

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

The parish church of Kirk Merrington stands on a hilltop 11 km south of Durham; although at no great altitude, its location at the centre of the belt of lowland which runs through the centre of Durham and on southwards down the Vale of York means that it commands an extremely extensive prospect (one which has been claimed to include, on a very clear day, both York Minster and Flamborough Head), and is a familiar object on the horizon over much of the county.

The church suffered a catastrophic 'restoration' - in reality an all-but-total rebuilding, in 1850/1, although the present building to some extent replicates the form and architectural features of its predecessor.

Architectural Description

The church has a highly unusual ground plan consisting of a nave with a massive tower in its centre; the 'east nave' has a northern chapel or transept and there is a separate lower and quite elongate chancel. All the architectural features are in a Romanesque style, and all arches round-headed.

The Exterior

The **Nave** is built of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone of a variety of colours, with tooled ashlar quoins and dressings of grey sandstone. Quite a tall and broad chamfered plinth extends around the nave and north transept, and both have an oversailing eaves cornice carried on carved Romanesque corbels, some grotesque masks, some simply moulded. The gables have an oversailing chamfered coping, with finial crosses, a foliate cross to the west and a wheel cross to the east. The 'west nave' is of two bays, with the doorway being set on the south side of the western bay. The nave and transept roofs are steeply-pitched, and covered with graduated Westmorland slates

The west end of the nave has a large window set fairly high (so as to light the gallery), with an inner order that has a continuous narrow chamfer and a moulded outer order on moulded imposts and jamb shafts with scalloped capitals and bases set a little above the level of the external sill; there is a hood with billet ornament. The north slope of the gable is broken, close to its apex, by a small chimney stack.

On the south the doorway is set in a shallow gabled projection. The arch has of three orders of chevron, the innermost on twin attached shafts, the outer two on detached shafts, all having moulded imposts and scalloped capitals and moulded bases to the shafts; the gable above has moulded kneelers, and a coping, chamfered below, with indented ornament. To its east is a window of the same type as that in the west end.

The masonry of the north wall of this part of the church has rather more large squared blocks in its lower courses; remains of plaster, and a crudely patched-up section of plinth, indicate the position of a boiler house, pulled down a few years ago. The two windows have continuous roll mouldings to their inner orders and chamfers to their outer, and hoodmoulds, chamfered above and below, terminating in very authentic-looking Romanesque beast heads. The eastern part of the nave has a window on the south exactly like that on the south side of the western section.

The masonry of the **Tower** is generally similar to that of nave and transept, except that there are irregular vertical areas of walling on both sides, extending upwards from a few courses above the plinth to around the level of the nave eaves. These consist of larger and more elongate blocks with quite deep but very weathered rough diagonal tooling, laid in quite neat courses. On the south there are two of these areas, overlapping the angles of the tower; on the north only one is exposed, at the north-west corner of the tower. The area on the north has two 'L-shaped' blocks, one on each side, which look to have been cut into when large blocks in the more irregular adjacent walling were put in place; there is one similar block on the west side of the western area on the south. The significance of these is that they would seem to imply that the better-coursed walling is stratigraphically earlier than the rougher masonry; and thus presumably a survival from the medieval building, perhaps indicating that the eastern and western tower arches were retained (albeit entirely re-cut) in 1850/51.

The lower stage of the tower is lit by one window on each side, with a narrow chamfer to the inner order and hoods chamfered above and below with beast-head stops; on the south the outer order has a roll moulding and on the north simply a chamfer. These windows are taller than those in the nave walls on either side, and quite different both in architectural detail and dressings which are of a more weathered stone, and roughly-shaped rather than cut square.

Above the nave roof the upper stages of the tower have attached angle shafts, with moulded bases, and capitals just below the top cornice. The middle stage is lit by narrow windows, in chamfered surrounds, to north and south. Above this is a moulded string (continued round the angle shafts) and then the four belfry openings, each of two round-arched lights, springing from shafts and half-shafts with scalloped capitals, under a tympanum above set within a shallow enclosing arch. The bold top cornice is carried on a series of grotesque corbels; above is a slightly-oversailing parapet, topped by a chamfered coping.

Access to the tower is by a stair on the north-east corner, set in a buttress-like projection of neatly-square stone that rises only to the middle stage. At its foot is a round-arched doorway with chamfered jambs and imposts, but the arch left square although an integral hoodmould or label is chamfered above and below; higher up are two chamfered round-arched loops, and a moulded string course just below the sloped cap of stone slabs.

The **North Transept** is generally similar to the nave in its fabric and features. In the angle of with the chancel is a large projecting buttress, technically projecting eastward from the north wall of the nave. In the side walls of the transept are windows with simple chamfered surrounds (it rather looks as if inner orders may have been cut away) and hoods, chamfered above and below, with grotesque mask stops, both human and animal. In the north gable is a rather more elaborate window, now blocked (it is set behind the organ) with a billet hood and jamb shafts with scalloped capitals. The gable has a ring cross finial.

The **Chancel** is considerably lower than the nave, and has a low-pitched roof. Its south and east walls are of neatly-squared stone, laid in courses which vary slightly in height. Most of the blocks are almost square; their form and even weathering give a convincing impression of genuine 12th-century fabric, although the tooled-and-margined sandstone dressings are clearly 19th-century work. There is no plinth. The side walls have a parapet with a chamfered oversailing course at its base, and a moulded coping.

Towards the west end of the south wall is a priest's door with a moulded arch under a billet-

moulded hood; the imposts are grooved and hollow-chamfered, and the attached jamb shafts have acanthus-leaf capitals and moulded bases. Further east are two windows with moulded arches and integral billet hoods and attached jamb shafts with scallop capitals.

At the eastern angles of the chancel are broad clasping buttresses with sloping set-backs; their ashlar dressings are plainly of the 19th century. In the east end are three windows of equal height, the central being distinguished by acanthus leaf capitals, whereas the other two have scalloped ones. The topmost section of the gable is in larger blocks of grey ashlar; the shallow-pitched gable has a moulded coping and a ring-cross finial.

The north wall of the chancel is very plain. The walling is of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, all looking 'old' and quite eroded. There are a number of puzzling features. One is a series of incised horizontal grooves, sometimes cut along the faces of a course of blocks, sometimes by widening the horizontal joint between courses; one explanation might be that the wall was rendered at some time, and the rendering then lined to simulate coursed ashlar. A little to the east of the centre of the wall there appears to be a blocked opening, its west side quite clear (although close to a modern down pipe), and the head is represented by four blocks roughly cut to a segmental curve. The topmost three courses are of later grey ashlar. Towards the west end of the wall at mid-height is an obvious patch of secondary masonry, with a small relieving arch above it; this may relate to the Gothic wall monument on the internal face of the wall.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered and colour-washed, except for the exposed ashlar dressings of the major arches, of window sills, and of the internal openings within the chancel.

In the **Nave** the south doorway has a segmental rear arch. The lower part of the western bay of the nave is occupied by a gallery; the area beneath is partitioned off to form an entrance lobby, with a small storage room to the west and a vestry to the north; the partition walls are probably of brick, but are concealed by boarding etc. The vestry has a small fireplace (now blocked) set diagonally in its north-west corner.

Each part of the nave has a three-bay roof; in the western part the arch-braced trusses spring from wall-posts carried by quite elaborate Romanesque corbels, but in the eastern the corbels are set at eaves level. The trusses have upper king-posts above the collars, flanked by curved struts; there are two levels of purlins, and a ridge.

A doorway set centrally in the partition wall opens into the nave, where a steep stair against the north wall gives access to the gallery (now disused). The two massive arches which carry the **Tower** are now of identical form; they have an inner order with a large demi-roll on the soffit, between hollows, and an outer with chevron, and are carried on stepped jambs with attached half-shafts that have scalloped capitals, moulded bases and a big impost band. Between them the ceiling of the tower has heavy east-west beams, supported on more Romanesque corbels

Access to the upper parts of the tower is only by the external stair turret. The ashlar facing of the newel well is now suffering very badly from erosion; at the head of the stair a circular pier rises to carry a heavy beam that in turn supports a flat slab ceiling, and a shoulder-arched

doorway opens into the lofty middle stage, which never appears to have had any particular use. There are a number of interesting features at this level. At the base of each wall is a stepped offset, totalling 0.65 m in height and 0.30 m in depth; this might simply be a constructional feature, or might conceivably mark the top of surviving pre-restoration masonry (although its regularity might argue against this). At the east end of the north wall is a vertical panel of masonry, flush with the front face of the off-set, containing the doorway, and rising to a sloped set-back just below the belfry floor. Whilst the dressings of the doorway opening are plainly 19th-century tooled ashlar, the remainder of the stonework of this projection, including the sloped top, looks convincingly 'ancient' but may simply be re-used material. Around 3 m above floor level there is a heavy east-west beam carried on shaped corbels; a little higher are pairs of corbels that carry struts to the heavy beams of the belfry floor, which are themselves supported by corbels. Above the heads of the north and south windows, which have plain ashlar rear arches, are further corbels, this time carrying a heavy transverse beam. There are also a number of rough blocks projecting from the wall faces, both at this level and in the belfry, which do not seem to have any particular function.

A steep ladder stair, set against the north wall, ascends to the belfry, where each opening has a semicircular rear arch with diagonally-tooled ashlar dressings. Above the head of the eastern belfry opening, and slightly to the south, is a large infilled socket. A little to the east of the head of the northern opening One of the projecting blocks is a section of a circular column c 0.18 m in diameter. The roof of the belfry is carried on two east-west beams, with diagonal struts supported by shaped corbels.

The **North Transept** opens from the eastern section of the nave by means of a large arch; this has jambs with pairs of attached shafts with a square fillet between, above a chamfered plinth; the shafts have moulded bases and capitals with chip-carved ornament. There is an impost band with tegulated and indented ornament, and a richly-moulded arch with pellet ornament and a heavy indented hoodmould (towards the nave). The internal opening of the window in the north wall is completely concealed by the organ.

The transept roof is of three bays, and of the same type as that in the western part of the nave.

The arch opening into the **Chancel** is smaller than those of the tower and transept. Its inner order carries a large half-roll flanked by smaller rolls, and the outer has chevron, with a billet-moulded hood. The jambs have pairs of attached shafts with a thin fillet between to the inner order, and angle shafts with scalloped capitals to the outer; towards the chancel there is no outer order, but the impost band is continued back to the side walls.

The priest's doorway has a segmental rear arch, and a continuous moulding to head and jambs consisting of a roll between hollows. The windows all have plain internal splays, but a chevron-moulded order just inside the glass-line. A chevron-moulded band runs beneath the eastern triplet.

The internal stonework of the east wall of the chancel, and of part of the eastern window in the south wall, has a very distinct heavy bolster tooling (which may be relatively recent: see *Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work for 1980*); this finish suddenly ends part way down the west internal jamb of the eastern window in the south wall; the dressings of the western window in the same wall show an older tooled-and-margined finish.

The chancel roof is of five bays, with chamfered tie-beams carrying a ridge and one level of

purlins, the longitudinal timbers having broad chamfers to their lower angles.

Fittings & Furnishings

The **Font** stands in the western part of the nave, and has a cup-like bowl on a rather worn turned shaft. Hodgson (1912, 211) describes discovering the bowl of the font upon the vicarage rockery, and states that its lower parts had been 'broken up into imitation rock work'; it had been replaced, presumably in 1850-1, by a neo-Norman successor which is now in St Peter's Church, Byers Green (DOE 1988). Hodgson thought the font bowl possibly 12th century; the DOE list more credibly suggests a 17th century date. The bowl appears to be that described and illustrated by Hodgson; the shaft is somewhat damaged but hardly 'broken up' as Hodgson stated..

The furnishings within the nave and north transept are all of softwood and of later 19th century date; the pews have fleur-de-lys ends, and some have faint remains of painted numbers. None are of especial interest, except perhaps for the **Eden Family Pew**, moved in 1986 to its present location in the transept, from the east end of the nave.

The **Organ**, set against the centre of the north wall of the north transept, has painted designs on its pipes and the inscription 'Holy Holy Holy' across a top rail. A 1985 letter from Dr Donald E Wright (DAC Records) describes it as being of 1866, and by Wadsworth. It originally cost £200, and can be regarded as 'historically significant in several ways'.

The **Chancel Screen** however is an important piece of c 1660-1670, of the Cosin school of woodwork. The DOE list account (1988) describes it as having a 'panelled dado, skittle balusters above support paired arches with cusped tracery; rinceau frieze below dentilled cornice with classical moulding; richly-carved fruit and flowers in principal vertical members; top swell cartouches flanked by scrolls and swags. This mixture of Gothic and Classical elements is typical of Cosin's work; the upper elements are described by Pevsner (1983, 345) as 'a crude version of the cresting on the Sedgefield chancel panelling with cherub's heads on the brackets'.

The **Chancel Stalls** are of the same date and style as the screen, with carved poppy heads; they are not in their original condition, part of the front of the northern one being missing; a loose poppy head lies nearby. The **Altar Rails** with turned balusters, a dentil cornice and poppy-heads at each end, are of the same period. The **Altar Table** is thought to be of early-17th century date, and has six turned legs, a heavy top cornice and large feet.. In the Sanctuary are two old **Chairs**, one relatively formal (18th century) and the other with interesting carvings including a bird drinking from a chalice? and grotesque masks on the legs..

Other 17th-century fittings were seem to have been lost in 1850-1; the 1889-90 note (Proc.Soc.Ant.Newcastle IV, 21) tersely states 'most of the old fittings were burnt' (see also 'Structural History' section, p.11).

There are two **Bells** in the tower; the details below are from the 1889-90 note (op.cit):

1. DEO GLORIA 1729 THO. WOOD CHURCH
WIL WILKINSON WARDENS

(25" diameter by 19" high)

The inscription is in a band of scroll work. E.SELLER /EBOR in shield below, between two bells in scroll work. This bell is cracked.

1. GLORIA IN ALTISSIMUS DEO 1723 in a band of scroll work.

SS

EBOR In shield below (26" diameter by 20" high)

The **Bell Frame** has two parallel pits, and is long headed, with corner posts and diagonal braces, and also external diagonal struts; it is probably of mid-19th century date.

Sepulchral Monuments

The oldest monuments in the church are now laid in the Eden family pew in the north transept.

These comprise:

- (1) A well-preserved coped grave slab with tegulated sides, a cross at each end, and remains of an inscription along the ridge. (Lang 1974.)
- (1) A worn medieval cross slab with a relief carving of a bracelet cross rising from an arch base, with a sword on the l. and a spade on the r. This is traditionally linked to the legendary hero Hodge of Ferry, who is said to have killed the great boar or 'brawn' of Brancepeth by luring it into a pit which he had dug. The slab is probably of 13th century date (Ryder 1985, 101 & plate 41)
- (1) A worn ogee-topped headstone, dated '1700' probably brought in from the churchyard.
- (1) A fragment of the original top slab of the churchyard tomb to three children of the Brass family, murdered in 1683 (see churchyard description).

The church has very little in the way of post-medieval monuments. On the north of the chancel is a brass plate to Sir Robert Johnson Eden d.1844, with a coat of arms, in a heavily-decayed Gothic surround; this has been described as a re-used 14th century piece (DOE 1988) but seems more likely to be contemporary with the plate. On the south wall of the western part of the nave is a marble tablet, with a shrouded urn, and an inscription to John Smith of Holstone House near Stockton upon Tees, d.1832, 'who bequeathed £200 for the use of ten poor widows in this parish', signed by 'G Green N.castle'. On the north wall is a small marble tablet to Mrs Archer of Ferryhill, d.1829.

Historical Notes

- 1144 The church played a brief but dramatic role in the rebellion of William Cumin, former chancellor to David, King of Scotland, who had laid claim to be bishop four years previously. After alternating violence and periods of negotiation with the official bishop-elect, William de St Barbara, Cumin seized and hurriedly fortified Merrington Church, surrounding it with an earthwork, but it was soon taken, perhaps before the defences were completed, by forces led by three of the local barons (Boyle, 160-161).

1794 The Durham historian Hutchinson (III, 325-326) provides the earliest description of the building: 'The church shews many marks of antiquity. The tower, like that of Jarrow, has stood in the centre of four aisles, forming a cross. The chancel is four paces in width, and five paces within the rails; in the centre of which space, the communion table stands, open on all sides; the ascent is by three steps: from the rails, the chancel is nine paces in length, neatly wainscoted in pannels, & c. stalled with oak on each side, with an open cut screen: the east window, of three lights, is under a circular arch; one, of three windows to the south, is now walled up; the arches are pointed: there are no lights to the north. The nave is entered from the chancel by a narrow circular arch. The whole length of the nave, from the screen of the chancel to the west end, is 26 paces, of which the tower takes up nine; but the arches being open under the tower, that part is stalled and forms part of the present space allotted for the congregation. The west side of the tower rises on a heavy circular arch, supported on buttresses; the east side also rises on a circular arch, but it springs from clustered pillars, capitalled in the ancient and most rude Saxon form. The body of the church is lighted by one window to the north, under a pointed arch, and another to the south under a circular arch, with an east light: a large porch, called Lawrence's porch, opens to the middle aisle by a pointed arch, near 24 feet in span; we could obtain no information why the name of Lawrence was given to this porch, nor could we discover any information, or other matter, to lead to it. The tower is a massive pile, near 60 feet in height, having small windows with circular arches. The south door is circular, the mouldings the mouldings ornamented with the zigzag figure, and the sides furnished with pilasters. We could find no traces of the ditch, or vallum, formed in Cumin's time.

1823 Surtees (III, 280) writes that the church 'retains several traces of early architecture; it was perhaps one of the first parochial structures built by the Convent of Durham. The chancel opens under a narrow circular arch. The tower rises near sixty feet, springing from the centre of the nave, on two heavy round Norman arches. The West arch is plain, resting on buttresses; but the Eastern arch springs from clustered pillars, with rude capitals; the tower is finished with crockets and open battlements, and has on every face double round-headed lights. A large South porch opens from the nave under a blunt pointed-arch; this is called Lawrence's Porch, possibly from some forgotten altar or chantry. Many of the original lights have been closed or altered. The East window has three lights, with some tracery under a pointed arch. There is also another ancient window of three lights on the North of the nave. The chief entrance is by a South door, which has had pillars, with grooved or fluted capitals supporting an arch ornamented with zigzag; this is curtailed or covered by a modern porch. The whole interior is heavily stalled with old wainscot, and a wooden screen divides nave and chancel.

A further pre-rebuilding account of the church is found in the Mitchinson Album in Durham Cathedral Library

Mitchinson Acct of Kirk Merrington (p24)

Dedication – St John.

Ground Plan. Nave with S porch; centre tower, chancel with S chapel, dedicated to St Lawrence.

The church was restored ruthlessly (practically rebuilt) in 1854. These notes were made prior to that date. The S door, ill protected by a ruinous porch, is a fine Norm one, three-ordered, the shafts gone, except the innermost pair, the caps along surviving; the arches richly adorned with chevron on the soffit of the innermost. The tower is a massive square, without staircase, of three stage. The basement stage opens into the chancel with a fine Norm arch, enriched with chevron, but thickly plastered; it is closed with a Deb. Roof screen. The arch that should open into the nave is closed with masonry. The second stage is lighted by plain, narrow Norm lights. The belfry, containing two small bells of late date, is lighted by four twin Norm lights, parted by a small circular shaft with octagonal cap and base, under a dripstone as at Jarrow. In lieu of buttresses a tall Norm shaft runs up from the base of the second stage at each angle to a parapet which is of late date. Inside the side chapel there is a large massive buttress propping the S wall of the tower.

The nave, blocked off from the church, is desecrated, containing only the font and much lumber. The W window is Norm, of the usual type. Similar ones occur on the N and S, but blocked or otherwise defaced. The roof (leaded) is nearly flat; against the tower is the coping of one of higher pitch,

The woodwork of the chancel is Elizabethan (or Jacobean) with rich poppy-heads and bench-ends. The S chapel opens from the chancel under a Dec arch springing from octagonal responds. It contains a large 3-foil headed piscine almost concealed by wainscot. In the churchyard is a grave cover with a simple floriated cross, sword and spade. For the legendary account of this, see Surtees.

1857 Fordyce (1857, I, 579) chronicles the rebuilding of the church. 'Symptoms of decay became very conspicuous in the venerable tower of this church a few years ago, and it appeared in imminent danger of falling. In 1849, measures were taken for its complete renovation.... it was found necessary, however, to extend the repairs to the whole church, except a portion of the north wall, which had been restored about ten years previously. The restorations have been made, as nearly as possible, in a style of architecture similar to the original. A greater extent of seat-room has been obtained, and the church will now accommodate 300 persons. Sir William Eden was the chief financial contributor; 'he was also at the sole expense of the beautiful arch at the entrance to the north transept'.

Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work

1850-1851

The church was more or less rebuilt from ground level, George Pickering (the Cathedral Clerk of Works) being the architect, raising a storm of antiquarian protest.

The records of the Incorporated Church Building Society (Lambeth Palace Library) preserve a little information relating to the rebuilding. The Society made a grant to the church of £50, on condition that the new accommodation included 83 free seats; previously there had been 209 sittings, 'none of which are free for the use of the poor' ICBS Minute Books 13, 283 and 14, 197); they also asked for drawings of the existing church, but the vicar stated that the parish could not afford to have these made. (File ICBS 4215)

2479	5.10.1933	Electric light (Merrington)
3043	30.10.1947	Modification of existing heating system (filed under Kirk Merrington)
3365	3.11.50	Electric organ blower (M)
3633	22 7 53	Erection of an oak tablet, repairs & re-decoration
4768	18 3 65	A/C Rewiring of the church (M)
4807	30 7 65	A/C Re-decoration of chancel
5449	13.6.73.	Removal of certain gravestones, tidying churchyard etc (filed under Kirk Merrington)
1980		1980 restoration of E and SE windows in chancel, re-tooling to remove paint (1984 Quinquennial)
1982		Churchyard tidied up by MSC Task Force 1982 (DAC files)
6290	12 8 85	Overhaul of organ
1985.		All four boundary walls of churchyard pointed and several lengths rebuilt (1989 Quinquennial, A.O.Lee)
6365	14 4 86	Introduction of new boiler, etc construction of platform outside church (St John the Evangelist)
1986.		Works including moving of Eden family pew into north transept (when new altar installed in nave) under N.A.C.R.O. scheme. (1994 Quinquennial, J.Kendall). Pews in baptistery area removed.
1993		Redundant boiler house to be demolished, with recommendation that an archaeologist be involved. No record of archaeological recording traced (possibly because no features of any significance were seen). Roof of tower to be repaired with new lead. (DAC files)
1999		Works underway repointing of west gable, damp-proofing etc. (DAC files)

The Structural History of the Church

The Medieval Church

Whilst many antiquarian sources lament the rebuilding of the church in 1850/1, several have been misleading as to the form of the original building, stating either that the present church

is a replica of the old or that the chancel is an 1850 addition (Pevsner 1983, 345). The surviving antiquarian descriptions of Hutchinson and Surtees (see 'Historical Records' section) and Billings' plate together make it clear that the church consisted of a nave with the tower at its centre (as today), but with a south 'porch' or chapel, on the south of its eastern portion. Surtees also refers to a south porch covering the Norman doorway, and this is shown in outline on the 1840 Tithe Award map, but not on Billings' print.

The print, published in 1845, shows the western part of the church from the south west. The tower is generally similar in form to its successor, but has what appears to be a straight joint separating it from the nave. At ground floor level a round-arched 18th century window has replaced an original light, the head and west jamb of which remain visible. Above this is a string, above which the shafted angles of the tower commence. The second stage has a small window on the south) as today but also a similar opening on the west, beneath the roof-line of a former high-pitched nave roof. The belfry is generally similar to that today, except that there is a small circular light or sound hole some distance above the heads of the main openings. The 1850 oversailing corbel table is absent instead there is a slightly-oversailing parapet carrying a rather complicated arrangement of small embattled turrets, each with three obelisk finials, at the each corner and stepped crenellations between. The nave shown has a south doorway, very much like that at present; to the east is a blocked round-arched light, and high in the west end a window with shafted jambs, as at present. Overlapping the south wall of the tower the west wall of 'Lawrence's porch' is visible; it seems to have had a sloping roof continuous with that of the eastern part of the nave.

The original 12th-century church was clearly of a highly unusual form. If Billings' straight joint is to be believed (his drawings are not always reliable in minor detail such as this) it would imply that the tower pre-dated the nave, although if, as suggested below, parts of the south wall of the tower remain in situ, then the drawing must be incorrect. On the other hand, if the drawing is correct, it would imply that the tower formed a tower-nave in the late Saxon tradition (cf Barton on Humber), possibly with the 'east nave' as its chancel. The fact that the two tower arches were somewhat different in form, one on 'buttresses' and the other on 'clustered pillars' might hint that the eastern was originally intended as a chancel arch. However, if the 'western nave' was an addition, it must have been built soon after the original building.

REWRITE THIS – CHANCEL IS EARLY C19 ON 1840 TITHE MAP BUT NOT MENTIONED BY ANTIQ ACCTS. The present chancel is something of a puzzle. Pevsner is definitely wrong in seeing it as an 1850 addition (as both the antiquarian descriptions and the 1840 map make clear). Both the antiquarian descriptions and the style of the present chancel arch (if it is anything like a correct copy) indicate that there was a Norman chancel to the east of the present nave, although its elongate proportions would tally more with a late 12th or early 13th century date than the apparent early/mid-12th century one of the tower and nave. If the squared stonework of the present chancel is in fact re-used from its predecessor, then a rebuilding at this date seems more likely than one later in the medieval period. Lawrence's Porch, opening under the 'blunt pointed arch' described by Surtees, might have been a medieval chantry chapel (cf Redmarshall?), perhaps added in the 14th or 15th century, although a letter from the vicar to the Incorporated Church Building Society (file ICBS 4215, Lambeth Palace Library) describes it as an 'awkward and unseemingly excrescence' added in the 18th century. OPENED FROM NAVE.

The east window of the chancel, to judge from Surtees' mention of tracery, may have been

renewed in the 14th or 15th century. At some late medieval or post-medieval date the original high-pitched roof of the western nave was replaced by the low leaved one shown by Billings; the elaborate tower parapet shown in the same print looks like a 17th or 18th century reconstruction of the original; both the antiquarian accounts and the print make it clear that there had been various alterations to the fenestration of the church.

The Restoration that became a Rebuilding: the ‘Galvanised Corpse’

Then came Pickering’s 1850/1 rebuilding, and much subsequent beating of antiquarian breasts. Hodgson (1912, 209-11), diverted (as often) within an article on Durham church fonts, talks of the church abandoned to the ‘wreckers’ and that, ‘when the work of demolition finished, that of confusion and mystification began’. He states that the facing stones of chancel and tower were re-used in their weathered state, but that inside, old dressings were re-tooled so that ‘all looks coldly, hardly, brightly, painfully new without really being so. Its is like looking upon a galvanised corpse’.

Two major questions remain. How closely does Pickering’s rebuilding replicate the old church, and does anything of the medieval fabric survive?

As Hodgson stated, Kirk Merrington church in its present state is a difficult building to interpret. On close inspection, the building, with its variations in fabric, and in architectural detail, looks anything but the product of a single rebuilding. The variations in form between the various windows might suggest that the architect was carefully copying what was there before, but inside the two tower arches are now identical whereas antiquarian accounts make it clear that they formerly had jambs of quite different form.

The vertical patches of better-squared stone in the lower part of the tower are especially puzzling. The plinth that runs below them is clearly 19th century, and that at the south-west corner shows no sign of the straight joint shown by Billings. So are they a quirk of Pickering’s rebuilding, perhaps introduced to better tie together the walls of tower and nave? Hodgson’s fulminations against the rebuilding (admittedly written almost half a century afterwards) suggest that tower was rebuilt from the ground. However, the evidence of the ‘L-shaped blocks’ at the junction between the better-squared stonework and the adjacent more rubbly masonry probably tilts the balance in favour of seeing these areas of walling as an in-situ survival of the 12th-century tower, although the character of the stonework (unlike that re-used in the chancel) is not distinctive of this period. The large elongate blocks might be more happily placed in a Saxo-Norman overlap context than a fully Norman one.

Inside the tower, the big set-back a little above the floor of the middle stage chamber could conceivably mark the top of surviving unrebuilt fabric, although it is very regular, and might simply be a 19th-century constructional feature.

Turning to the chancel, Fordyce explicitly states that ‘a portion of the north wall’ (which presumably means that of the chancel) was spared simply because it had already been ‘restored’ a few years before. As already described, the wall contains several problematical features; again, the balance of evidence would seem to favour a pre-19th century (and presumably medieval) date, but it is difficult to say much more than this. The traces of a blocked doorway might indicate that there was formerly a vestry here.

The whole chancel is something of a puzzle, both in its careful re-use of weathered old

walling stone, and in its very plain low-pitched roof, so different in style to the rest of the building. Perhaps the best explanation if this disparity is that the roof, more Georgian than Victorian in feel, survives from the earlier 19th-century works that Fordyce alludes to.

Summing up, it would seem likely that some sections of pre-1850 fabric survives both in the lower part of the tower, and in the north wall of the chancel. Unless further documentary records come to light, it is difficult to ascertain how much the details of Pickering's work reproduces what was there beforehand. Certainly, the windows of the nave, lower stage of the tower, and chancel are all of completely different characters. Although it is difficult to pick out any one feature as genuine 12th-century work re-set, there is a tremendous contrast between the sharp detail and 'textbook' style of, say, the grotesques of the eaves corbel table, and the convincingly Romanesque beasts that appear as head stops to the windows of the lower stage of the tower.

Dodd (1897, 53-4) relates an interesting story as regards the fate of the fittings of the old church. The churchwardens had 'chopped up the stalls and made a bonfire of them in the churchyard. Archdeacon Thorp came in the nick of time and just succeeded in snatching the poppy heads from the flames. The bulk of them he took to adorn his church in Holy Island, but a few remain in the chancel'. The 'Holy Island' reference is presumably an error for Farne Island, which Thorp rented at this time, and where he was engaged in reconstructing the medieval St Cuthbert's Chapel. The 17th-century woodwork here is usually stated to have come from Durham Cathedral.

The Churchyard

The church is set towards the centre of a large roughly rectangular churchyard, bounded by low rubble walls. The only semblance of any earthwork which might relate to the hurriedly-constructed defences from Cumin's rebellion is a slight break in slope a few metres west of the west end.

A number of medieval monuments lie round in the churchyard; they are clearly not in their original positions. Five are coped grave slabs, discussed by Lang (1974) and Ryder (1985); they are probably of late 12th or early 13th century date. The medieval slabs comprise:

- (1) A coped cross slab lying against the south wall of the nave to the east of the south door. A raised drum accommodated the cross slab whilst the shaft runs along the ridge; the sides have overlapping raised strips, and the head and foot have sockets for separate head and foot-stone crosses.
- (1) A similar slab, lying a little further to the east.
- (1) Another similar slab now lying outside the east end
- (1) A fourth slab of the same type (but without the end sockets) lying outside the north-west corner of the nave
- (1) Lying outside the east end of the chancel, close to (3), is a small double slab, of two parts with a groove between, showing faint remains of a pair of crosses..

Other medieval slabs are known to have been lost. An 1889-90 note in the Proceedings of

the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle (New Series IV, 21) states that ‘in the churchyard are eleven medieval grave covers, almost overgrown with grass, several are coped and one is further decorated with a tile pattern...’ In the next volume of the same periodical (891/2 , New Series V, 103) it is noted that the Rev R. Coulton, then vicar, had taken seven of the grave-covers from the churchyard and placed them inside the church, within the communion rails, including the small double slab (5, above) and four coped slabs, two with tegulated sides. So were there originally twelve slabs? A sketch accompanying the second note (left) shows the coped slab now in the north transept, and the second, now missing, with a plain end, a roll-moulded ridge, and semicircular tegulations on the sides.

The unpublished manuscript ‘Memorial Floor Slabs in England and Wales’ compiled by the Rev. George Rowe (British Museum Additional MS 39912-6), includes drawings of five cross slabs from Kirk Merrington, four of which are no longer traceable - vol.III p.121 and vol.IV, pp 24, (‘taken from a rubbing by Dr Charlton’) 48 & 70. (Copies at end of this report)

So it would seem possible that these four slabs, and the second tegulated one, had been taken into the church, but were later removed. Rowe also illustrates, on p.41 in volume I, a small slab from ‘Durham Cathedral Crypt’, labelled ‘from Kirk Merrington’ ; this is an unusual small monument with arcaded sides, no.10 in the cathedral refectory undercroft collection (Ryder 1985, 75 and plate 19).

Dodd (1897, 50-51) provides some intriguing information that may relate to Cumin’s defence works. He states that ‘right across the churchyard. From Mr Bruces’s grave (presumably that of Rev Charles John Bruce d.1887, at the extreme north-west corner) to the fire-hole (boiler room) door of the church, there is a trench filled with layer upon layer of uncoffined bones. Part of the trench is in the modern extension of the churchyard, and the sexton can tell at once when he comes to it, because the earth is easier to dig than on the adjoining sides, and it is no uncommon circumstance for skulls and bones to be thrown out by the gravedigger’s spade. Possibly the bodies may be those of soldiers slain during Cumyn’s rebellion.

Looking along the line that Dodd describes, there are one of two graves which appear to have sunk bodily into the ground, which would seem to confirm his reference to softer earth in this area. His reference to the ‘modern extension’ is puzzling, as even the 1840 tithe map shows the churchyard of exactly the same dimensions as at present. Perhaps there had been a strip along the western margin that had not been used for burials prior to the mid-19th century.

Archaeological Assessment

It would seem reasonable to much of the present church was rebuilt from foundation level in 1850/1, with the probable exception of parts of the tower and chancel walls. Any works involving large-scale plaster removal from internal wall faces should be monitored, as they may provide more information on the extent of surviving medieval fabric. Presumably there are also some remains of sub-floor deposits (and possibly structural remains) within the present building, although what there is will have been disturbed by a sub-floor heating system and, of course, many generations of burials. Nevertheless, any disturbance of the ground within the building will still merit some degree of archaeological monitoring.

Outside the building, in the churchyard, there may be more of interest. No definite remains of the documented defensive ditch around the church, dating from Cumin’s rebellion, have been traced - even the earliest antiquaries note this - but sub-surface remains presumably survive

(despite centuries of burial) and may be traceable using modern geophysical methods; even such basic approaches as looking down from the lofty vantage point provided by the tower, in a dry summer when there is discolouration in the grass, should not be overlooked. Dodd's bone-filled trench is intriguing, although its position makes it difficult to correlate with any defensive work.

Summary and Archaeological Priorities

One's appreciation of Kirk Merrington Church as an impressive Victorian building, of some architectural merit in itself, is inevitably tempered by the knowledge that it replaced a genuine 12th-century church of quite unusual interest. Pickering's rebuilding was savaged by later antiquarians, but it is perhaps unfair to judge him too harshly; we do not know the severity of the structural problems faced by the old building.

As regards gaining further information on the lost 12th-century church, it will probably be as worthwhile to search for little-known antiquarian sources as to examine what remains of the building itself, or perhaps even its underfloor stratigraphy. The only pre-rebuilding illustration so far traced is Billings' print; as the building was realised to be of antiquarian interest, it seems strange that no others are known.

The churchyard is of some importance, as it is clear that it conceals intriguing archaeological features, and also certainly evidences of Cumin's 12th-century fortifications.

Perhaps the main matter of current concern is in the treatment of the collection of medieval monuments. During the last century several have 'gone missing', apparently from inside the church; are they in some local garden? As Lang's article showed, the coped slabs that lie in the churchyard are of unusual interest, and certainly merit better treatment than being scattered around the periphery of the building. They merit being brought under cover, and properly conserved.; with proper interpretational material they would form an informative display.

Peter F Ryder May/June 1999

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**ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST
KIRK MERRINGTON**

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
JUNE 1999**

Medieval Cross Slab, traditionally ascribed to 'Hodge of Ferry'

PETER F RYDER

ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST, KIRK MERRINGTON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

JUNE 1999

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Kirk Merrington from the 1840 Tithe Award Map

The Church in 1845, after Billings.

The only illustration so far traced of the church before the 1850-51 rebuilding.

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

1. General south-west view

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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2. Tower and nave from the south

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

3. Window on south of tower.

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

4. General south-east view

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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5. East end

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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6. The chancel from the north

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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7. General north-east view

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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8. North view of nave and tower.

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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9. North-west view

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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10. Interior looking east

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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11 Interior looking west..

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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12. The arch into the north transept

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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13. Chancel arch and screen

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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14. Detail of chancel screen.

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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15 Middle stage of tower, doorway to stair.

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

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16. Bell frames

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

17. The Font

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

18. Grave slabs etc in Eden Family Pew

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

19. Coped slabs against south wall of nave

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

20. Coped slabs against south wall of nave

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

21. Medieval slabs outside east end

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

22. Coped slab at NW corner of nave

St John the Evangelist, Kirk Merrington

Archaeological Assessment June 1999 P F Ryder

23. View from north-west, looking along line of bone-filled trench recorded in C19, showing subsidence of monuments.