

St Edwin's Church, High Coniscliffe

St Edwin's Church at High Coniscliffe (NZ 226153) occupies a dramatic site on top of a cliffed eminence on the north bank of the River Tees, presumably the "Cynigen Cliffe" (King's Cliff) of the place name, although quarrying of the Magnesian Limestone is at least partly responsible for the topography in its present form.

Description

The church consists of a nave with a west tower and a five-bay north aisle (with north porch), and an aisleless chancel with a vestry on the north.

The **West Tower** rises in four stages, and is built of coursed roughly-squared stone. At the base is a steeply chamfered double plinth; between the first and second stages is a string course chamfered above and below, and between the upper stages are chamfered set-backs. Above the belfry openings the oversailing parapet is carried on rather weathered corbels; the parapet has an embattled coping and a crocketed pinnacle at each corner, with an octagonal stone spire rising within it.

The lower three stages each have a narrow square-headed window in each external wall, in chamfered surrounds; those of the third stage have narrower chamfers than those below. On the east side of the third stage the steep roof-line of the earlier medieval nave is clearly visible. The belfry openings are each a pair of two-centred arches lights divided by a circular shaft with a simple moulded base and capital. That on the west has what looks like a cut-back hoodmould outlining a single enclosing arch; on the south and east each light seems to have had its own arched hood. The northern belfry opening is concealed by the clock face. On the west a pair of large stone spouts project from the base of the parapet

The **Nave** is constructed of roughly-coursed roughly-shaped stone, often no more than rubble. There are substantial alternating angle quoins, quite irregular in form, at the western angles, showing that the aisle is an addition. A chamfered plinth seen at the west end, and extending part way along the south wall, clearly pre-dates the tower plinth. The parapets of nave, chancel and aisle are all similar, set on a chamfered oversailing course and with a chamfered coping; they are clearly of 19th century date. The low-pitched roof, like those of all parts of this church, are not visible from ground level.

Towards the west end of the south side of the nave is a 12th-century window, a single round-arched light with a chamfered surround, its monolithic lintel neatly grooved to simulate five regular voussoirs. The next window to the east is also a single chamfered round-arched light, with a chamfered hoodmould that has square block terminals; its dressings are all in finely-tooled 19th-century ashlar, and it occupies the position of the former south door, moved to the north side of the church in 1844. Some larger well-squared blocks to either side probably survive from the outer jambs of the original doorway, and the remains of whitewash still adhering to the wall face shows the area covered by the pre-1844 south porch. A break in the plinth also indicates the former door position; a short distance further east the plinth ends at a point at which the external face of the wall steps c 0.2 m outwards; this step was originally concealed by the east wall of the old porch, as higher up the wall (ie above the eaves of the former porch) old and new walls are flush. The remainder of the wall seems to have been completely rebuilt in 1844; whitewashed blocks in the lower courses are clearly re-used from its predecessor. This section contains three more round-arched single-light windows, this time

with roll-moulded surrounds and chamfered hoods with carved stops, and a sill string chamfered above and below. The heavy stepped buttress at the east end of the wall is medieval, and has a moulded stone, possibly part of a grave slab, built into its lower courses on the east side.

Only the upper part of the north wall of the nave is exposed, above the aisle roof. It is of roughly-coursed rubble, and has remains of plaster dating from before 1844, when it was enclosed beneath the more steeply-pitched aisle roof. The four clerestory windows are of early 19th century date¹; each is a single round-arched trefoil-cusped light with a hoodmould that has turned-back ends in the Tudor fashion.

The **North Aisle** is built of roughly coursed rubble; on the north there is a scatter of larger squared blocks, obviously re-used, in the lower courses. There is a rough projecting footing course at the west end (at the same level as the nave plinth, suggesting that the ground level had risen by the time the aisle was added), which incorporates a tapering slab (possibly as grave slab) at the base of the north-west quoin; the footing ends c 3 m east of the north porch. The west wall of the aisle has no openings; an earlier and much steeper roof line is visible; all but the lowest two stones of the north-west angle are 19th-century ashlar. On the north, to the east of the porch are four 1844 lancets in broad chamfered surrounds; their jambs each have a large upright block with a shorter horizontal one above and below. The east wall of the aisle, inside the boiler room, is heavily pointed, but seems featureless.

The **North Porch** is of c 1870 but was rebuilt in the 1970s, re-using the old material; there are substantial angle quoins, and a scatter of large squared blocks. The outer arch is a two-centred one, with a continuous chamfer, with a hoodmould chamfered above and below and ending in the usual carved stops. The coped gable has moulded kneelers and carries a cross

The **Chancel** is built of similar roughly coursed rubble fabric to the nave/roughly squared stone. On the south there is a rough projecting footing that changes into a rather crudely chamfered plinth c 2 m short of the east end. Set west-of-centre is a priest's door with a steep two-centred arch; above it is a short lancet window, and on either side a longer lancet; all the openings have hoodmoulds chamfered above and below, with carved stops like those of the nave windows, and all are in 19th-century ashlar. There are no indications of any older openings. A small flat buttress at the east end of the wall, and the south-east angle quoins above it, again are all in tooled-and-margined 19th-century ashlar.

The east end has an old chamfered plinth, missing for a metre or so at the south end, and above that probable medieval walling up to a big chamfered set back c 1.5 m above the ground. The upper section of wall seems to have been all rebuilt, except for the old and irregular quoins at the north-east angle. The stepped triplet of lancets, with their linked hoodmoulds and outer relieving arches of roughly-shaped voussoirs, are all of 1844, as is the shallow -pitched coped gable with its eight-terminal cross fleury finial.

Most of the north wall of the chancel is concealed by the vestry. The short section at the east end seems undisturbed 13th-century work, with its chamfered plinth and a lancet window with its head cut into a single large slab. To the west of the vestry the upper part of the wall is exposed, above the roof of the boiler house; this has what may be a straight joint, with to the west of it a re-used section of Pre-Conquest cross shaft. The lower part, inside the boiler

¹They are shown on the 1844 drawings

house, is obscured by heavy pointing, but has remains of a chamfered plinth.

The **Vestry** is quite a substantial structure of two storeys, with quite large roughly-alternating angle quoins and walls of the usual coursed rubble, including many river cobbles. There is a hollow-chamfered oversailing course below the old embattled parapet. At the east end is a square-headed two-light mullioned window with old bars inside the present glazing, whilst above is a single-light window with a rather broader chamfered surround and its glazing inside the old bars. The north and west walls are quite plain; a 20th-century stack rises from the centre of the western parapet.

The Interior

Inside the north porch the north door is a re-set 12th-century feature, brought from the south side of the nave. It has a round-headed arch of two orders, the inner with a continuous chamfer (probably once interrupted by imposts which have later been cut back) and the outer a series of sixteen beakheads, originally carried on jamb shafts of which the decayed capitals and imposts survive; the eastern capital shows some leaf carving. The outer jambs have hollows for the lost shafts, but are roughly made in rubble and may only date from the rather inexpert reassembly of the doorway c1870. The doorway now holds 19th-century panelled double doors.

Above the arch, and also brought from a corresponding position in the south wall, is a rectangular carved panel with a low relief carving of the Agnus Dei. Above are the incised letters 'AGNU'; to either side of an enclosing circle stand angels in long robes, with outstretched wings, trampling underfoot a pair of serpents whose tails intertwine with the central circle. Although sometimes described as a Saxon stone, this slab is probably contemporary with the doorway. Above the stone is a socket for the ridge of the earlier porch, c 0.3 m below its successor.

Access to the **Tower** is by a shoulder-arched doorway in the centre of the west wall of the nave; the doorway has a socket for a drawbar (indicating that the tower could be used as a defensible retreat) and an inner lintel formed by an early grave slab. The windows of the three lower stages all have simple slabs as their internal heads; that of the western in the third stage is another early slab, with interlace (see below). Access to the first floor of the tower is by a steep ladder stair, rising westward alongside the north wall. This is a rare medieval survival, and consists of two steeply inclined square-section timbers, to which are nailed fifteen triangular-section blocks, some with slots and mortices, indicating that they have been re-used from some even older structure.

The first floor of the tower is carried on three heavy north-south beams of considerable age. In the south-east corner of the second stage a heavy corbel projects from the east wall, c 1 m above the floor, and at the north-east corner (inside the clock shaft) is a rough opening that seems to run through most of the thickness of the wall, strangely placed overlapping the line of the inner face of the north wall of the tower². A 19th-century ladder stair rises to the second floor

²Hodgson (1870, 161) considers this 'contrived for enabling the ringer to see the right time for sounding the *sanctus* in the mass'; Billings' plate however shows an old clock face here, suggesting that the opening may be post-medieval.

The second floor is carried on five ancient north-south beams (the westernmost curving at one end), with a more recent girder added alongside the south wall. The east wall here shows the upper part of the original gable end of the early nave, with a small trapezoidal block at its apex; another 19th-century ladder stair rises to the belfry, the floor of which is carried on three big north-south beams.

The interior of the spire is open to the belfry, its alternate faces carried on squinch arches spanning the corners of the tower below. A further short ladder gives access to the parapet, via a small square-headed opening in the south-east face of the spire.

The interior of the main body of the church is plastered and whitewashed, the only exposed dressings being those of the arcade and the chancel arch. In the **Nave** the north arcade is of five bays, with two-centred arches of two chamfered orders, all the stonework (except capitals and bases) looks to have been retooled in the 19th century. The outer orders have broach stops above the capitals, and the hoodmould (towards the nave only) is chamfered above and below, ending in stops, that have probably been re-worked, c 0.50 m above the capitals. The octagonal capitals, which are of irregular plan, are quite damaged and seem authentic circular; although the circular piers have been re-cut the rather damaged 'holdwater' bases on their rough octagonal plinths again seem genuine. The responds have keel-shaped shafts; the eastern is the better preserved of the two. Above the arcade the clerestory windows have plain square internal lintels.

The windows on the south of the nave all have plain round rear arches; where the wall-face steps south there is a crude vertical chamfer on step; the internal face of the older wall to the west shows a marked batter

The nave roof, of 1844, is of nine bays with a half bay at each end; the low-pitched trusses have central king posts with four shorter verticals to each side, and carry a ridge and single level of purlins, with narrow chamfers. The tie-beams themselves rest on short stub-ties at each end, which in turn are carried by wall-posts, with trefoil cusping between wall-post, stub tie and arch braces; the wall-posts rise from large quadrant-shaped ashlar corbels. At the centre of each tie-beam is a painted shield.

The arch to the **Chancel** is offset north-of-centre; it is of steep two-centred form and of two orders, the inner with a narrow chamfer, and the outer with a bowtel moulding between two rolls and hollows. There is a hoodmould with a bowtel and nailhead ornament, coming right down onto the southern respond but disappearing into the wall c 1 m or so above the northern. The responds both have keeled shafts with fillets, and stiff-leaf style foliage to their capitals. The southern capital has nail head at the impost, above crossed pairs square-ended leaves; the shaft rises from a base, c1.5 m above the floor (behind the pulpit), cut away towards the nave but with 'holdwater' mouldings towards the chancel. At the level of the capital there is rather an awkward arrangement to the west of a re-cut block and below it the remains of a moulding returning south again, perhaps a remnant of the eastern respond of a lost south arcade (see 'Structural History' section. Above the lowermost stones of the outer order of the arch and hood have been renewed.

The northern respond has a capital with more elaborate flowers; the shaft below springs from a simple moulded corbel c 1.5 m above the floor, which together with the moulded base of its southern counterpart suggests there was at one time a low stone screen here.

The openings in the chancel all have plain rear arches, and there are no visible remains of any medieval ritual arrangements such as piscinae or sedilia. On the north is a large round-arched door to the vestry, with a continuous chamfer. The chancel roof is of four bays with a half bay at each end, and identical to that of the nave.

Inside the **Vestry** there is a small wall locker immediately to the south of the east window, the internal jambs of which are set virtually square to the wall. A modern wall safe at the west end of the north wall appears to have destroyed a medieval fireplace with chamfered jambs and lintel. A small trapdoor is the only access to the room above, which has a rebated wall-locker in its north wall, and four corbels at the head of the south wall, carrying the timbers of a modern roof.

Fittings and Furnishings

The **Choir Stalls** are of 15th century date, and have good carved poppy heads; the front of the reader's desk on the south is a 19th-century copy. The altar rails look to be of 20th century date, and the altar table 19th. In the nave the pews, and the panelled dado, are all of the 19th century; the Pulpit is of the 20th century. The Stained Glass is all of 19th and 20th century dates, and not of outstanding importance.

The **Font**, at the west end of the north aisle, has a semi-octagonal plinth and a circular shaft and bowl with simple mouldings; it is of medieval date, but has probably been re-tooled; Hodgson (1870, 160) thought it 'a little rude, and in no respect noteworthy'. The base is probably of the 19th century, as is the font cover.

In the Tower the **Clock** is of 1892, by W.Potts & Sons of Leeds; the clock case, on the north side of the third stage, bears pencilled graffiti going back to the beginning of the 20th century, and of local historical interest.

The **Bell Frames** have three parallel pits (Pickford frame layout 3:1) and three old short-headed trusses (a rarity in the North East) survive; these are of Pickford type 3D (sill, king-post, short head, and braces from the sill jointed to post and head); they seem to have been later converted to a long-headed form. Much more recently, the bells have been re-hung from a girder directly above.

There are three **Bells**; Hodgson (1870, 162) gives the inscriptions as:

(1) *I.H.C. - Maria - I.H.C. - Ora - I.H.C. - Pro Nobis*

(2) FRANCIS BOWES ESQUIOR T.V R.T 1681

(3) ROBERT BOWES ESQ. RICH.CARR PARSON, J.W. A.H. CHURCHWARDENS 1727

Sepulchral Monuments

Ryder (1985, 68-9 & pl.14) lists and illustrates five medieval grave slabs:

(1) Tapering slab in floor of north aisle; 18th-century initials 'M.V.' but with low angle lighting a 12th or 13th century cross can be made out, with a Lombardic inscription, probably indecipherable, running along the shaft.

- (2) Slab now displayed in porch; unusual design with triple incised border and geometric patterns including two pairs of shears, perhaps late 11th or early 12th century.
- (3) Slab forming inner lintel of doorway from nave to tower; design with raised cross shaft and geometric motifs, perhaps late 11th or early 12th century.
- (4) Fragment of incised bracelet cross of late 12th or 13th century date; formerly built into north wall of porch (external face) to west of door, present position uncertain.
- (5) Slab re-used as inner lintel of west window of third stage of tower; motifs include interlaced plait design, geometric patterns and a pair of shears. An important stone, unique in its juxtaposition of Pre-Conquest (the plait) and medieval (the shears) motifs; it seems to be undergoing active decay and would merit some conservatory treatment.

In the floor at the east end of the north aisle is a blue limestone slab with a brass inscription that Boyle (18... 665) give as:

*Orate p' aia Willm Berwys quondm baltui de Conscliff qī
obit decimo die Nobebr' A° dni M° v'xix° Ira dncalis b*

He records that this plate was at one time removed to Bishop Cosin's library at Durham but restored to the church many years later.

In centre of the nave at its west end is a large tapering slab of black limestone with the remains of marginal black letter inscription, now very worn (one word, 'April' alone is legible), with an indent for removed brass plate.

Post-Medieval Monuments.

In the south-east corner of the nave the pulpit overlies two ledger slabs, which have at one time had brass plates; the southern has an inscription to Christopher Vasey senior, d. 1678, but the northern is uninscribed. The westernmost of the row of old slabs in the north aisle, now broken into three, has an inscription to Lawrence Copland, and is probably of 18th century date. In the floor of the chancel is a large ledger stone with a coat of arms and inscription to 'Francis Bows Knight and Margaret his wife', of late 17th or early 18th century character. On the north wall of the chancel is an impressive mural tablet to Sir Francis Bowes d.1677, erected by his son, another Francis Bowes, in 1684; it has a broken pediment with an urn, and shafts with Corinthian capitals.

Carved Stones

Cramp (1984, 59-61) lists seven pieces of Pre-Conquest sculpture built into the walls:

- (1) In external face of north wall of tower 18" from ground. Fragment of cross shaft, 10th century.
- (2) In external face of west wall of tower 15" from ground, part of cross shaft. Last half of 19th century.

- (3) High in south wall of nave at west end. Possible cross shaft, of uncertain date.
- (4) In external face of south wall of nave. Part of cross-shaft or head. Mid 10th to mid 11th century.
- (5) In internal face of east wall of porch, below window. Part of cross shaft: late 10th century?
- (6) In north wall of north aisle, about half way along, 4 ' up. Part of cross shaft; first half of 10th century.
- (7) In external face of west wall of tower 15' up. Fragment, of uncertain date.

Four further pieces are mentioned by older writers but incorrectly described by Cramp (ibid, 155-6) as now lost:

- (8) Internal head of west window of third stage of tower. This is here described as medieval grave cover (5).
- (9) Lintel of door from nave to tower; here described as medieval grave cover (3)
- (10) Inner lintel of south window of lowest stage of tower; still present, but now no visible design.
- (11) Moulded fragment built into east side of foot of buttress at east end of south wall of nave.

In addition to these one can now add:

- (12) Internal east wall of lower stage of tower, high up and near south end.
- (13) External face of north wall of chancel, near west end, above boiler house roof. A large piece of carved cross shaft, the most obvious of all the Pre-Conquest fragments.

Historical Notes

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| 778 | The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that 'in this year Aethelbald and Heardberht slew three high reeves, Ealdulf, son of Bosa, at Cyninges Clife, and Cynewulf and Ecga at Helathryn, on the 11 th of the Kalends of April; and then Alfwold succeeded to the kingdom, and drove Aethelred from the land' |
| 10 th century | At the end of the 10 th century Styrt,m son of Ulf, records that 'I bought with my own money, and have given to St Cuthbert, four carucates of land at Cincgesclife. |
| 1794 | The first antiquarian description of the church is provided by the Durham historian Hutchinson (1794, 210-212)...'the church stands on the highest ground, almost surrounded by the deep workings of the quarry; and having a tower and stone spire, is an object seen from a |

considerable distance westward. The chancel is thirteen paces in length, and six in width; to the east, a window of three lights, three narrow windows to the south and one to the north: It is separated from the nave by a lofty pointed arch, rising from pilasters, whose capitals are ornamented with foliage in pierced work. The nave is twenty-four paces in length, has an aisle to the north, and by the appearance of the south wall, it seems there was formerly an aisle on that side. The north aisle is formed by four round pillars, not above five feet in height, with ancient Saxon capitals, supporting pointed arches, which denotes a modern reparation; the whole width of the nave is not nine paces: there are four irregular windows to the south, and three to the north. A monument to the family of Bowes, of Thornton, richly ornamented, and paced against the north wall, is mouldering away by the dampness’.

- 1823 Surtees (1823, 379) adds that the east window ‘consists of three lights, under a square moulding’.
- 1834 Mackenzie and Ross (1834, 177-178) add that two of the arches of the north arcade were ‘now walled up’.
- 1844 A major restoration of the church was carried out; a drawing of the interior at this time, whilst the roof was removed, is given by Billings (1846, 26); this shows a large blocked arch in the west end (mentioned in some subsequent accounts, such as Fordyce (1857, 538) but this is probably an error.

Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work

Faculty (all DDR/EJ/FAC)	Date	Works
-	1844	Extensive alterations, including re-roofing. Plans and elevations made prior to these works are preserved in the Society of Antiquaries Library, Burlington House, London, and in part reproduced by Ryder (1989)
3/323	1891	Alterations, including re-laying of floor, re-seating of church and 'sundry alterations in the heating apparatus, pulpit, font, chancel screen etc'.
3/487/4	8.1.1907	New organ and reredos
3/2376	15.7.1931	Tablet and lych gate
3/5539	23.1.1975	Removal of chancel screen, one step from the sanctuary and oak canopy
3/9477	26.11.2002	Rehanging of bells and associated works.

Structural History

This is a shortened version of the reconstruction of the structural history of the church set out by Ryder (1989, 61-62).

The west end of the nave and western part of the south wall of the nave appear to be of mid-12th century date, to judge from the old south door, now re-set in the north aisle. It is not clear how long the 12th-century nave was; an aisleless nave with a chancel arch in the present position would seem inordinately long and narrow.

The church was enlarged to its present size in the first half of the 13th century, either in one or a series of closely-spaced phases of work. In addition to its full-length north aisle the nave seems to have had a shorter south aisle or south-east chapel, perhaps of only two bays. Evidence of this is mentioned by Hutchinson, but ignored by later writers; the odd form of the south respond of the chancel arch is best explained by its once having been part of a combined respond serving both chancel arch and the lost arcade.

According to Hodgson the tower received its embattled parapet and spire in the 14th century. In the 15th or early 16th century a new low-pitched roof seems to have been constructed, and the outer wall of the north aisle heightened³; the present two-storeyed vestry may have been added at the same time.

As often, post-medieval alterations are poorly chronicled, and the evidence of them has been

³The Archbishop of York's Visitation Register for 1501 refers to the north side of the church as being in need of repair.

largely swept away by 19th-century restoration. The south aisle or chapel may have been demolished in the mid-16th century after the Dissolution of the Chantries; the 1844 drawings show a window that may have been of this period in the rebuilt section of the south wall of the nave. There was probably a gallery in the western part of the nave; Hutchinson's print shows a window high in the south wall of the nave near its west end, and early 19th-century plans show a cross-wall near the west end of the nave, that could well have carried the front of such a gallery.

Discrepancies between Hutchinson's print and the 1844 drawings suggests that considerable alterations to windows took place in the early 19th century; plain mullioned windows replaced narrower lancets in the chancel, and the square-headed east window of the chancel (perhaps of late 15th or 16th century date) was replaced by a simple Gothic successor; the clerestory windows are also probably of this period.

The 1844 restoration was fairly drastic; it may have been prompted by continuing structural failure of the rebuilt section of the south wall of the nave that replaced the removed arcade. Architecturally the windows were homogenised into a vaguely 'Early English' style, which Hodgson twenty-five years later saw as 'workhouse Gothic...a sort of hideous caricature of the art of the thirteenth century'. He was not impressed by the interior either, describing 'low deal roofs and cumbrous pews bedaubed with varnish the colour and apparent consistency of treacledark, damp, dismal and soul-depressing to a degree. An atmosphere of cold obstructive Protestantism pervades everywhere'.

Around 1870 it would appear that the south door and porch were transferred to their present position on the opposite side of the church.

Further works were carried out in 1891, but largely restricted to the fittings and furnishing of the church. More recent works include the rebuilding of the north porch in the 1970s and the unfortunate destruction of the vestry fireplace when a new wall safe was inserted, apparently in the 1990s.

The Churchyard

The churchyard is of trapezoidal plan; towards the main road on the north is a dwarf wall, from which railings have been removed, and an attractive lych gate of c 1931; at the east end of the wall is a gateway with plain square piers that have simple block capitals, and just beyond the Church Hall (the old National School), apparently of mid-19th century date. On the south of the churchyard is the former Vicarage, another mid-19th century building, rising directly from the cliff face that encircles the promontory on south, east and west. The oldest monuments in the churchyard appear to be a scatter of small early 18th century headstones on the south; those on the north of the church are mostly of the 19th century, the largest a cenotaph to Mary Ann, the four-year-old daughter of John and May Priestman, d.1861.

Archaeological Assessment

As in any medieval church, one can expect to find many generations of burial beneath the floor of the present building, along with possible structural remains of earlier structures. These remains will have been disturbed to some extent the 19th-century underfloor heating system (which existed beneath the nave at least, as the 1891 faculty plans show), but nevertheless any works entailing disturbance of floors and underlying deposits will require archaeological

monitoring. Externally a perimeter drain has been formed around the building, which will have disturbed archaeological layers adjacent to the wall faces.

Internally, it is possible that the present wall plaster covers earlier layers; Billings' plate shows the walls still plastered after the roof was removed in 1844; it seems unlikely that he would have made his error as regards the blocked arch in the west end if the walls had been stripped.

There are slab floors in the nave and aisle, with boarded areas beneath the pews; the present heating pipes are above the floor, but the plans accompanying the 1891 faculty make it clear that there was an under-floor heating system, at least in the nave.

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