

St. Olave's Church, Fritwell, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 5255 2941

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

June 1995

ST. OLAVE'S CHURCH, FRITWELL, OXFORDSHIRE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT
NGR SP 5255 2941

1. INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief during June 1995 at St. Olave's Church. The church is situated to the south of the C16 manor house in Fritwell - a village which is located just off the B4100, between Bicester and Banbury (Fig.1).

An existing drainage trench was deepened around the church, and new pipes installed, in order to counteract the damaging effects of damp to the walls. Additional trenches were dug to the north and south of the church (Fig. 2). The trenches were dug by the contractor by hand, and with the use of a small 'Kubota' JCB. The plans for the work were devised by Peter J.R. Bradley (Chartered Architect, Buckingham). The trenches extended to the west end of the churchyard, where two large soakaway pits were dug. Copper tubes were set into the walls of the church to facilitate drainage to the new soakaway.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

St. Olave's Church dates to the middle of the C12, and the north door survives from the nave of the Norman church. The earliest known vicar was Ralph (1160), when this church was under the patronage of St. Frideswides Priory, Oxford. In 1531 St. Olave's came under the patronage of Henry VIII. Various individual patrons maintained the church until it came under the patronage of Wadham College, Oxford, in 1935.

The church gets its name from St. Olaf (b. 995, d. 1030), who was a Norwegian king and a devout Christian. He fought in England against the Danes c. 1010, and was opposed to slavery and pagan worship. Sometime after his death, his perfectly preserved body was exhumed from a site near the present Trondheim Cathedral (Norway). It was found to be in a state of perfect preservation (probably due to the salty nature of the sand in which he was interred), and thereafter he attained 'cult' status throughout parts of Europe.

Urban churches were often named as a result of travel, trade and international connections, whereby travellers to Europe came into contact with kings and saints. The rapid spread of the cult of St. Olaf is indicated by his appearance as a dedicatee in both Exeter and York before 1066. Churches bearing his dedication were to be found in Chichester, Chester, Exeter, Norwich and London (nearly all of which had mercantile commercial connections). Quite why a small Oxfordshire village/hamlet church with no obvious 'international connections' should have chosen or had bestowed upon it the dedication of St. Olaf is unclear.

It is known that rural paganism was deeply entrenched in the countryside from the dark ages to the start of the medieval period and that the spread of Christian tradition gathered momentum in the corresponding period. Pagan places of worship were

gradually replaced by Christian churches, often on or near to the pagan sites. It may be that Fritwell was a site of Pagan worship, and in the gradual 're-education' of the rural populace a Christian church built here. Choosing the name of Olaf, whose cult status and devout Christian beliefs were legendary by the C12, would have been a clear departure from Pagan culture.

In 1865 the church was restored, as was the case of many churches in the mid-late Victorian period. The restoration of the chancel was carried out by George Edmund Street, who also rebuilt the west tower. The pulpit and reredos are also credited to Street.

Conservation work for St. Olaves is supported by English Heritage.

3. RESULTS

The drainage trenches excavated to the north and south of the church through the graveyard were generally 0.50-0.65 m deep (the depth increasing to the west to aid the water flow) and 0.40 m wide. A layer of light reddish brown clay loam [2] up to 0.50 m thick was observed in the trench sections beneath the topsoil [1]. The soil [2] was mixed, containing brick and limestone fragments, occasional human bones, and patches of sandy clay. The bones were reinterred in the pipe trench.

Two soakaway pits were dug at the ends of both trenches. Both pits were of 1.50 m deep, and measured 1.50 m x 1.80 m. Natural grey clay [9] at the base of the pits was sealed by a mid dark grey-brown clay subsoil [10].

The trenches dug in the graveyard did not reveal any features or structures, and were not deep enough to disturb graves. The soakaway pits fortunately avoided any burials.

The trench surrounding the church walls was dug to a depth of 0.30 m and was 0.35 m wide. The trench revealed offset footings below the church walls in several places:

A substantial footing [6] was exposed beneath the east wall of the north aisle (Fig. 2, 5). One visible course of roughly hewn limestone blocks extended for a length of 4.30 m, with the offset tapering from 0.20 m away from the wall, to 0.04 m away from the wall. The footing was 0.12 m deep, and was bonded with a hard grey mortar. There was no corresponding offset beneath the west wall of the north aisle.

A portion of an offset footing [3] comprising large limestone blocks bonded with hard gritty mortar was present beneath the SE wall of the south aisle. The masonry projected 0.30 m away from the S aisle wall, and was at least 0.13 m deep. The westward extension of the footing had been truncated by previous renovation work: the footing extended for 2 m.

Beneath the north wall of the chancel lay four visible courses of offsets [5], the lowest of which projected 0.16 m away from the wall (Fig. 3 and 4). The offsets were constructed of roughly hewn limestone blocks and were bonded with a hard yellowish-grey mortar. The courses of stones were laid such that they formed a gently curving arc

beneath the wall. The reason for this construction technique was not clear. It may of course relate to an internal structure beneath the chancel floor such as a tomb. The uppermost course of stones corresponds to the height of the present ground surface of the churchyard.

Two buttresses appear to have been added to the east wall of the chancel: both seem to have been bonded to the existing wall, rather than being integral in its construction. The NE buttress [8] had a short length of offset footing [4] beneath its north face (Fig. 4). The footing comprised limestone blocks, and extended for a length of 0.63 m.

The trenches were backfilled with plastic drainage pipes and gravel.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results from this watching brief, whilst limited in nature, shed a little light on the development of St. Olave's Church. It is noticeable that all of the visible offsets are located beneath walls on the eastern side of the church, and that both buttresses are positioned against the east wall of the chancel. It may be therefore that the ground was less stable beneath the east side of the church, and the walls required a greater level of support. The offset footings would have spread the weight of the load bearing walls, whilst the (later) buttresses would have strengthened the E wall of the chancel.

It is just possible that some of the offsets relate to an earlier building (did Fritwell have a Saxon/pagan place of worship?), but the evidence is thin. That the offset beneath the east wall of the north aisle is on a different alignment to the wall proper is surely of some significance, and represents the best available evidence for a precursor to the present building. Should further work within St. Olave's take place, for example beneath the floor of the nave, then it might be possible to answer this question.

If the top course of the north chancel offset represents the base of the wall construction, rather than an internal tomb, then it appears that the ground level of the church has changed little over the centuries. This is often not the case in well used churchyards, where soil is redistributed around the churchyard after each grave is dug. This would therefore suggest either a comparatively low rate of internment here, or an agreed policy of soil removal.

Of note was the 'shadow' of a former arch window in the NE corner of the chancel wall, which clearly shows as a difference in the stonework. It is not possible to demonstrate when the window was removed, but it seems likely that it formed part of Street's reordering of the chancel in the 1860's.

No pottery was recovered during the excavations, and modern brick and ceramic drain fragments were not retained.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Morris, R. Churches in the Landscape, 1989

St. Olave's, Fritwell, Church Guide Book

Pevsner, N. and Sherwood, J. Oxfordshire, Buildings of England

TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

CTX	TYPE	DEPTH	LENGTH	COMMENTS
1	Layer	0.15 m	-	Topsoil
2	Layer	0.50 m+	-	Churchyard soil
3	Structure	0.13 m	2.0 m	Offset footing beneath nave wall (S)
4	Structure	0.10 m	0.63 m	Offset footing beneath NE corner buttress
5	Structure	0.30 m	1.32 m	Offset footing beneath N wall of the chancel
6	Structure	0.12 m	4.30 m	Substantial offset footing beneath NE wall of the nave
7	Structure	-	-	Church walls
8	Structure	-	-	NE corner buttress
9	Layer	0.32 m	-	Natural subsoil
10	Layer	-	-	Natural grey clay

J. Hiller
Oxford Archaeological Unit
June 1995

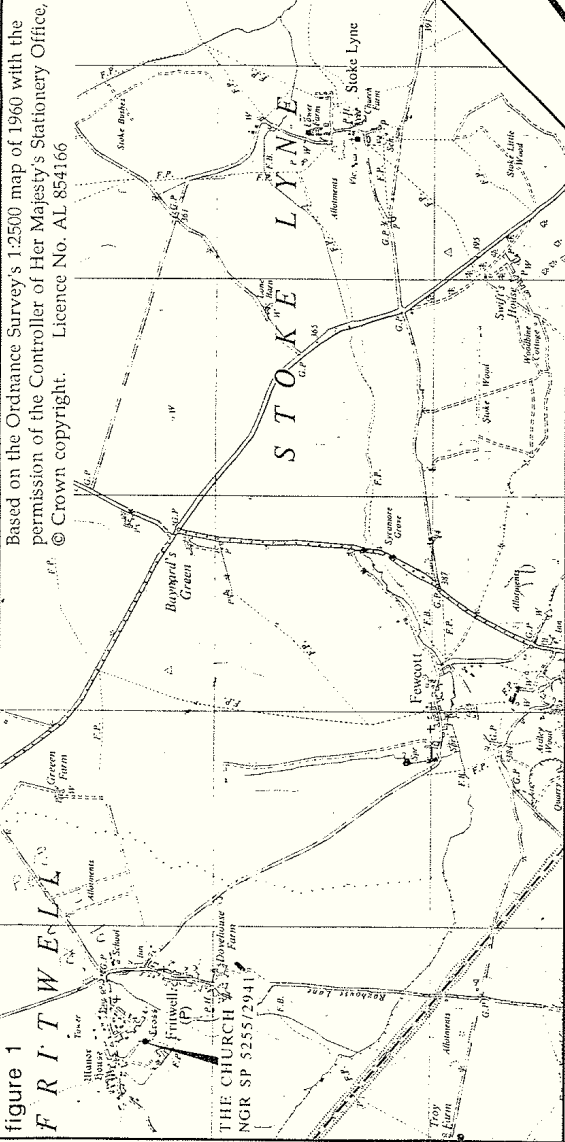
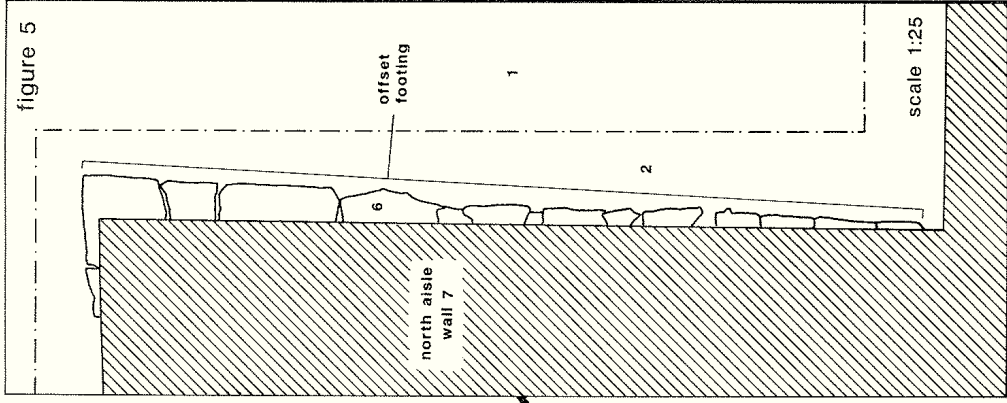
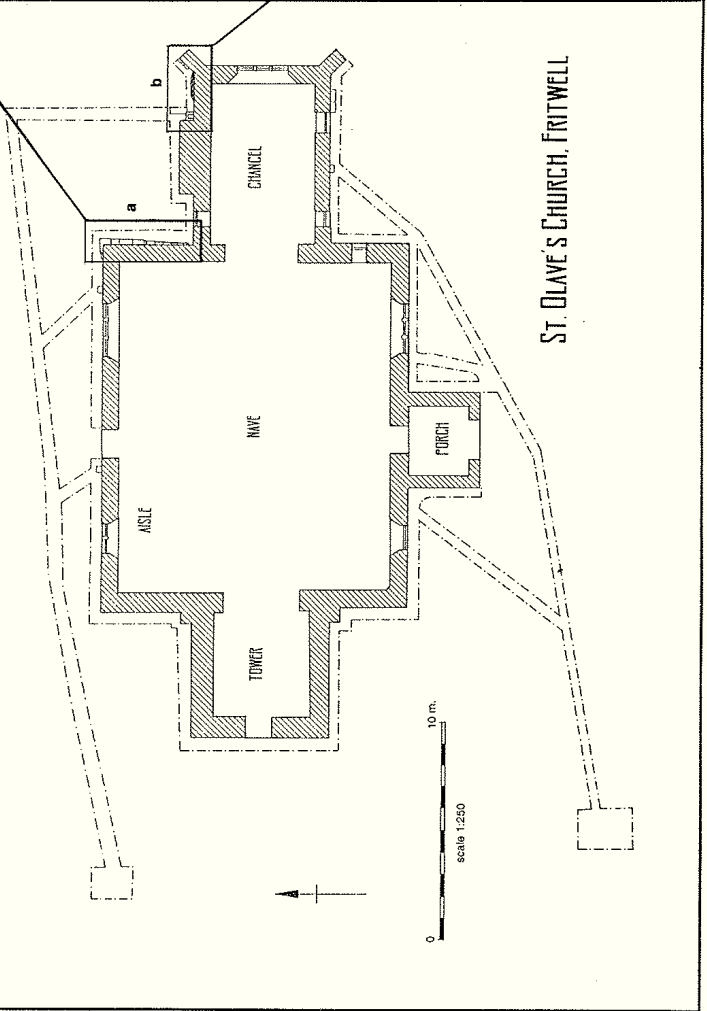
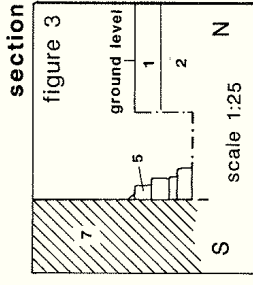


figure 2

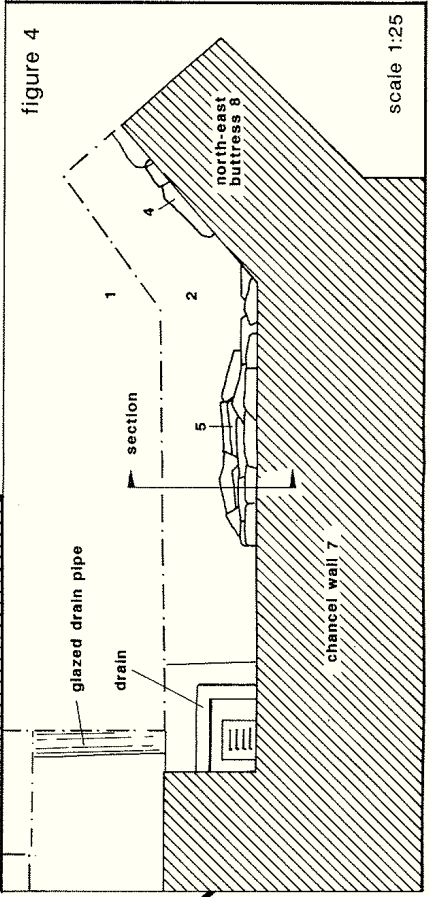


detail a

FROC 95



detail b





OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

46 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EP
Head Office Tel: 01865 243888 Fax: 01865 793496
Post-Excavation Tel: 01865 204642 Fax: 01865 204637



Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited. Registered Charity Number: 285627
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Office: 46 Hythe Bridge Street