

Old St Oswald's Church, Fulford

Interim Report for CBA & Church Commissioners 1980

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Bull CBA Churches Comm 13 (1980), 12 - 15

St Oswald, Fulford, York

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St Oswald's church, Fulford, is a redundant church, currently being converted into a dwelling house. In June 1980 the preliminary work of service trenching was watched and small excavations were made in areas which were to be disturbed by building work. Roman finds included a shard of bottle glass and a coffin lid. Evidence was found of a structure earlier than the present Norman church, which was possibly a pre-Conquest predecessor. The limits of the medieval and later cemetery were located to the south and the foundations of the pre-1070 'Wall Cottage' were recorded.

Topography

The settlement history of Fulford, on a terrace south of the Ouse, is complex. There are three nuclei - Gate Fulford, Water Fulford, and the area around St Oswald's church. The most documented settlement, of manor and village together with the ford which gives the settlement its name, is around the first two. St Oswald's church, has, until recently, been isolated from its settlement, though may not have been so in medieval or earlier times. There was, until recently, a ferry here, approached by a deep hollow way west of the church. This ferry is one possible reason for the location of a church here, which otherwise is a matter for speculation only. References to Roman lead coffins having been found here are erroneous (see, eg, the local guide-book to the village); they were, in fact, from a site on the other side of the Ouse, opposite St Oswald's church (information H Ramm). There are, nevertheless, many recorded Roman finds in the area, including burials (see VCH and Fulford guide-book).

The church

The church is situated close to the river, where there is a steep bank. The ground on which it is built is a metre or so above the highest recent flooding (local information). The dedication to St Oswald might suggest a pre-Norman date but little is known of the church before its recorded licensing for burial at the time of the Black Death. Before this, it is uncertain whether there was burial there. The core of the present structure is of the later 11th or 12th centuries. It has never been fully recorded (eg by the RCHM) as it lies just outside the city boundary. The unity of the nave and chancel is shown by a continuous chamfered string course at eaves level. The chancel is narrower and lower than the nave and there are internal single-splay windows of Norman date on the north side of the chancel. Other windows are of 14th century and later dates and there is a western tower of the late 17th century. No chancel arch survives but there are stubs which probably indicate its former position, incorporating a cushion capital and fragments of a column-drum.

The church flourished in the medieval and later centuries. The churchyard was extended to the south in 1870 over the site of a cottage with a wall. In recent years, however, it has been supplanted by a new church 500m to the south. The old church and its graveyard have been neglected and, to some extent, vandalised. In 1979 it was acquired by Mr Roy Grant for conversion to a dwelling house. This will involve little structural change and the church will, in major respects, remain unaltered, and indeed, preserved for posterity. York is indebted to Mr Grant for shouldering the onerous responsibility of consolidating the structure and saving it from inevitable deterioration.

With the full collaboration of Mr Grant, Mr Lorimer (the architect) and the contractors (Messrs Kilvington and Young), preliminary work was observed and limited excavation was done by the Department of Archaeology in consort with the York Archaeological Trust, whose report on the structure will follow. We would also like to thank Elizabeth Hardcastle, John Bateman, Ken Dark, and Richard Cross for their help in the work.

The graveyard

The graveyard was largely cleared in the spring of 1980, the stones being set around the perimeter. A record exists in the Borthwick Institute of their plan and a list of the inscriptions also exists, which enables the stones to be related to the plan. Although this merely epigraphic recording falls short of modern standards, it will still be possible to record the stones properly and to reconstruct their former position theoretically, allowing location analysis of date, lineage, iconography etc to be done. Some were broken in the process of being moved but it is hoped to preserve all fragments on the site.

The southern exterior (see Fig 3)

A JCB trench was dug for water, gas, and telephone along the line of the churchyard path from the lychgate to the south door. It was shallow (c 0.5m) and caused minimal damage to underlying archaeology. In the southern part, the brick footings of Wall Cottage and some floor levels were recorded but the soil beneath them appeared sterile.

None of the post-1870 graves in this area extended into the trench but in the area of the older churchyard the trench encountered continuous 'grave-earth'. Some skeletons were skimmed at the very base of the trench and bones disturbed from earlier graves were present in all levels.

About 2m south of the south doorway, the keeled lid of a Roman coffin was hit by the JCB and partly displaced. It had been lying (upside down) across the trench on an E-W orientation. It probably marks the position of a medieval or later grave. Its origin is a matter of speculation but its size and weight may suggest that the coffin to which it belonged is not far distant from the church, if not on its site, and was perhaps discovered during foundation or grave digging. A Roman burial ground here provides one model for the location of the church.

The south doorway

The bases of the jambs were uncovered. They end in a chamfered string course similar to that at eaves level. Between the ends of these the medieval threshold foundation (= a sleeper wall across the doorway) remains intact. The medieval threshold itself has been replaced by later blocks. It is evident that the medieval exterior ground level was c. 0.5m lower than it is now; the rise is due to burial. The external rise is doubtless the reason why the interior floor was heightened. The medieval or later stone floor exists still but above this was a wooden floor. Joist holes at a lower level than those of this latest wooden floor show that there have been other earlier wooden floors above the stone one.

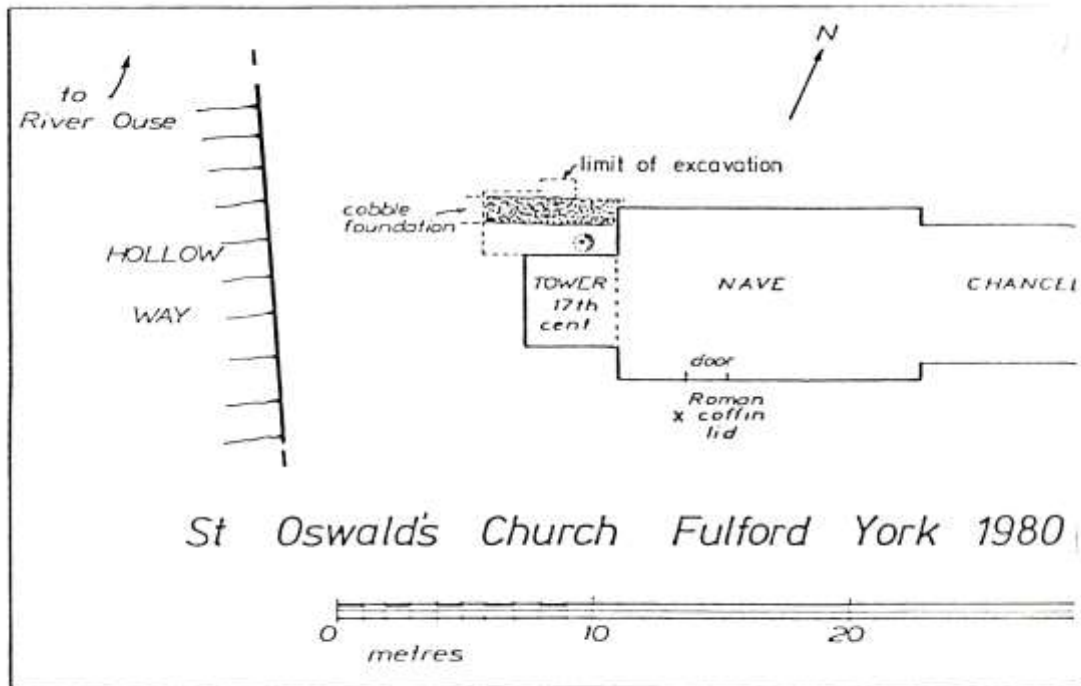


Fig 3

Church Interior

Three grave marker plates were set in the wooden floor. They were formerly marking graves in the stone floor but had been removed from this and set in the new floor. They are at present at The King's Manor. They should be cleaned of corrosion before re-setting.

The tower was cleared of guano, nests, eggs, and dead birds. The latter two were collected by the Environmental Archaeology Laboratory for comparative specimens. The bell and its frame were also removed and taken to the YAT laboratory for professional conservation.

Further work in the church includes the discovery of a fragment of an Anglo-Scandinavian cross, exposure of the medieval roof trusses and a rose-decorated wooden boss, and painted plaster. The YAT will report on these in association with their structural survey. The interior wall memorials were removed and will be re-set in the modern Fulford church.

The NW exterior

An area in the angle of the north face of the present post-medieval tower and the NW corner of the Norman nave is to be the site of a newel stair turret. This will give access to bedrooms in the tower. A small excavation was done here in advance of the contractors' work; an area of about 2m², was excavated to the level of the natural orange-brown sandy clay at about 1.5m below the present north exterior surface, and a further 2-3m² to the west of this was excavated to a depth of c 0.5m.

The earliest finds here were a struck flint flake and a sherd of Roman bottle glass, conceivably from a square cremation bottle. There was also a sherd of pottery with very small rosette stamps, and for this pagan Anglo-Saxon parallels can be adduced, though not in York.

The earliest features were a massive cobble-filled trench, a foundation over 1m wide. This was encountered below the Norman foundation of the NW nave corner and turned from this NW corner westwards. In this direction it was traced for several metres, well beyond the west face of the tower. There was no evidence of a return southwards in this stretch, which appears to preclude the identification of this as part of an earlier tower. It seems possible that this is, in fact, the NE corner of an earlier church lying to the west of the present church, partly under the tower and extending beyond this for an uncertain distance. If this interpretation is correct this earlier (?pre-Conquest) church lay close to the hollow way. Instability of the ground, it is suggested, necessitated its replacement by the Norman church further east, the west wall of the latter being built on the east wall of the former. The instability of the western area continued, however, even with the new church and gave trouble down to the present day.

Another feature which may be associated with this cobble footing is a large (0.5m diameter) post-pit. This lay just south of the E-W cobble footing. A post in this had been set in a padstone of half-burnt coarse limestone and was later dug out. While this might be only a scaffold-post of early date, it could just be an arcade post. In the absence of any other stone evidence here, the cobble footing is interpreted as the foundation for a sill-beam for a wooden

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superstructure. This might be associated with the pre-Conquest cross fragment mentioned above.

The foundations of a tower, possibly earlier than the present one, were also found under its north wall. Five courses survived, the lowest set 0.2m into the natural clay. The upper two courses were butted onto the Norman nave but the lower courses were extended underneath for at least 0.3m. There was buff mortar and tile in the tower courses, neither of which are present in the Norman work. The secondary date (?13th-14th century) was also shown by the incorporation in the tower of a fragment of Norman chamfered string course. There were also two stones retaining some very hard and fine brick-tempered cement, almost certainly of Roman date. This reinforces any suggestion of Roman structures in the vicinity.

The tower courses deviated from horizontal, down to the west, for about the same number of degrees (?3-5), as the present west wall of the Norman nave is out of true vertical. It seems likely that this tower became unstable because of the same instability which had caused the abandonment of the putative earlier church. It was probably this instability (or even collapse) that led to the building of the present brick tower, which now effectively buttresses the Norman church.

The only other features in this area were a scaffold post-hole associated with the medieval tower and the east end of a grave of uncertain date; in this were exposed the feet, legs, and lower pelvis of an immature skeleton (?adolescent or younger).

It may be possible to follow up these interesting results on a later occasion in a more leisurely, scientific, and less rescue-orientated atmosphere. Meanwhile, these preliminary observations will serve to inform interested parties in advance of a full illustrated report.

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July 1980