

St Oswald's Church, Durham

St Oswald' Church is situated in the south-east part of the city of Durham, to the east of the incised meander enclosing the Cathedral; it lies within the ancient barony of Elvet, and may be the earliest ecclesiastical site within the city.

The church consists of a six-bay aisled nave with a western tower, and an aisleless chancel flanked on the north by two vestries and an organ chamber.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Exterior

The lofty **West Tower** is built of coursed roughly-squared sandstone (with a considerable amount of 19th and 20th-century patching), with ashlar dressings. Above a chamfered plinth it is divided into four principal stages by chamfered set-backs and string courses; there is a fifth set-back below the level of the sill of the west window. Stepped diagonal buttresses at all four angles have crocketed gablets at the base of the belfry, above which they continue to carry diagonally-set pinnacles, also crocketed, at the angles of the embattled parapet.

One feature which may be of structural significance is a slight discrepancy in the depth of the blocks from which the chamfered plinth is cut between the walls of the tower and the bases of the buttresses; at each junction of the wall and buttress plinths there are 'short' stones, suggesting that the sections of plinth are different builds.

The west window of 1864 is of three trefoil-headed lights with loosely 'Perpendicular' tracery above, within a hollow-chamfered four-centred arch enclosed by a moulded hood with turned-back ends. Above and to the south, just below the second set-back, is a small chamfered square-headed loop lighting the tower stair. On the south the base of the stair was lit a narrower loop, now blocked, just above the first set-back. On the north the lowest section of the wall displays regularly-coursed roughly square stones rather more regular in character than anything else in the tower; the section above, between the first and second set-backs, shows indistinct traces of what may be a blocked opening. There is a smaller amount of similar fabric on the south.

The second stage of the tower (ie between the second and third set-backs) has a square-headed chamfered loop on the west (lighting the head of the mural stair) and a larger window on north and south; each of these has a cinquefoiled ogee head. The whitish stonework of the heads in each case looks of 19th-century date, but the chamfered jambs, in a yellower sandstone, may be medieval. A precisely similar window is set centrally on the west side of the third stage. On the east side of this stage (in fact at its base, as it cuts through the set-back) is a small opening with a two-centred arched head giving access from the tower onto (or rather, about 2 m above) the nave roof. It

lies within an area of recently-renewed masonry, and its external dressings are all new. The only other opening in this stage is higher up, on the south, and is a plain rectangular vent, again in an area of renewed masonry.

The base of the fourth, belfry, stage is marked by a moulded string with carved bosses on its soffit; all its stonework, together with the crocketed gablets on the buttresses (and all ashlar dressings above this level) looks no older than the 19th century. The belfry has an opening of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a moulded hood with carved stops. There is another moulded string at the base of the parapet, continued around the angle buttresses, from which spring gargoyles.

Externally the walls of the **Nave** are only seen above the aisle and chancel roofs at clerestory level, and at the south-east corner where a full-height diagonal buttress is extruded rather oddly into the re-entrant angle between the chancel and the south aisle. At clerestory level there are diagonal buttresses at all four corners (those to the west linking rather awkwardly with the eastern buttresses of the tower), and between them slender stepped buttresses form the divisions of the five bays, carried up as diagonally-set pinnacles which are now truncated at the level of the moulded coping of the embattled parapet; the parapet, with a moulded string at its base, is of ashlar. The clerestory windows are each of three cinquefoil-headed lights within a four-centred arch, under moulded hoods with turned-back ends; mullions and outer frames are both hollow chamfered. All the dressings at this level appear of 19th-century date.

The east wall of the nave, above the chancel roof, has a horizontal chamfered set-back at eaves level, above which the embattled parapet is carried up over the shallow-pitched end gable. The stonework below the set-back, of regularly coursed quite square blocks, is of late 12th-century character; that above is probably of 1834.

The **South Aisle** is of quite broad proportions, with a gently-sloping roof. It is built of squared coursed stone, and is divided into six bays by stepped buttresses. There is generally a chamfered plinth, and a string-course, hollow-chamfered beneath, at window sill level; the plinth, but not the string, is continued round the buttresses. The windows of the aisle - one in each end wall, and one in each of the central four bays of the south wall - are each of two uncusped lancet lights with a trefoiled circle in the spandrel, within a two-centred arch with a hoodmould that has typical early-19th century bar stops. The wall is topped by a parapet carried on an oversailing chamfered course. The western bay of the south wall contains an arched doorway of two orders, the inner a continuous bowtell moulding and the outer of similar section but with shafted jambs, beneath a hollow-chamfered hood with bar stops. Above this is a re-set medieval niche with panel tracery above a cinquefoiled arch, and a brattished top. At the east end of the

aisle the string is stepped up beneath the sill of the window, which is set at a higher level than the others.

Whilst the south aisle walls are reported to have been completely rebuilt in 1834, they do contain one or two anomalous features that are difficult to explain. At the west end of the aisle there is a puzzling gap in the plinth north of the window (possibly due to a post-1834 alteration?); the stonework immediately above the adjacent section of plinth again looks of different character to the normal walling of the aisle. The western bay of the south wall also shows some unusual features; on either side of the doorway there are disturbed areas in the masonry (as if the toothings for the side walls of a porch had been intended) and there seems to be a change in character of the wall fabric four or five courses below the parapet, again seen in the easternmost bay of the wall.

The **North Aisle** is of similar proportions to the south aisle and in its overall arrangement of features, although there are only two buttresses on the north wall, one at the east end and one between the second and third bays. The wall fabric is quite different as well; east of the buttress is coursed roughly-squared stone including quite a number of large blocks, whilst west of the buttress is roughly-squared and roughly-squared stone, with less large blocks but still of less regular character than the walling of the south aisle and chancel. The sill string and the two buttresses look of 19th-century date. To the west of the western buttress the plinth, which steps up slightly in level at this point, also seems to be of 19th-century stonework.

The west wall of the aisle has no plinth, although the sill string is continued beneath a two-light window of the same type as in the south aisle. On the north both plinth and string are stopped on either side of the north doorway, near the west end of the north wall, which has a pointed arch of two continuous chamfered orders, with a hoodmould like that of the south door; all its stonework is of 19th-century date. East of the doorway are two more windows of the south aisle type, on either side of the first buttress; east again are two further windows, each of two cinquefoil-headed lights with cusped piercing above, under segmental-arched heads and hoodmoulds with turned back ends. The heads of these windows (and of those further west) have been coated in roman cement, but the jambs appear genuine medieval work.

The **Chancel** is built of coursed roughly-squared stone (very similar to the fabric of the south aisle); it is of three bays (although there is no external bay division), with diagonal buttresses at the east end. On the south there is a chamfered plinth stepping down eastward beneath the central window, and a string of simple keeled section below the three windows, which are each of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel; their frames have much narrower chamfers than those of the aisle windows, although their hoodmoulds are of

similar form. The east gable and its flanking buttresses, of 1864, are clearly of a different build to the remainder of the chancel. There is no plinth, and the lower courses are made up of large rectangular blocks. The two buttresses have arched niches with statues of SS Cuthbert and Oswald, above which they are continued up as octagonal pinnacles. The moulded string is continued round both buttresses and the east end, where it is stepped up beneath the sill of the east window which is of four lights, with reticulated tracery above, under a pointed arch with a chamfered hood on foliage stops. The steeply-pitched gable is coped and carries a foliate finial cross.

The north wall of the chancel is concealed by the **Vestries** and **Organ Chamber**, comprising three separate 19th-century builds. The oldest section is the choir vestry of 1834, extended to the north in 1883. This is a gabled north-south block projecting from the centre of the chancel wall, with a chamfered plinth and stepped diagonal buttresses at its angles; it is built of squared stone, with ashlar dressings. At the north end of the east wall is a doorway with a pointed arch moulded with a continuous swelled chamfer, under a moulded hood, and in the north wall is a window of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights under a segmental-arched head, with a chamfered hood with turned-back ends. In the west wall, just to the north of the organ chamber, a straight joint indicates the position of the north-west corner of the 1834 vestry. The organ chamber of 1864 is built of squared tooled stone, and lit by a window of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil over, under a pointed arch with a hoodmould of the same type as those of the south aisle windows; the stonework of the head has recently been renewed. On the east of the old vestry is the new vestry of 1883, built of tooled squared stone with ashlar dressings. This has a chamfered plinth and a stepped diagonal buttress at its north-east corner; in the east wall, above a moulded string, is a square-headed window of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, with carved foliage and a shield with the 'ihc' monogram in the spandrel, under a moulded hood.

The Interior

The interior of the main body of the church is plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings, and the east wall of the chancel.

The **Tower** opens to the nave under a pointed arch of two orders, both chamfered towards the nave, although the outer is left square towards the tower. The jambs of the arch follow the same section, and have projecting imposts of late 12th-century character, hollow chamfered beneath a grooved abacus. Some irregularities immediately above the imposts, such as the first voussoir having broader chamfers than those above, suggest that the greater part of the arch may have been rebuilt.

The lower stage of the tower is roofed by a stone vault with eight moulded ribs springing to a central ring that provides an

opening through which bells could be lifted. The west window has a rear arch with a hollow-chamfered four-centred head, which may survive from its medieval predecessor. On the south, three steps above the present floor, is a square-headed chamfered doorway onto the tower stair.

The stair rises westwards to the south-west angle of the tower, and then northwards to give access to the ringing chamber. The walls of the stair passage are rather irregular, both in alignment and in fabric - around the base areas are quite neatly faced, but large parts are rough rubble. The stepped roof is almost entirely formed by re-used medieval cross slabs (see 'sepulchral monuments' section). At the corner of the stair, where there is a slight enlargement, the inner angle is formed by an attached shaft or newel post; this is an integral part of the four steps that actually form the angle (ie as if these were part of a conventional newel stair) but above these the shaft is carried up to the roof; the block above the steps shows clear signs of re-cutting, as if it formed an in situ part of a newel stair, and the tread had been cut away. One explanation of all this might be that there was originally a circular newel stair in the south-west corner of the tower, and that a fragment of it has later been incorporated in a new stair cut through the thickness of pre-existing walls (the irregularities in the walls and the circular enlargement of the stair passage at the corner would bear this out); alternatively, it is possible that the shaped blocks at the corner are re-used material from another newel stair elsewhere.

The walls of the ringing chamber are plastered and whitewashed. The door to the head of the mural stair is square headed, with a chamfered surround, like that at its foot. The north and south windows have segmental rear arches. On the east a glazed panel allows a glimpse of a squint or small opening looking down into the nave (or rather, into the organ), but its form is not clear. The third floor of the tower is carried by heavy transverse timbers (with a central square trap for lifting bells), resting on a chamfered oversailing course at the head of the north and south walls of the ringing chamber. Access to the upper stages of the tower is by modern ladders.

The chamber above the ringing chamber has whitewashed rubble walls; the only window, on the west, has a four-centred rear arch with a hollow chamfer to its head. On the east is a small opening rebated for a door (probably originally cupboard) now broken through to provide access onto the nave roof. The floor of the present belfry is of softwood beams, probably of 19th-century date.

The belfry is in two parts, a lower section housing the present bells, and an upper section in which the older bell frames, now empty, are retained. The lower section has a single opening on the south, which looks like a relatively recent insertion; it has a concrete internal lintel. 1.5 m above the present belfry

floor there is a chamfered oversailing course on the east wall, and above this a similar course on both north and south walls, directly below the beams which support the old bell frames. Inside the upper section, the old belfry proper, all four openings have four-centred hollow-chamfered rear arches, which look genuine medieval work, although the rubble 'voussoirs' that form a sort of rear arch or supra-arch are admittedly a feature commonly used in 19th century building.

The low-pitched roof of the tower is formed by three cambered tie-beams aligned north-south, one set centrally and one against each wall, carrying a ridge and one purlin on each slope; the basic structure might be late medieval.

The **Nave** has six-bay arcades which are virtually identical in detail. The eastern three pillars are circular and the western two octagonal, with similar but not identical simply-moulded capitals. The eastern responds have an inner keeled order and an outer square one, with moulded capitals and bases (the bases only just above floor level). The bases of the eastern three piers have a double roll moulding; on the north they have octagonal chamfered plinths, but on the south the base mouldings of the corresponding piers are close to the floor and the plinths are not seen. The western two piers have a roll moulding above a slightly overhanging lower member of swept convex section, also seen on the western responds which are of double-chamfered section. All the arches of the arcades are of two orders, the inner chamfered, the outer chamfered to the nave and square towards the aisles; there is a chamfered hood towards the nave; the eastern four arches are semicircular and the western two slightly four-centred. In addition, the eastern arches are constructed of quite small voussoirs of brown sandstone, and the western two (or more accurately, two-and-a-half) of much longer blocks of a greyer stone. It seems clear that the two sections of the arcades are of quite different dates (c.1200 and the later 15th century are usually quoted) but that the later medieval builders may have consciously adapted their style to suit the pre-existing one.

There are a number of peculiar changes in levels in the arcades, some but not all of which might be ascribed to the serious subsidence suffered by the building in the early 19th-century. This might account for the base mouldings of the north arcade piers rising westward, and even for the southern respond of the chancel arch being considerably below the level of the northern, but it is less easy to explain the change very marked discrepancy in level between the capitals of the eastern respond of the north arcade and the much taller capital of the next pier, accomplished without any distortion of the semicircular arch.

The spacing of the five clerestory windows bears no obvious relation to the six-bay arcade beneath; the windows have hollow-chamfered internal surrounds, which appear largely if not entirely of 19th-century date.

The present roof of the nave is of eleven bays, with low-pitched king-post trusses, with four upright struts on each side of the king post. The intermediate trusses have moulded wall-posts rising from wooden corbels carved as either grotesque masks or angels; these are relics of the medieval roof destroyed in 1834; most of the timbers of the present roof (including the wall-posts, principal rafters and all the longitudinal timbers -in effect six purlins on each slope) are also re-used older material.

In the **South Aisle** the glass-line of the windows is set close to the internal face of the wall, whereas in the case of the windows in the north aisle (both medieval and 19th-century ones) it is central to the wall (the openings having internal frames identical to the external, except that they lack hoodmoulds); this presumably simply reflects the different thicknesses of the two walls. The south door has a two-centred rear arch of plain square section.

The roof of the south aisle is panelled like that of the western bays of the south aisle, but is clearly of later 19th or early 20th century date; the wall-plate rests on an oversailing stone course, chamfered beneath.

In the **North Aisle** the north door has a three-centred rear arch; it opens well above the level of the church floor, which is gained by descending four modern steps. The aisle is spanned by a transverse arch in line with the fourth pier (from the east) of the arcade. This is of two chamfered orders; the inner order forms a segmental pointed arch, springing from just above the capital of the pier, whilst the outer is in fact a half arch, abutting on the wall just below roof level. The arch itself looks of 19th-century date, but the respond (in which the double-chamfered section of the arch is continued down the wall, without any impost or capital, to quite a high base, seems medieval. At the east end of the aisle is a segmental-pointed arch of two chamfered orders, opening into the former organ chamber; the inner order dies into the jambs, and the outer is continued down to floor level. Most of the dressings of this arch appear to be recent.

Close to the east end of the north wall of the aisle a modern wooden door conceals an old square-headed aumbry which is probably of medieval date.

The roof of the aisle is of considerable interest. That over the eastern four bays (ie east of the transverse arch) is medieval, and could be as early as the 14th century. It has wall-posts rising from the arcade capitals, and from brackets on the aisle wall (the eastern of timber, the other two of stone) carrying slightly cambered tie-beams, with arch braces; the tie-beams directly support a ridge, two purlins and wall-plates, carrying the roof, which is of very shallow pitch. There is ornamental cusped panelling in the spandrels of the arch braces on the west

faces of the central and eastern trusses, and on both faces of the western truss. All the timbers are moulded; they have obviously suffered damage in the 1985 fire, in particular towards the east end.

The western two bays of the aisle have a panelled roof with heavy moulded timbers of 16th-century character, carried on an oversailing chamfered course on the outer wall and stone corbels above the arcade; it is not clear whether the roof is ancient or a 19th-century reconstruction re-using old material.

The **Chancel** is entered under a two-centred pointed arch, of two orders. The broad and shallow inner order has narrow chamfers on both angles, whilst the outer order is chamfered to the nave and left square towards the chancel; there is a hoodmould, chamfered beneath, towards the nave. The arch springs from capitals with a square abacus, chamfered beneath, with foliage carving of the type usually known as 'waterleaf' (large fleshy leaves with curled tips) below, characteristic of the last two decades of the 12th century. The jambs are of two orders, the inner with a keeled moulding (which may be the product of re-cutting) and the outer chamfered; no bases are exposed.

The windows in the side walls of the chancel all have plastered two-centred rear arches, and the door opening into the vestry a three-centred rear arch, again plastered over; the arch into the former organ chamber is of similar form to that between the chamber and the north aisle, except that it has a moulded hood with foliate stops; all its stonework is new. During the repairs after the 1984 fire a blocked doorway was exposed to the east of the present vestry door, with a segmental rear arch in brick.

The east wall is of tooled close-jointed stone; the east window has a moulded rear arch on shafted jambs, with its internal sill lowered to form a shelf for the reredos. At the east end of the south wall is a wooden aumbry or wall cupboard.

Inside the former organ chamber, the north window has a plastered two-centred rear arch, and in the east wall a shoulder-arched doorway with a chamfered surround opens into the old vestry. Within this vestry a 19th-century doorway, with a two-centred pointed and chamfered arch under a moulded hood, opens into the chancel. What was originally the external doorway of the old vestry now opens inside the eastern vestry; it has a wave-moulded pointed arch with a hollow-chamfered hood, with stops of the same type as those on the south aisle windows. A two-light window in the north wall of the chancel, of precisely the same type as the three in the south wall, now opening inside this vestry; its stonework is surprisingly eroded considering its position.

The chancel has a simple hammer-beam roof, presumably of 1834; it is of seven bays, with arch braces to stone corbels on the walls; the timber are of relatively slight scantling, and very

plain.

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The wooden **Chancel Screen** is largely of 19th-century date, although said to incorporate some 16th or 17th century pieces.

The **Choir Stalls** have been ascribed to the first half of the 15th century, with carving of 'very bold and effective character' (Boyle, 380); the panelled and traceried fronts have poppyheads; the backs are largely of 19th-century date. There is also a 15th-century bench or '**Sedile**' which has been described as 'a very odd double seat of heavy timber with cross-like raised corner posts instead of arms. Flamboyant tracery decoration; also some coarse panelling of the linenfold type' (Pevsner & Williamson, 223).

At the east end of the south aisle is a late medieval iron-bound oak **Vestment Chest**, 2.4 m long, with two locks.

The **Font**, formerly under the tower but recently re-sited in the north aisle, is a Victorian piece.

The church possesses some 19th and early 20th century **Stained Glass** of some interest, in addition to two tiny medieval fragments - a rose and an 'ihc' monogram - now in the head of the western window of the north aisle. The west window (Life of St Oswald) is an early commission (1864-6) by Morris & Co, designed by Ford Madox Brown; it has suffered some damage from vandalism. There are several other windows of the same period by Clayton & Bell and one in the north aisle by Kempe & Co as a memorial to the architect C.Hodgson Fowler (d.1910).

An inventory of 1553 refers to three **Bells** in the tower. In 1694 six bells were cast by Christopher Hodgson or Hodson of London, a 1978 excavation in the Cathedral works yard revealed one of his bell casting pits, with fragments of the clay mould for bell no 3. Bell no.2 was re-cast in 1885, but the others survived until 1977 when the present ring of eight bells were cast in 1977 by John Taylor of Loughborough, and hang in modern frames. Two of the 17th-century bells (nos 3 and 5) were preserved, and now stand at the west end of the north aisle; these are inscribed:

(3) DEVM TIMETE PEX FORSTER AM VIC I EVANS C WARDEN CHRISTO
HODSON ME FECIT.

(5) IBIMVS IN DOMVM DOMINI PEX FORSTER A M VIC CHRISTOPHER HODSON
MADE ME 1694 IO EVANS CHV W.

The **Bellframes** that still survive in the belfry are probably coeval with the 1694 bells. These are long-headed frames of pegged oak construction, with straight-sided braces and sloping jack braces, but no centre posts. These would be classed as type 6B, and frame layout 6.8 (Pickford 1993)

The **Royal Arms** of Charles II were executed in 1660 at a cost of £6.00; formerly on the west wall above the tower arch, after restoration in 1986 they have been set against the east wall of the former Organ Chamber

A number of pieces of **Anglo-Saxon Sculpture** have been found in and around the church, and are now part of the collection of sculptured stones in the Monks' Dormitory at Durham Cathedral. Full descriptions have been published by Cramp (1984, 66). They comprise:

- (i) A late 10th or early 11th century cross shaft in two pieces, found in the west wall of the tower.
- (ii) An early 11th century cross shaft and head.
- (iii) An early 11th century cross shaft with part of its head.
- (iv) Part of a cross head from the first half of the 11th century.

The last three were found in 1895 in the wall between the churchyard and Church Street, when a 'new road was made into the churchyard'. A possible further fragment remains incorporated in this wall (see churchyard description). In addition another Pre-Conquest piece identified as a gable finial has been linked to St Oswalds, and cited as evidence for a Pre-Conquest stone church (Pevsner & Williamson 1983 ,223) although Cramp records the finial as unprovenanced.

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

The church has an important and extensive collection of medieval **Cross Slab Grave Covers**, although a number have been recorded and then lost. 21 extant slabs and a further 11 missing ones are described and illustrated by Ryder (1985, 79-82 and plates 23-25). Of these nos 1-12 are re-used in the roof of the tower stair, and nos 13-21, which in 1985 lay outside the west end of the north aisle, have now been moved to a display in the base of the tower, together with a number of architectural fragments and a couple of small 18th-century headstones.

There are a number of post-medieval **Wall Monuments** of some interest; these include:

- (i) On the east wall of the south aisle, a tablet to George Smith of Burnhall, d.1756, having a latin inscription and an ornamental surround with arms.
- (ii) On the south wall of the south aisle, a marble table to Jarrardus Salvin of Croxdale, d.1663, with arms, helm

and crest.

(iii) On the north wall of the north aisle. Important early Renaissance wall monument to Christopher Chayter of Butterby, d.1592, with latin inscription and arms

(iv) On the north wall of the north aisle, marble table with arms to Elizabeth Eyre d.1786.

There are also a number of minor 19th and early 20th century wall monuments.

Beneath the tower is a blue limestone **Ledger Stone**, with a coat of arms, to Elizabeth Davison, d.1712.

HISTORICAL NOTES

762 Peohtwine was consecrated Bishop of Whithorn at 'Aelfet-ee'. If this is correctly identified as 'Elvet Island', it would imply the existence of a minster church. The dedication to St Oswald has also been cited as evidence of an early foundation.

1156 The earliest priest to be recorded was Dolfín.

c1175-c1198 Under the rectorship of Richard of Coldingham the church was granted by Bishop Hugh de Puisey to the Prior and Convent of Durham.

1347 A fire at the church is recorded in the Durham Account Rolls (pers.cokmm.E.C.) > This may have prompted the rebuilding of the chancel and north aisle.

1402 Richard, John and Gilbert de Elvet were granted licence to found a chantry dediated to St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. There was also a chantry, in existence by 1392, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.

1607 Evidence in the accounts suggests that the church was first paved with flagstones (Wilkinson 1931, 50)

1630 The floor relaid and the church plastered, painted and rroughcast outside (ibid)

1698 Payment 'to Joh. Smith for nailing up the starrs, 1s6d'. (Wilkinson op.cit, 51); this presumably relates to one element of a decorated ceiling, perhaps over the nave.

1787. The earliest published description of the church, by the county historian Hutchinson (1787, 312-315), gives a valuable account of the building before its 19th-century vicissitudes, when its medieval fabric was intact and there were extensive remains of its medieval furnishings:

'The church stands in the centre of a very large burial ground, and having been built of stone subject to decay, is in most parts covered with rough-cast and lime: It is of such antiquity that we find one Dolfinus mentioned as priest there in 1156. This is a regular edifice, having two side ailes of similar form: The length of the nave is twenty-nine paces, the middle aile is eight paces wide, and the side ailes six paces each: It is supported on pillars, five in each row, three to the east are round and two to the west octagonal, light, and of a good height; the capitals, ornamented with rolls: The arches are circular: The arch which supports the tower, and that which opens the chancel, are pointed: The upper windows of the nave are regular, five on each side, with elliptic arches: The south aile is lighted by five side windows, three are east of the door, and two to the west, and there is a window at each end, all with pointed arches: The north aile has but three side windows, two to the east of the door, with elliptic arches, and one to the west, and a window at each end, with pointed arches. These variances shew, at different periods, material alterations have been made to the fabric. The pulpit is placed against the first south pillar. In the south wall, under the windows, are four arches for tombs, but no effigies or inscription; neither is there any tradition for whom they were made. The font is a large stone bason, and there is a gallery over it which fills the whole west end of the nave. The roof is of wood, in the vault form, of excellent workmanship, jointed with rose knots, the rafters supported on brackets, ornamented with cherubs bearing shields, but without blazoning of arms. One of the knots, in the centre of the arch, is painted blue, with an inscription in a circle in letters of gold, of the old black character: 'Orate p'A.W.Catten, Vicr.' We presume Catten caused the roof to be constructed in its present beautiful form, and find a Will. de Catten vicar in 1411. The church is well stalled, the chancel remarkably neat, and kept with that pious decency which is necessary to the solemnities of divine worship: It is 12 paces in length to the steps of the altar rails, and six wide: The altar is elevated six steps, and the space within the rails is upwards of 12 feet: The east window consists of four lights, under a pointed arch; there are three windows on the north side, and four on the south, some of which are modern: Behind the table, and on each side, it is wainscotted, painted and gilded; and below the rails, the chancel is regularly stalled in cathedral form with oak, having a large seat at each side of the entrance gate. The roof is flat and stuccoed. The vestry room is also very neat. There is much broken painted glass in the windows, but no figure perfect. Against the second pillar, chained to a desk, is "the defence of the apology of the church of England" with the sermon preached at Paul's Cross, by the bishop of Sarum, 1560, and other curious tracts. In the tower is a set of six musical bells'.

c1830?Surtees (1840) gives a description of the church obviously written before the 1834 works, and adds some useful notes. The eastern bay of the nave roof, nearest the rood loft, had been

painted 'blue sprinkled with stars'. In the windows of the north aisle were some remains of painted glass, the arms of Nevill, and I.H.S. in a roundel; a perfect shield of the arms of Lumley had been destroyed a few years previously. There were various slabs in the floor which had been robbed of brasses; in front of the altar rails was one which had borne the figures of a man and a woman, kneeling, and four shields of arms, whilst beyond this lay 'a fine slab of Stanhope marble' which had borne the effigy of an ecclesiastic. The nave, in addition to its clerestory, had a round window in the east end; he describes the east window of the chancel as of three, rather than four, lights; there was a niche with an elegant canopy over the south porch, and empty niches at the angles of the chancel. Surtees also reproduces an engraving of the church from the south-east (see cover), which itself provides additional information; the south wall of the chancel had four two-light windows, with a string-course below their sills and stepping up in between them; at the west end of the all was a fifth window, a square-headed mullioned-and-transomed 'low side'. The east gable of the nave, standing high above the chancel roof, had a square-headed doorway below the circular window mentioned in the text; the nave had an embattled openwork parapet (rather like that of the tower at Embleton, Northumberland) with crocketed pinnacles between each bay.

1834 The church was in very poor structural condition due to mining subsidence; Rickman (Gothic Architecture 4th edn., 1835) had described it as 'now so shaken by coal mines that it is shut up and must be taken down' and Mackenzie and Ross (1834, 395-6) state at present the edifice is disused, being in a dangerous state, owing, it is believed, to the creeping of the coal seams below. The walls, particularly those of the chancel, are shrunk and cracked, and require to be propped both internally and externally; and the architects who have viewed the church, concur in condemning it'. It was in fact partly rebuilt; works included the complete rebuilding of the chancel and south aisle, the remodelling of the clerestory, replacement of the nave roof and parapet, addition of a vestry north of the chancel and insertion of a new west window in the tower. The architect was the well-known Ignatius Bonomi.

1864A second restoration during which the east end of the chancel was again rebuilt, and the organ chamber added; the tower was restored and all its windows were renewed

1883A third restoration, this time under the architect C.Hodgson Fowler (for details see list of faculties, below).

July 1983A small excavation was carried out, in advance of a new pipe trench, by Richard Bailey and Eric Cambridge (Briggs, Cambridge & Bailey 1985, 140-143), to investigate interfaces predicted by Denis Briggs in a survey by dowsing. What appeared to be the remains of

a floor surface 0.30 m below the present floor was thought to be no later than the present arcades; it overlay what may have been an earlier wall foundation.

7 March 1984A malicious fire destroyed the organ and organ chamber, and effected smoke damage throughout the church. In the course of repairs the plaster was removed from the nave walls, and some archaeological recording carried out (Record, by Steve Coll, currently held by E.C.). This showed no evidence of any break in fabric above the nave arcades; at the west end of the nave there was clear evidence of the upper part of the tower arch being an insertion, of the square projections in the internal angles being contemporary with the eastern buttresses of the tower, and of the buttresses being an addition to a tower associated with a lower pre-clerestory west end.

1987An archaeological watching brief during the construction of the new organ loft at the west end of the nave showed littler other than disturbed ground (pers.comm E.C)

The new organ, by Peter Collins, was installed. The font was moved into the north aisle and the Royal Arms into the former organ chamber. The internal glazed porch at the north door was also constructed at this time.

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

No. and dateWorks

262 (1883)Restoration by C Hodgson Fowler. Removal of pews, lowering of floors (which were to be relaid with a bed of concrete), the removal of the western gallery and entrance lobbies, the cleaning of all dressed stone and replastering of all walls.

680 (6 Mar 1914)New footpath in churchyard

1088 (20 Aug 1922)Reredos, oak screen and panelling

2407 (23 Feb 1932)Repair and restoration of the walls of the church

4043 (28 July 1958)Removal of reredos etc.

- 4767 (18 Mar 1965) Conversion of closed churchyard to playground.
- 4938 (21 Dec 1966) Installation of oil-fired heating system
- 5590 (29 Jan 1976) Installation of peal of 8 bells, disposal for melting of 4 existing bells, installation of new lighting and power circuits in tower.
- 5801 (19 July 1979) Archdeacon's Certificate/ Restoration of external stonework.
- 6001 (28 May 1982) Chemical treatment for beetle, and limewashing of interior.
- 6129 (14 September 1983) Removal of pipework of old heating system, introduction of new heating system with shortening of oak pews, and excavation of trench for 'architectural' purposes.
- 6239 (27 Feb 1985) Confirmatory faculty for work necessitated by severe fire damage.
- 6277 (25 June 1985) Restoration and redecoration after fire.
- 6441 (13 Nov 1986) Installation of new organ and gallery, re-siting of font and royal coat of arms, and reconstruction of porch.

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

This is a difficult building to interpret in detail. Most writers agree that the nave walls are the earliest part of the present structure, and make them coeval with the three eastern bays of the arcades, generally dated to c1180; they vary on whether this church had a western tower. The chancel and aisles were both rebuilt, the latter being extended westwards to the full length of the nave, in the 14th century, and in the 15th century the nave clerestory was added and the tower rebuilt.

A combination of visible features and the recording carried out after the 1984 fire now clarify this picture:

- (i) It now seems clear that the late-12th century church had a nave of the present dimensions and a western tower, the lower part of which remains. There are several pieces of evidence for this:
- (a) The tower arch. Its imposts are clearly late 12th-century work, and seem to fit the jambs below rather too well to be re-used features; there are hints that the arch, above its lowermost voussoirs, is a

reconstruction; the 1984 recording confirmed this.

- (b)The mural stair looks very much like an insertion, possibly incorporating part of an earlier newel stair.
- (c)The character of the masonry of the lower part of the north wall of the tower, and the odd joins between the plinth of the walls and that of the 15th-century diagonal buttresses, all suggest the retention of the lower part of an earlier structure in the present tower.
- (ii)In the mid-14th century, perhaps after the 1347 fire, the chancel and aisles were rebuilt. Much of the evidence for this phase has been erased by the 19th-century rebuilding. The series of arched tomb recesses recorded in the south aisle are paralleled at this period by two other city churches in Newcastle, St Nicholas' and Blackfriars.
- (iii)Late in the 14th century, or c1400, it would appear that the tower was remodelled in its present form and the western bays of the arcades reconstructed. The post-fire recording shows the eastern buttresses of the tower and adjacent walling above the arcades as a single build, although no junction between this build and the earlier masonry further east was noted. What is not clear is whether the c1180 nave had full-length aisles (and that for some reason the western parts of their arcades had to be rebuilt). One clue here may be the pre-1834 positions of the doors in the side walls of the aisles; both seem to have been in the fourth bay, ie if one might expect to find doorways towards the west end of the aisle, then their positions would be appropriate to four- rather than six-bay aisles, although the scenario of a church with a partly-aisled nave is rather unusual. Such a plan would also account for the four-bay 14th-century roof in the north aisle, the odd transverse arch at its west end being cut through the west end of the old aisle.
- (iv)The clerestory was added to the nave c1415, if one accepts the evidence of the arms of William Catten (vicar 1411-1414) on the former nave roof; both the post-fire recording and the present odd relationship between clerestory and tower show that the former is the more recent.
- (v)The 1834 reconstruction; the walls of the chancel, south aisle, and western part of the north aisle were taken down and rebuilt. The present choir vestry was built, replacing an earlier vestry mentioned by Hutchinson.
- (vi)In 1864 the east end was rebuilt again, and the organ

chamber added

(viii)1883: the 1834 vestry is extended to the north and the present clergy vestry added on the east.

THE CHURCHYARD

The churchyard is of trapezoidal plan, narrowing to its north end, set between Church Street on the east and the head of the steep bank dropping to the Wear on the west; the church is set near the centre, with its east end close to the street.

Early maps of the city, including that of 1611 by Speed (reproduced in Roberts 1994, 17) show the churchyard as roughly circular, although it would appear to have been enlarged to its present extent by the 18th-century, to judge from the dates of the surviving headstones. The churchyard monuments have clearly been thinned, and quite a number are in poor condition.

The wall on the south side of the churchyard is of rubble, and in poor condition; at its west end, overlooking the river, it incorporates the remains of a 19th-century building. The wall on the east, fronting onto Church Street, seems largely 19th-century; its northern section acts as a retaining wall as the churchyard is around 1 m higher than the pavement. There appear to be a number of re-used stones in the wall, including, c 25 m north of the gateway by the east end of the church, a piece of sandstone c 0.15 by 0.20 m with a small panel bordered by an incised line. This section of wall is bulging forwards in parts, and will soon need repair.

The low return walls flanking the gateway by the east end of the church are largely made-up of re-used stones; many of these are clearly fragments of 19th-century churchyard monuments, but there is at least one piece of medieval tracery.

There is no boundary wall on the west side of the churchyard, where a wooded bank drops, precipitously in parts, to the River Wear. Part way down this slope, and only a few metres south of the axis of the church, is St Oswald's Well; an 'arcaded well-head' is said to have been destroyed by vandals in the 19th century (note in church guide 1994)

There are a number of references to an 'Anchorage' to the south of the churchyard, and Speed's map shows a building standing inside the churchyard towards its southern boundary.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

This is clearly a church of considerable historic interest, and may well be the earliest within the City of Durham. The evidence for its Pre-Conquest origins has already been cited - the historical sources, the apparent circular plan of the churchyard

and the finds of Pre-Conquest sculpture.

It is possible that the remains of an Anglo-Saxon church underlie the present building, although nothing in the above-ground fabric can be dated to before c1180.

Sub-surface archaeological deposits and structural remains in and around the church have clearly suffered badly, both from subsidence damage and rebuilding in the 19th-century, and in the subsequent insertion of underfloor heating systems within the church and a perimeter drain outside. The small excavation in 1983 did show that stratigraphy does survive within the building, and that an archaeological watching brief will be necessary if any further sub-floor works are to be carried out.

It seems unlikely that any medieval plaster survives inside the church, as most of the wall faces that escaped the 1834 reconstruction were stripped and replastered after the 1984 fire.

There are a number of archaeological concerns relating to the churchyard. It is possible that remains of the medieval south porch, demolished in 1834, survive below ground level outside the present south aisle, and to the east of the present south door. It is not clear whether there was a medieval north porch; if so, buried remains may still exist.

Quite a number of medieval carved stones (notably cross slabs) that formerly lay in the churchyard have 'gone missing': Edleston and Gibby (1948, 132) comment '....it is to be feared that those which are still missing have been used as foundation for a path or are buried under the concrete strip which now surrounds the church'.

The churchyard wall is in poor repair in parts. Pre-Conquest sculptural fragments have already been found here, and it is clear that there is further re-used material still in the wall. Any repairs to the wall should involve an archaeological watching brief.

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St Oswald's Church, Durham
An Archaeological Assessment

Contents

Architectural Description	
Exterior	1-4
Interior	4-8
Fittings and Furnishings	8-10
Sepulchral Monuments	10
Historical Notes	11-15
Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work	15-17
The Churchyard	17-18
Archaeological Assessment	18-19
Sources used/Acknowledgements	19-20
Phased Plan	at end
Drawing showing fabric of west wall of nave,	

after 1984 fire

at end

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Isometric drawings of exposed fabric of west wall of nave,
exposed by plaster stripping during repairs after 1984 fire.
Drawing by S Coll.

Suggested Interpretation (PFR) 3: Fabric of c1180 tower
1 & 4: c.1400 remodelling of

tower and west part of
nave

2(& 5) c1414 addition of

clerestorey

Photographic Survey of St Oswald's Church, Durham, January 1995

- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 1. Tower from west
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 2. Tower from south
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 3. Nave from south
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 4. South door
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 5. Niche over south door
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 6. South aisle from south-east
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 7. Chancel from south
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 8. East end of chancel
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 9. Chancel and vestries from north-east
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 10. Nave and north aisle from north-east
- Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995

11. Nave and north aisle from north
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
12. Tower from north
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
13. Interior looking east
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
14. North arcade looking north-east
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
15. Nave looking west
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 16 North aisle looking west
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 17 Roof of east part of north aisle, looking east
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 18 Roof of west part of north aisle, looking west
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 19 Capital of north respond of chancel arch
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 20 Tower stair, showing re-used cross slabs in roof
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 21 Bell frames, looking north-west
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 22 Bell frames, looking south-west
Durham St Oswalds Jan 1995
- 23 Sedilia in chancel