

## A Church by the River

Before 1866, when the new St Oswald's was built on Main Street, Fulford villagers walked half a mile to worship at this small 12<sup>th</sup> Century church. Owned by St Mary's Abbey until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, it functioned as a daughter chapel of St Olave's in Marygate, where parishioners were required to take their dead for burial.

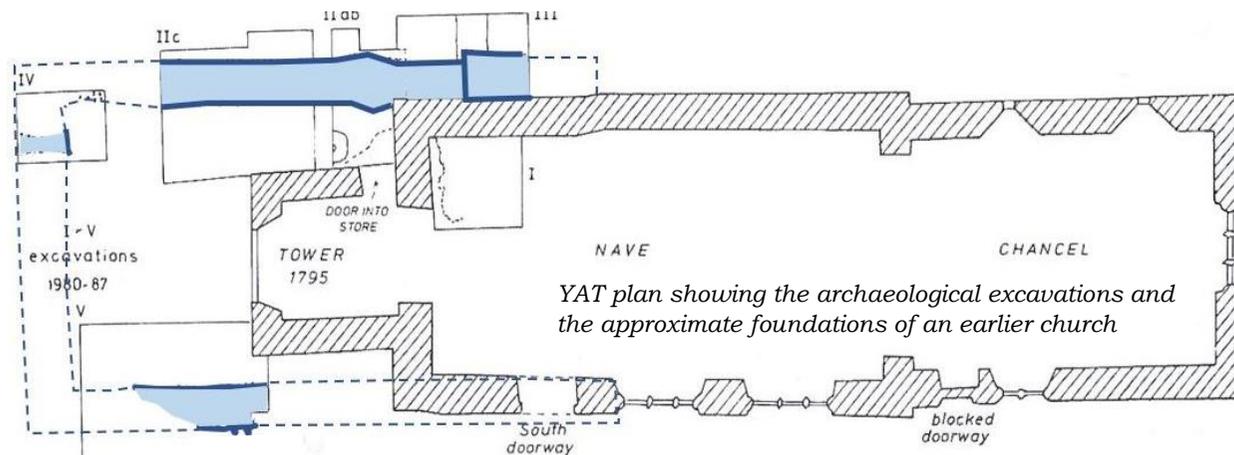
Its riverside location suggests this was an ancient crossing point. The river was very shallow here at low tide until 1757, when Naburn Weir was built. There was a landing stage here and on the west bank, a track across the Knavesmire is shown on the 1852 Ordnance Survey map, although a 1624 map of Dringhouses does not show this route.

There were springs near the church and a well where the lych gate now stands. In 1832, a lion's head was installed to disgorge water from the well. A surprising number of churches dedicated to St Oswald in the north of England have sacred wells close by.

Oswald was king of Anglian Northumbria from 634 to 642, when he was killed by the Mercian king, Penda. He had brought the Celtic monk Aiden to spread Christianity in his realm and was quickly venerated as a saint. Parts of his body were distributed as holy relics and his head is thought to lie with St Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral.

St Olave's church in Marygate, was founded in 1035 by Siward, the Earl of Northumbria, and he was buried there. His estates included Fulford, so perhaps the first St Oswald church may also date from this time.

Siward's successor, Tostig Godwinson, was killed at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. His widow, Judith of Flanders, promoted the cult of St Oswald in her homeland.



## Early Origins

During the 1980s, when the building was converted into a private house, archaeologists from the University of York and York Archaeological Trust dug trenches outside the tower and inside the nave. A detailed study was also made of the building, enabling its history and many alterations to be better understood.

The west end of the nave was found to be partly built on the cobble foundations of an earlier, pre-Norman church, situated mostly to the west of the nave. (The excavations and cobbled foundations are shown above; *found* in blue, *projected* dotted)

Another important discovery was part of a 10<sup>th</sup> century stone cross, built into the masonry of the north wall of the nave. Archaeologists also found a sherd of Anglian pottery, decorated with a small rosette stamp.

Roman finds included tegulae, sherds of pottery, a melon shaped bead, pieces of roof tile and glass likely to be from a cremation bottle. A Roman stone coffin lid was found just outside the main door, similar to others found in Victorian gravel pits nearby.

The earliest finds were Mesolithic flints, suggesting human activity in the area since the end of the last Ice Age.

## The Building

The church retains its simple 12<sup>th</sup> century layout, with two original Norman windows on the north wall of the chancel. The main door has been rebuilt at some time using the 12<sup>th</sup> century masonry.

Some of the wall masonry has been replaced and the large east window is 14<sup>th</sup> century. The south windows are all 17<sup>th</sup> century.

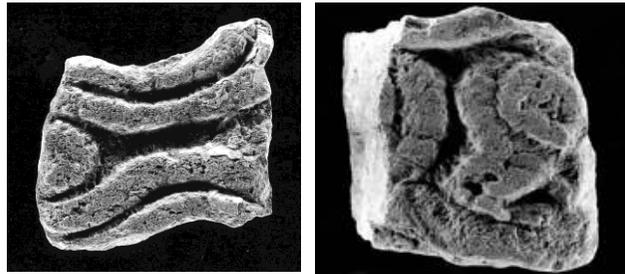
A record of 1577 tells of a 'decayed steeple' and archaeologists found that the present brick tower of 1795, was built on the 14<sup>th</sup> century foundations of an earlier tower.

It seems the medieval tower was demolished and replaced with a belfry on the roof of the nave, as seen below on this picture of 1624, the earliest we have found. This also shows windows on the north side and west end of the nave.



Detail from Samuel Parsons Plan of Dringhouses. Image York Explore

## The Stone Cross



*Two faces of the cross. Images: Corpus of A-S Sculpture*

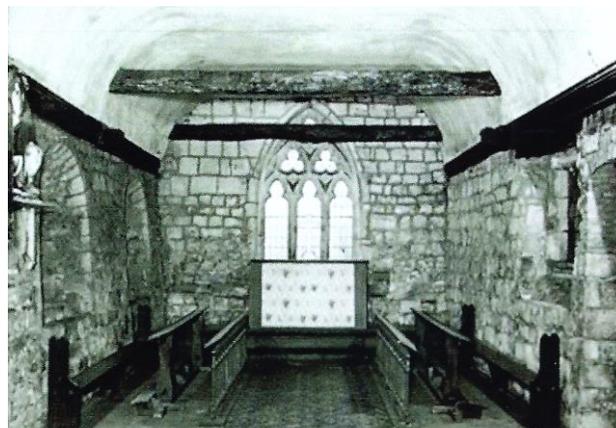
During the detailed examination of the building, part of the lateral arm of a stone cross was discovered in the north wall of the nave. Experts have dated it to the 10<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Scandinavian period, perhaps before the first church was built.

Standing some 2m tall and close to the river bank, it would have attracted people to the site to hear the Christian message from travelling preachers.

Traces of gesso indicate that it was probably painted. Carving on one side has been interpreted as a head and shoulders with long hair, similar to baptismal scenes on Durham crosses.

The other side has curving lines which look similar to those on arms of the 10<sup>th</sup> century cross at Stonegrave in North Yorkshire (pictured right).

The cross may pre-date the first church and could have been a focus for preaching and baptism, using water from the sacred well, or immersion in the Ouse.



*The chancel in 1967. Image: Historic England*

### How to find out more...

In 2017, Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society organised a Festival of Ideas conference on the *Mystery of old St Oswald's*. Expert speakers discussed the archaeology and history of the church, the significance of its riverside location and the implications of the 10<sup>th</sup> century stone cross fragment which was found in the building.

Reports from the 1980s archaeological investigations have been kindly passed to FFH by York Archaeological Trust and can be seen on the FFH website.

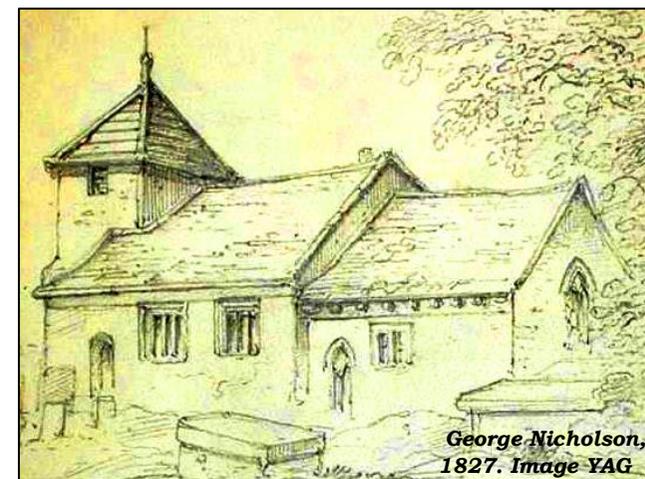
A full report on the church will be published by the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society in 2020.

We wish to thank Dr. Ailsa Mainman for her support to the work of FFH in bringing to light the story of this delightful little church.

Publication of this leaflet has been supported by PLACE (People, Landscape and Cultural Environment of Yorkshire, [www.placeuk.com](http://www.placeuk.com))

Researched and published by Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society (FFH). Details of meetings, membership and the history of the area can be found at: [www.ffhyork.weebly.com](http://www.ffhyork.weebly.com)

# The old Church of St Oswald



**Why was this 12<sup>th</sup> century church built close to the River Ouse and so far from Fulford village?**

**Why was it dedicated to a 7<sup>th</sup> century King of Northumberland?**

**Why were the foundations of an earlier church and a stone from a 10<sup>th</sup> century cross found here?**

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*The old church is now a private house, so please respect the privacy of the owners*