

## St Mary's Church, Thornborough, Bucks.

### *Observations on the south wall of the nave following the removal of plaster*

#### Introduction

The following short report describes observations made by the author after the removal of a section of plaster from the base of the south wall of the nave of St Mary's Church, Thornborough (grid ref. SP743336). A small area of plaster measuring 1.5 metres in length and 0.8 metres in height was removed from the south wall near to its junction with the west wall of the nave (see location plan). This action was necessary after the plaster had become unstable and had begun to fall away from the wall.

#### Observations

As a result of removing the plaster the original masonry construction of the wall was exposed. The wall is made up of rubble limestone of irregular construction i.e. without deliberate coursing. Blocks of masonry of varying size have been used, the largest at the base of the exposed section measuring at least 0.5 metres in length and 0.2 metres in depth. Smaller blocks and thin slivers of limestone have also been used as packing between the blocks. The whole construction is bonded with a soft light brown coloured lime mortar containing coarse aggregate.

A row of broken clay tiles was also revealed along the top edge of the damaged area, as shown by the diagonal hatching on the elevation drawing. This was thought at first to be the head of a low arch set into the wall. However, close inspection revealed that the pieces of broken tile were in fact pressed against and applied to a thin skim of lime mortar covering the masonry construction of the wall. The clay tiles appeared to be pieces of re-used medieval floor tile since they were slightly irregular in outline, with a thickness of 23 mms. None of the pieces carried any decoration but there was some trace of a lead glaze on several of the tiles. The largest of these pieces measured 12 x 12 cms, the smallest consisted of small fragments.

#### Discussion and recommendations

The thin skim of lime mortar to which the tiles had been applied appeared to be identical to that used in the masonry construction of the wall. This might suggest that they were applied soon after the construction of the wall in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, Pevsner notes that the church was substantially restored by William Smith in 1860, in which case the masonry was probably re-pointed and the tiles were applied to the same mortar at this date [1]. Any suggestion that they formed part of an arch can be rejected because none of the pieces continued into the actual construction of the wall. Pevsner gives a 15<sup>th</sup> century

date for the tiles in the north aisle and at the east end of the nave, therefore the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration appears to have re-used pieces that were already broken.

The reason for the application of these tile pieces seems to be that they were deliberately added in order to increase the thickness of the plaster covering over the masonry construction of the wall. The plaster is noticeably thick at this point, measuring up to 25 mms in thickness, presumably to hide irregularities in the profile of the wall created by the blocks of rubble limestone. A thick coat of plaster was therefore required, and this was partially achieved by adding the tiles to the thin skim of lime mortar applied to the masonry.

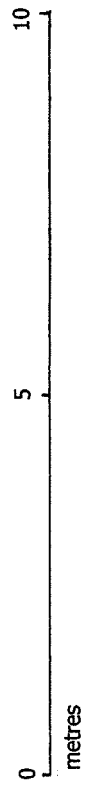
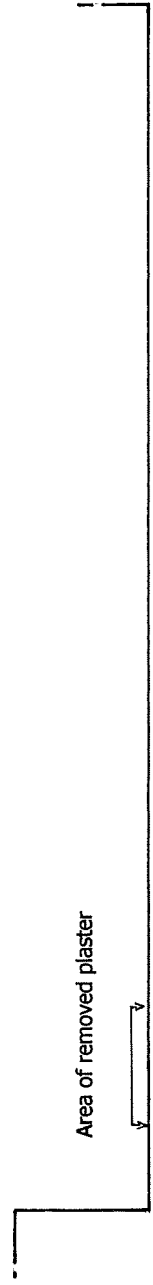
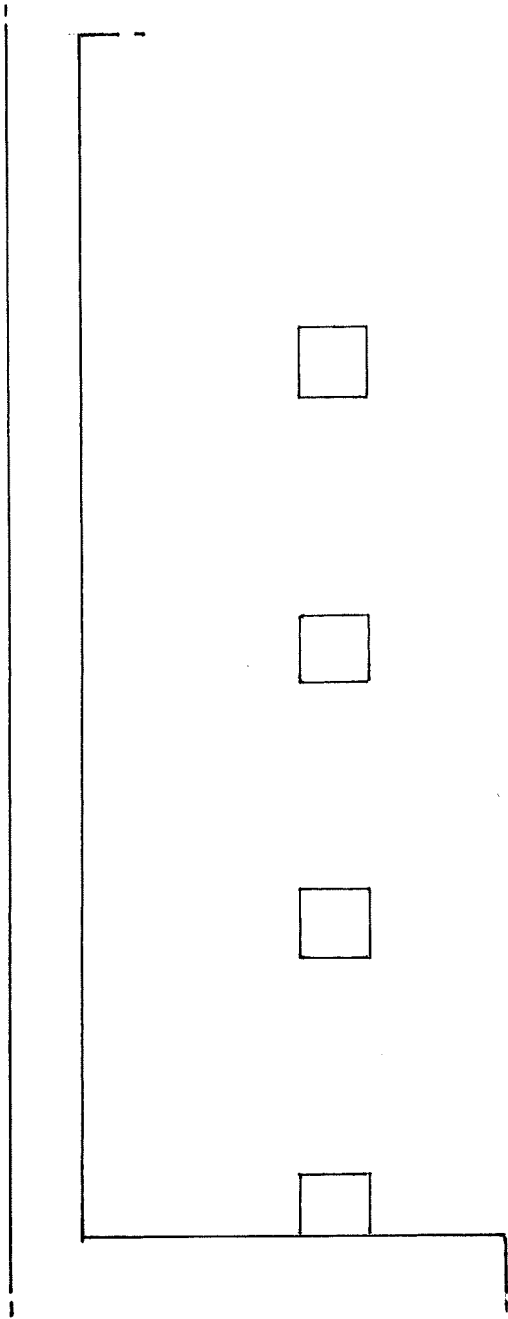
It is noticeable that the tiles also correspond with a gradual thickening of the wall at this point (as shown on the section drawing) so that the width of the wall increases by up to 60 mms where the tiles have been applied. This increase in the width continues to the base of the wall and also runs along virtually the full length of the south wall of the nave. The change in thickness may correspond with a slight step in the original construction of the wall, which was then partially obscured by running the plaster at a sharp angle to create a steeply shelving shoulder, rather than retain the step. This suggestion could be investigated further if slightly more plaster was removed from the wall above the tiles.

From the limited evidence available it is difficult to determine whether or not the row of tiles continues along the full length of the wall below the shoulder. This would only become more apparent if more plaster is removed. However, such an exercise should only be carried out if the plaster is considered to be in such poor condition that it has to be removed. The plaster is lime based, but probably dates from the 1860s. It does not contain hair, which was a normal addition to medieval plaster, used to add strength to the plaster. Further analysis of the plaster is therefore required before more is removed. If more plaster is removed then the wall construction, including any further tiles, should be recorded. Such work should also be carefully monitored to ensure that surviving sections of medieval plaster – perhaps carrying decoration – are not removed. The tiles should be carefully examined to determine whether or not any carry encaustic decoration, in which case they are likely to be medieval.

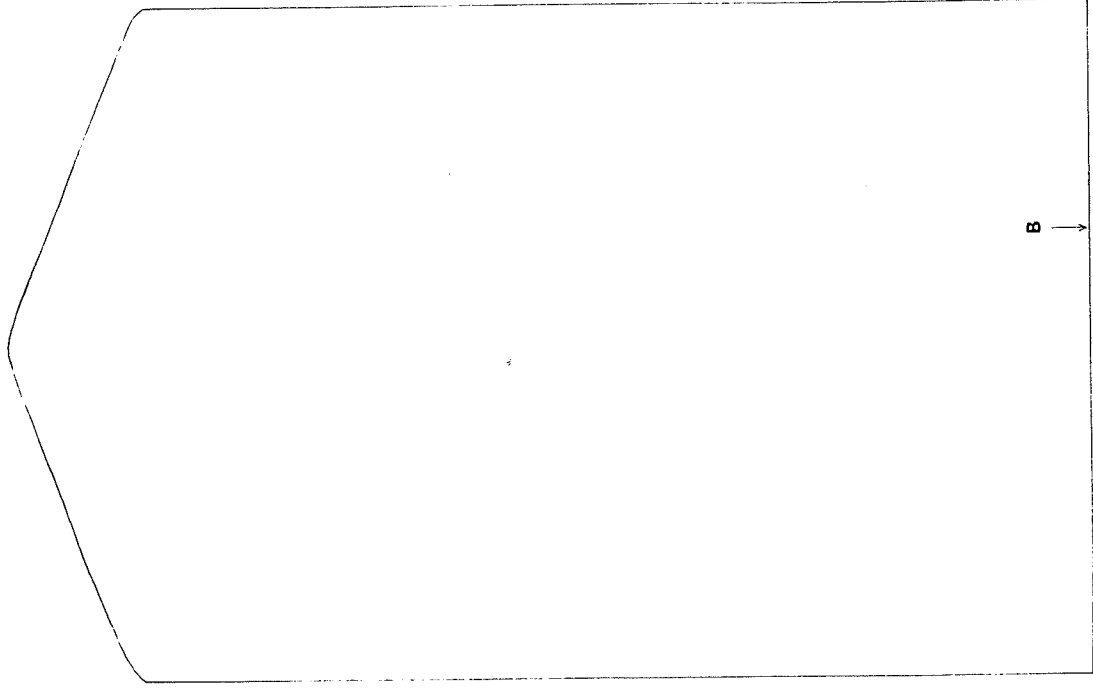
[1] *'The Buildings of England, Buckinghamshire'* Nikolaus Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson, 2000.





Gary Marshall, MIFA 18/4/2002  
National Trust Archaeologist, Stowe Gardens

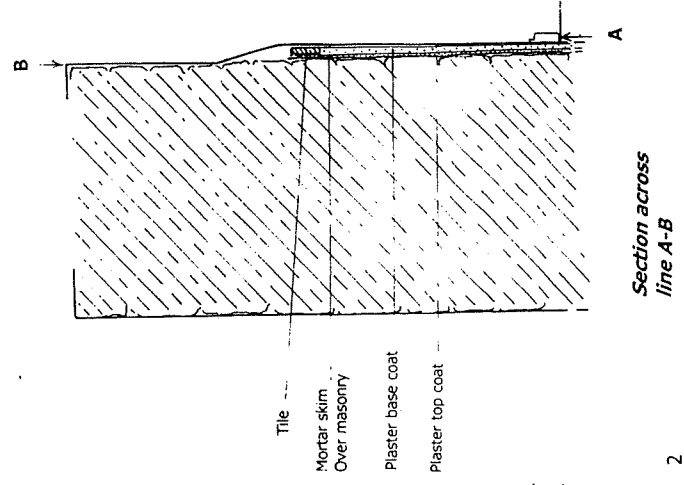
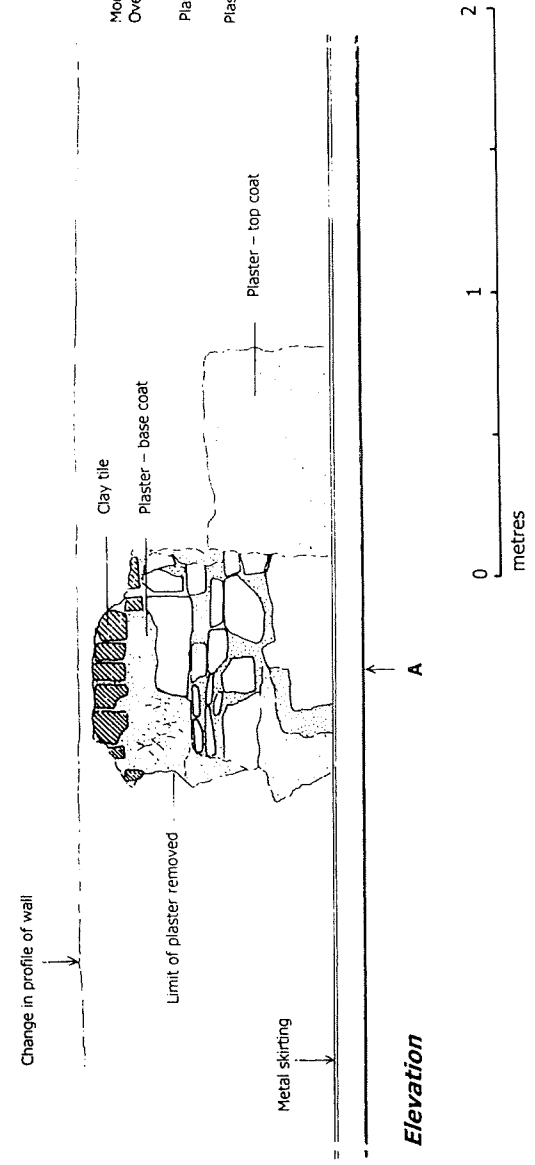
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**St Mary's Church, Thornborough**  
*Plan showing the location of the area of removed plaster*



- KEY**
-  Clay tiles
  -  Rubble limestone
  -  Mortar
  -  Plaster



**Elevation**

**Section across line A-B**

**St Mary's Church, Thornborough**  
*Elevation and section showing the area of plaster removed from the south wall of the nave*