

St James, Hamsterley

Hamsterley parish church stands alone 0.8 km to the east of the village, a little to the south of the Hamsterley to Witton le Wear road.

The Site

The site of the church is of peculiar interest; it lies away from any old settlement on the crest of a ridge between the valleys of Linburn beck (to the south) and the Wear (to the north); there is evidence of old rigg-and-furrow ploughing in the fields around the church, but not of any former settlement. The only other feature in the area is the Lady Well, now only an overgrown spring, in a small valley c 300 m to the west. An old footpath passes east-west through the churchyard; the present road runs about 100 m to the north. The 1896 Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map shows the church much more isolated than at present, without either the present road to the north or the farm to the south.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The church is an aisleless cruciform building, with chancel and nave only slightly longer than the transepts; in addition there is a porch on the south side of the nave.

The Exterior

The **Nave** is constructed of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone (heavily disguised by mortar and clumsy pointing), with large gritstone quoins at its west end laid in approximate side-alternate fashion; one of the upper quoins at the north-west angle is a re-used medieval cross slab, now badly weathered. There is no plinth. In the centre of the west end is a tall square-headed light with a chamfered surround. The gable has a simple slab coping, the footstones being renewed in the 19th century, and carries a rectangular bell-cote with a string-course, chamfered on its lower angle, below twin square-headed openings, each with a chamfered lintel; above is another similar string and a stepped crenellated top.

The western part of the south wall of the nave is largely covered by the south porch, east of which is a square-headed window of three trefoiled ogee-headed lights, in a hollow-chamfered surround. Its dressings are entirely of tooled ashlar of late-19th or early-20th century character. East again is what appear to be the west jamb of an earlier window, which from its position would appear to pre-date the south transept.

The masonry of the north wall of the nave is again much obscured by its pointing; no structural or architectural features are visible.

The **South Porch** is built of coursed roughly-squared stone with gritstone quoins, including re-used pieces of medieval cross slab. The outer archway has jambs of simple square plan, each consisting of two upright slabs with one long one, bonding back into the wall, in between. These carry impost blocks, hollow-chamfered on the lower angles, from which, rather unhappily, springs a segmental-pointed arch of a single order chamfered both inside and out. Fixed to the gable wall above the arch is a sundial in a nowy-headed panel, with the inscription 'Man fleeth as it were a shadow 1803'. In the west wall is a small square-headed

light with a chamfered surround. The porch gable has a simple coping, chamfered beneath.

Both of the **Transepts** are built of coursed roughly-squared stone, including some quite large blocks (notably in the lower courses of the north transept). They have chamfered plinths, with a slightly-projecting footing course beneath showing through in places, and a string course, chamfered beneath, towards the head of each side wall. Both are of unusual asymmetric section, in each case the east wall being considerably higher than the west - c 1.5 m above the string as opposed to c 0.30 m. The end gables have simple copings of slightly overhanging slabs.

On the west side of the **South Transept** the plinth is interrupted by the projecting upper parts of a remarkable pair of monuments, a cross slab and a female effigy (see 'Sepulchral Monuments' section). The south wall has three lancet windows with chamfered surrounds; parts of the outer jambs of the outer lancets may be of medieval date, but the remainder of their dressings are 19th-century ashlar. Above the central lancet is a small square-headed light, in a broad chamfered surround, which may well be medieval.

At the north end of the east wall of the transept is a blocked square-headed doorway, re-using a medieval grave cover, with a roll-moulded edge, set on its side to form the lintel. South of the doorway are two lancet windows. The southern seems genuine medieval work but the northern is entirely restoration.

The **North Transept** has a good north window of three trefoil-headed lights, with the spandrels pierced, set under a two-centred arch with a hoodmould, chamfered above and below, terminating in carved stops. On the east side is a single-light window with a segmental-pointed head and a chamfered surround, really too broad to be described as a 'lancet'; above, the northern section of the high-level string-course has been cut back or eroded away.

The nature of the pointing makes it hard to assess the fabric of the **Chancel**; it appears to show little evidence of coursing. As with the nave, there is no plinth. There are substantial gritstone quoins at the east end; some of these, in the upper part of the south-east angle, are re-used cross slabs. In the south wall are two lancets; that near the centre of the wall seems entirely 19th-century work, and may be set within a larger infilled opening; that near the east end of the wall seems original medieval work.

The east end has a stepped triplet of lancets in the usual chamfered surrounds. Their dressing are all of 19th-century tooled ashlar, except for the sill and the lowermost block of the southern jamb of the southernmost, which may be genuine 13th-century work. Above the central lancet, in the gable, is a simple square-edged slit vent of uncertain date. The gable coping is chamfered beneath, and, together with the large foot stones and simple finial cross, look of 19th-century date.

The north wall of the chancel has a low buttress-like feature close to the east end, with a scar above it; this is in line with the east wall of what seems to have been a sunk boiler room, now demolished and only visible as an irregular rubbly hollow. The boiler room was approached by steps down on the west side, and communicated with the space beneath the chancel floor by a square-headed opening, now infilled with white engineering brick, its lintel c 0.30 m

above the external ground level. There could well be other features in this wall which are now obscured by the pointing.

The Interior

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

In the **Nave** the south doorway, now opening within the south porch, has a round-headed arch with a continuous chamfer (simply stopped at the foot of each jamb), and simply-moulded imposts which have been partially cut away. There is a hood, chamfered on its lower angle, also carried by the imposts. The door itself is of considerable age; its external face is of three vertical boards, studded, and its internal of horizontal boards. The doorway has a semicircular rear arch, rather higher than the external opening; in its east jamb is a drawbar tunnel, and above its head a tablet recording that the roof was restored in 1960-61. The three-light window to the east of the door has a chamfered segmental rear arch of 19th or early-20th century ashlar.

The west window has a chamfered lintel and broadly-splayed internal jambs, the steeply-sloping sill seems to have been cut down at some time to form a seat-like recess.

The western third of the north wall of the nave is a little thicker than the remainder; this offset increases with height as the upper section of the wall slopes in; it is not clear whether this line marks a rebuilding.

The arches between the nave and transepts are set walls which are a little thinner than those of the nave further west; consequently there is a step-back, provided with tooled ashlar quoins of 19th-century date, in line with the western responds of the arches. The arches are of four-centred form, and of a single chamfered order, springing from simple corbels; both are entirely of 19th-century date.

The blocked doorway in the east wall of the **South Transept** forms a square-headed recess, its sill c 0.40 m above the present floor. Its lintel is formed by another re-used cross slab and there are drawbar tunnels in its jambs (tunnel on north and socket on south?). The two lancets in the same wall have rather distorted rear arches; both seem to have old dressings internally. At the south end of the wall is a square aumbry, considerably wider internally than its external opening (which is rebated for a door) would suggest.

Sections of the outer jambs of the outer lancets in the south wall of the transept look to be ancient, right up to and including the curve of their rear arches, although the remainder of their internal dressings are clearly 19th-century work. Beneath the easternmost is a piscina with a round-headed chamfered arch (whitewashed over); the projecting moulded bowl with its line of nail-head ornament is clearly a 19th century piece.

The single-light window in the east wall of the **North Transept** has an odd basket-arched head internally, although its dressings are so much cemented over that it is difficult to comment as to their age. The large window in the north wall has a broad splay internally and a rear arch of segmental-pointed form, in the form of a separate arch, chamfered on both its lower angle, lower than the splay behind.

The north end of the transept is partitioned off to form a vestry, by a low wooden screen.

The **Chancel** is entered under a roughly two-centred arch, plastered and whitewashed, of a single order, springing from jambs of plain square section, each with a small socket c 1 m above floor level; the only exposed masonry is on the projecting impost blocks, with large nutmeg ornament on their lower angle; the easternmost third of each impost looks 'old', the remainder being restoration.

The two lancets in the south wall of the chancel have lancet-headed rear arches, the dressings of which have been made up in cement or render so that their original form is not discernible; the actual splayed sides of each appear to be of old masonry. At the east end of the wall is a piscina with a roll-moulded trefoiled arch and a projecting bowl of quite bulbous section with a line of nail-head ornament round the top; the shallow bowl has a drain at the rear. All this seems genuine medieval work; adjacent to it on the east is a small rectangular aumbry, without any exposed dressings.

On the north of the sanctuary is rather a puzzling recess, rather like a trefoiled rear arch to a lancet. However, the splay of its sides seems such that, if maintained, the opening would not have pierced the whole thickness of the wall. The dressings of the west jamb (and western half of the arch) are 19th-century, so the feature may not have been restored in its correct form. On the east side of it is a shallow rectangular aumbry.

The interior of the **South Porch** has all its walls covered by render, lined to simulate ashlar. The small window in the west wall has a medieval cross slab re-used as its internal lintel, and sections of at least two further cross slabs are re-used in the stone benches against the side walls. In the north wall, above the doorway, is a tablet in the form of a skewed corbel, bearing the inscription 'restored in the sixtieth year of the Rev. J.G., Milner's incumbency, A.D.1884', with a cross bearing the monogram 'IHS' set diagonally above.

The roofs of the church are all of late 19th or early 20th century date. The nave roof is of five bays. The western three trusses have heavy collars about a metre above the tie-beam, with the apex of the roof being under drawn just above the level of the collar. Three vertical posts rise from tie to collar, one in the centre and one at each side. The easternmost truss, above the transept arches, has a tie-beam set at the level of the collars of the others. Each transept has a single similar truss, set centrally; here the trusses are asymmetric, reflecting the external form of the roofs. The chancel roof is of three bays, with a segmental boarded vault carried on moulded ribs, with the trusses having short king-posts which carried a moulded axial beam supporting the centre of the vault; there is a moulded wall-plate. The tie-beams are carried on large carved stone corbels, apparently of late 19th century date, with the arms of the See of Durham and Surtees on the south, and Blenkinsopp and Rawlins (together with a griffin) on the north.

The roof of the south porch is boarded and under drawn above two large boxed-in purlins

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The **Altar** table is a 19th-century piece, with Gothic panelling. On the north of the sanctuary

is an old **Chest**, probably of 17th century date. Most of the fittings are of late 19th or early 20th century date, and plain in character, including the very simple altar rails, carried on wrought-iron stanchions, the choir stalls and the benches in the nave and south transept; an exception is a restored late-18th century box pew in the north transept. The hexagonal **Pulpit** is of stone, with open Gothic-arched panels, and coloured tiles bearing scenes from Pilgrim's Progress; it was installed in 1885, the gift of Mr Henry Chaytor of Witton Castle. The **Stained Glass** in the east end lancets is by L.C.Evetts, and was installed in 1949. The **Organ**, in the north transept, was built by Nelson of Durham, c1810 and rebuilt and extended by H.A.Prested, also of Durham, being installed in its present location in 1985. The **Screen** which partitions of the vestry at the north end of the transept was constructed in 1992, using older timbers from the former internal vestry at the west end of the nave.

The **Font** stands at the west end of the nave, in front of the west window, within an Entrance Lobby/Baptistery partitioned off from the nave by a simple late-19th century panelled screen. It has a plain circular base and an oddly moulded slender shaft and a bowl, apparently of a different stone, with a moulded rim, with no evidence of any fittings Its date has aroused some antiquarian controversy; Hodgson (1912, 54) suggests, in an uncharacteristically tentative manner, that it dates from around the end of the 12th century; Fowler (1912, 106) places it in the 17th century. The Font Cover was given in 1975.

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

The earliest monuments in the church are the medieval **Cross Slab Grave Covers**, which comprise a collection of some importance, some re-set into the internal wall faces in the 19th century, and some re-used in the fabric. Nos 1-15 are described in detail and illustrated by Ryder (1985, 92-4 and plates 34-35) and nos 16-19 by Ryder (1994, 47 and fig.4); only brief descriptions are given here:

- (1) Slab in situ, alongside the female effigy (see below) beneath the west wall of the south transept. This pair of monuments has attracted some antiquarian interest; Hodgkin (1913, 147) suggests that they commemorate the founder of a chantry within the transept, along with his wife, and cites a case where the founder of such a chantry stipulated that part of his body should 'lie within the wall'. The lower ends of both monuments apparently projected internally, but were cut away last century. The elaborate cross head is carved in relief within a sunk panel; sword on r. of shaft; richly-moulded edge. late 13th or early 14th century.
- (2) Re-set high on internal face of north wall of nave. Small slab with incised cross with fleur-de-lys as terminals and at foot of shaft, and shears on left. 14th century.
- (3) Alongside (2); small slab with incised bow.
- (4) Large slab re-set on west of north transept. Incised coulter and ploughshare.
- (5) Alongside (4). Smaller slab with incised cross with trefoil terminals, stepped base and sword on r. of shaft. later 13th century?
- (6) Slab on east of north transept. relief design of cross with fleur-de-lys terminals with

pellets between, rising from stepped base, with sword on r. 12th century?

- (7) Large limestone slab in north wall of chancel, with matrix for brass cross; later 14th or 15th century.
- (8) Slab on south of chancel. Well-preserved relief design of bracelet cross with trefoil foliage springing from shaft and stepped base, with spoked wheel beneath base and petalled rosette on right. On the left of the cross shaft a chalice and on the right a rectangular object, probably a book, symbolising a priest; On the right of the cross a spear and on the left a dicebox, presumably Emblems of the Passion. c.1250.
- (9) Over blocked door on east of south transept. Incised bracelet cross rising from stepped base with sword on right of shaft and hammer and tongs on left. late 12th or early 13th century.
- (10) Slab re-used as internal lintel of door on east of south transept. The exposed section shows a pointed object - the blade of a small sword or the base of a cross - with below it a pair of shears.
- (11) On west of south transept, Foliated cross with hunting horn on left, and sword on right chamfered edge. Later 13th century.
- (12) Small slab lying loose in recess of blocked door in south transept, with crudely-drawn cross with fleur-de-lys terminals. Later 13th or 14th century.
- (13) North part of western bench in porch. Only hints of incised design, but the edge chamfer has a line of pellets of small balls. 13th century.
- (14) Internal lintel of window on west of porch. Incised emblem, probably a coulter.
- (15) Slab forming the external lintel of the blocked door on the east side of the south transept. Very similar to (4) with coulter and ploughshare.
- (16) Upper part of slab built into south-east quoin of chancel, facing south, c 3 m up. Relief carving of bracelet cross with sword or secondary cross on left and pair of shears on right, much worn. 12th or 13th century.
- (17) Upper part of slab in same quoin, but c 4.5 m up and facing east. Relief carving of bracelet cross with pellets and foliage springing from shaft. 12th or 13th century.
- (18) Part of slab re-used in south-west quoin of south porch, c 1 m up, facing west. Incised design of simple cross with small sword or dagger on right.
- (19) Piece of slab in south-east quoin of south porch, facing east, 2 m up. Incised design, difficult to interpret.
- (20) Upper part of slab in north-west quoin of nave, facing north, c 3.5 m up. Quite elaborate design in relief, with cross head in circle, but very worn.

- (21) In gable of north transept, near eastern verge. Incised cross shaft and ?base.
- (22) Near top of north-east quoin of north transept, facing north. Incised design, very faint.

Built into the base of the west wall of the south transept on the south side of slab (1) is an **Effigy** of a lady: 'the head rests on a cushion and the hands are folded in the act of prayer, but the whole effigy is too much injured to permit a minute description of the costume. The effigy is very rudely carved, and is probably the work of a local sculptor' (Boyle 514)

In the centre of the chancel floor is a 19th-century **Ledger Stone**; at the west end of the nave, to the south of the font, is another, of blue limestone, to Isabel Hodshon of Witton, d.1722

On the west wall of the south transept is a **Wall Tablet** to Anne, widow of the late James Elliot of Middleton in Teesdale, d.1779 (carved by I. Jopling); on the west wall of the north; on the west wall of the north transept is a tablet with a carved coat of arms, largely concealed by the organ. On the north wall of the nave are a few tablets, including 18th-century ones to Thomas Lamb, 'minister of this parish' d.1769 and Elizabeth, wife of the Rev. John Whaley, d.1768.

On the west wall of the north transept is a **Hatchment** for Crosier Surtees of Merryshields, d.1803, with the arms of the Surtees family and the motto 'Malo Mori Quam Fœdari'.

Carved Stones

In the south porch are two large corbels, somewhat weathered; one has the monogram 'CH' and 'fecit' and the other the date '1883'; two further corbels of the same type flank the outer arch of the porch, one bearing an eagle and the other a half-shield with a castle and three keys. Two others lie in the angle between the east wall of the porch and the nave, one with another half-shield bearing three five-petalled flowers and the other 'J.C.M. VICAR'. They were probably internal and carried the roof trusses of the nave, being removed in the 1960 roof renewal.

HISTORICAL NOTES

- 1794 Hamsterley church attracted little attention from the earlier historians. Hutchinson (III, 308) merely commenting that 'the chapel stands on a lofty hill, east of the village'
- 1834 Mackenzie and Ross (II,274) give a fuller account; 'The church was prebendal to Auckland College until the dissolution in 1547; and it contained a chantry or guild, from which Rowland Brown, the last incumbent, received a pension of £2 4s yearly in 1553. It stand about half a mile from the town, and is a neat building, in the form of a cross, with a low western turret. The entrance is by a south porch, inclosing a circular arch. The transept is entered by a pointed arch, and there is a holy water bason on the south side of the chancel. The east window is under a pointed arch, and there are pointed lights at each end of the transept; but the rest of the windows are double, with two circular arches over each. The font is a small circular bason. ...A flag on the floor of the north transept is sculptured with an ornamented cross'.
- 1857 Fordyce (I) relates that 'in March 1853 some sacrilegious persons cut off and stole a great quantity of leads from the roof of the church; and a few days afterwards, one of the bells, the gift of Lady Chaytor, was stolen from the turret'.
- 1883/4 A major restoration of the church took place, Boyle (1892, 513) decrying the work as being 'carried out in the most deplorable way conceivable, the result being the destruction of much of the evidence of its architectural history'

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

Faculty No.	And Date	Works
406	1900	Faculty not granted
485	21.12.1907	Alterations and repairs - to include new pitched roof to chancel replacing low-pitched one of old railway sleepers, and repair heating apparatus, and provide a second bell, also new Holy Table
2474	19.9.33	New oak lectern etc.
2794	15.11.40	Erection of a new organ
4254	12.7.60	Repairs to roof
5156	17 3 70	New font cover
5897	12.2.80	New heating boiler and light fittings
6334	16.1.86	Installation of a memorial lectern
6655	8.1.88	Renewal of lead valley guttering
7082	9.5.90	AC Internal redecoration and repointing external stonework
7477	5.3.92	General improvements
7513	23.4.92.	Levelling of churchyard

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Antiquarian writers have been in general agreement that the church is a product of the 12th and 13th centuries. Boyle (1892, 514) saw the south door as Norman, and the rest of the building as of early 13th century date, but Hodgkin (1913, 147) saw everything as a little later, although his phraseology seems a little confused; the nave and chancel were of 'the late 13th century', the south transept 'about twenty years later' and the north transept as of 'circ. 1300'. Pevsner and Williamson (1983, 298-299) saw the church as 'E.E' (ie Early English, 13th century) except for the Norman south doorway with the north window of the north transept being of c. 1300.

In examining the fabric of the church again, one can echo Boyle's complaint (see Historical Notes) as regards the 1883/4 works having destroyed much of the evidence of the architectural history of the church; in addition, the present pointing, so heavy as to approximate to render, clearly conceals much.

A Pre-Conquest Nave?

The major question would seem to be as to the date of the nave. Its only 'early' architectural feature is the south doorway, with its plain round-headed arch seen alternatively as Norman or (by Hodgkin) as late 13th century. It is so simple that it is difficult to precisely date, but is probably a 13th-century piece. However, the wall in which it is set might be older; the evidence for this is seen both in its angle quoins, which are large squared blocks set in side-alternate fashion, and in its being relatively thin (0.67 m). Both of these are out-of-character with 12th and early-13th century buildings in the area and could be taken as pointing to a Pre-Conquest origin, and it is tempting to draw parallels with another of the chapels-of-ease to St Andrews Auckland, Escomb. Against this it could be argued that at least one of the quoins in question is a re-used medieval cross slab (although this is admittedly high up at the north-west corner, and could be a late repair or heightening; internal irregularities point to structural movement and repair within the north wall of the nave) and that the west wall itself, as opposed to the side walls, is thick (1.4 m) - which again may be the result of later alteration, probably related to the construction of the bell cote. There are no signs of early quoining at the east end of the nave, except for one rough piece of projecting masonry on the south; however, large blocks are used again at the east end (including more medieval cross slabs) but these are almost certainly re-used.

The original nave, allowing for a later internal thickening of the west wall, would have measured c 14 by 5.4 m internally, proportions of around 2.6:1, not quite as elongate as Escomb (1:3).

This suggestion of the survival Pre-Conquest fabric is made with a considerable degree of caution, especially with the lack of corroborative evidence such as Saxon sculptural material. The absence of early documentation need not tell too much against it (as Escomb is similarly unattested historically); the peculiarity of the site, so distant from the present (medieval?) village, might also argue an early foundation.

13th Century Reconstruction

Chancel and transepts are clearly later than the nave. The chancel walls are only a little thicker than those of the nave, but the fact that it is as wide as the nave argues for it being an addition, as does the odd fragment of projecting masonry in the angle of chancel and south transept which it is difficult to interpret as anything other than a remnant of an earlier angle quoin. Many of the churches in Durham had their chancels rebuilt or extended in the 13th century, and the lancet windows and piscina at Hamsterley are all unarguably of this date.

The transepts are also clearly additions; this is shown by that on the south clearly replacing an earlier window, although unfortunately pointing without and plaster within render the vestiges of that window undatable. The strangely-positioned cross slab and effigy beneath the west wall of the south transept are almost certainly coeval with the wall; the cross slab looks stylistically of c.1300, although the lancet windows in the chancel could be fifty years earlier. A date within the last quarter of the century might be an acceptable compromise.

The evidence for the date of the north transept is in its three-light north window, which stylistically can be ascribed to the early years of the 14th century; it is very similar to windows in the chancel of Stanhope Church.

Post-Medieval Works

The date of the south porch poses a puzzle; it may be of post-medieval date but, like other parts of the church, has medieval cross slabs re-used in its angle quoins. The head of its outer archway does not seem to fit the jambs which, perhaps simply by coincidence, have an odd echo of 'early' techniques in their having two upright stones with a horizontal one, bonding back into the wall, between, an arrangement well known in Anglo-Saxon architecture where it has been termed 'Escomb fashion'. The only other pre-restoration features are seen in the west end, where the castellated double bellcote is clearly a post-medieval feature, usually ascribed to the 17th century; the tall square-headed window below it is probably of the same date.

Our knowledge of the church as it stood prior to the major works of 1883/4 is somewhat limited, as no old photographs or other illustrations appear to have survived. The only two sources are a ground plan of 1825 in a book of surveys compiled by Archdeacon Thorp (Durham Cathedral Library), reproduced in the current guide pamphlet, and the 1834 description by Mackenzie and Ross (See Historical Notes section). From these one can reconstruct the church as having a single large sash window in the east gable, with a pointed arch, and possibly a similar one in the south end of the south transept. Two other windows are shown on the plan (as well as that in the west end), on the south of the chancel and east of the south transept, which must be the ones which Mackenzie and Ross describe as 'double, with two circular arches over each'; these might have been mullioned windows with round-arched lights, possibly of late 18th or early 19th century date. The plan also shows a doorway near the west end of the south wall of the chancel and two structures on the north of the chancel, a vestry on the east and a stable alongside. Interestingly the plan shows no sign of any arches into either the transepts or the chancel; Mackenzie and Ross state 'the transept is entered by a pointed arch' but make no mention of any chancel arch.

The Late 19th and 20th Centuries

Then came 1883 and the restoration, the faculty for which does not seem to survive. As one would expect at this period, the church was re-medievalised in a fairly ruthless manner, although there does seem to have been good evidence for the triplets of lancets re-introduced to the eastern and southern gables. New arches were built spanning the openings into the transepts. The chancel arch is a puzzle; the substantial wall in which it is set, and the impost moulding, which is at least old in part, make it look an authentic 13th-century feature, which is how post-restoration antiquarian sources all interpret it. However, its absence from the 1825 plan (which admittedly seems more concerned with showing pew arrangements than architectural detail) coupled with the fact that its dressings are all concealed by plaster (unlike those of other openings in the church) together suggest that it may not be what it seems.

The vestry on the north side of the chancel seems to have been rebuilt at this time, without its attached stable, as the 1895 Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map shows a small structure here a little off-set from the east end, whereas the 1825 plan shows the east walls of vestry and chancel as being in line. At some subsequent date, perhaps in 1908, this vestry was demolished. There is a reference to a former boiler room beneath it, which extended beneath the chancel, being sealed off in the 1980 Quinquennial.

Further quite extensive works were carried out in 1908 when the low-pitched chancel roof composed of railway sleepers - an innovation of 1883/4 or a little earlier? - was replaced by the present more steeply-pitched roof. Further restoration work on the roofs was carried out in 1960.

THE CHURCHYARD

The churchyard is sub-rectangular in plan; the southern and western boundaries are quite close to the building; there have clearly been extensions to the north and particularly to the east. The churchyard walls are of roughly-coursed stone and of either dry-stone or roughly-mortared construction. The gateway to the churchyard, to the north-west of the church, is flanked by rusticated piers, rebated for gates, with simply-moulded caps that seem to have lost their finials; they may well be of 18th-century date.

The headstones on the south include some good 18th-century examples, including some small and quite vernacular stones, particularly toward the south-west corner.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

As already outlined in the 'Structural History' section, Hamsterley church, and in particular its early origins, is potentially of considerable archaeological interest. Although both the above-ground fabric and underfloor deposits have suffered considerable disturbance - the latter by an underfloor heating system, as well as the usual burials (there is a family tomb to the Blenkinsopp family of Hoppyland Hall in the centre of the chancel) - they are nevertheless worthy of detailed archaeological monitoring in the event of any works entailing their disturbance. If any re-pointing scheme is carried out, the opportunity should be seized to make a proper record of the fabric of the building; as such works will probably bring features of considerable interest to light, as has happened, for example, at Sedgfield. This is also true of re-plastering of internal wall surfaces where, in addition to concealed structural features in the walls themselves, it is possible that earlier plaster, with remains of mural decoration, may survive.

Peter F Ryder May 1998

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An Archaeological Assessment

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ST JAMES' CHURCH,
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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
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St James, Hamsterley. Archaeological Assessment May 1998. P.F.Ryder. 1. South-west view
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