

The Parish Church of St John, Elton

This is a small church, largely of 1841, consisting of an aisleless nave with a south porch, and chancel with a north vestry.

The Exterior

The church is built of squared and coursed stone, with dressings of tooled-and-margined brown sandstone ashlar; the buttresses and the front wall of the porch are of the same brown stone. The buttresses have chamfered plinths and chamfers to the angles, with distinctive stops at top and bottom; all the windows, except that in the east end, are quite broad and short lancets with chamfered surrounds and alternating-block jambs. The roofs are of Welsh slate.

The west end of the **Nave** has clasping buttresses; between them the wall has been re-faced in recent buff ashlar, except for a moulded string-course/set-back which crosses the wall at the level of the tops of the buttresses, and is stepped up (as a set-back only) above the west window. Above in the gable is a chamfered square-headed vent, below the gabled bell-cote which has twin lancet openings and a blind roundel above.



On the south (left) there are lancet windows in the first, third and fourth bays, the wall of the second bay, behind the porch, is thickened externally, a chamfered oversailing course at eaves level being returned vertically down each side of the projection. There are broad buttresses, continued up to the eaves, between the third and fourth bays and at the

east end of the wall. The west bay has a chamfered plinth continuous with that of the south-western buttress, but further east the ground level is higher and any plinth is buried.

The north wall of the nave is only of three bays, and of coursed stone, greyer in colour and possibly older than that of the other external walls; at the west end it looks as if the wall has been cut into when the angle buttress was constructed, suggesting that pre-1841 fabric may survive. There is a chamfered plinth, and stepped buttresses between the bays and at the east end; on this side the chamfered oversailing course at eaves level is continued above the buttresses rather than abutting against them. There is a 20th-century outbuilding built against the eastern bay, and a 20th-century chimney rising behind it at the east end of the wall. The central bay has a lancet window, but the western is plain.

The east gable of the nave has a slab coping on chamfered kneelers, and a ring-cross finial on a cross-gabled base.

The **South Porch** has a two-centred arch with a continuous chamfer, set beneath a steep gable on chamfered kneelers, with a roll-moulded finial. There are low buttresses at the south end of each side wall; the side walls have small chamfered lancets with almost triangular heads.

The **Chancel** is constructed of similar stone to the south wall of the nave, and has low clasping buttresses at its east angles, and a chamfered plinth. The south wall has two rather squat lancet windows (their sills set higher than those in the nave); the north wall has a single lancet, east of the vestry, which has rather greyer dressings (tooled rather than tooled-and-margined) and may be secondary. The east window is a pair of trefoiled lancets with an oculus above and between; the gable above has a slab coping, chamfered on its underside, and a cross finial.

The **Vestry** is of unusual semi-octagonal plan, and largely covers the north wall of the chancel, its west wall abutting on the buttress at the east end of the north wall of the nave. It is built of coursed roughly-squared stone (perhaps re-used), with a chamfered plinth; in its east wall is a square-headed doorway with a chamfered surround, and in the north-west and north-west walls short lancet windows of the usual type.

The Interior



The internal walls of the church are faced with some form of Roman cement or hard plaster, lined to simulate ashlar, and painted; the only exposed dressings are those of the chancel screen and re-used 12th-century features. All the windows have plain two-centred rear arches without exposed dressings

Inside the South Porch the south door has a two-centred arch with a simple chamfer and a re-set 12th-century chevron-moulded voussoir at its apex; its dressings seem rather rough, and are painted over. The slightly-segmental rear-arch re-uses another fifteen chevron voussoirs (some very narrow, and probably cut down), set on old chamfered and grooved imposts.

The dominant feature of the church interior is the triplet of Romanesque-style arches between nave and chancel, and their 1907 screen. The larger central arch has a roll mouldings and beak heads that look as if they have been cut back, and springs from rectangular ashlar piers with attached semicircular shafts on their western faces, with moulded bases and scalloped capitals. The smaller flanking arches each have a fat roll moulding flanked by hollows; all have impostes that are grooved and chamfered on their lower angles, the outer ones being continued back along the east wall of the nave. The flanking arches have ashlar sills c 0.8 m above the floor. It is not clear how much of this composition is ancient; the Victoria County History (1928, II, 234-5) is certainly wrong in stating that ‘the whole of the stonework is original’. The voussoirs of the central arch look old, if re-cut, and the two narrower voussoirs of the northern opening - and possibly the outer impostes - may be old. The lower part of the southern jamb has an odd step-back or rebate, up to its mid-height, with a triangular stop above; this gives the impression of earlier fabric re-worked, although it might simply relate to the 1841 pulpit that stood here.

In the chancel, the door into the vestry on the north has a slightly segmental arch with continuous chamfer, all plastered, but an old hoodmould with nail-head and turned-back ends, re-set. The vestry beyond has an under-drawn ceiling; a fireplace at the south end of the west wall is concealed by modern furnishings.

The nave has a four-bay roof with collar-beam trusses, under-drawn at the level of the collars; the principals spring from big moulded corbels, and there is a moulded wall-plate, and one level of exposed purlins. The principals and collars, which are halved and bolted across them, have a narrow chamfer. The chancel has a two bay roof, the central truss again being of collar-beam, type, but this time with straight braces rising to the under-side of the principals from shaped corbels, the northern set immediately over the head of the vestry door.

The south porch has a roof with rafter pairs, ashlaring and a ridge board.

Fittings and Furnishings

By far the most significant feature is the **Rood Screen** of 1907, designed by J.N. (Sir John Ninian) Comper, with paintings by Miss E Gulland; it was given by Mary Scott in memory of her sister Eleanor. The pair of central gates and screens closing the flanking openings all have open cinquefoil-headed panels beneath an ornate moulded rail, and the tympanum of the central arch a wrought-iron screen with swirling Gothic circles, behind the Rood. The lower parts of the gates are painted with figures of SS Matthew, Andrew and Peter (north) and Paul, James and James the Less (south). The screen clearly aroused mixed emotions; Hodgkin (1913, 124) refers to ‘a gaudily painted chancel screen which, with numerous coloured pictures, “decorates” the interior of the building.

In the south-west corner of the nave is the **Font** (1874), quite an elaborate neo-Romanesque piece with a square bowl carrying chip-carved decoration and various motifs (Sacred Monogram, cross, dove, scallop shell), set on a central circular shaft flanked by four smaller ones.

The **Pews** are of pitch-pine, and have moulded bench ends; they were installed in 1874, replacing the ‘square, high, painted deal pews’ of 1841. (VCH).

The **Pulpit** at the south-east corner of the nave is of segmental plan, with an openwork wrought-iron front with foliate patterns, and is of 1874, replacing one of 1841. At the north-east corner of the nave is a **Statue** of the Virgin Mary, bearing a plaque ‘ANDG and in

memory of peace 1919'

In the vestry there is a **Wall-Safe** with a panelled Gothic door, set in the centre of the south wall.

The **Stained Glass** is not of special note; the east window (north part Wise and Foolish Virgins, south part Ascension) is typical mid-19th century work, in memory of General William Sutton Esq, of Elton. The western window on the south of the chancel (the raising of Jairus' daughter) is in memory of the Rev Albany Wade. The west window of the nave (st John) was placed by John Hogg in memory of the Jefferson family of Elton in 1867, and has what are presumably the Jefferson arms at its foot.

There are two **Bells** in the bellcote, listed in the Durham Diocesan Bell Catalogue (1979,7) as being of 16th and 19th century date, founder unknown.

Sepulchral Monuments

On the south of the sanctuary is an **Effigy** described by Hunter Blair (1929,23-24). It is of fine-grained sandstone, rather weatherworn, and dated by Hunter Blair to c1320., who describes it as 'Head, in coif with ornamented fillet, rests upon two pillows; at each side a clerk in hood and gown, kneeling, reads from a book upon the top cushion. The surcoat of the cyclas type is worn above a mail hauberk. Hands, joined in prayer, are in mail mittens forming one with the hauberk sleeves.. Legs and feet in mail with plain leather knee-cops and prick spurs, the crossed legs rest upon a lion. Mail indicated by incised curved lines. The sword has straight quillons, a round hilt and circular, attached by interlacing thongs to a broad decorated belt bucked on the left side. The heater-shaped shield is much broken .

A 1714 return refers to this effigy as 'Gower's Statue', and it is presumed to represent Robert Gower the younger d.1315 (VCH)

Towards the east end of the north wall of the nave is an oval marble tablet to John Sutton Esquire of Stockton, d 1792.

On the north wall of the chancel to the west of the vestry door is a marble tablet to the Rev Albany Wade, d 1851, which states 'he rebuilt this church in the first year of his incumbency' which was of twelve years.

Historical Notes

c1100 In the *vitae* of St Godric (c1069-1170), a leprous woman from 'Hailtune' near Darlington was taken by Norman, the priest of the vill, to 'Badela' (Baydale) leper hospital, where she was reported as being cured through Godric's intercession.

Bishop Philip of Durham (1197-1208) appears to have regarded the 'chapel' of Elton as a dependency of Norton.

1794 The Durham historian Hutchinson dismisses the church as simply 'a mean edifice' (1823, 199)

- 1823 Surtees (III, 210) describes the building as ‘a small simple structure, consists of nave, chancel and South Porch; a circular arch divides the nave and chancel; another round arch, with the nailhead ornament, is closed up in the North wall of the nave. The old narrow lights are chiefly replaced by modern sashes’. The knight’s effigy lay ‘under an arch in the north wall of the nave’
- 1841 The church was rebuilt, or ‘almost entirely rebuilt’ (VCH) by the Rev Albany Wade, as recorded on his memorial tablet in the chancel.
- 1857 Fordyce (I, 214) describes the church as ‘nearly all rebuilt by the Rev A.Wade in the third year of his incumbency¹. He states ‘a circular arch divides the nave and chancel’ but otherwise describes the building as it is now, adding that the plain sashes of the windows had recently been replaced by diamond-cut glass.

Faculties and records of Structural Work

Faculties in Durham University Library, Palace Green; all are coded DDR/EJ/FAC/...

1841 (see above) Rebuilding of the medieval church.

1936 The Incorporated Church Building Society have an application for a 1936 grant for rebuilding and underpinning the porch, the architects to be Cordingley and McIntyre (no drawings) (ref <http://www.churchplansonline.org>)

Unfortunately no faculties pre-dating the mid-20th century appear to survive.

3/2954 1946 Installation of a new system of heating

3/5085 1968 New communion rail

3/5583 1975 New oak doors at entrance

3/6346 1986 Repair of Comper screen

¹This differs from the memorial plaque, which expressly states the rebuilding took place in the first year of Wade’s incumbency, and that he had been incumbent for twelve years on his death in 1852. Authorities generally seem to take the date of the rebuilding as 1841.

The Structural History of the Church

The surviving architectural features - chancel arch, and the heads of the south door and vestry door - all point to a mid-12th century building. The question is whether any of this structure remains in situ; most authorities imply that something of the medieval building survives. Boyle (1892, 648) states that 'part of the north wall and the arches between nave and chancel are ancient, as also is the south doorway'.

Whilst Surtees' brief account seems to be the only written description of the pre-1841 church, a ground plan of it made c1821 survives in a book of plans compiled by Archdeacon Thorp, now in the Cathedral Library at Durham². This shows a church with a chancel of approximately the same dimensions as at present, but a considerably longer nave (internal length c 16m rather than just over 10m); it gives no real indication of any chancel arch, although some sort of screen narrowing the entrance to the chancel could perhaps be a stylised depiction of the present (and highly unusual) three-arch arrangement, especially if the lateral arches were then blocked. Surtees only mentioned a single round arch.

So is the three-arched screen arrangement original, or an invention of some 19th century restorer?. It may be significant that Fordyce, writing in 1857, only mentions a single round arch, and the architectural detail of the arcade seems out of character with the simple church of 1841, pointing to it either being an original feature somewhat heavily restored, or a later Victorian creation re-using some old material, perhaps from elsewhere in the church. One rather lateral piece of evidence might be that the neighbouring church of Longnewton, when rebuilt in 1806 had a similar three-arched screen, in this case a simple piece of Georgian Gothick (removed in the 1850s) but perhaps taking its inspiration from Elton.

On balance, it seems likely that the three-arched arrangement is genuine, but so heavily restored in the 19th century that its detail may not be trustworthy. The north wall of the nave could be old, but does not really look like 12th-century masonry, and the blocked door mentioned by Surtees has clearly been moved to the north side of the chancel, where it now opens into the vestry. However, this probably was set opposite that on the south, in the removed western part of the nave. The manner in which the fabric of the present wall seems to have been cut into at its west end to allow the construction of the present north-western angle buttress would argue for the survival of pre-19th century walling. The other external wall faces all look of 19th-century character, whilst the internal walls are all plastered. So were the original walls taken down and rebuilt, or simply refaced in 1841? . At the moment it is impossible to say.

The Churchyard

The church, which is orientated some distance north of true east, is set towards the centre of a sub-rectangular churchyard, bounded on the south by the main road through the village, from which it is entered by a gateway more or less in line with the south porch. To the west of the gateway a prominent mound runs parallel with, and just inside, the southern boundary wall; to the east of the gateway it continues on a slightly different alignment, trending east-north-east across the south-eastern corner of the churchyard. This earthwork may indicate an earlier

²Plans and Drawings of Churches in the Archdeaconry of Durham 1825-1829

4 Volumes. Drawn by John Burlison and countersigned by Charles Thorp, Archdeacon of Durham 1831-62. The plan of Elton is in Vol 4 Deanery of Stockton (Add MS 85), no 10

boundary line, although the churchyard has not changed in shape since the 1st edition OS 6":1 mile map of c1860.

Most of the monuments in the churchyard are of 19th-century date; to the west of the church are two small early 18th-century headstones, and there are one or two other 18th-century ones to the south. A mound immediately to the south-east of the south porch covers the vault of the Sutton family.

Archaeological Assessment

The floor of the main body of the church is carpeted except for boarded areas under pews, and stone slabs in the chancel. There may well have been an underfloor heating system; this and the usual internal burials will inevitably have disturbed sub-floor stratigraphy, although as this is a church of 12th-century (or possibly older) foundation this may still have considerable archaeological significance. Any works disturbing floors should be accompanied by archaeological monitoring.

Any stripping of plaster from internal wall faces will also require care; as already explained, it is not clear how much medieval fabric survives in the internal wall faces, and there could well be concealed structural features of historical or architectural interest. It is even possible that, if medieval wall fabric does survive, it might retain remains of plaster with mural decoration of medieval or sub-medieval date.

Any works in the churchyard could also merit either a preliminary archaeological investigation, or a watching brief, in particular those close to the west end of the church (where buried remains of the west end of the longer medieval nave may survive) or in the area of the pronounced earthworks along the southern boundary of the churchyard

References

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Boyle, J.R. (1892) | <u>Comprehensive Guide to the County of Durham</u> , 648 |
| Fordyce, W (1857) | <u>The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham</u> . I, 214 |
| Hodgkin, J.,E. (1913) | <u>Durham</u> (Little Guide Series). London, Methuen & Co., 124-5 |
| Hunter Blair, C.H. (1929) | Medieval Effigies in the County of Durham. <u>Archaeologia Aeliana</u> 4 th ser. VI, 1-51 |
| Hutchinson, W (1823) | <u>History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham III</u> (second edition) |
| Mackenzie & Ross (1834) | <u>History of the County of Durham</u> , vol.II, 59 |
| Pevsner, N & Williamson E, (1983) | <u>County Durham</u> (Buildings of England series, Penguin), 265-6 |
| Surtees, H.C. (1823) | <u>History of Durham</u> Vol.III, 210 |