



*Figure 1: A watching brief at St Nicholas Church, East Challow, Wantage revealed the foundations of a medieval buttress which was removed when a window was inserted in the 16th century.*

## IN A COUNTY CHURCHYARD

Churches and churchyards are among the most evocative places in our historic environment. Churches have been at the centre of local communities for a thousand years (sometimes more), and the very fabric of everyday life is woven into their arches, walls and gravestones. Historians and archaeologists have an obvious interest in such sites, and Church Archaeology has become a recognised subject in its own right. The OAU has developed a high level of expertise in this field, with the ability to study the churches themselves and their cemeteries. Our director, David Miles, advises the Diocese of Oxford on the archaeological implications of developments in its churches (even the smallest jobs can reveal important remains), and our field team regularly carries out watching briefs, evaluations and excavations at churches. This newsletter describes some of our recent work in this field.



Several local churches have recently been the subject of small scale investigation by the Unit. Many churches, through appeals and donations, are implementing programmes of restoration and renovation both inside and outside their buildings. These improvements usually take the form of updating drainage facilities, installing new under-floor heating and restoring historic masonry. The general level of work usually requires little more than a 'watching brief', but on occasion small excavations are undertaken if sensitive deposits are revealed. The work provides an opportunity to observe any historic masonry, and can shed light on the restoration work undertaken at some of these churches in the Victorian period.

### ST MARY THE VIRGIN, CHARLBURY

Four small trenches were excavated in advance of the installation of new radiators (see figure 2). The Victorian tiled walkways and wooden floorboards were removed by the contractors prior to the OAU investigation.

Excavation of one of the trenches beneath the south arcade revealed a limestone wall with a one metre gap in the masonry, which must have been a doorway. The wall was butted internally by a compact mortar floor. It is known that the south arcade dates to the thirteenth century; therefore it is likely that the wall dates to the original Norman construction of the church. The fact that the thirteenth century porch (still in use today) is in line with the former doorway in the masonry is surely not coincidental. Enigmatic traces of stonework revealed beneath the north arcade might suggest that the original church was a small rectangular building. The insertion of fresh ashlar masonry beneath a north aisle pier base and underpinning of these blocks with a layer of limestone pieces was observed: this work probably dates to the restoration of the church aisles by J.C Buckeridge in 1874. Three graves of uncertain date were revealed.

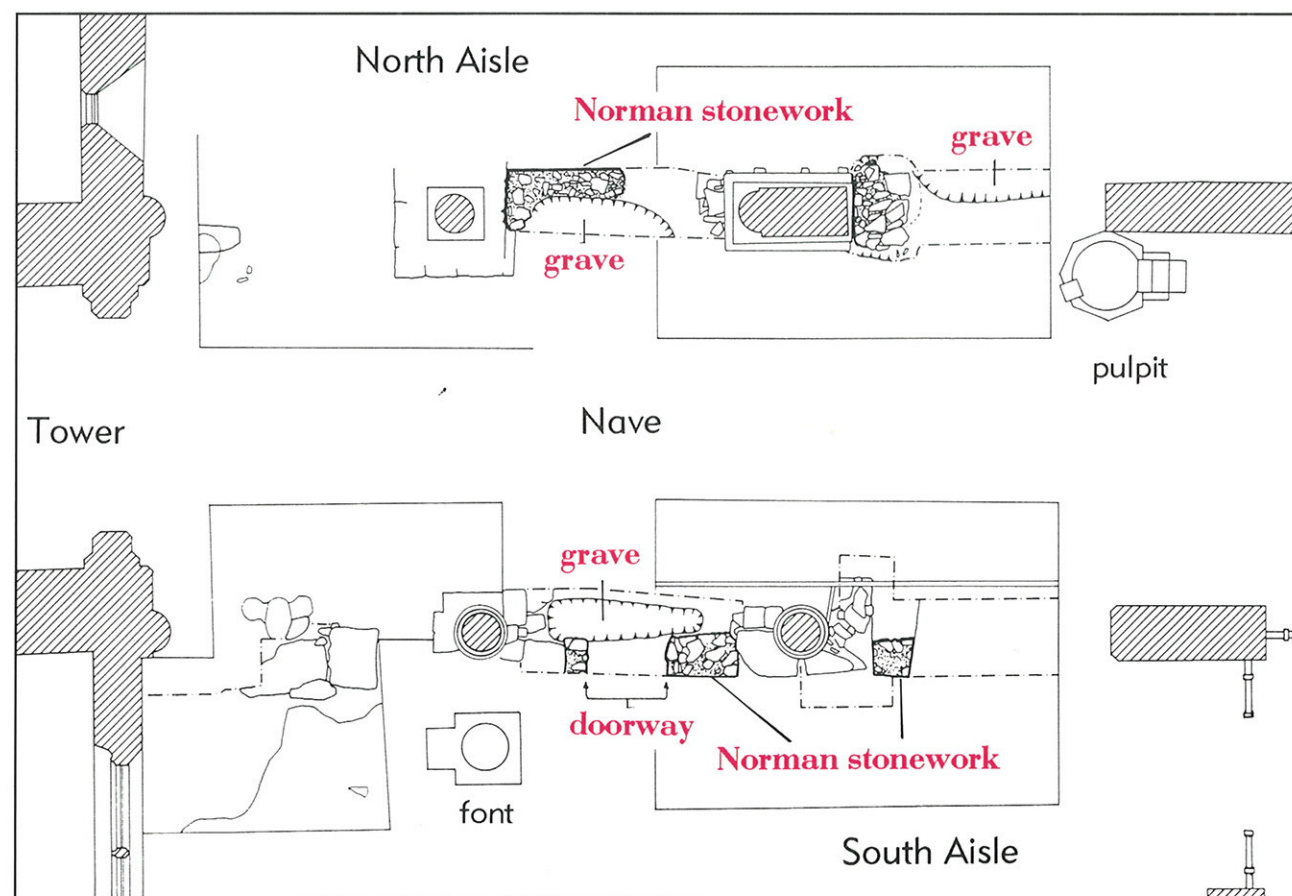


Figure 2: Plan of St Mary the Virgin Church, Charlbury (scale 1:100) showing the location of the original Norman stonework.

### ST MARY THE VIRGIN, IFFLEY

The church of St Mary the Virgin, Iffley was constructed between 1175–82, and was enlarged in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Excavation of a new drainage trench around the church walls provided an opportunity to examine the foundations and buttresses of the building. A course of chamfered stones was revealed 0.30 m below the present level of the churchyard, and probably indicated the original ground level. The build up of soil here demonstrates the variations in churchyard ground levels caused by grave digging; in this case obscuring the original masonry.

Careful observation of the footings and buttresses, and the relationships between them, provides an opportunity to observe how churches develop and enables us to compare the structural with the historical evidence. In this case the original Norman method of chancel construction was to build offset foundations prior to constructing the wall proper. More offsets were revealed beneath the corner of the chancel walls, constructed during the thirteenth century extension of the chancel. To counteract the effects of this enlarged chancel, four buttresses were added to the north and south walls, probably in the fourteenth century. Observation of the masonry revealed that the buttresses were clearly later additions, and not part of the original construction. The fresh looking ashlar masonry of the buttresses at the east end of the chancel confirmed that these were Victorian additions, built in 1844.

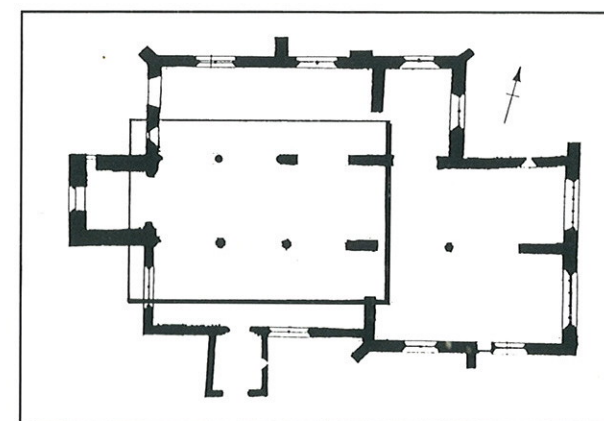


Figure 3: Plan of St Mary's Church, Charlbury (scale 1:500) showing location of figure 2

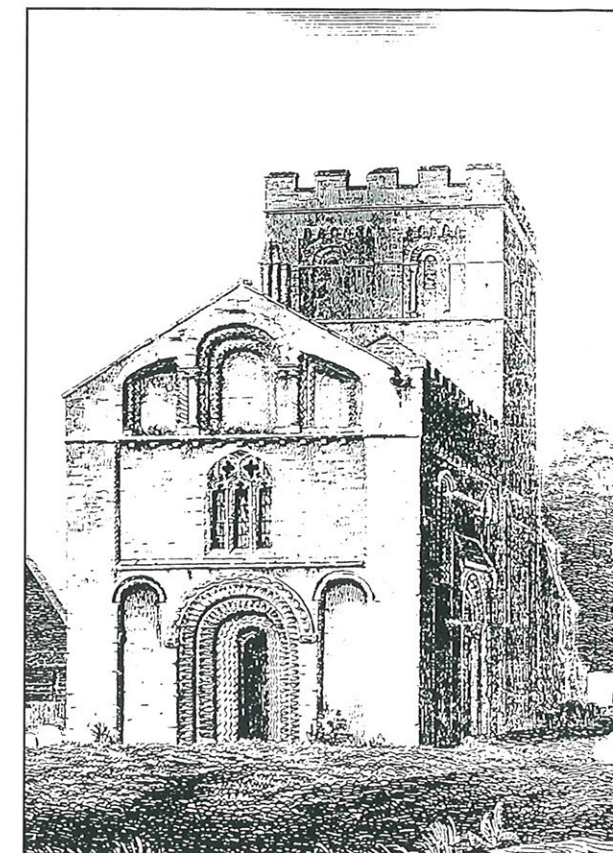


Figure 4: 19th century engraving of St. Mary the Virgin Church, Iffley

In the grounds of the church is the tombstone of the recluse Annora, a noble anchoress, who lived in a cell adjacent to the church from 1232 until her death in 1241. She received gifts of firewood and clothing from Henry III. Legend has it that the blocked arch which can be seen at the east end of the south wall of the chancel was a window through which Annora could see the altar. Observation of the surviving masonry tends to suggest that the blocked arch may have been a doorway to the original chancel, but the watching brief shed no further light on this issue.

Internal work in the church saw the removal of parts of the floor, which revealed two brick-built vaults, probably of Victorian date, sealed by a thick layer of concrete. Imitation medieval-style tiles laid during the nineteenth century were also replaced. Several of the Yorkstone floor slabs had masons' marks scored on them, suggesting that the Victorian built floor was carefully planned, with the marks on the stones indicating where they were to be laid.



## ST OLAVE'S CHURCH, FRITWELL

Excavation of a new drainage trench revealed a large offset footing beneath the north-east corner of the north aisle, on a different alignment to the east wall of the aisle. No comparable offset was visible beneath the west wall of the north aisle. Whilst this may represent no more than a cumbersome construction method, or later underpinning, it is possible that a pre-Norman structure was demolished and St Olave's built in its place, in the middle of the twelfth century.

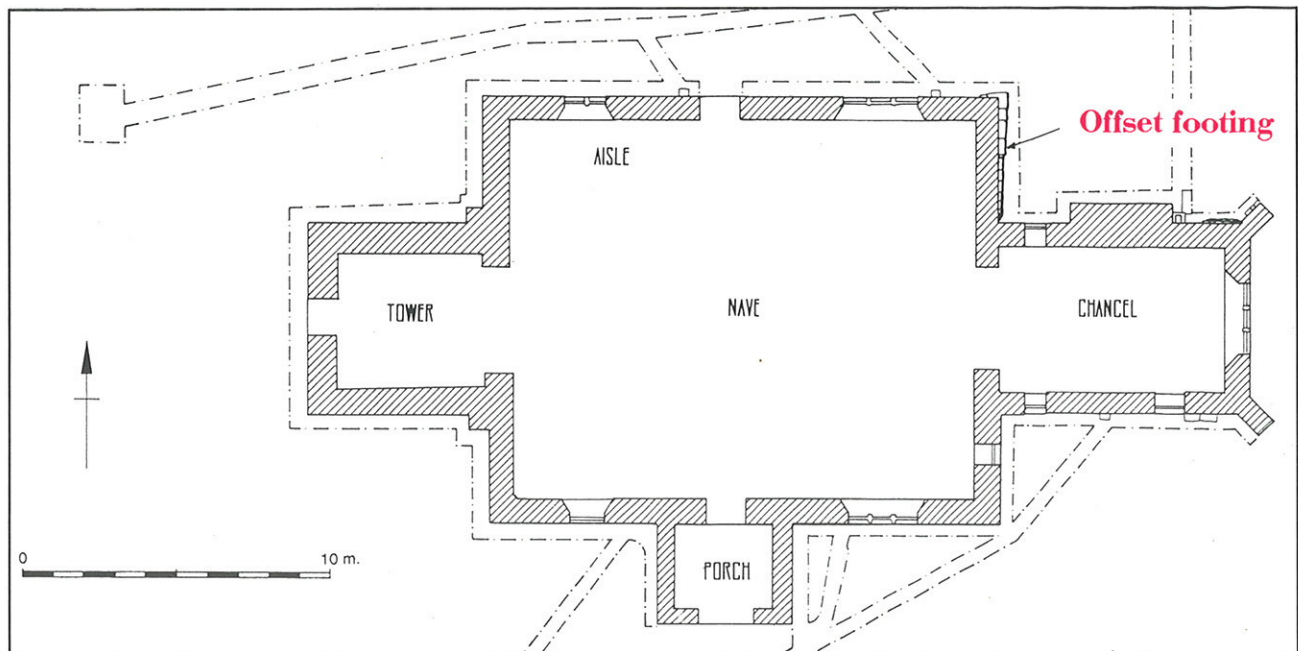


Figure 5: The offset footing found under the north-east aisle wall at St Olave's Church, Fritwell.

## FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Other churches recently examined by the Unit include St Lawrence's Church, Appleton, where the original medieval churchyard boundary ditch was discovered, the Chapel of St Michael, Rycote and All Saint's Church, Faringdon. Work is currently ongoing at All Saint's Church, Sherburn.

## NEW SOCIETY SEEKS TO PROMOTE CHURCH ARCHAEOLOGY

The Council for British Archaeology has had a Churches committee for a long time, and this has provided an invaluable forum for everyone interested in our historic churches. The CBA has been undergoing significant changes in recent years, however, and it has been decided that the formation of a new Society for Church Archaeology will offer a better voice to this important subject. A steering committee is currently working on the establishment of the new Society, and a formal launch is planned in Spring 1996. Graham Keevill of the OAU will be the Treasurer of the Society.

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**OAU NEWS** will end with a final issue at Christmas. This is due to increasing costs and a fall in subscriptions.