

# St Helen's Church, Skipwith, North Yorkshire

*Richard Hall*

*Investigations within and around the 11th-century tower have produced evidence for a previously unknown earlier structure. Although undated, associated sculpture and radiocarbon determinations suggest that it existed by the 8th/9th century. Later medieval remains include a remarkable concentration of grave covers, and fragments of alabaster altar pieces.*

In 2004–7, acting on behalf of UK Coal plc through the architectural practice of Ferrey and Mennim, York Archaeological Trust undertook a programme of excavation and structural recording in and around the west tower of St Helen's, Skipwith, North Yorkshire (NGR SE 657385), approximately 14 kilometres to the south-east of the City of York. Thirty-one individual trenches were excavated under the direction of Toby Kendall. Rectified photographic surveys of the external and internal face of the tower were undertaken by Colin Briden in 2001 and 2007 respectively, with the latter paid for by the Friends of York Archaeological Trust.

A church at Skipwith is first documented in 1084, when it was granted by William I to the bishop of Durham; Domesday Book records a church and a priest at Skipwith. 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 to suggest that the earliest church on the site, incorporating a single stage western porch/sanctuary, was constructed between AD 600 and 950, and that in c 1000–1050 this structure was heightened by the addition of an upper chamber and a belfry (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 550–4; Taylor 1978, 1084).



*Fig 1  
St Helen's Church, Skipwith, North Yorkshire,  
from the south-west (photograph, Richard Hall)*

All of this fabric survives, with some alterations, to the present day (Fig 1). Gem, however, believes that the tower, apart from the obvious addition of a late medieval belfry stage, is a unitary work. On the basis that its masonry belongs firmly to the technological stage associated with pre-Romanesque architecture, he dates its erection to the middle years of the 11th century (Gem 1988, 28 and note 2.5).

Fig 2

*Foundations of the earliest structure, and contemporary burials (Lesley Collet, copyright York Archaeological Trust)*

Analysis of the data retrieved in the recent investigations has identified a building earlier than the standing tower (Fig 2). It was represented by the foundations for a small porch or tower at its west end, protruding westwards from the standing tower; the building then widened to the full width of the standing tower but continued eastwards beyond the tower's east wall.

Within and around this structure were burials, some in iron-bracketed wooden coffins. The burials included several adult males of various ages, an adult female, a neonate and an infant. Three pairs of graves, in close but not intersecting proximity, may reflect familial relationships. Calibrated radiocarbon

determinations from three of these burials are in the range from the late 7th to the late 10th century. A piece of cross shaft, newly recognised on the external west face of the standing tower (Fig 3), has been dated by Dr Jane Hawkes to the early 9th century, and confirms the importance of this site at that time.

The locally well-known but otherwise overlooked so-called 'bear stone' (Fig 4), built into the tower's external south face, is now identified by Professor Richard Bailey as of pre-Norman date, and to have most likely functioned as part of a composite chair or throne (Hall et al, forthcoming). The piece is difficult to date more precisely on stylistic grounds but it raises a variety of questions about the status of the



Fig 3  
Newly discovered carved stone in the outer face of the tower's west wall (photograph, Peter Ryder)



Fig 4  
The 'bear stone' in the outer face of the tower's south wall (photograph, Richard Hall)

pre-Norman building which housed it. The continuing use and significance of the site in the Anglo-Scandinavian period of the later 9th to mid 11th centuries is attested by the presence of the well-known Ragnarök graffito stone on the inner north face of the tower (Fig 5; Lang 1991, 214–5, ill 823).

The earlier building was carefully dismantled and replaced, most probably in the mid-11th century, by a church of which the standing tower was a part. Analysis of the tower below the late medieval belfry suggests that it was erected in a single phase of building. Hitherto unrecognised details of the church's later medieval and post-medieval evolution were noted, including evidence for the construction and reconstruction of the aisles. Of particular significance among the associated discoveries were an extensive



Fig 5  
The Ragnarök graffito (photograph, Richard Hall)

series of cross slabs, studied by Dr Aleksandra McClain, and a considerable quantity of painted alabaster fragments representing one or more altarpieces, studied by Professor Richard Marks. Further information on all aspects of the investigation can be found in Hall et al forthcoming.

*Dr Richard Hall is Director of Archaeology at York Archaeological Trust, and Cathedral Archaeologist for Ripon Cathedral and York Minster*

## Bibliography

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