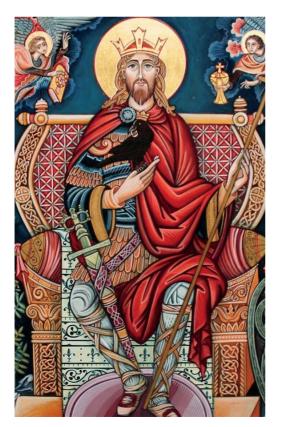


#### Oswald - Our Patron Saint

Our church is dedicated to St Oswald, King and Martyr. For eight years, he was King of Northumbria, a huge area which stretched from the Humber to the Firth of Forth. During his reign he established Christianity across his kingdom and was instrumental in the conversion of the King of Wessex.

The historian Bede, writing in the early 700s, called Oswald the "Most Christian King" and "Emperor of all Britain" because he united the various tribes under his rule. Oswald was born in 604, the son of Aethelfrith who was said by Bede to have "ravaged the Britons more cruelly than all other English leaders".

The twelve-year-old Oswald was exiled after his father's death, by King Edwin, Oswald's uncle, to the island of Iona at the monastery established by Columba. There he was taught by the monks and baptised into the Celtic Church. He also learnt the art of war and became so skilful that he was known as 'Whiteblade'.



After the deaths of both Edwin and Oswald's elder brother, he returned home to his native Northumberland to reclaim his kingdom.

He and the huge forces of Cadwallon met in the Battle of Heavenfield near Hadrian's Wall. Before the battle Oswald had a dream in which St Columba appeared to him and spread his cloak over the whole realm, promising him victory in the battle.

Oswald had his men erect a wooden cross, and prayed to God to "defend us against the pride and fierceness of our enemy, for that God knows our cause is just and that we fight for the salvation of our nations."

Oswald mounted a surprise dawn attack and Cadwallon and his son were killed in a great victory. Oswald's first act as king was to establish a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne with the saintly Aidan as his bishop.

Later on, according to Bede, Oswald and Aidan were eating together when a messenger brought in the news that many poor people were asking for alms. Oswald at once ordered the food to be taken out to them, and the silver dish to be broken up and the pieces divided up among them. "The bishop, who was sitting by, was delighted with this pious act, grasped him by the right hand and said, 'May this hand never wither".

In 642 Oswald marched south to confront the pagan King Penda of Mercia in the Battle of Maeserfelth or Maserfield. Oswald was killed, and Penda dragged his body from the field so that his remaining men would not be able to take it home for burial. The body was dismembered and the limbs and head displayed as a pagan sacrifice to Woden, the god of battle.

Oswald's brother Oswiu returned to the battlefield to find the parts of his body. By that time a "great black bird" is said to have picked up the right arm, flown to a nearby ash tree and dropped it (hence the name "Oswald's Tree" or Oswestry). Water gushed out, and this became Oswald's Well, the site of many miracles of healing. The well can still be visited in Maserfield, a short walk from the church. There is a large modern statue of the bird above the well.

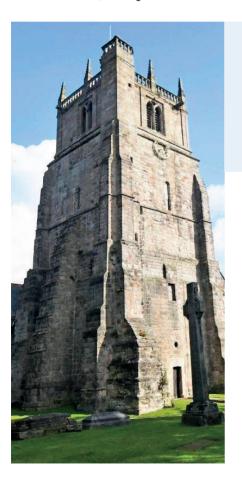


Oswiu took the head to Lindisfarne, and much later it was placed in the coffin of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral. The arms were buried in a silver case in the family fortress in Bamburgh. As Aidan had predicted, they were "incorrupt" at the time of Bede.

## History

In 1086, a Great Survey was carried out on behalf of William the Conqueror for what became known as the Domesday Book. Clerks were sent out to every shire to record the ownership of every piece of land and assess its value to the king. Oswestry was not mentioned by name, but a new castle was recorded, and a church, within the manor of Meresberie (modern day Maesbury).

The early history of St Oswald's is shadowy, and it is not known if there was a church on the present site prior to the Norman Conquest. It is known that in 1121 the church of St Oswald is listed in the possessions of Shrewsbury Abbey. In 1223 the Abbey appointed our first vicar, Philip Fitzleofth.



#### So, how old is the church?

The oldest part of the present building is the lower part of the tower. This, with the wall between the tower and the West Door, including the small lancet window, is thought to be from the 13th century.

Oswestry was a 'frontier' town, the scene of several violent attacks at that time, so it is not surprising that so little remains of the original building, and that what is left of the tower has been much repaired and added to.

Rev. David Cranage, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, noted that the tower is buttressed on all walls, including the sides now inside the church, raising the possibility that it was "built as an addition to a Norman or Saxon building and it may have been quite separate from it."

The oldest part of the present building is the lower part of the

## The Civil War

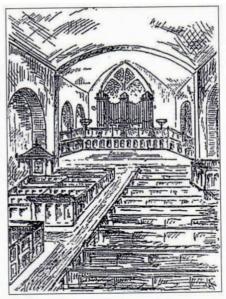
Much was to disappear in the Civil War when great damage was done. Richard Gough of Myddle, writing in the early 1700s, described how "The Governor of this towne when it was a Garrison for the King pulled downe many houses that were without the Wall lest they shelter an enemy. The Church also beeing without the Wall was pulled downe, and the toppe of the Steeple unto that loft where the bell-frame stood. The belles were brought into the Towne." The 'squinches' or masonry supports for the upper structure can still be seen inside the tower in the clock room.

The battle took place on the 22nd and 23rd of June 1644. The church was quickly taken by the Parliamentary forces and the New Gate breached. The Roundheads took the town, forcing the Royalists in the castle to surrender.

It is claimed that the church was used as a stable. The damage caused at this time took more than fifty years to repair. The tower buttresses were strengthened and a larger one added on the west side to stabilise the tower, and the lower section of the spiral staircase was filled in with stone.

Between 1700 and 1870, the church was very crowded, with box pews owned by the well- to-do. 'Free seats' were attached to the ends of the box pews for the poor, although that left little space in the aisles.

Several galleries were added to provide more seating, including two across the chancel for the choir and the organ. But with a growing population, space was insufficient for the town's needs, leading to the establishment of a second Anglican church, Holy Trinity in Roft Street, in 1837.



THE SINGING GALLERY, ST. OSWALD'S CHURCH, 1860.

#### The Victorian Restoration

The church underwent a full restoration in 1872-4 by the architect G. E. Street. Box pews and galleries were swept away. The nave, the body of the church, had a new roof, floor, pillars and windows. Meanwhile, for two years the congregation worshipped in the National School in Welsh Walls and in Oswestry School Chapel. There was a whole week of music to celebrate the re-opening, and there were 1500 people present at the final celebratory service, sitting on chairs, as the church's new pews had been lost in a fire at the premises in Shifnal where they were being made.

Prior to Street's restoration of the church, much of the floor had been paved with the gravestones of those buried beneath, heavily worn by feet in places. The floor was to be lowered, and the plan was to bury these stones under the new floor, having recorded their position and inscription. There were objections to this, as many of the bodies had been buried within living memory.

Approximately seventy gravestones remain under the nave floor, many others were eventually piled around the perimeter wall of the churchyard, and twenty-two were transported up to the first floor of the tower (presumably with great difficulty!) and fixed to the walls. Among them is a stone with an inscription in old Welsh in the form of an 'Englyn', a poem written to a strict format. The stone is dated 1661 and is thought to be one of the oldest of its type.

#### The inscription reads:

OS:GOFYN RHYW
DDYN RWYN RHO
DDI COELDDDYSG
PLE CLADDWYD
AER SALBRI LLYMA
EI ARGRAPH LLYMA
OERGRI DYNA EF
AETH DANAF FI

#### Translation:

'If any man should ask, I give certain knowledge Where Salbri's heir was buried Here's his impression, a cold, sharp cry, He is the one placed under me.



The identity of Salbri or Salisbury, is a mystery. Dr. Guto Rhys says: "This is a VERY important monument. It is one of the very earliest englynion on a grave, and therefore a prestigious monument, testimony to the fact that Welsh was most important in the high culture of the town." The stone appears to have been re-used, as there is an inscription below, in a different 'hand' to a "Mis Dorithy Ellis".

#### A CLOCKWISE TOUR OF THE CHURCH

#### The Tower

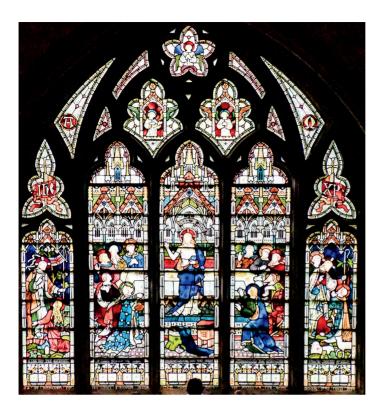
Entering through the South Porch and the Gregory doors, the first thing you see is the font, given by the Sunday School in 1874. The heavy cover has counter-weights for easy lifting. On the right is a board listing vicars of Oswestry going back to 1223, including William Morgan in 1599, who translated the Bible into Welsh. The tower wall behind the font with its heavy buttresses is covered with memorials to servicemen and prominent local people. Some were collected here from the other walls of the church for safe keeping during the renovation of 1872-4.



Round the corner on the north wall of the tower there are more memorials and brass plaques, many of which were also moved here during the building works..



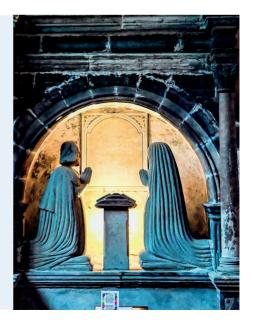
To the right of the Choir Vestry steps is a tiny 13th century lancet window, by far the oldest window in the church. Turning right, above the West Door is a window showing the meal in the Upper Room after the Resurrection of Jesus. There are only ten disciples: Judas had died and Thomas was absent. Also shown are Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden and Peter's forgiveness.



The West Window

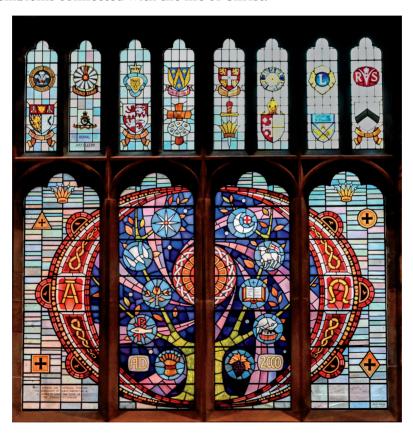
## The Yale Memorial

Passing the West Door, and into the church library, you come to the Yale Memorial, two large kneeling figures, Hugh Yale and his wife, Dorothy, facing each other in prayer. Hugh Yale was an important figure in the town, and left his land and property in trust for the town's poor. He died in 1606. A later member of the family, Elihu Yale, was born in America and founded Yale University. The memorial was formerly in the chancel, and moved to its present location during the rebuilding of the church after the Civil War.



### The Millennium Window

Behind the font is the window created by the local stained glass artist Jane Grey for the millennium in 2000. Funded by public subscription, it was installed in 2004. The main roundel shows Oswald's Tree surrounded by an 'O' for Oswald. On the tree are emblems connected with the life of Christ.



Included are the Lamb of God, the pelican, regarded as a symbol of Christ's self-sacrifice, grapes and corn, signifying the bread and wine of Communion, the Greek monogram for Christ with a fish, and a dove for the Holy Spirit. The tracery lights above the roundel feature various coats of arms including those of the Orthopaedic Hospital, Lichfield Diocese and Oswestry School, and in the middle, Oswald's Cross of Prayer and silver dish, Oswald's crown and the sword which slew him.



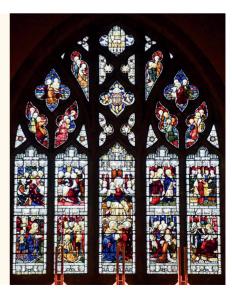
### The 1662 font

Below the window is the font of 1662, which is in regular use for baptisms today. It was given to the church by Colonel Edward Lloyd, who had been Royalist governor of Oswestry Castle during the early stages of the Civil War, in thanks for the restoration of the monarchy. The double-headed eagle crest on the font was given to the Lloyd family by the Holy Roman Emperor for distinguished service during the crusades.

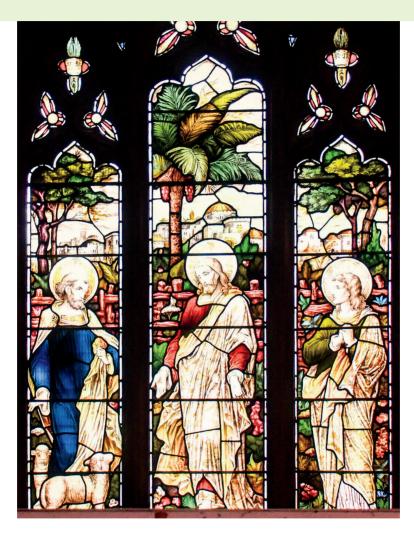
## The North Transept

Continuing along the north wall, we come to the passage through to the Parish Centre, to the left of a modern screen. In front of the screen is a case containing memorial books, and under it an ancient carved chest with slots for donations and heavy locks and hinges. This chest is reputed to have been used as a corn bin for feeding the horses of the 'Roundhead' soldiers who occupied the ruined church after the Battle of Oswestry in 1644.

The window behind the screen was added in 1887, when the present transept was created by moving the wall back to match the South Transept on the opposite side of the church. The window is on the theme of 'Offerings'. At the top is the Lamb, Christ sacrificing Himself for us. The central panel shows the Wise Men offering their gifts to the infant Christ, and the outer panels show Melchizedek offering bread and wine to Abraham, the Anointing of our Lord, the offering of the widow's mite and the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon with gifts.



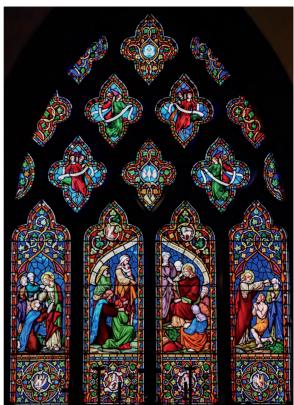
To the right is another window, partially obscured by the screen. Made by Heaton, Butler and Bayne, it shows the Risen Christ, St Mary Magdalene and Christ's instruction to Peter to "Feed my sheep, Feed my lambs."

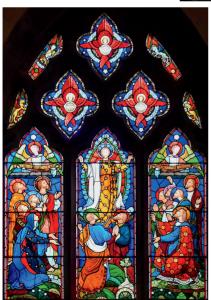


This window is in memory of Rev. William Howell Evans, a "young and vigorous curate from Hawarden" who set in hand the great restoration of the church in 1872-4, and whose brass memorial is on the wall between the choir stalls and the pulpit.

# St Catherine's Chapel

The altar in this chapel, bearing the initials WT and dating back to 1672, was gifted by William Tomkies, a solicitor from Willow Street. Between 1912 and 1980, the altar was in the church of St. David's in Welsh Walls. St David's was originally a 'tin tabernacle' built in 1877 in part of the churchyard to provide for the Church's Welsh speakers. It is now privately owned.





The windows in St Catherine's are especially lovely. The East window with its beautiful blues, showing the preaching and miracles of Jesus, is by Pilkington Brothers, in memory of the Venables family of Woodhill.

The window on the north wall shows the Ascension of Christ into heaven.

## The Chancel

Behind the High Altar is a marble reredos, or screen, made in the Victorian restoration. The reredos shows Jesus, his mother Mary, St John the Baptist, and the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Either side are life-size figures of St Peter, carrying keys and a book, and St Paul, holding a sword and a book. Above is the East Window depicting the Last Supper. High up on the right a small roundel of St Oswald can be seen.





Looking towards the High Altar, the choir stalls are to the right and left. The church supports a high standard of choral music, the treble line being mainly girls and boys. The choir sings a cathedral-style repertoire several times a month. It has benefited from a close association with Oswestry School.

## The Lady Chapel

Going through to the Lady Chapel, there is a fine carved wooden reredos behind the altar, installed in 1902 in memory of Stanley Leighton, antiquarian and local Member of Parliament. The middle section depicts the Annunciation. Either side are four female saints with local connections.

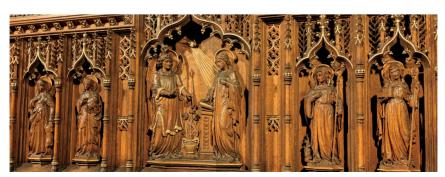
On the left is St Melangell with the hare which she saved from a hunting party led by Brochwel Yscythrog, Prince of Powys. She is linked with her lovely remote church at Pennant Melangell near Llangynog, now a centre for meditation and healing.

The next to the right is St Winifred, holding her head, which was cut off by the sword of Caradoc, a rejected suitor. Her head was restored by St Bueno, her uncle, and the place became a site of pilgrimage in North Wales. There is a local St Winifred's Well at Woolston, a few miles south of Oswestry, now in the hands of the Landmark Trust.



The third saint is St Bridget, or St Ffraid, an Irish saint with a connection to Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain over the Welsh border. She has a flame, as a fire was kept burning in her honour in Kildare for centuries, behind a hedge "which no man could enter".

The fourth saint is now known to be St Marchell or Marcella, rather than, as sometimes stated, St Werburgh. St Marchell is holding the Abbey which she founded at Ystrad Marcella near Welshpool. She is the dedicatee of St Marcella's Church, Denbigh.



On the left is an old chest holding altar cloths. It formerly contained parish registers and records, now held at Shropshire Archives in Shrewsbury. To the right of the door there is a most elaborate memorial in Latin to James Donne, a Christian scholar, vicar of Llanyblodwel (1796-1833) and headmaster of Oswestry School (1798-1833)

On the south wall there is a large triptych with full-length figures of Moses and Aaron holding the Ten Commandments. On either side are the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. The triptych formerly obscured the East Window behind the High Altar. It was consigned to the tower in 1861 when the new East Window was installed, donated by the Earl of Powis.



According to the Churchwardens' Accounts, the 'altar piece' was painted in 1716 or 1717 by John Downes of Whitchurch. It was probably one of the last elements of the restoration after the Civil War. In 2004 it was taken from the tower and fully restored, bringing out its lovely colours, and installed into its present place.

# St George's Chapel

Leaving the Lady Chapel and turning left we come to St George's Chapel, whose main feature is the War Memorial, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the architect of Liverpool Cathedral and designer of the red telephone box. The same architect added the altar to commemorate those who died in the second world war.

The large panel has the names of local people who gave their lives in World War One. There is also a memorial panel on the wall with the names of those from World War Two.

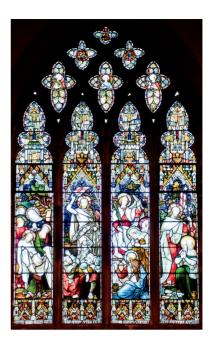


Current and laid-up banners are hung in this chapel. From 1914 until 1968 Oswestry had an important military connection through Park Hall Camp, where many men and women were trained in radar and artillery.

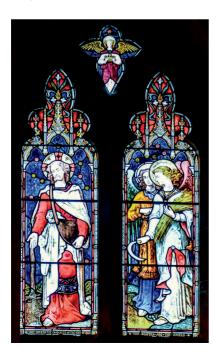
The chapel offers a space for a moment's quiet prayer or reflection.

The window on the left of the War Memorial depicts scenes from the 'Te Deum Laudamus', the ancient hymn of praise. There are illustrations showing: the glorious company of the Apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of Martyrs, the holy Church throughout the world. In the centre is Christ the King of Glory surrounded by angels.



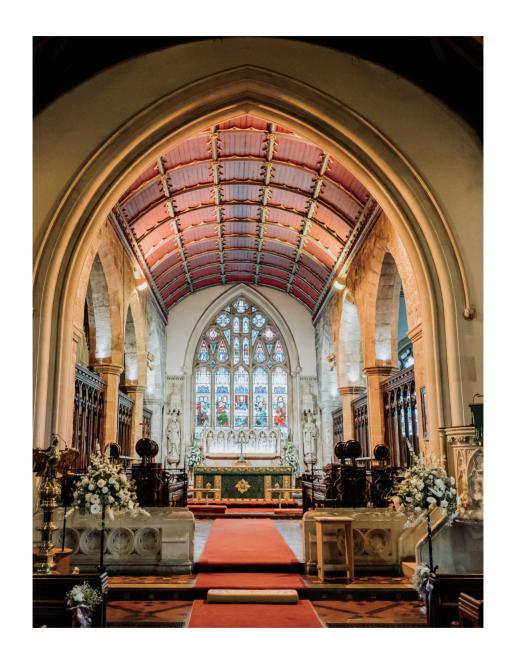


The window to the right in the South wall of St George's Chapel illustrates scenes after the Crucifixion. From the left, Jesus is laid in the garden tomb, He is raised from the dead, an angel appears to the women, and Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. The window was made by Ballantine & Son.



Moving down past the display area, we are back at the South Door. Over the door is a delightful little window, also by Ballantine & Son. Two angels enact the parable of the sower and the seed. "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man; the Reapers are the Angels".

Apart from the Millennium window and the 13th century lancet, the church's stained glass dates from 1861 to the 1890s. Seven of the windows were made by Clayton and Bell of London. Where other glass makers were used, this has been noted in the guide.



The Chancel, looking east.

## The Organ

In 1875 the eminent London organ builders William Hill and Son built a new organ for St Oswald's, placed in the North Transept. It had two manuals and pedals and 27 stops. It used 'Tracker Action' - that is, a mechanical system whereby when a key is pressed, it operates a series of wooden levers which open the valves to allow air into the pipes.

In 1911, the firm of William Hill and Sons was once again called upon to move and enlarge the organ. It was moved to its present location in St Catherine's Chapel; an additional manual division was added and further stops added to the pedal division. The original action was replaced by a Tubular Pneumatic system. In 1926 an additional Trombone stop was added to the pedal division and in 1959 the action was electrified.



In 2014, Nicholson & Co. carried out a complete refurbishment of the instrument. All of the original action was stripped out and replaced by a modern 'exhaust' electro-pneumatic system, and the pipework was cleaned and restored.

It is very much an organ in the English Romantic style, large and varied enough to cope with all schools of organ music as well as providing accompaniments for anything from Tudor anthems to hearty congregational hymn singing. It is no exaggeration to say that St Oswald's now has one of the finest parish church organs in Britain.

#### The Bells

Eight bells were installed by Rudhall's of Gloucester in 1717 in the key of F; the Seventh was recast by the same founders 30 years later. The Fifth bell was recast in 1846 by Mears of Whitechapel and the Treble in 1886 by Taylors of Loughborough.

Church records show that the eight bells of 1717 were far from being the first at St Oswald's. The Churchwardens' accounts show payments for new bells in 1580 and 1584. Other payments were made for their maintenance. The bells were taken down in the Civil War and taken within the town walls. These bells could have been recast in 1717, as the Churchwardens' accounts mention the sum of 5 shillings (25p in today's money) "For takeing downe the Bells". It then lists 9 shillings "Pd for carrying them to Shrewsbury" and £1 "Pd the bargeman". This last entry indicates that the old bells were shipped down the Severn to Gloucester to be recast into all or part of the new ring.

Visitors to the ringing chamber at St Oswald's can hardly fail to notice the wall-mounted peal boards recording 16 of the 70 peals known to have been rung in the tower. Pride of place must go to the earliest (1731).



This board is so significant that it was re-gilded in 1889 and again in 1991. It is generally recognised that, nationally, the first peal ever achieved was rung in Norwich on 2nd May 1715. As can be seen from our peal board Oswestry ringers were emulating this just 16 years later, almost to the day. Making allowance for the poor communications which existed 300 vears ago and that our ringers probably could not have tried this style of ringing until the new bells were hung in 1717, this is quite a remarkable achievement.



Further research shows that it was only the 22nd peal ever rung anywhere and the second in Shropshire. St Oswald's has an active band who usually ring for morning and evening services on Sundays as well as other special occasions. Details of notable ringing can be found by putting 'Oswestry' into the place box at < bb.ringingworld.co.uk/search >.

Visitors are always welcome, and it is best to check beforehand with the Tower Captain, whose contact details can be found on the parish web pages.



#### The Plate



The church has an interesting collection of silver. The oldest chalice, silver-gilt and lidded, dates from 1575 and inscribed "Richard Stanni the elder mercr was the funder of this cup geven to the Perryshe Churshe of Oswester and do 1575". A magnificent silver-gilt Steeple Cup with lid is hallmarked London 1583. Another silver chalice, again lidded, is of 1635.

A selection of the plate is shown above, including pieces which have come to St Oswald's from the chapels of St David, St Nicholas, and the workhouse Chapel of St Ann at Morda. The latter are marked 'House of Industry'.

"These chalices provide a tangible link with previous generations of parishioners, having been central to communion services for over four hundred years" (John Pryce-Jones, 'An Oswestry Miscellany').

## The Churchyard

The churchyard has been closed for burials since the middle of the 19th century and is now maintained by the Town Council.

The 'Ironbridge Tomb' is an unusual cast iron obelisk in memory of the Oswestry family of Thomas Jones, who ran two important hotels, the Tontine in Ironbridge, and what became the Mytton and Mermaid at Atcham.





Near the South porch is a Celtic cross, a copy of St Martin's cross on the island of Iona, where St Oswald was educated as a boy during his exile.

Elsewhere in the churchyard there are also the graves, now largely obscured, of French prisoners, officers kept in the town on parole from 1811-14

In the Broadwalk next to the church, there is a memorial to Wilfred Owen, the World War One poet who was born in Oswestry. There is another memorial to Wilfred Owen in Cae Glas park nearby

#### The Grammar School

As you leave the church via the porch, the former Grammar School can be seen across the churchyard to the right. The school was established by David Holbache in the early 15th century. It seems unlikely that anything of the original building is left, but dendrochronology indicates that part of the present building dates back to 1541-2, suggesting that the school was rebuilt after a major fire in Oswestry at that time.

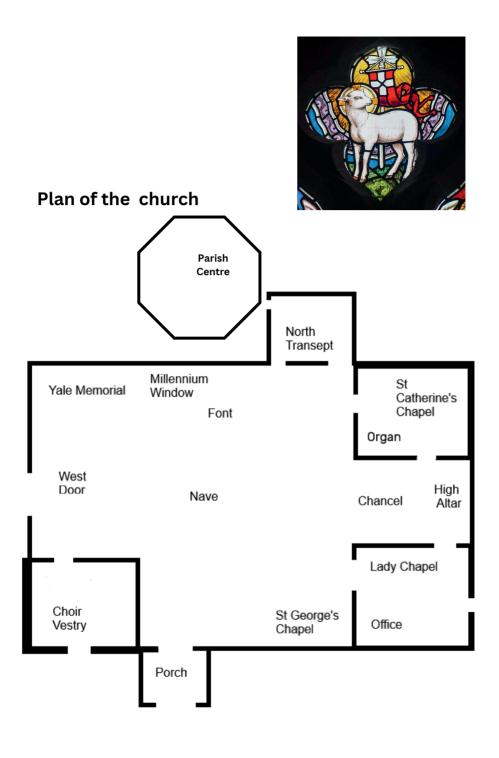


The 'Old School House' has been a haven for those seeking coffee, cakes and lunch for some time. The school itself outgrew its building in the late 1700s when it moved to its present spot overlooking the probable site of the battlefield where St Oswald was killed by Penda in 642.

### The Griddle Gate

Next to the old school is a lych gate called 'The Griddle' bearing the date 1631, where coffins would have rested on the way into the churchyard. In 1594 Richard Gruffyth ap Roger was paid for setting four stays "to stope the swine from goeinge throw the gridell."





#### Acknowledgements and thanks:

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#### Sources:

- John Pryce-Jones:
  - o 'Oswestry, Parish, Church and People'
  - o 'Oswestry, A Miscellany'
  - 'A Historical Perspective' (articles in St Oswald's Parish Magazine)
- Previous guide books to St Oswald's
- Christopher Jobson: 'St Oswald'
- Max Adams,: 'The King in the North'
- Isaac Watkin: 'Oswestry' 1920

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