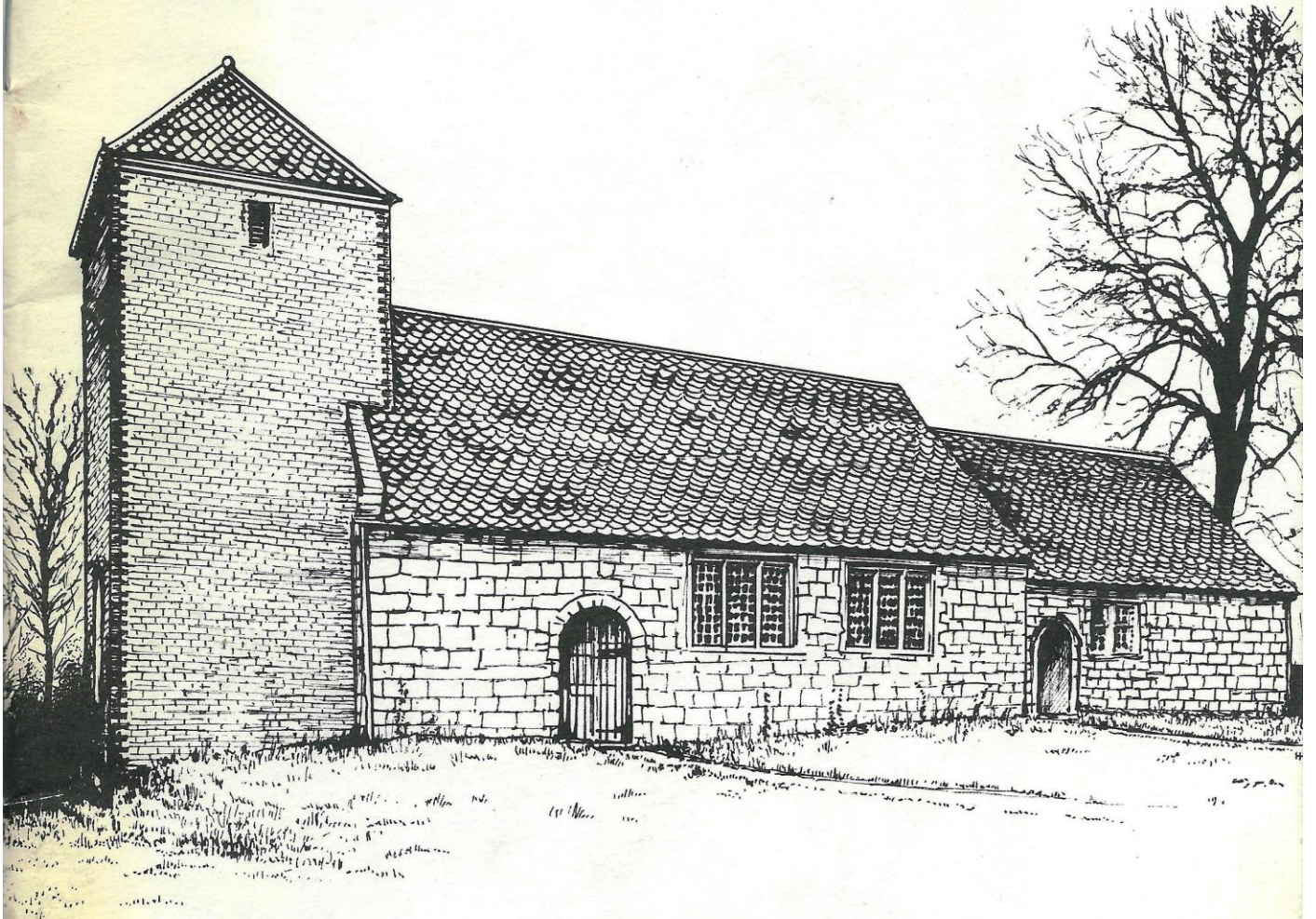


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BULLETIN OF THE YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST



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Out of Town



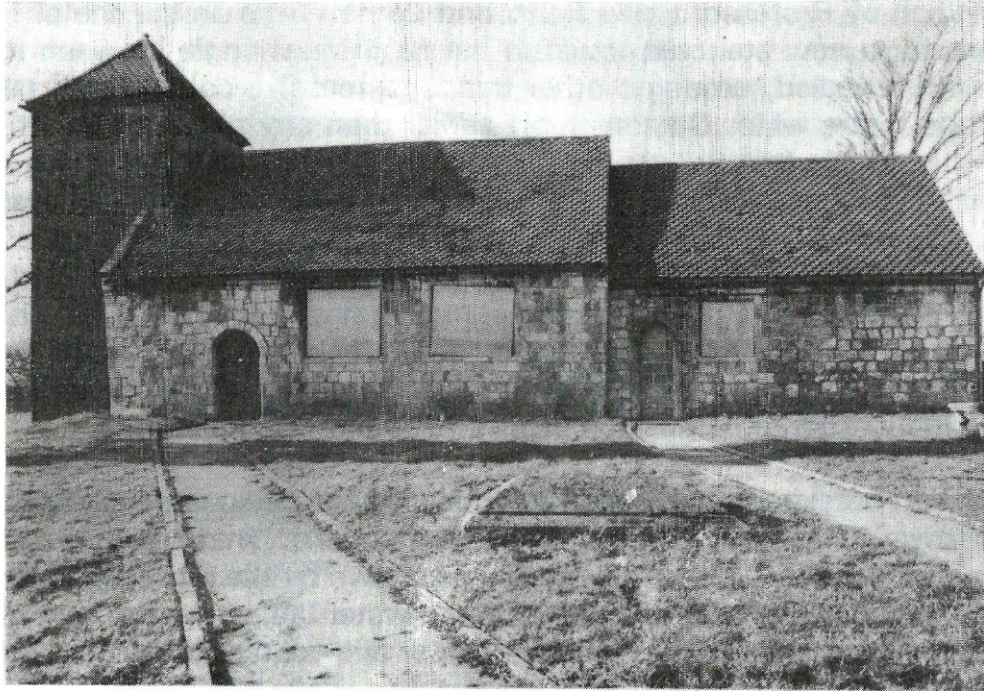
The conversion of the redundant church of Old St Oswald, Fulford to a residential property presented the Trust with the sort of assignment not normally encountered in our day to day activities. Firstly there was the opportunity to examine and record an historic building in a rural setting and secondly the possibility of co-operating in this venture with the Archaeology Department of the University of York.

The small church of St Oswald is situated above the steeply sloping river bank of the Ouse, just south of the present boundary of the city of York close to the point at which there was once a ferry crossing of the river.



Originally built during the 12th century as a chapel of ease by the Benedictine Abbey of St Mary in York, St Oswald's never achieved full parochial status and its congregation gradually declined after a much larger church was built in 1865 to serve the expanding ribbon development alongside the main York — Selby road. Old St Oswald was not immediately abandoned however, and was kept in a fair state of repair, last being restored in 1934 at the cost of £126. For the last twenty years or so the church has been disused and boarded up and the structure was suffering its seemingly inevitable fate as vandalism and the weather took their toll. It is thus fortunate that a purchaser was found willing to expend the resources and expertise necessary to restore the building sympathetically.

A plan of the graveyard and list of the inscriptions was made when the church was declared redundant. Since a large number of headstones from the southern part of the church yard were moved in the early months of 1980 it was necessary to up-date this plan and to record the current location



St. Oswald's Church, Fulford (old church).

of these stones. This type of information, whilst not of great archaeological significance, is required if any further study of an epigraphic or locational analysis nature were to be contemplated and was in this case collected by an enthusiastic group of school children as an afternoon project.

Initial trenching through the graveyard to provide services for the property was shallow and followed the course of the present church-yard path. Although dug through disturbed grave material for much of its length, intact burials were encountered at the extreme base of the trench only, the remainder of the material representing the disturbance to be expected within a graveyard in continuous use for hundreds of years.

The most interesting discovery during this part of the work was a keeled Roman coffin lid lying upside down some two metres south of the south doorway of the church, oriented east-west. It had, most probably, been re-used as a cover for a medieval or later grave but its size and weight dictate that its original site is unlikely to have been far from the church.

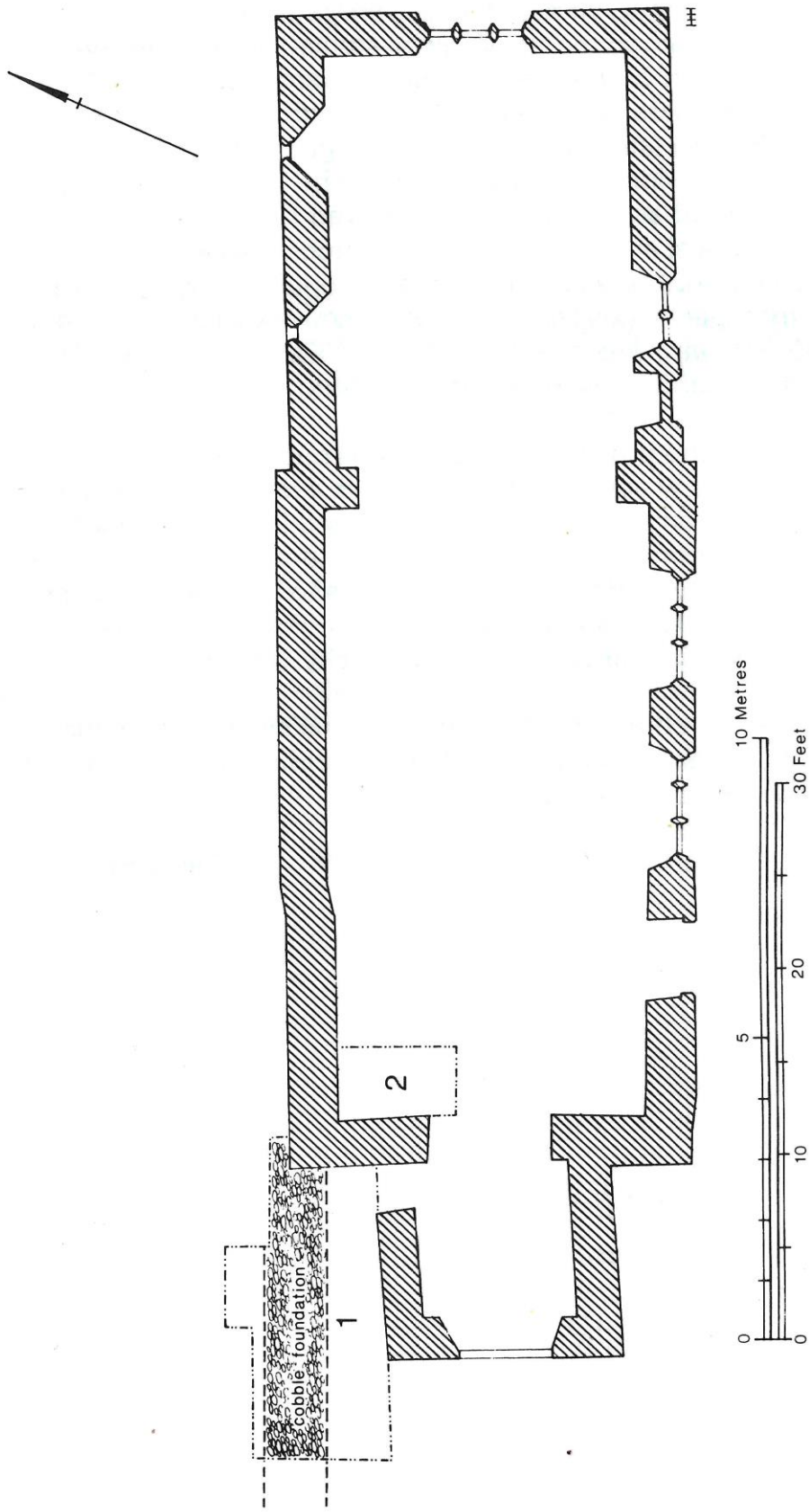
The church itself consists of an 18th-century brick built tower with adjoining nave and chancel constructed largely in limestone ashlar of the late 11th or early 12th century but exhibiting evidence of having been repaired and reconstructed many times in the past.

Excavation by Professor Philip Rahtz and Lorna Watts on the site of foundations for a new staircase tower in the north-west angle between tower and nave revealed, amongst other things, a massive cobble filled trench over one metre wide. Demonstrably earlier than any phase of the church itself this cobble feature was also recorded by the Trust in the north-west corner of the nave prior to the installation of a modern drainage system. Although severely cut by graves and by the foundation trenches of the standing building enough of the feature remained externally to suggest that it had supported a structure on an alignment similar to that of the church but further to the west. Fragments of water-worn Roman tile found amongst the cobbles would perhaps suggest that the feature is post-Roman whilst the stratigraphic position argues for a pre-Conquest date.

Excavation outside also demonstrated the existence below the 18th-century brick tower of roughly coursed stone foundations. That these were of a later date than the 12th-century nave was shown by the presence in one of the lower courses of part of the chamfered water table from the nave. Two pieces of 18th-century brick within the upper two courses of this foundation point to some interference at this date but the weight of the evidence would still suggest that these foundations were originally constructed to support a stone tower of perhaps 13th or 14th-century date. Unfortunately there is no historical documentation relating to any tower at all at St Oswald's.

The structure of the church had never been adequately recorded and it was felt that although the exterior could be safely left as it was to remain unaltered by the conversion a record of the internal surfaces of the walls which were to be obscured for the foreseeable future would be a worthwhile task. This was done by means of measured drawings and rectified photography and the results tended to confirm our fears that whilst the structure was basically a simple one of rectangular nave with a rectangular chancel added at a slightly later date on a slightly different alignment, part of both had been drastically rebuilt to such a degree that little of the original structure remained intact.

It is evident, for instance, that the east wall of the chancel, containing a fine early 14th-century window with two-centred heads and chamfered reveals above three trefoiled lights, has been rebuilt at least three times. Internally this shows as off-sets to the wall, required as it was pushed outwards by movement in the roof timbers, although externally there is less to show as the original masonry was re-erected each time, if occasionally in the wrong place. The final rebuild of this wall involved the removal of part of the three window lights to lower the top of the window so that a barrel-vaulted ceiling could be inserted in Victorian times.



*Plan of St. Oswald's Church: 1. area excavated by Professor P. Rahtz
2. area excavated by the York Archaeological Trust.*

Several interesting fragments of stonework were removed after the recording process was complete so that they can be studied before their eventual return to the church. Part of the shaft of a churchyard cross of late 10th or early 11th-century date was recovered from the north wall of the nave and whilst not being either in first class condition or a good example of its type is nevertheless further evidence of settlement in the area in pre-Conquest times. A finely executed scalloped capital removed from a stub wall constructed where a chancel arch might once have stood was also an unusual find from such a church. It seems unlikely that its origin is this church at all and it may well form part of the large body of stonework which was removed from York Minster after the disastrous fire of 1829 and has since found its way into so many structures in and around York.

In summary, although this project does not rank as one of prime importance amongst the Trust's many activities it has given us a most useful insight into the development of an ecclesiastical building within the immediate environs of the city of York which was not subject to expansive redevelopment during its long history. Rebuilding here seems to have been as a result of necessity rather than taste and this should provide us with an interesting comparison for our work in churches within the city centre.

Examination of the church was made possible by the close co-operation of the owner, Mr Roy Grant, his architect Patrick Lorimer, and the contractors, Messrs Kilvington and Young.

David Brinklow.