

St Giles' Church, Pontefract: New Archaeological Insights

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Extensive re-ordering of the church of St Giles, Pontefract during 2012 and 2013 involved the removal of the floors, principally in the nave and aisles. The work provided the opportunity for archaeologists to investigate the remains of the former medieval church, which had previously been observed in the 19th century. The recorded medieval fabric and foundations has resulted in a revision of the supposed medieval developmental plan. Unexpectedly, the excavations also revealed the positions of some thirty graves, which are thought to be of Civil War date.

St Giles is a Grade II* listed church that lies in the historic market place, at the highest point of the Magnesian Limestone outcrop occupied by Pontefract town centre, approximately 0.5km to the south-west of the castle (SE 4555 2190). A full description of the church as it was, prior to its 2012–13 re-ordering, is provided by Ryder (1988). The excavations by Archaeological Services WYAS, acting for the Parish Church Council, were required principally to mitigate the insertion of a new floor in the nave and parts of the aisles and chancel, and to facilitate stanchions to support a mezzanine floor in the west end of the church (replacing the former gallery).

The pre-Conquest and early Norman town of *Kirkby* was situated around the parish church of All Saints, to the east of the castle. St Giles is conventionally regarded as a chapel of ease to All Saints, which was established to serve the growing population in the marketplace (*Westchep*) beyond the late 11th/12th-century Norman borough of Pontefract that was established to the south-west of the castle (Fig 1). It is thought that the church acquired its dedication from the fair held upon St Giles' day, first granted in 1181 (Beech 1969, 8). There is, however, a degree of uncertainty over the date of the earliest chapel or church buildings at this location. Beech interpreted the documentary evidence as indicating two adjacent buildings on the site as a consequence of joint ownership: a chapel dedicated to St Oswald, served

by the Augustinian Canons of Nostell Priory, and a chantry dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, attended by the Cluniac monks of St John's, Pontefract. It was after the Cluniac monks acquired the whole site in 1122 that Beech supposed that a new church (St Giles) was constructed, incorporating the earlier chapel of St Oswald as the chancel of the new church, and a chantry as an eastern extension to the chancel (Beech 1969, 9). An alleged medieval description records the church as having '*a nave of five bays; from the easternmost pillar sprang the chancel-arch. Eastward of the chancel-arch was a chancel and a high altar, and further east was the chantry – served by its own special priest*', although Beech provides no source for the description.

St Giles' church has generally been equated with the site of St Mary de Foro ('St Mary in the market place'), several references to which occur in the early 12th century (eg Holmes 1899, 20, 22). These occur considerably earlier than references to the new market and Gillygate (the road leading to St Giles), which are first recorded in the early 13th century (Smith 1961, 76). It was originally supposed that the St Mary dedication related to an earlier chantry on the site, although this is now in doubt, as St Mary de Foro has also been equated with St Mary de Castello. A case has been made that this name may relate to another church (now lost) that lay in an earlier market place within the Norman borough, closer to the castle, rather than on

Fig 1

Plan showing the location of St Giles' church (1) in 12th-century Pontefract (J Prudhoe © Archaeological Services WYAS)

or near the site of St Giles (Roberts and Whittick 2013, 79–80).

Following the destruction of the parish church of All Saints during the Civil War sieges of 1645, Parliament committed £425 of the money it raised from the demolition of Pontefract Castle in 1649 to the repair and refurbishment (plastering and white washing) of St Giles, which had effectively become the parish church for Pontefract from 1645 onwards. Following Parliament's award, the alterations designed to reflect the church's new status were carried out between June and September 1649, during which time services were held in the Trinity Hospital chapel on the north-west side of Micklegate. St Giles was not actually formalised as the parish church until an Act of Parliament was passed in 1789 (Padgett 1905, 213–4; Whitehead and Peppiate 1979).

In 1705, the fabric of St Giles was still essentially medieval, and the tower was recorded as being '*mightily decayed and in danger of falling*.' It was consequently rebuilt in the classical style in 1707. Thereafter, the 18th and 19th centuries saw a series

of alterations that transformed the appearance of the whole church, cloaking or destroying almost every aspect of its medieval character (Fig 2). These alterations included the rebuilding or cladding of the walls and the installation of a gallery above the west end of the nave. The Lady Chapel was destroyed and the north aisle extended, whilst a vestry was added to the south side of the chancel. The tower is recorded as having been rebuilt again in 1790–1, as the 1707 foundations proved inadequate. The years 1868–9 saw the replacement of the windows, and the floor was taken up within the nave to facilitate the installation of new pews. This phase of work also resulted in the modification of the medieval chancel, which saw many fixtures, including a lancet priest's door in the north wall, removed to the nearby hermitage (eg Ryder 1988), where some of them still remain today.

Since the late 19th-century alterations, the only extant evidence of the church's medieval origins has been the arcade of the north aisle, with its five pointed arches and four quatrefoil-plan piers, each possessing moulded capitals and bases, which Ryder (1988;

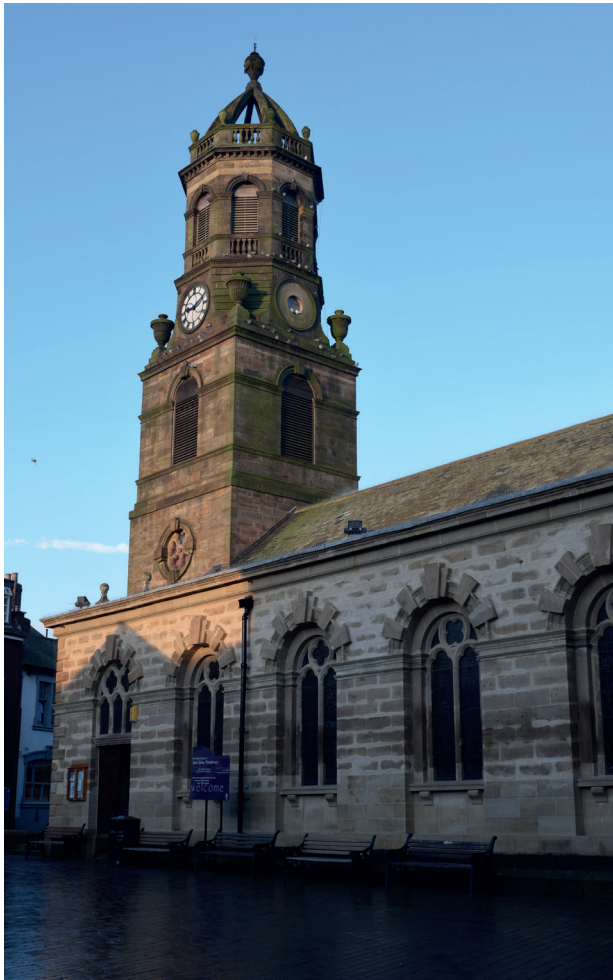


Fig 2
An external view of the tower and the south aisle as they appear today (Photo: I Roberts)

1993, 170) has dated to *c*1300 (Fig 3). Although no formal archaeological investigations had previously taken place, some observations were made during the removal of the floors and the lowering of the chancel roof in 1868. These observations noted the evidence for ‘an ancient tower...opposite the second pillar eastward from the present tower’, as well as what was interpreted as the ‘old south chancel wall, 2'10" [0.85m] thick and probably Norman’. Intriguingly, the work in 1868 also uncovered the foundations of another building ‘with walls of enormous thickness’ within the southern part of the chancel, which were interpreted as an earlier chapel (*Pontefract Advertiser* 20th June 1868; 15th March and 29th March 1879; 12th April 1879).

Although frustratingly short on detail, the Victorian descriptions of the earlier fabric had pointed to the former existence of a much smaller three-celled medieval

church comprised of a chancel, nave and tower. It is not clear whether the tower, or indeed the chancel, was a primary feature, but the north aisle is conventionally seen as an addition of the 13th or 14th century, based upon the extant arcade, with a Lady Chapel situated at its eastern end (see Beech 1969, 10; Whitehead and Peppiate 1979; Ryder 1988, 1993). Beech’s developmental sequence does not have the south aisle added until the 18th century, but this appears unlikely given the 17th-century portrayals which indicate the existence of the south aisle at an earlier date (eg Whitehead and Peppiate 1979; Ryder 1988).

St Giles was never provided with a churchyard and it is not documented as a place of burial in the medieval period. Supposed post-medieval burials have, however, been recorded there; the observations of 1868 noted the discovery of several interments associated with lead bullets, which were viewed as Civil War burials, whilst a coffined burial found beneath the chancel floor was thought to date to *c*1800 (*Pontefract Advertiser* 20th June 1868; Quinn 1992, 41).

Fig 3
The north arcade before re-ordering (Photo: P Guillian © Archaeological Services WYAS)

Archaeological Investigations

Re-ordering of the interior of the church required the removal of the existing floors to a depth of up to 0.4m within the nave, the eastern halves of each aisle, and a small part of the chancel. In the western half of the nave and parts of the aisles, the removal of the floor make-up deposits exposed the yellowish Magnesian Limestone bedrock, but in the eastern half of the nave a preserved mortar floor was left *in situ*. Apart from the need to renew the floor, the main ground disturbances related to the foundations for ten stanchions required to support a new mezzanine floor above the western end of the nave. Each of these required a 1.2m square pit to be excavated to a depth of c0.8m.

Nave and Chancel

As indicated by the Victorian accounts, evidence for the medieval nave, tower and chancel was found preserved beneath the church floor (Fig 4). The east end of the early nave was represented by a wall footing with an external chamfer, whilst the foundations of the original north and south walls were best preserved beneath the piers of the arcades. Significantly, these early foundations were not encountered beneath the westernmost bays of the arcades, which correspond with the location of the earliest tower foundation, 3.75m to the east of the current tower position. The south nave wall foundation

appeared to have been laid in herringbone fashion and was both 0.9m wide and 0.9m deep. By contrast, the north wall foundation was just 0.7m wide, but its depth could not be ascertained. The only evidence for the medieval chancel was seen in the form of a narrow (0.6m wide) east wall foundation, encountered 6.8m to the east of the east wall of the nave.

Although pictorial evidence suggests that a south aisle existed by the 17th century, the standing fabric within the church, in the form of the arcade's round piers, is only able to support an 18th-century date. It has been assumed that they had replaced a set of medieval piers, similar to the quatrefoil examples of the north arcade. This, however, seems to have been contradicted by the unexpected discovery of part of the original west respond of the south aisle, concealed behind a 19th-century wooden staircase (Fig 5). The respond survived as six courses of half-round dressed limestone, 0.6m in diameter and 1.65m high. It was supported on a half-octagonal moulded plinth, 0.8m wide, which sat directly upon the bedrock. A mason's mark in the form of a simple large 'X' had been carved into one of the stones. Thus it is concluded that the south arcade had been created in the medieval period, but not with quatrefoil piers. It would appear that the round 18th-century piers were designed to reflect the architecture of the 12th/13th-century piers they replaced. Indeed, the surviving medieval respond formed the support for the upper 18th-century pillar in the same location.

Fig 4

Plan of the excavated evidence (P Weston © Archaeological Services WYAS)



Fig 5

The original west respond of the south arcade (Photo: P Weston © Archaeological Services WYAS)

The four extant medieval quatrefoil piers of the north arcade were supported on eight-sided plinths (alternate long and short sides to better accommodate the quatrefoil piers). Each one was 1.1m wide and seated on a large slab of stone lying on top of the rubble of the earlier medieval wall foundation. The west respond also reflected the same quatrefoil design and had a similar foundation arrangement, the base slab being founded directly on to the bedrock. The fact that the foundation of the east respond survived as a simple half-round is curious. It could be a residual element of an earlier arcade, although it could equally have been modified during later alterations. Given the absence for any evidence for earlier round piers elsewhere in the north arcade foundations, and particularly below the west respond, the latter interpretation is favoured.

Although the chancel (together with the eastern chantry/sanctuary) has usually been regarded as the primary phase of the church (eg Beech 1969, 8; Cunnington 2011), the presence of the external chamfer to the east wall of the nave suggests that it is a secondary addition to the nave. Unfortunately, the scope of the re-ordering work carried out in the chancel and the east end generally provided very little new archaeological evidence. The limited extent of the ground works did not allow rediscovery of the large foundations in the southern part of the chancel

(*Pontefract Advertiser* 20th June 1868), although wall foundations were discovered below the floor in the southern part of the sanctuary. It is possible that they represent the north wall and an external buttress of the detached 18th-century building that was subsequently incorporated as the vestry (Ryder 1988).

Tower

The investigation of the foundations of the earliest tower was hindered through part of the area remaining unexcavated. The eastern side of the foundation was relatively well preserved and was comprised of robust coursed ashlar, over 1m wide and in excess of 0.8m in depth. The north and south sides were represented by 1m-wide trenches, only seen in short sections. The northern one appeared empty, probably robbed out when the new tower foundation was inserted, although the southern one still had some rubble fill in evidence.

The tower had clearly been relocated further to the west by the time the graves were dug, as one grave had partially been cut into the later tower's foundations. The westward movement of the tower must have created a gap between the tower and the nave walls. In the north wall of the nave this gap was seen to have been in-filled by a wall represented by a section of wider foundation in the western bay (between the respond and the first pier). This was slightly north of the line of the original nave wall, which could be

a consequence of the wall having been built whilst part of the old tower presented an obstacle. No such evidence was found in the corresponding bay of the south wall, which is consistent with the tower relocation having taken place at the same time as the south aisle was created.

Graves

Twenty-nine east-west grave cuts were identified in the western part of the nave and the eastern parts of the aisles, in the areas within the church where excavations were deep enough to expose them clearly against the natural bedrock. Only ten of the graves were partly excavated. Three were partly excavated in order to confirm the presence and depth of human remains, whilst another seven graves had to be partly excavated to mitigate the excavation of the stanchion foundation pits. The ten excavated graves confirmed that all the interred had been laid out in supine fashion, with their heads to the west. Seven of the graves contained adults, and the remainder contained the remains of children. There was no surviving evidence for coffins and the few artefacts recovered included a lead bullet and two undated clay tobacco pipe fragments.

Although bone preservation was generally good, the incomplete nature of the ten partial skeletons, more often the lower parts of the bodies, has made it difficult to age and sex the individuals. The seven adult individuals included one young adult male, an older adult male and a mature female adult woman. The ages and sex of the four remaining adults could not be specifically determined, other than that it was apparent that they were 18 years or older. The remains of three non-adults, whose sex could not be determined, included juveniles of 16–20 months, 4–5 years and 9–11 years. Although the lead bullet was found in one of the graves, there was no evidence of trauma consistent with a bullet wound. A full report of the recovered human remains is presented in the archive report (Holst 2013). The bones have since been reburied within the church.

Discussion

Interpretation has been limited by the incomplete nature of the investigations and a paucity of firm dating evidence. Nevertheless, the results provide new insights into the earlier medieval development of St Giles' church (Fig 6).

Pre-12th century

A question-mark must remain over the existence of the small free-standing chantry chapel, which is thought to pre-date the church proper (Beech 1969, 8). The theory that such a chapel might be represented by the later medieval chancel can now be discounted, given that the nave and chancel were clearly the products of different building phases. Moreover, the presence of the external chamfer on the east wall of the nave would indicate that the chancel was a secondary addition. Only the unconfirmed reports of early foundations in the southern part of the chancel, as revealed in 1868, continue to give credence to this notion.

12th century

On the basis of the newly recorded below-ground structural remains, it might reasonably be concluded that the supposed 12th-century church was a two or three-cell structure. Whilst a free-standing nave cannot be discounted, a two-cell structure comprising a nave and tower, with a chancel added later, seems most likely in the first instance, especially in view of the absence of evidence for a west end other than the tower. The nave of this church would have measured 18m by 7.5m in plan and the tower would perhaps have been about 6.25m square. The width of the nave is in keeping with other 12th-century naves in the area, such as Adel (Wrathmell 1993, 102), Tong (Swann 1993, 122), and Wakefield (Burgess *et al* 2014, 59).

Conventionally, the first stage of the church's expansion, beyond the three-cell church, has been regarded as the addition of the north aisle and the creation of the north arcade in the late 13th or early 14th century. However, the discovery of the western respond of the south arcade appears to challenge this notion. If the plain round profile of the respond, typical of Norman architecture, is representative of the rest of the original piers, then the south aisle and its arcade might be envisaged as a Romanesque development of the later 12th century. Although the rebuilding in the 18th century introduced a pointed south arcade to match the north, it is likely that this replaced a round-arched arcade, whilst the adoption of round columns may have been influenced by what had been there before. It is, moreover, noteworthy that when the east end was repaired in 1817, the exposed medieval arch '*on the site of the present sanctuary arch*' was typically Romanesque, being described as wide and semi-circular (Whitehead and Peppiatt 1979). If indeed

Fig 6

Proposed development of the church. Grey lines illustrate fabric thought to survive from the previous structural phase. (J Prudhoe © Archaeological Services WYAS).

an arch, this would add credence to the existence of the chantry chapel dating from the Norman period, but there is no other evidence for an eastern extension of the chancel before the 18th century (see Jollage 1742). Alternatively, it is conceivable that the early medieval chantry was accommodated within the eastern part of the chancel and that the discovered 'arch' was the remains of the east end window – a scenario that would accommodate the medieval description cited by Beech (1969, 9), the 1817 observation, and the archaeological evidence as it stands.

The east wall of the south aisle seems to have been on the same line as the east end of the nave. However,

the position of the west respond appears to indicate that a westward extension had taken place, by one bay, accompanied by the westward movement of the tower, which would otherwise have been encompassed by the wall of the south aisle. The new tower foundation was 3.75m to the west of the original location. Such a development would have required a western extension to the north wall of the nave, and this was indeed in evidence to the east of the north arcade respond. Here was encountered a 1m-wide rubble wall foundation, being significantly wider and of different character to the rest of the north wall foundation beneath the north arcade. That it is slightly misaligned with the original

nave wall is curious and might be explained by remains of the old tower presenting an obstacle at the time of its construction. That there was no evidence for a similar in-fill foundation in line with the south wall is entirely consistent with the tower being relocated at the same time that the south aisle was added.

Late 13th to early 18th centuries

With the strong likelihood of an earlier south aisle, the creation of the north aisle, with its well documented pointed arches and quatrefoil piers of the late 13th or early 14th century, would have resulted in a symmetrical church plan comprised of a chancel, nave, secondary tower and north and south aisles of similar proportions, but with different architectural styles. It appears that the church continued in this form until at least the early 18th century, when the medieval tower was deemed unsafe and was rebuilt in 1705. There is an intriguing reference to the purchase of a six foot (1.8m) wide plot of land to allow for the extension of the church in 1356 (PRO DL 29/507/8226), but it is impossible to equate this with any extant or excavated remains.

At some point the small 'sanctuary' structure was built abutting the south-eastern corner of the chancel. This building was on a slightly different orientation to the church because it respected the property boundary to the east. Ryder (1988) considers this building to be of post-medieval date, but the excavations which uncovered the remains of its northern end were not able to confirm the date of this structure, or its relationship with the medieval chancel. If the building is post-medieval, its position and plan prevents us from seeing the eastern sanctuary as a medieval structure (at least one of similar width to the chancel). The sanctuary had certainly been added by the middle of the 18th century, as it is portrayed on Paul Jollage's town plan of 1742. In 1657, the Pontefract Corporation was concerned about houses and shops in the market place adjoining the church, and in 1674 sanctioned their removal (Whitehead and Peppiatt 1979). It could, therefore, have been the removal of some of these buildings to the east that facilitated the construction of the sanctuary in the late 17th century. This development was accompanied by the eastward extension of both aisles to create chapels to the north and south of the chancel. The work on the south side also facilitated the incorporation of the secular building to the south-east as a vestry, effectively resulting in the present church plan. Like the vestry building, the sanctuary had to respect the property boundary to the east of the church,

resulting in a compromised symmetry and so explaining the angled east end.

It cannot be unequivocally proven that the graves within the nave date to the period of the Civil War sieges (1644–49), but circumstantially it seems extremely likely. The interments must certainly have been made prior to refurbishments and the instalment of wooden box pews, sometime after 1649, as a consequence of St Giles operating as the parish church. Indeed, the period of refurbishment and repair to reflect the church's new status in 1649 seems a most likely window of opportunity for the interments to have taken place. The Civil War years resulted in many fatalities from disease as well as fighting, and the loss of access to All Saints' churchyard must have necessitated burial in a limited number of suitable alternative locations around the town. The former medieval friary site has produced archaeological evidence to suggest that this was a place of 17th-century burial (Wilson 1964; Roberts 1989; 2009), and it seems likely that St Giles, despite not having a churchyard, offered a further temporary solution. In this respect it is notable that, for a time in 1645, interments were also made within St Clement's chapel, inside Pontefract Castle, due to the same lack of access to All Saints' churchyard (Roberts 2002, 96–9, 417).

Conclusions

Although the re-ordering of St Giles' church has only facilitated limited archaeological investigation, that work has been invaluable in corroborating and enhancing the observations made during the floor repairs of 1868. The evidence clearly reflects the existence of an earlier, smaller, medieval church plan, probably a typical three-cell church comprising of nave, chancel and tower, although the evolution of this plan remains uncertain. It is supposed that this represents the earliest 12th-century chapel of ease, although there remains scope for an earlier small chapel, albeit represented solely by unsubstantiated remains in the southern part of the chancel. The 12th-century date of the earliest recorded remains cannot be demonstrated from any recovered artefacts, but it is supported by the discovery of what appears to be a Norman respond of 12th/13th-century date at the west end of the south aisle arcade, likely a remnant of the earliest phase of expansion from the three-celled church. The early addition of a south aisle is an interpretation that is contrary to previous notions about the development of this church, although

otherwise the evidence broadly fits the well documented post-medieval development history.

Despite the limitations on the excavation work it is abundantly clear that the entire area of the nave and nave aisles had been used for burial purposes – a significant discovery which was not anticipated at the outset. That this use was short-term is indicated by the lack of any inter-cutting of the graves, suggesting that they were broadly contemporary, and the fact that such activity would have resulted in the suspension of normal liturgical practices. The period of the interments is believed to have been the Civil War years of the 1640s, when the castle sieges denied the townspeople access to the parochial churchyard of All Saints. The documented refurbishment of the church in 1649 marks the most likely period for burial.

The new archaeological evidence provides a different perspective on the medieval church's development, and reveals evident investment in it from the 12th century, reinforcing its documented importance as a key focal point in the development of the commercial quarter of the medieval and post-medieval town. St Giles provided a more immediate place of worship for the urban population and was the *de facto* successor as the parish church when All Saints' was ruined in the Civil War. Moreover, the recent excavations now reveal the extent of the church's further role in resolving a very definite urban problem during the Civil War – burial of the dead – the evidence for which, on a scale commensurate with the recorded loss of life, has largely eluded archaeological investigation.

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