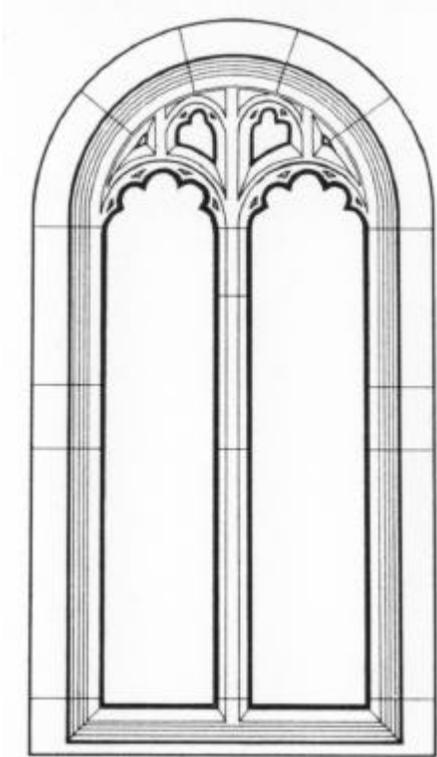


Historic Churches of West Yorkshire

Tong Church



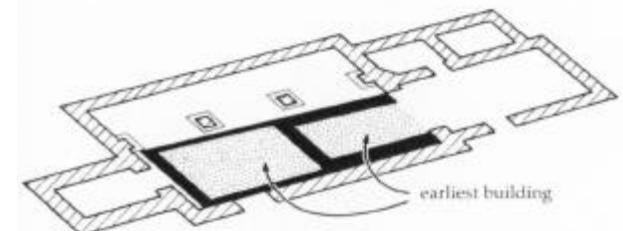
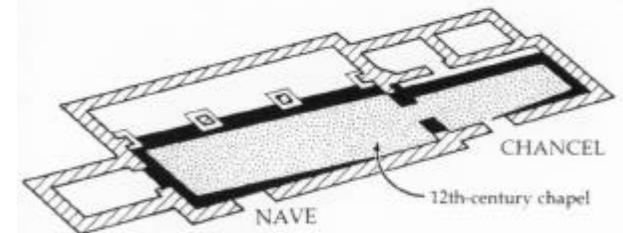
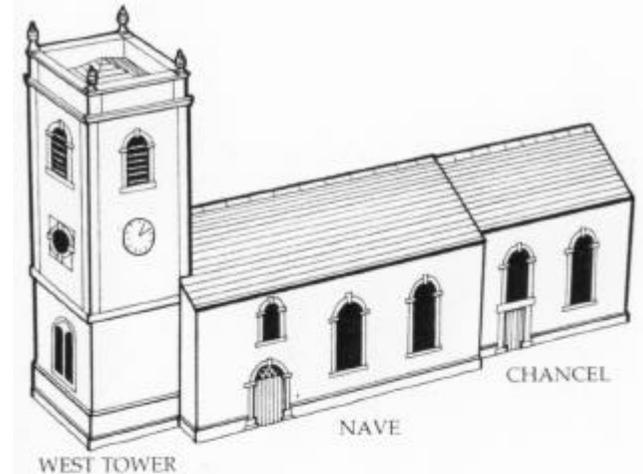
dedicated to St James, lies in the attractive and secluded village of Tong, five miles south-east of Bradford. A church stood on this spot in the Middle Ages; it was a chapel within the large parish of Birstall. The building was completely reconstructed in 1727 by Sir George Tempest of Tong Hall, and at first glance it seems now to be entirely of 18th-century date. But some medieval architectural features were rescued from the earlier chapel for reuse in the present structure; one of these, a window in the west wall of the tower, is shown above. This leaflet highlights what we know about the medieval chapel from such reused stonework, and from archaeological excavations carried out in 1979. Information on other leaflets in this series can be obtained from the West Yorkshire Archaeology Service, Registry of Deeds, Newstead Road, Wakefield WF1 2DE.

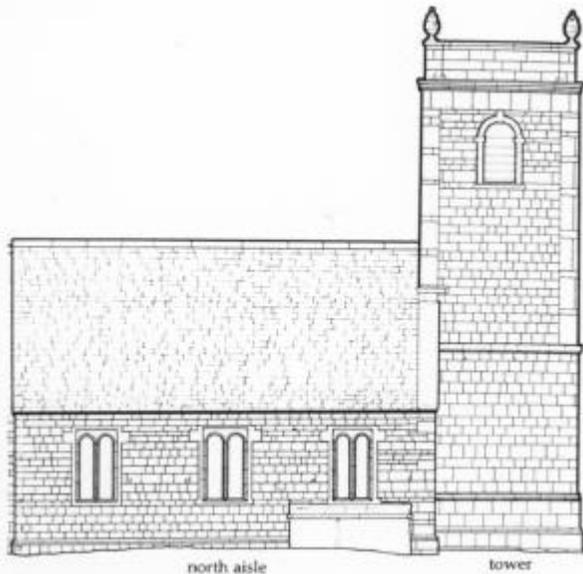
Tong Church is an 18th-century building consisting of a chancel, nave, north aisle and west tower; it is shown in the drawing on the right. There have been few alterations since it was erected: there are signs of possible alterations to the chancel arch, and the east window of the chancel was replaced by a larger, gothic-style window in the late 19th century. Inside, many of the fine 18th-century wooden furnishings and fittings are intact. In the 1970s, however, the woodwork was threatened by rising damp. As a result, it was decided to carry out a major programme of repairs, including the installation of a damp-proof course below the floor. This, in turn, would have destroyed any remains of earlier buildings. Since it was known that there had been a chapel at Tong in the Middle Ages - some of its architectural features had been reused in the 18th-century building - it was decided to carry out a full archaeological excavation in advance of the repair work. As expected, the dig showed that most of the nave and chancel areas had been disturbed by medieval and later burials. But enough undisturbed ground survived to reveal not one but two sets of rubble foundations belonging to earlier buildings.

The most substantial remains were the pitched stone foundations of the chapel which had been demolished in 1727 to make way for the present building. That chapel had consisted of a nave and chancel which were only slightly smaller than, and in much the same positions as the present nave and chancel. Their positions are shown in the drawing on the right. The north wall foundation of the nave was disturbed by the piers of the present north aisle arcade, and its other foundations were partly cut away by those of the 18th-century walls. Architectural remains indicate that the chapel was erected in the 12th century, and that in the later Middle Ages it had been provided with new windows; the detailed evidence is described overleaf.

Earlier still, were the remains of a two-roomed building beneath the present nave: the position of its stone footings are shown on the left. This structure pre-dated the 12th-century chapel described above; its position and alignment suggest that it was an even earlier chapel. This suggestion is supported by one other piece of evidence: the possible 11th-century gravemarker stone, described overleaf, which was found reused in the 12th-century foundations. If correctly identified, it indicates that there

was a burial ground at Tong before the 12th-century chapel was erected.





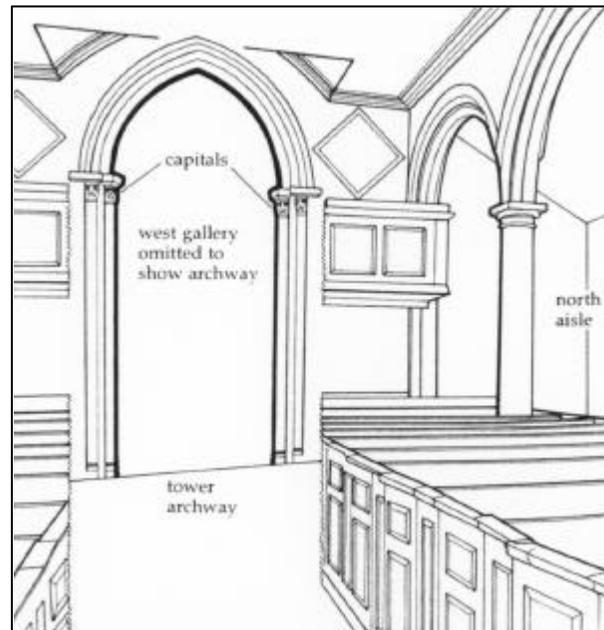
The old chapel at Tong seems to have been completely demolished to make way for the present church in 1727. When the church is viewed from the road, on the south side, there is nothing to indicate that an earlier building stood on this site. The first indications of a predecessor are to be seen in the west wall of the tower, which contains the window shown on the front of this leaflet. Parts of the window are in the Perpendicular style and date to the 15th or 16th century; in 1727 they were preserved and modified to fit within a Classical style frame with a semi-circular arch.

The drawing above shows the north face of the tower and the north aisle. The walling of the aisle is much less uniform than that of the tower, or indeed that of the nave south wall; it is probably composed of reused material from the earlier church. The aisle windows, in late medieval style, are possibly copies of windows in the pre-1727 building and may also contain architectural fragments from the earlier chapel. Inside the church, the inner face of the aisle wall is unquestionably made up of reused masonry: when the wooden panelling was removed temporarily in 1979, the stones behind could be seen to retain fragments of wall plaster painted with black-letter Biblical texts. Some of the lettering was upside down, thus proving that the wall was a complete reconstruction, and was not itself part of the earlier building.

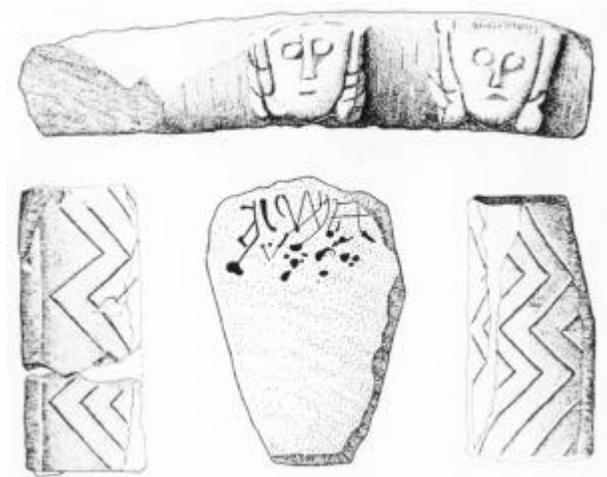
Inside the church, the general impression is of a very fine and well-preserved 18th-century building, with many of its splendid furnishings and fittings still intact. But it incorporates one substantial feature from the medieval chapel: the archway at the west end of the nave leading into the tower.

The upper half of the archway is now hidden by the west gallery, but the drawing below shows its full extent and form. The capitals at the top of the columns on each side are decorated in the Romanesque style of the 12th century. In fact most of its stonework comes from the medieval building; it was possibly the archway leading into the chancel from the nave. When it was reused in 1727, the columns were lengthened by the insertion of new sections of stonework, and the arch was changed from a semi-circular to a pointed form.

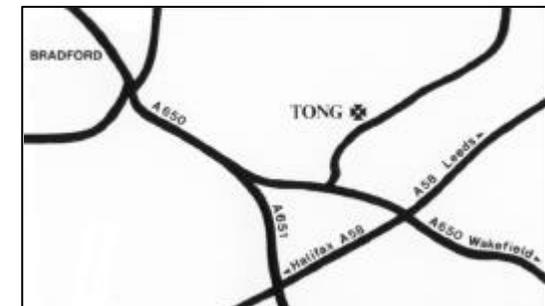
The excavations in 1979 revealed various other pieces of carved medieval stonework, the most important of which



are shown at the top right-hand corner of this page. The stone at the top, with human heads carved on it, comes from a 12th-century arch. The two blocks with chevron decoration, to each side, are also of 12th-century date; they are jambstones from the sides of a doorway. All these would have come from the same building as the tower



archway described earlier. But the stone in the centre is even earlier. It was found, reused, in the footings of the medieval chapel, and has been identified as an early grave marker. If this is correct, it shows that there was a Christian burial ground at this place even before the 12th-century chapel was erected, and it supports the suggestion that the earliest foundations, discovered in the excavations, described overleaf, belong to a church in use at about the time of the Norman Conquest. Thus a church which, at first sight, appears to be almost entirely 18th century, can now be seen to occupy a religious site which has been in use perhaps since Anglo-Saxon times.



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