

St Mary & St Stephen, Wolsingham

Wolsingham parish church stands towards the west end of this Weardale town, on gently-rising ground set back some distance to the north of the main street. The church consists of a four-bay aisled nave, a western tower flanked by baptistery (south) and choir vestry (north), a south porch, and a chancel with an organ chamber and vestry on the north.

Architectural Description

The Exterior

The **West Tower** is divided into four stages externally; the lower three are medieval work, and the belfry a 19th-century addition. The medieval walling is of roughly-coursed rubble, with cut gritstone quoins and dressings. The 19th-century work is of coursed roughly-squared stone, but with tooled-and margined dressings. .

A chamfered plinth extends around the whole tower, and there are pairs of heavy stepped buttresses, set back a little from the angles; those at the east end of each side wall are spring from shaped corbels above the aisle roofs. Around 4 m above the ground is a chamfered set-back, which is continued round the buttresses as a string-course, chamfered above and below. There is a second chamfered set-back below the former belfry, which is continued around the buttresses simply as a set-back; a short distance above this the buttresses step back into the wall.

The only external wall of the lower stage of the tower is on the west. Near the foot of the wall are a series of re-used blocks, one of triangular shape; these would appear to be pieces of a medieval coped grave slab (there is one cut up in a similar manner in the churchyard wall at Aycliffe). Above is a tall 19th-century lancet with ashlar dressings and a double-chamfered surround; the first set-back is carried up and over the head of the lancet. Higher up at the north end of the wall are two small chamfered loops to the tower stair, the lower with a segmental head and the upper with a segmental-pointed one.

Above the second set-back was the medieval belfry. On the west and north it retains remains of its original openings. Parts of their jambs and the outer corners of their heads being visible, showing that they were of two round or elliptical-arched lights with sunk panels in the spandrels; the style suggests a late 15th or 16th century date. On the south any remains of the opening have been destroyed by a 19th-century clock face in a circular double-chamfered surround, the outer element set proud of the wall-face. On the east indistinct traces of the old belfry opening can be seen, set a rather higher level than the others so as to clear the ridge of the nave roof.

The present belfry has slightly-irregular cut quoins, and twin lancet openings in the centre of each wall, with chamfered surrounds and linked moulded hoods terminating in carved stops. The embattled parapet, with a moulded coping, is carried on a chamfered oversailing course.

The **Main Body** of the church is of 1844, with minor late 19th and early 20th century additions; it is of uniform fabric type and architectural character. The walling is of coursed squared stone, the courses varying in height, but all with a distinctive simple tooling. The quoins and dressings are of diagonally-tooled ashlar. There is a chamfered plinth, stepped buttresses articulating the bays, and a chamfered oversailing course at the eaves. The windows are all lancets, in double-

chamfered surrounds with moulded hoods terminating in well-carved and varied mask stops ; their jamb stones are all tall upright blocks, not keyed into the adjacent walling. All the gables have a broad stepped coping of interlocked slabs, with elaborate moulded kneelers or brackets at the foot; there are foliate cross finials of varying form to south porch, nave and chancel. The roofs are of graduated Westmorland slate.

The **Nave** has a clerestory consisting of pairs of short lancets. The south porch projects from the westernmost bay of the **South Aisle** proper, although the aisle in effect continues beyond this to flank the tower; this final section, the baptistery, is an 1888 addition although its fabric and features closely match the 1844 work. There are single lancets in both end walls of the aisle.

The **North Aisle** has lancet windows as on the south, but no doorway; at its west end is a slightly narrower **Choir Vestry** with a short lancet on the north, above a flight of steps down to the boiler room in its basement, which has a square-headed doorway with a window of the same form alongside. On the west of the Choir vestry is a plain shoulder-arched doorway with a chamfered surround.

The outer archway of the **South Porch** has a continuous double-chamfered inner order and a moulded outer carried on jamb shafts with moulded capitals and bases; there is a moulded hood terminating in bosses of foliage. On either side are buttresses with sunk lancet-shaped panels in their upper parts, and gabled tops.

The **Chancel** is of four narrow bays, with tall lancets of the usual type; in the east end are a group of three stepped lancets with a linked hoodmould. The north wall of the chancel is concealed by the Organ Chamber with the 1913 **Clergy Vestry** to its east; this has an eastern lancet with foliate stops, and a north doorway with quite an elaborate shouldered head incorporating two bosses of foliage. The **Organ Chamber** is structurally a continuation of the north nave aisle, and has a short lancet on the north, with foliate stops to its hood.

The Interior

The inner doorway of the **South Porch** has a pointed arch of a single continuous chamfered order, and a hoodmould, chamfered beneath, with foliage stops.

The interior of the church is plastered except for exposed ashlar dressings of the main arches and arcades; the walls are whitewashed except for the east end of nave and aisles, which is, rather effectively, painted red.

The **Tower** opens from the nave under a lofty two-centred arch of two orders, chamfered except on the outer order towards the tower, which is left square. The inner order is carried on large semi-octagonal moulded corbels, with grotesque masks at the base. That on the south, both mask and corbel, looks genuine medieval work; that on the north, its mask a smaller copy of that opposite, is probably 19th century. Towards the nave there is a chamfered hoodmould with mask stops. The outer has big broach stops at the head of each jamb' the jambs, of tooled-and-margined ashlar blocks, are of plain square section. Whilst the jambs look 19th century the arch itself, although re-tooled, may be medieval.

Within the tower, in the north-west corner is a quadrant-plan projection containing the newel stair, entered by a low (c 1.2 m high) square-headed doorway with a chamfered east jamb. On the

north, facing into the tower, is a lofty round-arched doorway into the Choir Vestry, which seems, although clearly not *in situ*, to be a genuine 12th-century feature. The arch is of two orders, the inner with a narrow chamfer, and the outer with a large roll moulding between two hollows. The impost band has a groove and a hollow chamfer on its lower angle. The inner order chamfer is continued down the jambs below the bands, but the outer order has scalloped capitals and jambs shafts with moulded bases. It is difficult to be sure which elements of this doorway are authentic (but re-tooled), and which are wholly 19th century. The jambs shafts and their bases, and the impost moulding (at least to the inner orders) look as if they have been renewed.

The tower stair is of newel form; the treads are relatively square above (does the lack of wear suggest renewal at some time?) and very roughly shaped below. The internal walls of the stair are roughly plastered. The two small loops on the west have already been mentioned (see exterior description); there are two similar segmental-arched loops on the north, now covered externally by the Choir Vestry. The stair is open at the top, emerging into the floor of the former belfry, now the clock chamber. At this level the internal walls are largely concealed by mortar and old plaster. Here the old belfry openings on north and west can be seen to have timber internal lintels; the eastern opening, at a higher level, is quite clear internally. From the ends of its sills rough breaks in the masonry run diagonally downwards and outwards. There has obviously been some disturbance in this area (part of the wall face has been cut back), making it hard to interpret these; they might relate to an earlier pre-tower gable of the nave (cf Brancepeth) or, as there is no evidence of old coping stones etc, may simply reflect structural failure. On the south the old internal jamb stones of the former belfry opening seem to have been re-set on either side of the wider opening, housing the clock face, which replaced it; this too has a timber internal lintel.

The belfry floor is carried by two heavy 19th-century transverse beams set north-south; access to the belfry is by a ladder against the east wall. Within the present belfry the walls are of exposed roughly-coursed rubble; the belfry openings have internal timber lintels, those on the south and east utilising older timbers. The present roof is carried by two re-used north-south beams on large shaped corbels; access is by a ladder rising from the bell frames, set against the west wall.

The **Nave** has four-bay arcades of two-centred arches, each of two orders, chamfered towards the nave but with the outer left square towards the aisle; the piers are circular piers and the responds keel-shaped. The piers have moulded bases, differing somewhat in detail, on quite tall circular plinths. The capitals also vary; all have one of nail-head, and the westernmost pier on the south two. Various writers have suggested that the arcades survive from the medieval church (although that had a three-bay rather than a four-bay nave); it is difficult to determine whether this is correct. Close inspection shows that the voussoirs of eastern arches seem to be more neatly cut and finished than the others, although all show 19th-century tooling (as does the tower arch and re-set Norman doorway). This is clearest on the north; the implication would appear to be that the arcades survive *in situ*, although it is difficult to see any distinction between any of the piers below; were the old piers completely renewed?

The four-bay nave roof has trusses with intersecting arch braces which spring from moulded corbels at the level of the sills of the clerestory windows, which also carry wall-posts; there are also intermediate trusses, of the same form, springing from corbels at wall-head level. In the **South Aisle**, the south doorway has a double-chamfered rear arch, the voussoirs of which are left alternately 'long and short'. The six-bay roof of the aisle (including the two bays over the baptistery) has trusses with wall-posts and arch braces, on moulded corbels, and ashlaring to

the eaves. The **North Aisle** has a four-bay roof of the same type; at the east end of the aisle is a quadrant-shaped arch into the organ chamber.

The **Choir Vestry**, entered up three steps from the tower, has a wood block floor over the boiler room beneath; it has an under-drawn plaster ceiling.

The **Chancel** is entered under a lofty-two-centred arch, of two moulded orders, both springing from shafts with nail-head in the capitals; the shafts to the inner order are carried on corbels, those to the outer on full-height shafts with moulded bases, towards both nave and chancel. Towards the nave there is a moulded hood with mask stops; towards the chancel the outer order has voussoirs which alternate in length, in the same manner as those of the rear arch of the south door.

The eastern lancets are the only windows in the church with exposed dressings internally; they have richly-moulded rear arches, with hoodmoulds springing from mask stops, and jamb shafts with nail-head in the capitals and mid-height rings, and moulded bases. A moulded string runs beneath the windows. On the north side of the sanctuary is a lancet window, now covered externally by the Clergy Vestry. Further west is a shouldered-arched doorway into the Organ Chamber, of the same rather elaborate shouldered form as the external doorway of the Clergy Vestry. At the west end of the wall is a segmental chamfered archway (without exposed dressings) to the Organ Chamber, its form rather obscured by the organ pipes.

The four-bay chancel roof is of the same general form to that of the nave, except that the two levels of purlins have curved wind braces below them.

The **Organ Chamber** has a plain boarded ceiling; in its east wall is a plain square-haded doorway, without dressings, into the **Clergy Vestry** which has an under-drawn plaster ceiling; on the south is the lower part of the lancet window on the north of the sanctuary, its upper section concealed within the roof space.

Fittings & Furnishings

Most are of late 19th or early 20th century date, and not of especial interest. The carved oak stalls and benches in the chancel are contemporary with the mosaic flooring, and of 1895; the body of the church was re-seated in 1896. The low wooden **chancel screen**, with opening gates at the centre, has a series of two-light openings in a general 13th century style; it looks to be of mid-19th century date.

In the Sanctuary are a pair of old chairs, perhaps of 17th and 18th century dates.

The **Font**, in the Baptistery at the west end of the south aisle, is octofoil in plan, with attached shafts at the angles. Although decay is giving an appearance of age, it is of mid-19th century date. The older font is now in St Bartholomew's Church at Thornley, near Tow Law (Hodgson 1912, 63-4.); this is an interesting piece, which Hodgson saw as of 12th-century date, but which seems more likely to be a Post-Reformation stem and bowl set upon an inverted 12th-century capital. **Stained Glass.** The west window of the Baptistery, Jacob's Ladder, is an attractive piece in the Burne-Jones style, of 1881 by Henry Holiday (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 511). The other windows are generally of late 19th century date. That at the east end of the south aisle, in memory

of Thomas Chaplam of Wolsingham d.1856, has a Gothic marble dedication plaque below it. The three eastern lancets of the chancel.

The three Bells are dated 1856, and by Taylor and Sons, of Loughborough.

The **Bell Frames** are of type 3.3. (Pickford 1993, 53), with two parallel north-south pits and one the third set transversely at the north end.; they are of long-headed form, with corner posts and braces, and seem almost entirely of 19th-century date, with one or two older timbers re-used.

In the Clergy Vestry is a large **Painting** of the Burial of Christ, in poor condition; also a small watercolour of the church in 1847.

Sepulchral Monuments

Lying against the base of the western respond of the north arcade is the upper part of a medieval cross slab grave cover (formerly in the porch). It bears a relief-carving of a four-circle cross with a disc or boss on the shaft below; cut in a grey fossiliferous limestone (rather different from the local 'Frosterley marble' its design has some affinities with Purbeck marble monuments of the later 13th century (Ryder 1985, 121 and plate 55) and with a recently-rediscovered slab at Stanhope.

Wooler (1906, 205) states that 'one or two of the coigns (quoins) of the old tower (now hidden behind the south-west buttress at just above the first string course) have marks upon them something like a cross and a sword and a circle..' This would appear to indicate that other cross slabs were re-used when the tower was rebuilt. The west face of one quoin, 2.5 m above the ground, seems to show some sort of incised design, infilled with cement.

At the base of the tower stair is an old ledger to Jonathan, son of John and Mary Deardon, d.1718.

On the south wall of the tower is a marble tablet with a Latin inscription to Francesca Aisley, d.1673. The other wall monuments, in the chancel and aisles, are mostly of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. On the south wall of the chancel is marble tablet to various members of the Bates family, from 1808 - 1878, signed by Edwardes & Co of London. On the south aisle all east of the south door is a marble tablet, with a coat of arms in the pediment, to John Greenwell of Bishopwearmouth d.1839, by G Green of Newcastle; west of the door is a slightly-damaged marble tablet to Rev Philip Brownrigg d.1838 'Master of the Grammar School and Curate of Wolsingham, by Craggs of Gateshead. At the west end of the north aisle is another attractive tablet with scholastic various emblems - an open book, a globe, cross etc -to Rev. Peter Ionn, d.1821, 'Late Curate of this Parish and Master of the Grammar School' d.1821. Lying loose under the tower is a cast-iron graveyard marker , with a shrouded urn, to Mabel Fairless, d.1901

Historical Notes

c1125 The earliest reference to Wolsingham is in Reginald's Life of St Godric; Godric is reported to have resided for a year and nine months here, with a hermit named Aelric., before later moving to Finchale.

- 1780 'The pews were renewed at cost of £115 (Devey 1926, 201)
- 1781 The chancel was 'repaired and beautified' at the expense of Rev.W.Nowell; new seats, wainscotting and a pavement were introduced (Devey 1926, 213)
- 1794 The historian Hutchinson (III, 298-9) provides the earliest detailed description of the building: 'The church is placed on elevated ground, north of the town; is kept in neat order, being newly sashed and stalled: the chancel is six paces in width, and thirteen in length, with two steps to the altar, lighted by a large east window under a circular arch, and two windows to the south; is separated from the nave by a heavy circular arch: the nave is regular, having two side ailes, each formed by two round pillars, supporting pointed arches; is in length 22 paces, sixteenth paces in width, with the ailes; and lighted by three windows to the north and south, and a window at the east end of each aile. The font is of the Weardale marble, beautifully variegated with shells, and other petrefactions. The tower remains in its ancient state
- 1834 Mackenzie and Ross (II, 270) describe the church as '... a spacious edifice, consisting of a square western tower, a nave with side-aisles, and a chancel. The outer walls of the aisles are battlemented; and they are each formed of three pointed arches, supported by cylindrical pillars. There is a pointed arch under the tower. An elliptical arch opens into the chancel, which was repaired and beautified in 1781 by the Rev.W.Nowell. The east window is beneath a circular arch: the rest are square, with modern sashes, except six antique clerestory lights. A vestry on the north-east was recently erected. The church was new pewed in 1780, and there are galleries on the west and north... '
- 1848/9 'The edifice underwent complete restoration; no part of the old building remaining except the tower, which would have been rebuilt had funds been sufficient' The architect was Mr W. Nicholson, of Wolsingham. Rebuilding was completed. On the 20th march 1848 demolition of the old building commenced (Devey 1926, 317), and the church re-opened for divine service on 14th January 1849. (Fordyce, op.cit); the total cost was £1131 5s 8d (Devey op.cit, 319).
- 1855 New bells were procured, and the tower heightened and strengthened by buttresses (Devey 1926, 319).
- 1896 The Baptistry at the west end of the south aisle was added, Hodgson Fowler being the architect (Pevsner & Williamson 1983, 511); at this time Bishop Wescott restored the church to its original dedication, which had been altered (in the 18th or early 19th century; sources conflict) to St Matthew.

Faculties and Other Records of Structural Work

- 1723 Gallery
- nd (1741-7) Gallery

153	1844	Petition to enlarge church. church in 'dangerous and dilapidated state', necessary to take measures for 'repairing, altering and enlarging' building . Galleries at W end and in N aisle to be taken down, all seating in the body of the church renewed, and the lead roof replaced by Westmorland slates. (The works were carried out in 1848/9, see 'Historical Notes' section.
287	2 July 1888	Alterations and improvements, to include enlargement of organ chamber, and re-flooring and re-seating of the nave. R J Johnson was the architect .(The faculty includes a good ground plan)
378/5	14 2 1895	Relay chancel floor with marble and furnish oak stalls & benches
380	11 5 1896	Reseating etc.
470/12	20 4 1906	Reredos of carved oak
659	23 8 1913	Erection of a new clergy vestry
2318	10 2 1930	Installation of the electric light
2585	6 1 36	Improvements in the churchyard
2631	6 11 36	Installation of an organ blower
3766	8 2 55	Installation of an electrical sound amplifying system
4100	9 2 59	Installation of oil-fired heating system
4794	5 6 65	Alterations, new electric lighting system and redecoration

The Structural History of the Church

The ex-situ Norman doorway probably dates from the first half of the 12th century. It seems to have been moved into its present position in 1848; its previous position is not clear; Wooler (1906, 205) refers to it as being 'taken from the south entrance' whilst Surtees (1929) refers to it as being removed 'from behind the gallery at the west end'. Glynne, writing in 1851, says 'it was once within the south porch'. Wooler and Glynne seems more likely to have been correct, as the 1825 plan (in a book of surveys compiled by Archdeacon Thorp, now in Durham Cathedral Library) does not show any doorway in the western part of the church, other than in the western bay of the south wall of the south aisle.

As the arcades appear to have been of c 1200, it would appear that the Norman doorway had already been moved. One can tentatively suggests that an early 12th-century church of nave and chancel received aisles around a century later. The chancel would seem to have been rebuilt in the 13th or 14th century, as suggested both by its elongate plan, and the trefoil-headed aumbry found in its north wall during the 1848 rebuilding (Surtees 1929, 21) Wooler (1908, 207) illustrates two quite different medieval final crosses (cf West Boldon) which capped the east gables of nave and chancel.

The aisles may have been rebuilt or altered later in the medieval period; Wooler (206) relates that several pieces of tracery were found when their walls were being taken down in 1848.

Wooler considered the tower to be Norman, and Pevsner & Williamson (op.cit) 'late C12', but there seems no real evidence for this. The features that do survive seem more likely to point to a late medieval date; Glynne (1908, 148) saw it as 'a very coarse one, low and small, with little distinctive architectural character'. What details there are might point to a 16th century date, although it is quite possible that some fabric of the west gable of an earlier nave is incorporated in its east wall. The 1571 will of William Croke includes a bequest of 3s 4d towards 'ye mending of ye stepill of wolsingham church' (Wooler 1906, 205, footnote), which might conceivably suggest that the present tower was under construction at this time. The embattled parapets of the old church, which Wooler thought 'of the earlier Tudor time', may have been coeval with the tower, as may have been the nave clerestory with windows 'similar in character to those in the old tower', although Surtees (1929,21) suggested that these were of 'about 1710'. The low-pitched leaded roofs may have been of the same date.

Several illustrations of the old church as it stood prior to 1848 still exist - a print in Fordyce's history, an 1836 drawing in Wooler's article, and a water colour now hanging in the vestry. Unfortunately all show the same view, from the south-east. These illustrations, the antiquarian descriptions (see 'Historical notes' section) and Thorp's 1825 plan, allow one to reconstruct a substantial medieval church that had undergone various typical post-medieval changes.

The thin-walled vestry on the north of the chancel was probably an early-19th century addition (Mackenzie & Ross 1834, 270) ; in its western part the 'back stairs' led up to a doorway through the east wall of the north aisle into the northern gallery. A separate stair in the tower (in addition to the old newel) served the western gallery. The two early faculties (1723 and 1741-7) presumably relate to the insertion of the two galleries. The windows had all been altered, again probably in the 18th century; those in the aisles and side walls of the chancel were plain square-headed sashes, and a round-arched sash, with intersecting glazing bars in its head, in the east gable. Both the outer opening of the south porch and the priest's door in the chancel were plain square-headed openings.

Thus Wolsingham church had become, in external appearance at any rate, a much-altered building, and when Victorian 'restoration' came in 1848, little antiquarian objection seems to have been raised at what turned out to be an all-but total rebuilding. The architect was a local man and his style a conservative 'First Pointed' Gothic, which in some details looks more like work of 1820 or 1830. Later additions - the top stage of the tower in 1855, the Baptistry in 1888 and the Clergy Vestry in 1913 - have all closely followed his work both in style and materials

The Churchyard

The churchyard is of somewhat irregular plan, and the product of several phases of extension. The 1860 Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map shows a relatively small trapezoidal churchyard, with the church set a little north-east of centre; the 1853 extension recorded by Fordyce (op.,cit) ('about half an acre of ground, adjoining on the west) is still shown as a separate enclosure; a line of old trees still marks the boundary between the two parts. A much larger extension to the north was made around 1880, to judge from the date of its earliest monuments.

The monuments in oldest part of the church yard have clearly been 'thinned' in some areas. Some good 18th century headstones, and an area of table and box tombs of the same period, remain to the south and south-west of the church. Old headstones have been re-set along the inner faces of the south and east walls. Monuments of particular interest are

- (I) A box tomb just across the path from the south-east corner of the south porch, dated 1663, with a Latin inscription to the Ainsley family; the 'IHS' monogram and text 'Beati pacific' perhaps suggests recusancy.
- (II) Close to the south-east corner of the chancel, an unusual, if not unique, monument consisting of a slab of Frosterley marble shaped so as to appear as four adjacent tapered slabs. This is probably of medieval date; there is a local legend associating it with four children. Alongside to the west is a plain slab, again of Frosterley marble.

Archaeological Assessment

Of the above-ground fabric, only the tower and arcades can really be deemed to be of archaeological interest; any structural works here, including re-pointing of walls or plaster removal, should be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief. This of course includes the west wall of the nave, which is potentially the most interesting part of the building as it may retain in-situ 12th-century fabric.

Any works involving disturbance of floor levels in the remainder of the building will also require archaeological monitoring, although, as often, such deposits and structural remains that do survive will have been disturbed to some extent by the underfloor heating system.

Summary and Archaeological Priorities

Only the lower parts of the late medieval west tower and perhaps parts of the nave arcades survive from the old church.

Some of the earlier monuments in the churchyard are of some interest, and, again as often, are suffering both from natural erosion and petty vandalism. They may merit recording and conservation measures.

Peter F Ryder May 1999

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ST MARY & ST STEPHEN,
WOLSINGHAM

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

MAY 1999

The church before the 1848 rebuilding (after Fordyce)

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

MAY 1999

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