St Oswald’s
Widford

Although standing alone in fields today, was this little church once the heart of a long disappeared settlement or even a medieval village?
This little church is worthy of a few minutes delay and study.

Built on the site of a Roman building, there is a tessellated floor under the flagstones. Local legend has it that the bones of St Oswald rested here overnight while being taken back to Gloucester for burial in St Oswald’s Priory, but the theory is questionable.

Ethelfleda, daughter of King Alfred, was impressed by King (St) Oswald and founded St Oswald’s Priory in Gloucester in 909 AD. She endowed the Priory with two estates, Widford and North Cerney, which could explain the name of this little church.

Widford remained as an “island” part of Gloucestershire until 1844.

Evidence of deserted dwellings surround the church, but did they disappear due to the Black Death (1349 and after) or for economic reasons?

So, who was St Oswald?

Oswald, King of Northumbria, was born circa 604 AD in Deira, Northumbria. He fled to the Scottish kingdom of Dal Riada while his brother Edwin was on the Northumbrian throne and converted to Christianity while there.

When Edwin was killed by Cadwallon, King of Gwynedd, and Penda, King of Mercia, Oswald succeeded to the Northumbrian throne, c 633 AD. He defeated and killed Cadwallon in battle and for an eight year reign became the most powerful king in England. He consolidated Christianity and married the daughter of the West Saxon King, Cynegils. He also supported St Birinus in establishing Christianity locally from Dorchester-on-Thames. All this is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and by Bede. Oswald also gave Lindisfarne to (St)Aidan who came over from Ireland.
Oswald was killed in battle in 642 AD by the pagan King Penda and his body dismembered, his head and limbs were placed on stakes. Bede states that Oswald’s brother retrieved his remains in the year after his death. In 875 AD his head was placed in the coffin with St Cuthbert, which finally rested at Durham Cathedral, and some of his other bones might have been taken to Gloucester but unlikely as they were widely dispersed in the North after retrieval.

The tub font is early 13th or even 12th century which, with the lancet windows indicates 1100 to 1250 as the possible dates for building this church. It was owned by the monks of St Oswald’s Priory from 1086 until the Dissolution by Henry VIII between 1538 and 1545.

As a medieval church the floor would have been flat and the building divided in two by a screen in the chancel arch. The nave would not have had pews or seats and would have served as the community centre.

The chancel would have been the religious part with a table, the mensa, in the centre for the priests to kneel around. The aumbry, or locked dry cupboard, on the left was for the bread and plate. The piscina, on the right, was for washing the chalice. Wall paintings explained the religious stories of the day or from the bible.

The piscina had a drain hole in the bottom of the basin. This one has the trefoil top, early English design typical of the 1100 to 1250 period. The altar rail is a later addition, Jacobean style.
The chancel north wall painting includes parts of the martyrdom of St Lawrence and, possibly, St Edmund in the top tier and the Three Living and the Three Dead in the lower tier. Single figures adorn the reveals of the north lancet window. These paintings are dated at circa 1340.

The scenes on the chancel south wall are more difficult to identify. The top tier remains so but the bottom has been identified as St Martin of Tours dividing his cloak with a beggar. (J Edwards, Oxoniensia 47 (1982))
Following Dissolution the advowson (living) was purchased by the Harman family from Burford and the land in 1680 by the Fettiplace family from Swinbrook. The pulpit, commandments boards, box pews and their fittings all have a 17th/18th century appearance.

The pulpit was probably made from 15th century screen panels, maybe from a former chancel screen. A small desk below it might have been for the parish clerk or for readings during the service.

It is possible all these interior fittings, pews etc, were made by the local Fettiplace estate carpenters.

After Dissolution the church was in use until 1859 when it was closed and used as a farm building.
After 40 years the church fell into a serious state of disrepair and was restored by public subscription and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1904 when the Roman pavement and wall paintings were discovered. It is now protected by a Grade II* listing.

It was usual in medieval churches to enter and see a painting of St Christopher, patron saint of travellers, across the nave from the church door. This 15th century St Christopher has been overpainted with a 17th century Royal Arms.

The commandment boards are dated 1815 and may have remained in place while this building was used for farm purposes!!

Widford, probably originates from the AngloSaxon “withig ford” meaning ford by the willows, but was already “Widiforde” in the Domesday Book, 1086. Widford remained as part of Gloucestershire until 1844 when it was transferred to Oxford.

However, Widford was never on the road to anywhere. Marshes along the River Thames west of Oxford caused Gloucester traffic to go south via Abingdon. Not until the 1690s were roads west from Oxford through Botley, North Hinksey and Eynsham constructed. Another reason St Oswald’s relics were unlikely to have rested here.
As you leave note the exterior features associated with this 12th or 13th century building.

The bell cote for the sanctus bell which sits above the chancel arch. Typical of medieval churches, the bell was rung at the raising of the host during the sacrament.

These trefoiled top, lancet windows are the clear clue to the original date for building this church. These windows were standard design from the Norman Conquest until about 1250 and show that this church was built in the 12th or 13th century although parts may be earlier.

The east window, front cover, is a late feature although the design is Gothic decorated style, 1250 to 1350, but here it is not an indicator of the period in which this church was built. The west window is similarly a late installation.