

St George's Church, Middleton St George

The old church of St George (NZ 366117) now stands virtually alone amongst fields, close to the south-west end of the runway of Teesside International Airport, c 2 km to the east of the present village of Middleton One Row. The church consists of an almost square nave, extended to the north in the late 18th or early 19th century, with a south porch, and a chancel with north vestry.

The Exterior

The west end of the **Nave** is of roughly-coursed stone, little more than rubble in parts, with a mixture of cream and red sandstones; there are various evidences of cracking and repair; a concrete platform in front marks the base of the short-lived tower of 1883. There is no plinth, but a rough chamfered (or cemented) set-back c 0.3 m below the eaves of the side walls. The northern third of the wall, the post-medieval extension, is of rather better-coursed and squared stone. At the apex of the shallow gable is what appears to be the base of a bell-cote, with a large horizontal slab that has vertical tooling of late 18th or early 19th century character on its edge. There is no indication of any opening; the tower was simply butted up against the earlier wall, but there is a vertical patch of larger slabs which must relate to the north-west angle of the medieval nave, although they are not regular enough to have been quoins.

The south wall of the nave is built of roughly-coursed stone, again a mixture of different colours; the courses vary in height and the stones in size. At the west end is a shallow buttress rising to half the height of the wall; the buttress has a chamfered plinth, but not the wall behind. The south door, now inside the porch, is a square-headed opening with a very narrow chamfer to its jambs that is perhaps a later modification. Its lintel, which has a broader chamfer, barely fits the jambs below, suggesting either that it has been re-used or the opening widened at some time. Above the lintel is a rough relieving arch, and a small socket for the ridge of an earlier porch roof.

To the east of the porch is the one medieval window in the church, a much-mutilated opening with steeply-chamfered jambs made up of a variety of blocks of different sizes and colours, and a mutilated head. In its original form this window, or at least the one from which its head derives, has been of two lights, with pierced spandrels, but the tracery has been cut away. There is a hoodmould, chamfered above and below, turned-back at the l. end and damaged to the r. The opening now contains a simple 1888 wooden window of two acutely-pointed arched lights.

At the east end of the wall is a complicated buttress, made up of large blocks of red sandstone, now quite badly eroded; it has a chamfered plinth, a chamfered set-back at mid-height, and a sloped cap at two-thirds of the height of the wall. Below the plinth an irregular footing is exposed. On the east it is clear that this buttress has been built up against an earlier (and slightly wider) pilaster-like buttress similar to the one at the west end of the wall.

The north wall of the nave is again of roughly-coursed stone, almost as irregular as the earlier fabric on west and south, but with rather smaller stones. At each end is a shallow pilaster-like buttress, with a sloping cap at approximately half the height of the wall. Between them two timber windows, each of three acutely-pointed stepped lights, are set in openings with plain

square jambs and two-centred heads arched in brick.

The east wall of the nave, exposed above the chancel roof, is of quite small coursed stone; there is larger stonework lower down in the northern part of the wall (above the vestry/coal shed); there is also a large structural crack here, roughly marking the position of the north-east corner of the medieval structure.

The **South Porch** is built of roughly coursed stone (including some large blocks) with a scatter of brick thrown in as well; both side walls show irregular joints, which may simply result from the patching up of major structural cracks. The archway on the south has plain square jambs, including some large heavily weathered blocks, and a semicircular head in brick, perhaps of 18th century date; the gable above is coped with blocks that have parallel tooling on their sides. There are three steps down to the slab floor, and a simple stone bench on either side.

The south wall of the **Chancel** is built of regularly-coursed blocks, largely red sandstone; there is a chamfered plinth that appears to the east of the priest's door and ends c 0.80 m from the east end; the plinth may be a genuine medieval feature but everything above is a post-medieval rebuild. At the west end of the wall is a three-light window very like those on the north of the nave; further east is a priest's door with jambs of plain blocks but re-using the chamfered lintel of an earlier and narrower doorway.

The east end of the chancel is of similar fabric to the south, and has squared quoins. The east window is another timber three-light one, a rather broader version of that in the south wall. The low-pitched gable has a simple cut coping.

The exposed eastern half of the north wall of the chancel, to the east of the vestry, is of roughly-coursed stone, including some quite elongate blocks, and is of poorer quality than the south and east walls; it is quite featureless, without any plinth.

The humble **Vestry** is built of brick in stretcher bond, with a projecting course at eaves level on the north; it has a simple window and doorway on the north wall, with a low chimney between them; this has a band at mid-height; the short section above this may be a heightening.

The low-pitched roofs of the church are all of Welsh slate.

The Interior

The internal walls of the church are plastered and whitewashed; the only exposed fabric is seen in the inner order of the chancel arch, the internal surround of the east window, and an area of the east wall of the nave extending c 2 m to the north of the chancel arch, up to a height of c 1.8 m.

1 It is not clear whether this is an original termination or a break

2 Above is an inscription 'mark denoting original width of church', apparently indicating one large block low in the wall; this area seems to have been left exposed to display the original fabric.

In the nave the south door has an internal lintel of stone with a chamfered edge, and the south window a shouldered rear arch, with a chamfer to the lintel, both whitewashed over. The two windows on the north have simple two-centred rear arches, behind plaster.

The nave roof is of four bays, with king-post trusses, with raking struts rising from the jewelled base of the king-post; the tie-beams have chamfers to their lower angles stopped on either side of central pyramidal bosses that probably conceal the ends of vertical bolts. The ceiling is boarded, and under-drawn at the level at which the raking struts meet the principals. There are moulded wall-posts-cum-brackets below the tie-beams, with a shorter one at the south end of the easternmost truss, to clear the window beneath.

The chancel arch, displaced to the south of the central axis of both the widened nave and the rebuilt chancel, is of two centred form. The outer order, square and behind plaster, is continued uninterrupted to the ground. The chamfered inner order of red sandstone ashlar is carried on imposts chamfered below and rounded above, which in turn rest on shaped corbels supported by on human masks, the southern a woman with her tongue out³, the northern a man showing his teeth. Both appear convincingly medieval.

The internal walls of the chancel are quite devoid of structural features of interest. The south window has a plain rear arch and the priest's door a plain lintel, all beneath plaster; the internal surround of the east window is exposed (although heavily smeared with mortar) and has splayed jambs of roughly-shaped stone and a brick head. The plain square-headed doorway to the vestry on the north is entirely plastered round.

The chancel roof is of four bays, and has trusses which are a simpler and smaller-scale form of those in the nave, with plank-section king-posts, and without the raking struts to the principals. Once again the ceiling is boarded and under-drawn at around the mid-height of the trusses and similarly there are moulded wall-posts/brackets carrying the ties.

The interior of the vestry is plastered and whitewashed, and its ceiling under-drawn; there is a plain fireplace set diagonally at the north-west corner.


Fittings and Furnishings

The **Font** is described and illustrated by Hodgson (1912, 241) who considered it, perhaps unfairly, 'rude and poor'; he suggested a date c1160-70 although it is difficult to see how he could bracket it as precisely as this. The tall octagonal base, chamfered on its upper angle, he sees as probably of 14th century date. The circular shaft, of stepped section, and bowl, chamfered on its underside, are cut in a single block of red sandstone.

The **Furnishings** are generally of late-19th century date, and of the plainest possible character. There is a redundant harmonium on north of nave and an operative one on the south of the chancel. The pulpit at north-east corner of nave is of late 19th or early 20th century character.

³ Hodgson (1912, 241) reverses the sexes of the two masks, but sees the outstretched tongue 'as a protection against witchcraft'

The altar rails have ornamental wrought-iron supports, and the altar, which may be of 18th century date, heavy turned legs.

The oldest piece of **Stained Glass** appears to be the south window of the chancel, which has a coat of arms, (right) presumably that of the Cocks family, which from its character looks of 18th century date. Several of the windows have simple diamond leading with red borders, probably of 1888-9, but very fitting to the building.  The central light of the east window, a figure of St George, is also of this period; the north-east window of the nave (the Resurrection) is of 1914, and not outstanding.

This is one of very few churches to retain a working stove (by Romesse) on the south side of the nave.

Carved Stones

Several antiquarian accounts mention a supposed Saxon sundial, at one time built 'upside down' into the external face of the south wall of the chancel 'near the priest's door' (Jackson 1901, 65) By the time of the VCH account (1928, 221) it had been moved to St Lawrence's Church, where it is now kept in a cupboard. A more recent photograph of the dial (Cramp 1984, Vo.1 part II, no 807; left) is unfortunately not accompanied by any descriptive or interpretive text.



The lower part of the dial is divided into tenths (as on a dial at Old Byland), whereas on most Saxon sundials there is an eightfold division, and on medieval mass dials a twelve-fold.

Lying between the two cross slabs that currently rest on the concrete base of the former west tower is a third slab, mossed and beginning to break up with weathering, which does not show any obvious design, but has not been examined closely. Alongside these stones are four cut blocks with chamfered edges; it is not clear what these derive from.

Jackson (1901, 65) refers to ‘fragments of an earlier church’ built into the external walls of the present building, including ‘portions of round columns’; the only obvious circular stone currently

visible (right) is set high above the eastern roof slope of the south porch, and is c 0.25 m in diameter, too small to have been a structural column from a feature such as an arcade.

Sepulchral Monuments

Two sections of medieval cross slab grave covers were removed from the walls of the church, perhaps in 1888; they were taken to St Lawrence’s church, but at some point in the later 20th century they were returned to St Georges; in 1984 they were leaning against the south wall of the nave, but are now laid on the concrete base of the old tower at the west end.



Full descriptions and illustrations of the slabs have been published (Ryder 1985, 106 and plate 46):

- 1 (right) The upper part of an early-14th century slab of purple-grey sandstone bearing, carved in bold relief, an interlaced-diamond cross with oak leaves springing from it, with below a sword on the r. and a bird perching on the shaft on the l.



- 1 The lower part of a grey sandstone slab with a relief design of a cross shaft rising from a fleur-de-lys base, with the blade of a sword on the r. At first glance this looks as if it might be the lower part of slab (1), but closer inspection shows that they are parts of two different monuments.

Jackson (op,cit) refers to 'a piece of a Norman grave cover discernible on the north side of the nave' and Mountford (c1900, 46) also refers to 'part of a tiled Norman grave cover' but there is now no sign of it, unless it is the capstone of the buttress at the west end of the wall, which is more or less of the appropriate section for such a monument but now seems to bear no indication of carved ornament. Built into the external face of the south wall of the nave near its east end, about half way up, is a block which from its section is more obviously a portion of such a monument, similar to the one that is now set upright in the ground to the south-west of the church

(see churchyard description).

Turning to post-medieval monuments, there is one ledger stone in chancel, just inside the Priest's door, to Jane, the wife of Robert Killinghall, d.1726. There are two mural tablets on each side of the chancel.

On the south:

- 1 Tablet to Elisha Cocks of Middleton Hall 1832, in an elaborate surround with IHS at the top and a coat-of-arms below.
- 1 A smaller marble tablet to William Templeton Esq 1801

On the north:

- 1 Above the vestry door a Gothic tablet to the Rev. William Addison Fountaine, a former rector, d 1837 (and buried in Bath); it is signed by Wm Bulmer, marble mason of Stockton on Tees.
- 1 A smaller tablet to Elizabeth daughter David Rattray 1833 (buried at Daventry) and also by William Bulmer..

Historical Notes

Medieval records do not provide any information relevant to the structural history of the building; antiquarian interest has centred on the legal anomaly of a sinecure or dual rectory, recorded as early as 1312 (Jackson 1901, 66).

- 1794 Hutchinson's history of Durham (III, 141) is dismissive: 'the church of MIDDLETON ST GEORGE is a small edifice standing on a hill'.
- 1822 According to Hagan & Co (1851, 262) the church was rebuilt as 'a modern structure'.
- 1871 The church was replaced by the present church of St Lawrence in the village of Middleton One Row

Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work

Note: in the faculty index at the University of Durham there is considerable confusion between the two churches of St George and St Lawrence, a number of faculties listed under the former in fact applying to the latter edifice.

Date	Faculty No.	Works
1883	3/264	The erection of a tower at the expense of Henry A.W. Cocks, patron and lord of the manor; it was apparently never finished, and within a few years its foundations started sinking.
13 Aug 1888	3/289a	Alterations. Removal of pews, placing of new dado round walls, renewal of pulpit and reading desk, new floor. Estimated cost £80.00.
7 Oct 1955	3/3810	Underpinning vestry
7 Jan 1961	3/4315	Demolition of tower
13 Apr 1983	3/6086	Repairs to churchyard walls

Structural History

The evidence of the Pre-Conquest sundial and the supposedly 12th-century font point to there having been an earlier church on or near the site, but the present building is generally dated to the later 13th century or early 14th century; Hodgson (1912, 241) suggested c1320-30 citing chancel arch, south window and south doorway as all being of this period, although it is difficult to see any evidence for stylistic dating in the mutilated doorway. One feature Hodgson does not mention, the pilaster-like buttresses at either end of the south wall, look more of 13th-century type, so the basic fabric is here ascribed, very tentatively, to the 13th century, with south window and chancel arch, together with the supplementary buttress at the south-east corner of the nave, being of the 14th century.

One presumes that the church at this period simply consisted of a nave and chancel, symmetrical around the central axis provided by the chancel arch. However, the present asymmetrical plan of the nave is one that could result from a conventional nave and a north aisle being knocked into one. If this did happen, then the aisle walls must have been rebuilt from their foundations. One possible piece of evidence is that the Rev Jackson (1901, 65) refers to 'portions of round columns' being built into the external walls, but the one section of column that remains clearly identifiable is of too small a diameter for an arcade pier.

No visible evidence remains of any period between the early 14th century and the partial rebuilding that gave the church its present character. The VCH account put this at towards the end of the 18th century' but the reference in Hagan (1875, 262) to the church as 'a modern structure, having been rebuilt in 1822' is probably more credible, given both the style of the building and the justification for the work, quoted by both sources, in the need for extra

accommodation needed when the spa at Middleton One Row opened; public use of the spa wells only began c 1796. Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 365) also suggest that the enlargement took place 'probably in 1822'¹. The nave was widened to accommodate three rows of box pews² and the chancel completely rebuilt, apparently being slightly extended and also widened towards the north; the Rev C Jackson was later to adjudge the work 'effected with little care and less skill'³.

In 1883 came the addition of the west tower; old photographs (VCH f.p.298) show it as being of two stages, with a string-course at mid height. The lower stage had a square-headed doorway on the south and a window on the west, the upper paired lancets; it was topped by a parapet, little higher than the nave gable, with a squat pinnacle at each corner. It is difficult not to feel sympathy for the tower, considering the amount of antiquarian opprobrium that it attracted. The VCH was comparatively mild '...of a nondescript Gothic character, detracts unno small measure from the appearance of the building'. Boyle (1892, 662) saw it as 'a wretched structure....which it would be an insult to the word to call a tower' and the redoubtable Rev Joseph Hodgson (1912, 241) was, as often, less inhibited 'a small trumpery erection, indented to imitate a tower....has been tacked on to the west end, with which, having parted company, it is now only connected by strips of tin!'

In 1888 came what has been termed 'a general restoration'; according to the VCH (298) 'the building was repointed, the flat ceilings removed, open benches inserted in place of the old pews, and new wooden windows put in. As the Rev. Jackson later wrote 'the church was rescued from a ruinous condition and rendered suitable for occasional services' (Jackson 1901, 66)

The sorry little tower managed to stand, or rather lean, until 1961 when it was demolished, the stone apparently being used for repairs to Durham Cathedral.

The Churchyard

The old part of the churchyard is rectangular, with its longer dimension north-south; there is a recent extension to the north and north-east (its monuments of the 1950s and later) , giving the present overall L-plan. The junction between old and new parts of the yard is obvious, from the manner in which the old walls end and are replaced by fences. At the north-west corner of the old section of the yard is a small railed enclosure with mid-19th century monuments to the Wilson family.

A medieval coped slab, retaining its distinctive section but with no carved design visible, is

1 The same account is however badly confused in placing the church in the 'original village' of Middleton One Row; the earlier Pevsner (1953, 184) sees the extension as late C18.

2 The rather rustic 'at present' plan accompanying the faculty for the 1888 restoration identifies the various pews and their owners; it shows the pulpit against the centre of the south wall of the nave, and the squire's pew enclosing the south jamb of the chancel arch.

3 In a letter to his parishioners dated 28 September 1899, a copy of which is or was lodged in the vestry of St Lawrence's Church (Ovens 1973, 102)

stood upright in the ground c 6 m to the south-west of the south-west angle of the nave. Other monuments are mostly later 19th and 20th century, although there is a good headstone, surprisingly well preserved, to Elizabeth Ingledeu (d.1764) on the south of the path 4 m west of the coped slab just described.

On the east side of the yard is a raised mound c 6 m wide running parallel to and just inside the east wall, which is in effect a retaining wall, coped with large rough slabs, with a gully beyond. E wall beyond this is little more than a retaining wall. On the north of the church is an east-west path, with its tarmac subsiding in places into what are clearly unmarked graves.

The wall on the west of the churchyard is probably of early 19th century date. Near the centre is the present entrance, with cast-iron gates with ornamental finials to their rails, between arched monolithic piers, with a smaller pedestrian gate on the south. The wall to the north, c 1.5 m high, is of large coursed sandstone blocks, with a flat ashlar coping; to the south the wall is of roughly-coursed stone including many cobbles. The wall on the south of the churchyard is in two parts, the western brick on stone footings, with a series of small buttresses and the lower eastern part in roughly-coursed stone.

Archaeological Assessment

This is rather a sad little church, which seems likely to face redundancy in the near future. Changing tastes mean that its simplicity and humility are now likely to be seen as attributes, and its unimproved rural interior, never provided with mains services, seems to have entirely skipped the 20th century. The intemperate language of antiquaries such as the Rev Hodgson, whose opinion of the building - ‘one of the very smallest and most despicable - perhaps the very meanest and most beggarly in the County of Durham’ is a period piece in itself.

Nevertheless, apart from the simple chancel arch on its attractive head corbels, the building has nothing of architectural interest about it. When it comes to concealed archaeology, it may be a different matter. This is one of the very few churches in the county that does not seem to have had an underfloor heating system, with the result that its sub-surface archaeology may be comparatively well preserved, although of course there will have been the usual generation-upon-generation of burials within its walls. One would expect that some evidence of the wall-line of the smaller medieval chancel, and the north wall of the nave - or arcade if there was a north aisle - will survive.

Above the floors, all wall surfaces are concealed by plaster, which may also conceal features of interest. Whilst it seems unlikely that the internal faces of the medieval fabric in the nave will contain significant architectural features, the survival of old plaster with remains of painting is a distinct possibility. It is also possible that wall surfaces throughout the church might conceal painted decorations and texts from the 19th century, which would also be regarded as of some interest.

Externally, the almost-inevitable concrete perimeter drain will have occasioned some archaeological damage.

Priorities

Major decisions as to the long-term future of this church may not be far away. The possible archaeological significance of underfloor deposits and internal wall faces has already been outlined. The medieval cross slabs lying outside the west end are a cause for concern; not only are they exposed to weather and decay, but they could easily be removed. Theft of historic lapidary material is increasing, and there have been instances in this area. Slab (1) in particular is an important piece; both stones merit conservation and removal to a secure site. After appropriate treatment they should be set in an internal wall, either in the church (provided its long-term survival is assured) or perhaps in St Lawrence's church in Middleton One Row, its ecclesiastical successor.

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**St George's Church,
Middleton St George**

**An Archaeological
Assessment**

February 2003

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St George's Church, Middleton St George

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