

St Peter's Church, Bishopton

St Peter's Church stands in the centre of a roughly triangular churchyard at the centre of the village of Bishopton, 10 km north-east of Darlington and 8 km north-west of Stockton-on-Tees. The village is best known to archaeologists for its well-preserved motte-and-bailey castle c 400 m south of the church, which has itself attracted little antiquarian attention.

Description

The church consists of a nave with a north-western tower/porch, a three-bay north aisle with a vestry to the east, and an aisleless chancel with an organ chamber on the north.

All the architectural features of the building (with the possible exception of one window, now internal, on the north of the chancel arch) are of 19th-century date, but the fabric of the walls of the nave and chancel is largely medieval, and unusually complex. These are described first, before the Victorian parts of the church.

The Exterior

The west end of the **Nave** is built of squared and coursed stone, using a mixture of red, pink and buff sandstones; many of the blocks are almost square. The chamfered plinth at the foot of the wall seems an old feature although some of its blocks are 19th-century date replacement; a chamfered set-back at the level of the side-wall eaves again looks old, although the upper parts of the gable, with its ashlar coping and ring-cross finial are certainly Victorian. The west window is of three stepped lancets, with cusped circles above and a moulded hood.

The stepped buttress at the south-west angle of the nave, and the two similar ones on the south wall, on either side of the third bay, are of 19th-century date.

The south wall is of five bays, the western four have each have a two-light window (first and third bays of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil over, second bay two uncusped lights with a trefoil, fourth two uncusped lights with a plain circle) and the fifth a narrower window comprising a trefoiled lancet with a spheric triangle above. No plinths are exposed.

The complexities of the fabric of the wall are here described from west to east. In the first bay the upper part of the wall, around the window, is of regularly-coursed squared stone and looks like a 19th-century rebuild. There seems to be a ragged straight joint in the lower part of the wall a metre or so from the angle buttress; beyond this the lower part of the wall is of coursed roughly-squared stone with much red sandstone; beyond the window older masonry seems to survive to the full height of the wall, but is much obscured by render. High up here is a diamond-shaped incised and painted sundial inscribed 'FUGIT HORA' 'LAT 54"58' and dated 1776. This may be a restoration or replica.

Below the window in the second bay is a short straight joint with two large squared ashlar blocks to the right (east). These seem most likely to be the base of the south-west quoin of an early nave, with the red sandstone fabric to the west representing a later medieval extension. what appears to be the eastern jamb of an earlier doorway. The whole area of wall above the window is slightly 'dished' inwards, and above and slightly to the left of the window above is a sloping line in the fabric' both these features probably relate to an earlier and larger window being infilled..

On the east of the window, there is an irregular vertical column of smaller greenish stone, and then a straight joint just short of the first 19th-century buttress. There is a second straight joint just beyond the buttress, then more of the greenish stone. It is not clear whether the straight joints relate to the construction of the buttress or a narrow blocked window behind it, possibly the scar of the removed east wall of the former porch.

Immediately beyond the first buttress is another rough vertical patch of the greenish stone, with on its right side, high up, several stones with cuts and sockets, as if a monument (or another sundial?) has been attached to the wall here. Beyond this the wall fabric becomes good-quality squared stone; the third two-light window is obviously an insertion, with a patching of limestone blocks around its head. Below its sill are the jambs of a blocked doorway 1.50 m wide; they are of large squared blocks, but no chamfer is visible; a medieval cross slab (see 'sepulchral monuments' section) is set into the blocking. The stonework on either side of the blocked doorway has remains of white plaster adhering, ending in clear vertical lines which are obviously those of the internal faces of the walls of a former south porch; the line of the shallow-pitched roof of the porch can be traced from cuts in stones in the wall face on either side of the head of the present window. The position and size of the former porch are confirmed by the 1825 plan (see below).

Beyond the second buttress the large coursed stone continues in the upper part of the wall, but the lower 1.5 m or so changes to coursed roughly-shaped blocks of yellowish Magnesian Limestone. The fourth two-light window is again clearly an insertion, although its dressings are in a greenish/buff sandstone rather than the pink stone of the others. Once again there is a 'dished' area around and above its head. East of the window there is an area of smaller rubble low in the wall. The easternmost window (the trefoiled light with a spheric triangle above) has dressings of grey ashlar, and seems to be set within the jambs of a wider opening, probably one with an arched head. This last section of wall is heavily pointed; the angle quoins (which are set a little beyond the line of the present east gable of the nave) are quite large, and of a grey/green sandstone, laid on rough alternate fashion. The gable has moulded kneelers, an ashlar coping and a ring-cross finial, all of 19th-century date¹.

The walls of the **Chancel** are also of interest, but rather less complex than those of the nave. The south wall is of two broad bays, with a stepped buttress (again 19th century) set between them, rather east-of-centre. The western section of wall is of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone; the single lancet window, with a chamfered surround and hoodmould, is set in a patch of squared blocks or white limestone; immediately to the west is a patch of coursed rubble, as if there had been a wider opening at some stage.

The stepped buttress probably conceals the east end of the phase I chancel; what may be the tail end of one large squared quoin is visible on its west side, low down.

The eastern section of wall is quite different, consisting of coursed almost square blocks of Magnesian Limestone, of near-ashlar-quality, in a style characteristic of the later 12th or

1 The repair work underway at the time of survey has shown that there is a flue inside this wall, rising from the north-east corner of the nave; presumably there was at one time a chimney on the gable.

early 13th century. It contains a second 19th-century lancet window, but below this is a chiselled-back course, presumably once a string.,

The stepped diagonal buttresses at the east end are again of 19th-century date. The walling between them is again of the square near-ashlar fabric seen on the south, although there is a ragged joint with 19th-century stone close to the north-east buttress; just south of this, low down, is an incised consecration cross. A second, mentioned in several accounts, is probably concealed behind a headstone now set against the south end of the wall. The triplet of stepped lancets are clearly 19th-century, as is the regularly-coursed stonework of the gable, which has an ashlar coping and a ring-cross finial.

The eastern part of the north side of the chancel (the western is concealed by the organ chamber) is of similar squared limestone, but differs from the south and east walls in being rather more widely-jointed, and having an odd thinner course, gradually expanding to full height, at a little over half height. The lancet window at the west end of this section of wall is again clearly 19th century.

The tower and north aisle are entirely of 1846-7, and are constructed of coursed rubble with ashlar dressings of pink sandstone.

The **Tower** is almost square in plan, and projects a little beyond the lines of both west end and north aisle; diagonal buttresses rise to belfry level at its northern angles, and there is an octagonal stair turret rising only to the first stage at the south-west corner. There is a chamfered plinth, chamfered set-backs between the three stages, and a moulded string below the embattled and moulded parapet. The lower stage has an arched doorway on the west, with a double-chamfered surround and a moulded hood with carved stops; on the north is a lancet window. The stair turret, lit by a chamfered square-headed loop on the west, has a pyramidal roof of overlapped slabs half-way up the tall second stage, which is lit by lancets on north, west and east, with very small square-headed lights higher up on north and east; at the same level on the west is a clock face in a chamfered square panel. The belfry has a two-light opening in each face, of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a round-headed arch.

The north wall of the **North Aisle** has four lancets windows, with, between the eastern two, a shouldered doorway; all look of 19th-century date, with the possible exception of the eastern lancet, where the eastern half of its double-chamfered surround looks of much more weathered stone, although this may simply result from its proximity to a leaking downpipe..

The **Organ Chamber**, set back in the angle between the east end of the aisle and the north wall of the chancel, is built of roughly-squared and coursed stone, which seems to include some re-used medieval blocks. Its east wall has clearly been heightened in more recent squared stone.

The Interior

The interior of the main body of the church is plastered throughout.

The base of the tower forms an entrance lobby. On the north is a lancet window with a chamfered segmental-pointed rear arch, on the east and south doors with segmental-pointed timber frames into the aisle and nave respectively, and on the south-west a square-headed chamfered doorway into the newel stair. The doorway on the south opens into the west end of

the nave; towards the nave it has stone archway with a moulded hood. Above is a panelled wooden loft, set on timber braces springing from moulded corbels, under a tall arch (with roughly-shaped dressings) that rises well above the nave eaves. It would appear that this is simply a structural feature; a timber lintel has been inserted at some time, to carry old brickwork blocking off the head of the arch.

Further east is a three-bay arcade, with segmental-pointed arches, each of two chamfered orders, on circular piers and semi-octagonal responds, all with moulded capitals and bases. In a length of wall to the east of the arcade is a doorway to the vestry, with a shallow triangular head and a chamfered surround.

The west wall of the nave has a small triangular-headed recess or locker, plastered round, beneath the sill of the west window. The four two-light windows in the south wall have segmental-pointed rear arches, with chamfers to their heads only; the single-light window at the east end of the wall is quite different, with an exposed ashlar surround to its trefoiled and cusped rear arch under a moulded hood, which is carried on jamb shafts of Frosterley 'marble'.

The eastern bay of the north aisle is now closed off by panelled screens, to form a vestry. In its east wall is a triangular-headed doorway into the organ chamber.

At the east end of the nave is the chancel arch, of two-centred form, consisting of a chamfered inner order and a square outer one, with out any bases or imposts. On the north of the arch is a rather peculiar small window now opening into the organ chamber; it consists of a single trefoil-headed light with spheric triangle over (ie the same form as the easternmost window in the south wall of the nave), and it has a trefoiled rear arch that gives the appearance of having been truncated by the north wall of the nave. The exposed dressings of its 'external' opening all look of 19th-century date.

The chancel has a segmental-pointed arch to the organ chamber, with chamfered jambs and a double chamfer to its head only.

The nave and chancel roofs, of five and three bays respectively, have collar-beam trusses with ashlaring at the eaves and straight braces meeting at the centre of the collar; there is a diagonally-set ridge and two levels of purlins on each roof slope.

From the entrance lobby, a chamfered square-headed doorway gives onto the newel stair rising to the first floor of the tower (the Ringing Chamber); the top of the stair has a turned newel and cast-iron handrail, and a circular slab roof. Here the windows on east and west have segmental-pointed rear arches. The weight shaft has a case made up of what looks like re-used 18th-century panelling, with a cornice at its top.

A ladder rises to the Clock Chamber, and another to the belfry, where the openings have brick rear arches. Above is a monopitch lead roof; the internal faces of the parapet have been recently (1983) strengthened in brick.

Fittings and Furnishings

Although most of the **Woodwork** in the church is of 20th century date (the pews are of 1962), there are a number of older items. On the north side of the nave, close to the vestry

door, is an old chest with three locks, said to be of medieval date. A second chest (not seen) is said to be in the north aisle. In the chancel is a 17th-century table and two contemporary chairs, each with the initials 'W.B.'. Inside the tower, the casing of the weight shaft in the Ringing Chamber is made up of re-used 18th-century panelling, with a top cornice; in the clock chamber the casing seems to utilise older (16th/17th century?) panelling

The **Font**, at the west end of the nave, has an octagonal bowl and a circular moulded shaft and base; although probably re-tooled, it appears to be basically of medieval date; the VCH dates it to the late 12th century. The octagonal cover, with crude crockets at its angles, is thought to be of the 17th century.

The **Reredos**, of marble and Caen stone, is by Jones and Willis of Birmingham, and was erected in 1889 as a memorial to the Rev. Charles H. Ford.

The **Stained Glass** is not of outstanding interest, although the mid-19th century patterned glazing in the east lancets is good, as is the recent west window (Septima Waugh, 1984); the side windows of the chancel are typical 1870s pieces.

The **Bell Frames** are probably contemporary with the tower; they have three parallel pits, and are of long-headed type with two queen-posts and end-posts to each truss, but no bracing. One of the three Bells has an inscription dating it to 1847, the other two are uninscribed.

The **Clock** is by Windle of Stockton-on-Tees, and is dated 1847.

Carved Stone

Built into the west wall of the nave, adjacent to one of the cross slab grave covers, is a 14th or 15th century fragment with a small cusped recess and part of a larger design, difficult to make any sense of.

Sepulchral Monuments

The oldest monuments are a pair of medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers, now built into the external faces of the west and south walls of the nave (Ryder 1985, 61-2 and plate 9). The slab on the south of the nave, built into the blocking of the former south door, has an interlaced-diamond cross and is probably of early-14th century date; that at the west end has a crudely-executed cross, carved in relief, and is difficult to date; there is a very similar design on a fragment at nearby Great Stainton.

On the south wall of the nave is a marble armorial tablet, topped by an urn, to various members of the Hutchinson family, starting with Sarah Hutchinson d.1786; the inscription relates that it was erected 'in pursuance of a direction' in the will of Henry Hutchinson d.1811. On the south wall of the chancel is a tablet to Thomas Sowerby (d.1841) signed by R.Davies of Newcastle. Further west on the same wall is a brass wall tablet to John Page Sowerby (d.1866)

In the chancel floor is a brass in the form of a foliated cross, as a memorial to the Rev Ralph Tatham (d. 1822) and his son Charles (d.1827).

On the west wall of the nave, near its north end, is a brass plate with an inscription commemorating the Rev Thomas Burton Holgate (d.1871) and his three sisters ‘who at their sole cost out of a slender income rebuilt this church and gave the bells, the Clock, the Books and the Silver Plate for Holy Communion’

Historical Notes

- 1143 Bishopton’s most dramatic episode in of history came with Roger de Conyers having to fortify his residence at ‘Bischoptun’ against the usurping Bishop William Cumin, whom he had refused to support; the Bishop-elect William de St Barbara received the homage of loyal barons during a short stay at Bishopton.
- 1155 The earliest recorded incumbent, Alberic.
- c1180 The church was granted by Roger de Conyers to the Hospital of Sherburn; rectory and advowson remained with the hospital until 1860.
- 1290 The earliest record of a vicar of Bishopton
- 1501 The church was in poor repair, the chancel roof defective and several windows broken.
- 1732 Bishop Chandler’s visitation reports ‘the chancel wants whitening and ye pavements much broken’
- 1792 Archdeacon Pye found the building in a poor state: ‘the roof bad, ye walls bulged owing to ye heavy covering of lead. To repair ye floor of ye chancel or to wall it up for warmth sake. To repair ye south entrance into ye church. To mend floor at ye west end of ye church’.
- 1794 The Durham historian Hutchinson (III, 164) was not overly impressed: ‘The church is but a mean fabric. The chancel is long and disproportioned, and the nave is sixteen paces in length and only six in width’.
- 1823 Later historian Surtees (III, 69) recorded that ‘the whole building was repaired and modernised, and the leads exchanged for slate a few years ago. The lights are modern’.
- c1840 A sketch of the church (not yet seen, but it is implied that a drawing in the 1988 Christian Inheritance guide (p.10) is based on this original) shows three-light windows with simple intersecting tracery or glazing bars in the west end of the nave, in the south side of the nave on either side of the south porch, and two on the south side of the chancel.
- 1846-7 The remodelling of the church carried out by the Rev Holgate; Sharpe and Paley of Lancaster were the architects.

Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work

Date	Faculty No.	Works
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1877		Organ chamber added, and vestry rebuilt.
5 March 1889	3/293	Erection of a reredos and enlarging two windows 3/293
3/3692	12 March 1954	Conversion of part of north aisle into a choir vestry
3/3787	4 July 1955	(with Great Stainton) repairs to tower, spire and general repairs to churches 3/3787
3/4487	27 July 1962	Introduction of clergy stalls, choir stalls and pews and memorial tablet 3/4487
3/6134	30 Sept 1983	Renewal of lead roof on tower and repairs to parapet
3/6278	19 May 1988	Removal of kerbs in churchyard and renewal of gutters
	1994	New roof to organ chamber

Structural History

Bishopton is rather unusual, within County Durham, in that it retains much of its medieval fabric but only one arguable medieval feature. This is the strangely-positioned window on the north of the chancel arch. that is dated to c.1280-90 by the VCH. If this is in situ it is highly unusual; its asymmetric rear arch would imply that the north wall of the nave has been rebuilt inside its original line. However, the window is of a form rare in medieval buildings in this area, although popular in Victorian times, and its exposed dressings all look of 19th-century character..

This simply leaves us with the surviving medieval masonry in the nave and chancel, which has received little mention; Boyle's account (1893, 640) simply states 'parts of the chancel walls are ancient', the VCH (205) extends this to 'parts of the chancel walls and the south wall of the nave' but Pearson (1946, 10) sees the medieval building as 'completely demolished'. Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 110) start to redress the balance with 'much medieval walling surviving' and commenting on 'clear signs that the chancel as lengthened in the medieval period'.

At least four phases of medieval fabric seem to be visible. The earliest forms the greater part of the south wall of the nave, with substantial quoining at its eastern angle; a couple of quoins survive of the western angle. There is little to date it by; the quoins are not Pre-Conquest in style, and the wall is reasonably substantial (c 0.95 m) in thickness, ie probably too thick to date from before the Norman Conquest. The only surviving features that might be original are the external jambs of the south door; these are 2.50 m apart, and left square, both of which suggest they represent an outer order recessed for jamb shafts. This, the style of quoins, and the wall thicknesses would all tally with a 12th-century date.

The south wall of the chancel is generally of rather smaller stone, without any of the large squared blocks of greenish sandstone, so it would seem reasonable to see it as of a different date, although perhaps still in the 12th century. The chancel extension is in a totally different material, with squared limestone blocks very typical of the late 12th or 13th century. At this

period many churches in the area were having their chancels either rebuilt or extended (eg Haughton-le-Skerne). It is not clear whether the eastern part of the north wall survives from this period, or whether, as seems more likely, it has been taken down at some time (perhaps in the 19th century) and rebuilt, using old materials.

The western extension of the nave is the fourth phase; quite an amount of red sandstone is used, but its only features, the chamfered plinth and set-back, offer little in the way of dating evidence, other than generally looking 'medieval'.

It is possible that the story is more complex than this; the small limestone rubble in the eastern part of the nave wall might conceivably represent a rebuilt section, possibly replacing an arch into a former chapel.

Turning to the post-medieval history of the church, documentary references indicate alterations and remodelling at the very beginning of the 19th century. The writers of the Christian Inheritance guide (1988) consider that the simple three-light windows shown on the c1840 drawing may have been of late medieval date, but their style coupled with Surtees' reference to the 'lights' being 'modern' would tend to suggest that they were put in at this time; they may simply have had wooden tracery. Evidence of one such window seems to survive in the outline of an arched opening, without any cut dressings, that seems to be traceable above the easternmost window on the south side of the nave. A plan of the church dated 1825 survives in Archdeacon Thorp's book (Durham Cathedral Library); it shows the nave with its south door and porch, a window on either side, one in the west wall and one on the north, with one window near the west end of the south wall of the chancel and another in the east end.

Then came 1846-7 and the wholesale remodelling and enlargement of the church at the expense of the Rev. Holgate and his sisters, giving Bishopton a church that is an attractive and restrained exercise in Victorian Gothic, but that disguises its extant medieval fabric.

In 1877 the Organ Chamber was built, to house an organ acquired in 1871, and at the same time the 1846-7 vestry (presumably the east end of the north aisle) was rebuilt as it had structural problems consequent on its being built over a grave.

The Churchyard

The church stands towards the centre, which in plan approximates to a triangle with rounded angles; on the long south-west side there is the ground drops away sharply towards the churchyard wall. Some accounts refer to the stump of the original village cross, replaced in the 19th century, being moved to the churchyard, but it is no longer apparent. Most of the older monuments lie to the south of the church; the earliest seem to be a few small headstones of the early years of the 18th century; one headstone to the south-west of the church, to Jane Musgrave d.1786, with grieving cherubs, is of some merit. The monuments north of the church are largely of late 19th and 20th century date.

Archaeological Assessment

The fact that St Peters appears at first glance a Victorian building should not be allowed to diminish its archaeological importance as a medieval fabric, albeit much disguised. As regards the above-ground structure, any works involving disturbance of wall fabric will require careful monitoring. At the time of survey the plaster on the lower part of the south

wall of the nave was in poor condition, and large pieces falling off. It is important that prior to any repair work this is properly examined. There is a possibility that old plasters may survive beneath the present surfaces importance, so no widespread stripping should be undertaken without a preliminary investigation. Even if this is not the case, the wall fabric itself is of great interest - in fact it is our only source of information as the medieval building - and so exposed masonry will need recording, as photographs and probably also measured drawings, prior to re-plastering.

As often, it is difficult to evaluate the condition of the sub-floor archaeological deposits within the church. There are 19th-century tiled floors to the chancel and to the central aisle and west end of the nave, and boarded areas underneath the pews; a wood block floor at the east end of the nave may be more recent. Although there is a sunken boiler room beneath the organ chamber, it is thought that the central heating pipes within the building have always been above floor level, which would mean that the disturbance associated with the usual 19th-century sub-floor ducting has been avoided in this case. Whether or not this is the case, as with any medieval church any sub-floor works will require archaeological monitoring.

Priorities

A record of the extant medieval fabric in the external walls of the church would be most useful; this could take the form of a photogrammetric plot (expensive) or a stone-for-stone drawing based on rectified photography, and would enable the phasing of the walling to be better understood. .

Peter F Ryder January 2001

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St Peter's Church, Bishopston

An Archaeological Assessment

January 2001

**Reconstruction of the church as it appeared before the 1846-7 remodelling
(Christian Inheritance Guide)**

**Peter F Ryder
Historic Buildings Consultant**

St Peter's Church, Bishopton

An Archaeological Assessment

January 2001

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Peter F Ryder
1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ

St Peter, Bishopton
Photographs to accompany Archaeological Assessment
January 2001, Peter F Ryder

1. General north-west view
2. West end of nave
3. The south side of the nave (and tower. West part
4. The south side of the nave (east part)
5. General south-east view
6. Interior looking east
7. Supposedly medieval window on north of chancel arch.
8. Nave looking west.
9. The reredos.
10. Boxing of weight shaft in Ringing Chamber.
11. Boxing of weight shaft in Clock Chamber
12. The Clock.
13. Old cupboard in entrance lobby.

Note: no photographs were taken at this time of the north side of the church (all of 1846-7) , as it was shrouded in scaffolding.