

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, LOW DINSDALE

The hamlet of Low Dinsdale lies on the south bank of the meandering Tees, 2 km east of Neasham and c 6 km to the south-east of Darlington. The parish church of St John the Baptist (NGR NZ 347112) stands a short distance to the north-east of the partly-medieval Manor House and its complex of encircling earthworks; the church consists of a nave with a west tower, a two-bay south aisle or chapel, with a south porch, and a chancel with combined vestry and organ chamber on the north.

Description

The Exterior

The **West Tower** is of red sandstone with grey sandstone ashlar dressings. The red sandstone is rather more thinly coursed in the lower section, which represents the 1843 organ chamber heightened into a tower in 1876; these two dates are carved on successive chamfered set-backs on the south-western buttress. The tower rises in four external stages, divided by chamfered set-backs, and has rather slender diagonal buttresses at the angles¹ and a three-sided stair turret, rising only to the second stage, set in the angle between its north wall and the west end of the nave. There is a two-part plinth with a chamfered lower step and a heavily-moulded upper. The west window is of three trefoil-arched lights with foiled circles in the head, under a chamfered arched head, with a moulded hood that is continued round the tower and its buttresses as a string course. The second stage of the tower has single trefoil-arched lights on north, south and west; these have chamfered surrounds and moulded hoods with mask stops. The stair turret, which has a square-headed doorway at its base, rebated for a door opening outwards, is lit by three small lancets and rises to a pyramidal top at the level of the second stage. The third stage of the tower has clock faces, in chamfered surrounds, on north, south and west; the fourth is the belfry, which has on each side an opening of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a two-centred arch with a moulded hood that has the usual mask stops. The sloped caps of the angle buttresses are set about 0.60 m below a bold moulded string course, above which the embattled parapet has a moulded coping and heavy crocketed pinnacles at each corner; these have with more masks at their angles, but have lost their upper sections at some time in the 20th century.

The north wall of the **Nave** is built of heavy rubble, roughly coursed in parts, with some large rounded river cobbles and a mixture of grey and red stone. The north-west angle quoin is of large blocks including at its base a block c 0.6 m square projecting from the wall face; this might be interpreted as a surviving megalithic quoin of Pre-Conquest type, but it in turn rests upon a chamfered plinth, better seen at the east end of the wall (where the ground level, adjacent to a modern storage tank, is a little lower). This plinth of cut blocks has a neat 45° chamfer and is of 12th-century character. The uppermost courses of the wall are of thinly-coursed red sandstone, and seem contemporary with the oversailing chamfered eaves cornice which is clearly of 19th-century date.

In the wall (left) are two windows, each of two lancet lights with a roundel in the spandrel, with grey ashlar dressings and an outer arch of rough red sandstone voussoirs common to the

1 Their proportions doubtless relate to the original single-storey organ chamber, and their being simply heightened when this was raised into a tower.

other 1876 arched windows in the church. Between these windows are remains of an earlier and smaller one, c 0.50 m wide and 1.0 m high, set low, and clearly an insertion. Its jambs are of rough stone, and the original form of its head is no longer apparent.

The east gable of the nave, above the chancel roof, has a slab coping of 1876, similar to the gables of the south aisle, carrying the remains of a finial cross.

The **South Aisle** has a gabled roof parallel to, and of the same height as, that of the nave. It is largely faced with fairly-thinly coursed squared and tooled red sandstone of 1876, although there is a scatter of larger and more weathered blocks in the west end and lower part of the south wall, together with some old angle quoins (at least those to the south-west²). The west wall of the aisle has a double chamfered plinth (which looks in its present form largely of 19th century date); the other walls have no plinth, and are rendered up to around a metre above the surrounding drainage trench.

All the features of the west wall are of 1876. The west window of the aisle is two trefoil-arched lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, in a chamfered outer arch with the usual moulded hood and mask stops; above is a vesica window in a chamfered surround. The rather steep gable has a slab coping chamfered on its underside, simple chamfered kneelers, and the base of a finial at the apex.

On the south of the aisle the south door, inside the porch, is a surprisingly small and narrow opening with a segmental-pointed head and a single continuous chamfer. The western half of the head (cut in two blocks) and one block of the east jamb alone seem medieval. Further east is a window of two lancet lights with a small roundel in the spandrel; this is the 13th century window that clearly provided the model for the two 19th-century ones on the north of the nave. However in its present form only the lower half of its head seems original, and the remainder restoration. The wall has a chamfered oversailing course to the eaves.

The east end of the aisle has quite a large three-light window with simple intersecting tracery in the style of c1300; all its dressings are of 1876, although apparently copying an earlier window in the same position which had been altered in the early 18th century³. Above are a vesica and coped gable, exactly as at the west end.

The **South Porch** is entirely of 1876, and is built of the same fabric as the majority of the aisle; its outer archway has a two-centred arch of two continuous chamfers, under a moulded hood with mask stops⁴; the steep gable has a coping and finial of the same type as the other 1876 gables.

2 The second quoin from the base has both an OS benchmark and the date '1196' (in Arabic, and plainly an interpretative aid helpfully provided by the 1876 restorer) incised on its south face.

3 An old photograph (Eastwood 1897) shows it as having been converted to a round-arched form with an arched central panel, of a type seen again the south aisle at Brancepeth, in old illustrations, but which could hardly have been expected to survive the zeal of Victorian restorers who would doubtless have seen it as 'debased' or 'churchwarden' in style.

4 The VCH account (1928, 221) sees the outer archway as 'old'; this seems to be one of several errors.

The porch roof has common rafters with ashlaring and collars.

The **Chancel** is quite elongate proportions; it is noticeable that the alignment of the south wall changes to the east of the priest's door, the eastern section deviating c 0.30 m to the north. Some old well-squared masonry, well-coursed blocks with some diagonal tooling (perhaps 12th century) survives at the west end of the south wall, and some large blocks further east., although there has been much refacing, presumably in 1876. On the south face of one of the lower quoins at the south-east angle the date '1379' has been incised, perhaps misleadingly. The lower courses of the wall are rendered; there looks to be a chamfered plinth under this render, at least at the east end of the wall, where its projection shows in the wall-foot drainage gully.

There are two windows in the wall, each of two trefoil-headed ogee-arched lights under a square head, with pierced and cusped spandrels, and a broad chamfer to the outer frame. The western is entirely of 1876, but the eastern, apart from its head tracery, mullion and part of the sill, seems genuine 14th-century work. In between is a shoulder-arched priest's door. Its jambs are simply squared walling stones, only the head (of which the eastern shoulder has been cut away) having a chamfer, although even this looks of 19th-century date in its present form. About 1.5 m to the east of the door a large block near the foot of the wall has what seems to be a pair of incised lines, and may be part of an early grave cover.

The oversailing chamfered course at the head of both side walls of the chancel, and the form of its east gable, are all of 1876, and similar to those of the south aisle.

The east end of the chancel retains a considerable amount of medieval masonry, of large squared blocks. There is a chamfered plinth that seems old in parts, and a small chamfered set-back about 1 m above. The east window of 1876 is of three trefoil-headed lights with geometric tracery of foiled circles above, in the usual chamfered surround with a moulded hood and mask stops.

Only the eastern part of the north wall of the chancel is exposed externally, to the east of the vestry, and its large squared masonry seems genuinely medieval. There is no plinth. At the east end of the wall is a shallow pilaster buttress, its east side flush with the east wall, and to the west of that an inserted square-headed two-light window of 1876, of the same form as those in the south wall.

The pent-roofed **Vestry** is an addition of 1876, and is built of thinly-coursed squared and tooled sandstone; it has a chimney on its east end; the north wall, at the foot of which a flight of steps descend to the boiler room beneath, has a single small lancet window, chamfered round, and an oversailing chamfered eaves course; both ends walls have a cut coping.

The Interior

The internal walls of the church are plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings of the arcade and various openings.

The arch into the **Tower** is of two-centred form, and double-chamfered section; above the arch is a chamfered set-back between sloping cheeks formed by the eastern angle buttresses.

Towards the nave the chamfers of the arch are continued unbroken to floor level, but towards the tower both orders and a third outer order, chamfered but plastered over, simply die into the wall. The west window has a double-chamfered segmental-pointed rear arch, behind plaster.

The only access to the upper parts of the tower is externally, via the stair turret on the north. The walls of the stair well are faced in brick, in courses of headers, and the turret has a rough domical stone vault at the level of the second stage, which is entered by a plain square-headed opening. This chamber has small windows with brick rear arches; several curved stones, apparent former voussoirs, are built into the east and south walls here. Access to the belfry is by ladder; at this level the internal walls are faced with brick.

In the **Nave** the south arcade is of two segmental-pointed arches, each of two chamfered orders; the outer order is much narrower than the inner, and towards the nave seems to have been largely renewed. The central pier is octagonal with a moulded capital and a chamfered base, probably partly concealed beneath the present floor; it is made up of a mixture of stone colours (the arches being all red sandstone). The responds are simply square blocks of wall, from which semi-octagonal double-chamfered corbels spring to carry the inner order. Both responds and pier have a variety of infilled sockets from former fittings.

The two north windows have rear arches of almost triangular form, with chamfers to their heads only, behind plaster.

In the **South Aisle** the south door has a tall segmental-headed rear arch with a chamfer to the head only; all three windows have rear arches of similar form; the vesicas have chamfered surrounds. At the east end of the south wall is a large piscina (right) with two-centred arch; the richly-moulded outer order seems all restoration but the inner order, which has a trefoiled arch with pierced spandrels, is in part medieval. There are two quatrefoil bowls, and the projecting sill has a chamfer on its lower edge. A stone 'sedilia' (apparently a wall bench), running between the piscina and the south door was removed at the restoration.

The arch into the **Chancel**, inserted in 1876, is of two-centred form, and continuous double-chamfered section has a hoodmould with mask stops towards the nave. On the south of the chancel the priest's door has a segmental rear arch with a chamfer to the head only, the two windows have shouldered rear arches. Immediately to the east of the eastern window is a piscina; its two-centred arch, of plain square section, looks 19th-century restoration, but the moulded front of its quatrefoil bowl, which projects from the wall, may be medieval⁵.

On the north of the chancel there is a large arch to the organ chamber, with a continuous double chamfer like that of the chancel arch; to the east is the vestry door, with a chamfered two-centred arch under a moulded hood with mask stops.

The east window has an internal surround with bowtel mouldings attached shafts that have their own m capitals

The **Vestry** has a fireplace set diagonally in its north-east corner; the lancet on the north has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to its head only and the door to the chancel a

5 This is now salting and decaying very badly

plain three-centred rear arch, behind plaster. On the west is a panelled partition between vestry and organ chamber.

The **Roofs** of nave, aisle and chancel, all of 1876, are each of virtually identical form. Each is of two bays, with arch-braced collar-beam trusses at the centre and against each end wall, the braces carried on moulded stone brackets; an intermediate pair of common rafters in each bay also has a collar. There is ashlaring at the eaves, two levels of purlins and a ridge board.

Carved Stones

A variety of interesting pieces of sculpture, most of which seems to have come to light at the 1876 restoration, are built into the south porch. Descriptions of the Pre-Conquest pieces, and their dating, are to be found in Cramp (1984, 63-66, pl. 33-36) and of the medieval grave slabs in Ryder (1985, 71-2)

1 East Wall

A Cramp no.2. The uppermost of the several stones built into this wall. Part of a cross shaft with interlace and the lower parts of two figures; first half of 10th century.

A The monolithic internal head of a 14th-century two-light window, presumably that from the eastern part of the south wall of the chancel.

A To the l. of (B), Cramp no.4. Thought to be part of the side panel of a cross, 'it is incompetent and possibly late workmanship'. First half of 11th century?

A To the r. of (B). Cramp no.5. Part of a cross-shaft, possibly the upper part of no.3. Two panels of plaitwork; first half of 10th century.

A Below l. part of (B). Cramp no.6. Part of cross shaft and head, with a motif of birds and scroll. First half of 10th century.

A Below r. part of (B). Cramp no.3. Part of a cross shaft, possibly the lower part of (D), with two sides exposed. Plait work and the head of a dog-like animal. 10th century.

A Lower in wall, the lower part of a 14th-century cross slab grave cover with the incised shaft of a cross, with the top of an arched base, and the blade of a sword.

2 West Wall

H Uppermost stone is Cramp no.7, an incomplete cross head; the central boss contains dismembered interlace, with loose knots in the arms. Possibly the head of cross shaft A. 10th century

I Below (H), Cramp no.9 a stone with a small splay-armed cross head carved in relief, possibly a dedication or 'station' cross. 10th to 11th century.

J Lower in the wall, an impressive medieval cross slab of yellow sandstone, complete; it

bears an eight-terminal, cross rising from a trefoiled ogee-arched base, with a sword on the r. and on the l. the inscription 'Goselynus Suyteys'. Goseline Surtees is known to have died in 1366 (Boyle 1892, 662), which gives this slab the distinction of being the only cross slab in Durham that can be accurately dated!

Other Stones

- K A further Pre-Conquest carved fragment, Cramp no 10, is built into the internal face of the wall above the outer archway of the porch, 'too worn to produce sufficient date for typological analysis'.
- L Lying under a pew at the east end of the south aisle, a hogback grave cover in two pieces (Cramp 8a and 8b); it is stated that this was 'found during restoration of 1875, built into south jamb of chancel arch' which must be incorrect as prior to 1875 there was no chancel arch. A muzzled bear-like beast at one end survives complete; the sides have panels with knots, with a low arch beneath them; there are close parallels at Ingleby Arncliffe and Sockburn. First half of 10th century.
- M Alongside L are two foliate cross terminals and other fragments, that seem to be parts of fallen 19th-century gable crosses.

Monuments.

The medieval monuments are dealt with under 'Carved Stones'

At the east end of the south wall of the chancel is a mural tablet in a surround with a coat of arms in the broken pediment and scrolled sides, to Cuthbert Routh late of Dinsdale d.1752 signed by R(ichard) Fisher. On the north wall are tablets to Henry Chapman of Neasham Hill d.1845 and Elisha Ingledew Temple of Worsall d. 1860. There are also some small late C19 brass plates.

In the south aisle, fixed to the arcade wall immediately above the capital of its central pier, is a small brass plate set in a moulded stone frame, with a coat of arms and inscription commemorating a benefaction of £6.00 yearly to the poor of Dinsdale parish by Mary Wyvill (d 1668), who is buried at Spennithorne (North Yorkshire).

Furnishings

Virtually all furnishings and fittings are of late 19th or 20th century date, including the elaborate **Pulpit**, set on a shaft of polished crinoidal limestone, and the panelled **Reredos** (1883), both of both of white stone.

High on the south wall of the aisle is a **Hatchment** with the arms of Surtees impaling Cookson, for Elizabeth, daughter of Isaac Cookson who married Robert Surtees of Redworth in 1811 and died in 1847. There is an identical hatchment at Heighington (Summers, ed 1980, 31-2)

In the tower is a single **Bell** by John Warner and sons of London 1876. It is hung in a simple

long-headed **Bell Frame**, set north-south, which has two braces on each side, but no corner posts.

The most notable, or at least most memorable piece of **Stained Glass** in the church is undoubtedly the east window of the south aisle (left) , of 1876 by O'Connor & Taylor of London; a piece of Victorian melodrama showing a woman clinging to a stone cross in the midst of a raging sea; 'undisciplined and not at all imitation-medieval' comment Pevsner & Williamson (1984, 356). The other glass, all Victorian, is not especially memorable; that of the western window on the south side of the chancel is dated 1863, which is puzzling as the window is an insertion of 1876.

In the chancel are two stone pedestals or plinths of Classical section, and a third standing beside the pulpit; they could be of 18th century date, or more recent.

The wrought iron **Screen and Gate** beneath the chancel arch are of c1912 (in memory of Mary Christine Greatorex); sockets in the jambs of the chancel arch above show that they replace an earlier and taller Victorian screen.

The present **Font** at the west end of the south aisle is an elaborate late-19th century piece with a white marble bowl, set on a central granite shaft flanked by four smaller ones of black marble. A much older font (right) stands at the east end of the aisle; it has a hexagonal bowl, set on a plain circular shaft; Hodgson (1912, 248) sees it as 'the smallest, rudest, roughest, and most mutilated..of all ancient examples remaining in the diocese' and considers that it 'may be of any, even pre-Conquest date'⁶.

Above the south door is a brass plaque giving the dates of the 1876 restoration and the names of the Restoration Committee.

Historical Notes

1194-5 Norman de Dinsdale, parson of the church, is mentioned; in 1228 he successfully petitioned the monks of Durham to confer the church upon his son William le Breton.

1196 Eastwood (1901,62) cites this as the approximate date of the church, on the grounds that Bishop Hugh le Puiset gave his authority for its construction, and died in 1195; the VCH account cites this date (which was carved in 1876 on the south-east quoin of the south aisle), but does not give any explanation.

1214-33 During the time of Prior Ralph of Durham the monks founded chantries at Darlington and Dinsdale, for the souls of William le Breton and Alice his wife. That at Dinsdale was dedicated to St Mary.

⁶ His description and illustration are both incorrect in making the bowl circular. The VCH account (1928, 221) describes it as octagonal; both refer to a later octagonal step, now gone.

1379 The date carved in 1876 upon the south-eastern quoin of the chancel, which Eastwood (op.cit) gives as that at which ‘changes were made by Sir Alexander Surtees’. The VCH refers to 1379-80 as the date at which Sir Alexander augmented the stipends of two chaplains at Dinsdale ‘for the souls of Sir Thomas Surtees and his ancestors’.

1794 William Hutchinson, the first of the Durham historians, provides a brief description of the church (III, 143): ‘The church is a mean edifice; the chancel, ten paces in length and five in width, is lighted by a window of three divisions, under a pointed arch to the east: The nave measures ten paces from the chancel to the west end, and is in width twelve paces, including the porch on the south side, which is formed by an octagonal pillar supporting pointed arches. In this porch lies a stone, sculptured with a large crosier staff, the head radiated, and each point finished like a barbed arrow; it appears to cover a vault. In the north-west corner of the nave, there is another stone in the pavement sculptured in the same manner.

1823 Surtees (III, 240) adds a little additional information. The east window had ‘three lights under a pointed arch’ and there had been a ‘handsome pointed window’ at the east end of the aisle ‘but its interior work and tracery are destroyed’ The grave slab in the aisle floor was only a fragment, the Goseline Surtees slab (which he illustrates, although he does not show the inscription) being at the north-west corner of the nave.

Faculties and other records of Structural Work

Note; faculties recorded are those which deal with structural matters; those dealing with stained glass, memorial tablets and moveable furnishings are not included.

The faculties are housed with the Durham Diocesan Records, in the University Library (Palace Green building) at Durham.

| Reference | Date | Works |
|-----------|------------------|--|
| 3/208 | 1875 | Restoring and reseating church. |
| 3/5971 | 19 November 1981 | Repairs to tower, stonework and window guards. |
| 3/6720 | 5 May 1988 | Repairs to churchyard wall. |
| 3/6775 | 12 August 1988 | Repairs to the stonework of the church. |
| 3/8815 | 13 December 1999 | To remove and dispose of pews and frontal storage cupboard, removal of dado from north side etc. |

The Structural History of the Church

Alterations and restoration of the 19th century have left the fabric of the church a difficult one to read, and Eastwood's '1196' and '1379' dates, optimistically carved on the restored fabric, are to some degree conjectural. The evidence of the carved stones shows that there was a church on or near the site long before 1196.

The north wall of the nave probably preserves the earlier above-ground fabric of the building; its short length of exposed plinth is of general 12th-century character. There also appears to be work of this period in the chancel, where squared masonry of broadly 12th-century character (but of much more refined character than the nave wall) is seen at the west end of the south wall. A marked deviation of alignment in the eastern part of the south wall suggest that the chancel was extended, possibly in the later 12th century⁷. Eastwood (1901, 62) records that 'half of a round-headed window' was seen at the restoration 'near' the surviving 14th-century window, which would place it in this eastern portion of the chancel, and the pilaster buttress at the east end of the north wall would be difficult to place long after 1200. Thus it may be possible to tentatively identify three 'Norman' phases, perhaps of the early, mid- and late-12th century, correlating with the nave, a short chancel, and then the extension of the chancel to its present length.

The south aisle or chapel looks to be of the later 13th century or perhaps c 1300; the south window with its plain lancet lights and roundel over seems rather earlier (c1250?) but may of course have been re-used.

In the chancel the shouldered arch of the priest's door and the surviving two-light window are broadly of 14th century character, but it would be unwise to link them too closely with the Sir Alexander Surtees 1379 augmentation of his chaplain's stipends.

After this, as often with Durham churches, there come four centuries or so from which virtually all visible evidence has been swept by 19th-century restoration. The east window of the south aisle was clearly remodelled in the early 18th century (see footnote3, page 2) and the small window in the centre of the north wall of the nave, now blocked, has the look of being a crude post-medieval insertion. Surtees rather distant view of 1823 (f.p.232, see p.11) seems to show the church before any restoration works, with a small bellcote capping the west gable, and the nave roof set at a higher level than that of the chancel, implying the presence of a chancel arch.

Pre-restoration photographs show a small and simple south porch, very like that of the old church of nearby Middleton St George in having an outer round-headed outer arch of brick; this was presumably of post-medieval date, perhaps of the 18th century.

As often, there was more than one period of restoration during the 19th century, and, again as frequently happens, there is little documentary reference to the earlier works. The first phase of works, perhaps c 1825-30, seems to have been destructive to medieval fabric. It would

North-east view, from Surtees 1823 print

7 A very characteristic extension of this period in Durham churches; nearby Houghton le Skerne offers a good parallel, with its short chancel of c1100 being doubled in length in the later 12th century

appear that the chancel arch and east wall of the nave were removed at this time⁸, and new and continuous roof provided to cover both nave and chancel. The western gables of nave and aisle were either remodelled or rebuilt, with a steep pitch and a heavy crow-stepped coping, carrying large foliate finial crosses and standing above the low-pitched roofs of the church; each contained a lancet-arched opening, possibly intended to hold a bell. An old photograph (Eastwood 1897) shows that the west end of the aisle contained a large lancet with iron-framed glazing, and a hoodmould with turned-back ends, like those of the gable openings. Two more iron-framed windows are recorded in the north wall of the nave (ibid 40-43); the 'at present' plan accompanying the faculty for the 1875-6 works shows these. The smaller was set near the centre of the wall, and the other is in the place of the eastern of the present pair of two-light windows. The jambs and sill of the smaller window survive; it looks to be a crude insertion, and could well be of post-medieval date.

At the same time or perhaps a little later the old three-light window in the east end, which may well have been of 14th century date, was replaced by three new lancets, with linked hoodmoulds and blind foiled circles in the spandrels above.

In 1843, under the Rev W.S. Temple a western extension or annexe was constructed, oddly described by Eastwood (1897, 40-43) as a 'low tower', when it was in fact lower than the nave gable. Its purpose was made to house the organ, although the pre-restoration ground plan shows it as empty. In position it was something of a peculiarity; added 19th-century organ chambers are common, but they tend to be sited on the north side of chancels rather than at the west end. The 1875 faculty shows that it was intended to simply raise its gable (and thicken its walls internally) so as to carry a new bellcote. However, as restoration proceeded, 'subscriptions having increased' plans were changed and it was raised into a full tower (ibid, 63). The 'Perpendicular' window in its west gable was changed for one in the Decorated style, 'more in harmony with the rest of the church'; its removed tracery lies just inside the lychgate.

The restoration, carried out by the architect J P Pritchett of Darlington, succeeded in retaining most of the medieval features of the building, although its character was completely changed from a humble little ivy-clad building to a smart new edifice of very Victorian appearance, boasting a handsome tower⁹; the antiquarian concerns of Dr Eastwood, who left the church his painstaking handwritten account of its history and restoration, doubtless helped to safeguard its historic fabric and the important collection of early lapidary material that came to light at this time.

It is a little difficult to work out how much of the fabric was taken down and rebuilt at this time, and how much simply re-faced. It is clear that, as works proceeded, more drastic action was necessary than had at first been envisaged. The architects' plans show that it was intended to retain the 'rude stone sedile' in the aisle (Eastwood 1901, 63) but that this has to be removed, probably because it was felt necessary to completely rebuild at least the south

8 It may have already been enlarged or mutilated; neither Hutchinson nor Surtees make any mention of it.

9 Both editions of Pevsner's Durham (1953 and 1984) insist on seeing the tower 'of the same period (as the late 13th century south aisle) or a little later', and the latter invents a 1908 enlargement of the chancel.

and east walls of the aisle. The west wall, where rather more 'old' stone (re-used?) seems to remain, may have already been rebuilt c 1825-30; it is markedly thinner than the other walls; its odd broad chamfered plinth may relate to the thickness of extant medieval footings. The chancel seems to have been subject to more re-facing than re-building, although the remains of the round-headed window found there, despite its stone being in 'excellent preservation' (1876 newspaper article from the Darlington and Stockton Times, in Eastwood 1897) have either been removed or plastered over.

Post-restoration changes have been minor, although not well documented - the faculty for the 1875-6 works thankfully survives, but after that there is a gap of over a century.

The Churchyard

The churchyard is rectangular in plan; the eastern part, towards the road, is an extension of c 1876; the original western boundary, more or less in line with the present lych gate entry (erected in memory of Robert Thompson d 1908) on the south, is visible as a clear bank. Just within this, a little to the south-west of the tower, is the stump of a Saxon cross dated to the third quarter of the 11th century. It stands c 1 m high, and bears the worn remains of plaitwork, 'the last dregs of the Anglian tradition' (Cramp 1984, 63, no.1)¹⁰. A little to the north is a stone coffin and lid, the slightly-coped lid bearing a cross with a broad shaft and expanded arms, square-ended, with rounded armpits. It is almost certainly a Saxon or Saxo-Norman overlap piece (Ryder 1985, 72, pl.16).

Most of the monuments in the churchyard are of late 19th century and more recent date; three 18th-century box tombs lie just outside the east end of the church, and an eroded earlier 18th century headstone lies loose against the south wall. Five pieces of 19th-century tracery lying against the south wall just to the east of the lych gate are presumably from the 1843 Perpendicular-style east window replaced in 1876.

The walls of the churchyard are largely of river cobbles, with a plain slab coping; at the south end of the east wall is a simple Gothic-arched doorway.

Archaeological Assessment

The drastic changes and restoration work of the 19th century will clearly have reduced the archaeological potential of the church fabric and site, and the heating system of the church is at least part underfloor, which will have affected earlier structural remains and deposits. However, this is a significant medieval building on a site of known Pre-Conquest significance, so any work entailing disturbance of floors will require archaeological monitoring. Similarly substantial medieval fabric remains in the walls of nave and chancel, and their internal wall faces, currently behind plaster, are likely to retain significant evidence of the structural development of the church; the record of the 1876 restoration shows that substantial remains of an assumed 12th century window exist somewhere in the chancel, presumably in the internal face of the wall. Whilst it is possible that the medieval walls were stripped of plaster during the 1876 works, this is not proven, and it remains a possibility that historic plaster and even remains of mural decoration may survive; thus any removal of plaster should be monitored.

10 Pevsner & Williamson (op.cit) are in error in describing two cross shafts here.

Outside the church, the external drain only extends around the south side of the church, which will mean that on the north and east deposits such as constructional layers (eg mason's chippings) may remain in direct association with the standing fabric.

Priorities

Whilst heavily restored in the 19th century, Low Dinsdale church is important for its early origins, witnessed by an important collection of lapidary material, and its setting as part of a well-preserved historic landscape adjacent to the medieval manor house and the extensive earthworks of what has been seen as a defensible village site. The Pre-Conquest and medieval stones set in the walls of the south porch is of importance, and their condition (whilst not apparently giving immediate cause for concern) will need regular monitoring appears in reasonable condition. Less happy is the current situation of the Anglo-Scandinavian hogback grave cover ('Carved Stones' 'L'); this is one of the most important carved stone in the collection, but is tucked away under a pew and difficult for the visitor to inspect.

Peter F Ryder February 2003

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St John, Low Dinsdale

Photographs prior to the 1876 restoration, from MS volume by Dr J W Eastwood, kept in church.

(1) South-East View. Note 'Queen Anne' conversion of 14th-century east window of South Aisle, restored to original form in 1876. The three lancets in the east end and a mid-19th century replacement of what was probably another 14th-century three-light window

(2) South-West View, showing the 1843 western organ chamber that was heightened into the present tower in 1876; the west window of the south aisle, and the stepped western gables and bellcotes of both aisle and nave are probably of early 19th century date.

**The Church of St John the
Baptist,
Low Dinsdale**

An Archaeological Assessment

February 2003

North-East View

**Peter F Ryder
Historic Buildings Consultant**

The Church of St John the Baptist, Low Dinsdale An Archaeological Assessment

February 2003

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