

# Old St Oswald's Church, Fulford

## York Archaeological Trust – Interim September 1981

1. / 1981  
see letters  
N.B. no fishall records

### St Oswalds Church, Fulford, York

Interim report on excavation September 7-8, 1981

#### Introduction

The 1980 work on the church has been described in an earlier interim report, and there is also a short piece in Interim. The work then comprised observations of main services trenches, rectified photographs of the walls, examination of sections of the inner floor area (both by the YAT), removal and conservation of the bell (by the YAT), and a small excavation in advance of the construction of the new stair turret in the angle between the NW corner of the Norman church and the 18th century tower. Here was located a cobble foundation which appeared to be earlier than the Norman work (both stratigraphically and structurally), especially since it was traced for several metres to the west, well beyond the limits of the standing church or its west tower.

It was postulated that there had been a pre-Norman church west of the present one (an idea supported by the find of a ?10th century cross fragment inside); this had become unstable because of the slope down to the hollow way leading to the Ouse ferry; and that the Norman church had been built to the east of it, its new west wall built approximately on the old east wall of the earlier church (or on the dividing wall between an earlier nave and its sanctuary).

In 1980-81, the church conversion was completed and ready for occupation by Mr Roy Grant, the new owner, by early September. A small area of the NW corner of the nave had been left unconcreted so that we could check our hypothesis by following the cobble foundation of the postulated earlier church eastwards. On September 7-8 we opened an area 3 x 1.75 m alongside the north face of the west part of the north nave wall of the present church. By good fortune, the area had only been minimally disturbed by graves or other features, and features found were relatively intact. Some 1.5 cubic metres of pre-church (buried) soil were excavated north of the foundations.

#### Prehistoric and Roman

In this soil was defined a north-south linear feature, probably the base of a ditch, but conceivably the base of a deep timber slot (the profile could not decisively be seen above the level of the natural yellow-brown sandy clay, in the homogeneous brown sandy soil).

In this soil, in the area of the N-S linear feature, and probably from its upper fill, was a flint blade (?Mesolithic), two Roman sherds (including a ?2nd century rim), a small green melon bead, and a piece of Roman tile.

These Roman finds and others from disturbed levels support the evidence of Roman occupation of the area found in 1980, which included a massive keeled coffin lid (now set up on four pillars in the garden), ?funerary bottle glass, pottery, and tile. The coffin lid suggests burials in the area.

For students of continuity, it may be seen as no coincidence that the N-S linear feature, possibly of Roman date, is precisely on the line of the east wall of the postulated pre-Norman church.

## Anglo-Saxon/Norman

No more finds were made of Saxon date, though a stamped ?pagan sherd was found in 1980. The cobbled foundation was however shown to end some 1.70 m east of the NW corner of the nave, consistent with the earlier interpretation. Its end is now interpreted as the NE exterior corner of the foundation of the earlier church. On this was built the westernmost 1.70 m of the Norman church. East of this, however, a new foundation was built for the Norman work, of layers of sandy clay interspersed with cobbles and quite different in character to the earlier wholly cobble foundation. The new work was slightly (20-30 cm) wider than the old, and butted against it. Both were bedded c. 10 cm into the natural sandy clay; but whereas the east end of the earlier work lay on the softer fill of the base of the ?Roman ?ditch, the Norman builders took their footing to its base.

The postulated north wall foundation of the pre-Conquest church (or of its nave) is c. 90 cm wide. If its east wall foundation was of similar width, then the west wall of the Norman church must oversail it by c. 80 cm. This may have been one cause of the instability of the west end which developed later. It seems anomalous that the Norman builders put in a substantial new footing for their north nave wall east of the earlier church, but built their west wall only partly over the existing footings of the east wall of the earlier church.

The only other observations that may be recorded here are:

(a) the NE corner of the earlier church footing is, for c. 70 cm from the corner, predominantly of small (5 cm) cobbles, whereas the rest is of large (10-15 cm) cobbles; on its surface (perhaps outside where the wall proper would have laid) (whether of timber or stone is uncertain), was a layer of small gravel, perhaps developing by erosion or human movement outside the church corner,

(b) a well-defined builders' layer was located in the eastern part of the cutting. This consisted of stone chippings, pebbles and mortar, at a depth of c. 20-30 cm below the present surface; this is probably that of the Norman church builders,

(c) at a similar level a c. 60 cm wide band of cobbles extended across the cutting from N-S, roughly over the line of the earlier ?Roman ?ditch. The cobbles may be no more than a few stones laid in a soft patch, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that they are a foundation for a light timber wall extending north from the NE corner of the earlier church, conceivably the ?east wall of a lateral porticus. They form a western limit to the Norman layer.

## Medieval

At some date after the 12th century, the NW corner of the Norman church was rebuilt from its footings, probably when the tower was added in the 13th-14th centuries. The 45° chamfer course on this corner was reset a course higher here than the surviving part further east, probably due to a rise in ground level in the meantime. A few 13th-14th century sherds were found in disturbed upper levels.

We are indebted to Roy Grant for permission to carry out this small but rewarding excavation, and for his hospitality during the dig, entertaining us in his splendid new house, which preserves so well the form of its medieval predecessor.

Philip Rahtz  
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10.9.81