surface and appeared to represent a earth floor which had either extended over the entire area of the nave or possibly only within the central walkway.

Details of the footings of the north wall of the nave were revealed along the full length of the area below the pews to a depth of up to about 0.2m and to a depth of up to about 0.9m in the test pit against the north wall. The present north wall (1) is between about 0.95m thick at about ground level. At the west end of the excavated area the north wall overlay a layer of 'footings' (2) about three stones or 0.35m high which jutted out about 0.2m from the inner face of the wall. Towards the east this gradually merged with the face of the wall, disappearing at a point just to the east of the window in the north wall of the nave. The 'footings' in turn overlay three courses of large boulders (3) about 0.65m thick. The boulders lay below the general level of excavation and were consequently only revealed for a length of about 1.7m in the test pit dug by the builder against the north wall of the nave. It appeared, however, that like the 'footings' further to the west the boulder footings were also at a slightly different angle to the present north wall of the church. There was therefore a strong suggestion that the boulders (3) were the footings of an earlier nave wall, partly surviving as the offset 'footings' (2), set out at a slightly different angle to the present north wall of the nave.

This earlier wall would pre-date the window in the north wall of the nave, which is dated to 1684, and is consequently probably of medieval or late medieval date. The outer face of this earlier wall is possibly represented by the offset (19, noted above) below the external face of the north wall, identified in the test pits to either side of the buttress, and by the low step at the base of the wall from below the window in the north wall of the nave to the east wall of the vestry. The large boulders (20) revealed in these test pits are in turn likely to be the same as the earlier footings (3) revealed in the test pit dug against the inner face of the north wall. The apparent merging of surviving lower courses of the earlier wall with the present wall, at a point just to the east of the window in the north wall of the nave, may therefore provide an explanation of the step in the line of the wall at a point about 1.6m to the east of the buttress. This may represent the reuse of the earlier build of the wall at this point, the narrower wall further to the east having been entirely rebuilt. The rendering on the external face of the wall and plastering on the internal face prevents a more thorough testing of this hypothesis.

The dado on the inner face of the north wall of the nave was clearly contemporary with the replastering (4) of the north wall (noted below) which covers over an earlier layer of wall plaster which bears traces of wall paintings of and lime wash of probable late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century date. Traces of a thin layer of lime plaster (5) survived below the dado but no traces of wall painting were visible of the kind (noted below) which were identified above the level of the dado.

A further point of interest can be noted about the 'footings' (2) which it has been suggested represent an earlier north wall. The upper part of these 'footings' showed the base of a layer of wall plaster (17, evidently earlier than plaster layer 5 on the later wall above). It appears to be significant that this was at about the same level as the clay floor (18), noted above, identified below the central walkway, suggesting that the clay floor is contemporary with the early north wall of the nave and consequently pre-dating the seventeenth-century repairs to the church.

#### **Evidence of wall paintings in the nave**

CPAT was notified on 8 October 1997 that fragments of earlier wall paintings had been revealed following



the removal of 'a small section of addled plaster on the north wall'. Visits made on 9 and 11 October revealed that a defective area of the uppermost layer of wall plaster (4) about 1.1m high and 2.18m long from north to south was removed in an area between the two windows in the north wall of the nave and chancel in the area above the dado (see approximate location on the accompanying plan, fig. 1). This had revealed patches of pigment on an earlier layer of plaster (5), which appeared in places to be sealed below one or more layers of limewash. A sketch and photographic record was made and arrangements made for a visit by staff of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW), who carried out sketch recording on 22 October 1997.

The paintings are shown in the sketch drawing by Geoff Ward of RCAHMW given in fig. 4. The surface of the fragmentary paintings had been pecked in order to key in the upper layer of plaster. Towards the centre of the exposed area was an area with a rectangular grid of brown or black lines with some small patches of green/turquoise pigment and fleur-de-lis apparently drawn in pencil. Above this were areas of red pigment and to either side are patches of linear decoration of red ochre brush lines on an orange/yellow background. It has been suggested by Geoff Ward and Dylan Roberts that the painting is possibly a late Stuart to early Georgian Royal Arms, of late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century date — the linear brush strokes to the left-hand side suggesting a lion's mane, the vertical and horizontal lines towards the centre possibly representing the chequerboard divisions of a coat of arms, and the linear brush strokes on the right-hand side possibly representing a unicorn.

Again, an effort was made to limit the amount of disturbance to this earlier wall finish. A second possible area of wall painting was, however, revealed where a small area, about 0.2m across, of the upper layer of wall plaster had been removed just above the dado behind the reading desk (see approximate location on fig. 1). There were no certain traces of pigment in this area, but an earlier layer of lime plaster had scored vertical and horizontal lines suggesting setting out lines for a frame of a painted panel or text.

It is probable that more extensive remains of earlier wall paintings survive in the nave and chancel.

It appears that only parts of the painting have survived, parts of the surface of the surface of the underlying wall having been exposed in places, although more of the design probably survives below coats of limewash. What survived was protected with limewash and recovered in plaster.

### **External drainage works**

A watching brief was maintained during the digging of pits for gullies and trenches for slotted drainage pipes leading diagonally away from the north-east and south-east corners of the church on 22–23 September 1997. In both cases the trenches were generally no more than about 0.3m deep and no features of archaeological significance were identified, the trenches being dug through topsoil.

### **ARTEFACTS AND SAMPLES**

The artefacts and samples recovered during excavation are listed in the appendix. Human remains revealed during excavation have not been studied and were reburied within the test pit (14) which had been dug by the builder against the inner face of the north wall of the nave.

The only finds of significance came from the soil layer (11) immediately below boarded floor below the pews on the north side of the nave which included fragments of pre-industrial window glass from small diamond-shaped leaded panes (distinct from the small rectangular clear-glass quarries in the present windows), fragments from a number of different glass vessels, a bowl and a number of stem fragments from tobacco pipes, an a copper coin, probably a halfpenny of William III, 1695–1700.

## CONCLUSIONS

Limited recording in and around the little-known church of St Cwyfan's during the course of recent repair work has provided information about the structural history of the church and earlier schemes of internal decoration. It has also confirmed the suspicion that, though unspectacular, the church is significant in having escaped extensive restoration in the nineteenth century and consequently having preserved kinds of evidence that may only rarely survive elsewhere, as for example elements of the fabric of the medieval or late medieval church which survive within and below the north wall of the church, probably medieval to pre-seventeenth-century earth floors within the church, and traces of probably late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century wall paintings below the present wall coverings, all of which are important to our understanding of the nature of early churches. As noted above, some effort was made to disturb as little as possible during the present repair works, in order that these deposits might be investigated and recorded more fully during the course of a more extensive repair programme at some date in the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the following for their help, assistance or cooperation: Dr Sian Rees, Regional Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments; Robin Wolley, architect of Edmund Kirby, Architects, Liverpool; Mrs Peggy Wright, Secretary of the PCC; Geoff Ward and Dylan Roberts of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, Aberystwyth; Bob Silvester and Mark Walters of CPAT; Peter Birkhead, Chairman of the St Asaph DAC; the builder, Brian Jackson of Ruthin; and finally, the incumbent, the Venerable John S Davies, the Archdeacon of St Asaph.

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## APPENDIX

### LIST OF CONTEXTS

- 1 Walling: north wall of church.
- 2 Walling: north wall of church – internal offset.
- 3 Walling: north wall of church – internal ?earlier footings.
- 4 Plaster: latest layer of plaster on north wall of church.
- 5 Plaster: earlier layer of plaster on north wall of church.
- 6 Flooring: slate central walkway.
- 7 Flooring: slate chancel step.
- 8 Flooring: slate raised chancel floor.
- 9 Layer: gravel/concrete? immediately below 8.
- 10 Walling: rough walling immediately below 9.
- 11 Layer: soil layer immediately below boarded floor below pews.
- 12 Layer: gravel and sand foundation layer immediately below 6.
- 13 Layer: sandy floor layer ?below 11.
- 14 Test pit: test pit dug by builder against internal face of north wall of nave to test wall foundations.
- 15 Grave: identified in base of 14.
- 16 Slabs: slate slabs near surface of 11, towards east end.
- 17 Plaster: early plaster on offset 2 towards west end.
- 18 Flooring: clay floor layer below central walkway.
- 19 Walling: north wall of church – external offset.
- 20 Walling: north wall of church – external ?earlier footings.
- 21 Articulated human skeletal material uncovered by builders.
- 22 Grave: identified in base of 14.

### DRAWING RECORDS

Single A1 drawing showing firstly, 1:10 section and profile across lower part of north wall and across excavated area, and secondly 1:20 plan of excavated area below pews on north side of church.

### PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS

Colour print film: Film 627, frames 10–14

Colour print film: Film 638, frames 0–36

Colour slides 97.52.33–36 (wall paintings)

Black and white negatives: 683.20–25 (wall paintings)

See film catalogues in CPAT archives.

### MANUSCRIPT RECORDS

- 1 Summary report.
- 2 Miscellaneous correspondence, photocopies, notes, etc.

### COMPUTER RECORDS

- 1 Summary report text file LLANGWYF.PM5

**ARTEFACTS AND SAMPLES**

*Context 1: walling: north wall of church*

- 1 'Mortar from wall east of window'
- 2 'Mortar from wall below window'.

*Context 4: plaster: latest layer of plaster on north wall of church*

- 3 Plaster sample

*Context 5: plaster: earlier layer of plaster on north wall of church*

- 4 'Upper plaster towards west'.

*Context 11: layer: soil layer immediately below boarded floor below pews*

- 5 Plaster sample of reasonably abundant plaster in this layer, taken for comparison with plaster on north wall of church.
- 6 Worked wood sample of reasonably abundant material in this layer. Of the sample retained, 3 fragments appear to be thin roofing laths or similar, and one is part of a decorative beading. A cursory examination suggested that the latter was not closely matched by anything now visible inside the church.
- 7 Window glass. 19 fragments of pre-industrial greenish window glass of varying thicknesses, of which 6 are from diamond-shaped leaded panes (unlike the clear-glass rectangular leaded panes in all windows except for stained glass windows at east and west).
- 8 Vessel glass fragments. Single small fragment of thin-walled vessel.
- 9 Clay pipe fragments. Single bowl and 7 fragments of stem.
- 10 Iron nails. 2.
- 11 Copper coin. Traces of face on obverse indicate this is probably a halfpenny of William III, 1695–1700. Identification by Mark Walters, CPAT.

*Context 17: early plaster on offset 2 towards west end*

- 12 'Footings plaster towards west'

*Context 18: flooring: clay floor layer below central walkway*

- 13 Sample.



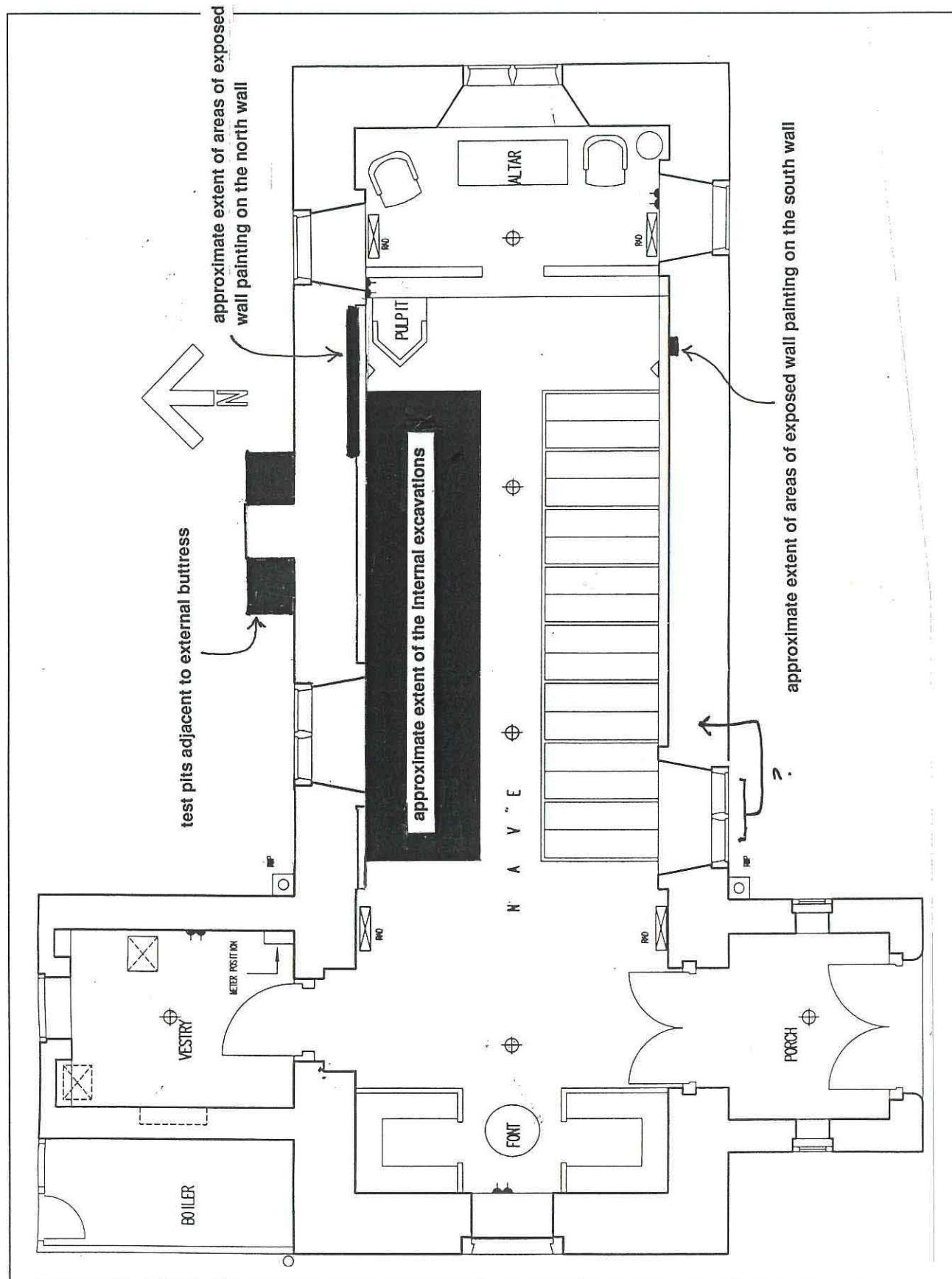


Fig. 1. After architect's plan of church (© Edmund Kirby, Architects, India Buildings Liverpool), not to scale, overlain by details showing test pits adjacent to external buttress, the approximate extent of the internal excavations, and the approximate extent of areas of exposed wall painting on the north and south walls. (Note amendment to position of window in north wall of nave; the window in the south wall of nave should probably also be further to the east.)

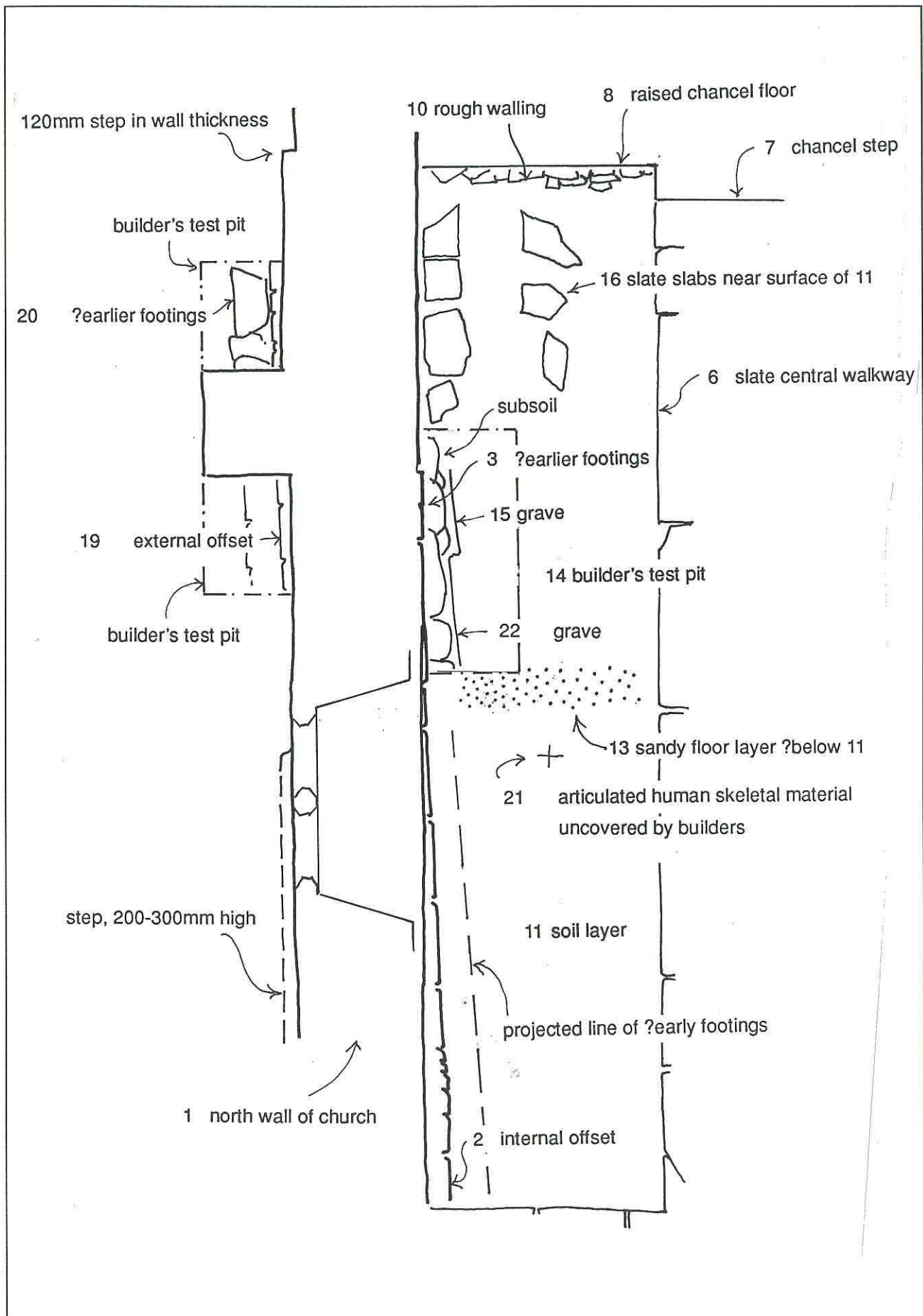


Fig. 2. Plan of excavations on north side of nave. Scale 1:40. Ecclesiastical north to left.



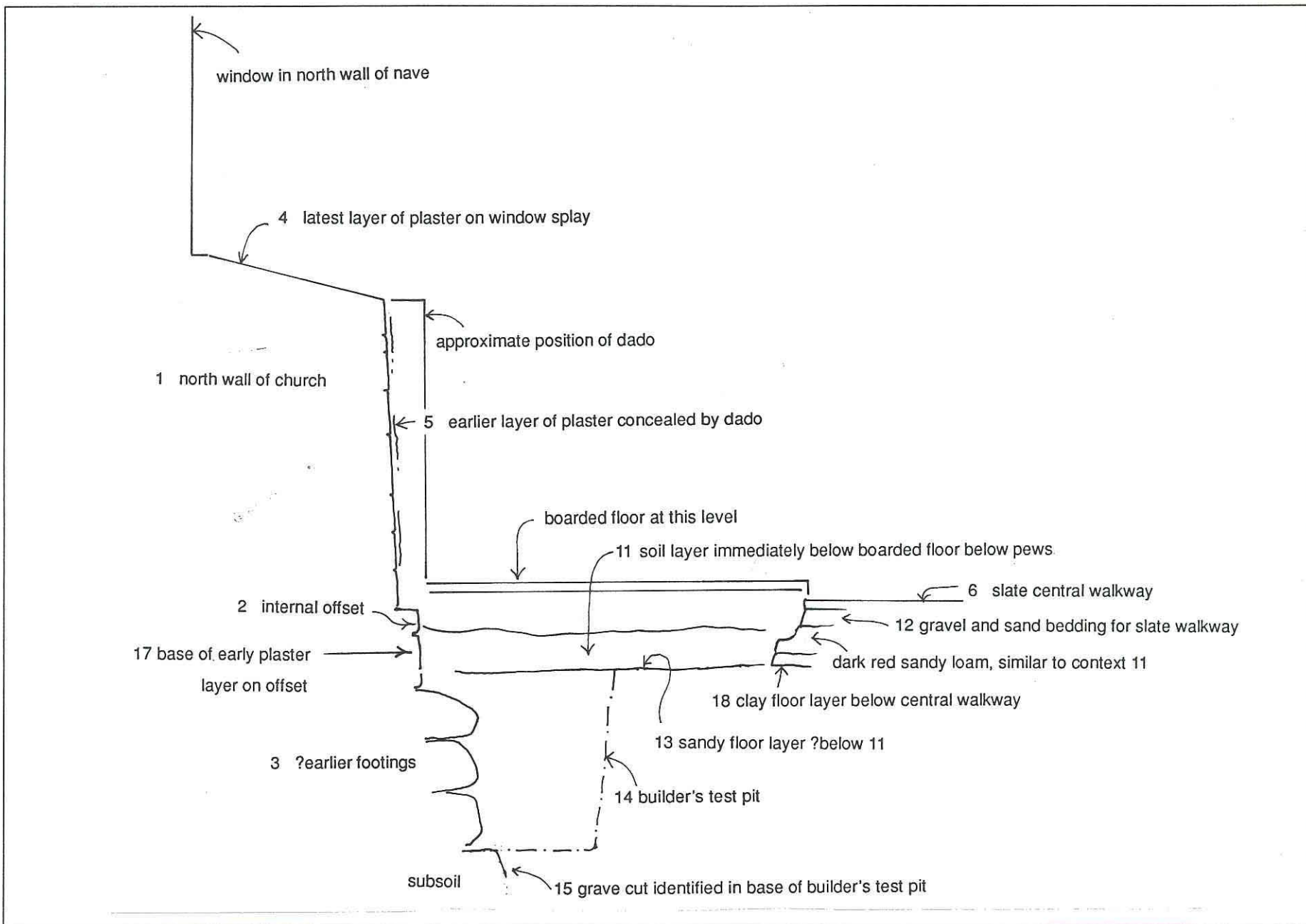


Fig. 3. Partial schematic section through north wall of nave and deposits below pews on north side of nave.

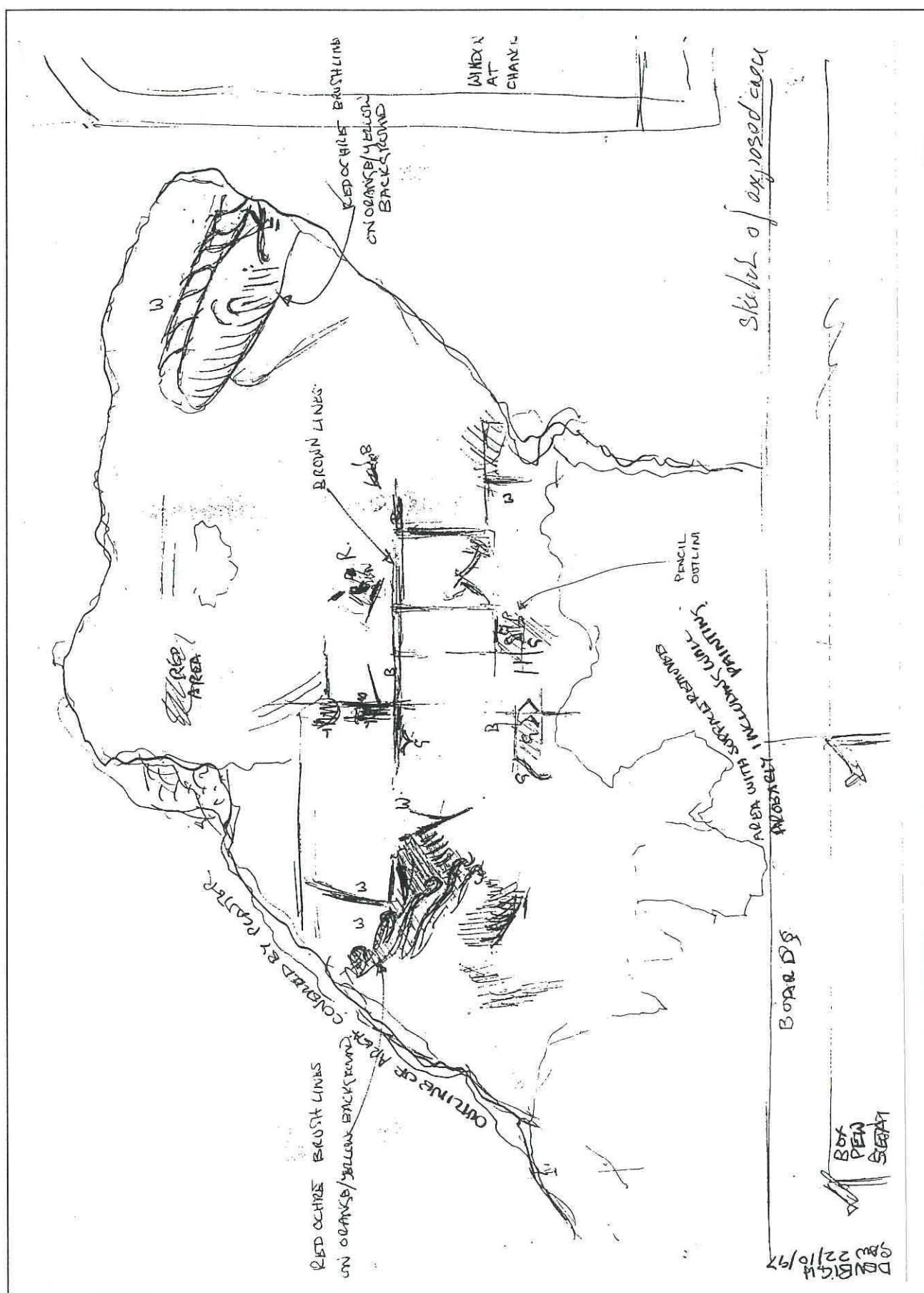


Fig. 4. Copy of sketch by Geoff Ward of RCAHMW (© Crown Copyright) recording fragments of wall paintings revealed on thin layer of lime plaster beneath upper layer of plaster between the window in the nave and the chancel. Not to scale, the exposed area is approximately 1.1m high and 2.18m across.