

St Peter's Church, Elwick Hall

St Peter's, the parish church of Elwick Hall, stands in a sub-circular churchyard bounded on west and north by steep slopes dropping to the stream (Char Beck) which separates church and village, and actually forms the parish boundary between Elwick Hall and Hart parishes, the village of Elwick actually lying in the latter.

The church consists of a four-bay aisled nave, with a tower unusually sited above the south porch, and a chancel with a vestry on the north.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Exterior

The church is almost entirely built of local Magnesian limestone, in forms varying from roughly-coursed rubble to well-coursed squared blocks; some dressings are of sandstone or grit.

The only walls of the **Nave** visible externally are the west end and the upper part of the east gable, above the chancel roof. The lower part of the west end is of large and almost square blocks of limestone, of 12th-century character. Two heavy buttresses, differing slightly in profile, are later additions, strengthening the arcades; the southern is of rather better-squared stone than the northern. Part of the original chamfered plinth of the west wall is exposed, its southern part being concealed by the concrete drain which extends all round the church; immediately to the south of the northern buttress the plinth steps out, indicating the base of a former pilaster buttress, the upper parts of which have been removed by its more massive successor.

The regular squared masonry extends as high as a chamfered set-back below the sill of the west window; at its north end this set-back steps vertically up the wall before turning again and disappearing behind the added buttress. Above the set-back the wall has been largely rebuilt; the two-light west window, with simple Y-tracery under a four-centred head, is clearly an insertion; it has a hollow-moulded hood with turned-back ends, and dressings of brown sandstone; what may be the jamb of an earlier window is visible immediately to the north. Above the window there is an area of fawn-coloured render or harling, partly obscuring evidences of two (?) earlier gable-lines, both at a considerably shallower pitch than the present one.

The eastern gable end of the nave again shows evidence of heightening, although the earlier lines are not clear.

The **South Aisle** is mostly built of roughly-squared and roughly-coursed limestone; it has quite a broad chamfered plinth (partly hidden by the concrete drain) which extends round the buttress at the east end of the south wall but seems to be overbuilt by its counterpart at the west end. The west wall of the aisle is

heavily mortared, and has the boiler-house chimney built against it; it is partly of coursed rubble, but just above the plinth is a course of large squared limestone blocks (re-used?), one of which has faint incisions on it, possibly the stepped base of a cross slab grave-cover. The plinth is broken away where it approaches the south-west buttress, suggesting that the angle of the aisle may have been rebuilt when the buttress was added.

The south wall of the aisle contains a number of interesting features. The section west of the tower has a lancet window (the only medieval window to survive intact in the whole church), with a simple chamfered surround; its dressings, of limestone, are rather battered. Below this window is a ragged break in the plinth, of uncertain significance. East of the lancet is a second slightly smaller window, now blocked; its head, badly damaged, appears to have been of lancet form, but its chamfered jambs are largely of blocks of gritstone, not seen elsewhere in the church; in view of the fact that local quarries were clearly operating by the later 12th century, they might be re-used material from a pre-Norman building.

The section of the wall east of the tower has a 19th-century window of three elliptical-arched lights under a square-head, and a hollow-moulded hood with turned-back ends; on either side of this are remains of earlier windows, of similar character to the two in the south wall of the chancel, although insufficient survives of either to determine whether they were of two or three lights. Further west is a blocked lancet, similar in proportions and materials to the intact one in the western part of the aisle. The squat buttress at the east end of the wall is built of squared limestone blocks; its plinth is continuous with that of the aisle.

The east end of the aisle, again of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, has a two-light window of the same type as those in the west end and the north aisle; to the north of it is an apparent straight joint, probably the south-east angle of the original nave. Below the window is an area of irregular rubble, perhaps the former access to a vault. Above the window is a chamfered set-back, rising gently northwards, that appears to mark an earlier roof-line.

The north and west walls of the **North Aisle** are of coursed roughly-squared stone, rather heavily mortared; the east wall is concealed by the added vestry. The west wall has a section of old chamfered plinth (rather like that of the chancel, and considerably narrower than that of the south aisle); it has been cut away before it reaches the north-west angle; to the south it terminates short of the added buttress, against an apparent vertical feature (two aligned blocks and an oddly projecting stone) that may denote an earlier buttress, although how this relates to the evidence on the south side of its successor is not clear. Above there are remains of a chamfered set-back that may, like that at the east end of both aisles, indicate an earlier roof-line, although this disappears northwards, as the

entire north-east angle of the aisle appears to have been rebuilt.

This rebuilding seems to extend to the whole north wall of the aisle; an irregular intermittent plinth is partly covered by the concrete of the adjacent drain, but one section, of square upright blocks, is exposed beneath the western of the two windows in the wall, and looks of post-medieval character. The two windows in the wall are both of early-19th century date, and of precisely the same character as that in those in the west wall of the nave and the east end of the south aisle. Built into the wall to the east of the head of the eastern window is the lower part of a medieval cross slab; in a similar position in relation to the western window is a stone that may be half the head of a lancet window.

The eastern wall of the aisle is largely concealed by the vestry, but can be seen to have a sloping set-back, marking a former roof line, as at the east end of the south aisle.

The **Tower** is divided into three stages by string-courses with a chamfer on their upper angle; the first also forms a set-back. The angle quoins of the lower stage are quite large and irregular, in particular at the south-east angle where a change to more regular quoins takes place around 2.5 m above ground level. The lower stage of the tower has a round-headed doorway on the south, of stepped or rebated section; the jambs are stone but the head is turned in brick, with a keystone; the soffit is rendered. Directly above the doorway, and apparently replacing an inscription relating to the 1813 'rebuilding' (Reynolds 1894, 180), is a sundial dated '1985'; above this is a broad lancet window with a double-chamfered surround and a hollow-moulded hood with turned-back ends, its detail and brown sandstone dressings of similar character to other early-19th century features in the church.

The second stage of the tower rests rather awkwardly on the lower, and is probably a total rebuilding; at three corners it is only slightly set-back (c 0.08 m) from the angle beneath, but at the north-west it is set-back c 0.23 m, showing that the north wall is markedly out of alignment with the aisle wall beneath. The second stage, containing the belfry, is lit by single lancets, with chamfered surrounds, on east, west and south; they have sandstone dressings of 19th-century character. The top stage of the tower is simply a lofty parapet, capped by a rather flimsy battlement, with flat capstones to the merlons.

The **Chancel** has a mixture of fabric types in its lower walls, ranging from squared limestone blocks to smaller and less regular coursed stone; the upper parts of the walls are of quite well-squared and coursed blocks. The south wall has two three-light square-headed windows of 17th-century date; each has elliptical-arched lights with chamfered surrounds, inside a stepped frame; the spandrels contain shallow triangular panels, whilst above the heads is a moulded hood with turned-back ends,

its section (a concave chamfer above a roll) quite different from the deep hollows of the 19th-century hoodmoulds.

At the west end of the wall is a short length of a string-course, chamfered above and below, running just above the sill level of, and cut by, the western three-light window. It reappears, having stepped down in level, just below the east end of the sill, for a short distance until it is cut by a single-light window, which has lost its head and upper part of its east jamb to re-facing. Beyond the single-light window is a longer length of the string, terminating below the western jamb of the eastern three-light window. Below the sill of the western three-light window is a blocked opening usually interpreted as a 'low-side window' (Hodgson 1913, 213-214). It is quite narrow, with a chamfered surround; one peculiarity is that the chamfer of its head does not extend as far as the west jamb; a second is that the sill appears to be at or below the present ground level. Immediately to the east of the east jamb is what seems to be a straight joint, perhaps a relic of an earlier opening in the same position, hinting that the 'low-side' may be a modification of an earlier priest's door.

The east end of the chancel contains a three-light window with simple intersecting tracery, under a two-centred arch and a hollow-moulded hood with turned-back ends; it would appear to be of early 19th-century date. It is not clear in the masonry how much of the end wall is genuine medieval work, although a ragged joint close to the east end of the south wall suggests that at least the upper part of the wall has been rebuilt. The absence of any sign of the string-course south of the window confirms this; to the north of the window is a length of the string, which terminates at the north-east corner. Midway along the wall the chamfered plinth emerges from beneath the concrete of the drain, and extends around the north-east corner, to terminate abruptly 1.70 m along the north wall, in a raised projecting block (structurally of one piece with the last piece of plinth) which appears to have a vertical chamfer on its western angle. Beyond this the plinth appears to be absent, although as usual the concrete makes inspection difficult. This raised block would seem to imply a wall returning northwards at this point, and there are slight traces that might be commensurate with this in the courses immediately above. The upper part of the wall (above the level of the vestry roof) appears to be a secondary build, of more regularly coursed and squared stone.

The **Vestry** is clearly a 19th-century addition, built of squared limestone, laid in irregular courses. The east wall has a shallow gable, with a moulded coping, above a doorway with a segmental-pointed arch and a continuous chamfer; in the centre of the north wall is a window of two lights with shallow triangular heads.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered and whitewashed, with

the exception of the exposed dressings of the chancel arch and nave arcades.

The lower stage of the **Tower**, forming the porch, is plastered internally; there is what appears to be a stone bench on the west side. The doorway into the south aisle is of two-centred form, with a continuous chamfer, and a hoodmould chamfered beneath; the dressings (painted over) appear to have a tooled-and-margined finish, suggesting they are of 19th-century date. The east end of the hoodmould is concealed by the adjacent tower wall, but the west end has a hood stop in the form of a mitred head.

The west window of the **Nave** has a four-centred rear arch. The nave arcades are each of four bays, with two-centred arches rising from circular piers and semicircular responds. Most of their stonework has been re-cut, presumably during the 19th-century. It is not clear whether some differences in detail between them are original or the product of this re-cutting.

The walling above the south arcade is c 0.60 m in thickness. The piers have moulded capitals; the third pier from the east differs from all the others in having an octagonal abacus. The first and third piers have 'holdwater' mouldings to their bases, whilst the eastern respond and second pier have simpler convex mouldings. The piers all rise from square plinths, becoming progressively lower towards the west end, where the base of the western respond is concealed by a boarded floor; the plinth of the third pier has a chamfered step at its base. The arches are all of two chamfered orders, with a hoodmould, chamfered below, and terminating well above the capitals, towards the nave.

The walling above the north arcade is noticeably thicker (0.72m) and this is reflected in the rather more massive piers. Both responds have classic 'waterleaf' capitals; the western (which seems more heavily re-cut) has a band of beading - sometimes described as 'nailhead' (Pevsner & Williamson, 266) - in the abacus. The bases have variations on the 'holdwater' moulding; that of the third pier is the best preserved. The arches are of similar form to those of the south arcade, except that the chamfers of the orders are much narrower, and little more than a bevelling off of the angle. The capitals have octagonal abaci.

In the **South Aisle** the surviving lancet has a semicircular rear arch; the south doorway has a segmental rear arch, and immediately to the east of it is a rather formless arch, with a broad chamfer (all in plaster) giving access to the stair which rises in the thickness of the east wall of the tower. The three-light window east of the porch has a square-headed rear arch, and the east window of the aisle a four-centred one. The south wall of the aisle is of unusual thickness; around 0.90 m., even allowing for its internal stoothing.

In the **North Aisle** the northern windows have roughly four-centred rear arches; the old shallower-pitched roof line is

faintly visible, through plaster, on the west wall. The east end of the aisle is occupied by the organ.

Both nave and aisles have good quality late 19th-century roofs; that of the nave is of four bays, with heavy principal rafter trusses carried on wall-posts, with arch braces, springing from stone corbels; above the tie-beams are cusped struts, and long arched windbreaks spring from the principals to the purlins; the whole is quite an impressive piece of carpentry, although its style is more that of the Welsh Borders than the North East.

The **Chancel** opens to the nave by a two-centred arch of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hoodmould on each face, springing from semicircular responds with moulded bases and moulded semi-octagonal caps; it appears to be entirely of 19th-century date. On the west the hoodmould is continued southwards as a short string to link with the south arcade hoodmould, but on the north it is simply carried along the wall to terminate in the corner.

The east window has a two-centred rear arch, and the two southern windows plain lintels; on the north is a 19th-century doorway to the vestry with a segmental-pointed arch, chamfered all round. On the north wall are four mural tablets, and on the south one, all set in shallow gable-topped recesses, perhaps simply formed in the wall plaster. There is a single step up into the sanctuary; there is no visible evidence of medieval ritual arrangements.

CARVED STONES

Two Pre-Conquest carved stones are set into the east wall of the nave, above and on either side of the chancel arch:

- (1) On north of chancel arch. A fragment, perhaps part of a round-headed slab, carved with a scene that appears to represent the stoning of two figures. This may be a confused version of the martyrdom of St Stephen, or of the Fall (the traditional interpretation), or of some contemporary secular incident. 11th-century. (Cramp 1984, 76, plate 52 no.245)
- (2) On south of chancel arch. Round-headed slab with cross having triquetra knots in upper spandrels and the beginnings of panels of knotwork in the lower. 10th or mid-11th century. (ibid. 76, plate 51 no 244)

Lying loose against the westernmost pier of the north arcade is a worn carved Crucifixion, probably of later medieval date; it is recorded as having been set above the lancet window near the west end of the south wall of the south aisle.

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The medieval Altar slab, with a chamfered lower edge and five consecration crosses; at one stage set in the chancel floor, it had been re-instated by the time the VCH account was written (1928)

The stalls in the chancel are of 19th-century date, but re-use 17th-century **Bench Ends** (eight in all), part of the restoration works generally ascribed to the decade 1660-1670 (but dated specifically to 1665 by Pevsner & Williamson, 1983, 266). The font has an octagonal sandstone basin on three steps; it looks of 19th-century date, but could be a re-cut medieval piece; however it is not the one of 'spotted' (Frosterley?) marble recorded by Mackenzie & Ross (1834, 452); the VCH simply calls it 'of late date'.

The **Bells** are described in detail in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle. New Series III (189), 40. Their inscriptions are:

(i) DEO GLORIA CHRISTOPHER HODSON MADE 1694 SAH

(it is suggested that the date is an error for '1664'; Hodson was a London founder.

(ii) SOLI DEO GLORIA 1664

With 'SS' beneath date, and several shields bearing three tripod cups impaled with a chevron between three bells on the sinister side of the shield. By Samuel Smith of York (1663-1709)

The **Stained Glass** is of 19th and early 20th century date, except for two painted shields of 18th-century character in the eastern window in the south wall of the south aisle.

On the west wall, on either side of the west window, are **Creed and Paternoster Boards** of 19th century date.

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

A section of a **Medieval Cross Slab Grave Cover**, bearing the shaft and stepped base of a cross carved in relief, is built into the external face of the north wall of the north aisle (Ryder 1985, 83 and plate 26); another possible fragment is built into the west end of the south aisle.

The church has very few **Post-Medieval Monuments**. On the south wall of the chancel is a marble tablet with a latin inscription to the former rector Dr Robert Parker, d.1777, and on the south side six 19th-century tablets to members of the Park family.

HISTORICAL NOTES

1153-1195 The episcopate of Hugh du Puiset, who has been credited

with building and rebuilding many Durham churches; the earliest parts of the present building have often been ascribed to the latter part of this period.

1327A chantry chapel was founded by William de Cumba

1624-1645. John Cosin, later Bishop of Durham, was rector; he is thought to have been responsible for restoration work in the period 1660-1670, following the Restoration.

1794The earliest published account of the church is found in Hutchinson's History of Durham (III, 46): 'The church stands on a remarkable elevation; the ascent from the dell or gully, which divides this parish from the town of Elwick, is very steep. The approach to the church is by a multitude of steps. The chancel is about seven paces long and five wide; it is ceiled above with wood, and lighted to the east by a window of three divisions under a pointed arch: It is divided from the nave by a low circular arch. The nave hath side ailes; is in length about thirteen paces, and in width, with the ailes, twelve paces. The ailes are formed by rows of three round columns, bearing pointed arches, with this variety, that the capitals of the north row of columns are octagonal, and those of the south row round. The pulpit is placed against the second south column, and the reading desk opposite. The tower is low and heavy, is a separate building, and stands at the corner of the south aile.'

1813The church was repaired, and the lead exchanged for slate (Surtees 1823, III, 85). The tower seems to have been rebuilt or remodelled at this time (there was formerly a datestone, with the names of the churchwardens, over the outer arch) and the roof renewed.

1834A more detailed account of the church by Mackenzie and Ross (I, 452) adds some useful information: 'The multitude of steps by which it was approached from the north-east in Hutchinson's time, are now removed; and the ascent is by a steep road and foot path. On the south side of the church is the tower, a low square structure, beneath which is the entrance porch, under a circular arch, dated 1813. On the south wall of the church is an antique sculpture, apparently representing the Crucifixion; and near the north wall lies a semi-octagonal pediment. The whole of the walls have been recently pointed: and brick drains, or gutters, are placed around the church...

...There is a large window under a semicircular arch to the west, two pointed windows in the north aisle, and a square modern window in the south aisle. The entrance from the nave to the chancel is beneath a pointed arch.... The east window contains three compartments, under a pointed arch; and there are two lights, similarly divided, to the south. The font is an octagonal bason of beautifully-spotted marble.'

1857Fordyce (II, 316) adds that 'the windows, except the two on the south side of the chancel, were renewed about twelve years ago'. He refers to a vault 'within the Communion rails', a small gallery at the west end, and the roof being 'flat and plastered'.

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

Faculty no. and dateWorks

37626.4.1895New Roof & c. (New roofs to nave and side aisle, to replace 'present ruinous roof'; pitch of nave roof to be raised 4'6"; introduction of new hot water apparatus and boiler.

39211.6.1898Laying out and improving churchyard

31386.11.1948Electric light etc

36096.5.1953Installation of a pipe organ and electric organ blower

37558.12.1955(AC) Replacement of heating boiler

409426.1.1959Introduction of credence table, wafer box and paten

45209.11.1962Laying out and maintaining an underground electricity cable through the churchyard

453229.12.1962Installation of oil-fired central heating and tank.

593126.5.1981Introduction of new pipe organ from St Andrew, Hartlepool.

621415.10.1984Rebuilding of the castellations (ie battlements on tower), re-pointing and general stonework repair.

633316.1.1986Removal of existing heating system and replacement by new oil-fired system.

636617.4.1986Setting of a sun-dial above keystone of main entrance to church.

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The evidence of the two grave markers implies a Pre-Conquest church on or near the site; another possible piece of evidence already mentioned is the gritstone dressings of the small blocked window in the south aisle wall immediately west of the tower.

The earliest architectural feature of the present church is of late 12th century date (Reynolds suggest 1180-1190); contemporary with this may be the well-squared masonry of the west end of the nave and the lower parts of the chancel. The core of the nave walls may conceivably be earlier; evidence for this hinges on the form of the chancel arch preceding the present 19th-century one. Reynolds (op.cit.181) suggests that a larger and later chancel arch (of which he identified a stone lying in the churchyard, now lost, as one of the capitals) had been built up, and a smaller round-headed opening (perhaps post-medieval) inserted in the blocking; in a footnote to his article (ibid.182) the Rev J.F.Hodgson queries this and suggests that the round-headed arch was an genuine earlier-12th century feature, like that at Haughton-le-Skerne.

The south arcade is stylistically a little later than the north; Hodgson suggested a date of c1220; the aisle wall is presumably of the same date. However, it has several unusual features; in addition to the strange little window with gritstone dressings, it is unusually thick, and the position of the south door seems quite unrelated to the arcade; all of this could point to its surviving from an earlier phase of the building.

Other medieval features that survive are not closely dateable. The blocked window in the south wall of the chancel which cuts the late-12th century string course may be a 13th-century lancet; west of this a priest's door seems to have been reduced to a low-side window, possibly at the same time. The lower part of the tower is also medieval, although heavily remodelled; the early-19th century print of the church, which seems to show it before the 1812 alterations, shows the tower with diagonal buttresses to its lowest stage, which would suggest a 14th or 15th century date. There are 15th century porch towers in this position at Danby and Hutton Rudby, both in Cleveland, and a 14th-century example set at the west end of a shortened south aisle at Croft-on-Tees.

Several phases of post-medieval work contribute to obscure evidence of the buildings' earlier structural history. A post-restoration remodelling in the 1660s seems to have included the reconstruction of the upper parts of the chancel walls, and some alterations to the south aisle; the two blocked windows towards the east end of the south wall are of this period.

The VCH account (241) states that the chantry chapel on the north side of the church was demolished at this time, and the wall of the north aisle rebuilt using its materials; some materials from this chapel, including 'two canopies of a piscina' are reported to have been incorporated in a farmhouse at High Tunstall.

The two heavy buttresses at the west end of the nave may be of post-medieval date; the early print only shows the southern one, implying (together with discrepancy in fabric between the two) that the northern is a 19th-century addition.

After the renewal of the roofs and remodelling of the tower in 1812/1813, considerable further alterations took place during the long incumbency of the Rev. J.Park (1828-1871), although discrepancies between the various documentary records make their sequence hard to unravel. Reynolds refers to the upper stage of the tower being added 'about sixty years since' (which would date it to c 1834) but the VCH ascribes this to 'about 1860'. The date of the renewal of the aisle windows is also in question; a printed notice formerly in the church dated this to c 1860 (VCH 241, footnote) but Fordyce (1857, 316) states that they were renewed 'about twelve years ago'. Stylistically the simple Y-tracery of the windows in the west end, north aisle, and east end of the south aisle, together with the intersecting head of the east window, all look of earlier 19th-century date (perhaps 1830-1840); the vestry may also be of this period. The three-light window at the east end of the south wall of the south aisle seems rather later, perhaps c1860-1870. The present chancel arch, modelled on the arcade arches, is also a product of Park's campaign of works.

The renewal of the roof in 1895 is documented by a surviving faculty; more recent alterations are listed under 'Faculties and other records of structural work'.

THE CHURCHYARD

The form and situation of the churchyard are both of some interest, capping a steep-sided spur on the south side of the deeply-incised Char beck, with a sub-circular boundary on the two sides - south and east- where the line is not constrained by the precipitous valley edge.

The main entry into the churchyard is at the south-west corner, by a lych gate built in 1881 as a memorial to Rev J.A.Boddy; from here a rubble wall (ruinous in parts) with an arched tile coping, largely rendered, curves round the east side of the

churchyard to a smaller gate at the head of a steep path rising up from the bridge over the beck; on the north the boundary wall is very ruinous, and runs some distance below the crest of the slope.

There are few monuments of especial interest; the regular rows of headstones are mostly of 19th century date, with a few 18th-century survivals, mostly badly weathered. A railed enclosure in the angle of chancel and south aisle contains the tomb of the Park family.

There is no surface indication of 'something like the stone foundations of an earlier building' discovered c 1891 (Reynolds, 179) 'about six feet to the north of the present church', except perhaps for a slight platform just outside the north wall of the north aisle.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The church, with its probable Pre-Conquest origins, is obviously of considerable archaeological interest, although as often it is difficult to predict the survival of sub-surface features. If the foundations referred to by Reynolds were of an earlier church, then one would have to postulate a slightly unusual slight shift of site. Perhaps the foundations were the remains of the 14th-century chantry, perhaps set on the north side of the chancel (where there are hints of a return wall)?

The floors of the church are of no great age; most of the nave is boarded, and the sanctuary stone flagged; one blue limestone slab set centrally in front of the altar may mark the entrance to a vault. The present central heating system is above the floor; although there may well have been an earlier sub-floor system, it is probable that archaeological deposits and structures survive. Any disturbance of floor levels ought to be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief.

Whilst, given the history of renovations and remodelling, it might seem unlikely that medieval plaster and paintings survive, again this cannot be ruled out, and any large-scale disturbance of plaster should be monitored.

Externally, there has been a perimeter drain adjoining the external faces of the church walls since the early 19th century; however this is relatively shallow in parts, and cannot be assumed to have destroyed all archaeological material. The area to the north of the chancel is of especial interest in view of the evidence of a medieval structure there. Any groundworks in the churchyard, and in particular an close to the church itself, will require a watching brief.

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ST PETER'S CHURCH ELWICK HALL

An Archaeological Assessment

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