



THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF NORWICH:
CITY, COMMUNITY AND ARCHITECTURE

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The Location and Setting of St Michael Coslany

THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL stands immediately east of the southern end of Oak Street and on the northern side of Colegate. It occupies one of the largest churchyards in the city with access to both streets via a doorway in the western tower and a nave doorway southward. Oak Street is probably on the line of a Roman road, extending from the River Wensum towards the small Roman town of Brampton some 20km to the north. The curtilage of the churchyard has been curtailed by widening of both Oak Street and Colegate in the early 20th century. As suggested by Pennell it appears to have originally occupied an acre, and 'ten feet of frontage were ceded in Oak Street (west) and twenty feet in Coslany Street (south)' (c.1925, 21).



St Michael Coslany churchyard looking south west
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THE ALIGNMENT OF OAK STREET south of Colegate, here known as Coslany Street, veers away from the presumed Roman alignment in order to cross the river at Coslany Bridge. From the 13th century at the latest, this was effected with two structures, taking traffic on to an island in the Wensum and off again to the south bank (Sandred and Lindström 1989, 15; Ayers 2014, 132–33). The braid of the river north of the island was gradually infilled during the medieval and post-medieval period although traces of it survived into the 19th century and were mapped on the First Edition Ordnance Survey, and the channel was seen in

archaeological excavations in 1995 (Oakey 1996, 405–406). This proximity to the river and to an early crossing was clearly important because St Michael's is one of only two churches where the parish boundary crosses to the opposite bank; the other is St Martin-at-Palace, a church also associated with an early river crossing (Campbell 1975, map 7). The low-lying situation of the church meant that it was prone to flooding; Pennell (c. 1925, 33) noted four feet of water in the church in 1912.

IT REMAINS DIFFICULT to characterise the origins of Coslany as a whole. It lies outside the identified line of the 10th-century defences surrounding the Anglo-Scandinavian burh on the north bank. It is possible that it lay within a smaller defensive system cutting off the southern end of the Oak Street peninsula where it is bounded by the river to the west and south and by the marshy deposits of the 'water of Muspole' to the east (Ayers, forthcoming). A date for the foundation of the church in the late tenth or early 11th century would fit with the dedication to Michael, a saint whose popularity declined markedly after the Norman Conquest.

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