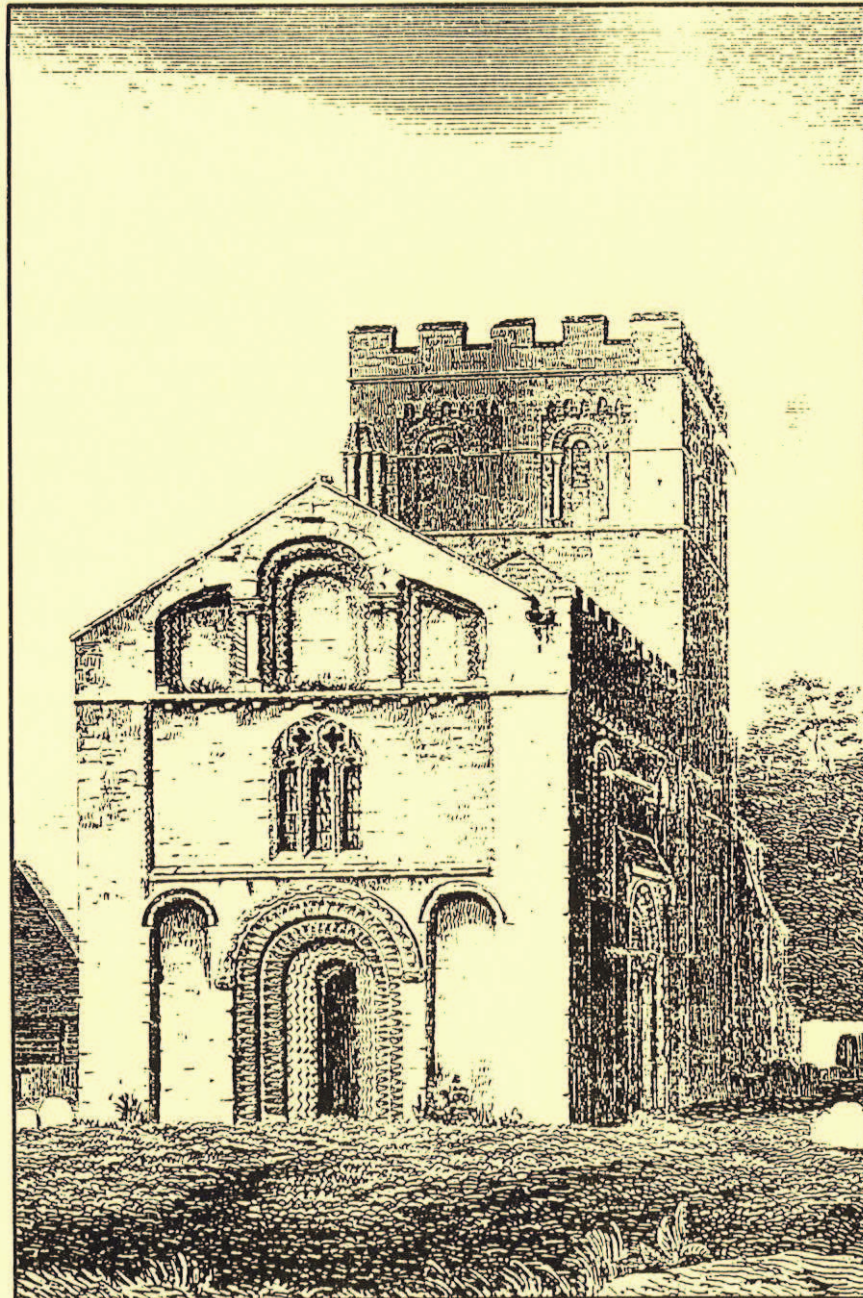


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# Church of St. Mary the Virgin Iffley, Oxford

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

February 1995

**Church of St. Mary the Virgin  
Iffley, Oxford NGR SP 5206 0304  
Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

## **1. SUMMARY**

The Oxford Archaeological Unit maintained a watching brief during renovation and restoration work at this church [Fig. 1] in January and February, 1995. Each stage of the work was monitored, and written and photographic records made. Background information relating to Iffley Church was kindly provided by Klara Spandl of the O.A.U.

The works within the church revealed several brick built vaults, some of which contained lead coffins. Some of the stone slabs which were lifted during the groundwork had mason's marks scored and painted on them. A shallow channel uncovered against the N wall was a part of a former heating system.

Externally the foundations of the church were revealed to a depth of c. 0.40 m, after the stone drain had been removed. It was possible to identify some of the phases of construction of the church.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Iffley, is undergoing renovation and is being furnished with a new underfloor heating system. This necessitated the excavation by the contractors of areas of the church floor, down to a depth of not more than 0.22 m below its present level. In addition, the stone drain surrounding the church was removed, and a new plastic pipe installed. The groundwork was carried out by Symm building company of Oxford under plans drawn up by architects Caroe and Partners of London. The stonework was refurbished by Joslins of Oxford.

Iffley Church is built of yellowish limestones which are roughly coursed. Limestone ashlar blocks are incorporated in the corners of the walls. It is roofed with stone slates. The historical background is discussed below.

## **3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The church was probably built between 1175-82 by Robert de St. Remy, who created a new parish out of his manor. The building is a characteristic late Romanesque parish church. It is possible that in common with other early churches, Iffley Church would have had an apsidal ending. There is little or no documentary evidence to suggest that a pre-Norman church actually existed at Iffley - the village was more likely served by Cowley Church, some 3 miles away.

In the east end of the south wall is a blocked-up arch, and together with a small re-used window in the east gable, may be all that remains of a Saxon church. Domesday Book records that Iffley, 'Givetelei', in the time of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), was held by Azor. He was a Saxon lord and may have lived where the rectory now stands, with his church nearby. The original Norman church consisted of a chancel, tower and nave. Probably before

the mid C13, the chancel was extended east by one bay with one-light windows in all three walls. This addition may have been paid for by the recluse Annora, who lived in a cell by the church from 1232 until her death in 1241.

In the late C13 sedilia of three bays were built in the chancel's south wall, and perhaps buttresses added to the south and north walls of the chancel. This work is dubiously attested to Robert of Efteley, the prior of Kenilworth 1266-76. The style of the stonework is, however, more suggestive of a C14 date. Internal alterations were made to the windows, the nave and the tower in the C15 and C16. In 1807 the south porch was removed.

Many alterations were made during the C19, perhaps a result of Iffley's close contact with the chief actors in the Oxford Movement, and with members of the Oxford Architectural and Historical society. R.C. Hussey oversaw the removal of steps from the pulpit, and the erection of two buttresses against the east wall. The chancel was repaired by J.C. Buckler in 1856. Electric light was installed in 1930.

#### **4. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS**

##### **4.1 Internal [Fig. 2]**

Two areas were opened within the nave to a depth of 0.22 m. A documented brick vault, with an entrance, was observed against the south wall of the nave. An insubstantial brick-built sleeper wall, aligned N-S, was observed in an open area against the north wall of the nave.

Observation of works beneath the floor of the tower not possible due to the presence of wooden floor joists.

The stone slabs comprising the floor of the choir (context 1=11) were lifted, and the ground level reduced by 0.22 m. The earliest deposit identified was a layer of undated mid-dark grey sandy loam (7), into which was set a brick-built vault (4). A second vault, represented by a large capping stone was also observed. Both vaults were sealed by a layer of concrete (9), which in turn was overlaid by a thin layer of sand (2) on which the stone floor slabs were bedded.

A shallow channel (10) incorporated into the concrete ran E-W alongside the offset footing of the N wall of the choir, and was filled with decayed wood fragments.

Works in the chancel consisted of the removal of a stair, and a reduction in the ground level. Three brick vaults (22, 23, 24), two of which contained lead coffins, were observed beneath make-up debris (20). Layer 20 butted a one-course brick-built sleeper wall (21), which ran N-S beneath the stone slab floor. Layer 20 contained several decorated floor tiles, of the same pattern as those at the east end of the chancel.

##### **4.2 External**

The stone drain which surrounded the church was removed and a trench dug to a depth of 0.40 m for a plastic drainage pipe. The trench was 0.50 m wide. Several pieces of human bone were observed in the spoil from the trench, and these were reinterred where they were



found. Two layers were observed in the section of the trench: a light yellowish-brown silty clay with gravel inclusions (18) butted the church foundations, and this layer was sealed by the present turf line.

Some of the foundations of the church [Fig. 2] were revealed, and four phases of construction could be identified. The earliest phase must relate to the original construction of Iffley Church. A 1.50 m length of an offset footing (12) was observed beneath the N wall of the church. The footing consisted of roughly hewn limestone blocks, of which 2 courses were seen, and projected 0.25 m away from the wall face. The footing lay below a course of chamfered blocks which rest 1.85 m below the base of the window in the north wall of the church. The chamfer course probably represents the level of the ground surface in the Norman period. The churchyard level today is up to 0.25-0.40 m higher than the chamfer course. The footings beneath the S wall were irregular, with occasional limestone blocks visible as offsets. It is possible that comparable offsets to those beneath the N wall lie beneath the excavated depth of the trench.

Beneath the NE and SE corners of the chancel lie offset footings comprising roughly hewn limestone blocks. Two courses of stone were visible beneath each corner. Footing 13 projected 0.18 m away from the N face of the NE corner. Footing 15 projected 0.15 m away from the S face of the SE corner. The similarity of stone type and construction method suggests that these offsets were constructed at the same time. These are surely the foundations for the C13 century eastward extension of the chancel.

Two substantial buttresses appear to have been added to the N wall of the chancel. The bases of each buttress clearly overlie and project well beyond the offset footings 12 and 13. Two opposing buttresses are incorporated into the S wall of the chancel. The base of the more easterly buttress overlay the offset footing 15. The construction technique of these four buttresses is different to that used for the corners: each buttress is built upon large, well hewn limestone blocks, which are not offset.

The buttresses at the east end of the chancel are clearly the latest additions, comprising fresh looking ashlar masonry, constructed upon irregular courses of limestone rubble mixed with sand and gravel.

A shallow offset footing (25) was observed beneath the SE corner of the tower. The offset was a single course of limestone 0.14 m deep, and projected away 0.12 m from the corner of the tower. The footings of the other corners of the tower were not offset.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this watching brief, whilst necessarily limited in nature, may shed some light on the early development of Iffley Church, and also attest to the amount of work undertaken in the Victorian period.

Apart from the chancel, the main part of the church dates to the Norman period. The stone offset beneath the N wall probably dates to this period. The offset footings beneath the chancel corners were part of the C13 eastward extension.

To counteract the effects of the enlarged chancel, that is the increased weight on the chancel walls from the heavy vaulted ceilings, 4 buttresses were added to the N and S walls. Observation of the footings of the church corroborates the documentary evidence, and the work was probably undertaken in the C14.

The buttresses at the E end of the chancel were probably built in 1844, and the work was overseen by R.C. Hussey (VCH, *vol V*, p204).

Inside the church the present works have revealed to some extent the scale of Victorian activity. The six vaults probably date to this period, although no direct dating evidence was forthcoming. The stone channel alongside the N wall of the choir is probably part of a Victorian heating system (Rev'd P. Judd, *pers comm*). From a boiler situated in the rectory, warm air was fed by ?underground pipes to the church and thence into a series of underfloor ducts. These were linked to ducts cut into the walls of the church. A cut air vent still exists in the NE corner of the chancel, and is equipped with a metal lid. This would have enabled the regulation of the air flow.

The sleeper wall in the nave is presumably an internal floor support, and would have had the same function as the sleeper wall found in the chancel beneath the make-up layer for the floor. The VCH records that the chancel was 'repaired' by J.C. Buckler in 1858. Quite what these 'repairs' entailed is not clear, although the following 'modifications' may relate to Buckler's work.

The chancel steps as they exist today are constructed upon red-brick footings, upon which marble floor slabs are laid. In addition, the make-up layer for the present chancel floor contained numerous decorated floor tiles, clearly medieval, and some of which were intact. Tiles with the same design can be seen at the E end of the floor of the chancel. New masonry appears to have been inserted at the base of the N and S walls of the chancel.

The presence of brick vaults beneath the chancel, and possible instability of the floor, may have led to the insertion of the brick sleeper wall beneath the chancel floor. In summary, therefore, it seems likely that Buckler's repairs were perhaps to elevate the floor, with new steps, which necessitated the removal of a former level of tiles, remodel the chancel walls, and stabilise the new floor level with a sleeper wall.

The mason's marks observed on some of the floor flagstones might suggest that the stone floor was planned, and that the stone sizes were crucial to the layout. The marks on the stones would therefore act as indicators as to where the stones were to be laid.

A number of human bones discovered by the contractors during the excavations were reinterred at the time of the works.

J. Hiller  
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February, 1995

## **6. BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Guide book of Iffley Church, 1986

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Victoria County History of the Counties of England. A History of Oxfordshire, vol V, p201-5.

## TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

Context	Type	Comments
1	Layer	Stone floor slabs, same as 11
2	Layer	Sand make up for 1
3	Structure	Limestone slab, capping for ?vault
4	Structure	Brick-built vault
5	Cut	Construction cut for 3
6	Cut	Construction cut for vault 4
7	Layer	Soil horizon of unknown date
8	Fill	Backfill of cut 6 against vault 4
9	Layer	Concrete, seals 3,4 and below 2, laid during 1850's works
10	Gully/Duct	Channel, part of Victorian heating system
11	Masonry	Same as 1, some of the stone slabs have mason's marks, both carved and painted on the underside
12	Masonry	Offset limestone footing beneath north wall of church
13	Masonry	Offset limestone footing beneath NE corner buttress
14	?Masonry	Foundation material beneath E wall buttresses
15	Masonry	Limestone offset footing beneath SE corner buttress
16	Masonry	Rough footing beneath buttress against S wall
17	Layer	Churchyard turf soil
18	Layer	Churchyard soil
19	Masonry	Footing beneath S wall buttress
20	Layer	Construction debris beneath stone floor of the chancel
21	Brickwork	Single course red brick support for raised floor of the chancel
22	Vault	Brick vault containing lead coffin beneath chancel floor, of Victorian date
23	Vault	Brick vault, lies to the N of vault 24, Victorian
24	Vault	Brick vault, Victorian
25	Masonry	Offset footing beneath SW corner of the tower
26	Masonry	Course of chamfered blocks at base of N wall



Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:10 000 map of 1976 with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown copyright

site location figure 1



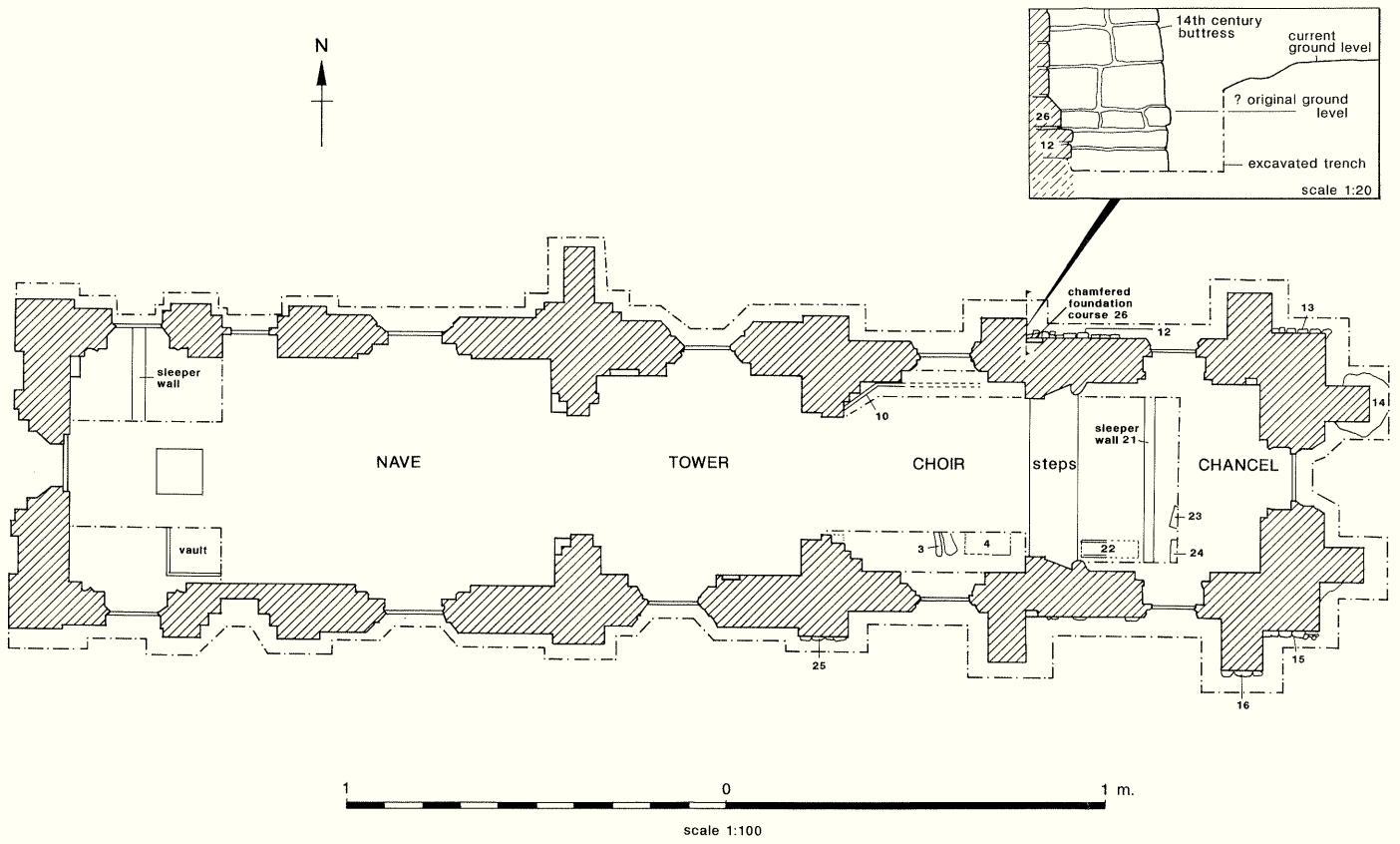


figure 2

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