

A Survey of the Parish Church of St Swithun at Compton Bassett, Wiltshire

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The building and churchyard were surveyed in order to produce scale plans. As a result, a previously unrecognised wall of possible Anglo-Saxon date was noted and seven major phases of structural alteration were identified dating from the 11th to the 19th centuries.

INTRODUCTION

This paper forms part of the study of medieval settlement and land use currently being undertaken for the Compton Bassett Research Project, which is based at University College London, Institute of Archaeology. The present report will concentrate on the archaeological evidence for the phasing of the

church and yard, while detailed discussion of the documentary evidence and the function of the church in the interpretation of later Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement will be the subject of future work.

The parish church of St Swithun lies at the extreme south-westerly end of the village of Compton Bassett (SU 031716), which is situated at the bottom of the scarp slope of the Marlborough Downs (Figure 1).

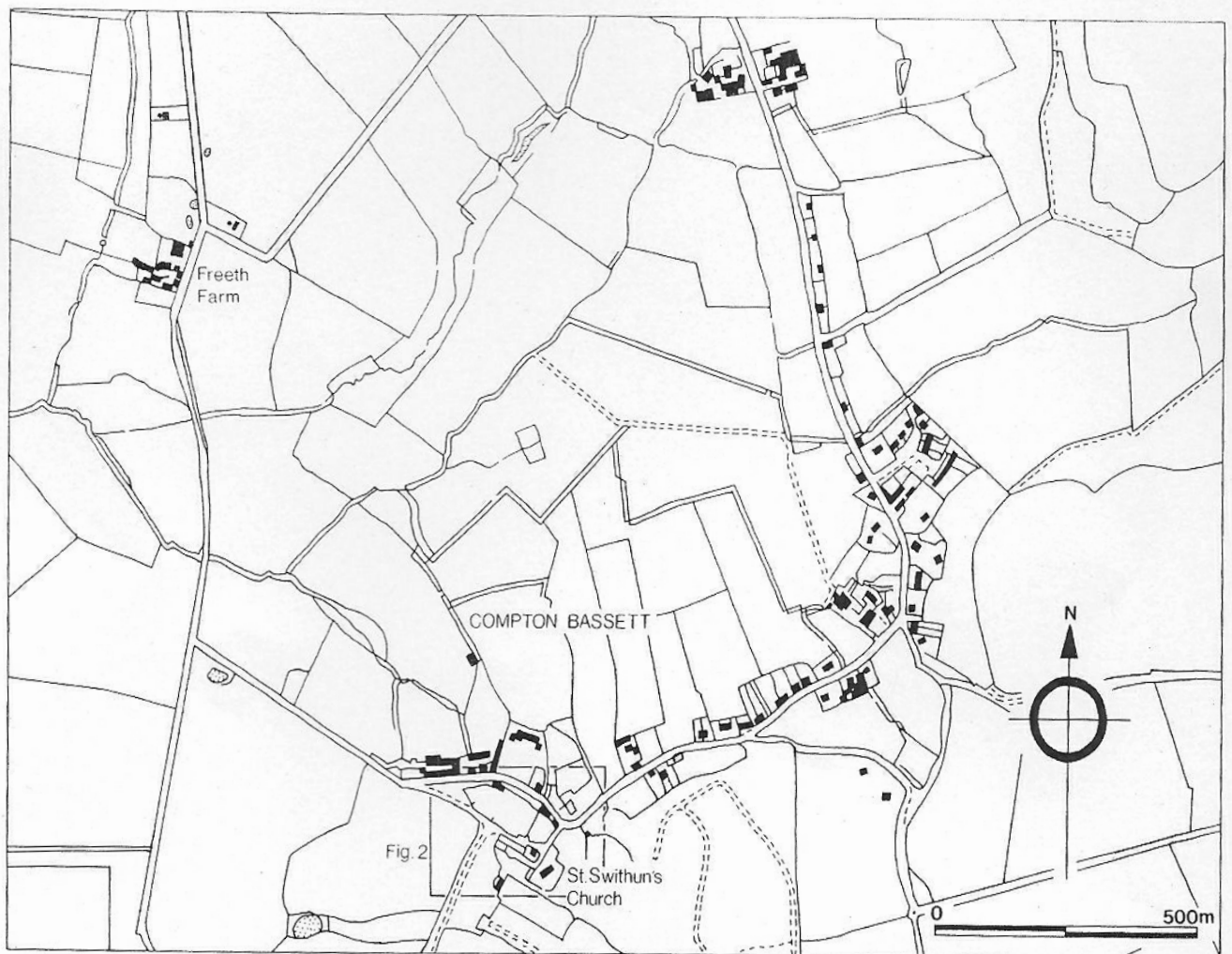


Figure 1. Compton Bassett: village map

Compton Bassett may be termed a settlement of the 'interrupted row' type as defined by Dyer (1990). The existence of a settlement by the Late Anglo-Saxon period is revealed by three entries in the Domesday Survey for Wiltshire (Thorn and Thorn 1979; 27-2, 32-3 and 67-63) which probably correspond to three separate manors. Earlier origins are suggested by casual finds dated to the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, including a quern stone from Freeth Farm just under 1km to the north-east of the church.

John Aubrey, writing in the later 17th century, was the first to mention the church, about which he wrote 'In the church I find nothing remarkable . . .' (Jackson 1862, 43). Jackson (*ibid.*, 43-44) elaborated to the extent of distinguishing between the Norman and Perpendicular work and went on to describe the fine stone rood screen that has since been the major focus of attention. He also made a note of the alterations to the church just before the large scale renovation and rebuilding of 1866 (*ibid.*, 44).

A.E.W. Marsh, in *A History of the Borough and Town of Calne* (1903), wrote in similar terms although, interestingly, he states that a rood gallery was still in use 'less than thirty years ago . . .' (*ibid.*, 305). Marsh was also the first to note that the stone screen originated from Winchester, although he gave no reference for this information.

The first attempt to interpret the development of the church was made by Ponting (1912). His observations, as far as they went, were accurate, the screen receiving the most detailed description. It is interesting to read the Revd E.H. Goddard's comments on the screen's origins, which appeared as a footnote in Ponting's paper. He noted that 'A curious tradition seems to have arisen that this screen came from Winchester Cathedral' (*ibid.*, 431). As it happened, Goddard wrote the introduction to Marsh's book which contained the root of the 'curious tradition'. The church was given the customarily short, but accurate, description in the Wiltshire volume of *The Buildings of England* series, again with most attention directed to a discussion of the screen (Pevsner and Cherry 1975).

THE CHURCHYARD

The church is approached via a sunken path which runs from the north-east corner of the present churchyard and is entered through a doorway in the north aisle. The path is up to 1m below the level of the ground surface in the churchyard and it seems probable that public access to the building has long followed this course.

The present boundaries of the churchyard are mostly mid 19th-century. It is, however, possible to reconstruct the layout of earlier boundaries from the study of maps. The following sequence was established (Figure 2). The medieval boundaries may be extrapolated from Andrews and Dury's map of 1773 and the 1901 1:10,560 Ordnance Survey map. The former shows the church standing in what appears to be a much larger yard than at present. The surviving boundaries on the north-east, south-east and south-west are, within 3m or so, probably those laid out at an early period as there is no evidence that any form of land modification has occurred in these immediate areas to facilitate significant boundary change. Mature yews are a feature of these boundaries.

The continuation of the north-eastern boundary, shown on the earthwork survey (Figure 3), appears on the ground as a sharp drop in slope of about 1m. This lynchet-like accumulation of soil lends weight to the idea that it is early. The 1901 map shows two superimposed boundaries. The earlier one, formed of irregular rubble, is shown on the earthwork survey and can be seen to run around the outside of the present bounds of the church. If the line of the early boundary on the south-western side is projected from where it disappears on the ground it can be seen to run in alignment with the north wall of the outbuildings associated with the now demolished Compton House. If the north-eastern boundary is also projected, it follows a line which forms the rear boundary of properties fronting on to the road, including the possible priest's house directly to the north of the church which is certainly late medieval and it may be reasonably presumed that its boundaries are of the same date. It may also be argued that the presence of the churchyard restricted these boundaries.

Andrews and Dury's map was drawn up about a century after the construction of the stables for Compton House, dated to 1665-70 by Pevsner (1975, 189). The map shows the stables standing in open ground within the possible early bounds of the church. A division between two properties fronting the road, when projected along its south-westerly course, aligns with the western end wall of the stables, indicating the possible limit of the church's enclosure on the north-western side.

The first edition of the one inch to one mile Ordnance Survey map, published in 1828, shows that access to the church was possible from Compton House, presumably by way of steps down the sharp slope of the south-western boundary. The course of this former entrance to the church shows clearly on the earthwork survey. The 1901 map indicates that by

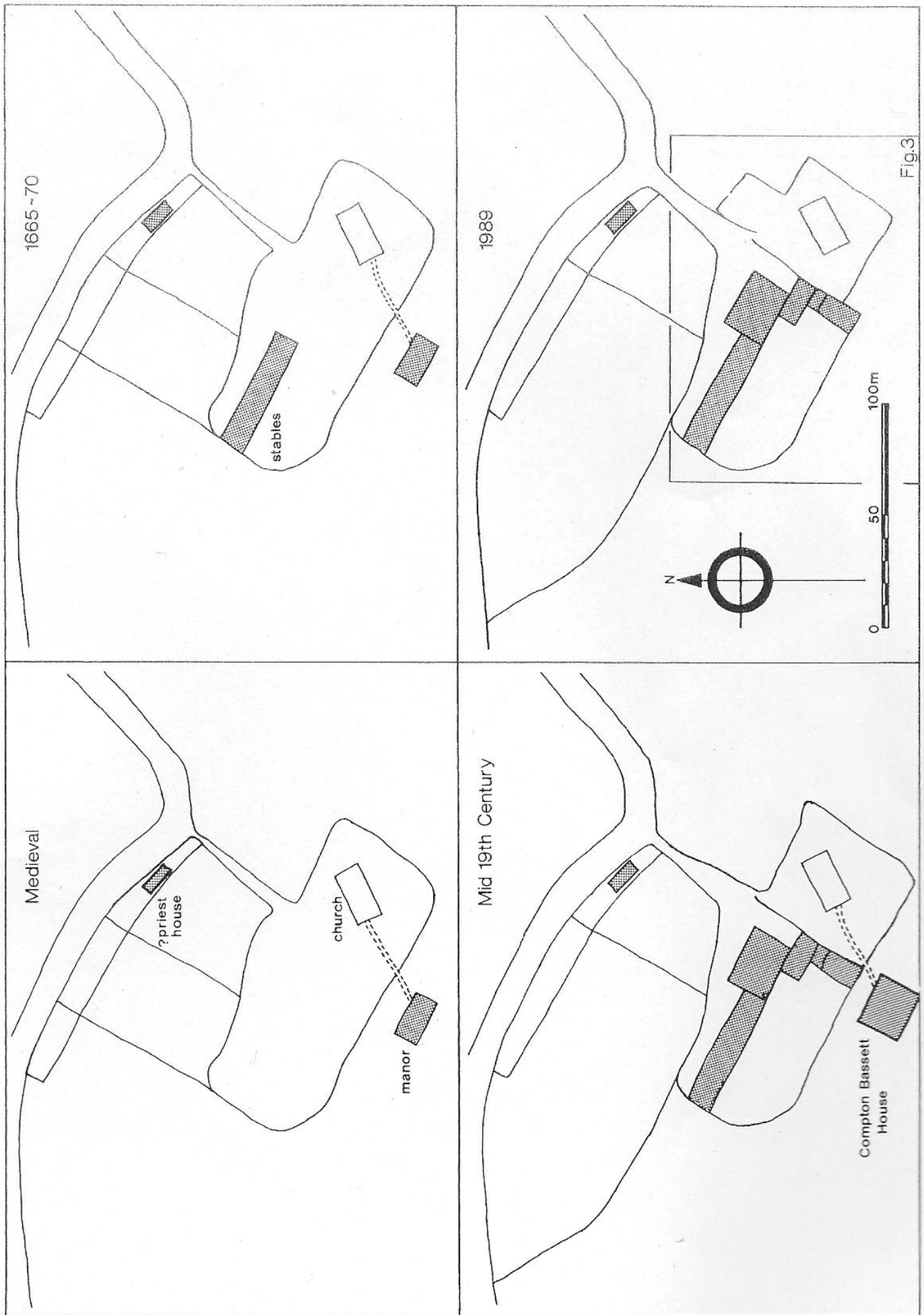


Figure 2. The development of the boundaries of the churchyard at Compton Bassett

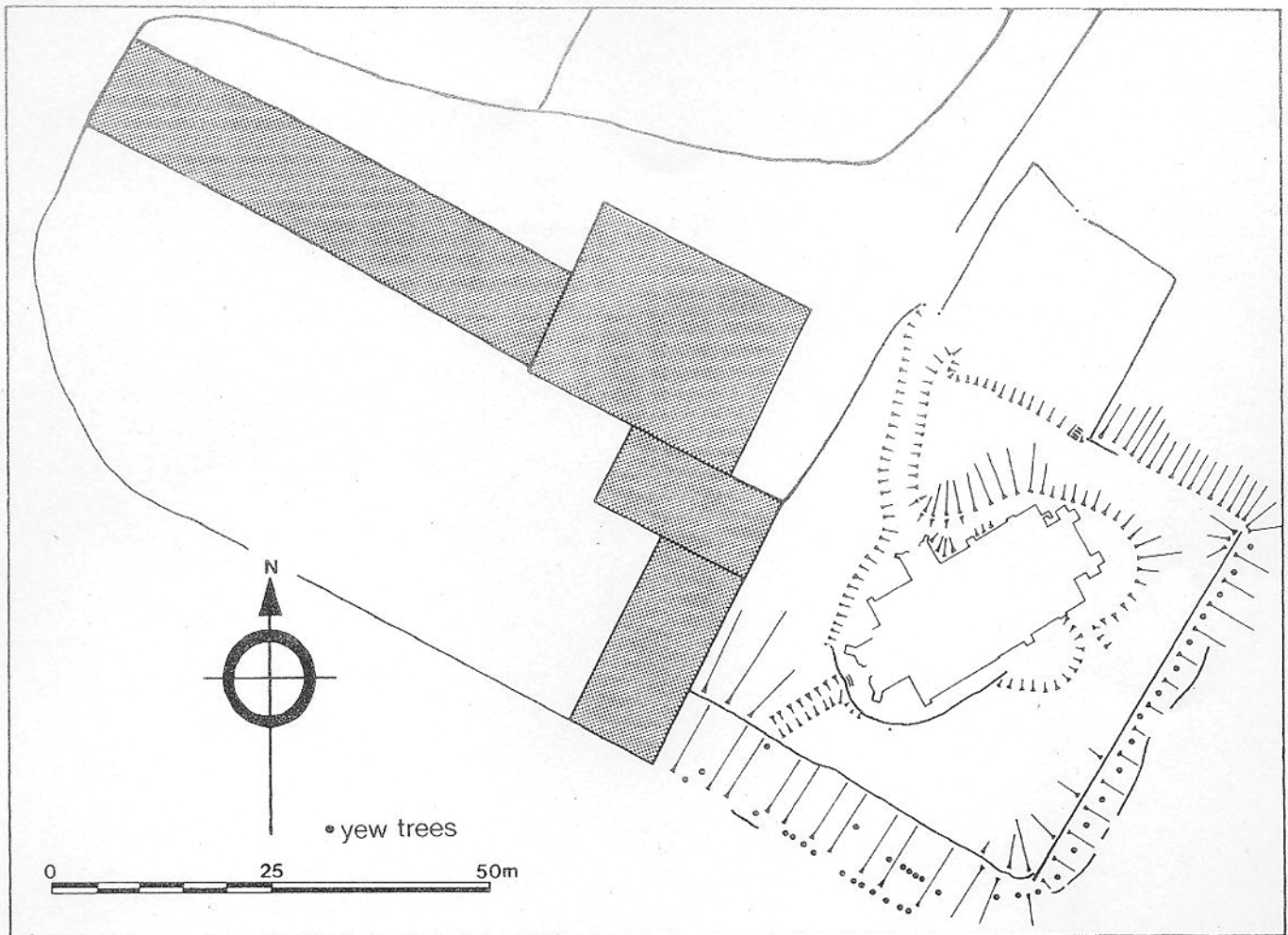


Figure 3. The churchyard earthworks at Compton Bassett

the late 19th century the area including the church and the stables had been further subdivided, with a brick-built outbuilding forming the churchyard's north-western limit. The access way from Compton House was no longer in use and the new existing boundaries had been laid out, without doubt reusing stone from the early boundary walls.

A similar subdivision of the churchyard appears to have occurred at Yatesbury, 3km to the east. Morris (1983, 5) briefly discussed the secular occupation of areas formerly used as churchyards and points out that it is most frequently a post-medieval phenomenon. The evidence here seems to conform to this general pattern. The churchyard was extended to the north-east c.1930 and presently encloses some 2,300 square metres.

THE CHURCH

The church is situated on a level platform cut into the natural slope and is orientated some 17 degrees north of east from a precise east-west alignment.

Structural Materials

The fabric of the older structures – the nave, aisles and tower – is of limestone, mainly in ashlar form. The walls of the Victorian work are of a roughly-tooled limestone, although the quoins are well-finished. Generally, a higher quality, more durable stone has been used in the earlier work.

Sarsen stone was used in the possible Anglo-Saxon wall and at the foot of the tower on the northern side. Although very little sarsen is now evident in the immediate area, it was available in the medieval period. The churches at Yatesbury and Cherhill both have towers supported, in part, by large sarsen blocks.

William Stukeley, writing in the earlier part of the 18th century, noted that there were, 'At Compton Bassett, not far from Marlborough, westward, houses made of stones as big as those at Stonehenge, standing endwise' (Anon. 1867, 342). (In a coombe just over 1km to the north-east of the church is a large elliptical mound which is probably a great sarsen block covered with soil.) The stone screen, in contrast, is formed of Caen stone from Normandy.