

## St John's Chapel.

The attractive 18th-century church of St John's Chapel stands on the east side of the village square, and on the north of the main A 689 road. The building consists of a broad nave with a low western tower and a chancel with a north-western vestry.

### Description

The **Tower** is built of close-jointed brown sandstone, and rises in three stages, with chamfered plinth which breaks forward slightly around the rusticated quoins; there is a band between the first two stages and a moulded string course and set back between the second and third. The openings of the lower stages all have raised semicircular-arched surrounds with impost blocks and keystones. On the west of the lower stage is the main entrance to the church, with a pair of panelled double doors under a radial fanlight; there is an Ordnance Survey bench mark on the lower south jamb. A little above and to the north of the door is a projecting shaped bracket and there seems to have been a southern counterpart, now broken off flush with the wall; these presumably supported some form of canopy. The second stage has a 12-pane fixed window on the west and 15-pane sashes in the side walls, the latter in taller openings with the band forming their sills. The belfry has a shallow pilaster at each angle and a pair of round-arched openings in each face except on the east, where the nave ridge comes almost to the tower eaves, with a band forming their imposts and the usual keystones. Above is a hollow-chamfered eaves cornice, and a squat pyramidal spire of Lakeland slate, with a lead finial.



*The church from the west*

The west wall of the **Nave** is built of similar sandstone to the tower, but laid in rather taller courses; the other walls are of quite different fabric, coursed roughly-shaped stone including a considerable amount of grey limestone, with tooled sandstone dressings. As with the tower there is a chamfered plinth, rusticated quoins (larger than those of the tower) and a mid-height band; at the wall head is a

hollow-chamfered cornice (returned around the quoins at each end), overhung by the eaves of the roof of graduated Lakeland slates. Both gables have a coping that is chamfered on its under-side. North and south walls are of three bays, with square-headed windows below the band and round-arched ones, with the usual imposts and keystones, above, all in raised surrounds. These windows are all 12-pane sashes (with radial heads) except for the upper one of the central bay on each side which has stained glass. The east wall of the nave has a pair of windows, set high up and adjacent to the chancel eaves; each is a round-arched opening with a raised surround, of which the imposts and keystone have been somewhat cut around.

The **Chancel** is built on similar fabric to the main part of the nave, although its eastern bay, added in 1881-3, is in rather smaller stone. It again has a chamfered plinth, rusticated quoins at its eastern angles (probably the original ones re-set in 1881-3) and a band on the side walls.

A short length of straight joint low down and close to the west end of the wall is probably a relic of the west jamb of the original priest's door; a little to the east of it is a round-arched window of 1881-3 but perhaps re-using parts of the surround of the door. East again is the present priest's door which has a similar round arch in diagonally-tooled 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar.



*The chancel from the south-east*

The east end has another round-arched window, set high, which differs from the others in that its arched head is made up of individual voussoirs. The gable above has a coping chamfered on its underside and a ring-cross finial. The north wall of the chancel, to the east of the vestry, has plinth and band but no other features.

The **Vestry** is built of similar fabric to the main body of the church; the junction between its north wall and the north-east corner of the nave suggests that it is an addition, as it butts up against the nave quoins, some have been removed to key in the vestry wall. The vestry plinth is a rough flat-topped one, except at the north-east corner where there are old rusticated quoins above a chamfered plinth which is broken forward in the usual manner. The north wall is plain, although at a height of c 2 m above the ground is a course of larger elongate blocks, two with horizontal grooves. The east wall has a doorway at its south end, holding a door of six flush panels, and a 16-pane sash (without cut dressings) adjacent to the north. A chimney stack rises against above the vestry roof against the taller east wall of the nave; it has a chamfered set-back at mid-height and a moulded string just below its hollow-chamfered cornice.

There are four interesting 19<sup>th</sup>-century down pipes, with their hoppers bearing the raised date '1883' that have a Solomon's Knot at its centre, and lobed fixing plates; one is set more or less centrally on each side of the nave, one on the south of the chancel and the fourth on the north of the vestry.

### **The Interior**

The internal walls of the church - in tower, nave, chancel and vestry - are all plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings, and a dado of grey plaster with a simple moulding at its top.

The lower part of the **Tower** is now open up to a panelled ceiling below the belfry. On the east the round-arched doorway into the main body of the church has panelled double doors in a raised surround with the usual impost and keystone; the opening is cut square with the wall, and there is an identical surround towards the nave. Directly above is a blocked doorway that formerly gave access to the gallery. Now a recess, this has an identical surround, again repeated on the opposite face of the wall. The windows in the tower have plain round rear arches and steeply-sloping sills. Access to the upper part of the tower is by means of a vertical ladder set against the north end of the east wall, to a trapdoor opening into a low chamber beneath the

belfry; the heavy beams that support the bell frame appear original.

Within the **Nave** there are no arcades but four heavy pillars c 0.60 m in diameter, rising to the ceiling; each has a chamfered base and a moulded capital below a square abacus; the central area of the ceiling, between the pillars, is raised and coved, with a central circular timber ventilator and pendant. The pillars are of considerable interest. Three have a basal drum c 0.75 m high which shows a characteristic vertical tooling of 18<sup>th</sup>-century character, but the fourth, the north-eastern, has a drum 1.10 m high with a quite different diagonal tooling; this has some minor damage and the general air of being an older stone re-used; in fact most of the stones of the pillars (including their bases) are similar to this. The south-western pillar is more or less vertical, but the other three taper in a rather irregular manner in their mid-sections. All four show infilled sockets for the timbers of the former gallery. In the side walls the lower tier of

windows have segmental rear arches, and the upper circular.



*The nave looking west*

The semicircular arch into the **Chancel** has a raised surround of vertically-tooled ashlar; there are chamfered bases to the jambs (that on the south concealed by the pulpit), raised imposts and a keystone. The priest's door in the south wall has a segmental rear arch; at the west end of the north wall is

an old door of six fielded panels opening into the vestry, without any stone surround, and on the north of the sanctuary a round-arched ashlar recess. The chancel has a boarded wagon roof.

The **Vestry** has a plain under-drawn ceiling; on the west is a projecting chimney breast with a plain stone fireplace containing a cast-iron grate of later 19<sup>th</sup>-century character. The window on the east has an old cupboard beneath it with simple double doors, perhaps of 18<sup>th</sup> century date; a large cupboard recessed into the south wall has doors of late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century type.

## Fittings and Furnishings

The **Benches** in the nave and **Stalls** in the chancel are relatively plain, and probably date from the 1881-3 restoration. The **Font**, near the south-west corner of the nave, is octagonal, with carved panels of foliage on alternate faces. An Inscription upon the upper of its two steps states that it was given in memory of Jane Green d1839, and a small brass plate records that it was moved to its present position in 1976. The **Pulpit**, adjacent to the south jamb of the chancel arch, is octagonal, and has simple fielded panels; it looks of 18<sup>th</sup> century dates, although the present ashlar base is probably Victorian. The **Altar Rails**, on spiral-twist brass uprights, look of early 20<sup>th</sup> century date. On either side of the chancel arch at impost levels are **Creed and Commandments boards**, with a **Paternoster board** above the arch; all look of 18<sup>th</sup> or possibly early 19<sup>th</sup> century character. On the south jamb of the chancel arch is a brass plate recording that 'This church was restored and enlarged as well as the vicarage house at a cost of nearly £3000 Anno Domini 1881-3'.

The **Stained Glass** is all of 19<sup>th</sup> century date, and of no more than local interest. The central upper window on the south of the nave, Jesus & Mary Magdalene, is of typical late-19th century character; the corresponding window on the north has two panels, the lower now replaced in plain glass, the upper with Christ in prayer, within a border of symbols and inscriptions<sup>1</sup>. The two windows set high in the east wall show the Good Shepherd (north) and an angel with scroll 'Blessed are the Pure in Heart' (south). The east window of the chancel has Christ as Salvator Mundi (in memory of George and Ann Sowerby of Old Park) and the south one an inscription to William James Green (d 1867) on a patterned background

On the east wall of the nave north of the chancel arch is a case containing an old chalumelea (an ancestor of clarinet) thought to have been played in the church, or its predecessor in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Sepulchral Monuments

On the west wall of the nave is a simple marble tablet to William Robson d.1835, signed by G Maile and son, Euston Road, London: on the south of the nave is a bronze plaque to the Rev James Whitehead Pattison, d 1936 and on the north a bronze plate to William Morley Egglestone d 1921 'antiquary, historian and public servant in his native dale'. On the east wall of the nave near the pulpit is a brass tablet to Lieutenant John Brumwell d1812 (but erected a century later) and above the north jamb of the chancel arch a Gothic tablet to three John Fosters, successive parish clerks, d 1828, 1843, and 1862. On the north jamb of the chancel arch is a marble tablet to Ann Crawhall of Newhouse d. 1845, signed by Davies of Newcastle, and on the south jamb one to Thomas Emerson, also of Newhouse, d. 1817 and wife Jane d. 1837

---

<sup>1</sup> Surtees (1925, 12) describes a window in the north wall in memory of Edward Emerson of West Hotts, d 1855, which included a coat of arms to which he claims the family had no right, and advocates its removal.

## Historical Notes

- 1465 The date of foundation of the original chapel, within the parish of Stanhope, is unknown but in 1465 Robert Rods obtained a licence from Bishop Bvooth to found a chantry dedicated to Jesus our Saviour and St John the Baptist. upon or near the present site.
- 1823 Hutchinson (III, 344) records that ‘the chapel was rebuilt by the late Sir Walter Blackett , assisted by a legacy of 50 l. given by Dr Hartwell’s will: it is a handsome building, dedicated to St John: has two side ailes; the roof is supported by four lofty stone columns, the shafts of which are 21 feet in length: the whole edifice is in length, 77 feet and 40 feet in width: neatly sashed, and stalled in oak’
- 1834 Mackenzie & Ross (II, 266) record that the chapel ‘is a handsome building, with a low western tower .... Neatly sashed and stalled in oak’.
- 1857 Fordyce (I, 673) states that the chapel ‘... is fitted up with oak pews, capable of accommodating 464 persons. An organ, erected five years ago by public subscription, occupies the western gallery; there are also galleries above each of the side aisles. The baptismal font stands at the west end, near the entrance. The chancel is divided from the nave by an arch, and the communion table enclosed by a wooden railing; above is a plain circular window, and one of similar construction at the west end. Near the entrance to the vestry, on the north side of the church, is a neat marble tablet... (Ann, wife of George Crawhall, d 1845). The church is entered at the west end, under a tower, which is surmounted by a low spire, and contains two fine-toned bells.
- The burying ground is of considerable extent, having been much enlarged within the last five years’.
- 1868 The chapel is made into a parish church – the new parish briefly including Westgate as well, until a church was built there a year later.

## Faculties and records of Structural Work

These are now in Durham University Library (Palace Green section) and are coded DDR/EJ/FAC/3.... Only faculties which might relate in any way to the structural history of the building, or to archaeological matters, are listed.

- |      |           |                                       |
|------|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| 146  | 1754      | Rebuilding church                     |
| 679  | 27.2.1914 | Setting back wall of churchyard       |
| 5607 | 14.5.1976 | Re-siting of font and removal of pews |

## The Structural History of the Church

The present church is a good-quality Georgian building of 1752, replacing a medieval predecessor of which almost nothing is known. The only reference to any survival of medieval fabric is in an MS note thought to have been written by the daughter of the Rev James Green, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, who suggests that the bases of the four pillars in the nave were re-used from the old church<sup>2</sup>. An examination of the pillars shows that they do appear to re-use a considerable amount of earlier masonry, and to be largely made up of drums from circular piers of two different diameters; the smaller being used in the upper parts of the piers (except the south-western) and the taper/junction between the two diameters of drum being rather clumsily achieved.



*(Left) Base of the north-west pillar, showing basal drum with tooling of typical 18<sup>th</sup>-century type, and possible re-used 12<sup>th</sup>-century base.*

*(Right) Base of the north-east pillar, showing taller drum with light diagonal tooling, perhaps re-used 12<sup>th</sup>-century work.*

Extrapolating from this evidence, one might presume that circular piers are usually of 12<sup>th</sup>-century (Norman/Romanesque) date, with those of greater diameter being more typical of the earlier part of the century. Allowing for the preponderance of broader over more slender drums, and for the original Romanesque piers considerably lower than their reconstituted successors, one might envisage a medieval building perhaps with a five-bay arcade of the early 12<sup>th</sup> century (from which the four bases survive) and a three-bay one of the later 12<sup>th</sup> century. This would clearly entail the building being of considerable size (comparable to that of the parish church at Stanhope) but experience shows that medieval buildings which were technically chapels were often no smaller than parish churches

---

<sup>2</sup> Pers. Comm. Mr John Backhouse

The present church was built in 1752 (although the faculty is dated two years later) and is very much a typical Georgian Dales church, a 'preaching box' nave with a full set of galleries, a small chancel and a low western tower. The surviving faculty provides some useful information. The petition, by Sir Walter Blackett, notes that the old church 'hath been for some years past in a ruinous and decayed condition', and that it was intended to erect the new building 'on the ground where the same stood'. The old building had been too small as the population had been greatly increased 'by the Working of the Lead Mines within the said Parish and chapelry'. The provision of the new building was described as 'an Act of Beneficence and Kindness to the said Inhabitants of the said chapelry, and for the Preservation of Religion as by Law Established'. This last phrase backs up the suspicion that the construction of what was really quite an impressive small church was in part a nervous reaction of the Anglican establishment to the rapid growth of nonconformity in the area. There was already a Presbyterian meeting house at nearby Ireshopeburn, and five years previously Wesley's lieutenant Christopher Hopper had begun preaching at Westgate.

Facing the village green, the tower and west end are of good quality close-jointed sandstone but the other elevations may well have been rendered, with the quoins, band and window surrounds of dressed stone standing proud of the wall fabric.

It is clear that the vestry is a later addition, although it is present on a c1825 plan<sup>3</sup> which shows that, in addition to the gallery timbers being socketted into the four main pillars, the gallery front was supported on a series of smaller intermediate posts, one in between each pillar and then four at the west end. The pulpit was set centrally in front of the chancel arch and the font at the west end of the nave a little to the north of the entrance doorway.

By the later Victorian period the substantial and well-furnished Georgian church had become old-fashioned, and a major restoration was carried out in 1881-3, Ewan Christian being the architect. Thankfully he did not succumb to the usual temptation to Gothicise the building; the chancel was extended – an expression of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century liturgical shift in the balance between Word and Sacrament - but the style of the existing building was closely followed. Perhaps inevitably the galleries had to go, and the interior of the church was more or less completely refurnished, an exception being made for the old pulpit, which was re-mounted on a new base and re-positioned on the south of the chancel arch.

## **The Churchyard**

In plan the churchyard is a long and narrow rectangle with the church standing at its west end; there were extensions to the east in 1845 and 1867-8 (Surtees, 1925, 12). Some land was lost from the south side of the yard in 1914 when the road was widened.

The churchyard monuments include a number of interesting headstones of 18<sup>th</sup> century date. Surtees records a stone inscribed 'W.H' (William Hartnell, Rector of Stanhope) and '1712' recording the granting of the right of burial, following a petition from local residents.

---

<sup>3</sup> Durham University Library Addl. MS 82-85PLANS AND DRAWINGS OF CHURCHES IN THE ARCHDEACONRY OF DURHAM, 1825-29. 4 Volumes. Drawn by John Burlison and countersigned by Charles Thorp, Archdeacon of Durham 1831-62

The existence of a handful of pre-1750 headstones on the south of the church confirms that evidence of the 1754 faculty that the new church was built on the site of the medieval chapel rather than, as was often the case, alongside it. This was perhaps due to the narrowness of the site; there was simply no room for two buildings side by side.

### **Archaeological Assessment**

It is clear that the present Georgian church stands on the site of a substantial medieval building, perhaps of 12<sup>th</sup>-century date. It is difficult, without direct investigation, to assess what remains of this structure; sub-surface remains will, as often, have been disturbed to some extent by both burial and the creation of an underfloor heating system<sup>4</sup>. The present nave floor has slabs in the walkways and wooden blocks beneath the benches; the chancel has a patterned stone floor with tiling in the sanctuary, all probably dating from the 1881-2 restoration. Any disturbance of floor levels inside the building, or the ground surface around it, should be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief.

Turning to the standing fabric, the wall plaster probably conceals both features of structural interest in the nave walls, eg sockets for the gallery timbers, and possibly earlier wall finishes which might include painted texts and other decoration. Any large-scale renewal of plaster should also be monitored, and records made of any features exposed.

### **References**

- Fordyce, W (1857)                    The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham,  
I, 621-2
- Hutchinson, W (1794, rev 1823)    History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of  
Durham III,
- Mackenzie & Ross (1834)    History of the County of Durham
- Pevsner, N &  
Williamson E, (1983)            County Durham (Buildings of England series, Penguin)
- Surtees, (1925)                    History of the Parish of St John's Chapel

### **Acknowledgements**

I should like to thank John Backhouse for a useful on-site discussion of the church, and to the churchwardens for arranging access to the building for me, at rather short notice.

Peter F Ryder September 2007

---

<sup>4</sup> Beneath the present carpets a heating duct, incorporating a furnace, runs the full length of the present nave