

The old church of St Andrew, Upleatham, stands half a mile to the east of the present village, just off the B1268 Saltburn to Guisborough road. It has the reputation of being the smallest church in England, and although this is not in fact the case the church has been a puzzle to historians for many years. Documentary and structural evidence point to a building which was once much larger.

The earliest known record of a church at Upleatham dates from the 12th century when land, together with a church, was granted to Guisborough Priory; however, the discovery in the churchyard last century of a stone cross fragment of 9th century date suggests that people may have worshipped at this place long before the Conquest.

The church is rectangular in plan and measures 6 m by 4 m within. At its western end stands a square tower dated 1684. This tower, which replaced an earlier bell-cote, butts on to the west wall. The south wall shows signs of much reconstruction. The former existence of a south aisle is suggested at the exterior by voussoirs which form two arches above later infilling. The north wall seems to be the best preserved since it includes ten Norman corbels in its upper course. This wall continues for 0.92 m beyond the face of the present east end. The east wall dates entirely from the 19th century, when it was erected across part of the original nave in order to form a mortuary chapel. In 1836 a new church was built in the village and the old church was allowed to fall into

decay, although in recent years some effort has been made to preserve it.

In an attempt to determine the original plan of the church a petition was made for a Faculty to carry out archaeological investigations. So far three campaigns of excavation have taken place between 1970 and 1974 under the auspices of the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Leeds. From the outset work was hindered by graves. Faculties for the excavations were granted on the condition that no known graves were to be disturbed, and since several grave-stones marked burials of the last 50 years within the area selected for excavation, this was a limitation which compelled an inconvenient and irregular trench plan (Fig. 14).

The excavations have shown that the north wall of the church originally extended beyond the present eastern gable for at least 3 m, and that the south wall once continued east as far as the 18th century Lowther vault and possibly beyond, although without demolishing the vault this cannot be proved. The investigations produced no evidence for a south aisle wall other than a trace of masonry below and at right-angles to the south-west buttress. Additional trenches revealed random mortared stonework, but the relationship of this material to the main structure of the church was not clear. The excavation also yielded potsherds ranging in date from the 13th to the 20th centuries, large quantities of glass, both plain and decorated, and fragments of painted plaster. None of this material

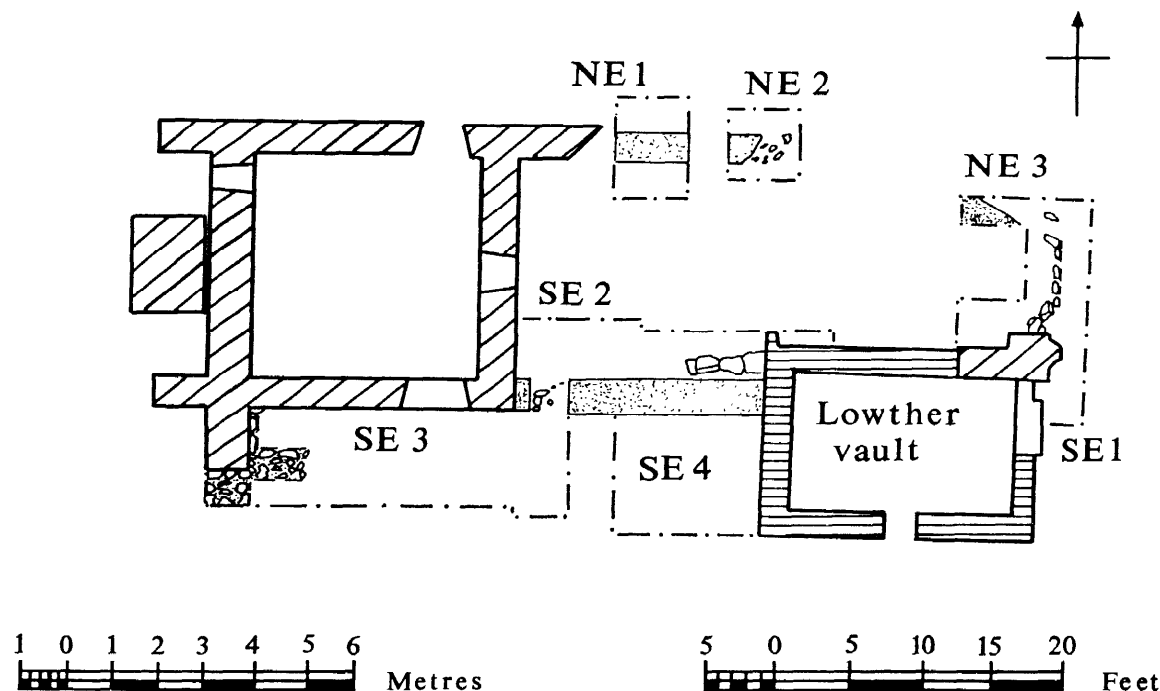


Fig. 14 Plan of St Andrew's church, Upleatham, Cleveland, showing layout of trenches cut in successive campaigns, and principal discoveries. 1970: trenches NE 1, 2, 3; SE 1, 2; 1971: trench SE 3; 1974: trench SE 4 [Drawing: David Evans]

could be attributed to specific layers because of the disturbed nature of the ground. Among the larger finds has been the stone effigy of a 14th century knight in an excellent state of preservation, although the legs have been broken off below the knees. Other finds have included a child's gable-ended grave slab, probably of the mid-11th century, two pre-Conquest cross fragments, and a tapered grave-slab showing an incised cross and two unidentified emblems.

The churchyard at Upleatham is still in use, and this excavation has produced information concerning the earlier history of the church which could well have been destroyed in future years. An excavation of the entire area would have been preferred, but as this is not possible under present circumstances at least some record is being kept before more of the site is disturbed by grave-digging.

The archaeology of the churchyard

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The churchyard, like the church, is an archaeological site. It is, though not so obviously, an 'ancient monument'. In addition to the visible features of boundary walls, churchyard buildings, and the gravestones themselves, there is much archaeological evidence which lies beneath the present surface. Many incumbents resent the attitude of those visitors whose interest seems to be more in the church and its yard as an ancient monument and the burial place of its parishioners than as the House of God. Yet such study of the historical features does not end with the building, its architecture, and memorials: it is to do with the history of the Church as an institution, the antiquity and the basis of Christian witness in the parish. As such it should be of equal interest to laymen and incumbent alike. The vicar of a well known church in Northamptonshire expressed it well recently when he said that the more that was known of the history of his church and parish, the better it was for the spiritual well-being of his parishioners.

The churchyard is normally as old as the church it serves, and sometimes older. It may have its origins as a sacred site in prehistoric times: Knowlton (Dorset) is set within a great religious earthwork of the 3rd or 4th millennium BC, while at Rudston (Yorks.) a prehistoric standing stone 19 ft high is one of the most conspicuous features of the churchyard. Continuity of religious observance may be assumed in these cases, the Christian church representing the 'takeover' of the pagan sanctuary, the adaptation of its site, and the weaning of its people from the old religion to the new. A more specific continuity in many churchyards is that of burial. Pagan Roman or Anglo-Saxon burials and finds are known from a number of churchyards, and later on the incoming Vikings were buried with their weapons in existing Christian churchyards. This may indicate their quick conversion to Christianity, albeit with a reluctance to abandon their custom of burying objects with the dead.

Within the Christian use of the yard, the earliest burials may go back to Roman times, witness to the earliest Christian worship in these islands. Such cases may be comparatively rare, although there is insufficient knowledge of how frequent they are, but the use of the yard for burial commonly extends back to the middle ages or even into the Anglo-Saxon period. One may expect an average parish of about 200 people and a history of 1000 years to have had some 6000 burials.

These are of considerable interest to archaeologists, not only because they contain information about man himself—his health, expectation of life and much else—but also because they tell us about burial practices in the past, which are, of course, part of the history of the Christian faith. The number of Christian burials in our churchyards may exceed 100 million, potentially a massive body of evidence. Obviously, most of these have been disturbed or destroyed by successive burial in the same area—skulls and other bones are well known as the attributes of the gravedigger in art and literature—and in many soils bones are not well preserved after more than a century or so. Nevertheless, much remains, as has been shown where there have been excavations of long-abandoned churchyards, such as those of deserted medieval villages. In two cases—Clopton (Cambs.) and Wharram Percy (N. Yorks.)—it was found that the ground had been deliberately made up over the centuries (Alexander, 1968: see also p. 36). There were four layers of burials, so that later disturbance of earlier burials was minimal.

The burials, however, are not the only archaeological evidence in the churchyard. The yard has not in most cases always been the same size, and there may have been previous uses of the area. At Wootton Wawen, near Stratford-upon-Avon (Warks.), modern burials are being dug through medieval priory buildings; below these are late Saxon graves, and under these in the lowest level there are earlier Saxon buildings, which may be of the monastery or part of the village (Barnie *et al*, 1975). This evidence was only discovered in 1974 when archaeologists excavated a small area in advance of modern grave digging. Apart from graves, buildings, and many other possible ancient features, the churchyard has often been used as a rubbish dump for unwanted objects from the church, such as pieces of old clocks, bells, and even fragments of sculpture. These were discarded by earlier generations but now have historical value; they have gradually been covered by soil and have become part of the archaeology of the churchyard.

This demonstration of the yard as an archaeological site does not mean that archaeologists intend, or would even like, to descend on every churchyard and excavate it, unless it is in danger of being destroyed. What are the threats? Major destruction does occur when the church or its yard is in the path of progress, such as a new motorway, a reservoir, or urban development.