

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS, RYTON

The churchyard of the parish church of the Holy Cross opens from the north-west corner of the village green of Ryton; the church is set back from the village, amongst trees, on a low hill on the south side of the Tyne valley. The church consists of a three-bay aisled nave with the aisles extending west to engage the western tower, a south porch, and an aisleless chancel with vestries and organ chamber on the north.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Exterior

The **West Tower** is constructed of roughly-squared stone laid in irregular courses, with cut dressings. The walls of the third (belfry) stage, and that of the northern side of the second stage, are of rather larger and better-squared stone. The tower is capped by a lead-covered spire.

The tower is divided into three stages; on the west a pair of tall stepped buttresses rise to the top of the second stage. At the base of the west wall is a chamfered plinth, continuous with that of the aisles. The lower stage, rising to a chamfered set-back at the level of the ringing chamber floor, is lit by a single broad and lofty lancet; the jambs of its lower part are cut into rough walling stones, showing that the sill level has been lowered at some time. The second stage (ringing chamber) has a single chamfered lancet on south, west and north; the outer face of the north wall of this stage is set a little outside that of the northern buttress (unlike on the south where wall and buttress are flush), which, together with the way in which the upper wall apparently over-rides the original coping of the west wall of the north aisle, and the apparent change in masonry type (see above) suggests that the wall may have been reconstructed, perhaps when the belfry stage was added. Above this, broad chamfered set-backs on east and west, and chamfered string courses on the north and south, mark the base of the third (belfry) stage, which has a single shoulder-headed opening in its south, west and north walls; on the east is a broader square-headed opening with a double-chamfered surround, with, a little to its south, a projecting sculptured block said to represent St George and the Dragon. An oversailing chamfered course, supported by a series of bold corbels (some plain, others carved with leaves and other devices), carries the base of the spire, which has broaches at each angle, and rises to approximately double the height of the tower.

The side walls of the **Nave** now rise a short distance above the aisle roofs; the visible masonry is of gritstone ashlar, very similar to that of the upper parts of the aisle walls; there is a moulded parapet, stepped up at each end; the eastern gable is flanked by pinnacles with simple geometric decoration of rather Jacobean character.

The side walls of the **Aisles** are of squared stone, heightened (from about two third height) in much larger blocks of gritstone ashlar; these bear many mason's marks. The original steeper roof line of the aisles is visible in their end walls; the west end of the north aisle retains part of its original coping.

The west wall of each aisle has a chamfered plinth, with above this a much broader chamfered set-back, cut into when the sill level of the western lancets was lowered. Apart from this modification, the lancets remain intact; each has originally had a monolithic head (now broken). At the external angles of the aisles are broad but low clasping buttresses, and there are also heavy buttresses, rising to the full height of the wall, in line with the eastern wall of the tower, taking the pressure of the half-arches which span the aisles at this point. Both aisles have a continuous chamfered plinth, stepping down at the west end, and a parapet with a moulded string at its base and a moulded coping (the western section of the south aisle parapet is embattled); the angles are capped by pyramidal finials of the same type as those on the nave and south porch parapets.

The south wall of the south aisle has three square-headed two-light windows, each of two cinquefoil-headed lights with trefoil-headed sub-lights over, within a hoodmould with turned-back ends, the top member of which is formed by the string. The window west of the porch has lightly-tooled ashlar dressings, and a hollow chamfer to both inner and outer frames; the two windows east of the porch, whilst of similar form and with similar hoodmoulds, are of ashlar with a heavier diagonal tooling, and have tall upright blocks forming each jamb, of double-chamfered section.

The east end of the south aisle has a window of two cinquefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a pointed arch with a hoodmould with turned-back ends; its dressings are entirely of 19th-century ashlar.

The north wall of the north aisle has a blocked doorway opposite that on the south; it has a plain two-centred arch, of one order with a continuous chamfer. In the western bay is a lancet window that is clearly an insertion (it was removed here in 1886 from the east end of the aisle); its western jamb looks original but the eastern jamb is more recent stonework. East of the blocked doorway are a window of two cinquefoil-headed lights under a square head; dressings and hoodmould are very similar to those of the south aisle windows east of the porch; close to the east end of the wall is a chamfered lancet window that seems genuine 13th century work. The squared stonework on either side of it implies that it was set in a gable rising above the eaves line of the original aisle.

The **South Porch** is constructed of roughly-coursed rubble, with the side walls being heightened in gritstone ashlar in the same manner as the aisle walls, and having a similar string course and parapet. The two-centred outer arch of the porch has jambs

of symmetrical section, with a central detached shaft flanked by pairs of attached shafts, with moulded capitals and eroded moulded bases; the two orders of the arch are richly moulded, with fillets, externally, but simply chamfered towards the porch. Above the arch is a worn sundial; the porch gable is capped by a cross dated '1816'. In the east wall of the porch is a square-headed window with a chamfered surround.

The interior of the porch has stone benches on the side walls; the window in the east wall has a modern timber internal lintel. The south doorway has a rather strange arch of segmental-pointed form, of two orders, within a moulded hood with foliage stops. The outer order is chamfered, and is carried on jamb shafts with moulded capitals, the eastern with nail-head ornament. The eastern shaft has a moulded base, the western a chamfered square base. The inner order is moulded with a filleted roll; the moulding continues unbroken down the jamb, except that the fillet terminates at the level of the capitals carrying the outer order.

The **Chancel** is constructed of neatly-coursed squared stone, many blocks being almost square in shape. The south elevation is divided into three unequal bays by a pair of buttresses, each of which has chamfered angles to its upper part, with carved bosses (some masks) at the head or foot of some of the chamfers; there is a chamfered plinth, a moulded sill string (both continued round the buttresses), and a chamfered string at the base of the parapet. The western bay contains three lancets, each with a simple hollow-chamfered hoodmould; at the extreme west end of the wall, beneath the string, is an opening, said to be a 'low-side' window, blocked by horizontally-tooled stone of late 18th or early 19th century type; one L-shaped stone appears to be the end of a hoodmould, carefully cut back; the chamfered plinth is cut away beneath this opening. The centre bay contains a square-headed priest's door, with a chamfered surround having bar stops just above the plinth; and pendant relief carvings on the soffit of the lintel (rather worn; the subjects seem to be animals and, on the west, a human head). On either side of the doorway the string terminates in further carved bosses. Above the doorway is a 'short' lancet, with mask stops to its hood, and to the east a second full-length lancet, with a plain hood. In the eastern bay is a window consisting of two lancet lights under a round arch, with a sunk quatrefoil in the spandrel (the head is cut from a single slab); the central circular shaft has a moulded capital and an octagonal base. This window has a hood of the same profile as that of the lancets, but made up of a series of curved sections that do not quite fit the shape of the arch, as if they have been re-used from the hoods of conventional lancets.

At the eastern angles of the chancel are heavy clasping buttresses, around which both plinth and sill string are continued. The east end has three further buttresses, one set centrally and rising only to the sill string, and the others, of miniature proportions, to either side; the latter look as they

may be 18th or 19th century work. The present fenestration consists of three lancets of equal height (with hoods with mask stops), with a vesica above the central one. The dressings of the three lancets (except for the outer jambs of the outer ones), together with the gable above, are of 19th-century ashlar. To either side of the triplet are blocked openings which have lost their heads; their dressings course in with the outer jambs of the present triplet, suggesting that the 13th century fenestration was a group of five lancets (as at Easington). High in the gable is a block pierced by a quatrefoil opening; this may be an older feature re-set in the 19th century.

The north side of the chancel is largely obscured by the present vestries and organ chamber; above the flat roof of the present vestry a cut for the gabled roof of its predecessor, breaking the string and the base of the parapet, is visible.

The external elevations of the church have quite a number of interesting downpipes and rainwater heads; several of these are dated;

- (1) South aisle south wall west of porch, 'RWH 1826'
- (2) South aisle south wall east of porch 'CT 1826'
- (3) South chancel wall, west end '182(5?)'
- (4) South chancel wall, eastern bay 'CT 1826'
- (5) North chancel wall, above vestry '1826'
- (6) North aisle north wall, near east end '1827'.

The **Vestries and Organ Chamber**, on the north of the chancel, are built of squared stone with ashlar dressings. The vestries have a chamfered plinth, moulded sill string, and a moulded string at the base of the parapet. In the east wall are two square-headed windows, each of three cinquefoil-headed lights, and a moulded doorway. The taller organ chamber has a chamfered plinth, and a coped gable on shaped kneelers; there is a single lancet window in the west wall, with a surround of two hollow-chamfered orders. In the return between the west wall of the vestries and the north gable of the organ chamber a stair descends to the boiler room (beneath the northern of the vestries); straight ahead at the foot of the stair, beneath the north wall of the organ chamber, is a blocked doorway with its lintel inscribed:

1796
The VAULT of the SIMPSON..
---of BRADLEY---

The Interior

The interior of the church is whitewashed, except for exposed dressings; the stonework is clearly visible through the whitewash on the side walls of the aisles, but elsewhere (notably in the nave walls above the arcades and tower and chancel arches) very little of the fabric can be seen. The east wall of the south aisle is plastered.

The tall lancet lighting the base of the tower has a broad internal splay, with remains of painting - a foliage pattern and a border of 'ihc' monograms - that seem likely to be of 19th century date. The arches opening to the aisles and nave are of similar type, although the latter is a little taller. Each is pointed, and of two chamfered orders; the arches to the aisle have chamfered hoodmoulds towards the tower; the tower arch has a similar hoodmould, with mask stops, towards the nave only. The inner order of each arch is carried on corbels, which show some variation in moulding and carved motifs; some have masks, and most have nail-head ornament, whilst the outer is continued down the responds to ground level, except in the case of the arches springing from the west wall, where the outer order dies straight into the wall.

In addition to the three principal arches, there are also straining arches or half-arches between the tower piers and the outer walls of the aisles; these are now considerably distorted, especially that on the north. Each is of two chamfered orders, springing from a moulded and carved corbel on the aisle wall, that on the south partially cut away.

Access to the ringing chamber is by a free-standing timber spiral stair in the south-west corner of the tower. This was constructed in 1886, and has been described as 'essentially a scaffolding of long, close-set uprights with occasional cross-bars and the treads to stress the horizontals, an example of how courageous new work can improve even a venerable building of the C13' (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 393).

The interior of the ringing chamber is whitewashed; the three windows all have shouldered rear arches. In the centre of the east side of the chamber is a square-headed doorway, cut straight through the wall, opening just under the roof of the nave. From the nave its dressings are concealed by render and whitewash, although it appears to have a heavy lintel with pecked tooling; on the ringing chamber side the opening is spanned by a series of timber and rough stone lintels, and looks as if it may be an insertion. The chamber is spanned by two trusses, carried by corbels c 1.5 m above floor level, on the north and south walls. Each consists of wall-posts carrying a heavy beam supporting the joists of the belfry floor; there are braces from wall-posts to beam; there is also a heavy east-west beam, set centrally, just below the level of the tie-beams of the two trusses. This structure would appear to have been built to take the weight of the belfry floor; in addition there are a number of sockets at a lower level (notably one a little above and to the south of the doorway into the high-level doorway into the nave, and another at the same level near the west end of the north wall) which may relate to earlier bell frames at this level.

A recent ladder rises to the belfry. The junction between ringing chamber and belfry stages is rather puzzling; at belfry level the inner faces of both east and west walls are roughly

stepped in (there are two corbels beneath this stepping on the west; others may have been removed), whilst the inner faces of north and south walls step slightly outwards.

The four belfry openings all have internal lintels of timber. There are various struts and props at this level, but only the massive transverse beams of the ceiling seem old. A short ladder at the north-west corner gives access to a modern floor at the base of the spire.

The structure of the **Spire** was not inspected in detail; although the lower sections of the four principal upright seem old, the majority of the subsidiary timbers appear recent. Whilst a few pegged lap-joints remain (presumably indicating that these elements are in situ) the majority of the joints are bolted. There is also a considerable amount of recent brickwork. A detailed survey would be required to reconstruct the original form the spire, and how much this is reproduced by the present structure.

The **Nave Arcades** are each of three bays; the pointed arches are each of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hoodmould on mask stops towards the nave. The responds are corbels of similar form to those of the tower arches; at the west end the chamfers of the outer order are continued down to ground level, whilst at the east they die straight into the wall. The western pier of each arcade is circular and the eastern octagonal; all have moulded capitals following the plan of the pier, and 'holdwater' bases, on square plinths. Sections of the piers and capitals have been cut away when galleries were inserted in the nave; this damage has been carefully repaired. The similarity between the original and inserted stonework suggests that the former may have been re-tooled at the time of repair.

High in the east wall of the nave, above the chancel arch, is a square-headed opening of similar form to, but rather smaller than, the high-level doorway in the tower.

In the **South Aisle** the internal wall face is of roughly-coursed rubble; the later heightening is not apparent internally. The south doorway has a segmental-pointed rear arch; its internal west jamb is rounded, whilst the east jamb is square. The window east of the porch has well-dressed stonework forming its internal splay (down to c 0.40 m above the present sill); this may survive from an earlier opening; the window itself has the incised inscription 'CHARLES THORP RECTOR' on the internal sill of its eastern light. An inscription in the same position on the western light has been almost entirely cut away when the window was converted to a hinged casement. The window at the east end of the wall has a rather broader rear arch, with its internal jambs at right angles to the wall; the lower 0.50 m of each jamb is of rubble, but above this is a jamb shaft with moulded base and capital, the capital coming a short distance below the present lintel. These shafts appear to be coeval with the neatly-coursed dressings of the internal jambs, and must relate

to a previous window. The present window has the incised inscription 'CHARLES THORPE RECTOR 1827' on its internal sill.

In the **North Aisle** the blocked north door has a rear-arch of shouldered segmental form. The lancet window to the west of the door has its eastern internal jamb formed in good dressed stone, but its western jamb cut in the coursed rubble of the wall (in contrast to externally, where its western jamb looks original and the eastern more recent), suggesting that the window had been mutilated before being moved to this position in 1886. The two-light window to the east of the blocked door has the remains of an incised inscription on its internal sill. The upper line has been largely cut away when a hinged casement was inserted; the surviving section reads 'IOH; WILSON A.D. 1828'. The jambs of this window, like those of that opposite in the south aisle, seem to be of old (medieval?) dressed stone down to c 0.30 m above the sill, showing that this has been lowered. About 1.5 m to the east of this window are two apparent straight joints, high up in the wall; these presumably relate to one of the former galleries. At the east end of the aisle is a segmental-pointed arch to the organ chamber, of two chamfered orders under a moulded hood; beyond is a second arch, of similar shape but carried on two hollow-chamfered ribs, through the actual organ chamber wall which runs parallel to and just outside the end wall of the aisle.

The **Chancel** is entered under a pointed arch of very similar character to the tower and arcade arches, of two chamfered orders with a chamfer hood to the nave, springing from moulded corbels, the southern with nail-head ornament. There is an internal string course on all three walls, at the level of the window sills. At the west end of the south wall is a recess (the lintel of which is formed by the string) in the position of the apparent 'low-side' window. The other southern windows all have plain rear arches. The string is stepped up over the priest's door; on the south of the sanctuary is a piscina, under a square-headed arch with a continuous roll moulding. The projecting semi-octagonal bowl carries some sort of carving or asymmetric sunk panels, but its inner part has been cut or broken away; there is a drain through the wall. Above the piscina, and in between the eastern two windows (the two-light window and a lancet) is a mural recess that seems contemporary with the painted memorial to Thomas Thorp (d.1854) which it contains. To the east of the piscina, beneath the string, are three large blocks tooled in late 18th or early 19th century manner; these may have formed a lintel to an opening or recess - there are hints of straight joints below.

The lower part of the east wall is concealed by the reredos; the triplet of lancets above have shafted jambs and moulded rear arches; all the visible stonework appears to be 19th century, and there is no visible evidence of the blocked openings visible in the external face of the wall.

At the east end of the north wall of the chancel, immediately

below the string, is a square-headed aumbry rebated for doors. The string continues to form the lintel of the 19th century vestry door, which has plain chamfered jambs; the string terminates beyond, and the western part of the wall is occupied by a large segmental-pointed arch to the organ chamber; this is of two chamfered orders, with a moulded hood.

The vestry is divided into two rooms, the northern of which originally formed a parish library; the southern room, the vestry proper, has a fireplace in the dividing wall dated '1886'.

All the roofs of the church (including the ceiling, i.e. the ringing chamber floor, in the tower) are of 19th century date. The internal porch in the south aisle is of 1886-7, and is a handsome piece of Jacobean-style woodwork.

FITTINGS AND FURNISHING

The **Font** has a large but plain circular bowl, carried on a clustered shaft. It is probably of 13th century date; references to a new font being installed in 1662 (Briggs & Dugdale 15) imply that it had been removed from the church, and must have been returned at some subsequent date.

Lying beside the font is a **Carved Stone**, which is clearly a fragment of a larger piece. It bears a relief carving of a cross-head formed of four circles, with pointed 'buds' between (forming a flat platform), with large fleur-de-lys projecting beyond, on a convex curving surface. Stylistically it would appear to be of later 13th century date; it might be part of an elaborate cross slab

The **Chancel Screen** and **Stalls** are of considerable interest. The screen is in the mixed Gothic/Classical style seen in 17th-century woodwork in several Durham churches, the 'Cosin style'. The central arch is like that in the screen at Sedgefield; the divisions on either side, marked by balusters, have flamboyant tracery in their heads. The shield on the end of the northern stalls bears a dolphin, and is thought to be that of Rev William James (1617-1659); Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 393) consider it more likely to be associated with the succeeding Rev Ralph Blakiston (1660-1676), brother-in-law of Bishop Cosin. The **Desks** in front of the stalls are all 19th-century work; the carving of the Nativity attached to the northern stall close to the vestry door was placed there in 1826 by the Rev Charles Thorp. The **Altar Rails** are also a 19th-century import; Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 393) comment that 'the two seated Apostles on the communion rail look as if they might be from the lower Rhine, c1500-1510').

The Organ dates from c1886, but was altered in the 1920s. In a letter dated 12 April 1988 (Diocesan Office file) Dr Donald Wright describes it as 'one of the few examples left to us of the work of this master organ builder'.

There are four **Bells**; of the three (treble, 2nd and 3rd) in the bolted timber frames, two are of 1763 (by Lester and Pack, of London) and the third was re-cast in 1868 by John Warner and Son. The separate (6th) bell has an inscription in memory of Bishop Baring, d.1879.

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

The most important medieval monument in the church is well-preserved Frosterley Marble **Effigy** of a deacon (incorrectly identified by Surtees as a Benedictine monk), now lying on the north side of the altar. It is thought to be of late 13th century date; effigies of deacons are something of a rarity.

There are, or were, two lesser medieval monuments (Ryder 1985, 110-111); a mid-13th century **Headstone Cross** currently lying on the internal sill of the east window of the south aisle, and a small **Cross Slab**, with a sword on the r of the cross shaft, which appears to be overlain by a shield, which in 1982 was on the internal sill of the easternmost window in the south wall of the south aisle, but was not seen in the recent survey.

On the north wall of the sanctuary, beneath the string course, are five brass plates; the first three have lengthy inscriptions, reproduced in full by Boyle (605/6)

- (i) Francis Bunny d.1610
- (ii) Francis Bunny (rector of Ryton from 1578), d. 1617
- (iii) Henry and John Bunny, d. 1588 and 158...
- (iv) Bunny arms impaling Wortley
- (v) Bunny arms

On the internal face of the south all of the chancel is an **Inscribed Slab** from the tomb of Bernard Gilpin (d.1583); a tablet below relates that it was brought from Houghton-le-Spring church (where Gilpin is buried) by Charles Thorp in 1828.

There are a number of post-medieval **Wall Monuments** in the church. On the north side of the north aisle is a marble monument, with the arms of the Tempest and Lambton families and a lengthy Latin inscription in a surround flanked by Ionic columns, to Nicholas Tempest of Stella, d.1625. At the west end of the south aisle is a marble slab to Frances, wife of John Humble, d.1754. There is a group of 18th and 19th century wall monuments on the north wall of the chancel.

On the south wall of the south aisle are two **Hatchments**, with coats of arms; that nearer the east end has, painted on the frame, the inscription:

M.S.R / Nov 22 / 1845 / AGED 73

HISTORICAL NOTES

1220The earliest rector known, Alexander de Nola

- 1297The village is said to have been burned by William Wallace
- 1346During another Scottish incursion King David is said to have had a vision at Ryton in which St Cuthbert warned him; nevertheless he is said to have plundered Ryton Church, and gone on to his defeat at Nevilles Cross.
- 1425There is a reference to money and land being given to St Mary's Altar in Ryton Church (Briggs & Dugdale, 7); this is presumed to have been the altar in a chantry chapel, probably sited at the east end of the south aisle.
- 1627According to Hutchinson (1787, 436) the 'front of the south aisle' was rebuilt in this year.
- 1703Western gallery erected by Sir Ambrose Crowley and the Company of Smiths of Winlton (Briggs & Dugdale, 19)
- 1751Extensive repairs to the spire (Briggs & Dugdale 9)
- 1787North-east gallery erected at the cost of Mary Stowe and Robert Edington (Briggs & Dugdale, 19). At this time the Durham historian Hutchinson (op.cit. 435-7) provides the earliest detailed description of the church. Her describes the south aisle as lit by 'two modern sashed windows' on the south and a small window to the east (his woodcut seems to show that as a lancet). He refers to the western gallery 'appropriated to the workmen called Crowley's Crew' (employed at a local ironworks). The pulpit was placed against the eastern pier of the south arcade. In the nave were enclosed stalls for the owners of Chopwell (on the south) and of Stella Hall. The vestry was 'neat and spacious'.
- 1816The church was re-furnished with new oak pews (Briggs & Dugdale, 19) and the roof, previously leaded, was slated (ibid. 13)
- 1820Surtees' description of the church (op.cit, 261-2) gives further details of the western gallery; it bore the inscription 'This Gallery was erected at the cost of Mr Ambrose Crowley, and the Company of Smiths, of Winlton' and the arms of the Smiths' Company. He describes the east window as consisting of six lights divided by a stone transom, under a square label; it is well seen in his engraving of the church.
- 1828In December of this year the Crowley gallery was replaced by a smaller organ loft (Fordyce 1857, 668).
- 1834Mackenzie & Ross (182-3) refer to there being, in addition to the organ loft, a north gallery extending to the east end of the nave, and a shorter gallery on the

south. There were 'traces' of a door, with some mutilated ornaments (ie the priest's door) on the south side of the chancel.

1844The square-headed east window was replaced by a triplet of lancets (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 392)

1846All galleries removed; the mutilated arcades were plastered and painted (Briggs & Dugdale 19). As part of the same programme of works the chancel roof was restored to its original pitch. Billings' illustration, published in October 1845, shows the east end with its lancets, but with the roof still of low pitch.

1877A second programme of restoration works commenced (see faculty details); lack of funds delayed completion until 1886. Works included cleaning arcades of plaster, and restoring damaged stonework

1886Church re-opened on October 20th after restoration, an account in the Newcastle Daily Journal (Briggs & Dugdale 21-24) refers to the works as having included the introduction of the vesica window in the east gable (replacing a small triangular window inserted forty years earlier), the replacement of the old vestries which had been 'very unsightly and very dilapidated'. The eastern lancets had been provided with stone mouldings internally; the present chancel roof.

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

Faculty no. and dateWorks

114 (1813)For appropriating a vault to Robert Thorp Esq. and the Rev. Charles Thorp

231 (1878)Reordering of seating at west end, and insertion of new two-light window in S wall of S aisle W of porch. Also refers to 'recent' complete renewal of roofs and extensive repair of spire.

271 (1885)Replacement of roof and ceiling of chancel. Removal of old vestries, with replacement by two vestries and organ chamber. Removal of lancet from, east end of N aisle to N wall. Renewal of all seating in nave and aisles, panelling of old pews re-used as dado.

New internal porch to S door, new pulpit, new spiral stair on

tower, font moved, new hot water heating apparatus, new screens. New floor (wood, on cement / concrete) over whole church. All internal walls to be scraped down and repointed.

3850 (24.5.1956)Archdeacon's Certificate. Repairs to steeple

March 1957 - The steeple is said to have been
February 1958 'completely rebuilt'; the timber framework was
'made good'
and the lead

cladding completely replaced (note in
Quinquennial Report 7, 1988)

4898 (22.8.1966)New oil-fired boiler

5048 (14.4.1968)Introduction of electric light.

5216 (27.10.1970)Repairs to stonework and windows.

5832 (7.3.1980)New heating system

5847 (30.7.1980)Confirmatory faculty for repairs to roofs.

5929 (20.5.1981)Exploratory work for repairs to internal walls,
replastering of vestry, and treatment
of door lintels against dry rot.
(carried out in 1983; all plaster in
aisles removed; Quinquennial Report 6,
1983)

6088 (18.4.1983)Restoration of hatchments.

6203 (18.7.1984)Restoration of external stonework.

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Ryton church, unlike most others in the area, is very much a product of one building phase. With the exception of the south porch, the belfry stage (and spire) of the tower, and the vestries the entire building appears to have been constructed in the first half of the 13th century; its date would fit well with the first record of a rector. It would seem likely that a single steeply-pitched roof covered both nave and aisles; the aisle walls were low, with such windows as they were being set in gables rising above the general eaves line.

The south porch is clearly secondary, as it is constructed in a quite different fabric type to the aisle wall. Similarities between the mouldings of the south door and the outer arch of the porch suggests that there cannot be more than a few years between the two.

The belfry (and spire) also appear to be an addition, being

constructed in quite different stonework to the lower part of the tower (with the exception of the north wall of the ringing chamber, which appears to have been rebuilt when the belfry was added); the manner in which the belfry stage seems to sit uneasily on the structure below also suggests that it is secondary. Here the date is a little more problematical; the shoulder-arched belfry openings and carved corbels at the base of the spire are probably of later 13th or 14th century date.

There is little evidence of later medieval work; the transomed east window removed in 1844 may have been a late 15th or 16th century piece, as may the windows in the side walls of the aisles which were later remodelled as sashes and then re-gothicised in the 1820s (although the internal jamb shafts of the eastern window in the south wall of the south aisle show that this was a 13th-century opening in origin).

As often, 19th century restorations have erased most of the evidence of post-medieval changes to the fabric. These would seem to have taken the usual form of windows being converted into sashes, and galleries being inserted to provide extra accommodation. This may possibly have taken place as 1627, when it is recorded that the south front of the south aisle was rebuilt; the heightening of the aisles, and the upper parts of the nave walls, may be of this period. Certainly the rather simple and geometrical mason's marks on the upper parts of the aisle walls are a rather similar suite to those seen on 17th-century bridges at Corbridge and Haydon Bridge. The strange little pinnacles at the angles of the parapet of the nave and aisles also look early-17th century in style. The parapets have clearly been subject to later alterations - old prints show the south aisle and nave parapets as embattled, whilst today only the section of the aisle parapet west of the porch retains its crenellations. Many of the chancel furnishings are of thought to be of early 17th century date as well, which might argue for considerable alterations taking place in this period.

The low-side window was probably blocked up at this period; Hodgson (1902, 226) states that 'save in the case of a smaller one on the south side of the church of St Margaret, Walmgate, York, this is, I think, the most elaborate instance of the blocking and obscuring of these openings that I have anywhere met with'.

By the later 18th century the church would appear to have had substantial family pews in both aisles, whilst additional accommodation was provided by a series of galleries above; additional lighting was provided by a dormer window over the south aisle, shown on Hutchinson's print, and by the lowering of the sills of the three lancets in the west end, to light the area beneath the western gallery.

Details of the 19th century works have already been listed (see 'historical notes' and 'records of structural works'); as often there were two principal phases of restoration, the earlier,

under Archdeacon Thorp (incumbent from 1807-1863) and the later between 1878 and 1887. They show the usual pattern of restoration or renewal of medieval features, followed by the modification of these in the interests of architectural rectitude. Archdeacon Thorp replaced a late medieval east window with by three lancets (where there had originally been five); the Rev J.F.Hodgson, never one to mince his words, saw these as a 'small and utterly despicable triplet' (1902, 225); during the 1886-7 works the triplet was retained, but provided internally with rich shafting and mouldings.

THE CHURCHYARD

The churchyard is large, and contains much of interest. Its most striking feature is a roughly circular mound about 30 m north of the church; this rises c 5 m above the churchyard to the south, from which it is separated by a slight ditch; on the other three sides its slopes fall much further. The summit of the mound is c 7 m by 9 m by a slight ditch, and shows (June 1993) some evidence of recent digging. Until recently this mound was thought to be a Bronze Age tumulus, but it is now considered to be the motte of an early Norman castle. The church stands in what could have been an attached bailey or court, its south side marked by the marked drop in level between the churchyard and the gardens of the former Rectory. There is said to have been another (and presumably smaller) mound on the south side of the church (Bourn 1896, 26), from which public announcements were made. On the west the ground falls steeply (Tenner Bank) into Church Dene, whilst it falls away more gently eastward.

The oldest monuments in the churchyard are, as one might expect, to the south of the church; here there is a good selection of 18th and early 19th century headstones and table tombs; a number are of interest, including:

- (i) Headstone 16 m south of the south-east corner of the chancel, to William Weddel (d.1770); good vernacular masoncraft, with winged skull on reverse.
- (ii) On south of south aisle. Headstone to James Hutchinson, d.1832, notable for an omission rectified by a 'P.S.' at the base.

At the east end of the church is a paved area, incorporating a considerable number of slabs which may have been removed from the church. Two or three are tapering stones, and may be medieval in origin. There is also a large slab with a marginal inscription in what appears to be black letter; this might be of 17th century, or even medieval, date. Several of these slabs are deteriorating and breaking up with frost and plant action. There are other old slabs of the same type alongside the south wall of the chancel and the south aisle. In 1883 C.C.Hodges drew

a medieval cross slab in the footpath on the south of the chancel (reproduced by Briggs & Dugdale, 44); it is no longer evident.

On the north side of the footpath a short distance east of the paved area are a pair of coped slabs, presumably of medieval date, of limestone. The larger (1.85 m long) is plain, whilst the smaller (1.50 m, but perhaps broken) has a raised motif (a sword?) on one side.

Further to the east is a stone coffin of medieval date, with the inscription 'A.D. 1610' carved at the head end; the drain is unusually placed at the foot.

East again, just north of the bend in the path, a large boulder is a recent introduction to the churchyard, as part of a memorial (as yet incomplete) to 38 miners and boys who died in an accident in a colliery at Stargate, in 1826, who tradition states are buried in this vicinity.

The wall between the churchyard and the former Rectory (a substantial H-plan house of either late medieval or 16th century origin) is of some interest, incorporating the north wall of a building with a central pair of blocked doorways and three triangular vents to either side; this might conceivably have been a tithe barn.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The church is of considerable architectural importance; its archaeological importance is less easy to assess. One problem concerns the actual origins of the building; there is no clear documentary or physical evidence of a church here before the early 13th century, although one would clearly expect there to have been one. The fact that no part of the present building is earlier than this date rather suggests that an older church (if one existed) stood on a different site, although the location of the present building, set centrally in what was probably the bailey of an early castle, implies that this could not be far away.

It is not easy to assess the condition of archaeological deposits within the present church. The present floor, apparently that laid down in the 1886-7 works, is concrete beneath the walkways and timber beneath the pewing; it is apparently at more or less the original level in the nave, and rather below the original level in the chancel (where a slight off-set on the south wall probably marks the medieval floor level). Although the present heating system is above the floor, a grille running the full width of the building inside the south door suggests that there was a Victorian underfloor system, which will obviously have disturbed both burials and any earlier structural remains that might exist. Any remains of the old vestry (the only part of the pre-19th century building) seem likely to have been completely removed by the boiler room and

vaults beneath its successor. Above ground, no plasterwork of any age appears to survive; the fragmentary remains of wall painting on the internal jambs of the west window (under the tower) are almost certainly Victorian.

As much of the above-ground structure is exposed, it would seem unlikely to conceal any major complexities; perhaps the most interesting feature is the timber framework of the spire. Apart from Whitburn, this is the only medieval timber spire in County Durham, and is potentially of 13th century date. Unfortunately the structure has been heavily altered, but parts at least would appear to survive in situ. It was not inspected in any detail in the present survey.

Externally, there does not appear to be any continuous drain around the church (which is somewhat unusual in this area); deposits adjacent to the wall faces may be preserved.

There are a considerable number of old grave slabs, probably floor slabs removed from the church c 1887, now forming paved areas around the east end, and on the south side of the chancel; some may be medieval. Many of these stones are very worn, or actively disintegrating, and give cause for concern.

Priorities

- (i) Probably the most important problem is the decay of grave slabs in the churchyard, in particular those in the paving outside the east end. It is a matter of some urgency to ascertain whether these have been recorded; if not they should be cleaned, properly photographed (with low-angle lighting), transcribed and catalogued.
- (ii) The internal timber framework of the spire need to be properly examined, and if the substantial medieval elements prove to be in situ (as they appear to be), drawn and photographed. Such recording will be imperative if any further repairs or renovation are to be carried out.
- (iii) Although not technically part of the church, the motte in the churchyard (a scheduled ancient monument) is clearly at some risk from unauthorised digging (probably by 'treasure hunters'). It is difficult to see what action can be taken here, except perhaps for the erection of warning notices.

Peter F Ryder
June 1993

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THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS

R Y T O N

An Archaeological Assessment

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Sketch Plan showing
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