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ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
T R U S T

**ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH,  
SPURRIERGATE,  
YORK**

**REPORT ON AN  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
WATCHING BRIEF**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*A watching brief was undertaken at St. Michael's Church, Spurriergate, York and the adjoining property, 24 Spurriergate (St. Michael's Chambers), in advance of minor building alterations. Evidence for the construction history of the liturgical north wall of the church was found. Four plaster surfaces were identified on the internal face, the earliest of which dated to the medieval period and was painted. Architectural fragments, found re-used in the wall, may have been derived from an earlier part of the church.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

During building work at St. Michael's Church, Spurriergate, York (NGR SE 6030 5170), York Archaeological Trust undertook an archaeological watching brief on behalf of the Spurriergate Trust (Figure 1). The watching brief took place between 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> May 1999.

### **1.2 Brief and methodology (Figure 2)**

The watching brief involved monitoring and recording the dismantling of the church fabric by the building contractors, William Birch Ltd., at two points. The first was in the internal wall of the south gallery of the tower at roof level, to enable an air extraction unit to be installed. The external elevation of the stonework affected was recorded. The second point was in the liturgical north wall, and involved the insertion of a doorway into St. Michael's Chambers, the offices next door, at mezzanine level. Both the internal and external elevations (the latter now in St. Michael's Chambers) and the fabric were recorded.

Generally, each stone was removed in its entirety using an electric jack-hammer or chisel, although some stones in the wall core and larger facing stones, which extended beyond the limits of the doorway, were cut through in order to avoid unnecessary disturbance of the church fabric. The main components of the walls, such as the wall core, were described individually and allocated unique 'context' numbers for ease of reference. Notable finds recovered from the church fabric, such as re-used architectural fragments, were assigned to the context in which they had been found. 1:10-scale measured drawings of the wall elevations were compiled on site (see Figures 3-5).

Advice was given on the impact of the building works on the church fabric, following consultation with the architects, Peter Gaze Pace. Gaps between the doorway and the intact church wall were filled with modern brick, so that the extent of the building works could be clearly distinguished from the pre-existing fabric. Each stone removed was recorded and numbered, in order to identify any stones of architectural merit. However, very few stones showed signs of previous use as architectural stone; none were deemed worthy of retention, except for one that bore a small segment of painted plaster (see 4.2 below).

In the interests of clarity, compass points in the text refer to the liturgical orientation of the church; for example, the liturgical north wall of the church is actually the north-west wall.

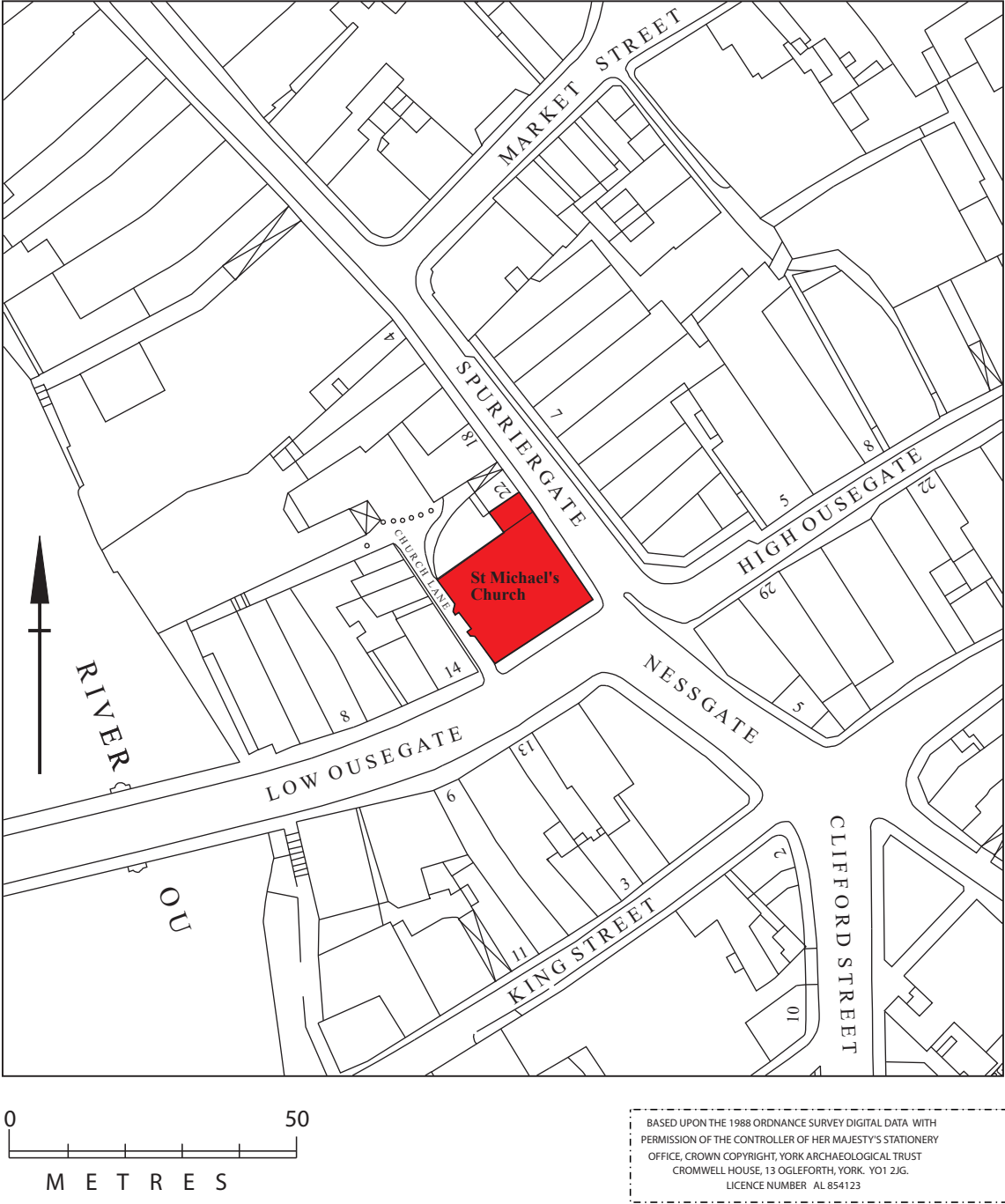


Figure 1. Site location

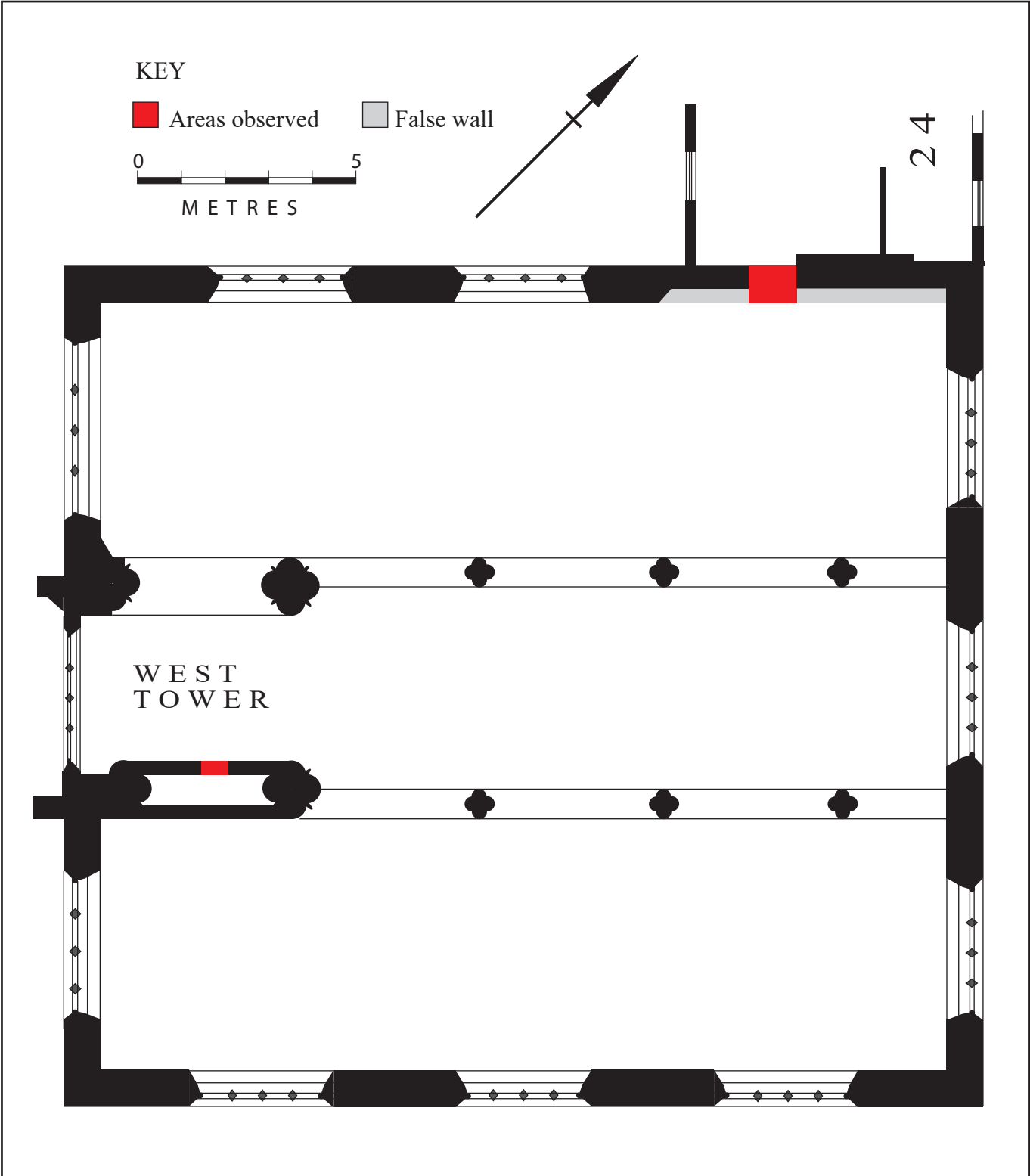


Figure 2. Location of observations (first floor plan)

## **2. HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL BACKGROUND**

The origins of the parish church of St. Michael, Spurriergate go back before the Norman Conquest. William Rufus gave the church to St. Mary's Abbey, probably as part of the abbey's foundation grant. The wealth of St. Michael, Spurriergate was valued at £10 per annum in 1736 (Drake 1736, 235), which was exceeded only by the churches of St. Olave and St. Michael-le-Belfry. The church passed to the Crown at the Dissolution and to the archbishop in 1868, and the parish was united with St. Mary, Castlegate in 1936 (Tillott 1961, 396-7).

The church walls are mainly of limestone, with some gritstone. The earliest part of the standing building is the nave, which dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The north aisle was widened in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It appears that the east (Spurriergate) side of the churchyard, which lay to the north of the church, was built over in 1337 by a row of houses that butted against the church (RCHM 1981, 220). The earliest detailed map of York (Baines 1822) shows buildings still standing in this position. As part of the widening of Spurriergate the east wall of the church was moved 2m (7 feet) to the west in 1821, reducing the length of the north aisle. The houses adjoining the church on the Spurriergate frontage (22-24 Spurriergate) were rebuilt in 1841, in a further stage of street widening. The north wall of the church was rebuilt in 1868. The tower was added during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, although its uppermost part was removed in 1966-67 (RCHM 1981, 40).

## **3. RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF**

### **3.1 The west tower**

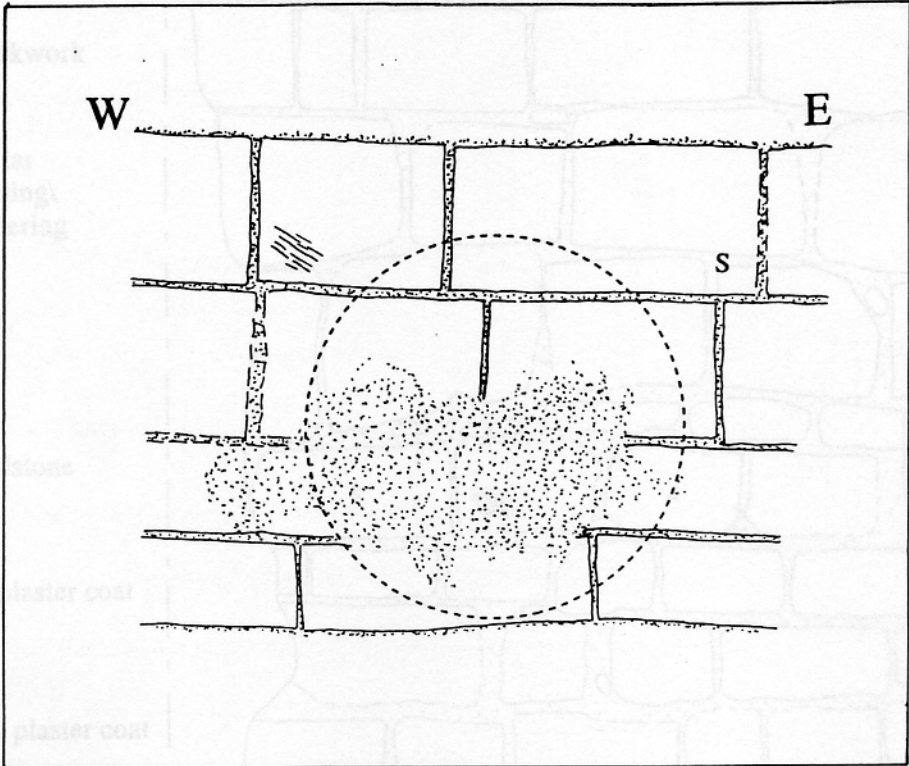
The affected fabric was the uppermost four courses in the 0.35m-wide internal wall of the south gallery, opposite the doorway onto the roof (Figure 2). The area of stonework removed formed a circle 0.60m in diameter, the top of which was 0.15m below the stone corbel of the gallery ceiling (Figure 3).

The courses varied between 0.13-0.18m in thickness (1000). The squared blocks measured 0.25-0.40m long, and were limestone with one example of sandstone. The visible face of each stone had been well dressed using a chisel, although patches of mortar up to 0.48m in diameter suggest that the stonework had once been rendered.

### **3.2 The north wall**

#### *3.2.1 The stonework*

The area of masonry removed to form the doorway in the north wall formed a rectangle 2.52m high (Figures 4 and 5). It was an average of 1.0m wide, although due to the cutting out of individual stones the sides of the opening were irregular (measuring as little as 0.93m wide) and the insertion of a lintel required an opening 1.4m wide at the top. The bottom of the doorway was at first floor level in St. Michael's Chambers, but as the mezzanine in the church was much lower the opening was 1.1m above the mezzanine floor level (to be reached by a stairway).



KEY:-



Mortar bedding rendering



Tooling marks



Sandstone



Borehole

Figure 3 West tower, south gallery, internal wall, external elevation

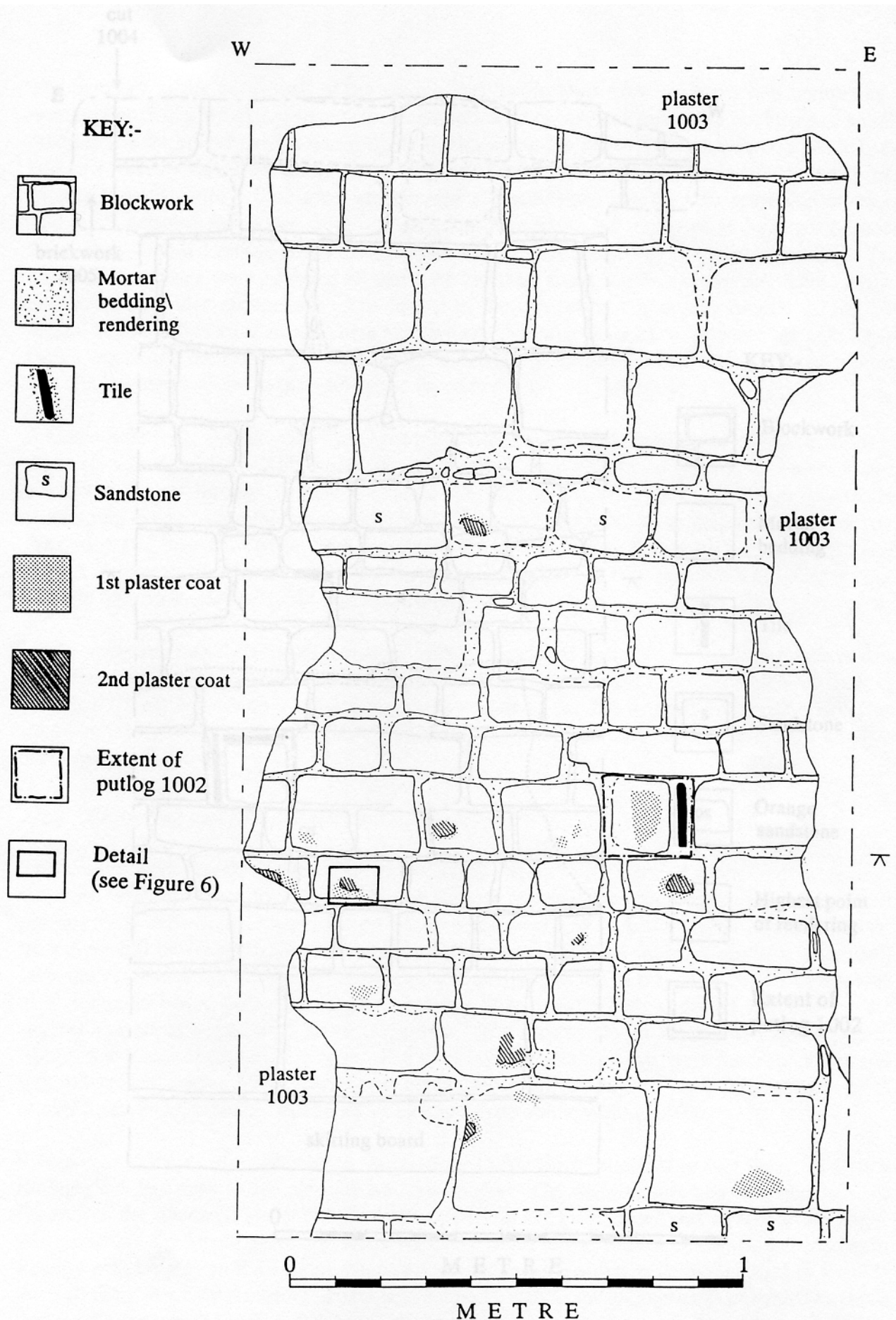


Figure 4. North wall, internal elevation



Plate 1 Section through north wall,  
looking east. Scale 20cm.



Plate 2 External elevation showing  
rendering. Scale 20cm.

The masonry in the north wall of the church was 0.60m thick (1001; Plate 1). It comprised a mortared core of small-large limestone fragments with occasional sandstone cobbles and small-medium tile fragments, which was roughly 0.20m thick; the larger stones appeared to have been laid in courses rather than as randomly deposited rubble. The core was faced internally and externally with coursed limestone and occasionally sandstone blocks, also some 0.20m thick. The joints between the stones were generally less than 5mm, but appeared to be larger because the slightly rounded visible edges of the stones had been concealed by the mortar bonding. The backs of the stones were rounded so that they could be fitted together along the visible edges, producing an ashlar appearance. The height of the courses was generally around 0.12m, but ranged between 0.05m–0.32m. There was a degree of correspondence between the courses of facing stones and the masonry core, although this was less evident in the courses of larger stones. The tile fragments found in the wall fabric dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A single hole some 0.19m wide by 0.17m high, which continued through the complete width of the wall was recorded. This hole was evidently a putlog that had carried a 6-inch square horizontal timber through from one side of the wall to the other, presumably to secure the scaffolding erected on either side of the wall during the construction of the church. After use, the putlog had been infilled on both faces of the wall with square limestone fragments, wedged in with fragments of ceramic roof tile and sparingly mortared (1002); the core was left as a void. The tile fragments date to the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Of the approximately 140 stones removed, only six displayed signs of re-use, all in the form of a chamfered edge. The chamfers were generally at 45 degrees and measured 0.07-0.10m long [stones 57, 133, 175-6 and 178], although one was at 65 (or 25) degrees and measured 0.18m long [stone 179]. It is likely that these stones had previously formed parts of plinths or window surrounds.

### *3.2.2 Plastering, rendering and alterations to the fabric*

There were signs that three successive layers of plaster had been applied to the internal face of the north wall; the latest formed a complete surface, whereas the others survived only in small patches. The earliest layer was light grey/brown in colour, and lacked a mortar base. In places, the plaster had been applied to the mortar bonding where it infilled slight concavities in the wall face, but elsewhere the plaster had been applied directly onto the stones. The plaster bore traces of a design in black paint, the largest surviving element of which appeared to form an 'x', suggesting part of a medieval script (Figure 6). The second plaster layer was light brown in colour, and also lacked a mortar base. The third layer was mid brown, on a 5mm-thick layer of fine grey/white mortar. The plaster had been stained with numerous dark grey vertical lines around 5mm wide, probably due to water having run down the walls (1003).

Subsequently, the existing plaster on laths, some 15mm thick, attached to two layers of lattice studding that had been nailed onto the wall, was added. The studding measured 75mm square in the area of the doorway; although measurements could not be obtained due to lack of access, it was clear that the scantling of the studs was very small at the foot of the wall, and increased steadily with height. In the area of stonework investigated, the plaster face was 0.3m in front of the wall face. It would therefore appear that the north wall of the church leans outwards by more than 0.3m, perhaps as much as 0.5m, and the scantling of the studding was increased with height





in order to offset this lean and form a vertical internal surface. Coats of cream, light brown and mid grey paint were observed on the plaster beneath the extant whitewash, which suggests that the plaster and studding was constructed some time ago.

The external face of the church wall had been covered at one time in a 5-10mm-thick layer of light grey/white mortar, which survived over much of the lower half of the exposed masonry (Figure 5; Plate 2). A brick chimney in St. Michael's Chambers (1005) immediately east of the stonework examined butted against, and so post-dated, the mortar layer, indicating that the mortar originally acted as rendering on the exposed external face of the church wall, prior to the construction of 24 Spurriergate and its chimney. The bricks in the chimney measured 2.125-2.25 inches thick, which suggests they date to the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

When 24 Spurriergate was built, it was not given its own south wall; the north wall of the church was used instead (Plate 2). The church fabric was concealed by plaster and laths fixed to half-inch thick vertical studs. There was evidence for a coat of light brown paint beneath the existing cream paint. The chimney immediately to the north of the exposed stonework was partly formed by a brick frontage (1005) butting against the church wall, but the rear part of the flue had been created by hacking out the church fabric to a depth of approximately 0.17m (1004).

## 4. FINDS ASSESSMENT

### 4.1 Ceramic building material

#### 4.1.1 Introduction

Two small bags of material were recovered from this site.

#### 4.1.2 Medieval material

Plain roofing tile was present. This is probably of the usual York peg tile form. In addition, one of the fabrics probably dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, rather than the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

There is also a fragment of brick, which is probably medieval. Again, brick is normally associated with the 14<sup>th</sup> century or later.

#### 4.1.3 Conclusion

The material from context 1001 is probably 14<sup>th</sup> century or later in date. The plain tile from context 1002 could range between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Much work was undertaken on the church during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and this material could easily fit in with that activity.

This material should be retained for further study.

#### 4.1.4 Context Listing

Context	Form/s	Date Range	Spot Date
1001	Brick (14 <sup>th</sup> +), Plain (14 <sup>th</sup> +, reused)	14-16 <sup>th</sup>	14-16 <sup>th</sup>
1002	Plain (reused)	13-16 <sup>th</sup>	13-16 <sup>th</sup>

### 4.2 Painted plaster

1001

A fragment of plaster, adhering directly to a stone in the internal face of the church wall (1001). It had been painted with a black design on a light grey background. The design appears to form a letter, possibly an 'X'.

1003

Fragments of plaster, painted brown. The mortar backing included horse hairs in its matrix; this bonding agent was commonly used in medieval and post-medieval mortar.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The section of the north wall of St. Michael Spurriergate examined during this watching brief was probably constructed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or a little later, according to the date of the tile found in the fabric. It is most likely that the north wall dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as there is architectural and documentary evidence that the north aisle was widened and buildings constructed against the north wall at that time. Although many parts of the church were rebuilt during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems that rebuilding of the north wall was confined to the western end, where two windows were added. The eastern part of the north wall was retained probably because it also acted as the south wall of the adjoining building (24 Spurriergate). Architectural fragments were re-used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century fabric, and could have been derived from an earlier phase of the church.

There was good correspondence between the courses of the facing stonework and the core, and a putlog was found to continue through the complete thickness of the wall. These features indicate that the three elements in each course had been laid at about the same time, and not as independent facing elements subsequently infilled with rubble.

The stonework was probably plastered internally from the beginning; the first plaster surface had apparently been painted with a scheme incorporating a script, presumably of medieval date. Two further plaster coats had been applied, perhaps during the later medieval and post-medieval periods. The current plaster surface was probably added as part of the rebuilding works in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and conceals a marked outward lean in this part of the north wall.

It is likely that the external face of the north wall was covered with a mortar rendering when it was constructed. Although a house is thought to have been built against the east end of the north wall in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the section of wall investigated probably stood above and to the rear of this building. However, when 24 Spurriergate was rebuilt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it concealed this part of the church fabric. Indeed, 24 Spurriergate is not free-standing as it employs the church wall as its south wall, and the internal plaster on the south side of this house was fixed directly to the north face of the church fabric. A brick chimney in 24 Spurriergate, constructed against the church wall, comprises bricks which are probably of 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century date. If these bricks were not re-used, it suggests that the chimney was part of an earlier building, and was incorporated in the extant, 19<sup>th</sup> century structure.

The other part of the church examined, the north wall of the south gallery at roof level in the tower, appears to have been part of the original (15<sup>th</sup> century) fabric.

## **6. LIST OF SOURCES**

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Tillott, P.M., 1961. *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: A History of Yorkshire, The City of York* (Oxford University Press)

## **7. LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS**

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