

ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH

AIGNISH

LEWIS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

REPORT

OCTOBER 2013

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH

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Summary

This document reports the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken at St Columba's Church, Aignish, Lewis by FAS Heritage. The watching brief was carried out in July 2012 on behalf of Addison Conservation and Design for The Uidh Church Trust.

The watching brief was designed to monitor the installation of four ground struts within the west chapel and the installation of new surfaces within the nave. The monitoring of the first ground strut trench identified two features at superficial depth and an engineering solution was adapted to avoid any further disturbance to below ground deposits by raising internal ground levels. The features were identified as a possible brick foundation for a burial enclosure and a stone slab grave kerb and cover; both burials are believed to post-date the disuse of the church in 1829.

Acknowledgements

FAS Heritage are grateful to Krystyna Pytasz, Addison Conservation and Design for her support during this project.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document reports the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken at St Columba's Church, Aignish, Lewis by FAS Heritage. The watching brief was carried out in July 2012 on behalf of Addison Conservation and Design for The Uidh Church Trust.

1.1 LOCATION AND LAND USE

St Columba's Church is situated within its churchyard on the north shore of the isthmus of the Eye peninsula, approximately 5km east of Stornoway, Lewis (NGR: NB 48469 32260)(Figure 1; Plate 1). The church is partially ruinous, but the walls are extant and define a long rectangular structure dating from the 14th and 16th centuries. The church is bound to the north by a sea wall installed to prevent further coastal erosion and to the south by remains of the churchyard. St Columba's Church and churchyard are Category A Listed (BH Number 19210) and a Scheduled Monument (SM No 1684).



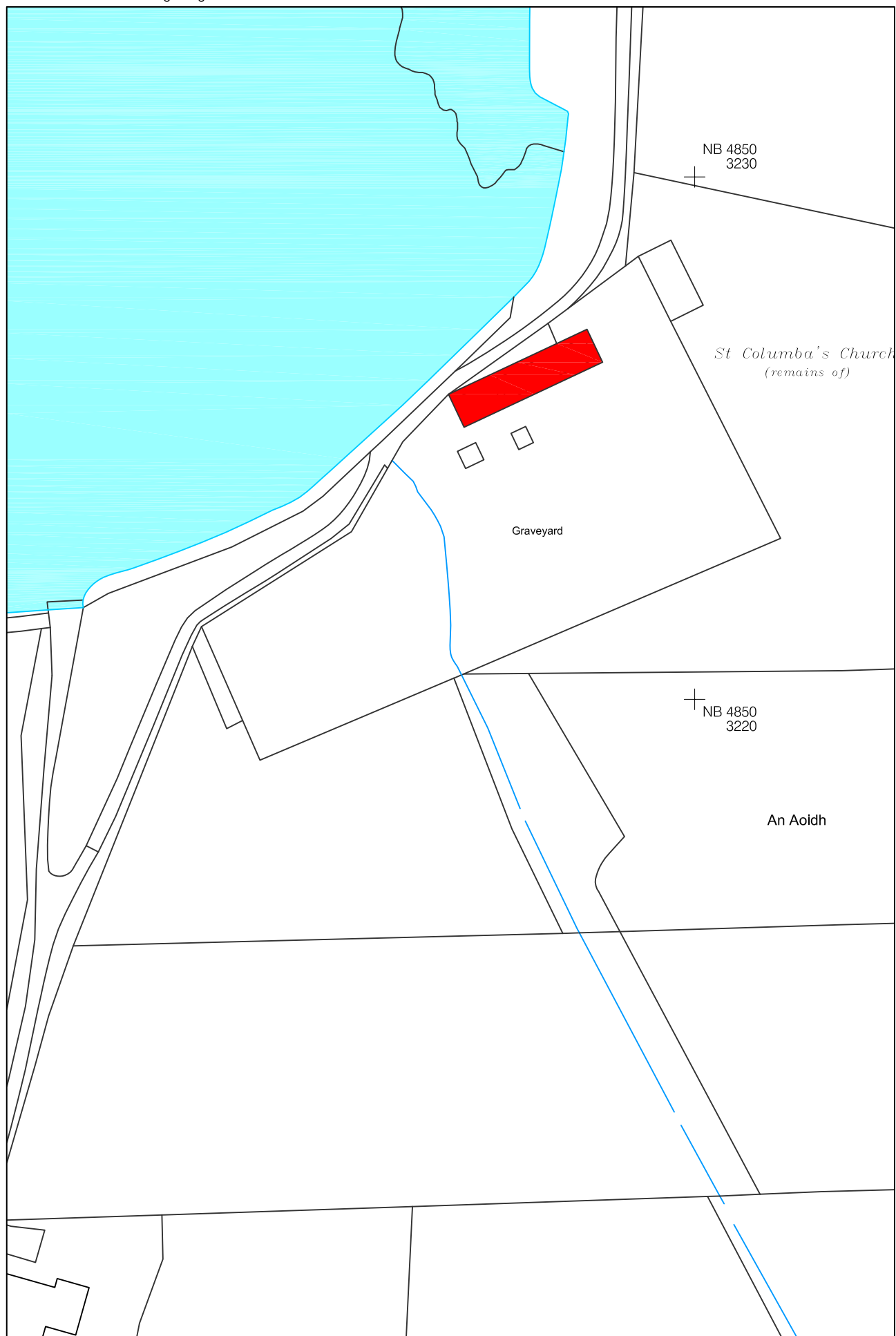
Plate 1 St Columba's Church looking east

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the watching brief was to preserve by record any archaeological remains to be impacted by the installation of four ground struts within the 16th-century west chapel of the church and the installation of new surfaces within the chancel and nave of the medieval church. Both phases of work required superficial intervention into the existing internal floor levels of the church and were designed to be undertaken under strict archaeological supervision with the aim of minimising the disturbance of human burials and structural remains.

1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

St Columba's Church (or Eaglais Chaluim Chille or Eaglais na h-Aoidhe) is reputed to have been built on the site of a monastic cell founded by a contemporary of St Columba, St Catan, in the 6th century. The medieval church, of simple rectangular plan of chancel and nave, is attributed to the Macleods and was probably begun in the 14th century. The early fabric consists of coursed gneiss rubble and later additions incorporate red sandstone. A recent reappraisal of the fabric of the church by Addyman Associates concluded that the earliest fabric is that of the chancel attributed perhaps to the late 14th century. The chancel was subsequently extended to the east with the construction of the nave. The latest fabric is that of the western end and the substantial burial aisle of post-Reformation date (Addyman 2000, 101); the unlit north wall also appears to have been raised during this operation (CNES SMR 2489). During the medieval period the church was the foremost parish church on Lewis



Location map

Scale 1:1000



Figure 1

and the chancel was used as a burial place for the Macleods of Lewis. Two graveslabs of c.1500 are still situated within the chancel and are attributed to Roderick Macleod, 7th Chief of Lewis (d.1498) and his daughter Margaret KacKinnon, mother of John, the last Abbot of Iona (d.1503)(Miers 2008).

The church was last used for worship in 1829 when Episcopalian worshippers moved to a new Scottish Presbyterian church built nearby at Knock to the design of Thomas Telford. In 1921 the western side of the church was threatened by coastal erosion; the north side of the churchyard has been lost to the sea. In 1994 rescue excavation in response to coastal erosion was undertaken at the western corner of the west chapel which was found to overlie earlier, probably medieval interments (CNES SMR 2489).

A number of archaeological interventions have been carried out more recently at and near the church. In 2000 an archaeological watching brief was maintained during the installation of temporary arch supports. No archaeological remains were disturbed, but the existing floor was recorded and a fragment of graveslab noted (Knott 2000, 101). Addyman Associates undertook desk-based and on-site reappraisal of the extant fabric in 2000, and analysis of the wall head ruins to identify evidence for historic roof forms in 2002 (Addyman 2000, 101; 2002, 123). In 2008 an archaeological watching brief was maintained during the installation of new gateposts to the entrance to the churchyard. The work identified stratified remains the earliest of which were recorded at 0.75m deep and took the form of midden material including handmade pottery overlain by a layer containing iron-working slag of possible medieval date (Dagg 2008, 185).

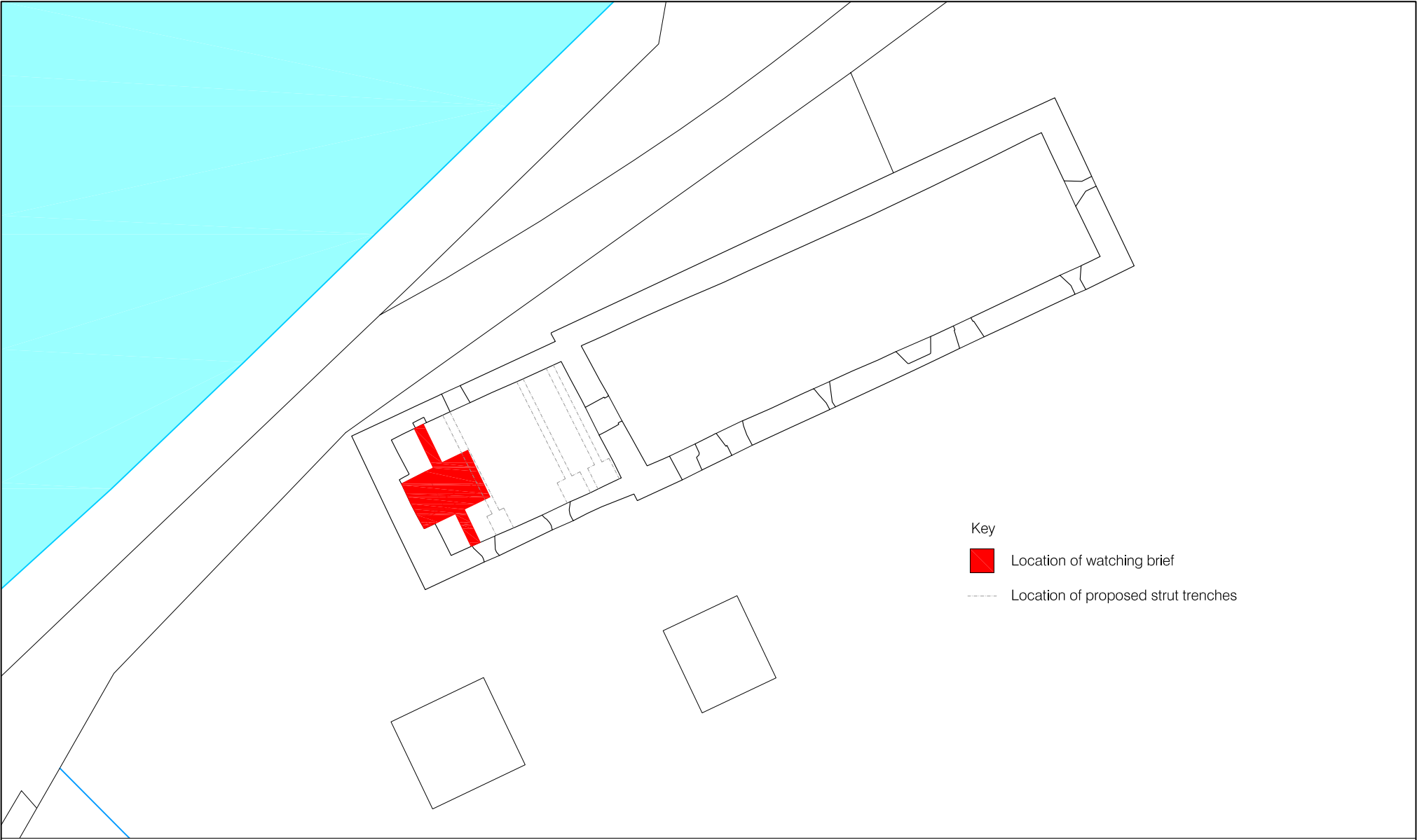
2.0 FIELDWORK PROCEDURE

The watching brief was intended to be undertaken in two phases. The first was designed to consist of monitoring hand-excavation of four ground strut trenches measuring 0.30m wide x 0.10m deep oriented north-south spanning the interior of the west chapel and the second of the installation of new ground surfaces in the nave (Figure 2). The results of the excavation of the first ground strut identified a grave, the marker of which lay at extremely shallow depth, and which was subject to further investigation to better define the feature. The presence of the shallow grave marker resulted in adaptation of the design, achieved by raising ground levels. This negated the requirement for ongoing archaeological monitoring of the remaining three ground struts and the second phase of monitoring of groundworks in the nave.

Fieldwork was undertaken in accordance with a Method Statement prepared by FAS Heritage (Appendix A).

2.1 RECORDING PROCEDURE

A site grid based on the Ordnance Survey National Grid and Ordnance Survey Datum was established and survey stations set out around the site using a total station theodolite (TST) to facilitate archaeological recording. The position of the first ground strut intervention was located using



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a TST positioned within an outline survey of the church plan.

A full written, drawn and photographic record was made of all deposits encountered during the course of the watching brief and were recorded using a standard system of context and feature record forms. The planning of features was undertaken digitally and reproduced at a scale of 1:20.

3.0 FIELDWORK RESULTS

The watching brief commenced with the monitoring of the hand-excavation of the westernmost ground strut trench within the west chapel. The trench spanned the chapel north-south measuring c.0.30m wide x no greater than 0.2m deep. Excavation commenced with the removal of a root bound turfline assigned C1000 and measuring c.0.10m deep overlying a fine, clean, highly humic soil C1001. C1001 measured at least 0.15m deep and removal across the footprint of the ground strut partially revealed two features consisting of a brick strip foundation assigned F1 and a stone-slab built feature assigned F2.

Excavation of a broader area measuring 2.8m (west-east) x 2.0m (north-south) x 0.20m deep was undertaken in order to more fully reveal these two features (see Figure 2). The western side of the area of investigation was occupied by a large concrete slab which overlay the westward continuation of F1, but where it could be seen to consist of a strip foundation of handmade brick bonded with lime mortar measuring c.0.4m wide and at least two courses high. The total discernible length of F1 was recorded as 2.7m (west-east). At its western end F1 could be seen to turn 90° continuing southwards a short distance to abut the base of the adjacent arch (Figure 3; Plate 2).

The area of investigation further revealed stone-built feature F2 which could be identified as a stone grave cover. The feature consisted of an upright stone slab at the western and eastern ends which were visible as upstanding slabs prior to intervention (Plate 3). These slabs enclosed a linear arrangement of slabs laid flat with the whole measuring c.1.3m west-east x 0.60m north-south. The slabs were rough, of variable geology and included a slate roof tile.

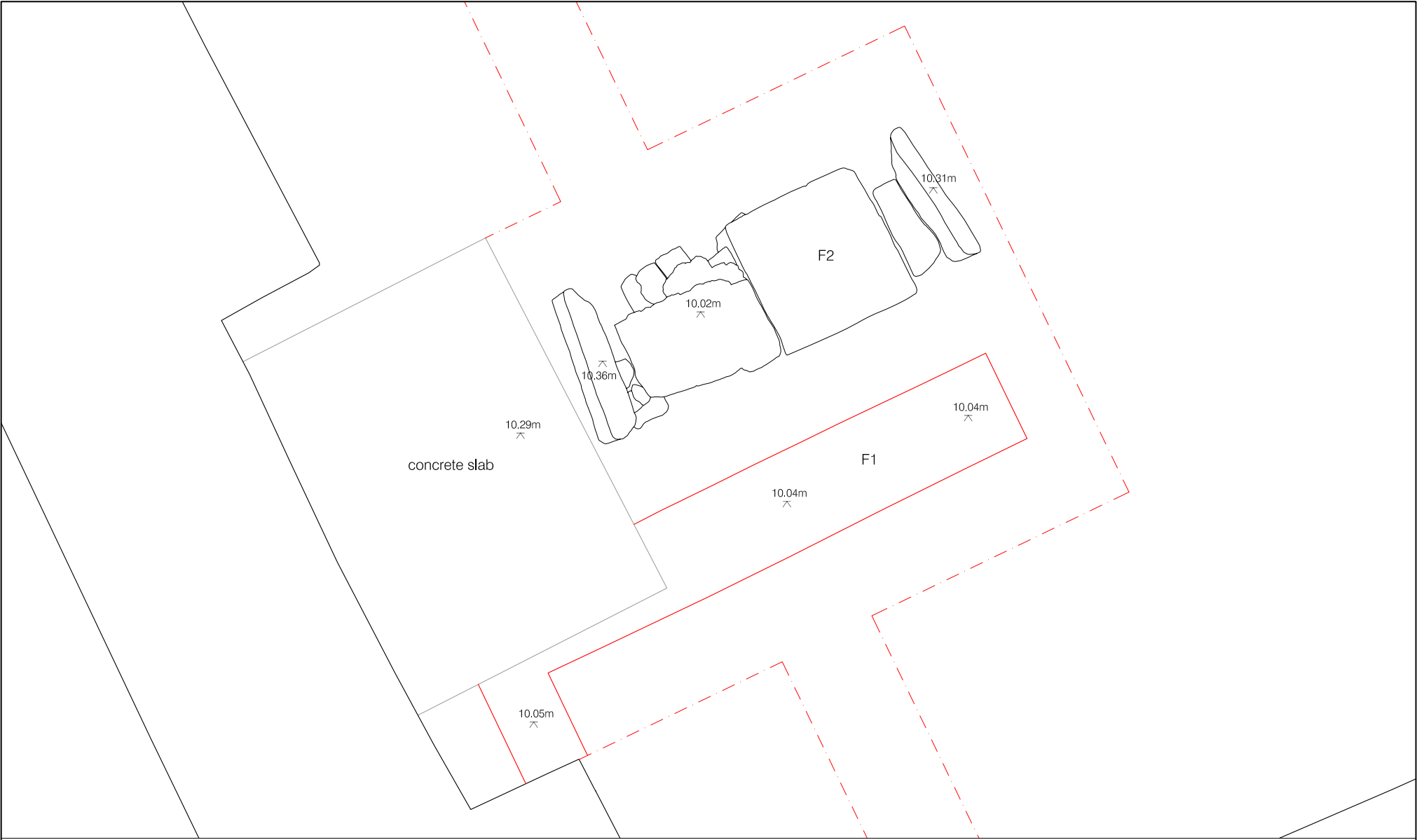
No further features were identified and the intervention was subsequently reinstated by hand.



Plate 2 F1 looking west (scale 1.0m)



Plate 3 F2 looking south (scale 1.0m)



Plan of F1 and F2

Scale 1:20



Figure 3

4.0 DISCUSSION

The results of the first ground strut trench provided some insight into the late use of the west chapel and allowed the engineering solution to be adapted to avoid any further intervention into archaeological deposits.

Further investigation of F1 along with inspection of the adjacent extant walls suggest that the footing may have formed part of a small burial enclosure position within the southwest corner of the west chapel. A wall plaque and an area of vestigial wall plaster survive on the west wall and suggest a nearby interment (Plate 4). F1 may represent the base for a walled or railed burial enclosure.

Further investigation of F2 revealed a somewhat *ad hoc* grave marker consisting of two small kerbs set to the west and east ends of the grave with a stone slab cover and no more formal memorial. Both burials are likely to post-date the disuse of St Columba's Church in 1829, perhaps once the chapel had become roofless, and after which time the area may have been used as part of the broader burial ground. Burial within churches, with the exception of purpose built burial aisles, ceased at or shortly after the Reformation and the upstanding nature of the kerbs forming F2 suggest they were erected after the building ceased to be used for worship.



Plate 4 Wall plaque and plaster adjacent to F1 (scale 1.0m)

5.0 ASSESSMENT

The presence of F1 and F2 at superficial depth within the western chapel would have resulted in disturbance during the installation of the ground struts. The results of the watching brief allowed the engineering design to be modified to remove any further impact on the archaeological remains within the western chapel and nave.

6.0 ARCHIVE

Copies of this report will be sent to Historic Scotland and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar for inclusion in the Sites and Monuments Record. The report will also be made available *via* OASIS and a short note on the results of the watching brief will be prepared and submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*.

References

- Addyman, T. 2000. 'Eye Church, Stornoway, Western Isles (Stornoway parish), medieval church and churchyard', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, New, Volume 1, 101
- Addyman, T. 2002. 'Eaglais na h'Aoidhe, Western Isles (Stornoway parish), late medieval church', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, New, Volume 3, 123
- Dagg, C. 2008. 'Eaglais na h'Aoidhe, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Western Isles (Stornoway parish), excavation', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, New, Volume 9, 185
- Knott, C. 2000. 'Eaglais na h'Aoidhe (St Columba's Church), Western Isles (Stornoway parish), watching brief', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, New, Volume 1, 101
- Miers, M. 2008. *The Western Seaboard: an illustrated architectural guide* (Edinburgh)

APPENDIX A METHOD STATEMENT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document presents a Method Statement for an archaeological watching brief at St Columba's Church, Aignish, Lewis and has been prepared by FAS Heritage on behalf of Addison Conservation and Design. The archaeological watching brief will be undertaken in two phases and will be maintained during the excavation of ground strut trenches and the preparation of the interior of the church for new surfacing.

1.1 LOCATION AND USE

St Columba's Church is situated within its churchyard on the north shore of the isthmus of the Eye peninsula, approximately 5km east of Stornoway, Lewis (NGR: NB 48469 32260). The church is partially ruinous, but the walls are extant and define a long rectangular structure dating from the 14th and 16th centuries. The church is bound to the north by a sea wall installed to prevent further coastal erosion and to the south by remains of the churchyard. St Columba's Church and churchyard are Category A Listed (BH Number 19210) and a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM No 1684).

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the watching brief is to preserve by record any archaeological remains impacted by the installation of four ground struts within the 16th century west chapel of the church and the installation of new surfaces within the chancel and nave of the medieval church. Both phases of work require superficial intervention into the existing internal floor level of the church and limited intervention to the immediate north of the church; the work will be undertaken under strict archaeological supervision and will aim to minimise the disturbance of human burials and structural remains.

1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

St Columba's Church (or Eaglais Chaluim Chille or Eaglais na h-Aoidhe) is reputed to have been built on the site of a monastic cell founded by a contemporary of St Columba, St Catan, in the 6th century. The medieval church, of simple rectangular plan of chancel and nave, is attributed to the Macleods and was probably begun in the 14th century. The early fabric consists of coursed gneiss rubble and later additions incorporate red sandstone. A recent reappraisal of the fabric of the church by Addyman Associates concluded that the earliest fabric is that of the chancel attributed perhaps to the late 14th century. The chancel was subsequently extended to the east with the construction of the nave. The latest fabric is that of the western end and the substantial burial aisle of post-Reformation date (Addyman 2000, 101); the unlit north wall also appears to have been raised during this operation (CNES SMR 2489). During the medieval period the church was the foremost parish church on Lewis and the chancel was used as a burial place for the Macleods of Lewis. Two graveslabs of c.1500 are still situated within the chancel and are attributed to Roderick Macleod, 7th Chief of Lewis (d.1498) and his daughter Margaret KacKinnon, mother of John, the last Abbot of Iona (d.1503)(Miers 2008).

The church was last used for worship in 1829 when Episcopalian worshippers moved to a new Scottish Presbyterian church built nearby at Knock to the design of Thomas Telford. In 1921 the western side of the church was threatened by coastal erosion; the north side of the churchyard has been lost to the sea. In 1994 rescue excavation in response to coastal erosion was undertaken at the western corner of the west chapel which was found to overlie earlier, probably medieval interments (CNES SMR 2489).

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2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 FIELDWORK PROCEDURE

The watching brief will be undertaken in two phases. The first will consist of the monitoring of the hand-excavation of four ground strut trenches measuring 0.30m wide x 0.10m deep oriented north-south spanning the interior of the west chapel. On the south side of the chapel interior four small pits will be excavated at the terminus of the strut trenches measuring 1.0m x 1.2m x 0.10m deep; the two eastern struts will also require 1m² trenches to be excavated to 0.30m deep on the north exterior of the west chapel. The second phase will consist of the monitoring of the installation of new ground surfaces within the interior of the nave. This will require the reduction of internal ground level by hand down to 0.10m below current levels. All works will be undertaken under strict archaeological supervision in order to minimise the disturbance of human burials and structural remains.

All archaeological remains revealed during the course of the works will be cleaned, sampled and recorded as appropriate. Any significant primary archaeological deposits will be hand-excavated. Structural remains will be recorded and left *in situ*.

2.2 RECORDING PROCEDURE

A site grid based on the Ordnance Survey National Grid and Ordnance Survey Datum will be established. Survey stations will then be set out around the site using a total station theodolite (TST) to facilitate archaeological recording. The position of interventions will be located using a TST.

A full written, drawn and photographic record will be made of all deposits encountered during the course of the watching brief. Archaeological deposits, features and structures will be recorded using a standard system of context and feature record forms. A series of indexes, capable of interrogation, will be maintained for all site records. The planning of features and sections will be undertaken at scales of 1:10 or 1:20 as appropriate. The photographic record will consist of 35mm colour and monochrome photography. Monochrome photography will be undertaken using silver-based film to ensure archival stability.

2.3 FINDS RECOVERY AND TREATMENT

All finds identified during the watching brief will be hand-collected and processed. Finds treatment will be undertaken in accordance with guidelines set down in *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 1998). Archive preparation will be undertaken in accordance with *Guidelines for the preparation of excavation archives for long-term storage* (Walker 1990). In accordance with guidelines laid down in MAP2, all metalwork and a sample of metallurgical residues will be submitted for X-radiography prior to assessment.

All wet-preserved artefacts will be treated in accordance with *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 1998), *Guidelines for the care of waterlogged archaeological leather* (1995) or *Waterlogged wood, guidelines on the recording, sampling, conservation and curation of structural wood* (1990).

2.4 ARCHIVE PREPARATION

On completion of the field investigation all records and material will be indexed, ordered, quantified and checked for consistency. The drawn record will be digitised in an appropriate format that will permit the output of standard AutoCAD files.

2.5 POST-EXCAVATION AND REPORTING PROCEDURES

A watching brief report for both phases will be prepared and will include archaeological background, fieldwork procedure, the results of the watching brief, preliminary dating of finds, illustrations (photographs, plans and sections) and assessment, conclusions and recommendations. Any recommended significant further assessment or analysis of finds or environmental samples will be undertaken. All finds will be declared to the Treasure Trove Unit in accordance with Scottish Treasure Trove law.

A paper and digital copy of the report will be sent to Historic Scotland. A digital copy of the report will be sent to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar for inclusion in the Sites and Monuments Record. The report will also be made available via OASIS and a short note on the results of the watching brief will be prepared and submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*.

3.0 MONITORING

The work will be monitored by Historic Scotland, who will be afforded adequate notice prior to the commencement of groundworks.

4.0 HEALTH & SAFETY

Health and safety will take priority over archaeological matters. Archaeologists undertaking fieldwork will comply with Health and Safety Legislation.

29/06/2012

References

- Addyman, T. 2000. 'Eye Church, Stornoway, Western Isles (Stornoway parish), medieval church and churchyard', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, New, Volume 1, 101
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