

St Michael and All Angels, Witton Gilbert

St Michael's Church stands amongst trees on the north side of the Browney valley 5 km north-west of Durham; the Church and the medieval Witton Hall that overlooks the churchyard from the north have recently been cut off from the rest of the largely-19th century village by the re-routed A691.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Before the 19th-century extensions the church was a simple rectangle in plan, 19.3 by 7.2 m externally. To this have been added a three-bay north aisle and north-east vestry, together running the whole length of the north side, and a west porch.

The Exterior

The fabric of the west and south walls of the older part of the church is of coursed and squared blocks, many of the individual blocks being almost square in shape, and showing remains of a diagonal tooling; this type of masonry is characteristic of the 12th century.

The west end of the **Nave** has a small plinth of roughly square section, and a chamfered set-back c 1.5 m above ground level. Above the western porch is a large circular window of 1860, set in a chamfered surround, within a semicircular-headed recess, with a chamfered arch carried on jamb shafts with simple block capitals carrying moulded impost, under a moulded hood. The gable has 19th-century shaped kneelers and a coping, chamfered on its lower edge, and carries a bellcote. The lower section of this has cut-back angles, like large broach stops, and the upper has semicircular-section pilasters that flank a pair of openings with pointed arches, and a gabled top with a cross finial.

The south walls of the nave and chancel have a simple square projecting course at ground level (a course lower than the plinth at the west end), which seems more likely to be a footing than a plinth. Near the west end of the south wall of the nave is a window of two round-arched lights; its lintel, mullion and sill are of tooled ashlar and are clearly Victorian, but the rougher alternating-block jambs are older, although clearly an insertion in the wall; they are of plain square-section and could be early post-medieval century work. East of this is the former south door, now converted into a window. This has a round-headed arch with a continuous narrow chamfer; the small window in it has a chamfered surround of 19th-century tooled ashlar, which is in effect an inner order to the older arch.

East again is an original single-light window with a round-arched head; its surround is of simple stepped section (somewhat obscured by the modern protective glazing); the sill is a 19th-century restoration. At the east end of the nave wall is a square-headed window of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, with simple piercing in the spandrels; there is a chamfered surround, and a hoodmould chamfered on upper and lower edges, with turned-back ends.

The division between nave and chancel is marked only by a single large stepped buttress which has a chamfered off-set c 0.70 m above the ground, and three further off-sets in its upper part. It is constructed of more elongate stones than the wall behind, and is probably of medieval date. On its east side two stone corbels and various metal fittings have clearly

carried a mural tablet, now removed.

The **West Porch** is built of squared sandstone with ashlar dressings. It has a large chamfered plinth; the west doorway has a two-centred arch moulded with a slightly-sunk quarter-round, stopped on the lowest stone of each jamb, and there is a moulded hood with turned-back ends. The porch gable has shaped kneelers, an ashlar coping, and a cross fleury finial. Each side wall has a small round-arched window with ashlar dressings.

The south side of the **Chancel** has a single 12th-century window midway along, very like that in the nave, again with a renewed sill; above and around its head is an area of disturbed masonry, which is difficult to interpret.

The east wall, flanked by a pair of large stepped buttresses, is less regularly coursed than the south and west walls. There are some thin courses in between the usual square blocks, suggesting that the 12th-century fabric here is in a re-used context rather than *in situ*; a ragged straight joint c 0.60 m short of the east end of the south wall may mark this reconstruction, which seems to include both the wall and the its buttresses, all of which have a chamfered plinth. Each buttress has three sloping off-sets. Between the buttresses there is some disturbance of the central section of the wall beneath the east window, which is of three lights with trefoiled ogee heads and intersecting tracery within the four-centred arch above. Much of the stonework of the window is restoration, although sections of both jambs and arch may be medieval. There is a simply-moulded hood (old in parts) with carved stops; the northern defaced and the southern (a grimacing bulldog) a recent restoration. The gable above has 19th-century kneelers, coping and cross finial. There is an OS bench mark on the southern face of the northern buttress.

The squared stone of the 19th-century northern part of the church looks to have been re-used from the original north wall, here larger tooled-and-margined quoins have been introduced; the kneelers and copings are of the same type as on the nave and chancel. At the west end of the **North Aisle** is a window of two round-arched lights with the narrowest of chamfers to head and jambs; set in the wall directly above is what may be a medieval headstone (see 'sepulchral monuments' section). The north wall has, from west to east, four single-light round-arched windows and, above the stair that descends to the boiler room, another of two lights. Between the second and third of the single-light windows, just below eaves level, one terminal of a medieval cross head (probably part of the same headstone) has been set in the wall.

The division between aisle and **Vestry** is marked by a stepped buttress, also apparently re-using old stonework. The north wall of the vestry has another two-light window of the same type as in the aisle, and to the east of it a blocked round-arched doorway with a slightly-sunk quarter-round moulding. Despite its degree of weathering this looks a 19th-century piece; there is an identical doorway at the south end of the east wall, with a single round-arched light beside it. The chimney which served the former fireplace at the south-west corner of the vestry breaks the roof slope, and has a pair of cylindrical stone shafts.

The Interior

The internal walls of the church are plastered and colour-washed, except for some exposed dressings. Inside the **West Porch** is the west door of the nave, set centrally in the west gable; this is said to be the old north door, re-set in 1860 (Beer 1995, 2). It has a semicircular arch with a narrow chamfer, in a raised stone surround that stands c 0.08 m proud of the wall face behind; incised Roman numerals on some stones lead credence its having been brought from some other location and re-assembled. The outer arch of the porch has a shallow segmental rear arch and the small windows in the side walls shouldered rear arches. The porch has a common-rafter roof with ashlar and collars.

The west wall of the **Nave** has a set-back of c.0.06 m c 3 m above floor level, which is broken by the head of the semicircular rear arch of the west doorway; this set-back now serves to carry the organ pipes/speakers, and may well be associated with the former gallery installed in 1742 and removed in 1860. Above, the circular west window has a plain round-headed rear arch.

On the north of the nave is a three-bay arcade of two-centred arches, each of two chamfered orders, carried on cylindrical piers with neatly-moulded bases and octagonal capitals; the responds are more elaborate, with the inner order being carried on corbels with scalloped capitals whilst the outer continues down the jambs.

On the south of the nave the westernmost window has a plain round-headed rear arch and a steeply-sloped sill; the former south doorway has a round-headed rear arch considerably taller than the doorway itself, the 12th-century window has an odd shouldered rear arch which seems to result from the jambs having been widened. The 14th-century two-light window has a 19th-century stop-chamfered lintel.

Within the **North Aisle** the west window has an elliptical-headed rear arch; all the north windows have shouldered rear arches.

The **Chancel** is entered under a rather unusual broad semicircular arch, springing from moulded corbels c 5 m above the floor. The arch is of a single order, although cut into two steps, with chamfered edges, towards the nave; towards the chancel it is square-edged. Most of its voussoirs are plainly of 19th-century date, but there are older blocks at the springing on each side, two on the north and one on the south.

The window on the south of the chancel has a similar shouldered rear arch to that on the south of the nave; to the east of it, low down, is an interesting piscina, with a roll-moulded trefoiled arch. The projecting section of the circular bowl has been cut away.

The east window has a pointed rear arch and an internal hood mould with carved stops of some form. On the north is a doorway to the vestry; this is of 19th-century tooled ashlar, and has an arched head and a rather unusual moulding of a hollow-chamfer between two grooves; there is a simple chamfered hood. Towards the vestry the doorway has a semicircular-headed rear arch.

Inside the **Vestry** there has been a diagonally-set fireplace at the south-west corner, now

masked by cupboards. In the south wall to the west of the door is a large wall safe. The two-light window on the north has a shouldered rear arch. The eastern doorway has a segmental-pointed rear arch and the small window alongside a round rear arch; there is no internal evidence of the blocked doorway on the north.

The roofs of the church are entirely of 19th century work. That of the nave, of three bays, has four arch-braced collar-beam trusses (two against the ends) with upper king-posts, ashlaring, two purlins on each slope and a ridge. The trusses spring from moulded and brightly-painted corbels. The north aisle roof has principals carried on short stop-chamfered wall-posts supported by corbels, except at the east end where the wall-post is left 'hanging' without support; the rafters have ashlar pieces. The two-bay chancel roof is of the same type as that over the nave, and that of the vestry to that of the north aisle..

FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

These are largely of 19th and earlier 20th century date; apart from the pulpit and font there is little of special note. The simple wooden benches in the nave and aisle probably date from the 1860 restoration; the choir stalls are of 1951.

The openwork **Chancel Screen** of 1886 has a top rail with carved and gilded flowers, a central arch with carved leaves in the spandrels, and side sections with ogee-headed arches with cusped quatrefoils over.

The **Pulpit** is timber, and hexagonal in plan, with panelled and carved side of 17th-century date; it is said to have been brought from Durham cathedral; its stone base apparently dates from the 1860 restoration.

The **Font** stands just inside the north door, and is an interesting and rather composite piece, thought to be a 15th-century repair of a late 12th century original (Hodgson 1912, 236). The plinth or sub-base, which has 'holdwater' mouldings, is of a greenish-grey sandstone; whilst the base proper, of concave bell-like section, and shaft above, are of Frosterley marble. The bowl, circular at the base and octagonal above, is of local ferruginous sandstone.

The **Stained Glass** is of late 19th and 20th century dates, except for two tiny fragments of medieval glass, one with a crowned head, set in the upper lights of the east window, and a lion's mask (?) in the head of the two-light window on the south of the nave.

The Bells were re-cast in 1948; prior to this one had borne the inscription 'C.H.me fecit A.D.MDCXIII': Christopher Hodgson was a London bell-founder who was working in Durham that year, engaged in re-casting the Cathedral bells.

SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS

The only ancient sepulchral monument is the possible headstone re-set in the external face of the north wall of the north aisle (with a further fragment in the north wall of the aisle). This bears a relief carving of a hand raised in blessing (sometimes used on medieval grave slabs as a priest's emblem) and may be of later 12th-century date; some doubt remains whether it is actually a monument or some other form of cross (Ryder 1985, 120 & pl.54). The stone appears to be in a deteriorating condition.

There are very few monuments of any sort in the church. Beer (1995,4) reports a 1739 ledger in the chancel floor, but this is concealed by the carpets.

HISTORICAL NOTES

- 1189 The earliest reference to the chapel, which was originally within the parish of St Oswald, Durham, is found in a document in which Hugh de Puiset licenses the prior of Durham to appropriate Elvet on the death of the incumbent, and to control the chapel of Croxdale and the chapel of Witton Gilbert 'which we have built to answer the need arising from the remoteness of the place, and we have dedicated a cemetery'
- 1423/1523 Hutchinson (see below) and other antiquarian sources quote the parish register (now lost) as the source for the information that in 1423, following a local petition, Witton Gilbert became a parish in its own right. However there is other evidence that Witton Gilbert was still a chapelry in 1484; it is suggested that 1523 may be the correct date for Witton becoming an independent parish (Beer 1995,1-2)
- 1787 Historian William Hutchinson (II, 348) comments simply that 'the church is dedicated to St Michael, and was founded in the year 1423.... The chapel being too small to contain the parishioners, a gallery was built at the west end in 1742. At the west end of the chapel hang two bells.
- 1820 Surtees (II, 370) describes the church as 'a small neat structure, consisting of a nave and chancel, separated from each other by a rude screen of oak. The South side of the nave has three modern sash-lights; the chancel has one old pointed light.'
- 1834 Mackenzie and Ross (II, 330) copy Surtees' description, but add a footnote regarding to the local custom of hanging funeral garlands of artificial paper flowers.

FACULTIES AND OTHER RECORDS OF STRUCTURAL WORK

Faculty Date and No.	Works	
1625	The church roof was renewed, the Dean of Durham granting a warrant 'for six trees of great timber and also four other timber trees to help towards finishing the ceiling of the parish Church' (Beer 1995, 2)	
1741	'The west Gabel end of the Church was taken down and rebuilt' (ibid)	
1742 (18th century box)	Gallery	
1860	Major restoration and enlargement; the architect was T. Austin of Newcastle and the cost £800.	
445	11.1.1905	Erection of Lych Gate
2506	30.5.34	A new Holy Table etc
2990	25.4.47	Oak Panelling
3469	27.10.51	Introduction of new choir stalls, stone paving and a carved oak lectern
3988	2.12.57	AC Replacement of light fittings and internal decoration
4220	8.3.60	Oil firing unit and oil storage tank
4408	18.9.61	AC Repair and re-siting of the organ
4424	2.11.61	AC General repairs
4906	31.8.66	AC General repairs
5115	28.3.69	Improvements to churchyard
5406	1.5.73	Removal of kerbs and damaged headstones and mounds from churchyard
5421	9.5.73	AC Internal redecoration of church
5535	21.12.74	Removal of small pipe organ and installation of electronic organ
6792	14.9.88	AC Internal re-decorations
6884	6.3.89	AC Repointing, general roof repairs and internal re-decoration
7447	9.1.92	Provision of gas supply; replacement of oil-fired boiler with gas-fired boiler
7879	4.7.94	Restoration of organ
1995		Relaying of areas of flagstone floor of nave and north aisle.

THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Documentary evidence shows that the church originated as a 12th-century chapel-of-ease, and

this may be reflected in its plan, a simple unaisled rectangle; this is unusual in this area, but seen in several churches of this period in and around York.

The structural history of the building, in as far as it can be deduced from surviving physical and documentary evidences, is relatively simple. In the 14th century the east end was rebuilt, perhaps following the collapse of the original Norman east wall (or apse?); the two buttresses of the rebuilt wall, coupled with the fall of the ground at this point, suggest some concern as regards structural stability. At or around the same time a new two-light window was inserted in the south wall of the nave.

Virtually all other structural evidences in the fabric were erased by the 1860 remodelling, no illustrations that pre-date this have been traced.. It is known that a gallery was constructed in 1741/42; the internal off-set in the west wall probably relates to this. The jambs of the two-light window at the west end of the south wall look post-medieval work, but may pre-date the gallery, which must have obstructed this opening to some extent. The west door with its raised stone surround may be a plain 12th-century doorway from the north wall re-set in its present position in 1860. The pre-1860 bellcote was described as large, wooden and slate-hung.

Then came the 1860 works, when the gallery was removed, the bellcote rebuilt, and the west porch, north aisle and vestry added. The chancel arch is something of a puzzle; Boyle (442) states that it 'has been rebuilt, but accurately represented the character of the original work'. It is not quite clear whether there was a chancel arch at all previously; none is mentioned in the earlier antiquarian descriptions. Did Austin find the older blocks at the springing of the arch *in situ*, and reconstruct the arch on the basis of these, or did he discover them elsewhere and incorporate them in a new feature? There are no local parallels for chancel arches of this type, which is virtually no more than a stone roof truss.

THE CHURCHYARD

The church stands towards the centre of quite a sizeable churchyard of irregular plan. The oldest memorials are found on the level platform immediately south of the church; these are mainly 18th and 19th century headstones; a few are of some interest:

- (1) A few metres south of the south-west corner of the nave, a headstone to Anne, wife of George Benson, d.1731, with the Sacred Monogram IHS on each face; were the Bensons a recusant family?
- (2) Near the south edge of the platform, roughly opposite the nave/chancel division. An unusual small anvil-shaped stone with an inscription on the east face to William Moggan d.1739, and a barely legible one on the top.
- (3) A short distance to the south of the chancel, a collapsed table tomb, the end panels of which have a death's head and crossed bones, beneath spiral pilasters. This is the grave of John Snaith (d.1681) and family (Beer 1995, 4)

- (4) Close to the south-east corner of the church, a headstone, probably of 1718 with a Latin inscription to various members of the Hopper family.

The monuments in the northern part of the church are all of 19th-century date; there are also a scatter of 19th century monuments on the sloping area west of the church. Prior to c.1900 the eastern boundary of the churchyard ran on the east side of the approach path from the north; a large extension was then made on land given by 'Coroner Graham' (the County Coroner) . A large monument to his first two wives was the first to be placed in this area. The monuments

The lych gate which forms the entrance to the churchyard at its northernmost point has a stone base, with a cross-gabled timber superstructure and a red-tiled roof. Two brass plaques indicate that it was constructed as a memorial by local families who lost their sons in World War I.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The majority of the church floor is now concealed by fitted carpets; there is some recent stone slabbing in the centre aisle of the nave, with a heating grate alongside. Although this is always a dangerous thing to say, Witton Gilbert is not a church where one would expect a lot of archaeological information relating to earlier structural phases to survive beneath the present floor levels; there will of course be many burials inside the building, from the medieval period onwards.

Documentary evidence suggests that it is unlikely that there was any building here before the 12th-century; the ground plan of the chapel built then remains clear, and there is no evidence of any enlargement or significant structural modification before 1860. A watching brief, carried out by the writer, when floor slabs at the west end of the nave and in the aisle were being relaid in 1995, showed no archaeological features other than brick-walled underfloor ducts for heating pipes which were probably contemporary with the 1860 works.

Nevertheless, any major works involving disturbance of floors ought to be subject to archaeological monitoring, as should any disturbance of wall plaster on the south and west walls of the nave, and chancel walls; it is possible that earlier plasters, or even remains of mural decoration, may remain behind the present surfaces. There may also be structural features of interest, notably in the north wall of the chancel which is plastered on both faces.

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The Headstone Cross
(partially reconstructed)

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ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS,
WITTON GILBERT
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
APRIL 1998

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St Michael & All Angels, Witton Gilbert
Archaeological Assessment May 1998 P F Ryder

1. General view from south-west

St Michael & All Angels, Witton Gilbert
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2. South view

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3. East view

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4. North-west view

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5. West doorway

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6. Interior looking east.

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7. Piscina on south of chancel.

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8. Interior looking west.

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9. Nave looking north-west

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10. The Font.

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11. General north view showing Lych gate