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ST HELEN'S CHURCH SKIPWITH NORTH YORKSHIRE

Report on an Archaeological Excavation

by R.A. Hall, T. Kendall & C. Briden

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A REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

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R.A. Hall, T. Kendall & C. Briden

with a report on the alabaster carvings by Richard Marks

Cover Illustration:
Excavation inside the tower

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SUMMARY

The church's west tower, of Saxo-Norman style, has been the focus of a campaign of investigation and analysis which included structural recording and archaeological excavation. Evidence for a building earlier than the standing tower was identified; an associated cemetery had included burials in wooden coffins, some of which were bound with iron brackets. This building was replaced by a church incorporating the standing tower; hitherto unrecognised details of its construction have been recorded. During the later medieval period the church expanded, and the tower was clasped by aisles which were subsequently truncated. Internally a sequence of floors, burials and other activities was discovered.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns that coal mining in the Selby coalfield might affect the stability of the tower of St Helen's church, Skipwith, North Yorkshire (NGR: SE 657385) led UK Coal plc to engage the architectural practice Ferrey and Mennim to arrange and oversee a programme of structural works. Following specialist engineering advice in 1995 from Ove Arup and Partners, a phased programme of architectural and archaeological investigation in and around the church was commissioned and funded by UK Coal plc in order to assess and then mitigate the risk of damage to archaeological deposits that might be incurred during any subsequent remedial consolidation. A rectified photographic survey was commissioned from Colin Briden, consultant historic buildings archaeologist, in 2001. A documentary assessment, a detailed preliminary survey of the church, its graveyard and memorials, and the excavation of three evaluation trenches in 2001, were all undertaken by Field Archaeology Specialists, in conjunction with Mike Griffiths and Associates. Ultimately, during 2004, York Archaeological Trust (YAT) carried out excavations within, and in a zone up to 2m wide around, the church's western tower. The work, directed by Toby Kendall, entailed the excavation and recording of thirty-one individual trenches to expose the foundations of the tower, so as to allow their support and consolidation. The engineering methodology employed did not disturb or destroy any of the foundations which had, however, been compromised in places by the digging of graves in the medieval and later periods. A comprehensive regime of building recording was also undertaken on the tower in 2004-5, under the supervision of Colin Briden.

The work was carried out in accordance with a written scheme of investigation drawn up by YAT and approved by the Heritage Unit of North Yorkshire County Council and the York Diocesan Archaeological Advisor. A Faculty for this work was granted to Skipwith PCC by the Chancellor of the Diocese of York. Logistical implications were worked out in consultation with William Anelay Ltd, who undertook the associated structural works of foundation enhancement. This report has been compiled by R A Hall, drawing on a stratigraphic archive report written by Toby Kendall, on a description of the standing tower written by Colin Briden, and on a suite of specialist reports which are held in archive.

Location, Geology and Topography

St. Helen's church is located at the western end of the village of Skipwith, approximately 14 kilometres to the south-east of the City of York (Fig. 1), in the low-lying and gently undulating terrain of the Vale of York. Skipwith is within 4km of both the River Ouse and the River Derwent; Riccall, where King Harald Hardraada of Norway berthed his invasion fleet in September 1066, stands between Skipwith and the Ouse. The area of the church and its associated graveyard appears to form a slightly elevated platform. In a field to the south of the church, across the village's main

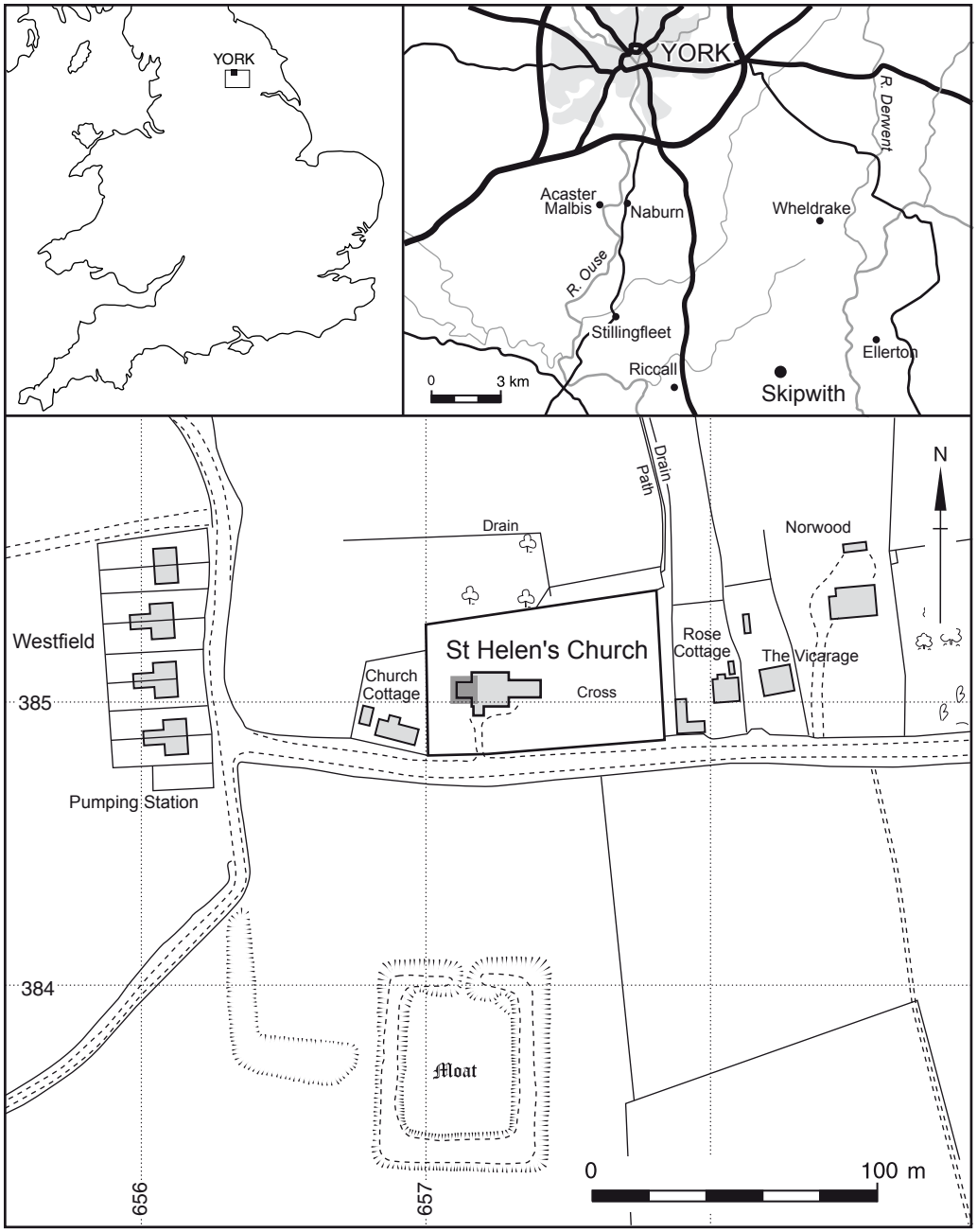

Fig. 1: Site location

street, lie earthworks defining a substantial moated enclosure, presumed to be of medieval origin, and probably that of the Skipwith family, whose manor house was 'prostrated and demolished' by 1657 (Allison (ed) 1976, 94). Earthworks have also been identified in the field immediately to the north of the churchyard, although their date and function are uncertain.

Historical and Architectural Background

A church at Skipwith was first documented in 1084, when it was granted by William I to the bishop of Durham who in turn, in the 1120s, granted it to Durham priory. The priory's church at Howden, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, was given collegiate status in 1267, and it was endowed with Skipwith church when its prebend of Skipwith was created in 1280. Skipwith remained in the patronage of Durham priory until the Dissolution; after being briefly in the hands of the archbishop of York the advowson passed to the Crown, where it remains (Allison (ed) 1976, 99).

The earliest known suggestion of a pre-Norman date for the church's origin was by Phillips (1853, 84), who commented 'Skipwith Church is well worth an examination, as containing very late Saxon or very early Norman work in the tower'. Brown (1925, 332 and fig 149, 478) was particularly interested in the tower's internal fittings, which he illustrated; without any detailed discussion of the fabric he dated the tower and the west part of the nave to c.1040. Taylor commented that 'In spite of its unusual interest, Skipwith church seems to have escaped other than passing mention in archaeological literature'. He went on (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 550-4; Taylor 1978, 1084) to suggest that the earliest church on the site, incorporating a single storey western sanctuary, was constructed between AD 600 and 950. In c.1050, he proposed, this western sanctuary was heightened by the addition of an upper chamber and a belfry to form a tower. All of this survives, with some alterations and additions, to the present day, together with part of the west end of the south wall of the contemporary nave, which is bonded in to the east face of the tower (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: The church tower from the south-west

The visible structural history of the later medieval church was reviewed by Pevsner and Neave (1995, 687-8). The two western bays of the north and south nave aisles are of different builds, but of 12th-century date. Late in the 13th century, at about the time when Howden Minster's Prebend of Skipwith was created, the aisles were extended by one bay to the east, and a new chancel was built, probably by Bishop Bek of Durham (1283-1311) whose arms appeared in the east window. A new belfry stage was added to the tower in the 15th century, and the nave was heightened with a clerestory in the 16th century. The tower at one time supported a wooden steeple, the repair of which is mentioned nine times in the churchwardens' accounts 1746-79.

In 1876 the church was thoroughly but conscientiously restored by J. L. Pearson. A clock was installed on the southern face of the tower in 1925 as part of the parish war memorial for World War I, and the tower was strengthened with steel girders in 1929.

Methodologies

The methodology for foundation enhancement initially proposed by the engineers, and for the concomitant archaeological work, was informed by the conclusions reached on the basis of the trial excavations, which took place over a three week period in April 2001. Three trenches, each measuring 1.5m x 0.9m, were excavated against the exterior of the church; one against the north aisle, the others approximately in the centre of the tower's west and south faces (Fig. 3). On the basis of this investigation the tower's foundations were defined as 'trench built, stepped out from the main superstructure by 0.7m to 0.8m and cut into the subsoil to a depth of between 1.2m and 1.35m from the present ground level' (Timms 2001, 22). The YAT excavations soon identified, however, that the tower's foundations are considerably slighter than this, and that their structural integrity is complicated because they rest irregularly upon earlier foundations. In view of this both the engineering and archaeological methodologies had to be changed, with excavation proceding to a depth of only 0.6m below ground level; concerns about undermining structural stability, and restrictions imposed by health and safety considerations, meant that some areas remained unexcavated or uninvestigated.

The basis of the building recording was a rectified photography survey of the external elevations of the tower produced by Colin Briden and Graham Moore as part of the structural engineering survey. This was digitised by Toby Kendal to give a stone-by-stone drawn survey of the tower's exterior, which was then enhanced through a close visual inspection of this external fabric from

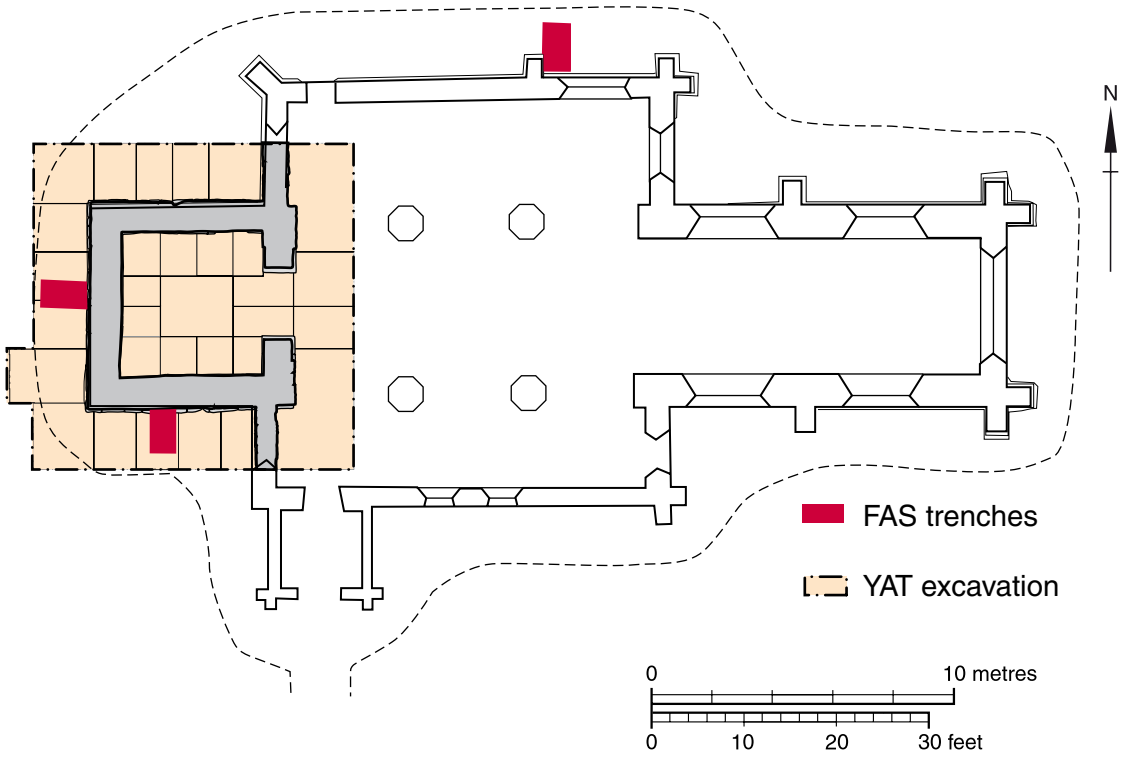

Fig. 3: Plan of the church showing excavation trenches

scaffolding. This allowed the survey to be augmented with geological information about the stone types utilised, based on identifications by Toby Kendal with specialist input from Dr Paul Buckland (University of Bournemouth), and facilitated the recognition and detailed study of subtle differences within the fabric of the tower.

EXCAVATIONS, OBSERVATIONS AND RECORDS

Natural sand deposits, when not disturbed by archaeological activity, were encountered as little as 1m below modern ground level. The sand overlay solid clay which was seen to the south and south-east of the tower at 1.7m below ground level. This was the highest level at which the natural clay occurred; it sloped gently down from south-east to north-west.

Early Features

The earliest archaeological features to be recognised either pre-date the earliest structural traces on the site, or were linked with their construction. Outside the present church such features were faint and impossible to define with much confidence, but internally they were more clearly discernible. There, however, restrictions on the depth and extent of excavation precluded an examination of all contemporary levels, and the picture is correspondingly incomplete (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Earliest features

Inside the north-west corner of the tower the configuration of strata, which were seen in only a limited area, hinted at deliberate levelling before construction commenced. At the south-west corner of the tower the top of natural deposits had apparently been disturbed. Beyond this disturbed soil, and cut into natural deposits, was a post-hole. In the south-east corner of the tower and to the east of the tower two other post-holes were revealed, as well as a very large sub-rectangular feature, measuring more than 3m across and 0.65m in depth. All these features may perhaps have been linked with the first phase of stone-built construction, described below, but their precise date and interpretation are unknown.

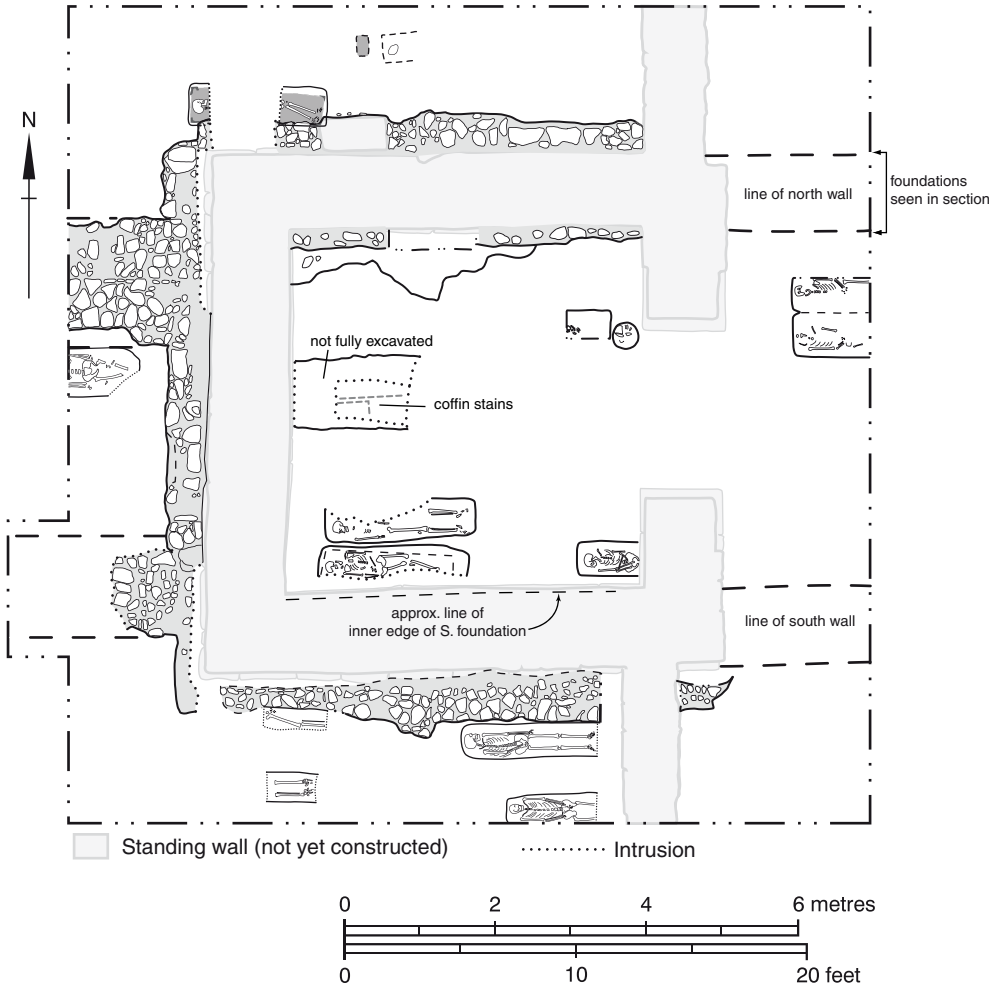

Fig. 5: Foundations of pre-tower church and associated burials

A Pre-tower Church

The earliest recognisable structure was represented by a series of foundation trenches. The structure they defined was associated with a series of human burials dated to the 7th-10th centuries, indicating that this building was a church.

The foundations (Fig. 5) protrude externally below parts of the north, south and west foundation for the standing tower. The inner face of the north foundation projects slightly from the inner face of the tower's north wall, whereas the inner face of the south foundation is set some 0.10m

back from the inner face of the tower's south wall. The inner face of the west foundation is set back from the inner face of the west wall, although the extent of this inset is not known, for these early foundations were not seen during the excavation of the tower's interior. There was no sign that any similar foundation or foundation trench had ever existed below the tower's east wall. A continuation of the line of the north foundation was seen in cross-section to the east of the tower, at the eastern limit of the investigation, in a pit dug previously to contain a coal bunker. It may be suggested, therefore, that this cell of the pre-tower church measured internally at least 7.6m from west to east, approximately 4.6m from north to south, and that it continued eastwards beyond the area examined in these excavations.

The construction cuts for all of these foundations were approximately 1.6m wide and c.0.65m deep, with vertical sides and a slightly concave base. The foundations appeared uniformly to have a single layer of large flat cobbles, occupying the bottommost 0.12m of the cut. The 0.4m above consisted of cobbles with occasional small gritstone rubble in a sandy matrix, topped by another layer of more uniform cobbles. This, in turn, was capped with a layer of stiff bluish-grey clay incorporating gritstone rubble fragments and topped with a pinkish coloured sand, presumed to be decayed gritstone. This sand extended a short distance into the body of the tower, and is interpreted as a deposit associated with the construction of the building. The only datable materials incorporated in these foundations were two fragments of Roman tile, assumed to be residual.

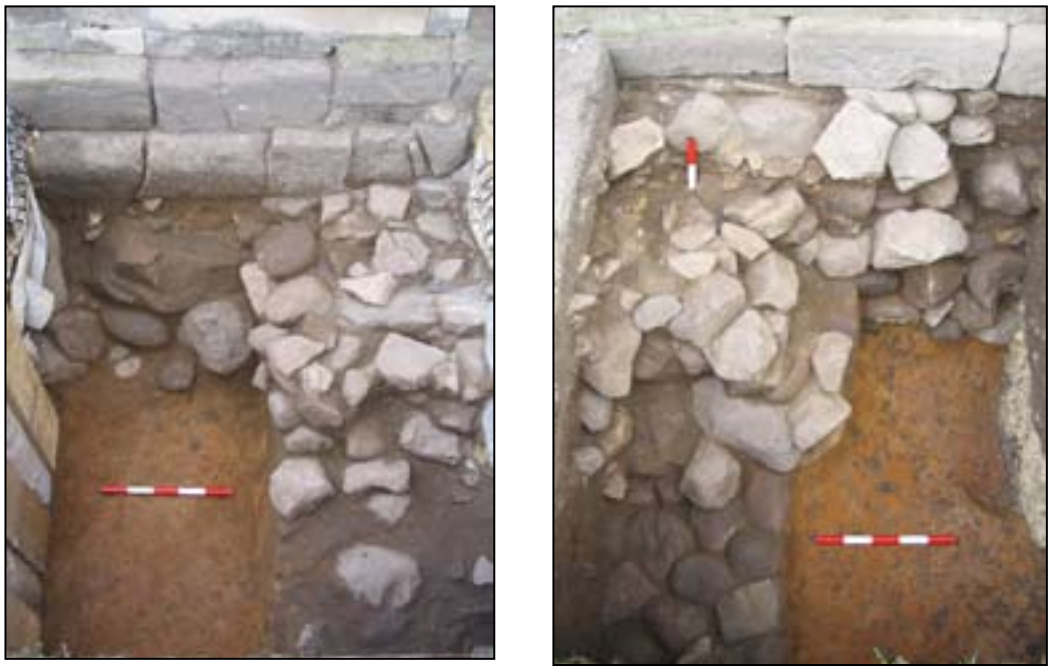

Fig. 6a, 6b: Northernmost of the two foundations projecting westwards below the tower's west wall, seen in two adjacent trenches, looking east. Scale unit 100mm

Running west from the early west wall foundation were two parallel foundations of similar form and character to those for the north, south and west walls, and apparently of integral construction with them (Figs 5, 6a and 6b). Their western ends, and the return that presumably linked them, lay beyond the limits of the excavation; a length of only 1.3m survived within the excavated area. They represent a further cell of the structure, measuring c.5.6m externally from extreme north to south; if the superimposed walls had stood upon the inner edges of these foundations, the area

enclosed would have been approximately 2.75m wide. This space had been severely truncated by later burials, and no traces of its internal layout or appearance survived.

Within and to the east of the area enclosed by the walls of the standing tower, but stratigraphically directly above the stiff bluish-grey clay and sand, was a skim of light yellow silty mortar, only a few millimetres thick, with its level surface at c. 8.65m OD. Fortuitously, this was the level to which excavation could continue inside the tower. This mortar may also represent construction debris from the erection of this first stone structure, which de facto became the initial floor level. Above this mortar a deposit (up to 20mm thick) of dark silty loam which survived in some places within the tower is interpreted as soil trampled in during the building's use.

Within the area enclosed by the standing tower, certainly cut through the mortar layer but apparently sealed beneath a relatively (up to 200mm) thick layer of friable brown/grey sandy silt, were seven graves which are interpreted as contemporary with this early structure. Two of the burials, towards the north-east corner of the standing tower, were badly disturbed; they contained the remains of a neonate and an infant. At least two graves, recognised by staining which represents the wood of decayed coffins, were identified at the base of a post-medieval grave at the west side of the tower. One of these burials could be identified as that of an older middle aged male; an iron coffin fitting (see below), found in the backfill of the post-medieval grave, probably came from one or other of these coffins. A grave in the south-east corner of the standing tower, truncated when the tower was erected, contained a young adult male. It provided a radiocarbon determination (Beta – 202748) of 1170 +/- 40 BP: cal AD 770–980 when calibrated to two sigma. A contiguous pair of graves in the south-west corner contained, to the south, an adult female in a decayed coffin and, to the north, a young adult male. The female skeleton yielded a radiocarbon determination at two sigma (Beta – 202747) of 1140 +/-40 BP: cal AD 790 to 990. Another pair of contiguous graves uncovered just east of the standing tower is also assigned to this phase of burial; the southern grave contained a coffined adult, and the northern a mature adult male. One burial within the area of the western cell was attributable to this phase, that of a young adult female.

Fig. 7: Earlier burial to the north of the tower, with metal coffin fittings of Anglian date. Scale unit:100 mm

Externally, another six burials appear to form a group linked together by their similar stratigraphic positions, their relatively deep form, and a similar level of bone preservation; one of them has been dated to the late 7th – late 9th century, suggesting that they are broadly contemporary with those described above. The northernmost represents the grave of a neonate/infant; staining appears to represent a coffin, and a further discrete area of staining measuring 0.28m x 0.16m, positioned immediately west of the grave, may represent some form of grave marker. Adjacent to the north-west corner of the standing tower, and cut by a later foundation, was the grave of a young adult male who had been interred in a coffin bound with iron brackets (Fig. 7). Two heavily truncated skeletons near the south-west corner were identifiable only as adults, and two further, well-preserved graves further east contained an adult male with a radiocarbon determination at two sigma (Beta-202750) of 1250 +/-40 BP: cal AD 680 to 880, and an adult female.

Apart from the contiguous pairs, these early burials were spaced more widely apart than became typical during the later medieval and post-medieval periods, and they also appear to have deeper grave cuts than was later the norm. Insofar as could be judged, all the burials were extended supine inhumations, aligned west-east, with heads at the west and, usually, with arms by their sides or crossed to meet at the pelvis.

N.S.H.Rogers writes: Among the small number of objects of probable Anglian or Anglo-Scandinavian date that were recovered is an incomplete pair of hinge straps (SF00465). One strap has a looped-up eye at one end and a rounded perforated terminal at the other; the smaller fragment has one surviving rounded perforated terminal (Fig. 8). Both strap fragments retain nails *in situ*. The eye on the larger fragment was formed by drawing out the head of the strap, looping it round and then welding the tip back onto the strap; this strap would have been nailed to the back of a chest, and looped to the second strap which would have been nailed to the lid. These hinge straps, which were probably used originally on a coffin chest, were recovered from the backfill of a grave inside the tower: the grave itself was post-medieval but it had truncated a group of earlier burials, from which these straps probably derived.

Also possibly from chests are four corner brackets, all associated with the burial at the tower's north-west corner which was truncated by the foundation for the medieval north aisle (Fig. 8). In addition, a looped staple fragment was found externally where the north wall of the tower abuts the aisle; this deposit may have been as early as the 10th century but had been disturbed by the medieval aisle and by a modern flue. One function of looped staples was to attach hasps to chest lids, so it is possible that it had originated in another disturbed chest burial.

Dr P.J.Ottaway writes: The type of chest from which these fittings would probably have come was an oblong box with a flat lid, the corners strengthened by brackets, and the lid attached to the box by two pairs of hinge straps. The chest would probably have been jointed together with wooden dowels or pegs (Watson in Ottaway 1996, 113). The earliest examples of chests used for burials are probably Romano-British (Ottaway 1996, 112), but the 8th – 10th century appears to be the period of the greatest popularity for this particular custom (Ottaway forthcoming a). Within this period, the majority of chest burials appear to come from the northern half of England; sites which have produced them include several in North Yorkshire including Ailcy Hill, Ripon (Ottaway 1996), Ainderby Steeple near Northallerton, and Spofforth (Ottaway pers.comm.). Other sites are Thwing, East Riding of Yorkshire (Ottaway forthcoming a), Dacre, Cumbria (Ottaway forthcoming b), and Norton, Teesside. The chest burials from all these sites were dated 8th – mid-9th centuries. Later examples are also known, however, for example from York Minster (9th – 10th century; Kyølbye-Biddle 1995). Chest burials were never common in mid-late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and in many they are unknown. It has been noted that where the custom does occur, it often appears to be concentrated in certain locations within the cemetery (Ottaway forthcoming a), and it may have been reserved for people of distinct status, probably of high social rank (Ottaway 1996, 113). It seems probable that both these Skipwith chest burials date from the same period as the other chest burials from North Yorkshire, that is c. AD 700 – 850, and thus they are probably contemporary with the earliest dated burial at Skipwith,with its radiocarbon determination of AD 680-880.

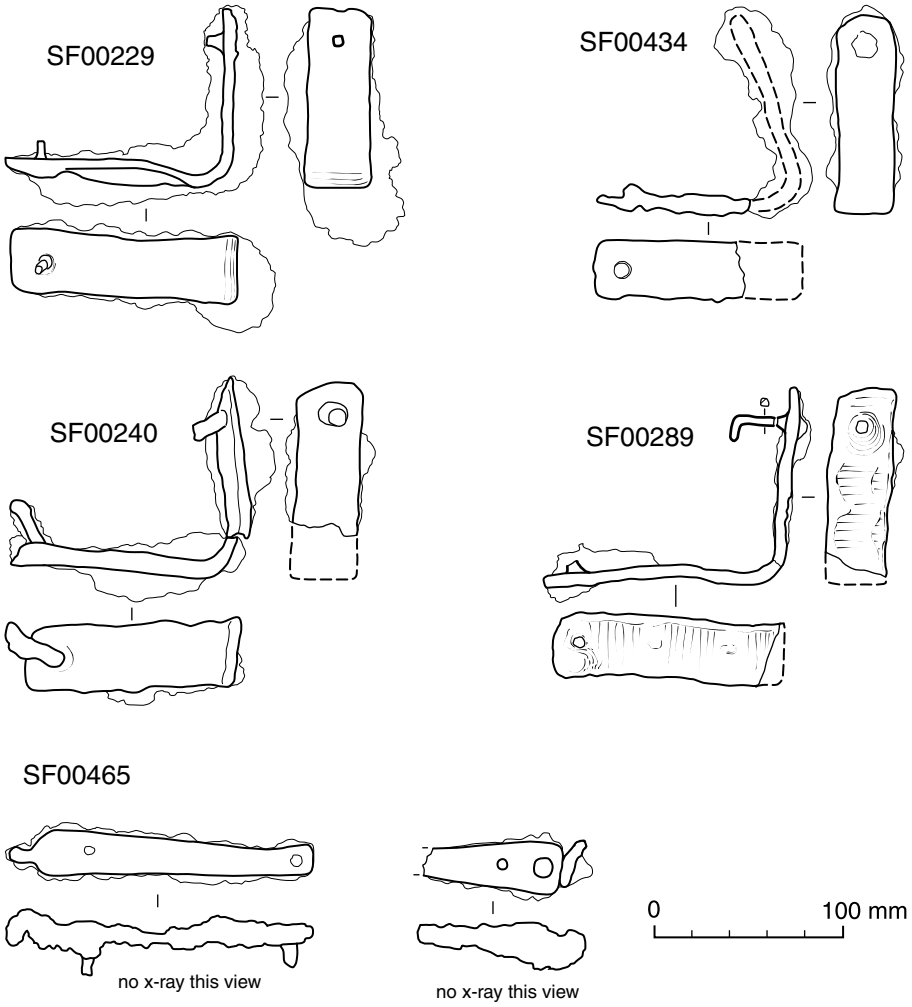

Fig. 8: Iron corner brackets and hinge straps (drawn from x-rays).

N.S.H.Rogers writes: Also likely to date from the Anglian/Anglo-Scandinavian period, although recovered in later contexts to the north-west and south-west of the tower, are two small rotary quern fragments made of vesicular lava. Rotary querns were widely used in the middle and later Saxon periods across north-western Europe, but in England prohibitions on their use began in the 12th century (Ottaway and Rogers 2002, 2799). While the number of querns recovered archaeologically decreases during the medieval period, fragments still occur, partly due to the hard-wearing nature of the material: some have been found on York sites re-used in walls, hearths or as post packing (*ibid*). These examples show no sign of re-use.

*

Within the standing tower, the graves and other features discussed above were all sealed by a mixed deposit of friable brown/grey sandy silt, up to 200mm deep, which contained limestone chippings, mortar fragments and charcoal flecks. The foundation trenches for the standing tower were dug into this deposit, and it may be interpreted as representing either the demolition of the early building or ground preparation undertaken before the new structure was erected. Later disturbances had truncated this deposit, and its dating was unfortunately compromised by a number of later intrusions that went unrecognised during excavation. It is also believed that immediately later layers had been removed, along with any dating evidence they may have contained, in at least one large-scale later medieval clearance event.

Outside the standing tower, to the south and south-west, later medieval structural alterations and the digging of graves had removed most of the strata which had originally related to this first church building. To the west and north, however, there survived some deposits characterised by the inclusion of fragments of white plaster which may either have come from the demolition of the pre-tower church or relate to its replacement). The absence of obvious and extensive demolition debris of larger size suggests that the dismantling of this earlier structure had been completed in a very careful manner, perhaps so as to facilitate re-use of its stonework.

Fig. 9: Section through foundations of standing building, clearly showing the construction trench for the standing tower cut diagonally through the build-up after the earlier building and mortar surface.

Construction of the Standing Tower and its church

Cut into the thick mixed deposit described above were the foundation trenches for the north, south and east walls of the standing tower (Fig. 9); no traces of a foundation trench (as opposed to the foundations themselves) survived along either side of the west wall (see below), or on the outside of the north and south walls. On the north, west and south sides the bases of these foundations impinged upon the foundations of the pre-tower church.

The north, south and west foundations were approximately 1.1m wide; where it was possible to investigate them more fully, on the northern and southern sides of the tower, they were only 0.35m deep. They are thus notably slighter than those for the pre-tower church. The foundations comprised at least two parallel rows of large gritstone blocks laid end to end, which formed the inner and outer

Fig. 10: Plaster/ render on internal face of reused gritstone blocks in the foundation for the tower's west wall.

faces of the foundation. The foundation trenches had been backfilled with a mixture of stone rubble in a mortar and sand mix

The north and south ends of the external face of the foundation for tower's west wall consisted of large unbonded weather-worn gritstone blocks, typically measuring 0.80m x 0.25m; later clearance events had removed any traces of the foundation trench in which they had been placed. No such blocks were present in the centre of this external face of the foundation where, instead, the foundations comprised angular limestone and gritstone rubble fragments and occasional cobbles, all in a matrix of friable light brownish/yellow mortar and sand. Inside the tower, however, the corresponding course of gritstone blocks was uninterrupted; some retained traces of a plaster render on their inner face (Fig.10). Similar gritstone blocks were seen all along both the outer and inner edges of the foundations for the tower's north wall; internally, the construction trench had been backfilled with rubble, etc, identical to that described above. Additionally, a single gritstone block similar in size to the others had been placed alongside the external face of the foundations some 1.5m east of the north-west corner of the lower plinth. It was not moved during the investigation, and remains *in situ*; its purpose is unknown. On the south side of the tower the gritstone block component of the external face of the foundations appeared to stop some 2.5m east of the south-west corner (Fig. 11); the remainder of the foundation for the south wall consisted of rubble, etc of the type described above.

Fig. 11: The junction between gritstone block and rubble foundations for the standing tower, over the earlier cobble foundations, below the south wall of the tower. Scale unit 100 mm.

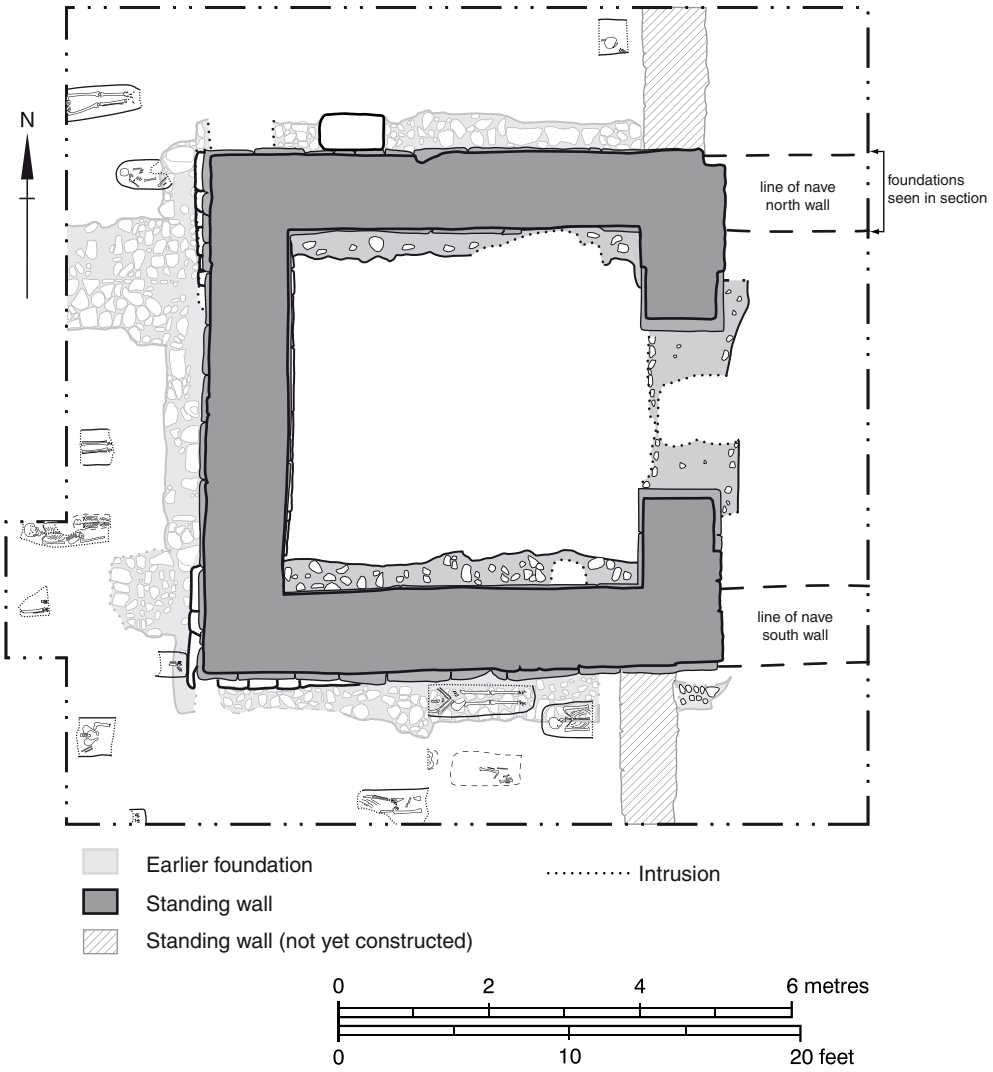

Fig. 12: Construction of the standing tower and associated features

On the eastern side of the tower, continuing without interruption below the tower arch, the foundations measured 1.25m wide at their top, narrowing to approximately 1m where the trench sides became vertical. Engineering restrictions on the excavations in this area made it impossible to assess their full depth here, but they were more than 0.35m deep; foundations for the earlier structure would have been encountered in the excavation if they had originally returned along this line. Indeed, the reason that this later foundation was deeper along the east wall than elsewhere was perhaps because the builders recognised that whereas the other three walls of their structure received some additional support from the earlier foundations, there was no such benefit for this east wall. The foundation material in this trench was identical to the mixture seen in parts of the other foundation trenches.

The tower stands directly on top of these foundations, occupying an approximate square measuring c.6.8m externally (c.4.8m internally). It was centred slightly to the north of its predecessor, and within the outer limits of the earlier foundations (Fig. 12). At its base is a double plinth of one square and one chamfered order made from relatively long, thin gritstone blocks like those in the foundations below. Varied blocks of gritstone were also the chief constituent of the lower part of the tower walls (Figs 13a,b). There seems little reason to doubt that these stones were almost entirely

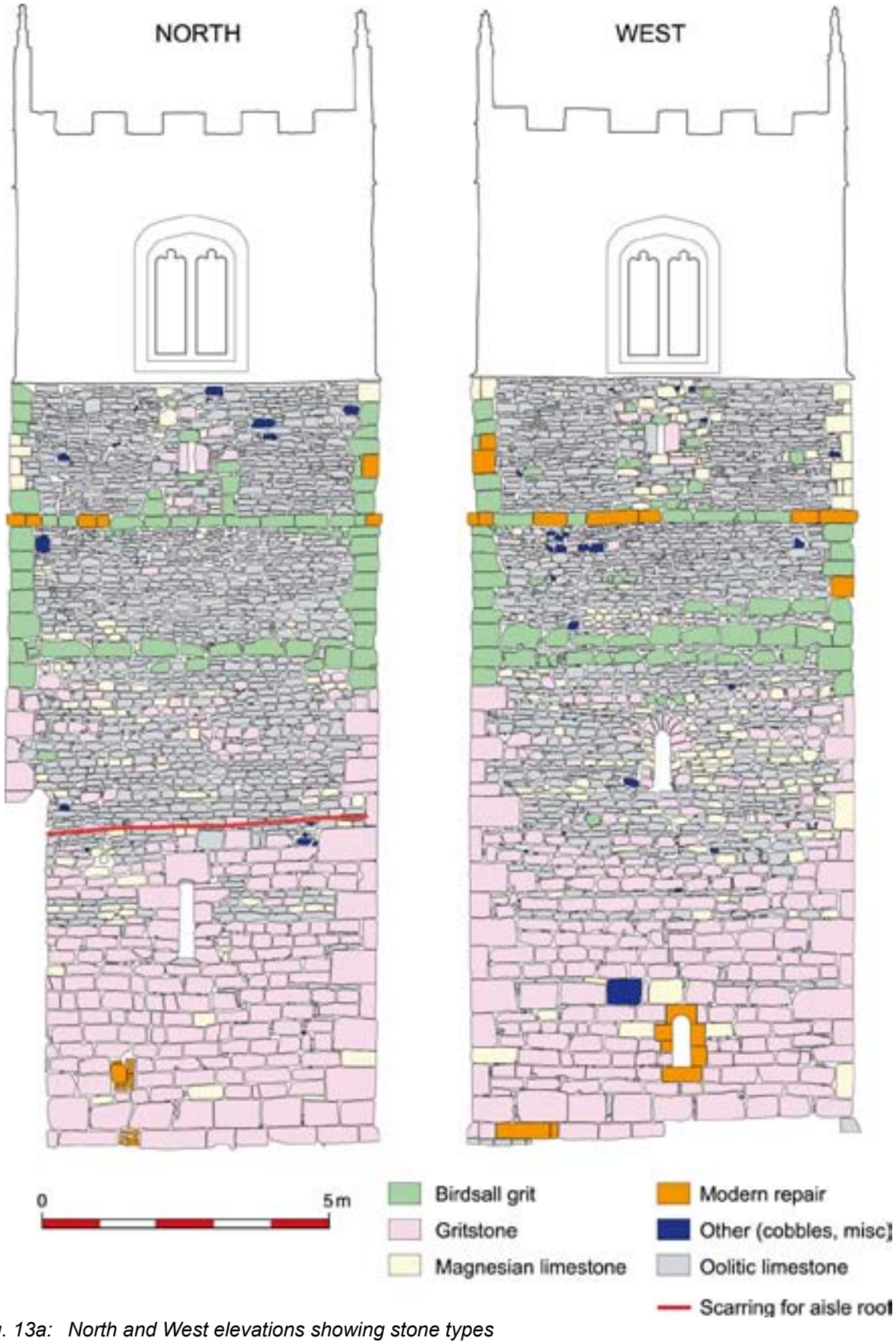

Fig. 13a: North and West elevations showing stone types

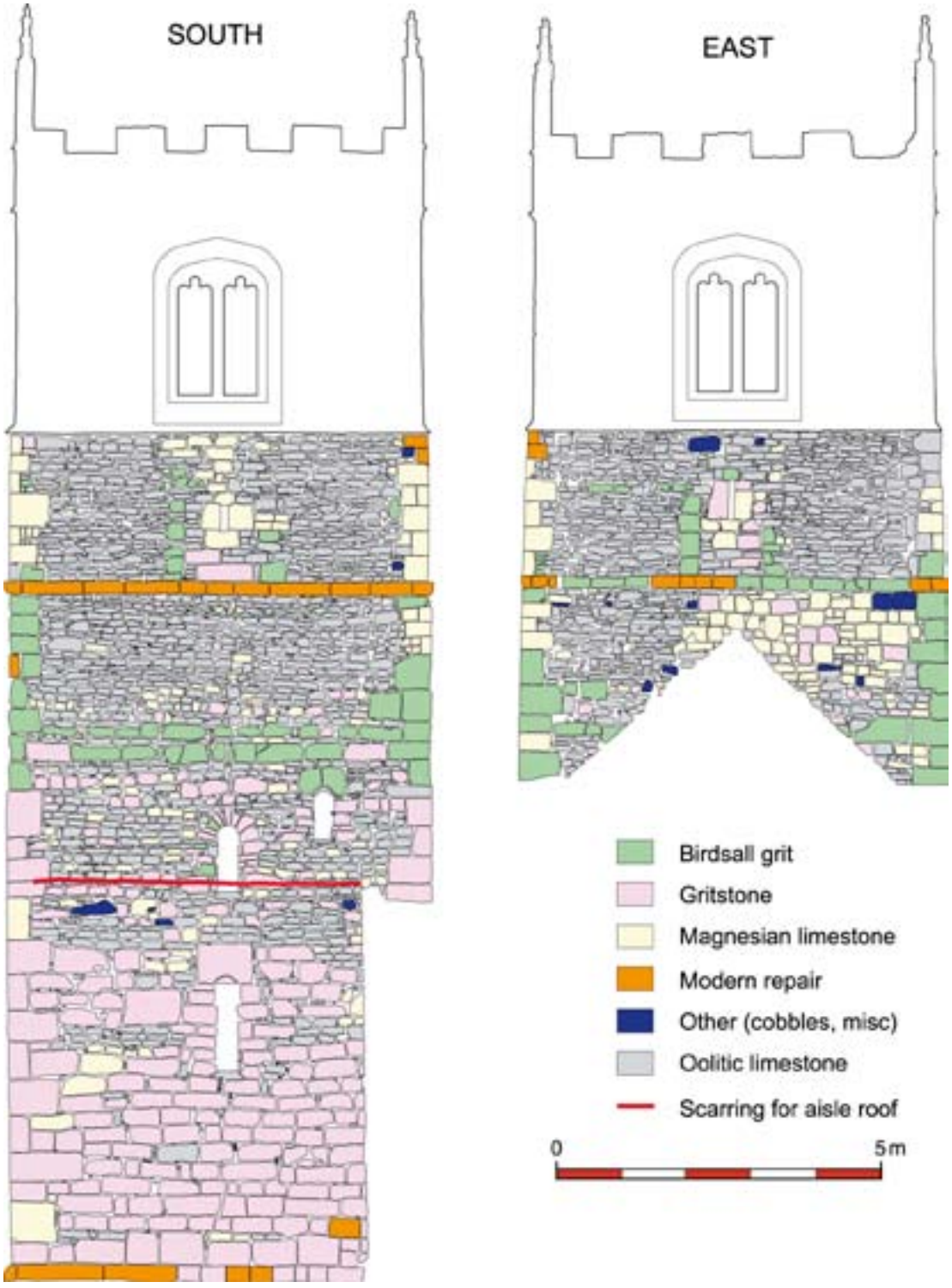

Fig. 13b: South and East elevations showing stone types

re-used Roman material; the variety in their sizes suggests that they had been robbed from a well-planned and well-executed Roman building. It is also possible that the north and south windows and the tower arch (excluding the strip-work) had been taken in their entirety from a high-quality Roman structure. Other material includes Oolitic limestone and Tadcaster (Magnesian) limestone; the bulk of the latter is repair work of later date.

The present west window is 19th-century or later, but it may replace an earlier one. It is set within an off-centre embrasure that appears to be an insertion into the original fabric, for the masonry here is undisturbed except for the very evident chisel marks associated with the west window, which has an internal splay only, crude and irregular, roughly cut through the fabric of the west wall. There is no suggestion in the internal elevation that this embrasure has been achieved by the partial infilling of a west door; the coincidence of near-vertical jointing through three courses on the external elevation, north of the window, does not convince to the contrary. There is no evidence for a door in either the north or south elevation.

The tower's imposing eastern arch comprises two elements: a round-headed arch 3.95m (13ft) tall on rectangular impost blocks, with square reveals carried on square plinths; and two bands of stripwork, the inner half-round, the outer square in section. The arch is built of gritstone and the masonry is accurately set out and cut. The stripwork is less accomplished; nevertheless, measurement reveals that it follows the line of the arch's soffit reasonably well. The masonry at the crown of the soffit has been renewed, probably during Pearson's restoration in 1876.

The arch and its decoration are structurally distinct in that they do not share a single stone; there is, in effect, a straight joint between them. This could be taken to mean that they have different origins with the arch, for example, being a re-set Roman item, and the stripwork a later embellishment of it. The stripwork decorates both sides of the arch, implying that it was intended to be seen, and to impress, from both the east and the west.

The north and south windows which light this chamber are very similar. Both are narrow double-splayed windows under round heads, placed in the middle of their respective walls. The splayed reveals are made of well-cut gritstone, although those of the south window, in particular, are unequal in the angle of their splays. Taylor suggested that these windows had originally been of single-splay form, modified in conjunction with his postulated addition of upper stories (Taylor 1978, fig. 681).

There are two decorated stones visible in this lowest stage of the tower. Near the base of the north internal elevation, carved on a piece of Lower Magnesian Limestone, is the graffito now interpreted as a depiction of Ragnarök, the end of the world as portrayed in Old Norse mythology, and dated to the 9th-11th centuries (Lang 1991, 214-5) (Fig. 14). Its position, so close to the floor, suggests that it was carved elsewhere and brought to site to be re-used. Whether this was done at the time of building, or whether it is a later insertion, is unknown.

On the south external elevation, adjacent to the western quoin which is at the same level as the head of the south window, is a gritstone block modelled in low relief with a zoomorphic shape that is known locally as the Bear Stone. This, however, seems to be a misnomer, for the animal has bovine characteristics at its mouth and ear (Fig. 15).

Fig. 14: Graffito interpreted as representing Ragnarök, on the tower's north wall.

Fig. 15: Detail of the 'Bear Stone'. Scale unit 100 mm.

The nature and quality of the materials change markedly both inside and out at around the level of the first floor (Fig. 13a,b). Initially, although large gritstones continue to be used for quoins, the mass-walling material changes dramatically from gritstone blocks to smaller sized, predominantly oolitic limestone rubble, with occasional blocks or slabs of other materials. The oolitic limestone slabs are coursed in a rather rough and ready fashion, although the quality of the work, in this respect, improves somewhat with height. There is no pitched-slab work, no obviously re-used Roman masonry, brick, or tile, and Magnesian limestone was barely used.

No evidence was recognised for the former presence of a west gable, as might have been anticipated if Taylor's interpretation of the tower as having two Anglo-Saxon phases of construction is correct. If such a gable ever existed, it was presumably removed before the tower was heightened, rather than simply being incorporated into the new work. There is, however, a slight but well-marked reduction in wall thickness, visible internally as a narrow offset, no more than 50 mm wide at most, which can be seen in the south wall immediately below the 19th-century first floor. The corresponding position in the north wall exhibits the change in building materials but no offset.

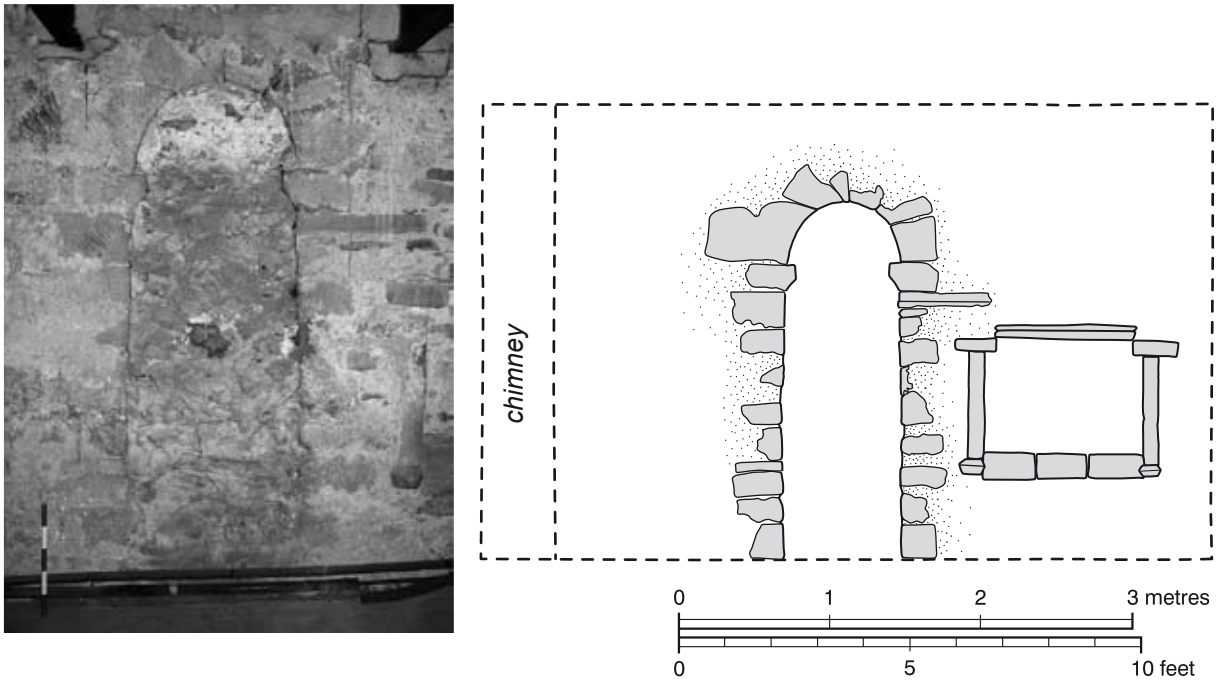

Fig. 16: Photograph and drawn elevation of blocked doorway in east wall of tower, and adjacent recess, showing inter alia *the extent of mortar/plaster rendering*

There are no physical remains of the original first floor; its existence and position can be deduced only from the level of the threshold of the high-level doorway in its east wall. This demonstrates that the present floor broadly coincides with the original level in this room; indeed, the 19th-century insertion has probably disguised the original joist sockets. The high-level east door shares the tall and narrow proportions of many of its fellows; it is constructed of roughly-tooled blocks and has what can only be described as a paraboloid arch springing from deeply chamfered imposts (Fig. 16). The masons have attempted radial joints but with only limited success. Beneath the south impost, in the jamb of the doorway, there is a re-used edge-moulded slab of unknown provenance, 57cm long and 9cm thick; and it can be seen from the east side of the wall that the bottom stone in each jamb projects into the doorway, and has a chamfered edge (Fig. 17). The door is now blocked; its external face, which is recessed from the surrounding wall façade, comprises carefully coursed small rubble. On the internal face the rubble infill is largely hidden by plaster and cement, but at least two pieces of brick can be seen; they measure 2¼ - 2½ inches in thickness, and may be of 18th-century date.

The room is lit by double-splayed windows, centrally placed in the south and west walls, and by a similar but smaller window, at a slightly higher level, in the south wall, which seems intended to cast light on a recess in the east wall. The double-splayed windows are smaller versions of those in the ground floor room but constructed in coursed rubble, with their heads turned in tapered gritstones (they are hardly voussoirs); the head of the smaller south window is cut from a single block.

A shallow oblong recess in the east wall of this chamber, south of the doorway into the nave, has been interpreted as an altar position (Fig. 18). The feature is flanked by colonnettes which rise from unmatched biconical corbels to carry impost blocks; the top of the recess, apparently made from two stones of very unequal length, is set flush with the face of the wall between, but not upon, the imposts. Its chamfered and rolled profile is correctly illustrated in Brown 1925, 333, fig 149, with detail; *contra* Taylor and Taylor 1965, 553, fig 269. The moulding which defines the bottom of the recess is made of three stones of unequal length. The recess is slightly deeper at its base than at its top; its back is partly covered by a skim of white plaster. Indeed, there is sufficient lime mortar adhering to the walls of this chamber to suggest that it was rendered and plastered throughout, although all traces of fine finishing plaster have fallen; all that is left is the lowermost layer. This detail and the presence of the altar both suggest that this room was at one time in regular use.

Fig. 17: Blocked doorway at first floor level in tower, seen from the nave

Fig. 18: Recess in inner face of the east wall of the tower, at first floor level. Scale unit: 100 mm.

The original bonding material, recorded externally only at first floor level where some of the south-west quoins were replaced, is a very homogenous light brown mortar incorporating limestone chips; pauses in the work were indicated by subtle but abrupt changes in the composition of the mix. Mixed in with the corework are occasional pieces of heavily rotted timber; the species could not be identified, but they may be offcuts from scaffold-poles and hurdling. The largest, which retained its bark, was some 50mm in diameter. All the pieces seen were too decayed for further examination.

Some five or six courses above the level of the first floor, approximately at the level of the second floor, the gritstone quoins give way to softer and more friable sandstone blocks ('Birdsall Grit' sandstone). Here, too, there is an external band formed by one, two or three courses of 'Birdsall Grit' sandstone, separated in some places by limestone slabs. Geological analysis might thus be taken to suggest a distinct phase of work in which only the first floor chamber was added to an earlier, single-storey structure. There is no structural evidence, however, for a break in construction between the first and second floors.

Internally, some components of the second floor's structure still survive, albeit in truncated form. The sawn-off ends of earlier joists can be seen immediately beneath the present second floor, two on the north side of the chamber and one on the south. All are securely lodged in purpose-made sockets and in one case mortar had slopped over the timber and taken up the cross-sectional shape of the joist before setting. The present second floor itself is probably post-medieval, with 19th-century repairs. It is almost entirely boarded out in tongued and grooved boards apart from a small area in the south-west corner, where there are remnants of three massive boards measuring 350mm wide and 50mm thick; they are all now 1750mm long but have evidently been cut down when the floor was remodelled. They lack any edge joints or overlapping chamfers, and are simply butted together. Their date is unknown.

Although Taylor (1965, 554) believed that this second floor defined the base of the belfry chamber, this can now be questioned. Externally, an extensively restored but apparently original chamfered limestone string course coincides internally with a series of joist sockets, now blocked with red engineering bricks. There are seven pairs of sockets, aligned east-west, with each socket measuring about 150mm square. In the east wall there is one more socket, in the south-east corner, but the corresponding position in the west wall is now occupied by a large corbel-like timber of unknown function. The date of these sockets is unknown, but the fact that their dimensions resemble those at second floor level supports the view that they may define the position of an original third floor. If this was the case, the second floor chamber had a floor-to-ceiling height of 1.75m and was evidently unlit.

Immediately above the limestone string course are four original belfry openings, one in the centre of each elevation. These were blocked up and reduced to rectangular slit windows in the late medieval period. The original belfry openings were about 1m wide internally with reveals made of sandstone blocks; straight joints are plainly visible in the interior of the belfry although the blocking, presumably 15th-century, has been more skilfully finished on the external elevations. All trace of the window heads has been removed from each elevation; probably they were paired narrow round-headed openings separated by a mid-wall shaft. The heads may have been turned in rubble, in a similar manner to that over the high-level east door.

Some evidence survives for a bell-frame of the type common in 11th-century west towers. To either side of the east belfry opening there are two vertical slots, infilled and crudely plastered over with Portland Cement. Each was originally approximately 0.30 m tall, but their width is now obscured; they were approximately 0.95–1.0 m apart. The corresponding locations on the west wall are more disturbed and obscured by Portland Cement. It is suggested that a pair of beams ran east-west here, and that bells were mounted and swung between them.

Fig. 19: Possible wall plate, with the scale resting on its upper edge, in the internal north elevation of the tower. View looking east. Scale unit 100 mm.

The pre-Conquest fabric terminates immediately above the level of the 19th-century floor of the medieval belfry; externally, this termination is marked by a chamfered limestone string course of late medieval or later date. Within the belfry, in the internal north elevation, there are five courses of oolitic limestone, carefully laid beneath a single, unjointed oak member 80mm high which runs the full visible width of the chamber (Fig. 19). Initially this was thought to be a later medieval trimmer, since medieval and later fabric rests upon it. However, it appears to be embedded in mortar of the type used in the tower's construction, and it seems to have been bonded into the apparently original, oolitic limestone of the tower's west wall. These observations suggest that it may be contemporary with the building of the tower. If this is the case, it may have functioned as an inner wall-plate of the original roof; the abutting courses in the west wall could represent an original west gable that was, presumably, matched by a corresponding east gable. On the south side of the medieval belfry chamber there is, in a precisely comparable position, a long 19th-century repair faced with Portland Cement, suggesting that a similar timber here has been removed. This may therefore be the position of the south inner wall-plate of the original roof.

The Nave

Within the body of the church, the north and south arcades spring from the east elevation of the west tower. The north arcade (the earlier of the two) makes a simple butt joint with the tower, but in the spandrel of the south arcade a fragment of walling survives which seems to be integral with the fabric of the tower itself, and is built of much the same material. This is interpreted as a remnant of a nave south wall contemporary with the tower; the remainder was presumably demolished when the south aisle was added, and no other masonry of early character can be seen in the spandrels of the arcade.

The foundations for this nave were exposed only in section, in the edge of the construction cut for a modern coal bunker which impinged upon the line of the nave's north wall. Little could be determined other than that they had a similar form and character to the foundations for the tower's north, south and west walls. Here they rested upon the foundations for the earlier structure.

MEDIEVAL – MODERN USAGE OF THE CHURCH

Early Activity In and Around the Standing Tower (c. 11th – 12th centuries)

The earliest surviving internal deposits associated with the standing tower appear, on the basis of the stratified position of a cut silver halfpenny of Henry III (voided long cross Class V), dated 1247-79, to be approximately some two centuries later than its likely date of construction. This coin was found within the tower, in a mortar layer sealing the tower's foundations. Its relatively late date suggests that a tranche of earlier deposits had been removed, leaving only a small number of shallow features of uncertain purpose below where they had been.

Outside the tower extensive disturbance confounded the recognition of contemporary deposits, but sixteen burials could be attributed to this phase of activity. They included adults of both sexes as well as infants. Because of the high degree of truncation they were all incomplete, but it was still possible to see an element of clustering around the south and south-west of the area investigated. One of the earlier, and more complete, of these burials, which lay within the now demolished western structure, gave a radiocarbon determination (Beta-202749) of 870+/-40BP: Cal AD 1020-1200 at two sigma calibration. All the burials were aligned west-east with heads at the west and arms by their sides or crossed to the pelvis; there were no signs of any coffins.

Aisles

On the line of the north arcade, adjacent to the tower, it could be seen that the foundation for the nave wall had been disturbed, not by burials, but as a direct result of removing the wall above to create the 12th-century arcade. More unexpectedly, wall foundations encountered running north and the south from the west end of the tower suggested that it had once been flanked by a continuation of the aisles; and analysis of the standing structure demonstrated the presence of faint scarring where the roof of each aisle had been tied into the tower (Fig 13a, b, north and south external elevations). The foundations to north and south were made of completely different materials, suggesting they were not constructed simultaneously. Although not fully excavated, and left *in situ* at the engineers' request, both foundations are believed to have been at least 1.3m deep.

That to the north was made up of field stones, possibly derived from the boulder clay, in a matrix of silty sand, and clearly abutted the foundations of the standing tower (Fig. 21). A single piece of ceramic building material dated to the 13th-16th centuries was found on the surviving top of this foundation, not assuredly deposited during construction. That to the south consisted of a basal layer of oolitic limestone fragments, covered by cobbles with both oolitic and magnesian limestone fragments (Fig. 22, 23). On top of the foundation were two small oolitic limestone blocks that may have been part of the aisle wall. There was no independent dating evidence for this foundation. The fact that elements of it were incorporated into the fabric of the tower (Fig 23b) indicates that there had already been some subsidence here which had created the gaps into which the new work was inserted. Unfortunately the more recent insertion of a repair to the base of the wall masked any further evidence.

It is not clear whether these now vanished west walls for the aisles mark their original ends or their secondary extensions. There was no trace further east of any foundation that could be interpreted as of 12th-century construction, to correspond with the date suggested by the architectural style of

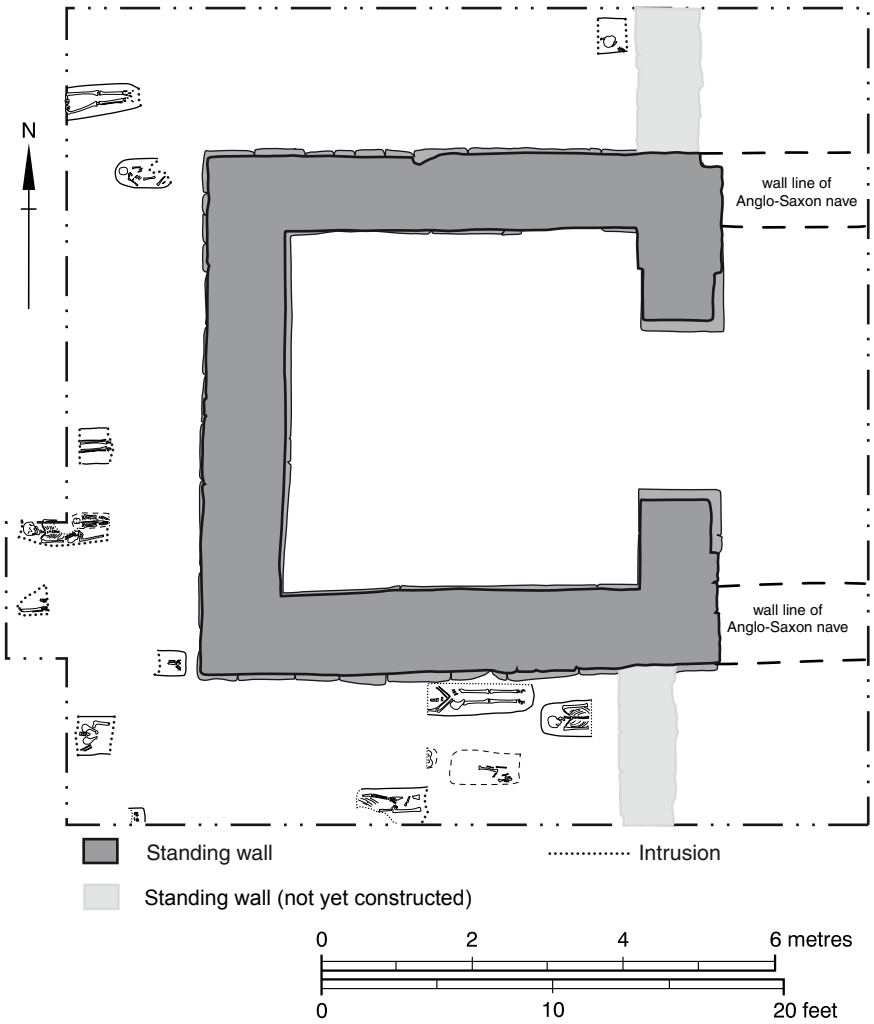

Fig. 20: 11th-12th century activity

the original arcades; it could be argued, however, that their later truncation, discussed below, had brought them back almost precisely to their initial position, and that the works associated with that eastward move had removed or, perhaps, partially re-used any earlier foundations.

Both aisles were later truncated; the west walls of the foreshortened aisles run north and south respectively from the tower's east corners. On the north side of the church one of the deposits which had been truncated during the construction of the repositioned west wall contained a German stoneware pottery sherd of 15th-century date; this demonstrates that the aisle was shortened at or after that time. Internally it could be seen that the construction cut for this repositioned west wall continued to a depth greater than 0.7m below ground level. The foundations comprised limestone rubble blocks, large cobbles and gritty mortar, and the wall itself was built of magnesian limestone and re-used gritstone blocks. The repositioned wall on the south side was subsequently rebuilt yet again, albeit in the same position, during Pearson's restoration in 1876. Inside the church it was observed that the Victorian foundations were of brick; the external face of the foundations was not exposed.

Fig. 21a,b: showing the northern aisle foundation in plan, looking southwards and section, looking eastwards. Scale unit 100 mm.

Fig. 22: Part of southern aisle foundation, looking north. Scale unit: 100 mm.

Fig. 23a (below): Southern aisle wall structure and foundation seen in section; Fig.23b (inset) two oolitic limestone blocks, one interposed below on overhanging stone in the tower wall, viewed from above. Scale unit: 100 mm.

Medieval Activity (c.13th – 15th centuries)

A series of floors, use deposits and lead-working hearths was visible within the tower and extended into the nave; their cumulative thickness did not exceed 100mm, and the uppermost lay only 0.25m below ground level. Although much disturbed, it was possible to see a general sequence that started with *in situ* burning and trample and then continued with compacted mortar surfaces, deposits apparently representing build up over them, silty layers and, finally, patches of a softer mortar spread.

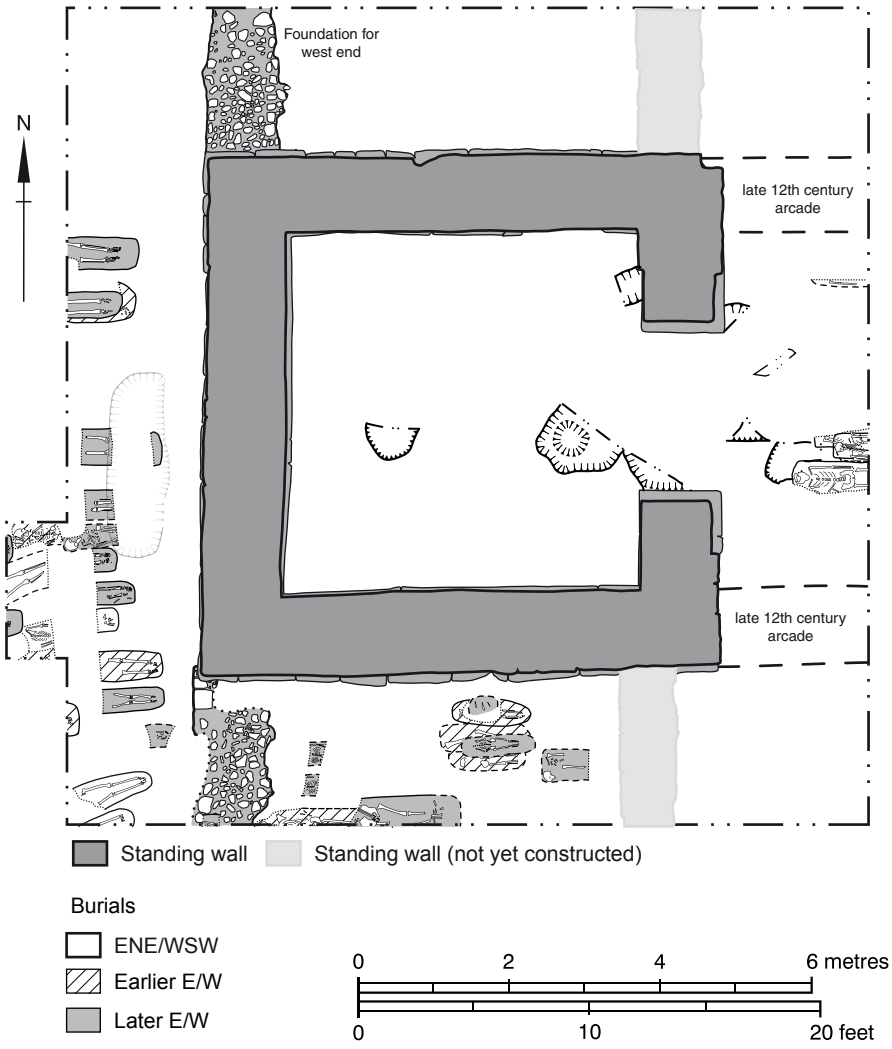

Fig. 24: Medieval burials and other activity

N S H Rogers writes: A small number of artefacts was recovered from these deposits (Fig. 25). They include a strap-guide and a bar mount, both used on belts, and both from the same context; and a medieval lace tag, all made of copper alloy. The strap-guide is a D-shaped loop with a decorative collared knop to one side and an external rivet on the other: these fittings were used to secure the part of a strap or belt which extended beyond the buckle, the rivet being used for attachment to the strap. A similar strap-guide was found at the College of the Vicars Choral, Bedern, York in

a mid-14th to early 15th-century deposit (Ottaway and Rogers 2002, 2903, fig.1477, 14387). The bar mount would have decorated a belt or, perhaps, a horse-harness strap (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 209), and closely resembles an example from London from a late 13th to mid 14th-century deposit (*ibid*, 213, fig.134, 1150). The lace tag would have been used to prevent the end of a lace fraying, and could be contemporary with the strap guide and bar mount. Similar examples from York appear to be mainly 15th – 16th century in date, but they have been recovered from 14th-century deposits (Ottaway and Rogers 2002, 2920-1).

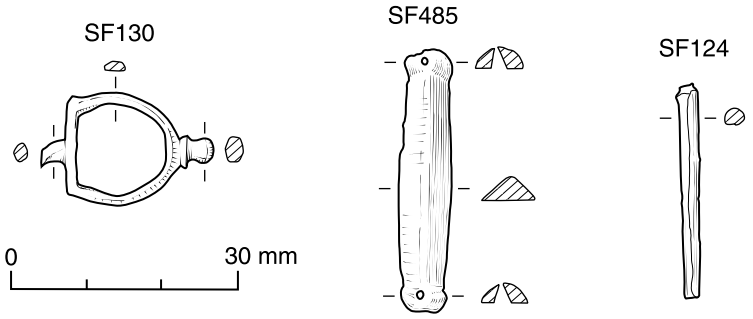

Fig. 25: Copper alloy strap guide, bar mount and lace tag. Scale 1:1

The tower was not used for burials at this time, but graves were dug at the west end of the nave, in the aisles and in the surrounding external areas. Accurate dating of these burials was difficult because of the paucity of associated artefacts and the degree of truncation by later structures and graves; the datable materials that were recovered show a possible date range of the 12th to 15th centuries, but some of the later graves might be of early post-medieval date. A radiocarbon determination from the stratigraphically earliest burial in the nave (Beta-202746) gave possible dates of Cal AD 1270-1320 and Cal AD 1350-1390 when calibrated at two sigma.

On stratigraphic grounds the external burials could be subdivided into three, apparently separate, phases; where a grave had no relevant stratigraphic relationships, it has been included in the latest possible phase. The earliest group of these burials was aligned west-south-west/east-north-east. Two later groups of burials were both aligned west-east; the earlier of these includes some graves within the extended southern aisle of the church, while some of the later group may post-date the reduction of the flanking aisles. A charnel pit, centrally positioned to the south of the tower, may have been occasioned by the alterations to the west end wall of the south aisle. A sub-rectangular feature, up to 0.9m deep and 2.45m long, occupied an approximately central position some 0.4m west of the tower; its purpose is not identified.

There was no sign that any of these individuals, who included both sexes and all ages, had been buried in coffins. They lay supine, heads to the west, their arms by their sides or crossed to meet at the pelvis.

Late Medieval and Early Post-medieval Activity (c.15th – 17th centuries)

In the late medieval period a belfry was added to the tower above a chamfered string course (Fig 13a,b). It has been heavily restored at various subsequent periods but was originally constructed of good quality magnesian limestone ashlar. If the pre-existing tower had east and west gables they were lowered, and the original belfry openings were infilled. Narrow slit windows were left to illuminate the belfry chamber and possibly the second floor chamber too, if the original belfry's floor was removed at the same time. Some of the original quoins may also have been replaced in this period. Major repairs were carried out to the east face of the tower immediately above the north pitch of the nave roof, where there is now a large area of disturbed fabric with blocks of magnesian limestone and inclusions of clay tile. Nothing is known of the medieval roof: the present roof is entirely 19th-century.

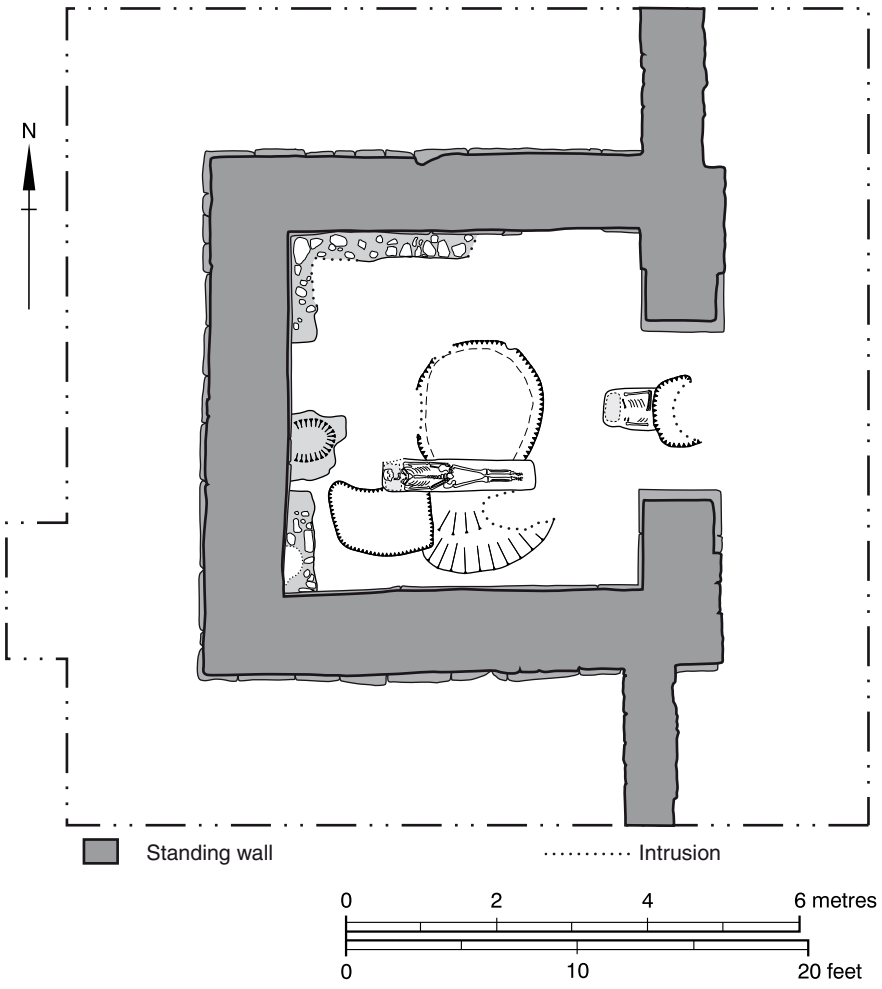

Fig. 26: Late medieval and post-medieval activity

The paucity of accurately datable archaeological material makes it difficult to separate late medieval from post-medieval activity in the tower and nave; unfortunately, the most precisely datable item that might originally have been associated with these horizons, a 16th-century Nuremberg token, was recovered from the backfill of a Victorian flue. The most striking archaeological feature attributed to

these centuries was a large circular cut in the centre of the tower, approximately 1.8m in diameter, and deeper than the base of the excavation. The presence of clay mould fragments in the backfill deposits, albeit they are of undiagnostic sizes and shapes, supports the contention that this was a bell-casting pit. Similar backfill deposits found in a shallow feature to the south suggest that it was in use at the same time as the pit; a sherd of 14th-century pottery found in this feature is thought to be residual. The western end of this feature in turn was cut by a large, sub-rectangular pit in the south-west corner of the tower. Its backfill contained a fragment of an alabaster panel, and further alabaster fragments were found in a still later pit dug into its backfill (see below).

All these features were cut by a 0.66m-deep grave containing the skeleton of an old middle adult (?)male with extensive pathologies. A dark brown stain beneath the skull suggested that the head had been supported by a pillow. Another, badly disturbed, grave in the centre of the tower arch had also contained an adult whose head had been supported on a pillow. In addition there were further floors, trample deposits, lead working hearths and, cutting the eastern of the two graves, a pit some 0.95m in diameter, its backfill containing debris and waste from metalworking. Shallow cobble footings in the north-west and south-west corners of the tower perhaps indicate the former location of a timber stairway up into the first floor.

An iron arrowhead with a sub-triangular head and an extended socket was recovered from a construction spread of the late medieval – early post-medieval period in one corner of the tower. *N S H Rogers writes:* This form of arrowhead is of Jessop's Type MP2, a multi-purpose arrowhead, thought to have been used for military or hunting purposes, and dating from 11th – 14th centuries (Jessop 1996, 196). Seven similar arrowheads were found in 12th –13th century deposits at Coppergate, York (Ottaway and Rogers 2002, 2967-9, 12826-32).

*

The difficulties of dating, and of relating deposits outside the building with the phases identified inside, have resulted in none of the external burials being attributed to this period. It is possible, however, that some of the later burials from the previous phase, and some of the earlier burials from the subsequent phase, may correctly belong to this period.

Early Modern Activity (c. 17th - early 19th centuries)

A series of uniform levelling and related deposits, dating to the later post-medieval and early modern period, was encountered throughout the excavated internal areas. The uppermost of these, up to 0.20m thick, is interpreted as supporting a floor surface, subsequently removed, which extended across the church. Cut into this deposit, in the north-west corner of the tower, was the latest in the series of lead-working hearths found there. This one was in a bowl-shaped depression c. 0.80m in diameter and up to 0.28m deep, ultimately backfilled with deposits including lead waste and slag. Nearer the south-west corner of the tower, and dug into the backfill of an earlier feature, was a sub-rectangular pit in which fragments of painted alabaster panel were found (see below).

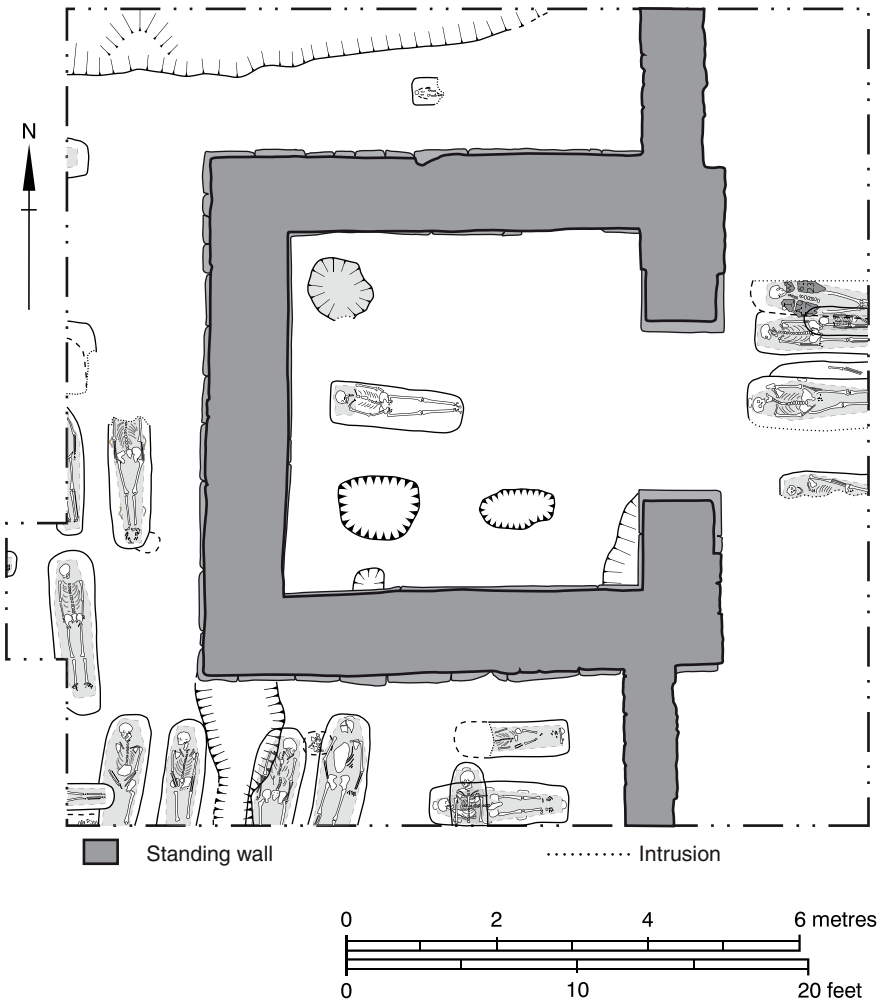

Fig. 27: Early modern activity

Burials, some demonstrably within coffins, were found in graves cut through the sub-floor deposit noted above. Associated dating evidence, mainly in the form of pottery or ceramic building materials, suggests that the earliest of these burials are of 17th/early 18th century date. A single grave within the tower contained no visible traces of a coffin but evidence, in the form of a dark stain, for a pillow or board below the head and shoulders of the occupant, an adult male. The northernmost of the graves at the west end of the nave contained a coffin relatively well-preserved in places because the solution in water of copper-alloy decorative studs on the lid had acted as

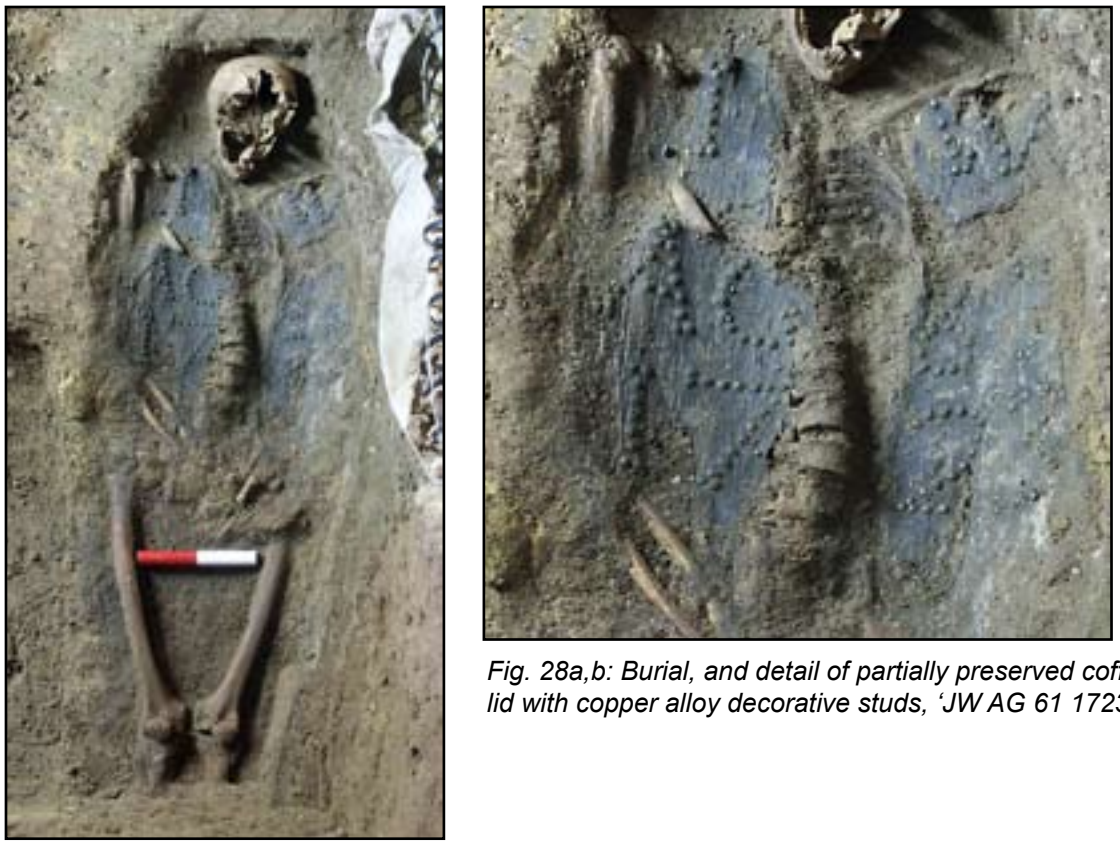

Fig. 28a,b: Burial, and detail of partially preserved coffin lid with copper alloy decorative studs, 'JW AG 61 1723'.

a biocide against bacteria and fungi which would have attacked the wood. The studs formed the inscription 'JW AG 61 1723' and this corresponds with an entry in the church's Burial Register which records the burial of Joseph Ward, aged sixty-one (Fig. 28).

Contemporary external burials, some in decorated coffins, were attributable to two distinct phases. Eight coffined burials, mostly adult males but including one adult female, had been buried in graves aligned approximately north-south, with the heads at the north. Dating evidence from the backfills was uniformly of 18th- or 18th/19th-century date; one set of coffin fragments resemble those seen in a coffin catalogue dated 1783. After this phase of unusually aligned interments, burial in graves orientated east-west was resumed.

Artefacts from these early modern deposits include a bone disc with a central perforation, found in a 19th / 20th-century deposit within the tower. Similar bone discs have been found in medieval deposits in York where they were interpreted as possible beads or buttons (MacGregor, Mainman and Rogers 1999, 1944-45); virtually complete buttons of silk with similarly sized wooden discs at the core were recovered from the mid-16th century wreck of the Mary Rose (Gardiner with Allen 2005, 96-7, fig.2.75, 81A4410). A smaller button with four perforations, and possibly made of mother-of-pearl was recovered from an 18th – 19th-century burial.

Victorian and Later Activity

A suite of post-holes within the tower, the insertion of a boiler and coal bunker with accompanying flues at the west end of the nave and under the tower, and a series of service trenches and other features around the tower, can all be attributed to the period since the restoration of 1876. In general the 19th-century repair work to the tower is unobtrusive. One addition, however, was the large flue which runs up its north-east corner. The last century has seen the addition of the current clock and further repairs with red engineering brick and Portland Cement. The latest disturbances to the ground surrounding the tower were as a result of the insertion of water, electricity and floodlights.

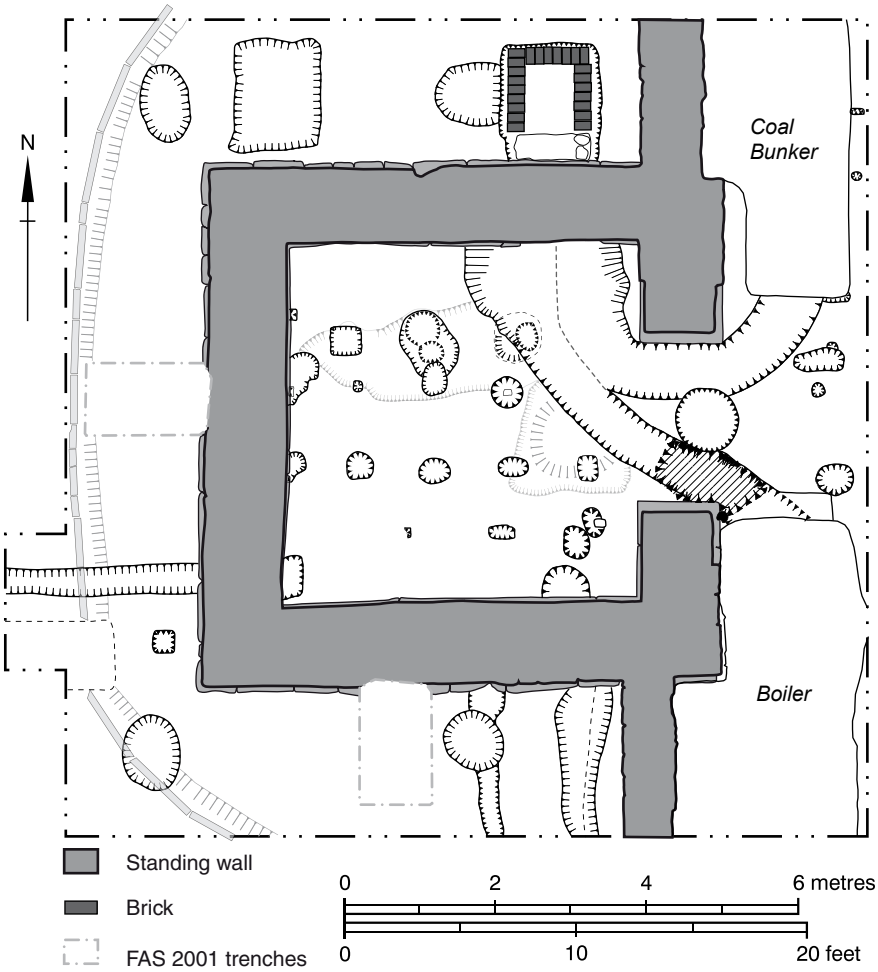

Fig. 29: Victorian and later activity

CONCLUSIONS

The discoveries described above pose a series of new questions about the context and function of Skipwith before the eleventh century, the date commonly ascribed to the church tower and, thus, hitherto, to the foundation of the church. In interpreting these results it is necessary to remember, however, that only a small area has been excavated, albeit an important one, and that crucial information about the evolution of the site may exist beyond the limits of the investigation.

The earliest activity now identified is represented by a number of burials with radiocarbon determinations which yielded calibrated dates of AD 680-880, 770-980 and 790-990. Collectively they indicate that burials may have taken place here as early as the late 7th or 8th century, although dates in the late 9th and 10th century are equally possible. The dated graves include two within the footprint of the building which predates the standing tower, and one adjacent to it. Whatever their precise date, they are evidence for ritual activity on this site before the generally accepted date for the construction of the earliest surviving parts of the church which stands today.

The chronological relationship of these early burials to the earliest structural remains is clear in the cases of the two dated burials within the building, for they cut through a mortar layer associated with its construction. The dated burial outside the building, the earliest by nearly a century, is associated with this phase of activity on less secure stratigraphic and other grounds. The siting of all the burials assigned to this phase of activity in relation to the foundations for this initial building could be interpreted as indicating that they were interred within or around a pre-existing structure, for none were truncated by the foundations. Additionally, there was no evidence that any other, earlier graves had been emptied by deliberate exhumation as a precursor to initial building, as was the case when the 10th-century church at Barton-on-Humber was erected on the site of an earlier cemetery (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 294). Although Hadley (2002, 220-1) has cautioned that coffined burials, like some of those seen in this early phase of burial at Skipwith, have been found at many places in northern England where there is no evidence for an associated church, and also that churches were built in pre-existing graveyards in the 10th and 11th centuries, the evidence here demonstrates that burials took place within an existing building, which can therefore be identified as a church.

The date of this first stone-built church could therefore be as early as the late 7th or 8th century; in which case the church may have had monastic connections. If the latest possible dating for the burials is correct, however, it may be an example of a private church founded in the wake of the Viking settlement in Yorkshire in 876, when landholding, ecclesiastical provision and opportunities for secular burials in and immediately around churches underwent dynamic change.

The form of this early building is known only in part; it had a relatively small porch or tower at its west end and a nave beyond. There was no surviving trace in the form of recognisable doorways, arches etc of how these elements articulated with each other or with the external area. The foundations consisted of cobbles and gritstone rubble in a sandy matrix; nothing of the superstructure survived, but it is surmised that this consisted, at least in part, of gritstones that were re-used in the next phase of building. The source of the gritstone is likely to have been the remains of a Roman building or buildings; the proximity of the Rivers Ouse and Derwent would have allowed for easy transport downstream from York, Malton or some other major settlement; alternatively, a villa or some other rural site nearer to Skipwith might have been the source. Millstone Grit, often clearly

derived from Roman buildings, was re-used in the building of a number of early Yorkshire churches (Morris 1976, 100-103; 1988, 192-5).

The burials provide the only evidence for the use of either cell. Burials of a neonate, an infant, and several adult males of various ages have been identified, as well as that of one adult female. The apparently deliberate layout of graves, with three pairs each in close but not intersecting proximity, may have familial causes, although it has not been possible to undertake any scientific examination that would shed light on whether proximity in death equates to family or kin groups. This careful layout also suggests a curated regime of burial; and the possibility that one at least of the external graves, that of a neonate/infant, was marked by a headboard finds a parallel in the cemetery excavated at Raunds, Northamptonshire, where a child's grave (as well as several others) had such a marker at its head (Boddington 1996, 46). The use of coffin chests, indicated by the presence of iron brackets and hinges, some of them still *in situ*, suggests that some at least of those interred enjoyed at least modest status in the local community.

The reasons why this early building was apparently carefully dismantled and re-built, albeit in a new configuration, remain obscure. Given that the north, west and south sides of the standing tower lie almost directly above its predecessor's foundations, yet do not incorporate *in situ* masonry from the earlier building, it seems possible that it was a structural failure that may have necessitated the rebuilding. As the rebuilding allowed the creation of a larger western cell (the present tower) than existed in its predecessor, it appears that the re-builders were also motivated by a desire for a more elaborate, ornate, ostentatious building. The date of the standing tower has not been confirmed in these excavations; a date in the second half of the 11th century seems most likely (cf. Briden and Stocker 1987, 145).

There remains room for debate about the building sequence exhibited in the tower's fabric. Essentially, the key question, in the absence of other credible supporting evidence, is whether or not the change in building stone between the large gritstone blocks of the tower's ground floor and the smaller limestone rubble of the upper stages below the later medieval belfry represents two completely independent building campaigns, as Taylor believed (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 550-4; Taylor 1978, 1084). An alternative view would see this break as a product of having to utilise differing sources of building stone, coupled with a sensible structural use of the larger material in the lower storey. This interpretation would see the entire standing tower, up to its later medieval belfry, as the product of one building campaign.

There are other Yorkshire church towers of approximately similar date which exhibit a dramatic change in building materials, and some of these have been studied archaeologically. At All Saints, Little Ouseburn, it is suggested that the lower 4m of the tower, built of gritstone blocks and not bonded into the nave west wall, is the product of an earlier building campaign than the upper portion which is so bonded (Butler 2006, 107-8). At St Mary Bishophill Junior, York, in contrast, where the masonry in the lower stage is predominantly small blocks of Lower Magnesian Limestone, much of it re-used Roman *saxa quadrata*, and the belfry is constructed of massive squared rubble, mostly gritstone, also presumably re-used Roman material, it was concluded that there was no convincing evidence that the tower was built in two distinct chronological phases (Briden and Stocker 1987, 130). These two examples demonstrate that some towers are of multi-phase construction; but that different stone types are not necessarily an automatic guide to such a building history.

The evidence for the early use of the ground floor space within the tower at Skipwith had been largely removed by later activities. It seems, however, that burial did not take place in this space until considerably later in the medieval period. In this respect the Skipwith data conforms with the results of excavations at Wharram Percy, East Riding of Yorkshire (Bell, Beresford et al 1987, 58), where no graves were found within the early-mid 11th-century two-cell church; at Barton-upon-Humber, Lincolnshire (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, fig.4) where there were no burials inside the western baptistery, just one grave inside the south door of the turriform nave, two graves symmetrically placed just within the chancel and one centrally placed at the east end; and at Raunds Furnells, Northamptonshire, where the only grave within the mid 10th - 11th-century two-cell church was a child's burial straddling the nave and chancel (Boddington 1996, 21).

Whatever encouraged the builders to erect a tower arch that was decorated on both its west and east faces remains uncertain; this elaboration presupposes that liturgical observances of some sort were undertaken on the tower's ground floor, whence participants looked eastwards through the decorated archway. If, for example, there had been a font in the middle of the tower space,

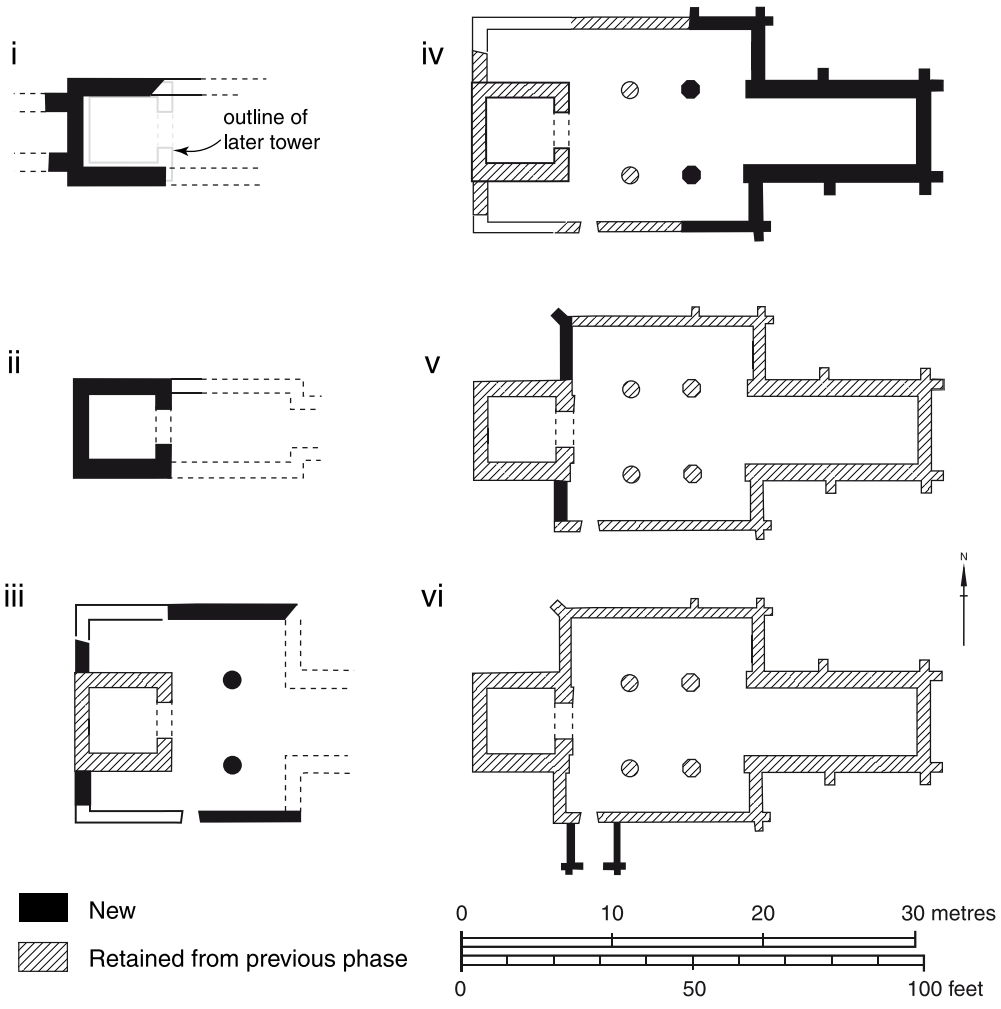

Fig. 30: Possible sequence for the development of the church's plan

traces of its substructure would have been destroyed by the late medieval bell-founding pit. It can be said, however, that Stocker's tentative suggestion (Briden and Stocker 1987, 145) that the tower at Skipwith may have served originally as a turriform nave is refuted by the confirmation that the lines of the late Norman arcades rest on the foundations of walls that defined the cell to the east of the tower; i.e. that this cell was no narrower than the tower, and did not therefore form a chancel to a tower nave.

Whichever interpretation of the original height of the present tower is accepted, this study has revealed evidence for an additional intermediate storey that was not previously recognised. This may have served the bell ringers, as was hypothesized when a similarly positioned room was identified as having originally existed at St Mary Bishophill Junior, York (Briden and Stocker 1987, 134, 143 and fig. 41); although there the chamber was 3.56m high, approximately twice as tall as that at Skipwith, and was lit by windows. Another possible interpretation is that the Skipwith room served as a treasury, as has been suggested for other similar tower rooms (Taylor 1978, 889).

The excavations have shed considerable light on the subsequent structural history and use of space within and around the church, revealing structural episodes that have hitherto been invisible or unrecognised, e.g. in the variation of length of the aisles. They have provided evidence for patterns and customs of burial, and for craft activities connected with the installation and upkeep of features such as the windows, and a bell or bells, and for the disturbance and destruction to fittings such as the alabaster carvings that was caused at the Reformation. The archaeological sequence is a valuable case study in the life cycle of a parish church, a reminder of how the church of the early 21st century has evolved and changed from its appearance and usage in past centuries (Fig. 30).

THE ALABASTER CARVINGS

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The finds included a considerable quantity of carved alabaster fragments; the most significant (and identifiable) are listed below:

A. Figurative/Narrative Scenes

1.14015 46 A: a spray of lilies below a lectern with an open book on it in high relief; flat reverse. Traces of gilding and red pigment; h. 125 mm, w. 64 mm, d. 58 mm. (Fig. 31a)

2. 13013 41: four bearded heads in high relief in two rows facing upwards and to the left; flat reverse. Embossed gilded ground and traces of gilding on the edges of the robes; some red pigmentation; h.135 mm, w. 109 mm, d. 50 mm. (Fig. 31b).

3. 13013 39 A & N: two fragments evidently from the same panel of an unbearded head and vested torso with a book (right) and two stones (left), facing frontally; flat reverse. Traces of gilding, notably on the hair, and red pigmentation; smaller scale than 1 and 2.

4. 13013 39 C: upper torso of a figure in high relief facing left , with arm emerging from a cowled garment; head missing; flat reverse. Traces of gilding and red pigment.

5. 10010 49: very worn fragment with what may be a head projecting in high relief. Traces of red pigment and a gilded ground.

B. Canopywork

The majority of the larger finds consist of fragments of openwork canopies.

1. 13013 40 A: the most complete and largest piece, comprising a curved base representing a vault providing a platform for, in the frontal plane, parts of two traceried designs set between two stepped buttresses. (Left and right) the base of a gabled opening pierced by pointed and cusped openings; (centre) a narrower two-light 'window' resting on a depressed arch. Behind this structure are the remains of three vertical structures. Flat reverse. Most of the vault retains red pigmentation and there are traces of brown and green paint and gilding on the superstructure. On the back are two parallel curving diagonal incised lines intersecting with a horizontal line; h. 61 mm, w. 105 mm, d. 46 mm (Fig. 31 c, d).

2. 14007 45 A: same scale and design as 13013 40 A. More of the gabled opening is preserved, with cusps to the shallow arched base and a pair of mouchettes above and crockets to a triangular gable; two vertical structures on the reverse. Traces of red paint.

3. 14007 45: as above but smaller, with part of the curved vault, a mouchette from a triangular gabled arch and a section of a stepped buttress. Traces of gilding.

Fig. 31a(above): 14015 46 A: spray of lilies

Fig. 31b (top right): 13013 41: four bearded heads in high relief in two rows

Fig. 31c,d(centre ,bottom right): 13013 40 A: front and rear view.

4. 14007 45 D: as above, with the right part of a triangular gabled arch and adjoining stepped buttress. Possibly the right part of 13013 40 A.

5. 13013 40 D: part of the superstructures on the reverse showing that they framed openings with a rounded head. Traces of red pigmentation.

6.14007 45 B, 14015 46 C, 13013 40 C, 13013 40 F, 13013 39 F, 13013 39 J, 13013 39 L: smaller pieces of the same design as above.

Interpretation: Identification

Of the figurative fragments, the subject-matter of one can be identified with certainty and two others a high degree of probability. The open book on a lectern/prie-dieu and the spray of lilies (14105 46 A) belong to an Annunciation (for comparisons, see Cheetham 1984, 168-174, nos 95-101; Cheetham 2003, 74-79, Life of Virgin ill. nos 15-35). The four male heads (13013 41) either come from a Pentecost or an Ascension scene – both are equally possible (for comparisons, see Cheetham 1984, 56, 288-294, nos 215-221; Cheetham 2003, 94, 142-4, Life of Virgin ill. nos 81-82, Life of Christ ill. nos 90-95). The stones, book and garment of 13013 39 A and N indicate that the figure is St Stephen (Hildburgh 1930, p.40, fig. 11: Cheetham 1984, pp. 150-1, nos 79-80). More problematic is the identification of the last figural piece (13013 39 C). The pose, left-facing direction and cowled upper garment resemble representations of Joseph in Adoration of the Magi panels (Cheetham 2003, Life of Virgin ill. nos 58, 59; Routh 1981). However, one of the Magi occurs in this fashion and position in at least two alabaster panels (Hildburgh 1944, 33, pl. X (d); Tavender 1949, 401, pl.VII).

The architectural fragments belong to a common design used for English alabaster altarpiece panels. The retable of St James the Greater given in 1456 to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela by the English priest John Goodyear has exactly the same design (Hildburgh 1926; Mata 1999, figs 101, 103). Better-preserved examples of the superstructure on the reverse (13013 40 A, D, 14007 45 A) can be seen on several altarpieces and individual panels (Mata 1999, figs 41, 59).

Interpretation: Context

The Skipwith alabaster finds comprise parts of one or more altarpieces. The unequivocal presence of an Annunciation panel and possibly of an Adoration of the Magi scene indicates that one of these altarpieces depicted the Joys of the Virgin (for comparisons see Cheetham 2003, 162, 163, 165-170). Surviving alabaster Pentecost panels are considerably fewer than Ascension ones: Cheetham lists seven for the former compared with 46 Ascension panels (Cheetham 2003, 94, 142-4). He also states that both are associated with Joys of the Virgin altarpieces rather than with those dedicated to Christ's Passion, with the Ascension occurring more frequently, as for example in the Swansea Altarpiece in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Cheetham 1984, 17, 56, 70-71; Cheetham 2003, 8, 10). It is however worth noting that the Ascension is only included in eight out of the 36 relevant Joys of the Virgin altarpieces listed by Cheetham and Pentecost is not present on any. The Ascension is included in one Passion retable and both it and Pentecost occur with other panels at Roscoff in Brittany and may comprise the remains of both Marian and Passion altarpieces (Cheetham 2003, 165-176). It is possible therefore that the Ascension /Pentecost fragment from Skipwith could come from a Passion rather than a Joys of the Virgin altarpiece, in

which case the finds include fragments from two alabaster altarpieces. Although the remains of the St Stephen figure could be from an independent devotional image, its size suggests that it is more likely to have formed part of an altarpiece: St Stephen statuettes can be found as end panels to both Marian and Passion alabaster altarpieces, albeit not exclusively so (Cheetham 2003, 64).

The incised marks on the reverse of 13013 40 A probably represent position indicators to guide the craftsmen when placing the panels into their wooden frames, although it is possible that the horizontal cut may represent a carver's setting-out line (Cheetham 1984, 25).

Significance

The alabaster fragments found in Skipwith church are valuable for the study of English medieval alabaster carving as a whole as very few (apart from sepulchral monuments) can be connected with their original locations. They also represent an important addition to the corpus of medieval alabaster carvings in Yorkshire. Carvings (almost entirely devotional images) in this medium are first documented in York parish churches from the 1390s and they recur occasionally in testamentary bequests within and outside the city throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, including a 'tabill of albaster' ie an altarpiece, for the high altar of St Saviour's church, York (Raine, J., 1836, nos CIV, CXLI, CLXXXV (pp.134, 172 255), 1855, nos XXII, CXVI, CCII (pp. 28, 151, 258), 1868, no. CXXXIX (p. 244); Raine, A., 1955, 76, 249, 259, 318). The picture is still too incomplete for a full assessment to be made of the extent of alabaster patronage in the county; nor is it yet possible to come to a conclusion on the issue of local as opposed to Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire-centred production (Marks 2004, 251). 'Alabastermen' are recorded in York from the 1450s and it has been claimed that an image of the Assumption of the Virgin and the St William altarpiece panels found at Peasholme Green in York are more deeply undercut than most alabasters and also exhibit distinctive stylistic traits (Willmot 1957). Skipwith (and Thorganby – see below) are close to York which may indicate that they were purchased there; but whether the city, like other centres, merely housed showrooms or was a site where working of alabaster took place, remains uncertain. Itinerant alabaster salesmen are known to have perambulated through country districts in some parts of England taking orders for their products, but none so far has been documented in Yorkshire. Insufficient of the Skipwith fragments remain to make comparisons with the York finds, but the unusual (if not unique) location of the lilies in front of the prie-dieu in the Annunciation panel may be of value for this debate if more material turns up. Conversely, the canopy types are widespread on English alabasters. That Skipwith was a prebendal church of Howden is unlikely to be of significance as most alabaster images and altarpieces were relatively inexpensive and within the means of rural churches, as is shown by survivals and documentary evidence.

Almost all English alabasters lack any kind of dating context and the widespread repetition of more or less standard design elements means that it has not yet been possible to establish a reliable chronology. Therefore the close affinity of the Skipwith canopywork to the St James retable at Santiago with its *terminus ante quem* of 1456 does not necessarily indicate that the finds can be dated to the middle of the century.

There is a further aspect to the Skipwith discoveries which makes them important. It is not known when they were removed and buried under the church tower, but legislation and ecclesiastical injunctions suggest that this occurred during the sixteenth-century Reformation. The condition and the fact that only some of the altarpiece(s) seems to have been preserved raise issues concerning

iconoclastic practices and attitudes to them during this period. The panels look as if they were broken up prior to interment, which if so would be in conformity with State prescriptions in the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I (Marks 2004, 263-4, 270. But why were parts of some of the panels preserved at all? Is it possible that some of the parishioners (even the incumbent and churchwardens) deliberately retained the fragments as tokens, even symbols, of the old ways, perhaps even in the hope of providing an element of continuity if the Catholic Faith was restored? These are questions to be posed, not answered, in our present stage of knowledge; indeed it may never be possible to draw any unequivocal conclusions on this subject (Marks 2004, 268-270). Considerable quantities of alabaster altarpieces and devotional images have come to light during church restorations, of which East Rudham (Norfolk) and Whittlesford (Cambs.) are notable examples (for Whittlesford see Marks 2004, 2-3, 251). With regard to Skipwith, it may be more than coincidental that the neighbouring church at Thorganby and that at Preston further to the east preserve (more extensive) caches of alabaster imagery (the former finds are in the care of the York Museums Trust). Elsewhere in Yorkshire alabaster figures and narrative panels exist in York (notably the St William of York altarpiece scenes) and in the West Riding at Ripon Minster and the churches at Broughton-with-Elslack and Burnsall (Marks 2004, 154, pl.108). The last is an Adoration of the Magi panel which presumably belonged to a Joys of the Virgin altarpiece (Routh 1981). Its undefaced condition and find location in the floor of the north chancel aisle (commonly a space dedicated to the Virgin) during the 1859 restoration may well be indications of continuing allegiance in the north to the cult of the Mother of God and by extension to the new religious dispensation in general. If so, it would not be an isolated example; indeed in the Holderness district to the east of Skipwith and where Preston is located, as late as 1567-8 it was reported that in many parishes images had been retained (Marks 2004, 268). Yorkshire as a whole remained conservative in matters religious during the Reformation (Dickens 1982a; 1982b).

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