

St Nicholas' Church, Durham

St Nicholas' Church stands on the north side of the Market Place of the City of Durham, with Claypath to its east and the modern Leazes Road in a deep cutting immediately to the north. The church consists of a nave with a four-bay north aisle and a tower/porch on the south, carried up as a lofty spire, with a two-bay aisle to the east of that; there is a short chancel with a single bay of aisle on each side, and a parallel vestry block to the north. The present building is an impressive High Victorian church, in a free 14th-century style, standing on the site of a medieval predecessor.

Description

The church is constructed of roughly-coursed and roughly-faced stone with fawn ashlar dressings; the steeply-pitched roofs are of Welsh slate except for graduated Lakeland slates on the vestry block. Most of the windows have the typical Victorian feature of either an outer set of voussoirs of roughly-shaped stone, or a similarly-constructed relieving arch above them.

The Exterior

The south and east elevations, towards the Market Place, and Silver Street, have much more elaborate detail than the plainer north and west fronts. The church is entered through a shouldered segmental-pointed arch, enriched with ballflower, between sunk quatrefoil panels with shields; the tower above rises in four stages, with pointed angle buttresses, and a semi-octagonal stair turret at the north-west angle. Above the doorway is a statue of St Nicholas in a big niche with a crocketed and pinnacled gable, flanked by sunk cruciform panels, whilst the third stage has a fine clock in a similar surround, carried on beasts' heads; the fourth (belfry) stage has paired two-light openings; the lofty octagonal spire, rising within a corbelled and crenellated parapet with angle pinnacles, has gabled lucarnes. Nave and chancel aisles are articulated by buttresses with cusped and crocketed gablets, carried up as crocketed pinnacles, and have three-light windows with free Flamboyant tracery; above their roofs is a clerestory of windows of cusped spheric triangle form, a mid-Victorian favourite. To the west of the tower where there is no aisle the façade steps back behind the adjacent Town Hall, and a narrow alleyway angles round the west end of the church; the western part of the nave wall is plainer, but has a big four-light window. The gables of nave and chancel are coped, with foliate cross finials.

The east elevation of the church is set at a slightly skew angle and fronts onto the beginning of Claypath. The east gable of the chancel has a big five-light window with cusped flamboyant tracery, with a spheric triangle above enclosing an Agnus Dei, within a triangle of trefoiled roundels; to the left the east end of the south aisle (now a church shop) has a shallow gabled porch, and to the right the north aisle has a two-light window; higher in the end walls of the aisle are plain square-headed two-light windows inserted in 1980-81 to light the new high-level rooms in the aisles. The façade is continued to the north by the vestry gabled end of the vestry block, which has its own shallow porch under a crocketed gable, flanked by triangular-headed windows beneath a window of five stepped trefoil-headed lights, with a transom at mid height; the steep gable above has a fleur-de-lys finial.

The west end of the church is relatively plain, with one large four-light window in the centre of the nave gable, set high in the wall, with a trefoiled vent in the gable.

The north elevation of the church, formerly raised directly on the city wall, now stands high above the modern Leazes road; apart from a chamfered plinth, there is little architectural detail. The nave aisle has a two-light window in its west end and three three-light ones on the north; the eastern bay of the aisle is now concealed by a westward extension of the vestry block. Above the aisle is a range of eight spheric triangle windows in the clerestory.

The vestry block, built on ground falling away to the north, is of two storeys above a basement; its western third is clearly a later extension, as can be seen from an irregular joint in its masonry, which is little better than coursed rubble. Carved detail is restricted to the east end of the façade – the north-east angle is bevelled, with a carved demon at the top, whilst the adjacent ground-floor light has a raised riband on the lintel and the two-light window above a pair of cusped quatrefoils below. The ground-floor hall has windows with trefoil-headed lights, a pair of two-light ones flanking a central stack projection on the west gable, and a two and a four-light one on the north, with transoms. The upper floor has two-light windows with shallow segmental tops to the lights, two in the west end and two on the north, set in gabled half-dormers; the head and jamb stones of the eastern of the two on the north have the look of being older material re-used, as have the jambs of the arched doorway to the basement boiler room.

The Interior

The church is generally entered through the base of the tower, which has a quadripartite ribbed vault, springing from foliage-carved corbels in the angles; the central boss of the vault has the mitred head of St Nicholas and the date '1858' whilst a shield against the west wall has 'J P Pritchett Architect' and one against the east wall 'Jackson Builder'); against the north wall is a shield with a fox, the rebus of the Rev George Townsend Fox, vicar at the time of the rebuilding, and against the south a shield with what looks like a Masonic device. On the north is a segmental-headed arch containing the glazed screen that backs the present altar; it would appear that the 1858 south door was 'turned round' in 1980-81¹, so that what was originally its rear arch. The present entry into the church is by a new square-headed doorway in the east wall, opening into the south aisle; at the north end of the west wall is a segmental-pointed doorway to the newel stair.

The original access to the **Tower** is by means of the newel stair which rises to a square-headed doorway into a chamber on the first floor, which has a stone slab floor, and a 20th-century square-headed doorway on the west, provided so a new entry could be gained from the inserted gallery in the south aisle. The walls are of roughly-coursed rubble, painted grey. The ceiling, probably an insertion, is of heavy east-west joists carried on a pair of plates set against the east and west walls, each of which have supported by two posts, with raking braces to the plate on the north side of each post.

¹ Although a 1980 drawing by Ronald Sims seems to show doorway already in its present form. The drawings for the 1857 faculty clearly show it as splayed and rebated internally, in the usual manner.

The lofty ringing chamber is on the second floor of the tower; here the walls are plastered and yellow-washed to half height- above they are of roughly-coursed heavy rubble, painted grey. The large two-light windows on east, west and south have segmental-pointed rear arches. The ceiling is of north-south joists, with a big central trapdoor for raising and lowering bells.

A third square-headed door from the stair opens into the clock chamber, with walls of painted rubble; the windows on east and west have segmental-pointed rear arches and the clock opening a round arch, whilst on the north is a pointed doorway from which a ladder would allow a descend to the nave eaves. The bell ropes are carried through this stage within slightly-inclined wooden boxes. The ceiling, ie the belfry floor, is carried on three north-south beams, additionally supported by large corbels with their lower angles bevelled, supporting two east-west beams.

The newel stair terminates at belfry level; here the openings have semicircular rear arches, and there are squinches in each angle to carry the spire; all the stonework is quite badly eroded. An inserted timber ceiling (with a central trapdoor) closes off the base of the stone spire.

The interior of the church was remodelled liturgically in 1980-1981, with the altar now being set against the south wall of the nave and its reredos formed by the screen already mentioned, set in an arched doorway within a square frame, with carved spandrel panels with shields and a moulded hood that is stepped down and continued along the wall to the west as a string course. Above and to the right are a vertical pair of quite elaborate single-light windows providing internal light to the tower stair. The interior of the main body of the church is plastered and whitewashed, with its ashlar dressings painted. The nave arcades – four bays on the north and two on the south, have double-chamfered arches set on piers and responds of quatrefoil and half-quatrefoil plan; piers and responds have elaborate foliage carvings to their capitals, whilst the hoodmoulds have stops that are either human heads or foliage bosses. -plan piers. All the windows have segmental-pointed rear arches, with chamfers only to their heads. There is further rich foliage carving on the brackets that carry the wall posts of the roof trusses.

The lofty chancel arch is moulded rather than chamfered, and springs from responds with foliate capitals; it is now infilled with a glazed screen, the chancel now forming a separate chapel. The flanking arches to the chancel aisles are largely concealed by 20th century works, that on the south by a gallery inserted into the aisle, and that on the north by the curved projection of a stair rising to the upper floor of the vestry block.

The chancel itself is short and markedly asymmetrical in plan. On either side is a tall arch – that on the north rather wider - containing an openwork stone screen that has cusped ogee arches with quatrefoils in their spandrels, below a moulded cornice carrying an inscription in raised letters. The northern screen is inscribed ‘ To the memory of Ralph Dixon esquire of this parish a mark of esteem’ and the southern ‘ These screens are erected by the proprietors of the Durham Waterworks 1858’; above the stone screens are glazed partitions of 1980-1981.

The roof of the nave is of eight bays, with collar-beam trusses with arched braces, those of alternate trusses coming down onto carved corbels, the other springing from the wall-plate; the chancel roof is similar, but of only two bays. The principal timbers are painted, the trusses green and the rafters red. The aisle roofs also have arch braces to their principals.

The interior of the vestry block has been considerably altered. The main hall is set a little below the level of the church, and has a 20th-century stair descending to its floor; an older stair rises at the east end to the upper hall (also reached by the recent stair in the north aisle), which has a fine scissor-braced roof with ashlaring to the eaves.,

Fittings and Furnishings

Most of the fittings and furnishings of the church date from the later 20th century, and largely from 1979-81 restoration, and are not described in detail here. There is some good glass of 1961 by L.C.Evetts in the south aisle

The **Font**, which stands at the south-west corner of the south aisle, is dated '1700'; it has a moulded circular shaft and a gadrooned bowl and base.

The **Clock** in the tower is dated 1871 and by Dent 'by special appointment to the Queen and HRH the Prince of Wales', of 61 the Strand, London

The **Bell Frames** are of timber, and of the long-headed form, with braces from sill to head but no corner posts (Pickford type 6A); in plan they are Pickford form 6.1, with two pits in line set along the south side of the belfry, and four parallel north-south pits beyond. Five of the bells are of 17th century date, and all bear the same inscription (differently arranged) and the stamp of James Bartlett, of Whitechapel:

FVNDATVR DEI GLORIE REGNO AVGVSTISSIMI IACOBI SECVNDI
NATHANIELE : : EPISE ROBERT DELAVAL ARM: PRÆTORE RALPH
TROTTER ROB: ROBSON CH WARDENS 1687.

The treble is inscribed:

CAST BY JOHN WARNER & SONS LONDOIN 1889
THIS BELL IS THE GIFT OF THOMAS AND ELEANOR WINTER
THE OTHER FIVE BELLS WERE REHUING AT THE SAME TIME
REV H.E.FOX VICAR
GOERGE CHAPMAN
JOHBN ROBINSON . CHURCHWARDENS
WILLIAM BOYD, MAYOR²

² Information on bells from Bells of the Newcastle and Durham Dioceses (1979) Durham & Newcastle Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers.

Carved Stones

The Victoria Count History accounts refers to ‘a few carved stones from the old church’ being preserved in Durham Castle; recent enquiry has failed to establish their whereabouts, or whether they still exist³

Historical Notes

It is claimed that there has been a church on the site ‘since at least 994’⁴, but this is arguable (see ‘Structural History’ section); a foundation in the early 12th century seems more likely.

1133 The earliest recorded rector, Galfrid de Elemer.

In the medieval period there were four chantries in the church, dedicated to S Mary (1250), St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist (1348), St James (1382) and the Holy Trinity (c1400); the church also had close links with trade guilds; the Corpus Christi guild had a shrine here, which was carried in an annual procession to the Cathedral (Emery 1997, 68).

1791 The medieval Clayport Gate, which was attached to the east end of the church, was demolished.

1794 William Hutchinson, the first of the Durham historians, gives a detailed account of the church (Hutchinson II 1823 ed, 378-9)

The church is very plain and meanly built, being constructed of small and perishable stones, so that from frequent pointing it is now almost covered with mortar. ... The north wall is strong and very lofty, supported by square buttresses, or rather bastions. This church hath two side ailes, that to the north running the whole length of the building; the south aile is shortened by the tower standing on the south west angle. The nave and two side ailes are twenty paces in width, and to the chancel the nave is twenty-six paces in length: The south aile is formed by one small octagonal column of considerable height, supporting blunt pointed arches: The north aile hath two short octagonal columns, with wide and lofty blunt pointed arches, rising from brackets at the extermities. The chancel opens with a pointed arch in the center, to the south a small column with a pointed arch, to the north a short round column, and irregular circular arches: The chancel is in length six paces to the steps, and the recess for the altar is six paces wide. At the opening of the chancel are the seats for the mercers company and body corporate, neatly fitted up. The roof of the north aile is supported by three half arches, rising from octagonal brackets. The gats have circular arches: The south windows are modern and sashed: the north windows irregular, and some under pointed arches. The fabric hath been constructed at various times; the north aile bears marks of remote antiquity; but no records afford us further light therein.... Though by the mode of architecture we should be led to give this church a contemporary date with the first settlement of the Saxons in Durham.

³ Pers.comm Norman Emery

⁴ Church guide, available online at <http://www.stnics.org.uk/stnics/guide.htm>

- 1834 The account of the church by Mackenzie & Ross (I 1834, 392) is similar to that by Hutchinson, but includes the note 'the tower was again repaired in 1833' and records that 'the chancel is separated from the north aisle by 'two circular arches, supported by a heavy cylindrical pillar and two pilasters with Norman capitals. Hence the date of this part of the building has been fixed as far back as the time of Bishop Flambard'.
- 1840 Surtees (IV, City of Durham section 47-8) includes a detailed account of the church: 'The Church of St Nicholas consists of a nave, with North and South aisles, a chancel, and a tower. The North aisle, which bears marks of high antiquity, extends the whole length of nave and chancel. It is divided from the nave by two low octagonal pillars supporting blunt pointed arches, and from the chancel by a low round column with a fluted capital, supporting round arches of unequal height and span; the roof is formed by three semi-arches springing from octagonal brackets. The South aisle is separated from the chancel by a small pillar and pointed arch, and from the nave by one slender octagonal column, supporting wide pointed arches. The chancel opens from the nave under a wide blunt arch springing from corbels of human heads. The tower is not in the usual position, but faces directly to the Market-square, springing from the Western angle of the South aisle: the principal entrance is underneath the tower, through a porch with a groined roof. The Southern front is almost entirely concealed by the Market Piazza. The outward Northern wall is of very great height and strength, supported by square buttresses, and was very probably considered as a portion of the defensive line of the City on the North, sweeping exactly in line with the curtain-wall of Nevill's Place and Claypeth Gate. The whole fabric has undergone various repairs and alterations at different periods.

Surtees then adds additional material 'taken from Woodness's Notes': 'The pulpit was of stone, and when the adjoining pews and reading-desk were removed in 1806, appeared in its original state, resting on a small stone pillar, and closely fixed into the wall at the South-east end of the nave; the ascent was by a few narrow steps winding round the pillar. The seats of the Mayor and Aldermen were on each side, at the East end of the nave..... There are two galleries, one for the children of the Blue-coat School, at the west end of the nave; on the front 'The gift of Sir John Eden, Baronet, 1721'. ...The other, between the two pillars of the North aisle, belonged to the Cordwainers' Company, erected 1729.

In 1768 the whole weather-beaten South front and the tower were chiselled over. At the same time the lights at the East end of the chancel were replaced by a large modern window.

In 1803 the interior of St Nicholas underwent a complete repair. The pews and paving were renewed; the Cordwainers' gallery, which encumbered the North aisle, was taken down; the wainscot removed from the altar (this was worked in small panels, and bore the initial and date, W.P. (William Pattison) 1627' and the wide arch betwixt the nave and chancel thrown open (the organ loft, which had succeeded the ancient roof loft, was taken down in 1684 and

replaced by the Commandments and King's Arms, which remained till 1806). The venerable stone pulpit perished at the same time. In 1826 a third gallery was built by subscription, extending nearly along the whole North aisle, and containing a hundred free seats, and four large pews, which were sold. The whole expense was 155l.14s. The cemetery is on the South and North of the Church, and is entirely enclosed.

1857 Fordyce 1857 (I, 374-5) notes that 'the external doorway (of principal entrance) has lost all its original mouldings and ornaments. The recent widening of the street at the east end of the church caused that portion of the building to be taken down; and considerable improvement at that extremity of the chancel was effected on its being rebuilt'.

One further early 19th century description of the old church is provided by Sir Stephen Glynne⁵:

'The Church of St Nicholas stands on the North side of the market place through which is the principal entrance to it. It is a large structure, & displays some marks of antiquity, although the barbarous hand of innovation has swept nearly all before it. It is however neatly pewed. It consists of a nave with North & South aisles, from which it is separated by rows of pointed arches. Those on the South side are wide and spring from slender octagonal piers. The Chancel is divided from the nave by a pointed arch, and has also aisles on each side; from that on the north it is divided by large circular pillars with Norman capitals from which spring semicircular arches, one of which is of singular form, running up to a much greater height than the other. The arches on the south side resemble those of the nave. The windows in this Church, alas! Are of too sad a description to be mentioned, especially; the Clerestory, which is wholly modern. The Tower stands at the North West angle and has been lately chiselled over. The South porch is good perpendicular.

(added in margin)

1869. St Nicholas has been wholly rebuilt, in a showy style of Edwardian Gothic. The Tower on the South side faces the market place & is surmounted by a fine Spire of stone, but perhaps rather too slender.'

1857-8 The church was entirely rebuilt, the architect being J.P.Pritchett of Darlington; at the time the Illustrated London News called the church 'the most beautiful specimen of church architecture in the North of England'; Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 222) call it 'one of the best churches Pritchett designed'. The rebuilding cost £5530, and occupied the period from June 1857 to December 1858. Although many praised the new building, there were clearly some objectors; in Rev Mitchinson's church notes St Nicholas is recorded simply as 'a church full of interest, gratuitously demolished and entirely rebuilt'⁶

⁵ 'Church Notes' reprinted in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle 3rd series III (1907-8) 283

⁶ Durham Cathedral Library, Additional MS 234. DURHAM CHURCHES.
A bound volume of notes, sketches and photographs presented to the Dean and Chapter of Durham by the Rt Revd John Mitchinson (1833-1918), 25 March 1914.

Faculties and Records of Structural Work

These are now in Durham University Library (Palace Green section) and are coded DDR/EJ/FAC/3.... Only faculties which might relate in any way to the structural history of the building, or to archaeological matters, are listed.

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|------|------------|---|
| 34 | 1803 | Taking off lead roof and reproofing in Westmorland slates |
| 37 | 1857 | Taking down and rebuilding church. The faculty is accompanied by drawings of the rebuilt church (without a spire!) but gives little information as regards the earlier building. |
| 40 | 1841 | Alterations 'to remove and pull down a projecting part of the chancel'; the drawing shows that the whole east end of the church was trimmed by up to 2 m, to widen the street. The plan accompanying the faculty shows the east end of the church is rather more detail than Thorp's 1825 one. The east end was square to the main axis of the church (but had its angles bevelled externally, as if buttresses had been removed) but the east end of the south aisle was skewed to the west. The east end of the north aisle (set back from the chancel) was square but the east side of the vestry block skewed to the line followed by the rebuilt wall. |
| 2513 | 27.7.1934 | Removal of the organ |
| 2554 | 22.3.1935 | Removal and re-erection of font |
| 2883 | 15.5.1945 | Erection of a clergy vestry (an internal structure within the south chancel aisle) |
| 5353 | 15.9.1972 | Alteration to the chancel steps, removal of pews and re-arrangement of furnishings etc |
| 5927 | 14.5.1981 | Complete re-ordering of the church and introduction of new organ |
| 5961 | 29.10.1981 | Converting south-west vestry to a sales area |
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The Structural History of the Church

Since the old church was completely destroyed a century and a half ago, it is difficult to reconstruct its building history; however, antiquarian records allow some attempt to be made.

The guidebook's claim of there being a church on the site 'since at least 994' (the arrival of the Cuthbert Community) seems rather dubious; it appears more likely that St Nicholas had its origins c1120 at the time of the foundation of the Bishop's Borough by Bishop Flambard (Roberts 1994, 62-63), when the old settlement on Palace Green was re-located around the present Market Place (Emery et al 1997, 67). Parts of the building destroyed in 1857 were undoubtedly of 12th century date, notably the north chancel arcade with its scalloped capital and round arches – which suggests that the church had become a well-developed building within half a century or so of its foundation. The other features described – the pointed arches of the other arcades and chancel – all appear to have been later medieval work, which seems to imply a major rebuilding in the 13th or 14th century. When the town wall were constructed after a Scots raid in 1312, the Clayport gate was set attached to the north-east corner of the church; Hutchinson thought that the north wall of the church actually formed part of the defences, but more recent workers (ibid) think this unlikely, and that the wall ran a little further north.

There is an interesting association between churches and town gates (Morris 1989, 214-7) – Winchester had churches associated with three of its gates – and also between churches and market places (eg Richmond, North Yorkshire).

The medieval church was clearly subject to extensive post-medieval alteration, as the surviving illustrations of the south side of the building make clear. The one photograph⁷ shows large sash windows in the south aisle, and apparently neo-Romanesque detail to the east wall rebuilt in 1841. The Victoria County History account states that a 'Norman' style window, presumably from this wall, has been re-used at Edmondbyers parish church⁸. The tower, as shown on the photograph, looks much altered; the large doorway with its almost round arch, and the arcade of small arches above, might have been of 15th century date (Sir Stephen Glynne talks of a 'good perpendicular' porch, after mistakenly locating the tower at the north-west angle) but their stonework looks 'fresh' and may not have been all that old; the tower's spindly diagonal buttresses also look recent, or more likely old ones trimmed down almost into non-existence. The north-western vestry was a three-storeyed block looking very much like an attached house.

Turning to the present building, the 1857 faculty plan and drawings shows it with a tower but no spire, and with only a small almost square vestry on the north of the north chancel aisle. The then vicar, the Rev George Townsend Fox, insisted on the spire (which the restoration Committee had decided against) and paid for it at his own expense (church guide). The church was built of 'snecked Pensher rubblework, with Caen limestone for piers and arches (Emery et al 1997, 68). Later alterations are also hard to correlate with faculty evidence; the vestry block is clearly larger than that

⁷ Cathedral Library, Dean Mitchinson album, reproduced by Roberts, p.38)

⁸ At Edmondbyers an information sheet claims that it is a shoulder-arched doorway in the vestry that was 'the north door from the east end of old St Nicholas'.

shown on the 1857 drawings, and has in addition been subsequently extended to the west.

The major renovation and re-ordering that took place in 1980-81, when the interior was re-arranged liturgically to face an altar in the position of the old south door, is really beyond the scope of this work.

The Churchyard

St Nicholas' Church now has no churchyard; in common with some other urban churches, that which it once had has been gradually destroyed by the encroachment of surrounding buildings and roads. The history of the cemetery, and various excavation within the Market Place (revealing vaulted and human remains) are recorded and discussed by Emery et al (1997); there were no burials after 1846, by when the cemetery was confined to a small slip of ground on the north of the church.

Archaeological Assessment

The present church is entirely of mid-19th century date, except for the re-use of one or two old features in Edmondbyers parish church, and the possible incorporation of others in the vestry block. It is clear that the present building occupies more or less the same footprint as its medieval predecessor, although perhaps not built directly upon its foundations (Emery et al, 85) and it is possible that archaeological remains survive beneath the present floors, although these will certainly have been disturbed to some extent by later works (including the underfloor heating system of the present church). Nevertheless, any significant underfloor works will need to be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief.

It is clear that significant archaeological remains – largely of burials, but also perhaps of the east end of the medieval church – survive outside the present building, beneath roads and pavements.

Peter F Ryder December 2007



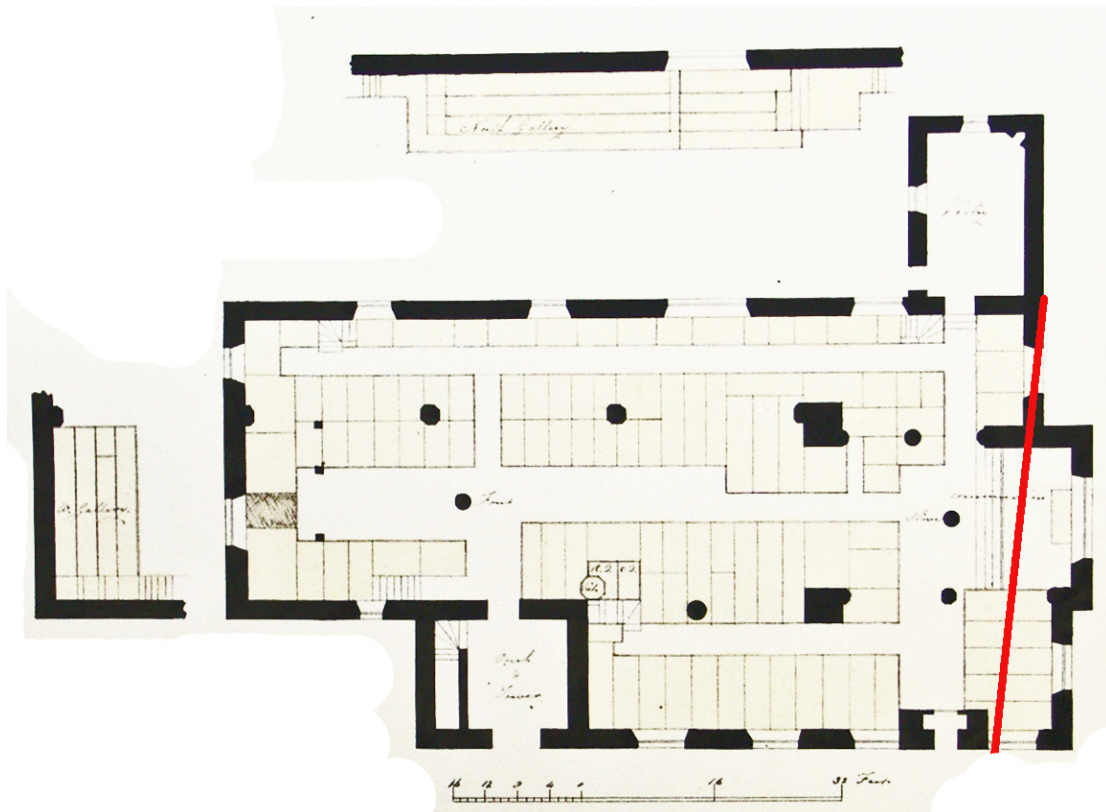
Photograph of St Nicholas' Church c1855, showing the east end as rebuilt in 1841

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The church seen from the north-west, across the modern through-road (Leazes Road) (c1970) which runs on the line of the former town walls.





1825 plan from Archdeacon Thorp's plan book
(red line shows east end as rebuilt in 1841)

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH
DURHAM

after a plan by R Sims

