

LOCAL GEOLOGICAL SITES

BRAINTREE DISTRICT



BraG1 St Barnabas Church, Alphamstone

Site location: St Barnabas Church, Alphamstone, Essex

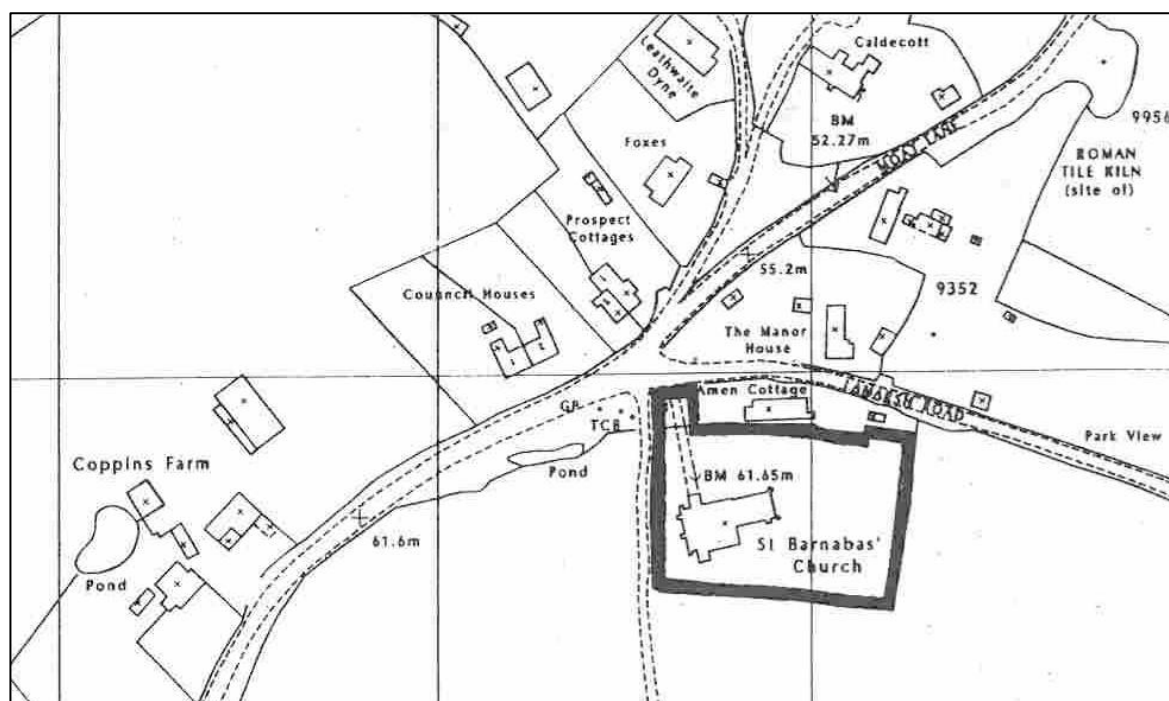
Grid Reference: TL 878 354

Status: Public – Churchyard accessible at all reasonable times

Summary of the geological interest:

Alphamstone churchyard contains a remarkable number of large boulders, some over a metre long. There is even a boulder inside the church. These stones were probably carried to the site by the ancestral Thames river that flowed across the area more than half a million years ago.

The abundance of sarsens here suggests that a former Pagan stone circle may have existed on this site, all the stones being transported here by man. The stones may be partly responsible for the name of the village.



Site Assessment. Local Geological Sites (LoGS) in Essex are assessed using criteria based on DEFRA guidance. An assessment form is used which asks key questions under four value categories: scientific, educational, historical and aesthetic. This site has been assessed and qualifies under these criteria.

Scientific interest and site importance:

The boulders are known as sarsens, an extremely hard sandstone formed around 55 million years ago when the climate of Britain was hot and a layer of sand beneath the surface of the ground became cemented with quartz. They are thus very resistant to erosion and have survived being carried in the floodwaters swollen by snowmelt as the climate warmed after a period of intense cold during the Ice Age.

Sarsens are not uncommon in this part of Essex but nowhere else in the county are so many concentrated in one place. The sarsens of Alphamstone have been referred to in books and articles on the landscape and history of Essex (eg. Rudge 1964) and archaeological reports (e.g. Hedges 1980). All the stones are rounded and water-worn and typical of sarsens elsewhere in the Stour valley.

There are at least 11 sarsens here; 9 in the churchyard and two inside the church (at the base of the west wall of the nave). At least two stones have almost disappeared beneath the grass and it is likely that there are others in the churchyard that are now completely buried. It is understood that there are sarsens in private gardens elsewhere in the village too.



The fourteenth century church of St. Barnabas, Althamstone. Photo: W.H. George



Boulder #5 at north-east corner of church Photo: D Potts 2023



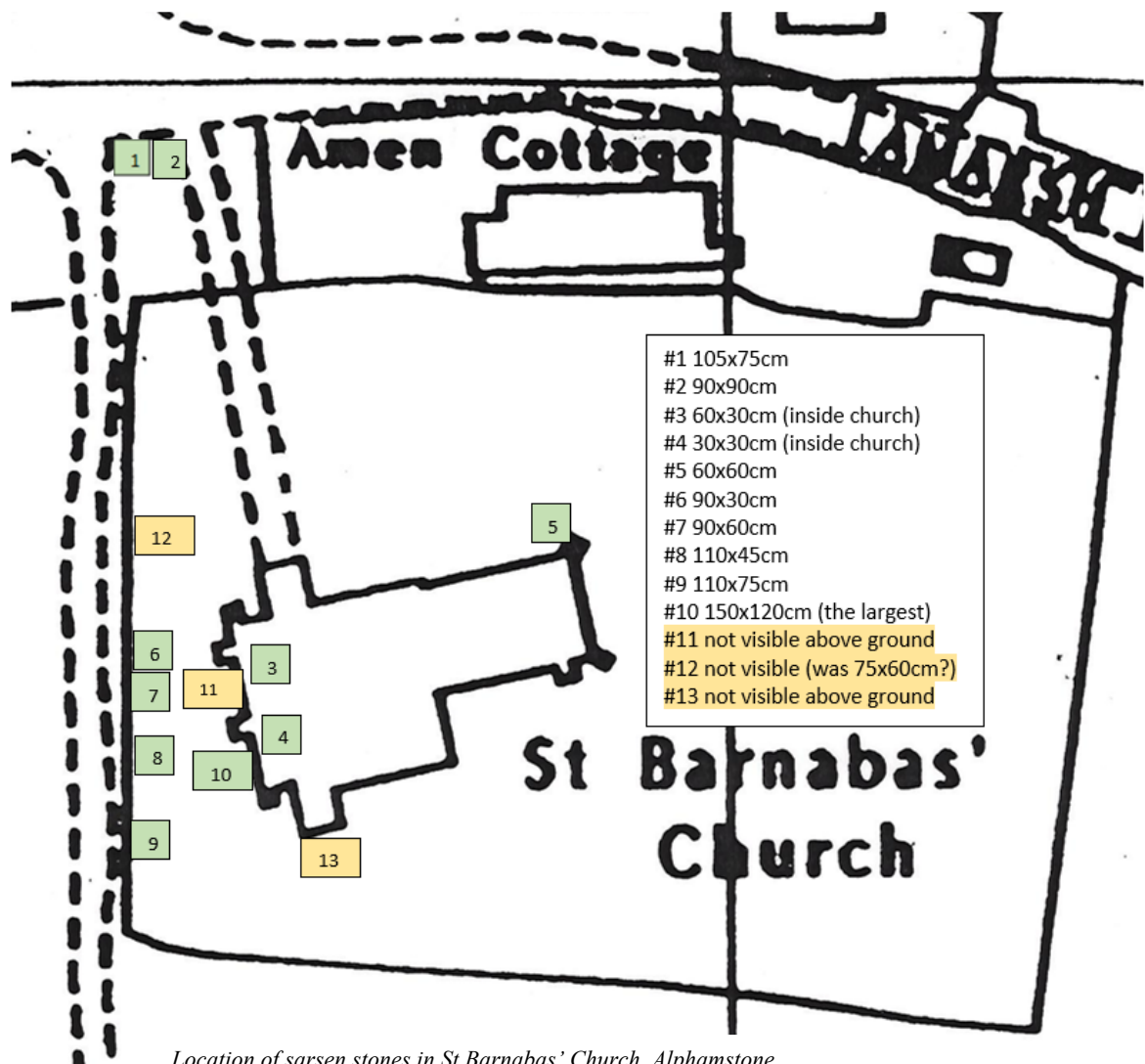
Boulder #9 next to hedge on west side of church Photo: D Potts 2023



Boulder #10 on west side of church. Photo: D Potts 2023



Boulders at entrance to church looking south. Photo D Potts 2023



Location of sarsen stones in St Barnabas' Church, Althamstone