

St Michael and All Angels, Houghton-le-Spring

The parish church of Houghton-le-Spring stands amongst trees in its sizeable churchyard at the centre of the cluster of older buildings that remain at the centre of what is largely a 19th and 20th century town; it contains fabric of a number of medieval dates with some quite notable architectural detail, despite having undergone heavy alterations last century.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The church consists of a four-bay aisled nave with a south porch, a crossing carrying a tower, transepts, and a chancel with an organ chamber on the north and what originally seems to have been a detached two-storeyed building (Clergy and Upper Vestries) to the south, now linked to choir and transept by a single-storeyed block (the Choir Vestry).

The Exterior

The external walls of the nave and aisles share the common characteristics of having a chamfered plinth and a moulded string at the level of the sills of the windows. The majority of the plinth, which steps upwards with the eastward rise of the ground, looks authentic medieval work; in places there is a lower chamfered member. In its present form the string course is virtually all 19th-century restoration.

The west wall is of squared stone; below the string-course the stones are very square in shape, and may be re-used 12th-century masonry; in places the eroded face of blocks has been made up with broken brick and rendered over, although the render is now falling away. The walls above the string, and the side walls of the aisles, are of more elongate blocks. This masonry is quite weathered in parts. At the west end the distinction between medieval and 19th-century work is not always clear, but in the side walls it is obvious that medieval masonry does survive, with broad patches of 19th-century fabric around the present windows.

The west window of the **Nave** is of five lights with trefoiled ogee heads, with reticulated tracery above, in a surround moulded with two hollow chamfers; the mullions and tracery are 20th-century restoration (although apparently faithful to the original) and the arch and hoodmould (which returns as a short string, to join the buttresses on either side) look to be largely of cement. Only the jambs look to be undisturbed 14th-century work; the sill is a modern replacement. The upper part of the gable is clearly of 19th-century date, along with its 'spheric triangle' window (containing three quatrefoil lights, under a hoodmould with head stops), kneelers, coping and the base of a gable finial (the finial cross itself fell recently).

The west window is flanked by large stepped buttresses with gabled tops, in line with the nave arcades. The southern has a shallow recess or sunk panel on its upper section, whilst the northern does not. There is no evidence of any windows in the west walls of the aisles.

The side walls of the nave stand up above the aisles roofs, although there are no clerestory windows. On the south this section of wall is of roughly-coursed and roughly squared stone, with many large blocks that have a crude diagonal tooling; it looks almost like a Victorian attempt to simulate ancient fabric; there appear to be occasional irregularities, but nothing that can be readily interpreted. On the north the fabric is quite different; the lower section of the exposed

wall-face is of quite small rubble, and the upper part of larger roughly-squared stone. The whole building has a moulded eaves course of 19th-century date, and graduated Lakeland slate roofs, with a ceramic cresting of fleur-de-lys, now badly damaged..

At the south-west corner of the **South Aisle** are a pair of stepped buttresses, with recesses copying that of the buttress south of the west window; they look as if they may be entirely of 19th-century date. There is an obvious ragged joint in the south wall of the aisle a metre or so from the buttress, which may mark the beginning of surviving medieval fabric.

The 19th-century south porch projects from the second bay of the aisle, and encloses the south door, which seems to be medieval work, now whitewashed over; this has quite a broad four-centred arch, with a continuous convex chamfer, and a moulded hood with turned-back ends.

On either side of the porch are evidences of a wider predecessor; these are especially noticeable on the west, where the scar of the removed west wall is very obvious; below this a lower chamfered plinth commences. Above are cuts for two earlier roof lines, both more shallowly-pitched than that of the present porch; an obvious socket may be associated with a wall-plate for the higher roof. On the east there is only evidence of a single old roof line.

The other bays of the aisle each have a two-light window under a pointed arch with a hoodmould that terminates in square blocks, as if the intended stops were never carved; the jambs have a sunk chamfer. In between the eastern bays is a gable-topped stepped buttress with a roll-moulded coping, that looks entirely of 19th-century date.

The side wall of the **North Aisle** seems to have been more heavily rebuilt than that of the south, although the plinth generally seems ancient, except for a patched section that seems to be the only visible sign of the former north door. There are four 19th-century two-light windows of the same type as those in the south aisle; the central of the three gable-topped buttresses looks to be medieval work, or at any rate considerably older than the others.

The **South Porch** is of gritstone ashlar and has a two-stepped chamfered plinth and stepped diagonal buttresses at the southern angles. In each side wall is a spheric-triangle window, under hoodmoulds with head stops; internally these have chamfered segmental rear arches. The outer arch is of two-centred form, and of two quite richly-moulded orders, the inner dying into the chamfered jambs, the outer carried on attached shafts; the hoodmould has stops in the form of the heads of a queen (left) and a bishop (right); the coped gable has a finial cross. The roof structure of the porch is a quite elaborate Victorian piece with ashlar pieces and scissor braces.

The **South Transept** is of three bays,; on the west the inner bay is covered by the nave aisle, and on the east the single-storeyed extension abuts the inner two bays.

The west wall of the transept has a two-part chamfered plinth, of different character to that of the nave walls, and a string, chamfered on both upper and lower angles, at sill-level which in this case looks ancient. The fabric is of coursed squared stone. A stepped buttress, reducing quite markedly in both width and depth at the level of the sill string, divides the two visible bays; it rises to a sloping top, ending in a roll moulding, just below a second and deeper string course, chamfered below, probably marking the original wall-head but now three or four courses below the eaves. The two windows, together with the corresponding pair in the north transept, are, from

an architectural point of view, one of the most interesting features of the church. Each is of two lancet lights, divided by a square mullion with stop-chamfered angles and a moulded capital and base; unfortunately in each case the mullion is a 19th-century restoration, and its detail may not be authentic. In the spandrel of the lancets is a quatrefoil light of rather disproportionate size, the hoodmould being stepped out to enclose it.

At the southern angles of the transept are paired buttresses which again reduce markedly in their dimensions at the level of the string, so that above this the angle of the transept stands out as a projection between them; the tops of the buttresses - those facing south have gabled caps, topped by a roll moulding - are linked by a small chamfered set back rounding the angle of the transept. The top of the buttress on the east side of the south gable is now very decayed.

The south wall of the transept is occupied by a large window of four trefoil-headed lights with 14th-century style tracery above; it is entirely of 19th-century date, and has a typical moulded hood with the usual block terminals; the gable above, with its kneelers, coping and finial, is contemporary with it, as is the string course below, which had a predecessor c 0.30 m higher, a short length of which survives to the east of the window. Below the string is a broad central projection accommodating the tomb recess within; the plinth is carried round this, and it is clearly of the same age as the wall, although the sloping top directly below the Victorian string is clearly a later modification.

The three-bay east wall of the transept has lancet windows, with chamfered surrounds and hoodmoulds with shaped stops; some of their stonework is 19th-century restoration. Between the central and southern bays is a buttress like that on the east; a scar on the wall face indicates that a similar buttress has at some time been removed from between the central and northern bay. A cut for the sloping roof of some removed structure runs from near the top of the wall at its south end, to just below the springing of the arch of the lancet in the central bay, crossing the scar of the removed buttress.

The architectural features of the west wall of the **North Transept** are very similar to those of the south. The lower part of the wall of the central bay (the southern of the two exposed bays) has been refaced and its plinth, which steps down to the level of that of the aisle wall, renewed. There are some minor detail differences in the buttresses between the bays, which are carried up to join the higher string, and in the two windows which again have had their mullions renewed.

The buttresses at the northern angles of the transept are again similar to their counterparts on the south, but there have been two further ones between them, now truncated at the level of the string course. The wall above the string is of snecked stone and must have been entirely rebuilt in the 19th century; it contains a large four-light window with 14th-century style; the details of the gable are again similar to those on the south.

The southern half of the east wall of the transept is concealed by the organ chamber and its stair turret; buttress and plinth details are as on the west. The northern and central bays have original lancet windows.

The lower part of the **Central Tower** is of squared stone, with some variation in size and course height, up to a change to ashlar, which marks the early-19th century heightening. Near the east side of the tower the roof-line of a previous chancel roof, shallow-pitched but with its

eaves line at a considerably higher level than at present, is visible. At this level the north-east angle of the tower has been crudely cut into by a square-headed doorway into the Ringing Chamber, gained by a short open walkway from the Stair Turret. Higher up have been lancet-headed openings set centrally on east and west. Only the head of the western is visible, just above the ridge of the nave roof (and just below the clock face, which spans the change in fabric), but the eastern, above the lower roof of the chancel, remains open (although with its sill raised) and has a chamfered surround. Its head is formed from two inclined blocks, in what is sometimes referred to as 'Belsay fashion', a technique quite popular in the North East in the 14th century. On the north side of the tower there is more 19th-century refacing of the lower stage; a large patch of secondary fabric above the ridge of the transept roof probably indicates an infilled opening.

The belfry stage has a large two-light opening in each face, with a transom at mid-height, cinquefoiled heads to the lights and a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a four-centred arch with a moulded hood that has turned-back ends. There is a moulded string below the embattled parapet which has tall octagonal crocketed pinnacles at each corners and smaller square one, set diagonally, midway along each side.

The Chancel shows a variety of fabric types. The central part of the north wall (the western part is concealed by the Organ Chamber) is of the coursed square blocks characteristic of 12th-century fabric; to the east this ends in a ragged joint against the coursed but more elongate blocks of the 13th-century work that makes up the greater part of the chancel.

The south wall of the chancel has a range of eight lancet windows, all with chamfered surrounds and hoods with shaped terminals. The lower parts of all but the eastern two bays of the wall are covered by the single-storey Choir Vestry. The eastern part has a chamfered plinth and the remains of a string (chamfered on upper and lower angles) at sill level at the east end, ending against a large patch of tooled-and-margined ashlar of a distinctive yellow/brown stone colour containing the easternmost two lancets, reinstated in the 19th century to replace a larger window, the relieving arch of which survives above them. The westernmost lancet is also a reinstatement, set in a patch of the same ashlar. Vertical scars, which appear to indicate removed buttresses, are, to varying degrees, apparent between the old lancets. The wall face above the heads of the lancets consists of four courses, not very level, of dark sandstone blocks; the first course is sloped or bevelled back at a noticeable angle, almost like the top of a buttress, whilst the upper ones are vertical. This whole section may well be a heightening..

The east end of the chancel has a pair of large stepped diagonal buttresses, with a double chamfered plinth; between them, the wall itself has a small chamfered plinth set at a lower level, which steps out round two much smaller buttresses that now rise only to the level of the string below the east window; the buttresses have chamfered angles rising to broach stops below their sloping caps. The east window is of five trefoiled lights with 14th-century style tracery above, beneath an arch with a chamfered surround and a moulded hood with turned back ends all its stonework is relatively recent restoration, although it is thought to be a faithful copy of the medieval original. In his discussion of Decorated-style windows, Hodgson considered this 'by far the finest in the county' (1907,73) and attributed it, along with that at Sedgefield, to Prior Fossour's master mason, who had designed the great west window of Durham Cathedral. The gable above, with its moulded kneelers, coping and finial cross, is again all 19th-century work.

The western part of the exposed section of the north wall of the chancel is of 12th-century date; it has an eroded sill string, chamfered above and below, below a round-arched window with a surround of two orders, which carry only the narrowest of chamfers. The 13th-century eastern part of the wall has a rough square plinth which is probably no more than an exposed footing; above is an unrestored lancet window with a worn hoodmould.

The **Organ Chamber** has a square stair turret at its north-west corner, built out into the angle between the chamber and the north transept. This has two-centred arched doorway on the north, with a continuous chamfer and a moulded hood with block terminals. Above is a small lancet under a moulded hood with carved terminals; there is a similar lancet higher up facing east, above the Organ Chamber roof; the turret is capped by a moulded cornice and a pyramidal roof of cut stone slabs. The Organ Chamber itself is constructed of roughly-shaped and snecked stone. It has a chamfered plinth, and a lancet window with the usual moulded hood and head stops in its east wall. There is a small outbuilding (Organ Blower Chamber) with a corrugated iron roof set in the angle between the east wall of the Organ Chamber and the chancel.

The **Vestry** is a two-storeyed structure now linked to the chancel and south transept by the single-storeyed 20th-century extension. It is constructed of squared blocks of gritstone ashlar. It has a large chamfered plinth and full-height stepped diagonal buttresses at the southern angles, and an embattled parapet with hollow-chamfered string at its base and a moulded coping; the buttress tops and the central merlon of the southern parapet have raised square blocks, which presumably carried some sort of pinnacle or finial. On the south there is a window of two trefoil-headed lights under a square heads, with above a window of three trefoil-headed lights under an elliptical arch, both in broad chamfered surrounds; there are two similar windows on the east, but here the three-light one is at ground-floor level and the two-light above. To the north of the ground-floor window is a buttress carried up to support a projecting chimney stack, which is additionally carried on two moulded corbels at first-floor level and rises above the battlements to a moulded cap. On the north of the stack the string at the base of the parapet is broken by a small arched opening with the remains of a projecting stone spout; there is a more recent opening for a downpipe to the south of the stack. North of the buttress is a relatively recent square-headed doorway, with a chamfered surround, which cuts through the plinth; above is a patch of 19th-century masonry, and one L-shaped stone marking part of the head of a small blocked window, otherwise obscured. At the north end of the wall is a projecting tothing, indicating that there when the structure was built there as an intention of constructing a further wall at this point.

The west wall is partly covered by the Choir Vestry, above the roof of which there is a projecting stack set north-of-centre, apparently of 19th-century masonry, and now carried up only as far as the parapet. To the north of the stack is a small square-headed window at first-floor level and, at the extreme north end of the wall, another set of toothings for an intended wall that never seems to have been constructed.

The north wall of the Vestry can only be inspected from the Choir Vestry roof, but has a number of features of interest. The lower part of the wall (ie the exposed section) is of gritstone blocks like the other elevations, but the upper is of roughly-coursed Magnesian Limestone, although the parapet is of gritstone once more. Low down are a series of five shaped corbels, apparently of 19th-century date, with above them a groove for a removed roof also visible on the internal face of the east wall of the Choir Vestry (which stands some height above the present roof). This roof has been pent against the Vestry, and was presumably associated with the later-19th century

covered passage replaced by the Choir Vestry in ?1972.

Above this roof line are a series of infilled sockets, corresponding with the corbels below, and above these again an infilled groove marking another roof-line. This one seems to be associated with a taller structure that had its roof pent against the chancel, as seen from the cut on the east all of the south transept.

The Choir Vestry has external walls to the south and east, with a chamfered plinth and a crenellated parapet.. The east wall, linking the vestry with the south wall of the chancel, has its plinth stepped down in its central section beneath two small chamfered lights; as already mentioned, this wall is carried up to a level parapet some distance above the present roof; on the internal face of this section (seen from the roof behind), as well as the roof-line already described, can be seen the pointed rear arch of a window. Brick patching around its dressings suggests that it is almost certainly of 19th-century date.. The south wall has two plain square-headed mullioned windows with, to the west, a re-set 19th-century doorway with a two-centred arch with a sunk chamfer and a wave moulding, under a moulded hood with block terminals. Over the doorway is a block with the crudely-incised date '1972' (?).

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered and colour washed, except for the exposed dressings around the openings.

The **Nave** has four-bay arcades with clustered piers consisting of four large cylinders, with fillets to the salient points, with four smaller cylinders between. The bases are of simple chamfered section, and like the capitals follow the plan of the pier; the capitals of the piers all look to have been either re-cut or renewed, whereas those of the western responds, which are of the same form, have more elaborate mouldings that are clearly unrestored, retaining remnants of old plaster and ?painting. The arches are pointed and of two chamfered orders; the easternmost arch of each arcade looks a little wider, and of rather more four-centred form, than the others, but this might be due to later movements; the easternmost arcade piers are markedly out of vertical.

The west window has its tracery set towards the centre-line of the wall; its internal frame has two continuous hollow chamfers.

Within the **South Aisle** the south doorway has a chamfered segmental head to its rear arch and quite a broad splay to its internal jambs. The windows in the side wall all have rear arches edged by a roll moulding with a fillet, all in 19th-century ashlar.

The details of the **North Aisle** are similar to those of the south; there are no pre-19th century features.

The **Crossing** has also has pointed arches of two chamfered orders (that to the nave apparently a little higher than the others) but the piers and responds that carry them are of quite different character to those of the nave arcades. Each of the main western piers is made up of semi-octagonal responds to arcade, tower arch and transepts, with the angles of the square pier also being chamfered; on the outer faces the 'inner orders' of the four-centred arches opening from aisles to transepts spring from simple imposts, whilst the outer orders end rather awkwardly

against the face of the pier; the arches themselves are in fact of a single order of voussoirs, stepped and chamfered so as to simulate an arch of two orders. At their outer ends the outer chamfer of the arch is continued down the respond to floor level.

The eastern angles of the crossing are of the same form as the western, although the semi-octagonal responds which carry the inner order of the arch to the chancel look to have been largely renewed. The inner orders of all the main arches are all carried on responds with moulded capitals of slightly-different form to those of those of the western responds of the arcades; the bases are of simple chamfered section, and follow the plain of the piers. The chamfers of the outer angles of the western piers are carried up to a stop in the form of a small cusped ogee arch at the level of the arcade responds. This outer angle of the pier is set a short distance outside the line of the outer face of the nave arcade, a pointer to the likelihood that earlier fabric has been remodelled here.

Within the **South Transept** there is an internal string course c.2 m above floor level, of rounded section above and chamfered below; this appears largely of 19th-century date. At the north end of the east wall is a 19th-century doorway, now opening into the Choir Vestry, with a two-centred arch moulded with a sunk chamfer and a wave moulding, with broach stops at the base of each jamb and a moulded hood with block terminals. The string is carried up over this doorway. The three lancets in east wall each have chamfered rear arches; all the windows in the side walls of the transepts have rear arches in the form of a rib, with the soffit of the arch behind (ie within the thickness of the wall) actually being at a higher level. The lancets in the central and northern bays have their lower parts blocked up by the extension.

On the south the string course is stepped up by c 5 cm, and runs above a piscina at the east end of the wall - with a broad trefoiled arch and a circular bowl within the thickness of the wall - and the central tomb recess which has a segmental arch with a filleted roll moulding between two deep hollows to both head and jambs. Above the string course the wall face steps back c 30 cm, possibly marking a rebuilding. The internal surround of the south window, with a segmental-pointed rear arch, has a roll moulding with a fillet, stopped above a plain square block at the base of each jamb; all this appears 19th century.

On the west side of the transept the string-course steps down c 10 cm from its level on the south wall, and forms the internal sills of the two two-light windows which have quite broad four-centred rear arches.

The **North Transept** shows very similar detail to the south, with the same internal string-course which looks virtually all 19th-century restoration. At the south end of the east wall an arch to the Organ Chamber opens above the string; it is two-centred, and of two chamfered orders, the inner carried on moulded corbels and the outer continued down the jambs to broach stops at the base. The string-course then steps down in level and runs beneath the sills of the two lancet windows, but between the lancets it is interrupted by a piscina recess, virtually identical in form to that in the south transept but set rather high (c1.5 m) above the present floor level, which may have been lowered.

At the north end of the transept the string-course marks an internal set-back, as on the south, but the wall is all plastered and there is no evidence of any tomb recess. At the east end of the wall is an aumbry or wall cupboard, boxed-round in 20th century woodwork.

Three steps lead up from the crossing into the **Chancel**. The south wall has a moulded string c 2m above the floor, forming the base of an internal arcade formed by the rear arches of the eight lancet windows; between the windows are circular shafts with moulded bases and capitals, carrying broad rear arches of flattened segmental-pointed form. There is nail-head ornament both in the capitals of the shafts and, on a larger scale, between two roll mouldings in the rear arches, which also have a hollow-moulded label or hood.. Beneath the fourth lancet is an old priest's doorway, now opening into the Choir Vestry. Externally this has a narrow two-centred arch, apparently with a narrow chamfer, and a plain square-headed rear arch. The string course is stepped down on the south side of the sanctuary, to run at a lower level between the two easternmost lancets.

On the east wall the string-course is stepped up c 0.60 m, and changes to a slightly different section, to run beneath the east window, which has a chamfered internal frame. High on the wall is a string course which is carried over the window as an internal label.

At the west end of the north wall is a large arch to the Organ Chamber, largely concealed by panelling and the organ itself; it appears to be of a single chamfered order, and has a hoodmould with carved stops. Beneath the arch the string course is continued for the full length of the wall, only being interrupted by a small priest's door set two steps up from the chancel floor. This is a plain square-headed opening, with jambs of square section, with a semicircular tympanum above with a relief carving of a scene where 'a pair of monsters reminiscent of the pelleted beasts of the Carleif books in Durham Cathedral Library entwine their necks to form a very symmetrical pattern' (Lang 1982, 57), with a frame with an indented ornament. It has been claimed that 'the other side of the stone has similar work' (report on meeting of Newcastle Society of Antiquaries in Archaeologia Aeliana 2nd series VI (1865), 186) but this would seem somewhat unlikely; 19th-century boarding conceals most of the reverse face of the tympanum, which only looks to have a simple rebate along its lower edge.

On the left side of the door the string course ends in a broken boss of some sort, whilst on the right it resumes in a carved leaf (19th century?). Then comes the 12th-century window which has a round-headed rear arch with a continuous roll-moulding to head jambs and sill. Below and slightly to the east of the window is a wall cupboard or aumbry, any detail of which is concealed by its wooden frame. The string course then steps down (as it does on the south) to run at a lower level beneath the single lancet window in this wall, which has similar internal detail - jamb shafts etc - to those of the arcade on the south.

The **Roofs** of the church are all of mid-19th century date; that over the nave is of eight bays, and has collar-beam trusses with arch braces, with ashlaring to the eaves. The trusses are carried alternately by wall-posts rising from moulded corbels set above each pier and against the end walls, and simpler corbels above the crown of each arch.

The four-bay roofs of the transepts, and the six-bay chancel roof, are all of the same general type; the chancel trusses are carried on large moulded corbels with sunk trefoiled panels. The aisle roofs again have corbels carrying their principals.

Under the tower there is a ribbed wooden vault of 1904, springing from a moulded stone corbel in each angle; the western are exposed stone, the eastern whitewashed. They appear to be of

19th-century date, although it is difficult to be certain.

The upper parts of the **Tower** are now reached by the stair turret on the north of the organ Chamber. The internal walls of the turret are largely of brick, plastered over. At its head a square-headed doorway, its lintel formed by the eaves cornice and its jambs are chamfered. From here a short timber stair leads to the doorway cut through the north-east angle of the tower, opening into the Ringing Chamber. This is plastered internally. In the centre of the west wall is a low square-headed opening at floor level, now walled up c 0.70 m back, forming a cupboard. There is a similar opening 1.5 m above floor level in the centre of the east wall. Both north and south walls have a sloped set-back (behind the plaster) at mid-height, above which there are two large corbels on the north and one on the south, where a second may have been cut back to accommodate the present wooden stair to the upper parts of the tower.

This stair leads up to a low floor containing the clock, with a shorter stair leading into the belfry. Here the four belfry openings each have the unusual feature of roughly-shaped blocks of their heads and jambs being left intermittently standing proud of the wall face. There are timbered shafts of uncertain function in the western angles of the belfry and clock chamber floor; there is evidence that these continued down through the Ringing Chamber, but they have now been removed at this level.

From the belfry a further wooden stair leads to the low-pitched leaded roof, which has graffiti dating back to the 1830s.

The interior of the **Organ Chamber** is largely cased in wood. In its east wall a small doorway opens into the Organ Blower Chamber; low in the south wall here (ie in the external face of the north wall of the chancel) is a re-used simply-moulded stone, of uncertain date.

The **Choir Vestry** has a pointed rear arch to its south doorway, and a segmental-pointed rear arch, with a slightly-sunk chamfer ending in broach stops, to the doorway opening into the South Transept. Access to the **Vestry** is gained by a doorway with a steeply two-centred arch with a single broad chamfer ending in broach stops, opening into a lobby with on the left an understair cupboard with an old (late 17th or early-18th century?) two-panelled door. On the west of the ground-floor room (Clergy Vestry) is a fireplace with a wooden architrave of no great age, with a series of wall safes to the north of it. There appears to be one old ceiling beam running alongside the east wall, cutting across the rear arch of the old three-light window there. There is a second lobby inside the eastern door, from which the stair to the upper floor (Upper Vestry) rises westwards along the internal face of the south wall; this stair itself has no pre-19th century features, but the adjacent wall face appears to have been cut away to accommodate it. The stairhead door is of 6 fielded panels, and of late 18th/early 19th century character. The upper room has a fireplace on the east, which like that below does not show any old features. The position of the blocked window at the north end of the east wall can be felt by tapping the plaster. The roof is carried on three slightly cambered tie-beams (one central, the others against the end walls) supporting a square-set ridge and two purlins.

Beneath the southern part of the Choir Vestry is a boiler room, roofed by a segmental rick vault and reached by an external stair.

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The **Font** stands in the centre of the nave, close to the west end. It is of dark limestone and octagonal; the bowl shows two sockets (one infilled) for a cover or fittings. The shaft has a moulding at top and bottom, and the base has large broach stops at each corner; it stands on a broader square plinth. Hodgson (1912, 70) sees the font as 'exactly contemporary with the nave, ie 1340-1350, but recorded only one socket, which he saw as the matrix for a ring for a plug chain. Fowler (1912, 106) argues that, due to lack of evidence of fastenings, the font might be a piece of post-medieval Gothic Survival.

The **Altar Rails** are of oak, and appear to be those installed in 1926 (see faculties section). The panelled marble reredos is dated by a brass plate on the north wall, as being erected, along with 'other ornaments; in the chancel, in remembrance of John Grey d.1895. The sanctuary is floored by Minton tiles; the walls of the eastern part of the chancel have also been tiled, up to the level of the string-course, but these have been painted over..

The **Choir Stalls** are dated 1869, in remembrance of Georgiana Elisabeth Charlotte Grey. The panelled front of the **Organ** has an inscription on memory of John Hatley, 'sometime churchwarden of this parish' d.1889; the organ pipes and casing above are dated 1941.

The traceried openwork **Screen** at the entrance to the chancel is a memorial to Thomas William Robinson Usherwood Robinson d.1888, and was installed in 1904, as was the **Pulpit**, which has figures of the Evangelists under canopies, and a carved and moulded stone base (Faculty 438, 1903).

An altar in the north transept uses an old table, probably of 17th century date.

The **Pewing** in the nave, together with the panelled dado, are relatively plain, and must be of mid- or late-19th century date. There is an internal wooden **Porch** of 1951 enclosing the south door.

None of the **Stained Glass** appears to predate the mid-19th century; the east window is typical of much of the rest, and was dedicated as a memorial to Elizabeth Elliot, 1861. The west window has some good glass of 1983 by Sep Waugh, of York, as a memorial to Bernard Gilpin.

There are eight **Bells**; five are of 1826 (by Mears of Whitechapel), one slightly later, and two of 1928; they are hung in cast-iron frames with 'H' castings of type 8.3C and frame layout 8.3 (Pickford1993).

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

Most of the older monuments are in the south transept. There are two medieval effigies

- (1) In the tomb recess in the south wall. A badly weathered effigy of a cross-legged knight: 'the head, encased in a cylindrical helm, rests on a cushion. A large shield, without charge, covers the left shoulder, and reaches almost to the knee. The right hand grasps the hilt of a sword, which is sheathed. The surcoat descends below the knees. Spurs are

strapped to the feet, which rest on an animal, apparently a lion. The effigy belongs to the latter part of the thirteenth century' (Boyle, 558) whilst Hunter Blair (1929, 17) suggests a date of c.1300. An attached note states 'popularly thought of as the tomb of Sir John le Spring, but more probably the tomb of Sir Rowland of Belassis of Moreton, knighted by Henry III after the Battle of Lewes 1264'

- (2) Lying loose at the south-west corner of the transept. '...of slightly later date. The sculpture is of a very superior character. The body is dressed in banded mail. A mail-hood protects the head and neck, whilst the face is exposed. The head rests on a cushion. The shield is large and heater-shaped. but is blank., Over the mail is a sleeveless surcoat. The right hand gasps the hilt of the sword, whilst the left hand holds the scabbard. The lower part of the legs and feet are destroyed' (Boyle, op.cit). Further detail is given by Hunter Blair, op.cit, 18) who dates the effigy to 1305-1310.

There is also a medieval grave cover, now broken into two halves, locally said to commemorate a pair of twins; it is thought to be of 13th-century date (Ryder 198, 99 and plate 40). It is illustrated in its complete form in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle 2nd series VIII, 1899, 198, when it was 'serving as the base for some architectural fragments' in the churchyard, 'south of the nave and next to the porch'.

In addition a small early medieval headstone, not mentioned in any published account, was at the time of survey lying on effigy (2); this is broken into two pieces, but has had a metal tenon fixed at some time in an attempt to repair it. It has a simple bracelet cross, and is probably of 12th century date.

The altar tomb of Bernard Gilpin, rector 1558-1583, is set on the east side of the transept; 'an uncommonly big tomb-chest, its sides decorated with large panels with squares and circle' (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 330); the west end has Gilpin's arms of a boar and tree, and the top slab has two moulded edges but is otherwise plain.

Fixed to the east wall of the transept at its south end is a brass plate, originally associated with the tomb (see below) on the south side of the chancel. This an inscription and kneeling figure of Margery Bellasis with her eight sons and four daughters, who as a widow is recording as 'bestowing her whole time only in hospitality and relief of the poor' and died aged 90 in 1567.

There are also five late 17th or early 18th century ledger stones in the floor of the transept, four with coats or arms, and another three in the floor at the north end of the north transept. In the south transept are a series of wall tablets, mostly of 18th and early 19th century dates. Details of the heraldry and inscription of several of these monuments are given by Hunter Blair (1935, 49-54)

On the south side of the chancel, immediately to the east of the priest's door, is the monument

from which the Margery Bellasis brass was taken; in form it resembles half a tomb-chest, with a plain top slab, a moulded base and side ornamented with strapwork patterns, in poor condition with the stone actively decaying.

Carved Stones

In 1863 there was ‘a curious caryatide-like stone in the churchyard, sculptured with figures whose arms interlace’ (report on meeting of Newcastle Society of Antiquaries in Archaeologia Aeliana 2nd series VI (1865), 186); its current whereabouts are unknown. At a later meeting of the same society in 1898, there were some ‘architectural fragments’ in the churchyard piled or mounted on the ‘twins’ grave cover (Proc.Soc.Ant.Newcastle 2nd ser. VIII, 198); these two are now lost.

HISTORICAL NOTES

- pre-1066 Although there are no Anglo-Saxon land charters for Houghton, several factors, including the size of its parish, point to it having been one of the major settlements in County Durham (report for The Conservation Initiative, Houghton-le-Spring, by Tyne and Wear Museums)
- 1183 The earliest reference to Houghton occurs in the Boldon Book MSS A..
- 1476 The Bishop granted a licence to Rector Gillow and others to found a Guild ‘in honour of God and the Holy Trinity’.
- 1483 On his death rector Gillow left money to endow the above Guild, and a Chantry ‘in honour of the Blessed Virgin’.
- 1604-5 Extensive repairs to the church including the erection of two ‘lofts’ (galleries) (Proc. Soc. Ant. Newcastle 3rd series V, 1913, 52).
- 1787 The Durham historian William Hutchinson (II, 540-542) prints the first detailed description of the building: ‘The church stands on a rising ground, in the center of a square area, formed by the buildings of the lower part of the town: It is in the form of across, with the tower in the center. The chancel is in length fourteen paces to the steps which ascend to the communion table, and with the aisle four paces; the width six paces. It was some years ago wainscotted, and staled on each side, probably by Mr Davenport; for on the north side is a shield bearing the arms of bishop Cosin, and on the south side another bearing the arms of Davenport. The wainscot being much decayed, was removed by the present rector, and the chancel is now fitted up with plaster in an elegant stile. The stalls too, being much decayed, have been repaired. The east window, consisting of five lights, is under a pointed arch. There are besides five other windows in the chancel, one of four lights under a flat arch, three under pointed arches, divided by small pilaster, and an adjoining one under a flat arch. The tower stands on four columns, giving an interior square of six paces, opening on every side to form the cross, and lead to the four limbs of the building. The nave is twenty-four paces in length from the pillars of the square, and has regular aisles formed by rows of three uniform

clustered columns supporting pointed arches, which at the western extremity spring from pilasters of similar form with the pillars; the whole having great symmetry, and being of beautiful architecture. The width of the nave, with its aisles, is twelve paces. The side lights are regular, four on each side, and modern. The west window consists of five lights under a pointed arch. The reading desk is placed against the north-west corner pillar, and the pulpit opposite to it. There is at present in agitation a plan for rebuilding the stalls and seating the church, many of which are now ruinous and much decayed; for removing the old organ, and introducing a new one in a gallery to be erected against the north wall of the church. The organ is placed in the south limb of the cross. The windows at the extremities of the cross are under pointed arches: One limb of this cross, but whether the north or south we cannot ascertain, is called Trinity porch. The nave is ceiled and stuccoed, and very clean' He gives an illustration of the church seen from the south-west (p.538).

1816 Surtees (Vol.1,152) describes the church, and includes some additional information as regards its fenestration: 'The East window is divided by plain mullions into five lights, under a pointed arch ornamented with tracery. The Chancel has two other windows, one divided into three, the other into four lights, under flat arches. Several old narrow lights, with quaterfoil heads, are built up in the transepts. The great West window is of handsome work, divided into five lights, under an arch ornamented with tracery worked into quaterfoils; but its effect is lost, from the erection of a modern gallery and organ-loft. He gives an elevation of the west end of the church (plate 3, f.p.116) and illustrates a knight's effigy and Gilpin's tomb (plate 4, f.p.148).

1854 Burial in the church and churchyard 'to be discontinued forthwith'.

1857-1858 Extensive alterations in which many old features were destroyed (see 'Faculties & c' section for details)

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

Faculty No.	And Date	Works
66	1786	Petition for erecting new seats.
c1825		Tower heightened (see 'Structural History' section).
1852		Organ Chamber constructed (PSAN 3 rd series V, 50)
70	1862	Petition for vault.
72	1858	Petition for alterations in the chancel of the parish church.
73	1857	Petition for restoring parish church; plans by John Dobson. show aisle walls reduced in height (previously there was one low-pitched roof over nave and aisles), and gallery to be removed over western two bays of

		nave. Also the addition of a south porch, 4 new windows (all) in north wall of north aisle, 2 in south aisle (eastern bay old two-light window seems to be retained - others were of 3 lights, to be replaced with 2). Spec. includes renewing nave & aisle roofs, lowering floor levels and converting old north door into a window.
241	1879	Plans and design for erection of chancel screen and placing ornaments in chancel.
270	1884	Placing a clock in the tower of the church.
438	1903	To erect oak chancel screen, new pulpit and other additions and improvements.
444/21	4 .5.04	Brass tablet and oak figures of evangelists in niches in pulpit.
867	28.10.19	To place in the churchyard a 5'9" German Howitzer gun captured by the Durham Regiment, proposed to be at SW corner of churchyard. This was never actually installed; a more conventional war memorial was constructed instead.
2016	15.3.1926	Two tablets and oak communion rail.
2242	12.3.1928	Two new bells in the tower.
2932	22.7.46	Erection of an organ case.
2976	31.1.47	AC Repair and clean stonework.
3419	5.6.51	Erection of a new inner porch.
3809	30 9 55	AC General repairs.
4106	12.3.59	Installation of an oil-fire boiler, oil storage tank, new radiators and extension of Choir Vestry.
4155	28.9.59	AC Interior re-decoration.
4494	28.8.62	Removal of headstones etc.
4706	17.8.64	Introduction of sound reproducing equipment.
4891	2.8.66	Repairs to organ.
5346	18.8.72	Replacement of heating boiler.
5428	23.5.73	Removal of platform, erection of Dais, portable altar, communion rails etc
5479	13.11.73	AC Restoration of east window.
5514	23.7.74	Installation of an aumbry and lamp bracket.
5589	20.1.76.	AC Restoration of stonework of south window.
5602	9.4.76	AC Repairs to windows in south transept.
5791	26.4.79	Restoration of stained glass and stonework.
5798	30.5.79	Introduction of a new font cover.
5957	20.10.81	Repairs to hood, arch, tracery and west window.
6023	27.8.82	Replacement of church boiler with an identical model.
6440	38.10.86	Reslating of the north aisle roof.
6565	14.8.87	Laying of gas main, conversion of boiler to gas, removal of asbestos, rearranging pipework.
6848	13.1.89	Re-pointing and repair of masonry.
7227	13.12.90	Renewal of north aisle timbers & ceiling, and north aisle gutters.
7735	4.6.93	To introduce new organ console doors and supporting rails.
8124	6.6.96	To install a new vestry heating system.

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Whilst the earliest extant fabric in the church, the western part of the north wall of the chancel, is of early 12th-century date, there are some indications of an earlier building on the site. The 'earlier foundations' reported in 1863 (probably seen at the time of the 1847-8 restoration) may simply have been of the east end of the 12th century chancel, but there are some interesting indicants in the form of the crossing that may - it is unwise to put it any more strongly - point to earlier fabric being present. One is the fact that in plan the crossing has 'salient angles' projecting, albeit slightly, beyond the walls of nave and transepts; the manner in which the western angles have had their lower parts chamfered back shows that earlier masonry remains physically present. The only place that this older masonry - of whatever date - is actually visible is on the west side of the odd straight joint visible externally at the west end of the south wall of the chancel. This seems to be set within the line of the east wall of the present crossing and tower, and must represent the south-east angle of a crossing pre-dating the present late 13th/early 14th century arches and tower. There is nothing particularly distinctive in what little masonry is visible. 'Early' masonry may also survive in the side walls of the nave, where the present arcades may well be insertions although their thickness - around 0.90 m - might be taken as indicating the thicker-walled Norman tradition rather than anything earlier.

Returning to the visible fabric, around 1200 the chancel was extended and remodelled with a long series of lancets on the south, and probably three more in the east end. The transepts were built or rebuilt at the same time. Some authorities put the west walls of the transepts at c.1250 because of the style of their windows, with 'proto-tracery', although it has been argued that these windows were altered in the 14th century: there are no other indications of a half-century break in building which would have left the transepts strangely unfinished.

Then comes the nave and crossing. Here there are some problems. The nave arcades, and in particular their western responds, look of c1300 whereas the arches of the crossing look rather later, perhaps as late as the great east and west windows; the east window has been linked to the master mason of Prior Fossor of Durham (1341-1374) who designed the great west window of the Cathedral. It is not clear whether the tower itself is of the same date as the crossing arches, or a little older; old prints show a southern belfry opening of two trefoiled-headed lights which could well have been a 14th-century feature, whereas the surviving eastern and western openings are simple lancets, and could be earlier. The tower was capped by a slender octagonal wooden spire, possibly a later medieval addition.

The two-storeyed Vestry, usually associated with the Guild of the Holy Trinity, is of the late 15th century. The toothings at the north end of each side wall imply that it was intended to link it to some other structure, presumably a full-length south aisle to the chancel, but this was never built, which explains its oddly isolated position.

The post-medieval history of the church is not too easy to put together in detail. It is known that galleries were being inserted in the church as early as the beginning of the 17th century, and that the Rev. Davenport carried out improvements in the 17th century; Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 329) suggest that the odd mullions (and hoodmoulds?) of the west windows of the transepts are his work, but the mullions at least are obviously 19th-century restoration. The remodelling of the nave to accommodate enlarged galleries must have come much later, perhaps not long before Hutchinson wrote his description in 1787. Old prints show the aisle walls heightened, with large quasi-Gothic windows with odd loop-like tracery that simply parallels the arch, and castellated parapets to the whole church. There was a large three-light window with simple intersected

tracery in the south end of the south transept, and another large window, perhaps similar, in the corresponding position in the north.

The various 19th-century changes are quite well chronicled, although there seems to be some debate as to the date of the heightening of the central tower; the evidence of old prints places it within the bracket 1824-1836. However a plan of the church dated 1825, in an MS volume 'Plans of Churches in the Deanery of Easington and Archdeaconry of Durham' (Durham Cathedral Library Add. ms.278) includes an elevation of the tower. Although this may be an addition to the original drawing, the provision of new bells in 1826 might imply a new tower had already been built to receive them. It has been suggested that Philip Hardwick was architect for the tower; in 1831 he made drawings for a new roof, and is recorded as having designed the present north transept gable window.

The 1825 plan shows access to the tower as being by an internal turret, with a newel stair, in the south-east corner of the north transept. When the tower was heightened a new external turret was provided, shown on Billings' print of 1844 (1846, f.p.46) as set in the angle of chancel and north transept, with an external doorway on the east and, apparently, a 'spheric triangle' window above. The print also shows the low-pitched chancel roof which has left its line visible externally on the east side of the tower, with above it the apex of the line of a steeply-pitched medieval (13th century?) roof now obscured by its mid-19th century successor.

The 19th century also saw a whole series of changes on the south of the chancel, in the manner in which the 15th century Vestry was linked to the rest of the building. The 1825 plan shows a small link block, the width of the Vestry, linking it to the chancel. The evidence of roof-lines on chancel, transept and vestry walls show that this was succeeded by an aisle-like structure covering most of the area of the present Choir Vestry (although not extending quite as far south) with a pent roof against the chancel. This quite large structure must have been relatively short-lived, as it would seem to have been removed by the time of the 1846-7 alterations when the arcade of lancets along the south side of the chancel was re-instated to its full extent; what replaced it was a lower gallery linking to a porch on the east side of the transept. This is shown on an 1896 plan by Messrs Hick & Charlewood (reproduced in Proc.Soc.Ants.Newcastle 3rd ser.V, 1913, , 47). This in turn was replaced by the present Choir Vestry in the mid-20th century; faculty evidence suggests a 1959 date, although there is a crudely-incised '1972' over its outer door. One puzzle here is the position of the door between the vestries and the south transept. The 1896 plan (and a later ground plan now hanging in the Clergy Vestry) show this as being located at the south end of the first bay of the transept wall, whereas now it is set at the north end of the wall, close to the respond of the crossing arch; it is difficult to see any rhyme or reason for this change.

The 1857-8 restoration, under Newcastle architect John Dobson (who has a better reputation in country house design than in his handling of medieval churches), left the church very much as we see it today; as early as 1863 the restoration attracted criticism from the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries: 'the whole church now presents much anachronistic work of the style peculiar to the destructive period of English architecture' (Proc.Soc.Ants.Newcas 2nd series VI, 188).

THE CHURCHYARD

The churchyard is quite large, but the introduction of a road serving the buildings on the east side, together with the removal of all upstanding monuments, has robbed it of much of its original

character. The entrance, from Durham Road, is a four-centred gateway beneath a crenellated parapet, with heraldry including the arms of Gilpin and the Diocese; it is probably of mid -19th century date and is a Grade II listed structure.

Within the churchyard itself the only monuments to survive clearance some years ago (1962?) are a scatter of recumbent slabs, most somewhat overgrown, and few legible. Lying outside the east end of the chancel is a large stone sarcophagus with a roughly-tooled lid, slightly ridged but bearing no carved design. Its general character might suggest a Roman date.

At the south-west corner of the churchyard is the War Memorial erected after the 1914-1919 War, a white stone cenotaph with standing figures of soldiers in bas-relief on either side and a St Cuthbert's cross as a finial.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

(i) Inside the church.

None of the present flooring of the church is of any great age, and it is difficult to assess the condition of archaeological deposits beneath. There is a recently paved area (1986) around the font at the west end of the nave; the remainder of the floor of the nave and aisles is carpeted, apart from boarded areas under the pews. The south transept floor is largely concrete, and that of the north transept (and crossing) carpeted. The western part of the chancel has carpets, although some heating ducts are exposed; the eastern part is tiled. The present heating pipes in the nave are above floor level.

It is highly likely that the underfloor deposits over the majority of the building have been disturbed by extensive burial, and by earlier heating systems. This was shown by an 'excavation' within the South Transept in 1955 which revealed that 'it had been the burial ground of former worshippers. Curious 3-foot square bricked channels underground were also revealed' (Church guidebook, n.d.). However, despite all this it is likely that significant archaeological deposits remain; in 1863 it was reported that 'the foundations of earlier walls have been discovered within the present chancel' (report on meeting of Newcastle Society of Antiquaries in Archaeologia Aeliana 2nd series VI (1865), 186). Thus any disturbance of floors and the deposits and structural remains beneath will require careful archaeological monitoring.

The fabric of the church is also obviously of archaeological importance. The plaster which covers all internal walls doubtless conceals fabric and features of structural interest in the walls themselves; it may also conceal earlier plasters, possibly with remains of mural decoration. There are tracts of colouration on the internal jambs of the lancet on the north of the sanctuary, although these may not be of any great age. As with disturbance of floor levels, any works entailing removal of plaster should be monitored, and preliminary samples taken to ascertain whether earlier layers do survive.

(ii) Outside the church.

Very often an ancient church has been effectively divorced from its associated external archaeological deposits - evidence of foundation trenches, layers of masons' chippings etc - by the cutting of a perimeter drain. As one might expect this has taken place at Houghton; on the

south the drain is concreted over, and on the north largely covered by brick paving, whilst at the east end, where the churchyard slopes quite steeply upwards, there is a sunk path, with a retaining wall, around the chancel. To the south of the Choir vestry, in the embayment between the old vestry and the South Transept, an area of concrete marks the top of a disused subterranean oil tank

Priorities

Houghton le Spring is a settlement of some historical importance that has seen very little archaeological study or investigation; the Tyne and Wear Sites and Monument Record does not include a single historic artifact from the town. The evidence of the size of the parish, the tantalising hints of early masonry in the crossing of the church, and the possible Roman sarcophagus all point to early origins, and the need for further research. In contrast, both church and town have suffered severely, the church in the alterations and ‘restoration’ of the late 18th and 19th centuries, and the town in its being carved in two by the new route of the A 690 Durham to Sunderland road in the 1960s.

The need for archaeological vigilance as regards the church fabric and buried deposits in and around the building has already been spelled out. Parts of the fabric of the church are complex and would merit detailed recording, notably the multi-period fabric of the south wall of the chancel. The production of an accurate modern ground plan, on a scale sufficient to compile all visible structural details and information from older plans, would also be a useful project.

Peter F Ryder. April 1998

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**St Michael and All Angels
Houghton le Spring**

**An Archaeological Assessment
April 1998**

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The Church from the North-East
after Billings (1844)

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ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
HOUGHTON LE SPRING

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
APRIL 1998

The church in the late 18th century

Peter F Ryder
Historic Buildings Consultant

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring
Archaeological Assessment April 1998 P F Ryder

1. General view from the north-west

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring
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2. Nave from the south.

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring
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3. South transept from the south-east.

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4. South transept, west side

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring
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5. East side of south transept and chancel.

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6. Vestries from south-west.

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7. General south-east view

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8. Chancel from north-east.

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9. General north-east view

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring
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10. North transept from north-west

St Michael & All Angels, Houghton le Spring

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 11. Interior looking east.
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 17. Chancel looking south-east
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 22. The Gilpin tomb.
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 23. Roman ? sarcophagus outside east end.