

WELL HOUSE, FORMALLY ADJACENT TO THE OLD CHURCH OF ST. OSWALD, FULFORD. AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EVIDENCE, WITH ADDITIONAL REFERENCE TO THE TOWER AND SPIRE BY ALLAN FRANCIS



*Francis Place: Panoramic view looking south from Clifford's Tower. 1705 (Image British Museum)
The artist's note says "Fulford Chapel and Well"*

In 1869 Well House, its buildings and land, was purchased and demolished to extend the graveyard of St. Oswald's to the south. At the same time a wall was built around the south and west sides to a height intended to avoid the problems of flooding and erosion in the graveyard. The conveyance document describes the buildings being sold as, "a cottage/tenement, the barn, stables and hereditaments" (anything subject to inheritance).

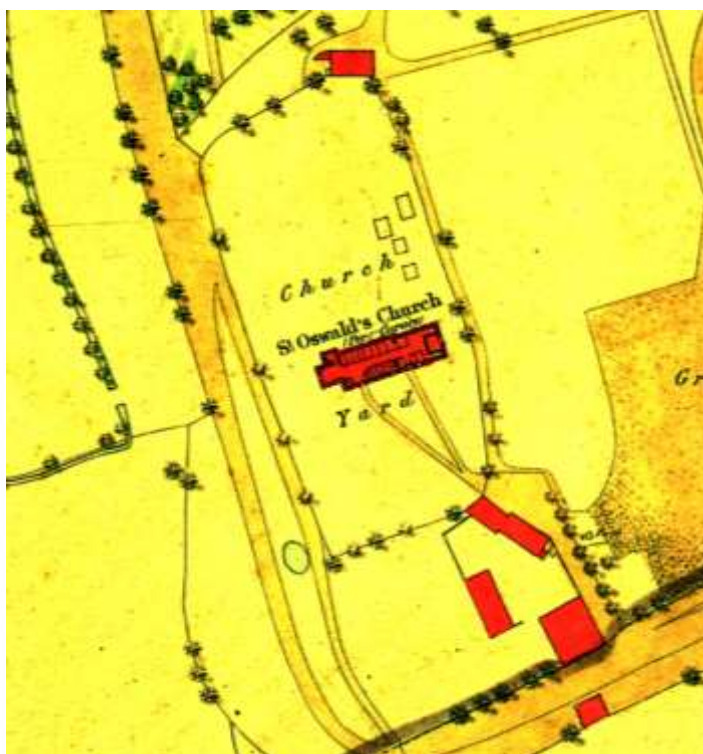
This can be easily identified on the 1852 OS Map, right, which clearly shows buildings, grouped around a small yard. Standing separate from this group and sited approximately where the early 20thC lych gate now stands was a large, square building of approx 9m sq. (30 feet sq).

This building may be what remained of the bathhouse, although its use or function still remains a mystery.

In its earliest incarnation, it may have simply been a freshwater spring, of practical and spiritual significance.

There is evidence of Roman activity in the immediate area; excavations to the north foundations of the chapel tower

have found Roman construction materials in layers associated with a possible Anglo-



Saxon church. Later interest in the healing properties of spring water (e.g. Lady Well and Piking Well, both on New Walk) may have caused the creation of a building around the spring and associated service buildings and cottage. There may be parallels with Lady Well house that was occupied by an innkeeper in 1745.

Pickering and Briddon (A History of Fulford, 1975) refer to Well House on a map of 1772 and are inclined to describe this as “a structure covering a well”, and the enclosure map, although torn and damaged shows no buildings. It is clear, however, from the Place drawing of 1705 that a group of buildings to the south of the chapel existed.

The Enclosure award documents of 1759 indicate that Well House was owned by John Taylor, the then lord of the manor, it is described as being part of the Great Ings and occupied by Ellen Watson who pays £14 a year rent. This figure would suggest a commercial use as no further description is given.



Part of the 1745 Enclosure Award Map (York Explore)

The existence of a cottage, barn and stabling arranged around a yard, (the land to the west at this time, is part of the Ings), is suggestive of an inn, much as in the case of Lady Well House. Bernard Ackroyd whom, in addition to being a local landowner, is listed as a brewer owned the land to the east. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the detached spring/bath house was a financial concern and may have been the focus of the enterprise.

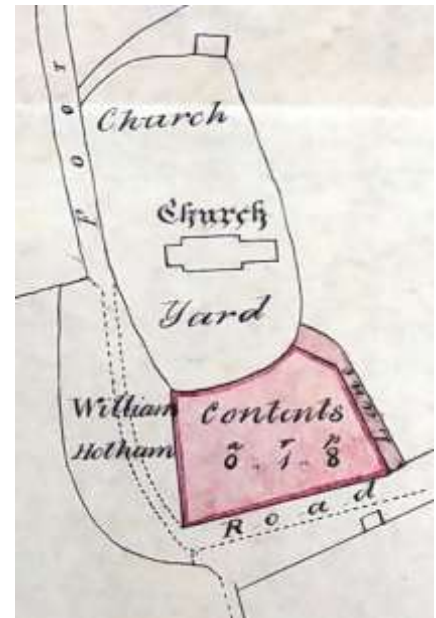
Further evidence for the identification of this building as the well or bathhouse comes from the 1871 census analysis –enumeration of district 27:

“Parliamentary boundary..... including.....Church Lane the right side of Church Lane to the river Ouse thence to the well or bath house.....”

This is an extract of a very short description of the boundary starting and finishing, in a clockwise circular route, at The Light Horseman. What is interesting is that the well or bath house is recorded as a point of reference on the boundary, which suggests that it is the large building fronting on to the former Church Lane, now St. Oswald’s Road. The other buildings to the north would be within the area defined. It should be noted that this description must predate 1871 as, by this time, the buildings had been cleared.

The renovation work in 1832, including the installation of a lion's head outlet spout, may be linked to the use of natural water sources as public bathing houses, however, this was apparently short lived as the water supply was cut off and the building was recorded as in bad condition in 1853. This might explain why it is not specifically listed on the conveyance, where the main buildings are described as, "now standing." and it can be assumed, it is simply part of the message.

At the time of the sale of the Well House land to enlarge the graveyard, William Hotham of Fulford House, described in 1871 census as a retired brewer, owned the property. It was lately occupied by John Brown, with the current tenant being, Charles Muld. As there are no records of a Muld living in Fulford, it may be a misspelling of Medd. There is a family of a John Brown and one of Charles Medd in the 1871 census, both described as gardeners and living near each other on Front Street. Hotham may have employed them, with Well house provided as accommodation. The adjacent plan shows the Well House lands sold to enlarge the churchyard in 1869.



When the service trench was dug in 1980, evidence of foundations and floor levels were recorded which appeared to relate to the Well House buildings. On the basis of this information a small test pit was opened on what was thought to be the position of the north wall of the south building. Domestic pottery was found dating from 1750-1800, together with several bases of hand-blown wine/port bottles of the same period. At 2-3 feet, gravel and large river stones were found, possibly all that remained of the foundations of a substantial wall of a building.

In conclusion, the Well House and the building to the west of the group, certainly pre-date the 1705 Place drawing, where they can be clearly seen and the well or spring may have its origins in prehistory. The tantalising fragments of early occupation that has been found together with a source of fresh water, surely indicates some form of settlement near by.

The earliest image that is known of both St. Oswald's chapel and Well House, is the Francis Place panoramic view 1705, looking south from Clifford's Tower (shown above). It is probable that the image was created using the camera obscura, a process of projecting an image through a small hole in a card (basic method), onto a surface in darkened room/area, from where the inverted image is traced onto paper. This technique was popular from the second half of the C16th as an aid for creating accurate drawings/paintings. This would explain the detail shown in the far distance of this panoramic view. Miraculously, in the distance can be seen St. Oswald's and buildings peeping out from behind. On close analysis, the building to the west of the Well House group is much as it later appears in the 19thC plan, however, towering above all the other buildings, is the separate building to the south.

In the Nicholson drawing of 1820s, which is also from the north west and surprisingly, almost at the same angle, can be seen part of the group of these buildings. The building to the west of the group, again, is largely unchanged, but the building to the south is much reduced in height and the roof can be just glimpsed through the line of vision. (See the plan showing Nicholson's viewpoint from where he was standing).

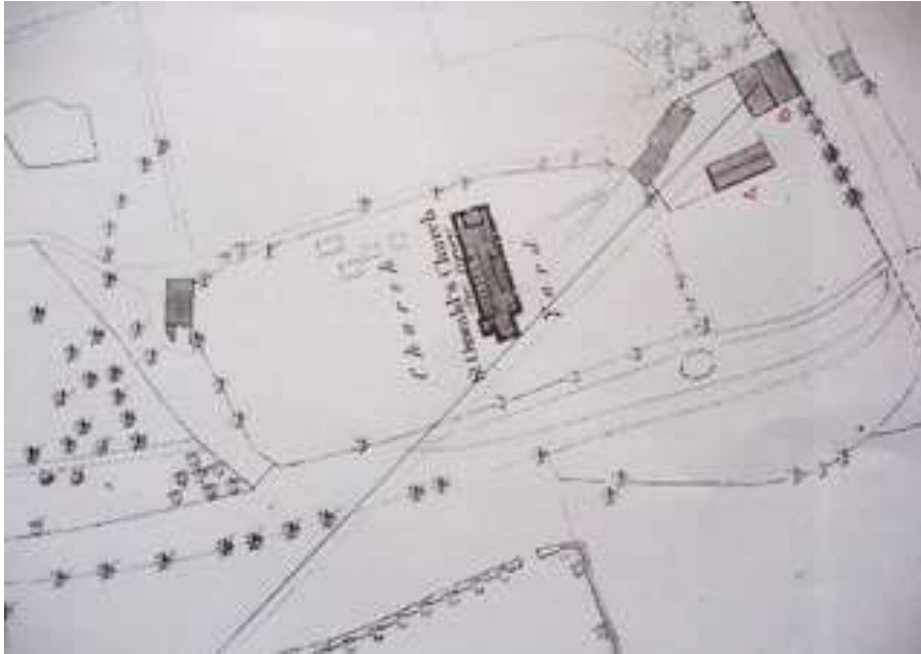


Image 1

Image 1 is a mid C19th plan showing the Church and buildings. Superimposed is the sight line and field of vision of Nicholson as he recorded the church. Beyond the church can be seen the whole of building A and part of the roof of building B.



Image 2

Image 2 is the drawing by Francis Nicholson. He may have been standing on the east bank of the river, with the ings in partial flood, hence the reflected image on the water, or he may have been on the west bank looking across. The ground falls away to the south of the church; consequently, the Well House group of buildings are on a lower level.

Judging by the relative height of the building visible, to the church, it would appear to be of two stories. The section of roof between this building and the church is actually the roof of the substantial building, the south wall of which would have been where the current south boundary wall is with St. Oswald's road, to the east of the lychgate.

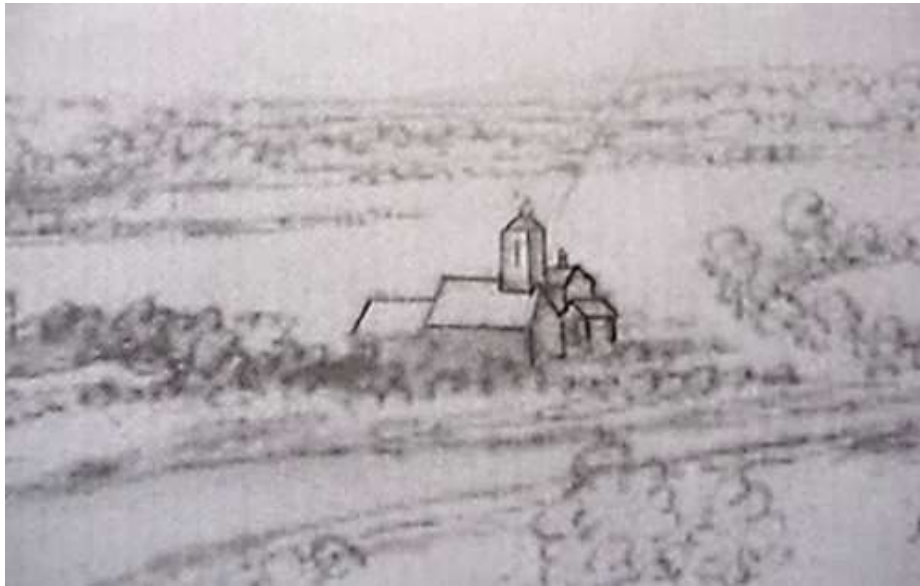


Image 3

Image 3 is the Francis Place drawing of 1705. Although this drawing observed from approximately 1 mile from the church it shows a remarkably clear image of the church and Well house. When the digital image is enlarged, surprising information becomes apparent. A closer examination of the original, I am sure would confirm what can be deduced from this image.

Regarding Well House, when the information from the map and the drawing of Nicholson are considered, the gable-ended house nearest the church would appear to be much as it was 120 years later, however, the building to the south is seen towering above the church. This building was on a much lower level to the church and therefore would have been of considerable height. By the 1820's the roof height has been significantly lowered.



**George Nicholson's 1827 drawing of the church
(Image York Explore)**

St. Oswald's Bell Tower and Steeple.



*The earliest image of St Oswald's, showing the church without a tower and with windows in the west wall of the nave
A bell-cote appears to be rising above the roof of the nave
Samuell Parson's Map of Dringhouses 1644 (Image York Explore)*

From what few references there are to maintenance in the ecclesiastical records, the use of the word 'steeple' rather than tower would appear to indicate the existence of a steeple from at least the mid C16th.

Archbishop's visitation. 1577. 'The steeple is in decay'.

Archdeacon's visitation 1721. ' The east side of the steeple to be now plastered where awanting'.

There is no evidence of a tower in the Francis Place drawing of 1710, but the steeple is clearly visible. Prof. Eric Gee in his survey stated that the foundations of the tower dated from C14th therefore it can reasonably assumed that at sometime after this date but no later than 1577, the tower was removed and replaced by a steeple, built into the roof of the nave. Around 1795, the brick tower was built on the old stone foundations, but surprisingly, apart from the beautiful drawing of 1644 by Samuell Parson's. there is no formal record of the removal of the steeple and the building of the new tower, even though this would have been a significant expense.

The work carried out in the early part of the C19th gives a clue as to what may have been roof work following the removal of the "steeple". The joist slots of a substantial crossbeam at eave height indicate that the steeple may have been 12' square and located at the west end of the nave. It would only have been possible to have built a gallery, as happened at this time, once the steeple was removed.

Removal of the steeple would have resulted in a gaping hole in the roof and the need for major repair to the roof structure. The completed rebuild may have looked rather rough; bearing in mind the roof was ancient and already altered to take the steeple. This may explain why the plaster barrel vaulting was carried out.



Image 4

This Historic England photograph is looking from the Chancel through the nave towards the tower and shows the roof and cross-timbers. It was taken in the 1960s, when the church was still in use as a mortuary chapel.

Allan Francis,
St. Oswald's Hall,
January 2018.

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Additional illustrations added by Christopher Rainger, Sept. 2020