

## Sunderland Minster

Sunderland Minster, until 1998 the parish church of St Michael, Bishopwearmouth, stands in the western part of the centre of the modern city of Sunderland, on the south side of High Street West at its west end (facing the Empire Theatre on the north side of the road), with Low Row bounding the churchyard on the west.

### Description

The church in its present form is quite a complex structure, consisting of a five-bay nave with both inner and outer aisles, extending west to engage the tower, and transepts; there is also a narthex west of the tower flanked by two porches; there are also low porch blocks overlapping the junctions of the transepts and the outer aisles. The chancel has a chapel (with a south porch) on the south and an organ chamber on the north, with beyond that a large choir vestry.

### The Exterior

Unless otherwise stated the external walls of the building are Caroe work of 1932-5, and of finely-tooled light fawn limestone (?) ashlar; their architectural features are in a style based on a free interpretation of 14th/15th century elements, the windows showing varied tracery forms beneath square heads. There is a hollow-chamfered plinth<sup>1</sup>; jogged lintels to all doorways and windows, and an oversailing parapet with a hollow-chamfered string at the base and a moulded coping. The transepts of 1849 are of coursed squared stone with a pecked tooling, and have smooth ashlar dressings. The roofs are of graduated green :Lakeland slates.

The lower parts of the **West Tower** are enclosed by adjacent structures; the narthex on the west, the aisles at the sides and the taller nave to the east. The lower part of the exposed section, up to around the level of the nave roof, is of coursed roughly-squared stone in irregular courses. This section has angle pilasters on west only, with between them a lancet window (its lower part concealed by the narthex roof) with a broad outer order to its head; over this is a larger Gothic-arched window holding a 16-pane sash with intersecting glazing bars in its head. Above the head of this is a moulded oversailing course. The eastern angles of the tower at this level have big buttresses to north and south with twin-gabled heads. The section of the tower above has pilaster buttresses at all four angles, and is of more regularly-coursed stone<sup>2</sup>, with much recent replacement; there are clock faces on north, south and west. The pilasters rise to moulded caps just above the levels of the sill of the belfry openings. On the east of the tower, immediately above the ridge of the nave roof is a lunette-shaped opening with a raised stone surround; the belfry openings have two-centred arches and similar raised surrounds. Above is a boldly-moulded string and chamfered set-back at the foot of the stepped and embattled parapet, rebuilt by Caroe. On the west of the tower is the **Narthex**, a single-storeyed block by Caroe, except for the early-

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<sup>1</sup>The stone below this seems to be sandstone, probably re-used, and is now decaying badly.

<sup>2</sup>This change to better-quality stone is sometimes seen as evidence of the tower being heightened, but in fact simply indicates the level of the 1807 aisle roofs, which would have concealed the poorer masonry below.

19th century west porch that forms its central gabled section; here the original facing of coursed squared stone, now quite weathered, survives to mid-height; it contains a window of three trefoil-headed lights with cusped intersecting tracery above, under a pointed arch and a moulded hood with carved stops. On either side are projecting gabled porches; each has shallow buttresses flanking a segmental arched opening with a moulded head, and jambs that splay inwards to a shoulder-arched doorway on the line of the internal face of the wall between shallow buttresses; the gables above have quatrefoils and fleur-de-lys finials. Beyond the porches are square-headed windows of two cinquefoil-headed lights; the moulded parapets step up on either side of the central gable, and again at each corner. The returns of the narthex block each have a single-light window above lower quarter-octagon plan links between the narthex and the outer aisles; these have stepped buttresses at the angles, with three-light windows in the central diagonally-set face and two-light in the other walls.

The side walls of the **Nave**, set well back above the paired aisles, are all of 1932-5 each have ranges of close-spaced clerestory windows, each of two lights with tracery above under a square head.. The east gable of the nave has moulded kneelers and a cross finial

The west walls of the **Inner Aisles**, largely concealed by the narthex, have big crocketed pinnacles at their outer angles. The west walls of the **Outer Aisles**, behind the links, have low-pitched gables with pairs of two-light windows flanking central pilasters that are carried up to niches, containing statues of SS Aidan and Cuthbert, with cusped heads beneath further crocketed pinnacles.

The south wall of the **Outer South Aisle** is of four bays, and articulated by stepped buttresses, above which a small diagonally-set shafts rising through the string course at the base of the parapet; there is a moulded string beneath the windows, which in the first three bays are of three lights and in the narrower eastern one a simpler two-light window, above the roof of the low porch that overlaps aisle and south transept. The north wall of the Outer North Aisle is similar except that the easternmost buttress is omitted,

The flat-topped **South Porch** has a doorway similar in form to the outer doors of the narthex, except that the inner doorway this time has a two-centred arch, with a two-light mullioned to the west and a three-light one to the east; each end wall has a single-light window.

The **North Porch** is smaller, only overlapping the western third of the transept; its outer archway and general form is similar to that of the south porch, with a two-light window to the west; there are single-lights on both.

The **Transepts** of 1849 are externally identical in form, except that the lower part of the southern is completely concealed by the adjacent porch. The north transept has a chamfered plinth; both have large four-light window, with closed panels between two transoms at gallery level. The lights below are cinquefoil-headed and those above trefoiled, with a big sexfoil in the head, under a moulded hood with carved stops. In the gables above are cusped spheric-triangle windows; the coped gables have moulded kneelers with trefoiled gablets above, and a ring-cross finial. There is a two light Caroe window in the centre of the west wall of each transept, lighting the gallery and set just below the eaves.

Only the easternmost bay, or sanctuary, of the medieval **Chancel** is exposed externally. It is built of coursed blocks of sandstone, and has a two-part chamfered plinth (only properly exposed on

the north) and paired stepped buttresses with gabled tops at the eastern angles. A moulded string at the level of the sills of the windows looks of 19<sup>th</sup> century date in its present form although it steps down close to the east end of the south wall in precisely the same way that the corresponding internal string course does. The north and south walls each have a window that in its present form looks Victorian; each is of two trefoil-headed lights with a cinquefoiled circle in the spandrel, under a moulded two-centred arch in a moulded surround with a hoodmould and head stops. Directly beneath the southern window, below the string, is what appears to be a blocked opening of low Gothic-arched form, without cut dressings<sup>3</sup> The east window looks genuinely medieval in part, and consists of five stepped lancets under a four-centred arch with a moulded surround and a hood with 19<sup>th</sup>-century head stops. The gable above has moulded kneelers with trefoiled gablets above, and rises to a large square-plan finial that has a raised wheel cross on its east side and simpler relief crosses to north and south.

On the south of the chancel, and concealing the western part of its wall, is the **Bede Chapel** of 1932-5. This has a canted three-sided apse, the eastern face being set forwards as a projecting panel, with two-light windows; on the south is a porch with typical Caroe detail, having a doorway on the south sheltered by a slab canopy, and a single-light window on its eastern return.

On the north of the chancel the east wall of the **Organ Chamber** is set back between chancel and choir vestry. It has a central projection holding a two-centred doorway with a double-chamfered surround, with a pair of lancets on each side. Some of the dressings of the doorway, including parts of the hood (which extends down on either side to a moulded string that runs beneath the windows) looks so weathered as to appear medieval<sup>4</sup>, very eroded moulded hood, continued as string higher to S. Above the openings is a big chamfered set-back; the wall above, of snecked stone, appears later.

The **Choir Vestry** to the north, a substantial east-west gabled structure, is built of snecked roughly-coursed roughly-squared stone, with dressings of diagonally-tooled ashlar. The east end has a large window, with a transom at mid-height, of four uncusped lancet lights, with a cinquefoiled circle in the apex, in a hollow-chamfered frame without a hood. On the north are two windows, each consisting of three trefoiled lancets of equal height, then to the west a lower section of wall, set forward, with two smaller single trefoiled lancets.

## The Interior

The interior walls of the church are generally plastered and whitewashed, except for dressings and the north, south and west walls of the nave.

The base of the **Tower** has low and absolutely plain round-headed arches on north, south and east, with roughly-tooled voussoirs; there are indications of narrow imposts that have been cut back, on the internal (ie towards the tower) faces of the walls only. The arches are carried on plain

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<sup>3</sup>Might it relate to access to a vault?

<sup>4</sup>The faculty drawings for the 1932-5 works note that a 'doorway from SW corner' (presumably of the chancel) was to be re-used here.

square jambs, except that the outer western jambs of both north and south arches have been cut back at some time. The arch to the west is slightly taller and of segmental form, springing from simple moulded corbels that look like Caroe work, although roughly chiselled to match the other dressings. On the west face of the wall (towards the narthex) the voussoirs of this arch project somewhat from the wall face; above the arch are two courses of tooled-and-margined ashlar of early-19th century character, then above that a broad recess (cut across by the present roof) framing the lancet window visible externally; the sill of the lancet (its lower part infilled in brick) is visible, with below it the shallow-pitched roof-line of the c1807 west porch.

The east wall of the tower (ie west wall of the nave) is of coursed roughly-squared stone varying in size; it is slightly narrower than the present nave, so that its eastern angles stand proud of the wall just inside the arcades. These angles are formed by large blocks laid in side-alternate fashion that at first glance might pass for Anglo-Saxon work; they contrast with the external western angles of the tower (seen from the narthex) which are of early-19th century tooled-and-margined ashlar<sup>5</sup>. However, the difference in character must be simple due to one being an external and one an internal wall (ie one that is intended to be plastered); the blocks course in perfectly with those of the jambs of the tower arch, which is clearly of c1807<sup>6</sup>.

Above the tower arch is a gallery (its front by Caroe) beneath a similar but slightly wider arch; higher up the wall, and partly concealed by the end truss of the roof, is a small blocked opening with a round-arched brick head.

On the north side of the tower at gallery level is a blocked doorway; externally the form of its head is concealed by the ceiling, but internally it now forms a recess, with a timber lintel beneath a round arch turned in brick. Access to the gallery is via a similar opening in the south wall, without any timber lintel, its jambs cut square with the wall. At this level the tower is subdivided by a north-south partition re-using part of the 1932-5 choir screen; the western part has bare walls (showing that the internal face of the western lancet at this level is all in brick) contains a stair to the ringing chamber. This is plastered round, and is lit by the sash window in the west wall, the sill of which lies a little below the present floor. On the east here is a square-headed recess that corresponds with the blocked opening visible from the nave. A steep stair alongside the east wall rises to another chamber, with its wall plaster now in poor condition; here there are small square openings behind the three clock faces, and, a little higher up, the lunette window in the east wall. A ladder against the south wall leads up to the belfry itself, where the internal heads of the openings are turned in brick.

Within the **Narthex**, the central section has a segmental-arched doorway in each side wall into the two western porches, the northern of which is now subdivided. Further segmental-headed archways, now blocked, formerly opened from the end walls of the narthex into the quarter-octagon plan links (now toilets) . The southern porch has a wooden stair against its east wall rising north to an elliptical-arched doorway set against the south-western angle of the tower, giving access to the office (on an inserted upper floor in the western bay of the outer south aisle)

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<sup>5</sup>There is an OS benchmark at the base of the north-western quoin.

<sup>6</sup>Hutchinson refers to the tower as having a 'lofty arch towards the nave' on 'short round pilasters', which bears no resemblance at all to the present arrangements.

and also into the upper stages of the tower.

The dominating feature of the **Nave**, and indeed of the whole church interior, is Caroe's five-bay inner arcades. All of the 1932-5 internal work is in fawn to brown ashlar. The piers are of cruciform plan, and of swept section between attached octagonal shafts with concave faces, with elaborately-moulded capitals and bases. The third piers, in effect crossing piers, are of more elongate plan, and carry arches linking to the outer arcades, whilst the eastern pairs of bays span Dobson's transepts. Above the arches is a corbel table carrying a projecting section of wall that rises to a moulded set back below the clerestory windows above the western three bays, and pairs of simply-moulded three-centred open arches towards the transept. A series of moulded corbels just below the corbel-table carry semi-octagonal shafts that rise beyond the thickened section of wall to moulded capitals that carry the roof trusses. The combination of the projecting section of wall-face, and the manner in which the rear faces of the wall-shafts are cut back above this seems designed to give the impression of a triforium gallery. The corbelled-out section of wall is repeated on the outer faces towards the transepts. The eastern respond of the north arcade is a moulded corbel, presumably to accommodate some fitting or furnishing (now removed) against the wall beneath.

The outer arcades are of four bays, starting west of the transepts and extending a bay beyond the inner, as the aisles extend to the line of the west face of the tower; they are of similar form to the inner arcades, although the arches are lower; similar arches span the inner aisles on the line of the eastern face of the tower, and open into the transepts at their east ends. There is a more complicated arrangement at the east end of each outer aisle, where a central octagonal pier carries one segmental arch and one narrower quadrant-shaped arch, allowing room in the outer corner of the aisle for a curved projection to accommodate the gallery stair. Pilasters from these piers support elaborate niches with the figures of St George (north) and St Michael (south), with above the niches circular traceried windows, with billet-moulded surrounds, opening from the transepts. The west walls of the outer aisle have blocked segmental archways to the link through into the narthex, and two-light windows that have always opened inside the the narthex.

Both transepts retain galleries, with their fronts in line with the outer arcades, carried on timber plates each supported by a pair of moulded octagonal timber posts. Beneath the galleries Caroe constructed stone internal porches and lobbies within the outer western angles of the transepts. These each have a substantial square pier at their inner angle, with a pair of four-centred arches springing from a slender octagonal pier towards the main body of the church (and from the central pier in the east end of the outer aisle) and a single arch towards the transept. The porch is further subdivided by a square-headed doorway, the outer section having a two-light window opening into the transept and a segmental-arched opening into the external porch. From the external porch further arches lead into lobbies at the foot of the stone stairs first curve through the projections in the corners of the outer aisles, and then angle their way upwards through the transept wall into the galleries, where they emerge between ashlar walls with stepped hollow-chamfered copings.

The end walls of the transepts, and the east and south walls of the Bede Chapel, have segmental-arched recesses designed by Caroe to house radiators. On the east side of the south transept is a Caroe arch into the Bede Chapel, with to the south of it a two-centred doorway (perhaps Dobson) into the porch on the south of the chapel, now accommodating heating apparatus. On the north side of this porch is a blocked doorway with a two-centred arch with very badly

weathered continuous mouldings, which must be another re-set medieval piece.

On the east of the north transept is a tall segmental-headed arch to the organ chamber, then to the north of it a doorway into the choir vestry; this has a segmental-pointed arch with a wave moulding, the head of which incorporates some weathered stones that could be ex-situ medieval work; the opening splays, in the manner of Caroe's porch doorways, to a two-centred arch on the line of the inner face of the wall.

The **Chancel** is entered under the chancel arch which is of two-centred form and of two orders, the inner with a broad chamfer inside a thin roll moulding, carried on triple attached shafts with moulded capitals and bases, whilst the outer continues unbroken to the ground; there is a moulded hood with head stops. Whilst the style of the arch is generally of the later 13<sup>th</sup> century, and it is recorded that the original arch was carefully dismantled and re-erected in 1808, the dressings must have been re-cut or re-tooled as nothing of the present arch looks convincingly medieval.

Inside the chancel there is exposed masonry below a moulded string that runs below the windows; the walls above are plastered. At the west end of the south wall two elliptical arches within a larger one open into the Bede Chapel; east of this are three heavily-restored medieval sedilia, their sills now at floor level. The deeply-moulded trefoiled arches seem genuine 13<sup>th</sup>-century work, but the attached shafts that carry them, with their foliate caps, and the moulded hood with its stops carved as bishops' heads seem all restoration. East of the sedilia is a trefoiled piscina, its projecting bowl cut away; once again its moulded hood and foliate stops are of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date. string course, plastered above. The string course above the sedilia, which steps down over the piscina, again seems all restoration, as does all the stonework of the two-light window above the string, and that opposite in the north wall. These have moulded rear arches and internal hoods with head stops.

Some of the internal surround of the five-light east window may be genuine medieval work; it too has a moulded rear arch, and an internal hood with head stops; its level ashlar sill is clearly restoration.

On the north side of the chancel the large arch to the organ chamber at the west end of the wall is largely concealed by the organ and panelling; east of it is a doorway, now blocked, with a two-centred arch and a moulded surround, 13<sup>th</sup>-century in style but apparently all renewed stone. East again, beneath the two-light window, is a square-headed aumbry, its surround concealed by its woodwork.

The Choir Vestry has no feature of real interest; its walls are plastered above panelling.

## **The Roofs**

The nave roof is of five bays, and an impressive piece of 1932-5 woodwork; the king-post trusses have moulded and brattished ties, carried on short shafts, with solid knee-braces or spandrel pieces, supported by the capitals of the stone wall-shafts. Above the tie, on either side of the king posts are three moulded square baluster-like uprights; towards the apex of the truss

horizontal struts , with arched braces below, produce a cruciform arrangement below the jewelled head of the king-post. There is a diagonally-set ridge and one level of purlins. There are trusses between each bay, and in addition set against the end walls. There is also a good low-pitched roof to the Bede Chapel.

The inner and outer aisles have low-pitched roofs with the longitudinal timbers carried on cambered ties; again there is much good detail, including wall posts with arched braces with carved and pierced spandrels.

The transept roofs, of 1849, are much plainer .Each is of five bays, with collar-beam trusses with their arch braces supported on stone corbels; above the collars further pairs of curving braces form an upper two-centred arch.

The chancel has a waggon roof, probably of later 19<sup>th</sup> century date, with a moulded wall plate. The choir vestry also has a waggon roof, which may be of the same date.

### **Fittings and Furnishings**

In the Baptistry at the west end of the Inner North Aisle is a marble **Font** of 1902; under the tower is an earlier pedestal-style font with a gadrooned oval-plan bowl, leaf ornament on the shaft and an eroded inscription with the date 181...on the base. The remains of a medieval (15<sup>th</sup> century?) font lies in the southern part of the narthex, beneath the stair up to the office, and consist of a square stone base with hollow chamfer, and a simple octagonal bowl.

The altar in the Bede Chapel incorporates four round-arched carved panels from a **Pulpit** of 1632, believed to be from the church, retrieved in 1925 from a Wesleyan Mission.

Most of the fittings date from the 1932-5 restoration, and include some good-quality work; the present Pulpit is a quite spectacular piece, bearing the Sacred Monogram and roundels with the Symbols of the Evangelists, with a richly-carved tester above. Caroe was also responsible for the present fronts to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century galleries in the transepts.

The screens and fittings to the outer aisles date from the by Ian Curry and Christopher Downs. Some of the **Stained Glass** in the church was re-located during the 1932-5 restoration, including the west windows of the southern porch of the Narthex and of the Outer North Aisle ( Jesus and the Children, and the Good Samaritan, both c1900). The west window of the older west porch incorporated in the Narthex was given in memory of William Bell d1856. Most of the windows in the main body of the church are of plain glass. The east window (the Ascended Christ), replacing one shattered by a World War II bomb, is of 1950, and by D.M.Grant. In the head of the north window of the chancel a 19<sup>th</sup> century angel survives.

Another re-set piece is the **World War I Memorial** in the form of a screen, now placed between the Tower and the Narthex. On the north wall of the central section of the Narthex is a tablet stating 'This church was restored to the Glory of God 1933-1935 restoration made possible by the munificence of Sir John Priestland' . A brass plate at the east end of the north wall of the chancel commemorates an 1876 restoration of the chancel by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

On the west walls of both transepts at gallery level are old **Benefactions Boards**; that in the

north transept relates to late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century benefactions, and local almshouses; that in the south transept is dated 1820.

There are eight **Bells**, all recast in 1932. The **Bell Frames** are of the long-headed type, and have eight pits, four set north-south with two on either side swinging east-west; the south end of the frames seems to have been extended in ironwork..

### **Sepulchral Monuments**

The earliest piece of sculpture in the church is a headstone or grave marker, in 2004 kept in the store in the basement of the outer north aisle. The lower part of the damaged stone is uncarved and roughly dressed, for insertion into the ground; the design is described by Cramp (1984, 1, 53 and plate 19) as ‘an incised standing cross....crudely framed by a wavering roll moulding. The cross has an incised roundel in the centre and incised squiggles in the quadrants’. There is a similar design on the rear, and fragments of ornamentation on the sides. Cramp considers ‘this crude lop-sided carving .... either very late in the (Pre-Conquest) tradition or utterly incompetent’, and suggests a possible 11<sup>th</sup> century date. Todd and Yellowley (2003, 3) refer to two other stones found in the 1930s work that were identified by the British Museum as ‘undoubtedly examples of late Saxon work’; one ‘probably part of a grave cover’ and the other a piece that ‘somewhat resembles some pillow stones found at St Hild’s nunnery at Hartlepool. It is not clear what has become of these; it is possible that they are elsewhere in the basement store.

Two pieces of medieval cross slab grave covers are built into the internal face of the south wall of the southern porch of the narthex; they are described and illustrated by Ryder (1985, 62 and pl.9) along with a third slab which in 1985 was in the store in the basement of the outer north aisle<sup>7</sup>:

- (1) Upper part of early to mid-12th century slab with simple bracelet cross under arcade of intersecting arches.
- (2) Part of the base of a slab; incised cross shaft and stepped calvary. Not dateable.
- (3) Upper part of mid- to late-12th century slab with cross paté in circle.

At the south-east corner of the south transept is a worn and damaged effigy of Thomas Middleton; the hands are clasped in prayer and there is a sword on the right and a dagger on the left, with the feet resting on a lion. There are very worn remains of a black letter inscription that has been read as

‘Hic iacet Thom’ Middleton Armiger.....MCCCC’.

‘Here lies Thomas Middleton, Knight ..... 1400’. This is the monument the lay in the north aisle of

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<sup>7</sup>It could not be located on this visit, but may well still be there.

the medieval church (see Hutchinson's description, below); it was lost in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and rediscovered in the 1930s buried beneath the floor of the west porch.

There are a number of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century **Wall Monuments**: On the east wall of the northern porch of the narthex is a pedimented tablet, with a pair of cherubs at the top, to Thomas Wilson, one of the proprietors of the glass manufactory at Ayres, d. 1776. On the east wall of the southern porch is a tablet to Ann, wife of Lieutenant Leech R.N., d. 1848, under an urn with a hawk perching on it, with on the base 'The Grave is Near'. In the south transept is a tablet to Christopher Bramwell, Bishopwearmouth merchant, d.1829. Various mid- to late -19<sup>th</sup> century tablets are found in the north transept and westernmost bay of the north aisle, where there is also a larger wall monument to Ann Maud d.1759 that has an open pediment with a coat of arms, and is flanked by fluted pilasters with Ionic capitals. On the westy wall of the outer north aisle is a tablet with a broken pediment and an apparently unfinished Latin inscription to Anthony Smith and William Scurfield, above a line of Greek key pattern. In the meeting room that occupies the eastern part of the outer north aisle is a tablet to Jane, wife of Henry Tanner 'of this parish, ship owner', d.1841

A complete list of monumental and other inscriptions in and around the church has recent been published (Yellowley 2001)

### Historical Notes

- 1214            The first documentary reference to the church, Philip of Poitiers being rector.
- 1787            A description of the church (Hutchinson 1787, II, 513-4) 'The altar rails form a square, thereby admitting many communicants to the service. The enclosure is six paces in length and three wide steps ascend to the rail; the whole is wainscoted on the east end ornamented with tabernacle work. The east window is under a pointed arch and formed of five lights; there are four south windows and one to the north having two lights each, under pointed arches. From the steps, the chancel is double stilled with oak in the cathedral form, ornamented with a carved entablature in open work. The entrance from the nave is under a lofty pointed arch, rising from a cluster of small round pilasters; closed with stalls and a handsome wood screen, suitable to the rest of the chancel. The whole length of the chancel within the rails and without is about 19 paces. The nave hath two regular aisles, formed by two rows of three round columns, about 14 feet in height uniform, with rolls for capitals, supporting circular arches; there are four upper windows on each side. The nave and aisles together are about 15 paces in width and 16 in length, regularly stilled with oak and carved with fleur de lys. The pulpit is lofty and well ornamented. Near it in the end wall of the north aisle is a monument, having the effigy of a man in armour to the waist, with elevated hands in high relief, belonging, as it is presumed, to one of the family of Middleton. The tower rises on short round pilasters supporting pointed arches in the sides an a lofty arch towards the nave. The west end of the nave is galleried'
- 1806            According to Surtees (1816, 227) and Fordyce (1857, I, 428) 'in 1806 the nave

and aisles were unroofed, and a part of the side walls taken down; the whole of the pillars and arches of the interior were removed, and the outer walls of the aisle raised to an equal height with the nave, so as to admit a gallery running round three sides of the church. Twenty-four feet of the chancel, and a large north porch, which adjoined the present vestry, were added to the body of the church. The arch above the chancel was taken down, the stones numbered, and carefully replaced in their original form, but further to the east. The western tower was also taken down and rebuilt, the south porch removed, and a west entrance opened under the new tower, a square structure, containing a clock, and surmounted by crocketed spires at the corners... The works were begun in December 1806; the chancel was opened for service in 1808, and the whole was finished in 1810...

1849 The transepts were added (Fordyce 1857, I, 429) providing the church with 540 extra sittings. The church was closed on 30 July 1849 and re-opened 10 March 1850.

### Faculties and Records of Structural Work

Faculty no.	Date	Works
3/1/14	21 Oct 1673	Gallery
3/9/a	'Temp John Lawrence rector' (23 Jan 1721/2 - c1732)	Erecting a gallery
3/12	1807	New pewing the church 'the stalls or pews... are in an irregular and decayed state and condition and liable to be damaged by the intended alterations to be made in the church'
3/16	1849	Enlarging church (addition of transepts, by John Dobson)
3/195	1873	Altering and repairing parish church, the works to include 'the removal of the present floor and pews, to cover the entire area with concrete.... improvements including the removal of portions of the north and south galleries for the purposes of rendering the transepts more useful and convenient'...
3/440/2	18 Dec 1902	New font, alterations to seating accommodation
3782	31 Dec 1917	Memorial chapel
3/1011	11 May 1921	New inner west doorway
3/2432	16 Sep 1932	Restoration and reconstruction of church
3/2574	20 Aug 1935	Giving up of a portion of the churchyard for street improvements.
3/2650	1 Feb 1937	Laying out the churchyard under the open spaces act.
3/4116	2 May 1959	Introduction of a moveable altar, credence table and altar rails, and removal of pews to a new position.

3/4835	4 Nov 1965	Removal of pews from north and south transepts
3/4886	22 July 1966	Alterations and improvements
3/5058	7 June 1968	Erection of a War memorial in the west porch
3/5122	8 May 1969	Repairs to the chancel
3/5263	16 June 1971	Repairs to tower and aisle roofs
3/5946	3 Aug 1981	Complete re-ordering of the church for the use of the parish and Action in Retirement.
3/6526	21 May 1987	Re-leading of roof over organ, raising pitch of roof...
3/8173	3 Oct 1996	Works including provision of a window in the internal west wall.
3/8998	20 Sept 2000	To indent stone mullions to certain windows...to replace mullions in two windows.
3/9471	19 Nov 2003	Works include disabled access ramps to south and west entrances

## The Structural Development of the Church

Our main source of information as regards the medieval church, apart from the rather fragmentary remains of its c1300 east end that survive today, is to be found in two late 18<sup>th</sup> century illustrations, a drawing in the British Library by Samuel Hieronymous Grimm from the 1780s and a print in Hutchinson (1787, II, 511). They show a church with a lofty western tower engaged by the nave aisles, which are articulated by buttresses with gabled tops, and have windows with pointed arches that seem to have lost their tracery; the nave has a four-bay clerestorey of 15<sup>th</sup>-century character, with two-light windows and an embattled parapet.

Grimm's south view (left) shows a gabled south porch, and Hutchinson's north-east view a north door in the corresponding bay of the north aisle. The chancel has two-light windows of late 13<sup>th</sup> century character on the south, with a peculiar form of clerestorey of small circular windows above, and an embattled parapet. Hutchinson's view (below) shows a gabled vestry extending north from the centre of the north side of the chancel, with a structure with a five-light window, probably a chantry chapel, in between this and the east end of the north aisle. There are relatively minor discrepancies between the illustrations (Hutchinson shows the tower rather higher in proportion to the nave) but the overall impression is of a substantially medieval church. The round arches of the nave arcades described by Hutchinson may well have been of 12<sup>th</sup> century date, but the features shown on the two illustrations span the later medieval period, from c1250 onwards. Todd and Yellowley (2003, 4) state that 'one researcher considers that the tower could quite possibly have been Saxon' but there is nothing in the features shown that really backs this up. It does appear that the tower was completely taken down and rebuilt in 1807; the stonework and mutilated low round arches of the base of the present tower at first sight could be taken for early medieval work, but in no way do they tally with Hutchinson's description of the old tower.

The evidence of faculties, antiquarian accounts and old illustrations makes the radical changes which the church fabric suffered during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries relatively clear.

The medieval building was largely swept away in the 1806-7 remodelling, as can be seen by

comparing a south-west view of 1810 (left) (reproduced by Todd and Yellowley 2003, 14) with Grimm's drawing of thirty years earlier. The nave has been extended east and its aisle walls doubled in height<sup>8</sup>, whilst the tower is rebuilt, and the south porch replaced by a western one. Bar the tower the overall appearance is of a large nonconformist chapel with a fully galleried interior; as in many chapels, access to the galleries was by a pair of stairs, in the bays flanking the rebuilt tower. The medieval arcades were completely removed, the new galleries being carried on cast iron piers. Only the eastern half of the old chancel was retained, dwarfed by the adjacent 'preaching box'; theologically, the form of the remodelled church emphasised the contemporary dominance of Word over Sacrament. Antiquarian concern was not entirely absent, as can be seen from the fact that the medieval chancel arch was carefully dismantled and re-erected, although either then or at some subsequent date it has been so heavily restored so as to lose any appearance of age.

With continued urban growth, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century additional seating was required, and this came in the form of transepts added by Newcastle architect John Dobson. The faculty plans for the 1849 works survive, and show the thick-walled medieval vestry on the north of the chancel as still surviving at this stage, with a smaller addition to its east. This was swept away during later 19<sup>th</sup> century changes when the present organ chamber and choir vestry were constructed. It was also in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century that the removal of panelling revealed the sedilia and piscina again, and it became obvious that medieval fabric did in fact survive at Bishopwearmouth, although a number of antiquarian writers such as Hodgkin's *Little Guide* of 1913, and, more surprisingly, both first and second editions of Pevsner's *Durham* (Buildings of England series) have failed to acknowledge the fact.

Finally, in 1932 came the final great remodelling by W.D. Caroe, an architect of national repute, who transformed an unwieldy building of no great aesthetic merit into one of considerable architectural status, 'quite a remarkable effort in a free neo-Perp' (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 451) with especially notable interiors, both in the detail of the fabric and the quality of fittings and furnishings. The reconstruction did come at some cost to the older fabric, as the addition of what is now the Bede Chapel entailed the loss of the western half of the south side of what remained of the medieval chancel, and whatever remained of the old walls of the nave aisles, raised and remodelled in 1807, was swept away. Although Caroe's works would have afforded an unparalleled opportunity to research the history of the fabric, there is no record of any archaeological recording or investigation being carried out at this time.

Caroe's interior was altered again in 1981 by Ian Curry, when his outer aisles were screened off from the main body of the church and put to new uses, a café on the south and meeting rooms and offices (above a low basement) on the north; the interior was opened out by the removal of Caroe's chancel screen, sections of which were re-used elsewhere in the building.

### **Archaeological Assessment**

Whilst the sub-floor deposits in any church of medieval origin are potentially of archaeological importance, it is probably safe to admit that those at Bishopwearmouth have suffered more disturbance than most, given the known 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history of rebuilding and alteration

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<sup>8</sup>The half-height buttresses shown suggest that the old aisle walls were retained and heightened.

to the building. As with many churches, and especially those in urban areas, there has been extensive burial beneath the floors. It is known that by the mid-19th century these internments were causing problems within the building, so that in a layer of six inches of concrete was added to the floor in 1872, sealing off c 53 vaults known to exist (Todd & Yellowley 2003, 18). The 1930s restoration was prompted by serious structural damage resulting from colliery subsidence; foundation works at this time will again have disturbed and destroyed earlier structures and deposits.

Nevertheless, as this is an important site with possible Pre-Conquest origins, any further excavations or significant disturbances of ground level in and around the building will require at least an archaeological watching brief

### **Priorities**

Tangible links with the early history of the area are important in a modern city, and it is unfortunate that the earliest piece of concrete evidence for a Christian settlement on the south bank of the Wear, the late Saxon headstone, is 'in store' and difficult of access, along with the best of the three medieval cross slab grave covers that the church possesses; these monuments certainly merit proper display. It is also unfortunate that two other Pre-Conquest stones found in the 1930s seem to have been lost; if the stones themselves cannot be located, photographs of them might still exist. Apart from the retrieval of these stones, no archaeological recording seems to have been carried out at the time of Caroe's reconstruction, or if it was, the records have never found their way into print. So perhaps a search is in order, for either physical or documentary evidence from this period.

Peter F Ryder April 2004

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Cross Slab Grave Covers (after Ryder 1985)

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# Sunderland Minster

(formerly the Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels,  
Bishopwearmouth)

## An Archaeological Assessment March/April 2004



**The Interior looking East**

**Peter F Ryder**  
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