

St Helen's Auckland

Introduction

St Helen's Parish Church is a largely medieval building, formerly one of a number of chapels in the parish of St Andrew Auckland. The 'accepted wisdom' is that the earliest part of the building is represented by the walls of the eastern two bays of the nave, perhaps of mid-12th century date. Aisles were added c 1170, and then the chancel rebuilt and nave and aisles extended a further bay to the west at the beginning of the 13th century. Towards the end of the medieval period chantry chapels were added to the chancel, the north aisle rebuilt, and a three-storeyed south porch added. A major restoration was carried out in 1866 by Austin and Johnson, during which the porch was rebuilt in its current two-storeyed form. As the works carried out at this time had a special bearing on the 2001 archaeological recording, a summary of the 1865 faculty (Durham Diocesan Records, Palace Green Library, Durham)

The 1865 faculty

The written specification for this faculty includes the following instructions:

'To take up all the flagging & steps in the church to excavate the soil below the flagging to the depth of eighteen inches, to remove the soil to such places or places as shall be pointed out, to fill in the space so formed with broken stones or masons chippings & form a level bed to receive the flagging'...

To clean all plaster

To excavate the soil outside the church to form open air drain around the perimeter.

To provide ventilation grates

'To work & fix new pieces of stone work for all places where the stone work has been cut away for gallery beams or other purposes, including the responds of chancel arch of north & south arcade jambs of chancel arch & c'.

'To build sleeper walls 1 foot thick set in mortar under the exterior framing of each group of seats or stalls, leaving openings where required for the circulation of air beneath the floor'.

'To build up the door on the north wall of the church with good rubble masonry corresponding with the adjacent work'.

To repair the old stair to the vestry.

'To take down very carefully the deal seats at the west end of the nave, to remove the floors, and to refix the floor level with the flagging and set up the seats again complete'.

'To take down the gallery in the nave and make use of the old materials to such an extent in

the new work as may be approved by the architect’.

In addition the Petition mentions

‘To remove the Gallery at the West end of the Parish Church which had been pronounced unsafe by the Archdeacon of Durham, to re-Pew that part of the church which from lack of Funds was left undone in 1848 when the West end was re-seated’...

The faculty is accompanied by a ground plan of the church ‘at present’, and a ground plan and longitudinal section (looking north) ‘as proposed’, both dated April 15 1865.

The plans make it clear that the south porch was to be rebuilt, a little larger than its predecessor, although this is not mentioned in the accompanying documentation. The ‘at present’ plan only shows a single wide opening on each side of the chancel, whereas the ‘proposed plan’ shows the arcades, as at present. The only new fabric specifically indicated on the ‘proposed’ plan (being coloured in, as opposed to being shown in black ink) is a new two-light window at the east end of the north aisle.

The 2001 Works

The greater part of the body of the church was re-floored, with an underfloor central heating system being installed; Laing Stonemasonry being the contractors.. This entailed the floors being dug out to a depth of c 0.35m. The 1865 faculty for the 1866 works stipulated that all paving and steps be renewed, and the floor beneath dug out to a depth of 18" (0.45m) and infilled with loose stone and masons’ chippings.

Archaeological Features

Summary

Archaeological Features recorded May 2001

In the course of the re-flooring, the floors of the nave, aisles and chancel (excluding the sanctuary) were removed, and dug out to a depth of c cm. As the 1865 faculty had suggested, this did not entail the disturbance of any pre-1866 deposits

The North Arcade

(1) The Eastern Respond (fig 1 a)

Keeled shaft with holdwater moulding to the base, never completed on northern third. Below this a chamfer, cut back on the face of the main block, then a rough rubble footing.

2 The Eastern Pier of North Arcade (fig.2)

This has a square plinth which would appear in its original form to have had three chamfered steps. The lowermost, which was presumably set just above the original floor level, is intact on south and east, with only a fragment remaining on the west and completely cut away on the north, partly by a brick-lined heating duct which cuts across the north-west corner The middle

step has been completely cut away; this exposes the rubble core behind it, which is overhung by the top step, which has been extended downwards in cement, so as to give the appearance of a single block above the level of the 1866 floor. Above this is a low octagonal section, carrying the circular pier, which has a base moulding of two rolls, but without the concavity of that moulding of the eastern respond.

3 The Western Pier of the North Arcade (fig.3)

This pier, representing the west end of the original nave, is a rectangular block of masonry with responds on east and west faces. The former is like that at the east end of the arcade, with a keeled shaft, and a chamfered outer order; the chamfer has broach stops below the capital, but at their bases terminate abruptly on the horizontal mouldings; perhaps the stops have been cut away. The chamfered plinth below this is barely present to the north of the central block. On the north face of the pier the chamfered plinth, set at a slightly higher level, only reappears on the western third. On the south face there is extensive brick underpinning at the south-east corner; west of this the inner face of the original west wall can be seen in section, with large blocks of its footing projecting at the base of the pier. The respond on the west face of the pier has a semicircular shaft with a cut-back fillet; the base mouldings and chamfered plinth are intact, the chamfer returning on each face of the pier for about a third of its total length. Below this is a projecting footing of large roughly-shaped sandstone blocks, much more substantial than anything in the eastern section of the arcade.

4 The Western Respond of the North Arcade (fig.1b)

This corresponds with the respond on the west face of the western pier, except that the fillet on the semicircular shaft is rather better preserved. The central block of the base lacks the chamfered plinth, and is neatly tooled; it may be a 19th-century replacement, and overhangs at its base, as if its predecessor had been cut away, together with its footing. At a lower level is a massive sandstone slab, the base of which was not exposed. This massive footing is clearly of one build with the adjacent footings of the west wall of both nave and aisle.

The South Arcade

(5) The Eastern Respond (fig. 4a)

The shaft is a 19th-century replacement (although the capital is old), as is the central section of the base, although the projecting rectangular block below the base mouldings is set oddly 3 cm off-centre to the north of the shaft above. Old sections of moulding survive on either side. The chamfered plinth below seems to be old; it seems to have retruned along the north face of the wall, but has been badly damaged. The footings below appear to be largely of loose rubble.

6 The Eastern Pier of the South Arcade (fig.5).

This is a circular pier, with a moulded base, resting on an octagonal plinth, chamfered at the top; on the north this plinth has been roughly hacked back flush with the face of the pier above; a replacement to this removed section, complete with base mouldings, had been simply sat on top of the 19th-century floorboards¹ The east face has also been repaired. The plinth

1 This has now been re-set on a new footing made up of re-used bricks from the

overhangs a rough rubble footing, except on the north where it was under-pinned by crude walling, consisting of two or three courses of small roughly-shaped sandstone slabs, almost certainly contemporary with the crude sleeper walls associated with the 1866 floor. Any evidence of a lower step to the base, like that of the corresponding pier on the north, would seem to have been cut away entirely.

7 The Western Pier of the South Arcade (fig.6).

This is a rectangular pier, corresponding to that opposite, with responds on both east and west; its sides and east face retain much old plaster, with some red ochre colouring. The shaft of the former has been keeled, but it has been cut back flush with the face of the pier, except for its upper third. The face below has an infilled vertical slot set south-of-centre, its top c 1 m above floor level. The outer angles are chamfered; the chamfer at the north-eastern angle has a simple stop one block above the level of the chamfered plinth (a fragment of which survives on the north; on the east it has been cut back like the shaft above); any stop at its top has been cut away. At the south-eastern angle the chamfer retains a broach stop at its top, and has a crude base stop only just above plinth level. The footing at its base of the east face is simply of rubble.

The south side of the pier has a continuous chamfered plinth (partly under old plaster); below its western part is a projecting block with a roll-moulded angle, perhaps a re-used grave slab.

The respond on the west face of the pier has a semicircular shaft with a rectangular fillet (here surviving intact); the outer angles are chamfered, with intact broach stops at the head. The moulding at the base has been partly hacked away, and the whole face of the block at the foot of the shaft has been cut back, along with the chamfered plinth below it. There is considerable brick underpinning at the north-west angle. There is a footing made up of sandstone slabs, not especially large; more substantial slabs projecting from the north side of the pier are presumably the footings of the original west wall; above them the wall position is indicated by a hacked-back and heavily cemented area.

(8) The Western Respond of the South Arcade (Fig.4b)

This again has a semicircular shaft with a fillet, cut away on its upper half only. The base mouldings are intact, and the chamfered plinth below. The footing is of massive sandstone slabs clearly contemporary with those of the west walls of nave and aisle.

9 The Pier of the South Chancel Arcade (fig.7)

Only the base of the northern half of this pier was exposed, the floor in the chancel, aisle (organ chamber) remaining undisturbed. The octagonal pier with a moulded base, set on an octagonal chamfered plinth; below floor level the foot of the pier had been largely cut away, only fragments of what may have been a second plinth surviving to the north-east and west. A north-south line of stonework lapped against the pier base on the north-east, extending north for c 0.60m and then returning eastward for 1.5 m. The top surface of one large block at the east end of this return lay at the level of the cleared chancel floor; the others lay a few cm

underfloor heating ducts.

lower.

The north-south line of stonework (two rows of stone c 0.43 m thick) seems most likely to have represented a former step; the east-west line probably relates to a post-medieval vault beneath the chancel.

10 The Pier of the North Chancel Arcade

As with its southern counterpart, the base of this appeared to have been roughly cut back before floor level; over its exposed southern half, nothing of its original perimeter was traceable.

Other Features of the Internal Footings of the Nave and Aisle Walls (Figs 7 and 8).

At the west end of the nave, the large slab footings extend north for c 1 m from the western respond of the south aisle, beyond which smaller rubble seems to indicate a disturbed area relating to heating ducts etc, although there is now only one opening (carrying heating pipes) beneath the centre light of the west window. The west wall of the south aisle has large slab footings, except for a central gap, through which a heating duct must have passed at one time. There is a similar gap at the west end of the north aisle; here the basal slabs of the duct were exposed, with mortar indicating the position of its removal side walls; its north side ran along the inside face of the footings of the original 13th-century aisle wall, a short stretch of which were exposed, c 1 m inside the face of the present wall, rebuilt in the 15th century.

Projecting footings extend eastward along the south wall of the aisle, including some large blocks that project c 15 cm from the wall. This section of footing ends beneath the internal east jamb of the westernmost two-light window; beyond this is a ragged gap c 0.80 m wide (perhaps a 19th-century vent) , with a second gap, as if footings have been cut away, beneath the blocked doorway at the foot of the former stair to the upper room of the medieval porch.

Beyond the present south door there is not a continuous projecting footing but a series of projecting blocks ; beneath the second of the two-light windows is a cavity, presumably of 19th-century date, communicating with a ventilation grille on the external face of the wall. Beyond this are two more large projecting slabs.

Discussion

The archaeological recording provided a little further information as regards the earliest structural phases of the church. The piers and responds of the eastern parts of the arcades, thought to have been cut through the walls of the earliest phase of the building, rested on relatively insubstantial rubble footings, in contrast to the massive sandstone slabs used in the footings of the western extension of c 1200. The bases of the arcade piers in particular had been badly cut around below floor level, presumably a consequence of extensive burial within the nave. The lowest level of chamfered plinth on the north arcade pier presumably was set just above the original (or at least c 1170) floor level, c 1 m below the present floor. On the south nothing of the original perimeter of the pier base remained..

The date of the initial structural phase represented in the above-ground fabric still remains

open to question; the only place in which its fabric is exposed would appear to be in the eastern gable of the nave, above the chancel roof. From what can be glimpsed from ground level, this is of large roughly-squared stone; a closer examination is desirable; a date in the 12th century may be the most likely, although an earlier origin remains possible.

In the chancel, the bases of the piers of the two-bay arcades were partially exposed. It had previously been thought that these had been introduced by Austin & Johnson during the 1866 works

Appendix 1

Architectural Description of Church (from 1992 Architectural Assessment)

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Exterior

The walls of the nave and aisles are of rubble, laid in rough discontinuous courses.

The west end of the nave is built of coursed squared stone and flanked by large stepped buttresses, dying into the wall at mid-height. Built between the buttresses is a small 19th-century boiler house with an embattled front wall of coursed roughly-squared stone; at the south end of this wall is a doorway with a roughly triangular arched head, each jamb consisting of a single upright stone, whilst at the north end a doorway with similar jambs has had its head removed and replaced by a small window with a two-centred head. Above and behind the boiler room is the west window of the nave, consisting of three stepped lancets set within a single arch, outlined by a hoodmould with zoomorphic terminals (stylised animal heads). The dressings of the window look as if they may be medieval, but have perhaps been re-cut at one time; in section the jambs have a square step within a broad chamfer, which on the mullions is cut to a broad hollow chamfer but on the jambs has a plain chamfer, the two meeting rather awkwardly. A patch of rubble around the head of the window suggests that it might be a secondary insertion. To the north of the window a rough column of reddened squared stone marks the position of the flue of the boiler house chimney which caps the wall to the north of the bell cote.

The west wall of the nave, the buttresses, and the west ends of the nave aisles have a chamfered plinth, apparently continuous; it is clear that the north aisle has been widened, the original plinth ending short of the end of the wall. On the south the last stone of the plinth is less worn, and looks like an insertion. The end wall of each aisle has a small lancet window with its surround cut to a square step within a chamfer (the same general section as the surround of the west window of the nave); each looks convincingly medieval, although some of the surround of that in the north aisle has been replaced in cement. The original steeply-pitched roof-line is clearly visible on both nave gable and aisles; one moulded coping stone of the original gable remains *in situ* just below the bellcote. The heightened section of the end wall of the south aisle, and the heightened and widened section of the north aisle, are of rubble, and have a corbelled-out parapet, similar to that of the added nave clerestory. There appears to be a blocked opening in this upper section of the north aisle end wall, directly above the lancet window.

The nave gable is capped by a 19th century gabled bellcote with twin openings under pointed arches, with a sunk circle in the spandrel.

The nave clerestory consists of three two-light windows in each wall, each having two round or slightly segmentally-arched lights with a chamfered square-headed frame; the eastern and western windows on the south have had their mullions renewed. At the west end of the southern clerestory is an additional single-light window with a segmental-arched head, without any chamfer, and with jambs and head each formed from a single block; although some of the 19th century accounts (eg Boyle, 524) refer to this as an early feature re-set from elsewhere, it appears to be entirely of late 18th or early 19th century date, and is sited to light a western gallery. Above the clerestory windows a hollow-chamfered oversailing course carries an ashlar embattled parapet. The upper part of the eastern gable of the nave has been largely rebuilt in coursed roughly-squared stone.

The south wall of the south aisle is built of roughly-coursed rubble, and has no plinth; it is capped by a parapet carried on a chamfered oversailing course. To the west of the porch a slight change in the character of the masonry at mid-height probably corresponds to the heightening visible in the west wall; this is not clear east of the porch, but in line with the east end of the nave is an irregular vertical break which could result from structural failure, but seems more likely to mark the removal of the south-eastern quoins of the original aisle, prior to its eastward extension; there is no other external structural distinction between nave aisle and chancel chapel.

The south door of the aisle, now within the porch, has a two-centred doorway of two continuous chamfered orders, the outer order having been partly cut away on the west; it holds a late medieval door (see fittings). There are two square-headed two-light windows in the south wall of the aisle, one on each side of the porch. Both have had cinquefoil-cusped heads to their lights and sunk spandrels, although the cusping of that west of the porch has been cut away; that to the east of the porch has had its sill renewed at some time.

The north wall of the north aisle is of roughly-coursed thin rubble, with well-squared quoins at the north-west corner. There is a rough plinth of concrete; only the western metre or so of the parapet is carried on an oversailing course - beyond this the parapet is flush with the wall, although a course of long blocks looks to be the remains of its base course, now cut back. There are large raking buttresses, clearly of 19th century date, to the west of the north door and marking the division between nave aisle and chancel chapel. The north door has a slightly flattened semicircular arch, with a continuous chamfer. West of the door is a short but broad lancet window with alternating block jambs and dressings of very orange sandstone, clearly of 19th century date; the area of rubble stonework around it looks as if it may have been rebuilt at the same time. East of the door is a window of two cinquefoil-headed lights under a square head, within a chamfered outer frame; its head and mullion are recent restoration.

The south porch is entirely of 19th-century date, and is a large two-storeyed structure of coursed rubble with ashlar dressings, with a chamfered set-back below the first-floor windows and an oversailing embattled parapet. In the south wall is a round-headed archway with a continuous hollow or casement moulding, beneath a moulded hood with zoomorphic stops like those of the west window. To the west of the door is a small lancet window, and at first-floor level a pair of square-headed two-light windows with cinquefoiled arches to the lights, with a single light window of the same type in the west wall.

The chancel, only the end bay of which projects beyond the flanking chapels, is built of coursed rubble, and is of relatively tall proportions (emphasised by the windows being set low in the walls) with a low-pitched roof. That these proportions result from a secondary heightening is clear from a change in character of the eastern quoins which takes place at the level of the sill of the east window; the quoins above this level are quite distinctive and different from any others in the church, being much larger than those below, laid in side-alternate fashion, and of reddish or reddened sandstone, showing rough diagonal tooling.

The east window is of three stepped lancet lights, the spandrels pierced, under a pointed arch. The lights have a narrow hollow-chamfered surround. Whilst the jambs look medieval, the head (with a hollow-chamfered hood having turned-back ends) seems to be entirely 19th century; the sill may also be a replacement.

In the south wall of the chancel is a square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights within a chamfered square frame; close inspection shows that the lights were originally cinquefoil-headed, and have been partially re-cut. On the north side is a similar window, except that it does not have the external chamfered frame, and the trefoil heads in this case appear to be in the original form.

The south chancel chapel is of similar rubble fabric to the adjacent south aisle, but at or about the junction between them the oversailing course at the base of the parapet appears to change from a straight to a hollow chamfer, and the parapet above changes to a single course of blocks from two. The quoins at the south-eastern corner of the chapel are quite irregular in form. A small 19th century chimney is corbelled out at the head of the angle between the chapel and chancel walls. In the south wall of the chapel are two two-light windows with cinquefoiled heads to the lights and sunk spandrels. The western is of the same type as the two in the south aisle of the nave, except that its chamfered surround is rather narrower, suggesting that it has been cut back. The eastern of the windows has jambs of well-cut alternating blocks - all its dressings are cut very square, and seem likely to be 19th century. The east wall of the chapel has a chamfered set-back just below eaves level, and contains a single quite broad lancet window with a chamfered surround.

The north chancel chapel is of the usual rubble masonry; its north-east angle quoins are noticeably better-squared than those of the south chapel, although still not regular. A hollow-chamfered oversailing course runs across the east wall just below eaves level (in the corresponding position to the set-back on the south chapel), and returns briefly along the north wall. There is a similar corbelled-out 19th century chimney to that on the south chapel. In the east wall of the chapel is a square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights, with regular well-cut dressings in orange sandstone (like those of the window at the west end of the north wall of the north aisle); it is clearly 19th century. Below and to the south of the window is a stone built into the wall bearing a number of parallel incised lines - it may be a fragment of medieval carving. In the north wall is a square-headed window of two cinquefoil-headed lights within a chamfered frame; its mullion, and perhaps its head, have been renewed.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings.

The side walls of the nave are 0.85 - 0.90 m thick, and have arcades of three bays, the western being separated from the others by a short length of solid wall. The western arches are semicircular and of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hood towards the nave; they spring from responds with attached half shafts, with raised square-section fillets to the faces of the shafts, and have moulded bases and simple square capitals chamfered beneath; the eastern responds have chamfers to their outer angles, terminating in broach stops. The rectangular blocks of masonry dividing the arcades have chamfered plinths on their outer and western sides, suggesting that these are survivals of the original external plinth of the first aisleless nave, before

its westward extension; an earlier slab with a moulded edge is built into the base of the southern 'pier' at its south-west corner. The inner faces of the piers, although plastered, are very rough, consistent with the original west wall being cut away at this point.

The eastern pairs of arches of the arcades are similar to the western arches in form and section, except that the chamfers of both orders and the hoodmould are narrower, and on the south the hoodmould is cut into an indented or 'nutmeg' pattern. The responds have chamfered angles and attached keel-shaped shafts (that of the west respond of the south arcade largely cut away); the piers are circular with 'holdwater' bases resting on octagonal plinths (that on the south renewed). The pier of the south arcade has a moulded circular capital, whilst that of the north arcade has been termed a 'primitively enriched Waterleaf capital' (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 396), having a square abacus above the carved bell.

Above the arcades, the clerestory windows have plain internal lintels, some chamfered.

The west window of the nave has a shouldered rear arch, with a narrow chamfer; although plastered over, it looks to be of 19th century masonry.

The south door has a pointed rear arch; a short distance to its west is a recess in the wall, apparently a blocked doorway into the original south porch; on the east side the recess is carried diagonally up the wall with four steps (their ends projecting from the internal face of the wall) which must have been part of the stair to the first floor of the original porch.

The western lancet of the aisle has a segmental rear arch; the other windows in the aisle have shouldered rear arches.

The west lancet of the north aisle has a rear arch like that of its southern counterpart; the western window in the north wall (the 19th century lancet) has a plain lintel internally, whilst the window east of the porch has a shouldered rear arch.

The nave roof, which may be of 16th or 17th century date, is of six bays, with cambered tie-beams carrying ridge and purlins; the easternmost tie-beam, against the east wall, is supported on two rounded corbels. The roof of the south aisle looks 19th century work, but two of the tie beams have small corbels, possibly medieval, beneath their outer ends. The roof of the north aisle is also 19th century, but the soffit of the wall-plate, which overhangs the wall face beneath, is supported by plain corbels on the line of each tie.

The chancel arch is pointed, each order bearing a narrow chamfer like those of the eastern parts of the arcades. It springs from keeled half-shafts with plain square capitals; the shafts and their holdwater bases appear to be 19th century restoration.

On either side of the chancel is a two-bay arcade, with steeply two-centred arches having a chamfered inner order (with wide and heavily-mortared joints between the individual voussoirs) and a square outer order that looks to be entirely of cement. The piers are octagonal, and have interesting capitals; that on the north is carved with primitive foliage of rather simpler character than the capital in the north nave arcade; that on the south has three of its sides carved with bands of beading, simple fleur-de-lis and other patterns. The responds of the arcades are shallow rather bulbous corbels, varying somewhat in section.

The sanctuary has a piscina on the south having a simple chamfered arch of roughly four-centred form. The east window has a slightly shouldered rear arch, whilst the windows in the side walls have plain internal lintels.

The windows of the chancel aisles have shouldered rear arches, except for the east window of the north aisle which has a straight lintel carrying a narrow chamfer.

The chancel roof is of 19th century date, as are the roofs of the chapels, although that of the northern chapel has what appears to be a projecting wall-plate (plastered over) beneath, carrying a pair of corbels, which in turn support the tie beams.

From Mackenzie & Ross (1834) History of the County of Durham , vol.II, 283

The church is an ancient structure, with embattled walls, a low western turret for bells, and an entrance porch on the south. The side-aisles are longer than the nave. Each of them separated from it by three circular arches, those on the south being sculptured with a wavy ornament. The first pillar on each side is square, the second round, and the third heavily clustered, and supporting a pointed arch over the entrance to the chancel. Beyond this, two low pointed arches open into each of the aisles. The east window consists of three compartments under a pointed arch: the rets are irregular. There is a gallery at the west end of the church.