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Excavations at Stoke Orchard Church

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EXCAVATION AT STOKE ORCHARD CHURCH

The excavations described below took place in November 1977 and were directed by the writer (then a Field Officer with C.R.A.A.G.S.). Their purpose was to obtain archaeological evidence relating to the earlier history of the chancel of the church of St James the Great, Stoke Orchard (SO 918282), where, because of subsidence problems, it was proposed to underpin the walls with a concrete beam and pads.

Summary

Three trenches were excavated alongside the walls to be underpinned. Evidence was found for three construction phases for the chancel of the church.

Phase 1 The foundation trenches for a chancel pre-dating the existing one were traced on the south, east and north sides (F9, F17 and F13 on the FIG.). On the south side, there survived a small fragment of the wall (F7) constructed of oolitic limestone blocks. The fill of the (elsewhere robbed) foundation trenches (4/5, 14 and 18) possibly consisted mainly of mortar from the demolished walls.

Phase 2 On the north (Trench 3) the foundation trench (F15) for the present chancel cut the foundation trench (F13) of the earlier wall. On the south the foundation trench could not be discerned. The original walls of the present chancel (F6 and F16) terminated 0.9 m west of the existing east end wall (F8). On the north and south sides of the chancel a plinth probably corresponded to a contemporary ground surface approximately 0.4 m below the present ground surface.

Phase 3 The east wall constructed in Phase 2 was demolished, for with the construction of the present east end wall (F8) the chancel was extended eastwards by 0.9 m. The foundation trench of the new east wall partly cut the robbed wall trench (F17) of the earliest chancel.

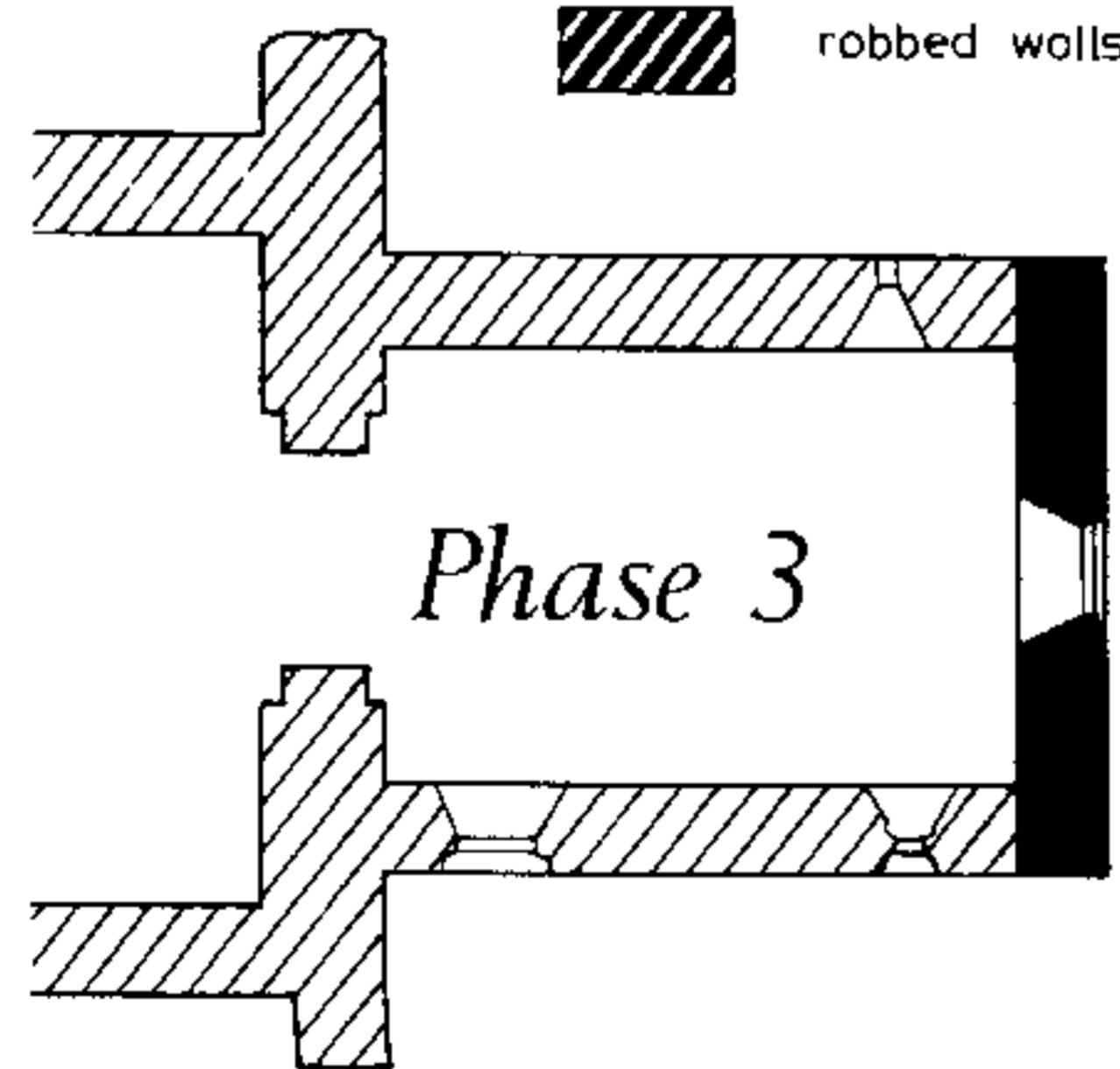
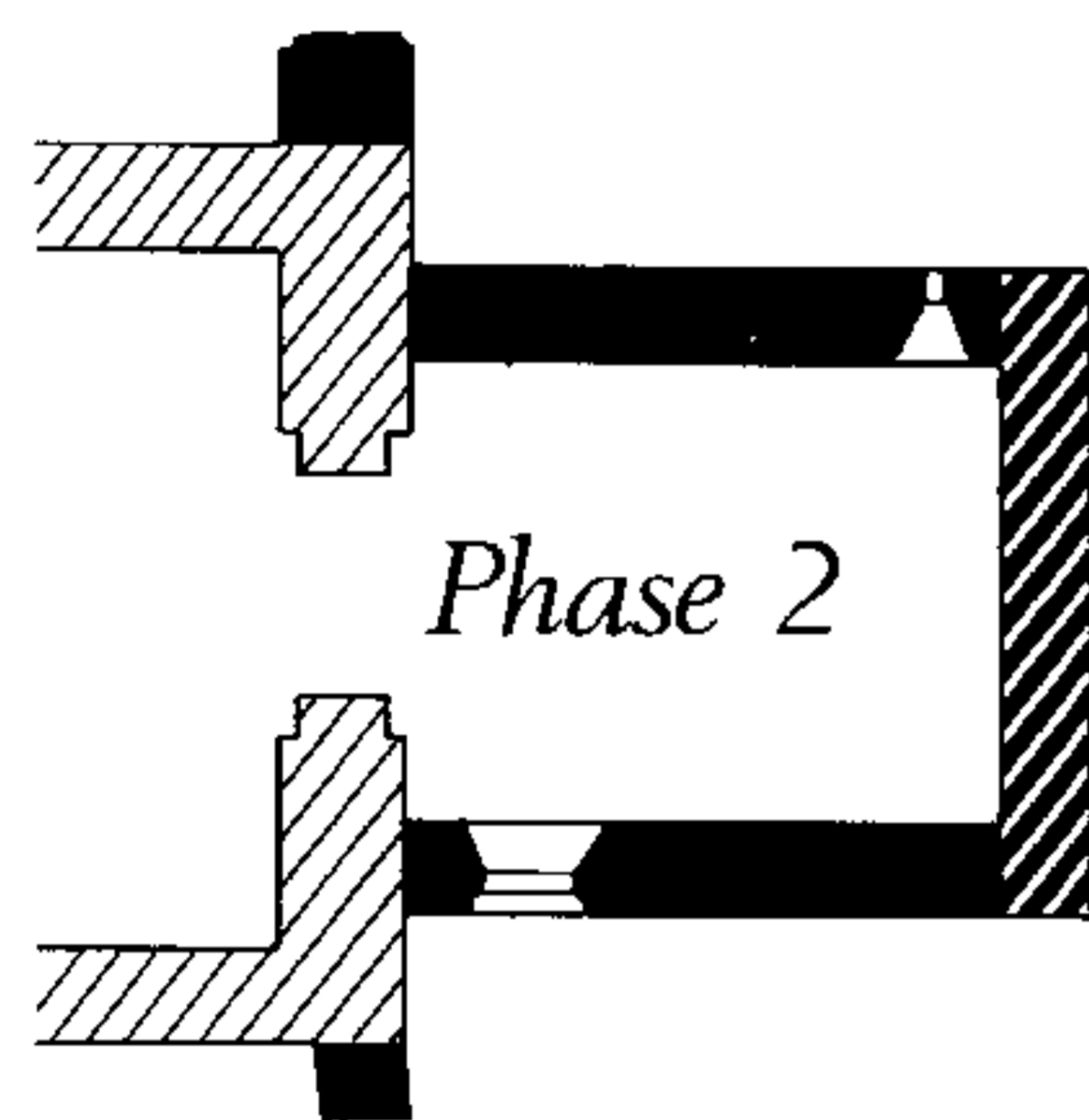
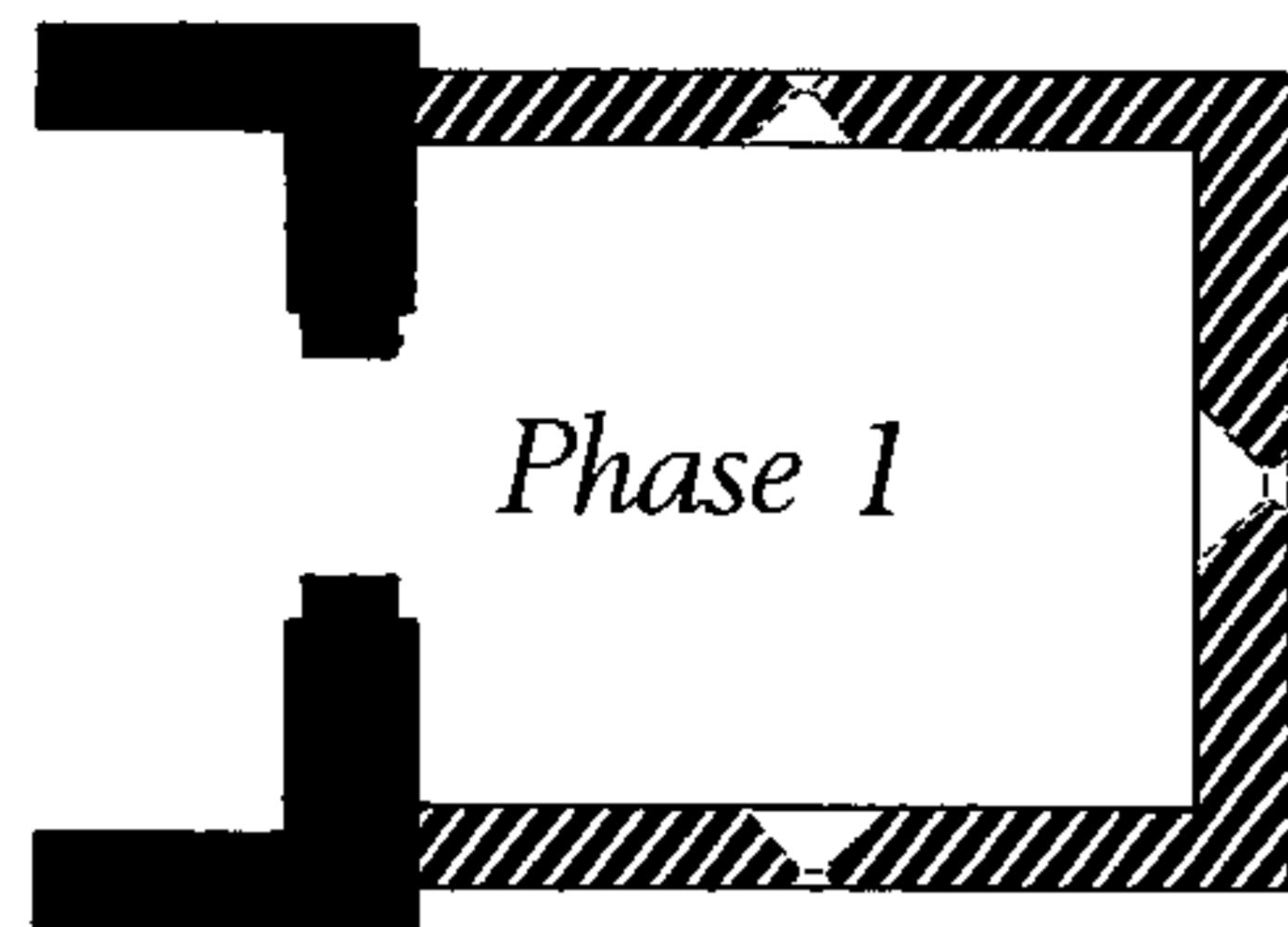
Conclusions

The architectural development of the church has already been discussed by Rouse and Baker in their examination of the now famous wall paintings.¹ Here it will be necessary only to examine the new information provided by the 1977 excavations.

The earlier chancel revealed by the excavations was probably contemporary with the surviving nave of the later 12th century, both belonging to the first church on the site. The walls of each were 0.7 m (2 ft 9 in) wide, although the wall of the later chancel was also of the same width. It has been suggested that the present chancel was probably built on earlier Norman foundations. It is now clear that this was not so and that the earlier chancel was larger and approximately 6.8 m (28 ft) square. Above the roof of the present chancel, at the east end of the nave, a dripmould indicates the outline of an earlier, higher roof, possibly that of the earlier chancel. The latter was probably lit on the south and north sides by single windows similar to those surviving in the nave, with possibly a similar east window (though Verey lists five Cotswold Norman churches without east windows).²

The excavations provided no new evidence for the construction date of the present chancel,

1. E. Rouse and A. Baker, 'Wall Paintings in Stoke Orchard church, Glos.', *Arch. Jnl.* CXXIII (1966), 79–119.
2. D. Verey, *Gloucestershire: 1 The Cotswolds; 2 The Vale and the Forest of Dean* (The Buildings of England, Penguin Books, 1970).



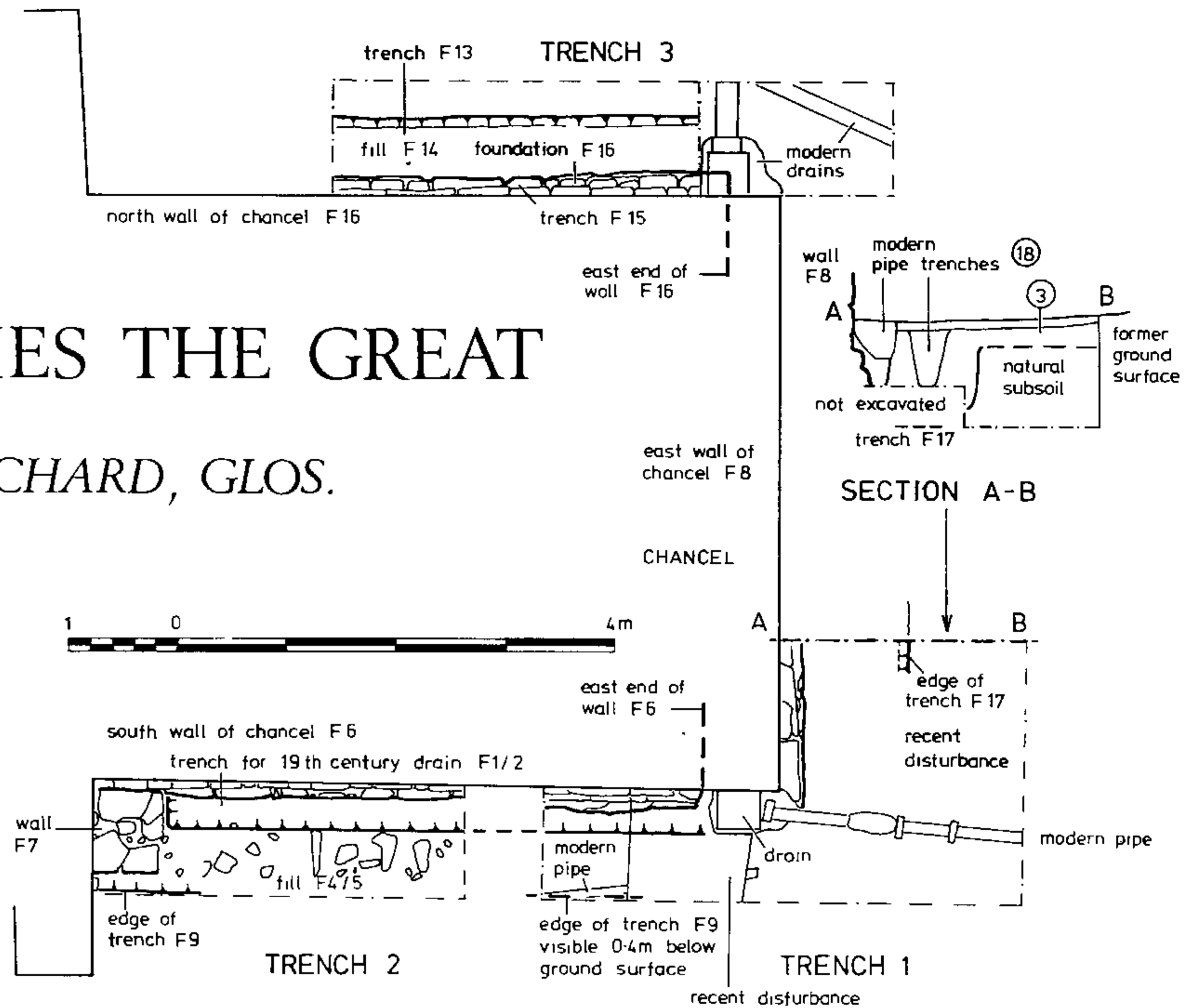
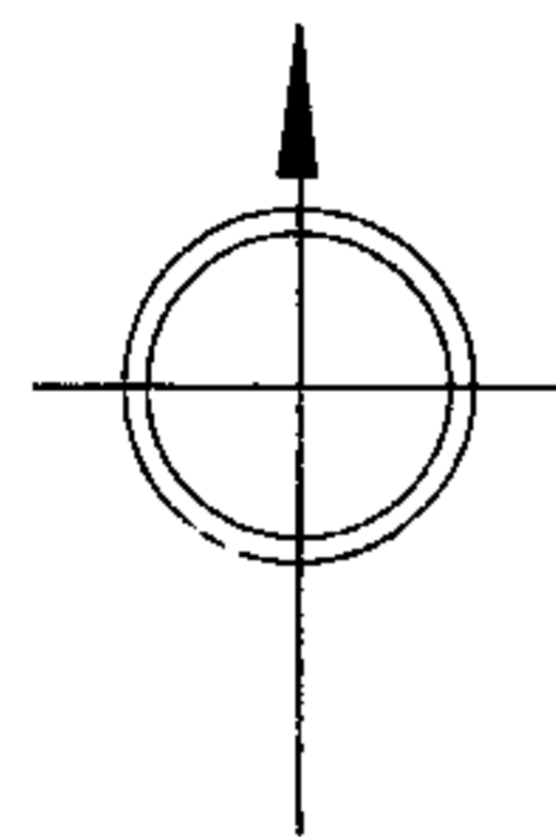
Early Development

retained
robbed walls



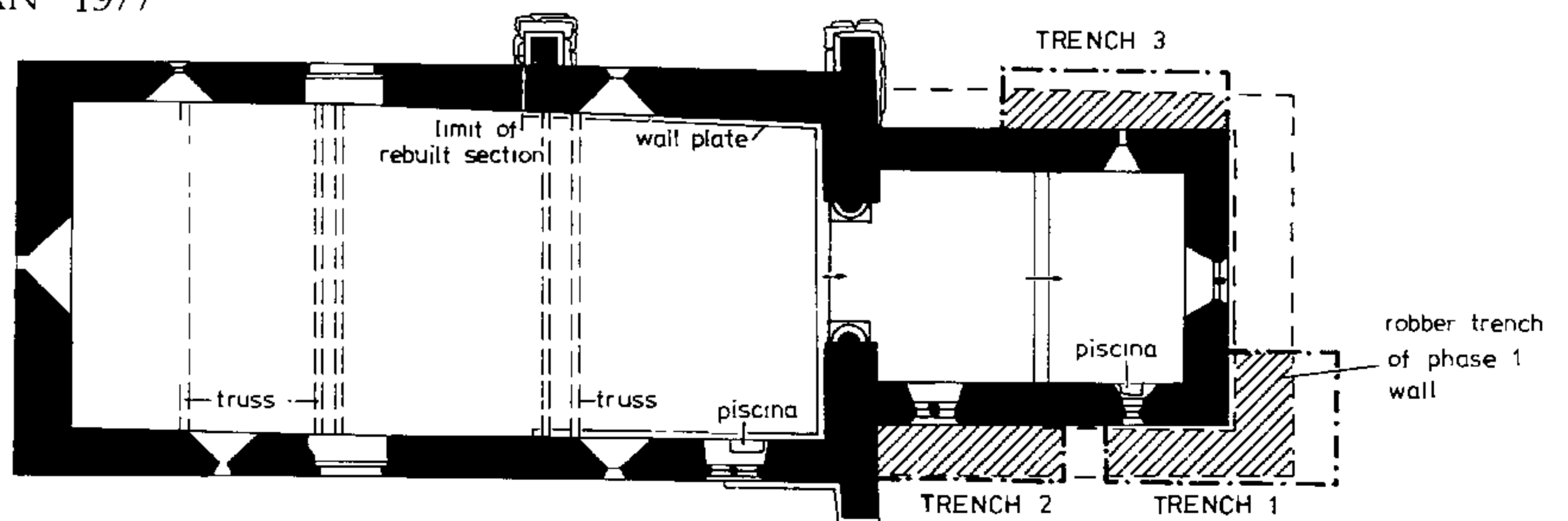
ST JAMES THE GREAT

STOKE ORCHARD, GLOS.



CHURCH PLAN 1977

with location of trenches



which was previously said to have been of the 13th or early 14th century. It is, however, now apparent that this chancel was lengthened in the 19th century by 0.9 m (3 ft). The construction of the new east wall, partly over the foundation trench of the earliest and long demolished chancel, may have contributed to the problems of subsidence which led to this excavation.

Acknowledgements

The excavations were undertaken on behalf of the Department of the Environment. I am most grateful to A. B. Chatwin, F.R.I.B.A., architect to the church, for his help; to the Stoke Orchard parochial church council for granting permission to undertake the excavations; and to Dr W. J. Rodwell for his archaeological advice during and after the excavations. The plans and sections were drawn by Cecily Haines.

ROGER LEECH

OBSERVATIONS AT DIDMARTON CHURCH, 1981

A watching brief was carried out by the writer during restoration work on the church of St Lawrence, Didmarton (ST 382187), early in 1981, in response to a request from the Redundant Churches Fund. In the limited time available it was possible to examine those areas where the floor had to be removed and all the internal wall stonework where the old plaster was stripped.

At the west end of the nave, from the doorway westwards, a concrete and flagstone floor was removed, exposing a make-up layer. The aisle flagstones and those around the font were not lifted. Some plaster was stripped from the south wall. This revealed little but the rotten timber sill and blocking of a high-level doorway, also visible outside, to the west of the doorway. Plaster stripping on the west wall uncovered a vertical straight-joint 1.70 m from the north-west corner, and a shallow, curving recess (0.08 m deep at the centre) running from the straight-joint to the north-west corner. This recess can be best explained as the position of an internal staircase to the west gallery that was superseded by the external stairs which led to the doorway cut in the south wall. The straight-joint did not appear to be part of the recessed feature. A shallow trench, 2 m long, was dug through the make-up layer, at a right angle to the wall in line with the straight-joint. At a level of *c.* 0.3 m below the surface of the flagstone floor lay a redeposited layer of very dark, sticky loam with lumps of red clay (4 and 8 on FIG.), cut by an east-west linear feature (F4) and a grave (F6). On the assumption that F4 might be an earlier north wall, the trench was extended to the south and a large part of an intact foundation (15) of stones in mortary loam was found, partially sealed below a make-up layer (5) for floors of the widened church. The straight-joint in the west wall is thus explained as a wall-scar for the north wall of a narrower nave. This means that the external 15th-century face of the west wall is merely a facade applied to an earlier wall: The date of this narrower nave was not established by material from the excavation but by cross-referring to the standing structure. On the outside of the east wall of the chancel there is a chamfered plinth which runs from the south-east corner to a point approximately 1.5 m from the north-east corner. The rest of the wall is of a markedly different build at the plinth level. In the north-east quoin of the chancel there is a re-used architectural fragment which consists of the base of a jamb for an opening, either an arch or a doorway. The