

## WHITBURN CHURCH

Whitburn Parish Church is unusual in now having no dedication ; there is some evidence ( see Historical Notes, below) that it was anciently dedicated to St Andrew. The church stands on the west side of Church Lane, opening off the south side of the picturesque main street of the village . The church consists of a five-bay aisled nave with west tower and south porch , and an aisleless chancel (with a marked deviation in alignment to the north of the central axis of the nave ) , with organ chamber and vestry on the north.

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

#### Exterior

##### The Tower

The slender but lofty (79 feet ) west tower rises in five separate stages , separated by set-backs or changes in fabric type. The lower three stages appear to be contemporary, and are divided by chamfered set-backs. The walling is of roughly-coursed grey/fawn rubble, except on the south where the area below the second set- back has been refaced in squared diagonally-tooled stone. The eastern angle quoins, seen above the nave roof, are well squared; those at the western angles are concealed by heavy diagonal buttresses which rise in three stages, to just above the third set-back. The fourth stage is of cream rubble , roughly coursed, with more roughly-shaped quoins. Whilst the fifth (belfry) stage is of coursed grey rubble, with quite large quoins and dressings of yellowish stone; the fabric and dressings of the diagonal buttresses are very similar to those of the fifth stage; in addition to the dressed blocks at their outer angles, some large slabs of yellowish stone have been shaped to tie them in with the fabric of the earlier tower wall. The parapet is of ashlar.

At the base of the tower is a chamfered plinth, only exposed on the west ; this clearly pre-dates both the diagonal buttresses (which have a broad plinth of slightly-concave section at a higher level) and a small single-stepped buttress set beneath the west window. The first set-back is only c 2.0 m above ground level, and is not seen on the (refaced) south wall ; on the west it is interrupted by the present west window; the section of the set-back which drops down beneath the window sill is clearly of later stone , and seems to be of the same build as the single-stepped buttress; it may perhaps

pre-date the west window. Beneath the west window a pair of irregular joints would appear to indicate the jambs of a former doorway; the 19th century west window is of two lancet lights, with a quatrefoil in the spandrel.

On the north side of the tower a stepping-up of the second set-back, adjacent to the west wall of the nave, is presumably related to some feature on the nave wall, now vanished. On the south the third stage of the tower has a narrow square-headed window, with a chamfered surround, which would appear to be contemporary with the fabric.

The fourth stage of the tower has a single opening in the centre of each wall, all except the south now being walled up. These have two-centred arched heads, and a continuous roll moulding of jambs and arch, under a hollow-chamfered hoodmould ending in bold stops or bosses, apparently carved as rosettes or flowers. On the north the hoodmould of the opening has been cut back to allow for the clockface.

The fifth stage of the tower is quite lofty; in each face is an opening of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, without any enclosing arch or hoodmould.

The parapet, set slightly forward from the wall face below, has a moulded coping, and looks to be of 19th century date. Above rises a short octagonal lead-covered spire, capped by a weathercock.

### **The Nave and Aisles**

The only external wall of the nave is a section of its west end, on the north of the tower; this forms a buttress-like feature, set forward from the line of the west wall of the north aisle, and is constructed of roughly-coursed rubble, with brownish well-cut angle quoins which may well be 19th century. The east gable of the nave, above the chancel roof, appears to be of 19<sup>th</sup>-century masonry, and is capped by a foliate cross.

The south aisle has a low-pitched pent roof; the only pre-19th century masonry visible is at its west end. This is a structurally complex elevation, displaying at least three fabric types. At the north end is a vertical strip of masonry consisting of quite large irregular blocks (this may represent the south-west corner of an original nave, although no cut quoins are visible). Adjacent to this is a larger area of much smaller rubble, roughly squared, and laid in courses. Within this there is a broken straight joint, 1.55 m from

the north end of the wall; this may indicate the position of a former buttress (see Structural History section). South of the broken joint is the only architectural feature in the wall, a vesica window, cut from two slabs in a way that suggests that it may be made up of the heads of two lancets. The southern third of the wall is of uncoursed rubble, and is probably 19th century.

The fabric of the 1867-8 parts of the aisle is squared snecked rubble with yellowish ashlar dressings. The south wall of the aisle is divided into six bays, the porch projecting from the second; stepped buttresses form the bay divisions, with a pair at each angle; a chamfered plinth and a moulded sill string are carried round the buttresses. The four windows east of the porch are each of two uncusped lancet lights with a trefoil in the spandrel; they have moulded labels which are continued as a horizontal string that is interrupted by the buttresses. West of the porch is a single-light window with a trefoil-headed arch and a separate trefoil above. The oversailing parapet has a bold hollow-chamfered course at its base, with a lion-mask gargoyle at each end, and a moulded coping. At the east end of the aisle is a three-light window made up of the same elements as the two-light ones in the south wall.

The south porch, contemporary with the aisle, has a chamfered plinth, and paired stepped buttresses at the corners. It has a pointed arch of two orders, the inner, with a hollow chamfer, continuous to the ground, and the outer, moulded, carried on jamb shafts with moulded capitals and bases. The moulded hood terminates in head stops similar to those on the north aisle. The north aisle is wholly 19th century; it has a separate gabled roof, but is rather humbler architecturally than the southern counterpart, although constructed of similar materials. There is one window in the west end, and five in the north wall, with buttresses only between the first and second, and third and fourth, bays, and at the east end of the wall. There is a chamfered plinth, and a chamfered course at the base of the oversailing parapet. The windows are all of two trefoil-headed lights, with a quatrefoil in the head and hoodmoulds with head stops.

### **The Chancel**

The chancel is quite elongate; its north wall is largely concealed by the 19th-century vestry and organ chamber.

The south wall of the chancel has four lancet windows, with single-stepped buttresses between the first and second, and third and fourth, and a continuous chamfered plinth. At least three fabric types are visible, although heavy pointing obscures their actual boundaries. The lower parts of the wall west of the second (eastern) buttress are of quite thinly-coursed rubble, whilst the remainder is of larger irregular rubble, except for an obvious heightening, above the tops of the buttresses, also in larger rubble.

At the west end of the wall is a 'low-side' window, with two trefoil-headed lights and a quatrefoil over; its dressings are entirely mid-19th century, but below parts of the jambs of a blocked doorway are visible. The dressings of the lancets are also all 19th century; they have chamfered surrounds, and hollow-moulded hoods with carved stops. Above the head of each lancet (and, similarly, above the head of the 'low side') are visible traces of what appears to be the outline of a rather broader and taller window. Between the second and third lancets a patch of larger rubble at the foot of the wall indicates another former door position. The buttresses appear to be medieval in their lower sections, but their upper halves look like 19th-century restoration.

The east end of the chancel has a pair of broad clasping buttresses at the angles, the caps of which are obviously 19th century. Between the clasping buttresses and beneath the sill of the east window are two short single-stepped buttresses, which are probably medieval. The east window is 15th-century in style but entirely 19th century in fabric; it has three cinquefoil-headed lights with simple panel tracery over, under a four-centred arch and a hoodmould with head stops. On either side of the window are ragged joints; it is not clear whether these relate to the jambs of a previous opening (or openings), or simply indicate masonry cut out when the present window was inserted. In the gable above hints of an earlier roof-line, parallel to and a little below the present one, are visible. The gable is coped, with a square-headed slit at the apex, and a foliate gable cross.

Only the eastern quarter of the north wall of the chancel is exposed externally. This has another lancet window, of the same type as those on the south; the outline of the head of its predecessor is especially clear here. A medieval buttress (of the same type as those on the south) has been incorporated in the east wall of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century vestry.

The vestry and organ entirely of 19th century date, and constructed of

snecked squared rubble, with ashlar dressings. On the north is a stair down to the boiler room, and a pointed doorway of one chamfered order, with moulded imposts and hood; west of this, above the boiler room stair, is an single-light window with a trefoiled ogee head. In the east wall of the vestry is a two-light window, of different character to any other in the church, with simple flowing tracery above trefoil-headed lights; the hoodmould has bosses of foliage as stops. The jambs appear to be of older stone than the yellow ashlar of the mullion and monolithic head.

### **Interior**

The interior of the body of the church is plastered and colour-washed, except for exposed dressings.

### **The Tower**

The tower opens to the nave by a pointed arch of three chamfered orders. The inner order is carried on 19th-century moulded corbels; in the soffit of the lowermost voussoir on each side is a square socket. The second order is chamfered towards the nave and square towards the tower; it has broach stops above the plain square-section jambs, which appear to be 19th century. The outer order, all 19th century, has moulded imposts, and broach stops at the base of the jambs.

The upper parts of the tower are reached by a series of ladders; the floors are all relatively recent. The first floor corresponds to the third stage externally; here the single-light south window has a deep internal splay; the innermost lintel is an early carved slab (see sepulchral monuments section). On the east, a short distance above the present floor level, the timber lintel of a blocked opening is visible, with hints of its jambs below. Some distance below the present ceiling level of the room is a set-back on all four walls, at the level of the internal sills of the fourth-stage openings. Below the sill of the western opening is the stub of a large beam. The fourth-stage openings have jambs cut at right angles to the wall without any rebate; there are crude cut outs in each internal jamb (except the east jamb of the north opening and the north jamb of the west) just below the ceiling.

The second floor shows the rear arches of the fourth-stage openings, just above floor level, and just below the ceiling two corbels on the south wall

and one on the north; a second on the north at the east end of the wall, may have been removed relatively recently, as its position is occupied by a modern pipe. These corbels are of simple quarter-circle section, with a raised band at the top of the curved face; they appear relatively afresh, and may be 19th-century work.

The third floor is the present belfry; the belfry openings have roughly-constructed rear arches of segmental-pointed form. The bell frames are described in the fittings and furnishings section; apparently quite independent of the frames is a timber construction carrying the spire. This is based on a vertical post in the centre of each wall (ie running down the centre of each belfry opening; the lower part of the post on the west has been removed), and horizontal plates adjacent to the internal faces of the east and west walls, a little above the window heads; these are carried in sockets in the north and south walls, and in addition supported by two corbels on each wall. Above these wall-plates form part of a rectilinear framework of timbers at the base of the spire proper; the spire rafters rise from this framework and are in addition supported by long raking struts which spring from the faces of the wall posts and are halved in passing braced fashion across short tie-beams carried on the heads of the posts.

### **The Nave and Aisles**

The side walls of the nave are unusually thin (0.50-0.52 m) their fabric is completely concealed by plaster. The five-bay nave arcades have double-chamfered pointed arches carried on circular piers. The western responds are simply round-ended lengths of wall; the eastern are 19th-century moulded corbels.

The capitals are all of quite simple form, with a ring below a square-section abacus, but there is considerable variation in the proportions of the separate elements; the bases (where visible; those of the easternmost piers are hidden by the floor) are simply moulded. There is also some variation in the manner in which the chamfers of the two orders terminate; some run uninterrupted down to the capital, whilst others have broach stops, of varying sides. There are also a number of mason's marks visible. The nave roof, of scissor-braced common rafter form, is totally mid-19th century.

In the south aisle, the vesica in the west wall has a plain plastered internal splay. The south door, opening within the porch, has a continuous moulding

of a chamfer within a wave, and a moulded hood with head stops. Built into the internal face of each side wall of the porch, in the southern angles, is a medieval head corbel.

### **The Chancel**

The chancel arch is of two chamfered orders, with a hollow-chamfered hood, and springs from moulded corbels; it appears to be entirely 19th century in its present form.

The 'low-side' window in the chancel has an asymmetric rear splay, the eastern jamb being cut more or less at right angles to the wall, whilst the western is splayed. Above the rear arch is an internal label or hoodmould, chamfered on the underside, which looks to be genuine medieval work. All five lancet windows have quite broad segmental-pointed rear arches, of two chamfered orders; the stonework is exposed, and looks to be ancient. It is not clear whether these rear arches relate to windows of the present lancet form, or the slightly broader openings suggested by the evidence visible externally. On the north side of the chancel is a pointed arch to the organ chamber, of two chamfered orders; the outer is continuous to the ground whilst the inner is carried on moulded corbels; there is a hollow-chamfered hoodmould with foliage stops. There is a similar arch (but without the foliage stops) into the organ from the east end of the north aisle. The east window has a moulded segmental-pointed rear arch which is entirely 19th century. There is no evidence of ancient ritual arrangements. There is a boarded dado, and a panelled and boarded roof with gilded bosses.

In the 1867-8 extensions on the north of the chancel, the cross-wall between vestry and organ chamber was removed in 2001/2 (Ryder 2002). It contained a doorway from organ chamber into vestry, which had a two-centred chamfered arch and moulded imposts and hood, and a fireplace, set diagonally at the south-west corner of the vestry, which had a segmental moulded arch. During these works traces were seen of a medieval buttress on the line of the cross-wall, and to the east of it remains (including a timber lintel) of what seems most likely to have been a high-set window.

### **FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS**

Whitburn church retains little in the way of old fittings and furnishings. The white marble font, in front of the tower arch, dates from the 1867-8

restoration; the contemporary altar and stone reredos, and a stone pulpit, all in the same 'Early English' style, were removed in 1953. The altar rails, chancel dado, stalls and chancel screen, are all of 1930. All stained glass is of late 19th and 20th century dates.

### **The Bells and Bell Frames**

The two bells in the tower are, together with the bell frames, a rare medieval survival. They are very similar to two of the bells at Heighington, and are thought to come from the same foundry; their inscriptions are:

1. SCE ANDREA ORA PRO NOBIS  
(with a representation of the martyrdom of St Andrew under the first initial)
2. SCA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS  
(with a similarly-placed representation of the Virgin and Child)

The bell frames are probably contemporary, and are of oak-pegged construction; there has been some later modification, including the addition of extra raking struts nailed onto the earlier members; the transverse beams which actually carry the bells are relatively modern replacements.

### **SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS**

The earliest sepulchral monument at Whitburn is a carved grave slab re-used as the internal lintel of the first-floor window in the tower. This does not appear to have been previously recorded, and is currently being studied. The slab is 1.23 m long by 0.41 m wide, and 0.12 m thick. Its position means that only a section of its carved face is exposed. The carving is in relief, and badly worn. There is a full length cross, with an expanded-arm head, set centrally; on the 1 of the cross shaft are a series of animals (lions?), on the r what appears to be a horseman with a spear challenging a dragon; other worn motifs behind may include a second horseman.<sup>1</sup>

Three later medieval cross slabs are built into the external walls of the south aisle. These comprise:

---

<sup>1</sup> This slab was described and illustrated by Ryder (1994, 50-51) when a tentative early-12<sup>th</sup> century date was suggested; more recently Clive Hart has pointed out the similarity between the animals depicted and Pictish carvings and suggested a date c1000 (see appendix 1).

- (1) External face of south wall of aisle west of porch. Slab cut longitudinally into two pieces. Dog-tooth ornament on edge chamfer. Incised design except for cross head, of double ring type, in relief; base a three-step calvary. Sword on r of shaft, and remains of inscription rendered by Boyle (1892, 570) as: 'CVRME CARNIS Q..... QVOD ES FUI'

Dog-tooth and cross head form together point to a date in the later 13th century.

- (2) External face of west wall of aisle. Relief design, badly worn. straight-arm cross with cup terminals in circle; emblem on 1 of cross shaft is probably a knife. Old drawings show a poleaxe on the r. 12th century?
- (3) External face of west wall of aisle, below (2). Relief design of cross With eight-arm head and fleur-de-lys springing from shaft, key on 1 of shaft. (14th century).

Built into the wall between (ii) and (iii) is a stone which may be part of the head of a slab, but the only motif visible is an incised marginal line. On the east side of the porch is a stone coffin, apparently found in the 1867 restoration (Hutchinson n.d, 13). It is of rather unusual shape, with a shouldered rounded top; the lid has round edges, and is broken into three pieces; it is said to have borne a carving of a pair of scissors (?) but this is no longer visible. The unusual form of both coffin and lid may point to a post-medieval date.

For a fuller description of these monuments see Ryder (1985) 118-119 & plate 54.

Two other fragments have been noted more recently:

- (4) Fragment built into the north wall of the vestry with an incised pair of shears.
- (5) Block in the east face of the medieval buttress incorporated into the east wall of the vestry, incised design difficult to make sense of, but most likely part of a grave slab.

Inside the church the effigy of Michael Matthew of Cleadon, who died in 1689, lies on a table tomb at the west end of the south aisle. Several sources reprint Surtees' description (1840, 51) of it:... 'A plump, stout elderly gentleman, in the full, stiff dress of 1689; a full periwig, neckcloth with square ends, coat with large buckramed skirts, embossed buttons, wide sleeves, and cuffs, doublet, rolled breeches, and square laced shoes with huge bows of ribbons; the head rests on a pillow, and the right hand holds a book open at the text 'I shall not lye here, but rise'. There is a skull between the feet. On the uprights of the tomb are represented in bas-relief the same figure kneeling with a lady in a corresponding dress on each side of him; and on the east and west uprights texts of scriptures.

Pevsner & Williamson (1983, 503) give the sculptor as W. Smith and describe the monument as 'the anachronism of a recumbent effigy on a tomb-chest, looking slightly ridiculous...' The monument was originally in a railed enclosure; it was removed to the churchyard by the Rev Hitchcock (1866-1881) but returned by his successor the Rev Price (1881-1901).

There are very few later sepulchral monument in the church. In the floor of the tower are one or two 18th century ledger stones. In the south aisle is a marble wall tablet to John Collinson Harrison, Lieutenant in the Royal Scots Greys, d.1900, and there are other 19th century tablets at the west end of the north aisle, along with a World War I war memorial.

## **HISTORICAL NOTES**

- 1563            The parish priest of Whitburn, Robert Hodge, was found guilty of seditious utterances against the King, and was hanged. In a letter of James Crane, a Government spy, Whitburn church is referred to as being dedicated to St Andrew, and as having a steeple used by mariners as a 'sea-mark'. (Hutchinson, n.d., 7-9)
- 1753            Reference in the church registers to a clock being erected in the tower, with faces on the north, south and east (ibid. 13).
- 1780            The Durham historian William Hutchinson, writing in the 1780s (Hutchinson 1823, 626-8) describes the church as

‘ . . . a neat edifice. The chancel is five paces in width , and ten paces in length to the three steps leading up to the altar . The east window, consisting of three lights , is under a pointed arch; there are four windows on the south , under pointed arches ; and two on the north, one under a circular arch, the other pointed . The nave is regular , having two side ailes, formed by rows of round columns, four on each side, with ancient roll capitals, supporting pointed arches; it is in length twenty paces, and twelve in width, lighted by three square-top'd windows to the south: the rafters of the roofs are vaulted. At the west end of the south aisle, railed in, is the ancient burial place of the owners of Clemson, where lies interred Matthew of Cleadon. There is an altar tomb, with a recumbent effigy cut in a modern dress with square-toe'd shoes: the date was 1689. The church has a lofty tower with a blunt spire'

- 1791 Dr Benjamin Pyre, Archdeacon, ordered repair of pews, and that the Creed, Lord's Prayer and commandments be placed on the Rood Loft (MS notebook held by incumbent). This is an interesting reference, as it shows the late survival of the Rood Loft.
- 1803 Alterations to the church took place (according to article 'Parish Church holds answer to the Whitburn question' in the Sunderland Echo for 22nd May 1969.
- 1820 When the historian Surtees (11, 50-1) wrote the church had been lately thoroughly repaired, and handsomely renewed (in 1803?)<sup>7</sup> he considered it the very exemplar nitidiss of a neat comfortable Parish church. The told rapiered roofs of the nave had been covered by a modern ceiling; the lights in the aisles were call modern under square labels (in an attendant footnote he refers to the former presence of dim mullioned windows and gives further details of the repairs; the floor had been raised two feet with clime rubbish and the church was warmed by a stove with its flue carried along the north wall of the nave.). He describes one of the lights on the north of the chancel as having a 'quarterfoil heads and the other a pointed arch. A portion of the great East windows, also under a pointed arch, was closed up in the walls. He also records a number of 17th and 18th century

sepulchral inscriptions that have now gone.

- 1834 Notes in church accounts refer to plans to build a new vestry, and to insert a new pointed window on the north side of the church where the old vestry window had been IMS notebook in possession of incumbent
- 1850 Churchwardens' accounts record an expenditure of £92.16.0 'for refacing the four sash windows on the south side of Whitburn Church by pointed windows and leaden frames corresponding very nearly with the date of the church'.
- 1851 An article in the Durham Chronicle for the 6 June describes the removal of vestry from within the church to outside, disclosing remains of a man about 7' high, buried with the head of a horse. It was conjectured that he was a knight who lived in Cleadon and fought in the Crusades.
- 1867-8 A major restoration of the church was carried out by Newcastle architects Austin and Johnson. This involved the rebuilding and widening of both nave aisles, and the addition of the organ chamber and vestry on the north of the chancel (see faculty list). The church was reopened on August 13th 1868.
- 1868 The paddock on the north side of the churchyard was presented to the church (churchwardens' account book)
- 1874 The lych gate was built, and apparently the present roadside wall.
- 1940 June 22nd. Whitburn suffered an air raid; glass was blown out of several windows in the church, and the old Tithe Barn destroyed.
- 1958 Replastering works in church photograph in Sunderland Echo 15 1 58)
- 1968-9 Repairs to steeple and repainting (photograph in scrap book held by incumbent)

- 1977 Repointing and some renewal of masonry carried out  
(Architects Report not, January 1982, by A.O.Lee)
- 1984 In August a fire (the result of arson) destroyed the vestry in the  
base of the tower, and necessitated complete redecoration  
throughout the church.

### FACULTIES

Faculty no.	Date	Works
159	1867	Enlargement of church. Specification includes excavation over the entire area of new building (aisles etc) to the depth of the present footings. All timbers renewed, except in upper part of tower.
3392	8.3.1951	Raising of sill of east window
3614	11.5.53	Improvement of east end and new pulpit.
4245	21.5.60	Establishment of a side chapel.
5706	16.12.77	Repairs to stonework.
6248	19.3.85	Restoration after fire damage.

(see 'Historical Notes' for other records of structural work)

## THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Whilst there are no architectural features in the church that pre-date the early 13th century (the date usually given to the building), there is some circumstantial evidence that earlier masonry survives.

The evidence of the early carved slab suggests that there was a church (or at least a burial ground) on the site by the early 12th century, and perhaps considerable earlier. Although the earliest surviving architectural features within the present church are of c1200, it seems possible, if not probable, that the arcades of this date are cut through earlier walls; insertion of arcades into older walls was a common, if not absolutely universal, procedure. The nave walls at Whitburn are unusually thin (0.50 m as opposed to the 0.75 - 0.90 m much more common at this period) and this could point to the survival of Pre-Conquest fabric; the elongate plan of the western responds could also indicate that these are in situ sections of earlier nave wall, perhaps left undisturbed to serve as buttresses for the tower.

If one accepts this model for the development of the nave, then the existence of the straight joint in the west wall of the south aisle 1.55 m out from the tower wall, and the buttress-like feature in a corresponding position on the north side of the tower, may indicate the positions of pre-aisle buttresses. The need for buttresses in this position may well have been occasioned by the construction of a tower or bellcote - another indicant that the lower part of the present tower pre-dates the aisles.

The earlier architectural features of the tower - the tower arch and old belfry windows - would fit with a date c 1200. When the original (12th century?) tower may have been heightened as part of the major remodelling of the church when aisles were added and the chancel rebuilt. A local tradition cites Bishop Pudsey of Durham as personally having designed the south arcade! Thinly-coursed rubble masonry, like that of the postulated pre-aisle buttress embodied in the west wall of the south aisle, is seen again in the lower courses of the western part of the south wall of the chancel. Whilst the chancel in its present form is undoubtedly of early 13th century date, as shown by its surviving architectural features and its elongate plan, some remains of a shorter 12th century?) predecessor may be incorporated. The authenticity of the 'low-side' windows is open to some question. Hodgson (1902, 231-2) states that it is an exact replica of the original (he claims its restoration to be by John Dobson, which is puzzling, as the 1867-8

works were undoubtedly by Austin & Johnson; was it restored on a separate occasion?). More recently Hutchinson (n.d., 12) claims that it was a priests doorway and was only converted into a window in 1867. Certainly its position is typical of the low-side windows found in many medieval churches in the North East; there was a separate priests door further east, although this may have been a post-medieval insertion.

Later medieval alterations to the body of the church have been entirely erased by the 19th century changes; only the Perpendicular style of the east window suggests that it may be a Victorian copy of what was there before. The square-headed windows in the aisle mentioned in the antiquarian accounts may have been of 15th or 16th century date.

In the late 14th or 15th century the tower was heightened for a second time, and the present belfry added. This heightening obviously caused some structural concerns, and the heavy diagonal buttresses were added to the western angles of the tower. The spire would appear to be of the same date; the timber structure of the spire, together with the bell frames and bells, is a rare survival of considerable value.

Post-medieval changes such as the replacement and tracery by sashes, and the insertion of galleries etc, were as usual erased by the restorers of the 19th century. The churchwardens' accounts show that some re-medievalisation in the form of the remodelling of window openings had already taken place prior to the major restoration scheme of 1867-8, when the short-lived vestry of 1851, added to the north wall of the north aisle, was removed. Both aisles were completely rebuilt, a new south porch added, and a combined vestry and organ chamber on the north of the chancel; the variation of window types in the rebuilt parts of the church suggests that some of the earlier 19th century features were reused. All timberwork was renewed, with the exception of that in the upper parts of the tower.

## THE CHURCHYARD

Prior to its extension in 1868 the churchyard was roughly rectangular, with the church set close to the centre of the north side. The 1868 extension comprises a second, rather narrower, rectangle to the north, its east side contiguous with that of the original part.

The older monuments in the churchyard lie on the south of the church; they generally comprise 19th century headstones and tombstones, but there are a scatter of 18th century stones; a number of the monuments are broken or badly decayed. There are a number of late 19th and 20th century monuments in the eastern half of the 1868 extension; these all lie east of a north-south bank that might have been a former field boundary. In the area west of this, as yet unused, are traces of east-west rigg-and-furrow.

On the north side of the path immediately inside the lychgate lies an octagonal stone bowl c 0.50 m across. This has sometimes been considered as part of an old font, but this interpretation is by no means certain. It may merit being cleaned and properly examined.

The present entrance to the churchyard is an 1874 lych gate, of timber with a pantiled roof, south-east of the church; the roadside wall, of rock-faced stone, capped by railings with fleur-de-lys tops, seems to be contemporary with the lych gate. There is now no entry into the churchyard on any of the other three sides, although an irregular embayment due west of the church may indicate an earlier entrance position.

There are old rubble boundary walls on the south and west of the yard. A watch house stood at the south-west corner of the churchyard until relatively recently, but it has been demolished; two piles of cut stone, with various pieces of door jamb etc (which look late (18th or 19th century), probably derive from it. There is a further dump of stone against the short section of the north wall of the old churchyard west of the 1868 extension; this is largely rubble, but includes a few fragments of churchyard monuments.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The visible fabric and architectural features, although difficult to interpret in parts, suggests that the church followed a fairly standard development through the medieval period. The recognition of the early grave slab re-used in the tower, and more tenuous structural evidence, implies that the presence of a church here, and perhaps parts of the present fabric, pre-date the usually accepted date of c1200, perhaps by some centuries.

It is often difficult to assess the degree of survival of concealed archaeological material, beneath floors and behind wall plaster. At Whitburn the underfloor deposits have clearly been considerably disturbed; in addition to the proposal to excavate floor levels down to the depth of the footings (at least in the area of the rebuilt parts of the building) in the faculty for the 1867-8 works, there is clearly an extensive underfloor heating system - and of course the usual practice of burial throughout the building (probably including several vaults; there was probably a Matthew family vault at the west end of the south aisle). Thus it is unlikely that sub-floor deposits and structural remains survive in good condition; it cannot be said that they have been completely destroyed, and any works which involve the disturbance of floor levels will require monitoring and possible archaeological investigation.

The same criteria apply to plastered wall surfaces. A reference in a manuscript notebook held by the incumbent refers to surviving old walls being replastered at the time of the 1867-8 restoration, and a photograph in the Sunderland Echo for 14th January 1958 shows the nave walls above the arcades partially stripped as they were replastered. Thus it seems unlikely that medieval wall plaster survives, although this cannot be ruled out. Any works involving disturbance of wall surfaces, at least in the chancel, where the survival of old plaster is at least a possibility, should commence with a trial investigation, to ensure that medieval wall paintings etc are not inadvertently destroyed. Any removal of plaster from the surfaces of the medieval walls will also require monitoring, as structural or architectural features of interest will almost certainly be exposed; this applies in particular to the nave walls, which may well hold the clue to the earliest parts of the history of the present building.

Outside the building, one can expect the areas to the south of the church to have been used for burial over many centuries. Occasional early burials may

exist on the north as well, as witnessed by the strange discovery in 1851 of the burial including a horses head.

The 2001/2 watching brief (Ryder 2002) showed that there is a concrete sub-floor, presumably of 1867-8, beneath the boarded floor of the north aisle/

### **Note on the Phased Plan**

This is taken from drawings by the architects Austin & Johnson, accompanying the faculty for the 1867-8 restoration. It should be regarded as little more than a sketch plan, although some obvious inaccuracies have been corrected. No recent measured survey has been traced.

Peter F Ryder February 1993/revised December 2008

### **Acknowledgements**

I should like to thank the Rev Ken Smith and his churchwardens for allowing me access to the church, and for allowing me to examine documentary material including a manuscript notebook and two scrapbooks compiled by a previous incumbent, which contained much material of interest.

### Sources Used

- Boyle, J.R.(1892) Comprehensive Guide to the County of Durham, 569-70
- Hodgson, J.F. (1902) ‘On Low-Side Windows’. Archaeologia Aeliana 2<sup>nd</sup> series XIII, 231-2
- Hutchinson, J. (n.d.) The Story of the Parish Church, Whitburn. British Publishing Co., Gloucester (c1960)
- Hutchinson W. (1787) History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham II (rep. 1823 )
- Pevsner, N & Williamson, E (1983) County Durham. Penguin (Buildings of England series) 503
- Ryder , P . F. (1985) The Medieval Cross Slab Grave Cover in County Durham
- Ryder (1994) ‘Some Further Medieval Cross Slabs in County Durham’,Durham Archaeological Journal 10, 43-53
- Ryder (2002) Whitburn Parish Church,. An Archaeological Watching Brief. Winter 2001/2 (MS report)
- Surtees, H.C. (1840) History of Durham II, 50-1

Manuscript notebook and scrapbooks held by incumbent.  
Durham Diocesan Records (D.D.R.I, Faculty Papers deposited with Durham University Archives and Special Collection.

## Appendix 1

### The Re-used Slab In the Tower.

Description from:

<http://www.arbeiasociety.org.uk/assets%20and%20documentation/lhi.pdf>

'The Coast from South Shields to Whitburn: Archaeology and History

This Christian sarcophagus slab (Fig. 8) is of a local sandstone measuring 90cm long by 42cm wide and 12cm thick. The slab is carved with a longitudinal shaft running centrally the full length of the stone leaving a rectangular field of carved decoration on either side of this shaft. At one end of the stone slab the shaft is expanded to form a ball and collar and stepped leaf-shaped head, which is almost spear-shaped. There is a possible expansion of the head of this shaft in the form of a cross with expanded arms. At least three plump lions with defiantly raised curly tails and one front paw raised populate one field of the slab. Two lions form a pair facing each other; the third is facing away from the pair. Perhaps we have lost a fourth lion, or the figure of Daniel? The figures echo distant Byzantine influences, observable in stone and in embroideries. The beasts are very similar in style to those depicted in Pictish art, for example as at Meikle in Strathmore. The second, more weathered field of the Whitburn slab appears to have a menagerie of wild beasts, a standing hunter and a mounted figure. The latter figure may have a spear in his hand. These subjects - beasts and lions, a hunter, and a rider mounted on a horse - represented the threat of evil over good. Daniel and the lions' den is a popular Old Testament depiction in the late Anglo-Saxon era often associated with deliverance. Clearly this sarcophagus slab belonged to a high status burial.

The Whitburn sculpture would comfortably fall into a date around AD 1000 and be broadly contemporary with the sculpture being created in the north of Northumbria, in the heart of Pictland as well as pieces of sculpture in the Tees Valley. The recognition of this extremely fine slab raises the question of the possibility of a late Anglo-Saxon church on or near to the present church site. Certainly, the present church has some very narrow proportions which may be due to the existence of the foundations of an earlier structure.