

The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Seaham

Seaham parish church stands c 300m back from the edge of the Magnesian Limestone cliffs of the Durham coast, on the north side of the steep-sided valley of Seaham Burn; little remains of the former village of Seaham around the church, other than the hall and former vicarage, the centre of the present town of the same name lying c 1 km to the south. The church consists of an aisleless nave with a south porch with, opposite to it, a small north vestry, a west tower and a chancel.

Description

The Exterior

The **West Tower** is constructed of coursed and roughly-squared stone, almost rubble in parts, with well-squared quoins, not of great size, but laid in side-alternate manner; there is a double-chamfered plinth, partly concealed on the south. A few of the larger walling stones show a diagonal tooling which has been identified as Roman (Aird 1912, I, 7)

The west window is a simple chamfered lancet, its sill around 2 m above ground level. The belfry openings on south, west and east, are tall lancets (occupying rather more than a third of the total height of the tower), with chamfered surrounds. The parapet is carried on a series of variously-shaped moulded corbels (that at the north-east angle is clearly a recent replacement); the embattled parapet itself is clearly of late 19th or early 20th century ashlar, but is topped by an older moulded coping.

On the east face of the tower, above the nave roof, there is no belfry opening, the raised tabling of a former steep-pitched roof extending up to parapet level. This tabling is clearly contemporary with the tower, being raised on the faces of some of the angle quoins; where it meets the south-west corner of the tower there is a projecting block marking the junction of the former coping of the west wall with the tower, about 1 m above the present nave wall.

The south wall of the **Nave** is of coursed roughly-squared stone (mostly sandstone), fairly small, and with roughly-shaped side-alternate quoins up to c 0.25 m high, usually correlating with two courses of wall masonry. There is a plinth with quite a broad chamfer, at a similar angle to that of the tower plinth; at the head of the wall a hollow-chamfered oversailing course (interrupted by the cut-back remains of two contemporary drainage spouts) carries a parapet with an embattled and moulded coping. At the east end of the wall is a massive stepped buttress of whitish Magnesian Limestone (whereas the majority of the fabric is a much browner stone, probably sandstone), plainly constructed to counter the pronounced outward lean of the wall.

Towards the west end of the wall is quite a large single-light window with a chamfered surround and a monolithic head of rough lancet form, perhaps re-cut; there seems to be disturbed masonry around the head, the chamfer of which does not match that of the jambs. Below the sill of the window is an area of disturbed walling, which some limestone. Above the western slope of the porch roof is one of the 'early' windows', on which Seaham's claim to be an Anglo-Saxon structure rests. Set high in the wall, it has a monolithic round-arched head, and jambs each formed by a small horizontal stone above a taller upright one.

The opening itself is of a rather strange shape as the horizontal jamb stones are set 3-4 cm further apart than the upright ones below. Below this window are the remains of an odd projection with a sloping top, almost as wide of the porch, the gabled roof of which now intersects it; its lower parts have been cut away; does it represent the remains of a raised panel of masonry that contained an earlier (?) version of the doorway.

The south doorway, now inside the porch, is a simple square-headed opening with a chamfered surround; the lintel is quite a shallow stone, and directly above is recess of irregular form, containing a stone with a large roll-type moulding, over which is a fragment of a hollow-chamfered oversailing course with a human mask.

To the east of the porch there is a considerable amount of redened stone (burnt?) In the lower courses of the wall. There are two-light windows of c 1913, each of two cinquefoil-headed lights with two trefoiled sub-lights over, under a pointed arch with a hollow-chamfered frame and a hollow-moulded hood with turned-back ends; above the wall is 'dished' back, almost as if the window is set within the blocking of an earlier and large square-headed opening. To the right (east) of the head of the western of the two are the remains - half the monolithic head, and the eastern jamb, of another 'early' window. At the east end of the wall is the huge stepped buttress already described.

The fabric of the north wall of the nave is rather different to that of the south. The coursed roughly-squared stone of the lower c 2 m is rather smaller than that above, and the two sections are separated over the greater part of the length of the wall, by a two courses laid obliquely, in 'herringbone' fashion. The walling above is of slightly larger, and certainly more elongate blocks, than that below. The quoining and parapet are similar to those on the south.

Near the west end of the wall is a tall single-light window with a rough segmental-pointed heads in oldish brickwork, and no real chamfer to its jambs, which are clearly secondary to the wall fabric. East of this window the 'herringbone' courses begin. Above the western slope of the vestry roof is one of the 'early' windows, with jambs of the same form as that on the south; the monolithic head is here cracked into two pieces, but has rudimentary decoration in the form of two incised lines parallel to the arch.

A little to the east of the vestry is another 'early' window, with rather more irregular jambs (the east jamb a small horizontal block above a tall upright one, the west jamb four horizontal blocks) and faint indications of an incised line on its monolithic head. Towards the east end of the wall is another tall single-light window, its sill cutting down into the herringbone course, with a monolithic round-arched head and plain square jambs, evidently not in their original form. At the east end of the wall is a substantial stepped buttress of limestone, a little smaller than the corresponding one on the south, and in this case set with its east face flush with the east end of the nave, rather than just short of it.

The **South Porch** is of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, a mixture of sandstone and limestone. The archway on the south has a head of elliptical form, and a continuous broad chamfer; the key stone is slightly pendant. The head of the arch is of limestone, but the jambs, chamfered inside and out, are of sandstone, and of 'short' blocks that do not key in with the adjacent walling. Aird (1912,II, 6) draws attention to the fact that these stone have a slight convex curve on the back, suggesting that they originally formed part of an arch (?the upper

parts of the chancel arch). Over the archway is a good 18th century sundial carried on a pair of block corbels, with a shaped block above bearing an incised inscription (partly destroyed by erosion), continued down onto the dial. The complete inscription is here taken from Aird (1912, I, 6):

“The natural clockwork by the Almighty One
Wound up at first, and ever since has gone,
Wound up at first, its springs and wheels hold good,
It speaks its Maker’s praise, tho’ once it stood
But that was by the order of His wondrous power,
And when it stands again it goes no more.

John Robinson, Rector
A.Douglass, Clerk, Fecit, A.D.1773
,Thomas Smith,)

(Church Wardens)

Samuel Stephens)

D.M.

Seaham in Latitude 54 51"

The porch is roofed by large overlapping slabs, interlocked together, which overhang the south wall as if they were a coping. The side walls of the porch each have a small square-headed loop.

The **Vestry** is built of limestone rubble, with little semblance of coursing; there are roughly-squared quoins at the northern angles; the north end has a gable coping ending in little gablets on the foot stones, and a chimney at the apex. On the east is a doorway and a 12-pane sash window (behind a protective grille); neither opening has any dressings at all. The eastern slope of the roof is of graduated Lakeland slates and the western of Welsh slate.

The **Chancel** is of coursed roughly-squared stone, the lower four or five courses of quite large squared blocks, with less regular fabric above. There is a chamfered plinth, set at a rather lower level than that of the nave; the parapet is of the same form as that of the nave. There are stepped buttresses of tooled yellow sandstone ashlar, probably of 1912, at the east end of the south wall, and at either end of the east wall flanking the eastern windows..

At the west end of the south wall is a mutilated lancet window, with a monolithic head, round-arched in its present form. Below is a disturbed area; here Hodgson (1902, 226-7) saw the remains of a ‘low-side window’, with a projecting stone seat, or platform, immediately in front, which he suggested might have been either sat or knelt upon by watchers who ‘burned lights and offered prayers at night-time for the dead’. The remains of the window are not very clear, and the platform beneath has gone, presumably cut away at the restoration, exposing the plinth beneath.

Towards the centre of the wall is a less altered lancet, with a neat chamfered surround and a monolithic pointed-arched head and near the east end a rather shorter lancet, with dressings of a whiter stone (probably limestone); its jambs are largely of ‘upright’ blocks, which would appear to suggest that it is an insertion.

The east wall of the chancel is mostly of limestone, with some browner stone only in the lower courses; the coursing is more regular than in the side walls. The wall has a pair of round-arched windows, which have had their chamfers cut away, except on the sills; they have hoodmoulds with large nail-head ornament, linked by a horizontal string course; there are some indications that this may have originally extended for the full width of the gable. Above the windows is what appears to be a low-pitched gable line, above which the wall face is set back a few cm, and then continued up the present gable is rather rubblier fabric; the gable has a moulded coping and a bracelet cross finial, of no great age.

At the east end of the north wall of the chancel the chamfered plinth is broken by projection of irregular plan, possibly the base of a former buttress, or of an attached wall (there is some disturbance in the wall above as well). Close to the west end of the wall is another mutilated lancet, its chamfer cut away, with a rough round-arched monolithic head; there is a more intact lancet set a little east of centre.

The Interior

The internal walls of the church are all of exposed stonework.

The west wall of the **Nave** is of coursed rubble up to the string course at the level of the tower arch imposts, with better-squared stone above, except for patches of rubble around the head of the arch (suggesting that this is an insertion). The tower arch is of pointed two-centred form, of two orders, each with quite a broad chamfer; their chamfers terminate in large leaf-like stops (like those of the chancel arch) on the lowermost voussoir, except in the case of the outer order towards the tower, which simply dies into the wall.. The inner order rests on large corbels with a hollow-chamfered lower angle, on each side studded by three large dog-tooth ornaments. The impost band, chamfered beneath, is stepped around the corbel and then returned across the full width of the wall, although its return sections are in relatively recent stonework. Below the impost the chamfer of the outer order towards the nave is continued down the jamb of the arch - which is in fact simply the angle between west wall of nave and the side walls of the tower. There is evidence that most of the stonework of the arch has been re-cut; all the masonry that faces the nave has a tooled-and-margined finish, whilst that towards the tower (which is presumably in its original condition) has a rougher more abraded surface. Above the arch is the line of an earlier low-pitched roof, roughly cut into the wall-face.

The internal walls of the **Tower** are of coursed and roughly-squared stone; the western lancet has a two-centred rear arch which appears undisturbed. Towards the west end of the north wall, c 1.8 m above the floor, is a rough cavity c 0.60 m long and c 0.30 m high, which may relate to an earlier tower stair or ladder. The present steep ladder-stair rises to a trapdoor that opens straight into the belfry. Here the belfry openings windows on north, south and west have shouldered rear arches. There are sockets for roof timbers at each end of the east and west walls, a little below the present roof. Below these, at the north end of the east wall, just above the level of the shouldering of the rear arches, is a large projecting slab or corbel. Any corresponding feature on the south is concealed by a recent heating installation.

On the south side of the **Nave**, the westernmost window has a two-centred rear arch; apart

from two stones at the apex, this seems medieval work; the outer opening has clearly been widened, its east jamb being cut back more than the west. The first 'early' window has three parallel monolithic lintels (some now cracked) and a very steeply sloped sill that may well be a later modification. The stones of the internal jambs do not course in very happily with the adjacent walling, perhaps indicating that the window has been re-used. Then comes the south door, with its internal jambs cut square with the wall; the inner lintel is a large block that seems to be chamfered on its upper angle, and may be a grave cover with its carved upper surface concealed. Immediately to the east of the door are the remains of a small stoup with a chamfered two-centred arch and a bowl that has been largely broken away. Beyond is the first of the pair of two-light windows, with an unusually broad splay to its internal jambs; the west jamb looks to be old (medieval?) stonework but the head, and masonry above, is all restoration, as are the east jamb and sill. Above the east jamb are the internal east jamb and part of the head of the fragmentary 'early' window. The second two-light window is similar to the first, except that in this case old masonry only survives in the east jamb, below this is a piscina with a near-semicircular arch, simply chamfered, and a bowl largely contained within the wall thickness, but with a projecting segment which has been roughly hacked back.

The fabric of the internal face of the north wall shows similar irregularities to the external face. There is a distinct break (with, in parts, a thin 'levelling-up' course) between a rubblier lower section and quite regularly coursed and squared stone in the upper section. This break comes c 0.20 m above the lintel of the north door, and corresponds with the herringbone course on the external face.

The westernmost window in the wall, like that opposite, has a relatively undisturbed rear arch, although there is restored stonework at the base of each jamb; the steeply-sloped sill has blocks with a crude diagonal tooling and must have been altered. Then comes an 'early'; window, high up; once again, its jambs do not match very happily with the adjacent walling. There are again three parallel monolithic arched lintels, the inner having a couple of incised concentric lines.

The north doorway now opens into the vestry; the former external face, now facing the vestry, has a shouldered arch, with a continuous chamfer, interrupting the herringbone course. The internal jambs are, as with the south door, set square to the wall, and include some well-squared ashlar blocks with light diagonal tooling that look like 12th-century work but may be re-used. Formed in the south face of one of the blocks of the east jamb is a small stoup, very like that on the south, with its projecting bowl hacked back.. The lintel is a large slightly-tapered block, probably a grave slab, although no carving is visible.

The eastern of the two 'early' windows in this wall is more elaborate than the others, although of the same general form. There are two monolithic lintels, both with incised patterns which have been described as 'lightly incised wheat-ear or cable ornament'; (Taylor & Taylor 1965, 536). At the east end of the wall is another lancet with its rear arch intact, except for the lower three stones of each jamb which are clearly restoration, as may be the steeply-sloped sill.

The nave has a six-bay roof of 1913, with simple king-post trusses, each with a pair of raking struts springing from the widened base of the king-post; there is a ridge-board, and a single level of purlins.

Inside the **South Porch** the slab roof is carried on two transverse arches, of roughly segmental-pointed form, chamfered on the lower angles. There is a stone bench, of shallow projection, on each side.

The interior of the **Vestry** is plastered, and the ceiling under-drawn; there are no features of any particular interest. An opening at the south end of the west wall, now walled up, communicated with a low extension or store, pulled down following damage by vandals a few years ago.

The **Chancel** opens under a broad and lofty arch spanning the full width of the chancel beyond. The arch is of two-centred form, and of two chamfered orders, with a moulded hood. Virtually all of the arch is 1913 restoration in smooth yellow ashlar; of the medieval arch there remain, above the springing, three voussoirs of the inner order on each side, and, towards the nave, five of the outer order on the north and three on the south. Towards the chancel the outer order seems all restoration; it has only a narrow chamfer, and simply dies into the side walls. The ends of the hoodmould are also old, with a good head stop on the south and a totally-defaced stop on the north. There are close similarities to the tower arch in the impost band, stepped around the corbels that carry the inner order, but in this case moulded rather than simply chamfered on its lower angle. Here the corbels have a broad concave chamfer to their lower angles, bordered by narrow lines of indented or small nail-head ornament. The concave face has a pair of masks carved in bold relief. These, although quite 'medieval' in appearance (one on the north is tonsured) looks suspiciously crisp and freshly-carved, and must surely have been re-cut to some degree.

Below the corbels on each side are a pair of rough sockets, c 2 m above the present floor, the eastern considerably larger; these must relate to former screens or a rood beam.

The internal walls of the chancel are of roughly-coursed stone, with some areas of rubble. On the south the westernmost window is a lancet of the usual type, with its internal opening undisturbed, although the present steeply-sloping sill, here and elsewhere in the chancel, looks to be a later modification. The original sills were probably level, later being infilled with masonry to give the present steeply-sloped form. The rear arch of the next lancet to the east, above the end of the altar rails, is also intact, although the tooled-and-margined finish to some of its dressings implies that some re-cutting has taken place - perhaps no more than tidying damaged faces after plaster was removed. The rear arch of the easternmost, shorter, lancet has limestone dressings (as does its external opening); immediately below its sill is a combined piscina and aumbry of unusual interest. The piscina, on the east, has a two-centred arch with a chamfer broken by a central line of nail-head; the circular bowl only projects slightly from the wall, and has a moulded front. The adjacent aumbry has had a taller trefoiled arch, the upper part of which is partly cut away by the window sill. Its jambs have a roll moulding, with an adjacent line of nail-head; here the moulding is continued round the sill. The rear face of the recess is a limestone slab with an incised priest's hand raised in blessing, with a chamfered off-set above. The large block which forms the sill of the piscina also has a carved design - a pair of broad leaves with a lobed acanthus between - at its lower right-hand corner. It would appear that the stone was originally an impost block, and that the acanthus leaves decorate what was the capital of a jamb shaft. The impost moulding has been cut away except for a section utilised as the moulding of the piscina bowl. The piscina and aumbry were uncovered during the restoration, and are described by Oswald (1916, 34-5 & 223)

On the north of the chancel both lancet windows follow the usual pattern of having their external openings crudely widened, but their rear arches intact, except for the infilling of their sills.

The east windows have more or less semicircular rear arches; their dressings are all white limestone. Above the windows is a horizontal set-back of 15-20 cm, perhaps relating to an old roof-line.

The chancel roof structure is of four bays, but otherwise identical to that of the nave.

Fittings and Furnishings

The Font has a square plinth, chamfered on the angles, and a circular shaft with a moulded base. The semicircular-section bowl has a moulding at the base, at the top 'a border of scroll-like dragons with leafy tails confronting each other in pairs' (Hodgson, 1912, 233). Hodgson saw the font as one of a pair with that at the nearby church of Dalton-de-Dale, and a typical example of a 'chalice font'. The whole surface appears to have been re-tooled. The present Font Cover is of 1997, but an older one, described as 'Jacobean', now rests on a shelf at the north-west corner of the nave

The **Organ** now stands against the south wall of the nave, to the west of the south door; in the 1970s it was moved from the chancel.

The nave has old **Box Pews**, with fielded panels to their backs and plain panelling to their doors. Some pew doors retain old brass plates, 'Mr Bewick, Seaton, 1811', 'Bryan Thompson, Seaton' and 'Tho^s Thompson'. There are also old box pews and stalls in the chancel; the brattished top rail to their west ends may be a later modification. The **Altar Rails** and panelled **Reredos** are of 19th century date; Aird (1912, I) states that they were then 'about fifty years old' and that they had been brought from St John's Church, Seaham Harbour, when its east end was rebuilt in 1886..

The **Pulpit** is Elizabethan; it is octagonal and stands on a square base, each face having an arch with diamond rustication to its archivolt; the dentil cornice above might be later (?).

Fixed to the south wall of the lower stage of the tower is a large **Commandments Board** of nowy-headed form, dated '1775'.

What has been interpreted as an early **Altar Slab** is not set in the floor at the north-east corner of the sanctuary; it has pattens of small indentations at two of the corners, and various other sinkings. Most of it is currently concealed by a fitted carpet; Aird (1912, I, f.p.9) gives a drawing and section of it.

Stained Glass. The east window is in memory of the rector Roderick Bethune d.1853, and has panels of the four evangelists. The side windows of the chancel are plain leaded glass. The two windows on the south of the nave are a matching pair, with early 20th century(?) figures of the Virgin Mary and St John, and SS Peter and Andrew. The easternmost window on the north of the nave is a memorial to the family of Brough, of Seaton, '1700-1923'.

The **South Door** has 19th or early 20th-century boarding on its external face, but its internal face has nine flush panels and old strap hinges with simple fleur-de-lys ends, and may be of 18th century origin.

The **Bells** are of considerable interest; a note in Proc.Soc.Antiq.Newcastle 2nd series III (1889) describes them as of the 'long-waisted' type. A 1971 note in the DAC file records them as being of 13th century date, and both by the same founder; one is 16¾" diameter and the other 17½". Both are uninscribed.

Sepulchral Monuments

The most significant medieval memorial is the stone coffin and lid lying outside the south wall of the chancel; see 'churchyard' section. Lying loose under the tower are three pieces of medieval memorials:

- (1) Upper part of a Magnesian Limestone headstone with an incised splay-arm cross on each face; 12th century or possible earlier.
- (2) The upper part of a well-finished headstone of brown sandstone with a round-leaf bracelet cross carved in high relief on each face; late 12th or early 13th century.

(these two stones are described and illustrated by Ryder (1985,111 & plate 48) ; see illustrations of left. There is also a fragment of coped and tegulated grave slab, probably of 12th-century date, and a broken headstone to Thomas Todd, d.1696, with a fine death's head and crossed bones..

On the south wall of the chancel are four wall tablets, all to previous incumbents, three on the south of late 18th or early 19th date (the earliest being to the Rev John Robinson d.1778) and one early 20th century one on the north. There are two 20th-century tablets in the nave, and a World War I **War Memorial** tablet, in banded marble, set to the west of the north door.

In the exposed section of the chancel floor is a tapered limestone slab, partly hidden by the fitted carpet, which may be of medieval date; no design is visible.

Historical Notes

- 1787 The Durham historian Hutchinson (II, 536) gives the first description of the building: 'The present church of Seaham, an humble edifice, doth not appear from the broken arch which divides the nave from the chancel to bear any similtude to the original building, that arch having been very lofty. We were told that in repairing the chancel, a fire grate and tongs of iron were discovered below the foundations; and that the walls are constructed of stone and mud, without lime. The nave and chancel are of an equal width, there being no ailes; the chancel is nine paces in length, and the nave sixteen, and five paces in width. There are three windows to the south and two to the north in the nave, and the like number north and south in the choir, with two small windows to the east. The tower is narrow. In the churchyard is a stone coffin, with a cover, lately dug up; the cover ridged on the top, as if designed to shut off any water that might come to it; on one side of the cover is an inscription with some Saxon characters, "Hic iacet Richardus vic. de Sehaiaim" '. The writer goes on to conjecture that the inscription refers to the incumbent Rchard de Overton mentioned in 1293.
- 1816 Surtees (I, 270) also describes the church: '.. a small fabric, retains traces of high antiquity. The Nave and Chancel are narrow and of equal breadth, separated from each other by a segment of a lofty round arch, which seems to indicate that the building has once been of considerably larger extent to the North. The tower at the West end of the Nave is square and low. All the lights in the Nave are narrow and round-headed, and the East window consists also of two round-headed lights under an ornament of Saxon zigzag or nailhead. The font is a plain stone basin, the rim ornamented with tracery. (footnote)..There is a small South porch, on the key-stone of which are inscribed certain numerals which have been supposed to mean 1080. I have always thought the capitals E.D. to be merely the initials of a Churchwarden, and the date 1680.'
- 1834 Mackenzie and Ross (I, 382) largely reproduce Surtees' description, but add a description of a sundial on the south porch, dated 1773, with its rhyiming inscription.

Faculties and other records of Structural Work

651	13 June 1913	Restoration of ancient windows To re-open two windows on north and one on south of nave. Also to divide the end pew on the north side of the nave, then square, into two.
685	11 April 1915 (1914?)	Choir vestry
720	24 Aug 1915	Renovating church. Removing lath and plaster to expose original walls.
2548	1 12 35	New heating apparatus system
4072	14 8 58	A/C Restoration & repairs
5650	7 2 77	Removal of kerbs and laying out and tidying up of the churchyard

The Structural History of the Church.

The Early Phases: Saxon or ‘Overlap’?

19th-century writers generally saw the earliest parts of the church as of later 12th century date; however, following the restoration of 1913, when the blocked high-level windows were re-opened, the local antiquary R. Anderson Aird argued for a Saxon date (Anderson Aird 1912, II), and pointed out similarities between both the windows and the proportions of the nave to those at Escomb. There were also parallels with Escomb in the excavated footings of a small square chancel, and of a western annexe or ‘porticus’ pre-dating the present west tower. More recently, Taylor & Taylor (1965, 534-6) have followed what they term ‘Aird’s closely-reasoned statement’ and claim the church as of period A2, ie AD 650-700. Other experts were not convinced that the newly-exposed features were as early as Aird claimed; at the time, when the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries visited the church, an open debate seems to have ensued with both W H Knowles and Joseph Oswald contending that the nave walls were either of late Saxon or ‘Overlap’ date (Proc.Soc.Ants. Newcastle 3rd series VI (1913) 59-71). When the same society visited again in August 1922, A. Hamilton Thompson argued that the Saxon origin had not been proved, and that the herringbone-coursing in the north wall ‘was characteristic of much work executed within twenty or thirty years after the Norman Conquest’ (Proc.Soc.Ants Newcastle 3rd series X, 51) The first edition of the ‘Buildings of England’ volume on Durham (Pevsner 1953, 205) saw the nave as ‘Late Saxon or Earliest Norman’ but the revised edition (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 398) saw the nave as ‘late C7 or possibly early C8’. Cramp (1984, 135 & plates 126/7) sees the ‘early’ windows as in-situ work of between the 7th and the 9th centuries.

It would seem that Aird’s arguments for a relatively early (Pre-Viking) date for the nave have now generally been accepted. However, it would perhaps be wise to re-assess the question once more. Before stating the relative arguments, it should be said that the evidence of early burials in the vicinity leaves little doubt that the site - as opposed to the present building - was

of significance well before the Norman Conquest.

The case for a Saxon date:

- (1) The small windows do have some distinct similarities to Escomb and other generally-accepted members of the 'Northumbrian' group of Saxon churches; however, small windows with monolithic heads set high in the wall are not entirely the preserve of such buildings - the nave at St Giles in Durham, generally accepted as an early Norman building, does have rather similar windows set high in the wall. There are also some evidences, especially internally, that the window jambs do not course in well with the adjacent walling, raising the possibility that the windows have been re-used in their present context.
- (2) The plan of the church, as traced through Aird's excavations, also looks early; however, the question might be asked as to how much the standing masonry of the nave walls might simply have been rebuilt on old foundations. Aird found that the footings of the original west end were set c 0.3 m back from the present internal face of the west wall of the nave, and stated that the wall had been thickened internally when the tower was built; however, as already mentioned (see interior description) there is rubble around the present arch (which seems to be contemporary with the tower) indicating that it is an insertion. If Aird's theory were correct, this would not be the case; assuming the wall to have been rebuilt on top of earlier foundations would solve this problem.

The case for an 'Overlap'/Early Norman date:

- (1) The herringbone coursing. Hamilton Thompson's point remains valid; in virtually all known cases, especially in the North of England, herringbone can be shown to be of early Norman date. At Seaham the herringbone coursing seems to mark a line above which the wall has been rebuilt (there is a clear fabric change), with two of the 'early' windows being in the upper section.
- (2) The angle quoins. Although laid in side-alternate fashion - itself no indicator of a Saxon date - the modest angle quoins at Seaham in no way merit Aird's comparison with the megalithic blocks at Escomb. In fact the angle quoins of nave and tower at Seaham are very similar.
- (3) The nave walls at Seaham are 0.80 m thick, rather thicker than Escomb (c 0.70m), although thinner than the c 0.90 m that often characterises Norman work.
- (4) The plinth. The Taylors (op.cit, 534) refer to 'the three quite different plinths of the chancel, nave and tower'. In fact, apart from the fact that the tower has a double plinth. In fabric, slope etc the three plinths are quite similar. Chamfered plinths such as this seem typical of 12th or early 13th century work; no other Saxon church in the region has a chamfered plinth. It is interesting that the plinth at the west end of the nave shows no trace at all of any junction with the walls of the western 'porticus' recorded by Aird, which would have come well outside the walls of the present tower..

In conclusion, I would consider that the balance of evidence is towards seeing the Seaham nave as a building of the 'Overlap' period rather than one of the small group of early Saxon or 'Northumbrian' churches, and to date it to c.1100. The high-level windows remain a problem; perhaps the best solution here is to see them as having been re-set from an earlier church, possibly the one of which Aird saw the foundations in 1913.

The Later Medieval Church

Whatever the date of the nave, the chancel is generally accepted as being of late Norman or 'Transitional' date, but here again there are some problems. What are stylistically the earliest features, the pair of round-headed windows in the east end, are in a wall that seems of later date than the remainder; it is faced in limestone blocks; at the restoration it was found that 'the east wall is of different date from the north and south walls and imperfectly bonded with them (Proc.Soc.Ants. Newcastle 3rd series VII (1915-6) 223). So if the east wall is of c.1200 (as the combination of round-arched windows and nail-head ornament suggest), then of what date is the remainder of the chancel?. The present lancet windows are stylistically of 13th-century type, but one at least (the easternmost on the south side) is clearly an insertion, and others may have been altered. Inside, the piscina and aumbry are clearly of 13th century date, and not necessarily early in the century.

As it would appear that a general remodelling of the whole church was carried out in the 13th century (when lancets were inserted in the nave, and the tower added) than the chancel may have been remodelled at this date as well. So perhaps one may tentatively assume that the chancel was rebuilt in the later 12th century (its elongate proportions would argue against any earlier a date) and then, for some reason (?the removal of an apse) the east gable rebuilt around 1200, with a major remodelling of the whole church following at some time within the next half century. The chancel arch is of this period as well; the two external buttresses, built to counter its thrust, are probably or a little later.

Thus by c.1250 the church was in more or less its present form. Later changes were more minor. Pevsner & Williamson suggest (1983, 399) that two of the southern windows of the nave were enlarged in the 14th century, but their present tracery, stylistically of this period, is less than a century old; all that remains of the earlier openings here are parts of the widely-splayed internal jambs, which may imply later medieval work but cannot be closely dated.

The embattled parapets of the whole church may well be of late medieval (15th century?) date, and probably coeval with the replacement of the original high-pitched roofs by a low leaved one; the greater part of the chancel arch must have been removed at this time

Post-Medieval Changes

Whilst a 16th century date has been suggested (ibid) for the south porch, it may be rather later. Although it is vaguely medieval in feel, it is clear that it replaces some sort of earlier projection, traces of which remain. The present south doorway, within the porch, is again hard to date, and may have been remodelled or renewed when the porch was built. Surtees reference to a date which he interpreted as '1680' (1816, 270) may be a useful clue here.

The church appears to have undergone the usual 17th and 18th century changes; windows were enlarged, and a gallery inserted. Fortunately an 1825 ground plan survives in a book of surveys compiled by Archdeacon Thorp (Durham Cathedral Library), showing a gallery at the west end of the nave, its front, carried on a pair of piers on either side of the central aisle, in line with centres of the westernmost window in each side wall. Access to the gallery was by means of a stair within the tower; the tower arch was closed off, at least at ground level, by a wall with a small doorway in its centre. Antiquarian descriptions and old illustrations provide more information on the church in its pre-restoration state. Several of the old windows had been enlarged; the two on the south of the nave, east of the porch, were simply plain openings with pointed arches and small-paned sash windows, with intersecting tracery at the tops (cf Whitby). The walls were covered by stoothing and plaster, the floor had been raised, and there were flat plaster ceilings (Aird 1912, 7)

The small vestry, built outside the former north door of the nave, is an early 19th-century addition. Prior to its construction the doorway may have been blocked; neither vestry nor doorway appear on the 1825 plan, but the vestry is shown on the c 1860 Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map. The vestry did have a low extension on the west, demolished after being damaged by vandals a few years ago.

The Restoration

Virtually every old church in County Durham suffered a 'restoration' in the 19th or early 20th century; Seaham was one of the last, and such works as were carried out were generally very respectful of the character of the building and its historic features; nevertheless, the redoubtable Rev J.F. Hodgson (1912, 232) could still rail against 'two brand new and quite incongruous traceried windows of 15th century type...filled with the inevitable gaudily coloured glass, distressing the eye and shutting out the daylight at the same time'. The one feature that does seem to have been destroyed was the rubble platform in front of the low-side window; it may be that the restorers interpreted it, possibly correctly, as some post-medieval feature of no great significance.

The Churchyard

The churchyard is rectangular, with the church set a little south-west of its centre; it is bounded by low walls of limestone rubble, in poor condition in parts. The entrance, set east-of-centre on the north, has low 19th-century gate piers with pyramidal caps. The churchyard monuments, mostly to the south of the church, are largely 19th century, although there are a scatter of 18th-century headstones, notably to the south-west of the building. To the south of the nave, and east of the porch, the c1912 lowering of the ground level has exposed the curved top surface of the brick arching of a vault; a large slab at its west end bears the simple incised but not-especially-informative inscription 'ENTRANCE to the VAULT'.

On the south side of the chancel is a medieval coffin with a coped cover, which bears faint remains of an incised inscription; the earlier antiquaries read the inscription as referring to a previous vicar of Seaham but Aird (1912, I, 8) saw as 'HIC IACET RICARDVS MILES DE

IHELAND'.. This is recorded by most of the early sources as standing in the churchyard, but at one stage was brought into the church to stand beneath the tower (ibid); at some more recent date it has been put back outside again, and has recently suffered damage, probably from vandals.

Archaeological Assessment

There is no doubt that the old village of Seaham is an area of considerable archaeological importance, and that there was a significant ecclesiastical or perhaps monastic site here from an early date. North of the churchyard, 25-30 burials were found in 1861 and said to be 'Brito-Roman' (see paper by Rev Angus Bethune in Antiq.Sunderland & Vicinity x, 90-91, 1909). Another dozen or so burials were found in the same area in 1983 when a gas main was being laid to the hall (Sunderland Echo 5.3.83) but no archaeologist was present. In 1998 ten burials were properly excavated (Abramson & Abramson 1998) , and found to be laid in Christian manner; radiocarbon gave a date between the mid 7th and late 9th centuries.,

Aird's excavations demonstrate that important structural remains, and doubtless also associated deposits, are preserved beneath the floor of the church. In addition to Aird's uncovering of foundations associated with the earlier phases of the church, there is the puzzling reference in Hutchinson's history (see 'Historical Notes' section) to a fire grate and iron tongs being found under the chancel, which may be the same feature as the a sub-floor stove 'understood to be of early 18th century origin' referred to in the 1994 Quinquennial inspection report. There is no evidence of the usual 19th-century underfloor heating system which has often disturbed sub-floor deposits and structural remains

Seaham thus must rate fairly highly amongst Durham churches, as being likely to preserve archaeological features beneath its floors; any disturbance of these will have to be carefully monitored, and may need to be preceded by an excavation. The present floors are largely concealed by fitted carpets, although there is exposed paving in part of the chancel, and again beneath the tower.

Similarly any disturbance to the above-ground fabric will entail archaeological recording and monitoring. This will also apply if any of the fittings, ie the box pews and stalls, are removed, exposing previously-hidden areas of wall. For instance, it is likely that the remains of the internal opening of the 'low-side' window in the chancel are currently concealed by woodwork.

Outside the church there is a concrete drainage channel running round the perimeter of the building, constructed in 1986. As the 1912/13 works had already reduced the external ground surface to the medieval levels, this may have occasioned some damage to archaeological material (in particular outside the tower, where it may well have disturbed the foundations of the western structure seen by Aird).

Summary and Archaeological priorities

Seaham is an important and intriguing church on an early site; the controversial question of the date of its nave walls cannot be regarded as settled. Both the visible fabric of the building,

and , as far as one can ascertain, the concealed archaeological deposits and structural remains beneath it floor seem to remain in an unusually-good state of preservation

Detailed recording of the standing fabric, either by photogrammetry or elevation drawings prepared with the aid of rectified photography, would be both instructive and useful, as would be the preparation of an accurate ground plan using modern equipment such as an EDM.

The situation of the church, somewhat sequestered yet close to an urban centre, means that both building and churchyard have both suffered from the attentions of vandals, who a few years ago destroyed a lean-to extension of the early-19th century vestry. It may be thought wise to remove the medieval coffin and coped lid, which for a time earlier this century was kept inside the church, into the building once more for its own protection, and to take advice on its conservation and cleaning.

Peter F Ryder May 1999

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The church from Fordyce's History of Durham (1857); a rather stylised drawing, showing the building before the addition of the vestry

ST MARY THE VIRGIN SEAHAM

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT MAY 1999

**The church from the south-west, before the 1912-13 restoration
(from John Mitchinson album, Durham Cathedral Library)**

PETER F RYDER

ST MARY THE VIRGIN, SEAHAM
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

MAY 1999

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